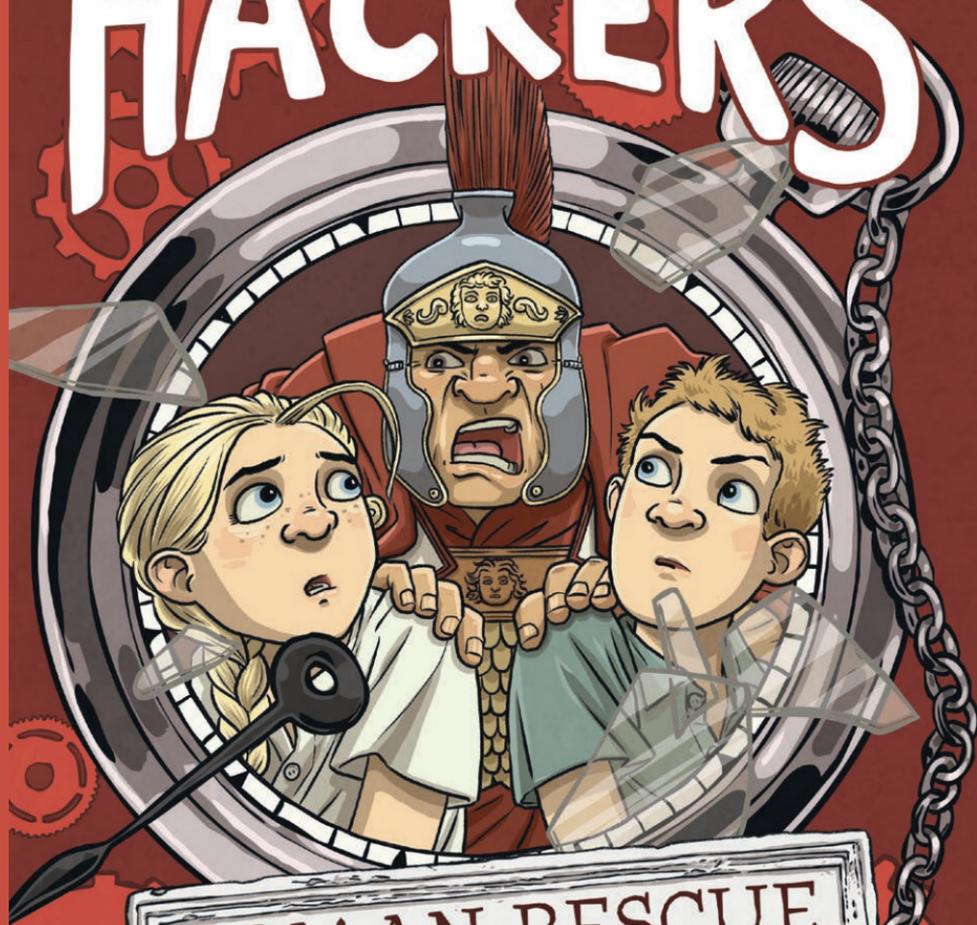


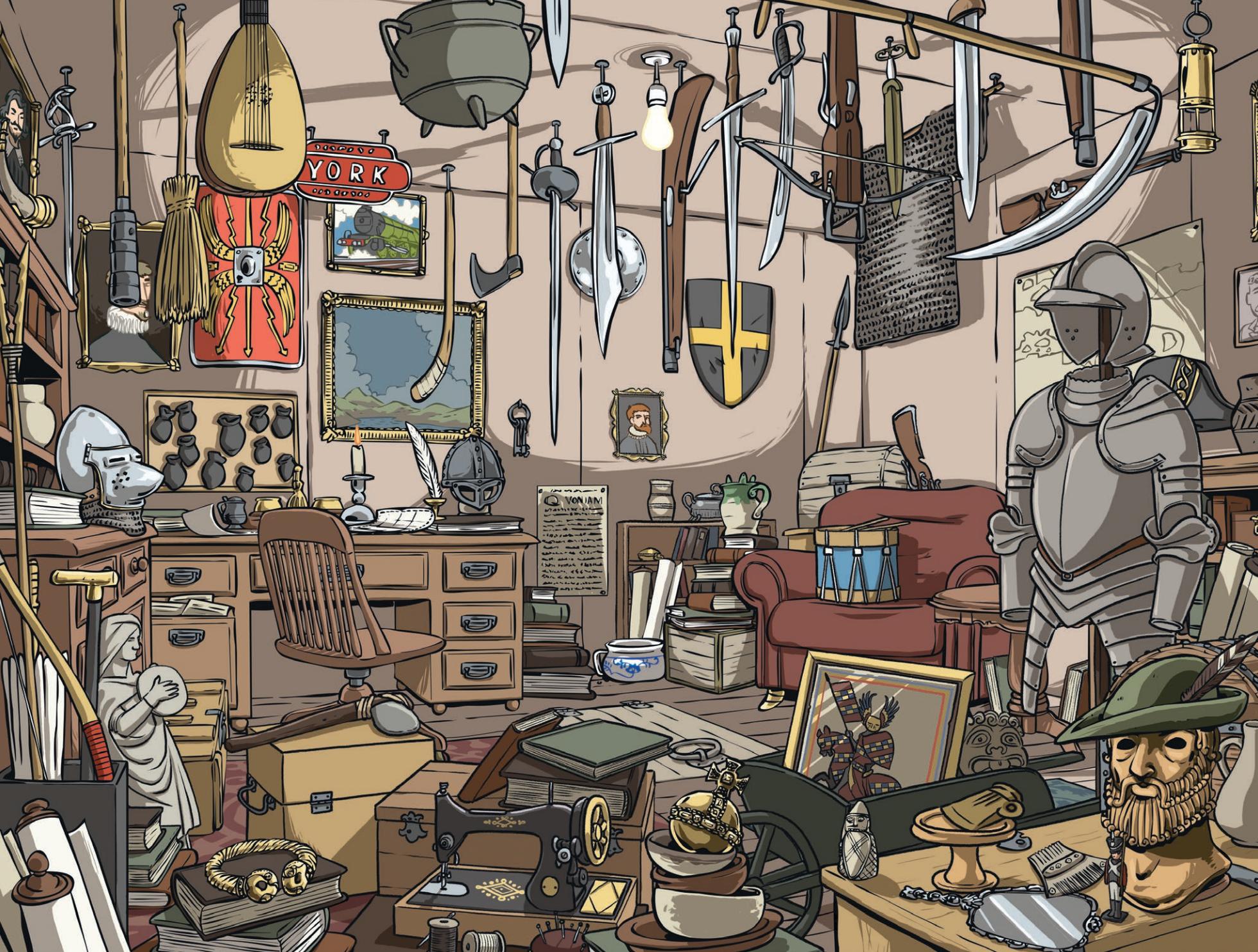
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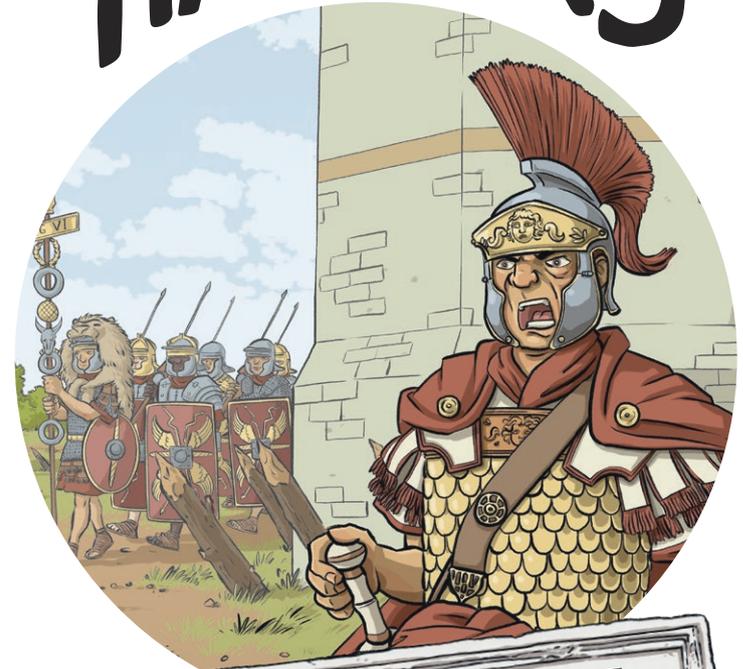
ROMAN RESCUE





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HISTORY HACKERS



ROMAN RESCUE

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Chapter One

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 towards 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?”

