

Jason and the Argonauts: A Ship Full of Heroes

Neil Foster Macphail

The Launch of the *Argo*

None of it would have happened if he hadn't lost his sandal in the river. Jason, son of Aeson had come to the icy torrent Anauros outside the walls of Iolcus, and had seen what looked like an old woman struggling to get across. Jason's father Aeson had once been king, but Aeson's brother Pelias had taken the throne of Iolcus after him. Jason had never known his father. He had been sent away when he was young. To get his education. Or so he'd been told.

Jason's teacher, the towering centaur Chiron, had always emphasized the importance of showing kindness to strangers. "**You never know,**" the half-man, half-horse person had told Jason in his rumbling voice, "**When you might be dealing with a god. And if you aren't kind to a god, he'll screw you over any way he can. And gods can screw mortals over worse than you or I ever could.**" Chiron always talked like that.

So, Jason, age twenty-one, had stepped into the strong, chilly current beside the bent figure wrapped in a brown cloak. He had taken the stranger by the elbow and had led her through the current, holding up his white chiton tunic above his knees with the other hand to keep it from getting wet.

Partway across, his left sandal had caught on a rock, and had come off his foot. Before he could do a thing, it was swept around a bend downstream and was gone. "**Zeus!**" Jason had sworn, frustrated. Now he was going to have to walk through the gates of Iolcus to see the Games, wearing only one sandal. It wasn't the Olympics or anything, but these Games were going to be mythic.

Jason scratched at his dark beard for a moment.

The old woman had looked very intently at Jason when he had sworn. After a moment she had smirked and said "I say his name like that sometimes, myself."

It was a good thing Jason had listened to Chiron. Hera was queen of all the gods of Olympus. She was the wife of the (frequently unfaithful) King of all the gods, Zeus. And she was standing there in front of him, manifesting herself as an old woman. She always found people acted differently when they didn't know who she was.

Looking at Hera, Jason could suddenly see through her disguise. The air between them shimmered as if in the heat, and for a moment Jason's mind grew confused. Then he could see Hera for what she was: an ageless, radiant goddess, standing there as tall as he was. If you ever get the chance to see a goddess, you really should. It's quite something. And every queen who lived only *wished* she could be as dignified and gracious and elegant as Hera, queen of the gods. You couldn't look away from her eyes if you tried. It was like being in the middle of a clap of thunder. You felt like falling to the ground and covering your head with both arms.

Hera blessed Jason without telling him why, wishing that in all his future adventures, he would be lucky. Only a god more powerful than Hera herself would dare send bad luck Jason's way now. Jason didn't know, but Hera wanted to get back at his uncle Pelias, the king of Iolcus, who was having these games. She had her reasons.

But all Jason knew was that he'd just met a goddess, and that she'd blessed him and disappeared in a painfully bright glimmer of sunlight and an explosion of doves flying up into the sky. Leaving him standing there with only the one sandal.

There were a lot of things Jason didn't know. He didn't know his uncle Pelias had sent men with swords to take Jason's father, king Aeson's, throne from him. He definitely didn't know that Pelias had sent other men with swords to the birthing bed of Alcimedede, Jason's mother, to kill the baby Jason as soon as he was born, so he'd never have to worry about the baby growing up and taking the throne from him. Jason didn't know that his mother had gotten a large crowd of women to stand around her as she gave birth, and had told them to pretend to cry as if the baby had died, so the sellswords would leave. She didn't want Pelias to know that Aeson had a surviving son with a better claim to the throne than he had. So Alcimedede had them wail loudly enough to drown out Jason's newborn cries. And the dangerous armed men had left the room and told Pelias that the baby Jason had not survived childbirth.

And now Hera, who stood for marriage and faithfulness, had a grudge against Pelias and was going to, as the centaur Chiron would have said, "**screw him over.**" By blessing his nephew Jason, born to be the true king. Hera was going to do anything she could to make Pelias' plans go wrong.

But Jason didn't know any of this. He only knew that Chiron was letting him take a break from Pythagoras' theorem and Euclid's geometry diagrams to go and see the Iolcus Summer Games for the week. Shot put, discus, javelin throwing, relay, wrestling, hurdles, pole vault, track. All of it. He was really looking forward to the whole thing.

What Jason didn't know was that an oracle had warned his uncle Pelias to beware of a man with only one sandal. The crazed, drugged-out, barefoot young priestess, her pupils dilated hugely, her hair wild, her voice distant and whispery, had been very clear about this in her sacred cave, where they'd consulted her. She'd sat inhaling the sacred smoke that issues from volcanic vents there. She was sure. A man with one sandal would seal Pelias' doom. And so Pelias had made sure that the men working security at the Games were on the lookout. For a man with one sandal.



Jason, wearing his one sandal, now stood before Pelias, an old man who sat on his throne, a big armoured man holding a naked sword standing to each side of him, and four men with spears blocking Jason's way to the door. Skeletal and gaunt, old Pelias sat and stroked his long, oiled white beard.

"So your father was my brother Aeson, previous king of this city?" Pelias asked, like he didn't believe a word of it.

Jason said this was true. He wondered if he was about to get a sword through the neck.

“And your mother was some farmer’s daughter or Iolcan whore?” Pelias continued. His voice was very level and low.

Jason thought the voice sounded dangerous. Thinking he might be signing his own death warrant, Jason told Pelias that, no, his mother was Alcimede, the wife of Aeson, and his queen.

“That would make *you* the true king of Ioclus instead of me,” Pelias said thoughtfully.

“In theory, yes,” Jason replied. “But you’re the one sitting on the throne, with all the men with the weapons. So it doesn’t really do me much good. I’m just a guy who needs to get my lessons done and learn how to use a compass, bisect triangles, work out the perimeters and areas of rectangles, and calculate the circumferences of circles. And geography, for some reason. Map after map after map. Too many maps.”

"What would you do if an oracle announced that one of your fellow-citizens were destined to kill *you*?" Pelias asked Jason.

“Well, didn’t she say that he’d ‘seal your doom’ rather than kill you? Anyway, I wouldn’t *hurt* him,” Jason answered hesitantly. “I would...send him on a dangerous mission?”

Pelias smiled.



Months later, Jason stood on the dock looking up at the mighty wooden warship tied up there. They would need a ship like this to complete their mission, so Argus the shipwright had been asked to build one. Seagulls wheeled in the late afternoon sun. Across the ship’s bow was painted the name *Argo*. (Well, in Greek it’s spelled αργου. It means “fast.”)

Argus had included wood from the divine forest of Dodona in the ship’s prow. He’d made her large enough to hold fifty men and a few horses. He liked this ship so much that he gave it a variation on his own name. This was a special ship, with a special crew, on a special mission Jason didn’t know much about yet.

Hera had a special interest in the ship, and due to her manipulations, the crew was made up of men who were far from ordinary sailors. Most weren’t sailors at all. They weren’t even ordinary humans. Hercules himself, son of Zeus and a mortal woman Zeus had cheated on Hera with, was on board, and was clearly in charge.

(Hercules is normally spelled “Heracles” in English and Ἡρακλῆς in Greek, but the Romans would one day call him “Hercules,” and so that is how his name will be spelled in this story. Because it’s the spelling most people know, nowadays.)

Hera was not fond of this son of her husband and another woman. No doubt she hoped that Hercules would not survive the quest, or that he would lose interest in it and go off and do something else. (It is a little-known fact that ADHD once stood for “Attention Deficient Hercules Disease.”)

But Hercules was stronger than anyone and could kill almost anything. He was standing, looking at the horizon and talking to his friend Peleus (not to be confused with King Pelias). One day, Peleus would father a son named Achilles, all of whose skin would be invulnerable to

any weapon. Well, all of his skin except for the skin on one of his heels. Achilles, son of Peleus would fight in the Trojan war.

Peleus' huge brother Telamon stood nearby, stacking some wooden crates of salted fish.

Suddenly Hercules' loud laugh rang out in the salty air. A grouchy seagull took flight from the prow of the *Argo* and flew off, startled.

Also onboard tying down some sails were Calais and Zethes, the sons of Boreas, the north wind. Men said that they could fly. Jason had no idea if this was true. Philoctetes the hawk-eyed archer was with the two brothers, arguing about girls and not helping out much. His bow and quiver were propped against a barrel on the deck.

At that point, three more of the crew came up behind Jason leading four horses, and he let them walk by him, and up the gangplank onto the *Argo*. Two of the three were very strong, quick and handsome. They were also obviously twins. These were Castor and Pollux. They have a constellation named after them, and an astrological sign as well. It is called Gemini. They were fierce horse soldiers and medal-winning competitive boxers. One of them (Jason didn't know if it was Castor or Pollux who spoke) asked the third, "Did you bring your harp?"

"It's a lyre. Not a harp," Orpheus answered. Orpheus had sad eyes and was tall and thin, compared to the stocky twins. "And yes. I brought it so you can have music on the trip. And in case we meet any women. But it's a *lyre*."

"*You're* a liar, Orpheus!" the twin who hadn't yet spoken said, punching Orpheus lightly in the arm. It looked like Castor and Pollux knew a thing or two about punching. Orpheus didn't, but he punched Castor or Pollux back anyway, and the four horses were loaded onto the ship.

"You getting on board?" came a woman's voice from Jason's left. A friendly, cheerful girl wearing a short white dress, carrying a wooden box, a hunting bow and a quiver of arrows smiled at him and took his arm. She led Jason on board, a very ordinary-looking man beside her. Her name was Atalanta. She had freckles and very curly brown hair and dark, warm eyes. The ordinary-looking man's name was Euphemus. As they walked up the gangplank, the small wooden box Atalanta been carrying fell out of her grasp and down into the water between the dock and the ship.

Euphemus jumped down and fished the wooden box out of the water and handed it back up to Atalanta. "I can't *believe* I dropped that again. Thanks!" she said.

"You're all thumbs!" he told her.

Euphemus grabbed the gangplank and chinned himself up on it, and then climbed into the ship. It happened so fast that Jason had almost failed to notice that when Euphemus had jumped down, he had landed and *stood on top of* the gently heaving surface of the water. Pausing there a moment, Euphemus had fished the box out of the water he was standing on, and had then jumped back up to the gangplank, launching himself from the surface of the waves. Jason would later get so used to seeing Euphemus do this that it would not seem strange at all.



Jason got to know the crew as the sun set. There were others who'd been on board when he'd arrived, like the unfriendly, already drunk Idas. Jason was overwhelmed. He'd always felt like an outsider as a child, because he was the son of a king, but most of the people on the *Argo* were the children of some god or other, or related to kings themselves. And most of them seemed to have god-like abilities. Many had magic items or weapons. Hercules even had a servant named Hylas with him, to carry around his weapons for him, working like a caddy. Jason himself was not the son of a god, and could do nothing supernatural whatsoever. Calais and Zethes could fly, Euphemus could walk on water, Hercules could lift a cow over his head, and all Jason could do was a bit of geometry and work with maps.

Jason enjoyed talking to Peleus and Telamon, who'd also known Chiron. "That old horse's ass still going on about Pythagorus and sea navigation?" Telamon demanded, after the sun had set and everyone had had a fair bit of wine.

Jason told him that he was. Alive and kicking, and making with the geometry. Jason had brought with him the maps that Chiron had given him. He showed it to Telamon and Peleus, who didn't know anything about geography.

Everyone enjoyed some roast venison steaks that Euphemus cooked. Atalanta was mainly on board because of her skills as a huntress, and she'd killed a deer the previous day. Atalanta could hunt animals (she always felt horrible for killing them, but did it anyway, with relentless, unerring talent) but she couldn't cook to save her life. She always got Euphemus to cook what she killed. Jason wondered if the two were a couple. A lot of people wondered that.

Orpheus lounged in a niche by the keel and played languid, beautiful music on his lyre while the moon rose. Hercules slapped him on the shoulder and got him to sing a couple of dirty, funny songs which had everyone clapping in time and laughing uncontrollably, but mostly Orpheus just played open, rippling music which sat quietly in the background, making everyone feel safe, relaxed, and good. You could get drunk on Orpheus' music if you stood near him when he played. And the Argonauts did.

Hercules thumped Telamon on the back as he walked away from him and came over to speak with Jason. "So, Jason, is it? When do we leave tomorrow?"

"What do you mean?" Jason asked. "You're the captain, right?"

Hercules laughed long and loud, the sound echoing off the water by the decking. "Do you think Pelias would let me captain a sea ship? I'm no sea captain! I'm an *adventurer*! I have no idea how to sail a ship. I could smash this ship with my bare hands, but I could never get it there and back again in one piece. Argus would never forgive me.

Also, I know nothing of sea navigation. I'd have us lost within two days and we'd *never* find our way back again. Typhis can steer, but he doesn't say enough to deal with the crew of this ship, or make decisions that affect them, and he can't actually navigate terribly well. *Everyone* onboard is crap with a map, in fact. Chiron says you're getting quite good, and that you need a challenge. And what Chiron says goes. Also, King Pelias specifically said he wanted *you* going on this dangerous quest so far from Iolcus, even though, no offence, you don't have godly powers or magic weapons or anything.

And Hera blesses this venture, even though she's never been terribly fond of me. We're all up for an adventure, but we're not, any of us, cut out to captain a ship like this one. Apparently, you're the son of a king. So, you should have some leadership skills. Am I right?"

Jason was overwhelmed by this sudden news, and was tempted to sneak down the gangplank into the night and run away. He'd replaced the missing sandal, after all. What more did King Pelias want of him? Then he had an idea.

"I'll only be captain if I get *elected* captain. Let's vote."

Hercules agreed. A small amphora was passed around and each person wrote the name of their choice for captain on a small slip of paper and dropped it in. Jason wrote "Hercules" on his slip.

And Hercules won. "Thank you, *everyone!*" he shouted. "My first act as duly elected captain of this wonderful ship the *Argo*, shall be to appoint Jason, son of Aeson, true king of Iolcus, captain in my stead. I'm not signing on for the whole voyage. Too much commitment. You all know me. If we're, say, going past an interesting island, and I see something or someone else I really want to do at that point? No offence, but I'm *off* this ship and on to the next big adventure of Hercules! The stories about me aren't going to write themselves."

Then the old prophet Idmon, bracing himself on the deck with his staff, white beard flowing in the slight breeze, told them that Hera herself had decreed that, if they were to have any success at all on their perilous journey, that Jason, son of Aeson needed to lead them.

Then everything went to pieces. Jason was horrified and depressed at this huge responsibility that had fallen on him, apparently from nowhere. Hercules' servant Hylas gave Jason a very dirty look and went below decks to sulk.

Euphemus and Atalanta argued about something else entirely, and eventually were obviously not speaking to one another. At this point, Butes, who considered himself a player, started hitting on Atalanta and it looked like Euphemus was going to hit him.

Then Peleus and Polyphemus had a big, loud argument with Hercules. The kind of argument that anyone listening can tell has happened for years, over and over. Apparently Peleus was sick and tired of Hercules avoiding responsibility. Polyphemus had things to say about this too. They wanted him to be captain. Hercules wasn't going to agree to it.

And then Idas got more drunk and, breathing sour wine fumes in Jason's face and leaning in way too close and poking him in the chest, told Jason that he was a stinking, pathetic coward who liked πένι.

Idas wouldn't shut up and Jason knew he'd have to fight him until Castor came over to try to pull his crewmate away. As it was, Castor needed to punch Idas in the face (twice) before Idas would be quiet. Idas leaned against a mast, sitting there on the deck where he'd fallen when Castor had smacked him, grumbling to himself and downing more of an amphora of wine. When he started to shout more insults at Jason, Castor threatened to hit him again.

The voices of Hercules, Polyphemus and Peleus, now joined by Telamon, rang out sharply. It was getting ugly.

Orpheus had been playing his lyre from the stern of the ship quietly at first, but in the middle of the commotion when his music was getting drowned out, he suddenly *twanged* his strings, snapping everyone's heads around to look.

Then he started to *play*. Orpheus was no ordinary musician. He could mesmerize gods, so calming the children of gods and their friends took him no more than fifteen minutes.

His music floated into the air and sat there, making everyone calm and a little sorry for acting up. The crew looked past Orpheus, to the moonlight making a shining path across the gentle waves directly over his shoulder, and up at the stars, sumptuously strewn across the inky sky. In fact, everyone stopped talking entirely, and listened, spellbound to Orpheus.

And then after some mumbled apologies, everyone went below decks to sleep, having all had a bit too much to eat and far too much to drink.



The next morning, heads sore and stomachs queasy, this wooden ship crammed tight with heroes set off down the coastline from Thessaly to fulfil the quest King Pelias had sent them on. Not all of them would be coming back.

The Women of Lemnos

Jason captained the *Argo* and her crew up the rugged, volcanic coastline past Thessaly for the next two months. The sun beat down from the brilliant blue sky and broke into glittering shards of golden light on the gently tossing waves.

The blue-green water was still and clear enough for Jason to see to the round yellowish-tan stones on the bottom, which looked like it lay just inches below the surface. Gulls wheeled in the salt air and the wind creaked and thrummed through the rigging of the ship, and through the thick canvas that made up the *Argo*'s sails.

Slowly, Jason learned what was, and what wasn't, his job. A captain didn't simply tell everyone what to do. Especially not with this crew of independent people, many of them demigods. The captain had to consult his crew to see what they thought. He had to see, as Hercules put it "which way the wind was blowing" as to what their opinions were, and then decide. If he simply told them they had to do something that none of them *wanted* to do, it wasn't going to happen. He had to figure out what most people wanted to do, and inform them that that's what was going to happen.

In a way, Jason felt that being a captain was like being a manager. A good captain told people to do what they already wanted to do, mostly, and let them do things about which they already knew best. Besides, he had Hercules, didn't he?

Jason didn't actually have to take the wheel of the *Argo* and steer the ship all day long, though he did from time to time, just because he felt like it. The *Argo*'s pilot was grey old Tiphys, who was steady, expressionless, unmoving and silent, but for a hacking cough. When Tiphys wasn't standing there at the wheel, chances are it would be dark-haired Ancaeus, wrapped in his bearskin, steering the *Argo* with a scowl of concentration his black beard short and bristling.

The *Argo* came with an extensive collection of maps, in addition to the ones provided by Chiron the centaur. Jason had trouble believing they were accurate. Many of them warned of sea monsters and islands inhabited by one-eyed giants, rocks that smashed together to crush ships, and other such things. Jason mostly just shrugged, wondered if the men who'd drawn the maps had been eating lotus leaves, and used his mapping tools and a quill to chart their course. He now knew where they were headed, and why his uncle the king had been so eager for Jason to go along. This wasn't a straightforward voyage.

They were headed for a place called Colchis. In Colchis, the story went, was the hide, or "fleece" as they called it, of what had been a giant, winged ram. It supposedly glowed like molten gold, and was a sign of power and authority, like a king's crown. Like the flying ram that had once grown it, it was highly magical. It hung on an oak tree in Colchis, guarded by a pair of giant bulls with hooves of brass. The bulls supposedly snorted flames out of their angry nostrils. The bulls, at least, needed to sleep from time to time. This was not true of the giant, fire-breathing dragon that also guarded the Golden Fleece. The dragon didn't sleep. Ever.

If half of this was true, Jason thought, even with his ship full of heroes, he wasn't likely to be coming back and claiming the throne from his uncle Pelias anytime soon. Sending Jason

away would likely work out very well for Pelias. Still, Jason had gotten on the boat, so he captained the *Argo* and took things one day at a time.

The *Argo* had a stock of wine, olives, biscuits and salted fish, but from time to time they would drop anchor and let Atalanta and Philoctetes climb the rocks and go ashore, taking their bows into the forest in search of wild venison or boar. Philoctetes was used to using his bow to fight battles. Atalanta was used to stalking and hunting down wild game. It got pretty competitive. Philoctetes was a better shot at targets which were a great distance away. Atalanta could track and hunt anything right back to where it slept.

Usually Atalanta won. And felt horrible about it. She always got Euphemus to cook whatever she killed. When there was roast venison or a pig roast, Orpheus would play the lyre for everyone, and more wine would be drunk than usual. Atalanta's game, Orpheus' music, Euphemus' cooking and the excellent wine that was stored in the hold were important reasons why such heroic people were willing to crew the *Argo* and stay aboard, even if the journey was bound to be dangerous. All that, and the chance of ending up in an epic story or song one day.

Some ships have a "crow's nest," which is an elevated seat at the top of the highest mast, so that a crewman can sit up there and keep watch for land, other ships, or dangers ahead. Often an old barrel is used as a crow's nest. The *Argo* had no crow's nest, as Calais and Zethes, the sons of Boreas, the north wind, could fly. They would take turns corkscrewing quickly up, floating like leaves on a gust of wind, high above the *Argo*. They would mess around for a while up there among the gulls and seabirds, then eventually float back down and report what they'd seen.

One time there had been dolphins. Euphemus had gone out, stepping casually across the surface of the waves to pet them, and several of them leaped up and nudged him in a friendly way with their snouts. Maybe it was true that Euphemus really was the son of Poseidon, god of the ocean? At that moment, with the man walking across the sea like that, it was easy to believe it.



After two months of travelling toward Colchis, one day Zethes called down from above the ship and reported the first major sea port they'd yet seen. The sun was setting as they pulled in and tied up at what they soon learned was a kingdom city called Lemnos. None of them had heard of it.

The local sailors who helped them tie up and talked to them were women. In the tavern they went into, everyone in the place was female also. The streets were entirely empty of children playing, or men of any kind. There were some elderly women, though. But no old men. In fact there were no men at all.

The crew of the *Argo* found all this a bit odd, but didn't mind, as many of the women who first spoke to them were fairly young, reasonably pretty, and very friendly. The Argonauts soon found a tavern and were drinking ale with the various women in there.

Just when Orpheus was about to go back to the *Argo* to get his lyre to play for a group of three laughing young women who might have been a little bit drunk, a female soldier came up and asked who was in charge.

Hercules put his arm around Jason's shoulders and said "That's *this* guy: Jason, captain of the *Argo*." The soldier announced that Hypsipyle the queen of Lemnos wanted to meet the *Argo's* captain. So Hercules and Jason (Jason wearing a particularly magnificent cloak), with Telamon and his brother Peleus coming along too, went to meet the Queen.



Hypsipyle was only a bit older than Jason, and was dark-haired and bright-eyed; slim and very lovely. She wanted to know everything about him, his crew, the *Argo*, and their quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece.

As the conversation wore on, the queen asked Jason if he would like a more private audience with her, and so Hercules, Peleus and Telamon went back to an inn by the docks, to check out the local nightlife. Jason and the young queen spent the night together. And the next night. And the next.

Before the crew of the *Argo* quite knew what had happened, a week had passed. Jason and Hypsipyle strolled in her lavish gardens, shot arrows at a target set up for that purpose, and generally lazed around under the olive trees and orchids. Trained colourful parrots ate grapes from their fingers.

One day, three weeks later, Hercules and Atalanta asked to speak with Jason alone. Drawing him aside, they had this to say:

"This is not how to be the captain of a ship, son!" Hercules said, shaking his head with a dark look in his eyes. "We need to get *going*. We're heroes, not lapdogs for the women of Lemnos!"

"I know, but Hypsipyle is being really nice..." Jason began.

"There's a reason for that!" boomed Hercules.

"I've never had a woman be this nice to me. And she might be pregnant..." Jason continued.

