

from *The Hoose o Haivers* (Itchy Coo, 2002)

THE WEAVIN CONTEST

by Susan Rennie

Tae the east o the Aegean Sea lies the country o the Lydians, whaur King Croesus aince ruled wi his muckle gowd that some say he howked oot the river whaur Midas had washed. In this country steyed a lass whase skill in weavin wis unmatched by ony ither mortal. Arachne had been taucht tae weave by the goddess Athena hersel. The fineness o her claith wis faur-kent an fowk traivelled fae aw ower Greece an the lands o the Aegean tae see an buy her work. Arachne ayewis yaised plain threids that she span fae the fleeces o her ain sheep, an dyed them wi simple dyes fae the flooers an plants in her gairden. But somehoo her claiths sperkled wi aw the colours o simmer, an the picters she wove were as fine as ony fae a maister penter's brush.

News o Arachne's fame suin reached Athena on heich Moont Olympus, an the goddess decided tae pey her auld pupil a veesit. Disguisin hersel as an auld wumman in a coorse woollen cloak, she glided doon towards Arachne's hoose on a clood. Arachne invitit the auld wumman in tae see her latest claith.

"No bad," the goddess croaked. "A bittie dreich for ma likin, but it shaws talent."

"Shaws talent!" spat Arachne. "Ma weavin is better than the goddess Athena hersel cud dae."

On hearin that, Athena flang aff her disguise an stood afore the bumbazed Arachne in a bleck-affrontit rage. But Arachne wisna fashed, an repeatit her challenge.

"I can weave a claith bonnier than ony yer goddess's fingers can mak," she said, heezin her chin in the air like ane o Phoebus's prood horses afore it sets oot tae pou the sun each mornin.

"Verra weel," said Athena (wha wis the godddess o war, forby weavin, an wis ayewis up for a fecht), "let's see *which* o us can weave the finer claith afore Phoebus rises again the morn." An wi that, she birked awa back tae Moont Olympus on her clood.

"Imagine, a fushionless mortal challengin a goddess!" lauched Athena. "I'll suin ding her doon," an she clapped her haunds tae summon her attendants. Instantly, a hunner woodnymphs an sea-nymphs appeared at the goddess's side.

"Find me," she commandit the wood-nymphs, "the sonsiest sheep that feed on the slopes o Moont Olympus, an fae their fleeces mak me the maist douce an delicate threid that ye can spin." Then tae the sea-nymphs, she ordered, "Sweem tae aw the airts an bring me back ainly the rarest an purest dyes tae colour ma threids." The nymphs did as their maistress ordered. They brocht her phials o Tyrian purple fae the coast o Phoenicia; crimson madder roots fae Phrygia; an fae Crete, airmfus o crocuses whase saffron they wid champ tae mak a daizzlin yella. But still Athena wisna content. She wantit something byordinar tae mak her claith unlike onything a mere mortal cud weave. Sae she

speired her relations for help. First, she turned tae Aphrodite, the goddess o luve an bonnieness.

“Dear sister Aphrodite,” she said, “help me pit the pridefu Arachne in her place. Gie me the saftest feathers fae yer snawwhite swans tae weave amang ma threids.”

She daured tae speir at the queen o the gods hersel.

“Michty Hera,” Athena began, bowin afore the queen, “the honour o the gods is at stake. Pluck for me the brichtest tailfeathers fae the paycocks that drive yer cheriot, sae their colours can ootshine Arachne’s dowie wool.”

Finally, Athena veesited the workshop o her brither Hephaestus, the god o fire.

“Dearest brither,” said Athena, “dinna let a mortal shame yer sister. Ding yer haimmer on yer finest sheets o gowd an siller, an pou them intae threids for me tae embroider on ma claith.”

Suin, Athena had gaithered thegither the finest materials that gods or mortals baith had iver seen. Afore sittin doon at her loom, she pit on her bronze helmet an her breistplate that wis decoratit wi the frichtsme gorgon’s heid. “Nae mortal lass,” she said smilin tae hersel, “can fleg the goddess o war.”