“Um, 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. They had no idea what they would find beyond the door at the top of the staircase. She 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 antiques shop for almost three months now. According to letters that the postperson 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 the wall on her left. “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 doubt her intelligence. “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 this very minute, 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 felt 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 round and snatched a handful of her brother's T-shirt. "Charlie Hacker, you're

a genius!"

"Eh?"

"Give me 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 down against the door handle with all the strength she could muster. The rubber sole hit its mark with a determined thud and then bounced back up and out of Tilda's hand, rolling down the first few steps of the staircase.

"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."

Retrieving the shoe, Tilda moved back resolutely 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 Tilda's stomach until, eventually, the handle gave a satisfying click.

As the door sprang ajar, a sliver 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 smelt 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... um... 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 her gaze bounced from one corner to the next, Tilda was shocked to see that every centimetre of space was filled with exactly the same thing...

Nothing.



Chapter Two

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, filthy carpet. Freshly disturbed streams of dust tumbled like flour from the roughly sawn ceiling beams and the sloping bare walls. Disappointment prised 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 exclaimed.

He bustled 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 fifties,” 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 anybody –”

“Hah! Found something!”

Her brother seemed to be locked in a corner of the room, hunched over and concentrating. 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 it were red hot to her touch.

“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 paused, 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,



prising one of the floorboards up, revealing a dark space below. Peering down into the gloom, he gasped. “A trapdoor!”

The blackness below them contained a narrow ladder, its rungs angled gently away from the floor as if beckoning them downwards.

Tilda thrust her head and shoulders into the space, twisting so she could peer all around.

“I think I can see an entrance to another room.” Her voice sounded muffled and distant. “And this one doesn’t look empty!”



Chapter Three

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.

Descending the wooden rungs, Tilda was surprised to find that the underfloor space 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 antiques shop below had a distinctive smell: occasional wafts of slowly decaying wood and fabrics, ancient polish steadily fermenting and water-damaged paper gradually decomposing. And 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!" Tilda exclaimed. She had already scaled the second ladder and was, now, bursting through a second trapdoor into Professor Howe's secret room. "It's like some kind of vault."

Excitement sent giddy butterflies fluttering in Charlie's stomach. As he scrambled to join his sister, the sights that greeted him struck like a laser beam.

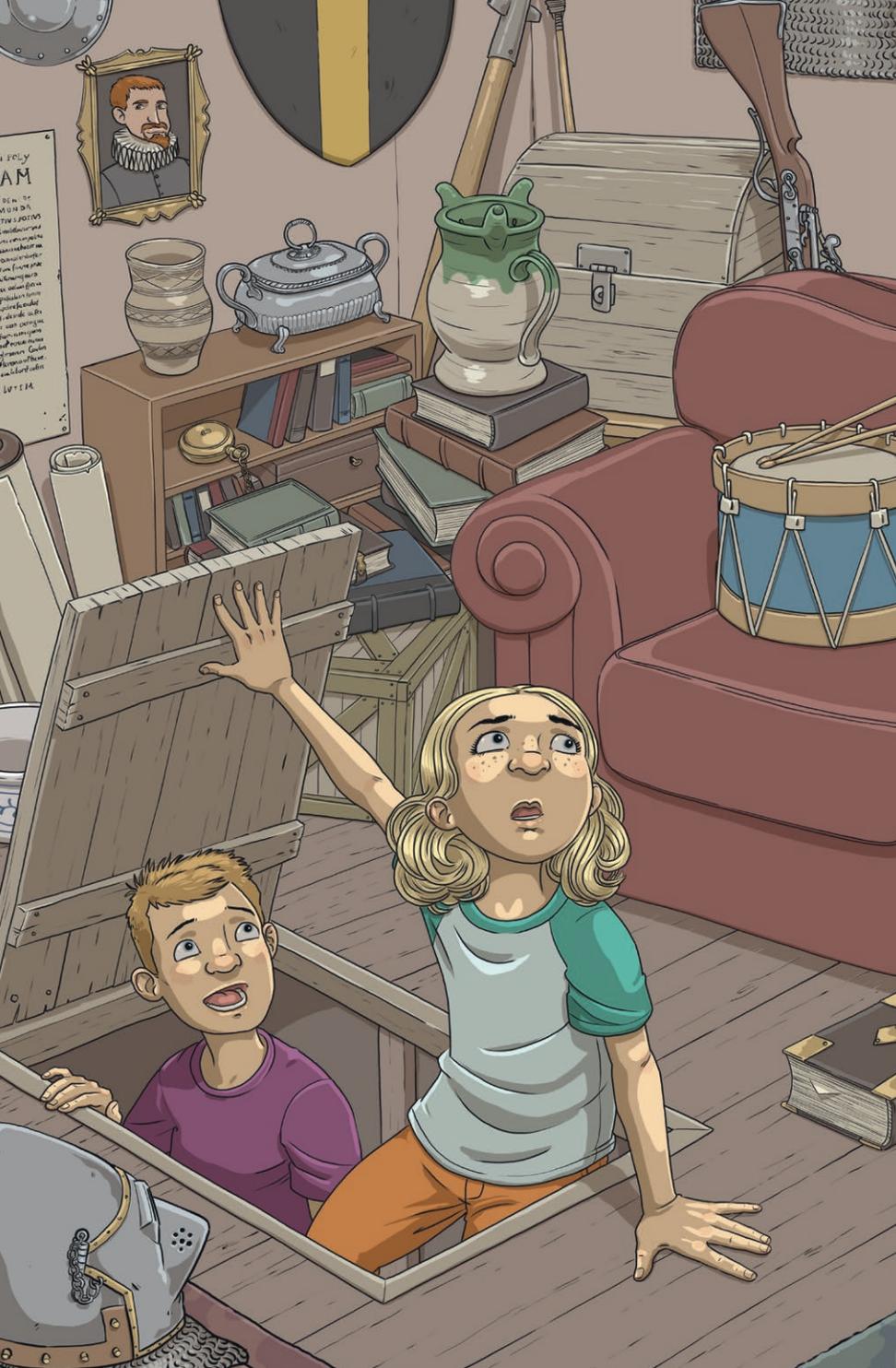
Tilda had been wrong. This wasn't a vault at all. This was more like a treasure chamber.

Charlie's eyes widened. "Wow! I knew it!" he cried. "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, with parchment spilling out of the drawers. Wooden trunks and chests, mostly studded with iron bands and rivets, were stacked in the remaining corners. Intriguing ledgers and thick scrolls were scattered around the room. However, it was the room's walls that entranced Tilda the most. 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. Chain mail 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 more 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 stepped farther into the room. The weapon felt heavy to hold; the wooden stock had the shape and smoothness that was clearly crafted by hand.

“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. 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 been in the sun for too long.”



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 scriptwriter... 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 Four

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 pocketbook.”

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 round until she was facing the room. “Everyone knows that.”

“Everyone, except maybe the professor.”

“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.

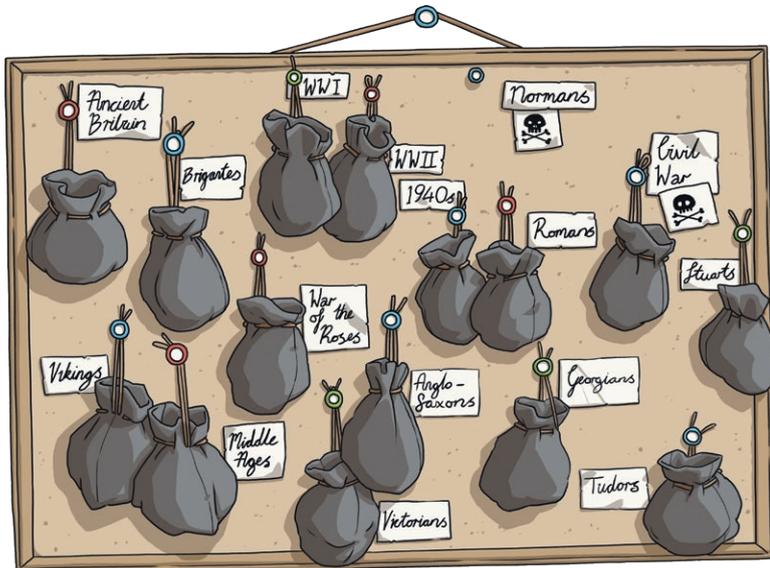
The two children stood staring at the large, rectangular corkboard that had been screwed to the wall. A collection of tiny leather pouches

hung from pins, each with a handwritten label showing various periods of time. One hook read 'Brigantes'; another read 'War of the Roses'. Along with 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 above a label reading 'Normans' and a skull and crossbones



sign. "Why is one missing?"

