

AUTHOR'S NOTE



お疲れ様でした! You have now officially completed **Part One** of the **Yokai Country™** saga. I have wanted to write an East-Asian fantasy series for a very long time. But before there was Temujin, Kuromaru, or even the many lands of Wakuni, there was only a boy and a dream. Those who are already familiar with my other written works will definitely know of my life-long pursuit of Japan and of the manga dream. But if this particular book is your *first* from **Owl Shogun Studios**, then here's the basic premise.

In essence, ever since I was eleven years old, I decided that my supreme goal in life was to go to Japan and become a professional manga artist. That same year, I conceived of a character who would go on to become the protagonist of my mainline series. In those early days, he was simply called Vulcan; named in reference to the ancient Roman god of fire and the forge. But given how similar it was to the Vulcans of *Star Trek*, his name was changed to the current **Velkan**.

For many years, I remained committed to the pursuit of this *manga dream* despite persistent environmental and situational limitations which severely slowed down my progress. But from the very start, I understood that *what* I sought to achieve was unorthodox in nature. Back then, and still today, there seems to be an intrinsic cultural resistance to the idea of a westerner creating manga. Many today still consider manga to be a fundamentally Japanese endeavor and that someone from the west can never hope to produce something with the same fidelity as them.

I categorically rejected this narrow-minded notion. Although, even *I* had to acknowledge the blatant fact that manga, as a profession, is simply not a viable career path in the United States like it is in Japan. And certainly, I had my fair share of rejections and detractors from publishers such as Funimation and Viz Media who even told me as such. I learned very early in my youth that if I was going to make this wayward dream a reality, it would require imaginative solutions and a high tolerance for naysay.

However, as I got older, life inexorably became more complicated and my time far less plentiful. The realities of the world and the cynicism it promoted began to slowly obscure my vision; like an interminable fog which hid even the brightest of flames. Just as old Sisyphus, king of Ephyra, was cursed to forever push a gargantuan boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down in perpetuity, so too did the manga dream start to feel like a Sisyphean labor. There were various moments when I felt utterly compelled to give up; overwhelmed by the moral decay of low-wage jobs whose only purpose was seemingly to extract every ounce of value from me until I was left rotten, withered and pillaged of all that made me hopeful in the milieu of corporate America.

There were even periods throughout my twenties where I nearly surrendered to my lowest instincts; tempted by the sweet mercy that suicide promised. But every time I sank into such abysmal depths, I would be reminded of that young boy who dreamed a dream. In those instances of stygian misery, it was always the **Manga Dream** which effectively pulled me back into the warm light of endless possibilities. Always, that boyhood dream would rekindle the flame within and beckon me to press onward.

However, manga creation is truly an all-encompassing labor which demands immense time and dedication. This, in and of itself, is no obstacle to me as I love manga more than anything in the world. Yet the iniquitous burdens of adult life no longer afford me the time or resources to invest into so costly an endeavor. I knew that at this rate, I would never achieve the manga dream. After more than fifteen years of numerous attempted manga projects, failing to build a social media presence, and trying to convince publishers to no avail, my faith in myself evaporated to the point where I felt like an irredeemable loser. But sometime during my late twenties, unwilling to give up on the dream, I came upon a rather interesting idea.

If, due to my circumstances, I can't produce a world-class manga of a professional quality within a timely manner congruent with modern demand, then I would have to build a team. In essence, a studio of talented artists who would help me create manga at a commercial capacity fit for a globalized, 21st century marketplace. Such a team would require a considerable amount of capital which, as of this writing, I simply do not have. So that's when I began to shift my life towards the acquisition of said capital with the sole intention of launching an official **manga production studio**.

But there was something about this that bothered me deeply. While I pursue monetary gain, what was to become of the fifteen-plus years' worth of notes, ideas, concepts, sketches, and prototype manga drafts that I had stashed away in my closet? What was to become of the very story I had been developing since I was eleven years old? There had to be *something* I could do in the meantime which could still satisfy that innate hunger for creative fulfillment. At the end of the day, we artists are required by nature to express our passions in some way or form, lest we become bereft of all that is essential to life.

The answer came in the final months of 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, where I flirted with the idea of taking my notes and adapting them into a series of fantasy novels. Essentially, while pursuing financial vitality, I would also become a part-time author. Never could I have realized just how monumental that decision would be for me and the future of the manga dream. On April 18, 2022, I published my very first novel at the age of 27... Far older than I would have liked... Nonetheless, it was the culmination of many long years of persistent ideation which led to the first installment of my mainline series: **Deorum Legions™**.

Set in the land of Theia, Deorum is a fantasy of which its very essence is derived from the old Greco-Roman world of classic antiquity. In this mythical setting of divine gods, mighty gladiators, and eldritch beasts, we follow the life of a young legionnaire named **Velkan Marius Aurelian** who aims to become consul and rule over the Lucian Republic. Currently, there are four volumes published with a fifth planned for release in early 2026. But while the story of Deorum Legions serves as my primary focus, destined to be adapted into a full-fledged manga, there was another story

with an entirely different concept which coexisted in my mind along with Velkan's Greco-Roman fantasy. That's where **Temujin Mugen** comes into the picture.

FINDING TEMUJIN -----

For as long as I can remember, I always preferred Epcot over the other major theme parks of the Walt Disney World Resorts. Even as a child, there was something inexplicably alluring to it that the other three parks (Magic Kingdom, Hollywood Studios, and Animal Kingdom) lacked. For a youth who yearned for life beyond the dull and culturally bereft swamp of Florida, Epcot provided a sublime escape. At the rear of the park, there's a section known simply as the World Showcase which, true to its name, features a dazzling collection of expertly detailed pavilions designed to evoke the nations of Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Italy, Germany, the United States, Morocco, and my two personal favorites – China and Japan.

