

BOOK I

ITALIAN FIRST LEGION, ETRUSCA.

IF I'M CAUGHT, THE EMPEROR WILL HAVE ME CRUCIFIED.



OR MAYBE WHIPPED UNTIL BLEEDING AND SEWN INTO A SACK WITH A DOG, A ROOSTER, A VIPER, AND AN APE.

THAT'S VERY UNLIKELY, CENTURION.

APES ARE SO VERY HARD TO COME BY THESE DAYS.



GREAT VESTAL RUBRIA, YOU'RE ASKING ME TO BREAK THE SACRED CODE OF THE ROMAN ARMY.

THREE MEN, AND YOU, THAT'S ALL--

IT'S TANTAMOUNT TO DESERTION.

EVEN FOR A VIRGIN, THE POOR GIRL IS AN INNOCENT. AND THIS MONSTROUS ETRUSCAN SECT HAS UNSPEAKABLE PLANS FOR HER...

WHY DON'T YOU ASK NERO FOR HELP?



ANTONIUS AXIA, NOWHERE ELSE IN ROME CAN A WOMAN WIELD SO MUCH POWER AS THE VESTAL VIRGINS. BUT MUCH OF THAT POWER IS BUILT ON...OUR MYSTIQUE.

I'D RATHER NERO NOT KNOW WE WERE SO CARELESS AS TO LOSE ONE OF OUR OWN.

THIS GIRL. THIS...VESTAL. IF SHE DOESN'T GET HELP...SHE'LL DIE?

WORSE THAN THAT. MUCH WORSE THAN THAT.

WHY ME, RUBRIA?

THE GODS, ANTONIUS...

"...THEY POINTED US TOWARDS YOU..."

ORKUS,
LORD OF THE
CAVE...

I--I AM
DRUSA, A VESTAL
VIRGIN OF HIGH BIRTH.
YOU C-CANNOT DO
THIS...TO SOMEONE
SUCH AS...AS...

...WE BRING
YOU A SPECIAL
BRIDE...

AAII!

MAY THE
ETERNAL FLAME
PROTECT ME...

ARRGHH!

GAHH!

THREE FINE
LEGIONNAIRES
FOLLOW
ME HERE.

THEY WILL PROBABLY NEVER SEE ROME AGAIN.

DESECRATORS!

AAGH!

AAGH!



A STRANGE STENCH MAKES ME GIDDY.



MAKES ME ALMOST FORGET WHY I'M DOING THIS.

ORKUS WILL STILL BE WED TONIGHT.



AAGH!



THEN I REMEMBER.

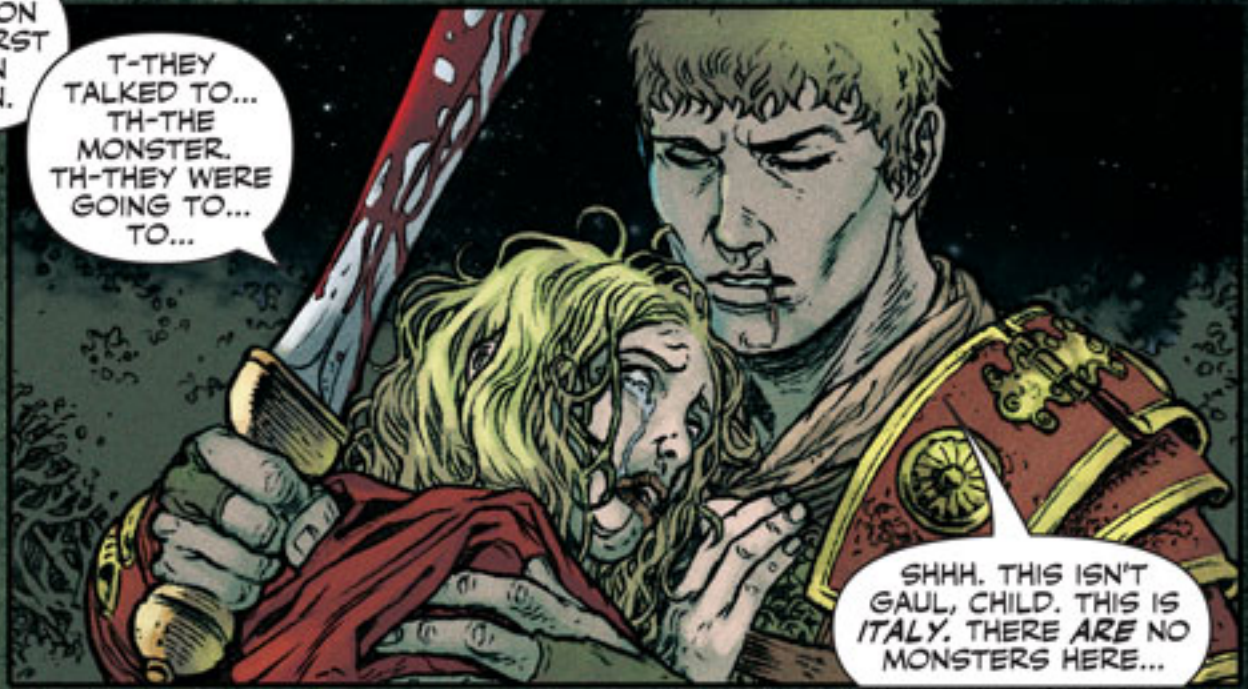
ROME, YOU HAVE SAVED ME...



