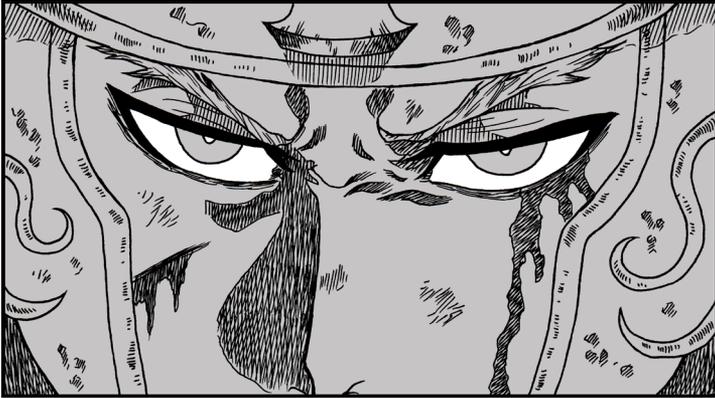


OWL SHOGUN STUDIOS



BOOK IV:

SONS OF THE REPUBLIC



Story & Art By:

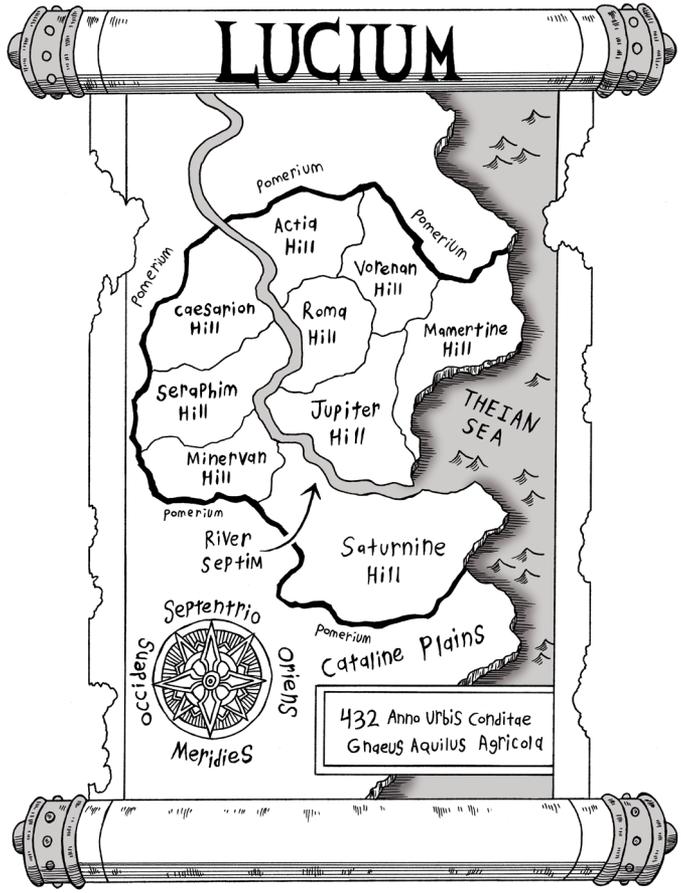
JOSH ALICEA

S.P.Q.L



SENATUS · POPULUSQUE · LUCIANUS

REGIONAL MAP



REGION: Theia

TERRITORY: Caelum - Lucium

YEAR: 432 AUC (Anno Urbis Conditae)



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, concepts and incidents are all products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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This is a **fantasy** inspired by **history**...

The **Deorum Legions**TM universe derives its essence from the old **Greco-Roman** world of classic antiquity. It is a setting of legionary armies, magnificent cities, ancient gods, mighty gladiators, mythical beings, and much more.

It is a cruel, violent, and unjust place. There is slavery, death, war, and all manner of strong themes that may not be suitable for some audiences. This book is not meant for the faint of heart nor the easily outraged. Read at your own discretion.

Most critically, this series of books is meant to emulate the unique **Japanese storytelling** tradition of **shōnen** manga with **seinen** characteristics. Now turn the page, dear reader, and let us now embark on this magnificent journey together...

