

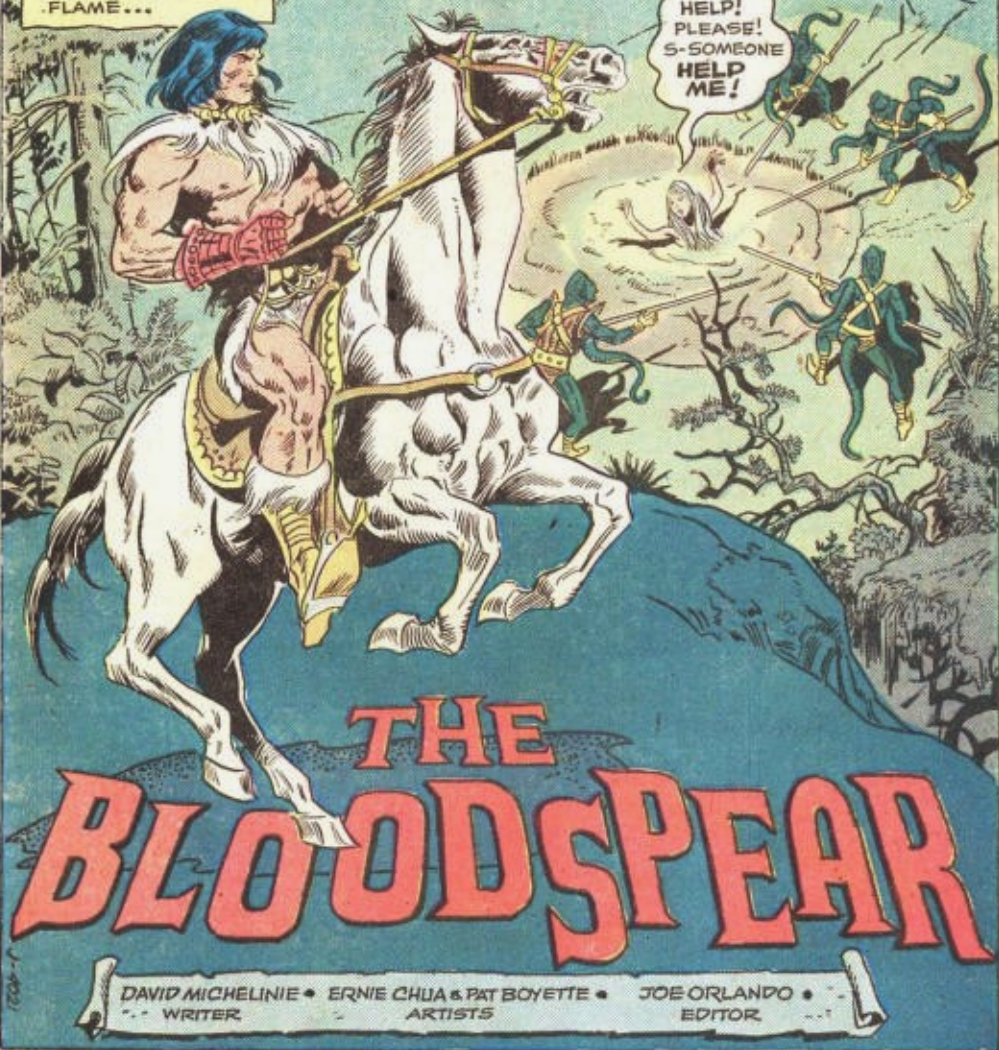
CLAW THE UNCONQUERED

HE HAS RIDDEN LONG AND HARD, THIS GRIM BARBARIAN, OVER THE SUN-RUINED WASTES OF PYTHARIA -- SEARCHING FOR A PAST AS VAGUE AND TENUOUS AS THE SMOKE FROM AN ILL-DOUSED FLAME...

