

Between the Temple and the Baths – Anneka Freeman

The street in front of the baths was always swirling with people. The baths were the beating heart of the town, and the crowds flowed through them like blood. There were slaves, running errands for their masters, and masters sweeping through with all the self-importance they imagined was right. And there were simple people, neither slave owners nor masters, who wanted only a bath and a moment to meet with friends and business partners.

The only spot of stillness was beside the gate of the temple precinct, in the L-shaped corner where the wall of the temple precinct met the wall of the baths. A man stood there, stock still, his eyes far away. He was well-dressed in the Roman style, but a mass of red curls proclaimed that his ancestors — or at least some of his ancestors — had probably always come from this part of the empire.

“Magnius!” called a voice from the throng, but the man seemed not to hear it. “Magnius!” They called again, and a man limped out the crowds. The limping man wore fine clothes as well, but his face and hair were dark. He was wrapped in a heavy cloak, as if the chill and damp in the air bit at him more than the other bath-goers. “My friend, how are you?”

The red-haired Magnius started and blinked. He saw the cloaked man for the first time. “Lucius,” he said, and gave a forced smile. “How are you?”

Lucius shrugged and shivered under his cloak. “Suffering as usual. The old wound plagues me in this weather. I miss the heat of Caurium on days like this.” Lucius peered closely at Magnius. “Are you... entirely well, my friend?”

Magnius gave one slight nod, but his smile had faltered and vanished.

“I hear you are to be congratulated,” Lucius said. “It is no easy thing to make a fortune in times like these, but I gather your investments are prospering.”

Magnius said nothing to that.

Lucius cleared his throat, confused at his friend’s silence. “Well... I've an appointment to keep,”

he said, angling his head towards the entrance to the baths. "I'll see you around, Magnius?"

"Yes," Magnius replied. "Vale, Lucius."

"Vale, Magnius." Lucius turned and left Magnius standing in the quiet space between the temple and the baths.

Nonetheless, the conversation pushed Magnius out of his stillness. He shook himself and turned, stepping through the gateway of the temple precinct and into the courtyard there. The altar stood just ahead of him, and beyond that, he could see the Corinthian front of the temple itself, with the glowering face above its pediment. According to his Roman father, it was in the shape of a Gorgon's head, and it would turn you to stone if you entered the temple without the goddess' blessing and permission. Only priests of Sulis Minerva were allowed inside.

But Magnius' mother had been Celtic, and along with her wild red hair she had given Magnius some of her stories. She said the face was the ancient guardian of Sul's springs, and his staring eyes could see any evil in your soul.

Magnius rather thought the poor fellow looked a bit confused, not sure whether to be a female gorgon or a male guardian, whether to turn you to stone or see into your soul. Magnius felt the same way, sometimes. He was half Roman and half Celtic, a citizen of the empire, but what kind of citizen?

Someone bumped into Magnius as they passed, recalling him to the present. The temple precinct was only barely quieter than the street outside, full of people moving this way and that, coming out of the Building of Luna, speaking with the man who was writing out curses on lead strips, and bustling around the steaming doorway off to the left that led to the sacred spring.

Again, Magnius moved away from the crowds and found a spot of stillness in the corner, near a side altar erected in honour of some priest from years past. He watched the crowds ebbing around the courtyard and didn't notice the man approaching him until he was within arm's reach.

"You seem troubled, young man."

Magnius jumped a little and looked — for a moment, his wide blue eyes and wild red curls

made him look like the face above the temple — Gorgon or guardian, Roman or Celtic.

The man who had come up beside him was old— very old, by his white hair, deeply lined face, and bent back. But his smile was kind and the lining of his fine toga declared him to be a priest here, and a very senior one. There was only one man that this could be. “Gaius Calpurnius Receptus.”

The priest smiled, his eyes all but vanishing into wrinkles. “You know my name,” he said, apparently extremely pleased by that. But who didn't know Gaius Calpurnius Receptus? He'd been the priest of Sulis Minerva for a decade before Magnius was even born. “But I do not know yours, my son.”

“Magnius Jucundus Rufus,” Magnius replied automatically.