Meanwhile, Arachne got oot her bag o threids an stertit tae choose her colours. The threids in her wool basket luiked gey coorse an dreich; but whan she stertit tae weave, aw the colours o the rainbow daunced aff her loom. As she wove, she minded stories aboot ither gallus wabsters: Penelope that wove a claith mony lang year waitin on her husband Odysseus returnin hame;

an Philomela whase tongue wis cut oot tae stap her fae clypin on her brither-in-law, but wha tellt her story by weavin it in claith. As she sat in this dwam, the picters in her mind were woven oot afore her. Awthing that Arachne saw or smelt, or thocht or felt that mornin wis woven intae her claith. A swalla that wheeched past her windae appeared in a corner, woven in glentin threids o daurkest blue. The hyacinths fae her gairden, whase sweet smell kittled her nostrils as she wove, an the olives she saw ripenin ootside her windae, grewed oot the edges o her weavin.

Faur abuin, Athena wis jist feenisht an luikin gey pleased wi hersel. She had woven a clanjamfrie o gods an goddesses sittin at Zeus’s feet, aw claithed in goons o purple an saffron, wi gowden croons an siller sandals, their cheriots, shields an javelins smooed wi jewels. She snipped aff her new claith, draped it roond her shooders, an glided back doon tae Arachne’s hoose.

“No feenisht yet? Whit a peety,” said Athena, struntin aboot like ane o Aphrodite’s paycocks, shawin aff her fantoosh shawl. “I’ll jist leave this wi ye,” she added, lettin her claith drap tae the ground ahint Arachne. “An apprentice needs something tae learn fae.” But afore the goddess cud summon her clood again, Arachne lowped up fae her wuiden stool cryin “Feenisht!”, an tied aff her last threid.

Athena gawked, an blenked hard a wheen times. For as she luiked, the picters on Arachne’s claith seemed tae kittle intae life. She thocht she saw the picter o Penelope smile as she wove, an wis shair she heard the clackin o Philomela’s loom. As she luiked at the

edges o the claith, her neb wis filled wi the scent o hyacinths, an the taste o olives swam in her mooth; as her een fell on the woven swalla, she heard its chitterin sang. The goddess clapped her haunds tae her lugs, but she cudna stap Arachne's claith fae dirlin throu her senses. Arachne's weavin thrummed wi the virr o life; while Athena's, for aw its bricht threids an fantoosh feathers, luiked cheap an gaudy nixt tae it.

The goddess's face turned pink, then reid, then purple like her ain dyes. She glowered at Arachne an thundered, "Weel, I can see ye didna dae *that* yersel. Nae doot ye tricked ane o the Muses intae giein ye a haund – they're ayewis ettlin tae help mortals – which o coorse means yer 'work' disna coont.

"Nae maitter," she added, her een brichtenin wi an idea. "As ye are that daft aboot weavin, ye can weave yer ain hoose fae noo on!"

The goddess nairraed her sea-green een on Arachne, an the lassie felt her body stert tae shrink. Forby, her legs were raxin oot intae lang spinnles an, as she gawked helplessly, mair legs stertit tae growe. She skreighed, an ettled tae haud ontae her loom, but Athena's pooer wis ower strang. Suin Arachne wis jist a scootie bleck speeder, skitterin roond Athena's sandals. The goddess bent doon an blawed, an Arachne skited backarts intae a stoorie corner o the room.

"Ye can weave yer glaikit wabs aw day lang there," the goddess spat. "But naebody will want tae weir yer weavin noo. They'll dicht yer wabs awa wi their cloots wioot a saicont keek."

She tore Arachne's claith aff her loom an rived it intae taivers, then wheeched awa, trailin her ain bit weavin ahint her.

Sae Arachne an her bairns, an their bairns an bairns' bairns, hae woven their wabs iver since. As Athena intendit, mony o them are dichtit awa, an ithers are brak by the thochtless wunds an dingin rain. But noo an then, ane o Arachne's faimly weaves a perfect wab, hingit wi beads o dew or frost an sperklin in the mornin sun, that minds Athena o Arachne's bonnie claith an brings a froon o scunneration tae the goddess's pearl-white broo.



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ARIADNE IN THE CLOUDS

by Susan Rennie

Ye ken hoo sometimes, afore a thunnerplump, ye hear a douce, dirlin rummle? No that lood clatterin that comes fae Hephaestus dingin his haimmer an makkin thunnerbolts. But the safter kind, that niver turns intae lichtnin? That's me, Ariadne, dancin on the clouds. I bide on Moont Olympus noo; but I didna ayewis. I wis born a mortal, jist like you.

