

## The Midnight Bell by Sarah Driver

It's a frosty winter's day and the Goddess is making the waters of the sacred spring bubble and steam, like broth in a cauldron. My breath is a white cloud of mist.

I dodge past Drusus, the oyster seller, and almost drop my bundle of firewood in my haste to escape the staring Gorgon—if I linger, his eyes could turn me to stone. Drusus yells at me but I just grin and walk faster, though I make sure not to run, because children have been known to slip and drown here.

Carefully, I tiptoe around the edge of the sea-beast mosaic and murmur a prayer to the mother for protection—no one steps on the beast if they want to avoid a curse. As I approach the healing baths, my ears are filled with laughter, shouts, curses and splashes. I step past the spits laden with roasting meat that drips juice onto the stones, the rich, smoky smell making my mouth water and my stomach grumble.

Suddenly a slave boy almost barrels into me. It's Felix. I slip on a splatter of garnet-red wine, but I stay upright.

'Salve, Alauna!' Felix calls.

'Watch it!' I tell him. 'I could've broken my neck!'

'Sorry. But listen. I've got to talk to you,' he whispers, grinning widely. 'You won't believe your ears!'

I won't believe him, more like. He's always telling strange tales from far-off lands. 'I'm working. Can't you see that?' I hurry on but Felix follows me. Ever since I stood up for him against that bully Belia, he won't leave me alone, even though I'm a paid worker and an official citizen, and he isn't.

I dump the firewood at the mouth of the furnace and start piling logs in, to keep the fire's breath alive.

Felix keeps plucking at the sleeve of my green tunic. When I've finished, I turn to face him. 'What're you bothering me for? We'll get shouted at, or *worse*, if you don't stop messing about. Haven't you got soot to scrape or pots to scrub?'

'You won't care about getting in trouble when you see what I've found,' he replies, golden-brown eyes shining in his copper-skinned face. 'You've *got* to see it.'

I could swear by my freckles that he's lying. But the bug of curiosity has bitten deep into my skin—I can feel its sharp teeth. I sigh. 'Alright. Where is it?'

'Meet me at midnight, in front of the temple steps.' Then, with a scrape of cloth against stone, he vanishes from sight.

Midnight? A chill runs through my blood. Mistress Enica is certain to sell me to the Emperor as a slave if she finds out I left the dormitory after dark. So I'll have to keep it a secret. I'm not sure I've ever had a secret before.

Only a thin silver moon guides me. I tiptoe from the sleeping quarters, throwing a black woollen cloak over my tunic and fastening it with a brooch. Tonight, it's easy to see why January is known as 'the doorway to the year', for the sky sweeps wide, dotted with so many bright stars that I feel as though I can see into forever. The lamps have been doused and an owl hoots from high in a tree above the temple courtyard. It's too dark to see the Gorgon, but I know he watches me. A shiver tingles along my spine and I rub my arms against the icy chill.

Why have I left my cosy furs on such a bitter night, just because that great

thump-foot Felix told me to? Some potent curse must have robbed me of my senses.

Suddenly an arm shoots out and grabs me. I swallow my scream when Felix's face appears, his teeth gleaming white in the moonlight.

'Think you're funny, do you?' I spit, snatching my arm away. 'You could lose me my job with the healers!'

'Just trust me for once.' Felix turns and hurries towards the network of healing baths. I follow, holding my hands out by my sides to keep from stumbling in the thick blanket of the dark. There's a faint smell of looming thunder, like the smoke when the coals are doused.

In the corner of the cold bathhouse, Felix taps a large slab of stone three times for luck and lifts it, to reveal a dark, dusty space. His mouth gapes. 'But it was right here! There must've been enough to buy a whole pound of silk, or a lion!'

'What are you talking about? You've wasted enough of my time. I'll be tired as death in the morning!'

Suddenly, the midnight bell strikes, clanging out over the stones. There's a rustle as a huge owl takes to the wing. It circles in the air three times, and zooms through the doorway. My head turns to follow its flight, but I cry out when I see a man standing before us, wearing a cloak of feathers. It's priest Memor, the haruspex, who reads the future from the innards of sacrificed animals!