“Oh! You are the son of Magnius Jucundus Rostratus, you are Magnius the Red!”

Magnius sighed. As the elder Magnius had always been known by his nose, so the younger Magnius was known by his bright red hair. Rostratus meant “beaked” in Latin, and rufus meant “red-haired.” He patted the unruly mass of it self-consciously, but the priest was still talking.

“You are Magnius the very fortunate, I hear,” he said.

Magnius looked down, hands dropping to his sides. Aquae Sulis was not such a big town, after all. Everyone knew everyone, and rumours traveled fast. Of course Gaius Calpurnius would know of his successes. He stared at the slabs of stone under his feet and tried to think how to explain how unlucky he really was.

The priest was quick to read his silence. “Or perhaps not so fortunate. What troubles you?”

Magnius looked up, looking much older than he really was. He looked haunted. “I think... I fear that I am cursed.”

Gaius Calpurnius looked suddenly very grave. “That is a serious matter. Do you know who has cursed you?”

Magnius shook his head.

The priest considered this for a moment. A few feet away, a lesser official was attempting to get

his attention, but Gaius Calpurnius waved him away. “It is all over the town that you have recently come into a great deal of money. Money may come with enemies, if it is acquired unscrupulously.”

“I have done nothing wrong!” Magnius declared. “If I knew who had cursed me, I would give them the money, gladly. It is no treasure to me. But no one has confronted me. Even my competitors have nothing but congratulations.”

Gaius Calpurnius folded his hands in front of him and rocked back on his heels, as he always did when considering a serious matter. “Curses are not always what they seem, and the gods have minds of their own. They are capable of laying a curse without being asked to do so, and frequently, those curses are the worst. And the most difficult to clear.”

Magnius looked up, horrified. “You think the gods themselves have cursed me? Why? What have I done?”

“I do not know if that is the case. And I do not know what you have done. There is only one who knows that.” The priest smiled sadly and waved a hand to the left, towards the door of the sacred spring, the home of the goddess herself.

Magnius' eyes followed the gesture and he swallowed nervously. The thought that Sulis Minerva herself might be angry with him made his stomach squirm. How could he escape the anger of a goddess? He felt very small and afraid.

Gaius Calpurnius laid his hand on Magnius' shoulder. “There is never harm in asking for forgiveness,” he said. “The goddess is wise, and never unjust.”

Magnius nodded.

“I will leave you to think,” the priest said, and then turned away, finally going over to the official who'd been waiting for him so impatiently. There was to be a sacrifice shortly, and both the priest and the haruspex would be needed. People were already beginning to crowd around the altar, and they would have to be cleared away so the procession could take place.

While the officials began to urge people to move back, to make space, Magnius edged towards

the door to the sacred spring. He barely heard the orders that were called, barely noticed the people around him. He was focused on the doorway, the steam curling out of it and vanishing into the cool air. What if the goddess really was angry? What if she struck him down the moment he entered the space? What if she dragged him into the spring, never to be seen again?

He closed his eyes as he stepped across the threshold, and felt the warm, steamy atmosphere of the place wash over him.

Nothing happened. No lightning, no divine hands dragging him down, no terrible retribution. He opened his eyes.

The interior of the sacred spring building was dark and full of quiet, echoing drips. It seemed that all the people had gone out to watch the sacrifice, because the room was empty. His eyes gradually adjusted to the dim light from the candles and from a few narrow windows high above. The water was dark, its surface roiling with bubbles. Steam coiled up through the air to the roof of the building, where it collected and dripped back down in a perpetual, gentle rain. It did not feel like retribution in here. It felt like a summer day after a thunderstorm; humid but still now, and warm.

In the spring building stood a statue of the goddess: a beautiful statue so lifelike he could almost see her breathing. The colour painted onto her marble cheeks was softly pink, and her grey eyes seemed to glitter in the darkness. She seemed to be walking on the water, and she stared over his head with cool and distant dignity. Her crested helmet gleamed in the dim light, and the spear in her hand looked sharp, but her gaze was not threatening. She looked ready to listen to his request.

