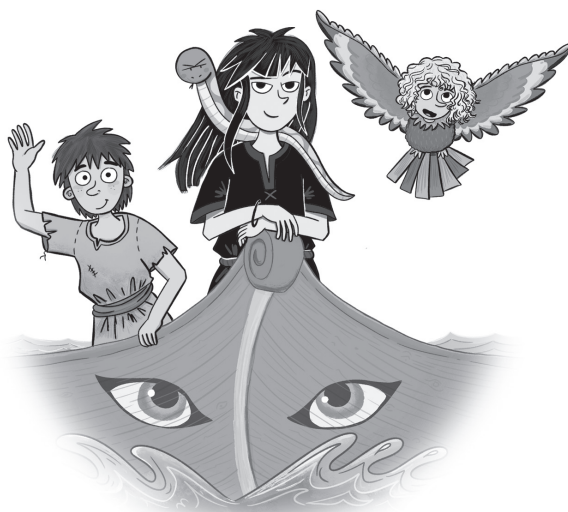




THE OTHERNAUTS



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CLARE POLLARD
ILLUSTRATED BY **MACHA YAO**





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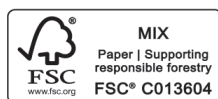
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For my sister 
C.P.

 To Ivy and Alix,
my bravest girls and
loudest cheerleaders,
wherever our journey takes us
M.Y.







The god of song has moved me so,
I shall commemorate heroes of long ago,
who on King Pelias's instruction sailed
that magnificent ship the Argo
through the Black Sea's narrows,
between the Clashing Rocks to seek
the Golden Fleece.

— Apollonius of Rhodes,
the Argonautica





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PROLOGUE

OK, first things first: I've been expecting you. I'm writing this on a scroll in Greece. Or, as you probably call it, an 'ancient scroll' in 'Ancient Greece'.

What you're holding in your hands is a translation of my tale into English, which you found mistakenly shelved in the children's section of a library or bookshop in some kind of ridiculous mix up. Over the years, this scroll I write upon will be hidden, suppressed, damaged,

eee

forgotten about, almost burned to cinders in the great fire at the Library of Alexandria, used to line a cat's litter tray (let's not even go there), and undergo various other humiliations before finally being discovered in the twenty-first century by a very silly publisher called Piccadilly Press who think it must be for kids because it's got jokes and pictures.

I know this because I'm an oracle. Seeing the future is kind of my job. How else would a person in 'Ancient Greece' (as you call it) know the crying-with-laughter emoji? 😂

But never mind, future reader: the important thing is, I've found you now. And what you hold in your hands is very important. It is the never-before-told **TRUE STORY** of Jason and the Argonauts, their legendary voyage to find the Golden Fleece, and the many monsters, gods and goddesses who they met along the way.

That's right - not the fake story in the *Argonautica*, made up by the poet Apollonius of



Rhodes many years later, which is all about big, strong, manly guys doing man stuff and acting all important. No, THIS is the real story. Did you know, for example, that there were children on the quest too, and they actually helped defeat the monsters and save the day?

Have you heard of the Othernavts?

(That's called a 'rhetorical question', which means I don't expect you to answer. I totally know that you haven't.)

Oh, just one more note before we start.

It's important to understand that ALL TIME EXISTS AT ONCE. That's how oracles can see the past and the future. So this story happened, is happening and hasn't happened yet. Hope that's cleared things up! 😄

Now let us begin.



 **IN WHICH PHOEBE IS BORED** 

Phoebe is bored.

You can tell how bored she is by the fact that she's poking around in the entrails of a dead frog for fun. Yeah, I know.

A deeply cynical eleven-year-old girl with black hair and crocodile-coloured eyes, Phoebe is very pale – an effect heightened by the layer of dust that always covers her skin, as well as her tendency to faint. She only ever wears a long black tunic fixed at the waist with a serpent-



shaped clasp. Often, she's seen alone, wandering the rugged tracks of the island of Lemnos, doodling skulls in the dirt with a pointy stick. Other times, she picks thyme or poppies then grinds them up on a stone, sprinkling in an eyelash or two, muttering curses under her breath.

No, I'm not going to teach you any ancient Greek curse words. Please don't ask.



