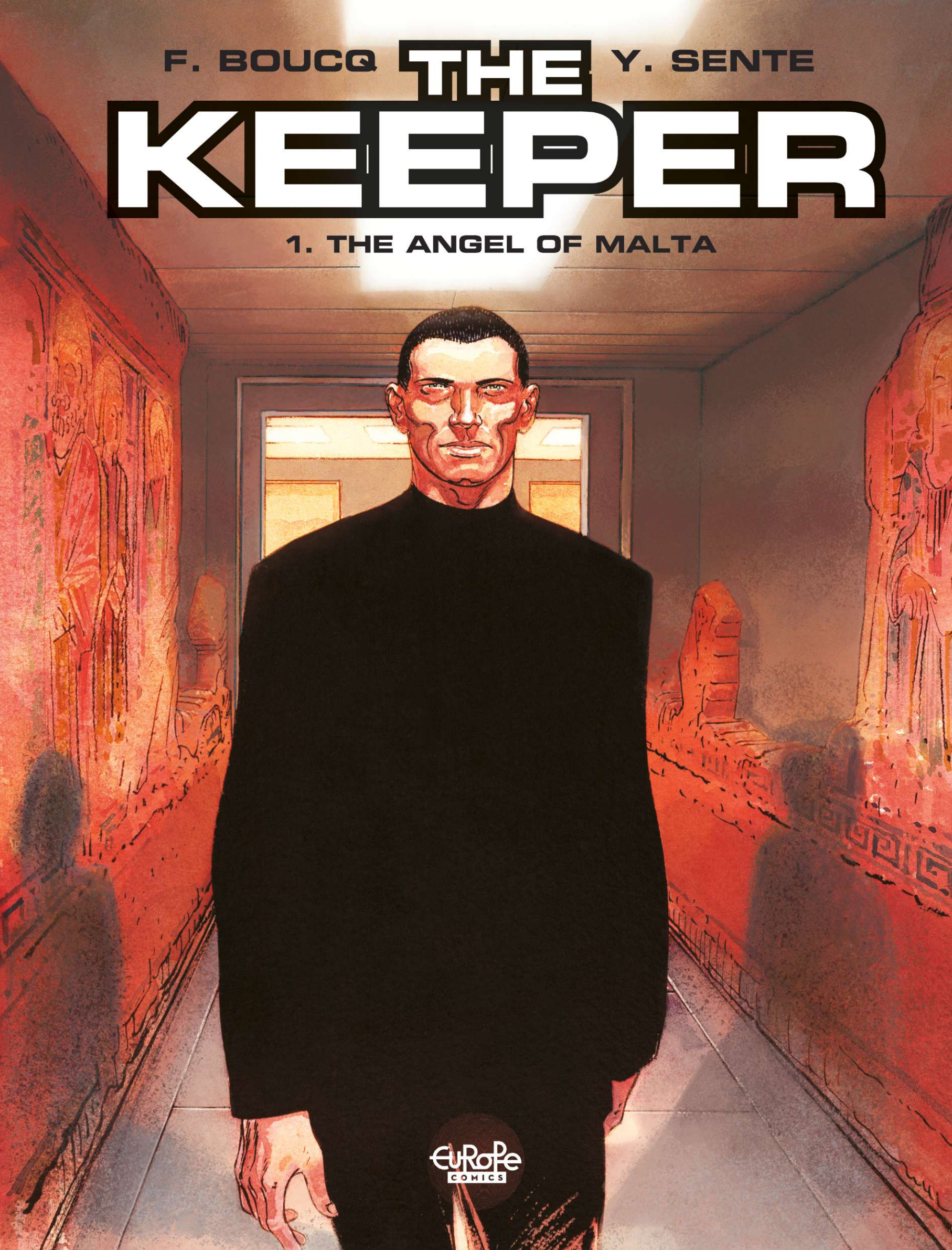


F. BOUCQ THE Y. SENTE

KEEPER

1. THE ANGEL OF MALTA



euRoPe
COMICS

F. BOUCQ **THE** Y. SENTE
KEEPER

1. THE ANGEL OF MALTA

Colorist:
Sébastien GÉRARD



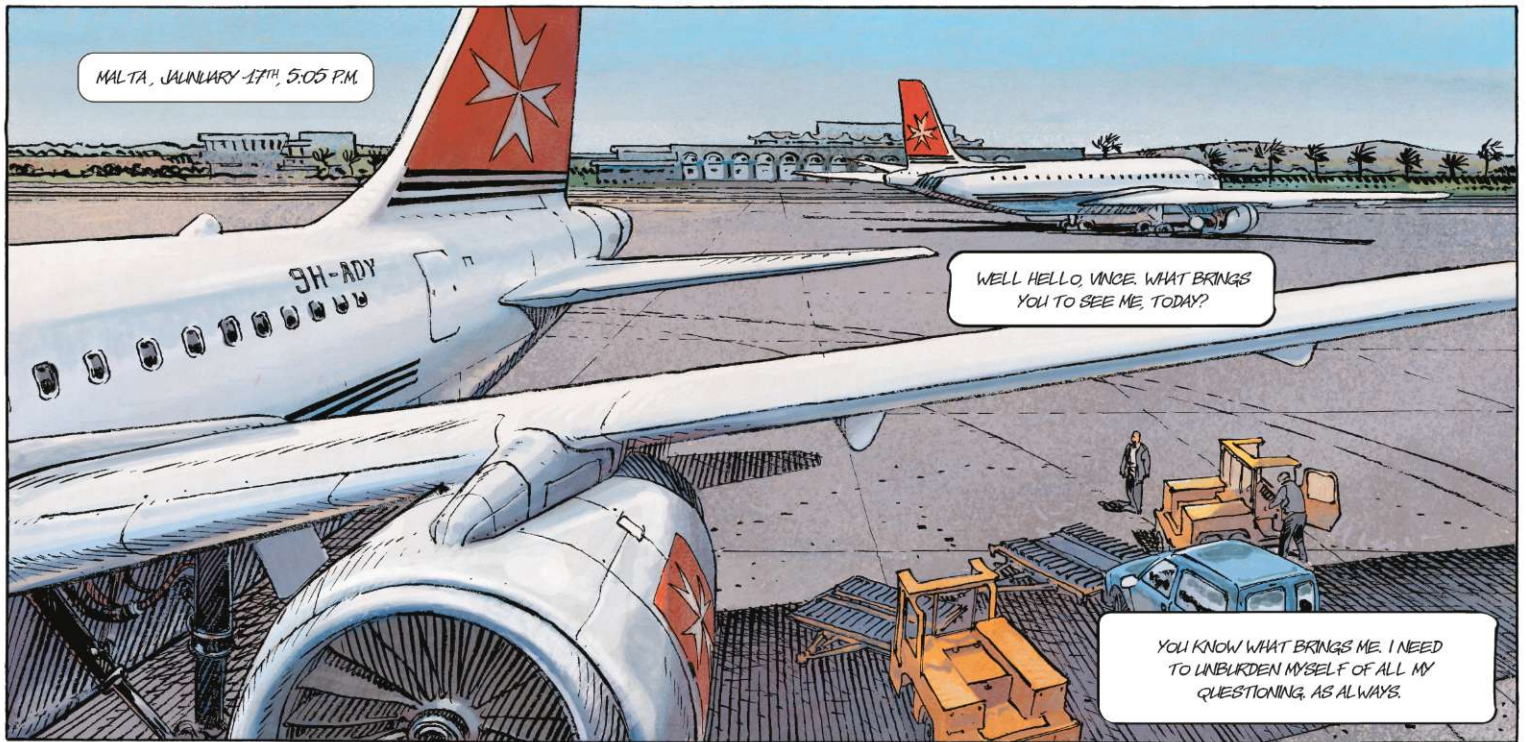
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MALTA, JANUARY 17TH, 5:05 P.M.

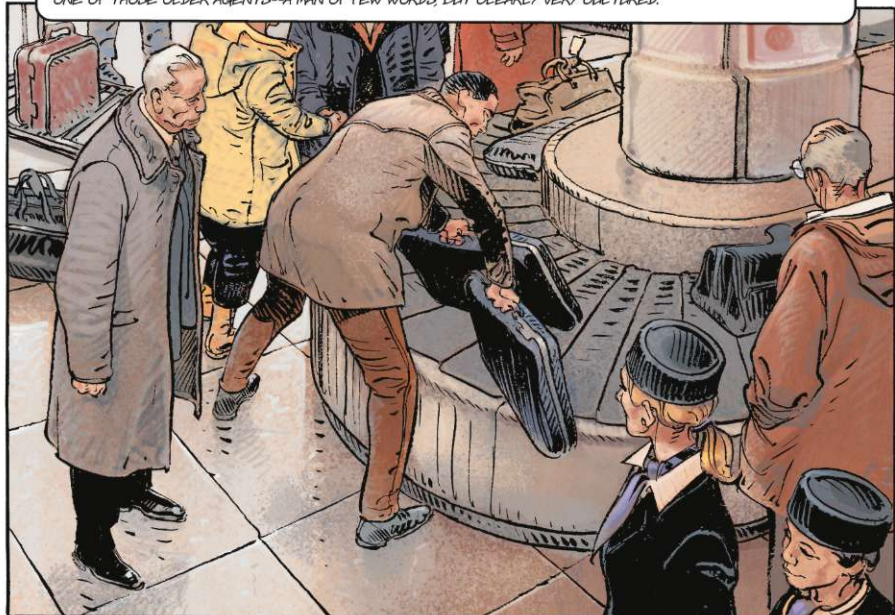
WELL HELLO, VINCE. WHAT BRINGS YOU TO SEE ME, TODAY?

YOU KNOW WHAT BRINGS ME. I NEED TO UNBURDEN MYSELF OF ALL MY QUESTIONING, AS ALWAYS.

YOU'VE JUST FINISHED AN ASSIGNMENT, I BELIEVE. WHY DON'T YOU START BY TELLING ME HOW IT WENT? GIVE ME ALL THE DETAILS.

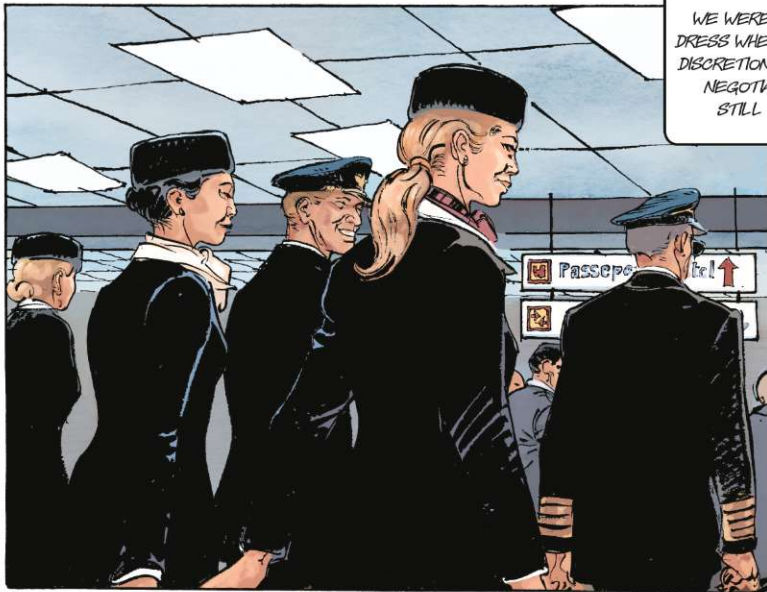


ALL RIGHT. LAST WEEK MY SUPERIORS SENT ME TO MALTA TO WATCH OVER ONE OF THEIR NEGOTIATORS, ONE OF THOSE OLDER AGENTS--A MAN OF FEW WORDS, BUT CLEARLY VERY CULTURED.



IT WAS A ROUTINE MISSION, SO I FELT FAIRLY RELAXED, MAYBE A BIT TOO RELAXED, AS IT TURNS OUT.





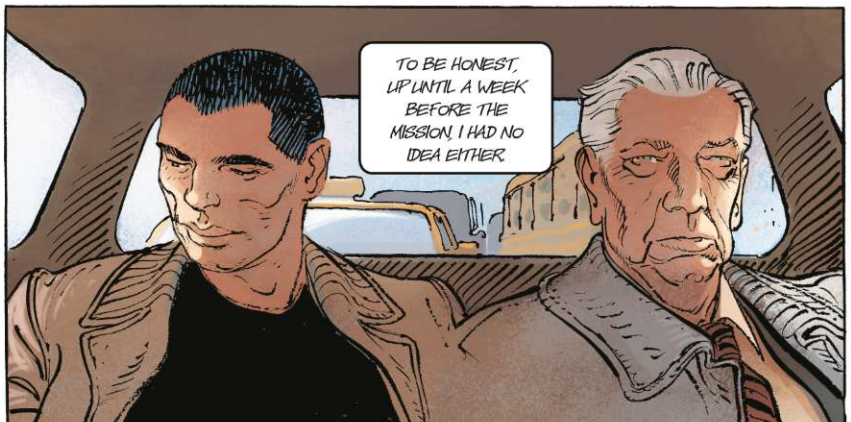
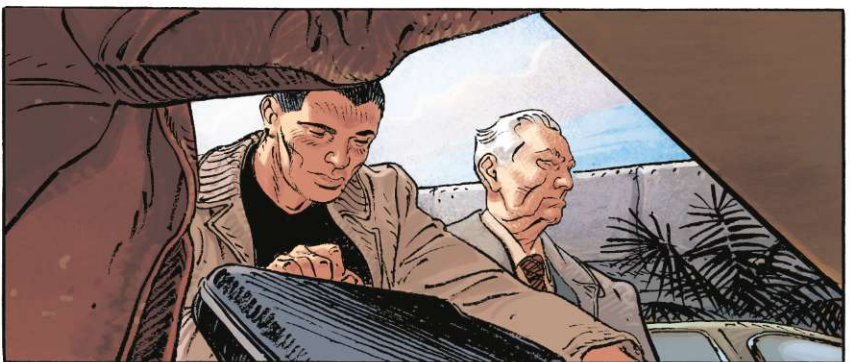
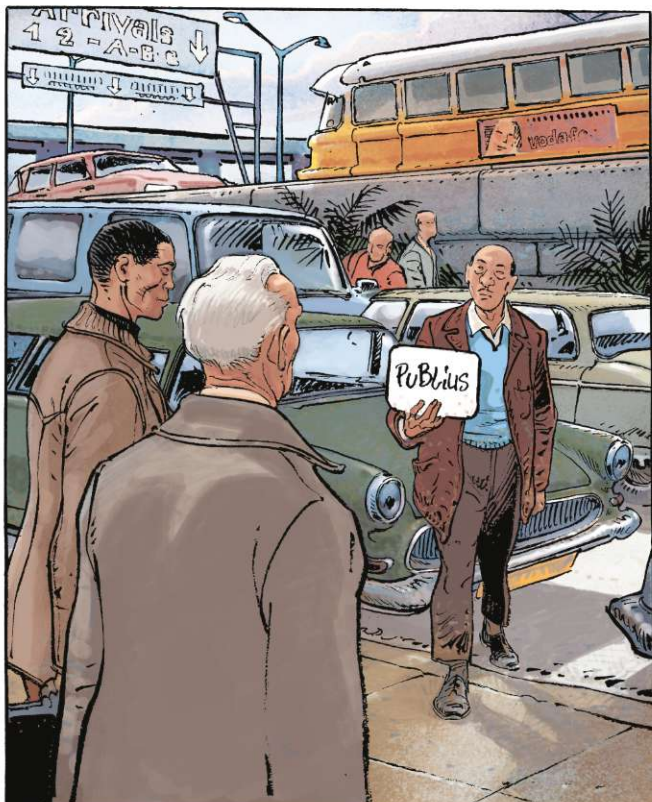
WE WERE IN "OMILIAN" DRESS WHEN WE ARRIVED. DISCRETION IS KEY WHILE NEGOTIATIONS ARE STILL ONGOING.



WELL? WHERE IS HE? THEY TOLD US HE WOULD--

NO WORRIES. HE'S OVER THERE.

THE DRIVER THEY SENT MOST LIKELY HAD NO IDEA WHO THE HISTORIC FIGURE WAS WHOSE NAME HE WAS HOLDING UP.



TO BE HONEST, UP UNTIL A WEEK BEFORE THE MISSION, I HAD NO IDEA EITHER.

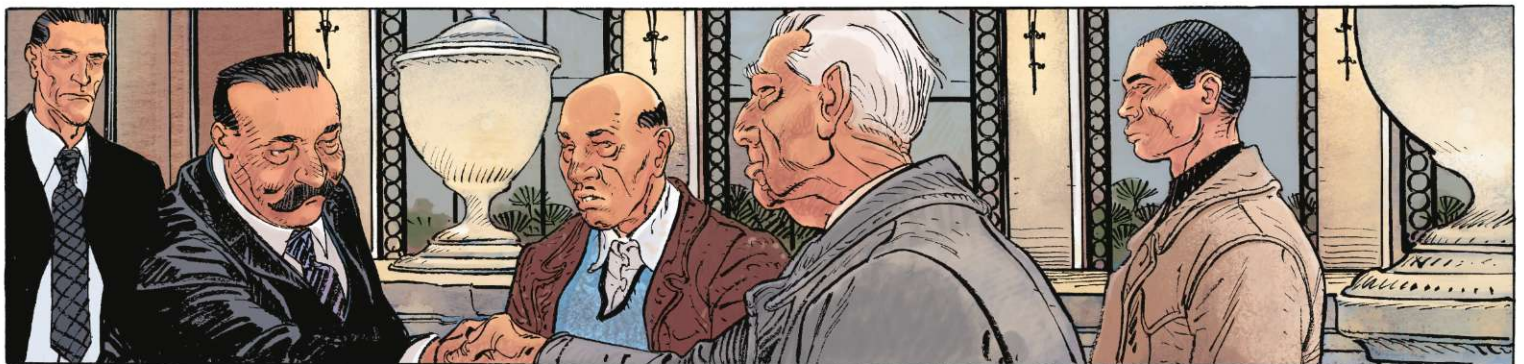


MY CONTACTS HAD CHOSEN A LUXURY HOTEL AWAY FROM DOWNTOWN FOR OUR FIRST MEETING.



SINCE THEY HAD RESERVED ROOMS FOR US THERE, IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME TO QUESTION THEIR CHOICE. I'VE NEVER OBJECTED TO A FEW CREATURE COMFORTS EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE.

ANYWAY, OUR MAIN HOST ARRANGED FOR A MEETING THAT SAME EVENING, AND FOR A CAR TO COME FOR US AT NIGHTFALL. NOTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY.



BEFORE HE LEFT, HE GAVE US AN ENVELOPE WITH THE OTHER PHOTOS IN IT. EVERYTHING WAS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN. THE SELLERS SEEMED LEGIT.



I COULD SEE IN THEIR EYES THAT THEY WERE THE REAL DEAL. THAT'S ALWAYS KEY.



WELL, THAT DOESN'T LEAVE US MUCH TIME TO RELAX. I'M GOING TO MY ROOM.

I PREFER TO RELAX WITH AN ESPRESSO AT THE BAR. I'LL WAIT FOR YOU THERE.



THE BARS OF BIG INTERNATIONAL HOTELS ARE ALWAYS GREAT PLACES FOR PEOPLE WATCHING AND INTERESTING ENCOUNTERS...



AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER OUR "GUIDE" CAME TO PICK US UP IN A RENTAL CAR. NIGHT WAS FALLING. EVERYTHING WAS CALM...



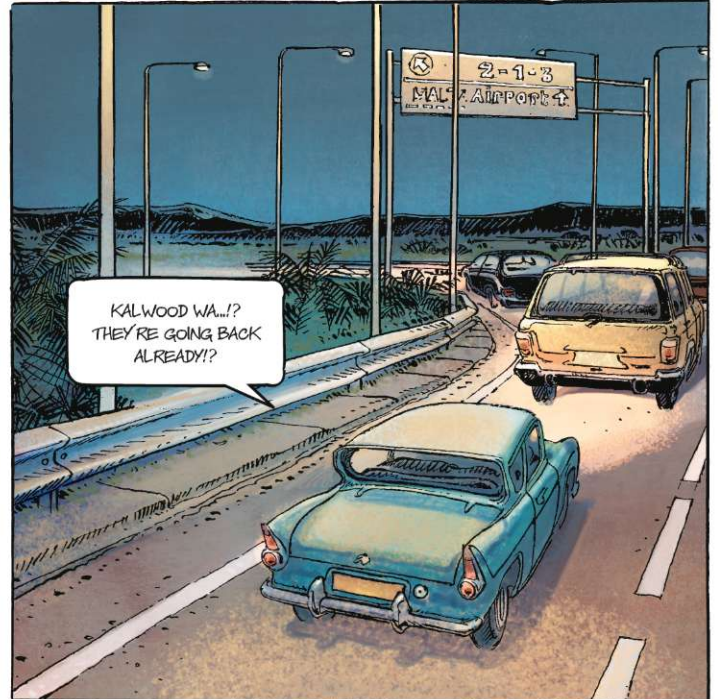
GOOD THING WE FOLLOWED THEM. I BET THOSE TWO GUYS ARE THE OTHER CLIENTS THEY DECIDED TO SELL TO.

LH-HUH.

MALTA IS A PRETTY UNUSUAL PLACE, YOU KNOW. THE ISLAND REALLY IS AT THE CROSSROADS OF EUROPEAN AND ARAB CULTURE, WHICH MAKES FOR AN INTERESTING COMBINATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY.



I WONDER WHERE THEY DECIDED TO MAKE THE TRADE.



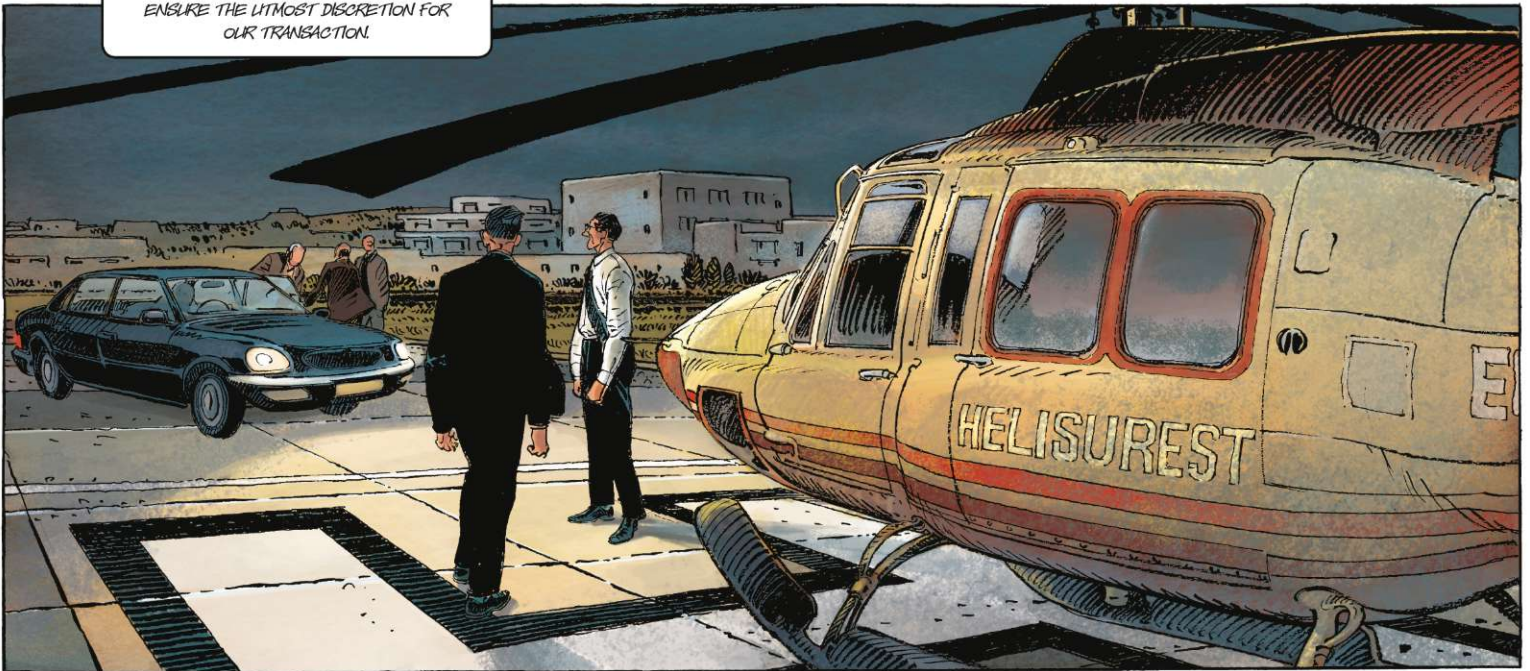
KALWOOD WA...!? THEY'RE GOING BACK ALREADY!?



