

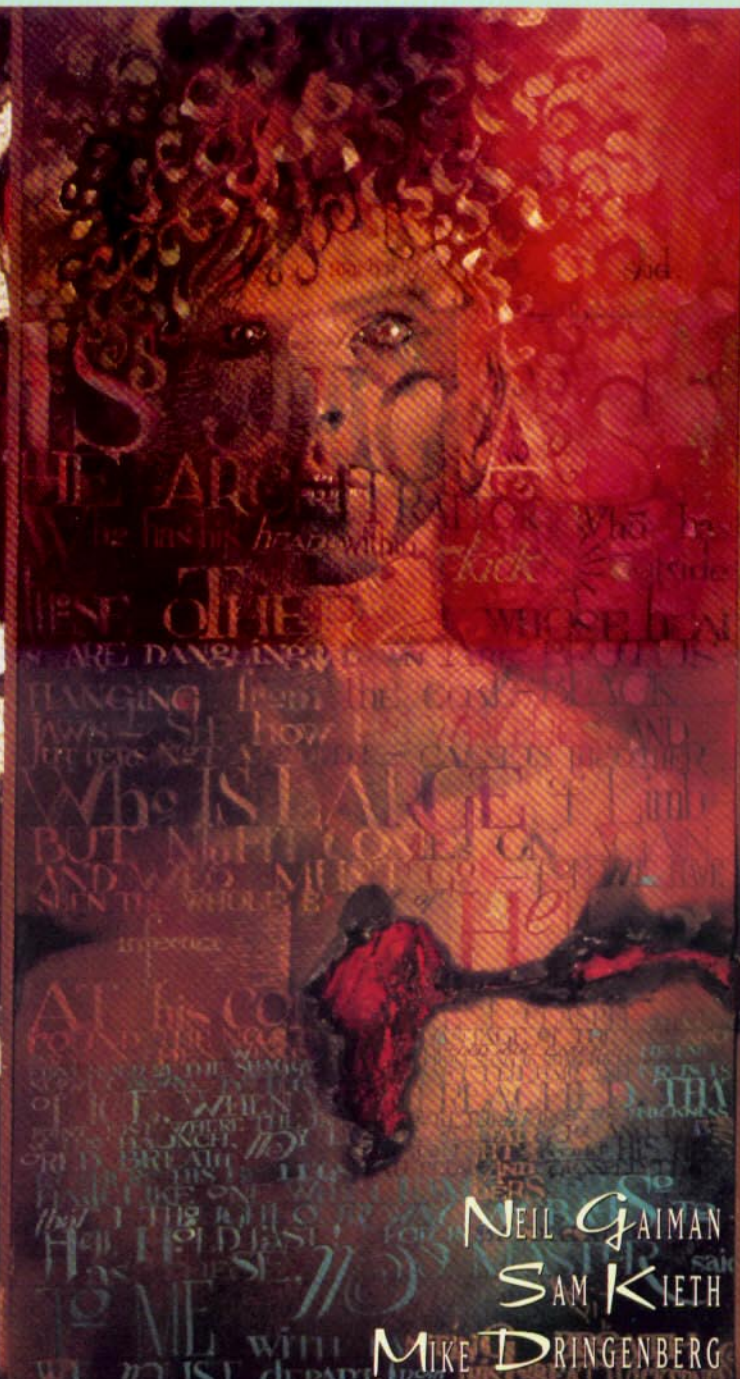
VERTIGO

ESSENTIAL VERTIGO

DC COMICS

THE SANDMAN

PRELUDES & NOCTURNES



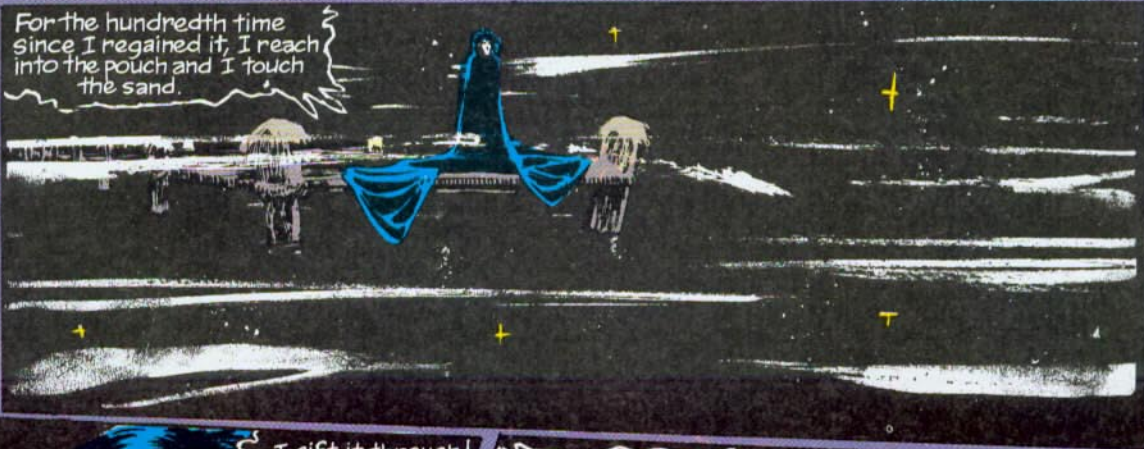
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OBI

For the hundredth time since I regained it, I reach into the pouch and I touch the sand.



