

A TWINKL ORIGINAL

HISTORY HACKERS



ROMAN RESCUE

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Chapter 1

A Very Difficult Door

Small fingers gripped Tilda Hacker's elbow from behind, squeezing until painful shivers shot up to her shoulder. The eleven-year-old stopped climbing the bare staircase with a sigh, glancing down at the nervous face behind her.

Beneath the scruffy blonde haircut that might look more at home on a terrier, Charlie Hacker's blue eyes threw worried glances toward the narrow door looming at the top of the stairs. "What if the attic is haunted?"

"Don't be such a numpty!" Tilda peeled her younger

brother's slim fingers away from her arm and sent strands of sandy hair flying back across her shoulders with a flick. "Why would Dad send us to the attic if it was haunted?"

"Erm, because he doesn't believe in ghosts?" the ten-year-old reminded her. "And he's too busy to remember that I do!"

Tilda wrinkled her freckled nose as invisible specks of freshly-disturbed dust threatened to make her sneeze. It had been years since anyone had climbed the narrow staircase. She still felt pleased that her mother and father had trusted her to explore the attic and hunt for anything valuable. Perhaps they saw her potential to become a proper antiques dealer, just like them.

The Hackers had lived in the creaking rooms above their antique shop for almost three months now. According to letters that the postman still slipped through their door, the previous resident had been a man called Professor Howe. For reasons nobody knew, he'd left in a hurry over a year earlier, leaving behind all his possessions and stacks of unpaid bills.

Since buying the house at an auction, the family had spent every spare hour decluttering their new home,

room by room. Now, only the attic needed to be cleared.

Tilda leaned her slender frame against an uneven wall. "Don't you think we'd know by now if this house was haunted?"

"Ghosts don't exactly send you a friend request, Tils!" Charlie fired his older sister a look that seemed to challenge her IQ. "Besides, everyone knows York is England's most haunted city." The thought seemed to send a shiver dancing through Charlie's body. "Dad says there's a pub not far from us that once had an entire legion of Roman soldiers walk right through the cellar. They're probably up there right now, plotting how best to scare us both."

"Well, someone should tell them they needn't bother," Tilda said. "You seem to be doing a pretty good job of that all by yourself."

Tiring of Charlie's whimpering, she grabbed his wrist and restarted her ascent. "Come on – I'll go in first and check it out. I mean, how scary can a group of dead men in skirts be anyway?"



The unpolished brass door handle bit like ice against Tilda's palm. It refused to move.

"Good," cheered Charlie. "I'll tell Dad the lock is broken. He'll never fork out for the repair."

Refusing to give up so easily, Tilda grabbed the handle with both hands and heaved against it a second time. Determination drove her to keep trying, until beads of sweat were tickling her nose and her hand felt like it had just caught a champion tennis player's hardest serve.

Tilda nursed her hand and glared at the stubborn metalwork. This felt like stalemate.

"Told you it was broken," Charlie said triumphantly. "The only way you'll ever get through is by kicking the door down."

Tilda whirled around and snatched a handful of her brother's T-shirt. "Charlie Hacker, you're a genius!"

"Eh?"

"Gimme one of your trainers."

"What? No! They won't fit you."

“I’m not going to wear it, silly. I’m going to use it to get through the door.”

Too impatient to wait, Tilda crouched and grasped hold of her brother’s right shoe.

“Hey! Gerroff!”

“You can have it back in a minute. I just need something tough enough to tackle this handle.”

“It’s made of rubber and foam,” bleated Charlie. “You’re going to murder my trainer.”

“These things are designed to run up mountains. I’m sure it can take a couple of thumps and wallops.”

“You’ll be getting the thumps and wallops if you ruin that thing. Do you know how much these cost?”

Showing how little she cared, Tilda slammed the shoe against the door handle with all the strength she could muster. The rubber sole hit its mark with a determined thud, then bounced away faster than a ricocheting bullet, throwing Tilda against the solid stone wall.

“That thing’s not going to move, Tils,” Charlie insisted.

“You’re wasting your time.”

“I’m not letting a door handle get the better of me.”

Crouching like a resolute brawler, Tilda moved back towards the door. When the shoe struck the handle a second time, she cleverly used the rubber sole’s recoil as fuel for her third and fourth strikes. Each blow grew more and more forceful, until...

"It moved!" she gasped. "It’s working."

“Try telling my poor trainer that.”

Further blows weakened the handle and excitement bubbled in her stomach, until eventually the handle gave a satisfying click.

As the door sprang ajar, a lip of unexpected yellow light poked through a gap no wider than a mouse’s head. Slim fingers of dust coiled into the stairwell, closely followed by the scent of dried timber.

Tilda handed back her brother’s shoe, sniffing the air like a curious puppy. “Well, it certainly doesn’t smell haunted.”

More than anything, the room smelled as if nobody had paid it much attention since the house had been constructed.

Apparently happy that his shoe had survived unscathed, Charlie slipped it back onto his foot before the room's scent caught his attention too.

"It smells like Grandad's woodworking shed." Charlie's nose flared above a slight smile. "I love the smell of wood."

Tilda raised an eyebrow. "So, you're coming in then?"

Charlie's smile vanished as he shuffled awkwardly. "Yeah! Of course! I just need a minute to let my... erm... shoe recover. The stressed foam could give way at any time and snap my ankle!"

Tilda gave him a begrudging nod; in her younger brother's database of excuses, that was certainly one of his best.

When she gently eased the door open, reluctant hinges shrieked like startled seagulls. If she hadn't been so excited by the thought of what hidden treasures awaited her, Tilda might have wondered how long it

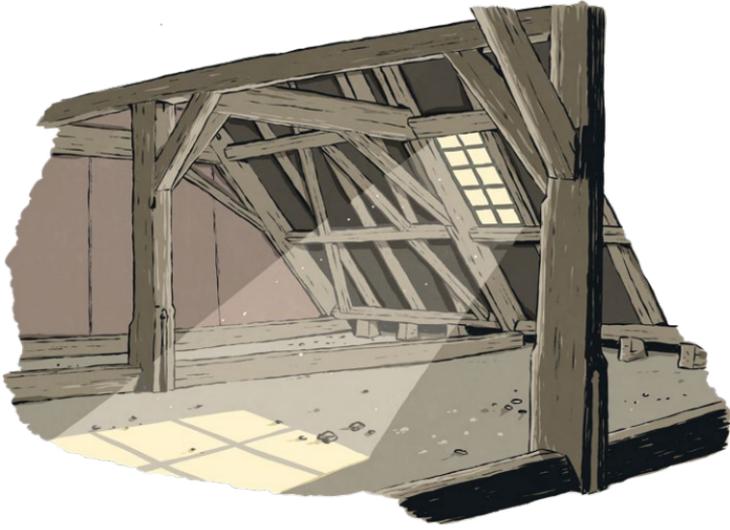
had been since the door had moved.

The combination of light and dust blinded her for a moment as her feet landed on bare floorboards. Warmth she hadn't expected wrapped itself around her like welcoming arms.

Once acclimatised to the room's unexpected brightness, Tilda could hardly believe the sight that greeted her.

The attic stretched across the entire length and width of the building; as Tilda's gaze bounced from one corner to the next, she was shocked to see that every centimetre of space was filled with exactly the same thing...

Nothing.



Chapter 2

Disappointed by Dust

Tilda felt robbed – as if one of the spectres Charlie so feared had crept from behind the bare rafters and made off with all of her hopes.

The original floorboards were almost hidden beneath a toe-deep dusty carpet. Freshly-disturbed streams of dust tumbled like flour from the roughly-sawn ceiling beams and the sloping bare walls. Disappointment prized a sigh from Tilda's lips as her shoulders drooped. The prospect of discovering the previous occupant's forgotten possessions and secrets had actually been quite exciting. Now, the thought of returning to her parents empty-handed seemed to land a large stone in the bottom of

her stomach.

“Any sign of ghosts?” Charlie called from the stairway behind her.

“Not unless they’re hiding beneath all this dirt.”

“Eh?” Charlie poked his head around the door. “Ah-chooo!” His sneeze sent a mini ash cloud rolling across the walls. “It’s empty!” he said.

He hustled past her, striding out into the middle of the room. Thick shafts of bright yellow sunshine flooded through large skylights.

“How can this room be empty?” Unlike Tilda, Charlie had hoped to find piles of junk and bric-a-brac that he could sell online. “The rest of the house was filled with clutter. This doesn’t make sense.”

Tilda shrugged as she moved to explore an empty space in the farthest corner of the attic. There were no signs that the room had ever been used. “Maybe the stairs were too steep for Professor Howe.”

“Are you kidding? Mum said Professor Howe was only in his early forties,” Charlie reminded her, “and he was

a treasure hunter, remember? I doubt he'd let a single set of stairs stand in his way."

"Well, maybe he just didn't like heights."

Charlie continued to explore the room, slapping ceiling beams, stamping on floorboards and tapping the walls.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh!" Charlie pressed an ear to the wall, drumming against the painted plaster. "I'm checking for hidden panels."

Groaning at the ten-year-old's stupidity, Tilda clasped her hands to her hips. "Charlie, why would anybo-

"Hah! Found something!"

Her brother seemed to be locked in a corner of the room, hunched like a beggar. His head was so still that it might have been glued to the wall itself. Only the index finger of his left hand moved, tapping gently.

"There's definitely something here."

"Yeah, it's called the wall!"

“No, no! Really!” With his other hand, Charlie beckoned his sister towards him. “There’s something behind this plasterboard.”

Slowed by doubt, Tilda moved to join her finger-tapping brother.

“It sounds hollow,” Charlie told her, shuffling to his left to make room. “Listen for yourself.”

Tilda gave Charlie a weary glance as she pushed her ear against the thinly-painted plaster.

“Listen!”

Charlie tapped a section of wall high above her head. It sounded flat and solid.

When Charlie tapped again, this time slightly lower, Tilda heard an identical sound.

“It’s just a normal wall, Charlie.”

“Keep listening.”

When Charlie tapped just centimetres from his sister’s head, the difference was immediate. Tilda jerked away

from the wall, as if she had just been electrocuted.

“You heard it, right?” asked Charlie. “It sounds hollow.”

Tilda nodded. Her brother was correct. That didn’t happen often!

“Maybe there’s something hidden behind it,” Charlie suggested. “We need to find out.”

“But it’s a solid wall,” Tilda reminded him. “We can’t just break through it.”

They both took a time-out, scratching their heads. Each studied the seemingly ordinary wall in front of them. Tilda scanned its length and breadth, searching for any flaws or joins that might indicate a doorway.

Taking a more hands-on approach, Charlie dropped to his knees and began tapping the floorboards nearest the wall.

When he looked back towards his sister, his excited smile told Tilda that the hunt for treasure was back on.

“We were looking in the wrong place. See!”

Charlie's small fingers hooked themselves around an almost invisible groove in the wood, prizing a one-metre-square section of floorboards up off the ground.

Tilda gasped, peering down into a thin shaft containing a narrow ladder. "A trapdoor!"

Oddly, the rungs of the wooden ladder were angled from the floor towards the wall. Anyone climbing down them would have to duck to avoid striking the top half of their body against hard plaster.

Charlie thrust his head and shoulders into the space, twisting so he could peer beneath and behind the wall.

"There's a small room behind the wall." His voice sounded muffled and distant. "And this one's not empty!"



Chapter 3

Trapdoor Treasure Trove

The day had just become way more interesting, sending Tilda's emotions on a rollercoaster ride from deep disappointment back to white-knuckle excitement.

Following her brother, Tilda was surprised to find that the underfloor shaft actually contained a second ladder. It was identical in size to the first but angled in the opposite direction, up towards the hidden room.

Even before she began climbing the second set of rungs, Tilda knew that the secret room would be nothing like the attic. She could smell the difference.

The air was thick with the scent of history. The antique shop below them had a similar smell: occasional wafts of slowly-decaying wood and fabrics, ancient fermenting polish and water-damaged paper gradually decomposing. Yet those smells were modern compared with the cocktail of odours that seemed to form a barrier between the secret room and the rest of the world. This was the scent of ancient artefacts, spewing fragrances that didn't belong in the twenty-first century.

"You have got to see this." Charlie had already scaled the second ladder and was now kneeling on the floor

of the secret room. "It's like some kind of vault."

Excitement sent giddy butterflies fluttering in Tilda's stomach. As she scabbled to join her brother, the sights that greeted her struck like a freeze-ray.

Charlie had been wrong. This wasn't a vault at all. This was more like a treasure chamber.

"Wow!"

"Told you," Charlie giggled. "This lot must be worth a fortune!"

The room itself was larger than Tilda had expected, perhaps even longer and wider than the family's garage. Yet it was so jam-packed with clutter that there was barely enough room for two people.

