

MY NAME IS JAMES ALLISON-- AND I AM DYING! I LIE SOFT BETWEEN SATIN SHEETS, WARMED BY TORRENTS OF BRIGHT SUNLIGHT WHICH CASCADE THRU MY BEDROOM WINDOW-- AND I AM DYING.

BUT, WHILE DEATH CREEPS UPON ME LIKE A BLIND SLUG, I MUST TELL YOU OF A MAN CALLED NIORD-- AND OF THAT LOATHSOME, DEMONIC THING WHICH CRAWLED HIDEOUSLY UP FROM HELL ONE DAY, AND INTO THAT SAVAGE, TIME-LOST LAND HE KNEW AS--

THE VALLEY OF THE

WORM!

NO, IT IS NOT OF THE DRAB, DISEASE-RACKED LIFE OF JAMES ALLISON THAT I DREAM-- FOR THAT SOON WILL END, AND BE BUT BRIEFLY MOURNED--

RATHER, AS DEATH'S BLACK WINGS UNFOLD ABOVE ME, I SEE THE COUNTLESS PREVIOUS INCARNATIONS WHICH HAVE BEEN MINE-- A GLEAMING PARADE OF FORMS AND LIVES--

FOR, I HAVE BEEN MANY MEN, IN MANY LANDS-- WITH NAMES LIKE HIALMAR AND HORSA-- ERIC AND JOHN--

--AND NIORD!
MOST OF ALL--
NIORD..!



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scripters artist inker ADAPTED FROM THE STORY BY:

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YES, I MUST TELL YOU, BEFORE I DIE, OF NYGARD AND THE HYDRN!

YOU HAVE HEARD THE BRISLY STORY OF THEIR MEETING
IN MANY GODS-- FOR, FROM THAT MEETING
SPRANG THE WHOLE CYCLE OF MYTHOLOGY
WHICH REVOLVES DOWN THE AGES UNTIL THE
TRUTH BEHIND IT ALL IS DARKLY LOST!

IN TIMELESS LEGENDS,
YOU HAVE KNOWN THAT
HERO AS PERSEUS--
HE WHO SAVED THE
LADY ANDROMEDA
FROM A MAMMOTH
SEA-BORN
SERPENT--

-- AS
BESWOLF,
WHOSE TERRIBLE
SHIFT SHARD
PUT AN END TO
A FEARSOME
FIRE-
MONSTER--

-- AND AS
SIGFRIED,
WHO MEN SAY
SLEW THE
SCALY
BEHEMOTH
CALLED
FARNIR!

-- AS SAINT GEORGE,
WHO SLEW A MIGHTY
DRAGON IN THE WILDS
OF ASIA MINOR--

YES, THAT IS
WHAT MEN
SAY.

BUT THEY
ARE
WRONG.

FOR, ALL THESE MYTHICAL
TALES ARE BUT THE
DIMMEST, DREAMIEST
SCAND-- THE FALLEST
RACIAL MEMORY--

-- OF THE GRIM, UNDERLYING
REALITY WHICH WAS THE
ADVENTURE OF NYGARD
HYDRN'S GAME--!

IT WAS A STRANGE WORLD IN WHICH NIORD LIVED AND LOVED AND FOUGHT.

I WILL NOT NAME THE AGE, FOR I WOULD BE CALLED A MADMAN... AND HISTORIANS AND GEOLOGISTS WOULD RISE UP TO REBUTE ME.

WE WERE A WHOLE TRIBE MARCHING EVER SOUTHWARD ON FOOT:

OLD MEN, WOLFISH WITH THEIR LONG BEARDS AND GAUNT LIMBS...

GIANT WARRIORS IN THEIR PRIME... WOMEN WITH TOUSLED YELLOW LOCKS WHO CARRIED BABES THAT NEVER CRIED...

AND I...

BUT ALREADY THE EPIC DRIFT--THE GREAT MIGRATION OF MY PEOPLE--HAD BEGUN.

...I WAS NIORD!

BUT WE'LL MARCH THRU, BY YMIR-- THOUGH DEMONS RISE TO BAR OUR WAY!

HO! A HARD LAND LIES AHEAD-- AYE, AND REEKING JUNGLE JUST BEYOND!



I COULD NOT KNOW IT THEN--

BUT WE HAD COME INTO THE COUNTRY OF THE WORM.

OTHER THINGS PREYED THEN UPON MY MIND, AND ON THOSE OF MY TRIBESMEN...

NIORD! HEAR YOU THE DRUMS WHICH BEAT IN THE DISTANCE?

I HEAR, BRAGI.



LET US MAKE CAMP FOR THE NIGHT.

ALL THRU THE HOT BREATHLESS NIGHT, THE TOM-TOMS OF A SAVAGE PEOPLE PULSED INCESSANTLY FROM THE NEARBY JUNGLE...



BUT WE WERE FIGHTERS, AND FEARED NOT...

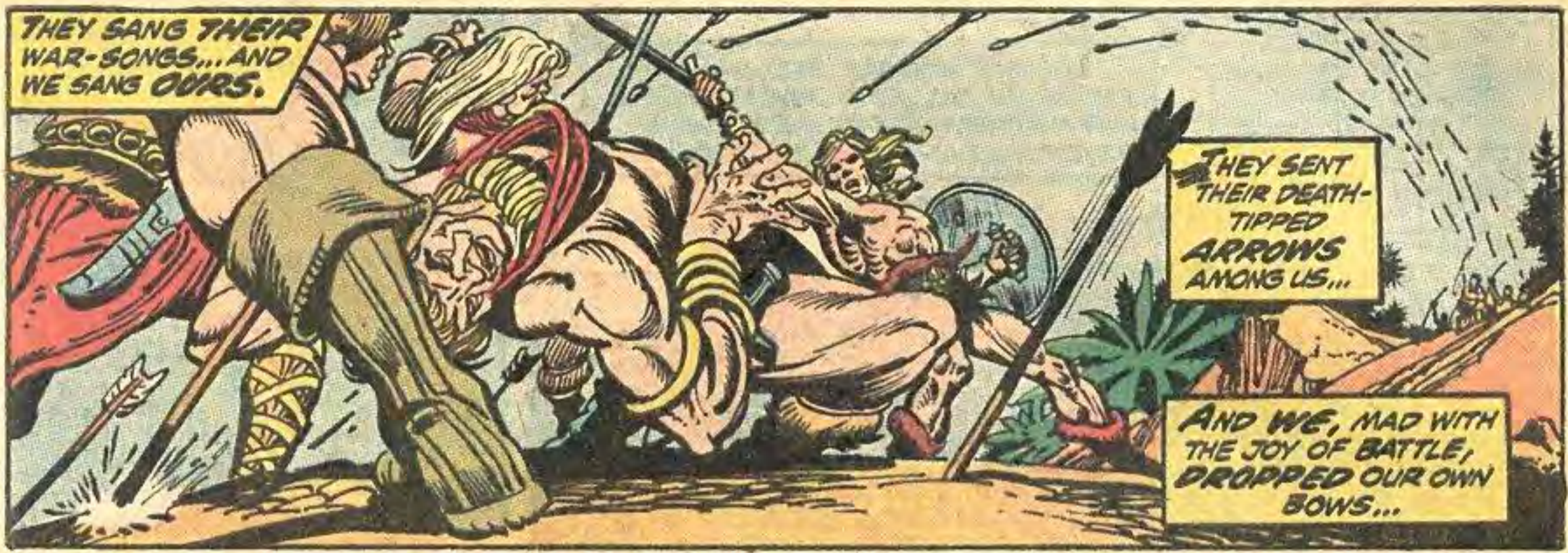
...MERELY WAITED FOR THE DAWN.

AND, IN THE MORNING, THE PICTS STOOD WAITING AT THE FOREST'S EDGE--

-- SHORT IRON SWORDS IN HAIRY PALMS, THEIR FLESH PAINTED, THEIR MANNER FIERCE.



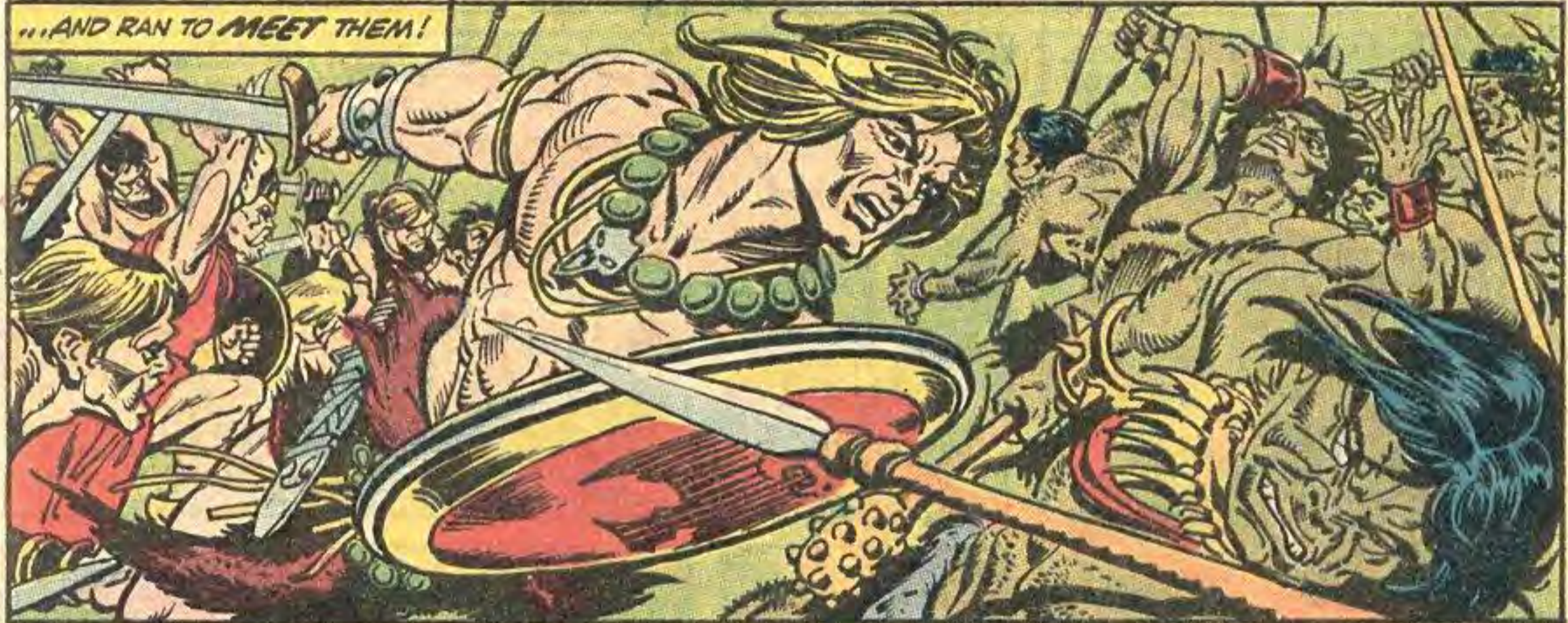
THERE WAS NO ATTEMPT AT AMBUSH.



THEY SANG THEIR WAR-SONGS... AND WE SANG OURS.

THEY SENT THEIR DEATH-TIPPED ARROWS AMONG US...

AND WE, MAD WITH THE JOY OF BATTLE, DROPPED OUR OWN BOWS...



...AND RAN TO MEET THEM!



I CANNOT PAINT WITH WORDS THE SLAUGHTER, THE FURY, ABOVE ALL THE MERCILESS SAVAGERY OF IT ALL-- OR ELSE YOU WOULD RECOIL IN HORROR--

BUT EVEN I, JAMES ALLISON, STAND AGHAST AS I REVIEW THE BUTCHERY IN WHICH I, NIORD, TOOK PART!