HERE, COVER YOURSELF...
WH-WHO... ARE YOU?

AXIA, CENTURION IN THE FIRST ITALIAN LEGION.

T-THEY TALKED TO... TH-THE MONSTER. TH-THEY WERE GOING TO... TO...

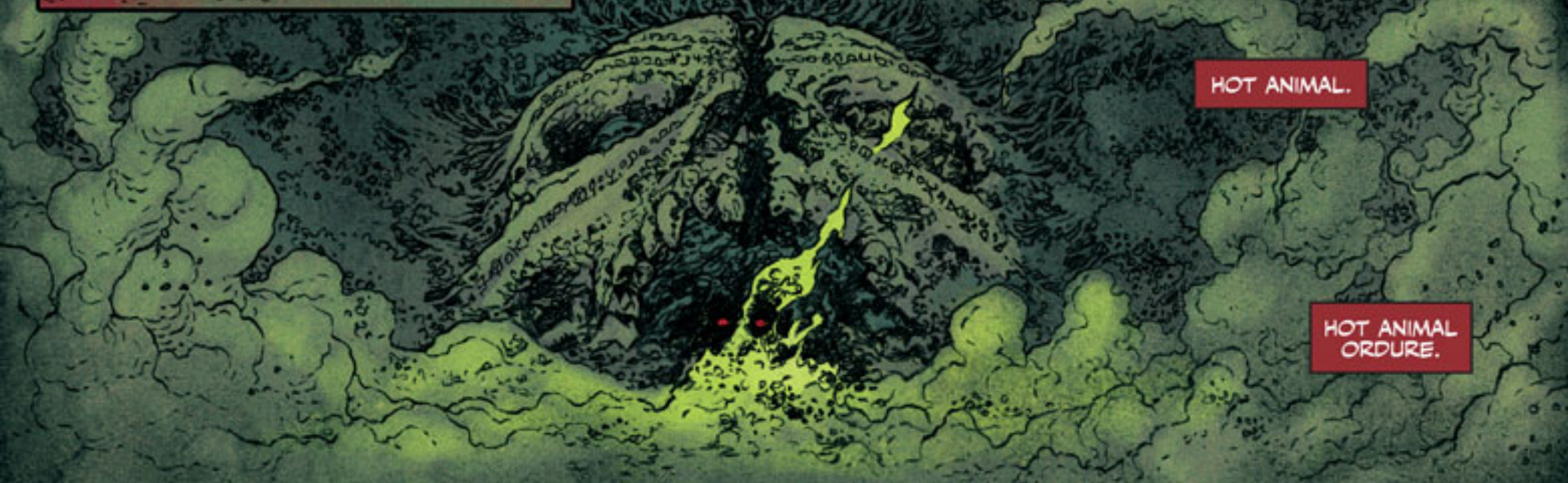


SHHH. THIS ISN'T GAUL, CHILD. THIS IS ITALY. THERE ARE NO MONSTERS HERE...



