

DC

THE SANDMAN

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neil gaiman and jon j muth

OBI



When I was a child I lived amid the mulberry groves.
In summer the mulberry trees would stain the green grass
with crimson pulp.



Birds of a thousand colors danced in the sky when I was a boy.
They brightened the day with their intricate songs.
"We are who we choose to be," sang the goldfinch, when the sun
was high.
"I dream about dreams about dreams," sang the nightingale,
under the pale moon.




The girls in my village had lips like plums,
were lovelier by far
Than other girls in other villages,
in the days of my youth.

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Now I am older, I respect
the will of the gods.
Long ago I passed the
examinations, and I was
appointed prefect of a
whole province.

I have commanded armies,
I have advised two emperors,
All the wisdom I had was at
their disposal, and all that I
knew theirs to command.

EXILES


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JON J MUTH - Artist & Colorist
DIGITAL CHAMELEON - Seps
TODD KLEIN - Letterer
KAREN BERGER - Editor
SHELLY ROEBERG - Assoc. Editor

SANDMAN characters created by
Gaiman, Kierth & Dringenberg




I have had tens of thousands
of cash, and a wife, a son,
and many concubines.


Only the phoenix arises
and does not descend:
thus it comes about that
now, in the grey of my
years,
I am sent far from the
court, and family, and
all I know, into exile.




I have seen many
strange things
upon my journey.



Passing through the
Nan Shan mountains,
we were beset by wolves,
urged on by a stunted
creature they called
their king.



When we killed
it, the rest
lost heart.
I have had dreams
about the responsi-
bilities of emperors;
It has been many
leagues since I have
heard the
nightingale.



But I have had dreams about dreams
about dreams.

Old friend, in my mind only do
I write you this letter,
But it is a splendid letter, with
perfect brushwork,
Old hands do not shake or cramp
when the letter is written on
the air.

When my son was born the
emperor commanded
fireworks.
They burst on the night sky
like sunflowers of light.
Now my son is dead and I am
in exile.



The desert is grey: Grey sand beneath grey skies,
and I say to my guide, "This desert is grey," and he agrees.
He is a man from a local village.
I ask the name of the desert, but my guide says nothing.
It has a name of ill omen, and ill omens have become my life.

My son allied himself with the people of the White Lotus.
"You are lucky that I have left you your head,"
the Emperor told me.

And now I am here, sand in my beard and
eyes and ears, thoughts washing into grey and sand,
Dreams, like sea-foam, washing over everything.



In the village where I found my guide, I encountered a small cat, white as blossom. She led me into the rocks outside the village, and showed me her kittens.



"If we find kittens here, we kill them," said the innkeeper.



"There is little enough food in the village for men."

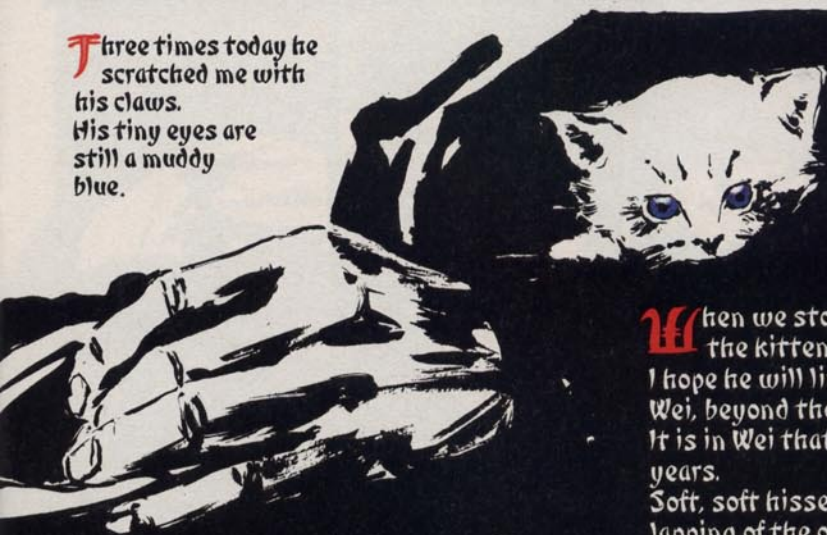


That night I crept out to the rocks once more, although it was cold, And I placed the smallest of the kittens in my sleeve.

