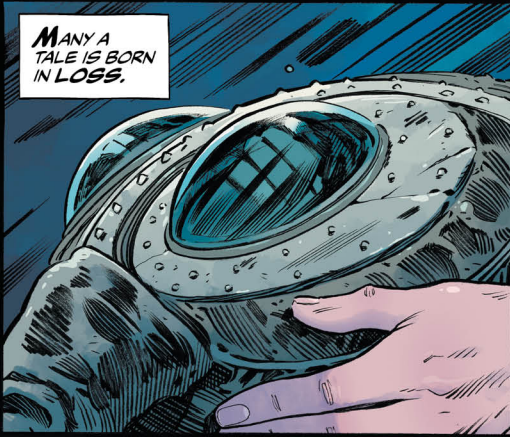
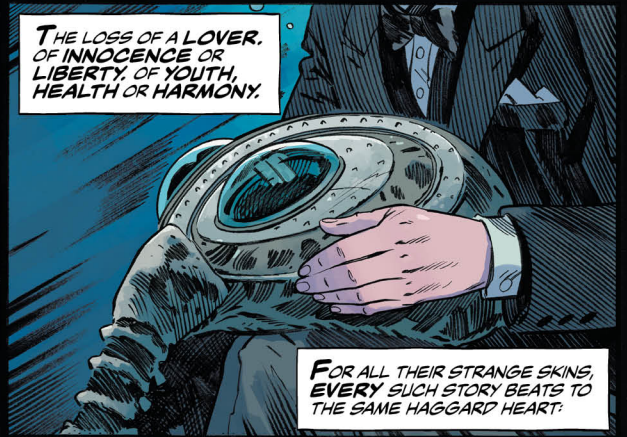


MANY A
TALE IS BORN
IN LOSS.



THE LOSS OF A LOVER,
OF INNOCENCE OR
LIBERTY, OF YOUTH,
HEALTH OR HARMONY.



FOR ALL THEIR STRANGE SKINS,
EVERY SUCH STORY BEATS TO
THE SAME HAGGARD HEART:

EMPTINESS
HAS REPLACED
CERTAINTY.



OFTEN THERE'S MUCH
TO **GAIN** IN THE CASCADE
THAT FOLLOWS. BUT IT'S
THE VOID ITSELF, **ALWAYS**,
THAT TAPS DOWN THAT
FIRST DOMINO.



EVEN
WHEN THE **HERO**
DOESN'T RECOGNIZE
EXACTLY **WHAT** HAS
BEEN LO...

...HAS
BEEN LO...
UM...

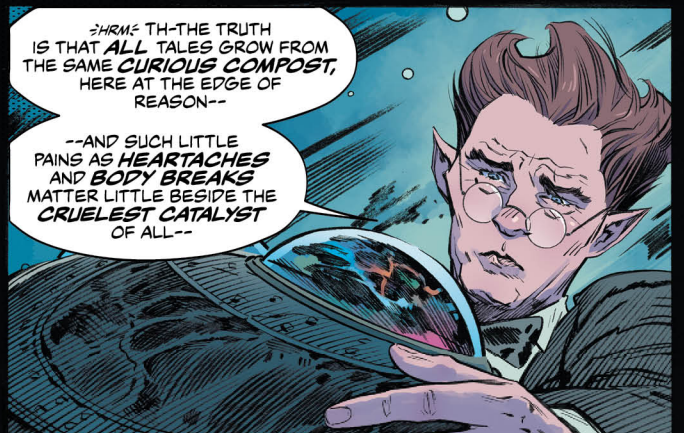


WH-WHAT
WAS I
SAYING?



~~SHRM-~~ TH-THE TRUTH
IS THAT **ALL** TALES GROW FROM
THE SAME **CURIOUS COMPOST**,
HERE AT THE EDGE OF
REASON--

--AND SUCH LITTLE
PAINS AS **HEARTACHES**
AND **BODY BREAKS**
MATTER LITTLE BESIDE THE
CRUELEST CATALYST
OF ALL--



THERE IS A
BREAKAGE
IN THE REALM
OF WONDER.

TODAY, SIGNS
AND PORTENTS VEX
THE DREAMING.

TODAY ITS CARVED
CURVATURES ARE
INFECTED, MOMENTARILY,
BY ARCHITECTURES OF
RAZOR AND GLASS.

SOMETHING ALIEN--A
GIFT? A CHRYSALIS? A
CODE?--HAS GLIMMERED
FORTH TO ENTRANCE
THOSE SUSCEPTIBLE TO
INEFFABILITY.

WHERE THE WORLD IS
TORN, INVASIVE
EXOTICS STUMBLE FROM
THE FLAW: FACES BLANK,
SKIN CELLOPHANE-TAUT,
WITHOUT MINDS OR WANTS.

AND THE
KING... THE
KING HAS LEFT
HIS CASTLE.