SO THAT NOW, AT SUNFALL, HE SEEKS ONLY PEACE IN THE SHELTER OF A GNARLED FOREST SPROUTING JAGGEDLY FROM THE SWELTERING DESERT'S EDGE...

...ONLY TO FIND THAT ON THIS DARK-STARRED EVE, SUCH PEACE WILL BE A LONG TIME COMING!

HELP!
PLEASE!
S-SOMEONE
HELP
ME!



THE BLOODSPEAR

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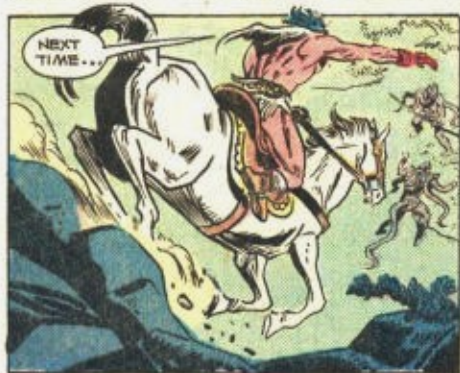
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WELL, HORSE, SHALL WE LEND A HAND--OR DO THE INTELLIGENT THING FOR ONCE?

AYE, WHY SHOULD I FEEL RESPONSIBLE TO EVERY HAPLESS WAYFARER, WHO FALLS PREY TO HIS OWN CARELESSNESS?!

AFTER ALL, THE ONLY REWARD COMPASSION HAS EVER WON ME HAS BEEN THE SHARP STING OF GREEDY BLADES!

LET THE WENCH FEND FOR HERSELF!





LIKE A HUMAN SCYTHE, THE FRENZIED BAR-BARIAN CARVES A SWATH THROUGH THE THROG OF WOULD-BE ASSASSINS--



--A SWATH OF BLOOD AND PULSING OFFAL--



HISS SSSWORD, MY BROTHERSS! GET HISS SSSWORD! WITHOUT IT, HISS FURY ISSS EMPTY!



LIKE PULPY, CARESSING FINGERS, RIBBONLIKE TENTACLES SLINK OUTWARDS--



--COIL ABOUT A FLASHING, CRIMSON GAUNTLET--



--AND PULL--

--REVEALING A-- SCALY, FUR-TUPT HORROR THAT ONLY THE KINDEST WOULD CALL A HAND...



SSSO, WE FIGHT A CRIPPLE, EH? THEN WITHOUT YOUR SSSTEEL YOU SSSHOULD PROVE A FEEBLE Foe, INDEED,

JUST KEEP THINKING THAT, SLIT-MOUTH--



--ALL THE WAY TO HELL!

SSSKRAAAA



ONCE MORE
THE BATTLE
IS JOINED--



--BUT THIS TIME
THE ATTACKERS
ARE FAR LESS
CONFIDENT--



--FOR THEY
REMAIN ONLY
TOO AWARE
THAT THEIR
LEADER, THE
MIGHTIEST
AMONG THEM--



--LIES SPRAWLED
NEARBY IN A PUDDLE
OF HIS OWN GORE--



--AND THAT THE
MAN WHO LAID HIM
OPEN SEEMS EQUALLY
DETERMINED TO DO
THE SAME TO THEM
ALL...



IT IS A THOUGHT
TO BREAK EVEN
THE STRONGEST
OF WILLS...

HO! THEY FLEE!
METHINKS THERE'S
A BIT OF THE
FOWL IN THESE
LIZARD MEN!

PLEASE!
H-HELP!



TH--THE MIRE
DRAWS ME DOWN
F-FARTHER
EACH MOMENT!

I'M WELL AWARE OF
THE PROBLEM, GIRL!
BUT I'LL WAGER THESE
VINES SHOULD PROVIDE
AN ADEQUATE
SOLUTION!



HERE, MAKE
THEM FAST
ABOUT YOU!

