

MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Apollodorus: The Library (Bibliotheca)

Vol. 3 Thessaly and the Golden Fleece

Chapters 9-12

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Chapter 9: Pelias, Neleus, and the Seer Melampus

But Aeolus's house had one more gift to give the world, and it came in the form of a woman who loved a river. **Tyro** (*TY-roh*), daughter of the proud Salmoneus, was raised by her uncle **Cretheus** (*KREE-thee-uhs*) in Iolcus after Zeus's thunderbolt destroyed her father's city. She grew into a young woman of uncommon beauty, and her heart fixed itself upon the river **Enipeus** (*eh-NIP-ee-uhs*), whose waters flowed past the city walls. Day after day she walked along its banks, speaking her secrets to the current, imagining that the god of the river heard and understood her.

She was not wrong that a god was listening, though not the one she supposed. **Poseidon** (*poh-SYE-don*), lord of the sea and all waters, watched her from his depths and desired her. He took the form of Enipeus himself, every ripple and eddy perfectly imitated, and rose from the water to meet her. Tyro, deceived but not unwilling, lay with him there on the riverbank. When the god departed, she was left with a secret that would shape the history of Greece.

She gave birth to twin sons, **Pelias** (*PEE-lee-as*) and **Neleus** (*NEE-lee-uhs*). Fearful of scandal, ashamed that she had been deceived by a god in disguise, Tyro did what countless women in myth would do after her: she exposed the infants, leaving them in the wilderness to die. She laid them beneath an oak tree on the mountainside, where the cold wind blew and the wolves roamed, and she turned away with tears streaming down her face. But the gods, or fate, or simple luck, had other plans.

A horse-keeper, leading his mares to pasture, heard the thin cry of infants above the wind. He found the two boys beneath the oak, their faces red with cold, their small hands clenched against the chill. As he gathered them up in his rough cloak, one of his mares grew startled by the sudden movement and kicked out. Her hoof caught the infant Pelias across the face, leaving a livid purple mark that would identify him forever. The horse-keeper named the wounded twin Pelias, which means "muddy" or "marked," and raised both boys as his own, alongside the colts and fillies of his stable. They grew up among horses, strong and wild as the creatures they lived among.

They grew strong and tall, as the children of gods tend to do, and eventually they learned the truth of their birth. They sought out their mother Tyro and discovered the cruelty she had endured at the hands of her stepmother **Sidero** (*si-DEH-roh*), who had tormented Tyro for years. The twins resolved to avenge their mother, and they pursued Sidero as she fled for sanctuary. She reached the precinct of **Hera** (*HEER-ah*), queen of Olympus, and threw herself upon the altar, grasping the sacred horns and begging for protection.

Pelias caught her there and cut her down upon the very stones of Hera's sanctuary. Blood ran across the altar of the goddess of marriage. This was not merely murder; it was sacrilege of the deepest kind, a pollution that no ritual could cleanse. Hera watched from

Olympus, and she never forgave Pelias. The goddess of marriage keeps her grudges longer than any other deity, and she would wait decades for her revenge. When Pelias needed divine favour most, Hera would ensure that it was denied him.[1]

The twin brothers could not share power for long. They quarreled, as brothers in myth so often do, and Neleus was driven into exile. He made his way to Messene in the southwestern Peloponnese, where he founded the city of **Pylus** (*PY-luhs*) and established a dynasty that would endure for generations. He married **Chloris** (*KLOR-is*), daughter of Amphion, and by her he had many sons: Taurus, Asterius, Pylaon, Deimachus, Eurybius, Epilaus, Phrasius, Eurymenes, Evagoras, Alastor, **Nestor** (*NES-tor*), and **Periclymenus** (*per-i-KLIM-eh-nuhs*).

Nestor, the youngest, would grow up to become the most famous of them all. His honey-sweet speeches would guide the Greek kings through the Trojan War, and his wisdom, earned through long years of living, would make him the counsellor every leader relied upon. Periclymenus received a gift from Poseidon: the power to change his shape at will, into a lion, a serpent, a bee, any living creature he chose. This gift would serve him well until the day he faced a hero greater than himself.

But our story must turn now to another branch of the Aeolid tree, to a man who could do something no other mortal could claim. **Melampus** (*meh-LAM-puhs*) was the son of **Amythaon** (*am-i-THAY-on*), and he lived in the countryside near Pylus, where before his house stood a great oak tree in which serpents had made their lair. When his servants killed the parent snakes, Melampus felt a strange pity for the orphaned young left behind in the hollow trunk. He gathered the wood and burned the bodies with proper rites, then raised the infant serpents with gentle care, feeding them on milk and honey until they grew strong and sleek.

One night as he slept beneath the stars, the serpents crawled to his sleeping mat and coiled upon his shoulders, one on each side. They stretched towards his ears and cleansed them with their forked tongues, licking away the wax and dust of mortal hearing. He woke in terror, thrashing to throw them off, but they had already vanished into the grass. And then he heard it: the conversation of the sparrows in the eaves, the gossip of the ants in their columns, the debates of the crows in the high branches. He could understand the speech of the birds overhead, the insects in the grass, the very wind as it moved through the leaves. The world had opened itself to him, and it was loud.[2]

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[1] The tradition of cataloguing mythological figures extends back to Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE), which lists hundreds of divine names in genealogical order. Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca* itself is, in part, a reference work — a library of stories organized for consultation rather than sequential reading. These tables continue that ancient tradition in modern form.

This was the origin of his prophetic gift, but it was not yet complete. Melampus would acquire the full power of divination only through patience and suffering. His brother **Bias** (*BY-as*) had fallen in love with **Pero** (*PEE-roh*), the beautiful daughter of Neleus, but Neleus refused all suitors unless they could bring him the cattle of **Phylacus** (*FY-la-kuhs*), which were guarded by a monstrous dog that no man could approach. Melampus volunteered to help his brother. He foresaw that he would be captured and imprisoned for a year, but he went anyway.

