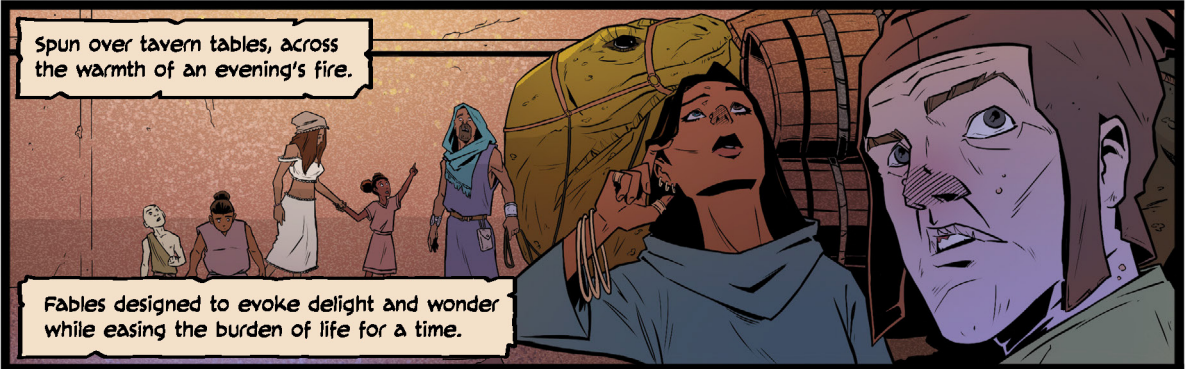


Tales told often are often told quite the same.

Launched upon some hapless stranger with seductive phrases like "Once upon a time..." and "In the land of..."

Magic spells that cause one to set their defenses aside and put all worry to sleep.

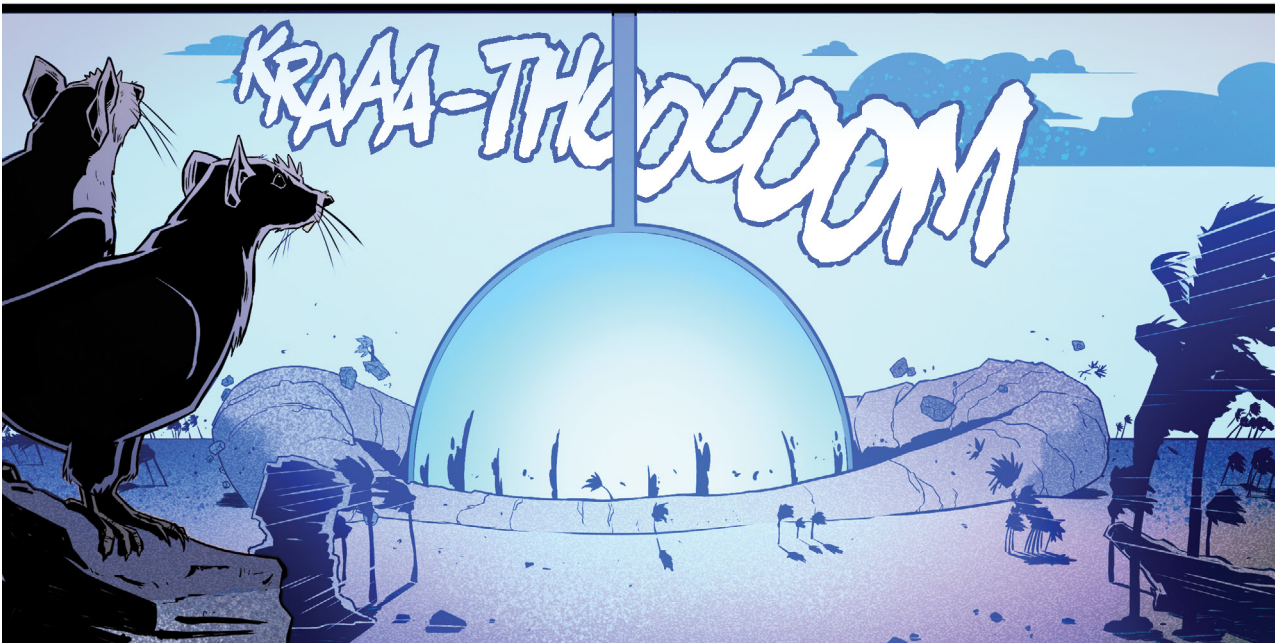


Spun over tavern tables, across the warmth of an evening's fire.