Phoebe drinks a gulp of water from her flask, looking out over her parched island. Lemnos, she reckons, is the worst place to live



in the entire world. It blazes and spits from its mountains, puffs out sulphurous smoke, and forms strange globular rocks that scatter its beaches like spawn. Its flowers are poisonous and prickly, its lakes salty, its dunes make your sandals perpetually sandy. Worst of all, it is a land with a tragic (and mortifyingly embarrassing) tale to tell.

It began when the people of Lemnos failed to honour the goddess of love, Aphrodite, with enough offerings at her temple. You'll meet Aphrodite later, but for now let's just be generous and say that 'love' is a word that means a lot of different things to different people.

Anyway, in a fit of irritation, Aphrodite decided to make the husbands and wives of Lemnos fall out with each other. To do this, she cursed the women, so they began to sweat the stinkiest sweat you've ever sniffed. It was as if a fox had eaten a binful of fetid blue cheese,





then got the runs. Or to use a simile more suitable for ancient times, as if all the heads of Cerberus – the multi-headed dog that guards the underworld – had vomited at once. Soon the men refused to go anywhere near their wives, which Aphrodite thought was hilarious.

Unfortunately, it also made the queen of Lemnos absolutely livid. In fact, she was so furious, she gave the women an order: they were to kill all the males of the island that night as they slept, including the boy children.

This isn't, I hope you realise, a feel-good feminist tale with a happy ending. Even Aphrodite woke up the next day and realised she'd gone too far.

Now a sense of shame hangs over the land. And far from enjoying their freedom, the women of Lemnos are terrified that men from other islands will hear of their monstrous crime and kill them in an act of vengeance. Lookouts anxiously patrol the cliffs. Feasts, music and



dancing are forbidden, in case they draw the attention of passing ships. It is stressful and, yes, very boring.

The moral of this tale, in case you're wondering, is *murder is bad*.

Also, *blue cheese is bad*.

Phoebe has never known her mother. It has always been implied to her that her mum died giving birth, which makes her feel sad and guilty. And when Phoebe was a baby, her father set off to sea on a voyage from which he never came back, so he wasn't there to be killed that fateful evening.

Phoebe did, however, have a twin brother. So after their queen gave the order to kill all the men and boys, her stepmother – Myrrhine – locked Phoebe's twin in a wooden chest, then tossed him into the ocean. Phoebe must have been about three. One of her first vivid memories is hearing him plead and bang inside the chest as the waves dragged it out to sea.

How she fell to her knees in the sand screaming, and the women had to restrain her.

‘What was I supposed to do?’ Myrrhine often asks when prompted, in her thin, wheedling voice. ‘Anyway, he might not have drowned. The sea god, Poseidon, might have taken mercy on him, or a fisherman might have pulled him up in a net. You should be thanking me, really, if you think about it, but of course nobody ever does . . .’

This is typical Myrrhine. Myrrhine’s eyes are the colour of disappointment. Her lip is constantly curled, as if at the bitter flavour of her own tongue.

But how can Phoebe forgive her stepmother? Each day her loathing for this stern, sour woman she is forced to share a home with only grows.

‘You’d better not be bringing more dust in the house,’ Myrrhine will snap at Phoebe when she gets back each evening, without even looking up from her spindle and thread. ‘Start sweeping.



You know I like a nice clean floor. And what's this about you fainting again? That horrible wine seller told me, drunk that she is – she should mind her own business. How do you think it makes me look, when you're always swooning? It's a nasty habit. But, oh no, you never think about *my* reputation . . .'

'I can't exactly help it,' Phoebe will reply, unable to resist a sarcastic comeback even when it makes her life more difficult. 'It's not like I think, ooh, I'd love a tiny blackout right now!'

'Rubbish! You *can* help it, and you *should*! An apology would be nice, but you never think about your poor old stepmother. I've been parched all day, because you didn't fetch water in the jar this morning. *And* the wheat wasn't ground properly for the bread; I almost broke a tooth. I hope you're proud of yourself, madam!'

