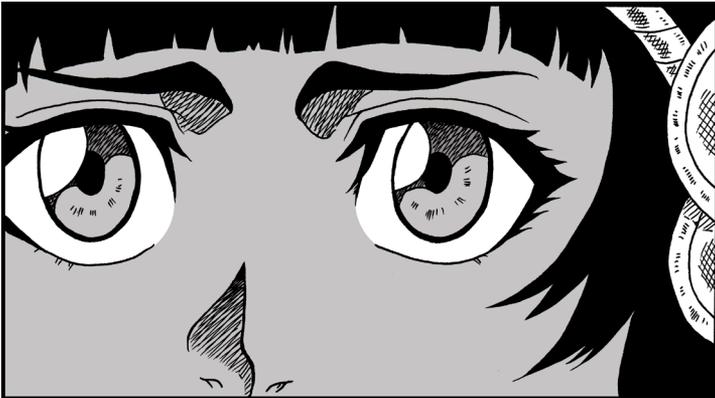


OWL SHOGUN STUDIOS



BOOK III:
THE GRAIN CRISIS



Story & Art By:

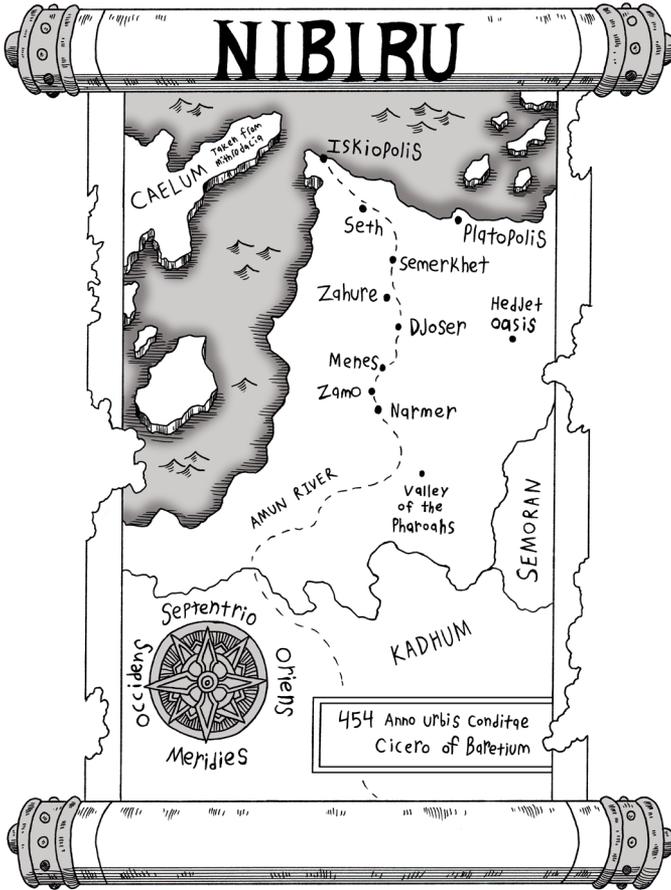
JOSH ALICEA

S.P.Q.L



SENATUS · POPULUSQUE · LUCIANUS

REGIONAL MAP



REGION: Theia

TERRITORY: Kingdom of Nibiru

YEAR: 454 AUC (Anno Urbis Condita)



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ch. 01: Pater Familias	1
Ch. 02: The Grain Crisis	18
Ch. 03: By Order of The Senate	36
Ch. 04: Contubernium	52
Ch. 05: The Eidolon Hunter	76
Ch. 06: Departure	93
Ch. 07: Kingdom of Nibiru	117
Ch. 08: Of Sedge & Bee	135
Ch. 09: The Kadhumites	152
Ch. 10: Amunet Epiphanes Soteira	166
Ch. 11: Long May He Reign	188
Ch. 12: Wrath of The Pharaoh	208
Ch. 13: Heroes Respite	232
Ch. 14: Casus Belli	254
Ch. 15: Parabellum	273
Ch. 16: Bellum Bestiae	299
Ch. 17: Scipio Lorentius	319
Author's Note	337

