

Temple Trespassers – Alyssa Hollingsworth

I run across the courtyard, darting in and out of the shadows. If Priest Calpurnius discovers me sneaking out of the sleeping chambers—again—he’ll probably have me expelled from the baths for life. Never mind that he’s my grandfather.

The heat of the baths mixes with the humid air, and I clutch my *bullā* tighter to my neck, hoping it will keep me from any evil spirits on the prowl tonight. They might know that what I want is impossible, and forbidden.

I want to hear Sulis Minerva speak.

It was my older sister, Junia, who put the idea in my head. She used to sit by the sacred spring for hours, watching the bubbles rise to the surface, her arms looped around her knees. “I’m waiting for the goddess to speak,” she always said, when she’d been there well long enough for our parents to get impatient.

“You’re saying a goddess would speak to *you*?” I asked, incredulous.

She held her hand out over the water—though she didn’t touch it, of course—and the mist curled around her fingers. “She’s always speaking, if you know how to listen.”

“What do you expect her to tell you?”

“Do you ever wonder how you can make a big change, one big enough they write stories about you?” She’d grinned. “I want the goddess to tell me the way.”

I’d called her crazy then. But now I had my own questions for the goddess. And if I heard her speak, I wouldn’t mind asking Junia’s questions, too. Junia wasn’t talking much herself anymore. Not since the accident.

The problem was I didn’t like going to the sacred pool. It was so hot, and the frothing water made my stomach uneasy. As for my dreams—well, if they aren’t about

food, they're normally things I'd rather not dwell on.

I peer around the corner. The dream hall is divided into little cells, each individual room with hardly more than a mat, and no doors whatsoever. Grandfather Gaius is on the watch tonight. I see him in one of the chairs outside the rooms, head bowed and arms folded across his belly, and I wonder if he's praying to the goddess or if he's fallen asleep, perhaps to do some dreaming of his own.

I creep closer. If I hide by one of the walls, I should be able to tell when someone has a dream. They'll hear Sulis Minerva or another god in their sleep, and maybe, just maybe, if I listen hard enough I'll figure out how to get the goddess to talk to me.

It's too silent tonight and strange after all the noise during the day. Even when you aren't inside, you can hear the talk across the whole bath complex, all those voices echoing off the vaulted ceiling, and the laughter and whatnot.

I glance aside toward the temple. It's almost always quiet there, like a clearing in the forest: Silence in the middle of sound. I can see the faintest red glow now, from the flames they say burn at Sulis Minerva's feet. Flames they say never fall to ash.

I've never been in. I'm not crazy enough to try. Only the highest priests go there, like Grandfather Gaius. Me and the ordinary people—we have to wait and hope the goddess comes to our dreams. But lately I haven't been dreaming so well.

I rub my left wrist, feeling the scar. On the very steps of her hall, I fell, and broke it so bad you could see all the bone. My parents paid high fees for my healing, and I was dunked in the waters again and again, the hot sour smell making it hard to breathe.

But now my wrist is mended—more or less. My dad says that there's nothing to make a goddess listen like coins.

Someone stirs in one of the rooms. Cries out. Grandfather Gaius jumps, blinking, then goes quickly to the room. I lean forward all the way until I have to brace myself with my hands on the warm tile, listening for their conversation. But it's so quiet—

An owl hoots, right in my ear. I start and turn. There's one of those white-faced owls, just standing on the pavement behind me, and it's enormous. I've never seen one so close. It's about as big as my mother's cat. Its eyes are black as jet. I rub my *bulla* nervously between my thumb and forefinger.

I catch a drift of the conversation—something about people in masks—and I turn my back on the owls. Owls are great and all, but I want to know the goddess. I want to know why it is she healed me.

Why it is she hasn't healed Junia.

Then there's a soft cough at my shoulder.

I glance back, and all about fall on my face as I whirl around. The owl's gone, and it's *Junia*. She's on her knees, crouched, her eyes wide enough to take in the whole courtyard, so black that they catch all the colour. There's a weird glow in her, like a flush or a fever, but instead of red under her skin she's gold. Or maybe that's just because we're by a yellow building.

