

TEODORA MANES

ATALANTA



SING MY NAME

il castoro
OFF



ilcastoro_off



ilcastorolibri

off.editriceilcastoro.it

Teodora Manes
Atalanta. Sing my name

English working translation by Christopher Turner

© 2026 Editrice Il Castoro Srl
viale Andrea Doria 7, 20124 Milano
www.editriceilcastoro.it
info@editriceilcastoro.it

Sovraccoperta di Anna Chiara Stagi
Plancia, taglio colore e segnalibro di Benedetta Baraldi

ISBN 979-12-5533-514-6

Finito di stampare nel mese di marzo 2026
presso Grafica Veneta S.p.A. - Trebaseleghe (PD)



TEODORA MANES



ATALANTA



SING MY NAME



il castoro
OFF

*To Chiara, Martina, and Valeria
the girls who saw me as a girl
when we were as wild and legendary
as the Achaeans beneath the walls of Troy.*

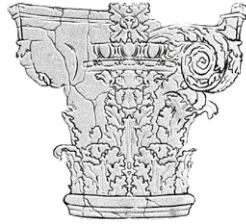
All things are full of gods.

Thales of Miletus

*Now Eros shakes my soul,
like a mountain wind
crashing through the oaks.
He loosens my limbs and stirs me,
sweetbitter, untamable serpent.*

Sappho

PROLOGUE



The first thing that matters is my name. The second, my family. The third, the goddess. And the fourth thing is the forest.

It's important to know the things your life's plan depends on, and these are mine.

My name says what I am: Atalanta, an Achaean princess, a daughter born of the amber of Arcadia. And my name tells you what I am not: a woman like all the others.

Atalanta means "she who equals a man in worth," and in this land of men my worth must be unswaying if it's to measure up.

The second thing that matters is my family. My family reminds me where I come from. My father always says, "Don't forget your blood, Atalanta."

And I don't forget. I come from this palace, from its sun soaked courtyards, from its rooms crossed by the soft breath of the Boreas wind. I come from the dark archive where the names of my ancestors and the stories of their deeds are kept on tablets. I come from the megaron, where, amid the dust that dances in the sunbeams, my father

receives the officials and the local chiefs, the lords and the merchants.

Ever since I was little, I've run up and down these stone corridors, playing hide and seek with the servants' daughters and the slaves. My sandals have left thousands of footprints on the faded carpets over the years. If you could see them, those footprints would trace out the map of an endless labyrinth, the tangled geography of a childhood that was long and free.

My family isn't just my father, but everyone who raised me in this palace—and, in the end, it's the palace itself and the city all around it.

This tiny city of Tegea sits in the center of Arcadia, perched on the mountainside from which you can see all the way to the sea, its houses pressed against each other, and its steep streets crossed by flocks herded by shepherds clicking their tongues.

When my father says I should be proud to be the princess of Tegea, he talks as if the city were still as grand and golden as it once was. I see it for what it is now, although without loving it any less. I see the countless abandoned houses infested with owls, the flat roofs caved in by the rains, the merchants' carts that stop for a day—just enough time for the drivers to sleep and put something in their stomachs before heading off again toward other places where things actually happen.

As I was saying: the first thing that matters is my name, the second is my family. The third is the goddess: Artemis, Lady of the Beasts. Our names and families of birth are simply a matter of chance, but the goddess chose me from among thousands of other girls. She laid her hand on my head and marked my fate. Her gaze strengthens me; her affection lets me know I'm on the right path. As long as the goddess is watching me, I know I'm living as I should.

The fourth thing that matters is the forest, which is my place in this world. This mantle of oaks and pines that covers the moun-

tainside is crossed by running deer and scoured by digging boars. It's alive with streams where naiads swim with skin as slippery as eels. The forest is where I run with my dogs by day and walk in Artemis's procession at night, carried in the scent of crushed pomegranate that surrounds her.

