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DC COMICS

No. 3 of 4
MAY 00

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travels
in
malegrise

PART THREE

PETREFACTION
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THE
SANDMAN
PRESENTS

PETREFAX



In the land of Malegrise, where every man, woman and child is a sorcerer, the travelling undertaker Petrefax has accepted the strangest commission of his career. He must help a dead woman to plead her case against her murderer by keeping her rapidly decaying body together long enough to complete the task.

For Calcinia was the victim of a sorcerous attack. When she discovered that her intended husband, Lord Bulgus, had obtained his title by murdering his own brother and nephew, Bulgus tore her soul in two and kept the larger part of it. Now she is mulé, walking dead — yet determined to prove his guilt to the sorcerous court of the Consistory.



She and Petrefax, aided by the gypsy Raven, have a single clue that may help them — a wizard called Quonce, who was Bulgus's accomplice. But as they make their way to Quonce's town, Bulgus attacks again, destroying a bridge under them and sending them into the turbulent waters of the Chibaïos River...




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POETS SAY THAT THE RIVER IS A SLOW BROWN GOD, BUT THE CHIBAIOS WAS THRASHING AND FOAMING LIKE A TETHERED LUNATIC TWO HUNDRED FEET BELOW ME.

A LOOSE HAWSER FROM THE SHATTERED BRIDGE LASHED AT MY FACE. I REACHED OUT AND TOOK IT.




GORSE TORE AT MY FACE AND THEN THE WALL OF THE RAVINE SLAPPED ME LIKE A GIANT HAND.

I FELL ANKWARDLY, ON MY LEFT SHOULDER. THE BREATH LEFT MY BODY IN A RAGGED SCREAM.




THE FLOW OF TIME SEEMED UNEVEN. CONGEALED. THE MOMENT STRETCHED.

I HELD OUT A HAND AS THOUGH I COULD PLUCK CALCINIA OUT OF THE AIR, BUT SHE FELL ALL THE SAME AND I LOST SIGHT OF HER IN THE FROTHING MAELSTROM BELOW.



IT WAS ALL FOR NOTHING, THEN. I HAD COMPROMISED MY LIFE'S WORK FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN TO LET FATE PROVE ITS USUAL TEDIOUS POINT.

MY MEMORIES OF THE NEXT HOUR ARE INCOMPLETE. I REMEMBER SITTING ON THE LEDGE AND MOANING HER NAME A GREAT MANY TIMES.



I SUPPOSE I MUST HAVE CLIMBED OUT OF THE RAVINE AT SOME POINT, BUT IT SCARCELY REGISTERED.

I WAS IN A WORLD WITHOUT CALCINIA: IT WAS A WORLD OF SUBDUED COLORS AND MEANINGLESS SOUNDS.



THEN I WAS STANDING AT THE SIDE OF A ROAD, A COACH WAS TRUNDLING TOWARDS ME, SLOWLY.

IT WAS A POST CHASE, I RAISED A HAND TO STOP IT...



...AND A PISTOL BALL MISSED MY FLESH BY A MATTER OF A FEW PALTRY INCHES, WHILE THE BRANCH OF A TREE TRIED TO THROTTLE ME.



I'VE ANOTHER PISTOL IN MY HAND, CULLY, AND A SPELL ON MY TONGUE THAT'LL PICKLE YOUR EYEBALLS IN YOUR MANGY HEAD.

SO LAY DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND THROW UP YOUR HANDS.



I DON'T HAVE ANY WEAPONS. I'M NOT A FOOTPAD. I MERELY WISHED TO TAKE A SEAT ON THE COACH.

A SEAT ON THE COACH, EH?



AND YOU JUST THOUGHT YOU'D ROLL IN A DITCH WHILE YOU WERE WAITING, DID YER?

I SWEAR TO YOU, I'M AN UNDERTAKER. I WAS ONLY ON MY WAY TO ASHWOK TO...



ONE MOMENT, FELLOW. AN UNDERTAKER, DID YOU SAY? THEN THIS MEETING MAY PROVE TO BE PROVIDENTIAL FOR BOTH OF US, MASTER UNDERTAKER. I AM SIEUR SUMELLO.

THE MAYOR OF ASHWOK.



AND LORD BULGUS?
IN MY WILD GRIEF, I
HAD FORGOTTEN HIM.

BUT HE HAD
NOT RETURNED
THE FAVOR.

