

ARGONAUT'S REMORSE

By Dan Morley

Jason sat upon the throne of Iolcos in troubled contemplation. Not even the music and dancers, nor the feast in his palace, raised his mood. The golden fleece stretched above his throne, hung as a symbol of prosperity, but claiming his throne had not gone as expected.

He'd imagined a hero's welcome, bearing a prize wrestled from the end of the world. Instead, they called him usurper. King Pelias, refusing to abdicate as promised, merely started the problems, and while his subsequent, unexplained disappearance emptied the throne, people whispered of the means of his demise.

When Seoras, Jason's aide and one of the Argonauts, entered the hall and skirted around the festivities, Jason sprang to meet him. 'Poleduris? Has he come?'

The man wiped his hands on his tunic, the loose garment plain white in the Athenian style. 'My lord, Jason. Poleduris is dead. Murdered.'

'Murdered?' The news staggered him, blackening his already dark mood. 'He was one of the strongest fighters aboard the Argo.'

'I don't think he had much chance to fight, not stricken by disease as he was.'

Jason frowned, glancing to the fleece. There should be no disease in his kingdom, not with the fleece there. 'I'd better see for myself.'

From beside the throne, Medea watched him leave, her dark eyes trailing him around the fluted columns and out into the scorching afternoon. The music dimmed to a drone as they approached a crowd. Jason parted them with a word and leaned over the body.

Poleduris lay face down, a spear in his back within a damp stain on his red, Spartan tunic. Jason reached out but drew his hand back from the sores and discoloured skin on the dead man's neck. Already flies buzzed around the man and he smelled foul.

'What happened?' Jason asked. When the crowd failed to answer, he rounded on them. 'The day is clear and the streets are busy. Someone must have seen this.'

A few onlookers slunk away while others exchanged dark glances or muttered things which Jason chose to ignore though they pained him. In spite of himself, his choler rose and so did his voice.

'Then be off with you! Back to your lives. I'll solve this myself.'

The onlookers scattered, leaving Jason and Seoras with the body. The crowd had scuffed the dusty street, hiding Poleduris' trail among countless footprints. Just two grooves remained, ending at the dead man's feet as though he'd dragged himself before collapsing. Trying to reach the palace, judging by how he lay.

'Fetch the fleece, Seoras. It may save him yet. And bring guards to watch over the body.'

Jason stayed with him while his aide scurried away. Murder in the street, outside his very palace, concerned Jason. As did the impossible lack of witnesses. The spear in his back gave no clues: bronze tip, simple shaft, like a thousand others, but hardly an inconspicuous weapon. He carried neither coins nor valuables which suggested a robbery but his sword

remained sheathed. The thought of a robber killing Poleduris seemed unlikely and the spear was hardly a thug's weapon.

As he mused over the circumstances of Poleduris' death, Seoras returned with the fleece. Jason draped it over his friend but he didn't stir. Pulling the fleece aside, Jason inspected the body again. No change.

Had the fleece's blessing failed? Had taking it from Colchis rendered it useless? Those were worrying questions. Then he stopped, realising this was also his friend, a veteran of the quest upon the Argo. He'd survived the Stymphalian Birds and mighty Talos. Such an ignominious death in Jason's own kingdom wounded him. Burying the worries and frustrations of a kingdom that wouldn't accept him, Jason bowed his head and placed a coin under Poleduris' tongue for his journey over the Styx. He vowed to find the killer.

'He contacted you, Seoras,' Jason said. 'Was he to meet anyone before coming to the palace?'

'All I had was a message, Jason. Two days past. He was coming directly to warn you of something but wouldn't trust a messenger with details.'

'A warning?' Jason gestured to a potter's workshop opposite. 'They have the best view of the street. Question them.'

Having instructed the guards to take the body from the street, Jason returned the fleece to his palace. It felt coarse and heavy, and looked dull instead of gleaming in the sun. Inside, the festivities continued as though nothing happened. Poleduris had made enemies of a dozen kingdoms and as many gods--they all had, aboard the Argo--but who would move against him so close to Jason, in such an open space? He sat in brooding silence until Medea

approached. Her priestess robes flowed around her figure and her olive skin contrasted against their light dye and patterned hem.

