

Purple laver...

I blinked and set the letter down on the table beside my wine cup. Some things - what Perilla's philosopher pals would call the eternal verities - never changed. They included death, pestilence and Mother's whacky recipes. In the four months we'd been back we'd piled up enough ways of cooking lentils to open an Egyptian cookshop, and some of the other stuff she recommended for a full and healthy life you couldn't put a name to even in hieroglyphs.

'Hey, Perilla,' I said. 'You any idea what purple laver is?'

The lady looked up from the book she was reading. Chrysippus's *Studies in Grammar*. That's one advantage of living in Athens, if you can call it an advantage: there're more libraries than even Perilla can shake a stick at. Serious ones, with not an Alexandrian bodice-ripper in sight. Listen hard and you can hear manuscripts crumbling all over town. Readers, too.

'It's a kind of edible seaweed, Marcus,' she said. 'Imported from Gaul, I believe.'

'Is that right, now?' Jupiter! In that case this was one recipe our chef Meton was definitely not getting his hands on. I'd enough problems with the local cuisine without letting the weird dietary habits of blue-rinsed Gauls into the act, and that bastard would slip me a batch of Mother's laver cakes just for the fun of telling me what I'd eaten and watching me go green.

'How is Vipsania?' Perilla had laid the book aside. Maybe she couldn't take the excitement.

'Thriving. She's off tomb-bashing with Priscus in Caere.' Priscus was my stepfather. The guy was well into his seventies, a good two decades older than Mother, but fit as a flea despite looking like a prune buried in sand for six months. Rooting around old tombs and collecting antiquities was his life, and although they were different as chalk and cheese she wasn't complaining. Maybe it did have something to do with what she fed the old bugger on, but even so I didn't want to know. If the gods had meant us to eat seaweed they wouldn't have invented the Baian oyster. 'Marilla's fine as well, she says. And Marcia sends her regards.'

Perilla's face softened. Our prospective daughter was still where we'd left her, on Marcia Fulvina's farm in the Alban Hills. The adoption hadn't got all the way through the courts yet but it was practically settled, and the kid's father had taken his one-way trip down the Rock before the year was out. No tears there. I was only sorry I hadn't been in Rome to give him the final shove myself.

'It'll be lovely to have Marilla here,' perilla said. 'To be a family at last.'

'Yeah. Yeah, it will.' I'd caught the tone, and it still wrenched at my gut, even after years of marriage: Perilla needed Marilla as much as she needed Perilla. It isn't easy, knowing you can't have kids of your own, and the princess was all right. I took a swallow of wine, braced myself, and picked up the letter again.

Incidentally, Marcus [Mother wrote], I have a favour to ask. Rather an unusual one. Before we left, Titus learned of a certain statue which has come up for sale and which the poor lamb is simply desperate to add to his collection. He's written his own letter which I've enclosed, so I won't go into details here, and he's also provided a note for delivery to Simon. [Simon was our local banker. Priscus dealt with his brother in Rome.] I know very little about the piece myself, but from what Titus says it really is rather special, and he'll be terribly disappointed if he doesn't get it; so do try your very best for us, my dear, because I was hoping to lure the old buffer down to the fleshpots after he's done his wretched tombs, and the last thing I want is for him to be sulking all through the holiday. Goodness knows fleshpots are no fun at all when Titus is in one of his moods, and after Caere I often find I need a break. Oh, and speaking of fleshpots I don't know if you ever met Catullina Gemella...

There followed a good half-page of prime Roman gossip. Jupiter! Eat your heart out, Tullius Cicero! Maybe I should keep Mother's correspondence to hand down to posterity as an epistolary antidote. As well as a culinary curiosity. I sighed and reached for the wine.

'Meton says dinner is ready, sir.' Our major-domo Bathyllus had oiled in on my blind side, bald scalp gleaming like Hector's helmet.

'Namely?'

'Apple and calf's brain casserole, tripe in a honey-ginger sauce and a fennel pottage.'

'Great.' Thank the gods for good, plain seaweed-free cooking. 'We'll be through in a minute, little guy. Once I've finished my pre-dinner drink.'

Bathyllus looked pointedly at the level in the jug, gave a sniff and padded out. Bastard.

'Did Vipsania have any other news, Marcus?' perilla said.

'Priscus wants me to agent for him. There's a statue he's got his eye on.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.' I sank a quarter-pint of Setinian. 'You'd think the guy would have enough junk already to last him without sending to Athens for more.'

'Everyone needs a hobby. And at least his is harmless.'

I grinned. 'Unlike Catullina Gemella's.'

'Whose?'

'Never mind.' I reached for the second roll: Priscus's letter. Something fell out. I picked it up and glanced at it. 'Gods!'

