



## Chapter 10

# Just Ordinary Children

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

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

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

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

“But you sai-” began Tilda.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What are we going to do now?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Tilda.

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



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

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

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

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

"A big deal?" Charlie suggested sarcastically.

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

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

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

for trusting her younger brother with something so important.

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

"Erm, excuse me," Tilda said bravely. "I think there's been some kind of mistake."

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

"Yes," Tilda continued, growing hopeful. "We're not slaves at all, you see. We're just ordinary children."

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

"Is that the way out?" Charlie sounded excited.

"It's where we take ordinary children when mistakes

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

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

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

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

“What now?” asked Charlie.

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

“Down there, I suppose.”

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

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



## Chapter 11 The Wrong Bucket

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bathing them?" asked Charlie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where's my clean strigil, Streen?"

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

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

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

apparently waiting to be cleaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charlie held his breath and watched other cleaners tip

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

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

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



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

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

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

"It helps to seal the pores," Tilda wearily explained.

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

"Wait," gasped Tilda. "That's the wrong –"

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the truth – it was an accident.”

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

“I want him whipped,” insisted the consul.

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 12

# Charlie or the Bowl

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

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

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

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

"Friends of the Emperor's," the young slave told him. Streen was sharing Charlie's punishment at the insistence

of the Persian cleaner, who had persuaded the supervisor that both slaves had been working in cahoots. "These are some of the most important people in Eboracum."

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

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

"You're not from around here, are you?" asked Streen.

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

"What exactly are we doing here?"

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

"Full of what?"



“Food, of course,” Streen informed him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charlie had always believed the Romans were

part of an advanced and sophisticated civilisation. Now, though, he was quickly beginning to think they were little more than well-dressed barbarians.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

"But it's horrendous!"

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

"What games?"

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

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

bowl towards a clutch of diners.

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

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

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