

ATALANTA

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*For Bee and Steph, my Northern writers' group,
who loved this novel from its earliest incarnation
and cheered it every step of the way*

Atalanta: From the Greek Ἀταλάντη (*Atalante*) meaning ‘equal in strength’.

‘Atalanta was exceeding swift of foot . . . she exposed not her self to view, unless accidentally in following the chase, or defending herself from some man; in which action she broke forth like lightning.’

– Thomas Stanley, translator (1665),
Claudius Aelianus His Various History: Book XIII
(pages 258–87)

PROLOGUE

When I was born, they left me on a hillside. The king had given his decree – *if it's a girl, expose her on the mountain* – and so some unfortunate soul was dispatched from the palace with this unwanted scrap of humanity: a baby girl instead of the glorious heir the king desired.

Left on the bare earth, I suppose I might have howled for as long as my little lungs could bear it. Or I could have lain, whimpering and fearful, watching as she came closer. The mother bear, her cubs still blind and damp-furred, attracted by the plaintive sound of a desolate newborn, her maternal anxiety still at its peak.

I'd like to think that I looked up at her, the mother bear, and held her gaze. That I didn't flinch away from her hot breath or the rough caress of her paw. She must have been too solicitous to leave me, unable to stand the sound of a hungry infant, and so she scooped me up and took me back with her.

I grew strong on bear milk. I learned to wrestle with my bear siblings, the rough and tumble of our play with no quarter given. I never cried when their claws or teeth scraped my

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skin or when they growled and pounced. Rather, I twisted my fingers into their fur, pulled them to the ground, buried my own teeth in their flanks and bit as hard as I could. By night, we curled up together, a tangle of limbs ursine and human, the soft pads of their paws resting on my sun-browned flesh in our warm nest of leaves and earth, the damp rasp of their tongues against my face.

Seasons passed and, weaned from their mother's milk, they learned to hunt for themselves, tentative at first, perched precariously on slippery rocks in the fast-flowing river that rushed through our forest. I would sit cross-legged on the grassy bank, watching the water for the shining dart of fish scales like they did, laughing at their clumsy swipes, the splashes that left them bedraggled. At first, their mother stayed close, intent upon them, but as their confidence swelled, she started to wander further away. She sniffed the air, her eyes drawn to the sloping hills, her attention drifting from us, caught by something else.

The cubs knew it before I did. They made themselves scarce before he appeared, the huge male in search of a mate. They hid themselves in the trees when he came shambling out of the mountains, from some faraway cave where the scent of the mother bear had carried on the fresh spring breeze. An irresistible summons to this monster, who seemed to rear up to the height of the trees themselves. The rumbling in his throat sounded like the thunder that had shaken the branches while I'd lain safe among the sleeping cubs all winter.

She sensed it too. In the space of a moment, the time it took for the wind to turn, she changed; swift, abrupt and inevitable. Her loving caresses turned to snarls and swipes; if any of her young looked back longingly before they scattered to the safety of their high branches, she leapt to chase them

away. I trembled from behind a boulder, feeling the hot blast of air as she roared her warning. The only mother I had known in my short life was gone, replaced with something terrible.

She let him follow her. From where I hid, I saw his great head butting against her neck, and her answering nuzzle.

The cubs were agitated at first, but after a while they calmed, and one by one, each of them at last climbed down. I watched as my brothers and sisters made their own separate ways through the forest, quickly swallowed up by the towering trunks and verdant branches.

Disorientated, I went too, wandering without direction among the trees, but in time my tears dried up and my gasping breaths slowed. I knew where I was, and the familiarity of the forest was soothing as I walked. The air was golden-green, filtering through the leaves, rich with the scent of pine and cypress and soft black earth. A fat spider squatted in the centre of her web between two branches, her hairy brown body and striped legs almost disappearing against the bark. A snake darted forwards, coiling swiftly into a protective circle, the diamond sheen of its scales glittering where the sunlight fell across it. Where the trees thinned out on the higher slopes of the mountain, lions prowled, sleek and soundless through the ragged bushes and rocky outcrops. A forest sharp with fangs and claws, trickling with venom, pulsing with life and beauty. There were a thousand interconnected threads criss-crossing through it: from the ancient roots soaking up water deep beneath the earth so that the trees could lift their mighty crowns towards the sun, to the insects that burrowed into the deep crevices of the bark, to the birds that nested in the boughs, to the deer that trotted lightly and the stalking predators ready to pounce.

