A Royal Bout (a story featuring Jason and the Argonauts)

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I

t wasn’t the same without Hercules with them on the *Argo*. Jason felt his absence keenly. It was a whole lot quieter aboard ship for one thing. Telamon was (just barely) talking to him again, and Peleus as well, but Jason felt more than ever the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. As captain he had to make final decisions that affected the *Argo* and her now slightly less than fifty heroic crewmembers.

And there was always argument. A ship full of heroes, many of them with gods in their ancestry, is always like that.

Like today. It was extremely hot, with the sun beating mercilessly down upon them from a brassy sky. Tempers had been flaring. Castor and Pollox had been shouting at each other again, and it had almost come to a brawl shortly before noon, but Telamon and Peleus had held the twin brothers apart, before almost starting to scuffle themselves. Atalanta had started out by yelling at them all and slapping Telamon, but had then run belowdecks so no one could see her burst into tears. Euphemus had gone down too, but had returned a moment later alone, with a serious expression. The *Argo* had been at sea for a month since their last tragic landfall, and everyone was restless.

“I see a dock with ships!” shouted Zethes right then, as they reached a gulf in the Propontis. Zethes was one of the sons of the North wind, and his voice came down to them from the air above the *Argo*, where he tumbled slowly like an autumn leaf caught in a breeze, never quite falling down to the ship below. His brother Calais was belowdecks. The two weren’t getting along either.

A dock. So, were they going to sail past, or drop anchor and stop for a while? Jason had to decide. His past few decisions, and their past few landfalls, had not gone well at all. They’d even lost Hercules, who was off with Polyphemus trying to find out what had happened to Hylas, who’d disappeared in the forest by a pond. For all they knew, something might have eaten Hylas. So there was immediately an argument about whether they should stop or not, given what had happened the last couple of times.

Atalanta and Philoctetes wanted to do some hunting. Telamon and Peleus thought they should sail on, as too much time had been lost on their quest for the Golden Fleece already.

When eventually Orpheus pointed out that they *were* getting low on fresh water, Jason decided they’d stop, so Tiphys headed the *Argo* into port.

Greek pattern.jpg

They sailed on in and came to a bit of dock where no ship was tied up, and a burly seaman with a shaved head told them to wait. “You need to talk to an emissary from King Amycus before you have permission to roam the land of the Bebrycians” he said, shaking his head. Then he lumbered off with his barrel of freshly caught fish balanced on one shoulder.

So they waited. Gulls circled, screeching from above them. Jason stood leaning on the rail, very conscious of the empty space right behind him where Hercules would normally be standing, thick arms folded over his enormous chest, dark beard jutting out from his chin.

Eventually a fancily-dressed man approached the *Argo*. He had two guards with him. His robes were white, with a garnet border around the edges. He wore a small, round, garnet hat and carried himself like they were lucky he was even taking the time to talk to them at all. He wore entirely too much scent, Jason thought.

“The king demands that every ship of...s*ea-wanderers...*prove its worth by sending a challenger to take on the King in unarmed combat,” he told them in a bored voice. (Well, he actually said “ἁλίπλαγκτοι” in Greek, rather than “sea-wanderers,” and “ἁλίπλαγκτοι” is a much ruder word. Like “bums” or “homeless people.” Only worse.)

“Who is he to call us ἁλίπλαγκτοιs?!” demanded Pollox from behind Jason. Castor and his twin brother Pollox were obvious choices to fight the King, as they were both champion boxers, among other things. If it was a kind of sport, either of them could beat anyone. They were always together, but all too often they weren’t getting along. They’d first learned to fight when their beautiful sister Helen had started dating and had often needed eager young men to be sent forcibly on their way. Now they spent too much time fighting each other, often over girls, athletics or nothing at all.

“Be quiet a second,” Jason told Pollox. He asked the Bebrycian emissary for more details, and was told that in order to keep dirty sailors and sketchy pirates from wandering the streets of Bebryces at night, for any foreign ship to stay in harbour, someone on board had to fight the King, who was a huge man, skilled in the art of boxing. As usually only the educated sons of wealthy men were lucky enough to be extensively trained in boxing, the King seldom had anything to worry about. It was an easy way of screening out the riffraff, the foppish man said. When he said “riffraff,” he rolled his eyes over the *Argo* a bit.

“Don’t you even want to know who we *are*?” Jason asked the emissary. Many of the Argonauts had gods or kings somewhere in their family tree, and they had powers beyond normal human ones. Hercules had been a son of Zeus, Euphemus was supposedly the son of Poseidon, and Zethes and Calais had explained their ability to float on the breezes by saying they were the sons of the North wind. Jason wasn’t sure about Castor and Pollox, but it wouldn’t have surprised him if there was divine blood in them as well. He’d once heard Castor say something to Pollox about a swan, but that he hadn’t entirely understood what had been said.

