

Robert E. Howard

BLOODSTAR



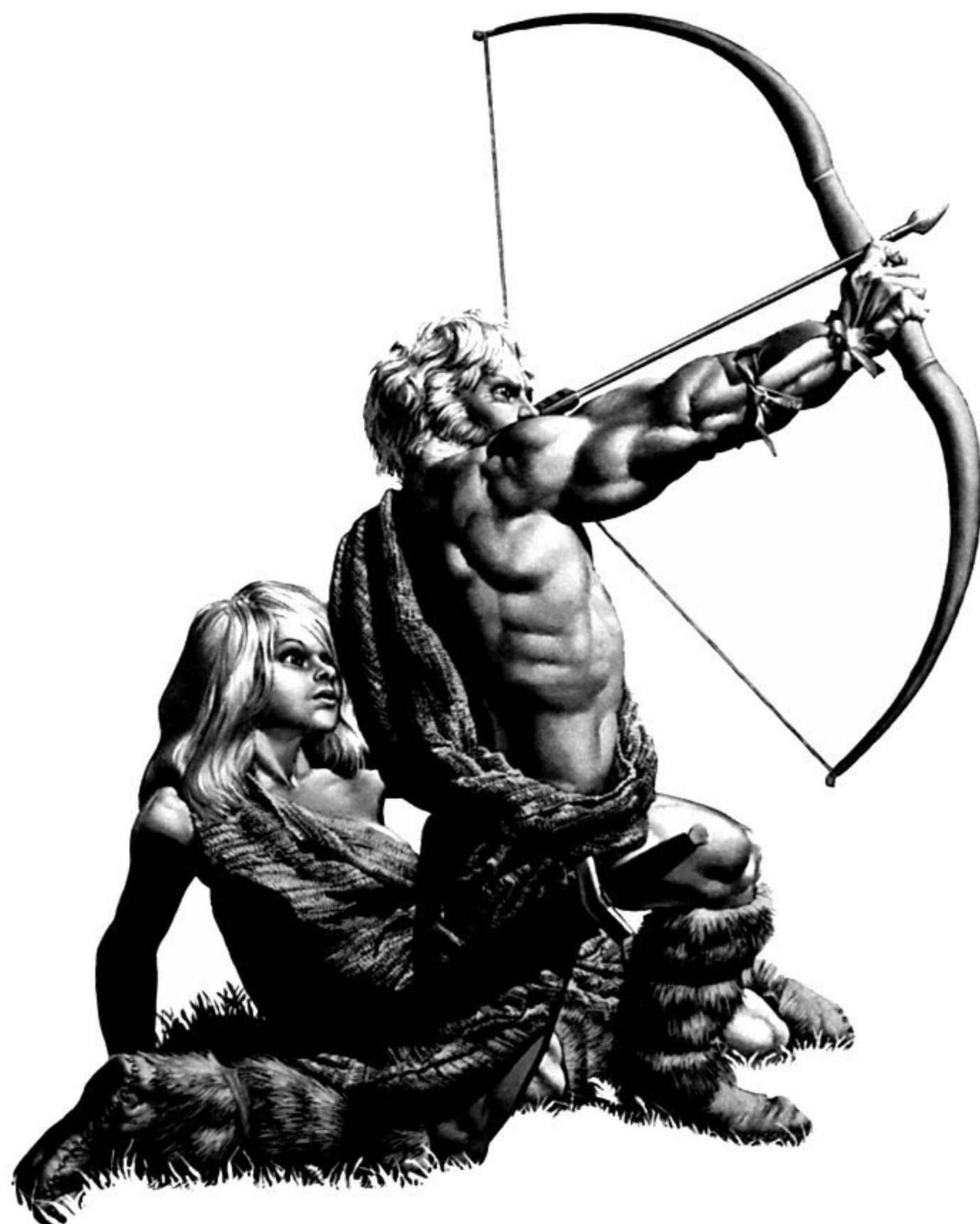
Illustrated by

Richard Corben



You are about to embark on a remarkable visual journey through the world created by Richard Corben and Robert E. Howard. **BLOODSTAR** is an unprecedented event—the collaboration of two of the most gifted talents in all fantasy, one an unparalleled artist and the other the genius of sword and sorcery. The book **BLOODSTAR** combines all the visual power of comic strip art with the richness of a traditional novel.

From outer space comes an undreamt-of force which hurls the world into a nightmarish Dark Age. Against this mythical backdrop of an Earth transmuted into barbarism, the passionate human struggle for life is played out on an epic scale. A hero with the mark of the Bloodstar emerges as the only man who can challenge the fearful powers which plague mankind. He must survive the clash of barbarian armies, master the trial of the teeth of Ymir, overcome the hideous Satha, and finally, he must throw himself against the madness and sorcery of an unspeakable peril known as the King of the Northern Abyss.





Robert E. Howard

Illustrated by

Richard Corben

Adaptation by John Jakes and John Pocsik

HotComic.net

Copyright © 1975, 1976, 1979 by the Morning Star Press, Ltd. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced by any means without permission in writing from the publisher, Ariel Books, 845 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022. This edition is distributed in the United States and Canada by Simon & Schuster, A Division of Gulf & Western Corporation. Lettering: Jim Warhola. Associate Editor: Joe Kelly. Design: Bruce Jones.

ISBN 0-671-25209-7

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 79-54173

Manufactured in U.S.A.

First Ariel Books edition—September, 1979

Read more FREE comics on ReadComicOnline

HotComic.net

Richard Corben

Richard Corben, 38, is an artist of unusual talent. Born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, his background includes film animation, sculpture and oil painting. Yet it is through his work in the underground comics of the early 1970s—in publications such as *Slow Death*, *Fantagor*, and *Rowlf*—that the Corben style began to attract attention. His subsequent work in magazines (*Creepy*, *Eerie*, *Heavy Metal*), books (illustrating the fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Philip Jose Farmer, among others), album covers (*Meat Loaf*, *Morning-Star*), and movie posters (*Phantom of the Paradise*) has consolidated his reputation as one of fantasy's master artists. A book-length adaptation of his little-seen animated film, *NeverWhere*, was released in 1978, and a fully illustrated version of *Arabian Nights* appeared earlier this year.

Fritz Leiber has written that Corben "reaches far back into time for his fundamentals . . . hunters and their weapons, witch doctors and their rituals, animals feared and revered . . . and the single figure of a man, one more statuesque and entirely natural animal, imaginative and feelingful and lonely and wondering about the mystery of his existence."

BLOODSTAR is vintage Corben. His mastery of human anatomy and his distinctly cinematic storytelling techniques—employing movement, photographic lighting, and pacing—are dramatically in evidence and represent Corben at the top of his form. Originally created in black and white for a limited edition, BLOODSTAR is replete with some of Corben's most evocative images: velvet-skinned beauties, unimaginable terrors from lightless depths, savage fights, hellish rituals, and muscled barbarians who stride magnificently across gently waving grasslands.

Like most romantics, Robert Ervin Howard felt he lived in the wrong place at the wrong time. Born in 1906 and a suicide thirty years later, he spent the majority of his life in Cross Plains, Texas. There, in the dust bowls of the American southwest, he spun wondrous tales of demonic necromancers, golden slavegirls on silver racks, unspeakable gods and barbarian kings who lived and loved in a time before recorded history.

Howard wrote short stories for the pulp magazines of the 20's and 30's, the popular magazines that delivered quickly-written fiction of every genre—cowboy, sport, detective, intrigue. Yet it was the arresting clarity and power of his heroic fantasy that lives to the present day, more widely read than the wizard of Cross Plains could ever have imagined.

Howard's most famous character, Conan, lived in a time called the Hyborean Age, an age after the sinking of Atlantis and before the beginning of recorded history. Through his writing, Howard evokes the elemental passions man felt before centuries of civilization diluted the intensity of his existence.

The tale of Bloodstar and his duel with the King of the Northern Abyss is adapted from one of Howard's most splendid stories, "The Valley of the Worm".

JOHN JAKES, who adapted the original short story to this full-length illustrated version, has emerged as one of the decade's most successful writers with his American Bicentennial series, which details the saga of the Kent family. He is also the creator of Brak and Barbarian and such fantasy works as *Mention My Name in Atlantis* and *Asylum World*.

JOHN POCSIK, who contributed additional text and dialogue, a former Arkham House writer, is the author of STARCROWN and the forthcoming fantasy novel ELFSPIRE.

Robert E. Howard



Prologue

Legends, like the lands and peoples from which they spring, rise and fall in cycles. Heroes and saviors, warriors and savants all burn with near-immortality, until the pantheon is shuffled and even newer heroes hold sway in the minds of the story-tellers.

But the story of Bloodstar, bearer of the crimson mark of doom upon his forehead, will never die. He was the first hero of the age of smoke and fire. He was the first hero to rise above his fellow men. And he was the first hero of the new times to stand against the dark.

This, then, is his story, told by a dying friend and handed down from fire to fire and son to son. It is the tale of his battle with the horror known as the King of the Northern Abyss. It is the story of a blood enemy who became a trusted friend, and of a friend who commits the most heinous of betrayals. It is the song of ritual and law, and of emotions that do not always conform to those customs. It is a story of revenge, and of destiny. It is the song of a man's defeat and of his victory, of his sorrows and of his joy. It is the newest of tales, and it is the oldest of tales.

Attend now the story of Bloodstar, who slew the hideous Worm.

And when you have finished, remember him as he was—a warrior standing proud and alone at mankind's Second Dawn.

THE END . . .

Space.

The ultimate void.

Gulfs of blackness dotted with raging suns, glowing clouds of gas and smears of frozen water vapor, errant sparks of fire that were once planetary masses—and the pink, red, blue-green, and brown worlds whirling about their prisoning stars.

One such planet is Earth. Snug and secure within its warm, cloudy atmosphere envelope, it spins from day to night as it has for eons, as its teeming billions expect it will for all time to come.

Shadows flow upon its emerald surface, across prairie and ocean, mountain and desert, village and town. Its great cities blaze at night with multicolored fire, intricate bracelets of light spreading down continental seaboard and across the vast dark expanses of Europe, Asia, the Americas—all blazing on as night's border-line silently engulfs them.

Earth is a world of extremes—blizzards in the mountains, shrouding all in silent whiteness; sudden floods churning through chasm and canyon, eating away at cliff and bank, monsoon rains in India, tornadoes over America.

But for the most part, the planet spins quietly and serenely on, mild and sweet for its inhabitants who pursue their daily and nightly activities with little thought for the laws of physics governing their world, unaware of the tenuousness of their world's existence in space.

Businessmen dressed in three-piece suits of the most fashionable cut, draft multipage contracts designed to give them every advantage in the arenas of commerce and art. Mothers in mansions and one-room field shacks bend over their newly born infants and close their eyes, remembering the warmth that squirmed within their wombs. Longhair and shorthair trade wadded bills for plastic bags filled with the green, white, and brown substances of dream. Politicians read speeches written for them by computers and try to understand just what it is they are saying.

Cheerleaders switch on their synthetic smiles and freeze them in place before the remote cameras.

Customers wait in endless lines—to go home, to be fed, to be entertained, to be held against the night, to be taken out of themselves, briefly.

Leaves fall quietly in the forests of the night as the small creeping things of the earth emerge from their warrens and burrows to watch the pale moon's rise and listen to the secret life stirring all about them. Hunters flick on flashlights, mothers turn on night lights, drunks try to find their headlights.

Deep inside the bowels of the Earth, miners hear the bracing beams creak, and shiver inside their coal-blackened garments. An entertainer, billed as the coolest, wittiest comedian to come along in quite a time, for whom nothing is sacred or untouchable, breaks into a fit of trembling and cold sweat just before going on a nationally televised talk show.

By the billions, dreamers dream, waking and sleeping, their fantasies of sex and visions of power and wealth, of love and death, and the billion other phantom images that have driven and haunted this ant race for all time.

And so Earth spins onward, moving endlessly from day to night and from night to day, not heeding the elemental blackness it came from, ignoring the absolute blackness into which it someday must return.

A few eyes lift heavenward toward those starry skies—eyes of lovers, eyes of weary military men on patrol, the keen eyes of terrorists cutting barbed wire along the border. Great antenna eyes probe and listen for sounds from the void: polished mirror eyes of telescopes in a thousand observatories and backyards across the planet tilt upward to study the quiet night, charting star grids, taking color measurements . . .

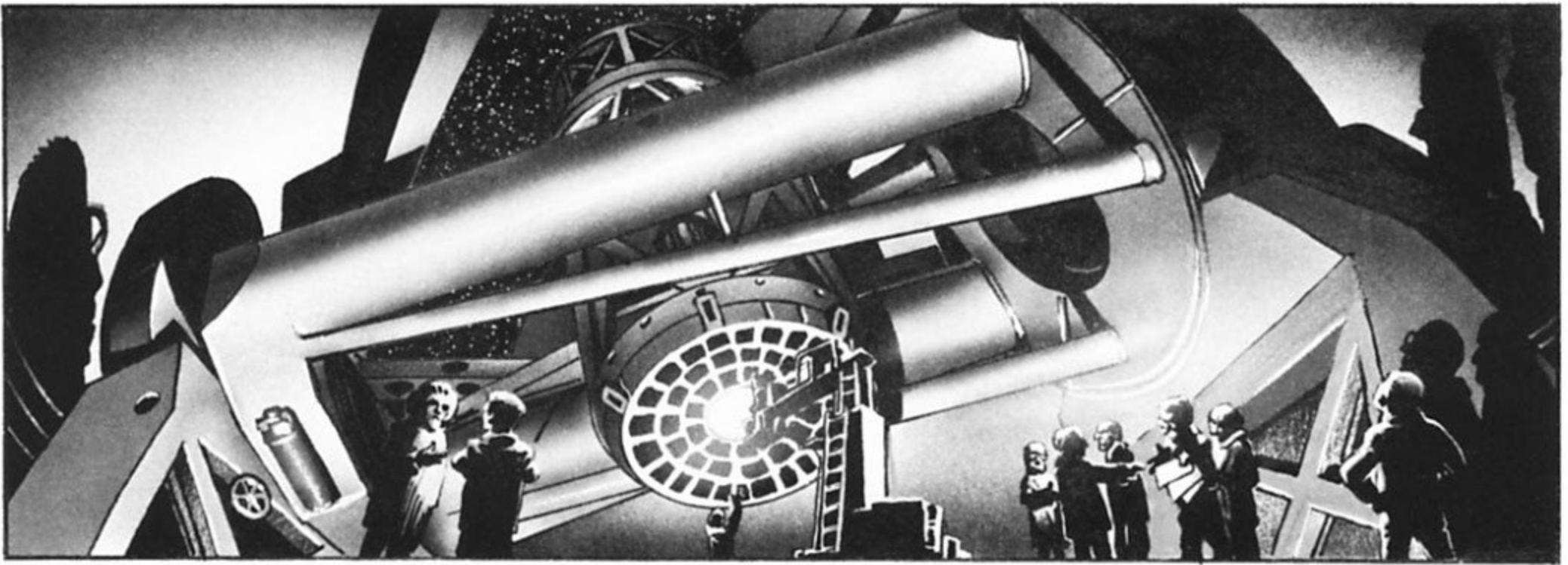
Clockwork activity of a clockwork world.

Everything seems normal out there in the blackness of space and upon the surface of the globe itself. Nothing can ever change . . .



ONE

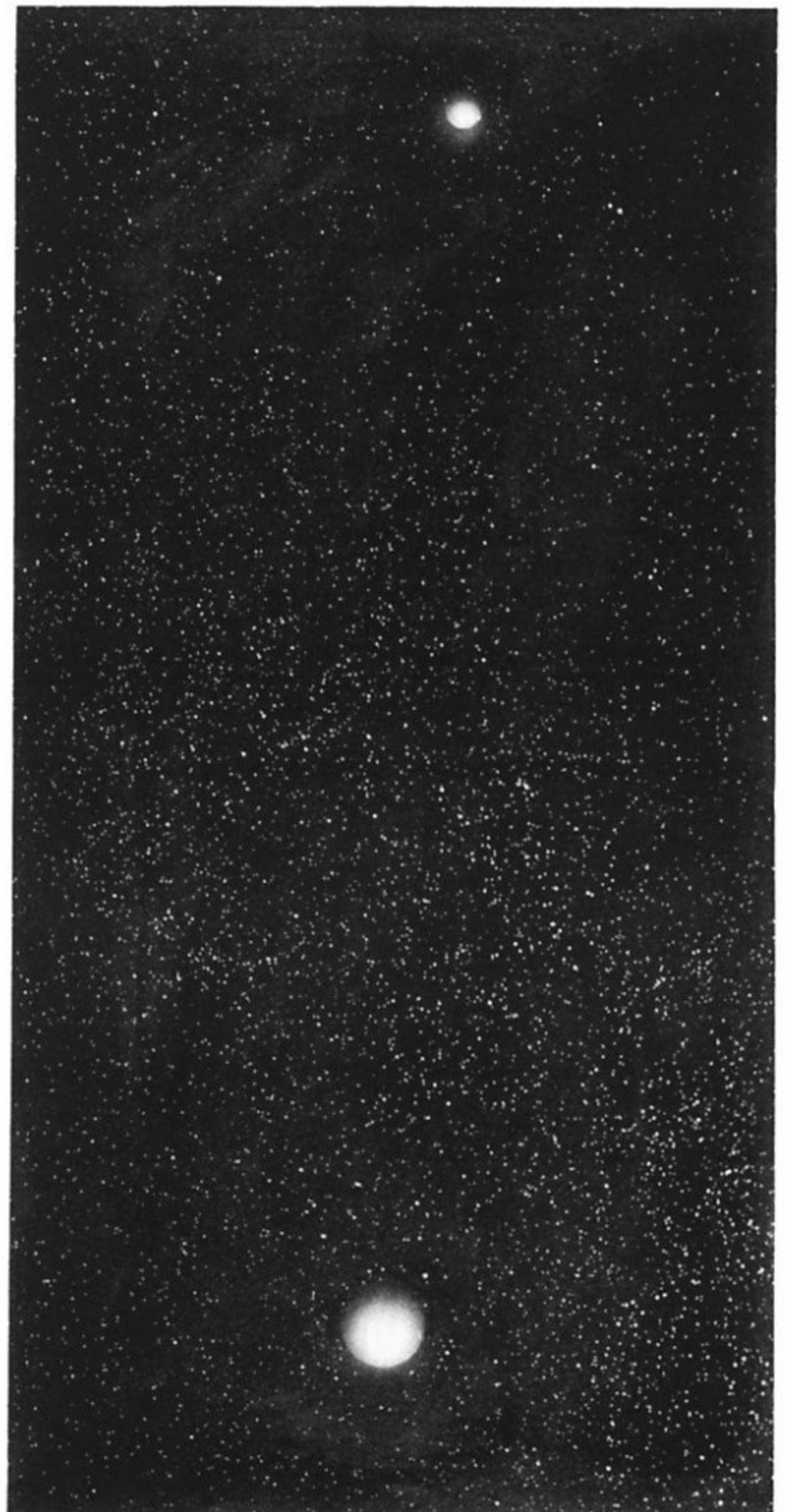
HotComic.net

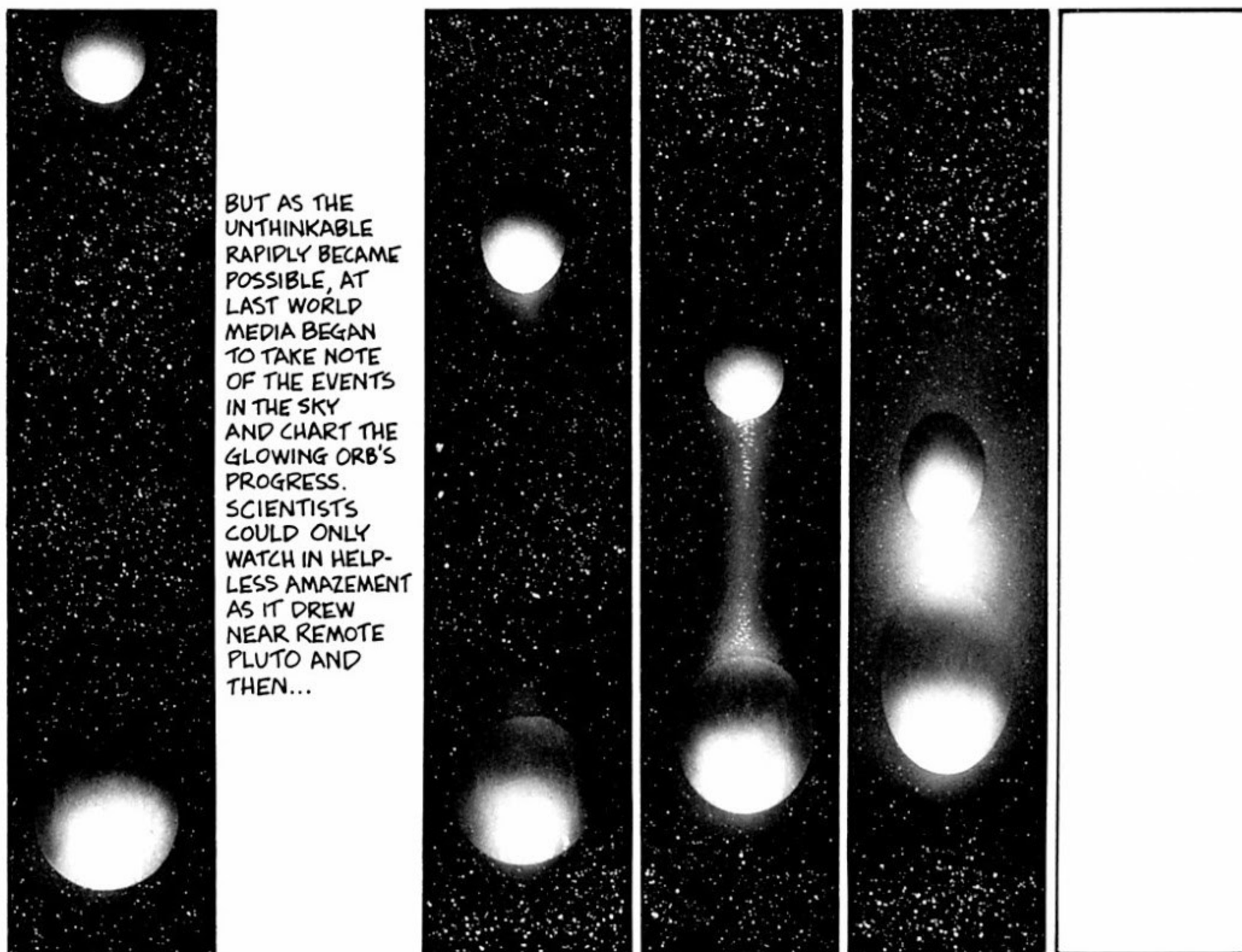


THROUGH THE POLISHED TELESCOPE LENSES ON MT. SHAW AND AT THE ARRECIBO BOWL, ASTRONOMERS ONE EVENING WERE AMAZED TO FIND A NEW LIGHT IN THE SKY. A BRIGHT OBJECT HAD MADE ITS PRESENCE VISIBLE IN THE VICINITY OF PLUTO. RUSSIAN AND SWEDISH OBSERVATORIES SOON CONFIRMED THE SIGHTING OF WHAT APPEARED TO BE A SMALL, WANDERING STAR OF UNDETERMINED MASS AND ORIGIN, HURTLING TOWARD THE SOLAR SYSTEM. SMALL MENTION WAS MADE OF THIS NEW BODY IN THE MORNING NEWSPAPERS, AND IT WAS ONLY BRIEFLY NOTED ON THE NEWS WIRES.

BUT ASTRONOMERS WATCHED THAT REGION OF THE SKY WITH INTENSE CURIOSITY AS THE DAYS PASSED, WONDERING WHAT MIGHT BE HAPPENING OUT THERE.

THE SPECK OF LIGHT GREW IN SIZE AND BRIGHTNESS AT AN INCREDIBLE RATE, SHOWING UP CLEARLY NOW ON PHOTOGRAPHIC PLATES. AS IT NEARED PLUTO, SCIENTISTS GREW UNEASY AT THE GROWING PROXIMITY OF THE TWO HEAVENLY BODIES. STILL, WITH SO MUCH SPACE OUT THERE, A COLLISION SEEMED UNTHINKABLE.





SO NOW THE WORLD DID TAKE NOTE, FOR THE WANDERING ORB HAD JUST DRAWN PLUTO INTO ITS MOLTEN MASS.



THE TWO BODIES FUSED IN A GIANT BALL OF BLINDING INCANDESCENCE.

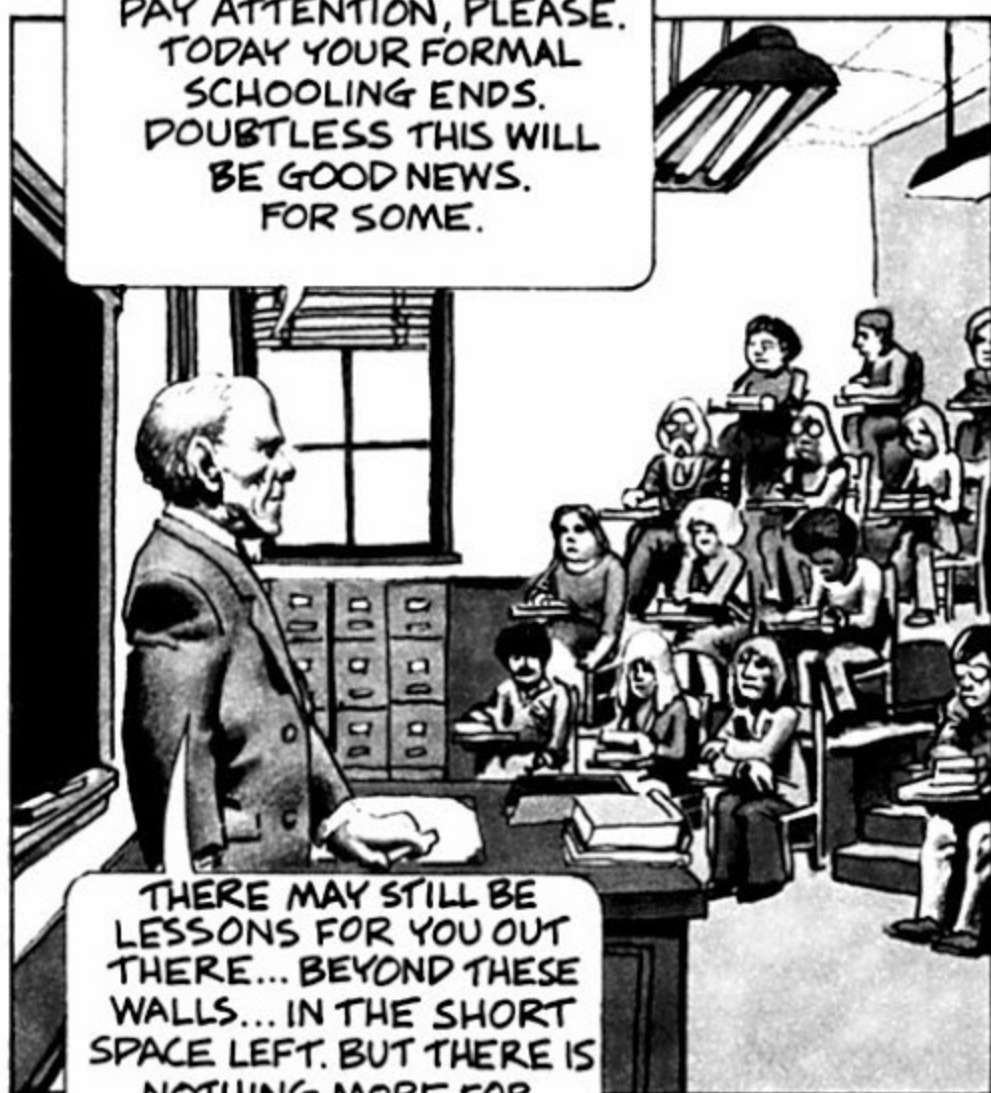
PEOPLE NOW WATCHED IT
RISE AND FALL EACH EVENING,
GROWING LARGER WITH
EACH NEW RISING.





WHY? WHY HERE?
OUT OF ALL THE
VASTNESS OF SPACE
WHY DID YOU HAVE
TO COME HERE?

PAY ATTENTION, PLEASE.
TODAY YOUR FORMAL
SCHOOLING ENDS.
DOUBTLESS THIS WILL
BE GOOD NEWS.
FOR SOME.



THERE MAY STILL BE
LESSONS FOR YOU OUT
THERE... BEYOND THESE
WALLS... IN THE SHORT
SPACE LEFT. BUT THERE IS
NOTHING MORE FOR
YOU HERE.

IS HE
KIDDING?

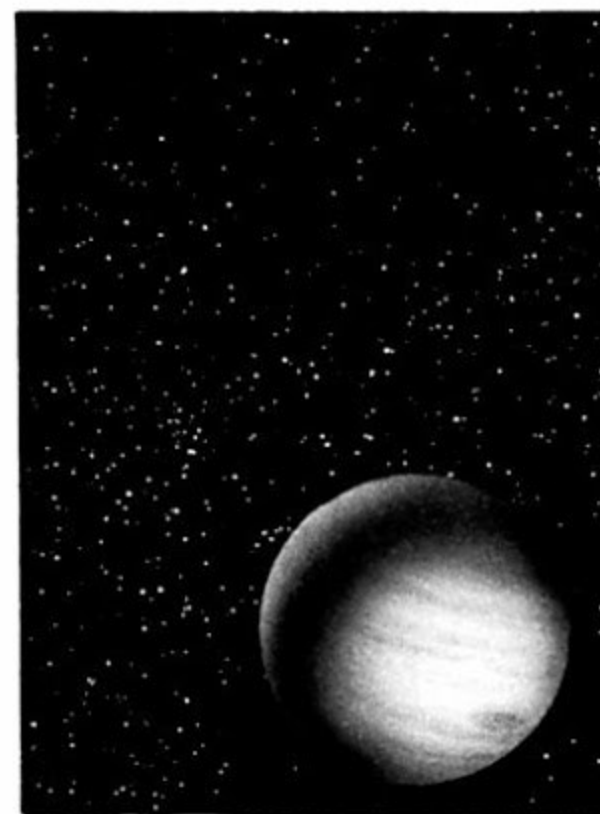


ONE FINAL PIECE
OF INFORMATION-
HIGHLY RELEVANT
AND NO LONGER
THEORETICAL
UNDER THE
CIRCUMSTANCES.

HEY!
DOC'S
DISCOVERED
THE
SECRET
OF
FIRE!



THE FINDINGS WHICH THE SCIENTIST
EXPOUNDED TO HIS ASTROPHYSICS
CLASS MADE THE SIX AND TEN O'CLOCK
NEWS, AS WELL AS MOST NATIONAL
AND INTERNATIONAL PAPERS. THIS
ALIEN INTRUDER INTO THE SOLAR
SYSTEM WAS MOVING ON A DIRECT
COLLISION COURSE WITH THE SUN.
ONLY THE GRAVITATIONAL PULL OF
THE OTHER PLANETS MIGHT DEFLECT
THE ORB'S DISASTROUS PATH.
WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, EARTH
WAS DOOMED!



DR. RICHARDSON,
JUST WHAT EFFECT WILL
THIS NEW STAR HAVE
ON OUR EARTH
AS IT PASSES?



YOU SAW WHAT
HAPPENED TO PLUTO.
I DON'T THINK EARTH
WILL SUFFER THE SAME
FATE. BUT THERE WILL
BE ERUPTIONS, TIDAL WAVES,
QUAKES AND STORMS...AND
MUCH HEAT. GREAT HEAT.

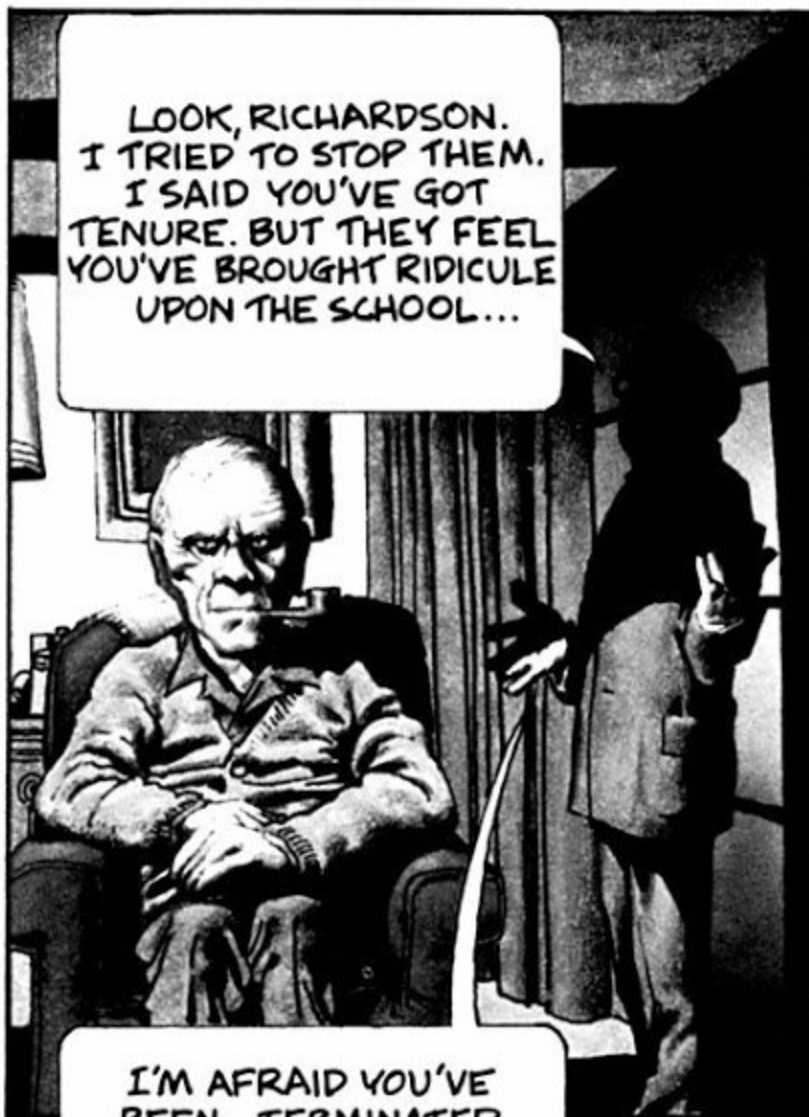
AS THE FIERY BALL
CONTINUED TO SPEED
CLOSER, THE TEMPERATURE
ROSE STEADILY. MID-
WINTER VANISHED, REPLACED
BY PREMATURE SUMMER.
STILL, LIFE WENT ON
MUCH AS USUAL.

