

The Bounty of Sulis Minerva
By Madeleine Woosnam

Chapter One

'Will they really have to serve *us*?' Freyja skipped with excitement as we rounded the corner of the atrium.

'Don't you remember Saturnalia last year?'

'No. I was still in the village last year. It was before Mam ...' Freyja sniffed and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her tunic.

My little sister was barely eight years old and already a slave to the most spoiled girl in Aquae Sulis. If Mam hadn't died Freyja would still be at home in our village by the river. I shivered

'What is it, Ginny?' Freyja stopped and looked at me. 'Did you have the dream again?'

I nodded and forced myself to smile at her.

'Saturnalia.' I sighed. Just the feel of the word in my mouth tasted good, like warm spiced milk. 'Saturnalia. Feast of the god Saturn.'

'Slave!' Octavia's voice echoed from the other side of the villa.

Freyja clung to me.

'Has she been beating you?'

Freyja's thin little body shook. I hugged her to me briefly. 'Go. Don't give her an excuse to do it again.'

'Ginny ...'

'Only two more days to go. Think, Freyja, seven days of as much food as you can eat, spiced milk and wine, presents ... and no running around after Octavia.'

Freyja's eyes lit up. 'Two more days?'

‘Two more days.’

She ran along the L-shaped atrium that bordered the *peristyle*, her bare feet slip-slapping on the cold stone floor. My heart squeezed.

I hadn’t told her about my plan to get us both out of here. About the money I’d been hoarding away, bronze radiates mainly and a few silver ones. Even one silver denarii. One hundred and ninety-three coins in all. The Goddess wouldn’t miss them, would she?

I pulled my cloak over my arms. ‘It’s freezing!’

It was going to be the coldest Saturnalia in memory, but I was determined it would be the last that Freyja and I spent in *Aquae Sulis*.

‘Bring my strigil, ear-scoop and oils, slave,’ called Octavia.

It was whispered that Octavia’s father, Marcus Aurelius, must have done something terrible to have been cursed with eight daughters. Especially as Octavia’s mother had died in childbirth. Probably took one look at Octavia and decided life wasn’t worth living. But, by Jupiter, her father spoiled her.

‘You!’ Octavia pointed to me. ‘I need you too.’

Technically I was Junia’s slave, but even Octavia’s sisters didn’t dare to cross her.

Outside the ice-cold air burnt into our lungs. Freyja and I trotted behind Octavia, along *Via Bella*, and into the Forum. We passed the Temple of *Sulis Minerva* and headed into the warmth and noise of a busy afternoon at the Baths.

‘Look! They’re playing knuckle-bones!’ Freyja pointed to a group of girls laughing and chatting together.

We slipped on wooden shoes, to protect our feet from the heated floor, and followed Octavia. She sweated her way through the *caldarium* while we took

care not to let her precious clothes out of our sight. Who knew who might take them if we did? The town was full of beggars and thieves and the pilgrims who visited all year long for the healing waters.

Octavia lay and snored like a wild boar on the warmed slabs of the *tepidarium*. I tipped some rosemary-scented oil onto her back and Freyja scraped her down with the strigil. Dirt slid off with the oil.

Octavia rolled over and raised her arms. Plucking Octavia's dark armpit hair had to be one of the worst jobs but Freyja didn't flinch. I fished in Octavia's ears with the ear-scoop and removed a blob of wax. The colour reminded me of our tallow candles in the village.

Two more days.

Octavia squealed like a pig as she got into the cold pool of the *frigidarium*. I wanted to push her silly head right under the freezing water. To make her feel the fear I felt when the waters closed over my head.

On the way out of the Baths we paused at the Sacred Spring. Octavia tossed a couple of bronze coins into the water and murmured a prayer to Sulis Minerva. The water bubbled and steamed. The Sacred Spring was connected to the Underworld.

'Ginny, you're shaking! What is it?'

'It's nothing, I'm fine.' But the waters swirled in front of my eyes. I hurried out after Octavia.

Chapter Two

'Io, Saturnalia, Freyja!' I handed her a warm poppy seed roll, baked by Junia in the kitchens that morning.

'Io, Saturnalia, Ginevra!'

We headed to the Forum, dressed in our borrowed finery; fur-lined cloaks and boots. Freyja's grey eyes sparkled like sun on a morning mist, and her copper hair crackled wildly round her head. My sister was beautiful.

'Let's go to the Temple.' She tugged on my arm. 'I want to see the sacrifice. I've never seen one before.'

'Alright, but you mustn't faint when you see the blood.'

'Hoc age! Hoc age!'

'I can hear the procession. Hurry up, Ginny!'