I grew up on the bonnie island o Crete – see, doon there? – that's set faur sooth in the Mediterranean Sea. I wis a princess. Ma faither, King Minos, ruled the haill island, an a when lands in Greece forby. Ivery day, fowk wid come tae the palace, humphin muckle jars o olive ile an wine, an the harbour nearby wis thrang wi ships bringin things tae sell fae aw the airts. But ae day something happened that chynged ma life for aye. News reached the palace that ane o ma brithers had been killt in Athens an ma faither went gyte wi rage. He pit on his plumed helmet an sailed aff in a ship fou o Cretan warriors tae fecht the Greeks. It wis mony months afore he returned; but the war wi Athens went on lang efter that, an the harbour – that had ayewis been fou o the colours an cries o merchant ships – wis thrang wi bronze-nebbit warships instead.

Ae day, in the middle o the war, a stranger dressed in Athenian claes arrived at oor palace an speired for the King. I wis feart an

wantit tae rin awa, but Phaedra, ma aulder sister (wha wis ayewis mair gallus than me) got me tae hide wi her ahint a pillar an keek oot tae see whit wid happen. I thocht the man had gane gyte, for he speired ma faither for a job. At first Minos lauched.

“Whit can a glaikit Athenian dae that the youngest bairn o Crete canna?” he said.

“Gie me some wuid an I'll shaw ye,” the stranger replied.

He brocht oot a bag o tools an biggit twa wee wuiden dolls, wi jintit airms an legs. Syne he held them oot tae us – for he kent fine we were there. Phaedra an I ran oot fae oor hidin place, lowpin an clappin oor haunds, an begged oor faither tae let the clever stranger stey.

The Athenian wis cried Daedalus. He had been a maister airchitect in Athens, an Minos agreed tae gie him a hame if he wid design a braw new palace for him, that wid be finer than onything in Greece. Sae Daedalus steyed. Ivery day, Phaedra an I veesited his workshop, an he made us byordinar toys tae play wi: birds wi peckin nebs, butterflees wi flappin wings, an cheriots wi birlin wheels poued by wuiden horses. He tellt us stories aboot Athens: hoo Athenian women tied up their hair an dressed gey different tae the lassies on Crete. But he niver tellt us hoo he cam tae leave his hame, an the palace wis fou o rumours o hoo he'd murdered a man – his ain apprentice – an had had tae flee gey fast fae Greece.

By the time the new palace wis feenisht, Phaedra an I were grown lassies. Daedalus had mairried a servant lass an had a son, cried Icarus, that wis noo his apprentice. The palace itsel wis the

mervel o the age. It wis built on fower levels an ivery room had pipes cairryin watter for washin an bathin. In the centre o it aw, there wis a lang room. On ae side, it wis open tae the sea; an on the ither sides, its waws were covert wi pentins o bulls an byordinar sea craiteurs. On special days, muckle bulls were led intae this room an Cretan athletes – baith lads an lassies – shawed hoo gallus they were by rinnin at the bulls’ heids, cleekin their horns an lowpin ontae their backs an aff again. Efterwards, women dancers – me amang them, for I luvd tae dance – wid stert tae birl roond: slaw at first, then faster an faster, tae the lang locks o oor hair, twistit intae ticht spirals an decoratit wi strings o pearls, span oot, an oor skirts birlid like peeries.

But Daedalus had designed a mair mervellous room than this. Faur ablow the dancin flair wis anither room, a derk room this time, fou o corridors that twistit an turned – jist like the Meander River, doon there, in Phrygia, whase streams wind ae wey an then anither. Daedalus cried this room the Labyrinth, an baith Phaedra an I were forbidden tae enter it. There wis ae door intae the Labyrinth, but nae wey oot. It had been built as the hame o a monster we cried the Minotaur: a craitur wi the body o a man, but the heid an horns o a muckle bleck bull.

I had niver seen the Minotaur, but I had heard mony stories fae the servants in the palace. Stories about the monstrous size o his horns, an his muckle appetite; hoo the servants had tae fling twenty sheep an goat carcasses, or a hunner live chickens, at a time intae

the Labyrinth, an rin oot feart for their lives afore the Minotaur shauchled up tae the door.

There were stories, tae, aboot whaur the Minotaur cam fae. The story that flegged me the maist wis ane that Phaedra tellt me: that the craitur wis oor hauf *brither*; that the gods had been angry at Minos for no sacrificin a special bull tae them an, as a cruel joke, had made oor mither faw in luvve wi this bull an gie birth tae a bull-bairn. I didna ken the truth an wis feart tae speir ma faither or mither. I ettled no tae think aboot the Minotaur, an every time I danced abuin the Labyrinth, I ettled no tae hear the soond o its braith an shauchlin hoofs.