A small desk and chair had been pushed into one corner, piled high with ledgers and thick scrolls. Wooden trunks and chests, mostly studded with iron bands and rivets, were stacked in the remaining corners. Yet it was the room's walls that entranced Tilda. They were a kaleidoscope of treasures, reaching forward from centuries past to create the most incredible mural.

Her eyes could barely take it all in; beautiful portraits and landscape paintings hung in carved golden frames across one entire surface. Opposite, chainmail shirts, leather jerkins and bronze chest plates watched from the wall like soldiers waiting for battle. Another wall housed heaving shelves piled high with leather-bound books, wax-sealed folders wrapped in ribbon and stacks of what looked like parchment.

“It’s incredible.” Tilda’s heart was racing so hard that she thought it might tear a hole through her chest. Perhaps this was how Howard Carter felt when he crashed through the wall of Tutankhamun’s tomb.

Above her, Charlie plucked a musket from a ceiling hook and peered down its barrel.

“Do you think this thing is loaded?”

Tilda snatched it from him and clambered up into the room. The weapon felt heavy in her hand; the wooden stock had the shape and smoothness that only real fingers could forge.

“We shouldn’t touch any of these things,” Tilda said, carefully placing the musket back onto its hook. Beside it, a collection of sheathed swords and rifles

hung like macabre stalactites.

“But they’re ours now,” Charlie pointed out. “Mum and Dad bought the house and all its contents – and this looks a lot like contents to me.”

“But they don’t belong here,” Tilda warned him. “This kind of stuff should be in a museum. This is real history.”

“Do you think it was Professor Howe’s personal collection?”

“Dunno.” Tilda squeezed past her brother, heading for the desk and chair. For some reason, she couldn’t shake the feeling they were trespassing. “Maybe there’s something over here that can tell us more.”

Seated at the small desk, Tilda carefully began searching the stacks of papers and ledgers for some kind of clue. She tried not to think about the items she was touching. Most were handwritten in ink, scratched across hard paper that must have been made centuries earlier. Some of the ledgers appeared even older, written in languages she couldn’t even begin to decode. Yet one item stood out like a rose in a bed of dandelions: a journal so new it almost glowed.

When she opened it up and began to read the neatly-arranged handwriting, her jaw slowly dropped open.

“What is it?” Charlie leaned over his sister’s shoulder. “What does it say?”

Tilda shook her head; this certainly wasn’t what she had expected to find.

“Either he was writing some kind of fantasy novel, or Professor Howe had gone a bit bonkers.”

As she ventured deeper and deeper into the professor’s journal, the content became stranger and stranger.

“None of this makes sense... he’s talking about hunting for treasure by going back in time. Look.” She jabbed at a page of writing. “He mentions the musket you showed me... says he stole it from a soldier during the English civil war.”

She turned back a few pages and next pointed to a paragraph of text. “And here, he says one of those duelling swords was given to him as a gift by a fifteenth-century nobleman.”

Charlie sniggered. “Maybe he didn’t disappear at all.

Maybe he got a job as a Hollywood script writer... sounds like it would make an awesome sci-fi movie.”

Tilda turned through more of the journal’s pages, causing a loose sheet to drop onto the floor.

Charlie stooped to pluck it off the ground. “Hey, what’s this?”

They both stared at a strip of tightly-folded paper. Two words were written neatly across the front: **ACCESS GATES.**

“Why would Professor Howe have a leaflet about gates?” Charlie wondered. “This house doesn’t even have a garden.”

Tilda snatched the leaflet from her brother. “Gate is just another word for a door, silly. Ancient cities like York had doors around the city walls to keep people out. They called them gates.”

“Ah, I see. So that’s why you get places like Micklegate and Fishergate?”

“Exactly!” Tilda nodded. “Maybe this is just a map of all those ancient gates.”

She gently cleared an area of space on the desktop and slowly unfolded the leaflet. Section by section, a map showing the streets of York emerged. Yet this wasn't quite the kind of map Tilda had expected to see. Not one of the city's famous gates was included.

Instead, the detailed sketch showed York's modern-day streets and roads, many leading to and from a collection of historic sites: the medieval Minster; Viking encampments; the first Roman settlements; a Norman garrison; even places Tudor kings had once called home.

The map contained a score of different locations, each marked and identified by its own neatly-drawn door. Beside many of these doors sat a series of dates and tiny icons in the shape of a key. One or two even had the universally recognised sign for danger – a skull and crossbones.

“What do you think it means?” Charlie asked.

Tilda kept gazing at the map, looking from one door to the next, hoping to see a pattern. Finally, she spotted something she recognised.

Turning back to the professor's journal, she flicked through

its pages until she found the one she was looking for.

As her finger pressed against a date scribbled on the map, she compared it to the one at the top of the journal page. They matched!

She checked several more, finding identical matches too. Suddenly, Tilda understood how the two documents worked together. The buzz of solving that particular puzzle made her wonder if she was perhaps more suited to a career as a detective than an antiques dealer.

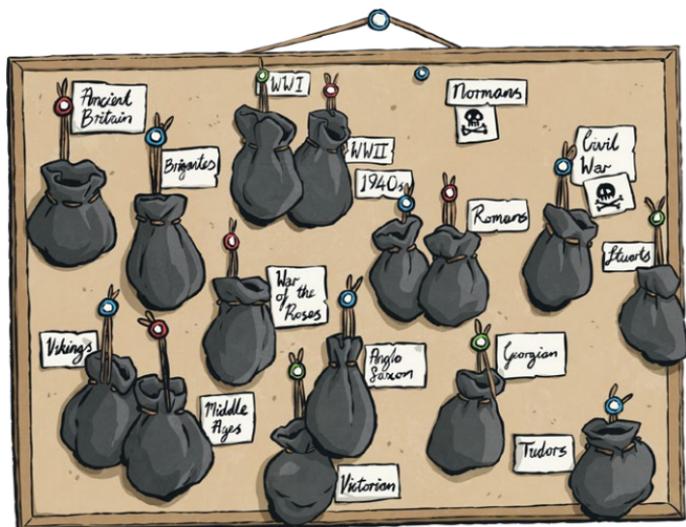
“This can’t be possible,” she told Charlie. “It has to be made up.”

Her brother’s puzzled expression prompted more explanation.

“These dates all match the detailed entries in the professor’s journal. And each entry talks about a single trip he made on that day.”

Now Charlie looked even more puzzled. “What’s so unusual about that? Everyone takes trips.”

“Not trips like these,” Tilda insisted. “These are trips back in time.”



Chapter 4

An Impossible Possibility

Tilda double-checked more than twenty dates, each time finding a corresponding entry in the professor's journal. The entries themselves were incredibly detailed, not only describing the people its owner had allegedly met and a number of significant historic events, but also containing a reference to a specific artefact and its position in the room.

Finally, she turned to a new page and scanned the text. "Back wall... second shelf from the left... fourth from the floor."

Following his sister's instructions, Charlie scuttled

across the small room and navigated the contents of the bookcase. "Got it!"

"Seventh book from the left should be a slim black diary."

Charlie counted across the shelf until his finger dropped onto a book that matched Tilda's description. "What is it this time?"

Tilda leaned back against the chair and exhaled loudly. She refused to believe what the professor's note was claiming. "Shakespeare's pocket book."

Charlie snatched his finger back as if he'd just been bitten. "The famous play-writing guy?"

Tilda closed the journal with a thud. "It can't be true."

Charlie gazed around the room. His eyes seemed to sparkle brighter than the various treasures. "These things all seem genuine enough, Tils. Why would the professor go to all the trouble of forging everything?"

"But time travel isn't possible!" Tilda swung the chair around until she was facing the room. "Everyone knows that."

“Everyone except the professor, maybe?”

“Wait, wait, wait!” This was all beginning to make Tilda’s head hurt. “How would he go back in time? There’s not one single mention of a time machine.”

Charlie thought for a moment. “Perhaps he used something else.”

Tilda snorted. “Like what, a magic potion?”

Charlie pointed to a section of wall behind his sister’s head. “He might have used one of those.”



So much for her aspiring to become a detective; Tilda couldn’t believe that she had missed something so obvious.

The two children stood staring at the large square cork board that had been screwed to the wall. A collection of tiny leather pouches hung from pins , each with a handwritten label showing various periods of time. One hook read **Brigantes**; another read **World War Two**.

Between those was every significant period in York's long and varied history.

"What do you think they are?" Charlie asked.

Every sensible gene in Tilda's body resisted what she was about to say next. "Maybe they're keys to open something like a time door."

Charlie pointed to an empty pin beneath a label reading **Normans**. "Why is one missing?"

Both children stared at the empty pin. Neither dared to say what they were each thinking.

Tilda remembered seeing a skull and crossbones sign scribbled beside the Normans' door on Professor Howe's map. Something told her that was significant.

Suddenly feeling a mixture of enthusiasm and fear, she reached out towards the tiny pouches, plucking off the one labelled **Romans**. It felt unexpectedly light and the fabric was more delicate than it looked. When she bounced it on her palm, it jangled softly.

Like every bag, this one was sealed shut by a tight knot. After gently working the knot loose, Tilda

tipped the contents out onto her palm.

Three thin, golden coins danced across her skin, plus a small golden signet ring which sparkled in the dusty light. Charlie reached out and plucked it from his sister's palm. Both children stared down with admiring eyes at the beautifully-fashioned golden band. What really caught their attention, though, was the face of a man which had been cut into the precious stone on top of the band, and cold eyes scowled up at Tilda with a look that sent contempt reaching through history.

"They look old," Charlie observed, "and valuable."

Tilda nodded. "I think they're genuine Roman coins. And that ring looks like it could be worth a fortune. I wonder how the Professor got his hands on all this stuff?"

"Check another bag," her brother urged.

When she emptied the bag marked **Vikings**, more coins rolled onto her palm. These were much plainer, and seemed to be made from less precious metals.

Checking the bags labelled **Tudors** and **Stuarts** confirmed that each little pouch contained the same contents: ancient money and little artefacts.

Charlie's brow creased like paper as he rubbed his chin. "The map shows the symbol of a key next to every door. How can we use money that is impossible to spend as a way to open a door? Is it some kind of puzzle?"

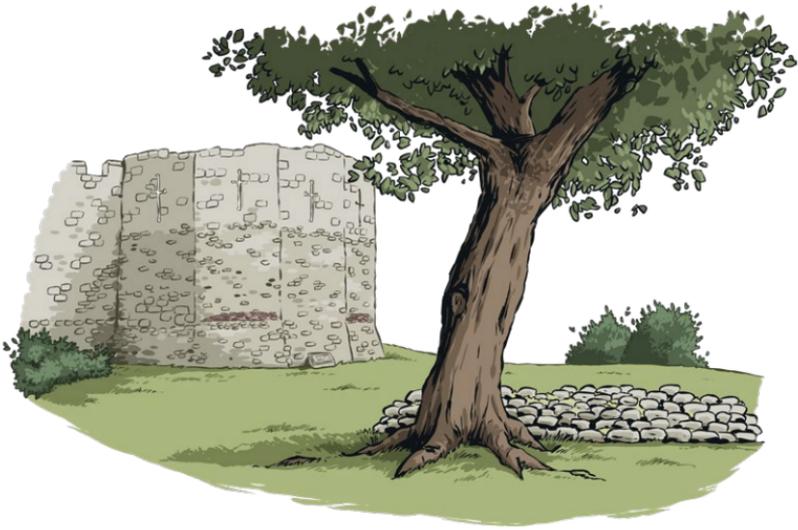
Tilda reached for the professor's journal. Instinct was telling her that the solution to this conundrum had to lie within its pages.

Maybe she was destined to be a detective after all – the answer stared up at her from the bottom of the very first page.

Tilda felt her cheeks flush with giddiness as she read the professor's words out loud.

"Although each time door is invisible to the naked eye, I have found that they can be opened and travelled through by anyone possessing the right historical artefact." Her finger trembled almost as much as her voice as she traced the words. "For a treasure hunter with a sense of adventure, these historic items are actually keys to the most incredible experiences imaginable."

When she glanced up from the journal, she found her brother hopping with glee. "We've got to see if we can open one of those doors!"



Chapter 5

A Tree with Secrets

“This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” grumbled Tilda, staring at her reflection in the antique shop’s full-length mirror. “If any of my classmates see me in this, I’ll never live it down.”

Charlie shuffled beside his sister and gazed back at his own reflection. His smirk and sparkling eyes suggested that he thought they both looked amazing – just like the pictures of Roman peasants that Tilda had found online earlier.

He wiggled uncomfortably, hitching his breeches up as high as they would go. They were actually made from

a pair of his mother's thick winter tights, but it was the best they'd been able to find. One of his father's old linen shirts hung down to his knees, fastened around his waist by a plain leather belt. Perched on a shoe rack near the door, a pair of tatty brown gardening sandals would complete the look.

Tilda's outfit was almost identical, although she had swapped tights for knee-length socks and her long hair was tied neatly in a braid. Despite never having had much of an interest in fashion, she still knew she was definitely not rocking the peasant look.

