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A Thousand Ships

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1

Calliope

Sing, Muse, he says, and the edge in his voice makes it clear that this is not a request. If I were minded to accede to his wish, I might say that he sharpens his tone on my name, like a warrior drawing his dagger across a whetstone, preparing for the morning's battle. But I am not in the mood to be a muse today. Perhaps he hasn't thought of what it is like to be me. Certainly he hasn't: like all poets, he thinks only of himself. But it is surprising that he hasn't considered how many other men there are like him, every day, all demanding my unwavering attention and support. How much epic poetry does the world really need?

Every conflict joined, every war fought, every city besieged, every town sacked, every village destroyed. Every impossible journey, every shipwreck, every homecoming: these stories have all been told, and countless times. Can he really believe he has something new to say? And does he think he might need me to help him keep track of all his characters, or to fill those empty moments where the metre doesn't fit the tale?

I look down and see that his head is bowed and his shoulders, though broad, are sloped. His spine has begun

to curve at the top. He is old, this man. Older than his hard-edged voice suggests. I'm curious. It's usually the young for whom poetry is such an urgent matter. I crouch down to see his eyes, closed for a moment with the intensity of his prayer. I cannot recognize him while they are shut.

He is wearing a beautiful gold brooch, tiny leaves wrought into a gleaming knot. So someone has rewarded him handsomely for his poetry in the past. He has talent and he has prospered, no doubt with my assistance. But still he wants more, and I wish I could see his face properly, in the light.

I wait for him to open his eyes, but I have already made up my mind. If he wants my help, he will make an offering for it. That is what mortals do: first they ask, then they beg, finally they bargain. So I will give him his words when he gives me that brooch.

2

Creusa

A deafening crack awoke her, and she caught her breath. She looked around for the baby, before remembering that he was no longer a baby, but had seen five summers come and go while the war raged outside the city walls. He was in his own room, of course he was. Her breathing slowed, and she waited to hear him cry out for his mother, terrified by the thunderstorm. But the cry did not come: he was brave, her little boy. Too brave to cry out at a lightning bolt, even if it was hurled by Zeus himself. She wrapped the coverlet over her shoulders, and tried to guess what hour of the night it was. The pitter-patter of rain was growing louder. It must be early morning, because she could see across the room. But the light was peculiar: a fat yellow colour which caught the dark red walls and painted them an ugly, bloody shade. How could the light be so yellow unless the sun was rising? And how could the sun fill her rooms when she could hear the rain falling on the roof? Disorientated by her recent dreams, it was several moments before she realized the acrid tang was in her nostrils, not her imagination. The crash had not been thunder, but a more earthly destruction; the pitter-patter

was not rain, but the sound of dried wood and straw crackling in the heat. And the flickering yellow light was not the sun.

Realizing the danger she was in, she leapt from her bed, trying to undo her previous slowness. She must get outside and away from the fire. The smoke was already coating her tongue with its greasy soot. She called for her husband, Aeneas, and her son, Euryleon, but they made no reply. She left her small bedroom – the slender cot with its red-brown coverlet that she had so proudly woven for herself when she was first married – but she did not get far. She caught sight of the flames through the small high window just outside her bedroom door, and all speed slid away from her feet into the floor. It was not her home which was ablaze. It was the citadel: the highest point of the city of Troy, which only watch-fires or sacrificial flames or Helios, god of the sun, travelling overhead with his horse-drawn chariot, had ever lit before. Now fire was jumping through the columns of stone – so cool to the touch – and she watched in silence as part of the roof caught, and a sudden shower of sparks flew from the wood, tiny whirling fireflies in the smoke.

Aeneas must have gone to help battle the flames, she thought. He would have run to offer assistance to his brothers, his cousins, carrying water and sand and anything they could find. It was not the first fire which had threatened the city since the siege began. And the men would do anything, everything, to save the citadel, site of Troy's most prized possessions: the treasury, the temples, the home of Priam, their king. The fear which had driven her from her bed ebbed, as she saw her own house was not

ablaze, she and her son were not in danger, but – as so often during this endless war – her husband was. The sharp fear for survival was replaced instantly with a familiar pinching anxiety. She was so used to seeing him go out to fight the pestilence of Greeks who had been encamped outside the city for ten long years, so used to the dread of watching him leave, and the crippling fear of waiting for him to return, that now it settled on her almost comfortably, like a dark bird perching on her shoulder. He had always come home before, she reminded herself. Always. And she tried to ignore the thought which the bird squawked unbidden into her mind: why should the past be any guarantee of the future?

