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The Fire Thief Fights Back



TERRY DEARY

KINGFISHER

For Nicky Potter, with thanks.



ONE

ANCIENT GREECE – BUT I'M NOT SURE WHEN

The first part of my tale is from a book of legends. "Hah!" you say. "Legends are just old lies. I want to know the TRUTH." Well, I have met one of the legends and I know that HIS story is true. So why shouldn't the other legends be true? Anyway, it's the only way we can explain what happened to me when I was a boy. And THAT was true, because I was there at the time. SO let's start with Ancient Greece and stop interrupting me with your moaning about the "truth" will you?

"What do you want, fat face?" the young god asked. He wore a winged helmet and had wings on his heels. He carried a rod with a snake wrapped around it. Even the snake looked shocked.

"You can't sss-speak to your mother like that, Hermes!"

"Oh, go shed your skin, you rat-tail of a reptile," Hermes replied and polished his nails on his white tunic.

"You'll be sss-sorry you sss-said that," the snake hissed. A goddess lay on a golden couch and scowled at the winged god. She was so beautiful you could hardly bear to look at her. Her dark hair fell in a curling cloud over her shoulders yet she never used curlers and hardly ever had to dye it.[1]

If you *could* bear to look at her, you'd have seen her face turn red with rage and her lips pull back tightly over her gleaming teeth. (And she never had to go to a dentist.) Somehow she controlled her temper.

"I am Hera, queen of the gods, wife to the mighty Zeus and ruler of the world. Speak to me like that and I will punish you like no god has ever been punished, Hermes."

He blew on his nails and gave a warm smile. "Oh,

1 Her hair was pretty good for a woman who was thousands of years old. In fact she didn't start dyeing it till she was 5,000 years old. But then she was quite a wicked goddess. Which just goes to show it is true what they say. Only the good dye young.

knock it off, Mum. You won't punish your dear little Hermes."

"Why not?" she spat.

"Because you *need* me! I am the messenger of the gods. If you didn't have *me* to run errands you'd be tramping from here to the Caucasus, from Troy to Atlantis, just to make mischief."

She narrowed her eyes. "Mischief?"

"Yes. You *know* you like to go around making trouble because you get *bored*, don't you, Mum?"

She raised her beautiful chin and looked through the window of the marble palace to the lake below and the mountains beyond. "Mischief is my job. It's what gods do."

Hermes walked across the shining marble floor, his winged sandals fluttering. He leaned over the goddess. "Anyway, you must *want* something or you wouldn't have *called* for me."

"Maybe."

"Oh, come on. What is it? You want me to kidnap some human maiden who's caught Zeus's eye? It wouldn't be the first time."

Hera glared at him, then her face went softer and almost tearful. Her voice was low. "It's more serious

than that, Hermes. Zeus has gone."

The winged god threw back his head and laughed. "Gone? So? He's always off somewhere, the old goat. He'll be back. He always comes back to Olympus."

Hera blinked away a tear. "Not this time, Hermes. Not this time."

She looked around to make sure there were no servants watching and reached under the couch. She pulled out a scroll of yellow parchment and unrolled it carefully. Hermes peered at it. There was a message there but not in the usual ink and stylus.

"What's this?" Hermes asked. Even the snake stretched its neck to look.

Hera explained. "Someone has taken a different scroll, cut out the letters and stuck them onto the parchment."

"They'll ruin the scroll!" Hermes sighed.

Hera shook her head. "What has that to do with anything, idiot boy? The point is they sent this message."

"But why didn't they just write it?" Hermes asked.

"Because they didn't want us to know who sent it!" Hera said wisely.

Hermes nodded and read the message:

Dear Hera,

I have captured Zeus. I cut out the tendons in his wrists and knees. He cannot run. He cannot throw his thunderbolts. He is helpless. He is a prisoner in Delphyne's cave. I will not tell you where he is unless you bring me his crown so I can rule the world. You have until sunset to obey or Zeus will lose an eye, an arm or a leg every day till on the last day he loses his head. I mean it. The crown, or your hubby gets it... and I don't mean a holiday in Crete.