PERHAPS
THAT WAS
A LITTLE
HASTY.

A
PERFECTLY
GOOD SCRYING
TABLE REDUCED
TO MATCHWOOD,
STILL, I SAW NO
OTHER WAY TO
HALT THEIR
FLIGHT.



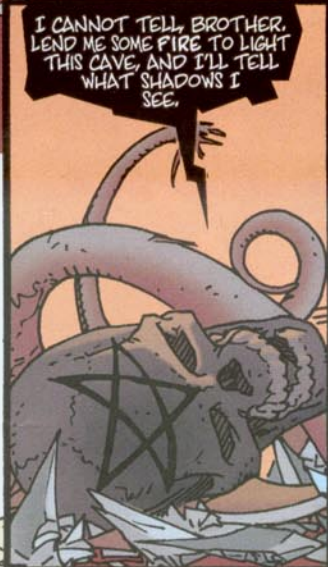
DID IT WORK, MALACHI? OR
DOES CALCINIA STILL
LIVE?

AH, THAT'S
THE PUZZLE, IF
A THING BREATHE
NOT, AND ITS HEART
HEAVE NOT, WHETHER
IT LIVES NOT ONLY
THE ROT WOTS.



DON'T
STRAIN YOUR CRACKED
WIT TOO FAR, HAS SHE THOUGHT
AND MOTION, I MEAN? DOES
SHE STILL STAND?

IS MY DEAR,
DEVOUS CALCINIA STILL
CHEATING HER GRAVE
OF ITS RIGHTFUL
PROPERTY?



I CANNOT TELL, BROTHER.
LEND ME SOME FIRE TO LIGHT
THIS CAVE, AND I'LL TELL
WHAT SHADOWS I
SEE.



EQUIVOCATE ALL YOU
LIKE, HER SOUL STILL
BEATS AGAINST THIS
CAGE, AND THAT'S
ALL THE ANSWER
I NEED.

SHE DODGED
THE BLOW, BUT
IT'S NO GREAT
MATTER.



UT SPUTUM
SCINTILLAM.

IF THE EARTH
ISN'T HUNGRY, LET
THE RIVER SWALLOW HER.



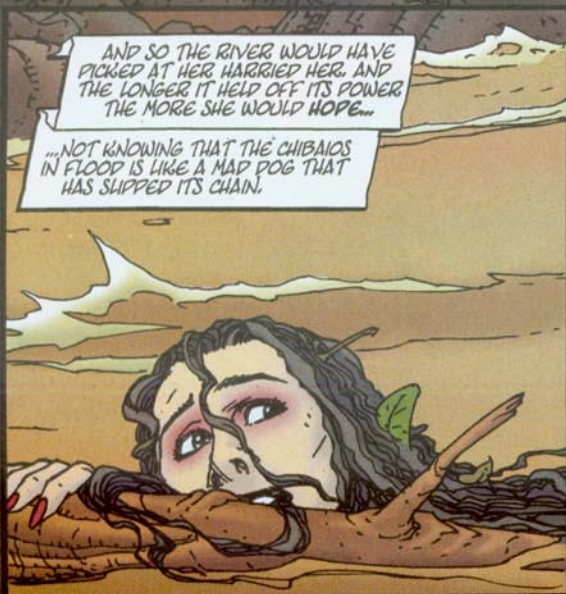
OH CALCINIA -- BETROTHED
TO DEATH BUT STILL HOVERING
ON THAT DREAD THRESHOLD.

MY THOUGHTS LINGERED ON
HER FATE. SHE COULD NOT
SWIM; THE RICH AND HEAVY
FABRIC OF HER DRESS WOULD
PULL HER DOWN.

BUT HAVING NO NEED
FOR AIR SHE COULDN'T
DROWN, EITHER.

AND SO THE RIVER WOULD HAVE PICKED AT HER HARRIED HER, AND THE LONGER IT HELP OFF ITS POWER THE MORE SHE WOULD HOPE...

...NOT KNOWING THAT THE CHIBAIOIS IN FLOOD IS LIKE A MAD DOG THAT HAS SUPPED ITS CHAIN.