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

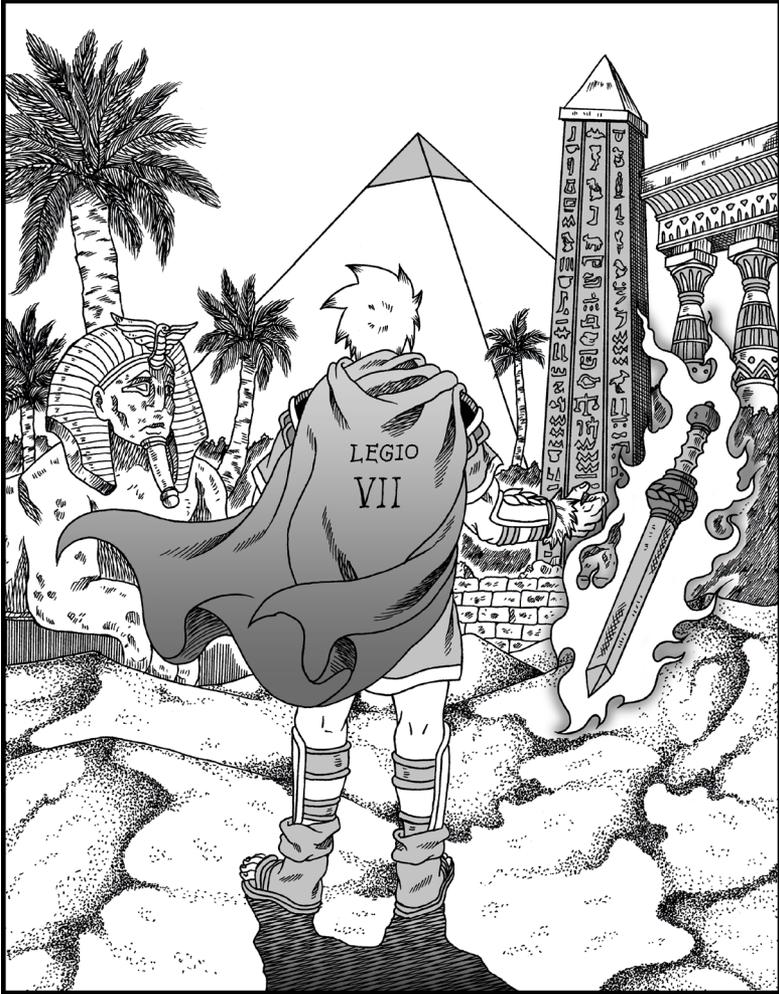
The **Deorum Legions™** universe derives its essence from the old **Greco-Roman** world of classic antiquity. It is a setting of legionary armies, magnificent cities, ancient gods, mighty gladiators, mythical beings, and much more.

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.

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- The Owl Shogun

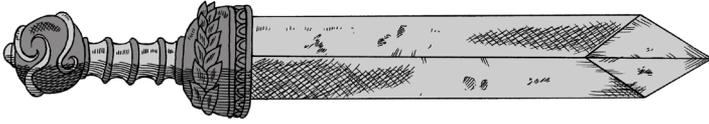
Book 3
The Grain Crisis



The Nibiru Arc

Story & Art:
Josh Alicea

I PATER FAMILIAS



443 Anno Urbis Conditae... Lucium.

The Hippodrome of Lucium, colloquially known by the people as the great Circus Maximus, is one of the largest entertainment venues in the ancient world. The stadium itself is several stories high, decorated with a multitude of marble pillars, grandiose archways, and a vast repertoire of masterfully sculpted bronze statues which line up the perimeter. Rather than having been built as a traditional oval stage like with a gladiatorial arena, the hippodrome is an elongated rectangle with smooth semi-circle ends. There is even enough seating for more than 300,000 spectators. Down below are the various professional charioteers racing along the track. The chariots themselves are each pulled around the circuit by four powerful horses of exceptional breeding. While the beasts native to the Cataline Plains surrounding Lucium are known for their agility, some riders prefer the stockier but more durable variants found in the northern frontiers near Zestrium and Londo.

