

ONCE... AYE, ONCE, IN INNOCENT YOUTH,
T'WAS A BALLAD OF HEROES BOLD,
IT SANG OF TREASURES AND
PLEASURES SWEET
IN THE MAWS OF HELLSGATE'S FOLD.
— W. P. BRYAN

MUSTN'T BE
AFRAID. NOT NOW.
NOT AFTER ALL THESE
YEARS! I'VE COME
TOO FAR!

THAT... THAT **CASTLE**,
FATHER...! IT **FRIGHTENS**
ME. SO DARK... SO HORRIBLE.
IT... IT FEELS... **DEAD!**

I, TOO, FEEL THE DREAD,
MY SON. THE OMINOUS
STILLNESS. THE ICY FIN-
GERS OF FEARSOME **DEATH**.
AND YET... IT **BECKONS**
US. THE HORROR... THE
PRESENCE WITHIN. IT WISHES
US TO **ENTER**, SO WE TOO
WILL BE **CAPTIVES** WITH-
IN HELLSGATE'S ACCURSED
WALLS.

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

I MUST KNOW THE
TRUTH. I MUST SEE
HER WITH MY OWN EYES. I
MUST KNOW FOR CERTAIN
IF MY FATHER WAS
RIGHT.

FATHER...! THAT... THAT
BEAUTIFUL **MUSIC**... CAN
YOU **HEAR** IT?... IT'S SO...
SO **SORROWFUL**. LIKE
A WOMAN, FATHER, LIKE A
VERY SAD, VERY **LOVELY**
WOMAN!

THERE IS **NO** MUSIC, SON.
NO SORROWFUL WOMAN.
IT IS A TRICK OF THE WIND.
A **TRAP** OF THE WILY CREA-
TURES WITHIN. THEY **WANT**
US, D'ARNOS... THE HORRI-
BLE HELLSPAWN BEASTS!

THERE ARE **GHOSTS** THERE,
MY SON. RESTLESS SPEC-
TRES OF A THOUSAND KNIGHTS
TRAPPED IN ETERNAL TOR-
MENT. THE CRIES YOU HEAR
ARE ONLY **THEY**... BEGGING
US TO **FLEE!**



THE FIRST ILLUSION. A MAIDEN FAIR.

MANY ARE **LURED** BY THE MUSIC... THE LEGEND... OR THE PROMISE OF LOVE AND WEALTH. THE **LEGEND** IS A SIMPLE ONE... SIMPLER THAN A CHILD'S RHYME.

WARRIORS HAVE TRAVERSED CONTINENTS TO PIT THEIR **SKILLS**... THEIR **MIGHT**, AGAINST THE **TERRORS** THAT LURK WITHIN.

IT TELLS OF A **SLEEPING PRINCESS** WHO LIES ON A BED OF **GOLD**... SHOULD A NOBLE MAN AWAKEN HER, FREE HER WITH A **KISS**, THE PRINCESS, HER TREASURES... HER PLEASURES WILL BE HIS FOREVER MORE.

MANY BRAVE MEN HAVE CLIMBED THOSE GRANITE STEPS TO **HELL**. YET, TO THIS DAY, NONE HAVE EVER **RETURNED**.



IS SHE REAL... OR CUNNING **BEAST**?

THE MUSIC BECKONS... HYPNOTIZES... **CLOUDS** THEIR MINDS. IT FORCES THEM TO SEE **PHANTASMS**. ...TO SEE BEAUTY WHERE THERE IS NAUGHT BUT **BEAST**!



WHAT MAGIC'S **THIS**? SHE TRANSFORMS MY STEED... INTO A GALLOPER OF THE **SKIES**!

THE MUSIC IS A **LURE**...! THE LEGEND IS THE **BAIT**, AND MANY A VALIANT WARRIOR HAS FORFEITED HIS LIFE... HIS SOUL... FOR NOTHING MORE THAN... AN **ILLUSION**!

BUT *HOW*, FATHER? HOW DID THIS COME TO *BE*?

IT BEGAN *YEARS* AGO, MY BOY... BEFORE YOUR MOTHER GAVE YOU BIRTH, A *PRINCE* RESIDED IN HELLSGATE THEN... A NOBLE AND GENTLE RULER. HE WAS A GOOD MAN. A JUST MAN. BUT HE WAS A SAD AND LONELY MAN.