The haruspex drops a handful of silver coins into the hole beneath the loose stone, except now it's not empty; it's almost overflowing with hundreds of coins. Some of them bear the regal profile of the Emperor, but others show animals, or ships, or are so worn their surfaces are blank. The haruspex fixes us with cold blue eyes—they're

worse than the Gorgon's. I can feel my body beginning to freeze on the spot.

Felix grabs my arm. I'm so afraid that my limbs have locked in place. 'What are you?' I ask the haruspex, my voice shaky.

'A great priest does not answer to the likes of children,' he breathes, voice bitter. 'Have you come to pay your dues, and save your fate?'

'What do you mean?' whispers Felix.

The haruspex begins to laugh; a deep, cracked rumble. 'Sometimes, animal sacrifices do not suffice to tell the future. They are not powerful enough to appease the gods.' His burning blue eyes switch between our faces. 'Sometimes, a child is required.'

'There's a pig of lead in the slave quarters, I can bring it to you...' Felix garbles desperately.

'Lead?' The haruspex's eyes dance with mirth. 'You think that lead will be enough to spare your lives?' He darts closer. We back away, until we're pressed against the cold stone wall. 'It's precious silver I want, boy. Coin or paterae, it matters not. But if you can find none, you will be given to the gods, in order to divine the futures of others.'

He swirls his cloak of feathers and rushes through the darkness, a shadowy blur. An owl hoots, high overhead. Memor's voice echoes into the darkness. *Bring me treasure before the morrow's midnight bell!* The pile of coins beneath the stone has gone.

'What are we going to do?' moans Felix. His face looks grey in the dim light.

'We've got to stop him,' I reply, teeth chattering, though whether it's from cold or fright I can't be sure.

'But how?'

'I don't know. I need some time to think.'

The sick have come to the baths seeking cures. I've spent the whole morning helping Mistress Enica care for the infirm and pox-ridden, even though I'm tired to the core of my bones.

The fires must be stoked, the Goddess must be appeased with offerings and petitioned with curses, and the sick need my help to ease their broken bodies into the bubbling waters. They may cast votive offerings in the shape of arms, legs, hearts, lungs, feet—whichever body part ails them—into the sacred spring, praying for cures. I scrub minerals into skin, rub ointments onto inflamed or blind eyes, and fasten amulets of jet around withered necks. Mistress Enica snaps her fingers for tinctures of eyebright, coltsfoot, nettle, hawthorn, marigold and birch. The ripples of the water dance with the sunlight, making shadows play on the brightly painted frescoes.

I've barely had time to breathe, yet all I can think about is the hoard of buried treasure, claimed in exchange for life. What happened to those who couldn't pay?

A bony finger nudges me. 'Daydreaming again, are we? I'd have thought you'd learned your lesson by now.' It's Belia, her blue eyes glaring. 'There are fresh herbs to grind and ginger draughts that want heating. You'll never make it past the order of apprentice if you don't stop dithering. At this rate, *I'll* be chief healer whilst *you're* still fetching firewood!' She sticks out her tongue.

When she turns to leave, I pull out my imaginary bow and send an arrow made of air sailing into her back.

What if we sacrificed *her* to the haruspex, and stole his treasure whilst he was

telling the future? The thought chills my blood. Even a bully doesn't deserve that fate—even the worst bully in the Empire. Silently, I curse Belia with a plague of a thousand warts. As for the haruspex, I'll have to think of something else. But what?

I'm rushing across the temple courtyard when the idea flies into my head. The power of the Gorgon must be greater at the chime of midnight—what if we were to hide the hoard before the eyes of the Gorgon, and he could turn the haruspex to stone?

There must only be minutes before the midnight bell. I hurry over the frost-slippery courtyard, trying to brush away my doubts, but they cling to me like sticky cobwebs. I hope Luna, the moon goddess, is smiling on me tonight.

Suddenly, Belia slips out of the shadows, a nasty sneer on her lips. 'Sneaking out after curfew? Mistress Enica will be most interested to learn of this.'

I pull my necklace from inside my clothes and rub my finger across the surface of the jet, to ward off Belia's evil eye. 'Go away. You don't know how much danger waits here.'