- The Owl Shogun

Book 4
Sons of The Republic



The Nibiru Arc

Story & Art:
Josh Alicea

The sands of time shift and sway...

Our tale must be placed on a brief pause...
But do not despair...

For but a mere moment, we shall peer into the
opaque mists of the past...

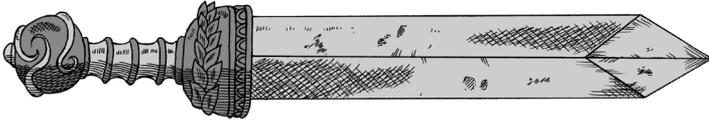
It is there that we shall uncover a long-forgotten
truth... One which shall one day play a crucial
role in the future of Theia...

Let us go there now... To that place 32 years
ago... To the year 423 Anno Urbis Conditae...

The darkest day in Lucian history...

I

FALL OF THE REPUBLIC



It was the darkest day in Lucian history... Most could scarcely believe that it was even possible... Sure, things have grown perilous as of late. But *this*? It was an absurdity unmatched since the Hyperboreans sacked the city centuries ago. But they were a foreign menace that was eventually pushed back to the far reaches of the known world. *This* was different. It was on this day some claimed that the Republic had truly perished. Looking back, it certainly *did* change; never to return to what it once was. For the first time in Lucium's proud history, the eternal city had fallen into the hands of an enemy general... And he was Lucian.

The rebel army marched over the bodies of the fallen who bravely fought to defend the holy city from their traitorous brethren. They paraded to the rhythmic cadence of drums and bombastic horns. Their military banners stood boldly with their red and gold hues as the mighty aquila, the golden eagle, signaled the cruel ironies of fate.

The people ran in fear as they closed their shops, fled the streets, and barricaded their doors. Those foolish enough

to stand up and fight against them were met with swift retribution. Rivers of blood flooded the cobbled alleys and flowed into the numerous sewers. The stench of death soon permeated all of Lucium. But more potent was the deafening silence. The prior pandemonium ceased as soon as the final pockets of resistance were eliminated.

Those that remained wished not to tempt the wrath of their new conqueror. The people hid in fright and did not dare to even peek through their windows. One man, a fellow of substantial means wrapped in an elegant toga, shivered behind the cover of a market stall as he witnessed the treasonous soldiers trudging along the forum. The city was theirs for the taking. Leading the army on horseback is their cherished commander.

One of the armored men disembarked from his horse and approached the hallowed steps of the senate house. In his hands was a rather large papyrus scroll. He then forcefully nailed it to the door for all to see. Afterwards, the General beckoned his men towards some undisclosed location. The man in hiding could only imagine what foul deeds awaited them. But with the soldiers gone, the patrician scurried over to the towering bronze doors of the Curia. He carefully read through the contents of this accursed scroll which was now hammered to the building.

Inscribed on it is a list of names each belonging to prominent families. To his relief, his own name was nowhere to be seen. But some of those listed were his friends. How did things come to this? With clenched fists, the man shifts his gaze up towards the Roma Hill where both the Temple of Romula and the Consular Palace stood. He could see the army ascending to the top; like ants cloaked in flames crawling to spread destruction wherever they went.

As the rebel army approached the palace, they were immediately met with the final remnants of Republican legionary forces. Bolstering their ranks are the infamous eidolon-hunting Equites. With their combined might, they manifested a monumental mass of ethereal weaponry in the form of swords, spears, and arrows which all floated in suspension as though gravity held no domain. In response, the opposing army conjured up their own floating weapons in kind. The ensuing battle could be heard all throughout the nine hills as blades and shields clashed for the very soul of the nation. In the end, even the fearsome Equites had fallen; their numbers dwindled to all but a handful of prisoners. None remained who could stop the mutinous General from entering the palatial edifice which hovered over them in immaculate grandiosity. The slaves ran as fast as their feet allowed for a salvation that would never come. Government officials cowered and kneeled for mercy. Just about every person within these sanctified walls pleaded, begged, and feigned fealty in the hopes of clemency – but not the Consul! Dressed in finery and adorned with a simple laurel wreath, the noble chief of the Lucians met the General's gaze with indignation. He then rose up from his consular chair and addressed him as he would any man.

