The Harpies (a story featuring Jason and the Argonauts)

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ason 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.

Greek pattern.jpg

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.

Greek pattern.jpg

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.

Greek pattern.jpg

“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.