



The History  
of the  
Heroes of  
Darvishan



Scribed by:

Sir Matthew Hill



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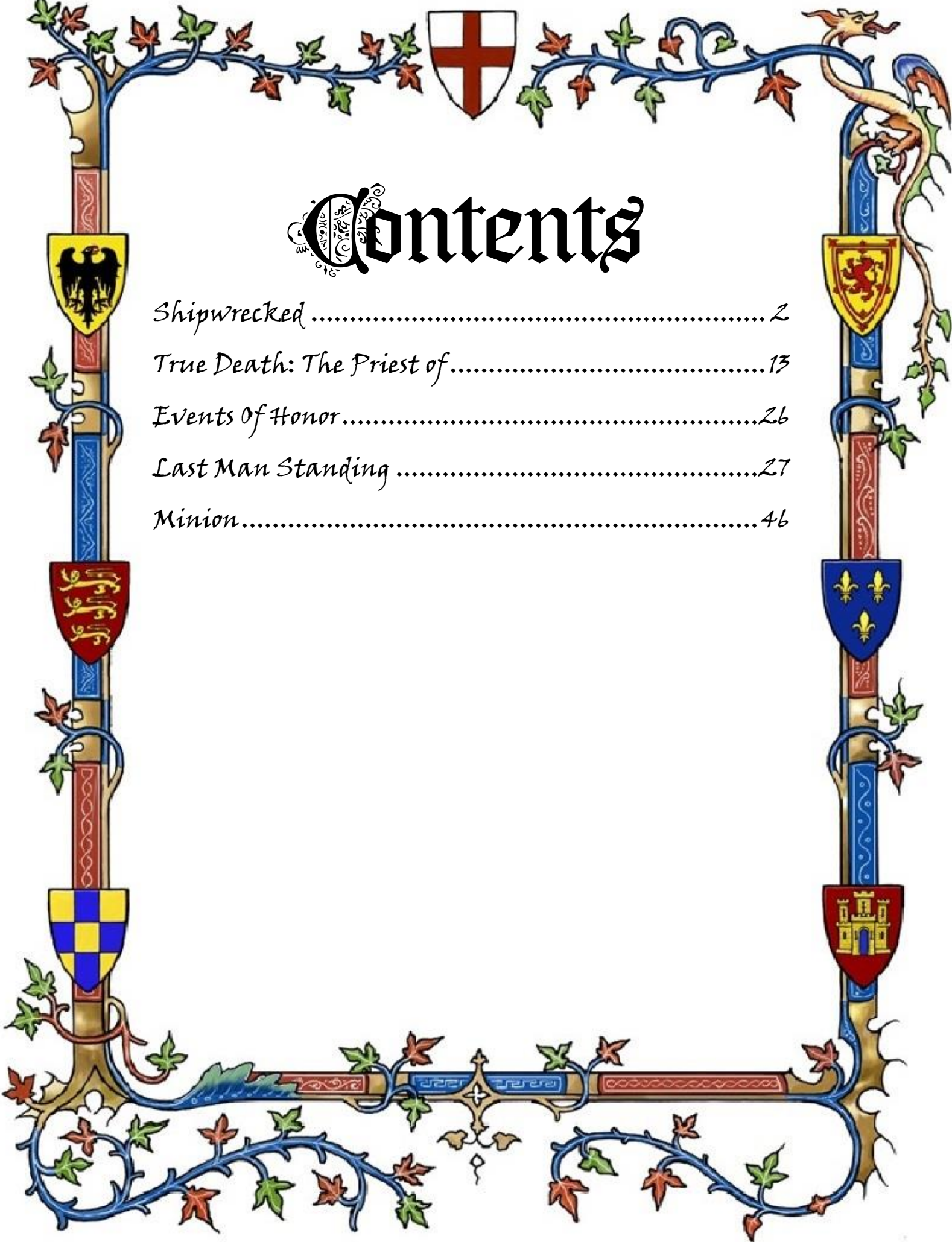
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# Shipwrecked





*You begin your return to consciousness by the harsh, shrill call of gulls invading the blankness of your mind. Accompanying this symphony of discord is the distant sound of waves lapping against a shoreline. You feel the sun beating down on you, scorching your exposed back. You open your eyes and see nothing but sand. It's everywhere around you, as far as your eyes can see, including within your clothes and, unfortunately, your mouth.*

*You realize that the sounds of the ocean that seemed so distant aren't distant at all, as you feel the water ebb and flow around your feet and legs. You're lying on your stomach. On some sort of beach. Has something affected your hearing? You force your ears to pop, releasing the pressure built up and opening your senses to the world around you. You have no idea how long you've been here. Or even where here is.*

*After doing your best to clear your mouth of the sand, you lick your dry, cracked lips. Based on how badly they're flaking, and how sore they are, you assume you've been here for a while. You roll over onto your back, throwing your arm*



*across your face in an attempt to block out the harsh rays of the bright sun, and attempt to gather your thoughts.*

*The boat. You remember that you were on a boat. Maybe it capsized, or it ran aground on some sandbar or was dashed against jagged rocks hiding just beneath the frothy waves. Did you fall overboard? Or were you thrown from the deck of the boat when it hit something. Or, even worse, were you pushed?*

*You hear the soft sound of debris being pushed and pulled across the sand by the flowing tides. The ship must have capsized. I've been marooned. You slowly sit up and look back to see with eyes that are still straining against the brightness of the sun and the grittiness of the sand that still clings to your skin. In the distance, out over the water, is an epic storm. It is a chaos the likes of which you've never imagined before, and you rub your eyes frantically to make sure you're seeing what you think you're seeing.*

*It's a funnel cloud that extends as far as you can see in either direction across the horizon. The swirling clouds are a mass of greys, blacks, and angry dark purples. Halfway up, the funnel narrows before swelling back up and extending into*



*the heavens. Even at its narrowest, you surmise that it's still hundreds of miles across.*

*The clouds ripple with light as small explosions illuminate the air under the inky surface of the storm. The lights shine only for an instant before being whipped away by the gale force winds you're certain are blowing like the breath of an angry god. Also, occasionally, you see blinding lightning fork across the funnel in all different colors. Some of the flashes of lightning seem unnaturally long, bursting and twisting across the surface of the storm with a wicked intelligence.*

*Almost as if the storm has become self-aware, actively searching for structures, objects, and even people to strike.*

*There is a low, constant rumbling and booming that sounds like the hoofbeats of a thousand horses emanating from the maelstrom. The storm pulses and moves as if it is alive. The clouds are drawn in with every pulse of the storm, as if there is some order to the chaos. Its size and power are incomprehensible, so you decide not to dwell on how you made it through alive. Much less relatively unscathed.*

*Considering you remember, at least partially, how you came to be here, you instead try and answer the burning question of*





where here is. Your eyes, now adjusted to the light reflecting off the sand before you, scan the beach to either side of you and see nothing but the shoreline and the debris of the boat you were on. There are frayed bits of rope, and wooden cargo containers that have busted and splintered from being dashed against the shore.

You pivot and check behind you, seeing a forest that runs parallel to the shoreline as far as you can see. The trees are massive, unusual, and quite possibly otherworldly. Now that you've had the chance to check your immediate surroundings, you take a moment to investigate your body and belongings. You notice first that your clothes are very ragged, even torn in some places. This explains the soreness in your back, exposed to the harsh rays of the sun. Most of the things you're sure you brought with you are gone, which you notice includes your shoes. You begin picking your way down the shoreline to investigate some of the busted crates for supplies.

As you rifle through the splintered wood, you realize that anything these crates may have carried was likely washed back out to sea, and you find yourself despairing as you think of your lack of resources. As you fret, you almost trip over the body. Likely an unfortunate shipmate, you find



them half buried under one of the crates you've tried to loot. It's a man, laying on his back. You're spared the sight of his surely bloated, rotting face by a large straw hat that covers his head. You notice he's wearing a well worn pair of shoes. Not like he's going to need them anymore, you justify.

You mutter a weak apology as you begin to untie the dead man's shoes. You're so focused on your task that when he sits bolt upright and begins screaming, you scream too.

"Bandits! usurpers, and thieves! Milk the cows, and set the rooftops ablaze! Someone bring me my lucky hammer!"

You're shocked by his healthy condition. Mostly because of how starkly contrasted it is by his appearance. His teeth are straight, with no cracks you can see, even if it looks like he's eaten a heaping helping of the same sand you spat out before. His beard and hair are jet black, with nary a gray hair to be found. His face is tanned and dirty, but marred by barely half of the wrinkles it should have.

He looks down at his hands, dirty and unkempt but with no calluses or scars, and speaks softly. "Every time I begin to dream a new dream, this old one comes knocking...every time..." He sees you for the first time. His eyes light up and he





shouts out with a renewed vigor. "I knew you'd come! Knew it! They tell me 'jump up and down long enough, you'll stir something up,' but honestly I prefer sleeping till the job is done! Follow me, and we'll be positively ready to...wait...who are you again?"

You laugh a little, not because anything is funny but because of how extremely uncomfortable you are, and state your name. You begin telling him of your life before your doomed boat ride, and when you finish he snorts with a start. He apologizes for falling asleep during your "riveting" recollection of events and asks you to start over.

You laugh that uncomfortable laugh again, assuming before you started your story that this man was not nearly close to stable, and begin to tell your story again. As soon as you begin, his hand shoots out and his index finger is pressed to your lips. "Shh-shh-shh! I've got no room for your furniture in my attic! See, my attic is full of my own broken furniture. And by that, I mean memories! And clocks! Lots of clocks that just won't stop tick-tick-ticking! If I had my journal, maybe I could beat out the cobwebs and...rebuild."



*With sudden enthusiasm he leaps to his feet, gives you a wide smile, and dons the large straw hat inside out on top of his head. "If you don't believe, just follow me and I'll show you! You'll see. You'll understand." And he darts off, gesturing wildly for you to follow.*





*After a long, exhausting trek, full of you tripping over unfamiliar ground and trying to keep up, you come upon what used to be a giant port city. It's a shell of its former glory, completely burnt through. The dirty man sits at the entrance and weeps. He looks at you through bloodshot eyes.*

*"I was too late..." he says, sniffing. He stands again and attempts to steel himself. "But a promise is a promise, and my oath is more important than sanity. Or death." With that ominous statement, he starts moving through the city. "Come, hero! I shall show you the way, as I have for all the others! Step into the once beautiful Port Phate, and see what it has in store for you..."*

*The tour lasts about as long as it takes to get to the mouth of a large river, flowing out to see at Port Phate. At one time this river likely provided many trading opportunities, but not now. Now you don't see anyone or anything aside from you and the dirty man. He directs you to a small ferry tied at the river's edge, steps aboard, and dips into a low bow with hat in hand.*

*"Welcome, hero! I am the Ferryman! Climb aboard, and we'll set sail for more...inviting lands." After a moment's*



hesitation, you step onto the ferry. After all, what do you have to lose? The Ferryman unties the ferry and takes up a long pole he uses to navigate the glorified raft up the river. After some time, between various ramblings that don't make much sense to you, the Ferryman begins making strange noises.

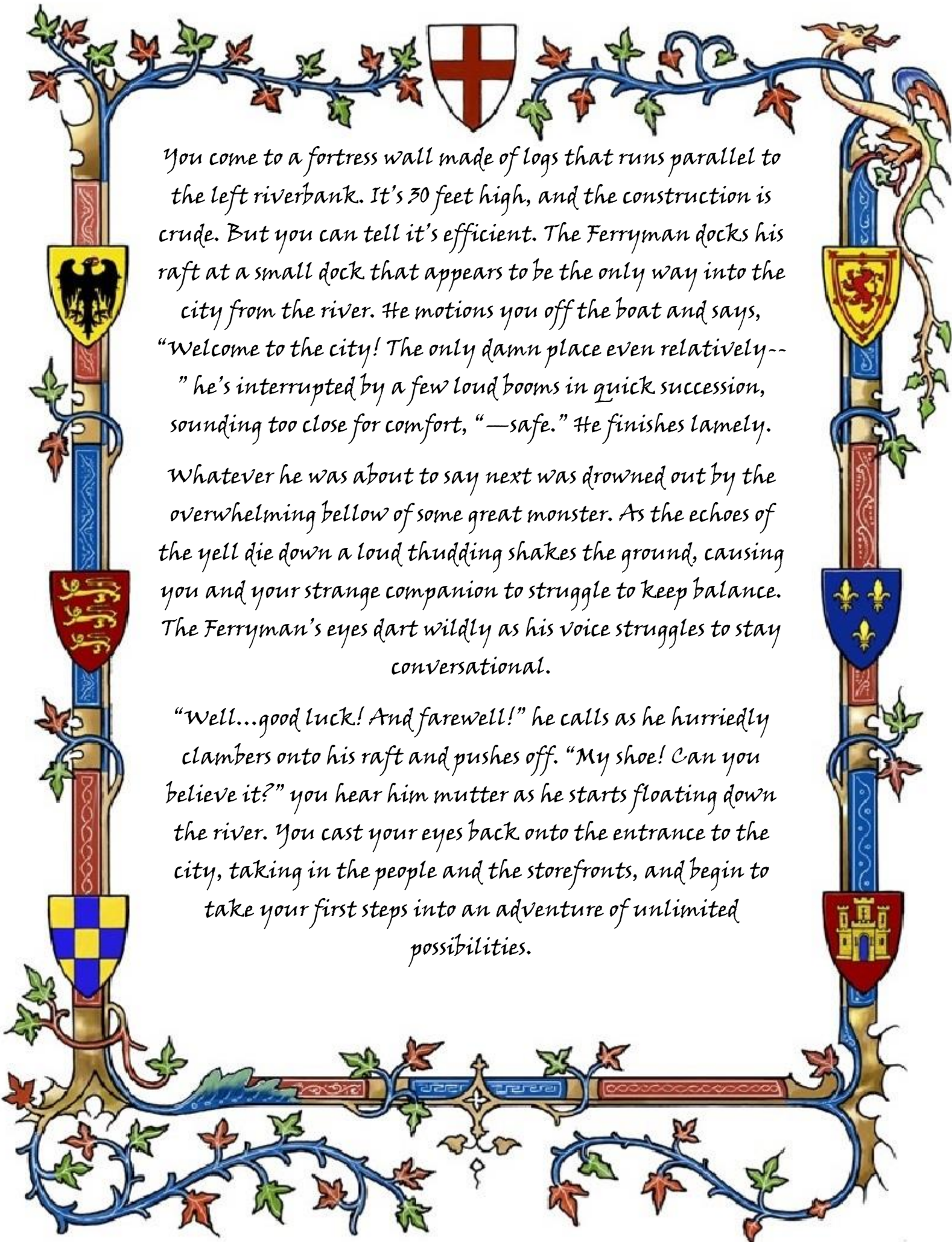
"Riiiiiiiiing! Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!" He takes off a shoe and brings it to his ear. "What?! I'm busy. I'm doing that thing. You know, the thing. Hold, please." He thrusts the shoe toward you and says, "It's the mayor." You take the shoe hesitantly, humoring the Ferryman. After "listening" for a moment you shrug and hold the shoe back to him. "Well o' course he's not there," he laughs as he throws the shoe into the water behind him, "he's dead!"

"Besides," he says, "that's not the mayor. It was just a shoe. You're not..." he cocks his head and stares thoughtfully at you for a moment, "crazy, are you?" Your travels continue calmly and quietly, and after about a day's time you come upon a clearly large settlement. You notice farm houses with friendly occupants who wave jovially to you.



You come to a fortress wall made of logs that runs parallel to the left riverbank. It's 30 feet high, and the construction is crude. But you can tell it's efficient. The Ferryman docks his raft at a small dock that appears to be the only way into the city from the river. He motions you off the boat and says, "Welcome to the city! The only damn place even relatively--" he's interrupted by a few loud booms in quick succession, sounding too close for comfort, "--safe." He finishes lamely. Whatever he was about to say next was drowned out by the overwhelming bellow of some great monster. As the echoes of the yell die down a loud thudding shakes the ground, causing you and your strange companion to struggle to keep balance. The Ferryman's eyes dart wildly as his voice struggles to stay conversational.

