

Parthian Shot 1

Accounts days only come two or three times a year in the Corvinus household; they rank with blots on the religious calendar like the anniversaries of Cannae and the Allia, and they involve a lot of creative swearing. Me and numbers just don't get on, and never have. Pythagoras, unless I'm mixing up my philosophers, believed the universe was made up of the little buggers, which says a lot about Pythagoras. Anyone silly enough to spread dangerous ideas like that around deserves to come back as a clam.

I'd just totted up the column on the latest tablet for the third time and got my third different answer when there was a knock on the study door and Bathyllus put his head round. Cautiously, which is par for the course on accounts days: our superefficient major-domo knows perfectly well that interrupting the master when he's wrestling with household income and expenditure can lose you teeth. Especially since when I'm balancing the books I have to keep off the fermented grape juice. Wine and arithmetic don't mix.

'Ah...I'm sorry to disturb you, sir -'

'Then don't, pal.' I reversed the pen and drew the blunt end savagely through the wax at the foot of the column. 'Jupiter sodding bloody God Almighty!'

' - but you have a visitor.'

Hell; that was all I needed. Visitors when I'm slaving over a red-hot abacus I can do without, and Bathyllus knows it.

'Pass them on to Perilla.'

'The mistress has gone out, sir. To the Pollio library. And the gentleman wants to speak to you personally.'

Bugger. Double bugger. I sat back in my chair. 'This "gentleman" have a name, by any chance?'

That got me a sniff; not much of one, mind, because like I say even our sarky, full-of-himself major-domo doesn't take unnecessary risks on accounts days. 'Yes, sir. Lucius Vitellius.'

My eyebrows hit the ceiling. We don't get many visitors, or I don't, rather, because Perilla's got her own network of intellectual geeks and literary weirdos who pop in and out to exchange anapaests, but even among the ones we do get ex-consuls don't figure all that prominently. And Lucius Vitellius didn't figure at all. The likelihood that one of Rome's top senatorial heavies - in both senses of the word - had just dropped in in passing to swap the latest barber-shop jokes over a mouthful of wine and a few nuts was on a par with flying pigs above the Capitol.

'He tell you what he wanted?' I said.

'No, sir. Only that it was important and if you were at home it was essential that he see you.'

Essential, right? Shit; I didn't like the sound of this, not above half. When movers-and-shakers like Vitellius used the word essential it means trouble. 'Okay,' I said, laying the pen down. 'Wheel him in. And bring the wine tray. If I'm going to be interrupted I might as well get something out of it.'

'Yes, sir.' Bathyllus prepared to exit.

'Uh, Bathyllus?'

He turned. 'Yes, sir?'

'Before you go, pal.' I passed him the accounts tablet. 'Just cast your eyes over this, will you? What do you make the total?'

He took it and glanced at the figures. His lips moved. 'Eight thousand three hundred and forty-six,' he said finally.

'You're sure?'

He gave me a look like I was a mentally-disadvantaged prawn. 'Quite sure.'

Oh, hell. That made total number four. Maybe I did need a break after all. 'Fine,' I said.

'Off you go.'

He left.

Vitellius came in like a homing hippo. 'Large' didn't do the guy justice; he barely scraped between the edges of the study door either side without taking the frame with him, and I reckoned nine-tenths of what lay under the sharp broad-striper mantle was pure solid blubber. Most fat men are just fat; Vitellius was a positive triumph of adiposity.

'Corvinus,' he said. 'Good of you to see me. Not interrupting you at all, am I?'

Yeah, well, maybe he had missed the abacus, the pile of wax tablets on the desk, the chewed pen and the clumps of torn-out hair littering the floor, but I wouldn't be placing any bets. Litter-carrier's nightmare or not, not even one of the senate's leading lights could be that unobservant. 'No problem,' I said. 'You, uh, want to sit down?'

The study only has one couch, but there is a chair for visitors. Quite a substantial one, luckily, and armless or it would've been a non-starter. He pulled it up and sat. The legs creaked and I heard a faint groaning as the leather straps underneath took the consular strain.

'You're doing the accounts?' Vitellius nodded towards the mess on the desk. So he had noticed after all.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Or I was, anyway.'

'Try to avoid it myself. Get my secretary to do it. Sharp young Greek lad with a proper head for figures. You have to watch the bugger, though. Some of these accountants are too damn constructive for their own good.'