Each charioteer represents one of four main factions or teams distinguished by simple colors such as red, green, blue, or yellow. These riders are all highly skilled and often subjected to extensive training well before they ever enter their first race. Everyone cheers for their favorite teams. In fact, it isn't uncommon to see several fights break out from amongst the audience as factional rivalries ran deep.

Some teams are also more aggressive than the others, resorting to unsavory tactics such as ramming to forcefully push aside their fellow racers. For members of the audience, witnessing such high-stakes and occasionally deadly races offered sublime elation. Most exciting for many are chariot collisions. Every once in a while, such crashes ended up killing the rider; much to the benefit of the other charioteers competing for total victory.

The ends of the track are the most dangerous as this is where the majority of accidents occur. Enthusiasts call this segment of track the "Shipwreck Zone" on account of how horses and chariots can pile up into a graveyard of wood, metal, and flesh. Any rider who is unfortunate enough to remain tethered to the very ropes which control the horses might find themselves dragged towards certain death. The prepared rider will promptly sever the tether with a knife to avoid such a dismal fate.

In the center of the stadium is the Spina, a concrete median which stretches almost the entire length of the track. This is the dividing strip by which the charioteers will circle around. The spina is also decorated with all manner of pagan symbols to add prestige to these games. Atop the spina are miniature recreations of famous temples, statues of the gods, and even several huge obelisks imported directly from the fertile desert kingdom of Nibiru.

Within the deluxe seating of the pulvinar box, the Consul watches the races along with a few senators of note. Given the religious importance of these games, the Consul wears a laurel crown of leaves with hanging fruit. Draped over his pure white tunic is an illustrious cape of red velvet hues. Next to him is his trusted advisor and friend, Julianus, who's hair was less gray and darker in color.

"A most excellent race!" Julianus boasts with energized amusement. "Surely, the Deorum smile upon us with these pleasant offerings."

"Bread and circus... That's all this farce is." The Consul replies with muted disdain.

"It's for the sake of social harmony. A necessary evil to placate the mob, wouldn't you agree?"

"If I were the god Velcanos or Tinius, then surely I would be most disappointed."

"Harsh words for a *consul* of the Republic. I would take care with such statements, sir. You never know who might be listening to drag your name into the mud."

"Perhaps you are right." Admits the Consul. "I never *did* develop an affinity for these crude sports."

The Lucian chief pauses as his eyes scan across the hippodrome; paying special attention to the audience members who dress in a myriad of colors associated with their preferred racers. He then resumes his musings.

"I believe that we have lost sight of the old ways. We Lucians used to be an austere people. A noble and pious people. Now? Showered in the riches of conquest, I fear that we are forgetting ourselves... Success has made us soft."

"Times have changed." Julianus posits. "Our ancestors did not know the pressures we face today. It was a simpler time. The city itself was smaller too."

“Oh yes... One need only look around... Over 300,000 people in this stadium alone... Nearly a *third* of this city's ever-growing population... A million *mouths* to feed.”

“Are you still planning to leave then?”

“I have to... The prosperity of Lucium depends on my visitation. Although, truth be told, I'd prefer to bury myself in scrolls. Pursuits of the mind interest me far more than troublesome distractions of the flesh.”

“I find that ironic.” Julianus chuckles “Considering how different *he* is from you.”

“Speaking of which, where *is* my son?”

In the hidden tunnels situated below the stadium, a young Bhutaki Marius sneaks around the guards to get a closer look at the horse stalls. He gawks at the noble beasts waiting to be sent out onto the track. Accompanying him is his dearest friend, a fellow youth possessed of silvery hair with black tips and violet eyes.

“Hey... Are you sure about this, Bhutaki? What if we get caught?”

“Relax, Cassius. No one's going to notice. We'll just get a quick peek and go on our merry way. Nice and simple.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. Nothing is ever *simple* with you... It always leads to disaster.”

“And yet, you follow me around like a shadow.”

“I try to make sure you don't get into more trouble.”

“Am I so bad an influence?” Bhutaki jests.

“Ha! If anything, *I'm* the enabler.” Cassius retorts as he puffs his chest. “To me, you simply provide much needed spontaneity in an otherwise dull life.”

“That's Arcturian pride for you.”

