

A HERO IS BORN

Meanwhile, back in Greece, more mischief was afoot. Phrixus had an uncle named **Pelias**, who has seized control of the kingdom of Iolcus. Pelias and his brother Neleus has stolen it from it's rightful king, **Aeson**. After his throne had been taken, Aeson lived in fear of his Pelias. When his wife bore him a son, Aeson feared Pelias would kill the child, so he claimed the babe had died at birth, and had the child secretly taken to be raised by **Cheiron**, the noble centaur.

This son was named **Jason**. Cheiron gave Jason a hero's training in athletics, arts and learning. When Jason had grown to manhood, he set out to reclaim his father's throne from wicked Pelias. On his way to Iolcus he came to a river. **Hera** sat on the banks of the river disguised as an ugly old hag. The handsome young hero had caught the goddess's attention (apparently her husband was not the only one with a wandering eye). Hera wanted to test Jason, and see if his manners were as good as his looks. So when Jason approached, she called out to him, and asked him to help her across the river. Jason kindly picked up the ugly old crone, and set out across the river. Hera made herself heavier and heavier as they went, but Jason did not complain, and brought her safely to the other side of the river. Somewhere along the way, however, he lost one of his sandals. Hera was pleased with Jason, and thereafter helped him in all his adventures.

When Jason arrived in Iolcus, he created quite a stir. The locals were very curious about the handsome stranger with long chestnut hair who wore a leopard skin slung over his shoulders and had only one sandal. Pelias came down from the palace to see what all the commotion was about. When he saw that the youth before him had only one sandal, he was afraid, since an oracle had warned him of such a foe. When Jason told Pelias who he was, and why he had come, Pelias was even more worried. Even though Jason asked in a very gentle tone to have some part in ruling the kingdom, Pelias did not trust Jason, and wanted to be rid of him as soon as possible. Jason was strong, and already quite popular among the people of Iolcus, so Pelias knew better to challenge him outright, so he came up with another scheme that would kill Jason all the same.

Pelias told Jason he would gladly turn over the kingdom to his control if Jason successfully completed a mission. Pelias said he had been troubled by dreams of his dead kinsman Phrixus. He said that Phrixus' soul could not rest in peace until the Golden Fleece had been retrieved from Colchis. Now Colchis was far away on the distant end of the Black Sea, and **Aeetes**, it's king, was known to be a cruel man (who would be even more nasty if asked to give up the prized fleece). To Pelias this seemed like a guaranteed suicide mission. Jason, however, was young and confident and immediately agreed to undertake the mission.

THE MISSION BEGINS

With the help of Hera, Jason recruited 56 of the greatest heroes of the day. They set out on a special ship, the **Argo**. The Argo had been built for the mission by Athena and had in its bow a special piece of wood that could talk. Because they sailed on the Argo, Jason's men were known as the *Argonauts* (literally Argo sailors).

The Argonauts set sail across the Aegean. They stopped to rest and gather provisions on the island of **Lemnos**. Now Lemnos was a rather interesting place. The women of Lemnos had become enraged with their husbands for having affairs with Athenian women. They were so angry they murdered all the men on the island and killed all the children their husbands had fathered by the Athenian women. Only the old king was spared (after a manner of speaking: he was put in a chest and dumped in the sea; luckily he floated to safety). Lemnos was ruled by the king's daughter, **Hypsipyle**. Considering how the women of Lemnos felt about men, things could have gone very badly for the Argonauts. Luckily, Hypsipyle fell in love with Jason, and ordered her women to treat

him and his men well. According to some stories, Hypsipyle even bore him twin sons.