AT LAST, WE PREVAILED--

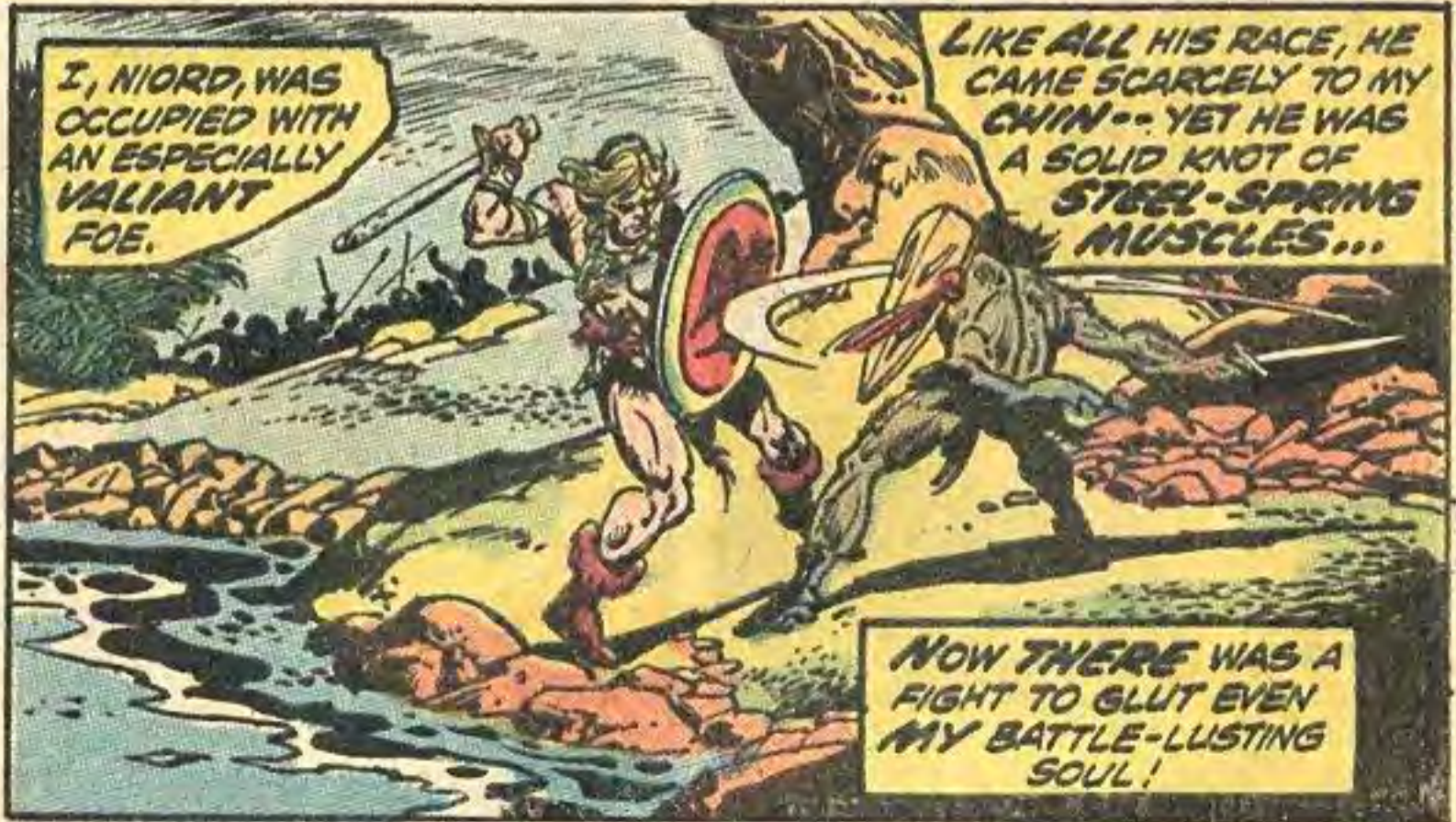
BUT IT WAS A VICTORY HARD-WON!



AND AS THE PICTS FLED, OUR WOMEN CAME FORWARD TO BRAIN THE WOUNDED ENEMIES WITH STONES... OR CUT THEIR THROATS WITH COPPER KNIVES.

WE DID NOT TORTURE.

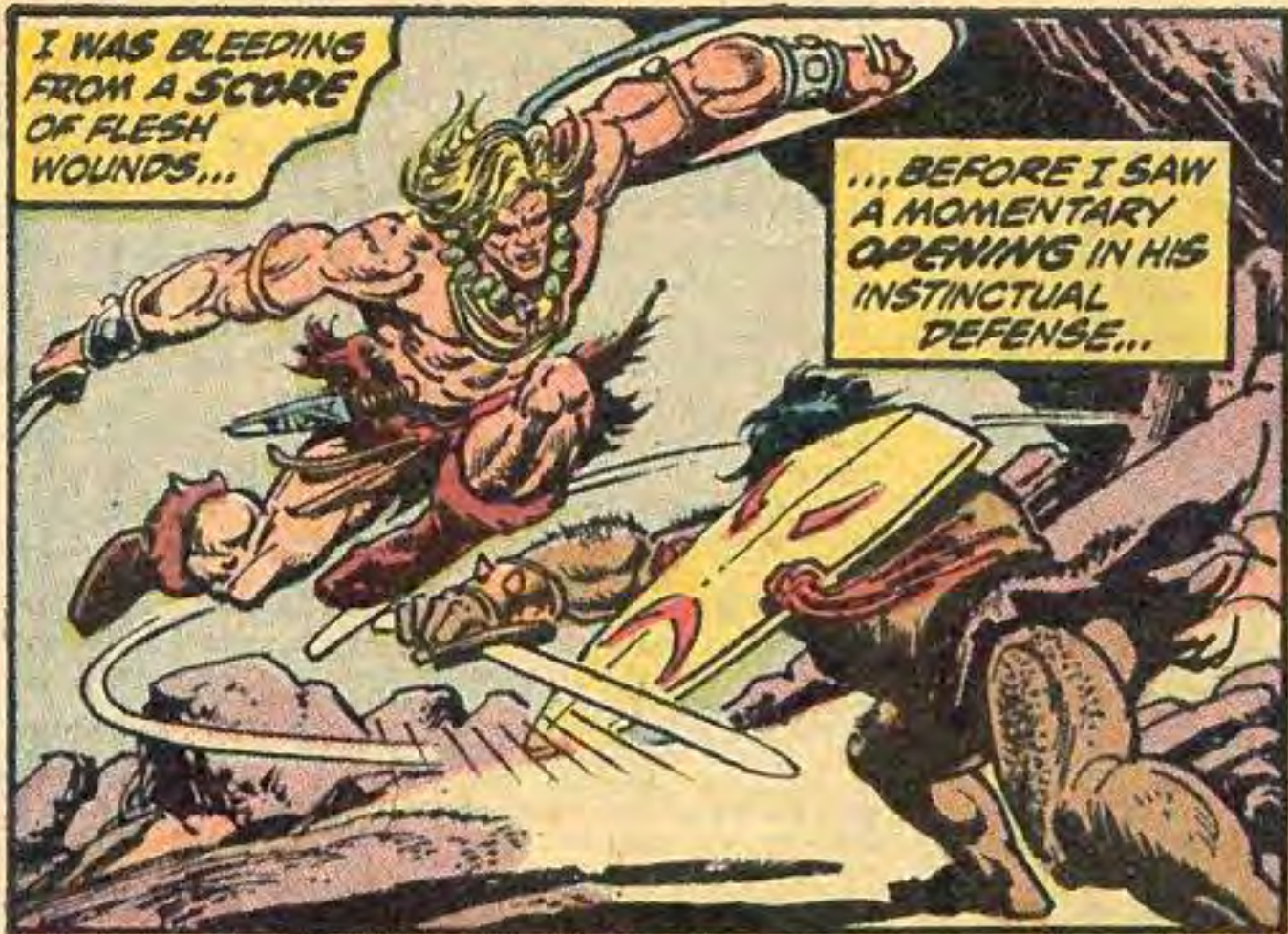
WE MERELY SLEW THOSE WHO WOULD HAVE SLAIN US.



I, NIORD, WAS OCCUPIED WITH AN ESPECIALLY VALIANT FOE.

LIKE ALL HIS RACE, HE CAME SCARCELY TO MY CHIN-- YET HE WAS A SOLID KNOT OF STEEL-SPRING MUSCLES...

NOW THERE WAS A FIGHT TO GLUT EVEN MY BATTLE-LUSTING SOUL!



I WAS BLEEDING FROM A SCORE OF FLESH WOUNDS...

... BEFORE I SAW A MOMENTARY OPENING IN HIS INSTINCTUAL DEFENSE...



... AND TOOK IT, MY SHIELD GLANCING FROM HIS UNPROTECTED HEAD!

KLUGG!



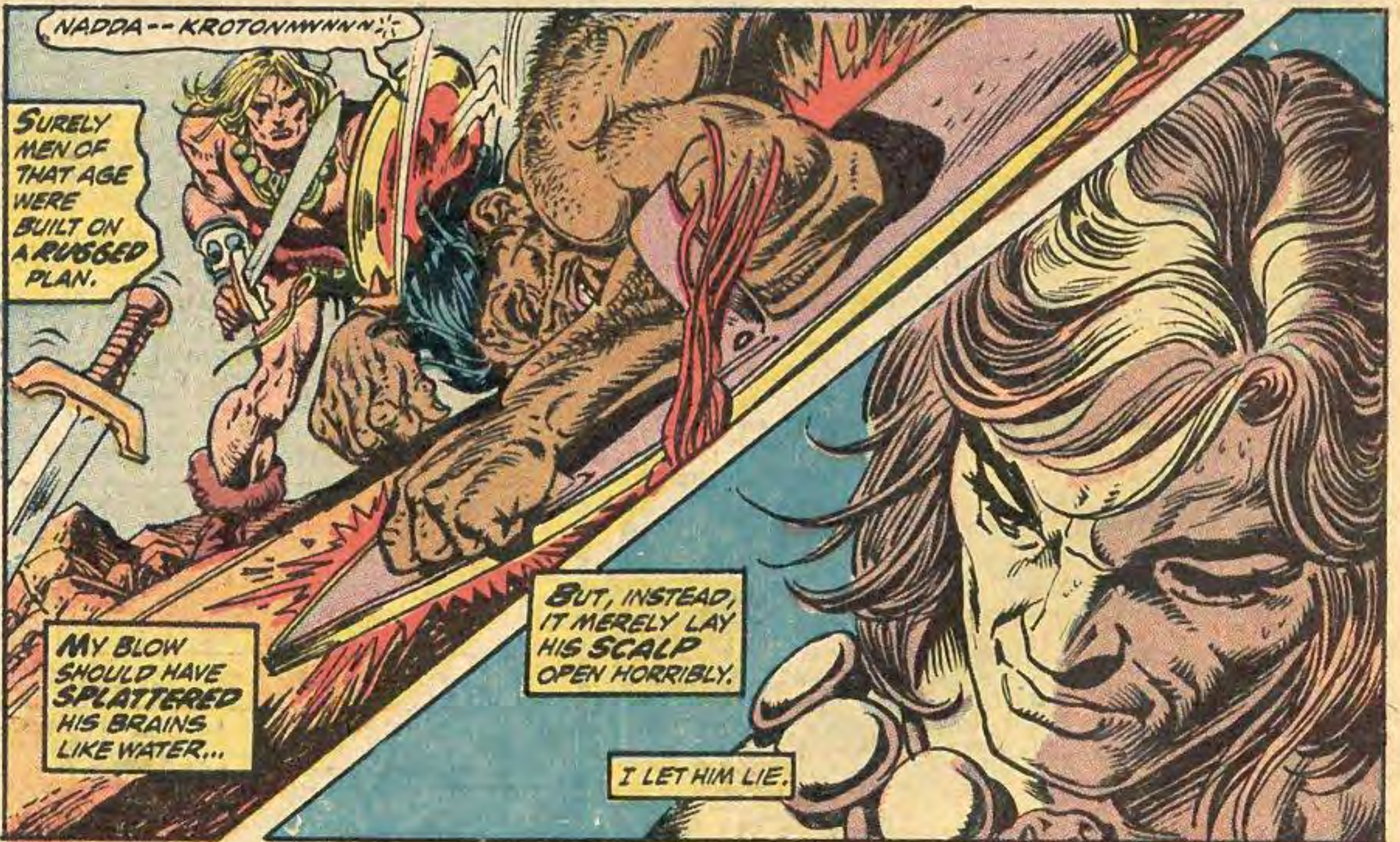
WHAT? STILL ALIVE!?

