

Chapter 1: The Crew Assembled

Jason set his feet firmly, withdrew the deadly sword from its sheath, and raised it toward the sky. Before him stood two enormous bronze bulls. They snorted fire from their nostrils and pawed the ground. A roar from the depths of Hades cascaded from their lungs and shook Jason.

I'm afraid! she cried. You don't stand a chance, Jason!

Fear not, Lady Melanie, these creatures are mere child's play for a great warrior like me.

Oh Jason, you are my hero. Jason . . .

"Jason! Jason!" his mother called.

He snapped out of the daydream.

"Jason! If you don't get your sorry butt down here this instant, you'll be late for school! And on the first day. Jason! If I have to come up there, I swear! Your brothers and sisters have already left. Jason!"

"I'm up, Ma. I'm getting dressed. Be right down," Jason replied, struggling out of bed in the early morning light. He hated getting up early. Almost as much as he hated school.

The sun shone in bits and pieces through the ragged curtains that hung limply across the window. Jason stretched and tried to shake the sleep from his brain. A paperback fell out of his pants pocket when he lifted them off the floor. He picked up the dogeared book, his assigned summer reading, and leafed through it.

"The Voyage of Argo," he read aloud.

"Jason! This is the last time. If I come up there!" his mother, again, shouted from downstairs.

"I wonder what would happen if she ever did come up," he mused to himself while crawling down the stairs.

"I swear, Jason. You're never going to amount to anything if you don't apply yourself. I'm speaking to your father about getting you in the mill next year. You're twelve now. That's enough schooling to work in the mill. At least you can bring in some money. You ain't worth much as it is. Here's your lunch." She extended a black metal lunch pail at him. "Hurry along. Don't want that teacher of yours sending home a tardy slip. Now git!"

Jason grabbed the lunch pail, hurried through the front door, across the porch, and into the road where he began to run. Once past the trees where his mother could no longer see him, he slowed to a crawl and kicked stones as his thoughts drifted. Everyone else was long gone and most likely halfway to school.

"Boy!"

"Damn, you scared me!" Jason shouted as he jumped back.

"Don't y'all be cussing. You is that Jason boy, ain't ya?"

"So? What's it to you?"

"Don't be smart mouthin' me! I know your daddy and he'll be whuppin' you if he knew you was swearing." "I have to go." Jason continued along.

"Where you going?"

"School."

"School? School's for fools. You need to help me. You know me?" He was following Jason.

"Yeah. You're Mr. Grayson from up on the Mill road. I have to go to school or my parents are gonna be mad."

Grayson, as he was known to the locals, was tall and skinny with gray scraggly hair and a long white beard. He raised prize winning sheep on a large farm and was believed to be quite well off financially, though extremely tight with his money.

"You know that big ram I got? The one with the gold-colored fleece?" Grayson asked.

“Yeah, everybody knows that ram. What about him?”

“Someone’s stole him last night. Took him right outta his pen! Dog never even barked.”

Jason turned to face him. “I never touched your damned ram!”

“I ain’t accusing you, boy. Don’t be a idiot. Look here.” Grayson was pointing at the edge of the road.

Jason glanced to where the old man was indicating. “They’re tire tracks. So what?”

“How many you know drives a truck around here?”

Jason scratched his head and stared at the tracks. “Can’t think of anybody.”

“Damn right, boy. Someone took him and headed to the Center, see?”

They walked together a short distance along the road while studying the marks on the edge.

“Yeah, looks like they headed to the Center. Nothing else this way. But what has this got to do with me?” Jason asked.

“I’m too old ta go traipsing after nobody. I want ta hire you ta find my ram.”

“How am I supposed to do that? Besides, I have to go to school.” Jason began walking away.

“I’ll pay you, if you bring him back.”

“Pay? Yeah, what, two dollars?” he called over his shoulder.

“Fifty!”

Jason stopped. Grayson had his attention. He must be serious to offer that much money. And fifty dollars would go a long way toward purchasing the guitar Jason’s neighbor wanted to sell. Though never having played a musical instrument, Jason assumed he had a natural talent for it.

“Fifty dollars to bring back your ram?” Jason asked.

“Yep. But it’s got ta be afore a week’s out. I got him entered in the county fair and he’s gotta be there in a week. Can you do it?”

How hard could it be to find that ram? After all, he was bigger than most, and that gold-colored fleece set him apart. It would be impossible to conceal him or show him in the fair under another name. This would be the easiest fifty bucks Jason had ever made.

“You got the fifty?” Jason asked.

Grayson shook his head. “I ain’t giving you it now, only after you bring him back.”

“Half now, the rest then.” Jason held out his hand.

