TOM HOLLAND

THE WOLF-GIRL, THE GREEKS AND THE GODS

A TALE OF THE PERSIAN WARS

ILLUSTRATED BY JASON COCKCROFT

AS A CHILD, I WAS OBSESSED by the Greek gods and heroes. I read everything I could about them. I would draw pictures of them for hours and hours. I had one big regret, however: that the age of heroes had come to an end. Once the Trojan War had been fought, once the Greeks had returned home, once even Odysseus had made it back to Ithaca, the gods kept to Olympus. They no longer appeared to mortals. Mythology was followed by history.

In time, however, I came to realize that history too could be thrilling. Like the Trojan War, the story of how the Persian king of kings, the most powerful person on earth, had invaded Greece, and then – against all the odds – been beaten back, seemed to me as exciting as any story I had ever read. I still think that today. Over the course of my life I have constantly retold it. I have translated Herodotus, the man who first narrated the history of the Persian Wars, for Penguin Classics. I have adapted Herodotus for BBC radio. I have written a prize-winning history of the period: *Persian Fire*. The thrill, the glamour, the poetry of the story has stayed with me all my career.

Even so, I have never forgotten that sense of longing I felt as a child: for the gods not to have vanished from the face of Greece, for the age of heroes to have persisted even after the Trojan War. When my daughters were young, we went to live near Athens for six months, and while we were there I would tell them a version of Herodotus' history – but one in which the gods as well as mortals had taken part. The central figure in this story was Gorgo, the Spartan princess who married Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylae. She first appears in Herodotus' account as a young girl – and so she made, I thought, the perfect heroine for the version of the story I wanted to tell my daughters. But I wanted a hero as well: so I chose Themistocles, the Athenian who won the battle of Salamis, and who had been quite as crafty and brilliant as Odysseus. I made him the favourite of Athena.

This is the story I have re-told in *Wolf-Girl*: a story that would have been familiar to Herodotus, for it follows his narrative closely. Spartan hoplites and Persian kings; ostracisms and battles; oracles and triremes: all are here. But so too are nymphs and lycanthropes, Zeus and Artemis, magical transformations and prophecies that come true. It is the story of the most thrilling episode in the whole of history – but told as it has never been told before. —— *Tom Holland*

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TOM HOLLAND *is an award-winning historian, author and broadcaster. He is the author of* Rubicon: The Triumph and the Tragedy of the Roman Republic, *which won the Hessell-Tiltman Prize for History and was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize;* Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West, *his history of the Graeco-Persian wars, won the Anglo-Hellenic League's Runciman Award in 2006. Holland has translated Herodotus, the man who first narrated the history of the Persian Wars, for Penguin Classics and adapted his work for BBC radio. Holland is also the presenter of BBC Radio 4's "Making History" and acclaimed podcast "The Rest is History". He has written and presented a number of TV documentaries for the BBC and Channel 4, on subjects ranging from ISIS to dinosaurs. He served two years as the Chair of the Society of Authors and is Chair of the British Library's PLR Advisory Committee.*

Born in New Zealand, JASON COCKCROFT *grew up in the north of England and studied illustration at Falmouth University. He has illustrated numerous picture books and fiction titles for all ages, most notably contributing the cover artwork for the first three UK editions of the Harry Potter series. His debut fiction title* We Were Wolves *published in 2021 and was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal.*