We have barely enough water for this desert-crossing for ourselves.

Only a fool would bring a kitten here.

Three times today he scratched me with his claws. His tiny eyes are still a muddy blue.



When we stop to relieve ourselves the kitten does also. I hope he will live to reach the town of Wei, beyond the desert. It is in Wei that I will live my remaining years. Soft, soft hisses the desert, like the lapping of the ocean against the pebbles of the beach.

DID YOU SAY SOMETHING, MASTER?



I SAID NOTHING.

I BEG YOUR PARDON, MASTER, I THOUGHT I HEARD YOU SPEAK.

I AM COMPOSING LETTERS THAT I SHALL, PERHAPS, WRITE, WHEN THIS JOURNEYING IS DONE, AND WE ARE SAFE. IT IS HOW I OCCUPY MY MIND AS WE TRAVEL. IS THERE SOMETHING YOU DO TO OCCUPY YOUR MIND?

I PRAY, MASTER, THAT THE ALL-HIGHEST, AND ALL THE LESSER GODS, WILL SEE US SAFELY ACROSS THE DESERT. ALSO, I HOPE.

I HAVE HEARD THAT ILLUSIONS BREED IN THIS DESERT, THAT GHOSTS AND FOX-SPIRITS WANDER IT, STEALING TRAVELLERS AND LEADING THEM OFF THE PATH.

IT IS TRUE, MASTER.

HOW LONG DO WE HAVE UNTIL NIGHTFALL?

SEVERAL HOURS, MASTER.

AND UNTIL WE CROSS THE DESERT?

AT LEAST ONE MORE DAY, MASTER.



My guide has silver bells sewn to his sleeve.
He has silver bells on the bridle of his horse.
The winds can come up suddenly in the
desert.



Those who enter often do not leave again.

The emperor did not order me killed.
Still, he would not grieve unduly
if I were reported dead.
I advised him wisely, him and his
father before him.

That which is dreamed can
never after be undreamed.
I have been travelling for many
months:



My heart is heavy within me:
I dream of a cup of wine.

Alas: we have no wine, and the wine
of memory is thin.
Heat and cold, dusks and dawns,
this is my lot.



Imagine a porcelain cup.
I pour out the hot wine,
and sip, exquisitely.



Sometimes
I do not
believe my
journey will
ever end.

Sand from the desert
whips across my face.

It feels as if they are whipping
my face with wire whips.

My wife once tortured
a servant girl with
wire whips.

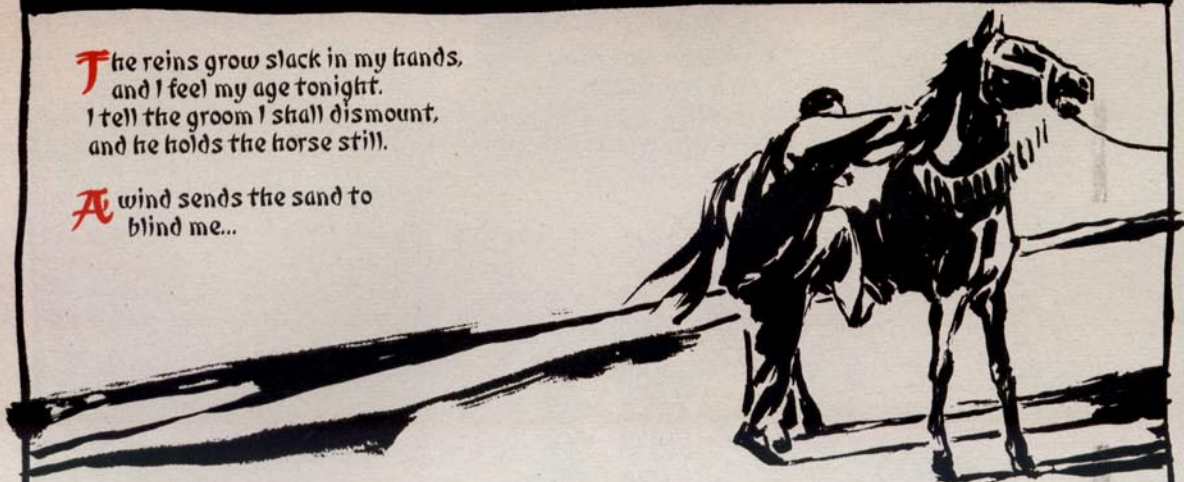
A gold ring was missing, and the girl the only suspect.
My wife killed the girl before she could confess.

