CHAPTER I

"AND NOW YOU WILL SEE! YOU WILL SEE WHAT THE FURIOUS JUDGMENT OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR LOOKS LIKE!"
SINNERS! SO MANY SINNERS AMONGST US! YOU MUST THINK THAT THE LORD ABOVE ISN'T WATCHING. OR, YOU MUST BE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO BELIEVE THAT HE IS NOT VENGEFUL.
WELL, I'M HERE TO TELL YOU...
...THE DAYS OF SIN WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE ARE OVER.
TURN YOUR EYES AND MEET THE FIERCEST, MOST BLOODTHIRSTY WARRIOR IN ALL OF GIMESH.
HE IS THE FIST, THE SHIELD, THE AXE OF THE LORD ABOVE.
HE IS...

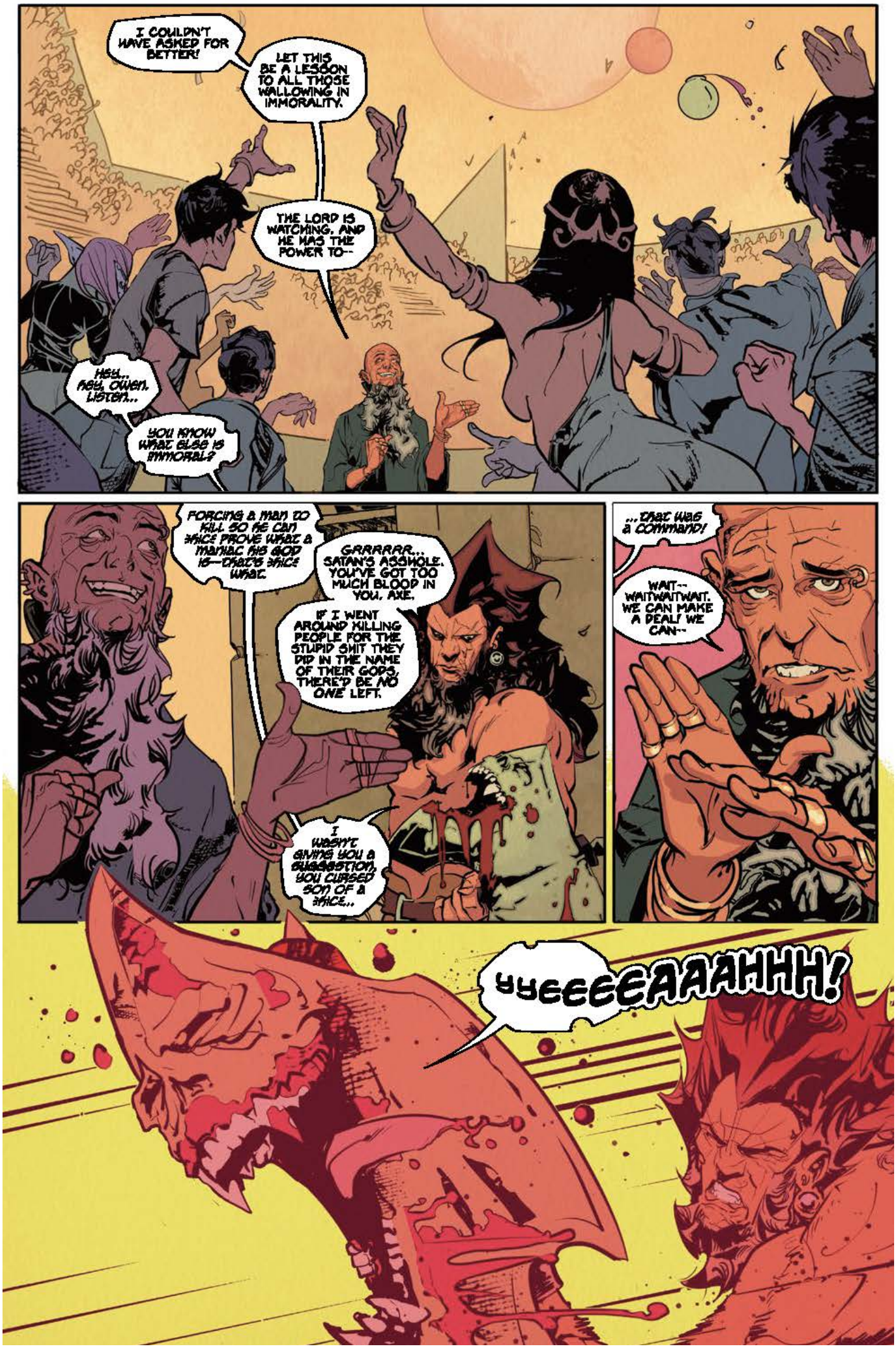
...THE BARBARIAN!
YEAH...
...FUCK THIS SHIT.