"Quinctius... Why have you?"

"It wounds me to see such hostility upon returning home, my dear Aelius." The General taunts.

"You turned your back on Lucium. You are nothing more than a dog needing to be put down!"

"A *dog*, you say?" Quinctius mutters with bated amusement. He then slowly walks towards the nervous Consul with a demented smirk. "If that's the case, then why grant me the title of legatus in the first place?"

“You were meant to defend the Republic! Not to become the instrument of its own destruction!”

“That’s all very well and good. But we both know who the *real* enemy is.”

“What madness do you speak?” The Consul questions with sweat dripping from his brow.

“Come now.” Quinctius whispers as he unsheathes his gladius. “Surely you are not blind to such blatant truths. The Republic has been dead for a long time. And *we* are the ones who did the deed.”

“Enough of your blasphemous words! The gods will smite you for your heresy!”

“And I welcome their fury. Should they deem my actions unjust, then let Romula come down and strike me where I stand.”

Quinctius backs away from the Consul, lifts his arms high into the air and fully embraces whatever punishment should fall upon him. Only silence can be heard. No bolts of lightning struck down from the heavens. No putrid flames erupted from beneath the ground. All that groveled before him was a frightened man whose time under the sun had long expired. To this, Quinctius smiles once more, grips his blade tightly, and inches closer to Aelius.

“Looks like the gods favor my cause. They know that I am just and in alignment with their will.”

“... And what perversion of justice is that?”

“Liberation.”

Quinctius took his sword and impaled the Consul straight through the stomach. The excruciating agony prompted Aelius to squeal as he held onto the General as though in brotherly embrace. Quinctius sees his suffering and kisses him gently on the cheeks.

“Hush now... Do not be afraid.” He whispers as his arms tenderly caress the Consul’s scalp. “The pain is only temporary. It will all be over soon.”

After a few more laborious breaths, the light of his consciousness begins to fade, and all sensation dissipates into the void. Aelius collapses onto the ground as blood oozes out of the wound like spilled wine. With the Consul now dead, Quinctius and his loyal troops stormed the palace and looted it as they would any conquered territory. Amidst the rapine of female servants and the pillaging of state property, Quinctius crouches down and removes the blood-stained laurel wreath from Aelius’ corpse. He then places it on his own forehead and casually sits upon the consular chair; relishing his hard-won victory.

“Oh, how I longed to return to this office.”

“What are your orders, sir?” One soldier inquires with his head bowed in deference.

“What we should have done years ago...” Quinctius hints. “Call for a general assembly. The people of Lucium should know that I am on their side.”

The announcement was to be held in the forum. The sheer immensity of the plaza allowed several thousand people to fit inside the public space without overcrowding. Many more chose to observe the proceedings below from atop their apartment balconies. Most of the oldest and grandest of structures stood here as a testament to the awesome might of Lucian civilization. Among them is the famed Arch of Marcus Ancius, a triumphal arch of glistening white marble. This most sublime edifice was built to commemorate Ancius’ victory over the Tiberian pirates

during the Siege of Plinium nearly a hundred years prior. Crowning the top of the arch is a life-like bronze statue of Marcus riding a chariot pulled by four noble steeds. This, and many structures like it, adorned the Lucian Forum in a splendid tapestry of impressive colonnades, sacred temples, reverent legislative buildings, and a dizzying plethora of statues.

Citizens of all types, be they lowly plebeians or elite patricians, stood in collective silence as they awaited the arrival of their conqueror. Even members of the senatorial class attended this morose affair. All, however, were closely watched by the eagle-eyed sentinels of Quinctius' legion. At long last, their extended wait was rewarded with a fanfare of stately trumpets and a parade of dancers. Marching in neat and organized formations are the very soldiers who defeated the last of the Republican army. They were the first to enter the city and bend it to their will. At the end of the procession was Quinctius himself. In an attempt to emulate Marcus Ancius, he rode atop a highly ornamental chariot drawn by four sturdy horses.