Belia snakes towards me, eyes glinting. 'The only danger will come from *me*, when I tell Mistresses Enica and Basilia, and the high priest, what you've been up to. So you'd better explain!'

I shake my head. 'I can't.'

'Then I'll tell, unless you give me your necklace. It will suit *me* far better.'

'But it was my mother's!' I cry.

'Too bad, little sneak.'

I sigh. 'Alright. But you'll have to follow me and see for yourself. Unless you're

scared?’

She frowns. ‘I’ll come. But any trouble and I’m going straight to the high priest.’

I nod. Quickly, we move down the silent corridor between the baths. Felix steps out of the shadows ahead. ‘Salve!’ he whispers in greeting.

Belia shrieks, but I clamp my hand over her mouth. ‘Shhh!’ I hiss.

When I take my hand away Belia glowers like she’s tasted something bitter. ‘I don’t associate with *slaves*.’ She reaches out and flicks the slave symbol, sewn into Felix’s sleeve.

I cross my arms. ‘As a healer, you should *associate* with whoever needs your help.’ Belia stays quiet, though I can feel her resentment.

We creep towards the cold bathhouse. But then a sudden movement flickers in the corner of my eye and I crouch behind a wall to watch, the others following me. The haruspex swishes through the night, wearing his feathered cloak. Why would he walk, when he could become an owl and fly? Then I glimpse what he’s carrying and my heart gives a lurch—it’s a wire cage, holding a white owl. Felix and I turn to stare at each other. ‘Did you see that?’ I breathe. What else has Memor lied about?

‘He’s making for the *temple*,’ whispers Felix.

‘Come on. We’ve got to follow him.’ I dart across the courtyard before Belia can complain.

We inch up the temple steps, shielding our faces from the fearsome gorgon. Fear tries to snatch my breath but I keep going.

‘You can’t go in there!’ Belia’s face is taut with fear.

I tiptoe into the temple.

Sulis Minerva is warmed by a single flame, and she's more beautiful than I could have imagined, but I avert my eyes from her as much as I can, to show respect. The haruspex's steps ring on the stone.

An elderly priest has fallen asleep whilst guarding the temple. The haruspex puts down his caged owl and reaches a hand into the priest's pocket. A silver coin gleams as he draws it out and drops it into his own money bag with a greedy smile.

Suddenly he turns and glares. Belia stands frozen, next to an ornate pillar. 'What have we here? A spy!' He strides forward and grabs her. She must have snuck past me!

'Let go of her!' I shout, running at the haruspex. I kick his shin and he yells, releasing Belia. 'Come on!' I tell her. We run from the temple and down the steps, Felix falling into step with us, Memor on our heels.

He corners us at the sacred spring.

'You lied!' I pant, breathless from running. 'You're not sacrificing children—you just made us believe that to scare us away from the treasure!'

'So, the child learns the power of illusion. Of course I lied.' His voice is as slippery as a snake. 'Members of my religious order have been stealing from sleepers for centuries, to appease the gods. But now I'm going to claim the ancient hoard for my own, and *you* can't stop me—I'll see to it that you're silenced.' He takes a step towards me.

'Leave Alauna alone!' says Belia. She shoves the haruspex. He stumbles back, and trips over the edge of the bubbling spring. He must have angered the Goddess, for the waters hiss and tumble, lapping hungrily at his thrashing arms. Before we can move, Memor is swept beneath the churning water.

'We should split the hoard, in case raiders come,' I tell the others. 'And because the silver was stolen, we should use it to help people—like poor travellers with no money to pay for cures.' We fill leather pouches with handfuls of coins, murmuring words of protection. By the time we finish my numb fingertips are caked in dried blood.

We fill three smaller pouches with silver and each take one to hide, leaving eight to bury before first light. These we seal with prayers and earth, beneath a storage building near the healers' dormitories. We stand in a circle and promise to guard our secret.

Belia grins at me and Felix shyly. 'I'm sorry, Felix. I was stupid. I don't care that you're a slave. And I'm sorry I bullied you, Alauna. Friends?'

'Friends,' says Felix.

'Friends!' I echo. 'You saved my life, Belia.' A shiver races through me. 'I'm frozen. Let's go back to bed.' High in a tree, an owl hoots.