HE WANTED MORE THAN ALL ELSE TO LIVE A *NORMAL* LIFE. TO LOVE. TO MARRY. TO CARESS A LOVING WIFE AND SIRE MANY CHILDREN.

THE DEMONS MAKE MY WAY *EASIER*.

DO THEY *WISH* ME TO SUCCEED?

ALAS, THERE WERE *NO* MAIDENS TO CAPTURE HIS LONGING HEART. UNTIL THAT FATEFUL DAY WHEN, QUITE BY CHANCE, HE MET THE FAIR *AURORA*.

SHE WAS A *PEASANT* GIRL, FAR BELOW HIS PRINCELY STATION. YET, WHEN THEIR EYES MET, THE *MAGIC OF AGES* CHURNED LOVINGLY BETWEEN THEM.

THEY WERE *MARRIED*, AND LIVED *HAPPILY* IN HELLSGATE CASTLE. IT WAS A FAR DIFFERENT ABODE IN THOSE DAYS. BRIGHT. CHEERY. ECHOING WITH AURORA'S MELODIOUS LAUGHTER.

AH!... A *DEVIL* BARS MY WAY!

AND YET, AS HAPPY AS THE PRINCE'S NEW LIFE SEEMED, AS WHOLE AND CONTENT AS HE FELT WITH HIS BRIDE, THE MONARCH SENSED SOMETHING *AMISS*...! SOME TERRIBLE *HORROR* AFOOT.

HE COULD NOT *IDENTIFY* THE OFFENSIVE PANGS. HE KNEW ONLY THAT THEY MADE HIM *ILL AT EASE*.

COME THEN, INCARNATE FIEND. I *WELCOME* A *REAL* TEST!

AURORA SENSED IT ALSO. FOR EACH NIGHT SHE WOULD CLING TO HER HUSBAND IN A NERVOUS SHIVER, AS THOUGH SHE FELT SINISTER EYES GLARING AT HER FROM THE BEDCHAMBER'S OMINOUS DARK.



BAH! WHAT A COWARDLY ACT! YOU FALL BEFORE THE FIGHT!



TIME PASSED, AND AURORA SEEMED EVER MORE FRIGHTENED. OF THE DARK... OR OF SOMETHING FAR MORE MALEVOLENT. SHE WITHDREW INTO HERSELF, AND BEGAN TO SHUN THE LOVE OF HER HUSBAND.

'TIS TRULY A PLACE OF DREAMS MOST BLACK...



...OF OGRES AND FOUL-SMELLING BEASTS.

THE PRINCE WAS A GENTLE MAN, A SENSITIVE MAN... HE SAW HIS WIFE'S REJECTION, AND HIS PAIN WAS THE PAIN OF A DAGGER, BEING SLOWLY PUSHED THROUGH HIS HEART.



FINALLY, HE COULD BEAR NO MORE. IN A FIT OF TORMENT, THE PRINCE CONFRONTED HIS BRIDE. HE HAD BUT ONE QUESTION FOR HIS ONCE-LOVING AURORA: WHY?

YET... IT IS ILLUSION ALONE... NAUGHT BUT FORM... LESS PHANTOMS!

THEN THE GIRL SORROWFULLY RELENTED. **TEARS** WELLING IN HER EYES, SHE SOBBED PATHETICALLY, CHOKING OUT HER WORDS, REVEALING THE **BITTER SECRETS** SHE HAD **HIDDEN** FROM HER HUSBAND.

"I... I MADE A **PACT**," SHE CRIED, "TO **BE** WITH YOU, TO BE YOUR **WIFE**... YOUR **PRINCESS!**"

IS THIS ALL CON-TRIVED TO **FRIGHTEN** THE LINKNOWING...



"A **DEMON** OFFERED ME YOUR **LOVE**... IN EXCHANGE FOR MY **SOUL**... AND OUR **FIRST BORN CHILD!**"

"I... I AM A **SOULLESS** WOMAN! HE CLAIMED THAT PART OF ME LONG AGO... AND SOON... **SOON**... HE'LL COME **AGAIN**... FOR THE **FINAL PAYMENT** IN OUR **HELLISH PACT**...!"

