

MARVEL
25TH
ANNIVERSARY

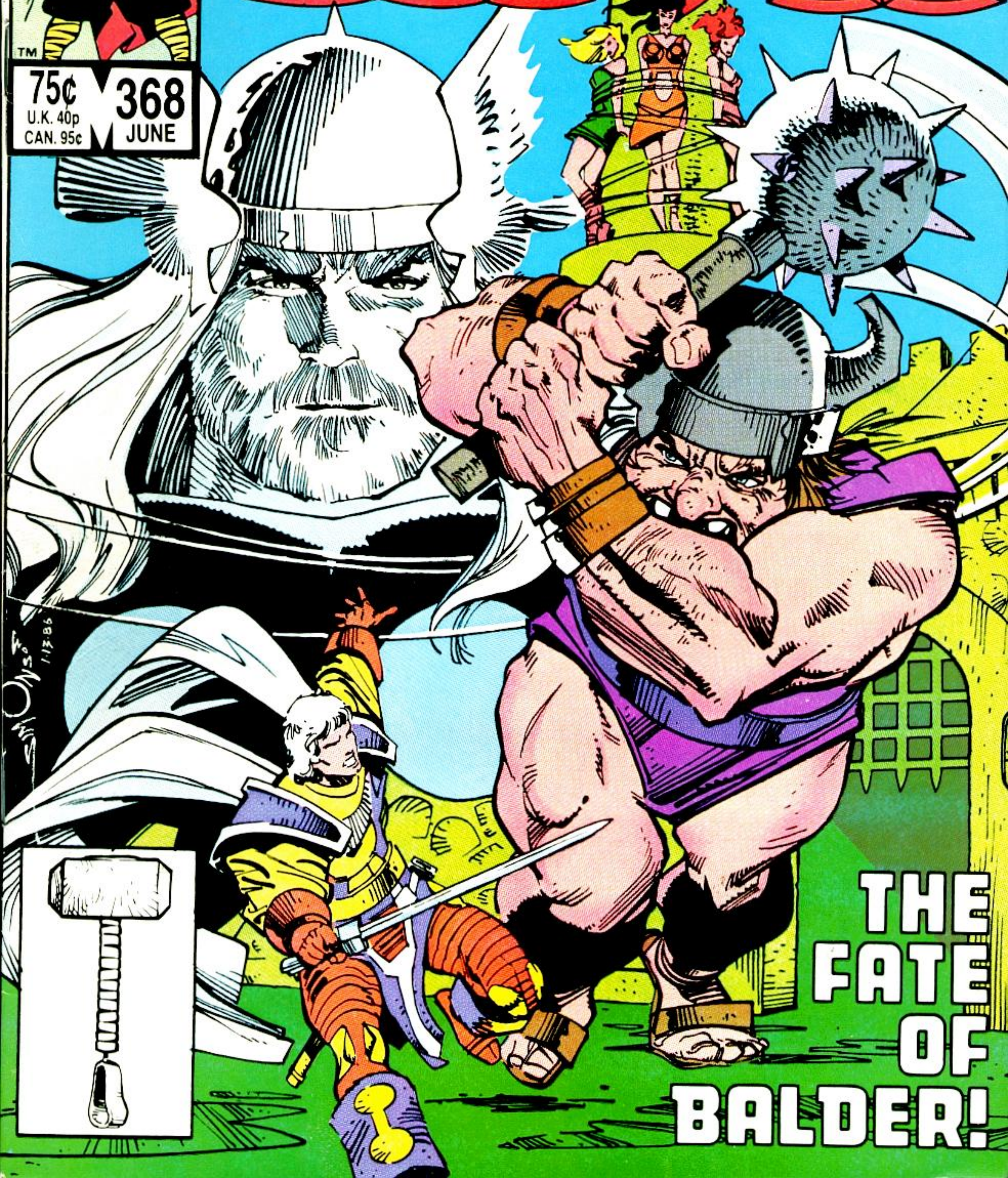
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TM

75c
U.K. 40p
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368
JUNE

the mighty **THOR**

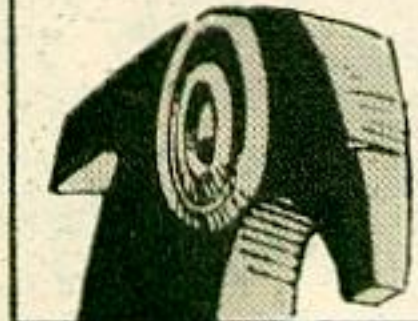


**THE
FATE
OF
BALDER!**

The EYE of the BEHOLDER

ASGARD--HOME OF THE MIGHTY NORSE GODS!

TODAY, BALDER THE BRAVE WAS TO HAVE BEEN MADE LIEGE LORD OF THE GOLDEN REALM.



INSTEAD, THE GODS WHO LOVED HIM WITNESSED... HIS FINAL AGONIES!

IT CANNOT BE! BALDER THE BRAVE HATH BEEN SLAIN BY KURSE!



THE SUN OF ASGARD SHINES NO LONGER!

FOR EVEN THE GODS CAN DIE.

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THE VILLAIN SHALL NOT OUTLIVE THEE, MY PRINCE! AGNAR OF VANAHEIM WILL AVENGE THY DEATH!



FOR BALDER THE BRAVE!

HOLD, AGNAR! THOR BIDS THEE STAY THY WRATH!



MY LORD, BALDER IS DEAD! YONDER KNEELS HIS ASSASSIN! LET JUSTICE BE DONE!

HOLD THYSELF IN CHECK, I COMMAND IT!

THERE IS MORE HERE THAN MEETS THE EYE!

I HAVE FOUGHT THIS SELFSAME KURSE BEFORE*



HE IS NO WANTON ASSASSIN, SLAYING FOR PAY OR PLEASURE. RATHER, HE IS A MAD VESSEL OF REVENGE SEEKING A SINGLE GOAL.

* THOR 363, TO BE PRECISE!

HIS POWER IS TRULY BEYOND BELIEF...

... BUT BALDER WAS NOT THE OBJECT OF HIS HATRED,

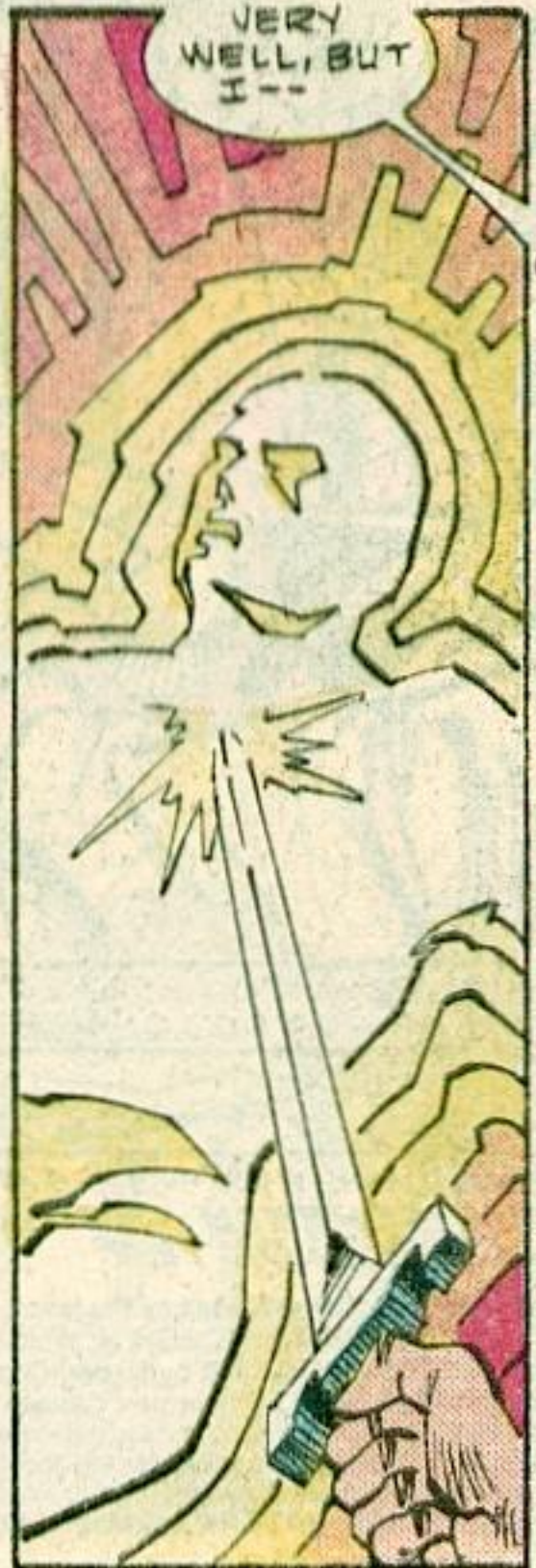
I WONDER...



AGNAR, TAKE THY BLADE AND TOUCH THE BODY OF OUR FALLEN BROTHER.

TOUCH HIM, I SAY, THE LIGHTEST GLANCE WILL BE ENOUGH.

MY LORD?



