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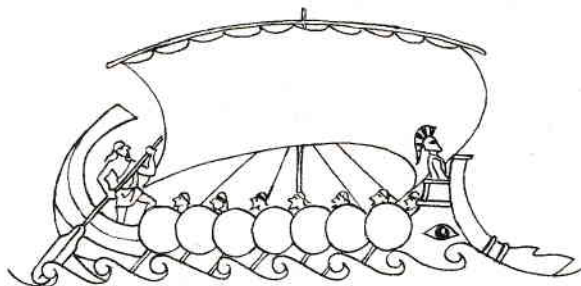
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## Part One

### *The Voyage of the Argo*



## Argo

*If only the Argo had sunk to the bottom of the sea*

It was hardly the fault of the Argo.

This was the kind of thing people said in those days: if you couldn't blame anyone, you'd say it was the ship. But Jason didn't set his Argonauts to row across the oceans because he was captain of the Argo; the men built the Argo because Jason wanted to find the fleece. So if you were trying to find the beginning of this story, then that's where you would go: to the glimmering softness of the golden ram. Would you choose the day it was born? Or the day it appeared in Hellas to rescue two children, about to lose their lives?

But we will start in the place where the ship set sail.

## Alcimedede

*rather than winging its way*

Alcimedede had never been a fortunate woman, and she said so to anybody who would listen. Of course, she acknowledged that it might look to others as though she had been very fortunate because when she was young, Alcimedede had married Aeson, the older son of the ageing king of Iolcus. And that was the kind of thing that girls prayed for: when I grow up, Hera, please let me marry a king, like you did. And her prayers had almost come true. The older son of a king would become king in time, so all Alcimedede had to do was wait.

And perhaps that had been her mistake. She had foolishly thought the Fates had granted her a happy lot: the old man would die and she would become queen. And – another ingredient in her happiness – Aeson was a soft, kind man who never raised his voice or tried to win an argument. His father issued occasional decrees and he allowed his wife to make decisions about everything else. This suited Alcimedede well, because she was her parents' only child, and she had never learned to yield to anyone. And they were both still so young: her husband had plenty of time to become domineering and inflexible.

When the old king died, Alcimede mourned in public and rejoiced in private. She would not miss the old tyrant, she doubted anyone would. And she would enjoy seeing his younger son Pelias lose influence, just as she gained it. The royal house would now have a king and queen, as was proper. She would go on to tell her friends and – when they had given up listening to her – her slaves, this was the last time she felt happiness.

Because it was not his youth that made Aeson weak, she discovered. It was his nature. And Pelias had known this from infancy, from the first time he grabbed a toy rattle that belonged to his brother and then kept it. He watched as Aeson tried to retrieve the little clay dog, shouted and screamed until Aeson crawled away. He never forgot how quickly his brother gave up, even when it was something he wanted very much. He took a simple lesson from their boyhood: Aeson didn't want anything as much as Pelias wanted everything.

So Pelias seized the throne of Iolcus for himself. He did not ask – or offer – to share power, he simply took it. And Aeson allowed it, because he didn't know what else to do or how to oppose it. Was he meant to take up arms against his own brother? Would any of their citizens wish for a civil war? Was it not better to let Pelias have what he so ardently wanted, and avoid bloodshed?

Alcimede had never forgiven either her brother-in-law or her husband for this disgrace, bundled out of the palace while pregnant and Aeson doing nothing about it except accepting their degraded status. Would he not fight for his son's future, if not for his own, the women of Iolcus asked? And their husbands and brothers all gave the same reply: Aeson would never fight for anything.

And so the city had Pelias for its king: a fractious man who saw his own ambitions concealed behind the eyes of every other man. If Alcimede had been capable of viewing things dispassionately, she would have noticed that although Pelias had stolen the kingdom from his brother, it brought him nothing but unhappiness. He sent messengers to the oracle to try to uncover plots against him, then sent them back to ask again because he could not trust its replies. This illegitimate king was still who he had always been: an anxious, querulous man.

The midwives were nervous when he had one daughter, then two, then three: no one wanted to take bad news to a king. But the birth of his daughters was one of the few parts of his life that did not make Pelias angry. Daughters would take care of him as he aged, but they would never threaten his rule. If he had been cursed with a son, it would not have survived infancy. His nephew – who was changing from child to man at a horrifying speed – was almost as unwanted.

This brought Alcimede to her second piece of terrible misfortune, disguised as good luck. She had a healthy pregnancy, despite the grievous disappointments she had suffered. And she gave birth to a healthy son, who everyone said looked like his father. But there the gods put a cruel end to her family. What had she done to offend Eilythia, goddess of childbirth? She asked the question repeatedly of anyone who would listen. But no one could give her an answer except Aeson, who asked if one healthy son wasn't enough for them.

And he wasn't, of course, because here was the third cruel trick the Fates had played on Alcimede. Despite

everything she had told him when he was a boy, her son was determined to be a hero. And because the women of Iolcus were all fools, dazzled by the mere idea of adventures, she could not even share her grief with them. It was easy for them to think a quest would burnish her family honour, but it hardly felt that way to Alcimedede. She had been granted only one child, and one who cared so little for her that he would set sail in an untested boat without so much as a thought about who would look after his mother while he was gone.