CONTINUED ON 3RD PAGE FOLLOWING



THEN HORSE AND RIDER STRAIN--AS SLOWLY, WETLY, THE TREMBLING GIRL BEGINS TO PULL FREE OF THE CLUTCHING BOG...



UNTIL AT LAST...

I--I'M FREE! HOW CAN I EVER THANK YOU?

BEST SAVE YOUR GRATITUDE FOR WHEN WE'VE REACHED SOME OTHER PART OF THE FOREST. THOSE WEASEL-FACED SERPENTS ARE LIKE TO RETURN WITH REINFORCEMENTS ERE LONG.



SO WE'D BEST HURRY MY HORSE ISN'T USED TO AN EXTRA RIDER!

OH, I DON'T THINK THAT WILL BE MUCH OF A PROBLEM...



WHAT DO YOU MEA--

SOTH!



WHAT'S THE MATTER, WARRIOR? YOU ACT LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN A CENTAURESS BEFORE!

IN TRUTH, GIRL-- I NEVER HAVE!



WELL, YOU'LL BE SEEING MUCH MORE OF ME IF THAT SCARLET GLOVE MARKS YOU FOR THE MAN I THINK IT DOES, BECAUSE I'VE A PROPOSITION FOR ONE CALLED... CLAW!

AYE, THAT'S ME. THOUGH I HADN'T THOUGHT MY NAME KNOWN HEREBABOUTS!



NEVERTHELESS, I'LL HEAR YOUR OFFER--

--AFTER WE'VE QUIT THIS SNAKE-STENCHED BOG!



AND AS THE SOUND OF GALLOPING HOOFES FILLS THE MOON-SHADOWED WOOD...

I AM ELATHIA, A SEEKER AFTER FORTUNE! I GO TO THE WALL OF WEEPING MISTS TO PILLAGE THE TOMB OF A LONG-DEAD SORCERER...

BUT IF LEGEND BE TRUE, THOSE BEASTS THAT ATTACKED ME ARE BUT ONE OF THE HIDEOUS PERILS THAT CLUTTER THE WAY!



THIS WOULD I OFFER YOU HALF MY PLUNDER TO LEND YOUR SWORD TO MY QUEST!

HMPH! I'VE LITTLE NEED FOR GOLD-- AND EVEN LESS FOR SORCERY!



AH, BUT THERE ARE OTHER BOUNTIES TO BE HAD--MAGICKS POWERS...

...KNOWLEDGE!



KNOWLEDGE:
THE WORD STICKS LIKE A THORN IN CLAW'S MIND--FOR THERE IS NOTHING HE COVETS MORE...

KNOWLEDGE TO EXPLAIN HIS SINGLE CHILDHOOD MEMORY, THAT OF AN INFANT ORPHANED BY TREACHERY-- AND KEPT FROM DEATH BY THE GENTLE HAND OF AN UNKNOWN SAVIOR...

KNOWLEDGE TO FILL THE VOID STRETCHING BETWEEN THAT MEMORY AND THE REBIRTH OF AWARENESS JUST SHORT WEEKS BEFORE--



REWARD
10,000 DENARS FOR THE HEAD AND RIGHT HAND OF [NAME]

-- A STORMY RESURRECTION MARKED BY A RESTLESS SENSE OF DESTINY-- AND THE UNJUST BRAND OF AN OUTLAW...

SUCH EMPTINESS TORMENTS THE VERY SOUL-- AND LEAVES CAUTION SHRIEKING TO DEAF EARS...



VERY WELL, GIRL-- YOU'VE HIRED A SWORD!

THIS IS THE CELESTIAL DIE CAST...

...WHILE SOME LEAGUES AWAY, AT BROODING CASTLE DARKMORN, TWO UNSEEN WATCHERS GROW SINISTER SMILES AT THE RESULTS OF THAT ROLL...



CONGRATULATIONS, MIFTUNG! YOUR LATEST PROJECT PROVES MOST INTERESTING!