VERY WELL, BUT I --



UPON MY LIFE!!

THIS IS NOT OUR FAIR BALDER! 'TIS NONE OTHER THAN MALEKITH THE SHAPE CHANGER, WHOM WE DID CAPTURE ONLY YESTERDAY*!

AS I SUSPECTED, IRON HAS EVER DESTROYED ELVISH ENCHANTMENT, AND THY SWORD HAS BROKEN MALEKITH'S SPELL.

THE DARK ELF ESCAPED OUR PRISON ONLY TO DECEIVE US IN BALDER'S GUISE.

BUT EVEN HIS MAGICAL DISGUISE COULD NOT DECEIVE KURSE, WHOM HE ONCE DID WRONG.

WHO KNOWS WHAT HARM HE WOULD HAVE WROUGHT UPON ASGARD IF HE HAD LIVED?



*LAST ISSUE--RM

ALL WELL AND GOOD, THOR, BUT WHAT OF THE REAL BALDER?

INDEED! THE BLADE OF FANDRAL CRIES OUT TO LEARN THE ANSWER TO THIS RIDDLE!

YES! WHERE IS BALDER?!!

AND NOW, HE HATH PAID THE FULL PRICE FOR HIS CRIMES.



THOR, I WISH TO LEARN THE FATE OF BALDER AS MUCH AS ANY, BUT WHAT OF KURSE?

IF HE IS TRULY AS POWERFUL AS YOU HAVE SAID, WHAT PRISON WILL HOLD HIM?

AGNAR, I MUST ASK A DIFFICULT TASK OF THEE.

UPON MY OATH, I SHALL NOT REST TILL I HAVE FOUND BALDER AND BROUGHT HIM HOME TO ASGARD.

THEN KNOW THAT THE BLADE OF AGNAR SHALL STAND BY THY RIGHT HAND, MY LORD.

NONE IN ASGARD, HEIMDALL, BUT I THINK THAT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY.

WITH MALEKITH'S DEATH, THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND KURSE'S WILL SEEMS TO HAVE DIED AS WELL...

... AND WERE IT NOT FOR HIM, WE WOULD EVEN NOW BE PAYING HOMAGE TO ONE OF ASGARD'S BITTEREST FOES.





AH, BUT THAT IS THE TASK I SET THEE, AGNAR! WHILE I AND MY CHOSEN COMPANIONS RIDE FORTH IN SEARCH OF THE SHINING GOD...

THOUGH HE IS QUIET, KURSE'S POWER CAN SHAKE THE VERY FOUNDATIONS OF THE NINE WORLDS.

BUT YOU CARRY THE SWORD OF FREY, WHICH CAN CUT ANY SUBSTANCE!

THEREFORE, I ASK YOU TO GO WITH HEIMDALL AND GUARD KURSE, LEST HIS FURY BE RE-KINDLED.

...I WOULD ASK THAT YOU REMAIN BEHIND!

MY LORD?!!

VERY WELL, MY LORD, THOUGH I LIKE IT NOT.



AGNAR IS A GOOD LAD.

IN TRUTH, I KNOW NOT WHETHER HIS WEAPON CAN STOP KURSE, BUT IF IT FAILS, THERE IS NAUGHT ELSE IN ASGARD THAT WILL AVAIL.

AND HEIMDALL WILL GIVE HIM GUIDANCE.

HE'LL MAKE A FINE WARRIOR WHEN HE IS FULLY TEMPERED.



COME, COMRADES! WE HAVE ONE LAST TASK IN ASGARD.

LET US EXAMINE THE PRISON CELL WHEREIN MALEKITH WAS HOUSED!



MAKE HASTE, MY FRIENDS! (PUFF PUFF)

VOL-STAGG SHALL BRING UP THE REAR... (PUFF PUFF)

...TO GUARD AGAINST ANY UNWANTED INTRUDERS! (PUFF PUFF)



THE CELL DOOR IS RENT ASUNDER! SURELY THIS CANNOT BE THE WORK OF MALEKITH HIMSELF!

SUCH STRENGTH WAS NOT HIS!



AND WITHIN THE CELL ITSELF, A PRISONER STILL REMAINS!

WELL, WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT?

LOKI!!!

HOW CAME YOU TO THIS PASSE?

DID YOU HAVE SOME HAND IN BALDER'S DISAPPEARANCE? PERHAPS YOU AND MALEKITH HAD A FALLING OUT?



ALWAYS PERCEPTIVE, EH, MY STEP-BROTHER?

USE WHAT FEW BRAINS YOU WERE GIVEN!

SO WHILE I LANGUISHED HERE ALONE, HE WALKED ABOUT AS-GARD WITH IMPUNITY.

EVER READY TO LAY THE BLAME AT LOKI'S DOOR, THOUGH HE SITS BEFORE YOU IN CHAINS AND TATTERS.

I AM AS MUCH A VICTIM OF MALEKITH'S TRICKS AS YOU!



THEN THAT CREATURE KURSE BURST FORTH FROM THE GROUND THINKING I WAS MALEKITH!

HE TOOK ME BY SURPRISE AND CAST A SPELL TO GIVE ME HIS APPEARANCE.

HE WOULD HAVE SLAIN ME, BUT AT THE LAST MOMENT, SOMETHING TOLD HIM I WAS NOT THE FOE HE SOUGHT...

... AND HE TURNED AND BROKE HIS WAY OUT OF THE CELL AS THOUGH IT WERE MADE OF PAPER.



YOUR PRESENCE HERE, I TAKE IT, MEANS THAT KURSE SUCCEEDED AND MALEKITH IS NO MORE. GOOD RIDDANCE!

AND GOODBYE!



THOR!

THE DEVIOUS ONE HAS DEPARTED, FANDRAL. FOR HOME, MOST LIKELY.

THOUGH I DO NOT TRUST HIM, AT LEAST PART OF HIS STORY WAS TRUE. KURSE WAS CERTAINLY HERE.

AND I EXPECT THAT MALEKITH DID OUT-TRICK THE TRICKSTER, FOR THAT ALONE, IT MAY HAVE BEEN WORTH THE DARK ELF'S VISIT.

LOKI IS NEVER SO SOUR AS WHEN HE HAS BEEN OUT-MANEUVERED!

THERE IS NOTHING FURTHER TO BE LEARNED HERE. 'TIS TIME WE BEGAN OUR SEARCH FOR NOBLE BALDER!

AND SHORTLY...

WHEN HE WAS LAST SEEN, BALDER WAS TRAVELING TO ASGARD FROM NORNHEIM.

THEN LET US BACKTRACK ALONG THE BYWAYS BALDER WOULD MOST LIKELY HAVE TAKEN.

SURELY ONE OF US WILL FIND SOME SIGN OF HIM.

THERE IS A TRAIL FOR EACH OF US, MY COMRADES. LET EACH CHOOSE ONE AND MEET HERE AGAIN IN A WEEK'S TIME.

FANDRAL THE DASHING SHALL TAKE THE RIGHT HAND ROAD.

VOLSTAGG CHOOSES THE RIGHT PATH BUT ONE.

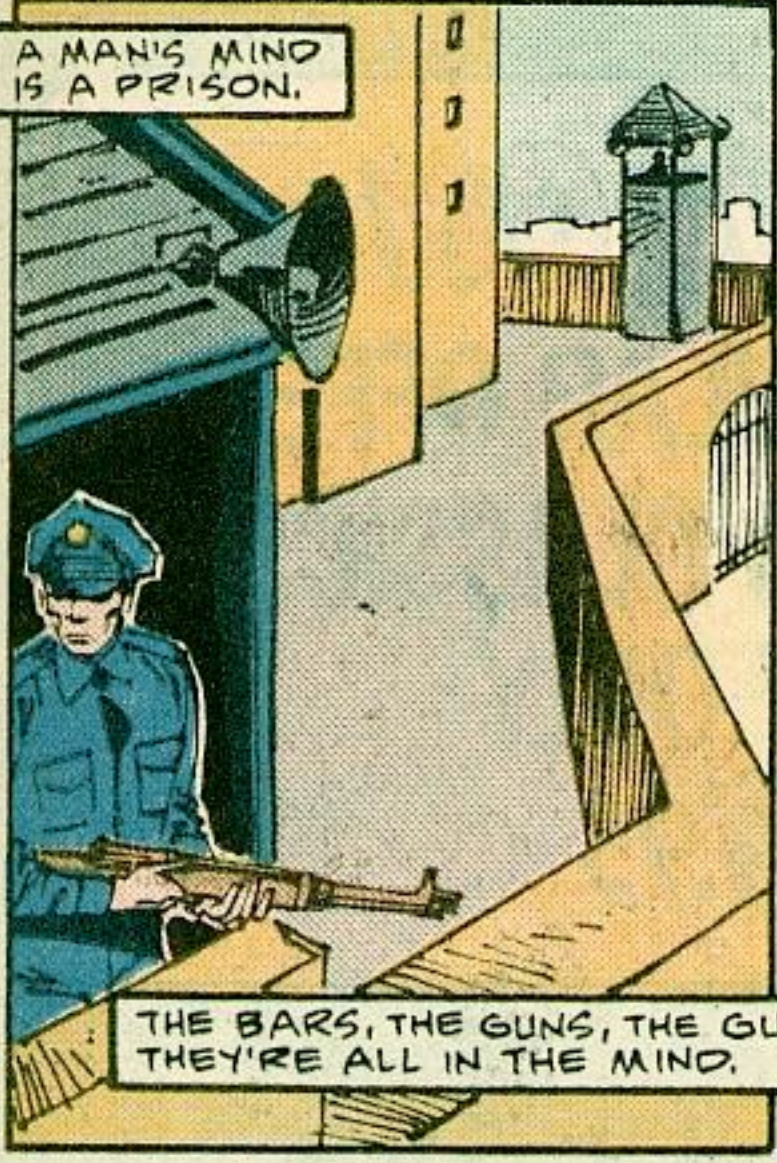
THERE'S A GOODLY INN DOWN THE ROAD A PIECE WHERE A MAN MIGHT FIND SOME INFORMATION CONCERNING WAY-FARERS AND SUCH.