'What's wrong?' Perilla got up quickly and came over to stand behind me. I was staring at the banker's draft. Harmless the old bugger's hobby might be, but it wasn't cheap, that was for sure. There were numbers there I didn't know existed outside a population census.

'You think the city council's hocking Phidias's *Athene*?' I said.

'Don't be silly, Marcus.' Perilla bent down for a closer look. Her breath caught. 'Oh. Oh, I see what you mean.'

I swallowed. Priscus might have a fair bit stashed away - apart from his tomb-bashing forays he lived pretty simply, and Mother had her own money - but he'd given Simon the authority to release the price of a villa on the Janiculum, with maybe a racing yacht thrown in. No ordinary statue would cost that much. No ordinary statue even came close. So what the hell was Priscus playing at?

I opened the letter itself. Where Mother's writing sprawled across the page like the tracks of a drunken spider, Priscus's was tiny enough to give a literate ant migraine. The guy might be willing to spend several millions on a bronze wrestler or a hunk of Parian that some big-name Greek had restructured with a chisel four hundred years back, but he could squeeze more words into a square foot of paper than anyone else I knew.

Titus Helvius Priscus gives greetings to his stepson Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus.

Vipsania will have mentioned the Baker statue to you, Marcus. Tremendously exciting, and certainly, assuming it's genuine, the antiquarian find of the century. If I can acquire it I shall die a happy man. Naturally the price, great as it is, represents only a fraction of the piece's true worth, and as you'll readily appreciate I pay it gladly.

I took another mouthful of wine. 'Readily appreciate', hell! Jupiter, I'd never understand antiquarians, not if I lived to be ninety. Personally if I ever lost what few marbles I'd got and splashed out the price of a villa on a statue I'd be happy if my nearest and dearest didn't poison my gruel.

'Corvinus, hold still, please,' Perilla murmured. 'How do you expect me to read if you keep jiggling about like that?'

'Sorry, lady.' I straightened the letter and read on:

I will not insult you by describing the Baker to you, since you will of course know of it already.

Yeah, sure I did; I carried a run-down of every work of art from Achilles' shield to the Wart's latest portrait in my head. Describing them in painstaking detail was my favourite trick at parties.

The obvious stumbling blocks are authenticity and provenance. My historian friends are divided over when the statue actually disappeared from the Delphian treasury, but the *terminus ante quem* can be no later than one hundred and thirty years ago while the *terminus post quem* is the period of the Phocian depredations of the Third Sacred War, dating back some two hundred and fifty years before that; consequently...

Shit. Priscus wrote even worse than he talked, and rereading didn't help much either. My head was spinning. I'd swear that half of this stuff wasn't even Latin.

'Hey, Perilla,' I said over my shoulder, 'just skim through this and explain it to me in words of one syllable, would you?'

But she wasn't behind me any longer. I looked round just in time to see her disappearing through the door in the direction of the dining-room. Yeah, well, Priscus off and running with the antiquarian bit between his teeth versus apple and calf's brain casserole on an empty stomach is no contest. I tossed the letter on to the side table, poured the last of the Setinian into my cup and followed her in the direction of the feed bag.

She wasn't in the dining-room either. Odd.

Bathyllus was doing complex things with tableware.

'Uh...you seen the mistress?' I asked him.

'I understand she's gone to her study for a book, sir.' The little guy had on his prim put-upon look. Or maybe it was just his hernia playing up again. 'Should I serve dinner now or would you like another pre-dinner jug while we're waiting?'

That's what I like about Bathyllus: when he wants to be sarcastic his touch is feather light. Still, he had a point. I was mildly peeved with Perilla myself. My one inflexible rule is no reading at the table; literature plays hell with good conversation, not to mention giving me heartburn.

'No, go ahead.' I stretched out on the couch and held out my hands for the slave to pour water over them. 'She'll be down again in a minute.'

A sniff. 'Very well, sir.'

She wasn't; in fact, the starters were already off and running when she came back. Sure enough, she was carrying a book-roll.

'Marcus, I've found it,' she said.

'Oh, whoopee.' I patted the couch beside me. 'But just leave it alone until we've eaten, Archimedes. Okay?'

Perilla ignored me. She lay down and held her hands out for the water, then patted them dry with a napkin and unrolled the book. 'The Baker statue was gifted to the Delphic oracle by Croesus of Lydia, six hundred years ago. Herodotus saw it at Delphi himself.'

'You don't say?' I tried to look unimpressed. Policy; give the lady an inch and she'll take a yard. 'Herodotus himself, eh? With his own little piggy eyes?' I passed her a fish pickle canapé.

'But you don't understand! Priscus is right. If the Baker's turned up it's incredible!'