Many years later we found the ring,
fallen between two floorboards...



The reins grow slack in my hands,
and I feel my age tonight.
I tell the groom I shall dismount,
and he holds the horse still.

A wind sends the sand to
blind me...



...and I am blinded.



And when my vision
clears, I am alone.



The sages tell us, what
is buried will one day
be uncovered:
If I waited long enough
I would hear the silver
bells tingle.



And we would resume
our journey toward
the town of Wei.

I have seen other illusions before today,
in other deserts,
once, in the far south, I saw the
Imperial Palace.

Each tile and
carving
distinct,
although it
faded as we
approached.



I have seen the swell of the sea
in places where there was
no water.

Now crimson banners proudly wave,
although the wind is still,
And the scent of amber pine resin
fills the air.

I hear the song of the
nightingales, and I
smell crushed mulberries.
And walking toward me
I see my son.

"You are dead," I tell him.



And he bows his head.

"I am dead, my father,"
he tells me.

**"They cut off my head
and my hands,
My body was thrown into
a pit, and all my White
Lotus magic could not
save me."**

Sand shifts under my feet. I can find no stable footing.

"**W**hat is this place?"
I ask my son,
who is dead.



"**H**ave I come to join you in the black terraces?"



"**I**s that tent the abode of the Prefect of the Dead?"

"**M**y father is still among the living," replies my son.



Anger comes over me then, and I reproach him.



"**H**ad you been content with life's surfaces, we would all have been happier.

"**N**othing good came of your studies into the magical arts."



My son bows his head. The kitten hisses, terrified, and flees.



I hurry after.

WHEN YOU WERE ALIVE, YOU WERE ALL MY JOY. NOW YOU ARE DEAD, I SEE YOU ONLY IN MY DREAMS.



FATHER? I AM YOUR SON. *THAT* IS ONLY A KITTEN. WHY DO YOU ABANDON ME TO CHASE AFTER IT?



AND WHEN I AWAKE, MY PILLOW IS WET WITH TEARS. THE KITTEN IS LIVING, AND IT NEEDS MY HELP.



DO NOT GO *THERE!*



WHILE YOU WERE ALIVE YOU DID NOT HEED *MY* WARNINGS. I AM ALIVE, AND YOU ARE DEAD. I SHALL TAKE MY OWN COUNSEL.



This is a strange desert: the spars of broken ships are around me. I walk up a hill, I call consoling words to the kitten.



AI!!



WHY ARE YOU HERE, IN THIS HOME OF DEMONS? ARE YOU LOST? OR ARE YOU ALSO A DEMON?

FORGIVE MY BLUNTNES, BUT I AM AN OLD MAN, AND MY FLESH IS SURE TO BE STRINGY AND LACKING IN TASTE: I DOUBT EVEN A DEMON WOULD RELISH IT.

I am no Demon, honorable Master Li.



YOU KNOW MY NAME? NOW I AM ASSURED YOU ARE A DEMON.



I know many names, Master Li.

Why did you come here, to my tent?



THE EMPEROR HAS SENT ME INTO EXILE.

AND I CAME TO YOUR TENT, LORD, SEEKING MY COMPANION ON THE JOURNEY, A SMALL KITTEN.



Ah: you are with
Walks The Night Alone.
He is here. Mrrwrr?



=meep=

You are many thousands
of leagues, and many
hundreds of years, from
your own place.

HUNDREDS
OF YEARS?

