

The death of Lentulus.

Fire. Cries. Blood. Iron. Pain. Flames.

Light. Bodies. Cries. Blades. Pain.

Dark. Blood. Blood. Death.

His eyes widened and he awoke. A quick look around...

The room, the table, a half-empty bottle, the scrolls scattered near the bed and the ceiling beams corroded by moisture.

'It's the saltiness', he thought. The wind carried it this far, up to the first houses of Pompeii.

After all, the port of Stabiae was not far away ...

His mouth was thick with a bitter taste. The night had been restless and had fostered many strange and confused dreams.

'If I was a weak woman, accustomed to second thoughts and open to fear, I would think about the bad omens.' he pondered, trying to smile.

He dreamed of a faceless man who was constantly changing his appearance, in a way that was impossible to recognize him.

According to the preceptors in Rome, that faithfully repeated the doctrines of the Greek philosophers, changing the form is a way to hide the soul, concealing its terrible secrets.

The character of his dream first became a large animal that spat fire and flames, then a terrifying beast, half-man and half-bull, or other unimaginable monstrosities, and he ate dismembered human bodies while shuddering with pleasure.

'Nonsense,' he repeated, *'the tension of these days has been remarkable, and after all, dreams have never hurt anyone.'*

Suddenly he heard a loud knock at the door. He rose from the couch, walked over to the door and asked, "*who is there?*", already sensing that he would receive no answer.

He opened the door abruptly and leaned out to look around. Nobody. The street was empty, wrapped in light mist mixed with early morning frost. Stuck hastily in the door was a rough dagger holding up a message.

Lentulus took it without hesitation; his eyes and mind were always alert to what was moving around. He cast one last look in the street and went back inside.

He looked intently at the message, hastily penned on a sheet of woven fibers.

He read it and reread it several times. Finally he triumphantly said, "*Here we are!*".

All anxieties and fears from the moment before had disappeared. Lentulus returned to being the envoy to the Emperor, using his clever and cautious characteristics, valued for missions like this one. He sat down at the work table. He re-examined his papers. "Yes!", he exulted, "everything is right! My suspicions were correct! ".

He updated his diary and thought about sending a message to Annius, his close friend in Rome, who was certainly suffering from inactivity.

He smiled, thinking of him, but forced himself to move quicker and then he went out.

Now the town was beginning to wake up. On the streets, hundreds of shops were opening and shopkeepers were carefully placing their goods on display.

The fresh scent of local vegetables and pungent smells of oriental spices mingled together.

The merchants came from all corners of the Empire to bring their goods or to buy local products, among which stood out the *garum*, the divine sauce the city was famous for.

Behind the imposing volcano, which hung over the city, the sun was rising quickly and its rays created intense shimmers on the golden medallion that Lentulus had around his neck.



1 - Streets are full of shops...

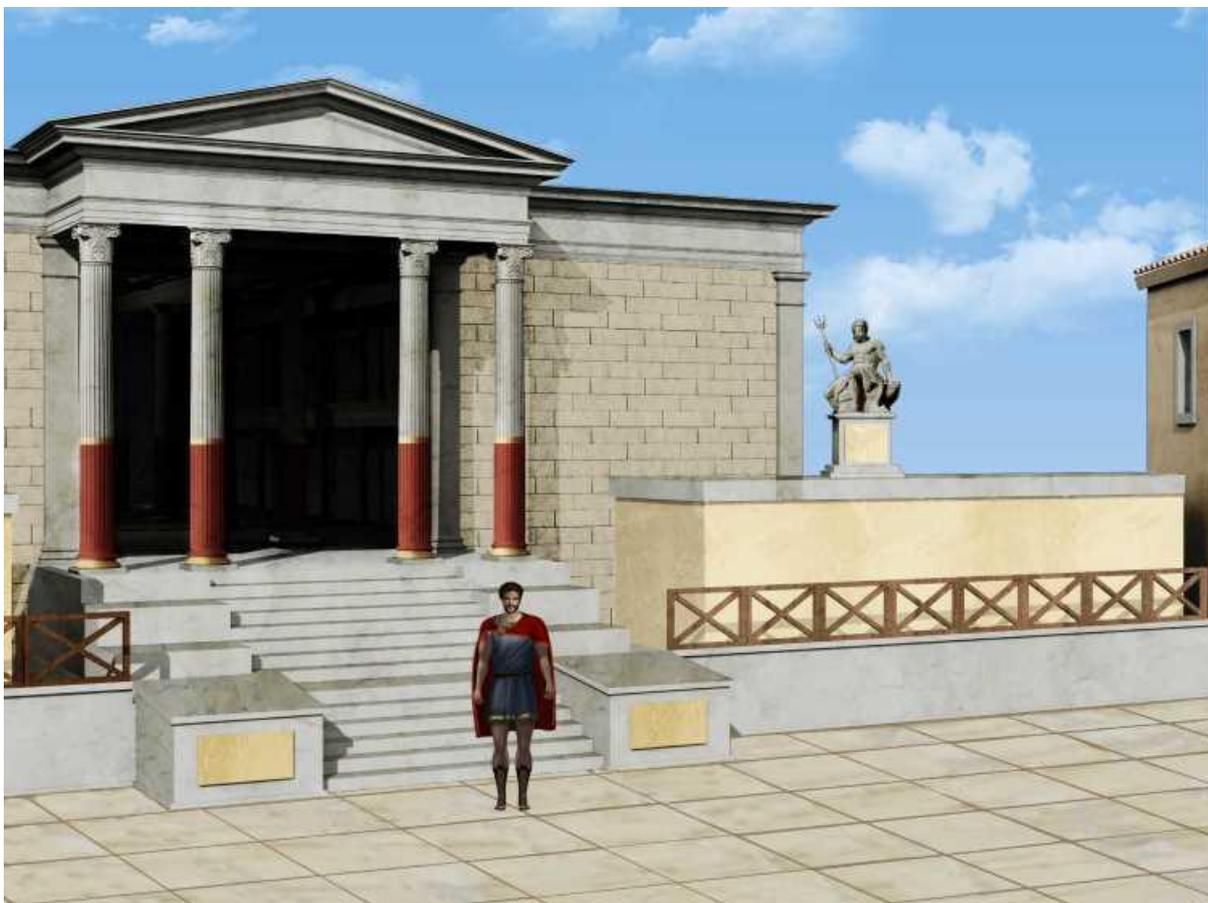
He crossed Via Marina and walked to the Forum.