HOW HARD IS YOUR SKULL, PICT?

NADDA--!



NADDA KROTON--!



NADDA-- KROTONNNNNN!!

SURELY MEN OF THAT AGE WERE BUILT ON A RUGGED PLAN.

MY BLOW SHOULD HAVE SPLATTERED HIS BRAINS LIKE WATER...

BUT, INSTEAD, IT MERELY LAY HIS SCALP OPEN HORRIBLY.

I LET HIM LIE.



NO, HELGA!

HE IS A SAVAGE FOE--A BRUTAL ONE-- BUT HE WAS BRAVE AS WELL.

LET HIM LIVE!

LIVE!?! SURELY, NIORD, THE SOUND OF BATTLE HAS DRIVEN YOU MAD!



MAD? PERHAPS I WAS-- BY THE STANDARDS OF THAT LONG-AGO AND BARBARIAN DAY.

YET, I RETURNED TO THE FRAY WITH UN-DIMINISHED VIGOR-- AND SLEW MANY MORE PICTS BEFORE THEIR UNTRAINED RANKS BROKE--

-- AND THEY FLED INTO THE SHROUDING DARKNESS OF THE JUNGLE!



THEN, AFTER BURNING OUR OWN DEAD ON A GREAT PYLE, WE DRAGGED THE LOOTED CORPSES OF OUR ENEMY ACROSS THE PLATEAU--

... AND CAST THEM DOWN INTO THE VALLEY, TO MAKE A FEAST FOR THE ALREADY-GATHERING VULTURES.



THAT NIGHT, AS JUNGLE TOM-TOMS THROBBED, I BOUND MY CAPTIVE'S WOUNDS-- AND BEGAN TO LEARN HIS PRIMITIVE, GUTTERAL TONGUE.

EK KAA GORM.

GORM. THAT MUST BE HIS NAME. THEN...

EK KAA NIORD.

HE BOASTED FIRST, OF COURSE-- OF HOW HE WAS A GREAT HUNTER AND FIGHTER...



AND, AFTER MANY DAYS IN OUR CAMP, HE TOO HAD LEARNED OUR SPEECH-- WELL ENOUGH TO SAY--

YOU... GOOD FIGHTERS... LIKE GORM.

YOU LET ME GO... I GO BACK INTO HILLS... MAKE PEACE BETWEEN OUR PEOPLES.

AGREED!

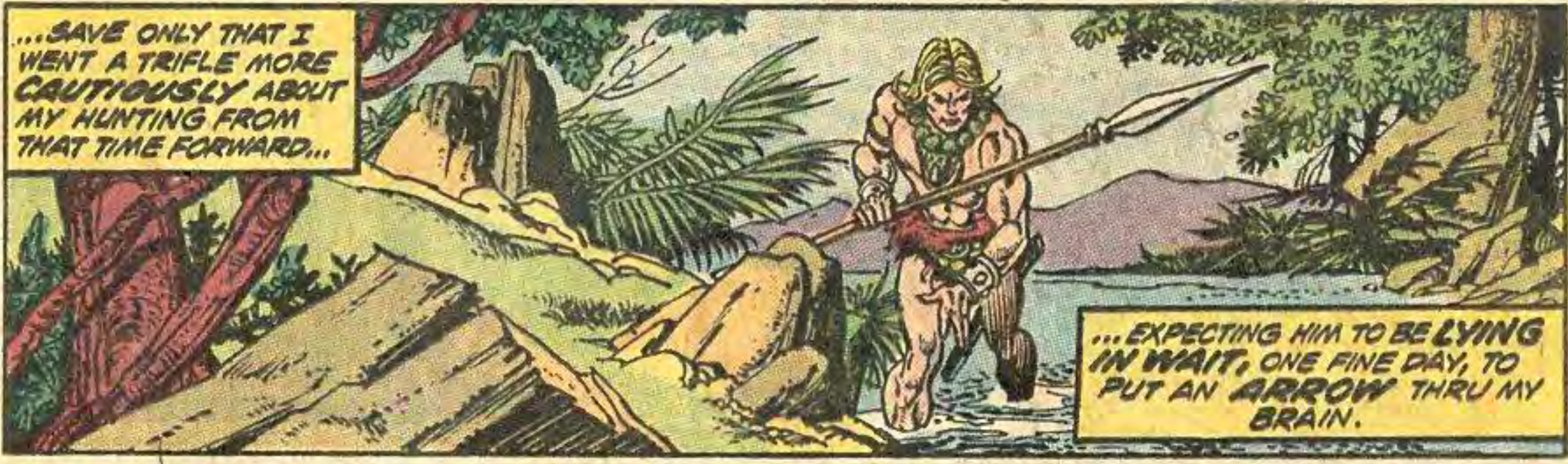


I'M SURE THAT GORM NEVER UNDERSTOOD WHY HE HAD BEEN SPARED-- ANY MORE THAN I, NIORD, TRULY UNDERSTOOD IT--

BUT AT LENGTH, HE WAS WELL ENOUGH TO DEPART...

AND WE FORGOT ABOUT HIM...

...SAVE ONLY THAT I WENT A TRIFLE MORE CAUTIOUSLY ABOUT MY HUNTING FROM THAT TIME FORWARD...



...EXPECTING HIM TO BE LYING IN WAIT, ONE FINE DAY, TO PUT AN ARROW THRU MY BRAIN.



THEN ONE MORN, THERE APPEARED, AT THE EDGE OF THE JUNGLE...

GORM!

AND WITH HIS FACE SPLIT IN HIS BIG GORILLA-GRIN!

I WONDER WHAT NEW DEVILMENT-!?



YOU... COME! GORM GOT SOMETHING ... TO SHOW YOU, AND YOUR TRIBE.

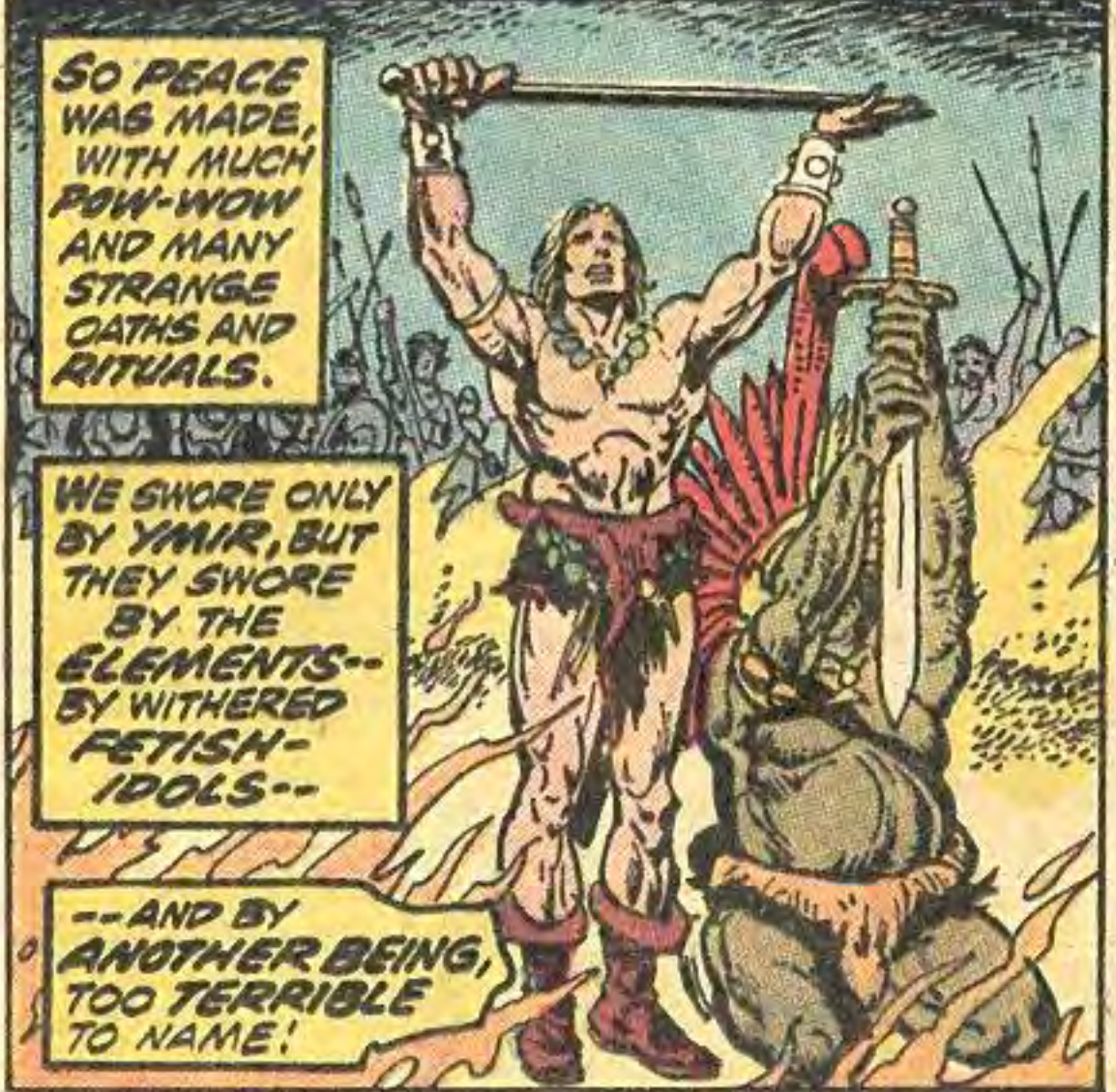
THE POINT OF A HEATHEN SPEAR, I'D WAGER, STILL...

VERY WELL, WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT US?



THEM!

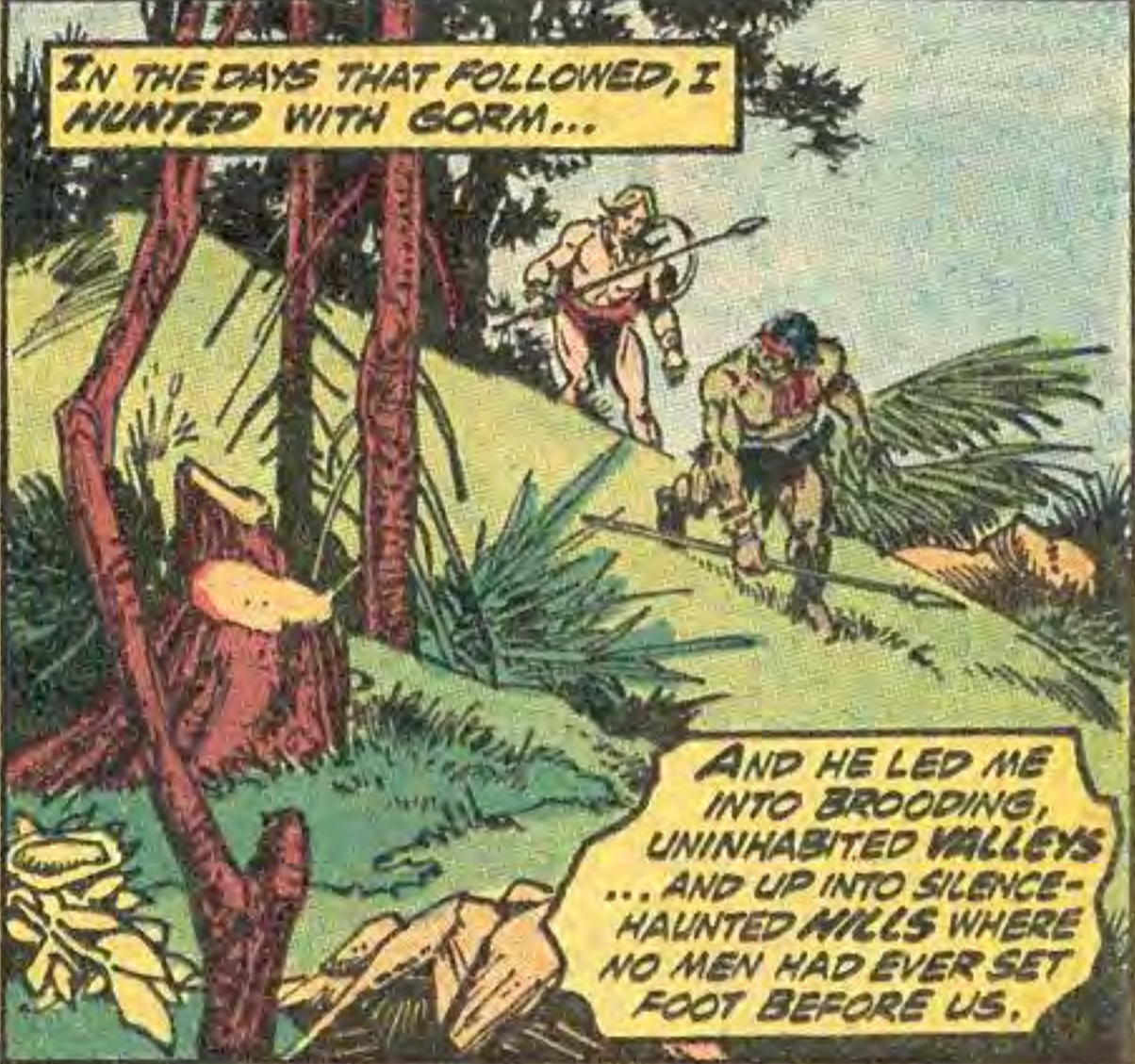
IN TOW BEHIND GORM WERE THE PAINTED, FEATHER-BEDECKED CHIEFS OF HIS CLAIN. OUR FEROCITY HAD AWED THEM-- AND THEY REASONED THAT WE HAD SPARED GORM BECAUSE WE VALUED THEIR KIND TOO LITTLE TO BOTHER KILLING ONE WHEN HE WAS IN OUR POWER.