"Well...good luck! And farewell!" he calls as he hurriedly clambers onto his raft and pushes off. "My shoe! Can you believe it?" you hear him mutter as he starts floating down the river. You cast your eyes back onto the entrance to the city, taking in the people and the storefronts, and begin to take your first steps into an adventure of unlimited possibilities.





True Death:  
The Priest of  
Pandoom

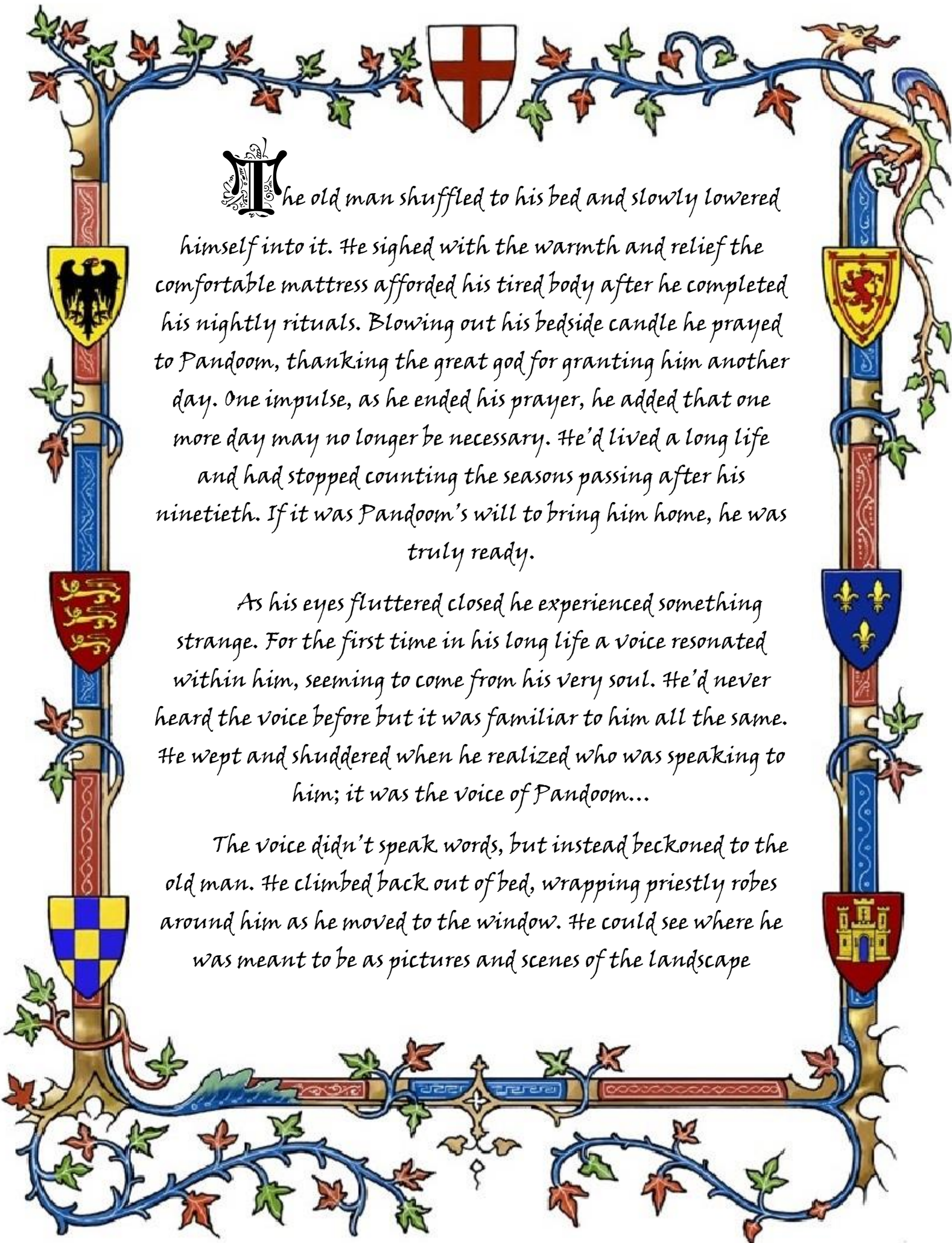




**T**he old man shuffled to his bed and slowly lowered himself into it. He sighed with the warmth and relief the comfortable mattress afforded his tired body after he completed his nightly rituals. Blowing out his bedside candle he prayed to Pandoom, thanking the great god for granting him another day. One impulse, as he ended his prayer, he added that one more day may no longer be necessary. He'd lived a long life and had stopped counting the seasons passing after his ninetieth. If it was Pandoom's will to bring him home, he was truly ready.

As his eyes fluttered closed he experienced something strange. For the first time in his long life a voice resonated within him, seeming to come from his very soul. He'd never heard the voice before but it was familiar to him all the same. He wept and shuddered when he realized who was speaking to him; it was the voice of Pandoom...

The voice didn't speak words, but instead beckoned to the old man. He climbed back out of bed, wrapping priestly robes around him as he moved to the window. He could see where he was meant to be as pictures and scenes of the landscape



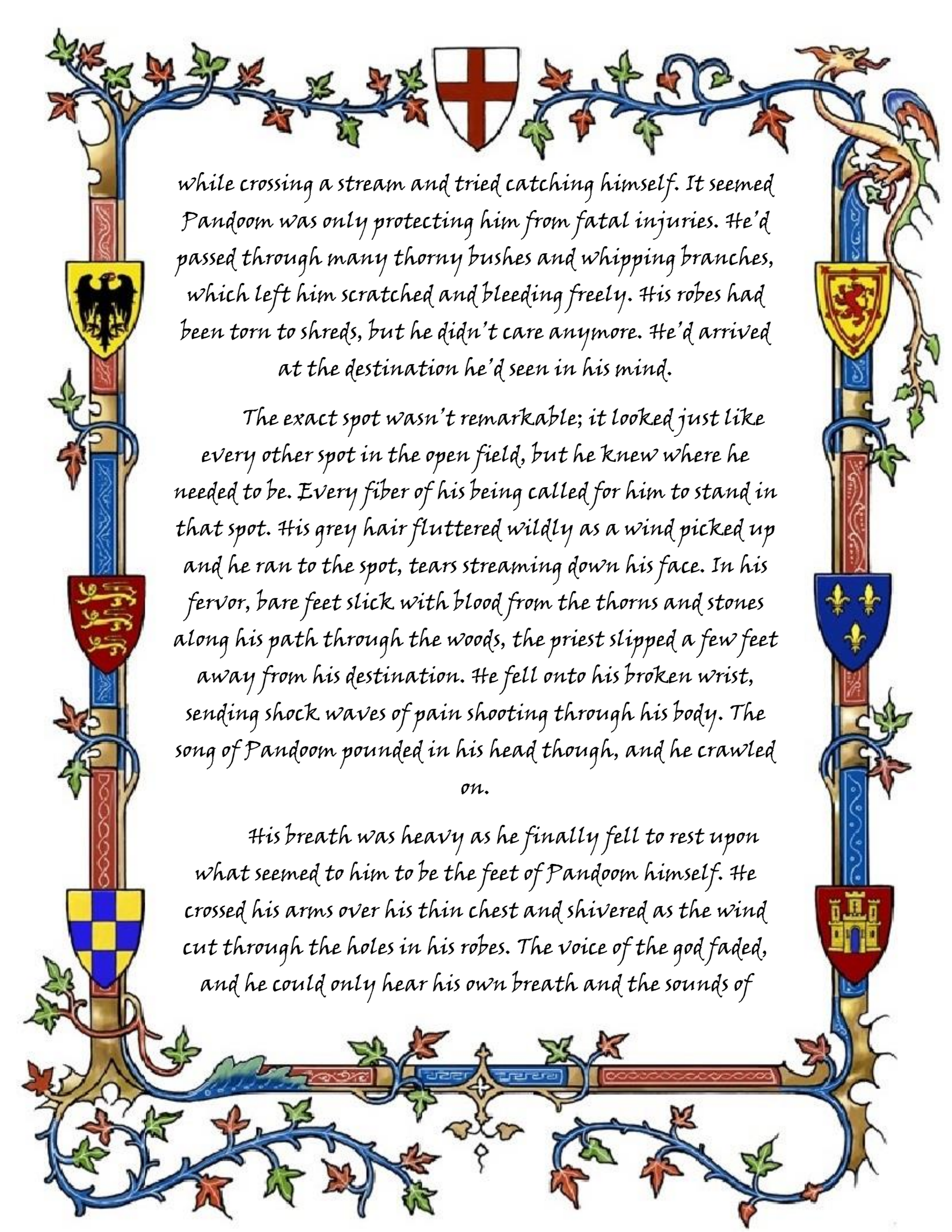


flashed through his mind. Through the thick woods and far to the west. The song of Pandoom ringing in his head was all that mattered in that moment. He knew he couldn't leave his bedroom and wander through the temple without being stopped and escorted back to his chambers. The voice did not relent in its alluring pull. It strengthened tenfold, reassuring him of his path. He clambered onto his writing desk and put his bare feet upon his window's ledge. "I trust you," he whispered, and he leaped from the tower.

He dropped a thousand feet with nary a thought of fear and impacted the water filling the temple's moat with barely a sound as he sank under the water with his robes billowing around his slight form. He clawed at the water with new strength and vigor, swimming for the far side of the moat. He climbed out, slipping and clawing up the muddy bank. He was now thoroughly awake, but somehow unharmed from his great plummet. He disappeared into the treeline, compelled to find the reward set for him by the voice of Pandoom.

After many hours and many miles west the old priest was battered and bloody. He moved through the canopy of trees, entering a perfectly circular clearing. He cradled his left hand to his chest, wrist drastically broken. He'd slipped





while crossing a stream and tried catching himself. It seemed Pandoom was only protecting him from fatal injuries. He'd passed through many thorny bushes and whipping branches, which left him scratched and bleeding freely. His robes had been torn to shreds, but he didn't care anymore. He'd arrived at the destination he'd seen in his mind.

The exact spot wasn't remarkable; it looked just like every other spot in the open field, but he knew where he needed to be. Every fiber of his being called for him to stand in that spot. His grey hair fluttered wildly as a wind picked up and he ran to the spot, tears streaming down his face. In his fervor, bare feet slick with blood from the thorns and stones along his path through the woods, the priest slipped a few feet away from his destination. He fell onto his broken wrist, sending shock waves of pain shooting through his body. The song of Pandoom pounded in his head though, and he crawled on.

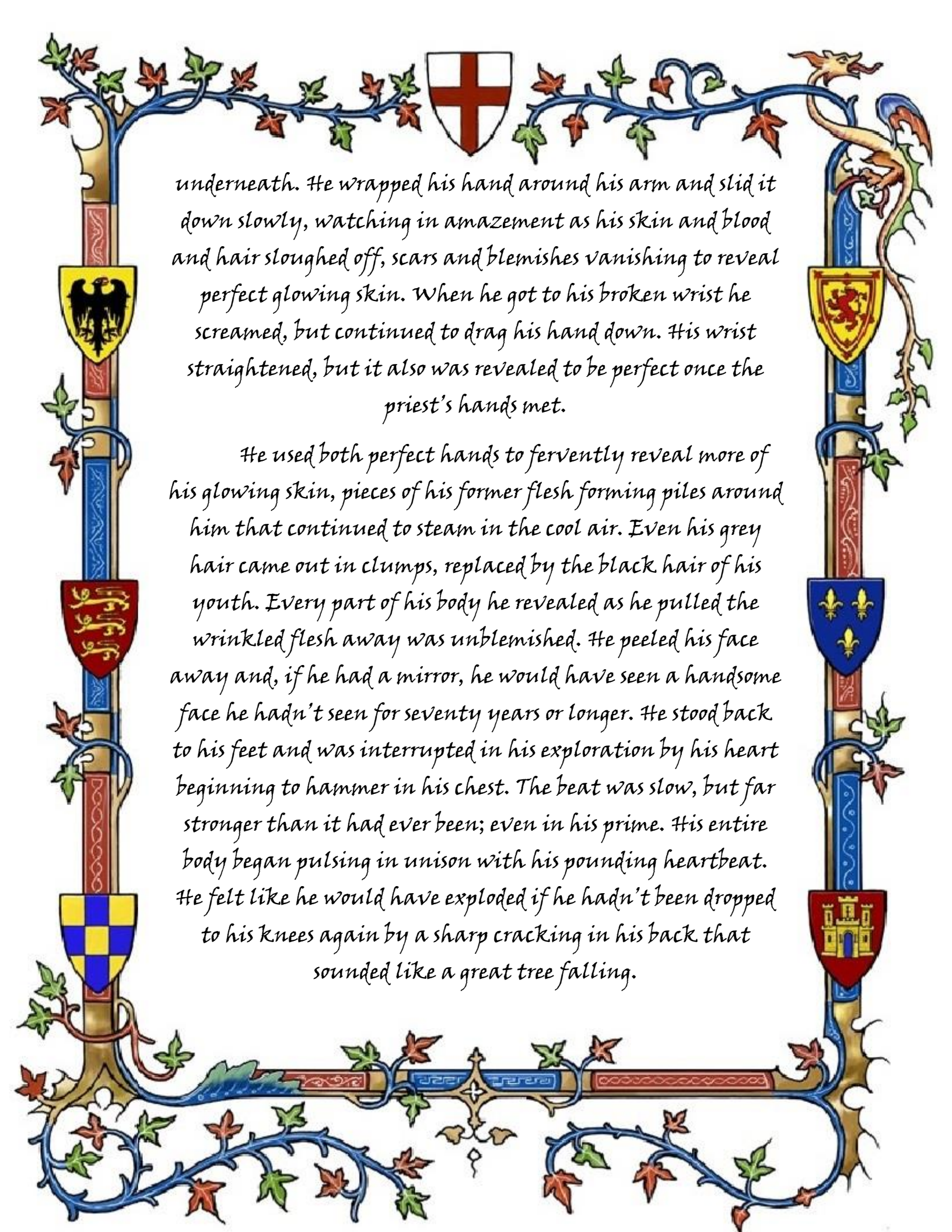
His breath was heavy as he finally fell to rest upon what seemed to him to be the feet of Pandoom himself. He crossed his arms over his thin chest and shivered as the wind cut through the holes in his robes. The voice of the god faded, and he could only hear his own breath and the sounds of



crickets. His vision became hazy and he wondered for a moment before realizing that his very skin was steaming, despite the chill that permeated his bones. As he cast his eyes around he noticed a deer poking its head into the clearing. As he watched he saw more deer making appearances. Coming up beside the herd was a large black bear. Neither animal disturbed the others. In the trees the priest could see raccoons and possum gathering as well. Animals of all shapes and sizes were converging on the clearing to observe the battered old priest.

As quickly as the cold set in it was obliterated by a wave of warmth that washed over the priest. He relaxed the grip of his good hand, where it had clenched onto his shoulder and upper arm and he was nearly blinded by the light that shined from where his hand had been. He examined his good hand, surprised to see that his fingertips and palm were also brightly glowing. He rose to his knees and all sound ceased as he pressed his fingertip to the patch of glowing skin on his arm.