And of course, Aeson had been no use – again – when Pelias made his cruel announcement. The king had recently declared that Iolcus was in need of a golden fleece, a magical artefact from far across the sea. Pelias knew little more about it: some gift from a goddess to her children, was it? Its beauty and power were fabled; people said it would bring riches to whichever land held it. But Pelias was already rich and had no need of any artefacts. The thing that made the fleece particularly desirable was how very far away it was, and how difficult to reach, across such dangerous seas.

Soon, there was a shipbuilder, and a crew. Men were volunteering from all over Greece to be part of this grand quest. Pelias could scarcely suppress his smirk when the messenger said that Jason – the king's own nephew – was hoping to make his parents and his uncle proud by leading this voyage. Pelias didn't necessarily want Jason to die, although it was all the same to him if he did. He merely wished that his nephew – and any other man who thought he might have a claim on anything Pelias regarded as his own – would leave his kingdom, and never return. Which, of course, this ship's crew could not once they had undertaken

such a mighty task. The humiliation of failure would see off the ones death did not seize.

And so, on a bright spring morning, Alcimedede counted a whole new set of misfortunes sent by the Fates to plague her. Jason was coming to bid farewell to his mother and to attempt to console his father, who had taken to bed months before when the voyage was first suggested. Alcimedede still hoped to dissuade her son from travelling. How could he abandon her this way? Better she should have died before being left with no one to help look after his father.

Jason tried to placate Alcimedede, to persuade her that he would be back in Iolcus before long, and to promise that he would be bringing the golden fleece to prove his worth. He would make her proud, he was sure of it. But his mother had grown used to disappointment before her son was born. There was no dissuading her from it now.

## Iphias

*towards the land of Colchis,*

The words Iphias left unsaid would have moved the sky and parted the sea.

Last night she had been standing before the altar of Artemis, protector of her city, murmuring a quiet prayer. No one else was by the shrine at that hour, no one but the statue. Artemis towered above Iphias, left foot planted on the plinth, right foot behind her, heel raised. The golden straps of her sandals and the golden hem of her dress glittered in the flickering torchlight. The goddess had a serene expression and a few strands of hair snaked free from her plait. Something about the pose, the way Artemis had been caught mid-stride, always made Iphias feel restless, as though she too was at the beginning of a journey. But as the priestess picked a stray white hair from her tunic, she was reminded that there were no journeys ahead for her.

Iphias smiled up at the moon as she walked around the sanctuary, checking everything was in order. Artemis was always closer to her when the moon was full. But when she looked back down into the shadows around her, the visions

came to her in a rush, bright and terrible: images of the young man who planned to set sail the very next day. She saw lethal trials ahead of him – brief flashes of horror – as though she was gazing up at a pitch-black sky, illuminated by sudden bolts of lightning. Iphias prayed for guidance, but the goddess waited until she was asleep before delivering her message in a dream.

Iphias felt the weariness in her knees as she offered up her thanks the next morning. Tired though she was, the priestess had the strength to perform this task. All she needed to do now was wait for the right time. And she knew it was approaching because the city spoke of nothing else as the men made the final preparations to ready their ship. Everyone who passed the temple brought another fragment of news as Iphias stood on the wide marble steps.

She sensed the tension filling the city as the men prepared to sail and the women to grieve, but she did not share it. The men's impossible quest would become possible once they had Artemis' advice. The priestess watched the street filling with people who wanted to see the Argo launch from her safe harbour. Today was a day they would tell sceptical children and grandchildren they had witnessed. And where there was a spectacle, there were traders selling food, offerings, amulets to bring luck to a sailor or those he was leaving behind.

The hubbub was building now, so Iphias knew that Jason had left his parents' house and was walking towards the harbour. Soon he would be right outside the temple: she had seen it already, in her dream. She descended a single step, wanting to be closer to the path so she could make herself heard, yet not wanting to lose her vantage point.

But as Jason came around the final curve of the street before he reached her, the crowd surged, a sudden swell taking the old woman away from the temple. Jason had grown to be a very handsome man, Iphias thought, as she scurried along with the thronging people to avoid losing her footing. There was no denying it. Even Artemis would look on him with favour: he resembled her twin, the sun to her moon. Iphias felt herself being tugged in his direction and then came the moment of connection, when her eyes met his.

The priestess felt the spark of acknowledgement. She knew Jason had seen her and wanted to discuss his plans. But just as she opened her mouth to speak, the whirl of people moved again and she was behind him as he strode away. She felt dizzy and detached, as though she had been awake through her dreams and was sleeping now. Iphias almost fell, but two younger priestesses from the temple had seen her difficulty and rushed over to help her.

‘Did you have something to tell him?’ asked one. It took Iphias a moment to hear the words and to understand what the girl was asking.

‘We could send a messenger,’ the other one said. ‘Or take the message ourselves.’

Iphias could see the excitement on their faces but she could not quite remember what might have caused it. She did have a message for someone, she knew that. She had been about to speak, but then she had not. And that was all she could find, blinking away tears from the harsh light of late morning. She would never again remember the words Artemis had given her, or the way Jason had seen her and walked past without stopping to take his leave of the goddess