His prophecy came true in every detail. The cattle theft failed when the monstrous dog, larger than any wolf, cornered Melampus against a stone wall. He was thrown into a windowless cell, and there he remained for nearly a year, fed on bread and water, alone with the rats and the beetles. But in that darkness, his serpent-given gift deepened. He heard worms in the rafters above his head, discussing in their small, precise voices how much of the wooden beam they had gnawed through. One claimed the centre was hollow; another boasted that the beam would fall within days. Understanding that the cell would collapse and crush him, Melampus begged his jailers to move him to another chamber. They laughed at him but indulged his request out of boredom. Not long after, the roof of his former cell fell in with a tremendous crash.

Phylacus, astonished by this display of prophetic power, released Melampus and asked him to cure his son **Iphiclus** (*IF-i-k-luhs*), who had grown to manhood without the ability to father children. The kingdom needed an heir, and every physician had failed. Melampus sacrificed two bulls in the proper manner, their blood pooling in the dust, and summoned the birds of the air to feed upon the flesh. A great vulture descended, ancient and bald, and from it Melampus learned the truth. Years before, when Iphiclus was a small child, his father Phylacus had been gelding rams in the field. He laid his bloody knife down upon a stump, and the frightened boy had run away from him. Phylacus, annoyed, had stuck the knife into a sacred oak and forgotten it. The tree had grown around the blade, and from that moment, the boy's manhood had been symbolically trapped in the wood.

Melampus found the oak, located the knife buried deep in its trunk, and scraped the rust from the ancient blade. This rust he mixed into a draught and gave to Iphiclus to drink for ten days. On the tenth day, the young man's vigor returned, and within the year his wife bore him a son named Podarces. The kingdom had its heir, and Melampus had earned his reward.

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Grateful, Phylacus gave Melampus the cattle, and Melampus drove them to Pylus and claimed Pero for his brother. The transaction was complete: one year of imprisonment, one miraculous cure, one bride delivered.

The Aeolid Branch of Iolcus and Pylus	
Cretheus + Tyro	King and queen of Iolcus
Sons by Poseidon	Pelias (rules Iolcus) and Neleus (founds Pylus)
Sons by Cretheus	Aeson, Amythaon, Pheres
Neleus + Chloris	Children include Nestor and Periclymenus
Periclymenus	Gift of shape-changing from Poseidon
Nestor	Wise counsellor at Troy; survived because raised among Gerenians
Amythaon's sons	Bias and Melampus (the first seer)
Melampus	Cured Iphiclus; cured the Proetides; won Pylus kingdom share

Melampus would perform one more miracle that secured his place in history. When **Dionysus** drove the women of Argos mad, roaming the hills with bloody hands and torn clothing, their father **Proetus** begged Melampus to heal them. Melampus demanded a share of the kingdom as his fee, and with his combination of ritual knowledge, herbal remedies, and the wisdom he had gleaned from listening to the creatures of the earth, he restored the **Proetides** to their right minds. This is the first recorded act of what we might call psychiatric healing in Greek myth: the cure of madness through understanding, patience, and the natural world.

Meanwhile, Pelias ruled in Iolcus with a firm hand, and he was not an unpopular king. The city prospered under his governance. He married and had children of his own, including a daughter named **Alcestis** (*al-SES-tis*), whose beauty and virtue would become legendary. But the shadow of his crime at Hera's altar never lifted. He consulted the oracle at Delphi about his kingdom, and the god gave him a warning he did not fully understand: "Beware of the man who wears a single sandal."

Pelias puzzled over this prophecy. He watched the roads. He questioned travelers. But prophecies have a way of fulfilling themselves precisely when the recipient has stopped looking for them, and the man with one sandal was not yet old enough to walk the road to Iolcus. When he did come, he would bring with him a quest that would launch the greatest ship ever built, crew it with the noblest heroes in Greece, and set them all sailing towards the edge of the known world.

But that is a story for the next chapter.

Mythology Note: Divination in Ancient Greece The Greeks believed that prophecy was a gift from the gods, not an innate human talent. Melampus receives his power through the intervention of serpents, creatures associated with earth wisdom and chthonic knowledge. His method of curing madness - combining ritual, herbal medicine, and talk - mirrors the actual practices of Greek healers at sanctuaries like Epidaurus. The prophet-seer was not merely a fortune-teller but a healer, a mediator between the human and divine worlds, and a figure who used knowledge of nature to restore what the gods had disrupted.

Discussion Questions 1. Pelias kills Sidero at Hera's altar to avenge his mother, but the sacrilege ultimately destroys him. When does righteous vengeance become self-destructive, and how does Greek myth typically draw that line? 2. Melampus gains prophetic power through patience - first the snake ordeal, then a year in prison. What does this suggest about how the Greeks viewed wisdom: is it a gift or something earned through suffering? 3. Neleus and Pelias are twin sons of the same divine father, yet one becomes a wise king and the other a sacrilegious tyrant. How much of their fate is determined by their choices, and how much by the circumstances of their birth?

Chapter 10: Admetus and Alcestis; Jason Claims His Birthright

Not far from Iolcus, in the small kingdom of Pherae, a king named **Admetus** (*ad-MEE-tuhs*) had won the love of a god through a simple act of kindness. This was no small achievement. Gods do not love easily, and they remember every slight, but they also remember every gift. Admetus, you see, was the sort of man who treated everyone with decency, whether they arrived at his door in silk rags or noble robes.

It happened that **Apollo** (*ah-POL-oh*), the golden god of music and light, had found himself in temporary disgrace. As punishment for killing the **Cyclopes** who forged Zeus's thunderbolt, Apollo was banished from Olympus to serve as a mortal herdsman. He came to Pherae disguised as a wanderer, dust on his cloak and weariness in his step. Admetus received him without asking his name, offered him food and wine before any questions, and gave him a place by the fire. This is *xenia*, sacred hospitality, and Admetus practiced it

as though the gods themselves had written the rules into his heart. Which, of course, they had.[3]

Apollo served as Admetus's herdsman for a year and a day. During that time, every cow bore twins, every goat gave milk in abundance, and the fields grew greener than they had in a generation. When the god finally revealed himself in a blaze of unearthly light, Admetus did not fall to his knees in terror. He simply smiled and said, "I hoped you might be someone extraordinary."