"Listen: There's a story that goes with *all* of this" Atalanta interrupted. "While all you guys have been having fun with all the local women, I haven't had much to do, obviously. The hunting around here is crap. So I've been talking to some of the older women, some of whom are Thracian, rather than Lemnian, and I've learned some things. Some things you're not going to like."

"What kind of things?" Jason asked warily.

"Ever notice there aren't any men in Lemnos? Like, no men at *all*?" Atalanta began, looking Jason very intently in the eye, with a bit of pity in her expression. Atalanta had not missed how stupid a lot of men get around women.

"Of course I noticed. I thought maybe this was a kingdom just for women or something..." Jason said, scratching his beard.

“That’s not the whole story,” Atalanta told him. And then she told him what had happened to the men of Lemnos.



Ten years before, the women of Lemnos had nearly altogether stopped taking the time to honour the love goddess Aphrodite with feasts and offerings. They had grown confident in their own ability to set the wheels of love and attraction in motion with the men who caught their eyes, all without offering anything to this goddess of sexual desire, far off on Mount Olympus.

Eventually, Aphrodite had pulled on some clothes and taken action. Standing before Thoas the King of Lemnos one day, Aphrodite had announced her decision:

“From this day forth, for five years, every adult woman of Lemnos shall stink. She shall smell worse than a pig farm, worse than a barrel of rotting fish, worse than a beggar vomiting in the gutter after soiling himself. She shall smell worse than anything. No man shall be able to stand near her, let alone make love unto her. And the hearts of the men and women of Lemnos shall be turned against each other. And you women shall all rue the day you neglected honouring Aphrodite. I have spoken.”

And with that, Aphrodite had returned to Olympus, with a sound like a thousand people sighing all at once, and a whiff of lingering perfume.

And from that moment, it was as Aphrodite had said. The women of Lemnos had stank for five years with an odour that was beyond belief. No young Lemnian teenage girl could get a teenaged boy to kiss her. No husband could sleep in the same bed as his wife. No babies were being born. The entire kingdom stank so badly that eventually word got around and no one came from other countries to Lemnos anymore.

Gradually, most of the men had left outright, looking for a city with women who didn’t smell like rotting warthog corpses. But *some* of the men who stayed in Lemnos had taken solace in a different way. They had been warring with nearby Thrace (which didn’t smell so badly), and some of them had started bringing Thracian girls back to Lemnos. Lots of Thracian girls. And Thracian girls had started ending up pregnant, as condoms in those days could only be made from sheepskin, and were quite hard to come by.

One night, the stinking, frustrated Lemnian women had decided to take action. Taking up swords and spears that terrible night, they had gone around from house to house in a huge, angry, shouting, reeking mob. At each house, the lady of the house had shoved her husband and sons out into the street, where they were laid hold upon by the furious mob, and killed on the spot or chased out of Lemnos. Entire bars filled with bored men drinking ale have been burned to the ground, the women cutting down the drunken men as they fled the flames.

The next morning there had been no men left. Even the King had disappeared that night. And Thracian women who gave birth to boy children over the next few months had fled the kingdom as well, to keep their sons alive.

Even after the five years were up, and the Lemnian women had finally been able to wash the divine Aphrodidic stink off their skins, the reputation of Lemnos had remained. Travellers had avoided going there, fearing the androicide and the now-departed smell.

Jason and the crewmen of the *Argo* had been some of the first men to set foot in Lemnos in many years. The women of Lemnos were looking to get pregnant, in hopes of bearing female children. (There were still some very militant Lemnian women living there, and if any woman gave birth to a son, she knew it would probably be safest for him if she were to flee the kingdom.)



Appalled at this story, Jason stalked through the palace, looking for Hypsipyle. He strode down white marble hallways, decorated with gold and purple carpet. Finding her sitting on a divan eating grapes, he confronted her. Her face fell, and she had to admit the story was true.

“And so you Lemnian women killed *all* of the men of your kingdom?” Jason demanded. “Even the king?”

At this point, Hypsipyle took Jason by the arm and led him to a small apartment hidden behind her throne room. A very solemn-looking little man with a white beard sat in a chair back there. “Jason, I’d like you to meet my father, King Thoas,” Hypsipyle said.

The king had been secretly kept alive in his tiny apartment by Hypsipyle, who couldn’t bear to have him killed. He had been Hypsipyle’s advisor, helping her run Lemnos. She was still fairly young, with little political experience. But she had a good head for politics.

Jason made a decision. “Look, Hypsipyle, this is all pretty messed up. I agreed to be the captain of the *Argo*, and get the Golden Fleece and everything, and we’ve been having a lot of fun and all, and I really care for you, but I need to go do what I set out to do. I promise I will come back one day to meet my son or daughter, as the case may be, and then we can be together forever.”

And Jason kissed Hypsipyle passionately and long, held her in his arms, and cried, and promised to come back as soon as they had recovered the Golden Fleece. And then he sadly made his way back to the *Argo*.

And Hercules and Atalanta went from inn to house to hedge, yanking out Argonauts, and eventually the *Argo* had all of her crew back on board.

Hercules gave them all a real talking to about what it meant to be heroes, and eventually the *Argo* set sail, in the middle of the night.

“Who knows *how* many ladies might be in the family way, as a result of our docking our ship in their fair waters!” Euphemus exclaimed.

“Yeah, really!” Butes agreed. Butes had nearly not come back with them to the *Argo* at all. It had taken Hercules to drag Butes out of a shrub personally.



For her part, months later Hypsipyle gave birth to a pair of twin sons, and had to flee her own kingdom, taking her father with her.

The *Argo* sailed on. And Jason forgot all about the promise he had made her. Guys are like that, sometimes.

Trouble at the Hellespont

Everything had gone to hell at the Hellespont. (The Hellespont was a sea that had been named after a woman named Helle, who had drowned in it. Supposedly by falling off the flying golden ram whose Golden Fleece the Argonauts were going after. “Hellespont” meant “Sea of Helle.”) Jason had no idea how they were going to retrieve the Golden Fleece now, after everything that had happened. He was standing on the deck, thinking about that.

As captain, it was not Jason's job to actually stand there, steering his ship. He had helmsmen for that. But this night, a chill rain slicing down, Jason had sent Ancaeus belowdecks. He stood alone on the aft deck of the *Argo*, steering her through the rough waves. He found it helped him think. Besides, he couldn't sleep. So he steered and thought, squinting through the downpour, trying to piece together what had happened.

It had started with Philoctetes, who had eyes like a hawk, seeing two figures on the shoreline. Two tall figures that looked human, but for having two extra pairs of arms each. Philoctetes had called Hercules to look, and of course Hercules had wanted to go talk to them.

They'd dropped anchor a bit out from the first likely looking beach, and Euphemus had done that magical thing he did. He had dropped lightly over the side of the *Argo* and sauntered casually across the waves toward the two figures like someone walking through a meadow.

The two six-armed figures, terrified at this eerie sight (or maybe it was Euphemus' four “missing” arms) had then started hooting and growling in a very animalistic way

Euphemus had paused in his walk, and stood on the waves, hands up to show he meant no harm. That was when a third massive creature had joined the two on the beach and thrown a rock at Euphemus, striking him squarely in the chest and knocking him off his feet. Euphemus appeared to be stunned, and lay there on top of the surface of the sea, cradled by the waves, which even now kept him from sinking.

All hell broke loose at this point. Calais and Zethes had taken flight and drifted like autumn leaves in a gale, reaching Euphemus and grabbing an arm each. While they towed him back to the *Argo*, Hercules had snarled “axe!” at Hylas, grabbed the double-headed weapon his caddy had fetched and slapped into his waiting palm, and then dove over the side.

Before Jason could do much of anything, Hercules had swum to the beach and single-handedly attacked all (now four) six-armed creatures. One had picked up another rock, and Hercules' descending axe blow had cleaved through not only the arm holding the rock, but the other two arms on that side as well. Gore was spraying everywhere and the howling, hooting and gibbering had started to attract more creatures to the bloody beach.

Thinking it was unsporting to take on these (now six, not including the one bleeding out on the sand) fierce creatures, Hercules had flung down his axe and smashed two of the creatures' heads together so hard that he may well have killed them. Jason had no idea. They'd ended up leaving too suddenly for any of them to be sure.

Because as a mewling horde of six-armed creatures swarmed out of the trees, Jason and Telamon had yelled at Hercules to swim back to the ship. There was nothing to be gained by

slaughtering a beach full of the beasts. Snarling at the advancing creatures through his dark beard, Hercules had stuffed the axe behind his broad belt again, and swam back to the *Argo* with angry strokes that could only be described as “herculean.”



A small fishing boat had been watching, and when the *Argo* sailed past, it had hailed them and drew alongside.

Petrius and Andochas, both of Dolione, had been very excited to meet the ship full of heroes. The *Argo* and the *Cleite* had stood at anchor, almost touching, and the two Diolones had told Jason and the Argonauts their story.

Cyzicus, the young king of the Doliones, had just married. His new queen was young and beautiful, and their ship, *Cleite*, was named after her. The most difficult problem faced by the young king and queen was marauding bands of robbers and mercenaries who hid in the woods around Dolione, looking to kill any Doliones who ventured into them, particularly at night.

Petrius of Dolione had then asked, after having seen the might of the unstoppable warrior Hercules, if Hercules and Jason would be willing to meet with Cyzicus the king to discuss the matter.

Jason had told Petrius and Andochas that they had the Golden Fleece to retrieve, but that nevertheless they’d be willing to visit briefly with the young king and his lovely queen. Hercules in particular had been eager to share his thoughts on how to deal with this bandit problem described to them.

So it was that the *Argo* had been anchored just offshore, and Jason, Hercules and fifteen Argonauts had set out down the forest trail to Dolione, which lay a day’s journey from where they’d made landfall. Petrius and Andochas of Dolione had gone with them, leaving their fishing nets in the *Cleite*, which they beached on the shoreline.

Night had soon fallen, and they had set up camp. Telamon had made a large campfire and they had begun to roast some wild game that Atalanta and Philoctetes had managed to kill on their way through the forest. A skin of wine had been handed around and Orpheus had begun to play beautiful, cheery music.

Petrius and Andochas of Dolione had seemed jumpy, though, and had been unable to relax with the Argonauts. Just when Orpheus had been starting to play and sing a song that was maybe a little bit rude, suddenly, Andochas of Dolione had leaped up and had started to say “There’s someone in the woods...” when an arrow had taken him through the throat. Andochas had fallen to the forest floor and had quickly bled out. Petrius had then grabbed a large fishing knife and had run to the fallen Andochas, only to be hit with three arrows, and had fallen as well, to lie dead beside his fellow fisherman.

“*Shield!*” Hercules had hissed to Hylas, who carried an impressive assortment of Hercules’ weapons, and sparred with him daily. “*Broadsword!*”

Hylas had pulled these out of the pack in which he stored the weapons, and Hercules had leaped into the woods with a roar, Telamon, Peleus and the others close behind. Atalanta and

Philoctetes had taken to some leafy cover and rained arrows down on the dark figures they soon saw sneaking toward them.

The battle had not taken long. The dark figures in the woods had been fewer than the Argonauts, and less skilled. Hercules had soon handed his bloody sword back to Hylas with his spattered shield, and had begun to have a look at who the enemy had been. It was very quiet now.

There had been four bowmen, also armed with short swords. They had killed a deer, the carcass of which now lay beside their own bodies. There had been four armoured men with longer swords and shields as well. And there had been three others, less well armed. One of these had worn a crown, until Hercules' blow had taken his head off and sent head and crown alike rolling into the bushes. Hercules had gotten a very serious look on his face when he saw the crown.



Standing in the middle of the court of the Doliones, Jason and Hercules had asked for an audience with the king. They had been told that the king was unavailable, but that the young queen would see them. With a sense of dread, Jason and Hercules had waited. The other Argonauts had remained outside the city.

Soon, with a flourish of trumpets, the young queen Cleite, lovely but worried-looking, had swept into the room.

“Oh beautiful and magnificent Cleite, we are honoured to stand in your presence,” Jason had begun. He’d been working with Idmon on his diplomacy skills, rightly expecting that he’d meet some kind of king or authority figure every time the *Argo* made landfall. “We were attacked as we approached your city, and slew our attackers. We had agreed to meet with your illustrious husband to discuss the recent dangers of your woods, but Petrius and Andochas, the Dolione fishermen who asked us to come, were both slain in the attack.”

“The valour of Hercules and the fame of the *Argo* and her crew had reached our ears already” Cleite had responded, her brow wrinkling slightly with concern. “It is indeed an honour to have the chance to consult with such heroes as to the safety of our city. My noble husband is on a hunting trip at the moment, but should be back on the morrow...” She had trailed off when Hercules produced the crown which had rolled into the bushes with the head he had severed with a wild backhanded stroke.

“I don’t suppose the king has had this crown stolen, or otherwise made off with...” Hercules had begun to ask.

“Oh, *Cyzius!*” the queen had sobbed. “How tragic that one so young, beautiful and so recently wed should have his life brought to an end so abruptly!” With that, she had torn a short sword out of the confused hands of one of her guards and had stepped toward Hercules, a crazed look in her beautiful eyes.

And Hercules had simply stood, arms at his side, not defending himself, in case the queen should choose to end his life then and there.

Cleite had then raised her gaze to the painted ceiling above them and threw the short, brass sword to the floor and strode out, leaving her guards behind her. Two of the guards had stood watch over Jason and Hercules, and the other two had run out after the queen, uncertain of where she'd gone.

Then a cry had gone up. "The queen! The queen! In her grief, fair Cleite has hanged herself! The queen is dead!"



The funeral had been hurried and sad, with the Argonauts awkwardly helping make arrangements, by way of apology. The situation had been horribly tragic and all, but once things were explained, no one could quite blame anyone for any of it.

And then, afterward, on the journey back to the ship, Hercules had approached Jason. "Look," Hercules had told him. "I can't find Hylas anywhere. I know he was deeply upset about what happened. He was the one who chose the sword that took off Cyzius' head. He can't quite deal with it. He went off to bathe in a forest stream earlier today (you know how clean he always is), and he didn't come back. When I went looking for him, I found no sign of him. The locals say that unwary swimmers are sometimes carried off by water nymphs. I think I need to go save him. I just need to do that for him. Polyphemus and I are leaving the quest for the Golden Fleece and going to get Hylas back from wherever he's got to."

"You have the full support of the *Argo*, for as long as it takes, Hercules!" Jason had told him. "We're all coming with you."

But Hercules had refused the offer. He had reminded Jason of how much time had been lost in the quest for the Golden Fleece already. He had said he didn't have any idea how long it might take to find Hylas. He had said that the only thing was for them to go on without him.

Jason had first argued, then reluctantly agreed to this, as he had learned that once Hercules got an idea into his head, there was no changing his mind. The two men had embraced awkwardly, and each had sadly gone their separate ways, Hercules into the forest to meet Polyphemus, who was waiting for him, and Jason back to the *Argo*.



Now, standing in the torrential downpour on the deck of the ship two days later, as the *Argo* sailed on into the night, toward who knew what dangers, and away from Hercules, who everyone had depended upon so much, Jason stared and thought.

Telamon wasn't speaking to Jason, as Jason had done exactly what Hercules had asked him to: he had set sail without telling anyone on board that Hercules and Polyphemus had stayed behind to look for Hylas. Telamon would never have stayed on board the *Argo* if he'd known what Hercules had planned, and he clearly blamed Jason for not telling him. "You're no

captain,” Idas had told Jason, poking him in the chest with a finger, clearly well on his way to a blackout drunk.

Jason started when the wind stopped abruptly, and with it the *Argo* herself. He then heard a rushing sound come from the sea, over the rail behind him. He turned to see something *coming up out of the sea*. It looked like a man, but it was obviously something more than a man. Bigger, and emerging from the sea as if the laws of physics meant nothing to it. Waves fountained off it until the massive figure could be seen to the waist. Jason couldn’t tell if the being was made of water, or only looked that way.

“I am Glaucus, a sea divinity,” the thing said. Its voice rolled like waves on rocky shores, deep, as if coming from far beneath the waves. “You have lost three of your crewmen, but it is not your fault. And your quest may yet succeed. You must continue on.”

“Why are you here? Why are you talking to me? What are you talking about?” Jason demanded of the sea divinity, confused.

“Some of us think... that you should be told,” Glaucus continued, his voice like the surf. “This event is more than random chance. Gods are always up to things, and they are up to something now. I dare not speak her name. The loss of your three crewmen is part of something bigger. Continue on your voyage and do not be discouraged.”

Jason stood there and didn’t quite thank the creature, and Glaucus smashed back under the waves and was gone, leaving Jason with more to think about. Was Hera the “her” whose name Glaucus would not speak?

The wind picked back up. The rain started to taper off. The *Argo* sailed on into the night.

A Royal Bout

It 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.



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...*sea-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 “ἀλίπλαγκτοι” in Greek, rather than “sea-wanderers,” and “ἀλίπλαγκτοι” is a much ruder word. Like “bums” or “homeless people.” Only worse.)

“Who is he to call us ἀλίπλαγκτοis?!” 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.



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 Pollox 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.

The Harpies

Jason wasn't sure what made him ask Tiphys to sail the *Argo* straight across the Gulf from the land of the drunken, rioting Bebrycians who'd attacked them after Pollox had felled their King in a fair fight. But across it they went. And when they sighted a small tree-lined harbour, they sailed into it and tied up at the small dock they found there.

It was a very small dock, overhung with branches from the dense forest. It looked recently built, though it also for some reason had disgusting stains all down it. And there were no other ships or even small boats in sight. There was just the dock, a sign, and a path leading into the woods.

Telamon went down the gangplank to the dock first, brow furrowed. "Jason. Come here," he said.

Jason came down next with Atalanta, Peleus, Philoctetes, Euphemus and Tiphys. Telamon was looking at a wooden sign which was nailed to the dock. "*Welcome Jason and the Argonauts*" it read in freshly carved letters. It looked like it had taken some time to carve, too. The lettering was very ornate. But there was a foul-smelling reddish brown stain running down it, too.

"Weird," Jason said.

"What is that *smell*!?" Atalanta wanted to know.

Tiphys coughed, but then, he'd been coughing a lot lately.

"Seriously, what *is* it?" Atalanta asked again. "It smells like..."

Nobody knew, so the Argonauts who were leaving the ship took the path into the forest, leaving the rest of the crew to work on minor upkeep to the decking, sails and rigging. Ancaeus decided it would be a good time to adjust how the helm was attached to the rudder, taking the whole mechanism to pieces. Idas, watching him, drank wine from a skin and told him he was putting it together all wrong.



Not far down the path, they came upon a small clearing. The smell got a lot worse. It was enough to make one gag. In the middle of the clearing was a gnarled, bent little man who looked to be at least one hundred years old. His things were everywhere. A dirty wooden bucket by a stream. A small pile of firewood. A fire that had just been started. Some tools. A filthy blanket. What looked like a small shelter with no roof. A pile of scattered lumber. All of it was strewn around the clearing apparently randomly. There were deep gouges marking much of it, and more reddish-brown filth.

"My name is Phineus," the filthy little old man told them. He was barefoot and wore torn up rags. He called out to Pollox without turning his head to look at him: "Nice work with Amycus, son. (He's fine, apart from the redecorating you did to his head. All set to go fight in the Trojan War and all.) Now *that* man had a beating coming to him and I'm honoured to meet the man who gave it. How's your face?"

The old man had long white hair straggling down his back and tangling in with his beard, which came to his waist. He was very bald on top. He stank unbelievably and had smears of reddish-brown all over him, and scratches as well. From the top of his bald head, to his cheeks, to his bare shoulders and arms and legs, ran painful-looking, deep scratches. His eyes were white and cloudy, but he appeared to know exactly where everyone and everything was, nonetheless. "Welcome Jason. Telamon. Atalanta. Euphemus. Idmon. Everybody. And most of all, welcome Zethes and Calais. I'm so glad you're all here and this personal hell can finally end. Tiphys, hand me that bucket of water so I can wash my hands."

The stinking old man had got each person's name correct, though he hadn't quite looked directly at any of them. Tiphys handed the filthy wooden bucket to Phineus. It had been recently filled with clean water, probably from a stream which ran through the woods beside Phineus' clearing. Phineus scrubbed thoroughly at his arms and hands, wincing at what this did to the scratches all over them.

"Here. Atalanta," he began. "Go a bit farther down the path until you reach a tree with your initial, a big "Alpha" carved into the bark. In a few minutes, a deer will cross the path in front of you. Shoot it and Euphemus can help you prepare it so we can eat."

Atalanta shrugged and disappeared down the path, taking bow and quiver of arrows with her.

As the old man scrubbed away at the filth that caked him, he turned to Tiphys. "Look, now that you're here, it's worth me putting on something better. Won't get shredded now. Do you think I could have that old tunic of yours? The one you wore before you bought the one you've got on now? It's under your cot belowdecks."

Shaking his head in confusion, Tiphys headed back up the path to the *Argo* to get it, coughing to himself a bit.

"..." began Jason.

"I'm a seer," Phineus replied. "The best prophet who ever lived. No offence, Idmon."

"If that's true, then why..." Jason began, looking at how the old man was living.

"Zeus *cursed* me, I was that good," Phineus replied. "I was a king and everything, but apparently it takes all the fun out of being a god if someone like me can just *tell* everyone what you're about to do next, even if you don't know yourself."

"But isn't that..." Jason started.

"No. It's not omnipotence. A lot of people make that mistake, actually. Omnipotence is being able to *do* anything. I can't even get rid of those harpies and put a roof on my house. Even Zeus isn't omnipotent. He's just incredibly mighty. Lightning bolts. Turning himself into a swan to get close to gullible women (no offence, boys). I'm not omnipotent. *Omniscient*, though? Kind of. Not really. I know most things that are soon about to happen right around me and to anyone I'm talking to," Phineus explained. "Doesn't mean I can do whatever I like."

There was the twang of a bowstring and a crashing sound in the brush.

“Euphemus, would you be so good as to go help Atalanta butcher that deer and bring back steaks for all of us? And maybe you should cook. I can’t get this stink off my hands” Phineus said, stepping into the stream and scrubbing himself as thoroughly as he could.

After a bit, he came out of the stream and stood, holding his rags in his hand strategically to cover himself. He waited a moment, then he put out a hand.

At that point Tiphys, coughing to himself, walked out of the trees and placed the old green tunic in Phineus’ outstretched hand.

Phineus put on the tunic, braided his hair behind him and his beard in front, then sat down with the rest by the fire. Then he poured a bit of water from a jug into a relatively clean cup and waited a moment.

Tiphys began coughing again, and Phineus handed him the cup of water, which Tiphys drank, to try to settle his cough. Phineus gave the helmsman a sympathetic look, then turned to face Telamon.

Telamon was skeptical. “Near omniscience... Do you mean...” he began.

“Yes,” Phineus replied.

“Okay, well if that’s true, then what am...”

“You’re thinking of a donkey painted bright yellow with a naked dwarf on his back. Well...naked but for a large blue hat,” Phineus told him.

Then he put his hand up in front of his blind face. Peleus had quietly picked up a small stick to toss at Phineus while the old man was talking to his brother. Seeing that the stick would be caught if he threw it, Peleus dropped the stick and scowled to himself, confused. Then he suddenly asked “What num...”

“Seven,” Phineus told him. “And no. My mother was a queen, actually. We did have some lovely she-hounds we were quite fond of, though, growing up.”

Jason poked the fire to get it really going and it was ready once Euphemus and Atalanta came out of the woods with their hands full of venison steaks. “That’s another deer that’s bought the farm...” Euphemus said.