He was astonished to see his skin moving as he ran his finger across his body, as if his skin was wax. Everywhere his finger moved revealed a trail of that same glowing skin



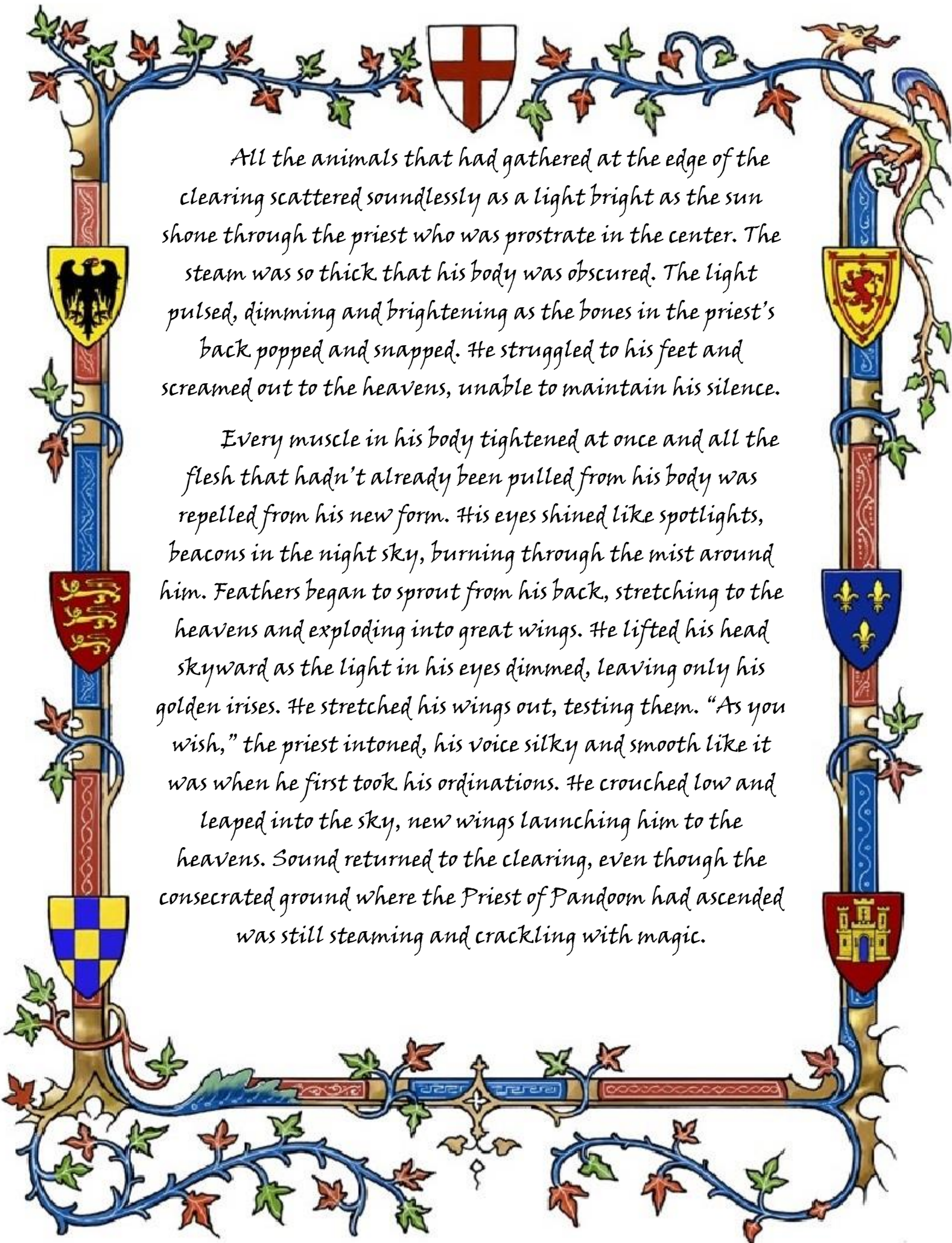
underneath. He wrapped his hand around his arm and slid it down slowly, watching in amazement as his skin and blood and hair sloughed off, scars and blemishes vanishing to reveal perfect glowing skin. When he got to his broken wrist he screamed, but continued to drag his hand down. His wrist straightened, but it also was revealed to be perfect once the priest's hands met.

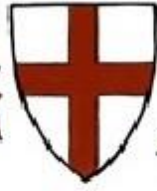
He used both perfect hands to fervently reveal more of his glowing skin, pieces of his former flesh forming piles around him that continued to steam in the cool air. Even his grey hair came out in clumps, replaced by the black hair of his youth. Every part of his body he revealed as he pulled the wrinkled flesh away was unblemished. He peeled his face away and, if he had a mirror, he would have seen a handsome face he hadn't seen for seventy years or longer. He stood back to his feet and was interrupted in his exploration by his heart beginning to hammer in his chest. The beat was slow, but far stronger than it had ever been; even in his prime. His entire body began pulsing in unison with his pounding heartbeat. He felt like he would have exploded if he hadn't been dropped to his knees again by a sharp cracking in his back that sounded like a great tree falling.



All the animals that had gathered at the edge of the clearing scattered soundlessly as a light bright as the sun shone through the priest who was prostrate in the center. The steam was so thick that his body was obscured. The light pulsed, dimming and brightening as the bones in the priest's back popped and snapped. He struggled to his feet and screamed out to the heavens, unable to maintain his silence.

Every muscle in his body tightened at once and all the flesh that hadn't already been pulled from his body was repelled from his new form. His eyes shined like spotlights, beacons in the night sky, burning through the mist around him. Feathers began to sprout from his back, stretching to the heavens and exploding into great wings. He lifted his head skyward as the light in his eyes dimmed, leaving only his golden irises. He stretched his wings out, testing them. "As you wish," the priest intoned, his voice silky and smooth like it was when he first took his ordinations. He crouched low and leaped into the sky, new wings launching him to the heavens. Sound returned to the clearing, even though the consecrated ground where the Priest of Pandoom had ascended was still steaming and crackling with magic.

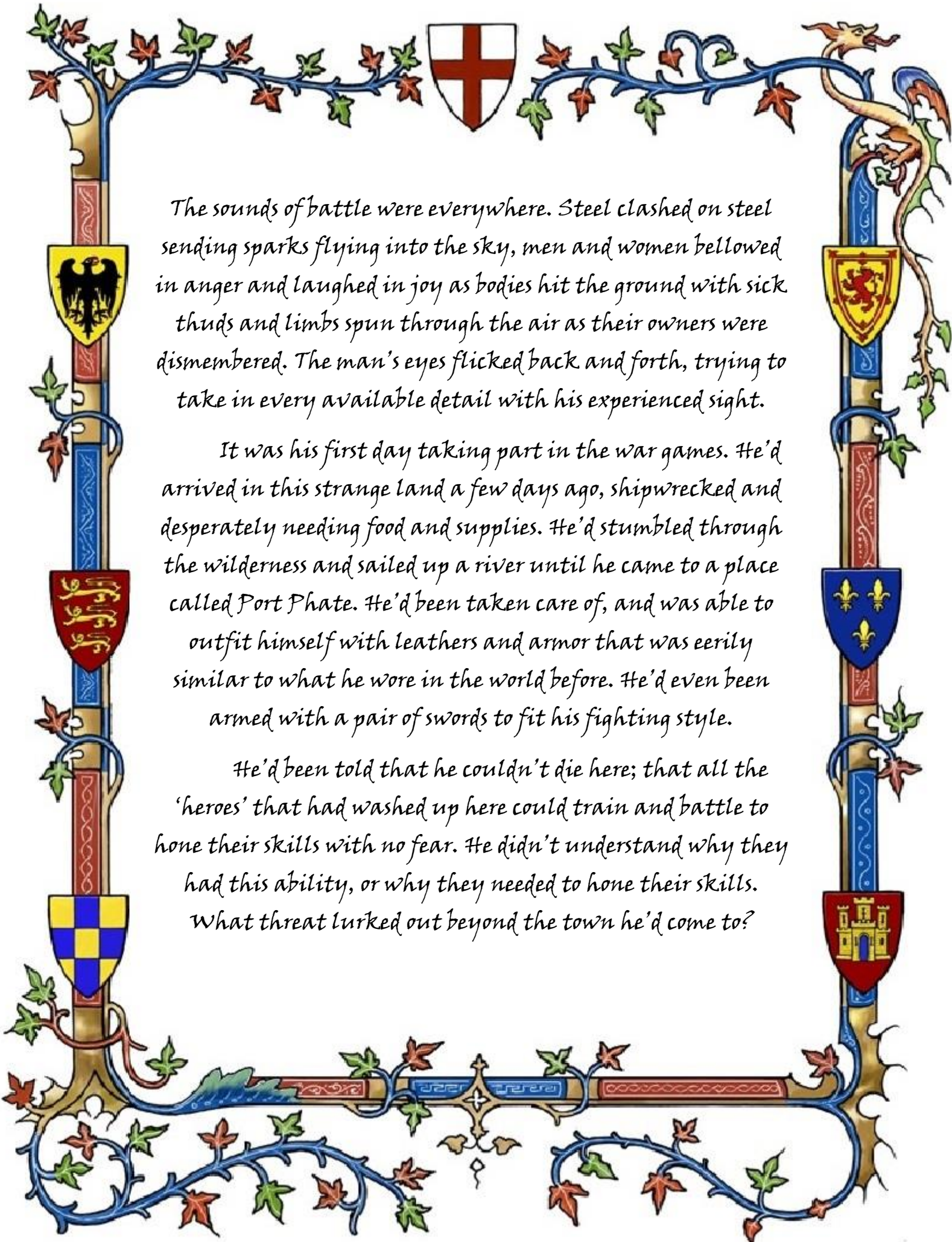




The sounds of battle were everywhere. Steel clashed on steel sending sparks flying into the sky, men and women bellowed in anger and laughed in joy as bodies hit the ground with sick thuds and limbs spun through the air as their owners were dismembered. The man's eyes flicked back and forth, trying to take in every available detail with his experienced sight.

It was his first day taking part in the war games. He'd arrived in this strange land a few days ago, shipwrecked and desperately needing food and supplies. He'd stumbled through the wilderness and sailed up a river until he came to a place called Port Phate. He'd been taken care of, and was able to outfit himself with leathers and armor that was eerily similar to what he wore in the world before. He'd even been armed with a pair of swords to fit his fighting style.

He'd been told that he couldn't die here; that all the 'heroes' that had washed up here could train and battle to hone their skills with no fear. He didn't understand why they had this ability, or why they needed to hone their skills. What threat lurked out beyond the town he'd come to?

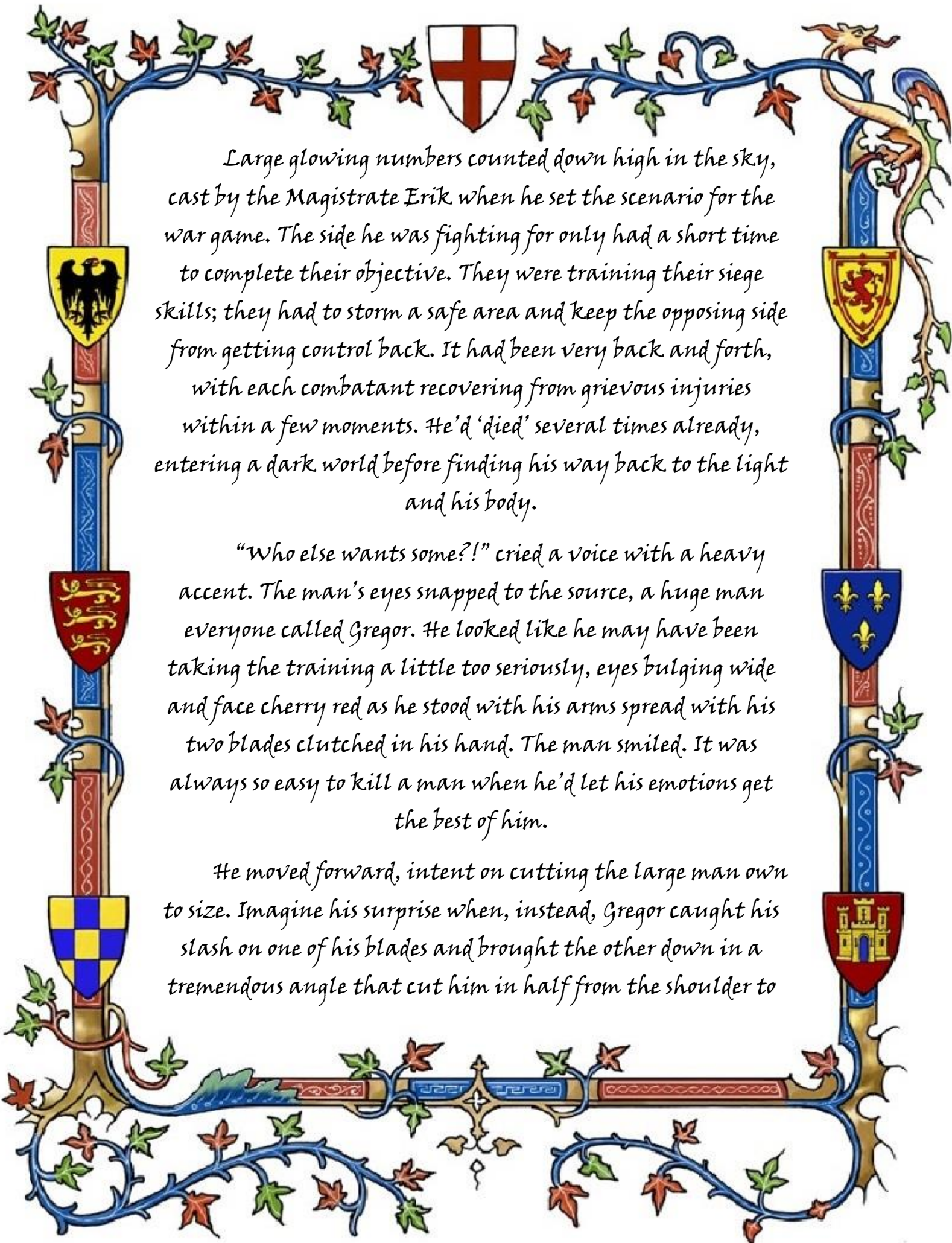




Large glowing numbers counted down high in the sky, cast by the Magistrate Erik when he set the scenario for the war game. The side he was fighting for only had a short time to complete their objective. They were training their siege skills; they had to storm a safe area and keep the opposing side from getting control back. It had been very back and forth, with each combatant recovering from grievous injuries within a few moments. He'd 'died' several times already, entering a dark world before finding his way back to the light and his body.

"Who else wants some?!" cried a voice with a heavy accent. The man's eyes snapped to the source, a huge man everyone called Gregor. He looked like he may have been taking the training a little too seriously, eyes bulging wide and face cherry red as he stood with his arms spread with his two blades clutched in his hand. The man smiled. It was always so easy to kill a man when he'd let his emotions get the best of him.

