

Trust me. Organising a wedding is a pain in the rectum.

Not that there was any great hurry now. Perilla's Aunt Marcia had passed away just after the Winter Festival, bolt upright in her chair where she'd nodded off after dinner. Hyperion the doctor had been there at the time, as well as Clarus and Marilla, and he'd said in his letter that it had been the best way for her to go. Still, it was the end of an era: Marcia and the villa in the Alban Hills had been a fixture for more years than I liked to count. The villa itself wouldn't be gone, mind, Aunt Marcia had made sure of that. Once Clarus and Marilla were hitched in four months' time the couple would take it over lock stock and menagerie as the old girl's posthumous wedding present.

So there I was, holed up in my study with an abacus while Perilla was scouring Rome for dress material to kit out the bridesmaids. I'd just added up the column of figures for the sixth time and got my sixth different answer when Bathyllus scratched at the door and sidled in. He had his propitiatory face on, which was fair enough because in the Corvinus household interrupting heavy arithmetic is the domestic equivalent of invading Parthia.

'Yeah, Bathyllus,' I said. 'What is it? Plague of rats in the kitchen? Housemaid gone berserk with a cleaver?'

'No, sir.' Not a flicker. 'A visitor.'

I laid the tablet down and brushed the torn-out hair off the desk. 'What kind of visitor?'

'A freedman by the name of Dion.'

'Who the hell's Dion?'

'I don't know, sir, and he wouldn't elaborate. I did ask him to call back tomorrow but he says it's important.'

'Is that so, now?' Odd, but then I could do with a break. Whoever the guy was, and whatever he wanted, it couldn't be any worse than another bout of wrestling with prenuptial arithmetic. Mind you, I'd take that to cruising the shops with Perilla any day. 'Okay, then. Wheel him in.'

I poured myself another cup of well-watered Setinian - abacus-wrestling needs a clear head, but you can take abstinence too far - and sat back in my chair just as the door opened again and the distraction came in. He was a middle-aged guy, Asian-Greek by the look of him, very prim and proper, on the plump side and with a definite lack of hair under the freedman's cap.

'Marcus Valerius Corvinus?' he said. Educated voice, with a slight Greek accent. 'It's kind of you to see me. I'm Naevius Sertorius Dion.'

If the last name meant nothing to me, the first two certainly did. I set the cup down. 'Naevius Sertorius? As in Naevius Sertorius Macro?'

'Yes, sir. I was the commander's secretary. He freed me in his will.'

I knew Macro, sure: ex-commander of Praetorians, Gaius's right-hand man until our fledgling emperor told him and his wife to kill themselves, and one of the most dangerous bastards I'd ever met. 'So?' I said.

'He left a letter for you, sir.' He drew it out from his belt and laid it carefully on the desk.

I looked but didn't touch. Odd was right. 'Why should Macro write to me? And the guy's been dead for almost three months.'

'He thought it better that there should be a delay, sir. I'm sure the letter will explain, if you'd be good enough to open it.'

Polite but firm; very firm. And from his tone of voice and the expression on his face I knew that freedman or not the guy wouldn't be fobbed off by a promise to read the thing later. If I wanted him out of my study, letter unread, it'd mean calling in the bought help to drag him through the door by the heels. I was beginning to get a bad feeling about this.

Bugger.

I reached for the roll of paper and broke the seal:

'Naevius Sertorius Macro to Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus. Greetings.

When you read this, Corvinus, both I and Ennia will be dead, on the emperor's orders. What excuse he'll offer publicly or in private I don't know, but whatever it is it will be the product of misinformation and calumny.

I fully realise the extent of the favour I am asking you to perform for me. We were never friends, you and I, but even when circumstances inevitably placed us on opposite sides I have always had the greatest admiration for your integrity, your persistence, and your skill in sifting truth from fiction. As indeed has the emperor. That last is important, and the prime reason for this letter, since if anyone can clear my name with Gaius then it is you.

Accordingly, I beg you (and you know that I am not a man who begs easily) to try to do so if you can, to the best of your abilities. I can give you no prior help; or rather - since of course I have my own suspicions on the matter - I will offer you none, because these suspicions are subjective and may be unfounded. Better that you are left to yourself; that approach has served admirably hitherto, and I therefore see no reason to depart from it.

