

HERCULES

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Based on the

Radical Comics Miniseries

Hercules: The Thracian Wars

by

Steve Moore

*It is a myth, not a mandate
a fable, not a logic
and symbol rather than a reason
by which men are moved.*

-Irwin Edman

ON BLACK

Darkness. A man's voice, vibrant and colorful. A storyteller. But he sounds nervous, as if under a lot of strain.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
I will tell you of Hercules. And I
swear by the gods, every word is true.

EXT. MEADOW - MYTHICAL GREECE - DAY

A bucolic utopia that could only exist in a dream -- or in myth. MAIDENS in white gowns cavort like nymphs through a field, picking flowers. One maiden stands out -- ALCMENE (early 20s), wildflowers in her raven hair. Stunning, yet innocent.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
His mother, Alcmena, was the greatest
beauty in all of Greece. Even Zeus
himself could not resist her charms.

Silence. The girls sleep on the grass, seduced by the heat of Greek summer and the song of cicadas. We push in on Alcmena's perfect face basking in the sun. She reacts as if someone had touched her -- not unpleasantly. Her eyelids flutter open.

ALCMENE'S P.O.V. -- a MALE FIGURE stands in silhouette between her and the sunlight. His body like that of a Greek statue.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
He came to her in a ray of sunshine.
And made her his own.

TIGHT ON ALCMENE -- her breath quickening, the tint of pleasure in her cheeks. She cries out softly, then moans, then --

INT. MYCENAEAN HOME - NIGHT

-- cries out in the throes of childbirth, the hands of mid-wives reaching in to help her. It is dark, but lightning flashes, a storm rages outside, Alcmena pushes harder, harder --

A NEWBORN'S WAIL CUTS THROUGH THE THUNDER.

Alcmena holds her child high, the lightning revealing a MOSAIC OF ZEUS decorating the home's marble ceiling. The baby's hand seems to reach for the hand of the god.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
Alcmena gave birth to a son. Part
mortal, part god.

INT. MYCENAEAN HOME - DAY

A week later. A scene of domestic bliss. Alcmena lowers her NAKED BABY into its crib and turns to prepare fresh swaddles.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

With his first breath, the boy made an enemy. Zeus' queen -- Hera. To her, this child was an insult, a living reminder of her husband's infidelity.

We move past Alcmene to a STATUE OF HERA in an alcove. Dust weeps from her marble eyes, the dust becomes a torrent, the eyes hollow out -- AND A VENOMOUS SERPENT DRIPS OUT OF EACH HOLE.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

Alcmene named her son Hercules -- which means "servant of Hera" -- but the goddess was still not appeased. She became Hercules' sworn enemy -- only his death would ever satisfy her.

The serpents slither past Alcmene's ankles and up the side of the crib. Hissing, they go for the defenseless baby.

Unaware of the danger, Alcmene turns to her son -- and yells in shock. BABY HERCULES lies grinning in his crib shaking the TWO DEAD SERPENTS like rattlers, their necks broken at sharp angles.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

Unfortunately for Hera, Hercules had much of his father in him.

EXT. NEMEA - MYTHICAL GREECE - DAY

Again, that shimmering world of legend. We do not see HERCULES' face, only his superhuman muscles and vast shoulders. BOW AND ARROWS over his shoulder, olive-wood CLUB on his leather belt.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

To ease Hera's rage, Hercules agreed to perform twelve labors -- twelve dangerous missions -- that, when complete, would bring him peace.

Ahead, a cave opening. Hercules steals closer. Closer. Just as he reaches the cave -- WHAM -- A LION THE SIZE OF A RHINOCEROS LANDS ON A BOULDER. It digs its claws, scraping away shavings of rock. Its roar is otherworldly.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

His first labor was to kill the Nemean lion. No ordinary predator, but a demon out of Hades. Teeth long as sabers, claws sharp as blades.

The lion lunges -- Hercules looses an arrow -- unbelievable velocity -- the ARROW SHATTERS when it hits the lion's hide.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

And a hide impervious to any weapon.

The lion pounces -- Hercules raises his mighty arms to meet it -- the LION'S SHADOW falls over him -- when abruptly ANOTHER MAN'S VOICE interrupts Iolaus with disdain --

GRYZA (V.O.)
What a load of crap.

EXT. CANYON - ANCIENT GREECE - NIGHT

We are no longer in legend, but reality. This world does not shimmer; it is filthy and real. Our storyteller, **IOLAUS** (20s), hangs by his wrists from a rope tied to the branch of a tree. A SPIKE jutting from the ground aims to skewer Iolaus up the ass.

IOLAUS
Every myth grows from a seed of truth.
Hercules is coming. Be warned, Gryza
-- he despises brigands.

A ROCKY CANYON on a CRAGGY MOUNTAIN RANGE pockmarked in CAVES and CREVICES to hide in -- the perfect lair for thieves. And indeed, Iolaus' audience is an ARMY OF RUTHLESS BRIGANDS. A CARD reads: **Macedonia, Northern Greece. 358 BC.**

The brigand leader, GRYZA (40s), steps up to Iolaus and prods him, causing Iolaus to swing like a pendulum over the spike.

GRYZA
Macedonia has been good to us. Plenty
of small villages ripe for pillaging.
We are here to stay -- and there is
nothing your Hercules can do about it.

IOLAUS
Indeed, your army is strong...

Iolaus keeps his voice steady but his eyes anxiously search the night. Suddenly, between the craggy rocks, he spots --

A GLIMPSE OF A LION'S MANE -- A FLASH OF LION CLAWS -- what seems to be a REAL LION stalks closer, unnoticed by the distracted brigands. Iolaus grins in relief.

IOLAUS
Yet -- as I was about to explain
before I was so rudely interrupted --
the Nemean Lion was strong too.
Hercules still destroyed it. Not with
a sword or spear or arrows, no...

A voice echoes throughout the canyon. Calm, deep, measured.

HERCULES (O.S.)
I did it with my bare hands.
(beat)
Or so they say...

Gryza and his brigands wheel around to face a towering figure standing uphill, lit by the campfire. A legend in the flesh.

GRYZA
(a whisper)
Hercules...

HERCULES is 6'5" feet tall, built like a honed athlete rather than a god. Scarred by war. He wears a lion pelt, the beast's head covering his skull. Around his neck, like a talisman, hangs A LION'S TOOTH. As in myth, he carries a WOODEN CLUB.

Hercules' gaze takes in brigands as they swarm across every nook and peak. He counts their numbers, counts their weapons.

HERCULES
Is this all you have?
(disappointed)
I was hoping for a challenge.

ANGLE ON THE BRIGANDS -- they swap amused looks, sneer, chuckle. Gryza laughs outright --

GRYZA
Two hundred of us. One of you.

HERCULES
As I said... I was hoping for a challenge.

Hercules smiles. It is a broad smile, a confident smile. But it never reaches his eyes. Like a MASK, it hides demons within.

And that smile cuts the brigands' laughter like a knife. Hercules is too calm, too composed. For a moment the brigands wonder... *could all those legends about him be true?!*

HERCULES
The king of this land has offered me gold to dispose of you. So you are faced with two choices: either leave and never return... or die.
(shrugs)
I get paid either way.

Dead silence. The brigands begin to grow nervous. Gryza snaps.

GRYZA
Make him bleed.

With savage cries, the TEN BRAVEST BRIGANDS charge at Hercules. Club in hand, Hercules calmly awaits them. We PUSH IN, not on Hercules but a CREVICE BEHIND HIM. Beat. THE DARKNESS SPEAKS --

AUTOLYCUS
Time to go to work.

We look closer and realize a man has been standing there all along, his BLACK CLOAK rendering him invisible in the night. **AUTOLYCUS** (early 40s), Hercules' peer and best friend, his eyes fast and smart, always looking for the next possibility.

AUTOLYCUS

Ready your arrows, Atalanta. Timing is everything.

Autolycus glances up a boulder over Hercules' left shoulder. A figure is concealed in the shadows like a sniper. **ATALANTA** (early 30s) -- body of corded sinew, her weapon equal parts BOW, SHIELD and SWORD. She stretches her bowstring.

ATALANTA

On your word, Autolycus.

The brigands are closing in on Hercules -- closer -- closer -- just as they have reached him, Autolycus hisses --

AUTOLYCUS

Let them have it.

Hercules swings his club -- it WOOSHES through the air -- connects with four brigands -- we hear the CRACK OF BONE --

-- while at the same time, Atalanta looses arrow after arrow, PAINTED BLACK to be invisible in the dark -- and Autolycus hurls KATAR BLADES, sharp razor-thin weapons, also PAINTED BLACK --

ALL TEN BRIGANDS DROP DEAD.

REVERSE ANGLE -- Gryza and his men gape in shock as, from their point of view, it seems as if Hercules wiped out all of their comrades with one strike of his club. Hanging precariously over the spike, Iolaus wheedles away the brigands' confidence --

IOLAUS

Ten men with a single blow. Still think you can defeat the son of Zeus?

For the first time, fear glimmers in Gryza's eyes. Enraged, he shoves his men forward.

GRYZA

Kill him. Kill him.

FORTY BRIGANDS rush forward. Hercules whispers to Autolycus, who is a dark shape over his right shoulder --

HERCULES

Seems they need more convincing.

AUTOLYCUS

That's the problem with the world today, no one has faith anymore.
(MORE)

AUTOLYCUS (CONT'D)

(beat)

Bait them.

The brigands engage. Hercules moves like a man possessed. His club shatters weapons, armor, flesh. Swords and spears flash at him but he weaves between them, a warrior at top form. Just when the brigands' sheer numbers seem to overwhelm him --

-- Hercules simply takes a step back into the cover of darkness. Thinking they have him cornered, the brigands follow --

ANGLE AMONG THE ROCKS -- in tight quarters, with the canyon walls narrowing and pressing in, the brigands' superior numbers are neutralized. Hercules, Autolycus and Atalanta take them on.

FIVE BRIGANDS try to climb around the canyon and stab Hercules in the back. As he fights, Autolycus sees them, cries out --

AUTOLYCUS

Amphiaraus. Now.

The five brigands creep up on Hercules' back but before they can slash him -- A SPEAR WHIPS OUT OF THE NIGHT.

The spear has appendages like a Swiss army knife -- BLADES, SPIKES AND JAGGED EDGES flick out of the tip. In moments, four brigands are dead. The last brigand turns to flee in panic --

AND RUNS INTO THE SPEAR'S POINT.

Impaled, the brigand looks up into his killer's PIERCING BLUE EYES. **AMPHIARAUS** (60s) is part priest, part prophet. He whispers to the dying man in blessing as he twists the spear --

AMPHIARAUS

May Zeus forgive your sins.

REVERSE ANGLE -- Gryza and his men only catch glimpses of the battle among the rocks. They can hear the clash of weapons and the screams of the dying. From their vantage, it seems as if Hercules is taking on -- and defeating -- thirty men on his own.

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- dangling from his rope, he grins as the battle unfolds... then blanches nervously as he notices --

THE ROPE IS BEGINNING TO FRAY.

With each twine that SNAPS, Iolaus plunges closer to the spike under his ass. He whispers a plea for Hercules --

IOLAUS

Hurryhurryhurry...

ANGLE AMONG THE ROCKS -- the surviving brigands have regrouped -- they face off against Hercules, Autolycus, Atalanta and Amphiaraus. Our heroes are still outnumbered.

HERCULES
Time to finish this.
(beat)
Bring out Tydeus.

Autolycus whistles softly, Atalanta lowers her head, Amphiaraus looks at the brigands with actual pity. The brigands react --
"who the hell is Tydeus?!"

HERCULES
(shouts)
Tydeus. Kill.

From an overlook above the canyon floor -- A MAN DROPS LIKE A CANNON BALL. He lands amidst the brigands. For a moment, he remains curled in a ball, breathing heavily.

The brigands inch in, nervous, scarcely daring to touch him. One brigand lifts his sword -- brings it down --

AN AXE BLOCKS THE SWORD.

The curled man unfurls to reveal **TYDEUS** (25). He wields TWIN AXES. He speaks only in grunts. His eyes are insane. More beast than human, he fights in a berserker rage.

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- watching in horror as the rope's twines SNAP ONE AFTER THE OTHER. Iolaus tries to call for help but all that emerges is a wheezy *"Heeeerc..."*

ANGLE AMONG THE ROCKS -- the brigands have nowhere to run -- Hercules and his companions seem to be everywhere -- AUTOLYCUS hurling his blades -- TYDEUS hacking with his axes -- ATALANTA loosing arrows -- AMPHIARAUS jabbing with his spear --

And HERCULES swinging his club.

CRUNCH... CRUNCH... CRUNCH...

The final brigand sees the club dropping towards him.

CRUNCH.

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- frantic now -- no sign of Hercules -- Iolaus' fate hangs by a few meagre twines of rope -- SNAP SNAP SNAP --

THE ROPE COMPLETELY BREAKS.

IOLAUS
(finds his voice)
Herculeeeeeees.

Just as Iolaus falls, Hercules appears -- with the head of his club, he pushes Iolaus deftly enough to allow the spike to pass right between Iolaus' legs. Crashing onto his ass, spike tip level with his eyes, Iolaus gasps in relief --

IOLAUS
Any longer, uncle, and --

HERCULES
-- girls from here to Sparta would
finally be safe from your attentions.

Hercules grins, offers his hand, pulls Iolaus to his feet --
then fixes a steely gaze on Gryza and the cowering brigands.

HERCULES
The rest of you may go. But first --
(points his club at Gryza)
-- surrender your leader.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. CANYON - DAWN

Daylight finds Gryza hanging by his wrists over a SPIKE. In exactly the same position Iolaus was in. Amphiaraus burns herbs over a small fire, thanking the gods for victory. Atalanta leads FOUR HORSE-DRAWN CHARIOTS that have seen better days.

Hercules surveys the carnage. He reaches down and plucks a BLACK-PAINTED ARROW out of a dead brigand. Studies it. Glances at Autolycus who is busy counting corpses.

HERCULES
Blades and arrows painted black.
Invisible in the night. Clever.

AUTOLYCUS
(counting corpses)
...forty nine... thanks... fifty...
fifty one. Fifty one brigands at two
gold pieces a head... minus the
headless ones... let's see...

Hercules and Autolycus add up the numbers. Swap a grin.

HERCULES
Not a bad night's work.

IOLAUS
The survivors will tell everyone how
Hercules defeated their entire army
alone -- as he did the Nemean Lion.

Atalanta growls, cleaning blood off her bow --

ATALANTA
I am sick of hearing about that lion.
Whatever happened to the Cretan Bull,
or the Apples of Hesperides?

Tydeus giggles with meaning. Autolycus translates --

AUTOLYCUS

Tydeus likes the Belt of Hippolyta.
Has it all. Naked Amazons, bondage...

IOLAUS

(defensive)

The lion is dramatic. It made Gryza's
men nervous, softened their resolve --

AUTOLYCUS

Their resolve must be broken, Iolaus.
When you spread the legend of
Hercules, make it bigger. Scarier.
Your task is to strike terror in the
enemy's heart before we strike his
body. The more they believe Hercules
truly is the son of Zeus, the less
likely they are to fight.

Hercules boards his chariot. Amphiaraus still chants.

HERCULES

Amphiaraus. Join us here on earth?

Amphiaraus' eyes snap open. He seems miles away. His voice is
soft, trance-like, his words a whisper --

AMPHIARAUS

A lion and crow in strange alliance...
they fight across fields of corpses...
against earth and fire... before they
stand at the gates of hell...

Iolaus reacts, intrigued by this enigmatic prophecy. But
Hercules and Autolycus only exchange a skeptical look.

AUTOLYCUS

If you're going to use those "herbs,"
Amphiaraus, at least share.

Amphiaraus snaps out of his trance. He pushes dirt over the
fire, troubled by what he has seen. Cackling, Tydeus prods the
dangling Gryza causing him to sway on his rope.

HERCULES

Tydeus. Control your urges.

Tydeus obeys. With one last grunt at Gryza, he withdraws.
Hercules steers his chariot past Gryza --

HERCULES

Your men know where to find you,
Gryza. If you have been a worthy
leader, they will return for you.

We PUSH IN on Gryza, mind racing. Has he been a worthy leader?

GRYZA
HERCULES!!!

INT. INN - MACEDONIA - DAY

TIGHT ON TYDEUS -- his mouth open and roaring with pure carnal joy as he floods it with goat meat and wine.

Our heroes are in a *pandohio*, an INN with CLAY WALLS and a THATCHED STRAW ROOF. We saw them in battle, now we see them at play. With the INN PATRONS urging them on --

-- Hercules, Autolycus and Atalanta play a drinking game. They chug a flagon of wine each, then place their left hand -- fingers splayed wide -- on a table and, as fast as they can, stab between the fingers with a knife.

Whoever bleeds loses.

The patron watch in awe as all three heroes wield their blades in liquid fast speed -- chug again -- stab again --

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- sitting by the fire, he sighs at the childish games, then shuts his eyes and meditates.

ANGLE ON HERCULES, AUTOLYCUS AND ATALANTA -- they chug wine again -- stab again -- chug -- stab -- chug -- stab -- ow.

Autolycus winces and nurses a bleeding thumb. Hercules turns to gloat when -- OW -- he winces and reacts at his bleeding palm. Atalanta holds up her unblemished hand and wiggles her fingers.

ATALANTA
Not even a scratch.

The patrons roar, crowning her the winner. Iolaus stumbles by, drunk, a VIXEN on each arm.

IOLAUS
That's right. The Hercules. Promise to misbehave and I will introduce you.

VIXEN #1
Are you Hercules' page?

IOLAUS
(stung)
His nephew. I immortalize Hercules' deeds for future generations --

Sucking on his bleeding thumb, Autolycus interrupts --

AUTOLYCUS

He talks. While the rest of us fight.
 (to Iolaus, cutting)
 It's a wonder you share the same blood
 as Hercules.

Everyone laughs, even the vixens, as Iolaus stews. Autolycus claps a hand on Hercules' shoulder. Together, they retreat to the back of the inn -- a bit more quiet, a bit darker.

AUTOLYCUS

Show me the gold.

Hercules opens a leather pouch, rains gold *drachma* onto the table. Autolycus eyes their pay with greedy delight.

AUTOLYCUS

Now that is a pretty sight.

HERCULES

One more payday, Autolycus. It's all
 we need and then...

Autolycus beams, fills two cups with wine. Toasts.

AUTOLYCUS

...then we get to live like the kings
 we have served.

HERCULES

(quietly)
 Or simply live.

Hercules drains his cup. Autolycus recognizes the look in Hercules' gaze. That desperate yearning.

AUTOLYCUS

Still dreaming of barbarian lands...

HERCULES

Beyond the Aegean, near the Black Sea,
 they say there is a valley cut off
 from the world. Where a man may live
 out his days in solitude.

Autolycus gives a reproachful look. Hercules tries to explain --

HERCULES

Everybody in Greece knows my name. I
 will never find peace unless I get as
 far from here as possible. Or die.

AUTOLYCUS

When are you planning to tell them?

Autolycus jabs his head at the rest of the companions.

HERCULES

Best if I don't. Their loyalty will
compel them to follow. They have
sacrificed enough for me already.
This gold may repair their lives.

Hercules glances at Iolaus carousing with the vixens --

HERCULES

Iolaus can return to Athens. Perhaps
even buy his own theater.

AUTOLYCUS

I pity the patrons.

-- Hercules turns his gaze to Amphiaraus meditating by the fire,
to Atalanta still playing the dangerous drinking game.

HERCULES

Amphiaraus can build a temple to his
gods, Atalanta can claim the throne of
the Amazons if she chooses.

AUTOLYCUS

What of Tydeus? Without you to temper
his rage, I fear what he may become.

Hercules studies Tydeus gorging himself on his leg of mutton,
eating savagely, voraciously like a wild animal.

HERCULES

Tydeus will go with me. Civilization
is too civilized for us.

ANGLE ON THE DOOR TO THE INN -- TWO SOLDIERS enter, carrying
shields. They glance around, making sure there is no danger,
then step aside to admit the HOODED FIGURE they are protecting.

The figure lowers its hood to reveal a woman of rare and
stunning beauty with eyes that change color in the light. This
is **ERGENIA** (late 20s). Autolycus notices her fine cloak, her
jewelry. He nudges Hercules.

Hercules turns, sees Ergenia crossing the inn towards him. The
companions stop whatever they were doing and watch as Ergenia
reaches Hercules and kneels before him, beseeching --

ERGENIA

Hercules. I have traveled Greece far
and wide to find you. My name is
Ergenia, daughter to Lord Cotys. Our
land is torn by civil war. My father
needs your help to stop the bloodshed.

Taking Ergenia's hand, Hercules gently helps her to her feet.
Autolycus quickly steps in, acting as Hercules' agent.

AUTOLYCUS

Unfortunately, my lady, Hercules is
fully committed until the feast of
Dionysus. We could possibly advance
you to the front of the line --
(rubs his fingers)
-- for the right price.

Ergenia raises a cynical eyebrow.

ERGENIA

I thought heroes fight for glory.