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

Tilda remembered seeing a similar 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 into her hand.

Three thin, gold coins danced across her skin, plus a small, gold 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. His 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 ‘Anglo-Saxons’, a couple of beads along with 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 other 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 clasping the contents of the Romans pouch safely in his hand and hopping with glee. “We’ve got to see if we can open one of those doors!”



Chapter Five

A Tree with Secrets

“This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” grumbled Charlie, staring at his reflection in the antiques 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, who was gazing back at her own reflection. Her sparkling eyes suggested that she thought they both looked amazing – just like the pictures of Roman peasants that she had found online earlier.

Charlie 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 leggings, but it was the best they’d been able to find. One of his father’s old linen shirts hung down almost to his knees, fastened around his waist by a plain leather belt. A pair of tatty, brown gardening sandals, which had been perched on a shoe rack near the door, completed the look.

Tilda’s outfit was almost identical, although she had swapped leggings for knee-length socks and her long hair was tied neatly in a braid.

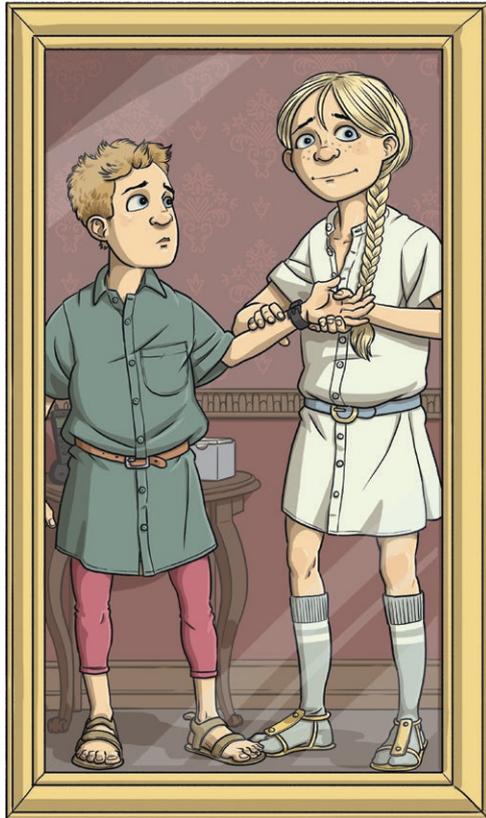
They’d already decided to explore the location of the doorway marked ‘Romans’. It hadn’t been a difficult decision. According to the professor’s map, the time door was just a few streets from their parents’ shop, right beside the remains of an old Roman tower, which was popular with out-of-town visitors.

“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 popped the contents of the Romans pouch into the pocket on his shirt, checked the time on his wristwatch and headed towards the door.



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

"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 in the direction of the antiques 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. And 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 an 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."

Sitting perched on the lid of a litter bin, Tilda peered down at the map and then pointed to the building behind her brother. "The museum 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 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. But, as her newly discovered 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 had been used quite a lot. Some parts were smudged. Others housed smears where raindrops had made the ink run. Near the sketch of the Romans’ door, 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 strange.” Tilda wrinkled her forehead. “I think a word was once written next to this image of the door, but not the others.”

“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. Now, as she continued to stare, her eyes began to recognise a pattern. First, just a single letter. Then, another. Until...

“Forfeit!”

“What?”

Tilda jabbed at the spot on the map. “The hidden word – it says forfeit.”

“Four feet?” Charlie glanced down at his own feet, as if he were 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!”

“OK, let’s try. Get out one of the coins,” Tilda instructed, although common sense told her this was maybe just one big waste of time. “Be careful. Remember – it’s probably quite valuable.”

Charlie stared at the coin and then at the tree and 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.” His face flushed the colour of a sunset as his anger and disappointment brewed.

“Stupid tree! Stupid map! Stupid coins!”

Perhaps, if Tilda hadn’t been pondering what to have for lunch, she would have been quick enough to stop Charlie. By the time she realised what her brother was about to do, though, 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 and 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 stretched to grab hold of her brother's shirt. But it was already too late.

Charlie had reached the wall and pushed the tiny gold 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 Six

Rumbled by Romans

Charlie had expected his skull to crash against the 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 it 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 before. As he climbed to his feet, he tucked the coins and the ring into his shirt pocket 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 fortress looked wrong. It seemed new! And that wasn't the only thing that appeared 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, shields 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 on the edge of 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 were no car engines rumbling, no mobile phones chirping and neither a single siren nor vehicle alarm. In fact, the loudest sound Charlie could hear was the tweet of songbirds coming from a nearby hedgerow.

What Charlie noticed most of all, though, 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 champion 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 grabbing one of the coins from his pocket, 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.

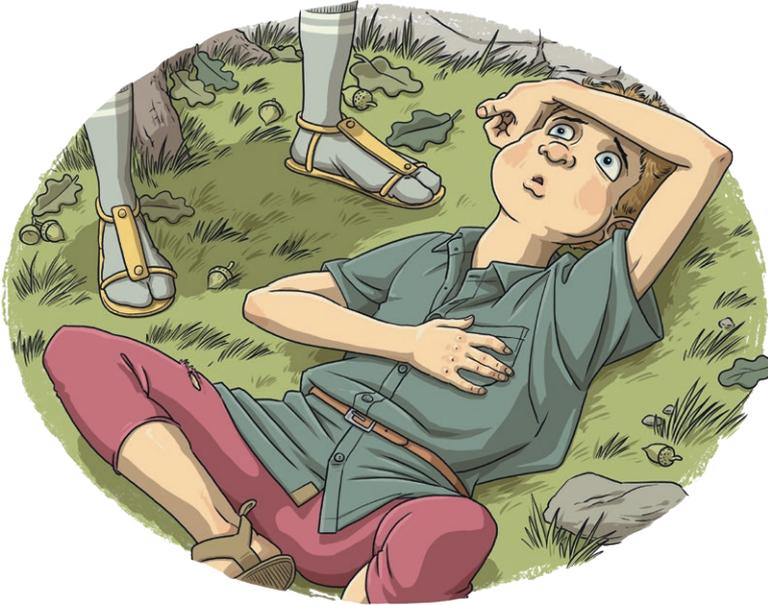
One half of his brain screamed at him to run. The other half urged him to stay still, telling him that none of this was real, and that he was perfectly safe. Unfortunately, Charlie believed the wrong half.

“I’ve gorrin!” growled a voice as shovel-sized hands snatched at 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 leggings. 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. With one ear pressed



to the earth, the vibrations of large feet wearing even larger sandals could be felt kicking and stamping around him.

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

Charlie had never been so relieved to smell diesel

fumes. He gulped dirty twenty-first-century air like a desperate fish and scrabbled behind the oak tree's thick trunk.

"Are they gone?" His eyes flashed with panic.

Tilda looked at her brother with confusion. "Are who gone?"

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

Tilda snorted. "Um, yeah! They left here in AD four hundred and ten 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. The last time she checked, Charlie wasn't in any way magical.



She crouched beside her brother 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 who were *pretty* furious about something. 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 leggings.

“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 forwards 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 the ground just centimetres away.

Looking behind her, 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, grabbing her hand and pocketing the small coin she had used. Frantically, he dragged 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 Seven

Living Statues

The Hacker siblings 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, which appeared to be bleached white, hung heavily from his head in untidy strips. His dark eyes raged with hostility.

"Away with yer," he bellowed. "Find yer own beasts. Them are mine!"

Feeling wholly unwelcome, Charlie and Tilda backed away from the stinking pen. Ducking low and hoping no one else would see them, the two children crawled past a mound of steaming manure before pushing 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 learnt at school. Eventually, she pulled a collection of facts from one of last term's history classes.

“Historians think it was built by 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 AD two hundred and eight and AD two hundred and eleven.” 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?"

"Shut up! 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, shut up," 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 memories from history lessons 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 forwards 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 buried her head in 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 Eight

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 gold coins spun free of Charlie’s pocket. 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 gold aurei. 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. “Savage folk like you don’t deserve coins like these!”

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, Emperor Septimius Severus 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 Blutos 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, um...” 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 whip 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.”

“OK, 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?”

“Um...” 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... um... 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.

“Um... 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 and the next, he says eleven. You said

yourself that only –”

“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 Nine

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 said –” began Tilda.

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

“But we have to get home,” protested Charlie weakly. “I have... um... 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.

Brushing over Charlie’s protests, 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 servi to help.”

Tilda racked her brains, certain that she had

heard this word before in history lessons. All at once, she remembered: ‘servi’ meant enslaved people, with ‘servus’ being used for an enslaved man or boy and ‘serva’ for an enslaved woman or girl. “He means enslaved people,” she hissed to Charlie.