And in the heart of it all, there was me.

PART ONE

1

She came to me in the forest after the bears had gone. She would have been an imposing sight to anyone, taller and stronger than any mortal woman would be – although I didn't know that then – with a gleaming bow in her hand, a fierce glint in her eyes and a pack of hounds at her heels. Even as a small child, however, my curiosity was more powerful than my fear. When she held out her hand to me, I took it.

I remember my first sight of the grove where she led me, stepping out from the cluster of cypress trees behind her. I squinted, dazzled for a moment by the golden light reflecting back from the shimmering surface of the pool before us. I screwed up my eyes, opened them again and blinked.

Across the water, set into the sloping mountainside, was a wide cave with large rocks dotted about in front of the entrance. And perched on the flat planes of the rocks were women – nymphs, as I would come to know them. The air rang with their soft chatter and gentle laughter. I looked up at the woman who had brought me here and she smiled.

They gave me berries, ripe and sweet. I remember the taste

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of the cold, clear water they gave me to drink, how clumsy I was with the cup they held to the mouth of the spring for me. That night, I did not sleep next to the bears' shaggy warmth, the heavy thrum of their hearts beating in my ears, but on a bed of animal skins, and I woke to the sound of a woman singing.

It was Artemis who had come for me, I would discover, and it was to her sacred grove that she had taken me. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, to whom the forest and all its inhabitants belonged. We all fell under her silvery gaze, we all bowed to her might, from the worms slithering in the earth to the howling wolves. The forest of Arcadia shimmered with her power.

She gave me to the nymphs to raise. It was their task to teach me what she found too tedious; for them to guide me to understand how they talked, and to learn, haltingly at first, how to respond; for them to show me how to weave the cloth from which they made the simple tunics they all wore, and how to honour the other gods and goddesses whose names they taught me, though none of them ever came to our forest. They taught me where to gather berries, how to avoid the ones that would make me sick, warned me against the innocuous-seeming fungi that would drain the life right out of me. I saw that their lives were dedicated to Artemis; they kept the forest for her, nurturing its springs, its rivers, its plants and all the life within it. In exchange, they lived there, loved and guarded by her.

At first, her visits seemed sporadic, unpredictable to me. From the cave where I slept beside the nymphs, I would watch the passage of the moon across the sky, chart its progress from slender crescent to shining orb. I learned that it would never dwindle back to a sliver again without her coming to us. Wandering through the forest, I would keep a watchful eye

all the time. The dogs that had waited patiently at her side when she'd first found me would follow me into the trees, as though they looked for their mistress too. There were seven of them, and at first I found it easier to be with them than the nymphs. Their soft fur reminded me of the bears and their sharp teeth never frightened me. Every rustle of branches or snap of twigs as we walked would catch my attention, root me in place, searching in between the clusters of gnarled trunks for any sign of her return. I was eager for her to come back and see what I'd learned each time in her absence. Whenever she stepped out, as startling and unexpected as a sudden rain shower in spring, I felt my heart leap.

She would call out for the nymphs to follow her, and they would leave me behind, fleeing lightly through the trees and returning with the dusk, their prey bundled over their shoulders. Those evenings, the grove would be rich with the mouth-watering scent of roasting meat. I yearned to go with them, for the day she would think me useful enough to take with her.

