

The Strength of Antaeus

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Hercules was the first to guess how it worked, all those years ago. I'd dangled from his hands in the thin, acid air, far from the earth's rich strength. Oh, gods, the creeping dark, the sick terror! I could do *nothing*.

He'd laughed as he flung me back to earth. Bastard.

I must have lain there for days, sprawled in the dirt, touching it with as much of myself as I could, even licking it.

People gathered around, waiting for me to leap to my feet and roar with rage, until they got bored and left. I slunk away in the darkness and found the entrance to a labyrinth of caves. Each one took me closer to the cool and steady heart of the earth. Perfect.

I did my tearful howling until I lost my voice, and on after that, until it just didn't matter anymore. Eventually, I closed my eyes, lay my damp cheek

against the damp limestone, and listened to the water as it dripped to form pillars and veils of rock.

He scared the shit out of me when he came to see me. I leapt away, cowering from the light of his lantern, the first light I'd seen since I'd gone to ground. It stabbed straight through my eyes to the back of my skull.

"Sorry," he said, but he did not blow out the lantern.

"You're not looking so good," I said when my eyes had gotten used to the light. And, indeed, his hair was lank and grey and thin, and a paunch had grown where once there'd been an admirable torso. Under each of his eyes was a purplish sac of flesh.

"I need a favour," he said abruptly. He flinched at my bark of laughter, but went on. "You're the only one who ever gave me a run for my money. And now that I'm...not what I used to be, you're the only one strong enough."

Another breath. "I have a son."

"I'm sure you have lots of sons," I said nastily.

"Admete has him."

That did get my attention. "Is he her son as well?"

"No," he said heavily.

Sacrifice, then. "And you want *me* to rescue *your* son. He's not going to look up to you very much after that."

"You think that matters to me?" he shrieked. Tears began to spill from his eyes. I looked away, disgusted at him for his weakness; at myself, for my brutality. Had he not in madness strangled his first two children with his own hands, then come to himself to see their little bodies at his feet? Whatever he'd done to me, did I have to hurt him in exactly this way?

Ah, but Admete. I could still feel her hand on my cheek, around the back of my ear, down my neck. I felt her breasts against my back as she pressed in close to massage my shoulders. Her hands slid down and along my ribs to stroke my chest, my stomach....

It had all been all a lie, of course. She was not for the likes of the morose and ugly giant Antaeus. Her throngs of admirers saw her grace and power; they never noticed that it did not trouble her when Hercules killed — killed! — to get her that damned belt. And not goddess-mad that time, either — he'd done it completely on purpose.

I followed Hercules out into the hot summer sun. The light beat on me like fists.

We travelled unopposed to her father's palace, which possibly made us a bit overconfident. At any rate, we were unprepared at the gate. From nowhere, from the corner of my eye, from the inside of a nightmare or the other side of the world, appeared four horses, insane, wild-eyed, all hooves and teeth and screaming.

"The mares!" cried Hercules. "Gods, I can't do this again!" I understood: the mares of Diomedes, defeated and captured once, long ago, at his hands. You don't stop and think, when you hear the stories, that any of his labours might actually have been hard for him, scared him, scarred him. But right there, on the doorstep, he just fell to pieces.

I did my best to fight them off, but there was no-one to watch my back, and in a horrible moment of pain and panic they were at me. If I struck one, there were three more, their yellow teeth crushing and tearing, the strikes of their iron-shod hooves shooting white-hot agony into shins and ribs. The froth

from their jaws burned where it fell on my arms, my chest, my face. I flailed and fended until even the strength I pulled from the earth wasn't enough, and I dropped at the gate, cowering with my arms over my head. Beside me, I heard Hercules sobbing. I hardly felt the rough grasp of the guards.

I stood before Admete, my arms bound behind me with chains. They'd taken the precaution of making us stand on a low platform; I could still pull something through from the ground beneath, but not like when my bare feet touched bare earth. Not enough to break the chains.