SO PEACE WAS MADE, WITH MUCH POW-WOW AND MANY STRANGE OATHS AND RITUALS.

WE SWORE ONLY BY YMIR, BUT THEY SWORE BY THE ELEMENTS-- BY WITHERED FETISH-IDOLS--

-- AND BY ANOTHER BEING, TOO TERRIBLE TO NAME!



IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, I HUNTED WITH GORM...

AND HE LED ME INTO BROODING, UNINHABITED VALLEYS ... AND UP INTO SILENCE-HAUNTED HILLS WHERE NO MEN HAD EVER SET FOOT BEFORE US.

BUT THERE WAS ONE VALLEY INTO WHICH HE WOULD NOT GO--!

NO! THIS IS THE PLACE OF BROKEN STONES--

AND THE DANGER THAT LURKS THERE IS GREATER THAN ANY!

THIS IS THE PLACE YOU'RE AFRAID OF, OLD WOMAN? COME-- WE'LL BRAVE IT TOGETHER, THEN.

WHAT? GREATER EVEN THAN SATHA, THE GREAT VENOMOUS SERPENT YOU'VE TOLD ME ABOUT?

OF ALL BEASTS, MY PEOPLE FEAR ONLY SATHA... AND WE SHUN THAT PART OF THE JUNGLE WHERE HE BREATHES HIS POISON.

TELL ME ABOUT IT.

BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE WE FEAR... SOMETHING NOT A BEAST... SOMETHING DOWN THERE...!

IN BROKEN STAMMERS, GORM TOLD HOW, LONG AGO, HIS ANCESTORS HAD DARED THAT GRIM VALE-- AND HOW A WHOLE CLAN OF THEM HAD PERISHED-- SUDDENLY, INEXPLICABLY, TERRIBLY--!

WHERE DID THIS HORROR COME FROM? DID ONE OF THE PILLARS COME TO LIFE?

YOU JOKE-- BUT IT CAME-- OUT OF THE EARTH!

NOW, LET US GO. IT IS NOT GOOD TO TALK OF IT-- FOR IT MAY COME--

--BECAUSE IT HEARS ITS NAME SPOKEN!

I FOLLOWED, LOST IN BROODING-- AND THUS, ALMOST UNTIL TOO LATE, I FAILED TO HEAR THE STEALTHY APPROACH OF--

LONGTOOTH!

TODAY, MEN CALL SUCH A BEAST A TIGER-- THOUGH HE WAS AS MUCH LIKE A BEAR AS ANY CAT--

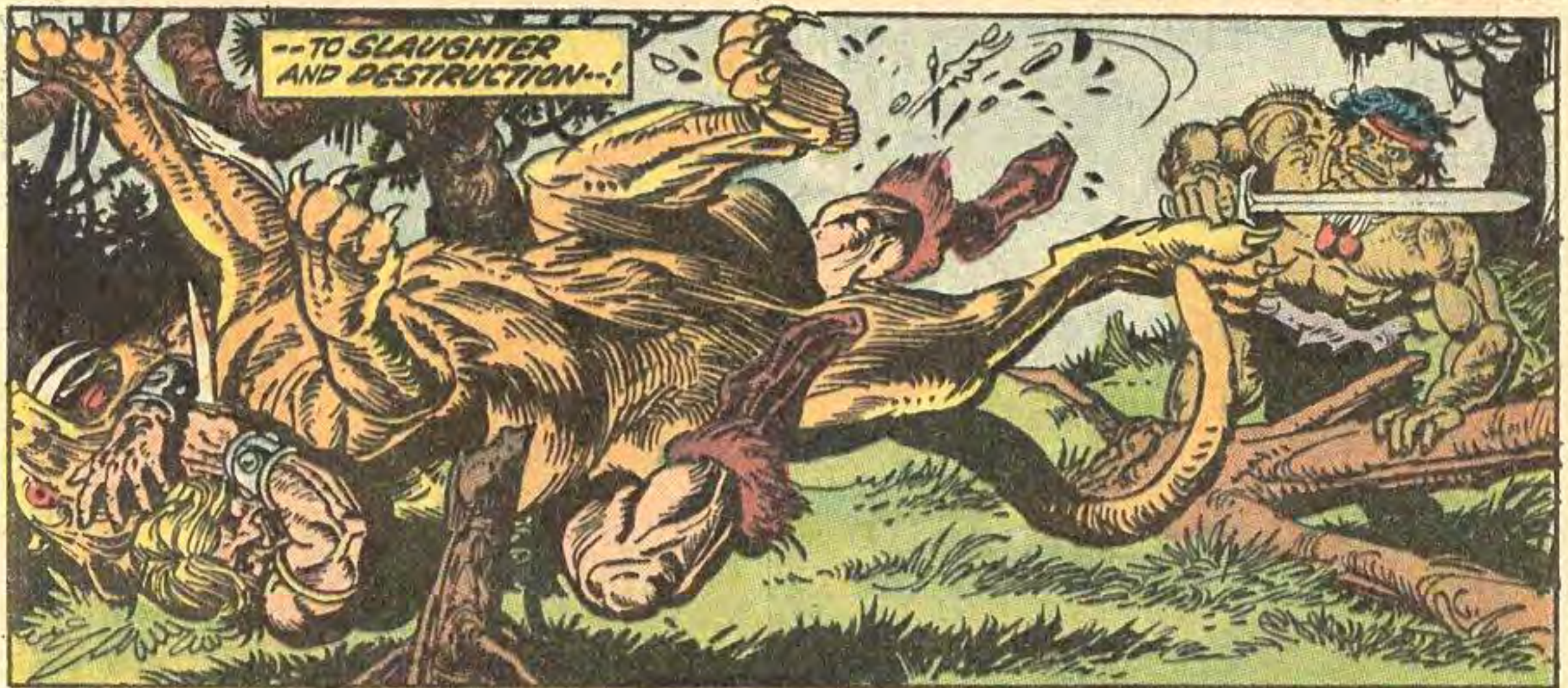


**LONGTOOTH:
MASSIVE-LIMBED,
WITH LOW-SLUNG
HEAVY BODY...**

**ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT
GONE MAD--**



**-- AND RUN
TO FANGS
AND TALONS--**



**-- TO SLAUGHTER
AND DESTRUCTION--!**



**AND YET, I KILLED LONGTOOTH, IN A
BATTLE THAT WOULD MAKE A SAGA IN
ITSELF-- AND WOULD HAVE DIED THAT DAY,
HAD NOT GORM BEEN THERE TO CARRY
ME BACK TO OUR CAMP.**

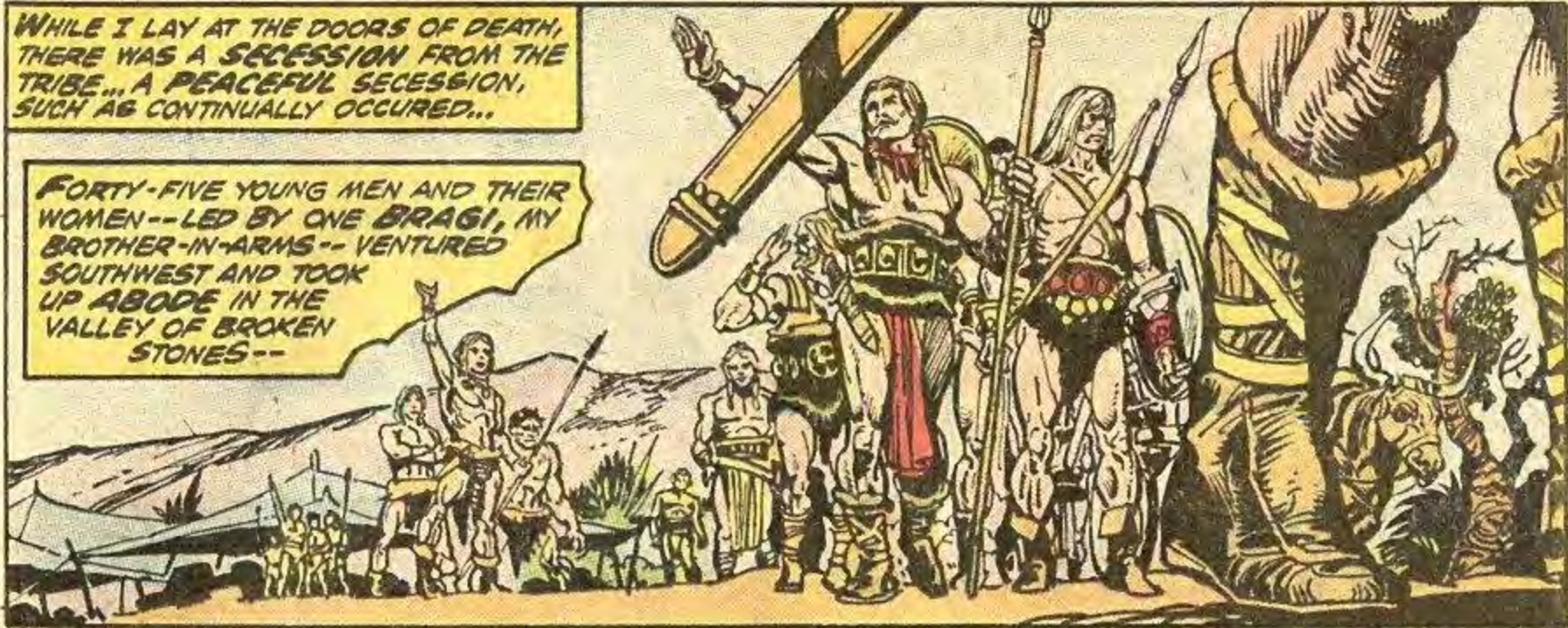


**FOR MONTHS AFTERWARD, I LAY SEMI-
DELIRIOUS... WITH GHASTLY WOUNDS
THAT MADE STURDY WARRIORS SHAKE
THEIR HEADS, YET, NURSED BY GORM,
I RECOVERED...**

...TO THE WONDER OF ALL.

WHILE I LAY AT THE DOORS OF DEATH, THERE WAS A SECESSION FROM THE TRIBE... A PEACEFUL SECESSION, SUCH AS CONTINUALLY OCCURED...

FORTY-FIVE YOUNG MEN AND THEIR WOMEN--LED BY ONE BRAGI, MY BROTHER-IN-ARMS-- VENTURED SOUTHWEST AND TOOK UP ABODE IN THE VALLEY OF BROKEN STONES--



-- WHICH CAUSED SOME COMMENT FROM THE GRIM-FACED PICTS-- AND SOME LAUGHTER, IN TURN, FROM MY FELLOW AESIR.