Athamas (A-THAY-MAS) - *king of Thebes, father of Phrixus and Helle*

Nephele (NE-FELL-LEE)-*cloud wife of Athamas, mother of Phrixus and Helle*

Ino (EYE-NO)-*jealous second wife of Athamas, who plots to have Phrixus killed*

Phrixus (FRICK-SUS) -*son of Athamas who is saved from sacrifice by a golden ram, who carries him to Colchis*

Helle (HELL-EH)-*sister of Phrixus who falls off the ram; the Hellespont is named for her*

Aeetes (EYE-EAT-TEES) - *king of Colchis*

Aeson (EYE-SON) - *rightful king of Iolcus, overthrown by Pelias*

Pelias (PE-LIE-AS)- *usurps Aeson's throne and sends Jason on a mission to retrieve the Golden Fleece*

Jason - *son of Aeson who goes on a quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece from Colchis in order to regain his throne*

A partial list of Argonauts:

Castor & Pollux—these twin sons of Zeus (by Leda) were famous for their skills in boxing and horsemanship; they were also patrons of sailors

Peleus—this hero left wife Thetis and baby son Achilles at home while he took part in the mission

Hercules—The strong man of the ancient world, was definitely an asset, but unfortunately he left the mission early. Hercules had brought with him a fine young boy named Hylas to act as his armor bearer. When the group stopped on an island, Hylas paused to drink from a stream. A water nymph looked up and saw the handsome youth and dragged him under the water to be with her. Hercules tried in vain to find Hylas, and wandered off in the dense woods to look for him. The Argonauts searched for Hercules at great length. Eventually the gods told them to leave the hero behind, especially since he still had labors to complete for King Eurystheus.

Orpheus—He was the greatest of all musicians, and could charm any creature with his music.

Mopsus—This hero had the gift of incredible vision and served as the look-out for the expedition.

Zetas & Calais— These two sons of Boreas, the North Wind, had purple wings. They chased the harpies away from Phineas.

Here is the rest of the Jason & the Argonauts Story:

Voyage to Colchis: On the voyage to Colchis, in addition to numerous other adventures, Jason and his crew of Argonauts freed blind King Phineus from the curse of the Harpies. These Harpies were frightful flying creatures with hooked beaks and claws, also known as the Hounds of Zeus, who daily tormented Phineus.

Whenever he was about to dine the Harpies would swoop down from the sky and help themselves to the blind man's dinner, defiling the leftovers with their foul smell. One couldn't stand to be near the food after they were finished, let alone eat it! Poor Phineus was starving to death.

King Phineus was a seer and he promised to help the Argonauts if they rid him of the Harpies. The king's servants set a feast for Phineus and the Argonauts. Immediately the Harpies darted down from the sky and in a moment had devoured just about everything, leaving behind their stench. Yuck!

Swords in hand, Calais and Zetes arose and gave chase to Ocypete and Aellopus, which were the proper names of the Harpies. These Argonauts were the swift-flying sons of the North Wind, Boreas. In not time they caught up with the monsters and would have killed them had not **Iris**, Hera's messenger, intervened.

Promising that the Harpies would never again trouble Phineus, **the goddess of the rainbow Iris** beseeched the sons of Boreas to spare their lives.

"Forbear to kill the Hounds of Zeus," she said, **"and by the waters of the river Styx I swear an unbreakable oath that Phineus will no longer be troubled by the Harpies."**

Cool. It's hard to say "no" to a rainbow...Calais and Zetes returned with the good news and the grateful Phineus instructed Jason on navigating the perilous waters, particularly the Symplegades, these terrifying rocks which had an annoying habit of clashing together whenever anything passed between them.

Whenever a vessel attempted to pass between the Symplegades the mist-shrouded rocks drove together, crushing her. But Phineus instructed Jason to first release a dove - if the bird made it through the Symplegades, then so would the Argo. If not, turn around and go home, it was hopeless.

Approaching the rocks Jason released the dove and the Argonauts were ecstatic to see it fly through and come out safely, with only its tail feathers harmlessly torn away near the end. Waiting for the rocks to say "ah", the Argonauts blasted through, with only the extreme end of the Argo's stern ornament shorn off as they snapped shut behind them.

The best part was, the Symplegades had gotten lockjaw. Evermore they remained open and never again imperiled sailors.

