



Chapter 7

A Tumble through Time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You still don’t believe me?”

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

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

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

“What are you talking about?”

“And keep your head down!”

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter 8

Living Statues

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

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

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

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

“Ssshhhh,” Charlie ordered.

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

“Will you shut up?” pleaded Charlie.

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

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

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

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

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

their backs up against the wall of a neighbouring hut.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe that’s where we are now!”

“Was he a nice Emperor?” Charlie asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What makes you say that?” Tilda gulped.

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



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

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

“Thieves!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tribune's troop laughed like a chorus line.

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

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

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

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

hanging from a belt around his midriff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charlie squirmed free of his sister’s grip.

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

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

Chapter 9

Foiled by His Own Fingers

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

“Gerroff!” he wailed.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wait!"

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

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

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

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

Tilda breathed a sigh of relief.

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

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

The soldiers nodded in agreement.

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

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

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

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

"How many fingers have you got, Blutos?"

Blutos snorted. "Eight, plus two thumbs."

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

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

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

Tilda smiled. So did Charlie.

“Easy, huh?” Tilda asked.

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

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

The tribune agreed. “A real idiot.”

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

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

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

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

“Great, let’s check.”

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

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

Blutos stared dumbly at his hand.

“How many fingers are on your left hand Blutos?”

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

Excitement ignited a sparkle in Tilda’s eyes. “So, what’s six fingers plus five fingers?”

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

“Six plus five, Blutos?” snapped the tribune.

“Erm... eleven?” Blutos reluctantly answered. “But that’s not right, sir. Yesterday I only had ten.”

Tilda ignored the bearded Roman, gazing up at the

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

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

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