THANK YOU, KING OCULUS! I'M RATHER PROUD OF IT MYSELF!



AS WELL YOU SHOULD BE, WIZARD! THIS UPSTART BARBARIAN IS A FORMIDABLE ADVERSARY--

--AND HIS DEATH WILL HONOR US BOTH!



THE NIGHT GROWS LONG, AND THE TRAIL EVEN LONGER...UNTIL AT LENGTH EVEN A HARDENED OUTLANDER MUST TAKE RELUCTANT PAUSE. A CAMP IS MADE...

... AND SOON, RESTIVE SLEEP DRAPES TWO TIME-WEARY FORMS...



... AN UNSUSPECTING PAIR WHO HAVE YET TO REALIZE--



-- THAT IN THE WOOD OF THE SILENT GOD --



-- SUCH SLUMBER IS APT TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY--



-- NIGHTMARE !

BOTH BE DAMNED! WHAT MANNER OF HELLSPAWN ARE THESE ?



CONTINUED ON 322 PAGE FOLLOWING



UP, ELATHIA!
RUN! THESE
SLUGS ARE OUT
FOR FLESH!

THE WARNING
CRIED, CLAW
TURNS HIS FULL
ATTENTION TO
THE SLIME-
DRIPPING
DANGER AT
HAND--



--AS TIME AND AGAIN,
GLISTENING STEEL ARCS
DOWN THROUGH THE
FIRE! IT NIGHT, CLEAVING
BODIES LIKE WARM,
PINK CHEESE...



...UNTIL THE ROCKY
EARTH RUNS WET, AND
THE AIR FILLS WITH
THE PUNGENCY OF
DEATH...



.. AND AT
LAST, THE
GLADE IS
STILL...

I-IT'S OVER!
WE.. WE WON!

WEE? I DIDN'T
NOTICE YOU SOILING
YOUR DELICATE
HOOVES WITH THESE
MONSTERS' BLOOD!

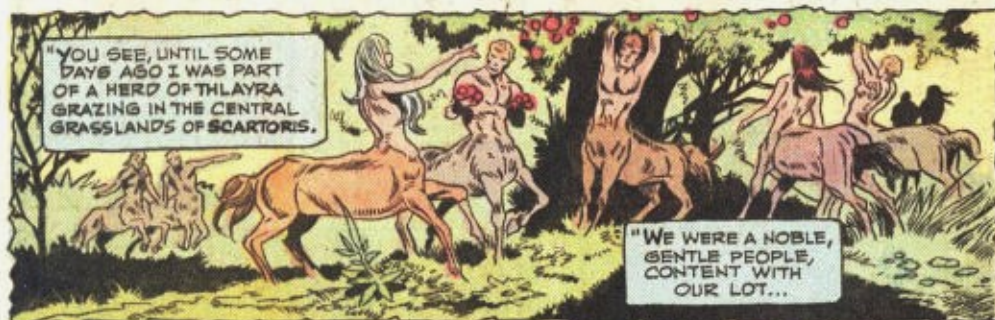


OH, BUT I... I
WAS SCARED! I-I'VE
NEVER KILLED BEFORE!
I'M SORRY IF--

FORGET IT,
GIRL.. AS YOU
SAID... IT'S
OVER!



BUT IS IT OVER,
BARBARIAN? IS
IT REALLY...?

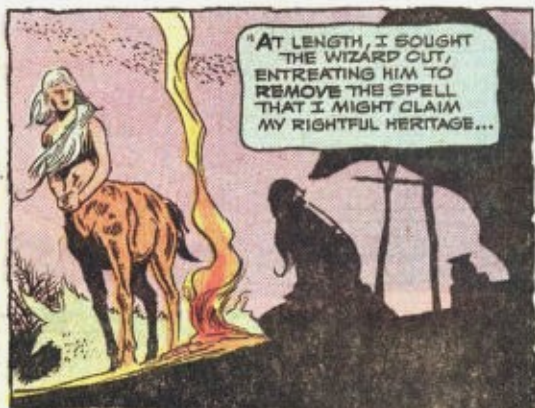


"I STARTED SEEING THE THLAYRA FOR WHAT THEY REALLY WERE-- ANIMALS! MERE BEASTS NO BETTER THAN CATTLE OR THE MILYRA THAT TOL IN THE FIELDS!