‘What troubles you, my king?’ she asked, draping her arms over his shoulders and enrapturing him with musky perfume.

‘King?’ Jason asked. ‘I don’t feel like one. A man was murdered in the street today and everyone went suddenly blind. They wouldn’t talk to me. I thought the fleece would rally the kingdom to me but---pah, listen to me. That’s my friend in the dirt. An Argonaut. I need to find who did this.’

Medea worked the knots in his shoulders. ‘People need to feel safe on the streets.’

‘I’m getting justice for Poleduris, not them,’ Jason said. He felt a determination he’d not known since Colchis, the end of the world. The throne hadn’t softened him yet. He was still an Argonaut, keen of mind and strong of back.

‘Shall I cast the bones?’ Medea asked.

‘No. No oracles. No gods. I’ve had my fill of them and there are whisperings enough.’

‘Whisperings, Jason?’ Her treacle hair tickled his neck.

‘They call you sorceress; claim you called down Hecate’s magic to dispose of Pelias.’ Jason watched her but her tight-lipped expression betrayed nothing.

‘Then you should follow Poleduris’ trail. Find the route he took. If he carried warnings of danger, perhaps danger followed him.’

The harbour. Poleduris would have come from the sea and the harbour master kept meticulous records. As Jason left the palace again, the fleece's custodians began stretching it back above the throne. On the dusty approach to the harbour, his aide caught up to him.

'Seoras, what have you learnt?'

'Little enough.' They walked on together, Seoras eyeing the streets like a bodyguard. 'The potter claims a monster killed Poleduris.'

'We've seen our share of monsters but none here in Iolcos. Anything else?'

'Just that the spear was thrown then the monster fled from sight.'

A thrown spear eliminated robbery. More likely someone stopping the message from getting to Jason. Anyone could have taken the dead man's purse but the spear drew attention. They wanted Jason to see it.

The harbour bustled. Iolcos' bountiful harvest attracted many merchants. Since the Argo's construction, countless new designs of ship had appeared, copying and improving on it so they all looked outlandish. One unloaded a large box-like cargo covered with hide while others traded fish, grain, cloth and countless other goods. Scratching and muffled screeches, sounded nearby. It sparked a memory in Jason but a group of dishevelled people filing off another ship drew his attention.

'Who are they?'

'Diseased men, misshapen like monsters,' Seoras said. 'Word of the fleece is spreading and people travel here believing it will cure their ailments. If you'll excuse me, I'll warn the harbour master that you're coming and prepare the ledgers.'

Jason nodded, transfixed on the procession. He watched the bustle for a while, casting suspicion on every face before looking for Seoras. As he approached, a cry went up from the harbour master's office.

He rushed to the small stone building. Smoke wisped from the doors and window and fire flickered inside. Seoras stumbled out, choking.

Jason grabbed him by the arm. 'The harbour master. Where is he?'

'Still inside.'

Without pause, Jason tore a strip from his tunic to cover his mouth and dashed inside. The heat staggered him and smoke stung his eyes. The building's wooden frame and furniture blazed. Casting around, he glimpsed a collapsed man in another, smaller room. Shoving a desk aside, he ducked in and dragged him out.

Jason fell to his knees coughing while Seoras tended the harbour master.

'He's alive, but look here.' Seoras cradled the man's head. 'He must have hit his head when he fell.'

'Must have,' Jason muttered.

As he glanced around, people scattered. He expected they'd seen just as much of the fire as they had of Poleduris' murder. It was too convenient for coincidence. With minimal clues and now no way to trace where visiting ships had come from, Jason found himself lacking both leads and allies.

Iolcos teemed with distrust and dissent, its populace eager to exploit the riches Jason brought yet ungrateful and uncooperative. He longed for his crew; good, dependable men

who would give their lives for one another through a bond wrought by strife. He missed that.

He needed loyalty, and, if it came to it, the greatest fighting men in Greece.