She was still beautiful, still full of grace and power. I saw no sign of her father or brothers; she ruled here now. I wondered and I did not wonder what had happened to them.

She wore a scuffed leather strap diagonally across her body; it bore a large, dull gem. This was Hippolyte's belt, that Hercules had done murder to get for her. Nobody really knew what it was for. But he hadn't been the first who'd killed to get it.

She looked at Hercules with a smile that was hard as ice. "Be brave enough to face it, O great hero: what kind of a life has your son ever had? This way at least he'll *have* a destiny. His blood will ensure favor —"

"Not from Olympus," said Hercules. "Spill the blood of their own? Whatever else he is or isn't, the blood of Zeus still flows in him. See *sense*, Admete!"

"No," she said slowly. "Not from Olympus. There are other powers, far more able to protect and strengthen my people. It is my right and my duty to see to that, and my people's right to take what they need from those whose rulers were not so wise as I."

Then she turned to me, and despite everything, my heart twisted in longing as I saw her expression soften.

"Antaeus," she said, and it was an apology and an invitation all at once. This time it would be different. She'd changed, she *was* wise now, and caring. I could see that, I could hear it in her voice. This time, she would not push me away —

"Antaeus," murmured Hercules at my side. "Please."

I glanced at him irritably. She was only doing what she had to do, she took no joy from it. Even he could see it in her face. But maybe he couldn't. Maybe she only showed her new self to me, me alone; maybe I was special at last. Yes, I was special.

Hercules sensed my choice. "Antaeus," he said again, more wail than anything. "Please."

I'd been watching Admete, couldn't take my eyes off her, the longing growing with every heartbeat. And in the moment of Hercules's despair, I saw contempt and triumph flicker across her face. Like being smacked with a wave from a cold, northern ocean, realisation flooded through me.

Nothing had changed.

And I was still the ugly, morose, inconvenient Antaeus, to be soothed and deceived and kept acquiescent lest I try to stop her, or my huge, ungainly feet trip her up, or my embarrassing broken heart cause her to blush.

I said to Hercules, "We've got to try again." He looked up, meeting my eyes with something too painful to be joy, and nodded.

I did what I could to draw power upward, through the flagstones and the wooden platform. I could feel the spongy cells within the timbers heave and

constrict as the power sought its way upward at my call. I gasped, drawing it, forcing it, until it broke through and flooded my limbs and lungs and thoughts with might. It wasn't all I wanted, but maybe it would be enough.

Admete was alarmed now. Her hand went to the jewel. She brought it to her forehead, then her lips, then her heart, and it began to glow. She started to murmur. I couldn't make out the words, but around her formed shapes that thickened and darkened and began to make sounds of their own.

I recognised them: ghouls and demons shaped like each of my failures, come to taunt me — and worse, each of my successes, come looming and creeping to exact retribution. Here was the first man I'd beaten in a wrestling match, and the first one I'd lost to — the only one, until Hercules. And here was Hercules himself, five times as large as life, breathing menace, reaching for me, laughing. He was going to hold me aloft, and this time he wouldn't throw me down until I was dead. I remembered the acid air, the helplessness, the panic and pain. I felt his hands seize me, lift me. I felt the weakness begin its creep through my veins, and my vision started to fade.

I hit the ground with a sharp, stinging shock, and gasped as strength rushed back in. The small Hercules, the real one, was wrestling with the demon Hercules, which shrank in his grasp. "I'll look after yours," he cried raggedly over his shoulder. "You look after mine."

His were snakes and boars and three-headed dogs; laughing men, crying women, poised to strike; and one that looked like me. We took them on, one by one. My demons held little terror for him; his were lap dogs and farmyard beasts to me. Their bodies, cold and brittle, shattered in my grip, and I hardly felt the briar-scratching of their fangs and claws. The one like me was the

easiest of all. And beside me, Hercules reached right and left, over and over, capturing the perversions of my worst memories, breaking their necks, dashing their skulls together.