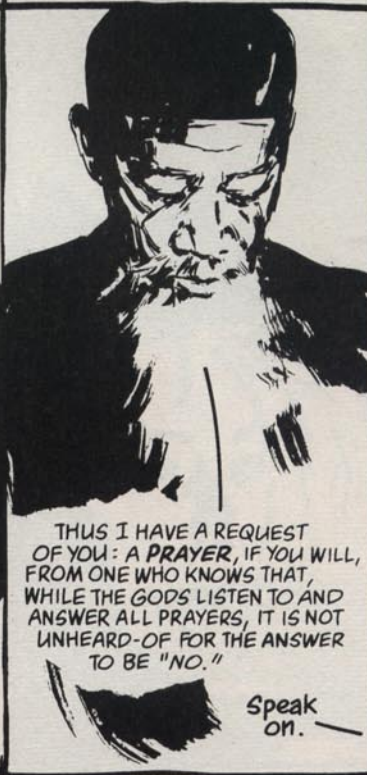
In a manner of speaking. You
are in one of the Soft Places, at
the edge of The Dreaming. This
is a place to which I come,
on occasion, to think, and
to remember.



MY LORD, NO
ONE KNOWS WHAT
TOMORROW SHALL
BRING. AND IT IS PROBABLE
THAT TOMORROW I SHALL
HAVE GONE TO MY
ANCESTORS.

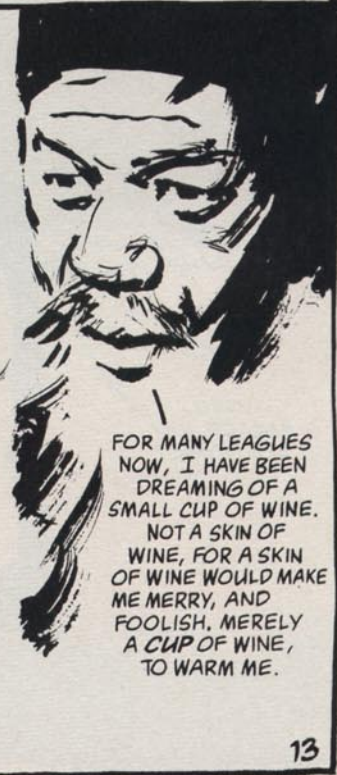


ALREADY THIS DAY I HAVE SEEN
MY SON, WHO WAS KILLED BY
THE EMPEROR, AND I TAKE THAT
AS AN EXCEEDING ILL OMEN. I
KNOW NOT WHAT YOU ARE, BUT
I BELIEVE YOU MEAN ME NO
HARM.



THUS I HAVE A REQUEST
OF YOU: A PRAYER, IF YOU WILL,
FROM ONE WHO KNOWS THAT,
WHILE THE GODS LISTEN TO AND
ANSWER ALL PRAYERS, IT IS NOT
UNHEARD-OF FOR THE ANSWER
TO BE "NO."

Speak
on.

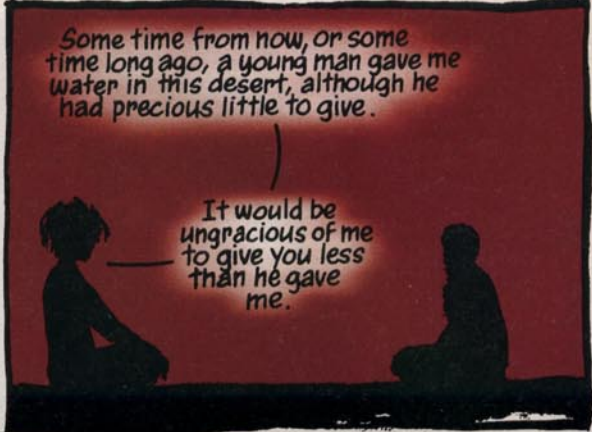


FOR MANY LEAGUES
NOW, I HAVE BEEN
DREAMING OF A
SMALL CUP OF WINE.
NOT A SKIN OF
WINE, FOR A SKIN
OF WINE WOULD MAKE
ME MERRY, AND
FOOLISH. MERELY
A CUP OF WINE,
TO WARM ME.



Some time from now, or some time long ago, a young man gave me water in this desert, although he had precious little to give.

It would be ungracious of me to give you less than he gave me.



Here.



THAT WAS GOOD. GOOD AS MY DREAMS.



Keep your coin, Master Li. Give it to one who needs it.

I SHALL GIVE IT TO THE NEXT BEGGAR I MEET, MY LORD.



HERE, PLEASE. YOU MUST BE PAID.





There was once a sage who loved his only son as much as you loved yours.