I SHALL TAKE THE LEFT HAND WAY. GOOD HUNTING.

AND VOLSTAGG, CONFINE THINE EXAMINATION OF THE INN TO THE INN-KEEPER AND HIS INFORMATION. LEAVE THE STORES FOR ANOTHER TIME.

HOGUN THE GRIM SAYS NOTHING. AND THE FOUR RIDERS MOVE ON.

A MAN'S MIND IS A PRISON.



THE BARS, THE GUNS, THE GUARDS, THEY'RE ALL IN THE MIND.

AND WHEN THEY TURN YOU LOOSE, MAYBE YOU'RE FREE.



SO LONG, THATCHER. REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU AND KEEP YOUR NOSE CLEAN.

AND MAYBE YOU'RE NOT.

I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU HERE AGAIN.

THE WARDEN NEEDN'T WORRY.



HE'LL NEVER SEE THUG THATCHER AGAIN.

ALL THESE YEARS.

ALL THESE CRUMMY YEARS IN THAT CRUMMY HOLE!



AND IT WAS YOU, THOR! IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR YOU, I'DA NEVER SEEN RYKERS ISLAND!

I'LL BET YOU DON'T EVEN RE-MEMBER ME NOW!

BUT I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN!

AND WHEN I'M THROUGH, YOU'LL NEVER FORGET ME, EITHER!



CAB!



KENNEDY AIRPORT, AND STEP ON IT!

I GOT SOMEBODY I GOTTA SEE.

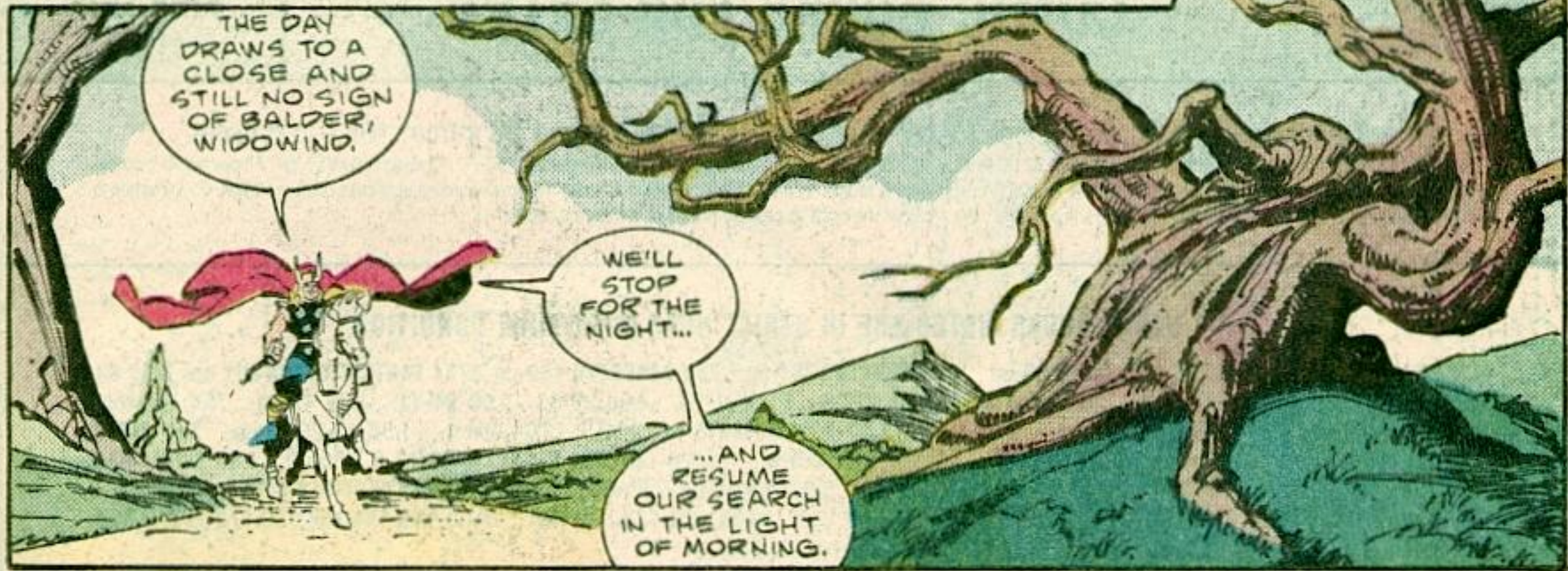


A PLANE MAY DEFEY THE SHACKLES OF GRAVITY FOR A LITTLE WHILE...



...BUT A MAN IS ONLY AS FREE AS HIS MIND.

MEANWHILE, ON A ROAD SOMEWHERE BETWEEN ASGARD AND NORNHEIM...



THE DAY
DRAWS TO A
CLOSE AND
STILL NO SIGN
OF BALDER,
WIDOWIND.

WE'LL
STOP
FOR THE
NIGHT...

...AND
RESUME
OUR SEARCH
IN THE LIGHT
OF MORNING.



LET US REFRESH
OURSELVES, AND
THEN TO SLEEP.

TOMORROW,
WE SHALL NEED
SHARP EYES
TO SEARCH
OUT ANY
SIGN OF
BALDER.

THEN,
MY LORD
THOR, YOU
HAVE NOT
COME TO
SAVE THE
LADIES?



WHAT?

WHY OLD GRANNY
THOUGHT YE'D COME
TO SAVE THOSE
NOBLE LADIES HELD
CAPTIVE BY
SLAGGNBIR,
THE TROLL.

WHAT
LADIES,
GRANNY?

'TIS A TALE
I'VE NOT HEARD
IN ASGARD.



BECAUSE NONE WHO
DARES THE CASTLE
E'ER COMES OUT
AGAIN!

WHERE
IS THIS
PLACE?



A MILE DOWN THE ROAD,
YOU'LL FIND A PATH THAT
LEADS OFF THROUGH THE
BRAMBLES TO THE
RIGHT.

FOLLOW THE SCAR-
LET FLOWERS AND
YOU'LL COME TO A
HIDDEN WAY.

FOLLOW
THE WAY
AND YOU'LL
FIND THE
CASTLE.

OLD
GRANNY'S
NO LIAR, SON
OF ODIN.



HOW DO YOU
KNOW ME,
GRANNY?

OLD GRANNY'S
NO FOOL EITHER,
LORD. EVERYONE
KNOWS THE SON
OF ODIN.

VERY
WELL, GRANNY.
IN THE MORNING,
BEFORE I RESUME
MY TRAVELS, I'LL
HAVE A LOOK AT THE
CASTLE OF SLAGGNBIR.

BUT THE SUN IS WESTERING ERE
THOR REACHES THE END OF THE
PATH OF SCARLET FLOWERS...