By this time the war atween Crete an Athens wis ower. But as pairt o the peace terms, ma faither had demanded that fowerteen Athenian lads an lasses be sent tae him as prisoners. They were tae stey ae nicht in the palace, but in the mornin they wid be led intae the Labyrinth tae feed the Minotaur.

Whan the Athenian prisoners arrived, they were led intae the throne room, whaur the haill coort wis gathert. I wis dressed in ma dancin claes, as I wis tae dance afore the palace that nicht. But whan I saw the leader o the prisoners, wi his sleekit limbs an bonnie bleck hair, I wis smitten wi luvve; ma heid dirled an I felt a gliff o reid burn in ma cheeks. The prisoner stepped forrart an annooned that he wis Theseus, the son o the King o Athens.

“The Minotaur will be weel fed wi sic royal meat,” said ma faither. “As ye are a prince, ye can be the first tae enter the Labyrinth the morn.”

“I amna feart o the Cretan bull-man,” answered Theseus, heezin up his pridefuheid. “I will kill the ugsome craitur an free ma freens an the fowk o Athens.”

“Ye nicht save yer freens, prood Athenian,” said ma faither, “but ye’ll no save yersel. Even if ye dae kill the Minotaur, ye will be trapped in the Labyrinth for aye an will sterve there among the skeletons o yer kinsfowk.”

I luiked til ma faither in horror, an ettled tae rin towards him, but Phaedra held me back, whisperin, “Wheesht, sister! Dae ye want the haill coort tae think ye are daft on an Athenian lad? Mind that ye are a princess o Crete.”

But whan I danced that nicht, I cudna help masel fae keekin at Theseus, an I wis shair I saw him luik at me. Phaedra, tae, despite her shaw o bein leal tae oor faither, seemed no tae be able tae tak her een aff the prince.

I feenisht ma dance early an ran tae the workshop, whaur I kent Daedalus wid be workin late. Daedalus, I thocht, maun ken the wey tae escape fae his ain Labyrinth. Forby, he wis an Athenian an wid shairly help an Athenian prince. But whan I speired at him for the secret o the Labyrinth, Daedalus shakit his heid.

“Princess, it is mony year syne I designed the Labyrinth,” he began. “Yer faither made me destroy aw the plans I had drawn, an I canna richt mind its pathwayes woot them. I nicht tell ye wrang an send Theseus intae a trap. I hae killt a man afore, lang syne, an I dinna want tae help anither tae his daith.”

I wis hert-seik. Whan Daedalus saw hoo I felt, he tellt me there nicht be anither wey, an began guddlin aboot among his tools tae he foond a baw o thick twine.

“Tell Theseus tae tie the end o this twine tae the door o the Labyrinth,” he said, “an unhap it as he walks. He can ayewis find his wey back if he follaes the threid.”

Early nixt mornin, I stood waitin at the tap o the derk stair tae the Labyrinth. Forby the baw o twine, I wis haudin a dirk that I had stolen fae ma faither’s room. As Theseus wis led past, I didna daur luik at him, feart ma face nicht betray me tae the guairds. But as he skiffed past, I slippit the twine an the dirk intae his haunds an whispered Daedalus’s plan.

I stood close by, as the stane door closed ahint Theseus – sae close I cud feel the icy cauld air o the Labyrinth skelp ma skin, an near foondert at the reek o foostie meat comin fae inside. I closed ma een, an imagined Theseus tyin the twine tae the back o the door, stickin the baw on the pynt o his dirk sae it wid unhap as he walked. In ma mind, I saw him pass piles o champit banes, an awaws smooored wi the bluid o the Minotaur’s victims. Suin, I heard the snochters o the Minotaur an cud feel the groond shooglin wi its steps. I kent Theseus wis getting near the centre, whaur the monster bided. Mibbe noo, he saw the clouds o the craitur’s braith hingin in the air. The craitur maun hae been twice Theseus’s size, its slaverin jaws barkit wi dried bluid, an its bluid-rin een glowerin radgelike. Noo Theseus wisna tall, or weel-built; but he kent weel hoo tae wrestle. Altho the Minotaur toored abuin him, he wis able