I sift it through my fingers.

Like myself, like the few others of my kind. ENDLESS.

Tonight I feel alone.

Feel each grain of it, inexhaustible. Endless.


I have always been solitary, but here on the nightward shores of dream, loneliness washes over me in waves, lapping and pulling at my spirit.

I watched him even then as he fell, his face undefeated, his eyes still proud.

It is time for me to walk the abyss. Time to reclaim my own.

I sprinkle sand into the waters of night. The grains burn as they fall, reminding me of another in times long passed away.

I must talk to the Morningstar.



I do not have
high hopes for
the meeting.

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The Wind that blows between the Worlds chills me as I fall.

Suppose I fail?

I cannot bluff Demons, as I bluffed the errant dreams with Constantine.

But I have the pouch. I have a modicum of power.



I have hope.

And I stand here, alone and afraid, in the Naked Space...

...at the gate of Hell.



GON GOG GGGG

OOOONNGG



AUH! MASTER! THERE IS ONE AT THE DOOR! LORD SQUATTERBLOAT! MASTER!



THERE'S ONE AT THE DOOR, AT THE GATE TO DAMNATION...



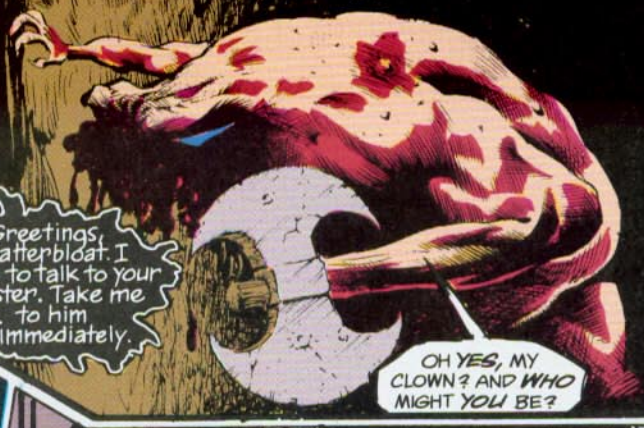
IS IT THIEF, THUG OR WHORE? THERE'S ONE AT THE DOOR...

AND THERE'S ROOM FOR ONE MORE TILL THE END OF CREATION.



THERE'S ONE AT THE DOOR.

AT THE GATE TO DAMNATION. HHHUUUUHHH...



Greetings Squatterbloat I wish to talk to your master. Take me to him immediately.

OH YES, MY CLOWN? AND WHO MIGHT YOU BE?

I have many names. But I am the King of Dreams, of the Nightmare Realms... I seek Lord Lucifer. The Lord of hell.

SO WHERE'S YOUR CROWN?



Some demon has stolen it. I have come to Hell to get it back.

OH YES, MY CLOWN. YOU'RE NEW IN TOWN.

SO WHERE'S YOUR RUBY?

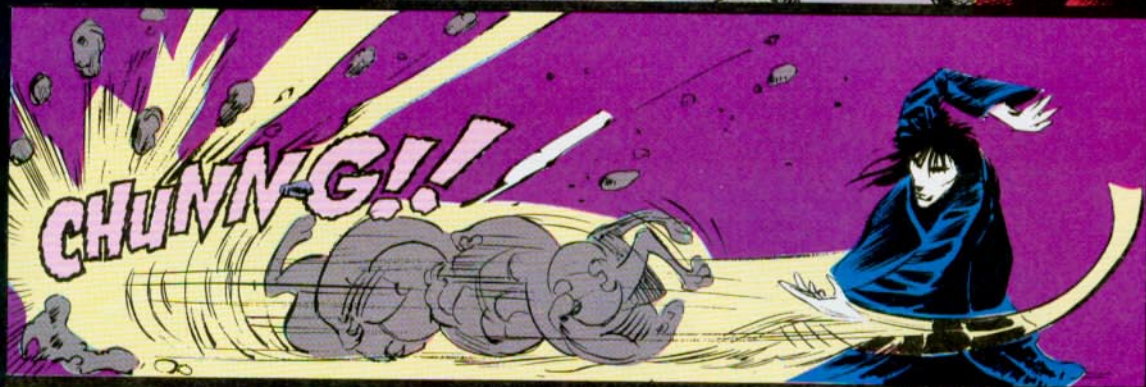
I will take no insults from you, little demon! Guard your tongue!

Lucifer will not be kind to one who insults an honored guest-- and I AM a guest in this realm, as I am the monarch of my own.

