CHAPTER FIVE

THE RETURN OF THE KINGS

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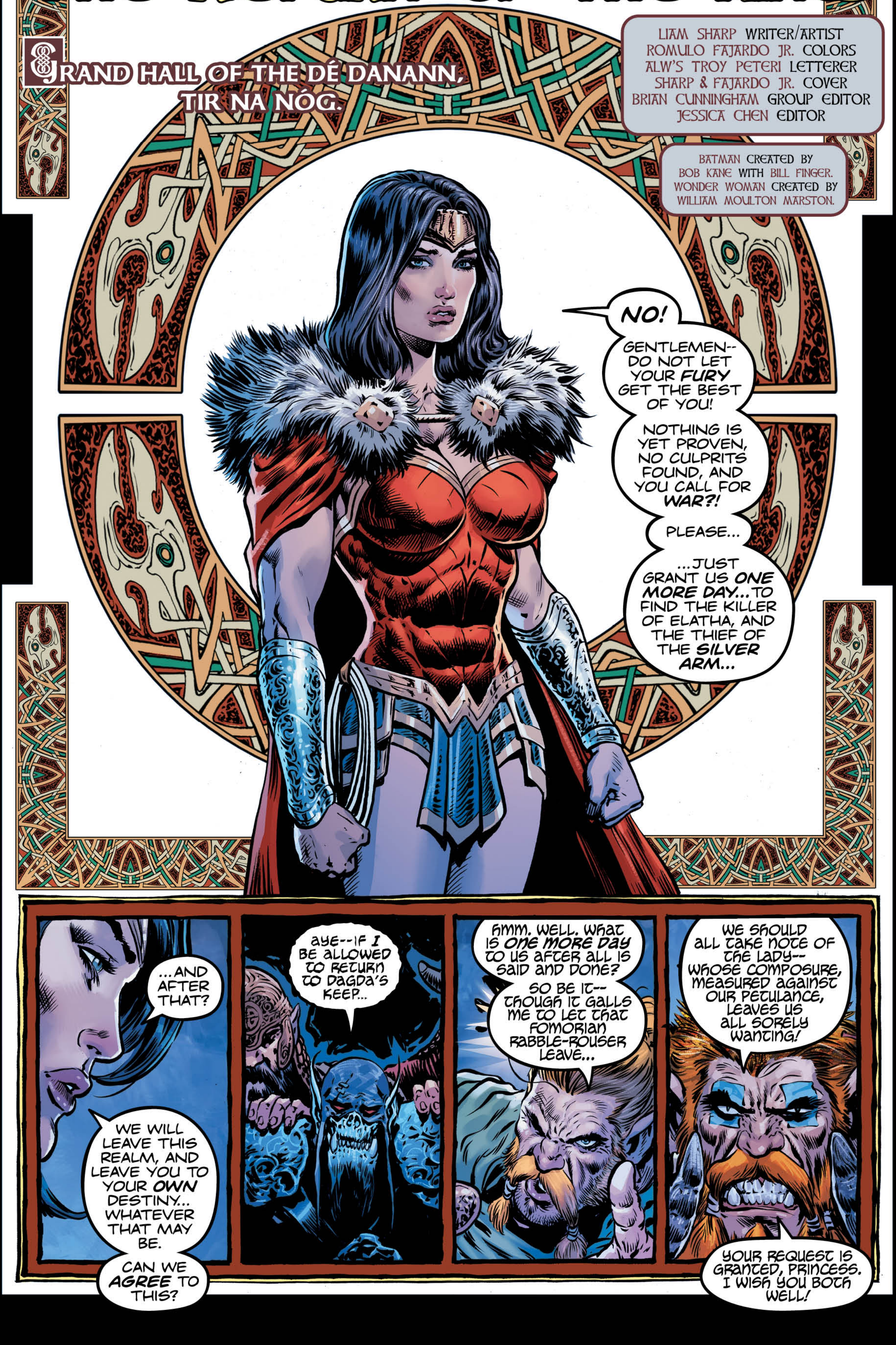
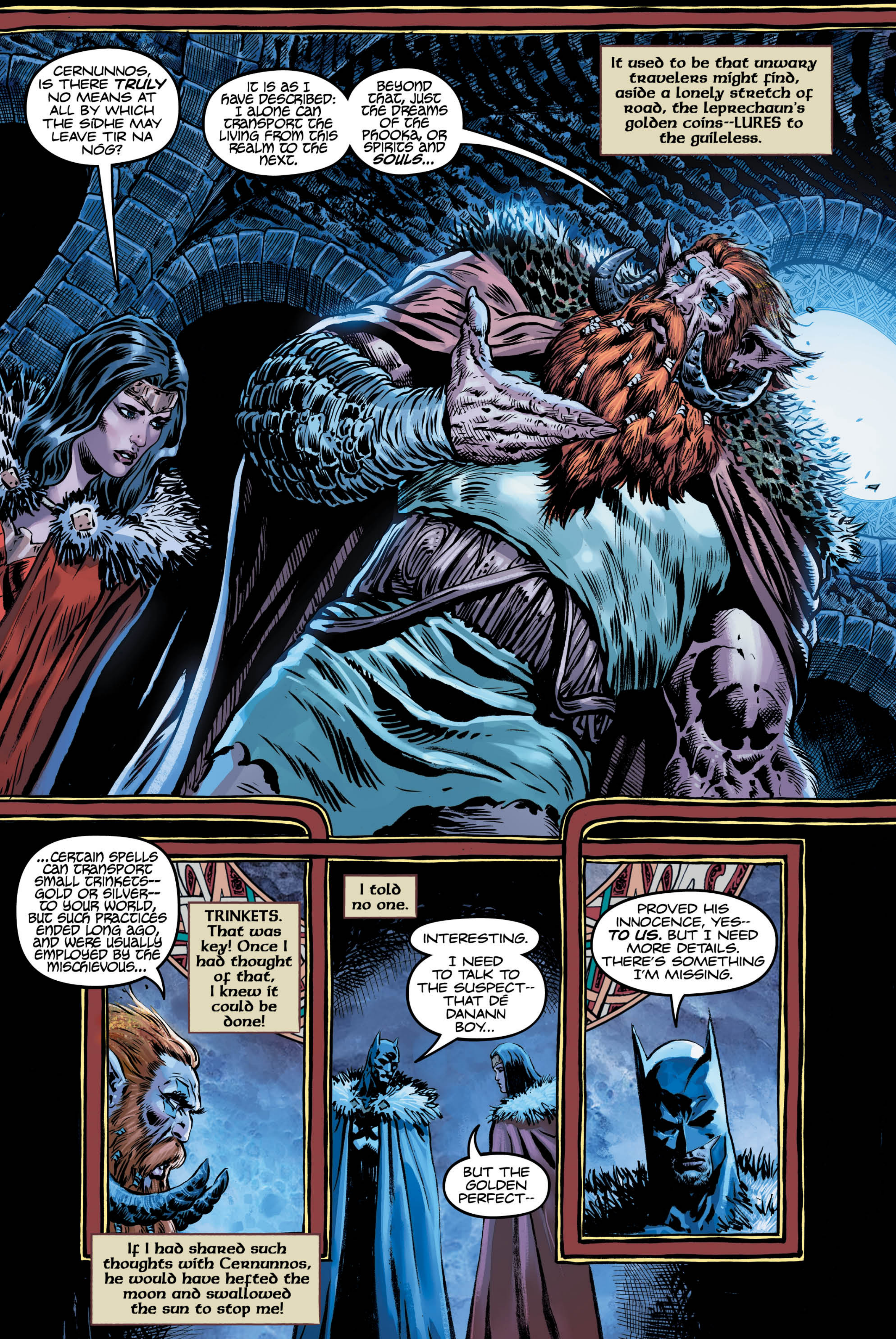
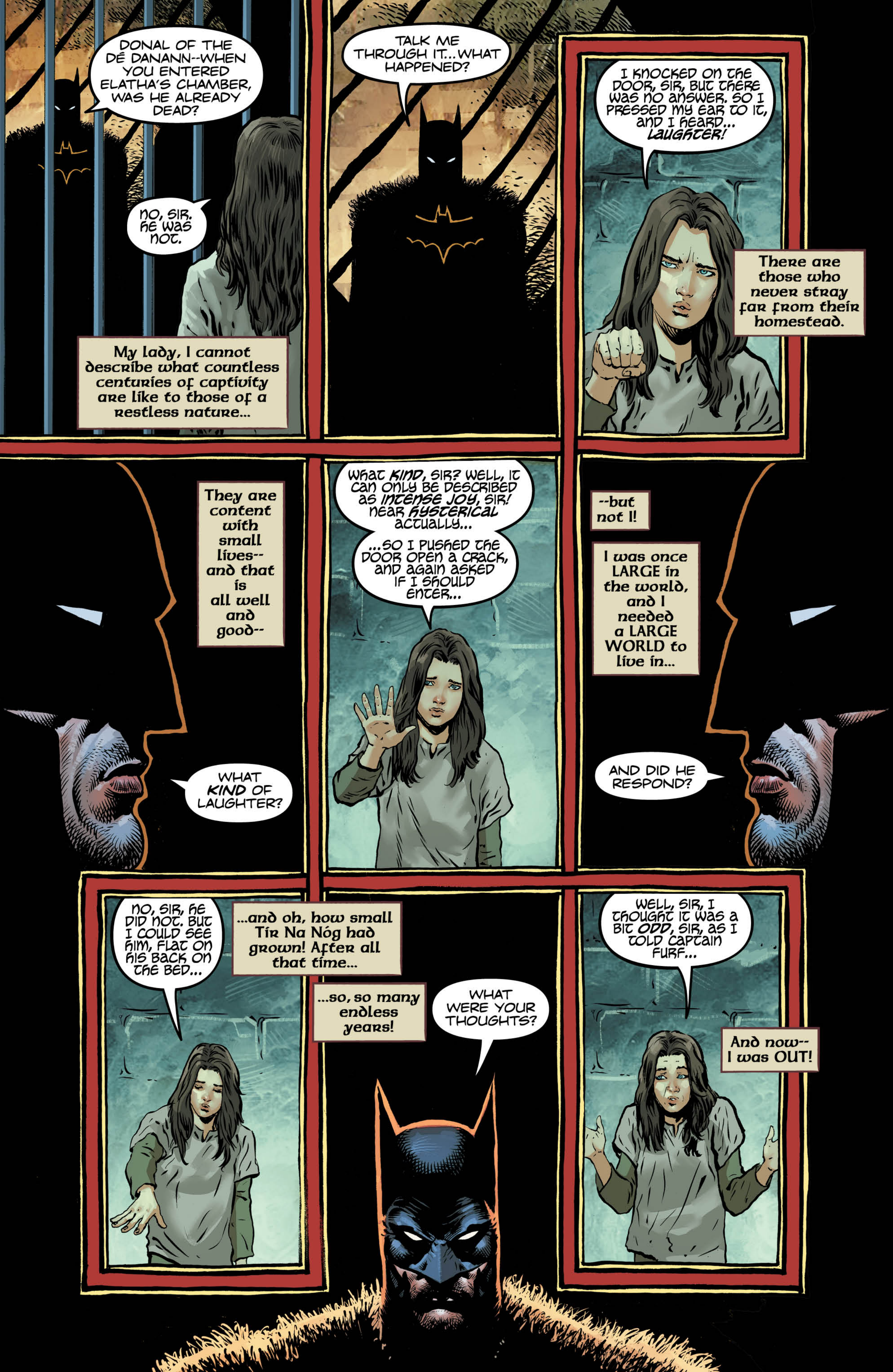
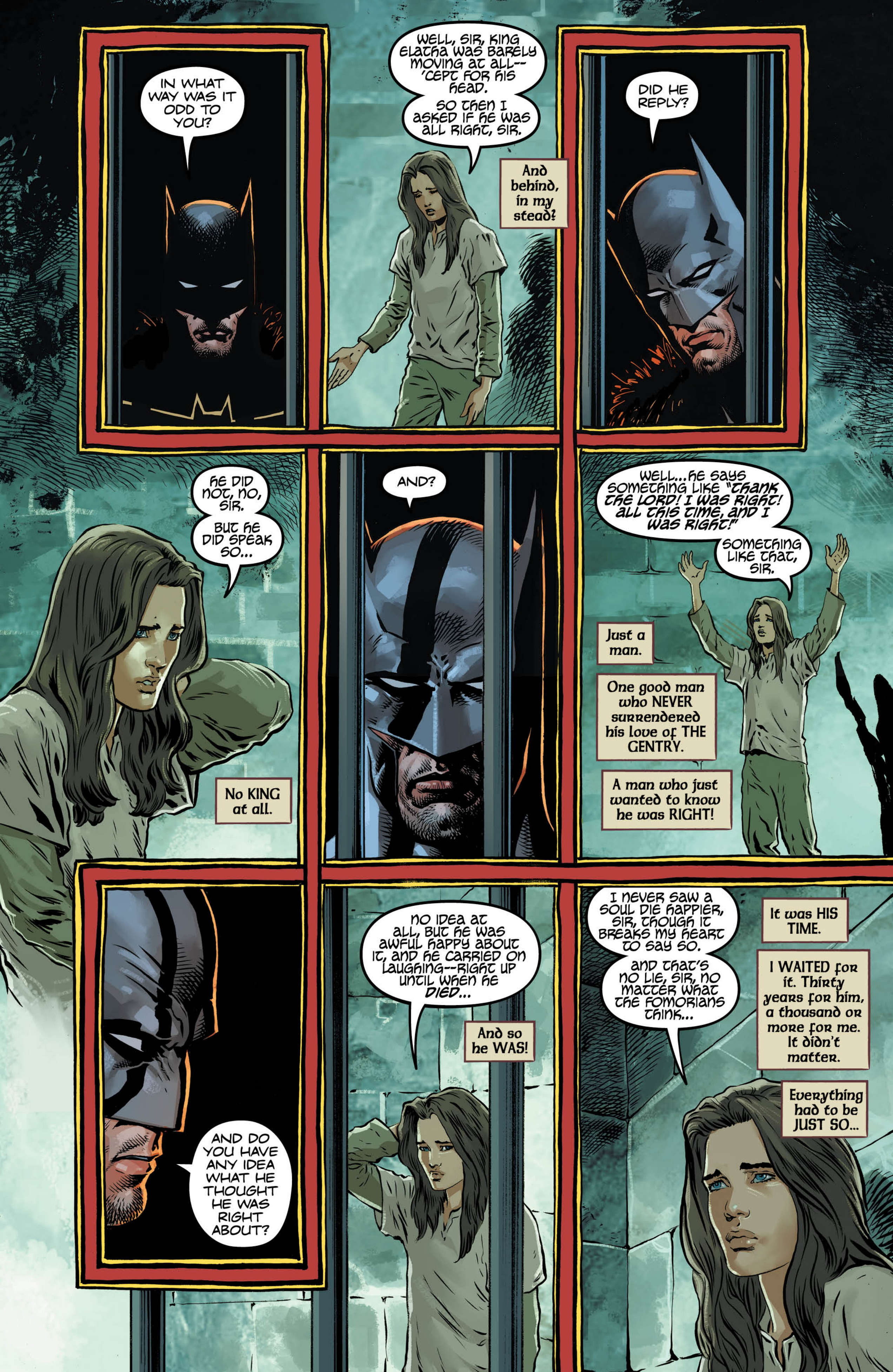
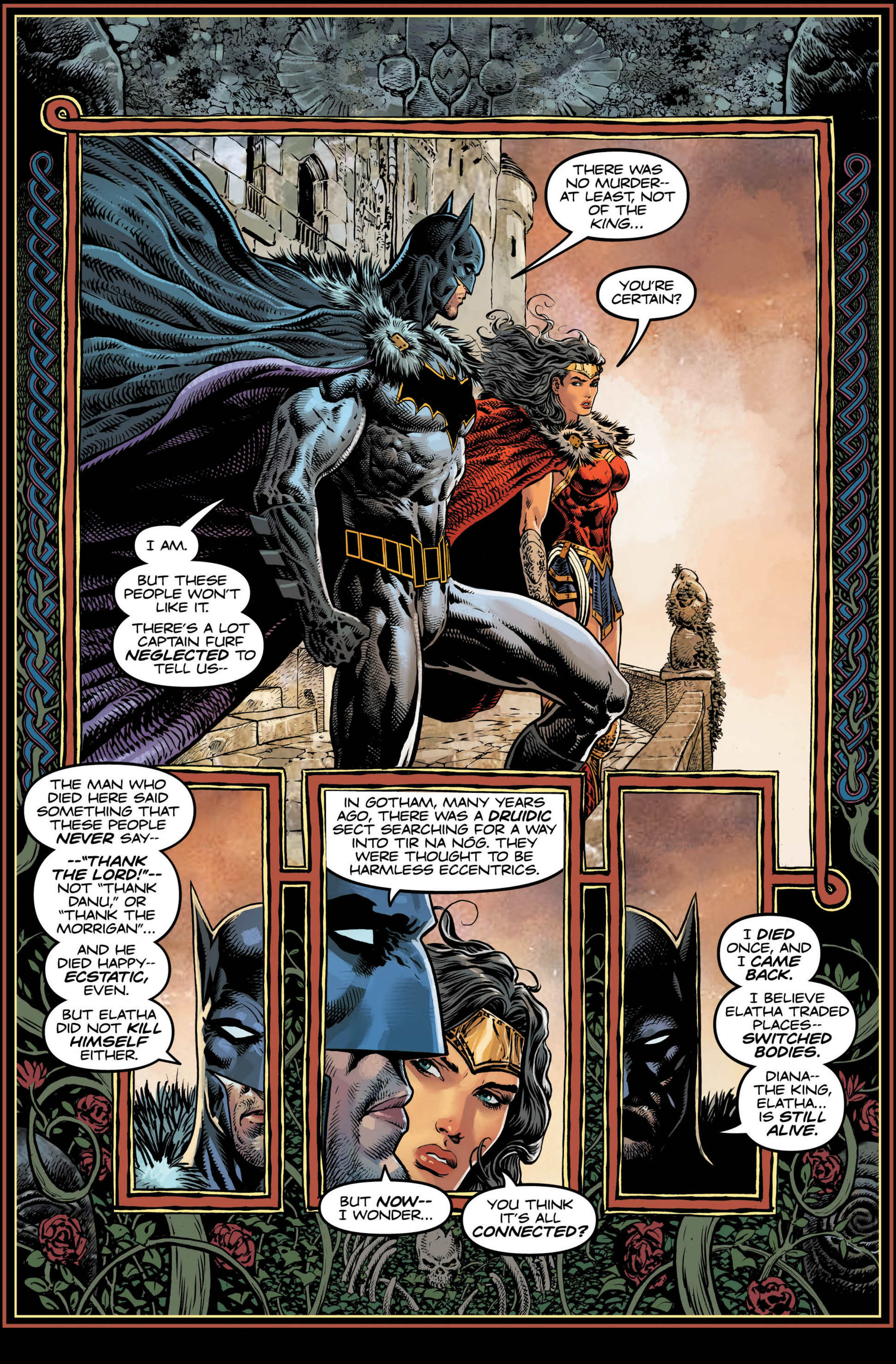

GRAND HALL OF THE DÉ DANANN, TIR NA NÓG.
