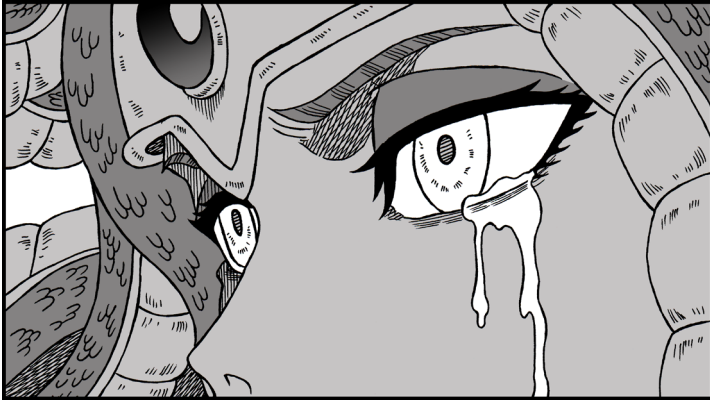


OWL SHOGUN STUDIOS



BOOK II:

THE SERVILE CONSPIRACY



Story & Art By:

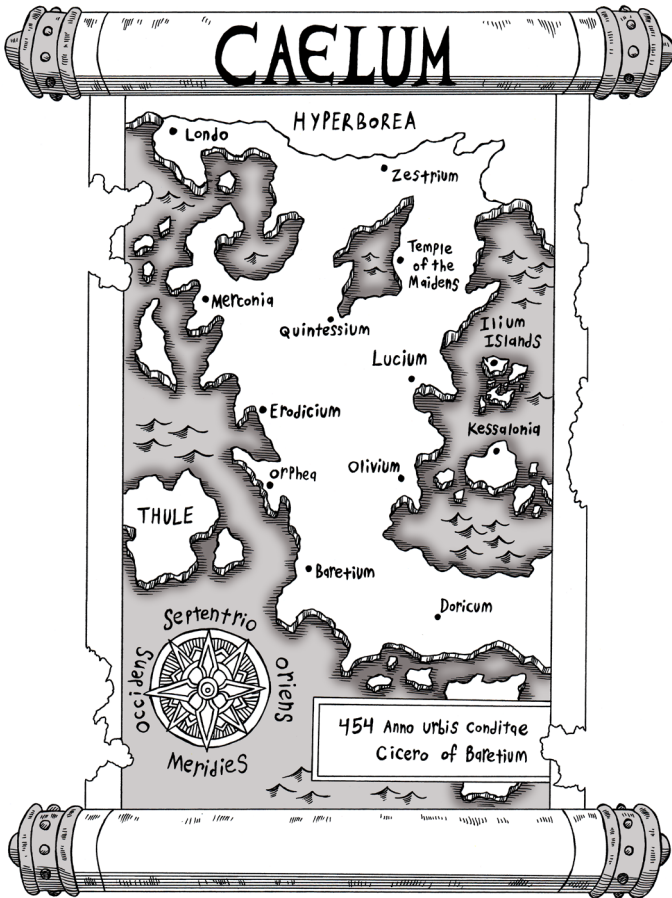
JOSH ALICEA

S.P.Q.L



SENATUS · POPULUSQUE · LUCIANUS

REGIONAL MAP



REGION: Theia

LAND: Caelum

YEAR: 454 AUC (Anno Urbis Conditae)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ch. 01: Servile Country	1
Ch. 02: Man of The People	11
Ch. 03: Pirates of Tiberia	34
Ch. 04: Mos Maiorum	57
Ch. 05: Of Man & Eidolon	78
Ch. 06: Numitor Priscus Longinus	101
Ch. 07: A Plebeian's Plight	112
Ch. 08: Blood & Sand	125
Ch. 09: Drucilla The Serpentess	143
Ch. 10: The Equites	168
Ch. 11: Vox Populi	192
Ch. 12: The Prophet	211
Ch. 13: Her Story	232
Ch. 14: Her Lament	254
Ch. 15: Her Justice	275
Ch. 16: Her Metamorphosis	289
Ch. 17: Velkan's Decision	304
Ch. 18: Lord of Calamity	321
Ch. 19: Into The Precipice	347
Ch. 20: For The Republic	360
Ch. 21: The Red Flame Roars	375
Ch. 22: Exodos	391
Author's Note:	410