1

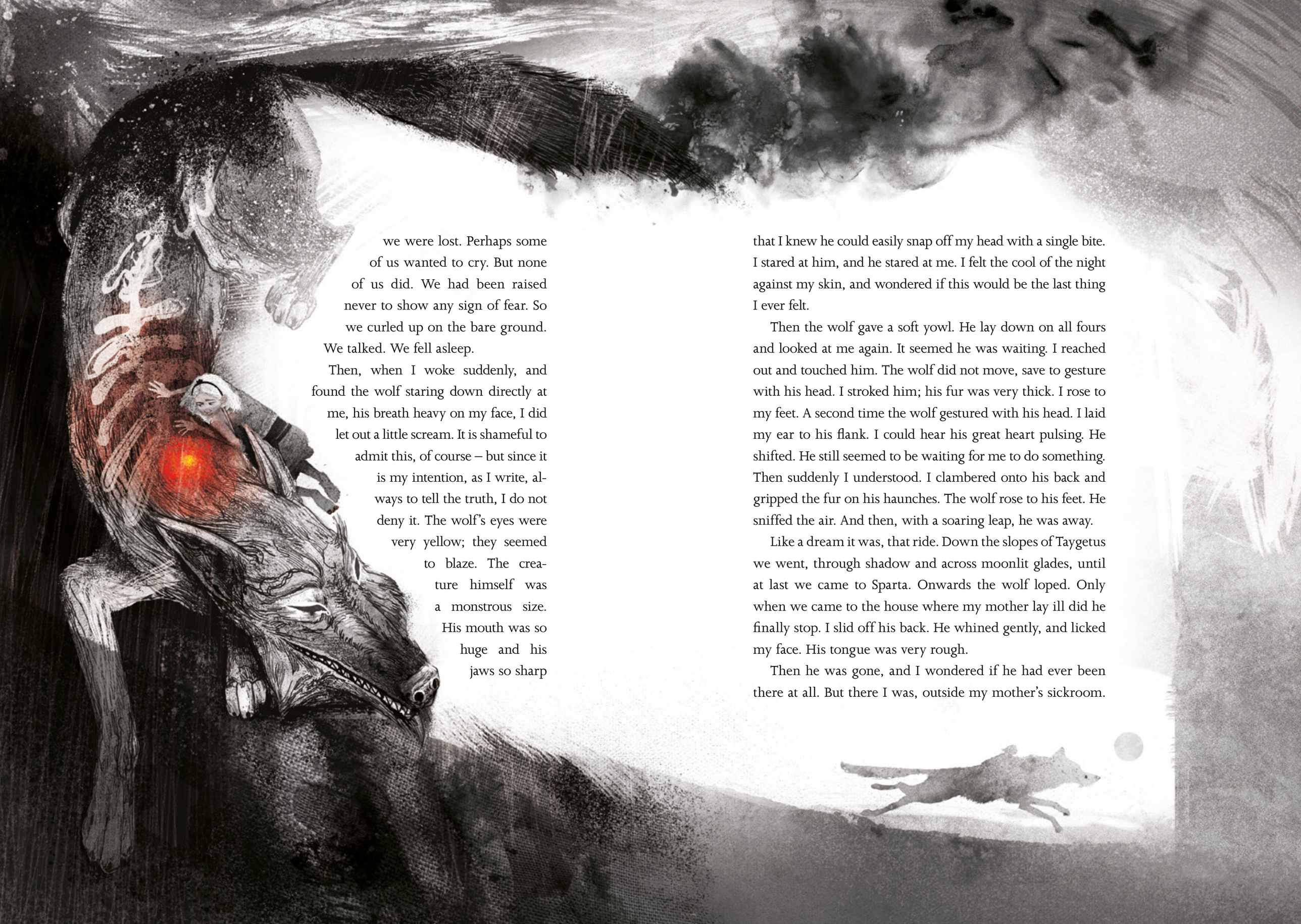
A NIGHT-TIME JOURNEY

I suppose it is rare for a woman to write. I do not say that to boast. I am a Spartan, after all, and we Spartans never boast. No one, though, has ever written anything like I have written here. It is the story of the greatest war ever fought. Years it lasted. Famous cities went up in flames. Mighty heroes, the pride of Greece and Asia, won undying glory for themselves. Some died before their time, and their shades fled down to the underworld. Others, when the war was done, met with equally unhappy fates. One, returning from the war, was murdered in his own palace. Another, a man of tricks and turns, the great schemer who did more than anyone else to secure victory for the Greeks, roams the world to this day. Who knows if he will ever make it home?

I too, in the years since the war, have roamed the world. I have spoken to those who fought in it, and survived. I have toured the fields and sailed the waters where the battles were decided. I have sought to understand everything that happened. This – what you are reading – is the fruit of my researches. How it was that East and West came to go to war. I played my own small part in this; you will find out how in due course. But this is not just my story. It is the story of everyone who played a part – gods as well as men. A story unlike any you will ever have read.