HERCULES

True.
(beat)
But mercenaries fight for gold.

ERGENIA

If you consent to aid him, Lord Cotys
will pay your weight in gold.

Autolycus reacts: "*that much?!*" He slides a plate of food over
to Hercules and whispers --

AUTOLYCUS

Indulge yourself.

Hercules studies Ergenia's bodyguards. Noticing something, he
stands. Moves closer to examine their shields. They bear the
emblem of A CROW. Iolaus repeats the words thoughtfully --

IOLAUS

A lion and crow in strange alliance...

Hercules glances at Amphiaraus -- those blue eyes gaze back,
concealing their secrets. Beat. Hercules nods to Ergenia:

HERCULES

Where are your father's lands?

ERGENIA

Thrace.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. SWAMPLANDS - DAY

Pounding rain. Ergenia and her guards on horseback lead
Hercules and his comrades across the Vistonidian swamps dividing
Macedonia from Thrace. Soaked, Hercules glowers at the heavens.

ERGENIA

(with a smile)
Perhaps your "father" Zeus is angry.
You must have displeased him.

HERCULES

If my "father" Zeus is angry, he
should show himself and say so instead
of pissing on me.

AMPHIARAUS

The gods speak to us through symbols.
As men, we must interpret them.

HERCULES

The gods are a fantasy, Amphiaraus.
And their symbols are figments of your
imagination.

Hercules lashes his horses. His chariot thunders forward,
wheels slicing through the mud. A hill rises ahead. Hercules
crests it, reaches the edge. And reigns his horses to stop.
His companions come up beside him. Autolycus sighs --

AUTOLYCUS

Well, we did it. We actually found a
bigger shithole than Macedonia.

REVERSE ANGLE -- our heroes overlook a blasted terrain of
scorched farmland and ruined crops. Like a blight, a VILLAGE
SMOLDERS in the rain. A CARD reads: **Thrace, Eastern Greece.**

EXT. FRINGES OF THRACE - DAY

Hercules and Ergenia ride side by side across the muddy plain,
the companions following. Ergenia studies Hercules --

ERGENIA

It has been a task tracking you down.
I searched from the peaks of Attica,
up the plains of Thessaly, to the far
north of Macedonia.

HERCULES

I go where the fight takes me.

ERGENIA

If there is one thing this world has
in abundance, it is conflict. No need
to travel so far from home. You could
have found a war closer to Athens.

Hercules is silent under Ergenia's perceptive gaze. Then --

AUTOLYCUS

Hercules.

Autolycus points to the horizon. Smoke rises over the hills.

ERGENIA

No...

Hercules and Ergenia lash their horses, her steed and his chariot racing each other -- cresting a hill to see -- A RECENTLY TORCHED VILLAGE STILL SMOLDERING.

EXT. FARMING VILLAGE - CONTINUOUS

Bodies everywhere. Charred homes. Carrion crows feasting. Mute with horror, Ergenia leads her horse into the town. Hercules and his companions follow, taking in the grim sight.

IOLAUS

Who is responsible for this?

ERGENIA

My father battles a warlord... Rhesus.

Ergenia dismounts her horse and removes a LEATHER BAG from her saddle marked with a A STAFF ENTWINED BY SNAKES, the symbol of Asclepius, patron of doctors. As she searches for survivors --

-- Hercules and Autolycus dismount. Backed by their companions, they spread out among the ruins. The smell of rotting flesh is overpowering. Tormented, Tydeus grips his axes. Hercules wipes ash off a SHIELD to reveal a BLACK CROW painted on it.

AMPHIARAUS

We have crossed into the land of the dead, the domain of Hades...

ERGENIA (O.S.)

Hercules.

Reacting to her cry, Hercules searches through the rubble -- finds Ergenia straining to move a heavy wooden beam off an OLD MAN pinned inside the husk of his home. She gasps in effort --

ERGENIA

Help me...

Applying his strength, Hercules grips the beam and moves it off the elder. As if carrying a child, Hercules lifts the old man. Ergenia leads him out of the ruins to a safer spot.

ERGENIA

Lay him down there.

Hercules places the elder on a patch of grass. Ergenia opens her leather bag to reveal IRON SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS and JARS. She sutures the wound. Opening a jar of herbal mixture, she presses it to the man's lips. His agonized movements subside.

ERGENIA

Valerian root. To ease the suffering.
He will sleep now.

The old man breathes easier. His eyes slip shut.

Ergenia removes her cloak and covers him. Hercules studies her.

HERCULES

Same in every war. While men end
lives, women save lives. Have you
taken the Hippocratic Oath?

ERGENIA

(shakes her head)

When the physicians were called away
to fight, the ill suffered. So, to
ease their pain, I taught myself the
art of healing. I play my part.

Hercules nods, respecting her. Ergenia possesses a sharp mind
behind her lovely face. Then they react to --

THE SOUND OF APPROACHING HORSES. Hercules raises his club. His
companions have their weapons ready. Tydeus is ready to charge.

HERCULES

Easy, Tydeus. Kill no one.

(beat)

Unless I say so.

A SQUADRON OF CAVALRY TROOPS ride into the burned town. Ergenia
touches Hercules' arm, lowers his club.

ERGENIA

My father's men.

The soldiers carry the sigil of the BLACK CROW. At their lead
is **SITACLES** (40s, truly huge, menacing.) Seeing Ergenia, he
bows his head in respect. He gestures at the destroyed village.

SITACLES

This war against Rhesus claims more
victims every day, my lady. It is
good to see you safe.

ERGENIA

Thank you, General Sitacles...

SITACLES

(to Hercules)

The mighty Hercules. My lord Cotys
sent us to escort you to his citadel.

Ergenia commands in the manner of a lady used to power --

ERGENIA

Gather the survivors. Give aid to the
wounded. We will follow.

Sitacles nods to his men. The soldiers begin herding the shell-
shocked survivors into a caravan.

Hercules notices the refugees behave nervously, eyes downcast.
Ergenia explains --

ERGENIA
When you have been slaughtered by
soldiers, you fear soldiers. Even if
they are on your own side.

EXT. THRACIAN PLAINS - DAY

Hercules and company ride their chariots beside the caravan.
MORE REFUGEES have joined up -- they number the hundreds now.
Hercules studies their faces: traumatized, shell-shocked,
anguished. A sight he has seen too often in the past.

In the distance, smoke rises from a DOZEN BURNED VILLAGES.

EXT. FRONT GATES - COTYS' CITADEL - NIGHT

Cotys' gargantuan STONE CITADEL is carved out of the slopes of a
DORMANT VOLCANO overlooking the SEA. The banner of the BLACK
CROW flies on every tower. From a hilltop --

-- Hercules and his companions, on their chariots, take in the
strong walls, iron gates, sentries at every post. Amphiarus
whispers a stream of babble --

AMPHIARAUS
Throneless land... crownless king... a
nation torn... deceit in shadows...

Autolycus rides up next to Hercules.

AUTOLYCUS
Sometimes I wonder why we bring
Amphiarus along. Atmosphere?

HERCULES
He fights without fear.

AUTOLYCUS
Of course.
(re: the citadel)
Well, it's no Athens.

HERCULES
Nothing ever could be.

EXT. COURTYARD - CITADEL - NIGHT

The citadel's courtyard jammed to capacity by THOUSANDS OF
REFUGEES -- poor, miserable, hungry -- the size of this camp
conveying just how terrible this conflict has been.

The chariots rest by a trough as our heroes water their horses.

Hercules strokes his horse's neck, then finds a boy staring at him. **ARIUS** (8) -- looks at Hercules with absolute hero worship.

ARIUS
You're Hercules.

HERCULES
That's right.

ARIUS
The son of Zeus.

HERCULES
So they say.

ARIUS
Is it true?

Silence. Hercules grooms his tired horse, completely shutting out Arius even as the boy hovers excitedly around him.

ARIUS (CONT'D)
My name is Arius. I... I know all
your labors by heart.

Silence. Arius gapes at the LION'S TOOTH around Hercules' neck.

ARIUS (CONT'D)
Is that a tooth from the Nemean Lion?

Silence. Ergenia hurries over, takes Arius by the hand.

ERGENIA
Arius.
(to Hercules)
I'm sorry if he bothered you.

HERCULES
Your boy?

Ergenia nods, leads Arius away. Hercules overhears her whisper:

ERGENIA
Stay away from him. Men who deal in
violence attract violence.

Darting glances back at Hercules, Arius dutifully trails after his mother into the citadel. Hercules is still for a beat, the boy having stirred memories. Sitacles approaches him.

SITACLES
Lord Cotys awaits. Have you ever met
a king, Hercules?

Hercules smiles at Sitacles' naiveté. As Hercules raises his eyes to the citadel's stone towers --

EXT. ATHENIAN PALACE - DAY (MEMORY)

-- the battle-scarred citadel transforms into a WHITE MARBLE PALACE capped by GOLD STATUES OF THE GODS. And the cheers of the refugees become the APPLAUSE OF THE ATHENIAN SENATE.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- younger, his flesh unscarred. He smiles proudly as, with his companions, he enters the palace gates.

INT. MAIN CHAMBER - ATHENIAN PALACE - CONTINUOUS (MEMORY)

MILITARY LEADERS and POLITICIANS resplendently dressed have collected to welcome their hero. Hercules pauses. A woman pushes through the crowd -- MEGARA, beautiful in her late 30s. Their THREE CHILDREN -- two boys and a girl -- by her side.

HERCULES

Megara...

Hercules makes a move towards his family, yearning to touch them, to embrace them. When --

EURYSTHEUS (O.S.)

Hercules. Come, come.

The crowd parts revealing the SILVER THRONE OF ATHENS. It is empty. **KING EURYSTHEUS** stands in the chamber beyond. He is young, mid-30s, pampered. Surrounded by a MENAGERIE OF CAGED MULTICOLORED BIRDS. He is feeding a PEACOCK.

HERCULES

King Eurystheus...

EURYSTHEUS

(re: the peacock)

Magnificent, isn't she? A gift from the envoy of the Medes.

The peacock spreads its wings and squawks. Eurystheus coos --

EURYSTHEUS

Yes, yes, my darling.

(to Hercules)

Well, do not keep us in suspense. Are we safe from the monster Hydra?

Hercules nods to his companions. Autolycus and Atalanta step forward placing cloth sacks on the floor before Eurystheus's throne. Hercules places his sack down in the center.

HERCULES

Trophies, Your Highness.

Hercules pulls away the sack, as do the others revealing --

NINE HUMAN HEADS.

They wear bronze helmets shaped to look like SERPENTS.
 Eurystheus climbs from his throne. With the tip of his toe, as
 if fearing the heads may bite, he prods the remains.

EURYSTHEUS
 Monsters, indeed. The Hydra were the
 most lethal assassins to ever walk the
 earth. They have killed more kings
 than there are thrones in Greece.

Eurystheus leans in close. Observes that the teeth of the HYDRA
 ASSASSINS have been filed to points. Like the fangs of a snake.

EURYSTHEUS
 You've done your people, your gods...
 and your sovereign... a great service,
 Hercules. Name your reward.

Hercules locks eyes with Megara. She nods: *"ask him."*

HERCULES
 To be with my wife and children, your
 Majesty. My twelve labors are done.

EURYSTHEUS
 You have a beautiful family. But are
 any of our labors ever truly complete?
 (smiles)
 We will discuss this at the feast.
 For now --

Eurystheus places a friendly hand on Hercules' shoulder and
 leads him towards the balcony.

EURYSTHEUS
 -- let the people have their hero.

Eurystheus steps first onto the balcony. A VAST THRONG has
 collected below. When they see their king, his people CHEER.

But when Hercules appears, the cheers become DEAFENING.

ANGLE ON THE CROWD -- shouting, yelling in awe and worship --
 men bow their heads in respect -- children wear cloaks made of
 lion pelts -- women reach out to touch him.

Hercules is the first rock star.

From Hercules smiling and waving dutifully, we RACK FOCUS to
 Eurystheus by his side. Watching him with a hint of envy.

EURYSTHEUS
 A man faced with such adoration might
 be tempted to think himself a god.

HERCULES

I do not want to be a god.

(beat)

Only a husband and father.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- his gaze drifts from the crowd to Megara and the children waiting for him. They shimmer like figures in a dream. Suddenly, in a SHARP CUT we --

FLASH TO -- *images of violence -- blood on a white marble floor -- a SHAPE THAT COULD BE A CHILD sprawled like a rag doll --*

INT. THRONE ROOM - COTYS'S CITADEL - NIGHT

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- grimacing at the memory, then pulling himself together as LIGHT STRIKES HIS FACE --

-- SERVANTS pull open a vast set of doors, torchlight pouring from the chamber beyond. Sitacles leads Hercules and his companions into a WAR ROOM in the desperate days of a campaign.

The walls are bare except for an enormous MAP OF THE KNOWN WORLD painted on animal hide stretched over the entire face of the longest stone wall. OFFICERS confer in hushed tones around --

-- LORD COTYS, 50s, on the modest wooden seat at the head of the room. Cotys is gaunt, skin hanging off his bones in folds betraying hardship. But he still has a noble air.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- all activity ceases as he crosses the chamber -- Hercules is aware every gaze is on him -- he can hear them whispering in awe -- the center of attention.

COTYS

Hercules.

Unlike a ruler, Cotys rises to meet Hercules halfway. Embraces him like a friend and brother.

COTYS

An honor to host such a legend.

HERCULES

Lord Cotys.

Cotys turns his gaze on Hercules' companions --

COTYS

But, in legend, you fight alone.

HERCULES

My reputation would not exist without my comrades.

(introducing the team)

Autolycus of Sparta, Tydeus of Thebes, Iolaus of Athens --

Cotys pauses, recognizing Amphiaraus.

COTYS
Amphiaraus, the famed seer of Argos.
(intrigued)
It is said you have glimpsed your own
death so you fight each battle knowing
that it is not yet your time to die.

AMPHIARAUS
True, my lord.

COTYS
What else can you tell of the future?

AMPHIARAUS
Only what the gods see fit to reveal.

COTYS
Shame. It would have been a great
gift to know the outcome of this war.

Iolaus stands straight as Cotys approaches -- then deflates as
Cotys just walks on past him to study Atalanta.

COTYS
With respect, I fear the task ahead
might be unsuitable for a woman. Even
if she is an Amazon warrior --

HERCULES
Atalanta.

In a flash, Atalanta slips an arrow in her bow -- looses the
arrow -- it streaks across the chamber -- an OFFICER holds his
helmet underarm -- the arrow pierces the HELMET'S EYEHOLE and
scoops it out of the officer's grip -- then pierces TWO MORE
HELMETS before planting itself in a wall.

Cotys blinks at THREE HELMETS dangling from the arrow's shaft.

COTYS
I stand corrected. You are welcome,
all. Hopefully, once I ply you with
wine and food, I can convince you that
Thrace is a cause worth fighting for.

As Hercules considers his prospective employer...

INT. FEASTING HALL - COTYS' CITADEL - LATER THAT NIGHT

A cavernous dining hall. Hercules and his comrades sit around a
table with Cotys and Sitacles, sharing a simple meal by the
light of oil lamps. Cotys' voice ECHOES in the emptiness.

COTYS

When my father built this citadel, it
was meant to be the high seat of all
Thrace. But now I fear it will be
little more than a headstone...

Cotys is interrupted as the door opens. Ergenia enters.

ERGENIA

Forgive me for being late, my lord.

Hercules reacts. Ergenia has washed off the filth of the burned village. In a clean gown, her hair up -- she is breathtaking.

HERCULES

How fares the old man?

ERGENIA

Alive. If you can call it living.
(looks to her father)
He lost everyone he loved.

Hercules notices Ergenia has been weeping. Cotys gives her hand a strong squeeze as she takes her place at the table.

COTYS

Ergenia is too much like me. She must
do her duty. It takes every one of us
to resist Rhesus. That demon --
(corrects himself)
That warlord we brought you to defeat.

Cotys' gaze drops to his plate. His meat is almost raw. The plate is splashed in blood.

COTYS

This was once a peaceful land. But
Rhesus was not content -- he craved
power. So he rose up and began this
campaign of slaughter.

SITACLES

Some say he is a sorcerer. His magic
words mesmerise men, bend them to his
will. He leads an army of monsters --
half horse, half human.

IOLAUS

Centaurs. You've actually seen them?

SITACLES

They have been seen.

Hercules is highly doubtful. Looks across the table at Ergenia.

HERCULES

Do you believe in such things?

ERGENIA

Evil is born from men. Not monsters.

Ergenia holds Hercules' gaze: a kinship shared by people who have experienced terrible things. Cotys urges Ergenia --

COTYS

Perhaps our guest should witness...

(with irony)

...the fruits of Rhesus' labors.

EXT. RAMPARTS - COTYS' CITADEL - NIGHT

Cotys and Ergenia lead Hercules to the citadel's overlook. In the courtyard below stretches a REFUGEE CAMP OF TENTS -- women and children huddled around fires, men standing in line for a ladle of soup. Cotys' SOLDIERS pass out blankets and supplies.

COTYS

Every week, more refugees arrive
seeking my protection. Forced from
their homes by Rhesus' marauders.

The shadows on Cotys' face make him seem even older. Tired.

COTYS

I never thought anything could ever be
good again. Until you came.
(beat)
You brought hope.

Hercules gazes over the camp. The misery is palpable.

HERCULES

I am a mercenary fighting for gold.

COTYS

How we view ourselves does not matter.
How others perceive us is important.
Your name is a rallying cry.

Cotys turns to Ergenia, urging her to speak. She takes Hercules' hand into hers. Appeals to him --

ERGENIA

I have seen too much reality to put
any faith in legends. But my son
believes in you. These people believe
in you. Bring us peace...
(beat)
...and I will believe in you too.

Hercules stares into her pleading eyes. How can he refuse?

INT. FEASTING HALL - COTYS' CITADEL - NIGHT

Atalanta tunes her bow, Autolycus plays with a cup of dice. Iolaus reads by the light of an oil lamp, Amphiaraus is deep in meditation. Tydeus paces, axes in hand, a caged tiger waiting to be released. Hercules enters. All eyes turn to him.

AUTOLYCUS

Tell me, who was more convincing?
Cotys -- or his daughter?

HERCULES

(a beat)
His gold.

Hercules stands before his comrades.

HERCULES

My friends. Our bonds have been
forged through steel and fire.

The companions gather around. More than a team. A family.

HERCULES

Autolycus, the closest I have to a
brother. We began as green recruits,
we grew into fierce warriors.

Hercules clasps Autolycus' shoulder. Best friends.

HERCULES

Tydeus, whom I found as a child,
starving and alone in a city of
corpses...

Tydeus is silent. He gazes at Hercules as he would a father.

HERCULES

...Amphiaraus, whose wisdom has guided
me in my darkest moments... Atalanta,
whose courage has saved my life more
than once...

Atalanta clasps Hercules' forearm, Amphiaraus bows his head.

HERCULES

...Iolaus, my own blood.

Iolaus stands tall, proud.

HERCULES

You lost everything when you chose to
follow me into exile -- glory, honor,
respect. All we have left is gold.
So we will accept Cotys' offer.

(MORE)

HERCULES (CONT'D)

We will destroy Rhesus for him and end this civil war. Are you with me? If any of you have any doubts, we leave Thrace tonight.

Instantly, Tydeus is at Hercules' side -- axes loyally raised.

HERCULES

Thank you, Tydeus. When slaughter is involved, I can always count on you.

To Amphiaraus who keeps his eyes shut in meditation --

AMPHIARAUS

It is the will of Zeus.

To Atalanta --

ATALANTA

From the day you helped me avenge my sisters, I vowed to be at your side.

To Iolaus --

IOLAUS

Finally, fresh material. Which title sounds more terrifying to our enemies -- "Hercules: Savior of Thrace?" Or "Hercules: A Hero's Vengeance?"

AUTOLYCUS

Both sound terrifyingly boring.

HERCULES

Autolycus?

Autolycus rolls the dice -- and SLAMS the cup down over them.

AUTOLYCUS

Mercenaries fight when the price is right. And this price is very right.

Hercules looks over his fearsome group and grins.

INT. THRONE ROOM - COTYS'S CITADEL - NIGHT

Cotys stands alone in his throne room studying the expansive map of the known world. Hercules enters, escorted by TWO GUARDS. Cotys beckons him to approach. Indicates the map.

COTYS

When I was a boy, my father taught me to identify these far-flung lands. Alexandria, with its fabled library. Babylon, with its hanging gardens. And your own home, Athens...

(MORE)

COTYS (CONT'D)
with its renowned Acropolis.

(beat)
Thrace possesses no such wonders. But
I love it still. And I will not see
it divided any longer. Your answer?

HERCULES
Let it be to death -- or victory.

Hercules offers his hand. Cotys beams. They grasp each other's forearm -- Cotys finding Hercules's grip is a vice.

SMASH TO BLACK.

Over black. Solid darkness. Then -- SOMETHING STIRS. The darkness feels alive, sentient.

THREE PAIRS OF EYES GLOW RED IN THE DARK.