LIHHN.



SPLOQ!



CHUNNG!!

OH YES, MY CLOWN-- AND WHO MIGHT YOU BE?

BACK TO YOUR GATE AND DUTY, SQUATTERBLOAT! I'LL TAKE THE DREAMLORD, PLAY HIS GUARDIAN...

... THAN ETRIGAN?

FOR INNOCENTS ABROAD NEED GUIDES OF NOTE-- AND WHO NOTES MORE THAN ME ...?

Etrigan. Yes, Merlin's demon. The half-man. I remember you. So you're a rhymier now? You've risen in hell's hierarchy, I see.

THIS WAY.

THINGS CHANGE.

THINGS CHANGE ... IN EARTH AND HELL ...

TO RISE AMONG THE FALLEN? STRANGE AND TRUE. BUT AS THINGS CHANGE, LORD, THEY TRANSMUTE AS WELL ...

AND IF I'VE CHANGED, O KING, THEN WHAT OF YOU?

I have been ... absent ... for some time. But changed ...?

... ALL TOO MUCH. SANDRA KNEW EVERYTHING. AND THE PAPERS. SO I HAD TO. PILLS. PLASTIC BAG.

HAD TO GET OUT. NEEDED A BREAK. HURTING. HURTING.

The Wood of suicides has changed since my last visit to hell. I remember it as a tiny grove.

SNAP

Perhaps.

... I THOUGHT THE HURTING WOULD STOP.

Now it resembles a forest.

HURTING HURTING HURTING
HURT HURTING HURT HURT
HURTING

Hell is changing.

Never trust a demon. He has a hundred motives for anything he does... Ninety-nine of them, at least, are malevolent.

KAI'CKUL! DREAMLORD! I HOPED ONE DAY YOU WOULD COME TO ME! FREE ME, MY LOVE! PLEASE?

I greet you, Nada. It... pains me to see you like this.

KAI'CKUL! FREE ME, LORD! YOU ORDERED ME CONFINED HERE! YOUR FORGIVENESS CAN FREE ME!

"Etrigan, WHY did you bring me here?"

Etrigan...

I IMPLORE YOU...

UPON YOUR RIGHT ARE SOULS, ENTOMBED, TO PITY. AN UGLY SIGHT...

DON'T YOU LOVE ME?

It has been ten thousand years, Nada... yes, I still love you.

"But I have not yet forgiven you."

NOW, ONWARD TO THE CITY! HAHHAHA HAHHA!



We do not talk for the rest of the journey to Dis, the hellcity.

Lucifer's palace. It, too, has changed. It echoes with loss and pain. The last time I came to this place it was as an honored guest, an envoy from my own kingdom.

This time I lack power. I lack my symbols of office.

But I am still DREAM, and the doors of the palace open as we arrive.

We travel to the summit, past vasty halls that echo of screams and grunts and sighs and dust.

Up stairs that run with sweet blood. At the top of his mansion he waits for us, alone.

Greetings to you, Lucifer Morningstar.

FELLO .

FELLO, DREAM.

ETRIGAN, PLEASE LEAVE US.

WE HEAR YOU WERE CAUGHT BY MORTALS, LIKE A NEWLY FLEDGED DEMON, SWEET MORPHEUS. WE EXPECTED BETTER OF YOU.

STILL, YOU ARE HERE NOW.

HAVE YOU COME TO JOIN FORCES? TO ALLY YOUR REALM TO OURS? TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF FELL?

You know my views on that, Lightbringer

yes.

YES, WE DO. YOUR FAMILY ARE WELL, I TRUST? DESTINY, DEATH, DESPAIR AND THE OTHERS? NO MATTER. WE ASSUME THAT THIS IS NO SOCIAL CALL...

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

My helm was... stolen from me. I believe one of your demons has it. I would like it back.

NOW.

BZZT

AY, IF IT WERE ONLY THAT EASY. THINGS HAVE CHANGED IN HELL SINCE YOU WERE LAST HERE...

Things have changed? What are you trying to tell me, Lucifer Morningstar?

That you no longer rule hell? That the demons no longer follow your rule?

We have met so you speak the truth, Proud Lord of Lies. Hell is now a diumvirate.

THIS IS OUR CO-MONARCH, **BEELZEBUB**. THE LORD OF FLIES.

Things do not change that much, proud one.

AH, BUT THEY DO, **MMMORPHEUS**.

LUCIFER ISZZ INDEED NO LONGER SOLE **MMM**ONARCH OVV THE NEZZER REGIONZZZ...

BBBUT NO. IT'SZZZZ A **TRIIUMMMVIRATE**.

AZAZEL WILL JOIN US SOON. HE IS THE THIRD LORD OF HELL.

SOME YEARS AGO THE DARK, THE SHADOW CREATURE, CAME FORTH TO CHALLENGE HEAVEN. THE EPISODE ENDED IN... PERHAPS A STALEMATE.