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

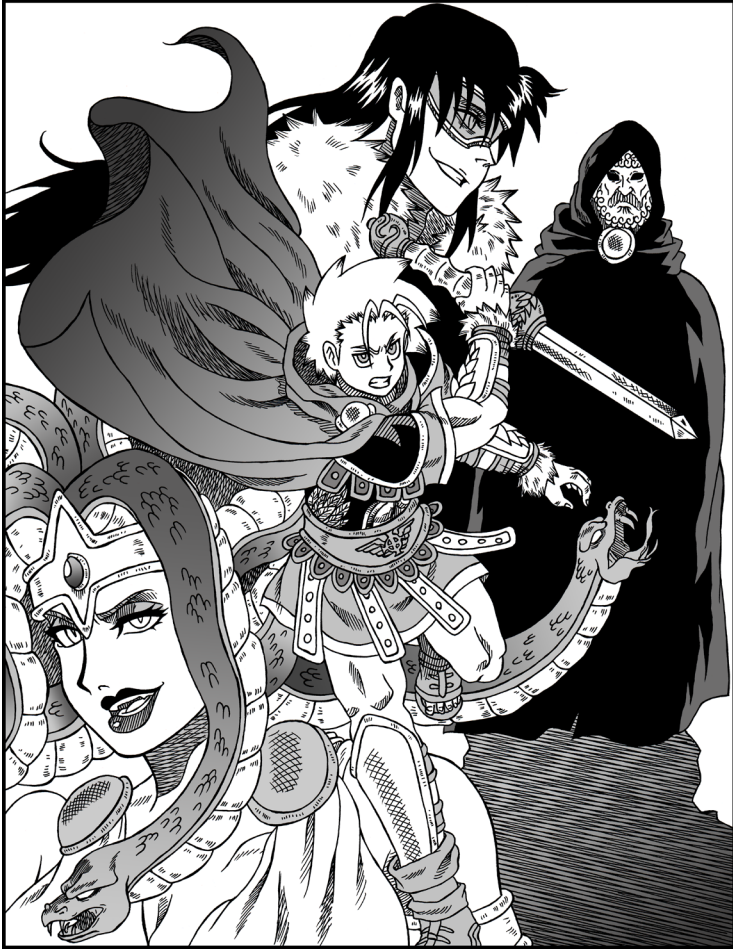
The **Deorum Legions**TM universe derives its essence from the old **Greco-Roman** world of classic antiquity. This is a setting of legionary armies, magnificent cities, ancient gods, mighty gladiators, mythical beings, and much more.

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.

But for those who revel in exploring strange new frontiers, I offer you a world that few have dared to portray in fantasy. And so, we meet here upon this vanguard. Now turn the page, dear reader, and let us embark on this great journey together...

- The Owl Shogun

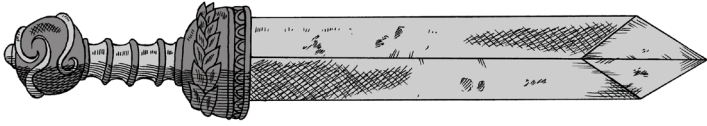
Book 2
The Servile Conspiracy



Story & Art:
Josh Alicea

I

SERVILE COUNTRY



Somewhere in the fertile hills of Caelum, a shadow looms. People are hard at work farming the land of what seems to be a rather massive plantation which stretches for miles. Such large agricultural operations have come to be known as Latifundia. Across this vast expanse of endless fields was a sweat-drenched ocean of flesh and tireless misery. They all possessed the servile mark. This symbol of servitude was branded directly onto their foreheads; proof that they were all nothing more than the lawful property of their masters.

While beasts of burden such as oxen are certainly present and used to pull wagons or to plow the soil, it is through the levy of countless slaves that the crops are picked in a timely and cheap manner. The demand for things like chestnuts, walnuts, figs, and olives was higher than ever. Volume is what mattered most.