The eyes are bestial. The darkness rises to reveal we have been looking at the SHADOW of a MONSTROUS ANIMAL WITH THREE CANINE HEADS. **CERBERUS** -- the hellhound guardian of the dead.

Cerberus' three heads snarl and strike -- we hear FLESH RIPPING, BONES SNAPPING, CLAWS TEARING INTO MEAT.

And over this, a WOMAN SCREAMING.

INT. HERCULES' TENT - DAWN

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- his eyes fly open. He does not sit up with a gasp. He simply lies on his cot, haunted. He is used to this nightmare. Probably has it every night.

EXT. CAMP - TRAINING FIELDS - DAWN

Hercules and his comrades have set up tents in a field outside the citadel walls. Hercules steps out of his tent, washes his face and head with a pitcher of water. Dispelling the dream.

AMPHIARAUS (O.S.)
You were shouting in your sleep.
(beat)
Again.

Hercules snaps his gaze up. Amphiaraus sits calmly, watching him. Beat. Hercules nods, silent.

AMPHIARAUS
The gods show you things they do not
share with others.

HERCULES
There is a word for that.
(beat)
"Madness."

AMPHIARAUS

After we were driven from Athens, I
consulted the Oracle of Delphi on your
behalf. Remember her prophecy?

HERCULES

"To find peace, Hercules must finish
the labor that remains unfinished."

From Hercules' tone, we know he thinks it's bullshit.
Amphiaraus patiently persists --

AMPHIARAUS

And do you recall what that was?

HERCULES

I completed my twelve labors long ago.

AMPHIARAUS

The twelve were handed to you by the
king of Athens. The thirteenth has
been ordained by Zeus.

(beat)

To find peace... you must confront the
beast that haunts you.

Hercules is silent. The moment ends as Iolaus rushes up.

IOLAUS

Uncle. Cotys' army has assembled for
your inspection...

Still holding Amphiaraus' gaze, Hercules nods. Turns to move
away. Amphiaraus' voice makes him pause --

AMPHIARAUS

No matter how far you go, how fast you
run -- the beast will always follow.
You must face it, Hercules.

(quietly)

A man cannot escape his fate.

Beat. Without glancing back, Hercules walks on.

EXT. TRAINING FIELDS - DAY

Olive-wood club slung over his back, Hercules climbs a hill in
stride with his companions. At the top, they look down on --

COTYS' ARMY in the plain below. FOUR THOUSAND MEN -- and not a
soldier among them. They mill about in a disorganized mob. A
ragtag group with mismatched armor or no armor. Pitchforks
instead of javelins, scythes instead of swords.

ATALANTA

Seems they've recruited the farmers.

AUTOLYCUS

I would be happy with farmers. All I see are village idiots.

Iolaus eyes a THRACIAN SOLDIER picking his nose up to the knuckle, then staring fascinated at his findings.

IOLAUS

Truly, this is a labor that might challenge even Hercules.

ON THE FIELD BELOW - LATER

Hercules inspects the army with his companions. Tydeus takes a close-up look at the Thracians -- and cracks up laughing. Autolycus checks their weapons, shakes his head at Hercules.

Atalanta grabs a Thracian, feels his muscles, peers at his teeth as if he was a horse. She grimaces her displeasure. Hercules turns to Sitacles standing with his troops.

HERCULES

Call a shield-wall, General.

SITACLES

(bristling)

I take my orders from Lord Cotys.

Hercules shoots a look. Grudgingly, Sitacles pumps his spear --

SITACLES

SHIELD-WALL!

The Thracians clatter together in a chaotic mess. Hercules groans. Tydeus cackles, loving this.

HERCULES

Atalanta.

WHAM -- Atalanta hauls off and kicks the nearest Thracian. He drops, taking ANOTHER TEN THRACIANS DOWN WITH HIM LIKE DOMINOS.

HERCULES

Corpses. Every one of you.

The Thracians go still. Fun and games are over. Hercules points to the Thracians standing on the right.

HERCULES

So are you. Exposed to enemy archers.

Hercules points to the Thracians on the left.

HERCULES

You, still alive. For about five breaths.

(MORE)

HERCULES (CONT'D)

That's how long it would take to climb
over your own dead trying to retreat.
Before the enemy spears you in the
back like fish.

Dead silence in the Thracian ranks. The soldiers have gone pale. Hercules has their attention.

HERCULES

If you want to defeat this "Rhesus"
and survive to tell of it, you must
learn to fight like an army.

ANGLE ON COTYS -- watching from the citadel ramparts.

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- the soldiers cringe as he circles them.

HERCULES

On a battlefield, a man alone is weak.

Reaching out, Hercules interlocks the soldiers' shields and places the men shoulder-to-shoulder, creating a wall of bronze.

HERCULES

But together, individuals become links
in a chain that is stronger than iron.

Hercules nods to Tydeus. With a roar, Tydeus rushes at the shield-wall -- and SMASHES INTO IT.

THE SHIELD-WALL DOES NOT BUDGE.

Hercules nods: "*better.*" A DOUBTING RECRUIT finds his voice --

DOUBTING RECRUIT

We are mortal, we need each other.
But why does the son of Zeus need
companions to fight by his side?

The troops glance over at the companions. Hercules and Autolycus swap a look. Iolaus quickly answers --

IOLAUS

Hercules does not need us. We need
him. With the son of Zeus as our
leader, we have brought down kings,
made empires tremble. Imagine what
you can accomplish. Just imagine.
You will be invincible.

The doubter falls silent, the troops puff their chests out, inspired. Hercules nods to Iolaus: "*nice work.*" Autolycus takes over like a drill sergeant, barking commands --

AUTOLYCUS

Today's lesson: how to disembowel the
enemy in five simple moves.

ANGLE ON COTYS -- impressed, he dares to smile. Dares to hope.

EXT. CITADEL RAMPARTS - DAY

From their vantage point up high, Hercules and Autolycus watch the recruits train in the field below. Suddenly, Hercules notices FOUR SCOUTS racing towards the citadel. Their leader PHINEUS (early 20s, a marathon runner) cries to the guards --

PHINEUS

Open the gates. Open the gates.

INT. THRONE ROOM - COTYS'S CITADEL - DAY

Phineus stands in the throne room with Cotys studying the MAP OF THE KNOWN WORLD. Hercules and his companions enter.

COTYS

My finest scout, Phineus. He has
brought word of Rhesus' movements.

Phineus turns to the map. The entire Northeast of Thrace is colored blood red. It reads: **RHESUS**. Between the lands of Cotys and Rhesus there is a small patch of land marked **BESSI**.

PHINEUS

Rhesus is preparing to attack Bessi
lands, my Lord. He will be on them
before mid-day tomorrow.

COTYS

Rhesus... here? In the East?
(realizes)
We are next. Unless...

Hercules places his hand on Cotys' shoulder. Takes him aside.

HERCULES

Your army needs weeks -- if not months
-- of training before they are ready.

COTYS

The Bessi are a fierce but primitive
tribe. If we do not protect them, it
will be a bloodbath.

HERCULES

Fight Rhesus with an untested army and
you risk losing the war.

Period. Cotys reacts, troubled. Sitacles protests --

SITACLES

My Lord, I vouch for my troops. They
are brave and ready for combat.

A beat as Cotys considers the map. Then --

COTYS

The gods have given us a gift. We
must not waste it.

HERCULES

(trying to dissuade)
Will your gods be fighting with us?

COTYS

No. The Son of Zeus will.

Cotys jams his dagger into the map marking the Bessi lands.

EXT. TEMPLE OF HERA - NIGHT

A marble-columned temple on the citadel grounds. Solemn
chanting. PRIESTS intone ancient prayers. ACOLYTES lead
SACRIFICIAL GOATS to a bonfire blazing in the atrium.

COTYS' SOLDIERS AND PEOPLE have collected for the ceremony.
They react in awe as a figure appears backlit by the fire.
Broad shoulders. Rippling muscles.

It is Hercules. In these mystical surroundings, presented in
this way -- he truly looks the son of Zeus.

One by one, his comrades materialize beside him. The effect is
magical, the people are entranced. Inspired. Hercules and his
comrades swap cynical smiles, aware they are playing parts in a
show designed to rally the people for war.

AUTOLYCUS

(a whisper; to Hercules)
Our friend Cotys is no fool. He
understands a hero's greatest strength
is inspiring others to fight for him.

Cotys joins Hercules before the people. Beckons him to a seat
at the foot of a TOWERING STONE STATUE. Iolaus realizes --

IOLAUS

Is that... Hera?

Hercules glances up at the statue's face. HERA'S STERN FEATURES
stare down at him. Iolaus keeps after Cotys --

IOLAUS

Hera is Hercules' sworn enemy. She
has plagued him since his birth.

(MORE)

IOLAUS (CONT'D)

What will the people think if they see him sitting at her feet?

COTYS

(apologetic)

I intend no disrespect. But Hera is the patron of Thrace. The people need to know we have her blessing.

HERCULES

I am sure the goddess and I can get along for one night.

With a wry grin, Hercules takes his seat. The crowd roars, delirious with fervor. Hercules watches as priests slit the throats of the goats and hurl their bodies into the bonfire.

EXT. CAMP - TRAINING FIELDS - NIGHT

An army camp on the eve of battle. Soldiers steady their nerves laughing, gambling, praying. Few sleep. Atalanta restrings her bow by the light of a fire. Staggering from wine, Sitacles plops down beside her. Hungrily, he studies her sinewy body.

SITACLES

I cannot understand. What is a woman -- a beautiful woman -- doing with these hardened men. These killers.

ATALANTA

I would not be here if I was not as hard as the rest of them.

SITACLES

The great Hercules needs a woman's protection...

Sitacles laughs. His laughter is echoed by some of the troops. Atalanta calmly strings her bow.

ATALANTA

I do not protect him.

(beat)

I protect you from him.

Sitacles frowns, not comprehending. Breathing heavily, he runs his hand up inside Atalanta's thigh and kisses her on the neck.

Big mistake. Before he knows it, Sitacles has been twisted around, his arm pinned against the rock he was sitting on by Atalanta's bladed bow.

With disdain, Atalanta kicks Sitacles in the rear, sending him sprawling. The soldiers laugh again -- this time at Sitacles' expense. Furious at the shaming, Sitacles draws his dagger.

In a flash, Atalanta disarms him -- raises her bladed bow as if to strike him -- terrified, Sitacles just manages to protect his groin with his shield before Atalanta jabs down with her bow.

HERCULES

Everything all right here?

Atalanta calmly resumes stringing her bow. Seeing Sitacles crawling out from under his own shield, Hercules understands.

HERCULES

General, from now on maybe you should favor the company of your men.

Seething, Sitacles retreats. Hercules picks up the fallen dagger. Glances at Atalanta.

HERCULES

He pulled a knife on you?

ATALANTA

(dead-pan)

It was only a small prick.

Atalanta, usually stoic, has a sly gleam in her eyes. Hercules smiles broadly, then joins Autolycus who grumbles --

AUTOLYCUS

Half of them don't know one end of a sword from the other. The rest will run at first sight of the enemy. For our last job, they're certainly not making it easy.

HERCULES

Just keep telling yourself: the sooner this is over, the sooner we get paid.

AUTOLYCUS

I will think on you fondly as I spend my gold on vice and leisure.

Smiling, they part. Hercules heads to his tent -- when he notices a SMALL FIGURE scuttling in the camp.

It is ARIUS -- he darts about to watch the last minute preparations. As Arius passes a tent, he hears a WHIMPER. Sounds like an animal in fear and pain. Arius peers in --

INT. TENT - CONTINUOUS

-- it is dark. Arius waits until his eyes adjust. He makes out a figure on a cot, huddled under the sheets. Shaking. A human being is making those terrible sounds.

Carefully, Arius approaches. The noises are anguished, heart-breaking. A soul in torment. Arius reaches out to touch...

TYDEUS SNAPS UP IN HIS COT, SNARLING.

Terrified, Arius recoils -- Tydeus can't see him, he is still asleep, he lunges, teeth bared, hands reaching for his axes.

WHACK -- A CHAINED COLLAR AROUND TYDEUS' NECK YANKS HIM BACK.

Tydeus sleeps chained like a dog. Arius scrambles away, turns --

AND SLAMS INTO HERCULES STANDING BEHIND HIM.

Seeing Arius' fright, Hercules softens. Holds the boy.

HERCULES

Your mother told you to stay away.
Why didn't you listen?

Arius catches his breath. Looks at Tydeus who has returned to his cot. Noises gurgling in his throat. Limbs twitching.

ARIUS

What's wrong with him?

HERCULES

Tydeus was born in war. His city,
Thebes, was under siege for five
years. Food ran out...

Hercules catches himself. Not wanting to upset Arius.

HERCULES

When I found him, he was more animal
than human. Never speaks of what he
saw. But he relives it every night.

EXT. TRAINING FIELDS - CONTINUOUS

Hercules frog-marches Arius through the camp like a captive until they reach his tent.

HERCULES

What are you doing here anyway?

ARIUS

I want to be a great hero -- like you.

HERCULES

(dark)
Like me.

ARIUS

No hero is greater than Hercules.
(gushing)
(MORE)

ARIUS (CONT'D)

I know all your labors. Like the Cretan Bull. How you wrestled it for seven days and seven nights...

HERCULES

(embarrassed)

That part might have been exaggerated just a bit...

ARIUS

...and struck it forty-nine times with your club of olive wood...

Arius' eyes light up as he notices the OLIVE-WOOD CLUB resting outside Hercules' tent. He tries to lift it -- won't even budge, way too heavy for him. Hercules picks it up easily with one hand, moves it out of Arius' reach.

HERCULES

Maybe not quite that many...

ARIUS

...until it fell dead and Crete was saved. It's my favorite labor.

(considers)

Also, Queen Hippolyta's Belt.

HERCULES

(gives a look)

A little young for that one...

Hercules breathes in relief as Ergenia appears. She rushes towards them, frantic.

ERGENIA

Arius -- there you are --

(to Hercules, apologetic)

He stole away to find you. Arius admires you --

HERCULES

Take him home.

Ergenia reacts at the harshness in Hercules' voice. Gently, she leads Arius away.

ERGENIA

Come, Arius.

(beat)

Hercules wants to be alone.

Before he goes, Arius pauses. Looks up at Hercules.

ARIUS

My mother is scared. If I can be like you... I can protect her.

Ergenia smiles warmly, moved by her son's love. But Hercules' tough facade holds, shutting the boy out. As Ergenia and Arius begin to withdraw, though, Hercules relents just a bit --

HERCULES

Wait.

Arius looks hopeful. Hercules beckons sharply: *"get over here before I change my mind."* As the boy approaches, Hercules removes the LION'S TOOTH from around his neck.

HERCULES

A tooth from the Nemean Lion. Only a hero may wear it. But to become a hero, you must grow strong. No one challenges you when you are strong.

Hercules places the lion's tooth in Arius' palm and closes the boy's hand over it. Arius is beyond blown away. Thrilled, he runs off. Ergenia is about to follow. Pauses.

ERGENIA

Is strength all you believe in?

HERCULES

And this.

Hercules holds up his club. Ergenia is disappointed.

ERGENIA

A weapon. The Hercules I have heard of was known for courage and honor.

(beat)

What changed you?

HERCULES

What you heard was a legend. What you see is real. I am a mercenary.

(beat)

Your son should worship someone else.

Shaking her head, Ergenia walks off. Hercules sits by the fire. We pull away to reveal that, even surrounded by an ENTIRE ARMY, Hercules is isolated. The campfire is his island. We hear what sounds like HIS HEARTBEAT -- THUMP THUMP --

EXT. TRAINING FIELDS - DAY

ANGLE ON HERCULES' OLIVE-WOOD CLUB -- banging on a shield -- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP -- creating a drill-sergeant's rhythm as --

-- the troops march locked in a shield-wall. Hercules inspects them. He notices one SOLDIER trying to hide his face. Hercules reaches into the formation, fishes the soldier out.

IT IS IOLAUS.

HERCULES

Your place is beside Lord Cotys. In
the back of the line.

IOLAUS

I've been giving it a lot of thought.
I really feel I am ready to fight --

HERCULES

Back of the line.

Deflated, Iolaus storms off -- aware Autolycus is sneering at him as he passes. Hercules resumes riling the troops.

HERCULES

The shield-wall is your home and
shelter. When you sleep, the wall
will be your blanket. Go take a piss,
and the wall goes with you.

Amphiaraus and Tydeus march alongside the troops in battle armor. Atalanta wears only leather. Completely unprotected.

HERCULES

You will live in the shield-wall and
you will die in the shield-wall -- but
you will never ever break formation.

ANGLE ON THE RAMPARTS -- Ergenia, her hand on Arius' shoulder, watches them go. Arius wears the lion tooth around his neck.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE BESSI SETTLEMENT - THRACIAN PLAINS - DAY

Hercules advances, his chariot leading the army. Abruptly, he raises his hand. The entire company halts. Slowly, Hercules dismounts his chariot. Cotys climbs off his horse. Together, they move forward. As we REVEAL what caused them to stop --

A HEAD ON A SPIKE.

Cotys' eyes move over a heart-rending sight as he chokes out --

COTYS

We are too late.

REVERSE ANGLE -- a vast barren field littered with BODIES. Amphiaraus is ever calm, as if expecting this.

AMPHIARAUS

The lion and the crow... they cross
fields of corpses...

EXT. BESSI SETTLEMENT - DAY

The village itself, a cluster of THATCHED HUTS and ANIMAL PENS built near a RIVER.

All empty, deserted. But the occupants have not left. Their CORPSES lie scattered around the village.

Hercules and his companions slowly investigate on foot. The Thracian troops following.

TIGHT ON TYDEUS -- his lips twitching in a jittery smile -- but his eyes are different -- even he is shaken by the carnage.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- studying a head on a spike. Rotted, hardly more than a skull. He frowns --

HERCULES
Something is wrong. This head is
rotted, weeks old at least. But the
bodies are fresh.

Hercules indicates the corpses strewn around the village. He scans his surroundings... assembling the puzzle. And then notices -- a FLY landing on a corpse's face.

THE "CORPSE"'S NOSE TWITCHES.

Hercules grabs his club -- his comrades reach for their weapons -- an ULULATING CRY fills the village -- A SIGNAL.

THE BESSI "CORPSES" RISE TO THEIR FEET.

They have been playing dead to lure the army into a trap. And not just the dead -- the EARTH PEELES BACK to reveal MORE BESSI hiding in shallow ditches -- GRASS PULLS AWAY as EVEN MORE BESSI emerge from camouflaged foxholes.

Our heroes find themselves surrounded by a fighting force doubling their own. Autolycus sighs, resigned --

AUTOLYCUS
Aaaand we have walked into a trap.

The Bessi wear no armor -- only high furred boots and leather skirts. Their bare skin is tattooed in thick black symbols.

At the sight of the enemy, Cotys' personal guards circle around Cotys and Iolaus, keeping them relatively safe.

THE BESSI ARMY has no organization; it's just a mad dash of thousands of curved sickles from all sides -- Hercules points with his club, dolling out orders to confused soldiers --

HERCULES
Form a square. Four shield-walls will
push out twenty yards and lock in to
defend the center.

Frightened, Cotys' army scrambles to get in position. By contrast, Hercules and his comrades are completely calm.

Atalanta even kneels in the grass and bows her head to pray --

ATALANTA

Lady Artemis, if I am to fall, let it
be with courage and honor...

AUTOLYCUS

Be a dear, Atalanta, and remind your
goddess that not all of your friends
are so eager to meet her.

THE BESSI LEADER, a seven-and-a-half-foot giant charges forward
through the flood of his warriors -- muscled body is tattooed
head-to-toe in strange symbols -- carries a two-handed sickle.

Autolycus draws his BLADES, spinning them in his palms -- Tydeus
preps his axes -- Amphiaraus readies his spear -- Hercules
wields his club, back to back with Amphiaraus --

HERCULES

Is this the moment of your death?

AMPHIARAUS

My time has not come yet.

(beat)

But I am not too sure about yours.

HERCULES

Comforting.

A SHORT BESSI WARRIOR reaches our heroes' ranks first -- going
straight for Atalanta -- she is still praying --

-- the Bessi charges, shrieking -- as if she had all the time in
the world, Atalanta finishes her prayer, then calmly stands --

AND IMPALES THE BESSI AT THE SHARP EDGE OF HER BOW.

Hercules nods to his comrades as he draws his LION COWL up over
his head like a war helmet. Shouts to his companions --

HERCULES

Light feet. Heavy hands.

Hercules charges forward and meets the Bessi leader in the field
of battle. A SMASH as club meets sickle -- ANOTHER SMASH as
Hercules' armor meets the giant's body.

Hercules is hurled back.

The Bessi giant is powerful. Hercules thinks fast, grabs a
FALLEN ARROW, snaps off its ARROWHEAD and hides it in his hand.

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- catching on to Hercules' plan, he grabs the
Thracian soldier nearest to him and whispers --

IOLAUS

Hercules' fists have been dipped in
the blood of the Hydra, lethal to
anyone but him. Watch.

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- the TIP OF THE ARROWHEAD held between his
fingers like brass knuckles, he takes on the giant.