He moved forward, intent on cutting the large man own to size. Imagine his surprise when, instead, Gregor caught his slash on one of his blades and brought the other down in a tremendous angle that cut him in half from the shoulder to



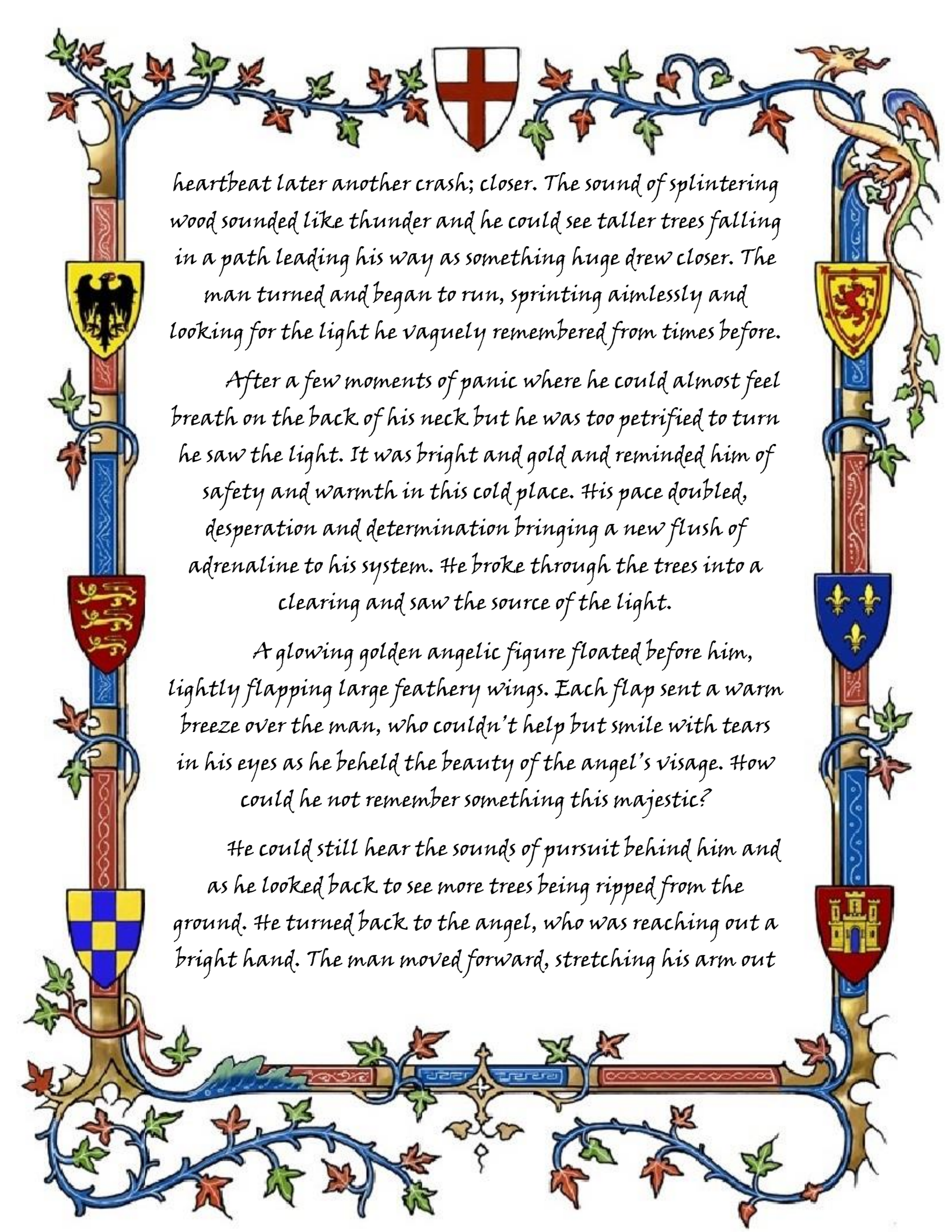


*the waist. His eyes went dim as his body crashed to the ground in pieces.*

*He awoke in darkness again. Instinctually he brought his hands to his chest, searching for the gash he expected to find. It would take time to get used to his wounds healing so quickly. His fingers found the edge of the wound and he inspected it. There was no blood, and the wound was cold to the touch, but he knew he would be warm again soon. His eyes adjusted and he could see his surroundings. He was laying in the exact spot he fell on the battlefield, but everything was colored in greys and shadows. None of the other heroes were there with him.*

*There was light, but not much, and he couldn't see where it was coming from. The sky was black, as if it were night, but no stars or moon shined. The sky was like a giant vortex and it seemed like pieces of that darkness were dropping from the vortex and crashing to the ground. It was completely silent, which he'd come to expect from his previous times waking in this shadow world.*

*His ears strained to pick up any sound and he flinched as the silence around him was shattered by a distant crash. A*



*heartbeat later another crash; closer. The sound of splintering wood sounded like thunder and he could see taller trees falling in a path leading his way as something huge drew closer. The man turned and began to run, sprinting aimlessly and looking for the light he vaguely remembered from times before.*

*After a few moments of panic where he could almost feel breath on the back of his neck but he was too petrified to turn he saw the light. It was bright and gold and reminded him of safety and warmth in this cold place. His pace doubled, desperation and determination bringing a new flush of adrenaline to his system. He broke through the trees into a clearing and saw the source of the light.*

*A glowing golden angelic figure floated before him, lightly flapping large feathery wings. Each flap sent a warm breeze over the man, who couldn't help but smile with tears in his eyes as he beheld the beauty of the angel's visage. How could he not remember something this majestic?*

*He could still hear the sounds of pursuit behind him and as he looked back to see more trees being ripped from the ground. He turned back to the angel, who was reaching out a bright hand. The man moved forward, stretching his arm out*

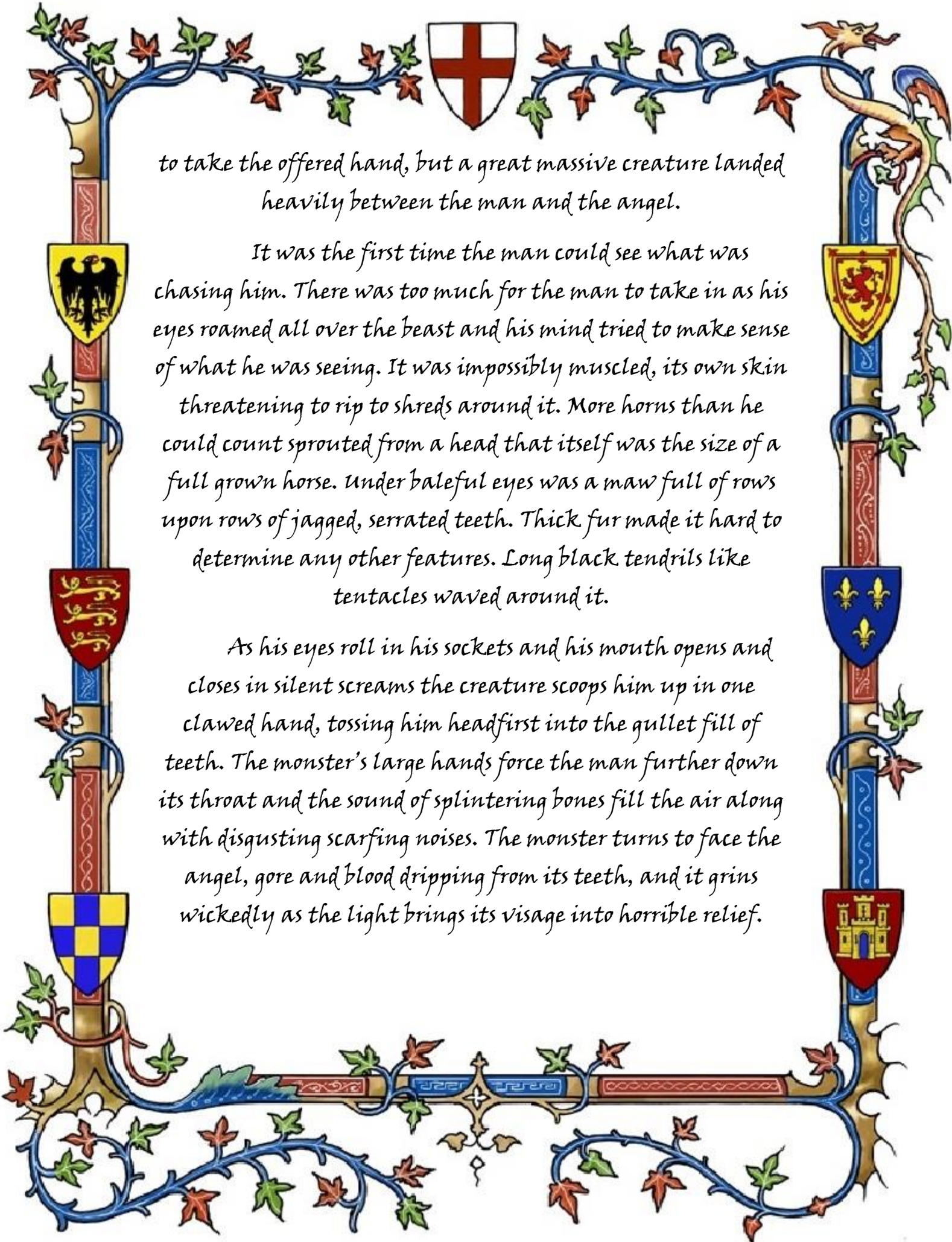




*to take the offered hand, but a great massive creature landed heavily between the man and the angel.*

*It was the first time the man could see what was chasing him. There was too much for the man to take in as his eyes roamed all over the beast and his mind tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It was impossibly muscled, its own skin threatening to rip to shreds around it. More horns than he could count sprouted from a head that itself was the size of a full grown horse. Under baleful eyes was a maw full of rows upon rows of jagged, serrated teeth. Thick fur made it hard to determine any other features. Long black tendrils like tentacles waved around it.*

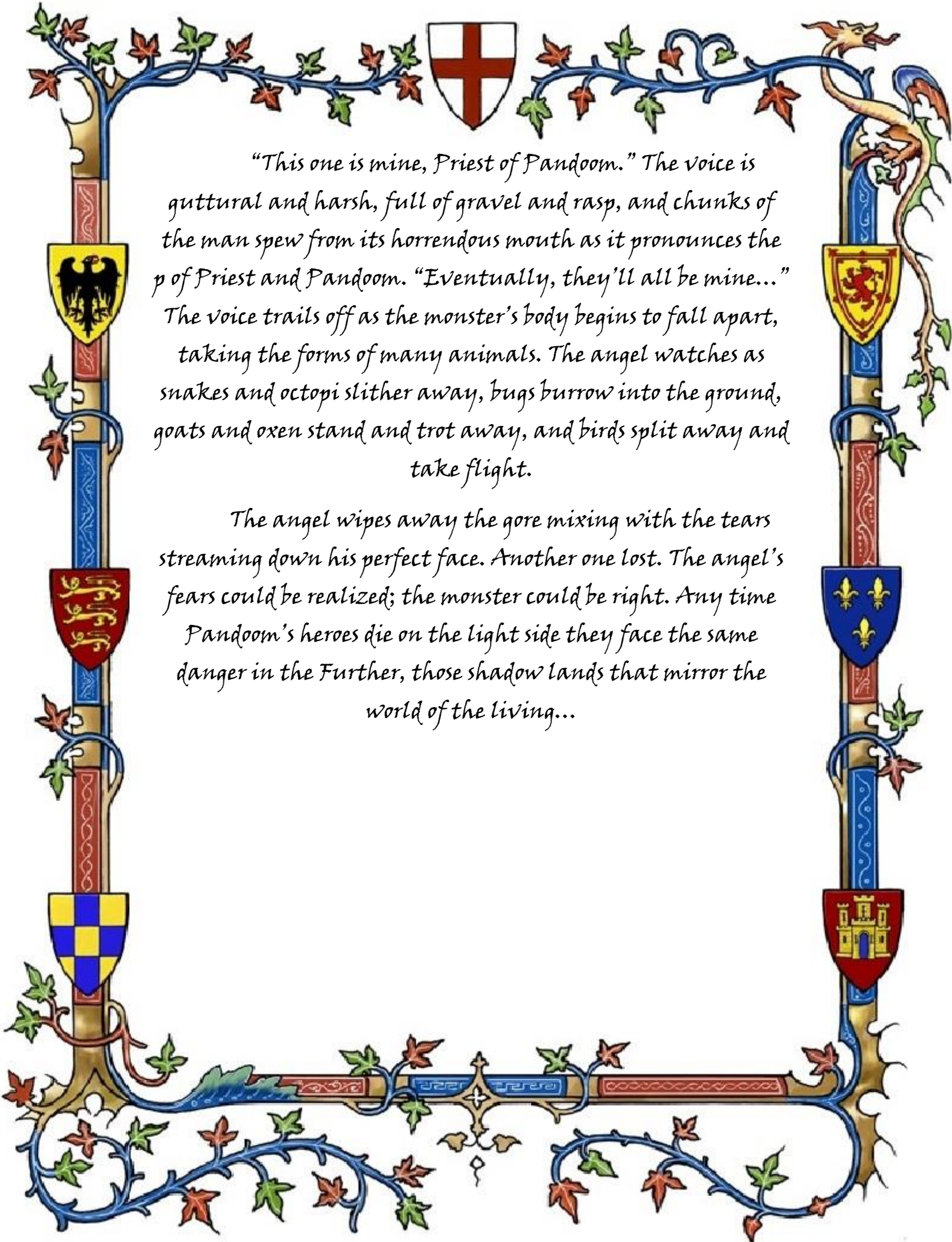
*As his eyes roll in his sockets and his mouth opens and closes in silent screams the creature scoops him up in one clawed hand, tossing him headfirst into the gullet full of teeth. The monster's large hands force the man further down its throat and the sound of splintering bones fill the air along with disgusting scarfing noises. The monster turns to face the angel, gore and blood dripping from its teeth, and it grins wickedly as the light brings its visage into horrible relief.*



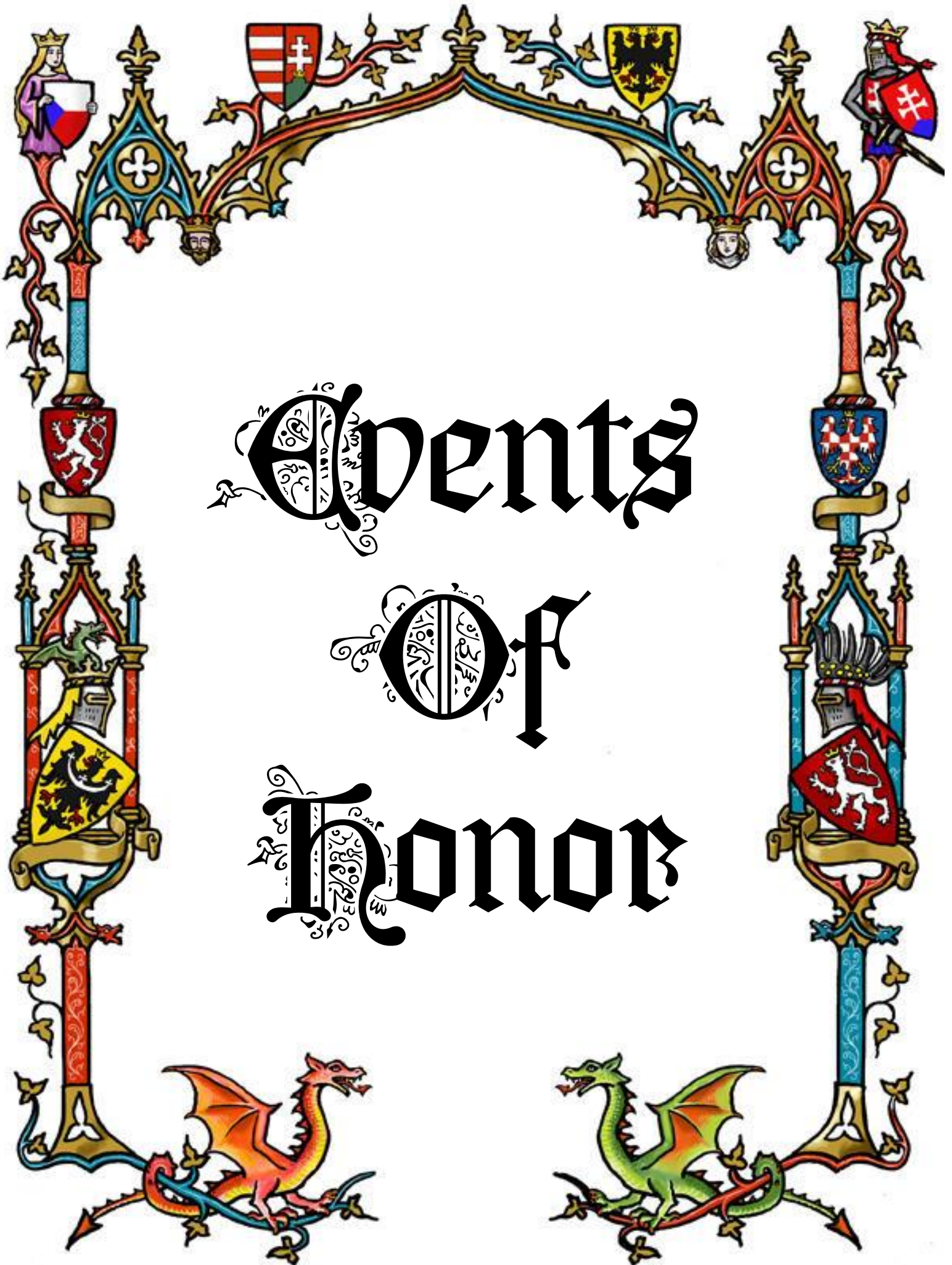


*"This one is mine, Priest of Pandoom." The voice is guttural and harsh, full of gravel and rasp, and chunks of the man spew from its horrendous mouth as it pronounces the p of Priest and Pandoom. "Eventually, they'll all be mine..." The voice trails off as the monster's body begins to fall apart, taking the forms of many animals. The angel watches as snakes and octopi slither away, bugs burrow into the ground, goats and oxen stand and trot away, and birds split away and take flight.*

*The angel wipes away the gore mixing with the tears streaming down his perfect face. Another one lost. The angel's fears could be realized; the monster could be right. Any time Pandoom's heroes die on the light side they face the same danger in the Further, those shadow lands that mirror the world of the living...*



Advents  
Of  
Honor





# Last Man Standing





**T**

housands of years ago, long before men could harness magic, man lived in a dark age. Superstition and the sword ruled. It was chaos. But there was a certain order to it. Not like now. If you killed a man, he stayed dead. If your arm was cleaved off, life as you knew it would never be the same. Medicine men and healers could only do their best and men, women, and children met their grisly ends to forces beyond anyone's control. It all changed with the Founders. Men and women who awoke powerful and dangerous skills that sometimes bordered on magical, but always changed the course of history. It all began with the first, Gillicomgain the Warrior.