“We’re not servi,” 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 ground. 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 overseer 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 that 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 and then handed across to a grumpy overseer.

The stocky man’s lopsided sneer told them he wouldn’t think twice about using the whip that was 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 were heated stone tiles, 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 them to get home.”

Tilda didn’t answer. She was too busy scolding herself for trusting her younger brother with something so important.

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

“Um, excuse me,” Tilda said bravely, turning

round. “I think there’s been some kind of mistake.”

The overseer stopped, squeezing the handle of his whip with his gnarled hand. “Oh really?”

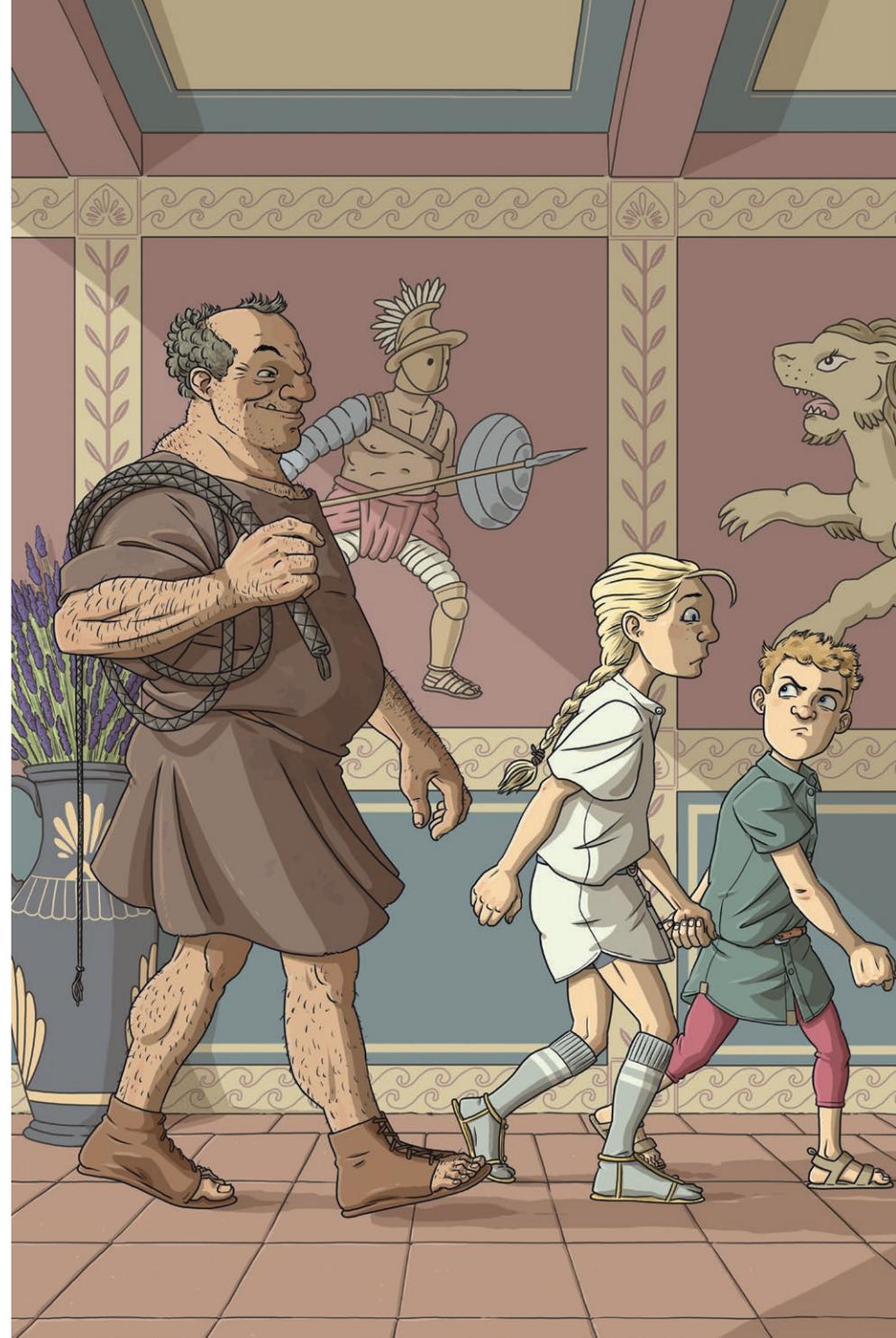
“Yes,” Tilda continued, growing hopeful. “We’re not servi at all, you see. We’re just ordinary children.”

“Oh, I see,” replied the overseer. 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 overseer stated, 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 overseer 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 that they try 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 servi. 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 10

The Wrong Bucket

Charlie and Tilda quickly found out that life as Roman servi was even worse than they'd realised. 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 servus, "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 servus whispered back, "It's part of the emperor's bathhouse. We'll be helping to bath 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, 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 that 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 one to each of the cleaners. 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 it was a weapon or a gardening tool.

"It's a strigil," whispered the small servus. "The cleaners use it to scrape sweat, dirt and bath oils off the guests' bodies."

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

The pale servus 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 an unwelcome alarm clock.

"Where's my clean strigil, Streen?"

Charlie turned to see a haggard woman glaring towards the two boys from the other side of the caldarium.

“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. On each one rested 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 Streen’s hand, cuffing him across his ear.

“Hey!” Charlie objected and 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 servi 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.

“Pass me my strigil and then 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 servi 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 servi, Charlie worked out that ‘getting on with it’ involved using a strigil to scrape the sweat, oil 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 his 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 servi. 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 servus 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 other cleaners finish the bathing process by gently ladling ice-cold water over their Roman guests.

“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!” An angry woman who seemed to be

the caldarium supervisor barked her orders, clapping her hands together like two cymbals. “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: not one 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 cleaners in the room rushed to rinse the man, but the damage was done.



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

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

“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 loudly that 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 servi. “He’ll be joining these lucky boys at the emperor’s banquet this evening... as a pregustator!”



Chapter Eleven

A Beastly Banquet

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 were other smells, too. Charlie knew they were 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. The food on offer was something he neither 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," the young servus told him. Streen was sharing Charlie's punishment at the insistence of the Persian cleaner, who had persuaded the supervisor that both servi 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?” enquired Streen.

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

“What exactly are we doing here?”

Streen nodded to another child standing next to a diner. “Our job is to be a *pregustator*. That means we have to taste the food and drink before the diners, to make sure it...” He trailed off.

“Make sure it what?”

“Tastes OK and doesn’t make them ill,” Streen informed him.

“Make them ill?” Charlie scratched his head. “Doesn’t that mean... we might get ill instead?”

“Or worse,” Streen muttered. “I’ve heard that some of the others don’t come back again.”

Charlie felt his eyes almost double in size.

The younger servus looked at Charlie grimly. “It’s better we get ill than the emperor, so they say.”

“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.”

Charlie wasn’t sure what Streen had meant by ‘don’t come back again’, but he did *not* want to find out. As for the food, the offerings on the plates he’d seen being brought into the banquet room had looked foul, greasy and certainly not delicious.

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 he heard the distinct bellowing of the emperor’s voice as he gestured towards Charlie.

“You are not here to stare at my guests!” he roared. “Come here – I want to try this marvellous food.”