Perhaps, though, if I had not woken up one night when I was a little girl, and found a wolf staring down at me, I would never have come to write it. I had gone that afternoon with my friends up the slopes of Taygetus. This is the savage, five-peaked mountain which separates Sparta from the land of the Messenians. My friends and I had never explored it before. We had always wanted to; and now there was no one to stop us. My father, the king, was away at war. My mother had been sick for many months, and was in her bed. So off we set.

All afternoon we played. As the sun began to set, we realized that



we were lost. Perhaps some of us wanted to cry. But none of us did. We had been raised never to show any sign of fear. So we curled up on the bare ground. We talked. We fell asleep.

Then, when I woke suddenly, and found the wolf staring down directly at me, his breath heavy on my face, I did let out a little scream. It is shameful to admit this, of course – but since it is my intention, as I write, always to tell the truth, I do not deny it. The wolf's eyes were very yellow; they seemed to blaze. The creature himself was a monstrous size. His mouth was so huge and his jaws so sharp that I knew he could easily snap off my head with a single bite. I stared at him, and he stared at me. I felt the cool of the night against my skin, and wondered if this would be the last thing I ever felt.

Then the wolf gave a soft yowl. He lay down on all fours and looked at me again. It seemed he was waiting. I reached out and touched him. The wolf did not move, save to gesture with his head. I stroked him; his fur was very thick. I rose to my feet. A second time the wolf gestured with his head. I laid my ear to his flank. I could hear his great heart pulsing. He shifted. He still seemed to be waiting for me to do something. Then suddenly I understood. I clambered onto his back and gripped the fur on his haunches. The wolf rose to his feet. He sniffed the air. And then, with a soaring leap, he was away.

Like a dream it was, that ride. Down the slopes of Taygetus we went, through shadow and across moonlit glades, until at last we came to Sparta. Onwards the wolf loped. Only when we came to the house where my mother lay ill did he finally stop. I slid off his back. He whined gently, and licked my face. His tongue was very rough.

Then he was gone, and I wondered if he had ever been there at all. But there I was, outside my mother's sickroom.

That was real enough. Clearly the wolf must have brought me there for a reason. And so I turned, and went inside.

The women attending my mother were startled to see me. One of them put down the wet cloth with which she had been mopping her patient's brow and tried to shoo me away. But my mother raised a hand.

"No," she whispered, and gestured to the attendants to leave.

She stretched out her arms and I folded myself against her. How hot she felt! Hotter than she had ever felt before. Her breathing was ragged and laboured.

"Mama," I whispered. I snuggled myself up against her even more tightly.

For a long time we lay together in silence. Then, raising her head, my mother tried to speak.

"Gorgo."

"Mama?"

She swallowed. I could feel her mustering all her energy. "In Athens…" she murmured. Her voice trailed away. She tried a second time. "In Athens … the girls, the Athenian girls…"

"Yes, Mama?"

"They turn into bears."

I looked up at her. I had no idea why she had told me this. Where was Athens? Why did the girls turn into bears? What was it to me?

"Your father…" my mother whispered. "I … I have failed to give him a son. But you, Gorgo, you…" She squeezed my hand and looked into my eyes. They glittered with desperation. She beckoned me closer. I laid my ear against her mouth. Her lips felt as though they were on fire.

"Danger is coming," she mumbled hoarsely. "Your father … Sparta…" She gasped. I could sense her summoning all her strength. When she finally spoke, it was an urgent, protracted wheeze. "The Persians." She coughed violently, and blood spattered her chest. "The Persians are coming." And then she slumped back onto her pillows. She was gasping for air.

I clung to her. "Mama," I whispered. "I love you. Mama, do not go."

But it was too late.

And I lay there, still hugging her tightly, until the attendants came back in and realized what had happened, and began to raise the cries of mourning.

2

A SERPENT ON A HILL

My father, Cleomenes, did not return for my mother's funeral. He was the king, and away at war. He could not possibly abandon his men. Instead – even though I was only ten – I led the mourning. Up and down the city I went, banging on a copper cauldron. All the other girls and the women joined me. Meanwhile, horsemen galloped around Laconia, the land which surrounds Sparta, summoning one man and one woman from every household to smear themselves with ashes and to put on sackcloth. Although I missed my mother, and wept to think of her as a shade in the underworld, a ghost flitting across the land of the dead, I knew she would not have wanted me to grieve in a manner unworthy of a Spartan. She had been brave, and clever, and determined, and proud. I had no better example before me. I vowed that I would be true to it. My mother would live on in me.

