



ATALANTA

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In the wild and dangerous world of ancient Greek myth, Atalanta, virgin priestess of Artemis, is one of the few strong female figures. Her name derives from the Greek word *atalantos*, meaning 'equal in weight', which hints at her ability to compete with men, and even to beat them. Indeed, though many doubted Atalanta's bravery simply because she was female, she was determined to prove them wrong. And so she did, time and time again. Atalanta did not shy away from a challenge - from slaying attackers to winning wrestling contests and even accompanying the Argonauts on their voyage against all odds.

It is not known for certain who Atalanta's parents were, since she was abandoned in the woods as a baby. Her parents, it seems, had wanted a boy, and cruelly rejected their new-born as soon as they discovered she was a girl. Luckily, Atalanta was saved by a bear, who found her in the woods and raised her. Thanks to spending so much time in the forest, Atalanta soon befriended the hunters, and quickly became the most skilled among them. Atalanta was sharp of eye and fleet of foot, and could outrun even the fastest creatures. And so, she grew up strong, swift and brave - not the typical blushing maiden you'd expect from ancient mythology!

In some versions of the Argonauts myth, Atalanta joined the crew as the only woman among them. Although Jason initially opposed the idea, Atalanta stubbornly insisted, and leapt on board the ship as it was setting sail, joining her lover Meleager on board. During the voyage of the Argonauts, Atalanta played an active role. In the games held in honour of Pelias, Atalanta wrestled with the hero Peleus and won.

Later in her adventurous life, Atalanta took part in the hunt of the Calydonian Boar, and was the first to draw blood. As a prize, Meleager gave her the boar's skin, but his uncles protested to a woman being awarded the prize. Meleager responded by killing them. According to some versions of the myth, Atalanta's father (either Iasus or Schoeneus) was proud to hear of Atalanta's victory in the boar hunt and finally claimed her as his daughter, after all those years. Now reunited with his daughter, Atalanta's father decided that it was time for her to marry, which she had always refused to do. Reluctantly, Atalanta agreed to marry, on the condition that the suitor must defeat her in a race. The successful suitor would be allowed to marry Atalanta; all those who were unsuccessful would be put to death.

At first, Atalanta defeated every suitor, and it seemed that no one would ever outrun her. But at last, a man named Melanion (or, according to some versions, Hippomenes), sought the help of Aphrodite, goddess of love. The goddess provided him with three golden apples, which he placed before Atalanta during the race. Spellbound, Atalanta stopped to pick up the apples, which delayed her enough to make Melanion the victor and, as agreed, the two were presently married. When Atalanta let her guard down and allowed Melanion to seduce her in a temple of Zeus, the king of the gods transformed them both into lions in punishment. But being transformed into a mighty lion was also a fitting end for our brave-hearted heroine, who had been bold enough to hunt alongside warriors, to outwrestle men, and to join the fittest and finest heroes on board the Argo.