Gillicomgain was young, and food was scarce in his small village. The people starved and disease ran rampant through the dusty paths between the buildings. Children were born malnourished, and Gillicomgain was no different. His dirty tunic hung from his skin-and-bones frame, and a ragged belt held up his trousers. The belt had several extra holes punched through the worn leather to wrap around his slim waist. On his back he carried a large two-handed sword that



made him stoop from its weight. It was as tall as he was, and he could barely lift it with both hands. The blade had belonged to his father, who had passed on a few days before. Gillecomgain was the oldest left in the family, so he was now the protector and provider. And he had no idea what he was going to do to survive.

He left his small village and took to the forest, desperate to find some small morsel to feed his siblings and ailing mother. He had been out to hunt with his father before, but was still learning to track game and move through the small game paths that wound through the trees. As such, he made the bushes rustle and branches snap with every step. Not only did every animal in the surrounding area know where he was, but so did the other hunters...

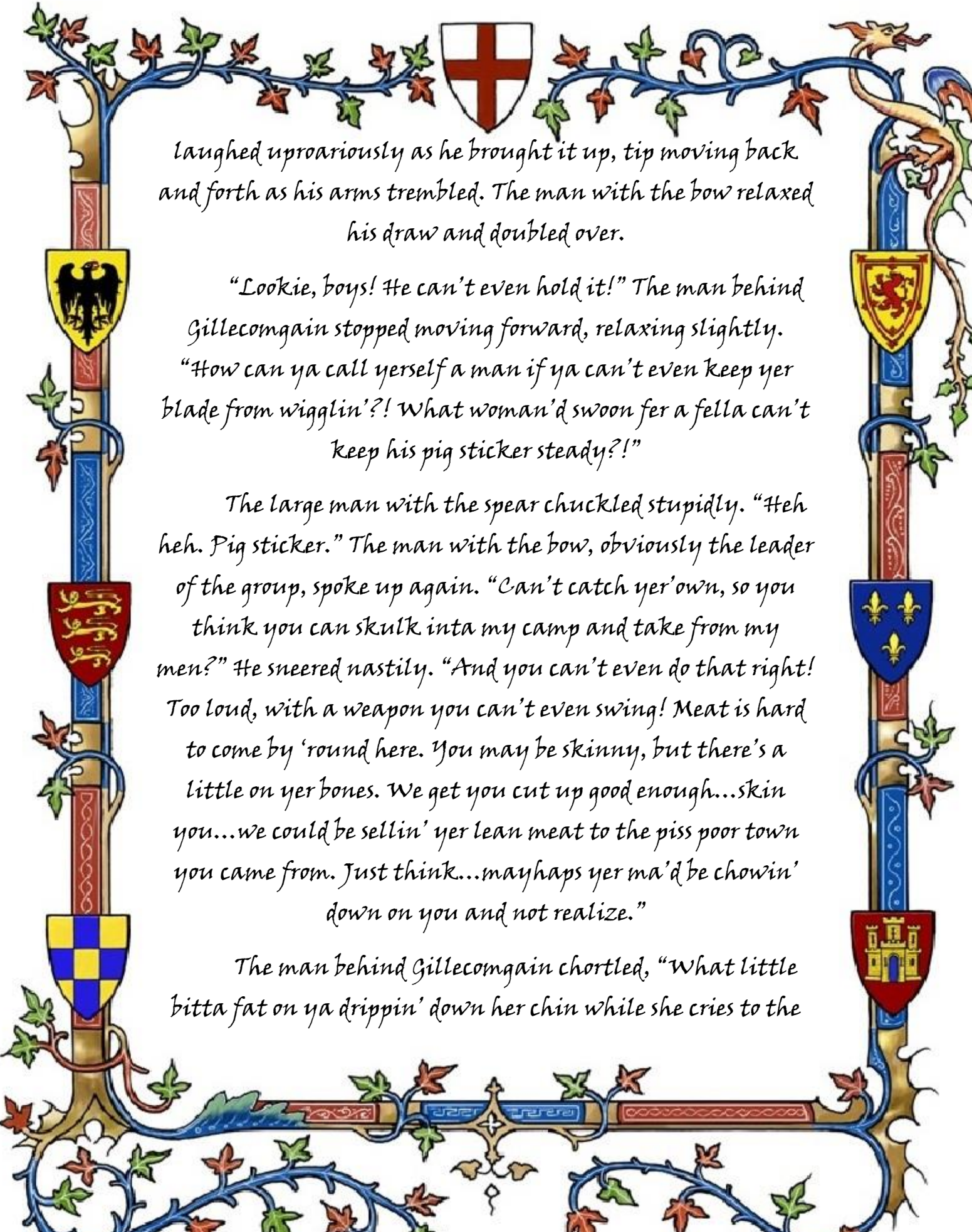
It only took an hour or so before Gillecomgain came to the clearing. He'd been drawn by the smell of cooking meat, and his mouth watered with the prospect of even a taste of whatever was cooking. He peered out of the trees into a small camp site with a small fire. Several stringy squirrels were roasting on sticks over the flames. A tent made of animal hide was standing close to the fire, large enough for a small



hunting party to take shelter. He saw no sign of anyone, and he thought it was too good to be true. He tried to sneak to the fire, knowing that what he contemplated would bring shame to his father if he was still alive, but also knowing that with the unwieldy blade on his back he'd find no better option to hold on longer. He didn't even notice when the men came out of the trees.

"There 'e is!" One of them cried, pointing a small hunting knife at the thin youth. "We was wonderin' when you'd stumble inna our camp!" The man cleared his throat and spat at the ground. "Stompin' 'round through tha trees an' scarin' off all tha game." Gillecomgain's eyes widened and he looked around him at the four men closing in. There was the man who'd spoke, now twirling two knives, coming from the right. A large man holding a boar spear was stomping in from the left. Behind him was a man holding a dagger and a shortsword. And in front of him, on the other side of the fire, was a thin man with a strung bow and an arrow pointed right at him.

Gillecomgain pulled the large sword from the sheath on his back, fumbling with it and almost dropping it. The men



laughed uproariously as he brought it up, tip moving back and forth as his arms trembled. The man with the bow relaxed his draw and doubled over.

“Lookie, boys! He can’t even hold it!” The man behind Gillecomgain stopped moving forward, relaxing slightly. “How can ya call yerself a man if ya can’t even keep yer blade from wigglin’?! What woman’d swoon fer a fella can’t keep his pig sticker steady?!”

The large man with the spear chuckled stupidly. “Heh heh. Pig sticker.” The man with the bow, obviously the leader of the group, spoke up again. “Can’t catch yer’own, so you think you can skulk into my camp and take from my men?” He sneered nastily. “And you can’t even do that right! Too loud, with a weapon you can’t even swing! Meat is hard to come by ‘round here. You may be skinny, but there’s a little on yer bones. We get you cut up good enough...skin you...we could be sellin’ yer lean meat to the piss poor town you came from. Just think...mayhaps yer ma’d be chowin’ down on you and not realize.”

The man behind Gillecomgain chortled, “What little bitta fat on ya drippin’ down her chin while she cries to the





resta her brats 'when's he comin' home?!'" They all started laughing again. The young man was terrified. It was hot near the fire, but he shivered as the sweat pooled at the small of his back and soaking his tunic.

"Can't get much for those clothes, but that sword should get us a small purse," the man with the bow said, using his arrow head to scratch under his chin. "Kill him. Make it quick too; squirrels are gonna burn." The man behind Gillecomgain ran forward with a battle cry, bringing his shortsword around to gut the young man. Gillecomgain whirled around, almost tripping, and brought the greatsword up in a hasty block. Somehow, his grip held and the shortsword rang against it. The brigand lashed out with his dagger, but the superior length of Gillecomgain's blade kept him from making contact. The man danced back.

"Not bad, kid," the man with the bow said. "I expected you to get skewered before you could even turn." He drew his arrow back again. "But you should never turn yer back to a man with an arrow." Gillecomgain began to turn back around as the arrow sprouted from his left bicep.



Instantly his hand dropped from his blade and the tip dropped to the ground. Blood began dripping heavily from the wound and pain like he'd never felt before coursed through him. He grit his teeth to keep from screaming, and the muscles in his neck strained as his eyes bulged. He couldn't swing the sword around with two hands, he'd never do it with one.

"Move in, boys," the Bowman commanded. "And don't cut him up too bad." The man with the knives rushed Gillecomgain and the boy decided that he had to try and fight back. The thought of these bastards skinning and selling him to the villagers he'd known his entire life was something he couldn't stand for. The man was two yards away. One yard. The knives glowed in the firelight as he brought them in for quick stabs.

It would be over before Gillecomgain could even move.

Suddenly adrenaline flooded Gillecomgain's body and a strength that couldn't possibly come from his slim frame naturally erupted down his right arm. A quick step forward, a sharp turn, and his right arm brought the massive blade over his head and came down to separate the man from his knives at the wrist. Blood spurted out like a fountain in a



town square and the man shrieked in pain and terror as he fell back.

“What?!” the Bowman exclaimed. He pulled another arrow from his quiver and pulled it back even as the other two men moved to action. But the new strength surging through Gillecomgain made him quicker. He darted between the two men, making the most of the space they’d left him by stopping their earlier advance. The Bowman couldn’t get a clear shot as his target now had his allies between them.

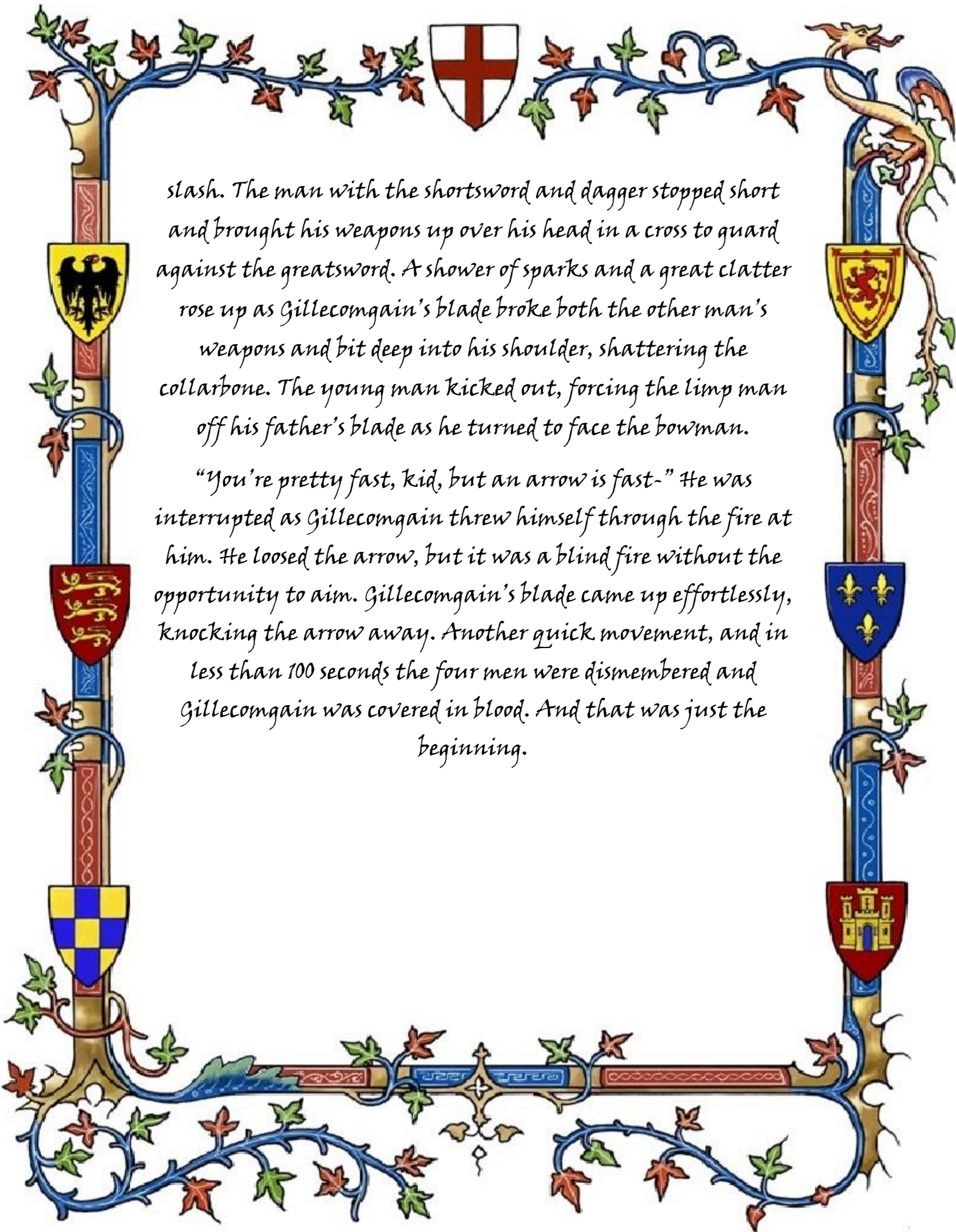
The huge man with the spear whirled around, bringing his weapon around in a deadly arc at head level. It would be enough to separate Gillecomgain’s head from his shoulders, even though the boar spear didn’t have a honed edge; only a point. Gillecomgain dropped to a crouch and spun, his greatsword biting into the man’s waist. The youth kept his momentum going, and the massive strength flowing through him brought the blade clean through with a sickening sound. The man’s torso kept spinning with his attack, twisting right off the waist and crashing to the ground.