One day the son died, and yet the father shed no tears and made no mourning.

When they asked why, he told them, I did not mourn him before he was born, and I will not mourn him now he is gone.

What do you think of that?



I THINK THAT WAS FOOLISHNESS.



YOU MOURN, FOR IT IS PROPER TO MOURN.

BUT YOUR GRIEF SERVES YOU: YOU DO NOT BECOME A SLAVE TO GRIEF, YOU BID THE DEAD FAREWELL, AND YOU CONTINUE.



Indeed.



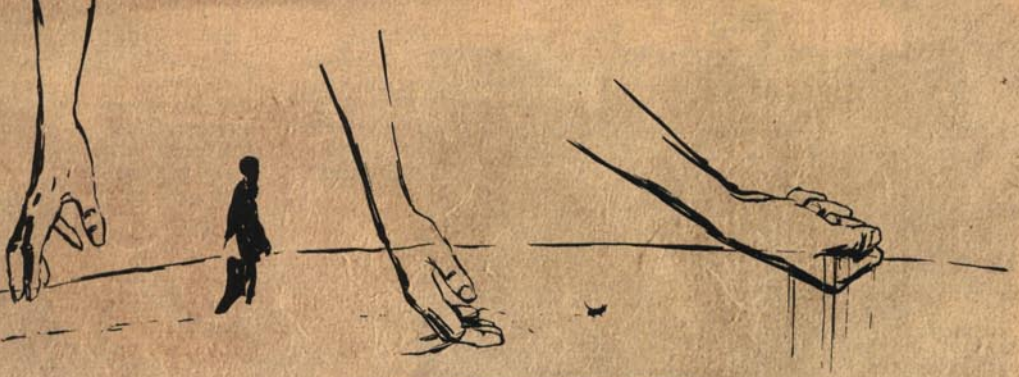
Mrrrr? Very well. If you must. Fare you well, Walks The Night Alone.



It seems that you are leaving now, Master Li.

LORD? IS THERE A WAY OUT OF THIS DESERT?





I follow the kitten through
the shifting sands,
Stumble on old legs:
I feel older than P'eng.
And then I hear the
murmur of voices.



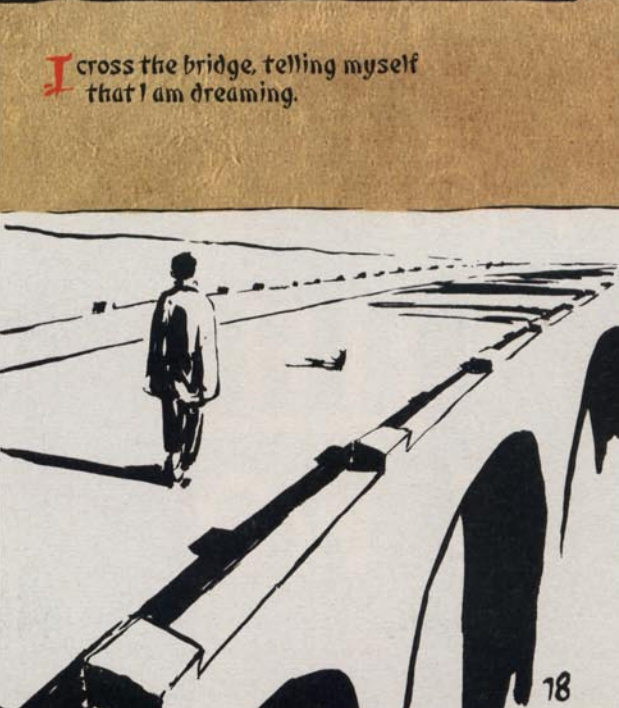
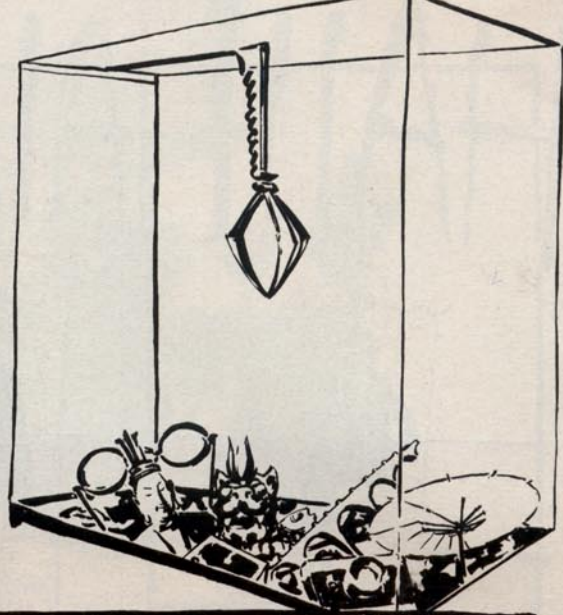
And from across the plain I hear
the sounds of madness.

HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!



HAI! HAI! HAI! HAI!





I cross the bridge, telling myself that I am dreaming.

As the yellow dusk thickens,
my thoughts are stirred
and troubled.

Once across the bridge I
find myself confused:

Have I crossed the bridge at all?
Am I again experiencing what
I have already experienced?

I cannot say, and truly do not know.
For the second time my feet take
me toward a tent.

I hear low voices,
distant riders,
far-off thunder.

Greetings,
Master
Li.

AND
TO YOU, — PARDON THE
MASTER. CONFUSION OF AN OLD
MAN, BUT HAVE WE NOT
MET BEFORE?

We have met,
Master Li.

THERE WAS A
MAN ACROSS THE
CHASM WHO COULD
HAVE BEEN YOUR
BROTHER.

... I SEE.

You met me,
Master Li. A long
time ago.

You are
wise.

meep

You too,
brave one.

Will you
walk with me,
Master Li?

I WILL
DO AS MY LORD
REQUIRES.

They rode toward us in a cloud of dust.
The jangle of harness and bit,
the clash of spear against shield,
Silver whips glinted at the horses'
flanks.
The pounding of hooves echoed like
thunder across the sands.



ARE YOU
THE LORD OF THIS
REALM?

I am.

MY LORD, WE
HAVE BEEN
RIDING FOR
SO LONG
A TIME.



That is why
I am here. The
time has come
for you to leave
this place.

MY LORD... WHAT
WILL HAPPEN TO US
NOW? WILL YOU
RETURN US TO THE
TIMES AND THE
PLACES FROM
WHICH WE
CAME?



OR WILL WE CRUMBLE
TO DUST, AND, FORGOTTEN,
BECOME ONE WITH THE
DESERT?

OMNIA
MUTANTUR,
NIHIL
INTERIT...?



Perhaps.

Flames flicker in the whiteness of his robe.
He shakes his head slowly. I cannot tell
if he is smiling.
Perhaps he smiles. And then he turns away.
There is the sound of summer thunder,
distant and gentle.

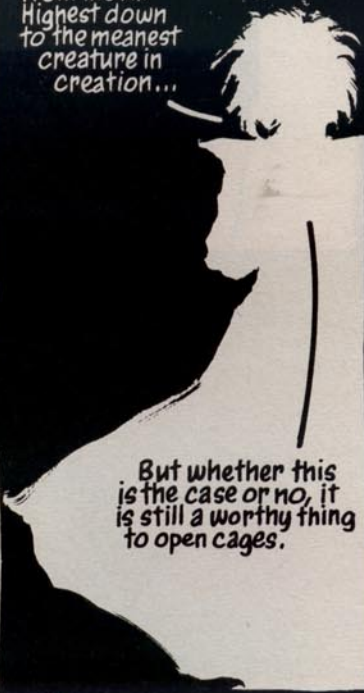
We are alone, in the silence, only the hiss
of the wind on the sand.

I have no liking
for prisons,
Master Li.



Sometimes I suspect
that we build our traps
ourselves, then we back
into them, pretending
amazement the while.

That this is
the way of life,
from the All-
Highest down
to the meanest
creature in
creation...



But whether this
is the case or no, it
is still a worthy thing
to open cages.

It is still a
virtuous act
to free the
imprisoned.

SO THE
SAGES TELL
US.



Tools, of
course, can be
the subtlest of
traps. One day, I
know, I must
smash the
emerald.

MY
LORD?

But
that day
can
wait.

Where
are you
going to,
Master
Li?



INTO EXILE, LORD.
THE EMPEROR NO
LONGER HAS NEED
OF MY COUNSEL.



