



part four

a game

neil gaiman

shawn mcmanus

of wood

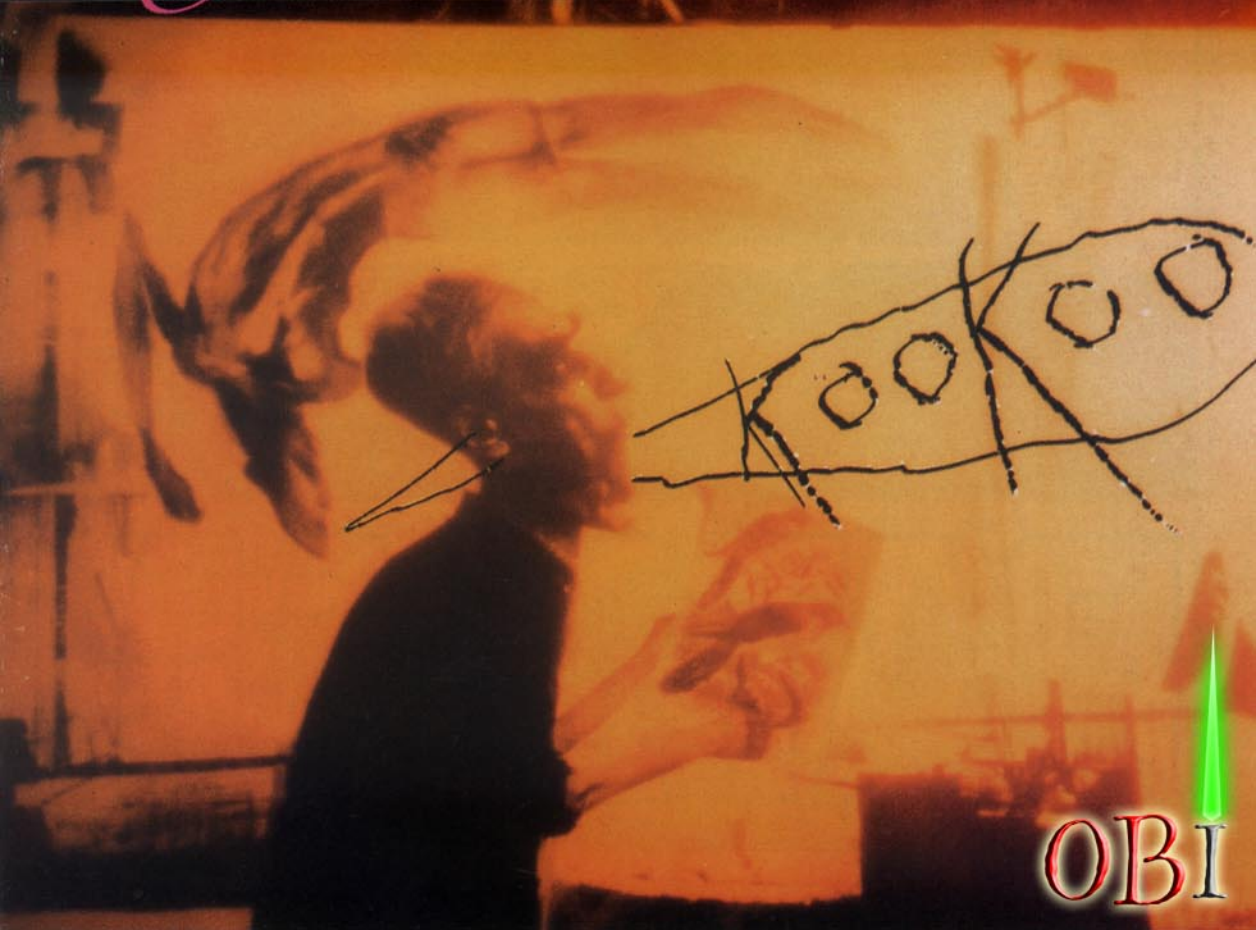
RATES

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the
SANDMAN™

SUGGESTED
 FOR MATURE
 READERS



OBI

THE LAND.

THEY'VE TOLD ME THAT THIS IS THE MOST RISKY PART OF THE JOURNEY.

RISKY. NOT DANGEROUS. RISKY.

THERE'S NO COVER ON THE PLAIN. IF THE BLACK GUARD SPOT US, THAT'S IT. NOWHERE TO GO. NOWHERE TO RUN.

IF WE MAKE IT ACROSS THE PLAIN THERE'S A FOREST. "IT'S NOT A SAFE PLACE," SAID WILKINSON. "NOT BY A LONG SHOT. BUT THERE'S PLENTY OF COVER, AND THERE'S NO LOVE LOST BETWEEN THE TREES AND THE CUCKOO.

"NOT THAT THEY'RE ON OUR SIDE, MIND YOU, ALTHOUGH MOST OF THE TREES ARE ALL RIGHT. KEEP THEMSELVES TO THEMSELVES, UNLESS THEY'RE BOTHERED, AND ONLY AN IDIOT BOTHERS A TREE."

THAT'S WHAT HE SAID.

THEY TELL ME THERE ARE BAD THINGS IN THE FOREST. I'VE BEEN TOLD TO PRAY WE DON'T MEET ANY TWEENERS. WHATEVER THEY ARE...

BUT IT'LL BE WARMER THERE. AND IF WE'RE LUCKY, THERE'LL BE FOOD.

I HAVEN'T EATEN SINCE I GOT TO THE LAND, LATE LAST NIGHT. WE'RE DRINKING MELTED SNOW. I'M STARVING.

I'M WEARING A PRETTY PARTY DRESS-- THE KIND I ALWAYS IMAGINED PRINCESSES WOULD WEAR, WHEN I WAS LITTLE.

I'M COLD.

I'M SO COLD.



4: BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT

Written by Neil Gaiman, drawn by Shaun McManus, lettered by Todd Klein, colored by Daniel Vozzo. Edited by Zach's Mom, Karen Berger, assisted by Alisa Whitney.

Sandman features characters created by Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth, and Mike Dringenberg.



COME ON.
LET'S CHECK
IT OUT.

SO, WILKINSON.
WHAT'S ON THE OTHER
SIDE OF THE
FOREST?



Once past the forest, we're
in trouble again.

There's people living
there, really down all the way
to the sea.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE?

Just normal
people. Like me,
or you, or Luz
here.



Or me.

Or Prinado.

They used to
be subjects of the
Hieromancer.
But...

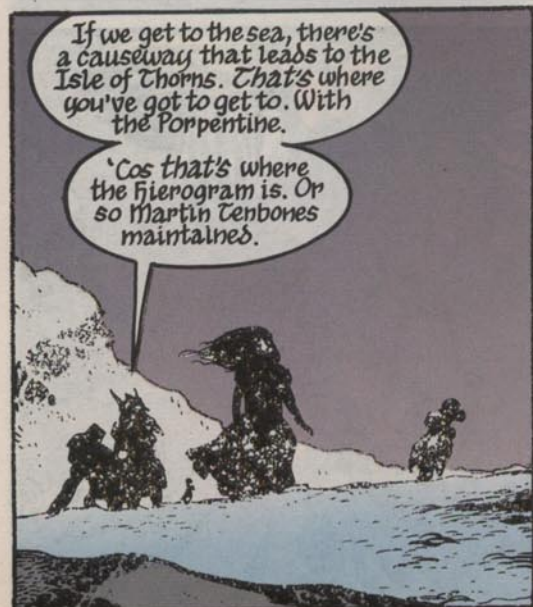
I... REMEMBER
THE HIEROMANCER. I
MET HIM, WHEN I WAS
HERE BEFORE. HE WAS A
SWEET OLD GUY. KIND OF
LIKE MY GRANDFATHER.
WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?