In order to remain competitive in this market, landlords are incentivized to buy more and more property from the poor and populate their fields with slaves purchased at the

lowest bidder. Slaves were plentiful thanks to the wars of conquest which have brought riches to the Republic. They were more cost-effective than hiring citizens entitled to those pesky liabilities such as legal rights. A slave will never complain. And if they do, they are easily replaced. So long as the legions bring Lucium victory, the slaves will keep coming in bountiful supply.

A stout and proud man named Patroclus watched from the comfort of a raised veranda on his opulent countryside estate. He observed their toil while sipping on a cup of Falernian wine. Shielding him from the relentless sun were two nearby slaves waving giant fans up and down. His children ran around and played, as children do. His wife, clad in colorful and jeweled finery, sits lazily on a cushioned triclinium sofa.

“Patroclus, dear.” She speaks. “Shall we please escape from this dreadful heat? I’m afraid I do not possess the constitution for such things.”

“If you despise the outdoors so much, you can always go back inside.”

“Oh, but I yearn for a return to the capital. There’s little to do out here in such rural desolateness... Perhaps we can make haste to Lucium earlier than planned? The children could make do for some activity and stimulation.”

“We agreed.” Patroclus snaps. “I must stay here to keep watch of the harvest. It’s this very plantation that pays for your livelihood. Just buy yourself a strapping young lad to satisfy you. Have several mount you for all I care – as long as I get some damned peace and quiet.”

“But these slaves... They’re nothing like the ones we have in Actia Hill... Much less refined.... I don’t much care for the way they look at me... It is all so... Boorish...”

“Oh, enough of your wailing, woman! Do you not see that I have a business to run?!?”

Another slave enters the scene. Compared to the others, he was much larger, imposing, and exceptionally well-built in terms of musculature. He was quite the impressive specimen. His skin tone was significantly darker too; hinting at his possible origins to lands south of Nibiru. Aware that he was interrupting a prior conversation, he steps in silently and lowers his head.

“Dominus, I have news.”

“What is it?”

The dark-skinned slave then whispers the details into his master’s ears which cause him to be visibly displeased by the information.

“Again?” Patroclus exclaims angrily; his right eye twitching ever erratically. “That’s the fifth time this month! What’s the world coming to? Fine! Show me to him.”

Patroclus rises up from his cloud-like furniture and follows the ebony slave. He leads him to a smaller building where the grain is stored. Standing there were a small band of thirteen or so hired mercenaries with spears in hand. Accompanying them were a few Molossians, a peculiar type of dog with hybrid features between a mastiff and a hound. They were a common breed in these parts and were excellent for hunting. They all circled around a single slave who was bloodied, wounded, and tied to a wooden pole with rope. Patroclus looked annoyed.

“This the one?”

“Yes sir.” One mercenary explained. “He tried to escape last night. But the dogs caught him. We roughed him up a little before you arrived.”

Patroclus walks over to the captured slave and crouches

down. His golden jewelry and fine silk toga contrasted greatly with the bare and tarnished skin of his subject. The slave expresses a look of distress in lieu of his master's scornful gaze.

"They told me what you did, boy... You ran near clear all the way to the other side of that river. I'm hurt. Now why'd you go and do something like that?"

The slave begins to shed tears; unable to think coherently on account of his panic. He tries his best to formulate words.

"... I can't do this no more.... I can't take this work..."

Patroclus chuckles over this unsightly display and addresses him as he would a child.

"Aren't you people supposed to be bred for this? I spent a good amount on you. I got a business to run. How can I do that when my labor force keeps trying to run away? Hmm?"

"... I just want to go home..."

"This IS your home now, boy. You will serve me, as specified on your contract and to my satisfaction. Then, and ONLY then, can you go back to whatever dung hole you came from. But in the meantime, I will get my money's worth. You understand?"

The slave then begins to cry uncontrollably. His voice crackles; barely able to vocalize a coherent sentence.

"I just can't no more... I want to go home... My family... I need to go see them again... Please..."

Patroclus stands back up and sighs in disappointment. He looks down on the demoralized slave with cold eyes.

"You wound me. You know that? You wound me deeply. I can't very well have you dampening the morale of this place. So, what to do with you? What do do?..."

