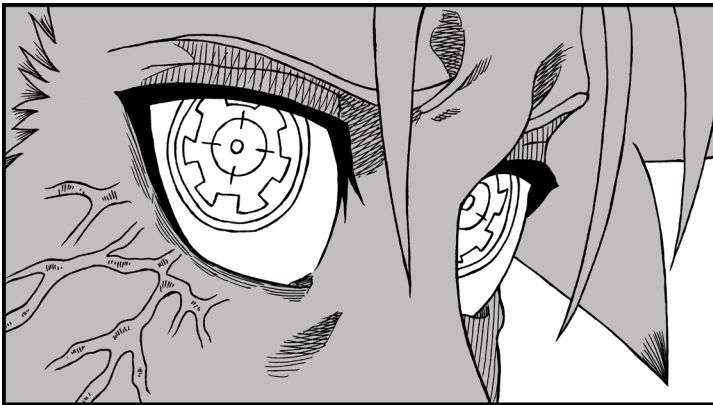




## BOOK 1: The Origin

### CHAPTER 1

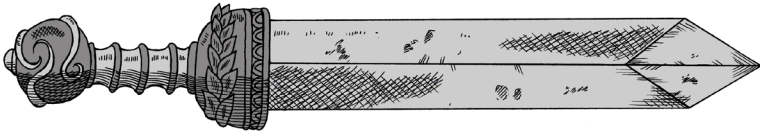
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Story & Art By:

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## I: TRIAL OF THE LEGIONS



Velkan Aurelian knelt down on the cold craggy floor and whispered a prayer to a tiny wooden idol; hoping his plea would be heard by the gods. The room was only faintly illuminated by the withering of candle wax. Aromatic resins containing frankincense filled the air with a pleasant fragrance. A final pleasure for the trial that was to come - for today was the selection.

He knew what this meant. This was the final trial one had to overcome if they were to take the oath. Everyone with aspirations to join the legions had to survive this deadly test. To prepare, Velkan sought to commune with the gods so that he might increase the chances of his success and good fortune.

Upon completing this solemn invocation, he grabs a knife placed next to the idol and presses it firmly onto his palms. After only a brief moment of hesitation, Velkan slices open his right hand. A gentle river of blood drips down and caresses the idol.

The pain was acute, but bearable. 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 from outside and addresses him in an authoritative tone.

"It is time. Are you ready? Have you made your peace?"

"I have" Velkan calmly replies. "I've waited my entire life for this moment."

The man, a strong and resolute-looking soldier, looks 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 a civilian life."

"And abandon my principles? We know where that road leads. There was a reason I chose this path, and I plan to see it through to the end."

"I was afraid you would say that. Very well... Come then."

The soldier walked outside, and Velkan followed. Velkan wears only a simple white tunic, whereas the other man is donned in a brilliant metallic armor adorned by a vibrant crimson cape. The symbol *VII* was etched into the fabric. Velkan stares intently onto this uniform, hoping that he too will soon be able to wear it. But the icy chill of the frost-filled winds sting his skin; ushering his awareness back to the present moment.

The two cross a mighty bridge elevated by a series of gargantuan pillars and arches. One could see the surrounding land for miles and miles above this bridge. To their front, was the Temple of the Vestal Maidens. This is where the selection was to take place.

The building was colossal in nature, decorated with a sublime architectural brilliance similar to those found in the capital city. Stone edifices of the gods could be seen towering over the structure. It was truly a sight to behold. But perhaps

even more impressive were the giant glaciers of crystals that enveloped the temple. They seemed like mighty translucent towers that soared to the heavens. A bluish light emanated from within it. Waiting at the front of the temple, on the other side of the bridge, was a woman clad in black robes. A hood covers her head while a metal visor covers her eyes. She speaks to them in a light but unfeeling voice.

“Greetings, brave cadet. I am Julia, a Vestal Maiden in service to the Goddess.” She gestures her hand to beckon Velkan forward. “Please step this way, and we shall begin the selection.”

Velkan does as she says and follows her. But as he looks back, he notices that the soldier behind him stood still in place.

“What’s wrong?” Velkan asks.

“This is as far as I am permitted to go. This is a sacred space. Even a *Centurion* cannot cross over. I will 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 were none of the familiar comforts of home. He looked around, taking in 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. Yet within moments, any thoughts of home quickly subsided.

Reaching the end of the bridge, Velkan and the Vestal Maiden approached a pair of colossal bronze doors. What lay on the other side? Even with months of training and mental preparation, the thorns of doubt festered in his heart.