NO, YOU IDIOT! THEY WOULDN'T HAVE LEFT THEIR BAGS AT THE HOTEL. I DON'T GET WHAT THEY'RE--AH! OF COURSE! THE HELIPORT!



OUR CONTACT HAD DECIDED TO TAKE US TO THE RENDEZVOUS BY CHOPPER TO ENSURE THE UTMOST DISCRETION FOR OUR TRANSACTION.

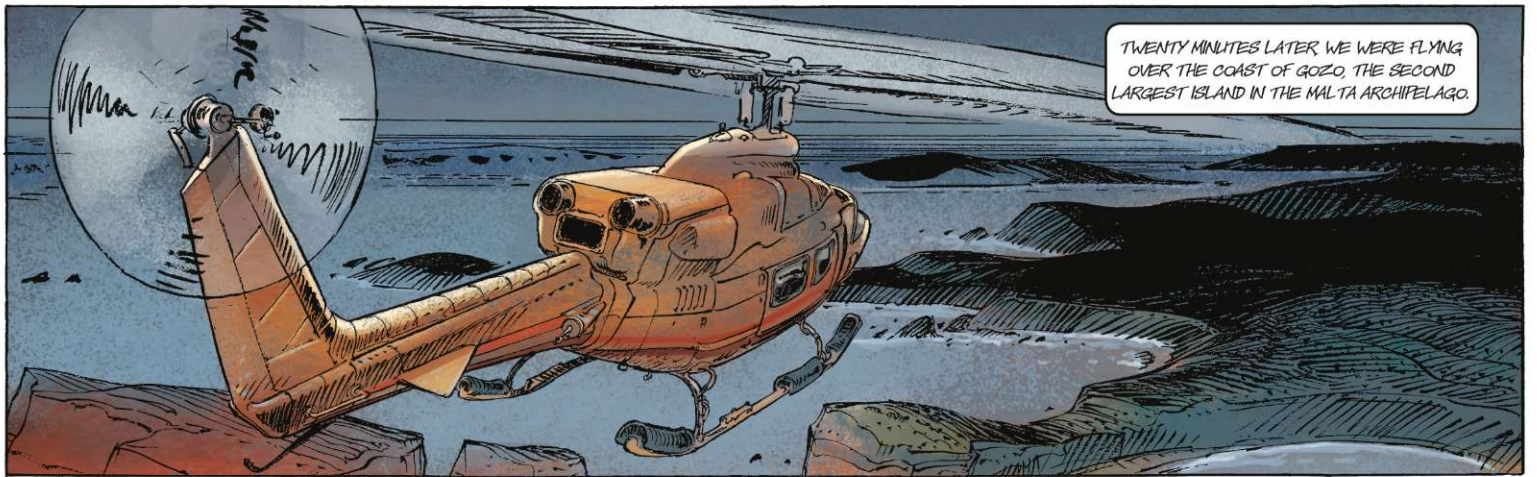


I DIDN'T LIKE THIS VERY MUCH, BUT WE HAD NO CHOICE. I COULD SENSE THAT MY PROTÉGÉ WAS A TAD NERVOUS AT TAKE-OFF, BUT HE MANAGED TO HIDE IT PRETTY WELL.



THEY'RE OFF. NOW ALL WE DO IS PARK OUR ASSES IN THE CAR AND WAIT FOR THEM TO COME BACK WITH THE PACKAGE.

IT REALLY IS A SHAME. THEY REJECT OUR OFFER AND SO FORCE US TO STEAL FROM OTHERS.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER WE WERE FLYING OVER THE COAST OF GOZO, THE SECOND LARGEST ISLAND IN THE MALTA ARCHIPELAGO.



WE LANDED AT THE FOOT OF THE FAMOUS GGANTJA TEMPLES.

THE WELCOME COMMITTEE INVITED US TO FOLLOW THEM THROUGH THE 5000-YEAR-OLD PORTICOS AND THEN TOOK US TO A ROOM UNDERGROUND.



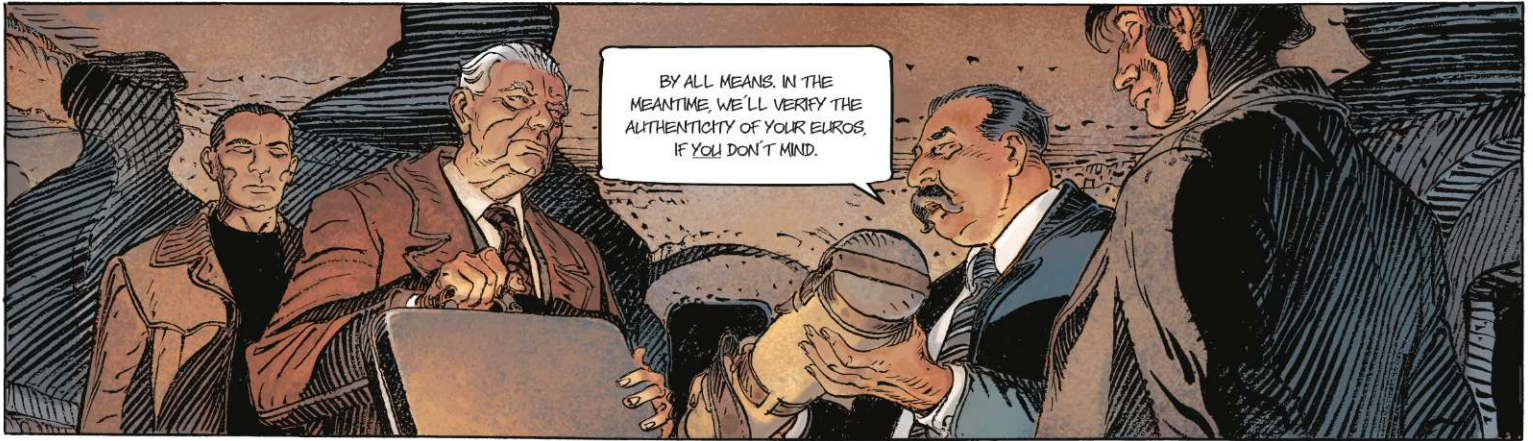
WELCOME TO GOZO, GENTLEMEN YOU'RE SENT FROM ABOVE... NO PLAN INTENDED! HEHN! HEHN! HEHN!



COME IN, DEAR CLIENTS, COME IN! I'M THRILLED TO SEE THAT OUR PHOTOS HAVE MANAGED TO CONVINCE YOU OF THE VALUE OF OUR DISCOVERY.



WE NEVERTHELESS NEED TO VERIFY ITS AUTHENTICITY, IF YOU DON'T MIND.



BY ALL MEANS. IN THE MEANTIME, WE'LL VERIFY THE AUTHENTICITY OF YOUR EUROS. IF YOU DON'T MIND.



YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO TRUST ANYONE, THESE DAYS. EVEN YOUR OWN PEOPLE. IT'S A SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS.



NOT TO WORRY. THE AUTHENTICATION WILL BE QUICK AND EASY.

YOU WON'T BE DISAPPOINTED.



GOOD LORD! SO IT'S TRUE...

THE FINDINGS OF THEIR EXCAVATION APPARENTLY BEING AS AUTHENTIC AS OUR EUROS, WE PRETTY QUICKLY TOOK LEAVE OF OUR "CLIENTS" TO RETURN TO MALTA.

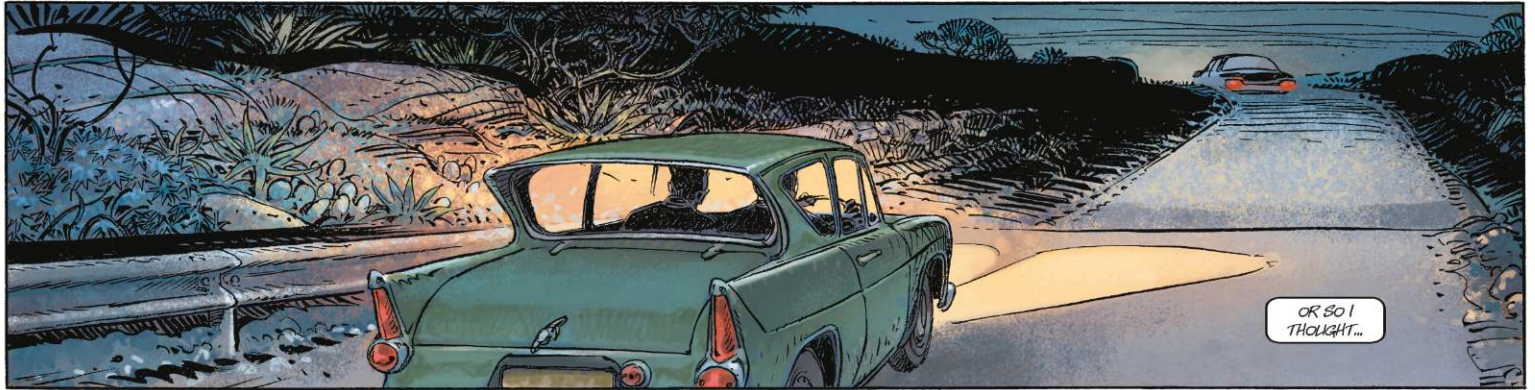


YO! WAKE UP! THEY'RE BACK.

WE CAN'T LOSE THEM, GO!

WE WERE TO USE THE RENTAL CAR OUR GUIDE LEFT BEHIND TO GET BACK TO THE HOTEL BY 11 P.M. THE MISSION HAD GONE OFF WITHOUT A HITCH.





OR SO I THOUGHT...

AFTER ABOUT TEN MINUTES, I WAS SURE OF IT: WE WERE BEING FOLLOWED. AND AT THAT TIME, WE COULDN'T EXACTLY TRY TO BLEND IN WITH THE TRAFFIC.



IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE'S TRYING TO GET THAT DOCUMENT FROM US. HOLD ON, I'M GOING TO TAKE THE NEXT SIDE ROAD JUST TO MAKE SURE.



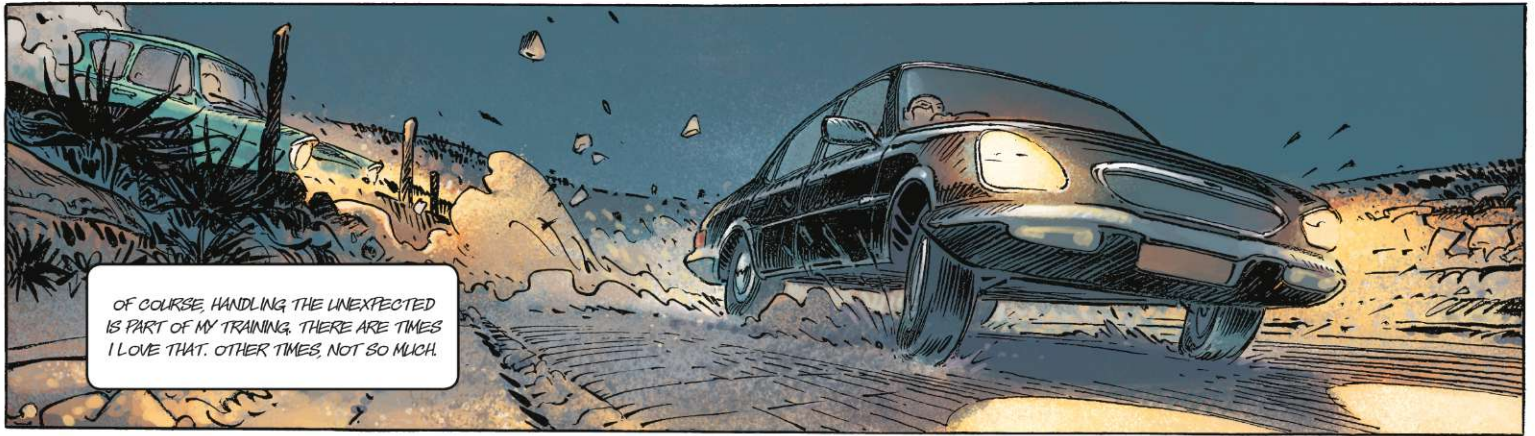
FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, SON, BE CAREFUL! THAT CAR MIGHT JUST BE--



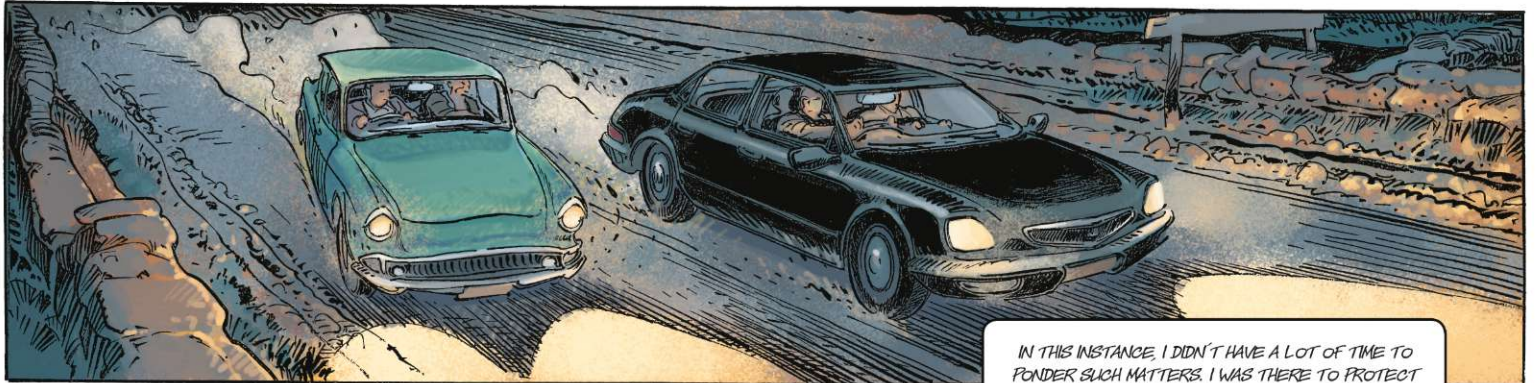
PUT IT IN REVERSE, YOU IDIOT! FASTER! CAN'T YOU SEE THEY'VE SPOTTED US?



NO TIME FOR DILLY-DALLYING.. SHOW US WHAT THIS OLD WRECK'S GOT UNDER THE HOOD.



OF COURSE, HANDLING THE UNEXPECTED IS PART OF MY TRAINING. THERE ARE TIMES I LOVE THAT. OTHER TIMES, NOT SO MUCH.



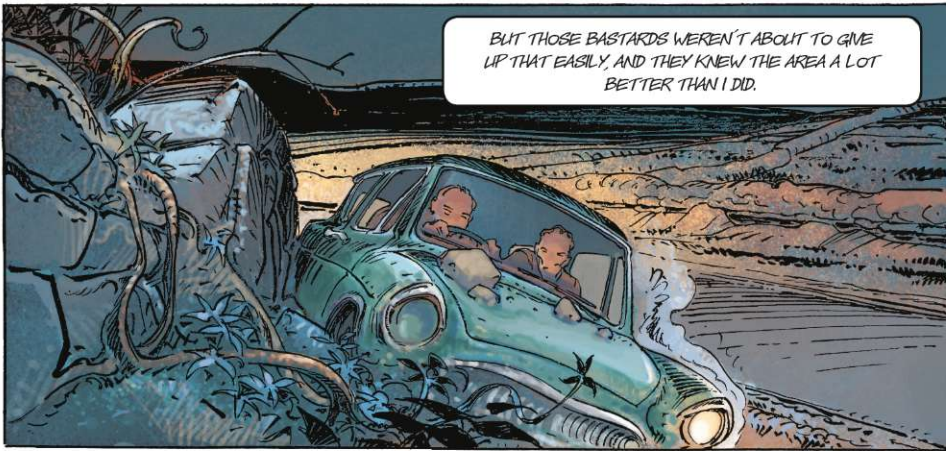
IN THIS INSTANCE, I DIDN'T HAVE A LOT OF TIME TO PONDER SUCH MATTERS. I WAS THERE TO PROTECT THE MAN SITTING NEXT TO ME, WHILE A STRANGER WAS POINTING A GUN TO MY HEAD.



I COULDN'T THINK OF A BETTER TIME TO APPLY THE POPULAR OLD THEORY ABOUT THE BEST DEFENSE BEING... OFFENSE! A SHARP TURN OF THE WHEEL AND--



LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE STUCK NICELY DONE, SON!



BUT THOSE BASTARDS WEREN'T ABOUT TO GIVE UP THAT EASILY, AND THEY KNEW THE AREA A LOT BETTER THAN I DID.

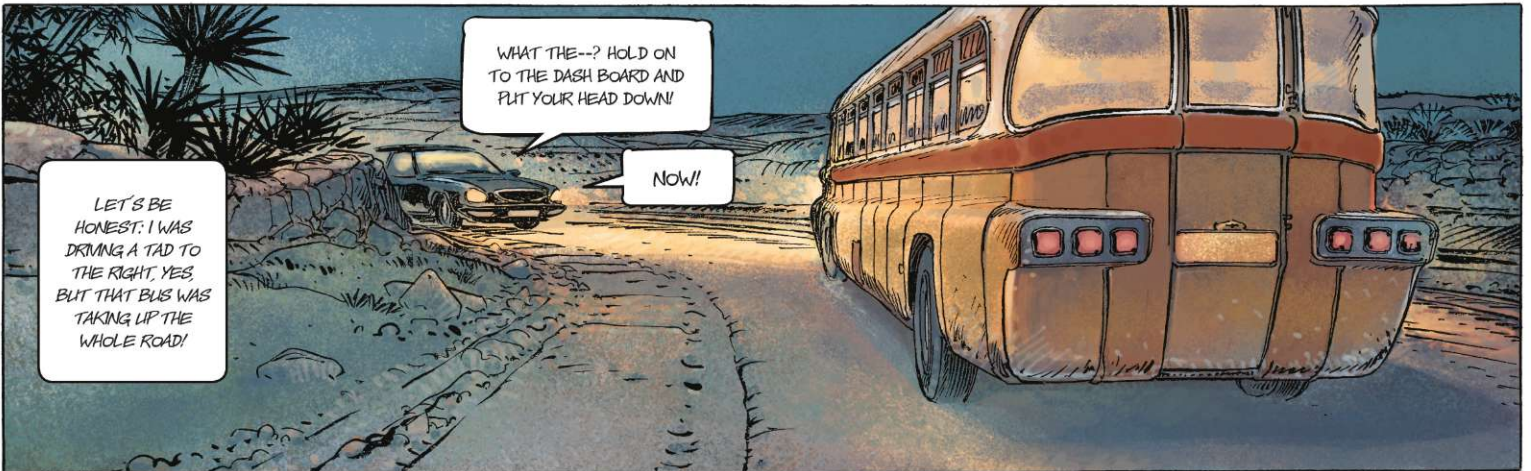


YOU IDIOT! YOU HANDLE YOUR GOAT'S HIND LEGS BETTER THAN YOU HANDLE THAT WHEEL! STEP ON IT!



DON'T WORRY. I HAVE EVERY INTENTION OF BRINGING US BACK TO ROME IN ONE PIECE!

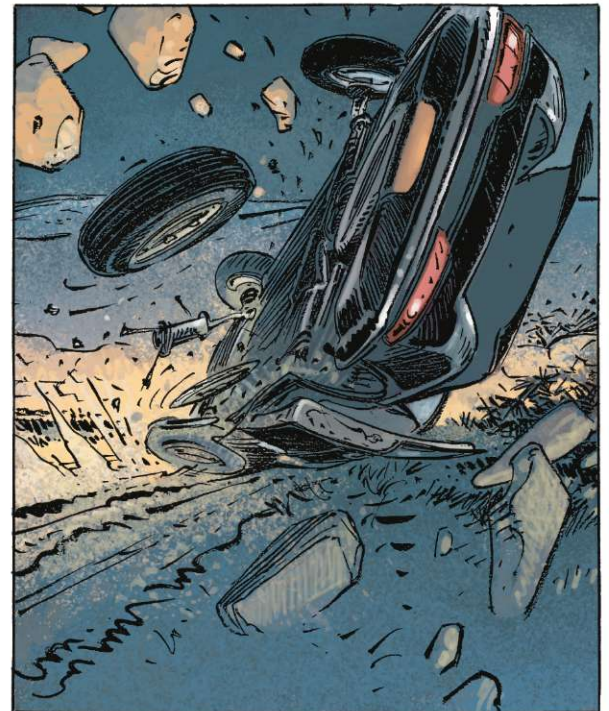
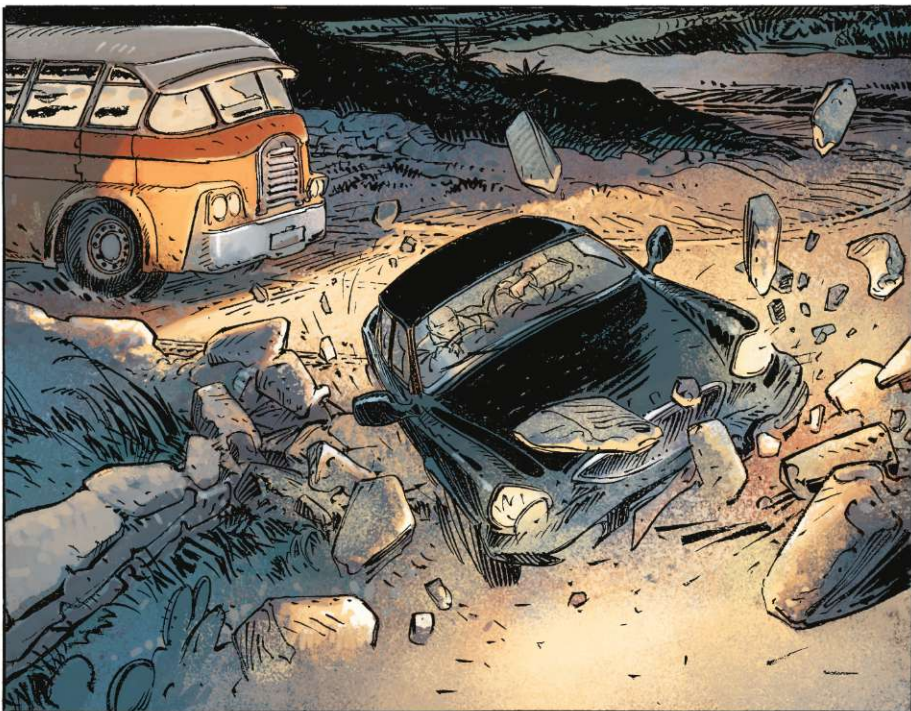
THIS CAR IS FASTER THAN THEIRS. WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO--



WHAT THE--? HOLD ON TO THE DASH BOARD AND FLIT YOUR HEAD DOWN!

NOW!

LET'S BE HONEST: I WAS DRIVING A TAD TO THE RIGHT, YES, BUT THAT BUS WAS TAKING UP THE WHOLE ROAD!





LOOK!
THE IDIOTS CRASHED!
STOP!



IT'S EMPTY!!
NO BODIES ON THE
ROAD... WHERE THE
HELL DID THEY GO?!



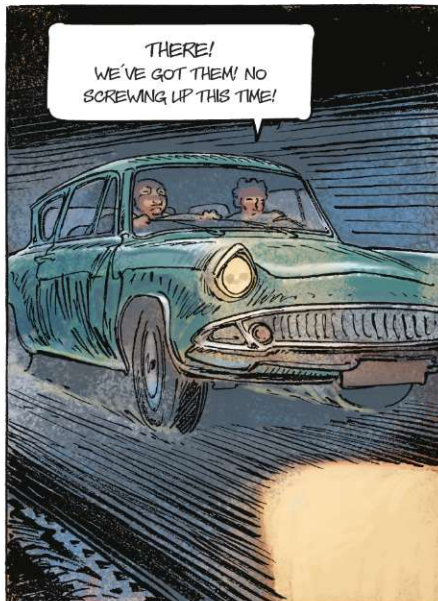
THAT BUS THAT JUST
WENT BY. LOOK YOU
CAN STILL SEE THE
TAIL LIGHTS.



FROM GROWING UP IN THE U.S., I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF DRIVING A NICE BIG YELLOW BUS, JUST LIKE THE ONE I USED TO TAKE TO SCHOOL.