How can Phoebe escape this poky mud-brick house of doom? Every evening it's just her and her stepmother eating together in silence,



hatred lying thickly between them. The meals Phoebe cooks are never good enough. ‘Needs more seasoning,’ Myrrhine declares. Or: ‘I think I found some dust in this.’ Phoebe wants to scream: *maybe if you’d been nicer to him, Dad would have come back! Maybe if you hadn’t thrown my brother in the ocean, he’d have cooked a more delicious dinner!* Her whole body wants to run away but there’s nowhere to run to.

Sometimes, Phoebe even prays to Aphrodite, at the temple where they make extra sacrifices so she’ll never get angry with Lemnos again. ‘Make something happen to me, mighty Aphrodite!’ she pleads. ‘Just *something!* Anything. I’m not fussy, seriously. ANYTHING! Well, OK, don’t make us all smell again – that was a disaster – but anything else.’ But now there are no men on Lemnos for her to flirt with, it seems there’s not much to interest the goddess of love. In fact, it’s as if the





gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus have forgotten this island altogether.

If she was a boy, maybe she could escape to sea and set sail on an epic adventure. She's heard of heroes out there slaying monsters and having battles. Not that Phoebe wants to be a boy – she has been educated in weaving, reading and man-hating since she was small, and is actually top of her class in man-hating. But still, she'd like to have some life choices at least. At the moment, she seems destined to drudgery until she dies.

It is dusk now, the sky getting lilac at the edges, which means it's nearly time to head home, but Phoebe stubbornly lays out the innards of that dead frog she has been poking. She is attempting batrachomancy, which is prophecy by frog. It's supposed to be a way to learn about the future. As the gods seem silent, Phoebe has been trying other methods, desperate for a sign that there's something for her to look



forward to. But what is she really looking for? Like, there's its tiny stomach, still digesting a midge. There's its froggy heart. Its lungs. Where is the message from the gods meant to be?

A white goat watches her from up a tree with a cunning, hungry glint to its eye. She knows that goats eat anything, but can't work out if he fancies the dead frog. Or her stick. Or her sandal?

Which reminds her to try scarpomancy: prophecy by old shoes.

Phoebe has previously tried:

✧ Dendromancy: prophecy by trees

✧ Symbolomancy: prophecy by things found next to the road

✧ Onychomancy: prophecy by fingernail clippings

✧ Stercomancy: prophecy by the seeds in bird poop and

✧ Amenscopy: prophecy by wind (don't ask).

Last week she tried amathomancy, which is prophecy by sand, but the sand she scattered only made a shape like a mouth yawning. And come to think of it, the dead frog also looks a bit like it's yawning.

'I'm doomed, aren't I?' Phoebe mutters darkly. 'Fated to be bored out of my brain.'

It's a shame because Phoebe is a girl after my own heart. The only thing that interests her, really, is prophecies and magic. Life is so dull, all that can cheer her up is daydreaming about her future and imagining herself as the next Oracle of Delphi, also known as the Pythoness.

The Oracle of Delphi is the most famous celebrity oracle. In Phoebe's fantasy, kings travel from all over the known world to witness her fall into a frenzied trance as she inhales strange fumes then whispers enigmatic prophecies from under her purple veil.

'For LO! I know the number of grains of sand and the measure of the sea!' Phoebe declares to



some rocks, imagining they are important men begging to hear her predictions. ‘OK, very well then, I will speak your destiny, you pitiful fools. I prophesise that an owl will be your ruin before the sun rises for the third time . . . Or *will it?*’

Or else she sometimes pretends she’s the teenage witch, Medea, from Colchis, who they say can make magic potions, hypnotise people, tame fire, turn a river around and even pause the stars. PAUSE THE STARS! (How cool is that?) Phoebe dreams about meeting Medea one day. Maybe she could even be her apprentice? At night, Phoebe practises trying to pause the stars and sometimes she thinks she’s done it but then the next night she looks up at the constellations and they’ve moved again.

In the stories the older women tell by the fire, oracles and witches are the only women who seem famous or important. It seems a girl’s only chance of getting in a story is by channelling supernatural powers.



Phoebe's hope is that one day, one of her potions will actually work. Abandoning the disembowelled frog, she thinks about mixing a quick one up now before she heads home . . . She looks around. An old bone? Sand? Hemlock? A goat's eye? Would that be a magic potion? Nope, she realises, it would just be a gritty, poisonous and spectacularly unappetising stew.