But so too, of course, did her final words. Where was Athens, and why did the girls there turn into bears? Who were the Persians? Why had it mattered so much to my mother to tell me about them with her dying breath? Even when I was at my most grief-stricken, I could not help worrying away at these questions. Then, of course, there was the further mystery: how and why had a wolf appeared to me on the slopes of Taygetus? Fortunately, however, I did not have to look far for answers. I had my nurse.

Lampito was the most talkative woman in Sparta – indeed, in the whole of Laconia. She was famous for it. She was interested in everything, and let everybody know it. There was no one quite like her. We Spartans do not generally talk much. We are trained to keep silent. Boys, if they chatter, are beaten. Even if we do have something to say, we keep it as brief as possible. This is why, in other cities, someone who speaks in a short, brisk manner is called "laconic". But my father and my mother, even as they raised me always to think before I spoke, found Lampito amusing. They admired her for the sheer range of subjects she knew about, and encouraged her to share her interests with me. And so she did.

One evening, shortly after my mother had departed for the underworld, and I was sitting beside my nurse looking up at the stars, I asked her where Athens was.

"Athens?" she answered. She snorted. "You don't want to bother with Athens."

"Why?"

"Their first king had a serpent's tail instead of legs."

"Oh." I pondered this information. "Why?"

"I don't know. He just did. His name was Cecrops. His daughters came to a sticky end."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. There were three of them. The goddess Athena gave them a box, and told them to keep it safe on the Acropolis. Do you know what the Acropolis is, my sweetheart?"

I shook my head.

"It means 'High City'. There is an acropolis here in Sparta; every Greek city has one. But the Acropolis in Athens is the biggest and the most famous in Greece. It is a great rock in the middle of a plain. The Athenians have built their city round it." Lampito paused, then frowned. "Now where was I?"

"The three daughters of Cecrops, who had a tail like a snake? Athena gave them a box."

"Yes, yes, so she did. She told them on no account ever to look inside it. The girls, of course, being girls, promptly opened it. Inside the box was a baby; a serpent was coiled around the baby's limbs. The sight of it drove the girls mad. Screaming, they hurled themselves off the Acropolis. The baby was called Erichthonius. He grew up to become the second king of Athens. He was the first man to ride a chariot, and the first to yoke oxen to a plough. Meanwhile, the serpent made its home in a hole on the summit of the Acropolis. It still lives there to this day, my sweetheart. The girls of Athens take turns in looking after it. Every day, one of them climbs the Acropolis and feeds the serpent a honey cake. It is immortal, you see, and sacred to Athena. It is a sign of the goddess's love for the Athenians and for their city. So long as it lives on the Acropolis, so people say, then Athens will never fall."

"Why does Athena love Athens?" I asked. "Is it because … at least, someone told me … is it because the girls in Athens turn into bears?"

Lampito looked at me and narrowed her eyes. "Maybe," she said. "Who told you that?"

I didn't answer.

Lampito nodded and kissed me. "There's lots I have kept from you," she admitted. "About the gods. About the rest of Greece. The Spartans are the best and the bravest of people, of course, that goes without saying – everybody knows that – but our city is not the only one, and it is good you should understand as much. I am sure your mother, may her shade be at peace, would not want me to keep anything secret from you." She gazed down at me shrewdly. "Tomorrow evening, then."

"But, Lampito—"

"Tomorrow evening. We will talk then about gods and bears. That is what I said, and that is what I meant."

And so she did.

THE LADY OF THE BEASTS

"It begins with the gods," said Lampito the following evening. Once again I was lying in her arms, looking up at the stars. "Everything in Greece begins with the gods. They love Greece, you see. This is our privilege, those of us who live here, but it is also our curse. The love of a god is a dangerous thing. Everyone knows that. Mortals are all too easily burned by the divine."

