

had in mind for them. The couple walked calmly along the track left by Circe until they reached the sorceress's hall. Circe was waiting, and ordered Jason and Medea to sit on brightly burnished seats by the hearth. Neither looked Circe in the eyes, Medea going so far as to hide her face in her hands, while Jason fixed his stare on his sword that he placed between himself and the sorceress.

Circe immediately recognized the guilt of Jason and Medea, and began the rituals that would cleanse them of their crimes. She sacrificed a newborn piglet, and drizzled its blood on their hands while calling on Zeus to hear her prayer, then prepared drinks and cakes to appease the gods and keep the Furies away from the couple. With the ritual complete, Circe sat opposite Jason and Medea. Recognizing a kindred spirit in the younger sorceress, Circe asked them about their journey and why they had come to her island asking for help.

Medea told almost the whole story, leaving out the murder of Apsyrtus, but Circe had already guessed at the hidden truth of Medea's guilt. Circe chastised Medea for this shameful deed of which she would never approve, adding that Aeëtes would not rest in his thirst for revenge, even if that meant going to Greece. With that, Circe dismissed Medea from her presence, telling her to take Jason with her. Medea was inconsolable at Circe's harangue, so it was left to Jason to take her hand and lead Medea away from Circe's home.

The couple picked their way back to the *Argo*, but their leaving Circe's hall had been noted by Iris, a messenger of Hera, who quickly returned to the goddess to make her report.

Hera had work to do if she was to help Jason reach his homeland safely. When Iris returned, Hera told her to ask Thetis, the water nymph, to come and see her, and then to tell Hephaestus, whose forge stood on a nearby beach, to hold off the blasts from his fires and let the *Argo* pass. From there, Iris was to ask Aeolus, ruler of the winds, to cease all winds except for the west wind, so that the Argonauts could reach the island of Alcinaus unmolested. Iris sprang into action and delivered her messages. Hephaestus and Aeolus agreed to Hera's requests, and Thetis soon arrived at Olympus, where Hera had specific instructions for her.

Thetis listened while Hera told her of Jason's voyage so far and how he would need more help to get through the trials still to come. The winds and fires of Hephaestus's forge had already been taken care of, Hera continued, but she wanted Thetis and her sisters, the Nereids, to assist the *Argo* through the twin horrors of Scylla and Charybdis.

Thetis readily acceded to Hera's request, and dived into the sea to meet with her sisters. When she had explained the plan and sent them out to the Ausonian Sea to make ready, Thetis swam in the blink of an eye to where the Argonauts rested on the beach. She picked out Peleus, her husband, and silently touched his hand to draw his attention. Thetis spoke softly, telling Peleus that the *Argo* must sail at dawn, and that her sisters waited to guide the ship past Scylla and Charybdis, and then through the treacherous wandering rocks known as the Planctae. However, Peleus was to inform no one of her assistance when it happened. Thetis left as quickly and silently as she came, leaving a breathless Peleus to tell the crew to be ready to sail at dawn.

## Sirens

It was with renewed vigour that the Argonauts brought their ship to readiness the next morning. They drew up the anchor, cast off the hawsers, and ran up the sail just in time for the west wind to spring up and pull it taut along the crossbeam. The *Argo* made good time, and the Argonauts soon arrived off the island of Anthemoessa, where a strange beguiling song greeted them across the waves.

This was the island of the Sirens, the daughters of the river god Achelous, who bewitched unwary sailors to wreck their ships on the rocks surrounding the island. The Argonauts were set to be the latest victims of the siren song when Orpheus, realizing the terrible danger they were in, sang a melody that brought his shipmates to their senses. In the nick of time, the Argonauts pulled the *Argo* away to the west; too late for Butes, however, who was overcome by the siren song and jumped overboard to swim ashore. There was nothing the distraught Argonauts could do to save their young shipmate, however, so they sailed on in silence.

## Scylla and Charybdis

The Argonauts had little time to reflect on their loss because looming ahead, in a narrow strait, lay the twin perils of Scylla and Charybdis. On one side of the strait, the smooth rock face of Scylla promised to shatter ships that came too close; on the other side, the whirlpool Charybdis sucked into the abyss anything nearing its deadly maw.

Smoke and fog, illuminated by bursts of fire from nearby mountains, filled the dreadful scene in front of the *Argo*, making certain navigation impossible. Just when the *Argo* set off, however, Thetis and the Nereids rose to the surface to help guide the ship. Thetis grabbed hold of the rudder blade and began to steer the *Argo*, while the Nereids circled around, raising the spirits of the beleaguered Argonauts.