JESUS! THEM NUTS AND
SALVATION SCREWBALLS
ARE GOIN' WILD!
NOTHIN'LL STOP THEM
FROM RIOTIN' NOW!



THE STAR'S
SUPPOSED TO
PASS SATURN
TONIGHT. WONDER
WHAT'LL HAPPEN
TO THE RINGS?

LOOK, RICHARDSON.
I TRIED TO STOP THEM.
I SAID YOU'VE GOT
TENURE. BUT THEY FEEL
YOU'VE BROUGHT RIDICULE
UPON THE SCHOOL...



I'M AFRAID YOU'VE
BEEN... TERMINATED.

WAIT
A MINUTE!
IT CAN'T BE
DAWN YET.



GOOD
LORD!
CHOKES!



LAUGHTER AND SKEPTICISM CEASED
EVERYWHERE AS THE STAR ROSE LIKE
A TWIN SUN TO SCORCH THE WORLD.

A FALSE DAWN ROSE
OVER AMERICA, BLINDING
WHITE AND HOT.

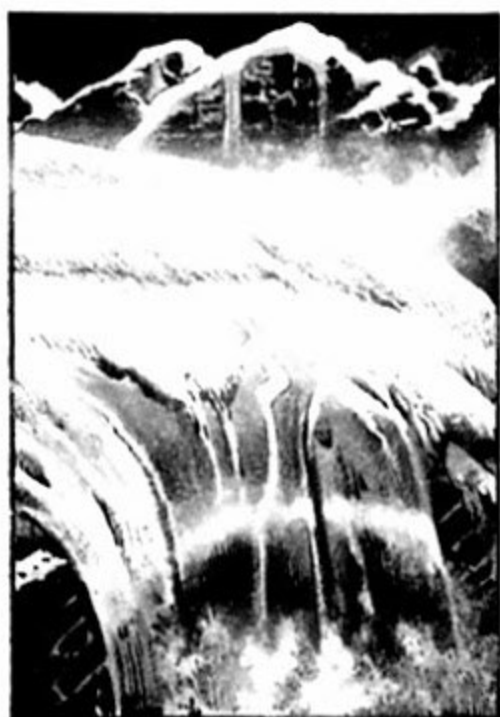
INFERNO WINDS
SEARED THE LAND
WITH CYCLONE
FORCE!



ALL OVER THE GLOBE
ICE AND SNOW
BEGAN TO MELT.

BOILING RIVERS THUNDERED
DOWN FROM THE HEIGHTS,
CARRYING EVERYTHING
BEFORE THEM.

THE EARTH YAWNED OPEN,
SWALLOWING TOWNS AND
CITIES. MOUNTAIN RANGES
SLID INTO THE SEA!
MUSHROOM CLOUDS MARKED
WHERE NUCLEAR PLANTS HAD
REACHED CRITICAL MASS
AND DETONATED.



THE MOON SWUNG
ERRATICALLY CLOSER TO
THE EARTH, CAUSING
CONTINENT-SMASHING
TIDAL WAVES.



MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ON
BOTH COASTS WATCHED IN
NUMB HORROR AS THE TITANIC
DOMES OF WATER AND STEAM
RUSHED TOWARD THEM! A FEW
EVEN TRIED TO FLEE, THEIR
EARDRUMS SHATTERED BY THE
ROAR OF THE ADVANCING
BLUE-GREEN WALL.

ASIA'S LONG-DORMANT VOLCANOES WOKE, SPEWING POISONOUS GAS AND TONS OF BLACK ASH WHICH BURIED PEKING AND MOSCOW. AFRICA BECAME A VAST GLAZED FLATLAND. THE MEDITERRANEAN BOILED AWAY.



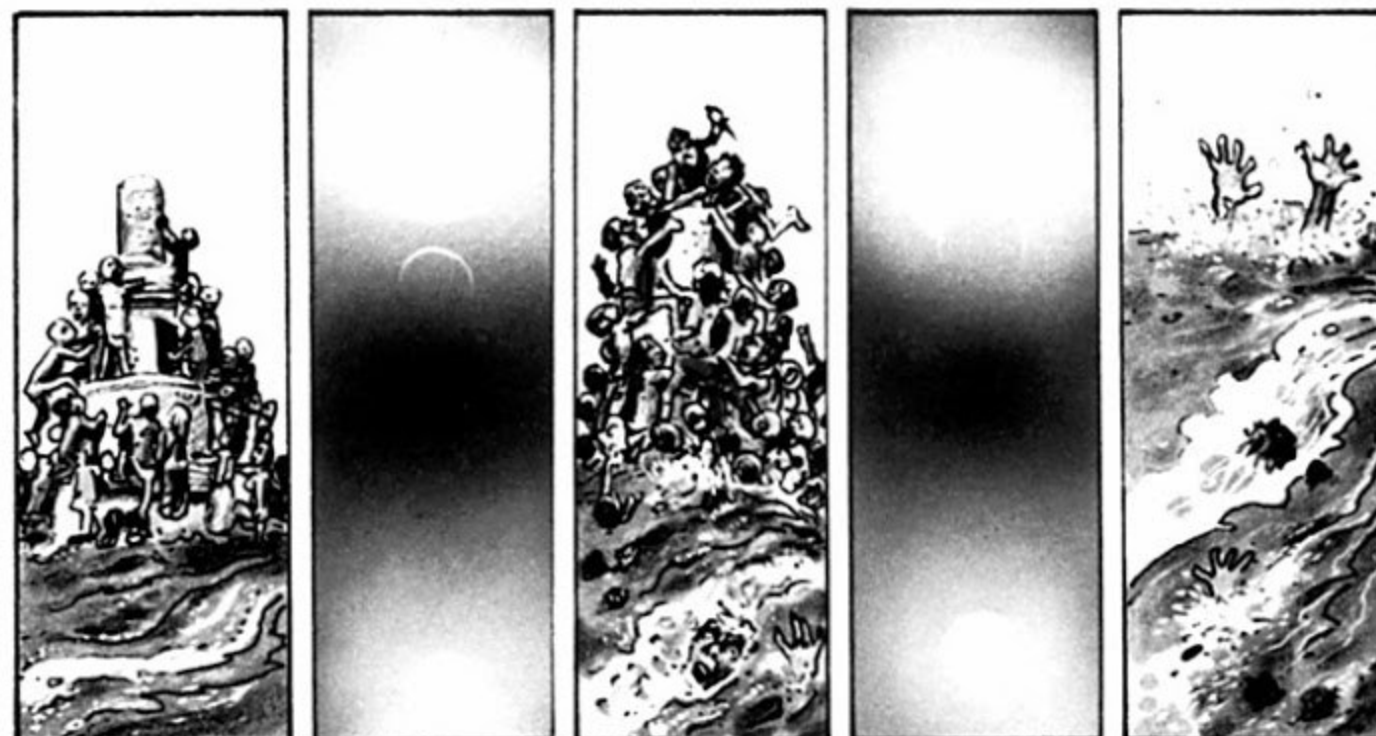
CLOSER DREW THE STAR, HOTTER AND BRIGHTER STILL.

MELTING POLAR CAPS FLOODED THE OHIO VALLEY AND SUBMERGED AUSTRALIA. WHAT WAS LEFT OF OLD NEW YORK WAS INUNDATED BENEATH MILES OF MUD.



AND THEN AS THE LAST FEW MILLIONS AWAITED THAT FINAL WITHERING DAWN-THE STAR DID NOT RISE!

HAD THERE BEEN LIVING EYES TO BEHOLD IT IN THE SKIES OVER THE PARCHED WASTE THAT WAS ONCE THE PACIFIC, THEY WOULD HAVE SEEN THE GLOWING MASS START TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE EARTH, ECLIPSED BY THE PRESUMPTUOUS MOON.



THE EARTH'S SURFACE SMOLDERED AS THE STAR MOVED TOWARD THE SUN. HURRICANE WINDS SWEEPED THE LAST REMAINING CITIES AWAY.



THE GROUND RIPPLED AND HEAVED FROM THE TREMENDOUS GRAVITATIONAL STRESSES PLACED UPON IT. THE TWO SHINING ORBS, DIMLY SEEN THROUGH THE PALL OF EARTH'S INCINERATION, MOVED SLOWLY TOWARD EACH OTHER.



THERE WERE ONLY A HANDFUL OF SURVIVORS LEFT WHO SAW THAT LAST MONSTROUS COSMIC UNION. FOR THEM, THE HEAT THE HUNGER, THE THIRST, THE PAIN, AND THE DESPAIR WOULD CONTINUE FOR AGES.



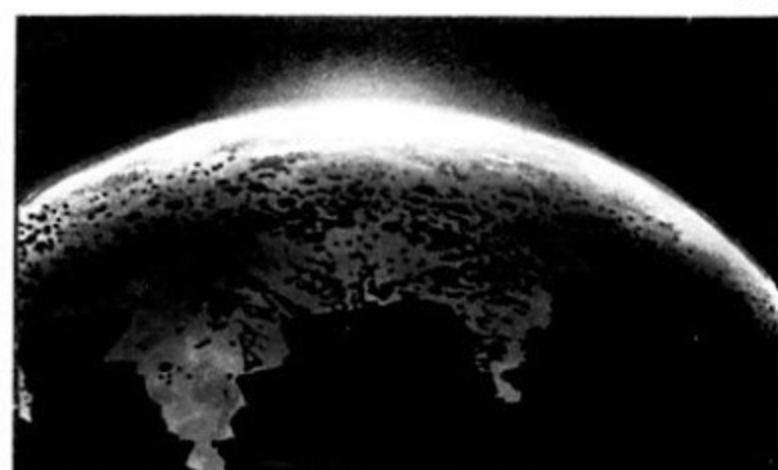
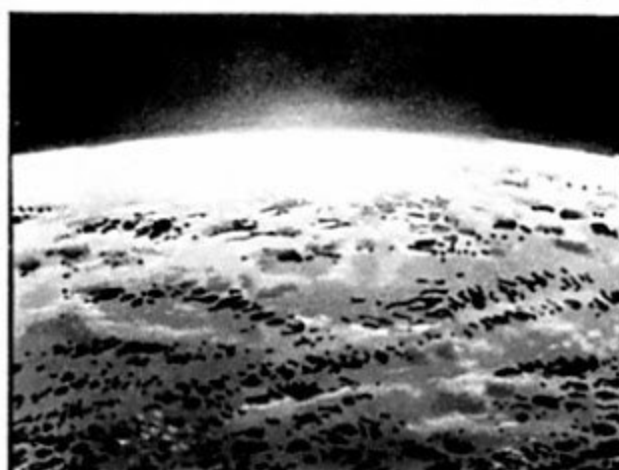
AFTER A TIME, CLOUD MASSES GATHERED TO SHROUD THE BARREN, SMOKING WORLD. THE FIRST TORRENTIAL DOWNPOURS BEGAN, COOLING THE MOLTEN ROCK, HEALING THE EARTH'S OPEN WOUNDS.





WHEN THE LUKEWARM WATERS
FINALLY RECEDED, THEY
UNCOVERED A WORLD'S DEAD.

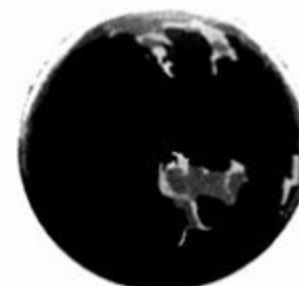
GREAT QUAKEs STILL
SPORADICALLY ROCKED THE
BATTERED GLOBE.



PICKING THEIR WAY THROUGH
THE WRECKAGE OF CIVILIZATION,
SURVIVORS FOUND TEMPERATURES
HOTTER AND THE AIR STEAMIER.
A LARGER SUN BLAZED IN AN
ORANGE SKY OVERHEAD. GREEN
SHOOTS BEGAN TO PUSH UP
THROUGH THE RUINS. SOON
LUSH WILDERNESS COVERED
THE LANDS FROM SHORE TO
PRIMAL SHORE.

SUCH CATAclySMIC UPHEAVALS
AND SHIFTS IN CLIMATE WERE
NOTHING NEW IN EARTH'S
HISTORY. IN ITS TIME IT HAD
KNOWN THE GRINDING MARCH OF
ICE WALLS, THE MOLTEN SPAWN
OF MOUNTAIN RANGES, LAVA
FLOODS FROM DEEP INSIDE.
THESE HAD MARKED ITS SURFACE,
BUT NEVER SHAKEN IT FROM
ITS ETERNAL ORBIT. NOW, AS
FOR ITS LAST THREE BILLION
YEARS, IT WHIRLED INDIFFERENTLY
THROUGH SPACE AROUND A
STRANGELY ALTERED SUN.

LIFE AGAIN THRIVED UPON ITS
SURFACE-HARDIER, STRONGER,
MORE BARBARIC.



THE STAR'S PASSING WROUGHT VAST GEOLOGICAL CHANGES. EARTH'S VERY CRUST HAD BEEN WRINKLED AND PUSHED INTO NEW PEAKS, PULLED AND STRETCHED TO FORM DEEP TRENCHES INTO WHICH SEETHING WATERS POURED TO BECOME NEW OCEANS.



POWERFUL RAYS FROM THE STAR HAD POISONED THE PRODUCTIVE LAND NEAR THE EQUATOR. RUINED CITIES GLOWED AT NIGHT WITH A RADIATION THAT WOULD LAST HUNDREDS OF YEARS. SOME LIFE FORMS DISAPPEARED COMPLETELY; OTHERS MUTATED-AND ADAPTED.



TECHNOLOGY WAS A FADING DREAM. SURVIVORS OF THAT STELLAR HOLOCAUST WERE RETURNED TO A SAVAGE SIMPLICITY OF EXISTENCE. PRIMITIVE TRIBES WANDERED ACROSS THE EARTH IN SEARCH OF FOOD... AND SAFE HAVEN.





. . . AND A BEGINNING

Centuries passed.

Two hundred years after the holocaust, the survivors remembered nothing of the world as it had been. Civilization, and the works of man, had become a legend told round campfires.

An age of great migrations began.

Some tribes fled to escape marauding neighbors who came howling out of the hills and the night to harry their villages with axe and flame. Packing up all their belongings and gathering their furs about them, they rode precipitately toward the sunrise, never to be heard from again.

Others ventured south. Earth had become a hothouse; its surface was matted by swampy jungles and dense steaming forests into which no ray of sunlight ever penetrated. Pale beings crept through the tangled, dripping woods, beings scaled and misshapen by the waves of radioactivity and assaults of plague germs which had been unleashed at the time of the Bright Passing. As the invaders from the north adapted to their hushed, twilight existence within those green labyrinths, they eventually interbred with the jungle mutants. Within several generations, shifting gene pools stabilized, and there rose up a race of serpentine creatures with golden eyes and boneless bodies.

Little remained of the world's once great cities. New York was lost and buried under a quarter mile of hardened mud and volcanic ash. Beneath the foam-slashed waters of a new, globe-encircling sea, London and Moscow were one with Atlantis, dreaming in the blue abyss. The remains of Rome were entombed in a glacier while the Pyramids were now strange, conical islands in shallow mid-ocean. Berlin was a mass of bubbled steel and silence. Wind and blowing sand ate away at the few surviving pillars of antiquity which the catastrophe had—strangely—not toppled.

Fiends and fell monsters haunted those ruins. Every tribe knew and shunned the "old places,"

for they were the sites of the forbidden gods of fire and lightning. Swift invisible death befell those who lingered too long in the vicinity. Jagged-topped spires stabbed up through the choking foliage, or loomed like weathered colossi above the creeping dunes that were slowly burying them, or marched in neatly serried rows through the shoaling waters.

The survivors of the Star forgot the knowledge of their race—its triumphs and its achievements. They forgot, and only in dreams or fevered delirium did they dimly remember, visions of titanic, hivelike structures filled with millions of scurrying people or the continent-spanning ribbons of grey stone over which gleaming shapes sped, faster than the breeze. They forgot how to forge and work iron, how to draw power out of wind and water, and how to band their villages for defense. Since paper had long since crumbled away, they forgot how to read; language soon returned to a complex series of animated grunts and growls.

Needs were basic now. Necessity and luxury were one and the same: food, shelter, safety.

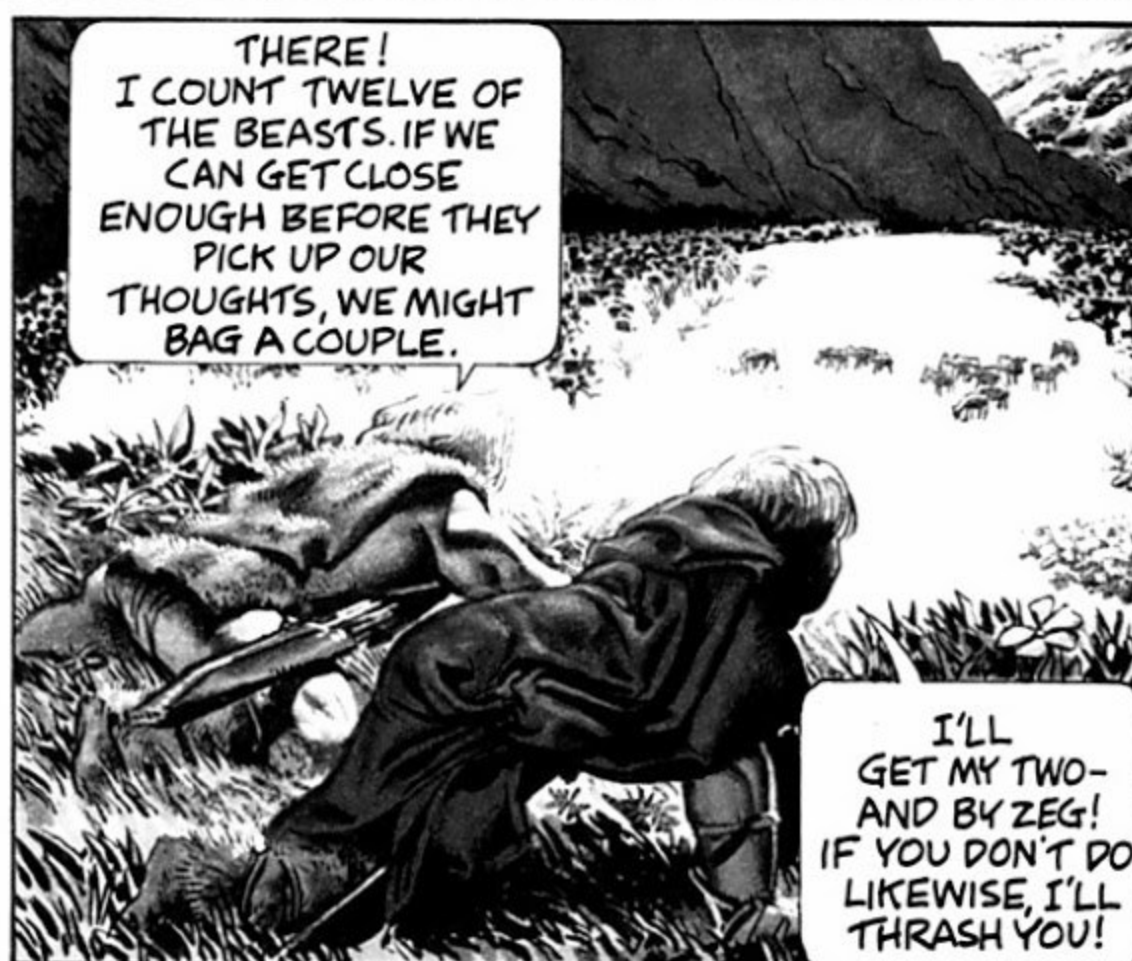
But survival was not easy. Game was often scarce, even out on the broad savannahs bordering the southern jungles. Some herds avoided the sparsely populated districts altogether, preferring the broken, smoking lands to the west where man did not go, or the jungle itself where the only dangers were the lurking carnivores and flesh-eating plants. Those animals which grazed out in the open had, like the hunters who pursued them, also changed, being more cunning now and possessed of strange powers and abilities that made them harder to bring down with primitive weapons. Still other mutated creatures preyed on the hunters themselves; a few were so poisonous that they killed by their very proximity.

A vast quiet lay over the world, disturbed only by the wind's high rush, the rustle of leaf and grass blade, and the irregular drum of the hoofbeats of the hunters . . .

TWO

HotComic.net

THE PAST WAS OF NO IMPORTANCE.
THERE WAS ONLY THE PRESENT...AND
THE HUNGER OF THE HUNTERS...



THE TWO HUNTERS CREPT DOWNWIND OF
THE MILLING HERD, KEEPING THEIR MINDS
AS BLANK AS POSSIBLE.

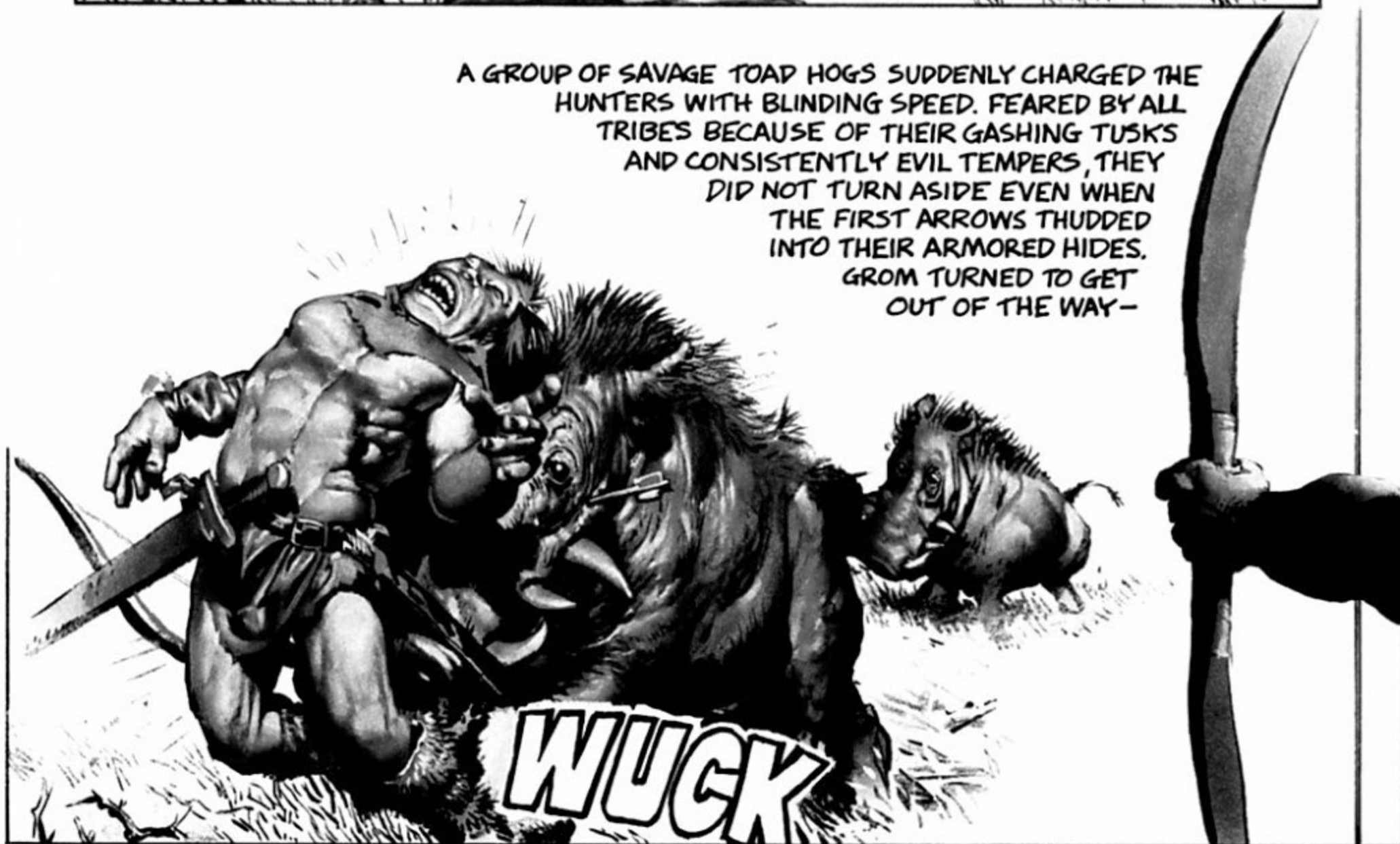


DRAWING THE BOWSTRING TAUT, BLOODSTAR FELT THE HAIR ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK RISE. HIS HEART BEGAN TO POUND WITH UNEASE.

THE WOLF STEEDS SENSED SOMETHING TOO AND SOUNDED THE FIRST ALARM OF THE MENACE STALKING THEM.



A GROUP OF SAVAGE TOAD HOGS SUDDENLY CHARGED THE HUNTERS WITH BLINDING SPEED. FEARED BY ALL TRIBES BECAUSE OF THEIR GASHING TUSKS AND CONSISTENTLY EVIL TEMPER, THEY DID NOT TURN ASIDE EVEN WHEN THE FIRST ARROWS THUDDED INTO THEIR ARMORED HIDES. GROM TURNED TO GET OUT OF THE WAY—



FOR THE OLD HUNTER, THE WORLD WAS FILLED WITH SUDDEN AGONIZING PAIN, A SOFT, CRIMSON SILENCE.



GROM!

HE LASHED OUT WITH HIS BLADE, CURIOUSLY FEELING NO HATRED FOR THE BEAST HE WAS GUTTING.



TWAUGH

TURNING, THE YOUTH SAW HIS FRIEND'S FALL AS IF IT WERE A LIFETIME AWAY.



THERE WAS ONLY THE SWIFT NEED TO LEAP TO HIS COMPANION'S AID, TO HELP HIM TO HIS FEET, TO JOKE ABOUT HIS CARELESSNESS.



THERE WAS A TENSE PAUSE. THE FIRST BEAST HAD FALLEN, ANOTHER WAS STAGGERING ABOUT AS ITS LIFE BLOOD GUSHED OUT UPON THE GROUND. THE LAST HOG GLARED AT THE YOUTH. ITS WARTY SIDES HEAVED. BLOODSTAR STOOD OVER HIS FRIEND, WONDERING HOW SEVERE HIS WOUNDS WERE. GROM WAS LYING SO STILL. CAREFULLY, BLOODSTAR REACHED FOR THE OLD HUNTER'S SPEAR.



THE SECOND HOG COLLAPSED...



SIGNALING THE DEATH-CHARGE OF THE LAST.

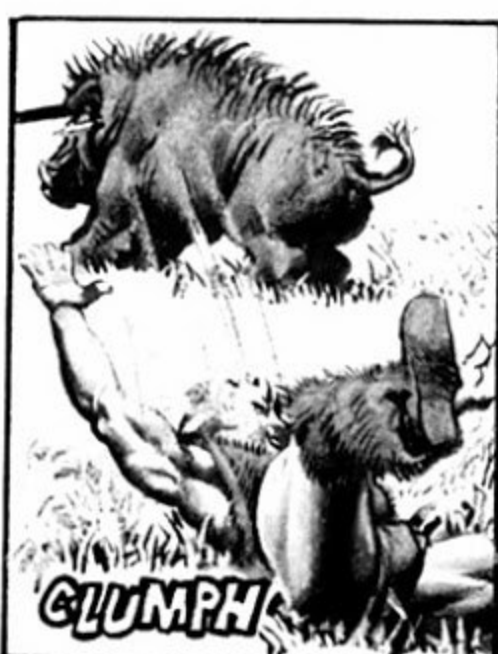
SNORT!
ERROUGH!



THE TWO ADVERSARIES COLLIDED IN MID-AIR.



THE SPEAR POINT PENETRATED THE MONSTER'S EYE AND SLID INTO ITS BRAIN. THE HOG SQUEALED, TOSSING BLOODSTAR HIGH INTO THE AIR...



TO LAND WITH BONE-JARRING FORCE. THE BEAST SHUDDERED, THE SPEAR SHAFT WAVING GROTESQUELY,



AND THEN IT TOO FELL DEAD.



PICKING HIMSELF UP, BLOODSTAR LIMPED OVER TO GROM.

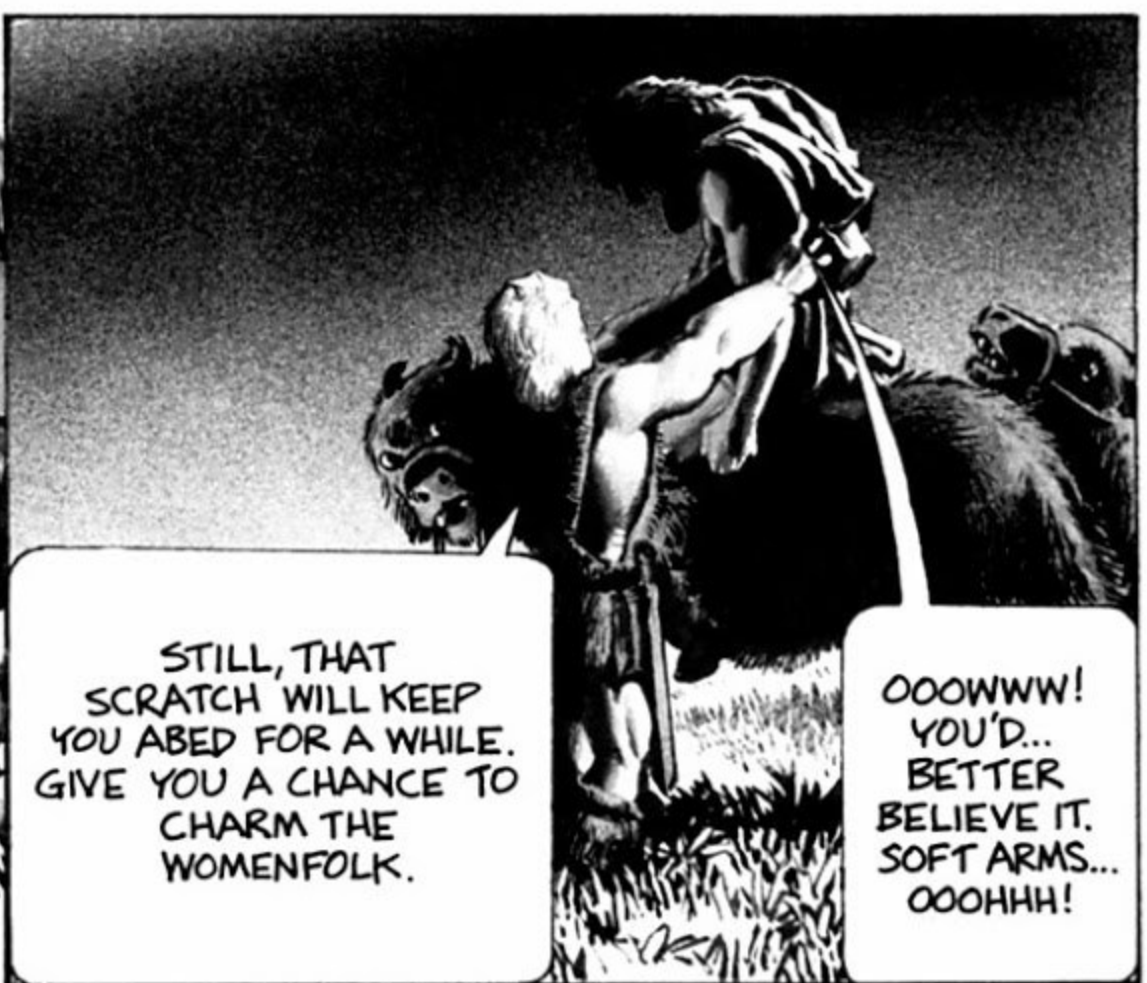
SEE?
NOTHING-A SCRATCH-
I'M JUST RESTING...WANTED
TO SEE IF YOU COULD HANDLE
THOSE PIGGIES YOURSELF.

YES, GROM,
I CAN
SEE YOU'VE
GOT...
GUTS.



STILL, THAT
SCRATCH WILL KEEP
YOU ABED FOR A WHILE.
GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO
CHARM THE
WOMENFOLK.

OOOWWW!
YOU'D...
BETTER
BELIEVE IT.
SOFT ARMS...
OOOHHH!



AT FIRST YOUNG BLOODSTAR
TREMBLED FOR THE OLD HUNTER'S
LIFE; THE TUSK WOUND WAS WIDE AND
DEEP. BUT, HAVING STOPPED THE
BLOOD FLOW AND CHEERED BY GROM'S
SARCASTIC SPIRITS, HE BEGAN TO
THINK HIS FRIEND WAS UNKILLABLE.
BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE
AESIR VILLAGE, HOWEVER, GROM WAS
FEVERISH, PALE, AND WEAK. THE
MEDICINE MAN WHO TENDED HIM CAME
TO BLOODSTAR WITH GRIM NEWS.
THE YOUTH TRIED TO BLINK AWAY THE
BURNING TEARS OF GRIEF.