Fables designed to evoke delight and wonder while easing the burden of life for a time.



Alas, this is not one of those tales.



When God fell on Kerethim, the impact was felt everywhere.

A physical thing. Land recoiling from the touch of the divine. Mountains shaking, the sun blotted out with soil.

Carrying an ethereal message to all kingdoms beyond.



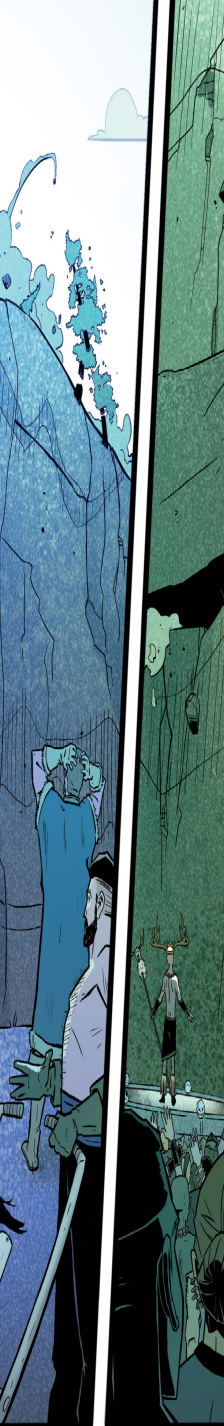
Into the opulent lands of The Dominion, overseen by its masked king.

A veil concealing a rapidly changing succession of victors in a bloody, constant war for control.



Through the Kingdom of The Rule, whose subjects would struggle in the aftermath as they had before.

Led by a family more interested in filling their private coffers than taking on the mantle of their ancient and dwindling King.



It echoed in the ruined proscenium of The Fellnacht, to whom it resounded like angelic music.

Their debased gospel now proven inarguably true.



Down through the shadowy warrens of The Nihli, scattered throughout Kerethim's undergrounds.

Bonded only by their shared darkness, they began to decipher what the reverberations truly meant.



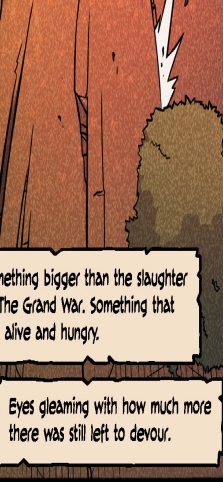
The Orphans marched through it.