"Of course, she's completely wild, this motherless girl," my wet-nurse, Cilissa, likes to tell the new servants the moment they arrive. "And she's drawn to that forest that's so full of demons. But there's nothing strange about that. Do you know what happened when she was born? Her mother died Unfortunately there's nothing strange about that, either. Queen Clymene screamed for two days, but Eileithyia, Lady of Childbirth, didn't want to sit beside her bed, and so, as it happens, she finally bled to death with the last push to bring the baby into the world. What is strange is what happened afterwards."

The girls want to hear the rest. So Cilissa tells her story—the one that, she says, ties everything together: my name, my family, the goddess, and the forest.

"King Iasus hadn't even finished drying his tears before he turned red with rage at the sight of the creature that had cost his wife so much to bring into the world. Because, you see, the king desperately wanted a son. For the whole pregnancy, he did nothing but burn sacrifices at Zeus's altar. As the black smoke of oil and flesh rose toward Olympus, he endlessly repeated his prayer for a son—a son he wanted to be a hero who'd restore the city's glory. Instead, he found himself looking at a pink and white newborn with that chubby little cleft between her legs. To make matters worse, she'd taken his wife from him. He looked at her with eyes that ... my goodness ... with eyes like the bottomless pits of Hades. I was only twenty back then and stood there before him with his child in my arms. She kept kicking her little feet in the air and wouldn't stay still, but I swear that dark

look froze the blood in my veins!”

“And then what happened, Cilissa?” one of the new girls asks.

“Ah, what happened next? What happened next was that the king left without giving her a name, without saying a single word, slamming the door and leaving me standing there like a fool. But the next day, it turned out that he’d had something to say after all. He’d spoken to his slaves and ordered one of them to do a terrible, terrible thing: take the baby into the forest and abandon her under a tree so some ferocious beast would find her. Or a lamia—a demon who drains the blood of newborns! When the slave came, I cried and screamed. I dug my nails into the baby’s swaddling, so they beat me until I had to let her go. I’d only been nursing her a day, but I’d already grown attached to her as if she were my own. She had a look that tore my heart in two. But nothing could be done. They stole her from me, and the slave took her into the forest.”

“And did he really abandon her? How did she survive?” asks another girl, her eyes wide with horror.

Cilissa raises her eyebrows with an air of importance. “Only Helios knows the truth—he who crosses the sky in the sun’s chariot and sees all things in every corner of the world. I only know what people said afterward, and it’s a strange story. They say that the baby was crying in a clearing, ready to soil herself with everything left inside her and then die of hunger. But then a she-bear arrived. She came up to the little one, sniffed her, and ... No, no, don’t make that face, she didn’t eat her! Instead, she licked her, comforted her, and then suckled her. She’d just lost her cub, you see, and that trembling little bundle of bones must have moved her. Or maybe Artemis sent her. Here we call her Agrotera, the wild one, but she’s always looked upon Atalanta with tenderness. Anyway, how it all happened isn’t clear, but the bear cared for the princess until her father, the king, came to his

senses and sent that poor slave back to fetch his daughter from the forest. The man must have been expecting a terrible sight in the clearing, but instead he found the little one clean and well fed, gurgling happily by her bear-mother's side."

At this point there's always one of the new girls who can't resist asking the question: "And did the baby take your milk, Cilissa, after she'd had the bear's? Didn't it taste a little watered-down to her? Didn't she miss the bear smell?"

Cilissa's eyes blaze, while the girl's shrink to the size of peas. "Did she ever take my milk! And she became strong and noble, thanks to both my milk and the milk of the bear sent by the goddess. You should think twice before making fun of someone who was looked upon with love by the Olympians! That look has never left the princess, and woe to anyone who disrespects her."

So, the moment they arrive at the palace, the new servant girls learn two things. The first is that the princess is a strange creature, with strange habits and whose birth is shrouded in legends. And the second is that they can't criticize her in any way at all if Cilissa is listening.

I've told my nurse many times to stop telling this story. I don't believe it. Not a word. "Lissa, why do you have to terrorize the servants? You only do it to see them react, don't you. That story is as phony as a coin from Hermes' purse! My father adores me! He did want a son but he never would have abandoned me. If he heard what you're saying, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. He'd have you whipped, Cilissa! And I don't want to see that. Would you please stop this nonsense once and for all?"