‘Send for the Argonauts, Seoras, all you can find.’

Over the following week, they arrived in dribs and drabs. Many had continued their adventures in lands beyond Jason’s call. As they came, he set them to work as eyes and ears, asking questions, integrating themselves by drinking with locals and taking jobs and lovers. Jason’s request was all they needed to come, and Poleduris’ murder fired their will. They renewed Jason’s resolve.

Some reported rumours of monsters yet found none, and on such a busy trade route, strangers were everywhere. Even in Jason’s palace new faces appeared every day. Gaius, an Argonaut from Argos, reported complaints against Medea. They spoke her name in secret, afraid of her sorcery, claiming she had tricked King Pelias’ daughters into butchering their father and tossing him in a cauldron thinking to restore his youth. Medea said nothing on the subject and remained distant, often sequestering herself in her shrine to Hecate though she claimed the goddess was silent.

The method of Poleduris’ murder ever gnawed at Jason. A spear in the back. Greek made. It sparked a memory but nothing tangible. Orpheus provided their best lead, believing the monsters nothing more than diseased people who sought healing from the fleece. He’d followed the crew of one of these plague ships into the Temple of Apollo yet they spoke only of finding a cure.

And so Jason simmered. He questioned dozens of people until Seoras brought news that Herakles himself would reach the palace the following evening to repay his debt for abandoning the Argo.

‘I suggest we welcome him warmly,’ Seoras said. ‘He never found Hylas. They say his mood is black and his temper fiery.’

‘We’ll give him a hero’s welcome,’ Jason said, smiling for the first time since his quest. Things had a way of getting resolved, one way or another, with Herakles around. ‘Feasting and dancers. A full belly and a firm leg have always soothed his temper.’

‘I’ll post additional guards if it’s all the same,’ Seoras said.

Jason laughed. Post as many as you like. I find it’s easier to keep him happy than contained.’

Herakles’ impending arrival gave Jason a second wind. He collated his evidence and theories and discussed them with the half-dozen Argonauts in his palace while Seoras arranged the feast.

Over the next day, the palace bustled with comings and goings, dancers practicing, table arrangements, decorations and jug after jug of wine. Medea remained absent after waking with a fever which Seoras tended while Jason chased another futile lead.

The preparations transformed the palace. Tables surrounded a large, clear space in the centre and guards patrolled every wall. Jason knew few of them, but why would he? After his exile, he’d travelled to the end of the world. He’d claimed his kingdom but knew little about

it. And it didn't know him, he realised. Perhaps that's why they offered no help; he must have appeared a usurper, ousting King Pelias and expecting their loyalty.

He watched guests arrive, scholars, politicians and craftsmen of renown, wondering how to win their trust. He'd always considered the Greeks as proud, inspired by great deeds. If bringing the fleece wasn't enough, they would see he had the respect of his company: Herakles couldn't help but inspire, and other Argonauts commanded fame in their own right. When the festivities began, Jason bid Orpheus play from his lyre.

Priestesses danced while Orpheus' music enthralled the guests. After his last note drifted from the palace, Seoras preceded eight men dragging a large, hide-covered box inside.

‘What’s this?’ Jason asked.

The men left it in the space surrounded by tables and retreated to the entrance but didn’t leave. Two remained by Seoras, hoplites’ helmets covering their heads.

‘A gift to commemorate the quest for the fleece,’ Seoras said. ‘Something to inspire the kingdom to see their king for who he is.’

Something passed through the guards, imperceptible had they not all tensed at once. Jason only had time to glance to Orpheus before Seoras pulled the hide cover away.

With keening screeches, two harpies burst from the revealed cage, scattering guests and harassing them from above. Guards blocked the exits and the feast plunged into chaos.

Orpheus drew his sword and retreated to Jason, followed by two other Argonauts. They fended off the harpies when they got too close though the creatures were more interested in easier targets.

‘We’re betrayed,’ Orpheus said. ‘The four of us can hold them until Herakles arrives.’

‘Herakles isn’t coming,’ Jason replied, focused on those around the cage. ‘When did they buy you, Seoras?’