Orpheus looked at Phineus and was about to speak, when Phineus said “Yes, that would be very nice. And some big roasting forks from the galley.”

Orpheus headed off to the *Argo* to fetch his lyre and the forks.

Phineus then turned to Jason and said, “Forty five this November, actually. Zeus cursed me with the appearance and symptoms of extreme old age, to keep me from interfering much in his business. I can barely walk up the path without getting winded and needing a nap. I don’t crap right anymore, and it hurts when I pee. And I’m blind, too. I know where everything is, but I can’t actually *see* it. Like, I *know* Atalanta is cute as a button, but I can’t *see* her. And then there’re the harpies.”

“...,” Jason breathed in to ask a question.

“Yeah,” Phineus said. “The flying kind. Two of them. Part of Zeus’ curse. They come at sundown each day and tear apart everything I’ve built, scratch me and fling their crap everywhere, further relieve themselves all over the place, and leave. Because my body feels so

old, and because they can just fly away when I chase them, I haven't been able to do a thing about them. Zethes and Calais will sort them out for me this evening, though."

"Will we?" Calais asked, a bit skeptical.

"You've got good hearts," Phineus said. "And you're going to love those venison steaks. It's been a month and three days since you had any venison, after all. That's a whole lot of salted cod. Feel that breeze from the North? Say hi to your dad for me. Now play us a song, Orpheus. Yes, *The Rains of Crete* would be perfect," he continued. Orpheus had just come back with the forks and his lyre.

And Orpheus played his lyre and sang, and they talked quietly as the sun set, then ate their steaks with a bit of bread and some golden yellow wine from the Argo. Thanks to a fairly brisk breeze out of the North, even the stench of the place was mostly carried away, and they had a pretty good time.

"So," Jason began eventually. "I have to ask..."

"No," said Phineus. "I will *not* tell you whether or not you will succeed in your quest for the Golden Fleece, or even *how* to succeed. And I will not tell you if you'll be king or not. I'll tell you about the Rocks, but that's it. The *Symplegades*, you know. The *last* thing I need is more gods with more curses to put on me. Speaking of which, everyone who doesn't like harpy crap in their hair had best get under some tree cover."

And so they all did.



The sun had almost slipped below the horizon a short while later when Phineus gestured. They soon heard a distant flap of large wings, and a raucous, brassy screech. The noise sounded a tiny bit like a seagull's call, but was louder, deeper and much more annoying. *Like a creaking hinge you've put your ear right up to*, Jason thought. *Like fingernails on a slate*.

Atalanta and a few others nocked arrows to their bows and stood ready. Other Argonauts picked up large rocks. Everyone waited.

With a spattering of dung falling wetly to the ground right before they landed, two harpies lighted in the middle of the clearing and began hopping heavily around, heads cocked first one side, and then the other. They were bigger than the largest birds any of the Argonauts had yet seen, being each about the size of a young child. They had the bodies of birds, with broad, vulture-like wings and razor-sharp, dung-encrusted claws they could use like hands.

The weird part, though, was their heads and chests. These looked creepily like the heads and torsos of naked, scowling, squinting, bald-headed little old women with mouths full of pointed teeth. The two harpies squinted around, looking for Phineus, and one gave her ear-splitting, rusty door hinge screech. The other dropped more dung and urinated copiously.

The Argonauts loosed arrows and flung rocks then, and the harpies screamed deafeningly and took to the skies in a flurry of feathers, scattering more foul-smelling dung, wings beating mightily.

Zethes and Calais took to the skies after them, firing arrows as they went. They gained altitude quickly, spinning rapidly like corkscrews at first, then scudding along rapidly after the harpies, turning very slowly as they went, loosing arrows at intervals. They soon disappeared from sight over the treetops, leaving the rest to breathe a sigh of relief.



“Well, that’s that,” said Phineus. “I think tomorrow I’ll start work on my house again. Those harpies kept tearing the roof off it, no matter how well I tried to fasten the boards down. Now, let’s find a dung-free spot to sit by the fire, and I’ll tell you about the Rocks. You too, Tiphys. Get something to write with. First thing, you’ll need a dove.”

And Jason and Tiphys the helmsman sat with the prophet Phineus, and he told them how to deal with the next big obstacle in their quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece. By the time Zethes and Calais came back, tightly corkscrewing down out of a stiff North wind before alighting in the clearing with a dove in hand, light as falling leaves, Jason and Tiphys knew everything Phineus was willing to tell them about the Symplegades, the Clashing Rocks which blocked the Bosphoros Strait to the Black Sea.

And the next day they set sail in the afternoon, after helping Phineus put a roof on his shack that morning.

The Clashing Rocks

In order to get through the Bosphorus Strait and into the Black Sea to Colchis and the Golden Fleece, Jason and his crew would have to take the *Argo* through an obstacle that no other ship had ever successfully passed: the Clashing Rocks, or “Symplegades” as they were sometimes called.

In Greek they were spelled “Συμπληγάδες.” They supposedly crushed whole ships that tried to pass. They made sailing into the Bosphorus Strait utterly impossible, even for fishermen in small rowboats.

Jason and the Argonauts had never been to the Strait, and had never seen the Rocks. Hercules had travelled through that region of course, when he’d encountered the savage Amazons, but he’d not gone through the Symplegades. He’d hiked around them on foot. He was off on his own adventures now anyway, which was no help to Jason at all.

To continue on to Colchis, where they had to retrieve the Golden Fleece, they would need to follow the somewhat sketchy directions of the helpful but stinking prophet Phineus and take their chances. With a bit of luck, and no interference from the gods, they hoped to get through alive. You could never tell with something that was magic, though. Anything could happen.

The trip to the Bosphorus Strait was solemn. Jason navigated from the rough map Phineus had helped Tiphys draw, outlining the safest and most direct route to the area. It took them two weeks, and no one seemed to be terribly looking forward to arriving. It rained most of the way there, and on days when it did not rain, the sky was overcast and threatening.

Argonauts who weren’t busy often stood looking at the distant horizon, seeking a glimpse of the Bosphorus. Tiphys and Jason argued now and then over the rough map, never sure if they were following it correctly. Tiphys was coughing a great deal now, but assured Jason that he was fine.

Calais and Zethes took turns spiralling up into the sky above the ship to sight ahead, and feeding seeds to the small white dove they kept in a small basket they’d woven from dried grass. The nearly omniscient prophet Phineus had told the sons of the North wind where they could find a dove in the forest in which he lived. They’d flown to the tree Phineus had marked with their initials (a “K” for “Κάλαϊς” and a “Z” for “Ζήτης”) and once the dove lit on a branch, between the two of them, they had managed to catch it as it tried to fly off.

Eventually, shortly after sunrise, Calais called down from above the mast to announce that he could see what looked to him like the landmarks which indicated the Clashing Rocks on Phineus’ chart. And they sailed for a day before they reached the mouth of the Bosphorus Strait, with its “teeth,” the Clashing Rocks.

The shoreline nipped in on both sides to form the strait, until there was a narrow channel at its mouth just wide enough for a ship only twice the width of the *Argo* to pass. There was a small fishing village nearby, and Tiphys, coughing, steered the *Argo* in to dock there so they could have a good meal and some wine before trying to survive the passage through the Rocks.



Most of the crew of the *Argo* went ashore and ate and drank in the town. Jason, Tiphys, Peleus and Telamon were sitting at a battered table in a pub called *The Spotted Salmon*, talking about what they were planning to do. The more they spoke of it, the crazier the plan sounded.

As they talked, an old fisherman came over to their table. He wore a gold tunic and a shapeless cloth cap, and his face was baked brown as a nut by the sun, which had also given it deep lines and creases. He squinted at them in a friendly way.

“You can’t go through th’ Clashing Rocks,” he told them. “It’s not allowed. Too many wrecked ships,” he continued. “We used to get people trying all th’ time, so now we just forbid it entirely. It’s a royal decree. Can’t do it.”

“We are on a quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece at the behest of Pelias, King of Iolcus. We have the *Argo*, the only ship of her kind, and her crew, who are all heroes, many of them the children of gods,” Jason told him. “We need to try this. In fact, we will. Colchis lies on the other side of the Bosphorus Strait, and that’s where we need to go.”

Tiphys started to say something, then broke down coughing.

“*No* ship has ever beat th’ Rocks,” the fisherman continued. And then he proceeded to tell them about a number of various ships which had been magically crushed between the two giant rock walls in a number of horrific ways. He told of many, many ships. In great detail:

“...But just his *body* got crushed, not his head, so we could hear him screaming out to us, begging for help, for hours afterward,” he said. “When th’ Rocks opened up, you see, it took a while for th’ wreckage to float back out again, and when it did, he was *part* of it. Took up a lot less space than when he went in. He was a *fat* man before. Ate more trout in one sitting than any man here, an’ that’s th’ truth of it! Well, he was thin when he came back out, and he’s *feeding* th’ trout now...”

As Marius the fisherman told them his stories, more fishermen and bored village people came over to the table, eagerly bringing even more stories of smashed ships as they came. Apparently the Clashing Rocks had even smashed pods of dolphins which tried to swim between them.

Jason soon realized he didn’t want to listen to too much more of this. The Argonauts left *The Spotted Salmon* and went to bed early, with an air of solemnity hanging over them.



They started out early the next morning after Jason had given them a speech. “We may not survive this,” he told them. “No one has before. So if anyone wants to disembark right now, we’ll understand. If we do get through, though, there’s no way to rejoin the ship without a ten-day hike over the cliffs. So if we make it, we’ll go on ahead. The choice is up to you.”

No one chose to leave the ship, so they untied the *Argo*, set sail and headed up the shoreline to the Rocks.

It was very, very still there. Bits of smashed ships lay half-submerged everywhere around the mouth of the Rocks. Tiphys had a hard time navigating around them. The rough, striated rock faces of the walls on each side of the channel were flat, with bits of wood ground into them.

Tiphys stood resolutely at the helm, face expressionless, coughing now and then despite his concentration.

As they approached, a crow stopped pecking at something which clung to a bit of ship's figurehead which stuck up out of the water at an odd angle. The bird cawed at them as if it disapproved, then flew away heavily.

First Tiphys steered around the wreckage to get a close look at the Clashing Rocks, and to check out the "safe" course into them charted out by blind Phineus. The rest of the Argonauts got all of the oars ready, sticking them out of the openings in the side of the *Argo* which had been designed for that purpose. The crew, in fact, apart from Jason, Tiphys, Zethes and Calais, were all down below, ready to man the oars, with Telamon taking charge down there.

The *Argo* was bobbing just outside the mouth of the Rocks, prior to sailing back out to get up some speed. The flat cliff faces of the Rocks loomed high above them, casting a shadow over the *Argo*. The waves lapped quietly against them. It was very quiet and peaceful. Oddly so.

Calais held the basket with the dove in it.

"Ready?" Jason asked him.

"I suppose..." answered the son of the North wind, and opened the basket, taking the dove out and handing it to Euphemus.

Euphemus dropped lightly over the edge of the ship, landing on the surface of the waves the way he did, carrying the dove gently in one hand. Then, frighteningly close to the Clashing Rocks, he released the dove, trying to make it fly between them so they could see how quickly the Rocks closed.

The dove was no fool, though, shot past Euphemus and began winging off in exactly the wrong direction. Zethes spiralled swiftly up into the sky after it, and just barely grabbed it out of the air, then knifed back down and handed it to Euphemus again, panting a bit from his efforts.

Euphemus, standing on the water, took a deep breath and tossed the dove toward the Rocks. This time Calais joined Zethes in the air and they darted and span around after the dove in order to chase it into the channel between the Rocks without going in there themselves.

As soon as the dove shot in between them, faster than the sons of the North wind could fly, the Rocks began to close, like a mountain-sized vice. At the grinding sounds around it, the dove shot like an arrow in flight, and Jason wondered if it would have time to get through, despite its size. He counted silently to himself.

Slowly, inexorably the Symplegades ground shut, smashing together with a massive grinding and rumbling sound that brought a startled, shouted string of swear words up to them from Idas belowdecks. Jason had only had time to count to twenty before the Rocks had completely ground shut, a heavy wave rushing out from between them and rocking the *Argo* as it passed. The air was filled with stone dust and the smell of scorched rock.

For a moment, the Rocks stayed closed. Then they ground back open again, the sea rushing back in between them. Telamon had to instruct the crew to backpaddle a bit to keep the *Argo* from being pulled in with it.

A couple of white feathers fell slowly down to the surface of the water where they floated, but Jason could see the dove flying off in the distance, minus a bit of tail plumage.

“So, do you think we can do it?” Jason said, barely daring to ask.

“It’s going to be very close” Tiphys told him. But they were heroes. They had to try.



They took the *Argo* out from the Rocks to give themselves enough distance to get some speed up, using Phineus’ diagram to chart their course. Reminding himself that the muscles that were moving the oars weren’t the muscles of normal men, but of heroes, the children of various gods, Jason shouted down to Telamon, “Go!”

“Row! Row! Row! Row!” Telamon’s deep voice could be heard, calling the rhythm of the rowing from belowdecks. The oars rose and fell, blurring with supernatural speed and the *Argo* moved forward as if roughly yanked by a giant hand. Jason nearly lost his footing, and had to grab the rail to keep from falling overboard. A few amazed cheers wafted across the water from the shoreline, where some village people were watching.

“Row! Row! Row! Row!” The *Argo* was moving so quickly that Tiphys was clearly having trouble steering her straight into the channel between the Rocks. After a bit of a wobble, he brought the prow around, and in she went.

No sooner had the prow of the *Argo* gone in between the Clashing Rocks than the angry rumble began. Dirt and small pebbles began to rain down into the water on either side of the *Argo* as it dove into the gap. All too soon, the debris began landing on the deck itself as the Rocks closed in.

Jason sent a prayer to Athena as the prow came out the other side into the bright sunlight, and a sickening wooden *crunch* filled the air, and a wrenching *stop* threw everyone to the deck.

Jason hit his head on the edge of a spar on the way down, and when he got carefully back to his feet, his ears were ringing and stars danced in front of his eyes. He ran to the back of the ship to see what had happened back there. The Rocks stayed closed. Tiphys got up from the deck, coughing weakly. Idas came up from below and made sure Tiphys was alright.

Ancaeus clutched his bearskin around him and looked mournfully at the now smashed rudder he’d just been working on while the ship had been docked by Phineus’ clearing. The ornate wooden ornamentation on the stern of the *Argo* and part of her rudder were completely trapped between the stone teeth of the Rocks, and crushed to splinters. Everyone was alive, though, and the hull didn’t appear to be breached.

Realizing they’d survived the passage between the Clashing Rocks, the Argonauts below let out a loud cheer, the kind of cheer you only hear from people who are more relieved than they’ve ever been before. Everyone checked out the stern and considered how close they’d been to the afterlife. Skins of wine got passed around, and a few of them sang while Orpheus played.

Eventually Jason, Peleus and Telamon took oars and stuck them between the rear of the *Argo* and the rock wall it was caught in. It took some prying, and the wood made some upsetting

grinding, creaking and splintering sounds. Eventually, though, the *Argo* tore free, leaving some moulding and part of the rudder trapped forever in now-immobile rock face. They had reached the Black Sea.

After stopping in a fishing village to repair the rudder and stern of their wounded ship, they headed off to Colchis after the Golden Fleece. And the Clashing Rocks stayed closed forever after. You can go see them today, and I assure you, they will not open.

New Crewmen

Jason and the crew of the *Argo* stood on the hilltop overlooking the sea while the sky got dark. The sun had set. They remained by the graves for a bit longer, then made their way back aboard ship.

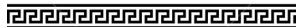
Tiphys' cough had been getting worse over the past few months, and a ship is a dangerous place on which to get an illness. He'd always insisted he was fine. Jason had been too busy getting them through the Clashing Rocks to really pay enough attention.

Tiphys' death had been sudden, and shocking to all of them. They were so used to him helming the ship quietly and uncomplainingly. But one afternoon he'd collapsed at the helm and by evening he was gone. Now scowling Ancaeus, in his bearskin, would be the *Argo's* day helmsman. Before he had mainly helmed at night.

And then the attack of the boar from the bushes when they were carrying Tiphys' body down to the grave by the sea in the evening had been just as sudden and just as shocking. White bearded Idmon, who hadn't said much at the best of times, had been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. The enormous boar had broken from the shrubbery, and had gored Idmon, opening a huge wound in his abdomen, and another in his thigh before Castor had killed it with a spear. Idmon had not seen this one coming, though he was a prophet. No one had. No one had had a moment to do a thing. Idmon had slipped away within scant minutes.

"That's that, then" Idas had said, and had turned away and spat, but Atalanta had seen a tear in his eye.

So they'd just dug a second grave, by the edge of the tombs and buried both men. It hadn't been a good day.



It had started with them dropping anchor right at the point where the Acheron River let out into the Black Sea in which they sailed, on their way to Colchis and the Golden Fleece which was their mission. They'd come to the mouth of the Acheron because there was a beautiful graveyard by it in which they planned to bury Tiphys the master helmsman. They thought it would be fitting to bury him by the sea.

Now that they'd buried two Argonauts in that lovely place, they had retired soberly to the ship for the night, planning to leave in the morning.

Atalanta was roaming around on the shoreline, bow in hand, unable to sleep, and Jason stood looking out at how the moon reflected off the water. They'd lost Hercules, who'd left with Polyphemus in search of Hylas, and they'd lost Tiphys and Idmon now, too. They hadn't even reached the Golden Fleece, and already they had five crewmembers fewer than they'd planned on. Jason was weighing the effect of this when Atalanta called to him from the shoreline.

"Jason! Some...one wants to talk to you. He's, well... kind of a person, but..." She trailed off. Her warm brown eyes were huge and she looked pale.

Jason had seen a lot of strange things by now. Clashing Rocks, men who could walk on water or fly, evil crone-like harpies, men with six arms, men who knew what was going to

happen before it happened... Jason dropped down the side of the *Argo* and swam the short distance to the shoreline.

Atalanta, bow over her shoulder, led Jason, dripping wet, straight into the chill graveyard. Everything was silent but for the distant sound of ocean surf. The stars were brilliant. Jason could just see a dim glow ahead in the darkness. A glow that had nothing to do with the full moon.

As he got closer to it, Jason could see the dimly glowing figure of a man standing in the gravestones. In fact, you could see the gravestones *through* it, if you looked.

“My name is Sthenelus,” the apparition began. Its voice somehow sounded like it was coming from very far away, but also sounded like it was inside Jason’s head at the same time. “I adventured with Hercules, a few years ago, when he was fighting those Amazons.”

“You’re...dead?” Jason asked, wanting to be sure.

“Of course I’m dead!” the shade of Sthenelus snapped, his luminescent eyebrows lowering in annoyance.

“Are you here to tell us that Hercules...” Jason paused.

“No, no!” Sthenelus’ shade said, waving a glowing hand. “I don’t know if *anything* could kill that one. He’s half-god, you know. And anyway, I would have heard. Ghosts talk, you know. In fact, I had hoped that Hercules was aboard your ship so I could speak with him. I never got to say goodbye, and I have something he should hear.”

“We parted ways a few months back,” Jason told him. “What did you want to say?”

“I died near the isle of Sinope, less than a day’s journey from here at full sail,” the ghost of Sthenelus told them. “But not all who failed to meet back up with Hercules died. There are three men, compatriots of Hercules, and heroes all three, who have been trapped on Sinope ever since. They were thought dead and the ship left without them. And not a ship has stopped on Sinope since. If any of them had died I would have known of it.”

“We’re going right by Sinope, and it’s clearly marked on our charts,” Jason told the spirit. “We’ll stop and see if they’re still there.”

“When you see him, tell Hercules I often recall the wild adventures we had together,” the shade of Sthenelus said. “Those Amazons sure could fight,” and then he slowly faded from view. Ghosts find lengthy conversations with the living awkward and tiring. And boring.



Before they left the next day, the Argonauts brought a skin of wine to the grave of Sthenelus and each poured a small splash of wine on his stone, to honour his memory. (This was called a “libation.” Nowadays, we’d throw a handful of dirt on the coffin instead, or put flowers on the grave.)



The trip to Sinope hadn't taken long. Sure enough, there had been three men stranded there. So with three ragged, grateful crewmen added to their number, the *Argo* sailed on from Sinope. One of the stranded men had been helmsman for Hercules himself once, and so was a very capable and much needed extra helmsman for the *Argo*.

They stopped very briefly at the mouth of the river Thermodon, refilling their fresh water and killing some small game, but they moved on as soon as they could. Amazons had built the harbour they were using and might spot them at any moment. The Amazons, Hercules had told Jason, were a race of well armed, heavily armoured, fierce warrior women most adept at the bow, but also handy with spear or sword. They had built a society with no men, and killed males on sight.

Atalanta had winced and covered her ears when Hercules had loudly told tales of how larger-chested Amazons would have their left breast removed so as to not impede their archery. Hercules said he didn't like the sound of this practice at all, but then, Amazons didn't like Hercules and didn't care what he, or any other man, thought. They were an armed and militant sisterhood, with a working society that didn't rely on men or see any need to deal with the inevitable complications that accompany men and women living together.

Jason didn't know if this story of Hercules was really true, but they left without seeing a single Amazon, so he didn't get to verify it. Atalanta didn't know, and didn't want to talk about it. "You *guys*," she said.

The next island they sailed to was the deserted isle of Ares.



Jason and the Argonauts dropped anchor just off the shore of Ares. They wanted to see the large and beautiful temple that was there (built by the warring Amazons) to honour Ares, the Greek god of war for whom the island was named. The Romans would later call their similar god "Mars," from whose name would come "martial law" and "martial arts." Also, the blood-red planet.

Ares was the god to pray to if you were fighting a war. Jason and the Argonauts were trying to avoid anything like that, and simply retrieve the mythic Golden Fleece at Colchis, but they wanted to see the temple to Ares.

The temple ended up being huge and stone and beautiful, with wonderful columns and painted frescoes in it, but before they could get in, they soon found it was defended by huge, aggressive birds. And the birds were an organized flock which worked together.

Each bird was large, brown and unremarkable-looking, but when the Argonauts set foot on the sandy beach of the Isle of Ares, then started screeching and dropping out of the sky like falcons to try to rake the Argonauts' eyes and faces and hands with razor-sharp talons. Pollox was caught off guard and almost lost an eye, but was saved at the last minute by Castor smacking him in the side of the head with the butt of his spear, dislodging the bird, then flicking the spear around to pin it squawking to the ground in one smooth movement.

Euphemus, Atalanta, Philoctetes and Telamon were standing at the rear, skilfully taking birds down with arrows, while most of the rest used spears or swords to try to stab or slash at the seemingly endless onslaught of dive bombing brown birds. The birds made strange hooting and warbling sounds as they dropped from the sky; calls which were more eerie than musical. They dropped like rocks, snapping their wings, talons and beaks open at the last minute to brake hard enough to land heavily on the heads, shoulders and necks of the Argonauts.

Zethes took to the air to slash at the flock with his short sword while corkscrewing like a tornado. This was really working until he got pecked in the eye and raked across the ear, causing him to land clumsily, clutching his head and falling to his knees. Calais and Peleus took him by the shoulders and led him to safety before returning to the fray.

Just when Jason and Telamon were getting ready to tell the shore party of Argonauts to retreat back to the ship, the Argonauts prevailed and the birds flew off, leaving a few wounded birds flopping on the sand.