Apollo, touched by this genuine warmth, offered his host any gift within his power. Admetus asked only for the hand of **Alcestis** (*al-SES-tis*), the beautiful daughter of **Pelias** (*PEE-lee-as*). She was not easily won. Pelias had set an impossible condition for her suitors: they must yoke a lion and a boar to a chariot and drive them around the city. No mortal man could do this. But Apollo, ever resourceful, guided Admetus through the ordeal. The lion and the boar stood in the traces, their fury held in check by divine will, and Admetus drove his strange team around the walls of Iolcus while the people watched in wonder. Alcestis came to Pherae as his bride.

But in the joy of his wedding day, Admetus forgot one thing. He neglected to sacrifice to **Artemis** (*ar-TEE-mis*), goddess of the hunt and the untamed places. This was not mere oversight; it was an invitation. When the newlyweds entered their bedchamber that night, they found it writhing with serpents. Coils of venomous shadow filled the room, and the marriage bed itself seemed alive with danger. Admetus cried out to Apollo, who had sworn to protect him. The god came at once and cleansed the chamber, but he could not undo what Artemis's displeasure had set in motion. The Fates had already begun to measure a shorter thread for Admetus's life.

Apollo did something extraordinary then. He went to the three **Moirai** (*MOY-rye*), the Fates who spin and measure and cut the thread of every life, and he offered them wine. Sweet, potent wine that made even the ancient goddesses of destiny grow sleepy and soft. In their altered state, Apollo bargained with them. Admetus could live, they agreed, but only if someone else would willingly die in his place. When the day came, someone had to choose death so that Admetus might continue to walk in the sunlight.

That day arrived sooner than anyone expected. Admetus fell ill, and the physicians could do nothing. His old parents were asked. They refused. His friends, his companions, the nobles of his court, all found reasons why they could not go. Only Alcestis stepped

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forward. She was young and beautiful and in love, and she looked at her husband with eyes that held no hesitation. “I will go,” she said. “Not because death is nothing to me, but because your life means more than my own.”

She descended towards death as towards a sleep, growing pale and still upon her bed. The household wept. Admetus wept hardest of all, for he realised too late what he had accepted. He had let her go. He had not stopped her. He had not said, “No, I will face it myself.” And now she was gone, and he had to live with that knowledge.

Salvation came from an unexpected source. **Heracles** (*HER-a-kleez*), the greatest hero in Greece, happened to be passing through Pherae on his way to one of his labours. Admetus, ever the perfect host, concealed his grief and welcomed Heracles with the same generosity he had shown Apollo. He would not let his personal sorrow violate the sacred laws of hospitality. Heracles, feasting in the hall while the household wore mourning, soon learned the truth from a servant. He was furious that Admetus had hidden his pain, and deeply moved by Alcestis’s sacrifice.

Heracles went to her tomb. There, in the darkness before dawn, he wrestled with **Thanatos** (*THAH-nah-tos*), Death itself. The struggle was terrible, bone against bone, will against will. But Heracles was not called the strongest man alive for nothing. He pinned Thanatos and forced him to release Alcestis’s spirit. She returned to the world of the living, pale but breathing, and Admetus wept tears of a joy he had never expected to feel again.

> **Mythology Note: Xenia - The Sacred Guest-Friendship** Xenia was the most important social institution in ancient Greece. Zeus himself bore the title *Xenios*, protector of strangers. To offer hospitality was a religious duty; to accept it created a bond that could be inherited by children and grandchildren. Nearly every major myth involves xenia in some form. Paris’s violation of Menelaus’s hospitality by stealing Helen launched the Trojan War. Admetus’s exemplary xenia is rewarded not once but twice: first with Apollo’s friendship, then with Heracles’s rescue of his wife.

But our story must turn now to Iolcus, where a different kind of fate was unfolding. **Aeson** (*EE-son*), the rightful king of Iolcus, had been overthrown by his half-brother Pelias. Fearing for his infant son’s life, Aeson had the baby smuggled out of the city to the slopes of Mount Pelion, where **Chiron** (*KY-ron*), the wisest of the centaurs, agreed to raise him. The child was named **Jason** (*JAY-son*), and he grew up among centaurs, learning everything a hero needs to know: how to throw a spear, how to play the lyre, how to track a deer through autumn leaves, and how to recognise a god in disguise.

When Jason came of age, Chiron told him the truth of his birth. The young man set out for Iolcus to claim his throne. On the road, he came to the river **Anaurus** (*ah-NOW-ros*), where an old woman sat on the bank, weeping because she could not cross. Jason, being well brought up, offered her his shoulder and waded into the current. The water was deeper than it looked, and the current strong. Midway across, Jason lost one of his sandals, which the river carried away into the mud. He did not turn back for it. He helped the old woman to the far bank, made sure she was steady on her feet, and continued on his way with one bare foot.

The old woman was not what she seemed. She was **Hera** (*HEER-ah*), queen of Olympus, and she had been waiting for just such a young man. Pelias had committed a terrible sacrilege years before, killing Hera's suppliant upon her very altar. The goddess never forgot, and she never forgave. Jason's simple act of kindness, offered to a seemingly powerless old woman, had earned him the most powerful enemy Pelias could imagine. Hera would support him in everything that followed, guiding events towards the destruction of the usurper king.[4]

Jason entered Iolcus with one sandal on his foot and destiny on his shoulders. Pelias received him in the great hall, and when he saw the single sandal, the colour drained from his face. The oracle had warned him: "Beware of the man who wears a single sandal." Here that man stood, young and confident, the very image of the threat he had feared for decades.

But Pelias was cunning. He would not kill his nephew outright and risk divine punishment for shedding kindred blood. Instead, he smiled and spread his hands in a gesture of welcome. "You have come to claim your father's throne," he said. "And you shall have it, my boy. You shall have it, if you complete one small task for me."