Five more winters passed before she came to me one dawn at the start of spring, when she whispered 'Atalanta?' at the mouth of the cave, and I leapt to answer. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining, her tunic loosely belted around her waist, and the smoothly curved bow in her hand. She greeted the hounds, then inclined her head for me to follow her into the forest depths, indicating for me to walk as soundlessly as she did, and to pause and look around with quick, darting movements at frequent intervals. I felt the pressure building up inside me, the gleeful joy at this new sport threatening to explode into giddy laughter, but I swallowed it down, setting my chin as firmly as hers and placing my feet exactly where

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she did on the soft earth. The dogs streamed ahead of us, ears pricked as they sniffed the air eagerly. When they caught the scent they were searching for, she pulled me down swiftly beside her, crouching behind a fallen log, peering over the velvety moss as she narrowed her eyes and took aim with the bow.

The stag broke through the trees, panicked by the hounds. It was a majestic creature, the antlers spreading wide and tall from its broad forehead, perhaps the most magnificent one I'd seen. Her arrow pierced its throat in an instant, before its liquid brown eyes could register the danger it had run into, and it slumped down, a trickle of red sliding down below the slender wooden shaft of her weapon.

She caught my admiring glance and smiled. The next time, she showed me how to hold the bow, its weight seeming to thrum in my hands, quivering with power.

From then, I lived for the days that Artemis would arrive in the grove, when she would beckon me out into the stillness of dawn with the bow in her hand. Her voice, low and urgent in my ear as she breathed her instructions: how to watch for the movement of the deer hidden deep among the ferns, how to render myself motionless, invisible, eyes fixed on the target, the bow strung taut in my hands until there was nothing left in the world but me and my quarry. I'd exhale as the arrow flew straight for its throat, just as she'd shown me. Under her tutelage, I shaped a bow of my own and never went anywhere in the forest without it. There was nothing sweeter to me in the world than the sound of her delighted laughter when I hit the mark.

As well as the thrill of success and the satisfaction of the kill, I wanted to please her. As the nymphs had told me, it was under the protection of Artemis that I had the chance

to grow free and joyous. She didn't live as the other gods did, and my life was like no other human's either. Artemis shunned the golden halls of Mount Olympus, the grand cloud-cloaked palace where the other immortals lived. She chose a life in the forest instead, preferring to bathe in the pools by silver moonlight and run through the trees by day, swift and graceful, a quiver of arrows slung across her body and her bow always ready. I saw that it pleased her to have a mortal grow up in her image, and I was glad of it too, even if I didn't quite understand just how much gratitude I truly owed her.

I had never known a human hearth; I had no conception of how rare a thing it was to be the protégée of a goddess, to spend my childhood in the wild simplicity and raw magic of the woods.

Artemis may have chosen to shun her fellow Olympians, but the Arcadian woods were full of her companions. The nymphs who cared for me were dedicated to following her: dozens of ageless daughters of rivers, springs, oceans and winds, young women who ran and hunted and bathed alongside the goddess.

They told me stories. At first, I liked it best when they recounted my own – how I'd been left on the mountainside and rescued by the mother bear and later by Artemis. It kept the memories of my earliest life vivid in my mind. I didn't want to forget who I was before I came to live with these gentle, laughing women. I didn't want to lose the way it had felt, the exhilaration I'd known clutching the mother bear's fur, holding on tightly as we ran through the forest, her powerful muscles shifting beneath me and the trees flying past.

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I was full of curiosity, though, watching my new companions from my vantage point perched on a boulder by the pool, shaded by the delicate sweep of willow branches. There was Phiale, who, in the summer months when the water ran low, could always coax more to flow from the springs even if they had dwindled to a trickle, while Crocale drifted gracefully across the earth, flowers blooming in her wake. When the ground dried and hardened, baked beneath the sun, Psekas could conjure a sprinkling of rain from the air to nourish the thirsty soil. I wondered how they'd learned such tricks. 'Have you always been in the forest?' I asked them.

'Not always,' Phiale told me. 'Some of us are the daughters of the Titan Oceanos, the mighty river that girdles the earth. Our father sent us to Artemis when we were children, and we've dwelt here ever since.'

It raised another question for me: though I was growing swiftly all the time, and was almost as tall as the nymphs were already, why did they never seem to change?