HE'S DYING.
BLOODSTAR, I FEAR HE
WILL NOT LAST TILL
DAWN. GO TO HIM.
HE WANTS TO SPEAK
WITH YOU.



SO, LITTLE BLOODSTAR!
GROM IS DYING. KILLED BY A PIG!
WHAT A WAY TO GO! LISTEN, FOR
THERE ISN'T MUCH TIME. I WANT TO
TELL YOU ABOUT YOUR FATHER,
BLOODSTAR THE ELDER-HE WHO
FIRST BORE THAT CRIMSON MARK
UPON HIS FOREHEAD. HOW
LIKE HIM YOU ARE!

YOU'VE HEARD
ME SPEAK OF THE KING
OF THE NORTHERN
ABYSS.

ONCE, LONG AGO, A BAND OF BLOND
GIANTS ENTERED MY PEOPLE'S LAND.
THEY WERE PART OF A WARRIOR
CLAN WHO HAD MIGRATED FROM THE
SMOKING SOUTHLANDS. THEY
WEREN'T WELCOME EITHER! OUR WAR
FIRES BLAZED AS WE PREPARED
TO GREET THE STRANGERS PROPERLY.

NOW I WANT
YOU TO KNOW 'T WAS
YOUR FATHER WHO
DEFEATED THAT LOATHLY
THING WHICH CRAWLED
UP OUT OF THE PIT
OF HELL.



THEY RODE WOLFMUTES-CREATURES
WE HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE-OR WALKED
ALONG BOLDLY: OLD MEN, NAKED CHILDREN,
BRONZED, PAINTED WARRIORS AND THEIR
WOMEN, WHOSE YELLOW LOCKS WERE LIKE
SUNLIGHT UPON WATER.



OUR SCOUTS WATCHED THEIR COLUMN PASS. AS ITS
HEAD RODE A FIERCE-EYED FIGURE: BYRDAG,
WARCHIEF OF THE AESIR. AN ORNATE ARMBAND
IDENTIFIED HIS LEADERSHIP.



ONE OF THE YOUNG WOMEN ALSO WORE
A SIMILAR ARMBAND-HELVA, THE CHIEF'S
DAUGHTER. WHAT A BEAUTY!

WE WATCHED THEM PASS THROUGH THE HILLS AND THOUGHT THEY MIGHT NOT STOP. WHAT BLIND IMPULSE OR RESTLESS WHIM HAD BROUGHT THEM INTO LAND, WE COULDN'T GUESS. ALL WE KNEW WAS THAT THEY HAD TO BE DRIVEN OUT - OR DESTROYED!

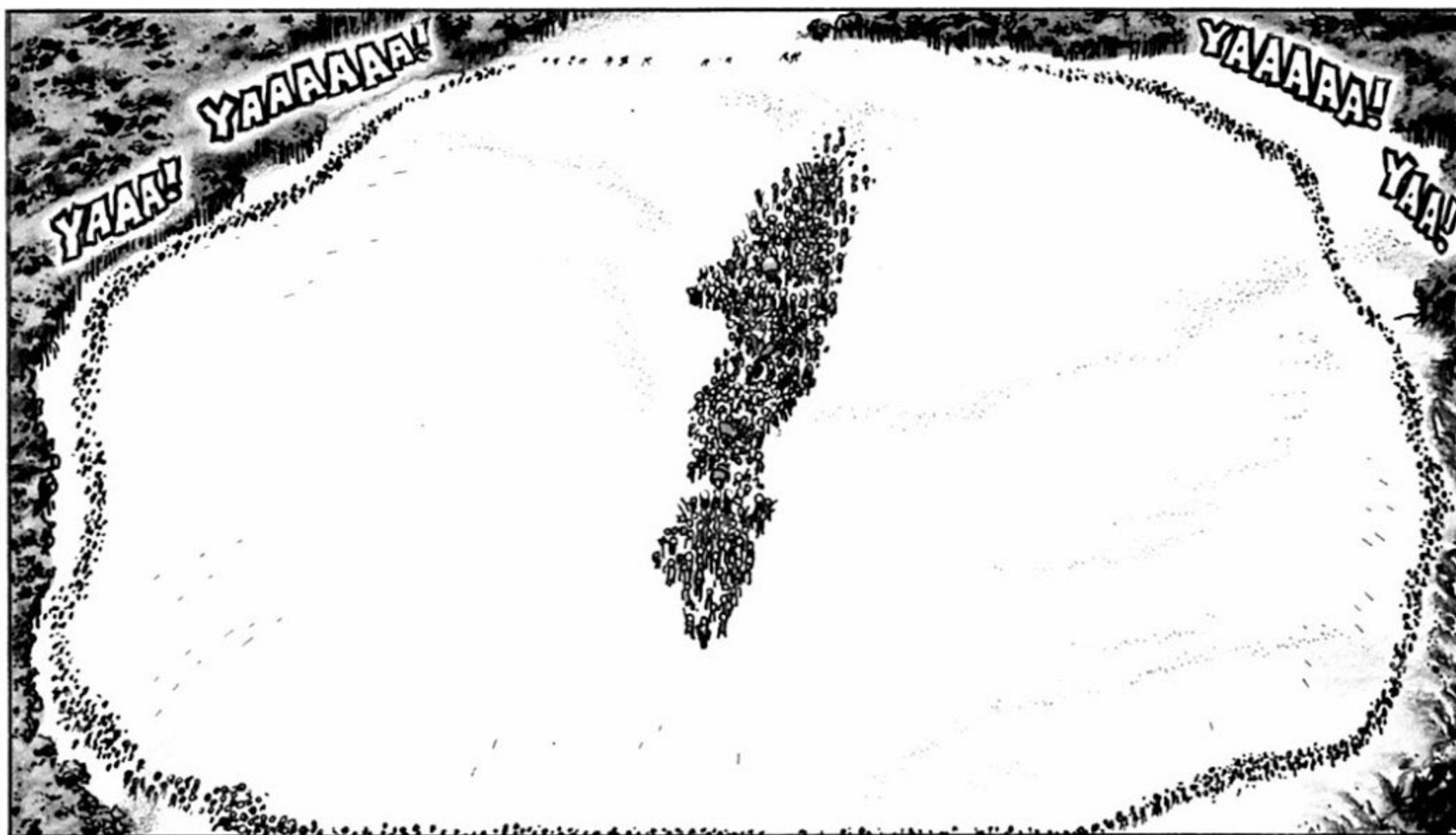


MY EYES WERE DRAWN TO THE TWO TALLEST WARRIORS WHO MARCHED ALONG TOGETHER, LAUGHING AND JOKING WITH EACH OTHER. I SOON LEARNED THEY WERE LOKNAR THE BOLD AND BLOODSTAR, HUNTER-COMRADES AND FRIENDLY RIVALS IN THE BRUTAL SPORT OF BATTLE. THEY SEEMED ALMOST LIKE BROTHERS.

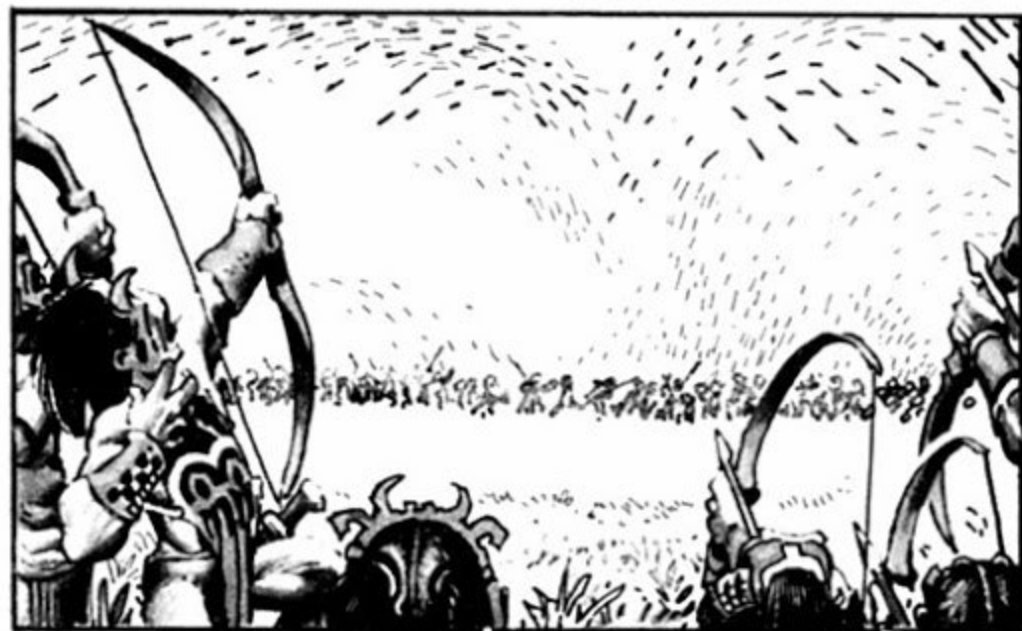


THEY HEARD OUR WAR DRUMS BOOMING AS THEY CAME OUT UPON AN OPEN PLATEAU BETWEEN THE HILLS. SUDDENLY THE POUNDING CEASED. MENACING SILENCE FELL. THEY KNEW SOMETHING WAS COMING-





WE THUNDERED OUR MASSED WAR CRY
TO THE GREY HEAVENS AS WE GREETED
THE INTRUDERS WITH FEATHERED DEATH.



THE RING CLOSED. BY ZEG! THEY REPAID
US WITH THEIR OWN HISSING CLOUDS.



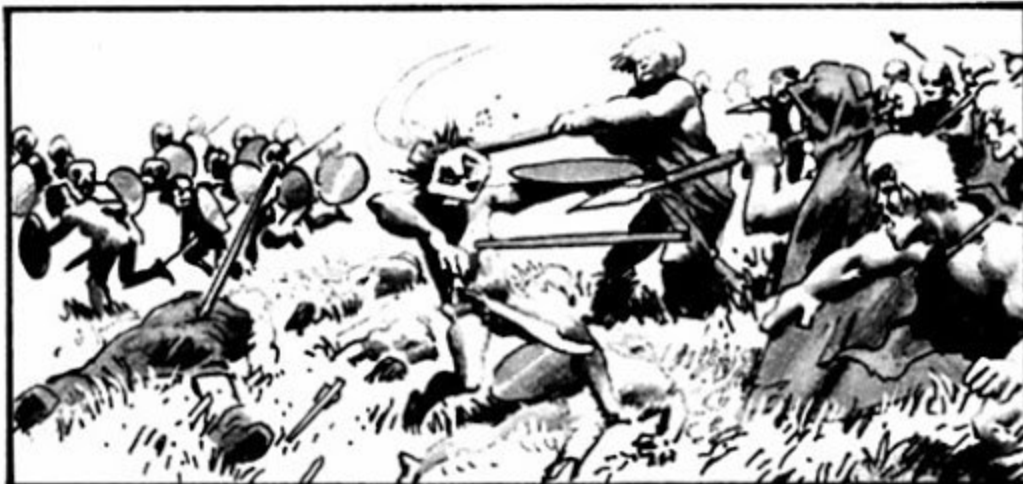
THE PRELIMINARIES OVER, BOTH FORCES SPREAD OUT
AND FELL UPON EACH OTHER WITH SWORD AND SPEAR.





THAT GOLDEN
AFTERNOON SAW
A GRAND BATTLE.

MANY BRAVE
WARRIORS FELL
BENEATH THE
STROKE OF STEEL
AND STONE.



WE WERE ALL DRUNK WITH
SLAUGHTER. WE MATCHED THE
YELLOWHAIR IN FEROCITY. OURS
WERE THE GREATER NUMBERS,
BUT THEY WERE TALLER AND
MORE AGILE. SINCE WE COULD
NOT BEAT THEM IN INDIVIDUAL
COMBAT, WE ADOPTED GROUP
TACTICS TO BRING THEM DOWN
AND TOOK A GHASTLY TOLL.
PILES OF BODIES MOUNTED.



WE KILLED AND WERE
KILLED WITH SAVAGE GLEE.
A MADNESS SEIZED US OUT
THERE ON THE PLAIN. BY
AND BY THOUGH, THE FIGHT
TURNED AGAINST US AND
WE FLED. I WAS ONE OF
THE LAST TO LEAVE. IT WAS
MY MISFORTUNE-AND
GOOD FATE-TO MEET YOUR
SIRE, BLOODSTAR THE
ELDER, THERE UPON THE
FIELD OF BATTLE, NOT AN
AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING
TO A FRIENDSHIP EITHER.

STAND FAST,
APE-FACE!
I'VE GOT
SOMETHING
SOFT AND
SWEET FOR
YOU!





GROM
KILLS!

ZEG, HE WAS FAST! HE
SIDE STEPPED MY CHARGE
AND BOUNCED HIS CLUB
OFF MY HEAD.

I COULD ONLY SLASH AIR
WITH MY BLADE!



ANOTHER CARESS OF HIS
WAR STICK WAS MORE THAN
ENOUGH TO CONVINCE ME HE
WAS NO ORDINARY FIGHTER.

THEN, FOR A WHILE, WE
PERFORMED A BIZARRE
DANCE OF DEATH
AROUND EACH OTHER—
WEAVING, HACKING,
THRUSTING, DUCKING,
FALLING BACK. STRANGELY,
NEITHER OF US WERE
ABLE TO CONNECT A
BLOW. BUT I SHIVERED
EACH TIME THAT CLUB
HUMMED PAST MY FACE.



SUDDENLY OUR UNCONSCIOUS RHYTHM WAS BROKEN AS THE BLOND GIANT'S CLUB SHATTERED MY WOODEN CLUB.



ZEG,
WHAT A BLOW!



THEN EVERYTHING WENT
BLACK FOR A SPACE.



I ONLY LEARNED
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT
SOME TIME LATER.



BY YMIR'S BEARD!
THAT'S THE HARDEST
HEAD I EVER HIT!
LOOK AT MY CLUB!



GET OVER HERE,
BLOODSTAR! YOU'D BETTER
GET BUSY IF YOU WANT TO
EQUAL MY SCORE OF KILLS!

HA, HA, HA!
WE'LL JUST SEE ABOUT
THAT, LOKNAR!

I LAY THERE ON THE
BLOODY GRASS, TRYING
TO CLIMB BACK OVER THE
RIM OF CONSCIOUSNESS.
THERE WAS MOVEMENT
ALL AROUND ME. I HEARD
SOUNDS I DID NOT LIKE,
SUCH AS THE RIPE POP OF
CRUSHED SKULLS. AESIR
WOMEN WERE FINISHING
OUR WOUNDED.



THERE'S ONE
OVER THERE,
HELVA.



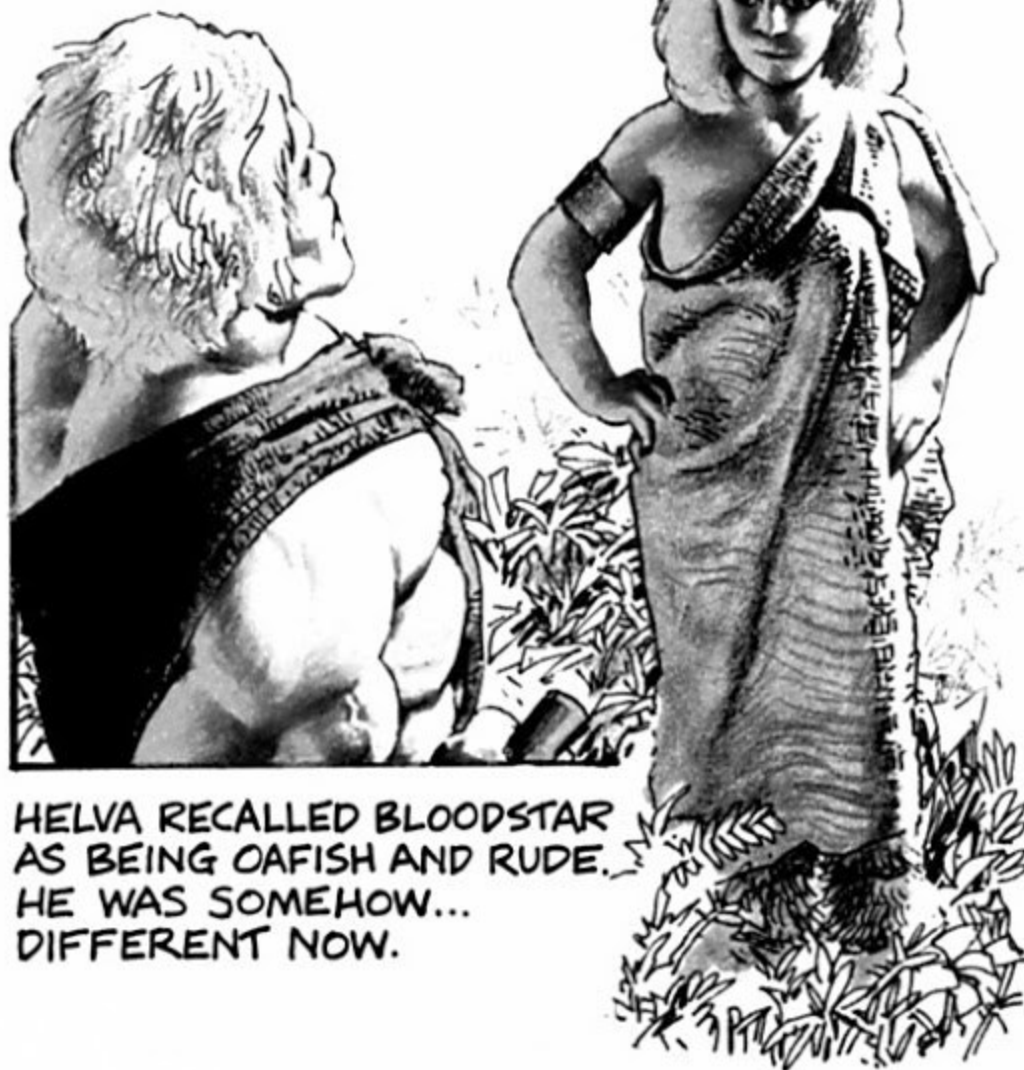
I SAID
I SPARE HIM!

WHAP

THEY GLARED AT EACH OTHER FOR A TENSE
MOMENT. ALTHOUGH THEY HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER
SINCE CHILDHOOD, THIS INTENSITY OF FEELING WAS
NEW AND DISTURBED THEM BOTH.

BLOODSTAR REMEMBERED HELVA.
AS AN AWKWARD, LONG-LIMBED
CHILD FOREVER FALLING DOWN.
SHE HAD BLOSSOMED INTO
LUSH WOMANHOOD.

SHE BLUSHED SUDDENLY
AND RAN AWAY.



HELVA RECALLED BLOODSTAR
AS BEING OAFISH AND RUDE.
HE WAS SOMEHOW...
DIFFERENT NOW.



THE VICTORIOUS AESIR
MADE THEIR CAMP A
SHORT DISTANCE FROM
THE FIELD OF DEATH.
EVERYONE WAS
SADDENED, FOR BYRDAG,
THEIR CHIEF, HAD BEEN
BADLY WOUNDED IN
THE DAY'S FIGHTING
AND LAY NEAR DEATH.

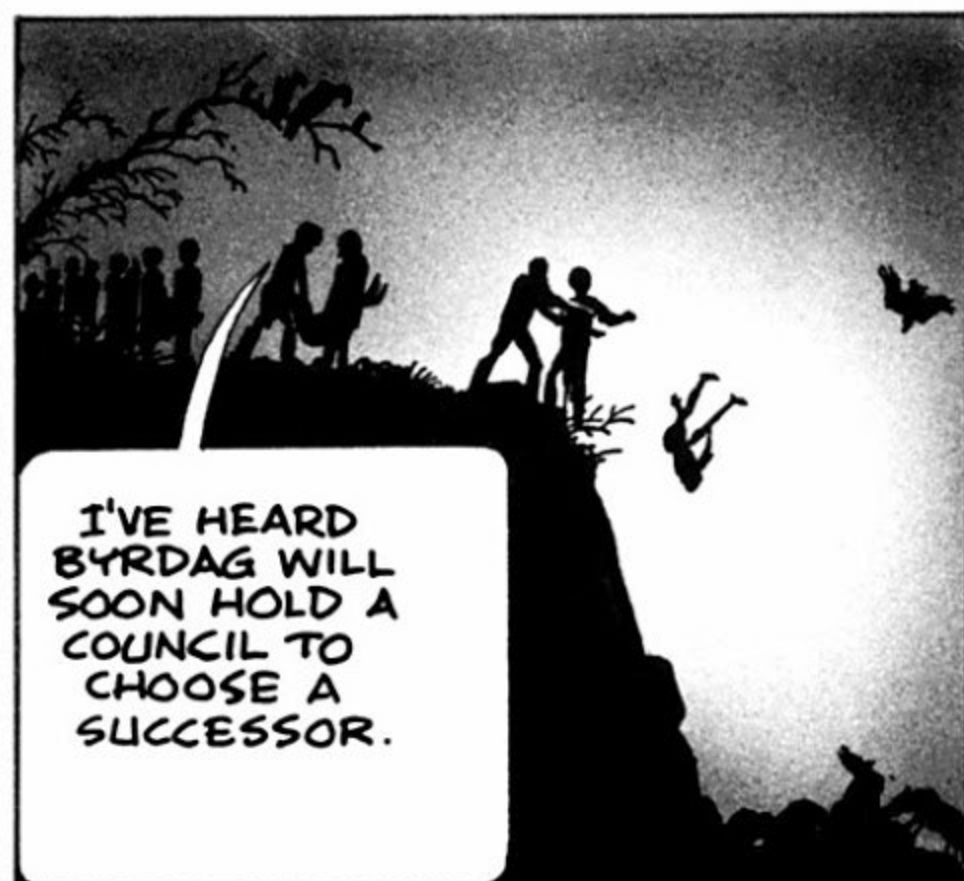
BYRDAG WILL
LEAD US AGAIN
HE'S TOO TOUGH
TO DIE.

COME,
BLOODSTAR
WE MUST ATTEND
THE PYRE.





THEY THREW THE BODIES
OF MY JUNGLE COMRADES
FROM A HIGH CLIFF TO
SCAVENGERS GATHERED
BELOW.



I'VE HEARD
BYRDAG WILL
SOON HOLD A
COUNCIL TO
CHOOSE A
SUCCESSOR.



A NEW
CHIEF?

AYE! BUT 'TIS NOT
MEET TO SPEAK
OF SUCH A THING,
LOKNAR.

I PRAY TO YMIR
FOR BYRDAG'S
SPEEDY RECOVERY.

YMIR,
ACCEPT THE
SPIRITS OF
THOSE MEN
WHO DIED
TODAY.

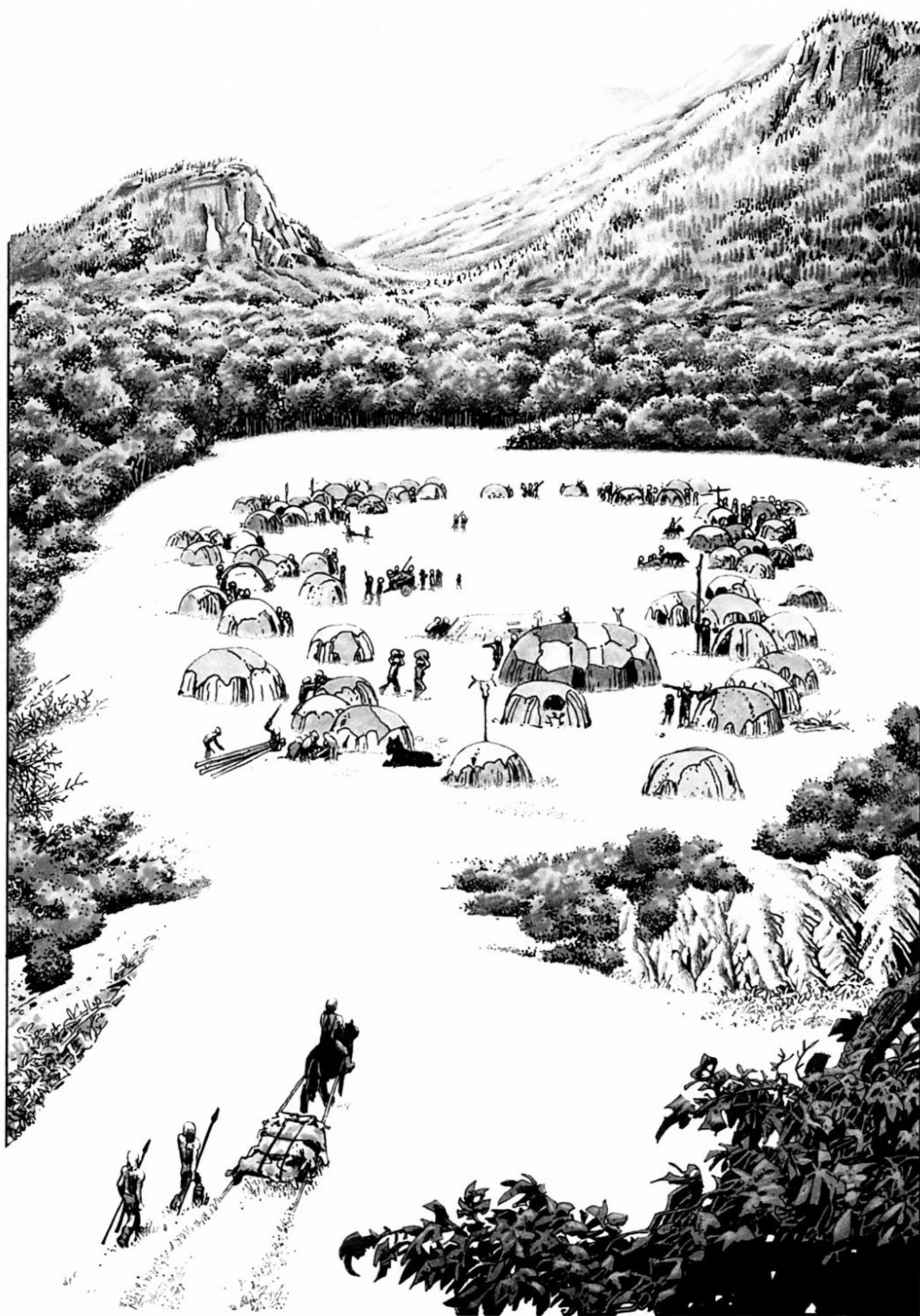
GREAT YMIR,
GRANT THAT
BYRDAG MAY
LIVE TO LEAD
HIS PEOPLE
A FEW YEARS
MORE.

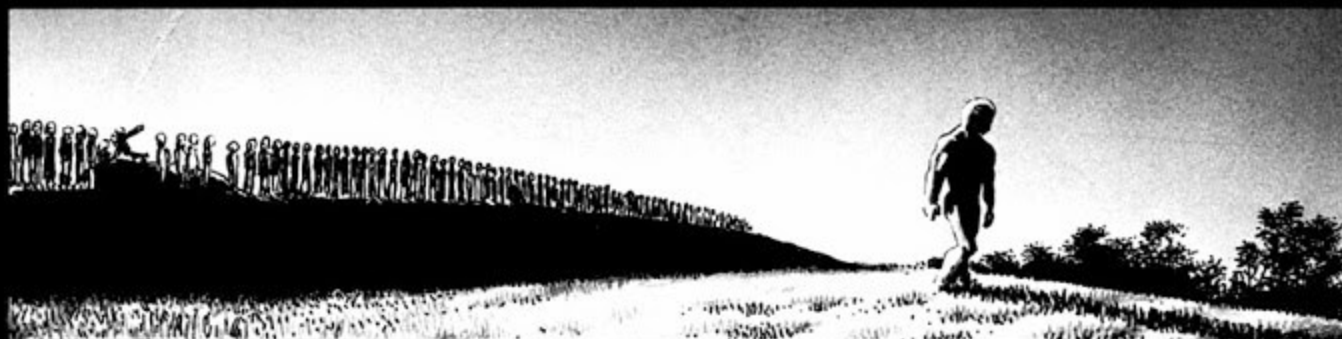
DID YOU SEE
OLD BYRDAG'S
WOUND? SPLIT
HE WAS,
FROM HIP
TO HEEL!

-AND FOULED
BY THE DIRT
BEFORE
THEY COULD
CARRY HIM
TO SAFETY!



...AS, OF COURSE,
DO I.





LOVE AND TREACHERY

Freed for the time being from threat of further attack by the ape tribes, the AEsir soon established a camp at the base of the hills which swept off toward the distant mountains.

Artisans and craftsmen erected a hut for their injured war-chief, a Tent of Wise Counsel, and shrines for the sacred totems which stood guard at the camp's four corners (for all knew it was not prudent to neglect or forget the gods of their icy homeland, sombre deities who ruled over the stark glacier fields, leaden skies, and freezing northern mists).

Thank-offerings were made for their deliverance from the savage enemy: trays heaped with smoked meats, dried fruit, and vegetables brought southward on the long trek.

But always the AEsir were being watched by misshapen figures hunched behind boulders high on the hillsides or balanced in the dangerously swaying treetops overlooking the camp. Squinting bloodshot eyes smouldered with hatred for the tall invaders from the north who had stolen away the land that was theirs.

Following their evening visitation to Byrdag, who lay tossing in delirium in his hut, the elders of the AEsir would pause on their return to the Tent of Wise Counsel to gravely watch the tribe's young folk—warriors and maidens alike—sing and dance in celebration of the day's successful hunting beneath the open skies.

First and foremost among the lithe, bounding figures were young Bloodstar and his friend Loknar.

The leaping flames highlighted the rippling muscles of both men. Their teeth flashed as they smiled fiercely at one another, arrogant in the strength and immortality of their youth. Their laughter rose with the smoke toward the crimson stars overhead.

The AEsir maids would watch the men for a while; then, hesitantly, by ones and twos, join the warriors in the circle. As the driving rhythms of drum and horn gripped them, they would feel

something hot stir and coil within their loins, and they would dance wildly and abandonedly long after the men had dropped in exhaustion.

More frantic than any of the others did Helva, daughter of the war-chief, dance. Her sweat-sheened body moved and twisted like a tongue of living flame, like the mad pulse of a fever dream, as her copper arms and legs flashed in the flickering light.

It was as if by dancing so furiously she could banish for a time the vision of the old man gasping and moaning in the darkness nearby. Her breath would burn in her throat, her vision blur; an icy chill would steal through her body, threatening to make her faint—yet on she danced, her heated face flushing whenever Bloodstar's eyes fell upon her.

The figures in the hills scowled and wondered.

At dawn, the hunters moved out for the daily course over the plain in search of game. The women watched until the last man disappeared over the tossing, golden rim of the world and prayed to Ymir that eventide would bring them all back safe, triumphant, and ready for the night's feasting.

Standing in the doorway of the hut, a dripping poultice in her hands, Helva saw two taller figures striding off. She leaned against the door frame, trying to still the pounding of her heart, to drive off the thoughts which came unbidden and unwanted to disturb her daily routine.

The AEsir never left their village unprotected. Spear-carrying warriors patrolled its borders and the washing-pool, alert for signs of imminent attack by the ape clans.

But no attack followed that initial battle. Scouts and hunters returned unharmed each day with news of their wanderings and adventures. The silent world was broken only by quiet laughter, the cries of children, and the music at night.

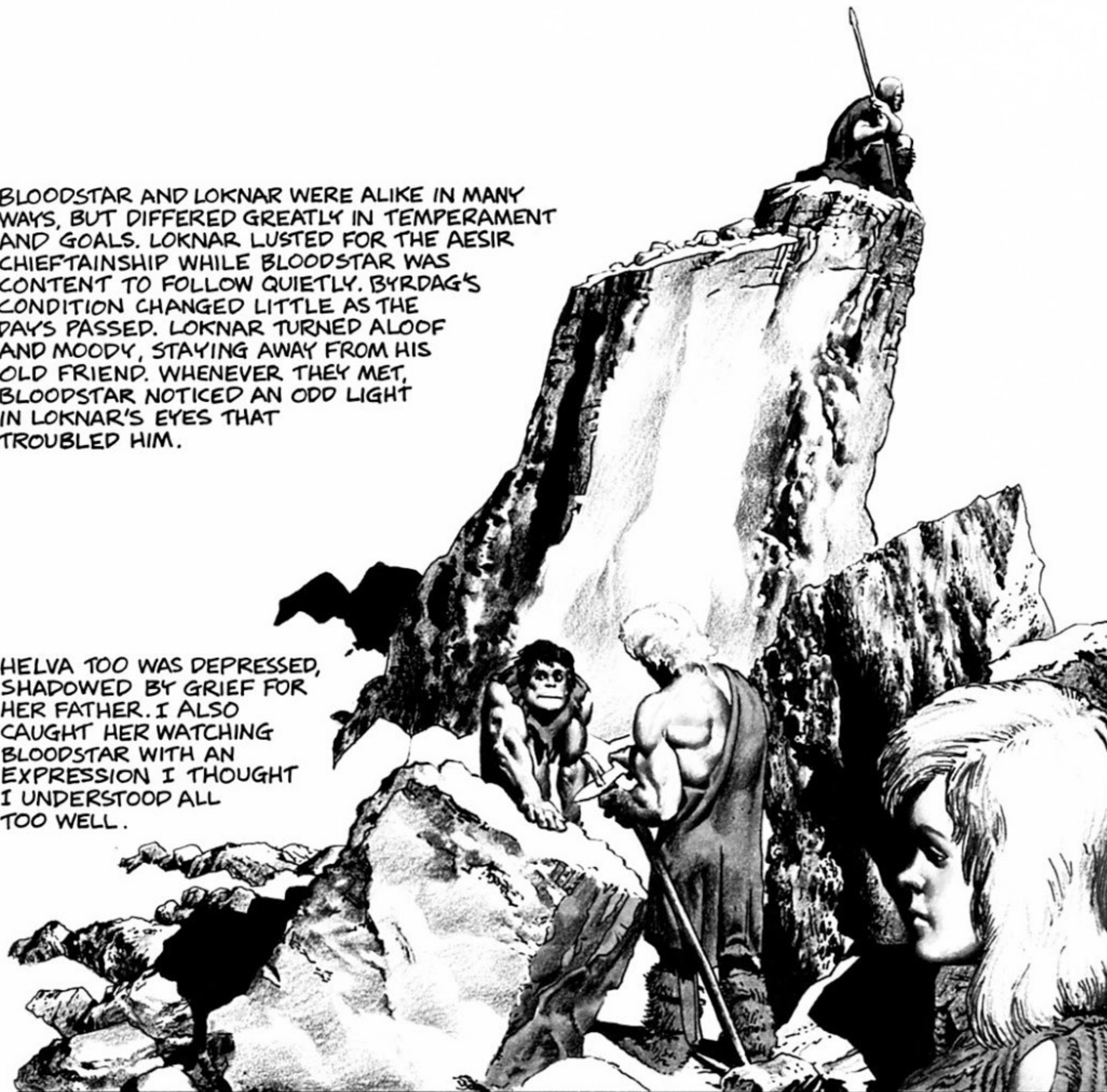
One bright day, a solitary hawk slanted smoothly down the breeze, circling above two hunters who were creeping through the tall grasses . . .