"FOR EVEN NOW, MY HUSBAND, MY **PRINCE**... THE LIFE OF OUR **FIRST BORN** STIRS GENTLY WITHIN MY **WOMB!**"

...OR IS THERE **MORE?** MORE HERE THAN **ANY MAN KNOWS?**



THE PRINCE WAILED SORROWFULLY. "**NO! NO!** HOW CAN THIS **BE?** YOU NEEDED NO PACT WITH THE DEVIL TO SECURE MY **LOVE**. I GIVE IT TO YOU **FREELY!**"

"BUT NOW... NOW... WHAT CAN WE DO?" AURORA WAILED. "HOW CAN WE **THWART** THE DEMON SURE TO COME?"

"WE SHALL STAND AND **FIGHT**," THE PRINCE VOWED. "THAT, I GLADLY DO FOR **YOU** AND OUR **CHILD**." AND WITH THIS OATH, THE PRINCE **READIED** FOR THE INEVITABLE CONFRONTATION.

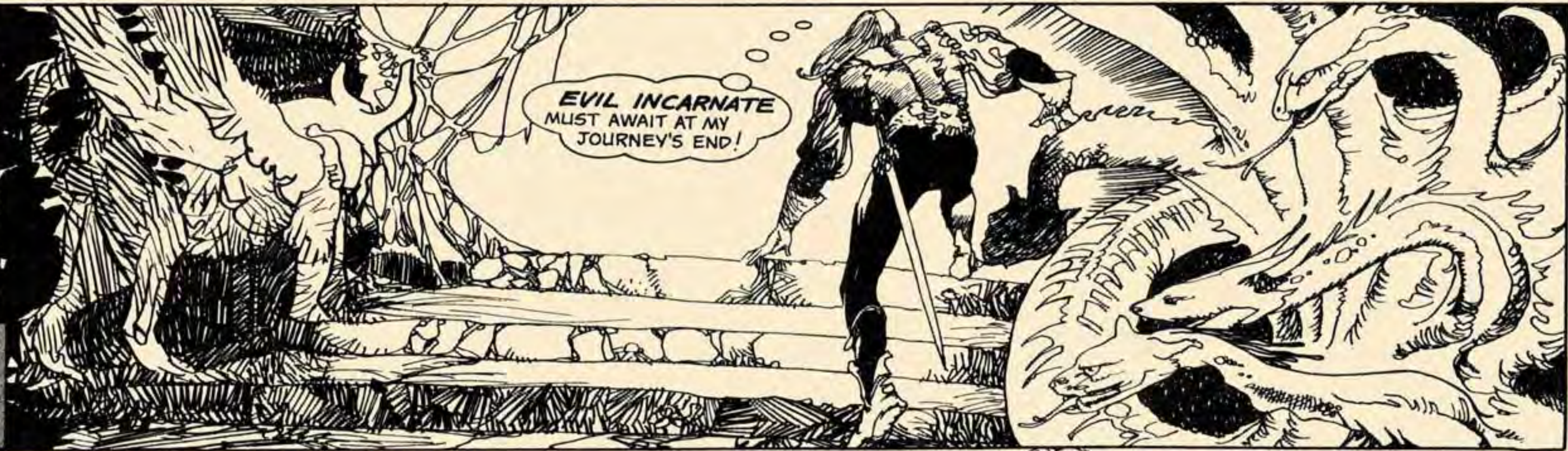
ILLUSIONS ALONE COULD NOT HAVE SLAIN **EACH** WHO PRE-CEEDED ME!



THE CHILD **CAME** ON A STORMSWEEP NIGHT. A **SON!** A GLORIOUS **HEIR** TO HIS FATHER'S THRONE. THE PRINCE WAS PROUD, PLEASED BY THIS MOST PRECIOUS GIFT FROM HIS WIFE. YET, HE WAS **READY**, ALSO... TO FACE THE **HELLSPAWN** HE KNEW WOULD **COME**.

AND **COME** IT DID, IN THE SICKENING FORM OF A **NINE-HEADED SERPENT**. IT ASSAILED THE CASTLE, SWIFTLY, SILENTLY. SLITHERING TOWARD THE NURSERY TO CLAIM ITS **PRECIOUS PRIZE**.