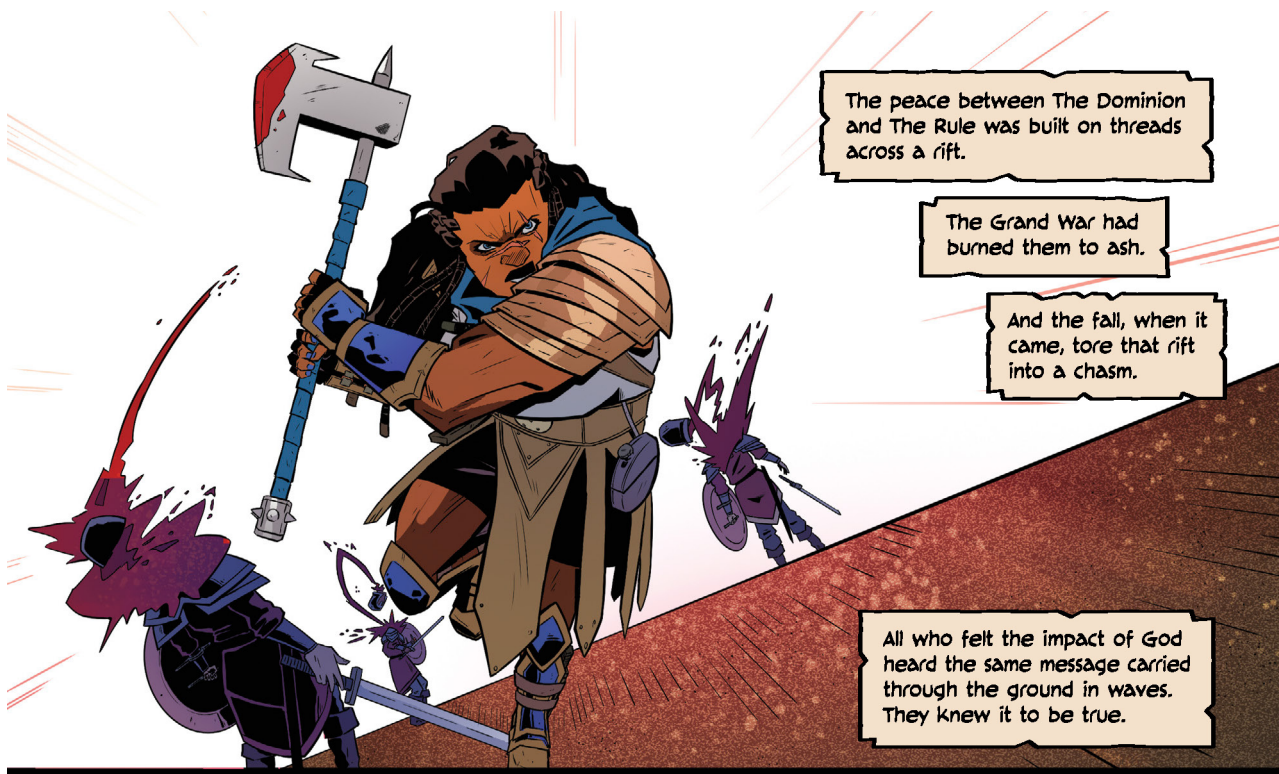
Those who'd lost everything to the war, growing as they wandered through ruined battlefields. They'd seen the worst atrocities this world could offer.

But they knew in their bones *this* was different.

Something bigger than the slaughter of The Grand War. Something that felt alive and hungry.

Eyes gleaming with how much more there was still left to devour.





The peace between The Dominion and The Rule was built on threads across a rift.

The Grand War had burned them to ash.

And the fall, when it came, tore that rift into a chasm.

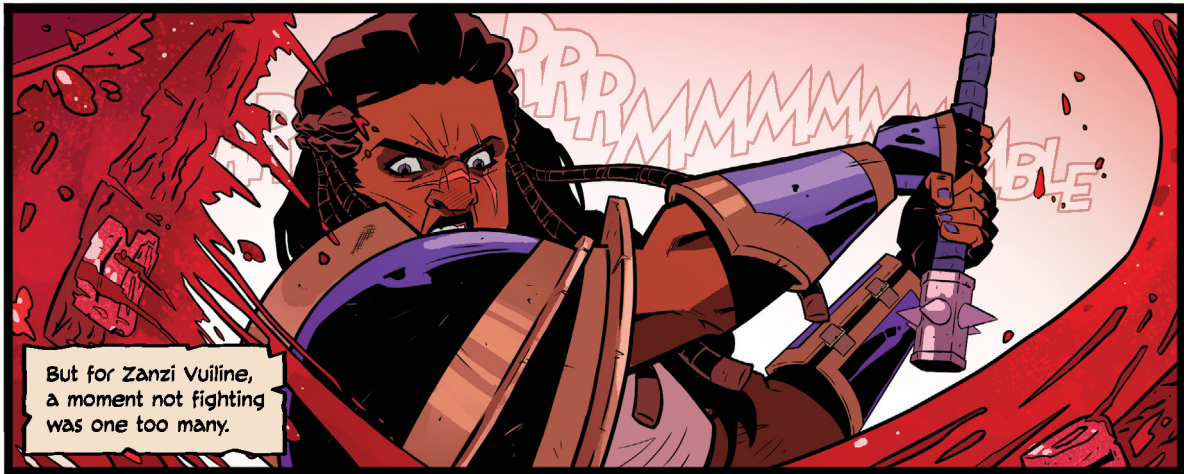
All who felt the impact of God heard the same message carried through the ground in waves. They knew it to be true.