With the help of Thetis and the Nereids, the *Argo* forged a path between the twin hazards, and on towards the Planctae beyond. The Nereids kept the wandering rocks away from the hull as the ship navigated the treacherous waters until, finally, the ship was through and again heading west. Hera looked on, overjoyed, and hugged Athena when the danger had passed. Jason and his hugely relieved Argonauts celebrated too, and the *Argo* sailed on.

## Return of the Colchians

The Argonauts soon sailed into the Ionian gulf and came to the island of Drepane, where Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, and his queen Arete prepared a welcome as if the Argonauts were their own sons returning from a dangerous adventure. Jason's crew revelled in the celebrations, but their joy was cut short by the arrival of a new Colchian army intent on seizing Medea. Alcinous moved quickly between the two sides, hoping to prevent all-out war on his island. Medea, meanwhile, begged Arete to protect her and not hand her over to the horrible fate she expected at the hands of Aeëtes.

Turning to the Argonauts, Medea reminded them of everything she had lost so that they could capture the Fleece and return safely to their families, and that if they betrayed her now they should live in fear of the gods for the rest of their lives. The warriors drew their swords and brandished spears and swore to protect Medea, but darkness fell before either side came to blows. All slept, except Medea who fretted long into the night.

Alcinous and his queen also had trouble sleeping. They lay in the dark, discussing how to deal with Medea. Arete pleaded with her husband to save Medea, partly on the prudent grounds that the Argonauts lived closer than the Colchians and it would be easier for them to exact their revenge, and partly because of Medea's begging Arete for help. Moreover, she added, Jason was committed to marrying Medea and that was a better fate than the vengeance of her father. Alcinous in reply pointed out that Aeëtes was a great warlord and quite capable of attacking the Greeks. If Medea was still a virgin, he continued, she must be sent back to her father, but if she was married or pregnant then she should stay with her husband. Having made his decision, the king rolled over to sleep.

Arete lay awake a little longer before rising to quietly summon a messenger to go to Jason and tell him that he must marry Medea immediately.

Arete's herald reached Jason, who was surrounded by watchful Argonauts wearing full armour. The warriors rejoiced when they heard the herald's story, and quickly set about organizing the sacrifices necessary for a successful wedding. Some of them took the Fleece to a sacred cave nearby and laid it out to make a splendid wedding bed. Nymphs sent by Hera brought garlands of flowers to spread around the cave. Finally, the nymphs unrolled fine linen to complete the marriage bed. The Argonauts took up defensive positions at the cave's entrance and Orpheus began to play the marriage song. Jason and Medea arrived soon after, and became man and wife, but even in their happiness they feared the judgement of Alcinous.

Dawn broke the next morning with all parties already awake in anticipation of the drama to come. Alcinous left the city carrying his golden staff of justice, accompanied by his army in full war panoply. Crowds gathered along the way, brought out by the news spread around the island by Hera, and the

air crackled with tension. Some of the Phaeacian men sacrificed a sheep and cow, while women brought linen and gold ornaments for the newlyweds. The nymphs danced and sang in honour of Hera.

Alcinous had heard of the marriage and kept to his word that Medea would not be returned to the Colchians. Like their counterparts before them, the Colchians dreaded returning to face Aeëtes. They begged Alcinous to let them stay on the island as Phaeacians, to which he agreed. Turning to the Argonauts, the king wished them a successful voyage home, and gave them many gifts, including twelve handmaidens to serve Medea. A week after their arrival, the Argonauts sailed away from Drepane on a fresh breeze, hoping their next stop would be home. Their destination was not Greece, however, but Libya.

# THE ENDLESS DESERT

The *Argo* sped on with full sail, past the land of the Curetes, through the Echinades islands, and on to the land of Pelops. Then a north wind blew up to tug the ship towards the Libyan Sea. For nine days and nights the Argonauts fought against the storm's inexorable force, but could not stop the *Argo* from being pulled deeper into the Gulf of Syrtis. Once in the gulf, there was no way out because of the shifting, sandy shoals and impenetrable beds of seaweed. Ahead lay the hostile, desolate Libyan desert, and it was on to that shore that the *Argo* came to rest.

The Argonauts climbed down from the decks and looked round in dismay bordering on outright despair. Search parties sent along the beach to find a way out returned with no hope for the desperate crew. When darkness fell, the Argonauts rolled into their blankets, fearing they might be dead by morning, while Medea and her handmaidens wailed laments deep into the night. Fortunately, the nymphs of the desert took pity on the abandoned sailors.