"Name it," said Jason, who was brave but not yet wise.

"Bring me the **Golden Fleece** from Colchis." Pelias spoke the words as though asking for a cup of wine. "The fleece of the golden ram that carried **Phrixus** to safety. It hangs in a grove sacred to Ares at the edge of the known world. Bring it to me, and I will yield the throne of Iolcus without argument."

It was a sentence of death disguised as a quest. Colchis lay at the eastern edge of the world, beyond mountains and seas that no Greek ship had ever crossed. The fleece was

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guarded by a sleepless dragon. No mortal could retrieve it. Pelias had just sent Jason on a mission from which no man could return.

But Jason was young, and the young do not know what is impossible. He travelled to the harbor of **Pagasae** (*pa-GAH-see*), near Iolcus, and there he summoned the greatest heroes of Greece. And they came. Word spread like wildfire through the cities and countryside: a quest was forming, the greatest adventure since the world began.

The shipbuilder **Argus** (*AR-gus*), with the goddess **Athena** (*ah-THEE-nah*) whispering instructions in his ear, constructed a vessel unlike any before it. Fifty oars it had, and a prow carved from the sacred oak of **Dodona** (*doh-DOH-nah*). This was no ordinary timber. The oaks of Dodona were the oldest oracles in Greece, and the wood could speak. When Athena fitted the talking prow to the ship, it became a vessel of prophecy as well as a ship of war. The ship was named the **Argo** (*AR-go*), after its builder, and its launch was blessed by the goddess herself.

The Argonauts - The Crew of the Argo

Hero	Parentage	Special Ability or Notable Feature
Jason (captain)	Son of Aeson; raised by Chiron	Charismatic leader; favored by Hera
Heracles	Son of Zeus and Alcmena	The strongest man alive; completed many labours
Orpheus	Son of Calliope (a Muse)	Music that can charm beasts and move stones
Castor and Polydeuces (Pollux)	Sons of Zeus and Leda	Boxing and horsemanship; the Dioscuri
Atalanta	Daughter of Schoeneus	Swiftest runner in Greece; first woman among the crew
Peleus	Son of Aeacus	Father of Achilles; destined to marry Thetis
Telamon	Son of Aeacus	Father of Ajax; great warrior
Zetes and Calais (the Boreads)	Sons of Boreas (North Wind)	Winged feet; can fly
Meleager	Son of Oeneus	Killed the Calydonian Boar
Laertes	Son of Arcesius	Father of Odysseus
Idmon (the seer)	Son of Apollo	Prophetic gift; foresees his own death
Argus (the builder)	Son of Arestor	Built the Argo with Athena's

The Argonauts - The Crew of the Argo

		guidance
Tiphys (the helmsman)	Son of Hagnias	Unmatched skill at steering
Echion and Erytus	Sons of Hermes	Sons of the messenger god
Lynceus	Son of Aphareus	Eyesight so keen he could see through walls
Ancaeus	Son of Poseidon	Great strength; a helmsman
Admetus	Son of Pheres	King of Pherae; survivor of Alcestis's sacrifice
Asclepius	Son of Apollo	The greatest healer in Greece

The list could go on for pages. In some versions there are forty heroes, in others fifty or more. Nearly every great name in the generation before the Trojan War answered Jason's call. What drew them was not merely the promise of glory but the nature of the quest itself. The Golden Fleece was more than a treasure. It was a symbol of rightful kingship, a connection to the divine, and a prize that would prove the worth of any man bold enough to claim it.[5]

And so the Argo was built, the greatest ship ever launched. Its talking prow gleamed in the Thessalian sun. Its oars were manned by the noblest heroes Greece had ever assembled. When Jason stepped aboard and grasped the helm, the oak of Dodona whispered a single word that only he could hear: "Sail."

The Argo slipped its moorings and caught the wind, bound for the edge of the world.

Discussion Questions 1. Alcestis volunteers to die for Admetus, but no one else, including Admetus himself, is willing to make that sacrifice. What does this story say about the nature of true love versus the fear of death? 2. Jason receives Hera's favour because he helps an old woman cross a river, not because of any grand heroic deed. What does this suggest about how Greek myth defines heroism? 3. Pelias tries to destroy Jason by sending him on an impossible quest

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rather than killing him directly. How does this pattern of prophecy-avoidance compare to other figures in myth who tried to escape their fates (Cronus, Acrisius, Laius)?

Chapter 11: The Voyage of the Argo - To the Edge of the World

The **Argo** (*AR-go*) sailed from Pagasae on a morning when the wind favored adventure. Its crew of heroes pulled at the oars in perfect rhythm, and the talking prow, carved from the sacred oak of Dodona, creaked and murmured prophecies that only Jason could interpret. Behind them lay the harbor of Iolcus and the unresolved quarrel with Pelias. Ahead lay the unknown.

Their first port of call was the island of **Lemnos** (*LEM-nos*), and it was a strange one. The women of Lemnos had done something terrible. Angered by their husbands' preference for Thracian slave girls, they had killed every male on the island in a single night. Mothers killed sons. Wives killed husbands. The island had become a place of only women, ruled by the young queen **Hypsipyle** (*hip-SIP-i-lee*). When the Argo appeared in their harbor, the Lemnian women faced a choice: treat these strangers as enemies, or welcome them as something their island desperately needed.

Hypsipyle chose welcome. The Argonauts stayed on Lemnos far longer than a simple resupply required. Jason himself fathered twin sons by Hypsipyle, though he did not know it when the ship eventually sailed on. The island interlude is the last moment of uncomplicated pleasure in this story. After Lemnos, the voyage would grow steadily darker.