AND I WAS NO LONGER CONTENT...



"AT LENGTH, I SOUGHT THE WIZARD OUT, ENTREATING HIM TO REMOVE THE SPELL THAT I MIGHT CLAIM MY RIGHTFUL HERITAGE...



"ONLY TO FIND THAT A COUNTERSPELL WOULD REQUIRE THE POWER OF KYRIACH-- AN ANCIENT RUNESPEAR LODGED IN THE TOMB OF THE VERY SORCERER WHO HAD ENCHANTED ME!

"AND THOUGH OBTAINING THE SPEAR WOULD MEAN GREAT DANGER, I HAD LITTLE CHOICE FOR THE ONLY OTHER CURE FOR MY CURSE WAS...DEATH!



"THUS I BEGAN, AND THOUGH THERE WERE TEARS AT MY PARTING, THEY WERE NOT MINE--

"--FOR THE THLAYRA WERE NO LONGER MINE..."



AND I ENCOUNTERED LITTLE DIFFICULTY UNTIL THE ATTACK YESTERDAY, WHEN THE FORTUNE OF THE GODS BROUGHT YOU ALONG SO...CONVENIENTLY...


AND THAT, FRIEND CLAW, IS MY STORY!



THE DAY WEARS ON IN SILENCE THEN, AS FOREST TURNS TO PLAIN...

...AND A ONCE-CLEAR SKY WASHES GREY WITH CLOUD AND UNNATURAL COLD...





... AN ICY CHILL THAT GELS THE VERY MARROW AS ITS UNDENIABLE SOURCE IS REACHED. A STEEP SLAB OF UNYIELDING STONE THAT CAN ONLY BE--


--THE WALL OF WEeping MISTS!

THE VAULT LIES AT THE TOP OF THE ESCARPMENT--AND THE RUNESPEAR RESTS WITHIN.


SEEMS THIS SORCERER HAD LITTLE CONSIDERATION FOR GRAVEROBBER. STILL, I'VE COME THIS FAR...



CAUTIOUSLY, RUGGED HANDS SPLAY OUT, LEATHER BOOTS SEEK FOOTHOLDS, AS A GRIPPING, SPIDERY PROGRESS IS MADE UP THE RAIN-SLICK STONE...

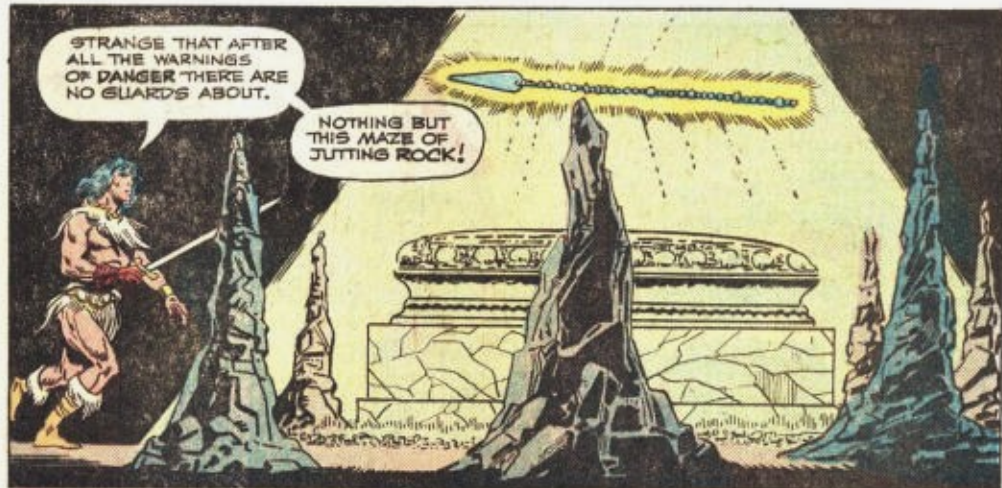


UNTIL, AT LONG LAST, THE DESTINATION IS REACHED...