Yours sincerely,

The secret kidnapper – The Typhon

Hermes turned pale as his feathers. "The Typhon? The most hideous creature in all the world! And now he's going to rule the world."

"Not if you set Zeus free," Hera said softly.

"Not if I set Zeus free," Hermes agreed. Then he swallowed hard. "*ME!*" he squawked. "This is a job for a *hero* – Heracles or Prometheus. Someone who doesn't mind being blasted by a hundred dragon breaths. I'm a messenger, Mum! Why should *I* go? Why can't someone *else* rescue Zeus?"

Hera grabbed her son by the front of his tunic.

"Keep your voice down. Listen. Everybody hates Zeus..."

"Well, I wouldn't say *everybody*, Mum. I know *you* do..."

"If Hades in the Underworld gets to hear about this he'll be up here like one of your father's thunderbolts. He's always wanted to rule the Earth. And Poseidon down in the sea would leap like a dolphin at the chance. We've already had to defeat the revolting Giants..."

"Ugly brutes," Hermes agreed. "Their mother, Gaia, was furious!"

Hera nodded her head quickly. "And that's why Gaia created the Typhon – for revenge." She shook the letter under Hermes' nose. "This is it."

"But you still aren't saying why *I* have to go after the Typhon, Mum. He's a monster."

"He's half man," Hera shrugged.

"Oh, yes!" Hermes squawked. "It's not the man-half I'm worried about! It's the half that has a hundred fire-breathing dragon heads under his arms and the serpents that are wrapped around his legs!"

"Nothing wrong with sss-serpents," Hermes' snake hissed.

"There is when they can stretch out as high as his head – and he's as tall as this palace!" Hermes moaned.

"Sss-sorry, I'm sss-sure!"

"Every one of those dragon heads spits fire," Hera explained. "He can heat rocks with his breath and throw them at you."

The snake sighed. "I can't do that."

Hera turned to Hermes. "You are the only one I can trust. If Poseidon or Hades takes over Olympus they'll destroy you."

"*Me?* What have *I* ever done? I'm only a poor little messenger of the gods. I never did anyone any harm. Not one single god," Hermes whimpered.

"You are the son of Zeus and that is enough," Hera explained. "They will crush you – or shut you down in Hades' Underworld forever."

Hermes shuddered. "But how can a little old feathered fool like me beat a serpent-snapping, fire-frizzling fiend like the Typhon?"

Hera lay back and thought. "First you have to find your father..."

"But the Typhon says in the letter he won't say where Zeus is hidden."

"The letter also says Zeus is a prisoner in

Delphyne's cave. The Typhon isn't very bright."

Hermes looked miserable. "Are there no heroes brave enough to fight the Typhon? Someone who could battle with the monster while I sneak into the cave?"

Hera shook her head. "When the Typhon first appeared the gods all fled into Egypt or disguised themselves as animals."

"Chickens," Hermes mumbled.

"Yes, chickens – or rabbits or ducks," Hera agreed. "Only Prometheus would have been brave enough to tackle the Typhon."

"Even Prometheus is hiding," Hermes sighed.

"Ah, but he's not hiding from the Typhon," Hera said. "He stole fire from the gods and gave it to the humans. He is being hunted by the eagle-winged Avenger."

"Can't we bring him back? Offer to pardon him if he rescues Zeus?"

Hera shook her head. "He's travelled through time – he's thousands of years in the future. If the Avenger can't find him then we have no chance. Only Zeus could track down Prometheus... and Zeus is a prisoner of the Typhon. It's your job. You're Zeus's son."

Hermes puffed out his cheeks and blew. "And a son's got to do what a son's got to do. I'll go and get my maps," he said and fluttered sadly out of the great marble room.

