THE THRITEENTH LABOUR OF HERCULES

THE RIDDLE OF THE SANN

It was late in the day and the sun was just beginning to go down, a ball of red fire on the horizon, when Hercules returned to the palace of King Eurystheus. The great man was battered and bloodstained, his thick dark hair matted with sweat and blood, his muscles ached with fatigue, his armour dented and battered, but his blue eyes were as sharp and alert as ever. A strange smile played on Hercules’ lips as he mounted the wide steps to the palace. The final twelfth Labour had been accomplished. The shadows seemed to lengthen, deepen, merging from dark blue into black between the marble columns as the hero approached the throne.

“Well?” came the voice of the King from the shadows. “Is it done? Where is Cerberus? Where is the Guardian of the Underworld? I trust you have brought the beast to me and not failed in your task?”

Hercules smiled grimly. He knew very well that the King was shaken. Eurystheus had not expected him to return alive from the Underworld, and now he stood before him in the great hall of the palace of Tiryns. Snarls and growls came faintly to the ears of the King and the dark shadow on the throne shifted uncomfortably.

“As you can hear, Your Majesty,” Hercules said, bowing low, “The Guardian of the Underworld awaits your inspection outside the walls of the palace. I feared if I brought him before your throne, you might have no palace left from which to rule from.”

“Well done, Hercules,” the voice of the King was almost strangled. “You have done what others could not. You have braved and overthrown death itself in bringing me its Guardian.”

“Then I am free to go?” Hercules asked. “You gave me twelve Labours to fulfil, and I have fulfilled them all. I have done all you have asked of me.”

A shaft of late evening light fell across the shadow of King Eurystheus as he leaned forward on his throne. The red light gave the impression that the King was bathed in blood. His thin features were twisted into a horrid smile. The sharp eyes flared like rubies. The lips twitched in a passion of agony. He knew that what Hercules had said was true; he had no further claim to the man that stood before him and yet… yet he was not ready to let him go. There must be something, someone, *something*, that his arrogant creature could not defeat. The fading light suddenly gave the crafty King an idea.

“Of course, Hercules, you are free to go. Have I not said that if you complete all the tasks I set for you, that you may have your freedom? Eurystheus does not go back on his word. But…” The final word echoed around the vast hall. “But there is one final task I wish you to do for me, before you take your leave.”

Hercules bunched his fists. This was not what had been agreed. “I have won my freedom! You expect me to do more?”

The eyes of the King were as iced blood. “If you are afraid?”

“I am afraid of nothing!”

It was at that moment, that Hercules knew he was trapped. The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself. He had always known that his impetuous nature would be his undoing and maybe that was so at this very moment.

“Kallu, the Lost Magician of the Sann,” Eurystheus stood tall on the dais of the throne, a dark flame flickering in the lost light. “Dare you face the Lost Magician? Many years has his black magic blighted my Kingdom. Every year he takes my people’s harvest. Overthrowing him would lead not just to your freedom, but also the freedom of my people who are under the yoke of his dark sorcery.”

Hercules swore deep under his breath. He had heard of Kallu, the Lost Magician of the Sann. The last of a race of wicked demons, the Sann, from the Netherworld. They had once waged war against the gods themselves and their forces of darkness and terror had laid waste to much of the known world, before the combined might of the Council of Elders from the mystical Hall of Wisdom under the instruction of his father, Zeus, had thrown them into the Abyss. All except Kallu. The demon had fled before the final onslaught that had trapped his people, and he had hid away from the eyes of mankind, deep in the caverns and dungeons of the hills that lined the edge of the Isle of Paros, slowly building his strength while the belief in the gods had waned enough for him to leave his dark hiding place and seek vengeance.

“And if I win against this Kallu? I will have my freedom? No more tests?”

A cruel smile spread across the lips of Eurystheus. “Yes, Hercules. No more tests. You will have your freedom.”

Hercules sighed deeply. He knew that he could not refuse the King. He would have to defeat the Lost Magician or die in the attempt. He bowed before the throne. “I will do as you wish.”

“Then go, my *Champion.*” Hercules heard the mocking tone of the King in those words. “Seek out the Lost Magician of the Sann. You will find him at his Citadel on the Isle of Paros. Free my people from his tyranny and give them their freedom. I will provide you with provisions and passage to Paros.”

“It will be done,” Hercules said with more confidence than he felt. Without a backwards glance at the King, he strode quickly from the throne room.