As we came into the Forum we saw the procession. At the head were Gaius Calpurnius Receptus, the high priest, and Marcus Aurelius, both dressed in purest white, their robes gleaming. Next came Lucius Marcius Memor, the ancient haruspex, leading the sacrificial cow. Its horns were painted gold and it had a holly wreath round its neck. It moored pitifully.

'Look, Ginny! The poor cow.'

'Favete linguis!' shouted the crier. 'Hold your tongues!'

'Shh!' said the crowd. Pipers began to play, softly at first. The priest touched the altar with one hand and prayed, his voice clear above the music. He prayed to Janus, Saturn and Sulis Minerva, goddess of the spring, and finally to Vesta.

The haruspex sprinkled cereals and scented salts over the cow.

'Why does he do that?' asked Freyja.

'He's preparing her for sacrifice.'

'Will it hurt her?'

'It'll be over so quick she won't feel a thing.' I hoped it was true.

The cow had gone quiet now. The priest took a sip of wine and then offered it round the crowd. The goblet was warm from where he'd held it tight. The wine tasted acidic, not like the sweetened spiced wine at the villa. It burned down my throat.

'Here, have some.' I handed it to Freyja.

Her wide eyes looked at me over the rim of the goblet. She gulped and coughed. 'Yuck!'

The priest poured the last of the wine between the cow's horns, traced a line with his fingers down the animal's back, and handed it over.

The pipes were louder now and the crowd pressed forward.

'Don't look.' I buried Freyja's head against my chest, wrapping my cloak around her. The haruspex moved in, ready to receive the cow's organs. The crowd was so quiet it was as though they were all breathing with one breath. And then there was a sigh.

'It's over,' I whispered, as blood flowed dark over the paving stones.

We didn't stay to hear what future the haruspex had seen in the cow's heart and liver.

Chapter Three

Later, when Freyja was asleep, I slipped out of the dormitory, through the atrium and into the street. A vast saturnalian supermoon glowed over Aquae Sulis like a sign from the gods. It cloaked the town in silver. Silent. Still. Even the watchmen had disappeared. Probably sleeping off all the wine. The paving stones glistened, slippery with frost.

I hugged my cloak round me. In spite of my three tunics, the cold cut right through to my skin. But it wasn't the cold that made me shake.

My leather shoes made no noise on the paving stones as I stole past the Temple towards the Baths. I let myself in through the side-door to the Sacred Spring.

'Sulis Minerva, save me!'

Four huge dark figures stood guard with their feet in the water.

But it was only the statues of the gods, ghostly in the moonlight, and casting shadows on the steaming pool. I wanted to cover their faces with my tunics so they wouldn't see what I was about to do.

I breathed in the stench of sulphur and waited for my heartbeat to slow. It was always worse just before. The sickening dread. I was doing this for Freyja, to give her a better life. So it was worth it, wasn't it?

I pushed a toe into the hot, hot water. My teeth chattered, loud enough to waken the dead in the Underworld.

'Forgive me, Sulis Minerva.' I forced myself in. 'Freyja,' I whispered, and the sound of her name gave me courage. But I couldn't last long. Fear began to blur my vision.

I wriggled my toes along the bottom of the pool till I felt coins, paterae, jugs and jewels. The water was too deep to reach in with my hands. I had to put my face under. And every time I did, I felt again the pull and suck of the river as it closed over my head all those years ago.

I took a deep breath. Plunged my head under and grabbed wildly for the coins, my eyes squeezed shut. Not enough. I dumped them on the side and went back.

'One, two, three ...,' I could do this. 'Four, five, six ...' Another breath. 'Seven, eight, nine, ten.' Down into the water until my fingers touched more coins. I had them. I scrunched my fist tight over them and pulled my head out, panting and gasping. They would have to be enough; I couldn't put my head under again.

I heaved myself out of the water and pushed my shaking limbs back into my clothes. The coins were mostly bronze but there was a gleam of silver too. And gemstones. Some of the rich ladies flung their jewels into the spring desperately trying to win favour with the Goddess. I didn't want their jewels. I tossed them back into the steaming waters and laid out the coins on my *stolla*.

'Sulis Minerva, be merciful, if not to me, then to my sister.'

'Ginevra!'

I jumped. 'Freyja!' It was as if I'd conjured her up by thinking about her. She stood by the door.

'What are you doing, Ginny?' I couldn't see her expression in the darkness. She struck a flint and lit a little olive-oil lamp.

'I ...'

Her eyes widened as she came towards me and saw the pile of coins.

'Ginny, are you ... are you *stealing* from the Goddess?'

'Not stealing, Freyja, just *borrowing*. I'll pay it back one day, I swear, once we're out of here. You can't go on working for that daughter of Pluto.'

'It's better than stealing. And where would we go?'