Patroclus looks around the area and ponders briefly on

the question. He looks at the simple wooden pole, the iron chains, and then back at the frightened face of his troublesome runaway. An idea soon comes to the surface. He smiles and addresses his mercenaries with delight.

“Marcus. You used to serve in the legions, correct?”

“Twenty years in the tenth. I campaigned all over th –”

“I don’t need all those details. What I’d like to know is if you can make one of those crucifix contraptions for me?”

Marcus is somewhat stunned by the question.

“... It would be a simple task...”

“Is that so? Even though they took away your abilities?”

“You don’t need Elysium to make ‘em.”

“Excellent! Do it.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. Build one for me and pin him to it. And make sure to place it high on a hill for all to see. This needs to be a warning to the others. A form of deterrence to any who would conceive of such foolishness again.”

As ordered, the former legionnaire-turned-mercenaries get to building a simple wooden structure in the shape of a cross. This method of capital punishment is frequently used throughout the region of Theia for criminals, traitors, and misbehaved slaves. It’s used even in the legions in order to reprimand deserters. Once constructed, the runaway slave is tied to the cross via rope. His wrists and feet are brutally hammered tight with iron nails.

He screamed from the excruciating pain. Finally, the cross was lifted and placed firmly into a dug-up hole. The force of gravity became a constant tormentor as the slave begged for the mercy of a quick end. He yells and screeches but receives no such relief. The cross, perched atop the tallest hill for all to see, sends a clear and sobering reminder to the

other slaves. They watch helplessly in horror. They know that, should they neglect their own duties, they too would end up like him.

And thus, they hastily pick up the pace of their labor so as to avoid such a cruel fate. The screams pierced through the air and could be heard over long distances; even as far as the neighboring farms. One mercenary grabs hold of a spear and readies his aim for a final strike. But Patroclus places his hands in front to cease the act.

“No! Let him savor this moment... Slowly...”

Hours would pass... Night befell this land bereft of light. Only the faintest shimmering of the moon offered insight into these darkened fields. In a small hut that was nothing more than a crudely made heap of clay and mud, the slaves are all bundled together in tightly compact rows. It was in this miserable space, exposed to the elements and each other’s filth, where they slept in diseased dwellings before starting the cycle all over again the next day. Meanwhile, their masters enjoyed the grotesque privilege of luxurious comforts within their gilded villa.

The crucified slave still hung high from the cross; bleeding and gasping for breath. He wore no clothes, for even his genitalia was bare and subject to the whims of nature. He had difficulty inhaling as his limbs were stretched beyond a reasonable limit. The wounds from his punctured wrists and feet were already developing an infection of sorts; the skin rotting, and the blood blackened. But perhaps the most terrible part of the experience was his thirst. As time went on, the agony persisted and increased in intensity. No longer did he have the strength to protest. The most he could manage was a silent whimper. He could feel himself slipping into the void. His time was almost at an end.

Nearby, a woman cloaked in silken white robes traverses across these profaned fields. The wind howled as the leaves danced with gentle gusts. She inched ever closely to the villa. So smooth was her gait that it appeared as though she was gliding through the field like some ghostly apparition. She looks around and sees a few mercenary guards patrolling the plantation; many with a lantern in hand and a pack of their loyal Molossian hounds. Their numbers have doubled to ensure that no more will attempt an escape.

In acknowledgment of their greater majority, the mysterious woman clad in white extended her hands. Lurking from within her clothing emerged several snakes of various shapes and sizes. They slithered down her legs and crawled away into the tall grass. The snakes then spread out to cover a wide area; each with a particular target in mind.

With their sensitive ears and keen sense of smell, the burly dogs barked as they perceived the incoming threat. But even this early warning system faltered as the snakes attack with unusual ferocity and coordination. They wrap around their victims and clamp their jaws down; sinking their fangs deeply into their flesh. It takes only a few minutes until all the mercenaries and their canine companions are eliminated. Afterwards, the vicious band of snakes collectively slither back to their mother; converging and crawling up the women's legs only to vanish under her garments. With a clear pathway secured, the woman makes her way towards the villa unopposed. But before she enters the building, she notices a slave tied to the cross atop a hill.