REMEMBER, BARBARIAN--I *OWN* YOU. I PURCHASED YOUR LIFE, FAIR AND SQUARE. DON'T YOU DARE EVEN *THINK* ABOUT EMBARRASSING ME.
I. OWN. YOU.
NOW GO OUT THERE AND DO WHAT YOU WERE ADVERTISED TO DO...
KILL.
CAN'T DO IT.
WHAT DID YOU SAY?!
THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS.
I *TOLD* YOU. I'M BOUND--BY MAGIC MORE POWERFUL THAN WHATEVER SHIT-STAIN GOD YOU WORSHIP--TO *ALWAYS* DO WHAT'S RIGHT.
BELIEVE ME, NO ONE'S MORE UNHAPPY ABOUT IT THAN ME.
FINE. *FINE!*
YOU NEED TO SATISFY YOUR RIDICULOUS *CURSE?* THEN GAZE AT THE THREE *DEVILS* BEFORE YOU--

"THIS ONE ENLISTED CHILDREN--PRACTICALLY BABIES--TO SELL HIS ILLEGAL SPICE ACROSS THE ENTIRE VILLAGE.
"THE DRUNKARD NEXT TO HIM BEAT AN INNOCENT WOMAN TO DEATH AFTER HE STUMBLED INTO THE WRONG HOUSE AND THOUGHT HE'D FOUND HIS WIFE IN BED WITH ANOTHER MAN."
"AND THIS ONE...I THINK HE WAS CAUGHT STEALING FOOD FROM THE MARKET? BUT STILL! TAKING FROM THE WEALTHY--WHEN WILL THE INHUMANITY END?!"
HRRRRRM.
WHAT SAY YOU?
WELLLLLL... THE FIRST TWO SHOULD DIE FOR SURE. YOU CAN EVEN DRAG IT OUT IF YOU WANT. BUT THE THIRD... EXECUTION IS HARDLY THE APPROPRIATE PUNISHMENT FOR THEFT.
WHAT ARE YOU--
...ARE YOU TALKING TO YOUR AXE?
I'M CONSULTING WITH MY AXE.
I CAN KILL THE FIRST TWO. BUT NOT THE THIEF.
BUT YOU MUST! IF PEASANTS KEEP STEALING FROM THE RICH, HOW WILL MONEY EVER TRICKLE DOWN?!
IF THE WEALTH WERE TRICKLING DOWN, THEN WHY ARE THERE PEASANTS IN NEED OF STEALING?
NO! I DEMAND YOU--
SHRRK
YOU HAVE MY ANSWER.

THREE AGAINST ONE, BARBARIAN. I LIKE OUR ODDS.
AW. YOU FORMED A TEAM? FUCKING CUTE.
THIEF. I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO KILL YOU UNLESS FORCED TO DEFEND MYSELF. WALK AWAY AND LIVE.
YEP. YEAH. ABSOLUTELY.
WHAT?! WHAT ABOUT OUR TEAM, ASSHOLE?!
NOW, AS FOR YOU TWO--
MY AXE...
...HAS SPOKEN.
GET THAT SWEET FUCKIN' NECTAR OF LIFE, OWEN!

GET THAT BLOOD!
YEGGGGG! YES, BARBARIAN!