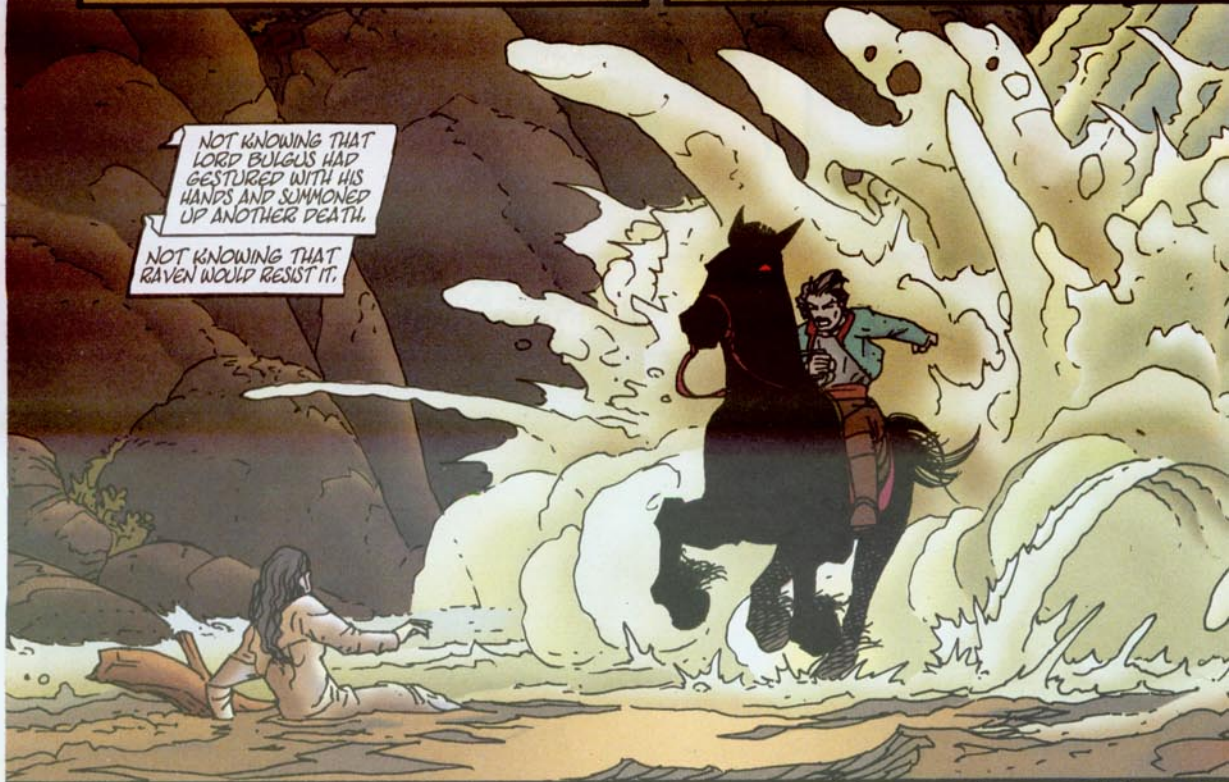


AND SO I CONSIDERED HER TO DEATH -- UPON THE ROCKS OR IN SLOW DISSOLUTION AT THE RIVER BOTTOM.



NOT KNOWING THAT LORD BULGUS HAD GESTURED WITH HIS HANDS AND SUMMONED UP ANOTHER DEATH.

NOT KNOWING THAT RAVEN WOULD RESIST IT.



RAVEN! OH THANK THE GODS!

GIVE US YOUR 'AND, QUICK, OR THAT THING WILL 'AVE US BOTH!







AND YOU CAN'T TURN BACK, ANYROAD.

CAN'T TURN BACK? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

IT'S PLAIN ENOUGH, EVEN IRONFOOT CAN'T RIDE UP A RIVER IN A FLOOD, SO THE ONLY WAY BACK IS AROUND THE MOUNTAIN. THAT'S THREE DAYS' RIDE.



THREE DAYS? THEN I'VE LOST, LORD BULGUS HAS ME BEAT. MY BODY WON'T LAST THAT LONG WITHOUT PETREFAK TO TEND IT.



RAVEN, HOW FAR IS ASCANDALUS?

NOBUT THIRTY MILES OR SO, WHY? WHAT'S IN ASCANDALUS?



THE CONSISTORY, I CAN STILL DENOUNCE PHRAX BULGUS, I CAN STILL PLEAD MY CASE, EVEN WITHOUT EVIDENCE.

AHE, IF THE CONSISTORY SHOULD OPEN ITS DOORS TO YOU.

