

The Curse of Sulis

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Mistress Drusilla rushed into Felix's tiny cubicle like a chariot pulled by wild horses.

'There you are, boy. The Master is ready to leave for the Bath House!'

Felix yanked his boot straps around his ankles and shrugged on his cloak. 'Ready.'

Mistress Drusilla stood in front of him, wiping her hands on her apron. 'How many times do I have to tell you? Good slaves never keep their Masters waiting.' She knotted the dangling cloak strings tightly around his neck. 'I know it's only your first week as a capsarius, but if you don't buck up your ideas, you'll be back on the streets.'

Felix's heart sank. For the first time in his life he was sleeping under a warm roof and eating a proper meal every day. The last thing he wanted was to be out on the streets again, starving hungry and begging for coins. 'I promise I'll do better, Mistress. It's just there's so much to learn.'

'Well, see you learn it quickly!'

I'd learn faster if Brutus wasn't such a bully, thought Felix. He hid a smile. After last night, he hoped things would be better today.

Mistress Drusilla stood back. 'Now, have you got the Master's scented oils and strigils?'

Felix looked down at his empty hands.

Mistress Drusilla tutted and hurried him into the atrium. 'Quickly,' she hissed, pointing at the shelf where the master's leather satchel lay. Felix ran towards it and hoisted the bag onto his shoulder. He bent to pick up a second satchel from the shelf below.

'You won't need Brutus's bag. The Master's son is sick.'

Felix's hand froze. 'Sick? What's wrong with him?'

Mistress Drusilla spread her hands wide. ‘The medicus doesn’t know. Says he’s never seen such oozing, pus-filled boils before. They’re all over him.’

Felix frowned. Brutus was fine yesterday. Did this mean...? No, it couldn’t be. He jogged back to Mistress Drusilla, the Master’s satchel tapping against his hip. She looked around, checking to see if anyone was near, then leant towards him and whispered, ‘Poor Brutus. Writhing around on his bed, he is.’

A coil of worry curled around Felix’s stomach.

‘If you ask me,’ the old woman continued. ‘I’d say he’s been cursed. The Master is beside himself... doesn’t think Brutus will survive the week.’

Felix gasped. ‘I’m sorry.’

Mistress Drusilla straightened. ‘Nothing for you to be sorry about. You didn’t curse him, did you? Only the Goddess, Sulis Minerva, can do that.’ She pushed Felix outside into the cold sunshine. ‘Now hurry up and make sure you mind your duties.’

Felix stumbled towards a tall man dressed in a white toga and long cloak, standing by the entrance gate. Deep lines of worry pulled at the Master’s eyes; he looked as if he hadn’t slept all night. Mistress Drusilla was right, only the Goddess could curse, but Felix was sure Sulis Minerva wouldn’t have done anything to Brutus if he hadn’t begged her.

‘Sorry for keeping you waiting, Master.’ Felix bowed his head.

‘Never mind, lad. You’re here now. I suppose Mistress Drusilla has told you my Brutus is sick?’

Felix nodded miserably. ‘I hope he gets better soon.’

‘That is kind of you, Felix. I know Brutus has been cruel since you joined my house.’ The Master ran a hand through his unkempt hair. ‘Give him time. He took the death of his mother very hard. I had hoped you two would be friends... I still hope.’ His voice wavered. It sounded like he was trying not to cry.

Felix's shoulders slumped. No-one had told him Brutus's mother had died. He thought wretchedly about the metal tablet onto which he'd scratched his angry note to Sulis Minerva yesterday.

Dear Goddess, please will you teach Brutus a lesson for saying I look like the hippopotamus on the back of a denarii. He is wrong about my teeth. They are not that big.
Yours worshipfully, Felix.

Felix scuffed the earth with his boot. He should've stood up to Brutus, not snuck out to the sacred spring after everyone had gone to bed. He should never have hidden behind the pillar and thrown the curse tablet into the water. Felix shook his head. He hadn't expected the Goddess to listen to him. After all, he hadn't paid the curse maker in the market to inscribe a lead tablet. He'd just used a bit of old tin he'd found in Mistress Drusilla's kitchen. He'd only wanted to stop Brutus being mean, not make him sick.

The Master rubbed his bristly chin. 'Come along, a quick trip to the Baths for a wash and a shave, and after that... we'll visit the Temple of Sulis Minerva and make an offering. Only she can help Brutus now.'

'Yes, Master.' Felix bowed his head again. An offering to the Goddess wouldn't make Brutus better, not when she still had the curse tablet. There was only one thing to do. He'd have to go back to the sacred spring tonight and fish the curse from the water. His throat tightened, making it difficult to breathe. Did he dare? If he stole from her, Sulis Minerva might curse him with oozing, pus-filled boils too.