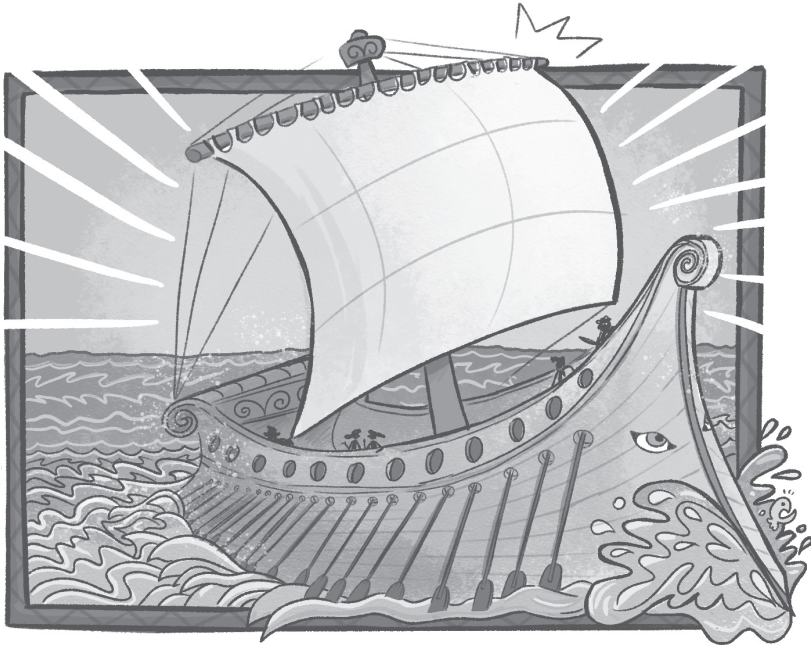
Which reminds her to try cephalonomancy: prophecy by boiling a donkey's head.

Only just then, something happens. It *actually* happens. The sky suddenly, drastically darkens and fills with a crackling, clammy tension and she realises a storm is coming on. There is a rumble of thunder and, a couple of beats later, a sheet of lightning.

'Better head for home,' she tells herself, abandoning her frog guts, and she starts to make her way down the dirt path back towards her town on the coast. The goat follows her. She feels the first flecks of rain on her neck, then, as she rounds the headland and picks her way

down the cliff, a vision confronts her on the tossing, roiling sea.

It is a huge and splendid ship, close to the shore, being whipped from side to side. A zigzag of excitement goes through Phoebe like a lightning strike. Is that . . . the ARGO?





2



THE LITERAL,



ACTUAL FAMOUS ARGO!

OK, OK, let's back up here, because I've just written 'the Argo' and you're supposed to be all, like, 'What?! THE ARGO!!! THE ACTUAL ARGO! THAT'S INCREDIBLE! NO WAY! SURELY NOT THE LITERAL, ACTUAL, FAMOUS ARGO! THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY WHOLE ENTIRE LIFE! I am SO excited for this story I need an ACTUAL WEE!' Gasp, swoon, go for a wee, etc. But it may be, O reader of the future, that you don't actually

know what the Argo is, so I'm just going to fill you in a bit here.

The Argo is the best ship in the whole world ever. It has magnificent red and gold sails, and its name means 'swift' because it can move so fast. It's as huge as a sea monster, with each of its fifty oars made from the finest pine wood. Its prow, at the front, is also made from a special plank of oak sacred to Zeus, king of the gods, so it can talk. I know – a talking plank – now you're interested.

Each of the fifty oars is manned by one of the Argonauts, which is what they call the ship's crew. Jason, their leader – a hero type with a big dimple in his chin – assembled them to help him on a daring and dangerous quest, and it's been said that they are the best crew in the whole world ever. A total dream team.

In Ancient Greece, legends travel fast. Even the women of Lemnos have heard of the Argonauts and know a ship this flashy and

enormous couldn't be anything but the Argo.

The rain has picked up. Phoebe squints through hissing, whipping waves of it. Jason is supposed to be very handsome, although never having spent time in the presence of men, she is not exactly sure what 'handsome' means.