Making a slight detour, she approached the crucifix and gazed upon the poor man who clung to the final vestiges of life. Barely lucid, the man looks over to her. He couldn't tell

if what he saw was real or a blood-starved hallucination. But from his point of view, she seemed to be an angel of death sent by the gods to deliver him from his mortal coil.

With a quick swipe of the hands, several serpents shoot forth at the wooden cross with such force that it snapped it apart. Before the man could hit the ground, the snakes wrapped around him; holding him in still and carefully placing him on the soft soil only to retreat back into the woman's cloak. Seeing just how injured he was, the woman gently places her hands on the man's cleaved skin. At the point of contact, a radiant golden light begins to emanate from her palms. Before he knew it, the pain soon subsided, and his wounds vanished. Suddenly, he could breathe and speak clearly again. After a few more moments, he was completely recovered. She then stood back up; her features well-hidden beneath her pristine and shadowy cloak.

The slave was both happy and bewildered. Why did she help him? Where did she come from? Why?

"Who... Who are you?"

"I am no one." She responded unemotionally. "I am but the instrument of your salvation. Now go to the others. Tell them that they are no longer bound by the imperium. I will not be far behind."

"But the Dominus... He would never allow such things. Were he to discover what transpired... He'd..."

"There is no need to worry." She encouraged. "For soon, he will depart from this world. He and the rest of his ilk."

Inside the countryside estate, Patroclus and his family are busy enjoying a ravishing array of delectable dishes. They are served their meals on beautifully rendered plates

while other slaves play riveting music on harps and lyres. The woman clad in white peeks through the window shutters and studies the room. As she lifts up the shutters, a gust of wind seeps through the house and extinguishes all the flames of candlelight. Darkness enveloped the scene and startled the residents.

“What’s going on?”

“Calm, woman. It is only the wind.”

But as Patroclus reignites a torch to relight the room, he and the others are spooked by the sudden appearance of a serpentine stranger. Before they can act, she summons a plethora of snakes that wrap around and restrict their movements. Even the slaves are unceremoniously detained.

“Who are you?! What do you want?!?”

The woman cloaked in white does not respond. She simply stands in place with a smile. She lifts her hands; signaling for the snakes to release their grip. They then slithered back to her but remained on the floor; their heads, hissing tongues, and deadly fangs aimed towards the affrighted patricians. Patroclus and his family huddled together as their slaves stood in front to protect them.

“Mama... I’m scared...”

“Not to worry, darling. All will be well.”

“Stay back you fiend!” Patroclus threatens. “I am warning you. Guards!!! GUARD!!!!”

“No one is coming...” A voice whispers.

From the dark recesses of the poorly lit room, a strange stygian figure emerges. This individual was covered in a blackened cloak with a hood. His face bore a golden theatre mask to hide his identity. He stood next to the woman clad in white and tilted his gaze upon the distraught landowner.

“Patroclus Priamus. It is an honor to see you again.”

“Whatever you want, just name it!” The patrician woefully begs. “I have money! Gold! Jewels! Anything your heart desires. Just say the word and it shall be so!!!”

The masked man looks to his begging with amusement. “To the very end, vanity defines you.”

Patroclus notices the plethora of snakes staring back at him with murderous intent. He sees how they obey the commands of the strange woman; spurring him to sweat profusely. He then addresses the man with the golden mask.

“She’s the *one*? The monster who has been hunting us down? The snakes are proof... Although, I did not consider that there would be a *second* accomplice.”

“My apologies.” The masked man says. “It is rude of me to hide behind this abhorrent visage. You never know who may be watching. Perhaps this will help to enlighten you.”

The cloaked man then slowly removes his lustrous mask. The reveal of his true self was enough to send Patroclus into fervent shock. His family took notice.

“... You... But you’re supposed to be...”

“It is nothing personal, I assure you. Your death is simply a means to an end. Your absence opens a window for me and my allies. I am truly sorry.”

A deep pit of rage bubbled beneath the surface as Patroclus contorts his face with regretful fury.

“You will not get away with this! Once the senate and the people find out the truth, the legions will descend upon you! And when they do, you shall -”

In an instant, a bright white flash erupts inside of the room. But for Patroclus and his family, all faded to black...