They'd already decided to explore the location marked Roman Doorway. It hadn't been a difficult decision. According to the professor's map, the time door was just a few streets from their parents' shop, right beside the remains of an old Roman tower which was popular with out-of-town visitors.

"We need to make sure we blend in," Charlie reminded his older sister. "This way, we can have a look around without attracting any unwanted attention."

"Cool your jets, Charlie Hacker," she urged. "We don't even know if the doors work yet. There's still a chance Professor Howe could have made this all up."

Ignoring his sister's reservations, Charlie slipped both feet into a tatty pair of leather sandals and checked the time on his wristwatch.

"Hey, you can't wear that," Tilda pointed out, unbuckling her own timepiece. "Wristwatches weren't invented until 1868."

"Why, what year are we going back to?"

She fought hard not to laugh at her brother's enthusiastic naivety. He'd bought into the professor's writing so much that discovering it was all make-believe would likely make him miserable for weeks.

Feeling a little sorry for him, Tilda decided to play along. "If the dates on the coins are accurate, we'll probably find ourselves in the second or third century."

"Wow!" Charlie almost danced out of his sandals. "Can you believe we're actually about to do this?"

"Come on," Tilda rolled her gaze towards the ceiling as she shoved her brother towards the antique shop's back door. "Let's get this over with."



In almost every other town or city in the country, two children dressed as Roman peasants would have caused quite a stir. Yet as both Hackers scurried through narrow streets leading to the ruins of York's famous Multangular Tower, they hardly earned a second glance.

Blending in with the army of costume-wearing guides employed to lead tourists around the city's landmarks made Tilda and Charlie feel like they were invisible. They also had the freedom to search for Professor Howe's hidden time door, completely undisturbed.

"It's got to be here somewhere," said Charlie.

They'd been searching the grounds around the ruins for almost twenty minutes, and both children peered hard at a now familiar spot on the professor's map.

According to the hand-sketched coordinates, the third-century time door should have been directly in front of them. Instead, all Charlie could see was the gnarled trunk of an old oak tree.

“It can’t be this stupid tree,” he pointed out. “It wouldn’t even have been an acorn at the time the Romans were here.”

Tilda peered down at the map sat perched on the lid of a litter bin, then pointed to the building behind her brother. “The museum building is there...”

Next, she gestured to an ancient angular ruin rising from the ground.

“...the remains of the Roman tower are there...”

Finally, she nodded towards the stretch of Roman wall half-hidden behind the tree.

“...and what’s left of the Emperor’s villa garden is there. So if this map is to be believed, we should be able to see the doorway right here.”

“But it’s a tree,” Charlie grumbled. “Not a door.”

As she’d originally feared, it was beginning to look as if the map and the little bag of Roman coins were all part of Professor Howe’s elaborate fantasy. Tilda suddenly felt foolish for even believing it could be possible.

Eleven-year-old girls were supposed to be much smarter than that.

“Wait,” Charlie barked. “What if we’re in the right place, but we’re looking for the wrong thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if the door isn’t a door at all? What if it’s disguised as something else? Or even hidden?” He paused, nibbling his lip as if he was reluctant to say what was really on his mind. “Or what if it’s waiting for us to do something first?”

Tilda couldn’t remember reading anything about that in the professor’s journal. Yet as her newly-found detective’s instinct kicked into overdrive, she found herself wondering if the map itself held any further clues.

The faded ink and bleached paper suggested that the map itself had been used quite a lot. Some parts were smudged. Others housed smears where raindrops had made the ink run. Near the Roman door sketch, Tilda’s focus landed on a patch of paper that looked like it might be missing a word. Something had been erased.

Fuelled by a sudden idea, she lifted the map up into the air, letting the afternoon's sunlight bathe the paper.

"That's interesting." Tilda wrinkled her forehead. "I think another word was once written next to the image of the door."

"A magic word?" Hope amplified Charlie's words. "Like 'open sesame'? Or 'abracadabra'?"

"Shhhh!"

Tilda shook her head as she strained to make out the weak indentations now visible in the sunlight. Initially, they'd resembled little more than a collection of random lines and curves. Yet as she continued to stare, her eyes began to recognise a pattern. First just a single letter. Then another. Until...

"Forfeit!"

"What?"

Tilda jabbed the spot on the map. "The hidden word – it says forfeit."

"Four feet?" Charlie glanced down at his own feet, as

if he was actually counting them.

“Dogs have got four feet. Maybe we need to find –”

“Not four feet,” Tilda giggled. “Forfeit – you know, as in give up, surrender, lose.”

Charlie stopped looking for dogs to abduct. “Why would it tell us to give up?”

“Perhaps it’s a hidden message,” Tilda suggested. She knew this wasn’t the news her brother wanted to hear. “Maybe it’s telling us we’re wasting our time.”

Charlie raised a hand to silence his sister. “It’s gotta mean something else.”

“But that’s what a forfeit is, Charlie... to give something up.”

Her brother refused to accept that. “What about when we play board games with Dad?”

“You always cheat,” Tilda reminded him.

“No, no, not that!” Charlie paced back and forth in front of the tree. “When we do something wrong, Dad

makes us pay a forfeit. What if we have to pay to open the door? Maybe that's what the money is for!"

Although common sense told her this was probably just one big waste of time, Tilda pulled the professor's cloth pouch from a small purse strapped to her belt.

She handed one of the coins to her brother and sighed. "Be careful – it's probably quite valuable."

Charlie stared at the coin, then at the tree, then back at the coin. "What should I do with it?"

In the video games Tilda sometimes played, there was always an enchanted keyhole somewhere unexpected. "Let's check for a secret slot concealed in the bark, or the roots?"

Five minutes of patting and probing drew a blank. The tree was just a tree.

Tilda sat back onto the grass, propping herself up with both elbows. Sunshine caressed her face.

"Maybe we should go home."

"No chance!" her brother insisted.

“There’s something here – I can feel it.”

“Well, all I can feel is my stomach rumbling,” Tilda grumbled. “I missed lunch.”

“The map lied!” Charlie growled. “I can’t believe it.”

“At least we still have the professor’s hoard,” Tilda tried to lift his spirits. “And if those coins and the ring are genuine, Mum and Dad can sell them for hundreds of pounds – maybe thousands.”

Charlie was too annoyed and disappointed to care. His face flushed the colour of a sunset as anger brewed.

“Stupid tree! Stupid map! Stupid coins!”

Perhaps if Tilda hadn’t been enjoying the sun’s warmth quite as much, she would have been quick enough to stop Charlie. Yet by the time she realised what her brother was about to do, it was already too late.

“No Charlie, don’t...”

The tiny Roman coin left her brother’s fingers like a catapulted stone, fuelled by his frustration and anger. It struck the bark, then ricocheted left towards the

Roman wall. Both children watched it spin towards the ancient stonework and then... it vanished!

“Did you see that?” Charlie gasped. “It passed straight through.”

Tilda refused to believe her eyes. Surely, that hadn't just happened.

“Gimme another coin!” Charlie squealed.

This time, he launched the coin straight at the wall. Just like the first, it passed right through solid stone.

“Quick, Tils,” Charlie thrust his hand forward. “Another.”

“Wait, it's the last one.”

“It's all I need.”

Charlie snatched the last coin and the signet ring from his sister's hand and stepped towards the wall. Suddenly feeling scared, Tilda reached to grab hold of her brother's shirt. But it was already too late.

Charlie had reached the wall and pushed the tiny

silver coin towards the eroded stone. This time it wasn't just the coin that vanished. So did Charlie's hand, followed quickly by his arm and shoulder.

Tilda's jaw dropped open as she watched the wall swallow her brother whole!

Chapter 6

Rumbled by Romans

Charlie had expected his skull to crash against Roman wall, yet now he found himself lying on his back staring at a clear blue sky.

Stranger still, the park, which had been filled with milling tourists and happy picnickers just moments before, was now nowhere to be seen.

Instead, Charlie was alone behind the wall, beyond which sat a large and impressive stone fortress, not the ruin he had seen seconds earlier.

His throat felt dry and rougher than sandpaper as he picked up the two coins he'd thrown moments earlier. As he climbed to his feet, he tucked the coins and the ring into his sock for safekeeping. Now stretching up onto his tiptoes, he peered over the wall towards the fortress.

The stone building looked familiar, especially the position of its angled walls. Yet everything else about the stone fortress looked wrong. It seemed new! And that wasn't the only thing that seemed out of place. The group of Roman soldiers gathered by the door definitely shouldn't have been there.



Charlie ducked back behind the wall, hardly daring to breathe. Had he really just seen Roman soldiers?

A second glance confirmed that he had, yet these men looked nothing like the badly-dressed tour guides that he was used to seeing. This group looked like the real thing, bulging with threatening muscles, dressed head to foot in full iron and leather armour, and carrying huge swords and javelins.

Charlie pressed himself flat against the stonework, suddenly feeling a mix of terror and excitement. After all, if he had just seen Roman soldiers, that could only mean one thing: he really had managed to travel back in time.

Now fizzing with curiosity, Charlie scanned his surroundings. York as he knew it had vanished. Instead, he was sitting in what appeared to be a farmer's meadow and a short distance away sat a small cluster of cone-shaped huts. Brown smoke snaked from the tip of thickly-thatched roofs and the walls looked like they were made from woven wood and dirt.

That wasn't the only difference. This version of York was so quiet. There was no rumble of car engines, no

mobile phones chirping, nor a single siren or vehicle alarm. In fact, the loudest sound Charlie could hear was the tweet of songbirds coming from a nearby hedgerow.

Yet what Charlie noticed most of all were the smells. No longer filled with the aroma of vehicle fumes and city litter, this version of York stank more like a farmyard with a major case of blocked drains.

In an instant, none of that mattered any more. Instead, Charlie's attention was seized by the sounds of jeering and shouting coming from behind the wall.

Summoning as much courage as he could, he slowly poked his head back over the wall and peered back towards the fortress.

The troop of Roman soldiers had now split into two groups. Nearest the fortress, a dozen Romans hacked and parried with their swords and javelins, clearly practising a series of well-rehearsed battle moves. Charlie wondered how the Romans had ever been defeated; this lot would scare the life out of even the toughest WWE wrestlers.

Much closer to him was a second cluster of soldiers. These were every bit as muscular and just as heavily

armed, but far more terrifying because right now, they were looking straight at Charlie Hacker.



The largest and most intimidating of the soldiers used the glinting tip of his javelin to point towards the wall.

“Hey! Peasant! What do you think you’re doing there?”

Charlie quickly ducked back behind the wall, but it was too late; the clattering of armour and scuffing of boots told him that the soldiers were heading his way. And stomach-churning instinct told him that these were definitely not tour guides.

Thinking quickly and still gripping one of the coins in his fist, Charlie found what he hoped was the area of wall he’d travelled through. As the sound of onrushing soldiers became louder, he threw himself at the stone.

When skin and bone hits something as solid as stone, there’s only one winner – and it wasn’t Charlie. He could feel his muscles already beginning to bruise as he landed in a heap. Although still dazed, he realised why the portal hadn’t worked. The ‘magical’ doorway

was on the other side of this wall – and that’s where the Roman soldiers were. He was hoping he still had time to clamber over the wall and slip back through the portal when a powerfully-thrown javelin landed beside him.

One half of his brain screamed at him to run. The other half urged him to stay still, telling him that none of this was real, and that he was perfectly safe. Unfortunately, Charlie believed the wrong half.

“I’ve gorrin!” growled a voice as shovel-sized hands snatched Charlie’s shirt.

Finally feeling in control of his limbs, Charlie spun away, twisting for all he was worth as the collar of his father’s cheap shirt slipped from the man’s grasp.

Another soldier lunged towards him, fingers outstretched, tearing a huge hole through his mother’s winter tights. More hands grabbed hold of Charlie’s arms, lifting him into the air. He could smell the soldiers’ stale sweat and hear their angry grunts as he was dragged over the stone wall like some kind of hunting trophy.

His brief journey ended painfully as he was slammed onto the ground. Large feet wearing even larger

sandals kicked and stamped, sending Charlie rolling across the ground.

Any minute now, a pair of unfriendly hands would seize him by the hair or by the throat. He closed his eyes and screamed, desperately trying to avoid the blows by rolling over and over until he reached the wall.



Chapter 7

A Tumble through Time

“Hey!” snapped Tilda as Charlie suddenly reappeared, rolling across her feet. “I only painted those nails yesterday.”

Charlie had never been so relieved to smell diesel fumes. He gulped dirty 21st-century air like a desperate fish and scabbled behind the oak tree’s thick trunk.

“Are they gone?” His eyes flashed with panic.

Tilda looked at her brother as though he were mad. “Are who gone?”

“The Roman soldiers,” he panted. “Have they gone yet?”

Tilda snorted. “Erm, yeah! They left here in 410 AD and I don’t think anyone’s expecting them back any time soon.”