Bhutaki then gestures for him to follow. They tip-toe their way around the dark and narrow corridors; stopping whenever a guard or two happens to pass by. They keep up this sneaking around for a good few minutes until finally coming across the very prize they sought after; as if they had stumbled upon a coveted relic beneath a hidden tomb.

“Isn’t she a beauty?” Bhutaki comments.

“Sure is... What craftsmanship.”

The object of their affection is a racing chariot of a most grandiose design. A set of four horses were already attached to the vessel in preparation for the next round of races. Cassius marvels at its sleek aesthetics. Bhutaki, itching for action, proceeds to climb atop it. The horses neigh abruptly; spooked by this sudden movement.

“What are you doing?” Cassius whispers.

“I want to know what it’s like. Just try to keep the horses calm before they alert someone.”

Cassius hurriedly moves towards the startled beasts and gently places a hand on their muzzles in an effort to soothe their nerves. Bhutaki stands inside the chariot and is taken aback by how raw it feels. The wheels are made with the finest wood and faint traces of goldleaf to add artistic embellishment along the base of the cart. He caresses the handlebars and rope; taking a moment to embrace the tactile sensations of the materials used to build such a transport.

“Incredible... They must’ve spent a fortune on this.”

“Okay, you’ve had your fun. Now let us take our leave before someone finds us.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure? Haven’t you ever wanted to know what it’s like to be a charioteer?”

“Watching the races is not the same as performing in it. I don’t fancy dying.”

Bhutaki, only half-listening to his friend's concerns, inspects the thick tether that controls the horses.

"I hear that they must train for *years* before ever being allowed to enter a single race... Such devotion... The kings of old would clamor to participate in such things."

Cassius crosses his arms in frustration. But even *he* could not deny the rising swell of desire building up within him. It wasn't long before the curious Arcturus takes it upon himself to board the transport.

"Alright fine... Move over."

"That's the spirit."

Bhutaki closes his eyes and imagines himself as a famous charioteer. He envisions the blazing heat of the sun beating down on him as trails of dust clouds erupt high into the air while competing for the great title of champion. He can hear the roar of the crowds and feel their admiration as he attains victory. It is a pleasant fantasy. But this vacation of the mind is disrupted by the sound of clanking metal doors and incoherent mumblings from the distance.

"They're coming... Let's go!" Cassius urges.

"Damn... It was *just* getting good too."

However, before he could fully step off, Bhutaki accidentally pulls on one of the ropes tied to the horse. In response, the four large equines pull the chariot forward at maximum speed as it darts across the hall.

"Whoa! What in the?!?"

"Bhutaki! What are you - AHHHH!"

Cassius and Bhutaki are both taken on an adrenaline-inducing joyride by these powerful creatures. Fearing for their safety, they each hold onto the ropes for dear life. The chariot sways and shakes violently as the horses drag them up a ramp and onto the hippodrome stadium in full view.

Not knowing what to do, Bhutaki races across the track amidst a deluge of other charioteers vying for first place. The racers swerve their carts and bump into them; trying their best to remove Bhutaki and Cassius from the competition. This only further stokes their nervousness.

“How the heck do you control this thing!?” Bhutaki shouts. “Woah!!!”

“Watch out!!!” Cassius fervently yells. “Too close to the wall!!! THE WALLS!!!”

Bhutaki struggles to make sense of how exactly to maneuver the chariot in such hostile conditions. From the pulvinar box, Julianus and the Consul lean in and squint their eyes in disbelief.

“That wild duo...” Julianus points out. “One of them looks an awful lot like... No... Is that?”

“It is...” The Consul mumbles.

The audience shouts with exhilaration at the sudden arrival of these unexpected newcomers. Though he hadn't the faintest clue what he was doing, Bhutaki took command of the tethers and beckoned the horses forward. He pushed them to go faster and faster to the point where he ended up passing the other riders. For a few moments, he was proud of his efforts and even had a big smile on his face.

But Cassius does not share in his amusements. The first turn was coming up, and their momentum would see them crashing upon the walls like a condemned criminal thrown off the Sabine Rock.