The Argonauts' Route - Stops and Significance

Stop	What Happened	Key Characters
Lemnos	Island of women who killed all men; Jason fathers twins	Hypsipyle (queen)
Cyzicus (Doliones)	Friendly reception; storm blows them back; friendly fire kills king Cyzicus	Cyzicus (young king)
Mysia	Hylas taken by nymphs; Heracles left behind	Hylas, Heracles
Bebryces	Boxing match; Pollux kills King Amycus	Amycus, Polydeuces

The Argonauts' Route - Stops and Significance

		(Pollux)
Salmydessus	Phineus freed from Harpies; gives prophecy	Phineus, the Boreads
Symplegades	The Clashing Rocks; dove loses tail feathers; they scrape through	Athena's aid
Colchis	Three tasks completed; Medea falls in love; fleece taken	Aeetes, Medea, Eros

The next landfall was the country of the **Doliones** (*DOH-lih-on-eez*), a friendly people ruled by the young king **Cyzicus** (*SIZ-i-kuss*). He welcomed the Argonauts with open arms, fed them in his hall, and exchanged gifts as the laws of *xenia* demanded. They departed on favorable terms, and Cyzicus stood on the shore waving farewell.

But a storm rose that night and blew the Argo back towards the very harbor they had left. In the darkness, neither crew recognised the other. The Doliones, thinking pirates were attacking, rushed to defend their coast. The Argonauts, thinking they had stumbled into hostile territory, fought back. In the confusion of torches and rain, Jason ran his spear through Cyzicus before he recognised the young king's face. When dawn came and the truth was visible, the grief was terrible on both sides. Cyzicus's young bride **Cleite** (*KLY-tee*) killed herself in sorrow. The Argonauts held funeral games and mourned deeply, for this was the first blood on their hands, and it was the blood of a friend. The oak prow spoke no comfort. Some wounds, it seemed to say, do not heal with distance.

After the Doliones came Mysia, and here the crew suffered its greatest loss. **Hylas** (*HY-las*), the beautiful young companion of Heracles, went ashore to fetch water from a spring. The nymphs of that spring saw him bending over the water, his face reflected in the pool like a fallen star, and they desired him. They reached up from the depths and pulled him down into their watery realm. Heracles, hearing his companion's last cry, plunged into the forest searching frantically, tearing up trees by their roots and calling Hylas's name until his voice grew hoarse. But Hylas was gone. The nymphs had claimed him, and in the world of Greek myth, when the nymphs take someone, they do not give him back.

The Argo could not wait. The crew argued about it, but the talking prow counseled departure, and Jason made the hard choice. They sailed without Heracles and his companion **Polyphemus** (*pol-i-FEE-muss*), who had also gone ashore to search. This is one of the most debated moments in the myth. Some say Heracles rejoined the crew later; others say he never forgave the departure. What matters is that the greatest hero in Greece was no longer aboard, and the Argonauts felt his absence like a missing limb.

Their next challenge came at the hands of a brute named **Amycus** (*AM-i-kuss*), king of the **Bebryces** (*BEH-bri-seez*). Amycus had a habit of challenging every stranger to a boxing match, and he always won because he was enormous and cruel. He stood on the shore and demanded that the Argonauts send their best boxer against him. **Polydeuces** (*pol-i-DYOO-seez*), also called Pollux, one of the **Dioscuri** (*dy-oh-SKOO-rye*), stepped forward. He was not the largest man on the crew, but he was the finest boxer. The fight was brutal. Amycus fought dirty, as bullies do, but Polydeuces was faster and smarter. He waited for an opening and struck Amycus a killing blow to the elbow, following through with a punch to the temple that sent the brute down into the sand, where he would never rise again. The Bebryces scattered, and the Argonauts resupplied in peace.

They sailed next to **Salmydessus** (*sal-mi-DES-sus*), where they found a sight that stopped even these hardened men in their tracks. **Phineus** (*FIN-yoo-uhs*), a blind prophet of Thrace, sat at a table spread with food he could not eat. Every time he reached for bread, the **Harpies** (*HAR-peez*), filthy winged creatures with women's faces and vultures' bodies, swooped down and snatched the food from his hands. What they could not carry away they defiled with their stench, making it unfit for any living thing. Phineus was starving in the midst of plenty, his punishment from Zeus for revealing too much of the future to mortals.

The Argonauts were moved to pity. The **Boreads** (*boh-REE-ads*), Zetes and Calais, the winged sons of the North Wind, volunteered to chase the Harpies away. They took to the air on their feathered feet, and the pursuit was spectacular, three winged forms wheeling and diving across the Thracian sky. The Boreads drove the Harpies to the **Strophades** (*STROH-fa-deez*), islands where they were forbidden to return. In gratitude, Phineus gave the Argonauts the prophecy they needed. He told them of the **Symplegades** (*sim-PLEG-a-deez*), the Clashing Rocks that guarded the entrance to the Black Sea, and he told them how to pass them. "Send a dove first," he said. "Watch what happens to her. Then row as you have never rowed before."[6]

They reached the Symplegades, and the sight was enough to turn a brave man's bowels to water. Two massive rocks stood on either side of the narrow strait, and they were not still. They crashed together with a sound like the end of the world, grinding any ship between them to splinters, then recoiling only to crash again. This was the gateway to Colchis, and it was a killing machine.

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[6] The Latin alphabet itself adapted Greek letters, so many spellings reflect Roman rather than Greek usage. *Heracles* (Greek) became *Hercules* (Latin); *Aphrodite* stayed closer to the Greek, while *Jupiter* replaced *Zeus* entirely. This guide uses the Greek forms that appear throughout this book, with Latinized variants noted only where they differ significantly.

Jason released a dove as Phineus had instructed. She flew true and fast, darting between the rocks. The Symplegades crashed together, and she was through, but barely. The rocks caught her tail feathers, stripping them away. She flew on, alive but bare, a tailless bird from that day forward.

“Now!” cried Jason. “Row! Row as if your lives depend on it! Because they do!”

The heroes pulled at their oars with a strength born of terror. The Argo shot forward like a thrown spear. The rocks crashed together behind the stern, then parted, then began to close again. It was going to be close. Too close. But **Athena** (*ah-THEE-nah*), who had guided the ship from its building, reached down from Olympus and held the rocks apart with her divine hands. The Argo scraped through, losing only a fragment of her stern ornament. But she was through. The Symplegades would never close again after that, or so the story goes. Once a ship has passed, the challenge is defeated forever.