Inside the temple, they descend down a swirling spiral 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. A palpable sense of anxiety begins to build for Velkan. Each step increases the weight on his psyche.

One thing that particularly spooked him was a window revealing a horrific sight in another room. A pile of corpses; freshly procured. The blood still dripped like a scarlet river. He could still see the expression of pain and fright displayed on their lifeless faces. This disturbed Velkan down to his very core.

“Hold on... Are they?...”

“They are those who failed to be selected.” She responds.

“But those are cadets... Like me...”

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

“How does one determine worthiness over another? By what standards is this test based on? Is it strength? Wit? Or maybe character?”

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

“Which is?”

“To know thyself. To conquer one’s fears. To overcome thyself.”

Velkan found this answer to be unsatisfactory. All she gave him were vagaries and riddles. But the time for thinking was at an end. Finally, they reach the bottom and enter a large open chamber. Waiting for them were four other Vestal Maidens, each dressed in similar garb.

The inner sanctum of the temple was circular in nature, held

up by monstrously tall marble pillars and arches. In the center was a pool of a liquid-like substance glowing with a luminous blue light. The head maiden, an older-looking woman, speaks 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 with a façade of courage. "Of Ilium..."

Next to them, a stone tablet begins to glow. The words that spell out his name are magically etched onto the stone without any external input. Then the stone floats away.

"It is recorded into the annals." The elder maiden declares. "Now step forward, cadet."

Velkan inches closer into the fluorescent pool, wowed by its radiant glow. He notices that, though it is like water, it bears a striking resemblance to the glacial crystals outside.

"That substance... Is that Elysium?" Velkan inquires.

"Indeed." One maiden answered. "This was the very site where the legendary founder first discovered its use. It is here where he acquired the power of the gods, just as you may soon will."

"And If I fail? I just end up a corpse like the others?"

"Indeed." Says another maiden. "You will perish and fade into the Aetherium as a sacrifice."

"Oh, is that all? Then this should be no big deal." Velkan jokes, poking humor at the severity of the situation.

The elder maiden interrupts. "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 rather than water. Eventually, Velkan's entire body sinks below the liquid surface.

Up above, the Vestal Maidens clasp their hands in prayer and chant a series of incantations in unison. A bluish flame begins to emit from their hands.

Below the luminous lake, a multitude of ethereal chains dart toward Velkan. They quickly wrap around his body and limbs, preventing him from swimming back up. Struggle all he might, the chains do not break. 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 part of the ordeal. Rather, it was merely a prelude of things to come. What came next was something no one should ever be made to endure. When the body becomes exposed to high quantities of Elysium, it begins to change on a structural level.

Within seconds of swallowing, the veins started to violently protrude all throughout the body. A few more seconds later, they began to 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. The pain was 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 no one could hear his screams. Blood could be seen rising to the lake's surface, only to evaporate instantly upon touching the air. The Vestal Maidens maintained their prayer and incantations with indifference.

Terror and despair intensify when Velkan discovers that he

no longer has the capacity to breath in the absence of lungs. Soon, even the pain begins to fade, along with all other sensation. Taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell disappear from his realm of experience. The final remnants of his body disintegrate until only his brain remained, attached to the spinal cord.

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

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

Beneath the lake, an angelic entity approaches the brain & spinal column. The being smiles and taps the brain ever so delicately. Immediately, the brain and spine suddenly glow with the intensity of the sun. All is consumed by a white light.

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Velkan opens his eyes. He is no longer in the Elysium Lake. In fact, he has no idea where he is. He frantically looks around to get his bearings. The residual trauma from his recent horrific 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 manages to calm down long enough to take his surroundings into account. This definitely was not the Temple of the Vestal Maidens. He was in an all-together different place. It was night. A massive moon, larger than any he had seen, casted its lunar light upon the land. The soil was grey. The trees were mere husks devoid of vegetation. The ground was littered with the skull and bones of apparently



fallen warriors. Grave markers dotted the area with swords thrust into the stone.

Velkan walks along this barren wasteland to find only death and the forsaken. At the edge of a cliff, overseeing a vast black ocean, he sees a set of stairs leading up to a floating island of rock. The steppingstones themselves were suspended in mid-air, as if gravity had no dominion. He cautiously walks up these floating platforms, careful not to misstep and fall. With the higher vantage point, 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 temples. Shattered pillars, arches, and statues orbit around the floating island, as if it were 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 smile; his teeth stained and rotted.