As the waves smack the Argo, it's clear one man is in charge – pointing and instructing – so maybe that's Jason. And beside him, seemingly oblivious to the chaos, a man with a quiff is plucking at an instrument. That must be Orpheus, she realises, the ancient world's most famous poet and singer. They say he is so talented that he can charm birds out of the trees, or lambs into a kebab wrap.

Is that great big fellow by the rigging Hercules – the world's strongest man, famous for slaying the nine-headed hydra (and arguably just as famous for his impressively humungous abs)? It must be.

There are two interchangeable blonde guys



with little wings on their heels. And perhaps that being, with the legs of a horse and the torso of a human . . . is a centaur? Phoebe has never seen one in real life before.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning strikes an oar. The thunder intensifies. A wave rears and slops over the Argo's deck, filling Orpheus's lyre with seaweed and leaving an octopus clinging to Hercules's head – he has to pop it off one sucker at a time.

Jason is shouting desperate instructions to the crew – and then the ship turns and begins to approach Lemnos, steering around rocks with great effort, trying to pull itself into a safe harbour. They are coming to the island! Phoebe gulps. *Whoa*, she thinks. *That is actually a lot of men*. It's a bit scary seeing them get closer, with their muscles and weapons and patriarchal views.

One of the island's lookouts must have noticed too. At the edge of her sight, Phoebe

notices a clifftop torch begin to flame, which is the signal for ‘start panicking’. Then the next watchwoman sees and lights her own, and so on, and the panic spreads in flames along the coast, fear strung like a golden nerve over the storm-racked cliffs.

The grown-up women will all be taking their positions. Phoebe imagines her stepmother, Myrrhine, grimly putting down her spindle and heading to the palace, scowling and tutting about how she always knew this dark day would come, and it’s everyone’s fault but her own.

Phoebe gets that electrical shiver again. *Something’s happening.* She runs the last bit of the path home, which is a real effort as Phoebe is not a fan of running. It gives her a stitch, and her feet make horrible squelchy noises in her soaked sandals. When she gets there, the absence of complaints confirms that Myrrhine is gone.

Normally Phoebe would have to start sweeping or chopping, or balance that heavy water jug on her head, but instead she puts on some dry clothes, then coils her pet snake, the Pythoness, around her neck. (The pet snake is named in honour of the Oracle of Delphi, but is actually a small leopard snake rather than an actual python.)

Shaky with adrenalin, she grabs some snacks, coins and a knife. She suddenly feels like she needs to be prepared for anything. For destiny.

‘When things happen to you,’ she says aloud, giving herself a pep talk, ‘you must seize your moment. Or hide under the bedclothes. Um, tough choice. Deep breath. I’m going to seize the moment! Whoa, that sounds so deeply uncool, it’s a good job no one is listening.’

Outside, the storm is blowing itself out. Dark clouds are moving quickly over the setting sun. Phoebe creeps down the stone steps towards the harbour, peeking round corners, trying to get a

sense of what's happening. After a minute she finds a good view of the bay and can see that the Argonauts have been allowed to anchor for the night. They are trying to make beds for themselves on the rain-pocked beach and get a fire going with damp wood. All except for Jason, who is being led towards the palace.

Phoebe wonders if Jason's noticed the lack of men on the island yet. What's the queen going to say to get out of this one?

And then there's the ship, seemingly empty, swaying on the becalmed waters a little way from the camp. It's so beautiful. So big! So gleaming! So mythical! It's the most amazing thing Phoebe's ever seen in her life. (Which, admittedly, is not a high bar, the second most amazing thing is probably raisins.)

Phoebe can't resist. She jumps down on to the beach and very, very quietly wades through the glittery dark sea towards it. She touches the stern. And then she sees a rope and footholds.

Should she? Yes. In an impulsive, totally uncharacteristic moment, with a lot of puffing and cursing, and very little dignity, Phoebe somehow pulls herself up on to the deck. THE ARGO! she thinks. THE ACTUAL ARGO! THAT'S INCREDIBLE! NO WAY! SURELY NOT THE LITERAL, ACTUAL, FAMOUS ARGO! THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY WHOLE, ENTIRE LIFE! EVEN THOUGH THAT'S NOT SAYING MUCH!