PREPARE TO GET OUT
AS SOON AS I PULL OVER
AND I ADVISE YOU TO DO
WHAT MY FRIEND SAYS.
HE'S A REAL TOUGH GUY.

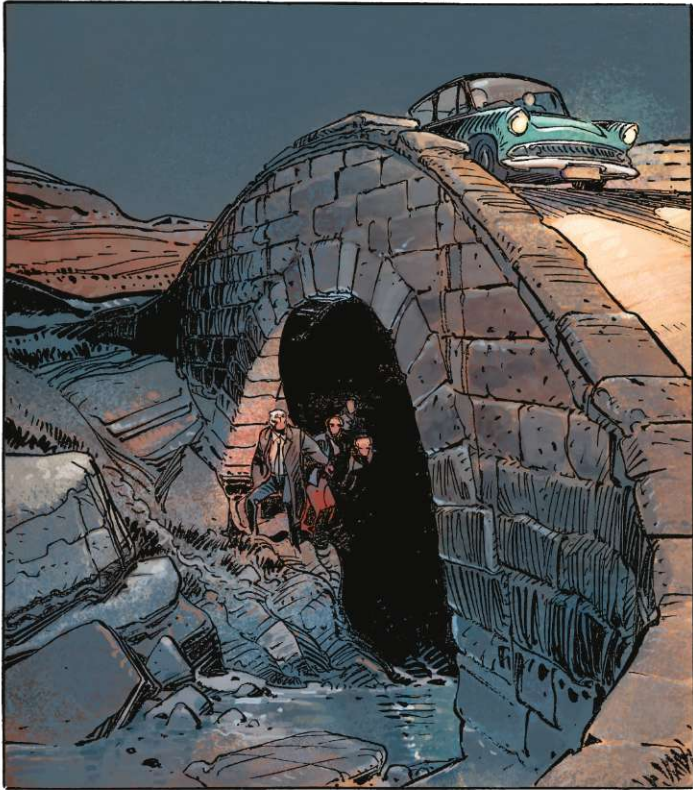


THERE!
WE'VE GOT THEM! NO
SCREWING UP THIS TIME!



AND... AND YOU,
SON?

I'LL SEE YOU
BACK AT THE HOTEL
TOMORROW MORNING,
AND DON'T WORRY.
I REALLY AM A
"TOUGH GUY."



THEY'RE NOT STOPPING, OKAY, YOU CAN COME OUT.



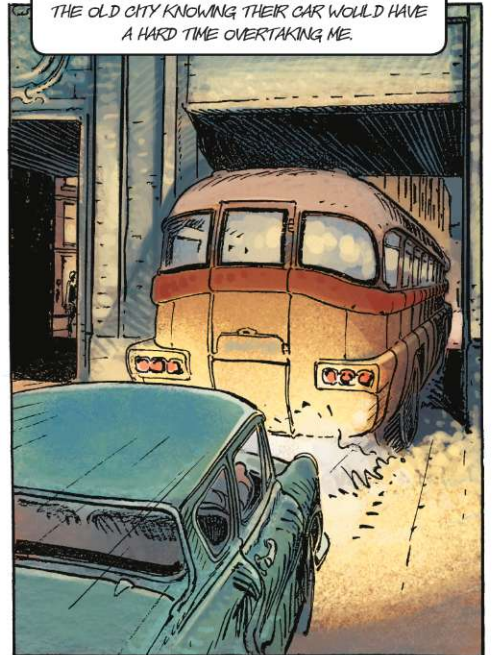
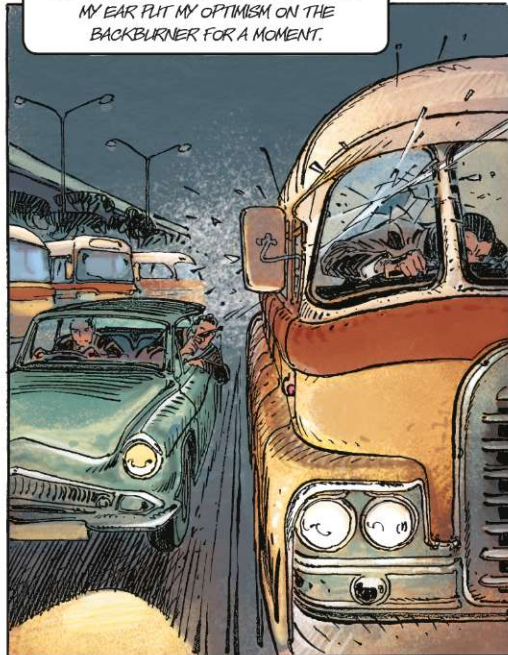
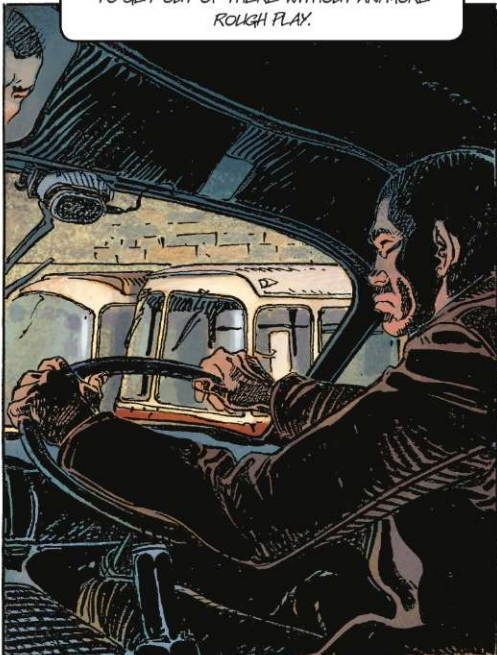
I AM DEEPLY SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE, BUT IT WAS TRULY A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH... BOTH YOURS AND MINE, I SHOULD ADD.



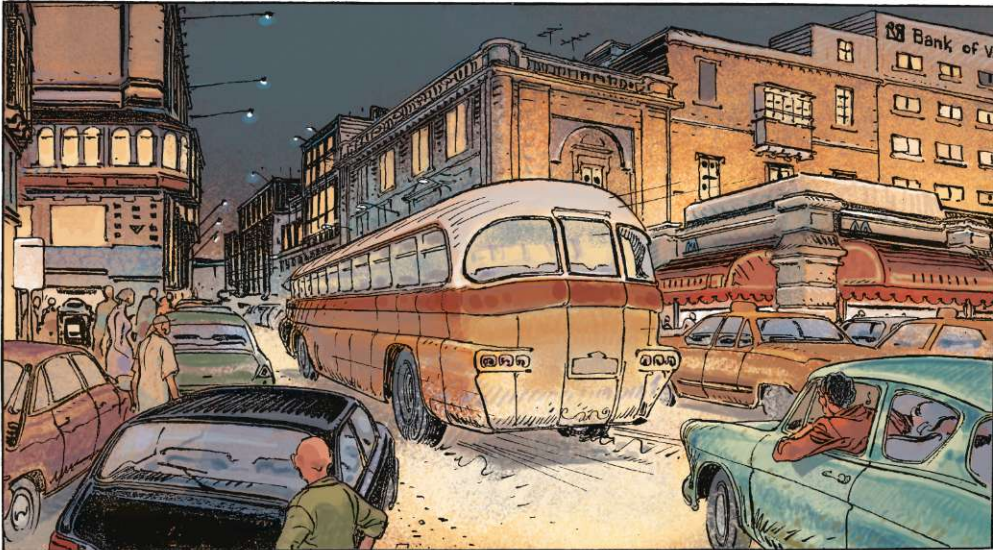
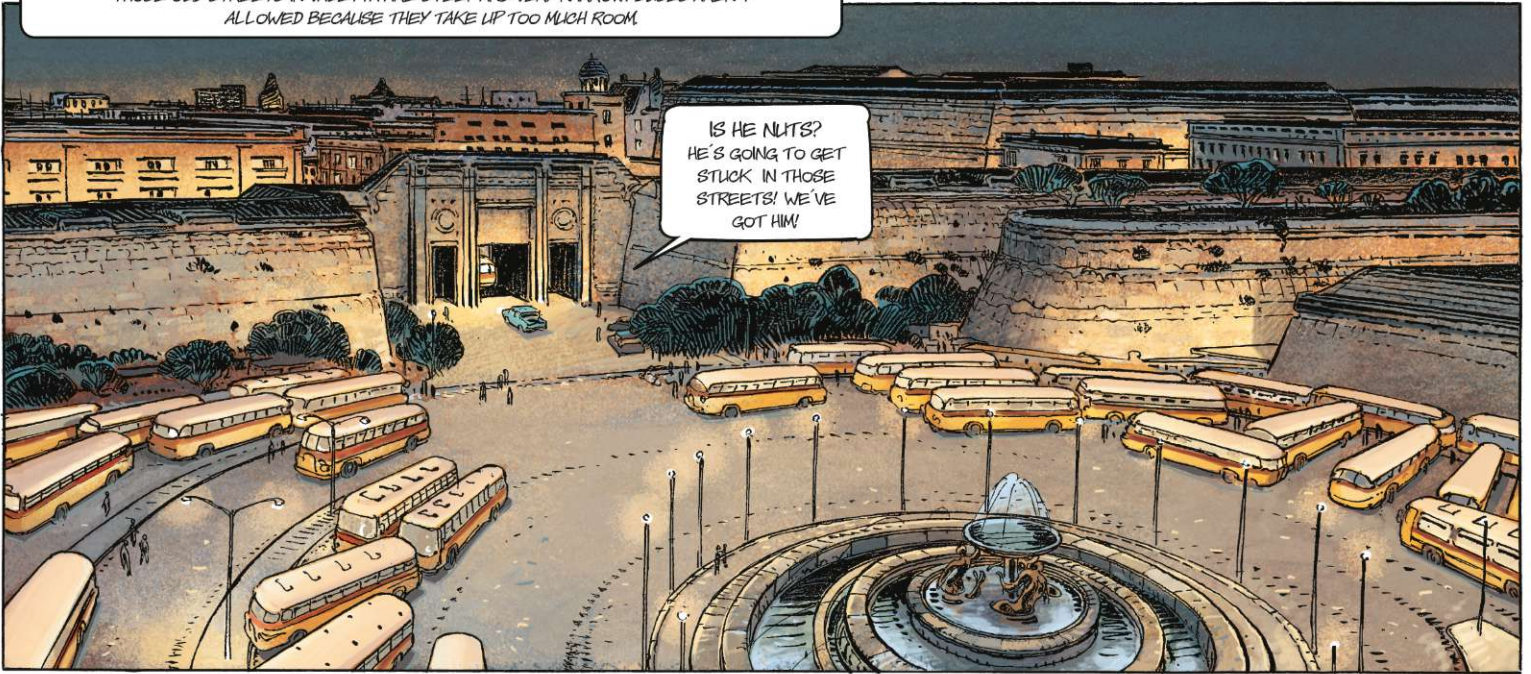
AS I PULLED INTO THE VALETTA BUS STATION, I STARTED TO THINK THAT MAYBE I WAS GOING TO GET OUT OF THERE WITHOUT ANYMORE ROUGH PLAY.

THE BULLET THAT CRASHED THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD AND NEARLY TOOK OFF MY EAR PLT MY OPTIMISM ON THE BACKBURNER FOR A MOMENT.

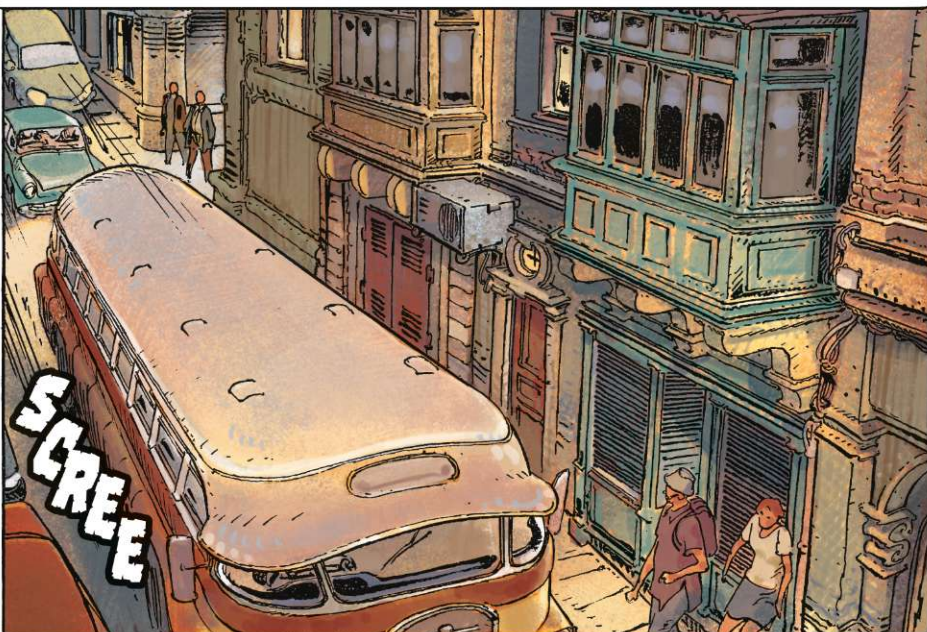
THOSE WHACK JOBS WEREN'T EXACTLY LEAVING ME ANY CHOICE. I CHARGED THROUGH THE OLD CITY KNOWING THEIR CAR WOULD HAVE A HARD TIME OVERTAKING ME.



THOSE OLD STREETS IN VALETTA ARE STEEP AND VERY NARROW. BUSES AREN'T ALLOWED BECAUSE THEY TAKE UP TOO MUCH ROOM.

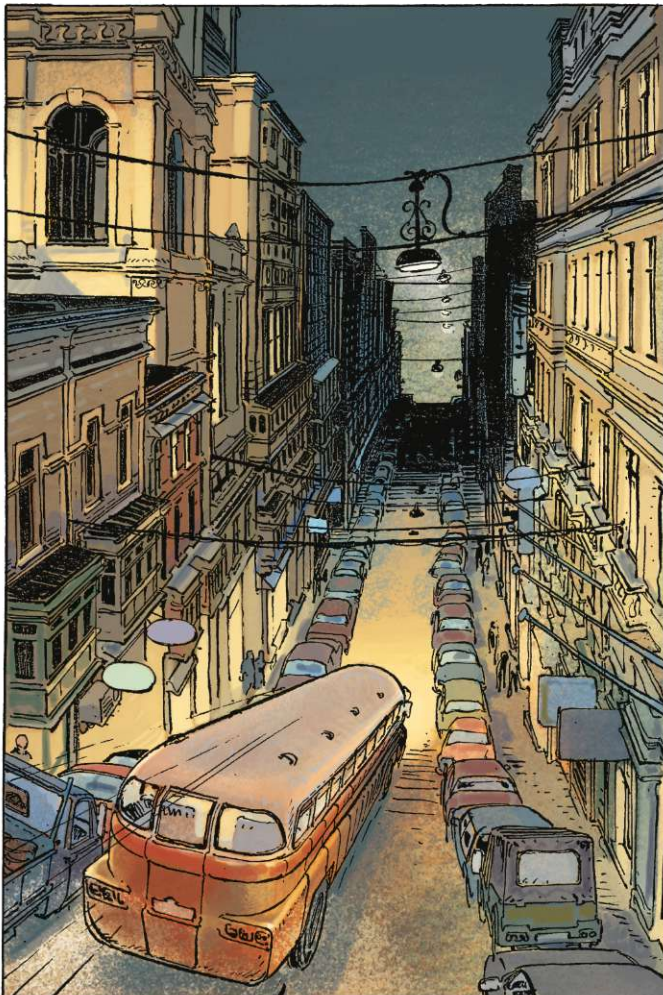
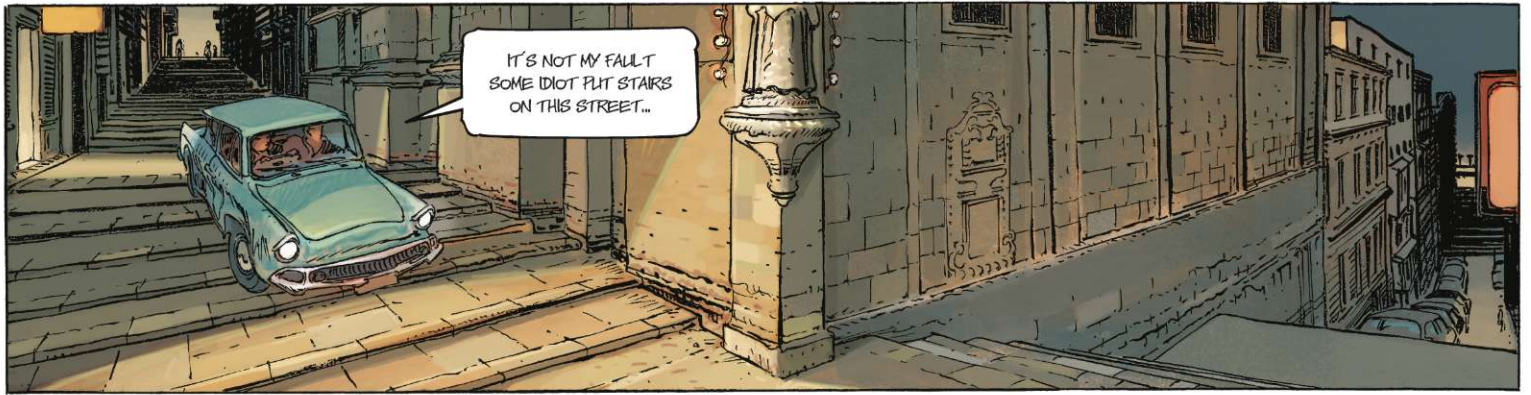


THE RULES OF MY PROFESSION ARE SIMPLE. I HAVE LICENSE TO KILL BAD GUYS WHEN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.



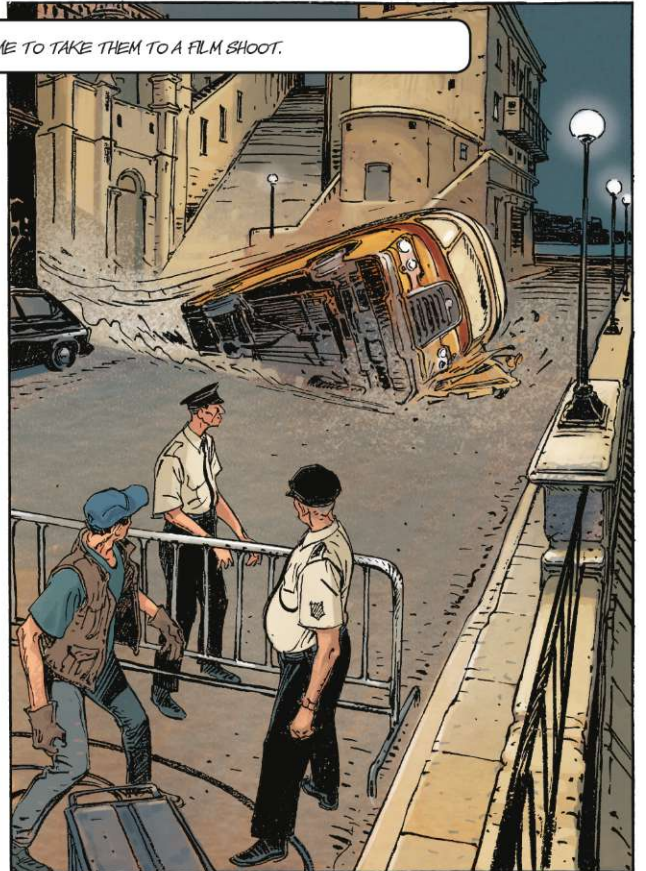
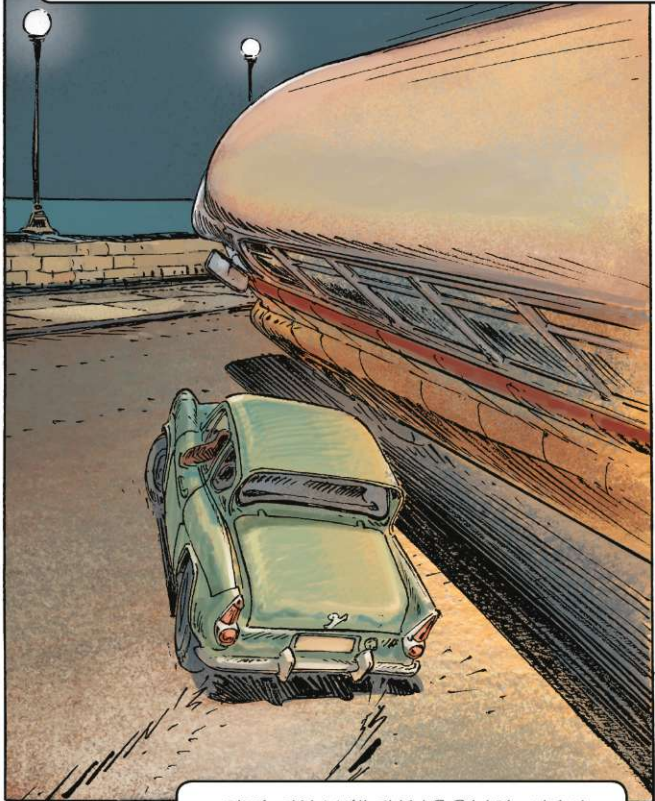
BUT SACRIFICING INNOCENT SOULS IS OUT OF THE QUESTION.