“W-where'd you come from?” I stammer. “What are you *doing*?”

“Listening.” She tilts her head, and if it weren't for her dark hair going out all directions, and if she weren't my sister, I'd swear she looks just like the owl.

“You can't be out here.” I loosen the grip on my *bulla* one finger at a time, trying to slow my racing heart. She's my older sister, but since the accident it seems like I'm the one always having to take care of her. Our parents will have my head if they discover

she's missing. "You're going to get us in trouble!"

"Worse trouble is afoot tonight," she whispers, and flashes a grin marble-white. "Come!"

She springs to her feet, but sways a moment. I'm tempted to call Grandfather Gaius, but then he'd know I'd been sneaking around. Maybe I can convince her to go home—

But she is gone before I can do anything, running straight across the courtyard. I glance back toward the dream rooms, but before I've made up my mind I'm off after her. I don't notice till my sandals slap the pavement that she's barefoot. She doesn't make a sound. But she's been like that since the accident: quiet.

Then I realize she's going right toward the temple.

"Junia!" I hiss. I can feel the Gorgon on the pediment, even though I don't look at him—feel his eyes on me, trying to make me like him, trying to turn me to stone.

Junia rocks to a stop, but she doesn't look at me. She looks up, at him.

"Gods!" I grab her, to make her turn away before it's too late. For all she's not stone yet, she's strong. Stronger than I'd realised. I try to pull her but she stays straight and still. She keeps staring up at him, and I swear I can see the scowling face reflected in her wide eyes.

"What an unhappy creature," she says, and turns her attention to something lower down. The temple entrance. She walks around me, dragging me toward it. "Come."

"We can't go in there!" I try to hold her back, but I might as well be a breeze for all it slows her down. "You know we can't go in!"

"The new haruspex arrives tomorrow, yes?"

“How did you know that?” Grandfather Gaius told me, but only a few hours ago.

“I hear things.” She starts up the steps.

I let her go, hesitating at the foot of the stairs. I’m looking but not looking at the blotch on the step halfway up, to my right. It’s still stained, and even in the night, even with only the moon, I can see the shadow of the place Junia fell.

The place I pushed her.

It was an accident. She’d been standing just here, where I am now, and I’d been running toward her. My foot had caught on the bottom step and I knocked into her and she went down and the crack of her head on the stone—

Well, that’s mostly what I dream about now.

“Come, Marcus!” she whispers from the top, beckoning me.

This is the most she’s talked since the fall. The most she’s done anything, really. Normally whenever she tries to speak, the wrong words come, or when she tries to walk she tips over. She’s not normal. Everyone, including me, is beginning to think she never will be.

But she’s better, right now. And I don’t want her to stop being better, so I go after her.

I’ve just reached the top step when she pulls me into a column shadow. That’s when I hear the voices.

“Tell me the plan again?” says one, very softly.

“The new haruspex is a pretender. He does not adhere to tradition, but brings new ideas from Rome. It’s your job to see that he never enters the city, much less the temple.”

There’s a quiet hoot. I look up and see that owl again—perched in a dark corner

of the ceiling, above the columns. Its golden eyes flash at me in the dark.

“And the payment?” The man’s accent is clumsy. I think he may be from somewhere in the west.

“I hid it. Let’s get you in your garb, then you will receive the first half. The rest will be paid after the haruspex is no more.”

Two shadows come out of the temple. I recognize the priest when he steps into the moonlight—a pinched-face man I’ve never liked. The other man is definitely from the wilderness to the west. That explains why he entered the sacred temple without fear, even though he is not a priest.

I press back against the column as they pass, and Junia does the same. The priest goes on without looking, but the wild man glances our way. His eyes are bright blue and sharp like a bird’s. I remember the stories of his people, of barbaric sacrifices and fierce warriors. But then he moves on, his steps silent on the stone.