BUT THE CIVIL WAR IN HELL THAT ENSUED TIPPED THE PRECARIOUS BALANCE OF POWER.

WE RULE IN COALITION NOW, **AZAZEL**, **BEELZEBUB** AND I.



THREE KINGS IN DARKNESS. I AM AZAZEL. WELL COME, DREAM KING.

Hell, a triumvirate? Things change indeed.

Very well. I seek a demon, who has stolen my helm of office. I wish it back.

I do not know the demon's name.

WHICH DEMON, ZZEN? NAME IT AND WE WILL BBBRING IT HERE.

THERE ARE MORE THAN A MILLION DEMONS, AFTER ALL.

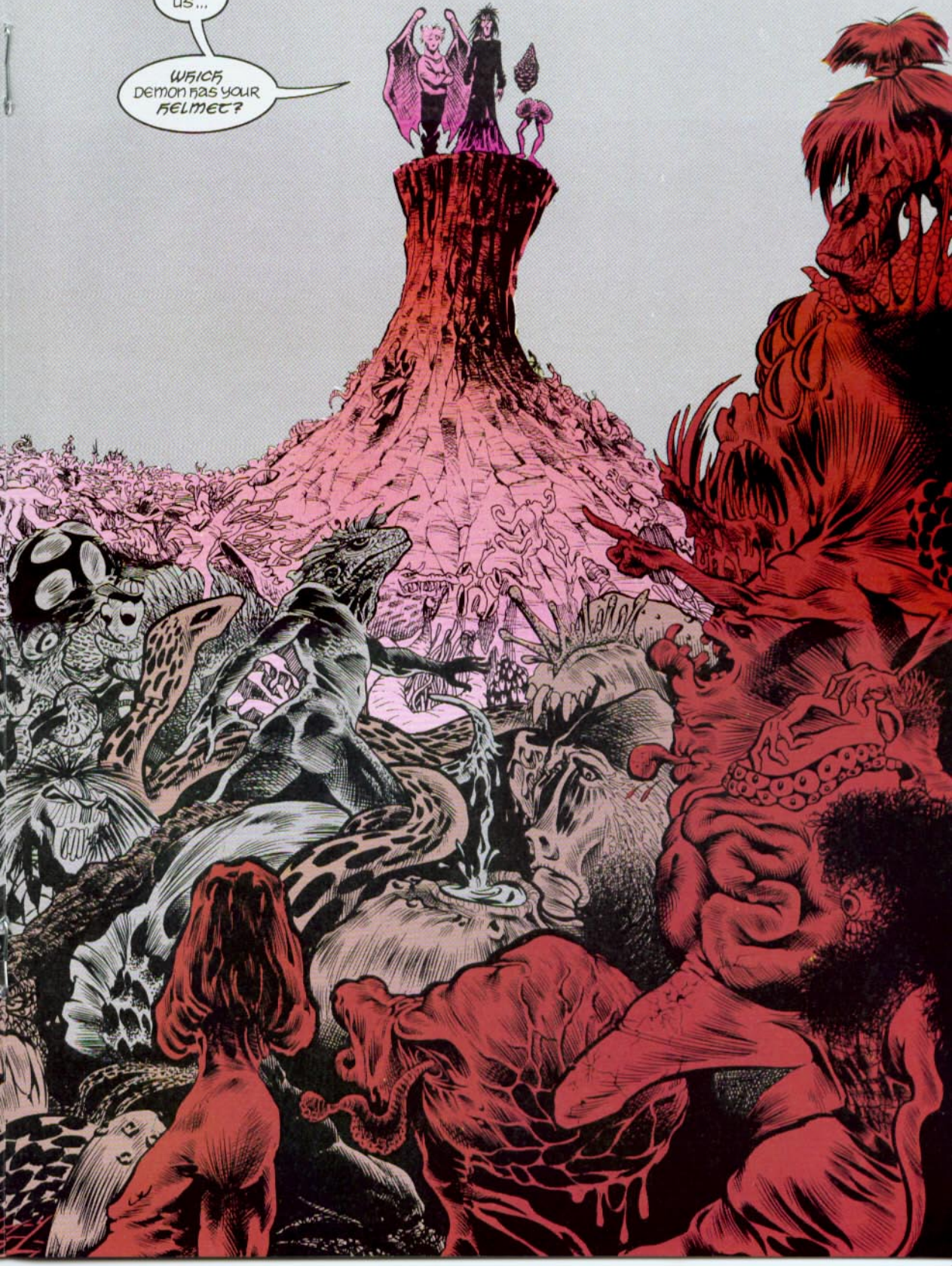
THEN LET US SUMMON ALL OF THEM TO TELL, AND MEET THEM ON THE VASTY PLAINS OF FELL!



THERE.
NOW, DREAM
KING ...

TELL
US ...

