

Dear Reader,

Chapter 1

Everything you know about Aos is wrong. I don't just mean the myth about how dragons don't exist. That's obviously been proven false, right? I'm talking about everything—from the origins of our civilization, to our culture, to our fairy tales.

All of it's based on lies.

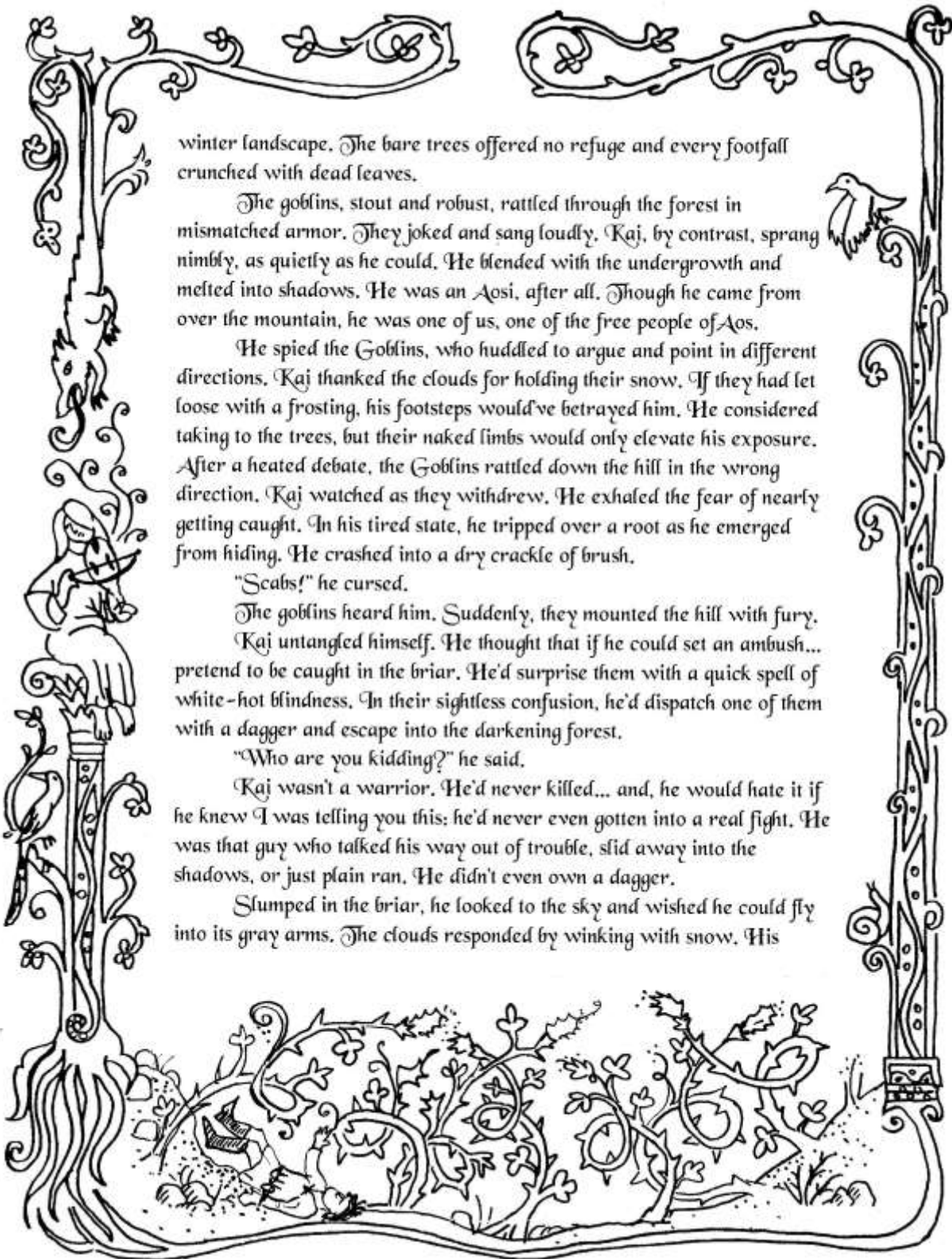
I can't believe that after everything that's happened, the lies are still circulating. Speaking of, I'm going to address the biggest one up front: I'm not dead.