The world had changed forever.



For a moment, it humbled them.

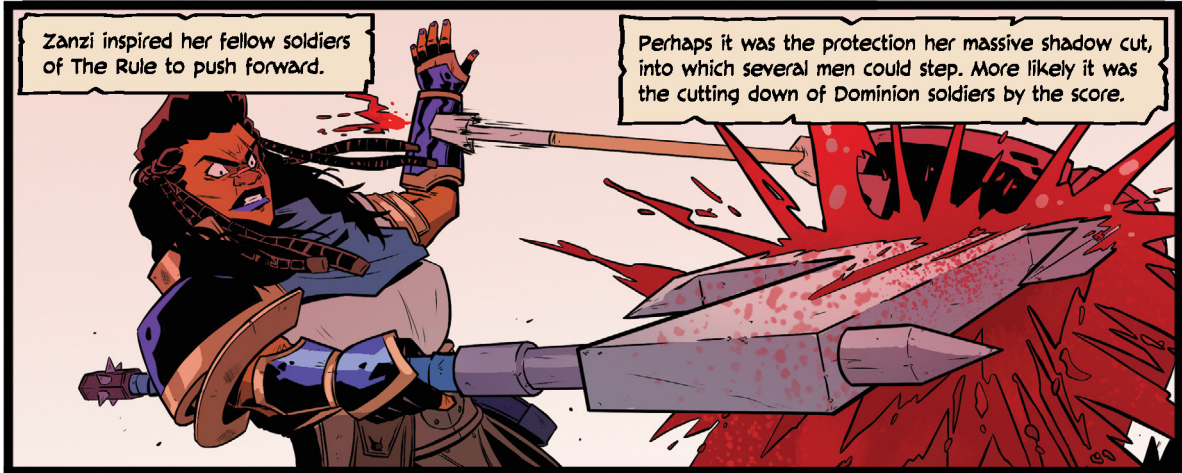


But for Zanzi Vuiline, a moment not fighting was one too many.



She warred as if she were born to it.

A heritage of violence rather than an oath of service.



Zanzi inspired her fellow soldiers of The Rule to push forward.

Perhaps it was the protection her massive shadow cut, into which several men could step. More likely it was the cutting down of Dominion soldiers by the score.



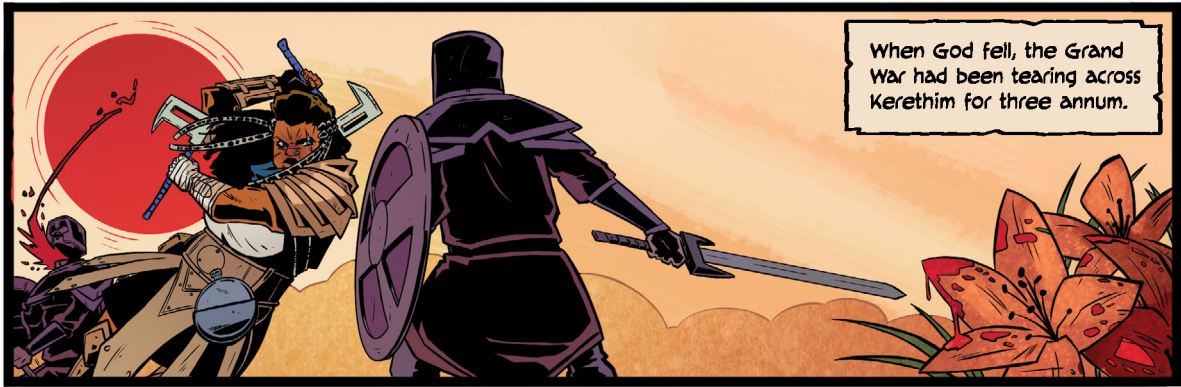
Zanzi fought for nothing more complicated than her own will to survive.