THEN I SMELL IT AGAIN.

BY MITHRAS...



HOT ANIMAL.

HOT ANIMAL ORDURE.

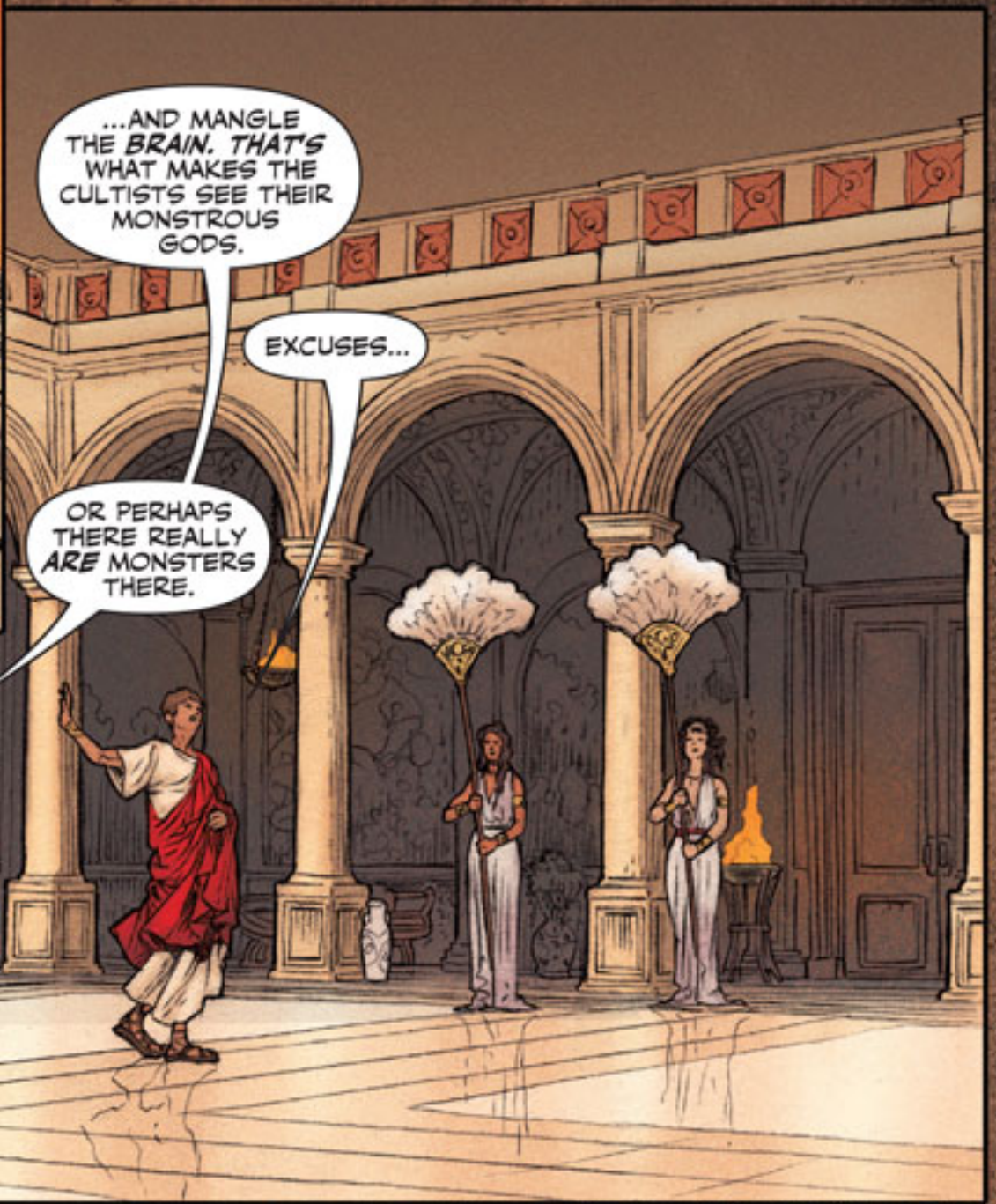


MAY VESTA... G-GODDESS OF THE HEART AND HOME...SAVE US...!