Now that we have that out of the way, I'll get on with the truth...

I should start by telling you about Kaj. It's hard to imagine what life was like before I met him. I mean, it is and it isn't. It's like I've always known him, as if we'd grown up together-- even though I didn't meet him until after my sixteenth birthday. Funny how that works.

We met under a waterfall in the enchanted forest. Sounds romantic when I write it down, but it wasn't like that. It was winter, right after the solstice. Everything was dead and frozen... the only creatures crazy enough to roam the desolate, ice-encrusted landscape were a few scraggy wolves, foul-mouthed ravens, and Kaj. By the way, he burst into my life half dead from exhaustion and hypothermia, trailed by a troop of angry goblins.

Later, he told me that he never thought he'd make it to Avonmora with so many goblins on his trail. They'd chased him from the foothills. Fatigue and hunger wore at him. The cold bit into his lungs as he gasped at the frigid air behind an outcropping. He struggled to find cover in the



winter landscape. The bare trees offered no refuge and every footfall crunched with dead leaves.

The goblins, stout and robust, rattled through the forest in mismatched armor. They joked and sang loudly. Kaj, by contrast, sprang nimbly, as quietly as he could. He blended with the undergrowth and melted into shadows. He was an Aosi, after all. Though he came from over the mountain, he was one of us, one of the free people of Aos.

He spied the Goblins, who huddled to argue and point in different directions. Kaj thanked the clouds for holding their snow. If they had let loose with a frosting, his footsteps would've betrayed him. He considered taking to the trees, but their naked limbs would only elevate his exposure. After a heated debate, the Goblins rattled down the hill in the wrong direction. Kaj watched as they withdrew. He exhaled the fear of nearly getting caught. In his tired state, he tripped over a root as he emerged from hiding. He crashed into a dry crackle of brush.

"Scabs!" he cursed.