“Oh gods! Bhutaki! The turn! Slow down!!!”

“I can't! I don't know how!!!”

Bhutaki pulls on the ropes in a desperate attempt to make the horses perform a sudden sharp turn. However, their momentum is simply too great. He then notices a

peculiar entrance leading back into the tunnels below the stadium; similar to the very exit they had emerged from.

“You see that? I think it leads back underground. I’m going to take us there.” Bhutaki boldly declares.

“Are you crazy?!?” Cassius screams in shock. “We’ll never make it in one piece!”

“I’m going!”

“Oh gods!!!”

Upon reentry of the tunnels, they must evade countless walls and pillars. The pathway leads to a single wooden gate with light shining through it. In a hectic mania, the various hippodrome workers frantically open the gates to allow the rowdy horses to bolt past it. Bhutaki and Cassius narrowly avoided sudden death. But before they could celebrate, the situation grew only more tenuous. They had left the safety of the tracks and now ended up racing down the bustling and crowded streets of the Lucian Forum.

“Oh Romula!!!” Cassius pleads.

It took everything Bhutaki had to steer the horses away from the plethora of merchant stalls and fleeing pedestrians which littered the roads. Additionally, he had to dodge the heavy traffic of intersecting carts, wagons, and other chariots dashing across the crowded city. In minutes, Bhutaki and Cassius leave a wave of chaos and destruction in the form of broken wares and damaged property.

Time and time again, he pulls back on the ropes in an attempt to stop the horses, but the disturbed creatures would not heed him; instead choosing to gallop ahead towards destinations unknown. All Bhutaki could do was steer them right or left to avoid hitting people. It wouldn’t be long until the legionnaires arrived; coming after them at break-neck speeds aided by aether-infused feet.

“Legions!” Cassius cries out.

A unit of about ten soldiers gave chase and began emitting bluish flames of raw aether from their palms. In synchronized cooperation, they each manifest ethereal chains and shoot them forth like projectile arrows towards the wayward chariot. One string of ghastly chains dashes in front, causing the chariot to flip over. Bhutaki, Cassius, and the four horses are all sent flying high up into the air. Thankfully, before they or the creatures can splatter onto the solid ground, more of these astral chains dart through the air and wrap around them; holding them in suspension above the floor like hanging laundry.

The chariot may have been destroyed, but the horses were now safely secured. The youths, on the other hand, are swiftly apprehended, given metal cuffs, and sent to the dungeons of the Tullianum. Bhutaki and Cassius were now trapped in the desolate cesspit of a cell drenched in the smell of human defecation.

“Remind me *not* the do that again with you.” Cassius mutters begrudgingly.

“A great bit of fun that was though, eh?”

“Oh yes... Nearly dying and now having to reside in this bucket of filth and shit is my idea of a good time.”

“Alright...” Bhutaki confesses. “I might have erred in my judgement...”

The two youths would stay in their prison cells for several hours before a legionary guardsman approached and opened their cell with a pair of heavy iron keys.

“Bhutaki Marius. Cassius Arcturus. You two are free to go.” Spoke the soldier in an authoritative tone.

The youths look at each other with puzzlement, but gladly evacuate the smelly quarters of their horrid dwelling.

They follow the legionnaire through the cold and dim halls of the Tullianum dungeons for a few more minutes before stepping out onto the warm and mesmerizing vista of the forum. Their happiness is short lived, however, as waiting for them just a few feet away is none other than the director of the Equites, Praelior Livens. Even back then, he wore his iconic black leather trench coat with orange glass visors covering his face. His long purple hair flowed with the gusting of the wind and a creepy smirk stretched from cheek to cheek. He leered over at Bhutaki with a mocking gaze. A discomforting chill ran down his spine.

“On second thought, I’ll just go back to my cell.” The young Marius says to the guard.

“Not my problem anymore. Now scram!”

Bhutaki follows Praelior down the winding streets of the Via Sacra, or sacred road, which ran right through the heart of the Lucian capital. The boy hardly said much of anything; recognizing the heap of trouble he had found himself in. Praelior, on the other hand, took great delight in teasing the youth.