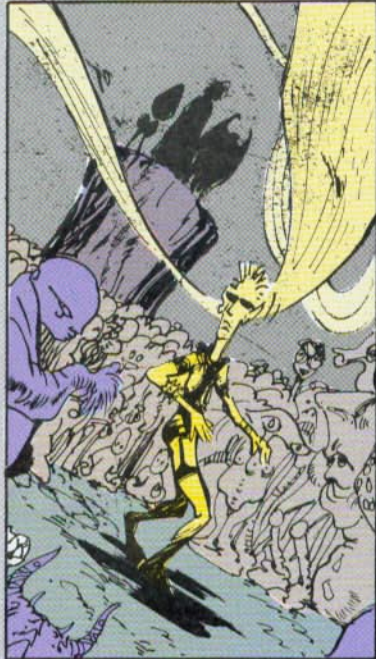
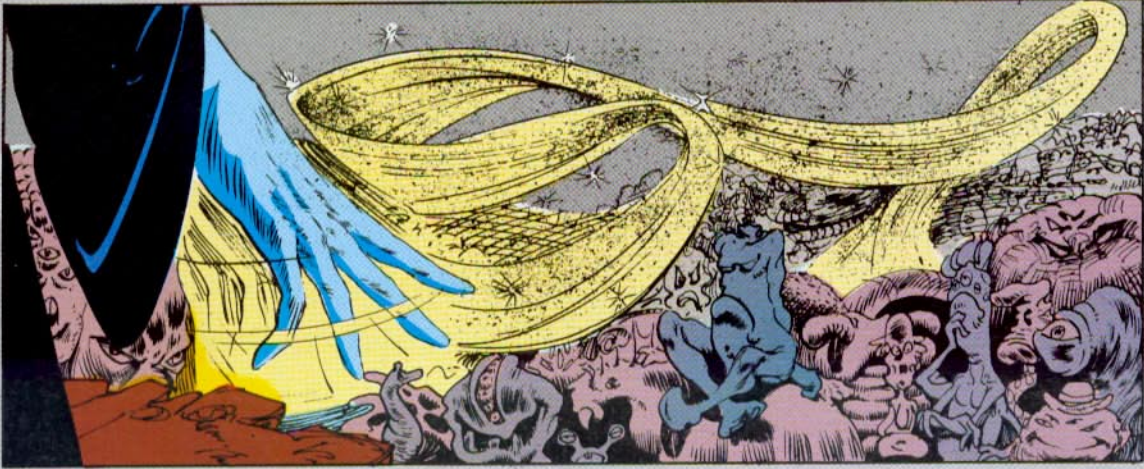
WHICH
DEMON HAS YOUR
HELMET?



I look at the demons, some I recognize from nightmares. Others have passed through the dreamworld in the past. But there are so many...

One of you has my helm; my mask of pure dream. I crafted it myself, from the bones of a dead god. It is one of my tools...

Ah.



you may not talk to us that way, choronzon.

Have you the helmet?



Choronzon, a duke of hell. One of Beelzebub's.

Well, Choronzon. Does Dream speak truly? Do you indeed have his mask of office?



Ssss. What if I have?



Yes, lords.



Return it to me. Now.

Ssss. I traded it from a mortal for a paltry thing, but it was a fair trade.

I have broken none of the laws of hell. If you want your precious back then you must fight me for it. Ssss.

Ssss. Sso. As the challenged, I choose the battlefield.

I assert reality.

A challenge? I do not know if I am strong enough. I truly do not know.

Very well. Yes, I challenge you, Choronzon.



SSS. WELCOME, LADIES N' GENNEMEN, TO ANOTHER THRILL-PACKED EVENING OF FUNFUNFUN HERE AT THE HELLFIRE CLUB.

I AM YOUR HOST, CHORONZON, HIGH DUKE OF THE EIGHTH CIRCLE, CAPTAIN OF THE HORDE OF LORD BEELEZEBUB.

TONIGHT, FOR YOUR ENTERTAINMENT AND--SSS--DELEC-TATION...

A FORMAL CHALLENGE.

AS THE CHALLENGED, I SET THE METER AND TAKE FIRST MOVE.

AND THE CHALLENGER IS DREAM, ONCE THE MASTER OF THE REALM OF SLEEP...

SSSO LET'S HAVE A BIG HAND FOR-- MISTER SANDMAN!

It has been long since I was forced to play such games with Demons.

I rise slowly, approach the stage.

Around me a soft susurrus of sound, and a languorous, ironic applause.

"The Hellfire Club." It feels like a bad joke.

And like everything else in Hell, it is deadly serious.

SSSO...

YOU KNOW THE RULES, DREAMLORD? IF YOU WIN, I WILL RETURN YOUR HELMET.

IF YOU LOSE, YOU WILL SSSERVE AS A PLAYTHING OF HELL, FOR ETERNITY. OUR SSSLAVE.

I understand.

"VERY WELL. I HAVE THE FIRST MOVE..."

I AM A DIRE WOLF, PREY-STALKING, LETHAL PROWLER.