‘They didn’t need to, Jason. What we did in Colchis haunts me. Not the skeletons, nor the man of bronze. We’re the monsters. We took the fleece, knowing the consequences for their city. So I let them in, covered their trail, plotted their ambush and exposed Medea’s sorcery so the whole kingdom knew what brigand sat on their throne.’

A harpy’s claw raked Jason’s back, dragging a line of pain. Both Jason and Orpheus swiped at the creature but it evaded their swords and caused more panic among the captive guests. The guards even fought the few Argonauts that hadn’t reached Jason’s side. Of course. Seoras had posted them.

As if reading Jason’s thoughts, Seoras smiled. ‘Nobody wants a pirate king and his sorceress queen. We would serve the rightful heir of Iolcos.’

‘And who might that be?’ Jason asked through gritted teeth.

The guard beside Seoras removed his helmet. It was Acastus, son of King Pelias, former Argonaut and the man who betrayed them in Colchis.

‘One traitor deserves another,’ said Jason, his eyes narrowed.

‘Better a traitor to a thief than the thief himself.’ Acastus levelled his weapon. ‘A spear in the back, Jason. That’s what you expected of me.’

‘So you’ve come for me at last?’

Seoras' other guard then revealed himself, an athletic Colchisian, but deformed and diseased. Monstrous in appearance. No doubt Poleduris' murderer.

'He's come for you.' The man nodded towards Acastus. 'As the fleece's guardian in Colchis, I've come to end the calamity that you brought upon us.'

'That will cause the same suffering here,' Jason said. 'Disease, famine, drought.' He glanced to the fleece behind his throne. It was gone, along with most of the guards.

'All things that you brought to Colchis. Iolcos' suffering is on your hands. Pirate and usurper, I leave you to your fate.'

He turned on his heel and marched for the exit. As the guards there parted, he paused and turned, a vengeful sneer on his face. Raising his hand to the sky, he called to his dark patron. 'Hear me, Hecate, Nemesis, Erinyes! The blasphemer is trapped. Enact the vengeance denied you in Colchis. Raise the Children once more!'

A peal of thunder shook the palace and skeletons, armed for war, tore themselves from beneath the floor, cracking and crumbling the marble. They closed ranks, cutting down guests that bolted for the exit or deeper into the palace.

A spear flashed towards Jason. He parried on reflex, shocked by the speed and fury with which Acastus struck. Orpheus and Seoras fought beside them, well-matched with their swords, while Jason's other allies struggled against harpies and skeletons, using tables and columns as much as weapons to fend off their enemies. They were quickly outmatched and outmanoeuvred. Jason knew he was beaten. Despite his heroic company, he fought against both heroes and sorcery.

Sorcery.

‘Follow me,’ Jason said.

Pursued by Acastus, they fought a retreat through the palace, Jason shattering the skull of a skeleton fighter that blocked his way. Acastus’ spear scraped Jason’s side as he barrelled into piled detritus which barricaded a door closed.

‘Medea!’ he called, clearing the door by hurling pieces of the barricade at Acastus.

As he dislodged a chair blocking the handle, the door burst open and purple smoke billowed out. The loyal Argonauts plunged in, followed by their enemies. It seemed abandoned until Jason glimpsed Medea. She held Seoras from behind, a dagger at his throat, her expression malicious.

‘Poisoner,’ she whispered before cutting his throat.

‘Find them,’ Acastus shouted from the smoke. ‘Find them and kill them!’

Following Medea’s lead, Jason and Orpheus fled through an open window into the palace olive grove. There was no sign of Jason’s other allies.

‘Where to, my love?’ Medea asked.

Jason glanced back at his lifelong ambition in ruins.

‘Corinth.’ The weight of Jason’s failure weighed on him as Seoras’ words of piracy resounded in his mind. He thought of the Colchisian’s deformities and of starving, diseased people left in Colchis; the fate that now loomed over his own kingdom. The Colchisian was

right. He was a pirate and usurper and he'd brought this. 'Iolcos has nothing for us. We seek our fortunes in Corinth.'