Lampito paused. "True," she went on to acknowledge in a grudging tone, "I do not claim that the immortals love only Greece. They are perfectly fond of other lands as well. There are some of them, sometimes, who pay visits to the very ends of the earth. Apollo, for instance. The radiant archer, the god of prophecy and light. He often heads to the furthest north, where the sun never sets, and the Hyperboreans have their great circular temple of stone. How does he fly there? Why, my sweetheart, on the backs of wild swans.

"Then there is Poseidon, the lord of the sea. He heads in the opposite direction. In the distant south he feasts with the Ethiopians, the handsomest of people. They kill bulls in his honour, and rams by the hundred. They know how to make a god feel welcome. So no wonder he likes to visit them.

"But home is always Greece. The palace of the immortals – as I hope you remember, my dove, for I have told you this before – stands many hundreds of miles north of where we are sitting now, high on the summit of a mountain named Olympus. From its glimmering peaks the gods gaze out at the world of mortals. They look down at the road which winds past its foothills, and marvel at how like insects we humans seem. Mortals in a wagon cannot, as Apollo does, shimmer through the air like light when they wish to make a journey. No, my darling. We have to bump, and crash, and get bruises.

"And even then there are lots of places where wagons cannot go. The lands that stretch south of Olympus are often rugged and wild.

Worse than Taygetus. Crags rise everywhere; they hem in the lowlands. At the narrowest point between the mountains and the sea, there is barely room for one wagon to overtake another. The pass is called Thermopylae: 'Hot Gates'. Steaming water rises from springs, and the rocks look like melted wax. A stench of sulphur hangs in the air. It is no place you would ever want to visit."

Lampito reached for a stick, and began to draw a map in the dust.

"South of Thermopylae too," she continued, pointing with its tip, "in a valley that lies beyond further peaks, isolated by a ring of mountains and shadowed by wheeling eagles, vapours rise from the ground. These fumes are sacred to Apollo. The god travelled to the valley back when he was still young, and found a giant python there, bloated on goats, and sheep, and unwary shepherds. Was Apollo scared, my dove? He was not. He fitted an arrow to his bow. A single shot. There was a blaze of light, and down fell the monstrous serpent, dead.

"Ever since, the valley of Delphi has served as Apollo's shrine. I have never been, but those who have report it to be a holy, haunted place. The vapours come from the underworld, drifting upwards through a fissure in the rock, and give to all who breathe them in the gift of prophecy. In time, men built a temple there. A priestess sits inside it. She is an old woman, but dresses just as you do, Gorgo, in the tunic of a young girl. She is called the 'Pythia' – after the giant snake, you see, that once coiled around the rocks of the valley. Down into her lungs she gulps the fumes! People travel from all over Greece to put their questions to her. They know that the Pythia speaks not with her own voice but with the voice of golden Apollo. Her words are the words of a god.

"You have roamed Laconia, Gorgo. You have visited its lonely places. You know that there are many spots in Greece like Delphi, where the gods are close. Our mountains, our springs and our groves are places they often visit. We mortals do not have to see them to sense their presence. Word spreads. People bring offerings. Someone puts up an altar. In time – as at Delphi – a temple may be built. The gods, though, must never be taken for granted. They must always be approached with care. When Apollo reveals the future, he speaks in riddles. Although he has the gift of healing, his arrows are tipped with plague. The blaze of his beauty can kill a mortal stone dead.

"Equally dangerous is his twin. Oh, beware of her, my sweetheart! Artemis, like her brother, is an archer; her passion is the hunt. She never misses her target. Down from Olympus she will come, her hair worn short just like yours, Gorgo, a quiver of arrows on her back, a silver bow in her hands. Her haunts are places like Taygetus: the forests and the crags where wild animals roam."

Lampito paused. Her face, normally so round, so brown, so jolly, appeared now quite different. Pale and solemn she looked. "Did you see her, Gorgo, that night when you climbed Taygetus?"

I shook my head. I did not want to tell Lampito what I had seen. I hugged the knowledge of it to myself.

"One day, perhaps, in woods so dense that even during the heat of summer they provide shade from the midday sun, or perhaps by night, on riverbanks lit silver by the full moon, you will catch a glimpse of the lady Artemis. But be warned, Gorgo. You must tread carefully. The goddess does not roam the wilds alone. Her companions are nymphs, spirits of the springs and the trees. From a distance they look like waves that surge but never break. Seen up closer they have the appearance of beautiful girls. Artemis is strict about those she allows to join her. None are permitted to look at, still less to kiss, a man. The goddess guards her privacy fiercely.