Often, I would lose myself with awe and wonder over the architectural details, smells, sounds, and ambience of each environment which sought to emulate their respective countries. In those halcyon days of yore, it was the closest thing I had to simulate the exciting life of a world traveler. As a lifelong appreciator of art and history, Epcot served as a critical window into a realm beyond the rather quotidian conservatism and banal rurality of hometown Davenport, Florida. Each time I strolled through the different pavilions, numerous ideas emerged from an internal reservoir of creativity sparked by my innate desire to see the world.

In particular, the Japanese and Chinese pavilions both provided me with the most heightened sense of adventure. Of all the places on Earth that a child could ever hope to visit,

I distinctly recall gravitating mostly towards the distant lands of east Asia. Even if it was merely a well-crafted illusion built by Disney's brilliant Imagineers, it was a stimulating enough setting for my younger self to be fully immersed in the fiery aestus of eastern fantasies – allowing my imagination to flourish.

It would also be in Epcot, just over ten years ago (2015), that the idea of a lone wanderer riding across an ancient Asiatic landscape atop a beast, first entered my conscious thought. However, the true origins of what would become **Yokai Country**TM extends further into my past.

Back in the summer of 2012, there was an international manga competition organized by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was only 17 years old at the time and had just graduated high school. I spent the greater part of three weeks drawing constantly with only four hours of sleep per day. Since I believed that this contest would be a means to enter Japan's manga industry, I gladly committed to such an extreme schedule in order to produce a one-shot manga worthy of recognition. I felt that if my art and writing was good enough, I might finally have a chance of achieving the ultimate dream... Sadly... Nothing ever came of it.

In truth, it was a rather pitiful work. The art was horrendous, and the story was laughably amateur. Even though I poured my heart and soul into every stroke of ink, that fifty-five-paged manuscript amounted to nothing more than an awkward mishmash of chanbara samurai films and gigantic mechas. Despite this glaring disappointment, the experience of waking up to draw from sunrise to sundown was invaluable to forging an iron-clad work ethic that would endure to this day. As for the title of that 2012 one-shot manga, I chose to bestow upon it the name of **EON**.

Very few elements and concepts from the project would ever translate into future works. However, there are two specific characters that *did* get recycled for later use. One such character was a prototype of what would eventually become **Praelior Livens**, who would not reappear again until Book 2 of Deorum Legions™ which came out in 2023. The other character was a katana-wielding wanderer clad in blue robes and a simple straw hat. This, of course, was the very first instance of what would one day become Temujin. But long before he was a banished onmyōji, he was a simple farmer from Xenorath Village named **Ancel**.

After that faithful summer, my time for writing and drawing significantly reduced as I entered college for a worthless bachelor's degree in **video game art & computer animation**. Although I would still, on occasion, develop Velkan's storyline in very rare moments of free time, I did next to nothing for Ancel. In those days, he was simply a generic and disposable character from a failed side project. Velkan had existed since the very inception of the manga dream and took precedence over everything. It wouldn't be until **2015** that the seeds of an Asian fantasy arose within me with Ancel returning to the very forefront of my mind.

That year, I had visited Epcot with a cohort of friends. I was only 20 at the time, but I fondly remember when we reached the Chinese pavilion and happened upon an unusual set of bronze figurines depicting a group of twelve or so warriors. Each of them had a unique shape as well as different armor and weapons and were all crafted with exquisite detail. For some reason, I was mesmerized by these bronze warriors. In those days, I knew next to nothing about Chinese history nor the fascinating nuances of its culture. Perhaps what I witnessed were standard motifs within the

society such as the monk Budai or the famous Sun Wukong. Regardless, the fact remains that those bronze warriors left an indelible impression on me.

In the absence of such prerequisite knowledge on the intricacies of Chinese artistic tradition, all I could do was admire these figurines and ponder over their possible significance. I began to imagine a fictitious storyline about these mysterious warriors facing incredible trials and turbulations whilst overcoming a myriad of deadly foes. That same evening, I returned home and sketched out my own version of the twelve warriors; combining Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and even Indian aesthetics to create a diverse cast from various imagined lands.

That is when I remembered our old friend, Ancel, from the EON one-shot. I decided to resurrect him from the purgatory of abandoned ideas and assigned him the central role as protagonist of this ragtag group; initially referred to as the Black Lotus. Since the name *Ancel* did not really fit within this developing Asian setting, I quickly changed his name to the more exotic-sounding *Temujin*. At the time, I was reading up on the travels of Marco Polo and his journey to the heart of the Mongol Empire. I then decided to use the name Temujin, which was the given name of the warlord, Genghis Khan. The family name of *Mugen* is taken from the Japanese word for “infinite” because... Well, I thought it sounded cool... That’s all there is to it! I even changed his outfit to the current design as shown in this very book.

At around the same time, the third installment of the Witcher video game franchise had just released in May of 2015. Produced by the Polish game studio, CD Projekt Red, **Witcher III: Wild Hunt** went on to become one of the most successful games of that year and continues to be looked on

fondly by gamers even to this day. Based on the original books by renowned Polish author, Andrzej Sapkowski, The games follow the story of Geralt of Rivia who is himself a professional monster slayer.

For several months, I lost myself in this rich and vibrant world of grotesque beasts, warring armies, and genuinely captivating characters. As I played the game with utmost enthusiasm, I often ended up pretending that Geralt was instead Temujin wandering throughout the continent atop a mythical dragon instead of a generic horse. But this got me wondering: where were all the of Asian fantasy games?

In the western world there seems to be this unspoken rule that if a story is set in a fictional universe, then it must always adhere to the tired trope of medieval European aesthetics with armored knights, wizards, elves, dwarves, goblins, dragons, et cetera. To be fair, many assumptions of what makes a legitimate fantasy setting can be attributed to Tolkien's magnum opus, *Lord of The Rings*, which essentially created the modern fantasy genre as we know it.