DEMONS, LITTLE MAN?

WE'VE LEFT OUR WEIRDS IN THE FAR BLUE NORTH--

WHAT MATTER YOUR DEVILS ON US?



WHEN MY WOUNDS HAD BECOME MERE SCARS, AND MY STRENGTH RETURNED, I GIRT ON MY WEAPONS AND STRODE OVER THE PLATEAU TO VISIT BRAGI'S CAMP. GROM DID NOT GO WITH ME-- HE'D NOT BEEN SEEN FOR SEVERAL DAYS.



STILL... I KNEW THE WAY.

AT LAST I TOPPED THE FINAL RIDGE AND LOOKED DOWN INTO THE DREAMING VALLEY. I LOOKED FOR SMOKE AND SAW NONE. INSTEAD--

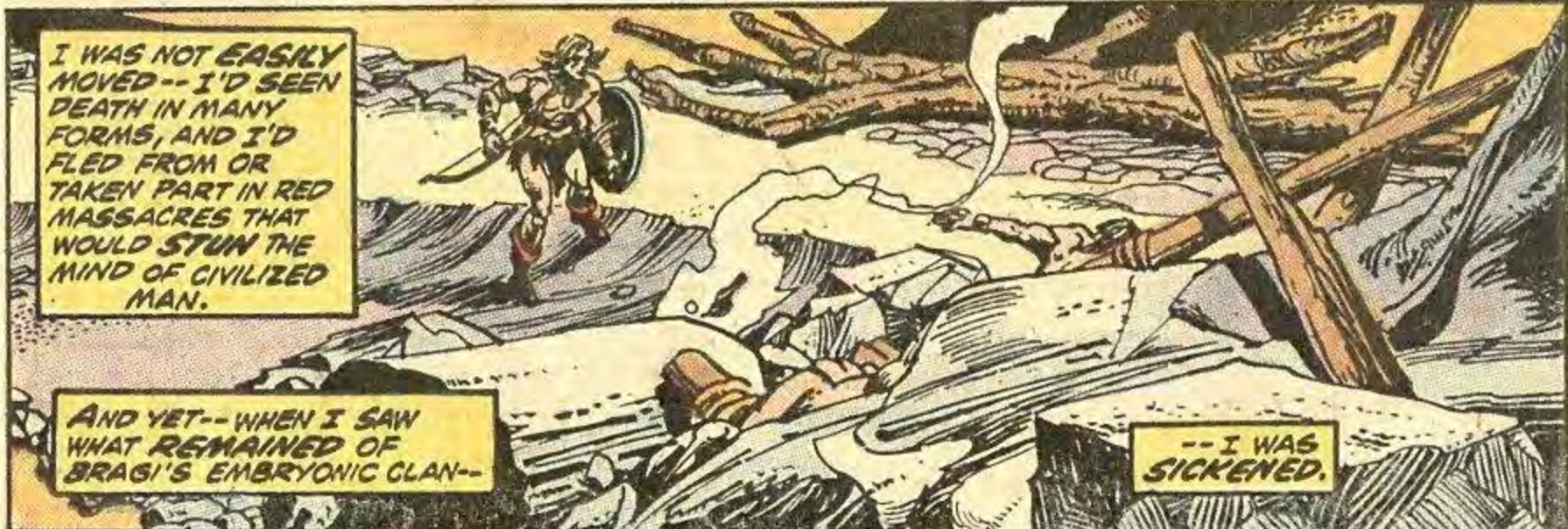
VULTURES!



I WAS NOT EASILY MOVED-- I'D SEEN DEATH IN MANY FORMS, AND I'D FLED FROM OR TAKEN PART IN RED MASSACRES THAT WOULD STUN THE MIND OF CIVILIZED MAN.

AND YET-- WHEN I SAW WHAT REMAINED OF BRAGI'S EMBRYONIC CLAN--

-- I WAS SICKENED.





NO HUMAN FOE COULD HAVE COMMITTED THIS GHASTLY ATROCITY. I CAST ABOUT THE LAKE SHORE-- AND THERE, IN THE MUD, I SAW A SWOLLEN TRACK.

RAGING, I DREW MY SWORD AND BEGAN TO FOLLOW IT, WHEN--



BLONDHAIR-- NO!

IT IS DEATH TO FOLLOW THE TRAIL OF DARK ONE--!

GORM! BY YMIR... YOU, HERE?



HE TOLD ME OF THE HORROR THAT HAD COME UPON BRAGI'S CLAN--

-- FIRST SPEAKING OF THE NIGHTMARE WHICH HAD BEFALLEN HIS OWN PEOPLE, LONG AGO, WHEN FIRST THEY REACHED THESE JUNGLE-COVERED HILLS--



-- AND WERE SET UPON BY A LOATHSOME, NIGHT-SPAWNED MONSTER.



HE TOLD HOW THE PICTS HAD FOUND A HIDDEN TEMPLE, AND A YAWNING SHAFT INTO THE BLACK EARTH-- AND HOW THERE CAME FIRST A DEMONIC PIPING UPON THEIR INVASION-- AND THEN A SLITHERING VISION FROM HELL!

HUNDREDS OF THAT PICTISH BAND WERE SLAUGHTERED-- AND THOSE WHO SURVIVED SPOKE LITTLE OF WHAT THEY'D SEEN--



-- SAVE TO WARN ALL OTHERS AGAINST THAT DREADED SPOT-- THE VALLEY OF BROKEN STONES!

AND YOU, GORM?

I CAME NEAR HERE TWO SUNS AGO-- TO HUNT.

I HEARD SOUNDS FROM THE VALLEY-- SCREAMS. YOUR PEOPLE--!

I HID-- THEN SAW YOU.



I NODDED. TOGETHER, THEN, WE BUILT A FUNERAL PYRE... AND AS THE FLAMES BEGAN TO TWIST AGAINST THE DEEP NIGHT SKY, MY BRAIN BEGAN TO SEETHE LIKE A THING IN FEVER...

... AND SLOWLY... MY PLAN BEGAN TO FORM... AND IT BROUGHT A SHORT, FIERCE LAUGH FROM MY LIPS.



NOW, GORM... TAKE ME TO SATHA, THAT GREAT SERPENT OF YOURS.

I KNOW HE DID NOT THIS DEED--STILL, I HAVE USE FOR HIS VENOM!

BUT--NO MAN DARES SEEK OUT THE MIGHTY CRAWLING ONE--!

I DARE, PICT.



GORM GAPED AT ME, BUT MY WILL WAS LIKE A WIND THAT SWEEP HIM ALONG MY COURSE--

--AND AT LAST-- HE LED THE WAY.



DEEP INTO THE SOUTHERN JUNGLE WE WENT, UNTIL WE CAME TO A LOW-LYING EXPANSE, DANK AND DARK BENEATH THE CREEPER-FESTOONED TREES, WHERE OUR FEET SANK DEEP INTO THE SPONGY SILT, CARPETED BY ROTTING VEGETATION, AND SLIMY MOISTURE OOZED UP BENEATH THEIR PRESSURE...

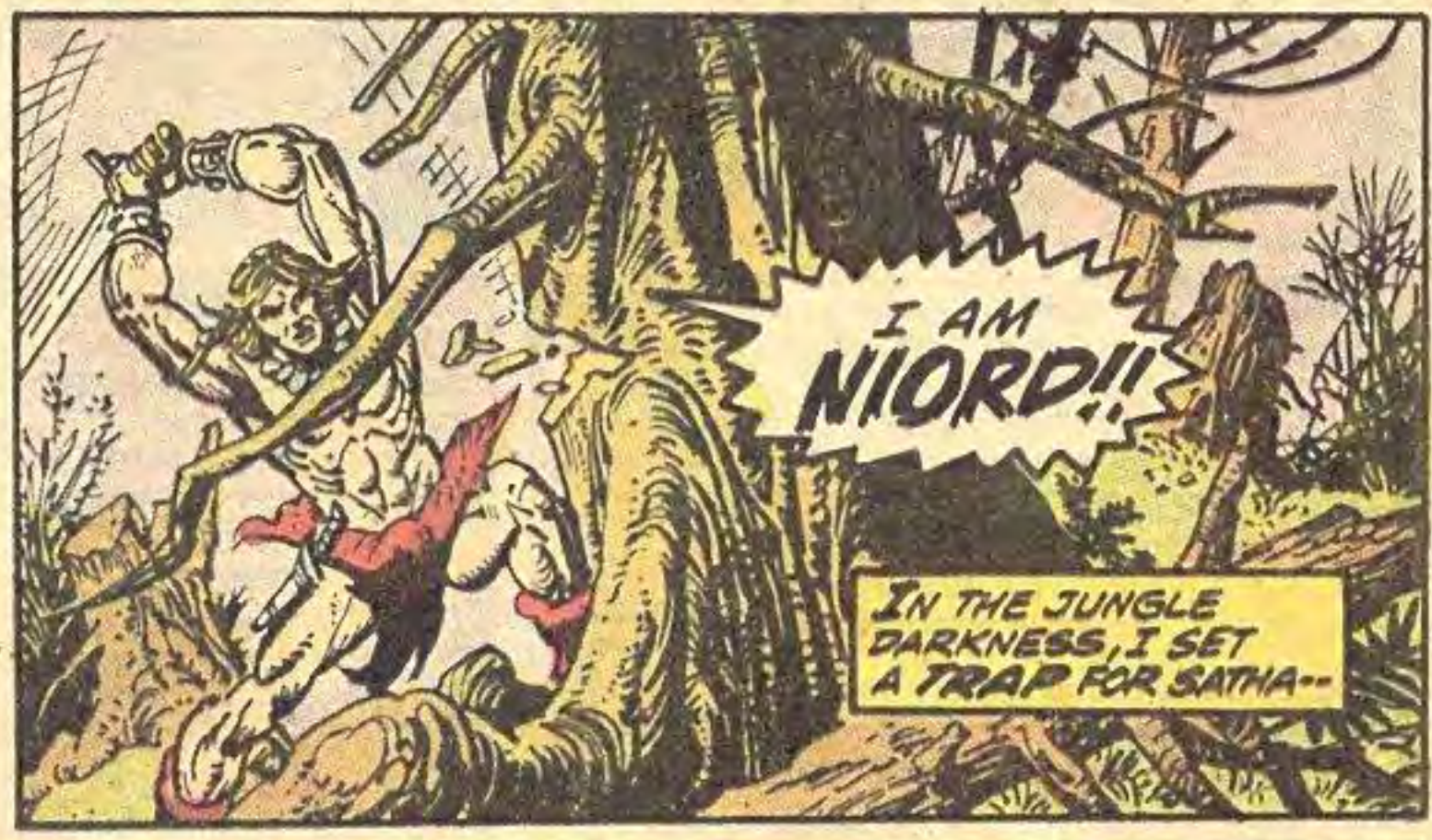
THIS, GORM TOLD ME, WAS THE REALM HAUNTED BY SATHA-- THE GREAT SERPENT!



I CAN GO NO FURTHER, BLONDHAIR-- NOR SHOULD YOU!

NOT EVEN THE BRAVEST OF MY PEOPLE'S WARRIORS WOULD STALK SATHA-- HERE, IN HIS LIAR.