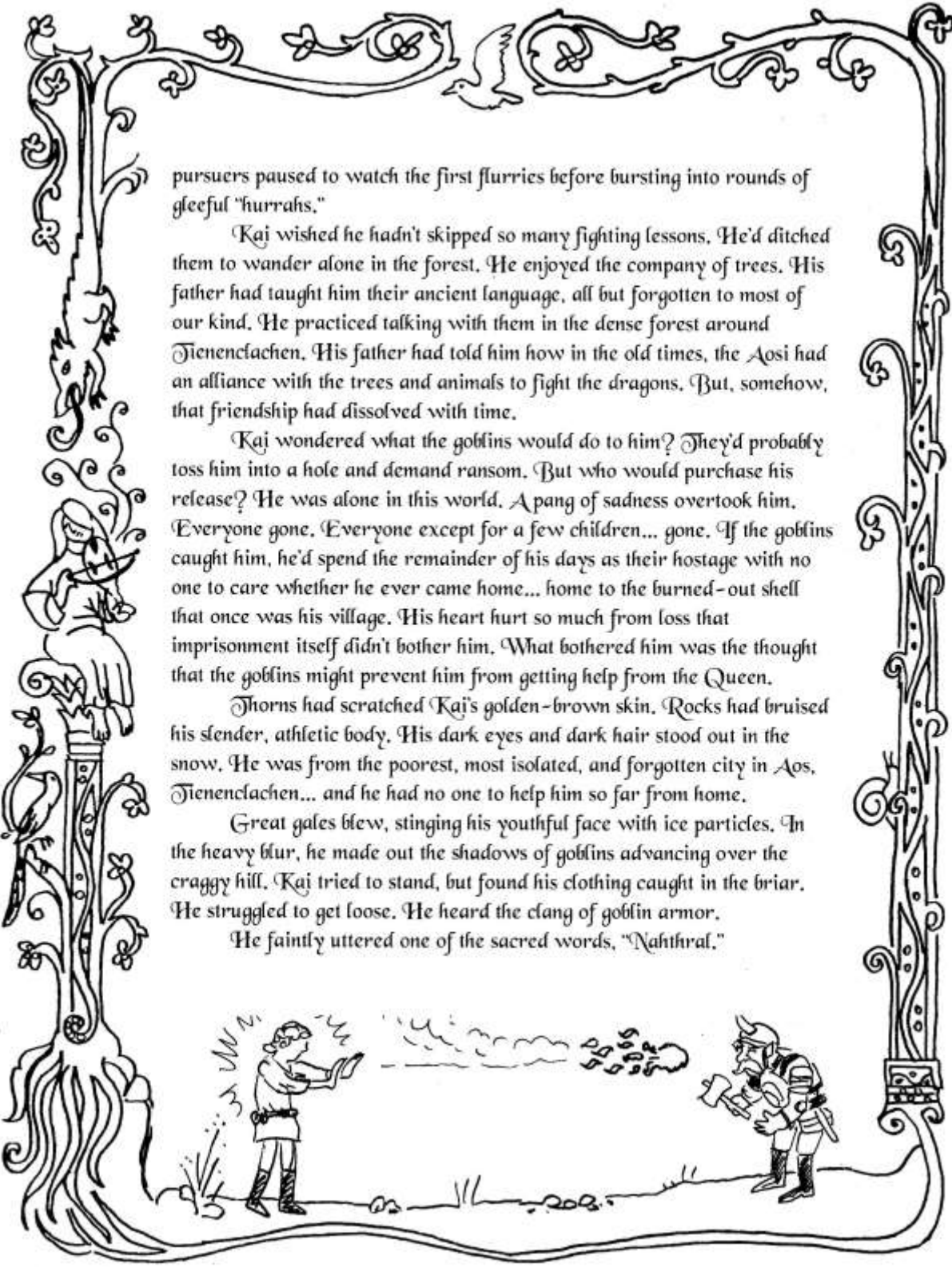
The goblins heard him. Suddenly, they mounted the hill with fury.

Kaj untangled himself. He thought that if he could set an ambush... pretend to be caught in the briar. He'd surprise them with a quick spell of white-hot blindness. In their sightless confusion, he'd dispatch one of them with a dagger and escape into the darkening forest.

"Who are you kidding?" he said.

Kaj wasn't a warrior. He'd never killed... and, he would hate it if he knew I was telling you this; he'd never even gotten into a real fight. He was that guy who talked his way out of trouble, slid away into the shadows, or just plain ran. He didn't even own a dagger.

Slumped in the briar, he looked to the sky and wished he could fly into its gray arms. The clouds responded by winking with snow. His



pursuers paused to watch the first flurries before bursting into rounds of gleeful "hurrahs."

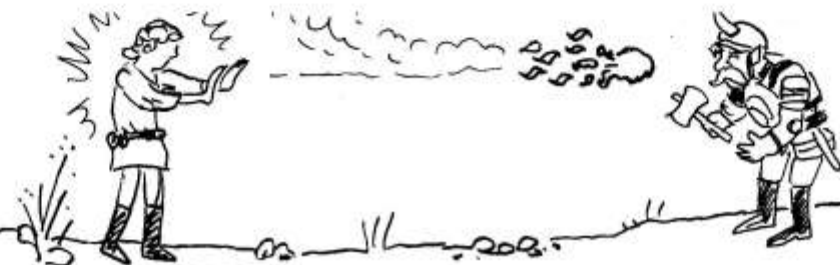
Kaj wished he hadn't skipped so many fighting lessons. He'd ditched them to wander alone in the forest. He enjoyed the company of trees. His father had taught him their ancient language, all but forgotten to most of our kind. He practiced talking with them in the dense forest around Tienencachen. His father had told him how in the old times, the Aosi had an alliance with the trees and animals to fight the dragons. But, somehow, that friendship had dissolved with time.