NO! GENTLEMEN-- DO NOT LET YOUR FURY GET THE BEST OF YOU!
NOTHING IS YET PROVEN, NO CULPRITS FOUND, AND YOU CALL FOR WAR?!
PLEASE...
...JUST GRANT US ONE MORE DAY...TO FIND THE KILLER OF ELATHA, AND THE THIEF OF THE SILVER ARM...
...AND AFTER THAT?
WE WILL LEAVE THIS REALM, AND LEAVE YOU TO YOUR OWN DESTINY... WHATEVER THAT MAY BE.
CAN WE AGREE TO THIS?
AYE--IF I BE ALLOWED TO RETURN TO DAGDA'S KEEP...
HMM. WELL. WHAT IS ONE MORE DAY TO US AFTER ALL IS SAID AND DONE?
SO BE IT-- THOUGH IT GALLS ME TO LET THAT FOMORIAN RABBLE-ROUSER LEAVE...
WE SHOULD ALL TAKE NOTE OF THE LADY-- WHOSE COMPOSURE, MEASURED AGAINST OUR PETULANCE, LEAVES US ALL SORELY WANTING!
YOUR REQUEST IS GRANTED, PRINCESS. I WISH YOU BOTH WELL!


CERNUNNOS, IS THERE *TRULY* NO MEANS AT ALL BY WHICH THE SÍDHE MAY LEAVE TIR NA NÓG?
IT IS AS I HAVE DESCRIBED: I ALONE CAN TRANSPORT THE LIVING FROM THIS REALM TO THE NEXT.
BEYOND THAT, JUST THE DREAMS OF THE PHOOKA, OR SPIRITS AND *SOULS*...
It used to be that unwary travelers might find, aside a lonely stretch of road, the leprechaun's golden coins--LURES to the guileless.
...CERTAIN SPELLS CAN TRANSPORT SMALL TRINKETS--GOLD OR SILVER--TO YOUR WORLD, BUT SUCH PRACTICES ENDED LONG AGO, AND WERE USUALLY EMPLOYED BY THE MISCHIEVOUS...
TRINKETS. That was key! Once I had thought of that, I knew it could be done!
If I had shared such thoughts with Cernunnos, he would have hefted the moon and swallowed the sun to stop me!