THREE

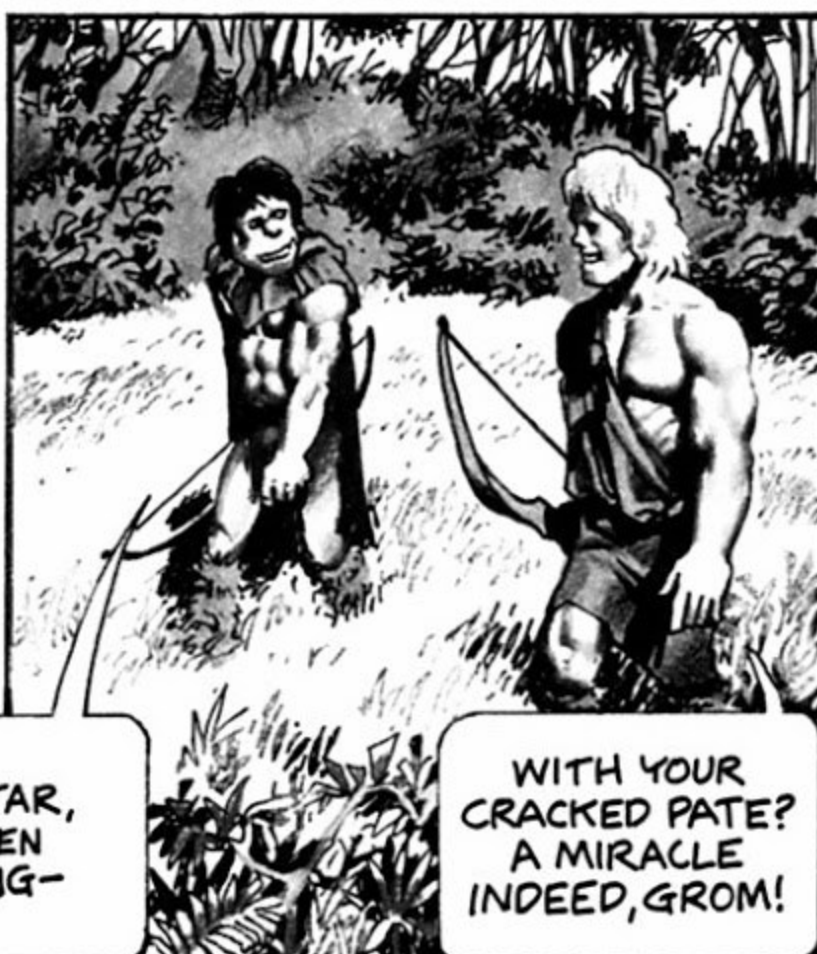
HotComic.net

BLOODSTAR AND LOKNAR WERE ALIKE IN MANY WAYS, BUT DIFFERED GREATLY IN TEMPERAMENT AND GOALS. LOKNAR LUSTED FOR THE AESIR CHIEFTAINSHIP WHILE BLOODSTAR WAS CONTENT TO FOLLOW QUIETLY. BYRDAG'S CONDITION CHANGED LITTLE AS THE DAYS PASSED. LOKNAR TURNED ALOOF AND MOODY, STAYING AWAY FROM HIS OLD FRIEND. WHENEVER THEY MET, BLOODSTAR NOTICED AN ODD LIGHT IN LOKNAR'S EYES THAT TROUBLED HIM.

HELVA TOO WAS DEPRESSED, SHADOWED BY GRIEF FOR HER FATHER. I ALSO CAUGHT HER WATCHING BLOODSTAR WITH AN EXPRESSION I THOUGHT I UNDERSTOOD ALL TOO WELL.



MY OWN WOUNDS MENDED QUICKLY. I SPENT A GREAT DEAL OF TIME WITH MY SAVIOR AND SOON BLOODSTAR MASTERED THE TONGUE OF THE JUNGLE FOLK. IT TOOK SOMEWHAT LONGER FOR ME TO LEARN HIS. WE BECAME HUNTING COMPANIONS—AND FRIENDS.



BLOODSTAR,
I'VE BEEN
THINKING—

WITH YOUR
CRACKED PATE?
A MIRACLE
INDEED, GROM!

NO-LISTEN!
THERE CAN BE
ADVANTAGES FOR BOTH
OUR PEOPLES IF THERE
IS PEACE BETWEEN US.
LET ME RETURN TO
MY TRIBE AND TELL
THEM OF THE WAYS
OF THE AESIR.

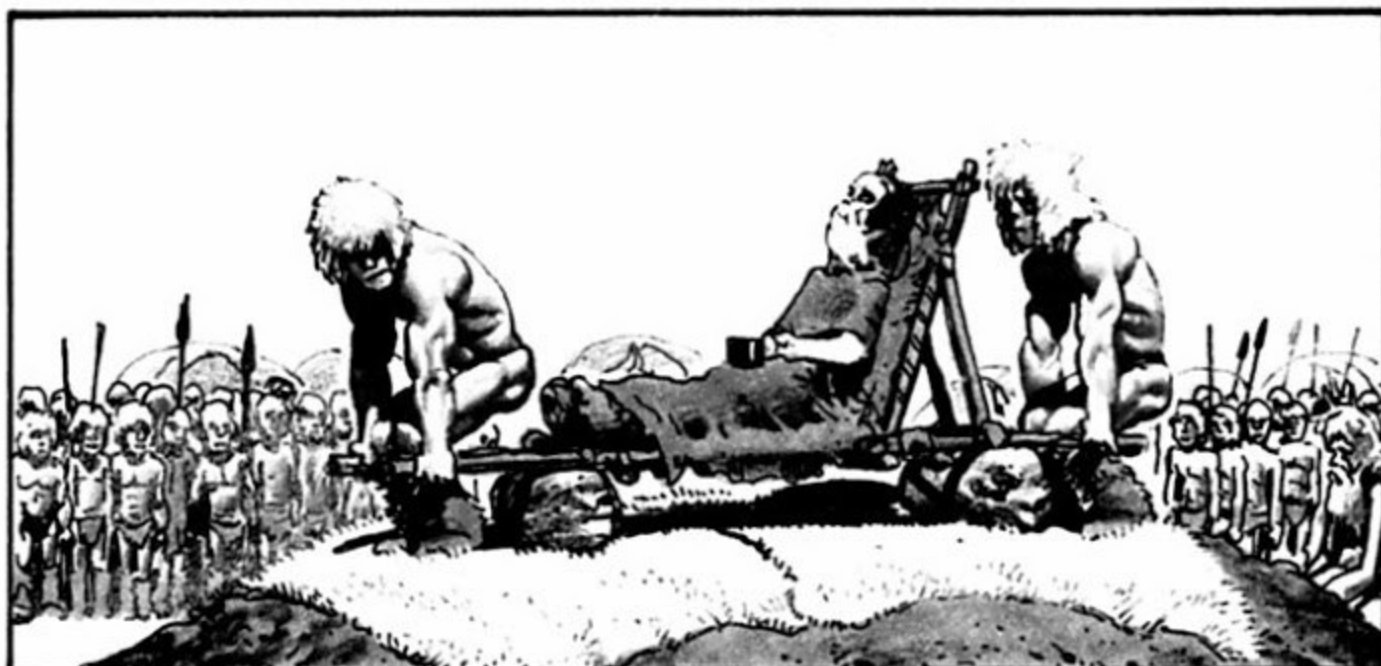


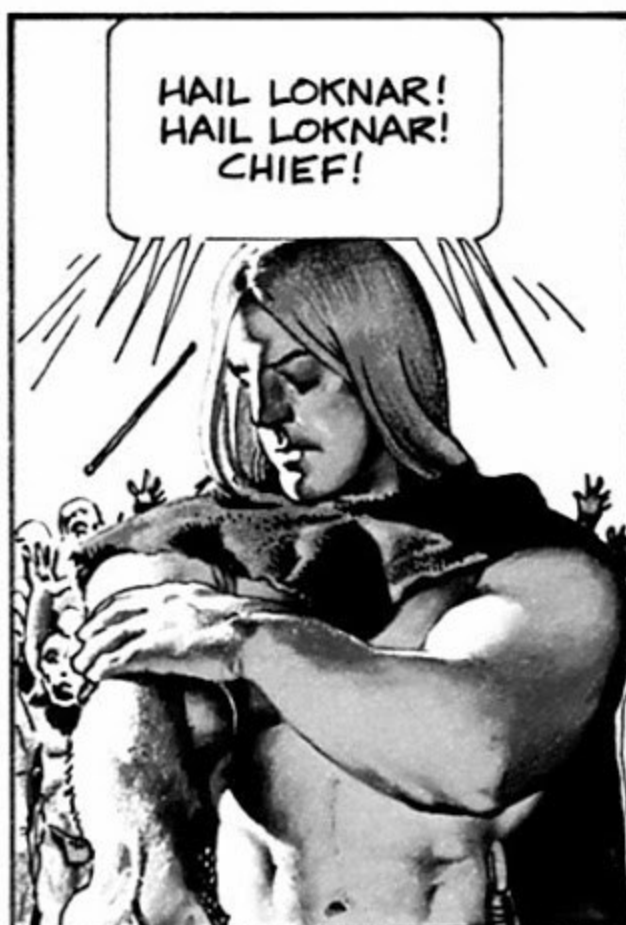


THOUGH BLOODSTAR HAD LITTLE FAITH IN MY PEACE-MAKING SKILLS, MY PEOPLE WERE IMPRESSED - BOTH BY THE FEROCITY OF THE YELLOWHAIR WARRIORS AND THEIR SPARING OF MY LIFE. WITHIN A WEEK, OUR CLAN CHIEFS EMERGED FROM THE JUNGLE TO THE RATTLE OF THE SACRED DRUMS.



OUR PEACE DELEGATION TOOK THE AESIR BY SURPRISE. THE ENTIRE TRIBE WAS CALLED TO THE COUNCIL MOUND. A HUSH FELL OVER THEM AS THEY BEHELD BYRDAG'S WASTED FORM AND FEVER-RIDDEN COUNTEenance.





BLOODSTAR CHEERED THE NEW LEADER LIKE THE REST, BUT HIS HEART WAS SAD AS HE WATCHED LOKNAR CARESS THE BAND OF LEADERSHIP. BLOODSTAR TURNED AND FOUND HELVA WATCHING HIM. THEIR EYES MET WITH AN INTENSE LONGING THAT CAN, IN A SINGLE INSTANT, UNITE THEM FOR ALL TIME.



HELVA TURNED AWAY, LOWERING HER HEAD AS A CRIMSON FLUSH OVERSPREAD HER FACE. SHE KNEW-AS DID HE- THEIR DESIRE WAS ALREADY DOOMED. BY CUSTOM AND LAW, SHE- THE DAUGHTER OF AN AESIR WARCHIEF- MUST GO VIRGINAL TO THE BED OF THE MAN ACKNOWLEDGED AS BYRDAG'S SUCCESSOR.



AND THOUGH HE HAD NO DESIRE TO BECOME A LEADER, BLOODSTAR REGRETTED IT WAS NOT HIS MASSIVE ARM THE BAND OF POWER ENCIRCLED. HIS LOVE FOR HELVA WOULD FOREVER SMOULDER, UNFED, IN THE HEARTH OF HIS HEART.



THAT NIGHT, AS LOKNAR SAT UPON BYRDAG'S THRONE, PEACE WAS MADE BETWEEN THE AESIR AND THE JUNGLE TRIBES. THE AESIR SWORE TO COLD YMIR WHILE MY PEOPLE MADE THEIR PACTS BY ZEG AND HIS NAMELESS CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT.

WE ALL SAT AROUND THE FIRES, FEASTING AND DRINKING THE POTENT LIQUOR OF FERMENTED FRUIT WHICH MADE US ALL SICK. THEREAFTER WE LIVED PEACEFULLY WITH EACH OTHER.



PREPARATIONS FOR THE WEDDING OF LOKNAR AND HELVA CAUSED MUCH EXCITEMENT AMONG THE AESIR. BLOODSTAR SHUNNED THESE FESTIVITIES, PREFERRING TO HUNT THE SILENT JUNGLES WITH ME. I COULD NOT BLAME HIM.



I LED HIM DEEP INTO THE INTERIOR, INTO BROODING VALLEYS WHICH HAD NEVER KNOWN THE SOUND OF MAN, HIGH ONTO THE WIND-HAUNTED HEIGHTS.

BUT THERE WAS ONE DARK VALLEY OF RUINS, TOWARD THE NORTH, INTO WHICH I WOULD ON NO ACCOUNT TAKE HIM. EVIL MAGIC STILL CLUNG TO THE STONWORK AND SHATTERED RELICS NEARLY HIDDEN BY THE CREEPERS.

GROM, I SHOULD LIKE TO EXAMINE THOSE RUINS MORE CLOSELY.

NO! A GREAT EVIL LIVES DOWN THERE! AN ENTIRE CLAN OF MY PEOPLE PERISHED THERE A LONG TIME AGO.

NO! ASK ME TO FACE A WEREBEAR OR A GHOSTIGER...OR WRESTLE THE MONSTER SATHA. I'D DO THAT TO AVOID ENTERING THAT VALLEY AGAIN!

FORTUNATELY I CONVINCED HIM TO ABANDON HIS FOOLHARDY IDEA. THE NEXT MORNING WE STARTED BACK TOWARD THE CAMP OF THE AESIR WITH FOUR SMALL LOPERS.

THESE PELTS WILL MAKE SOME FINE BOOTS AND LEGGINGS, EH?

GROM! AREN'T THOSE GHOSTIGER TRACKS?

LET'S FOLLOW THEM.

UH...THAT'S A BRAVE IDEA BLOODSTAR. BUT WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE TO DO WHEN WE CATCH UP WITH IT?

OH, I'LL THINK OF SOMETHING. NEVER KILLED A GHOSTIGER BEFORE. LET'S HANG THESE IN THE TREE.

IF WE DON'T FIND IT BY NIGHTFALL, WE'LL GO ON BACK.

ZEG PROTECT POOR OLD GROM!





THE GHOSTIGER SCREAMED IN PAIN AS IT BOUNDED TOWARD ITS ATTACKER. I WATCHED WITH MY HEART IN MY MOUTH AS BLOODSTAR CLOSED THE GAP WITH GIGANTIC BOUNDS.



BLOODSTAR SPRANG AT THE FURRY TERROR.

THE TIGER'S JAWS OPENED WIDE. HIS SPEAR CLASHED OFF A FANG AND PLUNGED ON DEEP INTO THE CREATURE'S BRAIN. THE SWORDLIKE TEETH SWEEPED DOWNWARD, RIPPING INTO BLOODSTAR'S CHEST, CLOSING ROUND HIS ARM.



BLOODSTAR WENT DOWN BENEATH THE CREATURE'S MASSIVE WEIGHT.

AND STILL THE DYING BEAST TRIED TO REND ITS PREY, DRAWING UP ITS HIND LIMBS TO DISEMBOWEL... HIS BLADE ROSE...



A GOUT OF BLOOD SPURTED FORTH, DRENCHING THE MAN WITH ITS ACRID WARMTH.



THE GHOSTTIGER'S EYES GLAZED... MAN AND BEAST LAY STILL FOR A LONG MOMENT. THEN BLOODSTAR STIRRED. I GAVE A HUGE SHOUT OF JOY.

GROM! GET THIS THING OFF ME!

BLOODSTAR! ARE YOU HURT?



OH, HELVA! NO, I... UH! COME CLOSER. I LOVE YOU...

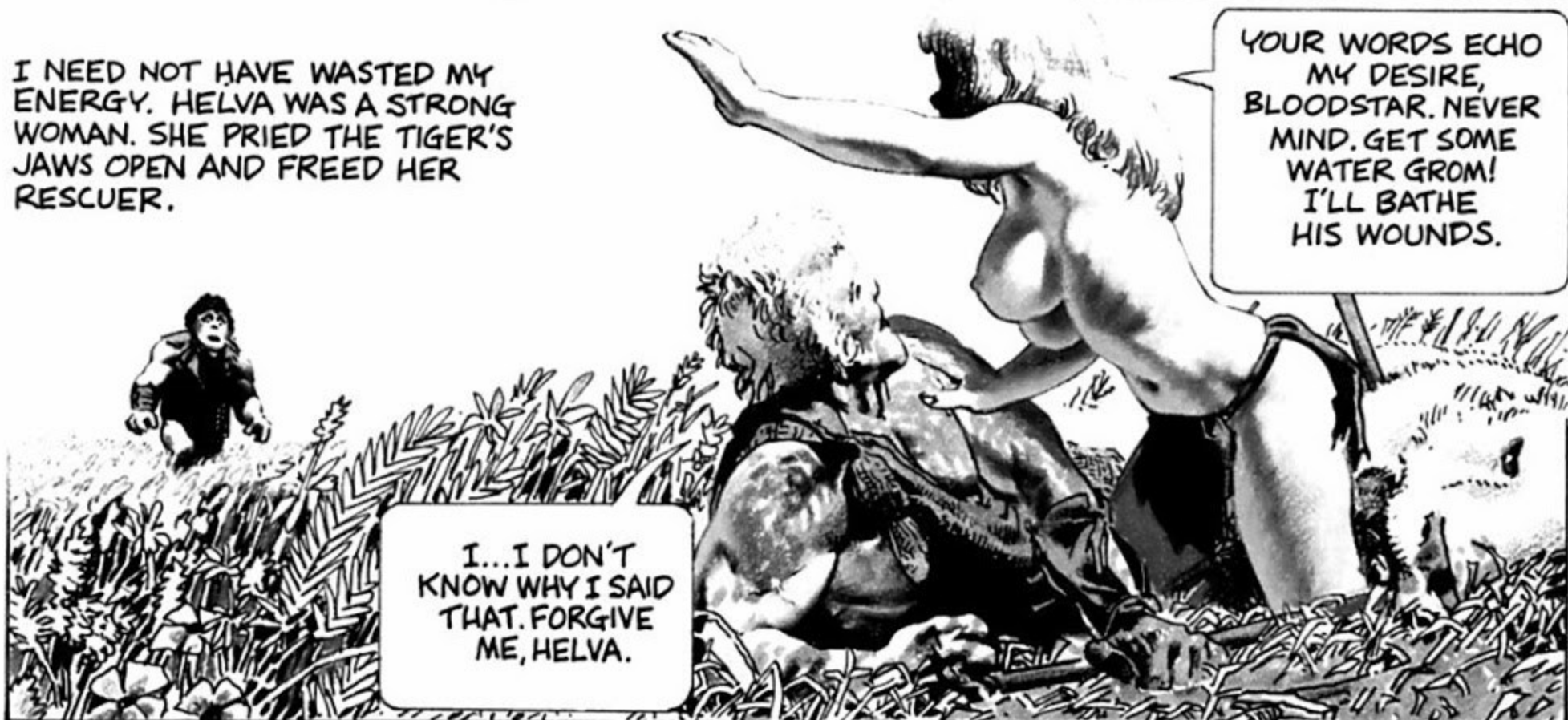


I CLIMBED DOWN FROM THE TREE WHERE I HAD SOUGHT A VANTAGE POINT—MERELY TO WATCH THE FIGHT, OF COURSE.



I NEED NOT HAVE WASTED MY ENERGY. HELVA WAS A STRONG WOMAN. SHE PRIED THE TIGER'S JAWS OPEN AND FREED HER RESCUER.

YOUR WORDS ECHO MY DESIRE, BLOODSTAR. NEVER MIND. GET SOME WATER GROM! I'LL BATHE HIS WOUNDS.



I...I DON'T KNOW WHY I SAID THAT. FORGIVE ME, HELVA.



THIS IS A
BEAUTIFUL
SPOT.

YES, I COME
HERE OFTEN TO
THINK AND
DREAM... OF YOU.
IT WILL BE OUR
SECRET PLACE.

I WENT BACK TO
RETRIEVE THE LOPERS.
WHILE I WAS GONE,
SOMETHING OF FAR-
REACHING CONSEQUENCE
OCCURRED BETWEEN
BLOODSTAR AND HELVA.
THE NEARNESS OF THE
GIRL'S LUSH FIGURE WAS
HAVING DEVASTATING
CONSEQUENCES UPON
HIS BODY.



GIVE ME YOUR
LOIN-POUCH TO WASH
IT'S ALL COVERED
WITH BLOOD.

HELVA, I...

BLOODSTAR, NOTHING
SHOULD STAND BETWEEN
US NOW. YOU VENTURED
YOUR LIFE FOR MINE
AND YOU'VE SAID YOU
LOVE ME. NO NEED TO
BE EMBARRASSED.



SEE? JUST
SKIN BETWEEN
US. I WON'T EVEN...
OH!



THE QUIET GLEN ECHOED TO
THEIR CRIES OF PASSION.

THEIR LOVE-DANCE ENDED, THEY
LAY INTERTWINED. SUDDENLY
THEY WERE AWARE OF HOSTILE EYES.

THEY HAD BEEN CAUGHT IN AN ACT THAT VIOLATED AESIR CUSTOM. HELVA HAD BEEN PLEDGED TO WED LOKNAR. BUT NOW, NO LONGER A MAIDEN, SHE WOULD BE CONSIDERED UNCLEAN FOR THE NEW CHIEF'S BED. LOKNAR HAD SEEN EVERYTHING. HIS FEATURES WERE TWISTED WITH RAGE AND JEALOUSY. THOUGH HELVA COULD NOT BE PHYSICALLY PUNISHED, BLOODSTAR COULD...



ON YOUR FEET, DEFILER! YOU HAVE SULLIED MY CHIEFTAINSHIP I'LL UNMAN YOU WHERE YOU STAND!

HOLD, LOKNAR! THERE MUST BE A TRIAL.



OH YES... THERE WILL INDEED BE A TRIAL. THE TEETH OF YMIR!

LOOK NOT TO ME FOR MERCY, MY FORMER COMRADE. YOU'RE DEAD TO ME!



LOKNAR, WE HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING WRONG. YMIR KNOWS IT!

THE TEETH OF YMIR! ONLY THRICE BEFORE, IN BLOODSTAR'S LIFETIME, HAD THIS ORDEAL BEEN USED AS HE WHISPERED TO ME. THOUGH NO ONE HAD EVER SURVIVED IT, HE VOWED HE WOULD. YMIR, HE SAID, KNEW THAT HIS LOVE FOR HELVA WAS GOOD. HE ASKED ME TO WATCH OVER HER AS THE GUARDS TOOK HIM OFF.

WHY DO THEY DO THIS BLOODSTAR?



GET AWAY FROM THAT CAGE YOU! NO ONE'S ALLOWED TO SPEAK TO THE PRISONER!

ALL MORNING LONG I HEARD THE SOUND OF AXE AGAINST WOOD AS TRIBESMEN CUT STAKES. WATCHING THEM HAMMER THE TERRIBLE 'TEETH' INTO PLACE. I WAS FILLED WITH A TERRIBLE FOREBODING.



DAY ADVANCED TOWARD DUSK. AN OUTSIDER, I WAS NOT PERMITTED TO WATCH... BUT I CREPT BACK ANYWAY. A VAGUE PLAN WAS FORMING IN MY MIND.



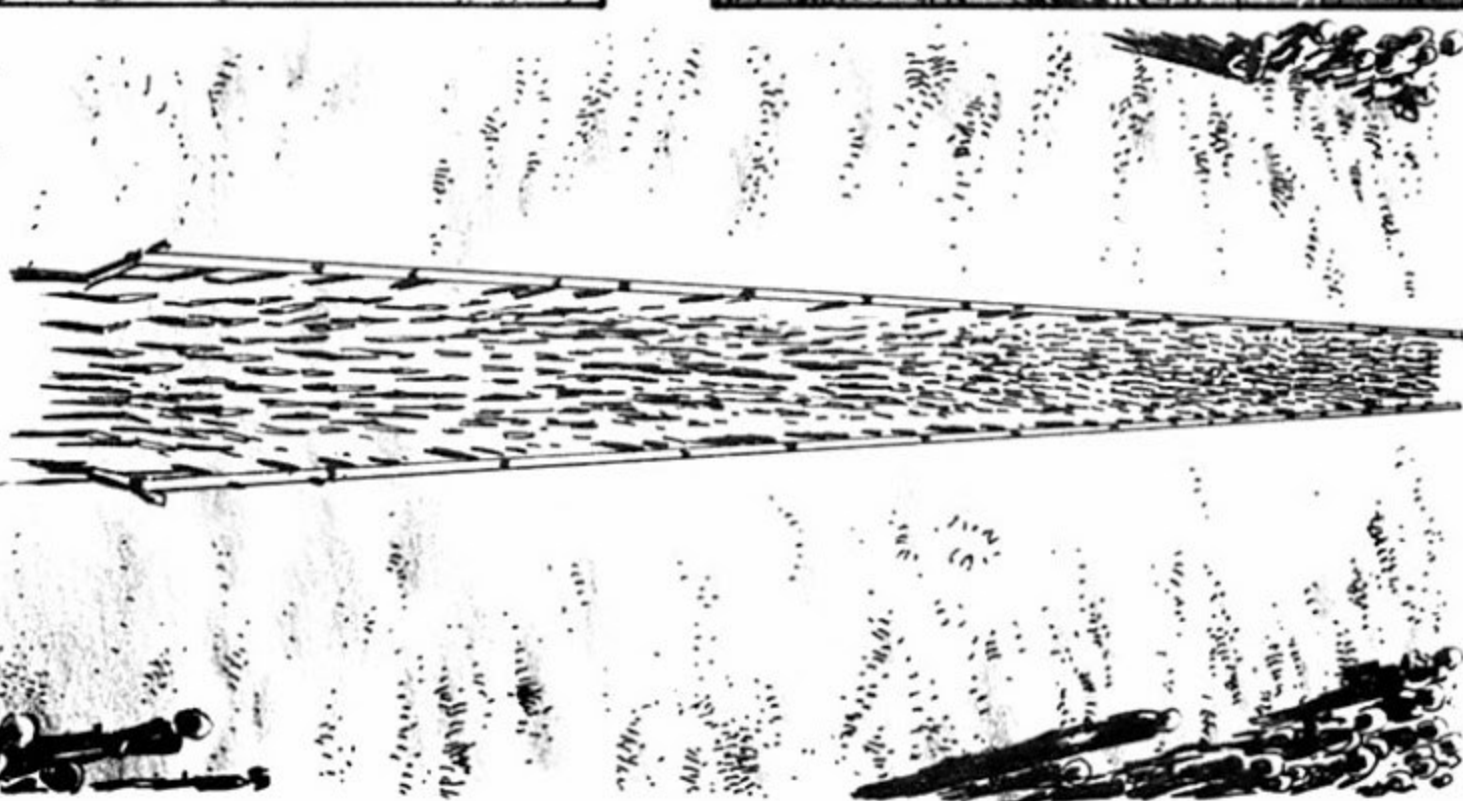
BYRDAG, GAUNT AND HAGGARD, WAS A FIGURE OF WRATH.



BUT NEVER HAD BLOODSTAR LOOKED TALLER OR STRONGER AS HE STOOD BEFORE THEM ALL.

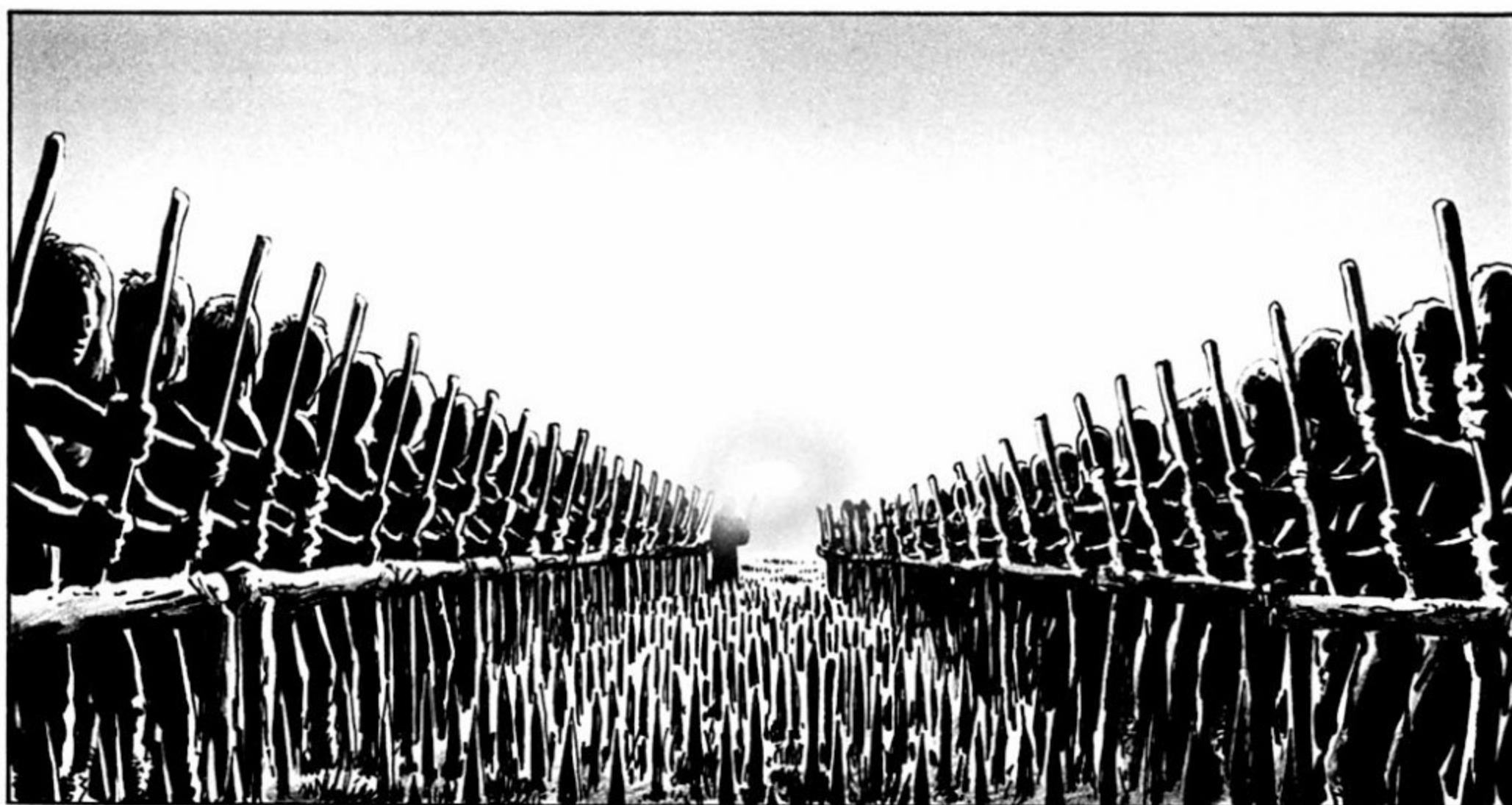
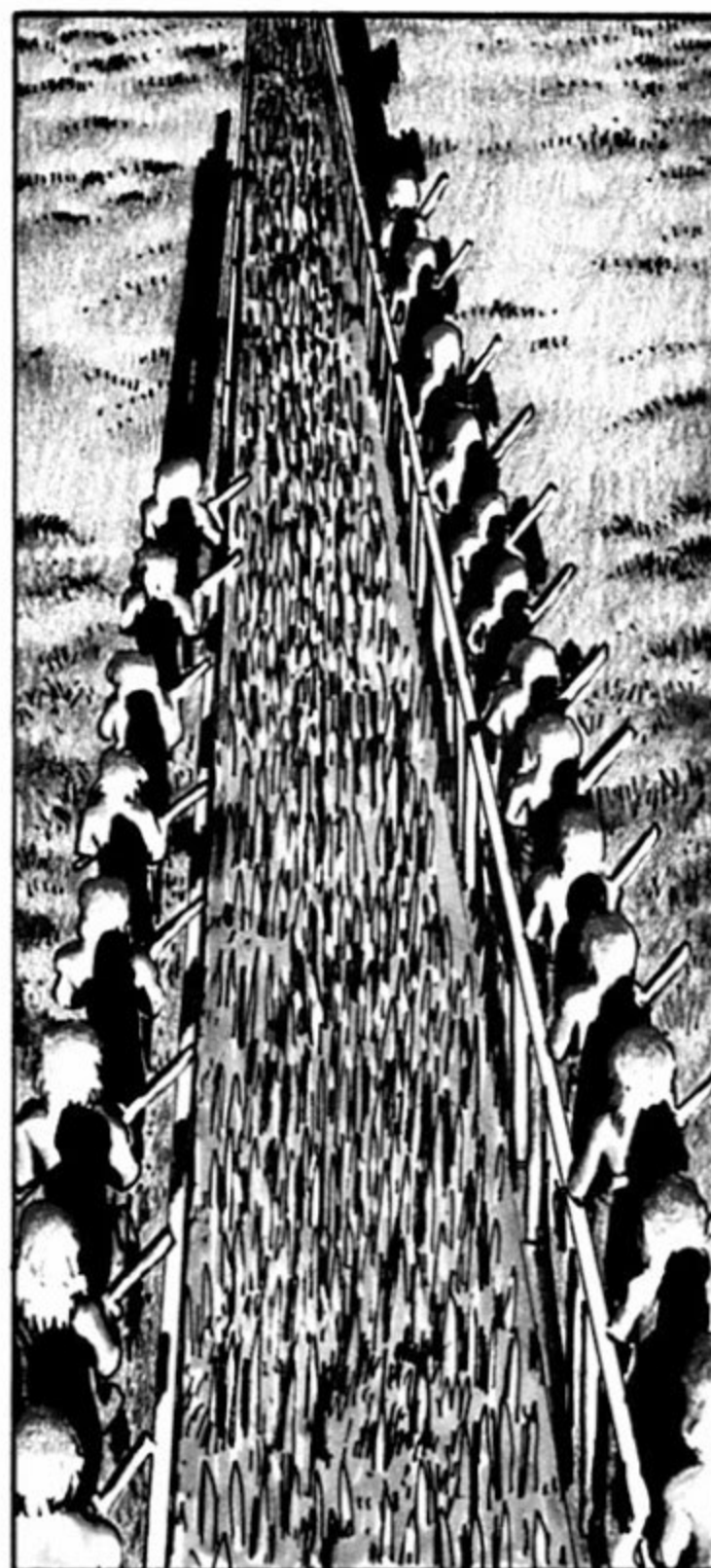


THE JAWS OF YMIR WAITED- A RECTANGULAR COURSE TWENTY-FIVE YARDS LONG BY TWO WIDE. WOODEN RAILS RAN ITS LENGTH. HUNDREDS OF DEADLY, SHARPENED STAKES-THE 'TEETH'-DOTTED THE COURSE, STANDING OUT IN BOLD RELIEF.