I COULDN'T HAVE ASKED FOR BETTER!
LET THIS BE A LESSON TO ALL THOSE WALLOWING IN IMMORALITY.
THE LORD IS WATCHING, AND HE HAS THE POWER TO--
HEY... HEY, OWEN. LISTEN...
YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE IS IMMORAL?
FORCING A MAN TO KILL SO HE CAN ONCE PROVE WHAT A MANIAC HIS GOD IS—THAT'S ONCE WHAT.
GRRRRRR... SATAN'S ASSHOLE. YOU'VE GOT TOO MUCH BLOOD IN YOU, AXE.
IF I WENT AROUND KILLING PEOPLE FOR THE STUPID SHIT THEY DID IN THE NAME OF THEIR GODS, THERE'D BE NO ONE LEFT.
I WASN'T GIVING YOU A SUGGESTION, YOU CURSED SON OF A ONCE...
...THAT WAS A COMMAND!
WAIT-- WAITWAITWAIT. WE CAN MAKE A DEAL! WE CAN--
yyeeeeeAAAHHH!

I'M LEAVING NOW. THERE GONNA BE A PROBLEM WITH THAT?
SHHHIT, MAN. WE BARELY EVEN GET *PAID* FOR THIS.

I AM A BARBARIAN. I WAS BORN OF A LONG LINE OF BARBARIANS. I COME FROM BARBARIAN LANDS.
MY LIFE USED TO BE SIMPLE.
I DRANK.
I FUCKED.
I FOUGHT.
I FUCKED.
I FOUGHT.
I DRANK.
I FOU--
YOU GET THE POINT.

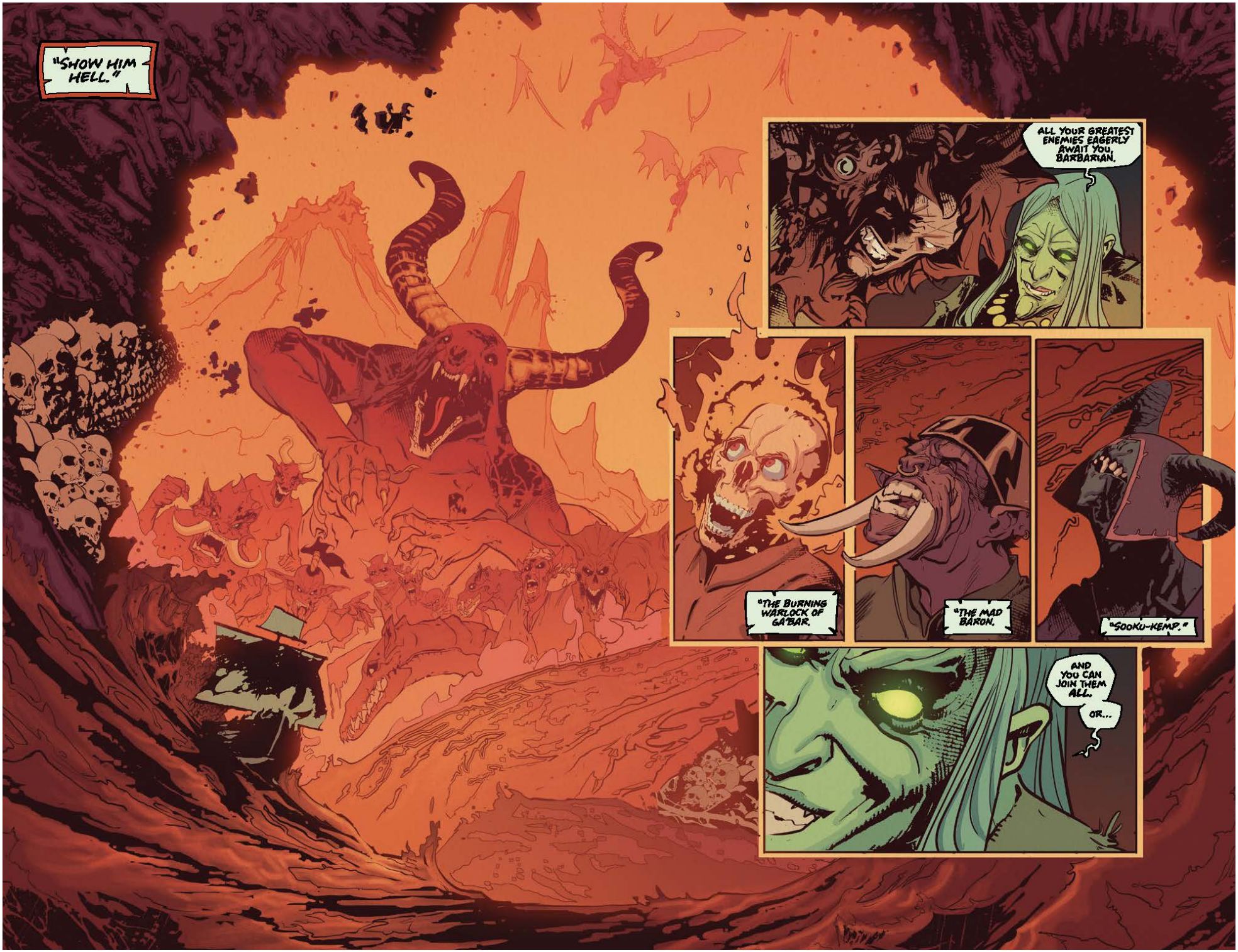
I WANTED NOT FOR ROYALTY. NOT FOR GOLD. NOT EVEN FOR SONGS SUNG IN MY NAME--PARTICULARLY SINCE THERE ARE FEW WORDS THAT DRIVE FEAR INTO THE HEARTS OF YOUR ENEMIES AND RHYME WITH OWEN.
TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN A NAME THAT RHYMES WITH BLOOD, OR AXE, OR EVEN SPILLED GUTS.
ALAS.
I WOULD HAVE STAYED TRUE TO SUCH A SIMPLE LIFE ALL MY DAYS HAD IT NOT BEEN TAKEN FROM ME.
THIS IS MADNESS! WE MUSSSST TAKE TO THE HOLD AND PRAY FOR DELIVERANCCCCCCE!
YOU MAY, ZUMMM, BUT NOT I! I BEND THE KNEE TO NO MAN, NO GOD, NO STORM, EVEN!
BUT OWEN, WE--
THE GAME THEY PLAYED ON ME WAS LONG, AND I DID NOT SUSPECT THEIR TREACHERY FOR EVEN A MOMENT.
GGUURRKKK!
ZUMMM, NO!
THREE ALLIES. THREE MEN I EVEN CONSIDERED FRIENDS.
BUT IN TRUTH--
YOU.
I COMMAND YOU--REVEAL YOURSELVES.
YOU COMMAND US? THAT'S RICH, BARBARIAN...