BUT THE PRINCE WAS THERE. **WAITING!** LURKING IN CONCEALING SHADOWS. THE DEMON-THING CREPT CLOSER... CLOSER TO THE CHILD. ITS HOT BREATH **SCORCHED** THE BABE'S SATIN SKIN.



EVIL INCARNATE
MUST AWAIT AT MY
JOURNEY'S END!

THE PRINCE'S **BLADE FLASHED** BUT **ONCE**. AND A MONSTROUS **HEAD** FELL QUIVERING UPON THE FLOOR, POOLING RED RIVULETS OF **GORE**.

THE CREATURE **HISSED** IN PAIN, ITS REMAINING HEADS COILING FOR THE LUNGE. THE PRINCE WAS **READY**, HIS SWORD **PREPARED**. BUT THE ATTACK **DID NOT COME!**

INSTEAD, THE DEMON-THING HISSED A **CURSE**, IN A SICKENING, SNAKEY TONGUE. IT FOULED THE AIR WITH THE STENCH OF **DEATH**, STABBING THE PRINCE WITH AN ICY BLADE OF **FEAR**.



AH! THE
DEMON SERPENT!
OF COURSE!

ALL ELSE MAY BE
HALLUCINATION... BUT
THIS IS A
DEMON-TRUE!

I CAN **DEFEAT**
YOU, LOATHSOME THING...
AS MY **FATHER** DID...
SO LONG AGO!

"YOU WANT YOUR CHILD, MAN...? THEN **KEEP** THE LOATHSOME BEAST. I'LL TAKE, INSTEAD, **ALL** THAT IS YOURS... YOUR **CASTLE** AND YOUR **WIFE!**"

"YOU'LL FEEL HER GENTLENESS **NEVERMORE**. FOR NOW, SHE IS THE BRIDE OF **DEATH**. **MANY** MEN WILL KNOW HER LOVE, BUT **NONE** WILL SLAKE HER THIRSTS!"

THE DEMON BANISHED THE PRINCE FROM HIS OWN ABODE. AND SLOWLY... THE CASTLE **CHANGED**. DEVILS, DEMONS AND HELLSPAWN HORDES CLAIMED ITS ONCE-FAIR HALLS. THE STINK OF **DEATH** FILLED THE AIR... AND, ALAS, FAIR AURORA WAS HEARD FROM... **NO MORE!**



BUT... *WHAT OF THE PRINCE, FATHER...*
AND HIS *INFANT SON?*

THE PRINCE TOOK TO THE *VILLAGE* TO
RAISE HIS ONLY BOY. HE IS NOW A *HUMBL*
ED MAN, BROKEN. HURTING YET FROM THE
MEMORIES OF HIS FAIR *AURORA'S* LOVE.

BUT HIS SON IS GROWING STRAIGHT AND
TALL... AND SOMEDAY SOON... *YOU'LL BE*
A MAN!

M-ME, FATHER?

YOU, MY SON. YOU ARE THE NEW PRINCE.
THE RIGHTFUL *HEIR* TO HELLSGATE
CASTLE. SOMEDAY, PERHAPS, YOU CAN
SUCCEED, WHERE MANY BRAVE MEN
HAVE *FAILED*...

... AND *FREE YOUR*
MOTHER FROM A
DEMON'S SPELL!



NOW... *NOW...*
THE PATH IS *SAFE*.
THE PRINCESS CAN
BE *SAVED!*



THE *PRINCESS...*
FAIR *AURORA...*
MOTHER!



I AM **HERE**, MOTHER, ASIDE YOUR GOLDEN BED. AS I VOWED TO **FATHER**, LONG AGO.

YET, CAN THIS TRULY **BE**?

LIPS **SO WARM**, SO **SWEET**, SO **FAIR**, SO **YOUNG**... A MOTHER **NOT AT ALL!**

MORE...



... MORE... **LOVER!** SENSUOUS. GENTLE. FAIR.



NO... NO...!



I KNOW **TOO LATE!**

UNDERSTANDING COMES WITH **DEATH!** NO WARRIOR... NO MAN... NO MATTER HIS STRENGTHS, CAN THWART THE **DEMON'S CURSE!**

MOTHER... LOVELY MOTHER, IS HERSELF A **DEMON-THING!** A BEAUTIFUL, ACCURSED **HELLSPAWN...** **EVER MORE!**