THERE WAS NO EXPRESSION UPON BLOODSTAR'S FACE AS HE STUDIED THE COURSE. I WONDERED IF HE WAS AFRAID. I REMEMBERED HOW HE HAD ONCE TOLD ME, "MOST BATTLES ARE WON OR LOST IN THE MINDS AND HEARTS BEFORE THE FIRST BLOW IS EVEN STRUCK." AS I WATCHED, FIFTY AESIR MEN AND WOMEN LINED THEMSELVES ALONG THE RAILS, ALL WITH LONG STAVES AND CLUBS. AND AT THE END OF THE COURSE, OUTLINED AGAINST THE BLOODY GLARE OF THE SINKING SUN, STOOD HIS FORMER FRIEND LOKNAR-TO GREET HIM WITH THE FINAL BLOW.



BLOODSTAR, YOU'VE BEEN BROUGHT BEFORE US TO FACE OUR GOD FOR THE EVIL ACT YOU COMMITTED. IT'S AN ACT FOR WHICH OUR PUNISHMENT IS BANISHMENT. NOW WE SHALL SEE IF THIS ACT HAS ALSO ANGERED ALMIGHTY YMIR.



YMIR, WE OFFER THIS MAN TO YOU FOR JUDGEMENT. IF YOU ALLOW HIM TO PASS THROUGH THE JAWS ALIVE, NO AESIR WILL RAISE A HAND AGAINST HIM. HE WILL BE PERMITTED TO LEAVE WITHOUT FURTHER HARM. BUT HE SHALL BE OUTCAST FOR ALL TIME.



THE TESTERS WILL USE ONLY STICKS—NO BLADES OR SPEARS! HE IS NOT TO BE STRUCK ON THE LEGS. LET THE ORDEAL BEGIN!

YMIR GUIDE YOUR STEPS, BLOODSTAR.



SUDDENLY, THE ENTIRE TRIBE BEGAN YELLING TAUNTS AT THE PRISONER. BLOODSTAR IGNORED THEM, TURNING TO SMILE AND WAVE AT HELVA.



HER CHEEKS WERE WET WITH TEARS



BLOODSTAR TOOK A DEEP BREATH—AS DID I—AND SPRANG INTO THE JAWS OF YMIR WITH A DEFIANT SHOUT.





IT WAS INCREDIBLE. BLOODSTAR DANCED BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE SPIKES, HIS BARE FEET NARROWLY MISSING THE TEETH. HE DUCKED AND WHEELED AND RAISED HIS ARMS TO FEND OFF OR DEFLECT THE BLOWS. THE STAVES HISSED THROUGH THE AIR. THE SOUND OF THEIR IMPACT AGAINST HIS FLESH WAS FRIGHTFUL TO HEAR. A MADNESS SEEMED TO POSSESS BLOODSTAR'S FORMER TRIBESMEN. I COULD HEAR THEIR SNARLS AND CURSES OF HATRED, SCREAMS FOR HIS BLOOD, SHOUTS FOR HIS DEATH!



I GASPED-AND ALMOST FELL OFF MY PERCH.





THE ASSAILANT WHO HAD
TRIPPED BLOODSTAR SWUNG
AT HIM AGAIN.



UNLUCKILY FOR HIM!



NOW I COULD SEE HIM FIGHTING
BACK, PUSHING CLUBS ASIDE
AND STRIKING HIS ATTACKERS
BEFORE THEY STRUCK HIM.



A CLUB WAS THRUST INTO
BLOODSTAR'S HANDS-PLACED
THERE PERHAPS BY SOME
COMRADE WHOSE LIFE HE
HAD ONCE SAVED.



HE HAD GAINED THE HALF-
WAY POINT! THE TESTERS
JAMMED TOGETHER TO GET
AT HIM, BUT THE PRESS OF
THEIR NUMBERS HINDERED
THEM. MANY FELL BACK,
CLUTCHING THEMSELVES,
AS BLOODSTAR THRUST AND
JABBED. IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE
TO SEE WHO WAS HITTING
WHOM.



NO ONE WHO HAD UNDERGONE THIS ORDEAL HAD EVER GOTTEN THAT FAR. A MASS OF WOUNDS, BLOODSTAR NOW LURCHED PAST AS WE ALL WATCHED. HE MIGHT WIN AFTER ALL! I HEARD THE SCREAMS FOR HIS BLOOD FADE.



BUT THEN I SAW LOKNAR AT THE END OF THE GAUNTLET. BLOODSTAR'S ENEMY WOULD NOT LET HIM PASS.

WITH SCANT YARDS TO GO, THE CROWD BEGAN TO CHEER BLOODSTAR WILDLY.



JUST THEN A BLOW FROM BEHIND SENT HIM REELING TOWARD LOKNAR.





BLOODSTAR'S IRON
HEEL SMASHED INTO
HIS CHEST—

MY HEART WAS IN MY
MOUTH AS I WATCHED
HIM LAND IN A PANTING
HEAP. THE TRIBE CHEERED
ITS LUSTY APPROVAL.



BUT LOKNAR
WOULD NOT GIVE UP!



I ROARED OUT MY JUBILATION. LOKNAR TRIPPED OVER THE VERY SPEAR HE HAD MEANT TO SLAY BLOODSTAR WITH...

ONTO THE IMPALING SPIKES!



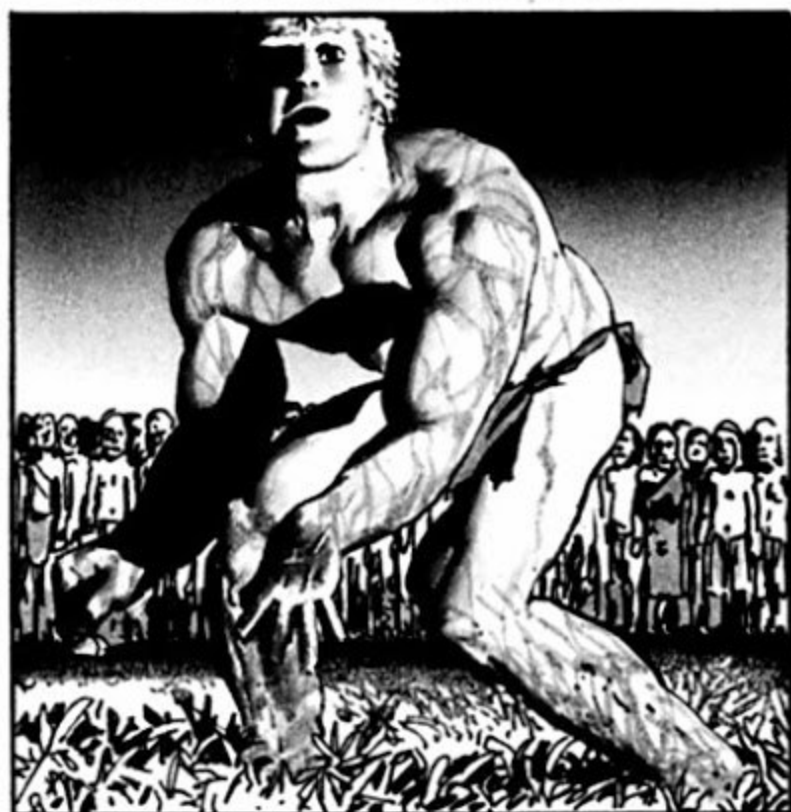
HIS CRY OF AGONY SPLIT THE DUSK, SILENCING THE BLOODTHIRSTY PACK.



THOSE CHILLING CRIES ECHOED ACROSS THE CAMPSITE AS HE FLED INTO THE DARKNESS.

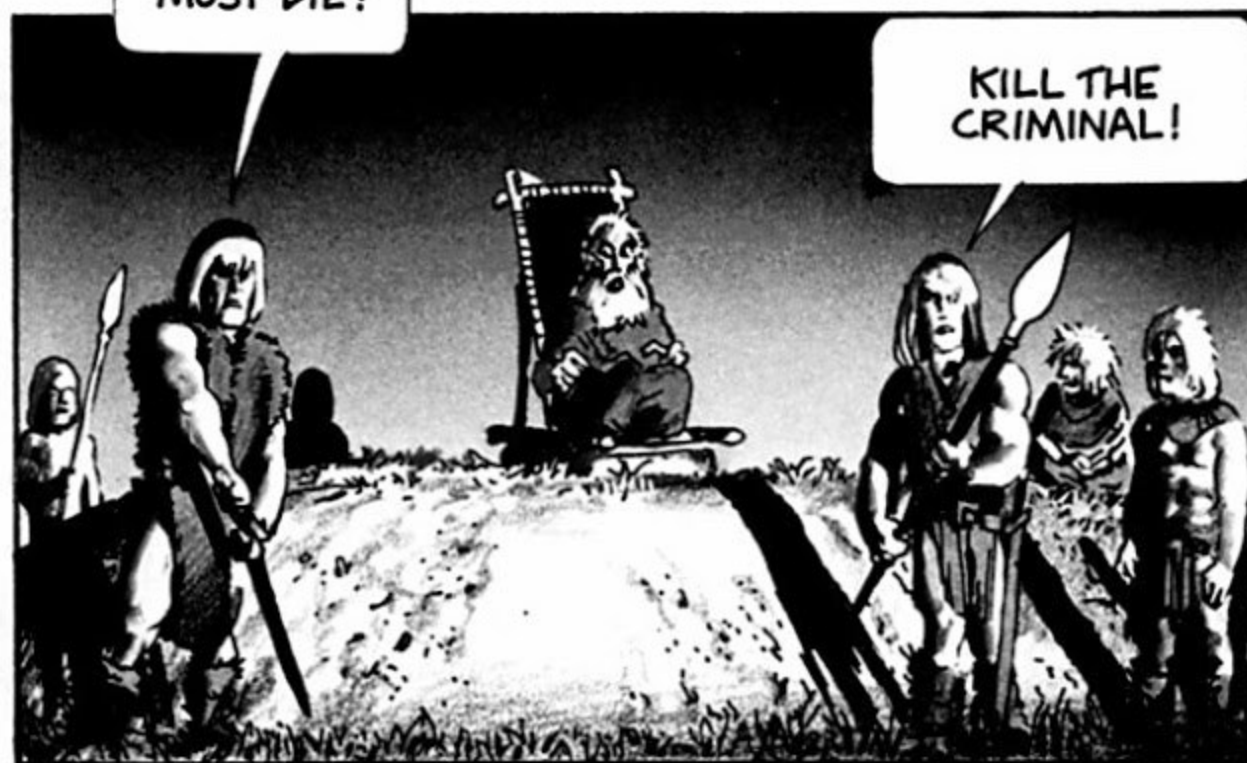


BLOODSTAR CROUCHED IN PAIN, WAITING. BUT HE HAD WON! HE LIVED! YMIR HAD HIM!



HE STILL MUST DIE!

THERE WAS MOVEMENT BEHIND OLD BYRDAG. SOME OF LOKNAR'S FRIENDS STEPPED FORWARD, DRAWING THEIR WEAPONS.



KILL THE CRIMINAL!

BYRDAG'S VOICE WAS SHRILL WITH ANGER. THE WARRIORS LET THEIR SPEAR POINTS DROP.



TOUCH HIM NOT, YOU COWARDLY SCUM! TWICE THE AESIR HAVE BEEN DEFILED BY BLOODSTAR AND LOKNAR. WOULD YOU ANGER OUR GOD A THIRD TIME? THROW YOUR WEAPONS DOWN BEFORE YMIR DESTROYS US ALL!

BLOODSTAR! GREAT YMIR HAS GRANTED YOUR LIFE BE SPARED. BUT YOU MUST LEAVE US FOREVER-ON PAIN OF INSTANT DEATH SHOULD YOU EVER RETURN.



HIS BODY ON FIRE, BLOODSTAR SCARCELY HEHEED THE OLD MAN'S PRONOUNCEMENT OF DOOM. HE COULD NOT FIND HELVA ANYWHERE! HIS EYES SEARCHED THE TENTS. SHE WAS GONE! HIS HEART BROKE.

GO!
INTO THE
DARKNESS!

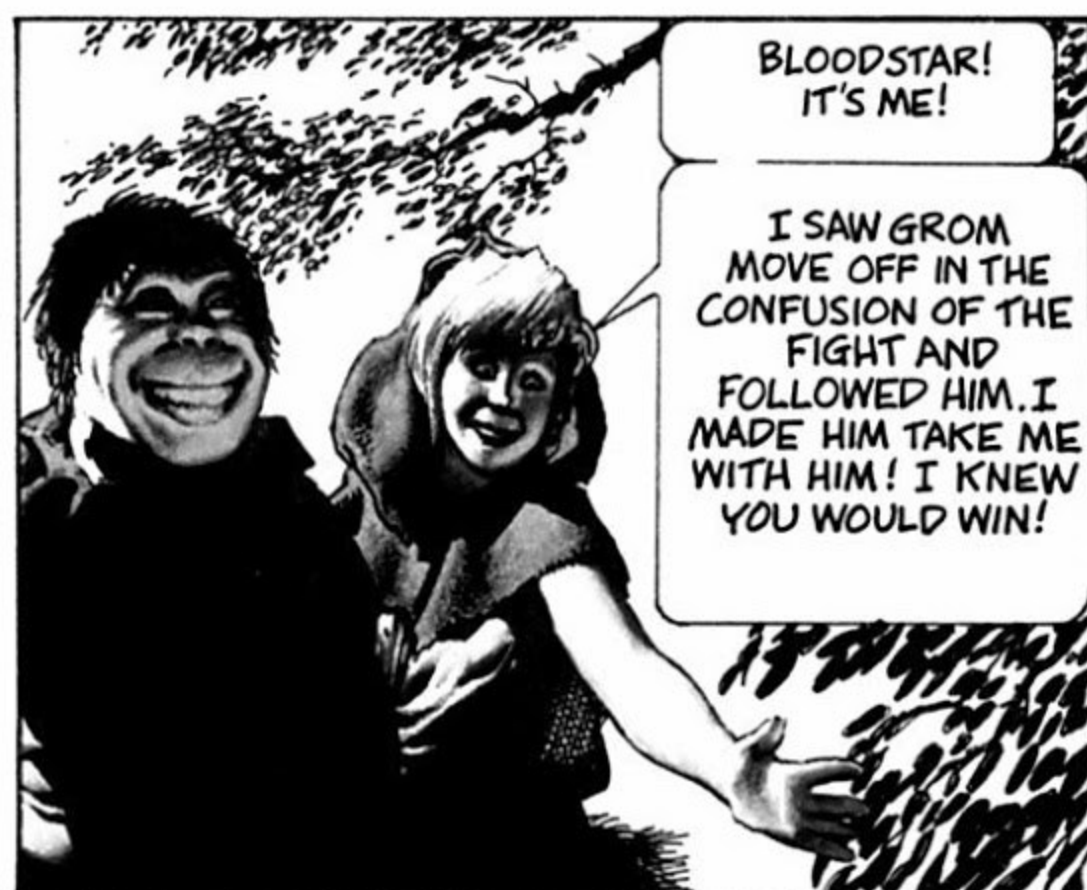
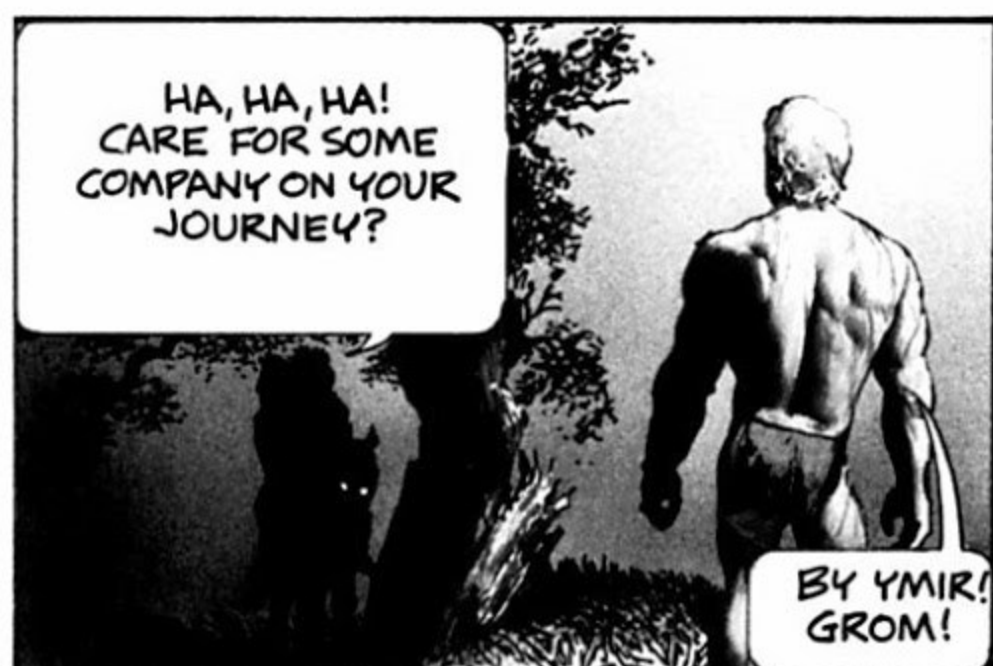


BLOODSTAR STAGGERED THROUGH THE NIGHT. HIS BRUISED, BATTERED BODY ACHED FROM THE BLOWS IT HAD SUFFERED. HE LIMPED ALONG, FEELING BLOOD FLOWING FROM HIS MANY OPEN WOUNDS.



AND WITHIN HIM HE MUST HAVE FELT AN EVEN INTENSER AGONY. TEARS BEGAN TRICKLING DOWN HIS CHEEKS, MIXING WITH THE BLOOD.

SUDDENLY HE PAUSED AS HE SENSED ME WATCHING HIM FROM BENEATH THE TOSSING BRANCHES. I THOUGHT FOR ONCE I HAD HIM SCORED, BUT—



AND SO WE THREE BEGAN THE LONG AND LONELY ROAD INTO EXILE. OUR JUBILANT LAUGHTER ROSE TO GREET THE FIRST STARS. WE WERE HEADING INTO THE UNKNOWN, BUT WE WERE NO LONGER ALONE. AND WE NOW HAD—
HOPE!



DARK BIRTH

The ensuing days were, happily, kind to the three exiled wanderers.

Outcasts, they rode some distance down the Northern Abyss to a place where they were certain they would not be followed either by the AEsir or by any of Grom's race.

There they set up a small compound and got on with the business of everyday life according to the old cycles of land and sky, wind and sun.

Shadows moved across the plain, but they were the friendly shadows of billowing clouds or rippling flocks of wild birds ripe for plucking from the sky. Or they were the gently stirring shadows of trees heavily fruit-laden, or the shadows of their own loyal mounts as they rode at the hunt.

Bloodstar, Helva, and Grom laughed like children as they went about their appointed round of tasks. Each day brought a new surprise, a new delight, a new reason for merriment, a new hold on a life they had not dreamed possible.

It was old Grom who, with his keen nose, sniffed out a spring bubbling up from some deep-buried mountain root to emerge, ice-cold and clear as crystal, between the gnarled roots of a lordly tree.

At first, he had quinched up his nose while he smelled the liquid, then shut his eyes tight as he tasted it (it might be poison—or worse!). Then his broad face had split almost in half with a huge grin of satisfaction as he threw himself headfirst into the shallow pool, gasping and sputtering from the cold.

Swallowing greedy gulps, he suddenly had become shame-stricken and rose to timidly offer the first cup to his friend's woman with an embarrassed smile.

Bloodstar labored secretly for days, vanishing mysteriously each dawn and returning long after rosy sunset—always without an answer to Helva's questions as to his whereabouts during the day. His enigmatic smile often infuriated this daughter of an AEsir war-chief who was accustomed to getting her own way.

Finally, one afternoon, Bloodstar came bursting in to sweep the girl up in his arms and ride with her to the hut he had finally finished for them, complete with outbuildings for the animals, in a fold of the nearby hills. Helva's tears of happiness and squeals of joy more than compensated for his blistered hands and the persistent ache in his back from lugging wood and stone over long distances.

And Helva it was who delighted all the rest with her songs and her cooking. When her two men were back from the long day's hunt, she would sing to them over dinner, and tell them stories and legends from her AEsir childhood, tales of places and beings cold, white, and eternal.

As the days flowed by, what had happened to them in the village of the AEsir—Loknar's treachery and ultimate fate, Byrdag's wrathful pronouncement of banishment—dimmed in their memories, becoming little more than an occasionally remembered bad experience. Bloodstar's scars were the only visible reminder of the incident.

But there were nights when Bloodstar would wake to find Helva crying for her lost father in her sleep. Taking the girl in his arms, he would hold her against his broad chest until her sobs ceased and she was peacefully slumbering once more.

Life was good to them on the plain. Bathed in clear light and shadow, they prospered.

And unseen, but not unfelt, life began to grow and swell and prosper within Helva also: like the greening grasslands, the cyclic process of creation and birth had begun. She smiled with her secret knowledge as she watched Bloodstar and Grom trudging home from the hills.

She was carrying Bloodstar's child; his golden seed had taken root.

Soon she would be fulfilled!

Helva smiled to herself as she dreamed of the future and waited for her mate to return.

And more and more she also thought of her father as she felt the first tentative kicks begin . . .



FOUR

THE GRASSLANDS TEEMED WITH GAME. AS A RESULT, WE ALL GREW LAZY AND CONTENT OUT THERE ON THE PLAIN. I THANKED KIND ZEG EACH DAY THAT SUCH GOOD FORTUNE HAD BEEN GIVEN US. NEVER WERE TWO PEOPLE HAPPIER OR MORE IN LOVE THAN BLOODSTAR AND HELVA.

ONLY ONE BIRD?
WAS YOUR LUCK
THAT POOR?

THERE'S PLENTY
OF GAME, HELVA
THIS IS ONLY THE
MORNING PREY.
BESIDES, YOU SHOULDN'T
COMPLAIN. HAVEN'T YOU
BEEN OVEREATING
LATELY?

THE SEASON
IS TURNING. THE
BIRDS FEEL IT.
I FEEL IT.

SOON HEAVY
RAINS WILL COME.
GOOD THING-UH!
'OVEREATING?'



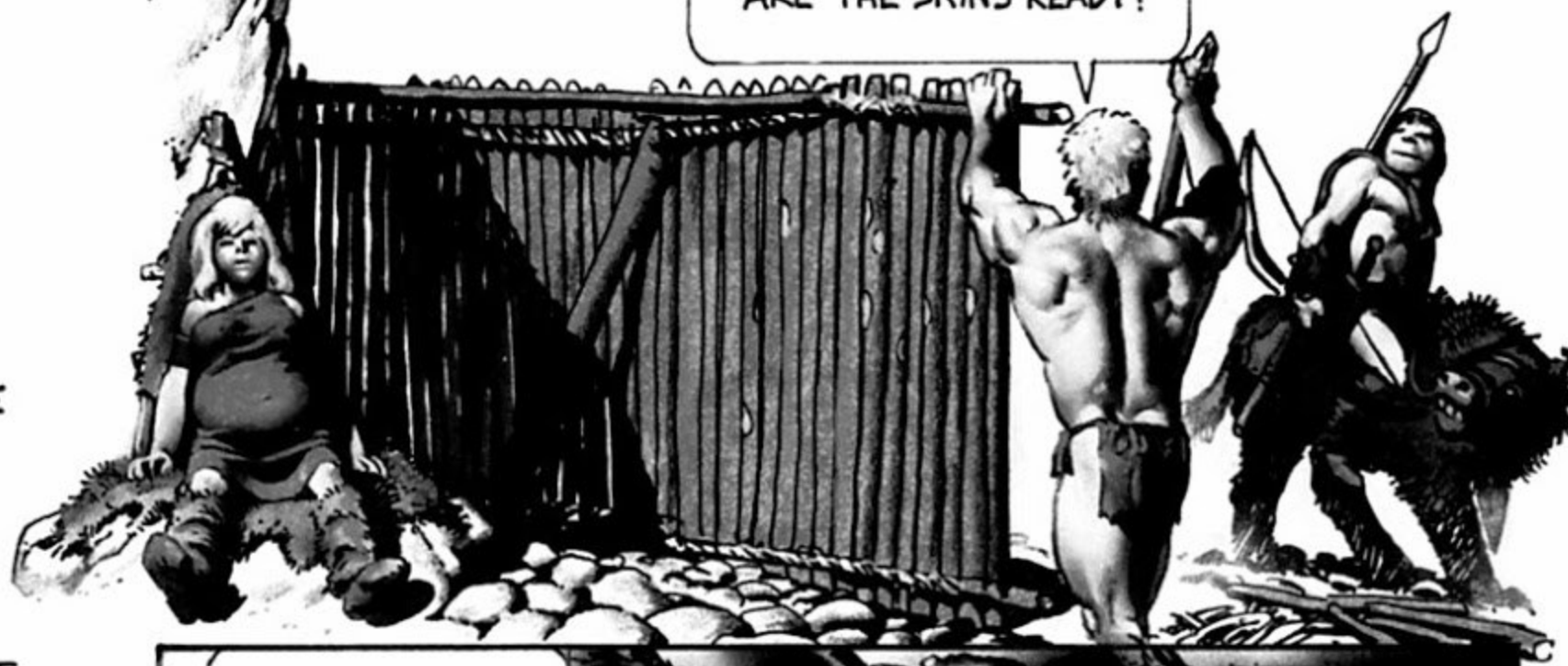
BLOODSTAR, I DON'T
THINK HELVA'S DIET IS THE
REASON FOR HER INCREASE IN
GIRTH. IN FACT, I SUSPECT IT
WILL INCREASE YET FURTHER.



WHAT DO YOU MEAN, GROM?
I... HELVA! IS IT TRUE?
ARE YOU REALLY...?
YMIK! HADN'T YOU
BETTER LIE DOWN?

NO, GO AHEAD.
I WANT TO FINISH THE
ENCLOSURE WHILE THERE'S
STILL LIGHT.
ARE THE SKINS READY?

AS I PREDICTED,
THE FRUIT WITHIN
HELVA'S LOINS GREW
AND RIPPENED.
BLOODSTAR REBUILT
THE SHELTER,
MAKING IT LARGER
TO ACCOMODATE THE
NEW MEMBER OF
OUR TRIBE.



HELVA CAME DUE ONE
STORMY NIGHT WHILE RAIN
THUNDERED ON OUR ROOF
AND LIGHTNING LASHED
THE DARKNESS. BLOODSTAR
BECAME AS NERVOUS AND
ANXIOUS AS AN OLD WOMAN.

GODS!
WE SHOULD NEVER
HAVE LEFT AESIR!
THE CHILD IS
DOOMED!

SHUT UP AND STOP
WORRYING. I'VE ATTENDED
BIRTHS BEFORE.
FETCH SOME WATER.

-AND SEE WHAT'S
TROUBLING GREYTAIL.
DAMN BEAST IS
HOWLING...





STOP THAT WHINING
OUT HERE! YOU CAN'T BE
HUNGRY AGAIN!



WHAT'S THE
MATTER, GIRL? ARE
YOU SICK?



WHAT?
WELL, I'LL BE...EASY,
GREYTAIL.

WHERE'S THAT
WATER? WE NEED IT
IN HERE!



HERE. I'VE GOT
TO HELP THE WOLFMUTE.
SHE'S BIRTHING A CUB!

OH? ALL RIGHT,
WE DON'T NEED
YOU IN HERE WITH
US ANYWAY.



HELVA! GROM!
TAKE A LOOK AT
GREYTAIL'S PUP!



HERE, DADDY,
I'LL TRADE YOU
THAT FOR THIS.

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE LOOK OF WONDER AND HAPPINESS ON YOUR FATHER'S FACE WHEN HE TOOK YOU IN HIS ARMS FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME. TEARS GLISTENED IN HIS EYES AS HE SAW THE MARK UPON YOUR FOREHEAD. HE SPOKE YOUR NAME—AND HIS—SOFTLY.

BLOODSTAR.



THOSE WERE HAPPY DAYS FOR US THERE IN OUR REFUGE. HUNTING WAS NOT AS GOOD DURING WET WEATHER, BUT FISHING WAS BETTER. AND WE ALL FOUND TIME TO SPOIL THE BABY.



LOOK AT THAT! STRONG AS A LION! HE'S A BORN WARRIOR, JUST LIKE HIS FATHER.

THOUGH HELVA WAS HAPPY, WE COULD SENSE A SADNESS DEEP WITHIN HER, A LONGING DENIED.

OH, BLOODSTAR! HOW I WISH MY FATHER COULD SEE OUR SON. MY FATHER...



MY FATHER...



IT CAME AS NO SURPRISE
TO ME WHEN THEY
ANNOUNCED THEIR PLANS.



WE'RE GOING BACK
AS SOON AS THE RAIN
TIME ENDS. IT MAY BE
DANGEROUS, GROM.
WILL YOU—

FOOLISH TO ASK!
I'LL NOT ABANDON
MY NEW FAMILY.

THE DAMP MONTHS PASSED. ONCE
AGAIN THE AIR BECAME WARM.
IDYLIC DAYS FLOWED BY LIKE
WATER THROUGH OUR FINGERS.
BUT APPREHENSION GNAWS
AT ME ALL THE TIME.

HA, HA, HA!



I COULD SEE THAT BLOODSTAR TOO WAS
APPARENTLY STRUGGLING WITH SOME INNER
CONFLICT. HE CONTINUED TO PUT OFF THE
RETURN JOURNEY. HELVA SENSED IT TOO.



WELL, ARE WE
GOING OR NOT?
YOU SAID—

I'M SORRY, HELVA.
TOMORROW
WE START OUT.



IT'S BEEN A LONG
TIME, BLOODSTAR.
I KNOW THEY BANISHED
YOU, BUT...THEY'VE
PROBABLY FORGIVEN AND
FORGOTTEN US BY NOW.

WHAT DID WE DO
WRONG, EXCEPT HOLD EACH
OTHER, THAT WE SHOULD
HAVE TO BE FORGIVEN?



I'M SORRY,
I KNOW YOU DON'T
WANT TO LEAVE
HERE. BUT I WANT
TO SEE MY
FATHER SO MUCH.

I KNOW, MY
LOVE. IT'S JUST
THAT I FEEL—



PERHAPS WE COULD
STOP ONE OF YOUR
FORMER FRIENDS
OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE
AND FIND OUT
WHAT THE MOOD
THERE IS.

WELL DONE, GROM!
WE'LL DO
JUST THAT!



SUN BLAZED DOWN UPON US.
WARM BREEZES FAWNED OUR
FACES. WE TRAVELED ALONE
AND UNDISTURBED. IT LOOKED
AS IF WE MIGHT CONTINUE
THAT WAY FOREVER.

I LOVED TO WATCH YOUR
FATHER'S FACE AS HE PLAYED
WITH YOU. YOU GREW FAST
IN THAT MILD CLIME.