After many more days of sailing, they reached the river **Phasis** (*FAY-sis*) and the kingdom of **Colchis** (*KOL-kis*), at the edge of the known world. Here everything was different: the language, the customs, the very smell of the air. The fleece was close. They could feel it.

King **Aeetes** (*ay-EE-teez*) received them in his brazen hall. He was the son of **Helios** (*HEE-lee-os*), the Sun, and his eyes burned with a light that was not entirely mortal. When Jason asked for the fleece, Aeetes smiled a smile that did not reach his eyes. “You want my fleece? Very well. Prove yourselves worthy.” He set three tasks that no mortal should have been able to complete.

First, Jason must yoke two fire-breathing bulls of bronze, their hooves solid iron, their breath like the forge of **Hephaestus** (*hef-EES-tus*). Second, he must sow the teeth of the dragon that **Cadmus** (*KAD-mus*) had once slain in the field before Thebes. From each tooth would spring an armed warrior, and they would attack the sower. Third, he must defeat these earth-born men, who were experienced fighters and would show no mercy.

Jason despaired. He was brave, but he was not a sorcerer. Fire-breathing bulls could not be tamed by courage alone.

But **Medea** (*meh-DEE-uh*), the daughter of Aeetes, had already seen Jason, and what she saw burned through her like wildfire. Hera, watching from Olympus, had asked **Eros** (*AIR-os*), the primordial force of desire, to make Medea fall in love with the young Greek captain. Eros obliged, as he always does. His arrow struck Medea’s heart, and from that moment she was lost. Love in Greek myth is not gentle. It is a force that overrides reason, duty, and self-preservation. Medea, granddaughter of the Sun, skilled in all the arts of

magic and herbal lore, would betray everything she loved for a man she had only just seen.[7]

She came to Jason in secret by night. She was beautiful and terrifying, her dark hair scented with eastern spices, her eyes holding depths of knowledge that made Jason shiver. She gave him a jar of magic ointment, a gift of her own making. “Anoint your body and your weapons with this,” she told him. “It will protect you from the fire of the bulls for one day.”

“And the earth-born warriors?” Jason asked.

“Throw a stone among them,” she said. “They will not know who threw it. They will turn on each other, thinking one of their own struck the first blow. Born of the earth, they have no minds of their own. They are easily confused.”

“Why are you helping me?” Jason asked, though he already knew. He could see it in her face, the same desperate hunger that Eros inflicts on all his victims.

Medea looked at him with eyes that held no artifice. “Because I would rather be dead than live without you.”

The next day, Jason anointed himself with Medea’s ointment. It smelled of strange herbs and something older than herbs, something that prickled the skin and made the air around him shimmer. He approached the fire-breathing bulls, and when they roared flame at him, the fire parted around his body like water around a stone. He yoked them to a plow of iron and drove them through the field, sowing the dragon’s teeth behind him. The earth rumbled. Armed men sprang from the soil, fully armoured, their spears already bloodthirsty.

Jason remembered Medea’s instruction. He picked up a stone and threw it into their midst. The earth-born warriors turned on each other in confusion, cutting each other down until none remained. It was over.

But Aeetes had no intention of honouring his bargain. He planned to kill the Argonauts and keep the fleece. Medea learned of his plan and led Jason by night to the grove of Ares where the fleece hung upon an oak tree. Guarding it was a dragon that never slept, whose scales gleamed like burnished bronze in the moonlight. No weapon could pierce it. No trickery could deceive it.

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[7] The tradition of cataloguing mythological figures extends back to Hesiod’s *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE), which lists hundreds of divine names in genealogical order. Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca* itself is, in part, a reference work — a library of stories organized for consultation rather than sequential reading. These tables continue that ancient tradition in modern form.

Medea stepped forward. She began to sing, a low, ancient melody that had been taught to her by her aunt **Circe** (*SIR-see*), the greatest witch in the world. She sprinkled herbs she had prepared, and the air filled with a sweet, heavy scent. The dragon's eyes grew heavy. Its head sank towards its coils. Still it tried to resist, but Medea's magic was too strong. The sleepless dragon fell into enchanted sleep.

Jason reached up and took the Golden Fleece from the oak branch. It was heavier than he expected, and warm to the touch, as though it held the life of the golden ram from which it had been taken. In the moonlight, it glowed with its own radiance.

They ran. Medea went with them, forsaking her father, her country, and everything she had ever known for the sake of a love that had been planted in her heart by a god's arrow. She did not look back. If she had, she might have seen Aeetes's face in his palace window, already planning pursuit and revenge.

The fleece was theirs. But the greatest danger awaited them not in Colchis, but in the heart of a princess whose magic had saved the quest, and would now demand a price that no one had foreseen.

Mythology Note: Apollonius Rhodius and the Argonautica The most famous ancient telling of the Argonauts' voyage is the *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes, a Hellenistic epic that deliberately echoes Homer's style. Apollonius gives full dramatic treatment to Medea's psychology, making her one of the first truly complex female characters in Western literature. Apollodorus, writing his *Bibliotheca* centuries later, compresses the voyage into a concise narrative summary. Our retelling draws on both traditions, restoring some of Apollonius's character depth to Apollodorus's more compressed account.

Discussion Questions 1. The Argonauts accidentally kill King Cyzicus, a friend, in a case of mistaken identity. How does this event change the tone of the voyage? What does it suggest about the nature of heroism? 2. Medea helps Jason because Eros has made her fall in love with him. To what extent is she responsible for her actions if they are caused by divine manipulation? 3. The Argonauts must leave Heracles behind at Mysia. Is Jason's decision to sail without him an act of necessary leadership or a betrayal of a comrade?

Chapter 12: The Return of the Argonauts - Love, Betrayal, and Aftermath

The fleece was theirs. But the way home would demand a price no one had foreseen.