I AM NOT ONE OF YOUR PEOPLE--



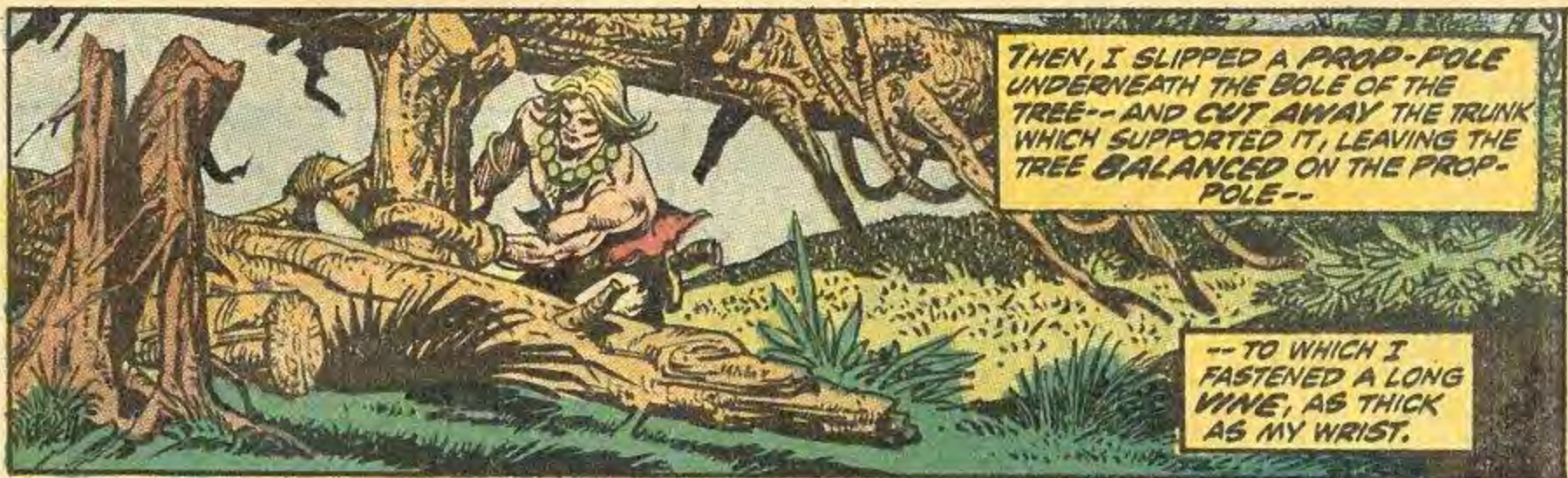
I AM NIORD!!

IN THE JUNGLE DARKNESS, I SET A TRAP FOR SATHA--



CREEAK! CRUNCH!

FIRST, I HACKED THROUGH A LARGE TREE-- AND LET IT FALL SO ITS WEIGHT WAS CAUGHT BY A SMALLER TRUNK.



THEN, I SLIPPED A PROP-POLE UNDERNEATH THE BOLE OF THE TREE-- AND CUT AWAY THE TRUNK WHICH SUPPORTED IT, LEAVING THE TREE BALANCED ON THE PROP-POLE--

-- TO WHICH I FASTENED A LONG VINE, AS THICK AS MY WRIST.



AND THEN I WENT ALONE THROUGH THAT PRIMORDIAL TWILIGHT...

THE STENCH WAS INCREDIBLE. I WALKED FOR MINUTES-- UNTIL THERE MOVED SOMETHING BEFORE ME IN THE UNDERBRUSH, AND UP THROUGH THE DARKNESS REARED--



SATHA!

NO, NIGHTBEAST-- YOU COME TO FIGHT YOUR LAST BATTLE--

-- A BATTLE THAT WILL MEAN YOUR DEATH!



THAT'S RIGHT, SNAKE-- FOLLOW ME!

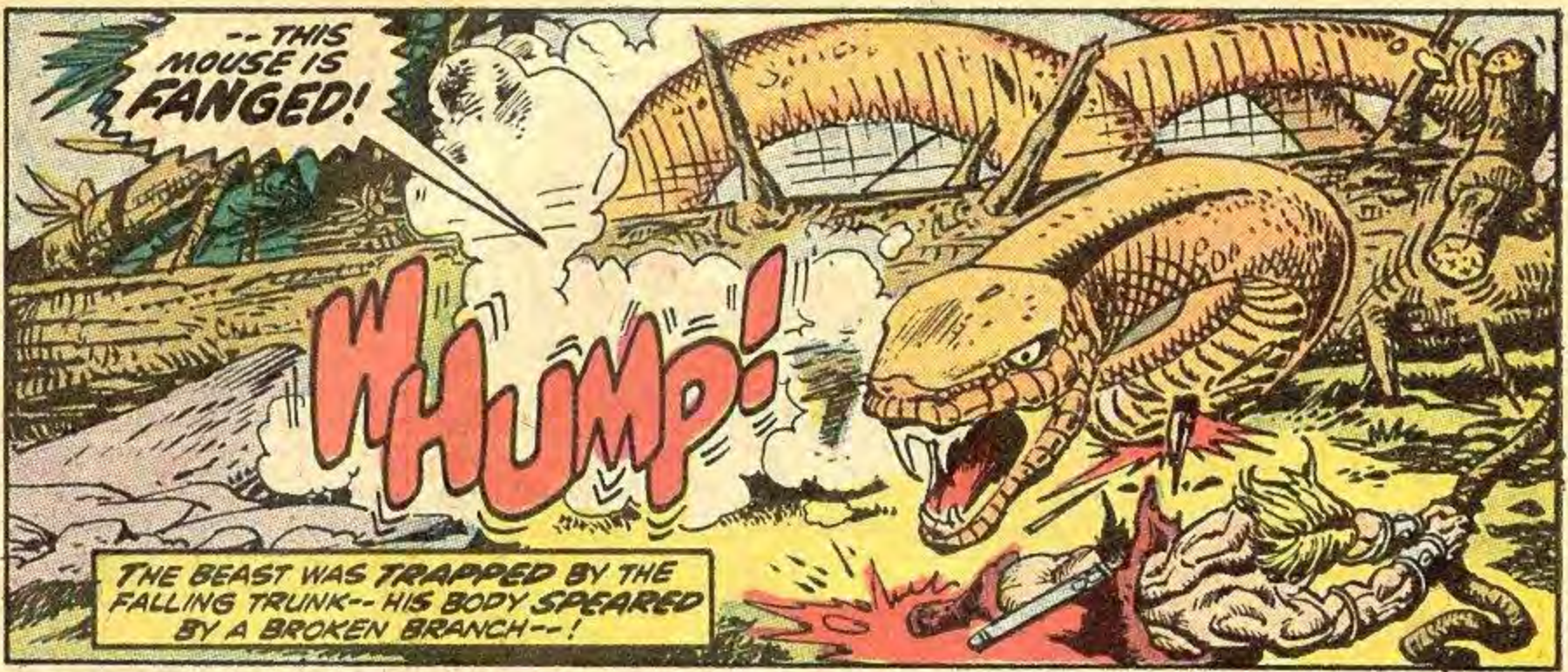
I'M NOT FOOL ENOUGH TO FACE YOUR DEADLY FANGS WITH A NAKED SWORD--



NO, NIORD HAS OTHER WEAPONS, AS WELL--



-- FOR THOUGH I AM TO YOU AS A MOUSE IS TO A KING COBRA--



-- THIS
MOUSE IS
FANGED!

WHUMP!

THE BEAST WAS TRAPPED BY THE
FALLING TRUNK-- HIS BODY SPEARED
BY A BROKEN BRANCH--!



IN ANOTHER INSTANT
YOU'LL BREAK FREE,
SATHA.

A PITY YOU
SHALL NOT
HAVE THAT
INSTANT--

INSTEAD--
THIS
MOMENT--



**YOU
DIE!
DIE!**



IT WAS DONE...
AND SILENT, I
SET TO WORK.



BY THE DARK GODS,
BLONDHAIR-- HE DID
NOT KILL YOU?

NOT ME,
PICT... BUT
IF LUCK
HOLDS, HIS
VENOM WILL
YET FIND
A VICTIM...



AYE... A
VICTIM FOUL...
IN THE PLACE
OF BROKEN
STONES!



FOR HOURS I STEEPED THE ARROWHEADS IN THE POISON, UNTIL THEY WERE CAKED WITH A HORRIBLE GREEN SCUM. I WRAPPED THEM CAREFULLY IN BROAD LEAVES, AND THEN, THOUGH NIGHT HAD FALLEN AND THE BEASTS WERE ROARING ON EVERY HAND, I WENT BACK THROUGH THE JUNGLED HILLS...



YOU MAKE PAINT? ARE YOU CRAZY, BLUE-EYES?

SUCH IS THE CUSTOM AMONG MY PEOPLE, GORM...



FIRST-- TO PAINT ONE'S FACE AND LIMBS--

THEN TO BREAK BOTH SPEAR AND ARROW--



-- THOUGH TONIGHT, ONLY ARROWS MUST DO.

SNAP!



AND SO I STOOD, AND SANG MY DEATH-SONG TO THE SUN AS IT ROSE OVER THE CLIFFS, MY YELLOW MANE LIFTING IN THE MORNING WIND--



-- AND WHEN I HAD FINISHED THE PRAYERS OF ONE WHO GOES TO CERTAIN DOOM--

-- I WENT DOWN INTO THE VALLEY-- BOW IN HAND.



NOR COULD I BLAME GORM FOR NOT ACCOMPANYING ME. HIS COURAGE IN COMING THIS FAR, AGAINST THE FORCE OF HIS TRADITIONS, HAD ALREADY TOUCHED ME.

I WAS ALONE -- AND SUCH WAS AS IT SHOULD BE.

AFTER AN HOUR'S MARCH, I CAME TO THE PLACE OF BROKEN STONES.

ABOUT ME, COLUMNS LOOMED, RUTTED WITH AGE AND COVERED WITH VINES-- AND I MARKED THEM IN MY MIND, AND CHANGED MY PLAN.



THERE WAS A STENCH OF DEATH ABOUT THAT PLACE--

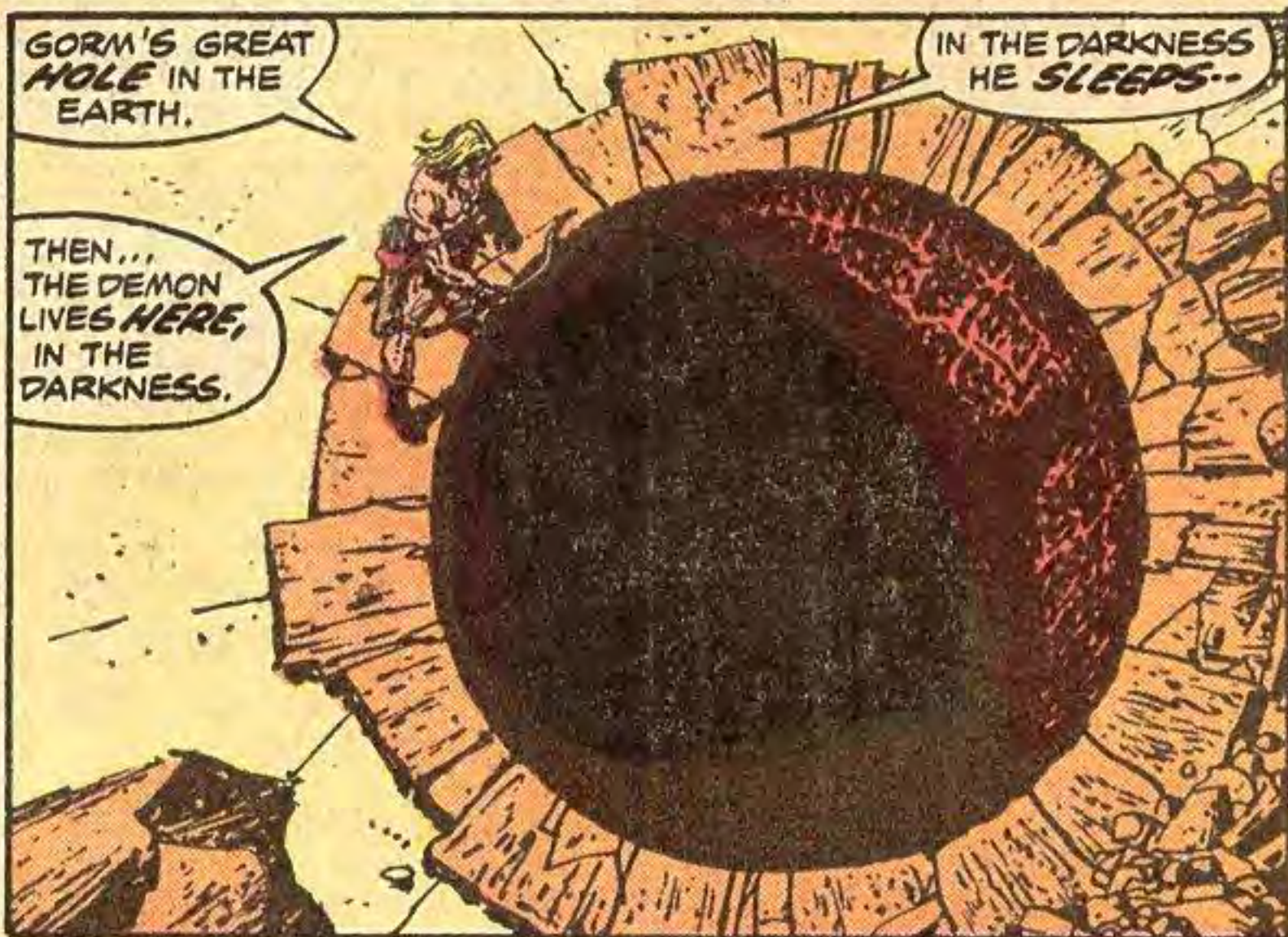
-- OF DEATH-- AND OTHER THINGS.