The marble floor was cold against Felix's knees as he crawled between a pair of jewelled curtains. He crouched beside a thick pillar, hearing the midnight bell strike in the square outside. So far so good. Just like last night, he'd slipped past the Temple Guards and was back inside the sacred spring chamber. Now all he had to do was slip past Sulis Minerva. His

heartbeats pounded in his ears. The second he stepped around the pillar, the all-seeing Goddess was sure to know.

He stuck his head out and peered through the warm steamy mist. In the centre of the room, sunk into the floor, was a large round pool. Firelight danced on the water, a reflection from the lit torches that blazed around the spring like Temple Guards. Felix shivered. He wanted to be home in bed. But the guilt of Brutus writhing in agony spurred him on. He got to his feet and slid around the pillar.

Bubbles popped and rippled the surface of the pool as sacred water welled up from the underworld. He'd have to find his curse amongst the hundreds of coins and tablets people had offered to Sulis Minerva in return for favours. That could take all night, so the sooner he started the better. He squared his shoulders and whispered: 'Forgive me, Goddess.'

He marched forward, his eyes focused on the water. He blinked rapidly. Where were all the coins? Perching beside the pool, his eyes darted across the bottom. It had been wiped clean. 'How can this be?' he muttered, fighting the panic rising in his chest. Had Sulis Minerva taken them? Was she teaching him a lesson?

'Oi! Not so fast,' a deep voice echoed around the chamber. Felix jumped. Out of the corner of his eye, a bright light pierced the darkness. With a sense of dread, he turned to look.

Felix breathed out. The chamber was empty. He peered through the mist. Overflow water from the spring ran down a shallow gully and out through a small bricked arch. Light flared through the arch and a voice echoed: 'Come on. I haven't got all night.'

Felix gaped. Was the voice talking to him?

'Oh no,' he groaned. *Sulis Minerva is calling me down to the underworld.* He glanced over his shoulder at the jewelled curtains. He could make a run for it. But where could he hide from a Goddess?

With trembling hands, he took off his cloak and boots, and folded them neatly into a pile. 'I'm coming, Goddess,' he whispered. Slowly, he lowered his legs over the side of the pool, wincing as his feet plunged into the hot cauldron of the sacred spring. There was no going back now.

His breath came in little gasps as he splashed along the gully towards the tunnel's entrance. Crouching down, he tried not to think how deep the water might be in the underworld and ducked under the arch.

It was dark in the tunnel. His hands brushed against a stone wall and his ears filled with the sound of gushing water. He stood upright. The water was cooler and deeper, it rushed around his legs and dragged at the skirt of his tunic. Felix wiped the spray from his face, relieved he could stand easily. This wasn't a tunnel to the underworld. It was the aqueduct draining dirty water from the Bath House to the river.

The light flared again. Felix shrunk against the wall. Ten paces away, two men the size of bulls, hunched together over a flaming torch.

'Give me one of those money bags. If you slip under the water, I don't want to end up with nothing,' said the deep voice Felix heard before.

'You won't be empty handed, Frankus. You know where the treasure we've already looted from the Goddess is buried. Now stop your whinging and let's bury this lot with the rest.'

Felix's eyes widened. That's why the sacred spring was empty. These men had stolen all the money... and his curse tablet too. He had to get it back. But how? They were three times the size of him.

A soft hand touched Felix's shoulder. His heart exploded and he covered his mouth to stop crying out. Next to him stood a smiling girl in a white tunic, her eyes shimmered gold in the firelight. 'Sorry I startled you,' she whispered.

‘Who are you?’ mouthed Felix, his eyes on stalks. ‘What are you doing down here?’

Her smile widened. ‘I’m Mina, from the Sisters of Sulis. I’ve come to help you.’

‘Help me?’ he repeated, blankly.

She nodded towards the two men, still arguing ahead of them. ‘You want to rescue the treasure, don’t you?’

Felix wasn’t sure he’d put it like that. But he did want his curse tablet.

‘Come on,’ whispered Mina. ‘They’ve set off again.’ She held his hand and pulled him gently through the streaming water.

Felix’s brain buzzed with questions. Who was Mina? He’d never heard of the Sisters of Sulis. How did she know about the robbers? And, the loudest question of all: what on earth were they going to do when they caught up with them?

One step behind the robber’s backs, Mina let go of his hand and whispered in his ear. ‘I’ll distract them. You grab the treasure.’

Felix wanted to protest, but Mina stepped forward and tapped the men’s backs.

‘Excuse me. I bring a message from Sulis Minerva.’

‘Huh?’ The men whirled around. The light from their torch swept across Mina’s midnight-black hair, coiled round her head like a serpent.

The men glared down their noses; they didn’t look at all distracted. They had shaved heads and wore sheepskin jackets; in their hands they each clutched a bulging money bag.

‘Well, well. What have we here, Frankus? A *little* boy and a *little* girl. Shall we eat them for our supper?’ The man grinned, revealing a gummy gap between a pair of bulging front teeth. Felix thought he looked just like the hippo stamped on the side of a denarius... and the reason he was in all this trouble.