He's dead. I expect that
he's dead. If he's lucky he's
dead.

Then we come
to the Citadel of
the Cuckoo.

Maybe we
can avoid it. Maybe.
But it stands between
us and the Brightly
Shining Sea.



If we get to the sea, there's
a causeway that leads to the
Isle of Thorns. That's where
you've got to get to. With
the Porpentine.

'Cos that's where
the Hierogram is. Or
so Martin Tenbones
maintained.



I hope you'll know
what to do when we
get that far because
none of us have a
clue...

SHH.
LOOK!

Oh
no...



OH, HOW GHASTLY.
THE POOR THING.

Murphy protect us---
it's the Tantoblin. I
knew he was dead. I
felt him die.

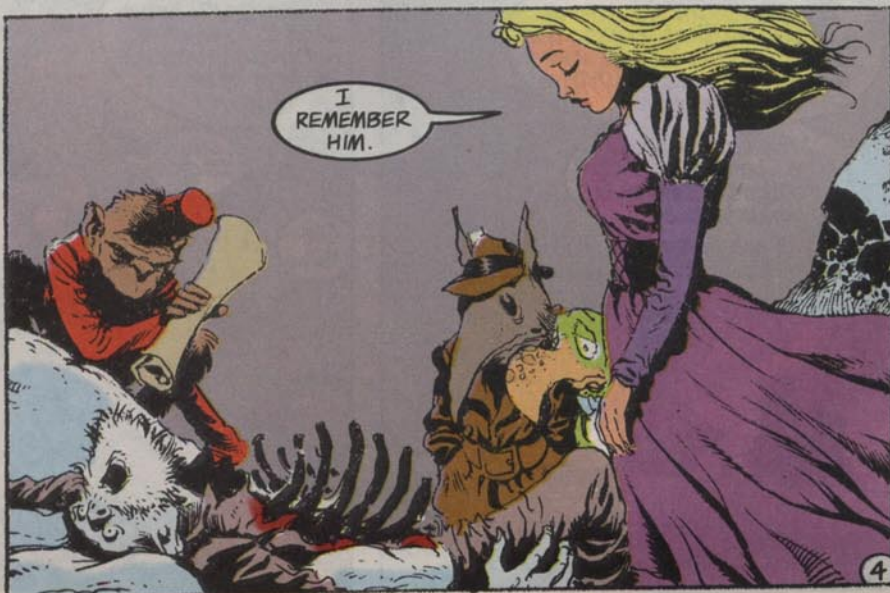


'E was
carrying a
message for
us.


'E still
'as it.
Look.



'ere it is.
Do you want
to read it now?
It may be
important.



I
REMEMBER
HIM.



"MARTIN TENBONES AND I WERE ON OUR WAY TO THE ARCH OF THE PORPENTINE, WHEN WE WERE ATTACKED BY THESE WHITE GRUB THINGS, LIKE FAT CHILDREN.

"SOME PEOPLE HELPED US ESCAPE--THEY WERE CARRYING THIS ROOM AROUND WITH THEM."

"I MEAN, IT WASN'T A **BIG ROOM**, OR ANYTHING, BUT WE WENT INTO IT, AND WHEN WE CAME OUT, WE WERE SOMEWHERE ELSE. SOMEWHERE CLOSER TO WHERE WE WANTED TO BE.

"AND THIS GUY WAS WAITING FOR US, AND HE MADE US BREAKFAST. I LIKED HIM."

Yee, that was the Cantoblin right enough.

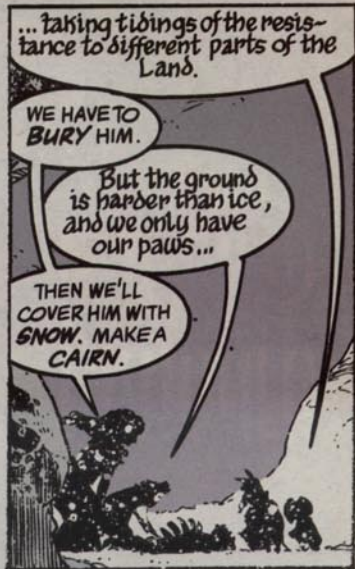
Then, when the Cuckoo crushed the rest of the Room Patrol, he became a courier...

...taking tibings of the resistance to different parts of the Land.

WE HAVE TO BURY HIM.

But the ground is harder than ice, and we only have our paws...

THEN WE'LL COVER HIM WITH SNOW. MAKE A CAIRN.



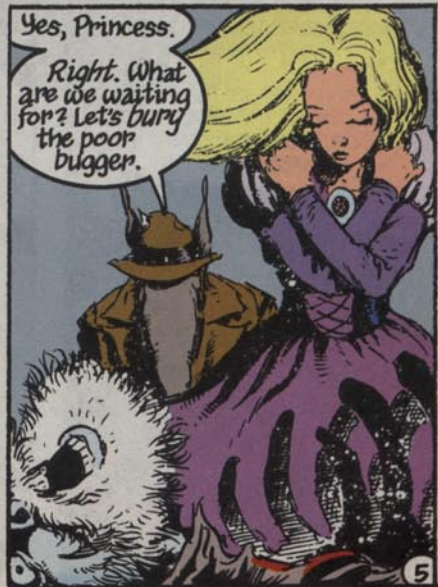
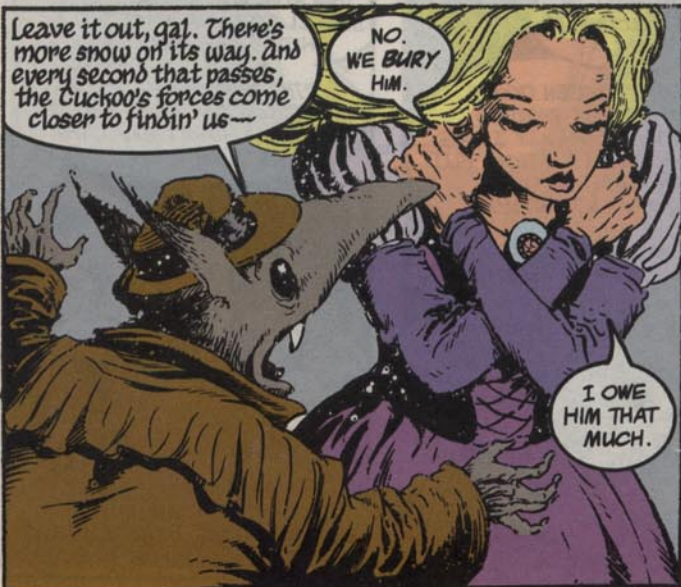
Leave it out, gal. There's more snow on its way. And every second that passes, the Cuckoo's forces come closer to findin' us--