Even though I sincerely love a good medieval fantasy game, book, movie, or TV show, I also feel that there is an untapped potential to expand our definition of what constitutes as proper fantasy. It's almost as if the west is unwilling to decouple from the very idea that *fantasy* must always equate to the European Middle Ages. It was in my yearning for something unique and different that led me to set Velkan's story in my own fantasy version of the ancient Mediterranean. This choice includes not just the culture and aesthetics of the Greeks or Romans, but also of the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Gauls, Nubians, Illyrians, Phoenicians, Akkadians, Sumerians and so on. It's an exciting setting that I feel is largely unexplored in fictional literature.

But as I continued to play the Witcher, delving deeper into its rich lore and world-building, I began to wonder why there weren't similar experiences set in non-western centric places within the video game industry. Back in 2015, as far as I was aware, there simply wasn't a suitable equivalent. And so, taking the concept of a wandering monster hunter like Geralt, fused with my enthusiasm for Asian culture, I began to form the basis of what would one day transform into the very book you are now holding in your hand.

SAMURAI COUNTRY -----

One notable dilemma I faced when developing these novels was that, due to living in Florida, there was (and still is) very little in my immediate environment to reference or derive inspiration from in the crafting of an authentic fictional setting. To compensate for this pervasive ennui, I found myself entirely reliant on foreign entertainment media. However, none of this was truly a lived experience which could inform my work via an intimate or experiential touch. With the creation of Deorum Legions, I could sort of overcome this cultural desert by virtue of the fact that the United States of America is descended from a proud heritage dating back to the ancient Greco-Roman period. Absent ready access to the immaculate cities of Europe and its treasure trove of pristine archeological sites, I had only *books* as my primary means to fill in the gaps of my incomplete imagination. While the ancient Romans are underutilized in the video game space, there's quite a sizable collection of films and TV shows which feature the ancient world; albeit with a distinctly Hollywood lens. However, it was through literature written by passionate scholars where I found the bulk of my research material.

I read as many books as I could reasonably get my hands on – anything and everything – to unveil the mysteries of the Greco-Roman world as well as all of the nuances and intricacies which defined that period. This abundance of material informed my writing process, allowing me to craft a much more colorful and believable world which I sincerely *hope* captures the essence of Roman life through the filter of a fantasy story.

If you're wondering why I talk so much about *Deorum* when this is supposed to be about Yokai Country, it's because their developments were essentially parallel to one another. Even though *Deorum* received the bulk of my attention, over the years my interests often switched back and forth between the two series like the swinging of a pendulum. *This* time, the pendulum happened to swing far enough in the other direction and this book was the result.

But while there is a vast amount of research material (regarding ancient Rome) available across a wide range of mediums, I found that the same was not true with respect to the far east. Frustratingly, I discovered an alarming lack of literature written in English for general Asian history when compared to Roman, Greek or even Egyptian history. It seems that much of the information I seek exists primarily in its native format with competency in Japanese or Mandarin being an expected necessity. One day, I *will* master these languages and assimilate the knowledge hidden in those tomes with relish. Meanwhile, what of the books I've yet to write? How was I to inform my worldbuilding to the same quality as *Deorum* when the culture depicted in such a story is so fundamentally different from my daily life?

While I did indeed have much exposure to Japanese popular culture such as anime and manga, I consider these

to be a superficial lens. To truly understand a people, one must come to know their full history. And so, just like with Deorum, I endeavored to accumulate as much information as possible. Having been born in the west, I wanted to avoid certain pitfalls I've seen other writers make when choosing to emulate Asian culture in a story. Hollywood is rife with examples of orientalist assumptions that are often outdated, racist, and plain inconsistent with reality.

In the early stages of Temujin's story, I chose to cast him in a world loosely based on feudal Japan. However, there was yet to be any yokai or spell-conjuring wizards. The Land of Wakuni did not exist, nor did the concept of the Mikado or the capital city of Taiyō-kyō. My sketches were bare-bones and absent of many features that would later come to define the modern Yokai Country™. At this point, Temujin was merely a wandering ronin who formerly served as a samurai retainer for some fallen daimyo. He did not yet ride atop a kirin either, but rather walked on foot. It was, in my opinion, a very unremarkable story which shamelessly copied Japan's famed Sengoku Jidai (warring states period during the 16th century) but with super-powered samurai and shinobi. I envisioned Temujin being an aimless vagabond going from battlefield to battlefield slicing through armies of ashigaru foot soldiers like a **Dynasty Warriors** player.

Much of the later versions of this story would be inspired by several sources such as **Moribito** (A novel written by Nahoko Uehashi) and **Shogun** (A novel written by James Clavell). The video game series, **Nioh** (I and II, developed by Team Ninja) exposed me to a vast tapestry of mythical yokai and formally introduced me to the concept of onmyōdō, or the Way of Yin & Yang. **Sekiro**, a video game produced by FromSoftware who also gave us Dark Souls,

Demon's Souls, Bloodborne, and Elden Ring, presented a most transcendent gaming experience. **Ghost of Tsushima**, set in the highly cinematic backdrop of 13th century Japan, presents a gripping tale of a lone samurai named Jin Sakai who struggles to defend Japan from a Mongol invasion. I even began watching various old and classic Japanese films from **Akira Kurosawa** such as Seven Samurai, Rashomon, Throne of Blood, Yojimbo, Kagemusha, and The Hidden Fortress. This is but a small fraction of the media I had consumed to inform my writing while I scrounged up what little I could on historical accounts as well as insight into Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

But although I enjoyed reading about the harrowing struggles of samurai clans vying for dominance or of the legendary exploits of figures such as Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu, China's iconic Three Kingdoms period is equally fascinating to me. After the calamitous fall of the Han Dynasty, many warlords clamored against one another to control the realm. Among such people were Cao Cao, Liu Bei, Dong Zhuo, and Lu Bu. It is in these moments of utter chaos that people rise to the occasion and whose stories are told and retold; capturing the imagination of future generations. Japan's Sengoku Jidai and China's Three Kingdoms period intrigue me in much the same way that the civil wars of the late Roman Republic do. You had towering figures such as Cicero, Crassus, Pompey, Gaius Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Brutus, and even the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, all competing for control of the Mediterranean until only one man remained – he who would become the princeps of an empire: Augustus.