"SOME SAY THERE ARE WEIRD FUMES THERE..."



...TOXIC GASES THAT EMANATE FROM THE BOWELS OF THEIR CAVES...



...AND MANGLE THE BRAIN. THAT'S WHAT MAKES THE CULTISTS SEE THEIR MONSTROUS GODS.

EXCUSES...

OR PERHAPS THERE REALLY ARE MONSTERS THERE.



SOME WHISPER THAT THERE IS AT LEAST ONE MONSTER LIVING HERE, IN NERO'S PALACE.



BE CAREFUL, VESTAL. YOU GO TOO FAR.



GREAT NERO, I KNOW UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES ANTONIUS AXIA WOULD BE EXECUTED.

AND HE WILL BE. I'LL HAVE HIM CRUCIFIED FOR DESERTION.

DELICIOUS.



KILL HIM AND I'LL LET THE SACRED FIRE OF ROME GO OUT.

THE HOLY FIRE OF VESTA...
WHOSE FLAMES GUARANTEE
THE CONTINUATION OF
THE ROMAN STATE...

ARE YOU
THREATENING
ME, VESTAL?

I AM MERELY...
PREDICTING THE
FUTURE.

ANTONIUS
DISOBEYED
ORDERS!

HE WAS
A HERO AT
TIGRANOCERTA.
THE TROOPS
LOVE HIM.

BESIDES, I *BEGGED*
HIM TO GO TO ETRUSCA.
THOSE CULTISTS HAD
SNATCHED ONE OF MY GIRLS.

TO BECOME
EMPEROR, ONE MUST
BE SKILLED IN THE ART
OF DECEPTION, AND
KNOW WHEN ONE IS
BEING *DECEIVED*.

YOU'RE
KEEPING SOME-
THING FROM ME,
RUBRIA.

WHY ARE YOU
SO INTERESTED
IN SUCH A
CENTURION?

MY
EMPEROR IS
RIGHT, AS ALWAYS.
WE HAVE *PLANS*
FOR CENTURION
ANTONIUS.

PLANS?
I THOUGHT THE
EPISODE IN ETRUSCA
LEFT HIS MIND
CRACKED.

IT DID.
THOROUGHLY.

BUT WE IN
THE TEMPLE OF
THE VESTALS...
HAVE WAYS OF
HEALING...

"...THOSE WHO ARE BROKEN..."

AAAAAEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

I FORGET HOW LONG I SCREAMED.

THE SMELL WOULDN'T LEAVE ME. THAT CURIOUS STENCH OF HOT, STEAMING BEAST.

THAT STINK OF FOULEST WASTE.

WH--WHAT?

CALM YOURSELF, SOLDIER. LET US BATHE YOU.

B-BLOOD... IT'S...BLOOD...

WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL... A SECRET FORMULA.

IT WILL HELP CLEANSE YOU.

THIS WAS JUST ONE OF THEIR OBSCURE RITUALS.

CULMINATING IN STRANGE RITES BY ETERNAL FLAME.

FINALLY, I WAS
DEEMED READY TO
SEE THE *CODEX*.

THE SACRED WRITINGS AND
SYMBOLS HANDED DOWN BY
THE ANCESTORS, GUARDED SO
JEALOUSLY BY THE VESTALS.

READ.
CONSUME.

THIS IS WISDOM
REPUTEDLY HANDED
DOWN BY WISE VESTA
HERSELF...

ON THESE
SHEETS OF PAPYRUS YOU
WILL FIND
CLUES THAT
REVEAL WHY
MEN ACT AS
THEY DO...

"A MAP THAT
LEADS THROUGH
THE HUMAN
LABYRINTH..."

I READ UNTIL I NO
LONGER SEEMED TO
CONSUME THE *CODEX*.

THE *CODEX*
SEEMED TO
CONSUME ME.

ANTONIUS?