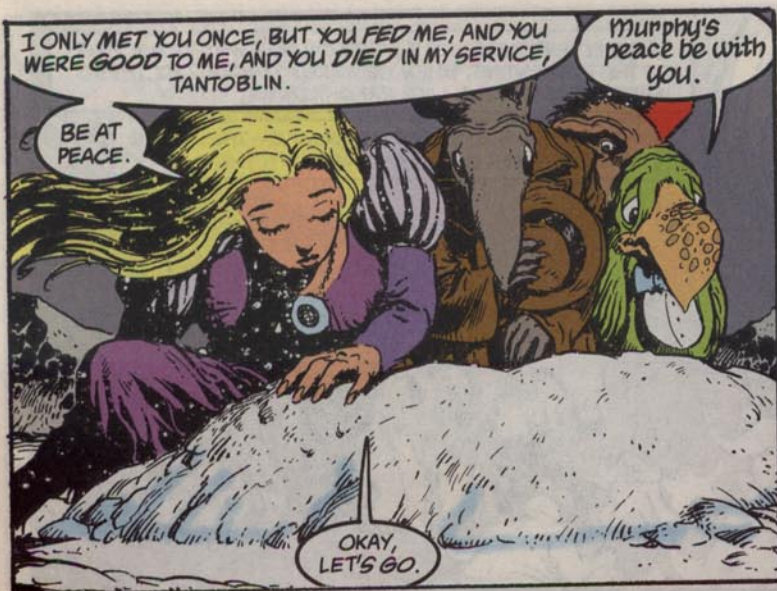
NO. WE BURY HIM.

I OWE HIM THAT MUCH.

Yes, Princess.

Right. What are we waiting for? Let's bury the poor buggler.





I ONLY MET YOU ONCE, BUT YOU FED ME, AND YOU WERE GOOD TO ME, AND YOU DIED IN MY SERVICE, TANTOBLIN.

Murphy's peace be with you.

BE AT PEACE.

OKAY, LET'S GO.



Look! Shelter! Let's get under there until the worst of it's over.



I SUPPOSE THE SNOW WOULD HAVE BURIED THE TANTOBLIN ANYWAY...

PRINADO-- LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT THE SCROLL YOU TOOK FROM HIM. IT MAY BE IMPORTANT.

'Ere it is, Princess.



Princess? Is that a picture of you?

YES. I'VE BEEN DOING A LOT OF FACE-PAINTING RECENTLY. ORIGINALLY I WAS GOING TO GET A TATTOO. BUT I DON'T WANT ANYTHING PERMANENT ANYMORE.

IT'S LIKE I CAN BE A DIFFERENT PERSON EVERY DAY.

WHERE DID HE GET THE PHOTOS FROM?



THIS IS WEIRD. MAYBE THE SCROLL EXPLAINS WHAT THE PHOTOS ARE ABOUT...

"THE EUROPEAN CUCKOO (CUCULUS CANORUS) WINTERS IN THE..." HUHN? WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?

Read it, my Princess. The Tantoblin thought it was important. He gave his life bringing it to us.

"THE EUROPEAN CUCKOO (CUCULUS CANORUS) WINTERS IN THE TROPICS, AND IS AN ABUNDANT SUMMER VISITOR TO CONTINENTAL EUROPE AND BRITAIN, ARRIVING IN EARLY APRIL.

"IT TAKES ITS NAME FROM ITS DISTINCTIVE SONG. THE CUCKOO DOES NOT ITSELF BUILD NESTS; INSTEAD IT PLACES ITS EGGS IN THE NESTS OF OTHER BIRDS.

"THE SPECIES MOST VICTIMIZED TEND TO BE THE TREE-PIPIT, PIED WAGTAIL, HEDGE SPARROW, REDBREAST AND REED-WARBLER.



"INDEED, A BIRD WILL BROOD THE FOSTER-CHICK WHILST HER OWN INFANTS LIE SLOWLY DYING OUTSIDE THE NEST.

"THOUGH SMALL BIRDS INSTINCTIVELY MOB THE CUCKOO, WHEN AN EGG IS IN THE NEST AND AFTER THE ABNORMAL FLEDGLING IS HATCHED, NO ATTEMPT IS MADE TO DISLodge IT.

"FOR WHEN HATCHED THE YOUNG CUCKOO, DURING THE FIRST FEW DAYS OF ITS NAKED, BLIND AND APPARENTLY HELPLESS EXISTENCE, THROWS OUT THE UNHATCHED EGGS OR FELLOW NESTLINGS.

"AFTER A WHILE THE MURDEROUS INSTINCT PASSES AND ANY NESTLINGS THAT ARE TOO HEAVY TO HAVE BEEN THROWN OUT ARE ACCEPTED AS BED-MATES. AS A RULE THE YOUNG CUCKOO GETS THE NEST TO ITSELF.

"APPARENTLY THE VOICE OF THE YOUNG CUCKOO HAS A COMMANDING, ALMOST HYPNOTIC POWER..."

Shh.
Quiet.

Danger.



WE SAT THERE IN SCARED SILENCE AS THEY MARCHED PAST US, ONE BY ONE, THEIR BOOTS TRAMPING QUIETLY ON THE FRESH SNOW.



THEY CAME SO CLOSE.

I COULD HAVE REACHED OUT AND TOUCHED ONE. I COULD HAVE REACHED OUT, BUT I DID NOT.

BLACK GLISTENING ARMOR. I HAD NO DOUBTS THEY WERE SEARCHING FOR US, AND HAD A BRIEF, MAD IMPULSE TO SCREAM, TO RUN OUT, TO LAUGH, TO SAY, "HERE WE ARE!"



HIDE AND SEEK...

BUT I SAT THERE LISTENING TO MY BREATHING, LISTENING TO MY HEART THUMPING IN MY CHEST, POUNDING LIKE A DRUM IN ONE OF THOSE CRAPPY LATE-NIGHT JUNGLE MOVIES.



I COULD HEAR IT. AND I KNEW THEY WOULD TOO.

THIRTY OF THEM. I COUNTED. WHEN THE LAST ONE HAD MARCHED PAST OUR SHELTER, WE WAITED IN SILENCE.

NOTHING ELSE STIRRED.

SOON THE SNOW DIED DOWN, AND AN EARLY TWILIGHT FELL, AND WE RECOMMENCED OUR JOURNEY.