THREE WITCHES.
LIVING IN DISGUISE. PLOTTING FOR THIS VERY MOMENT.
...BUT WE LONG TO RETURN TO OUR TRUE FORMS.
AND NOW YOU'RE GOING TO COMMAND WE DIVULGE WHAT WE WANT, YES?
I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT, WITCH.
YOU WANT TO DIE.
RRRAAAAHH!

SKKRKH
TOO SLOW, BARBARIAN.
AHHHH!
ENOUGH. WE GROW TIRESOME.

KILL... YOU...
OH, BARBARIAN. YOU'LL DO NOTHING OF THE SORT. IN FACT, IF ANYONE IS GOING TO MEET THEIR END...
...IT'S YOU.
GGRRRAAAAHH!
YOUR STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE ARE LEGENDARY, BARBARIAN. BUT THE KNIFE THAT CUT YOU IS ENCHANTED WITH DARK WOLFSBANE MAGIC.
YOU MAY BE ABLE TO SURVIVE THE WOUND LONG ENOUGH TO MAKE IT TO SHORE--
BUT THE KNIFE'S POISON WILL WITHER YOU TO DUST LONG BEFORE YOU MAKE IT.
WHAT DO YOU WANT?
WE'VE WAITED FOR THIS MOMENT FOR SO VERY LONG. AND ALL OUR POWER, ALL OUR SACRIFICE, HAS LED US RIGHT HERE.
WHAT DO WE WANT? THAT'S SIMPLE--
TO OFFER YOU A CHOICE.
SISTERS?