Charlie breathed a sigh of relief and tried to stop shaking. He was back, and that meant he was safe.

Although her brother had only been gone for a few seconds, Tilda couldn’t deny that something very strange had just happened. The only people who could vanish through walls and reappear were usually stars of a fantasy movie. Last time she checked, Charlie wasn’t in any way magical.

She crouched beside Charlie and whispered, “What just happened?”

Still trying to catch his breath, Charlie grabbed hold of his sister’s arm. “The doorway... it really works, Tils. I swear I went back to Roman times and got chased by soldiers with anger management issues. I think they thought I was spying.”

“So Professor Howe’s journal wasn’t a made-up story?”

“No, it definitely wasn’t. Look!” Charlie poked his finger through the tear in his tights. “Romans did this, honest.”

Tilda’s shaking head and creased brow confirmed that despite Charlie’s evidence, his sister was struggling to accept his story.

“You still don’t believe me?”

Tilda guided a bewildered stare towards the wall. “I don’t... it can’t... that’s not...”

With trepidation already drying his mouth and every fibre of his body telling him he was about to make a huge mistake, Charlie handed Tilda one of the small Roman coins he’d rescued from the meadow.

“As soon as you hit the grass, start running!”

“What are you talking about?”

“And keep your head down!”

Not waiting for his sister’s response, Charlie clutched Tilda’s hand tight, and with a deep breath of polluted air still filling his lungs, launched them both back towards the time wall.



Brother and sister each fell forward onto a patch of dusty ground. Charlie landed on top of Tilda with a grunt.

At the same moment, the iron point of a javelin grazed into the ground just centimetres away.

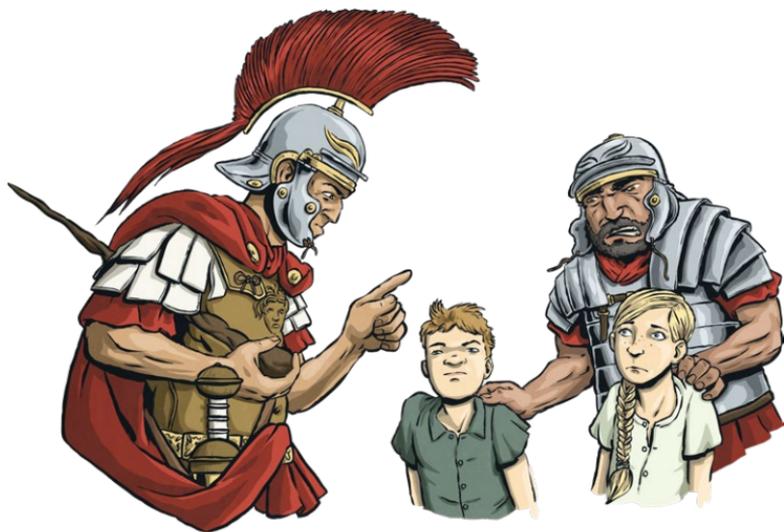
Looking back over her shoulder, Tilda saw the pristine Roman fortress. A second ago it had been little more than a ruin. “Hey, isn’t that the –”

“Run!” yelled Charlie, dragging his sister towards the mud huts he’d seen during his earlier visit.

Tilda’s eyes swam with confusion. “That man over there looks just like a... like a...”

Stumbling across uneven ground, Charlie finished his sister’s sentence.

“A Roman soldier. Yeah, I know – that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!”



Chapter 8

Living Statues

They crouched low, hiding behind a small wooden fence which appeared to be made from thin sticks and woven tree branches. A trio of pigs wallowed in gloopy mud just a few metres away.

The smell of rotting vegetables and something much, much worse flooded their nostrils, yet Charlie hardly registered the stench. He had more important things on his mind, like keeping away from the group of angry Roman soldiers and their weapons.

Tilda clamped her hand across her nose and mouth. Her eyes flashed left and right, wild with disbelief.

“This really can’t be happening,” she mumbled.

“Sssshhh,” Charlie ordered.

“But it worked,” Tilda continued. “It actually worked.”

“Will you shut up?” pleaded Charlie.

“This is Roman Britain!” Tilda gazed around the village, flicking her eyes from one small mud hut to the next.

“Oi! Gerraway from me pigs,” bellowed an unfriendly voice.

Charlie and Tilda turned to see the haggard face of an ugly peasant farmer glaring through the doorway of his hut. His long hair appeared to be bleached white, and it hung heavily from his head in untidy strips. Dark eyes raged with hostility.

“Away with yer,” he bellowed. “Find yer own beasts. Them’s are mine!”

Feeling wholly unwelcome, Charlie and Tilda backed away from the stinking pen. Ducking low and hoping they would remain unseen, the two children crawled past a mound of steaming manure before pushing their

their backs up against the wall of a neighbouring hut.

“Where are we?” Tilda’s heart was beating like an Olympic sprinter’s.

“I think this is still York.” Charlie pointed to the large fortress beyond the white wall. “That’s gotta be the building from the Museum Gardens.”

Although her eyes could see the building, Tilda’s brain was struggling to process these new sights and sounds. “But it looks brand new... and so big.”

“That’s because it is brand new,” Charlie said. “And it is definitely big. When was it first built?”

Tilda tried her best to kickstart her bewildered brain into action, desperately attempting to recite what she’d learned at school. Eventually, she pulled a collection of facts from one of last term’s history classes.

“Historians think it was built by the Emperor Septimius Severus,” she recalled. “Roman Emperors liked to build big buildings to show how important they were, and Severus was one of the most important ever. He ruled the entire Roman Empire from York between 208 AD and 211 AD.” She suddenly gasped.

“Maybe that’s where we are now!”

“Was he a nice Emperor?” Charlie asked.

“I doubt it. You don’t usually get to conquer half the world by asking nicely,” Tilda replied. “Why?”

Charlie gulped and pointed to their right. “Because I think that lot are from his army.”

Tilda swept her gaze up the wide paved road until it reached a troop of Roman soldiers. The sight pushed her head back like a slap.

The men were huge. Their skin bulged with the kind of thick muscles a rugby player would envy, and each wore what looked like enough polished armour to stop a rhino at full charge.

“They’re not men,” gasped Tilda. “They’re like living statues!”

“Let’s hope they’re not looking for a fight,” Charlie said, backing away and dragging Tilda with him.

“What makes you say that?” Tilda gulped.

Charlie shivered as his jog became a sprint. “Because that one with the sharp-looking sword is pointing it straight at us.”



Running away proved to be the wrong strategy. Both children skidded around the mud hut and found themselves in the middle of a yard filled with startled chickens and geese.

The birds flapped and squawked in panic as Charlie and Tilda tried to find an escape route through the blizzard of feathers and wings. When a troubled farmer threw open the door of his hut to investigate what was causing all the commotion, the two young time travellers suddenly found themselves face to face with even more trouble.

“Thieves!”

The soldiers were quickly on the scene, flashing their swords and pointing their spears, and roughly apprehended the two children. Moments later, Charlie and Tilda found themselves dumped at the feet of a very mean-looking man. His polished silver headpiece

bristled with an impressive plume of thick, red horse hair.

“The farmer caught them red-handed, Tribune,” a Roman soldier lied, kicking dust into the children’s faces.

The helmet’s owner glared down at Charlie and Tilda through eyes that looked like they could start a fire. As he swung his heavy sword towards them, Tilda squirmed to avoid the razor-sharp steel.

“What are these pathetic specimens?” snarled the huge man.

“Chicken thieves, Tribune,” barked a particularly large legionnaire. What looked like half the man’s breakfast decorated his bushy ginger beard. “A couple of pox-ridden Brigante peasants looking for an easy meal, sir!”

“What a nerve!” Charlie whispered to Tilda. “How many easy meals do you reckon he’s eaten?”

“Shurrrup! He’s got a sword,” Tilda hissed. “Right now, he can say and eat anything he wants.”

“Do you know the punishment for theft?” the tribune sneered.

Tilda shook her head. She remembered reading that Romans had odd rules, some of them quite savage, and she just hoped theft was one of their lower misdemeanours.

Perhaps not realising how much trouble they were in, Charlie thought he'd take a wild guess. “How about a strong telling-off?”

“A strong telling-off?” the tribune laughed. “Is this Brigante being serious?”

The tribune's troop laughed like a chorus line.

“Why does he keep calling us Brigantes?” Charlie whispered.

“It's the local tribe,” Tilda explained. “They think we're savages.”

“We're not savages, you idiot!” snapped Charlie.

“What did you just call me?” Food crumbs flew from the soldier's beard as the legionnaire reached for a dagger

hanging from a belt around his midriff.

“Charlie, shurrup,” pleaded Tilda. “You’re going to get us into serious trouble.”

“But we haven’t done anything wrong,” her brother insisted. “This lot are a bunch of bullying morons.”

As more history class memories came rushing back to her, Tilda began to realise what a big mistake Charlie was making. Twenty-first-century rules are nothing like Roman customs and laws. She remembered reading that punishments for some crimes included being beaten or whipped... or even worse.

The crested tribune leaned forward and glared down at Charlie. “Lying to a Roman soldier is a very serious crime... some might even call it treason.”

Before Charlie could get himself into even more trouble, Tilda locked a hand across her brother’s mouth. But the look on the Roman leader’s face told her that the damage was already done.

“Now, what did this scrawny, thieving peasant dare to call my soldier?” the tribune hissed.

“Nothing, sir,” Tilda lied. “Forgive my brother – he often gets his words muddled up. He meant to say how much he admired your soldier’s athletic physique.”

Charlie squirmed free of his sister’s grip.

“No I didn’t,” Charlie admitted. “I said he’s an idiot!”

Tilda cupped her head into her hands and groaned. This wasn’t going well at all. And when she saw a smaller legionnaire pull a vicious-looking whip from a dirty sack, she realised that things were about to get a whole lot worse.

Chapter 9

Fooled by His Own Fingers

The tribune instructed two soldiers to drag Charlie into the middle of the paved road. Tilda was held prisoner by the vice-like grip of an unfriendly legionnaire. She watched aghast as her brother struggled to break free.

“Gerroff!” he wailed.

As he twisted and turned like a trout on a hook, three silver coins spun free of Charlie’s pouch. They landed on the road with a trio of clinks. The blubbery Roman soldier stooped to claim them.

“What do we have here?” he smirked, gazing down at the coins in his hand. “Three silver denarii. I’ll enjoy spending those at the local tavern.”

“They’re mine,” Charlie insisted, straining to snatch back the coins. “I need them!”

The Roman soldier laughed as he pocketed the money. “Not where you’re heading, you don’t.”

Charlie avoided his sister’s gaze. He didn’t need to



see the desperation in Tilda's eyes to remind him that without those coins, they were stuck in the third century.

"I could have forgiven you the theft of a chicken," the tribune told Charlie. He walked with strong arms clasped behind his back, slowly circling his prisoner. "We all have to eat and that farmer has more than he needs. But when you insult one of my soldiers, you insult me, the Emperor and the whole of the Roman Empire. And that definitely sounds like treason to me!"

Charlie stopped struggling and shrugged. "What if I said sorry?"

"It is too late for an apology," the tribune explained, as he turned to the smaller legionnaire. "Hand me the whip."

"The wh-wh-whip?" spluttered Charlie. "Why do you need a whip?"

The fat soldier smiled wickedly at Charlie. "A couple of hard lashes might teach you a lesson."

"Are you lot crazy?" Charlie yelled, desperately wriggling to escape.

The tribune gave his whip a couple of test cracks. "Now hold still and take your punishment."

"Wait!"

Tilda slipped free of her Roman captor and rushed to her brother's side. "You can't whip him yet. You have to give him a chance to defend himself."

"Nonsense," insisted the fat legionnaire. "Go on sir, lash him hard. He deserves it."

But the tribune didn't lash Charlie. Instead, he put his whip down and gave Tilda a considered nod.

"This girl is smarter than the boy – she knows Roman law."

Tilda breathed a sigh of relief.

"He didn't insult your soldier," she confidently told the tribune. "He was just stating a fact."

The commander laughed. "He called him an idiot. That is clearly an insult."

The soldiers nodded in agreement.

As a plan brewed, Tilda winked at her brother. "So, if we can show that Blutos is in fact an idiot, will you promise not to hurt my brother?"

The tribune rubbed his chin, pondering the question. Tilda hardly dared breathe as she waited for the soldier's response.

Eventually, he nodded. "Maybe... if you can prove it."

Knowing this was the only opportunity that they would get, Tilda spun back to face the bearded giant. Two narrowed Roman eyes told her that Blutos was ready for the challenge.

"How many fingers have you got, Blutos?"

Blutos snorted. "Eight, plus two thumbs."

Folding thick arms across his chest, he offered Tilda a defiant glare.

"Oh, erm..." Sucking her bottom lip and scratching her head, Tilda did her best to sound unsure. "So, how many with thumbs?"