Evading a swing of the scythe, Hercules punches -- the arrowhead
concealed in his hand gashing the giant's face.

ANGLE ON IOLAUS AND THE THRACIAN -- the soldier reacts as it
seems that Hercules's punch cuts like a sword.

Hercules lands more blows on the Bessi -- his abdomen, his
chest, his neck -- everywhere Hercules strikes, a wound opens.

HERCULES LANDS A FINAL BLOW TO THE GIANT'S THROAT.

He topples, dead. To the world, it looks as if Hercules just
slew a man with his bare fists.

Iolaus beams. The Thracian is invigorated by what he has seen --
whispers to the man beside him --

THRACIAN SOLDIER #1

Did you see? Hercules uses the...

-- who whispers to the man next to him --

THRACIAN SOLDIER #2

...Hydra's venom, lethal to touch...

-- who passes it on to the man next to him --

THRACIAN SOLDIER #3

...the gods fight on our side.

-- the story spreading like wildfire through the ranks,
Hercules' name becoming a war-chant --

THRACIAN SOLDIERS

Hercules. Hercules.

Iolaus smiles. His words just as lethal as any sword.

ANGLE ON THE ARMY -- Sitacles raises his spear -- the shield-
wall advances, four shield-walls marching out of the center --
kinda shaky, but holding it together --

Hercules leaps into his chariot's cab -- CRACKS the reins --
the chariot launches FORWARD -- TWO MORE CHARIOTS follow -- one
driven by Amphiaraus with Tydeus inside, the other by Autolycus
-- Atalanta remains on foot to begin long-range archery attacks.

OUR HEROES' CHARIOTS EAT UP THE DISTANCE TO THE BESSI LINES --
AND PLOW IN, CHEWING UP DOZENS OF ENEMIES UNDER THEIR WHEELS.

Hercules swings his club -- it makes a deep "WHOOSH" as it
travels -- THUD THUD THUD -- the club drops Bessi like flies.
Hercules calls out as if unleashing an animal --

HERCULES
Tydeus. Kill.

ANGLE ON TYDEUS -- in the cab of Amphiaraus' chariot, Tydeus
INHALES and EXHALES rapidly, winding himself into a mad rage.
Poking his mouth up over the gold armor plate, Tydeus cackles --
then runs up the chariot's bow and leaps out over the Bessi.

Like a human missile, he lands amidst the ranks of the enemy,
axes drawn -- and scatters them, chopping in an iron tempest --

-- our heroes' chariots burst out the other side of the Bessi
army, leaving a wake of dead behind them.

AND NOW THE SHIELD-WALL OF COTYS' TROOPS MEETS THE BESSI RANKS.

Thousands of shields and spears SHIVER and RATTLE -- Cotys'
soldiers forget their brief training as they devolve into
brawling dogs, just like their enemy --

ON HERCULES AND HIS COMPANIONS -- they dismount their chariots
to join the frantic, scattered melee on foot --

Amphiaraus cuts and whirls with his SPEAR, using it to impale,
slash and slice, the spear an extension of his body --

Autolycus sees a DOZEN BESSI charge him -- he shrugs his cloak
over his shoulders, hiding his body behind it -- just as the
Bessi reach him, Autolycus throws open his cloak --

LIKE A MODERN GRENADE SHOOTING SHRAPNEL, AUTOLYCUS HURLS
HANDFULS OF BLADED WEAPONS, TAKING OUT THE BESSI.

ANGLE ON ATALANTA -- charging toward the melee, every arrow
finding a throat -- she dives into the Bessi ranks, using her
sharp bow as a sword -- bashing, cutting, slashing the enemy --

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- adjusting settings on his spear' handle,
causing different blades and spikes to snap out of the head --
finally using it to skewer a Bessi sneaking on Tydeus --

ANGLE ON TYDEUS -- eyes shot red with insane bloodlust, Tydeus
deflects an enemy blade with one axe, hacks with the other --

Another Bessi charges Tydeus -- but is knocked off his feet when
the DEAD BODY OF A THIRD BESSI hits him --

AS HERCULES CARVES THROUGH THE ENEMY, USING HIS CLUB TO BAT
BODIES OUT OF HIS PATH.

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- crouching between TWO SOLDIERS, the battle raging around him -- yet still he takes notes with his quill and parchment, like a modern war-correspondent.

IOLAUS

Look -- even the living dead are no
match for Hercules.

The soldiers around Iolaus watch in awe as Hercules advances on a Bessi -- the enemy seizes a dead soldier's shield emblazoned with a crow -- Hercules brings his foot down on a fallen spear causing it to flip up like a lever --

KNOCKING THE SHIELD OUT OF THE BESSI'S GRASP.

The Bessi gapes, unprotected. The last thing he sees is Hercules' club coming down --

SPLAT! Iolaus and the soldiers cringe at the mess.

ON THE CHARIOTS -- remounted, Amphiaraus and Autolycus run down remaining resistance in their chariots --

Hercules lowers his lion pelt, mops sweat off his face. And pauses. A FIGURE stands in the horizon. From this distance --

THE FIGURE LOOKS PART MAN, PART HORSE.

Now that the fighting is over, Cotys and Iolaus join Hercules.

COTYS

Rhesus.

IOLAUS

(stunned)

He does appear to be a Centaur.

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- our hero is skeptical as he glimpses the villain for the first time.

HERCULES

Appearances can be deceiving.

TIGHT ON RHESUS -- all we see are his eyes -- filled with rage at the failure of his ambush.

Turning his equine body, Rhesus disappears over the horizon.

EXT. BESSI SETTLEMENT - LATER

A CROW soars across the red heavens... ominously, it descends OVER THE BATTLEFIELD, which is littered with broken spears, shields, helmets and swords. Bodies tangled with one another.

The crow lands. Feasts.

Atalanta and Iolaus walk through the brutal aftermath. Iolaus is being uncharacteristically silent.

ATALANTA

Did an enemy snip your tongue?

IOLAUS

Sometimes words fail even me.

ANGLE ON SITACLES -- helmet off, sweat drenching his face as he stares at the dead from his army. Furious, he glares at PHINEUS and HIS SCOUTS. They stand, shell-shocked.

Autolycus approaches Sitacles while SCRAPING a whetstone down a disc-shaped THROWING BLADE. He spins it between passes.

AUTOLYCUS

General Sitacles. I suggest your scouts need a refresher course on HOW TO KEEP THEIR DAMNED EYES OPEN. Next time, they might actually see the enormous army lurking in wait for us.

Autolycus walks away, still SHARPENING his throwing blade. SCRAAAAAPE! He meets Hercules at the edge of the battlefield. Autolycus registers Hercules' grim expression.

AUTOLYCUS

That look reminds me of a ferocious youth I once trained with.

HERCULES

These recruits were not ready for war.

AUTOLYCUS

Then we make them ready. I have plans for the future. And leaving my bones in Thrace does not fit into them.

EXT. BESSI SETTLEMENT - DUSK

BESSI PRISONERS. On their knees, hands and feet bound. Yet heads high in defiance. Cotys' troops guarding them. Cotys circles them, Hercules and his companions looking on.

COTYS

How did Rhesus deceive you into serving him? Well?

(off their silence)

Someone had best answer. Or I will feed you to my Cyclops.

Hercules exchanges a scoffing look with Autolycus: "a Cyclops?! Really?!" Seeing the prisoners' fear, he plays along --

HERCULES

Yes, the one-eyed giant is going to get you.

YOUNG BESSI CAPTIVE

Lord Rhesus is our protector... we will not betray him...

Sitacles shakes his head, whispers to Hercules --

SITACLES

Rhesus' sorcery clouded their minds.

COTYS

Your protector?! You are the Bessi.
You bow to no man.

Enraged, Cotys draws his axe and seems about to swing it at the prisoners. In a flash, Hercules seizes Cotys by the wrist.

SWORDS ARE DRAWN -- by Cotys' personal guards.

WEAPONS ARE DRAWN -- by Hercules' companions.

For a tense beat, allies eye each other warily. Cotys looks furious at Hercules' hand gripping his own.

The moment passes. Cotys' arm goes limp, lowering the axe. He motions his guards to stand down. Hercules releases him.

COTYS

Forgive me. But I am bitter. We came to help them, to save them. Instead, they killed so many of us...

(then, driven)

Not their fault. Rhesus. This is his doing. I want him dead. He cost me a thousand soldiers.

HERCULES

You don't have any soldiers.

Cotys is taken aback. Not used to being spoken to this way.

HERCULES

You have men. Brave men. Loyal men. But untrained, unprepared for combat. Even a sword, once forged, needs to be tempered before it cuts.

(beat)

Give me time to make soldiers.

Beat. Cotys nods, curtly. Satisfied, Hercules turns away. And Cotys reacts -- A WOUND RUNS ACROSS HERCULES' BACK. Hurriedly, Iolaus covers the injury with Hercules' lion pelt.

IOLAUS
Come, uncle. Before your loyal army
sees you bleed like a mortal.

Iolaus helps the injured Hercules off the field.

EXT. BESSI SETTLEMENT - NIGHT

Hercules, aching from his injury, sits outside his TENT as DOZENS OF CHARIOTS arrive bringing NURSES from Cotys' citadel. Ergenia steps off one of the chariots. Cotys greets her.

ERGENIA
Father. Congratulations on a great
victory. You must be proud.

Cotys does not miss the sarcasm in her voice.

COTYS
I am, actually. Do you know why?
Every victory I win keeps our people
safe from danger.
(beat)
And keeps your son from danger.

Ergenia gives her father a look as she walks away.

ERGENIA
Excuse me. The injured need my help.

INT. FIELD HOSPICE TENT - NIGHT

Hercules sits on a stool at the center of his hut while Ergenia applies NOXIOUS SALVES from her apothecary to his shoulder and back. If this is painful, Hercules gives no indication.

ERGENIA
A salve of mint, chamomile and clay to
stop the bleeding. Hollyhock and
rosemary to seal the wound.

Ergenia bandages the wound, then offers Hercules a CUP OF BREW. He sniffs it and grimaces.

HERCULES
What is this?

ERGENIA
Extract of lithops. For the pain.

HERCULES
I don't need it.

Hercules returns the cup. Ergenia smiles wryly.

ERGENIA

Forgive me, I forgot. No mortal can
harm Hercules. And the Nemean lion's
hide is... indestructible.

Ergenia reaches over to where Hercules's body armor and the hide
of the Nemean lion hang on a post. She holds up the hide --
REVEALING A GASH WHERE THE ENEMY SWORD STRUCK.

Hercules is silent. Ergenia circles him.

ERGENIA

The lithop plant comes from the land
of the Nubians. When mature, it takes
on the appearance of a stone to fool
hungry animals. Its myth protects it.
But also keeps life from touching it.

Again, Ergenia offers the cup.

ERGENIA

Drink... son of Zeus.

Hercules takes it, drinks the brew. Then --

HERCULES

Where is Arius' father?

ERGENIA

He was taken by the gods before my son
saw daylight. I miss him to this day.
(beat)
But as long as I have Arius, I do not
despair. He is a good boy. Some day,
he will make a fine king.

A beat. And then --

HERCULES

I never knew my father.
(beat)
The only thing I can say for him is...
he must have been a very strong man.

Hercules looks at his arms -- muscles like iron, bones of steel.
Ergenia takes Hercules' hand.

ERGENIA

We place so much hope on children. We
look to them to repair all our
mistakes and redeem all our sins.

Hercules smiles, but he is dying inside. He stands.

HERCULES
Thank you for your care. But my
wounds do not heal so easily.

Thoughtfully, Ergenia watches after Hercules as he walks out.

EXT. FIELD HOSPICE TENT - CONTINUOUS

The moment Hercules is alone, his facade of calm shatters. Grief twists his features. He storms away from the camp and his comrades -- he loses himself in the deserted Bessi village --

EXT. BESSI SETTLEMENT - CONTINUOUS

-- the homes are empty, deserted -- their occupants dead or fled
-- as Hercules walks, his BLOOD POUNDS IN HIS SKULL.

HERCULES' P.O.V. -- *the village begins to twist and warp -- reality peels away -- flashes of memories -- MEGARA AND THE CHILDREN DEAD, BLOODIED -- a SHAPE moves over their corpses -- a MONSTROUS SHADOW OF A BEAST WITH THREE CANINE HEADS --*

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- he sees the SHADOW OF THE CERBERUS rising before him as he saw it in his dream -- THREE CANINE HEADS ready to snap. With a cry of rage, Hercules swings his fist --

THE SHADOW DISSIPATES.

Hercules drops to his knees. Breathing heavily.

A HAND TOUCHES HIS SHOULDER.

Hercules looks up. Finds Tydeus standing over him. Tydeus, the only one as messed up as he is. Trying to cheer Hercules up, Tydeus clasps the axes around his belt. Hercules musters a smile, the meaning clear.

HERCULES
You're right... we have work to do...

A noise begins. Steel meeting steel... CLANK...

INT. FORGE - NIGHT

... CLANK... CLANK... the HISSES of hot iron QUENCHED in water... stone GRINDING against bronze...

IOLAUS (V.O.)
When Hercules gives an order, even the gods listen. Zeus' master ironsmith, Hephaestus, lights his forge and his hammer begins to fall...

MOLTEN HOT IRON is drawn from a forge -- Placed on an anvil -- THE SMITH'S HAMMER descends -- CLANK!

THE PROFILE OF HERCULES WEARING THE LION COWL -- IS IMPRINTED ON
SWORDS, SHIELDS AND HELMETS.

EXT. BESSI SETTLEMENT - DAY

The Bessi settlement is converted into a munitions factory --
silos emptied out of bags of grain which are thrown into the
street for ants to feast on -- they are transformed into --

STONE MILLS -- IRONSMITHS -- FORGES -- AS ARMORERS forge spears,
swords, armor, helmets.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
As molten steel is forged into swords,
men are forged into soldiers.

ANGLE ON THRACIAN SOLDIERS -- under Autolycus' drill-sergeant
tutoring, they train -- run -- lift weights -- spar -- march --

IOLAUS (V.O.)
They carry the shield of Hercules --

ANGLE ON A SHIELD BEARING THE LION SIGIL -- it flies up to block
a blow from Hercules' club -- THUD -- the shield lowers
revealing a very relieved Phineus.

PHINEUS
It's lighter.

IOLAUS
Infused with souls of the Stymphalian
birds from Hercules' sixth labor.

The Thracians react in awe and eagerly take up their new
shields. Cotys gives Hercules a knowing look.

COTYS
Spirits of birds?

HERCULES
Wood -- with a layer of bronze
hammered onto the surface.

ANGLE ON A BRONZE HELMET -- it has been shaped to look like THE
HEAD OF A LION in tribute to Hercules' cowl. The helmet lowers
on a THRACIAN SOLDIER'S HEAD.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
They wear the helmet of Hercules --

As soon as the helmet settles on the soldier's head -- HIS FACE
DISAPPEARS. The helmet hides his features in shadow. Hercules
studies the effect with satisfaction. The soldier protests --

THRACIAN SOLDIER
It covers my whole face.

IOLAUS
 Forged after Hercules' very own helmet
 when he defeated the demon Geryon in
 his tenth labor.

Cotys takes Hercules aside --

COTYS
 An intimidation tactic...

HERCULES
 (nods)
 A human face betrays fear. Conceal
 the face... conceal the fear.

Cotys smiles, impressed.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
 They wear the armor of Hercules --

ANGLE ON SITACLES -- holding up a NEW ARMOR. The armor is RED --
 and MADE OF LEATHER. Sitacles derides it to Cotys and Hercules.

SITACLES
Leather armor? This is "superior
 Athenian technology?" Lord Cotys, our
 men will be skewered like pigs.

Autolycus tosses a SPEAR to Hercules -- who, without missing a
 beat, thrusts at Sitacles. Startled, Sitacles uses the leather
 armor to protect himself.

THE SPEAR DOES NOT PENETRATE THE ARMOR.

Soldiers react in disbelief. Iolaus is quick to explain --

IOLAUS
 Hewn from the skin of the Erymanthian
 Boar from Hercules' third labor.

Cotys inspects the armor. Not a scratch on its surface.
 Hercules privately gives him the real explanation --

HERCULES
 "Linethorax." Layers of linen and
 leather with a resin core to slow your
 enemy's blade.

COTYS
 Remarkable. But why red? Won't it
 offer a target on the battlefield?

AUTOLYCUS
 It will also conceal blood. What does
 not bleed cannot be defeated.

COTYS

Make more.

ANGLE ON THRACIAN TROOPS -- stripping the Bessi village of anything metallic -- pitchforks, scythes, plows --

ANGLE ON THE HEAT OF FORGES -- melting the farming tools down, the molten steel pouring into molds -- cooling -- giving birth to swords, spears, axes -- ALL BRANDED WITH THE LION COWL.

Fields that formerly grew wheat and vegetables are now the training ground for Cotys' army.

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- tutoring soldiers on handling javelins.

ANGLE ON ATALANTA -- mentoring troops on archery.

ANGLE ON TYDEUS -- whipping his axes around in a wild frenzy while his students cower in terror.

ANGLE ON ERGENIA -- from her field HOSPICE tent, she grimly watches the preparations for combat. Glances at her nurses --

ERGENIA

Keep the apothecary stocked. We are going to be busy.

EXT. BESSI FARMLAND - DAY

ANGLE ON TYDEUS -- standing in the river, he plunges his hands fast as lightning and emerges with TWO FISH for lunch.

Hercules and Autolycus keep an eye on Tydeus from the shore while TROOPS train in the fields beyond them.

AUTOLYCUS

Tydeus looks almost human.

HERCULES

He has a good heart. All it needs is some peace and it will show itself.

AUTOLYCUS

Better not show itself too soon. We still need him to kill people.

Iolaus approaches with a TRIO OF ATHENIAN REFUGEES. All three men are star-struck. Hercules' companions gather round to hear as Iolaus prods the leader of the refugees --

IOLAUS

Tell them what you told me.

ATHENIAN REFUGEE #1

(in awe)

Hercules...

IOLAUS

Yes, yes, it's Hercules -- greatest
moment of your life, something to tell
the grandchildren -- speak.

ATHENIAN REFUGEE #1

We are Athenians, my lord...

HERCULES

Long way from home.

ATHENIAN REFUGEE #1

Things have changed in Athens. King
Eurystheus has been overthrown.

Hercules reacts, surprised. Autolycus bursts out laughing --

AUTOLYCUS

The perfumed dandy, having to wallow
in shit along with the rest of us.
Now that I would pay to see.

IOLAUS

Wonder what became of his rare birds.

ATALANTA

I'm sure they were delicious.

ATHENIAN REFUGEE #2

The throne is vacant... the nobles are
quarreling over it... it is civil war.
We did not want to fight our brothers
-- so we fled for barbarian lands.

HERCULES

You are welcome to join us if you
wish. Get something to eat.

The three men bow their heads and withdraw. Hercules' mind
races with the implications. Iolaus whispers in his ear --

IOLAUS

No more king means no more exile.
Uncle... we can go home.

HERCULES

Home?

The very word hurts. Hercules hides his pain behind a smile.

HERCULES

You will return to Athens, Iolaus.
Once this war has been won and we are
paid. But not a moment sooner.

Hercules picks up his club. Beats on a shield. THUMP--THUMP--

EXT. PLAINS OF THRACE - DAWN

-- THUMP -- THE FRONT LINE OF COTYS' ARMY MARCHES. Bronze LION HELMETS and LION-HEADED SHIELDS. Blood-red LINOTHORAX ARMOR. SPEARS with BRONZE HEADS. IRON SHORT-SWORDS. A fierce force.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
 Ten thousand warriors led by a living
 demi-god march to meet Thrace's
 greatest evil.

Iolaus marches beside the ranks, whispering to individual soldiers, knowing the legend will spread from mouth to mouth --

IOLAUS
 No matter the terrors Hera or her
 minion Rhesus can think up to throw at
 us, we are prepared...

Three thousand men. Three thousand links that compose a singular chain; a uniform symphony of RATTLING BRONZE. Unstoppable.

IOLAUS (V.O.)
 Prepared for war. Prepared for death.
Prepared for glory.

EXT. EASTERN THRACE - DAY (AERIAL VIEW)

We soar over the foreboding peaks of MOUNT ASTICUS -- the BLACK SEA glistens in the east, DENSE FORESTS in the south. Cutting down the middle, like a river of bronze and leather and flesh, the army flows. Brandishing a new sigil: THE LION COWL.

EXT. BORDERS OF THE ISTROS FOREST - NIGHT (AERIAL VIEW)

TENTS as far as the eye can see. Peppered by the warm glow of CAMPFIRES. Men spar, repair armor and weapons.

INT. COTYS' TENT - NIGHT

Phineus rolls out a MAP painted on animal hide. Hercules and his companions, Cotys and Sitacles cluster to study it. Autolycus sticks a throwing blade in a section of the map.

AUTOLYCUS
 Rhesus is here. Nearly close enough
 to stick a blade between his ribs.

HERCULES
 What evidence have you seen?

PHINEUS
 Centaurs. Hundreds of them.