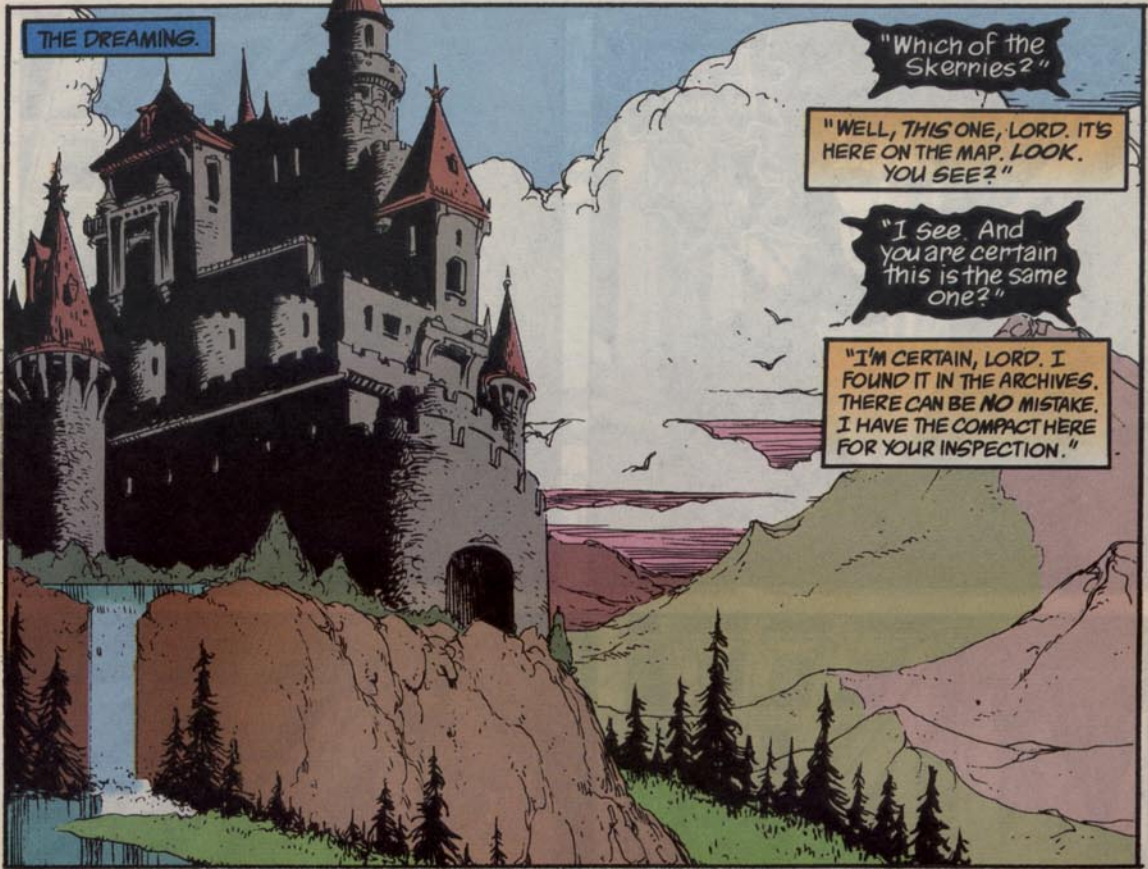
JESUS CHRIST, I COULD HAVE TOUCHED THEM. ALL THEY HAD TO DO WAS BEND DOWN AND THEY'D'VE SEEN US.

NOTHING ELSE BAD HAPPENED CROSSING THE PLAIN; ALTHOUGH WHEN I TRIED LOOKING AT THEM AGAIN I SAW THAT THE POLAROIDS HAD CHANGED INTO OLD PLAYING CARDS, WHILE THE WORDS ON THE SCROLL HAD RUN TOGETHER, AND WERE BLURRED AND UNREADABLE.



THAT NIGHT WE SLEPT IN A DITCH, THE FOUR OF US HUDDLED TOGETHER FOR WARMTH.

I DO NOT REMEMBER DREAMING.



THE DREAMING.

"Which of the Skerries?"

"WELL, THIS ONE, LORD. IT'S HERE ON THE MAP. LOOK. YOU SEE?"

"I see. And you are certain this is the same one?"

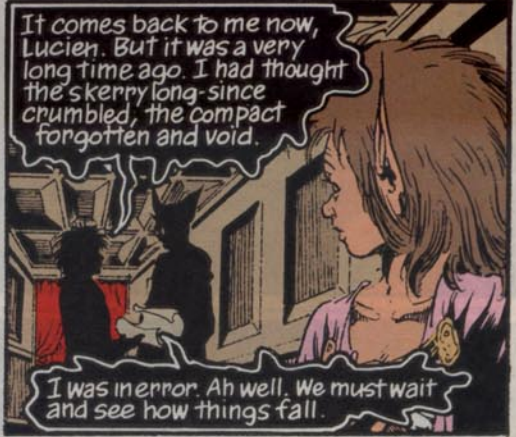
"I'M CERTAIN, LORD. I FOUND IT IN THE ARCHIVES. THERE CAN BE NO MISTAKE. I HAVE THE COMPACT HERE FOR YOUR INSPECTION."



Let me see it.



Hmmm.



It comes back to me now, Lucien. But it was a very long time ago. I had thought the skerry long-since crumbled, the compact forgotten and void.

I was in error. Ah well. We must wait and see how things fall.



UH. EXCUSE ME, SIR. YOU MAY NOT REMEMBER ME. MY NAME'S NUALA. I WAS A FAERIE GIFT.

NUALA.



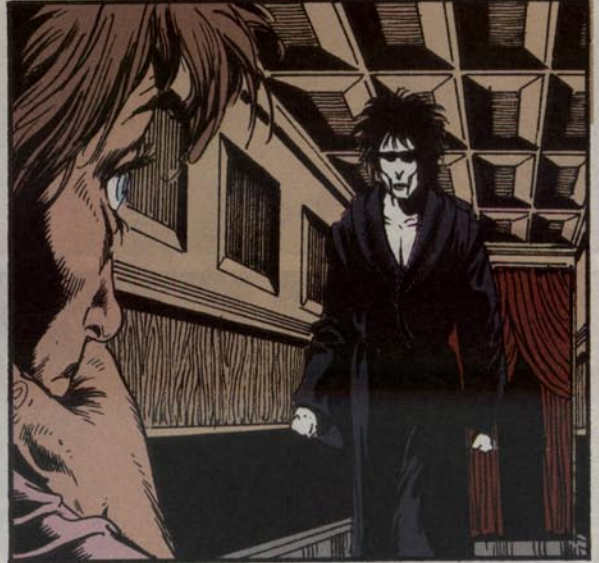
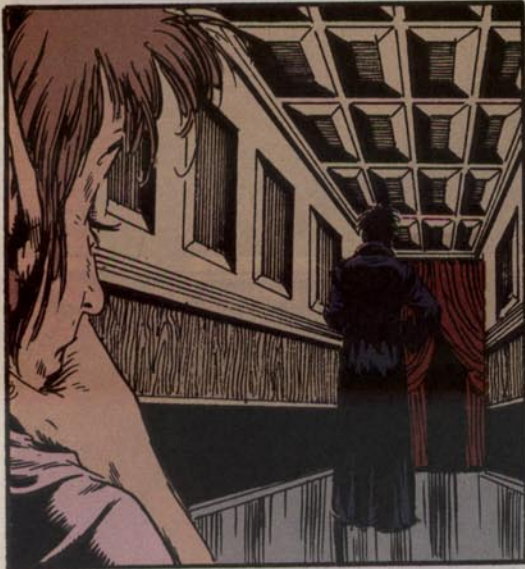
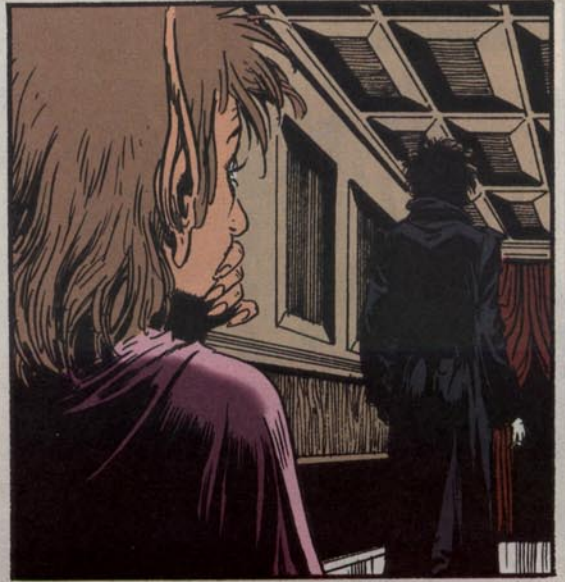
YES. RIGHT. WELL. I WAS TOLD TO WATCH THE DREAMS OF THE MORTAL WOMAN. **BARBIE**. AND NOT DO ANYTHING.