'Like Artemis, we grew from childhood to take this form and this is how we will stay,' Phiale explained. 'While the goddess will never die, we can be harmed by wild beasts or . . . in other ways.' She paused. 'Nymphs can be killed, like the creatures you hunt in the woods. But the ravages of age won't ever touch us.'

'What about me?' I asked.

She cupped my cheek in her hand, stroking back the wisps of hair that had escaped my braid. 'You're mortal, Atalanta. Not like any other mortal who has ever lived, but you will grow and age like every human does.'

'Don't frighten her.'

Approaching from the far side of the grove, her hair coming

loose from its braid and her face smudged with traces of dirt, Callisto was returning from a hunt. She tossed her spear aside, letting it land with a clatter against a rock, and sank down on the ground beside the boulder I was sitting on.

‘She doesn’t frighten me,’ I said. I reached down and plucked a leaf from Callisto’s tangled curls.

‘Of course not.’ She leaned her head back, closing her eyes against the gentle sunlight.

‘Are you weary?’ Phiale asked her.

Callisto reached up her hand and caught my fingers in hers. ‘I’ve been hunting with Artemis, but she ran so far ahead. I can’t keep up with her.’ A wry smile lifted the corners of her mouth. ‘Not like Atalanta here, who can already run across the mountainsides with her all day and come back refreshed and ready for more.’

Phiale laughed. ‘Atalanta is only young, that’s why she’s so full of energy.’

‘Don’t you think she’ll be even more formidable when she’s fully grown? I do.’ Callisto squeezed my fingers and then she opened her eyes, looking up at me. ‘You’ll take my place as her closest companion before long,’ she said. There was no bitterness in her tone, no hint of jealousy. She said it simply and sincerely, with the affection she always showed me. It made my chest swell with a surge of pride and I looked away, not quite sure how to respond.

We felt it at the same moment, the sudden tingling in the air as though the forest itself was alert with anticipation. It meant only one thing. Artemis was here.

She strode out into the clearing, nymphs jumping up to attend her. She stood in the centre of them all, head and shoulders taller, holding a javelin stained with blood. She was still

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glowing from the thrill and exertion of the chase. She handed off the spear, her bow and her quiver of arrows to a couple of nymphs standing ready, and they laid them carefully at the sides of the cave. While they did so, Crocale slid the tunic from Artemis' shoulders and swept up her hair as the goddess stepped naked into the water.

Artemis sighed with contentment as the midday sun caught her in its glow, highlighting her upturned face, the curve of her shoulders and her breasts. It was a moment so beautiful, so harmonious, that I think all of us were suspended in it.

'There were men out hunting this morning too,' Callisto said. There was something significant in her tone, some kind of meaning that passed between her and Phiale as they glanced from each other to Artemis, still blissfully bathing.

I sat up straighter. 'How close did they get?'

Callisto laughed. 'Not very.'

'They never do,' I said. Men, hounds and horses. They intruded on our forest every now and again, horns blaring and the thunder of their shouts startling the birds from the treetops, but in all their noise and chaos, they never knew for a moment how close they might pass to me, a nymph or the goddess herself.

Phiale's face was unusually stern. 'Don't be so sure,' she said. 'They've made it deep into the forest before.'

I shrugged. 'They aren't fast enough to catch more than a glimpse of us.'

'You can't let them catch even a glimpse.' Phiale shook her head, and I felt a flicker of irritation at her caution.

'Truly, you mustn't.' Callisto stood, reaching into the cave to retrieve a wide-mouthed cup that she dipped into the stream of water constantly replenishing the pool.

‘A hunter did once find this sacred grove,’ Phiale said. Callisto was standing half in the shadows of the cave, so I couldn’t see her face, but Phiale’s gaze was intent and serious, fixed upon me as she spoke. ‘He got separated from his companions and, searching for them, stumbled right on to the banks of the pool.’

‘Really?’ I wasn’t sure whether to believe her or not. Perhaps it was a joke or a story she was telling to test my credulity.