“Oh? A visitor? Yet another wanderer trying to find his way...”

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

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

“Am I dead?”

“Not yet. It depends on how you perform. Right now, you’re in place 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 puts on a welcoming smile.

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

Velkan is taken aback by this nonchalant request. He reminds himself of the reason he decided to undergo the trials. If this is part of it, he cannot lose focus.

“Respectfully, I must decline your offer. I haven’t the time.”

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

“I came to seek an audience with Gladios.”

The old man raises his eyes slightly. “The God of War? How fanciful. Why would you want to search out such a fellow?”

“It’s part of the trials. Before I can become a legionnaire, I must seek out and acquire his power. Or so I was told.”

“The legions? Impressive. 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? Pride? 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.”

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

“I made a promise to someone...”

“Ah... So, love, is it? No... Despite your age, you don’t seem to be overcome by the passions of romance. Could it be family, then?”

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

The old man strokes his beard, puzzled by the boy’s

insistence. "I could take you to him. But I doubt it'd 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. Doubts. 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. We can talk away all of your troubles..."

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

"As I said, I will gladly 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 this. A sense of confidence is restored upon witnessing how thin and malnourished 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.

"Sorry. But I don't have any time to waste on silly games."

Disappointed, the old man lets out a sigh and snaps his fingers. Velkan is instantaneously teleported back to the island, standing right in front of the old man. He is alarmed by this. He noticed that the old man's demeanor changed from

friendliness to a more serious manner.

"You know, it is considered extremely rude to walk away after someone graciously offers you his drink."

"Who are you? Really?..."

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

"... I was hoping, given your background, that you would've been open to more amicable dialogue – that we might sever the chains of your past and free your mind. But it seems you will need to learn the hard way. The painful 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 orbs then transform into physical weapons.

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

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

"Gladios will not give you the power of the crystals out of the goodness of his 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 in satisfaction while analyzing his stance.

"Very good! Your instructors taught you well." The elder comments.

Both warriors stand facing the other. They are 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... 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 island like a rag doll. The young man is then hurled into a floating pillar, slamming into it like a meteorite. The old man steps off the island and ‘walks’ on thin air as he calmly approaches the broken pillar.

“Is that it? Stand up and fight me! 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. The old man takes delight in this.

“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-clash sword & 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. 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 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, swiping him away like a bug with his hoplon shield. Velkan 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, destroying the immediate surrounding environment. From the dust cloud, Velkan emerges.

But rather than fight, he is now running away. Before Velkan could get far, the old man was already standing next to him. The old man looks at Velkan and is disappointed by what he sees. Instead of confidence, only fear is displayed on the youth's eyes.

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

The old man raises his rusty spear and then erupts into a sudden burst of flames. He is enveloped by an explosive cyclone of wind, fire, and debris. The force of the twister is enough to nearly blow Velkan off the cliff. Velkan can hardly believe what is happening. After a few minutes of hurricane force winds, the old man reveals his new 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 up.

“You lied...” Velkan remarks. “Such speeds are beyond the capacity of human beings. It can only mean that... 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.”

“How can I...?” Velkan laments. “I’m just a human. You are the God of War! How on Theia am I supposed to win against you?!? That is impossible!!!”

This angers the deity. He looks at the youth’s trembling hands and cringes.

“Look at you... Frightened beyond reason... These are unbecoming of a warrior. You must purge despair from your mind. Only then, will you have a semblance of hope for victory.”

In a flash, Gladios appears point-blank and slices Velkan’s shield in half. All he has left is a sword. Panic really sets in. Velkan makes another run for it. 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 then flings him off the spear, throwing 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.

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. To fight this fate. 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 feet, but is unable to do so. Gladios watches this scene, unamused.

“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. His mother. His father. And all those who have suffered. For if he failed, it would all have been in vain. He could not die. He mustn’t die. Velkan dug deep within himself and tapped into an inner reservoir of



strength. He attempts a second time to get back up, only to be stabbed by Gladios.

“This is getting boring... 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 bluish orb of flame. The God of War quietly approaches the floating sphere and carefully taps it with his index finger.

“Now reveal to me, your truth...”

Like a tidal wave, Velkan’s memories begin to flood into the God’s mind. A kaleidoscope of vivid imagery, emotions, and thoughts. He saw 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 scatters to the wind.

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

## TO BE CONTINUED...

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