This cavalcade was met with mixed reception. Some people cheered over concerns of reprisal. Others remained stone-faced in disapproval. All the same, Quinctius lifted his arms to embrace what little adoring fans he had. In fact, he cared little for actual approval. The optics alone were painfully clear... *He was in charge.*

Amongst the crowd, a man in a brilliant cerulean toga, a patriot by the name of Sentius Lorentius, looked on with disgust. He too bore witness to the list nailed onto the senate doors. What was the significance behind the names attached to that scroll? Was the fact that his family is not named just as terrible a fate? It was a crippling anxiety that afflicted

many within the aristocracy. Near Sentius, another patrician in senatorial garb was fuming with potent anger.

“What a disgrace... Parading around as though he conquered some foreign empire... But all he’s done is subjugate his own people... And that purple robe and golden crown... The sheer audacity... Does he truly expect us to accept a king?”

Later that day, the senate met in session. The usual faces of mature and elderly statesmen filled the august chamber with the zeal of sloths. Though this sacrosanct institution has existed for as long as there’s been a city, this particular session would forever be marred by the farcical nature of their present circumstances.

The senators all whispered amongst themselves in hushed tones; their faces as grim as the white togas they wore. Sentius sat there in contemplation. Next to him was a friend and colleague by the name of Crispus.

“The general mood couldn’t be more dismal.” Sentius comments as he adjusts his toga.

“As it should be. The Republic has been rendered into little more than a brothel. It is only natural. But look *there*.”

The disgruntled senator pauses only to lift his hand and direct Sentius’ line of sight to the other side of the room. There, the senators appear more cheerful and in relatively good spirits. He then resumes his quiet rant.

“You can see those who supported him. Pompous fools, the lot of them. Is there no end to their treason?”

“I’d take care with that tongue, Crispus. Such senseless yammering could be bad for your health.”

“Health? Ha! Lucium is dead and you dare speak to me about health? Absent a noble suicide, you and I will have to make do with lifelong dishonor.”

“The man killed a *Consul*.” Sentius reiterates. “He would not think twice to end our lives as well. I have a son to think about.”

“Then I lament for the future that *his* generation must inherit. Gods have pity on us all...”

Their chatter halts upon hearing the sounds of heavy footsteps and clanging metal. The treacherous general, Quinctius, confidently waltzes into the aureate hall with a small retinue of guards. Each member of the senate closely observes his every move with bated breath. Their heartbeats quicken when he makes his way over to the consular chair and sits on it without a second thought. So quiet was the room that you could hear audible gasps from a few exasperated elders. A higher-ranking senator of exceptional decrepitude slammed his wooden staff onto the ground and announced the beginning of this new session. Without wasting any time, one senator stood up to address the political body; relying solely on clever hand gestures and well-timed oratorical techniques to convince his captive audience.

“Esteemed colleagues! Fellow conscript fathers. Lucium has seen its share of dark and troubled days. For years, have we not been made to endure ample division and civil strife? Now, we can finally cast aside such horrific things and look towards a brighter future. The victory brought to us by Quinctius Mella ensures it! But there is still much work to be done. In lieu of this, I propose that he be granted full imperium over Lucium and made dictator for a term of five consecutive years!”

A deafening stillness pervades the Curia... *Dictator*...? Was he serious? A ludicrous suggestion! And yet... No one spoke... At least not right away... Some were still wondering

if this was all just a fevered dream spawned from excessive wine. Eventually, the senators looked to each other and whispered. Finally, one spoke his mind.

“Coward!” Shouted a faceless voice hidden by the congressional crowd.

“Who said that?” The Quinctius supporter angrily lashed out. “I am no coward!”

“You’d dare utter such vile rhetoric on the eve of Lucium’s downfall?” Another blurted out in defiance.