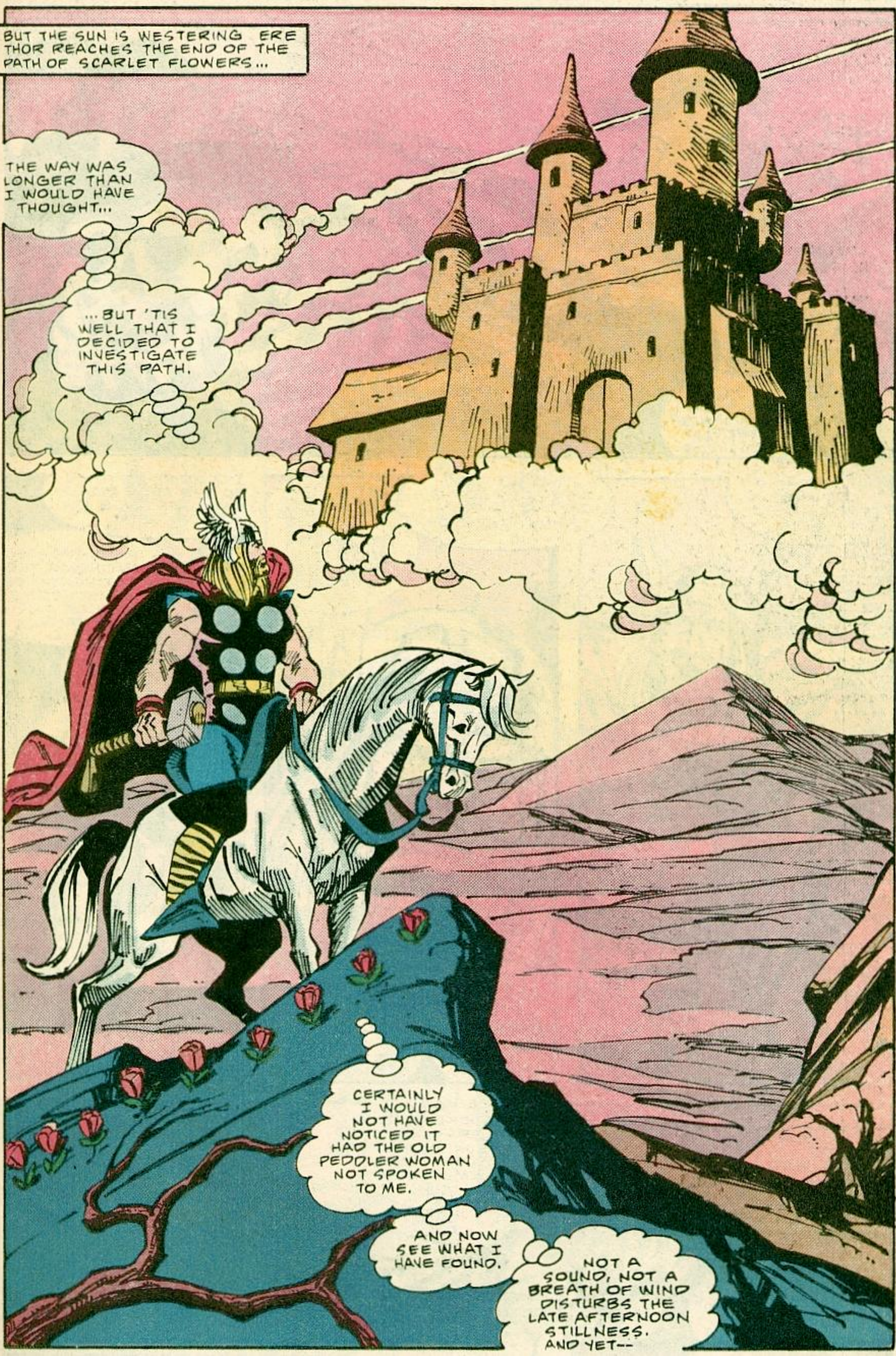
THE WAY WAS
LONGER THAN
I WOULD HAVE
THOUGHT...

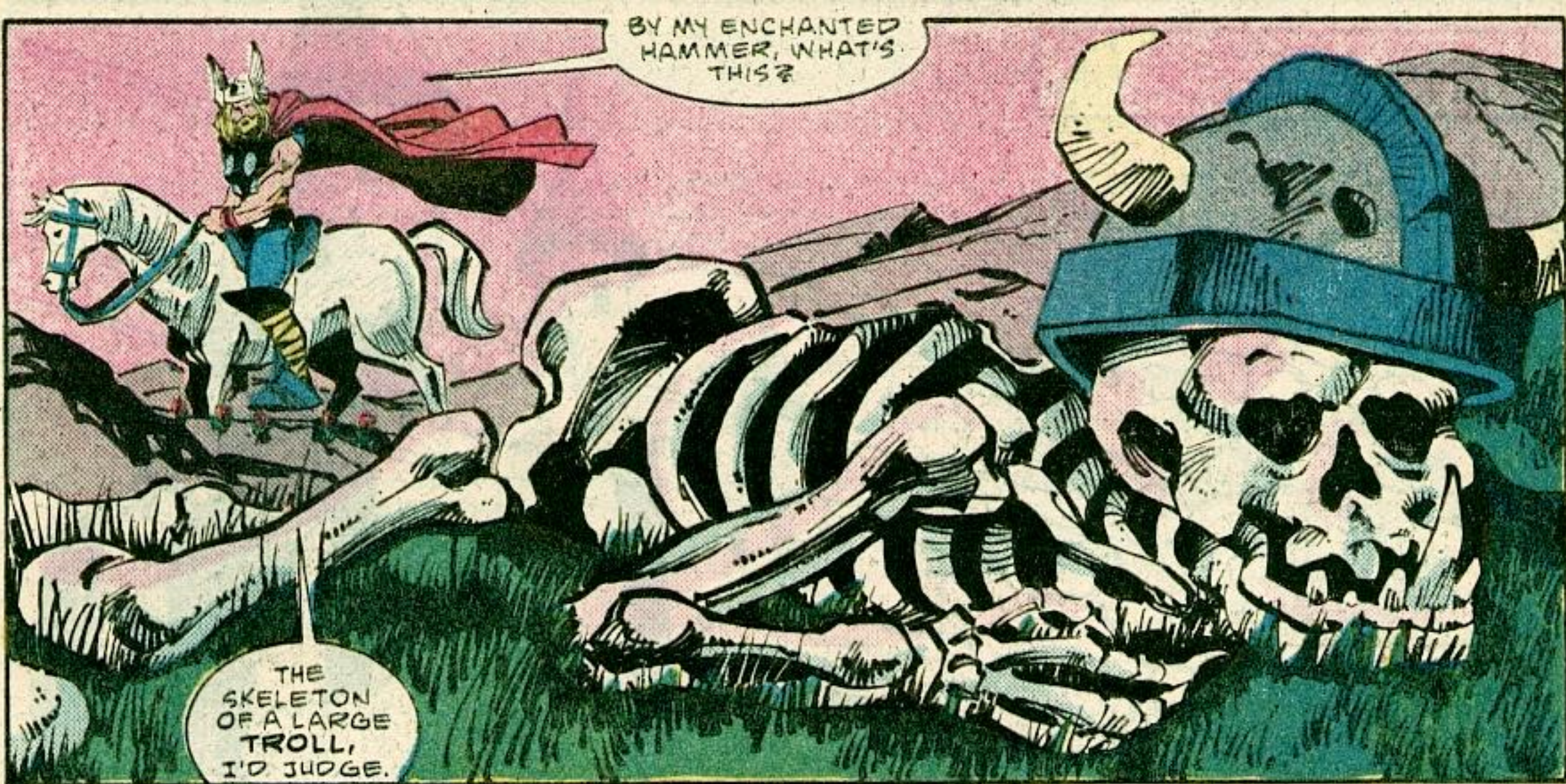
... BUT 'TIS
WELL THAT I
DECIDED TO
INVESTIGATE
THIS PATH.

CERTAINLY
I WOULD
NOT HAVE
NOTICED IT
HAD THE OLD
PEDDLER WOMAN
NOT SPOKEN
TO ME.

AND NOW
SEE WHAT I
HAVE FOUND.

NOT A
SOUND, NOT A
BREATH OF WIND
DISTURBS THE
LATE AFTERNOON
STILLNESS.
AND YET--





BY MY ENCHANTED HAMMER, WHAT'S THIS?

THE SKELETON OF A LARGE TROLL, I'D JUDGE.



PICKED CLEAN BY THE SCAVENGERS, BUT RECENT, ALL THE SAME.

PERHAPS THESE ARE THE BONES OF SLAGGNBIR HIMSELF.

BUT THERE IS NO SIGN OF ANY OTHER LIVING BEING ABOUT...

...AND NO SIGN OF BALDER. OR THE CAPTIVE MAIDENS GRANNY SPOKE OF.

NOR IS THERE ANY CHALLENGE TO MY PRESENCE FROM THE FLOATING FORTRESS.



THE CASTLE AND VALLEY REEK OF SORCERY AND ILLUSION.

IT DOES NOT SEEM LIKELY THAT BALDER STRAYED THIS WAY OFF THE PATH TO ASGARD.



I'D BEST RETURN TO THE MAIN ROAD AND CONTINUE ON TO NORNHEIM.

PERHAPS EVEN NOW, ONE OF THE WARRIORS THREE HAS FOUND SOME TRACE OF OUR COMRADE.



BUT, AS THOR TURNS HIS HORSE'S HEAD ABOUT TO FOLLOW THE WINDING WAY BACK...

A MOMENT. THERE IN THE GRASS... A GLINT LIKE SOME TINY EMERALD SUN.