'West. Mam's family is out west, beyond the Roman lines. Britons. Celts. Like us.' I had her by the shoulder, her bones fragile in my hand. The lamp guttered. 'We wouldn't have to be slaves any more. Not with this money. And there's more.'

'Ssh! What was that?' Freyja jumped.

'I didn't hear anything.'

'Something moved.'

'It was probably just a rat. There's no one here.' I clasped her cold hands in my sweating ones. 'Please, Freyja, say you're with me.'

'I'm with you.'

I hugged her and my wet hair made damp marks on her cloak.

'You went into the water? The dreams ...?'

I nodded.

'That was so brave, Ginny. After what happened. But we have to give the money back to the Goddess. It's wrong to take what's hers.'

'Freyja, come on, you're freezing.' I wrapped up the coins in my *stolla*. 'Let's go back. We need to get in before the watchmen wake up. We can talk about it in the morning.'

Chapter Four

The villa was silent. We sat together on my bed.

'Look!' I pulled out more coins from under my mattress.

'Slaves! What in Jupiter's name are you doing?'

Octavia.

'Octavia. Mistress. We were just ...'

'Don't bother to lie. I followed you to the Baths. I know you've been stealing. I'll have you both beaten, branded and thrown out onto the streets.'

'No. Please. Not Freyja. It's nothing to do with Freyja.'

'We'll see what my father has to say about this. Follow me.'

Freyja slipped her hand into mine and squeezed it. But I'd put my sister in danger. We were never going to get away.

Octavia strode into her father's *cubiculum*. I heard his soft outbreath of surprise and the rise and fall of Octavia's voice. Marcus Aurelius came out, clutching a cloak around himself and a lamp in his hand.

'My office.' He waved at us to follow.

We stood, Octavia, Freyja and I, in a line in front of his desk. Freyja held herself tall and still while I trembled like a leaf in an autumn gale.

'It was me,' I said, 'I wanted to get Freyja away. Oct ...' I stopped and glanced at Octavia. Then I remembered. Saturnalia. When slaves may speak freely to their masters without fear of punishment.

'Octavia beats Freyja.' I pushed Freyja towards him and opened the back of her tunic. The red welts were livid against her pale skin.

Marcus Aurelius put his head in his hands.

Octavia turned away and said nothing.

'I'm sorry,' said Marcus Aurelius, 'this is my fault.' He looked up at me. 'And you've stolen from the Goddess and risked an eternity in Hades to rescue your sister.'

Not to mention the fear. *Mam standing screaming on the bank as the river carried me away from her.* I pushed the memory out of my mind.

'How many coins did you collect?'

'Two hundred and fifty-three.'

'And what are you planning to do with them?'

'We were going west ...' A tear ran down my cheek. We'd never get away now.

'It's a dangerous journey.' Marcus Aurelius frowned.

'You'd be caught and returned to me!' Octavia started towards Freyja.

'We no longer need them here,' said Marcus Aurelius. 'I've found another slave to take their place.'

He was going to throw us out?

'Octavia, *you* will be Junia's slave for the remainder of Saturnalia.'

'I will *not*, Pater ...' Octavia stamped her foot.

'Longer, if that's what it takes for you to learn your lesson. These girls have suffered enough. I'm setting them free.' He signed and handed over two scrolls as he spoke. 'They have enough money ...'

'No!' said Freyja. 'We're not taking money that belongs to Sulis Minerva. We'd be cursed. We have to give it back.'

'But, Freyja ...'

'I'd rather be beaten by Octavia every day than take what isn't mine.'

Marcus Aurelius flinched. 'I'll make sure it's returned to Sulis Minerva.' He got out a soft leather bag. 'Put it in here.'

I hesitated.

'Go on,' said Freyja. 'You can trust him.'

He leaned over the desk and rested his hand on Freyja's wild curls for a moment. 'Thank you,' he said.

I opened up my *stolla* and the coins clinked into the bag. Marcus Aurelius got up and went over to the corner of the room behind us. He pulled aside the floor covering and lifted a small stone out of the floor. He shone the lamp down into the cavity beneath. There were already seven leather bags, some worn with age.

'My insurance,' he said. 'The Roman Empire is dying and I won't let my family die with it. But I promise this bag will be returned to the Goddess. Now go. And may the gods be with you.' He pressed something cold into my palm and closed my fingers over it. 'My own money,' he whispered.

'May the gods be with you too,' said Freyja softly. She took my other hand. 'Come on, Ginny. It's almost dawn.'

We slipped out into the Forum again. I looked up. The Water God on the Temple pediment stared down at us.

'He looks sad,' said Freyja, 'and lonely.'

Maybe she was right but his eyes, that seemed to see into my soul, made me shiver.

'Let's go,' I said.

We bowed to the god, just in case, and headed for the city gates.

THE END