At this point, Cilissa always looks away and mutters to herself, "I know what's true and what isn't. I was there. You too, but you can't remember. I know the king is a good father. I'm not saying he didn't

regret that moment of madness and would like to forget it. But what happened, happened, and it's never a good idea to pretend things are different from how they are, or that people are different from who they are."

I let her speak. Cilissa is as grumpy and strange as the old she-bear in her stories, and no one really understands how her mind works. But she loves me completely and runs our house like a general directing an assault on a city. Maybe it would turn a lot of people strange, living in this huge, nearly empty palace, having to tighten the purse strings every day to make the accounts meet on the meager tributes from the citizens of Tegea.

And, to tell you the truth, my father and I are very different from the rulers of other cities. After my mother died, he never remarried and raised me only with the help of the nurse and servants.

One of his favorite lines is, "Anyone who needs help is already lost." Maybe that's why he's still alone. Or maybe it's because he lives on a past glory that no longer exists. He spends his days in the archive studying the tablets that tell of the legendary deeds of the heroes of our line, while at night, he looks for their paths among the constellations in the observatory. Since I was a baby, still sucking milk from a milk-soaked cloth, he told me about our ancestors, how fearless they were, and how much the gods loved them. "They were great men, Atalanta, who hunted monsters and routed their enemies. We must learn from them and train our bodies and spirits to be worthy descendants."

That's why he took me into the forest to ride and hunt. I remember the first time he put me on his horse. I must have been about four, and the beast was so big that I felt like I could touch the sky, and so terrifying that my blood ran cold. But he passed me the reins without a word. He saw my lips trembling, and his black eyes turned as dark

and gleaming as obsidian. “No moaning, Atalanta,” he whispered dryly. “No faces. The time has come when you must honor your name.”

After that, there were plenty of times to honor it: The first time I plunged my knife into the throbbing neck of a hare, and its gushing blood stayed under my nails for days. The first time I drew my bow on the satyrs of the forest, and they howled with laughter. The first time I saw the flash of a lynx’s golden eyes among the branches, or heard the deep breath of a bear among the alders. The first time that baron’s son hit me in a fight and knocked me down onto the sand floor of the palace gym. The first time I lost a footrace, and the head trainer slapped me in front of everyone.

At every trial, my father’s obsidian eyes were there to restrain me, judge me, and push me forward like a gust of wind. I felt them on my back like the unseen hand of some god and gritted my teeth, swallowed my tears, got up, and did better. He watched me with dark eyes ablaze with love.

So, I became the strongest. When I lace up my leather gloves and step into the boxing ring, the sons of Tegea’s lords eye me in terror—even the ones who tower over me. So, I became the fastest. At the harvest festival games, there’s not a man in the city who can jump higher or run faster than me. So, my heart grew stronger. Even though I know just how dangerous the forest is—so full of beasts, monsters, and demigods—I walk through it without fear. I’ve learned to speak—and when not to speak—to the creatures, and they all know who I am.

So, I learned to honor my name. But everyone knows how malice breeds in the hearts of the gods. So, in some ways, this story is about how I had to learn to lose that name.