“If your champion puts up a decent fight with the King, then and only then might the King possibly wish to know who you *are*,” the emissary explained. “Your champion can tell King Amycus his name *if* he fights well and is invited to have supper with the King and his Queen. *Only* if he puts up a good fight. Otherwise, the King doesn’t care what your name is, and doesn’t trust you to *tell* the truth anyway. Choose your champion, if you have one. The King will be here in late afternoon before his supper. A fight *always* helps his appetite. Also, he’s never lost a match.” And the emissary was gone, taking his guards with him, and leaving a couple more men patrolling the docks to make sure the Argonauts stayed in their ship.

Jason knew that Hercules would have insisted on fighting the King himself, but Hercules was gone now, and so Castor and Pollox stepped up and began arguing with Jason over which one would get to fight the King. Both were famous boxers and wrestlers, and Jason knew that if he didn’t soon make a decision as to which one he thought had a better chance of winning, they’d start hitting each other. He also knew that whichever brother he didn’t pick would *never* forgive Jason for not respecting his boxing ability.

“I tell you guys what,” Jason started. “The gods have been getting involved in our adventures an awful lot so far, so let’s leave this up to them.” He had the twins draw straws. Pollox drew the short straw, which meant he had to fight Amycus the King of Bebryces, which he was hoping to do anyway.

Greek pattern.jpg

A huge, noisy crowd gathered down by the docks. Eventually the King himself came down to a small cleared area he used as a ring. King Amycus was a mountain of a man, and he took off everything but a small tunic in which to fight Pollox. He had a shaved head and a beard like a shovel. His massive body was extremely hairy. He paced up and down, cracking his knuckles and shrugging his huge shoulders to work the kinks out. The sun continued to beat down almost as hotly as it had at high noon. It was very still.

Once the King arrived, Jason, Telamon and Castor went down to the bout with Pollox, but the rest of the Argonauts had to watch over the side of the ship, as there was no room in the exhibition area for any more people. Pollox wasn’t a small young man, but next to King Amycus, he looked like a child.

Without any speeches (or anything at all) things kicked off (literally) with the King suddenly throwing a low stomp kick at Pollox’s knees. The King's kick went wide, and he missed, stumbling slightly. Was he faking clumsiness? He then attempted a couple of short, snapping left and right jabs which Pollox had no trouble avoiding. Confident, Pollox rushed in but was taken down immediately. Hard. By a massive forearm across the forehead. Amycus *had* been faking.

The King kneeled on Pollox’s back and went to work with short elbows and punches. He smothered Pollux under the weight of his huge body and tried to land all of his shots on Pollox’s kidneys. Castor looked on in shock, mouth open but speechless, for once.

Pollox knew what was up, so he managed to catch the King in the mouth with a wild elbow and got out from under Amycus and back on his feet. Pollox then landed a front snap kick to the King’s huge body, making Amycus grunt in rage and surprise. Then Pollox followed with a series of fast punches, working combinations that were dazzling to see, but Castor could have told anyone that Pollox was not landing nearly as many as he tried. At least he was trying to stay out of the King’s superior reach.

The King lowered his massive head and plowed straight through all this, swatting several of Pollox’s jabs aside with open-handed slaps. He then got in a hard punch of his own that took Pollox in the middle of the chest. Another short, brutal left to Pollox’s ribs brought a sharp pain that told Pollox he now had ribs that were either cracked or broken.

The King then nailed Pollox with an overhand right to the upper chest, rushing in with one more good shot before Pollox landed two hard rights of his own, first opening the way for each with a sharp left jab. Pollox didn’t get out in time after landing these, and the King grabbed him in both arms and took Pollox to the dirt again.

As Pollox scrambled back to his feet before Amycus could pin him fully, Jason realized that there weren’t going to be any rounds. This brutal scrap was going to continue until one or the other man could not get back up. And Pollox had already been brought down twice.

The spectators could see that it hurt Pollox to breathe. They roared and held up skins of wine they were working away at.

“Stop clinching with him, you idiot!” Castor yelled at his brother. “Work around him and move in and out of his range. Let him be the bull; you be the scorpion! But don’t get fancy like that time in Crete! You’ve got feet... use them!”

Pollox jumped back and, predictably, the King rushed him. Pollox then jumped to one side and the King stumbled and fell to one knee. Pollox stepped in quickly and kicked the King in the face as Amycus was trying to get to his feet. The King grunted but got up anyway, bleeding from a cut on his cheekbone.

The King then started moving Pollox backward and Pollox let his hands drop slightly just for a moment, and ended up eating a left hand from Amycus as a result. They traded jabs for a bit and Pollox then landed a huge body kick, moving out of range before the King could grab him again. Pollox followed that with two stiff shots as the King's breathing showed that all of this was finally tiring him out. Sweating, red-faced King Amycus was then unsuccessful in another takedown attempt and Pollox landed a good left hook which moved the King back a step.

Pollox then snapped a clubbing left hand, winged another circling right, and stumbled into Amycus, knocking him over, to land on top of the King on the ground. Amycus lurched to his feet anyway, bringing Pollox back up with him and pushing him away, clearly needing to get his breath.