“The office of dictator is meant only in extreme emergencies.” A third added. “It is not a prize to be won or given on a whim.”

“We’ve had numerous dictators in the past.” One traitor retorted. “There is substantial precedence.”

“The role of a dictator is to fend off against genuine threats of barbarian incursions or foreign invasions. It was never meant to stamp out fellow Lucians! It is sacrilege!”

As the debate raged on, Crispus tugged on Sentius’ toga to get his attention and spoke softly but with urgency.

“Sentius, say something. With your auctoritas, perhaps we can sway the senate to – ”

But before Crispus could finish speaking, Sentius rises from his seat and raises his hand. Yet just before he was able to add his own input, Quinctius also stood up; prompting all in the room to return to a state of uneasy quietude. He then spoke with a gravity befitting a conqueror.

“It’s as you say.” Quinctius nods in agreement. “Indeed, I crossed the pomerium under arms. I spilled the blood of my countrymen. I broke through the walls and slew Aelius where he stood. But I did not do so out of malice or some misplaced desire to eradicate Lucium as some of you wrongfully accuse.”

Quinctius then begins to pace around the room and shifts his gaze periodically; meeting the eyes of those who spoke against the motion.

“I sought only to eradicate the corruption that has infected our society and threatened to destroy all that we hold dear. Certain measures were unavoidable. The losses, while regrettable, were a necessary step to ensure that Lucium could endure and prosper. The Republic that you clung to was impotent... Dysfunctional... A corpse without hope of resuscitation. But I will restore the world to what it once was. Just as it should be.”

On cue, a small platoon of fully armored legionnaires rushed into the hall to fill up the remaining space; their swords drawn, and their arrows ready. Quinctius then smiled and concluded his speech.

“Who will refuse to join me on this noble quest?”

As the session reaches its unceremonious end, the senators all empty the vast halls of the Curia and disperse throughout the many exits of the Lucian Forum. Sentius walks out at a slow pace; careful not to seem overly enthused nor demonstrably disturbed. Walking beside him is Crispus who suddenly ceases his gait and looks up towards the colossal Arch of Marcus. Sentius pauses to look upon the goliathan structure as well.

Each corner is graced with pillars styled after the three classical orders – that being Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. Underneath the arch soffit are deep square-shaped coffers decorated with floral designs embedded into the stone itself. No part of the arch was spared of striking detail. The entire arch is a monument to what many considered a *golden age* in

the Republic's long and treasured history. It went without saying that the landmark's very visage invoked in people a sense of longing for that time.

"Marcus Ancius..." Crispus mutters; the very name sending shivers down his spine. "Now *there* was a true Lucian if ever there was any... He was given the all-encompassing powers of the dictatorship so that he could quell Leokoles and his dreadful pirate fleet. With the full authority of all the legions, Leokoles was defeated; the Republic saved. Then he willingly gave up his supreme powers and retired to a life of farming... *Farming*... Imagine that? It was this noble act of placing the Republic before personal ambition that made him a hero."

"These are entirely different times, Crispus. We have no such men these days. We are... Far removed from their greatness."

"Listen to me, Sentius! Your family was the first of the patrician clans to join Lucius and build the Republic in the early days. As a descendant of one of the founding fathers, you have the consideration... No... The moral responsibility to lead us out of this darkness."

For but a moment, Sentius becomes distracted by the chuckling of nearby legionnaires. The soldiers leered over at them with suspicious eyes as they spoke. History taught him about what happens to those who utter ill motives against those who commanded the army. He then taps his friend on the shoulder and offers a tender grin to hide his unease.

"Go home, Crispus. Tell your children that you cherish them. Make love to your wife. And sleep well. Tomorrow, we will speak of no such things again, understood?"

"Say what you will. But you can't run away from your destiny. The blood of the Lorentii runs deep within you."

After this, Crispus reluctantly walks away in bitter disappointment. Sentius then saunters over to his personal lectica, or litter, and sits within its comfy interior. A group of four burly slaves lift the wheelless transport and begin to carry him up towards Actia Hill. Curtains of silk allowed a sort of veil to separate himself from the chaos of the outside world; his lectica a private sanctuary from which he could ruminate in his own thoughts.