"Once, in Boeotia, the fertile plain which stretches southwards from Thermopylae, a huntsman crashing through the woods stumbled upon her bathing in a lake. A terrible mistake. The huntsman, turned by Artemis into a deer, was torn to pieces by his own hounds. None of the hundred nymphs who attended her have ever forgotten the sight. They know better than to betray their mistress. The chase is all that counts."

And even as Lampito said this, a deer suddenly emerged from the trees and looked at us. Rather than jitter and run, it began to nibble at some leaves.

"Shh!" Lampito lifted a finger to her lips. We sat together in silence, watching the beast, until at last it trotted away.

"Deadly though the goddess may be in the hunt," my nurse murmured softly, "she loves wild creatures as well. Animals know her as the Lady of the Beasts. Those she does not slay she places under her protection. When she and her nymphs rest from hunting, they play with lion cubs. Wolves roll on their backs to have their stomachs tickled by her immortal fingers. Deer nuzzle her."

Lampito turned back to face me. She looked even more solemn than before. "The most dangerous thing that a huntsman can ever do," she told me in a lowered voice, "is to kill an animal adopted by Artemis as her favourite. Once, when a king killed a stag in a grove sacred to the goddess, she demanded the sacrifice of his daughter in payment. Yes, Gorgo. The king had to kill his own daughter. Imagine that! But imagine also how terrible her anger was when a group of young men trapped her pet bear in a net, and speared it to death. Artemis found the animal's bloody corpse lying by the side of a beach at a place called Brauron. There was no trace of any huntsmen – but the goddess did not have far to look.

"Brauron is a village in Attica, the land which neighbours Boeotia, and of which Athens is the capital. This was where Artemis found the huntsmen. She reached over her shoulder to draw an arrow from her quiver. In her anger and her grief, she prepared to rain down a great storm of annihilation upon Athens. Every last girl in the city was to pay for the death of the bear with her life.

"But then Artemis lowered her bow. Why? No one knows for sure. The gods behave as they please. It is not always given to us to understand what they do. Something, though, had made Artemis hesitate. Mercy does not come naturally to the Lady of the Beasts. Perhaps only a goddess as dangerous and powerful as she was herself could possibly have persuaded her to change her mind. Artemis is the mistress of the wild places of the world; but she has a half-sister who keeps watch over cities.

"Athena, like Artemis herself, is a daughter of Zeus, the king of the gods. But Athena, unlike Artemis, has no mother. Instead she sprang fully formed from a crack in her father's skull. Few mortals have ever seen her – only her absolute favourites – but they report her to be very beautiful. Her eyes, deep like a fathomless pool, bright like glittering jewels, are grey. This is how she can best be recognized. She wears