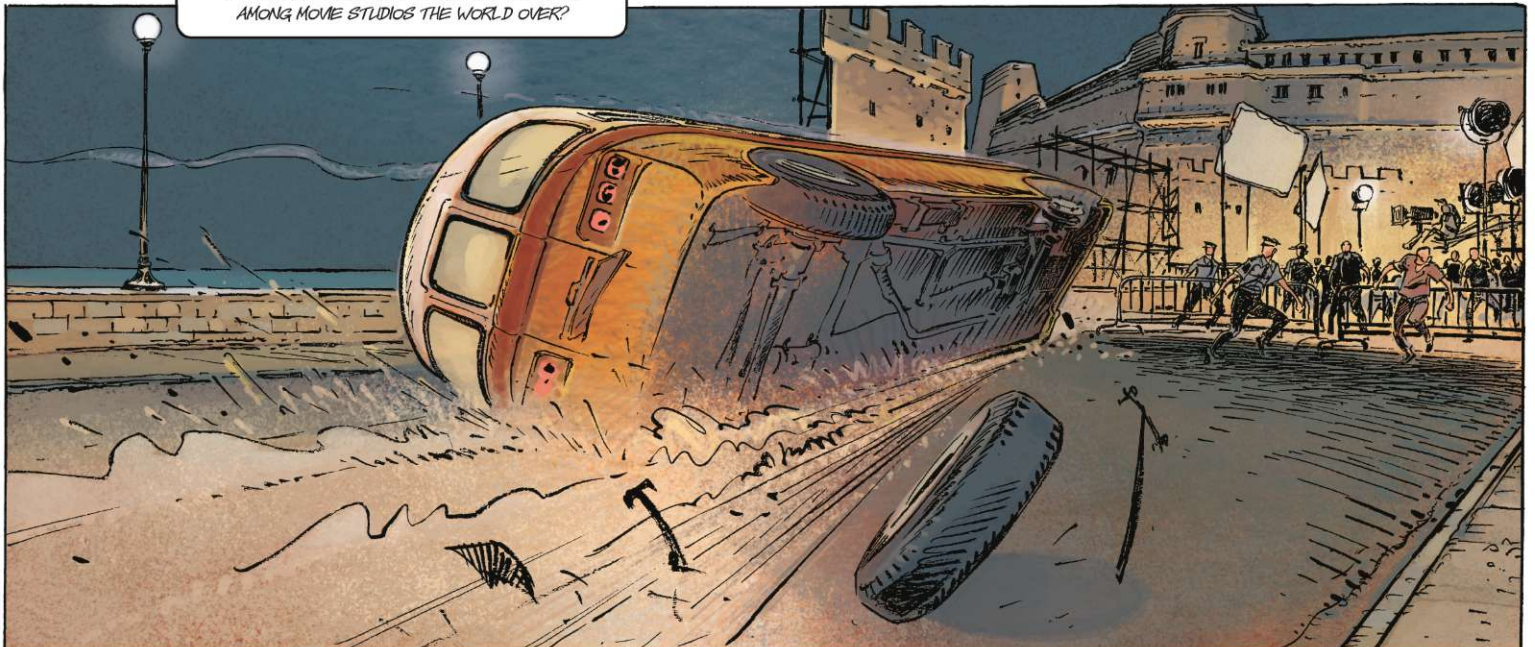


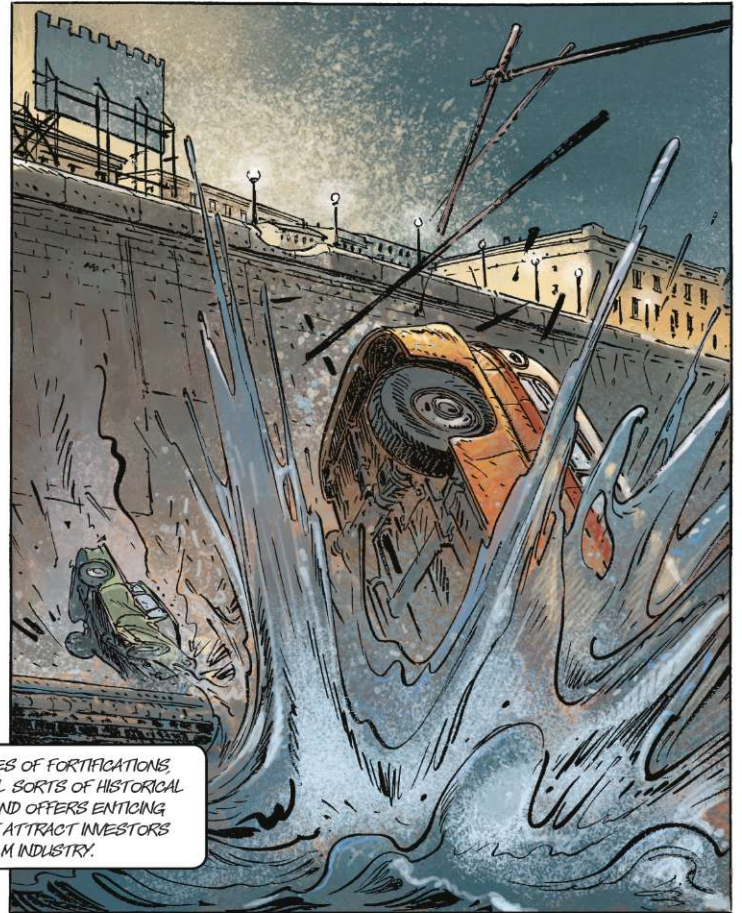
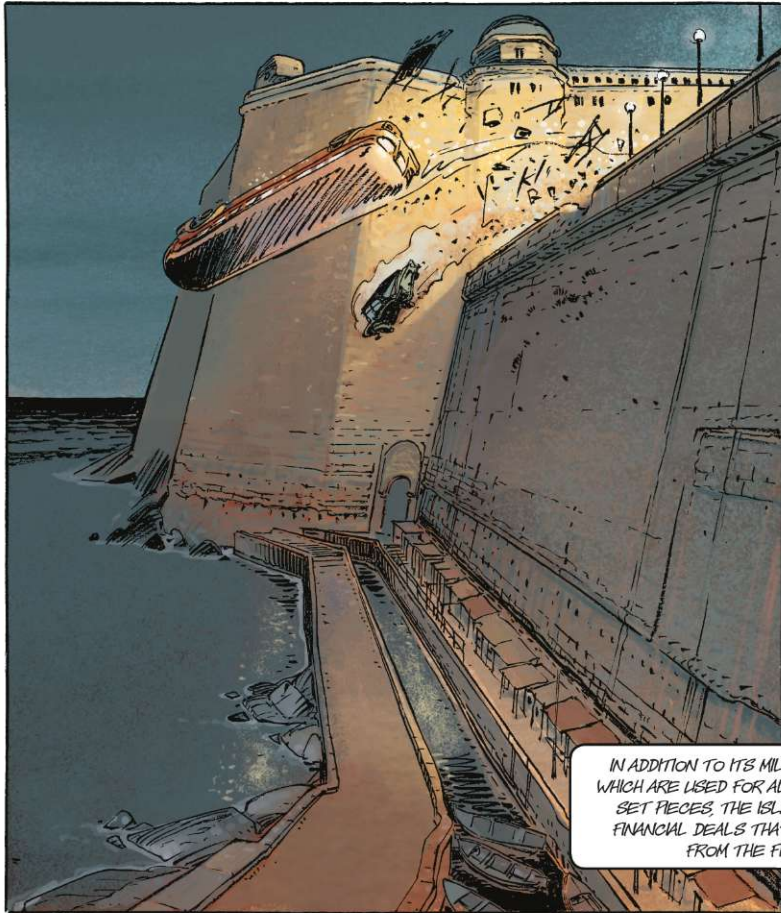


FOR MY PURSUERS IT WAS THE FINAL BLOW. THEY CERTAINLY WEREN'T EXPECTING ME TO TAKE THEM TO A FILM SHOOT.



DID YOU KNOW MALTA IS A POPULAR LOCATION AMONG MOVIE STUDIOS THE WORLD OVER?





IN ADDITION TO ITS MILES OF FORTIFICATIONS WHICH ARE USED FOR ALL SORTS OF HISTORICAL SET PIECES, THE ISLAND OFFERS ENTICING FINANCIAL DEALS THAT ATTRACT INVESTORS FROM THE FILM INDUSTRY.

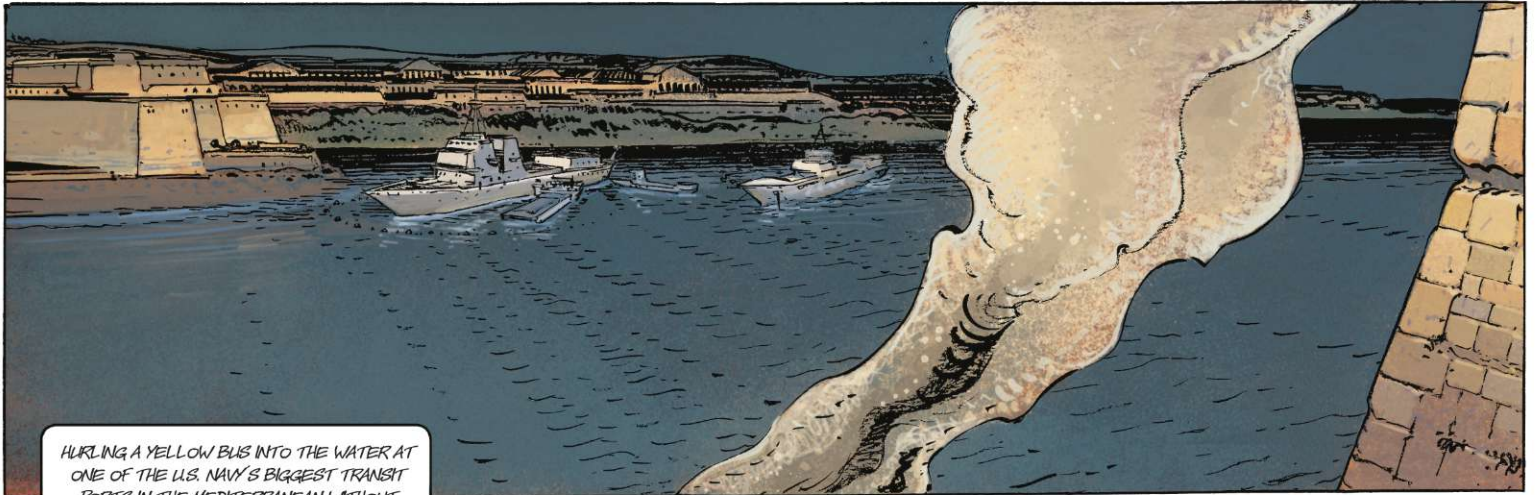


IT TRULY IS AN AMAZING PLACE FOR BIG BUDGET FILMS. I DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO REALLY TAKE A CLOSE LOOK BUT I THINK THEY WERE SHOOTING A FILM ABOUT THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR THAT DAY... BUT I DIGRESS.



ANYWAY, AFTER PARTIALLY DESTROYING ONE OF THOSE MAGNIFICENT SETS I JUST MENTIONED, I PULLED MYSELF OUT OF THE WRECKAGE OF MY BEAUTIFUL YELLOW BUS...

...AND SET OUT TO REACH THE SHORE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.



HURLING A YELLOW BUS INTO THE WATER AT ONE OF THE U.S. NAVY'S BIGGEST TRANSIT PORTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING IS NO EASY FEAT...



I KNOW, YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A BOAT. FATHER FRAZIO IS ALWAYS AWAKE AND HE LIKES EUROS.



ER... HELLO THERE, LITTLE GIRL. I ER... FELL IN, AND--

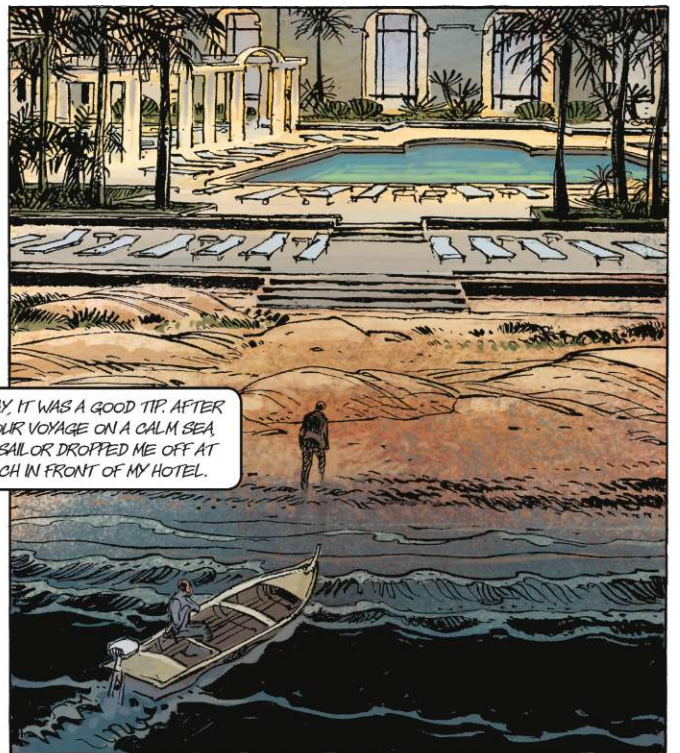


AND WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I--

I JUST KNOW, IS ALL. IF YOU WANT TO ASK HIM FOR HELP, HE'S IN HIS CABIN OVER THERE.



BEING A LITTLE PRESSED FOR TIME, I WALKED AWAY, WONDERING IF THAT LITTLE GIRL WAS REAL OR IF I WAS HAVING A WAKING DREAM.



EITHER WAY, IT WAS A GOOD TIP. AFTER A HALF-HOUR VOYAGE ON A CALM SEA, THE OLD SAILOR DROPPED ME OFF AT THE BEACH IN FRONT OF MY HOTEL.



I WAS ANXIOUS TO CHECK AND SEE IF MY PROTÉGÉ HAD MADE IT BACK TO THE HOTEL SAFE AND SOUND.



ONCE THAT WAS CONFIRMED BY A HELPFUL FRONT DESK AGENT, I WENT UP TO BED.



THAT IS.. WELL, NO POINT LYING TO YOU.. THE LOVELY LUFTHANSA FLIGHT ATTENDANT FROM THE BAR HAD PROMISED TO WAIT FOR ME...



...AND I WAS IN NEED OF A LITTLE RELAXATION.



FINALLY! I WAS STARTING TO THINK YOU HAD FORGOTTEN ABOUT ME...

OH MY GOSH... YOU'RE SOAKED!



YOU CERTAINLY HAVE A KNACK FOR TAKING WOMEN BY SURPRISE.

I TRIPPED AND FELL IN THE WATER ON THE BEACH... IT'S A LONG STORY.



HOW ABOUT WE FORGET ABOUT LONG EXPLANATIONS AND GET YOU OUT OF THESE CLOTHES AT ONCE... YOU COULD CATCH COLD, THIS TIME OF YEAR.

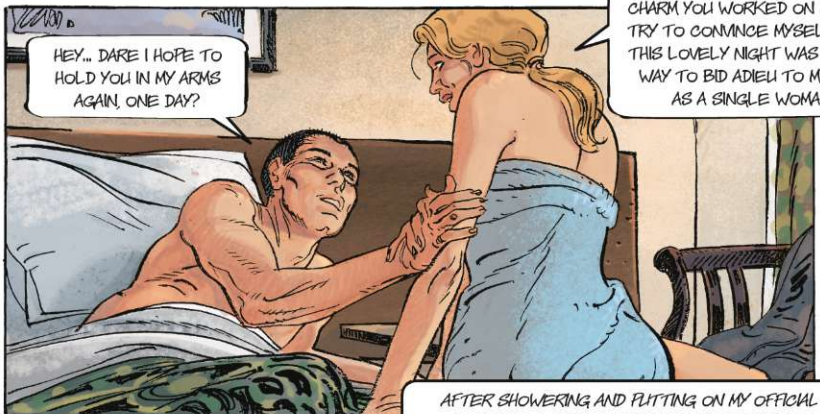
YOU ARE THE VOICE OF REASON ITSELF.



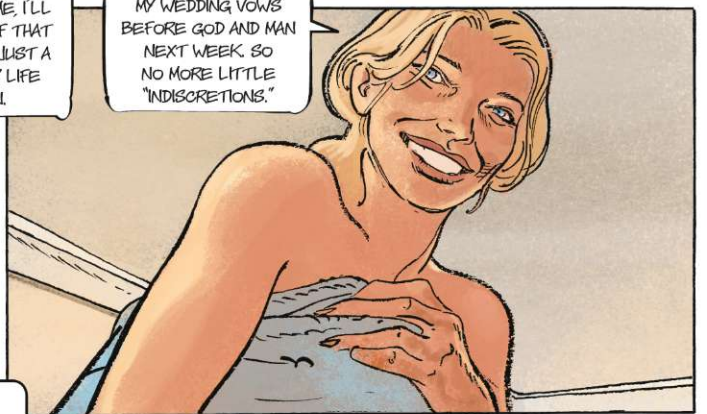
UP AND AT IT, BEAUTIFUL STRANGER! I HAVE TO HURRY, OR I'LL MISS MY FLIGHT.

FORGET ABOUT IT, DARLING, REGARDLESS OF THAT UNUSUAL CHARM YOU WORKED ON ME, I'LL TRY TO CONVINCE MYSELF THAT THIS LOVELY NIGHT WAS JUST A WAY TO BID ADIEU TO MY LIFE AS A SINGLE WOMAN.

YEP! I'LL BE TAKING MY WEDDING VOWS BEFORE GOD AND MAN NEXT WEEK, SO NO MORE LITTLE "INDISCRETIONS."



HEY... DARE I HOPE TO HOLD YOU IN MY ARMS AGAIN, ONE DAY?



AFTER SHOWERING AND PUTTING ON MY OFFICIAL COSTUME--WHICH ALWAYS DOES WONDERS TO DISCOURAGE OVER-ZEALOUS CUSTOMS OFFICIALS ON MY WAY BACK FROM A MISSION--I WENT DOWNSTAIRS TO MEET MY PROTÉGÉ, FATHER ORNELLO.



THE GIRL WAS A QUICK LEARNER WHEN IT CAME TO SURPRISE FACTOR.



I WAS BEGINNING TO WORRY, SON, DID EVERYTHING GO ALL RIGHT, LAST NIGHT? ACCORDING TO THE MORNING PAPERS--

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ IN THE PAPERS, FATHER. I FOR ONE HAVE NO DESIRE TO KNOW WHAT THEY WROTE IN THAT ARTICLE.



YOU ARE AS INVALUABLE A COLLABORATOR AS YOU ARE AN UNUSUAL CHRISTIAN, SON. COME, OUR TAXI'S WAITING!

I'M RIGHT BEHIND YOU, FATHER. RIGHT BEHIND YOU.

AS SOON AS WE HAD GOTTEN ON OUR PLANE BACK TO ROME, I ONCE AGAIN STARTED TO FEEL OVERCOME WITH DOUBT OVER THE REAL REASON I GOT INVOLVED IN THIS UNUSUAL LINE OF WORK. PERHAPS IT HAD TO DO WITH THE DEATH OF MY TWO PURSUERS--EVEN THOUGH COMPASSION IS NOT EXACTLY MY THING.



WHILE I REALIZE NO ORGANIZATION IN THE WORLD CAN LAY CLAIM TO PERFECTION, I REMAIN CONVINCED THAT SOME FORM OF SPIRITUALITY MUST RISE AND BE HEARD OVER THE NOISE OF PURELY POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES IF ONE WISHES TO KEEP MEN FROM CONSTANTLY RIPPING EACH OTHER TO SHREDS.



I HAD A VERY CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING AND SO IT WAS QUITE NATURAL FOR ME TO TURN TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. I LIKELY COULD HAVE SERVED ANOTHER RELIGION HAD I BEEN RAISED IN A DIFFERENT CULTURE. BUT THAT'S NOT THE POINT.

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PROUD OF BEING ACCEPTED INTO THE AGENCY IN CHARGE OF PROTECTION AND EXTERNAL INTELLIGENCE FOR THE CURIA.

BEING A BODYGUARD FOR THE VATICAN'S ARCHEOLOGISTS AND ART BUYERS WAS A GOOD FIT FOR ME... BECAUSE I KNEW I COULD BE OF SERVICE TO THE CHURCH WITHOUT GETTING MIXED UP IN ITS POLITICS.



WHEN I GOT BACK, MY BOSS TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO BE OFFERED A PROMOTION TO A SPECIAL CELL WITHIN THE SECRET SERVICE. NOW THAT WAS A WHOLE DIFFERENT BALLGAME. LIKE IT OR NOT, I WOULD BE CLOSELY INVOLVED WITH VATICAN INTRIGUES.



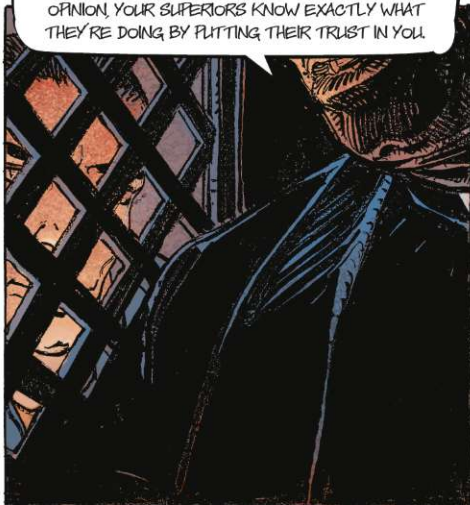
ALL MEN ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO DOUBT AND SCRIPLES, VINCE. BUT SOME OF THEM HAVE TO TAKE ACTION.



BUT WHY ME, FATHER? YOU KNOW I'M NOT SAYING THIS OUT OF FEAR OR COWARDICE, BUT I SINCERELY BELIEVE THERE ARE MEN WHO WOULD BE BETTER FOR THE JOB, MEN WHO ARE MUCH MORE COMMITTED TO THE CURIA'S POLITICS THAN I AM.



IT IS SAID THAT THE LORD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS. PERHAPS SOME OF THE REASONS AT WORK IN THIS STATEMENT STILL ESCAPE YOU BUT IN MY OPINION, YOUR SUPERIORS KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THEY'RE DOING BY PLUTTING THEIR TRUST IN YOU.



WHAT ABOUT THOSE INNER VOICES I TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT KEEP DISTURBING MY THOUGHTS? CAN I STILL BE A RELIABLE AGENT IF I HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT MY OWN MOTIVES?

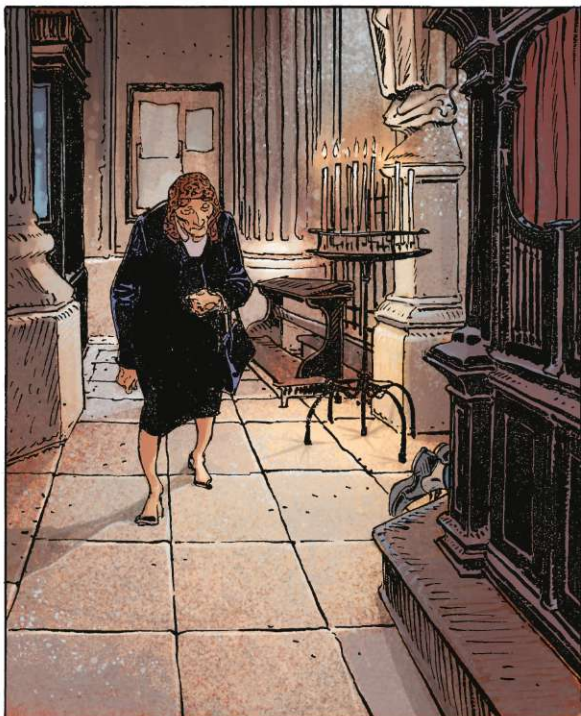


SO FAR THESE VOICES HAVE NOT PREVENTED YOU FROM USING COMMON SENSE AND GETTING THE JOB DONE EFFICIENTLY IN ALL KINDS OF CIRCUMSTANCES. WHY WOULD THIS CHANGE WITH YOUR NEW JOB TITLE?



YOU MAY BE RIGHT. I'M PROBABLY OVER THINKING THINGS.

YOU MIGHT ALSO HAVE TOO MANY READY-MADE ANSWERS. LET THE ANSWERS COME TO YOU AND GO TO YOUR MEETING IN PEACE, VINCE.