But as they neared their destination, Sentius gently lifted the curtains and gazed outwards to the ritzy streets of the Actia. The rows of stately residences gave him the impression that nothing had changed. The marble buildings and bronze statues which dotted the area bestowed a sense of fragile permanence; perfectly preserved and reminiscent of how things used to be. But this betrayed the truth. Once they arrived, his slaves slowly placed the litter down as Sentius stepped out with solemn relief. His home is a most luxurious estate heightened with all manner of beautiful detail. He tightens his loose toga, gathers his courage, and steps through the door. Upon entry to the Lorentius Villa, he is greeted warmly by his many slaves.

“Dominus!”

“Welcome home, my Dominus!”

“Greetings, master!”

And though the kind reception of his house servants was well received, it was the familiar visage of his wife that gave his mind solace.

“You’re back.” She sighed with relief. “Oh, thank the gods. I was beginning to fear the worst.”

“It’s alright, Iulia.” Sentius assures. “I am fine.”

“So... It is true then?” Consul Aelius is dead?”

“Stabbed right through the stomach it seems.”

“Oh Romula... What do we do?”

“What is there *to do*?” Sentius replies as he throws himself onto a triclinium sofa to rest his aching body. “The Republic has fallen... And now... A man with no respect for tradition sits upon the chair as dictator...”

“Dictator? That wretch committed the ultimate sin. Why’d the senate allow such a thing?”

“His men forced us at the tip of a sword... Our *capitulation* is why I’m still here to utter such things.”

Iulia, taken aback by the severity of his words, walks over to sit next to her husband.

“And Crispus? How are he and the others taking it?”

“As you’d expect.” He sighs. “They’re all mourning... Each in their own way.”

“... Sentius... You and Mella go way back... Perhaps you can persuade him to –”

Before she can conclude her thoughts, their discussion is interrupted by a small child running across the central atrium. The boy lunges towards Sentius with tiny arms and enthused laughter.

“Papa! Welcome home! I missed you!”

“Hey!” Sentius replies; lifting up the boy and embracing him affectionately. “How’s my brave little Scipio doing?”

“Mama and I were reading about the tale of King Helion and his long voyage home after the... The... I forget what it was called...”

“The Jovian Wars.” Iulia corrects.

“THAT’s the one! Yeah!” Scipio then whips out a tiny piece of messily scribbled papyrus. “I even started writing my own stories.”

“Did you? We have ourselves a poet now. Perhaps one day, you’ll write a tale that will be remembered for all time.”

"It's also time for him to sleep."

"Can't I stay, mama? I wanna be with papa."

"Your father is a very busy man, Scipio. The Republic depends on men like him. Now off to bed with you." She urges. "Go on now!"

Not one to argue with his parents, little Scipio concedes. He goes to his father and presses his lips against his cheeks. He does the same for his mother, who kisses him back in return. He is then escorted down the hall by a slave.

"Come, young dominus. Right this way."

Scipio turns his head back to see his parents one last time before finally making his way to bed. All that remained was Sentius and Iulia.

"He's growing so fast." Sentius remarks; stunned by his son's reading ability.

"He's smart too. You'd be surprised by just how much he knows at so young an age."

"If I recall, he'll be nearly ten years this summer."

"Yes."

"Gods... Have I missed out on so much?"

"You're a senator. We knew what the price would be when you accepted the appointment."

"... But for how much longer, I wonder..."

"Sentius?" Iulia says; concerned over her husband's changing demeanor.

He looks down onto the glistening floor; the tiled mosaics offering a contrasting beauty to his troubled thoughts. He clasps his hands together and lowers his voice.

"... They pinned a scroll onto the senate doors... A list of names... All of them patrician families."

"Were *we* on it?"

"No... But Balbinus, Radicius, and Florens were..."

“They all spoke out against Quinctius months ago during the war. That was before he... You don’t think?”