King **Aeetes** (*ay-EE-teez*) pursued them with his fleet, and the Argonauts could not outrun him. The oarsmen were exhausted. The wind had turned against them. In the desperate space between capture and escape, **Medea** (*meh-DEE-uh*) made a choice that would mark her forever.

Her brother **Apsyrtus** (*ap-SIR-tuhs*), young and brave, had led part of the pursuit force. Medea arranged a parley on a nearby island. She lured him there with promises of negotiation, and when he came, trusting his sister as brothers do, she and Jason ambushed him. The killing itself was quick, but what followed was the act of a mind pushed past every boundary of conscience. Medea cut her brother's body into pieces and threw the fragments into the sea behind their fleeing ship.

It worked. Aeetes, reaching the bloody water, could not continue the pursuit. He stopped to gather the remains of his son, to give him the burial that scattered pieces denied. The Argonauts escaped into open water, but the silence on the Argo was absolute. The heroes looked at Medea with new eyes. They had seen what she was capable of when cornered. They had seen that her love for Jason was not gentle or soft. It was a force that could override every natural bond, including the bond between siblings.

This was murder. It required purification. The talking prow guided them to the island of **Aeaea** (*ay-EE-ah*), where **Circe** (*SIR-see*), Medea's aunt, dwelled in a palace surrounded by tame wolves and lions, men transformed by her magic. Circe was older than Medea by generations, and her power was the kind that came from long practice rather than raw talent. She performed the rites of cleansing, washing the blood-guilt from Jason and Medea with seawater and prayers, burning barley and honey, chanting words that had no translation in any mortal tongue.

But the reunion of aunt and niece was tense. Circe looked at Medea with eyes that knew too much. She saw where this love was leading. She had lived centuries watching young women destroy themselves for passion, watching them trade kingdoms and families and honour for men who would eventually forget their names. She saw the same pattern forming in her niece's face, the same desperate light in the eyes. She said nothing aloud, but when Medea turned away, Circe whispered a prayer to the old gods of the earth, the ones who had no names and no thrones but who listened to women in extremity. Some knowledge is too heavy to share, and some paths cannot be avoided by warning.

They sailed on, past the island of the **Sirens** (*SY-renz*), whose song promised knowledge of all things. Every man who heard their melody steered his ship towards the rocks, driven

by a desire to hear just one more note, to know just one more secret. The Argonauts would have joined that company of the drowned if not for **Orpheus** (*OR-fee-us*). He struck his lyre and sang a counter-melody so powerful, so achingly beautiful, that it drowned the Sirens' voices in a wave of competing music. The men rowed on, their ears filled with Orpheus's song, their hearts torn between two kinds of enchantment.

Only one man fell. **Butes** (*BYOO-teez*), a minor hero, leaped overboard and swam towards the Sirens' shore. He would have been dashed on the rocks, but **Aphrodite** (*af-roh-DY-tee*), goddess of love, caught him up and carried him to safety. She had her own plans for him.

They passed **Scylla** (*SKIL-ah*) and **Charybdis** (*kah-RIB-dis*), the monster and the whirlpool, steering between them with the precision of desperate men. Scylla's six heads snapped at their oars, and Charybdis's whirlpool churned like a drain in the sea itself, but **Tiphys** (*TIF-is*), the helmsman, found the narrow thread of safe water and held to it with steady hands. They survived the **Wandering Rocks**, which shifted and crashed like the Symplegades they had already conquered, the water between them boiling with displaced fury. They passed the island of the Sun's cattle, where the sacred oxen of **Helios** (*HEE-lee-os*) grazed on emerald grass, their hides gleaming in the perpetual light. Odysseus's men would later eat these cattle and be destroyed for it. The Argonauts, warned by the talking prow, did not touch them. They were learning that survival in the mythic world requires restraint as much as courage, and that some temptations are not worth the price they exact.

The last guardian stood at Crete. **Talos** (*TAL-os*) was a bronze giant, the last survivor of an ancient race of automata forged by Hephaestus. He patrolled the island's shores, hurling boulders at any ship that approached. A single vein ran from his neck to his ankle, sealed with a bronze nail, and through this vein flowed **ichor** (*EYE-kor*), the divine blood of the gods. Talos was nearly invulnerable.

Medea stepped forward once more. She spoke to the giant with her witch's voice, weaving words of power and confusion. She called upon the spirits of death and dissolution, and Talos, who had walked the shores of Crete for centuries without injury, felt something he had never known before: doubt. He staggered. In his confusion, he struck his ankle against a sharp rock. The bronze nail that sealed his divine vein was jarred loose. Ichor, bright as molten gold, poured from the wound. Talos tried to stop it, pressing his bronze hands against the leak, but the life flowed out of him. He fell with a crash that shook the Cretan shore, and the bronze giant lay still. The last guardian was gone.[8]

[8] The Latin alphabet itself adapted Greek letters, so many spellings reflect Roman rather than Greek usage. *Heracles* (Greek) became *Hercules* (Latin); *Aphrodite* stayed closer to the Greek, while *Jupiter* replaced *Zeus* entirely. This guide uses the Greek forms that appear throughout this book, with Latinized variants noted only where they differ significantly.

The Argo sailed into Pagasae harbor to rejoicing. Jason had the fleece. He had survived the edge of the world. But the quest was not yet complete. Pelias still sat on the throne of Iolcus, and he had no intention of yielding it.

Medea devised the plan. She went to Pelias's daughters and demonstrated her magic with a convincing display. She took an old ram, cut it into pieces, and cast the pieces into a cauldron of boiling water with herbs of her own preparation. From the cauldron emerged not the old ram but a young lamb, frisking and new. The daughters were amazed. Medea told them they could do the same for their father, make him young again, restore his vigor and strength.

The daughters wanted to believe. Pelias was old. His death would come soon enough without magic. But they could not bear to watch their father weaken. They took him at Medea's word, and in their gullibility and love, they cut their father into pieces and boiled him in the cauldron. No young man emerged. Pelias was dead, destroyed by his own daughters' hands, manipulated by a sorceress who knew exactly how to turn love into murder.