“Well, you’ve certainly been quite the naughty boy, haven’t you? Commandeering a racing chariot? I wonder what your next feat shall be?”

“What did you do with Cassius?”

“I sent him home. Truth be told, the two of you should be *severely* punished. You have only the *Consul* to thank for such undeserving mercy.”

“No one got hurt... Isn’t that good enough?”

“The sheer expenditure incurred from the havoc you caused is astronomical. A real drain on the treasury.”

“You must be loving this... Seeing me mess up.”

“Perhaps he will finally disown you? I’ll be sure to suggest the mines of Doricum to him.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Why not? Your very existence is a joke in my view.”

The two continue their walk until finally reaching the base of a most astounding of buildings. The great Consular Residence is a true marvel of Lucian design, evoking a sense of pompous grandiosity that eclipsed the many villas on Actia Hill. It is, in every meaning of the word, a palace. It’s believed that the very grounds on which this immaculate edifice stands was once the site where Lucius declared that the city be a Republic, thus breaking away from the old tradition of kingly rule. Interestingly enough, this awe-inspiring complex does not possess any of the austere qualities one would expect of a humble leader in service to the people. A mere cursory glance is all you would need to deduce that no expenses were spared in the construction of this palatial structure. Only the finest marble, sourced from the quarries of Merconia, were used for the floors, walls, and innumerable collections of evocative statues which grace the premises. Breathtaking gardens possessing a vast tapestry of vegetation offered respite from the troubles of statecraft. But there were other things such as alabaster from Mithrodacia and exotic artworks from distant Lemuria. Hundreds of docile slaves worked tirelessly in and around the palace; tending to the needs of the Consul and his family. It mattered little what their task was, be it cleaning or being used for sexual gratification, they never complained and always performed their duties with utmost devotion. This was certainly a place fit for a monarch; an apt comparison which made many free-born Lucians uncomfortable.

The Consul is seated upon a curule chair next to his exquisite marble desk as he sifts through mountains of paperwork. Bhutaki is escorted down the grand hall by Praelior. On both sides of this hall, next to massive pillars, are rows upon rows of Equite soldiers; all of them wearing their black cloaks and silver galea helmets with metal visors covering their eyes. They stand quietly in attention; still as stone. Bhutaki walks up to the Consul and waits to be called upon. But the head of state simply ignores him; preferring to stamp and sign his endless pile of official documents that required his attention. Eventually, after several minutes of waiting, Bhutaki loses his patience.

“... Father...”

“You will speak *only* when spoken to.” The Consul immediately replies; refusing to look towards his son.

Bhutaki kept on waiting and waiting until his father finally felt satisfied with his work. As he continues to sign scroll upon scroll, he opens his mouth and initiates his conversation with him.

“Do you know *why* you are here?”

“... I can take a few guesses...”

“And what am I?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“*What am I?*” The father reiterates.

“... The Consul of Lucium.” Bhutaki answers hesitantly.

At this point, the father places down his ink quill and raises his head up to face his son directly.

“Precisely... The Consul of Lucium... At all times, people look to me for both leadership and as the upholder of our values. There are many who yearn to see me falter. One little mistake... One tiny misstep... Anything to question my legitimacy... I take pride in the sanctity of this office, for it is

the very essence of our Republic. Yet, my idiot son seems bent on undermining *everything* I have labored to build.”

“Father, if you would just let me explain, I – ”

Before he could utter any more words, the Consul lifted his hand; gesturing for the youth to cease his speaking. He then looks to Praelior.

“Leave us.”

On command, all of the Equites remove themselves from the room. Even the slaves walk away, leaving only father and son. The Consul then stands up and paces around the room whilst sighing in frustration.

“What am to do with you, Bhutaki? I did not raise you in such a manner. Why do you plague me so?”

“Father, I... I know what I did was wrong... I see that now... I just... I don't know... I just...”

The Consul takes a moment to consider his words carefully. Despite his rage, even *he* cannot help but be swayed by fatherly sentiments.

“You have lived for fifteen summers... Not quite a boy and yet not quite a man either... I too was once gripped by such restlessness when I was your age... It can be... Difficult to resist these urges and temptations.”

“Then... You are not angry?” Bhutaki asks timidly.