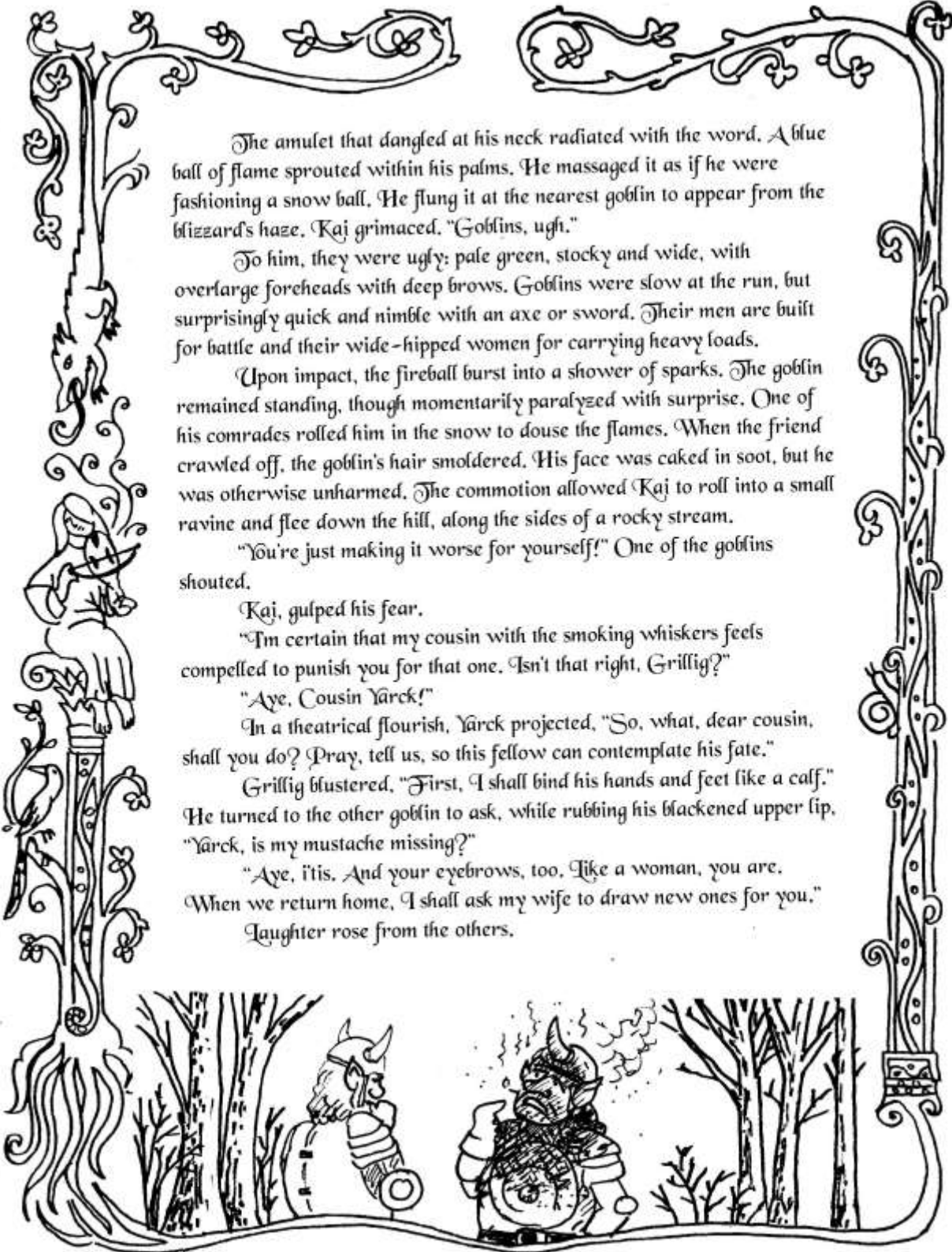
Kaj wondered what the goblins would do to him? They'd probably toss him into a hole and demand ransom. But who would purchase his release? He was alone in this world. A pang of sadness overtook him. Everyone gone. Everyone except for a few children... gone. If the goblins caught him, he'd spend the remainder of his days as their hostage with no one to care whether he ever came home... home to the burned-out shell that once was his village. His heart hurt so much from loss that imprisonment itself didn't bother him. What bothered him was the thought that the goblins might prevent him from getting help from the Queen.

