

Herakles and the Nemean Lion

written by Leanne Guenther based on the Greek Mythology texts by Beren and Baldwin

The forest of Nemea was green and still, but despite its peaceful appearance the people who lived near it had stopped going in. A lion lived there and it was larger than any lion they had ever seen, with a coat the color of dry grass. Every week it carried off cattle and sometimes even people.

Hunters and the king's woodsmen had tried to kill it but none of them came home.

Herakles was the strongest man in Greece. His cousin, a king who envied him, had given him a set of tasks to perform, and the lion was the first. Herakles confidently set out for Nemea when the king challenged him to deal with the lion.

The villagers met him on the road. They told him how many had failed before him and warned that he would not return alive.

"This challenge is mine and it's only the first," said Herakles. "I'll finish it."

He walked into the forest and followed the signs until he found the lion's den. Then he waited. When the lion came out, he drew his bow and shot. The arrows struck its golden hide and fell to the ground broken. They didn't draw a single drop of blood.

Herakles put down his bow, grabbed the club he'd crafted from an olive tree and swung it. The mighty blow knocked the lion to the ground. Before it could rise, Herakles seized it by the throat and held on with all his strength until the lion went still.

Herakles knelt beside the animal. It was said that no blade could cut that hide but with Herakles great strength he tugged and pulled and in time the pelt was off. He wrapped the tawny skin around his shoulders like a cloak and set the lion's head on his shoulder. The skin that had turned away every arrow would now protect him.

Then he walked to the palace to report to the king.

The king looked out and saw a man in a lion's skin coming up the road. The king's face went pale... he hadn't expected Herakles to survive the battle with the mighty lion. So he hid himself inside the palace and sent a message to Herakles that he was grateful but that Herakles should leave for his next trial now. From then on, the king would send his orders through a messenger.

Herakles wore the lion's skin for the rest of his life. Later, the people of Greece held games in the forest where it had all begun, the Nemean Games, in his honor.





