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Opening extract from

The Night Raid

Written by

Caroline Lawrence

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To the staff and pupils of Summer Fields Oxford,
with thanks for your inspiration and input!

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THE NIGHT RAID

CAROLINE LAWRENCE



This story is taken from the ninth book of Virgil's Aeneid, *an epic poem about the wanderings and battles of the hero Aeneas after the fall of Troy. It was written in Latin shortly before the birth of Christ.*



– EURYALUS –

I was young when they killed me. Just a teenager.

They say death on the battlefield wins you true glory.

They say when someone stabs you it doesn't hurt.

They say it feels like a fist has punched you. That you hardly notice it, in the heat of the battle.

They are wrong.

You DO notice when someone plunges a sword into your body.

It doesn't feel like a fist has punched you. It feels like a heavy, iron, double-edged sword has stabbed you. The blade pierces your skin, parts your muscles, scrapes your bones and pops your organs.

It burns cold. Freezes hot. Then it makes you want to puke.

It does not feel glorious.

It hurts like Hades.

Which is where I am bound.



– NISUS –

1

DESTRUCTION

I was ten the first time I saw Rye.

It was on the worst night of my life.

I was on the run.

Rye was a small dark shape at the side of the road. Across the street a house was on fire. I had slowed to a jog because the road went downhill there. Pools of blood made the paving stones slippery.

Rye was crouched beside the body of a man in the gutter.

A clatter of tiles came from the other side of the street as the roof of the burning house collapsed. Flames burst out between the stone

pillars of the porch. The bright yellow light showed me the scene. A boy of about five or six, with black curls and pale skin. He was trying to take the sword from the dead man's hand.

I was running for my life. So I passed him by. I had seen enough death in one hour to last a lifetime. What did one more matter?

But then the moon came out from behind a cloud and I heard the goddess whisper in my head. "Help him," she said.

I stopped, closed my eyes and prayed to her. "If you want me to help him then you must help me, Diana."

When I turned to look back, I saw the whole town on fire. Black buildings within orange flames. Sparks flying. And I could hear the screams of men, women and children.

Every part of my body wanted to run, but I made myself go back towards the little boy. I crouched down on the other side of the body.

I pretended to be calm. "Hello," I said. "I'm Nisus. What's your name?"

"Euryalus," he said. "But they call me Rye." He was still trying to pull the fingers off the handle of the sword. But the man's death grip would not let it go.

I looked at the dead man. He had straight eyebrows and curly black hair. I looked at the boy. He had curly black hair, too. And straight black eyebrows, drawn together in a scowl. His bottom lip stuck out. At first I thought his face was smudged with mulberry jam. Then I saw it was blood.

"Is this your father?" I said.

He nodded. "They killed him. So I am going to kill them. He showed me how."

"You can't kill them, Rye," I said.

"He showed me how," the little boy repeated. "He told me I had to protect Mama."

The smoke made my eyes blink. How could his father have said such a thing?

"You can't kill them," I said. "They're big and you are small."

For the first time he lifted his gaze and looked at me. His eyes brimmed with tears. They also blazed with black anger.

"Rye," I said, "there are too many of them. And they will be here any minute."

"They killed Papa." He stood up, planted his feet apart, clenched his fists. "I hate them!" he spat.

"I know," I said. "I hate them, too. And one day we will take revenge. But now is not that time." I stood up and held out my hand. "Come with me," I said. "I promise I'll teach you how to fight. And one day we will kill them."

He looked up at me, his eyes wet and blazing at the same time.

"Promise?" he said.

"I promise. I swear on the moon goddess Diana, my family's protector." I pointed up. "See? She has come out from behind that little cloud. She will guide us to safety. Hurry!"

He shook his head, his lower lip still pushed out. "I have to stay and protect Mama."

I stared at him. "Your mother is still alive?"

He nodded.

"Where?" I asked.

He took my hand and tugged. His little fingers were slick with his father's blood.

Rye pulled me between two slender marble pillars into an open doorway. I found myself in a courtyard open to the sky. Moonlight sucked the colour from the world. Everything was black, grey or silver. In the smoky darkness between pillars of a walkway, I saw a big square loom for weaving cloth.

"There she is." Rye pointed to the loom. I saw a pair of silk slippers in the gap between the bottom of the cloth and the floor.

"You must come now," I warned her. "The warriors are coming."

The slippers did not move and no sound came from behind the loom.

A whisper of dread prickled my backbone.

I stepped forward and pushed the loom aside. A woman crouched in the shadow of a pillar.

"No!" she cried. She put up her arms to protect her head. "Don't hurt me!"

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "I'm here to help you."

"Where's Rye?" she whimpered. "What have you done to my little boy?"

"He's right here," I said. "He's safe. We must go. Before they come back."

"No!" She shook her head. "My husband. He told me to hide."

"Your husband is dead," I said. "He can't help you. But I can. Come with me. With Diana's help I'll protect you. You and your little boy."

The moon went behind a small cloud, as if she had slipped behind a curtain.

"No!" Rye's mother sobbed. She shook her head. "You're only a boy yourself. How can you help us?"

Fear gave my mouth a sour taste, but I lifted my face to the moon goddess. "Diana," I prayed. "Please give us a sign."

I hoped the goddess would appear from the cloud to give my words power. But she did something much better. She fired a flaming arrow. We all saw it streak up into the star-spattered dome of the sky.

"Look, Mama!" Rye pointed. "A shooting star!"

At last his mother came out of the shadows. She looked up. We all watched the orange light rise up to the top of the night sky, then sink down to the east. Towards Mount Ida.

It left a trail of fire that glowed.

"Like a rainbow in the night," Rye said. He wiped his cheek. It left a dark streak of blood on his sleeve.

"It's more than a star," his mother whispered. "It's a sign."

I nodded.

She clutched my hand. I could feel the hard patches of skin the weaving had left on her fingers. Just like my mother's hands. My dead mother's hands. I pushed the thought aside. No time for grief now.

"Come," I said. "We'll go the way Diana's arrow pointed. Towards Ida."

Rye's mother nodded and squeezed my hand. "The moon goddess must like you," she said. Then she held out her free hand to the boy. "Come, baby. Let's go with …"

She looked at me.

"Nisus," I said. "My name is Nisus."

"I'm not a baby!" Rye cried. "And I want to hold Nisus's hand."

I almost smiled. "I have two hands," I said. "One for each of you."

So I held his hand in my right and hers in my left and I led them out of the dim courtyard towards the flame-lit street.

As we passed out of the double doors, Rye's mother let go of my hand and threw her arms around one of the pillars. She kissed it and pressed her cheek to the cool marble. "Oh, my dear house," she cried. "How I loved you."

She did not see the body of her husband lying in the gutter. I was glad of it. I took her hand

again and pulled her towards the road. Towards the Ida Gate.

Behind us I could hear the shouts of men. They were coming – the Greeks who had butchered my family and burned my city.

Hand in hand in hand, the three of us hurried down the bloody street. Two children and a woman. Running for our lives from the burning city – Troy.