Thorns had scratched Kaj's golden-brown skin. Rocks had bruised his slender, athletic body. His dark eyes and dark hair stood out in the snow. He was from the poorest, most isolated, and forgotten city in Aos, Tienencachen... and he had no one to help him so far from home.

Great gales blew, stinging his youthful face with ice particles. In the heavy blur, he made out the shadows of goblins advancing over the craggy hill. Kaj tried to stand, but found his clothing caught in the briar. He struggled to get loose. He heard the clang of goblin armor.

He faintly uttered one of the sacred words, "Nahthral."





The amulet that dangled at his neck radiated with the word. A blue ball of flame sprouted within his palms. He massaged it as if he were fashioning a snow ball. He flung it at the nearest goblin to appear from the blizzard's haze. Kaj grimaced. "Goblins, ugh."

To him, they were ugly: pale green, stocky and wide, with overlarge foreheads with deep brows. Goblins were slow at the run, but surprisingly quick and nimble with an axe or sword. Their men are built for battle and their wide-hipped women for carrying heavy loads.

Upon impact, the fireball burst into a shower of sparks. The goblin remained standing, though momentarily paralyzed with surprise. One of his comrades rolled him in the snow to douse the flames. When the friend crawled off, the goblin's hair smoldered. His face was caked in soot, but he was otherwise unharmed. The commotion allowed Kaj to roll into a small ravine and flee down the hill, along the sides of a rocky stream.

"You're just making it worse for yourself!" One of the goblins shouted.

Kaj, gulped his fear.

"I'm certain that my cousin with the smoking whiskers feels compelled to punish you for that one. Isn't that right, Grillig?"

"Aye, Cousin Yärck!"

In a theatrical flourish, Yärck projected, "So, what, dear cousin, shall you do? Pray, tell us, so this fellow can contemplate his fate."

Grillig blustered. "First, I shall bind his hands and feet like a calf." He turned to the other goblin to ask, while rubbing his blackened upper lip. "Yärck, is my mustache missing?"

"Aye, it is. And your eyebrows, too. Like a woman, you are. When we return home, I shall ask my wife to draw new ones for you."

Laughter rose from the others.



Griffig stomped and cursed, running his hands over his naked brow. "I'm going to pluck every hair from your corpse one at a time!"

"Tut, tut," Yärck said, frowning displeasure.

"Um, I mean," Griffig said hesitantly, "I'll pluck every hair from your not-dead body!"

Yärck nodded.

Kaj forced himself not to listen. He distracted himself by counting rocks and whispering the names of plants as he nimbly navigated the rough terrain. "Maple, oak, spruce..." He hoped the goblin's verbosity would help put distance between them.