WHILE HIS
STEWARD--HIS
MOST TRUSTED
CONSIGLIERE--

...-IS A DAFT
OLD LIBRARIAN
WITH NO IDEA WHAT
TO DO.

DAMN
IT ALL.

≧LOUGH≦



MATTHEW.

SORRY, PAL. I KNOW IT AIN'T POLITE TO INTERRUPT WHEN YOU NARRATOR TYPES GET GOIN'.

AREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO BE SEEKING THE MASTER?

IT'LL BE CHAOS IF THE SENIOR DREAMS DISCOVER HE'S QUIT.



SURE, BUT C'MON! IF AN IMMORTAL ANTHROPOMORPHIC ABSTRACTION DON'T WANNA BE FOUND, HE AIN'T GONNA BE.

LOOK--LUCIEN-- DON'T BE SO GLUM, OKAY? DREAM'S GONE AWOL BEFORE SEVENTY YEARS, ONE TIME!



YOU REFER TO THE PERIOD WHEN THE REALM'S DECAY CAUSED VAST PSYCHIC DAMAGE?

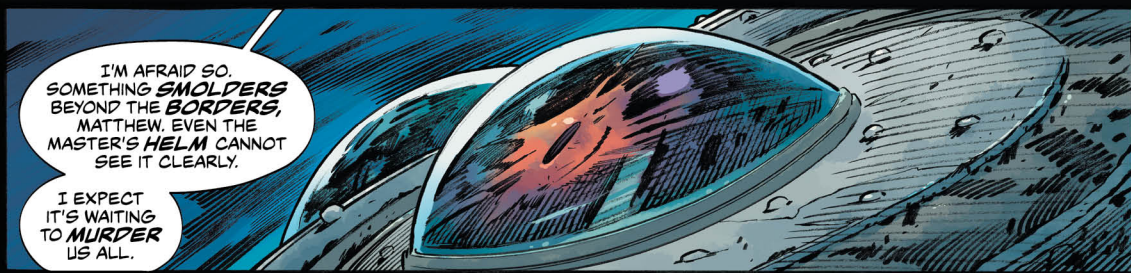
--DURING WHICH THE MASTER WAS HELPLESS, AND HAD NOT CHOSEN TO ABSCOND.

UHM--

y--

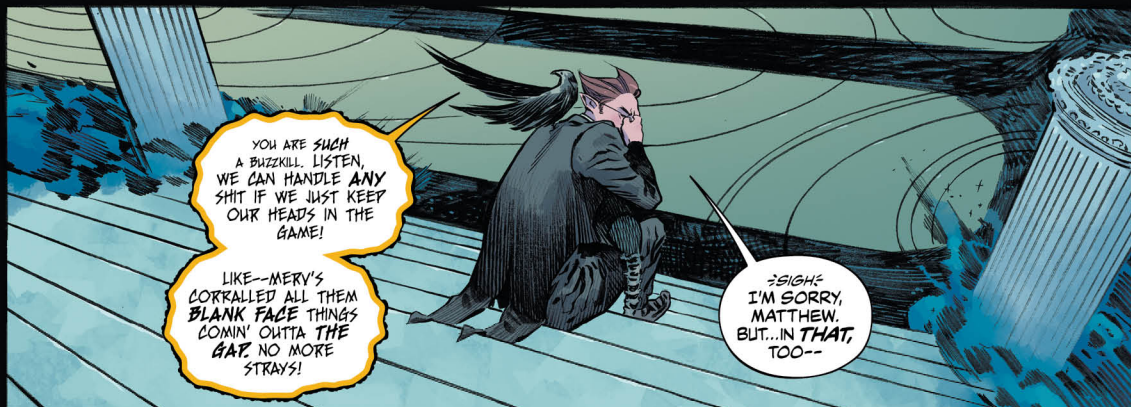
AND DURING WHICH NONE OF THE PRESENT EMERGENCIES, NEITHER INTERNAL NOR EXTERNAL, WAS IN EFFECT.

WAIT-- EXTERNAL?



I'M AFRAID SO, SOMETHING **SMOLDERS** BEYOND THE **BORDERS**, MATTHEW. EVEN THE MASTER'S HELM CANNOT SEE IT CLEARLY.