“It's not *what* you did, son. It's *why* you did it. But in that, I am partly to blame. The demands of this high office have kept me busy. Meanwhile, you are possessed of all this raw energy without the proper channels to direct it into more *productive* pursuits.”

“I'll change... I swear to you. I won't sully the name of Marius anymore.”

“No you will not.” States the Consul in a matter-of-fact tone. “That is why I am taking you with me.”

"With you?" Bhutaki questions. "Where?"

"I'm going on a journey to the Kingdom of Nibiru."

"Nibiru? But... Why that shithole of a country?"

"That *shithole* has been a close and important ally since the days of Lucius. Since the dawn of the Republic, every Consul before me has, at least once, made the trip to rekindle ties with their Pharaohs. It's clear you've become bored. That is most dangerous. Perhaps some time abroad will cool your head; instilling into you some damned perspective."

"I won't go." Bhutaki refutes.

"It is not your choice to make."

"I have rights. The Consul cannot coerce a citizen."

"True... But as the father, as the Pater Familias, I am well within my legal authority to order you."

"... You wouldn't..."

The father sits back down on his marble desk and crosses his hands together while glaring directly at Bhutaki.

"The arrangements have already been made. I suggest you settle any lingering affairs. We leave in three days."

And as promised, Bhutaki and his father set sail for the desert kingdom three days later. They left from the great port of Lucium and traversed the calm cerulean waters of the Theian Sea atop a ginormous quinquereme. This monstrous galley boasts several layers of oarsmen, propelling the mighty vessel at great speeds relative to its unruly size. Up on deck is a sizable number of legionary guards. The sails of the ship are colored in rich reddish dyes emblazoned with a golden eagle and laurel wreath design with the words SPQL woven into it; a clear declaration to all that this here was indeed a Lucian vessel.

Hanging over the edge of the wooden railings is a sickly Bhutaki, who kept vomiting on account of the ship's constant swaying. His legs are wobbly as he is overcome by a chronic case of nausea.

"All this motion... This is intolerable..."

"I recall that your mother harbored similar opinions regarding sea travel." Taunts the Father.

"A presence sorely missed." Bhutaki replies.

"Every day."

Bhutaki looks around but is sullen over the sheer vastness of the Theian Sea. For miles upon miles, there is nothing but sapphire skies and endless water.

"I had no concept that the sea was so massive. It looks much smaller on a map."

"All you have ever known is Lucium. You'll quickly come to learn that the world is a far bigger and much more complicated place than the confines of the capital walls."

"How much longer until we arrive?"

"If the winds are favorable, I'd say it should be no longer than a good twelve days. If not? Thirty days."

"THIRTY?!!" Bhutaki shouts in disbelief; feeling the urge to throw up once again. Unable to contain it anymore, he hovers over the railing and unloads his gastronomic cargo overboard. "... I hate this... I want to go home..."

The Consul simply chuckles at this. He then gently taps him on the shoulder.

"Why don't we head on down and visit the Medicus. She'll fix you a tonic to help with the sickness."

Bhutaki does as instructed and heads below deck, walking through a long and dark corridor of strong and grizzly men who push and pull their oars with exhaustive effort. At the very back is a room where the Medicus resides.

She was an older woman and prepared a simple herbal remedy that helped soothe Bhutaki's nerves for a little while. The Consul accompanied him soon after.

"So what exactly *is* the purpose of this voyage?" Bhutaki inquires, still coming to bearings with seasickness.

The Father looks among the many amphora jars stacked in the room. He then reaches a hand inside one of them and scoops up a small portion of grain; slowly allowing it to fall from his hands and back into the jar.

"For *this*." He states.

"Grain?" Bhutaki says disappointedly. "You mean to tell me that we've come all this way for... *Grain*?"

"It may not look like much to you, but this is one of the most important keys to running the Republic."

"Do we not grow our own food? There is plenty of farmland in Caelum."

"Grain is not our *only* crop. Olives and grapes are such an example. But the truth is, even with all our land, we simply do not grow enough to meet demand. *Especially* the capital. Lucium's population keeps increasing every year with no end in sight. It is a great parasite in need of constant nourishment, lest it feed upon itself."