Jason was lying with his cloak over his head when the nymphs appeared beside him. One pulled his cloak off and chastised Jason for abandoning hope. She assured him that he would get back to Greece if he paid attention to a significant omen that was about to happen. The nymphs vanished before he could reply, but Jason felt renewed and quickly roused his shipmates. The downcast Argonauts gathered round to hear Jason speak. He told them of the nymphs and their cryptic message. Then, just as Jason finished, a huge horse rose out of the surf, shook out the spray from its golden mane, and galloped off into the sands.

Peleus understood immediately the meaning of this incredible event, and shouted to the Argonauts that they must carry the ship on their shoulders through the desert, following the hoof-prints of the magical horse. The warriors sprang into action, preparing the *Argo* for her new voyage, then hoisted her on their shoulders.

The Argonauts marched across the blistering desert for twelve days and nights, until they came to the Tritonian Lake. They did not stop, but strode in until the waters buoyed the *Argo*, and only then did the Argonauts release their burden. The starving and thirsty sailors could not rest, however, because they needed to hunt for food and water. They set off along the shore, where they arrived at the garden of Atlas with its golden apple trees.

The Argonauts saw nymphs, the Hesperides, in among the trees, dancing and chanting songs, but when they approached the nymphs dissolved into the earth. Orpheus called on them to come back and show the Argonauts where they could find a spring. The nymphs returned out of the ground in the guise of trees. One of them, Aegle, spoke, accusing the Argonauts of bringing Heracles with them. She continued that Heracles had visited the garden the previous day, killed their guardian serpent, and then smashed a rock to create the spring to which she pointed.

The strangeness of the nymph's story did not deter the Argonauts from flocking to the spring and slaking their thirst, though some hoped that they might meet Heracles again on their way home. After gorging themselves on fresh water, the Argonauts split up to search for Heracles; Calaïs and Zetes took to the air while Euphemus sprinted out into the desert; Lynceus used his far-sightedness to scan the horizons, and Canthus followed along, hoping to find answers from Heracles on what had happened to his friend Polyphemus. The search was in vain, however, and the Argonauts returned to the ship, all except for Canthus whose terrible fate soon became apparent.

## The Deaths of Canthus and Mopsus

For a man who lived as a hero, Canthus died in a most prosaic fashion. While out on his search for Heracles, he came across a flock of sheep and quickly decided to take some back for his shipmates. The shepherd had other ideas and, throwing a well-aimed slingshot, killed Canthus. The unfortunate shepherd died too, at the hands of the avenging Argonauts when they discovered Canthus's fate. They buried Canthus and took the sheep for which he had sacrificed his life.

Death had not finished with the Argonauts this day, however. As they returned to the ship, Mopsus stood on the tail of a snake lying in the sand, causing it to whip back and bite the man's leg. The snake's poison immediately took effect, numbing the Argonaut's body before its fatal last spasm. Jason and the other Argonauts grieved for their comrade and built a burial mound over his body, befitting his heroic status.

It was with heavy hearts that the crew boarded the *Argo* for the next leg of their journey.

## The Tritonian Lake

The *Argo* sailed out into the Tritonian Lake on the edge of a southerly breeze. The Argonauts lacked direction, however, and could not find an exit to the ocean. With mounting frustration amongst its crew, the little ship meandered around aimlessly until Orpheus called for Jason to steer into shore. His plan was to make an offering to the gods in exchange for a path through to the sea. The sailors disembarked and conducted the ritual, and straight away Triton, the son of Poseidon, appeared. He introduced himself and offered a clod of earth to Euphemus.

Triton listened while Euphemus explained how they came to be in this predicament, then stretched out his hand to show them the path they must sail. Once in the ocean, he added, they should stay close to the coast until they reached a cape, then head straight out to sea to get home.

The Argonauts scrambled on board, eager to get underway. They did not see Triton enter the water behind them but nevertheless urged Jason to sacrifice their best sheep to him, which he promptly did by cutting its throat and throwing it over the stern. Triton was delighted and appeared to the Argonauts in his true form as half-man, half-sea serpent. He took up a position in front of the *Argo* and guided the ship out to the ocean where he disappeared under the waves.