Blutos didn't even think about his answer. "Ten!"

Tilda smiled. So did Charlie.

“Easy, huh?” Tilda asked.

Blutos dismissed Tilda’s question with a wave. “Can we club the boy now, sir?”

“Wait! I haven’t finished!” Tilda turned to the tribune. “Surely, only an idiot wouldn’t know how many fingers and thumbs he had, right?”

The tribune agreed. “A real idiot.”

“Okay, Blutos,” Tilda continued. “Show me your right hand.”

After a moment’s pause, Blutos slowly raised his hand up into the air. It resembled a startled starfish.

“Now, Blutos,” Tilda smirked. “You just told us all that you have ten fingers, including thumbs. Is that right?”

Blutos nodded, grinning at his fellow soldiers. None of them noticed that the smile had slipped from their leader’s lips.

“Great, let’s check.”

Tilda touched each of the Roman's digits as she began counting backwards from ten.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven..." When she reached his little finger, there was triumph in her voice. "Six! That's six fingers!"

Blutos stared dumbly at his hand.

"How many fingers are on your left hand Blutos?"

"Erm..." Blutos was still trying to come to terms with the news that his right hand had six fingers. "Five?"

Excitement ignited a sparkle in Tilda's eyes. "So, what's six fingers plus five fingers?"

"I... erm... but..." Blutos looked at his fellow soldiers for help, but most of them were too busy staring at their own fingers, counting like anxious toddlers.

"Six plus five, Blutos?" snapped the tribune.

"Erm... eleven?" Blutos reluctantly answered. "But that's not right, sir. Yesterday I only had ten."

Tilda ignored the bearded Roman, gazing up at the

tribune instead. "See, Blutos doesn't know how many fingers he's got. One minute he says ten, next he says eleven. You said yourself that onl-"

"Blutos," the tribune snapped. "These dirty Brigante savages are right. You really are an idiot!"

Charlie and Tilda swapped high fives. It seemed that one of the oldest playground tricks in the book had just saved their skins.



Chapter 10

Just Ordinary Children

Tilda grabbed Charlie by the wrist and slowly began backing away from the Romans.

“Well, it was nice meeting you all,” she told them. “But we’ve taken up enough of your valuable time, so we’ll be on our way now. Have a nice –”

“Not so fast, Brigantes!” the tribune barked.

He clicked his fingers and nine angry soldiers immediately surrounded the two children. Sharpened sword blades and spear points cut off all escape points, herding them close together.

“But you sai-” began Tilda.

The stern tribune quickly interrupted her. “I said if you could prove my soldier was an idiot, I wouldn’t club the boy over the head. I didn’t say anything about letting you festering thieves go free.”

“But we have to get home,” said Charlie weakly. “I have... erm... homework to finish.”

All he wanted to do was step back through the wall and return to the twenty-first century; at least it was safe there.

The tribune smiled coldly. “Oh, I’ve got something far more interesting in mind for you two.”

“Look, we’re really sorry,” said Tilda. “Just let us go and we’ll never bother you again, we promise.”

“That’s a very generous offer,” scoffed the tribune. “But Emperor Septimius is holding a very important banquet tonight and he needs more slaves to help.”

“We’re not slaves,” gulped Charlie. “Is that even legal?”

“What’s this got to do with any eagle?” growled Blutos.

He kicked Charlie in the back, sending him sprawling onto the dirty floor. And when Tilda turned to object, he slammed his spear handle hard against her shoulder.

“Take them into the fortress,” the tribune ordered. A thin smile narrowed his lips. “Tell the slave master to find them both the dirtiest jobs possible – especially the boy.”

As the soldiers marched the two children towards the fortress doors, Charlie tugged on his older sister’s hand.

“What are we going to do now?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Tilda.

It had been easy to outsmart these Romans once, yet something told her it wouldn’t be as easy a second time.



Having been half-marched and half-dragged to the fortress, Charlie and Tilda were shoved into a courtyard and imprisoned behind heavy wooden doors. However, their journey didn’t end there. They were jostled inside the building then handed over to a grumpy slave master.

The stocky man's lopsided sneer told them he wouldn't think twice about using the whip looped around his shoulder.

Feeling more afraid by the minute, the two time travellers were ordered along sweeping corridors smelling of lavender. All around them, beautiful hand-painted frescoes decorated the smooth walls. Beneath their feet, heated stone tiles were designed to make visitors feel cosy and warm.

"Feel that?" Tilda whispered, glad of the distraction. "It's underfloor heating. I remember reading all about this at school. Now, what did they call this?"

"A big deal?" Charlie suggested sarcastically.

"It is a big deal, Charlie," she insisted. "This is cutting-edge stuff... it uses a system of channels called a hypocaust to push warm air onto the tiles. It really works."

"Well I think we should be more concerned with finding a way to get those coins back," Charlie argued. "We need those to get home."

Tilda didn't answer. She was too busy scolding herself

for trusting her younger brother with something so important.

“Keep up!” the slave master barked. The unusually hairy man was wearing what looked like an old leather smock. It was decorated in dark stains, and Tilda tried not to think what might have made them.

“Erm, excuse me,” Tilda said bravely. “I think there’s been some kind of mistake.”

The slave master stopped and turned around and his gnarled hand squeezed the handle of his whip. “Oh really?”

“Yes,” Tilda continued, growing hopeful. “We’re not slaves at all, you see. We’re just ordinary children.”

“Oh, I see,” said the slave master. His stern face finally cracked a smile: four brown teeth decorated his gums like tombstones. “If you’re ordinary children, you’ll need to go through the second door on the left. Here, let me show you.”

“Is that the way out?” Charlie sounded excited.

“It’s where we take ordinary children when mistakes

like this are made,” the slave master said, opening the door.

Tilda peered in, hoping to see daylight and a route back home. The doorway seemed to open onto a steep flight of stone stairs leading somewhere dark, damp and very uninviting. Disappointment sent a chill down her spine as she realised that this time, she was the one who had been tricked.

“Gerrin!” The slave master shoved Tilda into the darkness, kicking Charlie down the steps after her. “Make sure you don’t linger on those steps – or I’ll be in to give you a beating.”

The door slammed behind them and a key turned in the lock.

“What now?” asked Charlie.

Tilda pointed to the steep flight of stairs as tears ran freely down her freckled cheeks.

“Down there, I suppose.”

Charlie stared helplessly at his older sister and suddenly wished they had never found the old map.

All this was his fault. He'd insisted they'd tried to find the time-travelling portal. He'd even dragged his sister back in time, despite knowing it was a dangerous place. And now it seemed they were destined to spend the rest of their lives as slaves. As he walked tentatively down the stone stairs, he made a promise to himself that somehow, he would get them both out of this.



Chapter 11

The Wrong Bucket

Charlie and Tilda quickly found out that life as a Roman slave wasn't much fun. Nobody listened to them or cared what they thought, and if they dared to disobey, they were slapped or cuffed or kicked. This certainly wasn't the kind of exciting adventure that either Hacker had imagined.

Charlie and Tilda were separated. Tilda was roughly pushed into a group of huddled girls and women. Charlie was made to join a small group of frail-looking boys and told he'd be working in the Emperor's caldarium.

As they were led through a labyrinth of narrow passageways, Charlie whispered to a cowering slave. "What's a caldarium?"

The boy looked a year or two younger than Charlie. Pale skin suggested he hadn't seen sunshine in months, maybe even years.

"Sssssh," the boy held a finger to cracked lips. "We're not supposed to talk."

Charlie shrugged. "I just want to know where we're going."

Perhaps realising Charlie was new, the slave whispered back. "It's part of the Emperor's bathhouse. We'll be helping to bathe Roman officers and the Emperor's special guests."

"Bathing them?" asked Charlie.

The frail youngster screwed up his face and gave Charlie a nod, before slipping back in line behind him, clearly afraid to say more.

The smell of the caldarium was unbearable; even bowls of freshly-picked lavender couldn't hide the terrible stench of sweat and festering water. Pockets of grime floated on the surface of bathwater which looked like it hadn't been changed in months.

"Here!" A man who looked half-starved handed each boy an odd-looking tool. "Take these and give it to those women. And don't look at or speak to any of the Patricians – they're very important people."

Charlie stared at the small instrument. It was curved, made from metal and looked like a cross between a

sickle and a scoop. He wasn't sure whether this was a weapon or a gardening tool.

"It's a strigil," whispered the small slave. "The cleaners use it to scrape the sweat off their bodies."

"Urgh!" Charlie held the metal strigil away from him as if it might bite. "Haven't they invented showers yet?"

The pale slave looked confused. "What's a shower?"

"Never mind," Charlie shook his head. "Hey, I'm Charlie. What's your name?"

Before Charlie's companion could reply, a shrill voice filled the room like a shotgun blast.

"Where's my clean strigil, Streen?"

Charlie turned to see a haggard woman glaring towards the two boys.

"Fetch it now, and bring that Brigante savage with you. I've got a job for him."

Streen led as they both weaved their way between wooden tables. Each one contained a large Roman man,

apparently waiting to be cleaned.

“Do as she says,” Streen warned. “Rumour has it she was once a Persian princess. She has a foul temper.”

“Give me that!” The woman snatched the strigil from Charlie’s hand, cuffing Streen across his ear.

“Hey!” Charlie objected then ducked to narrowly avoid a second blow, aimed at him.

“Stop squabbling, savages,” snarled a man laying face down on the table. “Or I’ll have all three of you whipped for wasting my time.”

“Yes, Consul.” The Persian woman gave Charlie a glare that looked like it could ignite wood. “I’m sorry. Our new slaves still need breaking in... please forgive me.”

“Just clean me, woman,” the Roman consul growled. “You’re not in Persia now!”

Streen picked up a large wooden bucket and handed Charlie another, before gently steering him towards a neighbouring table where a cleaner was preparing to begin work.

“Hold that bucket steady,” the woman told him. Charlie was at least pleased that she sounded friendlier than the Persian. “Let’s not make any mistakes today – this job is unpleasant enough already.”

Elsewhere, other slaves poured cold water onto burning coals, filling the room with billowing clouds of red hot steam. The heat was clearly intended to make everyone sweat.

Before long, Charlie and the woman were joined by a large Roman man. He grunted at Charlie as he climbed onto the table and turned onto his bulging stomach. Rolls of fat gathered around his waist and across his shoulders, and every inch of blubbery flesh was covered by a thick film of sweat.

“What are you waiting for, cleaner?” he barked. “Get on with it.”

From the actions of his fellow slaves, Charlie worked out that ‘getting on with it’ involved using a strigil to scrape the sweat and grime off the customer. As the cleaner pushed the tool across the Roman’s skin, a ripple of putrid fluid gathered inside its curved heel.

Charlie held his breath and watched other cleaners tip

the sweat from their strigils into buckets just like the one he was holding.

Before he could prepare himself, a slosh of sweat hit the bottom of his own bucket. Some of it splashed up across Charlie's wrist.

Trying to take his mind off the disgusting work, Charlie cast his gaze around the large room. There were dozens of tables and scores of unhappy slaves. Worse still, the room was ringed by tightly-packed chairs and benches, each one filled with sweaty, dirty Romans waiting to be cleaned. This was going to be the longest and most unpleasant day of Charlie's life so far.



Eventually, Charlie's bucket was filled to the brim with slimy sweat. Needing to empty it before any other Roman could be cleaned, he followed another slave to a large trough in the farthest corner of the room. He was pleased to find Tilda emptying a bucket of her own.

"This is gross," he told her as he tipped the contents of his bucket away. "Haven't these people heard of soap?"

Charlie watched the other cleaners finish the bathing process by gently ladling ice cold water over their Roman guest.

“It helps to seal the pores,” Tilda wearily explained.

“Shame it’s not got any ice in it – now that would be funny,” Charlie sniggered as he reached for a bucket.

“Wait,” gasped Tilda. “That’s the wrong –”

“Silence!” Even angrier now, the supervisor barked her orders, clapping her hands together like two symbols. “Hurry!”

Shocked into action, Charlie snatched up the bucket and hurried back to his cleaning station. He never saw his sister’s horrified expression and he certainly didn’t hear her worried yelp. His ears were still ringing with the sound of the supervisor’s clap.

As the cleaner began ladling liquid from the fresh bucket and pouring it across the important Roman’s back, both had no idea that Charlie had picked up the wrong bucket: Tilda’s bucket, not containing clean fresh water at all, but filled instead with stinking, putrid, filthy sweat.

The bucket was half empty before anyone noticed. It was the smell that gave it away.

“What are you doing?” howled the Roman consul, leaping off the table as slimy sweat rolled across his skin.

Instantly, other slaves rushed to clean the man, but the damage was done.

“I want that slave punished,” bellowed the soggy Roman. His radish-red face looked like it might ignite like a grenade. “Or I will report you all to the Emperor Severus.”