"But why Nibiru? It's a desert"

"Yes, much of it *is* just barren sand. But the lands surrounding the ancient Amun River is some of the most fertile in the world. They produce more than enough grain to feed Theia. And since we are unable to grow the necessary amount, we rely on Nibirian grain to keep the people fed."

"So... If the Pharaoh decides to withhold the grain supply, then Lucium starves?"

"You're starting to get it now." Confirms the Father. "It is why Lucium and Nibiru must *always* remain friends in an

otherwise dangerous world. It is a... *Special* relationship. Who knows? Perhaps you may even grow fond of them."

"Their laws and customs are odd." Bhutaki retorts with worry. "And they worship strange gods."

"Their gods are much older than ours, Bhutaki. Nibiru was a great power long before Lucius ever entered the scene. They precede even the Lemurian city-states. You don't have to *agree* with their ways. But their long history does *merit* our utmost respect."

Bhutaki takes heed of his father's words. However, he does not reply as he was still potently remorseful over his disreputable actions back home. His head tilts down and his mood sours. The Consul takes note of this.

"What ails you so?"

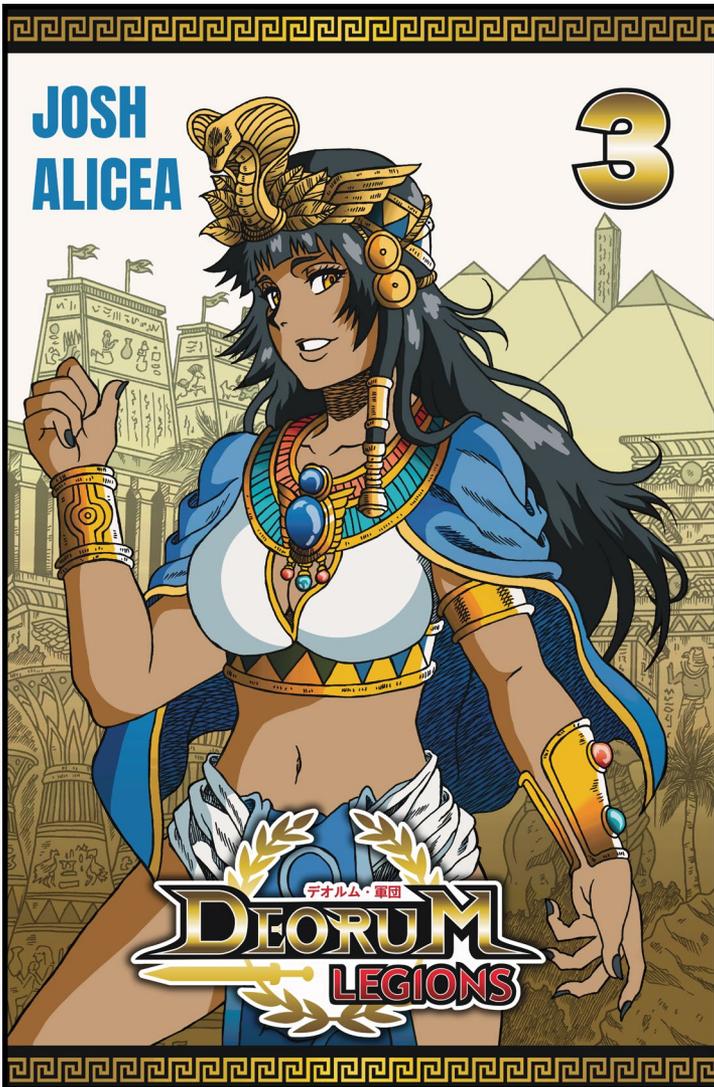
"... Nothing... I just... I swear to the gods that I will make you proud... I won't screw up like before..."

"Still on about that?"

The Consul pauses and gently lifts his son's head by the chin and offers a rare smile of tender warmth.

"Listen to me, Bhutaki. You are heir to the House of Marius, descended from the founding fathers of the Republic. But most crucially, you are my son. No matter what you choose to do in life, I will always be proud of you."

THANKS FOR READING



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