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Meleager and the Calydonian Boar

Nathan Musser

“Oeneus, king of Calydon, had given thanks to all the gods for his plentiful harvest. Well, all the gods except Diana; he kind of forgot about her. To take revenge, the hunter goddess summoned her most fearsome monster, the Calydonian Boar, determined to let it ravage the Calydonian fields until the people once again learned to respect her.” Peleus paused. “At least, Meleager’s messenger said something like that. I was already on board when I heard we’d be fighting a monster. The rest was just filler backstory.”

Peleus stared up at Oeneus’s palace. Soon, he would be hunting a ferocious monster with the world’s greatest heroes. Roaming the countryside, fighting alongside friends, winning fame and renown ... there was no better way to spend the day. He hadn’t been this excited for a quest since hearing about the Golden Fleece.

“We’re already late,” his brother Telamon said, hefting his spear. “We’d better hurry. We don’t want a repeat of the Earthborn attack.”

Peleus didn’t need to be reminded. During their voyage with Jason on the Argo, their first real shot at some action had been fighting the Earthborn men – but by the time Peleus and the other Argonauts had arrived, Hercules had killed most of the enemies. Typical Hercules, taking all the fun for himself. “Let’s find Meleager – quickly.”

They found the prince of Calydon feasting with the other assembled heroes, preparing for the impending quest. Meleager sat at the head of the table, Jason on one side and Theseus on the other; beside Theseus, Ancaeus, clad in a large bearskin, was drinking his fill of wine. Beside Jason, Nestor and Phoenix were deep in conversation (at least, Nestor was talking; Phoenix seemed to be dozing off). Laertes sat beside Ancaeus, talking with the seer Mopsus, who was saying something about miraculously surviving a snake bite. Jason greeted the arriving heroes with a nod as Peleus and Telamon took their seats. Only one empty chair remained.

Ancaeus set down his goblet of wine. “We are all here, then?” he said, wiping his mouth. He heaved his two-headed battle axe from its resting place against the wall. “I’m ready to slay a beast!”

The heroes cheered. Peleus grinned, hungry for action, but Meleager raised a hand. “There is one more,” he said.

“Please tell me it’s not Hercules,” Peleus muttered. He imagined searching the woods and fields for hours, only to find the boar dead at Hercules’s feet before any of the other heroes could even help. He definitely hoped it wasn’t Hercules.

The doors banged open, and the heroes all turned to see the newcomer. A woman stood in the doorway, holding a bow, with a quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder. Peleus raised an eyebrow – it was almost as if this woman was coming with them on their quest as the final hero.

“The final hero!” Meleager announced from the head of the table. He raised his arms in welcome, though it looked suspiciously like he was flexing. Peleus rolled his eyes. “Or should I say, heroine,” Meleager continued. “Atalanta, can I get you any wine before –”

“A woman?” demanded Ancaeus, gesturing angrily with his battle axe. Laertes and Mopsus leaned away. “This is an outrage! I refuse to quest in the company of a woman!”

All eyes turned to Atalanta.

“Then I will kill the boar alone,” she said.

Ancaeus’s face reddened, but Meleager just laughed. “Then we shall be on our way!” the prince said. “Ready yourselves, my friends, for today, vengeance and glory shall be ours!”

...

Peleus was not feeling much glory. After leaving the palace, they’d split into smaller groups, tramping over the hot Aetolian countryside to find the monster. Any other day, the boar would be goring travelers or uprooting trees, but now, when they wanted to find it, it had decided to take a day off. Go figure.

Peleus kept his eyes peeled for a gigantic monster. He picked his way across the side of a steep hill that was dotted with rocks and scraggly bushes, the ground sloping sharply down into a ravine. At the bottom of the ravine, several hundred feet below, the cypress trees grew so closely together that the valley looked like it was filled with a sea of green.

Beside Peleus, Telamon poked at the underbrush with his spear, as if the huge boar might be hiding in a small, scrubby juniper bush. The other members of his group, Phoenix and Mopsus, weren’t far behind. Peleus wasn’t sure what use it was to have a seer along if he couldn’t even tell them where the boar was, but he decided not to bring that up.

The blazing sun was already lowering in the sky. They’d been hunting for nearly eight hours, with no sign of the boar. If it didn’t show up soon –

A woman shouted in the distance, startling Peleus from his thoughts. Then he heard the voice of Meleager cry, “The boar! It’s here!”

Peleus spun toward the voices. They came from below, deep in the ravine. As he watched, something moved through the trees – something so large that it crushed all the cypresses in its path, blazing a giant trail through the green sea.

Peleus grinned. It was time. The heroes around him needed no urging; they all grabbed their spears, plunging down the ravine as fast as humanly possible. Several times, Peleus tripped over rocks and bushes as he hurried down the hill, but he didn’t let that slow him down. He was not going to miss this boar fight.

The shouts grew louder as he finally slid to the bottom of the ravine. Through the trees, Peleus glimpsed snapshots of the fight: Meleager and Theseus dashing between tree trunks, Atalanta firing arrow after arrow, Ancaeus planting his feet, gripping his battle axe, facing something in the distance.

Then another tree cracked and fell, and the boar burst into view. Eager for battle as Peleus was, the sight was enough to make even his blood run cold. The monster was easily forty feet tall, its eyes glistening red as blood. Its tusks, dirtied from ripping up trees and travelers alike, were longer than Peleus himself. As Peleus watched, the boar turned toward Atalanta’s position, opened its mouth – and breathed a stream of fire. The huntress rolled away just in time, only her cloak singed.

Peleus and his team froze. “Meleager never mentioned it could do that,” Phoenix said.