YOU SEEM TO THINK THE WORLD SHOULD SKIP WHEN YOU TURNS THE ROPE.



DOES IT LOOK LIKE A SKIPPING ROPE I'M HOLDING?

IT'S NOT, IT'S A LASH.



AND I WILL MAKE THEM LISTEN.



YOU SAID YOU WERE AN UNDERTAKER, MASTER PETREFAX, BUT THAT'S A CLAIM ANY MAN MIGHT MAKE WHO OWNS A SHOVEL.



WHAT ARE YOUR CREDENTIALS?

THE BEST, SIR. I WAS RAISED AND TRAINED IN LITHARGE.



THE GREAT NECROPOLIS, MMM? WELL, THAT'S A GOODLY RECOMMENDATION. JOURNEYMAN RATHER THAN MASTER, OBVIOUSLY, BUT STILL... I MAY BE IN A POSITION TO OFFER YOU EMPLOYMENT.



I REGRET THAT MY CURRENT TASK IS URGENT. I CAN'T DEVIATE FROM IT.

THAT'S A PITY. WILL YOU TAKE SOME SNUFF?

I THANK YOU, NO.



SNFFFF! AAAAAH! A GREAT PITY. MAY I ASK WHAT THIS BUSINESS IS THAT PRESSES YOU SO?

I WISH TO SPEAK TO THE WIZARD, QUONCE.



TO QUONCE? HOW SINGULAR. I WOULD NOT HAVE CONSIDERED YOU A FOOL, BUT THAT'S A FOOL'S ERRAND.



IN WHAT SENSE?

HE IS A RECLUSE. TO BE FRANK, I THINK IT IS UNLIKELY THAT YOU WILL OBTAIN AN INTERVIEW. OR A GLIMPSE, FOR THAT MATTER.





HE AGREES TO CARRY OUT A BURIAL FOR ME, I AGREE TO INTRODUCE HIM TO THE WIZARD, QUONCE.

WHEREBY IT IS ENTERED INTO ON THIS DAY... BETWEEN THE PARTIES WHOSE NAMES ARE SUBSCRIBED HERETO...

THAT THIS AGREEMENT SHALL BIND THEM BOTH...

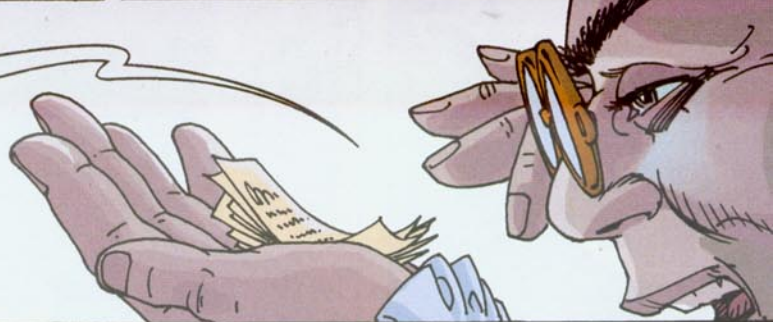


I HAVE TO SEE QUONCE FIRST, AND A BURIAL IS TO MEAN THE INTERMENT OF A SINGLE PERSON.

DID YOU GET ALL THAT?

YES, SIR.

WELL NOW, THERE ARE ENOUGH WHERESOEVERS AND NOTWITHSTANDINGS HERE TO SUPPLY THREE CONTRACTS, WILL YOU READ IT OVER, MASTER PETREFAX?



BUT THIS IS GIBBERISH. MOST OF IT SEEMS TO BE WRITTEN AS A SINGLE SENTENCE.



OF COURSE, IT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE LAW TO MAKE OPAQUE AND DIFFICULT WHAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE SIMPLE. OTHERWISE MEN OF BUSINESS WOULD BE OBLIGED TO SPEND THEIR AFTERNOONS WITH THEIR FAMILIES.

HERE, MASTER PETREFAX, YOU MAY USE MY PEN.

AND PLEASE WIPE IT BEFORE RETURNING IT.





THE YOUNG UNDERTAKER WHO STOLE MY FIANCEE'S BODY -- HE SEEMS TO HAVE ESCAPED BOTH THE JUSTICE OF THE STATE AND THAT OF THE MOB.

FIND HIM AND BURN HIM.

TO ASH.

MY LORD, I SERVE YOUR FAMILY AS ESTATE MANAGER AND SOLICITOR.



I HAVE NEVER...