HA, HA, HA! WHAT A
LITTLE STRUTTER! WE
SHOULD NAME HIM
BLOODSTAR THE
WANDERER.

DARK THUNDERHEADS WERE
BOILING ON THE WORLD'S RIM
WHEN WE CAME TO A SPOT
A DAY'S MARCH FROM THE
AESIR VILLAGE.



REMEMBER
THIS PLACE,
HELVA?

YES...I DO,
IT'S OUR
PLACE,
WHERE WE
FIRST...



WHOA THERE, GREYTAIL!
STEADY! THAT WAS
JUST A LIGHTNING FLASH.
LET'S BE QUIET FOR
THE LOVERS.

WE'LL CAMP
HERE. TOMMORROW
I'LL GO INTO THE
VILLAGE AND BRING
BYRDAG BACK.



BUT WHY
CAN'T...

WE CAN'T TAKE
THE CHILD CLOSE
TO THE CAMP. HE
MIGHT START CRYING
AT THE WRONG MOMENT
AND GIVE US AWAY.



SO WE PASSED THE NIGHT
THERE WHERE BLOODSTAR
AND HELVA FIRST EMBRACED.
THEY FELL UNDER ITS SPELL
ONCE AGAIN.



OLD GROM WILL
ROCK YOU TO SLEEP
TONIGHT, SMALL ONE.

WITH LUCK, I'LL
BE BACK WITH YOUR
FATHER BEFORE
SUNSET.

AND I'LL
BE BACK WITH
DINNER!

DAWN WAS BRIGHT
AND CLEAR. THE THREAT
OF RAIN NO LONGER
SEEMED IMMINENT. THE
COOL MORNING BREEZE
WAS SWEET WITH THE
RICH JUNGLE ODOR.



WUH,
WAGA,
WU, WU.

BE A GOOD BOY
WHILE I'M GONE.
WATCH OVER YOUR
MOTHER.



REMEMBER,
IF YOU SEE ANY
SIGN OF DANGER,
MOUNT GREYTAIL.
SHE'LL CARRY
YOU TO SAFETY.



WE LEFT THEM, LITTLE KNOWING. HAPPY WITH THE THOUGHT SHE'D SOON BE SEEING HER FATHER, HELVA LOUNGED BY THE FALLS WHILE HER SON PLAYED. THE WATER'S SOOTHING ROAR AND HER OWN REVERIE CLOUDED HER NORMALLY ALERT NATURE.



NEARBY A TWISTED, MISSHAPEN SHADOW GLIDED ACROSS THE GRASS.



GREYTAIL LIFTED HER HEAD. HER NOSTRILS FLARED AS SHE RECOGNIZED A FAMILIAR SCENT.



BUT THERE WAS ALSO SOMETHING STRANGE ABOUT IT. AN AURA WHICH CAUSED THE ANIMAL TO BARE ITS TEETH AND GROWL MENACINGLY.



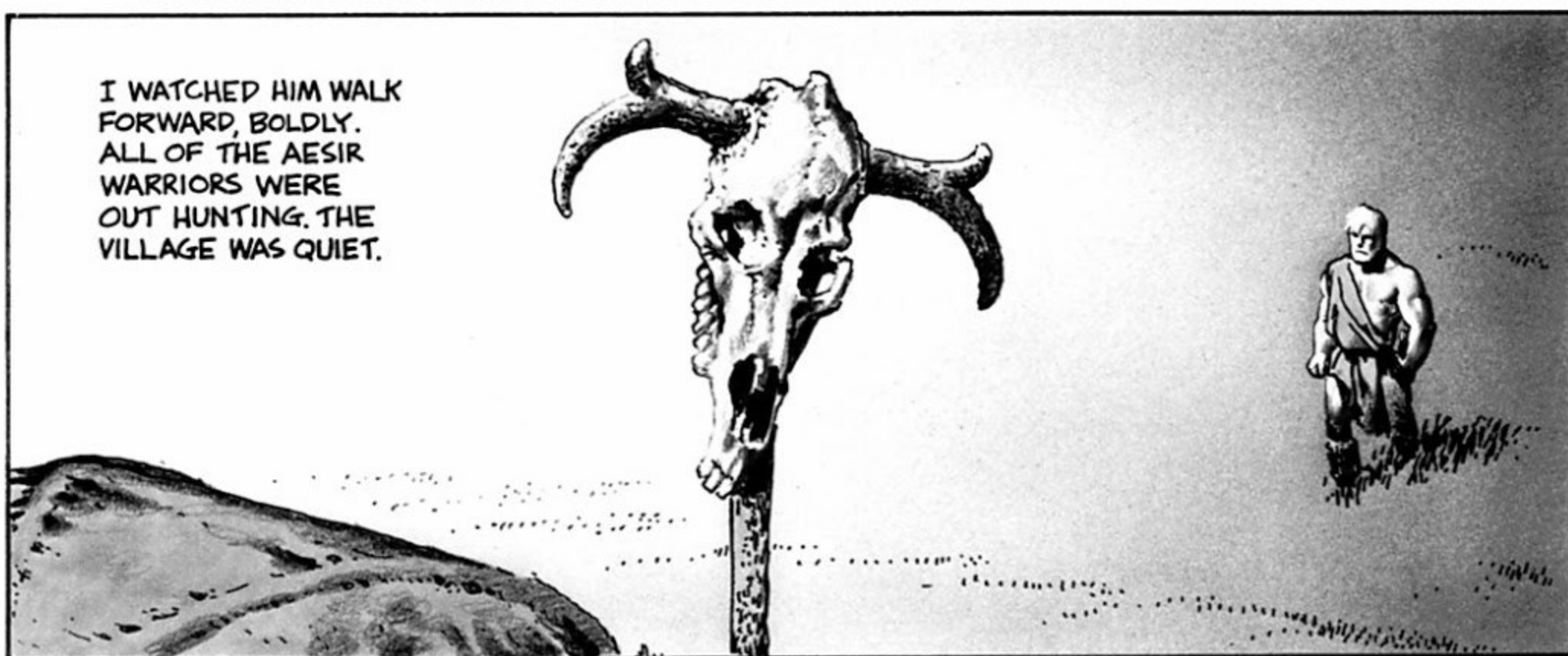
FEATHERED DEATH SILENCED THE BEAST.



BLOODSTAR MUST HAVE FELT AN ODD ANXIETY AS HE MOVED TOWARD THE AESIR ENCAMPMENT, THE TENSION OF RETURNING TO A PLACE ONCE KNOWN AND LOVED AND NOW FORBIDDEN TO HIM.



I WATCHED HIM WALK FORWARD, BOLDLY. ALL OF THE AESIR WARRIORS WERE OUT HUNTING. THE VILLAGE WAS QUIET.



A FEW CHILDREN SAW HIM, BUT GAVE NO ALARM.



WHAT MUST HAVE GONE THROUGH HIS MIND? HAD THE OLD MAN DIED? OR HAD HE LOST HIS CHIEFTAINSHIP? HIS HEART POUNDING, BLOODSTAR APPROACHED THE WARCHIEF'S TENT.



BYRDAG!
PUT DOWN YOUR
KNIFE.





WHAT ARE YOU
DOING HERE,
DEFILER?
YOUR LIFE IS
FORFEIT.

BECAUSE OF HELVA,
OLD ONE, SHE
WISHES TO SEE YOU.



MY DAUGHTER?
WHERE IS SHE?

A PLACE NOT
FAR. WE CAN BE
THERE BY EVENTIDE.
I WILL
CARRY YOU.



FOOLISH GIRL
WHO THREW EVERYTHING
AWAY! WHY SHOULD
I WISH TO SEE
HER NOW?

I CAN THINK OF ONE
SMALL REASON, BYRDAG.

EH?



YOU HAVE A
GRANDSON.
YOUR BLOOD
LIVES ON.



GET YOUR HANDS
OFF ME! THE WARCHIEF
OF THE AESIR CAN
STILL WALK!



I HEARD A LOW
RUMBLE JUST NOW.
WE'D BEST HASTEN
IF WE DON'T WANT
THE STORM
TO OVERTAKE US.

THE QUIET WAS
OPPRESSIVE. I FELT THE
WEIGHT OF THE HEAVENS
NEARLY BURST OPEN
WITH THE DELUGE.





I SEE SOMETHING
MOVING IN THE SHADOWS.
'WARE PHANTOMS!

HOLD!
IT'S ONLY POOR
GROM!



WHY AREN'T YOU
BACK AT THE HUT WITH
HELVA? HUNTING BEEN
THAT BAD?

SOMETHING
STRANGE IS GOING
ON, BLOODSTAR.
I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE
TO HIT A THING.
THE GAME IS
UNNATURALLY ALERT
AND FRIGHTENED...
AND I'VE HAD TO DUCK
AESIR HUNTERS, TOO!
THEY'RE TRAVELING
IN GROUPS OF FOUR
AND FIVE TO THE
EAST OF HERE.



THAT'S BECAUSE OF
THE DISAPPEARANCES
WE'VE HAD THIS PAST
YEAR. MENO GO OUT...
AND DO NOT
COME BACK.

WE'D BETTER
HURRY BACK.
SHE SHOULDN'T
BE LEFT ALONE.

WAIT
A MOMENT.
LISTEN!



WHAT?

I THOUGHT-
NO IT CAN'T BE!-
BUT I THOUGHT I
HEARD THE SOUND
OF PIPING...

FIRE TAKE YOUR
IMAGINATION,
GROM! HURRY!

BLOODSTAR, WIDE-EYED, DASHED INTO THE GATHERING DARKNESS WHILE I GUIDED BYRDAG.



HELVA!

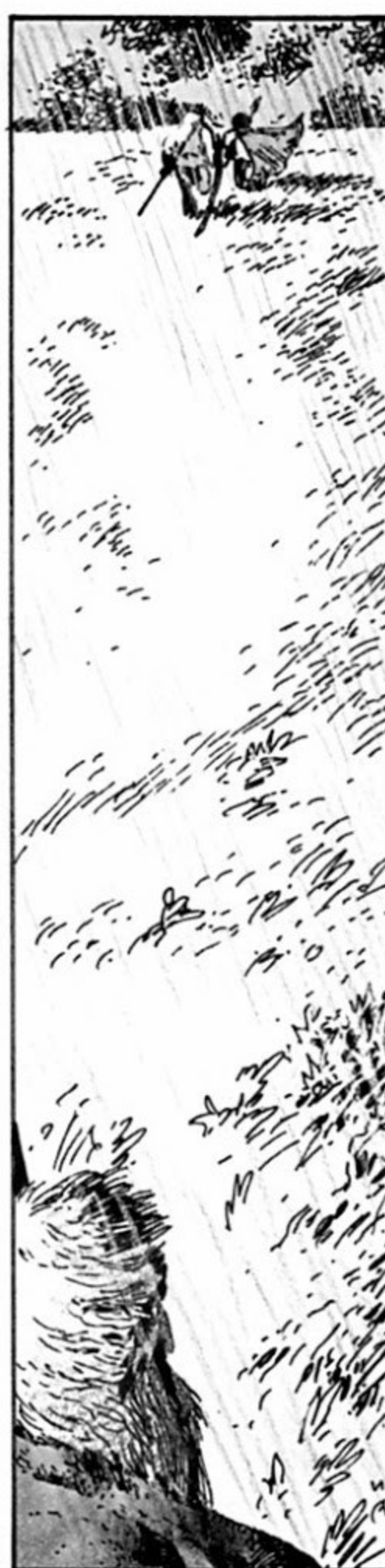


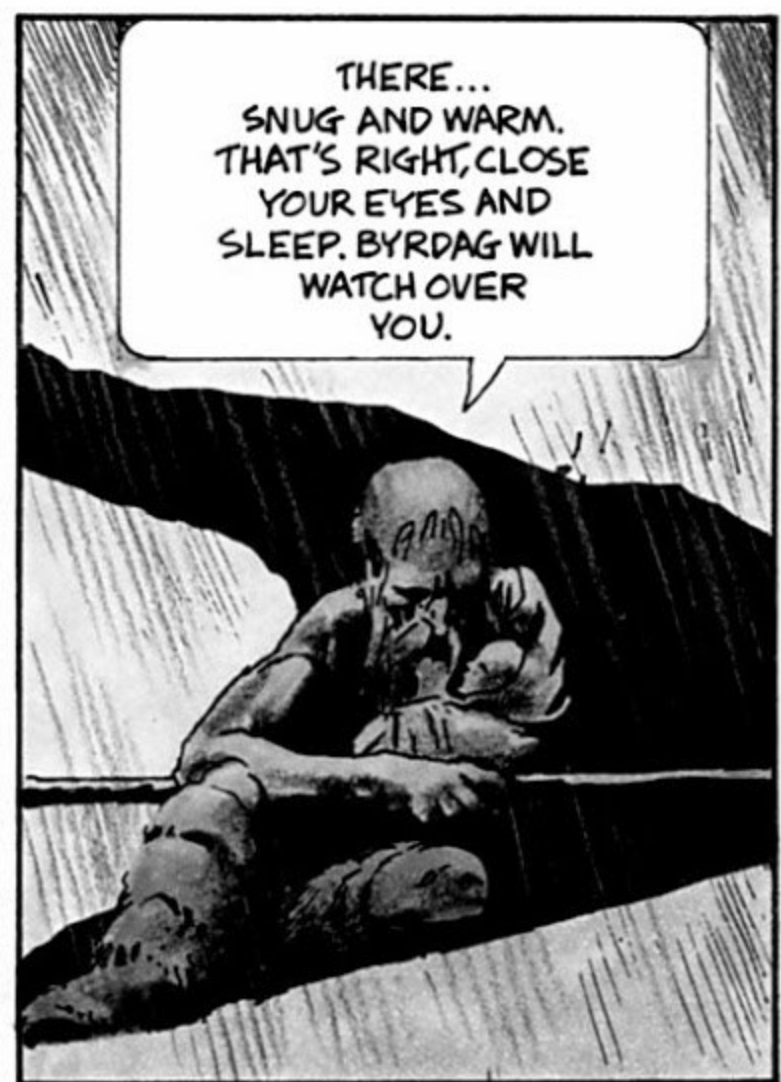
SSSSSSS KRAKABOOM!

HELVA!
WHERE ARE
YOU?



SHE'S GONE, GROM!
SHE'S BEEN TAKEN! AND
LITTLE BLOODSTAR
TOO!



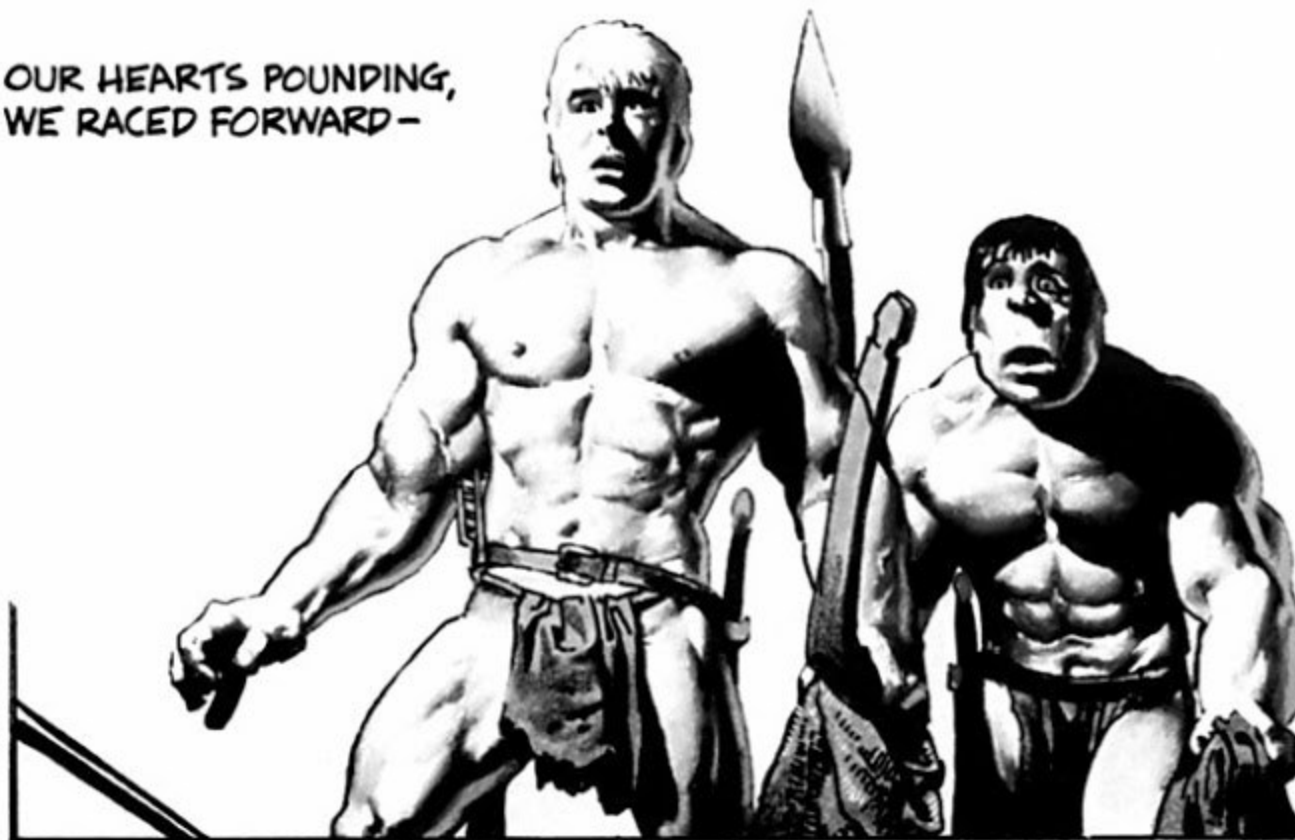
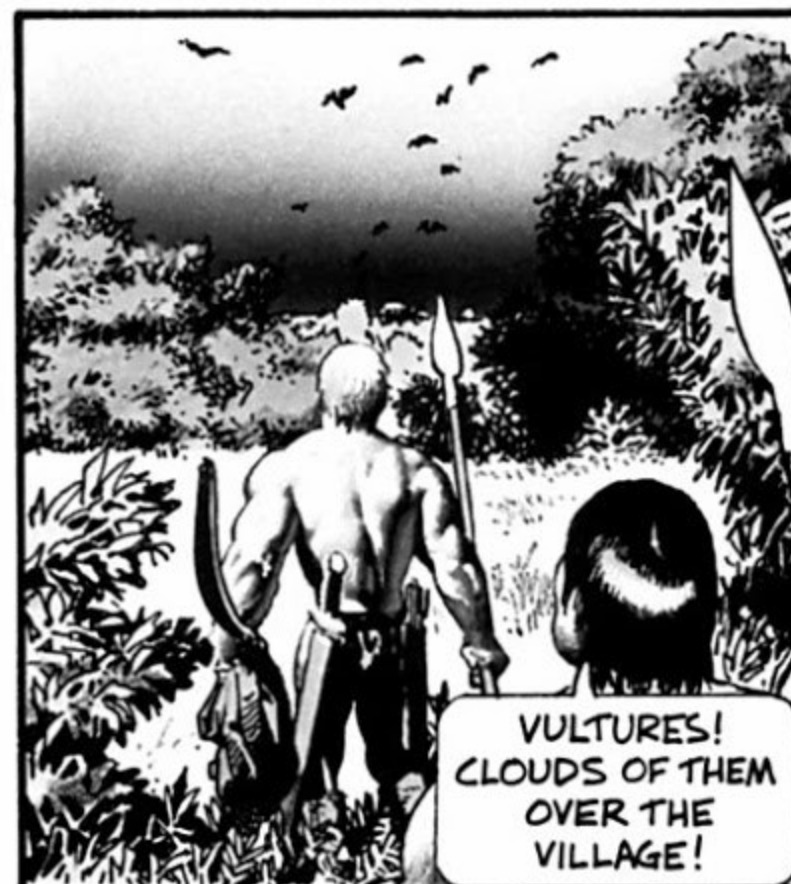




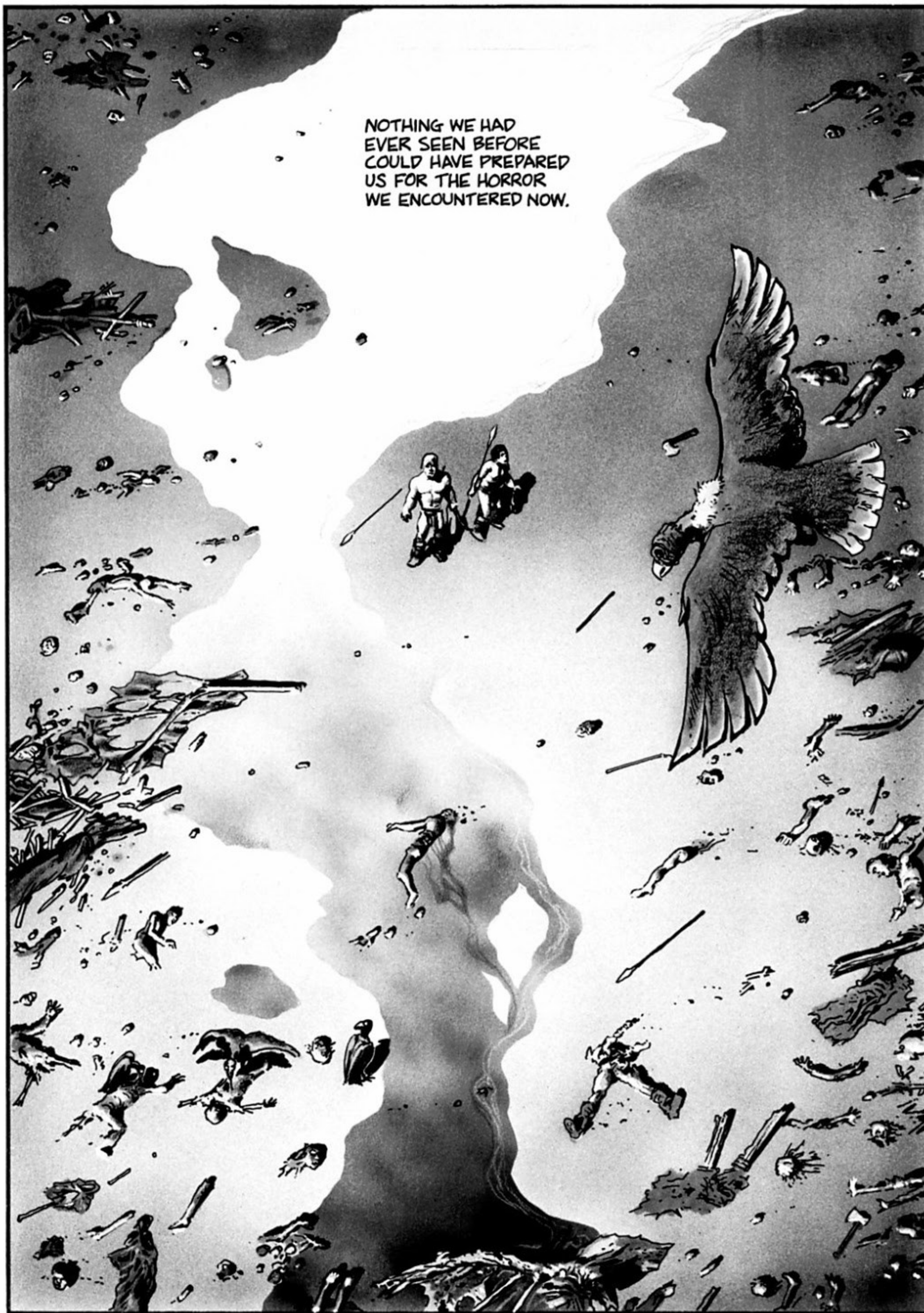
WE PASSED A SLEEPLESS NIGHT, COLD AND CRAMPED, AMID THE TANGLED ROOTS OF A FOREST GIANT. I HEARD MY FRIEND'S QUIET SOBS ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT.

AT FIRST LIGHT, WE EMERGED FROM THE DRIPPING TREES TO RENEW THE SEARCH. BUT WHATEVER TRAIL THERE WAS HAD BEEN WASHED AWAY. WE RANGED THE GRASSLANDS, LOOKING FOR SOME SIGN. AT LAST, WEARY AND DEPRESSED, BLOODSTAR DECIDED TO LOOK IN THE VICINITY OF THE AESIR ENCAMPMENT. IT WAS THEN THAT I SAW—

OUR HEARTS POUNDING, WE RACED FORWARD—



NOTHING WE HAD
EVER SEEN BEFORE
COULD HAVE PREPARED
US FOR THE HORROR
WE ENCOUNTERED NOW.



HUNTING SATHA

Grom and Bloodstar entered the devastated camp warily.

Smoke still ascended in solitary spirals from the wreckage of tent and hut; like mist-wraiths, it rose in pale streamers through the watery sunlight toward the clouds of gathering vultures which seemed strangely reluctant to stoop toward carrion so freely offered.

The nauseating smell of corruption hung in the air like a noisome fog—foul and unbreathable, sweet and sour all at the same time. There was also an overpowering odor of moldering decay, like the rotting heart of a centuries-old jungle exposed to the rays of the sun for the first time.

Patches of white slime smeared the earth all through the campsite, winding in still-wet trails amid and over the dismembered corpses.

The earth had been scooped into odd mounds and furrows, as if a massive weight had been dragged through the center of the AEsir village.

Shattered spears and broken arrow shafts bristled in the earth near darker areas where pools of blood had clotted.

Both men stared in shocked, unbelieving horror at the bodies. Severed limbs and heads lay all around them. Sightless eyes watched as they passed; slack-jawed mouths, opened for an eternal scream, shrieked soundlessly at them.

Here and there, a hand or a foot protruded from a depression where someone had been mashed into the mud.

Bloodstar suddenly felt his legs buckle. He sank to his knees on the damp earth. Raging sorrow tore at his heart. He lifted his head toward the sky, his face twisted in grief, and screamed his outraged loss.

Grom could only stand helplessly nearby, trying to avert his eyes from the atrocities around him,

unable to comfort his comrade.

The ape-man was trembling also, for he was remembering another scene of grisly terror from his youth.

The breeze sifted through the ashes of the dead cooking fires, sweeping them in gray clouds across the tainted ground.

One vulture, braver than its fellows, landed and sat watching the two living creatures balefully, waiting for them to move on. Grom hurled his war club at it. The bird flapped away with an angry wail.

The tall AEsir warrior moaned again, shouting out the names of the Forbidden Ones, to whose shadowy realm all men must some day return. His eyes were wild and staring as he took in once more the terrible vista surrounding him.

The utter silence was the worst: Bloodstar kept waiting to hear ghost-echoes of the lives which had once thrived in this place.

It must be a dream, he told himself over and over; I am dreaming. The AEsir cannot all be dead...

But the horror of the violated encampment remained, a mute and ghastly testimony.

Grom moved toward the desolate figure.

He rested a horny hand upon Bloodstar's shoulder. The AEsir's body shook with his silent sobs of grief. Grom felt the heartache of his friend's loss; his own rheumy eyes grew moist.

For a moment, one long moment, the ape-man tensed as those other memories came flooding back, sights and sounds and cries he had thought forever buried and lost in the past.

He sank to his knees across from his friend and bowed his shaggy head for his own dead.

Two figures, frozen in a wasteland of horror—Grom opened his mouth to speak...



FIVE

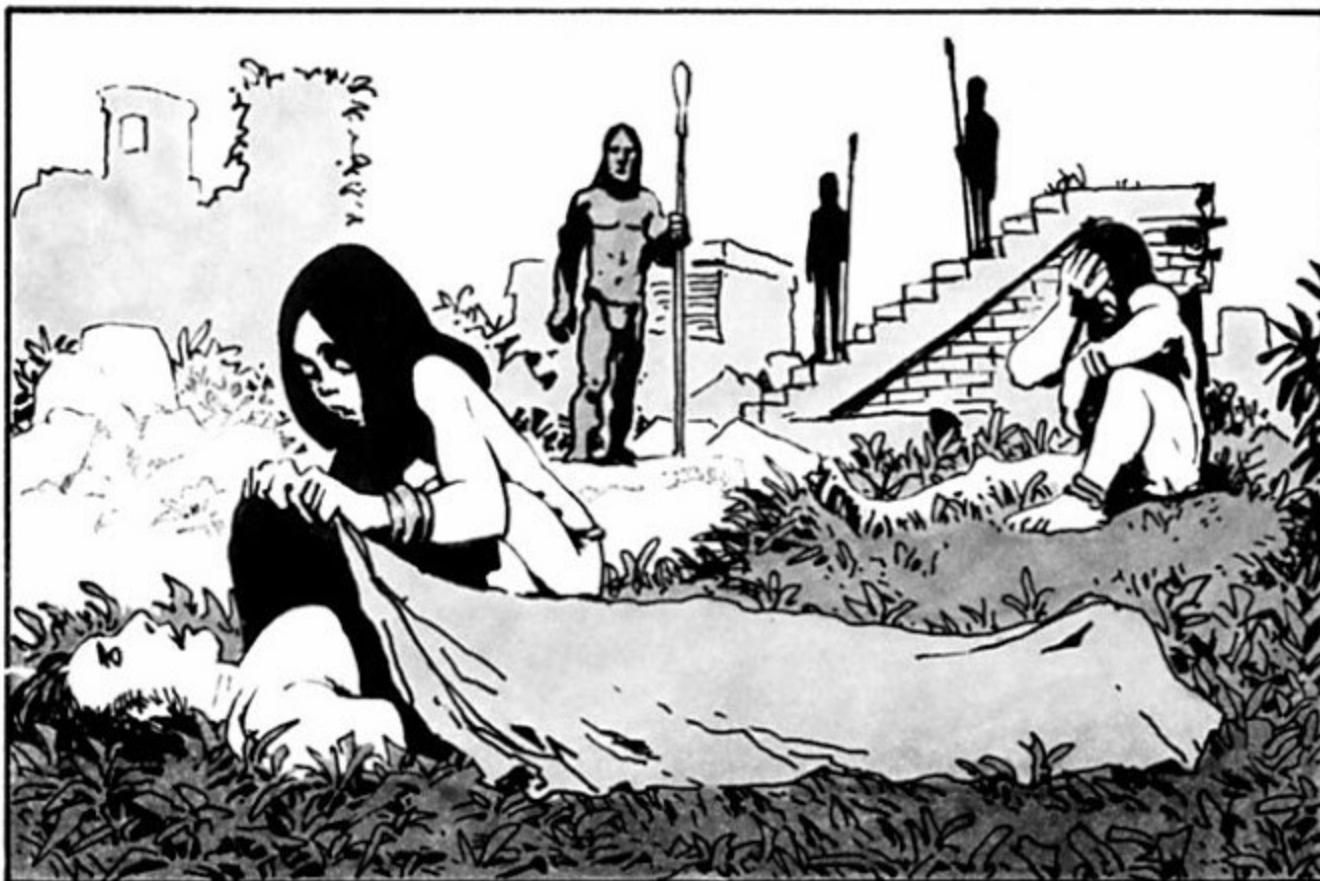
HotComic.net



THE CARNAGE AROUND US CALLED TO MIND ANOTHER SCENE OF NIGHTMARE TRAGEDY FROM MY OWN YOUTH, AND I TOLD YOUR FATHER THE STORY OF THE KING OF THE NORTHERN ABYSS, AND OF THE CURSE WHICH BEFELL MY PEOPLE THERE, AND THE REASON WHY THEY NOW SHUN AND FEAR THAT VALLEY OF DESOLATE RUINS.



ONCE, I SAID TO HIM, FATHER'S FATHERS WANDERED INTO THAT VALLEY FROM THEIR REGULAR TERRITORY. HUNTING WAS GOOD, SINCE THE AREA WAS FREE OF PREDATORS. THEY DECIDED TO SETTLE THERE IN THAT PEACEFUL VALLEY. BUT AFTER A FEW WEEKS, A WITHERING SICKNESS CAME OVER THEM. SOME DIED, AND THE ENTIRE CLAN WAS AFFECTED STRANGELY. OFFSPRING BORN WITHIN THE SHADOWS OF THOSE WALLS WERE EITHER DELIVERED DEAD OR HORRIBLY DEFORMED. THE NEW GENERATION OF JUNGLE PEOPLE DIFFERED VASTLY FROM THEIR PARENTS. OF SUCH STOCK CAME I.



ONE DAY, ONE OF THE WARRIORS WHO HAD THE SICKNESS, BUT LIVED, WAS EXPLORING THE CRUMBLING BUILDINGS WHERE HE DISCOVERED A SEEMINGLY BOTTOMLESS WELL.



SOMETHING OVERCAME HIM THERE, SOMETHING WHICH TOOK OVER HIS MIND. HE RETURNED TO OUR CAMP OUTSIDE THE WALLS, LEAPING HIGH INTO THE AIR IN A DANCE OF MADNESS. ALL THE WHILE HE PLAYED A HYPNOTIC MELODY ON HIS PIPES.



HIS COMRADES SHOUTED IN FEAR. HE GIBBERED AND DROOLED AND CACKLED INSANELY AS HE DANCED. HIS EYES ROLLED UP IN THEIR SOCKETS.