HERCULES
 Superstitions...

AUTOLYCUS

We saw shadows in the night.

Cotys stares at the map, convinced of his impending victory.

COTYS

So. The beast is finally cornered.

Hercules examines the map, which shows a DENSE FOREST standing between them, some mountains and the Black Sea.

HERCULES

Unless we are playing into his hands.
A forest means we'd have to abandon
the chariots and continue on foot.
Good place to launch an ambush --

AUTOLYCUS

-- bad place to be caught in one.
It's a gamble.

SITACLES

From what I hear, you like to gamble.

AUTOLYCUS

Not with my life.

Seeing Hercules' hesitation, Cotys encourages him --

COTYS

Look at everything you have achieved.
My men passed through fire and are
forged in your image. At this time,
in this place, we can put an end to
Rhesus and his reign of terror.
(beat)
Hercules... my friend... you will be
forever known as "Champion of Thrace."

The words ring familiar. Hercules sets his jaw.

EXT. BORDERS OF THE ISTROS FOREST - NIGHT

Autolycus, Tydeus, Iolaus and Amphiaraus sit by a fire listening to FLUTE MUSIC. The flute player is Atalanta revealing a softer side beyond her skill at war. They react as Ergenia approaches.

ERGENIA

Room for one more in your company?

Autolycus stands, makes space for her.

AUTOLYCUS

It would be a pleasure having female
companionship for a change. Atalanta
does not quite count. No offence.

Atalanta shrugs: "*none taken.*" Ergenia sits beside Autolycus.

ERGENIA
Where is Hercules?

AUTOLYCUS
Inspecting troops, weapons, plans. He
never rests before a battle.

Ergenia looks over to Iolaus. She seems troubled.

ERGENIA
You are a famed storyteller, Iolaus.
Grace me with a story.

IOLAUS
Any particular subject, my lady?

ERGENIA
Murder. Of a woman and her three
children.

The companions go still. Dead silence. Iolaus whispers --

IOLAUS
That is not a tale for fair ears.

ERGENIA
Is it true?
(beat)
Did Hercules slaughter his own family?

ATALANTA
(angry)
Who said so?

ERGENIA
The new Athenian recruits. They tell
me this is the reason he was exiled
from Athens.

Iolaus glances at the others, then begins --

IOLAUS
Hercules had completed a labor and
returned home. But Hera would not
allow him to live in peace.

ERGENIA
No myths. I want the truth.

IOLAUS
(persists)
Hera could not harm Hercules as long
as he was performing his labors. So
she harmed those he loved the most.

ERGENIA

Enough.

(to the others)

Will anyone tell me what really happened?

AUTOLYCUS

No one knows. Not for sure.

(beat)

We found Hercules alone. Megara and the children were dead. He remembers nothing.

Ergenia absorbs this.

ERGENIA

Tell me, Autolycus. Do you believe he is innocent?

AUTOLYCUS

I believe...

(beat)

I believe Hercules is the finest man I have ever known. And my friend. He saved my hide many times.

Ergenia's gaze travels around the fire, touching on each of the companions as they remember...

ATALANTA

Risked his life to help me avenge the slaughter of my sisters...

IOLAUS

He is my kin, my blood...

(beat)

Took Tydeus in when everyone else saw nothing but a wild animal...

Ergenia studies Tydeus, looks into his spooky eyes -- then reacts as Amphiaraus, who has remained silent until now, speaks.

AMPHIARAUS

Whatever the truth, the death of his loved ones haunts Hercules. Only the gods can help him find peace.

Autolycus grimaces, placing no hope in superstitions.

AUTOLYCUS

Not the thirteenth labor again...

AMPHIARAUS

The unfinished labor ordained by Zeus. If Hercules overcomes the beast that haunts him... he will find peace.

ERGENIA

"The beast that haunts him...?"

AMPHIARAUS

Hercules has told me that when he
shuts his eyes he sometimes sees
Cerberus... the guardian of the dead.

We PUSH IN TIGHT ON AMPHIARAUS -- on his wide, blue eyes looking
into the distance. But what do they see?

DISSOLVE TO:

THE CRESCENT MOON

Hanging in the sky above a dense forest.

EXT. OUTSIDE ISTROS FOREST - NIGHT

ANGLE ON A SPIDER'S WEB -- stretching across the branches of a
tree, moonlight glistening off the strands. Through the web, we
see Hercules and the troops advancing. A FAT SPIDER crawls
across the web as if devouring the men.

ANGLE ON THE FOREST -- trees side by side like prison bars.
Thick. Dense. Dwarfing even Hercules as he stands with Iolaus.

HERCULES

When the battle begins, stay close to
Cotys. If I fall... make your escape.
Return to Athens.

IOLAUS

(a plea)
Let me fight by your side.

Hercules looks at Iolaus, sees how badly Iolaus wants to join
him. Hercules takes a deep breath.

HERCULES

Iolaus, I know you are brave and loyal
and true but...

IOLAUS

Then why not give me a chance? We
share the same blood --

HERCULES

And I will not see it shed.

With a wave of his hand, Hercules leads the army into the forest
on foot. Dejected, Iolaus watches the troops pass him.

EXT. ISTROS FOREST - NIGHT

Moonlight can barely penetrate the thick branches. Shafts of silver light barely filter through. Cotys is protected by his personal guard, Iolaus by his side.

Hercules walks at the head of the line with Amphiaraus. With silent hand gestures, Hercules directs the troops -- when to spread out, when to advance. Amphiaraus pauses.

AMPHIARAUS

The gates of Hades are open...

Hercules looks at Amphiaraus. Does not mock him. He senses the otherworldly nature of this place. He squints into the night. And sees faint GLINTS moving quickly amidst the trees --

Hercules raises his hand. The entire company halts. Silence -- except for their pounding hearts.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- staring into the dark -- leaning forward --

HERCULES' P.O.V. -- *The CERBERUS EXPLODES OUT OF THE TREES -- snarling, all three heads snapping at Hercules' face --*

Instinctively, Hercules swings his club --

CRUNCH. THE CLUB MAKES CONTACT.

Not with a beast but a MAN -- now a very dead man. He crumples at Hercules's feet. Every inch of him is PAINTED BLACK. Black leather armor. A black wooden club. A SILENT ASSASSIN.

Hercules shouts a warning to his troops --

HERCULES

The night is alive.

Scores of SILENT ASSASSINS converge on the army -- cloaked in black cloth and leather -- wielding weapons of bronze and iron enamelled in a SMOOTH MATTE BLACK that reflects no light --

-- the soldiers try to engage the Silent Assassins, but they have trouble finding them in the dark -- the bronze-armored troops glimmer in the moonlight, making them easy targets --

-- men die right and left in TOTAL SILENCE -- the assassins moving on to the next target, depleting the ranks --

HERCULES

Shield-wall.

The troops remained disciplined -- they LOCK together, strength in their numbers: shields locked, individual spears thrust forward, skewering the Silent Assassins when they appear --

The shield-wall is impenetrable to the mobile assassins -- while Hercules engages them, his club striking with accuracy --

-- Amphiaraus, whose blue gaze seems to penetrate the dark, skewers assassins with his spear -- but this is taking too long -- Hercules looks around at the vast number of trees --

A plan forms. He turns to Amphiaraus.

HERCULES

We need fire.

ISTROS FOREST - MOMENTS LATER

While the soldiers continue engaging the assassins, Hercules, Amphiaraus and a handful of troops fan out carrying LIT TORCHES. Running on either side of the conflict, they ignite the trees --

-- the sudden blazes ILLUMINATE the forest, exposing the Silent Assassins where they were once hidden -- Cotys' archers fire arrows with deadly accuracy --

-- cut down, the Silent Assassins retreat -- the soldiers pursuing as the trees explode into a furnace behind them.

EXT. FOOTHILLS OF MOUNT ASTICUS - FIRST LIGHT

Dawn. Over THICK CLOUDS OF SMOKE billowing from the inferno. TWO HUNDRED SILENT ASSASSINS race out of the BURNING FOREST.

Hercules pursues, the army behind him, as if born from the flames themselves. Ahead, the monstrous Mount Asticus rises like an unbreakable granite wall.

As the Silent Assassins flee, SHAPES move in the smoke wafting from the forest. Hercules pauses. He hears HORSE HOOVES. A HORN BLOWS -- AHH-WHOOOOOOOOOO!

A CLUSTER OF SILHOUETTES inch forward from the smoke... HORSES -- WITH THE UPPER BODIES OF HUMANS.

The breath catches in Iolaus' throat. He chokes out the word:

IOLAUS

Centaurs. They're real.

Panic in the ranks. The kind of fear only the supernatural can cause. Hercules, completely cool, shouts --

HERCULES

Hold position. Look at me. Look at me. Am I afraid?

He is not. And when the troops see their leader fearless, they too grow courage. They organize themselves into a shield-wall.

Cotys pushes forward through the wall to where Hercules stands with Iolaus and Amphiaraus. They watch as --

THE MORNING DAYLIGHT spills over the shadows, it reveals that they are not centaurs at all -- they are RIDERS ON HORSEBACK.

THEIR MUDDY AND BEDRAGGLED GARB CREATES THE ILLUSION OF CENTAURS -- BOTH RIDER AND HORSE WEAR UNIFORM ARMOR THAT BLENDS SEAMLESSLY MAKING IT SEEM LIKE THEIR TWO BODIES ARE ONE.

HERCULES

"Centaurus." Sometimes, I wonder if we truly share the same blood.

Iolaus reacts, annoyed at himself for being gullible. Hercules grins: "*just kidding.*" They watch as the leader of the riders lowers his horn. He carries a two-handed sword called RHOMPHAIA, its hilt shaped like a galloping horse.

This is **RHESUS**.

Hercules reacts, recognizing him as the figure in the horizon after the Bessi battle. Rhesus' clothes and armor are as worn down and grimy as those of his men. He looks like a guerilla fighter who has lived in woods and mountains.

Then he removes his helmet. Although rugged and unshaven, Rhesus is strikingly handsome. In his 30s, with golden hair that falls out over his shoulders.

The other "centaurs" on his flanks move in closer. Hercules observes in alarm. Not just a few horsemen but A CAVALRY.

And backing them up is a VAST ARMY comprised of Thracian tribes.

HERCULES

(to his men)

Get in close, keep their horsemen contained. If we give them room to charge, we're lost.

Rhesus rides out behind a wedge of LARGE BODYGUARDS for protection. He ceases his approach when he is fifty yards out from Hercules, Cotys and their army.

RHESUS

Lord Cotys. You have come looking for a fight. We are happy to oblige.

HERCULES

That's a relief. Shame if we came all this way for nothing.

RHESUS

Ah, Hercules. The Son of Zeus speaks. From the tales your jester...

(MORE)

RHESUS (CONT'D)

(eyes Iolaus)

...has been spreading, I expected you
to be nine feet tall. And half lion.
Your legend ends here.

Rhesus' army ROARS in support. Sitacles turns to Cotys --

SITACLES

Their minds are gone, my lord. Rhesus
has bewitched them.

RHESUS

There is no magic. I only speak for
the men of Thrace.

And we see what a collection of different tribes and cultures
this coalition holds -- fire-worshipping shamans, nature-armored
in wicker and carrying flammable, tar-soaked arrows.

RHESUS

Even those who once marched and fought
for Lord Cotys.

Out from Rhesus' ranks emerge the SILENT ASSASSINS. Their
leader removes the black leather mask covering his face...

It's PHINEUS.

Cotys loses his composure at the betrayal --

COTYS

Traitors. The Cyclops will have you.

HERCULES

(to the troops)

Shield-wall.

The troops LOCK SHIELDS. Rhesus shouts --

RHESUS

Look around. You are surrounded. The
woods at your back, my men at your
front and Mount Asticus on your
flanks. Surrender now -- and we will
consider being merciful.

ANGLE ON THE TROOPS -- nervously eyeing the enemy army -- when
the EARTH SHAKES. HORSE HOOVES approach.

ANGLE ON RHESUS' RIGHT FLANK -- the tribal warriors react as a
CHARIOT explodes from the woods. Atalanta driving the horses.

MORE CHARIOTS roll up behind her, twenty in all, occupied by
heavily armored men from Cotys' army. They have travelled the
long way around the forest.

TIGHT ON RHESUS -- he looks behind -- ahead -- to his left --
HE IS COMPLETELY SURROUNDED.

Hercules offers him a murderous smirk.

HERCULES
That's right. A trap.

ANGLE ON THE CLIFFS OF MOUNT ASTICUS -- where Rhesus' JAVELIN-THROWERS await, each with a quiver of horse-headed javelins.

Autolycus creeps along a rocky outcropping. He is shrouded in a stone-colored cloak to camouflage him against the cliffs --

As he sneaks up on an UNSUSPECTING JAVELIN-THROWER, Autolycus palms a blade -- spins it -- zeroes in on the COIN PURSE hanging off the javelin-thrower's belt and SLICES.

The blade cuts the purse free while Autolycus pushes the javelin-thrower off the edge of the cliff, sending him screaming to his death. After a moment's thought, Autolycus opens the purse, fishes out a coin and tosses it after the dead man --

AUTOLYCUS
To pay the ferryman.

On Autolycus' signal, TWENTY MORE OF COTYS' SCOUTS, ALL CAMOUFLAGED IN GREY CLOAKS spring out and cut down the remaining JAVELIN-THROWERS or shove them off the cliffs.

ANGLE ON THE BATTLEFIELD -- for Rhesus, it is fight or die. He draws his *rhomphaia* and, rearing his horse, cries out --

RHESUS
ONE LAND! ONE THRACE!

The CALL IS ECHOED by the UNITED TRIBES OF THRACE before they charge on foot while Rhesus' men charge on horseback --

ANGLE ON COTYS -- the hopeful King of Thrace observes with a grim smile. His guards shepherd him to safety as --

-- Rhesus' horse-mounted men charge ahead of their leader, THUNDERING TOWARD Hercules --

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- he draws his olive-wood club and calmly turns to face his troops. SHOUTING over the ROARING DIN --

HERCULES
Before you lock shields with the man
who stands beside you, look at him --

The soldiers exchange glances with their brothers-in-arms.

HERCULES

Know that he is your brother. How you
fight for one another will determine
your fate today.

There's melancholy in Hercules... a look of inescapable duty...

HERCULES

Will it be death? Or victory?

FOUR THOUSAND SHIELDS LOCK TOGETHER AS ONE. The answer that
follows from the troops is unanimous --

THRACIAN SOLDIERS

VICTORY.

RHESUS' CHARGING CAVALRY is within yards of Hercules, but he
does not turn to face them. He nods to his army --

HERCULES

Then see it done.

NOW HERCULES TURNS. FACES THE CAVALRY.

A wave of riders stampede towards Hercules. He raises his club.
At his signal, the rear lines of the shield-wall fortify behind
the front, ANCHORING IT with their weight -- the horses are
getting closer -- closer -- closer -- just before impact --

HERCULES

Drop.

The front line of the shield-wall DROPS TO ITS KNEES, shields
and spears angled upward -- Hercules runs into the CAVALRY
CHARGE -- he places his hand on a charging HORSE'S NECK, using
it for support so he can vault high enough to SMASH THE RIDER.

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- he climbs a rocky outcropping and unfurls
a LEATHER BAG to reveal -- DOZENS AND DOZENS OF HIS SPEARS.

ANGLE ON SITACLES -- commanding his troops --

SITACLES

Archers.

Without ceasing its march, the advancing shield-wall OPENS,
revealing a LONGBOW ARCHER between every pair of shields ---

SITACLES

Loose.

THWIP-THWIP-THWIP-THWIP -- a THOUSAND ARROWS take flight as
Rhesus' cavalry charges the shield-wall -- like a modern
artillery fire, the arrows descend on the riders.

A THIRD OF RHESUS' CAVALRY IS DECIMATED.

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- hurling spear after spear --

ANGLE ON ATALANTA -- on her chariot, firing arrow after arrow --

Rhesus' cavalry is caught between SHIELD-WALL, CHARIOTS and BOMBARDMENT of spears and arrows. And it gets worse --

ANGLE ON AUTOLYCUS -- leading Cotys' scouts, they lie flat on rocky outcroppings overlooking the battle. On Autolycus' signal, the scouts draw THROWING BLADES. And loose.

OVERHEAD ANGLE -- Rhesus' horsed army is bogged down in the mire of the melee, just as Hercules surmised --

ANGLE ON RHESUS' RANKS -- seeing their cavalry in trouble, the foot soldiers counter-attack. HURL JAVELINS.

The javelins slice down on the shield-wall. Most bounce off the LION SIGIL SHIELDS. Not all. Every now and again, a Thracian soldier screams and dies, skewered.

And another soldier steps in to fill the gap in the shield-wall.

ANGLE ON COTYS AND IOLAUS -- safe at their vantage point, watching the battle -- Iolaus urging the army on --

IOLAUS

Look at Hera's work. To help Rhesus,
she sends all manner of evil at us.

ANGLE ON THE BATTLEFIELD -- among Rhesus' ranks, TRIBESMEN SMEARED IN DIRT FOR CAMOUFLAGE light TAR-SMEARED ARROWS AFLAME.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

Creatures made of Earth herself...
living wood and grass and dirt...

BURNING ARROWS shoot like comets to Cotys' ranks. Sitacles sees them coming, yells a warning --

SITACLES

Volley.

ANGLE ON ATALANTA -- looks at the small shield on her bow. Too small. Accepting her fate, she steps off her chariot. Closes her eyes. Dips back her head to bask in the hail of fire.

BURNING ARROW AFTER ARROW MISSES ATALANTA.

She stands tall, erect, in the burning rain -- an arrow even lances through her hanging locks of hair.

ATALANTA EMERGES UNSCATHED, AS IF DIVINELY PROTECTED.

ANGLE ON ATALANTA'S CHARIOT -- concealed in the rear, Tydeus inhales and exhales, inciting his berserker rage -- IN, OUT -- IN, OUT -- once he's got his adrenaline pumped --

HE LEAPS FROM THE CHARIOT AND STRAIGHT INTO COMBAT.

OVERHEAD ANGLE -- Tydeus cuts a bloody path through Rhesus' ranks displaying a rage terrifying even for him.

ANGLE ON ATALANTA -- having survived the rain of fire, she now enters the fray in up close hand-to-hand combat -- firing an arrow, hacking with her sharp bow, deflecting an enemy -- and repeating the process all over again --

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- SLOW MOTION -- Hercules smashes enemies with his club -- a RIDER rears his horse behind Hercules, moves to strike with his spear --

THE RIDER IS HIT BY ONE OF AMPHIARAUS' SPEARS.

BACK TO ACTION -- from his perch, Amphiaraus reacts -- if Hercules realizes how close he came to death, he does not show it. Keeps swinging the club -- WHOOSH! SMASH! CRACK!

Rhesus' riders draw BRONZE BOLOS -- they twirl them and THROW -- but the BOLOS GLANCE HARMLESSLY off the unmoving shield-wall -- Cotys' troops wait for Hercules' order --

HERCULES

Thrust.

THE SHIELD-WALL CLANGS TO ITS FEET -- SPEARS PEER THROUGH THE WALL OF ARMOR -- RHESUS' CAVALRY IS TORN TO SHREDS.

Rhesus' troops try to retaliate but their weapons glance off the SHIELD-WALL -- swords slash the LINOTHORAX ARMOR, but no blood can be seen -- the front line SOLDIERS in the shield-wall have their faces concealed in the shadows of their LION HEAD helmets.

THEY LOOK DEMONIC.

ANGLE ON RHESUS -- surveying the carnage in dismay -- beside him, his LIEUTENANT whispers --

LIEUTENANT

In the name of the gods, what has
Hercules brought --

Grimacing, Rhesus shakes his head.

ANGLE ON TYDEUS -- fighting alone at the center of Rhesus' main force, bodies piling around him -- TWENTY HORSEMEN encircle him.

So what does he do? He looks up and over his gilded mouthguard.

AND SPEAKS FOR THE FIRST TIME.

TYDEUS
Surrender. Or die.

The riders laugh, exchanging looks: *"he IS mad."*

ANGLE ON HERCULES AND AUTOLYCUS -- swap a look across the field of battle. *Did Tydeus just speak?*

ANGLE ON TYDEUS -- the riders' hesitation is all Tydeus needed -- he charges straight at the closest horse -- plants his foot on the horse's neck -- leaps --

BEHEADS THE RIDER AND OCCUPIES THE EMPTY SADDLE.

WHOOSH! -- Tydeus hacks the stunned riders on either side of him. This time, his opponents' faces go pale. The riders charge -- Tydeus happily takes them all on.

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- leading Cotys' army over a pile of dead horses and horsemen -- driving forward to reach Rhesus --

Rhesus' army is broken and failing -- his troops crash into one another in an undisciplined mess --

ANGLE ON RHESUS - looking around, recognizing the situation is hopeless -- he turns to his lieutenant --

RHESUS
Take all survivors and retreat through
the mountains.
(urgently)
Go.

Reluctant, the lieutenant waves his sword in the air --

LIEUTENANT
Retreat. Retreat.