Movement caught his eye. The sacred spring connected the temple complex to the bath complex, and as he looked, a girl appeared there in the viewing area from the baths. She couldn't have been more than thirteen years old, and she wore the simple garb of a slave. Her eyes and hair were dark, but he couldn't quite tell if she was Roman or Celtic or something else entirely. She leaned out of the viewing window and squeezed her eyes shut a moment before tossing something into the water. A curse or an offering, he did not know.

Then she opened her eyes and saw him there. Her eyes widened as she recognized that he wore the clothes of a free man, and a rich one. She jerked back, like she was about to run.

“Don't go!” Magnius said, holding out a hand. She froze on the spot, not daring to disobey a direct order. “Sorry,” he said, and her eyes widened. “Forgive me, I did not mean to interrupt your prayers.”

The slave blinked in surprise. “Nor I yours,” she said. Her accent was strange. She looked uncomfortable. “It is not often that a master apologizes to a slave,” she noted, carefully, like she thought he might shout at her.

He smiled thinly. “I suppose it isn't. But my mother was a slave.”

Her eyes widened and she leaned out of the sill again, staring across the water at him with sudden eagerness. “Were you?”

Magnius laughed. “No, never. My father freed her before he married her. I was born free.”

“That would be quite a thing, to have your children be free,” the slave girl whispered, but her words echoed loudly in the space.

A sudden frown quirked at the corners of his mouth, pulling them down. “Yes. It would, I think. My mother thought so.” He looked down and swallowed thickly. Sudden tears filled his eyes and he swiped at his cheeks.

“Are you alright, master?” asked the slave girl.

Magnius nodded. Then he shook his head suddenly. “I had a daughter,” he said, quietly. “She was a slave, but she was mine. I freed her, adopted her, but... She is dead now. She was only eighteen months old.”

The slave girl considered this, just as gravely as the priest outside had considered the news that Magnius believed himself to be cursed. “I am sorry.”

“I feel that it is my fault somehow,” Magnius confessed. “I fear that I have angered the goddess and this is her punishment.”

“Have you done anything to upset her? I knew a boy who shot down an owl to prove he could and the goddess cursed him with stuttering,” the girl said seriously.

Magnius shook his head. “I don't know-- I am a pious man, and I have had good fortune in all other things,” he said, still rubbing tears from his eyes. “My investments have prospered, I was able to afford new slaves—”

“Including your daughter's mother?”

Magnius looked up at the girl and nodded mutely.

The girl looked uncomfortable again. “And... you freed her daughter.”

“I did.”

“But... you didn't free her first?” she asked, hesitantly.

Magnius blinked. He hadn't thought of that. He frowned. “She hasn't... she never asked.”

The slave girl gave him a pitying look. “Master, a slave can never ask.”

Magnius stared down at the bubbling water. His mother would have scolded him roundly for being so thoughtless. His lovely Mercatilla, and his beautiful daughter, who he'd named after her. She'd said that to have a freed child was the greatest gift she had ever been given. But perhaps that was because she'd never been given enough.

Yes, he would free her. Then they could be married, if she wished it. They would leave this place together, find a new home, and start again. Surely that would lift the curse?

“Set that right,” the slave girl advised him. “And I wager your luck will turn.” She leaned back from the sill of the viewing window. “You might want to leave a sacrifice, though, just in case.”

Magnius would give anything, everything, to lift the curse and be happy again, with his Mercatilla. But what could he give that would be grand enough?

He thought of bags of coins lying safe in his house. More than he needed. More than he could ever use. In that moment, he decided. He would take only enough to support himself and to give Mercatilla every comfort. Then he would return the rest to the goddess.

But he could hardly haul all his bags of coins in here, to the temple precinct. He'd never make it that far without being robbed. Then he remembered something his mother had always said. That anything buried found its way to Sulis eventually. He had a house, didn't he? And a box and bags and a shovel. He would take what he needed and bury the rest. Sulis Minerva would know that it was for her and leave him in peace.

He glanced at the face of the goddess. She seemed to be smiling. He looked to the slave girl, and saw that she was smiling the exact same smile: cool and reasonable and forgiving.

“Thank you,” he said, and he didn't know which one he was thanking. Or maybe they were one in the same.