Now they could explore the island of Ares. There might be Amazons around, as it was their temple, so the Argonauts kept careful watch as they walked around the sandy, beautiful island named after the god of war.



Just as Jason was coming back out of the magnificent temple to Ares, Calais dropped down out of the air, spinning very slowly, landed more gracefully than his wounded brother had, and said “Jason. I found some guys. Hiding from the birds in a cave.”

And it was true. Jason and Peleus followed Calais on foot and found four ragged young men. The eldest looked to be perhaps Jason’s age.

“We are the four sons of Phrixius,” the oldest of the men told Jason.

Jason was immediately interested. Phrixius had been the man who’d been riding the huge flying golden ram whose magical fleece they sought. His twin sister Helle had fallen off during the same flight, and drowned in the sea which was now called the Hellespont, or “sea of Helle.”

Phrixius had managed to hold on to the magic creature all the way to Colchis, where King Aetes the ruler of Colchis had taken him in and given him Chalcioppe his daughter as wife. In gratitude, Phrixius had slaughtered the ram, sacrificing it to Zeus so he’d bless their marriage. He’d made a gift of the creature’s golden fleece to the King, who loved to collect strange and magical things. Or so the story went.

And these four young men claimed to be the actual sons of Phrixius and Chalcioppe. This would also make them the grandsons of King Aetes. And Jason had been ordered to get King Aetes’ Golden Fleece and bring it back to his own uncle, King Iolus, if Jason was to claim the throne that was rightfully his. This was all a bit of a problem.

Jason and Telamon decided to not tell Argus of Colchis, Phrontis, Melas, and Cytisorus what their true mission was. Not at first, anyway. They just told them they had to speak with King Aetes and so would take the four men back home, and left it at that.

But for the rest of the journey to Colchis anyway, they would have another four crewmen to add to the three they'd picked up on Sinope. The crew of the *Argo* was back to full capacity. Jason wondered how much of a role Hera and Athena were playing in it all. With gods, you never know.

Jason and the Argonauts: The Golden Fleece

A Divine Scheme

Zethes and Calais had sighted Colchis on the horizon, and Jason, Peleus and Telamon were having a quiet, but heated argument up toward the prow of the *Argo* as a stiff breeze scudded small puffs of white cloud across a dark blue sky.

“I think we should just tell them,” Jason insisted. “I don’t feel right going to Colchis and leaving them out of the loop.”

“Our mission is to retrieve the Golden Fleece any way we can, and you think it’s a good idea to tell the sons of the king what we’re up to?” Telamon argued.

“Do you really think Aetes is going to just hand that Fleece over to us out of...what? *Gratitude* for returning his shipwrecked grandsons to him?” Peleus demanded.

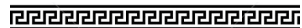
“Well, he might,” Jason insisted. “I don’t feel right about not trying that first. We’re supposed to be a ship of heroes, not marauding pirates.”

“I don’t think it’s the wise approach,” Telamon said. “But then, it’s exactly the sort of thing I’m always trying to talk Hercules out of, so if that’s what you really want to do, then I’m with you.”

“Me too” Peleus said.

“It’s what I really want to do,” Jason told them.

And the *Argo* sailed on toward Colchis, where the mythic Golden Fleece awaited.



In Olympus, home of the gods, Hera the wife of Zeus, and Athena, goddess of fairness and wisdom, discuss how to help Jason. They’ve already been helping him more than he suspects.

“We’ve gotten them to Colchis. Now they’re anchored out of sight, deciding how to handle the situation. But King Aetes is never going to assent to their request” Hera thinks out loud. “The son of the Sun is dark and moody. And his anger burns hot as Helios at noonday.”

“True,” Athena agrees. “And we’ve got really no leverage with Aetes. He’s extremely controlling and stubborn. What else could we try?” Athena asks her mother.

“Well, I was thinking of asking Aphrodite to help us,” Hera says, thinking it through as she speaks. “We could ask her if she could make Medea, the daughter of Aetes, fall in love with Jason. If the daughter of the King were in love with Jason, then Jason could probably get valuable help with his quest from someone inside the Royal family like that. He’s already probably going to have the support of the four grandsons of Aetes whom he rescued from the Isle of Ares. Tell me, do you think this plan has any wisdom in it?” Hera asks.

Athena knows wisdom when she hears it and folly as well. “It just might help. But Jason’s got that woman from Lemnos that he is pledged to,” she replies. “I suppose he could get Medea’s help if she were in love with him. But it would go poorly for him to betray Hypsipyle, who really needs him right now. She’s been chased out of Lemnos with the twin sons of Jason and her sick father. Wouldn’t be right for Jason to run off with Medea, and it wouldn’t end well. Also, Medea’s a bit of a witch, isn’t she? Word has it that the young princess has been foolishly

dabbling in evil and magic for some time. She's a tool that is just as likely to cut anyone who tries to wield her as help them."

"I don't feel inclined to worry about any of that right now," Hera replies. "Jason needs the Fleece if he is to take the throne of Iolcus. Now, do you think Aphrodite would help us?"

"She's been having trouble with her son, Eros, lately. And this is a job for which we'd really need him," Athena tells her. "But let's go see."

The two goddesses head off to Aphrodite's chambers. The goddess of sexuality and romantic love cannot be forced into anything she's not already open to. They will have to hope she's in the mood to be accommodating.

Aphrodite reclines on an elaborate round pink bed, brushing her endless waves of shining hair out. Or is it a couch she lies on? There is kind of a fancy rim around it. Hard to tell. Cloying perfume is in the air. When the two goddesses approach, Aphrodite draws a filmy bit of fabric around her naked shoulders a bit and turns over to face them when they stand opposite her. She does not sit up. The Romans would later call her Venus, and sexually transmitted diseases would be called "venereal diseases" because of her. This would make her laugh uproariously to hear it.

"Jason? I like him! So cute," Aphrodite tells them once they explain their plan to her. "And Medea is pretty...open...to persuasion of any kind, really. I don't see why not. Trouble is, little Eros has really been a bit of a pain lately. I don't know if he'd even agree to go to Colchis, let alone bring his arrows and skewer Medea for you."

Eros, from whose name comes the word "erotic," and who the Romans would call Cupid, is a winged child with a quiver full of arrows and a bow. He has rosy cheeks and curly hair, and comes to his mother's chamber when sent for by Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who flicks into view like a hummingbird, then out of sight again just as quickly. (Hermes is just that fast. The Romans would call their version of him Mercury.)

"Eros, dear, Grandma needs you to shoot a pretty lady in the heart for her," Aphrodite says, reaching out to gently pinch her son's cheek. Aphrodite knows how much her mother, the ever-youthful looking Hera, dislikes being called "Grandma." But she can't help teasing people.

"Don't wanna," Eros pouts, flinching away from his mother's languid touch. Even while pouting, he is an adorable child. The wings on Eros' shoulder blades flap in a clearly irritated way.

"Oh, dear. Will you do it if I give you a toy?" Aphrodite asks, her eyes lighting up as if she's just thought of this. In fact, ugly Hephaestus the smith of the gods, who has an abiding crush on Aphrodite, made the toy at her request months earlier.

"What is it?" Eros asks, interested.

Aphrodite lazily throws long, tanned, smooth legs over the raised edge of her bed/couch and saunters slowly across to a small chest by the door, trailing perfume and fabric as she goes. She withdraws something from the chest, turns, and holds it out to Eros.

"A ball?" Eros whines, disappointed. "I already have tons of those."

“This bouncing ball is made so that it leaves a fiery trail after it, like a shooting star, every time it is bounced” Aphrodite explains, bouncing it once off the floor so it lands in Eros’ startled arms. It does indeed briefly leave a meteoric fiery trail behind it as it goes. Aphrodite adjusts her barely-there fabric whatever-it-is up, as it is perpetually in danger of falling entirely to the floor. She sticks out a pouting lower lip and looks at her son big-eyed with mock-impatience, tapping a bare foot on the white marble floor.

“Okay. I’ll do it then, I guess” Eros says after a moment, without looking at anyone in particular.

“Good boy. Don’t forget your arrows this time!” Aphrodite laughingly says, throwing herself across the bed and reaching a bare arm out for an apple.



“Jason of the *Argo* is here, having rescued our long lost Argus, Phrontis, Melas, and Cytisorus, grandsons to the King!” the royal steward announced when Jason arrived at the palace in Colchis. They were ushered into the throne room immediately.

Gods can move unseen among mortals if they wish and Eros does this now, sandaled feet making no noise as he walks into the throne room of King Aetes right beside Jason.

King Aetes rose to his feet when they entered. If he was pleased to see his grandsons, his face did not show it. His daughter Medea, however, leaped to her feet and cried out with joy at the sight of her returned nephews. She was their aunt, though only slightly older. Her eyes were slightly glassy and she appeared to be under the influence of something. The sound of Medea’s cry drew Chalcioppe, her eldest sister (the mother of the missing young men) into the throne room as well.

At this point, Eros casually fits his arrow to bowstring, pulls it back to his ear, and the invisible, divine arrow swishes across the throne room to pierce Medea directly through the heart with a small thud and melt there like heated wax. Eros laughs to himself (he loves doing this, truth be told) and then the feathered wings on his back flit him back to Olympus to play with his new toy.

Medea suddenly clutched her heart and sighed deeply, catching her first glimpse of Jason, nephews almost entirely forgotten. She strode across the throne room and hugged each one, looking at Jason the whole time, until she came to Jason himself.

Forgetting royal decorum, Medea threw her arms around Jason and kissed him on the neck, saying “And who are *you*, who brings my sister’s sons safely back to us, striding into the palace like a god among men?”

“I am Jason of Iolcus, in Thessaly, Greece” Jason began. “I am the captain of the *Argo*, sent on a mission to retrieve the Golden Fleece for my uncle, King Pelias. The golden ram from which it was taken flew here from Thessaly (quite near Iolcus, actually) and so King Pelias feels that we Iolcans have more claim to its magic Fleece than you Colchians. No offense meant.”

“We agree, Grandfather,” said Argus, the eldest of the sons of Phrixius. “The golden ram came from Thessaly, and although our father and dear aunt clung to it to escape dangers you are

only too well aware of and which I will not mention now, it rightfully ought to be returned from whence it came. Jason was honest with us, and told us of his mission, and we owe him our very lives.”

“I am Aetes, son of Helios the Sun himself!” bellowed the King. “I plough the Plain of Ares with my mighty fire-breathing oxen, and sow acres of it with dragon’s teeth, defeating the deadly crop which magically springs up! Only I am worthy to be the keeper of the Fleece!”

“All this may be,” Jason admitted quietly. “And I am only Jason, son of Aeson, late King of Iolcus, and now ship’s captain. But my mission is the same nonetheless, and I will do whatever you ask in order to complete it.”

“Whatever I ask?” the King said, quietly.

“Whatever task your grace sees fit to give me and my crew.”

King Aetes, son of Helios the Sun himself, smiled suddenly, and it was like his father breaking through the clouds. “If you, Jason, son of Aeson, late King of Iolcus, can do what I do, ploughing with my oxen, sowing the crop I sow, and reaping what grows from it, then and only then may you return to Iolcus with the Fleece of the golden ram which saved the life of my son Phryxius long ago.”

Peleus stared straight ahead.

Telamon looked very directly at Jason, in the very eyes, and very carefully did not say “I told you so.”

The Love of a Sorceress

She steps out onto the Plains of Ares, the earth scorching under the heat of her grandfather, Helios the sun. In her hands she just barely holds onto the reins of the two oxen of her father King Aetes. The Khalkotauroi are far larger than normal oxen. They have brass hooves and the inside of their throats are brazen as well. Their eyes are wild. Their voices are odd and metallic-sounding.

They know her, but they do not want to obey her. If they had not known her, she never would have gotten the steel yoke and harness chains on them.

The Khalkotauroi struggle and she is nearly pulled off her feet repeatedly. They low and roar with harsh, brassy sounds, paw the ground with their metal hooves and breathe white-hot flames that raise heat-ripples everywhere she looks. At any moment she is certain they will turn on her and burn her to a cinder. Somehow she gets the oxen ploughing the first furrow.

One ox wrenches his head around and lets loose a blast of flame. It doesn't hit her directly, only passing by her, but her nightgown and her hair burst into flames nonetheless. Weeping with fear, she beats out her nightgown and presses it to her head, trying to put out the fire.

Her right hip and thigh are badly burned, and the right half of her head is bare, but for puckering red skin. Her right ear is almost entirely gone. Her right eye swells shut. If the beast had wanted to burn her to death, leaving nothing, it could have. It was just expressing its displeasure, and had burned her by accident. Now it snorts and paws the soil with brass hooves.

She gets up and continues to force the oxen to plough, weeping with pain.

Somehow, after what seems like years, she has managed to get the oxen to crookedly plough four acres of the Plain. They would never have ploughed if she were not the daughter of Aetes, if they had not grown accustomed to her being nearby when her father ploughed the Plain.

The dragon's teeth are next. She flings them into the furrows she has ploughed in the field. And she waits.

At first nothing happens, then things start to thrust their way, struggling, up through the soil. At first they look like embryonic, metallic beetles. Before her eyes they become an army. Armoured. Armed. Eager to kill. More and more and more insect-like soldier-things. More than any normal army could defeat. Clashing with the screeches of tortured metal, they turn toward her and loom over her, blocking out the sun. Swords scrape out of sheathes and she screams as the threshing blades fall on her unprotected body.



Medea awoke, sweating. She felt the right side of her face and head, to reassure herself that she was unharmed. Ear, hair and skin were all intact. Even her nightgown was intact, though soaked with panic sweat. Still, Medea trembled.

She could not sleep. She could not stop thinking of Jason. His eyes, his hands, his everything. Every person she had spoken with that day had found that eventually, Medea was talking about Jason, whether she intended to or not.

Ever since Jason had returned to the *Argo* to talk to the Argonauts about what had transpired, Medea had longed to run after him. He needed her help. Everyone but her nephews seemed to be against him.

A quiet tapping at her door drew Medea to it, to find her eldest sister Chalciope waiting there, looking concerned. "I heard you call out. And then you were walking around in here," Chalciope told her. "What's wrong?"

Medea poured out her heart to her elder sister. Medea was only recently a young woman, and her eldest sister was the mother of four grown sons. Sometimes Chalciope was more of a mother to Medea than their own mother, who was cold and unapproachable. Ever since the time Medea had gotten disturbed enough to talk of poisoning herself with her herbs, potions and drugs, Chalciope had been keeping a close eye on her little sister.

Medea spoke of Jason's quest. She tried to remember to mention her nephews Argus, Phrontis, Melas, and Cytisorus as well, so she wasn't just talking about Jason the whole time. She told Chalciope how worried she was about Jason and her four young nephews who would certainly be helping him with this impossible task. But how could she, the daughter of the King, involve herself?

Chalciope told Medea to follow her heart. She shared Medea's concern about her four sons. She knew that Medea had been experimenting with potions and magic. Chalciope said to do what her heart told her to.

Medea stayed up all night, mixing a potion for Jason. She'd first taken a concoction designed to fill her with energy and keep her awake. The black powder had tasted bitter, but now she felt like she wouldn't need to sleep for a week. It made her grind her teeth and her leg shook uncontrollably. Medea often cooked up concoctions to alter her mood. She worked away now, making a potion for Jason that would do two important things for him. She couldn't believe how much she loved him.

Once the potion had cooled, she filled a small glass phial with it, and pushed it down the front of her robe. Then she sent a messenger boy in the night to the *Argo*, to tell Jason to meet her at the temple of Hecate before dawn.



Jason sent Atalanta and Euphemus back to the *Argo*, once he had arrived at the temple of Hecate, and could see that Medea had come alone to the forested mountaintop.

Medea walked down the temple steps, the same wind that whispered through the mighty pines whipping her dark robes tightly around her womanly body. Her thick hair was curling and black, and her eyes were dark as well. They were impossible to look away from. Her hair flew in the wind like the waves in a night storm. (By now, Jason had often seen waves in a night storm. As a result, the similes he employed were almost entirely nautical.)

At first Medea, the princess, sorceress and high-priestess of Hecate just stood there right in front of him, looking into his eyes as if reading her future in them. She was almost as tall as he. Then Jason took her in his arms and held her tightly to him. They stood like this for a long time,

swaying slightly in the wind, taking in each other's warmth and feeling the pressure of each other's arms around them. It felt at the same time safe, yet more dangerous, than anything had a right to feel.

Then as the first light of dawn had just started to show that the sun would come up over the horizon in a few hours, Jason spoke.

"Princess, I am utterly at your mercy," he said, holding her face between his hands. "You could betray me to your father the King. You could lie to me. You could trick me and lead me to my death. Or you could help me and I could make your name famous across all of Greece. Medea: saviour of the Argonauts."

Wordlessly, Medea reached into her dress, and from where it had been thrust between her breasts, she drew the small glass phial with the magic potion. She pressed it into Jason's hand and kissed him deeply. The phial was warm in his hand. She explained how to use it and what it would do. She repeated the instructions to make sure he understood.

Then suddenly her eyes grew fierce. "If you ever forget my kindness to you," Medea began. "If you sail back to Iolcus and forget about me, I will summon the winds to carry me through the night skies to you, and I will confront you to your face and my wrath will be unstoppable."

Jason laughed softly and kissed her again. "Never mind being carried on the wind through the night skies. Come with me aboard the *Argo*. Return with me to Iolcus and be my wife."

Medea broke away from Jason, shocked and confused, then wandered, as if in a dream, to her bedchamber alone.

And Jason went back to the *Argo*, the small glass phial in his fist.



"Well, it's better than nothing," Telamon said, hearing of the potion. "If it works."

"Are you sure you can trust her?" Atalanta asked him. "There's something about her that I don't like."

"She is a bit...unpredictable, my aunt, but you can trust her. She truly seems to love Jason," said Argus, grandson of the King. "And she is a mighty ally. No one in all of Colchis has one half of her knowledge of herbs and potions and magic."

"Are you really going to drink that donkey's kidney juice?" Euphemus asked him doubtfully.

"How does it work again?" Calais wanted to know.

"Not very heroic, getting helped out by the man's daughter..." complained Idas, who was always saying things like that. He spat over the rail and then took a pull on his wineskin.

Jason told them he needed to sleep, and went below to his bunk. It had been a long day.

The Plain of Ares

“**H**aw!” Jason yelled at the khalkotauroi, the giant pair of fire-breathing, brazen-hooved oxen he had yoked to the steel plow Hephaestus had made for Aetes, son of Helios the Sun.

Jason knew a thing or two about animals, mythic and mundane, having been taught a great deal by Chiron the centaur. This is why, once he had applied the potion Medea had created for him, he had gone to King Aetes and agreed to perform the task given to him. He had then gone to the stone stables where the oxen were kept, and had fed them. The khalkotauroi were fed in the morning and in the evening. Jason had arrived in time for their evening meal and had fed them. He had not only fed them, he had crawled into their stone paddock and slept on the stone floor with them.

He figured that if they had by morning grown accustomed to his scent, and if he had fed them twice, they'd be easier to work with.

Jason was only a bit worried about their fiery breath, and somewhat more worried about their bronze hooves. The potion wouldn't help against the latter.



As he had been told to do, the day before he had drank down half of the glass phial of greyish potion, and had given it an hour to work. As Medea had told him, he had not eaten nor drank anything overnight, and had drank it on an empty stomach. He soon knew that if he'd eaten anything, it would certainly have come up once he'd drank half of the phial of potion.

Then he had gone into a small, enclosed room belowdecks, carrying a small bowl and a lit torch. He had poured the remaining quantity of potion into the bowl, and had lit it. It had smouldered for nearly an hour, filling the tiny space up with thick, sickly-smelling fumes which seemed to stick to every inch of him. And his skin had itched. *How* it had itched... But Medea had told him not to scratch it, and so he hadn't.

He'd stayed in there alone for two hours, once the potion had burned away to nothing. The Argonauts were under strict orders to stay abovedecks, as Medea had said that anyone who hadn't drank the potion would be killed by the fumes caused by burning it.

And then he had come back up to the deck of the ship. His belly had felt peculiar. His skin had felt peculiar. His head had felt extremely peculiar. And then he had gone to see the King.



When morning had come and Jason had fed the khalkotauroi, patted them and decided to try them, he knew he was in for a wrestling match. The yoke itself was made of steel and was extremely heavy. And the oxen did *not* want to be yoked. The khalkotauroi snorted and pawed the ground, then had breathed fire directly at him. Jason had felt the heat of the scorching flames, but the potion had magically made him immune to their heat. He felt it, and it was uncomfortable and more than a bit frightening, but it didn't burn him at all.

The other thing the potion had done was make him tireless. It did not make him stronger, exactly, so much as it simply allowed him to do things that normally would have tired him out immediately, without tiring at all. And trying to yoke these giant oxen should have been the most tiring task ever, but thanks to the potion, he was able to do it. Once the oxen realized that their fiery breath didn't seem to be doing anything to Jason, and when he patted them on their brawny necks and spoke quietly to them, they were almost docile. King Aetes treated them far more roughly than Jason did.

The King had mounted his gleaming chariot, and had rode with great fanfare down to the Plain of Ares, where a crowd had gathered. He rode several laps of the Plain, and gave a speech, saying the fun would begin once Jason showed up with the khalkotauroi yoked together. Clearly he was counting on Jason getting burned to a crisp at the stables and never showing up at all.

Telamon had sailed the *Argo* up the coast so that it dropped anchor within sight of the Plain. Most of the Argonauts climbed the rocky, volcanic cliffs and stood to one side of the Plain, opposite where the King and the local folk stood.

When Jason came down the road to the Plain, just barely keeping the yoked khalkotauroi moving ahead, the crowd cheered. No one had ever before attempted such a thing as to even approach the King's giant creatures. The massive oxen snorted and breathed a bit of fire, but they didn't bother trying to burn Jason anymore. That had repeatedly not worked and so they had given up on it altogether.

Jason began to plough a furrow and the King's face grew very dark indeed. The sun beat down from above, but with the help of the potion, Jason couldn't even feel it. And Argonauts filled the air with encouraging shouts, which made Jason feel better.

Jason had to keep the oxen ploughing until he had the four acres ploughed. With each furrow, the khalkotauroi grew more stubborn about doing this. The oxen were getting pretty impatient with him, and Jason feared they would think of stamping him to a jelly under their brass hooves. Tireless, thanks to the potion, he was just able to drive them straight enough to plough the four acres. His furrows weren't perfectly straight. Particularly not the last few.

Once he had finished, Jason was very glad to be able to drive the yoked pair over to their master the King, hand him the reins, and ask for the dragon's teeth he now had to sow. The potion kept him from tiring but it did nothing to stop him from worrying.

Jason adjusted his shield on his back, and the sword at his side, and took the heavy sack of dragon's teeth from the King. Aetes had first had to send a pair of servants to fetch a bag of dragon's teeth from the Palace. Apparently the dragon shed teeth throughout the year and grew new ones continuously. The king had never expected to need them that day and had not brought them with him.

Jason threw the heavy sack to his shoulder, and walked down to his furrows. He reached into the sack over and over, careful so as not to cut himself on the dragon's teeth which it carried. Dragon's teeth are like shark's teeth, only narrower and longer. Each curved brown tooth was as long as Jason's longest finger, and half again as thick, twisted and wickedly pointed. Tireless, due to the potion, Jason walked the furrows, tossing handfuls of teeth into

them. By the time he'd emptied the bag over four acres of furrows, he could see movement from the rows where he'd tossed the first teeth. A rattling, chittering, metallic scraping sound began to grow

Jason threw the bag to one side and stopped to drink from a wineskin Idas tossed him. Jason turned his back on the furrows, held the wineskin up before drinking from it, and got a huge cheer from the onlookers on both sides of the Plain. But the sounds behind him told him it was high time he turn his attention to the Plain again. He'd only drank a small sip from the skin, as he knew nothing much was going to stay in his stomach for long.

