



Chapter 16 **Top Price for Tilda**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A few eager bidders hollered and whooped.

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

When nobody offered such a beast, the auctioneer continued.

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

Nobody responded.

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

Still no response.

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

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

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

“Seven!”

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



Charlie was still gasping. He had leapt from the manure

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fifteen hundred!" yelled the unwashed trader.

"Sixteen hundred!" Charlie screamed back.

"Seventeen!"

"Eighteen!"

The crowd grew silent and the atmosphere suddenly

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

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

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

“Two thousand!” Charlie barked.

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

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

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

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

The crowd cheered. Charlie had won!

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

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



Chapter 17

The Sweet Sound of Sirens

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

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

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

my two thousand silver denarii."

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

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

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

"You mean you don't have my money?"

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

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

"She's my sister," Charlie pleaded. "I need to get her back home."

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

laughed out of –”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hand and pulled her into the crowd.

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

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

“Stop those children!”

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

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

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

“It’s there, hurry!”

“Don’t we need the coins?” Charlie worried.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Tilda hoped, even though the

tone of her voice betrayed an obvious lack of belief.

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

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

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

"It was our only chance," Charlie admitted.

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

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

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

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

"Happy?" Charlie gasped. "Why wouldn't I be happy? It's not even m- ouch!"

Tilda kicked her brother's shin. "Is it valuable, then?"

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

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

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

Charlie shuffled awkwardly. "Erm, well..."

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

be a reward for its return.”

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

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

Charlie and Tilda exchanged hopeful glances.

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

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

“I want something else.”

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

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

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

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

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



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

Charlie could feel the sun beating down against his

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

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

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

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

"Even the Viking coins?"

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

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

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