tae flit about, gleg as a hinny-bee, an bumbaze the craitur. The Minotaur stottert an stampit, an peched an snochtert, but cudna cleek ontæ Theseus. The Athenian dooked unner the Minotaur's horns an stickit his dirk intæ the craitur's breist, ower an ower again. The Minotaur skreighed an trauchled about, but Theseus held his dirk fast in the craitur's flesh, tæ at last it foondert an clattert tæ the groond in a dub o its ain bluid. Ootside, I felt the mighty dunt as the Minotaur fell, an I heard its deein girns. Whan Theseus cam oot, pechin an smooored wi its bluid, I wis hertgled. Cleekin ontæ ane anither, we fled tæ Theseus's ship waitin in the herbour.

The sails o the Athenian ship were bleck. Theseus had promised his faither tæ chynge the sails tæ white if he killt the Minotaur; an by this sign, the King wid ken whether his son wis alive or deid lang afore his ship reached Athens. But there wis nae time tæ chynge them noo, for the palace guairds micht be efter us; an sae suin as we lowped aboard, the ship poued awa fae the Cretan coast.

Sae I set sail wi Theseus for Greece, a country I had niver seen. Aw that I kent about Athens were the stories Daedalus had tellt me as a bairn. I wis feart I wid luik unco strange tæ the Greeks, an that they widna want their prince tæ mairry a Cretan lass.

I needna hae fashed, for the gods had ithier plans for me. Whan oor ship arrived at the island o Naxos, we aw went ashore tæ eat an rest. I wis that happy tæ be on land again, I stertit tæ dance, thinkin naebody wid pey me ony mind. But ye niver ken whan the

gods are takkin tent. Dionysus, the god o wine an pairtyin, had been veesitin Naxos, an saw me dance. On a sudden, he made up his mind tæ wheech me awa fae Theseus.

“That lassie is wastit on a mere mortal,” the god sneered. “I will mak her *immortal* an she can dance in the haws o Moont Olympus.”

Sae the sleekit god disguised hisel an crept intæ Theseus's dreams as he slept. “Theseus,” said the dream Dionysus, “Leave Ariadne an return tæ Athens wioot her.”

Whan Theseus awoke, he didna mind about me at aw, an made ready tæ sail for hame wioot me. I wis dumfoonert, an stertit tæ rin towards the depairtin ship. But I felt masel bein poued backarts, an syne up, as a muckle whirlwind gaithered an birlt me skywarts tæ the hame o the gods on Moont Olympus. The bonnie white pearls lowsed fae ma hair an skited aff intæ space, whaur they became a constellation o bricht sterrs.

Sae noo I dance on the clouds abuin ye, hert-seik for the hame I left on Crete. An fae here, I can see aw that happens. I saw Theseus returnin hame tæ Athens an forgettin tæ chynge the colour o his ship's sails; an his faither, miskennin by this that his son wis deid, deein hisel wi grief. An I saw whit happened tæ Daedalus.

Ma faither wis bleck-affrontit whan he foond oot that Theseus had escaped – an taen me wi him. He jaloused that Daedalus had helped in some wey, an locked him up in his ain Labyrinth wi his son, Icarus. But Daedalus wis ower cannie tæ stey there for lang. There wis a windæ, heich up in the wa, that had aince let in air for the Minotaur tæ breathe. Onybody lowpin fae it wid be killt on the

jaggy rocks ablow. But Daedalus wisna thinkin on lowpin. He had been watchin the seabirds flee past the windae an stertit drawin picters o their wings. He gaihert chicken feathers fae the Minotaur's lair, an picked up the twine that Theseus had left ahint. Wi these, Daedalus biggit twa pair o artificial wings: ane for himsel, an ane for Icarus. He jined the wee-est feathers thegither first, syne added layers o bigger anes, tae he wis shair the wings were strang, an finally smooored the haill unnerside wi meltit wax. Whan the wax wis richt set, Daedalus helped Icarus pit on his wings, syne picked up his ain.

“Mind, Icarus,” he warned, “dinna flee nearby the sun. Yer wings arena jist like a bird's. Phoebus's rays will melt their wax an they will faw apairt.”