As we vanquished them, Admete summoned more, but each was weaker than the last. We fought our way to her, and Hercules ripped the belt off over her head (even now I did not dare to touch her).

"Where is he?" Hercules shouted, his nose an inch from Admete's. He was red-faced and shaking: it does things to you, to stare your nightmares down.

When she wouldn't answer, he stepped away from her and slowly, carefully, placed the belt over his head and across his chest.

She lunged toward him and clawed at the belt, but I knocked her frantic hands away. It was the first time I'd touched her since the day she'd begged me to fight Hercules, and shown me how much she admired my strength.

"It's all right, leave her," Hercules said. "My son."

The gem pulsed. Hercules cried out and staggered, but said, "This way."

I pushed Admete away and followed him through the halls of the palace, nearly running him over as he stopped in front of a door. He burst through, then dropped to his knees next to a rag of a child curled in a corner. He cradled the child in his arms and got clumsily to his feet.

The boy's head lolled, and his vacant eyes moved aimlessly from side to side. His limbs were insect-thin, his body a mere knob of bone and flesh. I realised the boy could not walk or speak, had never walked or spoken. Could never tell his father he loved him. Could never understand when his father said the same. And yet Hercules held him gently, as you would a treasure of

unspeakable value, a thing of great beauty, so fragile, so fragile. And he rocked the boy, and he wept.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "You need to guide us out of here," I said. "I lost track."

He nodded, and we started back. He was paying a price for using the gem, but we did not dare leave it behind: it was our compass, for one thing, and if Admete got hold of it again, well, I didn't want to think what she'd conjure up when she was *really* upset.

In the end our demons found us anyway. It happened when the boy made a twisting, whining sound, and Hercules faltered in his control of the gem. They took their moment. But Hercules could not fight this time, not while he cradled his son. And he wouldn't, couldn't, put the boy down.

Here's something for you: many things can give you power, and really, most of the time they're just not that fussy about whether you deserve it. As I hung from the latest demon-Hercules's hands, breathing agony in and out of gasping lungs, feeling my heart slow and flutter until it stilled — I felt something new stir in my chest instead. Not the power of the earth, dark and cool and steady. Not the hot beat of passion I'd felt during those nights with Admete. This was a wave, growing, moving faster, salty like the sea. I knew it was tears, and they filled me with strength enough.

Tears flew from my cheeks as I whirled and struck in the fight. And wherever they landed, they became tiny beacons, flickering and then flaring, until they outshone the gem. Their searing light dispersed the shadows and lit for me a corridor along which I moved, with demons — my own, and Hercules's, and some I did not recognise that might have been the boy's — clinging to my

legs, trying in vain to drag me down. I left a trail of their odd and horrible bodies behind me.

I was not surprised that the fight took me in the end to the door to Admete's throne room. The power within me drove me to seek an ending.

She stood in the centre of the room, haughty, betraying no emotion at all. Still beautiful.

"And what will you do now, Antaeus?" she said. "Will you kill me?"

I closed my eyes and let the wave of power flow toward her, over her, through her. I felt her rage and shame that a flawed Antaeus dared to love a ruined Admete, and her growing terror as the power crashed against her again and again.

When it was done, I opened my eyes. Admete stood as she had been, then fell, senseless, to the floor. I tried to feel regret, love, triumph — something, but I was a limestone cave, hollow at the heart.

I left, and wandered until I found Hercules and his son. Hercules still wore the belt, but the gem had shattered; the boy had cuts on his chest and face. Together, we left Admete's palace.

Sometimes I carry the boy as we travel. He weighs no more than a rag. He does not grow, barely eats. He says nothing, understands nothing. But I carry him as though he were the most precious of great treasures.

END

(Illustration: "Hercules slaying Antaeus", c. 1460, attributed to the Florentine artist Antonio Pollaiuolo)