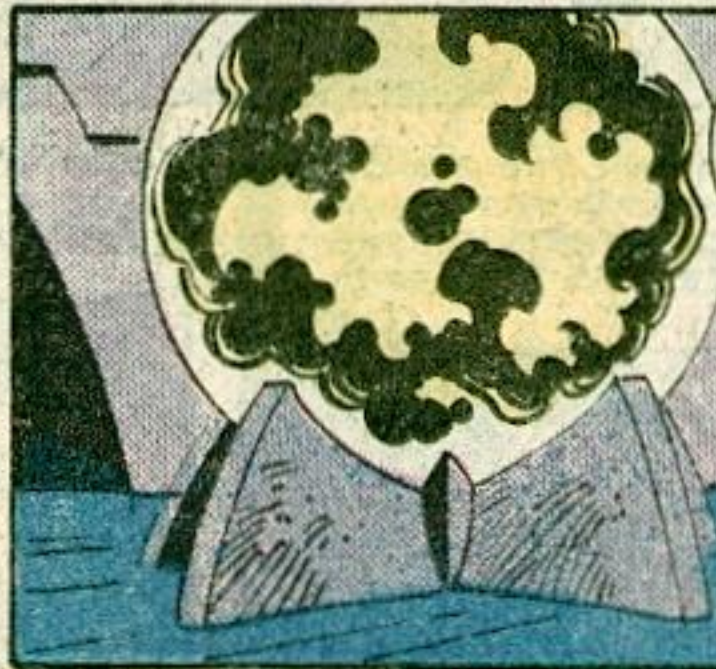
A TELL-TALE OF SOME KIND. PERHAPS I'D BEST DISMOUNT, AND HAVE A LOOK.

MEANWHILE, IN A FAR CORNER OF ASGARD, IN THE FORTRESS OF LOKI...



... A SOFT VOICE QUIETLY INTONES A LONG AND COMPLEX CHANT...

... AND WHEN THE CHANT IS FINISHED...



... THE PAST BECOMES THE PRESENT.

MALEKITH WAS FORTUNATE INDEED THAT KURSE DEALT WITH HIM BEFORE I WAS ABLE TO EFFECT AN ESCAPE FROM MY CELL.

MY REVENGE FOR HIS TREACHERY WOULD HAVE BEEN BITTER.

OH, LOKI, I'M SO GLAD YOU'RE HOME. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO YOU!

WAIT UNTIL YOU HEAR WHAT THAT CREATURE SIF DID TO--



LORELEI, PLEASE! MUCH HAS HAPPENED DURING MY STAY IN THE PRISON OF NO ESCAPE...

... AND MOST OF IT IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANYTHING THE LADY SIF COULD CONCEIVABLY HAVE DONE TO ANYBODY!

I AM STILL NOT CLEAR ABOUT HOW I CAME TO OCCUPY A CELL IN ASGARD'S PRISONS...

BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION OF ALL IS THIS, NAMELY, WHAT HAS BECOME OF BALDER?



AND IF THE MYSTIC VAPORS OF URO SERVE ME WELL, THEN WE SHALL SOON KNOW THE ANSWER!

"FOR IN THE SHADOWS OF THEIR ROLLING COILS, THE RECENT PAST MAY BE REVEALED!"



"AND WHAT I SEEK... IS THE PAST OF BALDER."

MY LORD BALDER, HAS THE DELIVERER OF THE LADIES COME AT LAST?



YOUR PARDON, MOTHER?

WHY, OLD GRANNY THOUGHT YE'D COME TO SAVE THOSE NOBLE LADIES HELD CAPTIVE BY SLAGGNBIR, THE TROLL.

WHAT LADIES, I PRAY?

I HAVE HEARD NO STORIES OF DAMSELS HELD AGAINST THEIR WILL IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD.

BECAUSE NONE WHO DARES THE CASTLE E'ER COMES OUT AGAIN!



WHERE IS THIS PLACE?

A MILE DOWN THE ROAD, YOU'LL FIND A PATH THAT LEADS OFF THROUGH THE BRAMBLES TO THE LEFT.



FOLLOW THE SCARLET FLOWERS...

... AND YOU'LL COME TO A HIDDEN WAY.

FOLLOW THE WAY AND YOU'LL FIND THE CASTLE.



OLD GRANNY'S NO LIAR, NOBLE BALDER.

HOW DO YOU KNOW ME, GRANNY?



OLD GRANNY'S NO FOOL EITHER, LORD. EVERY-ONE KNOWS THE SHINING ONE WHO WILL SOON BE THE RULER OF ASGARD.

VERY WELL, GRANNY. THOUGH I AM IN HASTE FOR HOME, IT SHALL NOT BE SAID BY ANY THAT BALDER FORSOOK THE HELPLESS IN DISTRESS.



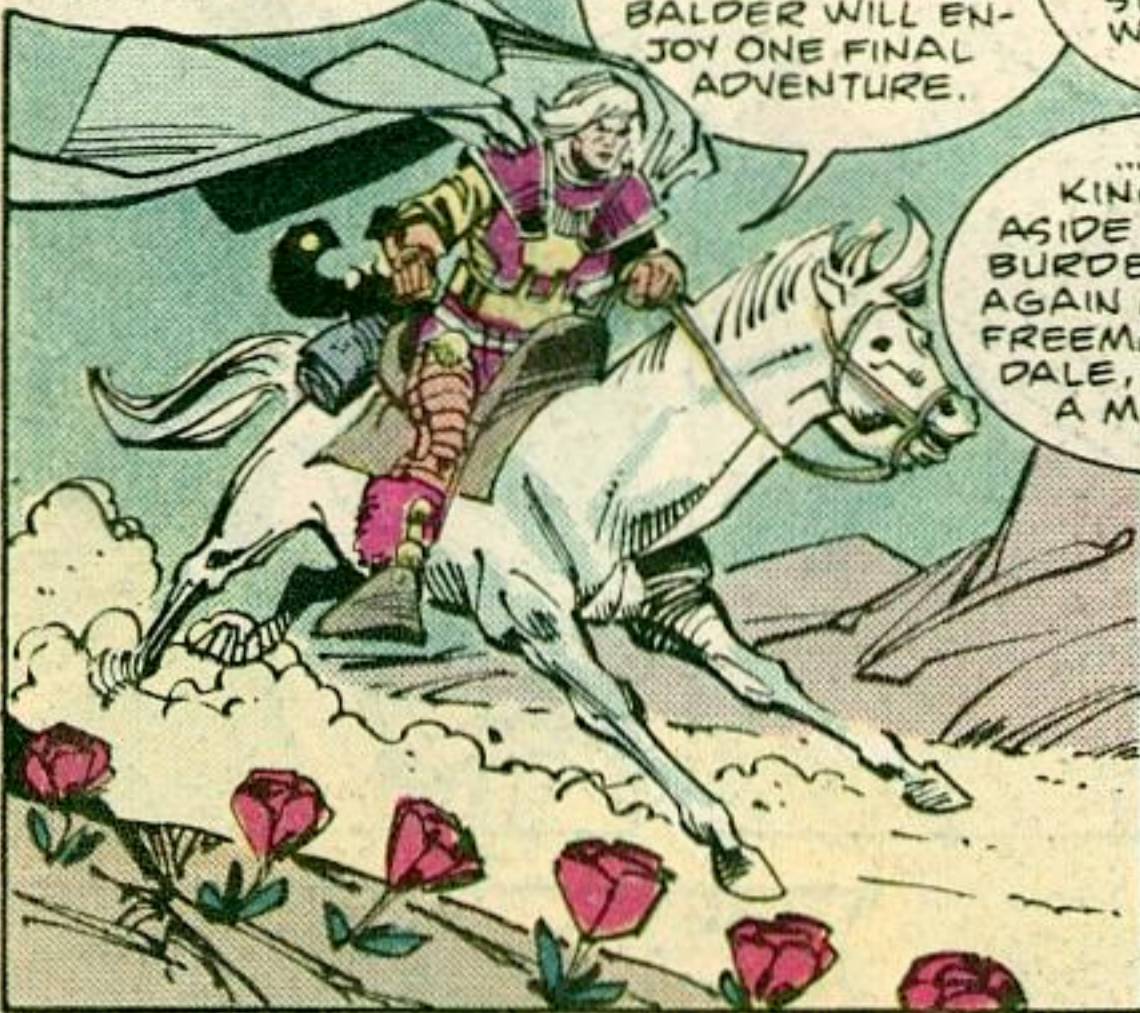
I'LL HAVE A LOOK AT THIS CASTLE OF SLAGGNBIR.

I SHOULD RIDE HARD FOR ASGARD WHERE MY DUTY CALLS ME...

...BUT BEFORE I TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF HIGH OFFICE, BALDER WILL ENJOY ONE FINAL ADVENTURE.

AFTER ALL, WHEN I HOLD THE GOLDEN SCEPTER, A FOLLY SUCH AS THIS WILL BE DENIED ME...

THE PATH OF FLOWERS SHOWS NO SIGN OF ENDING AND YET, I HAVE TRAVELED THE BETTER PART OF A DAY.



...FOR WHAT KING CAN SET ASIDE HIS HEAVY BURDEN AND BE AGAIN A SIMPLE FREEMAN OF THE DALE, EVEN FOR A MOMENT?

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE OLD PEDDLER -- BUT WAIT!



THAT CAN ONLY BE THE STRONGHOLD OF SLAGGNBIR!

AND FORMIDABLE IT IS, TOO, HINTING OF PUISSANT MAGIC.



BUT I TOLD KARNILLA ONCE THAT SHE WOULD LOVE ME LESS IF I DID NOT RIDE TO A SPLENDID DOOM.

AND THIS IS BUT A SMALLISH CASTLE!



