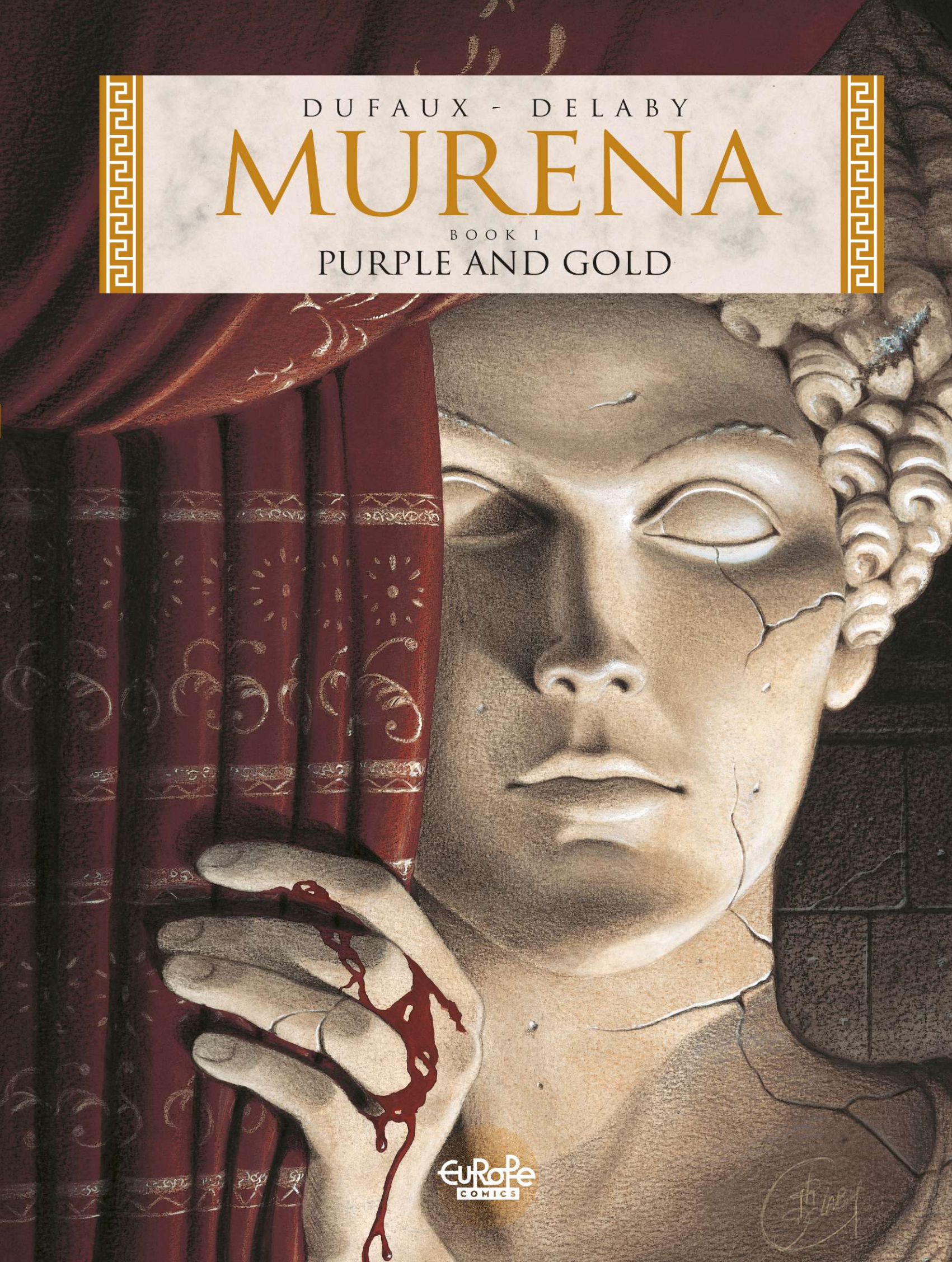


DUFAUX - DELABY

MURENA

BOOK I

PURPLE AND GOLD



Europe
COMICS

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D U F A U X - D E L A B Y
MURENA
BOOK I
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BOOK

I

PURPLE AND GOLD

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BENELUX



Rome. May, 54 AD. Noon. Emperor Claudius has been watching the fights since dawn. The heat is intolerable. The crowd has left their seats for shade or lunch. Claudius remains where he is.

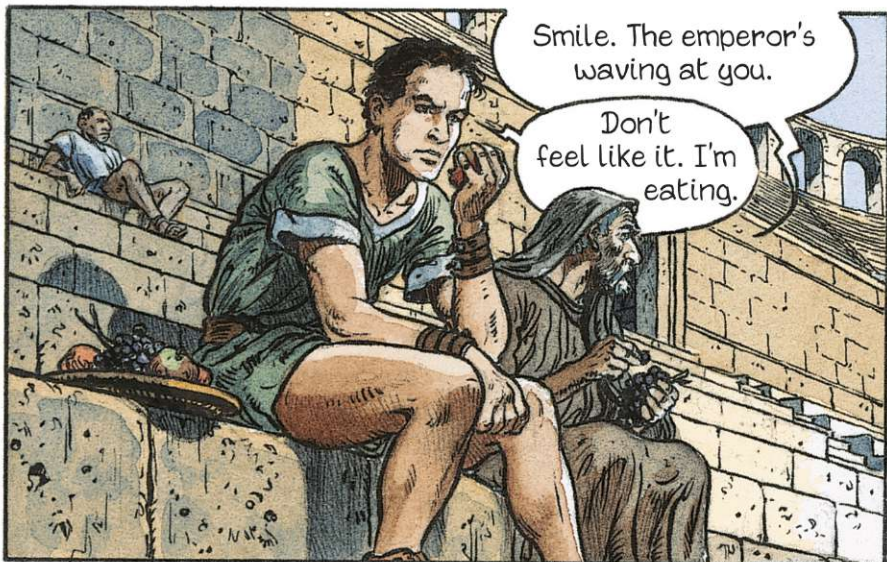


At this hour, only slaves who survived the morning's battles are fighting in the arena. Their bodies, naked and defenseless save for cloth wraps, no longer draw much attention. The groans of the dying go unnoticed.



Smile. The emperor's waving at you.

Don't feel like it. I'm eating.

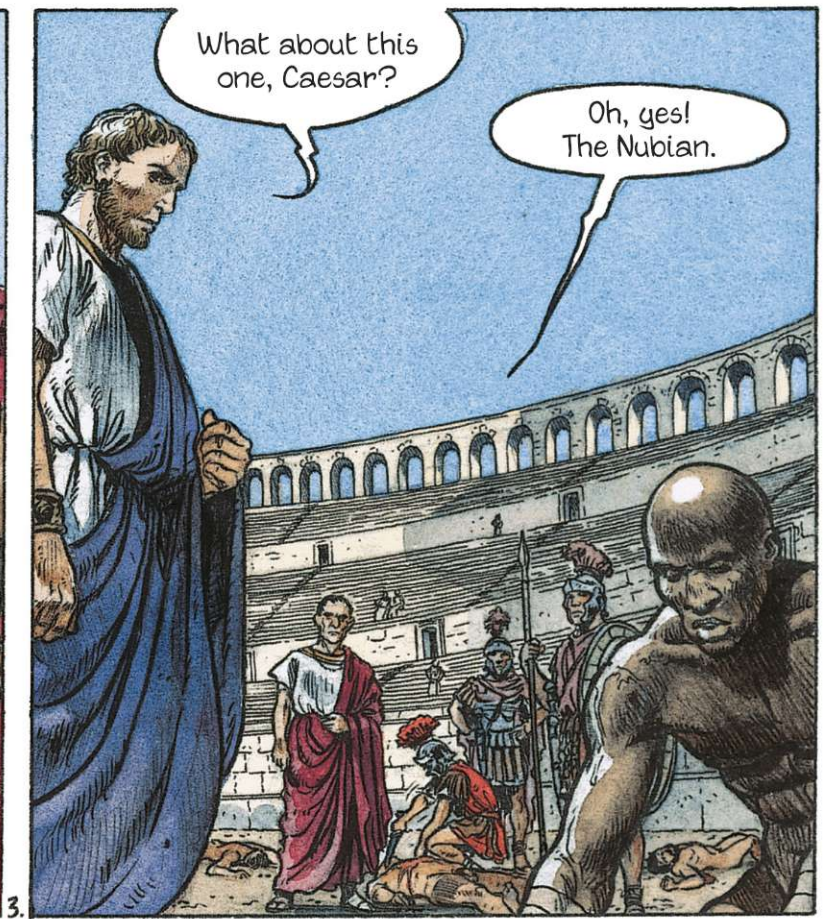
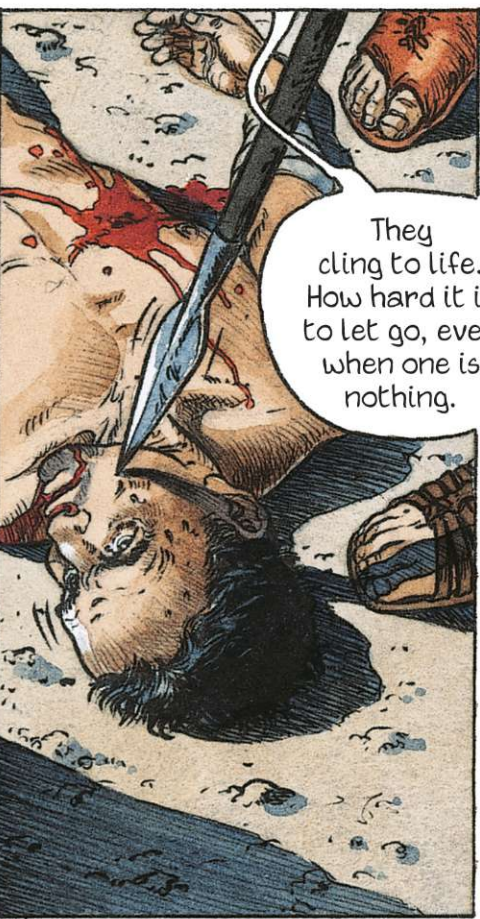
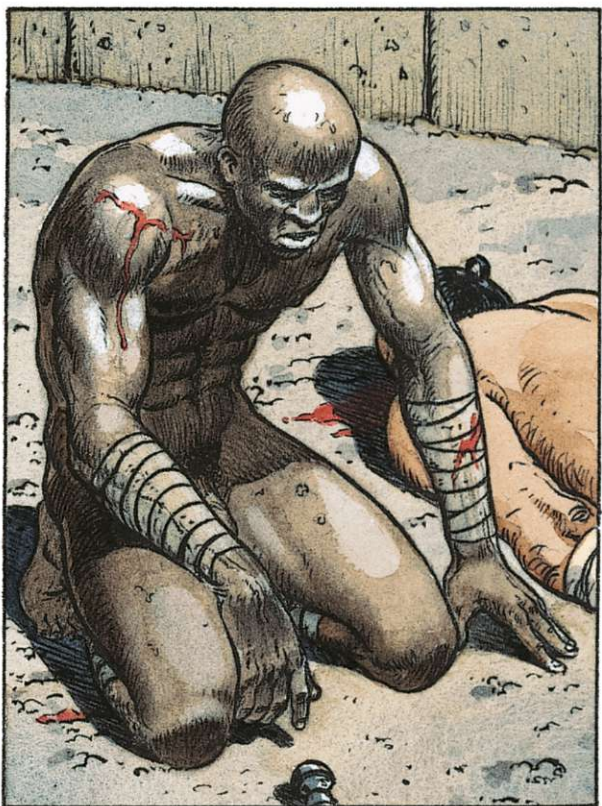
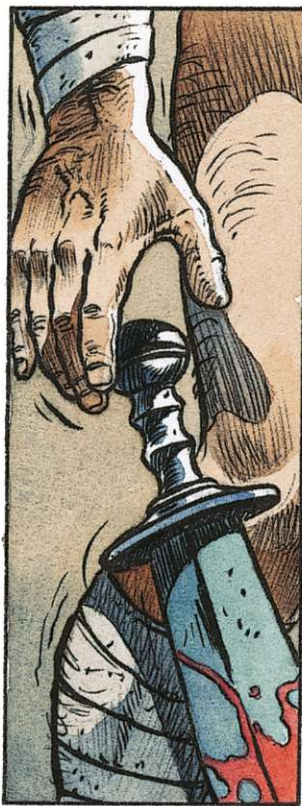


Careful, or you'll wear out his patience.

He's taken what he wanted already. I have nothing more to give.









He's quite lucky.

He should have died.



But he fought valiantly. I am inclined to grant him pardon.



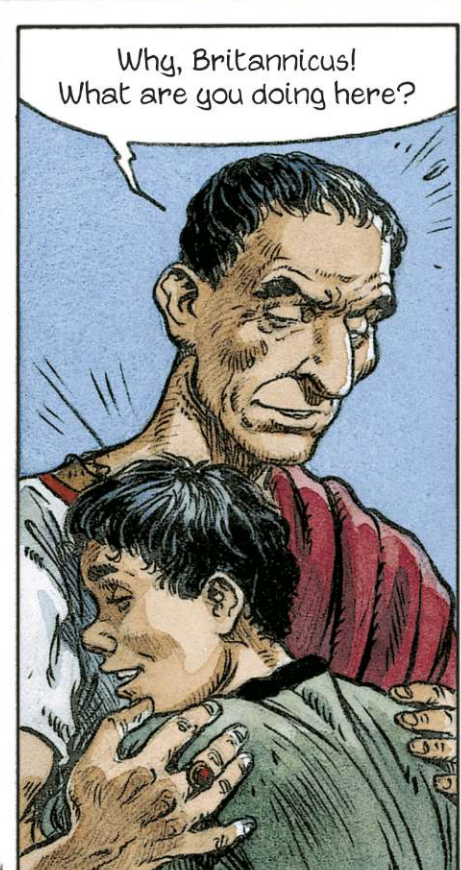
You! Slave! Caesar is waiting! Implore his mercy!



Brute! How dare you defy the emperor?! You shall die!

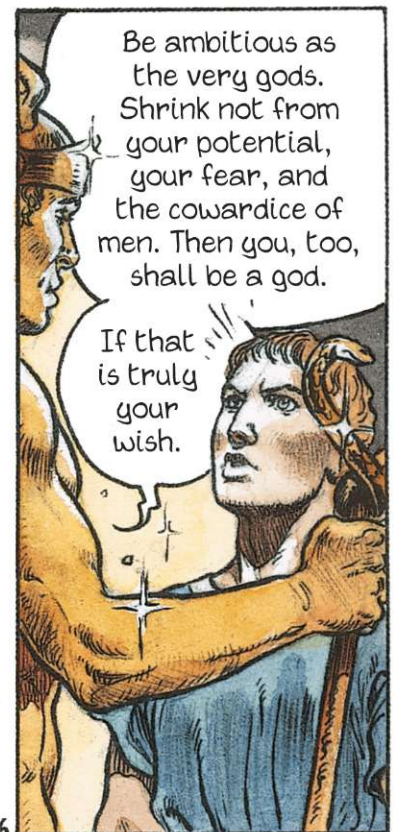
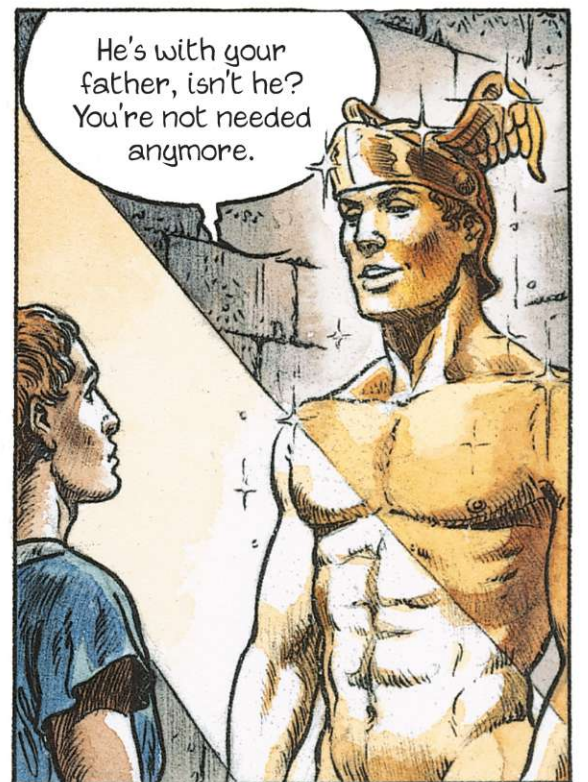
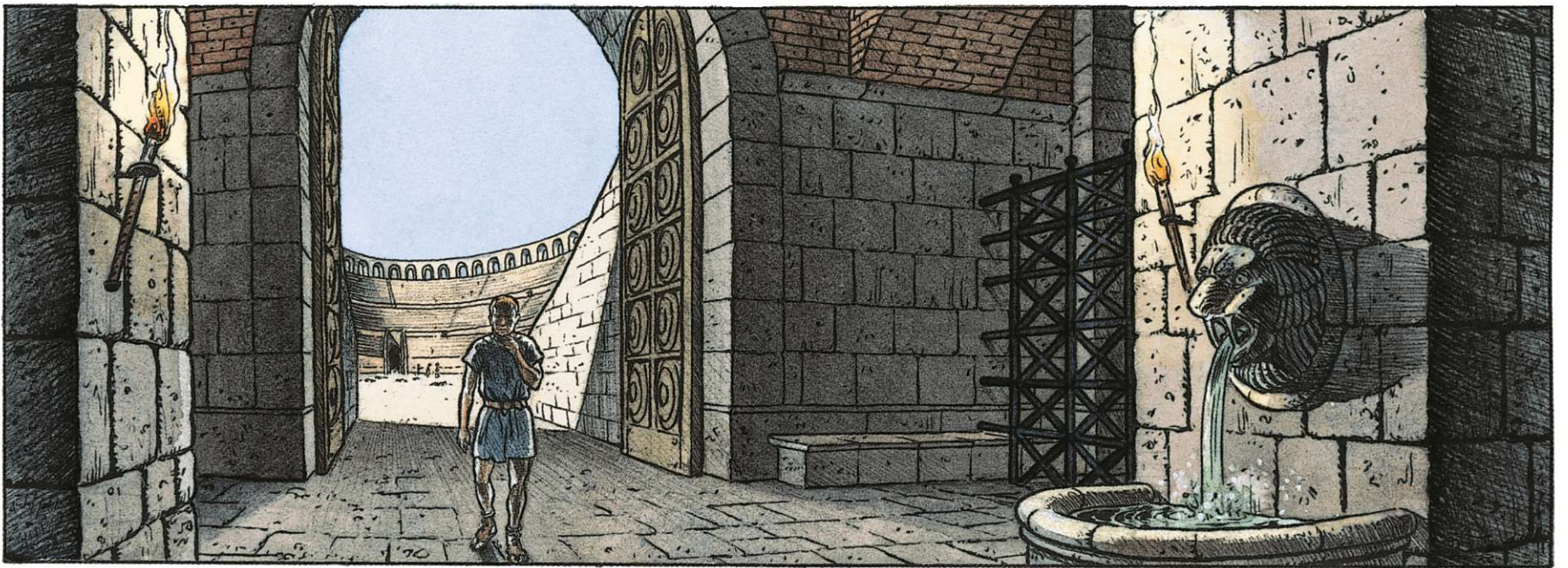


SPARE HIM, FATHER! I BEG YOU!!



Why, Britannicus! What are you doing here?





It is. I want to be free to make my own choices, and not have to depend on anyone.