GORM'S GREAT HOLE IN THE EARTH.

THEN... THE DEMON LIVES HERE, IN THE DARKNESS.

IN THE DARKNESS HE SLEEPS--



BUT NOT FOR LONG!

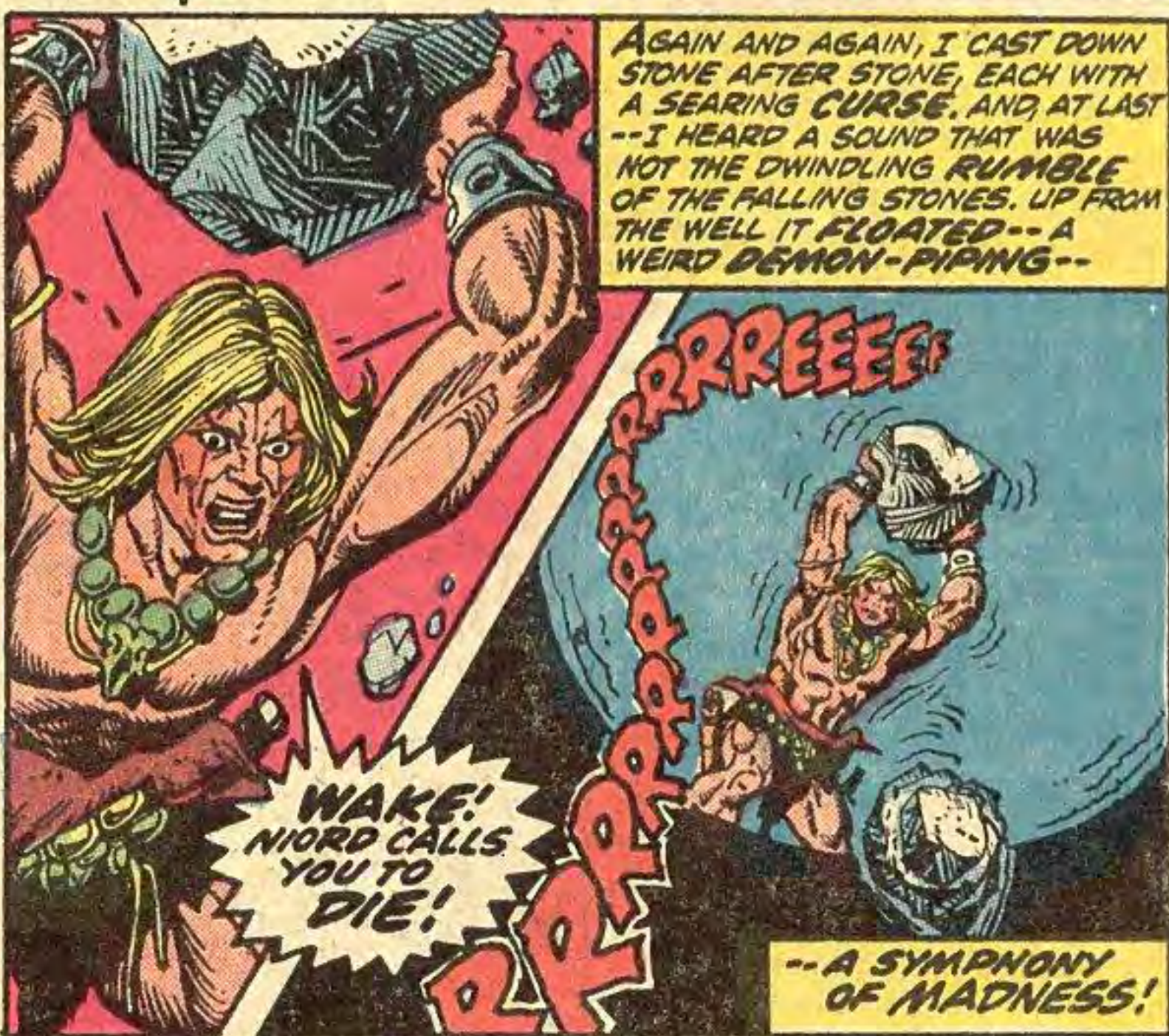
WAKE, YOU SON OF THE DEVIL--



AGAIN AND AGAIN, I CAST DOWN STONE AFTER STONE, EACH WITH A SEARING CURSE. AND, AT LAST --I HEARD A SOUND THAT WAS NOT THE DWINDLING RUMBLE OF THE FALLING STONES. UP FROM THE WELL IT FLOATED-- A WEIRD DEMON-PIPING--

WAKE! NIORD CALLS YOU TO DIE!

-- A SYMPHONY OF MADNESS!

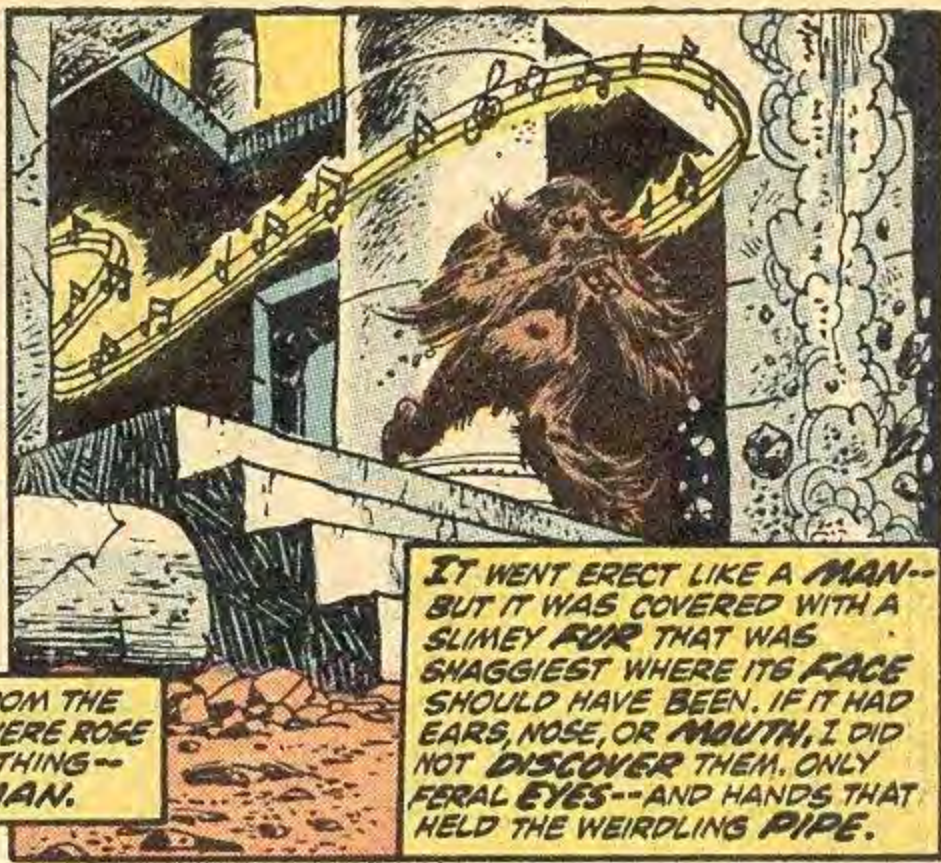




AROUND ME, THE TEMPLE BEGAN TO TREMBLE.

TURNING, I FLED-- ALL OCCURRED AS I PLANNED.

--AS, FROM THE SHAFT, THERE ROSE SOMETHING-- INHUMAN.



IT WENT ERECT LIKE A MAN-- BUT IT WAS COVERED WITH A SLIMEY FUR THAT WAS SHAGGIEST WHERE ITS FACE SHOULD HAVE BEEN. IF IT HAD EARS, NOSE, OR MOUTH, I DID NOT DISCOVER THEM. ONLY FERAL EYES--AND HANDS THAT HELD THE WEIRDLING PIPE.



YOU'VE LIVED TOO LONG ALREADY, BEAST.

IT'S TIME ENOUGH FOR YOU-- TO DIE!



FFFTTT



THE CREATURE WENT DOWN AS THOUGH STRUCK BY A THUNDER-BOLT-- BUT TO MY HORROR--

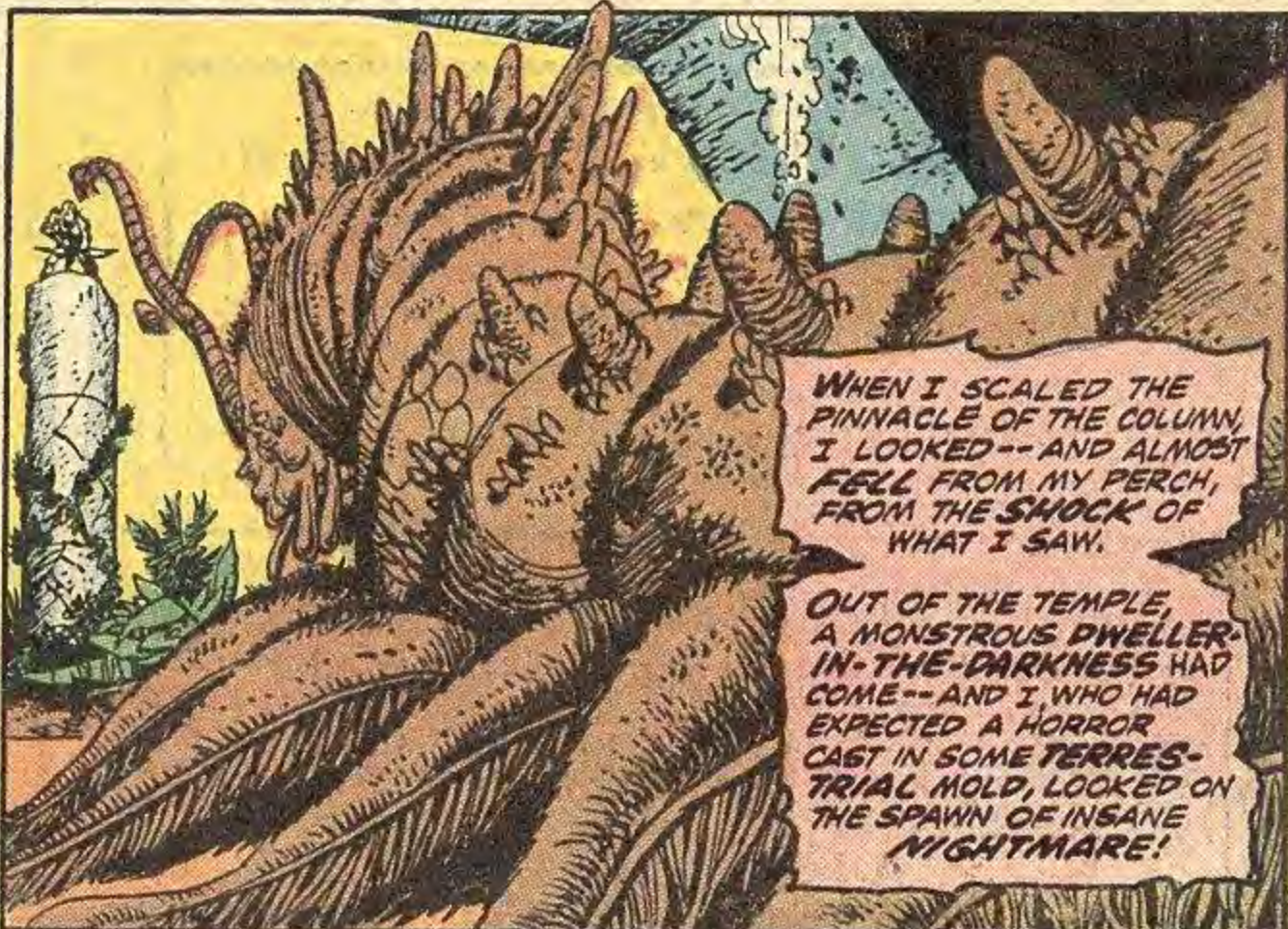
--THE PIPING CONTINUED-- MORE MADLY THAN BEFORE!