I wanted to create an ultimate epic which synthesized elements of all three of these tumultuous periods in history

similar to how George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* derives much from the War of The Roses in which two opposing families, the houses of Lancaster and York, fought bitterly for the English throne from 1455 to 1487. However, not long after, I suddenly lost all momentum with Temujin's story. Life got busy as usual, and the pendulum swung back to Deorum. Thus, this lengthy back-and-forth dance between Temujin Mugen and Velkan Aurelian would continue throughout my twenties. Suffice to say, Temujin received very little care or meaningful development during this time; my East-Asian fantasy world trapped within a sort of self-imposed stasis. Often, I wasn't even sure if I *wanted* to write it anymore... But then I finally went to Japan.

In 2019, I seized an opportunity to live and work in Japan as an assistant language teacher (ALT) and served in the town of Namegata in Ibaraki prefecture. As soon as I (regrettably) returned to the United States, I began working on the manga dream with renewed vigor. When the world was besieged by the Covid-19 pandemic, I had ample time during the ensuing lockdowns to devote myself purely to Velkan and Temujin in equal measure. By this point, the concept of a Greco-Roman fantasy had already been conceived and was in the process of persistent ideation. At the same time, I was delving deeper into the limitless possibilities that a Temujin story could offer and eventually came up with the continent of Wakuni.

Not long after, several of the characters you're familiar with came into being such as Kuromaru, Monzaemon, and Izumi. Yokai, Mononoke, and Ayakashi were also starting to slowly populate the world, although their role was not yet clear. And while onmyōji were indeed present, they did not carry any sort of weight in my mind. They existed only in the

periphery of this young and germinating fantasy. Temujin's story was still very much firmly rooted in the cliché tropes of samurai media. And perhaps it is *because* of how pervasive and common samurai are in anything even tangentially related to Japan, that I soon lost interest again; once more pivoting to the more unique Deorum. The trigger which prompted me to commit fully to Temujin came in the form of a near-catastrophic car accident in May of 2024.

THE WAY OF YIN & YANG -----

Long story short, I got into a terrifying car accident when a wayward driver, who neglected to adhere to both signage and speed limits, slammed into my side; effectively causing my vehicle to flip over twice. Luckily, I came out relatively unscathed. But this harrowing experience left me with a renewed resolve to fulfill the manga dream. During my recovery, I spent every waking moment trying to finish **Book 4 of Deorum Legions**. Once that was completed, I set my gaze towards Temujin Mugen.

The desire to make my very own Asian fantasy still burned brightly, but I feared that my enthusiasm would waver over time like it always did. I concluded that the reason was due to it being about **samurai**. As of this writing, there is already an overwhelming abundance of samurai content across various forms of media from anime to video games. They are to the Japanese what medieval knights are to the west. But just as there is more to western history than the Middle Ages, there is so much more to Japanese history than the Sengoku Jidai or the Edo period which every piece of media seems to center around with obsessive fixation.

The idea of making yet another story adhering to the rather unimaginative trope of samurai just did not appeal to

me. Thus, I decided that Temujin's story would have nothing to do with samurai whatsoever. I would center it around yokai and other intriguing entities prevalent in the mythos of Shinto and Buddhist tradition. But I needed to equip Temujin with the means to combat against yokai such as oni, kappa, and tengu. That's when I remembered those obscure wizards of the imperial court. Of course, I'm referring to our beloved **onmyōji**.

In Deorum, the primary fighting force in the series are the legions of Lucium. Their bodies are infused with the Elysium Crystals and have been bestowed incredible power from the goddess, Romula. But their fighting techniques are rather straightforward and streamlined. As of right now, there are no equivalents to magicians in the world of Theia. *Onmyōji*, however, offer me the exciting opportunity to explore an entire class of warriors whose entire framework revolves around ancient Taoist sorcery.

The more I researched the onmyōji, the more the world of Wakuni solidified in my mind. Before I knew it, the story had greatly shifted to resemble **Heian period** Japan with some trace elements of Han and **Tang dynasty** China. The Heian period is often considered the classical era of Japanese history and is the time when Japanese culture truly began to flourish – branching away from the heavy influence of mainland China such as in prior centuries. That's when I learned that in the capital city of **Heian-kyō** (modern-day Kyoto) there was once a branch of the government known as the **Onmyōryō**, or the Yin-Yang-Bureau.

From there, everything started to fall into place. Ideas kept emerging from the fountainhead of my consciousness with incredible consistency. No more was Temujin merely a wandering ronin, but a master of the ways of yin and yang,

the five phases, and a host of other arcane techniques contemporary to the myths of ancient Japan. But when I imagine the city of Taiyō-kyō, I envision the ancient Tang Chinese capital of **Chang'an** – a city that was every bit as grand and immaculate as Byzantium's Constantinople.

In the first drafts of this book, I wrote Temujin as a working sorcerer actively serving the bureau in the name of the Mikado, the emperor. But in such a setting, I was unable to focus on yokai like I originally wanted to. I rewrote it several times to better match the feelings of wonderment I felt when playing *The Witcher* back in 2015. At the end of the day, Temujin was initially conceived as a slayer of monsters. And thus, I wrote the *current* version of this book where he is a disgraced onmyōji banished from the capital and forced to traverse the land endlessly where his only practical means to make a living is to take on contracts and hunt yokai.

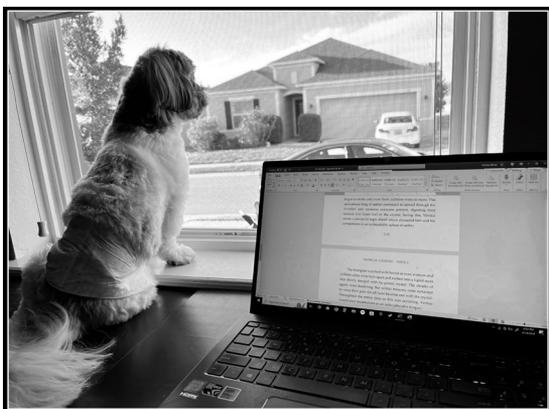
Lastly, I decided that, rather than tell a traditional or linear story in adherence to the old Aristotelian three-act structure, I would instead tell a total of five separate tales featuring Temujin, formerly Ietsugu, during his thirty-year period of banishment. This is a nod to the more episodic storytelling implemented in shows like **Samurai Champloo** and **Avatar: The Last Airbender**. At long last, I got the East-Asian fantasy I always wanted – albeit a simple one.