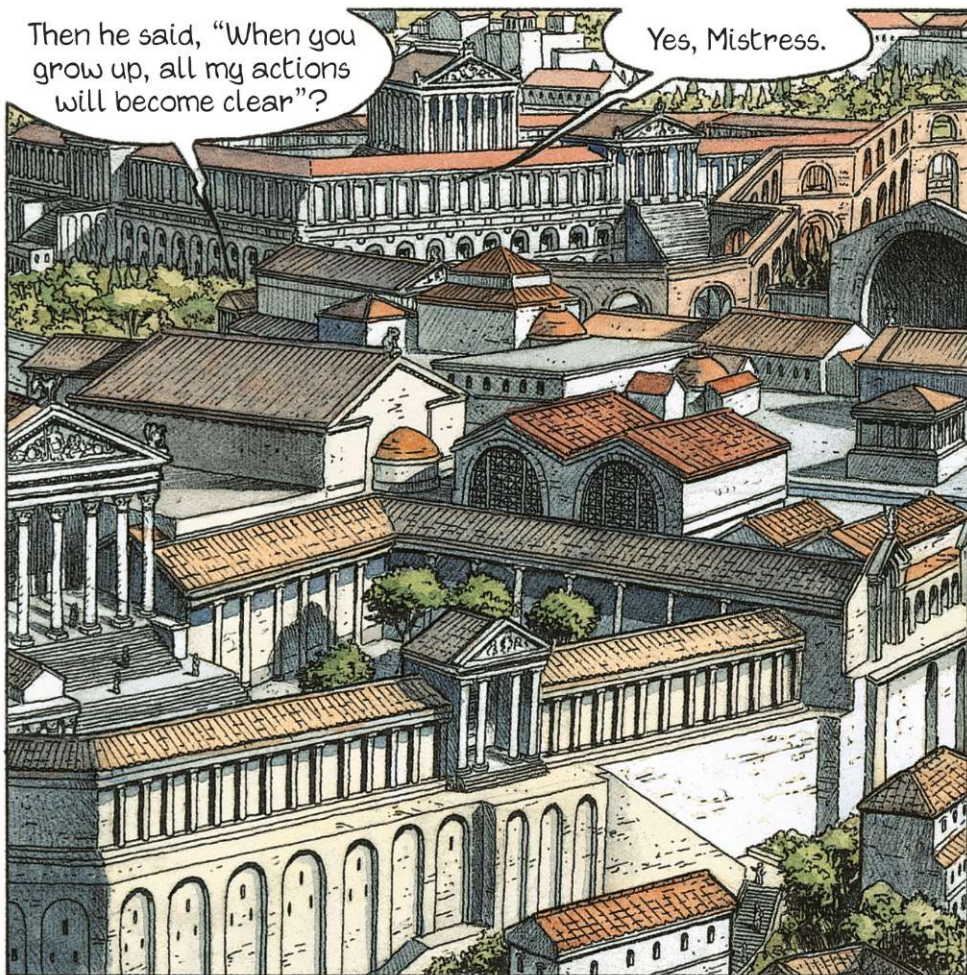
Then the sacred fire inside you shall rise unto Olympus itself, where ambrosia and nectar will be poured in your honor.



Go, Lucius Domitius Nero! Glory and fortune shall be yours. If you follow my light.

OUR
light.

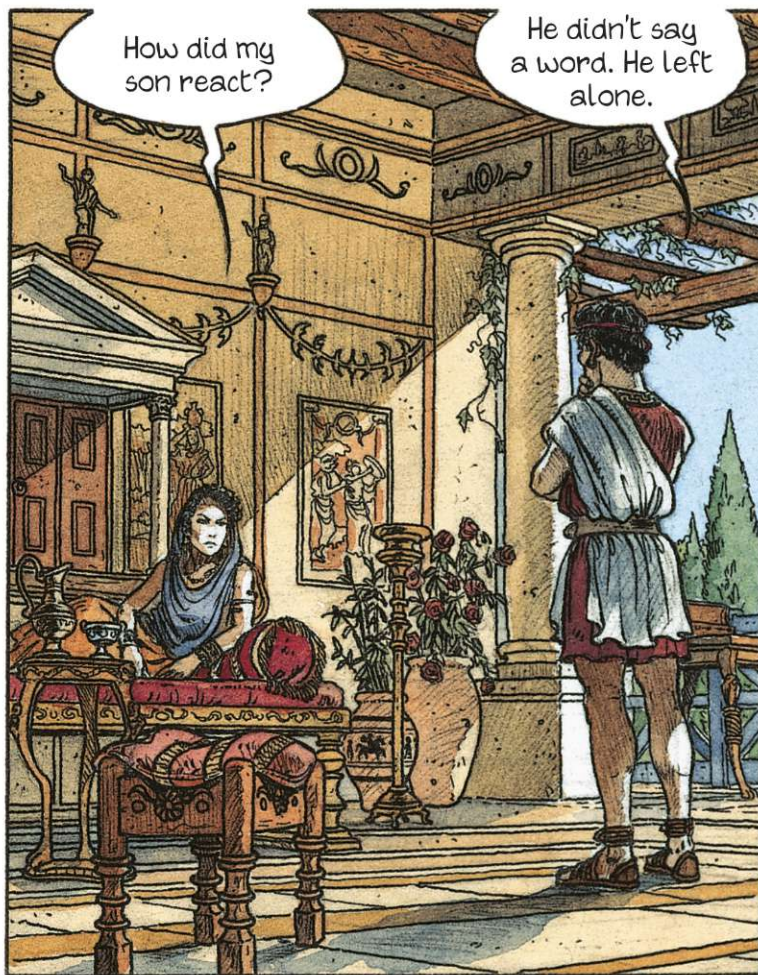
Then he said, "When you grow up, all my actions will become clear"?



Yes, Mistress.

How did my son react?

He didn't say a word. He left alone.



Hmm...and what do the courtiers think?

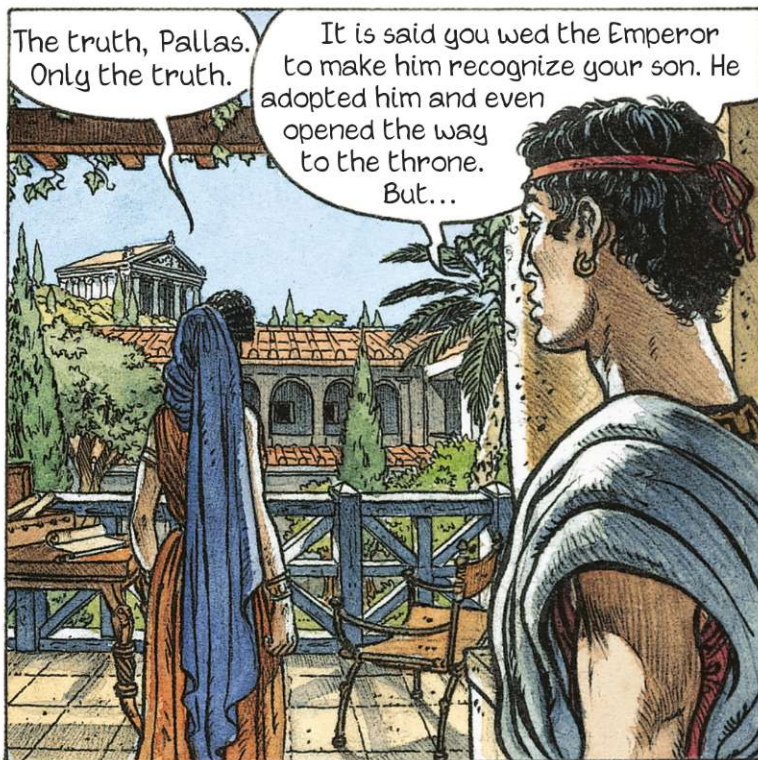


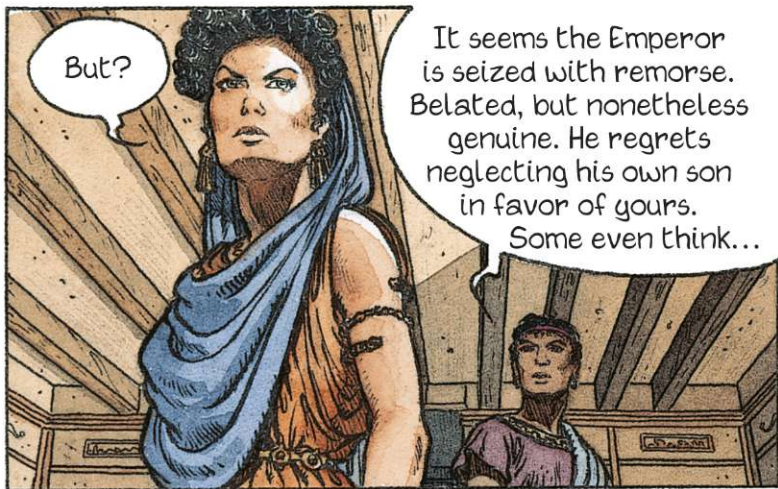
Sometimes the truth is hard to accept, Mistress.



The truth, Pallas. Only the truth.

It is said you wed the Emperor to make him recognize your son. He adopted him and even opened the way to the throne. But...



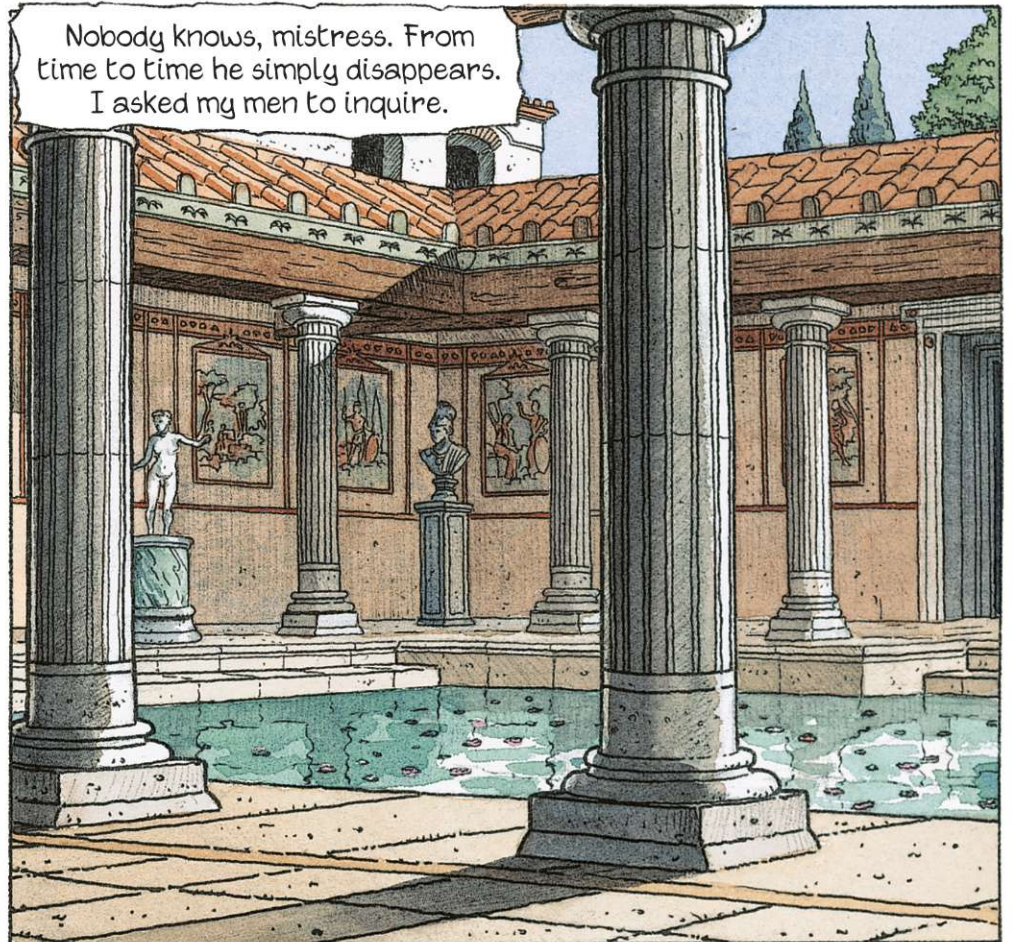


But?

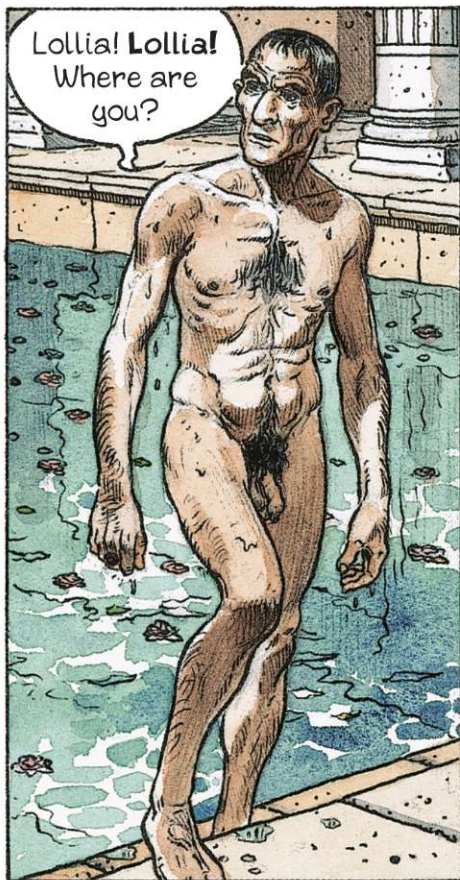
It seems the Emperor is seized with remorse. Belated, but nonetheless genuine. He regrets neglecting his own son in favor of yours. Some even think...



That he could change his mind again about the throne. Britannicus could still be in the running... Where is the Emperor?



Nobody knows, mistress. From time to time he simply disappears. I asked my men to inquire.



Lollia! Lollia! Where are you?

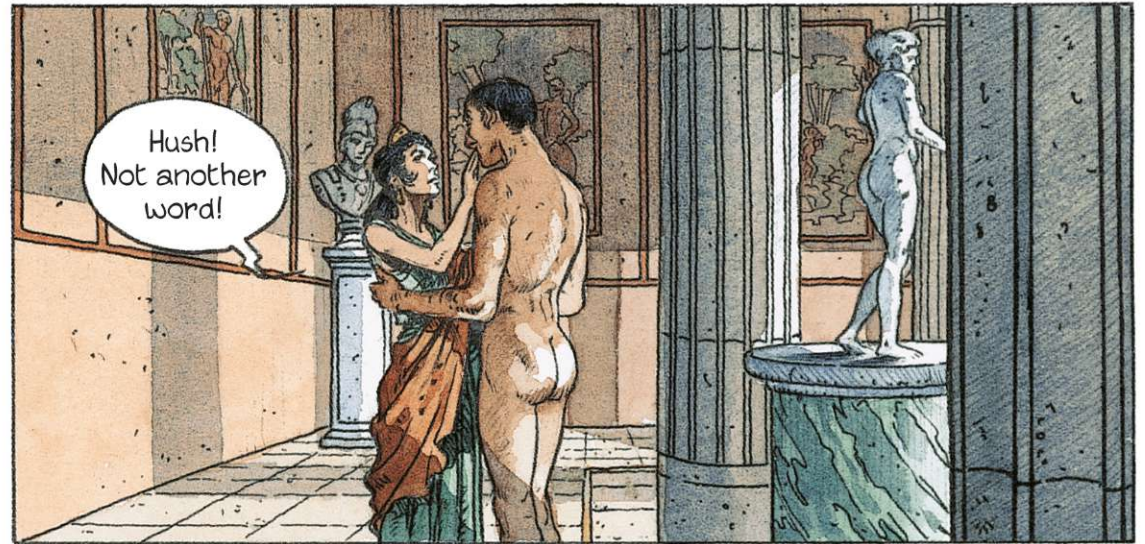
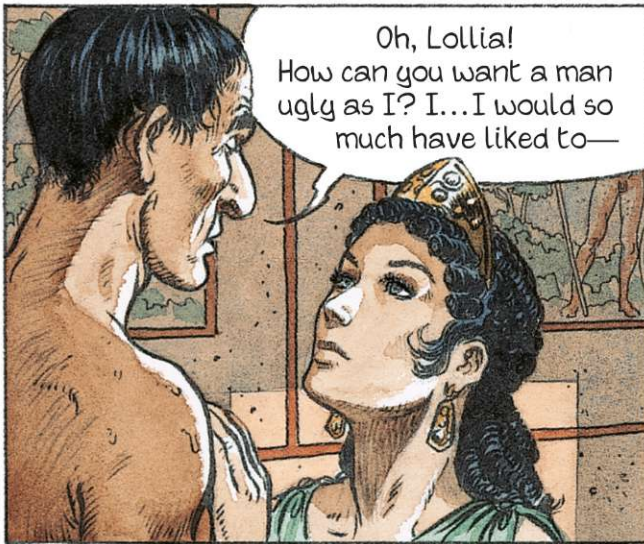
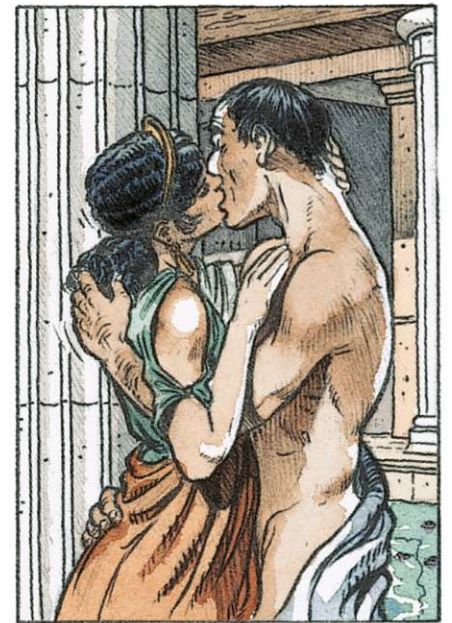
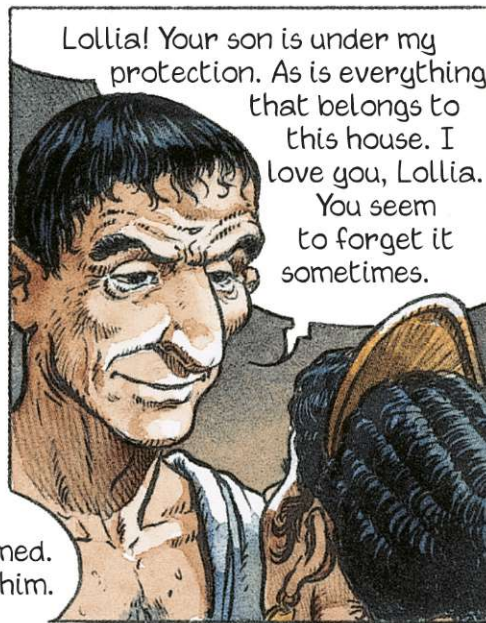