THE CONDITIONS OF SERVICE ARE DEFINED BY THE MASTER, I BELIEVE.

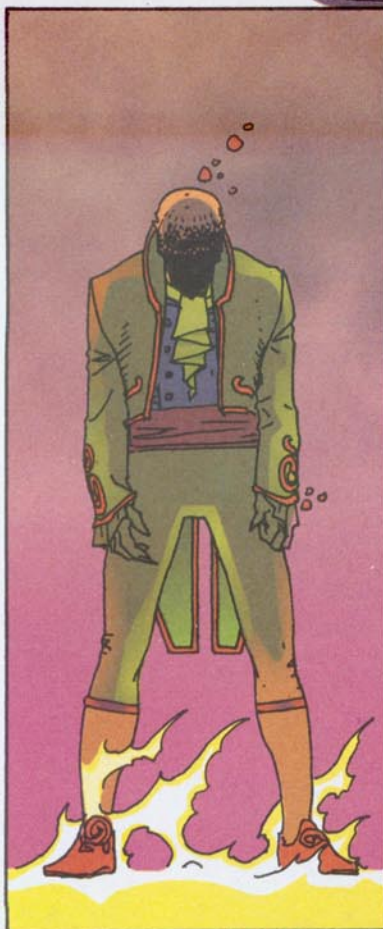
BY YOUR NAME I COMMAND YOU, TAKE ON YOUR TRUE ASPECT AND CONSUME HIM.



AS YOU SAY MY LORD,

ANTHONY, YOU WILL PLEASE CONVEY MY COMPLIMENTS TO THE UNDER-BUTLER AND TELL HIM THE HOUSE IS IN HIS KEEPING UNTIL MY RETURN.

AND THAT I WILL EAT HIS EYES IF HE TOUCHES ONE DROP OF THE MADEIRA.



SEE, MALACHI? NOT INCAUTIOUS AT ALL.

AS WHEN I MURDERED YOU, I THINK I'VE BEEN MOST SCRUPULOUSLY THOROUGH.



FOR ALL YOUR WOODCRAFT WE APPEAR TO BE LOST.

NO WE'N NOT, YOU ONLY GET'S MOSS ON THE NORTH SIDE OF A TREE.

THE ROAD'S GOT TO RUN BY 'ERE, WE'LL COME ON IT SOON.



AND IF WE DON'T?

THEN I RECKON YOU'LL 'AVE SUCH A FINE TIME CURSIN' AT ME YOU WON'T MISS IT.



LOOK! UP AHEAD, THERE'S A MAN.

WE CAN ASK HIM.



EXCUSE ME, SIR, DOES THE ROAD TO ASCANDALUS RUN NEAR HERE?

AYE, MISSY, THAT IT DOES, JUST DOWN THE BOTTOM OF THIS SLOPE AND ACROSS THE COPSE, BUT IT'S A DANGEROUS JOURNEY.



DANGEROUS? WHY?

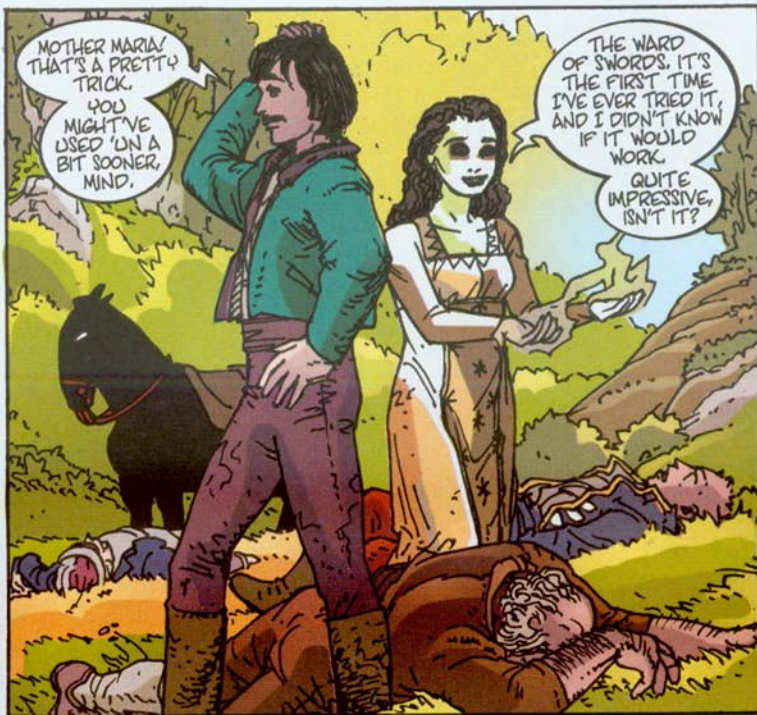
'CAUSE THE FOREST IS FULL OF ROGUES AND CUTTHROATS, IS WHY.