The old man reached in a pocket and pulled out a handful of one-dollar bills. He methodically counted off ten and extended a trembling hand toward Jason.

“Ten now, the rest when you bring him back.”

“Deal,” Jason responded, grabbing the cash. *This is going to be easy.*

“You bring him back, aright, boy? One week!” Grayson held up a withered finger. As he turned away, Jason saw a tear run down the old man’s cheek.

“Fifty bucks! I can’t believe how easy it is to make money. I not going to waste my time working at the mill when I can make money like this. He’s right about school, too!” Jason told himself as he quickened his pace toward town.

Every now and then Jason glanced at the tire tracks that continued straight for the Center. He wondered whether or not to include his friends in this sudden bounty and decided he could get along fine alone. He was heading down the last hill before the river when his best friend Nicky called out to him.

“Wait up, Jason. I’m going to be late again, but I just saw this hawk. He swooped down and took a dove! I had to see what happened ‘cause that’s a sure sign, don’t you think?”

“You on about that sign stuff again? Birds don’t tell the future, unless it’s a chicken, then they can foretell what’s for supper!” Jason replied.

“You’re just jealous ‘cause I have the gift. I tell you, something big’s gonna happen. I know it! What are you lookin’ at?” Nicky asked as he caught up to Jason.

“It’s these tire tracks, I mean, nothing.” Jason glanced around.

“Tire tracks? Looks like a truck but nobody has a truck around here. Why are you interested in them anyway?” Nicky stood hunched over studying the impressions.

He was several inches shorter than Jason and had thick curly hair. Most other kids thought him peculiar because he was always watching birds and told everyone he could see the future in their ways. He and Jason had been friends forever and were always together. Jason decided to tell him about the money. Sort of.

“You know that ram with the gold-colored fleece that old Grayson has?” Jason asked him.

“Sure, everybody knows that ram. What about him?”

“Someone stole him last night and Grayson is paying me twenty dollars to bring him back. That’s why I’m following these tracks because he thinks this is how they took him.”

“That’s a big job alone,” Nicky hinted, as he stared at Jason.

Jason sighed. “Want to help me? I’ll give you five bucks.”

“Five bucks? Sure!” His face lit up. “But won’t we be late for class?”

“Not going to class. Don’t need any more schooling. Think I’m going to start my own business.”

“What kind of business? Can I work for you?”

“Finding lost animals, dimwit, what do you think? Maybe you can help, if this goes good.”

“Where do you think they took the ram?” Nicky asked.

“I figure they made it to the Center, then headed north to the main highway.” He indicated the direction.

“How are we going to follow them? We haven’t got a truck or car or anything.”

“Don’t worry, I’m resourceful.”

“You sure are.” Nicky looked puzzled and scratched his head.

“What’s resourceful mean?”

“You’re kinda dumb sometimes, you know? It means I can find some transportation, that’s what it means.”

“Hey fellas, wait up!” a voice called out from behind the pair.

“Oh damn! Let’s hurry up and cross the bridge before he catches up,” Nicky pleaded. “I don’t want to get beat up again.”

“Don’t worry, Harry won’t bother you as long as I’m around.” Jason pointed to his chest.

“How’s it hangin’, losers?” Harry asked as he punched Nicky in the shoulder.

“Ow! What’d you do that for?” Nicky rubbed his shoulder.

“Leave Nicky alone, Har.”

“Just kidding, Jason. How come you always have to look out for him?”

“I ain’t scared of you,” Jason said.

“Maybe you should be,” Harry replied. But it was an idle threat because Jason was about the only kid Harry didn’t bully. He admired the fact that Jason could achieve just about anything with little or no effort, even though it was an illusion Jason played up. The fact was Jason had not achieved anything in his twelve years on this earth, other than barely passing the fifth grade. Harry was two years older than the others in his class because he had been left back twice. He wasn’t very bright, but was much bigger than everyone else, which mattered most.

“You better leave us alone. We have important business to take care of,” Nicky told him.

“What important business?” Harry asked.

“It’s nothing, Harry, he’s just funnin’ you,” Jason quickly added as he glared at Nicky.

“Ah come on, Jason. Tell me what it is.” He grabbed Jason by the arm.

“We’ve been hired to find the ram with the gold-colored fleece,” Nicky blurted out.

“He’s missing?” Harry asked, his eyes wide in disbelief.

“Stolen last night. See these tire tracks?” Nicky pointed toward the edge of the road. “We’re following them. That’s how they took him. In a truck.”

“Can I help?” Harry asked. “I won’t get in the way, and I can carry him back after we find him, and if anybody tries to stop us I’ll pound ‘um.”