Jason tightened the shield on his left arm, taking his sword in his right and turned to face the task of reaping what he had just sown. He ran over to where the first beetle-like monsters were struggling and growing out of the soil, and started hacking them to bits.

Far faster than he could hack them to bits, four acres of teeth sprouted into four acres of armoured man-monsters. Before he had tirelessly destroyed even five of them, the entire four acres were filled with equally tireless, relentless armoured troops, each monster/soldier soon standing at least as high as Jason himself. He now had an entire army of creatures to kill, all by himself. He was tireless, but if they chopped him down, he would still die. And there was one of him and thousands of them.

He remembered what Medea had told him of what she knew of these creatures, from watching her father and his men deal with them. He had asked some very specific questions about the magical creatures. They were shockingly fast, tireless and strong, but they had no brains to speak of, nor were they terribly coordinated. They were killing machines drawn to noise and motion. Fast weapon arms, but slow on their feet. Did not make any attempt to shield, block or protect themselves from attack. They did not work together, but rather, each one homed in on what it took to be an enemy, and attacked it. It was the noise and motion that drew them in. Fighting them made them fight you.

So first Jason stopped moving and was completely silent, and after quite a bit of aimless hacking and slashing, eventually almost all of the eerie soldiers stood more or less as still as he was. They almost looked uncertain, some of them turning their heads this way and that, looking about to discover him at any moment. If he moved at all, they would be on him in a moment.

Jason then stuck his sword in the ground and when the entire field lurched forward toward him, picked up a rock and threw it into the middle of the four acres. Like machines, all the dragon's tooth soldiers standing around where the rock landed lashed out with their axes and swords. Mostly they hit each other with huge clashing sounds. They were making more noise and moving around more than Jason was, so he heaved another rock. The same thing happened. Tiers of magical troops mowed each other down with their swords.

Once Jason had heaved three rocks into the middle of the soldiers in different corners of those four acres, an outlandish battle had broken out across the whole field. One that didn't in any way involve him. Slashing, stabbing and hacking blindly and fiercely, the creatures began demolishing each other in their mania to find Jason. The more noise they made, and the more

they moved, the more his silent stillness hid him from them. The metallic smashing was deafening as the creatures voicelessly, expressionlessly roughly dismantled each other.

Jason stood very still in one corner of the field, and only had the battle spill over into his area a few times. Each time, he fought down the urge to raise his sword and start fighting, and instead, just quietly threw another rock past the fighting soldiers. This drew the fighting farther away from him again each time.

Eventually, scattered across the four acres, only a handful of monster warriors remained more or less intact, and Jason pulled his sword from the soil, and engaged them one at a time, fighting like a man chopping down trees and driving it into firewood. All he had to do was dismember each one before the next one made its way across the field of wreckage to him. This took a bit of fast work with the last four.

While he was engaging the very last one, Jason slipped on a severed limb and sustained a nasty but not fatal slash across his calf. If he'd not been in the middle of a fall, and hadn't partially blocked the blow, he'd have lost his leg at the knee. He got up and took the creature's head off, and then all four limbs. (The dragon's teeth soldiers continued fighting even if their heads were cut off.)

Eventually all was silent. The deadly crop had been harvested.

Jason limped, bleeding from his right leg, to King Aetes, the crowd cheering deafeningly. Medea hugged him, and Jason stood facing the King.

"I have done as you asked, your grace" Jason told him.

"It seems to me you had a bit of help," the King told him, glaring at his daughter. "You have played falsely. We will speak about this on the morrow." And the King took to his chariot and rode back to his palace, his face stormy under the cloudless sky.

A chill wind came in from the sea.

The Golden Fleece

Jason spent the night aboard the *Argo*, and went and presented himself to Aetes the King of Colchis the next morning, early.

He had sailed the *Argo* through hardships, magical and mundane, and he had managed to complete the task King Aetes had set for him, hitching the giant fire-breathing oxen with the brass hooves to his iron plough, ploughing four acres of land on the Plain of Ares with them, sowing the teeth of King Aetes' dragon in the furrows, and then destroying the monstrous warriors that sprang from them.

He would never have been able to do it without the magical potion King Aetes' daughter Medea, priestess of Hecate, had prepared for him.

Aetes made Jason wait for a long time. When he swept into the throne room and summoned Jason, he was brief and curt. "I know that Medea is behind your success," the king said. "I told you that if you ploughed my field, sowed my seeds and reaped my crop, that you could take the Golden Fleece. And I will not go back on my word. You may keep the Golden Fleece if you can *take* it. It is in the oak tree in the garden behind the palace. Help yourself and be gone."

Jason looked at the king levelly, and then went to the *Argo* to bring Telamon and Peleus with him. This sounded too easy.



It turned out that it was. As Jason approached the *Argo*, Medea came out of the trees and taking him by the front of his tunic, pulled him into the pines and kissed him hard. "There are things you need to know," she said quietly into his ear.

When Phryxius had sacrificed the magic golden ram to Zeus, hoping to get divine blessing on his marriage to King Aetes' daughter Chalciope, he had skinned it and had hung the ram's magical golden fleece in an oak tree in the King's garden. And then the god Hephaestus had made Aetes' the khalkotauroi, the two giant oxen with brass hooves and throats. They had guarded the garden, keeping would-be thieves out with their fiery breath.

But then one young adventurer had very nearly made off with the Golden Fleece. What he'd done was wait until the oxen fell asleep at night, and then he'd made his way in, seized the Fleece, and almost got out with it before the palace guards caught him and killed him on the spot.

So what Medea's father King Aetes had then done was to set a new creature to guard the oak tree with the Golden Fleece in it. It was a dragon. In addition to the dragon breathing fire that was too hot for any potion or magic to counteract, there were two other interesting things about it.

Firstly, it could shed its teeth into the soil, causing armed monster soldiers to spring up, one for each tooth, while the dragon regrew the shed teeth almost instantly.

Secondly, it never slept. Ever. This last trait was very unusual for dragons, which famously do a great deal of sleeping.

“So you can’t make me immune to its fire?” Jason asked. He’d done just fine with the fire snorted out by the khalkotauri, thanks to Medea’s magic potion.

“Dragonfire is hotter than any fire there is,” Medea explained. “The breath of the khalkotauri is hot, but it is not dragonfire. Dragonfire is beyond my ability.”

“And the dragon *never* sleeps?” Jason clarified.

“Not normally. It never has in the seven years we’ve had it guarding the oak. But I have an idea about that. If you take me with you and make me your wife when you flee Colchis, I will help you,” Medea told him.

Jason agreed, just as quickly as he had agreed to marry Hypsipyle earlier that year.

Medea did not go back to the palace that day. She was avoiding her father, who she was certain would have her killed on sight for helping Jason with the khalkotauri. Even so, she had some specially grown leaves she wanted to prepare and try out. She told Jason she would meet him at the *Argo* after dark.



The sun had set and it had grown well and truly dark by the time Medea came out of the pines and approached the *Argo*. Dark clouds hid the stars and a stiff wind blew them along and hissed through the pines. Jason came quietly down the gangplank onto the docks, and met her at the bottom, taking her in his arms and kissing her passionately when he reached her.

Leaving Telamon and Peleus aboard the *Argo*, Jason let Medea lead him through the darkness to the King’s garden by a very indirect, but secret route. There were guards around, but with Medea’s help, Jason got into the garden without being seen.

Medea gave Jason one more kiss and then they headed off deeper into the garden, sticking close to the hedges which bordered it. Eventually they approached the oak, which Medea had of course seen many times before.

It was a thick oak with broad, spreading branches. And hung upon it was the Golden Fleece of the magic ram upon which Phryxius and Hellen had flown. It shone like molten gold in the darkness, just barely illuminating the sinuous coils of the dragon which lay vigilant among its roots. The dragon’s eye glittered as it turned its head to look at the two of them.

“I’ve fed it before,” Medea whispered. “Mostly when I was a girl. It’s been a while, so I hope this works.” She took a small leathern sack from the front of her dress and pulled on some gloves. They looked like ordinary leather, but Jason could tell they’d been treated with mysterious potions to make it safe for Medea to handle what was in the sack. Looking more closely revealed that the little sack had been similarly treated.

From the sack Medea took some folded, broad, flat leaves, handling them very carefully. These leaves had an odd, pungent smell coming off them, and in addition to being very odd, rare leaves to begin with, had been soaked in various potions as well. Medea compressed the leaves into a ball and tossed that to the dragon.

The dragon started for a moment, and flame began to glow inside its massive maw, as it prepared to shed teeth into the ground so that an army would spring up. While the army sprang up, it would then breathe dragonfire on Jason and Medea if they approached the oak.

But now the dragon paused. It began to sniff at the ball of specially prepared leaves, making snorting and whuffling sounds. After a bit, it snapped the leaf ball into its maw and swallowed it without chewing. It lay its head upon its forelegs, satisfied. Medea muttered some words of a spell to herself, making intricate hand gestures. Then she crouched, looking intently at the dragon across the courtyard from them.

“Half of the preparation involved making the leaves tasty for the dragon,” Medea then explained while they waited to see if the mixture would have an effect. “The other half was soaking them in unguents and tinctures designed to fortify their effect. The spell I just said will help things along.”

Jason and Medea stood beside the row of hedges, hearing the distant voices of palace guards changing shifts. The stars were out in full force, spread across the sky. There was no moon. And soon clouds began to cover the stars.

The dragon then opened its mouth wide, twice. At first, Medea and Jason braced to run, but on the third opening of its vast, glowing maw, the dragon yawned.

“This preparation, even in the smallest dose, would kill almost any creature imaginable,” Medea whispered. “If the gods smile on us, it will manage to put the dragon to sleep for a brief time. It will recover soon.”

Jason wanted to wait until the dragon, who had lain his huge head upon his taloned forepaws by this point, was deeply asleep, but Medea warned him that they had no way of knowing how long the leaves would keep the dragon asleep. Dragons have amazing recuperative powers.

So once the dragon seemed to be lying completely limp, stretched out across the grounds, Jason made his way right up to it, and touched the dragon’s foreleg to make sure it was truly asleep. The dragon stirred but did not open its huge eyes, so Jason stepped over the dragon’s tail and seized the glowing Golden Fleece from where it hung among the branches of the oak tree.

He came back over to stand by Medea and rolled the Fleece up, wondering at its deep reddish-gold liquid glow. He stuffed it into a thick grain sack he’d brought for this purpose. The Fleece shone through the grain sack somewhat, but its glow was dampened at least.

“It’s so lovely,” Medea said, stealing a glance inside the sack, unable to look away. She was as delighted as a young girl who’s caught moonbeams in the folds of her party dress.

“Back to the *Argo*,” Jason murmured to Medea, kissing her, taking the sack from her and folding it under his arm. He and the young sorceress began to retrace their steps to the ship.

Once past the palace area and starting to head into the woods, Jason and Medea came upon a palace guard relieving himself beside the path.

Jason got ready to fight or run, when he realized that Medea was gone from his side. He couldn’t see her anywhere. Had she betrayed him? Was she able to turn invisible at will?

“Who goes there?” the guard asked irritably, adjusting his robes and turning to face Jason.

“Nobody,” Jason said, not knowing what else to say, and not wanting to admit who he was in the darkness. (Odysseus had once said something very similar when asked who he was.)

“Let’s have none of that,” the guard began and had taken two steps toward Jason when Medea abruptly stepped out of hiding from beside the path, unfolded her hands from her voluminous sleeves, grabbed the guard by the back of his head and cut his throat from ear to ear with a long knife. The movement looked practiced and was done without thought. The guard pitched over onto the ground with a quiet gurgle. Medea wiped her knife clean on the fallen guard’s tunic and it disappeared back into her sleeves.

Jason stood rooted to the spot as the guard quietly bled out on the ground.

“Well, come *on!*” the sorceress urged Jason.



Once back aboard ship, Jason roused the crew, and under cover of the cloudy moonless night, they untied the *Argo*, set the sails, and left Colchis, first paddling, then catching some wind and going as fast as the North wind could take them.

“We’re bringing that *τρελή σκύλα?*” Idas asked, grumpily as usual, when he saw Medea standing on the deck, wind tossing her dark dress and hair.

“Be quiet,” Jason told him. “That’s my soon-to-be wife you’re talking about.”

“Well, *σκατά.*” Idas spat over the side and went to refill his wineskin.

Sea Pursuit

Three days in, and the pursuit continued. The *Argo* (whose name means “fast” in Greek) had been running full out for three days. As fast as the *Argo* was, King Aetes, furious over the loss of the magical Golden Fleece, had despatched his son Absyrtus, and two entire fleets of incredibly fast ships.

The *Argo* was a fast ship filled with heroes, but now it was pursued by two whole Colchian fleets, each of which had so many ships it looked like clouds of birds were following the *Argo*.

King Aetes told Absyrtus that if he didn’t bring back the Fleece, Absyrtus’ half-sister Medea, and Jason’s head, he was not to come back at all, on pain of death.

Jason told Ancaeus, wrapped tightly against a chill wind in his black bearskin, to take the fleeing *Argo* up the Ister (also called the Danube) river, to try to confuse their pursuers. Ancaeus did this. One Colchian fleet followed them into the Ister. The other, Telamon told Jason, was most likely trying to head them off by looping around through the Propontis.

Soon the pursuing ships came into arrow range. At first, only Philoctetes was hawk-eyed enough and had a strong enough bow to have any hope of landing arrows in the approaching ships. He sighted carefully and slowly, and sent arrows out of the sight of regular folk, and grunted with satisfaction if he saw a Colchian fall over, arrow through an eye or neck.

Before long, the fleet that followed them had drawn close enough that Atalanta and some other Argonauts could help out, and arrows started hissing past one another in both directions.

Jason stood in the bow and shouted instructions back to Anacaeus. He was keeping his eyes open for the first sign of the second fleet blocking their escape. To try to confuse the second Colchian fleet, Jason had Ancaeus bear east into the Sea of Chronus, instead of continuing on down the Ister.

The *Argo's* best bowmen were Philocetes, Atalanta and Telamon, so they took up the best archery positions at the stern of the ship behind Ancaeus, and tried to hit the tiny figures of men on the pursuing Colchian ships. As the range continued to decrease, the three Argonaut bowmen brought down soldier after soldier, but still the fleet behind gained on them. They suspected that around the next bend in the river they'd encounter the lead ships of the second fleet, sent to head them off and trap them between the two fleets.

Soon the flagship of the Colchian fleet was coming up so close behind them that it looked like they were going to try to ram the *Argo*.

Tragedy struck suddenly. A figure ran to the bow of the flagship and hurled a javelin with all his might. The javelin arched through the air and into the *Argo*, ending up sticking three feet out Atalanta's back.

Atalanta gasped weakly and fell to the deck in an awkward sideways heap, sweat matting her curly brown hair, dark eyes filled with pain and shock. The javelin had gone through just under her ribcage. She lay on the deck bleeding out, and Euphemus knelt by her, crying openly, holding tightly to her limp hand. "Atalanta! I don't know what I'll do if you pass away..." he gasped out.

Peleus knelt behind them with a shield to catch any stray arrows that might land where they were.

"Euphemus..." Atalanta managed to whisper. "We never... But I always..."

Suddenly Medea was at Euphemus' side, dark robes and hair tossing in the sea breeze, heedless of the arrows that whipped back and forth through the air. Kneeling, she shoved Euphemus out of the way and grabbed Atalanta's shoulder. Medea's eyes rolled back in her head as she yanked the javelin all the way through Atalanta's abdomen and threw it over the side, abruptly worsening the bleeding.

She tore open Atalanta's tunic to expose the wound area. Then she sprinkled something from her sleeves all around Atalanta and began chanting in a low, guttural tone. Her eyelids fluttered and only the whites of her eyes could be seen as her arms traced intricate patterns around the wounded Argonette. Medea's chanting grew louder as arrows and javelins landed all around them. Two arrows embedded themselves in Peleus' shield, one right after the other. Peleus swore and ducked lower behind it.

Eventually the magic started to work. Atalanta's bleeding stopped and colour started to return to her cheeks slightly. She seemed to be in a deep sleep. The tunic remained torn and soaked with blood, but the wound in her body healed in front of their eyes. Eventually, only a fine white scar remained.

"Get her below!" Medea shouted at Euphemus and Peleus, coming out of the trance she'd put herself into. "She must sleep for days now, to heal fully."

“Yes. Get her...below,” Jason echoed absently, still looking ahead of them up the river. He was still scanning for signs of the second Colchian fleet.

As Euphemus and Peleus carried Atalanta belowdecks, iron grapples from the Colchian flagship behind them clanged onto the deck of the *Argo*, and the men on the Colchian ship pulled the ropes tied to the hooks taut, until the Colchian flagship and the *Argo* were lashed together.

The Colchian flagship dropped anchors and brought both ships to an eventual stop. The lead ships of the first Colchian fleet caught up and took up position behind the *Argo*, bowmen on every ship drawing arrows back to their earlobes.

A lean, dark figure, imposingly tall, leaped the gap between the ships and made his way to the rear of the *Argo*. He has straight black hair, a small trimmed beard, and dark, empty eyes. His vivid blue robes, hemmed in gold, fluttered in the stiff North wind that had not quite been able to drive the *Argo* out of Absyrtus’ reach.

“Jason! Give me the Fleece. You are coming back with us,” Absyrtus said, his tones level.

Jason stood in the bow without moving, and Absyrtus walked up to him. The two men stood, looking warily at each other.

“This Fleece is going back to Thessaly,” Jason said.

“It’s useless, Jason of Thessaly. You have been wily and brave, but this is over,” Absyrtus told him, almost kindly. “My men and I are sworn to not return to Colchis without bringing the Golden Fleece, my half-sister Medea, and your head. If you come with me now, I will return you to my father Aetes with your head still sitting right where it should be. Perhaps he will let you live. He loves to collect oddities, and you are rapidly becoming one.”

Jason’s mind was racing at this point, though his face remained calm. He saw no sign of the second fleet yet. Was it coming at all? Was their escape route blocked, or had the second fleet gotten lost in the river mouths?

Absurdly, he noticed that Absyrtus had continued talking and that he’d zoned out. “Where is my half-sister? Where is the Golden Fleece?” the man asked Jason calmly, his eyes intense but empty.

“I am here, brother,” said Medea, walking to his side, the sack holding the Golden Fleece in her hands. She smiled warmly at Absyrtus.

Jason felt his heart drop into his feet. It looked like Idas had been right about Medea after all.

“Now the Fleece will return to the oak in our palace courtyard. Look at how lovely it is. Look how it glows,” said Medea, taking the Golden Fleece from the grain sack and placing it into her half-brother’s arms, then stepping back from him, hands in her huge sleeves.

Absyrtus was still holding the Fleece and looking at its molten gold glow when Medea cut his throat from ear to ear and shoved him over the side of the ship. Jason grabbed the Golden Fleece and held onto it as Absyrtus fell into the sea and was gone.

A wail of dismay went up from the Colchian flagship as Peleus and Telamon’s short swords slashed through the ropes that bound the two ships together, and the *Argo* pulled away in a hail of arrows, heading as quick as the North wind across the sea of Chronus.

Jason and the Argonauts: Bringing Back the Fleece

The Anger of a God

The Argonauts had grown desperate. At first things had gone well. Without their leader Absyrtis, the first Colchian fleet pursuing the *Argo* had dispersed, afraid to return to Aetes without the Fleece. And the Argonauts had seen no sign of the second Colchian fleet. Perhaps it had gotten lost.

But there are consequences for blood murder. Because Medea had killed her own half-brother, she had drawn down the anger of Zeus, king of the gods, and now Zeus had set his face to disrupt the Argonauts' attempts to return to Thessaly with the Golden Fleece, and to make certain they never put Jason on the throne.

Once the sea had been the friend of the *Argo* and her crew, the sea god Poseidon being fond of his son the Argonaut Euphemus. Once Boreas the North wind had been her friend too, with his sons Zethes and Calais aboard as well.

But everything had changed now. Zeus was far more powerful than either Poseidon or Boreas, and even Zeus' wife Hera was now afraid to help them in any clear way, so long as Zeus was having a thunderous tantrum.

And the sea storms that season were unprecedented. The ocean currents swept the *Argo* off course and tried to wreck her on the rocks. The winds never seemed to blow the way the Argonauts needed them to, and from time to time they did not blow at all. Jason could not see the stars at night, nor the sun to navigate with by day, as the clouds were dark and thick, even when the wind left them.

Often the *Argo* sat for weeks, becalmed in a still sea under a slate grey sky with not the slightest hint of a breeze. Then suddenly there would be a violent storm and Zeus would really express his anger. When Zeus was angry, lightning bolts lit up the sky. Deafening thunder rolled and pealed across the waves and shattered into echoes upon the rocky cliffs of the shore. Unexpected ocean currents continually tried to pull them into those cliffs and dash the *Argo* to pieces.

After months of being pulled off course by ocean currents and Olympian storms, no one on board the *Argo* had a clue where they were now. They were in a sea no one had ever laid eyes on.

Eventually, short of food and water and desperate to be off the ship for a bit, Jason had Aceunus steer the *Argo* toward a large island and drop anchor. Aceunus and Euphemus, who'd been at the helm, were happiest of all to take a rest from fighting the winds and the currents.

The island was a peaceful, beautiful place, and they needed a rest. The Argonauts explored the beaches, gathering exotic fruit and refilling their water stores from a freshwater stream that came out onto one of the beaches. Euphemus and Atalanta walked along the beach, the healing Argonaut leaning on her friend when her wound pained her. Medea went in search of what herbs could be found on the island. The only unusual thing was that the island was full of a huge number of animals. Pigs in particular.

"How did so many farm pigs get to an isolated island like this?" Orpheus wondered.

"No clue," Calais answered him.

“Probably from a shipwreck. Other than that, I don’t *want* to know,” Idas said, sitting on a rock and spitting between his teeth and he carved the core out of an apple.

“I wonder if there are any *women* on this island...” Butes mused aloud.

Idas gave him a disgusted look.

Jason left Medea and wandered off into the woods, restless. He had to think about what to do about the wrath of Zeus. It was behind a small grove that he met a woman. She was strikingly beautiful, and tall, with sea-green eyes and shining brown hair so long it looked like a cape. She wore form-fitting velvety robes of brilliant sky blue with gold jewelry. She looked and dressed remarkably like the sorceress Medea and there was also something similar in how she carried herself.

“Welcome,” the woman said. Her voice was gentle and smoky. “You must be relieved to rest, having battled these unseasonable storms for so long. I don’t know how you made it here safely.”

Jason couldn’t look away from her eyes. “We are completely exhausted. I hope you don’t mind if my crew do a bit of hunting on your island?” he began.

“You may kill and eat anything you wish,” the woman said, her eyes hypnotic and her voice soothing. “But please, come and eat with me at *my* table tonight. I would like to get to know you better. Bring as many crewmen as you like. It has been all too long since I had any human beings to talk to on this isle.”