He passed in front of Phylenaide's *Thermopolium*, she was a pretty shopkeeper, and thought about going inside for a refreshment.

"*Better not!*", he said at the doorway. Phylenaide was known for her loquacity and he had no time to lose.

The Forum suddenly appeared before his eyes with all of its majesty.

Inside the imposing and majestic basilica, that hosted markets and judicial disputes, activities were taking place as usual.



2 - The exterior of the basilica.

Just to the west, in the sacred area, there was the Temple of Apollo, one of the oldest temples in the city. On its porch, like other chipped walls of many public buildings, still bore clear signs of the terrible event of a few years ago: the earthquake.

In a few moments, it had almost destroyed the city, despite the favorable auspices that the priests had drawn from the bowels of animals in previous years. 'Go and have faith in the priests!', he smiled, quickening his pace.



3 - The Temple of Apollo.

A few crossroads, a last stretch of road, and he was at the meeting place.

As he had learned in many years of difficult and dangerous missions, it was better to settle down in the sidelines, where he could survey the area without being seen.

'He believes he is ... clever ... He thinks ...', the man who was waiting for Lentulus had followed the whole scene and now, thanks to passages and trapdoors known only by him, he quickly followed. As always, the thought of bringing death and deciding the fate of a man, filled him with excitement.

Meanwhile, Lentulus was trying to ease the tension that gripped him. He thought back to Annius, their friendship born between two *"homines novi"* of plebeian extraction, who had made their way into their careers thanks to their skill and loyalty.

"Uhm," he thought, *"together we have travelled the world, but we have never settled down."* The thought ran easily to his beloved, whom he met recently, and this distraction - the last little accident in a series of other small ones, whose end was perhaps already decided by the gods - was fatal.

Now the murderer was behind him. He emerged from the shadow that hid him.

"Health ... to you ... brave ... Lentulus ...".

Lentulus spun around, the short sword was already drawn. *"Ah, it's you!"*

"I have ... something ... to show you ... come closer ...".

Lentulus cautiously approached him.

"Here ...", said the man and Lentulus opened his palm. He immediately felt a slight pain, like an aggravating insect bite.

He looked incredulously at his hand that now had a pin stuck in it, bathed in blood, that seemed to be greedily drinking all the light of day.

In a moment he understood. He tried to react and pounce on the man, but his limbs began to feel weak. His tongue was heavy and his legs bent like reeds under an immense weight.

He collapsed to the ground, unable to say a word.

The man, grinning with pleasure, remained motionless in front of him. He nodded, and two men appeared out of nowhere and wrapped Lentulus' unconscious body in a shroud. They took him behind a heavy wooden door. The closing bang of the doorway sounded like a death sentence.



4 - Annius meet a beggar.

... ..

How long had it been? Hours? Days?

Lentulus did not know, he could not think. Whatever he had been injected with did a darn good job.

He had a confused mind and his muscles continued to betray him by not responding to his will.

He was in a clearing not far from Pompeii. Indeed, by straining his hearing he seemed to catch the buzz of the city.

He looked up. His enemies were before him. Those whom he had tried to deceive by weaving a careful plot of information and contacts. Now they had won. Now they could fulfill their terrible plans! Their thirst for blood was unstoppable!

He angrily tried to lash out at them, but his legs did not respond. One of them, the leader, beckoned in a simple yet terrifying way.

Lentulus was pushed to the ground and hit in the head. He heard the rustle of the blade that rose to meet his neck. He thought about Rome, his friend, his beloved and then, with a cry, absolutely nothing more.

Sic animosus mortuus est.

And thus a valiant one dies!