I have asked Dion to keep this letter back - he is aware of its general tenor - until such time as my death is no longer recent, and so as an issue of general concern and interest: I think that, given Gaius's present state of mind, this would be the wisest - and the safest - course of action. Our new emperor is very young and has his foibles but at root he is a decent and fair-minded man, and once time has distanced him a little from events I am sure that, if supplied with the appropriate evidence, he will be amenable to their reassessment. If nothing else, my rehabilitation will remove the stain from our children, and knowing that you will be working towards it when we are gone will ease both my and Ennia's minds greatly.

Believe me, Corvinus, that whatever the outcome you have my grateful thanks and my very best wishes.

Macro.'

I let the page fall. Shit.

Dion was watching me closely. 'Well, sir?' he said.

'Well what?'

'Will you do it? Look into the circumstances of the master's death?'

I sighed. 'Listen, pal. Contrary to what your ex-master seemed to assume I'm not a complete idiot.' Decent and fair-minded, right? From what I'd seen of the bugger - and I'd seen a fair amount of him over the years - the adjectives fitted Our Gaius like bedsocks did a snake. 'Macro was chopped by the emperor's order. End, finish, close the book. Even if there is any dirt to be dug I put one spade in the ground and I'll find myself told to slit my own wrists. Quite rightly so.'

'But he's innocent! He didn't do anything!'

'Calling someone like Macro innocent is like saying Brutus and Cassius were old Julius's bosom chums. Now come off it, Dion, you know I can't help, even if I wanted to. Which I don't. I'm sorry, but if the guy didn't deserve chopping this time he'd already deserved it a dozen times over.'

'If he had,' - Dion was angry, but he was holding it in - 'If he had, then he was acting for the good of Rome. Sir.'

Yeah, well, I'd heard that one before, too. It was funny how often the good of Rome coincided with the good of whoever claimed it as an excuse, and Macro had been as altruistic as a fox in a hen-run. 'Fine' I said. 'I won't argue. But the answer's still no. And that comes with bells on. Now just go, okay? Thanks for coming, but I'm busy.'

Dion drew himself up. 'Valerius Corvinus,' he said, 'I am gravely disappointed in you. And so would the master be.'

'Yeah. Yeah, right.' I reached for the abacus. 'The door-handle's behind you. Just turn it and push.'

'Whoever poisoned the emperor's mind against the commander had reasons of his own for doing it. Thanks to you it would appear that he will get clean away, and that, sir, might not in the end be to the good of Rome at all. Forgive me, but from what Macro said about you I'd expected far, far more. Evidently I was wrong and so was he. You couldn't care a fig for the truth.'

He turned and left, slamming the door behind him, and the slap of his sandals echoed along the corridor.

The echoes faded.

I stared at the door's panelwork for a good half minute. Then I picked the letter up and read it through again, twice.

Hell.

Watery Setinian's no food for the brain. I got up, opened the door and yelled for Bathyllus to bring me half a jug of the proper sort. Then I lay down on the reading couch to think.

I was a good half way down the jug when Perilla got back hot, tired and material-less an hour later.

'That was a complete waste of time,' she said as she collapsed onto the other couch. 'I have been in every material shop in the city including that big new one by the Livian Porch that everyone's talking about and there's simply nothing suitable. You'd think you could find something the right weight and colour for bridesmaids' dresses in Rome.'

I grunted. Me, when I want a new cloak or a pair of boots I just go out and buy them, and so long as they fit and do the job they're supposed to do I couldn't care less about finicky details like colour and style. Hell is a woman shopping. And a woman shopping for wedding supplies is hell with frills on. Still, a sympathetic grunt is all they want, usually.

'So,' she went on, 'It's a nuisance but I'm afraid we'll just have to try elsewhere.'

Well, so long as the 'we' wasn't used inclusively she could try where she liked. 'Fine by me,' I said. 'You have anywhere particular in mind?'

'I thought Alexandria.'

I almost swallowed my winecup. 'What?'

'Alexandria, dear. The big city on the coast of Egypt?'

Oh, gods! She wasn't joking, either. Bring weddings and women together and you kiss sanity goodbye. The Macro problem could wait. 'Perilla...'

'We can take Marilla and Clarus. They'd love it. They've never been abroad.'