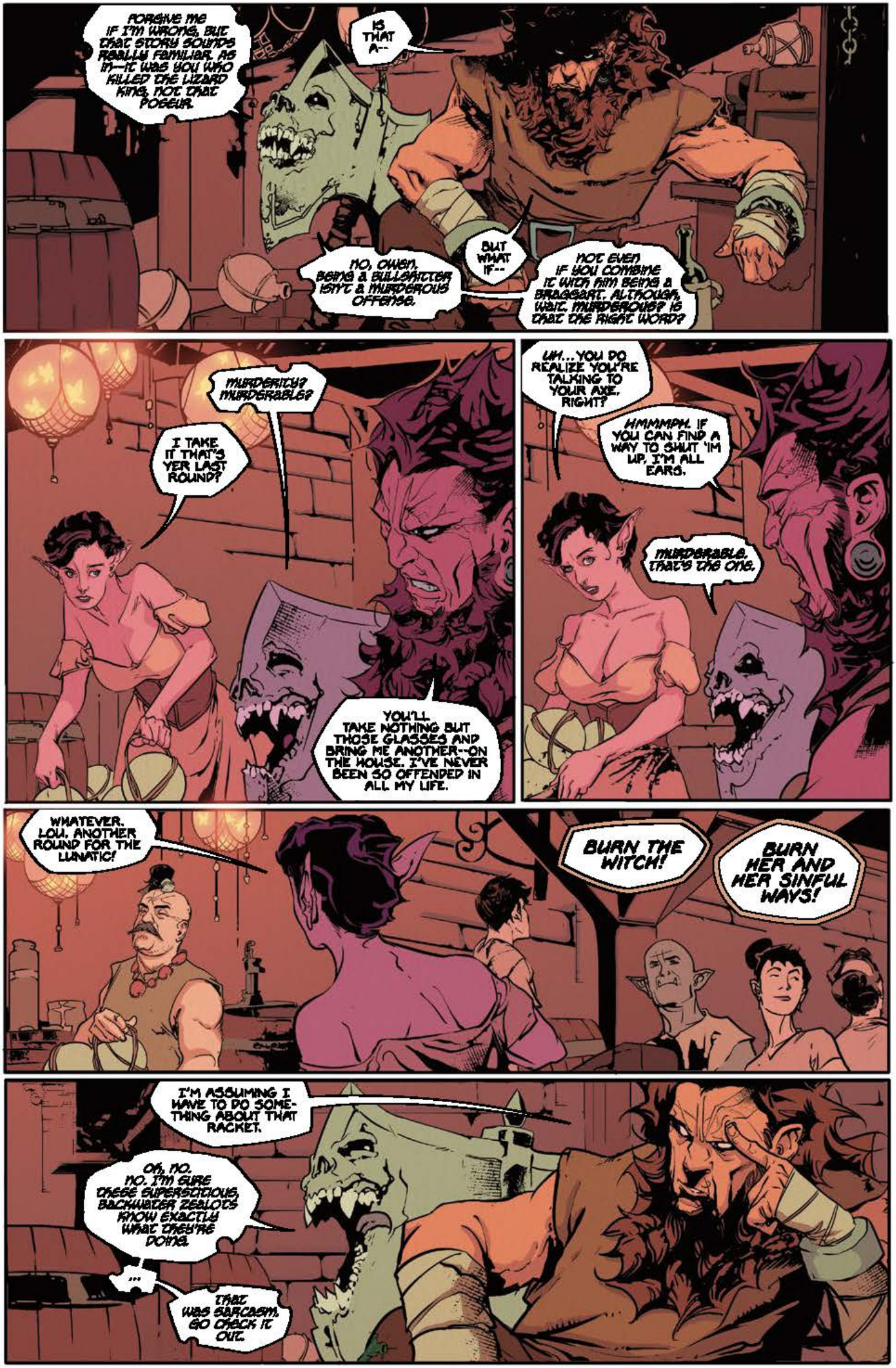
TAKE HIM.
YOU'LL PAY FOR THIS. MARK MY WORDS.
DON'T USE ALL YOUR STRENGTH NOW. IT ONLY MAKES THE POISON WORK FASTER.
THROUGH THE STORM THAT RAGES AND POWERED BY THE LIFE THAT FADES, SHOW THIS MAN WHAT HE NEEDS TO SEE!
BREAK YOUR WATERS! REVEAL WHAT LIES BENEATH!
BY THE POWER OF THREE, WE COMMAND YOU! SHOW THIS MAN!


"SHOW HIM HELL."
ALL YOUR GREATEST ENEMIES EAGERLY AWAIT YOU, BARBARIAN.
"THE BURNING WARLOCK OF GA'BAR.
"THE MAD BARON.
"SOOKU-KEMP."
AND YOU CAN JOIN THEM ALL.
OR...