In the next installment (Part 2), I hope to delve much deeper into the Lands of Wakuni, the capital, and the very nature of the Yin-Yang Bureau. This first book was meant *only* to introduce readers to the world of Yokai Country. I have a plethora of ideas that I can't wait to share with you, and I assure you that the tales of Temujin are far from over! There's still much more to come for characters like Hayate, Monzaemon, Izumi, Li Qian, and the great Lord Sōgen.

Speaking of Sōgen, the idea for an all-powerful yokai based on a humanoid Shih Tzu was directly inspired by my very own dog. His name is **Yoshi**, the cutest darn thing I've ever seen. Ever since he came into my life, he's been my steadfast companion and is always by my side when I write.



Sometimes I convey to him my ideas despite his lack of verbal feedback (lol). It helps me to overcome writer's block. All the same, I always feel his intense love and support which inundates me with an unyielding wave of resolve. Thank you so much, Yoshi! You are now, forevermore, immortalized in these pages as Lord Sōgen.



There is so much more I can talk about regarding the making of Yokai Country, the research that went behind it, and the path I'm taking to achieve the manga dream. But all of that can be a book in its own right and we simply haven't the time nor the space for such indulgent musings of the ego. Therefore, I shall end things here for now.

Already, I am working on **Part Two** of **Yokai Country** and have many fun things planned. In the meantime, I have taken the liberty of adding the first chapter from Book 1 of Deorum Legions at the end of this lengthy **Author's Note** section so that you can preview it for yourself. Who knows? Perhaps Deorum Legions can provide you with a suitable placeholder; at least until the next installment of Temujin's story is released sometime in the near future. I hope you'll join me on this grand journey into the lands of Wakuni. Thanks for reading... お元気でいてください。

The Owl Shogun (Age 30)
Davenport, Florida, USA
November 21, 2024

Until we meet again! See you in Part 2!



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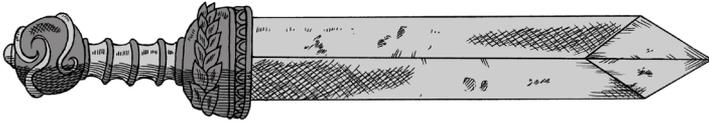
デオルム・軍団

DEORUM LEGIONS



I

TRIAL OF THE LEGIONS



Velkan Marius Aurelian knelt down on the cold and craggy floor as he whispered a prayer to a tiny wooden idol. He hoped his plea would be heard by the gods. The room was faintly illuminated by the withering of candle wax. The aroma of frankincense and myrrh filled the air with a nice fragrance. This was a final pleasure for the trial that was to come... For today was the selection.

He knew what it meant. This was the final test one had to overcome if he was to take on the oath. Everyone with aspirations of joining the legions had to survive this deadly rite. In preparation, Velkan sought to commune with the gods so that he might increase his likelihood of success. He then grabs a knife placed next to the idol and presses it firmly against his palms. After a brief moment of hesitation, he slices open his right hand. A gentle river of blood drips down and caresses the idol. This offering was the least he could provide for protection. However, his meditative trance is disrupted by the sudden knocking of the door. A man opens it and addresses him in an authoritative tone.

“It is time... Have you made your peace?”

“Yes...” Velkan calmly answers. “I have waited my entire life for this moment.”

The man, a strong and resolute-looking soldier, shifts his gaze over to Velkan with a glimmer of apprehension.

“You know... You don’t have to go through with this... You can still leave. You can *choose* to return to civilian life.”

“I already made my decision, Bhutaki. And I plan to see it through to the end.”

“I was afraid you would say that... Very well.”

The soldier steps outside, and Velkan follows. The boy wore only a simple white tunic, whereas Bhutaki is donned in a brilliant metallic armor adorned by a vibrant crimson cape. The symbol ‘VII’ was etched onto the fabric. Velkan stares intently upon this uniform, hoping that he too will one day wear it. But the icy chill of the frost-filled winds stung his skin; ushering his awareness back to the present.

They cross a mighty bridge elevated by a series of gargantuan pillars and arches. From their vantage, they could see the surrounding landscape for miles. Directly in front of them is a temple of colossal size. This is where the selection was to take place. The structure is decorated with a sublime architectural brilliance similar to what you would find in the capital. Stone edifices of the gods can be seen towering over the bridge like timeless sentinels. It was truly a sight to behold. But perhaps even more impressive are the giant glaciers of blue crystals which enveloped the temple; like mighty translucent towers soaring up to the heavens. A bluish light emanated from within it as well.

Waiting on the other side of the bridge is a woman clad in stygian black robes. A thick hood covers her head while a metal visor veils her eyes.

“Greetings, brave cadet.” She says in a gentle yet unfeeling voice. “I am Julia, a servant of the Goddess.” She then gestures her hand to beckon the boy forward. “Please step this way, and we shall begin the selection.”

Velkan follows her as requested. But as he looks back, he notices that the soldier halted in place.

“What’s wrong?” Velkan mutters.

“This is as far as I am permitted to go. Even a *centurion* cannot cross over into such sacred ground. I shall wait here for your safe return...”

The separation between him and the Centurion was like being cut off from the world. Here in these desolate frozen wilds, there was none of the familiar comforts of home. He looked around to embrace the environment but could not help feeling small by comparison. A last glance was made towards the Centurion in an attempt to seize this fleeting moment; a final appreciation of his old life. But these thoughts of home quickly subsided. Reaching the end of the bridge, Velkan and the maiden Julia approached a pair of herculean bronze doors. What lay on the other side? Even with months of training and mental preparation, the thorns of doubt festered in his heart.