“We’ll learn soon enough...”

Within the profaned halls of the Consular Palace, Quinctius Mella commemorated his triumph with a celebratory feast. His loyal generals joined him in this banquet of culinary delights. The wine poured endlessly, and the food never ceased as countless slaves served their every whims. It was a most boisterous occasion with unrestrained desires now fully realized.

For years they had marched, bled, and fought for the Republic, only to be discarded. Now Lucium was theirs. Now they were at the top. Quinctius, satisfied with the spoils of his success, stands up and taps on his glass cup. The generals quiet down and look to their leader with reverence as he gives them a toast.

“Generals! My dear companions. I am thankful that you are here to share in this momentous occasion. Was it not *I* that promised wealth and riches beyond your wildest dreams? Was it not *I* that promised victory over our foes? And yet, the senate would have stripped this from you and taken the glory for themselves. But now, *we* are the masters of Lucium. To reward your loyalty for all these years, I give to you the main event of the evening.”

The Dictator claps his hands which prompted a vast number of female slaves to enter the main dining hall. All of them are dressed in scant and revealing drapery; their breasts in full display to entice the generals.

“Aelius coveted these pretty things for himself. But unlike *him*, I will share my bounty with you all.”

The female slaves slowly meander towards the men via sensual maneuvers which aroused even the staunchest among them. The generals placed their cups down and no longer touched their food; for their appetite was now whetted for more carnal desires. The slaves mounted atop them and demonstrated their mastery over the arts of love. It did not take long before the banquet devolved into a proper orgy of unrestrained lust and unfettered fantasies.

Quinctius watched with glee as he helped himself to a ripe serving of three slave girls of diverse hues. They each competed for who would dominate him to which he had no complaint. They kissed and caressed each other with reckless abandon. Amidst this graphic display, one young soldier strolls through the explicit scene. At first he was shocked by the unfiltered fornication occurring all around him. But he steeled his resolve and timidly approached the Dictator. Quinctius, still in the act of coitus, addresses the man as he tends to his women.

“What is it, boy? Can’t you see I’m in the middle of something important?”

“I... The men are awaiting your orders, sir...”

Recognizing the meaning of his words, Quinctius dismounts from his erotic subjects and walks away towards the outdoor balcony despite being naked. The young soldier followed; doing his best to ignore the licentious mania that abounded. Upon reaching the balcony edge, Quinctius halts his gait and peers over the vast Lucian skyline and grins over its magnificence.

“Tell them they have my approval for the operation. But do so quietly. I don’t want to make a big fuss over it.”

“What of the women and children, sir? Shall they be spared of such a fate?”

“No... All children grow to be men. Revenge and hatred will direct their actions and threaten our hold over this city. Such embers must be extinguished before they can grow into a flame. They *all* go. Leave nothing to chance.”

“By your will, sir.”

Under the cover of darkness, Quinctius' legion marched upon the Actia Hill and split up into smaller and more mobile units. Each squad was assigned to a particular residence belonging to those who proved disloyal to the cause. Once the signal is given, they storm the homes of prominent senators and statesmen.

Any who resided within these palatial villas were immediately slaughtered without forethought. None were granted mercy; be they slave or freedmen. For several hours, noble patrician blood was spilt in the name of peace. As for the children... Their only crime was being born to the wrong family. But the true scope of this horror would not be made clear until the coming dawn.

Sentius awoke to the golden rays of the rising sun piercing through the windows. He kissed his wife and removed himself from the bedchambers. His morning routine often involved a simple cup of water with figs and other small fruits. He then took to the garden to center himself before the stresses of the day began in earnest. But just as he was settling into a state of mindful tranquility, he could hear a forceful knocking on his door. Then, a voice frantically calling out to him.

“Sentius! Sentius, open this door! It's urgent!”

The patrician hurries to the entrance and is struck by the distraught look of his visitor.

“Crispus? What’s possessed you in so early an hour?”

“It’s Balbinus! He and his family were...”