...YOU CAN ACCEPT OUR CURSE.
HENCEFORTH, YOU LIVE IN SERVITUDE, AND ALL THE WORLD IS YOUR MASTER. ANY CRY FOR HELP, ANY HAVEN UNDER SIEGE, ANY BEGGAR IN DISTRESS, YOU MUST AID.
YOU WILL DO GOOD...
OR YOU WILL SUFFER FOR ETERNITY.
BUT FOR THIS CURSE TO WORK, IT MUST BE ACCEPTED...
...WILLINGLY.
MAY I SEE HELL ONCE MORE?
SURRENDER, BARBARIAN. WE HAVEN'T THE TIME TO--
I ACCEPT YOUR TERMS, WITCH. IF ONLY TO LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO FIND A WAY OUT OF THIS. AND AFTER I BREAK THIS CURSE, THEN I WILL BREAK YOU.
BUT TELL ME--WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?
YOU'LL SEE, BARBARIAN. YOU'RE BUT ONE PIECE OF A MUCH LARGER WHOLE...

AND THERE IT IS. A LIFE EXTENDED, BUT A LIFE HARDLY MY OWN.
FUCKING WITCHES.
I CAN HARDLY CALL MYSELF BARBARIAN ANYMORE. EVEN MY OWN NAME TURNS TO ACID ON MY TONGUE.
THEY STOLE ME FROM ME.
AND NOW I ROAM. CURSED, OF ALL THINGS, TO BE GOOD. WHATEVER THE FUCK THAT MEANS.
ALL I TRULY KNOW IS THAT I AM NOTHING...

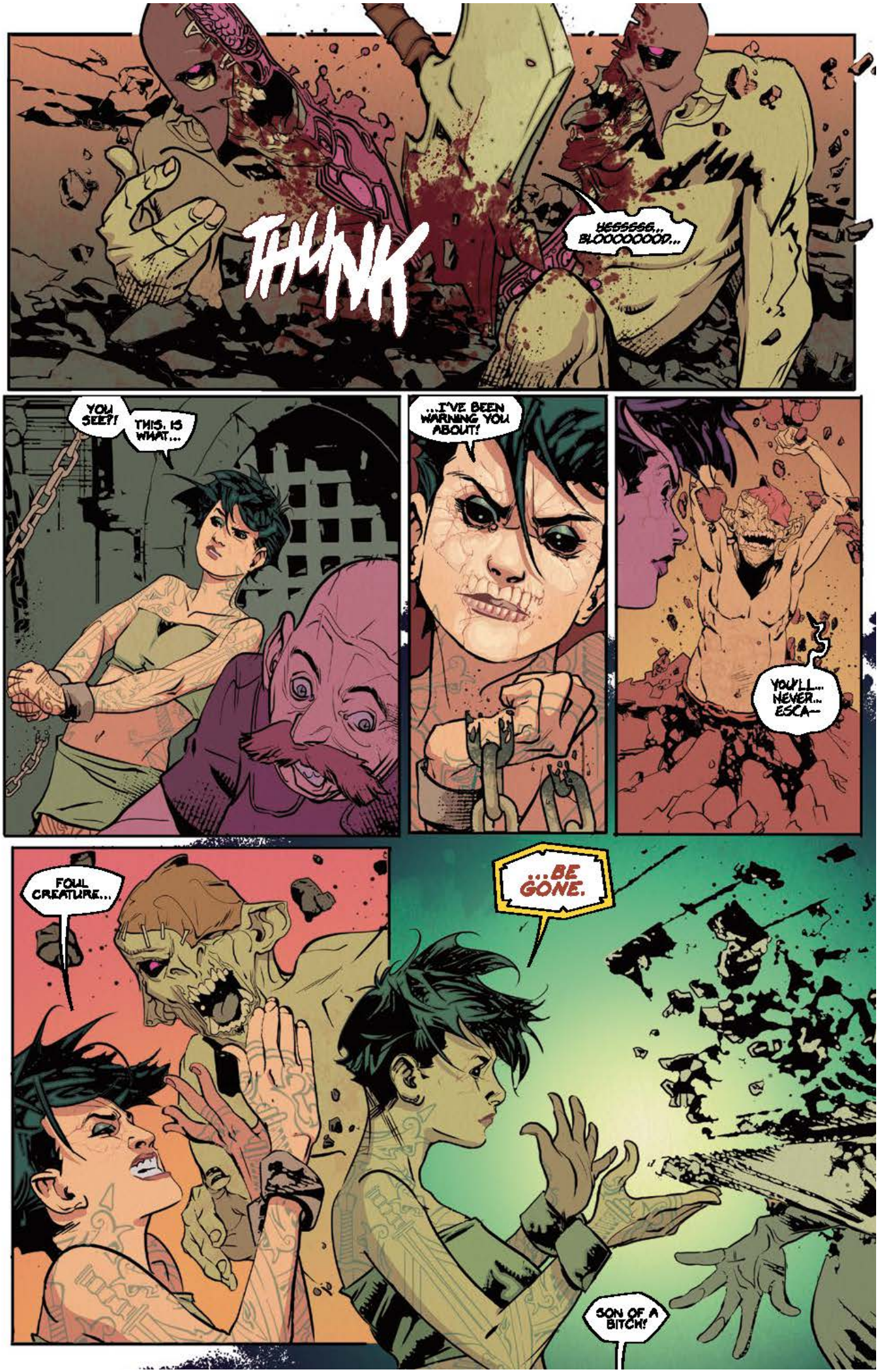
...I'M NO ONE.
"THEN I GRABBED THAT HIDEOUS BEAST--THE ONE WHO CALLED HIMSELF THE LIZARD KING--I GRABBED IT BY ITS FOUL THROAT, AND I SAYS TO HIM, I SAYS--"
PUB
NOBLE ROBSTER
YALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE YOU TO YOUR NEW REIGN, YOUR HIGHNESS--'
'A REIGN OF BLOOD!'
AND THEN, YOU KNOW, I STABBED HIM. I STABBED THAT BASTARD RIGHT IN HIS FACE. GREEN BLOOD CAME SQUIRTING OUT EVERYWHERE. IT WAS DISGUSTING.
ANYWAY--
DOGS OF HELL...
YAAAAAYYY
...DO I HATE BRAGGARTS.
ANOTHER ROUND! ON ME! THE MOST FAMOUS BARBARIAN OF THE VANISHED AGE!