Standing swiftly, Gillecomgain brought the sword up and around over his head again for another punishing overhead



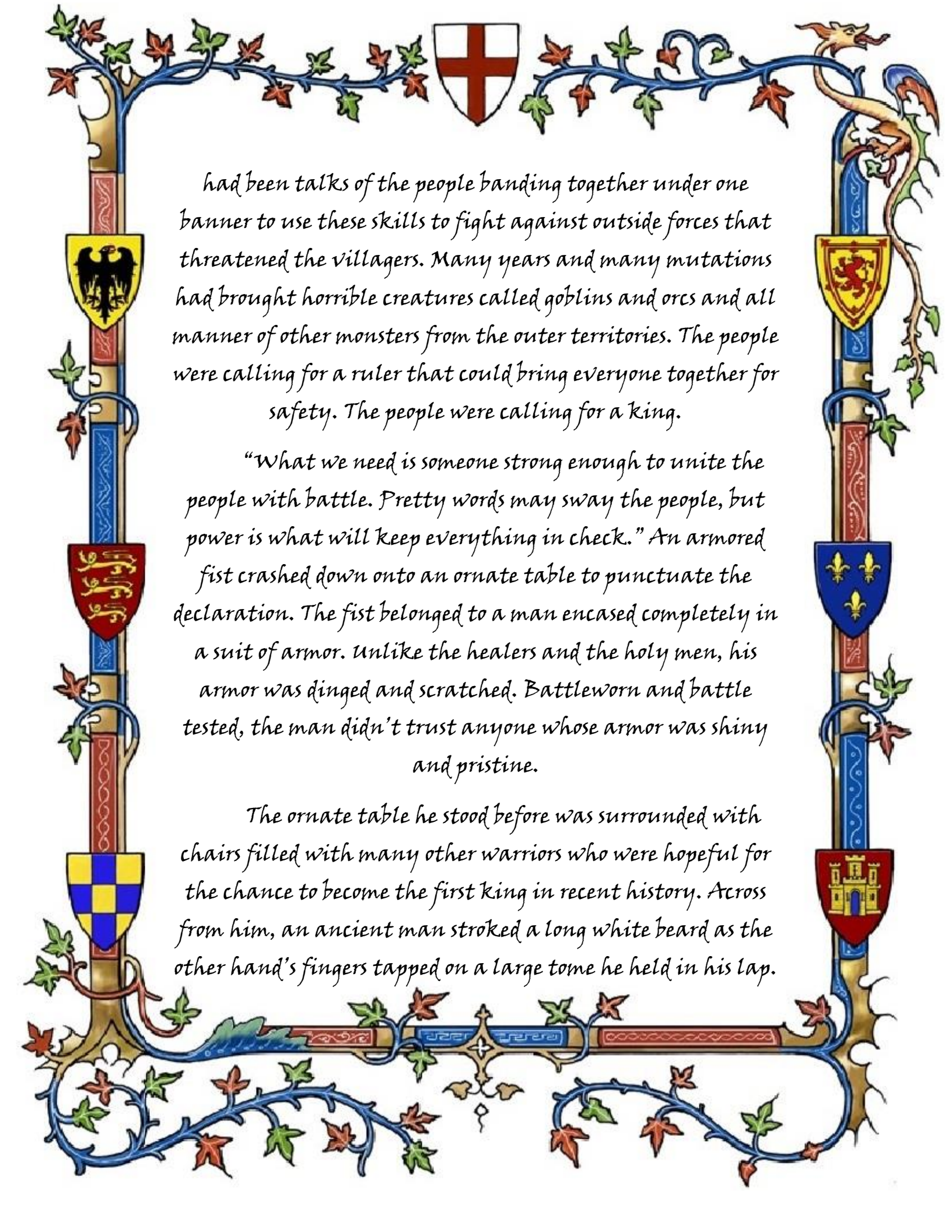
slash. The man with the shortsword and dagger stopped short and brought his weapons up over his head in a cross to guard against the greatsword. A shower of sparks and a great clatter rose up as Gillecomgain's blade broke both the other man's weapons and bit deep into his shoulder, shattering the collarbone. The young man kicked out, forcing the limp man off his father's blade as he turned to face the bowman.

"You're pretty fast, kid, but an arrow is fast-" He was interrupted as Gillecomgain threw himself through the fire at him. He loosed the arrow, but it was a blind fire without the opportunity to aim. Gillecomgain's blade came up effortlessly, knocking the arrow away. Another quick movement, and in less than 100 seconds the four men were dismembered and Gillecomgain was covered in blood. And that was just the beginning.





Hundreds of years passed, and the heroes of the land now all possessed strange skills and powers. Some were just as powerful as Gillecomgain's, and some were so strong they could wipe out whole groups in combat. Men and women fought for no purpose other than honing their skills for battles. They didn't need to fear death through combat, as each of the heroes was possessed by some ability to recover from grievous wounds. But there



had been talks of the people banding together under one banner to use these skills to fight against outside forces that threatened the villagers. Many years and many mutations had brought horrible creatures called goblins and orcs and all manner of other monsters from the outer territories. The people were calling for a ruler that could bring everyone together for safety. The people were calling for a king.

“What we need is someone strong enough to unite the people with battle. Pretty words may sway the people, but power is what will keep everything in check.” An armored fist crashed down onto an ornate table to punctuate the declaration. The fist belonged to a man encased completely in a suit of armor. Unlike the healers and the holy men, his armor was dinged and scratched. Battleworn and battle tested, the man didn't trust anyone whose armor was shiny and pristine.

The ornate table he stood before was surrounded with chairs filled with many other warriors who were hopeful for the chance to become the first king in recent history. Across from him, an ancient man stroked a long white beard as the other hand's fingers tapped on a large tome he held in his lap.



*“So what do you propose, Baltigo? Should we all stand out in a field and brutalize each other to decide who should lead us? Shouldn't we decide this with some modicum of civility? A ballot, perhaps?” The man called Baltigo sneered. “Why would I let the fate of our country be left in the hands of you sages, locked in your gilded towers pouring over your books? Why would I back a vote, Halcyon, when I could overwhelm everyone in this room with sheer force and take the power for myself?” The old man, Halcyon, tugged on his beard and laughed.*

*“You know as well as I do that the strange powers of this land keep us from dying from combat. A test of strength such as yours means nothing, because we would return from the veil and the challenge would continue. Until we die of age or sickness. It would solve nothing.”*

*“What if,” a small man with his lower face obscured by a cloth spoke up, “we did determine our king by combat? Surely you're correct, Halcyon, that it would be a short term solution. If Baltigo were to defeat us all today, surely someone would be better prepared tomorrow? Perhaps,” he pulled out a dagger and spun it on his fingertip, “a poisoned dagger would*



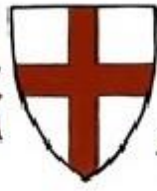
*find him and leave him weak before he repels the next wave of contenders?"*

*Baltigo glared at the small man. "Just what I'd expect from someone who works in the shadows, Malvo. Treachery." Malvo smiled under his mask, "I just mean that whoever is the strongest today isn't guaranteed the strongest tomorrow. So I propose a compromise. You and your scholars, Halcyon, may be able to overwhelm the rest of us with fire. A holy knight may call forth the power of his god to bolster his strength. I may stick Baltigo between the shoulders when his back is turned. Any one of us has the power to be king. Let it happen. Let the strongest be king. For a time. A regular contest to determine who will lead us moving forward."*

*And the men and women surrounding the table found this agreeable.*







*A few weeks after the table discussion, dozens of men and women gathered in a grassy field. The flyers and advertisements had gone out and people had been preparing. They'd all answered the call. They all wanted to be king. But Baltigo knew it would be him. He was the strongest everywhere he went. Forget what Malvo said about someone getting the better of him. He'd win this day, he'd win every day.*

*The assembled were waiting for the town crier to make his appearance. He would be the one who would announce the event and kick things off. He took a spot in the center of the field. He would be in the middle of everything, and he'd still come out on top. As the anointed time grew closer he noticed more and more of his competitors arriving. He also noticed that they were all setting up close to him. Instead of worry he felt satisfaction.*

*"They're terrified of me," he thought with a grin. "They know I'll dominate this field, so they want to wipe me out before I get the chance. Idiots." He stood as the town crier finally made his way onto the pitch. The garishly dressed man called out in a magically amplified voice. "Welcome,*

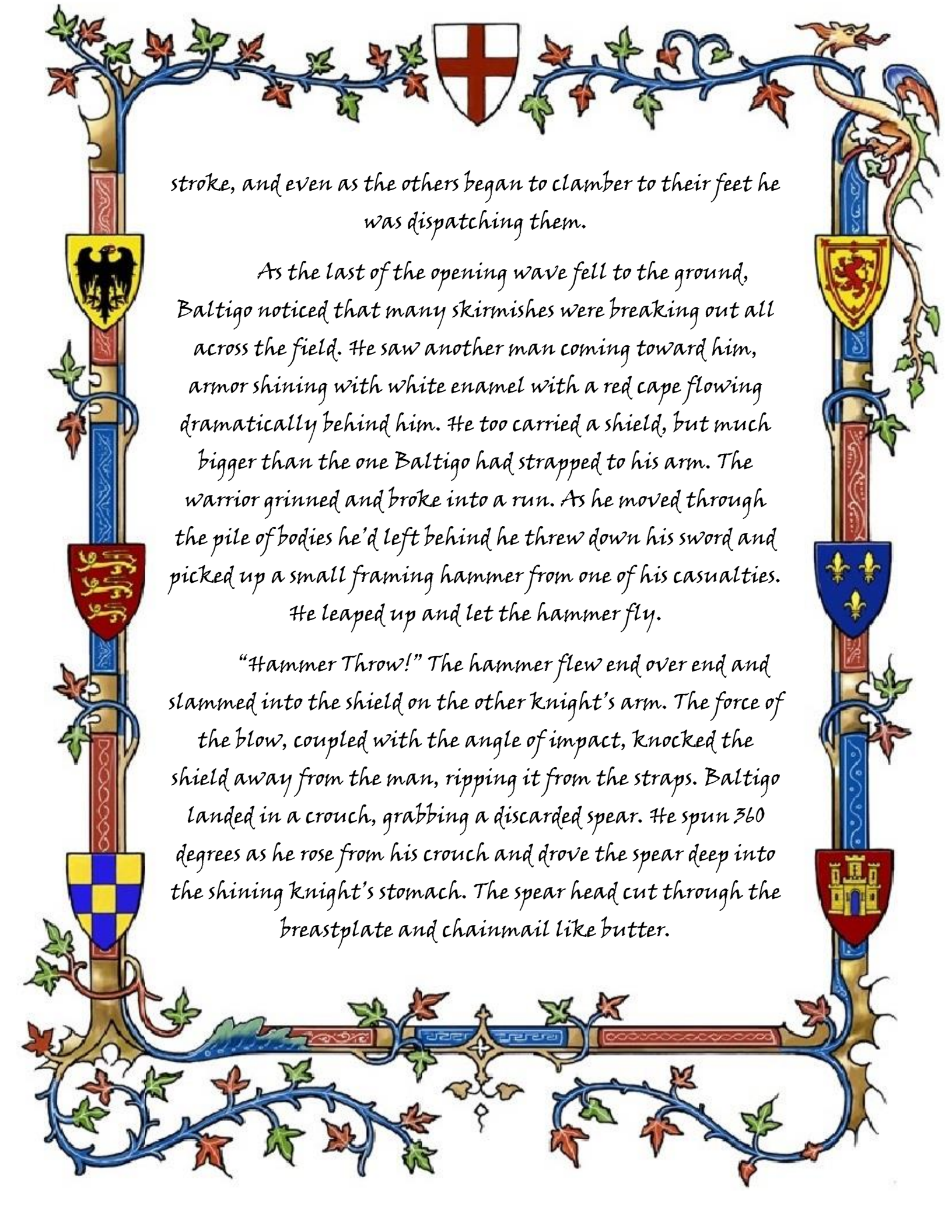


*one and all! It's a wonderful day for our competition! Make sure to make it a grand combat, because something truly majestic is on the line!" He waved his hands and the image of a golden crown appeared above their heads.*

*"Our king will be the Last Man Standing! Raise your weapons when you're ready!" Baltigo drew his sword from his scabbard and pointed it to the sky as he strapped his shield to his arm. The golden crown disappeared from the sky as large shimmering numbers took their place.*

*"Three! Two! One! Begin!" Baltigo brought his sword down to his side, not even keeping his shield in ready position. It began just like he thought it would, with five or six brave combatants deciding to strike together to remove him from the competition. He waited a few beats for the men and women to come in close before he knelt and slammed the pommel of his sword on the ground.*

*"Ground Pound!" he cried as a burst of energy radiated out from him. The people nearest him dropped to their knees, but one man was less lucky. He was a step away from Baltigo and was mid-swing, completely frozen like a statue. Baltigo's sword separated his head from his shoulders with one easy*



stroke, and even as the others began to clamber to their feet he was dispatching them.

As the last of the opening wave fell to the ground, Baltigo noticed that many skirmishes were breaking out all across the field. He saw another man coming toward him, armor shining with white enamel with a red cape flowing dramatically behind him. He too carried a shield, but much bigger than the one Baltigo had strapped to his arm. The warrior grinned and broke into a run. As he moved through the pile of bodies he'd left behind he threw down his sword and picked up a small framing hammer from one of his casualties.

He leaped up and let the hammer fly.

"*Hammer Throw!*" The hammer flew end over end and slammed into the shield on the other knight's arm. The force of the blow, coupled with the angle of impact, knocked the shield away from the man, ripping it from the straps. Baltigo landed in a crouch, grabbing a discarded spear. He spun 360 degrees as he rose from his crouch and drove the spear deep into the shining knight's stomach. The spear head cut through the breastplate and chainmail like butter.



The knight's eyes widened as he looked to the massive spear jutting from under his ribs and then to the large shield on the other arm of his assailant. "He's...so...powerful. He can wield a spear like that with one hand..." The light died from his eyes and Baltigo pushed him off the haft of his new weapon. He turned just in time to see another hammer flying at him.

"Hammer Throw!" He heard. He felt the hammer slam into his shield and felt it start to rip away from him. He redoubled his grip, calling out "Spartan's Grasp!" The hammer bounced off the shield and flew high into the air. The man who threw it leaped into the air, caught it, and landed back on the ground running at Baltigo. He pulled a handaxe from his belt and brandished both weapons together. Baltigo turned to face him and felt a sharp pain at his right kidney.

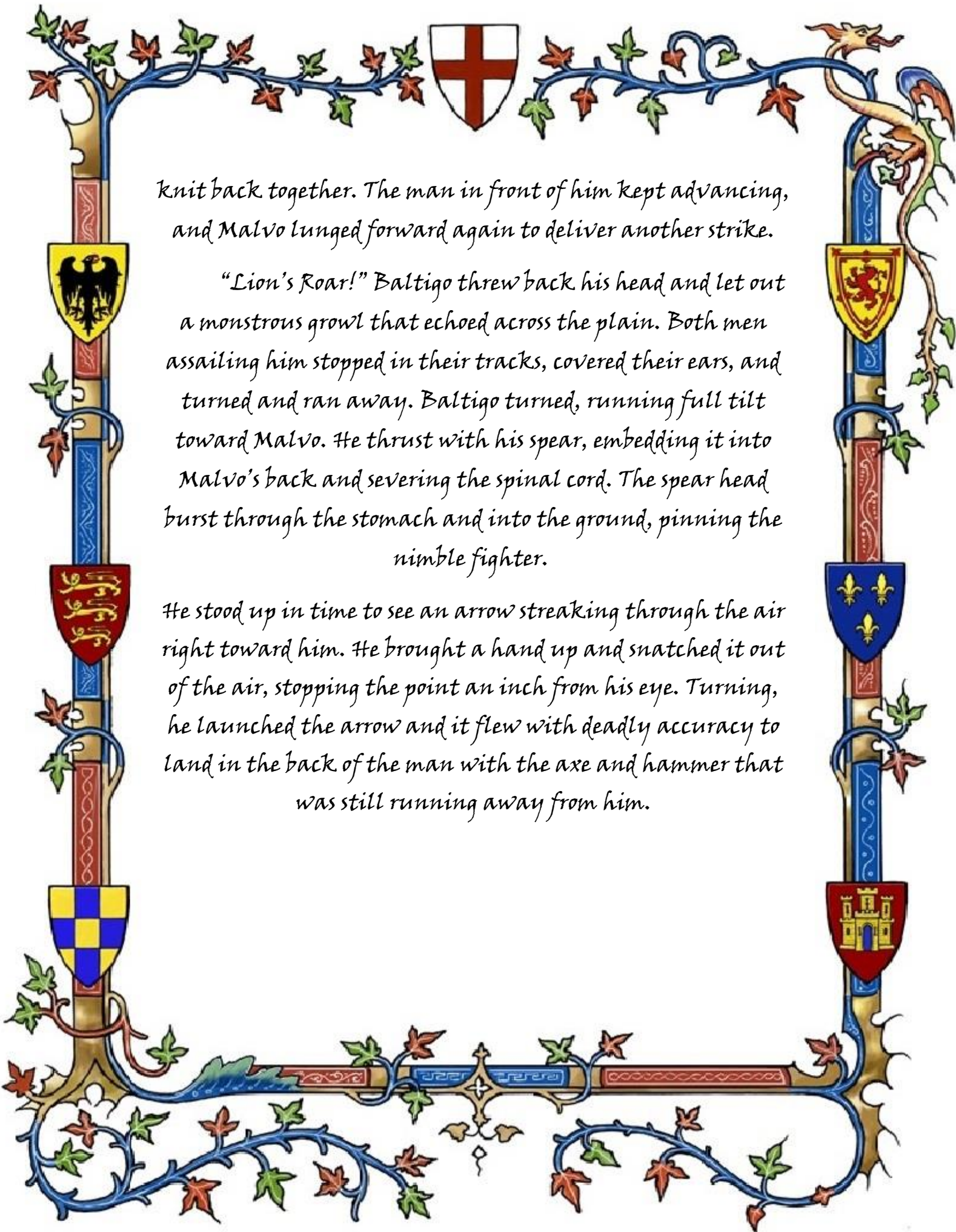
He looked over his shoulder and saw Malvo with a sharp blade thrust into the knight's back. Malvo grinned. "I told you I'd get you, Baltigo!" He pulled the blade out and Baltigo staggered forward. "Iron...Iron Heart Surge!" Bright energy flashed around him and he felt pain fade as his skin



knit back together. The man in front of him kept advancing, and Malvo lunged forward again to deliver another strike.

