

BEAU STREET HOARD STORY

ROMAN TIME TRAVEL

JAS BILAN

‘You can throw your pennies into the water,’ said Mrs Hundal, ‘and make a wish.’ She swiveled to face us all. ‘And no pushing. Tony. You can go first.’

There were some advantages to being the smallest boy in the class.

The coin was cold in the centre of my palm. I knew what my wish was going to be. The ten pence piece flew over the shiny barrier, then splashed into the greenish liquid of the Roman Baths.

*

‘Quick Antoninus,’ shouted a voice through the dark foggy night. ‘This way.’

Antoninus? People had called me all sorts of names before, but this was the first time anyone had called me that.

I was out of breath. Footsteps boomed behind me. I was on automatic. My feet pounded the ground. I didn’t know where I was going or what was happening. But I was running. I flicked my eyes down to the ground. My legs were moving so fast, as if they belonged to someone else.

‘Round this corner,’ called the voice again.

I followed. The ground was wet. Every time I put my foot down, it slid into mud. My lungs felt like they were going to burst. As we went down another street, a hand grabbed my arm. Through the darkness I could just about make out a round face. It was a boy. He was about nine, my age. His cheeks looked hot.

‘Antoninus,’ he said, between gulps of breath. ‘That was a close one.’ He patted my tunic. ‘How much do you think we got?’

I was wearing a tunic! It looked like a dress. I was freezing.

‘Er... I don’t know.’ This was really confusing. I was in a strange place and my pockets were full of money. What was this all about?

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘We’ll count it when we get back.’ He wiped his face with the back of his hand. ‘If only Father could see me now. He’d be

horrified.’ The boy laughed. ‘He’d say ‘Gaius Marius is this a suitable pastime for the son of an army officer?’ Well. I don’t care.’

Had my wish brought me back in time? The tall pillars of the building we were leaning against were hard against my shoulders. How was I going to get back?

Rancid breath loomed towards me through the darkness. A thick hand pushed into my cheek. It pressed against my mouth.

‘So,’ said a voice with a strange accent. ‘You want to steal my money do you?’

‘Run,’ said Gaius Marius. ‘Run.’

I couldn’t move. The man shoved his hand against my stomach. I was lifted into the air. Blood rushed to my head as he threw me over his shoulder. My face banged against the man’s back as he took quick strides. I couldn’t see Gaius Marius. Had he managed to get away, like he had told **me** to?

‘Grab the other one,’ said a deep voice.

I heard a thump as a door was kicked open. I fell through the air onto a cold stone floor, money from my pockets jangled and fell with me.

The man scrambled to the floor on his hands and knees, collecting the coins that were all over the place. ‘We’ll see what we’ll do with you two later,’ said the man, stuffing the coins into a bag that he wore around his neck. He swayed then burped. ‘We’ll teach you a lesson.’ The heavy door slammed with a dull thud. The key twisted in the lock.

‘Antoninus?’ said Gaius Marius staring at me through the dim yellow light of a small candle that was hooked onto the wall. ‘You’ve changed.’

‘I’m not Antoninus,’ I said, sounding as unsure as I was feeling. ‘I’m just plain Tony.’

‘What?’ said Gaius. ‘What are you talking about. Who are you? Where’s Antoninus?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Why were we running? Why was that man chasing us? And how are we going to get out of here?’ I looked at the small window with bars on it. There’d be no chance of getting out that way.

Gaius Marius came towards me. He gripped my shoulders and shook them. ‘Who are you? Tell me the truth. Has someone put you up to this?’

Antoninus is my father's slave boy. He is going to be so mad if he's gone missing.'

'Let go of me,' I shouted, pushing him back. 'I don't know who you are or what's going on.' I stared at the solid wooden door, wondering about escaping.

Gaius Marius dropped his hands and sat back on the floor. 'If I'm honest, Father would be more upset if anything happened to Antoninus, rather than me.' He slumped against the wall. 'Everyday I must study,' he said. 'I must take offerings to the Goddess Sulis Minerva. Even though I do all these things Father gives me no praise. So I said to Antoninus, I wanted to do forbidden things instead. What did it matter?' He brushed the floor with his hand. 'Like going out at night and swiping money from those men who gamble.' He looked towards the door. 'We agreed we would collect the money and throw it in the spring. Maybe then the Goddess Sulis Minerva will hear my requests and make Father notice me. I made a deal with Antoninus,' continued Gaius. 'I said I would teach him to read and write if he would come with me. I've hidden more coins in my father's house.'