She had pledged herself long before The Rule decreed every citizen must be a soldier.

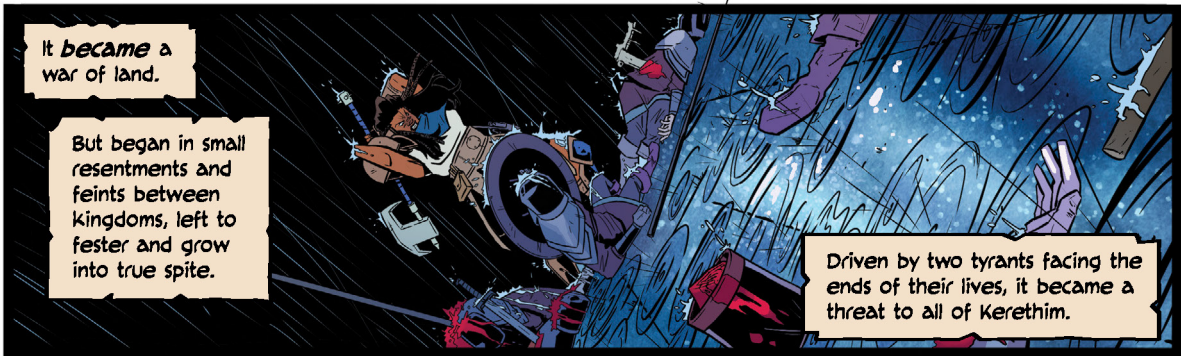


If she were motivated by anything else, she never spoke of it.

Zanzi was always more apt to express herself in direct ways.



When God fell, the Grand War had been tearing across Kerethim for three annum.



It became a war of land.

But began in small resentments and feints between kingdoms, left to fester and grow into true spite.

Driven by two tyrants facing the ends of their lives, it became a threat to all of Kerethim.



To the soldiers fed to its engines, it made little difference what The Grand War was truly about.

Surviving to collect the victory at the end of the carnage occupied all their thinking.



Some earned calm. A legacy, stories of their own to tell across a table. To pass down.

A return to the lives they had too easily given up.



If it was possible to return from the horrors of war. To fill that lack of roaring sound and the taste of blood.

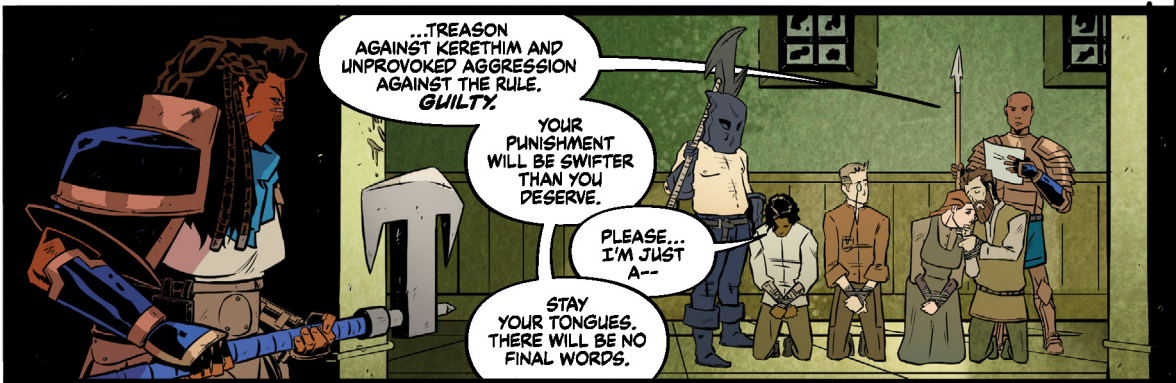
This was one of countless questions in search of an answer.