I see.
I am
sorry.

Would the venerable Master Li do honor to me and my modest realm by consenting to act as a counselor?

To come to my humble castle and stay for as long as he wishes?



YOU HONOR ME WITH YOUR OFFER, LORD.



I AM GOING INTO EXILE: SENTENCED TO BE PERFECT IN THE FARTHEST OUTPOST OF THE EMPIRE. I AM QUITE AN OLD MAN, AND THE EMPEROR IS STILL A YOUNG MAN. THEREFORE I DO NOT EXPECT EVER TO RECEIVE A MESSAGE TELLING ME I CAN RETURN HOME.

I SHALL NOT LIVE TO SEE MY WIFE AGAIN, OR THE VILLAGE OF MY BIRTH.

BUT I HAVE SPENT MY LIFE IN OBEDIENCE TO THE WILL OF THE EMPEROR, AND THE EMPEROR HAS SENT ME TO THE VILLAGE OF WEI. I WILL DO AS MY EMPEROR HAS COMMANDED.



I understand.

If you change your mind... tell the kitten. He will tell me.

AS YOU SAY, SIRE.



LORD-- WHAT WAS IT THE BARBARIAN SAID, AS THE RIDERS VANISHED?



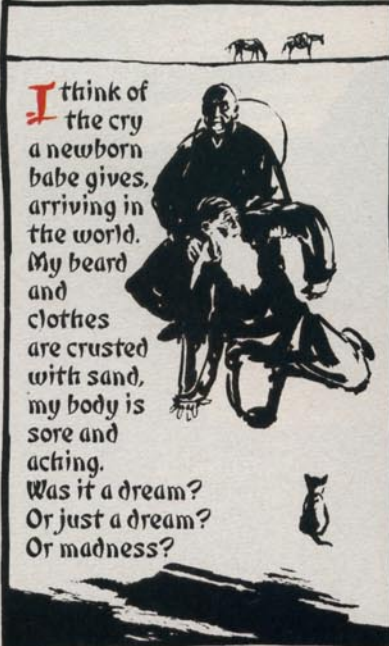
Omnia mutantur, nihil interit.

"Everything changes, but nothing is truly lost."

Fare you well, Master Li.



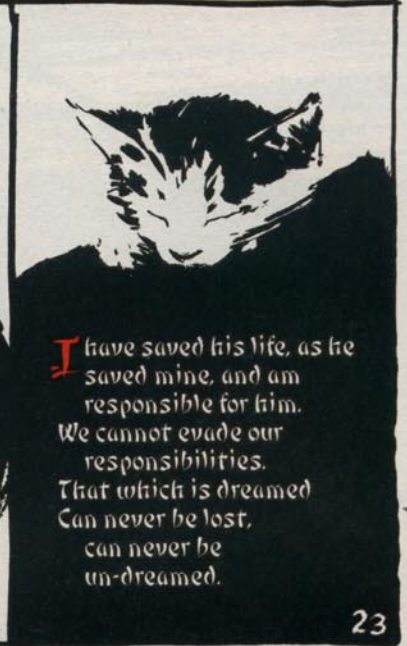
My guide had thought me taken by the desert, Stolen by ogres and fox-spirits, stolen by demons or ghosts. The kitten saved my life, making me cry out.



I think of the cry a newborn babe gives, arriving in the world. My beard and clothes are crusted with sand, my body is sore and aching. Was it a dream? Or just a dream? Or madness?



But truth or no, still I behaved in the correct manner, And correctness in behavior is one of the cardinal virtues. I place the kitten in my sleeve once more.



I have saved his life, as he saved mine, and am responsible for him. We cannot evade our responsibilities. That which is dreamed can never be lost, can never be un-dreamed.

I shall truly set brush to paper when I reach the village of Wei, old friend.
My thoughts go to you; and to my wife, alone and disgraced in the Capital;
And to my son.



I am banished to the grey waste at the end of the world,
but I mourn myself no longer; I cherish the pain in my hand.
I imagine the taste of the mulberries in the violet dusk.
And tomorrow I shall arrive in the town of Wei.



Only the phoenix arises
and does not descend.
And everything changes.



And nothing is
truly lost.

END