I told no one.
INTERESTING.
I NEED TO TALK TO THE SUSPECT--THAT DÉ DANANN BOY...
BUT THE GOLDEN PERFECT--
PROVED HIS INNOCENCE, YES--*TO US.* BUT I NEED MORE DETAILS. THERE'S SOMETHING I'M MISSING.


DONAL OF THE DÉ DANANN--WHEN YOU ENTERED ELATHA'S CHAMBER, WAS HE ALREADY DEAD?
NO, SIR. HE WAS NOT.
My lady, I cannot describe what countless centuries of captivity are like to those of a restless nature...
TALK ME THROUGH IT...WHAT HAPPENED?
I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR, SIR, BUT THERE WAS NO ANSWER. SO I PRESSED MY EAR TO IT, AND I HEARD... *LAUGHTER!*
There are those who never stray far from their homestead.
They are content with small lives--and that is all well and good--
WHAT *KIND* OF LAUGHTER?
WHAT *KIND*, SIR? WELL, IT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS *INTENSE JOY*, SIR! NEAR *HYSTERICAL* ACTUALLY...
...SO I PUSHED THE DOOR OPEN A CRACK, AND AGAIN ASKED IF I SHOULD ENTER...
--but not I!
I was once LARGE in the world, and I needed a LARGE WORLD to live in...
AND DID HE RESPOND?
NO, SIR, HE DID NOT. BUT I COULD SEE HIM, FLAT ON HIS BACK ON THE BED...
...and oh, how small Tír Na Nóg had grown! After all that time...
...so, so many endless years!
WHAT WERE YOUR THOUGHTS?
WELL, SIR, I THOUGHT IT WAS A BIT *ODD*, SIR, AS I TOLD CAPTAIN FURF...
And now--I was OUT!


IN WHAT WAY WAS IT ODD TO YOU?
WELL, SIR, KING ELATHA WAS BARELY MOVING AT ALL-- 'CEPT FOR HIS HEAD.
SO THEN I ASKED IF HE WAS ALL RIGHT, SIR.
And behind, in my stead?
DID HE REPLY?
HE DID NOT, NO, SIR.
BUT HE DID SPEAK SO...
No KING at all.
AND?
WELL...HE SAYS SOMETHING LIKE *"THANK THE LORD! I WAS RIGHT! ALL THIS TIME, AND I WAS RIGHT!"*
SOMETHING LIKE THAT, SIR.
Just a man.
One good man who NEVER surrendered his love of THE GENTRY.
A man who just wanted to know he was RIGHT!
AND DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT HE THOUGHT HE WAS RIGHT ABOUT?
NO IDEA AT ALL, BUT HE WAS AWFUL HAPPY ABOUT IT, AND HE CARRIED ON LAUGHING--RIGHT UP UNTIL WHEN HE *DIED*...
And so he WAS!
I NEVER SAW A SOUL DIE HAPPIER, SIR, THOUGH IT BREAKS MY HEART TO SAY SO.
AND THAT'S NO LIE, SIR, NO MATTER WHAT THE FOMORIANS THINK...
It was HIS TIME.
I WAITED for it. Thirty years for him, a thousand or more for me. It didn't matter.
Everything had to be JUST SO...


THERE WAS NO MURDER-- AT LEAST, NOT OF THE KING...
YOU'RE CERTAIN?
I AM.
BUT THESE PEOPLE WON'T LIKE IT.
THERE'S A LOT CAPTAIN FURF **NEGLECTED** TO TELL US--
THE MAN WHO DIED HERE SAID SOMETHING THAT THESE PEOPLE **NEVER** SAY--
--**"THANK THE LORD!"**-- NOT "THANK DANU," OR "THANK THE MORRIGAN"...
AND HE DIED HAPPY-- **ECSTATIC,** EVEN.
BUT ELATHA DID NOT **KILL HIMSELF** EITHER.
IN GOTHAM, MANY YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A **DRUIDIC** SECT SEARCHING FOR A WAY INTO TIR NA NÓG. THEY WERE THOUGHT TO BE HARMLESS ECCENTRICS.
BUT **NOW**-- I WONDER...
YOU THINK IT'S ALL **CONNECTED?**
I **DIED** ONCE, AND I **CAME BACK.**
I BELIEVE ELATHA TRADED PLACES-- **SWITCHED BODIES.**
DIANA-- THE KING, ELATHA... IS **STILL ALIVE.**