Getting the Fleece: When they arrived at Colchis, King Aetes wasn't about to hand over the Golden Fleece without a fight. He demanded that Jason accomplish a series of tasks to earn the Golden Fleece: he must yoke a team of fierce, fire-breathing bull oxen and plow a field with them; then he must sow the teeth of a dragon in the field, and deal with the warlike armored men who sprouted from these "seeds".

As if that wasn't enough, he must brave the sleepless dragon who guarded the Fleece. Jason accomplished all these tasks with the help of Medea, Aetes' daughter, who had fallen in love with him.

You see, Athena and the goddess Hera, who had helped Jason and the Argonauts throughout the voyage, had asked the goddess of love Aphrodite to intervene. Aphrodite instructed her son, Eros, to let fly an arrow at the heart of beautiful Medea the moment she laid eyes on Jason. Sure enough, the mischievous Eros did what he does best and Medea fell madly in love with our hero Jason.

It's a good thing, too! Medea was a powerful witch and she gave Jason a charm which, when sprinkled on himself and his weapons, would make them invincible for a day. Jason subdued the bulls as they rushed him from their lair, breathing flames of fire from their nostrils. He harnessed them to the yoke and drove them over the field, casting the dragon's teeth into the furrows.

In no time a wild-looking and ferocious army of creeps had sprouted forth and as one they attacked Jason. He dispatched a bunch of them with his sword and then, remembering Medea's words, he flung a stone in their midst. Just like she had told Jason, his attackers turned on each other and within moments they all lay dead, as the Argonauts cheered and King Aetes gritted his teeth.

The King returned to his palace, determined that Jason would never have the Golden Fleece, but Hera was looking out for the Argonauts. She made Medea, her heart all aflutter for Jason, determined to leave with him. As the unsuspecting Argonauts celebrated Jason's victory and King Aetes conspired on ways to kill them, she raced to the ship and warned them of her father's deadly plans. Medea said that her father planned on burning the Argo and slaying its crew and she vowed to help Jason get the Golden Fleece, if only he would take her along with him, away from Colchis.

Grateful Jason promised to marry Medea and make her his queen. After all, she had saved his life on more than one occasion. She urged him to get the Fleece quickly and leave, before they were killed. In the dark of the night they reached the sacred grove where the Golden Fleece hung. The skilled witch Medea soothed the loathsome and hissing dragon with incantations and then gave Jason drops of a magic potion to sprinkle on its eyelids. With the dragon fast asleep, Jason stealthily unfastened the Fleece from the oak tree and with Medea hurried down to the waiting Argo.

The Pursuit: King Aetes started off in pursuit of the Argonauts but could not overtake them. Medea's brother, Apsyrtus, had also joined her aboard the Argo and during the flight from Colchis Medea killed or took part in the murder of her brother. It is sometimes said that Medea cut her brother limb from limb and threw the pieces into the

sea and that, gathering Apsyrtus' limbs, Aeetes fell behind in the pursuit. But some say that it was Jason who cut Apsyrtus into pieces to slow down their pursuers, or even that he was, with Medea's help, treacherously killed by Jason on an island in the mouth of the river Ister (now known as the Danube). As is the case in most of mythology, various sources cite different versions.

According to some, King Styruus of Albania, who had come to Colchis to marry Medea at the time when the Argonauts arrived in the country, joined Aeetes, but he drowned during the pursuit.

Because of the death of his son King Aeetes gave up the chase and returned to Colchis, but he sent many others to search for the Argonauts, threatening that, if they did not bring the Golden Fleece and his daughter back to him, they should suffer the punishment due to her...and he planned on punishing her plenty!

In the meanwhile, because of the horrendous acts which they had committed, the Argonauts were driven off course by fierce storms that Zeus sent. The Argo's oracular branch then spoke and said that they should seek purification with Circe, a witch living on the island called Aeaea. The witch Circe, who purified the Argonauts for the murder of Apsyrtus, is sometimes said to be the daughter of the sun god Helios. But some say that she was the daughter of Aeetes by Hecate. Circe was the one who later would trap Odysseus and his men, turning them into swine. But that's another story...