Eurystheus watched him go as the sun finally slipped below the horizon to be lost in the jumbled darkness of the clouds that were gathering like an omen of doom. The broad strong back and muscled arms of Hercules swung definitely as he left the great hall*. All your courage and strength will be for nothing against the Lost Magician*, the King thought as the huge doors of the palace swung shut. *Farewell, Hercules, we will not meet again. Kallu will destroy you.*

Hercules stood on the grim beach of the Isle of Paros. The ship that had brought him there faded behind the spray of the sea and was lost to sight in the mist that surrounded the haunted isle. The legends of the Lost Magician were many. Some said that he was dead and that it was only his magic that lived on; others that he was a ghost, a shade that was never allowed to rest for the terrible deeds that he had committed in life; to some, he was a story to frighten the children and nothing more, but all knew that when harvest time came around for the people of Tiryns, they would awake and find the harvest gone from the stores and from the fields, as if a great and dark magic was at work; and Kallu, the Lost Magician of the Sann was blamed. *Well*, Hercules thought grimly to himself, *if Kallu is responsible, then it was time to find out.*

The Citadel of Kallu thrust like a pointing finger at the sky, as if in mockery to the gods themselves. A pillar of black obsidian, perched on the rocks above the crashing waves of the ocean that framed the edge of the thick, dark jungle that framed the fringes of the island. Hercules looked up at the tower and could see no way of gaining entrance. He had walked all around the structure and had seen no sign of a door. It was as if only a sea bird or a being of magic could gain entrance.

Shading his eyes from the spray, Hercules gazed up towards the top of the tower. A thin balustrade ran around the top of the tower and from it a spindly spire thrust upwards towards the dark clouds that billowed and boiled above it. There was the obvious entrance, Hercules reasoned, but how could he gain access to it? He glanced again at the tower. It was not made by any manmade brick. There was no mortar on edge where he could gain a fingerhold and pull himself up the wall, it was one sheer sheet of shiny blackness.

A large black shadow cut across Hercules, dragging him out of his thoughts. Above him glided a strange creature. It was the size of a man, but there all resemblance ended. The head was reptilian and elongated, crowned with a bony ridge, the mouth like that of a great bird. The body was strong and muscular; each arm was attached to a sheet of stretched skin, taut between hip and claw like hands, creating a wing of some sort. A lazy flap of the great sheet propelled the creature forward. Between the cruel talons of the lower limbs was a mass of wheat and corn. The missing harvest of the people of Tiryns. Kallu had obviously conjured up this demon to steal the harvest, Hercules reasoned.

The creature was unaware of the man at the base of the tower as Hercules watched the reptile flap its wings, land, and hop inside the tower from the balustrade. As the thing vanished from sight, Hercules shook his head. There was no way he would be able to get inside. He had tried cutting notches in the tower with his sword, but the blows had just glanced off, leaving no trace of a mark. He had to admit that maybe Eurystheus had him this time. He couldn’t even get inside to face Kallu. Unless…

The sun was setting when the great reptile soared forth from the Citadel of Kallu, the leathery wings flapping in a rhythm of death and destruction. As the creature circled the tower, its sharp eyes spotted what appeared to be a great mass of greenery and corn below. With an inhuman shriek, the reptile made for the harvest that laid below on the beach.

Beneath the layer of vegatation, Hercules waited. Every muscle in his body taut and ready to spring. From a tiny gap in the straw, Hercules watched the great creature fly ever closer. As the sharp claws stretched out to grasp the harvest, Hercules leapt into action. He burst from the straw and launched his powerful body upwards towards the monster.

A thin scream burst from the creature as the demigod broke cover and grasped it around the snake-like neck. The thing broke away and climbed sharply, banking up and towards the boiling clouds. Hercules felt the thick muscles of the beast writhe beneath his grip like a snake but held fast. He glanced down and his eyes widened as he saw the ground far below him, a smear of dull retreating colour. Hercules tightened his grip on the creature as it rolled and dipped, attempting to shake him off, but he clung tightly to the thing, forcing it ever closer to the lip of the tower and Kallu.

The wind tore through Hercules’ hair as he pulled himself up onto the back of the beast which squawked and shrieked with rage and fear. It rolled again, and Hercules dug his fingers into the throat of the thing which attempted to turn its great head and snap at him with tiny, sharp, dagger-like teeth. A horrible smell of dead carrion and fish rolled up Hercules’ nostrils, making him gag. Up and down, soaring high into the air and dropping like a stone, the creature tried every trick it could to dislodge and throw the desperate Hercules to the ground.