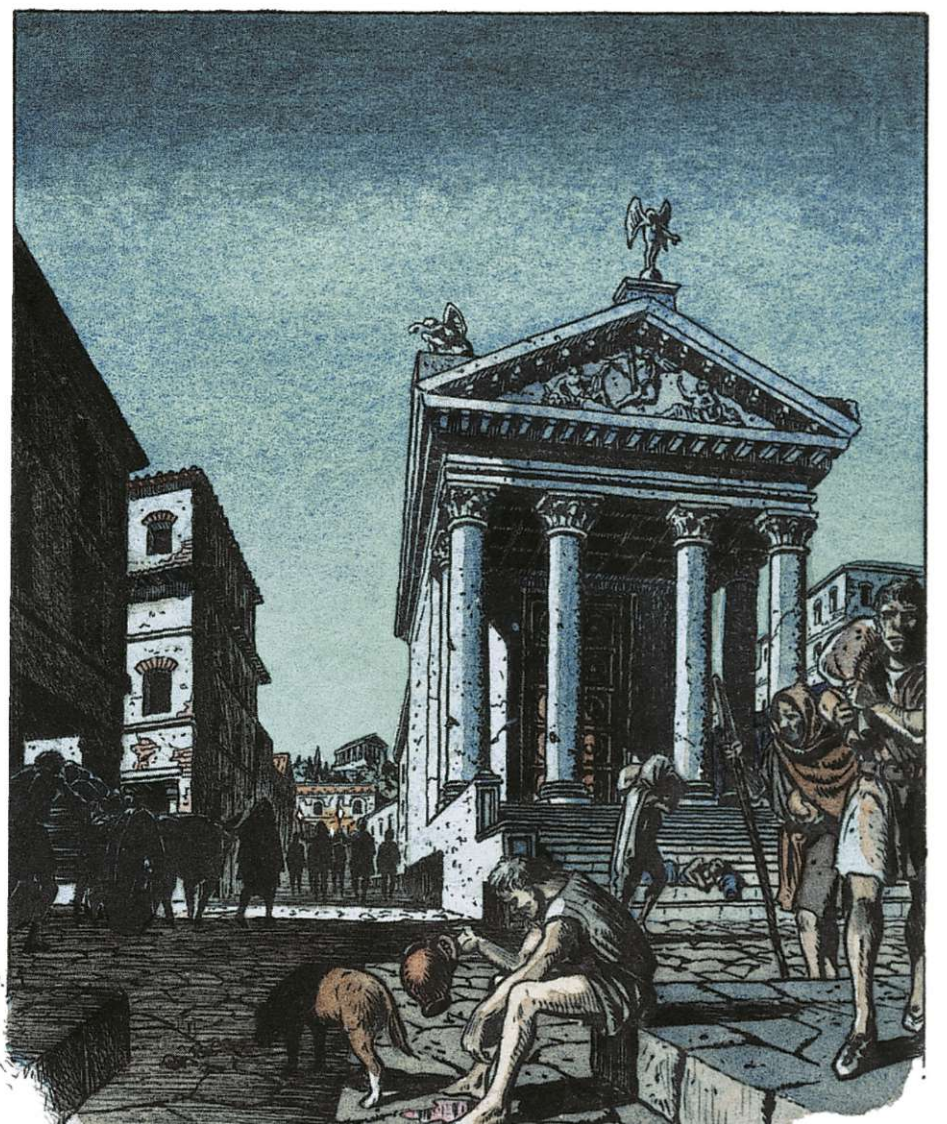
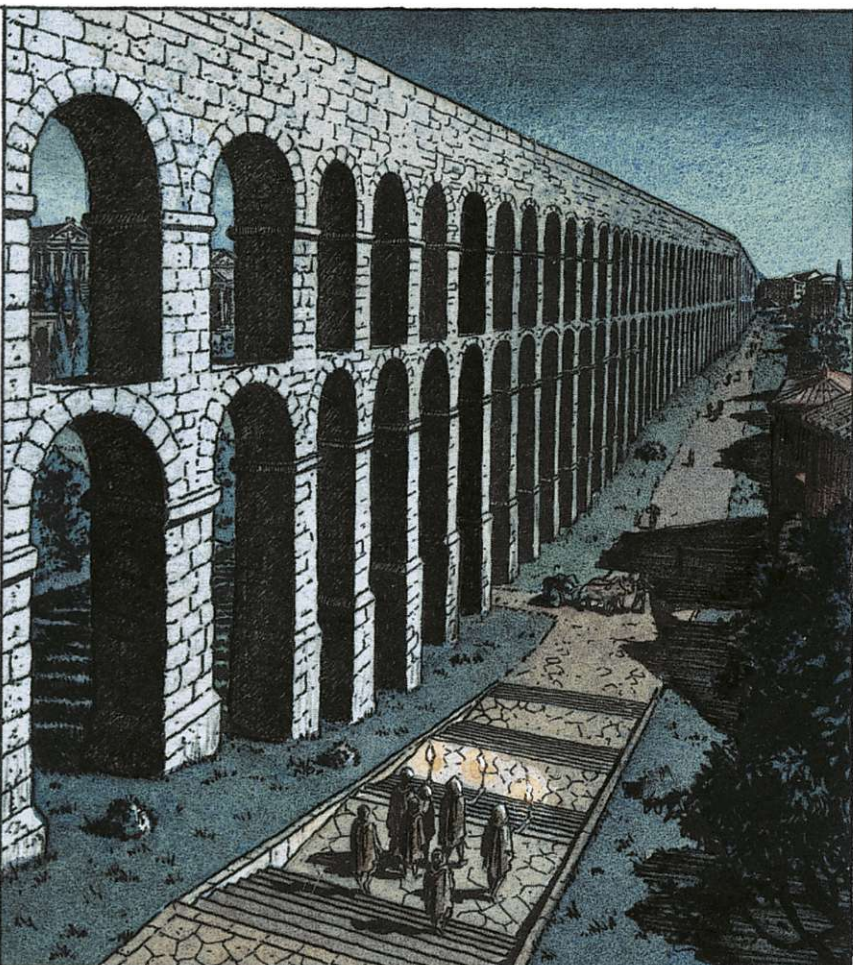
Hurry! I'm cold.



I called. Where were you?

I was with my son. He saw you this morning at the games. It seems you pardoned a slave?



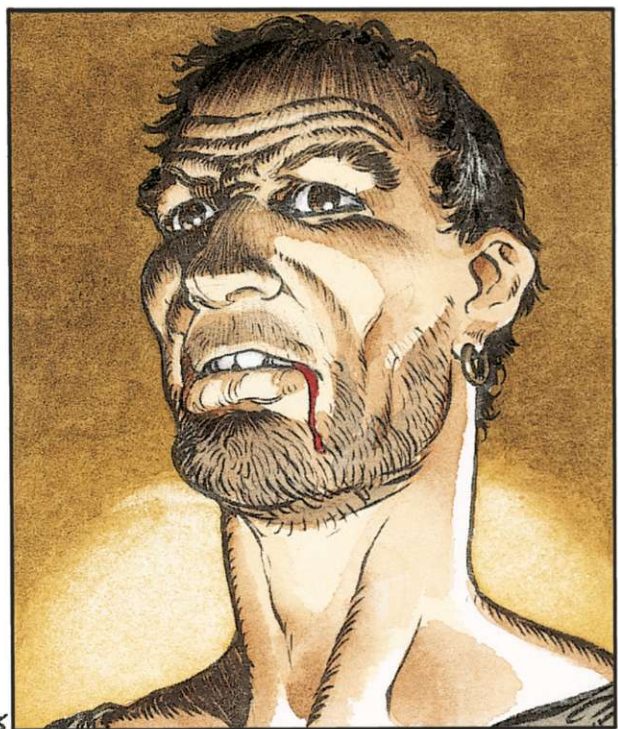














AAAAA



ARGLL...
I can't breathe!



Too soon!



He's not moving.
He's dead!



Your poison is too strong. Too fast. It betrays our crime.

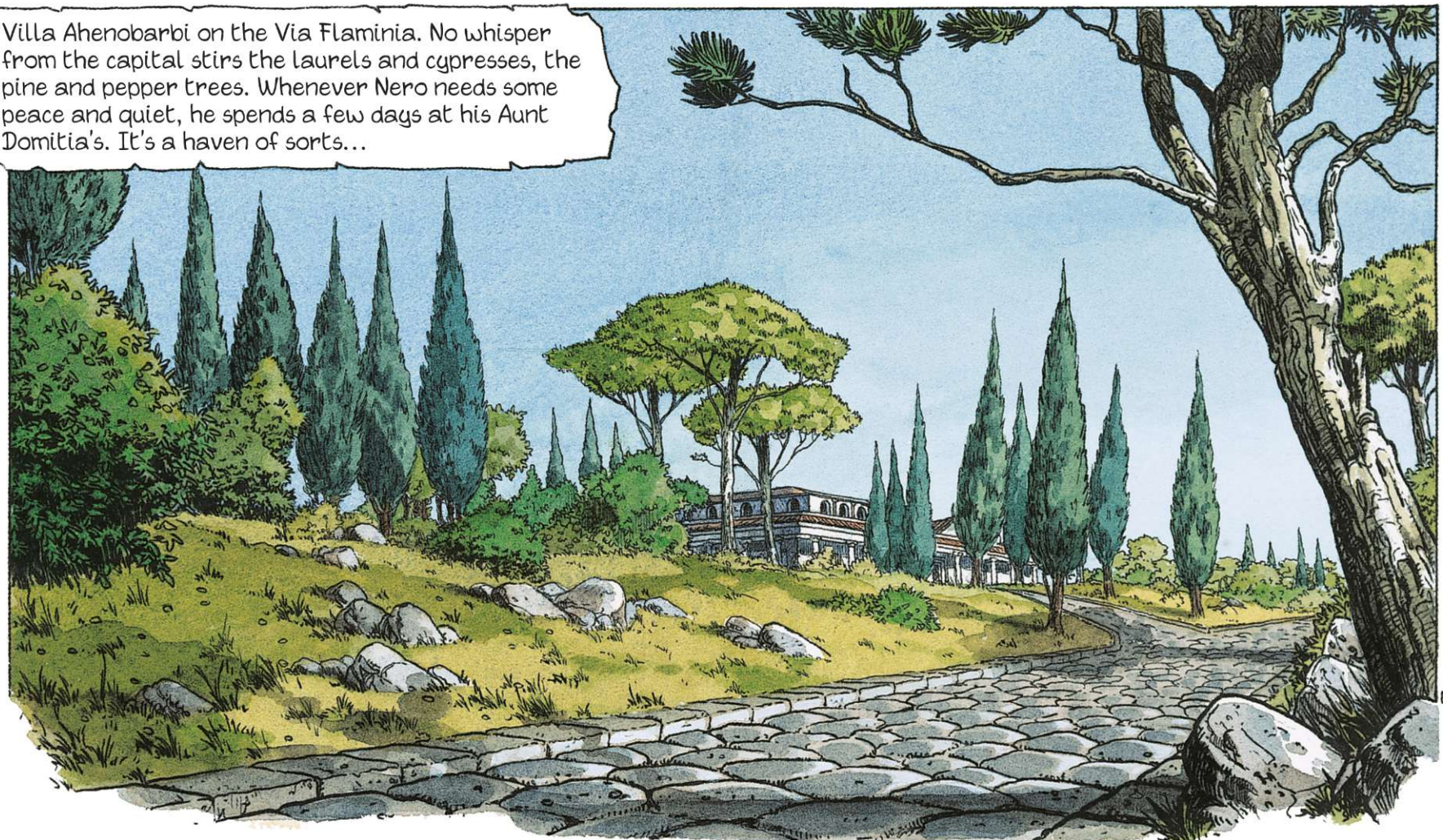
Yes, but if it works only slowly, insidiously, we risk arousing the victim's suspicions.



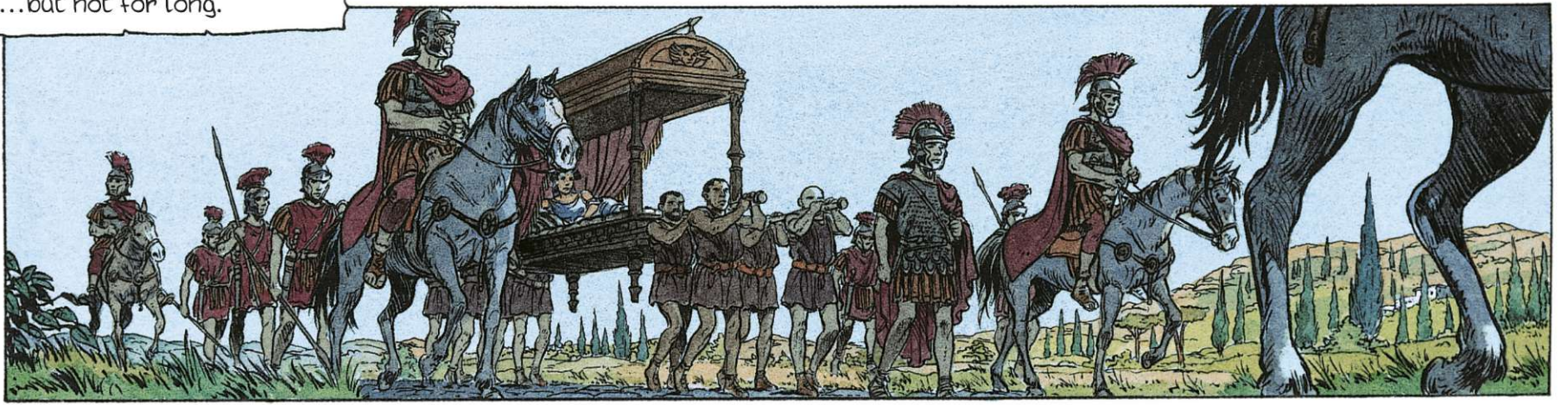
It's not easy!

You can do better. Try again! I'll be back in a few days.

Villa Ahenobarbi on the Via Flaminia. No whisper from the capital stirs the laurels and cypresses, the pine and pepper trees. Whenever Nero needs some peace and quiet, he spends a few days at his Aunt Domitia's. It's a haven of sorts...



...but not for long.



Your mother has left Rome. She's coming for you.

Oh!



To what do I owe this honor?

I don't know.

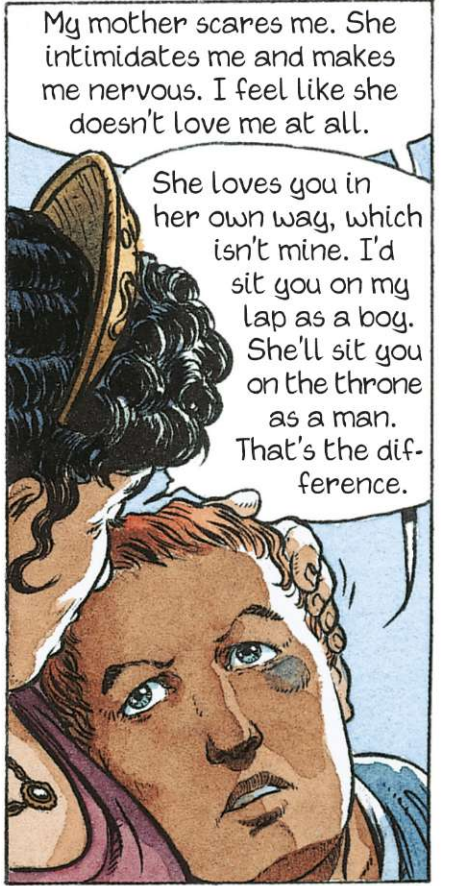


But you don't trust her.

Lucius, you must face facts. When your father died, your mother had little time for you. She entrusted you to me, and I don't think she ever looked back. I raised you as if you were my own. But times have changed.



With no father, no fortune, and no influential friends, the court was never in the cards for you. You'd be a normal boy were it not for your mother's ambition. She loves power, but power is vast. It doesn't leave much room for anything else.



My mother scares me. She intimidates me and makes me nervous. I feel like she doesn't love me at all.

She loves you in her own way, which isn't mine. I'd sit you on my lap as a boy. She'll sit you on the throne as a man. That's the difference.

But she won. She married the Emperor. He gives her everything she wants... and she wants everything!

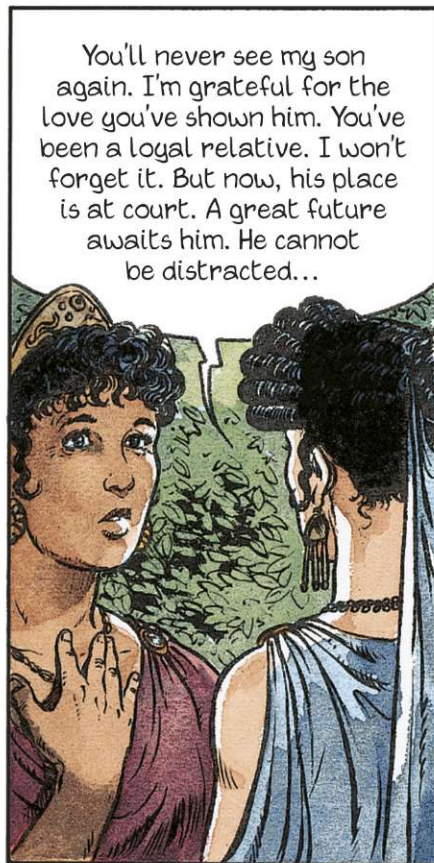






Silly me, losing my temper. He isn't even your concern anymore...

What do you mean?



You'll never see my son again. I'm grateful for the love you've shown him. You've been a loyal relative. I won't forget it. But now, his place is at court. A great future awaits him. He cannot be distracted...



He grows soft here. He must harden his heart.

His heart? You speak to me of hearts, Agrippina? Do you even know what one is?



Believe me, a heart beats in this chest! But I alone say how and when. It has no right to speak!



March, Tiberius Claudius Nero!

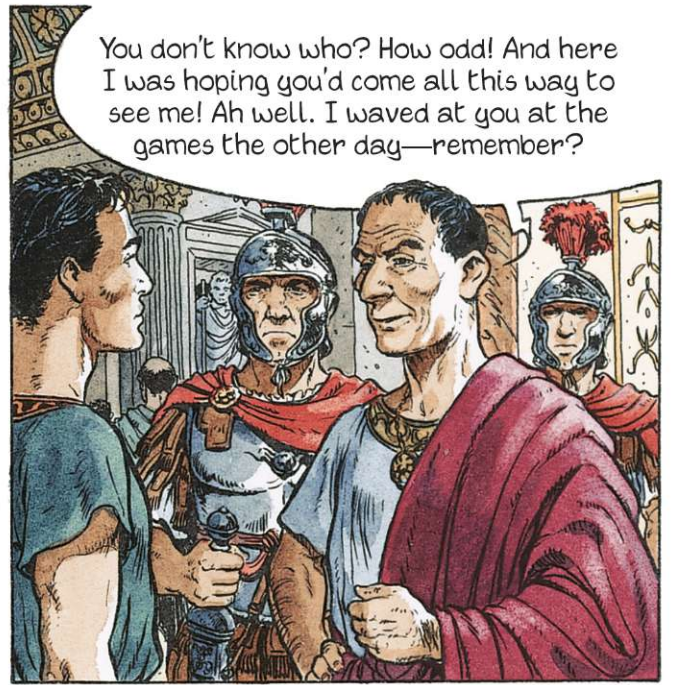
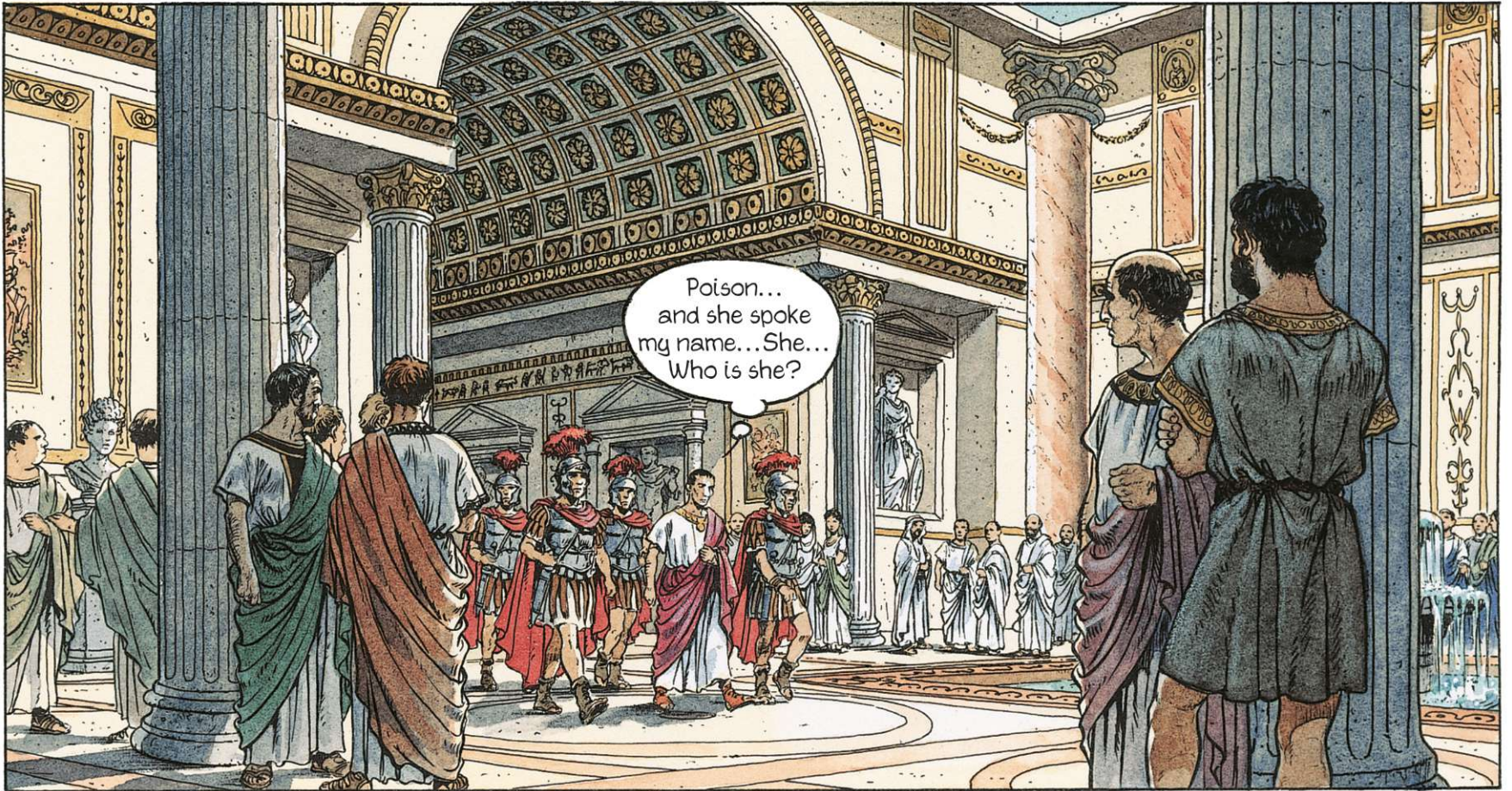


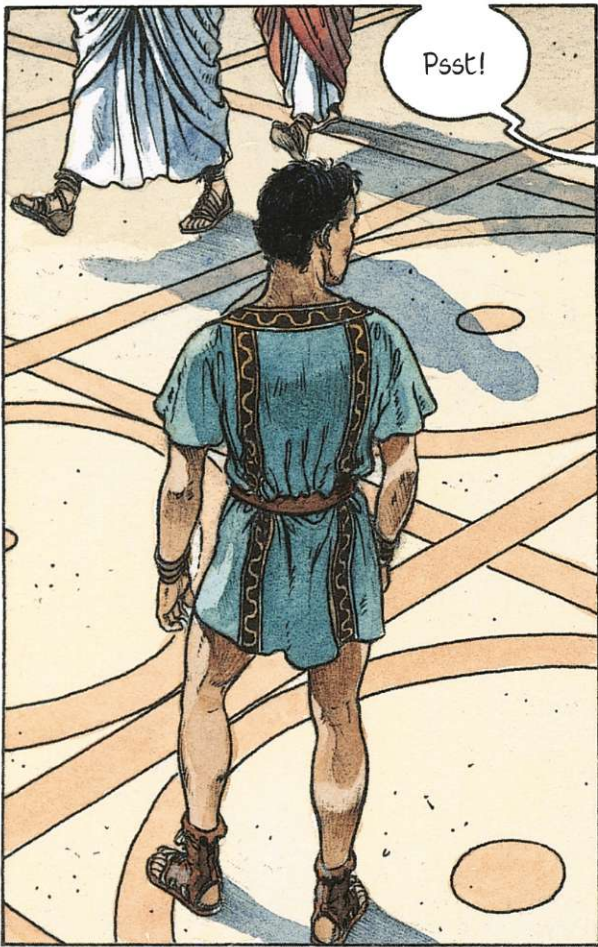
Good luck, my boy! May the gods watch over you...



Farewell, Aunt. I love you. Don't forget me.



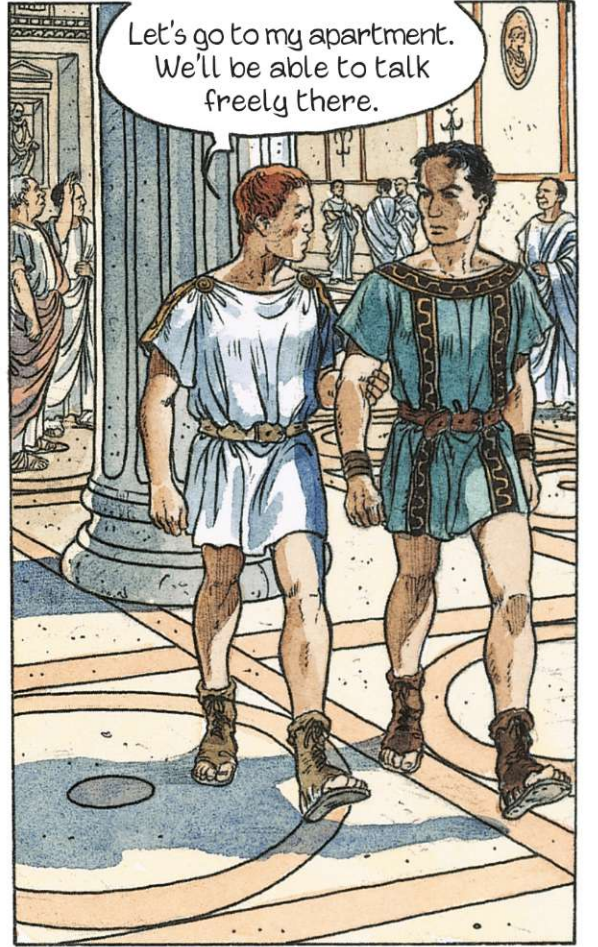




Psst!



Over here!



Let's go to my apartment. We'll be able to talk freely there.



You saved my life last night. Why? Did you recognize me?



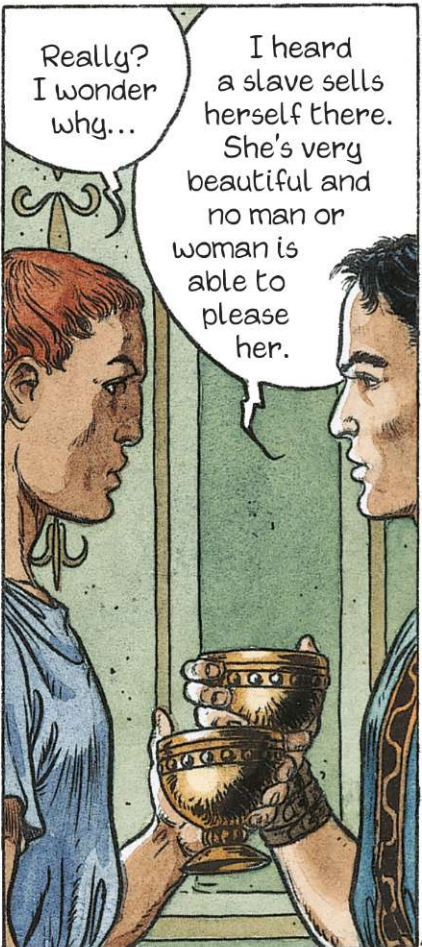
No. It was too dark. I just acted instinctively.

And skillfully. You're good with a sling.



Tell me... What were you doing there? Do you know that house, the one with the guard?

Yes. All Romans know it.



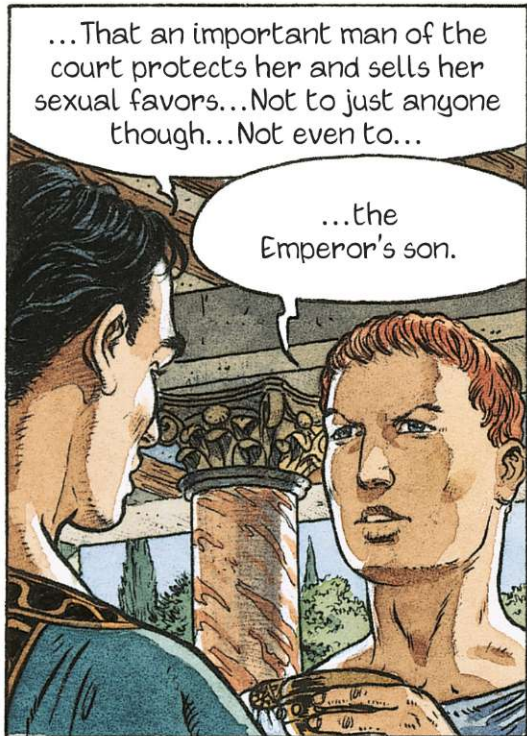
Really? I wonder why...

I heard a slave sells herself there. She's very beautiful and no man or woman is able to please her.



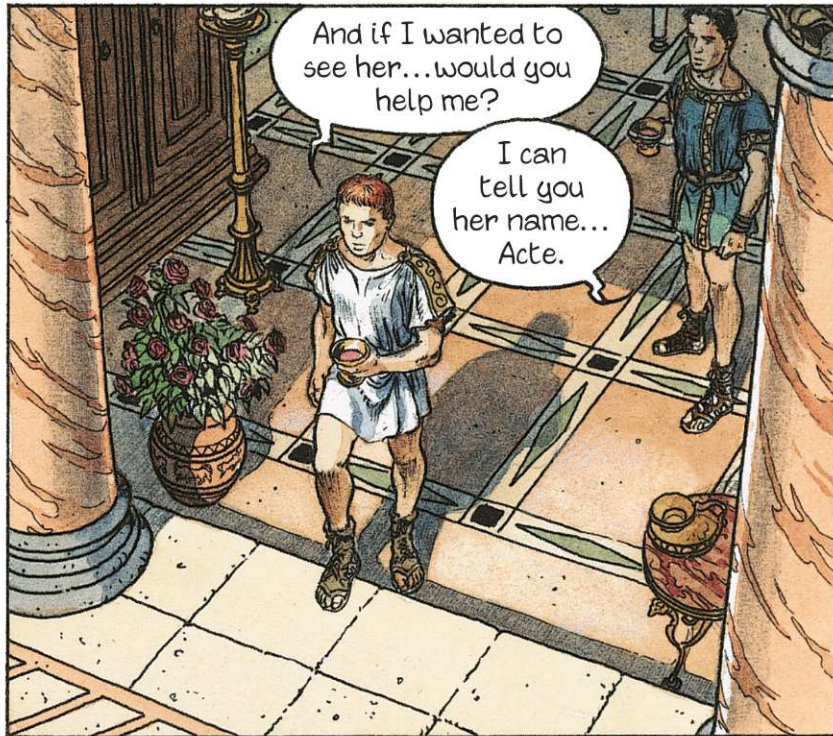
It's also said...

Yes?



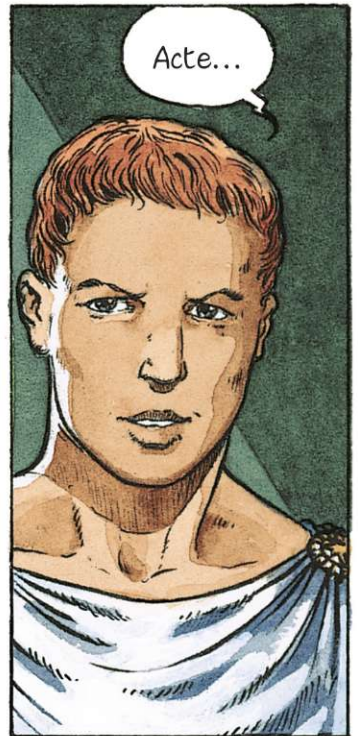
...That an important man of the court protects her and sells her sexual favors... Not to just anyone though... Not even to...

...the Emperor's son.

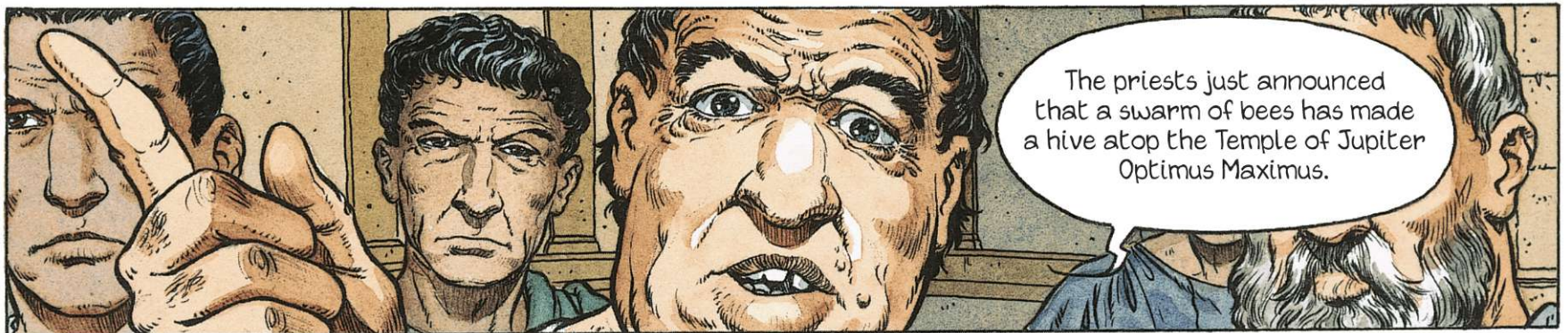


And if I wanted to see her... would you help me?

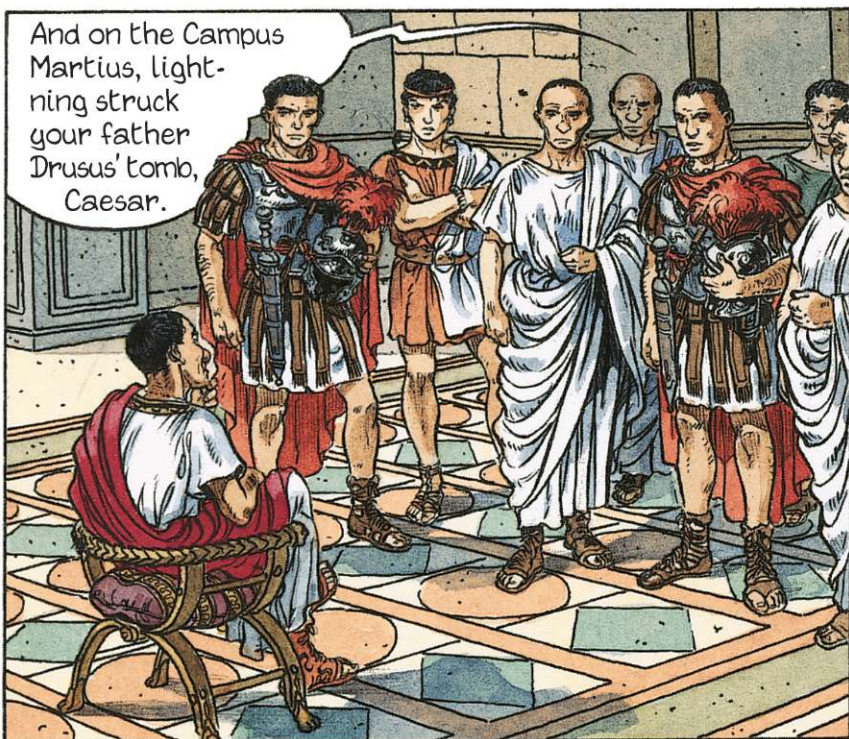
I can tell you her name... Acte.



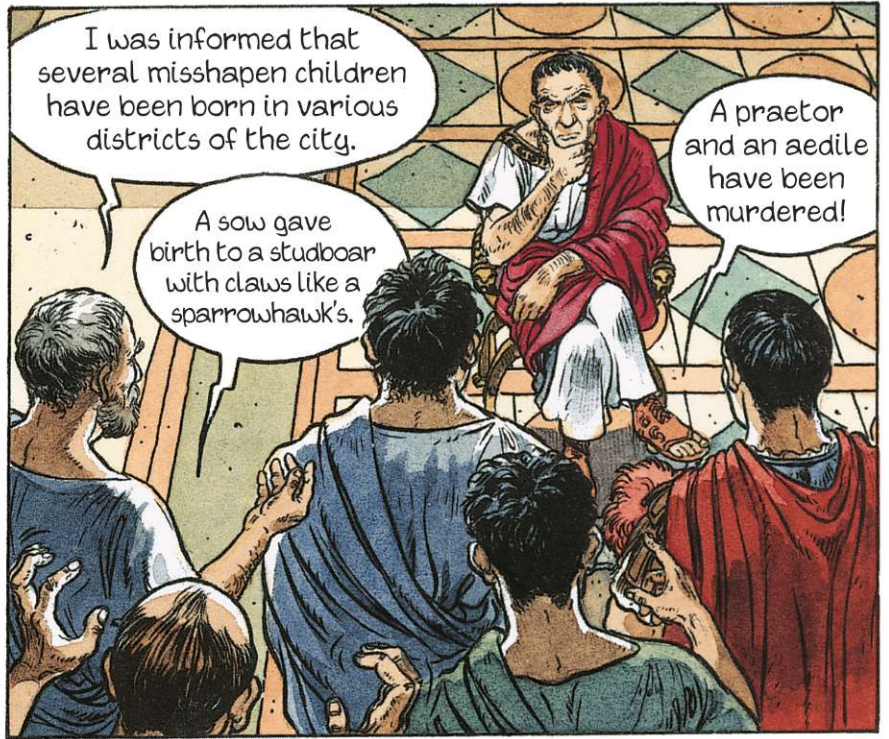
Acte...



The priests just announced that a swarm of bees has made a hive atop the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.



And on the Campus Martius, lightning struck your father Drusus' tomb, Caesar.



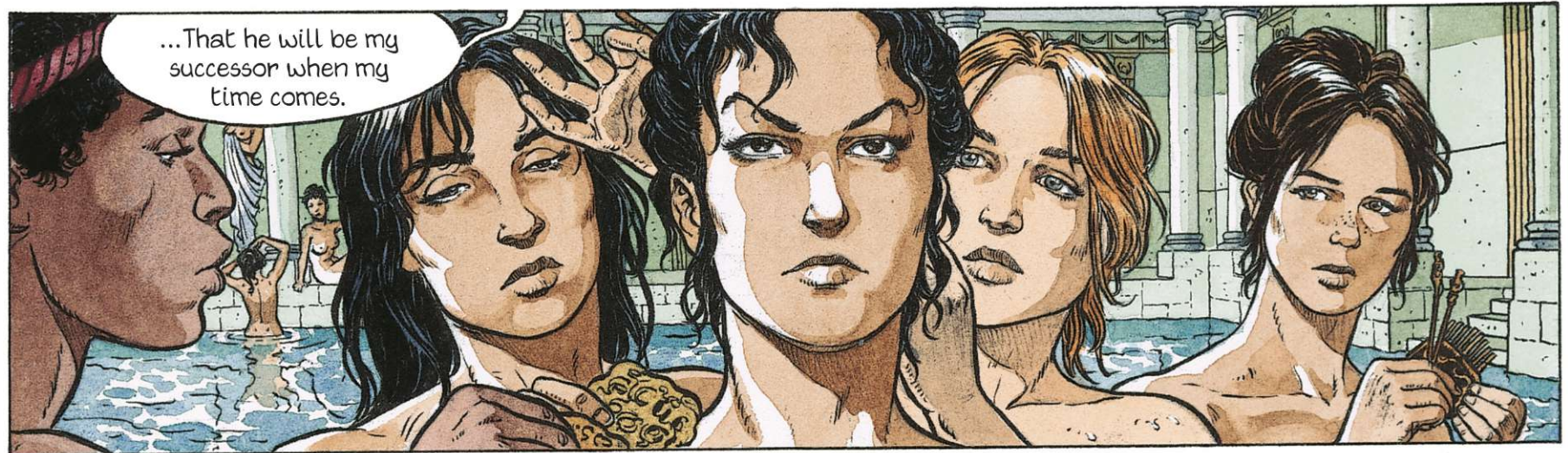
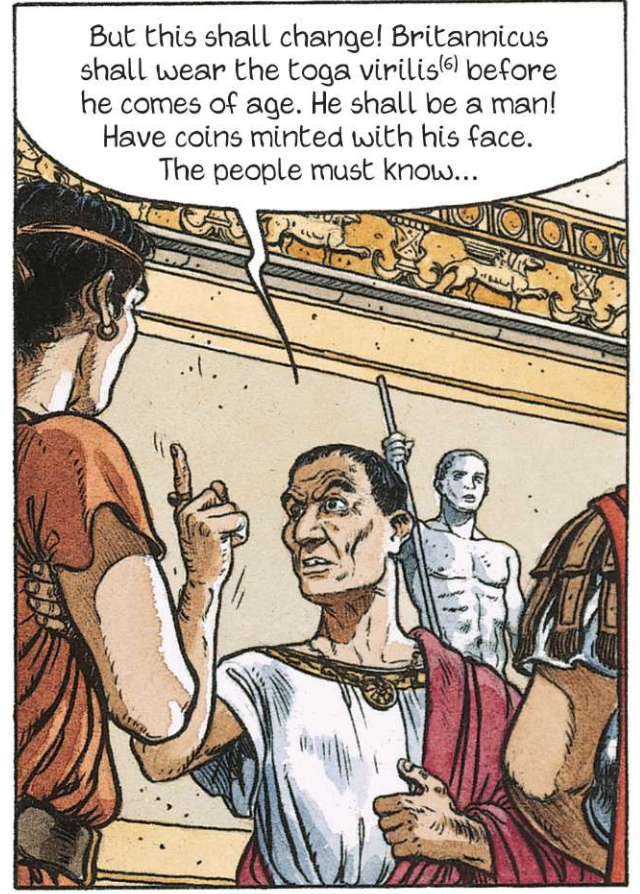
I was informed that several misshapen children have been born in various districts of the city.

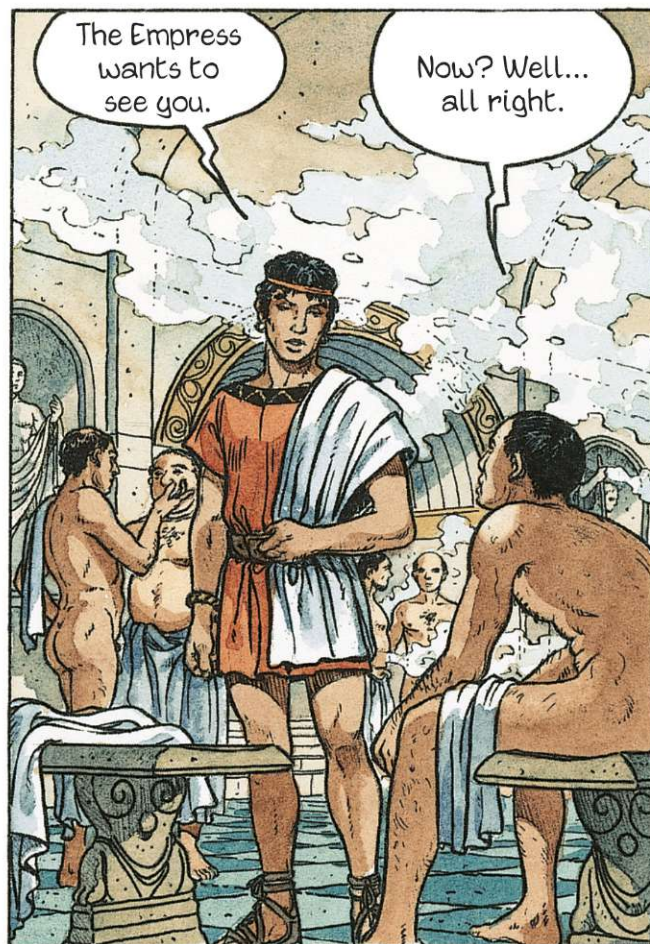
A sow gave birth to a studboar with claws like a sparrowhawk's.

A praetor and an aedile have been murdered!



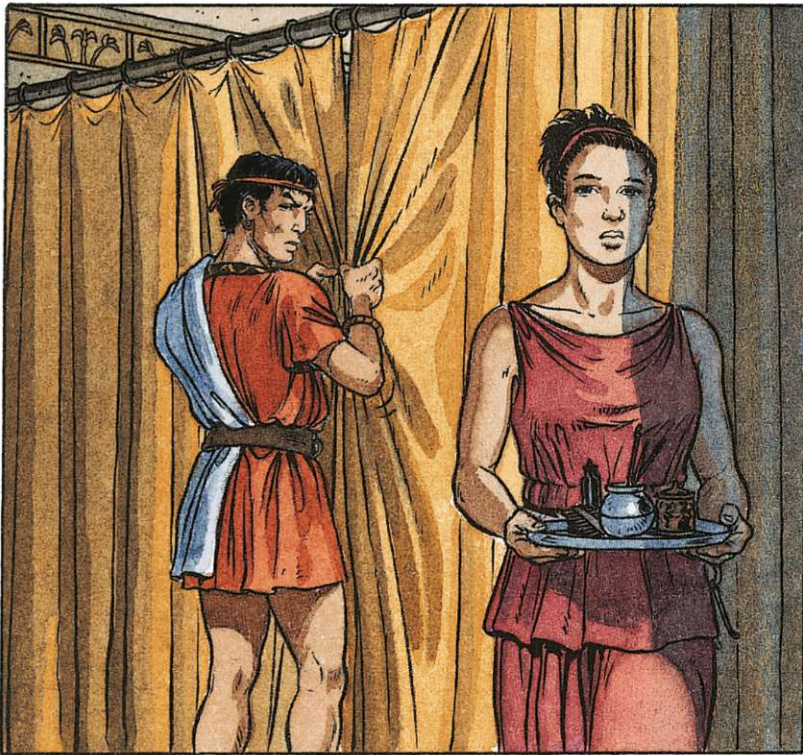
Yes, the time has come for a decision. He who inflicted the wound must now heal it... I made a mistake. Never... Never should I have married that woman.







Leave us.
We are not to be
disturbed.



If you want your son on the throne,
you'll need the support of the Praetorian
Guard. Without them, you can't do
a thing.

I know.
That's why I
invited you
here.



Come sit down beside me.
I have something very important
to tell you.



Let me guess. You need my
help betraying Caesar, my
master. Your husband.

A poor master...
and a poor husband,
who satisfies neither
wife nor empire. Don't
deny it. You think
the same thing.



And will your son be any
better? Who can promise
me that?

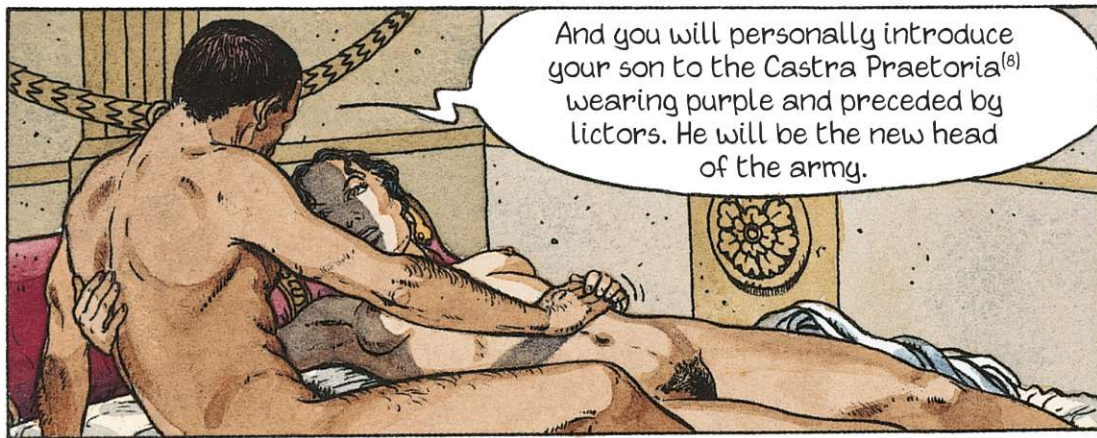
I can!
I will be the
power and he
will be its
face.



You need a man on the throne.
So be it! You will have one.
But womankind will win the
day. I want you to be part
of this victory.



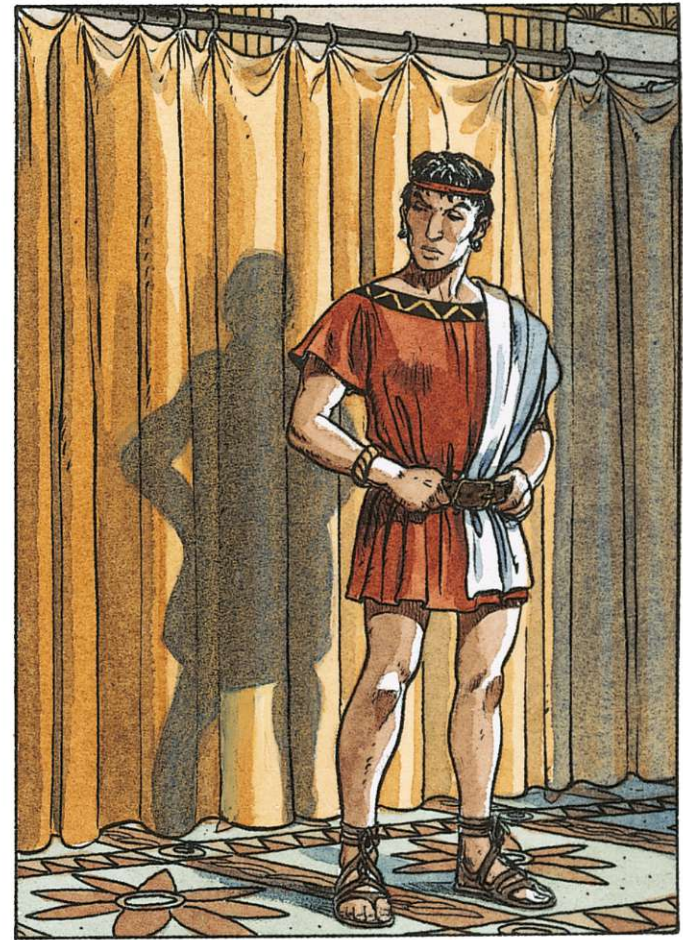
15,000 sesterces for each
praetorian. Free extra wheat
every month, and a new
home for veterans.



And you will personally introduce your son to the *Castra Praetoria*⁽⁶⁾ wearing purple and preceded by lictors. He will be the new head of the army.



I will do as you advise. Now, quick—I know what comes next, and I don't like to be kept waiting.



I've made some big decisions, and one of them involves you. We shall marry!

What?! But... the empress?



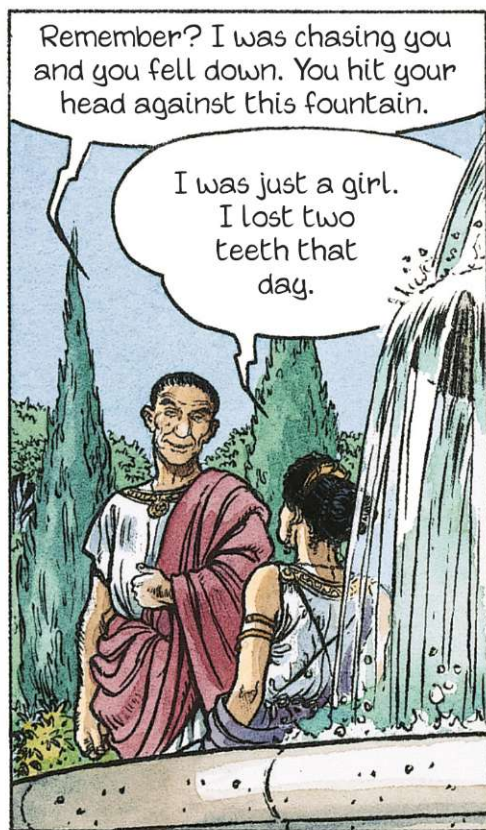
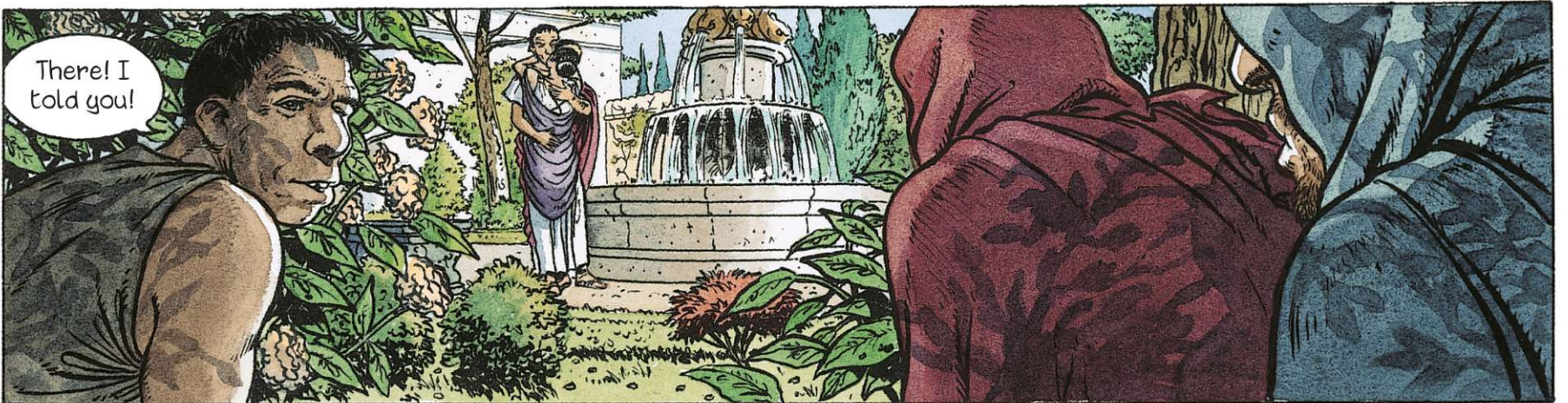
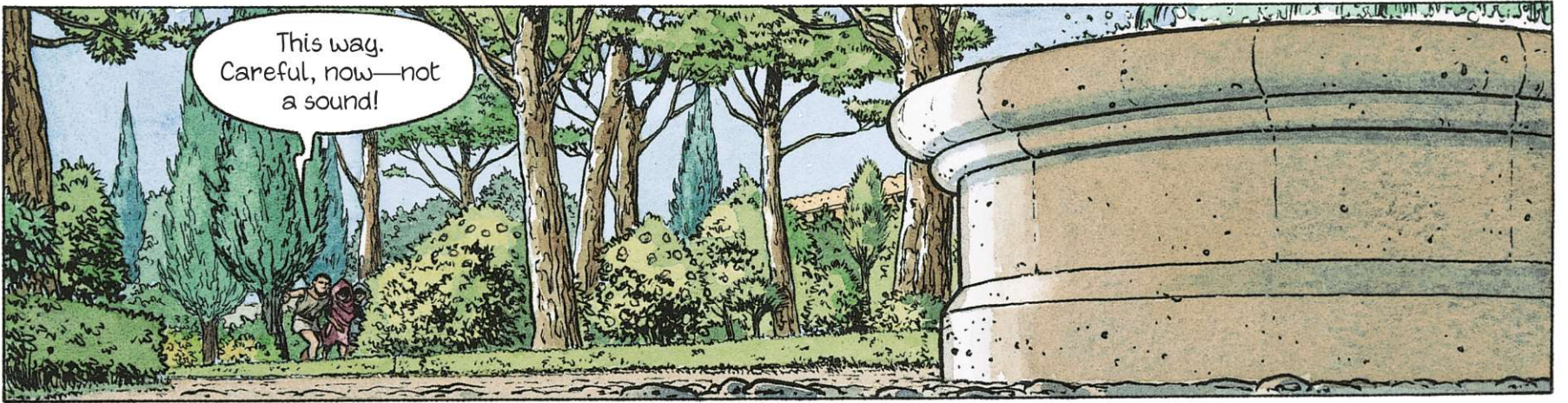
You know she'll never let you renounce your marriage. We've discussed this before.

Yes. But times have changed. Now it's either me or her!



Remember, before I even met Agrippina I wanted you for my wife.

And get it was she you chose to live by your side.





Well, that worked out quite nicely!



?!

Looks like business is booming!



Those men? Oh...th—they were friends, Master.

Who were those men? What did they want?



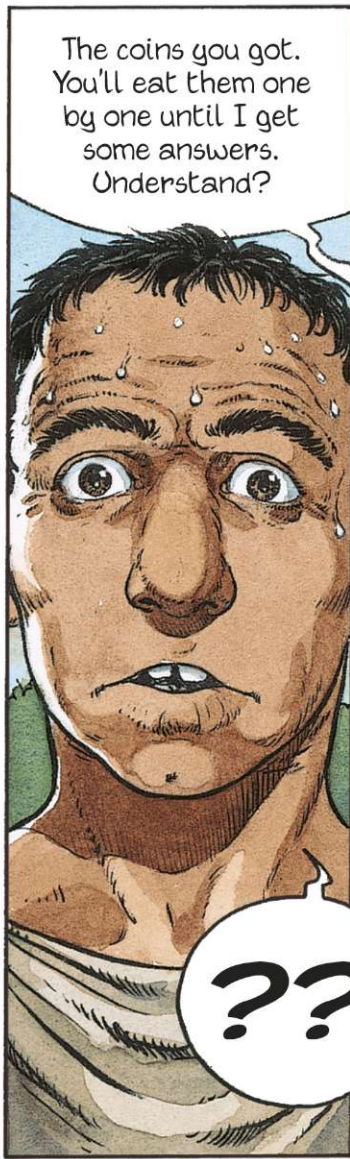
This is the first time, master.

Really? Since when do slaves invite their friends over to my house?



Eat them!

Wh-what?



The coins you got. You'll eat them one by one until I get some answers. Understand?

??



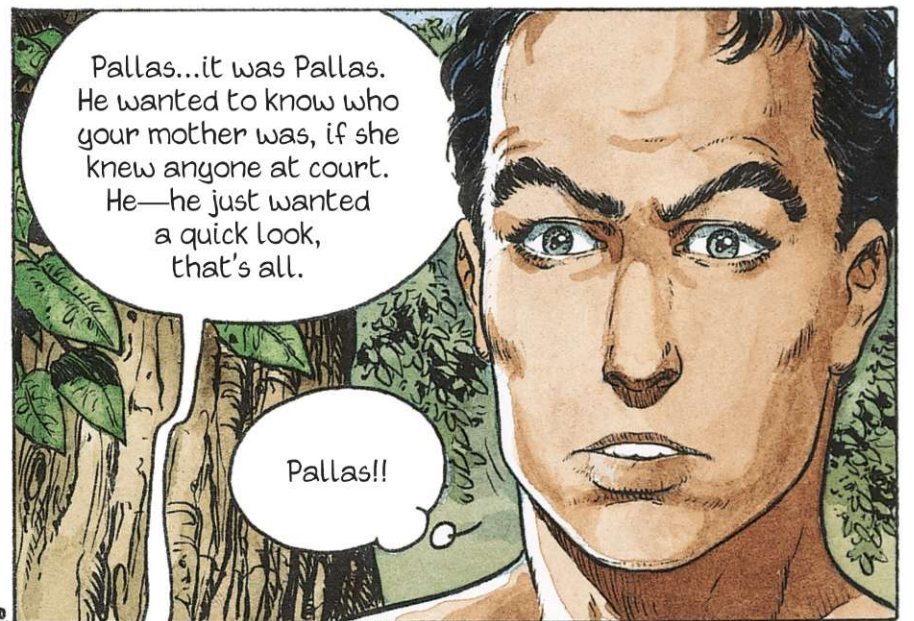
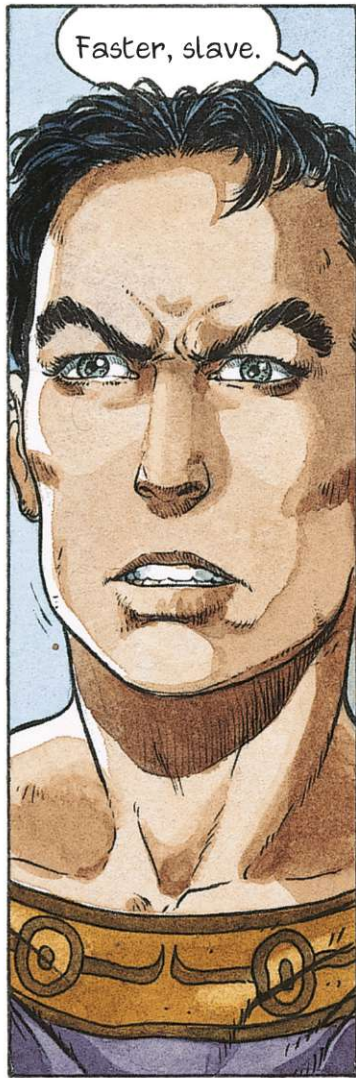
Or I'll cut your throat right here!

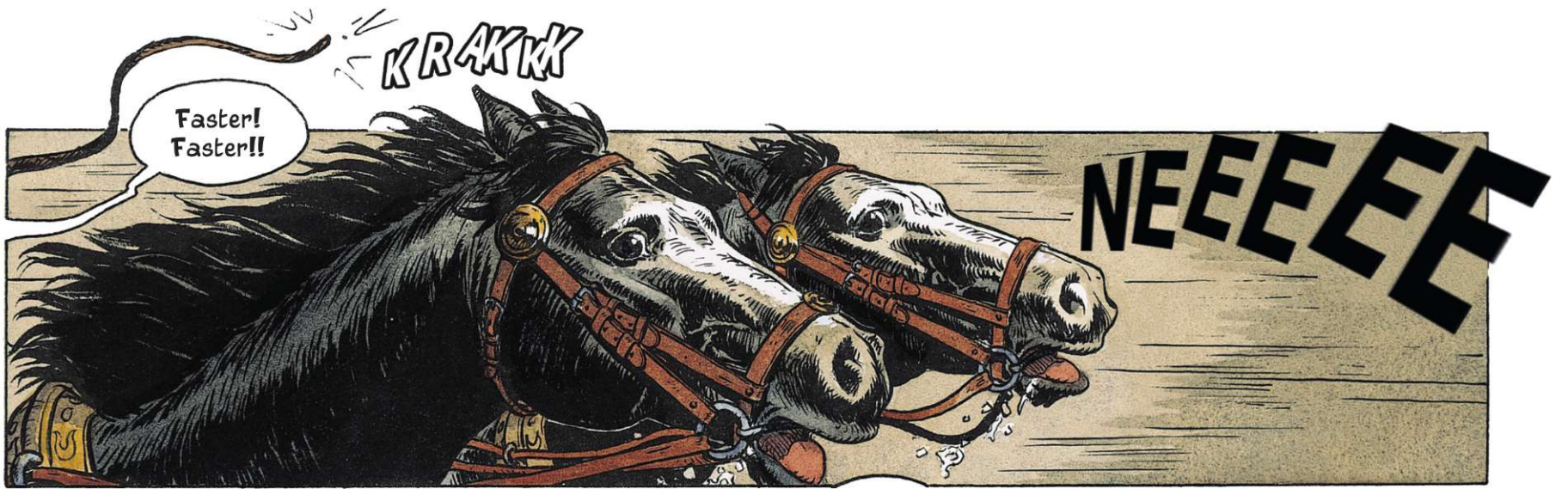


One by one, slave.



S-some friends, Master. J-just f-friends.

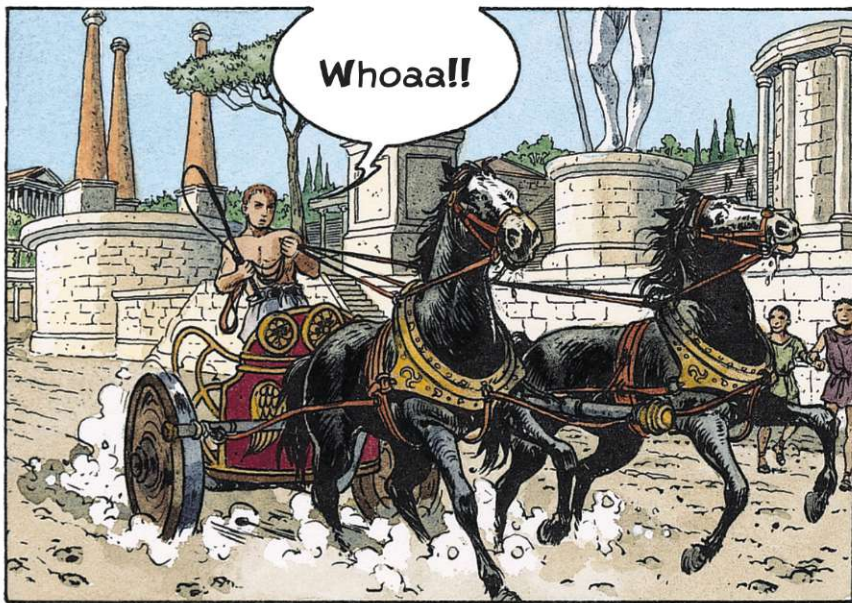




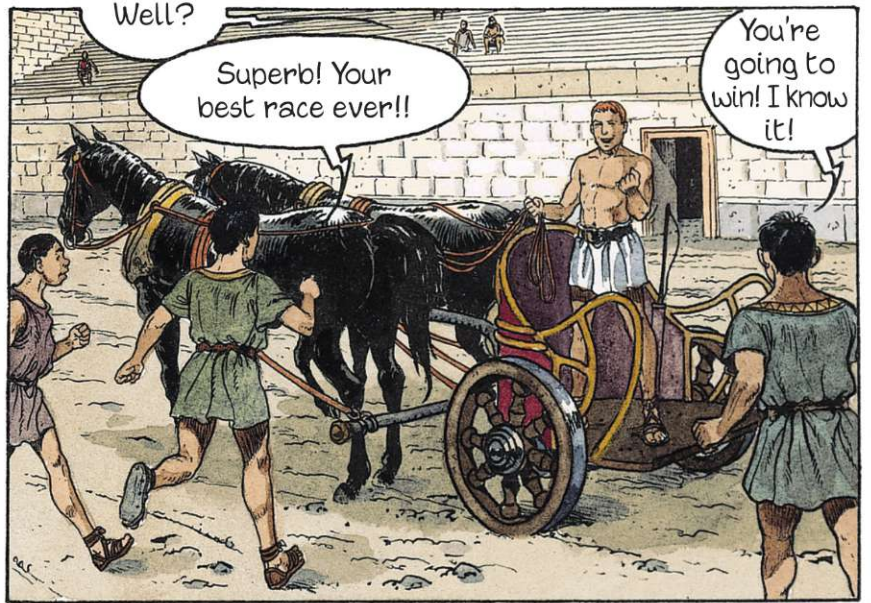
Faster!
Faster!!

KRAK

NEEE



Whoaa!!



Well?

Superb! Your best race ever!!

You're going to win! I know it!

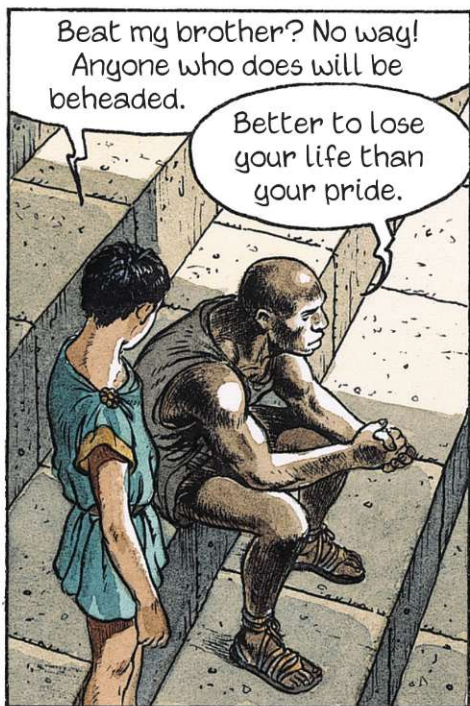


He did run a great race. What do you think?

He has true strength.



But I know somebody who could beat him.



Beat my brother? No way! Anyone who does will be beheaded.

Better to lose your life than your pride.



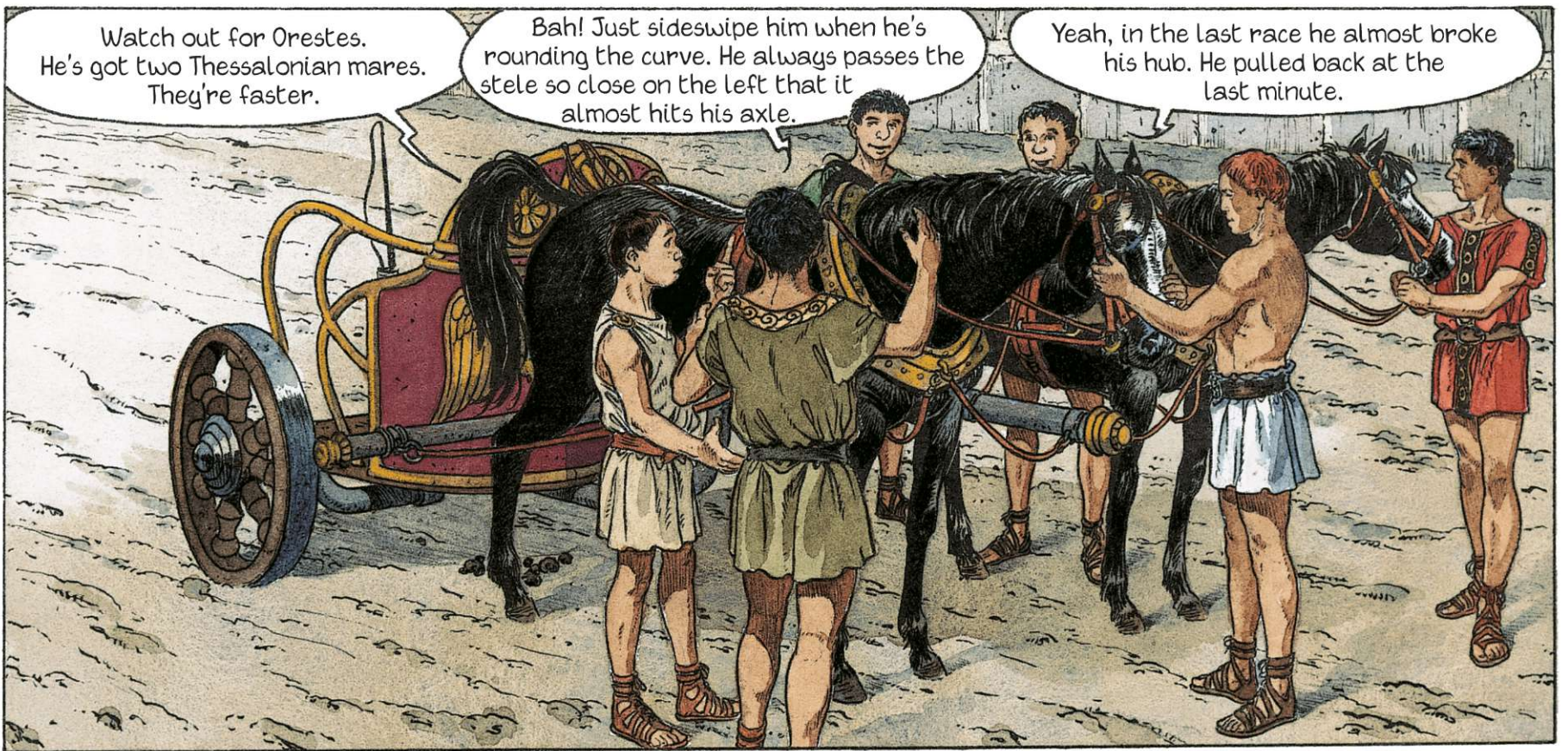
What a strange slave you are! I don't know what to make of you. Sometimes you scare me, and sometimes...

Yes?



I feel I can trust you. I feel that you're loyal.

You saved me. I won't forget that.



Watch out for Orestes. He's got two Thessalonian mares. They're faster.

Bah! Just sideswipe him when he's rounding the curve. He always passes the stele so close on the left that it almost hits his axle.

Yeah, in the last race he almost broke his hub. He pulled back at the last minute.



I need to talk to you.



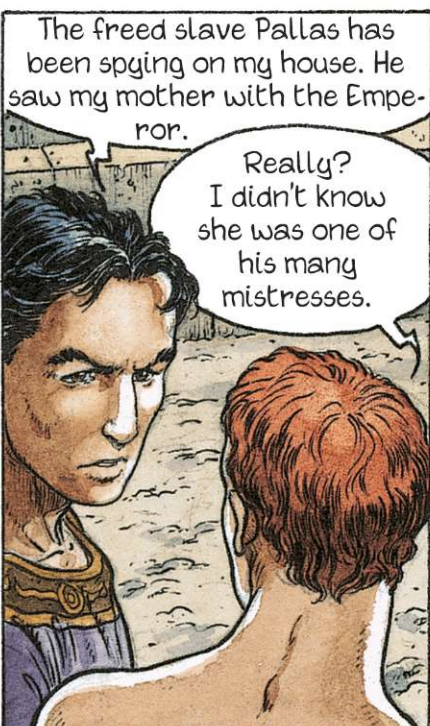
Oh, it's you! What's the matter? You look troubled.

With good reason. Come.



My mother is in danger. I need to know if I can count on you.

What happened?



The freed slave Pallas has been spying on my house. He saw my mother with the Emperor.

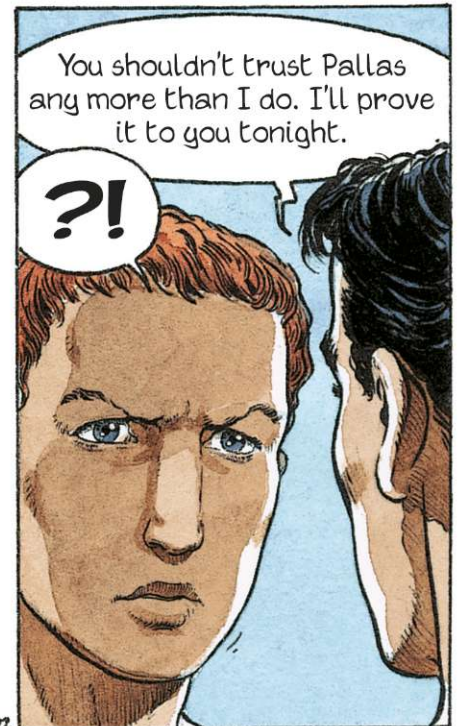
Really? I didn't know she was one of his many mistresses.



I fear the Empress' wrath. Agrippina listens to you. Beg her mercy. Say my mother won't ever see the Emperor again. You have my word.

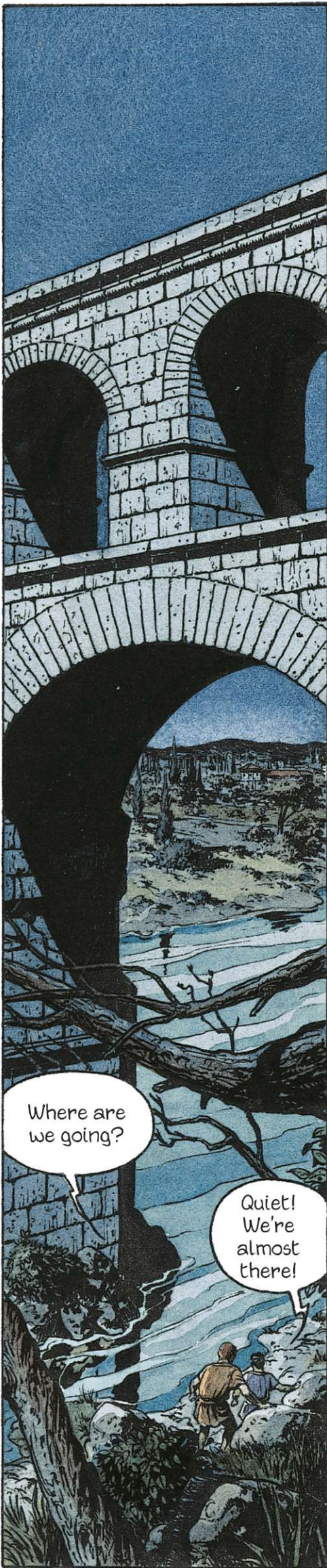


I don't care if he cheats on my mother. That's her problem. But she can be jealous...and very vindictive. It all depends on how Pallas breaks the news.



You shouldn't trust Pallas any more than I do. I'll prove it to you tonight.

?!



Where are we going?

Quiet!
We're almost there!



Look!



Recognize him?
The one holding the torch.



Him?!
But—but—



Yes. That's Acte in the litter. When she's not busy selling her favors, she comes here to bathe. Always the same spot, safe from all prying eyes...but ours.



Acte...





Let's get closer...
Be careful...

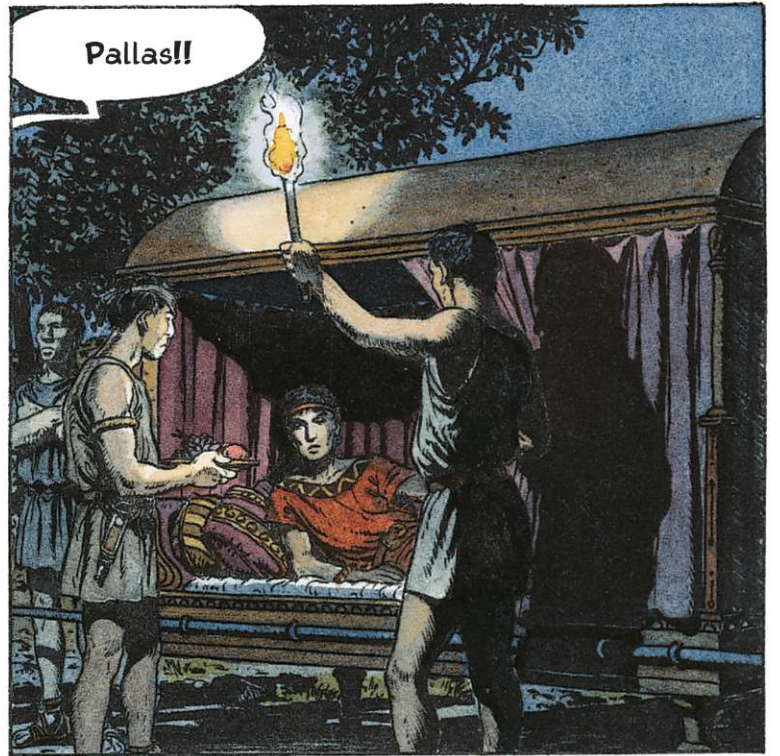


What strange beauty! I've never seen anything like it.

Androgynous. The synthesis of all forms of love. A boy's chest and a woman's grace.



Look! There is someone else in the litter!



Pallas!!



Now do you see? He watches over your beauty, exploiting her charms, selling them to the highest bidder. Good thing for you I found out by asking around.

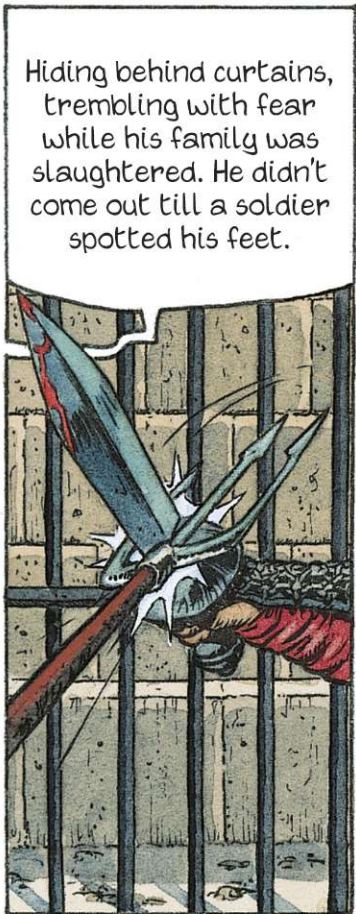


What's wrong?

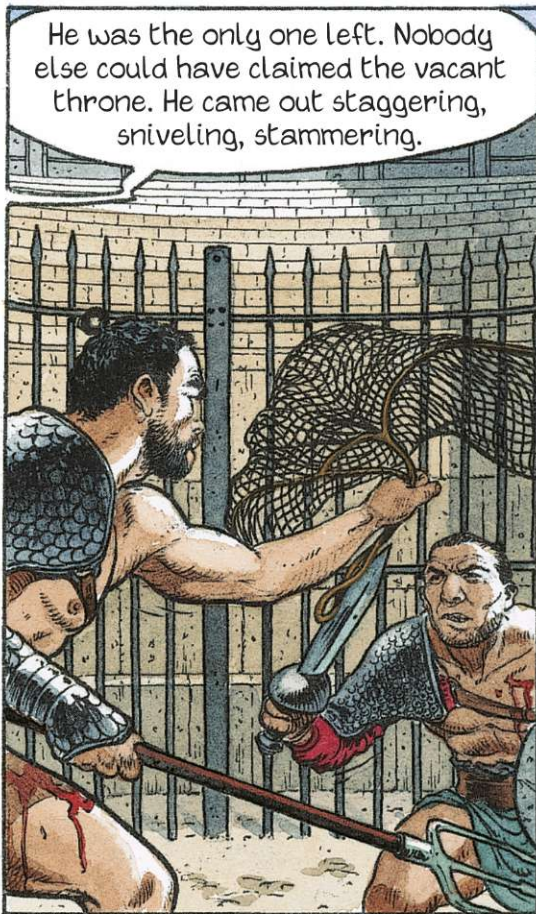
Nothing... I thought I heard a noise.



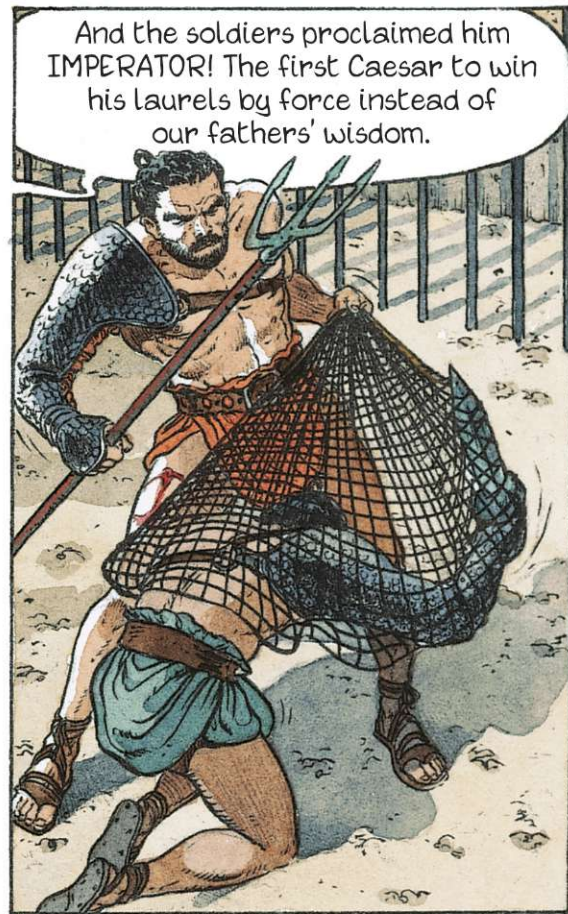
Do the senators remember how Claudius came into power?



Hiding behind curtains, trembling with fear while his family was slaughtered. He didn't come out till a soldier spotted his feet.



He was the only one left. Nobody else could have claimed the vacant throne. He came out staggering, sniveling, stammering.



And the soldiers proclaimed him IMPERATOR! The first Caesar to win his laurels by force instead of our fathers' wisdom.



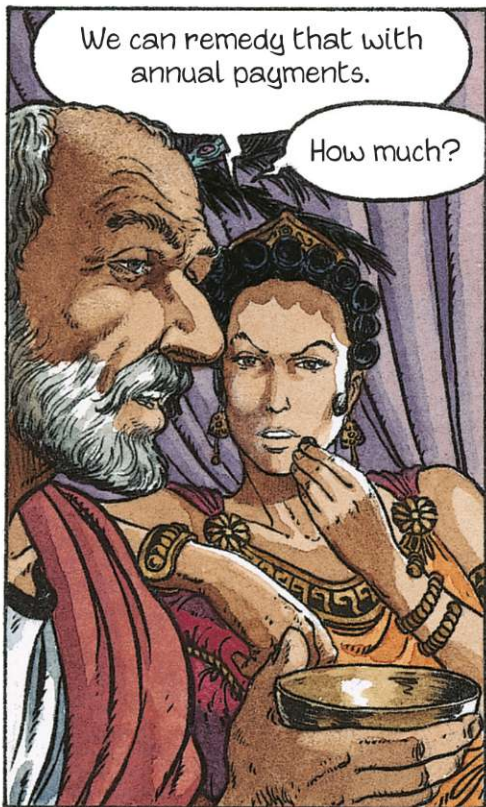
And this man has ruled us ever since: still stammering and sniveling, whether settling affairs of state or slipping into my bed.

Your words are harsh.



After all, the Senate has nothing against your husband.

You can change that. You and your friends. For instance, I've heard that several senators from great families were ruined.



We can remedy that with annual payments.

How much?



500,000 sesterces. But for you, I have other plans.



The fight is over. They await your decision...



Ah, yes. The Thracian lost. Let him die! At least that way he's good for something.



Bring me the victor. Naked. I want a good look at him.



As I was saying, you'll get a praetorship and much more. I want you in charge of our new Caesar's education. You'll be his mentor.

Ah! And who is our new Caesar?



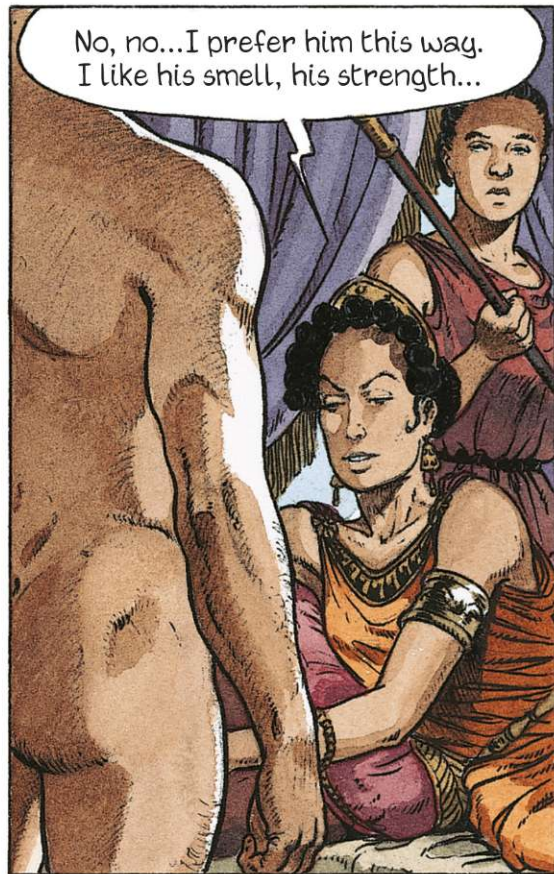
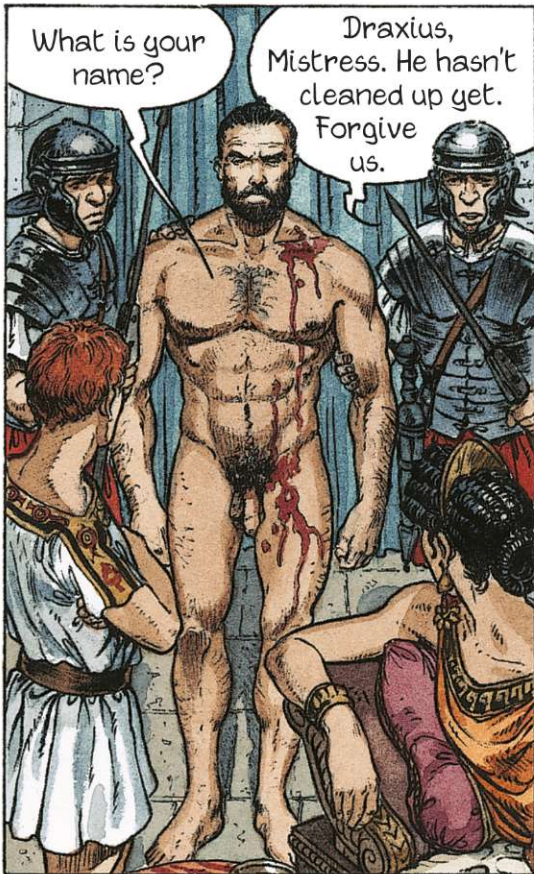
My son, Lucius Domitius Nero.



Hmm. For him to become emperor, Caesar must die. That might take a while.



I don't like waiting. You should know that.





I've been watching you for some time now, Draxius. You're brave. You've earned your victories.



How'd you like to be a free man again? I have a deal for you.

I'm listening.



A woman has dared to humiliate me. Bring me her head, and you'll be free. I'll tell you where to find her, and when to strike.

?!!



Mother! What have you got against that woman? Have you heard rumors—

Rumors! Pallas never reports mere rumors! Only the truth.



Claudius is besotted with that woman! He's even thinking of marriage. How can I stand by and watch that happen? Is that what you propose, my son?

Lollia Paulina is the mother of one of my friends. Please mother... exile or banish her, but do not kill her!



Besides, that man Pallas is worthless, mother! Let me tell you—did you know he corrupts young girls? And makes his living from it?

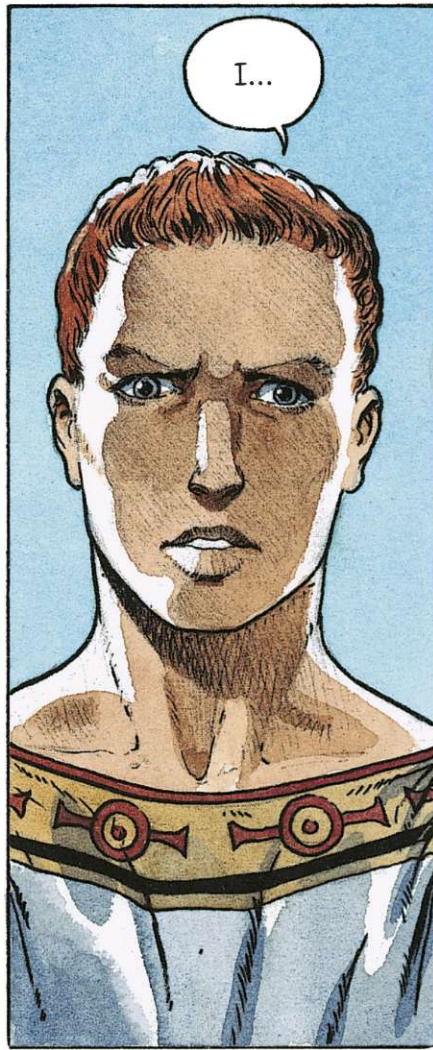
Why should I care? Let him make hay or make money from whatever he likes.



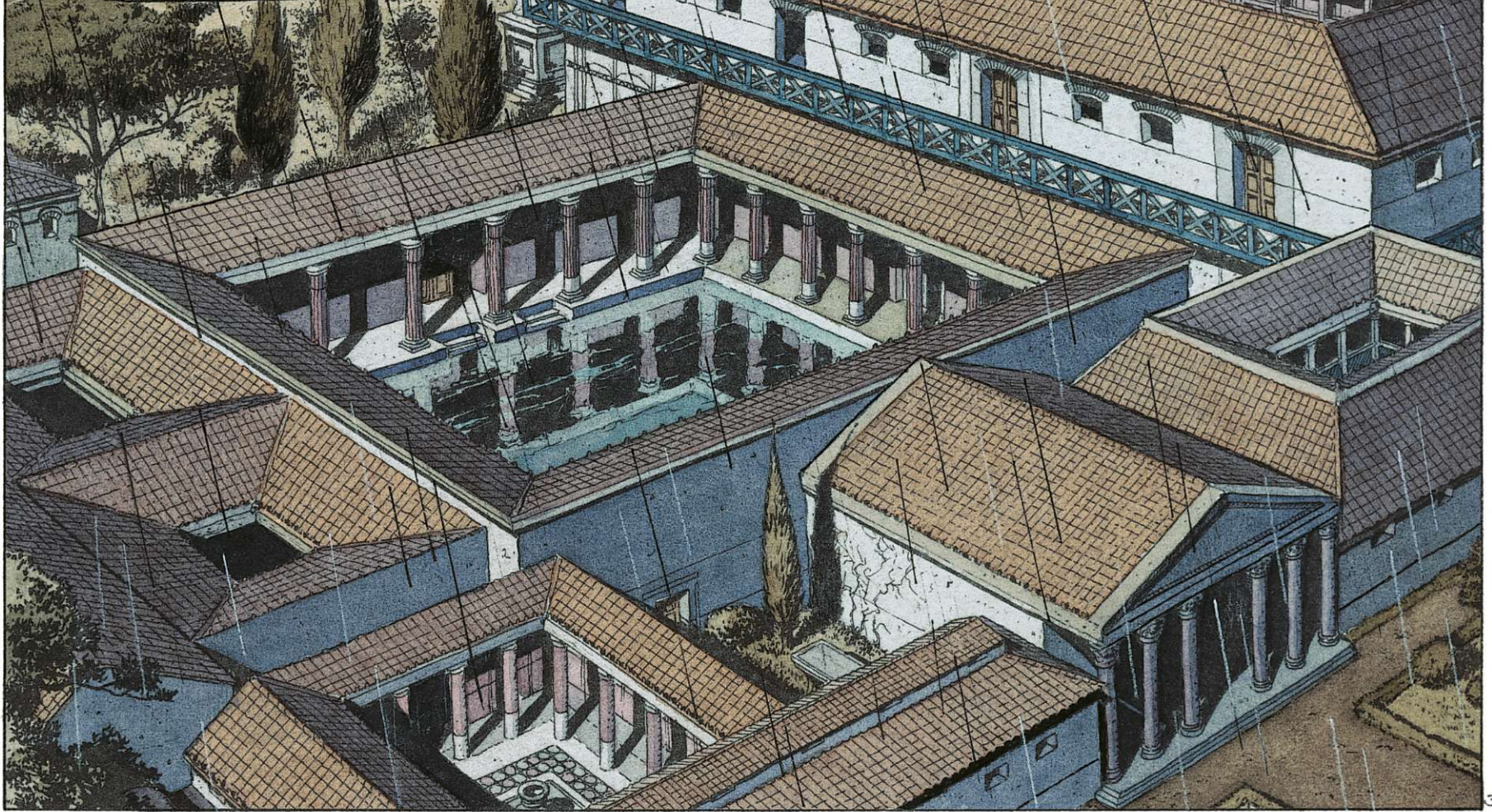
I care! I-I want one of his girls! And I don't want to pay for it!

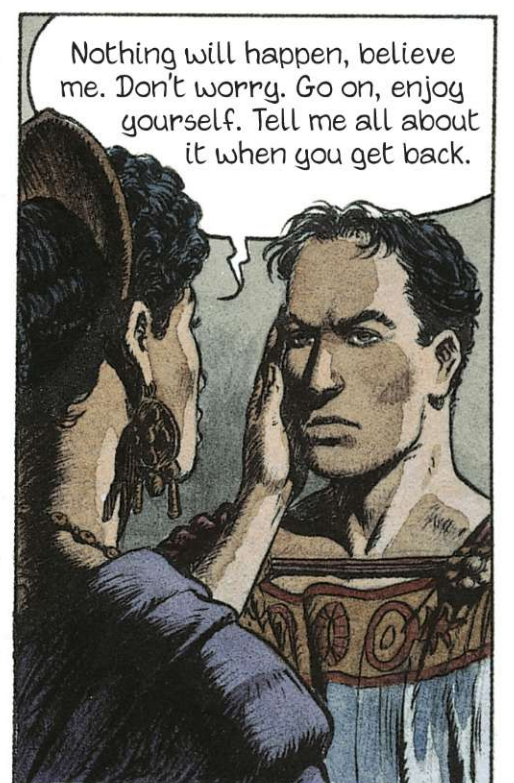


Well, well! Are you in love, my son? Will your pride not tolerate a situation someone else has forced upon you? We're so alike.



On the night of October 12th, while the court readies for the annual festival honoring the divine Augustus, sheep livers are cast about for augurs to take the auspices. An ill omen, sulfur-yellow, like the dark clouds gathering over the city. Nothing good will come of this night.









Except for a clumsy old man who fancied trying his hand at the sword. But he was not a problem.



Then I took care of the woman personally.



Is it her?



Lollia Paulina!



How can we be certain?

Her teeth, Mistress... Let me examine her teeth.



Open her mouth. I'll check.



It's her. Her teeth are cracked because of an accident long ago.⁽¹⁰⁾



What? What's wrong? You look like you've seen—



The head of a Gorgon. Yes.



Always...always the same vision! It haunts me!



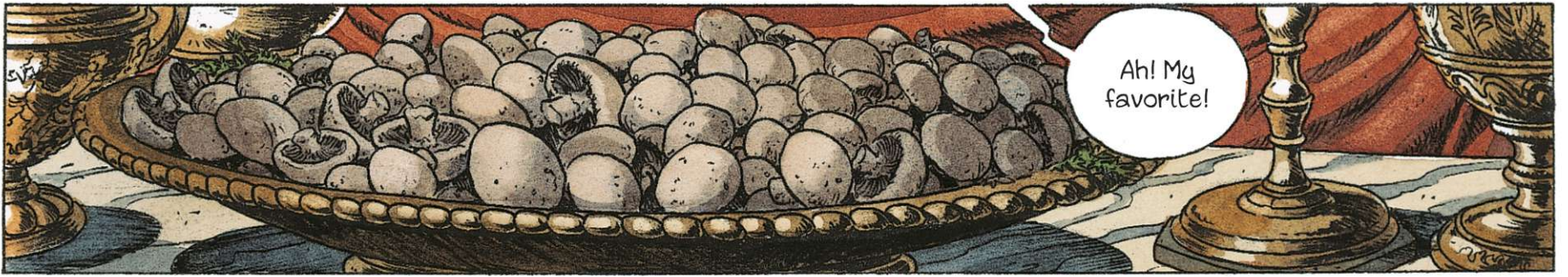
The dish... Bring the dish.