Sae Daedalus an Icarus lowped, ane efter the ither, fae the windae o the Labyrinth. Their wings were heezed up by the warm air an they were suin glidin faur abuin the Cretan coast. At first, Icarus follaed his faither; but syne he got mair gallus an stertit fleein faur ahead. “Ca cannie, Icarus,” I heard Daedalus warn. But Icarus wisna listenin: he wis soarin, fair kittled by the feelin o flicht. Daedalus cried looder an looder, as Icarus got faurer an faurer awa. He ettled tae follae his son, but the wax on his ain wings stertit tae melt an he kent there wis naething he cud dae. In desperation, he cried oot tae Athena, the goddess o craftsfowk, mindin her hoo she had saved his apprentice afore in Athens. An it wis then that I foond oot whit had happened tae Daedalus that time.

Daedalus's young apprentice had inventit a saw – something that naebody in Athens had seen afore – jist by copyin the jaggy shape o a fish skeleton. Daedalus had gane gyte wi jealousy, an had lowped at the apprentice, pushin him oot the heich windae o his workshop. But Athena had been watchin an, feelin sorry for the lad, chynged him intae a bird as he fell, sae he cud flee awa. Noo, Daedalus begged Athena tae turn Icarus, tae, intae a craitur wi real wings that wid save him. But this time, the goddess wisna takkin tent, an we baith gawked, pooerless, as Icarus tummeld heidlang intae the sea in a clood o brukken feathers.

Hert-sair an forfochen, Daedalus landed faur fae Crete, on the island o Sicily. He wis gien a job there, in the palace o anither foreign king, inventin new mervels. But he niver flew again, nor biggit anither pair o man-size wings. An whan he tellt his new apprentices that mortals cud flee like the birds, awbody said he had gane gyte an wis jist talkin haivers. But I've seen mortals flee since then, an seen some gey weird contraptions traivellin throu the sky. An I ken it wis Daedalus that stertit it aw.

Mibbe ye'll mind some o ma story whan ye nixt hear the thunner rummlin. An mibbe ye'll mind on Daedalus the nixt time ye find yersel fleein throu the clouds.



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THE AIPPLE RACE

by Susan Rennie

Atalanta wis the fastest rinner on Earth. Even Hermes – the postie o Moont Olympus, that cairried aw the gods’ messages tae ane anither – even him, wi his fantoosh wingit sandals, cudna flee as fast as Atalanta.

“That lassie,” said Hermes, peched oot efter ettlin tae ootrin her ae time, “can rin faster than an arra.”

“Tell me about it,” said Eros, luikin doon at Atalanta an shakkin his heid.

Noo, ye’ll ken about Eros. He wis the son o Aphrodite, the goddess o luv, an ayewis humphed about a muckle bow an a when luv-arras that he’d shoot doon at mortals whaniver he felt like it. His arras didna hurt, but they fair caused some stushies, for whan ye were nippit by ane o Eros’s dairts, ye cudna help yersel fae fawin heelstergowdie in luv wi the first person ye saw.

Atalanta had been scunnerin Eros for a lang time. The lassie jist wisna interestit in luv. Aw she thocht aboot wis rinnin.

“A man,” thocht Atalanta, “wid jist slaw me doon. If there wis a man that cud rin as fast as me, I nicht *think* aboot mairryin him. But,” she shrugged, “there jist isna.”

Eros had been dingin his fastest, maist sleekit arras at Atalanta for a haill year noo, but the lassie had jouked them aw. Whan Eros

shot an arra fae ahint Atalanta, she ran ower fast for it tae catch her; if he shot it fae faur ahead, she wid lowp ower it, or dook tae the side.

Noo, aw thae arras that Eros had been dingin doon hadna jist fawn tae the ground, or flawn intae space. Eros’s arras were magic: they didna stap tae they stickit in somebody’s airm, or leg, or dowp. Efter a haill year o Eros shootin at – an missin – Atalanta, mair nor three hunner laddies had been duntit by his arras as they dandered near Atalanta’s trainin track. Ivery ane o them wis noo heids an heels in luv wi Atalanta. They sent her bunches o crocus an narcissus; but Atalanta wisna a flooer kind o lassie an jist flang them awa. Sae they sent her sleekit rinnin tunics, an saft sandals made by Nike, the goddess o Victory. But Atalanta wisna interestit. She preferred her auld, baggy tunic, an rinnin barefit. Forby, she wis sair scunnert wi aw these luv-seik suitors gawkin at her trainin aw the time.

Ae mornin she turned tae them aw an said: “Aw richt. I’ll gie ye aw a fair shot. I will mairry the first man that can rin a race wi me – an win. But mind, if ye rin an lose . . . ye’ll hae tae dee.”