“Yeah, alright, you can come, Harry. But we’re going to miss school today,” Jason said.

“Even better!” Harry jumped in the air.

They were at the bridge on the edge of town when they spotted a thin trail of dust coming down the North Road. It was Rob. He was the fastest kid in school. No one could even think of catching him once he got up to full speed. He bragged about being able to run across the lake and not get his feet wet!

“Mornin’ guys,” Rob shouted as he tried to slow down, but went past the trio a fair distance before coming to stop. “What are you up to?” he asked them when he finally caught up. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

“We’re looking for the ram with the gold-colored fleece,” Nicky informed him.

“You have to stop telling everyone,” Jason admonished him.

“This is our job.”

“The ram is missing?” Rob asked.

“Yeah, and ole Grayson is paying Jason twenty bucks to find him and bring him back and I’m getting five out of that.” “Hey, I should get five too,” Harry added.

“I’ll help for five bucks,” Rob offered.

“Look, I can do this on my own!” Jason tried to reason with them as he watched his money evaporate. “It’s not that hard. All I have to do is follow these tire tracks and lead the ram back.” But it was too late. Now there were four.

“And we get out of school, too,” Harry enthusiastically told Rob. “Jason says we don’t got to go. This is more important.”

“I never said you don’t have to go to school,” Jason began. “I said you will miss school. Oh, never mind. If we’re doing this together there are a few rules. First, I’m the leader. What I say goes. Second, don’t tell anybody else what we’re doing, or that we’re not going to school. Third, don’t mention the money. Everybody agree?” All three nodded.

“We should call ourselves something,” Nicky spoke up.

“We’re not calling ourselves anything,” Jason told him.

“How about Jason and his Followers,” Rob suggested.

“I just said—” Jason began.

“I like it,” Harry agreed. “Jason and his Followers,” he repeated as he wrapped his arm around Jason’s shoulders and squeezed tight.

“Okay, okay,” Jason relented as he struggled out of Harry’s vice-like embrace. “Let’s get back to the job at hand. We have to follow these—ow!” he yelped. “I got hit with a rock!” “Oh no! It’s her!” Nicky cried out.

“What’s the brain trust up to today?” Melanie asked as she walked up to the four boys.

“None of your business,” Jason informed her. “Why did you hit me with a rock?”

“I didn’t hit you. I was aiming at a squirrel and your fat head got in the way. Stay out of my way and I won’t hit you, dummy.”

Melanie was one of the smartest students in their class, had long black hair, brown eyes, and was the prettiest girl in the county. At least that’s what Jason thought, though he would never admit it to anyone. Not even to his best friend. If the guys found out he liked a girl they would tease him mercilessly. Especially *her*. And she had a huge crush on Jason. Why else would she throw rocks at him?

“We have important business to take care of and don’t want no girls around so beat it!” Nicky said.

“Important business my butt! You guys never do anything important,” Melanie replied.

“Oh yeah? For your information we have been hired by Grayson to find his ram with the gold-colored fleece that was stolen last night and we’re following tire tracks of the ones that stole him and Jason is getting paid twenty bucks and I’m getting five and Rob is getting five and Harry is getting five so there.” Nicky was proud of himself until he noticed the look of horror on Jason’s face.

“Is this true? The ram was stolen?” Melanie asked Jason.

“Yeah, it’s like blabber-mouth says. Grayson hired me and I’ve tracked their truck here to the Center.”

Melanie perked up. “Did you say a truck?”

“According to the tire tracks, they were driving a truck. I figure they headed north from here,” Jason replied.

“There’s a truck parked down by the river where Mr. Westman rents out rowboats. I saw it on my way here.” Melanie was pointing in the general direction.

“Come on! Let’s go down and check it out.” Jason took off running and motioned for the others to follow.

The four of them, followed by Melanie, hurried down to a small dock on the river south of the bridge. A few ramshackle buildings sat on the bank and belonged to Mr. Westman, who made a living renting boats to fishermen. He and his son Steve, another good friend of Jason’s, were standing in animated conversation beside a brown truck when the group arrived.

“Know whose truck this is?” Jason asked as they approached the pair.

“Just discussing that,” Steve replied. He had red hair, freckles, and the most incredible eyesight. He claimed he could see a black cat a hundred yards away at midnight! “We think the owners of the truck took one of our boats sometime in the night. Found a twodollar bill stuck in the door of the shed. What’s that?” He was pointing at something on the ground behind the truck.

“It looks like wool,” Nicky answered him as he retrieved the object. “Gold-colored wool.”

“That’s definitely from Grayson’s ram,” Jason added confidently.

“We’re on the right track.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked.