

DUFAUX - DELABY

MURENA

BOOK II
OF SAND AND BLOOD

Europe
COMICS

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D U F A U X - D E L A B Y
MURENA
BOOK II
OF SAND AND BLOOD



BOOK

II

OF SAND AND BLOOD

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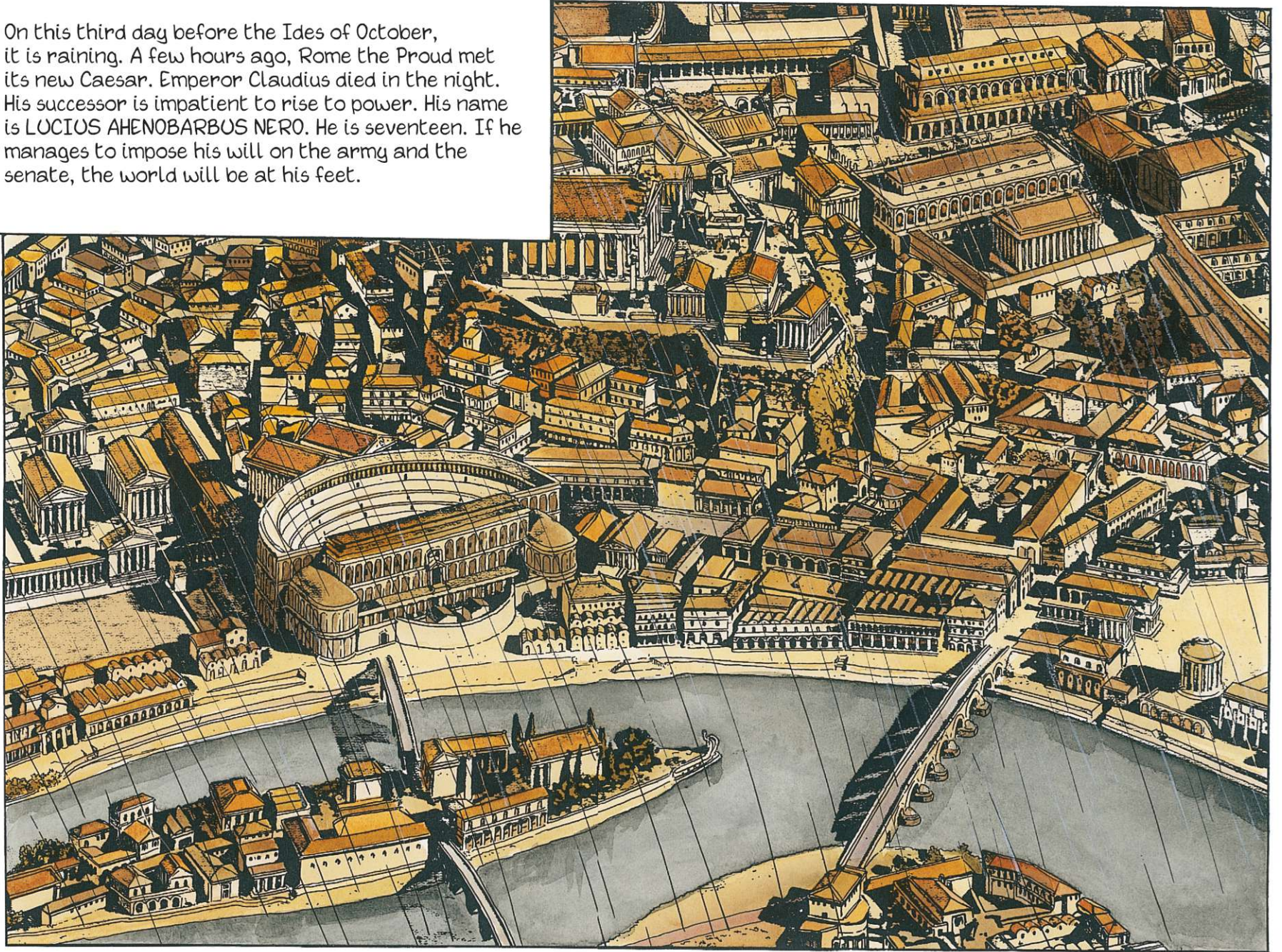
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DARGAUD



On this third day before the Ides of October, it is raining. A few hours ago, Rome the Proud met its new Caesar. Emperor Claudius died in the night. His successor is impatient to rise to power. His name is LUCIUS AHENOBARBUS NERO. He is seventeen. If he manages to impose his will on the army and the senate, the world will be at his feet.



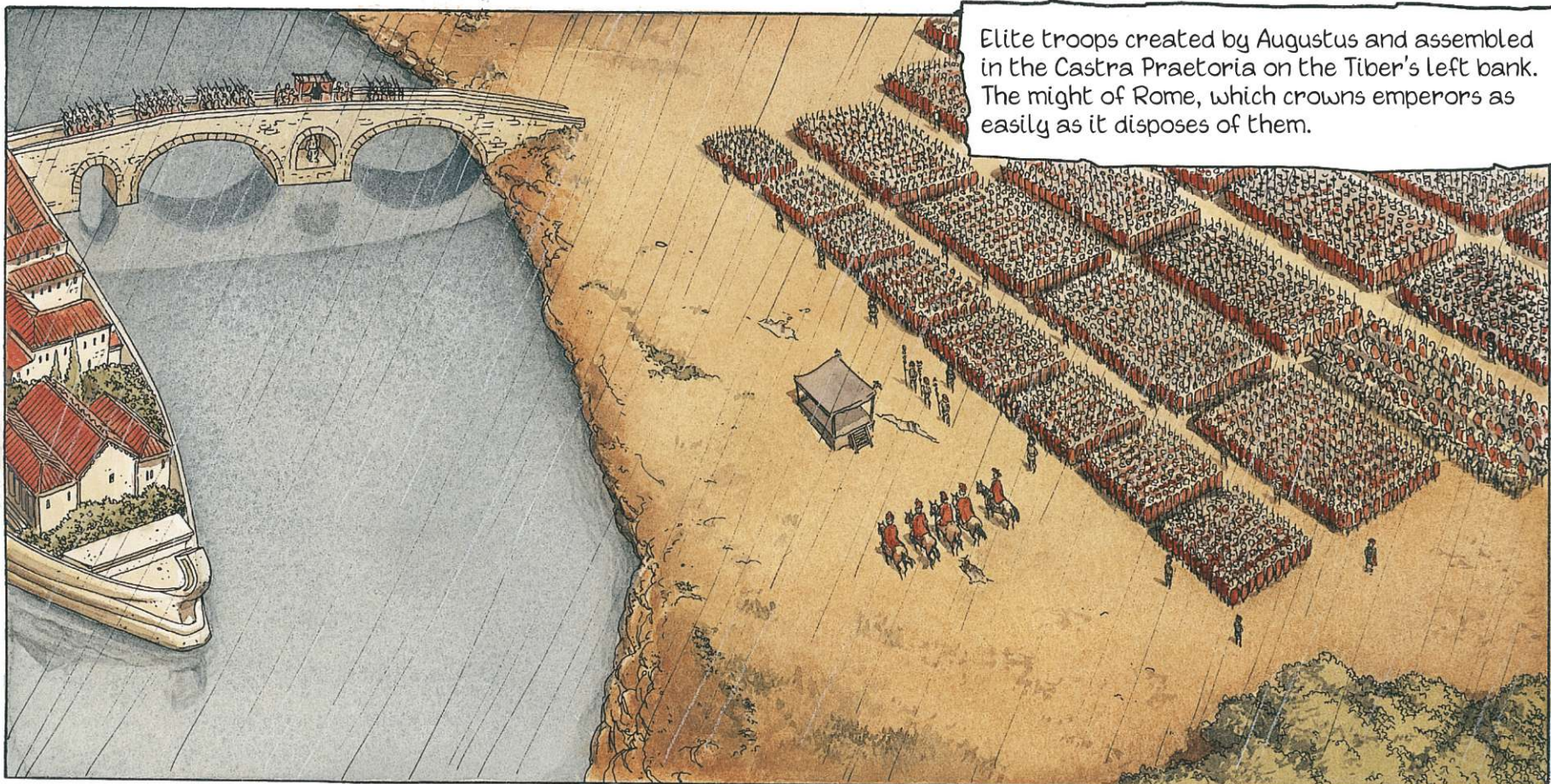
At noon, a litter followed by an imposing escort departs for the camp of the Praetorian Guard. They will have to cross the entire city. The young Emperor has plenty of time to reflect on what awaits him...



Six thousand men in cuirasses, carrying javelins and shields painted in the colors of the Guard. Feet in the mud, faces resolute beneath their helmets.



Elite troops created by Augustus and assembled in the Castra Praetoria on the Tiber's left bank. The might of Rome, which crowns emperors as easily as it disposes of them.



He is here!!



Your men are ready to listen to you, Caesar...



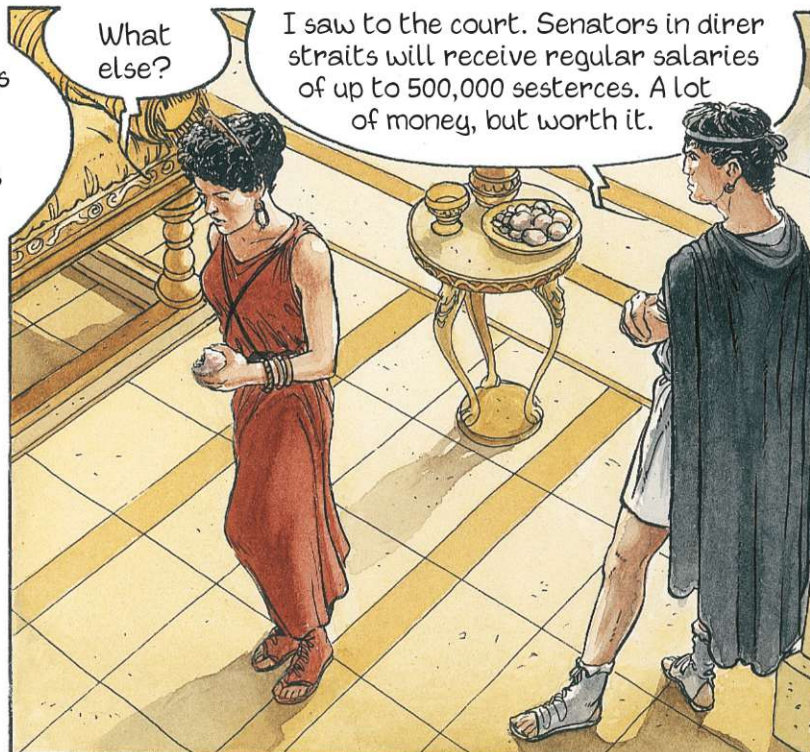
I—



Burrhus had skilfully prepared his speech. It was flawless. He was showered with praise. The army's support was absolute.

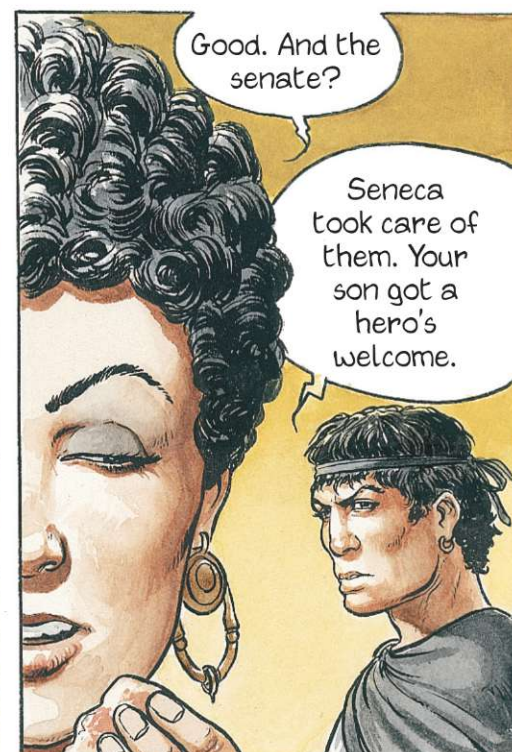


So money buys an emperor. Everything does have its price.



What else?

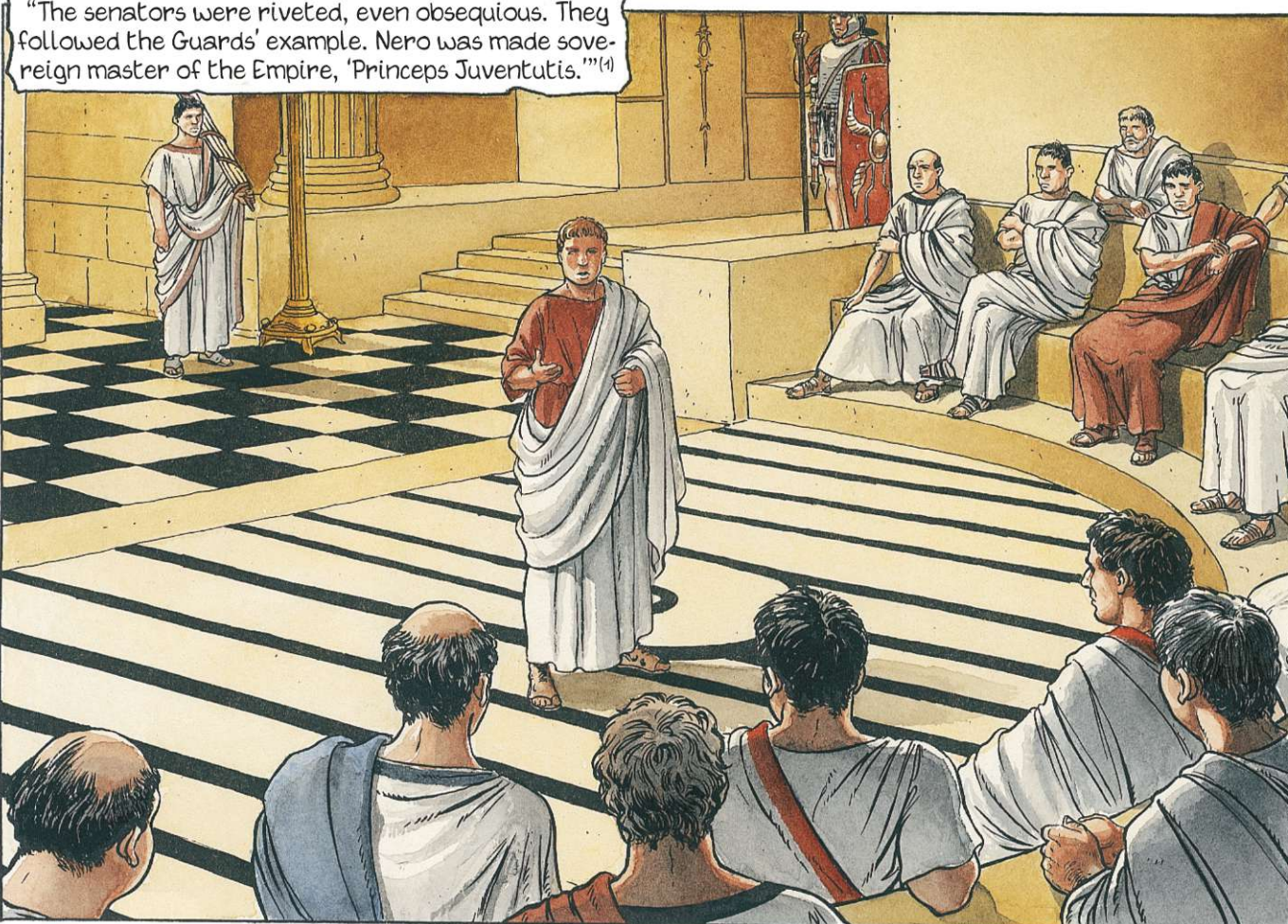
I saw to the court. Senators in direr straits will receive regular salaries of up to 500,000 sesterces. A lot of money, but worth it.



Good. And the senate?

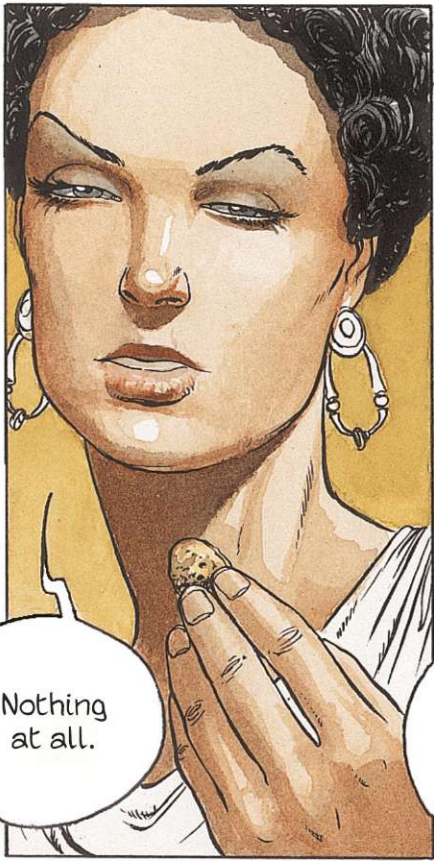
Seneca took care of them. Your son got a hero's welcome.

"The senators were riveted, even obsequious. They followed the Guards' example. Nero was made sovereign master of the Empire, 'Princeps Juventutis.'"⁽⁴⁾



Nothing stands between you and power now, Mistress. The world is yours...





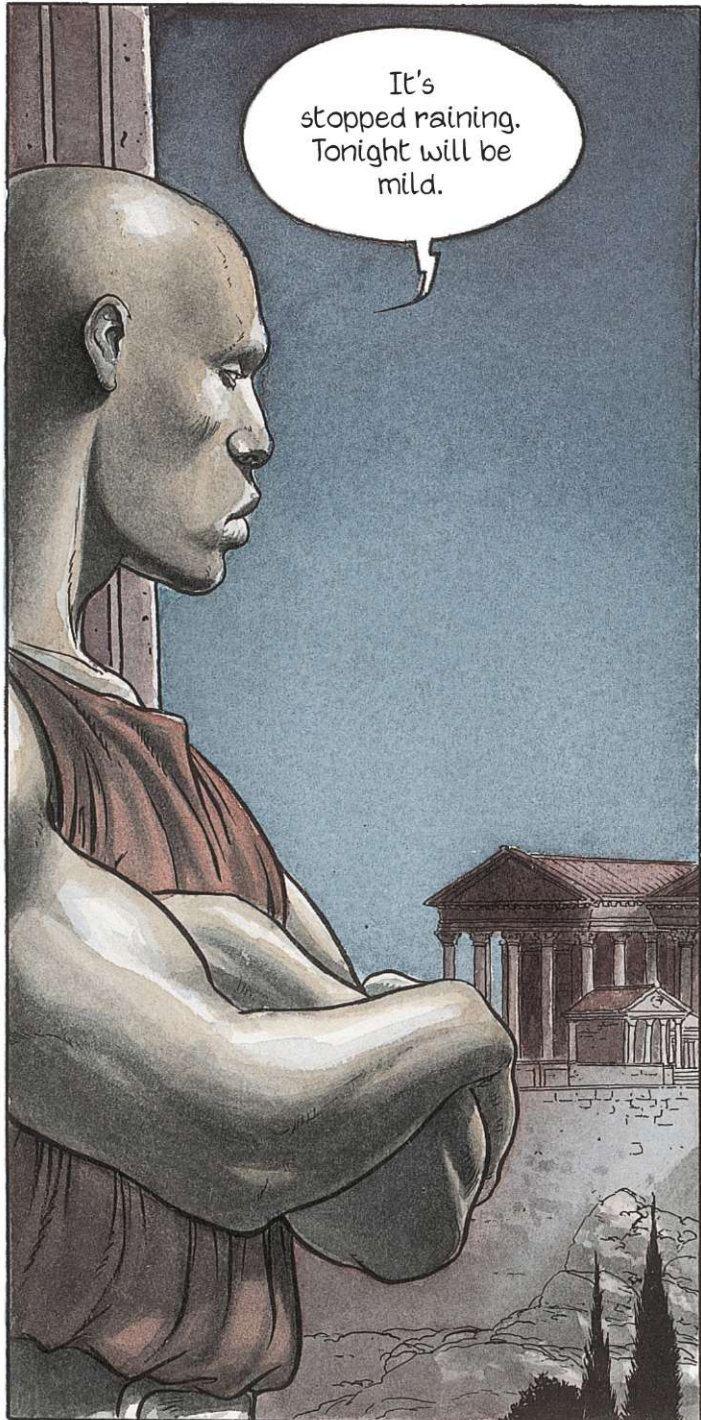
Nothing at all.



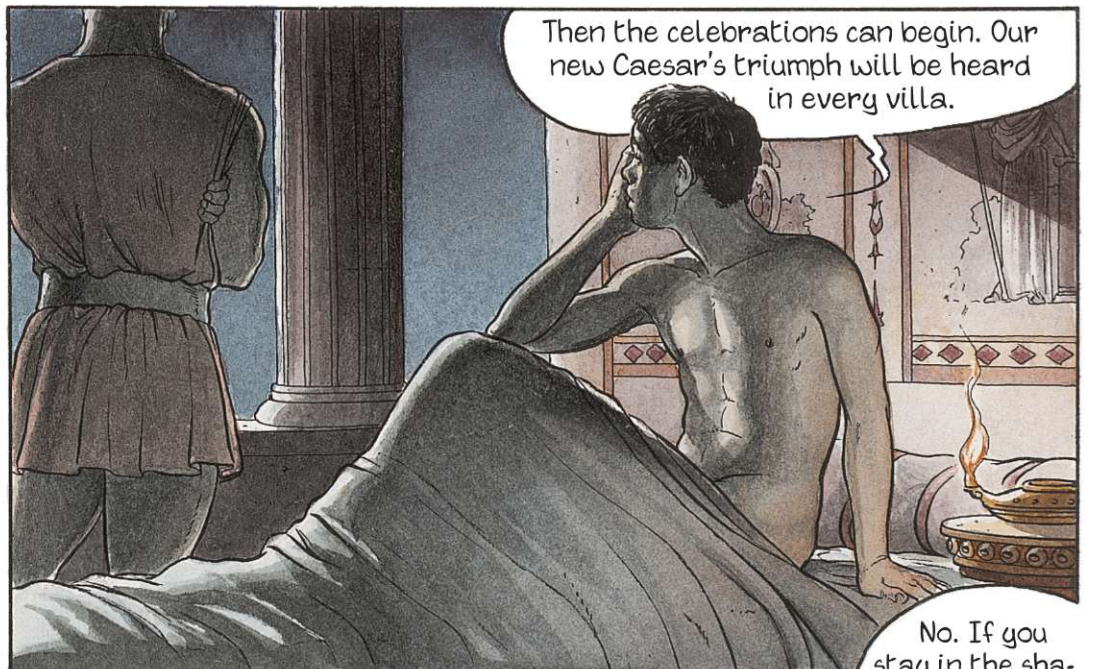
I've eaten all the flesh. Only the stone remains...



...my son.

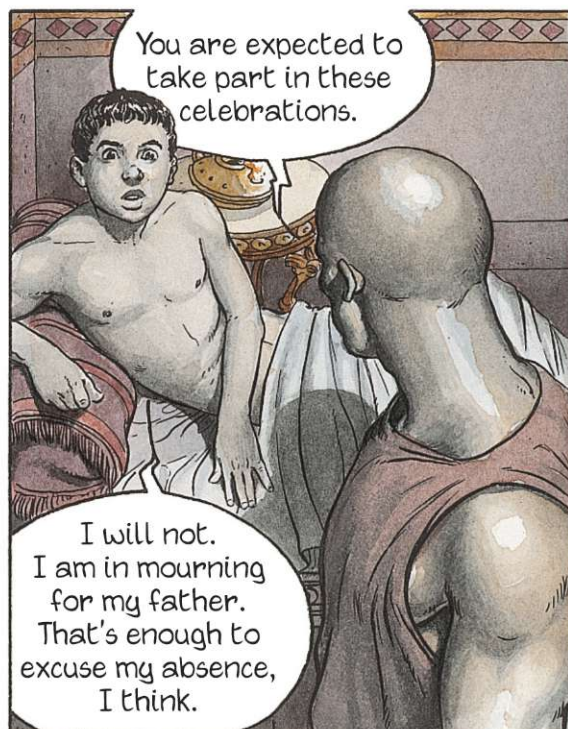


It's stopped raining. Tonight will be mild.



Then the celebrations can begin. Our new Caesar's triumph will be heard in every villa.

No. If you stay in the shadows, she will crush you. You, too, have a right to power.



You are expected to take part in these celebrations.

I will not. I am in mourning for my father. That's enough to excuse my absence, I think.





Othon! Are you alone?!



Bad news! I was at Murena's house. They are in mourning. His mother was killed by thieves.

Who? Lollia Paulina?*

*LOLIA PAULINA WAS EMPEROR CLAUDIUS' MISTRESS.

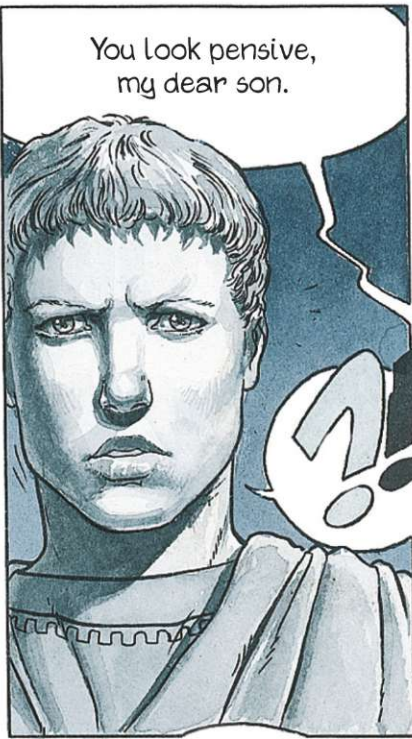


She died a horrible death.

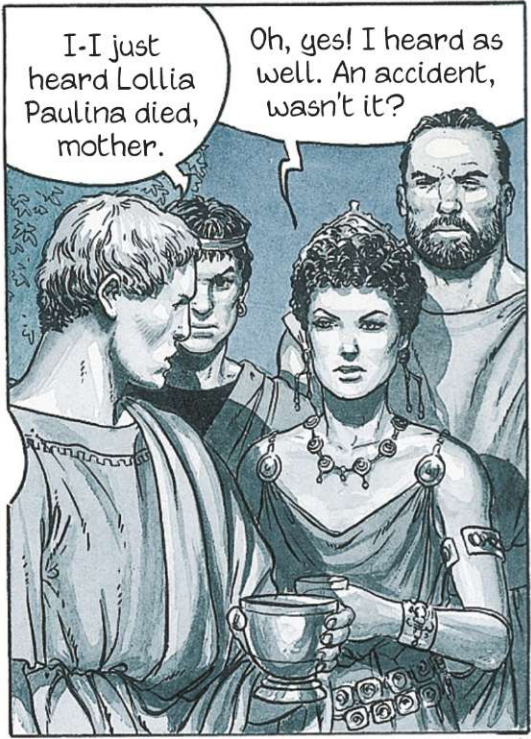
Oh no!



Agrippina! She must have taken her revenge!



You look pensive, my dear son.



I-I just heard Lollia Paulina died, mother.

Oh, yes! I heard as well. An accident, wasn't it?

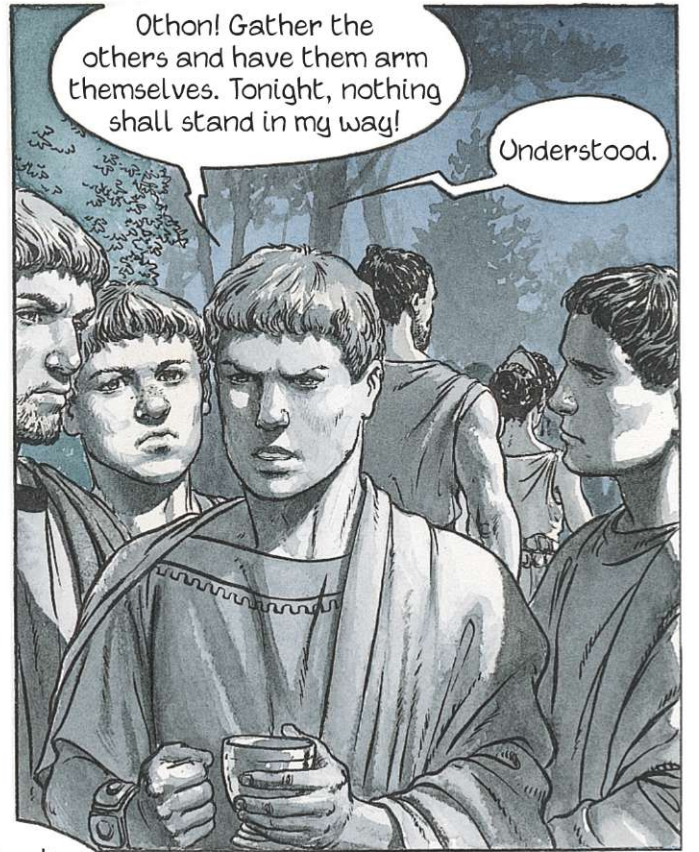


No less tragic for that. May I remind you her son is a friend of mine?

Let his grief be ours, then...



...till my cup runs dry.



Othon! Gather the others and have them arm themselves. Tonight, nothing shall stand in my way!

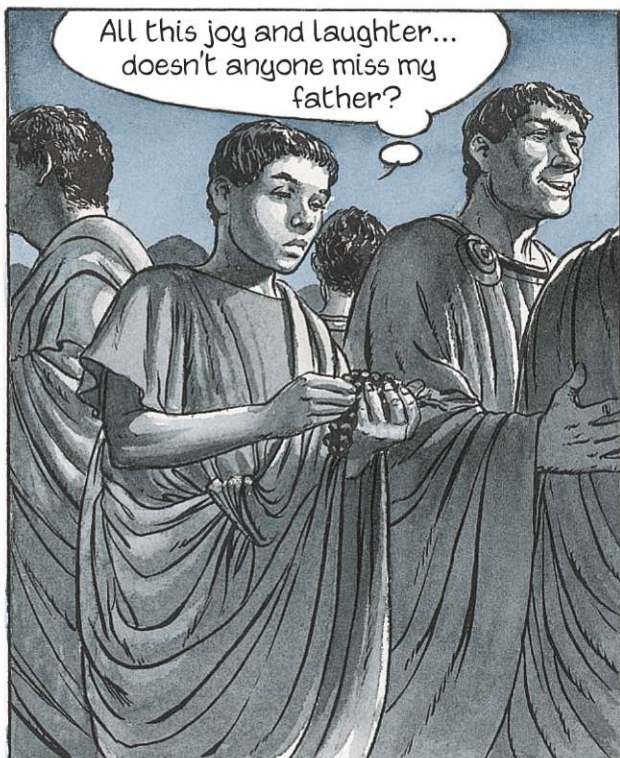
Understood.



Well, well! Look who dared to crawl out of his hole!



That boy by the table there—give him a shove for me!



All this joy and laughter... doesn't anyone miss my father?



HEY!!

WATCH OUT!!



Stupid boy!
Look! You've soiled
my tunic!



I-I'm sorry!
I don't know
what hap-
pened. I trip-
ped, and—

Yeah, everyone saw
you trip! That's
no excuse!



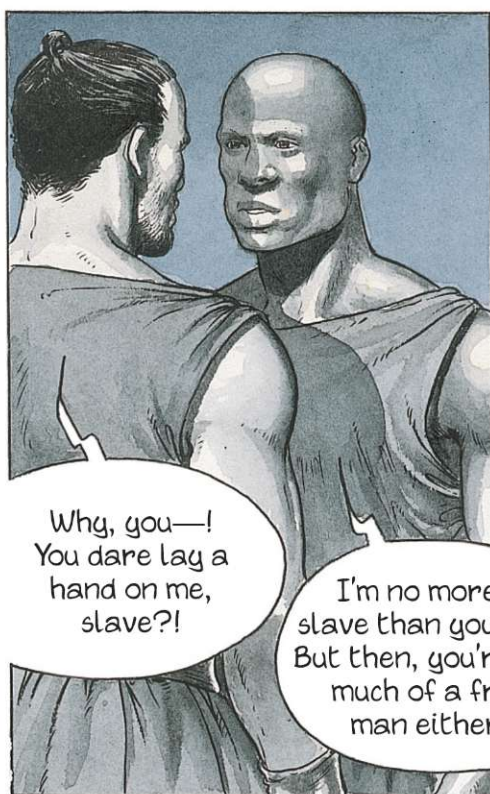
Why,
I ought to
teach you—



Leave that
child alone!



Why, you—!
You dare lay a
hand on me,
slave?!



I'm no more a
slave than you are.
But then, you're not
much of a free
man either.



I can still
smell sweat
and filth from
the arena on
you, gladi-
ator.

Quick! Call for bets!
Raise the stakes!





2,000 sesterces on the Thracian!



AND 1,000 ON THE BLACK MAN! WHO'S NEXT?

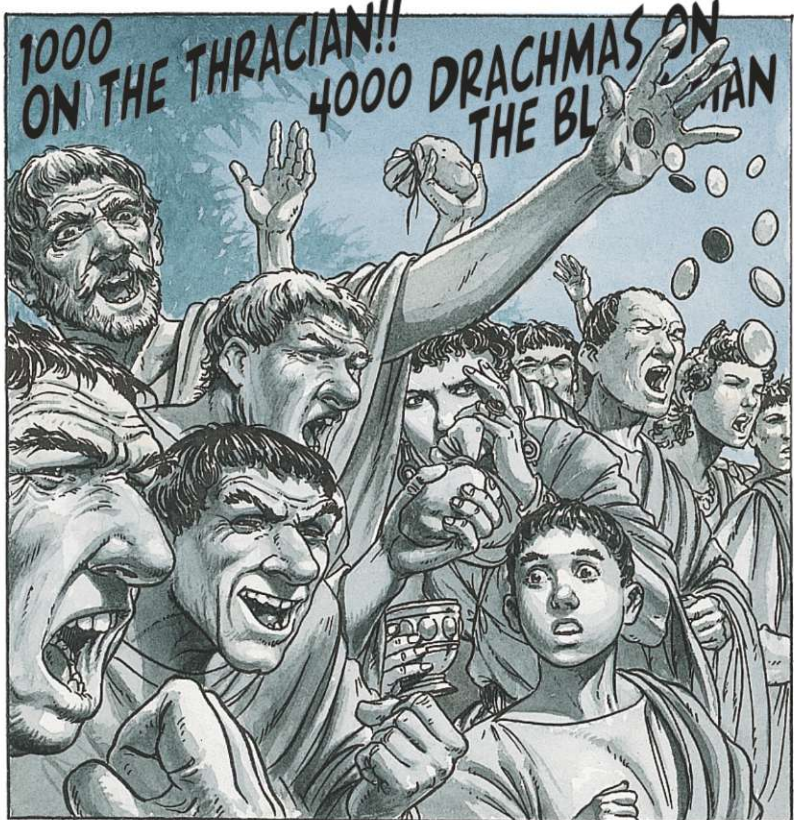


I don't want to fight.

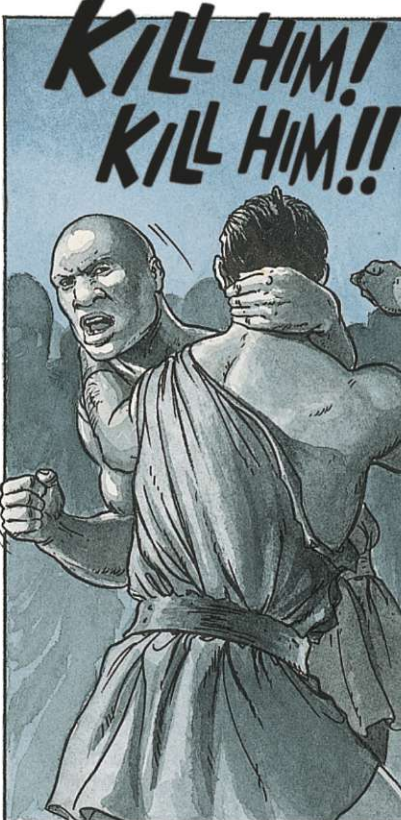
Why not? You afraid...



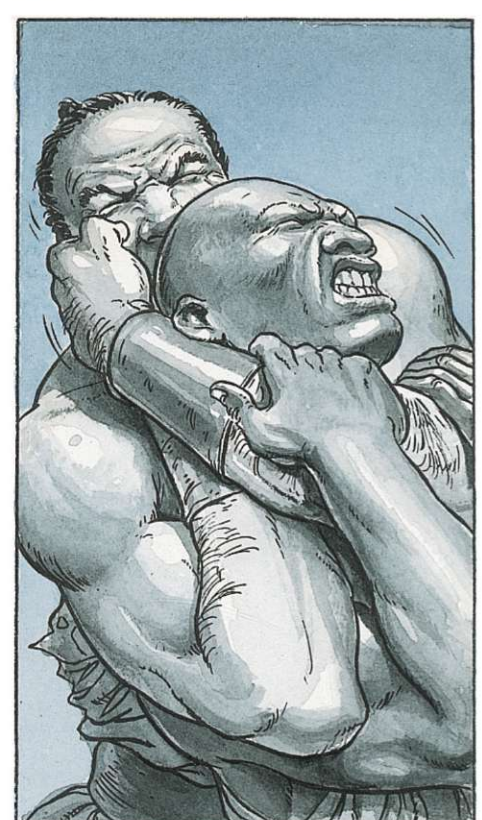
...slave?



1000 ON THE THRACIAN!!
4000 DRACHMAS ON THE BLACK MAN

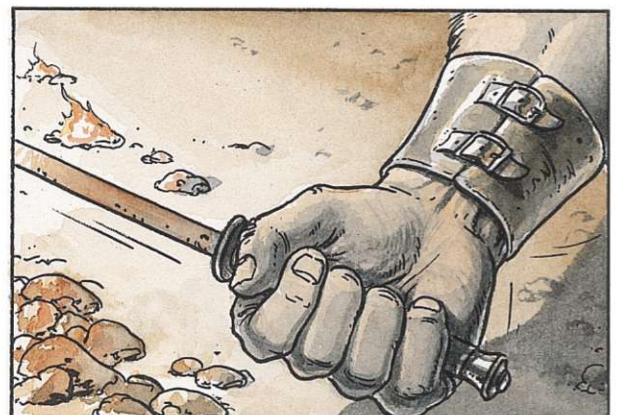
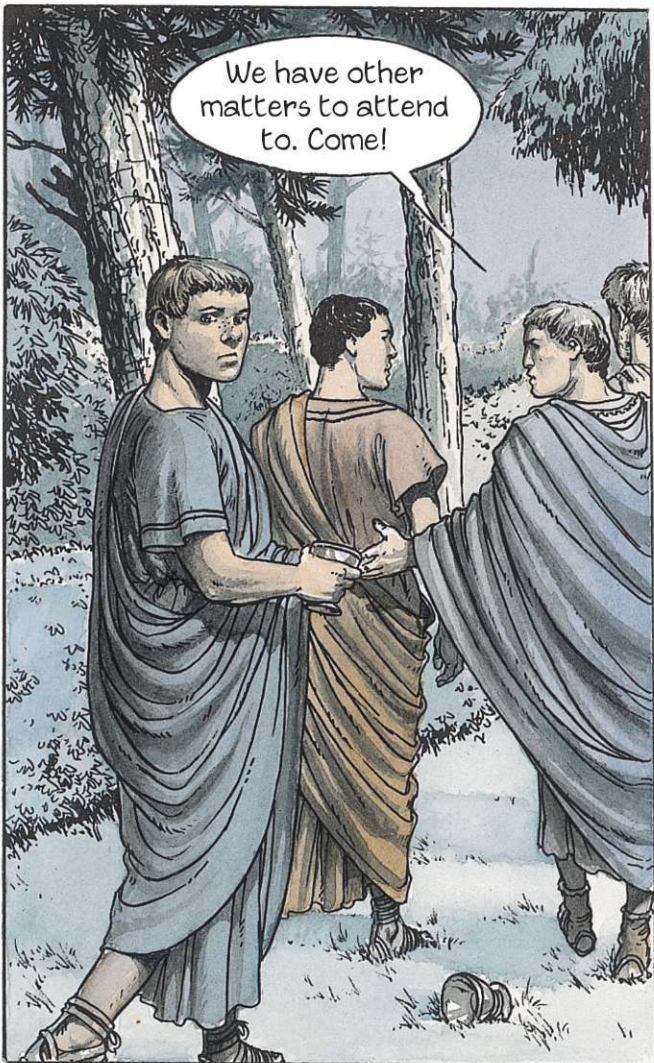


**KILL HIM!
KILL HIM!!**



Such disrespect! I'll put an end to this!

NO! Don't...



**ENOUGH!
STOP FIGHTING!!**



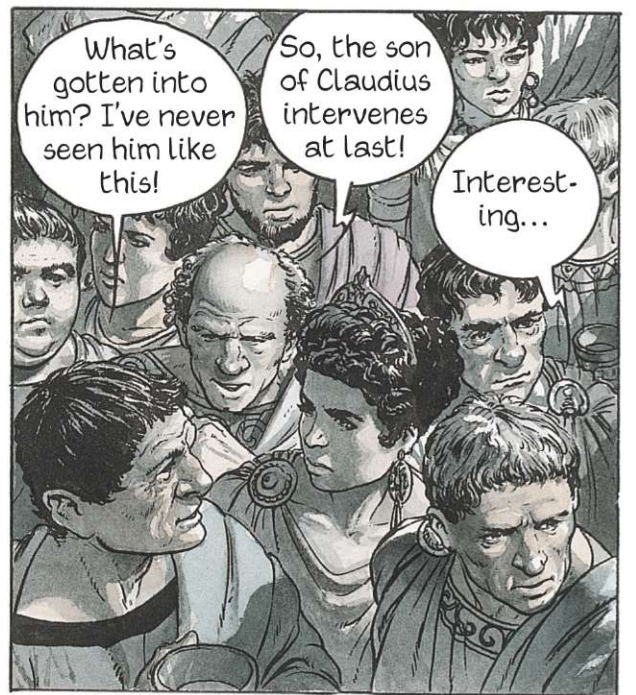
Guards!
Separate
them if you
must!



What's
gotten into
him? I've never
seen him like
this!

So, the son
of Claudius
intervenes
at last!

Interest-
ing...



He's found
his father's
voice. He has
the power
inside
him!



We'll
meet
again!

I'll be
wait-
ing.



Nero?
I think he's gone.
Where to, I
wonder?

My son! Where is
my son?

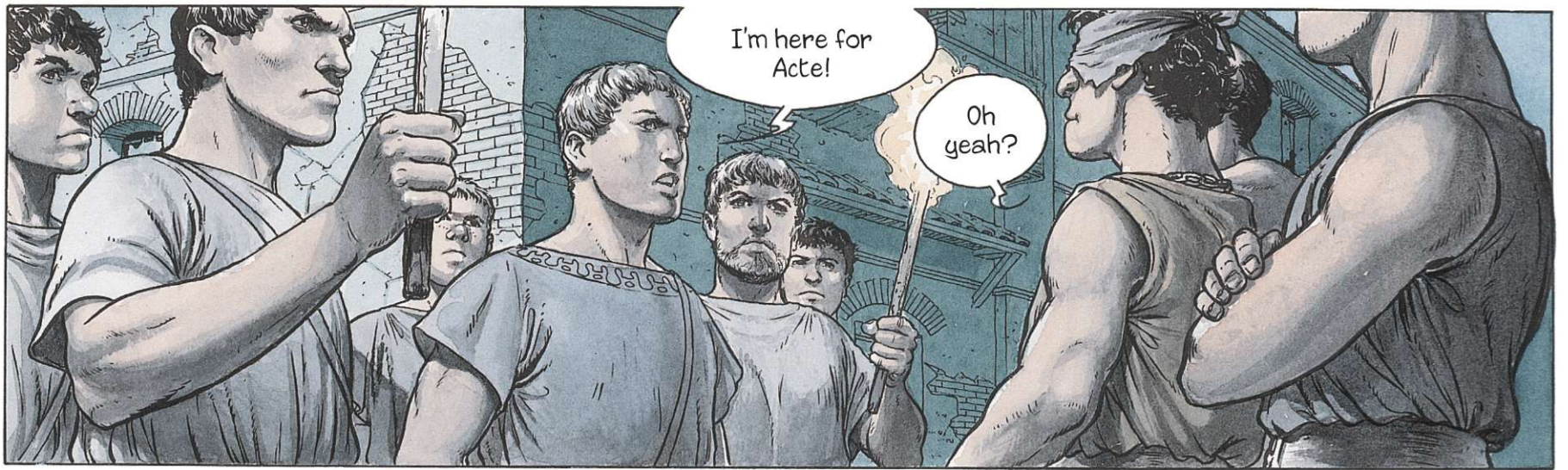


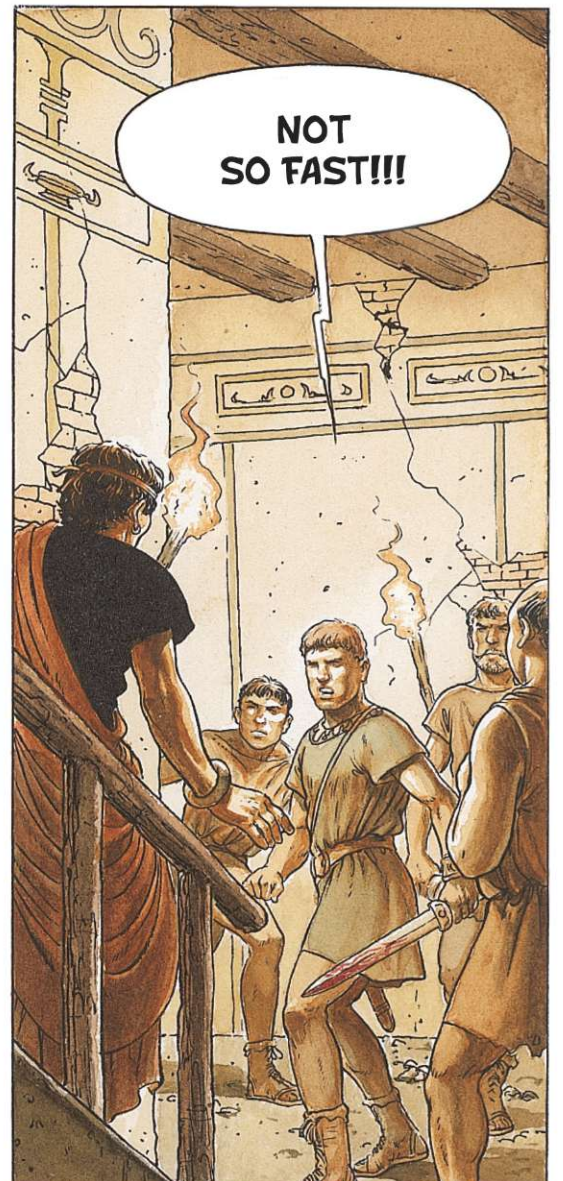
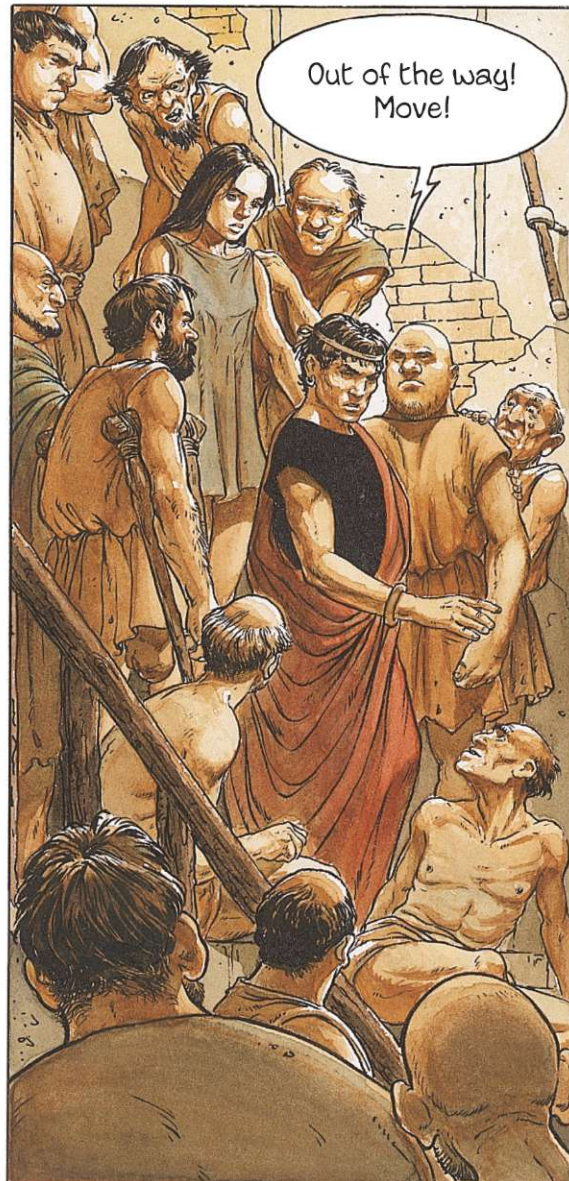
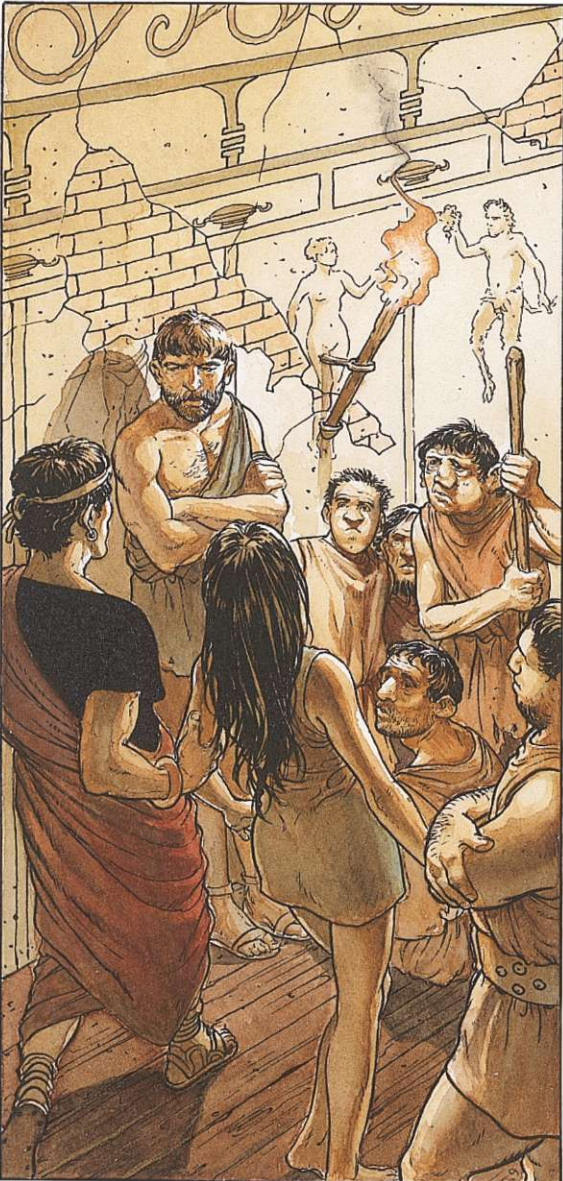
No falling back!
Are my orders
clear?

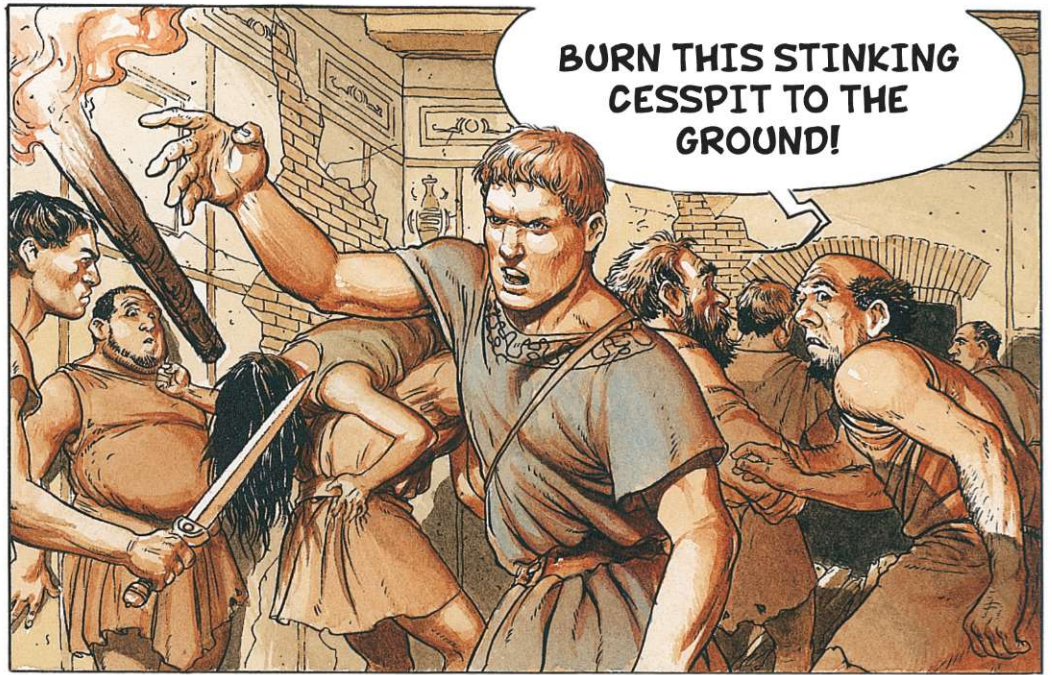


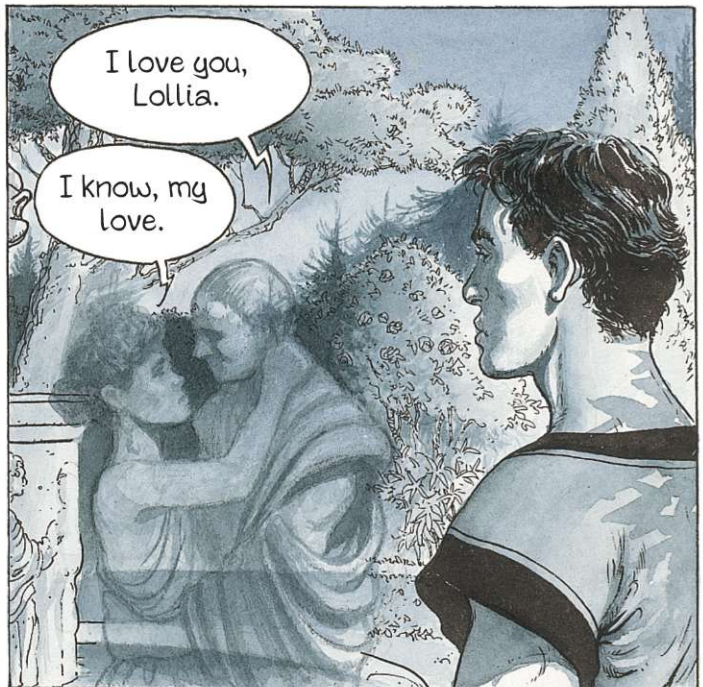
This time
they're going to let
us in!



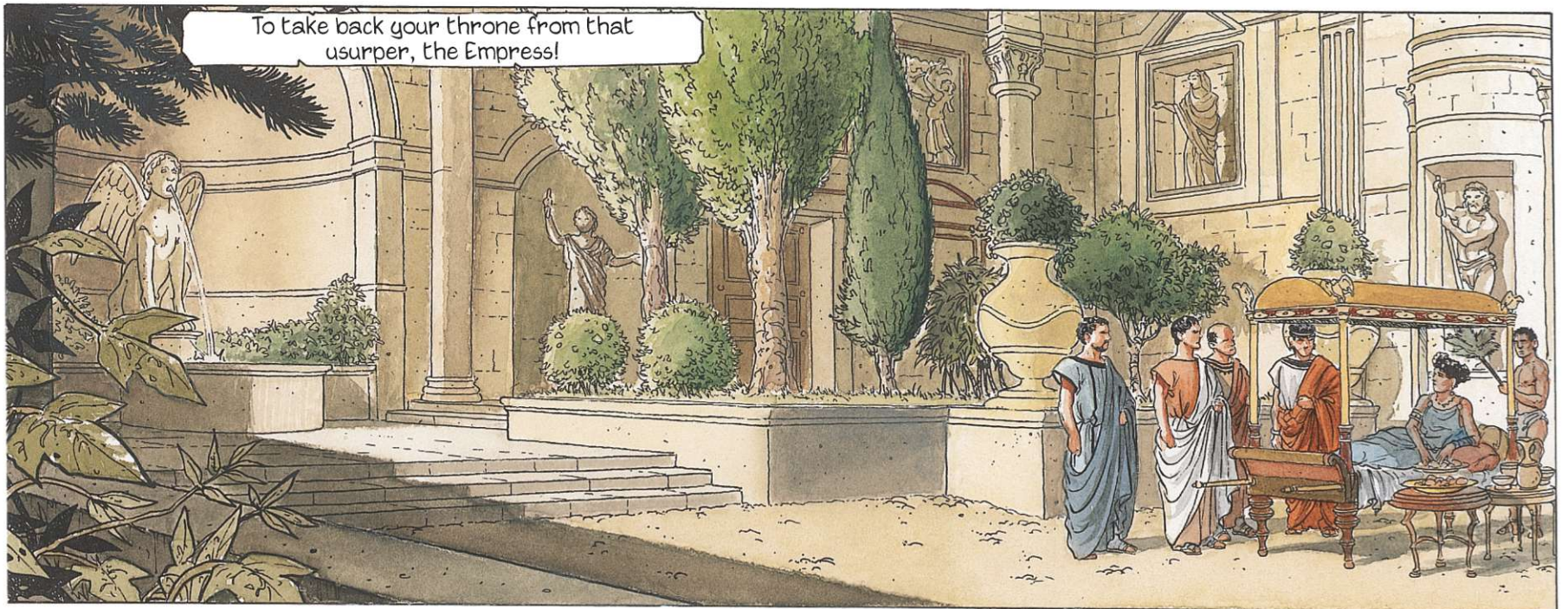












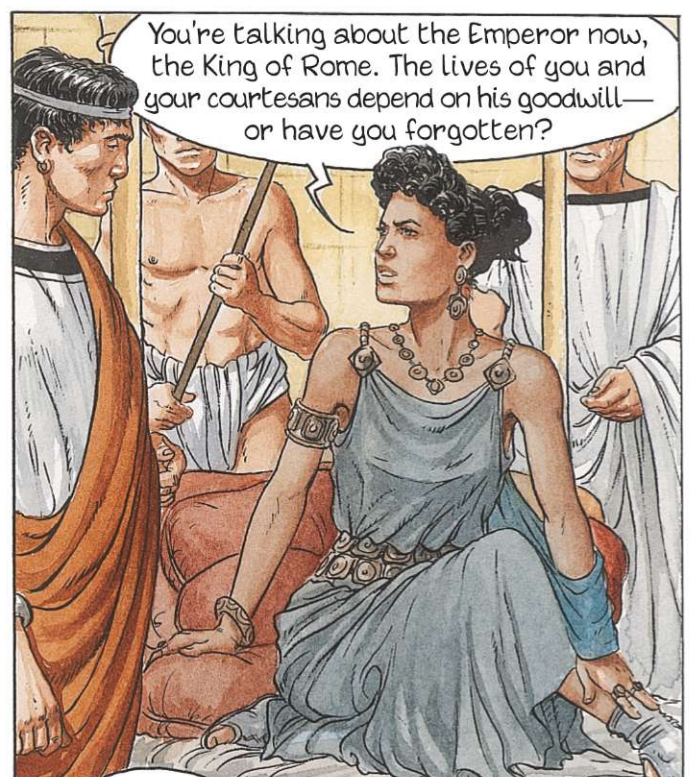
To take back your throne from that usurper, the Empress!



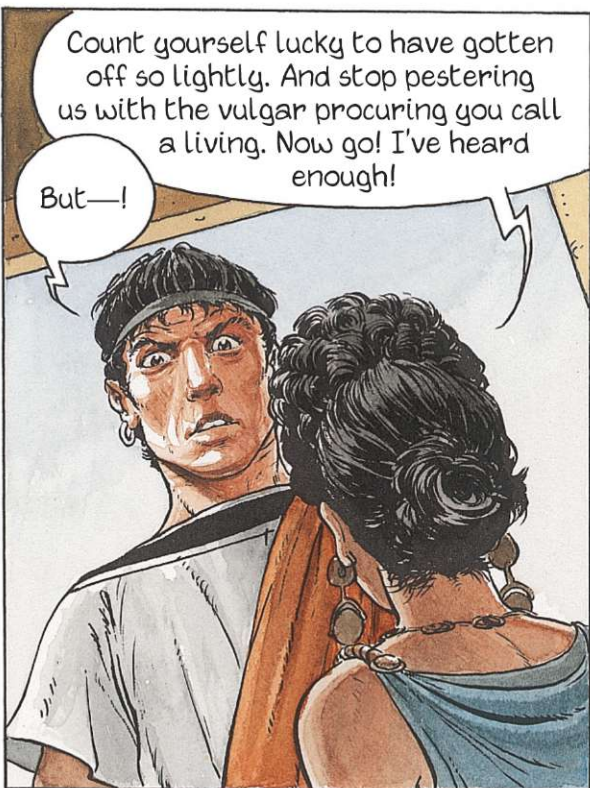
I won't stand for such barbarity! The girl is mine! I've invested an awful lot of money in her. I want her back, before that savage does her any damage.



Just a minute! Are you calling my son a savage?

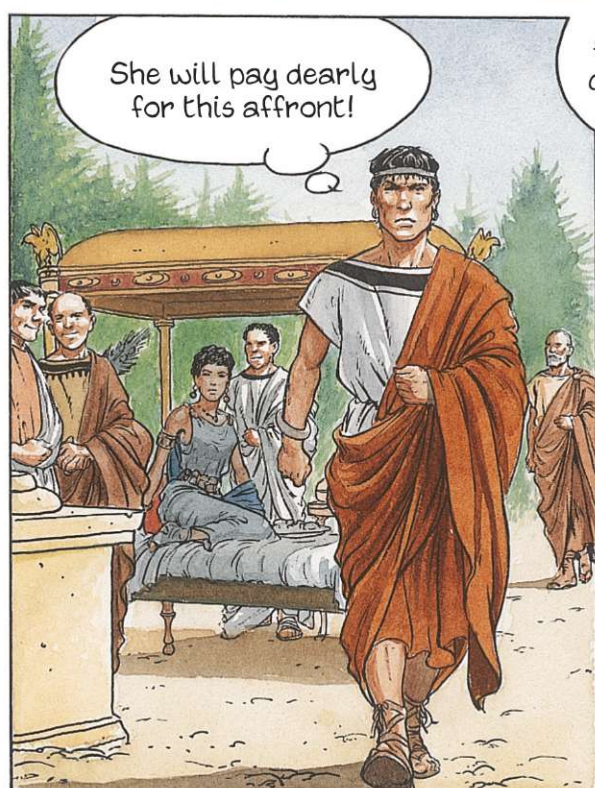


You're talking about the Emperor now, the King of Rome. The lives of you and your courtesans depend on his goodwill—or have you forgotten?



Count yourself lucky to have gotten off so lightly. And stop pestering us with the vulgar procuring you call a living. Now go! I've heard enough!

But—!

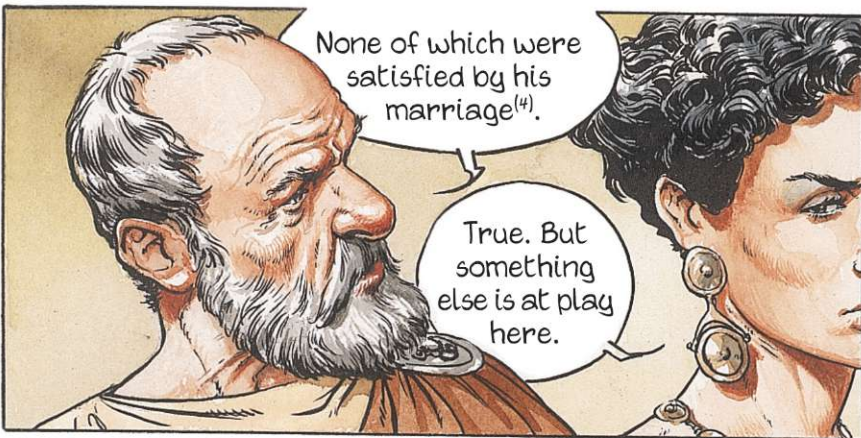
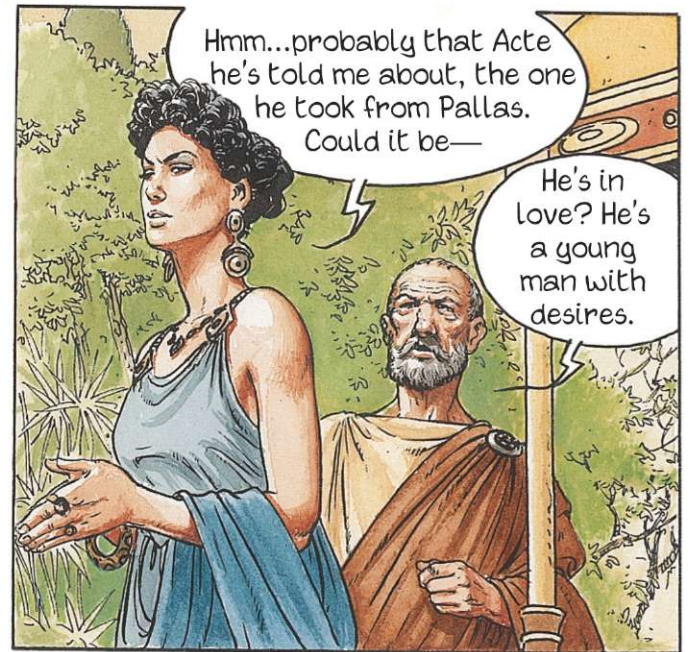


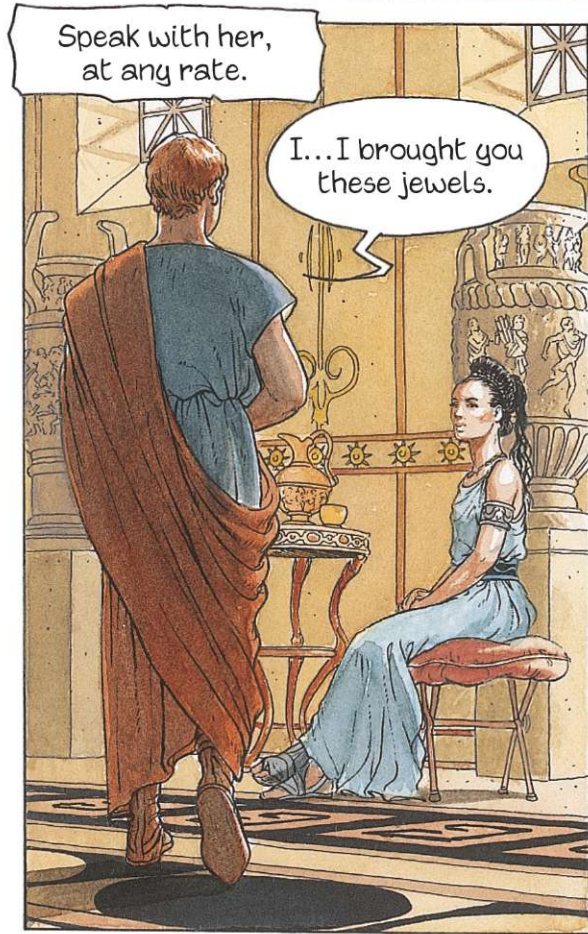
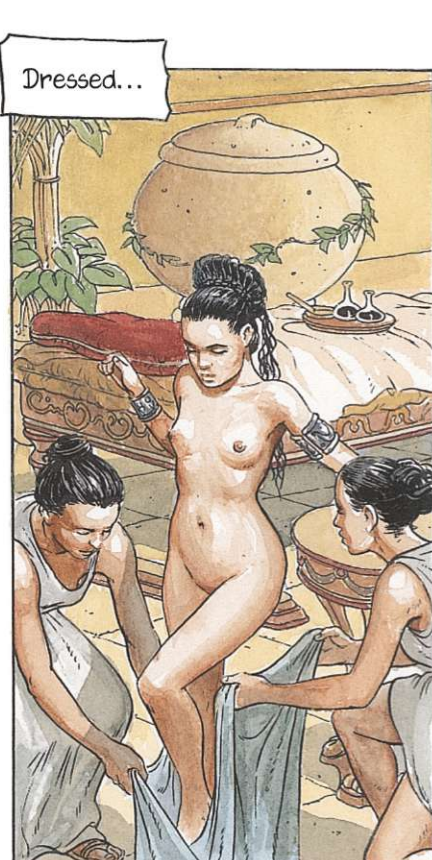
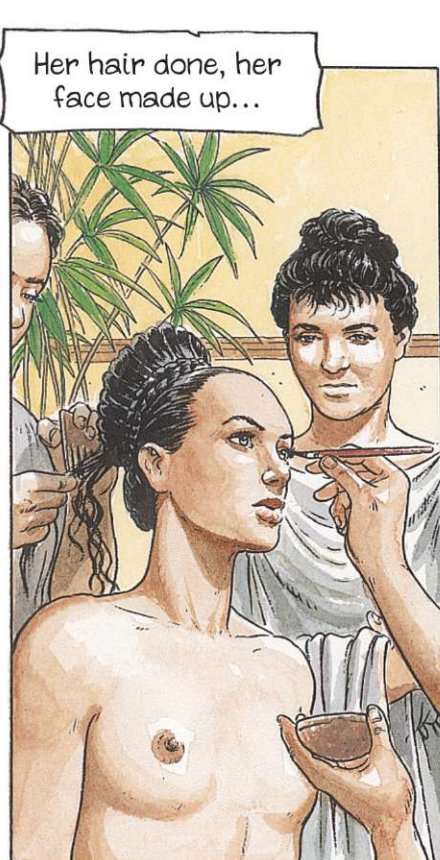
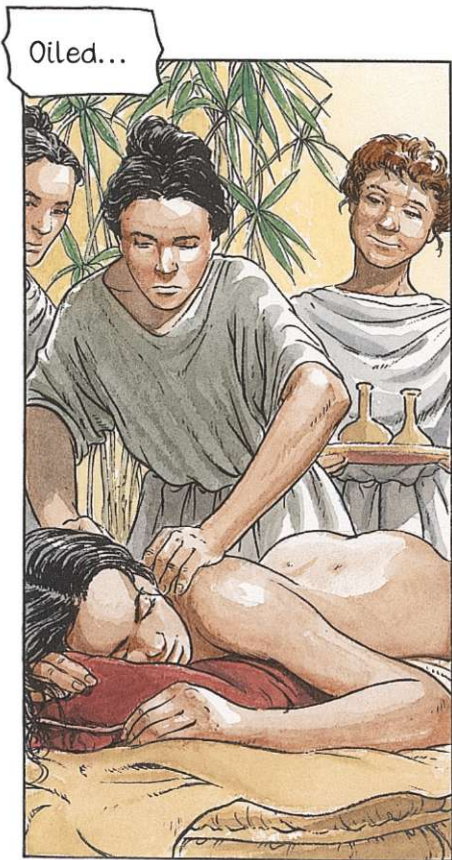
She will pay dearly for this affront!

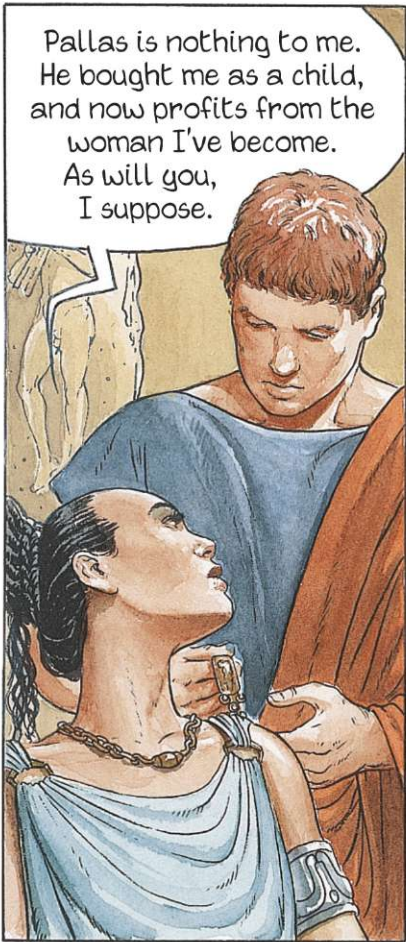


Your freed slave cuts a sorry figure.

Bah! His face is an open book. I really need to take care of him some-time soon.



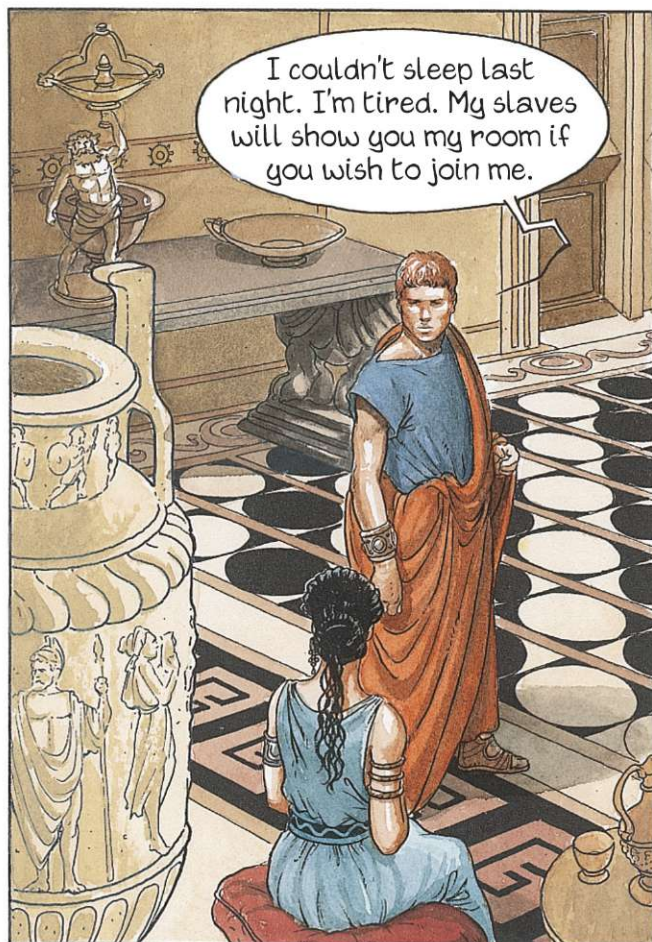




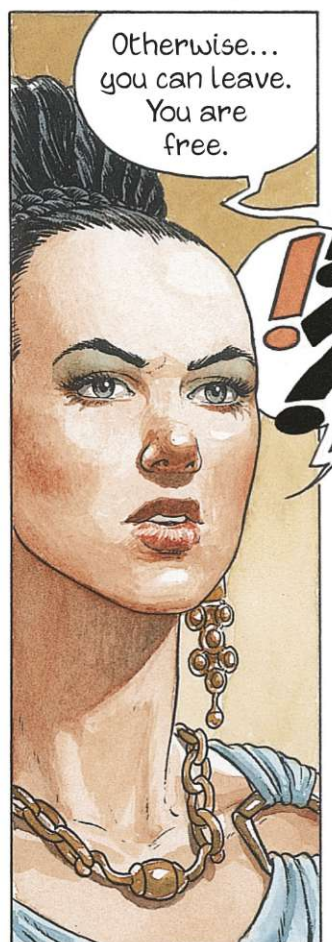
Pallas is nothing to me. He bought me as a child, and now profits from the woman I've become. As will you, I suppose.



I shall leave you the second earring. You can put it on yourself.



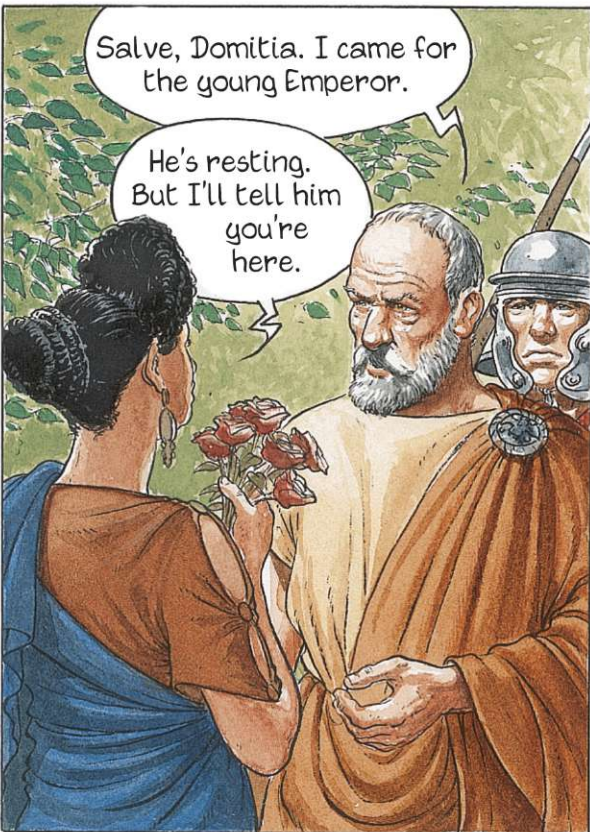
I couldn't sleep last night. I'm tired. My slaves will show you my room if you wish to join me.



Otherwise... you can leave. You are free.



Ah! So soon?



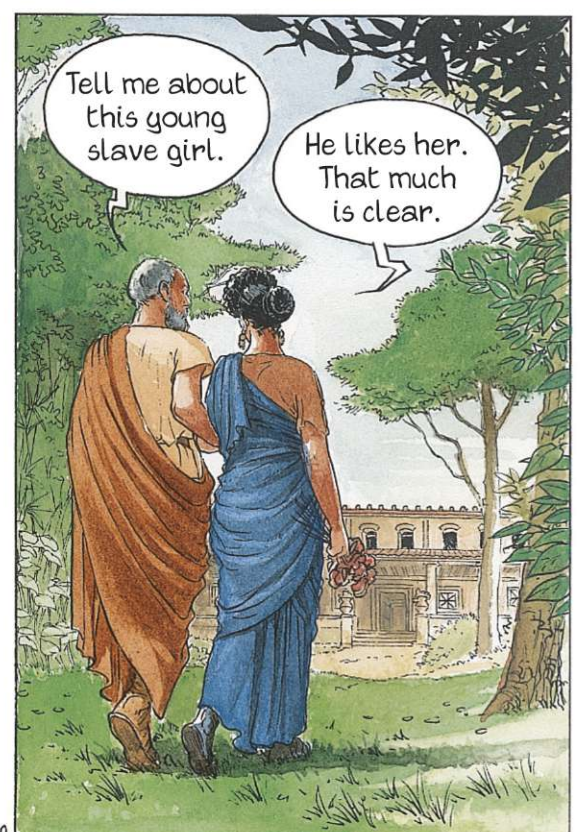
Salve, Domitia. I came for the young Emperor.

He's resting. But I'll tell him you're here.



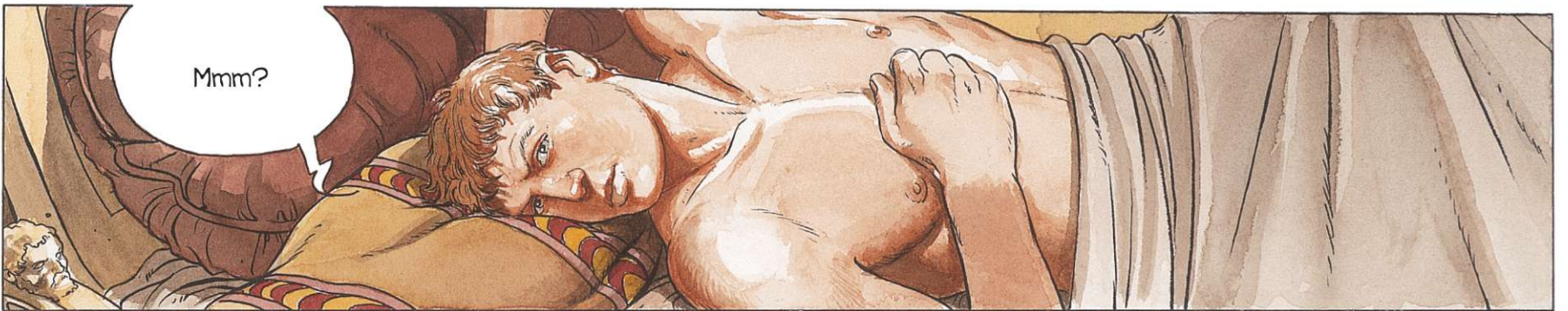
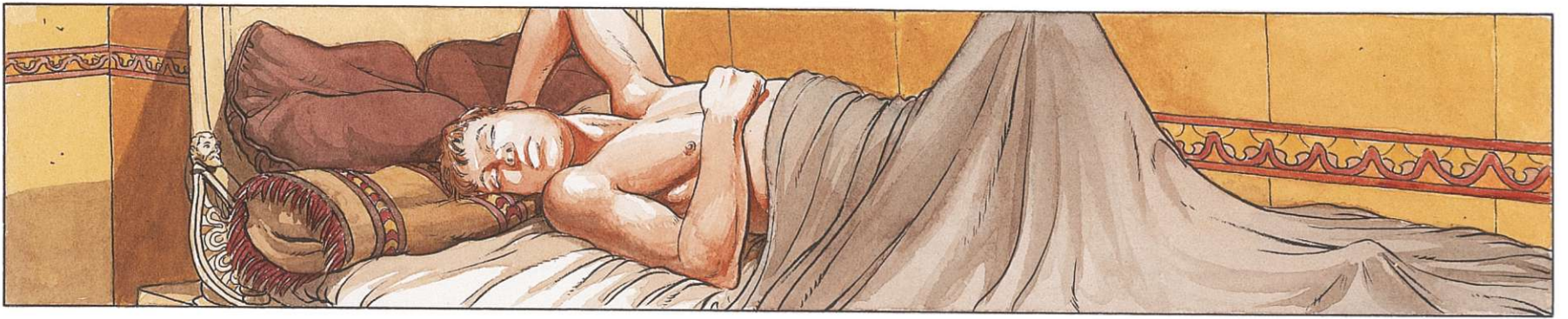
Perhaps we should let him sleep. He needs it, I think. And I've heard so much about your delicious honey cakes, Domitia.

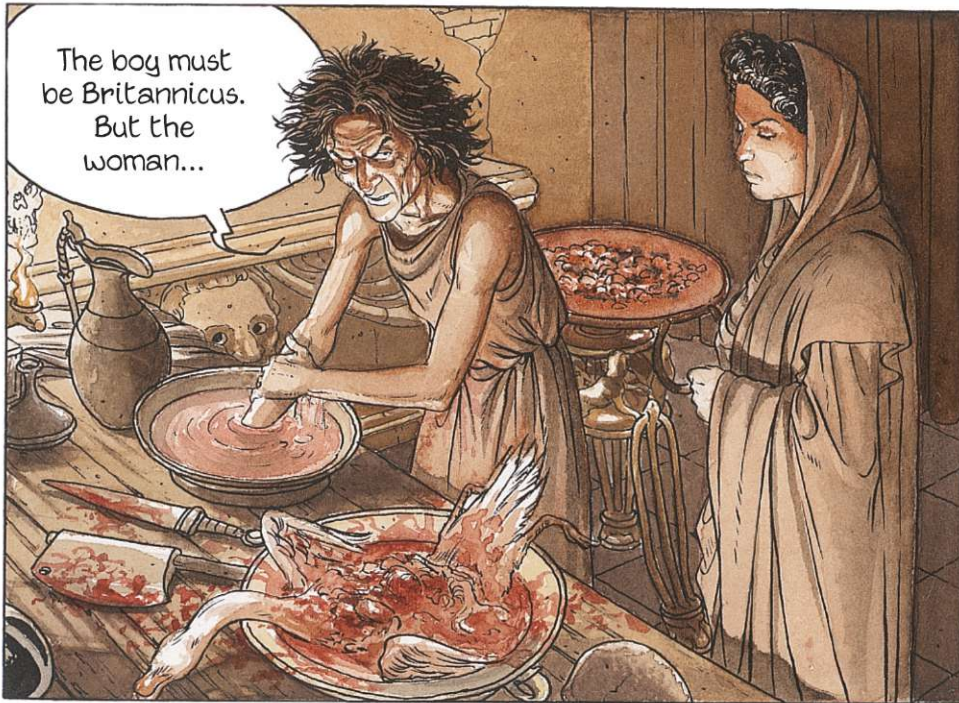
As it turns out, I have some. You won't be disappointed.



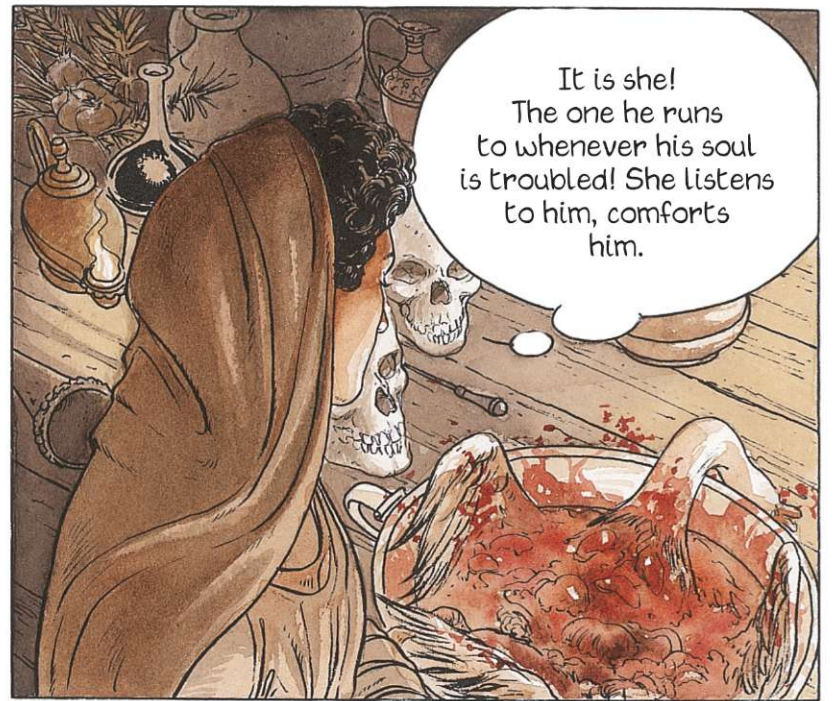
Tell me about this young slave girl.

He likes her. That much is clear.

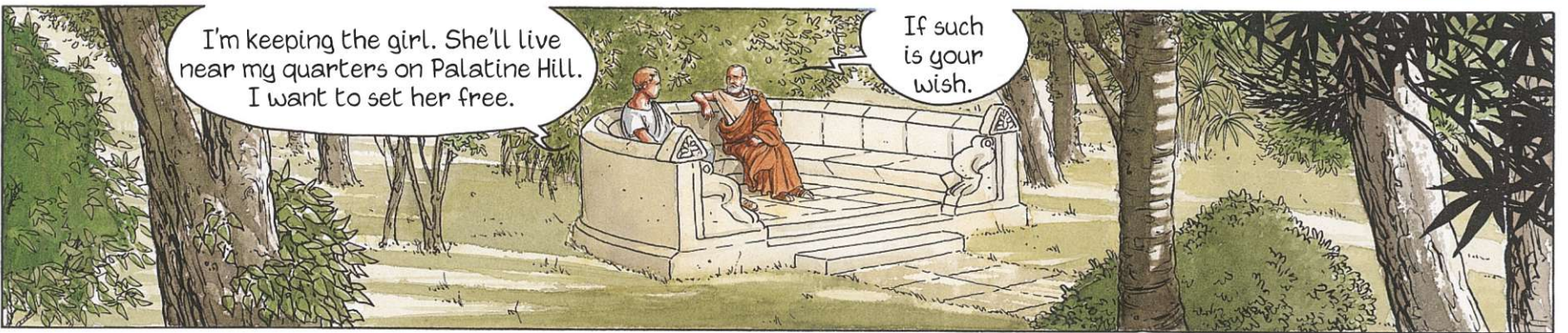




The boy must be Britannicus. But the woman...

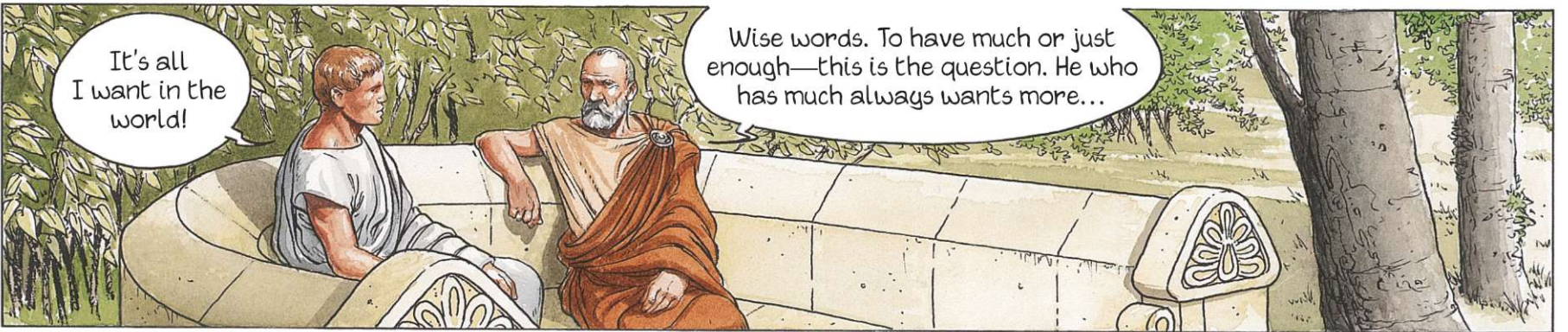


It is she! The one he runs to whenever his soul is troubled! She listens to him, comforts him.



I'm keeping the girl. She'll live near my quarters on Palatine Hill. I want to set her free.

If such is your wish.



It's all I want in the world!

Wise words. To have much or just enough—this is the question. He who has much always wants more...



...which means they never have enough. He who has enough has something the rich never know...

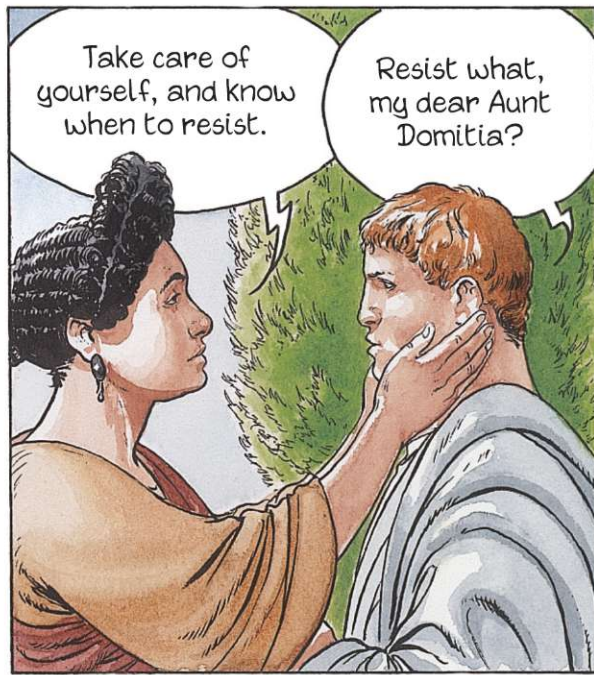


...An end to desire! And speaking of desire...⁽⁵⁾



Leaving already?

I must. But this time I will not be alone. She will be with me.



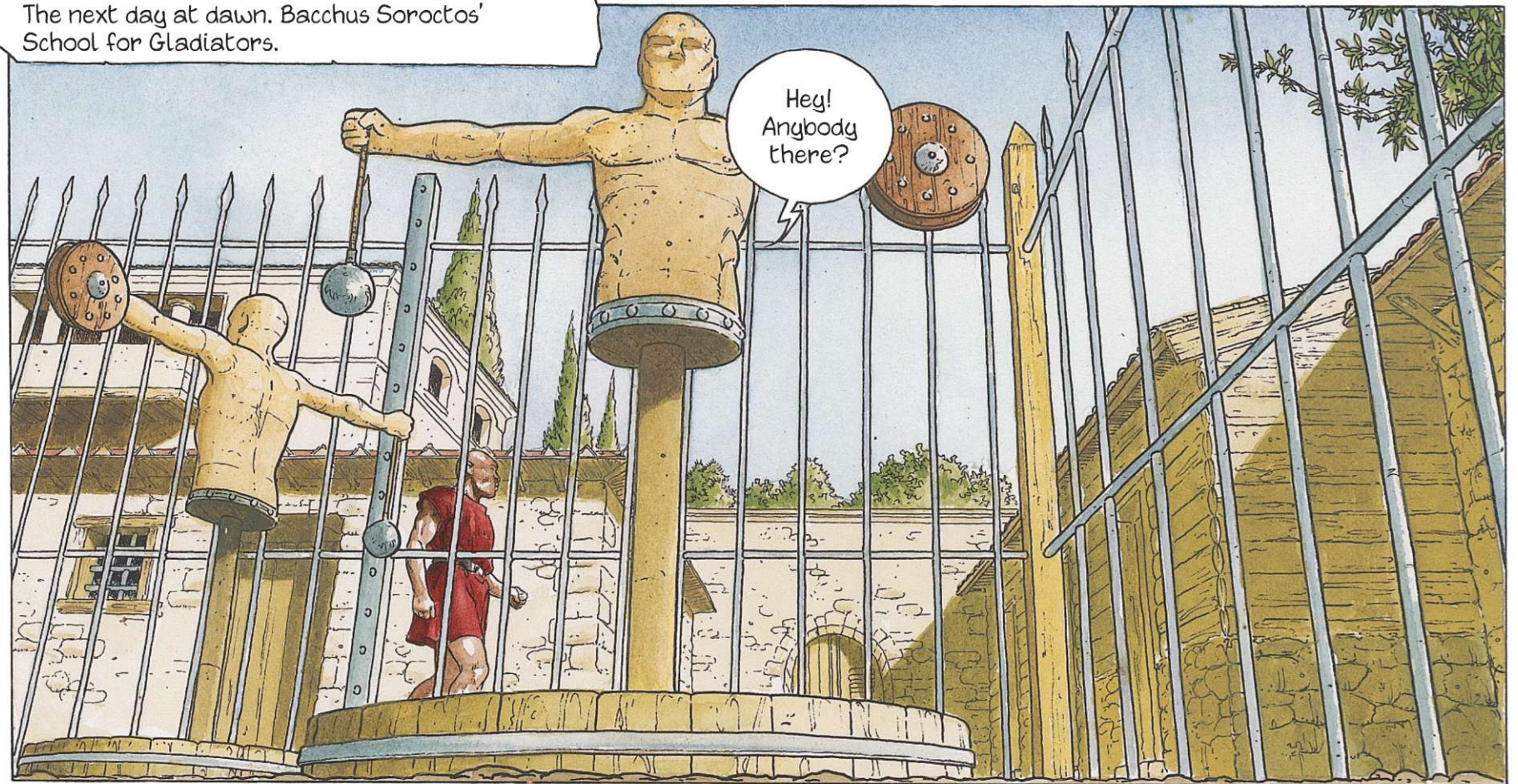
Take care of yourself, and know when to resist.

Resist what, my dear Aunt Domitia?



Yourself, my child. Yourself.

The next day at dawn. Bacchus Soroctos' School for Gladiators.



Hey! Anybody there?

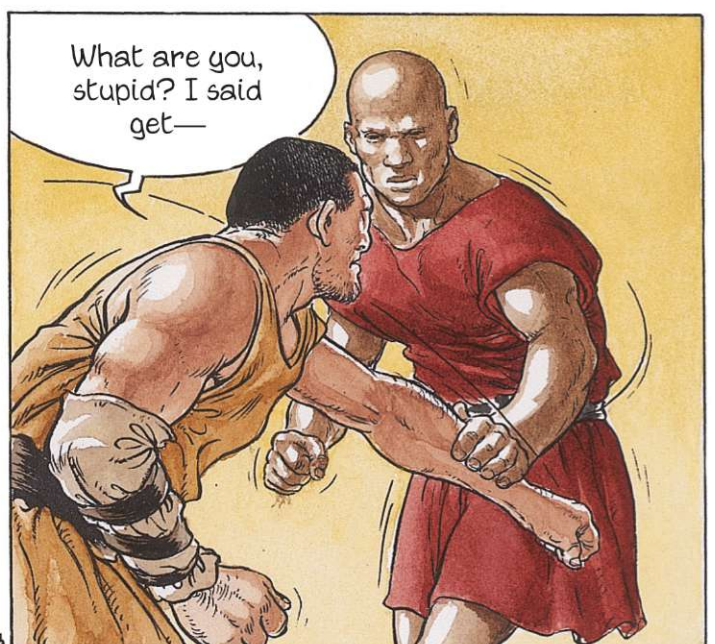


The hell do you want? Beat it! Scram!

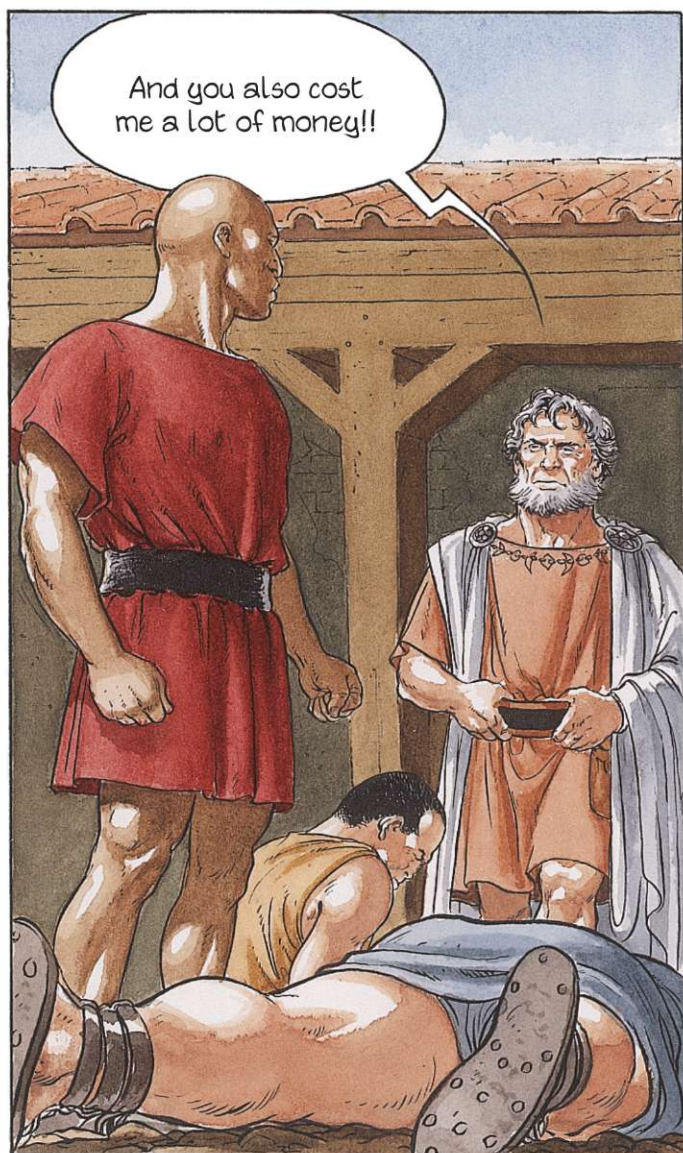
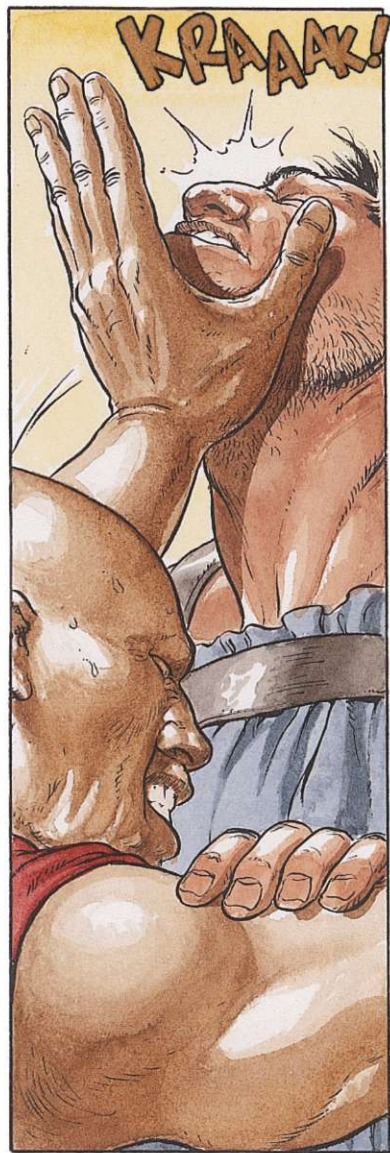
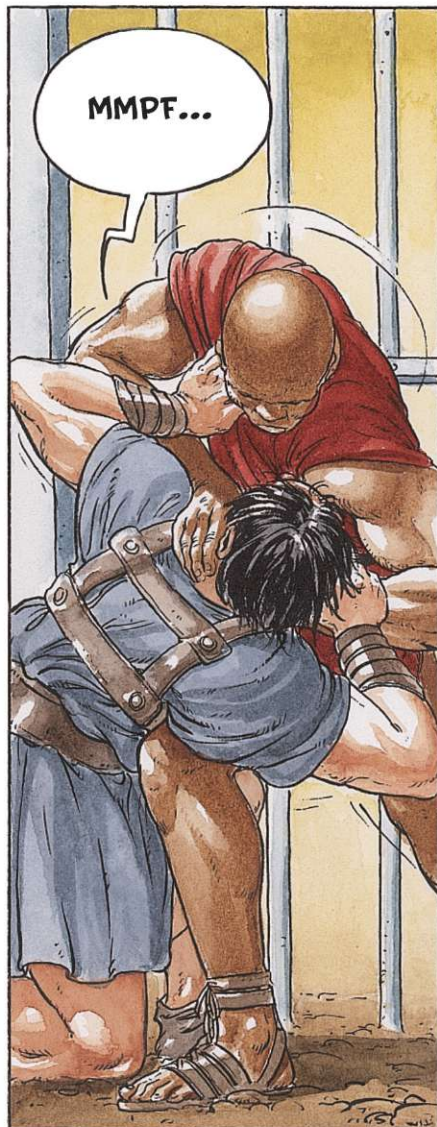
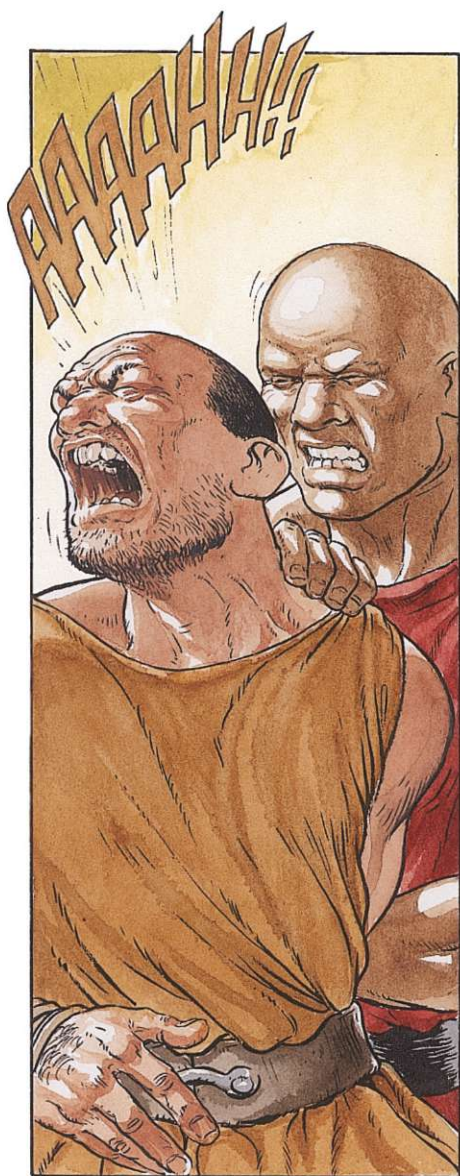


I'm looking for Bacchus Soroctos.

That so? Well, he's not looking for you!



What are you, stupid? I said get—



Idiot! Shut up or I'll break your other arm!



This one's useless now. What a shame. He was just starting to make me some money.

So you're Bacchus Soroctos?



At your service! That is, within the limits of my humble means.

I want to learn how to fight—how to win.



Really? You look like you've got that covered.

I know the arena, true. I've fought there, and I'm still alive for now. But that won't last. I need to learn what really counts.



A thirst for blood!



Killing and not being killed is my trade. But all this costs a pretty penny, you know.



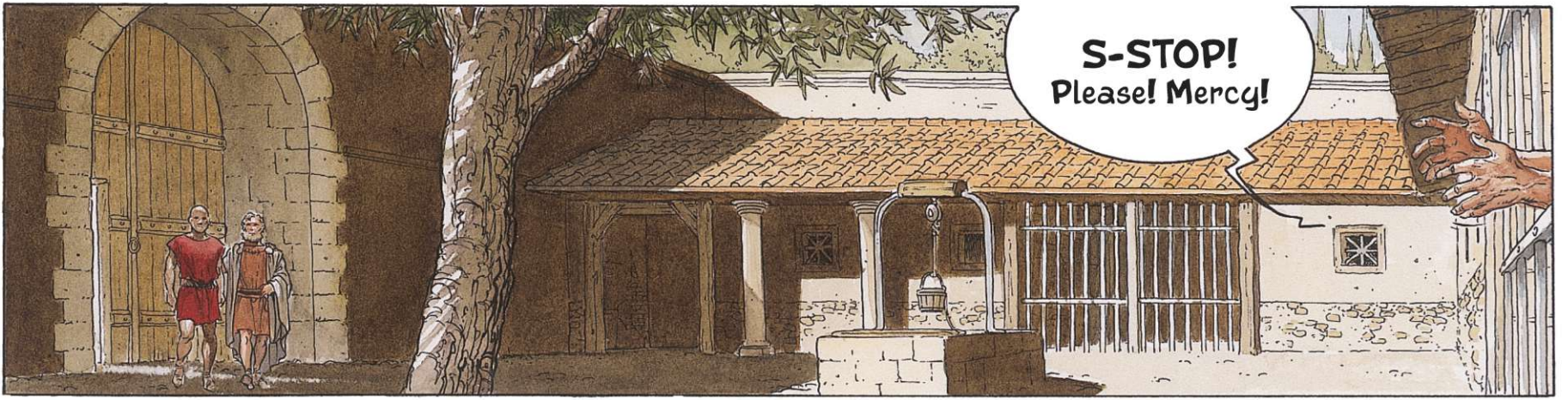
I can pay!!

In that case, I'm sure we can reach an agreement. Follow me. I'll draw up a contract that'll satisfy us both.

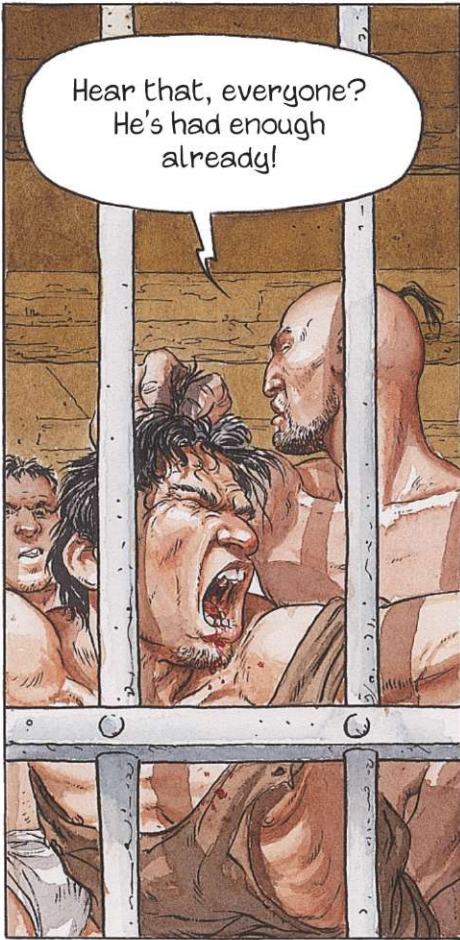


FRRAHHHHH
???





S-STOP!
Please! Mercy!



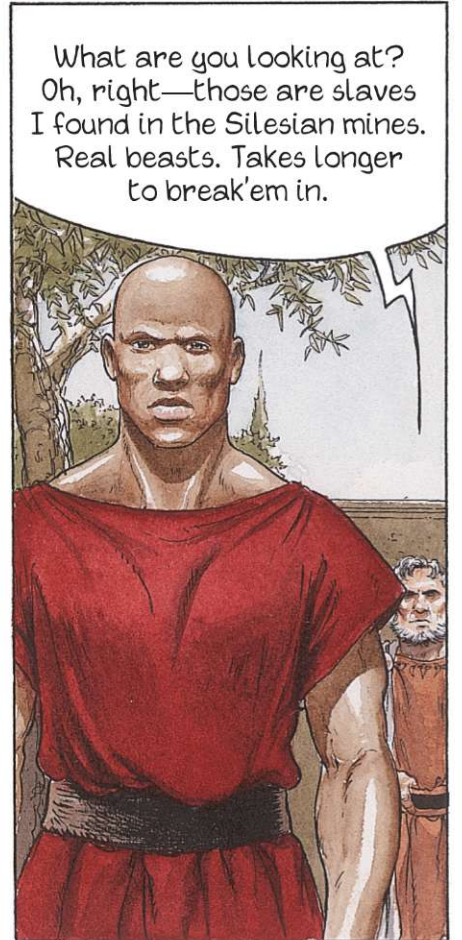
Hear that, everyone?
He's had enough
already!



I said everyone,
you hear? Everyone.
You better satisfy them
like you satisfied
me!



C'MON!
LET'S FINISH
THIS!

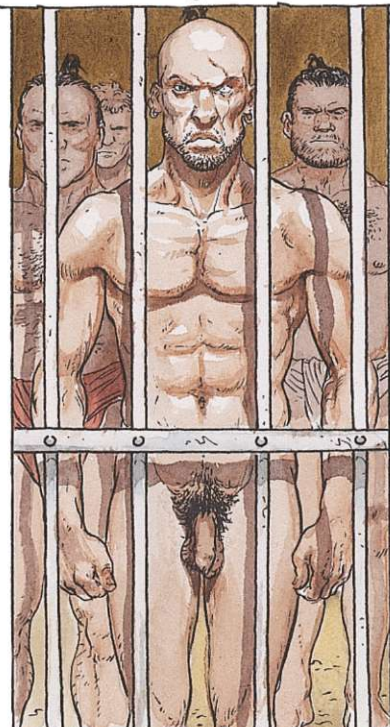


What are you looking at?
Oh, right—those are slaves
I found in the Silesian mines.
Real beasts. Takes longer
to break'em in.

But once they are, they'll
be powerful fighters.
Especially that one—

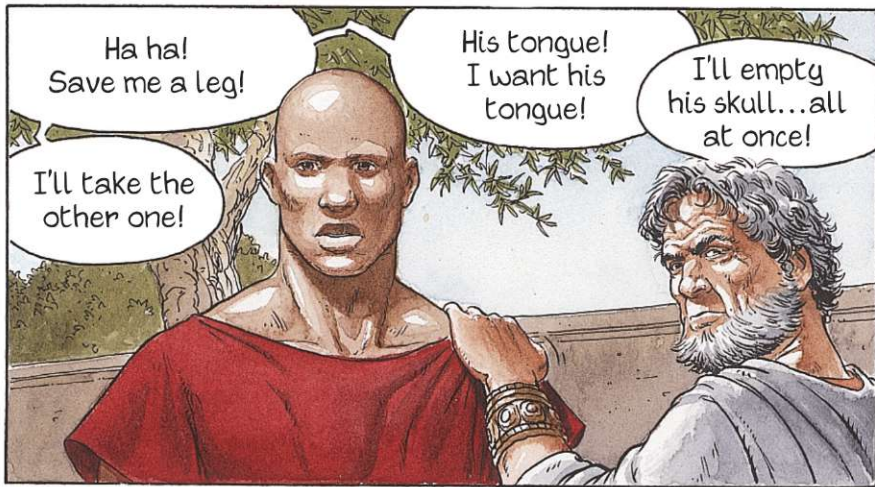


Massam. He's already killed
two of my trainers. But I
make more money off him
than anyone else.



Heg, new gup! Get over
here! I've never had black
meat before. I'll guarantee
you a feast like no
other.





Ha ha!
Save me a leg!

His tongue!
I want his
tongue!

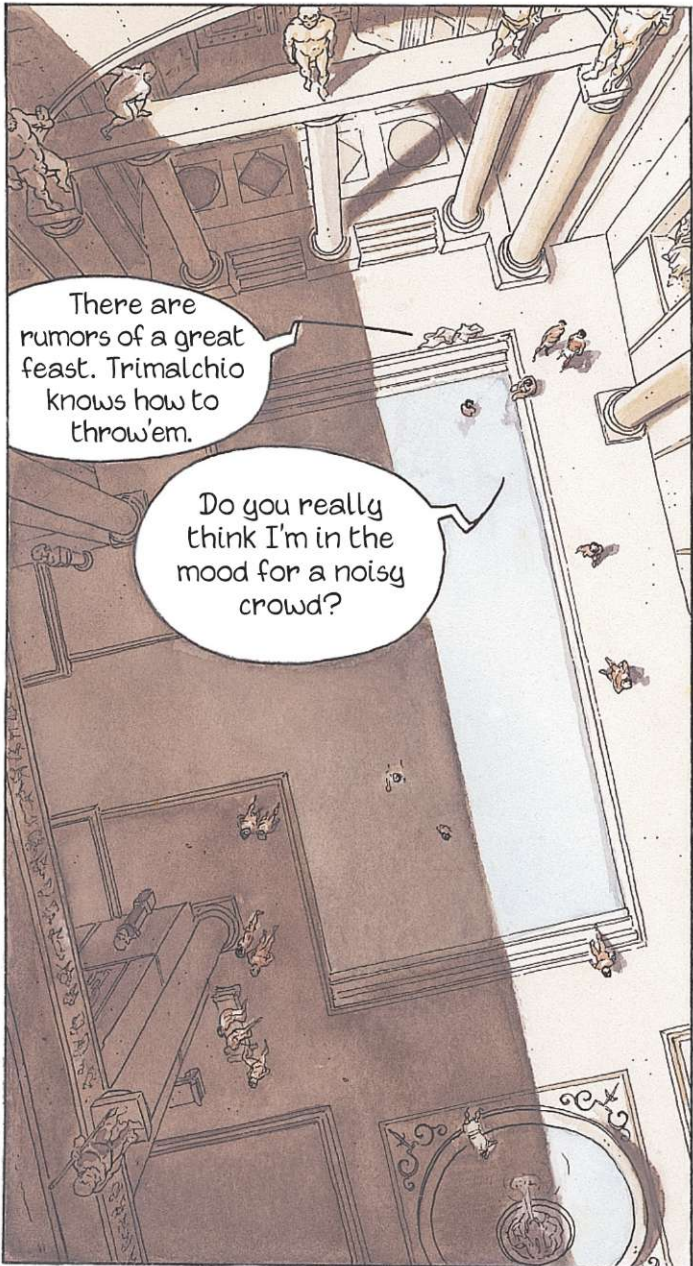
I'll empty
his skull...all
at once!

I'll take the
other one!



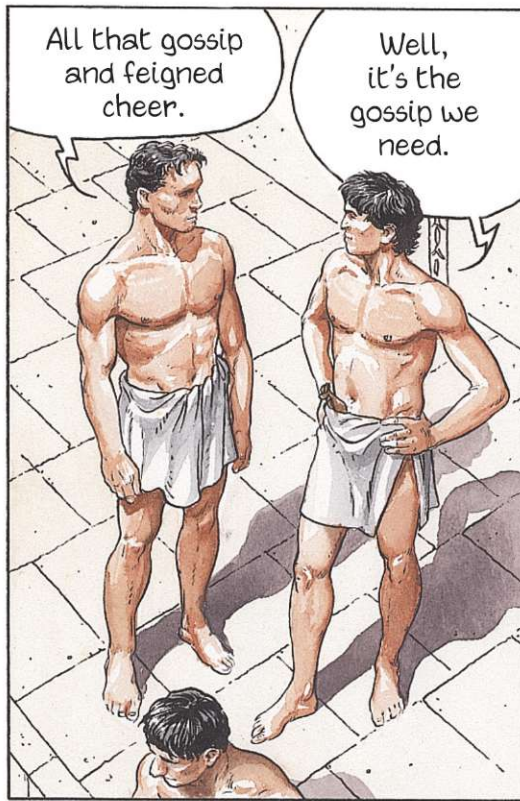
Talk about a thirst
for blood! Better
watch out!

So
I see!



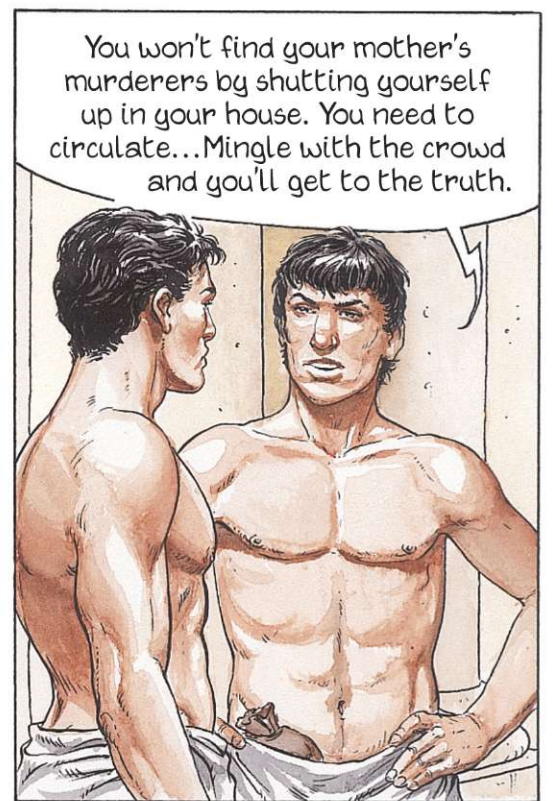
There are
rumors of a great
feast. Trimalchio
knows how to
throw'em.

Do you really
think I'm in the
mood for a noisy
crowd?



All that gossip
and feigned
cheer.

Well,
it's the
gossip we
need.

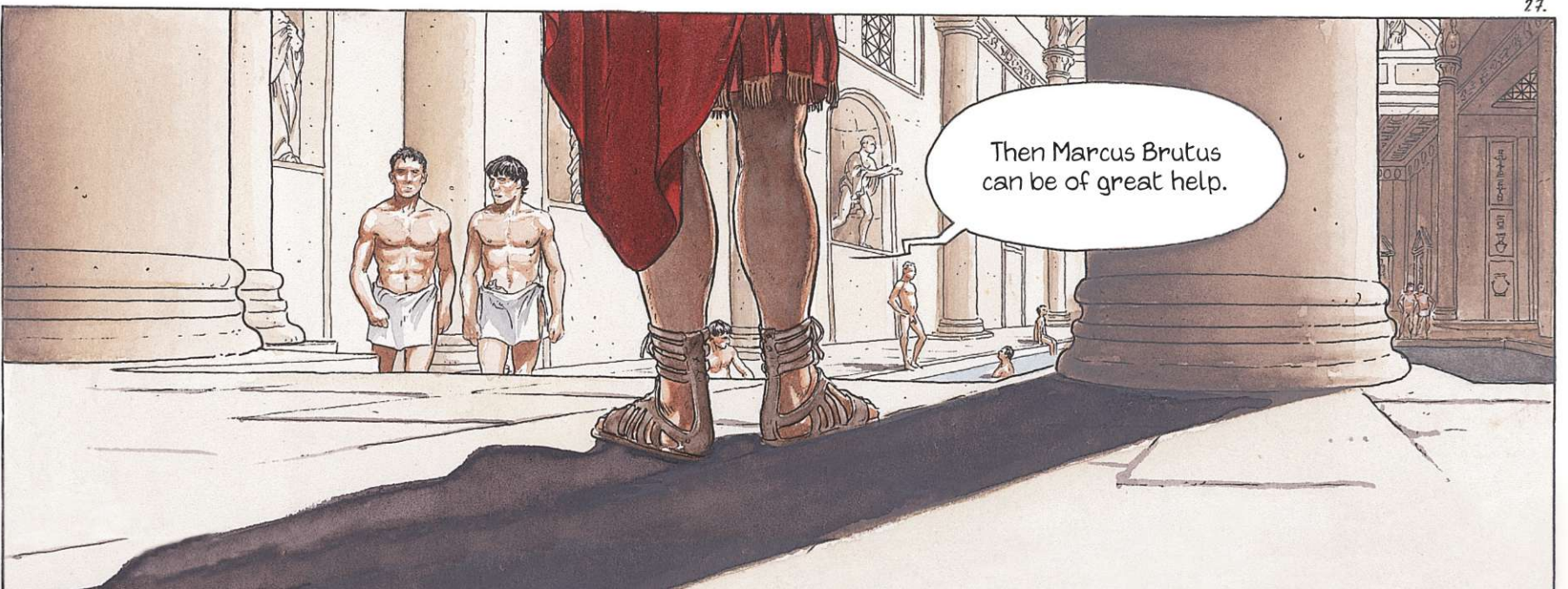


You won't find your mother's
murderers by shutting yourself
up in your house. You need to
circulate...Mingle with the crowd
and you'll get to the truth.



Look!
There's our
man. C'mon,
I'll intro-
duce you.
You still
trust me,
right?

Of course.
You know
I do.



Then Marcus Brutus
can be of great help.

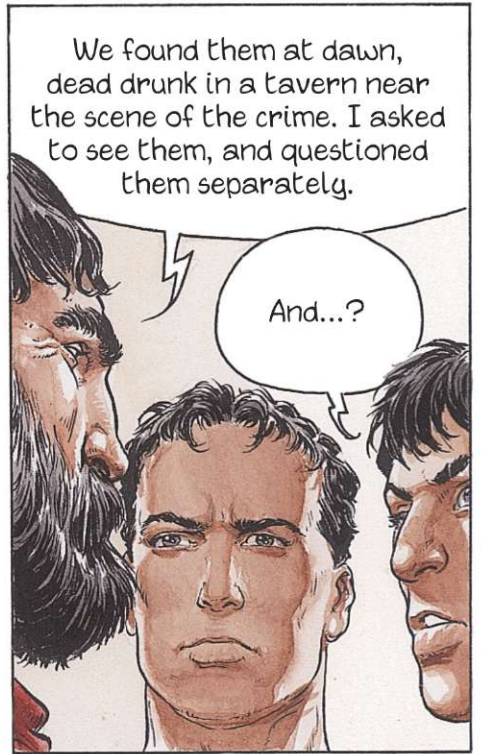


I may have news.

Ah! I expected no less!

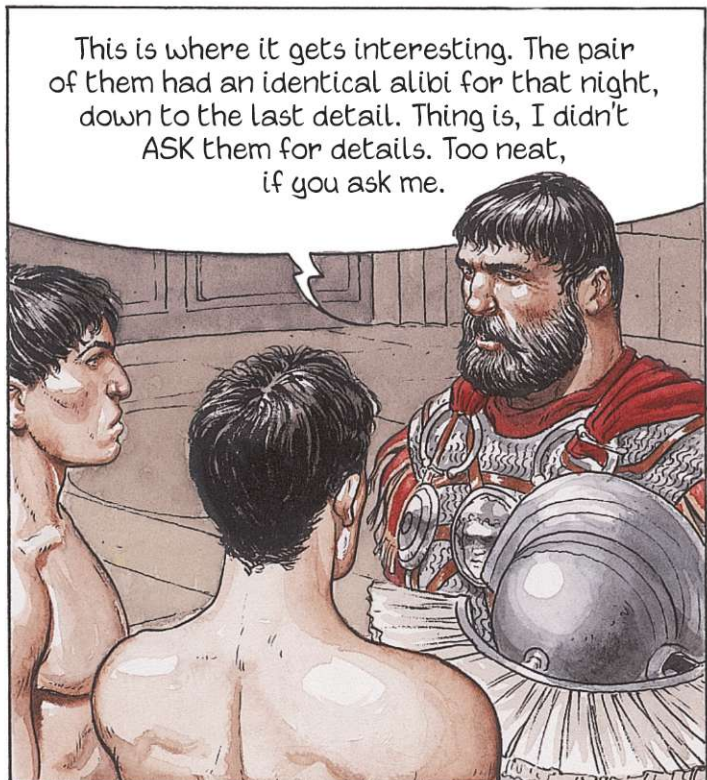


On the night of October 12th, two soldiers from Paulus' contubernium missed roll call. Two bullheaded types who'd been in and out of prison.⁽⁶⁾

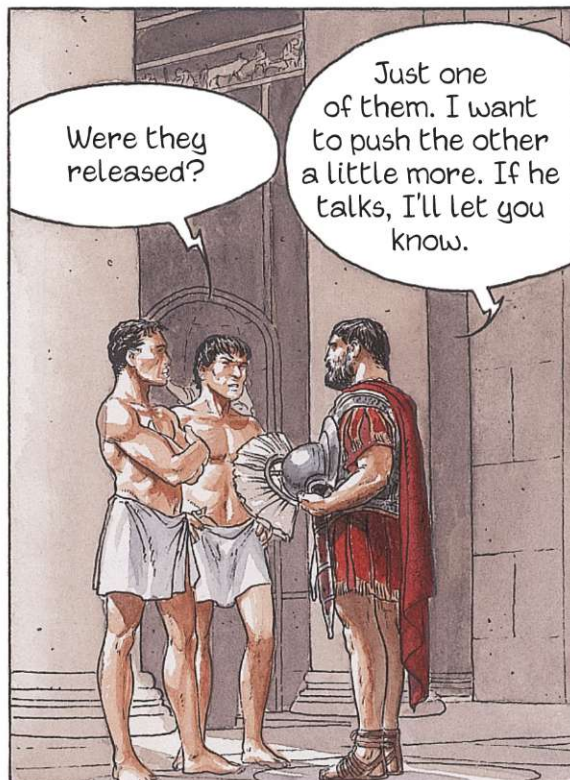


We found them at dawn, dead drunk in a tavern near the scene of the crime. I asked to see them, and questioned them separately.

And...?

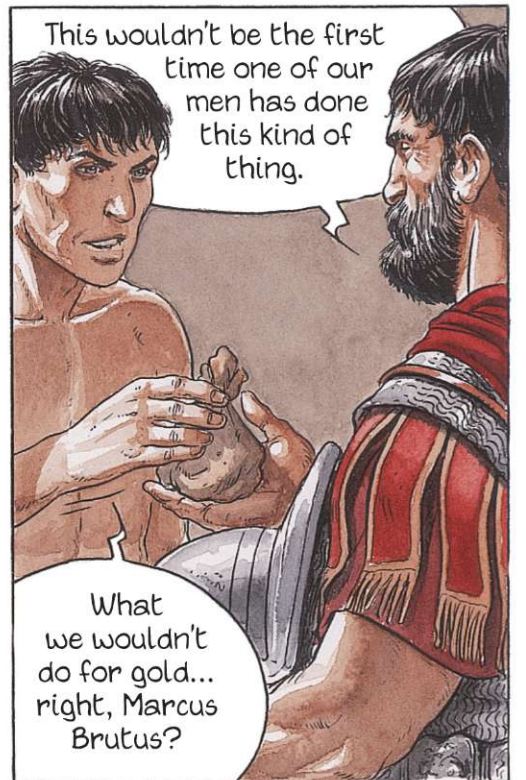


This is where it gets interesting. The pair of them had an identical alibi for that night, down to the last detail. Thing is, I didn't ASK them for details. Too neat, if you ask me.



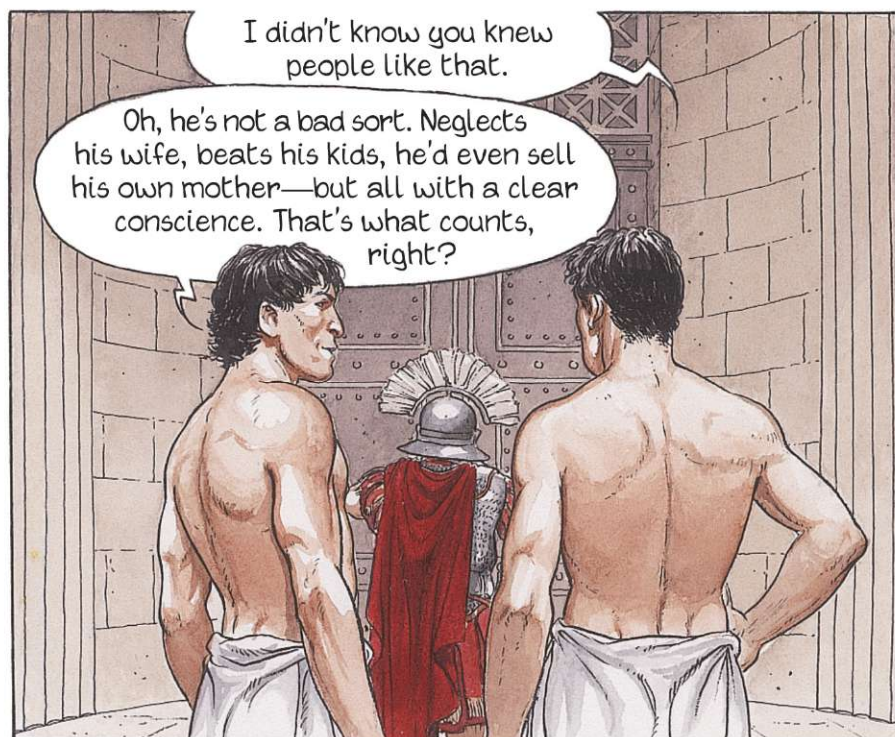
Were they released?

Just one of them. I want to push the other a little more. If he talks, I'll let you know.



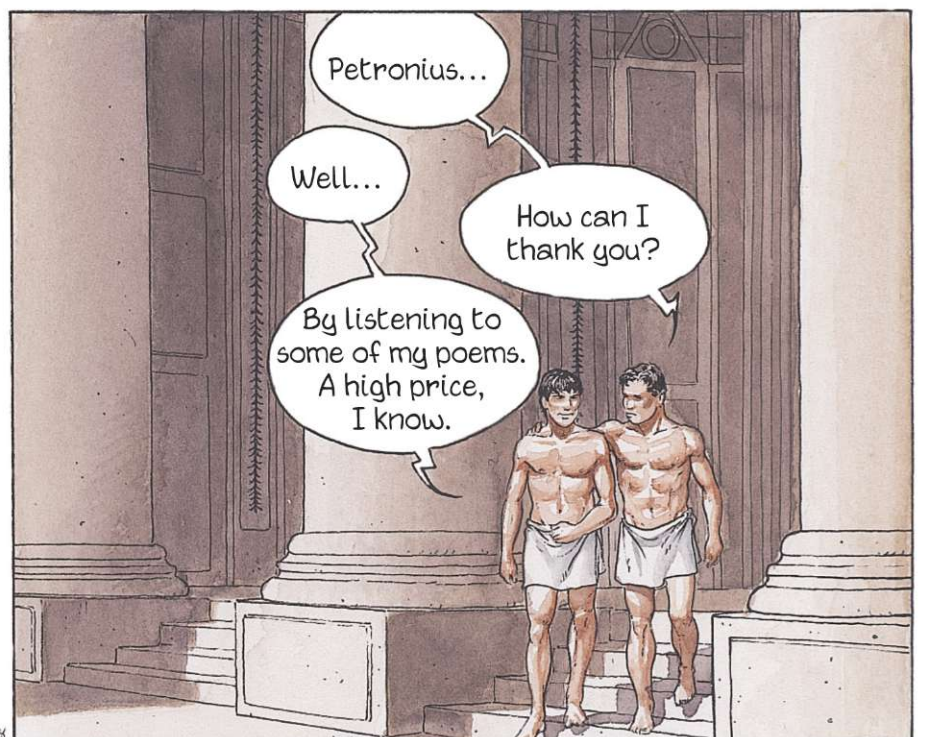
This wouldn't be the first time one of our men has done this kind of thing.

What we wouldn't do for gold... right, Marcus Brutus?



I didn't know you knew people like that.

Oh, he's not a bad sort. Neglects his wife, beats his kids, he'd even sell his own mother—but all with a clear conscience. That's what counts, right?



Petronius...

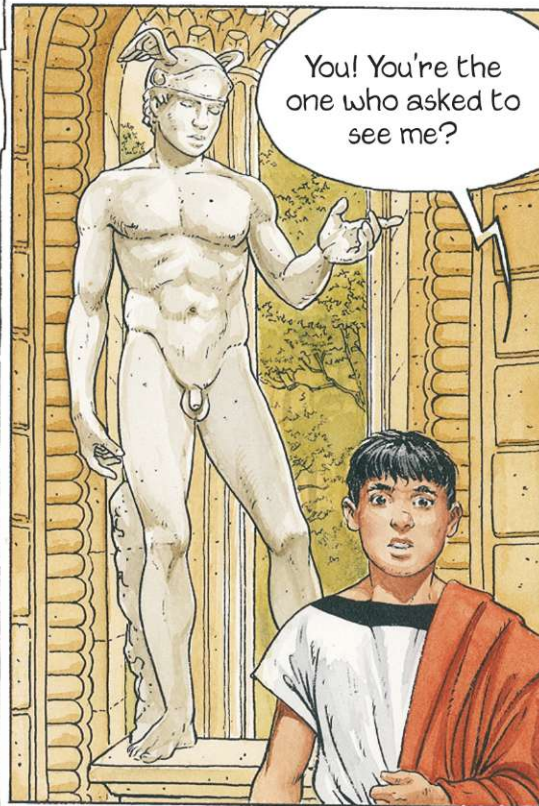
Well...

How can I thank you?

By listening to some of my poems. A high price, I know.



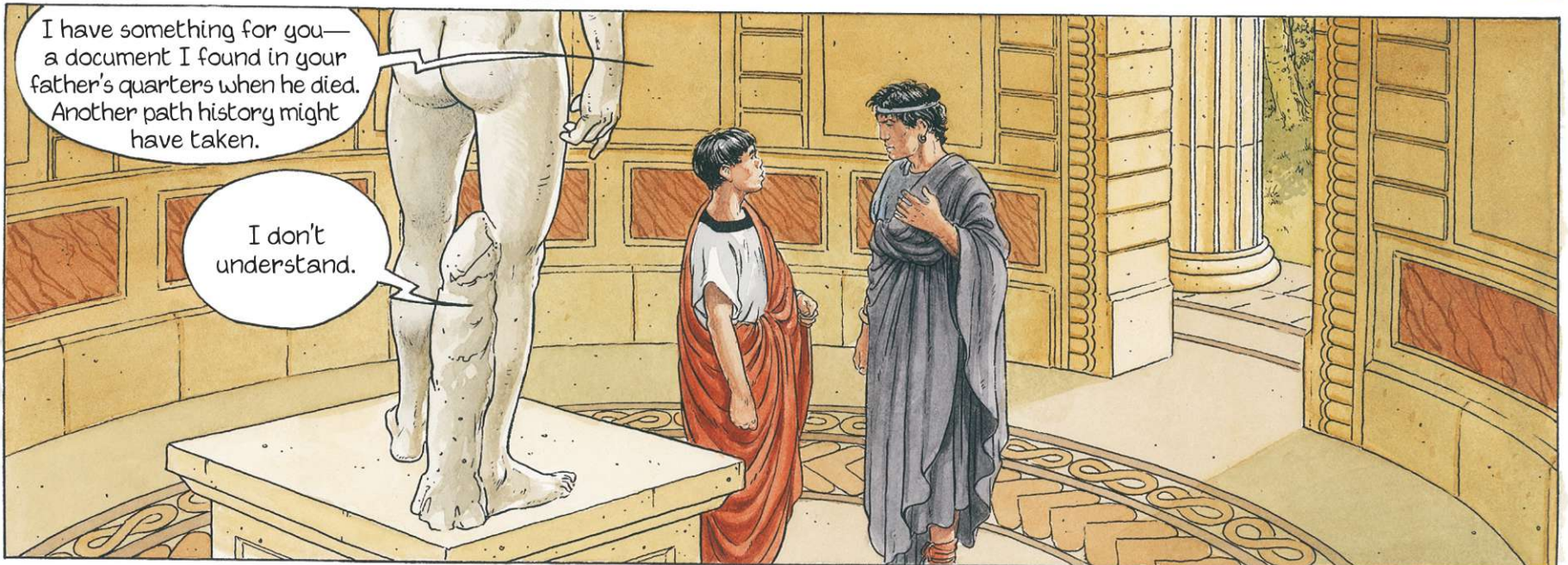
A few weeks go by. But what is time to the gods? A mere breath, a footprint in the sand, fleeting desire gliding by an illusion... They don't even bother opening their eyes.



You! You're the one who asked to see me?



You weren't expecting Pallas? Don't worry. No one expects Pallas anymore.



I have something for you—a document I found in your father's quarters when he died. Another path history might have taken.

I don't understand.



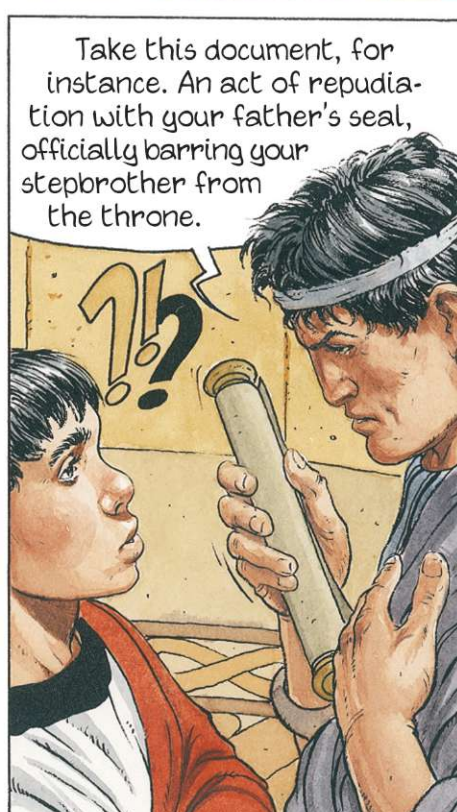
Of course not. You were NEVER meant to understand. Not even my former mistress knows this document exists.

You mean my step-mother?



So you'd betray her, too?

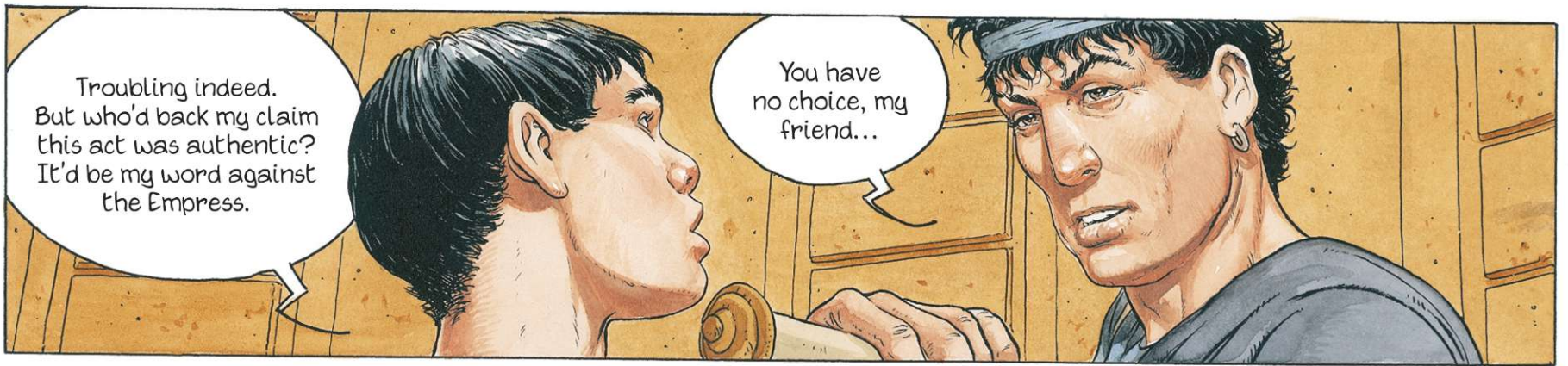
She no longer takes my council. So I'm looking for another that might appreciate what I have to say.



Take this document, for instance. An act of repudiation with your father's seal, officially barring your stepbrother from the throne.



Go on, read it. Looks like your dad wanted to make it up to you. He rejected Nero. You're his heir.

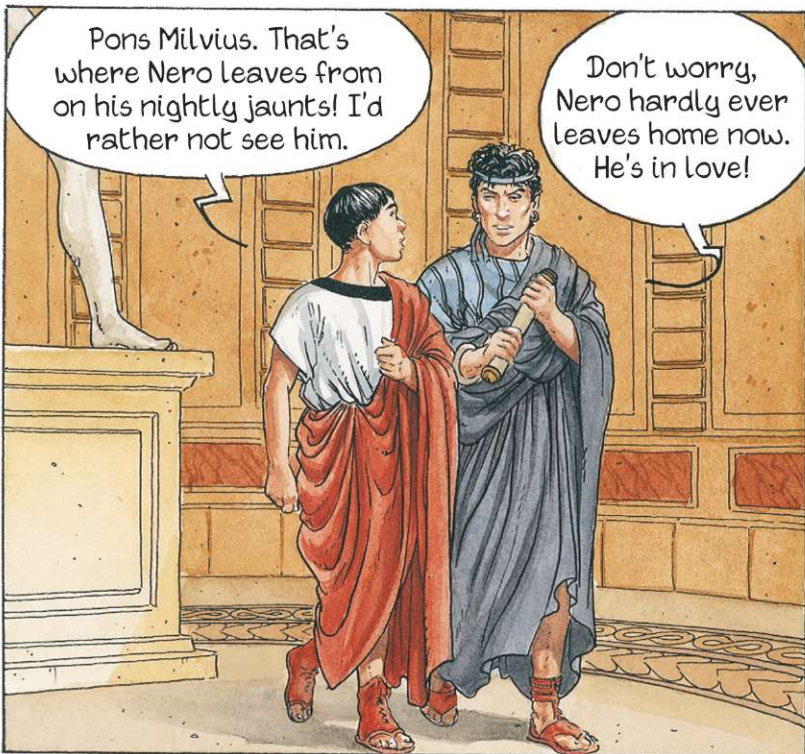


Troubling indeed. But who'd back my claim this act was authentic? It'd be my word against the Empress.

You have no choice, my friend...



It's either her or you! Want proof? Meet me on the banks near the Milvian Bridge, at the end of the Via Flaminia.



Pons Milvius. That's where Nero leaves from on his nightly jaunts! I'd rather not see him.

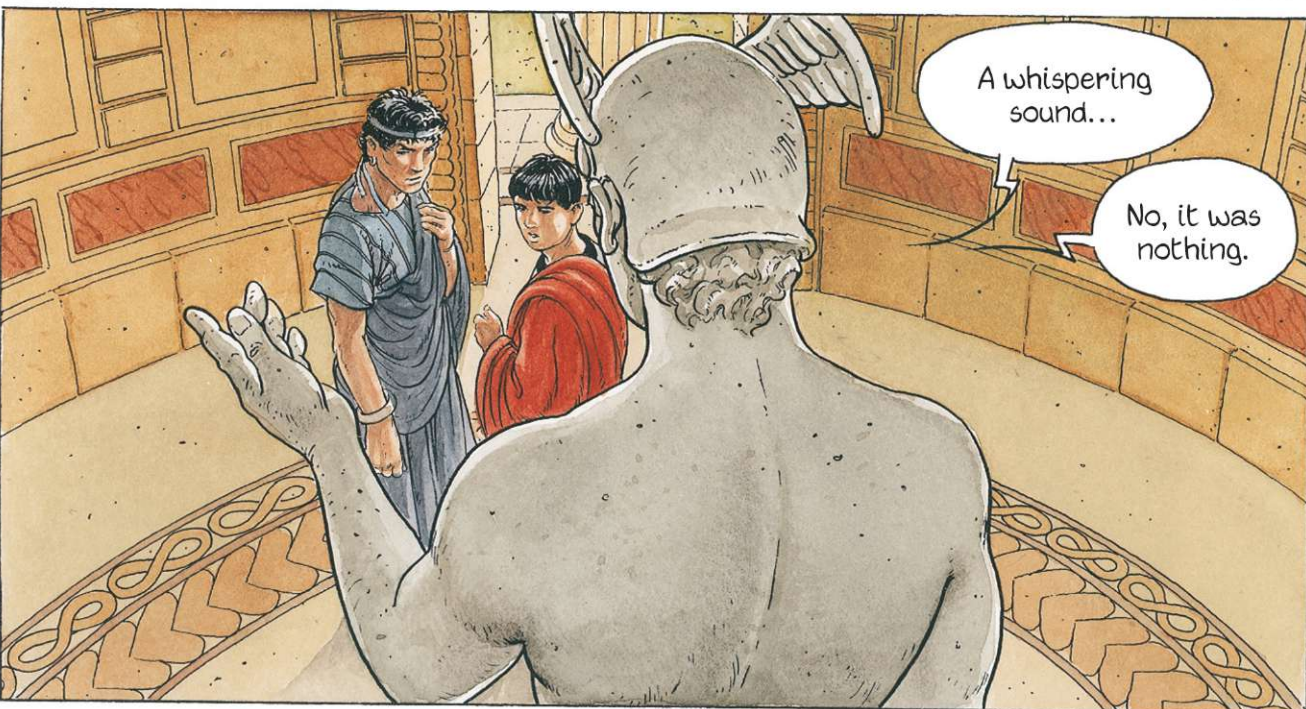
Don't worry, Nero hardly ever leaves home now. He's in love!



With a slave who was very valuable to me! And I am told to forgive and forget. Oh, with the gods as my witness, I shall have my revenge!



Wait! Did you hear something?

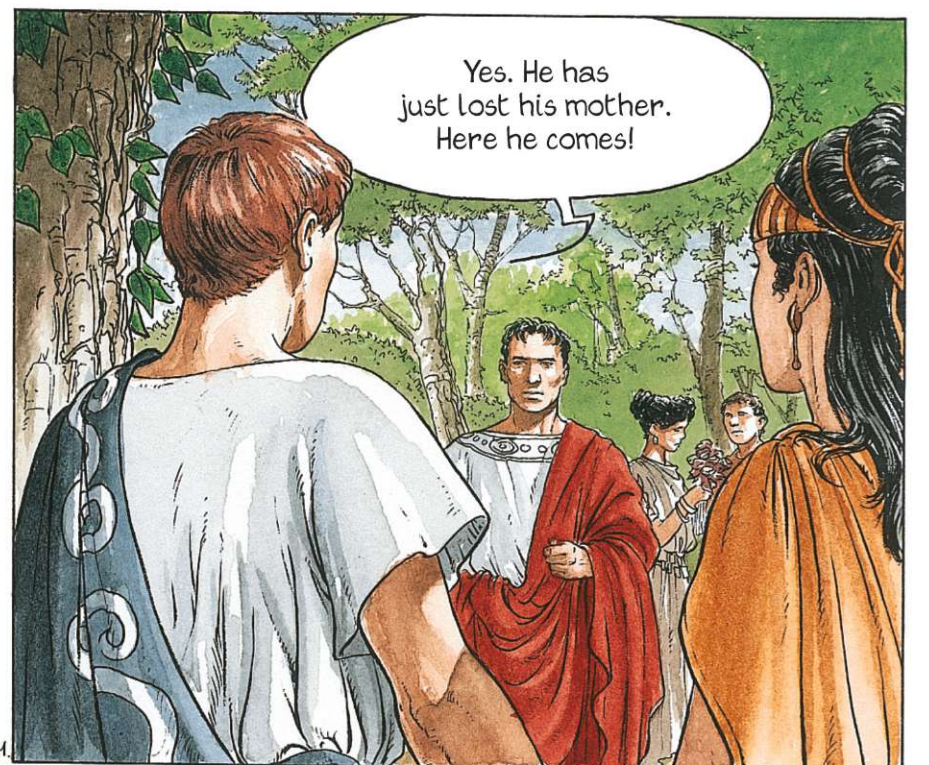
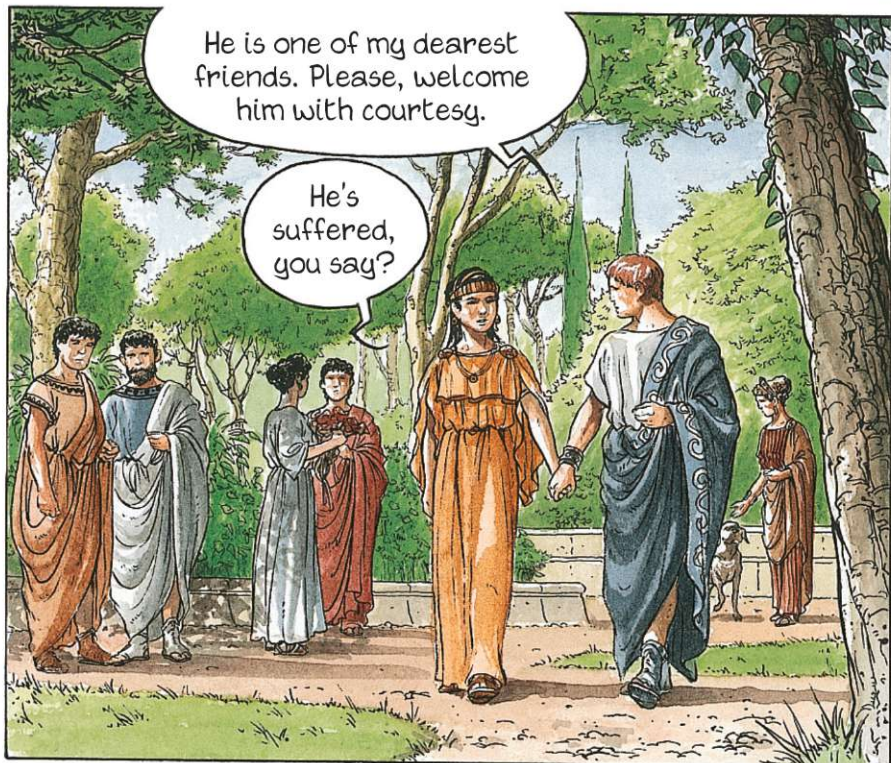
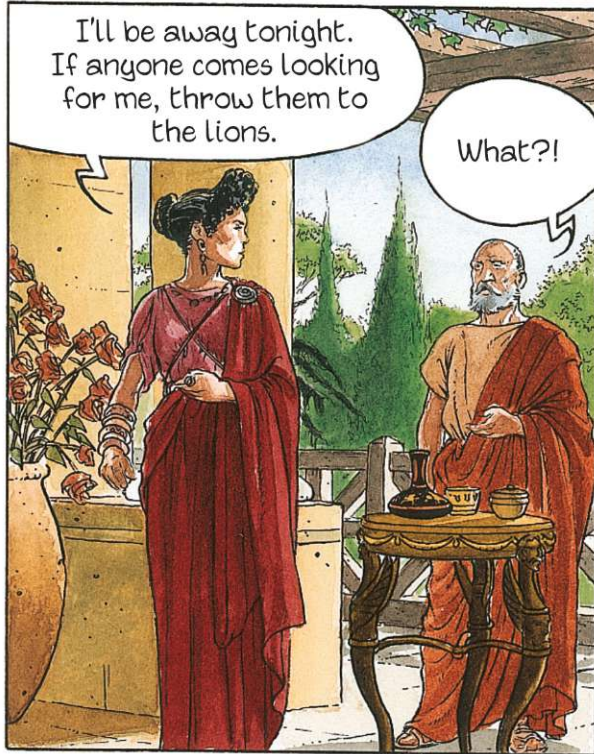
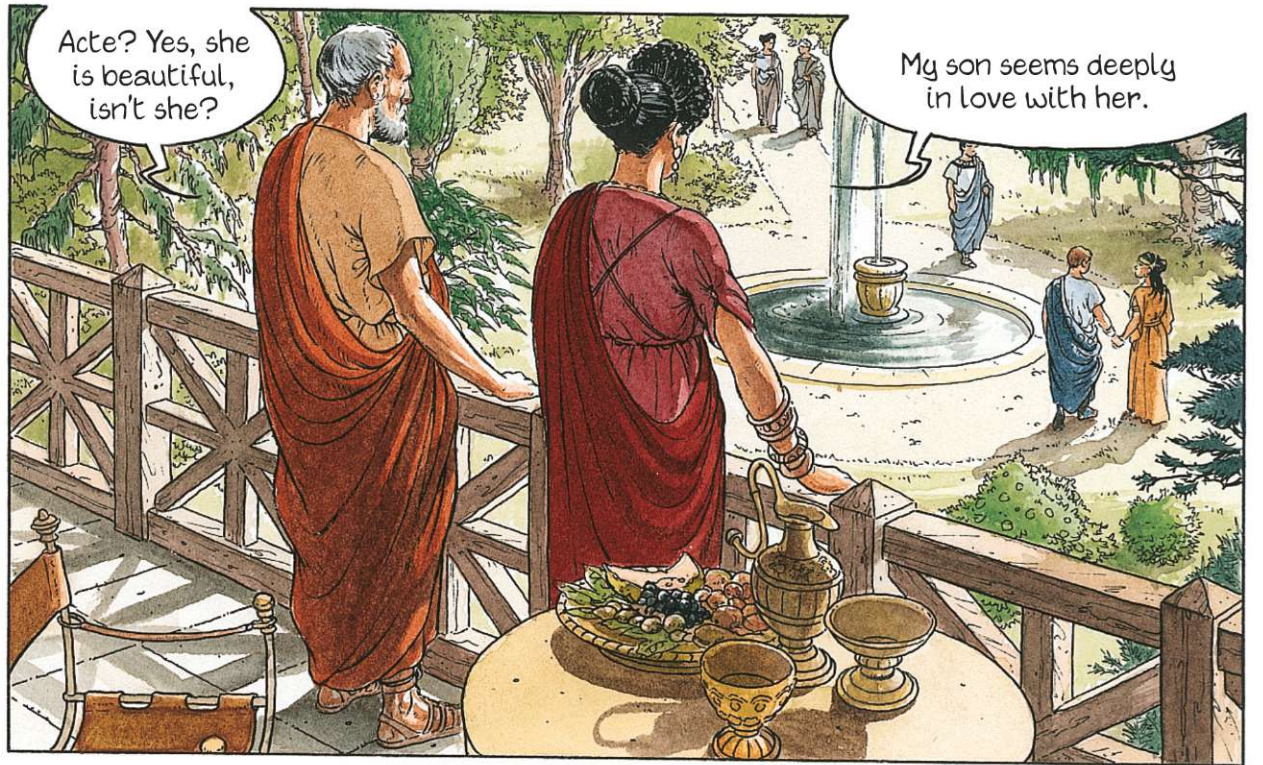
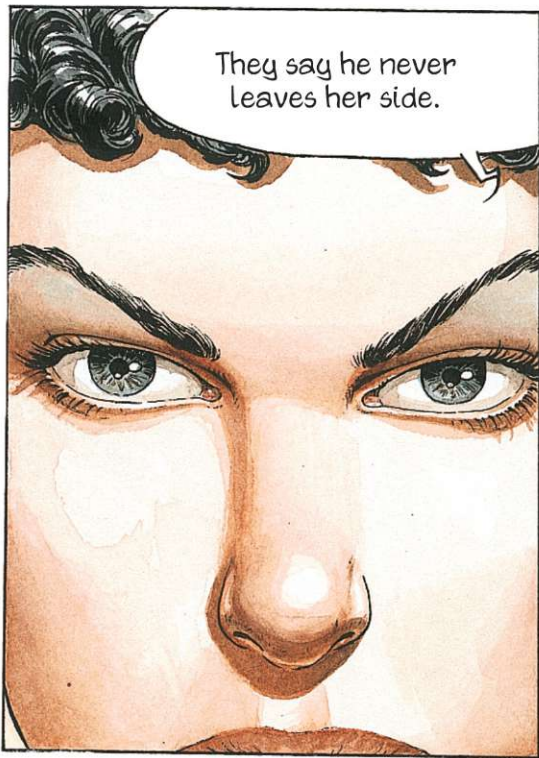


A whispering sound...

No, it was nothing.



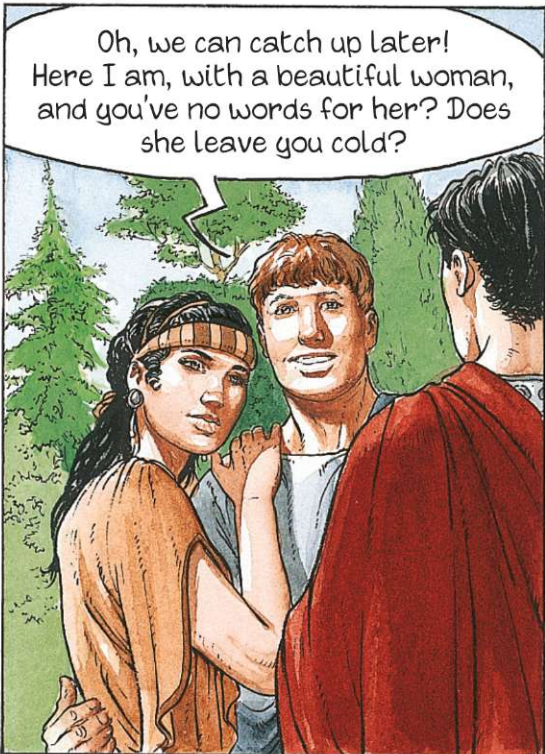
I must have dreamed it.





Is that young Murena? The son of Lollia Paulina?

In the flesh. I hear he's inherited his mother's fortune.



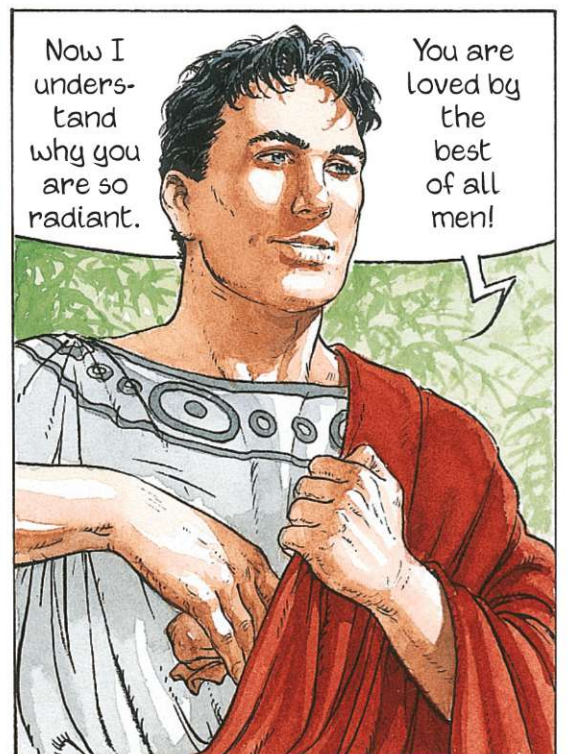
Oh, we can catch up later! Here I am, with a beautiful woman, and you've no words for her? Does she leave you cold?



One night you saw her from afar. You found her captivating then.

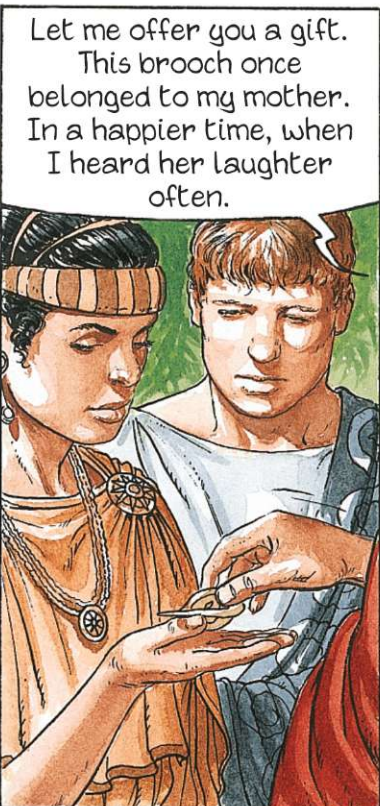


Acte! I should've guessed!



Now I understand why you are so radiant.

You are loved by the best of all men!



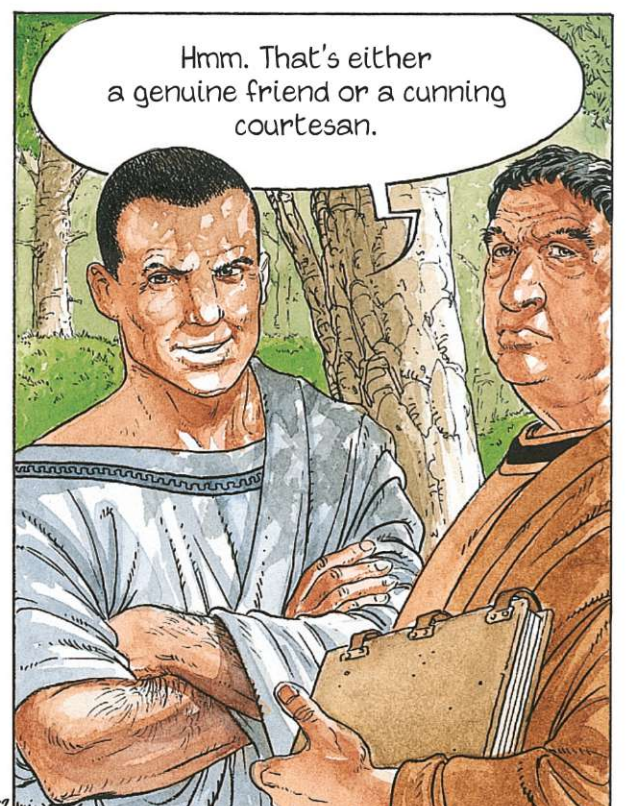
Let me offer you a gift. This brooch once belonged to my mother. In a happier time, when I heard her laughter often.



Thank you, my friend. I will never forget this.



We love you too!

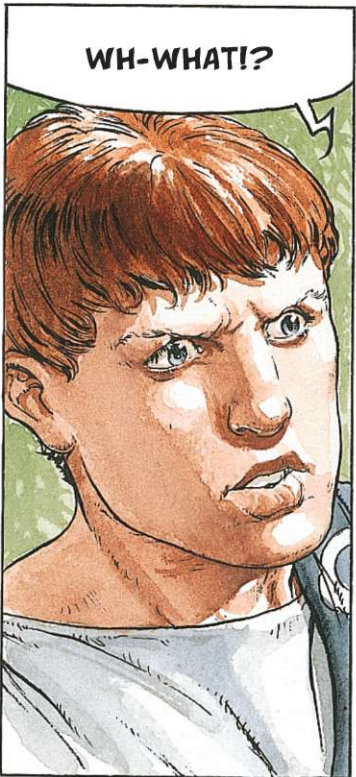


Hmm. That's either a genuine friend or a cunning courtesan.

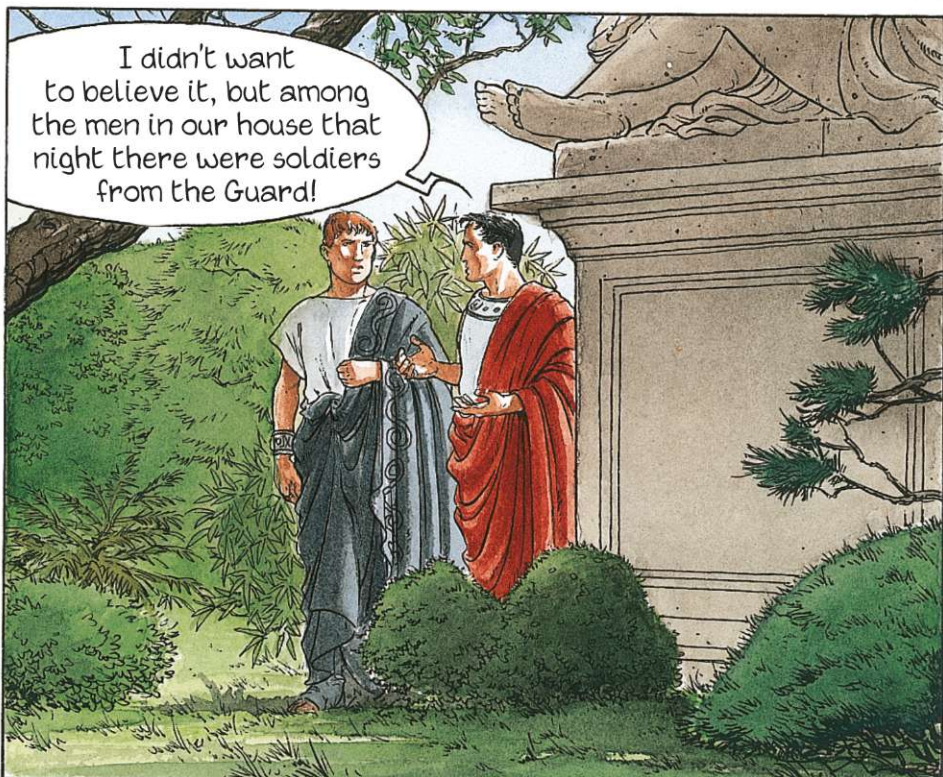


You look so anxious. Is there something you want to tell me?

It's about Lollia Paulina. I think I've found her murderers.



WH-WHAT!?



I didn't want to believe it, but among the men in our house that night there were soldiers from the Guard!



My Guard? A-are you sure?

One of them was arrested and confessed to his deed.

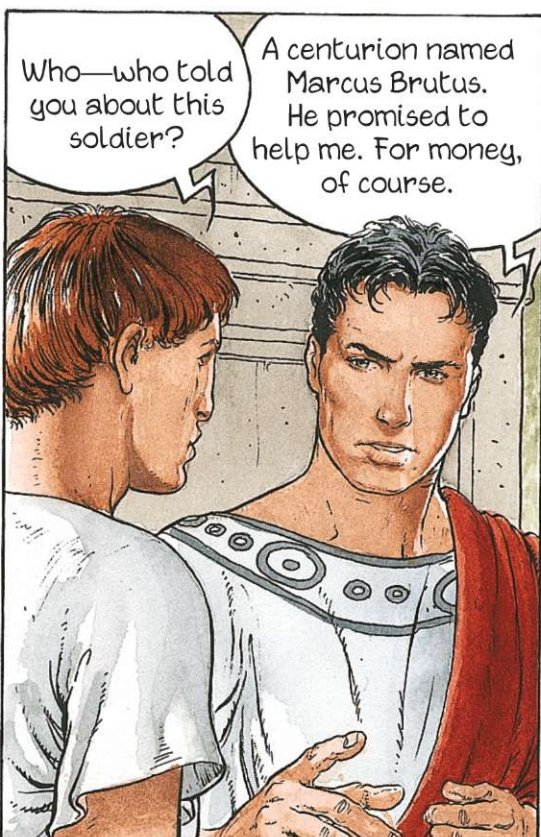


Was—was he working alone?

No. An ex-gladiator he met in a tavern hired him. A man who seems to have access to the Imperial Palace.



Draxius! My mother's slave!!



Who—who told you about this soldier?

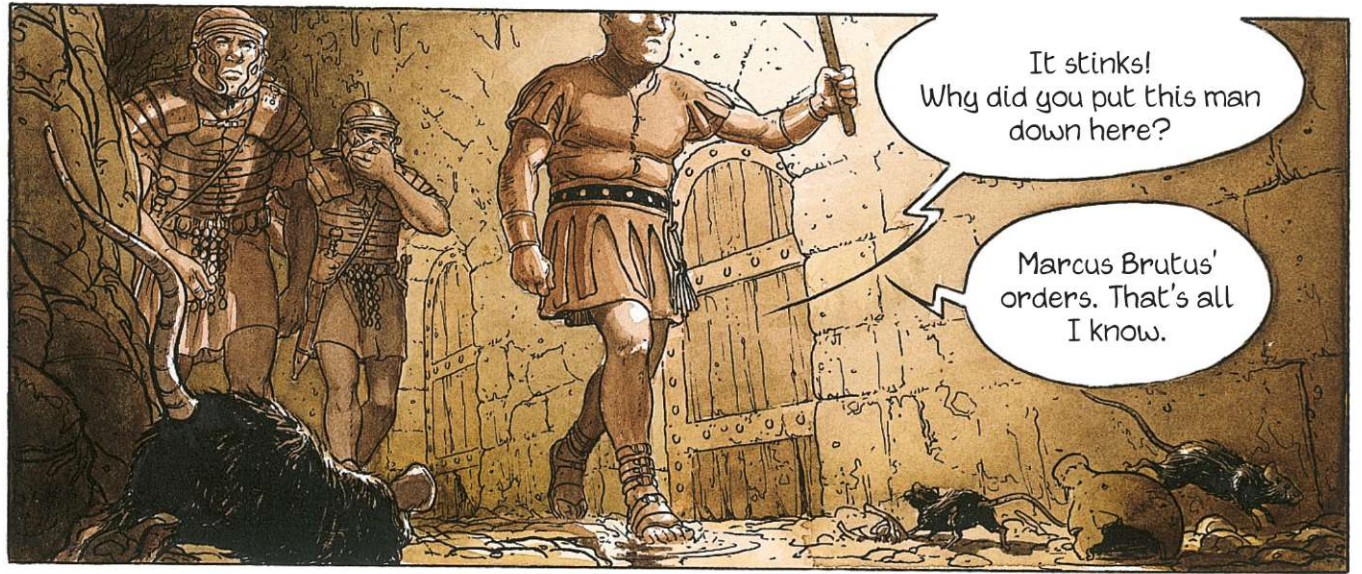
A centurion named Marcus Brutus. He promised to help me. For money, of course.



Good. I will take care of this affair.

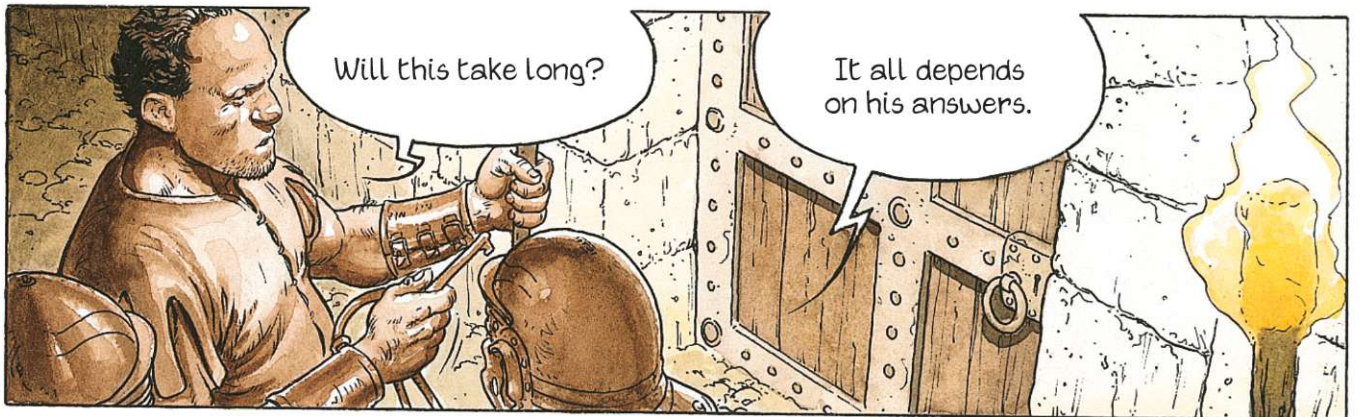


Careful!
The steps are slippery!



It stinks!
Why did you put this man down here?

Marcus Brutus' orders. That's all I know.



Will this take long?

It all depends on his answers.



Get up! You've got visitors.

!!?



Are you the one suspected of taking part in Lollia Paulina's murder?

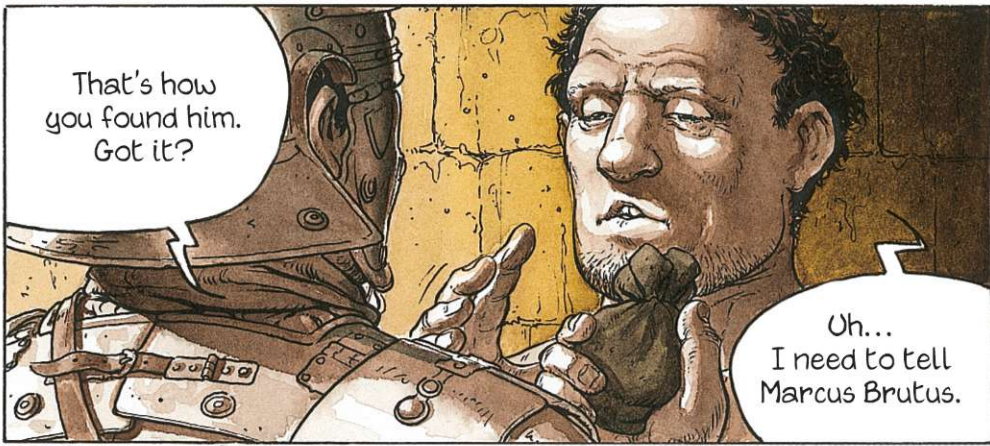
I-it wasn't just me! I-I was just following orders!

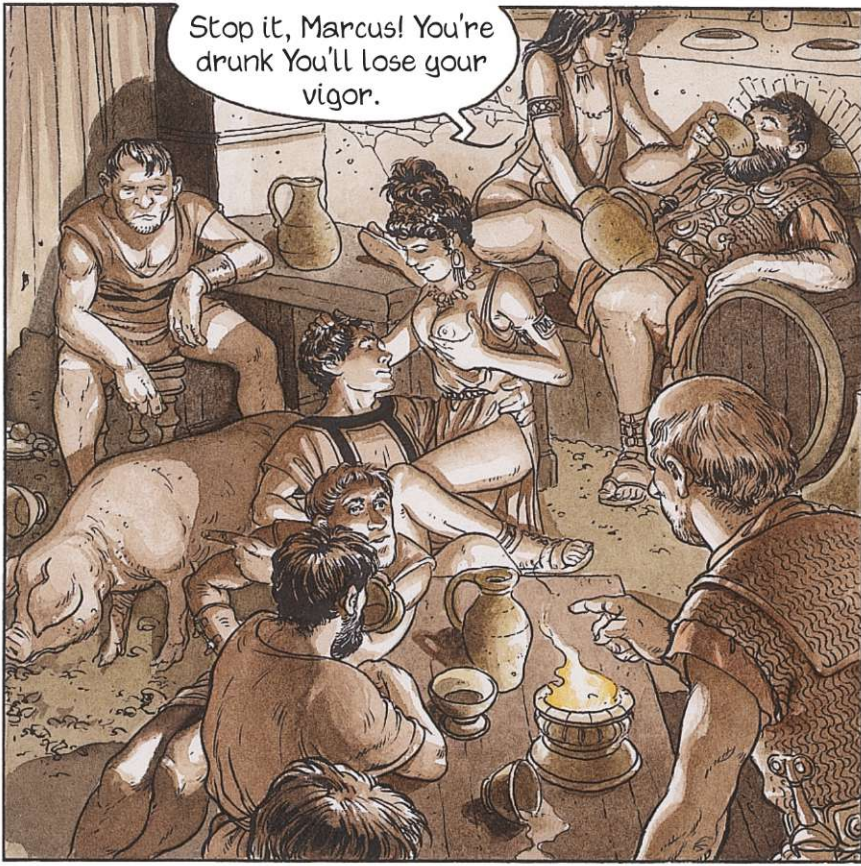


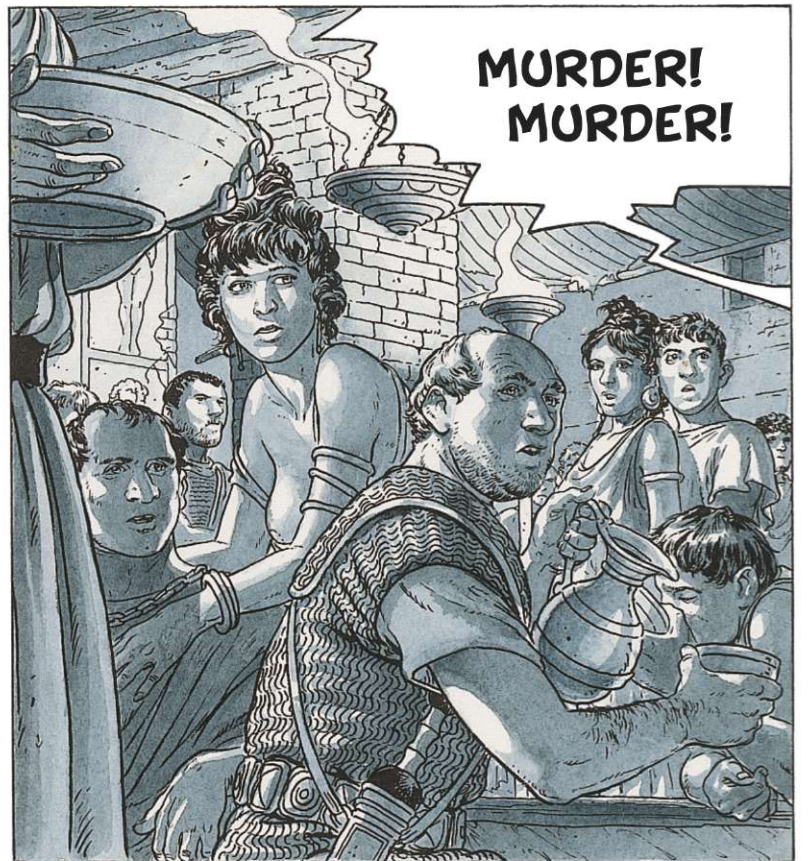
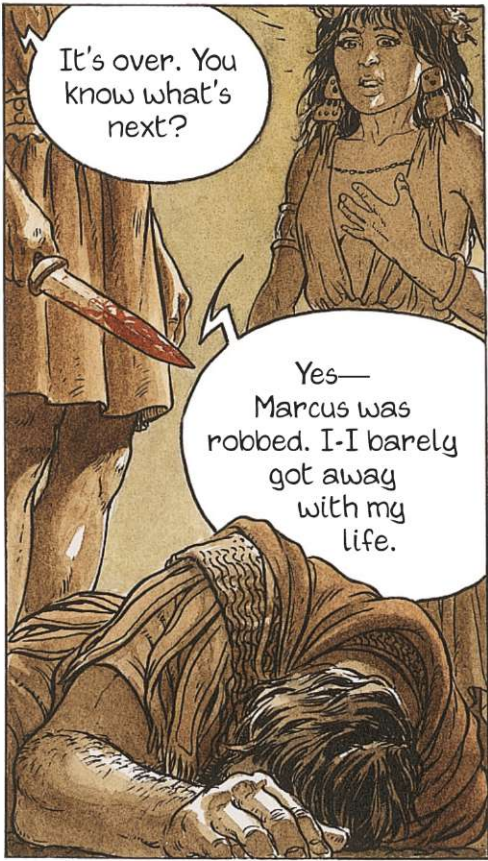
I'll take the torch. You can go.



Don't worry. You won't have to take any more orders.









Here? I know this place!

So you know who lives here?



No, I—not really. I never dared enter. But I've seen this house in my dreams. My nightmares!

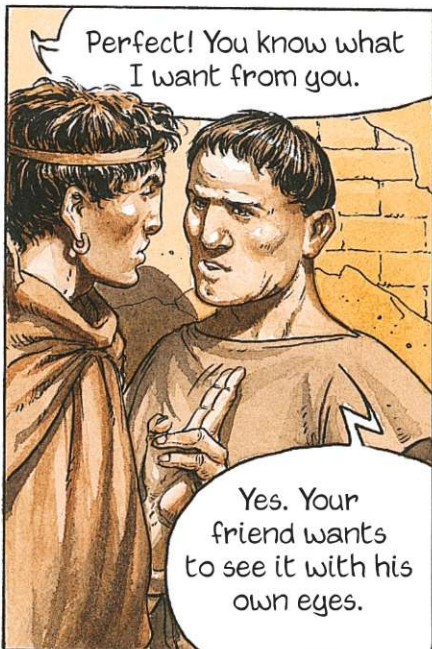
A nightmare?



Well said. Follow me.



Quiet! She's just arrived.



Perfect! You know what I want from you.

Yes. Your friend wants to see it with his own eyes.



Everything's ready. The door's not a problem now.



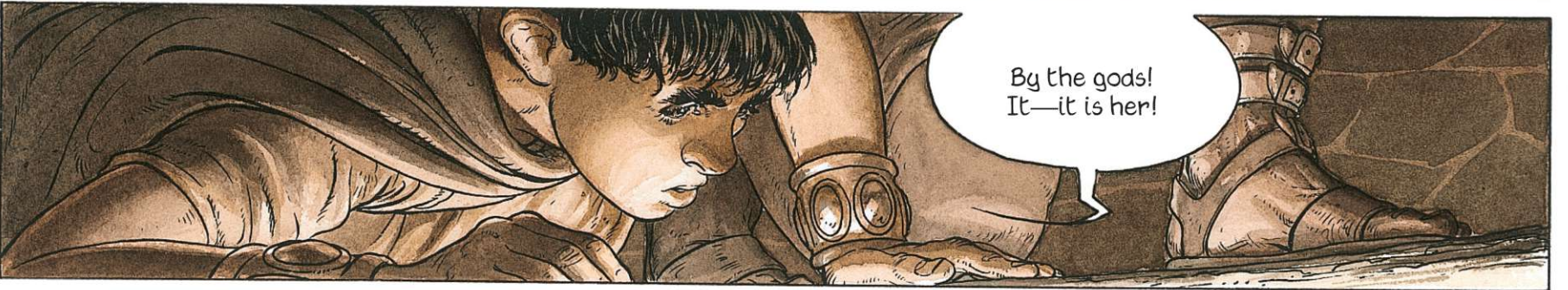
Not a sound! They're right next door.



Careful. The floor's rotted through in parts.



You can see everything from here.



By the gods! It—it is her!



Well?

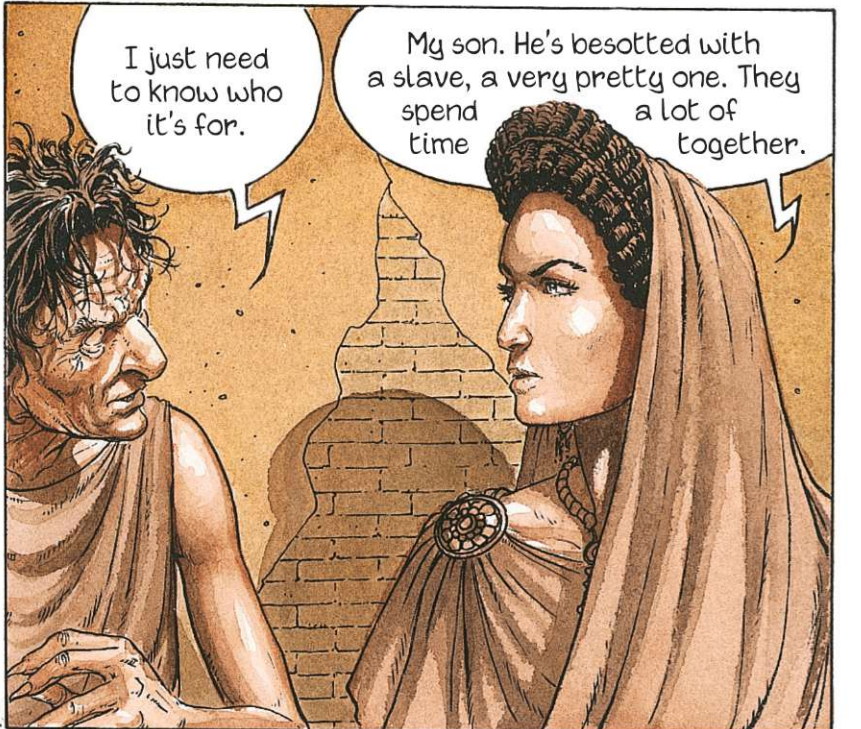


The heart is still beating. I shall extract its liquid and send it to the palace.



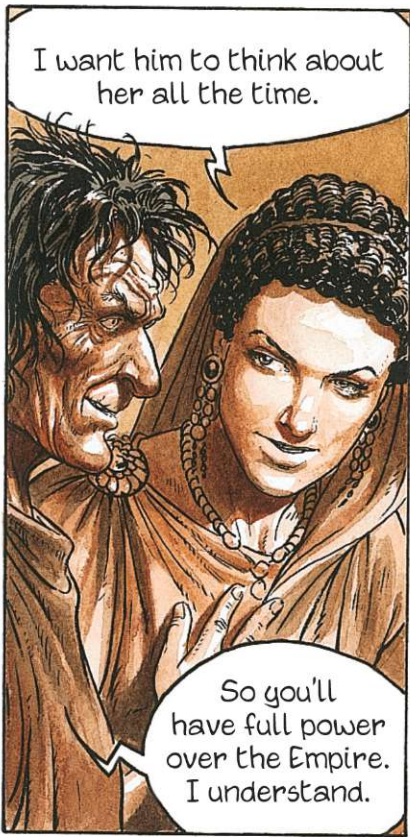
I'll add some of my herbs. You'll see. No love potion is as strong as this one.

Perfect!



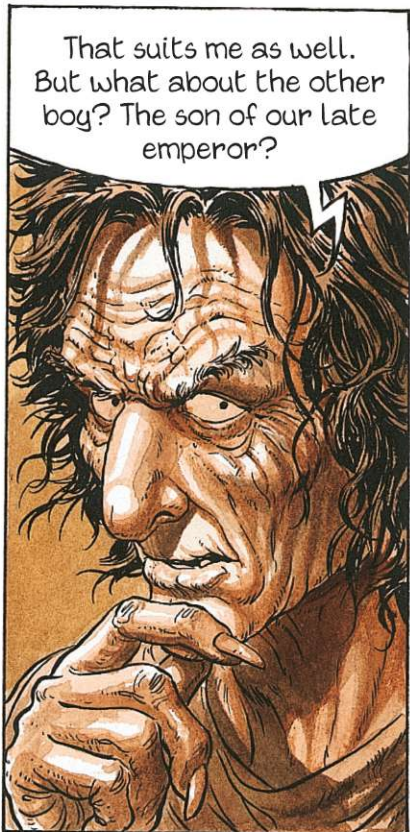
I just need to know who it's for.

My son. He's besotted with a slave, a very pretty one. They spend a lot of time together.



I want him to think about her all the time.

So you'll have full power over the Empire. I understand.



That suits me as well. But what about the other boy? The son of our late emperor?



Britannicus? Bah! What worked for Claudius will work for his son.



Still have some of that poison?

Enough for the son to join his father.



I-I feel sick. I can't breathe!



Quick! They're coming out!



It's agreed, then? In three days.

I'll be ready.



Feeling better?

I—you might as well know. I suffer from the gods' disease^(a). I-I almost had an attack.



But still, I understood!
My poor father! How
could that woman—

She would
dare anything
for her son!



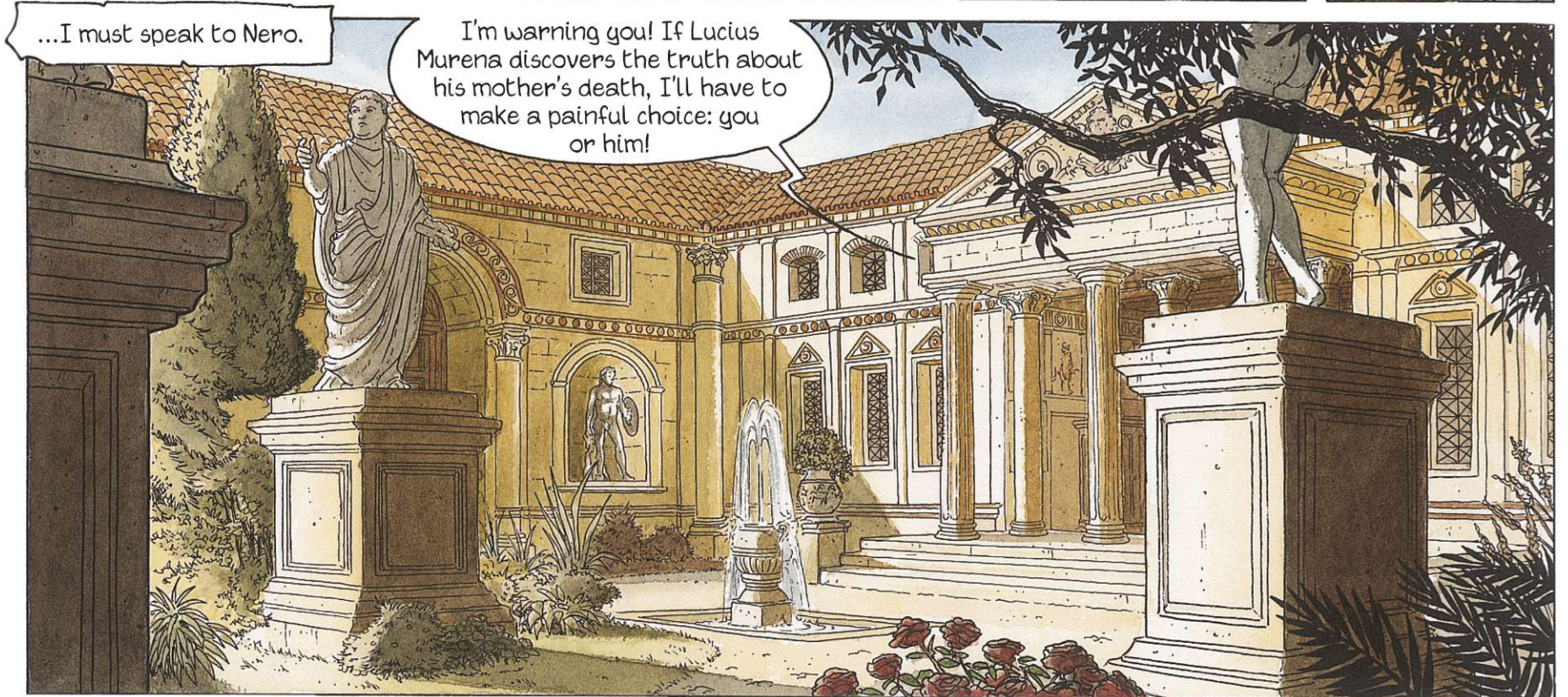
Remember, they acted
together! United by a lust
for absolute power. Your
power, according to your
father's will.



I'll do it! I still have
friends at court and in the
senate. I'll see them
tomorrow.

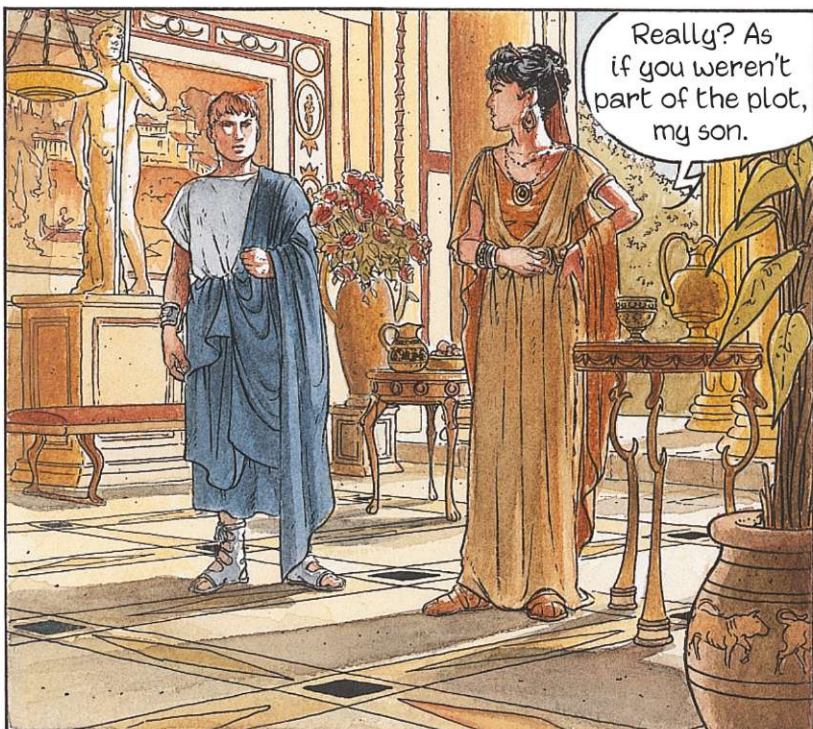


But first...

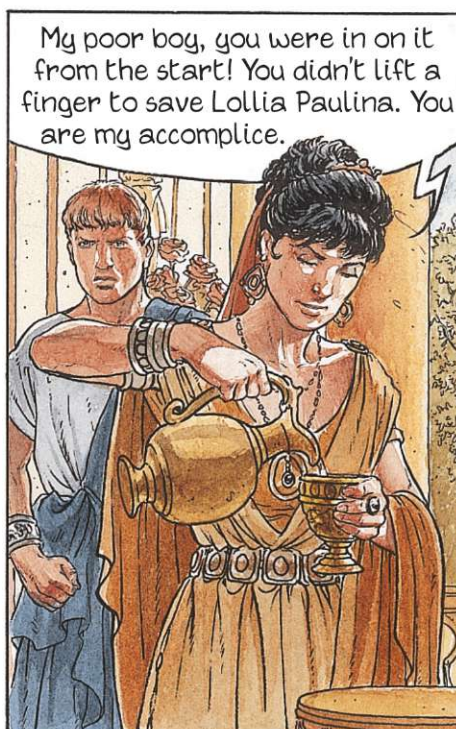


...I must speak to Nero.

I'm warning you! If Lucius
Murena discovers the truth about
his mother's death, I'll have to
make a painful choice: you
or him!



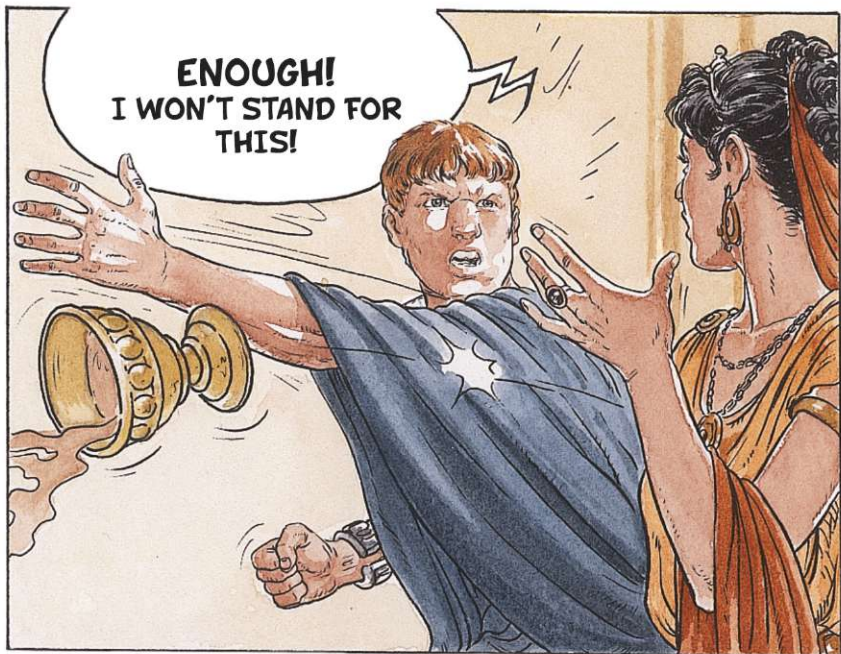
Really? As
if you weren't
part of the plot,
my son.



My poor boy, you were in on it
from the start! You didn't lift a
finger to save Lollia Paulina. You
are my accomplice.



A poor accomplice, I must
say, always hiding behind his
mother's skirts when it comes to
making a decision.



ENOUGH!
I WON'T STAND FOR
THIS!



I warn you: I'll never be your
accomplice again! I and I alone
make the decisions now.
And no one gets
in my way,
understand?



Not even you... The
best of all mothers!



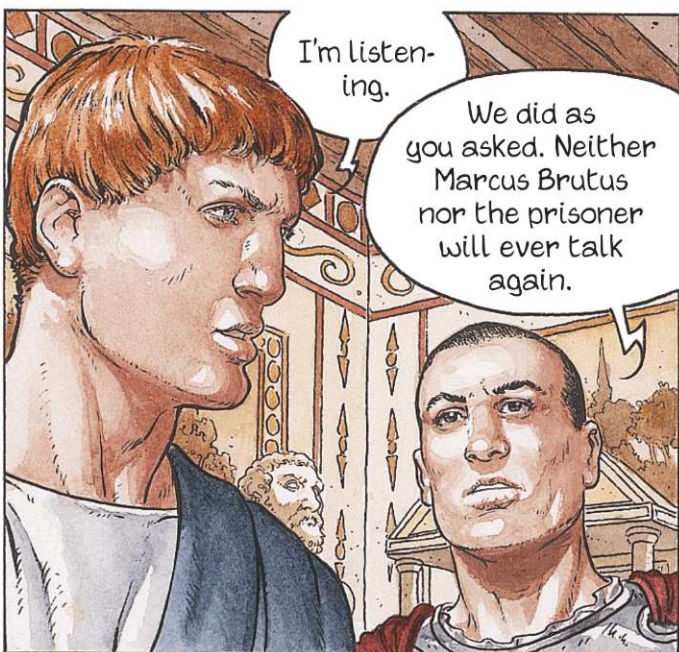
Well,
well...



I've never seen her look like
that before. It's almost like
she's—scared.



He's changing—he can stand up
to me now. Every child rebels
against his mother...



I'm listen-
ing.

We did as
you asked. Neither
Marcus Brutus
nor the prisoner
will ever talk
again.



Perfect! Now all I need is an explanation
for their deaths. Unless the guilty party
steps forward...



Burrhus?

Yes?



The time has come for you to choose sides. Are you with me or my mother?

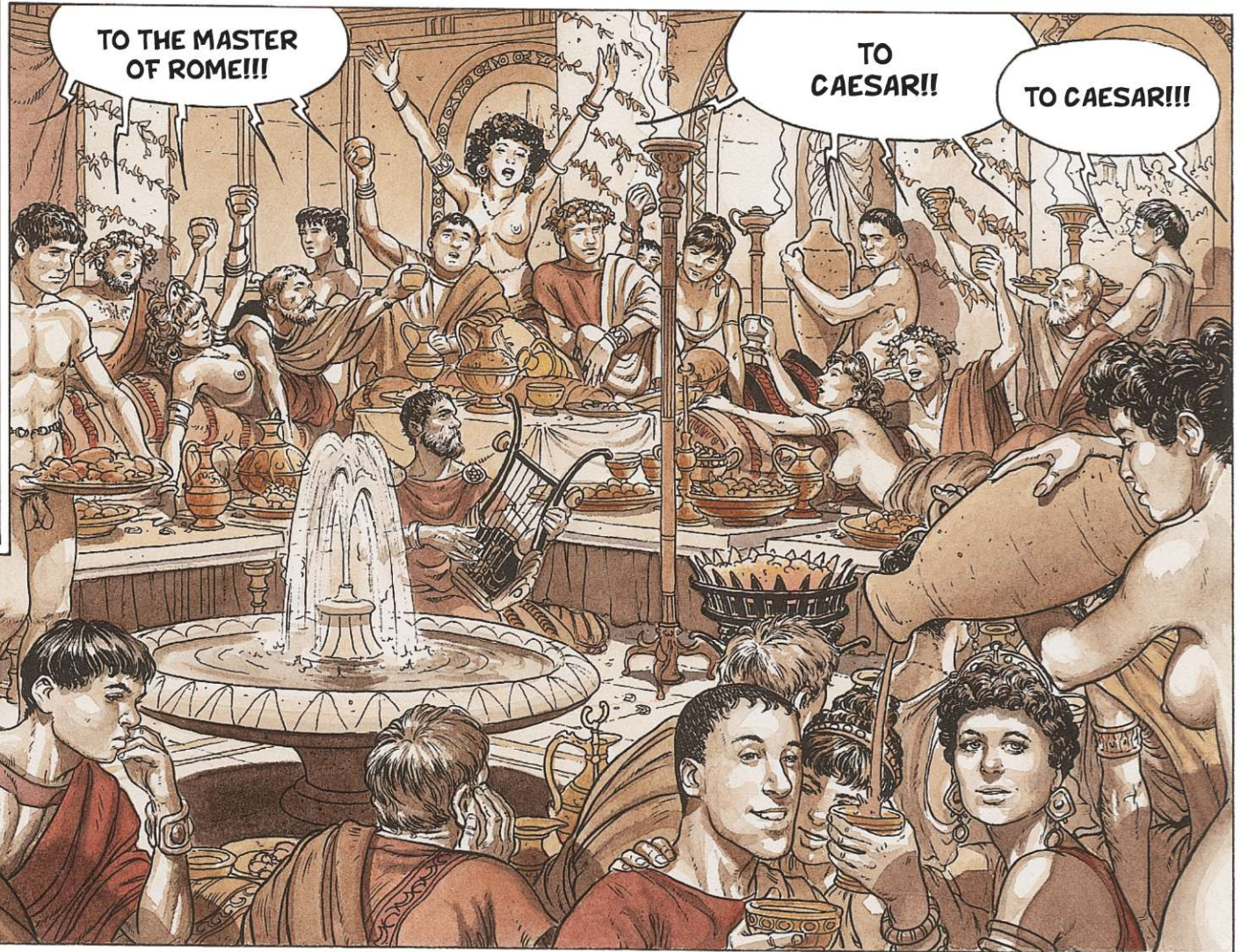


I...



With you, Caesar. I will obey your orders.

That night, as the Romans celebrated Sigillaria⁽⁹⁾, Britannicus found himself seated near Nero's table. As usual, a slave had tasted the food and drink brought before his master. The imperial banquet had not yet become an orgy. And when everyone raised a glass to the new Caesar, Britannicus alone did not. He bore on him a document capable of changing the face of the world.



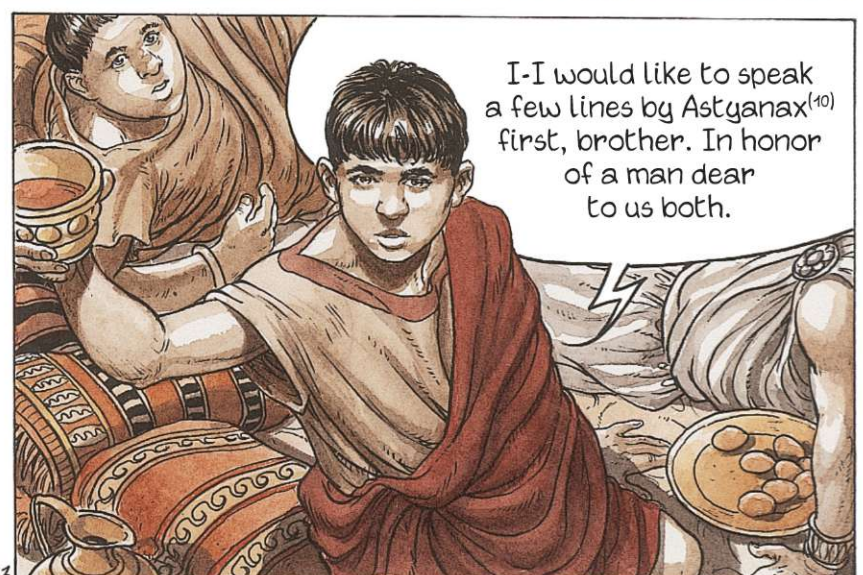
TO THE MASTER OF ROME!!!

TO CAESAR!!

TO CAESAR!!!



Well, Britannicus? Why do you not drink in my honor?



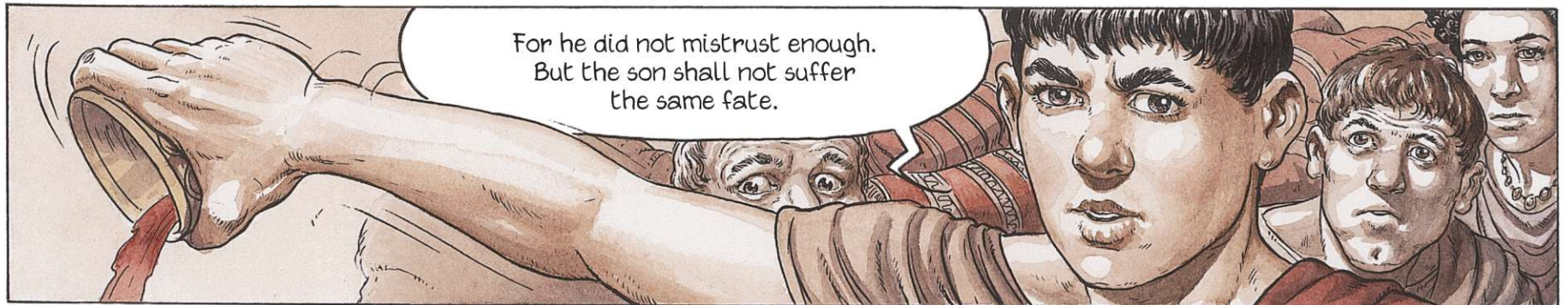
I-I would like to speak a few lines by Astyanax⁽¹⁰⁾ first, brother. In honor of a man dear to us both.



O Pater, O Patria, O Priami domus!
I have not lacked for birth, only luck.
Know that I once had a throne! See now
what power, wealth, and fortune fate
deprived me of!



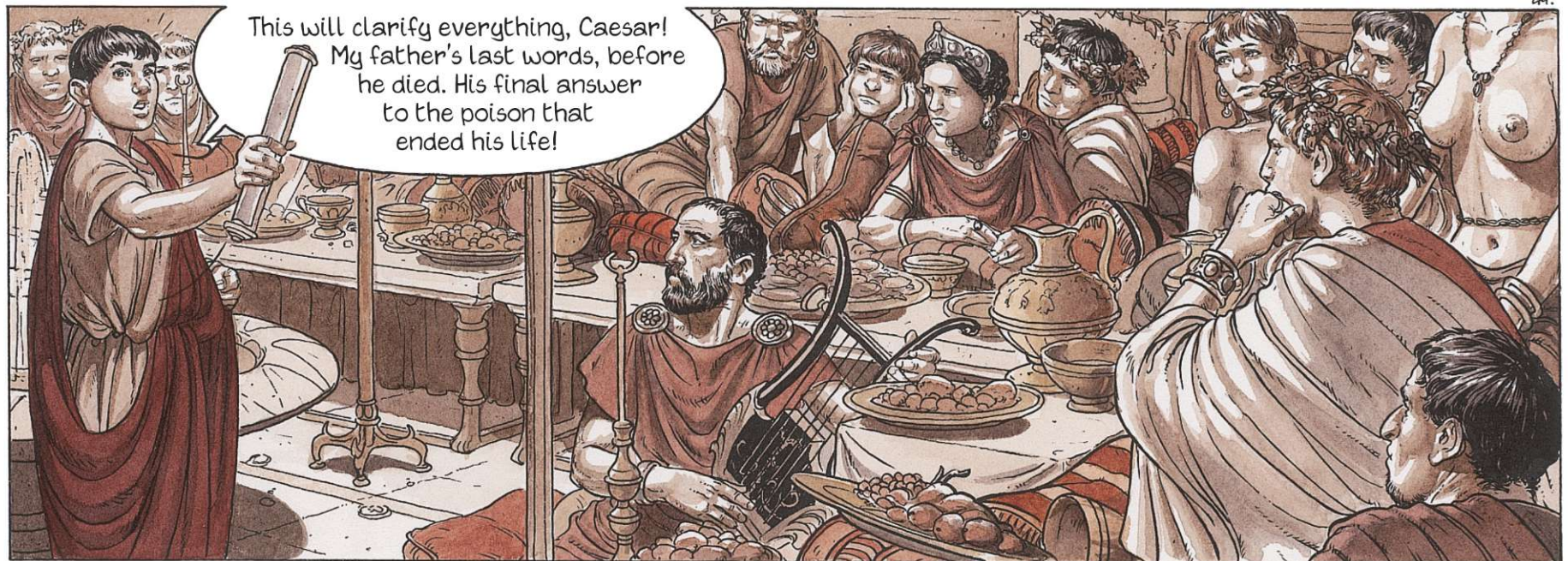
To Claudius, who vanished
too violently from
our lives.



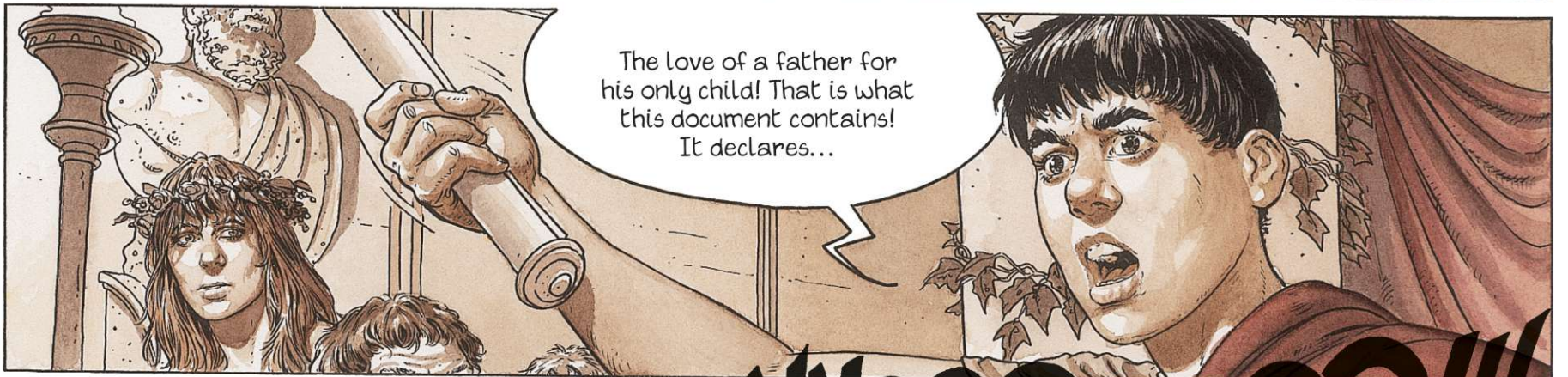
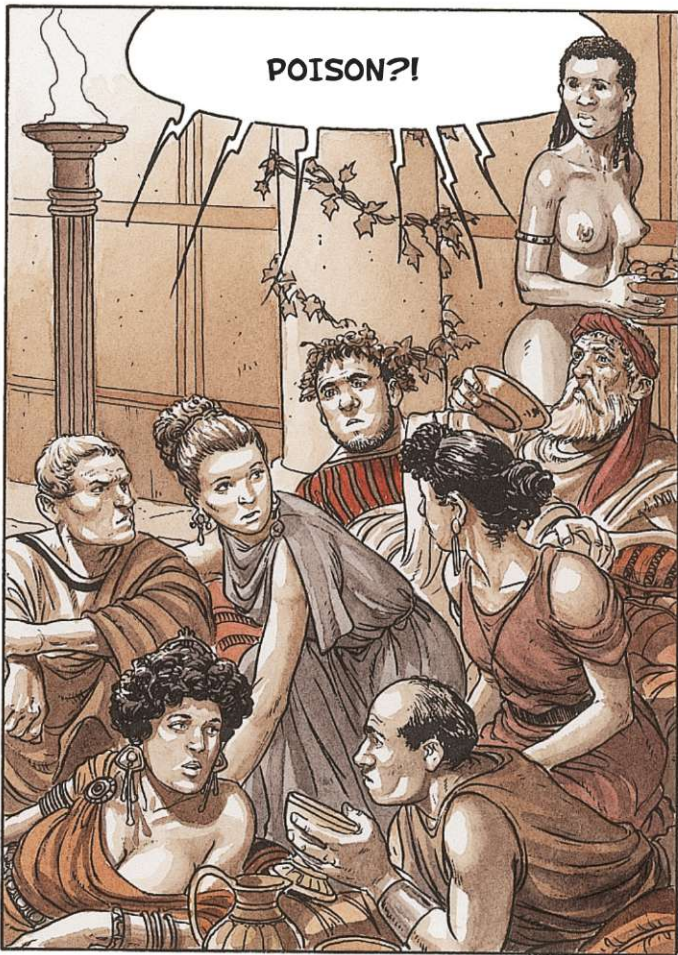
For he did not mistrust enough.
But the son shall not suffer
the same fate.

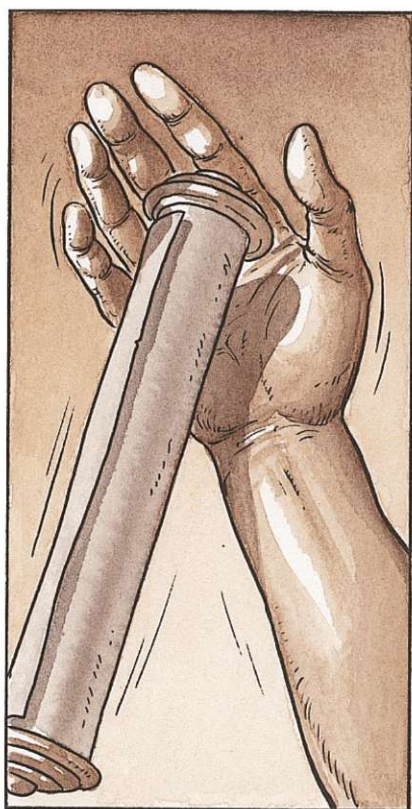


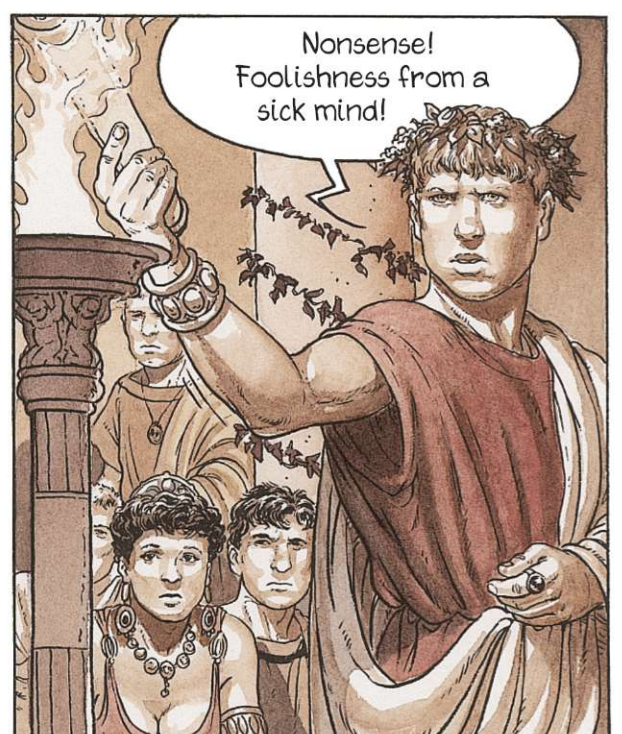
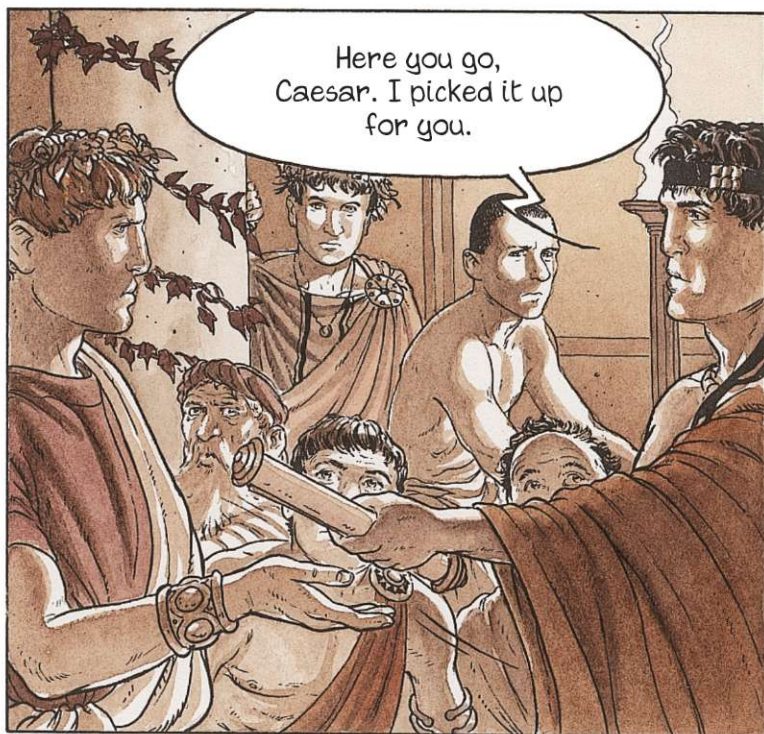
What do you mean
by that, my brother?
Your insinuations are
offensive. They need
to be explained.



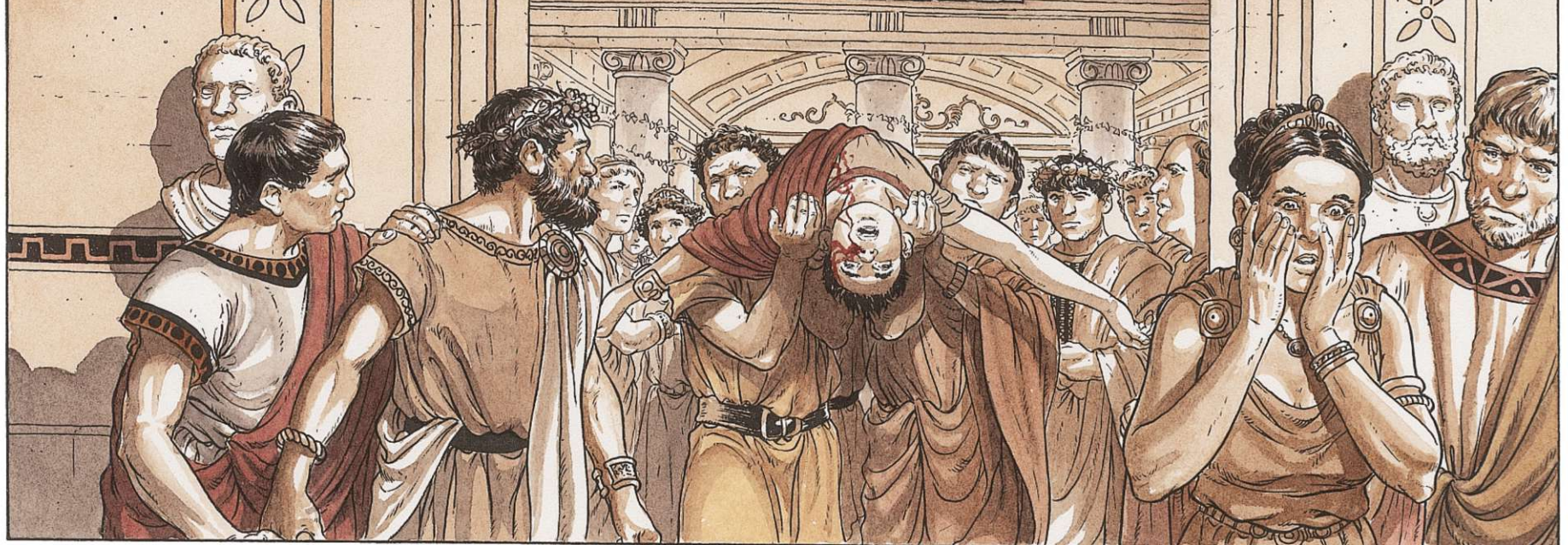
This will clarify everything, Caesar!
My father's last words, before
he died. His final answer
to the poison that
ended his life!







And so, like father, like son. The boy's body was carried from the room. His death was sudden, dramatic, brutal. And already, the air was thick with rumor.





Poison? Britannicus was poisoned?

It would explain his sudden, terrible death. Also—⁽¹¹⁾



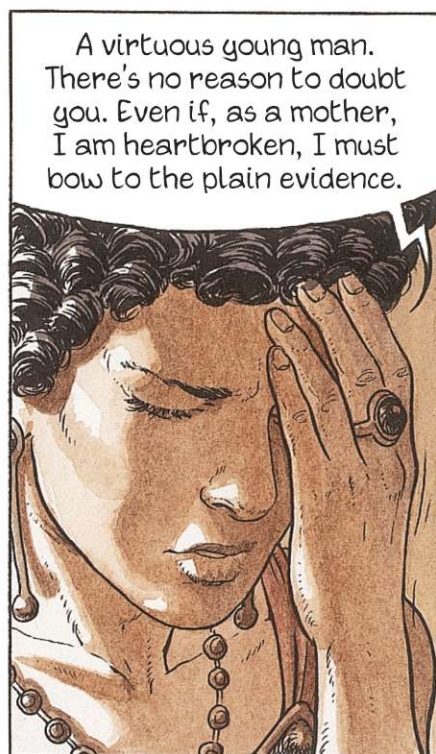
Yes?

A friend of ours who drank from Britannicus' cup has fallen ill as well. It's fairly serious.

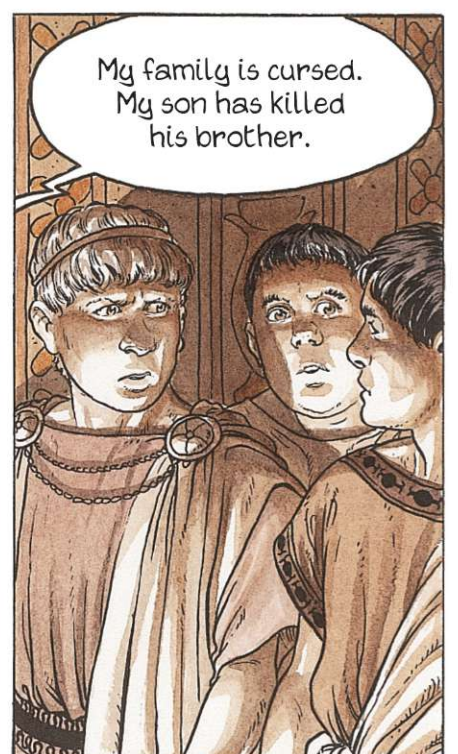


Your friend's name?

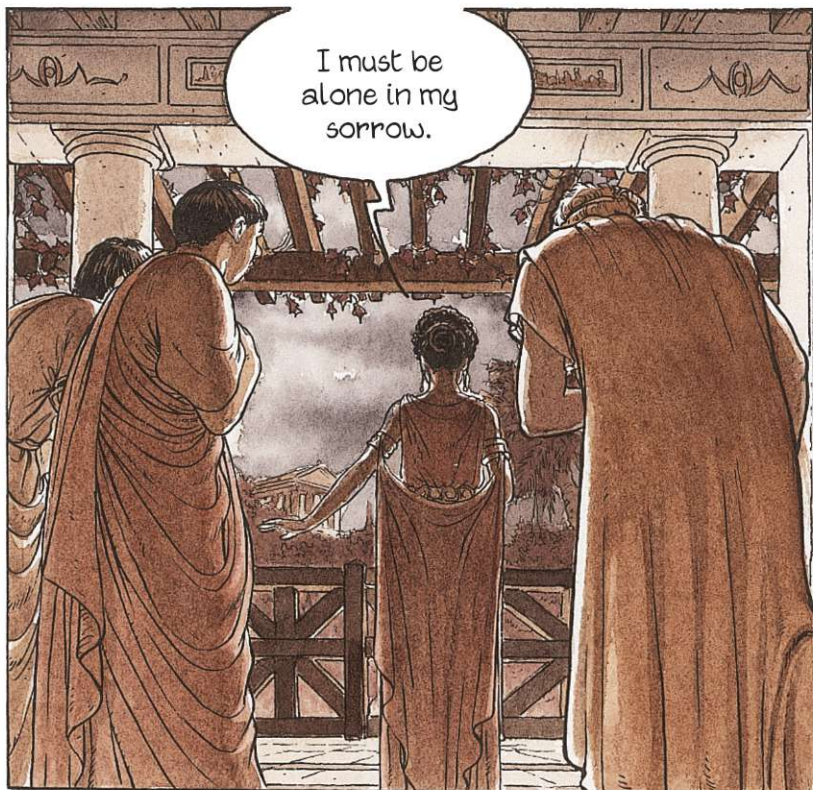
Titus Flavius Vespasianus⁽¹²⁾.



A virtuous young man. There's no reason to doubt you. Even if, as a mother, I am heartbroken, I must bow to the plain evidence.



My family is cursed. My son has killed his brother.



I must be alone in my sorrow.



Ha ha ha! You'll need your mother again, my son! Now we've both bitten into that rotten fruit called power!

But my mouth shall know more bitterness than yours!

GLOSSARY

CHAPTER TWO

①

PRINCEPS JUVENTUTIS

Prince of youth.

②

It was the custom to maintain a sacred fire to burn incense in honor of the Lares, guardian spirits who were considered to protect the house and family.

③

At this time, Petronius (PETRONIUS ARBITER or NIGER, author of SATYRICON) was yet to become the great writer that we know him as today.

④

In our tale, we don't hear much of OCTAVIA, Britannicus' sister ('Sad Octavia', as she was called by Racine), who was married to Nero when she was just a child.

He never loved her, and ended up publicly renouncing her. She had little place in his life.

⑤

The first moral lesson given by Seneca, taken from the LETTERS TO LUCILIUS, letter CXIX.

⑥

CONTUBERNIUM

Each legion consisted of ten Cohorts, divided into six Centuries, each with eighty men. The Century was composed of ten Contubernia. The soldiers of a Contubernium shared a tent.

⑦

In reality, Claudius' testament was never found.

⑧

Britannicus suffered from epilepsy. This is an important fact to keep in mind for the end of the chapter.

⑨

LES SIGILLAIRES

The celebrations that came soon after those in the worship of Saturn. Romans would give clay or silver statuettes to their loved ones. They certainly lived well in this leisure-centered civilisation: 182 days off per year!!!

⑩

An extract from Cicero's TUSCULANES.

⑪

For many historians (Tacitus and Suetonius, amongst others), there's no doubt about it: Britannicus died from a deadly poison administered to him on Nero's orders. This theory, however, has since been questioned. At the time there barely existed any poison capable of provoking such an instantaneous death. What's more, there doesn't seem to have been any reaction on behalf of the Senate or the court to Britannicus' death.

Clearly, his brutal death didn't draw any comment. So it seems that Britannicus may actually have died from a violent rupture of the small arterial aneurysms. This is known to be a cause of sudden death in epileptics. In any case, the debate remains open.

⑫

Reference to VESPASIEN, future emperor of Rome. He was 14 years old.



“HIS LIBERTINISM, HIS LECHERY,
HIS EXCESSIVENESS, HIS GREED
AND HIS CRUELTY CAME TO LIGHT
GRADUALLY, AND IN SECRET, AS THOUGH
JUST PART OF THE AMORALITY OF YOUTH.
AND YET, HIS VICES WERE WITHOUT
DOUBT BORN OF HIS CHARACTER,
RATHER THAN HIS AGE.”

SUETONE. NERON XXVI.