The exuberant Argonauts spent the evening in the bay then sailed on at dawn the following morning, keeping the desert on their left. The Argonauts saw the headland receding, then a south wind carried them forward out to sea. When the wind died, they took to their oars, heading directly for Crete. But there a new danger awaited them.

## Talos, the Bronze Man

The island of Crete was protected in unique fashion by a bronze giant called Talos. His armoured skin was invulnerable to mortal weapons, so that when the Argonauts tried to tie up on the shore Talos easily drove them away by throwing rocks. The Argonauts drew back the *Argo* to a safe range while they considered their options. What the Argonauts did not know was that Talos was created with a weak point on his ankle, where a lightly covered vein presented a life-threatening target.

It was Medea who stepped forward, ordering the Argonauts to stay out of range while she dealt with the problem. The crew watched in fascination as Medea began to chant ritual incantations that conjured death-spirits from Hades. She kneeled, fastening her stare on Talos's eyes, all the while praying and singing in a furious temper before unleashing phantom demons against the bronze giant. Talos responded with greater efforts at throwing rocks, straining to sink the *Argo*.

The giant's obsession proved his downfall when, distracted, he caught his ankle on a pointed boulder that ripped open his exposed vein. Talos's molten blood poured out on to the sand, and he staggered for a few moments, growing weaker by the second, until, finally, he crashed to the ground. The jubilant Argonauts rode ashore in safety and, before they sailed the next morning, set up a shrine to Athena for their deliverance.

## Darkness and Light

The *Argo* sailed all that day and into the night, but the Argonauts grew increasingly fearful when the stars and moon did not show to help them navigate. The chaos of darkness sent the sailors into new fits of anguish, and

some even wondered if they were alive or dead. Finally, Jason held out his hands and called on Apollo, as god of the sun, to save them. Straight away, Apollo came down to the Melantian rocks, from which he held up his silver bow and cast a beam of light out to sea. The Argonauts could now see the tiny island of Hippuris and rowed quickly across to drop anchor. Dawn came soon after and the hugely relieved Argonauts built an altar to Apollo.

The Argonauts sailed on, passing along the coast of Greece without further incident until they came to the beach of Pagasae. Jason's epic adventure to recover the Golden Fleece and return to claim his kingdom was nearly over.

## **The Return to Iolcus**

For a couple whose love burned so brightly and who had overcome such adversity, Jason and Medea's lives after the search for the Golden Fleece disintegrated into tragedy. When they arrived in Iolcus, Medea persuaded the usurper Pelias's daughters that they could help rejuvenate their father by chopping him into pieces and placing his parts into a cauldron with some magical herbs. They quickly followed Medea's recommendation, but too late they realized their role in regicide when Medea withheld the required herbs. Pelias's son, Acastus, had seen the murder, however, and promptly drove Medea and Jason out of Iolcus. From there, the couple moved to Corinth where Medea gave birth to two sons. The idyllic love between Medea and Jason appeared as strong as ever, but then Jason made a fatal error.

For all his promises to Medea, Jason was still the son of a Greek king and

she a foreign princess; it was only right, to Jason anyway, that he should marry into Greek royalty despite his promises of everlasting fealty to Medea. Therefore, Jason married Glauce, the daughter of King Creon of Corinth, hoping to keep Medea as his mistress. Medea flew into a rage, berating Jason for abandoning her. She could never return to Colchis and no one in Greece would have her, or so she thought. As luck would have it, the king of Athens arrived in Corinth and offered Medea protection if she would use her magic to give him children. Medea now set about plotting a vicious revenge on her unfaithful husband.

Medea paid a call on Jason to apologize for her previous behaviour and present a gift of a beautiful dress for Glauce. Jason delightedly took the dress to his new bride. Glauce was obviously enchanted by the dress and decided to wear it for her father to see. But Medea had laced the dress with a poison that burned; when Glauce put on the dress, the poison acted quickly, killing the princess in hideous fashion. Her father died too in his desperate efforts to save Glauce.

In the meantime, Medea killed Jason's children with a knife so that he would be fully punished, then escaped to Athens. Jason did not follow; rather he stayed on until finally linking up with Peleus, who was a prince in his own right, and Telamon. They attacked Iolcus and restored Jason to his kingdom, but Jason had also upset his benefactor goddess Hera when he abandoned Medea.

His misfortunes continued, therefore, until finally a weary Jason fell asleep beside the rotting remains of the *Argo* on the beach, where it had been deserted after the search for the Fleece. While the former hero slept, the rotting stern broke off and killed him, an ignominious end to a life that would become legend.