Men on horses and on foot scramble to retreat back up through the mountain pass into the safety of Mount Asticus --

ANGLE ON COTYS AND IOLAUS -- seeing Rhesus routed, Cotys and his men break out in cries of joy. Iolaus cautions them --

IOLAUS
It is not over yet. Not until Rhesus
kneels.

ANGLE ON THE BATTLEFIELD -- Hercules and Rhesus see each other across the carnage -- Hercules on foot, Rhesus on horseback.

Rhesus charges -- Hercules has defeated riders a hundred times this day alone -- he swings his club --

BUT RHESUS SURPRISES HIM. SLIDES OFF THE REAR OF HIS HORSE.

Rhesus hits the ground and comes at Hercules with a two-handed swing from his *rhomphaia* --

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- can't help showing some admiration as the villain holds his ground against the hero --

IOLAUS

Rhesus has guts, I'll give him that.

Cotys grimaces, not willing to hear anything good about Rhesus.

ANGLE ON HERCULES AND RHESUS -- Rhesus feigns a strike at Hercules, riposting quickly and slicing an ear off the Nemean Lion cowl -- Hercules swings back --

-- Rhesus gracefully dips away and counters with a two handed horizontal swing of his *rhomphaia* -- Hercules evades --

THEN HEAD-BUTTS RHESUS THROUGH HIS HORSE-HEAD HELMET.

Woopy, Rhesus falls to the ground -- his world swims, he sees his men trying to ride to his rescue -- he waves them off --

RHESUS

Leave now. That is an order.

Rhesus' men hesitate -- then grudgingly turn their horses in retreat toward the pass through Mount Asticus --

ANGLE ON PHINEUS AND HIS ASSASSINS -- the final loose end in this battle -- Phineus and his assassins dart through the trees, hoping to catch up with Rhesus' retreating forces --

WHACK -- A BLADE CUTS DOWN AN ASSASSIN.

Phineus wheels about as -- WHACK WHACK WHACK -- the blades are coming out of nowhere, everywhere. In seconds, the assassins are dead. Phineus is last man standing. Autolycus steps into the open. Spinning a blade threateningly in his hand.

AUTOLYCUS

I suspect Cotys may pay a bonus for the pleasure of killing you himself.

EXT. FOOTHILLS OF MOUNT ASTICUS - DAY

Combat is over. Hercules stands over the reeling Rhesus. All around, Cotys' troops hold prisoners at sword-point. Autolycus shoves Phineus forward and kicks his legs out from under him. Cotys beckons Iolaus to approach and gawk at Rhesus.

COTYS

So we learn that Centaurs, like all monsters, exist only in myth.

RHESUS

There is a true monster in Thrace.
And he looks through your eyes.

COTYS

One man's opinion. When the story of
this battle is told, I shall be... how
did you put it, Iolaus? "A brave king
of noble bearing." While you will be
remembered as "a demon from Hades."
History is written by the winners.

RHESUS

At what cost? You wiped out entire
villages...

Hercules goes still. Around him, the companions react, unease
creeping into their expressions.

RHESUS

...slaughtered civilians...

IOLAUS

(to Hercules; stunned)
What is he saying?

RHESUS

...defiled your victims' bodies.

COTYS

Enough. Shackle him.

Rhesus struggles as soldiers fit him with painful, heavy chains.
Cotys moves away. Hercules goes after him, confronts him.

HERCULES

That burned village when we arrived --
that was you?

COTYS

(shrugs)
They resisted.

HERCULES

The Bessi settlement -- heads on
spikes -- your doing?

COTYS

An example to those who would defy me.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- his rage barely under control as the truth
crashes in --

HE HAS BEEN FIGHTING FOR THE WRONG SIDE.

HERCULES

It was you -- you started this war,
not Rhesus. You deceived me.

Hercules moves aggressively towards Cotys. ARCHERS snap arrows
into bows. A warning for Hercules and his companions.

COTYS

Deceived? A mercenary who has sold
his conscience for gold long ago must
not presume to judge his employers.

SITACLES

(re: the prisoners)
My lord, what of the rest?

COTYS

I don't think we brought enough
shackles for everyone.
(beat)
Start with the traitor.

Sitacles places his sword against Phineus' throat. Hercules
moves to intervene -- the archers raise their bows. Autolycus
grabs Hercules' arm, whispers --

AUTOLYCUS

Not unless you want your friends
murdered as well...

Hercules clenches his fists helplessly. Restrains himself.
With a grimace of disgust, he addresses Cotys --

HERCULES

The war has been won. End the
bloodshed. Show mercy.

COTYS

Mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the
innocent. And these scum are guilty.
Of defying me.

Cotys flicks his wrist. On that signal, Sitacles slits Phineus'
throat. Hercules yells in outrage as -- across the battlefield
-- SWORDS COME DOWN -- BODIES OF PRISONERS TOPPLE, GUSHING.

In an instant, Rhesus is the only still-living warrior in his
army. Sitacles raises his blood-stained sword.

SITACLES

Glory to Cotys, King of all Thrace.

Cotys' army SHOUTS in response. In triumph. In bloodlust.
Cotys raises his arms for silence and responds --

COTYS

And glory to Hercules... the King's
Champion.

Again, the army ROARS. Hercules shakes his head, not wanting
such praise. Cotys glances over to him and sneers --

COTYS

Don't look so glum, Hercules. I could
not have done it without you.

(beat)

This is your greatest labor yet.

Hercules looks from the field of countless corpses to his
companions, numb with shock, to Cotys' celebrating army -- THE
LION ON THEIR HELMETS, ON THEIR SHIELDS, ON THEIR WEAPONS.

Monsters of Hercules' own creation.

EXT. THRACIAN PLAINS - DAY

Cotys' army marches home in victory. Perfect discipline.
Perfect formation. Hard to believe these were once farmers.
Hercules walks ahead of them. He carries his olive-wood club
slung over his shoulder, arm draped over the hilt.

His companions walk behind him, leading their horse-drawn
chariots by the reins. They are silent, shell-shocked. Even
Tydeus looks uncharacteristically grave.

In the front of the procession, Rhesus "marches" as King Cotys'
prize. He staggers under the weight of the shackles. Hercules
watches Rhesus' torment. Hercules glances at Iolaus --

HERCULES

Cotys didn't want heroes, he wanted
conquerors.

IOLAUS

I cannot turn this into a victory,
uncle. My talent is not great enough.

As they pass the charred cinders of a NOW-EXTINCT THRACIAN
VILLAGE, Rhesus' legs go weak beneath him. He sinks to the
dirt, heart-broken by what he sees. Sitacles looms with a whip.

SITACLES

On your feet, swine.

Sitacles lashes Rhesus once, twice -- Rhesus twitching with
every crack. Before the third lash, Hercules seizes Sitacles'
wrist and pushes him away. Sitacles is about to retaliate --

COTYS

Sitacles.

Riding by, Cotys calls Sitacles away with a jab of his head. Grudgingly, Sitacles follows his master. Placing a hand under Rhesus' arm, he hauls him back to his feet. Rhesus whispers --

RHESUS

I fought with an ill-equipped army
sewn together from the bickering
tribes of Thrace. My greatest asset
was my legend. And it almost won.

(beat)

But your legend is the most powerful
weapon in all of Greece. Men follow
it, die for it.

Rhesus locks eyes with Hercules.

RHESUS

So why do you waste it?

EXT. ARMY CAMP - NIGHT

As Cotys' troops make camp, Hercules stands on the fringes of their territory, staring off into the night. In deep thought.

AMPHIARAUS (O.S.)

When you feel lost, faith will always
set you on the right path again.

Amphiaraus has come to join Hercules.

HERCULES

The gods have done nothing to earn my
faith.

AMPHIARAUS

Do not confuse crimes of men with acts
of gods. Men gave you suffering...

(beat)

...gods gave you the labors.

HERCULES

(exasperated)

Will I ever be finished with these
labors?

AMPHIARAUS

Soon, yes. We will both meet our
fate. I will find my death. You...

(beat)

...the beast that haunts you.

HERCULES

Cerberus exists only in my mind.

AMPHIARAUS

(patiently)

And when you do meet it, you will
either choose to believe that the
blood of Zeus flows in your veins. Or
you will perish.

Hercules shakes his head, resisting. Amphiaraus sighs.

AMPHIARAUS

Find your faith, Hercules. If you
refuse to believe in the gods...

(beat)

...at least believe in yourself.

Off Amphiaraus... faint MUSIC and DRUMS... they grow LOUDER...

INT. FEASTING HALL - COTYS' CITADEL - DAY

In contrast to the beginning of our story, the hall is now filled with joy and festive laughter. Cotys sits at the head of the table while his SENIOR OFFICERS indulge in the finest food and scantily clad SLAVE GIRLS. As we pull away from the table --

-- we reveal the centerpiece of the celebration is RHESUS, who hangs from the wall in chains, his body stripped to the waist and covered in cuts and bruises, his face a rictus of agony.

A JUG OF WATER IS PRESSED TO RHESUS' LIPS.

Rhesus' eyes focus through the pain. And find Ergenia easing his suffering if only a little. Parched, he gulps the water.

RHESUS

Thank you...

ERGENIA

It is only a small mercy.

RHESUS

There is no greater kindness in the
world than water for a thirsty man.

Rhesus holds Ergenia's eyes for a beat. A connection between them. Interrupted by Sitacles -- as he holds a GOLDEN JEWELLED CROWN high and shouts across the din --

SITACLES

Raise your cups, dogs.

The officers raise their cups. Cotys smiles, waiting for this moment a lifetime. Sitacles places the crown on Cotys' head.

SITACLES

One land. One King. One Thrace.

RHESUS

(defiant)

Thrace is not a man, a king or a god.

Thrace is her people.

A blow from Sitacles silences Rhesus. Cotys' men CHEER --

ANGLE ON HERCULES' TABLE -- Hercules and his companions sit apart from the festivities. Hercules downs cup after cup of wine. Sensing Hercules' boiling emotions, Autolycus counsels --

AUTOLYCUS

Sometimes, my friend, we simply bet on
the wrong chariot. Our work is done.

Let us collect our fee and be gone.

A SOLDIER stands guard nearby holding a shield. Hercules stares at the LION COWL SIGIL; his own mark. In the shield's POLISHED SURFACE, Hercules can see his own REFLECTION staring at him. He looks away in rage and disgust. Autolycus seizes his arm.

AUTOLYCUS

Don't do anything unwise.

Autolycus points out ARCHERS concealed around the feasting hall. Watching Hercules. In case he makes a false move.

Hercules notices Ergenia withdrawing from the celebration through a doorway. He thinks it over. Rises.

ATALANTA

Where are you going?

HERCULES

To do something unwise.

Hercules heads after Ergenia.

INT. CORRIDOR - OUTSIDE FEASTING HALL - CONTINUOUS

A torchlit stone passage. Ergenia walks fast, Hercules follows.

HERCULES

Cotys sent you to win my trust. With
that honest smile. Those pretty eyes.

ERGENIA

I had no choice.

Hercules grabs her by the neck. For a moment, we fear for her.

HERCULES

(in disgust)

You really are your father's daughter.

ERGENIA

(fighting to breathe)

I did not do it for my father. I did
it for my son.

Hercules hesitates. Releases his grip. Ergenia breathes again.

ERGENIA

If I disobeyed Cotys or resisted in
any way, Arius would be executed. I
did what any mother would.

(beat)

I protected my child.

HERCULES

By sacrificing innocent lives. By
helping destroy Thrace.

ERGENIA

For every lie I told, I lost a piece
of my soul. But you must understand --
My husband was king. Cotys poisoned
him to wedge himself onto the throne.
Arius is the legitimate heir.

Ergenia turns on Hercules, trying to make him see --

ERGENIA

My father is old and brutal. He will
not live forever -- the gods or his
enemies will see to that. And once he
is gone, Arius will take the throne.
My son will be a good king and heal
this tortured land.

HERCULES

A dream...

ERGENIA

A destiny.

(pleads)

You can help. When you leave Thrace,
take Arius with you. Keep him safe --

HERCULES

(curt)

Find another savior. I am a murderer,
no better than your father.

Hercules moves away. Ergenia takes his hand gently into hers.

ERGENIA

I know what you were accused of, I've
heard the stories -- but I cannot
believe them.

HERCULES
Believe. They are the only truth that
 has ever been told about me.
 (beat)
 It was me. I killed my family.

The air goes out of Ergenia. She is shocked.

ERGENIA
 No...

Pulling his hand free from Ergenia, Hercules looks at her with tears in his eyes and speaks with a breaking voice --

HERCULES
 There is a madness that touches
 soldiers. When a man has seen too
 much war, sometimes death follows him
 home. His mind breaks. He kills...
 (beat)
 I tore my wife, my two boys, my
 daughter apart in their sleep.
 (beat)
 After it was done, I fled Athens in
 disgrace. Now I fight for gold.

Hercules takes a step toward Ergenia, who backs away, afraid --

HERCULES
 I am no hero.
 (beat)
 Only a beast.

Beat. Ergenia is frozen, captured by Hercules' haunted eyes.

SITACLES (O.S.)
 Hercules.

Hercules and Ergenia turn. Sitacles stands in a doorway.

SITACLES
 Forgive the interruption, my lady.
 (to Hercules)
 The King commands your presence.

INT. FEASTING HALL - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

The table is littered with scraps of food. Rhesus has been taken away. Hercules enters, finds his companions guarded by ARCHERS. Cotys is at the window. He beckons Hercules closer.

COTYS
 Advance... Champion of Thrace.

Hercules crosses the room. Whispers an aside to Autolycus --

HERCULES
Are we prisoners?

AUTOLYCUS
Remains to be seen.

Hercules joins Cotys at the window. They overlook -- COTYS'
ARMY. Training. Practicing. Keeping prepared.

COTYS
Today is the first day of my dynasty.
The fulfillment of my father's dream.
But my ambitions are only just
beginning. My father wanted a
kingdom. I crave an empire.

HERCULES
To build an empire you need a vast
army. More than them.

Hercules jabs his head at the troops below.

COTYS
These thousand will train another
thousand and they another. The
lessons of Hercules will spread. What
you began here can never be stopped.

Cotys leans close, checks to make sure Sitacles cannot hear.

COTYS
If you fear what such a beast may do,
then lead it. Be my General.

HERCULES
(affronted)
You want me to serve you?

COTYS
Spare me the moral outrage, child
killer. If you peel back our skin,
you would find we are the same.

For a moment, we think Hercules will break Cotys' neck with his
bare hands. But he glances at his companions. At the archers
guarding them. One wrong move and his friends are dead.

HERCULES
(a low rumble)
I would sooner spend an eternity in
Hades than a second under your crown.

COTYS
Well, I'll take that as a "no." Pity.
In that case...

Cotys strides across the room and takes his throne. Gestures to Sitacles. Hercules and his companions prepare to fight for their lives. Instead the archers part to reveal --

A DOZEN SLAVES CARRYING HEAVY BAGS OF GOLD.

The slaves drop the gold at Hercules' feet.

COTYS

Your weight in gold. Paid in full.

(beat)

Your services are no longer required.

Cotys and Sitacles withdraw, the archers filing out after them. Leaving Hercules and his companions alone with the gold.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - COTYS' CITADEL - EVENING

Hercules and his companions, carrying their bags of gold, cross the refugee camp to the stables. The victims of war silently part for them to pass, their eyes accusing.

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- surrounded by innocents whose misery he has contributed to. Starving mothers, wailing infants, broken men.

The bag of gold in Hercules' hands grows heavier with each step.

EXT. STABLES - COTYS' CITADEL - EVENING

Hercules is deep in thought as around him the companions load their weapons, armor and gold onto their chariots.

AUTOLYCUS

If we hurry, by nightfall we could be
spending our fortune in Macedonia.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- he moves to board his chariot. His hand reaches for the reins. Pauses. Instead, Hercules grabs his bag of gold --

AND TOSSES IT ON THE GROUND.

HERCULES

Spend mine, too.

The companions exchange looks as Hercules removes his armor and olive-wood club from the chariot. Pained, Autolycus asks --

AUTOLYCUS

What do you think you're you doing?

HERCULES

I helped a tyrant enslave a nation. I
cannot leave without setting it right.

AUTOLYCUS

Aha. And who exactly shall be paying
us for this suicidal endeavor?

HERCULES

There was a time when we fought not
because the price was right, but
because the cause was right.

The companions react. This is the old Hercules talking. A fire
in his eyes they have not seen for a long time.

HERCULES

Look around. This is the right cause.
Thrace needs our help.

AUTOLYCUS

To hell with Thrace. We have gold.
That valley you spoke of is within
reach. Leave now. Be free.

HERCULES

(quietly)
I would never be free.

Frustrated, Autolycus turns away.

AUTOLYCUS

We have fought side by side in
countless battles. But not this time.
In this fight, you are alone.

ATALANTA

We cannot abandon Hercules.

AUTOLYCUS

He was going to abandon us. He never
intended to return to Athens.
(to Hercules)
Tell them.

The companions look at Hercules: *"what is he talking about?"*
Hercules takes a beat. Confirms --

HERCULES

It's true.

Hercules straps on his armor. The companions are silent.
Amphiaras shakes his head, Iolaus looks betrayed. Hercules
turns his back, fully expecting them to ride off.

ATALANTA STEPS OFF HER CHARIOT.

HERCULES

Whatever debt you owed me has been
repaid. Go.

ATALANTA

There are bonds stronger than debt.

Hercules reacts. Sees the depth of feeling and friendship in Atalanta's eyes. Tydeus cackles: "*that's more like it.*" Axes in hand, he joins Hercules and Atalanta.

AUTOLYCUS

Tydeus smells blood. But I expected better of you, Atalanta.

As a reply, Atalanta straps on her bow and arrows. Autolycus reacts as Amphiaraus steps off his chariot.

AUTOLYCUS

Amphiaraus, this is complete madness.

AMPHIARAUS

The hour of my death is tonight. An arrow of flame will burn my heart.

(to Hercules)

A man cannot run from his fate.

Desperately, Autolycus shakes his head --

AUTOLYCUS

Crazy. All of you. Come, Iolaus.

IOLAUS

I think I'll stay.

HERCULES

Nephew --

IOLAUS

Uncle --

Hercules reacts as Iolaus gets right in his face -- talking back for the first time.

IOLAUS

All I have ever done is tell stories of great deeds performed by others. It is time I stopped telling their stories... and started living my own.

Hercules glances to his companions. Atalanta nods. Tydeus smiles, respecting Iolaus. Hercules chews it over -- then breaks out in a grin and claps Iolaus on the shoulder.

Autolycus busies himself collecting the bags of gold and carrying them to his chariot, mumbling --

AUTOLYCUS

Fine. The rest of you may have lost your minds but not me, not me.

HERCULES

Autolycus...

Autolycus turns, expecting Hercules to ask him to stay.
Instead, Hercules embraces him.

HERCULES

Live like a king, my friend.

Autolycus shrugs off Hercules, climbs in his chariot and rides.
The remaining companions solemnly watch after him. Then --

ATALANTA

Your orders?

HERCULES

Kill Cotys.

EXT. COTYS' CITADEL - NIGHT

ANGLE ON THE CITADEL -- TWO GUARDS patrol the main entrance,
walking back and forth. As the guards walk towards each other,
for a split second, they stand together.

AN ARROW SPLITS THE AIR --

The arrowhead strikes THE FIRST GUARD with unerring accuracy,
passing through his THROAT and skewering the SECOND GUARD behind
him. One arrow kills both guards.

Hercules rushes forward, Atalanta by his side already stringing
another arrow in her bow. Iolaus, Tydeus and Amphiaraus follow.

INT. CORRIDOR - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

Led by Hercules, the companions make short work of the guards in
the hallway -- Hercules fells two with his club -- Atalanta and
Amphiaraus drop two more with arrow and spear.

The THRONE ROOM is just ahead. Hercules throws open the door --

INT. THRONE ROOM - COTYS'S CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

-- Cotys and his officers cluster around the MAP OF THE KNOWN
WORLD planning their campaigns when our heroes storm in --
Hercules makes straight for Cotys when --

-- Cotys' personal guards swarm in his way. Hercules smashes
them but the delay buys Cotys enough time to sound the alarm.

COTYS

Sitacles. Archers.

Answering their king's summons, soldiers and archers led by
Sitacles pour into the throne room -- our heroes find themselves
in a fight for their lives --

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- plowing through guard after guard -- cutting his way to Cotys -- Cotys does not run or retreat -- he waits for Hercules, ironic smile on his lips.

Hercules reaches Cotys. Raises his club to strike.

A CHAIN LASSOES AROUND HERCULES' WRIST.

COTYS

Bring him down.

Soldiers wielding chains circle Hercules -- A CHAIN goes around Hercules' throat -- ANOTHER CHAIN around his waist --

HERCULES' P.O.V. -- the chains tightening, cutting off oxygen -- his vision turns blurry -- he sees the fate of his companions --

-- Iolaus is captured immediately -- Amphiaraus surrenders with acceptance -- Atalanta is beaten brutally -- it takes a dozen guards to wrestle Tydeus to the floor.