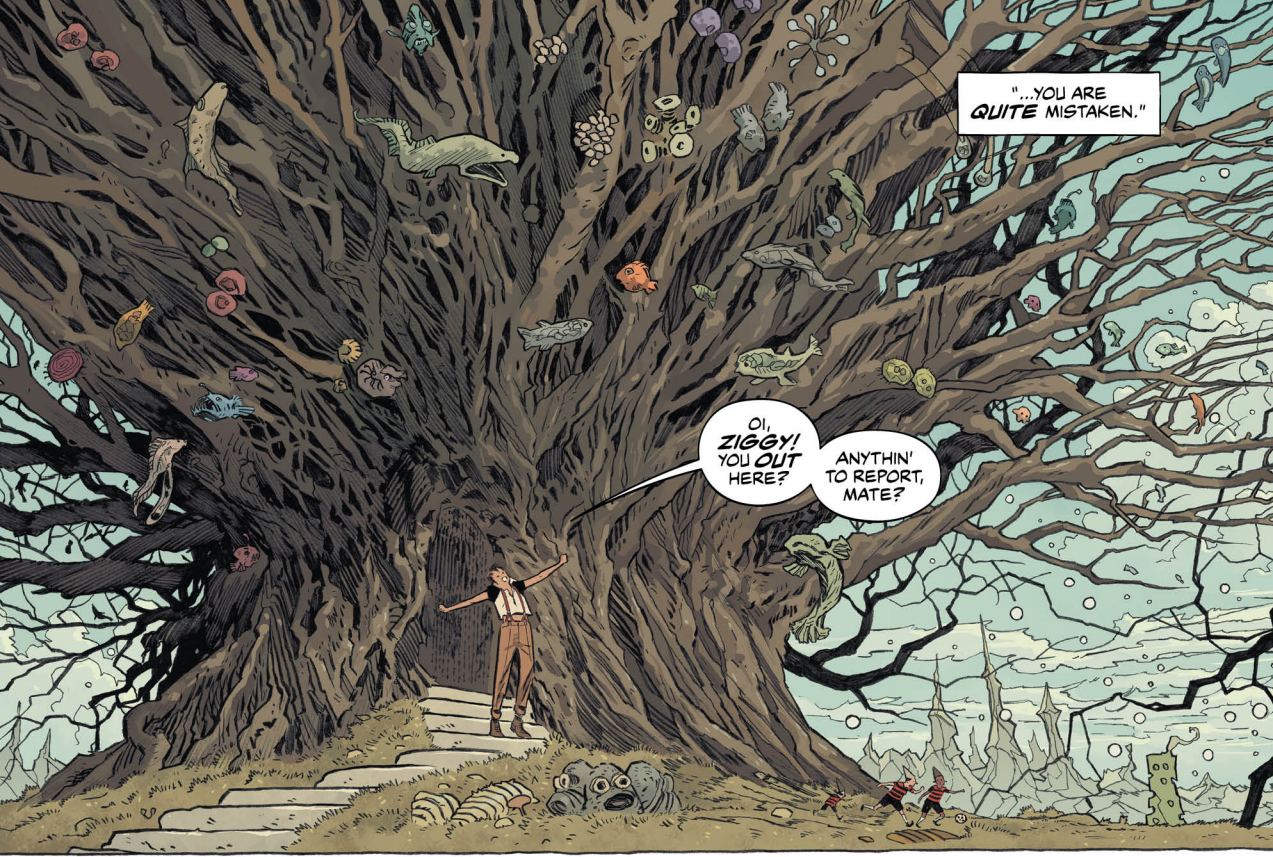
I EXPECT IT'S WAITING TO **MURDER** US ALL.



YOU ARE SUCH A BUZZKILL. LISTEN, WE CAN HANDLE ANY SHIT IF WE JUST KEEP OUR HEADS IN THE GAME!

LIKE--MERY'S CORRALLED ALL THEM BLANK FACE THINGS COMIN' OUTTA THE GAP NO MORE STRAYS!

SIGH I'M SORRY, MATTHEW. BUT...IN THAT, TOO--



"...YOU ARE QUITE MISTAKEN."

OI, ZIGGY! YOU OUT HERE?

ANYTHIN' TO REPORT, MATE?



OH HHH THAT'S RIGHT--YOU CAN'T TALK, OR THINK, OR DO ANYTHING EXCEPT EXACTLY WHAT I TELL YOU. HEH.

HONESTLY ZIG, IF YOU BLANKS'D CRAWLED OUTTA THAT CRACK WITH ANY SORT OF WEDDING TACKLE YOU'D BE THE PERFECT MEN.



BULLIT, EH, YOU'RE A DECENT ENOUGH GUARD DOG--NO BONE--

--SO I'M GLAD I FOUND YOU BEFORE THEM WAGE SLAVES UP THERE ROUNDED YOU U--



THE CREATURE NAMED DORA IS ONE OF THE FEW RESIDENTS OF THE DREAMING WHO ACTUALLY SLEEPS (THOUGH SHE NEVER DREAMS)--

--AND CERTAINLY THE ONLY ONE WITH A GIFT AWAITING HER WHENEVER SHE WAKES.



A HAIRLESS **BARBIE DOLL**, A BOOK WITH THE FINAL CHAPTER MISSING. THE FIRST BARS OF A LULLABY IN THE WRONG KEY...