THIEVES SO DEADLY AND SO QUIET-LIKE...



THEY'LL PUT A KNIFE TO YOUR WINDPIPE 'ERE YOU CAN SAY GODS SAVE US.







DO YOU KNOW QUONCE WELL, MASTER PETREFAX?

IS HE PERHAPS A COLLEAGUE OF YOURS IN SOME VENTURE? A FRIEND FROM YOUR YOUTH?



SCOFF I'VE NEVER MET HIM, WHY DO YOU ASK?

I WAS CURIOUS, HE HAS ALWAYS STRUCK ME AS A MAN WITH A SECRET SORROW, AND I WONDERED IF YOU MIGHT KNOW WHAT IT WAS.



A SCOFF A SECRET SORROW? WHY DO YOU SAY THAT, SIEUR JUMELLO?

OH, I AM AN OBSERVER OF HUMAN FOIBLES. IT IS MY HOBBY.



WHEN A MAN RETREATS FROM THE SOCIAL VICIES INTO THE SOLITARY ONES, I FIND THAT IT BETRAYS A PERSONAL CRISIS OF SOME KIND...

YOU SEEM UNCOMFORTABLE.



IT IS THE SMELL, I'VE NEVER ENCOUNTERED SO PERVERSIVE A STENCH OF DEATH. DO YOU HAVE PLAGUE IN ASHWOK? IS THAT WHY YOU NEED ME?



A PLAGUE, MASTER PETREFAX? HA HA, HA HA HA. NO, NOTHING OF THE KIND.




I CONFESS THAT THE SMELL HAS SOME BEARING ON OUR CURRENT PROBLEM -- BUT WE WILL DEAL WITH YOUR OWN AFFAIRS FIRST...

...AS OUR CONTRACT STIPULATES.








ASCANDALAS, MOTHER OF EMPIRES AND CRADLE OF GOVERNANCE.


IT'S SAID THAT THE FIRST PRINTING PRESS WAS MADE HERE, THE FIRST JURY TRIAL HELD AND THE FIRST OPERA PERFORMED.

AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, THEREFORE THE PEOPLE OF THIS CITY ARE BOTH PAROCHIAL AND INSUFFERABLY ARROGANT.