Ye’d think the chance o deein wid pit a lot o fowk aff. But no the puir, arra-stickit lads that were in luv wi Atalanta. Dizzens o them wantit tae rin, an dizzens endit up as denner for the forest wolfs. Suin, even the wolfs cudna keep up, an the line o peched-oot suitors waitin tae be eaten raxed faur ootwi the forest.

Meanwhile, Eros wisna giein up. Ae day, he waitit tae Atalanta had feenisht her mornin trainin an wis sittin doon tae eat her

goat's cheese piece. He aimed at her a mega-muckle luvie arra; it wis that big he cudna fit it in his bow an had tae fling it wi his twa hauns. *Wheech!* went Eros's arra, heidin strecht for Atalanta's hert. Atalanta didna even blenk. She heard the arra comin an jist pit up her haun – withoot stappin eatin her piece – an dinged it awa. The arra skitit aff an olive tree, an landed in a burn that cairried it strecht tae the taes o a lad that wis paidlin nearby: Hippomenes. Feelin the nip at his taes, Hippomenes lowped oot the watter an luiked up, across the burn tae Atalanta.

Noo Atalanta wisna a bonnie sicht. She had been rinnin for three oors strecht, her tunic wis drookit wi sweit, her legs were smooed wi mud an her hair wis raivelt up wi bits o leaf an twig. But Hippomenes thocht she wis the bonniest thing he had iver seen. He follaed her as she jogged hame, in a dwam, wunnerin wha she cud be, an hoo suin he cud mairry her. But whan he cam tae the forest, an saw aw the ither luvie-seik lads an heard their stories, he wis sair disjaskit.

“Eros is torturin me, by makkin me faw in luvie wi a lassie I canna howp tae win,” he sighed. “Aphrodite, goddess o luvie, help me, I beg ye.”

Hippomenes wis in luck. Aeolus, the god o the fower wunds, wis bored. It wis simmer an he cudna hae fun deavin fowk wi snell wunds like he did in winter. Forby, he cudna stick Eros, an wis ayewis luikin for weys tae get him intae trouble. Sae the wund god heezed up Hippomenes's sighs an cairried them gently, blawin

them aw the wey tae Moont Olympus an strecht intae the lugs o Aphrodite.

Maist o the time, Aphrodite jist let her son get on wi his job. Aw richt, he made mistakes. That time an arra had duntit Narcissus while he wis keekin in the pool, sae the lad fell in luvie wi himsel, had been fair embarrassin. An whan the neb o ane o Eros's arras had scartit her ain breist – jist as she'd been kissin him goodbye ae mornin – she had spent a haill simmer girnin an greetin efter a mortal cried Adonis. But Eros wis young yet. In anither million year or twa he'd get it richt, an syne his mither cud relax.

But whan Aphrodite heard Hippomenes's plea, an luiked doon at the bauchle Eros had made this time, she kent she had tae dae something.

“If ye want a thing daen,” she sighed, “dae it *yersel*.”

Sae Aphrodite stepped ontae her Invisible Clood an dandered doon tae Earth tae sort things oot. First, she stapped on Cyprus, her favourite island, whaur she kept a magic orchard. In the middle o this orchard wis a gowden aipple tree, its brainches hauden doon by glentin fruit. Aphrodite picked three gowden aipples – “Because,” she thocht, “ye can niver trust a mortal tae get it richt first time.”

Syne she flew tae Atalanta's forest, an parked her Invisible Clood richt afore Hippomenes.

As Aphrodite stepped doon fae her clood, Hippomenes saw a fit appear in the air. He blenked hard an shuik his heid; but the fit wis

still there, an suin it growed an ankle, syne a haill leg an body.

Hippomenes stood like a stookie, gawkin.

The goddess introduced hersel.

“Aphrodite. I believe you begged?”

Hippomenes cud scarce nod his heid.

“Aw richt then. These are magic luv aipples. Thraw ane afore Atalanta as she rins an it will distract her.”

“But is that . . . no . . . cheatin?” stammert Hippomenes, still bumbazed.

Aphrodite glowered.

“Fine,” she said, turnin back tae her clood. “I’ll gie them tae anither lad that *really* luv Atalanta.”

“Aw richt,” blurtit oot Hippomenes, “I’ll tak them. Whit wis I tae dae again?”