*and the adventures of Balder in BALDER THE BRAVE #4 will show you how--Reliable Rat!

SURELY NO FOEMAN LURKING WITHIN CAN DAUNT THE WARRIOR WHO DEFEATED THE GIANTS OF JOTUNHEIM IN THEIR OWN REALM*!

BELOW IT, NO GRASS GROWS AND THE PATH OF FLOWERS STOPS.

WHOEVER HE MAY BE, SLAGGNBIR IS CERTAINLY A POWERFUL WIZARD.



AND THOUGH IT APPEARS THAT SLAGGNBIR IS EXPECTING VISITORS, IT IS NO MATTER!

I DOUBT THIS IS TRULY WISE, FOR THE SILENCE TELLS ME THAT EVEN THE ANIMALS SHUN THIS PLACE.



BALDER THE BRAVE IS A MATCH FOR ANY TROLL!

SLAGGNBIR'S COLLEAGUES MUST BE GIANTS TO REACH THE LADDER...

... BUT HE SHOULD HAVE MADE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF TALLER FRIENDS!

... NO SUCH DEVICE CAN KEEP BALDER AT BAY!



THOUGH A MORTAL MIGHT FAIL TO REACH THE LADDER...

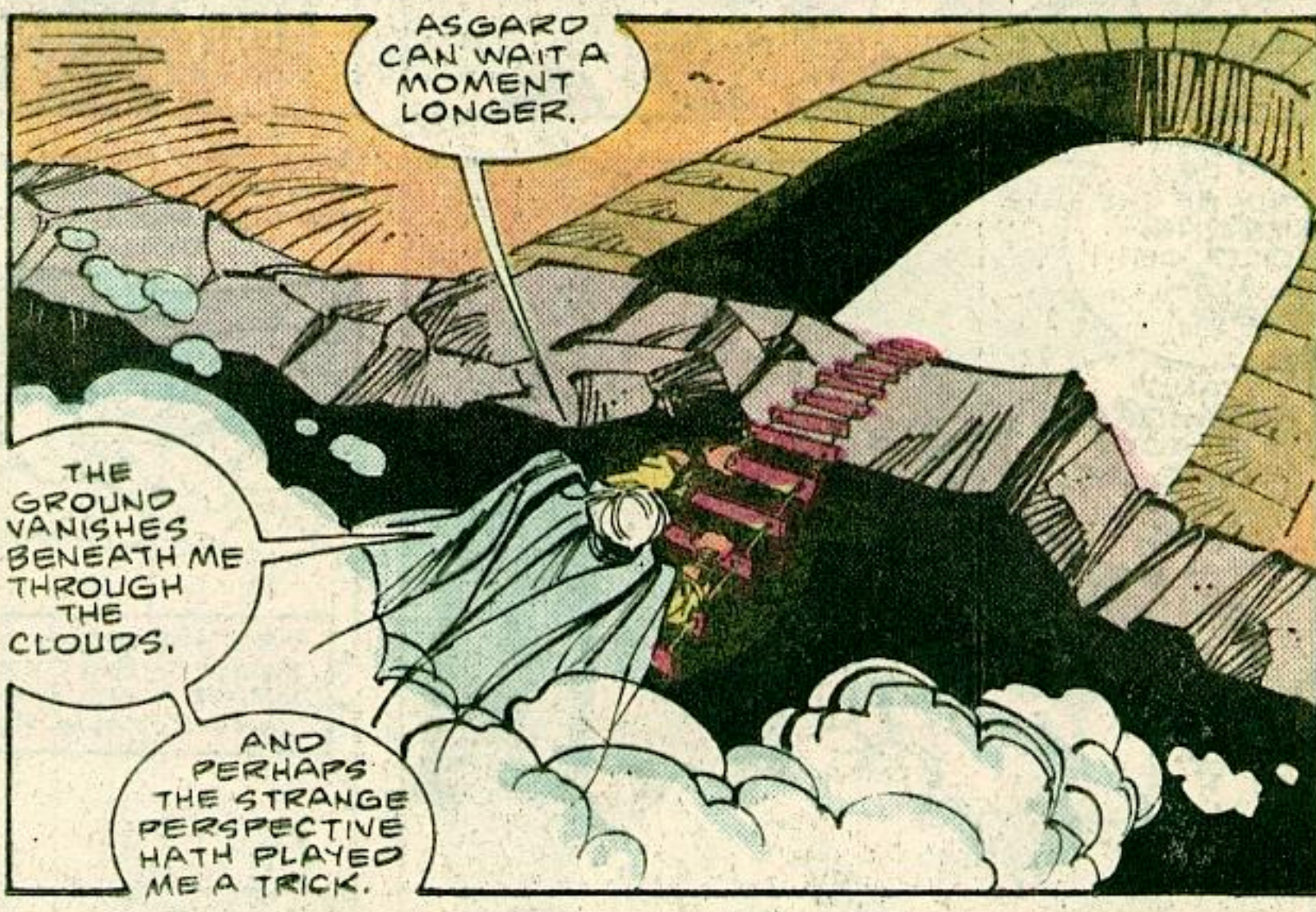
AND AS FOR THE OWNER OF THIS KEEP...

ASGARD CAN WAIT A MOMENT LONGER.



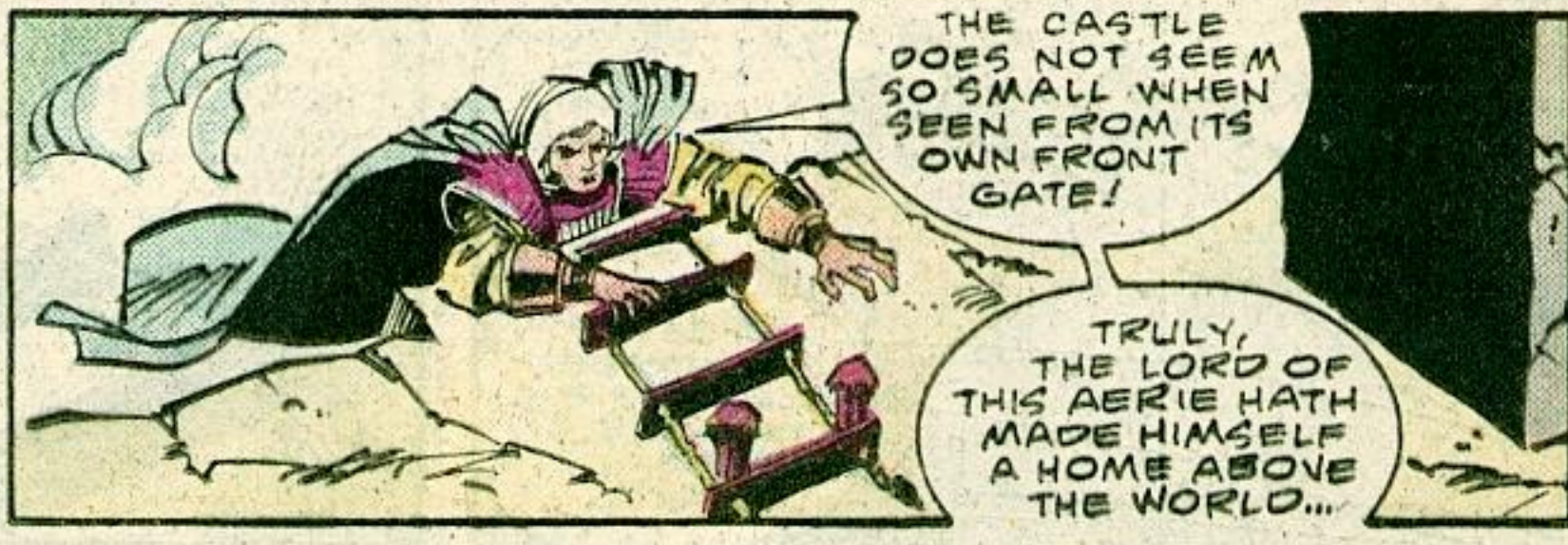
... NOT EVEN A TALL TROLL CAN TOUCH BALDER THE BRAVE IF HE DOES NOT WISH IT!

I WILL CLIMB UP AND TEST THE OWNER OF THIS FLOATING TOWER.