The unfriendly Persian cleaner grabbed hold of Charlie from behind, digging her nails into the backs of his arms.

“I saw it all,” she hissed. “He did it deliberately. I knew he was trouble as soon as I saw him – these Brigante savages always are.”

Charlie struggled against the woman’s tightening grip. “She’s lying.”

Tilda rushed over to offer her support. “He’s telling

the truth – it was an accident.”

“Silence!” The supervisor clapped her hands again, this time so loud even the Roman consul covered his ears. “It’s too late for excuses.”

“I want him whipped,” insisted the consul.

The supervisor shook her head. “Oh no, he won’t be whipped...”

Charlie breathed a sigh of relief. But his respite was short lived.

“...I have something much worse in mind.”

The supervisor jabbed him in the chest with a pointed stick as she steered him towards a group of particularly miserable-looking slaves. “He’ll be joining these lucky boys at the Emperor’s banquet this evening... on vomit duty!”

Chapter 12

Charlie or the Bowl

Charlie gazed out across a large banquet room that resembled a Hollywood movie set. Beautifully-attired Roman aristocrats were sprawled casually across low, cushioned benches. They were all wearing richly-coloured silk tunics that seemed to float and flow around their bodies like some kind of slow-moving liquid.

The air itself was thick with heavily-scented perfume, strong enough to tickle Charlie's nostrils and make him want to sneeze. And there was another smell too. Charlie knew it was coming from the seemingly endless plates of finger food laid out on tables in front of the Emperor's guests. Yet none of the smells were familiar, and the food on offer was neither something he recognised nor wanted.

When a waiter waltzed past carrying a fully-loaded plate on each shoulder, Charlie had to convince himself that he hadn't just seen a pile of stuffed eyeballs.

"Who are these people?" Charlie whispered to Streen.

"Friends of the Emperor's," the young slave told him. Streen was sharing Charlie's punishment at the insistence of the Persian cleaner, who had persuaded the supervisor

that both slaves had been working in cahoots. “These are some of the most important people in Eboracum.”

“Eboracum?” Charlie asked. He was sure he’d heard that name somewhere before, but couldn’t remember when.

“This place. The Emperor’s town!” Streen’s forehead wrinkled as he gave Charlie a strange quizzical look. Now Charlie remembered: Eboracum was the Roman name for York.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” asked Streen.

Unsure how to answer that particular question, Charlie quickly changed the subject.

“What exactly are we doing here?”

Streen nodded to one of many wooden bowls dotted around the room. Most seemed to have been positioned close to the diners. “Our job is to collect and empty those bowls down the Emperor’s latrines as soon as they’re full.”

“Full of what?”

“Food, of course,” Streen informed him.



“But isn’t that a waste?” Charlie scratched his head. “The cooks must have gone to a lot of trouble to cook all this.”

“Oh, it’s not wasted,” Streen sniggered. “It’s food that has already been eaten.”

Charlie felt his eyes almost double in size. “You mean...”

The younger slave nodded grimly. “Why do you think it’s called vomit duty?”

“Yeesh,” Charlie screwed up his face. “The food in this place must be terrible.”

“No, no, no, it’s delicious. Prepared by the finest cooks from across the Empire.”

“So why do these people want to puke their guts up?”

“So they can keep eating,” Streen explained. “They stuff themselves but they don’t want to stop. So they reach for a bowl, empty their stomachs, then carry on eating.”

Charlie had always believed the Romans were part of an advanced and sophisticated civilisation. Now, though, he was quickly beginning to think they

were little more than well-dressed barbarians.

Still, there was a part of the time-traveller's brain that refused to believe what his companion was telling him. All that changed though, when one of the elegant Roman women reached for a large wooden bowl, casually slipped two fingers down her throat, then promptly filled the vessel with a barely-digested meal.

"Urgh!" Charlie gasped, stunned and repulsed by what he had just witnessed. "That's disgusting!"

Before Streen had the opportunity to reply, a heavy hand landed on Charlie's shoulder and a mean voice snarled into his ear.

"You're not here to stare at the Emperor's guests. Start emptying those bowls."

Charlie reluctantly followed the lead of the other slaves and started to collect up the bowls. Many were already filled to their brims, slopping with foul-smelling contents. He really couldn't imagine a worse job.



It was a busy evening. Roman guests reached for their bowls every few minutes, chucking up streams of undigested food into bowls as fast as Charlie and the other slaves could empty them.

“Can’t they just eat less?” Charlie wondered aloud as he returned to the banquet hall with a stack of empty bowls.

“That would be an insult to the Emperor,” Streen told him. “Guests have to show him how much they’re enjoying his banquet by eating as much as they can.”

“But it’s horrendous!”

“Not half as horrendous as the games some of the less gracious guests like to play,” Streen warned him.

“What games?”

“Oh, a really funny one, where they deliberately miss the bowl. They like to catch out the new slaves.”

“Oh, really?” Charlie mused, as he knelt to slide an empty

bowl towards a clutch of diners.

“Well, here’s one slave they won’t be catching out.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” a voice he recognised sniggered from beside him.

As Charlie turned to meet the triumphant sneer of the Roman tribune, he realised he wasn’t quite as smart as he’d hoped – or as fast! Before he could even think to position his bowl, a regurgitated gush of half-chewed food was already slopping across his head and shoulders.

Chapter 13

Chop Off Her Pretty Head

Tilda's evening wasn't much better than Charlie's. After her brother's disastrous antics in the caldarium, Tilda was watched closely by a very suspicious slave master. It was clear that she wasn't trusted. And despite having done nothing wrong, she was singled out for extra work duty and hauled to the humid bowels of the Emperor's busiest kitchen.

Her task was to help the army of cooks and chefs to prepare food. Unsurprisingly, she was given all of the worst jobs.

"Excuse, me, did you just say collect the snails?"

"Yes! They're in the back room, swimming," the cook explained, pointing to what looked like a large pantry. "And hurry up! Fattened snails are the Emperor's favourite delicacy."

Roman Britain really was nothing like Tilda had imagined. The sophisticated intellectuals she'd read about in her history books hardly seemed to resemble this bunch. Surely, people clever enough to conquer half the world could think of tastier things to eat than snails.



According to the slave who hustled Tilda towards the 'fattening' pantry, each snail had been fed on a diet of salt and milk for days. Salt because it made the snails thirsty, and creamy milk because thirsty snails loved it, slurping until they became too fat to fit back into their shells.

Tilda's new job was to gather these slimy gastropods into a bowl, pop off their shells, and drop them into a pan of hot oil. Once cooked, they were to be served to the Emperor and his guests on a bed of shredded leeks.

"I thought it was just French people who ate these things?" Tilda muttered to herself.

"They taste like chicken," a teenage slave whispered. "You should try one – when no one's looking."

I'd rather starve, thought Tilda.

"What about a stuffed dormouse?" asked the girl, waving a tray of food beneath Tilda's nose. "Or perhaps a nice slice of boiled pig's brain?"

Hadn't these people heard of pizza? Tilda swallowed hard, trying not to be sick as she reluctantly fished boiled snails from a pan.

Once that task was completed, she didn't stick around to check out the rest of the food; one glimpse of the pickled sows' udders and a plate of roasted magpies was enough to make her flee. Whatever job they gave her next couldn't be as bad.

"Go to the dining room and help Melussa at once," ordered the Emperor's head of house.

He was a stern man who looked like he had missed more meals than was good for him. His large hooked nose resembled the beak of a long-dead dinosaur.

"I want you to greet the Emperor's guests and help to wash their hands and feet," she was told. "Melussa is a good girl, she'll show you what to do. And don't you dare speak to any of the visitors. These people are the Emperor's most influential senators who are far too important to be bothered by a mere slave."

Tilda didn't know which was worse: frying slimy snails or washing the stinky hands and feet of the haughty diners.

She joined Melussa at the doorway and was handed something that might once have been a sponge.

“This will help you get most of the dirt off,” Melussa told her. She seemed older than Tilda, and long red hair fell down her back like a waterfall. Her tone made it clear that she was taking charge. “Make sure you rub between the toes. And don’t worry, you’ll get used to the smell.”

Despite her companion’s coldness, the two girls worked well together. Melussa greeted the guests with a smile and hung their heavy robes on bronze hooks. The finely-woven fabrics looked expensive and the robes with purple borders and stripes were particularly striking. They seemed to be worn only by the Emperor’s most respected guests.

Once Melussa had washed their hands, the visitors stepped towards Tilda and her sponge.

Some of the Emperor’s guests clearly hadn’t bathed in weeks; their feet stank like sweating cheeses. Tilda lost count of the warts, bunions and verrucae that she encountered.

Eventually, the stream of guests slowed to a trickle, until the two slaves finally found themselves alone with nothing to do.

“We should return to the kitchens,” Melussa told Tilda. “If any guests arrive now, they’ll be late and that would be an insult to the Emperor.”

Tilda was glad there would be no more feet to wash. She’d tried not to think of the bacteria and colonies of diseased germs lurking between those filthy toes, and had consoled herself with the knowledge that things could be even worse.

After all, she had narrowly escaped being chosen as one of the Emperor’s food tasters – apparently, the great and feared leader of Rome was scared of being poisoned.

Tackling a few scabby feet was a piece of cake compared to being force-fed a mouthful of lamb’s brains, roasted magpie, larks tongues and fish guts.

“Some of those robes are beautiful,” Tilda whispered out loud. She allowed her fingers to reach out and touch the fabric.

“What are you doing?” Melussa hissed. “Leave those alone at once! You mustn’t...”

But Tilda wasn’t listening. She was too busy wrapping the fine cotton fabric around her shoulders.

She giggled. "I think purple suits me, don't you?"

Before Melussa had the opportunity to reply, a booming voice reached across the room.

"Take your hands off those garments!"

Tilda became tangled in purple cotton as she turned quickly towards the voice. She found herself suddenly staring at a stern face she recognised.

On the back of an old coin in Professor Howe's treasure room, Emperor Septimius Severus had looked pretty intimidating. In the flesh though, he had the kind of glare that made serial killers look friendly.

"How dare you wear the clothes of Rome?" The Emperor's question seemed more threatening than one of his soldier's swords tips. "Come here, now!"

Tilda gulped. Only seconds earlier, the guests had all been chatting cheerfully and nibbling on disgusting canapés. Now, they were all staring silently at her. Nobody dared even chew.

"Do whatever he says," whispered Melussa. "He might let you live."

Tilda shuffled forward.

“Do you believe yourself above Roman laws?” Septimius Severus roared. “Or are my slaves no longer required to obey our strictest customs?”

The eyes of every guest were focused on her and Tilda felt welded to the spot. A growing sense of dread made her tongue feel thick and heavy.

“I... erm... sorry,” she stammered. “It just felt so nice.”

“Nice?” Septimius growled. “Of course it’s nice. Those robes are made from the finest Egyptian cottons. You shouldn’t even be looking at garments that fine. I’ve had men executed for daring to wear my colours.”

“But it’s just a robe,” Tilda pointed out.

The entire room gasped. Several women shrieked.

“Insolence!” the Emperor howled. “If disrespecting the clothing of my guests wasn’t bad enough, you now dare to question our ancient sumptuary laws and my authority?”

“Surely that’s treasonable, great Caesar?” pointed out

a guest. "Such an offence must not go unpunished."

"Quite right, Torthicus," nodded the Emperor. "Guard, chop off her head!"

As the room was filled with the metallic ring of a heavy sword being unsheathed, Tilda's brain began to overload with terror. This shouldn't be happening. Surely, even in the second century there had to be laws against separating heads from necks?

It was the look of eager excitement on the sword-wielding soldier's face that told her that no such law existed. It also told Tilda that if she wanted to survive, she only had one option.

She ran. Or at least she would have, if three burly guards hadn't grabbed her arms and lifted her off her feet. The tip of the sword was just centimetres from her throat.

"Wait!"

Gasps of uneasy horror rang out around the dining hall. Somebody had dared to challenge the Emperor.

All heads turned to the elegant lady seated in a marble

chair beside the Emperor's throne.

Her blue eyes sparkled confidently beneath raven-coloured hair braided across her head like a crown. It was Emperor Septimius' wife!

"Why don't we have a little fun with our slave first?" she suggested. "This is a party, after all."

At first Emperor Septimius scowled. Clearly, he would have much preferred to see Tilda's head cleaved from her shoulders. Then his lips twitched into a wretched smile, as if an even better idea had just popped into his head.

"You're quite right, my dear Julia," he nodded. "We should throw her to the lions instead."

The room erupted in thunderous applause. Everyone thought it was a wonderful idea. Well, almost everyone.

"No, no, no, no," objected Julia, the Emperor's wife. "The lions have had enough fun with last week's gladiators. Besides, I was thinking of something a little less... well... messy."