My move.

I am a hunter, horse-mounted, wolf-stabbing.

I smell spilt alcohol, stale smoke and cheap sex, perfume and mold. And I feel the grass beneath my hooves, the flanks between my legs.

All is real. Nothing is real. Choronzon's move.

I AM A HORSEFLY, HORSE-STINGING, HUNTER-THROWING.

There are many ways to lose the oldest game. Failure of nerve, hesitation... Being unable to shift into a defensive shape. Lack of imagination.

"I am a spider, fly consuming, eight legged."



I AM A SNAKE, SPIDER-DEVOURING,
POISON-TOOTHED.



I am an ox,
snake-crushing,
heavy footed.



I feel the snake writtne beneath
my hoof, its spine crushed.



I AM AN ANTHRAX,
BUTCHER BACTERIUM,
WARM-LIFE DESTROYING.



A change in
direction, but
still an old
gambit.

I think...

I think I
understand
how Choronzon
plays. How I
can turn it
against him.



I think I will
abandon the
offensive.

I am a
world, space-
floating, life
nurturing



I AM A NOVA,
ALL-EXPLODING...

...PLANET-CREMATING.



I am the Universe--all things encompassing, all life embracing.



I AM ANTI-LIFE, THE BEAST OF JUDGMENT. I AM THE DARK AT THE END OF EVERYTHING. THE END OF UNIVERSES, GODS, WORLDS...

...OF EVERYTHING.

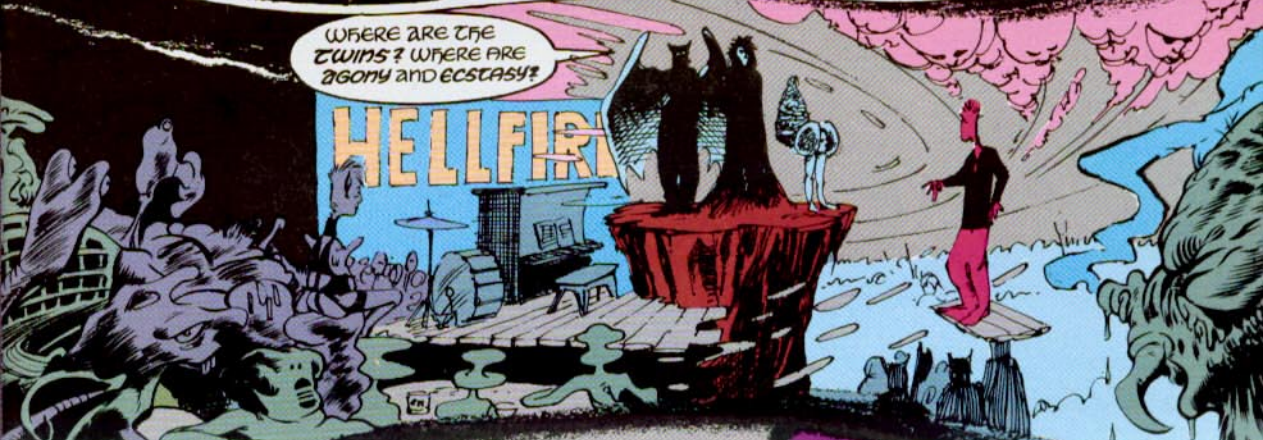


SSS. AND WHAT WILL YOU BE THEN, DREAMLORD?



I am hope.

SLURP





BBZ. HERE, DREAM MASTER. THISZ ISZ YOUR HELMET. YOU HAVE WON IT FAIRLY.

TAKE IT.

I thank you. The kings of Hell are honorable. I will remember this.

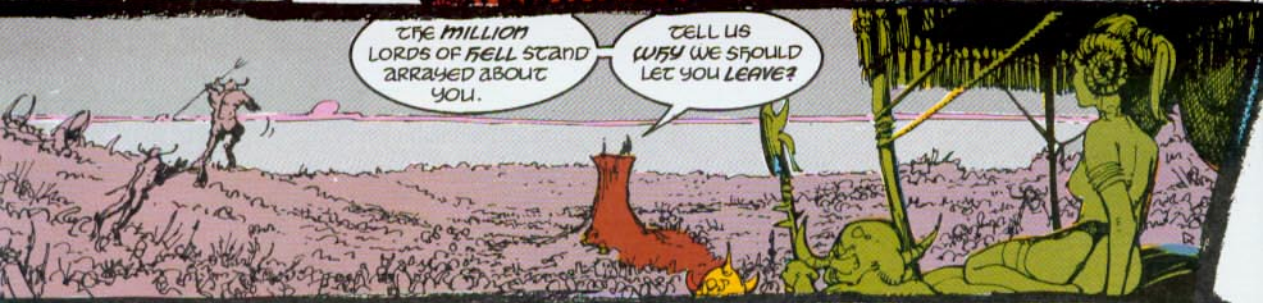
HONORABLE? YOU JOKE, SURELY.