‘Artemis was bathing, just as she is now,’ Phiale went on. The laughter and soft splashes as nymphs joined Artemis in the water meant her story wouldn’t be overheard, but still she kept her voice so low that I had to strain to hear her. ‘The nymphs flung themselves into the pool, clustering around the goddess to shield her from his view, but it was as though he was frozen to the spot, just staring.’

Despite myself, I felt a stirring of unease. ‘What did she do?’

‘He had two dogs with him,’ Callisto said. ‘Artemis was furious – more so than I had ever seen her. I remember her face, how she looked at the dogs and then back at the man. It was silent, no one moving, and then at once her hand struck the water, and droplets flew at his face. Her voice – it wasn’t like Artemis’ voice, it was deeper, terrible. She told him to go and tell his companions how he saw the goddess naked.’

Phiale took up the tale. ‘He tried to get away, he scrambled back towards the trees, but I could see where his hair dripped with water that there was something forming on his head, something that made no sense. I stared, not able to believe what I was seeing, but as he screamed, I saw it taking shape – two antlers twisting out of his skull.’

‘Antlers?’ I gasped. ‘But how . . .?’

‘He fell, and all across his body, fur was growing. He was

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convulsing, over and over, his screams ringing into the sky, and then he rolled over on to four legs – no longer a man but a stag.’

‘The dogs . . .’ Callisto said, and she swallowed.

‘He tried to flee, his legs tangling underneath him. They leapt on him at once, and the whole grove rang with the sound of their snarls.’

‘I couldn’t watch,’ Callisto said.

I was fascinated and repelled in equal measure. ‘But isn’t this a warning to the men to stay away? Why does it mean I should avoid them? If they follow us here, they’ll meet the same punishment.’

‘Imagine if Artemis hadn’t been here that day.’ Phiale pushed her hair back from her face impatiently. ‘Imagine if a man found one of us here without her, came across a nymph bathing alone, disrobed and vulnerable? If they knew we were here, what do you think they would do?’

‘I don’t know.’ I could tell from her tone it was something awful.

Callisto came forwards, into the light again. ‘Of course you don’t, and that’s because of how we live, just us women and Artemis.’

‘Artemis keeps us safe here,’ Phiale said. ‘But in exchange, we’ve all made the same vow: that we have nothing to do with men.’

‘His dogs were howling all through the evening, searching for their master,’ Callisto said. ‘They wanted his praise for the kill they’d made. We heard his friends in the distance shouting his name, Actaeon, over and over. It took hours for them to give up.’

I thought about it. ‘He came to hunt. He found something

stronger than he was.’ That was the way of the forest. Artemis had taught me that when we’d stalked our prey through the woods, bow in hand. We had to be able to take on whatever we encountered, to be strong enough to come out the victor every time.

‘That’s right,’ Phiale said. ‘But Artemis isn’t always here, and we aren’t all as fast as you are, Atalanta.’ Her mood was lightening now; she laughed as she said it, already back to playfulness.

‘Nor do we all have as much skill as you already do with the bow,’ Callisto added, kissing my forehead.

But I would be there, even when Artemis was not. I’d only regarded the hunters as a noisy nuisance, but now I resolved that if any came as close to us as Actaeon had, I would make sure they fared no better. I had been tempted sometimes to dart ahead of them, to see if any of them could ever manage a fleeting glance at me. Now when they thundered through with their horses and their dogs, I would turn away from their noisy intrusion and head deeper into the heart of the forest, where they could never manage to follow.

I was determined to keep growing stronger and faster. I worked harder, practising every day at shooting my bow, perfecting my aim. When Artemis came for me, I would show off my skills, bringing down stags and mountain lions alike. I would race her across the steep slopes of the mountains, my legs pumping, my breath sharp and desperate, always just a fraction behind her. I was young enough to think I might one day beat her, that I could be faster than a goddess. I wanted her to trust that I could protect us all, just like she did: I, who had grown up

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in the rough and tumble of the bears and stalked the woods silently with my bow and arrow. She was my sister, mother, guide and teacher all in one, and just like her, I wanted to fear nothing.