

## Chapter 13

# Chop Off Her Pretty Head

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

I'd rather starve, thought Tilda.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She giggled. “I think purple suits me, don’t you?”

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

“Take your hands off those garments!”

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

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

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

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

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

Tilda shuffled forward.

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

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

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

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

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

The entire room gasped. Several women shrieked.

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

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

a guest. “Such an offence must not go unpunished.”

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

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

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

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

“Wait!”

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

All heads turned to the elegant lady seated in a marble

chair beside the Emperor's throne.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

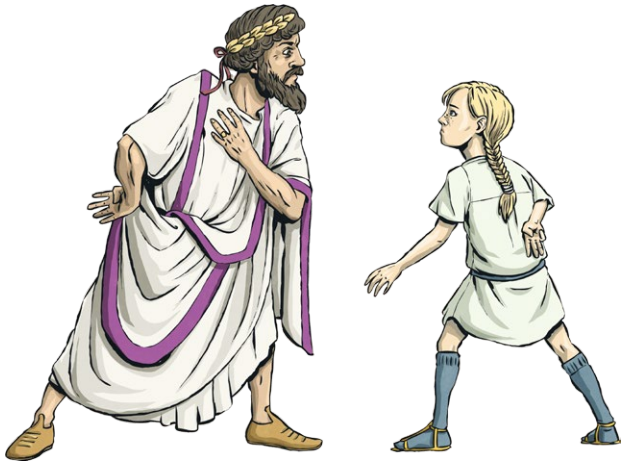
"What did you have in mind, my little lavender petal?"

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

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

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





## Chapter 14 The Exploding Emperor

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tilda chose two.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hands at the ready!” Julia instructed.

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

“Three... two... one...”

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

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

“Seven!” shouted Tilda.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## Chapter 15

# Escape Is a Smelly Business

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

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

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

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

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

It quickly became clear that Charlie was being put



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

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

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

"Look who we have here!"

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

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

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

"Heard about your sister, Brigante?" A mocking smile

danced across his lips.

Charlie was suddenly worried. “What about her? If she’s been hurt I’ll...”

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

“Left?” gasped Charlie. “How? Where?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blutos nodded and grinned. “All because someone

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

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

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

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

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

As the soldiers continued to grumble, Charlie scanned

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course," Charlie replied. "But I thought I'd show you an old Brigante tribal game."

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

the wooden sword, snapping the pointed end clean off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The drill sergeant thought for a moment.

“Does this game of yours have a name?”

Charlie grinned. “Rounders!”



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

Eventually, the last trigon ball disappeared over the wall.

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

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

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

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

“Nor am I,” echoed another.

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

None of the Romans wanted to fetch their missing balls.

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

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

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

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

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

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