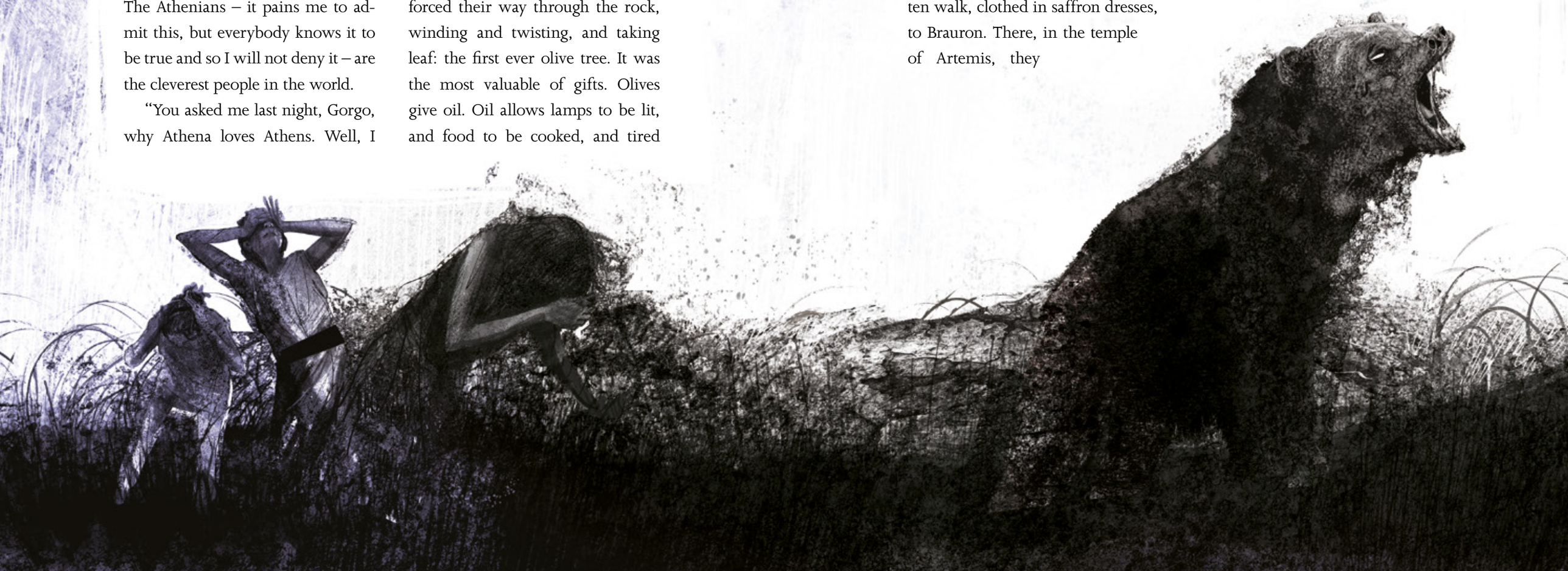
full armour. Her war cry when she first emerged from Zeus' skull made all Olympus shudder. Ever since, Athena has delighted in battle. When rival armies meet, their armour and weapons flashing, she will sweep unseen through their ranks, and shiver with pleasure at the prospect of the slaughter to come.

"Yet she is the mistress as well of the arts of peace: of wool-working, and weaving, and carpentry. Above all, Athena admires intelligence. The cleverer and craftier a man, the likelier she is to love him. I suppose this is why Athens is her chosen city. The Athenians – it pains me to admit this, but everybody knows it to be true and so I will not deny it – are the cleverest people in the world.

"You asked me last night, Gorgo, why Athena loves Athens. Well, I will tell you. She became the city's protectress as the result of a contest. Poseidon, the lord of the sea, had laid claim to the city as well, so a contest was set: each was to offer a great gift to its people. The king of Athens sat in judgement. The two gods both came to the Acropolis. With his trident Poseidon struck its summit. The first ever horse, white like the foam of a towering wave, reared up from the rock. But Athena merely smiled. Calming the animal with her cool hand, she bridled it, and tamed it. Then, with her spear, she tapped the summit of the Acropolis. Branches forced their way through the rock, winding and twisting, and taking leaf: the first ever olive tree. It was the most valuable of gifts. Olives give oil. Oil allows lamps to be lit, and food to be cooked, and tired bodies to be rubbed down. Grey-eyed Athena won the prize. The city took her name.

"So this is what I think happened to stop Artemis raining down death on Athens. I think, as she stood on the edge of the city and put an arrow to her bow, she suddenly thought of her sister, and had second thoughts. And so she spared the Athenians the firestorm of her deadly arrows. Even so, she did not spare it completely. A price still had to be paid; it is still being paid today.

"Every year a procession is held. All the young girls of Athens aged ten walk, clothed in saffron dresses, to Brauron. There, in the temple of Artemis, they make offerings to the goddess. Then they all become bears. For a year they roam the mountains and the forests as the favourites of the Lady of the Beasts. Only when the year is over do they return to human form. But no Athenian woman ever forgets what she has been. Even when she is very old, toothless and caring for her grandchildren, she will look from the city to the hills, and remember that she was once a bear. She will remember what it was to run with Artemis."



A blockbuster retelling of the Persian Wars from multi-award-winning author of *Rubicon* and *Persian Fire* Tom Holland, lavishly illustrated by Jason Cockcroft.

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With her mother's dying words,
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