

The Calydonian Boar-hunt

(Time – 12:36)

In the land of Calydon, the queen had gone into labour. As she lay on her bed, surrounded by servants, she had a vision. She saw three hideous sisters: the Fates. The first spins out the thread of a mortal's life, the second measures out its length and the third cuts the thread and ends the life. The moment the queen gave birth, the second Fate cackled. 'You see that burning log? The moment the fire has destroyed it, her child will die.' And then the sisters were gone. The queen leant forward. She plucked the log from the flames. She doused it and threw it into a battered bronze box. She told no one what she had seen and done.

The first to hold the baby boy was not the king but the queen's two brothers. Her parents had died long ago. Her brothers had reared her from a child; they were as dear to her as her own life. She named the boy Meleager and he was unstoppable. Again and again he fought and won. Against impossible odds he knew no fear.

There came to the forest of Calydon a monstrous beast, a boar the size of a bull with bristles as jagged as daggers and tusks as sharp as swords. In those times, champions walked the earth; brave, brutal, reckless men eager to win fame. The king of Calydon sent out word: here was a proper challenge. The man courageous and resourceful enough to best this beast would win the right to be called 'Hero'.

Many men answered the call, among them warlike Peleus, Achilles' father, and stern Jason of Iolcus and Theseus of Athens; great men skilled in battle. Of course Prince Meleager was to lead the chase. The morning of the hunt arrived. Meleager sighed. His tiresome windbag uncles insisted on coming along. The young heroes were eager for the off, teasing one another. A forest of flashing blades, these two dodderly fools were holding them back, telling them how to hunt. Meleager only tolerated them for the sake of his mother.

The hounds were baying, straying at the leash. Just as they were about to set off they heard the sound of a trumpet from the palace. A servant came running. He swallowed, looked at the company anxiously. 'Your highness: another to join the company.'

The hunters looked and gasped. She was graceful as a deer, beautiful. But she held a bow; she wore a quiver of deadly arrows. 'I am the daughter of the king of Argos. My name is Atalanta.' She locked Prince Meleager with her gaze and it was as if the champions no longer existed. He was rooted to the spot. He couldn't speak. She was extraordinary.

This was too much for his uncles. 'You are not meant for this place. Get back to the kitchen where you belong.'

Still lost in her eyes, Meleager said, 'To whom do we pray for a successful hunt? It is to a goddess: Artemis.'

The uncles bristled. 'Careful. You have some respect for your elders.'

'I'd rather have her on this hunt than you,' said Meleager.

The brothers were furious. 'If you were not our sister's son, we'd split you in two for that remark.'

Now they saw the queen approaching. The brothers slunk back. She threw her arms around her son's neck. The other champions marvelled at her calm. It was as if her son were about to take a stroll through the palace gardens, not do battle with a monster. It was as if he had a charmed life.

The forest stank of boar. Alert, watchful, they slipped silently from dappled shadow to dappled shadow. They made no sound. They spoke only with gesture. The fleetest of foot, the most graceful, was Princess Atalanta; her every step was a dance. Meleager found it hard to remember he was on a hunt. His eyes kept straying back to her. Now she had an arrow notched to her bow. Meleager saw

signs of the boar: uprooted trees, trampled bracken. Where were the birds? So silent was this forest, he became aware of the rasp of his own breath, the beating of his own heart. The hounds ahead were whimpering. The champions lifted their spears aloft.

Prince Ancaeus was at the far end of the line. He would have made a fine king. He was not impetuous like the others; he had only joined this hunt to please his father. Movement ahead. He lifted his axe and it was over. One moment he was the handsome heir to a throne, a picture of physical perfection. The next moment he was a mangled mess of blood and bowels. The screams of Ancaeus unmanned the champions. It was pandemonium. They took aim at anything. Every snapped twig, every glimpsed movement brought arrows. In the chaos many a champion killed another. The old uncles were barking orders.

Meleager cast about – where was Atalanta? She emerged, smiling, out of the undergrowth ahead of him, pursued by an abomination. It came like a boulder hurled by a catapult, smashing trees, tossing hounds, broad as a house, quick as thought, its dripping tusks as long as a man's arm. Meleager saw it stumble – there was blood in its eyes. The beast was blind! The feathered tail of an arrow was emerging from between the boars' ears.

Meleager scrambled up a tree, along a branch. He dropped onto the beast's back. He plunged his blade between the bristles, through the coarse hide, and severed its spine. The boar squealed, snorted, thrashed and reared. Meleager leapt clear. The air was black with nets and spears and arrows. Now the monster sinks to its knees. The champions surround it, hacking, stabbing. The monster slumps with a sigh and it is still.

Men hobbled shame-faced out of the undergrowth. They were astonished to find Meleager unharmed. One of the uncles stepped forward, kicked the carcass. 'Huh! You call yourselves heroes? Bragging babies! Your knees buckled at the first sign of danger. If it weren't for Meleager you'd all be dead.'

'And her.'

'What?' said the other uncle.

'And her,' said Meleager. 'You see the arrow there, between the ears? *She* drew first blood. To hold your nerve, to loose an arrow and strike your target before the charge of that thing! The pelt and tusks belong to her.'

Princess Atalanta stepped forward to claim her prize. The uncles shoved her. 'Stop this nonsense. No one knows whose arrow that is. No one saw. All of us were loosing shafts, but all of us saw you climb and leap and strike with no thought for your safety. The prize is yours.'

'That is my arrow,' said Princess Atalanta.

'You *say*.'

Meleager took her hand. He led her toward his uncles. 'The prize is hers.'

'You- you are a love sick boy. You are blinded by her beauty. Do you think we will stand by and let you give the glory to some...girl?'

The uncle drew his dagger and lunged at her. He staggered, gasped. He fell to his knees. He put his hands to his split belly but it was no use. The red torrent found its course between his fingers.

'What have you done?' The other uncle drew his blade and fell beside his brother. Meleager stood over them, his chest heaving, his weapon dripping. The champions were dumbfounded, astonished.

In the palace the queen heard a commotion. A messenger came running from the forest; he was ashen, trembling with shock. The queen screamed: something awful had occurred. She fled from the news.

She scurried to her bed chamber and there was a fire, a fire burning in the hearth. She lunged for the battered bronze box, she lifted the lid - the blackened log was still there. Her son was safe.

The servant was at the door. He would not meet her eye. 'What do you want? What is the matter?'

'There has been a great tragedy.'

'For some other mother.'

'Your highness. Your brothers...'

She dropped the box. 'The boar killed my brothers?'

'No, your highness. Your son killed your brothers.'

'What?' She had no parents. Her brothers had been everything to her. Now her son had slaughtered them. She stared at the log in the box.

In the forest, Meleager turned to Atalanta. 'You are the one. I have waited for a wife and you have come.' He took her hand. She smiled. 'If you would marry me, I would marry you.'

Meleager frowned. She said, 'What is wrong?'

He said, 'My mouth. It tastes of ash. I'm so hot.' He fell, gasping, writhing, clawing the air. In her bedroom, his mother watched the log burn.