

Atalanta's sisters and her brothers had each presented their father with both sons and daughters, grandchildren, who clustered around his knees, begging for stories and squabbling for the right to sit in his lap. Atalanta was the only one who was not married.

"I'm too busy," she replied whenever the subject was raised.

And indeed she was. Her days were spent setting lures for rabbits, traps for fish, mending nets, sharpening arrow heads and knives and tending to her bows. Because of her skills as a hunter no one in the village went short of meat or fish or lacked leather for bindings or sandals.

However, as time went on comments became more pointed and folk began to look at her strangely. "She isn't married you know." They would nod to one another, turn their eyes to the heavens, shrug their shoulders and shake their heads.

Finally her father insisted, "It is not seemly for you to be un-married. You shame me in front of everyone." Atalanta loved her father and held the honour of her family highly so she replied, "I have dedicated my life to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. She is also unmarried. But, dear Father, in order to spare you pain I will agreed to marry any man who places the moon and the stars at my feet."

What neither he nor the villagers saw, what they didn't notice, was the way Atalanta's gaze lingered on the young blacksmith and how very often she visited the forge to ask about knives or arrow heads. They didn't notice the way his hand lingered, just that fraction too long, when he handed her something or the way he watched as she walked away.

Well it didn't take long for the village to begin talking about Atalanta's strange conditions. Likewise it didn't take the blacksmith long to hear of her promise.

That night he went to the temple of Artemis. As he knelt to pray he placed a brand new dagger, one he had just finished and ground to an astonishing sharpness, into a grove on her altar as an offering.

After bowing his head and sending his prayers to the goddess he sat back on his heels and watched the moon rise through the apple trees that surrounded the temple. He marvelled at the gleam of moonlight on the golden apples that grew only in this spot. He noticed that one apple, in particular, looked just like the moon. And he remembered the story his grandmother used to tell him of the stars secreted inside each apple. At that moment the wind tossed the branches and two apples fell from a tree hit the altar. One rolled across and fell into his lap – and it was the one that looked like the moon.

The blacksmith laughed out loud, bowed his head in thankful prayer, gathered up the apples and quietly made his way back home.

After the heat of the day the villagers gathered in the square to drink wine, watch the moon and talk over the day. Everyone was there, the children, the scholars and teacher, the workers and farmers, the physician, the musicians, the men and the women, young and old.

As Atalanta returned from her hunt, several rabbits and a hare tied to her waist, a string of fish in her hand and a haunch of deer over her shoulders the blacksmith rose from his seat on the edge of the fountain.

He bent low to the ground and gently rolled the golden apples towards her feet and then reached out with his dagger and quickly cut one in half so that the halves fell open.

There, before the whole village, he'd placed the moon and the stars at her feet.