This was Jason's revenge, but it was Medea's method, and the distinction mattered. Iolcus was not grateful. The people saw a foreign witch who had brought violence into their royal house. Jason and Medea were exiled, driven out with their children and a few possessions, crossing the isthmus to Corinth in the grey light of early autumn. They made their way to that prosperous city, where King Creon received them with the tolerance that powerful kings show towards useful exiles.

For ten years they lived in Corinth. Two sons were born to them, boys with their father's dark hair and their mother's burning eyes. For a decade, Medea was simply a wife and mother, her magic put away in wooden chests, her foreign ways gradually softening into the patterns of Greek life. She made friends among the Corinthian women. She learned their customs, their festivals, their ways of weaving and cooking. It was, in its way, the happiest period of her existence, though happiness built on murder and deception is a fragile thing, and Medea must have known, somewhere in the depths of her wisdom, that the peace could not last. Women like Medea do not get to live quiet lives. The gods do not permit it.

Then Jason committed the betrayal that would destroy everything.

He had grown older. The wild youth who had sailed to the edge of the world was gone, replaced by a man who measured his life in practicalities. His heroic youth was behind him, and he wanted the security that a royal alliance could bring. **Creon** (*KREE-on*), king of Corinth, had a daughter named **Glauce** (*GLAW-see*), young and beautiful and politically useful. Jason decided to marry her, casting Medea aside not with cruelty but with the particular cowardice of men who want to avoid scenes. He told Medea it was for the best,

that the marriage would secure their sons' futures, that she must understand, that he was doing this for all of them. He spoke the words men have always spoken when they discard the women who made their success possible, the words that sound like reason but taste like ash.

Medea's response was terrible in its precision. She sent Glauce a wedding gift: a golden robe and crown of extraordinary beauty. When the young bride put them on, the enchanted garments caught fire. They did not merely burn; they consumed, a fire that water could not extinguish, a fire that clung to flesh and devoured it. Glauce burned alive, and her father Creon, trying to tear the burning garments from her body, caught the flames himself and died alongside his daughter.

> **Content Warning: The Death of Children** The myth of Medea includes the most difficult act in all Greek mythology: the killing of her own children by Jason. In the following passage, this act is not described in detail, as would be inappropriate for readers of any age. What matters is the consequence: that grief and rage, when pushed past all limits, can lead a person to commit the unforgivable, and that the act itself transforms Medea from wronged woman into something beyond simple moral categories. Both victim and villain, Medea becomes the ultimate tragic figure of Greek myth.

Then Medea did the unthinkable.

In her grief and rage, in the shattered ruins of a love that had demanded everything and received betrayal in return, Medea committed the one act from which no mother, however wronged, can ever return. The details are best left in silence. What matters is the consequence: Corinth was forever changed, the sound of women's lamentation rising from every house. Medea, who had given up country, father, and brother for Jason, now destroyed the last thing that bound them together. She did not do it coldly. She wept even as she did it, which makes the act not better but more terrible. She was not a monster when she began. She became one through suffering.

Helios (*HEE-lee-os*), her grandfather, the Sun himself, sent her a chariot drawn by dragons, winged serpents that breathed smoke and fire. She stepped into the chariot and rose into the air, leaving Jason on the ground below with nothing but ashes and the ruins of every life he had touched. He called after her, but the dragon wings beat on, carrying her eastward, away from Greece and into the lands where the sun rises.

She found refuge in Athens, where she married King **Aegeus** (*ay-JEE-us*), father of the hero **Theseus** (*THEE-see-us*). For a time she lived as queen, her magic hidden, her past unspoken. But when young Theseus came to claim his birthright, Medea recognised a threat. She tried to poison him, arranging for him to drink a cup of lethal wine at a feast. Theseus survived only because his father, at the last moment, recognised the sword

Theseus carried and dashed the cup from his lips. Medea fled again, disappearing into the eastern lands from which she had come.[9]

> **Mythology Note: Medea in Greek Tragedy - Euripides's Transformation**
> Medea's story reached its most powerful expression in Euripides's tragedy *Medea* (431 BCE), which transformed her from a helper-witch into one of the most complex figures in Western drama. In Euripides's version, Medea is not merely a wronged woman seeking revenge; she is a conscious agent who debates her own actions, understands their horror, and commits them anyway. The play forces its audience to ask whether a society that gives women no power except through marriage and motherhood drives them to monstrous extremes. Euripides was controversial in his own time for making a child-killer the sympathetic centre of his play. The question he poses remains alive today: when justice is unavailable, what remains? And what does a person become when they choose vengeance over everything else?

Jason's end was smaller than his beginning. Without Medea's magic, without Hera's favour, he faded into obscurity. Years later, while sitting beneath the rotting hull of the Argo, which had been drawn up on shore and dedicated to **Poseidon** (*poh-SYE-don*), a piece of the decaying timber fell and struck him dead. The ship that had carried him to glory became the instrument of his end. It was, in its way, a fitting conclusion for a man whose greatness had always depended on others.

Medea disappeared into the east, beyond the reach of Greek storytelling. Some say she found peace in the kingdoms of Asia. Others say she lived forever, sustained by her grandfather's blood, watching the centuries pass. Her story became a warning and a mystery: the woman who sacrificed everything for love and found that love was not enough. The woman who saved a quest and destroyed everything after it.

But in Argos, another hero was about to be born. And the age of monsters was not yet done.

> **Discussion Questions** 1. Medea is both the greatest victim and the greatest villain of the Argonauts' story. Can a person be both simultaneously? Does

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understanding her suffering excuse her actions? 2. Jason's downfall comes after he no longer needs Medea's help. What does this say about relationships based on utility rather than genuine equality? 3. Euripides wrote his *Medea* nearly 800 years after the myths first circulated. Why do you think this particular story remained so powerful for so long, and what does it say about ancient Greek attitudes towards justice, gender, and revenge?

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