The nixt race wis set for first thing in the mornin, an Hippomenes had speired tae gae first. The lave o the luv-seik suitors were staundin aboot at the stert o the race, howpin Hippomenes wid lose an gie them a chance, as weel, tae be eaten. The forest wolfs watched, tae, slaverin at the meal tae come. In the guid seats, up on Moont Olympus, Aphrodite sat doon tae watch her plan unfauld.

Atalanta keeked at Hippomenes as she wis warmin up. He wisna bad-luikin; it wis awmaist a peety she wis gaun tae gub him in the race. An that poke o fruit he wis cairryin wis shair tae slaw him doon even mair.

They set aff. Atalanta had set the course throu the roughest pairts o the forest. She led Hippomenes throu mirky burns fou o sherp stanes, an alang stoorie moontain paths, lowpin ower boulders an dookin unner tree brainches. At first, Hippomenes cudna see Atalanta at aw, an wis jist follaein the soond o her rinnin feet. But as suin as they cam tae a bit open groond, he howked oot an aipple an rowed it alang the path, sae it stapped jist aheid o the gleg-fittit lassie.

Atalanta wis dumfonert. Normally naething cud stap her whan she wis rinnin. But the aipple wis fou o Aphrodite’s pooer an sooked Atalanta’s gaze towards it. She tuik a keek backarts an, happy that Hippomenes wis faur ahint, she stapped tae pick up the magic fruit. Hippomenes catchit up, but cudna pass her, an suin Atalanta wis faur aheid again. A saicont time, Hippomenes threw doon an aipple, an again Atalanta slawed up tae retrieve it – but no for lang.

By noo, Aphrodite was gettin impatient, an whispered intae Hippomenes’s lug, “Dinna waste this ane, mortal! Thraw it tae the side, *faurer awa*.”

Sae Hippomenes skiffed the third aipple awa tae Atalanta’s richt side, aff the path. But this time Atalanta wis ontae him.

“I’m no fawin for that aipple trick again,” she thocht, ettlin tae turn her een fae its bonnie glentin.

“I maun *focus*,” repeatit Atalanta ower an ower tae hersel.

“Ye maun *luve*,” whispered Aphrodite, as mony times, intae Atalanta’s lugs.

The pooer o Aphrodite's third aipple wis ower strang. Even Atalanta, the strangest lassie on Earth, cudna thole it. Ivery muscle in her body wis pouin her towards the aipple. She cudna stap her legs fae cairryin her towards it; or her airm fae raxin doon tae pick it up; or her fingers fae closin roond the gowden globe an haudin it tae her cheek tae feel its caller skin. Whan Atalanta liftit her heid again, she saw Hippomenes wheechin past her. But this time, the byordinar thing wis, Atalanta wisna fashed. Altho she kent she cud easy hae lowped up again an owertakken Hippomenes, Atalanta didna want tae. Insteid, she jist dandered alang tae the feenishin line – an let Hippomenes win. For Aphrodite's aipple had worked its magic. Atalanta had fawn in luv wi Hippomenes, an wis fair luikin forrart tae trainin him up as a rinnin pairtner.

Aw this, ye'd hae thocht, wid hae made for a happy endin. An it wid hae, if Hippomenes hadna been sae glaikit. He forgot the first rule o hoo tae be a happy mortal: if a goddess dis ye a favour, ye maun thank her. Naething fancy: jist an offerin or twa, a couple sonsie sheep or goats, a nice big jaur o wine. Efter the race, Aphrodite wis waitin by her temple, tae see whit gifts Hippomenes wid bring her. But the daft gowk jist walked strecht past the temple. He didna even bow his heid. The goddess wis bilin. She tuik a deep braith, an turned Hippomenes intae the first thing she thocht o – which wis a lion. Atalanta cudna believe it. She felt like greetin. The ainly laddie she had iver fawn in luv wi had jist stapped bein human. But Aphrodite cudna ignore a luv-seik lassie, sae she turned Atalanta intae a lioness.

Mind, the life o a lioness isna easy. Hippomenes got tae lee aboot aw day while Atalanta did aw the huntin an humphed the carcasses o meat back for their tea. But noo Atalanta cud rin faster an faurer than iver afore; an ivery day Hippomenes watched her rax her tawny limbs an set aff for her mornin rin, the wund dirlin throu the hairs o her sleekit heid an back, an her tail raxin oot faur ahint her.



‘The Weavin Contest’, ‘Ariadne in the Clods’, ‘The Aipple Race’
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