WELL. I...



I DID SOMETHING. WHEN SHE FIRST STARTED TO DREAM. I SORT OF TRIED TO WARN HER. THAT THERE WAS BAD STUFF GOING DOWN. I COULDN'T JUST STAND BY AND NOT DO ANYTHING...

I THOUGHT I SHOULD TELL YOU. I'M SORRY.





You're smilin' this morning. That's not something I expected to see in a hurry.

MMM? OH, HI, WILKINSON. I'M WARM. I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. I THOUGHT I WAS NEVER GOING TO BE WARM AGAIN. WHERE ARE WE?



The forest borders. You hungry?

OOH. I WISH YOU HADN'T ASKED. YES, I'M STARVING.

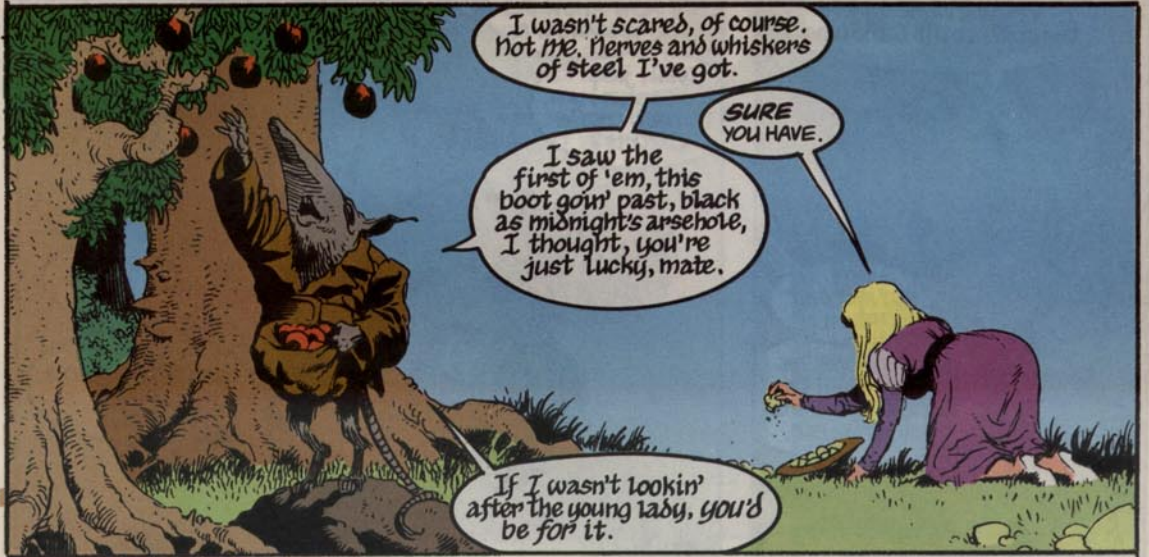
Well, Prinaldo's up trees lookin' for eggs, and Luz is barterin' with the Gniebrig for fire.



Here, take my hat. Only pick the white mushrooms with the pink gills.

OKAY.

Close call last night. There but for the grace of Murphy went we. Facked into messy little chunks.



I wasn't scared, of course. Not me. Nerves and whiskers of steel I've got.

SURE YOU HAVE.

I saw the first of 'em, this boot goin' past, black as midnight's arsehole, I thought, you're just lucky, mate.

If I wasn't lookin' after the young lady, you'd be for it.



WILKINSON?

Yes?

WHAT'S THE HIEROGRAM?

It's um. Well, it's um. It's sort of more like an um. Well...

YOU DON'T KNOW?

Martin Ten-bones síó.

I suppose we'll just have to burn that bridge when we come to it.



YEAH. I WISH I KNEW WHAT I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO DO.

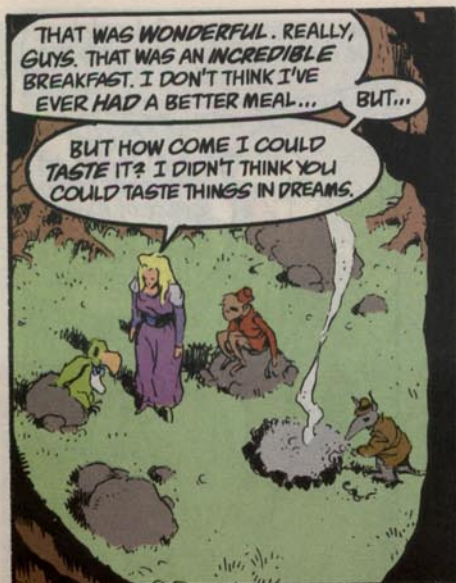
"Wish in one hand, shit in the other, see which fills up first."

Old Wilkinson family saying.



Which reminds me. There's a stream just down there. Do your necessaries, and wash up afterwards. The others 'll be back soon.

Then we'll have breakfast.



THAT WAS WONDERFUL. REALLY, GUYS. THAT WAS AN INCREDIBLE BREAKFAST. I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER HAD A BETTER MEAL... BUT...

BUT HOW COME I COULD TASTE IT? I DIDN'T THINK YOU COULD TASTE THINGS IN DREAMS.



This isn't a dream.

It is a dream.

Well, yes, it is a dream.

But not in the way she means.

Is still a dream.



Before you came, before the cuckoo, the Land was here.

HUH? BUT IF IT'S MY DREAM...

No. You come here to dream. But the Land is older than you, Princess.



HOW--HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Well, just look around you. Did you create all this?

I DON'T KNOW. DIDN'T I?

No. Course you didn't. You're just the Princess.



ANYWAY--ALL I'M SAYING IS I'M REALLY HAPPY. I CAN'T REMEMBER EVER BEING SO HAPPY BEFORE.

NOT WHEN I WAS FIRST DATING KEN.

NOT EVEN WHEN I WAS A LITTLE BITTY KID, HAVING PICNICS WITH MY TOYS. I'M JUST...

