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Opening extract from

Gods and Warriors

Written by

Michelle Paver

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The shaft of the arrow was black and fletched with crow feathers, but Hylas couldn't see the head because it was buried in his arm.

Clutching it to stop it wobbling, he scrambled down the slope. No time to pull it out. The black warriors could be anywhere.

He was ragingly thirsty and so tired he couldn't think straight. The Sun beat down on him and the thorn scrub gave no cover; he felt horribly exposed. But even worse was the worry over Issi, and the aching disbelief about Scram . . .

He still couldn't take it in. Last night he and Issi had made camp in a cave below the western peak. Now his sister was missing, his dog was dead, and he was running for his life.



Gods and Warriors

Michelle Paver



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NOT FOR RESALE

1

The shaft of the arrow was black and fletched with crow feathers, but Hylas couldn't see the head because it was buried in his arm.

Clutching it to stop it wobbling, he scrambled down the slope. No time to pull it out. The black warriors could be anywhere.

He was ragingly thirsty and so tired he couldn't think straight. The Sun beat down on him and the thorn scrub gave no cover; he felt horribly exposed. But even worse was the worry over Issi, and the aching disbelief about Scram.

He found the trail that led down the Mountain and halted, gasping for breath. The rasp of the crickets was loud in his ears. The cry of a falcon echoed through the gorge. No sound of pursuit. Had he really shaken them off?

He still couldn't take it in. Last night he and Issi had made camp in a cave below the western peak. Now his sister was missing, his dog was dead, and he was running for his life: a skinny boy with no clothes and no knife; all he had was a grimy little amulet on a thong round his neck.

His arm hurt savagely. Holding the arrowshaft steady, he staggered to the edge of the trail. Pebbles rattled down to

the river, dizzyingly far below. The gorge was so steep that his toes were level with the heads of pine trees. Before him the Lykonian mountains marched off into the distance, and behind him loomed the mightiest of them all: Mount Lykas, its peaks ablaze with snow.

He thought of the village further down the gorge, and of his friend Telamon, in the Chieftain's stronghold on the other side of the Mountain. Had the black warriors burnt the village and attacked Lapithos? But then why couldn't he see smoke, or hear the rams' horns sounding the alarm? Why weren't the Chieftain and his men fighting back?

The pain in his arm was all-consuming. He couldn't put it off any longer. He picked a handful of thyme, then snapped off a furry grey leaf of giant mullein for a bandage. The leaf was as thick and soft as a dog's ears. He scowled. Don't think about Scram.

They'd been together just before the attack. Scram had leant against him, his shaggy coat matted with burrs. Hylas had picked out a couple, then pushed Scram's muzzle aside and told him to watch the goats. Scram had ambled off, swinging his tail and glancing back at him as if to say, *I know what to do. I'm a goathound, that's what I'm for.*

Don't think about him, Hylas told himself fiercely.

Setting his teeth, he gripped the arrowshaft. He sucked in his breath. He pulled.

The pain was so bad he nearly passed out. Biting his lips, he rocked back and forth, fighting the sickening red waves. Scram, where are you? Why can't you come and lick it better?

Grimacing, he crushed the thyme and clamped it to the wound. It was a struggle to bandage it with the mullein leaf

one-handed, but at last he managed, tying it in place with a twist of grass that he tightened with his teeth.

The arrowhead lay in the dust where he'd dropped it. It was shaped like a poplar leaf, with a vicious, tapered point. He'd never seen one like it. In the mountains, people made arrowheads of flint – or if they were rich, of bronze. This was different. It was shiny black obsidian. Hylas only recognized it because the village wisewoman possessed a shard. She said it was the blood of the Mother, spewed from the earth's fiery guts and turned to stone. She said it came from islands far across the Sea.

Who *were* the black warriors? Why were they after him? He hadn't done anything.

And had they found Issi?

Behind him, rock doves exploded into the sky with a whirring of wings.

He spun round.

From where he stood, the trail descended steeply, then disappeared round a spur. Behind the spur, a cloud of red dust was rising. Hylas caught the thud of many feet and the rattle of arrows in quivers. His belly turned over.

They were back.

He scrambled over the edge of the trail, grabbed a sapling and clung like a bat.

The pounding feet came nearer.

Scrabbling with his toes, he found a ledge. He edged sideways beneath an overhang. His face was jammed against a tree root. He glanced down – and wished he hadn't. All he could see was a dizzying view of treetops.