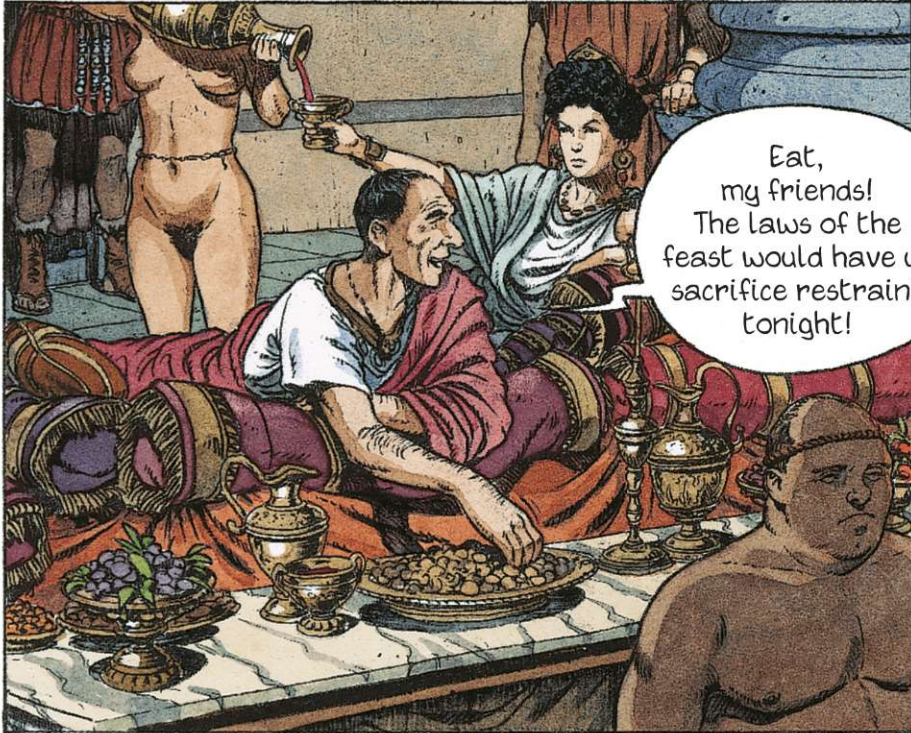
Mushrooms. Perfect.



There! The effect won't be immediate. Make sure he's the only one who eats from this plate.



Ah! My favorite!



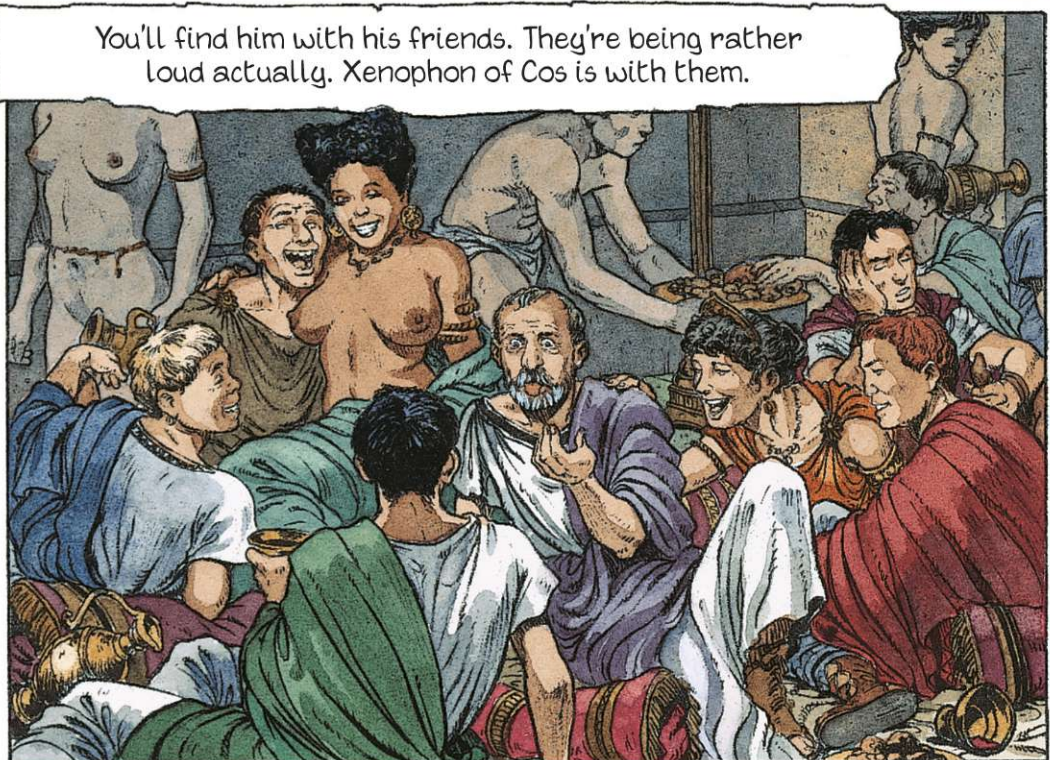
Eat, my friends! The laws of the feast would have us sacrifice restraint tonight!



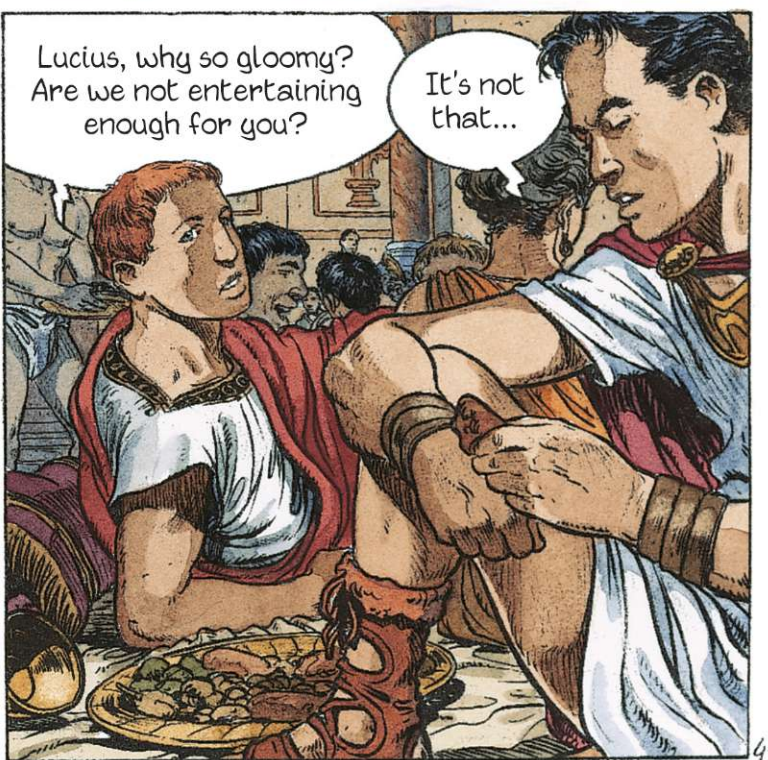
I do not see your son...



My son? He is your son too, Caesar. Don't forget that.



You'll find him with his friends. They're being rather loud actually. Xenophon of Cos is with them.



Lucius, why so gloomy? Are we not entertaining enough for you?

It's not that...



It's Pallas' presence that troubles me. Look how he struts about before the Empress. I won't be able to rest till that man is gone.



You remember your promise, don't you? Did you talk to your mother?

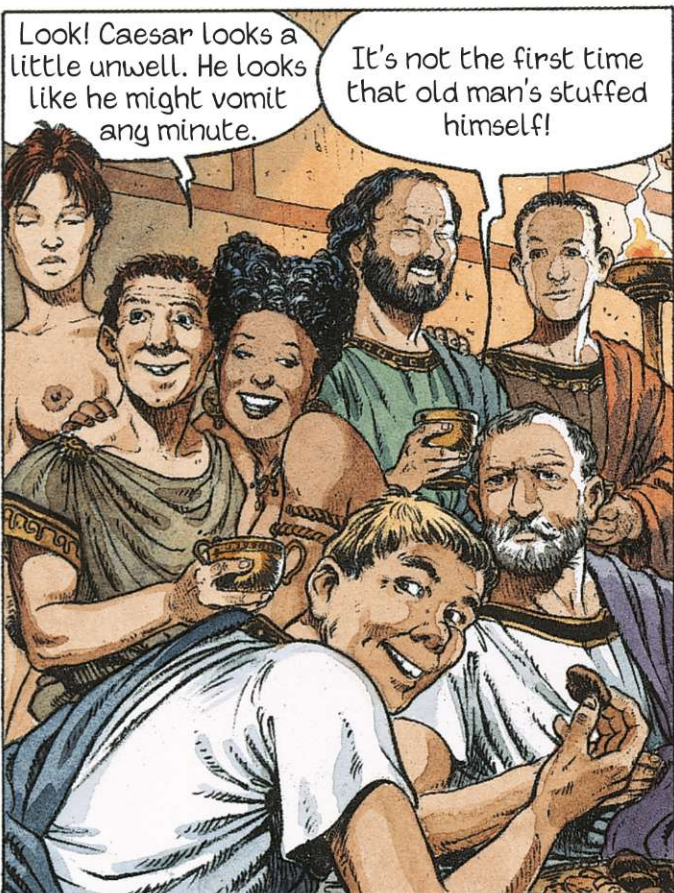
Yes. I...



She will see what she can do.



I'll not forget this.



Look! Caesar looks a little unwell. He looks like he might vomit any minute.

It's not the first time that old man's stuffed himself!

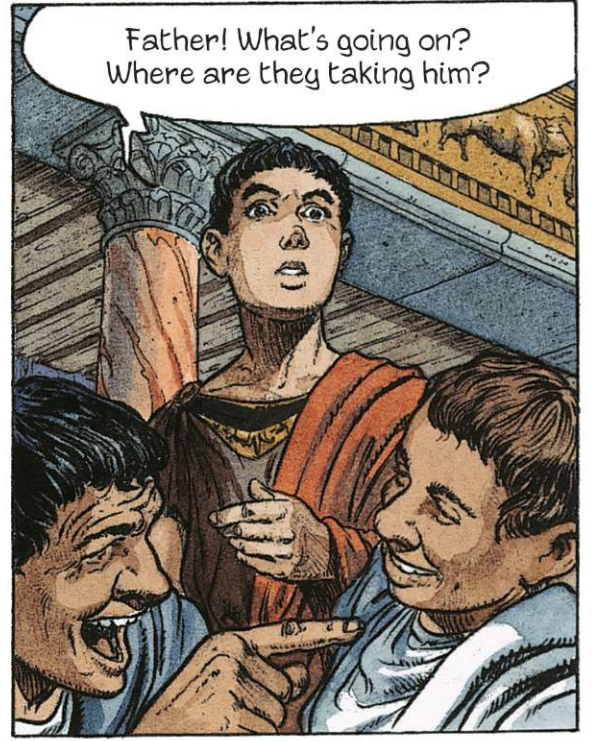
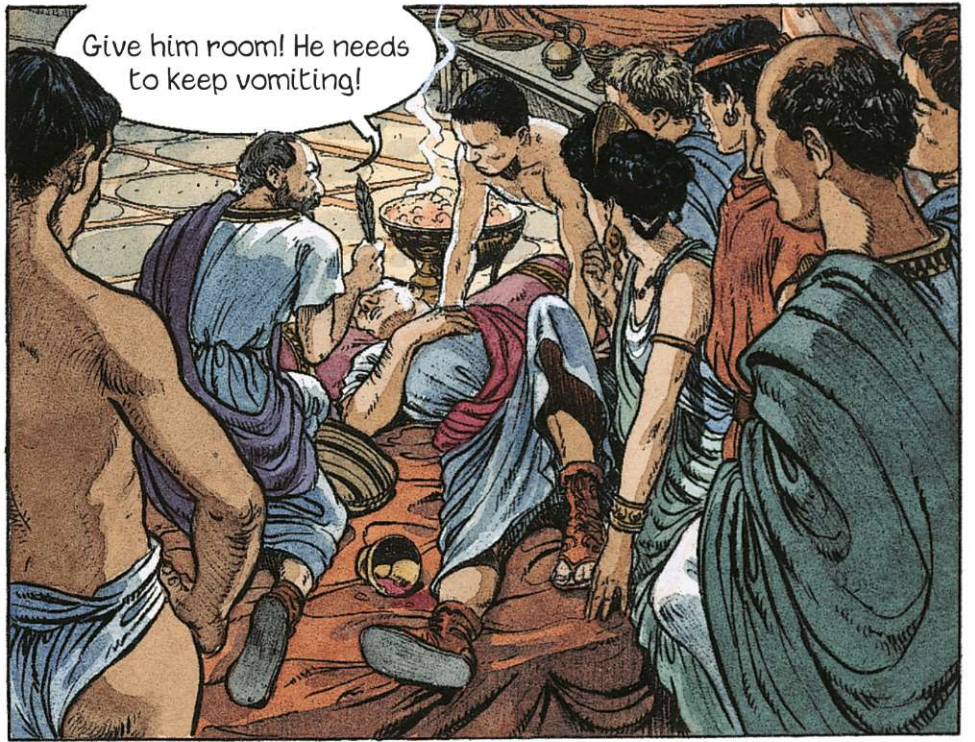


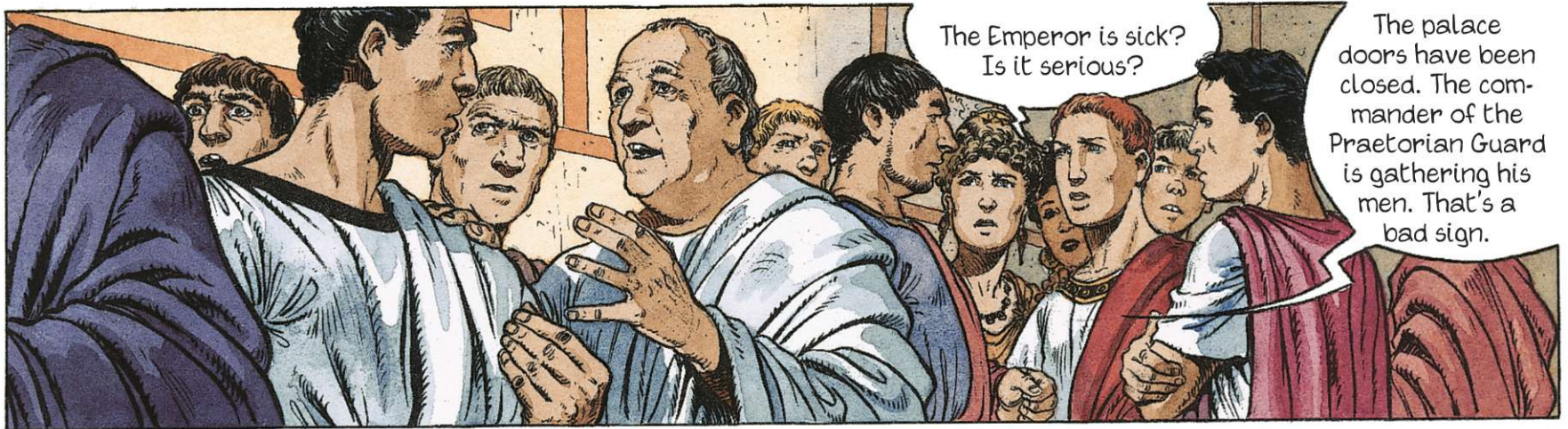
I—I feel hot! I can't breathe! I—I need some air!



DOOH!







The Emperor is sick?
Is it serious?

The palace doors have been closed. The commander of the Praetorian Guard is gathering his men. That's a bad sign.



Well?

I was able to keep everyone out. But he clings to life.



I did what I could.

I know. You shall be amply rewarded. But he must die now.



Hmm...I know a way.



Wh-where is everyone?
Don't leave me all alone!
It... hurts! It hurts!!



I heard you, dear husband.

!!!



And look what I've brought:
sweet consolation.



Your beloved wants
one last kiss.

LOLLIA!!! Noooooo...



The fifth Caesar died that night at the hands of a Gallic poisoner and a Greek doctor. The Emperor's will was never made known, and no one would ever know what it contained.



Pallas' meticulous search of Claudius' quarters had indeed proved effective.



Well, well...
an act of repudiation.
This might prove useful
someday.

Claudius' son was brought to his room. The scared boy was then kept away from the imperial apartments, and from power. He was given no chance to claim the throne, though it was his birthright. The Empress had set her pitiless schemes in motion, and nothing could stop them.



Finally between the sixth and the seventh hour,⁽¹²⁾ the doors of the palace were opened to make way for Rome's new Emperor. The Praetorian cohorts immediately hailed him with wild acclaim.



Nero is seventeen. His mother has committed a murder that has put him in command of the greatest power in the world. He was once told: "Be ambitious as the very gods. Shrink not from your potential, your fear, and the cowardice of men. Then you, too, shall be a god...If that is truly your wish." It was what someone else had wished for him.



GLOSSARY

BOOK I

①

HOC HABET. Lit. "He's got it!" What spectators shouted when a gladiator was struck.

②

In 39 CE, Claudius had married Messalina, a blood relative of Augustus. She bore Claudius two children, Britannicus and Octavia. Infuriated by her infidelity, Claudius ordered her death. She was in the gardens of Lucullus at the time.

③

THE GENS CLAUDIA

One of the great Roman families, with ancient origins the Sabine tribe, later admitted into the patrician class.

④

THE GORGON

Three female creatures of monstrous appearance, daughters of Phorkys and Keto. Medusa, the best-known of the three, was slain by Perseus. As myth would have it, a mere glance from her could turn a man to stone. The symbolism with the poisoner Locusta seems clear.

⑤

THE BESTIARI

Gladiators who survived the morning's fights. Crowds took little interest in their fate.

⑥

Thus did Britannicus don the toga virilis and come of age three years before it was legally allowed, betraying the Emperor's haste. Could he tell his end was near?

⑦

THE THERMAE, where everyone met up every day before meals, luxurious bathhouses with steam rooms (sudatorium), hot baths (caldarium), warm baths (tepidarium), cold baths (frigidarium), and massage rooms.

⑧

THE CASTRA PRAETORIA

The massive barracks of the Praetorian Guard, built by Sejanus on the Tiber's left bank, below Pinician Hill, or the Collis Hortulorum. Thanks to imperial favor, the Praetorian guardsmen enjoyed great privilege.

⑨

So it is said. A true story from the slaughter of Caligula and his family.

⑩

Another true story. Cassius Dio wrote:

"She forced Lollia's mouth open and closely examined her peculiarly uneven teeth."

⑪

Such feathers were common at banquets, meant to induce vomiting in guests, after which they could continue eating.

⑫

Between noon and one. Careful—in ancient Rome, the lengths of the hours varied with the seasons. Daylight hours began with sunrise and ended at sunset.



“THAT HE WAS OF A CRUEL AND
BLOODTHIRSTY DISPOSITION WAS SHOWN
IN MATTERS GREAT AND SMALL...AT ANY
GLADIATORIAL SHOW, EITHER HIS OWN OR
ANOTHER’S, HE GAVE ORDERS THAT EVEN
THOSE WHO FELL ACCIDENTALLY SHOULD
BE SLAIN, SO HE COULD WATCH THEIR FACES
AS THEY DIED.”

SUETONIUS, LIFE OF CLAUDIUS XXXIV