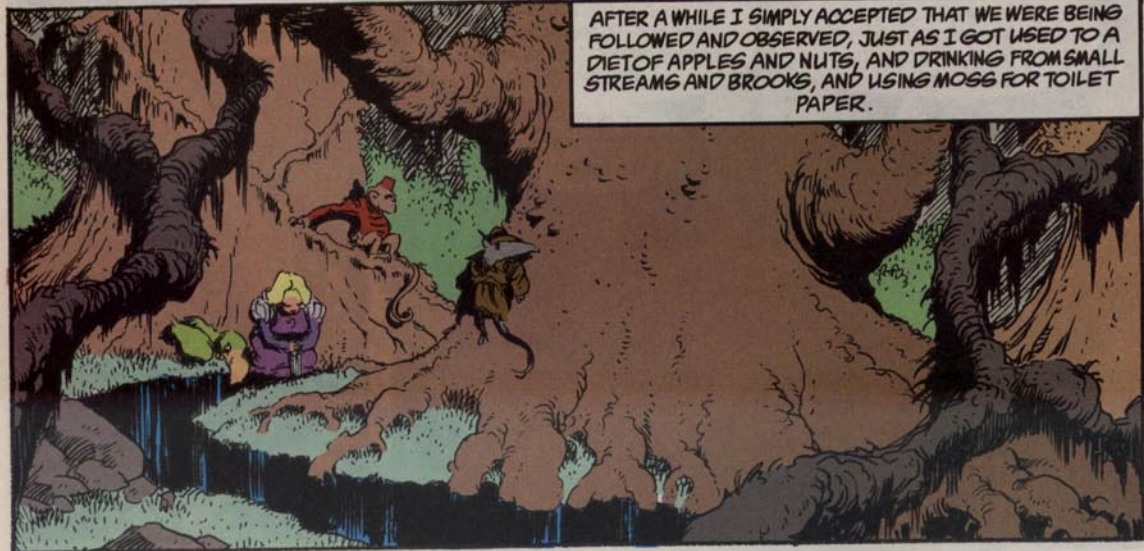
...HAPPY.



WE WALKED THROUGH THE FOREST FOR DAYS. ALL THE TIME I FOUND MYSELF IMAGINING EYES UPON ME, PEERING FROM BEHIND TREES.

DARKNESS. THE SMELL OF LEAVES AND TWIGS. SMALL RUSTLINGS. THE FOREST IS NOT A COMFORTING PLACE FOR TRAVELLERS.

BUT WE WERE WARM, AND WE HAD JUST ABOUT ENOUGH TO EAT. SOMETIMES THAT'S ALL THAT'S IMPORTANT.



AFTER A WHILE I SIMPLY ACCEPTED THAT WE WERE BEING FOLLOWED AND OBSERVED, JUST AS I GOT USED TO A DIET OF APPLES AND NUTS, AND DRINKING FROM SMALL STREAMS AND BROOKS, AND USING MOSS FOR TOILET PAPER.

I FELT LIKE **BILBO** IN **MIRKWOOD**, IN THAT BIT WHERE THE **GIANT SPIDERS** GET THEM.

WILKINSON?
ARE THERE -- ARE THERE **GIANT SPIDERS** AROUND HERE?

Giant Spiders? Round here? Course not.

SORRY. SILLY OF ME.

Nah. The **Giant Spiders** is all in a little forest to the west of here.

They are good people. They are loyal to you, not to the **Cuckoo**. But they are few in number, and timid beasts.

OH.

THAT'S NICE.



AS WE GOT FURTHER INTO THE FOREST THE TREES BECAME SO THICK WE LOST THE SUN COMPLETELY. THE LIGHT THAT DID FILTER THROUGH THE LEAVES WAS STAINED GREEN AND GOLD BY DAY, COOL MOONLIGHT-BLUE BY NIGHT.

WILKINSON CLAIMED, WHEN I SPOKE TO HIM, TO HAVE AN INSTINCT FOR DIRECTION.



ACTUALLY HE TOOK HIS LEAD FROM PRINADO, WHO, FROM TIME TO TIME, WOULD CLIMB EASILY INTO THE HIGH BRANCHES, AND SCOUT THE WAY AHEAD.



AND THEN, ONE DAY, PRINADO DIDN'T COME BACK.



But what do we do? Without Prinado we are lost...

Mm. There are meant to be paths, somewhere in the forest. Really old ones, from before there was even a forest here.

Don't know how we'd find one, mind you.



WE'RE HEADING TOWARDS THE SEA, AREN'T WE?

Yes.

THEN SHOULDN'T WE BE LOOKING FOR STREAMS AND RIVERS? THEY'LL BE FLOWING INTO THE SEA, AFTER ALL.

So we follow a stream...?

That's really smart.



DO YOU ... DO YOU THINK PRINADO'S ALL RIGHT?



No.



PRINADO?



WILKINSON?
LUZ?

WAKE UP!

PRINADO'S
BACK. I
THINK.



Prinado?
Prinado old
buddy?

Is that
you?



No... it's
not.



WHO--WHO
ARE YOU?

DO YOU
SERVE THE
CUCKOO?

Wahhh... We
are Tweeners...

We do
not serve the
Cuckoo.

We serve no one
but ourselves. The
Tweeners belong to
the Tweeners, and
these are our
woods.

We were here
before the Cuckoo.
We were here before
you.



Tweeners?

Run!
Just
run!



Cannot escape tweeners.

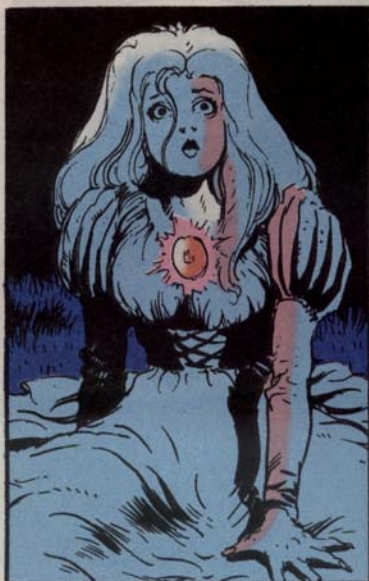


These are tweener woods.

Hhh



OW!



THE PORPENTINE! LOOK AT IT!

WHY'VE THEY STOPPED COMING?

The path.



It's one of Murphy's paths. I thought they were all lost...

...but the Porpentine remembers.



As long as we follow the light of the Porpentine we'll be safe.

BUT THE TWEENERS?

They cannot walk on this path.



IN SADNESS AND FEAR WE WALKED DOWN THE RUINED PATH, GUIDED BY THE LIGHT OF THE PORPENTINE.

THERE WAS NO MORE SLEEP THAT NIGHT FOR ANY OF US.

AS THE SUN CAME UP THE LIGHT OF THE PORPENTINE FADED. BUT THE PATH WAS STILL THERE--OLD AND BROKEN, BUT ALWAYS VISIBLE: JUST.

THE STONES OF THE PATH WERE OLD. REALLY OLD.



"FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD" KEPT RUNNING THROUGH MY HEAD. BUT THE STONES WERE NOT BRICKS, AND THEY WERE DIRTY GREY.