It was at the precise moment when the winged reptile, animated by who knows what foul black magic, was directly above the tower, that Hercules let himself drop. A cry of reptilian rage came from the creature’s throat as Hercules hit the black floor of the tower and rolled across the shining surface to lay breathless at the edge of the balustrade.

Hercules lay, breathing hard at the margin of the tower. Demigod he might be, but he had always hated heights. He’d had his eyes tightly shut all the way down. Gingerly, he opened one bright blue eye and squinted. With a gulp, he quickly shut it again. The ground below the tower looked a million, dizzying miles away. The crashing waves and cruel rocks of the Isle, tiny from the top of the tower. With a grunt, Hercules rolled himself away from the edge and sat up. Above him, the great reptile circled and screamed in rage but flew no closer.

The tower turret that stabbed upwards from the main body of the Citadel was undercut by a pillared archway made with the same black stone as the rest of the structure. Strange carvings adorned the pillars. Weird, writhing creatures, winged serpents and other bizarre demons all carved out of the odd black stone. Underneath the archway, a dark staircase descended into blackness. Gripping his sword tightly, Hercules made his way down the steps and into the heart of the tower.

The staircase was lit by guttering green torches set in black sconces along the wall. Macabre shadows flickered and danced across the stone as the hero made his cautious descent into the darkness. Hercules felt the thick fog of magic all around him. It flashed across his senses and sparkled before his eyes, and he felt his skin crawl.

There was nothing more that Hercules detested more than magic, and dark magic at that. It had been dark magic from the jealous Hera, Queen of the Gods, that had destroyed his family and he now loathed sorcery in any form; and this dark tower with its torches of green flame, smacked of the darkest magic. It was distant and otherworldly, as if created and cast by a being beyond human understanding at the very limits of the universe itself. Hercules felt his throat dry with fear.

The stairs ended at a large open chamber. It was empty, save a carved lectern on which sat an ancient book, bound in dark leather, a mighty emerald crystal, as big as Hercules’ fist, that hung in the air and glittered with strange fire in the dim light, and a black throne carved with leering demons. On the throne a dark figure watched the entrance of Hercules. Kallu, the Lost Magician! Hercules raised his sword; the figure on the throne waved an arm and the sword was torn from Hercules’ grip to go spinning across the room and crash into the black wall.

“Not how I would expect a thief, burglar and murderer to greet his betters.”

Hercules stood firm. He had been shaken by the easy way the magician had disarmed him with barely a flick of his wrist, but he tried to push down the feeling of fear he felt that bubbled and seethed in his stomach.

“You are Kallu, the Lost Magician?” Hercules asked of the shape on the throne.

The darkness shifted as the figure detached itself from the black seat. Kallu stood almost twice as tall as Hercules himself. The body was huge and muscular, covered in shimmering green and purple scales that shimmered iridescent like a snake in the light of the emerald crystal. Great hands ended in cruel, curved claws. A thick, hairy tail lashed from side to side as if it was alive. The face was a grotesque parody of the human face. A hooked nose, a thin mouth stuffed with jagged, misshapen teeth, cunning red eyes that burned like coals and a head surmounted by curling horns. This was Kallu, the Lost Magician of the Sann.

“I am, Kallu.” The voice was like the growl of some great beast. “And you are Hercules, sent by King Eurystheus to destroy me, is that not so?”

“If I must,” Hercules countered. “You have been taking the harvest of his people. They have no food; they are hungry, and famine stalks the land.”

“And you think that you can destroy me, boy?” Kallu smiled through animal teeth and the eyes burned. “I am not of your world. I am of the Sann; demons of the Netherworld. My power is great and can best even that of a demigod such as you.”

“You created that thing out there?” Hercules asked, pointing up the stairs towards the entrance of the tower. “That creature that steals the harvest of Tiryns?”

“It is a thing from your world, from a time long ago. A time eons before the oceans themselves drank Atlantis. It will be the death of the people of Tiryns and not all your strength can stop it.”

“Then I must destroy you!” Hercules leapt forward to strike Kallu with his mighty fists, but the demon merely waved a clawed hand to send him whirling and spinning through the air before crashing into the black wall like his sword before him. Dazed, Hercules watched as Kallu walked towards the great spinning crystal.

“I will give you a chance, Hercules,” the demon said, almost lazily, as it gazed with red eyes at the gleaming gem. “Solve the Riddle of the Sann and I will leave the people of Tiryns in peace. They will have their harvest, their grain, and their wheat, and grow fat and prosperous. Fail, and I will destroy not only you but also all of Greece in fire and brimstone. This world will be mine in vengeance after the defeat of my people, the Sann. I am all powerful! And once I leave this tower of stone…”

Hercules narrowed his eyes at the creature that stood staring at the great, spinning crystal in front of him. Could he trust a thing like that to keep its word? He shrugged his shoulders and knew he had no choice. “Very well, Kallu. I’ll solve your riddle. Tell on.”