'I know this is going to sound crazy,' I said, shuffling up next to Gaius. 'I wouldn't blame you if you didn't believe me.' Was I really talking to a Roman boy, trying to explain something even I couldn't figure out? 'I'm not from this time.'

Gaius looked at me strangely. 'What do you mean you're not from this time?'

'I live in the city of Bath in 2015,' I said.

'Well,' said Gaius. 'You look exactly like you live right here in Aquae Sulis to me.' He lifted the candle off the hook and held it close to my face. 'You have the nose of a slave.'

That was charming! 'It's Aquae Sulis in the future,' I said, trying to explain something I was still trying to work out. 'Except now we call it Bath, because of the hot springs. Maybe Antoninus is there, with my teacher Mrs Hundal and all the other children from Claverton Juniors.' I imagined how amazing it would be for everyone.

'I don't understand what you're talking about,' said Gaius. 'But what I do know is that we have to get out of here. They're not nice men.'

‘Here,’ I said. ‘Hand me the candle.’ I held the flame as steady as I could and looked under the door. ‘I think there’s something on the other side.’ I crouched further down, pressing my face against the icy floor. ‘There’s something there but I can’t quite see it.’

Gaius put his head right against the ground and peered under as well. ‘If you hold the candle, I’ll try to get a better look,’ he said.

‘Can you see anything?’ I asked. It was so cold in here I was starting to shiver.

‘I can see something dark on the other side. I think the man might have dropped the key,’ said Gaius. ‘But the gap under the door is too small to fit my hand.’

I felt in my pocket. ‘What about this?’ I asked. It was strange. Even though my clothes had changed, the pencil had travelled with me. I held it between my fingers.

‘What is it?’ asked Gaius.

‘We use them for writing with,’ I said, lying on the floor. I pushed it under the door. ‘Maybe, just maybe, I can pull the key through the gap.’ I stretched my fingers as far as they would go. The end of the pencil was slippery. I didn’t want to lose it.

Gaius lay next to me, watching as I performed the tricky job of pulling the key into the room. Beads of sweat formed on my upper lip even though I was cold. What if the man realised what had happened and came back?

‘You’ve nearly got it, T...Tony,’ said Gaius.

One last pull and the key slid into the room. I picked it up and slotted it into the lock. It twisted with a clunk.

‘Tony. I am in your debt,’ said Gaius grasping my hand and arm.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ I said, turning the handle. ‘Before he comes back.’

We had been locked in a sort of stone shed. We ran down the narrow alleyway back into the street. My feet splashed into puddles of water.

‘Let’s go to the spring,’ said Gaius. ‘We can offer some of the coins to the Goddess. Maybe it will bring Antoninus back. This way.’

We crossed a square. Even though it was dark, there were people coming and going through the arch that led to the sacred springs.

‘This way,’ he said, pointing towards the head of a statue. It was golden and glowed in the light of the flares that lit up each side of the spring.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I said, sitting on the edge of the pool. Shiny jewellery glistened at the bottom of the water. So people really did throw all sorts of precious things in.

‘Here,’ said Gaius, handing me a small silver coin. ‘Throw it in and make a wish.’ He looked into the spring. ‘I know what mine will be.’

I looked down at the coin. It had a hippopotamus on it. Part of me wanted to keep it. It was so unusual. I never really thought that Roman coins would have pictures of hippos on them.

‘I’m sure your father loves you Gaius,’ I said. ‘Maybe he’s just not so good at saying it.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ he said. ‘I know he wants me to be in the army like him.’

‘Let’s throw our coins together,’ I said, looking at the cool hippo. I closed my eyes.

Splash. Our coins landed in the water.

*

‘Move back now,’ said Mrs Hundal ‘All those who haven’t had a turn at throwing their coins in should do it now.’

‘Where have you been?’ asked my mate Milo. ‘Lucky for you Mrs Hundal didn’t notice. There was a really proper looking Roman boy, part of the things they put on here. He even spoke Roman and everything.’

‘Was there?’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ said Milo. ‘He was dressed as a slave. He was really cool.’

I opened my palm revealing the coin with the hippo on it

‘Where did you get that from?’ asked Milo.

‘I found it,’ I said. ‘Next to the spring.’

Milo looked like he didn’t believe me. ‘You’d better hand it in then,’ he said.

I looked at the coin one last time. ‘Miss,’ I said, putting my hand up. ‘I found this on the floor.’