SOON WE COULD HEAR THE CRIES OF DISTANT SEAGULLS. THERE WAS SALT IN THE AIR, AND THE LOW MUTED CRASH OF BREAKERS.

AND THEN THE FOREST ENDED, AND SO DID THE PATH.

SO THAT'S THE CITY. AND THAT'S THE SEA. WELL, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

We've got to get you through the town, and down to the Isle of Thorns.



I'll go down and fetch help.

Luz, girl, it's too dangerous.

No, Wilkinson. You must stay here. Guard the Princess.

I will seek out the resistance. They can hide her for as long as is needed.

ARE YOU SURE, LUZ?

I am sure. Alone, I have a chance. Together we have none.



You stay here. I will be back by nightfall.

GOOD LUCK, LUZ. HURRY BACK.

I will, Princess. Do not worry. I will be fine.



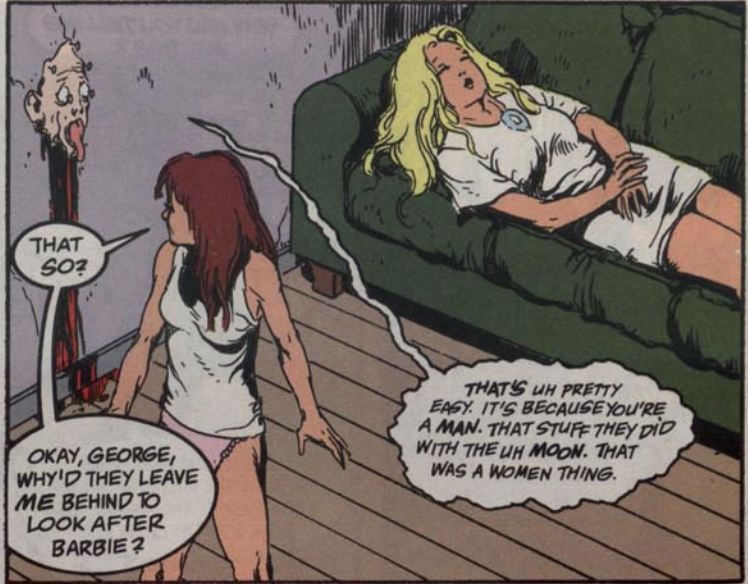
NEW YORK.

SO UH DON'T YOU WANT TO TALK TO ME? I KNOW UH LOTS OF THINGS. WHEN YOU'RE UH DEAD THERE'S STUFF THEY DON'T BOTHER KEEPING SECRET ANY MORE.



THAT SO?

OKAY, GEORGE, WHY'D THEY LEAVE ME BEHIND TO LOOK AFTER BARBIE?



THAT'S UH PRETTY EASY. IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE A MAN. THAT STUFF THEY DID WITH THE UH MOON. THAT WAS A WOMEN THING.

I AM NOT A MAN.



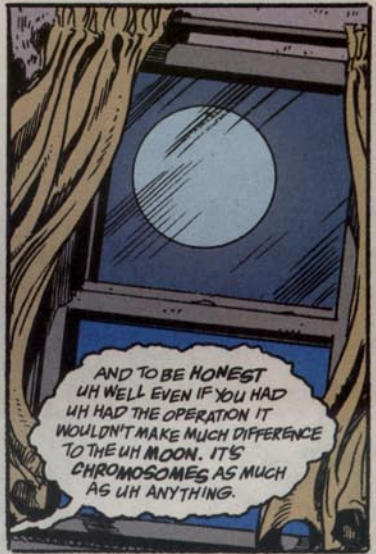
MAYBE NOT TO YOU, YOU'RE NOT. BUT YOU'VE GOT THE UH, YOU KNOW. MALE NASTY THING.

LISTEN: I'VE HAD ELECTROLYSIS. I'M TAKING HORMONES. ALL THAT'S LEFT IS JUST A LITTLE LUMP OF FLESH; BUT ALL THAT DOESN'T MATTER...



INSIDE I'M A WOMAN.

SHE DOESN'T THINK SO.



AND TO BE HONEST UH WE'LL EVEN IF YOU HAD UH HAD THE OPERATION IT WOULDN'T MAKE MUCH DIFFERENCE TO THE UH MOON. IT'S CHROMOSOMES AS MUCH AS UH ANYTHING.

...IT'S LIKE UH GENDER ISN'T SOMETHING YOU CAN PICK AND CHOOSE AS UH FAR AS GODS ARE CONCERNED.



WELL, THAT'S SOMETHING THE GODS CAN TAKE AND STUFF UP THEIR SACRED RECTA.

I KNOW WHAT I AM.



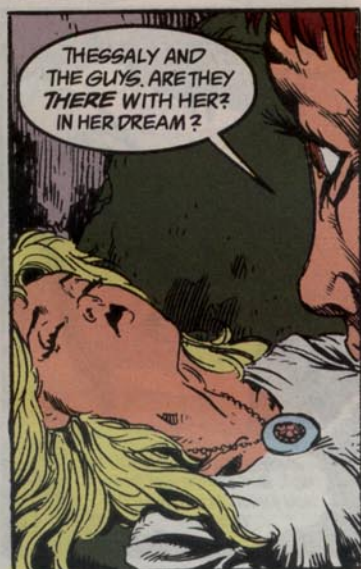
I'LL UH TELL YOU SOMETHING ELSE. MESSING WITH THE MOON LIKE UH SHE DID. THAT'S DANGEROUS. I MEAN REALLY DANGEROUS.

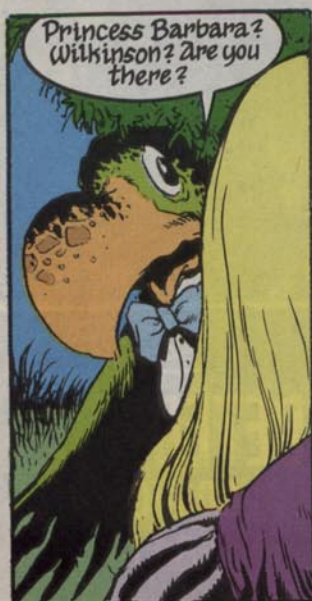
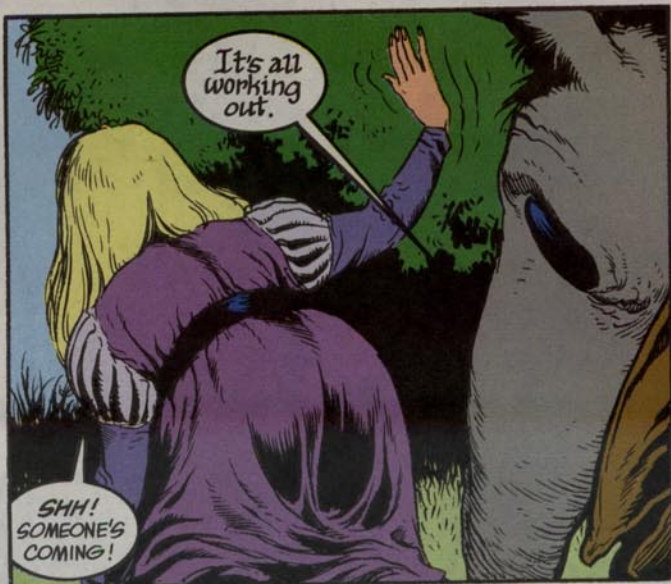
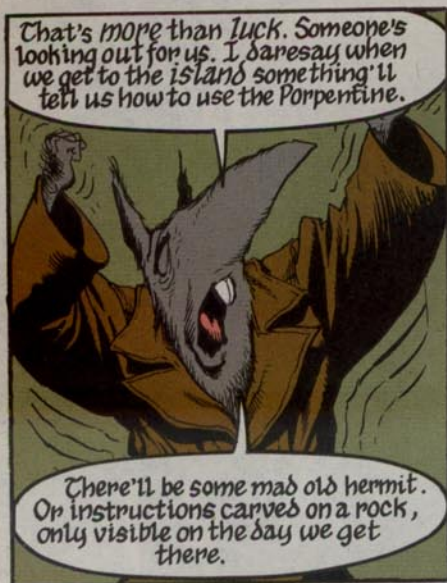
DRAWING DOWN THE UH MOON. THESSALY WASN'T JUST DOING SOMETHING UH SPIRITUAL. THAT WAS UH PHYSICAL TOO.