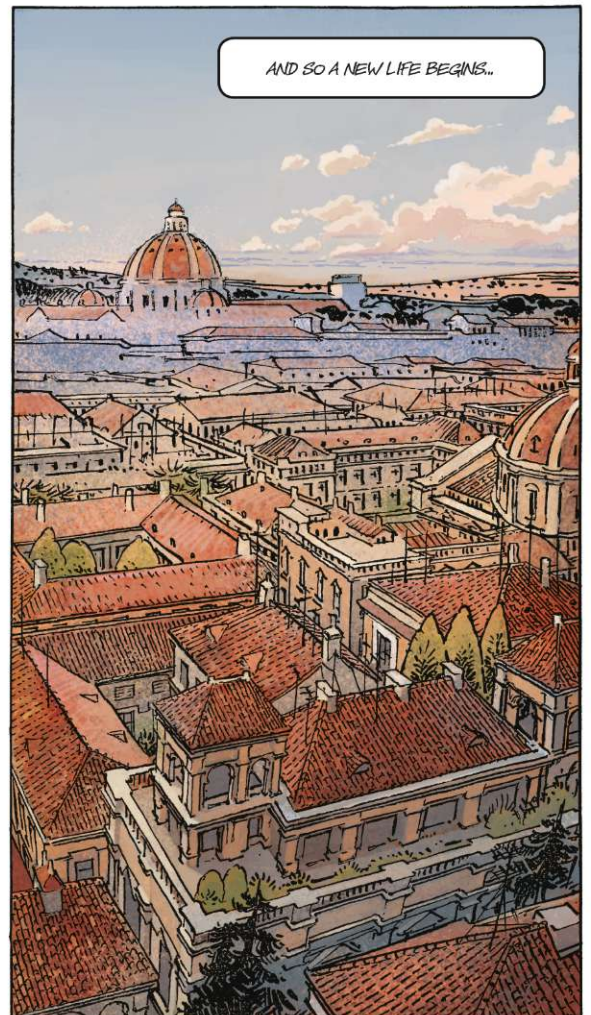


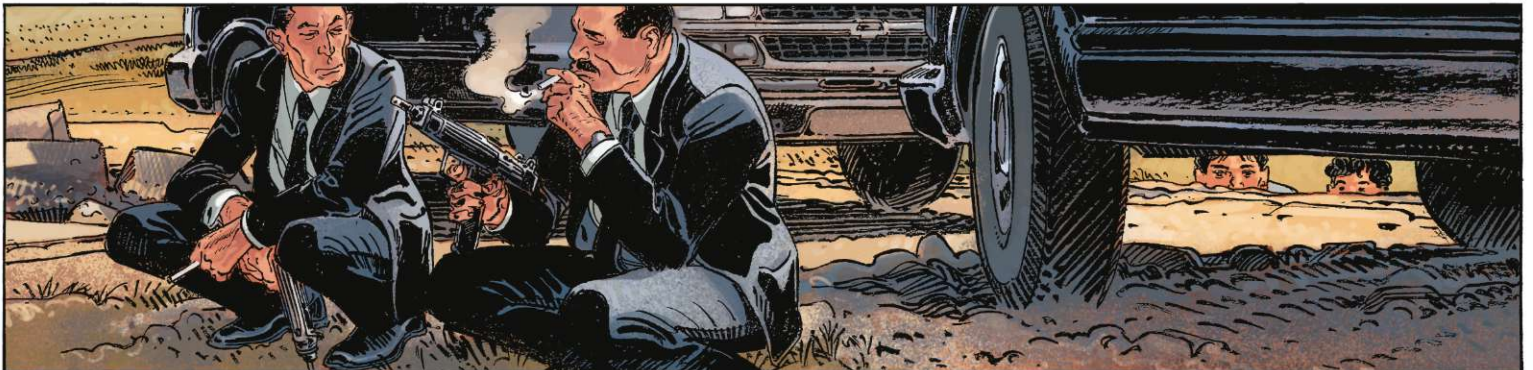
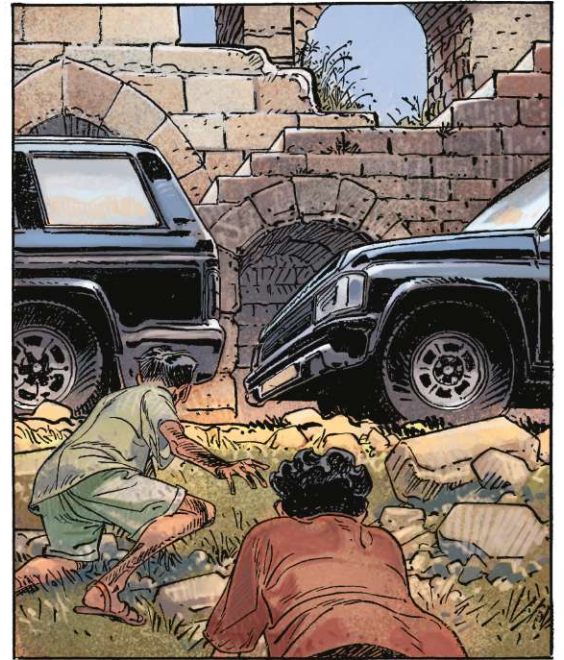
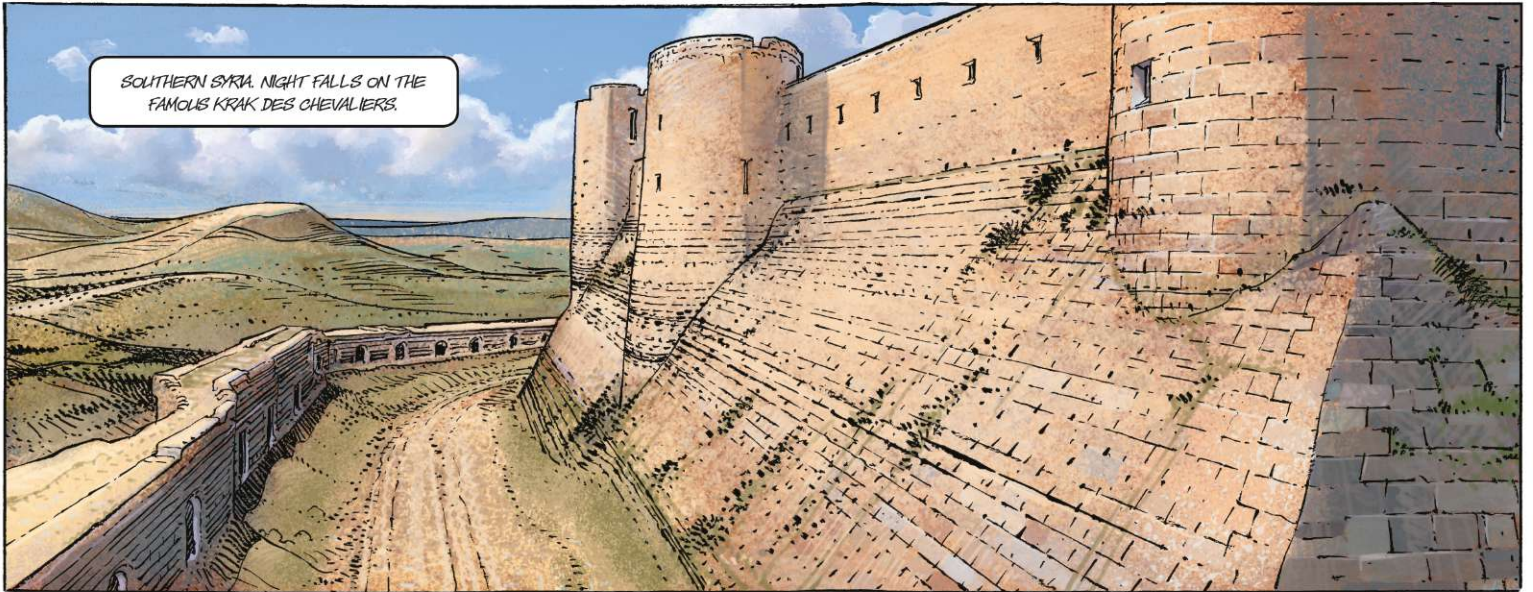
AS LONG AS WHAT WE TALK ABOUT STAYS BETWEEN US, NOBODY WILL NOTICE A THING AND EVERYTHING WILL BE JUST FINE.



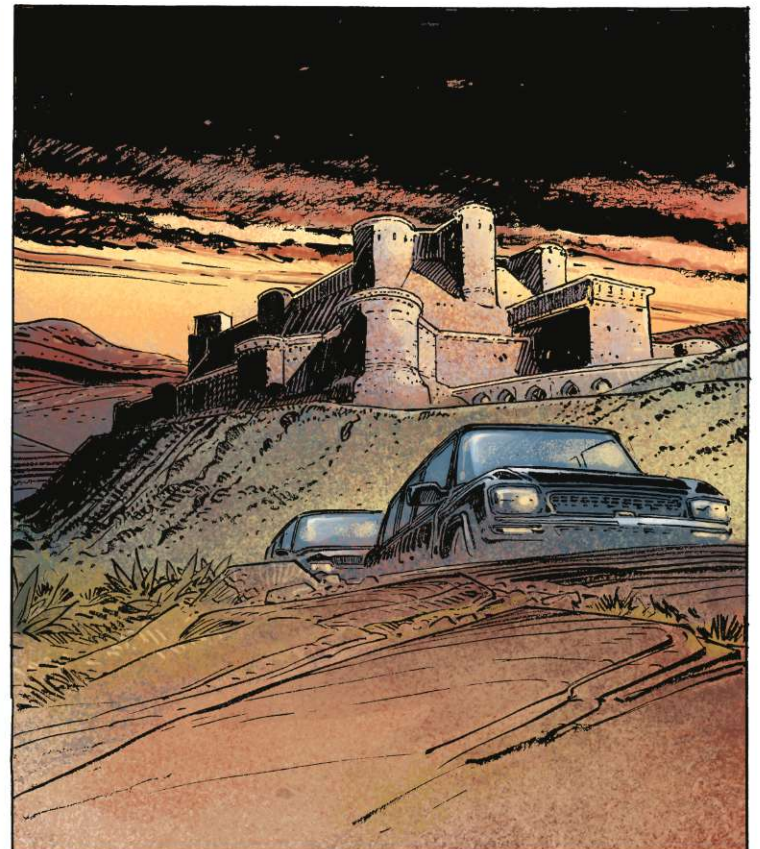
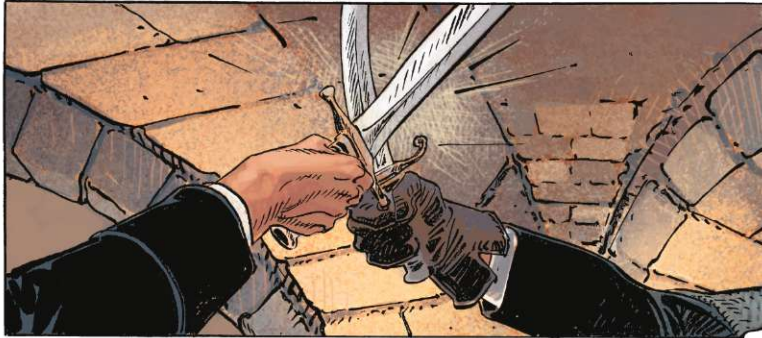
PLUS, I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN YOU'VE ALREADY DECIDED TO ACCEPT THE OFFER AND SINCE YOU WILL NOW BE A KEEPER, A KEEPER, TRY TO BE THE BEST IN THE BUNCH.

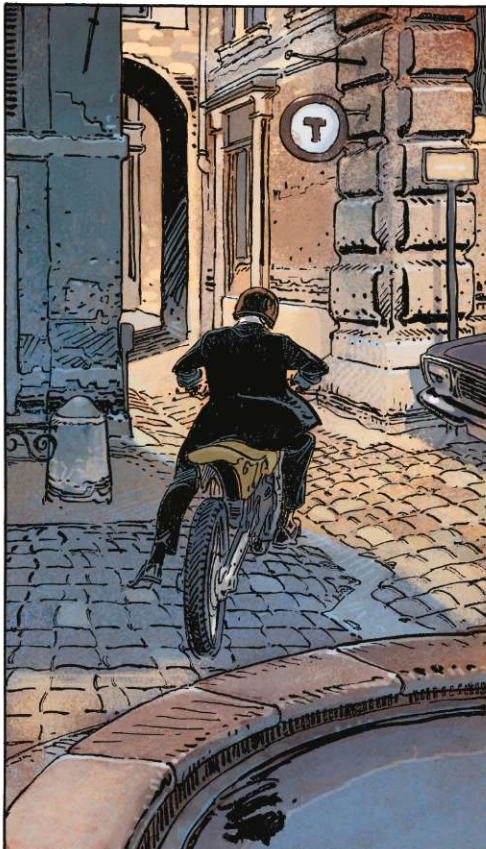
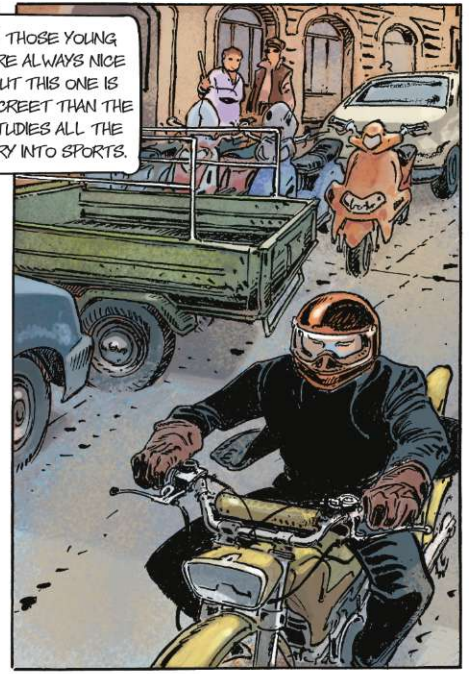


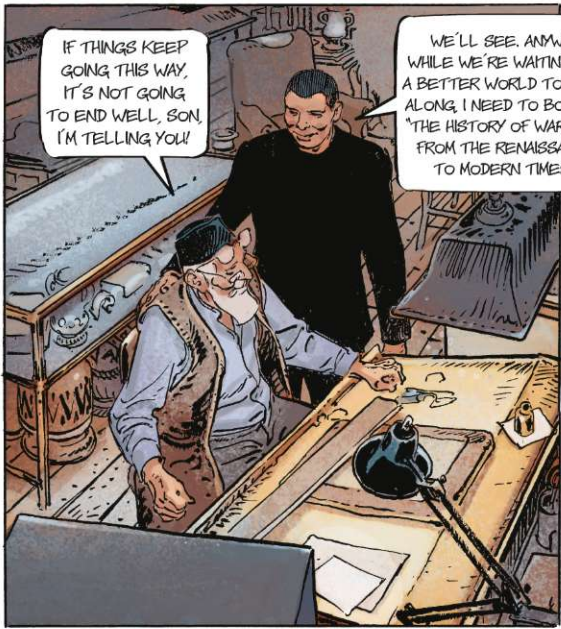
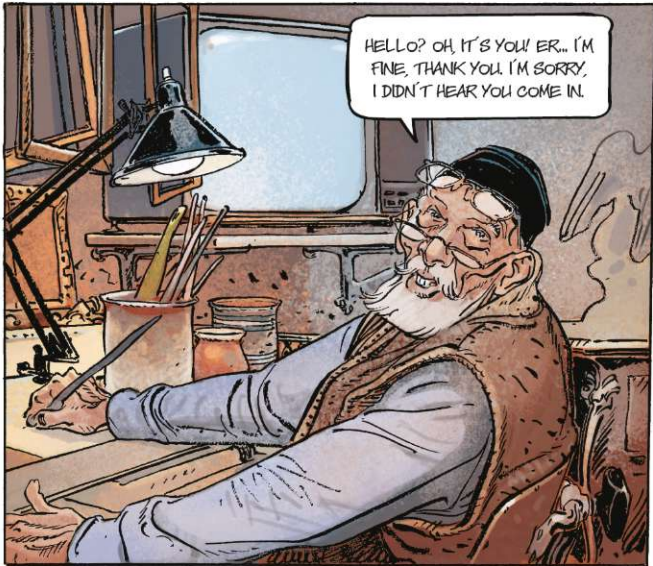


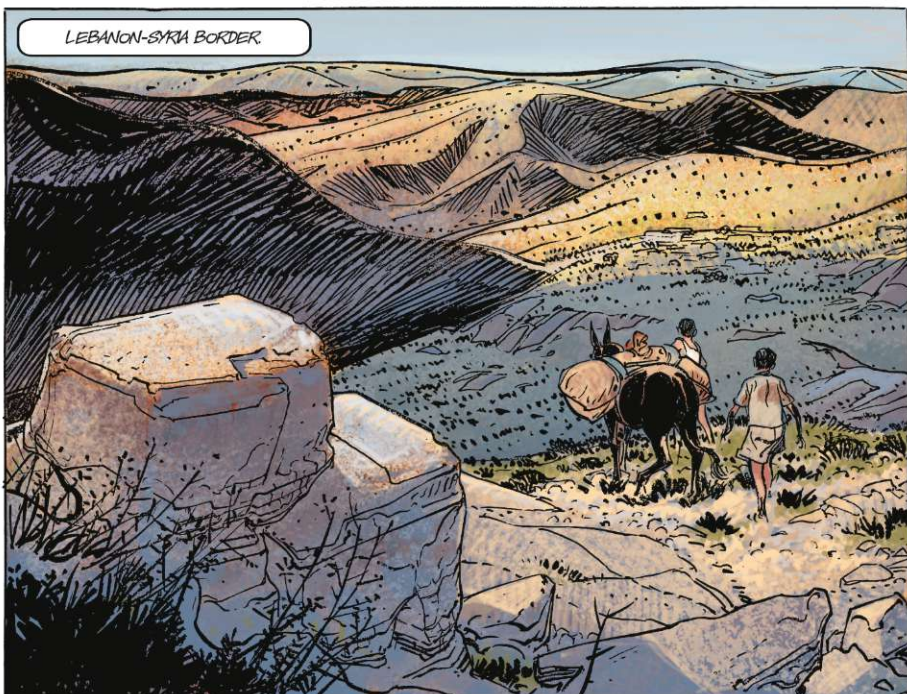


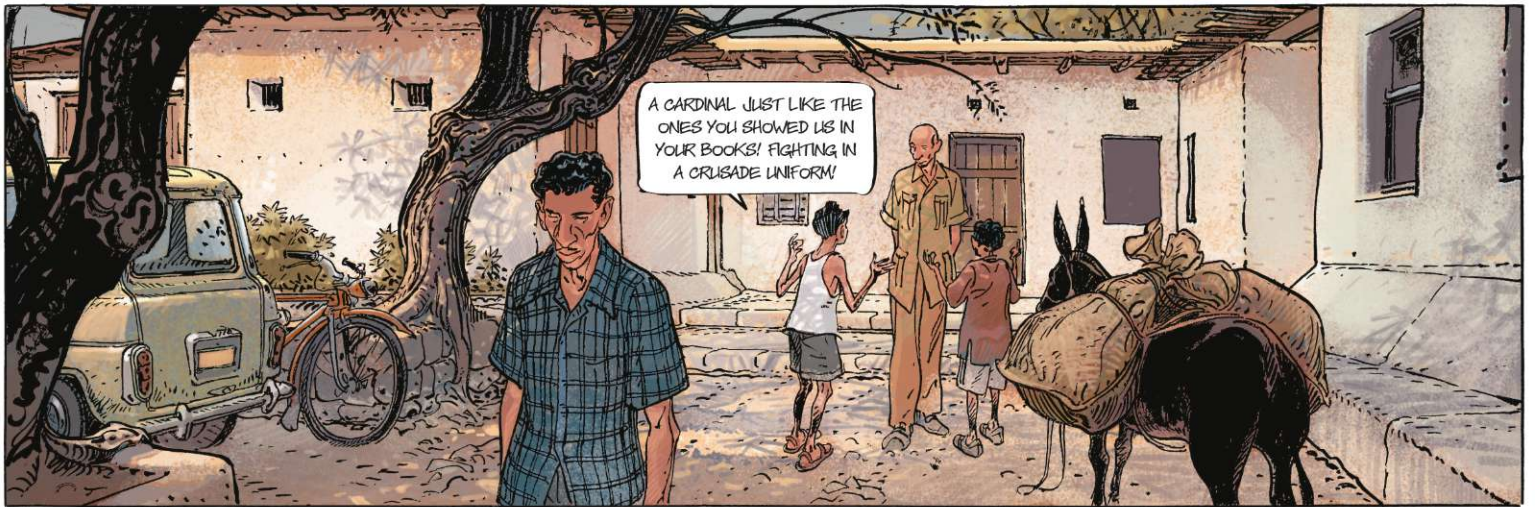












A CARDINAL JUST LIKE THE ONES YOU SHOWED US IN YOUR BOOKS! FIGHTING IN A CRUSADE UNIFORM!



CALM DOWN, KIDS. NOW, WHAT IS IT YOU'RE TRYING TO TELL ME?

I SWEAR WALLID, IT'S TRUE! WE SAW A GUY DRESSED UP JUST LIKE IN THE PICTURES OF ROME YOU SHOWED US!



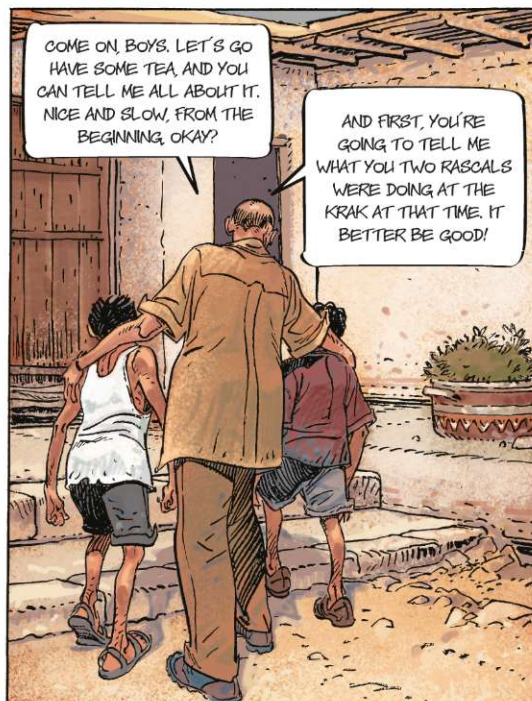
EXCEPT THAT HIS COSTUME WAS LIKE THE OTHER ONE, THE CRUSADE YOU KNOW, THE ONE WHO KILLED EVERYBODY IN JERUSALEM.



YEAH, YEAH! THE CARDINAL WAS DRESSED UP AS GODFREY OF BOULLON AND HE FOUGHT AGAINST ANOTHER GUY WHO WAS DRESSED UP AS SALADIN HIMSELF! HE EVEN LOST A BUTTON FROM HIS BLACK AND RED ROBE. LOOK!

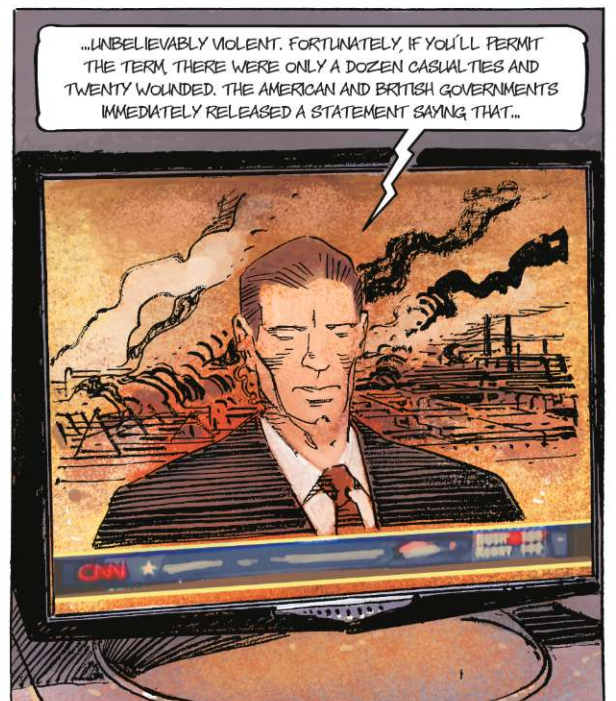


HMM...



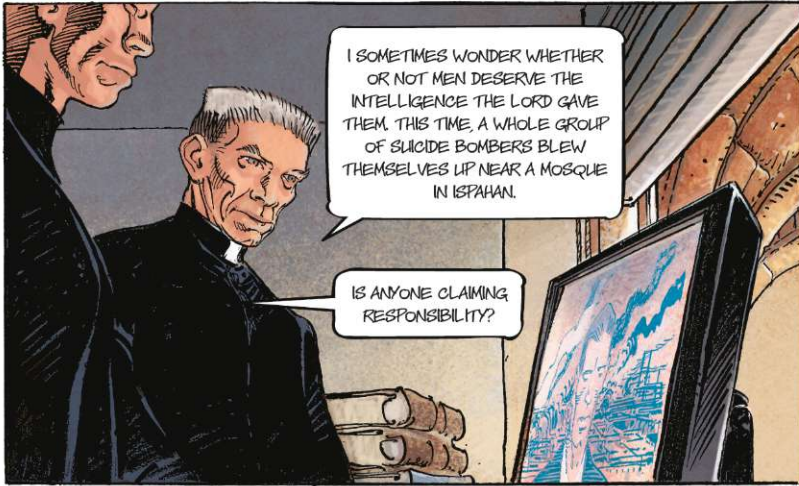
COME ON, BOYS. LET'S GO HAVE SOME TEA AND YOU CAN TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT. NICE AND SLOW, FROM THE BEGINNING, OKAY?

AND FIRST, YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME WHAT YOU TWO RASCALS WERE DOING AT THE KRAK AT THAT TIME. IT BETTER BE GOOD!



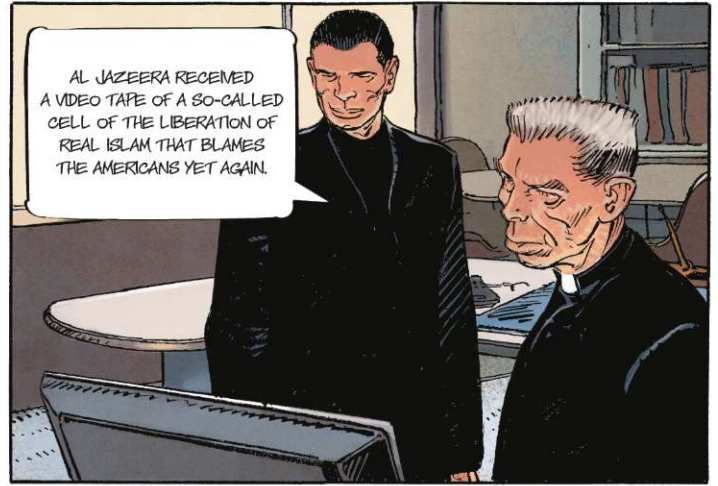
...UNBELIEVABLY VIOLENT. FORTUNATELY, IF YOU'LL PERMIT THE TERM, THERE WERE ONLY A DOZEN CASUALTIES AND TWENTY WOUNDED. THE AMERICAN AND BRITISH GOVERNMENTS IMMEDIATELY RELEASED A STATEMENT SAYING THAT...





I SOMETIMES WONDER WHETHER OR NOT MEN DESERVE THE INTELLIGENCE THE LORD GAVE THEM. THIS TIME, A WHOLE GROUP OF SUICIDE BOMBERS BLEW THEMSELVES UP NEAR A MOSQUE IN ISPAHAN.

IS ANYONE CLAIMING RESPONSIBILITY?