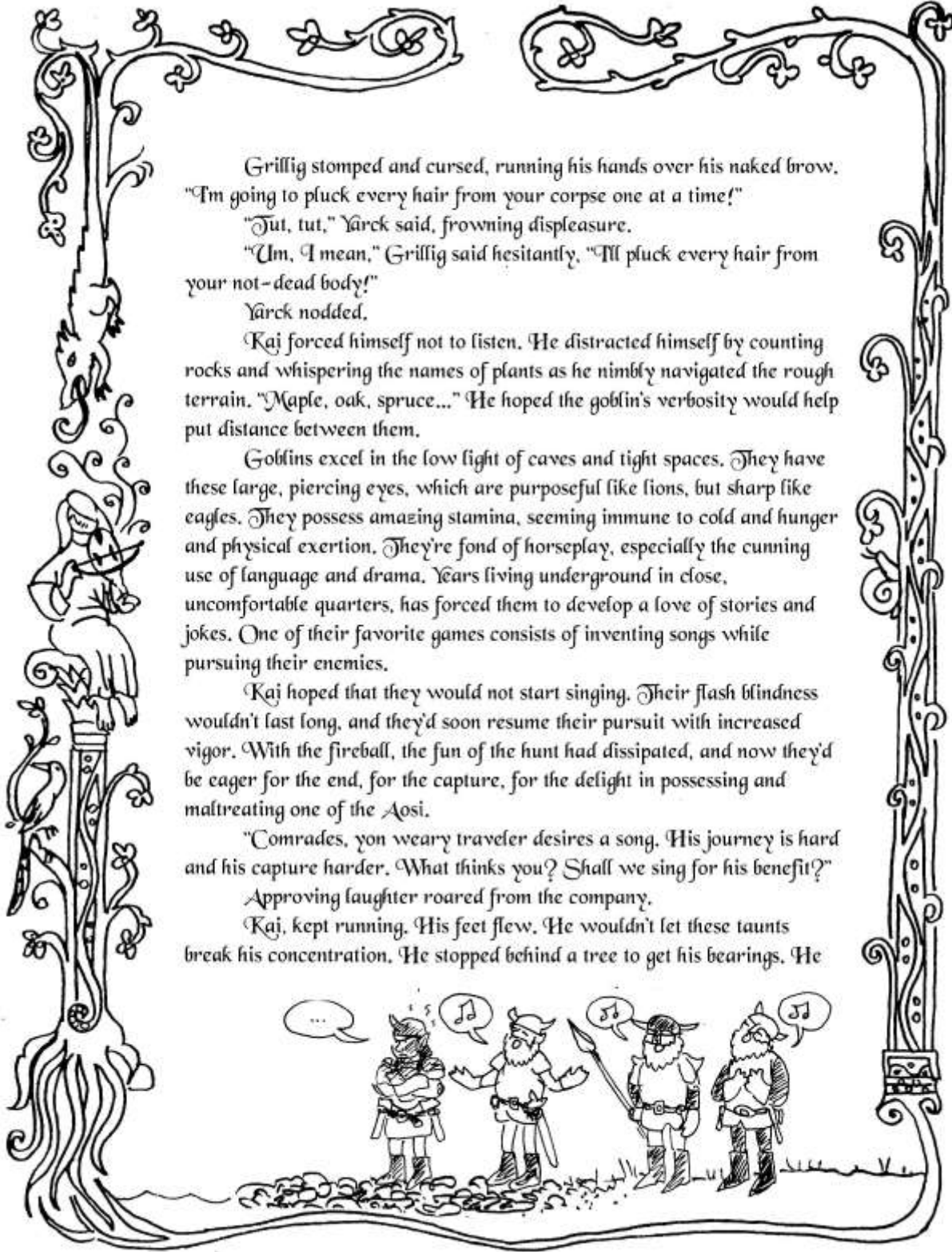
Goblins excel in the low light of caves and tight spaces. They have these large, piercing eyes, which are purposeful like lions, but sharp like eagles. They possess amazing stamina, seeming immune to cold and hunger and physical exertion. They're fond of horseplay, especially the cunning use of language and drama. Years living underground in close, uncomfortable quarters, has forced them to develop a love of stories and jokes. One of their favorite games consists of inventing songs while pursuing their enemies.