...AND STEEL-BLUE EYES LOOK ON A VISION OF TREASURE BEYOND IMAGINING...

...ABOVE WHICH HOVERS THE GLOWING, MYSTIC-CARVED LENGTH OF--KYRIACH!



STRANGE THAT AFTER ALL THE WARNINGS OF DANGER THERE ARE NO GUARDS ABOUT.

NOTHING BUT THIS MAZE OF JUTTING ROCK!



BUT AS THE LEERY OUTLANDER MOVES FORWARD, A WAVE OF SUDDEN SLUGGISHNESS OVERCOMES HIM--AND HE SOON LEARNS WHY THE TOMB HAS NO GUARDIANS...



NONE ARE NEEDED!

GODS! MY LEGS-- THEY TURN TO STONE!



IN NEAR PANIC, THE STARTLED BARBARIAN LASHES OUT--

--ONLY HOW DOES ONE FIGHT A FOE THAT ISN'T THERE...?



AND THEN...

THE CRYSTAL! I FELT NOTHING UNTIL I ENTERED ITS LIGHT!



SOTH TAKE MY SOUL IF I'M WRONG--



--FOR I'LL NOT GET A SECOND CHANCE!



SSRAKSH





THE MYSTICALLY-CHARGED SHAFT SCREAMS DOWNWARD, BUT ITS TARGET'S REFLEXES ARE WELL-HONED--

--AND THE POINT TASTES ONLY THE BARK OF A NEARBY TREE...



...A TASTE THAT PROVES SHUDDERINGLY LETHAL, FOR THIS ENCHANTED WEAPON DRINKS NOT ONLY BLOOD--

--BUT LIFE ITSELF!



GIVE UP, CLAW! YOU'VE SEEN WHAT KYRIACH CAN DO! ONE SCRATCH WILL LEAVE YOU AS HOLLOW AND LIFELESS AS THIS HUSK!

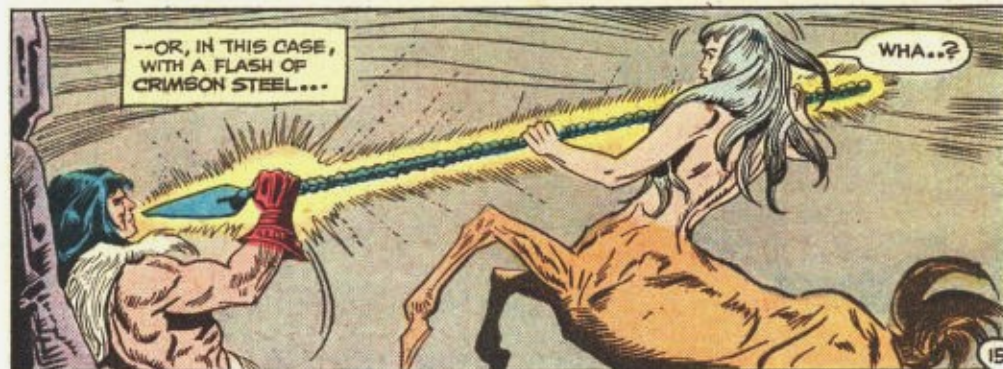
AND EVEN YOU CAN'T DODGE FOREVER!



BUT IT IS NOT A WARRIOR'S WAY TO ACCEPT DEFEAT, FOR HE KNOWS THAT EVEN WHEN DEATH SEEMS INEVITABLE--



--FATE CAN CHANGE THE ODDS WITH ONE SHRUG OF GOD-LIKE SHOULDERS...