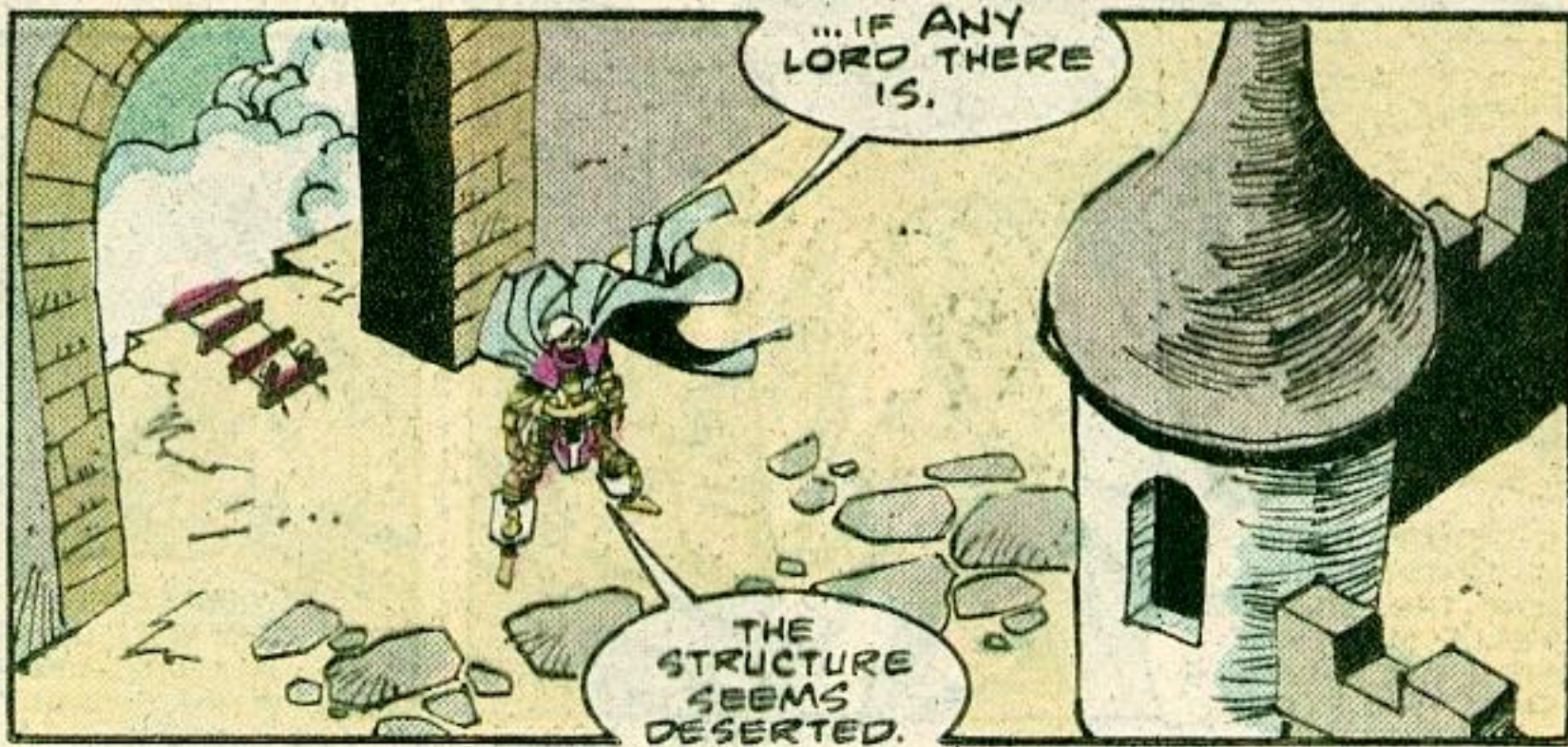
THE GROUND VANISHES BENEATH ME THROUGH THE CLOUDS.

AND PERHAPS THE STRANGE PERSPECTIVE HATH PLAYED ME A TRICK.



THE CASTLE DOES NOT SEEM SO SMALL WHEN SEEN FROM ITS OWN FRONT GATE!

TRULY, THE LORD OF THIS AERIE HATH MADE HIMSELF A HOME ABOVE THE WORLD...



... IF ANY LORD THERE IS.

THE STRUCTURE SEEMS DESERTED.

AT LAST, A CHAMPION WHO CAN SAVE US! KOSSI, LOOK BELOW IN THE COURTYARD!

IT CANNOT BE, UNN! 'TIS SOME TRICK OF THE DEMON TO TORTURE US ANEW!

COURAGE, KOSSI! BRAVE WARRIOR, HELP US, WE BE-SEECH THEE!

SAVE US FROM THE WICKED POWER OF SLAGGNBIR!



WHAT?



OR ARE YOU, AS KOSSI FEARS, ONLY ANOTHER VISION SENT TO BREAK OUR SPIRITS AND CAST US INTO DESPAIR!

HEAR ME, FAIR DAMSELS! BALDER THE BRAVE IS NO VISION!

THE BLOOD WITHIN ME FAIRLY BURNS AT THE SIGHT OF THY HELPLESS FLIGHT!

...AND I SWEAR UPON MY SACRED OATH THAT I WILL RIGHT THIS WRONG!

COME FORTH, FOUL SLAGGNBIR!

WHO ARE YOU THAT YOU SHOULD USE THESE LADIES SO CRUELLY!

COME FORTH FROM THE SHADOWS IF YOU DARE!

THERE IS A LONG MOMENT OF SILENCE...

...AND THEN THE FETOR OF DEATH COMES SURGING LIKE A WAVE OUT OF THE GREAT ENTRANCE...

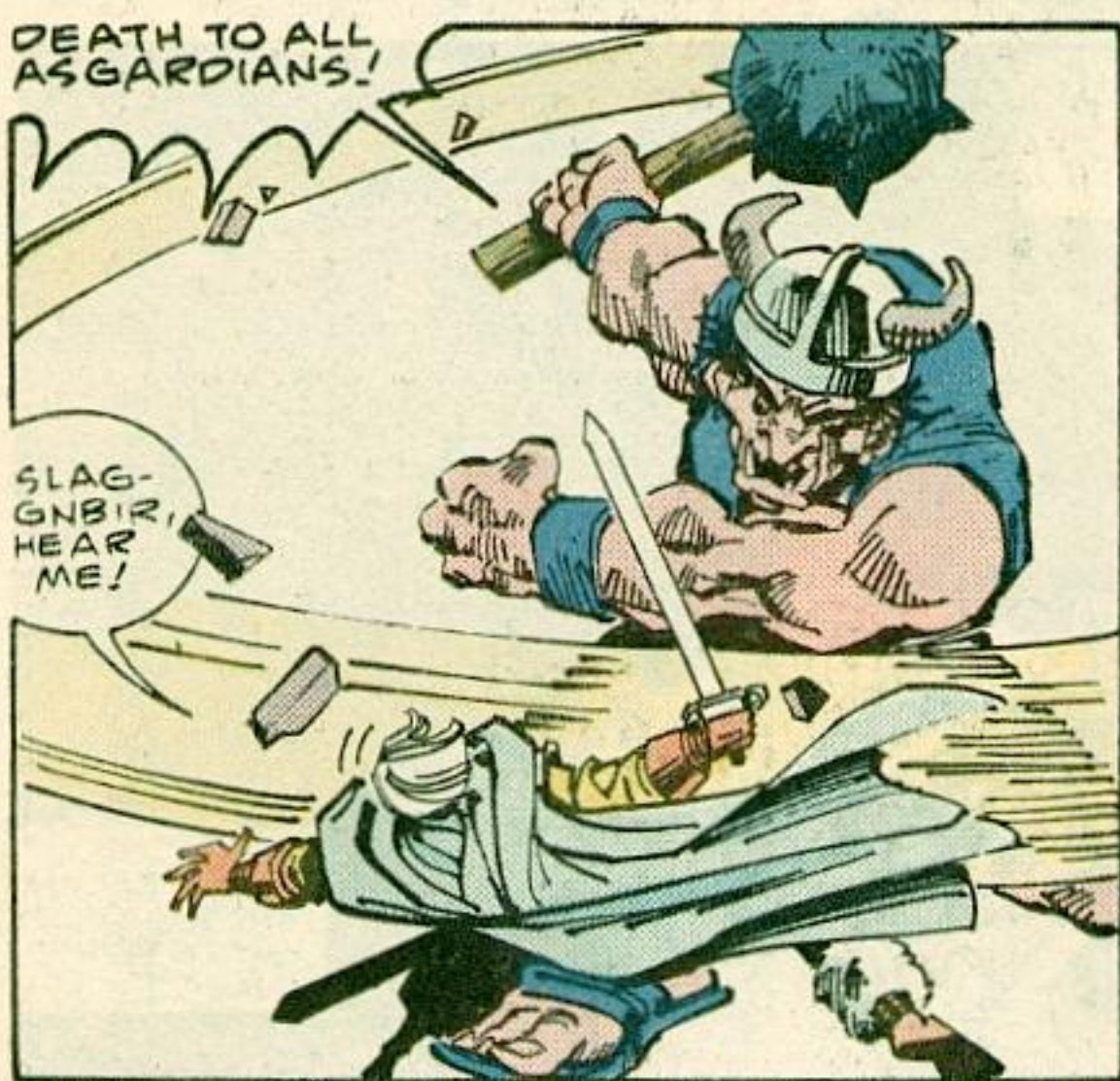


...AS THE MASTER OF THE CASTLE GREETES HIS GUEST,

A TROLL THE SIZE OF A SMALL GIANT!



WELCOME, BALDER, TO THE CITADEL OF SLAGGNBIR!



DEATH TO ALL ASGARDIANS!

SLAGGNBIR, HEAR ME!



YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME, BUT I CAN EASILY BEST YOU!

YIELD AND I SHALL BE MERCIFUL!

SCHWISSKK!





SHORTLY...