FORGIVE ME IF I'M WRONG, BUT THAT STORY SOUNDS REALLY FAMILIAR. AS IN--IT WAS YOU WHO KILLED THE LIZARD KING, NOT THAT POSEUR.
IS THAT A--
BUT WHAT IF--
NO, OWEN. BEING A BULLSHITTER ISN'T A MURDEROUS OFFENSE.
NOT EVEN IF YOU COMBINE IT WITH HIM BEING A BRAGGART. ALTHOUGH, WAIT. MURDEROUS? IS THAT THE RIGHT WORD?
MURDERITY? MURDERABLE?
I TAKE IT THAT'S YER LAST ROUND?
YOU'LL TAKE NOTHING BUT THOSE GLASSES AND BRING ME ANOTHER--ON THE HOUSE. I'VE NEVER BEEN SO OFFENDED IN ALL MY LIFE.
UH... YOU DO REALIZE YOU'RE TALKING TO YOUR AXE, RIGHT?
HMMMPH. IF YOU CAN FIND A WAY TO SHUT 'IM UP, I'M ALL EARS.
MURDERABLE. THAT'S THE ONE.
WHATEVER. LOU, ANOTHER ROUND FOR THE LUNATIC!
BURN THE WITCH!
BURN HER AND HER SINFUL WAYS!
I'M ASSUMING I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT RACKET.
OH, NO. NO. I'M SURE THESE SUPERSTITIOUS, BACKWATER ZEALOTS KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THEY'RE DOING.
...
THAT WAS SARCASM. GO CHECK IT OUT.

MOVE ASIDE! MOVE! SHE NEEDS ROOM TO BURN!
PLEASE! SOMEONE, PLEASE! I-I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!
SURE, SURE. JUST LIKE ANY WITCH WOULD SAY!
YOU'RE IN DANGER! ALL OF YOU ARE--
YOU HEAR THAT? SHE'S THREATENING US!
WE BEST BURN HER GOOD BEFORE SHE CAN TURN HER DARK MAGIC ON US.
I'M NOT THREATENING YOU. I'M TRYING TO EXPLAIN. IF YOU'D JUST LISTEN--
HEY!
CAN WE STOP MURDERING WOMEN FOR FUCK'S SAKE?