AL JAZEERA RECEIVED A VIDEO TAPE OF A SO-CALLED CELL OF THE LIBERATION OF REAL ISLAM THAT BLAMES THE AMERICANS YET AGAIN.



"SO-CALLED"?

WHEN A THIRD PARTY WANTS TO START A FIGHT BETWEEN TWO OTHER PARTIES, NOTHING TURNS PEOPLE AGAINST EACH OTHER BETTER THAN CLAIMING TO DO THINGS IN THE OTHER'S NAME. IT'S AN ANCIENT AND VERY EFFECTIVE STRATEGY. BUT LET'S GET DOWN TO BUSINESS.



I AM VERY HAPPY WITH YOUR LAST MISSION, VINCE. FATHER ORNELLO HAS NOTHING BUT PRAISE FOR THE WAY YOU HANDLED THINGS. THE DOCUMENT YOU MANAGED TO SECURE IS "SENSITIVE," TO SAY THE LEAST. IT WAS VITAL THAT IT END UP IN OUR HANDS.



AS I ALREADY INDICATED IN THE MESSAGE I LEFT YOU, TALK OF YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENT HAS REACHED THE TOP LEVEL OF THE HIERARCHY. THAT'S WHY, DESPITE YOUR LIMITED YEARS OF SERVICE HERE, BISHOP BLACKROSE HAS ASKED TO SEE YOU, TO OFFICIALLY ASK YOU TO JOIN THE KEEPERS.



BISHOP BLACKROSE? HE'S CARDINAL JONOVITCH'S NEW PERSONAL SECRETARY, RIGHT?

INDEED HE IS, AND WHEN THE VATICAN'S SECRETARY OF STATE'S MOST TRUSTED ADVISOR ASKS TO SEE US, ARRIVING LATE IS NOT AN OPTION.



IF YOU'LL PERMIT ME, FATHER, WE CAN'T POSSIBLY MAKE IT TO THE VATICAN IN FIFTEEN MINUTES IN ROME TRAFFIC.

FOLLOW ME, WE'RE EXPECTED AT THE PALACE OF SIXTUS V IN FIFTEEN MINUTES.



WE COULD TAKE MY BIKE AND--

THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY, MY SON.



AS YOU KNOW, WHEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE DECIDED TO FOUND OUR AGENCY, AT THE DAWN OF THE 21ST CENTURY...

...HE NEEDED A PROTECTION AND INTELLIGENCE BODY FREE TO ACT QUICKLY AND INDEPENDENTLY OF THE VARIOUS GROUPS THAT COHABITATE IN THE CHURCH.



TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN, THAT BODY NEEDED FIRST AND FOREMOST TO REMAIN UNKNOWN TO THE CURIA'S TRADITIONAL PROTECTION AND INTEL AGENCIES.

WE ALSO NEEDED ACCESS BETWEEN THE OFFICES OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND HIS FIELD AGENTS TO BE IMMEDIATE, UNDER ANY AND ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.

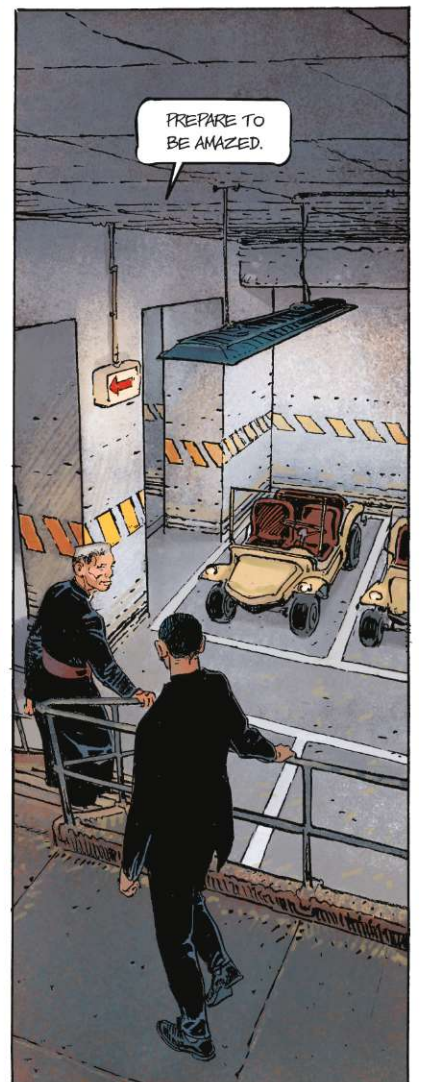


HENCE THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DIRECT AND SECRET PASSAGEWAY BETWEEN OUR OPERATIONS CENTER AND VATICAN CITY WAS A NECESSITY. YOU'RE ABOUT TO SEE IT FOR THE FIRST TIME.

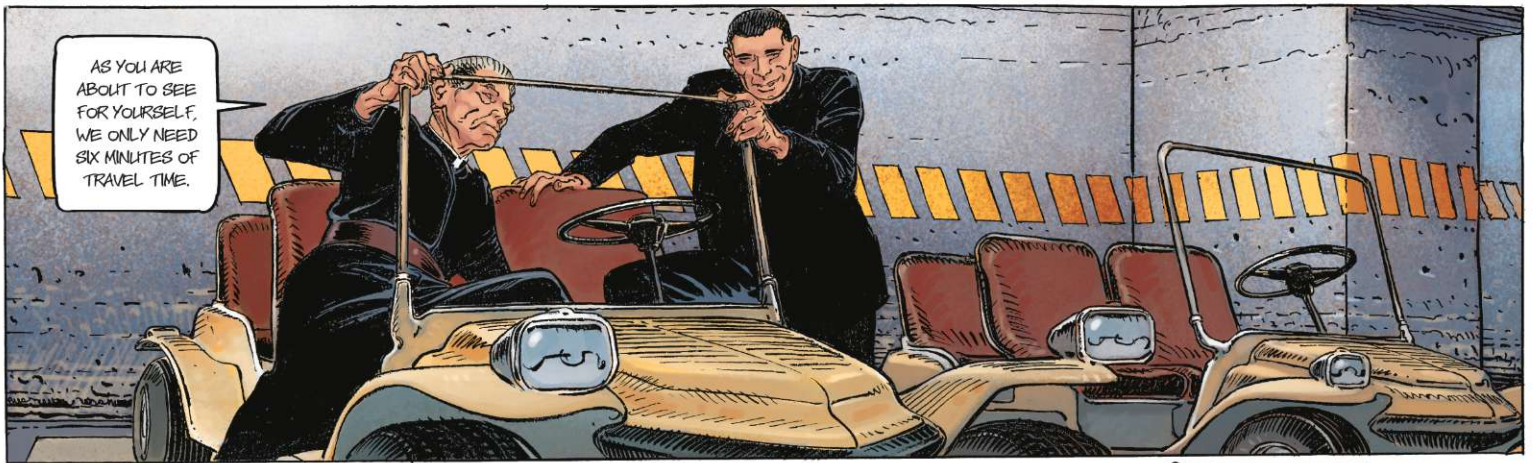


FEW PEOPLE IN OUR OWN ORGANIZATION EVEN KNOW ABOUT THIS SECRET PASSAGEWAY, OF COURSE.

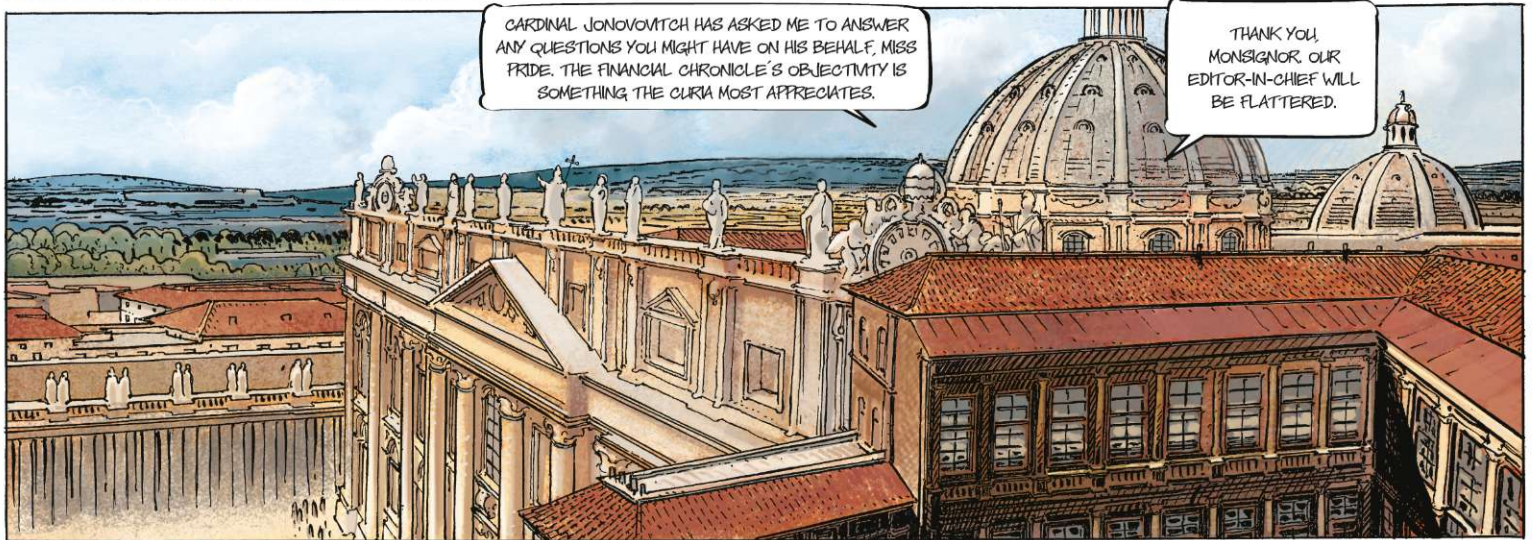
OF COURSE, FATHER.



PREPARE TO BE AMAZED.

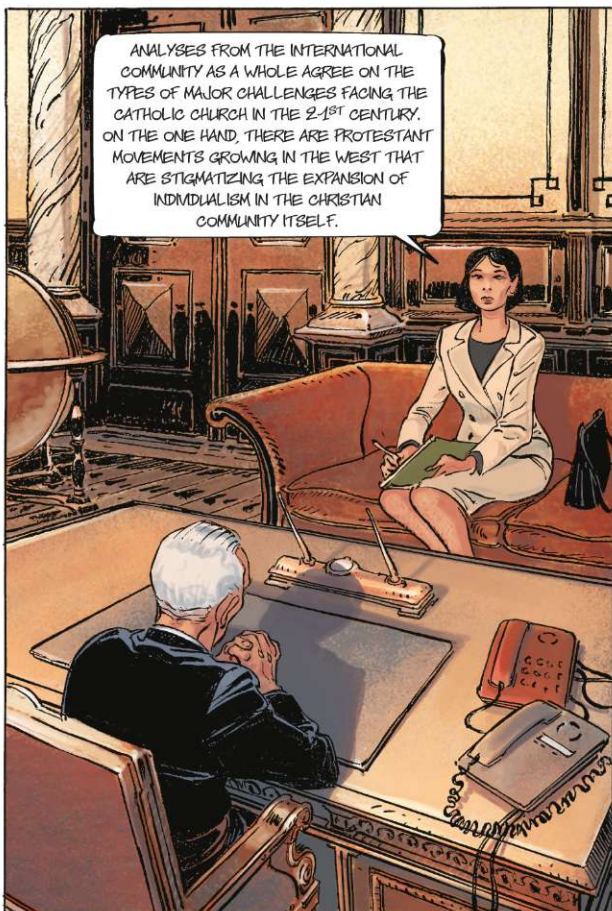


AS YOU ARE ABOUT TO SEE FOR YOURSELF, WE ONLY NEED SIX MINUTES OF TRAVEL TIME.



CARDINAL JONOVOMTCH HAS ASKED ME TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE ON HIS BEHALF, MISS PRIDE. THE FINANCIAL CHRONICLE'S OBJECTIVITY IS SOMETHING THE CURIA MOST APPRECIATES.

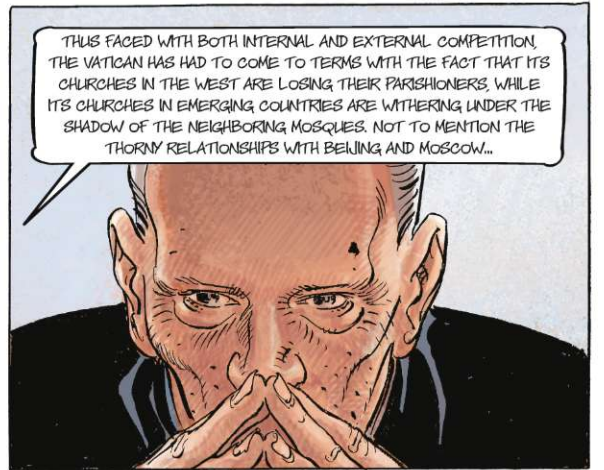
THANK YOU, MONSIGNOR. OUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF WILL BE FLATTERED.



ANALYSES FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE AGREE ON THE TYPES OF MAJOR CHALLENGES FACING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY. ON THE ONE HAND, THERE ARE PROTESTANT MOVEMENTS GROWING IN THE WEST THAT ARE STIGMATIZING THE EXPANSION OF INDIVIDUALISM IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ITSELF.



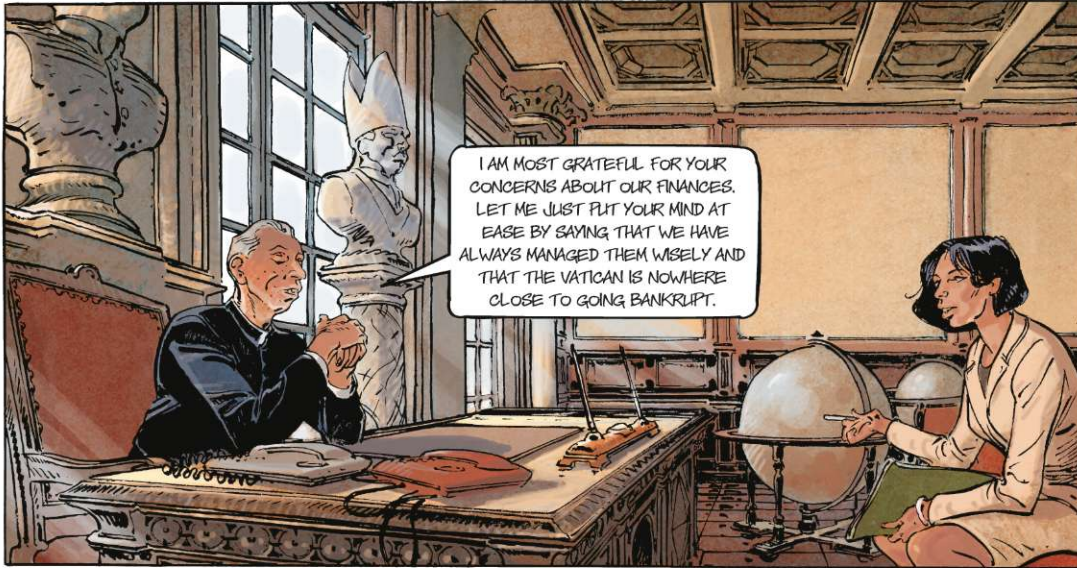
ON THE OTHER HAND, RADICAL ISLAM IS ON THE RISE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD AND IS POSITIONING ITSELF TO THOSE LEFT BEHIND AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE INDIVIDUALISTIC RELIGIOSITY OF THE WEST.



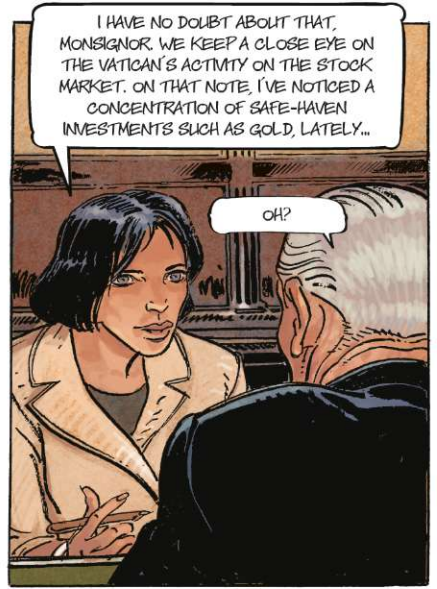
THIS FACED WITH BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMPETITION, THE VATICAN HAS HAD TO COME TO TERMS WITH THE FACT THAT ITS CHURCHES IN THE WEST ARE LOSING THEIR PARISHIONERS, WHILE ITS CHURCHES IN EMERGING COUNTRIES ARE WITHERING UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE NEIGHBORING MOSQUES. NOT TO MENTION THE THORNY RELATIONSHIPS WITH BEIJING AND MOSCOW...



FACED WITH SUCH REALITIES, THE CHURCH IS GOING TO HAVE TO COMMUNICATE, AND COMMUNICATING ON SUCH A LARGE SCALE MEANS FUNDING. IT IS ON THIS PARTICULAR ISSUE THAT THE FINANCIAL CHRONICLE WOULD LIKE A STATEMENT FROM THE CURIA.

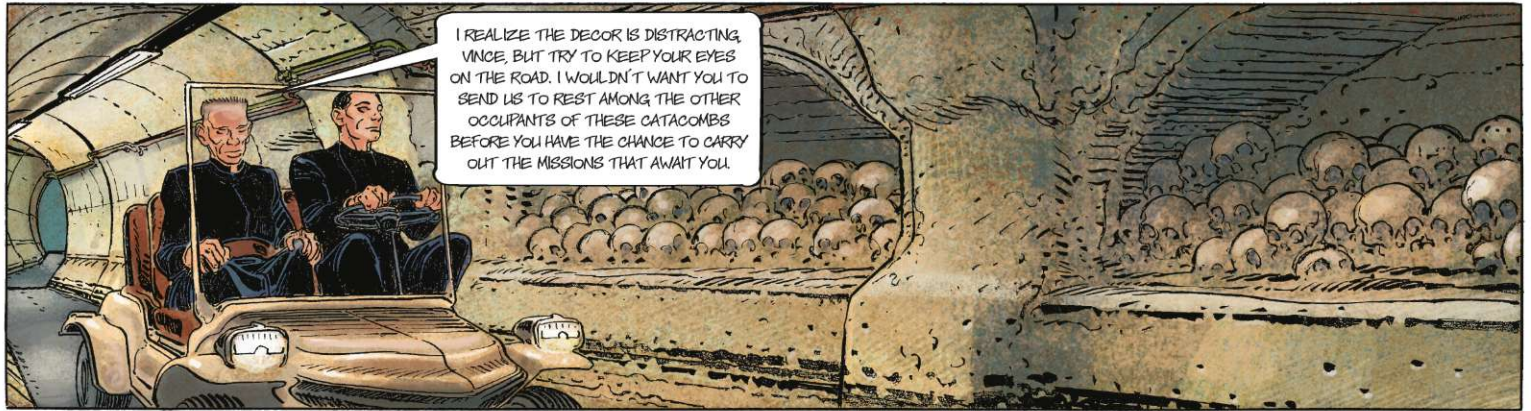


I AM MOST GRATEFUL FOR YOUR CONCERNS ABOUT OUR FINANCES. LET ME JUST PUT YOUR MIND AT EASE BY SAYING THAT WE HAVE ALWAYS MANAGED THEM WISELY AND THAT THE VATICAN IS NOWHERE CLOSE TO GOING BANKRUPT.



I HAVE NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT, MONSIGNOR. WE KEEP A CLOSE EYE ON THE VATICAN'S ACTIVITY ON THE STOCK MARKET. ON THAT NOTE, I'VE NOTICED A CONCENTRATION OF SAFE-HAVEN INVESTMENTS SUCH AS GOLD, LATELY...

OH?



I REALIZE THE DECOR IS DISTRACTING, VINCE, BUT TRY TO KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE ROAD. I WOULDN'T WANT YOU TO SEND US TO REST AMONG THE OTHER OCCUPANTS OF THESE CATACOMBS BEFORE YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO CARRY OUT THE MISSIONS THAT AWAIT YOU.



HELLO, FATHER SOFFRANELLO. HOW ARE YOU TODAY?

I'M WELL, GIORGIO, THANK YOU.



PLEASE FOLLOW ME.



THANK YOU AGAIN FOR SEEING ME, MONSIGNOR.

IT WAS A PLEASURE, DAUGHTER. I TRUST YOUR ARTICLE WON'T GIVE OUR FAITHFUL ANY ADDITIONAL CAUSE FOR CONCERN. I'M COUNTING ON YOU.





FATHER SOFFRANELLO! PARDON ME, I ALMOST KNOCKED YOU OVER!

NO HARM DONE, FRANCESCO. WE'RE ALL IN TOO MUCH OF HURRY TODAY.



ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MISS LAURA PRIDE, A REPORTER WITH THE FINANCIAL CHRONICLE.

A PLEASURE, MISS PRIDE.

LIKEWISE, FATHER.



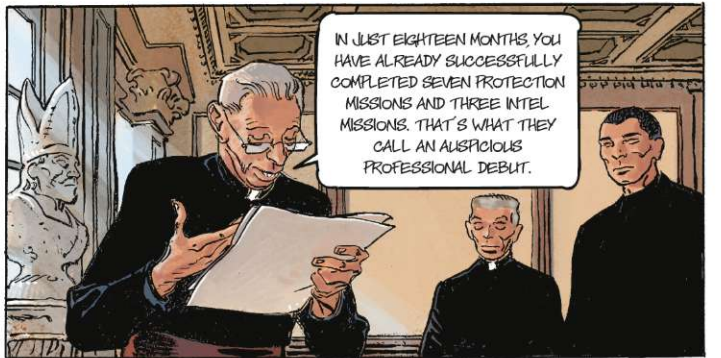
YOUR GUESTS ARE HERE, FATHER.

VERY WELL. COME IN, FRIENDS, COME IN!

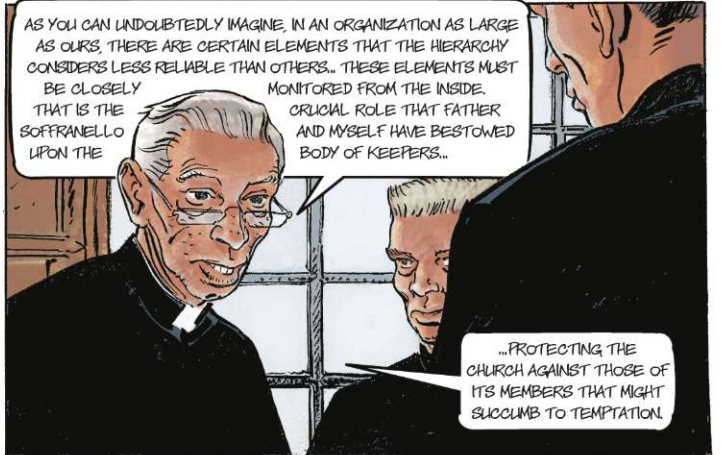


MONSIGNOR BLACKROSE, IT'S AN HONOR TO MEET YOU.

FIRST AND FOREMOST, CONGRATULATIONS SON, FOR SUCCESSFULLY CARRYING OUT YOUR LAST MISSION, OF COURSE, BUT ALSO FOR HOW PLEASED FATHER ORNELLO WAS WITH YOUR PERFORMANCE. BELIEVE ME, THAT IS A FIRST IN CURIA HISTORY!



IN JUST EIGHTEEN MONTHS YOU HAVE ALREADY SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED SEVEN PROTECTION MISSIONS AND THREE INTEL MISSIONS. THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL AN AUSPICIOUS PROFESSIONAL DEBUT.



AS YOU CAN UNDOUBTEDLY IMAGINE, IN AN ORGANIZATION AS LARGE AS OURS, THERE ARE CERTAIN ELEMENTS THAT THE HIERARCHY CONSIDERS LESS RELIABLE THAN OTHERS... THESE ELEMENTS MUST BE CLOSELY MONITORED FROM THE INSIDE. THAT IS THE CRUCIAL ROLE THAT FATHER SOFFRANELLO AND MYSELF HAVE BESTOWED UPON THE BODY OF KEEPERS...