Hercules resists, hurling guards off of him, trying to get rid of the chains -- but for every one guard he knocks off, three takes his place -- Hercules is swarmed --

-- like ants trying to bring down an elephant, the guards place chains on Hercules' legs and arms, pulling him to his knees.

Hercules is helpless. Cotys circles him, taunting --

COTYS

I ask you to join me, you refuse. I
order you to leave, you return. Did
you imagine I would be unprepared?

Cotys watches as the companions are fitted in chains.

COTYS

So the mercenaries have a conscience
after all. Ah, but Autolycus seems to
be absent. Too smart for this fight.

Hercules reacts -- in chains -- his companions in danger -- abandoned by his best friend. And it only gets worse --

ERGENIA AND ARIUS led in. Under guard.

SITACLES

(to Cotys)

I caught her conspiring with Hercules.
They were planning to remove the young
prince from your protection.

Cotys fixes Ergenia with a dismissive look --

COTYS

My mistake was siring a daughter.

-- and tears Arius out of her grasp. Ergenia screams, tries to reclaim her son -- but the guards restrain her.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- there is nothing he can do. On his knees, bleeding, chains binding him, his vision fading.

ARIUS

Hercules.

Arius breaks free from Cotys, bolts between the soldiers -- he rushes to Hercules' side -- his small hand reaching for Hercules' outstretched chained arm.

BOY AND MAN CLASP HANDS.

TIGHT ON ARIUS -- squeezing Hercules' hand, trying to give him strength. Then Cotys tears Arius away.

The boy pressed something in Hercules' palm. Hercules looks --

IT IS THE LION TOOTH HE GIFTED ARIUS.

Hercules' fist tightens around the tooth. Grief and rage tearing at his features. Cotys' unruffled voice taunting --

COTYS

My father may not have been what you would call a "kind" man -- but he taught me a vital lesson. Kingdoms are won with armies. But empires are won by alliances.

A figure enters through the doors, draped in a cloak that resembles a peacock.

EURYSTHEUS, the deposed king of Athens.

HERCULES

Eurystheus...?

If that shock was not enough -- behind Eurystheus, THE SHADOW OF A THREE-HEADED CANINE MONSTER floods the entire wall.

IT IS THE CERBERUS.

But as Hercules stares, his eyes wide -- THE SHADOW BEGINS TO MELT AND SHRINK as the creature casting it grows closer. Until Hercules sees it is not one creature but three --

WOLVES.

Large timber wolves, spiked collars around their necks attached to chains. Each held by a WOLF TAMER in light, fur-lined armor.

EURYSTHEUS

Remember them, Hercules? The Wolves
of Hades. They remember you.

Hercules reacts, realizing THESE WOLVES ARE THE BEAST THAT HAS
HAUNTED HIS NIGHTMARES. The chain around his neck tightens.
Hercules loses consciousness, the howling of wolves in his ears.

SMASH TO BLACK.

INT. DUNGEON CELL - NIGHT

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- he wakes when his head is DOUSED WITH
WATER. MANACLES on his arm from wrist to elbow, each with a
THICK CHAIN moored into the stone behind him. AN IRON COLLAR
around his throat binds him to the wall. LEGS MANACLED.

TYDEUS, ATALANTA, IOLAUS and AMPHIARAUS are bloodied, on their
knees, bound in chains, hands padlocked behind their backs. To
Hercules' dismay, ERGENIA is chained with them.

SIX HOODED EXECUTIONERS squabble over the prisoners' weapons,
claiming Tydeus' axes and Atalanta's bow.

One of the executioners tries to pick up Hercules' club. Can't
budge it. The executioner can barely drag it along, the club
making grooves on the flagstones. Much heavier than it appears.

A STATUE OF HERA looms in shadows, the goddess' face yellow by
SULFUR DEPOSITS spreading like lichen in this depth.

As Hercules fully regains consciousness, COTYS and EURYSTHEUS
step into his line of sight. Hercules struggles to speak --

HERCULES

...wolves...

EURYSTHEUS

Didn't quite catch that, Hercules.

HERCULES

Those wolves are the Cerberus -- they
are what I saw the night my family --

Hercules goes still. The truth crashes in. He raises his head
to stare at Eurystheus and Cotys. His voice shakes --

HERCULES

I did not murder my family.

EURYSTHEUS

No.

(glances at Cotys)
We did.

Hercules erupts -- fighting against the chains, yearning to crack Eurystheus' neck. On their knees, his companions react --

HERCULES IS INNOCENT.

HERCULES

WHY?!

EURYSTHEUS

You left me no choice. When people called out your name louder than mine, when they saw you as a god... how long before they saw you as their king?

HERCULES

I wanted nothing.

EURYSTHEUS

Precisely. Your sin, Hercules, was that you had no ambition. I can deal with an ambitious man. But a man who wants nothing?

Eurystheus laughs, bewildered: *"what kind of man is THAT?"*

EURYSTHEUS (CONT'D)

Killing you would have turned Athens against me. I had to ruin your name. So I asked my ally for help.

COTYS

In Thrace, you see, we train wolves as bloodhounds. They hunt anything.

We PUSH IN on Hercules' eyes as --

INT. HERCULES' HOME - ATHENS - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The imagery is surreal -- A GOLDEN CUP falls in SLOW MOTION, spilling its BLOOD-RED CONTENTS -- HERCULES SLEEPS, DRUGGED --

-- WOLF PAWS step into the splattered liquid -- the THREE WOLVES stalk through a home by night -- torchlight casts their SHADOW on the wall so the THREE WOLVES BECOME ONE BEAST -- CERBERUS.

A WOMAN'S SCREAMS. FOLLOWED BY THE SOUND OF TEARING FLESH.

INT. DUNGEON CELL - NIGHT

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- writhing in agony, in rage, the chains the only thing keeping him from vengeance --

HERCULES

Megara... my children...

COTYS

(calmly)

You have my permission to join them.

Flames roar under Hera's statue to reveal a CHOPPING BLOCK. The executioners sharpen their axes. Hercules and his comrades are about to be sacrificed.

COTYS (CONT'D)

Since you chose not to serve us in life, you will serve in death. A sacrifice to the goddess Hera.

(beat)

Eurystheus, how do you destroy a myth?

EURYSTHEUS

With another myth, of course.

Cotys leans as close as he dares, telling a campfire tale --

COTYS

Once Upon A Time, two mighty kings captured and executed a child murderer named Hercules. The kings were blessed by Hera. Anyone who dared oppose them felt her curse. With this legend spreading ahead of us and my army behind us, we shall retake Athens. And then --

HERCULES

You split Greece like a pie.

(eyes Cotys)

North...

(eyes Eurystheus)

...and South.

Cotys smiles for a beat, as if seeing this new world he and Eurystheus plan to create. Then he shrugs --

COTYS (CONT'D)

For now, watch your companions perish. Starting with my faithless daughter...

An executioner pushes Ergenia towards the chopping block.

HERCULES

She is your own flesh and blood.

COTYS

Her blood is watered down. With her out of the way, I can raise Arius to be my worthy successor.

ERGENIA

Don't touch my son.

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- among the companions, he is chained the closest to Hercules -- he whispers urgently --

AMPHIARAUS

Who are you?

Hercules' gaze snaps up. Meets Amphiaraus' blue eyes.

AMPHIARAUS (CONT'D)

Are you a murderer? No.

Hercules reacts. The real murderers are Cotys and Eurystheus. Hercules strains against his chains.

They must pay.

AMPHIARAUS (CONT'D)

Are you a mercenary who turns his back on the innocent? No.

Hercules reacts as Ergenia is forced to kneel, head on the chopping block -- the executioner approaches, axe sharpened. Hercules increases his pressure on the chains.

He must save her.

AMPHIARAUS (CONT'D)

Are you only a legend -- or are you
the truth behind the legend?

Hercules' fist is clenched tight -- he opens it -- sees he is still clutching the lion's tooth Arius returned to him. The symbol of Arius' faith.

AMPHIARAUS (CONT'D)

Others believe in you, they have faith in you. Have faith in yourself.

A change comes over Hercules. A calm. Steadily, without forcing it, Hercules strains against the chains. Incredibly, FISSURES open in the stone around the iron moorings. Hercules presses on -- a sound builds in his chest --

AMPHIARAUS (CONT'D)

Remember the man you were before you lost your soul. Remember the deeds you performed, the labors you accomplished. Now tell me --

(shouts)

WHO ARE YOU?

-- the sound rises up from Hercules' soul, exploding in a LION'S ROAR -- the roar becomes words --

HERCULES

I! AM! HERCULES!

Hercules YANKS the iron moorings out of the stone wall -- NECK, ARM and LEG IRONS at once -- the two heavy chains are now gripped in his hands like WHIPS --

WHOOOSH! -- one chain CRUSHES the face of the executioner standing over Ergenia, killing him instantly.

TIGHT ON COTYS AND EURYSTHEUS -- retreating from the dungeon -- Cotys snaps at Sitacles --

COTYS
The Cyclops. Hurry.

Sitacles uses his sword to HACK through a thick rope -- it drops releasing WEIGHTS -- A MECHANISM is activated --

-- the remaining executioners charge at Hercules -- Iolaus kicks out, trips one -- Atalanta wraps her chains around the man's neck and chokes him --

-- Hercules lashes with his chains like iron tentacles, slicing the executioners to pieces -- he sees Eurystheus flee through the gate after Cotys and Sitacles --

THE IRON GATE DROPS, TRAPPING OUR HEROES IN THE DUNGEON.

Hercules reaches the gate in time to glimpse Cotys and Eurystheus disappearing in the dark. Gripping the gate's iron bars, Hercules BEGINS TO BEND THEM.

The mechanism Sitacles activated finishes its cycle. With a final clanging, A STEEL HATCH OPENS IN THE STONE WALL. As Hercules struggles with the gate, Ergenia reacts in dread --

ERGENIA
The Cyclops is coming...

The hatch leads down a long dark tunnel. Through that tunnel, a giant approaches, over seven feet tall. Wears layers upon layers of NECKLACES. But instead of beads -- HUMAN EYES.

The figure crawls through the hatch. Only has ONE EYE. The other, long gone, is scarred over by a flap of skin.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- he sighs with fatigue and disbelief --

HERCULES (CONT'D)
It's a one-eyed giant.

The "CYCLOPS" unravels a weapon from its belt -- a GRAPPLING HOOK with rope attached to reel its enemies in like fish -- Hercules searches a dead executioner and finds a RING OF KEYS -- tosses them to Ergenia -- points to his companions --

HERCULES (CONT'D)
Free them.

-- the Cyclops launches its hook -- it curls around Hercules' leg, knocking him off-balance -- the Cyclops pulls him in -- Ergenia fumbles with the keys, trying to fit the right one in the right padlock -- she manages to get Iolaus free --

-- Hercules is pulled in close by the Cyclops -- once Hercules is close enough, the Cyclops pounds on him with its fists, crushing him to the floor --

-- Iolaus grabs a log from Hera's bonfire and thrusts it in the Cyclops' face, giving Hercules a chance to rise -- the Cyclops swats Iolaus against a wall with a THUNK --

-- as the Cyclops moves to finish Iolaus off, Hercules steps in its way -- the Cyclops charges -- we expect a huge battle -- but Hercules simply reaches out with his bare hands and rips out the Cyclops' SINGLE EYE straight from his skull.

The Cyclops howls, blinded -- Hercules grabs the man, lifts him in the air -- all seven feet of bone and muscle --

AND BREAKS THE CYCLOPS' SPINE WITH A RESOUNDING CRACK.

Ergenia finishes freeing the companions from their chains. They race to collect their weapons -- Tydeus recovers his axes, Atalanta her bow, Amphiaraus his spear -- with effort Iolaus picks up a heavy EXECUTIONER'S AXE.

Anxious, Tydeus hurries to Hercules' side to see if he is okay. Hercules reclaims his olive-wood club. Lifts it easily, wields it with the familiarity of an old friend. He turns to the companions. His face low, in shadow.

HERCULES (CONT'D)

For three years, they put me through
hell. Now I will show them hell.

Hercules raises his head to the torchlight. His face is a mask of rage and hatred -- he looks absolutely terrifying.

HERCULES (CONT'D)

Cotys' army prepares to march.
Thousands will die. Millions will
suffer. Only we can end it. For
years, we served gods or kings or
gold. Tonight, we serve Greece.

Hercules marches to the iron gate. His comrades fall in behind him, Atalanta at Hercules' side.

HERCULES (CONT'D)

Hold nothing back.

HERCULES FLATTENS THE IRON GATE WITH A SINGLE KICK.

INT. CORRIDOR - DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

A long dank passage lined with IRON CELL DOORS. The stone walls are encrusted with YELLOW SULFUR DEPOSITS. Steam wafts up from cracks between the flagstones implying volcanic activity below. If not hell, one of its waiting rooms.

A DOZEN GUARDS race past us to intercept Hercules and his companions. We do not see the battle -- we only hear the SOUND OF CLASHING WEAPONS and DEATH SCREAMS. Then --

A GUARD IS LAUNCHED THROUGH THE AIR.

REVERSE ANGLE -- Hercules and his companions march down the corridor, the bodies of guards scattered around hem.

HERCULES

Find Rhesus.

Ergenia hurries from door to door peering through the barred windows until --

ERGENIA

Here.

Hercules joins her, looks into the cell. Startled, Rhesus stares back from a snarl of chains on the dank stone floor.

RHESUS

Hercules...? I'm beginning to think
there may be more to you after all.

INT. ANTE-CHAMBER TO DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

A stone cavern thick with more SULFUR DEPOSITS. TORCHES mounted on the walls spit and flicker like HELLFIRE. Hercules leads the way, the companions following. Rhesus, armed with a sword, moves protectively beside Ergenia.

RHESUS

Where is your son?

ERGENIA

Cotys took him.

RHESUS

We will retrieve Arius, I promise.
Stay close.

Rhesus takes Ergenia's hand. Hercules notices, gives a soft smile. As they reach the stairs leading to the upper world --

-- ARCHERS pour down the steps. Hercules seizes a THICK OAK TABLE and lifts it spilling over FLAGONS OF WINE left by the guards. Holding the table as a shield, Hercules protects his friends from the onslaught of arrows while --

-- Atalanta uses her bow to snipe at the archers, Amphiaraus skewers a few with his spear, Tydeus suicidally darts out from the table's cover to hack at them. The archers take position on the stairs, blocking any escape.

TIGHT ON OUR HEROES -- hunkering behind the table, arrowheads piercing the wood around them. Hercules studies the staircase --

HERCULES

If we charge, those archers will cut us down.

IOLAUS

Can't stay here... the smell is making me sick...

AMPHIARAUS

Sulfur. The stench of the underworld.

ATALANTA

When you think of the agonies this dungeon must have seen, it is not hard to believe we are in hell.

Ergenia studies the sulfur deposits. To Hercules' surprise, she darts out from cover, seizes the flagons of wine and begins filling them with sulfur she scrapes off the walls.

ERGENIA

This citadel was built over ancient hot springs. What do you get when you mix sulfur with alcohol?

Off their blank stares --

ERGENIA (CONT'D)

And you call yourselves Greeks.

(beat)

Greek fire.

ON THE ARCHERS - MOMENTS LATER

Perched on the steps and keeping to the shadows, the archers react as TWO BURNING FLAGONS are hurled at them like grenades. The flagons hit the stone --

AND EXPLODE, SPEWING LIQUID FIRE LIKE NAPALM.

The stairway is ablaze, archers flailing at their smoldering clothes -- screams echoing down the passage --

REVERSE ANGLE -- ON OUR HEROES -- reacting to the carnage from behind the table's cover.

HERCULES
I thought the first Hippocratic Oath
was "do no harm."

ERGENIA
Good thing I never took the oath.

Ergenia catches Rhesus' look of sincere admiration. She reciprocates with a smile. Hercules pushes the table aside and charges up the stairs, his comrades behind him --

-- Hercules crushes with his club -- Atalanta looses arrows, collects fresh quivers from dead enemies -- Tydeus slashes with his axes -- Rhesus protects Ergenia --

ANGLE ON IOLAUS -- having a hard time with his heavy executioner's axe, he has to drag it --

ANGLE ON AMPHIARAUS -- swiveling like a demon with his spear, taking out enemy after enemy -- when suddenly --

TIME SLOWS DOWN.

SLOW MOTION -- Amphiaraus senses it, looks up -- at the head of the stairs, an ARCHER aims at him -- we HEAR AMPHIARAUS' BREATH, HEAR HIS HEARTBEAT -- THUMP THUMP THUMP --

The archer looses his arrow -- as it crosses the Greek fire, it ignites -- an ARROW OF FLAME heads for Amphiaraus' heart.

AMPHIARAUS
The time of my death has come...

Amphiaraus does not fight it. Shuts his blue eyes. Relaxes his arms. Chest out, in complete acceptance.

The arrow streaks toward him leaving a plume of smoke in its wake -- and an instant before it sears Amphiaraus' heart --

HERCULES PUSHES HIM TO SAFETY.

HERCULES
Amphiaraus.

Amphiaraus blinks. The arrow MISSED him. Amphiaraus who has always been so calm, cool and collected -- GAPES IN SHOCK.

AMPHIARAUS
No... that was my moment... my fate...

HERCULES
We are both free to make our own fate.

Hercules charges up the stairs, his friends streaming after him. Amphiaraus reacts, liberated. Follows.

INT. GROUND FLOOR - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

Cotys stands in the entrance to his citadel, GUARDS massing around him. A badly burned ARCHER cowers at his feet --

THRACIAN ARCHER

Hercules has called on his father --
Zeus is hurling thunderbolts --

Cotys kicks the archer and reacts at the SOUNDS OF BATTLE approaching from the stairs. Snarls at his troops --

COTYS

Someone here please tell me. How is
it possible...
(shouting)
...that my citadel is under attack by
five damned Athenians?

Everyone avoids Cotys' gaze. Eurystheus is in a panic --

EURYSTHEUS

Hercules is going to kill us. Why did
I ever listen to you?!

COTYS

Shut up.
(to Sitacles)
Unleash the wolves.

INT. STAIRWAY LEADING UP FROM DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

An uphill battle step by step -- Hercules leads the way, seizing ENEMIES and tossing them over his shoulder where Tydeus finishes them -- ahead, torchlight glows from the doorway --

AMPHIARAUS

(warning Hercules)
Before we escape the underworld, we
must pass the guardian of Hades...

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- a MONSTROUS SHADOW falls over him from the top of the stairs. He stops cold. Staring at --

HERCULES' P.O.V. -- *the silhouette of a THREE-HEADED BEAST stands at the doorway, blocking any escape. JAWS SALIVATE -- FANGS FLASH IN THE TORCHLIGHT -- A CHORUS OF RAVENOUS HOWLS --*

HERCULES

Cerberus.

But now Hercules knows this is no monster of his imagination or otherworldly demon. His fingers tighten around his club's grip, he steadily climbs step after step --

INT. GROUND FLOOR - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

-- as if rising from the darkness of the underworld into the world of the living, Hercules emerges into the light.

THE THREE WOLVES STAND IN HIS WAY.

Each beast is chained to its TAMER. Behind them, the passage is flooded with SOLDIERS. Cotys and Eurystheus watch Hercules' reaction with amusement.

COTYS

What you see, Hercules, is the last
thing your wife and children ever saw.
The jaws of my "Cerberus."

The tamers unleash their wolves -- each tamer gives a high-pitched WHISTLE instructing the wolves to attack.

AND HERCULES RUSHES TO MEET THEM.

One wolf clamps its jaws on Hercules' leg, one on his left arm -- Hercules blocks the third's fangs with his club.

EURYSTHEUS

(relieved)

Three wolves should be more than
enough for one lion.

Hercules' companions pour out from the staircase behind them -- Tydeus, desperate to defend Hercules, hurls his TWO AXES, planting them in two of the WOLF TRAINERS' SKULLS -- their last breath wheezes through the whistles in their lips --

-- but it is the only help the companions will be able to give -- Cotys' soldiers keep them at bay with spears, creating a stalemate as Hercules fights alone --

-- a blur of fur and flesh as Hercules whips around, sends the wolves sprawling -- but every time he gets rid of one, the other two gang up on him -- chewing him, mauling him --

-- two have him by the legs, the third going for his throat -- Hercules drops his club, seizes the wolf by the neck --

THE WOLF'S JAWS INCHES FROM HIS THROAT.

ANGLE ON EURYSTHEUS AND COTYS -- they share a smile, knowing this is the end --

ANGLE ON THE COMPANIONS -- despairing, unable to intervene, too many soldiers between them and Hercules --

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- his strength beginning to give, the wolf winning out -- Hercules feels its hot breath on his skin.

Until Iolaus shouts over the din --

IOLAUS

The Nemean Lion was invulnerable --
its hide could not be pierced. But
Hercules still killed it. Not with a
sword or a spear or arrows...

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- inspired by Iolaus' words.

HERCULES

(low, to himself)
I used my bare hands...

FLASH TO -- *the mythic Hercules, his body perfect, unmarked by
any wound, his hands tight around the Nemean Lion.*

TIGHT ON -- the real Hercules, bloodied and damaged, his hands
around the wolf's neck.