CHAPTER 1

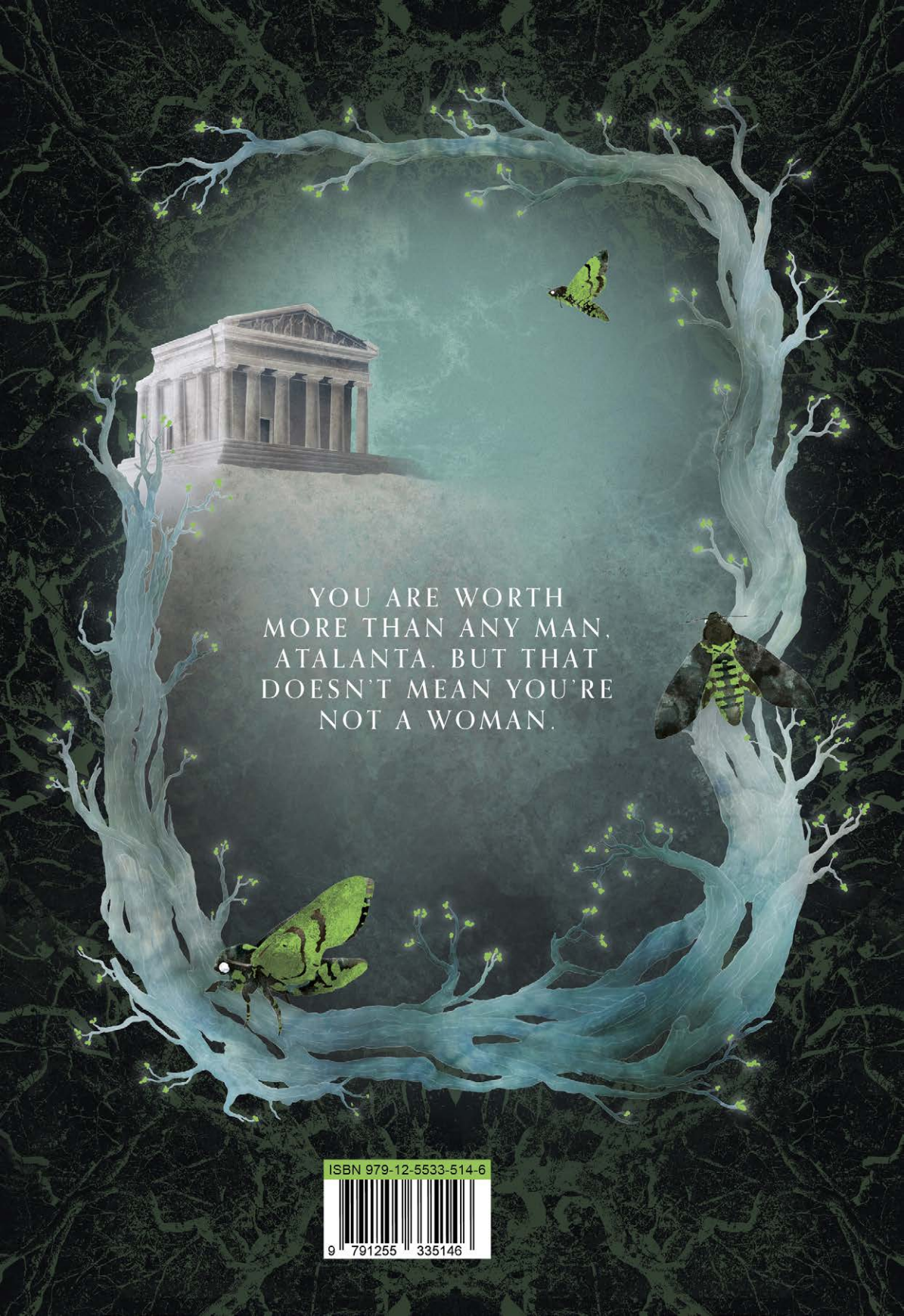


It was a balmy evening in the season of Pleiades's descent, just a few days after my thirteenth birthday, when a messenger arrived at the palace with a silver chain around his head. He brought news that the King of Mantinea was traveling south and requested hospitality. Even though that was three years ago, I remember everything.

I sensed it was an important visit by the way the slave girls hurried along the corridors loaded down with cleaning rags and brooms in a desperate attempt to tidy up our dusty palace—at least a little.

My father summoned me to the throne room. His eyes flashed with a hidden light behind his veneer of calm. Mantinea was a small but flourishing city, and it was important to him that we made the right impression. I was a little nervous: I'd never met the rulers of other cities. My father hardly ever had illustrious guests, and then, until that day, I'd been too young to be present when he did.

I sat beside him in the megaron, perched on a stool near his great ebony throne, its wood scented with rose oil. For the occasion, I'd



YOU ARE WORTH
MORE THAN ANY MAN,
ATALANTA. BUT THAT
DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE
NOT A WOMAN.

ISBN 979-12-5533-514-6



9 791255 335146