Felix pushed Mina aside. ‘Hand over the bags, you bullies, or we’ll...we’ll...’

‘Or you’ll what? Run to the Goddess? Pah! She won’t help you. She can’t even stop us taking all her money.’

Mina swept her right arm in front of her and formed a fist with her thumb stuck out. ‘Maybe you should tell her that. Sulis Minerva wants a word with you... down below!’ Mina flicked her thumb downwards.

The money bags splashed into the water and the men stumbled backwards. ‘What magic is this?’ yelled Frankus. ‘Something’s tugging my legs. Make it stop!’

Water splashed over Felix’s face as the pair crashed into the stream and were swept under. The light from their torch extinguished, plunging everything into darkness.

‘Quick, Felix!’ called Mina. ‘Grab the treasure before it’s swept away.’

Felix dived into the water. He didn’t care about the money, but he had to find the curse tablet. Warm, dirty water washed into his mouth, making him gag. He clamped his lips shut and skimmed his hands along the stone floor of the aqueduct. How would he ever find the bags in the dark?

His lungs burned for air. He’d have to surface. But he couldn’t leave Brutus on his sick bed, not when it was his fault. Felix kicked harder. Finally, his fingers brushed against something round and lumpy. Praying it was the treasure, he wrapped his hands around it and pushed his feet onto the floor. As his head broke the surface, water streamed from his nose and ears. He opened his eyes to darkness. ‘Mina?’ he coughed.

‘You did it! You found the treasure!’ Mina’s hands clapped his shoulder. ‘Come on, I can just make out the firelight from the Sacred Spring. I’ll guide you back.’

Untying the drawstrings, Felix and Mina each tipped a money bag upside down. A sparkling cascade of bronze and silver coins splashed into the water around their feet.

‘I wonder where the rest of the treasure is buried?’ said Felix. ‘You know, the money they stole before tonight.’

Mina shrugged. ‘Who knows? At least they won’t be able to spend it where they’ve gone. Anyway, I’ve a feeling whoever finds the treasure will look after it and keep it safe.’

Felix gave her a sideways glance. How could she know that? And how did she know where the robbers were? They weren’t really in the underworld with Sulis Minerva, she just said that to distract them... didn’t she?

‘Mina, what happened to them? Did they slip and get carried down the aqueduct to the river?’

Mina smiled mysteriously. ‘Maybe.’

Felix sighed and stared into the water. He couldn’t think about the robbers now. He still had work to do. And if he didn’t get home before sunrise, Mistress Drusilla would be angry again. His eyes stung and he felt tired, but he couldn’t leave until he found his curse.

Mina held out her right hand. ‘Brutus is wrong. You don’t look like a hippo.’

Felix’s head snapped up. ‘What did you say?’

‘This is for you.’ In her palm lay a small rectangular piece of tin, with tiny writing scratched on the surface. ‘A gift from Sulis Minerva, in return for your bravery.’

Felix stared at his curse tablet, a slow smile spreading over his face. He lifted it from Mina’s hand, feeling like a huge weight was lifting from his chest. Brutus would get better now; he was sure of it. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered.

‘You’re welcome.’ Mina’s voice echoed softly around the misty chamber. Felix looked up, but the Sacred Spring was empty. He spun around. ‘Mina? Where are you? Come back!’

He heard a giggle. ‘We’ll meet again. When the Sisters of Sulis have need of you.’

Felix climbed out of the water and took a last look at the bubbling spring. He smiled. Whoever the Sisters of Sulis were and wherever Mina was, he hoped she'd need him for another adventure soon. He tucked the tablet safely into his tunic pocket. Before going to bed, he'd burn the curse in Mistress Drusilla's kitchen fire. He didn't need it anymore.

Felix tiptoed from the kitchen into the atrium. In the yard outside, he heard a cockerel crow the rising sun. He closed his eyes and yawned, keen to get to bed. He opened them again and froze. The Master was standing in front of him.

'You're up early, Felix.'

'Yes, Master. I... um, I couldn't sleep.'

'Me neither, I was worried about Brutus.' The Master ruffled Felix's damp hair. 'It seems I wasn't the only one.'

'How is Brutus, sir?' Felix crossed his fingers behind his back.

A broad smile lit the Master's face. 'Much better! Sulis Minerva has answered my prayers.'

Felix smiled. He knew the real reason Brutus was well, but he wasn't going to tell the Master.

'It's a miracle,' the Master continued. 'An hour after midnight, Brutus stopped writhing in pain. His skin is as smooth and clear as marble.'

'I am glad, sir. I look forward to seeing him when he's out of bed.'

'There's no need to wait,' said the Master. 'Come with me now. He's been asking for you. Says he wants to say sorry for something.'

And I must say sorry to him, thought Felix as he followed the Master into Brutus's bedroom.

-The End-