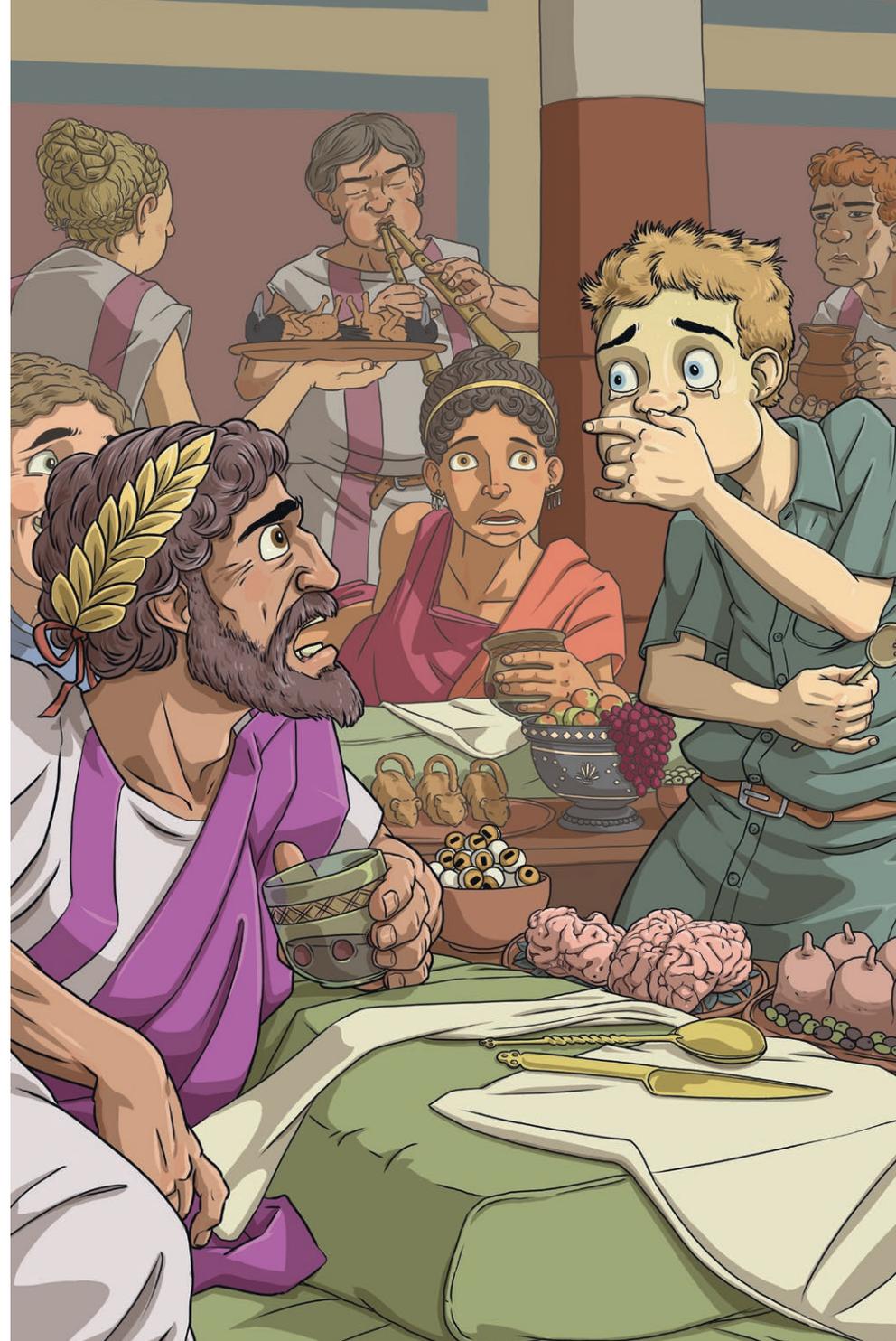
Charlie reluctantly followed the lead of the other servi and moved to stand closer to the emperor. He looked at the plate of food presented in front of him – fattened, glistening and slimy snails. “Yuck!” Charlie exclaimed.

“Get on with it, boy!” shouted the emperor.

Taking one look at the emperor’s angry face, Charlie decided that the snails might be safer than annoying him any further. Desperately searching for the smallest specimen, he reached out and, with great difficulty, grasped a slippery, gooey snail between his fingers. Grimacing, he slowly brought it to his mouth and, with the emperor’s eyes urging him on, he reluctantly popped it in.

Charlie really tried to keep the revolting food in his mouth, but he just couldn’t. No sooner had the snail touched his tongue than Charlie’s body lurched forwards in disgust. The slimy morsel came flying out of his mouth at top speed, soared across the table and landed in a sticky mess on the floor.

“What are you doing?” came an outraged bellow



near his ear. “You’re wasting good food! Get back here and try another dish – I’m hungry!”

Charlie gingerly stood back up, preparing himself for what repulsive offering could be next. Far too soon, another brimming plate was thrust in front of him.

“Fried dormice!” announced the emperor. “Delicious!”

Deciding that it was best to just try and get it over with, Charlie picked up the smallest scrap of the dish that he could find and brought it to his lips. ‘It’s just a chicken nugget. It’s just a chicken nugget,’ he thought to himself, trying to block out the stomach-churning smell or the fact that his chicken nugget had a tail.

Once again, soon after the morsel of mouse had entered his mouth, it flew straight back out, half chewed, into the air. Desperate to get the hideous taste from his mouth, Charlie grabbed a nearby napkin and began furiously rubbing his tongue in horror. Only it wasn’t a napkin. An elegant Roman woman turned towards him scowling in anger as Charlie suddenly realised

that her long, luxurious robe was making its way into his mouth. “Um, sorry, I didn’t realise...” he tried to explain. She quickly yanked her robe away in disgust and sat back down glaring at him.

“This is disgraceful,” a familiar voice barked. “You are insulting my food, you are insulting my cooks and, most importantly, you are insulting *me!* You have one chance to redeem yourself, boy; otherwise, there will be trouble.”

Charlie turned and looked straight at the emperor’s fuming face. He certainly didn’t want to find out what he meant by ‘trouble’. Quickly, the reluctant food taster grabbed an unidentified item from the next plate and shoved it into his mouth. Keen to keep it there for as long as possible this time, he hastily chewed and then tried to swallow the ghastly gristle. This was not a good idea. As he felt the now familiar lurching of his stomach, the indistinguishable remains hurled out of Charlie’s mouth and landed directly in front of him – all down the robe of a very angry emperor.



Chapter Twelve

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 overseer. 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 more appetising things to eat than snails. According to the serva 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 serva 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?”

‘Haven’t these people heard of pizza?’ Tilda wondered, swallowing hard and 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 serva.”

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 her brown hair was fastened in a bun. 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 Tilda’s reluctance, 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 verrucas that she encountered.

Eventually, the stream of guests slowed to a trickle, until the two girls 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 lambs' 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.

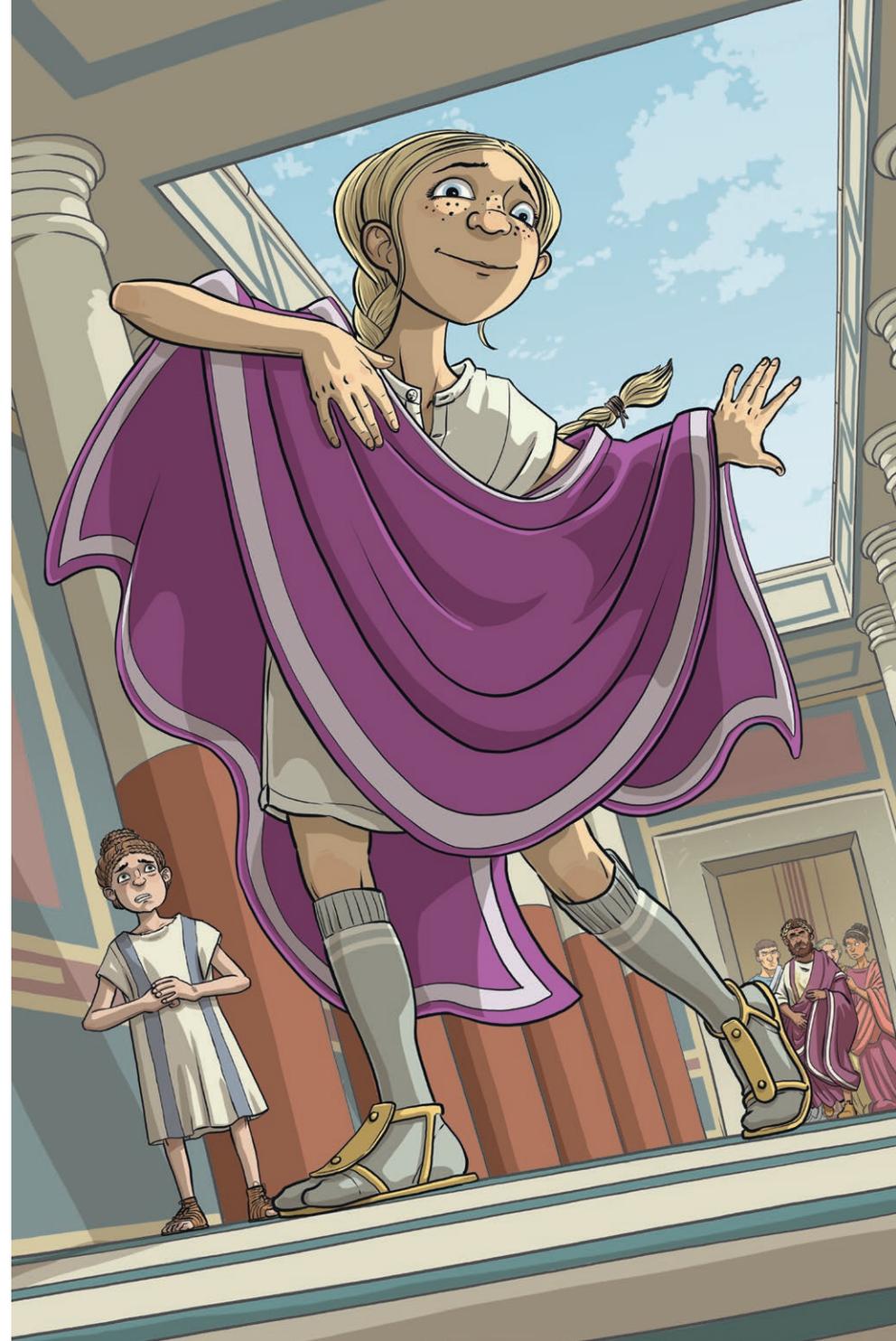
“Take your hands off those garments!”