'Right. Right.' Bathyllus knocked and came in with the wine tray, deferential as hell.

'Fine, little guy,' I said. 'Just pour for us and then go and buff up the cutlery, okay?' That got me another sniff; if there was a prize for Rome's top snob Bathyllus would win it at a slow canter, on his scale consulars rate pretty high, and left to himself he tends to make the most of them. I waited until the door closed behind him with a frustrated click. 'So. What can I do for you?'

Vitellius took a swallow of the wine. The huge jowls wobbled as he smacked his lips.

'Not bad stuff, this. Who do you deal with?'

Bugger; I hate this pussy-footing around. I could cheerfully do without Vitellius, too, even if the alternative was cerebral torture. 'A guy in the Argiletum. It's all right. Now I'm sorry to be pushy, but -'

'Got a little job for you. At least, not me personally.' He paused. 'In fact, Corvinus, this isn't my idea at all and we may as well get that straight from the start, all right? No offence meant, but there we are.'

Jupiter! Yeah, well, on the few occasions our paths had crossed we hadn't exactly hit it off, but there was a sourness to his tone that didn't suggest the relationship was set to

improve. Still, he was the one sitting in the visitor's chair drinking my wine, not the other way about. I leaned back against the couch-end. 'Yeah?' I said. 'What kind of job would that be, now?'

That got me a long, slow, jowly stare: evidently in Vitellius's book answering questions was something other people did, preferably when he was doing the asking. He took another gulp of wine and set the cup down, like he was drawing some kind of line. 'I'm just the messenger-boy,' he grunted. 'Isidorus'll explain things to you personally.'

Yeah? Well, that was a delight to know, anyway. 'Who's Isidorus?'

'The man who wants you to do the little job.'

'Really? All of that?' I said brightly. Shit; break over. Two minutes into the conversation or not, I'd had enough of this lark. Throwing the bugger out on his very substantial beam-end would take a lot of muscle, sure, but I could always call in some of the bought help to give me a hand. And finding out whether he bounced or just came down with a nice hefty thud would set me up very nicely for the rest of a very boring morning. 'Now listen, pal. You may not be aware of this, and it's not your fault if you aren't, but you chose a really terrible day for giving me the run-around. Bearing that in mind, and considering the possible resultant consequences of an unconsidered reply, suppose we try that last one again. You ready? Good. Now. Who the fuck is Isidorus? And why should he think I need any sort of a job?'

The jowls purpled and quivered. I could see the guy was within a hair's-breadth of coming back at me in spades - not that I'd've minded - but he just reached for his cup and took another gulp before he answered. Interesting; ex-consuls aren't exactly easy-going at the best of times, and that little bit of *lèse-majesté* ought to have got me blistered. Vitellius was holding himself in so tight I wondered he didn't rupture. The question was, why?

'Isidorus of Charax,' he said shortly.

I nodded. 'Right. Right. That is really informative, pal. So far we've got the length of a name and a place of birth. Now maybe you'd like to go a little bit further and tell me what the guy actually does.'

The purpling went up a notch. 'Jupiter bloody Best and Greatest, Corvinus! If this were up to me..!'

'You'd spit in my eye. Yeah. I'd sort of worked that one out for myself, and to tell you the truth I'm wondering why you don't. Seriously wondering, because Isidorus has to be Greek, Greeks in Rome don't rate consular messenger-boys, and if they ever did the bugger in question sure as hell wouldn't roll over and take it like you seem to be doing. So I'll ask you again: who's Isidorus?'

Pause; long pause, while we glared at each other. Then, suddenly, Vitellius grinned; not a pleasant grin, either, even allowing for the three or four blackened teeth that showed when he smiled.

'Oh, dear,' he said. 'I am really going to enjoy this.'

He reached into his mantle-fold, pulled out a sealed letter and handed it over. Then he reached for his wine-cup, took a hefty swig and sat back, his eyes on my face.

I broke the seal, and my eye went straight to the authorising signature...

Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus.

Aka the Wart.

Oh, shit.

I read the thing through from the start. Not that there was much of it; just the bald request that I be good enough to put myself at the disposal of Isidorus of Charax and the Roman senate, on a matter which would be explained to me.

I raised my eyes to Vitellius's face. He was smiling so hard there could've been a hinge in his neck.

'The litter's waiting,' he said.

I took a long slug of my untouched wine before I stood up. Something told me I was going to need it.

The Wart, eh?

Fuck.