“I am Jason of Thessaly, son of Aeson,” Jason told her, hoping they were far enough from Colchis for her to have any connection to or stake in, the little matter of the Golden Fleece he and Medea had stolen from her father the king’s palace garden. “I came aboard the *Argo*, and our crew is fifty men and women.”

“And I am Circe of Aeaea,” the woman told him. “And this is my domain, this island.”

Jason wondered why the island’s name didn’t have any consonants in it. “I’d be happy to join you at table,” he told her. “And I know some of my crew would be delighted to come as well.” And he went down the path after her, amazed at her elegance and grace. The way she sauntered ahead of him was mesmerizing.



Circe’s dining hall, carved into the rock the lay beyond the woods, was large, but it wasn’t large enough to accommodate all fifty Argonauts, of course. Jason took Castor and Pollox, Zethes and Calais, Telamon and Peleus, Euphemus, Philoctetes, Orpheus and the still recovering Atalanta with him.

Medea was off deep in the woods somewhere gathering herbs, and Idas promised to send her their way once she returned. Idas turned down the invitation to attend. “There’s something off about that *αγελάδα*,” he told them.

Jason did not invite Butes, as one never knew what Butes might say to women.

Circe’s food was excellent. The wine, the beer, the meat, the bread with butter and honey, the cow’s milk, the goat’s cheese; all of it. The Argonauts were stuffing themselves like the pigs

that wandered the island, laughing and enjoying themselves, when Medea walked in with a very odd look on her face.

“Aunt?” she asked their hostess. “Can it be?”

“Medea!” shouted Circe, getting to her feet. “It’s been so long!”

And then it was time for explanations. Jason and Medea explained how they’d taken King Aetes’ Golden Fleece, and how Aetes had sent Absyrtus to kill Jason and bring the Fleece and Medea back to Colchis. They explained how Medea had, in killing her half-brother, incurred the wrath of Zeus, and now they could barely navigate or sail the *Argo* anywhere at all.

“The wrath of Zeus is a difficult thing,” Circe told them. “You must be purified or you will never escape this. Please let me help you.”

Jason and Medea agreed. For the evening, however, it was party time. Food was taken out to the *Argo*, and Orpheus serenaded everyone with his lyre. Circe cautioned everyone to stay either aboard the *Argo*, or inside her house, as the many animals that roamed the island could be quite fierce. “Some of them aren’t quite natural,” she told them.

Circe explained to Jason, much to his astonishment, that she was King Aetes’ sister, and therefore Medea’s aunt. Jason could tell from how she spoke that Circe was not fond of Aetes. He wondered what Circe might do if she disliked someone.

Then Circe began to ask Medea quite a few very technical questions about Medea’s magic. Jason could figure out that Circe was a sorceress at least as powerful as Medea, if not more so, though with very different skills.

They talked for a long time about potions and transformations, the pronunciation of power words from arcane languages, poisons and ointments, and the role of the moon and the stars in making it all happen. “Skyclad” this and “moon’s blood” that. Skrying stones and hands of glory. The conversation went on for quite a while, and eventually Jason just went over and listened to Orpheus’ playing. He wasn’t following much of it.



And so it was that when it was morning Jason and Medea had slaughtered and sacrificed an ox that was wandering the isle of Aea, had prayed to Zeus, saying they now saw the wrongness of what they had done in killing Medea’s half-brother, would never act in that way again, and had ritualistically bathed in a special bath Circe prepared for them. Circe had presided over the whole ceremony, saying holy words over it.

“Woman’s a witch, not a γαμημένος priest” Idas had growled. But by the time the ceremony was over, everyone noted the sun coming out from behind the clouds for the first time in weeks. Circe was, after all, the daughter of Helios the sun.

The Argonaut Butes seemed quite smitten with Circe. He never took his eyes from her, though she spared him not a glance. When she walked, he found a way to follow her.

When she was done the ritual, Circe told them they were now purified of the wrongful action, and she blessed them and wished them better fortune while voyaging. “I have no idea if

you will ever claim the throne of Iolcus in Thessaly, now that you have angered Zeus,” Circe told them. “But maybe now at least you can get back to Greece safe and sound.”

“We will get back,” Jason said. “I will take Medea as my wife, and I will take the throne. In our voyage, we have already done harder things than that.”

“Well,” Circe told them, “Hera surely *does* hate your uncle King Pelias of Iolcus. She has hated him ever since he killed frail Sidero, even though she was hiding from him in a temple raised in Hera’s honour. Pelias slaughtered the old woman right on the altar of the temple. Hera would much prefer you be king in his stead, or certainly that you kill your uncle somehow. And with my niece at your side, his days are surely numbered. Either way, I’m sure Hera planned this union and has a vested interest in your success.”

“I hope so,” Jason said.

Then Circe told them of Scylla and Charybdis, two sea monsters that guarded the most logical course for the *Argo* to take in order to get back home. “You certainly don’t want to meet them,” she said. “They will tear your ship to pieces. Scylla has four eyes and six long necks with a horrible head on the end of each one. Each head has not two, but three rows of sharp teeth in its mouth.

And get this: Scylla’s body is nothing more than twelve tentacle-like legs and what actually looks rather like a bristly-haired cat’s tail, while four to six growths that look like dog-heads ring her waist. And Charybdis is the *ugly* one.”

“You sure know a lot about Scylla, and exactly what she’s like...” Jason began.

Medea nudged him to silence.

“Scylla used to be a beautiful woman, loved by the sea divinity Glaucus,” Circe told them. “Used to be. She’s not so beautiful *now*.” The sorceress laughed. “Poor dear is *so* upset over her present form that she rages and wails and destroys all ships that sail past. With Charybdis’ help, she’s nearly unstoppable. Hercules killed her once, you know, and her father, the sea god Phorcys used magic flames to restore her to life. That has only made her more angry.”

“A γαμημένος sea god uses magic *flames*, and they resurrect rather than kill?” Idas muttered. But not loudly enough for Circe to hear.

“Hercules? Have you seen him?” Jason asked, Telamon and Peleus leaning in to hear Circe’s answer.

“That one? Not for years,” Circe told them. “Anyway, if you try to sail the way you’re planning on going, you’ll end up having to sail between Scylla and Charybdis. If you try to sail a safe distance from the one, you end up running into the other.”

“Really?” Jason asked.

“Inevitably,” Circe affirmed. “You do *not* want to find yourself between Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla’s tentacled necks allow her heads to come up out of the sea and pluck unwary sailors right off the decks of their ships, screaming. She pulls them underwater and eats them. And then she tears the ship to pieces.

Charybdis is also not as pretty as she once was. Now she’s an enormous bladder with flippers, and all day long she sucks in and then belches out sea water so aggressively that it

creates whirlpools and eddies and tides which wreck passing ships and push them within reach of Scylla. You need to try a different route. Take it from me.”

And so, taking their leave of Circe, and now having located on their maps where the isle of Aea was located, the Argonauts sailed off under a relatively clear sky, with winds that seemed as gentle and friendly as before.

Jason noted that Medea had taken great care in counting every single Argonaut to make sure not a single one was left on the isle of Aea with Circe. He wondered why.



The sea nymph Thetis plays with her infant son Achilles at the water's edge. She teaches him the different sea shells, and hands him pebbles from the beach. And then a sudden implosion of light and before her stands the goddess Hera in all her grace and beauty.

“There is a ship,” Hera begins, “Which is making her way south down the coast. You and your sisters must ensure that she passes the Planctae safely.”

“The Wandering Rocks?” the glamorous sea nymph asks. “They are treacherous to ships indeed. Why is this ship so important?”

“All you need know is that the fate of this ship is important to me,” Hera answers, “And that your infant son's future wife and his father are both on board the Argo.”

“Peleus is on the Argo? It will be done,” Thetis says after a moment of thought, her right hand held protectively on her infant son's shoulder.

And Zeus' wife Hera disappears in a painfully bright glimmer of sunlight and explosion of doves flying up into the sky.

The child Achilles blinks, and then his gaze returns to the tide ebbing and flowing, lapping at his heels.

The Sirens' Song

Jason stood at the bow, looking at the horizon ahead of them. Aceunus was belowdecks, and Euphemus steered the *Argo* along the alternate route they had worked out after talking to the sorceress Circe. It would take weeks longer to go this way, but it would keep them out of the grip of the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis. The main downside to this route was that it wasn't terribly well charted. Ships seldom returned from it.

The only thing that was interfering with the quiet that Jason wanted to enjoy on deck, was that Butes, who fancied himself a ladies' man, wouldn't stop going on and on to Philoctetes and Peleus about the beauty of Circe. About how she was probably lonely on that island by herself with only the animals to talk to, and how he kind of wished he'd stayed behind to "comfort" her.

Medea came up from belowdecks, and overheard the laughter and conversation. Jason was afraid she'd be offended at how they were talking about her aunt, but instead, Medea burst out laughing and wouldn't tell anyone why. Butes also seemed to be a little more interested in Medea than Jason was quite comfortable with.

"Have you seen Euphemus?" Medea asked Jason.

"He's at the helm," Jason told her.

Medea went over to the helm and stood by Euphemus as he steered. "Sometimes I have visions," the sorceress told the son of Poseidon. "They don't always turn out the way one would imagine, and are often disjointed, but I ought to tell you what I saw."

Euphemus looked at her and said nothing, holding the wheel of the *Argo* steady. Euphemus often didn't say a lot.

"I had a vision last night which suggests that you will one day father an entire country. A country that will be called Libya." Medea looked at him very directly. "The vision was mysterious. It involved a clot of earth."

"I have a bridge in Athens I'm trying to sell," was all Euphemus said.

With that, Medea went below, leaving him to ponder her words.



The *Argo* was tied up at a harbour by the outlet of Lake Tritonis. Argonauts were getting on and off the ship on various errands, when Butes announced that a stranger stood at the bottom of the gangplank and was asking for Euphemus. Euphemus went down the gangplank to see what the man wanted.

The man smiled slowly. "My name is Eurypylos. Do you accept this sacred clod of earth?" The stranger held it out to Euphemus.

Euphemus took it. Hearing about the vision from Medea involving a clot of earth made him take the stranger more seriously than he otherwise would have. Some very strange people hang around the docks, after all.

"You wouldn't lie to me?" Euphemus asked the man. "You're not looking for money?"

"I have lied only about my name. And I did that only to hide my true nature so that we might speak freely," the stranger said.

“Who are you really?” Euphemus asked, slightly annoyed. He had his suspicions.

“I am Triton,” the man told him.

“Triton, as in my *half-brother* Triton, messenger of our father Poseidon?” Euphemus asked. “Triton who this very lake is named for?”

Triton shrugged. As he did, Euphemus could then see the trident his half-brother was carrying, and the fact that instead of legs, Triton’s lower body was a large, muscular tail with flukes. Triton had been using magic to hide his appearance so he could pass unnoticed among the regular human beings in the harbour, but there was no fooling his own half-brother.

“Anyway, here’s this sacred clot of earth,” Triton said. “Your descendants will live on it. Entrust it to the care of the Nereids until its time has come.”

“What?!” Euphemus asked. “I didn’t really get any of that. Are you sure you aren’t a couple of bananas short of a bunch?”

“That’s all I was told,” Triton said, allowing himself to fall off the edge of the dock into his lake, and disappearing beneath its waves after saluting Euphemus with his trident.

Euphemus was left holding the big clot of earth. It was about the size of his head. He was pretty sure it was magic, but he didn’t know anything beyond that.



The *Argo* was heading down the coastline again, on a humid, sultry day. Medea walked away from Butes, who had been asking her a barrage of questions about Circe. “Do you *hear* that?” she asked Jason.

Euphemus was at the helm again, while Aceunus was down below sleeping. Jason could hear nothing but the wind, the surf and the calls of gulls, and he said so.

Medea grabbed Orpheus by the shoulder as he was walking past and said “Stop. Can you hear that?”

Orpheus listened intently, and then said “I think I hear something, just at the edge of my ability to hear. But I don’t know what it is.”

Medea let him go and went below, brow furrowed. Aceunus came up on deck shortly after Medea had gone below, and replaced Euphemus at the helm. It was Euphemus’ turn to get some sleep.



He holds the clot of earth in his two hands. It gets larger and larger until he can barely hold it. His hands get wet and when he looks down at them, he sees that the clot is weeping warm milk. Soon his hands and forearms are dripping with it.

The clot grows, more and more, and by the time it is almost as large as he is, he finds he is holding in his arms a beautiful, smiling woman. She is unclothed and they begin kissing. Soon they are on the floor together.



Euphemus put on his tunic and came back up on deck, looking for Medea. He had to tell her his dream.

But Medea's thoughts were elsewhere. "Do you *hear* that?" she asked him.

Euphemus looked out at the orange-pink sky, at the sun setting, and tried to hear what Medea was talking about. He could almost hear...music. There *was* something.

"What *is* that?" he asked her.

"Something that sounds like magic," Medea said. "Something that isn't safe. Tell Orpheus to get his lyre."

But no one was listening to Medea. The *Argo* sailed into the channel. In the golden glow of the setting sun, everyone came up on deck and began to listen.

"I don't hear anything" Idas said. He was about to spit over the rail, but then he stopped. "Wait... what's *that*?"

The song, carried across the waves to them, didn't just touch their hearing. It spoke to their other senses as well. It felt like a warm, lingering caress on the cheek and hip. It looked like the orange-pink sunset it accompanied. It tasted of honey, cream and strawberries. And it smelled of orange blossom and sun-warmed skin.

"Do you *hear* that?! Where *are* they?" demanded Butes.

"I *see* them!" exclaimed Philoctetes, delighted. No one had eyes as sharp as Philoctetes did. "They're all sitting on a big rock there in the distance across the channel!"

"*Where*?!" Butes almost shouted at him.

"*What*...are sitting there" asked Medea very levelly, as if talking to a small child.

"Women! Beautiful, lovely, wonderful ladies!" Philoctetes answered, a distracted note in his voice.

"Are they *singing* ladies?" Medea asked levelly.

Philoctetes didn't answer, being too busy looking and listening. All the other male Argonauts were trying to get a glimpse too.

"Are they *naked* ladies?" Medea asked more firmly. "Who just happen to be sitting on some *very dangerous rocks*?"

No one was paying her any attention, apart from Atalanta, who looked at Medea, confused, then tried to see what exactly it was all the men were trying to see.

Medea sighed, then slapped Philoctetes, *hard*, right across the face. His intense eyes lost their thousand yard stare and focused on Medea for a moment, then he started to turn back to the source of the singing. Medea grabbed him by the cheeks and asked her questions again, looking deeply and piercingly into his eyes.

Philoctetes answered in a distracted tone "Yes, they're lovely, singing, naked ladies who just happen to be sitting on big dangerous rocks in the middle of the sea with no land around, and I'll bet they'd really like me if they met me; I'm quite nice, you know, and I'm funny and have a good beard and great abs, and so I think maybe..."

Medea let go of Philoctetes' face and grabbed Jason and Orpheus by their upper arms. "Those are *sirens*!" she told them. "Their magical song lures sailors to their deaths! They lure

ships in the wreck on the rocks! If you men listen to their song a moment longer, you will certainly throw yourself into the waves, trying to swim after them and be drowned in these treacherous waters.”

Jason didn't answer. Jason didn't hear her. He was as entranced by the sirens as the rest of the Argonauts.

“I could *walk* out to them,” Euphemus said in a distant voice. “In fact, I think I'll just...”

“Atalanta, grab Orpheus' lute!” Medea barked at the female Argonaut.

Shaking her head to clear it of the magical distraction, Atalanta went and got the instrument.

When Atalanta returned, Medea shoved the lute into Orpheus' hands. “You'd better be as good as they say, son of Morpheus... Your playing has to be more magical to this ship full of lonely heroes than the singing of a rock full of lusty, unclothed *sirens*. Play loudly and well.”

Distractedly, Orpheus struck a chord on the instrument, and once it rang out, he got drawn into the familiar movements of picking out a melody. He played more and more loudly, making it harder and harder to hear the sirens' singing over his notes.

Orpheus' music spoke of the Argonauts being lonely men, easily led astray by seductive magic. Of being far from home and missing loved ones who were waiting for them still. Of sailing on to see them. Of how nice it would be to soon see everyone again, back home. Of how better home would be than anything *here*.

At first no one listened, but then the competing music started to cause the Argonauts to turn toward Orpheus one by one. And Orpheus began composing words to a song on the spot, singing along with the lute to really get his message across:

*The sirens' song rings out 'cross ocean calm
To lonely men, whose hearts are open books
As fish to hooks, the Argonauts will leap
Unless their hearts enraptured I can keep*

*Lest you would drown, pray heed my hasty tune
Past them we sail, and best had leave them soon
Or we'll go down to chilly, darksome depths
So sail we on, to live and still draw breath*

To home! To home!

He kept going like that, as Euphemus and Aceunus between them just barely managed to steer the *Argo* past the deadly rocks that were all around them now. The urge to steer the *Argo* right into *and over* the rocks to somehow get to the sirens was nearly irresistible. The sirens had chosen a rock across the channel from them, which no ship could safely navigate to, and lay sunning themselves upon it in the last rays of the setting sun which made languid tangles of arms and legs seem kissed by gold.

“If you’ve got this,” Euphemus told Aceunus “I could just take a walk *over* to those ladies of easy virtue and give them the time of day...”

“Both hands on the wheel!” Aceunus told him, and focused his attention on Orpheus’ playing.

As the *Argo* sailed down the channel, they all caught a distant glimpse of the sirens lounging on the rock across it from them, but with Orpheus’ tune mostly drowning out the sirens’ song, the Argonauts were able to hold themselves back from leaping into the sea.

As they began to move out of range of the siren’s deadly song, Orpheus continued to play, and then a loud *splash* drew everyone’s attention. Orpheus had to keep playing, but the others looked over the side.

Butes had leaned too far out while trying desperately to catch a glimpse of the sirens in the fading light, and had fallen into the chilly sea. Instead of being pulled back aboard ship, he was now swimming *away* from the ship, and back to the rocks with the sirens on them. It was much too far for anyone to swim. And they couldn’t risk sending Euphemus after him.

“Butes! Get *back* here!” Jason called after him. “You lusty idiot!”

“No!” they could all just barely hear Butes shout.

“You’ll *drown*, you lunatic!” Medea shouted. “Fish will nibble the flesh from your moldering bones, while they lie in the chilly depths of this channel!”

“Don’t care!” they could hear in response.

“You always did think with your *πέος!*” Idas yelled after the enraptured Argonaut. “Get *back* here before you drown!”

“Butes!” Peleus shouted after him.

“ ”

And that was that. They dared not turn the *Argo* around after Butes and sail into the rocks. Now that they were sailing away from the sound of the siren song, they were starting to snap out of the trance, like men awaking from a dream. Even as they sailed a safe distance away, though, there was a wistful longing seen in everyone’s eyes.

Telamon went over to Orpheus and clapped him on the shoulder. “Now *that* is why the centaur Chiron said it was very important to bring you along...you saved our lives!” he said.

Orpheus played a last ringing note, looked at the rising moon and said nothing.

Idas took a pull from his wineskin and then spat over the edge where Butes had recently fallen.



The love goddess Aphrodite is sprawled across her luxuriant bed, wearing something gauzy and barely there. She looks lazily into Butes’ eyes, one of her own eyes hidden behind a curly, dangling lock of her flowing hair. She pats her bed with a tanned arm. There are no chairs in Aphrodite’s rooms. Only couches and beds.

Butes is soaking wet, and coughing. He has barely escaped drowning. He falls into the warm, yielding bed of the goddess of sensual delights. The goddess begins plucking at his wet clothing.

“I have been following your adventures aboard the Argo,” Aphrodite tells him, flinging his sodden tunic onto the floor. “I looked down and saw you hoisting sails in the sun when Cupid was at Colchis for me. So when I saw that you were drowning today, I sent some of my people to pull you out and bring you to Olympus. You are, by far, too beautiful and too lusty to die today. I thought we could... get to know each other.”

Butes cannot believe his ears. Or his luck.

The Wandering Rocks

Euphemus steered the *Argo* through another narrow part of the sea where the shoreline could be seen on both sides. The shore was close enough on both sides of the ship that if you wanted to, you could land an arrow on each bank without trying very hard. Low hanging trees leaned over the water on both sides. The waters were calm and deep and dark. There was a good wind, so the *Argo* had full sails up. She was moving along about as quickly as her name suggested, which was far faster than all but the very fastest sailing ships. A Colchian battleship might catch the *Argo*. No other vessel had a chance.



Beneath the surface of the waters, the Nereids congregate. Beautiful underwater women, they came from far away seas to carry out the goddess Hera's request, as made to the sea nymph Thetis. Unlike their cousins the sirens, the Nereids are often friendly to human beings. You never can tell, of course. They are playful and changeable, like the dolphins they swim with and tease in elaborate underwater games.

The Nereids gather, in ever greater numbers. Their hair streams around them like seaweed, floating in the tide, and their gowns float around them as well. Many of them wear jewelry. Gold and silver bejeweled relics sunk to the bottom of the sea in shipwrecks. They meet in their silvery underwater cave deep under the dark waters. They pray to Poseidon, god of the sea, to help them with their task. And he does.

Usually the size and shape of normal human women, the Nereids now put off their jewelry and gowns, gather divine oceanic power and begin to grow larger. Soon they are giant women, three times their usual size and growing larger still. Increasingly, they become transparent, and seem to be made of water. Water solidified into flesh. They reach their full size, and they wait. They are so watery now that they can barely be seen, but somehow they are more solid and powerful than ever. The power of a raging torrent resides in each one.

Only Thetis retains her original size and form. She has her own purposes.



Squinting in the noonday sun, Euphemus steered the *Argo* down the strait until Ancaeus relieved him. Then he sat and thought about the odd visit from his half-brother, Triton, messenger of their father Poseidon.

Triton had handed Euphemus a clot of earth the size of his head, and had simply told him “Your descendants will live on it. Entrust it to the care of the Nereids until its time has come.” And then he’d smashed below the surface of the waves and disappeared, with nothing any more helpful to add.

And Medea’s vision about Euphemus being the “father of an entire country” had been no less confusing. He and Atalanta were just friends, right?...What *was* it with prophecies always being confusing? What was the point of them? Euphemus sat and scowled, the clot of earth down below under his cot where he didn’t have to look at it.

Ancaeus piloted the *Argo* further down the strait, maintaining the high speed of which the *Argo* was capable in the good wind that lifted her along. Increasingly, there were outcroppings of rock around, and rocks sticking out of the water, but it looked like there was a safe channel down the middle of the strait, so Ancaeus was steering the *Argo* straight down that at speed.

The Argonauts had very nearly wrecked their ship and drowned two days before, when they'd sailed past the sensuous sirens, with their haunting singing. The sea was full, Euphemus knew, of creatures that could be very dangerous, mysterious, magical and beautiful.

So it was that when a lovely female form, lying in the sun on some rocks in a wet gown, called out to them, Jason had the crew take in the sails, slowing the *Argo* down nearly to a halt, and was about to tell Philoctetes to put an arrow through her throat before she could sing to them.

Euphemus leaped to his feet and grabbed Jason by the arm. "No! That's no siren," he told the captain of the *Argo*. "That's a sea nymph. A Nereid. Friendly. Probably."

Philoctetes lowered his bow, but kept the arrow nocked.

"How can you tell?" Jason asked the son of Poseidon.

"It's pretty easy if you've seen both," Euphemus told him, as they drew abreast of the rock where the Neriad waited. "There's no similarity, really." He cleared his throat and raised his voice a bit. "Which one are you, then?" Euphemus called over the side.