“Then our glory will be greater!” said Peleus, trying to convince himself as much as his allies. He charged forward, the heroes following. Mopsus threw his spear, a perfect shot at the boar’s eye – but some invisible force knocked it aside. The spear spun uselessly into the trees.

From the ground, Atalanta fired another arrow. This time, she hit the boar. The beast squealed as blood dripped from the wound. It turned its fiery gaze to the huntress, its eyes spewing hate.

“The first blood!” Meleager shouted. “The first honor goes to Atalanta!”

Ancaeus’s eyes flashed with fury. “She may have wounded the beast,” he growled, “but I will be the one to slay it – Diana or no Diana.”

Peleus and his team reached the clearing as Ancaeus raised his battle axe and charged the boar head-on. The boar snorted and pawed the ground, clearly relishing the moment. Ancaeus looked like an ant next to the monster, but still he charged, bellowing his battle cry.

Jason, Nestor, and Laertes appeared at the far side of the clearing – all eyes watching, horrified, as Ancaeus staggered mid-charge. He sank to his knees before he even reached the boar, clawing at his breastplate. Peleus frowned – was that an arrow sprouting from his chest? Where had it come from?

The boar did not stop to ask such questions. It skewered the fallen Ancaeus through the stomach, tossing the hero screaming through the air, the only trace of him the gore staining the boar's tusk. The remaining heroes froze, wide-eyed, as a rider shimmered into existence atop the boar. She was at least ten feet tall, with dark brown hair and a silvery tunic – and a quiver slung across her shoulders, a knife strapped to her waist, and fury written on her face. It was the goddess Diana, armed with her fearsome bow.

The goddess's eyes flashed in anger. “Who else will dare disrespect Diana?” she growled.

If Peleus had known he'd have to fight a goddess, he might not have been so eager to join the hunt; in fact, he now almost wished that Hercules was with them. What is this quest doing to me? he thought.

But Peleus had given his word. He had promised to slay the boar, and he would never hear the end of it if he ran away now. He tightened his grip on his spear. The other heroes did the same.

“You will fall before the goddess of the hunt!” cried Diana, her voice shaking the trees.

The boar leaped forward, spewing fire toward Jason and Nestor. The heroes dove aside, Nestor throwing a spear as he fell. The weapon scraped the boar's back leg; Theseus, charging forward, slashed his sword across the open wound, drawing a thick stream of blood.

The boar bellowed in pain. Peleus and Telamon launched their spears in unison. They struck the boar's flank, but the spears merely stuck like toothpicks against the monster's skin.

“Target the eyes!” Laertes shouted, throwing his own spear. His aim was true, but Diana flicked her wrist, sending the weapon careening wildly into the sky. Atalanta launched more arrows at the monster as Phoenix jabbed at its hide, the boar squealing with anger.

Undaunted, Jason pressed forward, spear in one hand, sword in the other. He skewered the boar's snout, and blood gushed out. Behind him, Meleager hurled his own spear, striking the boar's

spine just beneath Diana. The boar reeled in pain. Peleus leaped to his feet, sword drawn, rushing for the beast. Jason was in the monster's face, hacking with his sword.

The boar opened its maw. Flames heated up inside for a last, defiant fireball.

“Throw!” Peleus bellowed, and he and Jason hurled their swords down the boar's throat. The beast half squealed, half choked as it sank to the ground, finally defeated.

For a moment, everything was silent, and Peleus was feeling pretty proud of himself – until Diana jumped off the boar's back, stalking toward him and Jason. She didn't even speak; she drew her bow, fast as lightning, and fired.

Peleus barely had time to think, I'm dead, when he heard the twang of another bowstring.

Nothing pierced his chest. He was still alive. He glanced beside him; Atalanta had fired, somehow shooting Diana's arrow out of the air with her own.

The goddess spun on Atalanta, furious – though Peleus saw the briefest hesitation in her movement. Diana nocked another arrow, but slowly.

Atalanta is a fellow huntress, Peleus realized. If there was anyone who could stand up to Diana without immediately getting an arrow to the chest, it was Atalanta.

But the goddess kept her bow trained on Atalanta, so Peleus tightened his grip on his sword. If Diana unleashed her full strength against them, the monstrous boar would be child's play in comparison. Across the clearing, all the heroes grabbed their spears, uncertain of how to proceed – honor the goddess, or defend Atalanta?

Diana seemed to sense their indecision. Her eyes shifted off Atalanta, scouring the heroes, each one individually. Peleus felt as if her gaze penetrated his very soul, which was more than unsettling. But something had changed. Now, the goddess didn't seem as angry. Was she ... curious?

Diana eventually spoke. “You would defend Atalanta?”

“With my life,” Meleager said, stepping forward. “Just as she would do for us. She drew first blood. She is a member of this quest, and a great hero.”

And you're obviously in love, Peleus thought, but he decided to keep his mouth shut.

“You respect a huntress,” Diana said, lowering her bow, “and so you respect me. But neglect me again ...” She fixed her gaze on Meleager. “And I will not be so lenient.”

She vanished into a mist.

Peleus released his breath, which he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Diana had been a strange mixture of both terrifying power and impressive skill. Peleus wasn't anxious to meet her again, but one thing was for sure: he would certainly never make Oeneus's mistake and forget to offer her sacrifices.

Meleager stood next to the boar carcass, pulling his deadly spear from its spine. “Unless there are any objections, I give the spoils to Atalanta.”

While Peleus did think a giant boar's head would look great on his palace walls, he had to admit that, without Atalanta, they never would have appeased the goddess. “To Atalanta!” he said.

“To Atalanta!” cried the heroes, and the shout echoed throughout the glade, ringing through the skies until it reached even the lofty temples of Mount Olympus.