LOOK AROUND YOU, MORPHEUS.

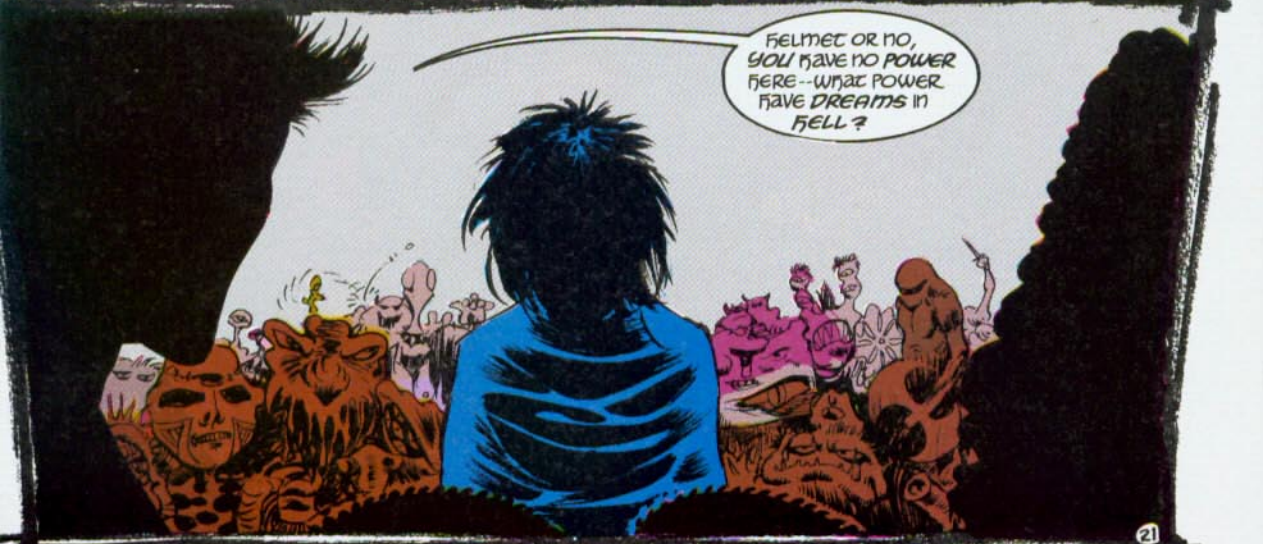


THE MILLION LORDS OF FELL STAND ARRAYED ABOUT YOU.

TELL US WHY WE SHOULD LET YOU LEAVE?



HELMET OR NO, YOU HAVE NO POWER HERE--WHAT POWER HAVE DREAMS IN FELL?



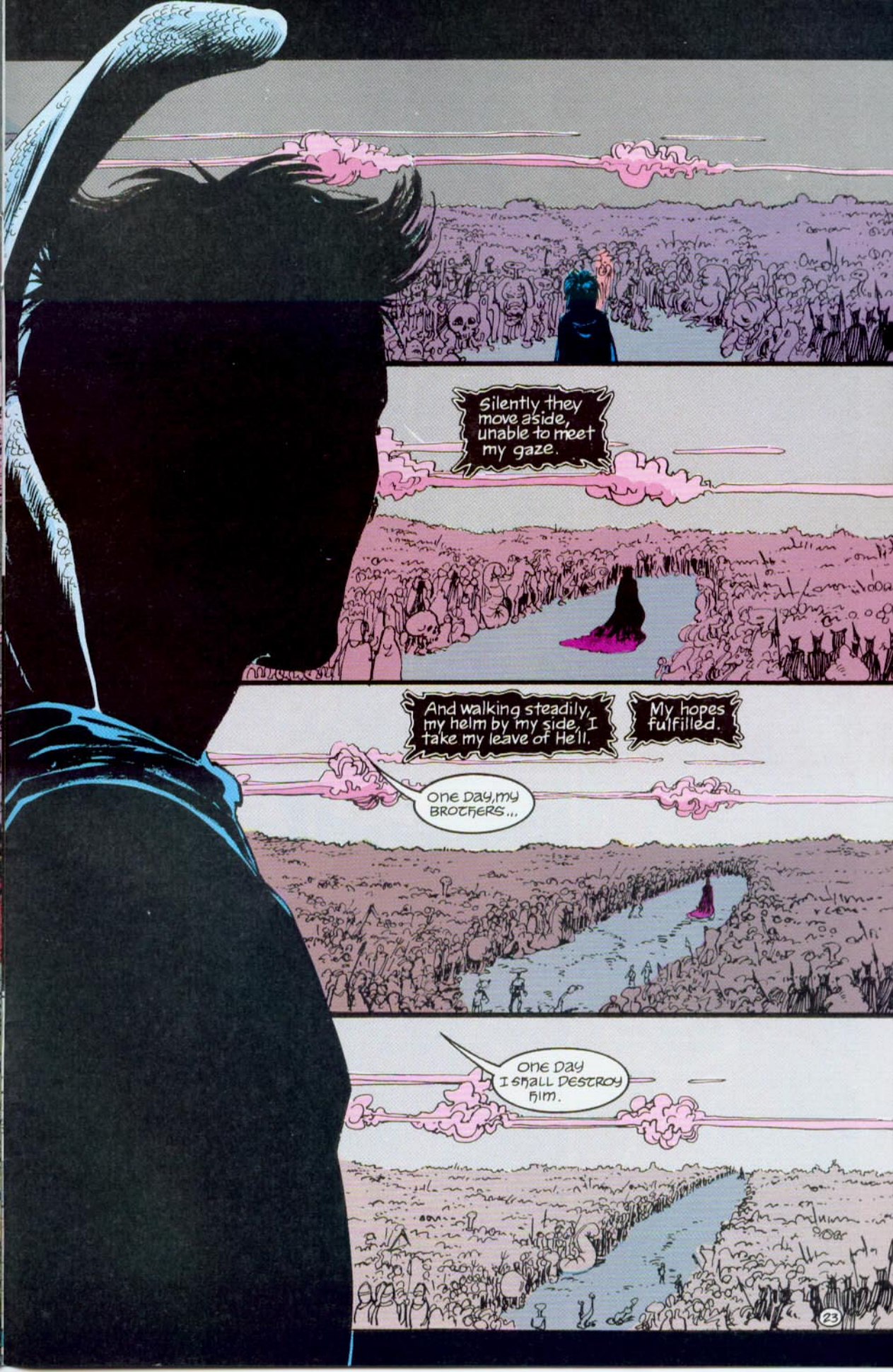
You say I have
no power? Perhaps
you speak truly...