"I am Thetis," the Neriad called back.

At this point Telamon and Peleus came up from below, where they'd been tarring a leaky seam, and Peleus walked over to Jason's elbow. "I *know* her," Peleus told Jason quietly. "At least I did once. (Well, maybe a couple of times.)"

Thetis beamed when she saw Peleus, and gave him a languid wave of her hand. Peleus looked at his feet.

"What do you want with us?" Jason asked Thetis.

Thetis rose gracefully to her feet (for Neriads are just as agile on land as in the seas) and smoothed her gown over her thighs. She cast a lingering look upon Peleus, and then turned back to Jason. (Neriads do not marry, but they are known to frequent the company of human men, especially ones with some divine blood in their lineage.)

"Hear me, Jason, of the *Argo*. You have passed many dangers in the seas as you have travelled," Thetis began. "This strait, like many others, is cursed and has a magical danger that is surprisingly similar to the Clashing Rocks you have already safely passed."

Jason cast his eyes around, but could find nothing that even remotely resembled the Symplegades, the cliff walls which crushed ships to splinters as soon as they tried to pass between them. No Clashing Rocks could be found. All Jason could see were rocks sticking out of the water here and there, and it looked like a simple matter for Ancaeus to navigate a safe course through them, even at full speed.

"You cannot see them," Thetis explained. "But if you venture any farther into this strait, these rocks will shift and move around, chewing your ship and her crew to bits, just like a watery mouth full of moving stony teeth. The Wandering Rocks have claimed many a ship in these

waters. If you could wander for days deep below these waters as I and my sisters do, you would find many, many wrecked ships, many filled with precious cargo.”

“Seriously?” Jason asked. This was really too much. Who was it who went around cursing the sea and making rocks move and that sort of thing? He turned to Euphemus.

“I have heard tell of this,” Euphemus told him, thinking for a moment. “Through the grapevine. I don’t know where the Wandering Rocks *are*, but a little bird one told me there is such a thing. They could certainly close the book on us.”

“Hera instructed me to ensure that the *Argo* passed this strait undamaged by the Wandering Rocks,” Thetis told them. “My sisters will make sure that it is so.”

Her sisters? Jason wondered. *How?*

“Unfurl only a small sail,” Thetis told them. “Sail through. *Slowly.*”

Jason wondered if he was crazy to trust yet another beautiful female being who wasn’t quite human, then called out to Calais and Zethes to unfurl a sail, and they soon saw to the rigging. The *Argo* began to make her way down the strait.

As she did, suddenly an underwater force *shoved* the *Argo* sharply to port. Jason had to grab the rail to keep from losing his feet. Idas swore and grabbed a bit of rigging to keep his own feet. And they all saw a rock *move* past them. Like a whale swimming past. But for the underwater intervention, the rock would have smashed into the ship. And all around them, the Argonauts could see all of the rocks coming to life and beginning to move around, stirring up the channel.

Ancaeus steered as best he could, but in addition to this, forceful movements under the water corrected his piloting so that the *Argo* just barely missed being hit by each of the shifting rocks that passed them. It was a deeply unsettling experience. Ancaeus would have the *Argo* drifting slightly to port, and suddenly the ship would *swerve* to miss a rock.

If the Argonauts had had eyes to see what was going on under the water, they would have seen giant sea currents in the form of watery women, passing the *Argo* back and forth between them like a group of children playing with a ball. Their aim was to shift the ship away from every dangerous rock that tried to smash it.

It was slow going, and the unexpected swerving course was very unnerving, but eventually the *Argo* got past the Wandering Rocks with only a few slight scrapes on her hull from rocks that had passed a little bit too close for comfort. If Hera had not been on their side, they would have been chewed up and swallowed by the strait and its Wandering Rocks.

Once the waters stilled and they were past the rocks and heading into open waters, Thetis bobbed up from underneath the sea in front of them. “Go in peace, Argonauts,” she told them.

“One moment,” Euphemus called out to her, surprising everyone. Euphemus didn’t normally say much. But Euphemus, speaking over the side of the ship, explained to Thetis about the huge clot of earth his half-brother Triton had given him, the clot that Medea had said his descendents would “live upon,” whatever that meant. The clot of earth that Triton had been told to ask Euphemus to “entrust to the Neriads.”

“You’re Neriadae, so I thought I would ask you what you thought,” said Euphemus finally, Atalanta standing beside him. “Wouldn’t want to make you hot under the collar.

Thetis thought about what Euphemus had said. Neriads have moods which change like the tide, and there is no predicting whether they will respond to a request in the manner of a still sea, or more like a storm. Eventually Thetis said “Show me this clot of earth, son of Poseidon.”

Euphemus went below and got it. The *Argo* bobbed at rest in the open waters. Carrying it in front of him awkwardly, Euphemus walked across the deck and over to the side of the ship to hold it up and show it to Thetis. “I think it’s magical. I’m not sure how, or why or anything, but it seems enchanted to me,” he called down.

“I see what you mean,” Thetis told him, the water only coming up to her waist, though there was nothing to stand on. She started to move in closer for a better look, and Euphemus, trying to hold it out where she could see it better, lost his grip and dropped the huge clot of earth into the sea with a huge splash.

Everyone on board gasped (except for Idas, who swore) as the clot of earth *floated*, bobbing on the waves, and then began to *grow*. It grew so rapidly that a number of Argonauts had to run below, Castor and Pollox leading them, to poke oars out the oarlocks and paddle the *Argo* back out of the way, lest she ground herself on what was rapidly becoming an island.

It would be something if, instead of the *Argo* running into an island, an island ran into her, Jason thought to himself.

By the time the sun had begun to set, the clot had fully become a largish island. Eventually it seemed to have reached its full size and grass and trees had sprouted on it, leaving it lush and forested.

The sea nymph Thetis then stepped onto the island, sea water pouring off her and leaving her gown suddenly dry. Euphemus dropped over the side of the ship and walked across the water to her, and they explored the island a bit, together.

“Lovely place,” the sea nymph said.

“Apparently my descendants are going to live here,” Euphemus told her.

“Do you *have* any children, son of Poseidon?” Thetis asked Euphemus. Thetis had left her own child, Achilles, at play in a cove with some friendly mermen and sea maids. She was starting to miss the little fellow.

Euphemus had to admit that he did not.

Thetis looked at Euphemus thoughtfully and without blinking until Euphemus grew uncomfortable, cleared his throat and told her “Well, I’d best be getting back to the ship.”

And he walked across the waves, deep in his own thoughts, climbed back up into the ship, and went below to get something to eat as the *Argo* continued on her journey, leaving a few hauntingly beautiful notes from Orpheus’ lyre hanging in the air in her wake.

The Wedding

The *Argo* was tying up on another scorching day at a free dock in Drepane, off the western coast of Greece when the second Colchian fleet overtook them. The harbour filled with fast, armed Colchian ships. There was nowhere to run, as the *Argo's* route out of the harbour was entirely blocked by the fleet.

Before spears and arrows could start flying, a small ship, carrying an envoy of the king of Drepane was rowed out into the harbour. It stopped beside where the *Argo* was berthed, and a scroll was delivered. The message was very clear: Alcinous, the King of Drepane would mediate between the two warring sides, so long as they promised to maintain a truce while in Drepane.

Jason and the Argonauts agreed to this arrangement, and when the ship was rowed back from the flagship of the Colchian fleet, the news was that the Colchians had agreed as well.

Alcinous the King met with the Colchians and the Argonauts separately. The Colchians had a pretty strong claim. Jason had run off with not only the Golden Fleece that King Aetes of Colchia felt was his by right, but with Aetes' daughter, the sorceress Medea, as well. A guard lay dead in their wake, and also Medea's half-brother Absyrtus. The second Colchian fleet had the same orders as the first: return to King Aetes with the Golden Fleece, his daughter Medea (with whom he would no doubt deal harshly) and the head of Jason, son of Aeson.

Jason's claim was that Medea had come of her own free will, that the Golden Fleece had come from a ram originating in Thessaly anyway, and that after all, he had won the Golden Fleece fair and square. Jason had plowed with the fire-breathing, brass-hooved oxen, sowed the magical dragon's teeth, "reaped" the harvest of undead fighting creatures which sprang up from it, and had, finally, taken the Fleece from the king. Jason felt that the King was not only cruel and vengeful, but being entirely unfair.

Alcinous the King of Drepane had a real conundrum to solve. And the last thing he wanted was to enrage the King of Colchis, or a boat full of half-god heroes. He went into his private chambers and spoke to his wife about it that afternoon.



Philoctetes, Castor and Pollox stood on the deck of the *Argo*, looking suspiciously across the blindingly sun-lit water at the enormous Colchian fleet anchored there, blocking their way. There was no wind at all. Jason, Peleus and Telamon were over by the helm (which was empty, as they were at anchor) talking about the situation.

"Have we really got through so much, only to lose the Fleece (and Medea, of course) so close to home?" Peleus said, rhetorically.

Then Euphemus called quietly from beside the gangplank. Jason went over to him immediately. An envoy had been, and had left a note to Jason, telling him to meet in a clearing up a forest path leading away from the harbour. Jason took Peleus and Telamon with him, and went, suspecting a trap.

Idas had told them how stupid he thought they were being, to trust an anonymous note in this kind of situation. When they'd left anyway, he had drawn on his ever-present wineskin and said "But never mind. No sense listening to what an *μαλάκα* like me has to say..."

They'd ignored them, as one often had to do with Idas, and hoped he wasn't right. The trouble was, he often had a point.

Armed discreetly, Jason, Peleus and Telamon went into the clearing indicated in the note. Under the shadows of a grove of trees waited a cloaked woman, with a guard on either side of her. The guards had their swords sheathed, and though they looked ready to draw them, when Jason and the two brother Argonauts didn't draw theirs, they merely stood ready.

When Jason stepped into the shadows of the grove, the woman, drew her cloak back from her face and told them "I am Queen Arete, wife of wise Alcinous. My husband the king is very undecided as to which side to take in this situation. I am not so undecided. The whole thing hinges upon this: my husband is kind, and could not turn you over to the Colchian fleet if you two were married. He could not allow the Colchians to separate your head, Jason, from your body, and you, Medea, from your husband, if you were husband and wife. Now tell me, are you two married?"

Jason and Medea hesitated a moment too long before answering, and Arete said to them "Not yet, I see. My husband knows I have an eye for such things, and tomorrow, he will ask you if you are married, and he will ask me if you are telling the truth. And I will not lie to my husband, any more than he would allow the Colchians to separate husband from wife.

And with that, she wrapped her cloak more tightly around her face so she could move freely through the town, and left the grove.

"So, you ready to get hitched?" Peleus asked Jason.

"I should probably see if Medea has anything to say about the matter," Jason replied.



And so it was that Jason (with Telamon and Peleus, Castor and Pollox beside him) and Medea (with Atalanta beside her) stood in a cave Calais and Zethes had scouted out from the air, in a lagoon up the coast from the docks. They consecrated the cave to Hera, and by sunset were ready to begin the ceremony.

Jason wore his best white tunic, and had the spectacular Golden Fleece draped across his shoulders, while Medea wore a midnight blue gown, with a garland of white flowers in her hair. Atalanta wore a white gown, with dark blue flowers in her hair, to match.

Orpheus played a hauntingly beautiful song, and then Jason took a vow to Hera, goddess of, among many other things, marriage, to love Medea forever. And Medea, for her part, vowed the same.

Then the celebration was in full swing. A lot of wine was drunk. Orpheus played songs into the night, as the stars shone brilliantly, spread out like crushed diamonds across a black velvet sky. Everyone danced with everyone.

Idas held himself up by throwing an arm across Jason's shoulder and then breathed winey breath into his face and told him "I didn't think you would be a good cap'n, I didn't think you would *ever* get the Fleece, and I didn't think you'd ever settle down and marry a woman, and I have been wrong, wrong, wrong, *wrong*... about all of it. You're okay, you know that? Okay. And Medea? She's a nice girl. Maybe a bit, you know, evil and murderous and *hic* all that, bu' I see why you're into her, you know? Great στήθη." With that he walked off, stumbled over a rock, barely managing to keep his feet, and tried unsuccessfully to get Atalanta to dance with him.

Atalanta was dancing with Euphemus, who was none too pleased when Idas threw up beside the two of them, and then wiped his mouth, swore, spit and started pestering Atalanta for a dance again.

Finally, the Argonauts left the married couple to their first night alone together. In the sacred cave of Hera, the Argonauts had fashioned for them a bed, and Jason spread the Fleece over it as a bedspread that night.



Late the next morning, Jason and his new wife Medea made their way back to the ship in time to meet an envoy from the King. "Alcinous the King has made his decision," the envoy told them. They were to present themselves before him.

Jason and Medea, with Peleus and Telamon, Euphemus and Atalanta, made their way to the palace of Alcinous of Drepane. Their arms intertwined, hips bumping against each other's now and then as they walked closely together, there was no mistaking the bond between them.

The Argonauts were led into the throne room, where Alcinous and Arete his queen sat waiting.

"Your claim to the Fleece is as strong as that of the Colchians," Alcinous began. "The ram who wore it came from your country. You harnessed and plowed the field of Ares with the khalkotauroi. You sowed the teeth of the dragon. You reaped the deadly metallic crop that sprang up from your sowing. You took the Fleece from the Great Worm that guarded it with dragonfire.

"The only thing that bothers me is the taking of the King's daughter, Medea. I see that she is with you of her own free will. I could not possibly separate a husband from his wife and give you to the Colchians. Are you two indeed husband and wife? My wife, Queen Arete will know it if you lie."

"We are, oh King. And we are very happy," Jason told him, his arm around Medea's slender waist. He squeezed her a bit as he said this.

And the Queen rose from her throne and walked slowly over to them. First she looked them up and down from a slight distance, and then she stepped closer and looked first into Jason's eyes, and then Medea's. "I wasn't sure of their faithful, sacred bond when I looked into his eyes, but when I looked into hers, I saw that there could be no doubt. These two are as married as any newly married couple could be."

The king nodded to himself. He paused for a moment in thought, then said “Go, return to the *Argo*. I will inform the Colchians of my decision, and I will see that they abide by it. They must give you your leave, and vow not to pursue you any longer. They will head away from Greece, just as you will head toward it. If they do not, the kings of the several nearby kingdom cities will join me in expelling them from our waters.”

And so back to the *Argo* they went. They waited all afternoon, while the king spoke with the Colchians, who’d come ashore using a different dock at the other end of the harbour. And then, around suppertime, the Colchian ships started departing. At first one by one, and then in groups, they all sailed out of the harbour.



The goddess Hera stands in her chambers, deep in thought, holding a fluted glass of ambrosia. A gold band encircles her temples. Her radiant white robes swirl across the floor as she turns to speak to Athena, who is there with her, similarly dressed.

“I do not know about that one. He fell hard enough once Aphrodite did her work for us at the woman’s end of the match. Like a babe in the woods, really. But he fell for Hypsipyle just as quickly before, and he seems to have entirely forgotten about her, and their twin sons...”

“Men are like that sometimes,” Athena murmurs. “Especially when they are young.”

“I need him to take care of King Pelias, in Iolcus. But if he breaks his vow to his new wife, my wrath will know no bounds,” the wife of Zeus says firmly.

Talos the Brass Giant

They needed to get by the sunny island of Crete, given the route they were taking in making their way back home. This much was certain. But they weren't expecting what they saw as the *Argo* sailed closer to that island. How could they?

The closer they got to Crete, the more Medea seemed worried. She went belowdecks and fiddled in her things with herbs and small vials. She practiced odd chants. Jason was worried. She wouldn't tell him anything besides "Be careful when we sail past Crete."

The sorceress' nervousness spread to the other Argonauts. If the sorceress was worried, shouldn't they be worried, too? Castor and Pollox had to be separated by Peleus and Telamon, who then almost got into a fist fight themselves. Euphemus and Atalanta weren't speaking. Again. No one dared say a word to Ancaeus, from where he scowlingly steered the ship.

Only Idas seemed undaunted. He just sipped his wine, checked the ship for leaks, smirking slightly to himself. He seemed to find it funny when people were fighting. It's like other people being unhappy made him happier. Idas wasn't evil, but he was a weird guy.



Calais and Zethes were tumbling through the air like they did, right above the tip of the main mast of the ship. Eventually, they caught sight of Crete, pointing the island out to the keen-eyed archer Philoctetes, who showed it to Jason and Ancaeus as they drew closer.

"Try to steer as far away from that island as you can, as we go past," Medea muttered to Ancaeus, who growled back something no one could understand.

Zethes pointed out that there was a ship ahead of them, heading toward Crete too. Philoctetes said it looked like a warship, and that he could see men on board who were armed and unfriendly looking. *Good thing it's headed away from us*, Jason thought.

Jason had Ancaeus hold back, as the unknown ship ahead of them looked like it might be heading for trouble. If he had not given this order, the *Argo* would have soon pulled abreast of the other ship. There were very few ships which could keep up with the *Argo*.

Suddenly, everyone gasped. Everyone except Idas, who muttered "σκατά!" to himself. Something was coming into view, moving around the coastline of the island of Crete. It had been on the other side of the island, hidden from their view, and now it was approaching. At first they thought it was a ship, but it was too large. And too... man-shaped.

It was, in fact, a giant, metal man, striding around the island, clearly guarding it from just such people as the soldiers in the ship ahead of them. The metal creature was twice as tall as the tallest mast on the *Argo*. And he was throwing huge rocks. "χυδαία λέξιη!" Idas swore again, too startled even to spit over the side.

The worst thing about it all was that they were trapped. The winds and currents being what they were, and the current as well, they couldn't really turn around and just sail in the opposite direction. Not with any great speed. The giant would be on them before they'd gotten far. They would just have to brave it out and try to get past while the giant metal man was trying to smash the other ship with huge boulders.

Jason turned to look at Medea, who was white, with a thin, pinched look to her face. Her dark eyes were huge. “What exactly *is* that thing? What do you *know*, woman?” Jason demanded, irritated that Medea hadn’t been more open with them about what had been bothering her.

“I wasn’t sure if it was true. I’ve heard the stories, but everyone tells them. It seems that that is Talos, a bronze giant forged by the inventor Daedalus on behalf of Zeus, placed here to guard Crete,” she said.

“To guard Crete? Against what, exactly?” Telamon wanted to know.

“There is a woman there, one of fabled beauty,” Medea told them. “Her name is Europa. Zeus, the father of the gods, after fathering three sons with her after pretending to be a huge white bull in her father’s herds, placed her on Crete, where she married a king. The thing is, countries keep getting the idea of abducting beautiful queens or princesses, either to hold for ransom, or just to really take revenge upon city states they have a contention with. So Zeus gave Europa three magic items to protect her and his three sons. One of them was this bronze giant Talos. It is not only massive and made of metal, but intelligent as well. It knows what it’s doing. It will certainly perceive us as a threat.”

“Well, let’s try to sail past while he’s trying to smash that ship, then” Jason said.

“We can always try,” Telamon said.

Ancaeus did his best, calling out orders to Argonauts regarding the sails and rigging. They were in a tight fix.

But just as the *Argo* was ready to really put on a display of speed, Talos finally hit the other ship with a huge rock. It snapped the main mast right off the ship and tore a huge piece out of the side. A second rock smashed the ship almost in half and it began to sink. Heavily armoured soldiers fell screaming into the sea and sank instantly. The ones who managed to strip off their armour in time were trying to make it to shore. Talos was trying to stamp on them with his huge brass feet.

And then, Talos turned his gaze toward the *Argo*.

“Τώρα την γάμησα...” Idas swore to himself, his voice trailing off.

Medea stood stock still, staring up at the giant.

“Talos!” Jason called out to the giant metal man.

With the groan and creak of scraping metal, the giant stopped for a moment, a heavy rock in its two hands, and looked at them. Then it began to raise the rock to throw at them.

“We mean no harm!” Jason called again. “We just want to sail by. We’re not stopping in Crete.”

The metal giant paused for a moment. Then “IS THIS TRUE?” rang out metallically across the water to them, sounding like the largest of brass instruments. The massive rock Talos had been holding fell into the sea with a huge splash, forgotten for the moment.

“We mean no harm to Crete. We have no interest in Europa or her sons,” Jason called back.

“WHO ARE YOU? WHAT IS YOUR MISSION? YOUR SHIP LOOKS READY FOR BATTLE, AND YOUR MEN AS WELL,” the brassy voice rang out again, deafeningly.

“I am Jason, captain of the *Argo*, and these are the Argonauts, her crew. We sailed to Colchis and are bringing back the Golden Fleece to my uncle, King Pelias of Iolcus” Jason called, feeling a bit silly to be shouting so much. He didn’t know how long his voice was going to last.

“JUST YOU, AND THESE MEN?” the clarion voice of Talos rang out again.

“Yes. And Medea, the niece of Circe the sorceress, a sorceress in her own right, who helped us in taking the Golden Fleece, and in our other adventures,” Jason shouted at the top of his lungs.

“OF CIRCE I KNOW. OF MEDEA I DO NOT. BUT ONE THING IS CERTAIN: NO SHIP WITH A DANGEROUS SORCERESS IS GOING TO SAIL PAST CRETE” Talos grated, rust in his trumpeting voice.

“She means no harm...” Jason began.

“IF SHE MEANS NO HARM, SAIL CLOSER SO I CAN HAVE A LOOK AT HER,” Talos interrupted.

Medea stepped to the prow of the *Argo*, and Anceus steered the ship a bit closer to the giant, who towered above them, glinting in the noonday sun.

“You see? She is here, and she means you no harm,” Jason called out, not needing to shout as much, now that they were closer.

“I SEE. WHETHER SHE MEANS HARM OR NOT, I CANNOT TELL,” Talos boomed.

“So, mighty giant; you are the work of Daedalus the inventor?” Medea asked.

“I AM,” Talos replied, his voice even more deafening and metallic from this distance.

“I’ve read about you. No doubt his best work. He left that huge brass nail in the back of your left thigh, though,” Medea mused, looking up at the tower of a man whose waist began where the top mast of the *Argo* ended.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?” Talos asked her.

“It’s right there on the back of your leg near your knee. And the thing is, you have a nerve that runs from your heels to your brain. One single nerve. And that brass nail needs to come out, or it may work itself in deeper and paralyze you one day,” Medea called up to Talos. “Leave it in, and you may end up paralyzed, a giant statue guarding Crete. Take it out, and you will live forever.”

“DO YOU THINK DAEDALUS MADE ME TO BE AN IDIOT?” Talos’ voice rang out. “I THINK I WILL SMASH YOU ALL ANYWAY.” And Talos began to bend over to find another boulder to smash them with.

“Get rope!” Medea shouted at Telamon. “Now!” And then she began chanting in a dark, disturbing voice, using a language none of them knew. She used her fingers to paint odd, twisted patterns on the deck of the *Argo*, using an assortment of odd-smelling liquids from a number of vials she pulled from her robes, tossing some dried leaves and powder here and there as well. Then she raised her arms above her head and gave an extremely loud shout, and all of the

patterns she had drawn started to smoke on the deck, without burning the wood they were scrawled upon. A sharp, acrid reek rose with the smoke. And her chanting began again, at first quiet, and then louder. Medea's voice was suddenly very deep.

Talos laughed, then, and raised a truly enormous boulder above his head, far above them, silhouetted against the sky with seawater pouring off the rock, when the air above the *Argo* erupted with winged, screeching *things*.