That grew all too loud in the sudden silence of victory.



TAKE THEM OUT WITH THE REST AND WAIT FOR THE CARAVAN. KING FIYLOK WANTS THEM IN THE CAPITOL CITY.

WE SHOULD SLAUGHTER THE LOT AND SAVE THE WEAR ON OUR STEEPS.

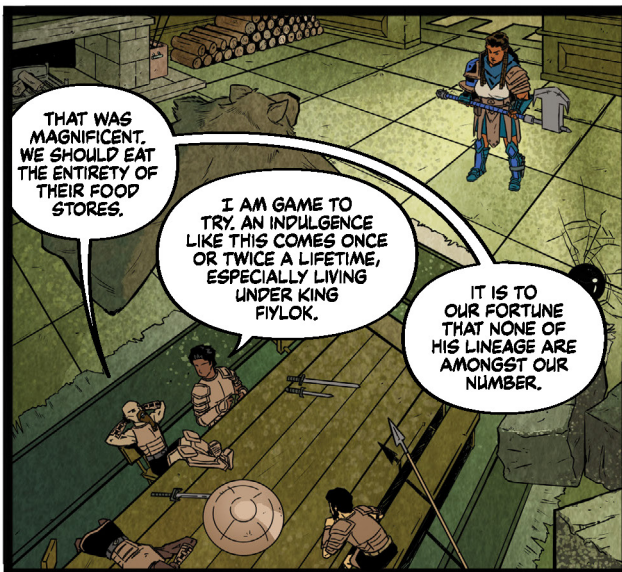


...TREASON AGAINST KERETHIM AND UNPROVOKED AGGRESSION AGAINST THE RULE. **GUILTY.**

YOUR PUNISHMENT WILL BE SWIFTER THAN YOU DESERVE.

PLEASE... I'M JUST A--

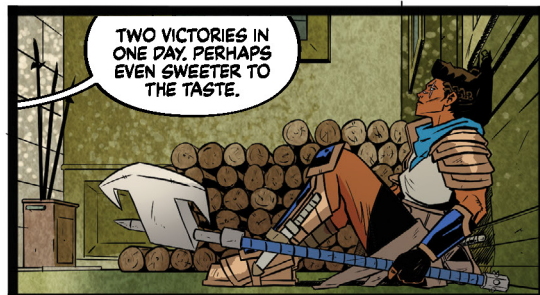
STAY YOUR TONGUES. THERE WILL BE NO FINAL WORDS.



THAT WAS MAGNIFICENT. WE SHOULD EAT THE ENTIRETY OF THEIR FOOD STORES.

I AM GAME TO TRY. AN INDULGENCE LIKE THIS COMES ONCE OR TWICE A LIFETIME, ESPECIALLY LIVING UNDER KING FIYLOK.