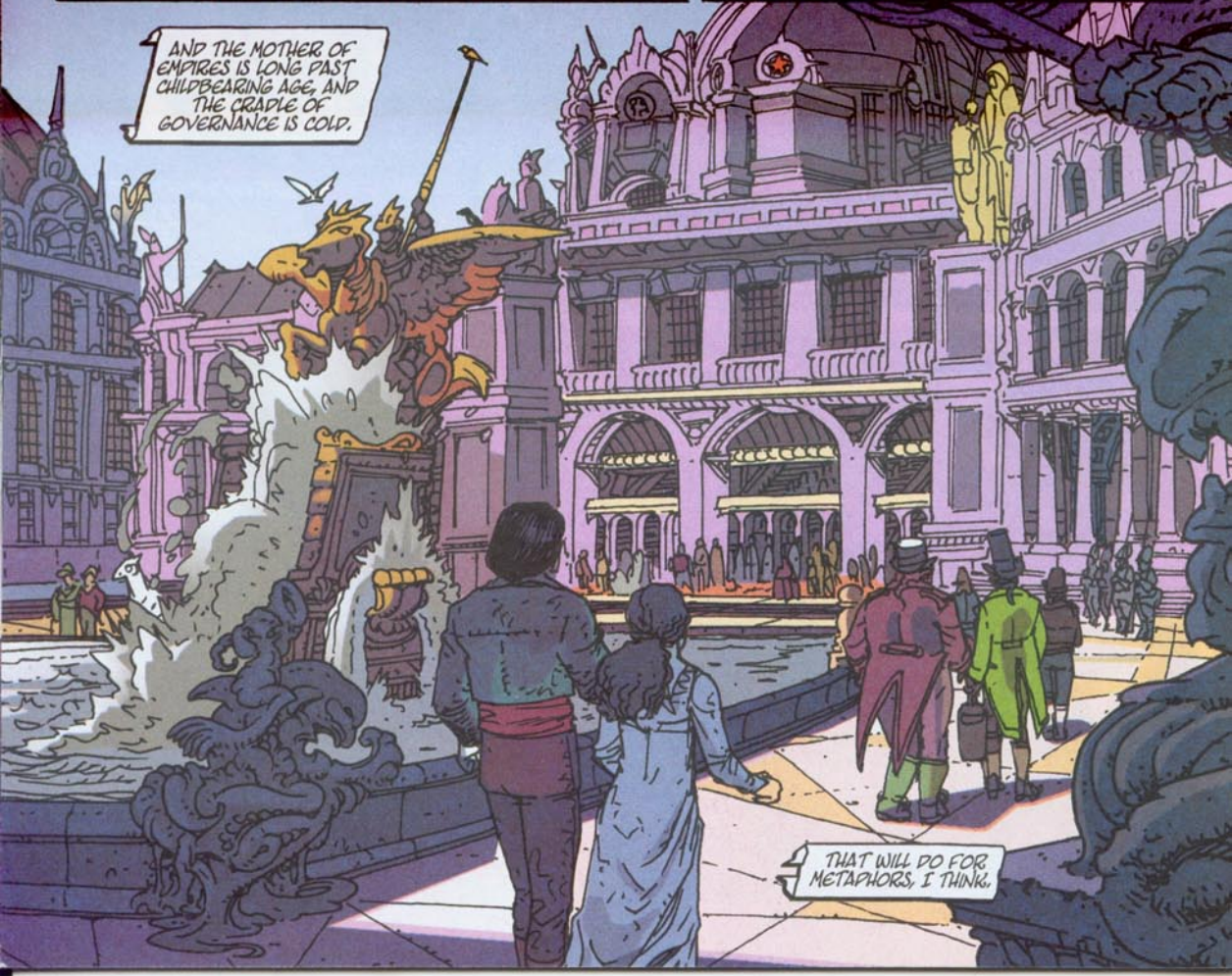


THE CONSISTORY? ON MINISTER SQUARE, THAT WAY.

BUT THEY WON'T LET YOU BEG THERE WITHOUT A LICENSE.



HALL OF JUSTICE IS DOWN THE 'LL, BUT GET THAT THERE 'OSS TIED UP FIRST.



AND THE MOTHER OF EMPIRES IS LONG PAST CHILDBEARING AGE, AND THE CRADLE OF GOVERNANCE IS COLD.

THAT WILL DO FOR METAPHORS, I THINK.



SIR, I HAVE A CASE TO PLEAD BEFORE THE CONSISTORY. AM I IN THE RIGHT PLACE?

THAT DEPENDS.



PLACE YOUR DEPOSITIONS ON THE TABLE TO MY RIGHT AND ANY TOKENS OF GOOD WILL ON THE TABLE TO MY LEFT.

I... HAVE NEITHER. PERHAPS YOU COULD TELL ME HOW I SHOULD PROCEED?



AH, I SEE. WELL, THE CONSISTORY WON'T HEAR A CASE UNTIL THE DEPOSED EVIDENCE HAS BEEN EXAMINED BY THE COURT APPELLATE, AND THE GIFTS ARE THE CUSTOMARY RECOMPENSE FOR THEIR TIME.

LACKING BOTH, I DON'T SEE HOW YOU CAN PROCEED.



BUT... I HAVE COME HERE FOR JUSTICE, I HAVE NO FUNDS, I HAVE NO SPONSORS.

ARE YOU SAYING THAT MY ACCESS TO THE COURT IS BARRED BECAUSE I CANNOT PAY FOR IT?

NOT AT ALL, THAT'S A GROSS IMPUTATION.