I sighed. 'Perilla, it's dinner-time, I'm hungry, and frankly I couldn't care less if Priscus's hunk of marble turns out to have the nosey old globetrotting bugger's name carved across its backside in cuneiform. Now shut up and let's eat.'

'Very well.' Perilla nibbled the canapé. 'I thought you'd be interested, though. The Baker wasn't marble. Nor was it bronze. It was solid gold, four and a half feet high.'

The olive I was chewing went down the wrong way and I choked. Perilla reached over and pounded me on the back.

'You are interested, then?' she said.

Jupiter in a bucket! 'Uh, Bathyllus?' I said when I could breathe again.

'Yes, sir?'

'There's a letter on the side table next door. Just bring it through, would you?'

He left, and I turned back to Perilla. '*Solid* gold?' She nodded. 'Solid as in "solid"?' Another nod. 'And four and a half *feet*?'

'So Herodotus said, yes.'

I sat back. Yeah. Well, maybe it was incredible after all. Not that Priscus would care a toss for the monetary value; it took a philistine like me to think of that aspect.

And it explained the price. Even melted down four and a half feet of solid gold is a lot of gravy.

'Okay,' I said. 'You have my undivided attention. You happen to know why this thing went missing?'

'No. But if it's reappeared, then as Priscus says it's a major find. If Melanthus confirms its authenticity, naturally.'

'And who the hell is Melanthus?'

'Marcus, didn't you *read* what Priscus wrote?'

'Not from beginning to end, no. I gave up when my brain started to hurt.'

'What brain?'

'Now listen, lady..!'

Someone coughed: our bald-headed major-domo, mission fulfilled, complete with Priscus's letter. I grabbed it and unrolled. This time I skipped the lumpy stuff.

I have asked a correspondent of mine at the Academy, one Melanthus of Abdera, if he would be kind enough to cast a professional eye over the statue before, Marcus, you conclude the financial formalities on my behalf.

Shit. That was all I needed. You can't move in Athens without tripping over some parboiled egghead philosopher, and the ones at the Academy are the pick of the clutch. I was getting bad feelings about this business already, find of the century or not. I carried on reading.

Melanthus is an expert on Eastern art, and you may trust to his judgment implicitly; also, naturally, Argaius understands that any sale will depend on his approval.

He'd lost me again. I checked above for Argaius and found him three paragraphs back. He was the seller, and according to Priscus he had an import-export business near the Serangeion. I frowned. I knew the Serangeion, in the run-down Piraeus docklands area between Zea and Mounychia harbours, and it wasn't a good address for a reputable art dealer. Certainly not one who dealt in solid gold statues with star billing in Herodotus.

Something stank worse than the Tiber in midsummer, and it wasn't Meton's fish pickle canapés, either. I looked up. Perilla was helping herself to the fennel pottage.

'It all sounds absolutely fascinating, doesn't it, Marcus?' she said.

Perilla never ceases to amaze me. She was serious. She was actually serious. I hated to burst the bubble, but it had to be done.

'It all sounds absolutely suspect, lady,' I said. 'Either we're talking black market here or Priscus is being sold a pup. I don't know about you, but personally I'd go for the second option.'

The spoon paused in mid-dollop. 'You think so?'

I sighed. 'Perilla, anyone with a business near the Serangeion knows more about faking ancient statues than a dog knows how to scratch. It's a con, believe me.'

'But that's terrible!' She looked stricken.

'It's the way the world works. The best favour I can do Priscus is to write back telling him to forget the whole thing, buy a hack team at the Racetrack and lose his money sensibly.'

'He'd never believe you.'

Well, she had a point there. I held out my plate for the tripe. I knew Priscus, and from the tone of his letter the guy had stars in his eyes. If I wrote back to say he'd be better throwing his cash down the nearest manhole or blowing it on wild women and fancy booze he'd ignore me and get himself another agent by return. At least I was family. And there was just an outside chance that this was on the level. The odds in favour were about the same as I'd put on a herd of flying pigs being spotted over the Acropolis, mind, but still...

'Marcus?'

I blinked. 'Yeah. That's me.'

'You really think this is a swindle?'

'If it isn't, lady, then I'm a eunuch priest of Attis.'

'But Melanthus -'

'Perilla, I wouldn't trust one of these Academy bubbleheads to authenticate his own grandmother. They're a con artist's dream. Most of them don't have the sense to come in out of the rain, let alone spot a competent fake.'

She was silent a moment. Then she sighed.

'Well, I suppose it does sound rather too good to be true,' she said. 'So. What can we do?'

'Go through the motions. At least until the dickering stage. After all, it can't hurt to give it a try, can it?'

Like hell it couldn't. But then, I didn't know that yet.