The Mother of Heroes

My timbers creak as the salt air finds its way between my ribs. Carrion crows sharpen their razor beaks on my flesh but find no sustenance there. I was shaped from the great prows and deck planks and rudders of their ships and pinned together in three short days by the gods themselves, moulded for a single purpose: to end the war. Those gods gave me a hundred sea-soaked horse hides for protection against flaming arrows hurled from the highest battlements, but the skins have long since dried and cracked. They now lie in brittle broken pieces at my hooves, and most have turned back into the dust from which they came. But still my wooden bones stand ten long decades after I was first given as a gift to this great citadel, and then in turn the city was given back to me as reward for all my labours.

Now, though, everyone has gone and I alone stand watchful guard over this place of empty ruin. The salt-winds that blow in across the plain from the wine-dark sea still stir the blood-stained ashes of Troy. Yet I stand here, a silent sentinel in the agora, waiting for my children to return. Those same winds have
worked with the suns of a hundred harsh summers to bleach my bones and I am no longer what I was, but still I stand.

That night a century ago, through the mighty gates of Troy, a hundred ropes drawn by a thousand men dragged me home. My hoof-wheels turned and groaned with the weight of my burden, an expectant mother near her time.

Like any mother, I could feel my children stir within my belly, but I could also hear them speak of me while they thronged my womb. They wondered if my limbs would be strong enough to bear them forth. They worried that my great hard-timbered frame could not protect them from the light of sight. They struggled to hold their tongues and their peace until my time had come. Such innocents as children are, concerning themselves with matters only their mother must contend with.

My children were born in the dark, full-made, well-grieved and helmeted, sword-handed. They came into this world by night and in silence. My midwife was stealth, herself. It was a painless birth, and I watched these brothers spread out through the city’s streets at first pad-footed and in the shadows of that Trojan moon. And then the blood began to flow. Throats were slit silent and bellies empty-slashed with bronze. One by one, ten by ten, a hundred by a hundred the Trojans awoke to the sting of a metallic death. The heavy gates through which I had been drawn into the agora had been closed hard fast at my
back. Now, the binding ropes were cut, the bolts drawn back and the great portal was opening again, pushed in by the weight of an army hungering for victory. The others brought fire to light the way and torch the timbers of the city. Those mighty walls that had been built by the gods, and which had defied every onslaught from without, would be brought down from within by the stolen gift of Prometheus. High on my vantage point, I stood on my rolling beams, proud as I watched my children take the city for me, their mother. And although I could feel the flickering heat from the flames all about me, I was never harmed. My children would never place their own mother in danger.

With dawn came the soft caress of her rosy fingers, and with the ever-spreading light from the East the work of my children was all too plain to see. The gutters ran thick black with Trojan blood, the hacked limbs of men lay still and lifeless, and the wailing of the women violated in the night filled the air like a stench. The houses were still burning, sending great belches of smoke up to the gods like unanswered prayers. The glittering riches of a now impoverished people were already being allocated and loaded on to every ship. And the young were being taken away in chains.

One young man, a Trojan by his dress, slipped past me. He bore an old man clinging upon his back and led a small child by his side. I watched as he lurked before peering around every corner seeking a safe path of escape. When my children were no longer in the agora, he made his way across the empty square
towards the open gate. As he passed, he spat upon my hoof and looked up to curse me. I thought to call out to my young, but the look in the man’s eyes told me he was nothing now without his home and letting him live might only ensure his telling of my glory.

Now, after another century has slipped through my grasp, when he is long dead and all have surely forgotten that he ever lived, I still stand, whether he told of me or not. There may be vines growing up and through me now, and birds may nest in my salted wooden loins where once I bore my young, but I am still here.

A hundred years more and I still look out through wooden eyes across the broken rooftops and over shattered walls to search the sea for my children who have been gone so very long. But I am no longer alone. Amongst the rubble of the city, new men in rags now find shelter. They herd their sheep about my feet, and I hear them talk about the wind. They build their fires, scavenging around the agora for kindling. Piece by piece, they take of me what the years have forced me to release.

One child looks up and asks his mother if I can talk. She shakes her head and tells him that, whatever kind of creature I was, I am now long dead. She is wrong. I will still be here when she is gone, and that child is stooped and grey because the memory of me will last forever. My children might be heroes whose
rage and speed and cunning are sung of in epics, but if they are heroes then I am the mother of heroes and greater still. I was the one who gave birth to victory, I mothered their peace, made great their defeat. My glory will ever outlast my rotting bones.

I feel the shepherds pull and tear at my limbs as winter approaches and I watch their flames rise higher. They roast their lamb in the night and sing while my bones burn and keep them warm. These godless people trailing after their flocks climb upon my back to steal my mane, to take my tail, to pull at my throat. Each night is the same and slowly I am losing any sense of myself. But my identity does not depend on any physical existence. I am so much more than beams and planks of weathered wood sawn and pinned together. I will live forever in the minds of men. In their imaginations and in the darkness of their dreams, I will stand for eternity in this city that my children captured for me and me alone.

I am the daughter of Poseidon and his brine is my blood. But one day as the rest of me crumbles slowly back into this earth, my blood will once again be his. The rain will wash my ashes across the plain to the Scamander and the river will carry me home to the sea. There, I will dwell forever drawing life from the words spoken of me by every tongue.
“She was the wooden war horse of Troy,” they will say, “the great mare fashioned by the gods. Her story will become history when it is spoken of by men yet unborn. A silence given voice and willed as an eternal song for those to come.”