Talos the Brass Giant (a story of Jason and the Argonauts)

*Neil Foster Macphail*

T

hey 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.

Greek pattern.jpg

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 λέξη!” 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 ουρώed 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 sploshing 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.