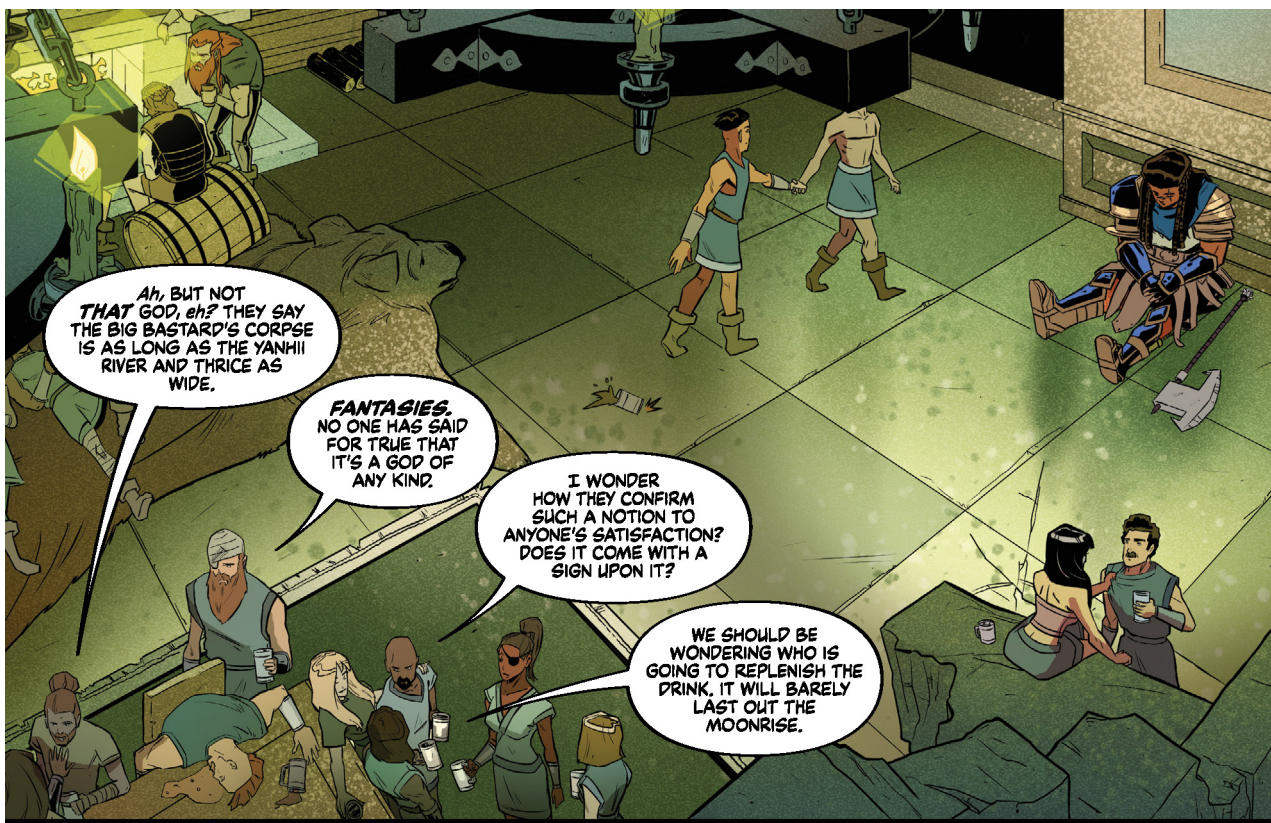
IT IS TO OUR FORTUNE THAT NONE OF HIS LINEAGE ARE AMONGST OUR NUMBER.



TWO VICTORIES IN ONE DAY. PERHAPS EVEN SWEETER TO THE TASTE.



GOD MUST BE SMILING UPON US.



Ah, BUT NOT THAT GOD, eh? THEY SAY THE BIG BASTARD'S CORPSE IS AS LONG AS THE YANHII RIVER AND THRICE AS WIDE.

FANTASIES. NO ONE HAS SAID FOR TRUE THAT IT'S A GOD OF ANY KIND.

I WONDER HOW THEY CONFIRM SUCH A NOTION ANYONE'S SATISFACTION? DOES IT COME WITH A SIGN UPON IT?

WE SHOULD BE WONDERING WHO IS GOING TO REPLENISH THE DRINK. IT WILL BARELY LAST OUT THE MOONRISE.