Once inside, they descended down a swirling staircase which seemed to go on forever. The pathway is gently lit by muted flames; unveiling detailed engravings on the stone walls. They tell the story of the first legions and their conquests. They speak of the gods and the origins of the Lucian people. But they also show death and suffering. Velkan began to feel a palpable sense of dread. Each step towards the depths only further accentuated this anxiety.

But what disturbed him most was a horrific sight in a nearby room; a pile of freshly procured corpses. The blood of

these unfortunate victims oozed like a scarlet fountain. He could even see the expressions of pain and fright displayed on their lifeless faces.

“Hold on... Are they?...”

“They are those who failed to be selected.”

“But those are cadets... Like me...”

“Gladios makes no such distinctions. The same fate awaits all of the unworthy.”

“And... How does one determine worthiness over another? By what standards is this ritual based on? Is it strength? Wit? Or perhaps character?”

“It differs slightly for everyone, but the goal is always the same.” Julia hints.

“Which is?”

“To overcome thyself.”

Velkan found this answer to be unsatisfactory. All she gave him were vagaries and riddles. However, he has only the briefest of moments to ponder its meaning. Not long after, they reached the bottom and entered a large and open chamber. The inner sanctum of the temple was circular in nature, held up by monstrously tall marble pillars and arches. In the center of all this is a massive pool containing a strange and liquid-like substance which glowed with a ominous blue light.

Waiting for them are five other maidens, each dressed in a similar garb. The oldest among them stepped forward and spoke directly to Velkan.

“Thou who seeketh to join the legions of old, to become a soldier of the Republic and guardian of our sacred homeland, state thy name and place of origins.”

“Velkan Marius Aurelian.” He replies; trying to keep the nerves in check via a façade of courage. “Of Ilium...”

Next to him, a stone tablet begins to glow of its own accord. The words that spelled out his name are magically etched onto the stone surface without any external input. Afterwards, the stone floats away like dust to the wind.

“It is recorded into the annals.” The elderly maiden declares. “Now step forward, cadet.”

Velkan inches closer towards the fluorescent pool; mesmerized by its radiant glow. He notices that, though it is similar to water, it bears a striking resemblance to the glacial crystals outside.

“This substance... Is that elysium?” Velkan inquires.

“Indeed...” One maiden answered. “This was the very site where the legendary founder first mastered its use... It is here where he acquired the power of the gods, just as you will... Should they deem you a suitable vessel...”

“And if I fail? I just end up a corpse like the others?”

“Yes.” Says another maiden. “You will perish and fade into the Aetherium as a sacrifice.”

“Is that all? No pressure then.” Velkan jokes, poking humor in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Enough of these questions. Submerge thyself into the ambrosia, this nectar of the gods, and be transformed into an agent of the divine.”

Velkan reluctantly complies and steps down into the pool of elysium ever so slowly. It is strangely warm to the touch; more like oil than water. Eventually, Velkan’s entire body sinks below the liquid surface. In unison, the maidens clasp their hands in prayer and chant a series of arcane incantations. Right away, wild flames with a bluish hue began to emit from their hands. Immediately after, a multitude of ethereal chains manifested beneath the luminous lake and hurriedly darted towards Velkan. They

quickly wrap around his body and limbs; preventing him from swimming back up to safety. Though he struggled, the chains did not relent. He holds his breath for as long as possible until, inevitably, the air exits his mouth. Elysium rushes to fill the vacuum left in his lungs and stomach.

But the choking and drowning was not the worst of the ordeal. Rather, it was merely a prelude. What came next was something no one should ever be made to endure. He remembered learning that when the human body becomes exposed to high quantities of elysium, it begins to rapidly change on a structural level.

Within seconds of swallowing this luminous fluid, his veins began to protrude all throughout. A few more seconds later, they started to violently burst one by one. His eyes rolled back from the pain as his skin and flesh slowly melted away into dust-like flakes. His muscle fibers were ripped to shreds. His teeth loosened and fell out. Eventually, the pain became intolerable as blood escaped from every orifice, such as his ears, mouth, and nose.

It was beyond anything he could have imagined. Every iota of his being was crying out for relief. But none could hear his torment. Blood could be seen rising to the lake's surface only to evaporate instantly upon touching the air. However, the maidens maintained their prayers and incantations with cold indifference.

Terror and despair intensify when Velkan discovers that he no longer has the capacity to breathe in the absence of lungs. Soon, even the torturous pain begins to fade along with all other sensations. Taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell vanish from his realm of experience. In time, the final remnants of his body disintegrated until only his brain remained; loosely attached to the spinal cord.

Totally deprived of all sensory stimulation, Velkan's consciousness is plunged into a deep state where nothing can be perceived. In this dark abyss, he simulates death. The ethereal chains which kept him tethered dissipate and the maidens ceased their prayers; the blue flames all but extinguished from their palms.

"Now the rest is up to you." The elder whispers.

Beneath the luminous lake, an angelic entity approaches the brain and spinal column. With a serene smile, she taps the brain ever so delicately. Upon this gentle touch, the brain suddenly glows with the intensity of the sun. It is in that moment that all is consumed by a blinding white light.

Velkan opened his eyes and was taken aback. No longer was he in the Elysium Lake. In fact, he has no idea where he is. He frantically looks around to get his bearings. But the residual trauma from his recent *experience* could still be palpably felt. Did he really melt away into nothing? Was he dead? Where is this place? What in Theia is going on?

Though he was still on edge, he managed to calm down just enough to take his surroundings into account. This definitely was not the Temple of the Maidens. He was in an all-together different place. It was night. A massive moon, larger than any he'd ever seen, cast its lunar light upon this land of ashen soil. The trees were mere husks devoid of vegetation. The ground was littered with the skull and bones of fallen warriors while grave markers dotted the area with swords thrust into the stone.