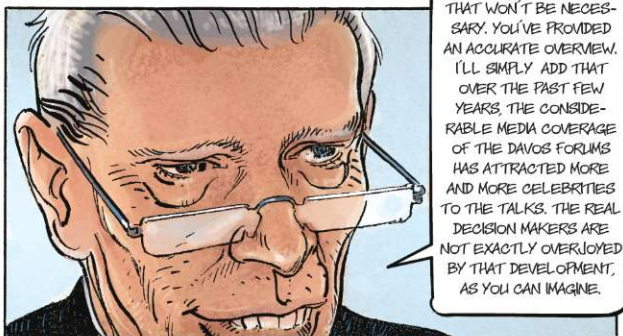
...PROTECTING THE CHURCH AGAINST THOSE OF ITS MEMBERS THAT MIGHT SUCCEED TO TEMPTATION.



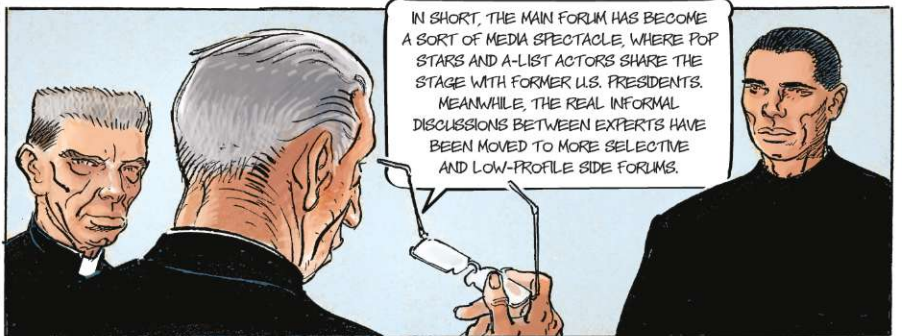
YOU HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY HEARD OF THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM IN DAVOS?

IT IS DURING THAT FORUM THAT THE WORLD'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LEADERS GATHER IN SWITZERLAND FOR A FEW DAYS EVERY JANUARY TO DISCUSS THE WORLD'S KEY ISSUES IN AN INFORMAL SETTING.

WOULD YOU LIKE AN OVERVIEW OF THE MOST RECENT TOPICS DISCUSSED THERE?



THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY. YOU'VE PROVIDED AN ACCURATE OVERVIEW. I'LL SIMPLY ADD THAT OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, THE CONSIDERABLE MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE DAVOS FORUMS HAS ATTRACTED MORE AND MORE CELEBRITIES TO THE TALKS. THE REAL DECISION MAKERS ARE NOT EXACTLY OVERJOYED BY THAT DEVELOPMENT, AS YOU CAN IMAGINE.



IN SHORT, THE MAIN FORUM HAS BECOME A SORT OF MEDIA SPECTACLE, WHERE POP STARS AND A-LIST ACTORS SHARE THE STAGE WITH FORMER U.S. PRESIDENTS. MEANWHILE, THE REAL INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN EXPERTS HAVE BEEN MOVED TO MORE SELECTIVE AND LOW-PROFILE SIDE FORUMS.

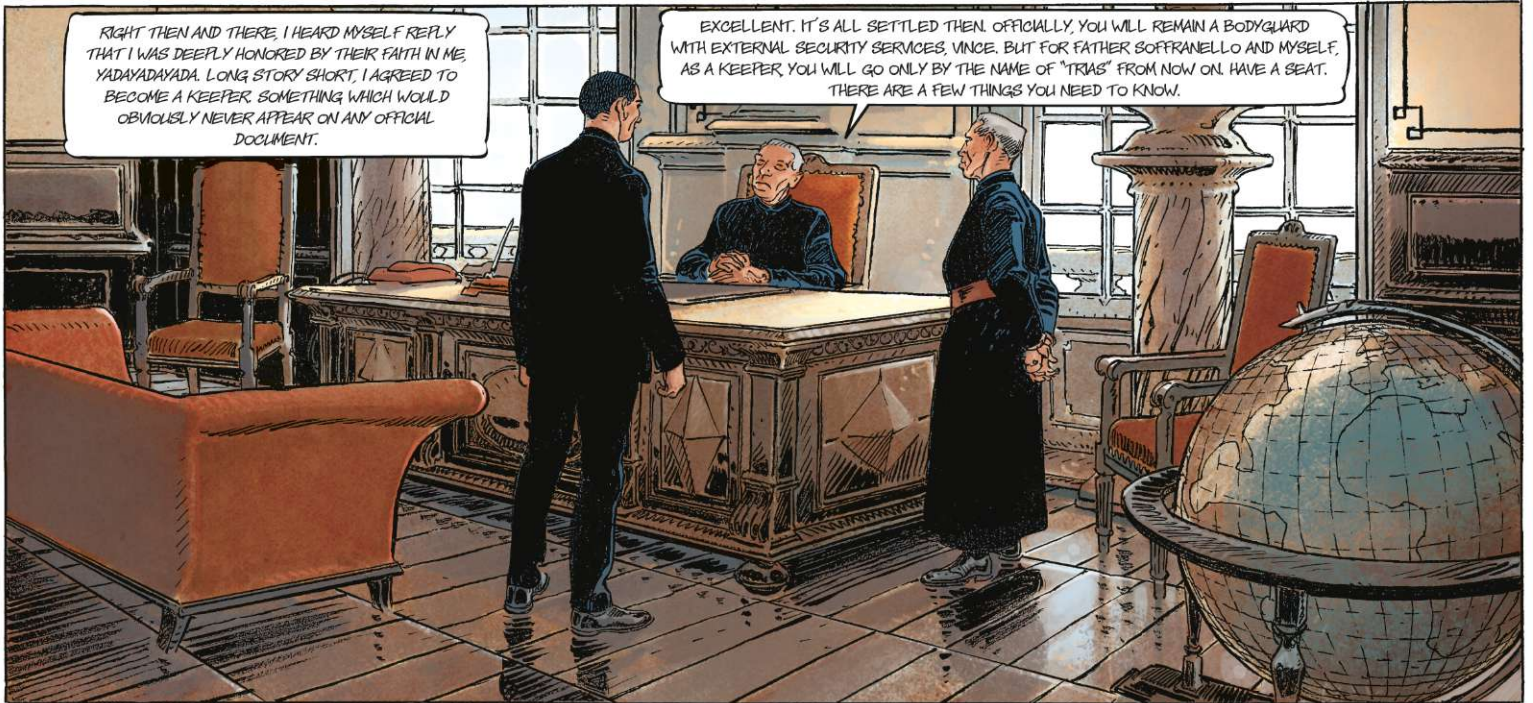


THIS YEAR WE ARE SENDING TWO OF OUR CARDINALS WHO HANDLE THE VATICAN'S FINANCES TO ONE OF THESE SIDE FORUMS. THERE WILL BE CLOSE TO ONE HUNDRED OF THE WORLD'S MAJOR PLAYERS ON THE STOCK MARKET IN ATTENDANCE. THE PEOPLE YOU'LL SEE THERE HANDLE MORE THAN 100 THOUSAND BILLION DOLLARS A YEAR.

THE PEOPLE I'LL SEE THERE?

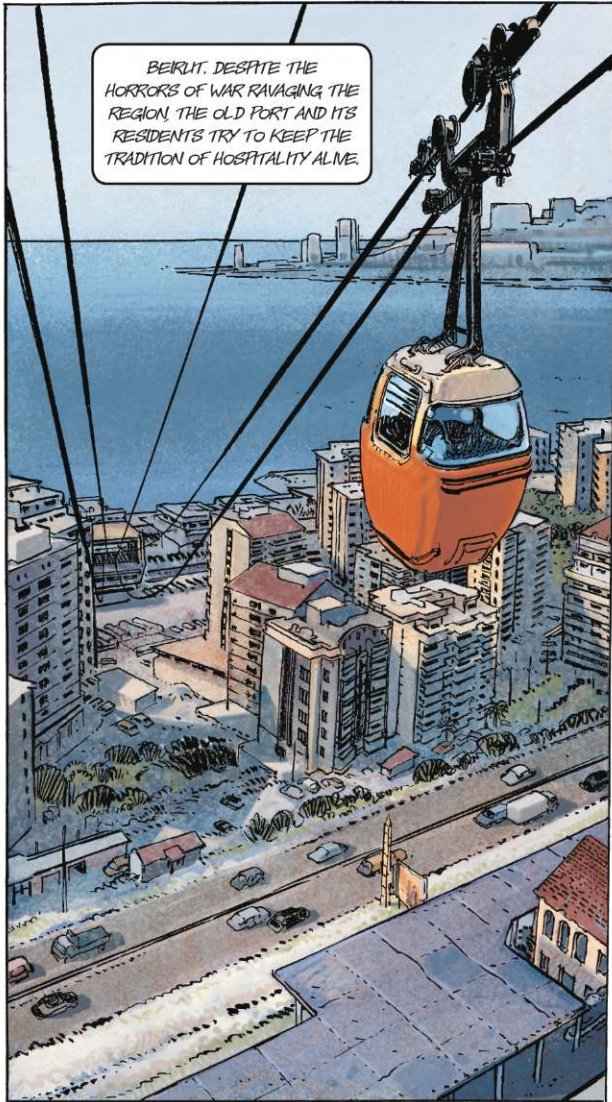


YES, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO ACCOMPANY ONE OF OUR ENVOYS TO DAVOS. OFFICIALLY YOU WILL BE HIS BODYGUARD. BUT I ALSO WANT YOU TO REPORT BACK TO ME ON THE KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS OUR TWO EXPERTS HAVE WITH THE WORLD'S LEADING FINANCIERS. PROVIDED, OF COURSE, THAT YOU AGREE TO BECOME A KEEPER..

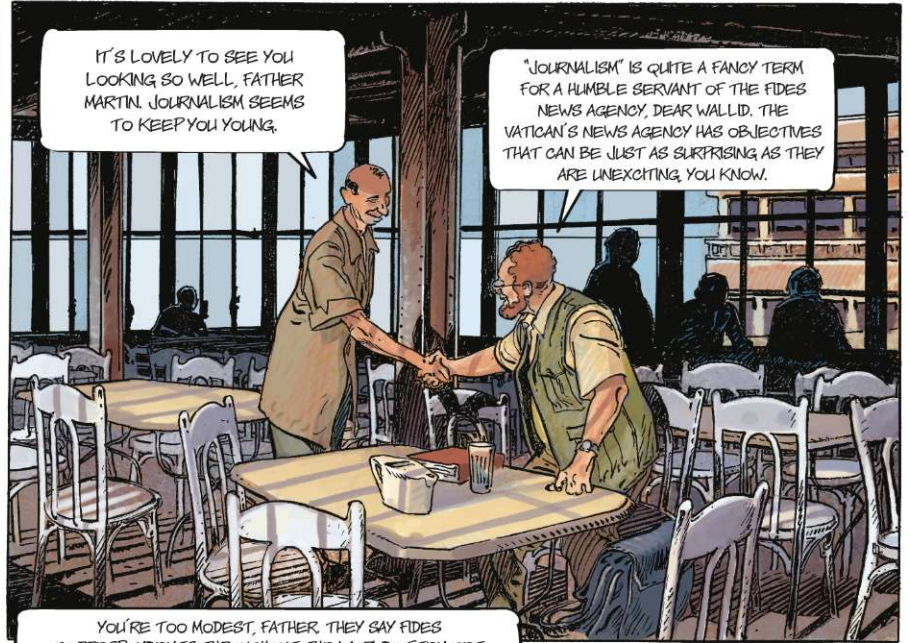


RIGHT THEN AND THERE, I HEARD MYSELF REPLY THAT I WAS DEEPLY HONORED BY THEIR FAITH IN ME, YADAYADAYADA. LONG STORY SHORT, I AGREED TO BECOME A KEEPER, SOMETHING WHICH WOULD OBVIOUSLY NEVER APPEAR ON ANY OFFICIAL DOCUMENT.

EXCELLENT. IT'S ALL SETTLED THEN. OFFICIALLY, YOU WILL REMAIN A BODYGUARD WITH EXTERNAL SECURITY SERVICES, VINCE. BUT FOR FATHER SOFFRANELLO AND MYSELF, AS A KEEPER, YOU WILL GO ONLY BY THE NAME OF "TRIAS" FROM NOW ON. HAVE A SEAT. THERE ARE A FEW THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW.



BEIRUT. DESPITE THE HORRORS OF WAR RAVAGING THE REGION, THE OLD PORT AND ITS RESIDENTS TRY TO KEEP THE TRADITION OF HOSPITALITY ALIVE.

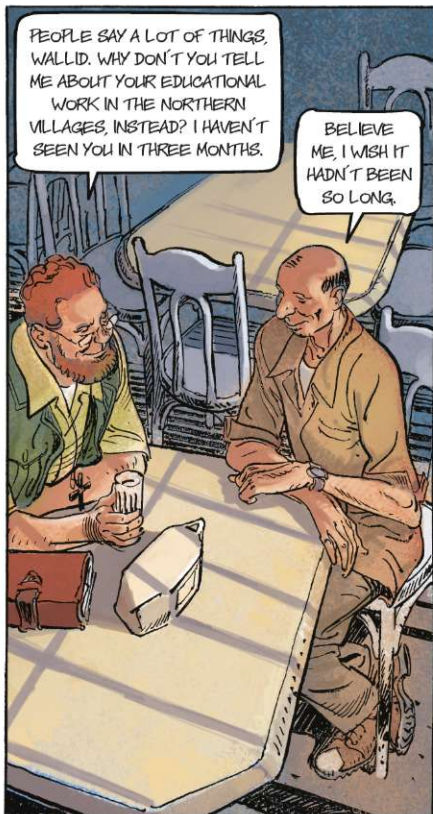


IT'S LOVELY TO SEE YOU LOOKING SO WELL, FATHER MARTIN. JOURNALISM SEEMS TO KEEP YOU YOUNG.

"JOURNALISM" IS QUITE A FANCY TERM FOR A HUMBLE SERVANT OF THE FIDES NEWS AGENCY, DEAR WALLID. THE VATICAN'S NEWS AGENCY HAS OBJECTIVES THAT CAN BE JUST AS SURPRISING AS THEY ARE UNEXCITING, YOU KNOW.



YOU'RE TOO MODEST, FATHER. THEY SAY FIDES CORRESPONDENTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD OFTEN GET THE KIND OF RESULTS THAT MAKE THE BIG NEWS AGENCIES JEALOUS... EVEN THE SECRET SERVICES OF THE MOST POWERFUL NATIONS IN THE WORLD!



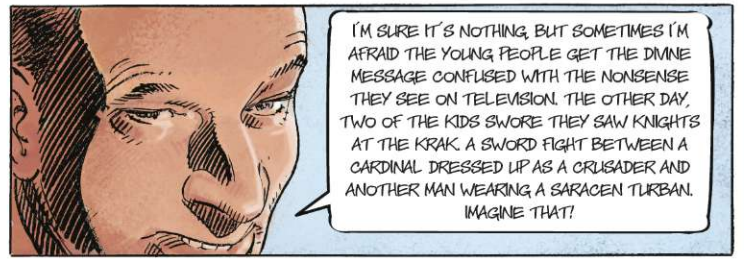
PEOPLE SAY A LOT OF THINGS, WALLID. WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR EDUCATIONAL WORK IN THE NORTHERN VILLAGES, INSTEAD? I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU IN THREE MONTHS.

BELIEVE ME, I WISH IT HADN'T BEEN SO LONG.



THERE'S SO MUCH WORK TO DO THERE THAT I ONLY COME TO BEIRUT WHEN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. EVERYTHING IS GOING WELL, THE CHILDREN ARE EAGER TO LEARN AND THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE SPEAKS TO THEM WITHOUT A DOUBT. IT'S JUST THAT...

WHAT, MY SON?



I'M SURE IT'S NOTHING, BUT SOMETIMES I'M AFRAID THE YOUNG PEOPLE GET THE DIVINE MESSAGE CONFUSED WITH THE NONSENSE THEY SEE ON TELEVISION. THE OTHER DAY, TWO OF THE KIDS SWORE THEY SAW KNIGHTS AT THE KRAK A SWORD FIGHT BETWEEN A CARDINAL DRESSED UP AS A CRUSADER AND ANOTHER MAN WEARING A SARACEN TURBAN. IMAGINE THAT!



I WANT ALL THE DETAILS. YOU HOW MUCH I LOVE THOSE STORIES A LITTLE OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

SURE IF YOU WANT.





THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU, SON. ENJOY THE REST OF YOUR DAY.



THE MONSIGNOR'S WORDS WERE STILL ECHOING IN MY MIND: "THERE ARE TWELVE KEEPERS IN THE WORLD, NO MORE, NO LESS. THEY ALWAYS WORK ALONE AND THEY DON'T KNOW EACH OTHER. WE'VE ASKED YOU TO BECOME TRIAS SON, BECAUSE THE THIRD KEEPER HAS JUST LEFT US..."



START, YOU FREAKING PIECE OF SHIT!



SWEARING RIGHT IN FRONT OF THE VATICAN IS RATHER FROWNED UPON IN THESE PARTS, MISS PRIDE.



TOUCHÉ, FATHER. I APOLOGIZE. I'VE ONLY JUST RECENTLY BEEN TRANSFERRED TO OUR ROME OFFICE AND APPARENTLY MY BAD AMERICAN MANNERS ARE STILL WITH ME.



NO WORRIES, AND CALL ME VINCE. IT'S SHORTER AND A LITTLE LESS FORMAL THAN "FATHER." DON'T YOU THINK? MIND IF I TAKE A LOOK?

GLADLY! I'M IN A BIT OF A HURRY.

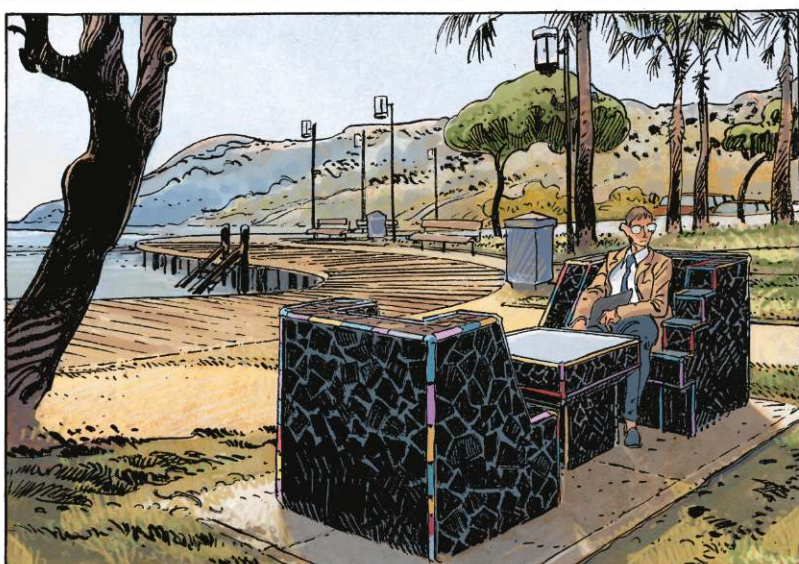
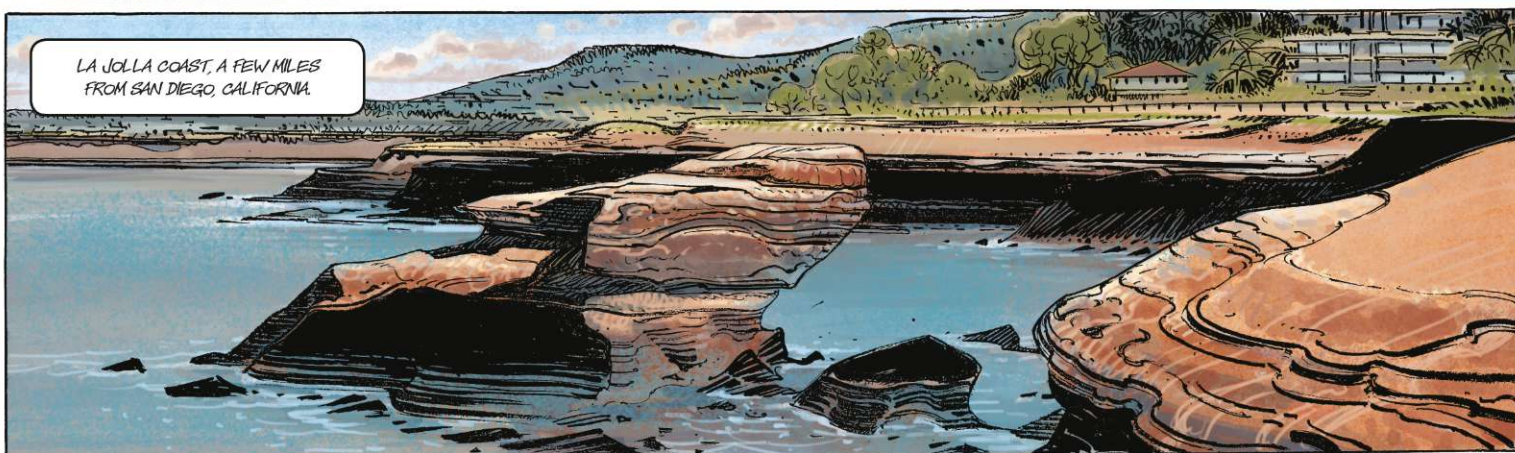
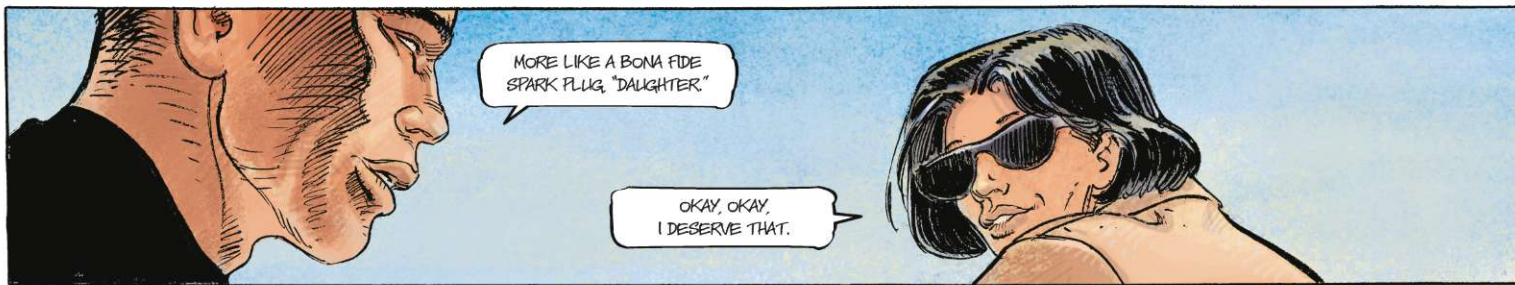


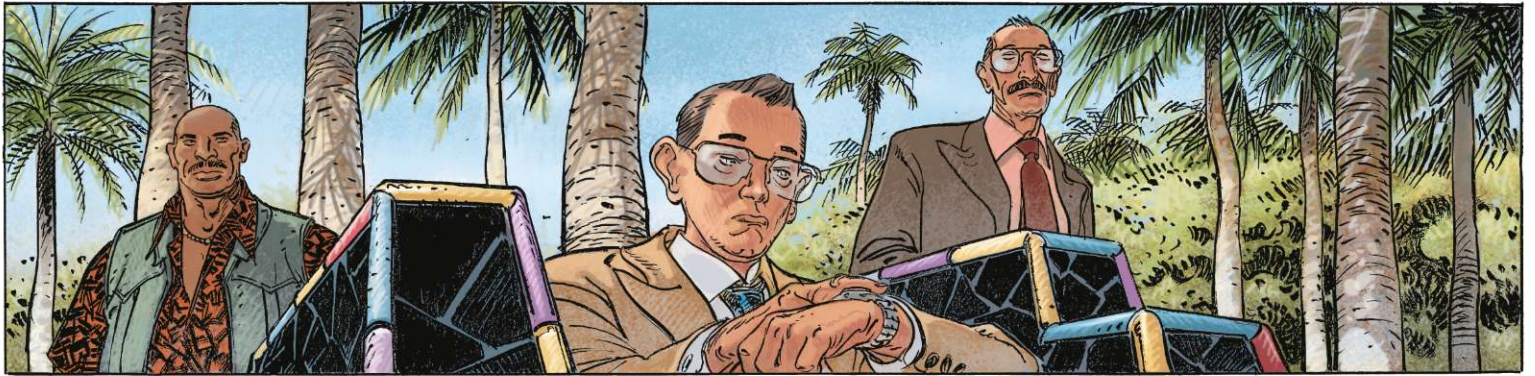
GO AHEAD, TRY STARTING IT.



WHY IT'S A BONA FIDE MIRACLE, FATHER!