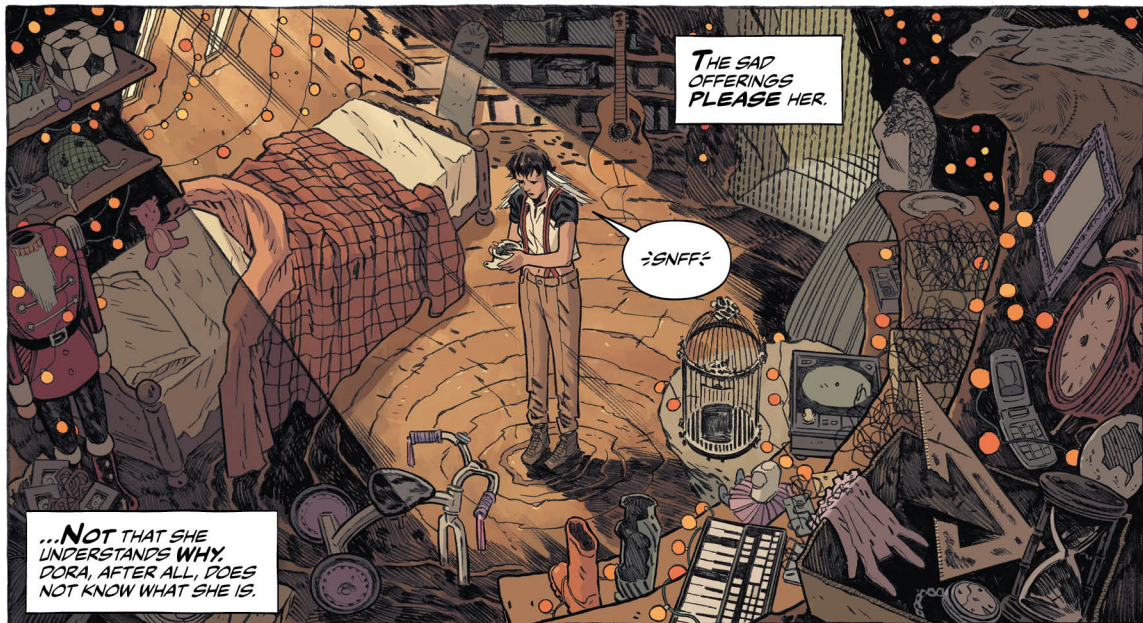
COUGH I'M, UH, I'M STILL HERE, Y'KNOW.

AND ALTHOUGH SHE HAS NO IDEA WHO LEAVES THEM--



...THOUGH IT DRIVES HER MAD THAT **SOMEONE** IS ATTUNED TO HER ODD TASTES... THOUGH SHE'S ANGRY AT HER **SENTRY** FOR FAILING TO **SPOT** THE GIFT BRINGER--

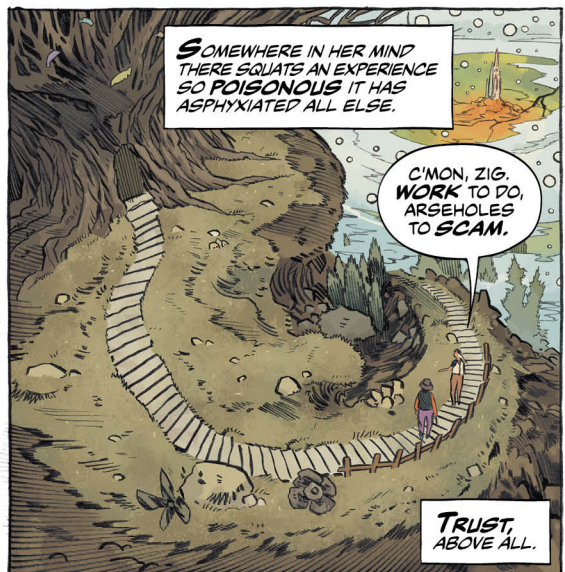
--STILL:



THE SAD OFFERINGS PLEASE HER.

SNFF?

...NOT THAT SHE UNDERSTANDS WHY DORA, AFTER ALL, DOES NOT KNOW WHAT SHE IS.



SOMEWHERE IN HER MIND THERE SQUATS AN EXPERIENCE SO POISONOUS IT HAS ASPHYXIATED ALL ELSE.

C'MON, ZIG. WORK TO DO, ARSEHOLES TO SCAM.

TRUST, ABOVE ALL.



SHE KNOWS ONLY THAT SHE'S DIFFERENT FROM THE DREAM THINGS AROUND HER--

FUGGAYOU LOOKIN' AT, DUMBO?

KEEP YOUR FACE COVERED, ZIGGY.

--AND THOUGH SHE GNAWS AT HER ABERRATION, THE THINGS THAT MAKE HER UNIQUE--HER NEEDS--CANNOT BE DENIED.