Balbinus... His name was on Quinctius’ list... Did something happen to them as the city slept? The mere thought stirred his soul into a dark place.

“I’ll get dressed and be out in a moment.” Sentius mutters. “In the meantime, shall I get you some water?”

“No I’m... Just be quick... Gods have mercy on us all...”

Sentius steps back inside the villa and is approached by his many house slaves.

“Is everything alright, Dominus?”

“... Fetch my toga, Demeter. I must leave at once.”

The slaves dressed Sentius meticulously so as to have him look his best for every occasion. The toga itself is a massive wool garment that requires the assistance of two people to manage properly. After pre-folding the toga, the slaves ran it down the front of Sentius’ body and over the left shoulder. They then wrapped it around him with the full weight of the garment supported by the left hand; freeing his right. Once fastened tightly, the slaves then make a few final adjustments to the toga to ensure that specific folds were noticeable so as to give him a dignified look. Ready to face the rigors of the day, Sentius steps back out and meets up with his fellow senator.

“Your slaves get you ready faster than mine.” Crispus comments in surprise.

“I spent good money for their refinement.”

“Hmm... You get what you paid for I suppose.”

The two statesmen then began their trek down the steep Actia Hill and towards a large gathering of citizens; both patrician and plebeian alike. Such assemblies were typically uncommon in these parts for the plebeians seldom had any

reason to come to this district. And yet here they were, standing before the home of a cherished friend.

The first thing Sentius noticed was the stench. It was a most putrid odor; detectable even from their distance. Everyone seemed sullen, which only served to quicken his heartbeat. As he and Crispus pushed through the cluster of crowds, they were further disturbed by the devastation. The Villa of Gaius Balbinus was ransacked as though it were beset upon by common thieves. Of course, it was well known who committed these heinous crimes. The evidence was everywhere. Small clumps of cerulean flames still burned brightly on the ground; proof of aether-based attacks.

What was once a breathtaking villa, fitted with the finest of ornamental décor, was now barren. Amidst the excessive damage and impure vandalism, there were stains of blood splattered all over the walls like vibrant paints. Piled up all over the floor are the bodies of slaves and freed servants. Their deaths weren't clean either. No honorable executions were had. This butchery was the work of savage men.

"This is all so..." Sentius mumbles; trying his best to keep his composure. "And they took everything."

"Not only that... Look over there." Crispus adds, pointing to a massive wall where dozens upon dozens of statuesque busts would have been. "The ancestral figures have been shattered... They really meant to wipe out the whole bloodline off the face of Kosmos..."

"Still no sign of Balbinus or his family though... Maybe they escaped?"

"Let's keep looking."

The flies began to congregate over the festering puss and rotten flesh. The smell got worse the deeper into the villa they went. It was enough to make a man faint. Even the

peristylium garden was left tarnished and burned. Statues were turned over and left to scatter on the blood-soaked tiles. Anything of value had long been carted off. Even the family treasury was missing. Sentius was about to evacuate these sordid grounds until he happened upon a room that caught his eye. It was only then that he truly despaired. His body froze and his eyes widened like a chasm.

“Crispus!”

Silence... Both Sentius and Crispus had seen their fair share of inhumanity over the years. They were no strangers to the short and brutish nature of life. But nothing could prepare them for this senseless act of cruelty. The lifeless husk of Gaius Balbinus hung in suspension via rope along with the rest of his family. Hanging like depraved grapes were his five children; the eldest no older than fourteen winters. Their skin showed signs of torture before finally having their throats slit to drain them like pigs. Nailed to Gaius’ forehead was a wooden plank inscribed with a message that read: TREASON.

Overcome with grief, Sentius collapsed onto his knees and began to cry out. Tears dripped down his cheeks as he could not formulate any cohesive words. And how could he? Crispus, lamenting with his bereaved friend, firmly places a hand on the shoulder.

“If we’re not prudent, that’ll be us one day...” Crispus warns. “That will be you, Iulia, and your son Scipio hanging from there... This is the tyranny of Quinctius Mella.”

THANKS FOR READING



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