When the Argonauts had been purified by Circe they sailed past the Sirens, who tried to attract the crew with their seductive song. Orpheus, by chanting a counter melody restrained all of them except for Butes, who was unable to resist their enchanting song and swam off to the Sirens. However he was saved by Aphrodite, who carried him away and settled him in Lilybaeum (the island of Sicily)

During the escape the Argonauts received help from the goddess Thetis and her Nereids, who were fifty sea-nymphs, in order to avoid the danger of Scylla and Charybdis, sea monsters guarding each side of the passage between Sicily and Italy.

Scylla is one of the sea-monsters which was on one side of the Strait of Messina, between Italy and Sicily, the other being Charybdis. Scylla had the face and upper body of a woman, but from the flanks she had six heads and twelve feet of dogs. Not a pretty sight.

Charybdis was a sea-monster, who three times a day drew up the water of the sea and then spouted it again, thus forming a whirlpool. She lay in wait on one side of the narrow Strait of Messina, and on the other side was Scylla. The two sides were so close to each other that one could even shoot an arrow across. So sailors, on trying to avoid Charybdis became the victims of Scylla.

Before they returned to Iolcus the Argonauts landed at Crete, where Medea killed the giant bronze creature called Talos, who guarded the island and threw huge rocks at any approaching ship. Four months after the start of the voyage, the Argo returned home.

But when they reached Iolcus Jason found out that his parents and brother Promachus had been killed - Mean King Pelias had seen to that! Jason surrendered the Golden Fleece as per the agreement and dedicated the mighty Argo to Poseidon. He then conspired with Medea as to how to punish King Pelias for the murder of his kin.

To avenge her new husband's family Medea caused King Pelias' daughters to cut him into pieces and put them into a boiling pot, thinking that this "magic" would restore their father's youth. They were dead wrong! The daughters were hysterical once they realized that they had murdered their own father. Too late.

With Pelias dead, Acastus, the king's son and one of the Argonauts, became king, and having buried his father, or what was left of him, he expelled Jason and Medea from Iolcus. They settled in Corinth, had two sons and lived happily for ten years. But Jason eventually grew restless, dumped Medea, the "foreign witch" as everybody called her, and took on a younger wife called Glauce, who was the daughter of the King of Corinth.

Bad move. Medea, who had done so much out of her love for Jason, including betraying her father, murdering her brother and causing the death of King Pelias, grew most bitter and sought revenge. So with the help of poisonous drugs she made a golden crown and bade her sons give it as a gift to their stepmother Glauce. Once worn, the crown burned its wearer. When this was done the evil woman killed her own sons and fled to Athens.

Some say that the young princess Glauce accepted the gift, and was burned to death along with Jason and Creon, her father. But others say that Jason survived, yet, unable to endure the loss of both wife and children, killed himself. Still others say that Medea cursed him a foul death: that the wreckage of the Argo would fall upon Jason and kill him...and that's what happened.

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HERACLES

Heracles (Latin: Hercules) was the son of the god Zeus and Alcmene and was the greatest of the Greek heroes. His name means "Glory of Hera", which is ironic considering that Hera, Zeus's wife, relentlessly tormented Heracles throughout his life, even driving him crazy at one point.

His gift was fabulous strength; he strangled two serpents in his cradle (sent by Hera, wouldn't you know), and killed a lion before manhood. When Hera eventually drove him mad, in his lunacy he killed his own children and his brother's, mistaking them for attacking enemies. He was so grieved upon recovery that he exiled himself and consulted the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The Pythoness, which is what the oracle was called, told him that before he would be forgiven he must first perform twelve Labors for mean King Eurystheus. These Labors included:

1) Kill the lion of Nemea.

The valley of Nemea was infested by a terrible lion. Eurystheus ordered Hercules to bring him the skin of this monster. After using in vain his club and arrows against the lion,

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