Velkan walks along this barren wasteland only to find death and the forsaken. At the edge of a cliff overlooking a vast black sea, he sees a set of stairs which led to an island

floating in the sky. The steppingstones themselves were suspended in mid-air as if gravity held no dominion. He cautiously walks up these weightless platforms; careful not to miss a step and fall. With the higher elevation, he gets a better view of the setting. For miles, all he sees are ashen deserts, craggy chasms, and deadened forests. The sky is populated by what seems like the decaying ruins of ancient temples. Shattered pillars, arches, and statues orbit around the floating island as if a dreadful collection of moons.

At last, Velkan reaches the top of the steps and stands upon the island. To his surprise, an old man sat there alone. He was dressed in a raggedy cloak and sat next to the warmth of a fire; burning brightly atop the bowl-side of a rusted shield. The old man looks to Velkan and smiles; his teeth stained and rotted.

“Oh? Yet another fool trying to find his way...”

“What is this place?” Velkan asks, unsure he wants to hear the truth. “This does not look like the Aetherium.”

“HA!” The old man scoffs. “The Aetherium? Do you see pristine white marble and brilliant golden light stretching beyond the horizon? No, this isn’t it. This is an entirely different realm.”

“Am I dead?”

“Not yet. Right now, you’re in between the living and the dearly departed. Lost and broken. But enough of that.”

The old man whips out a sizable chug filled with a purplish beverage. He then puts on a welcoming smile.

“Come sit next to me and enjoy a wonderful glass of wine. I made it myself.”

Velkan is perplexed by this nonchalant request. He reminds himself of his purpose and why he sought to join the legions. He could not lose focus!

"I must decline your offer. I haven't the time."

"Why the rush?" The old man retorts. "What *is* time, within the context of eternity?"

"I came to seek an audience with Gladios."

The old man raises his eyes slightly. "The God of War? Why search out such a dreary fellow?"

"It's part of the trials. Before I can become a legionnaire, I must acquire his blessing... Or... So I was told..."

"The legions? I see. But why commit yourself to such a dangerous profession? Life is too short to engage in activities where one's life is often cut prematurely. Is it glory you seek? Fame? Or perhaps *hunger* that compels you?"

"I have to join the legions. It's the only way I can fulfill my dream. The only way I'll change the Republic."

"Hmm... The Republic, as an institution, has endured for over 400 years. What could a *boy* do to alter its course?"

"I made a promise..."

"Ah... So, love, is it? No... Despite your age, you don't seem to be overcome by the passions of romance."

"Please, I just need to see him. Do you know where he can be found?"

"I *could* take you to him." The old man says as he strokes his beard; puzzled by the boy's insistence. "But I doubt it would be a fruitful engagement. You don't seem ready."

"I am ready!" Velkan declares impatiently.

The old man simply chuckles in delight.

"Oh, my dear boy... Your heart is overflowing with fear... Doubt... Regret... Even some resentment... Yes... It's practically written all over your anima."

"What does that have to do with the trials?"

"Everything. A soldier is only as strong as his mind. A weak mind leads to a weak body, which invariably leads to

death. I know why you've come. But to claim the awesome power of the quintessence, one must have the mental fortitude to wield it. You, my child, do not possess it. You're close, but too many fragments of your past still linger. They hold you back. Now please... Sit... Relax... Have a drink and we can talk away all of your troubles..."

"Thank you." Velkan replies. "But again, I must decline. I need to find Gladios."

"Very well... I will take you to him. But first... You'll have to get through me. Or! We can share glasses and drink the night away. Personally, I prefer the later."

Velkan eases up upon hearing these words. A sense of confidence is restored as he sees just how thin and frail the old man seems. Get through him? As in a fight? Not taking the challenge seriously, Velkan descends back down the stairs; ignoring the old man's offer.

"Thank you. But I must move on."

Disappointed, the old man lets out a sigh and snaps his fingers. Velkan is instantaneously teleported back to the island and positioned right in front of the old man. Alarmed by this unnatural trick, Velkan also notices that the old man's attitude changed to a more serious demeanor.

"When he first arrived, your uncle accepted my offer."

"Who are you? Really?..."

The old man releases another laborious sigh. He then stands up and places his hands straight into the fire which burns atop the shield. From within the scorching flames, he pulls out a mighty spear.

"... Given your background, I hoped that you would've been open to more amicable dialogue – that we might sever the chains of your past and free your mind. But like your brother, it seems you will need to learn the hard way."

The old man points to the ground near Velkan's feet. A sphere of light emerges from the floor and elevates up to his waist. The orb then transforms into a physical weapon.

"Grab that sword and shield." The old man sternly demands. "They will suffice for this duel."

"Wait!" Velkan recoils in shock. "Are you saying that I must truly fight you?"

"You will not be granted the power of the crystals out of the goodness of your heart. You'll need to earn it. Prove to me that you are capable of wielding it. And then perhaps you will face his judgement."

Velkan gulps nervously, grabs hold of his tools and readies himself for combat. The old man smirks with satisfaction while analyzing his stance.

"Very good! Your instructors taught you well."

Both warriors stood still like statues. Only their capes flap with the wind. Sweat drips down Velkan's cheeks; his eyes focused on the task at hand. The old man makes a few final remarks while gripping his spear tightly.

"Steel yourself, boy... Solidify your resolve... Never retreat... Remember why you are here AND YOU MIGHT SURVIVE!!!"

Without warning, the old appears behind Velkan and strikes with his spear. Velkan only narrowly blocks it with his shield. But the weight of the attack is too great to bear and, with a swiping motion, the elder flings Velkan off the floating island like a rag doll. The young man is then hurled into a floating pillar, slamming into it like a meteorite. The old man then steps off the island and *walks* on thin air as he calmly approaches the broken pillar.

"This isn't the physical world. Your body should be able to endure far greater damage than this."

Velkan struggles out of the rubble from the impact crater. He is bloodied and battered, but his spirit is intact. He braces for more; much to the old man's delight.

"I love the look in those eyes. They defy me. They defy fate. Marvelous! Let us savor this moment!"