She jumped as she heard another monstrous crash, louder surely than the one which had woken her. She peered around the edge of the window, looking out over the lower parts of the city. Now she saw that this was not a fire like other fires save for the importance of its location: it was not confined to the citadel. Pockets of angry orange light were flickering all over the city. Creusa murmured a prayer to the household gods. But it was too late for prayers. Even as her tongue formed the sounds, she could see the gods had abandoned Troy. Across the city, the temples were burning.

She ran along the short dark corridor which took her towards the front of the house through the courtyard room she loved with its high and ornately patterned walls. No one was here, even the slaves had gone. She tripped over her sheath, then twisted her left fist into the fabric to shorten it. She called again for her son – could Aeneas have taken him to collect her father-in-law? Was that where

he had gone? – and opened their large wooden door onto the street. Now she could see her neighbours running along the road – none carrying water as she had imagined Aeneas would be, but only bags with whatever they had managed to gather up before they fled, or nothing at all – she could not suppress a cry. There were screams and shouting coming from every direction. The smoke was sinking into the streets, as if the city was now too ruined, too shamed to meet her eyes.

She stood in the doorway, unsure what to do. She should stay in the house, of course, or her husband might not be able to find her when he returned. Many years ago, he had promised that if the city ever fell, he would take her and their son and his father, and any other Trojan survivors, and sail away to found a new city. She had put her fingers on his lips, to stop the words from coming out. Even saying such things could invite a mischievous god to make them come to pass. His beard tickled her hands, but she did not laugh. And nor did he: it's my duty, he had said. Priam commands me. Someone must take on the mantle of founding a new Troy, if the worst should happen. She again tried to crush the flurry of thoughts that he would not return, that he was already dead, that the city would be razed before dawn, and that her home – like so many others – would not be here for anyone to return to.

But how could this have happened? She pressed her head against the wooden door, its black metal studs warm against her skin. She looked down at herself and saw oily black dust had already settled in the creases of her shift. What she could see happening across the city was not possible, because Troy had won the war. The Greeks had

finally fled, after a decade of attrition on the plains outside the city. They had arrived with their tall ships all those years ago and had achieved what, exactly? The battles had been waged nearer the city, then further away; advancing right up to the beached vessels, then closing back towards Troy. There had been single combat and all-out war. There had been sickness and famine on both sides. Great champions had fallen and cowards had sneaked away with their lives. But Troy, her city, had stood victorious in the end.

Was it three days ago, four? She could no longer be completely sure of time. But she had no doubt of the facts. She had watched the fleet sail away herself, climbing to the acropolis to see it with her own eyes. Like everyone else in the city she had heard the rumours several days earlier that the Greek army was packing up. Certainly they had withdrawn to their camp. Aeneas and his fellow men – she would never think of them as warriors, for that was their role outside the city, not within it – had debated the merits of a raiding party, hoping to discover what was going on as much as to cause mayhem. But they had held themselves back within the city walls, watching patiently to see what might happen next. And after another day or two with no spears thrown nor arrows fired, people began to hope. Perhaps another plague was ravaging the Greek camp. It had happened before, a few moons ago, and the Trojans had cheered, making thankful offerings to every god. The Greeks were being punished for their impiety, for their senseless refusal to accept that Troy would not fall, could not fall to mortal men. Not to men like these, these arrogant Greeks with their tall ships and their bronze armour, glinting in the sun because not one of them could

tolerate the notion that he should labour in obscurity, unseen and unadmired.

Like everyone else, Creusa had prayed for plague. She had not thought there was anything better to pray for. But then another day passed and the ships began to move, the masts quivering as the men rowed themselves out of the bay and into the deep waters of the ocean. And still the Trojans stayed quiet, unable to believe their eyes. The camp had been an eyesore to the west of their city, behind the mouth of the River Scamander, for so long that it was peculiar to see the shore without it, like a gangrenous limb finally amputated. Less horrifying than what had been, but still unsettling. And a day later, even the last and slowest of the ships was gone, groaning under the weight of the men and their ill-earned treasure, ravaged from every small town in Phrygia, from everywhere with fewer men and lower walls than Troy itself. They rowed themselves into the wind, then unfurled their sails and floated away.