"Lion's Roar!" Baltigo threw back his head and let out a monstrous growl that echoed across the plain. Both men assailing him stopped in their tracks, covered their ears, and turned and ran away. Baltigo turned, running full tilt toward Malvo. He thrust with his spear, embedding it into Malvo's back and severing the spinal cord. The spear head burst through the stomach and into the ground, pinning the nimble fighter.

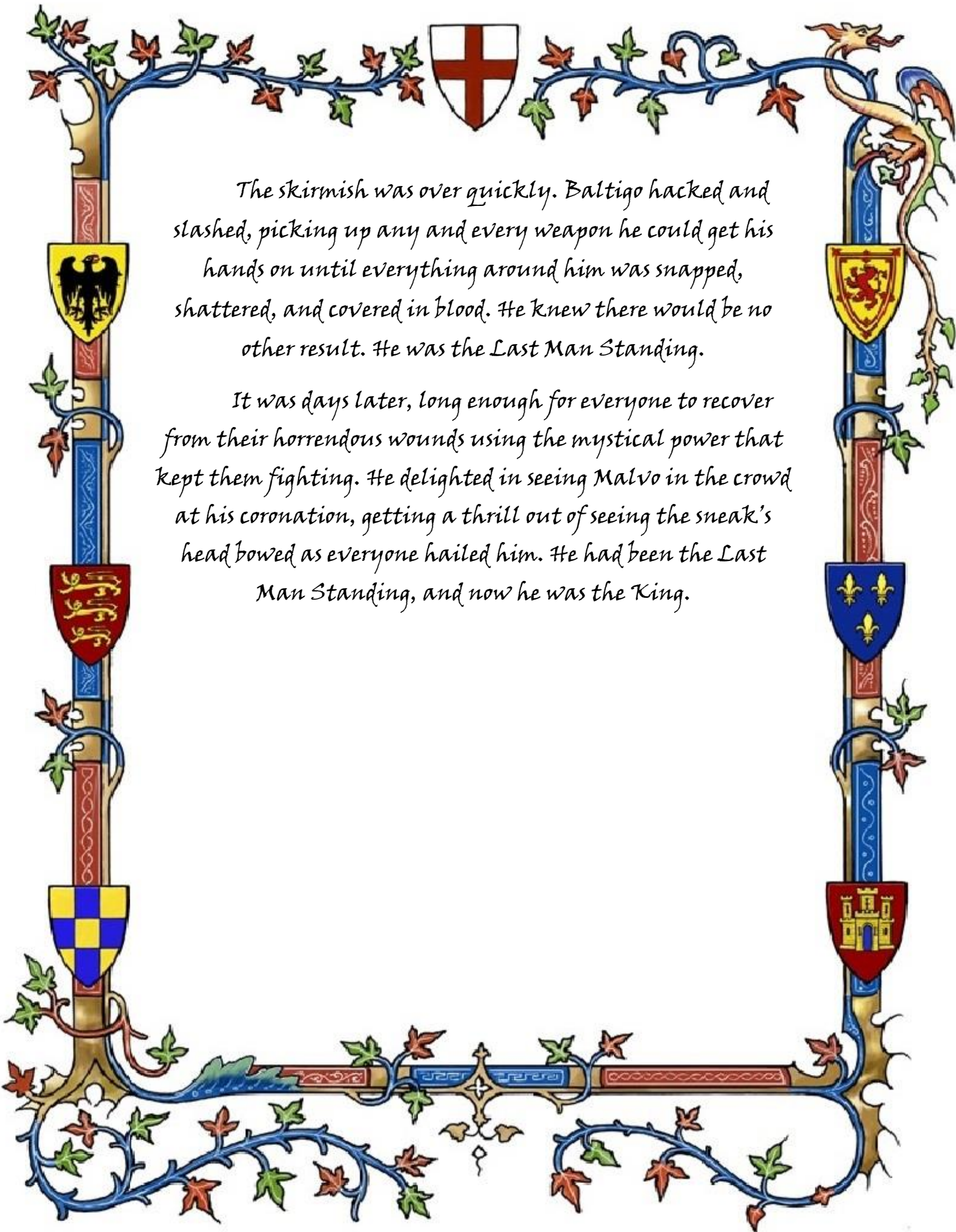
He stood up in time to see an arrow streaking through the air right toward him. He brought a hand up and snatched it out of the air, stopping the point an inch from his eye. Turning, he launched the arrow and it flew with deadly accuracy to land in the back of the man with the axe and hammer that was still running away from him.

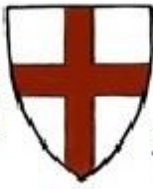




*The skirmish was over quickly. Baltigo hacked and slashed, picking up any and every weapon he could get his hands on until everything around him was snapped, shattered, and covered in blood. He knew there would be no other result. He was the Last Man Standing.*

*It was days later, long enough for everyone to recover from their horrendous wounds using the mystical power that kept them fighting. He delighted in seeing Malvo in the crowd at his coronation, getting a thrill out of seeing the sneak's head bowed as everyone hailed him. He had been the Last Man Standing, and now he was the King.*



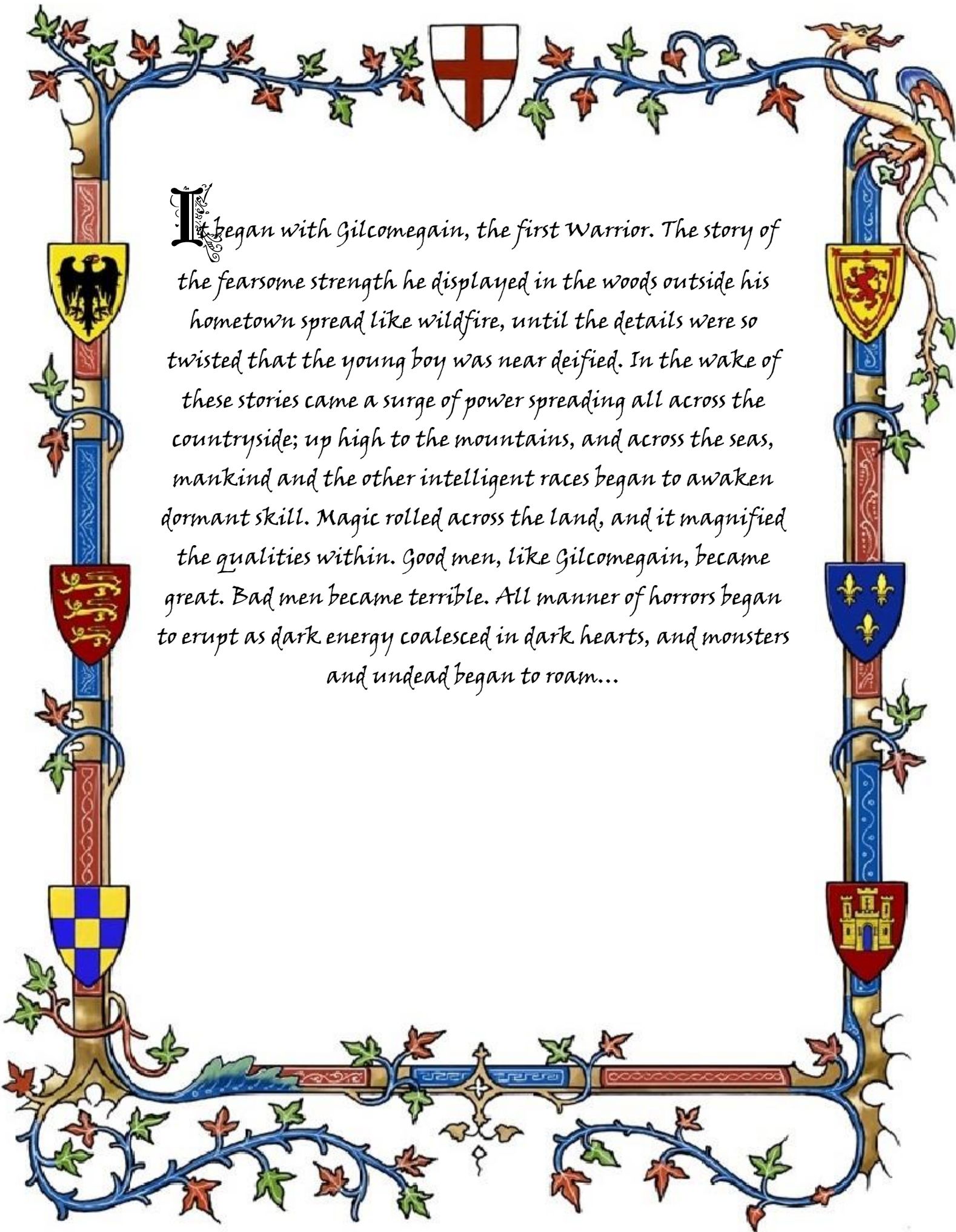


# Qinion





**I**t began with Gilcomegain, the first Warrior. The story of the fearsome strength he displayed in the woods outside his hometown spread like wildfire, until the details were so twisted that the young boy was near deified. In the wake of these stories came a surge of power spreading all across the countryside; up high to the mountains, and across the seas, mankind and the other intelligent races began to awaken dormant skill. Magic rolled across the land, and it magnified the qualities within. Good men, like Gilcomegain, became great. Bad men became terrible. All manner of horrors began to erupt as dark energy coalesced in dark hearts, and monsters and undead began to roam...



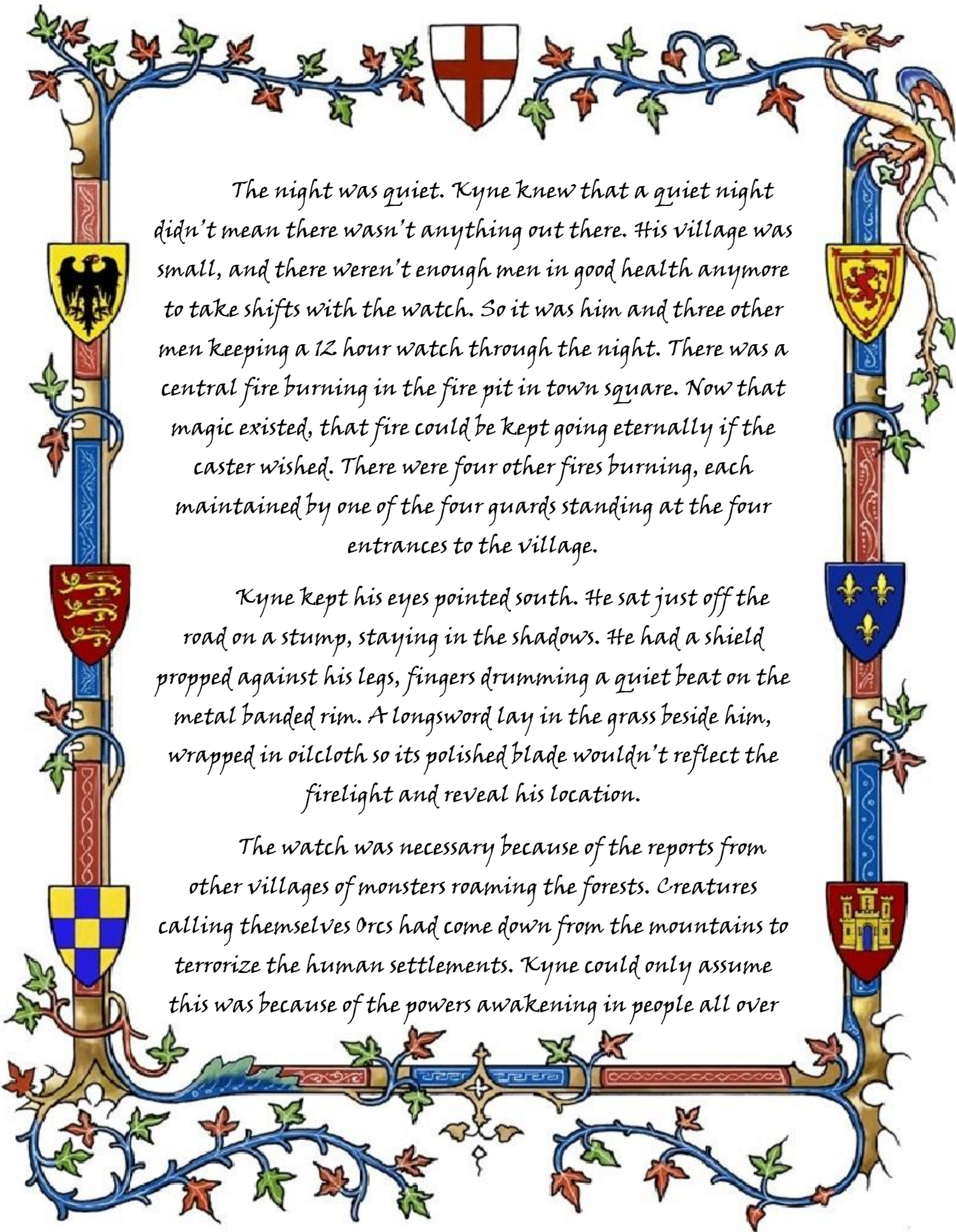




The night was quiet. Kyne knew that a quiet night didn't mean there wasn't anything out there. His village was small, and there weren't enough men in good health anymore to take shifts with the watch. So it was him and three other men keeping a 12 hour watch through the night. There was a central fire burning in the fire pit in town square. Now that magic existed, that fire could be kept going eternally if the caster wished. There were four other fires burning, each maintained by one of the four guards standing at the four entrances to the village.

Kyne kept his eyes pointed south. He sat just off the road on a stump, staying in the shadows. He had a shield propped against his legs, fingers drumming a quiet beat on the metal banded rim. A longsword lay in the grass beside him, wrapped in oilcloth so its polished blade wouldn't reflect the firelight and reveal his location.