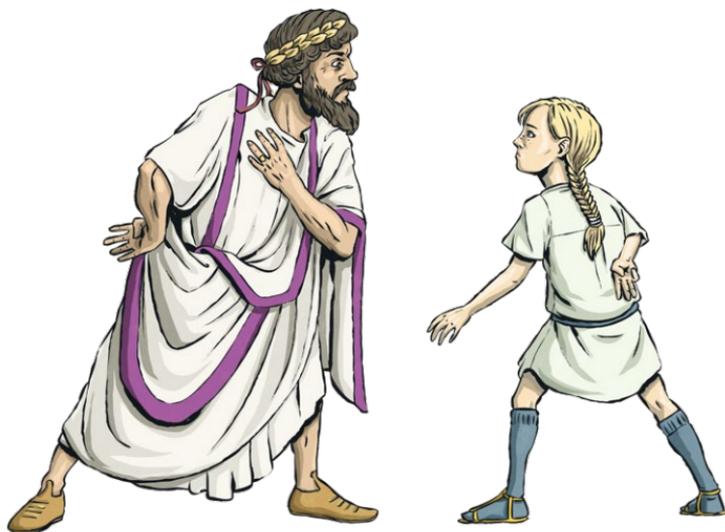
Emperor Septimius looked disappointed, but was placated by a plate of freshly-roasted larks' tongues.

“What did you have in mind, my little lavender petal?”

As Julia smiled gently, Tilda was sure she actually winked towards her.

“Let's play a game. If she wins, we'll sell her at the slave market tomorrow and I'll order your vilicus to purchase that new donkey you've been considering. But if the girl loses, you can chop off her pretty head.”

Emperor Septimius clapped his chubby hands excitedly. “That sounds like I can't lose, and you know how much I love not losing. Deal!”



Chapter 14

The Exploding Emperor

“Have you ever heard of Micare?” Julia whispered to Tilda.

Tilda shook her head, relieved that it was still attached to her neck.

“Don’t worry, he’s useless at it,” the elegant woman smirked, nodding towards her husband. “Especially after a few jugs of wine. I’m sick of him ruining dinner parties with his mindless violence; getting blood stains out of my toga takes forever, and I prefer a good sing-song any day.”

“I’ll keep this simple,” barked the Emperor. “I know you slaves aren’t usually very smart, so here’s how Micare works. First, we both put one hand behind our back.”

After a reassuring smile from the Emperor’s wife, Tilda did as she was instructed.

“Next, we each stick out a number of fingers.”

Tilda chose two.

“We then guess the number on both hands combined. The winner is the one who guesses correctly. And that’s always me.”

Tilda suspected that was because most of his opponents deliberately lost, probably to keep the Emperor happy, and their own heads on their shoulders. However, Tilda was playing to win. Julia counted down from three to one, and both players spoke simultaneously.

Thrusting her hand out in front of her, Tilda made a confident guess: “Five.”

Pulling his own hand from behind his back, the Emperor shouted, “Six!”

“Ha! You’re both wrong,” laughed Julia, counting both sets of fingers. “The answer is four.”

Tilda breathed a sigh of relief, pleased that she had survived to play another round at least.

“Try again,” urged the Emperor’s wife, slowly stepping behind her husband. “Ready?”

The leader of the Roman Empire was concentrating like a cup final penalty taker. His guests were baying with encouragement, urging their host towards a glorious victory. In fact, the only person not taking the game seriously was the Emperor’s wife. Julia was too busy trying to surreptitiously attract Tilda’s attention by wiggling three of her fingers.

Tilda almost missed it. Even when she saw the wiggling digits, she wasn’t entirely sure what they meant. It seemed so unlikely that the Emperor’s wife would be trying to help a slave.

“Hands at the ready!” Julia instructed.

Tilda unfolded four fingers of her own and prepared to thrust her hand forward. Julia counted down.

“Three... two... one...”

Tilda closed her eyes and added her own four fingers to the three the Emperor’s wife had wiggled.

“Six!” shouted the Emperor, extending his three fingers.

“Seven!” shouted Tilda.

Screams and gasps of disbelief rang out around the room. One large man even fainted.

“The slave wins!” yelled Julia. “Bravo!”

For a moment, Emperor Septimius looked like he might explode. His mean face flushed the colour of a cricket ball and his worried guests each held their breath, waiting for the leader’s temper to ignite.

After a moment of silence that seemed to last an hour, the Emperor surprised them all.

“Good... great! I’ve been wanting a new donkey for months; a white one with big ears, and a black ‘go faster’ cross down its back.”

He waved his hand through the air. “Take this slave

away and make it look presentable. If I don't get top price at tomorrow's market, somebody will pay."

As two brawny guards hauled Tilda away, she mouthed a discreet 'thank you' to the Emperor's wife.

Chapter 15

Escape Is a Smelly Business

The next morning, Charlie was in the exercise yard. The smell of vomit seemed to follow him like a wretched shadow. Yet that was the least of his worries.

If being spewed on by a bloated tribune wasn't bad enough, finding out he was going to be punished because of it was even worse.

"How can it be my fault?" he'd pleaded the night before, as a burly servant had dragged him to the dungeon. "I'm the one covered in puke."

"Your job was to hold the bowl up," he was reminded, before being shoved into a tiny cell. "There'll be a serious punishment when the slave master finds out you couldn't even do that."

Before the sun had a chance to rise, Charlie had already been hauled from the slab of stone that was meant to be his bed. Without even a sniff of breakfast, he was then marched to a dusty training yard and made to join a group of sorry-looking legionnaires.

It quickly became clear that Charlie was being put



put through a punishment session designed for soldiers who weren't making the grade. Charlie wasn't sure whom the drill sergeant hated the most – him, or the failing legionnaires.

After an eight-kilometre run and an hour spent holding a shield during combat training, Charlie ached all over. He desperately wanted to go home.

As a group of battle-dressed soldiers drew jealous glances from Charlie's latest companions, a voice barked words in his direction.

“Look who we have here!”

Charlie peered over the rim of his shield and locked eyes with a gloating Blutos.

Before he could stop himself, he heard the words spill from his mouth, “Good morning, idiot!”

Surprisingly, Blutos ignored the insult. Perhaps it was because he'd already lost that argument. Or maybe because he could hardly wait to share what new information he had.

“Heard about your sister, Brigante?” A mocking smile

danced across his lips.

Charlie was suddenly worried. "What about her? If she's been hurt I'll..."

"You'll do nothing," Blutos laughed. "Besides, you couldn't help her if you wanted to. She left here last night."

"Left?" gasped Charlie. "How? Where?"

Before Blutos could give him an answer, the group's drill sergeant bellowed, "On your feet, you pathetic wasters!"

He tossed an object into the middle of the yard. It looked like an inflated pig's bladder glued between two wooden squares. "It's trigon time. Let's see how long you lot can keep this off the ground."

The trainees all groaned. They were tired, sore and utterly miserable. So the last thing any of them wanted was to spend the next hour or two throwing and catching the balls.

"Oh, you'll love a good session of trigon," Blutos guffawed. "Make sure it doesn't hit the ground – I've heard it's ten lashes for anyone who drops it. Don't worry though, I'll tell the drill master to make

a special exception in your case, and give you twenty!”

To make matters even worse, trigon had to be the most boring game in the Empire. Charlie and his two companions formed a wide triangle and then began throwing the ball to each other.

It soon became obvious that the object of the game was to avoid dropping the ball. Yet at the same time, the throwers tried their best to make the ball uncatchable. Soon Charlie was doing his best to field spinning lobs, hand-stinging full tosses and deliberately shortened throws.

It took his full concentration to make sure he didn't become the loser. His mind was so focused that he didn't notice Blutos creep up beside him.

“Your sister is to be sold at today's slave market.” The fat soldier could barely contain his glee. “The highest bidder gets to keep her. I reckon by this time tomorrow, she'll be on her way to Rome.”

“Rome?” Charlie fretted, almost dropping the trigon ball. “But that's in Italy! I'll never see her again.”

Blutos nodded and grinned. “All because someone

couldn't keep his mouth shut, eh? Now who feels like an idiot?" Charlie ignored the legionnaire's vengeful smirk. He suddenly had much bigger things on his mind. Like working out how to escape from the fortress and rescue Tilda, and getting back through the time wall, before they became trapped forever.

He was still trying to figure out a master plan when the game came to a sudden halt. One of the legionnaires in another group had dropped the ball and was already in the press-up position.

"This is so dull," Charlie heard one of the other soldiers grumble. "You'd think the Emperor's cleverest aediles would have invented a more exciting game than this by now."

"There's little chance of that ever happening," scoffed his companion. "Being a soldier isn't about fun. It's about duty. And duty is just another word for boring. If I had my way, I'd wallop these stupid trigon balls so hard they'd break in two."

Charlie could barely keep the smile off his face as a brilliant plan suddenly formed in his mind.

As the soldiers continued to grumble, Charlie scanned

the training area for something useful. He eventually spotted the perfect item; a thickly-carved wooden training sword. As the remaining Romans watched their companion struggle to reach fifty press-ups, Charlie grabbed the sword and rushed towards the drill sergeant.

“Halt!” howled the sergeant, dragging his own iron sword from its scabbard.

Charlie skidded to a stop just centimetres from the pointed tip.

“Put down that sword, slave,” ordered the Roman. “Before I show you what a real sword can do.”

“Oh, erm, no, no, sorry,” Charlie apologised, “It’s not what you think... I just wanted to show you something.”

The sergeant scowled down the steel blade. “What, you think I’ve never seen a sword before?”

“Of course,” Charlie replied. “But I thought I’d show you an old Brigante tribal game.”

Before anyone could stop him, and as his brilliant idea got even more brilliant, Charlie stamped down onto

the wooden sword, snapping the pointed end clean off.

“Do you know the punishment for damaging the property of Rome?” Blutos hissed.

Charlie ignored the soldier. Holding up what was left of the heavy wooden sword, he explained, “Our warriors call this a bat. Let each soldier take it in turns to try and hit one of those trigon balls as high and as far as you can, then see if they can race all the way around the training yard before the other team can retrieve the ball.”

The drill sergeant looked interested. Even Blutos was paying silent attention.

“It might be a little too tough for your pampered soldiers,” Charlie teased. “It’s a bit of a lung buster.”

Charlie was pleased when the drill sergeant took the bait. “There’s nothing you wretched savages can do that a Roman can’t do better!”

“Okay,” Charlie nodded. “If you really want to tire out your soldiers and test their fitness, split them into two equal teams and let me explain the rules to the game.”

The drill sergeant thought for a moment.

“Does this game of yours have a name?”

Charlie grinned. “Rounders!”



Within minutes, the Roman legionnaires were having the time of their lives. As the ball was hurled towards them, they each took it in turns to swing and flail and swipe at the little wooden sphere. They soon got the hang of it and before long, trigon balls were sailing clean over the fortress walls – exactly as Charlie had hoped.

Eventually, the last trigon ball disappeared over the wall.

“Now what are we going to do?” one of them grumbled. “We can’t play without a ball and I was really starting to enjoy myself.”

“Go and get it then,” suggested a man with a missing ear.

“No chance,” said the first man. “I didn’t hit it.”

“Well I’m not getting it, either,” insisted one-ear.

“Nor am I,” echoed another.

“Count me out, too; I’m worn out already,” said his pal.

None of the Romans wanted to fetch their missing balls.

With his plan now in full swing, Charlie flapped his arms in mock annoyance and trudged towards the fortress doors.

“Okay, okay... I get the message: it’s my game, I’m the smelly Brigante, so it’s up to me to fetch the balls.”

The Roman soldiers were obviously grateful for the chance to rest and catch their breath; rounders was exhausting! They were more than happy to see the guards open the fortress doors and let Charlie out.

They were even happier still when Charlie began hurling the balls back over the wall and the game restarted; they hadn’t had this much fun in... well... ever!

Which perhaps explained why none of them noticed when Charlie failed to return through the doors. Nobody saw him wander casually down the road, either.

And not one pair of Roman eyes watched as he hitched a ride on a passing manure cart and rode away towards the next village. Charlie Hacker was free!



Chapter 16

Top Price for Tilda

Unfortunately, Tilda Hacker was still very much a prisoner. The iron chains around her wrists and ankles reminded her of that. And she was scared. This was the first time she'd been put up for sale.

The market was crowded. A collection of traders sold their wares from simple table tops; they served eager customers with freshly roasted meats, roughly woven clothing, and crudely crafted cooking pots, wooden serving bowls and iron farming tools. Trade was brisk.

However, all that stopped as soon as the town's officious-looking auctioneer climbed onto a stack of

hay bales and called for everyone's attention. His tone told them that the day's real business was about to begin.

It seemed that every Roman or Briton with a few coins to rub together had come to bid for a slave. And there were plenty to choose from: old ones, young ones, strong ones and weak ones. They were all available for the right price.

Tilda was attracting a lot of attention. In fact, she was the auctioneer's star lot. And she was scheduled to be sold next.