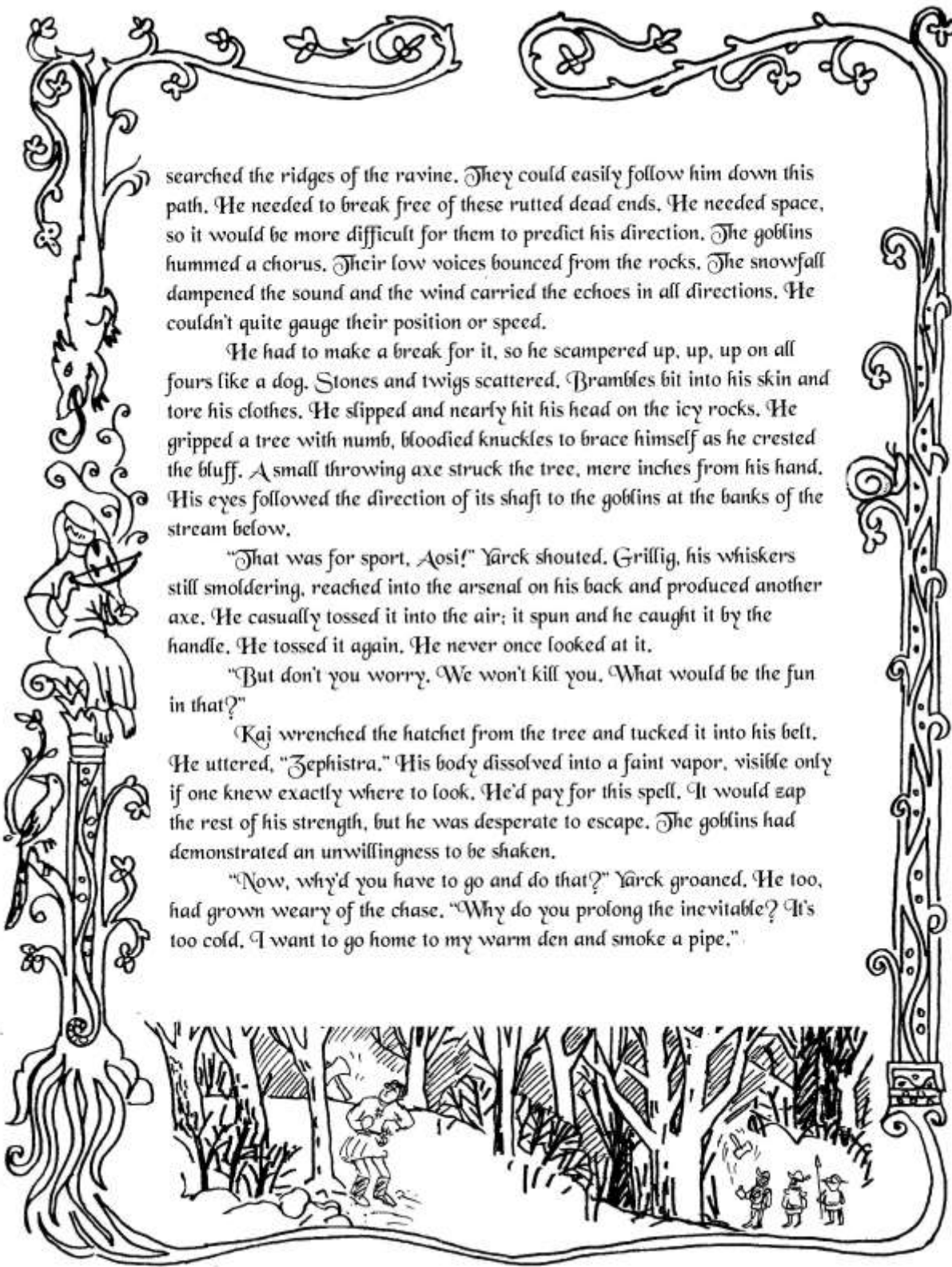
Kaj hoped that they would not start singing. Their flash blindness wouldn't last long, and they'd soon resume their pursuit with increased vigor. With the fireball, the fun of the hunt had dissipated, and now they'd be eager for the end, for the capture, for the delight in possessing and maltreating one of the Aosi.

"Comrades, yon weary traveler desires a song. His journey is hard and his capture harder. What thinks you? Shall we sing for his benefit?"

Approving laughter roared from the company.

Kaj, kept running. His feet flew. He wouldn't let these taunts break his concentration. He stopped behind a tree to get his bearings. He





searched the ridges of the ravine. They could easily follow him down this path. He needed to break free of these rutted dead ends. He needed space, so it would be more difficult for them to predict his direction. The goblins hummed a chorus. Their low voices bounced from the rocks. The snowfall dampened the sound and the wind carried the echoes in all directions. He couldn't quite gauge their position or speed.

