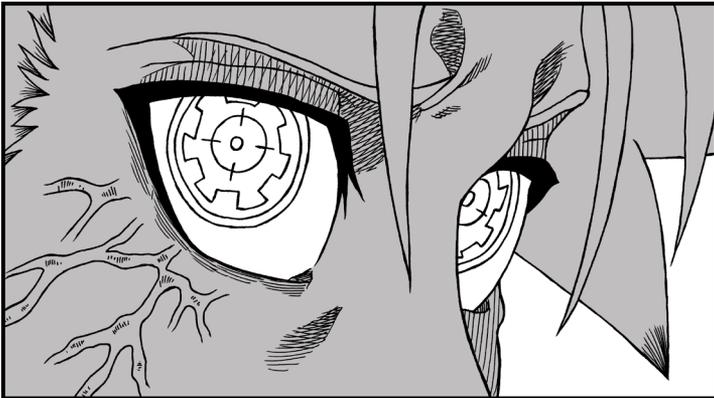


OWL SHOGUN STUDIOS



BOOK I:
THE ORIGIN



Story & Art By:
JOSH ALICEA

S.P.Q.L



SENATUS · POPULUSQUE · LUCIANUS

REGIONAL MAP



REGION: Theia

LAND: Caelum

TERRITORY: The Ilium Islands

YEAR: 453 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.

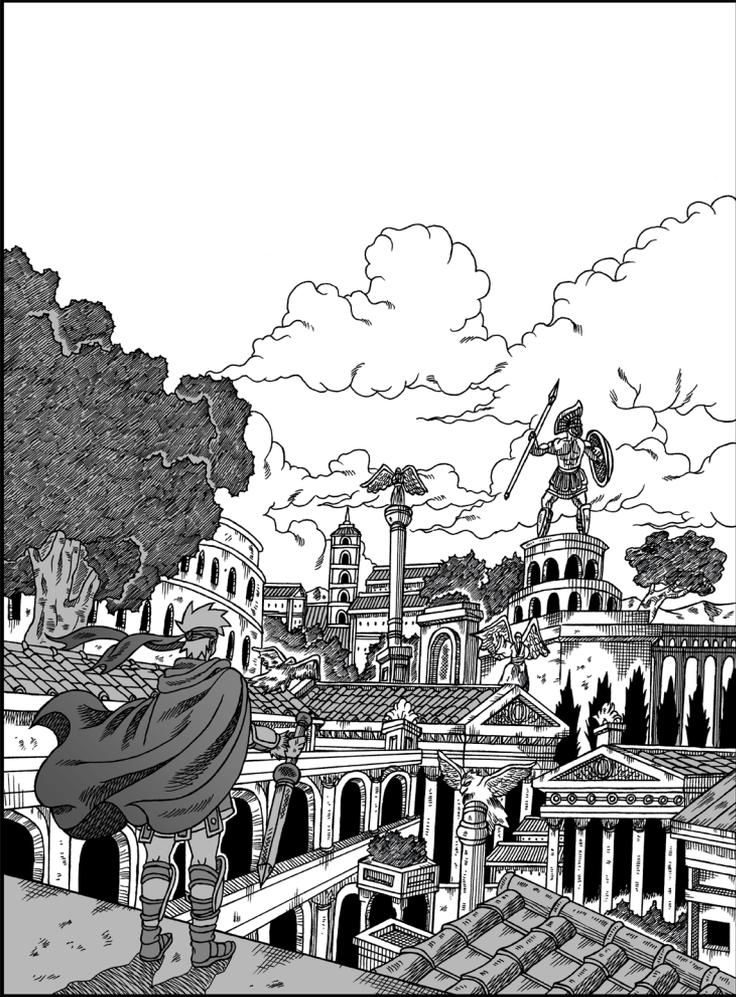
It is a cruel, violent, and unjust place. There is slavery, death, war, and all manner of strong themes that may not be suitable for some audiences. This book is not meant for the faint of heart nor the easily outraged. Read at your own discretion.

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 1

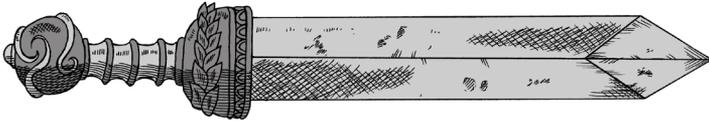
The Origin



Story & Art:
Josh Alicea

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. Gladius 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...”

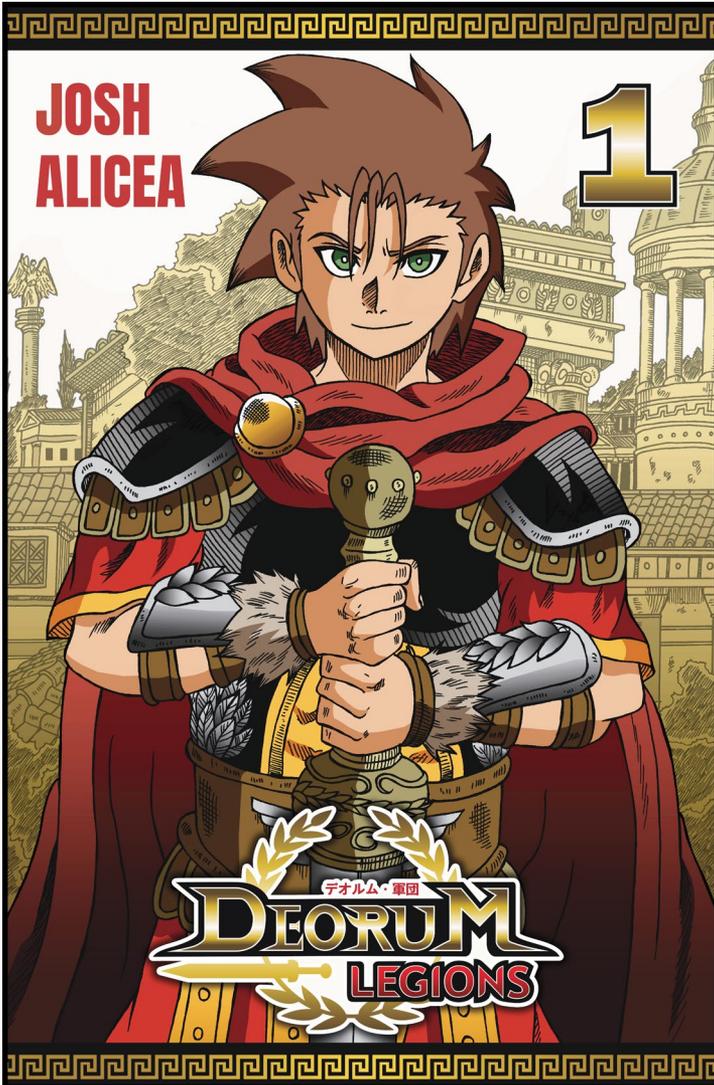
Like a tidal wave of information, Velkan’s memories begin to flood into the God’s mind; a kaleidoscope of vivid imagery, emotions, and thoughts. He saw and felt it all. His upbringing in Helos, the tragedy of his family, his journey to the capital, and his reasons to join the legions. All at once, Gladius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

THANKS FOR READING



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