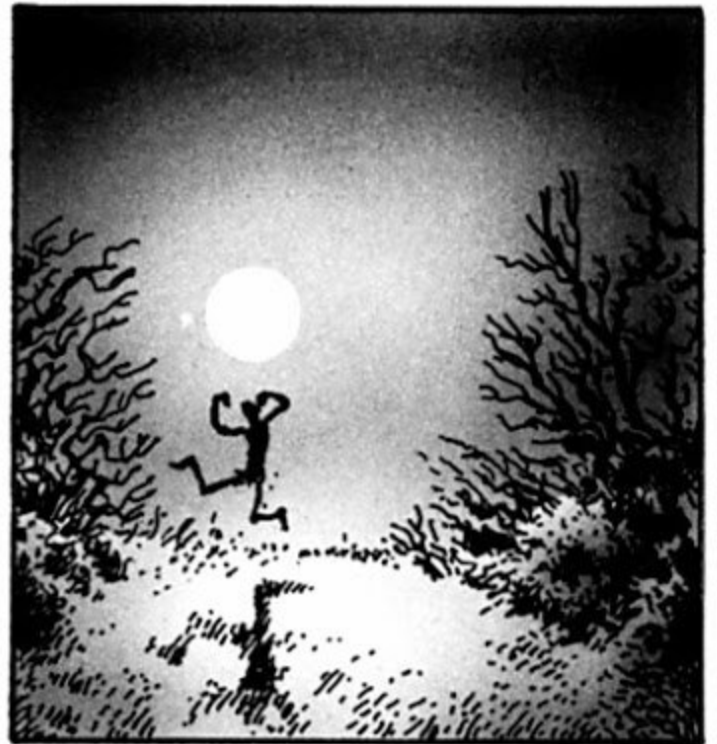
SUDDENLY SOMETHING TOWERED BEHIND HIM—



THE PULSING HORROR FLOWED INTO OUR MIDST, CRUSHING AND MANGLING. IT DEVoured WHOLE GROUPS. I REMEMBER MY MOTHER FLED OUT OF THE VALLEY WITH THE REST. BEHIND US, THE MONSTER FEASTED. I CAN STILL HEAR THE DARKNESS SHATTERED BY THE SCREAMS OF ITS VICTIMS.

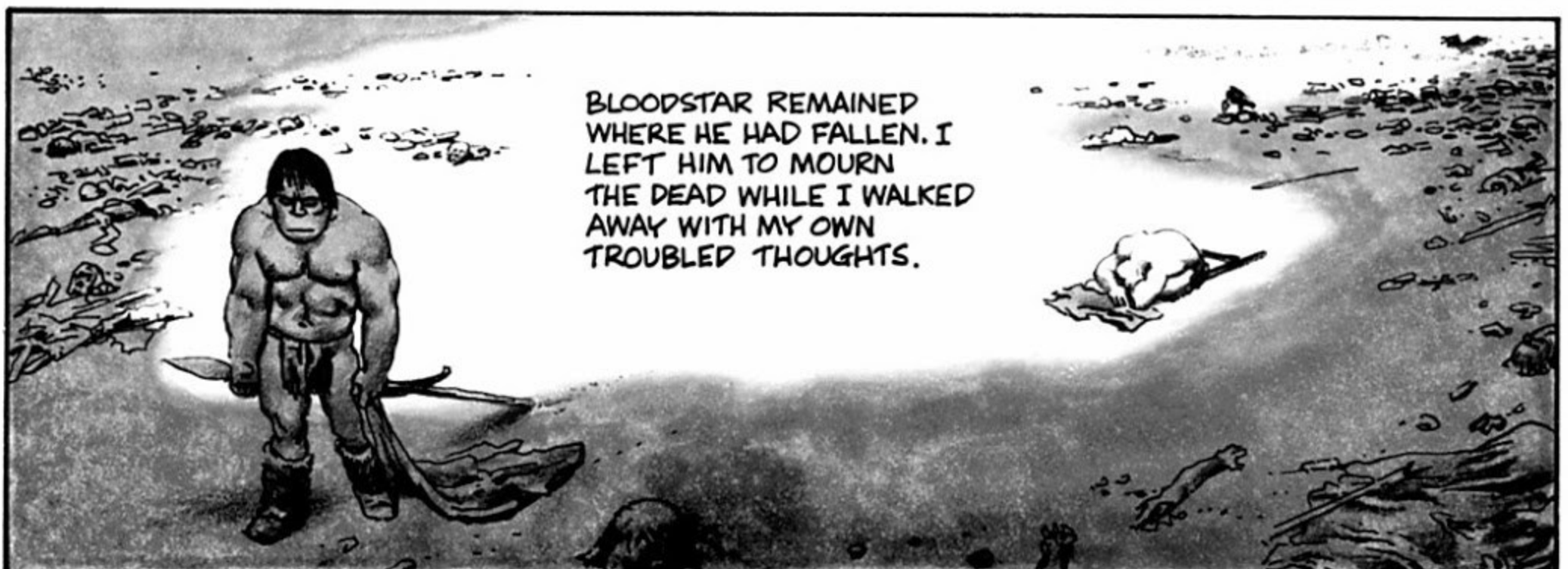


THE PITIFUL REMNANTS OF MY TRIBE AVOIDED THE PLACE AFTER THAT. BUT THEY WATCHED ITS BORDERS, LEST SOMETHING CREEP OUT OF THE NIGHT AFTER THEM. FOR MONTHS AFTER THE MAD PIPER COULD BE SEEN DANCING IN THE MOONLIGHT AS HE TRIED TO LURE US BACK.



I FEAR THE DEMON HAS RISEN FROM THE DEPTHS ONCE MORE TO DESTROY YOUR PEOPLE.

OH, YMIR! IS THIS ALSO THE FATE OF HELVA AND LITTLE BLOODSTAR?



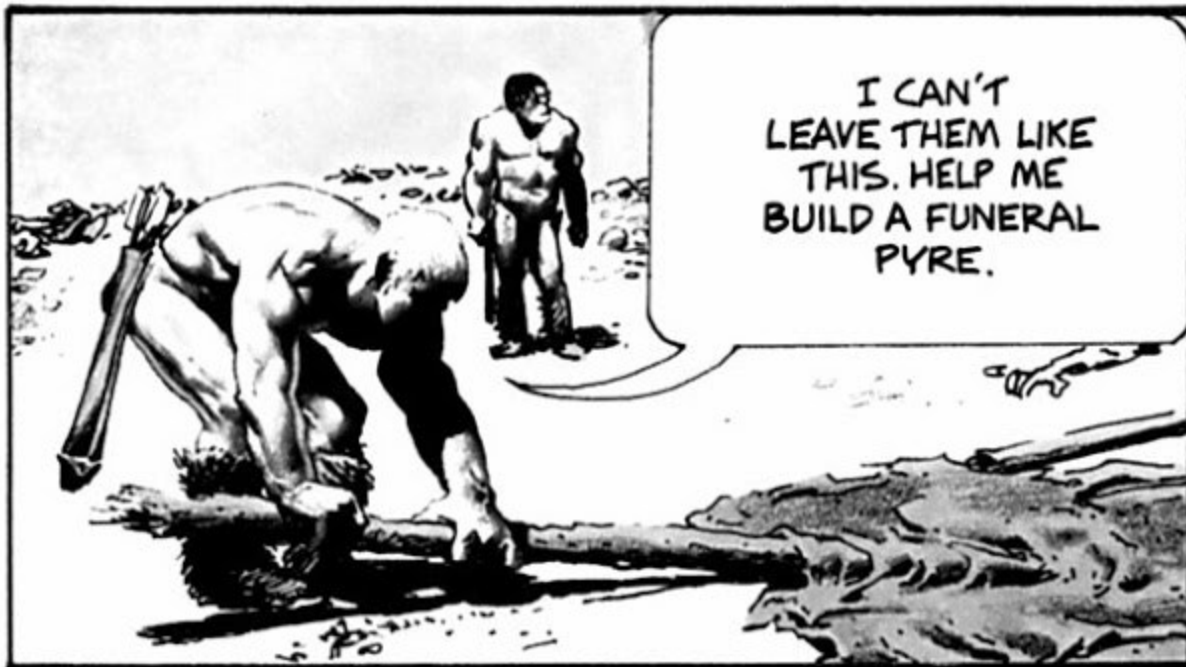
BLOODSTAR REMAINED WHERE HE HAD FALLEN. I LEFT HIM TO MOURN THE DEAD WHILE I WALKED AWAY WITH MY OWN TROUBLED THOUGHTS.

AS THAT DREADFUL DAY PASSED, TOWARD RAVEN DUSK, I CROUCHED, HOPING FOR SOME SIGN OF LIFE. EVEN THE CARRION BIRDS WERE FRIGHTENED. I WAS WATCHING MY SHADOW LENGTHEN ALONG THE DUND WHEN I HEARD BLOODSTAR STIR.

COME, MY FRIEND
LET'S LEAVE.
I KNOW WHAT I
MUST DO NOW.



I CAN'T
LEAVE THEM LIKE
THIS. HELP ME
BUILD A FUNERAL
PYRE.



IT WAS HARD WORK TO FIND WOOD DRY ENOUGH TO BURN. I SHUDDERED AS WE GATHERED THOSE PITIFUL HUMAN REMAINS AND PLACED THEM ON THE PYRE.



IT IS DONE!
NOW I MUST FIND
SATHA. I NEED
HIS POISON FOR THE
TASK I HAVE
IN MIND.



I FOLLOWED YOUR FATHER SILENTLY BACK INTO THE FOREST, CERTAIN HE HAD GONE MAD WITH GRIEF. BUT HE MUST HAVE SENSED MY THOUGHTS, FOR HE PLACED HIS HAND UPON MY SHOULDER AND ASSURED ME THAT HIS MIND WAS STILL HIS OWN. A DAY AND A NIGHT'S MARCH TOOK US DEEP INTO THE SEETHING, ROTTING SWAMP.



SATHA IS STRONGER
AND SWIFTER THAN TEN
TIGERS. HE'S ALMOST
AS LONG AS THE TALLEST
FOREST GIANT IS HIGH.
ONE DROP OF HIS
VENOM CAN KILL A
MAN INSTANTLY.



MY COURSE
IS SET, GROM.
I AM GOING
WITH YOU-OR
WITHOUT
YOU.



THEN I THINK
IT TIME WE PAINT
OURSELVES AND SING
OUR DEATHSONGS
TO YOUR GOD AND
MINE.



I DON'T
SING TO ZEG, AND
I'VE NO INTENTION
OF DYING-YET!



AH!
THIS IS WHAT
I WANT. LET'S
MAKE SOME AXES
AND WE'LL FELL
THAT TREE.



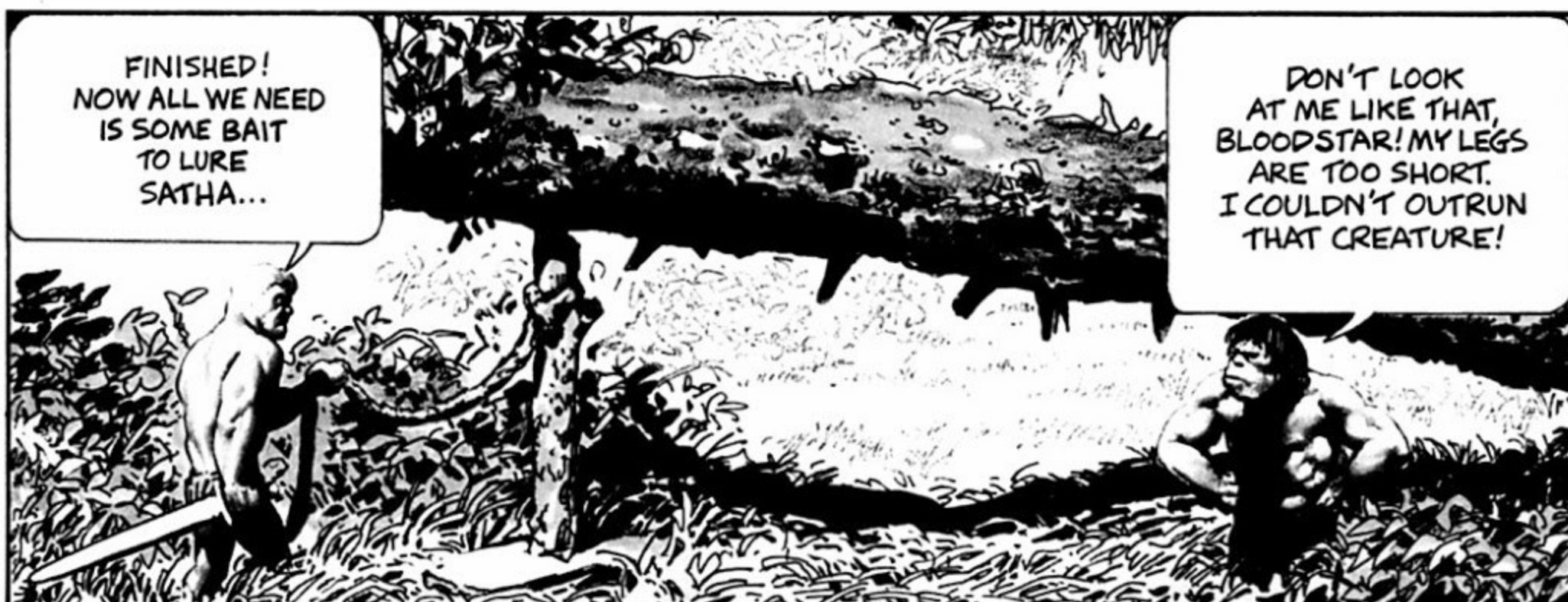


YOU CUT AWAY
THE BRANCHES ON
THE UNDERSIDE WHILE
I CONSTRUCT THE
DEADFALL TRIGGER.
WE'LL ALSO NEED
A LENGTH OF
ROPE VINE.



FINISHED!
NOW ALL WE NEED
IS SOME BAIT
TO LURE
SATHA...

DON'T LOOK
AT ME LIKE THAT,
BLOODSTAR! MY LEGS
ARE TOO SHORT.
I COULDN'T OUTRUN
THAT CREATURE!



LURING ANY KIND OF A
PREDATOR INTO A SNARE
WITH LIVE BAIT IS DANGEROUS
ENOUGH. SERPENTS ARE
THE WORST, FOR THEY LOSE
INTEREST IF THE PREY
IS OUT OF SIGHT OR TOO FAR
AWAY. IT MUST REMAIN
TITILLATINGLY CLOSE AT ALL
TIMES - BUT NOT TOO CLOSE!

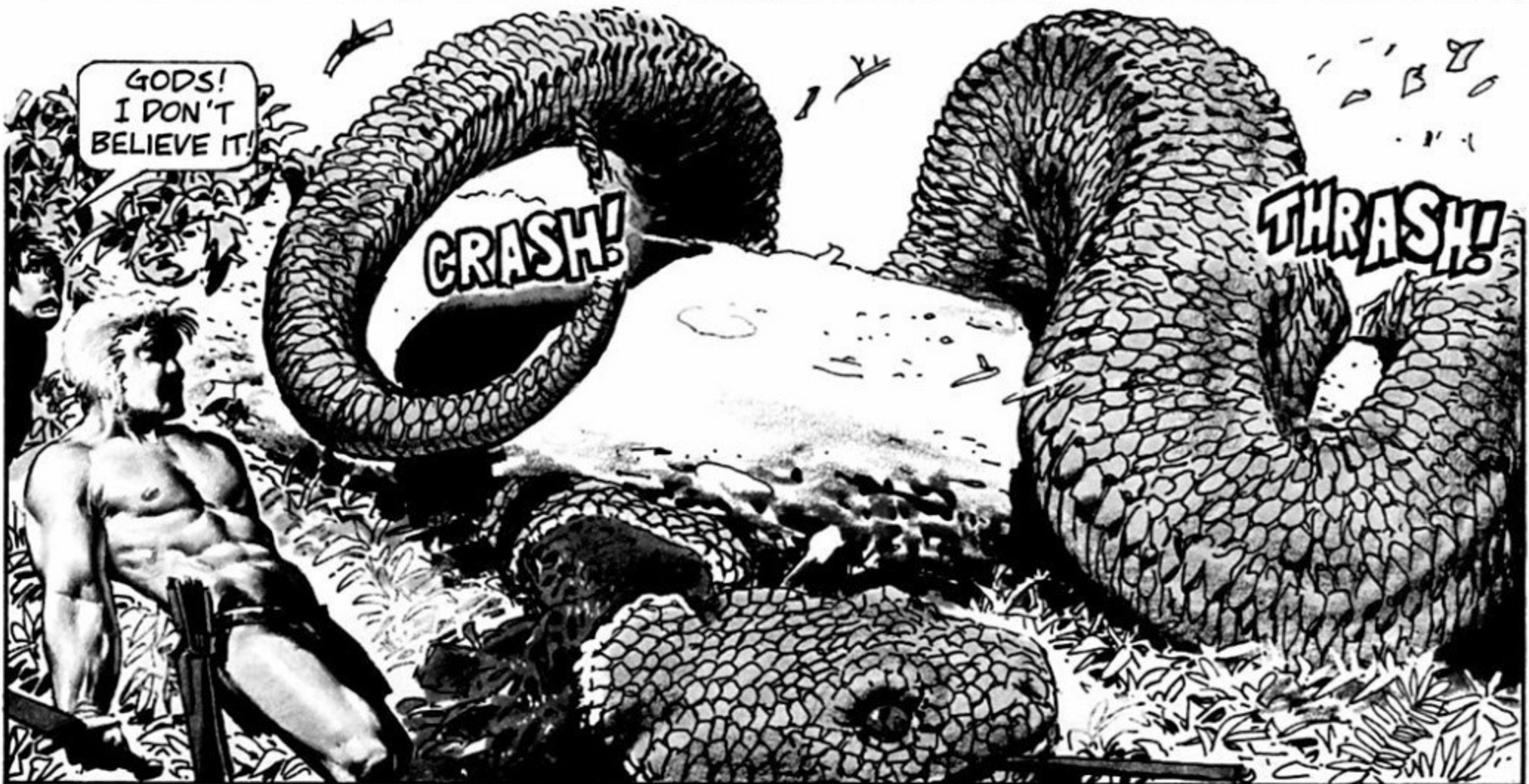
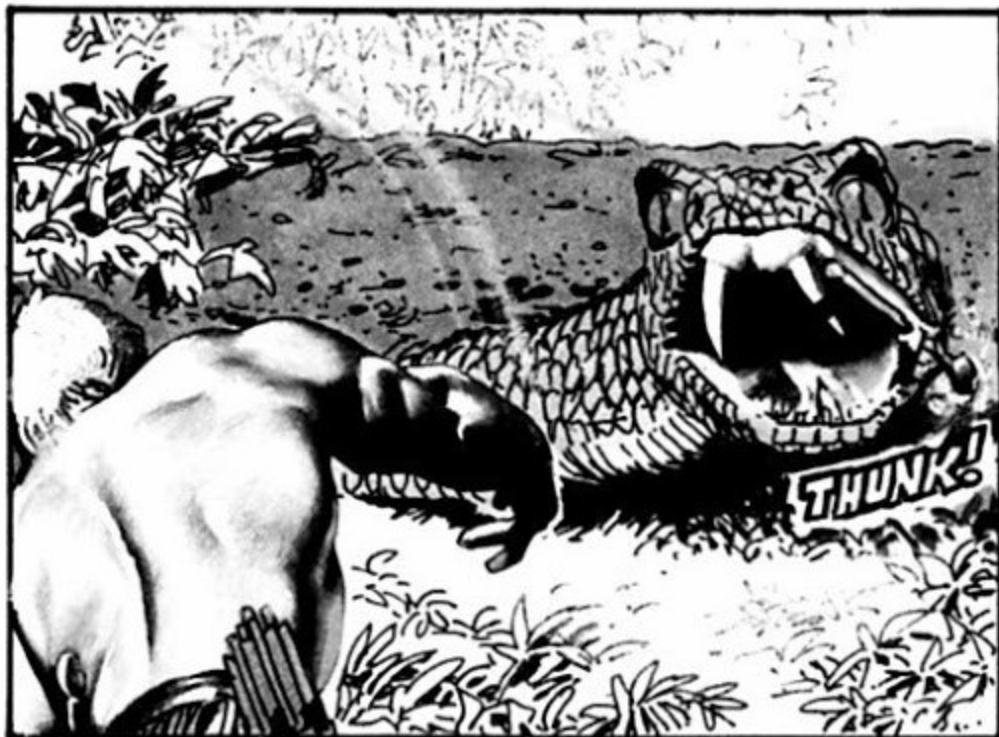
KEEPING THIS IN MIND, BLOODSTAR
HIMSELF MARCHES INTO THOSE
PRIMORDIAL DEPTHS IN QUEST OF
THAT SCALY MONSTER.





THE RUSH OF THE SERPENT'S SUPPLE
BODY BEHIND HIM WAS LIKE THE
SWEEP OF THE WIND THROUGH
TALL GRASS. HIS BREATH
BURNING IN HIS CHEST, HE
CAUGHT SIGHT OF ME...





THE GIANT SERPENT'S WRITHINGS FINALLY QUIETED. CAREFULLY, BLOODSTAR CUT OPEN THE POISON SACS AT THE BASE OF THE GREAT FANGS.

THEN HE DIPPED AND COATED THE BARBED HEADS OF ELEVEN ARROWS IN THE CAUSTIC VENOM.

DON'T FALL ASLEEP, GROM. WE'RE LEAVING THIS PLACE. SOON, I'M GOING TO SLAY THE KING OF THE NORTHERN ABYSS—OR HE, ME.



DUSK WAS FALLING WHEN WE STARTED BACK OVER THE TANGLED HILLS TOWARD THE VALLEY OF THOSE FORBIDDEN RUINS.



LATER, AS I FOUND, EVEN AS BLOODSTAR AND I WERE HURRYING THROUGH THE STEAMING NIGHT, TWO OTHER FIGURES HAD REACHED THE DEVASTATED VILLAGE.





ASHES OF A
MIGHTY FUNERAL
PYRE...ALL OF MY
PEOPLE - GONE!



WHY, OH, GREAT
YMIR? WHY?
WHY HAVE YOU LET
THIS DOOM
VANQUISH
YOUR
PEOPLE!



AH, LITTLE BLOODSTAR!
HOW I ENVY YOU,
FOR YOU CAN'T KNOW
WHAT'S HAPPENED HERE.
YOUR FATHER MUST HAVE
BUILT THE CLEANSING
PYRE. WE'LL FIND THEM
TOMORROW.



THE HORROR FROM THE ABYSS

Tree branches clashed together like bony teeth over their heads as the AEsir and the ape-man hurried without pause all through the dripping night. The storm wind moaned a sad lament for the passage of this last AEsir warrior.

Dawn found them standing at the mouth of the valley of Grom's forbidden city.

The horizon was reddening when they came to a halt on the high bluff which overlooked the scattered ruins. The silence was as absolute as it had been in the desecrated AEsir camp.

Bloodstar looked out over the ruins for a long time, watching them take confused shape against the slowly lightening horizon. He stood there for a long time, as if frozen to the spot. Grom approached nervously once or twice, but withdrew swiftly when he sensed his friend's desire to be left undisturbed.

Then Bloodstar lifted his arms to the brightening sky. He began to chant a melodious obeisance to his gods of snow, frost, and fire, gods of the storm wrack and the freezing rains.

Turning, he picked up his stout war-spear and, bracing it against his knee, snapped it in two without a word.

Grom raced forward, crying out, but the AEsir waved him back with a stern gesture.

The beast man backed away, knowing that the spirit was upon his friend, as it had been the day of the ordeal of the Teeth of Ymir.

Removing all of his arrows from their quiver, Bloodstar broke them also—all save those few tipped with Satha's deadly venom.

Then he painted his face and limbs with bright colors, daubing them on as is the AEsir custom when a warrior knows he is going to certain doom. His face was a grim mask in the dawn's growing light; the birthmark which gave him his name stood out, bold and angry, upon his forehead.

His preparations completed, Bloodstar turned back toward the city and started to chant his deathsong, singing of his life and deeds, fights and battles, of his love and great loss. In this manner, he greeted the crimson ball of the sun as it lifted above the jagged horizon.

As if night were unwilling to relinquish its hold upon the forbidden city, shadows stark and black flowed more palpably in the ruins toward them.

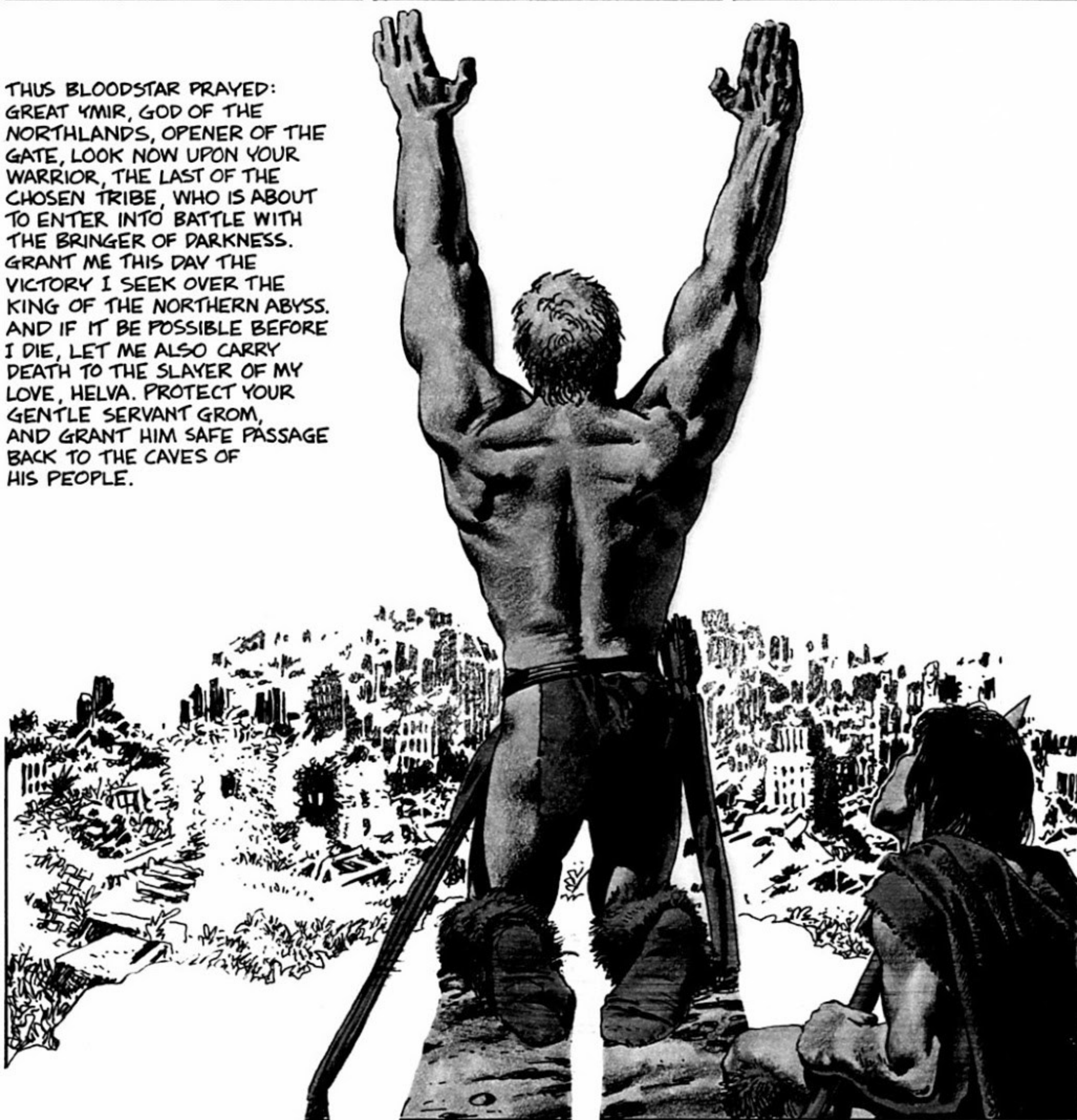
Suddenly Grom began to shiver violently, for he had sensed a *presence* lurking down there amid those shattered walls, something which had touched his mind, briefly, and swiftly withdrawn . . .

SIX

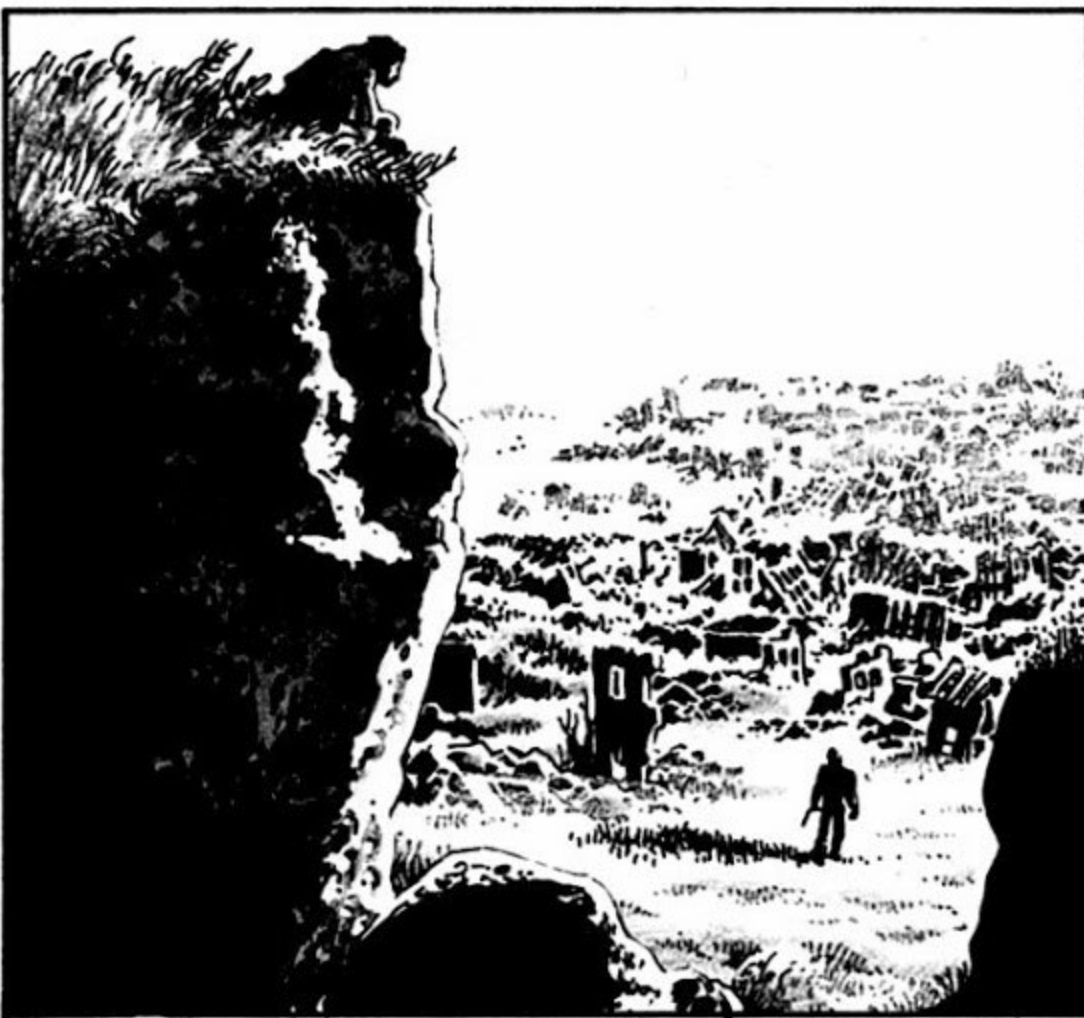
HotComic.net



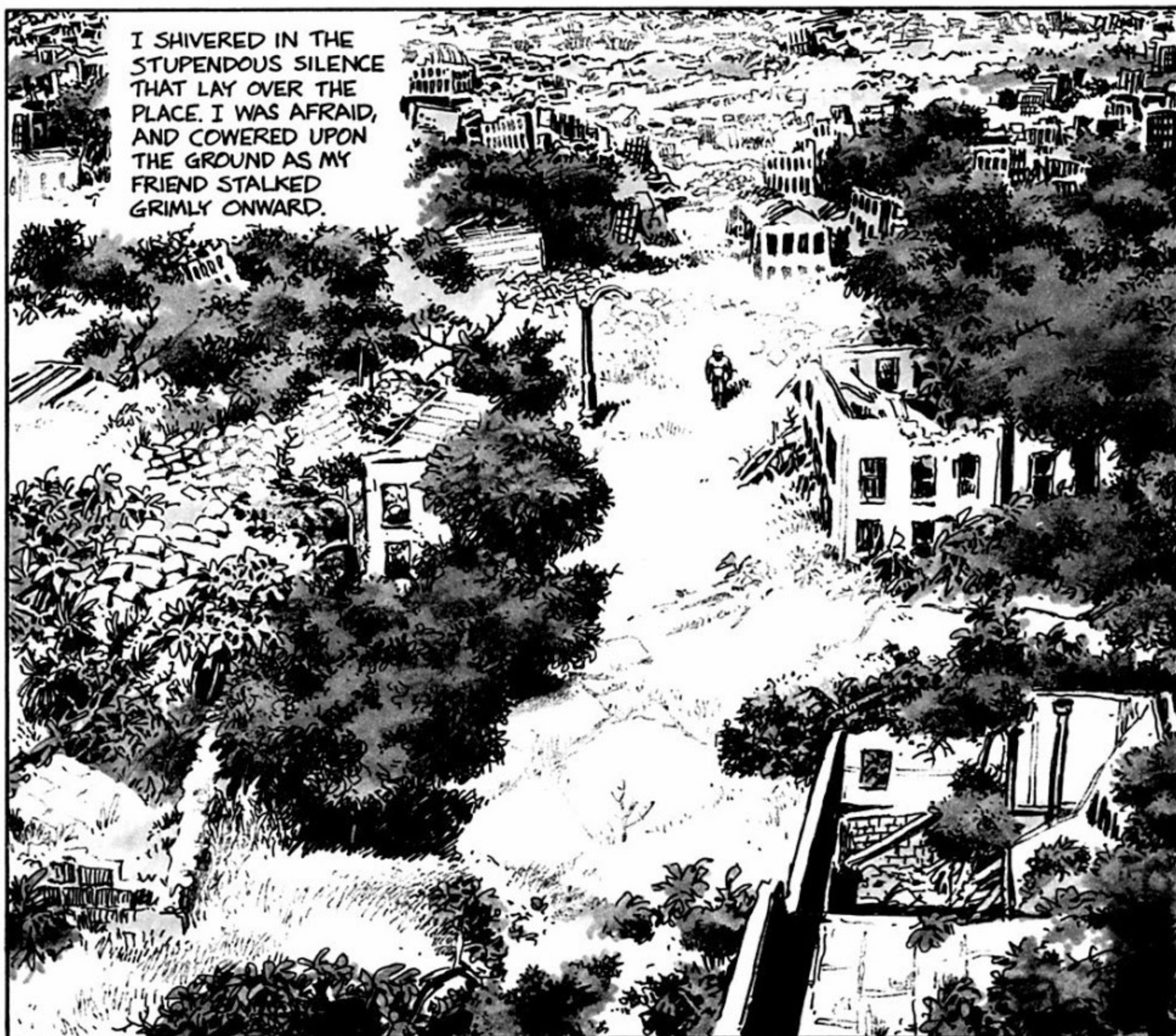
THUS BLOODSTAR PRAYED:
GREAT YMIR, GOD OF THE
NORTHLANDS, OPENER OF THE
GATE, LOOK NOW UPON YOUR
WARRIOR, THE LAST OF THE
CHOSEN TRIBE, WHO IS ABOUT
TO ENTER INTO BATTLE WITH
THE BRINGER OF DARKNESS.
GRANT ME THIS DAY THE
VICTORY I SEEK OVER THE
KING OF THE NORTHERN ABYSS.
AND IF IT BE POSSIBLE BEFORE
I DIE, LET ME ALSO CARRY
DEATH TO THE SLAYER OF MY
LOVE, HELVA. PROTECT YOUR
GENTLE SERVANT GROM,
AND GRANT HIM SAFE PASSAGE
BACK TO THE CAVES OF
HIS PEOPLE.