The things seemed to be pouring upward out of the smoke Medea had raised. The screeching and wailing they made grew louder and louder. They were roughly speaking, human shaped and human sized. They seemed to be made of shredded black fabric, but they had white faces and hands with long, blackened nails on them. Their hair, long and black with shocks of white shot through it, streamed out behind them as they swirled in the air, black-lipped, wrinkled mouths agape and full of teeth that looked like sacks filled with broken glass.

They blotted out the sun, and then flew straight into Talos' face, howling like nothing any of the Argonauts had ever heard, nor hoped to hear again.

The rock Talos had been holding splashed down in the water, nearly overturning the *Argo*. A deafening roar of confusion, anger and panic rang out from the brassy throat.

"What in hades *are* those things?" Telamon demanded, staring upward with his mouth open, holding the coil of rope he'd been sent to bring the sorceress.

"They are called *keres*," she snapped. "Now give me that rope." Medea began to lash one end of the rope very securely to the mast. Then she turned to Calais and Zethes, the sons of the North wind, gifted with flight, and said "One of you (or the both of you, it doesn't matter) tie this end of the rope securely around the head of that brass nail in its thigh. Securely."

"Tie this end of the rope around the head of the brass nail in the thigh of that enormous metal giant that you just ovpóed off, and which is trying to *kill* us?" Zethes demanded.

"Unless anyone else on this ship can fly, then you're up," Medea snapped. "You just might be able to save us. You're supposed to be heroes, aren't you?"

"I'll bet *you* could fly, if someone gave you a broom!" Calais called over his shoulder as he and his brother took to the air, holding the rope.

The dark cloud of *keres* swirled blackly around Talos' head, and the brass giant batted vainly at them. It was hard to say if the screeching, fluttering black things would be able to hurt the giant, but they had certainly, for the moment at least, freaked him out.

Talos had half turned away from the *Argo*, still waving his massive brass arms around, trying to clear his field of vision, when Calais and Zethes glided to him, rope held between them. It was only with difficulty that the two sons of the North Wind were able to lash the rope to the huge nail in the giant's thigh, as he wasn't keeping still at all, panicked as he was by the *keres* which were clawing at his eyes and wailing.

"Now what?" Zethes called from where he slowly rotated in midair, still holding the rope that was attached to the giant.

"Now get back here and help us *row*!" the sorceress told him.

Talos took a panicked step and the rope pulled from Zethes' hands. He and his brother corkscrewed through the air and touched down on the deck of the *Argo*.

And all the Argonauts who were not already manning oars ran below and began to powerfully row the *Argo* away from the beleaguered giant. Telamon's voice rang out, helping them row together.

The rope played out, then became taut. The *Argo* stopped moving away from Talos, held in place by the rope tied to the nail in the giant creature's thigh. Telamon's voice rang out more urgently from below, as Ancaeus held his place at the helm, and Jason made sure the rope remained tightly lashed to the main mast of the ship. "If Talos has a single nerve, running from his heels to his head, why are we pulling this nail out?" Jason yelled at Medea, over the wailing screech of the cloud of *keres*, and the splashing and roaring of Talos.

At that moment, Talos, in his thrashing around, twisted sideways, nearly overturning the *Argo*, and the nail wrenched free and dropped into the ocean, accompanied by a deafening brassy groan of pain from the metal giant and a shuddering creak from the mast the rope was tied to. What looked like molten metal began spraying out of the giant's body, hissing into the sea as the hot liquid metal hit the cold ocean water. Talos let out an ear-shattering wail of despair and panic, and after barely keeping his feet for a moment, he crashed backward into the sea.

"It's not a *nerve* that Daedalus built into this creature, running from his heels to his head," Medea told Jason, eyes still on the fallen giant, who'd mostly slipped beneath the waves. "When Daedalus made Talos, he made a single *vein* that ran from his heels to his head, taking what passes for blood in the metal creature, around to the various parts of his brass body."

"And now we've just emptied that blood into the sea," Jason said, his voice flat.

"That's right," Medea told him, rubbing out what was left of the smoking arcane symbols she'd painted on the deck of the ship. As she did this, the black cloud of *keres* disintegrated into ash and the sun shone freely down.

Jason slashed through the rope, letting the brass nail sink into the waves just as the brass man who it had until recently been part of had done.

It seemed best to get out of that region as quickly as possible.

The Return

Getting back to Iolcus hadn't been easy. A magical sandbar had blocked their way no matter which direction they'd steered. They would come about hard, and head in the opposite direction from the sandbar looming in front of them, and somehow, there it would be in front of them again. No matter what they had done, and no matter what the charts had said, they would find themselves "meeting" it over and over, under the glare of the sun in the burnished sky arcing overhead.

Eventually Idas could no longer be heard swearing. He was below decks, passed out from too much wine even for him.

Jason had been just about ready to wade to the nearest shore and build himself and Medea a house when, right on cue, they had three mystical visitors. They were sea nymphs, hair gleaming wetly under the sun, eyes green as the sea.

They had explained that the sandbar was magical (obviously) and that they would never be able to go around it. They would have to go *over* it. If they could get the *Argo* over the sand, only then would it remain behind them.

After days of discussion, the Argonauts had cut down two of the *Argo's* masts, and sawed them into wooden "rollers." Then they had tied anchor rope to the prow of the ship, placed the rollers in front of it at water's edge, and everyone had gotten out of the ship. The remaining three horses too, obviously.

What they had done next would certainly not have been possible for any but a crew of heroes and demigods with three strong horses. They had hitched the horses to the rope, and taking hold of it themselves, as if taking part in a game of tug of war with their own ship, had heaved it creakingly out of the water and up onto the rollers.

The remaining sails had been set to let the friendly North wind give them a bit of a stiff push as well, and for a straight week they had dragged the *Argo* across the rollers, moving across the baking surface of the sandbar at a snail's pace.

It was very odd, the ship out of water, and the sand shimmering and baking hot in the distance, with a chilly North wind gale blowing across it, kicking up sand. The sand got into their eyes and ears, nostrils and mouths. The sand got into *everything*, as Idas was quick to point out.

Even the task of moving rollers back around to the front of the ship each time it had been dragged across them wouldn't have been possible for normal men.

Eventually they'd made it to the water on the other side, and this time, when they sailed away, the sandbar, defeated, had remained behind. It was a task even Hercules would have bragged about.



Finally, as winter rain had begun to fall in Iolcus, the *Argo* arrived back at the docks where their adventure had begun, more than a year before.

"So, what's the plan?" Telamon asked Jason.

“It δεκάρα well better involve kicking that μαλάκα off the throne that used to be your father’s!” Idas growled.

The Argonauts looked at Jason, standing there, brow furrowed, the Golden Fleece over one arm, and his sword buckled on.

Finally he said “Yes. We’ve been to hades and back, on a quest from which King Pelias never intended us to return. I cannot forget the fact that he killed his brother Aeson, my father, the rightful king. It’s time for the man with one sandal to seal Pelias’ doom.” Superstitiously, he took off one of his sandals, threw the Golden Fleece across his shoulders, wearing it as a mantle of authority, and started off toward the palace. Every Argonaut left the ship and followed him.

There was a long, guarded walkway into the palace. Jason had been taken prisoner and led across it at spearpoint the first time he’d visited Iolcus those many months ago. As the Argonauts approached the walkway, the guards on both sides lowered their spears to bar the way.

It was Medea who made the first move. Striding purposely toward the first pair of guards with a beautiful smile on her face, she raised a hand as if about to ask for directions, then hissed “*sleep*,” lowering her hand abruptly. Some reddish-brown powder poured out of the hand she’d used to gesture with.

The first two armoured guards crumpled to the street then, instantly asleep, like puppets whose strings had been slashed. The other guards lowered their own spears and advanced. The sons of the North wind punched straight through all of the armed resistance, flying at the centre of an arctic gale, landing beyond the guards, backs against the wooden gates of the palace entrance. Then the two began loosing arrow after arrow at the guards they now stood behind. Atalanta and Philoctetes sent arrows at the guards from the opposite angle. The rest simply charged right through the middle of the pack in a powerful phalanx move.

Unable to control the situation, with heroic armed demigods attacking them from in front and behind, the guards fell quickly to the swords of Jason, Telamon, Castor, Pollox and all the rest. Several of the guards fled, rather than try to face them. Jason signalled his crew to let the guards flee.

Now the entire crew of the *Argo* stood in front of the massive cedar doors. Heavy iron hinges and brass bands were nailed to them. Medea put her hand on the doors and spoke quietly but intensely and everyone stood back a bit.

What happened next was eerie: all the metal bits that had been holding the wooden doors together wiggled squeakingly free of the cedar beams and fell to the street. It took a while. Then the cedar beams fell to the street with huge thuds. Now they were a pile of beams, rather than doors.

The Golden Fleece shining like a pot of molten gold, Jason strode into the throne room, just in time to catch the aged King Pelias being helped off the throne by the unmarried of his daughters: Pisidice, Antioe and Asteropeia. They obviously wanted to lead him to safety.

“I stand here in possession of the Golden Fleece which, added to my royal lineage, proves that I am, by rights, the true king of Iolcus,” Jason said quietly but firmly to his uncle.

“Are you going to...kill me?” Pelias asked Jason.

“Yes, he γαμημένοσ well is!” Idas spat at the king.

“I am Jason, the son of Aeson. You killed my father, prepare...” Jason began.

“Actually,” Pelias said quietly, “he’s not dead. I could have killed him, but I find killing so... wasteful. Often people of royal blood are useful in future as bargaining chips. As your father is now. Spare me and I will take you to him. I do now bargain for my life with his.”

“So my father isn’t dead after all?!” Jason asked, incredulous.

“He wasn’t this morning when we fed him, though he’s well along in years by now,” Pelias told him. “If you promise not to kill me, limiting your ‘sealing my doom’ to simply taking my throne, I will take you to him.”

Medea looked sharply at Jason when she heard this, but Jason agreed.



Leaving the rest of the Argonauts in control of the palace, Jason, Telamon, Medea, Castor and Pollox went with limping old Pelias and his three daughters deep underground to the cell where Aeson, once king of Iolcus, had secretly been wasting away while Jason had grown to adulthood.

In a dark, stinking cell, deep underground and guarded around the clock, Aeson, once the king of Iolcus, lay on a cot.

The meeting was bittersweet, as Jason was now reunited with his long-lost father, but it was clear as he embraced the emaciated old man, that Aeson would not live to reclaim the throne.

Jason turned to Medea. “You do magical, unnatural things, right?” Jason asked her grimly. He had been increasingly troubled by how unnatural some of the things Medea did were.

“Yeeeeesss...?” she replied, uncertainly.

“Can you... give him more *years*?” Jason asked, getting excited at the idea. “Like, could you take years off my life and add them to his?”

Aeson grabbed Jason by the wrist, with a skinny arm that had running sores all over it. “No! I will not allow you to give me a portion of your own life,” he told his son, raising himself up from the cot in which he lay in his own filth.

Medea thought for a moment. Ignoring Aeson’s words entirely she told Jason, “Perhaps it could be done. But, *reinvigorating* his blood might undo the decades of neglect and give him another ten years or so without cost to your own span of years.”

Jason agreed readily.

“Have a bronze tub large enough for your father to lay in brought to me” the sorceress told them. She began sorting out some dried leaves and powders, and Telamon was sent in search of the tub. Jason wasn’t letting Pelias nor his daughters out of his sight, so they stood to one side as well, waiting to see what would happen to them.

And so it was that Jason helped his ancient father into a bronze tub and took the stone knife that Medea gave him.

“I know this will be hard, but in order for the enchantments to work properly, the blood must be let out by someone who loves the person who is the subject of the spell” the sorceress explained. “I can purify and reinvigorate the blood and reinstate it in your father’s body, but I need you to use the ancient Thessalian flint to start it flowing. You must cut deeply. I cannot do this for you.”

Jason did as she asked, though it pained him deeply to make the incisions where Medea indicated, deep into the arteries in Aeson’s thighs and throat. Aeson gasped in pain, as any of us would, and his blood began to gush out at an alarming rate and pool in the bronze tub in which he lay.

Medea dipped her fingertips in the blood and made arcane symbols on the sides of the tub, muttering evil-sounding words and making guttural sounds all the while, once taking a fistful of yellowish dust from a leather sack and blowing on her open hand so the dust drifted into the air above Aeson.

Aeson, already thin, pale and white from the decades of his imprisonment, now lay still and cold in the tub, eyes staring sightlessly upward. As near as any could tell, the old king was dead. Medea continued to chant and whisper to herself, and then she gave a shrill shrieking screech and was still. She stood with her head bowed, eyes closed, shaking slightly with effort.

Everyone stood looking down at Aeson. And then, the blood which had poured out of Aeson in crimson torrents began to pour back *into* him. Wormlike, trickles of blood crawled up his body and back into the vessels from which they had come.

Colour returned to Aeson’s cheeks. His hair remained white and straggling, but his flesh gradually took on a healthy hue, and filled out until he looked like an old man still, but one in excellent health.

Jason’s father sneezed loudly, three times. His eyes opened, at first looking confused, and then lighting up with wonder at how young he suddenly felt. A laugh of absolute delight burst from his lips and rang out in the dark tunnel.

Jason would not take the throne from Pelias today, after all. His father Aeson would live to sit upon the throne again.

Then Aeson imprisoned his brother Pelias in the very cell in which he had languished for so many years, and father and son walked off arm in arm together.

Betrayal in the Night

Late that very evening, when Jason was sitting at table, drinking fine wine with his father, the newly reinstated King Aeson, Medea heard a knock on the door of the side chamber where she and Jason were staying. When she opened it, Pisidice, Antinoe, and Asteropeia stood outside, their faces veiled to disguise themselves from anyone watching.

Asteropeia was tall and willowy, with light brown hair, while Pisidice and Antinoe were shorter and stouter, with dark hair. Pisidice wore her dark hair in elaborate braids piled on top of her head. Antinoe wore her hair loose. Although they were all the daughters of Pelias, they all had different mothers, of course.

“What are you three doing here?” demanded Medea, holding her robe closed with one hand at the neckline. “My husband should have had all of you killed!”

“We need a favour,” Asteropeia said quietly, her head bowed slightly. “And we’re willing to pay gold for it.”

“A favour?” Medea asked, filled with disbelief. “What do you mean?”

“Our father Pelias languishes in a dank cell,” Pisidice joined in. “We don’t ask that he be released, of course...”

“Well, obviously not,” Medea replied. “Now leave the palace or I’ll have you killed.”

“He will not live long in that place. Now, we are willing to pay you your weight in gold if you will do for him what you did today for his brother, Aeson,” Antinoe spoke up.

“Revivify his blood?” Medea asked. “And you said you’ll pay me my weight in gold to do it?”

“Most assuredly,” Pisidice told her.

“Weeeeeell...That will take some planning. And for it to work, you have to really, truly love your father,” Medea warned them.

“We would not be standing here before you, risking our lives and offering a fortune in gold, if we did not” Asteropeia told her.

“I will need to stay up all night preparing my magics,” Medea told the three sisters. “Meet me at your father’s cell this time tomorrow evening, bringing the gold of which you speak, telling no one of what we plan to do.”

The three unmarried daughters of Pelias assured the sorceress that this would be so, and left Medea to get things ready.



Outside Pelias’ cell, Medea met the three sisters a night later while Jason drank more wine in the palace with his father Aeson and discussed how the kingdom ought to be run. Each sister carried a third of Medea’s weight in gold. Medea did not weigh a great deal, but each sister gasped under the weight.

Medea carried only a small bundle under her arm, and the ancient Thessalian flint knife which had been used in human sacrifices since before anyone could tell.

There had been a guard set to watch Pelias' cell, of course, but Medea had put him to sleep using a powder she had blown into his face, after offering to whisper a secret in his ear. Then she had taken from his unconscious hand the key ring which had the key to Pelias' locked cell.

"As tokens of your love for Pelias your father, you must each wear one of these magically-treated robes which I have prepared," Medea told them, once she'd checked the gold. "They are saturated with magical tinctures and solutions to help with what I'm doing tonight. To work, they must touch nothing but your bare skin."

The three sisters left their fine dresses, underthings and sandals in the corner, and soon stood before the cell wearing only the heavy magic robes. The robes had a strong, pungent odour to them and felt somewhat waxy to the touch. Medea gestured in the air in front of each sister, muttering guttural words that sounded disturbing. The skin of each sister tingled when the sorceress did this.

The bronze tub that Medea had used to enact her spell for Jason's father was still outside the cell that Aeson had occupied, and which Pelias now served time in. Medea unlocked the door to the cell and the three sisters took their father Pelias by the hand and led him slowly and stumblingly to the tub. They helped him into it and looked at Medea.

"Are you certain you truly love him?" Medea asked them.

They assured her that they did. Pelias lay back, gritted his teeth and closed his eyes tightly.

"Are you certain that you are ready to do to his flesh what my husband Jason did to that of his own father?" she continued.

They told her that they were.

Handing Asteropeia the jagged flint knife, Medea began to make twisting shapes in the air with her fingers, and to mutter to herself. Then she directed Asteropeia to make an incision in the old man's flesh. Once this had been done and blood was gushing out, Medea took the flint knife and gave it to each of the other two sisters, and directed them to make further incisions.

Once it was done, Medea dipped her fingertips in the blood and made arcane symbols on the sides of the tub, muttering evil-sounding words and making guttural sounds all the while, once taking a fistful of sand from a leather sack and blowing on her open hand so that it drifted into the air above Pelias' unmoving body.

Pelias, now lay still and cold in the tub, eyes staring sightlessly upward. The three daughters looked at Medea with very large eyes.

Medea stood with her head bowed, eyes closed, very still and very quiet. She stood that way for some time.

Finally, Pisidice spoke. "What now?" she asked, a tremble in her voice.

"Now nothing," Medea answered, opening her eyes and looking very directly at Pisidice.

"What do you *mean*?" Antioe demanded, panic in her voice, the bloody flint dagger trembling in her grip.

"Now Pelias is dead," Medea told the three sisters. "And you three were the ones who killed him."

A wail went up from all three women, and Pisidice, the last one holding the knife, looked at it for a moment, then raised it and stepped forward, her gaze as flinty as the stone blade. Antioe and Asteropeia stepped forward with her, murder in their eyes.

Medea simply waved one hand, fingers twisted into an odd sign, and spoke one word:
“Burn.”

At that, the specially treated robes of all three sisters burst violently into flames, blackening the ceilings and almost immediately leaving nothing but three small, smouldering heaps on the floor.

Medea picked up the Thessalian flint and one of the piles of ingots, and walked contemptuously back to her chamber. She'd send some servants down for rest of the gold later.

Aftermath

The next day early, Acastas, the son of Pelias, and half-brother to the three incinerated sisters, demanded to see Aeson the king. He wanted vengeance for what had happened to his sisters and father.

Jason and Medea stood to one side of King Aeson with Telamon and Euphemus with them, while Acastas stood to the other side with two friends, wounded rage in his eye and a sword at his hip.

“She is an evil witch and the people of Iolcus are not safe so long as she is allowed to live here!” Acastas told the King. “If you are to have the support of your subjects, you must keep them safe!” he continued.

Jason, his head still ringing from too much wine the night before, asked Medea, “Is it possible that while you slept, the three daughters of Pelias came in the night, and killing their own father, incited the wrath of Zeus, who struck all three immediately with lightning?”

“No. That is not what happened,” Medea said.

“Is it possible, Medea, that you attempted the same spell as you cast the day before with King Aeson, and it simply failed to work?” Euphemus suggested.

“Perhaps it failed because, unlike me, the three daughters did not truly love Pelias their father?” Jason added.

“No. That is not what happened either,” Medea said quietly.

“We can’t have evil witches killing Iolchian citizens who haven’t been found guilty of anything, and also arranging the murder of prisoners whose lives the King has decreed shall be spared!” Acastas shouted.

“Medea, perhaps you should tell us what really happened,” King Aeson said quietly.

“I felt the King and Jason my husband were foolish to spare the lives of Pelias and his scheming daughters,” Medea told them. “In fact, I don’t think this bellowing idiot Acastas should be allowed to live either. It’s not safe.”

“And so...?” King Aeson continued.

“So I manipulated the three daughters into killing their own father, using magic to gain access to Pelias’ cell, and then killed all three daughters in self-defense when they sought their vengeance upon me, using magical robes I had prepared previously.”

King Aeson looked very serious. He would have to think about this one. Politically, this would be a very important decision to make.

The King told the group that he would have to deliberate about this matter until the next day.



“It isn’t so much what you did to Pelias, who certainly had it coming,” King Aeson told Medea. “It’s that you do not hesitate to disobey the decrees of kings, seemingly without thinking, whether they be your father, or the father of your husband, the hero Jason. You do not so much as warn your husband, or his father the king, what you plan to do. You know what we’d say.”

“I tell you, no one in Iolcus wants a woman this dangerous, with this little regard for the power of kings, and simple matters of right and wrong, to be allowed to live here,” Acastas repeated. He had with him some very prominent businessmen and politicians, and all agreed with his views.

“Are you sorry for what you have done, Medea?” King Aeson asked her.

“I am not,” Medea told him, holding his gaze.

“Then, Medea, daughter of Aetes, I am left with no choice but to send the problem that is you, out of my presence,” Aeson said regretfully.

“You can’t do that! She’s my wife!” Jason protested, the Golden Fleece flung radiantly over one shoulder, his sword at his hip.

“Do you wish to keep near you a wife so dangerous and unreasonable?” the King asked his son.

“Yes,” Jason told him.

“She is banished from my kingdom, and if you wish to stay with her, you must go elsewhere,” Aeson told Jason. “I would take it as a personal favour if you would go to distant Corinth to help run our concerns there.”

“Then Corinth it is,” Jason said stubbornly. After his travels, “distant” meant something different to him than it did to most people.

“And I have to warn you, son,” Aeson continued, “That even once I have passed on, what has occurred here, and your banishment to Corinth, mean that you will almost certainly never take the throne in Iolcus.”

“I understand,” said Jason, taking his wife’s hand and leaving for the *Argo*. Euphemus and Telamon followed with them.

Afterword

When it came to their stories, the Ancient Greeks loved tragedies. The more things that went wrong, the more betrayals, the more horrible, truly messed up things people in their stories had to go through, and the more often tales ended with pretty much everyone dying, the better the Ancient Greeks thought the stories were.

They thought stories like that were realistic. Stories where everything goes wrong and nothing turns out how people hope. Because everyone dies, right? At the end?

So the secret to whether or not you get a happy or a sad ending to your story, is when you choose to end it. With the story of *The Quest for the Golden Fleece*, modern audiences would prefer the story to end with the *Argo* sailing away from Colchis, having taken the Golden Fleece from King Aetes' garden and gotten safely away. Or they would have wanted Jason's father to really be dead, and for Jason to kill his uncle and take the throne.

But the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece does not stop there, nor end that way, in any of its various tellings. And so I did not stop telling the story at that point either. I think I will stop telling it now, though. Before more deaths and betrayals happen. Maybe even infidelity and divorce.

If you wait too long to end any story, the main character will certainly die. Eventually. Because we all do. So the key to a happy ending is stopping telling the story before that happens.

We wouldn't want to end the story with Jason, a decrepit old man, crawling alone under the rotting wreck of the *Argo* for shade from the sun, only to have the figurehead of the ship break free and fall on him, killing him, would we?

No. So let's leave him now, with his new, pregnant wife and his friends all around him.