THE GAME WAS NOT YET OVER.

WITHOUT A BACKWARD GLANCE--

--I TURNED AND FLED-- TOWARD A PILLAR.



WHEN I SCALED THE PINNACLE OF THE COLUMN, I LOOKED-- AND ALMOST FELL FROM MY PERCH, FROM THE SHOCK OF WHAT I SAW.

OUT OF THE TEMPLE, A MONSTROUS DWELLER-- IN-THE-DARKNESS HAD COME-- AND I WHO HAD EXPECTED A HORROR CAST IN SOME TERRESTRIAL MOLD, LOOKED ON THE SPAWN OF INSANE NIGHTMARE!

BY YMIR'S EYES!

FROM WHAT SUBTERRANEAN HELL IT CRAWLED IN THE LONG AGO I KNOW NOT, NOR WHAT BLACK AGE IT REPRESENTED! BUT IT WAS NOT A BEAST, AS HUMANITY KNOWS BEASTS--

FOR LACK OF A BETTER NAME--



--I MUST CALL IT A WORM!



AS THE MONSTER LUNGED FORWARD, I SAW IT CATCH UP THE CORPSE OF ITS HAIRY SLAVE-- AND FOR AN INSTANT, THE APISH FORM DANGLED--

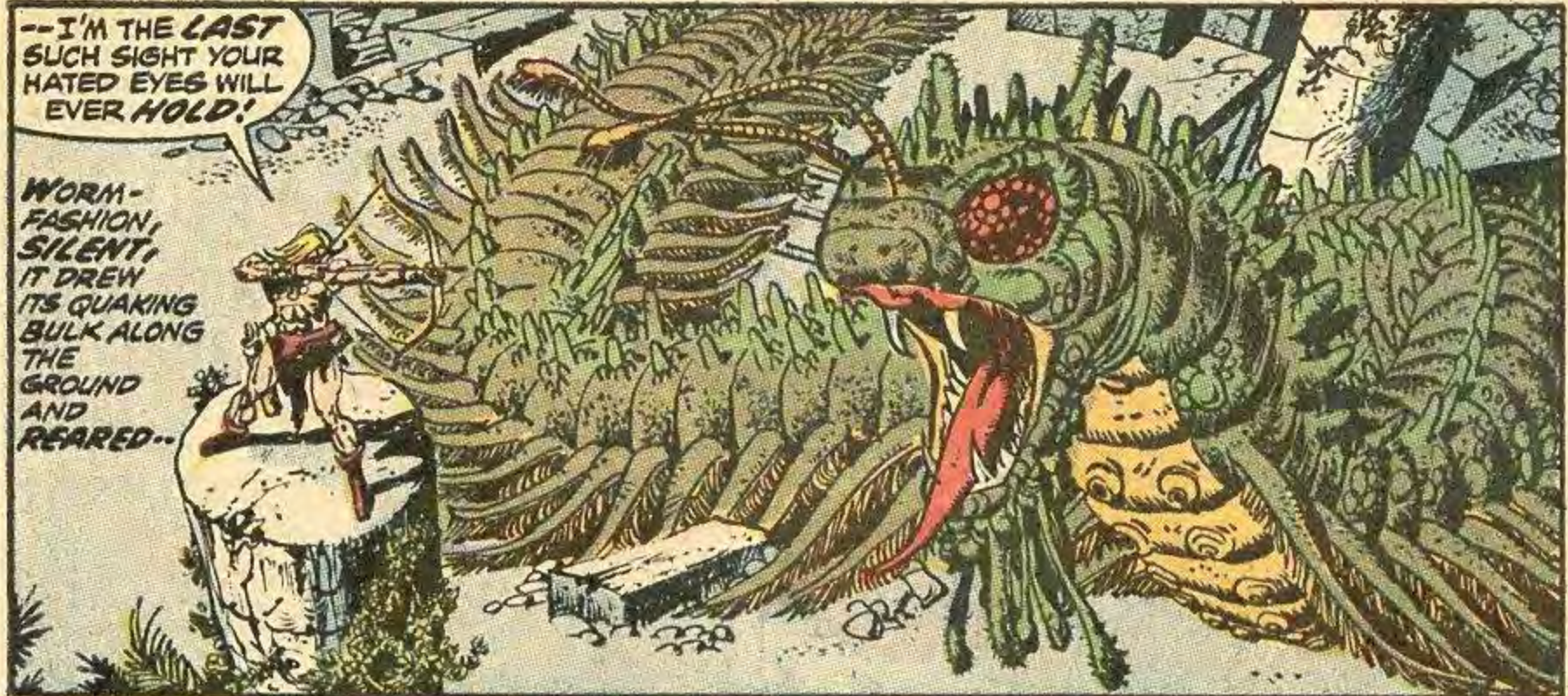


-- THEN WAS DASHED TO PULP AGAINST THE TEMPLE WALL.



YOU SEE ME, DO YOU, DEMON?

LOOK LONG AND WELL, THEN--



--I'M THE LAST SUCH SIGHT YOUR HATED EYES WILL EVER HOLD!

WORM-FASHION, SILENT, IT DREW ITS QUAKING BULK ALONG THE GROUND AND REARED--

--AND I FIRED-- ARROW AFTER ARROW ARCHING ON ITS WAY IN VENOMOUS PRECISION.



THE MONSTER CAME AT ME LIKE A MOVING MOUNTAIN--

--AND IT SEEMED ALMOST AS THOUGH MY SHAFTS HAD HAD--NO EFFECT!



THEN--

THE CREATURE SURGED -- SHUDDERING IN MINDLESS AGONY. ITS HEAVING SIDE STRUCK THE COLUMN--



--AND I FELL!



DIE, MONSTER!

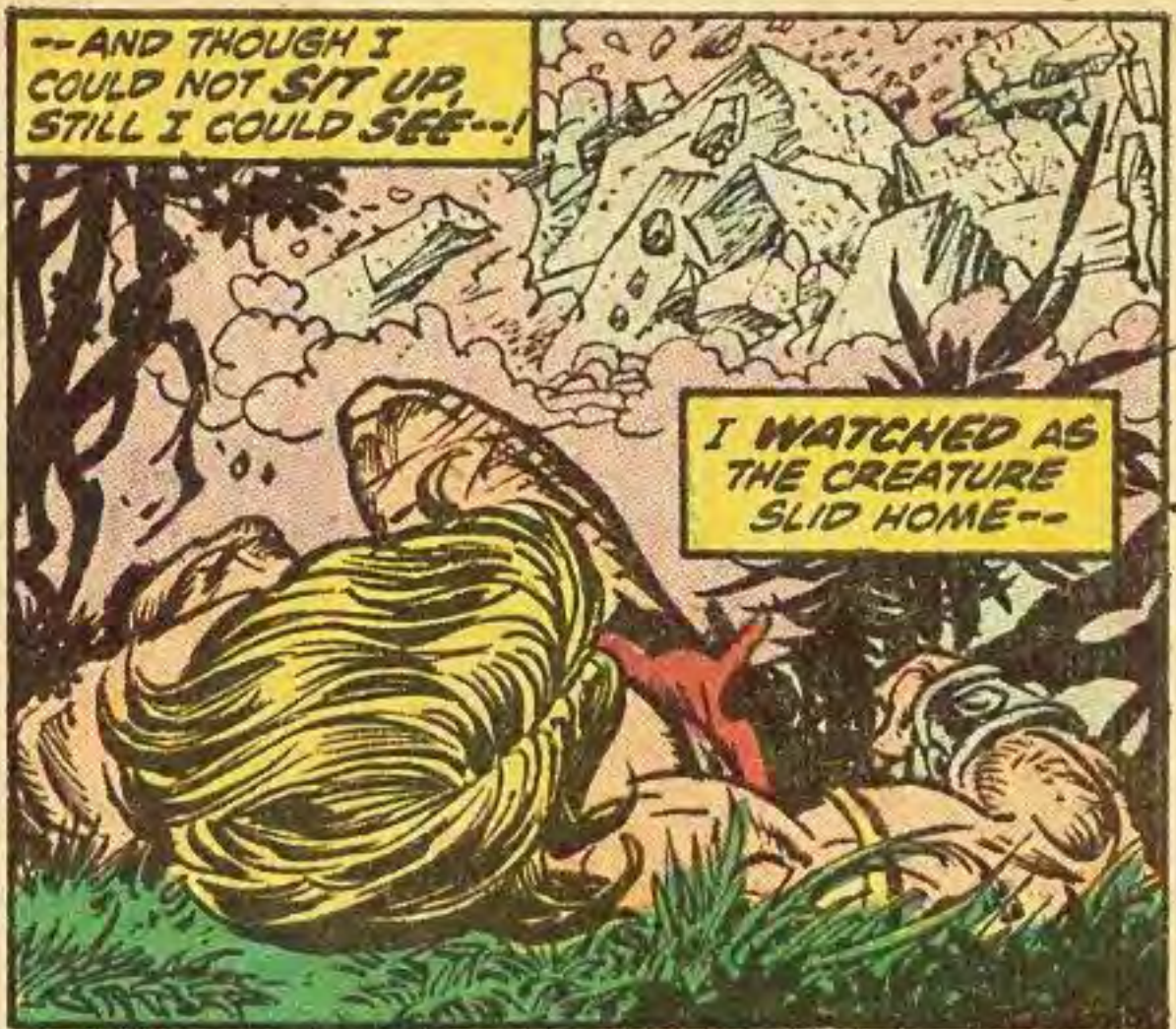
GIVE BACK THE BLOOD YOU TOOK FROM MY BROTHERS!

DIE, MONSTER--





THE IMPACT MUST HAVE SPLINTERED HALF THE BONES IN MY FRAME-- YET EVEN SO, THROUGH THE RED BLAZE OF INCREDIBLE PAIN, I COULD HEAR THE BEGINNINGS OF A DISTANT RUMBLE--



-- AND THOUGH I COULD NOT SIT UP, STILL I COULD SEE--!

I WATCHED AS THE CREATURE SLID HOME--



-- AND AS THE MONSTER VANISHED INTO THE TEMPLE WELL, WITH A RENDING, GRINDING GROAN, THE RUINED WALLS CRUMPLED--TOTTERED--AND COLLAPSED IN A CLOUD OF RISING DUST.



BLOND-HAIR-- DO YOU LIVE?

I SAW THE FIGHT-- I CAME--

MY SWORD, GORM...! GIVE ME... MY SWORD...

YOUR WOUNDS ARE GREAT, BLONDHAIR.

GORM WILL TAKE YOU HOME.

TOO LATE...



I BADE HIM LEAN CLOSER, AND HE DID, TO HEAR WHAT I HAD TO SAY... FOR I WAS PASSING SWIFTLY...

LET MY TRIBE REMEMBER... LET THE TALE BE TOLD FROM VILLAGE TO VILLAGE, FROM TRIBE TO TRIBE... SO THAT MEN WILL KNOW THAT NOT MAN... NOR BEAST...

... NOR DEVIL... MAY PREY IN SAFETY ON THE GOLDEN-HAIRED PEOPLE OF... ASGARD.



THERE WAS MORE THAT I SAID-- BUT ALREADY IT FADED, AS THE LIFE FLOWED FROM ME.

I FINISHED MY FEW WORDS--

-- AND THEN, WHILE GORM HOWLED AND BEAT HIS HAIRY BREAST...

DEATH CAME TO ME...



... IN THE VALLEY OF THE WORM...!

FINI