Two stocky Roman guards tugged on a pair of chains, dragging Tilda into the centre of the market square.

Tilda felt a rough hand squeeze her arm. "Plenty of fat on that," a voice yelled.

A strong hand yanked her hair. "Nice and healthy."

Somebody else prodded her in the back. "She's a strong 'un, alright. There's plenty 'o years of hard graft in her."

Tilda suddenly felt like a cow at a village fête. Couldn't these people see that she was a human being?

The auctioneer banged a heavy stick against the top of an ale barrel and the market fell silent.

“Next lot is a slave from the Emperor’s house itself.”

A ripple of enthusiasm swept through the crowd of would-be bidders.

“As you can see, she’s not the usual specimen; our Roman masters haven’t had time to beat the best years out of her yet, so you could be getting quite a bargain here.”

A few eager bidders hollered and whooped.

“The Emperor wants top price, though,” warned the auctioneer as he peered down at an unfurled scroll. “However, it does say here that he will give first refusal to any bidder offering a clean white donkey that has a ‘go faster’ cross on its back.”

When nobody offered such a beast, the auctioneer continued.

“Okay, cash bids it is... will anyone start me off with two thousand silver denarii?”

Nobody responded.

“Come on,” cried the auctioneer. “This is a prime northern female; the best we’ve seen in years. At two thousand silver denarii, I’m giving her away.”

Still no response.

“Okay, one thousand. Will anyone bid one thousand silver denarii?”

“Five hundred!” yelled a voice from the back of the market.

“I have five hundred,” acknowledged the auctioneer. “Will anyone give me six? Thank you, dear. We have six hundred from the farmer’s wife at the front. Now, does anyone bid seven?”

“Seven!”

“A generous bid from the finely-dressed businessman... a man who clearly knows a quality product. But she’s worth more than that... who will offer eight hundred?”



Charlie was still gasping. He had leapt from the manure

cart as soon as it had reached the outskirts of the village, and then desperately sprinted towards the crowded square, hoping that he wasn't too late.

Too small to see over the heads of the crowd, he leapt onto an upturned barrel and watched as excited men peppered the auctioneer with bids. They were all trying to buy Tilda!

"Eleven hundred dinarii!" hollered a toothless slave trader. He looked like he hadn't washed in months.

"Twelve hundred," screeched a wiry rival, carrying a piglet under his arm.

As the value climbed, Tilda looked more and more distressed. She had already given up trying to free her wrists from the biting iron shackles and now her desperate eyes scanned the crowd, clearly seeking a saviour.

Charlie waved his arms until his sister's eyes locked onto his. For a moment, relief drained her face of all distress and her lips moved silently: Help me, Charlie.

Her brother's nod seemed to reassure her for a moment but time was against Charlie. The bidding was slowing down and the auctioneer looked set to bring down his

gavel in a matter of seconds. Somehow, Charlie needed to come up with another escape plan, and fast!

There was so little he could do. Roman guards stood on sentry at every exit from the market. The auctioneer was surrounded by a ring of burly henchmen packing clubs the size of cricket bats. Charlie only had one option.

“FOURTEEN HUNDRED DINARII!” he bellowed at the top of his voice.

The entire bidding audience seemed to gasp as one. Even the auctioneer seemed a little stunned as he peered across the crowd at Charlie.

“Erm... I have a new bid from the... erm... the dwarf at the back.”

“Fifteen hundred!” yelled the unwashed trader.

“Sixteen hundred!” Charlie screamed back.

“Seventeen!”

“Eighteen!”

The crowd grew silent and the atmosphere suddenly

became tense. This was serious money – the kind that only wealthy Romans and corrupt Britons had to spare.

“Nineteen!” Charlie’s rival was sweating, as if the tension was getting to him, too.

But Charlie didn’t care. It was quite fun spending money he didn’t have. He just hoped that by winning the auction, he would buy himself enough time to figure out how to free his sister. Paying for her wasn’t an option.

“Two thousand!” Charlie barked.

The people around him stared in disbelief. Some even backed away, as if scared by the price itself. For many in the crowd, two thousand dinarii was an amount they could only dream of.

“Do I hear a bid for two thousand and one hundred dinarii?” the auctioneer asked.

All eyes fell on Charlie’s rival bidder. Even the piglet tucked beneath his arm seemed to pause and look up at its master. Everyone waited for the man’s next bid.

But it never came. Instead, the man gave a stern shake of his head and a defeated wave from his hand.

The crowd cheered. Charlie had won!

Heavy hands slapped him on the back. Some punters even shook his hand. And women kissed his cheek. Then two sets of strong hands grabbed his arms.

“Nice bidding,” whispered a menacing voice. It belonged to one of the auctioneer’s huge henchmen. “Now it’s time to cough up.”



Chapter 17

The Sweet Sound of Sirens

Charlie was half-carried, half-dragged to the auctioneer's podium. He hadn't expected things to happen so fast. There wasn't even time to gather his thoughts, never mind craft an escape plan.

Tilda was brought to meet him. Her iron chains were quickly removed and as she massaged her sore wrists, she shot her brother a look that seemed to ask him what he planned to do next.

"She's all yours," said the grinning auctioneer. If he was shocked to see that his winning customer was a boy, he didn't show it. "As soon as you hand over

my two thousand silver denarii.”

Charlie gave his sister a feeble shrug as he said, “I think there might have been a small misunderstanding...”

The henchman’s fingers gripped Charlie’s arm like a police dog’s bite.

“You see,” Charlie continued, “...I thought that was the amount you were going to give me to take her off your hands.”

“You mean you don’t have my money?”

“Well, when you put it like that...” The throbbing veins on the auctioneer’s neck told Charlie that this wasn’t going to end well. “I suppose... no.”

The auctioneer was shaking now and his entire face looked swollen and scalded.

“She’s my sister,” Charlie pleaded. “I need to get her back home.”

The snarling auctioneer seized Charlie by his shirt and began to shake him like a toy. “Do you know what your little trick will do to my reputation? I’ll be

laughed out of –”

Then the shaking stopped. Something small, round and glistening had just bounced out of Charlie’s sock.

It hit the floor with a clank before twisting and spinning across the dust.

Slowly, the auctioneer released his grip on Charlie and smoothed down the creases in his shirt. A smile stretched his mouth as he crouched down to pluck the object off the ground.

“I thought you said you couldn’t pay?”

The auctioneer held up the tiny golden signet ring that Charlie and Tilda had taken from Professor Howe’s treasure vault. Its stone sparkled in the sunlight like a torch.

Everyone stared open-mouthed at the ring as if it was an alien from outer space. Charlie couldn’t understand what was so special about it – nor did he care.

This was the opportunity he had been waiting for, so while the auctioneer and his henchmen were busy gazing at the ring, Charlie grabbed hold of Tilda’s

hand and pulled her into the crowd.

At first, nobody said a word. People simply watched in stunned silence as the two children dashed through the marketplace as fast as their young legs would carry them.

Charlie thought they'd got away with it. Tilda, too. Until a booming voice chased after them.

"Stop those children!"

"Hurry!" gasped Charlie. "Let's get to the wall."

"I'm going as fast as I can," Tilda panted, but they knew it wasn't fast enough. The clatter of chasing footsteps was getting louder with every step.

As they emerged from a gap between two mud huts and left the village, Tilda pointed to a familiar-looking section of wall.

"It's there, hurry!"

"Don't we need the coins?" Charlie worried.

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Tilda hoped, even though the

tone of her voice betrayed an obvious lack of belief.

They could hear the panting breath of their pursuers, now only strides behind them. Summoning stamina and strength they didn't know they had, Charlie and Tilda made a final desperate dash. It seemed like they were going to make it right up until they were just metres from the wall, when one of the auctioneer's henchmen rugby-tackled them both. Charlie face-planted straight into the grass. Tilda crashed to earth beside him.

The auctioneer himself arrived moments later. His face was flushed red and he panted for breath like a retired greyhound.

"Why... did... you... run?" he gasped.

"It was our only chance," Charlie admitted.

"We had to try," Tilda nodded. "We don't belong here."

"But there's no need to run." The auctioneer waved the ring at them. "Not when you possess an item like this."

"Oh, sure," Tilda sneered. "I suppose you'd just let Charlie swap the ring for me?"

“Well, actually, yes,” the auctioneer nodded. “If your brother is happy with such a transaction.”

“Happy?” Charlie gasped. “Why wouldn’t I be happy? It’s not even m- ouch!”

Tilda kicked her brother’s shin. “Is it valuable, then?”

“In the right hands, something like this could be almost priceless,” the auctioneer confirmed. “This ring carries the Emperor’s mark. These are only given to his most valued and trusted subjects.”

Charlie shrugged “If it’s so important, why did you chase us? You can have it if it means we can leave this awful place.”

Bending close so he couldn’t be overheard, the auctioneer whispered to the two children. “This ring doesn’t belong to you, does it?”

Charlie shuffled awkwardly. “Erm, well...”

“I could get into a lot of trouble for accepting stolen property. Especially property like this.” He dropped his voice even lower as he gave Tilda and Charlie a knowing wink. “But if it’s really valuable, there might

be a reward for its return.”

“We found it,” Tilda interrupted. “We didn’t steal it. It doesn’t belong to anyone from this... erm... place.”

“Good!” The auctioneer seemed relieved. “In that case, it’ll be easier to sell. A ring bearing the Emperor’s mark can open a lot of doors, and I know people who would give me several thousand denarii to get their hands on this.”

Charlie and Tilda exchanged hopeful glances.

“Let me keep this ring and you can go free,” the auctioneer promised.

Charlie didn’t hesitate. He thrust his hand towards the auctioneer’s, ready to give it a vigorous shake. He was about to say “Deal!” when Tilda stepped between them.

“I want something else.”

Disappointment wrinkled the auctioneer’s brow. “You do?”

Charlie echoed the man’s question. “We do?”

“We need a key to get us home, remember?” Tilda’s hushed words reminded him.

Tilda thrust her palm forward. “It would be awful if the Emperor ever found out that you had his ring. Give both of us a solid gold aureus and I guarantee you’ll never see or hear from us again.”

A second later, two golden coins were nestled in Tilda’s hand. Her fingers snapped shut around them and before the auctioneer had the chance to change his mind, Tilda grabbed her younger brother by the wrist and yanked him towards the wall. She just had time to push one of the coins into Charlie’s hand before she hurled them both straight at the ancient stonework.



Brother and sister collapsed breathlessly onto the soft, sweet grass of York’s museum gardens. A few curious tourists glanced across at them, wondering why two children were wearing fancy dress. But on the whole, Charlie and Tilda’s return to the twenty-first century went largely unnoticed.

Charlie could feel the sun beating down against his

back, but what kept him pinned to the floor was the soft and reassuring murmur that only comes from the gathering of summertime tourists. It was definitely a twenty-first-century sound. And they were definitely the same tourists he'd seen before they left. Which could only mean one thing: back in twenty-first-century York, they had only been gone for minutes, not days.

Tilda smiled as the beat of pop music filtered from the speakers in the museum café. Both children grinned happily at the distant howl of a police siren.

Minutes later, as they made their way back towards the antique shop, Charlie linked his arm around his sister's and held out the bag of Roman coins. "You know, I think we should give these to Dad to sell in the shop."

Tilda agreed. "We should probably give him all of Professor Howe's other coins too."

"Even the Viking coins?"

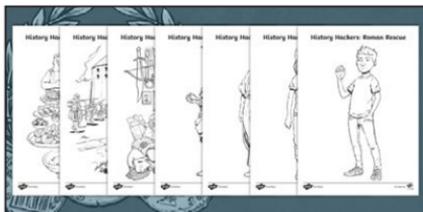
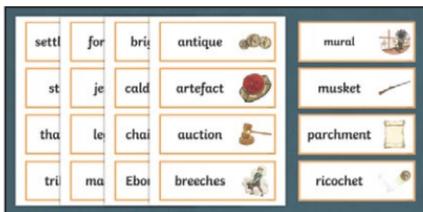
"Especially the Viking coins," Tilda insisted. "Apparently they were far worse than the Romans. And the Anglo-Saxons weren't much better either."

She paused to scratch her head. “Come to think of it, I’m not entirely sure if anywhere in the past is a good place to visit.”

Charlie felt a little flutter of excitement rumble through his belly. “I guess there’s only one way we’ll ever really find out.”

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“Charlie ducked back behind the wall, hardly daring to breathe. Had he really just seen Roman soldiers?”

Tilda and Charlie Hacker know that time travel isn't possible. So, when they discover a secret room in their new house containing the journals of the mysterious Professor Howe, they can't believe their eyes.

Catapulted back into a time of Roman occupation, the history-hopping Hackers find themselves in unfamiliar and dangerous territory, and Tilda is forced to play a game of life and death with the leader of all Rome.

Can Charlie find a way to escape an impenetrable fortress and rescue his sister before they are trapped in time forever?