The warriors came on at a punishing run. He caught the creak of leather and the rank smell of sweat – and a strange bitter tang that was horribly familiar. He'd smelt it last night. The warriors' skin was smeared with ash.

The overhang hid him from view, but to his left the trail curved round and jutted over the gorge. He heard them run past. Then they rounded the bend, and through a haze of red dust he saw them: a nightmare of stiff black rawhide armour, a thicket of spears and daggers and bows. Their long black cloaks flew behind them like the wings of crows, and beneath their helmets their faces were grey with ash.

A man called out, terrifyingly close.

Hylas stopped breathing. The warrior who'd shouted was directly above him.

Further up the trail, the others wheeled round and moved down again. Towards him.

He heard the crunch of pebbles as a man came walking back. His pace was unhurried – Hylas guessed this was the leader – and his armour made a strange, hard clink.

'Look,' said the first man. 'Blood.'

Hylas went cold. *Blood.* You left blood on the trail.

He waited.

The leader made no reply.

This seemed to rattle the first man. 'Probably just the goatherd's,' he said hastily. 'Sorry. You wanted him alive.'

Still no reply.

Sweat streamed down Hylas' flanks. With a jolt, he remembered the arrowhead, left lying in the dust. He prayed they wouldn't spot it.

Craning his neck, he saw a man's hand grasp a boulder on the edge of the trail.

It was a strong hand, but it didn't look alive. The flesh was smeared with ash, the fingernails stained black. The wrist-guard that covered the forearm was the dark red of an angry sunset, and so bright that it hurt to look. Hylas knew what it was, though he'd never seen it this close. Bronze.

Dust trickled into his eyes. He hardly dared blink. The two men were so near he could hear them breathe.

'Get rid of it,' said the leader. His voice sounded hollow. It made Hylas think of cold places beyond the reach of the Sun.

Something heavy pitched over the edge, narrowly missing him. It crashed into a thorn tree an arm's length away and swayed to rest. Hylas saw what it was and nearly threw up.

It had once been a boy, but now it was a terrible thing of black blood and burst blue innards like a nest of worms. Hylas knew him. Skiros. Not a friend, but a goatherd like him: a few years older, and ruthless in a fight.

The corpse was too close; he could almost touch it. He sensed the angry ghost fighting to break free. If it found him, if it slipped down his throat . . .

'That's the last of them,' said the first man.

'What about the girl?' said the leader.

Hylas' belly tightened.

'She doesn't matter, does she?' said the other man. 'She's only a –'

'And the other boy. The one who ran off.'

'I winged him. He won't get far –'

'Then this is not the last of them,' the leader said coldly. 'Not while that other boy remains alive.'

'No,' said the other man. He sounded scared.

Pebbles crunched as they started up the trail. Hylas willed them to keep going.

At the bend where the trail jutted, the leader stopped. He put his foot on a rock. He leant over to take another look.

What Hylas saw did not resemble a man, but a monster of darkness and bronze. Bronze greaves covered his powerful shins, and a carapace of bronze overlaid his short black rawhide kilt. His breast was hammered bronze, surmounted by bronze shoulder-guards of fearsome breadth. He had no face: just an eye-slit between a high bronze throat-guard masking nose and mouth, and a black-painted helmet made of scales sliced from the tusks of boars, with bronze cheek-guards and a crest of black horsetail. Only his hair showed that he was human. It hung below his shoulders, braided in the snake-like locks of a warrior, each one thick enough to turn a blade.

Hylas knew the leader might sense his gaze, but he couldn't look away. He just had to keep watching the slit in that armoured head, knowing those unseen eyes were raking the slopes to find him.

For a moment, the head turned to scan upriver.

Do something, Hylas told himself. Distract him. If he looks back and sees you . . .

Bracing himself on the ledge, Hylas silently let go of the sapling with one hand, and reached for the thorn tree where the body of Skiros hung. He gave it a push. The corpse shuddered, as if it didn't like being touched.

The armoured head was turning back.

At full stretch, Hylas gave another push. Skiros fell, rolling and bouncing down the gorge.

'Look,' chuckled one of the warriors, 'it's getting away.'

A ripple of laughter came from the others; nothing from the leader. The helmeted head watched the boy's body crash to the bottom – and then withdrew.

Blinking sweat from his eyes, Hylas listened to their footsteps recede as they headed up the trail.

The sapling was beginning to give under his weight. He grabbed a tree root.

He missed.