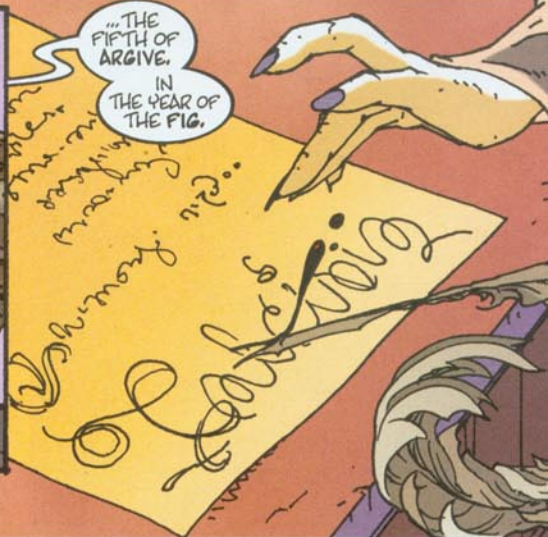
WRITE YOUR NAME HERE AND I'LL ADD YOU TO THE LIST FOR THE NEXT REVIEW DAY.

THOSE CASES ARE HEARD BY A CIRCUIT JUDGE IN STRICT ORDER OF APPLICATION.



THANK YOU, AND WHEN IS THE NEXT REVIEW DAY?

SATURSDAY...



...THE FIFTH OF ARGIVE, IN THE YEAR OF THE FIG.



HAVE YOU SEEN A PALE WOMAN GO BY? POSSIBLY WITH TWO MEN?

THERE'S BEEN NO WOMEN PASSED BY 'ERE, SQUIRE. WE SHOULD 'AVE NOTICED 'UN FOR SURE.

OR ANYTHING ELSE STRANGE?



WELL, A FIREBALL FLEW BY SOME THREE HOURS SINCE. THAT WERE STRANGE, ON ACCOUNT OF IT WERE WEAVIN' ALL ABOUT LIKE IT WERE LOOKIN' FOR SOMEWHERE PARTICULAR TO FALL AIN'T THAT RIGHT, SURGEN?

AYE, SIMKIN. SET THAT HAYSTACK ON FIRE, THOUGH IT WERE AS HIGH UP AS ANY BIRD.



THAT WAS MERELY THE ANGEL OF DEATH GOING BY, NOTHING MORE?

NOT THIS DAY, SQUIRE.

NOT ANY OTHER DAY, NEITHER, AS FAR AS I RECOLLECTS.



THANK YOU.

DON'T YOU THINK OF IT, SQUIRE. 'APPY TO BE OF SERVICE TO YOU.



THE ANGEL OF DEATH FLYIN' OVER YOUR FARM, THAT'S GOT TO BE A CURSED FOUL OMEN, SURGEN.

NOT IF 'E KEEPS ON GOIN'.



QUONCE'S HOUSE WAS OF A SINGULAR DESIGN. THERE IS ONLY ONE ROOM ON EACH STORY, EACH RUNNING THE FULL LENGTH AND BREADTH OF THE BUILDING.

IT HAS FOURTEEN LEVELS IN ALL, EIGHT OF THEM BELOW THE GROUND.



THE HOUSE IS EMPTY, ISN'T IT? QUONCE ISN'T HERE.

OF COURSE HE IS. THE CONTRACT ENGAGES ME TO BRING YOU TO HIM, AND I WILL DO SO.

OTHERWISE YOU WOULD BE FREE TO DEFAULT ON YOUR COMMITMENT TO ME.

THEN WHY DID YOU LET US IN WITH A KEY?



AND WHAT OF THE PATINA OF DUST? AND HIS JOURNAL, LEFT OPEN FOR ANYONE TO READ.


AH YES, THE JOURNAL. PARTS OF IT HAVE A MORBID BUT IRRESISTIBLE APPEAL.



2fl.oz with Fly Agaric diluted in water, just before bed. 4fl.oz undiluted at five of the clock.

The pleasure was a little dulled but the transformation was also less extreme. Must try to do so without a midday dose.

Use Belladonna as the reagent? Sharper, perhaps, and quicker to work.



HE HAD BEEN DEAD SIX DAYS, BY MY JUDGMENT. THE DRUG MADE HIM A BLOATED COLOSSUS, ALMOST EIGHTY FEET TALL. IT HAD ALSO TURNED HIS LEFT ARM INTO WOOD AND PETRIFIED HIS HEAD AND NECK.

THE REST OF THE DAMAGE, I ASSUME, HAD BEEN DONE BY RATS AND INSECTS.

THIS WAS THE BODY I WAS TO BURY, AND WITH IT, CALCNIA'S LAST HOPE OF PROVING LORD BULGUS' GUILT.

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, EVEN SUCH A SPECTACULAR PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE AS THIS COULD NOT LIFT MY SPIRITS.

**TO BE
CONCLUDED**