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

As a face cut into the precious stone on top of a ring, Emperor Septimius Severus looked pretty intimidating. In the flesh, though, he had the kind of glare that would make even the bravest heart tremble.

“How dare you wear the clothes of Rome?” The emperor’s question seemed more threatening than the tip of one of his soldiers’ swords. “Come here, now!”

Tilda gulped. She had expected the emperor and his guests to be chatting cheerfully and nibbling on disgusting canapés. ‘Why was he here?’ she wondered. ‘And what were the strange stains down the front of his robe?’



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

Tilda shuffled forwards.

“I am forced to come here and change my robe because of the stupidity of one servus and *this* is what I find! Do you believe yourself above Roman laws?” Septimius Severus roared. “Or are my servi no longer required to obey our strictest customs?”

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

“I... um... 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.

More guests had, now, appeared to see what was the cause of the emperor’s outburst. There were audible gasps and 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 third 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.

Blindly, she ran. Finding herself in the busy banqueting room, she panicked and hesitated, giving three burly guards the opportunity to grab her arms and lift 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 chestnut-coloured hair braided across her head like a crown. It was Emperor Septimius’s wife!

“Why don’t we have a little fun with our serva 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 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, I’ll order two of your guards to take her to tomorrow’s market as a warning to others. They can also 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 Thirteen

The Exploding Emperor

“Have you ever heard of micatio?” 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. I prefer a good sing-song any day.”

“I’ll keep this simple,” barked the emperor. “I know you servi aren’t usually very smart, so here’s how micatio 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 simultaneously, “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 penalty taker in a Cup Final. 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 someone in Tilda’s position.

“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.

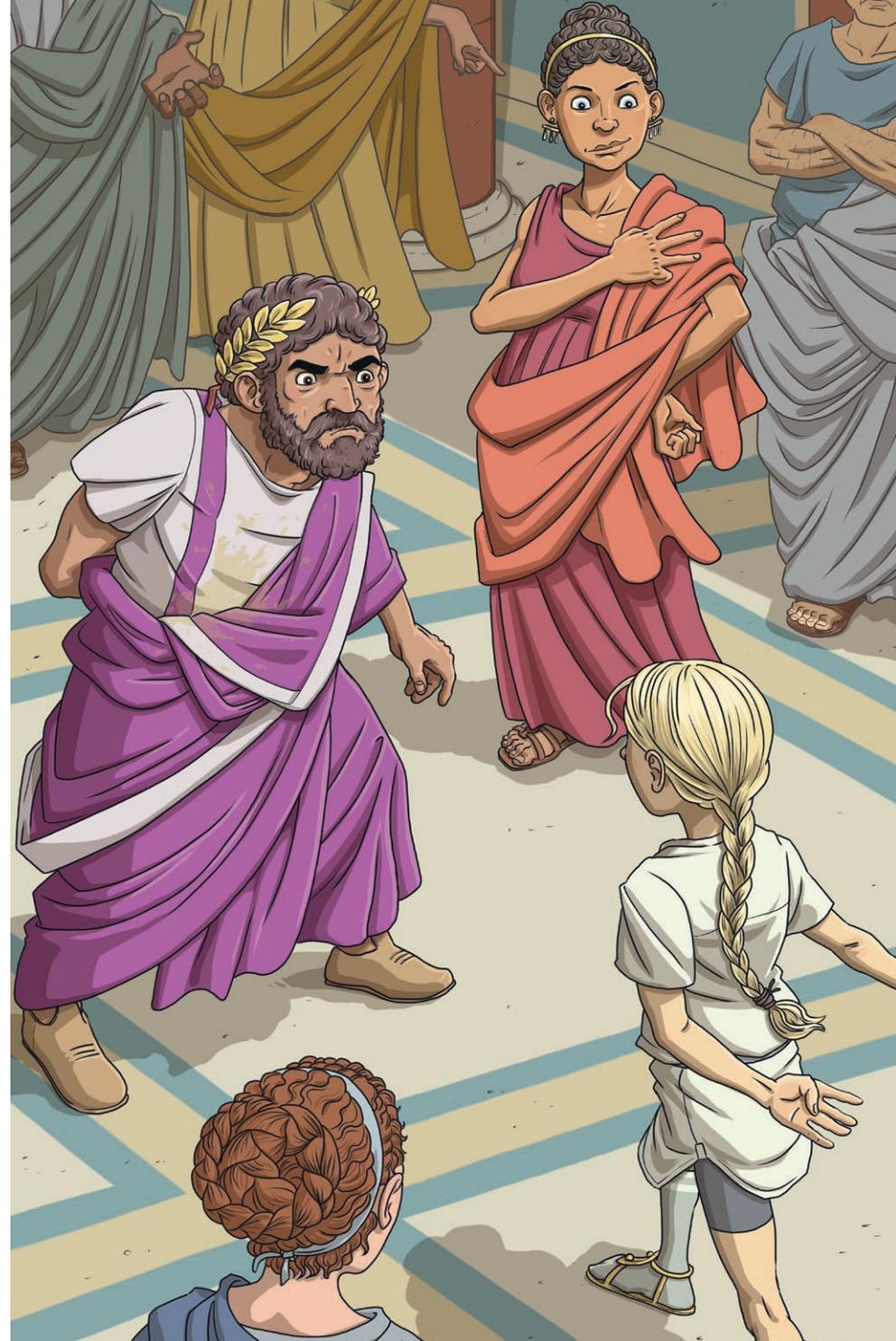
“Seven!” cried Tilda simultaneously.

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

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

Tilda mouthed a discreet ‘thank you’ to the emperor’s wife.

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. “Now, take this serva away. I can’t bear to look at her any longer. Tomorrow, she can serve as a warning to others that insolence will not be tolerated. I hope she has strong shoulders to bear the weight of her misdemeanours.”



Chapter Fourteen

Fleeing the Fortress

The next morning, Charlie was in the exercise yard. After the previous evening’s duties, his stomach still grumbled and an unpleasant taste lingered in his mouth. Yet, that was the least of his worries.

If being forced to taste the frightful food at the emperor’s banquet wasn’t bad enough, finding out he was going to be punished because of not being able to swallow 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. “Those dishes were disgusting.”

“Your job was to protect the emperor and his guests, not cover him in your vile vomit,” he was reminded, before being shoved into a tiny cell. “There’ll be a serious punishment when the overseer finds out what you did.”

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 through a punishment session designed for soldiers who weren’t making the grade. Charlie wasn’t sure who was hated the most by the drill sergeant – 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 passing by 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’s left here already.”

“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’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 fifty press-ups 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 a hundred!”

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. At the same time, however, 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 paraded at today’s market as a warning to others that the emperor will not tolerate insolence.” The fat soldier could barely contain his glee. “Who knows when you’ll ever see her again... Or if!”

“What do you mean?” Charlie fretted, almost dropping the trigon ball. “What’s going to happen to her?”

Ignoring his questions, Blutos 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, rescue Tilda and get back through the time wall, before they became trapped for ever.

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 subjects 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, servus,” ordered the Roman, “before I show you what a real sword can do.”

“Oh, um, 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 they 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 certainly 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!”

“OK,” 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 of 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 their ‘bat’ at the little 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 Blutos.

“Nor am I,” echoed another.

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

None of the Romans wanted to fetch the missing balls.

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

“OK, OK... I get the message: it’s my game and 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!

This 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 Fifteen

Mayhem at the Market

Unfortunately, Tilda Hacker was still very much a prisoner. The iron chains around her ankles reminded her of that. A long wooden post in the shape of a 'Y' had been strapped along the backs of her arms and tied to her wrists. Another part of the post stuck out behind her neck; the heavy weight pressing down on her shoulders forced her to hunch forwards.