This was getting surreal. 'Lady, just listen to yourself! Capua or Naples, fine, although why the shops there should be any better than the Roman ones beats me. Alexandria's the other side of the fucking Mediterranean!'

'I'm quite well aware of that, thank you, Marcus. But the sea connections are excellent. And we could stay with Stratocles. He wouldn't mind if we turned up on spec, I'm sure.'

'Who the hell's Stratocles?' I was seriously worried now. Once the lady gets an idea into her head she's like a terrier with a rat. And, like I say, where wedding shopping's concerned women aren't rational.

'You remember. Uncle Fabius's old freedman.' Fabius had been Aunt Marcia's husband, dead over twenty years before. 'He owns a paper factory that supplies half the copyists in Rome. And he's got a huge house near the city centre. There would be plenty of room.'

Forget the rat and terrier; we were operating on a whole new level here. If she'd got down to the fine details of accommodation then we were in real trouble. This thing had to be knocked on the head right now before she started asking what socks I wanted packed. 'Perilla, watch my lips. We are not chasing off to Alexandria just so you and Marilla can go on a shopping binge. It's ridiculous!'

'No it isn't. I told you. There are plenty of boats, and it wouldn't take long at this time of year. Twelve or fifteen days at most.'

'Plus the ten it'd take to get down to Brindisi. Plus the shopping binge. Plus the journey home. We'd be lucky if we got back in enough time to chill the wine for the sodding reception. Jupiter, lady, have some sense!'

'Well.' She sniffed. 'We can think about it, at least.' Right. Keeping an eye out for flying pigs all the way. 'So how was your day?'

Ah. I told her, as gently as possible. Not that that helped much.

'Marcus, you can't!' She was staring at me in horror. 'Whatever the reasons, Macro died by direct order of the emperor. If you start poking around Gaius will be livid, and if there is anything to find it'll be even worse. You did say no, didn't you?'

'Yeah, but -'

'Listen. Macro's death is nothing to do with you. You didn't even like the man. And Ennia was Gaius's mistress, everyone knows that. Their suicides were the emperor's business, no one else's, and they're finished and done with. Now don't be stupid.'

'I've been thinking it through. Macro's wasn't the only enforced suicide round about that time. There were Gemellus and Silanus just before the new year. If all the deaths were connected then -'

'Juno! Will you listen! Macro was Praetorian Prefect and the emperor's chief advisor. Gemellus was Gaius's co-heir, at least Tiberius named him as such in his will. And Junius Silanus was Gaius's father-in-law and the most powerful man in the senate.'

'Right. Full marks. So what if -'

'Stop it! Just...bloody...stop it!' I blinked: the lady never, ever swears, not even mildly. 'I'm not dense, and it doesn't need half a brain to see the what if here. You're going to say that they were involved together in some sort of plot against Gaius, yes? That they were, in effect, executed for treason but it wasn't made public.'

'Ah...yeah. Yeah, that would just about cover it. Or at least -'

'Fine. So what?'

'How do you mean, so what?'

'Marcus, what on earth business is it of yours? This is political! Gaius may be a lot of things but he isn't a fool. If he does something he does it for a reason, and even if it's the wrong reason he's still the emperor. Start grubbing around in the whys and wherefores of politics just for the fun of it and you'll find yourself ordered into suicide as well. What's more, you'll deserve to be.'

Yeah. True. All of it. Even so -

Silently, I passed her the letter. She read it through. Twice. Then she said, very quietly:

'Oh.'

'Doesn't sound like an admission of guilt, does it?'

'No, but all the same.' She handed the roll back. 'All the same, Marcus. Don't do it. Don't get involved. I mean it; please, not this time. It's far too dangerous, and it isn't worth it.'

'No arguments,' I said. 'None at all.'

She smiled. 'Good. That's a huge relief. The best thing you can do with that letter is burn it.'

I reached over for the wine jug and topped up my cup. Bugger; this was going to be tricky. 'None the less,' I said. 'I, ah, was thinking I might go round for a word with old Cornelius Lentulus tomorrow. Just to set my mind at rest, clear the air a bit. That wouldn't hurt, would it?'

Perilla's smile faded and she turned away.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, I think it would. Very much so. And, Marcus Valerius Corvinus, I think you are a complete fool.'

Ah, well, I couldn't disagree there, either; but then I always had been, and it was too late to change.