VRMMMMM





WELL HELLO THERE, STEVE. WHAT'S UP? DON'T TELL ME. A MATCH.COM BLIND DATE IN THE PARK? HAND OVER THAT NICE LITTLE ENVELOPE RIGHT THERE IN YOUR LAP, WILL YOU?

OH, BUT IT IS. IT'S EXACTLY WHAT I THINK. LOTS OF PRETTY PICTURES THAT YOU ARE CONTRACTUALLY FORBIDDEN TO SHOW TO ANYONE.

BUT I GOT THIS SNEAKY SUSPICIOUS FEELING, STEVE BOY, THAT YOU SITTING HERE ALONE IN THIS PARK WITH THOSE PICS AND THAT FLASH DRIVE IN AN ENVELOPE, CAN ONLY MEAN ONE THING: YOU'RE MEETING SOMEONE. THE COMPETITION, PERHAPS, OR WORSE: A REPORTER.

LISTEN, JACK. IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK I--



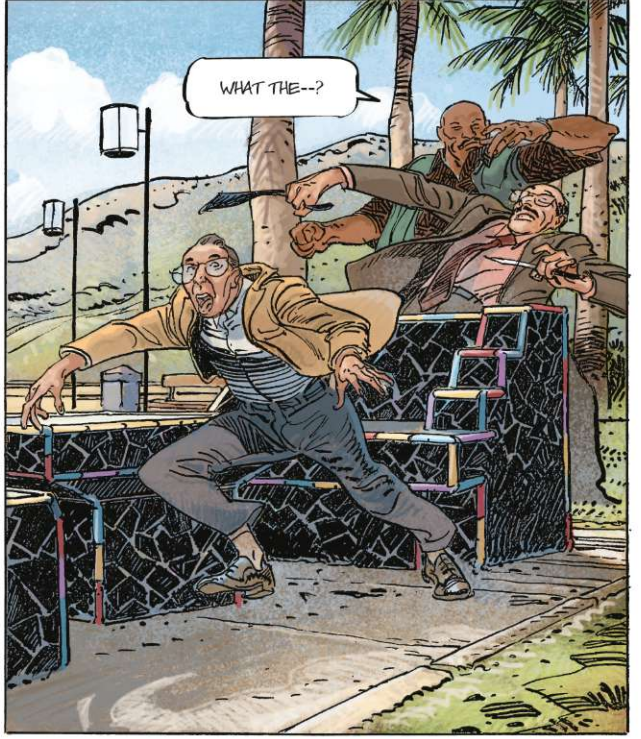
PLEASE TRY TO UNDERSTAND, JACK. I HAVE SOME MONEY PROBLEMS I COULDN'T TELL YOU ABOUT... AND WHEN THAT SCRIBE CALLED ME UP TO OFFER ME 5 GRAND JUST FOR A FEW PICS PROVING THAT WHAT WE'RE WORKING ON IS THE REAL DEAL, I THOUGHT THAT--



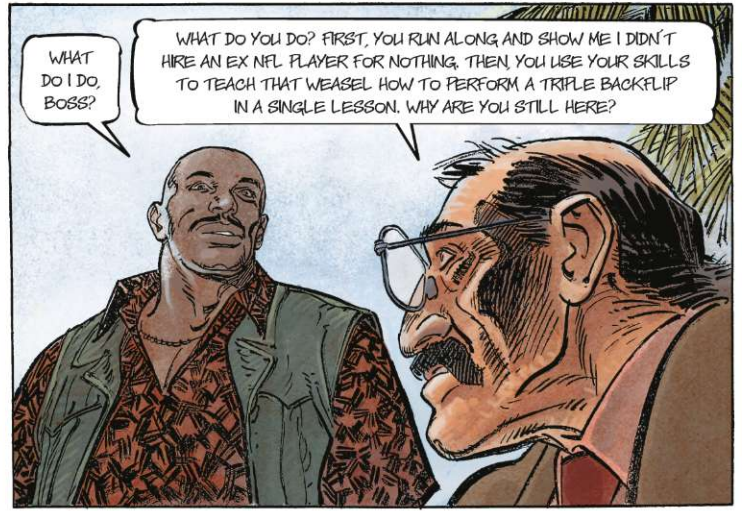
YOU THOUGHT YOU WOULD CUT A FEW THINGS OUT OF THE CONTRACT, HUH? IS THAT IT?

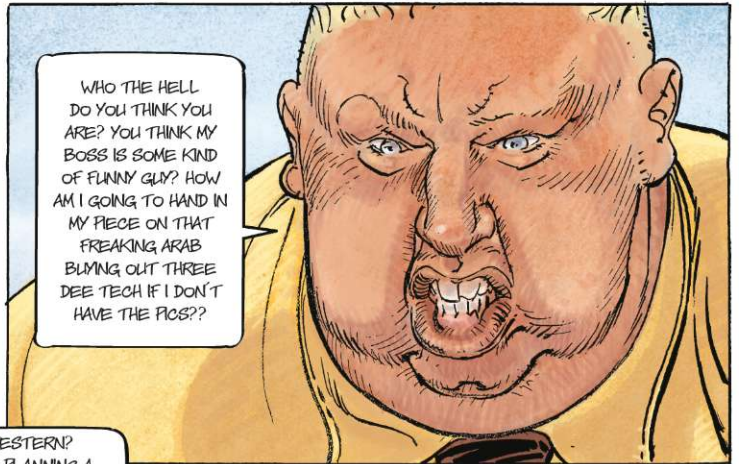
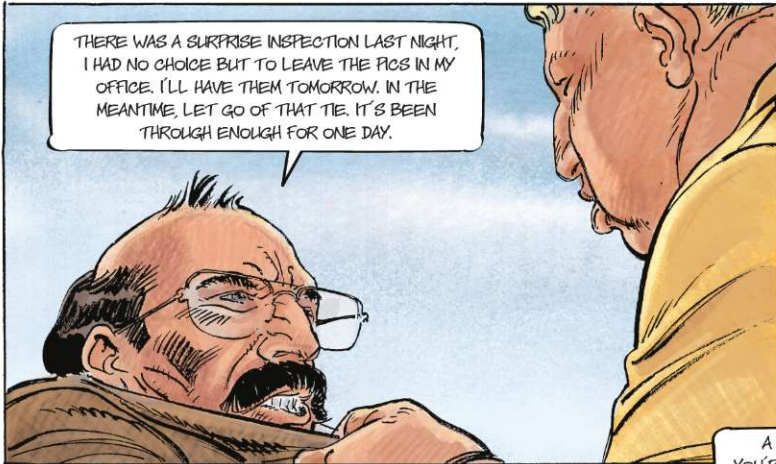


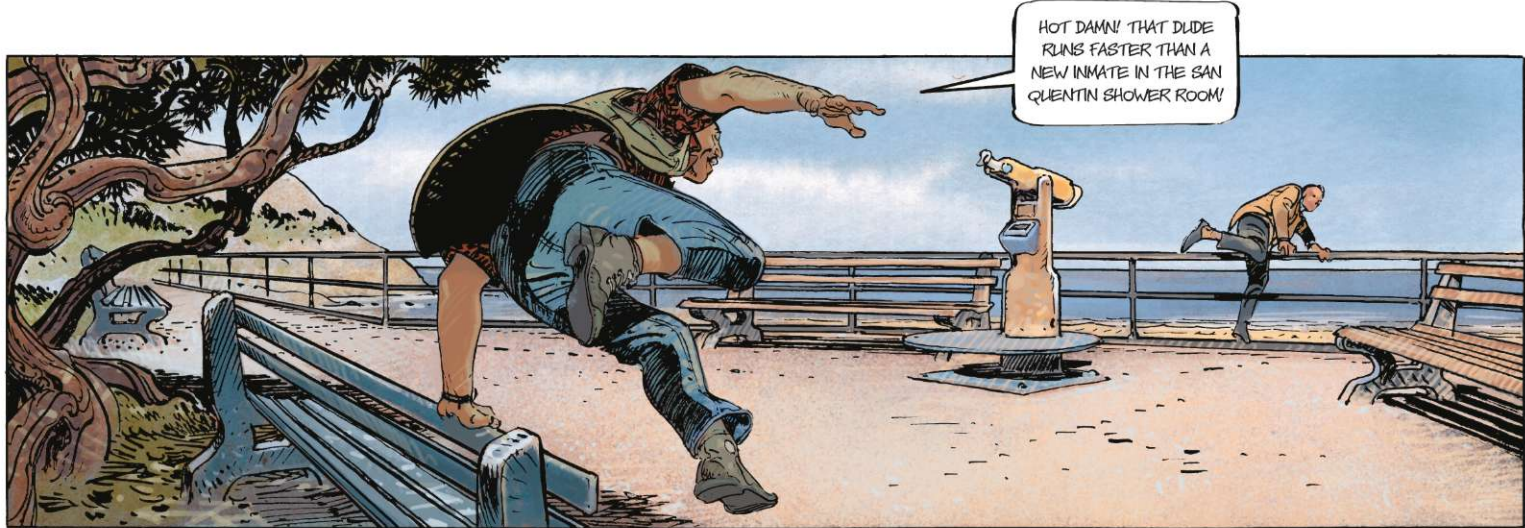
WELL SPEAKING OF CUTTING...

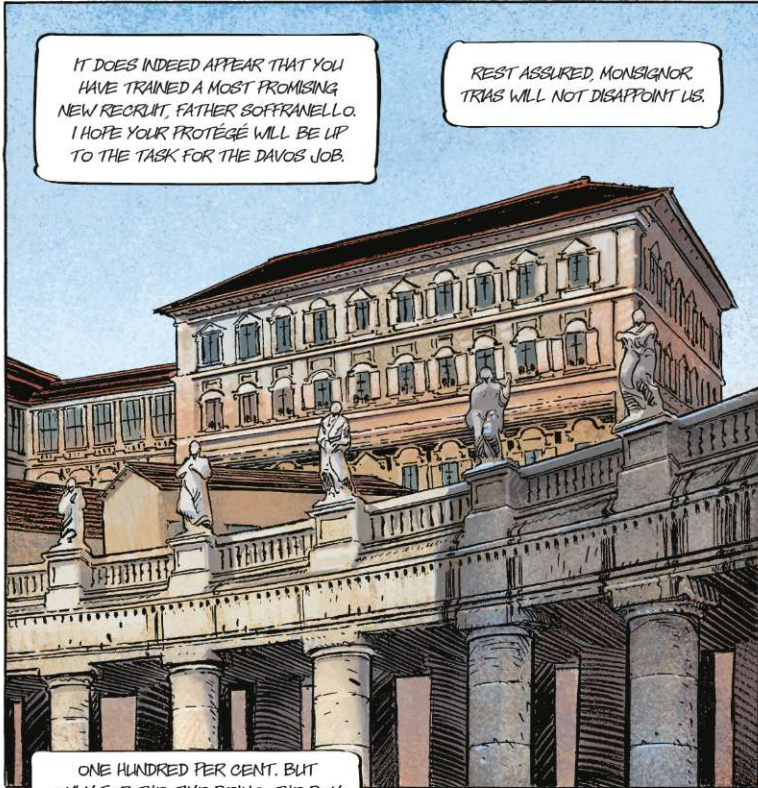


WHAT THE--?



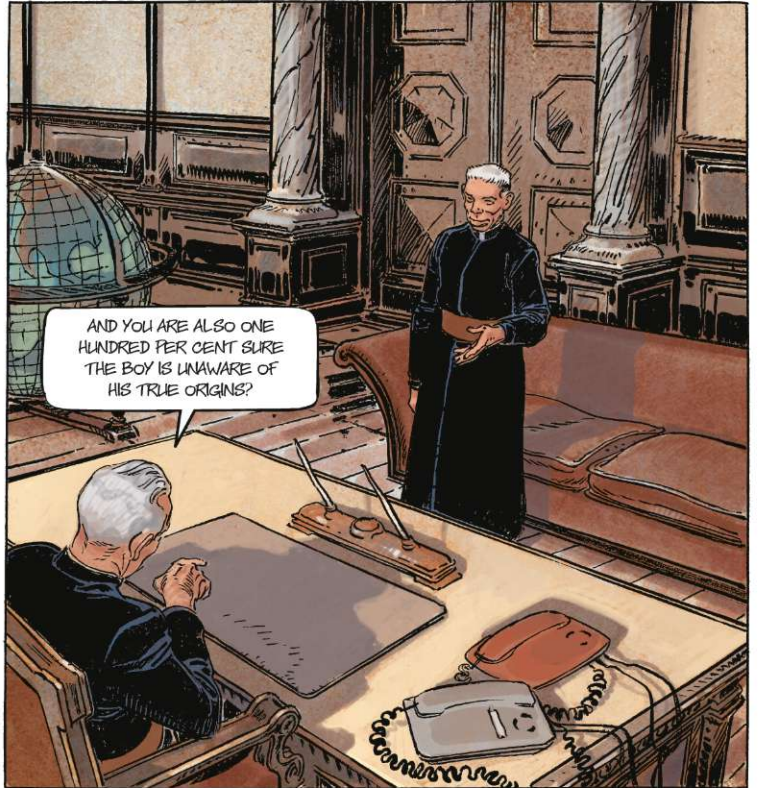




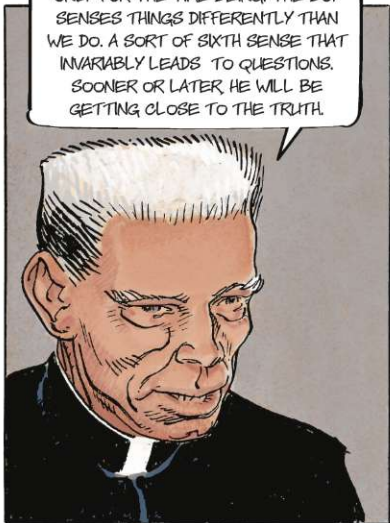


IT DOES INDEED APPEAR THAT YOU HAVE TRAINED A MOST PROMISING NEW RECRUIT, FATHER SOFFRANELLO. I HOPE YOUR PROTÉGÉ WILL BE UP TO THE TASK FOR THE DAVOS JOB.

REST ASSURED, MONSIGNOR. TRIAS WILL NOT DISAPPOINT US.



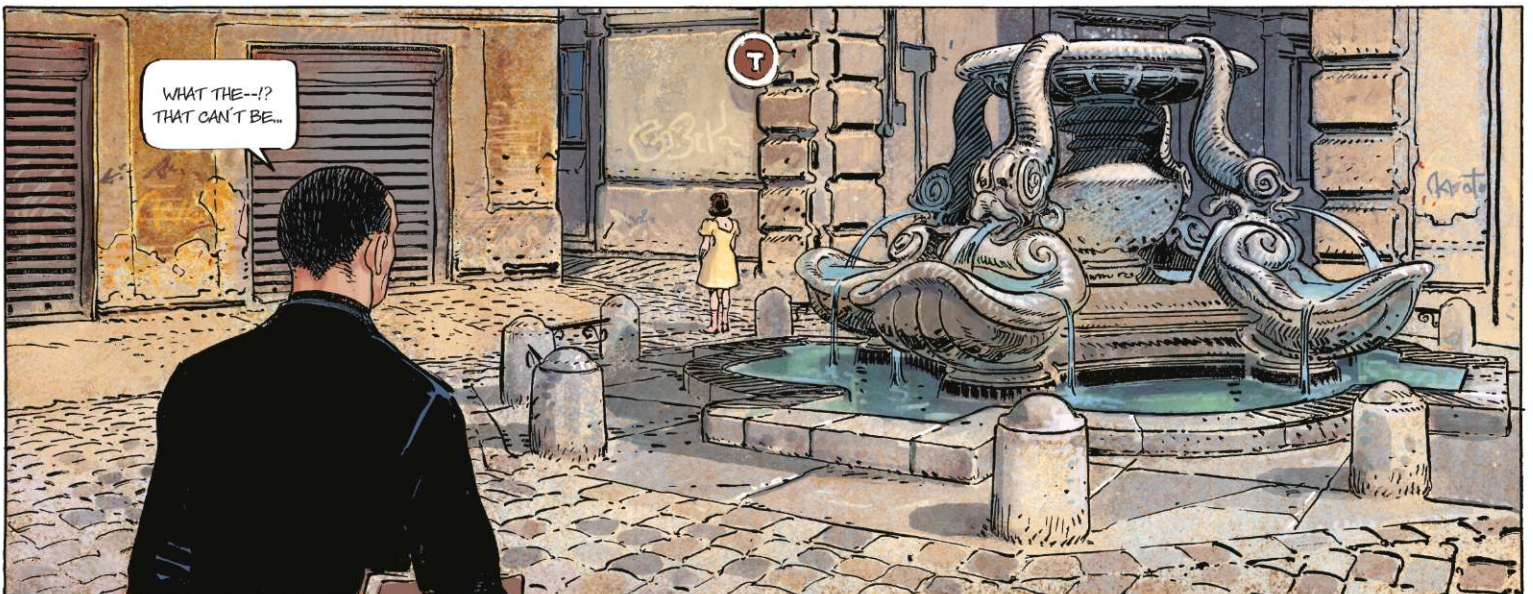
AND YOU ARE ALSO ONE HUNDRED PER CENT SURE THE BOY IS UNAWARE OF HIS TRUE ORIGINS?



ONE HUNDRED PER CENT, BUT ONLY FOR THE TIME BEING. THE BOY SENSES THINGS DIFFERENTLY THAN WE DO. A SORT OF SIXTH SENSE THAT INVARIABLY LEADS TO QUESTIONS. SOONER OR LATER HE WILL BE GETTING CLOSE TO THE TRUTH.



BETTER BEAT HIM TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH. DON'T FORGET.



WHAT THE--!? THAT CAN'T BE...

T



WHO ARE YOU, LITTLE GIRL? ARE YOU THE ONE I SAW IN MALTA?

YES, THAT WAS ME.



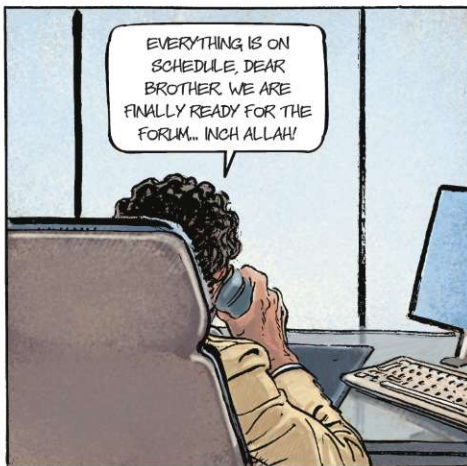
I'VE BEEN WATCHING OVER YOU SINCE YOU WERE BORN, VINCE. TRUST ME, OKAY? NOW THAT YOU'VE BECOME TRIAS, YOU'RE FOLLOWING THEIR PATH.



YOU'VE BEEN WATCHING OVER ME SINCE I WAS BORN? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?



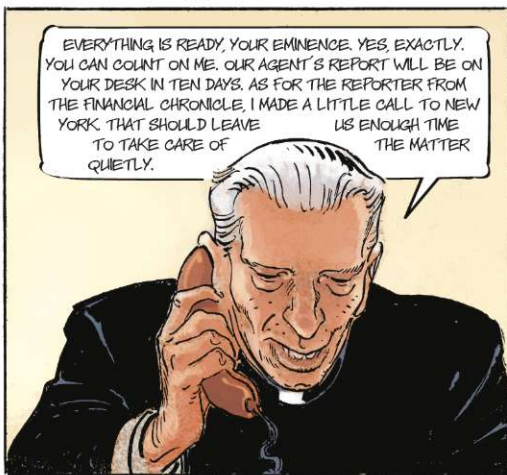
EVERYTHING'S ALL SET, SIR. THE HARD DRIVES ARE ON THE WAY. PARDON ME? NO, THE MINOR COMPLICATIONS HAVE BEEN DEALT WITH.



EVERYTHING IS ON SCHEDULE, DEAR BROTHER. WE ARE FINALLY READY FOR THE FORUM... INCH ALLAH!



OF COURSE WE'RE READY, FATHER! WHAT'S THAT? A BODYGUARD? I REALLY DON'T THINK THAT'S NECESSARY... WELL, ALL RIGHT, IF THE SECRETARY OF STATE INSISTS... PLEASE THANK HIS EMINENCE FOR US... YES, THANK YOU.



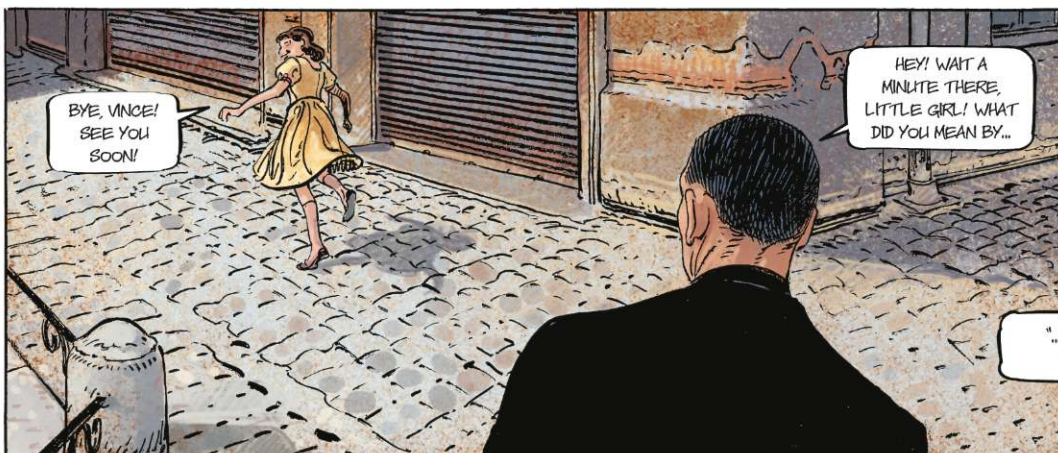
EVERYTHING IS READY, YOUR EMINENCE. YES, EXACTLY. YOU CAN COUNT ON ME. OUR AGENT'S REPORT WILL BE ON YOUR DESK IN TEN DAYS. AS FOR THE REPORTER FROM THE FINANCIAL CHRONICLE, I MADE A LITTLE CALL TO NEW YORK THAT SHOULD LEAVE US ENOUGH TIME TO TAKE CARE OF THE MATTER QUIETLY.



OKAY, OKAY, YOU'RE THE BOSS... STILL, THOUGH YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT THE MOVEMENTS OF THESE CAPITAL ASSETS. IT LOOKS LIKE THE VATICAN IS TRYING TO... ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT! YEAH, NOTHING BUT THE FORUM FOR A WEEK, GOT IT.



HELLO? HELLO? YES, I... I'M HAVING A HARD TIME HEARING YOU, BROTHER. YES, I JUST WANTED TO SEND YOU A BUTTON FROM A CASSOCK. THAT'S RIGHT, A CASSOCK! I NEED IT FOR MY ANALYSIS REPORT. THAT'S RIGHT, YES. THANK YOU. HELLO? HELLO?



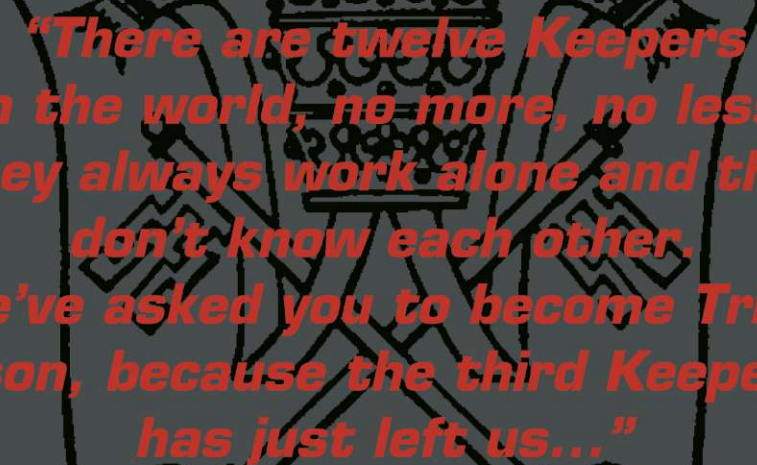
BYE, VINCE! SEE YOU SOON!

HEY! WAIT A MINUTE THERE, LITTLE GIRL! WHAT DID YOU MEAN BY...



"...I'M FOLLOWING THEIR PATH?"

CONCLUSION TO FOLLOW IN "WEEKEND IN DAVOS."



***“There are twelve Keepers
in the world, no more, no less.
They always work alone and they
don’t know each other.
We’ve asked you to become Trias,
son, because the third Keeper
has just left us...”***