She had been tied to a 'furca': a common Roman punishment that Tilda remembered learning about in her history lessons. It was often coupled with some other punishments that didn't bear thinking about. She was scared. And she could

see no way of escape.

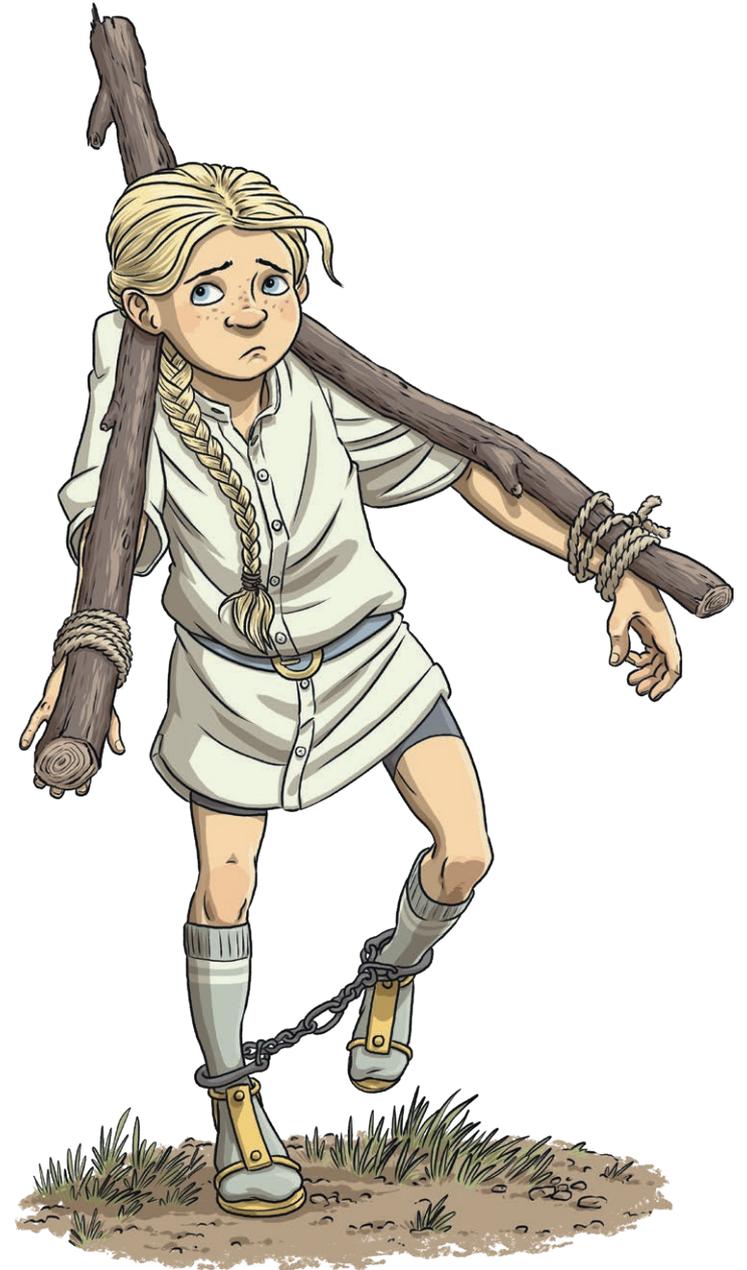
The air surrounding her was filled with sellers' cries, bustling chatter and snorting cattle. The market was crowded.

A collection of traders sold their wares from simple table tops, serving eager customers with a varied selection of goods: freshly roasted meats, roughly woven clothing, crudely crafted cooking pots, wooden serving bowls and iron farming tools. Trade was brisk.

A heavy hand on Tilda's shoulder forced her forwards into the throng of jostling customers and she stumbled as she tried to lift her feet under the weight of the chains and the furca. A few passersby pointed at her and laughed.

"Get moving," jeered a voice belonging to one of the stocky Roman guards who stood behind her.

"Show everyone what happens when one of *you lot* misbehaves!" sneered another. "This one's been disruptive in the emperor's palace, so this is just what she deserves. Let this be a lesson to all of you servi! Any messing around, laziness,



disobedience or rudeness and *this*,” he smirked, prodding Tilda in the back, “could be you!”

A few of the shoppers turned round to look at Tilda’s reddening face and unusual appearance. She could hear their mutters and sniggers as she struggled past them. One of them knocked her arm roughly, twisting the rope around her wrist awkwardly.

“I didn’t do anything!” Tilda protested, desperately wanting to rub her sore wrist.

“That’s enough!” shouted the stern voice of the soldier, dragging her farther through the chaotic rabble. The traders’ calls were loud and insistent. One voice was louder than the rest.

Standing atop a stack of hay bales in front of the forming crowd, a surly-looking man called for everyone’s attention. His tone told them that business was about to begin. He gestured to his left at an enclosure teeming with grunting livestock.

It seemed that every Roman or Briton with a few coins to rub together had come to bid for

something. Cows, pigs, chickens and donkeys were all squashed in together. There were plenty to choose from: old ones, young ones, strong ones and weak ones. They were all available for the right price.

Tilda looking pityingly over another man’s shoulder at a reluctant cow being dragged into the centre of the square. ‘Rather you than me,’ she couldn’t help but think, remembering learning in history lessons about how enslaved people were sold at ancient Roman markets.

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

“Plenty of fat on that,” he announced. “Nice and healthy, too! Cash bids it is for our first lot today. Will anyone start me off with one thousand silver denarii?”

A ripple of enthusiasm swept through the crowd of would-be bidders as they pushed closer towards the prize cattle. Tilda shuffled her feet slightly

“Come on!” cried the auctioneer. “This one’s a

bargain. Who wants it?"

Insistent shouts came from all angles as the price rose higher and the crowd closed in around Tilda and the guards. Struggling to maintain her balance, she felt elbows and knees jabbing into her as the horde of people pushed to get a better view.

One man to her left yelled, "I'll take it!" and enthusiastically flung his heavy arm into the air, catching Tilda's shoulder and sending her flying forwards. The guards reached for her, but it was too late and she landed in a crumpled heap on the floor, pinned down by the hefty furca. Around her, people shouted insults and complaints as they dived out of her way. Sprawled on the floor, with muddy knees and scrapes on her hands, Tilda felt hot tears beginning to trickle down her face.

"What do you think you're doing?" roared one of the guards down at her. "You've caused enough trouble as it is! Get up! If you don't move right now, I'm sticking you up there with the pigs and the cows! You can be the next lot to be sold!" Tilda tried to move one of her feet, but it

was no use. She closed her eyes and wished for a miracle.

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 scrambled onto an upturned barrel and watched as excited men peppered the auctioneer with bids. He could see a large cow in the centre of the square and throngs of people jostling for a better view of the action.

As he peered closer, he saw a lot of movement towards the front of the crowd. Straining his ears for any clues of what was causing the commotion, he could hear angry shouts and clattering and banging. He had no idea where Tilda might be but, perhaps, getting closer to the action would help. He clambered down from the barrel and headed towards the auction.

It seemed that the cow had been sold and the auctioneer was readying his next lot: a white donkey with big ears and a black 'go faster' cross down its back.

“Hurry up – this is the one the emperor wants!” one of the guards growled at the other. “Grab the girl and let’s get to the front. I don’t want to go back to the palace empty-handed!”

The second guard reached forwards, digging his hands under Tilda’s arms, and tried to haul her off the ground. “It’ll take two of us – this wooden thing weighs as much as an elephant!” he groaned.

Exhaling heavily, both guards tried again, the strain of lifting both the furca and Tilda obvious on their contorted faces. “Ready, heave!” Together, they pulled at Tilda’s shoulders and yanked her onto her feet. In the process, the contents of the money pouch hanging from the older guard’s belt became dislodged. Not noticing the rattling of shiny metal as it fell clinking to the ground, they dragged Tilda as quickly as they could to the front of the crowd.



Chapter Sixteen

The Sweet Sound of Sirens

The auctioneer began his bidding and the guards called out their price. A few other eager bidders hollered and whooped as the amounts rose.

“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 this one’s worth more than that... Who will offer eight hundred?”

“Eight!” shouted the guards in unison, keen to join the fight.

“Eleven hundred dinarii!” hollered a toothless trader. He looked like he hadn’t washed in months. Clamours and yelps rose from the square at the mounting cost. Beads of sweat gathered on the brows of the guards, who spun round to stare at the man who had outbid them.