“We have to tell Grandfather Gaius,” I whisper to Junia. But when I turn, she isn’t there.

She’s slipping through the doorway and into the temple.

“No!” I hiss, going after her. I stop on the threshold and glance over my shoulder. The priest and the man are in the courtyard, and if they turn they will see me. I can’t stay in the open. I can’t let her go in alone. I can’t go in myself. Junia’s simple now—the goddess may pardon her for the trespass—but I have all my wits, and it is beyond forbidden for me to enter.

I look inside the sacred temple, trembling with indecision. I can see the red glow of the fire and Junia’s silhouette as she stops before it. Surely Sulis Minerva will know I

only want to grab her and get out. Surely she'll know I act on Junia's behalf.

I grip my *bullā*, gulp a deep breath, turn my gaze to the dark floor, and step in.

It's warmer in here, probably because of the fire. It smells like coal and soot. I can hardly breathe, I'm so scared. I don't know if I dare speak.

Just as I get close enough to grab Junia, her hand snakes out and catches me by the wrist. "*Look.*"

I do before I mean to, and I see her. I see the goddess.

I will probably die for laying eyes on her, but in that moment I don't care. Her face is a polished gold that flickers in the firelight. It's a beautiful face, more beautiful than anything I have ever seen, and so lifelike I feel that any moment her nostrils will flare and she'll breathe. My chest hurts to look on her, and maybe it's because I'm going to die, but it hurts in a good way.

"Why did she heal me?" I ask, not exactly to the statue, not exactly to Junia. "Why me and not you?"

Junia turns to me, her black eyes turned gold and red in the flame. Her face is spooky, lit like the statue's, all angles and shadows. She says, "There is more than one way to heal and more than one way to break. Your guilt will lead to resentment, and you will come to hate what you now regret. Love will restore what you've lost."

It makes hardly any sense, and maybe that's because of her cracked head. But in that moment I'm half convinced it's not my sister speaking at all.

It's Sulis Minerva.

I'm too busy gaping to stop her when she bends and begins to feel along the darkness for something.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“The money is here,” she says. “We find it, we hide it, and then he can’t pay for the haruspex to be murdered.”

I nod and begin to search with her. Who knows how long it will take the priest and the man to return. I don’t want to be caught in here.

I’ve almost made it around the whole room when my hand brushes something against the wall. Leather. A leather bag. “I found it!” I whisper, continuing to pat around in the dark. No. Not just one leather bag—there’s a whole pile of them.

“You’re completely mad,” I tell Junia as she puts the last of the bags in the new hiding place. It’s under the floor of Grandfather Gaius’s house. “We could buy so much with this! Or, at the very least, we could’ve given it to the goddess.”

She starts moving tiles over the hole. “No. Sulis Minerva is wisdom and healing. She wouldn’t want blood money, and she wouldn’t want us to use it.”

I’m still not totally used to Junia making some sort of sense.

“Time is the greatest wound.” Junia slides the last tile into place. “Coins aren’t just money—they’re messages. They tell our history, where we’ve come from and who rules us. It’s a story, it’s a map. Let the future uncover it.”

“A treasure map.” I move a stool over the place it’s hidden, so Grandfather Gaius won’t notice the loose stones. “The treasure *is* the map.”

She grins. “The treasure is our story.”

The sun rises outside. Horse hooves and conversation drift down from the street, and Junia goes outside to look. I suppress a yawn as I follow.

The new haruspex and his party of travellers are arriving at the baths. The haruspex is a kind looking man, with a strange red hat. Grandfather Gaius has stepped out to greet him, looking surprised.

“You’re earlier than I expected,” Grandfather Gaius says.

“Word came on the road that we were in danger.” The haruspex holds up his hands. “But the goddess protected me. I am without a scratch.”

I look at Junia, and she gives me a wink. Did she finally hear the goddess, then? Is that how she knew to stop the murder?

Perhaps the goddess doesn’t speak only in water or in dreams.

Perhaps sometimes she speaks loudest through the people we love.