FAREWELL, GROM.
YOU'VE BEEN A NOBLE
FRIEND. PRAY FOR
MY SOUL.



I SHIVERED IN THE
STUPENDOUS SILENCE
THAT LAY OVER THE
PLACE. I WAS AFRAID,
AND COVERED UPON
THE GROUND AS MY
FRIEND STALKED
GRIMLY ONWARD.







I COULD SEE BLOODSTAR
APPROACHING THE BIZARRE PIPE
PLAYER. I WONDER IF HE
THOUGHT THERE WAS SOMETHING
FAMILIAR ABOUT THAT
LOATHSOME BEING.
SUDDENLY THE HAUNTING
MUSIC STOPPED. I HEARD
A FAINT DEMENTED
LAUGHTER.



HEH! HEH!
WHAT'S THE MATTER?
DON'T YOU
RECOGNIZE ME?

YOU NEVER
WERE VERY BRIGHT
BLOODSTAR...
HERE, I'LL GIVE YOU
A HINT.
HE, HE, HE!



LOKNAR!



THAT'S RIGHT!
LOKNAR, FORMER WAR
CHIEF OF THE AESIR!
DON'T GIVE ME
ANY TROUBLE OR
I MIGHT HAVE TO
PUNISH YOU...
LIKE I DID THEM.
HEH! HEH!



I LIKE THIS ARMBAND.
IT'S MY FAVORITE.
BUT I HAVE ANOTHER ONE TOO.
HE, HE, HE!

WANT TO SEE IT,
OLD FRIEND?
I THINK YOU DO!



WHO CAN SAY WHAT BLOODSTAR FELT WHEN LOKNAR DREW ANOTHER ARMBAND FROM BENEATH HIS FILTH-CRUSTED CLOAK. SUNLIGHT SOFTLY GLINTED ON IT. IT WAS SMALL, SUCH AS A WOMAN MIGHT WEAR, AND BORE THE DESIGN OF AN AESIR CLAN CHIEF.

HELVA!
OH YMIR, 'TIS
HELVA'S!

YAAAAAAA
HA, HA, HA!

YES, HELVA!
SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN
MINE. BUT SHE WAS
NAUGHTY AND RAN OFF WITH
A MANGY DOG! HEE! HEE! HEE!
SO I HAD TO PUNISH HER...
SHALL I TELL YOU
HOW LONG IT TOOK FOR
HER TO DIE?

YOU WERE BAD
TOO, BLOODSTAR.
YOU DISOBEYED
THE CHIEF OF THE
AESIR...

YOU
RUINED ME!
SEE WHAT
YOU DID!

YOUR HANDIWORK,
MY FRIEND!
NOW I AM GOING
TO FIX YOU FOR-

I COULD FEEL THE FIRE OF
HIS RAGE AS BLOODSTAR
HURLED HIMSELF FORWARD.

DIIEEEEEEE!

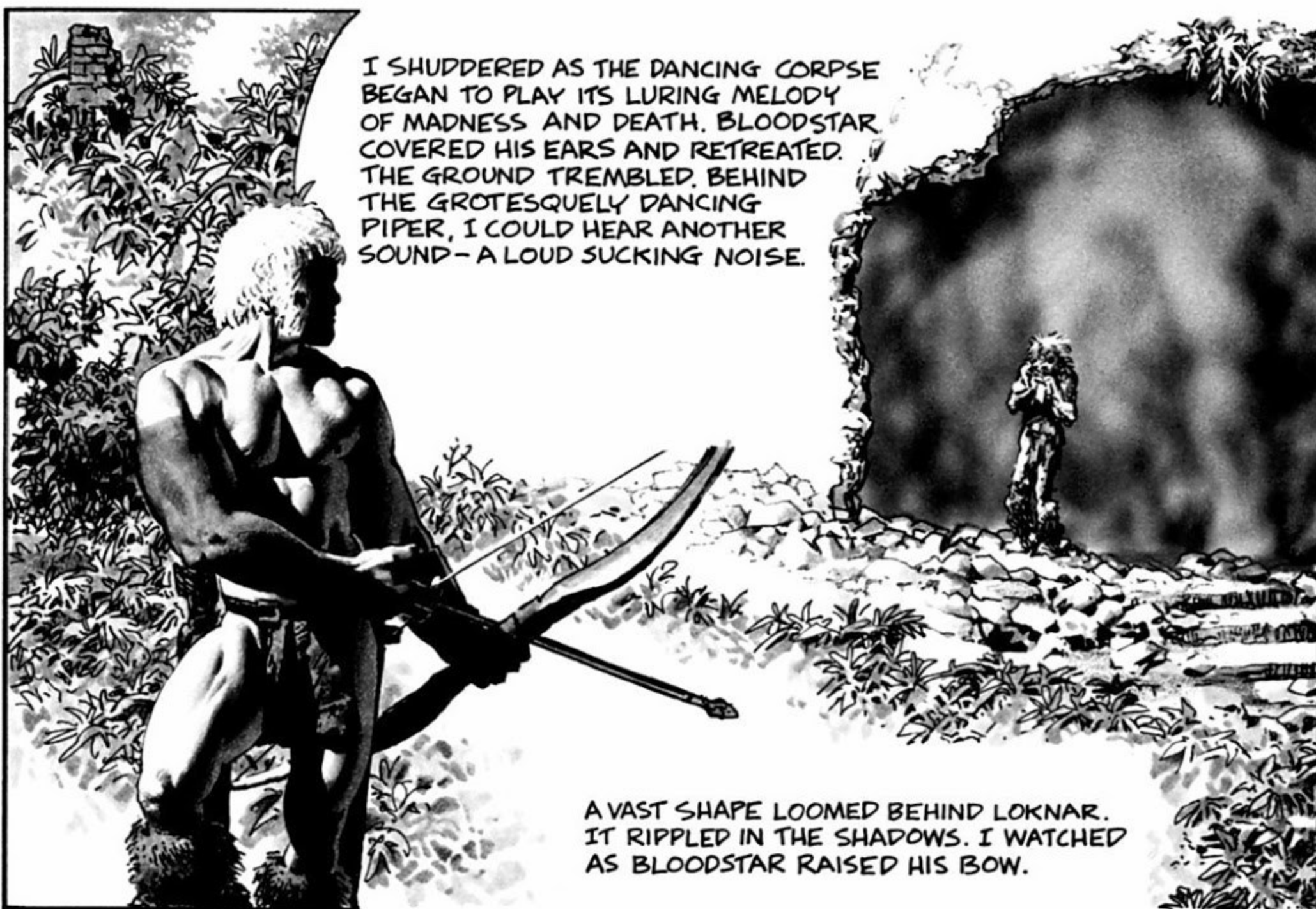
HEE! HEE! HERE'S
ANOTHER
SURPRISE
FOR YOU!

WHUD!





THE GHASTLY GRIN
VANISHED FROM
LOKNAR'S FACE. HE
WAS JERKED TO HIS
FEET AS IF PULLED
ERECT BY A ROPE.
HIS BODY TWITCHING,
LOKNAR RAISED THE
PIPES AGAIN TO HIS
SORE-FESTOONED LIPS.



I SHUDDERED AS THE DANCING CORPSE
BEGAN TO PLAY ITS LURING MELODY
OF MADNESS AND DEATH. BLOODSTAR
COVERED HIS EARS AND RETREATED.
THE GROUND TREMBLED. BEHIND
THE GROTESQUELY DANCING
PIPER, I COULD HEAR ANOTHER
SOUND - A LOUD SUCKING NOISE.

A VAST SHAPE LOOMED BEHIND LOKNAR.
IT RIPPLED IN THE SHADOWS. I WATCHED
AS BLOODSTAR RAISED HIS BOW.

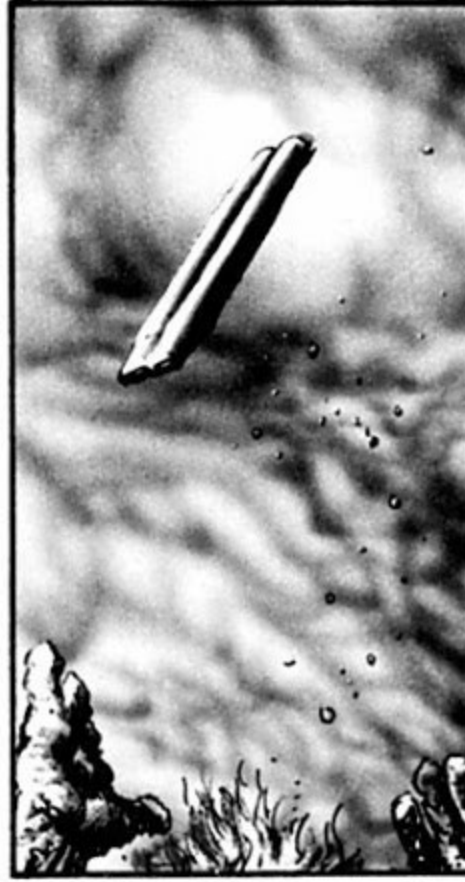
THE ARROW HISSED
THROUGH THE AIR INTO
LOKNAR'S ROTTING CHEST.



HE WENT DOWN AS
IF STRUCK BY A
LIGHTNING BOLT.



BUT THOUGH THE PIPES FLEW
FROM HIS LEPROUS FINGERS,
THAT GHASTLY PIPING CONTINUED.

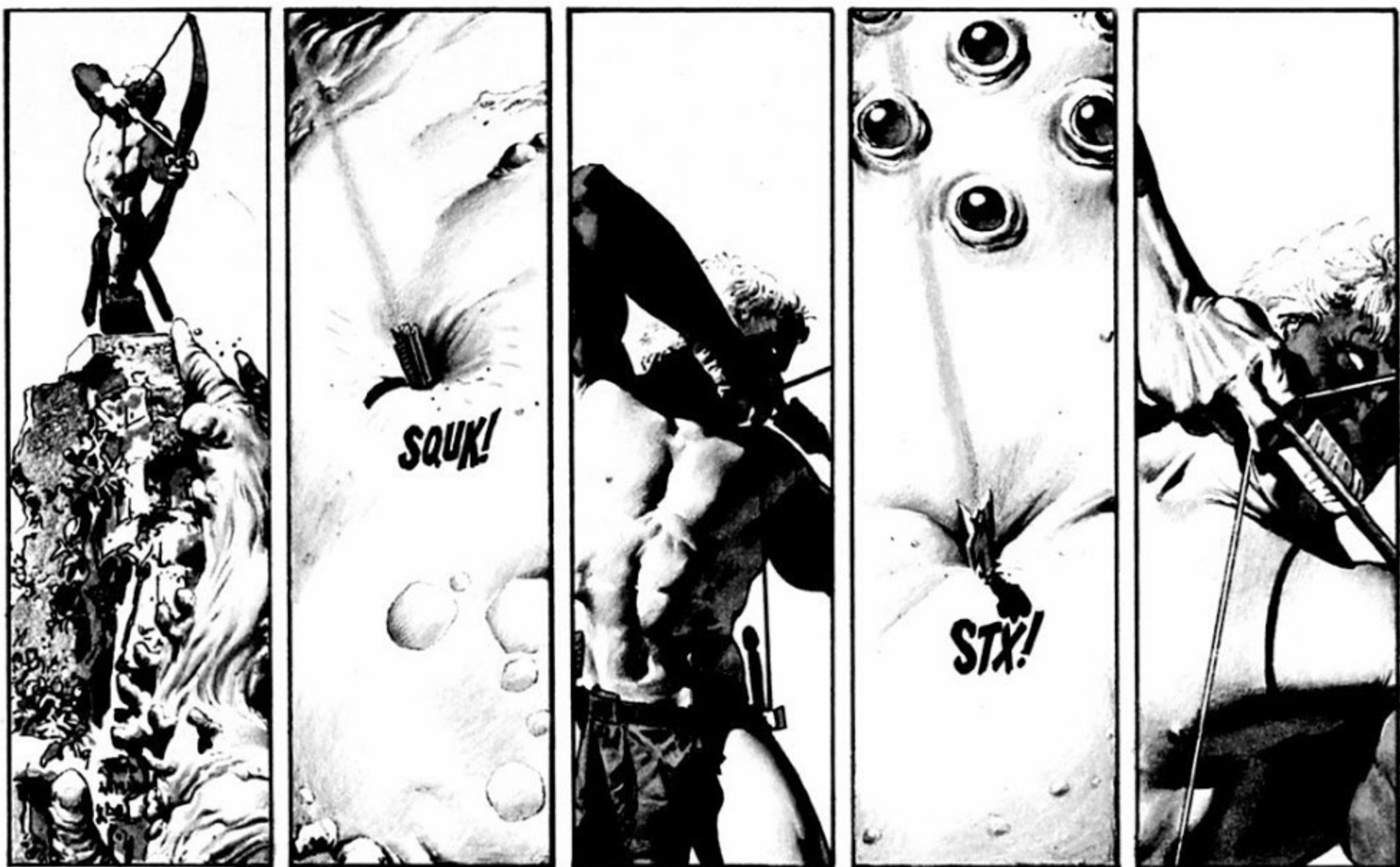


BLOODSTAR RACED
TOWARD A TIME-WORN
PILLAR, IGNORING THE
SLITHERING NOISES
BEHIND HIM.



WHITE AS CORPSE FLESH,
THE THING DRAGGED ITS
JELLIED BULK ACROSS
THE BROKEN GROUND. THIS
WAS NO ORDINARY WORM.
IT POSSESSED A DEMON
INTELLIGENCE AND AN
OBSCENE HUNGER. THE
MONSTROUS WORM-SAC
PULSED THROBBINGLY AS
IT SLID TOWARD MY
FRIEND.





EVEN AS A TENTACLE LIFTED TOWARD HIM,
I SAW BLOODSTAR SEND A SHAFT DEEP INTO
THE HORROR. ARROW AFTER ARROW DISAPPEARED
INTO IT, EACH TIPPED WITH ENOUGH VENOM
TO FELL A BULL ELEPHANT.



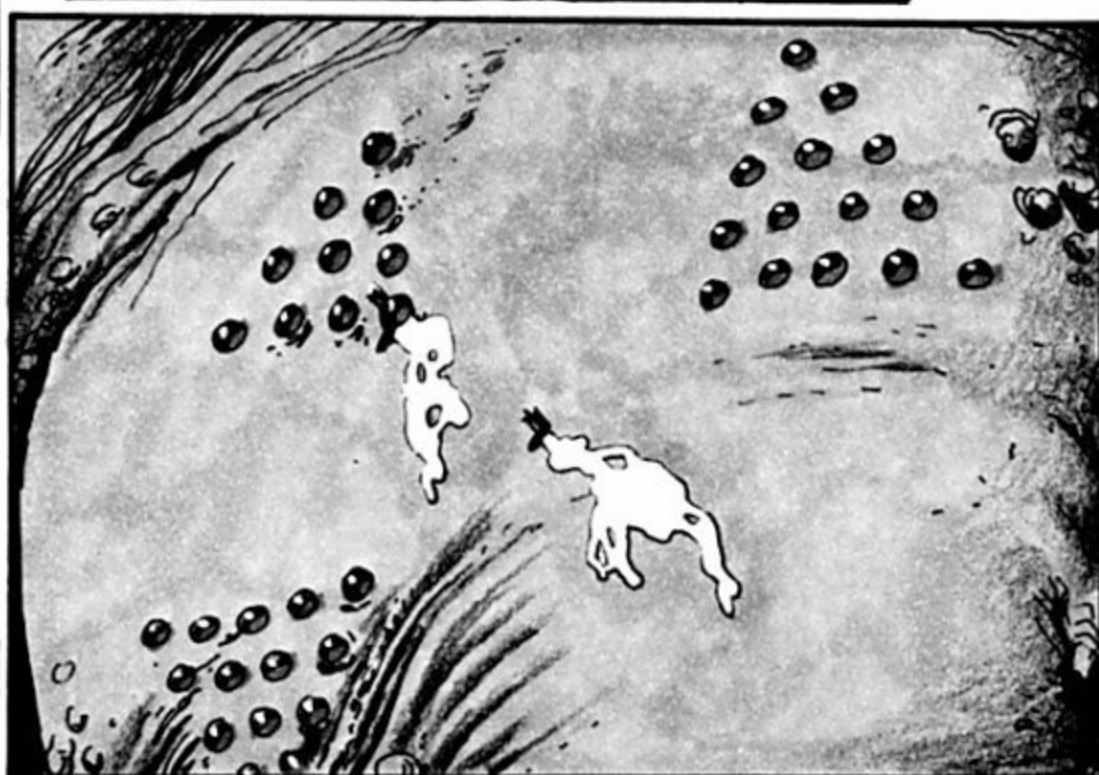
BLOODSTAR'S
CONFIDENCE FADED
AS HE SHOT HIS
LAST ARROW INTO
THE QUAKING MASS.
DID HE HEAR YMIR
CALLING HIM?

SATHA'S POISON WAS
POWERLESS AGAINST
THIS UNDYING BEING!

I TRIED TO SHOUT A
WARNING FOR HIM TO FLEE...

FLEE!







MY EYES BURNED WITH UNSHED
TEARS AS I WATCHED HIM TRY TO
REACH HIS SWORD-AND FAIL.



THE MONSTER'S TENTACLES
WHIPPED WILDLY THROUGH
THE AIR.

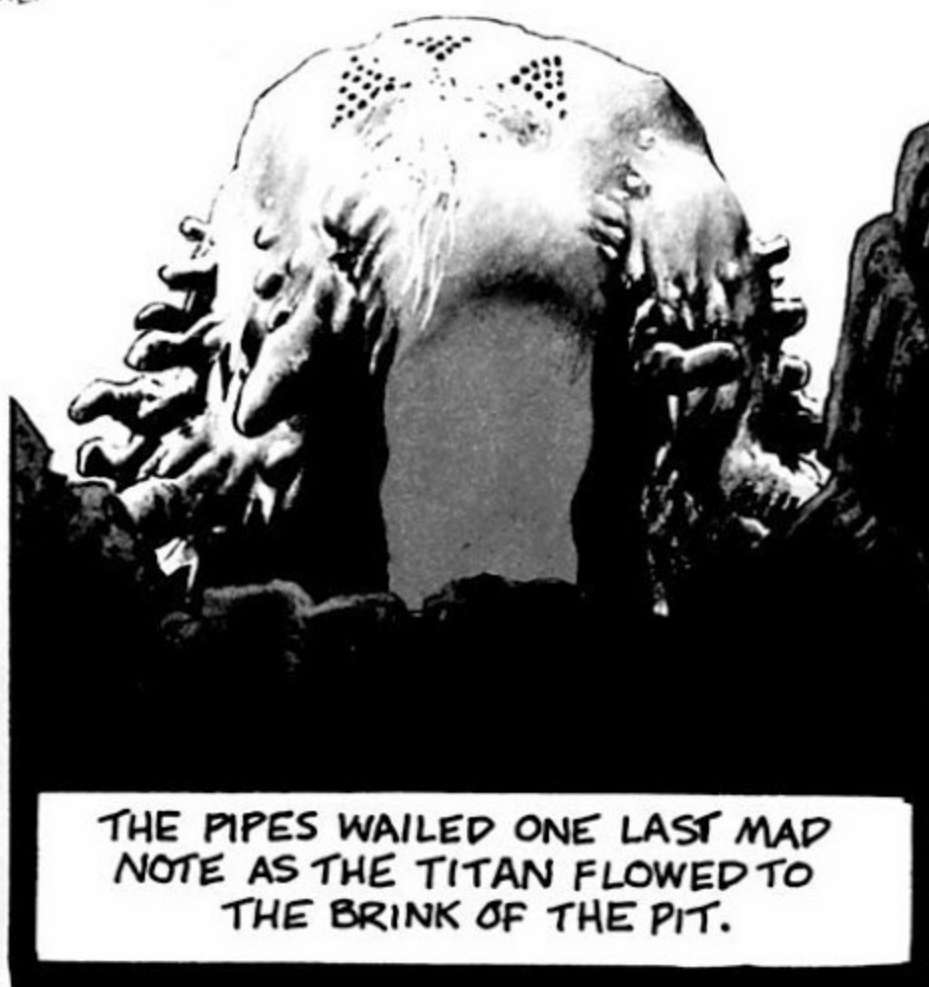


ICHOR POURED FROM THE WOUNDS CAUSED
BY THE SWORD STROKES. THE THING
UPROOTED TREES AND BUSHES AS
IT LUMBERED THROUGH THEM.



THE WORM VEERED TO SNATCH UP
LOKNAR'S BODY. BLOODSTAR'S FORMER
FRIEND DANGLED LIMPLY FOR A MOMENT...

ONLY TO BE SUDDENLY DASHED AGAINST
A WALL WITH SUCH FORCE THAT HE
BECAME A SHAPELESS PULP.



THE PIPES WAILED ONE LAST MAD
NOTE AS THE TITAN FLOWED TO
THE BRINK OF THE PIT.

I COULDN'T BELIEVE
MY EYES! I SAW
IT CHANGING AS IT
HUNG THERE ON THE
LIP OF THE ABYSS.



I WANTED TO FLEE,
BUT MY FEET WOULD
NOT CARRY ME.



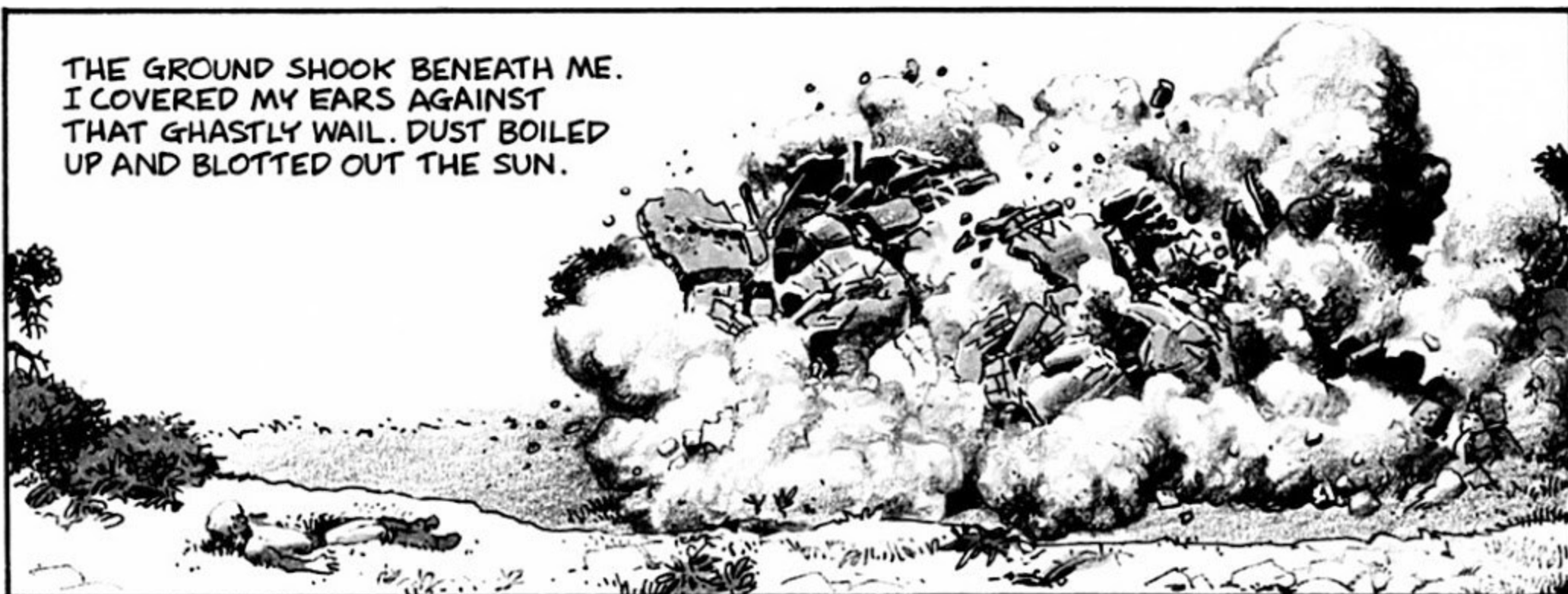
THE STENCH FROM
THE DYING MONSTER
WAS OVERPOWERING.



AT LAST SILENCE AND
PEACE RETURNED.



THE GROUND SHOOK BENEATH ME.
I COVERED MY EARS AGAINST
THAT GHASTLY WAIL. DUST BOILED
UP AND BLOTTED OUT THE SUN.



... HELVA
... LITTLE ONE



BLOODSTAR!
BLOODSTAR!





GROM...MY FRIEND,
I'M DYING. HAND
ME MY SWORD.



LET MY TALE BE
TOLD FROM CAMP TO
CAMP AND FROM TRIBE
TO TRIBE, OF THE LOVE
SHARED BY BLOODSTAR
AND HELVA, AND OF
THE TREACHERY AND
SORROW WE
SUFFERED.

BLOODSTAR!
YOUR SON—
HE LIVES!



BYRDAG
FOUND HIM BY
THE FALLS.



MY SON!

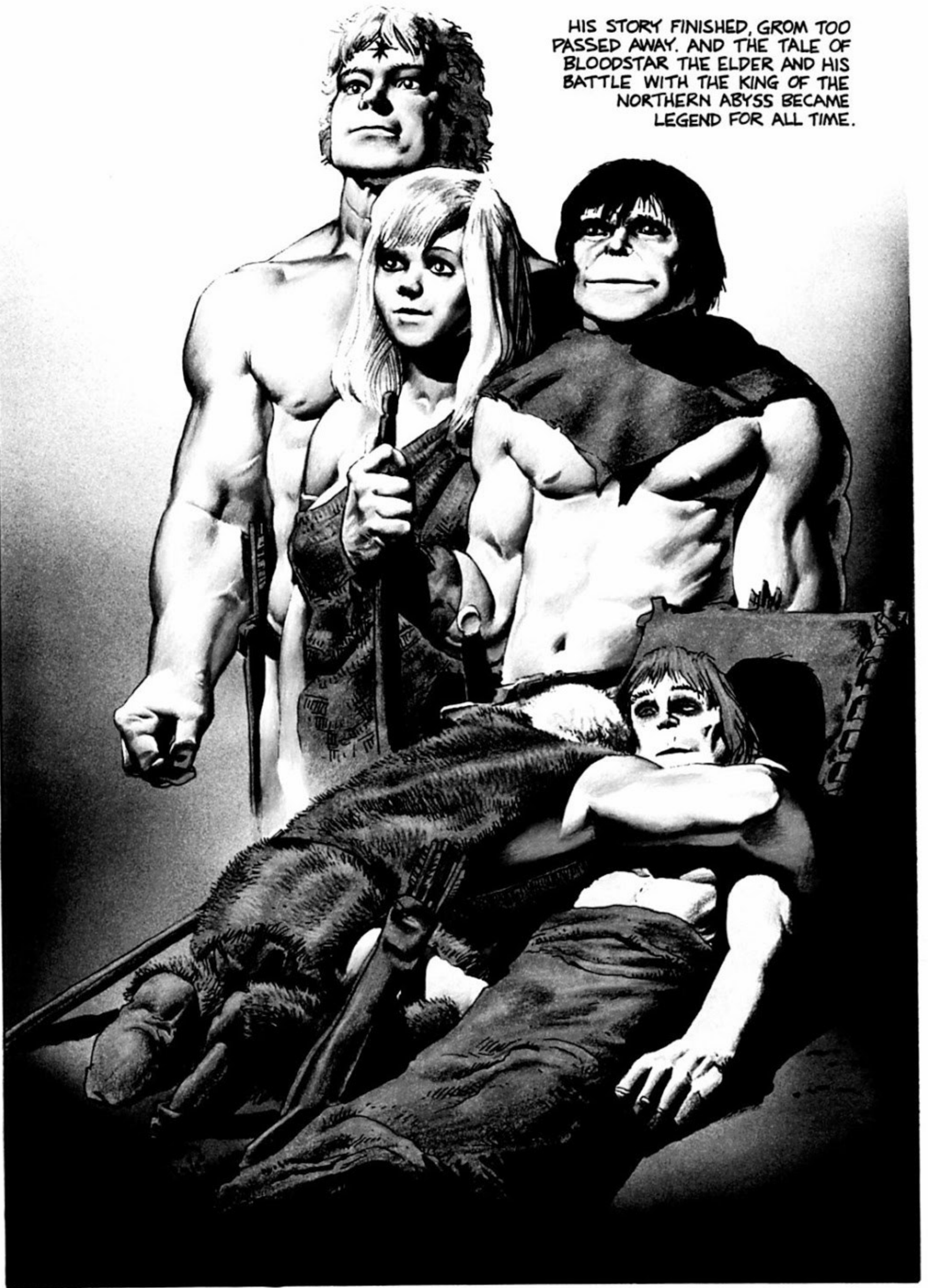


KEEP MY SON
SAFE, GROM. TEACH
HIM WELL, AND WHEN
HE CAN UNDERSTAND,
TELL HIM OF MY
VICTORY OVER THE
HIDEOUS WORM.
NO DEVIL WILL EVER
AGAIN PREY ON
THE AESIR.

BUILD ME A
CAIRN WHERE I
MAY LIE, WITH MY
BOW AND SWORD AT
MY SIDE, THAT I MAY
GUARD THIS VALLEY
FOREVERMORE.
IF THE GHOST OF
THE WORM RETURNS
MY SPIRIT WILL BE
READY TO DEFEAT
IT AGAIN.

YOUR FATHER,
SIGHED ONCE AND
PASSED OVER
INTO THE DARK.

HIS STORY FINISHED, GROM TOO
PASSED AWAY. AND THE TALE OF
BLOODSTAR THE ELDER AND HIS
BATTLE WITH THE KING OF THE
NORTHERN ABYSS BECAME
LEGEND FOR ALL TIME.





Epilogue

Thus ends the tale of Bloodstar the Elder.

But the glory of the AEsir continued on in his son, and in his son's children, who sailed strange ships of wood and stone back to the icebound headlands of their tribe's origin.

And it came to pass that those sons of Bloodstar founded the dynasty which came to be known as the Northern Ring, or Kingdom of Frozen Light.

Its warriors traveled the world's white-foaming seas in quest of new lands and lost tribes.

Its explorers charted the perilous passages through the Smoking Realms.

The AEsir once more began to spread from the remote crown of the world to inhabit and repopulate the warmer climes, as did those first AEsir men and women.

Many deeds of heroism those sons of Bloodstar performed and recorded, above the land and in the underworlds beneath it.

Many were the soul-blasting wonders they beheld—and destroyed, sorceries and magics surviving from the earlier evil ages of man.

For always they hearkened back to the memory of the King of the Northern Abyss, and the man of AEsir blood who gave his life to slay that ancient evil.

When the sons of Bloodstar finally returned to that southern refuge beyond the Tainted Mountains where the first AEsir tribe had lived and perished, they found no trace of the Northern Abyss, or of the forbidden ruins. Grom's race had vanished; a primeval peace had returned to the golden plain.

Upon the spot where legend said that first son of Bloodstar had been born, they caused the capital city of Helvatica to be built.

Helvatica—wondrous beyond imagining. The precious gems which crusted her towers and spires glittered like the stars at noontide.

The city and its people prospered.

Ever did those succeeding generations remember and pay tribute to the sacrifices of their forebears—of Bloodstar the First and Grom the Faithful, of the Lady Helva, and of old Byrdag who saved the race.

And it has come to pass in this youthful time of the world that we still remember.

Legend and reality are one.

Man and myth are inseparable for all time.

Bloodstar's protective shadow falls over us all.

And the AEsir blood lives!