Creusa and Aeneas stood on the city walls, watching the white froth churning up on the shore, long after the ships had disappeared. They held one another as she whispered the questions he could not answer: why have they left? Will they return? Are we safe now?

*

A loud, distant thud jerked Creusa back to the present. She could not now go up to the acropolis to look for Aeneas. Even from her house, she could see that the citadel roof had collapsed in a rush of smoke. Any man who had been underneath it would be dead. She tried not to think

of Euryleon darting past his father's legs, trying to help quench an insatiable fire. But Aeneas would not have taken their only son into danger. He must have gone to collect Anchises, to lead the old man to safety. But would he return for Creusa or expect her to find him in the streets?

She knew Aeneas' heart better than she knew her own. He had set off to find his father before the fire had reached its fullest extent: Anchises lived closer to the acropolis, where the flames were burning most fiercely. Aeneas would have known the journey to his father's house would be difficult. He would have anticipated returning, but now he would see that it was impossible. He would be making his way to the city gates and trusting her to do the same. She would find him on the plains outside; he would head towards what had recently been the Greek camp. She paused on the threshold for a moment, wondering what she should take with her. But the shouting of men was coming closer and she did not recognize the dialect. The Greeks were in her city and there was no time to search for valuables, or even a cloak. She looked across the smoke-filled streets, and began to run.

*

Creusa had been caught up in the festival atmosphere that spread through the city the previous day: for the first time in ten years, Troy's gates were thrown open. The last time she had walked out onto the Scamandrian plains which surrounded the city, she had been little more than a child, twelve years old. Her parents had told her that the Greeks were pirates and mercenaries, sailing the glittering seas to find easy pickings. They would not stay long in Phrygia,

everyone said. Why would they? No one believed their pretext: that they had come to claim back some woman who had run off with one of Priam's boys. The idea was laughable. Countless ships, as many as a thousand, sailing across oceans to besiege one city for the sake of a woman? Even when Creusa saw her – saw Helen with her long golden hair arranged over her red dress, matched by the gold embroidery which decorated every hem and the ropes of gold she wore around her neck and her wrists – even then she did not believe an army would have sailed all this way to take her home. The Greeks took to the seas for the same reasons as anyone else: to fill their strongboxes with plunder and their households with slaves. And this time, when they sailed to Troy, they had over-reached. In their ignorance, they had not known that the city was not merely wealthy but properly defended. Typical Greeks, Creusa's parents had said: to Hellenes, all non-Greeks were alike, all were barbarians. It had not occurred to them that Troy was a city surpassing Mycenae, Sparta, Ithaca and everywhere they themselves called home.

Troy would not open her gates to the Greeks. Creusa had watched her father's brow darken when he spoke to her mother about what Priam had decided to do. The city would fight, and they would not give back the woman, or her gold or her dresses. The Greeks were opportunists, he said. They would be gone before the first winter storms battered their ships. Troy was a city of fabled good fortune: King Priam with his fifty sons and fifty daughters, his limitless wealth, his high walls and his loyal allies. The Greeks could not hear of such a city without wishing to destroy it. It was in their nature. And so the Trojans knew

this was why they had come, with the retrieval of Helen as their pretence. The Spartan king – Trojan wives muttered as they gathered by the water to launder their clothes – had probably sent Helen away with Paris deliberately, to give him and his fellow-Greeks the excuse they needed to set sail.

Whatever their reasons, when the Greeks had first made camp outside Creusa's home, she had been a child. And the next time she walked outside, she held the hand of her own son, who'd had a whole city for his nursery, but had never run across the plains outside. Even Aeneas, battle-wearied after years of fighting, had a lightness to him when the gates creaked open. He was still wearing his sword, of course, but he had left his spear at home. Scouts had reported that no soldiers had been left behind. The coast was empty of men and boats. Only a sacrificial offering remained, a huge wooden thing, they said. Impossible to know who the Greeks had dedicated it to, or why. Poseidon, for a safe voyage home, Creusa suggested to her husband, as their little boy tore off across the muddied ground. The grass would grow again, she told Euryleon when they first walked outside. Thinking of her own childhood, she had promised too much. She had not thought of all those studded feet trampling, all those chariot wheels churning, all that blood draining.

Aeneas nodded, and she caught sight of their son's face in his, just for a moment, beneath the thick dark brows. Yes, Poseidon was surely the divine recipient of their offering. Or perhaps it was Athene, who had protected the Greeks for so long, or Hera, who loathed the Trojans