He had to make a break for it, so he scampered up, up, up on all fours like a dog. Stones and twigs scattered. Brambles bit into his skin and tore his clothes. He slipped and nearly hit his head on the icy rocks. He gripped a tree with numb, bloodied knuckles to brace himself as he crested the bluff. A small throwing axe struck the tree, mere inches from his hand. His eyes followed the direction of its shaft to the goblins at the banks of the stream below.

"That was for sport, Aosi!" Yarek shouted. Grillig, his whiskers still smoldering, reached into the arsenal on his back and produced another axe. He casually tossed it into the air; it spun and he caught it by the handle. He tossed it again. He never once looked at it.

"But don't you worry. We won't kill you. What would be the fun in that?"

Kaj wrenched the hatchet from the tree and tucked it into his belt. He uttered, "Zephistra." His body dissolved into a faint vapor, visible only if one knew exactly where to look. He'd pay for this spell. It would zap the rest of his strength, but he was desperate to escape. The goblins had demonstrated an unwillingness to be shaken.

"Now, why'd you have to go and do that?" Yarek groaned. He too, had grown weary of the chase. "Why do you prolong the inevitable? It's too cold. I want to go home to my warm den and smoke a pipe."



Kaj trotted across the ridge. He noticed his footprints in the snow. So much for invisibility.

Kaj looked to the trees for help, but they were silent. He hoisted himself into the branches of a gnarled oak. Clumps of snow fell. He whispered, "Please, help me."

The sleeping tree did not stir.

Kaj glanced toward the goblins. They'd seen the dislodged snow. He jumped to the neighboring tree. More snow fell. He continued branch to branch, through the tangle of trees until he reached the last, which overhung a small river. When he'd gained the farthest branch on the farthest tree, the goblins began to sing.

"Faery, Faery, up in the tree, why, oh why, d'ya fly from me?"

"I'm not a Faery!" Kaj shouted before he could stop himself. His position revealed, he let the spell dissipate. His body emerged from vapor. "I am Aosi. We're rightful owners of this forest, You're trespassing here."

Yarck laughed. "Let's not get started about trespassers, Faery."

The goblins assembled around the thick trunk. His only chance of escape was to jump into the frigid water below.

Yarck spoke "Don't be a fool. You won't last a quarter hour in that water. It's so cold, it's freezing as I speak."

Indeed, the thick water crackled and groaned with ice chunks. Where it stagnated, around the edges, it had already solidified.

Yarck continued, "And if the cold doesn't kill you, the waterfall will. It's just around the bend." His voiced became fatherly. "Why don't you come with us? Warm yourself by a roaring fire with a cup of hot cider."

Kaj shivered on the branch. A cold wind knifed through his bones. The chase and the spell of invisibility had conspired to leach his energy.



He couldn't let them catch him. He had to complete his mission. He was the only hope his people, his town, his family, had...

He took a deep breath. But he couldn't bring himself to jump. He readjusted. The icy slush crept along below him. It didn't eddy and spin into whirlpools. It clumped and caught on the rocks and logs.

Yarck sang, "What are you waiting for my Faery Fay? Don't want to go swimming on such a sorry day?"

Kaj closed his eyes and filled his lungs to bursting. He let go. He fell backwards into the water. He came up gasping for air and yelping, "Scabs and Boogers!"

"There she blows!" shouted one of the goblins, and they all laughed.

"Well, I'll be..." Yarck said, "he jumped after all."

Grillig said clapping his meaty hands together and rubbing, "I guess that's that, then. Who's up for a raging fire and a hot cider?"

The other goblins agreed. They wanted to escape from this weather that declined by the second. Kaj's bobbing head, with its shiny black hair and chattering teeth, faded into the white of the snow and ice.

"Come on, Yarck. We'll come back in the morning for the body. It'll still be worth something."

Yarck stood motionless. He figured the freezing body would reach the falls by the time he counted to twenty.

"I'll be along directly. Go on. This's no weather for sport anyhow."

Grillig slapped Yarck on the back, "I was fun, Cousin. Maybe next time." He turned to the group, "Come, lads."

Yarck counted to thirty, his eyes fixed on the viscous water. "I wish you well," he said to himself. "I wish you well."