The god Prometheus was also flying. Flying far out in the galaxy of stars. A strange monster flew by his side. A man with fifty heads on top of his square body and a hundred arms – fifty down each side. He was the guardian of the gates of the Underworld – the Hecatonchires – and he was escaping.

The two legends slowed as they reached an amber sun and headed for a planet of blue grasslands and green seas.

"Here we are, Hec," Prometheus said as they swooped down towards a village. "Your home planet."

Head number 35 sniffed away a tear. "Home," he said. "The prettiest word ever invented."

"Except the word 'prettiest'," head 27 argued.

Head 35 ignored him. "A planet where everyone has fifty heads and a hundred arms."

They hovered in the clouds. "I'm sure you'll be very happy here," Prometheus said.

"Oh, I will," head 35 said. "You could join me, Theus. The Avenger would never find you here."

"I'd feel a bit out of place," the hero demi-god sighed. "I'd be treated like a monster."

"Well, I suppose you are – only one head and two arms. You *are* a bit freaky."

"Thanks," Prometheus muttered.

Big Hec nodded fifty heads. "But I know what you mean. I was like that on Earth. People treated me like some weird alien! Me! I reckon *they* are the weird ones!"

"I can't imagine why."

"Because I have a hundred arms!" the Hecatonchires cried. "I mean, even your spiders have eight arms and as for your millipedes..."

"Yes, Hec. I'm glad you've found a planet full of your own sort," Theus said and looked down sadly.

"You'll find a home somewhere, Theus," head 49 said. "But I have a feeling it will be back on Earth. All you have to do is find a human hero and Zeus will set you free."

"I know," Theus said and nodded his single head. "I've been to that place they call Eden City. I've visited it twice now. I'm sure the answer lies down

there. I went there in 1858 and again in 1795. Maybe if I go back just a little further... just ten years."

"That's 1785!" the Hecatonchires told him.[2]

"Then 1785 it is," Theus said and slapped the 100-armed monster on the back. "Goodbye, my friend. I hope you find happiness... but forgive me if I don't shake hands with you." He laughed. "It would take too long!"

As the Hecatonchires let himself drift down to the green and blue planet he waved a hundred hands in farewell.

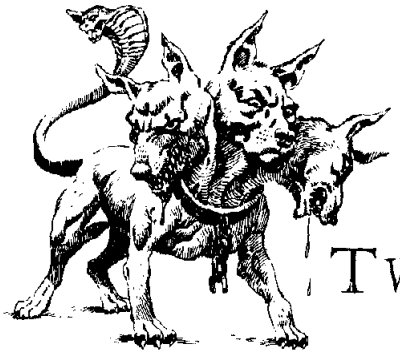
Theus soared back to the edge of the universe and turned left at the farthest star. That way he would arrive back on Earth ten years before he left it in 1795.

He sped past meteors and comets through the emptiness towards a little planet that wasn't green and blue like the Hecatonchires' home. It was blue and green. "Home," he cried. "A pretty word."

But as he raced down towards the sunset side of Earth the god found there is a lovelier word than "home".

It's the word "hope".

2 The Hecatonchires was good at counting because he had a hundred hands and five times as many fingers. He could count up to... er... a lot. Then he could go on to use his toes and count up to a-lot-plus-ten.



Two

Eden City – 1785

You don't believe in legends? Then what about history books? There it is. 1785, the year of Freedom. We'd fought a vicious war against the king who ruled us from over the ocean. He was a madman who'd never been to or seen our country. We'd beaten him! We called it the War for Freedom. Of course, after we drove out his soldiers and his cruel rule, we were left to make our own laws. There will always be crafty criminals who will travel around looking to lie and cheat and rob. People like me and my ma.

Eden City didn't have much to do with the War for Freedom. Nobody fought over it because there was nothing worth fighting for.

It was a jumble of tumbled houses and taverns,