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

“We’ve got to get it,” the guards whined. “Check if we’ve got enough!” Reaching for his money pouch, a troubled look came over the face of one of the guards. Patting his body furiously, his look turned from concern to horror as the realisation dawned on him. The emperor would be furious with them and would not hold back on his punishment. He shuddered as he felt along his belt and then opened his fist, revealing

no coins, no money pouch, nothing. The coins given to them earlier that day, specifically for that donkey, had gone.

“Fifteen hundred!” yelled the unwashed trader.

As the value climbed, Tilda felt the atmosphere heating up among the onlookers. She had already given up trying to free her wrists from the biting rope shackles and, now, her desperate eyes scanned the crowd, seeking a saviour.

Charlie, who had shoved his way through a horde of sweaty Romans, 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, mouthing ‘Help me, Charlie’.

Roman guards stood sentry at every exit from the market. The auctioneer was surrounded by a ring of burly henchmen packing clubs the size of cricket bats.

The bidding kept climbing. Distracted by their own desperation, the two guards frantically searched the ground for the money they’d been given earlier to secure the emperor’s prize



donkey. Charlie noticed their lack of awareness and seized his opportunity. He sped over towards Tilda and grabbed her arm to pull her away. Tilda's face screwed up in pain as her arm stayed where it was but Charlie's fingers left an angry mark. Tilda wouldn't budge. The wooden post pressing against her back and shoulders was too heavy to move with her.

Trying another way to free her, Charlie wrestled with the ropes on her wrists and desperately smashed at the chains on her feet with a rock. "Come on!" he panted, as he tried a third time. Hearing the clanking of rock against metal, one

of the guards noticed Charlie's efforts to release Tilda.

"Oi!" The snarling guard seized Charlie by his shirt and began to shake him like a toy. "This one's in enough trouble as it is! You can join her, too, if you like –"

Suddenly, the shaking stopped. Something small, round and glistening had just bounced out of Charlie's pocket.

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



Quickly, the guard released his grip on Charlie and peered closer at the tiny treasure. A smile stretched across his face as he crouched down to pluck the object off the ground.

“We’ve got it,” he murmured to himself. “Two thousand!” he then screeched at the auctioneer, who brought down his gavel in a matter of seconds.

“Sold! To the sweaty men at the front here.” The unwashed trader scowled.

The crowd cheered and the auctioneer strode over to collect his payment, his hands outstretched. The guards reached forwards to pay him using *Charlie’s* gold ring.

“Hey! That’s mine!” Charlie shouted, stepping in front of the guards.

The auctioneer held up the tiny, gold 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 were an alien from outer space. Charlie couldn’t understand what was so special about it, but Tilda noticed an opportunity.

“You stole that from Charlie!” she announced. “It belongs to him and he doesn’t want that stupid donkey!”

“No I don’t!” demanded Charlie, joining in. “I want you to set my sister free! Get those ropes off her wrists and undo her chains!”

The guards protested, “We want the stupid donkey! Don’t listen to him: he’s lying, like *they* always do!” Charlie looked outraged at the guards and his shoulders dropped with a sulk.

The grimy trader was standing close by and could hear the mounting tension building. Seizing his opportunity, he piped up, “That boy’s right – the ring *is* his!”

Charlie spun round to see who had come to his rescue. A toothless grin met him. The auctioneer looked convinced. Then, turning to Charlie, he asked, “Hold on – you’d be happy with that? You just want this girl?” He looked at Tilda

in disbelief.

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

For a few moments, Charlie’s mind swam with the possibility of riches beyond his wildest dreams. Glancing at his sister, still shackled with chains and trapped by the furca, he snapped back to reality. “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. “Um, 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... um... 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.

“I’ll keep the ring, they can have their donkey and, by the looks of things, you both can go free,” the auctioneer promised. The guards looked gleefully at the donkey and hurriedly undid Tilda’s shackles and removed the furca from her shoulders.

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,” she requested.

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 said to him in a hushed voice.

She thrust her open hand towards the auctioneer. “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, she grabbed her younger brother by the wrist and yanked him into the crowd.

“Hurry!” gasped Tilda. “Let’s get to the wall.”

“I’m going as fast as I can,” Charlie panted.

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 – quick!” 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 antiques shop, Charlie linked his arm through his sister's and held out his Roman coin. "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."

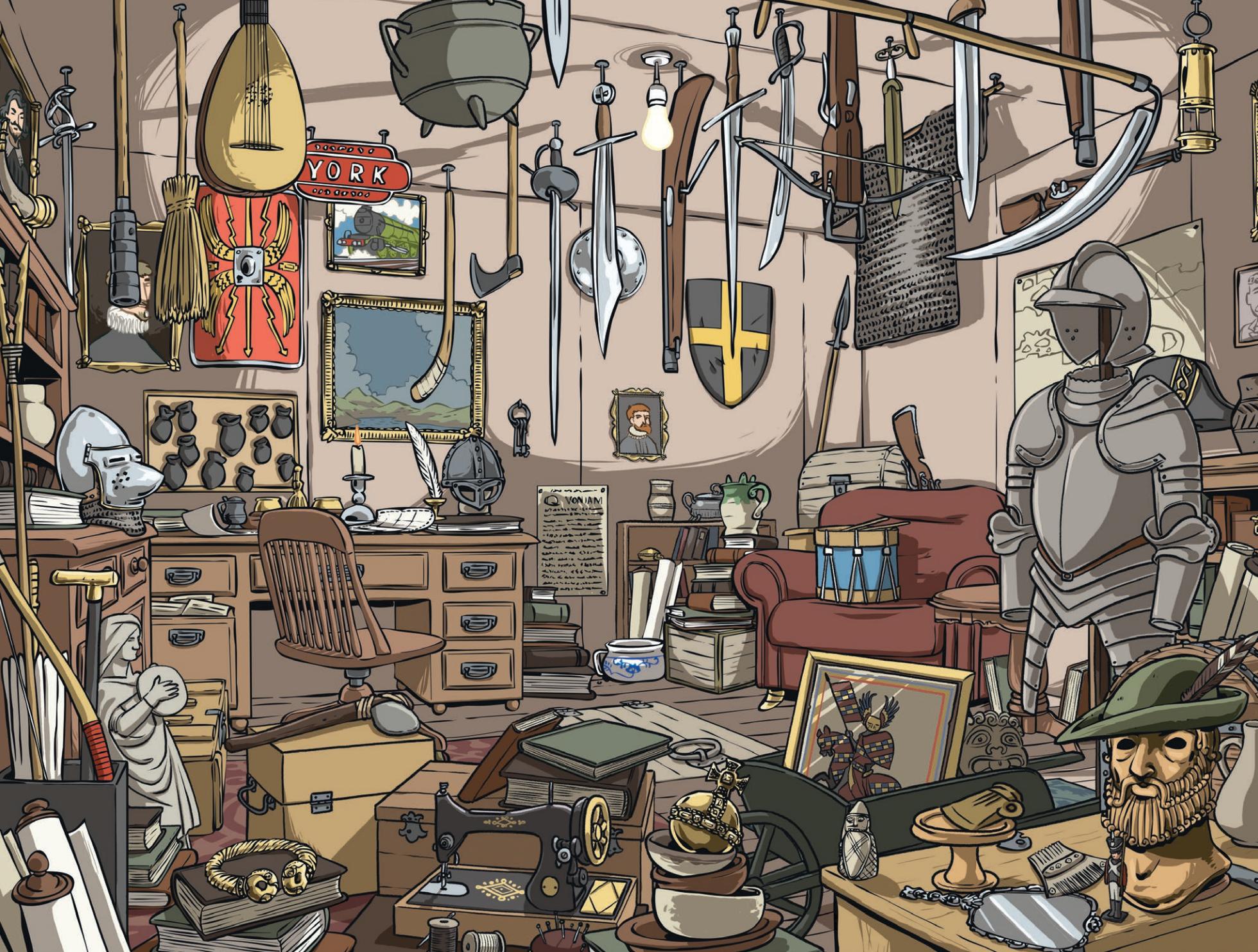
"Even the Viking coins?"

"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."

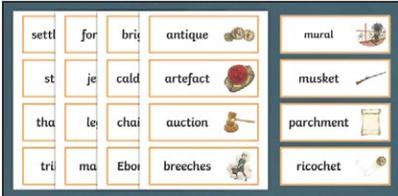
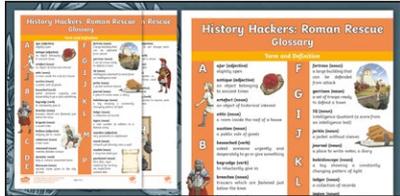






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**Charlie ducked back behind the wall,
hardly daring to breathe.
Had he really just seen Roman soldiers?**

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