With a push against the air, the old man dashes towards Velkan like a bolt of lightning; aiming his spear directly at his head. Velkan manages to dodge just in the nick of time before the entire pillar shattered into a million pieces. The elder makes another rapid swing. This time, the two warriors clashed with sword and spear. Velkan is pushed back onto the island. The old man unleashes a high-speed flurry of thrusts, swings, and swipes. All Velkan can do is stay on the defensive, blocking attack after attack with no relief in sight.

Suddenly, the old man delivers a devastating kick straight to the jaw; pushing Velkan back several meters. Just as he regains his balance, a spear almost stabs him in the back of the neck. Velkan evades the fatal blow but is cut in the cheeks. Once more, the unrelenting force of the old man's attacks come like a never-ending storm.

It is overwhelming. Who can defeat such a being? He fights like a god. It's absurd, Velkan thought. Just when things couldn't get worse, the old man jumps several dozens of feet into the air and slams his spear down on Velkan's shield. The force of the impact is enough to completely tear the floating island asunder.

Velkan attempts to grab hold of a rock for dear life as they fall to the ground. The old man simply jumps from one plummeting comet to another until he reaches Velkan; swatting him away like a bug with his hoplon shield. He is once again slammed into the ground, creating another crater. Bleeding profusely and barely able to stand, Velkan manages

to remove the rubble from his body. Just as he does so, the old man is already making another swing; effortlessly and completely destroying the surrounding environment. From the dust cloud, Velkan emerges. But rather than fight, he is now running away. Before Velkan could get too far, the old man was already standing next to him. Looking directly at the youth, the deity is disappointed by what he sees. Instead of confidence, only fear is displayed on Velkan's eyes.

"So much potential... Yet you run?"

The old man raises his rusty spear which then erupts into a sudden burst of flames. His body becomes enveloped by an explosive cyclone of wind, fire, and debris. The force of the twister is enough to nearly blow Velkan off the cliff. He could hardly believe what was happening. After a few minutes of hurricane force winds, the old man reveals his true form. Though he still bears the same decrepit face, his body is that of a fit and athletic young man – a perfectly chiseled marble-like figure decked with Hellenic armor, a long spear, and a giant circular hoplon shield. His cape flows with the currents of the wind emanating from his very presence. Velkan could feel the weight of the atmosphere press down on him. It takes everything he has just to stand.

"You lied..." Velkan remarks. "Such speeds are beyond the capacity of human. It can only mean that... You're..."

"Yes. I am an indeed Gladios, the God of War."

"Why didn't you reveal yourself earlier?"

"You never asked. You assumed I was but a feeble old man. That was your first mistake. Appearances seldom win battles. All war is deception."

"But how can I...?" Velkan laments. "I'm just a human. How... How am I supposed to win against you?!? That is impossible!!!"

This angers the god as he leers over at the youth's trembling hands with contempt.

"Look at you... Frightened beyond reason... This is unbecoming of a warrior. You must purge despair from your mind. Only *then* can you dream of victory."

In an instant, Gladios appears point-blank and slices Velkan's shield in half. All he has left is a sword. Panic begins to set in. Velkan makes another run for it. While he flees as fast as his legs will carry him, Gladios sighs.

"You've forgotten yourself. Let me remind you."

In an instant, Gladios appears in front of Velkan and swings the spear. Velkan tries to deflect with his sword, but it only ends up breaking into tiny fragments. He drops the hilt and essentially gives up. Gladios grabs Velkan by the neck and lifts him up into the air with a single hand. The young man struggles to free himself from his godly grip, but before he can do so, a sharp pain is felt in his stomach.

A warm and wet sensation courses down his lower body. It was the spear, penetrating through his abdomen. Gladios casually flings him off the tip and throws him onto the dirt. Blood drenches the soil. Warmth turns to cold. His breath is fleeting and his mind disoriented. His vision blurs and all the senses begin to dull. Darkness encroaches.

Is this the end? Is this where all of his efforts led to? All of his hopes and dreams? His fears and sorrows? The promises he vowed to keep? Does it all vanish like this? He coughs up blood while desperately gasping for air. Fear is replaced with the need to survive. Memories of the past begin to flow into his mind; images of those he loved, and those he lost. With the last ounces of strength, Velkan attempts to get back on his two feet but is unable to do so. Gladios watches this scene with amusement.

“How interesting... You allowed fear to take root, yet now in this moment, you cling to life? I wonder, though... Is this base survival? Or perhaps... You have a higher purpose? A self-appointed reason for living...”

A reason for living. That’s right! There is a reason Velkan chose to endure this hell - why he left the island and sought to join the legions. It was to keep his promise. It was to change the Republic. For his brother... His sister... If he failed, it would all have been for nought. He can’t die... He mustn’t die! Velkan digs deep within himself and taps into an inner reservoir of strength – making a second attempt to get back up only to be stabbed by the God of War.

“Hurry up and die already.”

Alas, the cold timelessness of the void beckons Velkan, and his vision blackens into nothingness. Gladios stands over Velkan’s lifeless body patiently, as if waiting for something to occur. His patience is rewarded as, in mere seconds, Velkan’s corpse begins to light up and transform into a brilliant orb of fire. The deity quietly approaches the floating sphere and taps it with his fingers.

“Now reveal to me, your truth...”

Like a tidal wave of information, Velkan’s memories begin to flood into the God’s mind; a kaleidoscope of vivid imagery, emotions, and thoughts. He saw and felt it all. His upbringing in Helos, the tragedy of his family, his journey to the capital, and his reasons to join the legions. All at once, Gladios understood everything he needed to know about Velkan and who he was.

“I see... So *that* is the essence of your soul...”

He taps the orb again, causing it to disperse into a cloud of spirit-like dust. The glowing particles then scatter to the winds like sand in a storm.

“Hold steadfast to these memories, Velkan Aurelian... Remember why you fight... Remember why you pursue this dream of yours... For he who has a reason can overcome anything... The next time we meet, I hope you will have learned at least that much...”