THAT'S A WITCH BACK THERE, YA HEAR ME? A WITCH. WE'RE GONNA BURN HER BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT ALL WITCHES DESERVE. AND IF YOU GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT, THEN I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU--
SEE ME WHAT? RIP OFF YOUR BALLS? IS THAT WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO SAY?
NHHGGGHH...
GRAB
AAAAHHH!
POP
DON'T MAKE ME ASK THE SAME QUESTION TWICE.
IT'S LIKE HE SAYS! THIS HERE'S A WITCH, AND WE'VE GOT ORDERS TO TURN 'ER TA ASH.
AND DID SHE GET A TRIAL? ANY OPPORTUNITY TO DEFEND HERSELF?
YEAH, YEAH, YEAH, I'LL GET TO IT, OKAY?
WERE YOU-- ARE YOU TALKING TO YOUR AXE?
DO YOU HAVE ANY PROOF SHE'S A WITCH? OR DID SOMEONE TELL YOU SHE WAS, AND YOU FIGURE THAT'S REASON ENOUGH TO SET SOMEONE ON FIRE?
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT IF I WENT AROUND BURNING CERTAIN PEOPLE JUST BECAUSE?
AIN'T YOU THE BLOKE WHO COOKED THEM TWO FOLKS AT GELLAR'S PASS JUST LAST WEEK?
...
TODAY, SMITHEEL. WHAT IF I STARTED BURNING PEOPLE TODAY?

LOOK, YOU TWO EITHER STEP ASIDE, OR I'M GONNA FLING YOU AS!--
CCCRRRKKKK
WHAT IN THE--?!
OHHHHH UGH...
CCCRRRKKKK
THE WITCH! SHE'S SUMMONING DEVILS!
...SHIT JUST GOT INTERESTING!
DEATH... TO... THE...


THUNK
HESSSSS... BLOOOOOOOD...
YOU SEE?! THIS. IS WHAT...
...I'VE BEEN WARNING YOU ABOUT!
YOU'LL... NEVER... ESCA—
FOUL CREATURE...
...BE GONE.
SON OF A BITCH!

YOU ARE A WITCH!
SO WHAT?!
I'M OBVIOUSLY NOT A BAD WITCH! IF I WERE I WOULD HAVE KILLED THE FUCKFACES WHO WERE TRYING TO BURN ME ALIVE!
I DON'T TRUST WITCHES.
BLOOD, OWEN! BLOOD!
BLOOD!
BLOOD!
BLOOD!

URSK!

MOOOORRRREE...
THERE. I DID MY PART. YOU'RE FREE TO GO.
WAIT, YOU'RE JUST GONNA LEAVE? YOU THINK THAT'S THE END OF THOSE THINGS?
DON'T CARE.
NO! YOU HAVE TO HELP ME!
GGRRRRRR...
THE MAGIC WORDS, OWEN! YOU HAVE NICE NO CHOICE.
YEAH! LISTEN TO YOUR MAGIC AXE...FRIEND... THING.
WAIT. YOU..
YOU CAN HEAR ME?! IT'S A MIRACLE! FOR SO LONG, I'VE ONLY HAD THIS ORF TO TALK TO, BUT NOW... THERE'S FINALLY SOMEONE ELSE WHO—

MMMMMPPPPPP MMMMPPPPP!
SHUT IT.
ALL RIGHT, *WITCH*. WHAT BIG, BAD EVIL NEEDS AN AXE BURIED IN ITS SKULL *THIS* TIME?
ARE YOU FOR REAL?
OPEN YOUR EYES, MAN. RIGHT UP *THERE*--THE ABBEY.
YOU SEE THAT?
WHAT. THE. *FUCK*?
AXE...

...WAS THAT MONASTERY ALWAYS COVERED BY A DEMON CLOUD?
BEATS THE SHIT OUT OF ME. BUT IT IS NOW.
SO! IT'S SHIZE OUR PROBLEM TO DEAL WITH...
...US AND THE WITCH.
SNAP