THE COMING OF SLAGGNBIR CHANGED EVERYTHING.

HE SLEW OUR FATHER AND LAID WASTE TO THE LANDS, FINALLY CUTTING THE CASTLE FREE...

...TO ROAM AND PILLAGE AT HIS PLEASURE.

AND WE WERE THE BAIT HE USED WHENEVER HE CHOSE.

BUT WHAT OF YOU, OUR SAVIOR?

YES, TELL US OF YOURSELF AS YOU ACCEPT THESE TOKENS OF OUR FAVOR AND OUR GRATITUDE.

YOU CALLED YOURSELF BALDER, BUT ARE YOU REALLY HE OF WHOM THE STORIES TELL?

BALDER THE BRAVE I AM CALLED BY THOSE WHO...

AND HAVE YOU A LADY, BALDER?

I LOVE A QUEEN - WHOM I HAVE LATELY LEFT. KARNILLA IS HER NAME AND SHE IS EVER IN MY...

AND WHERE ARE YOU FROM, BRAVE BALDER?

THE GOLDEN REALM OF ASGARD.

THERE IS MY HALL AND MY...

I MUST RETURN, FOR I AM CALLED ON AN ERRAND OF GREAT URGENCY.

WE WOULD NOT SEEM SO UNGRATEFUL AS TO LET YOU LEAVE IN SUCH WASTE...

BUT TELL US AGAIN, WHO YOU ARE AND WHO IS YOUR LADY AND WHERE IS YOUR HOME?

SURELY YOU HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN ALREADY, LADIES. WHY, I AM... I... I...

...ESPECIALLY WHEN WE HAVE YET TO REWARD YOU FOR YOUR COURAGE AND DARING.

HOW VERY ODD. I CAN'T REMEMBER.

THEN LIE BACK, DEAREST ONE, AND WE SHALL TELL THEM WHO THOU ART AND EVER SHALL BE.

FOR THOU ART ANNAR, OUR LORD AND MASTER.

WE ARE YOUR LOVERS AND LIVE ONLY TO PLEASE YOU.

... AND THIS CASTLE HAS ALWAYS BEEN YOUR HOME.



AND A TIMELESS IDYLL BEGINS AS ANNAR AND HIS LADIES LET SLIP AWAY THE HOURS, UNAWARE OF THE PASSING OF DAYS.

DEAREST ANNAR, WHY THIS SORRY FROWN?

HAVE NOT YOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS BEEN FILLED WITH JOY?



TELL US, DARLING, THAT WE MAY SOOTHE THY CLOUDED BROW

THIS RING, IT... DISTURBS ME.

I FEEL I SHOULD REMEMBER IT SOMEHOW...

...AND YET I CANNOT!



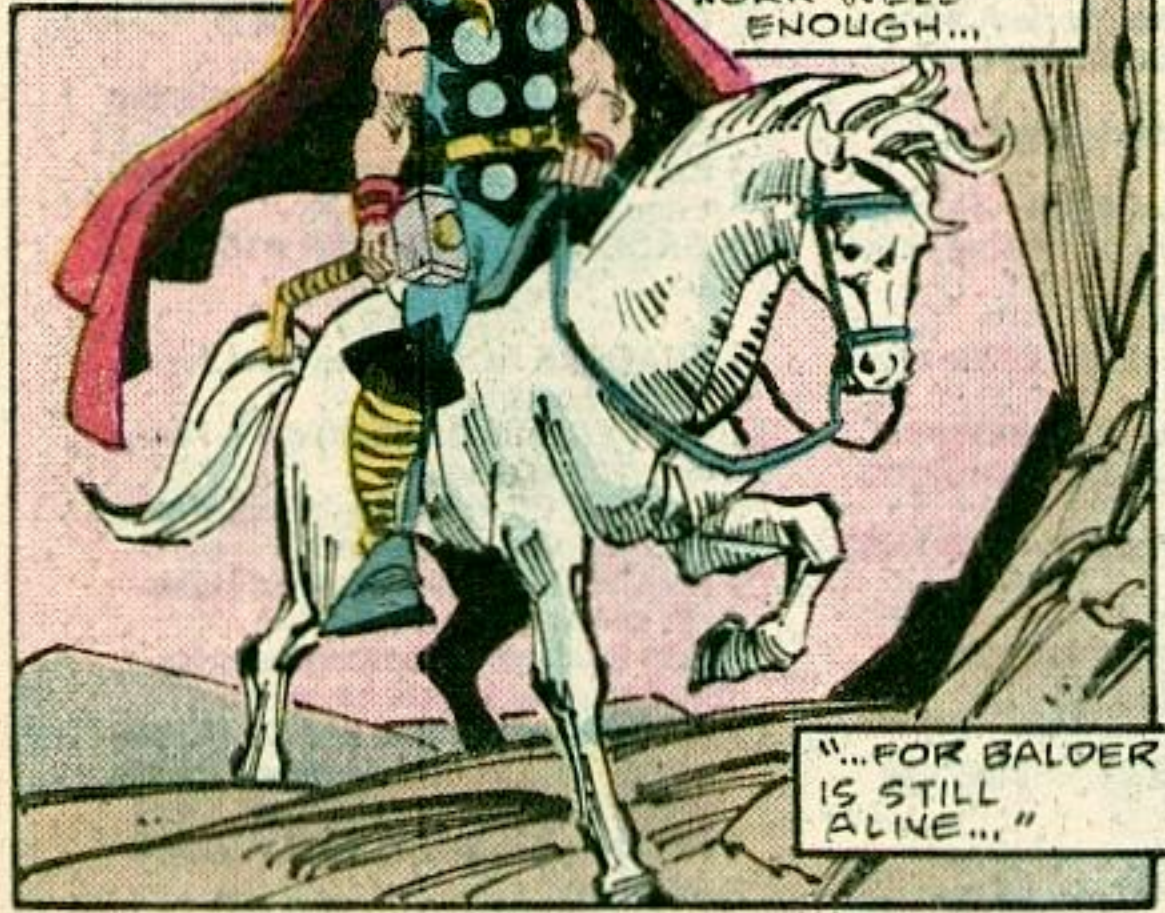
THEN AWAY WITH IT, ANNAR!

SURELY SUCH A SIMPLE BAUBLE IS OF NO CONCERN TO YOU... OR US.



"SO THE PAST IS NOW THE PRESENT AGAIN, LORELEI.

"I FEAR THAT THE HIDDEN WATCHER IN THE DARK, UGLITHA, HAS NOT YET DONE HER WORK WELL ENOUGH...



"...FOR BALDER IS STILL ALIVE..."

... AND SHE MAY LIVE TO REGRET THAT.

BUT MALEKITH HAS UNDONE MY PLOTS AND BALDER'S LIFE OR DEATH NO LONGER MATTERS TO ME.



NOW THOR IS ABOUT TO FIND BALDER'S PRISON.

THIS SHOULD ALL PROVE TO BE VERY AMUSING.

BY THE EYE OF ODIN, THE GLINT I SAW CAME FROM A RING SET WITH A SINGLE EMERALD.

AND DEEP WITHIN THE EMERALD IS A "K" GLOWING LIKE GREEN FIRE.

THIS RING CAN ONLY HAVE BEEN A TOKEN OF KARNILLA'S ...AND BALDER ALONE WOULD HAVE CARRIED IT HENCE.

I HAVE DISMISSED THE CASTLE TOO LIGHTLY.

I STILL FEEL SOMEWHAT DRAINED FROM USING MY BELT OF STRENGTH ON EARTH*...

...BUT MY DUTY TO THE GOLDEN REALM IS CLEAR.

THOUGH THE STINK OF SORCERY REEKS FROM EVERY WINDOW, I SHALL NOT REST TILL I HAVE SEARCHED EVERY TOWER AND BAILEY.

NOT A SOUND DISTURBS THE SILENCE.

*A few issues ago --RM

AT LEAST THE COURTYARD SEEMS REAL ENOUGH...

...AND THE FLAGGING BENEATH MY FEET HAS SUBSTANCE.

BUT THE AIR OF MENACE SEEMS ALMOST PALPABLE.

I'D BEST BE ON MY GUARD.

I'LL WAGER THAT BEHIND THE GREAT GATE, SOME MALEFICENT FORCE WAITS FOR THE UNWARY.

BUT THOR HAS SPENT A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AMONG ILLUSIONS LATELY...

...AND NO SIMPLE CONJURING TRICK WILL SUFFICE TO DEFLECT MY PURPOSE NOW!

BY THE BEARD OF MY FATHER!!



WELCOME, NOBLE STRANGER, TO THE CASTLE IN THE SKY.

FEW INDEED ARE SO VENTURESOME AS TO PASS THROUGH THE GREAT GATE.



BUT THOSE WHO DO MAY ENJOY WHAT-EVER DELIGHTS THEY MAY FIND WITHIN!

NEXT ISSUE: **THREE CHARMS FOR DEATH!**

THE FIGHT YOU NEVER THOUGHT YOU'D SEE! THOR AND BALDER LOCKED IN MORTAL COMBAT! BE HERE!