But--you
say that DREAMS
have no power
here?

Tell me,
Lucifer
Morningstar...

Ask
yourselves,
all of you...

What power
would HELL have
if those here
imprisoned were
NOT able to DREAM
of HEAVEN?



Silently they
move aside,
unable to meet
my gaze.

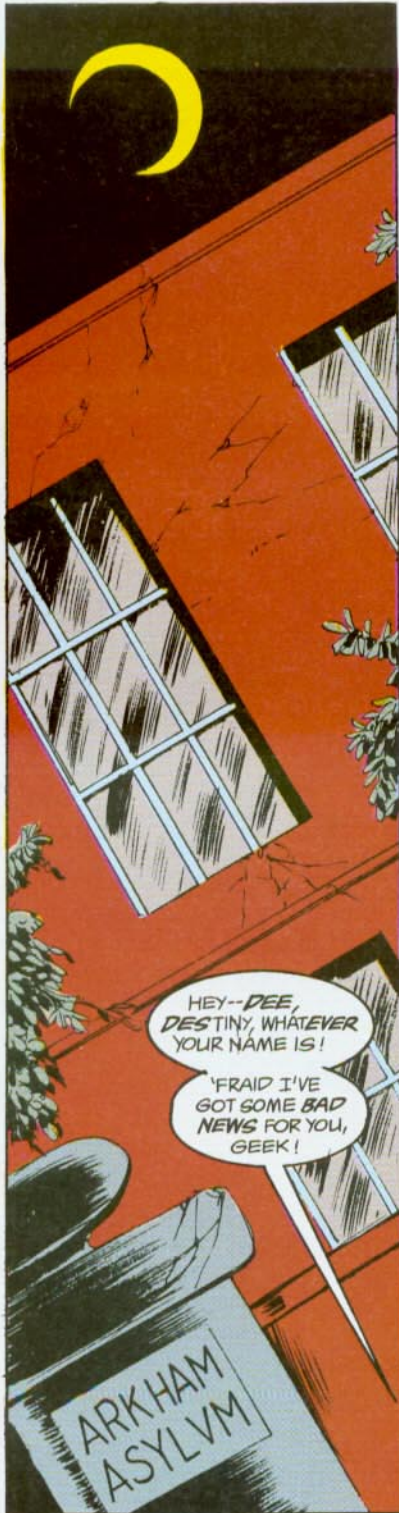
And walking steadily,
my helm by my side, I
take my leave of Hell.

My hopes
fulfilled.

One Day, MY
BROTHERS...

One Day
I SHALL DESTROY
HIM.

EPILOGUE



HEY--DEE,
DESTINY, WHATEVER
YOUR NAME IS!

'FRID I'VE
GOT SOME BAD
NEWS FOR YOU,
GEEK!

ARKHAM
ASYLUM



HUNTOON SEZ TO
TELL YOU YOUR
MOTHER'S CROAKED.
SHE'S DEAD.



SEEMS SHE WANTED
YOU TO HAVE THIS.
CATCH!



CLINK



THANK YOU...
MOTHER.



IT'S JUST
WHAT I ALWAYS
WANTED.

NEXT: MONSTERS & MIRACLES