--OR, IN THIS CASE, WITH A FLASH OF CRIMSON STEEL...

WHA..?

THE VERY AIR ITSELF
CRACKS AND ROILS TO
THE ERUPTION OF DARK
ENERGIES. ARCANES
FORCES NEVER MEANT
TO BE RELEASED TO
THE LIGHT OF DAY...

KLASH



...AND WHEN THE UNHOLY TURMOIL
FINALLY DIES, IT IS A MERE SHAFT
OF WOOD AND IRON THAT RESTS IN
THE SETTLING DUST...

THE MAGIC!
I-IT'S GONE!



AYE, 'TWOULD
SEEM THIS METAL
HAND OF MINE HOLDS
POWERS I NEVER
IMAGINED!

NO! Y-YOU CAN'T
ROB ME OF MY ONLY
CHANCE TO BE HUMAN!

I WON'T LET
YOU! I WON'T!
I WON'T!



LIKE TWIN-BLADED KNIVES,
THE CENTAURESS' HOOVES
SLICE DEEP INTO STONE-
RUBBLED EARTH--



--AS DESPERATE
FURY BLINDS HER TO
THE RUDIMENTARY
FACT THAT A SPEAR,
EVEN WITHOUT OCCULT
POWERS, REMAINS--



CONTINUED ON 5th PAGE FOLLOWING.

--A MOST DEADLY WEAPON...

GNK!

A DREAMLIKE SILENCE QUIETS THE SCENE, BROKEN ONLY BY THE MOAN OF A DISTANT WIND... AND THE SHALLOW RASP OF A PAINFULLY-LABORED WHISPER...

THIS ISN'T EXACTLY... HOW I'D PLANNED IT... WARRIOR...

BUT PERHAPS... IT'S FOR THE BEST...

FOR I COULD NEVER HAVE GONE BACK... TO LIVING AS A HALF-BEAST...

NOT AFTER KNOWING... WHAT I REALLY AM...

BUT AT LEAST... WHEN THE SPELL REVERSES ITSELF... IN DEATH...

AT LEAST... I'LL HAVE... THAT MUCH...

FOR A MOMENT, CLAW WATCHES THE NOW-STILL BODY, AWAITING THE MIRACULOUS METAMORPHOSIS...

AND THEN, SLOWLY SHAKING HIS DARK MANED HEAD, HE TURNS AWAY...

... PERHAPS PONDERING THE NATURE OF THE "THING" THIS GRACEFUL, LONELY CREATURE HAD SOUGHT TO BECOME...

... AND HOPING THAT FROM WHATEVER AFTERLIFE SHE MAY NOW BE WATCHING, SHE CAN FINALLY SEE THAT MAN—THE IDEAL FOR WHICH SHE HAD SACRIFICED LIFE AND LINEAGE... IS BUT ANOTHER ANIMAL...

ONE OF GREED,
BRUTALITY--



... AND CRUEL,
CRUEL LIES...



EPILOGUE :

AN ILL-LIT CHAMBER
FAR AWAY...

I-I DON'T UNDERSTAND, SIRE! IT SHOULD HAVE WORKED! SHE BELIEVED MY EVERY WORD--!



BUT STILL YOUR PLAN FAILED, WIZARD! WELL, YOU'VE HAD YOUR CHANCE!

NOW, IT'S MY TURN!



B-BUT, SIRE, YOU CAN'T--

OH, BUT I CAN, MIFTUNG! MY METHODS MAY NOT BE AS GUBTLE AS YOURS, BUT THAT VILE SAVAGE STANDS BETWEEN ME AND THE RULE OF THIS UNIVERSE--

--AND I WILL SEE HIM DEAD!



EVEN IF IT MEANS DESTROYING A WORLD IN THE PROCESS!