Pollox then landed some big shots but once again stayed in too close for too long and was grabbed and taken down, getting back up quickly, only to absorb an elbow to the side of the head from the King.

Despite this, Pollox threw a lunging kick to the King’s belly. He then softened Amycus up with several shots before the King once again took him to the ground and twice swept his feet out from under him when Pollox tried to get back up. The King then smothered a tiring Pollox in the dirt, letting him chew on grit.

“You cretin! Get up!” yelled Castor, outraged. Pollox somehow managed to head butt the King in the face, and just barely crawled out from under him. Both men were shiny with sweat and exhausted, bleeding from a number of tiny cuts. Amycus was swaying slightly and puffing like an enraged bull as the two shuffled in a half circle.

Surely the King would invite Pollox to dinner to find out who it was that could fight so fiercely? The increasingly drunken crowd had all been cheering for their King and were now getting restless and upset. They’d never seen their King have this much trouble with an opponent before. They didn’t like it.

Amycus then lunged at Pollox twice, and each time Pollox simply stepped aside and let the King’s momentum carry him on past. The second time, Pollox managed to smash his right forearm down across the back of the King’s neck *hard* as Amycus stumbled past him, the ground shaking with his passing, droplets of sweat falling to the dust. Then Amycus turned and the two men stood flatfooted, looking at each other for a moment, breathing heavily. Was Amycus going to invite Pollox to supper at this point?

And then Amycus shot out a hand try to grab hold of Pollox once more, but he was clearly slowing. Pollox deflected the grab smoothly and turned the deflecting move into an open-palmed strike, driving the heel of his right hand straight into the King’s nose with a lot of shoulder behind it. The King’s nose broke audibly and began fountaining blood into his jutting beard.

Pollox then drew the hand back and swung a huge, slow, unstoppable punch from the side, with a lot of hip movement into it. He didn’t even bother to lead with his left. The blow hit the King brutally on the side of his jaw, turning Amycus’ head sharply to the left. The *crack* of the punch connecting could be heard clearly from the *Argo*. And Amycus fell heavily at an awkward angle and lay still. Too still? Jason could not be sure. Was Amycus even breathing?

For a moment, there was utter silence, broken only by the distant screams of gulls wheeling in front of the setting sun. Jason could just barely hear Idas’ voice growl from the *Argo*, “σκατά. Well, that’s that.”

Then sheer pandemonium broke out. It turned out that a large number of the drunken Bebrycians had brought knives, swords and clubs to the fight with them. Others picked up rocks or large sticks. Suddenly the crowd rushed, howling, on Castor, Pollox, Telemon and Jason. These four had not brought any weapons with them and had to punch and kick at people who now swung weapons at their heads wildly.

Pollox wasn’t in good shape, but anyone who came at him (and many did) had to get through Castor first. Castor blocked the way to Pollox, holding a club he’d pulled out of the hands of a drunken man who’d been quite surprised to get Castor’s fist in the neck when he tried to hit Pollox with it. Pollox picked a rock up from the ground and held it, breathing heavily and painfully. They were completely surrounded, and about to be swept under a tide of drunken people with weapons.

“Argonauts! To me!” Jason shouted across the docks. And Greek heroes spilled over the side of the *Argo*. Euphemus dropped over the side and landed on the surface of the waves, and ran across them to the shore, bow in hand and an arrow ready, drawn back to his ear. Bebrycians would be pushing up the daisies if they didn’t avoid his arrows. Zethes and Calais both flew to land as well, with arrows nocked in their bows and their short swords on their belts.

Most of the Argonauts came running with swords and shields, some throwing javelins as they came. Idas slung a fist-sized rock using his leather sling, and it took the little round garnet hat right off the white-robed emissary’s head, leaving a long gash across his scalp as it did. Idas had then laughed bitterly, spat, leaped ashore and began coldly sticking his short sword in the gut of anyone who tried to threaten him. Peleus fought his way toward his brother Telamon, who stood by Jason.

Jason wrenched a short sword out of the hands of one of his attackers and fought his way quickly to the *Argo.* Then he called the Argonauts back to the ship. They were on this journey to retrieve the Golden Fleece, not conquer this city of drunken savages, after all.

As usual, the Argonauts didn’t want to leave before they’d beat every Bebrycian who raised a weapon. There was no point in this though, and Jason didn’t want injuries and fatalities among his crewmen, so he yelled at them repeatedly until every last Argonaut came back to the ship. A few were bleeding from slight injuries. Telamon was limping, holding onto Peleus for support. A couple of crewmen needed Jason to shout their names before they turned and came.

So the *Argo* sailed away across the Gulf, with a few futile but very satisfying arrows from Atalanta and Philoctetes arching across the harbour as she left.

*That could have gone better*, Jason thought. *Could have gone worse, too. At least we didn’t kill everyone. Did we kill the King of this city too?*

And someone got out the wine, and Orpheus got out his lyre and everyone bandaged each other’s wounds, and slapped each other (carefully) on the shoulder or back, and talked about the fight, and who did what, and all of the Argonauts laughed and sang and got along.

It’s funny how that works, sometimes.