I UH HATE TO THINK WHAT SHE DID TO THE UH TIDES. AND THE UH WEATHER.



SHE SHOULDN'T MESS WITH THE UH MOON. THAT'S DANGEROUS.







That's her.



Run, Princess!
Get away from here!



Luz?



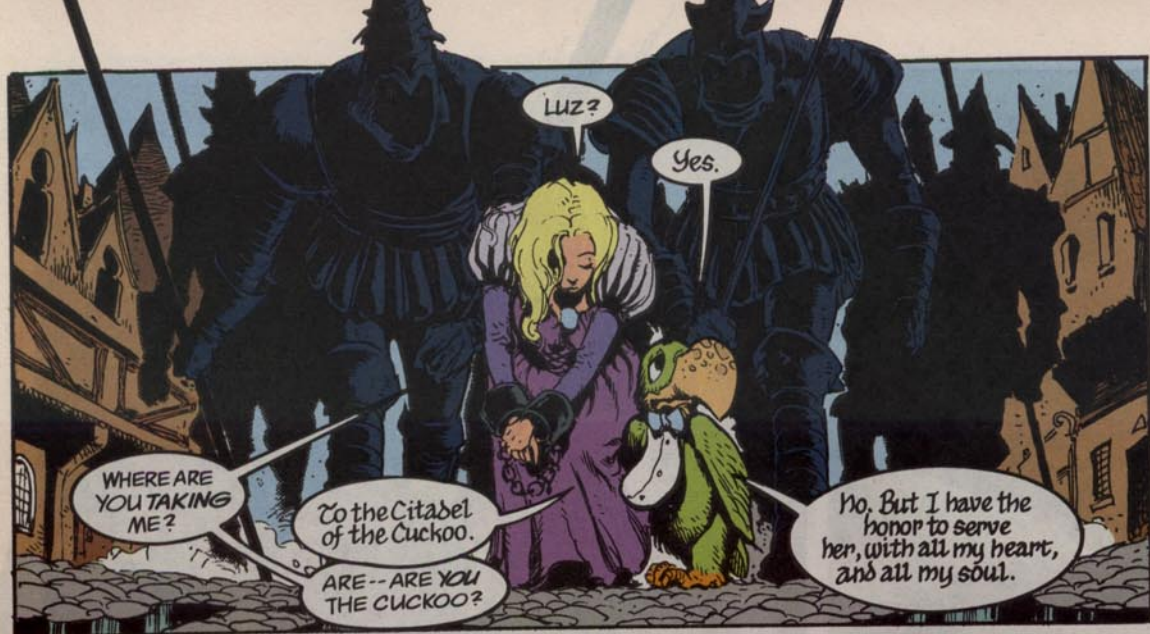
If you want her, you'll have to take me first!

For Murphy's sake, lass, get back into the forest.

RUN!







Luz?

Yes.

WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?

To the Citadel of the Cuckoo.

ARE-- ARE YOU THE CUCKOO?

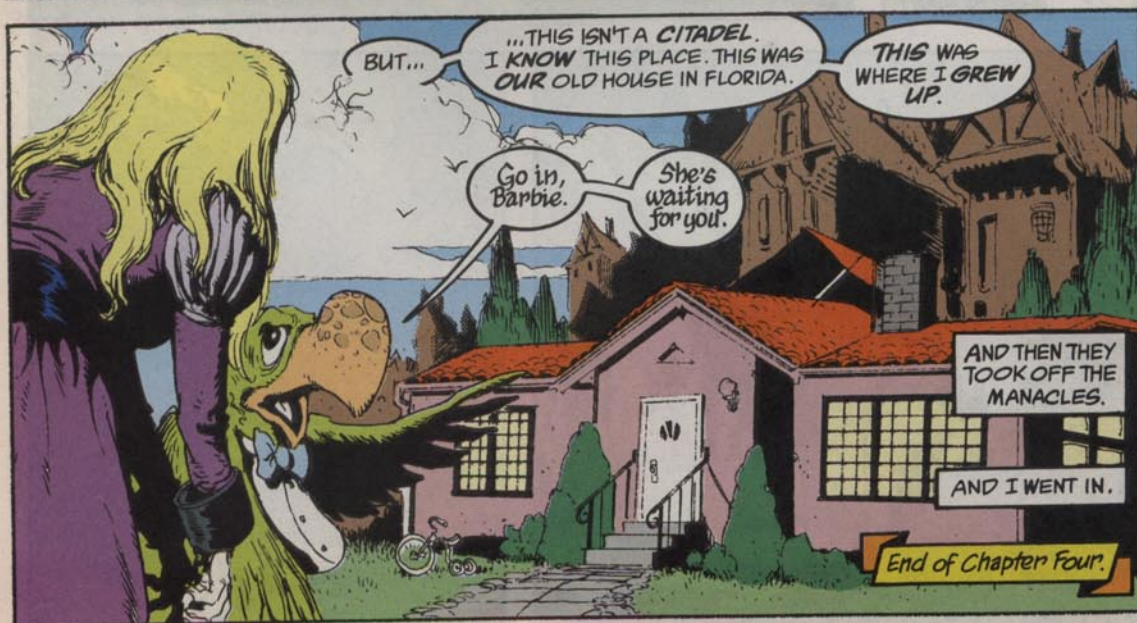
No. But I have the honor to serve her, with all my heart, and all my soul.



THE IRON MANACLES CUT INTO MY WRISTS.

IN THE TOWN BLANK-EYED PEOPLE STARED AT US, HOPELESSLY. THEY LOOKED LIKE COWS ON THEIR WAY TO THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE...

...BUT PERHAPS THAT WAS HOW THEY SAW ME.



BUT...

...THIS ISN'T A CITADEL. I KNOW THIS PLACE. THIS WAS OUR OLD HOUSE IN FLORIDA.

THIS WAS WHERE I GREW UP.

Go in, Barbie.

She's waiting for you!

AND THEN THEY TOOK OFF THE MANACLES.

AND I WENT IN.

End of Chapter Four.