A howl of laughter came from the beast and the red eyes gleamed as Kallu intoned the Riddle of the Sans. “What has heat but no flame. Shape but no sides. Is seen only half the time, but is there all of it? What is your answer, son of Zeus?”

Hercules thought hard. He looked narrowly at Kallu. The eyes of flame, the hideous claws, and the mouth full of demon teeth. Then he looked at the black walls of the tower; solid and impenetrable to all men but himself, and he then thought of the winged monstrosity that lurked without. All things from a nightmare it was true, but… something was niggling at the back of Hercules mind. Something that Kallu had said…

“Well, Hercules?” Kallu snarled through lips that dripped and slavered. “Do you have the answer to the Riddle of the Sanns?”

In the head of Hercules ran the words: Once *I leave this tower of stone*… and finally the niggle at the back of his head burst forth like the light of the sun as it frightens away the night. He had the answer to Kallu and he had the answer to the riddle.

“Time grows short,” A growl that purred into hideous laughter came from the rubbery lips of the demon. “You have had time enough to think! What is the answer! Tell me! What is the answer!”

“From what you say,” Hercules said, edging towards his fallen sword that lay close to the foot of the black stairs. “It sounds like a creature of the Underworld. Heat but no flame, could be some kind of animal. Animals have warm blood. Shape but no side sounds like a mist or vapour. But, if it is seen only half the time, it sounds like a creature of the night. Maybe that’s the answer. A ghost. A shade of the Underworld! That’s my answer, Kallu. A shade!”

A great bellow of laughter came from the sorcerer demon. The huge flanks shook with wicked laughter and the eyes flashed red with triumph. “Foolish man! That riddle was the only thing that kept me bound to this dark tower! The Elders who imprisoned me in this jail of stone placed a spell that only the Riddle of the Sann could break. I was almost powerless save for the work of my ancient servant! Using him I was bound to lure one such as you to my tower. One who would have not only the physical strength of a god, but also think like one, to be able to set me free! And now I shall have my vengeance! Destroy him!”

With an inhuman shriek, the winged servant of Kallu flew from the shadows towards Hercules. In one swift, cat-like movement, Hercules swept his sword from the floor and flung it with all his strength towards the great emerald crystal. His aim was sure and true, and the blade pierced the very heart of the gem which shattered into a million fragments that hung like shimmering dust in the air, before they were blown away on a foul breeze that roared through the chamber.

Before Hercules’ amazed eyes, the pinioned monster fell lifeless to the floor, decaying as it did so. The skin shrivelled and retreated on the great body, the muscles wasted away, the wicked eyes fell inwards, lifeless, and empty, the whole body burst into dust. And then it was gone, only a memory of its ancient race remained.

Kallu turned his blazing eyes on the man who stood before him. For a moment the two faced each other across the shards of shattered crystal. Hercules picked up his sword and pointed it at the magician.

“What have you done!” screamed the demon as pinpricks of emerald light began to flash across its scaly body. “What have you done! You spoke the Riddle of the Sans! You gave…”

“The wrong answer,” Hercules smiled grimly. “It fell into place when you said about leaving the tower. You were trapped here by that crystal. You only had a limited power, such as animating that fossilised monster. If I had given you the correct answer to the riddle, you would have been free to wreak havoc across our world. Knowing the power that you possess; you could have even unleashed the Titans. But now…”

“No! You cannot do this… you cannot…” The Lost Magician writhed and twisted in agony as the emerald light became stronger and brighter. Kallu’s eyes widened in terror as he began to melt and burn in green fire. Hercules had to shield his eyes from the glow as with a terrible scream, the body of the Sann burst apart and was then sucked inwards back into whatever gruesome Netherworld it had come from.

Hercules stood there in the now empty chamber; a shaft of bright, warm light filtered down from the roof above. Standing in the warmth, Hercules thought of the answer to the riddle he had kept from Kallu and the answer that would now give him his freedom from Eurystheus. *The Sun*, Hercules smiled to himself. *The sun*. That is the answer to the Riddle of the Sann. Without a backwards glance at the chamber of the Netherworld sorcerer, Hercules left the empty chamber that had once been the prison to the Lost Magician and strode out into the light of a new day.