BOTH THE MYTHIC HERCULES AND REAL HERCULES TWIST THEIR ARMS.

SNAP -- THE WOLF'S NECK BREAKS.

Eurystheus' grin fades as the first wolf slumps dead.

Hercules rises, blood dripping off his arms. Kicks off the
wolves clinging to his legs. Collects his club.

The SECOND WOLF lunges at him -- Hercules swings his club --
BASHING THE WOLF'S BRAINS OUT IN MID-AIR.

THE THIRD WOLF crouches, ready to pounce -- teeth bared,
snarling -- Hercules gives it a look, a single look --

AND THE WOLF BOLTS AND RUNS, WHINING, TAIL BETWEEN ITS LEGS.

The last wolf trainer realizes nothing now stands between him
and Hercules. Grabbing the man, Hercules hurls him to his
companions -- Atalanta impales him with her bladed bow.

Chaos. The troops swarm in -- Hercules swats them out of his
way with his club, making for the two kings --

-- Cotys retreats to the right, escaping to the courtyard --
Eurystheus flees left, deeper into the citadel --

-- around them a battle rages -- Hercules and his companions
against the troops -- the space is tight, the stone walls
squeezing in -- narrow, claustrophobic --

-- ATALANTA does not even bother loading her bow, she simply
grabs a fistful of arrows and shoves them into the nearest
soldier's chest --

-- TYDEUS retrieves his axes from the skulls of the wolf tamers
 -- he kisses their blades like lost loved ones -- then hacks
 away at the enemy --

-- HERCULES and RHESUS fight back to back, Rhesus shielding
 ERGENIA with his body --

RHESUS
I'll watch over Ergenia. You go after
the kings.

Hercules gives Rhesus a nod, the kind he reserves for his close
 companions. As he sets off, AMPHIARAUS uses the spikes on his
 spear to slay TWO GUARDS, then cries in triumph --

AMPHIARAUS
The beast is dead. The thirteenth
labor is complete. You are free.

HERCULES
 The labor may be finished.
 (beat)
 But I am just getting started.

Setting his sights, Hercules heads after Eurystheus -- Sitacles
 gets in his way --

SITACLES
 I am not afraid of you --

WHAM -- Hercules beats Sitacles against the wall with his club
 and strides after the scrambling Eurystheus --

INT. ROOM AFTER ROOM - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

-- Eurystheus races through the citadel, tripping, staggering --
 every time he glances over his shoulder, Hercules is behind him
 -- marching with terrifying deliberateness --

EURYSTHEUS
 It wasn't my fault... Cotys poisoned
 my mind...

-- Hercules keeps coming, head low, eyes grim -- Eurystheus
 slams a door, locks it -- Hercules smashes through --

EURYSTHEUS (CONT'D)
 I am your king... you took an oath to
 obey me...

-- Hercules keeps coming, like death -- Eurystheus pushes over
 furniture in his way -- Hercules crushes it underfoot --

EURYSTHEUS (CONT'D)
 You fight for gold... I still have
 gold... name your price...

-- Hercules keeps coming, relentless -- Eurystheus trips on his fancy cloak, sprawls -- raises his hands in surrender --

EURYSTHEUS (CONT'D)
Please, Hercules... I beg you...

-- Hercules seizes Eurystheus by the throat, lifts him up --

EURYSTHEUS (CONT'D)
(strangled)
Forgive me...

HERCULES
As you pass Elysium, on your way to
Hades, ask my family for forgiveness.
(beat)
I have none.

Hercules squeezes. With a CRUNCH, Eurystheus' windpipe collapses. The corpse drops. For a beat, Hercules keeps his head low, breathing heavily. One down, one more to go.

Behind Hercules, silently, Sitacles rears -- mouth bloodied, ribs broken -- raises his sword to stab Hercules in the back.

WHACK -- AN EXECUTIONER'S AXE CUTS SITACLES DOWN.

Hercules turns to find Iolaus standing there, heavy axe in his shaking hands, corpse at his feet. Beat. Hercules nods.

HERCULES (CONT'D)
Well done... warrior.

Iolaus beams with pride.

INT. GROUND FLOOR - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

A chaotic melee -- Atalanta fires arrows at close range with pinpoint accuracy, then uses her bladed bow to slice enemies -- she is covered in CUTS AND SLASHES but keeps fighting --

-- Amphiaraus uses his spear more as a club in these tight quarters, tripping opponents -- stabbing them while they are down -- a sword HACKS HIM in the back -- he back-thrusts with the spear, killing the enemy behind him --

-- eyes bloodshot with madness, Tydeus roars as he spins, chopping up enemies in a circle --

-- Rhesus and Ergenia fighting together -- she has picked up a fallen sword and is hacking as best she can --

-- Hercules and Iolaus charge into the room, uncle and nephew side by side, clearing out all remaining resistance.

RHESUS

Cotys' army will be waiting outside.

HERCULES

Let us face them together.

The path to the courtyard is open, the doors hang wide.
Limping, in pain, Hercules and Rhesus step through --

EXT. COURTYARD - COTYS' CITADEL - CONTINUOUS

-- into the outside world. And react.

REVERSE ANGLE -- COTYS' ENTIRE ARMY WAITS IN THE COURTYARD. Our heroes are hopelessly outnumbered.

Yet it is the soldiers who look scared. Hercules and his companions resemble something hell spat out -- bloodied, wild-eyed, grinning crazily and UTTERLY TERRIFYING.

Cotys stands at the head of his army. His voice laced with anger and disdain --

COTYS

You are no god, Hercules. Only human.
And I shall prove it.

On Cotys' signal, the ranks part to reveal -- ARIUS. A soldier holds A KNIFE at the boy's throat. Ergenia cries in anguish, tries to rush forward. Rhesus restrains her.

COTYS (CONT'D)

(to Hercules)

Before you do anything rash -- think
back on your three children.

Hercules goes still.

COTYS (CONT'D)

Look at the boy's mother. You know
what it is like to lose a child. Will
you let her suffer as you suffered?

Hercules recognizes the torment on Ergenia's face.

COTYS (CONT'D)

You failed to save your sons,
Hercules. But you can yet save him.
Accept your fate. Admit defeat.

Hercules focuses on the knife at Arius' throat. A long beat.
He drops his club. To his companions --

HERCULES

Lower your weapons.

The companions obey. The spear goes down, the bow, the axes, the sword. Iolaus is last, dropping his executioner's axe.

COTYS

Much better.
(to his troops)
Massacre them.

Cotys' soldiers are about to hurl their spears when -- the soldier holding his knife on Arius gurgles --

A KATAR BLADE IMBEDDED IN HIS THROAT.

Hercules' gaze darts to the ramparts where -- A PATCH OF DARKNESS comes alive, revealing a man camouflaged and nearly invisible under a BLACK CLOAK --

HERCULES

Autolycus.

AUTOLYCUS HAS RETURNED -- he moves in a blur of speed like a whirling dervish, BLADES pouring from the shadows of his cloak --

HERCULES (CONT'D)

(shouts to Autolycus)
I thought you would live like a king.

AUTOLYCUS

(shouts back)
The thing about kings. They live well
-- but many of them die really badly.

Autolycus rains blades on Cotys and his troops -- we have never seen him this lethal, this fast -- the guards around Arius crumple, slashed by blades -- the boy is free --

ERGENIA

Run, Arius.

-- Arius bolts, sprinting towards his mother -- Autolycus covering him as he climbs down the ramparts -- the blades scattering Cotys' troops -- Arius runs -- fast -- faster --

COTYS

Archers -- aim for the boy.

-- ARCHERS drop on one knee for a steadier shot -- their arrowheads gleam at Arius's back -- Hercules sees what is coming, lunges forward to shield Arius --

The archers loose their arrows --

Hercules throws himself in the way to shield Arius -- the arrow is about to pierce Hercules' heart -- Tydeus sees it coming, knows Hercules is going to die --

SO TYDEUS LEAPS FORWARD AND BLOCKS THE ARROW WITH HIS BODY.

Arius reaches his mother's arms safely -- Ergenia holds him, cradles him -- all eyes turn to --

TYDEUS, ARROW IN HIS CHEST.

But if the wound is fatal, no one told Tydeus. He does not fall -- HE GETS MAD. He breathes -- *in out* -- *in out* -- then unleashing a BATTLE CRY and waving his two axes --

HE CHARGES.

Mute with shock, Cotys gestures: "*hit him again.*" The archers launch arrow after arrow. Tydeus is hit -- in the chest, the stomach -- over and over. And yet --

TYDEUS KEEPS CHARGING.

The closer Tydeus gets, the archers begin to miss -- their hands shake with fright -- and then he reaches them and it is too late as he hacks and hacks until they are dead --

INSPIRED, HERCULES AND THE COMPANIONS ATTACK.

-- Cotys retreats, his troops falling over themselves as Hercules' club swings -- Atalanta's arrows flash through the night, Autolycus' blades cut -- the troops run --

-- allowing our heroes to reach their fallen companion -- Hercules and Autolycus drop by Tydeus' side -- Tydeus is dead but does not know it yet, blood frothing on his lips --

HERCULES

Easy, Tydeus.

Through the blood, Tydeus manages a single word --

TYDEUS

Child.

AUTOLYCUS

Safe. Thanks to you.

Tydeus flashes a bloody smile. Tries to get the tempest going again. Breathes -- *in out* -- *in out* -- *in* --

Out.

He is gone. Hercules shuts Tydeus' eyes.

HERCULES

Find peace, my friend...

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- ON AUTOLYCUS -- ON ATALANTA AND IOLAUS --
ON AMPHIARAUS -- they have lost a friend, a comrade, a brother.
The first of their little family to die.

No time to mourn. Cotys' troops charge -- the companions
retreat -- Hercules carrying Tydeus' corpse, not about to leave
him behind -- Atalanta covering them with arrows. Ergenia holds
Arius' hand, Rhesus helping them. Hercules seeks cover --

AND SEES HERA'S TEMPLE.

The marble-columned structure on the citadel grounds. It offers
shelter, a defensible position, sanctuary.

HERCULES
Temple. Go.

Our heroes bolt, eight tiny figures pursued by a swarm -- they
pour up the temple steps, soldiers at their heels --

INT. TEMPLE OF HERA - CONTINUOUS

-- it becomes the last stand at the Alamo as Hercules places
Tydeus at the feet of the Hera statue and shouts --

HERCULES
Barricades.

-- Atalanta and Ergenia tip over the COPPER VATS containing the
goddess' ETERNAL FLAME, spilling BURNING OIL on the marble steps
-- Hercules, Autolycus, Iolaus and Rhesus stand at the temple
gate, holding back the enemy onslaught --

-- Hercules smashes soldiers by the dozen -- Autolycus flips
blades -- Rhesus stabs with his sword -- Iolaus swings the
executioner's axe like a madman --

-- Amphiaraus conceals Arius behind Hera's inner sanctum and
places a finger on his lips, urging the boy to keep silent --

-- and the battle takes its toll -- Autolycus TAKES A SPEAR to
the side -- Iolaus A SLASH across the face -- Hercules is HIT BY
ARROWS in the bicep and thigh --

STILL THEY FIGHT, PILING THE TEMPLE STEPS WITH DEAD UNTIL --

COTYS
Fall back. Hold formation.

-- the troops stagger from the temple, reeling -- but they pull
together, reassemble for the final assault.

ANGLE ON OUR HEROES -- the temple resembles a hospital, with
Ergenia tearing drapes from the altar to bandage Autolycus --

AUTOLYCUS

I cannot believe I am going to die...
 (furious)
 ...FOR FREE.

REVERSE ANGLE -- outside the temple, Cotys raises his double-bladed axe -- commands his troops --

COTYS

Lock shields.

CLANG. As one, FOUR THOUSAND SHIELDS CLICK INTO PLACE. A HUNDRED SHIELD-WALLS FORM. Cotys grins. Calls out --

COTYS (CONT'D)

Hercules. You know there is no way to defeat a shield-wall.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- staring out at the wall of armor heading his way -- it looks completely hopeless -- he looks up as if appealing to the gods -- his gaze on Hera's hard stone face.

HERCULES

Except one...

With a grimace, Hercules rises. Ergenia has not yet finished bandaging his wounds. Gently, he brushes her off. Limping, he circles the Hera statue. Stands behind its base.

ATALANTA

Hercules...?

HERCULES

(quietly)
 Step aside.

Hercules places his hands on the statue's base.

Flexes his muscles.

Plants his feet on the ground.

ANGLE ON COTYS -- outside the temple -- points his axe at the smoldering bloodied marble steps --

COTYS

Advance.

Feet thudding in march, the first shield-wall moves forward. Followed by another. And another. And a hundred more.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- he strains -- muscles locking -- sweat beading on his skin, pouring down his cheeks -- every atom, every molecule of his being shudders --

Rhesus places his arm protectively around Ergenia -- the companions watching, faces wet with sweat, silently urging Hercules on. Amphiaraus smiles as --

CRACKS APPEAR ON THE STATUE'S FOUNDATION.

It can't be happening. It is. As astonishing, as superhuman, as unreal as it seems --

HERA'S STATUE MOVES.

ANGLE ON COTYS -- leading his troops -- climbing up the temple steps -- the gate is right before them --

ANGLE ON HERCULES -- a fire in his eyes as he pushes -- pushes -- pushes -- a lone man trying to move a goddess --

AND SUCCEEDING.

As Cotys and his overwhelming force reach the gate, a SHADOW falls over them --

HERA TILTS FORWARD.

ANGLE ON ARIUS -- peering out from the temple's inner sanctum, wonder in his eyes --

ARIUS
He is the Son of Zeus...

HERA TOPPLES.

The statue's head crumbles like a boulder, its stone body collapsing forward towards the gate, wiping out the front of the temple, scattering columns like bowling pins --

TIGHT ON COTYS -- as Hera's head tumbles towards him --

COTYS
I don't believe --

His last words.

THE STATUE DROPS, SQUASHING COTYS LIKE AN ANT. DEBRIS CRACKS THE SHIELD-WALL OPEN AND TRANSFORMS COTYS' DISCIPLINED ARMY INTO A WILD-EYED MOB FLEEING IN TERROR.

EXT. TEMPLE OF HERA - MOMENTS LATER

A cloud of fine dust hangs over the ruined temple like a fog. Something stirs in the mist. A figure emerges and stands tall at the top of the temple stairs.

HERCULES.

Covered as he is in marble dust, he resembles a ghost -- or a Greek statue. Gradually, his comrades emerge by his side. Autolycus and Atalanta. Then Iolaus and Amphiaraus. Then Ergenia, holding Arius' hand. And Rhesus.

REVERSE ANGLE -- corpses everywhere, but Cotys' army still stands. If they attack, our heroes will be cut down.

Things look grim.

And then -- AH-WHOOOOO! A war horn sounds.

On the hills, OVER A THOUSAND SILHOUETTES HAVE APPEARED surrounding Cotys' citadel. And they look like Centaurs.

ANGLE ON RHESUS -- reacting at the riders --

RHESUS

My men...

HERCULES

You must have been a worthy leader,
for them to return for you.

ANGLE ON COTYS' ARMY -- the soldiers suddenly look very scared. Rhesus cries out --

RHESUS

Cotys is dead. You are surrounded.
Lay down your arms.

SWORDS waver -- SHIELDS falter -- but the army still holds.

RHESUS (CONT'D)

Soldiers. You have been deceived into
serving a tyrant. You have committed
terrible crimes in his name. Murdered
your fellow countrymen.

Cotys' soldiers look at each other. Weapons still holding.

RHESUS (CONT'D)

Lay down your arms and end this...
(beat)
...before Hercules ends you.

With his eyes, Rhesus points out Hercules. Cotys' troops react: Rhesus' riders behind them, Hercules before them.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- a half-smile forms on his face. His steely gaze passes over the enemy troops. Calmly --

HE TAKES A STEP FORWARD.

And the entire army TAKES A STEP BACK.

Like the brigands at the opening of our story. The soldiers regard Hercules not only with fear... but also respect.

Beat.

A THRACIAN SOLDIER breaks rank. Drops his sword and shield on the ground. And kneels.

ANOTHER SOLDIER does the same. ANOTHER. ANOTHER. A CLANG as a THOUSAND SWORDS AND SHIELDS drop, piling onto the earth.

THOUSANDS KNEEL BEFORE HERCULES.

In the distance, Rhesus' troops shake their weapons in the air. Triumphantly, they chant -- "*Hercules, Hercules.*"

The kneeling Thracians take up the chant -- "*Hercules, Hercules*" -- thousands of voices sounding as one.

TIGHT ON HERCULES -- reacting to the sound of his name cried out like the adoring crowd in Athens used to. Years ago.

EXT. COURTYARD - COTYS' CITADEL - DAWN

TIGHT ON TYDEUS -- eyes shut, face composed. For the first time, at peace. Smoke billows by. FIRE CRACKLES.

Tydeus rests on a FUNERAL PYRE. Hercules holds the torch. Amphiaraus, Autolycus, Iolaus and Atalanta beside him -- their wounds have been bound, they look weary but strong. Rhesus, Ergenia and the people of Thrace pay their respects.

RHESUS

(to Hercules; quietly)

Let his ashes rest here. He will be
forever honored as a hero and legend.

Hercules lowers his head. Watches his fallen comrade consumed.

EXT. REFUGEE CAMP - COTYS' CITADEL - DAY

Some days have passed, enough for our heroes to heal. Hercules and Rhesus walk through the refugee camp -- which is being dismantled as people return to rebuild their villages.

RHESUS

A man with a cause can be stronger
than a god. Never imagined it would
take both to bring peace to Thrace.

HERCULES

I heard that Thrace is not a man or a
king or a god. Thrace is her people.

Rhesus hears the echo of his own words. He smiles. They watch as ARIUS works with the REFUGEES, helping pack belongings, aiding the OLD MAN Hercules rescued onto a cart.

Arius notices Hercules and Rhesus. He runs to them. Hercules kneels to the boy's level, waves him close.

HERCULES (CONT'D)

Arius.

ERGENIA stands nearby, watching the exchange in silence.

HERCULES (CONT'D)

As king, your subjects will live and die based on decisions you make. Find advisers you trust.

Hercules directs Arius' gaze to Rhesus: *"trust this man."*

HERCULES

And lead not with this --

Hercules palms the hilt of his olive-wood club --

HERCULES (CONT'D)

-- but this.

Hercules touches Arius' heart. Conveying the lesson he has learned: *"believe in yourself."*

HERCULES (CONT'D)

Do I have your word as a man?

Hercules extends his forearm. Arius looks at it, then him, overcome by the gravity of all this.

ARIUS

I promise.

Ergenia smiles as Arius's small hand grasps Hercules's massive forearm. Together, they shake in agreement. Then Hercules hangs the LION'S TOOTH around the boy's neck.

HERCULES

You have earned it.

Gently, Rhesus leads Arius away -- as they go back to aiding the refugees. Hercules stands as Ergenia approaches.

ERGENIA

Is that really a tooth from the Nemean lion?

HERCULES

Every myth grows from a seed of truth.

Hercules watches as Rhesus put his oversized helmet on Arius' small head and lifts him into a horse's saddle. Ergenia studies him. Knows he is remembering his own children.

ERGENIA

There will always be a place for you here. With us.

Hercules nods his thanks. Ergenia embraces him with gratitude.

ERGENIA (CONT'D)

Zeus can take on many forms. That father you never knew. Perhaps?

HERCULES

If believing that I am the son of Zeus gives you strength... then believe.

Hercules smiles, accepting his legend. He walks to the citadel gates where his companions wait on their chariots. He looks back to where Ergenia and Rhesus stand watching Arius ride.

Rhesus holds Ergenia's hand.

Satisfied, Hercules takes his place by Iolaus in the chariot. Autolycus looks over to Hercules.

AUTOLYCUS

Where to next? Barbarian lands?

Hercules takes a deep breath. Looks to the horizon. We could do it now -- leave Greece forever, find a place where no one knows him, where he could be alone. And then --

HERCULES

No.

(beat)

Home.

A beat -- as Hercules' words sink in. Autolycus grins, Iolaus beams, Atalanta and Amphiaraus smile. Hercules laughs -- a man free from guilt and ghosts. He lashes his horse, thundering the chariot through the citadel gates. The companions follow.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

Already the name "Hercules" is a thing of legend.

EXT. THRACIAN PLAINS - DAY (AERIAL SHOT)

FOUR CHARIOTS carrying five heroes tear across the plains, leaving dust trails in their wake, heading for the horizon --

IOLAUS (V.O.)

Many will remember him as the hero who
completed the twelve labors, then
ventured into the underworld and
destroyed the Cerberus.

-- they grow distant, mere specks in the landscape --

IOLAUS (V.O.)

Others will remember him as the
cunning general who united a nation
under its rightful king.

-- until they ride out of sight.

IOLAUS (V.O.)

His legend will have many names. The
Athenian Lion. The Son of Zeus. The
Mortal God. But the one name that
must be known -- the one that must be
remembered -- is simply HERCULES.

SMASH TO BLACK.