GLANEEL AND I HAIL FROM YAN-FAWER. A LONG RIDE BACK BUT WELL WORTH IT.

MY FAMILY'S STABLES AVOIDED THE WORST OF THE BURNING NIGHTS. I HAVE AN OCCUPATION TO RETURN TO--IF I WISH.

I REMAIN UNSURE. IN ALL TRUTH, I PICTURED THIS DAY AS A DREAM I WOULD CARRY UNTIL I WAS STRUCK DOWN IN BATTLE.



THERE IS LITTLE OF THESE LANDS WE'VE FOUGHT FOR THAT I HAVE TRULY SEEN. PERHAPS I WILL TAKE A LONGER ROAD HOME AND EXPLORE IT ALL.

THAT I SURVIVED ALL WE SAW, I FEEL IT MUST BE A MESSAGE FROM ABOVE.



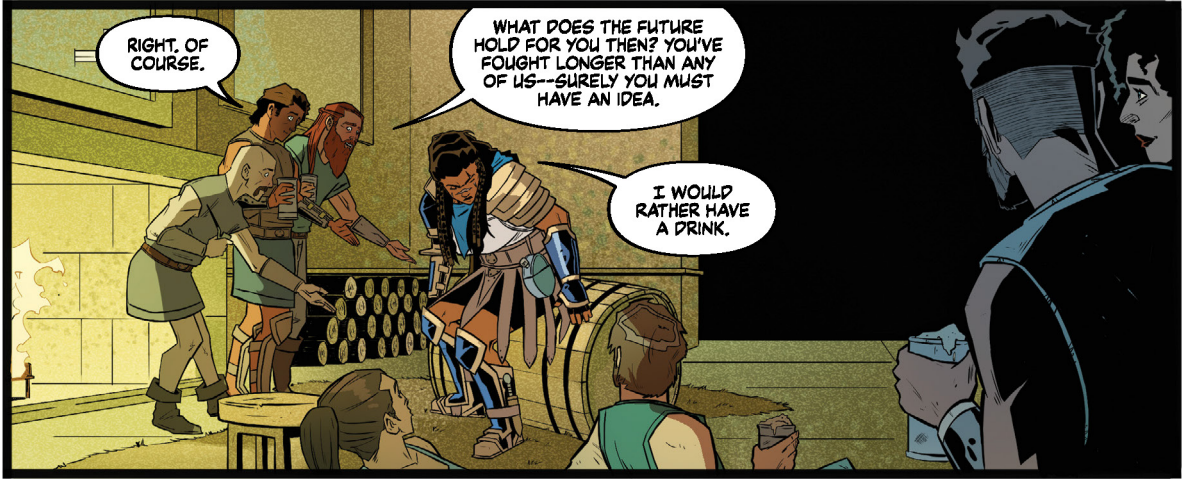
YOU TRULY BELIEVE IN SUCH THINGS AFTER ALL WE HAVE DONE?

IS GOD'S BODY NOT DRAPED ACROSS KERETHIM?



ZANZI UNDERSTANDS. TELL US, DO YOU BELIEVE THAT GOD HAS FALLEN TO KERETHIM?

I HAVE SPENT FAR TOO LONG WITH THE DEAD TO SPEND MY VICTORY THINKING OF ANOTHER ONE.



RIGHT. OF COURSE.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR YOU THEN? YOU'VE FOUGHT LONGER THAN ANY OF US--SURELY YOU MUST HAVE AN IDEA.

I WOULD RATHER HAVE A DRINK.



AS YOU WISH, LADY VUILINE.

PLEASE, HERE, MINE REMAINS UNTOUCHED.

MY THANKS. ONE WILL SUFFICE FOR NOW.



TONIGHT, I CELEBRATE. ON THE MORROW, I PREPARE TO RETURN TO MY HOME. MY LOVE. MY CHILDREN.

I ONLY HOPE I AM ABLE TO FIND MY WAY TO THEM.

