Stealing the Golden Fleece (a Jason and the Argonauts story)

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ason 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.

Greek pattern.jpg

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,thetwo 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 khalkotauroi, thanks to Medea’s magic potion.

“Dragonfire is hotter than any fire there is,” Medea explained. “The breath of the khalkotauroi 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 khalkotauroi. 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.

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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 Helles 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.

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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.