The watch was necessary because of the reports from other villages of monsters roaming the forests. Creatures calling themselves Orcs had come down from the mountains to terrorize the human settlements. Kyne could only assume this was because of the powers awakening in people all over

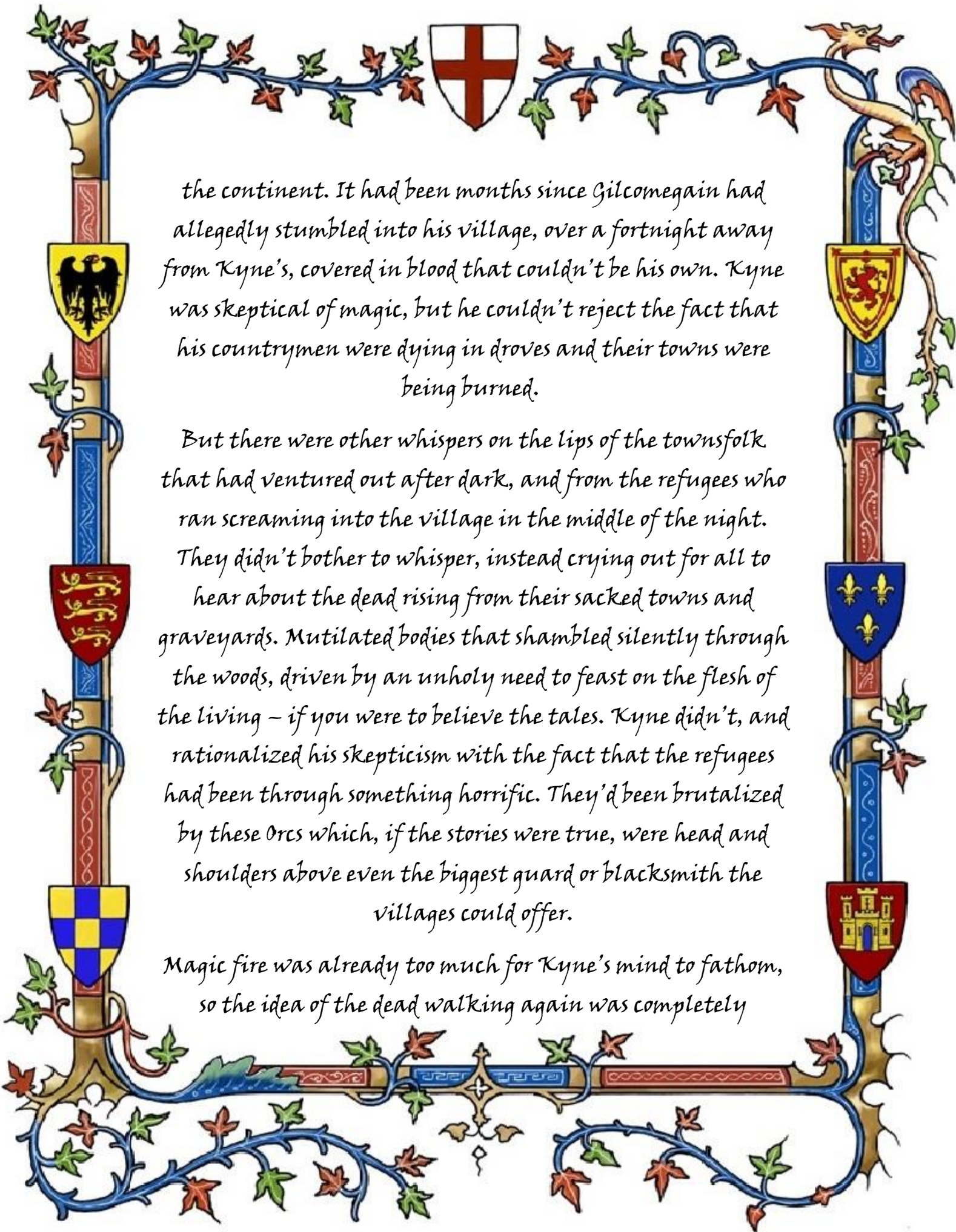




*the continent. It had been months since Gilcomegain had allegedly stumbled into his village, over a fortnight away from Kyne's, covered in blood that couldn't be his own. Kyne was skeptical of magic, but he couldn't reject the fact that his countrymen were dying in droves and their towns were being burned.*

*But there were other whispers on the lips of the townsfolk that had ventured out after dark, and from the refugees who ran screaming into the village in the middle of the night. They didn't bother to whisper, instead crying out for all to hear about the dead rising from their sacked towns and graveyards. Mutilated bodies that shambled silently through the woods, driven by an unholy need to feast on the flesh of the living – if you were to believe the tales. Kyne didn't, and rationalized his skepticism with the fact that the refugees had been through something horrific. They'd been brutalized by these Orcs which, if the stories were true, were head and shoulders above even the biggest guard or blacksmith the villages could offer.*

*Magic fire was already too much for Kyne's mind to fathom, so the idea of the dead walking again was completely*





unbelievable to him. So when a twig snapped in the distance, sounding like a peal of thunder in the silence of the night, the guard assumed it was a group of those same refugees seeking shelter. The Orcs hadn't made it this far south of the mountain ranges, and if they had they'd approach from the north of town.

Still, Kyne slid his arm through the straps of the shield and lowered his left arm to grab the hilt of his covered blade. Casting his gaze out into the shadows he searched for any sign of movement. He was surprised to find that he could see small pinpricks of white light bobbing toward the town, moving up the road and through the trees. If he didn't know any better Kyne would have said that the lights were eyes, as they moved in groups of two for the most part.

Kyne kept still as the lights grew closer. Between the dim moonlight and the light of the fire he began to pick out shapes. Men and women were moving through the darkness, limping and stumbling. Kyne had been right, even though he knew better; the glowing lights were their eyes. The guard stifled a momentary cry of fear before he came to his senses. There were only a half dozen of the shambling creatures, and



they were slow. Hopefully he would be able to dispatch them quickly and alert the other guards to be on the lookout.

As he stood and brought forth his longsword, Kyne noted that the undead also carried weapons. Some were simple, clubs and batons likely wrestled from the hands of dead townsfolk. Or perhaps it was their original owners who carried them now. Two of them carried rusted blades, likely buried with them, but one carried a sword in as good a shape as his own. Slow or not, he'd have to keep an eye on that one.

When Kyne stood, each undead's eyes trained on him. They began to move a little quicker; they showed purpose when presented with a meal. They began to groan. Each voice was quiet by itself, but together they made a chorus of damnation. As they drew closer Kyne could see that each one was decayed and falling apart. One had no lower jaw, another had a large chunk of its skull missing – which left it with one eye – and another had only one arm. Two stumbled because one was missing a foot and the other had a broken ankle; its foot bent completely back as it was drug behind it.

Knowing he'd have to make the first move to keep from being surrounded, Kyne threw himself forward and swung his sword.



The closest undead slowly brought a club up to try and defend, surely a muscle memory, but it couldn't match the speed of a living foe. Kyne's blade cut through the club mid-swing and he brought his shield forward and drove the lip into his enemy's ribcage. There was a disgusting cracking sound as the undead was thrown back into its group and all but the one with the newer steel tumbled to the ground with a clatter.

Kyne watched as they all struggled to their feet including, to his grim fascination, the one whose ribs he'd just destroyed. It was deformed now, hunched and hobbled even more than before, but there was no blood and it was only a little slower than before. The one who'd stayed on its feet moved forward now, more careful than its brethren. It showed less decay than the others, some of who were little more than bones at this point. A putrid smell radiated from it, and its flesh was hanging from an emaciated frame.

The newer undead brought its sword around much quicker than Kyne anticipated, likely because it seemed to be newly dead. Kyne threw his shield up and the blade bit into the iron banding, sending sparks flying and illuminating the rancid face before him a little better. The lips were pulled back over

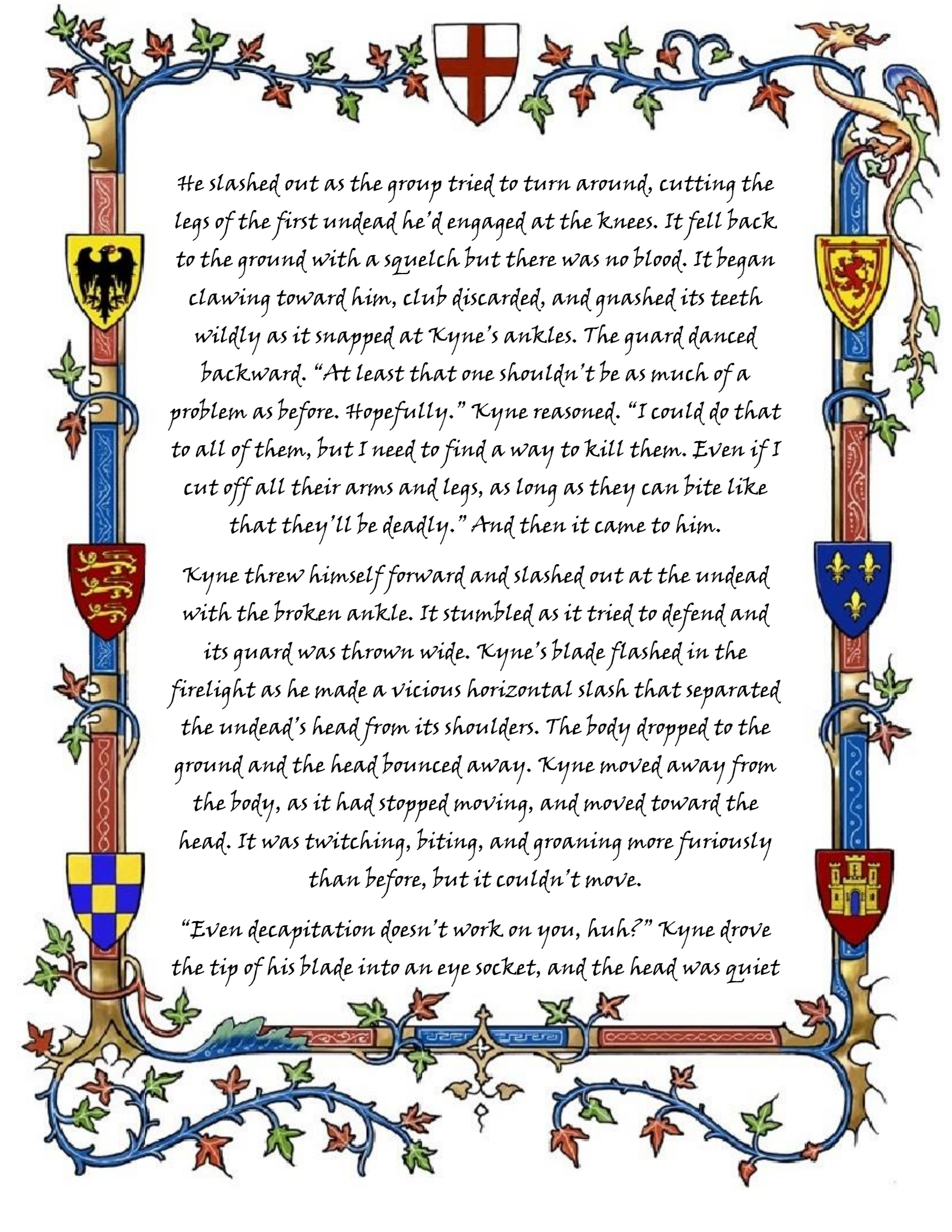


*the teeth in a rictus grin, and their eyes showed absolutely no intelligence. Off-put, Kyne retaliated with a quick slash at the belly.*

*The tip of his longsword hit home as the undead took a ragged step back, slicing the belly. It didn't look like much, but it was usually a fatal hit for a living foe. The undead looked down as its lower belly pulled away from the skin of its chest.*

*The stomach and intestines fell to the ground with a squishing noise, and Kyne realized for the first time how much danger he may be in. The monster showed no reaction other than a cock of the head. Almost as if the undead thought it was interesting that he was still alive.*

*"How in the hell am I supposed to kill something if it can survive getting disemboweled?!" Kyne thought with a panic. He wished now that he'd paid more attention to the stories told about the undead, as maybe there would have been a way to dispatch them permanently. The undead stepped forward, slipping on its own entrails, and fell to the ground in a heap. Kyne used this opportunity to dart around behind the group to try and engage some of the stragglers.*



He slashed out as the group tried to turn around, cutting the legs of the first undead he'd engaged at the knees. It fell back to the ground with a squelch but there was no blood. It began clawing toward him, club discarded, and gnashed its teeth wildly as it snapped at Kyne's ankles. The guard danced backward. "At least that one shouldn't be as much of a problem as before. Hopefully." Kyne reasoned. "I could do that to all of them, but I need to find a way to kill them. Even if I cut off all their arms and legs, as long as they can bite like that they'll be deadly." And then it came to him.

Kyne threw himself forward and slashed out at the undead with the broken ankle. It stumbled as it tried to defend and its guard was thrown wide. Kyne's blade flashed in the firelight as he made a vicious horizontal slash that separated the undead's head from its shoulders. The body dropped to the ground and the head bounced away. Kyne moved away from the body, as it had stopped moving, and moved toward the head. It was twitching, biting, and groaning more furiously than before, but it couldn't move.

"Even decapitation doesn't work on you, huh?" Kyne drove the tip of his blade into an eye socket, and the head was quiet



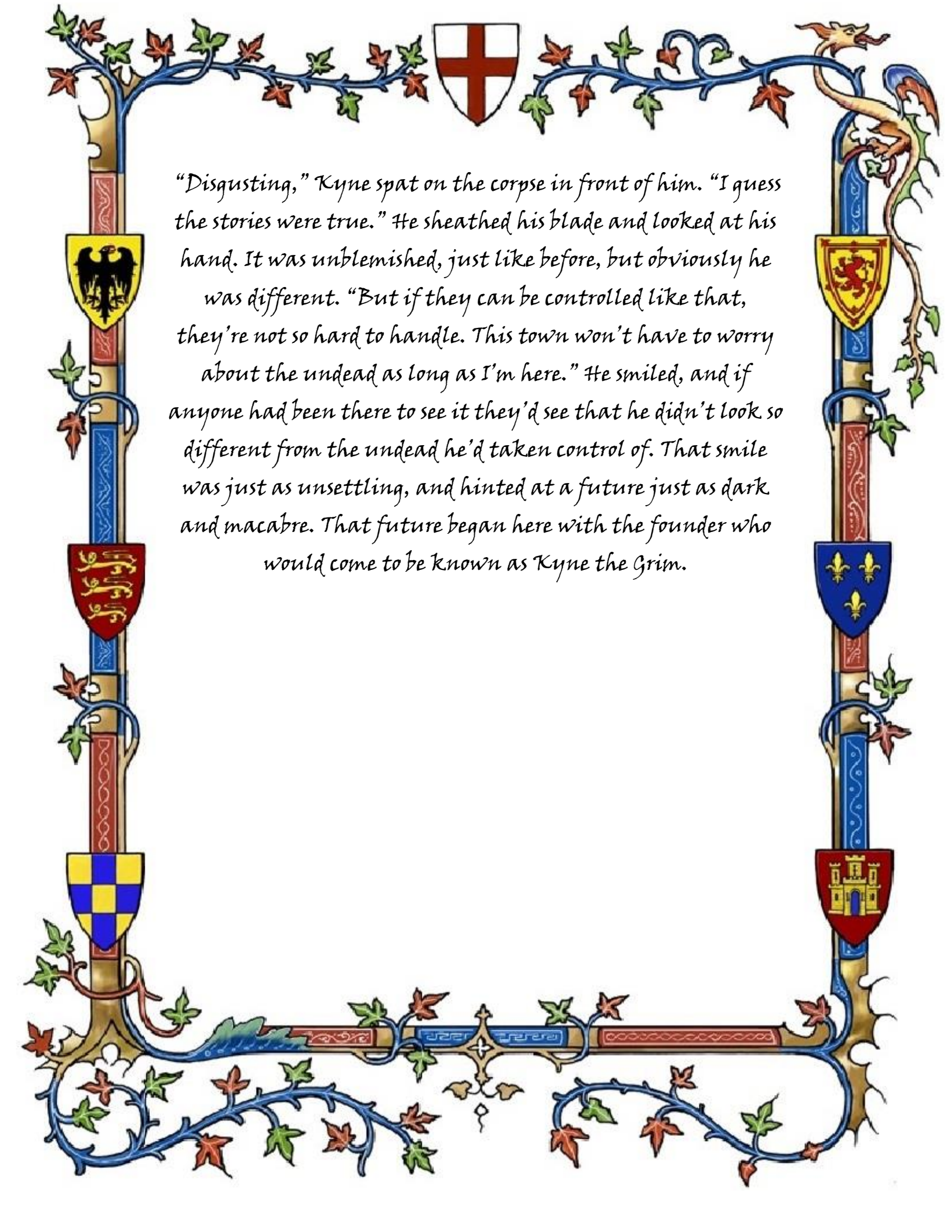
at last. "Rest In Peace." The guard said, with a grim smile. His words brought forth a warm feeling inside him as a pink light shimmered around his left hand. Almost against his will, he thrust his hand toward the undead with the intact sword he'd gutted before. The pink light flew from his hand and struck the monster in the chest. The undead staggered back for a moment and then the pink energy took over the white glow in its eye sockets.

The monster looked at him for a second and then raised its blade in a salute and threw itself at the nearest undead, putting the blade right through its nasal cavity. It then ripped the sword out of its comrade's face and the other undead crumpled, no light in its eyes any longer. Kyne raised an eyebrow curiously, but didn't question this new development.

It seemed he'd awakened some new power himself.

It only took a few minutes for the two of them to destroy the rest of the undead. When it was over Kyne and the last undead met by the fire. The undead saluted again, grinning its macabre smile. Kyne frowned for a second before bringing his sword point up through his ally's chin. The light died as the zombie dropped to the ground. "Rest in pieces."





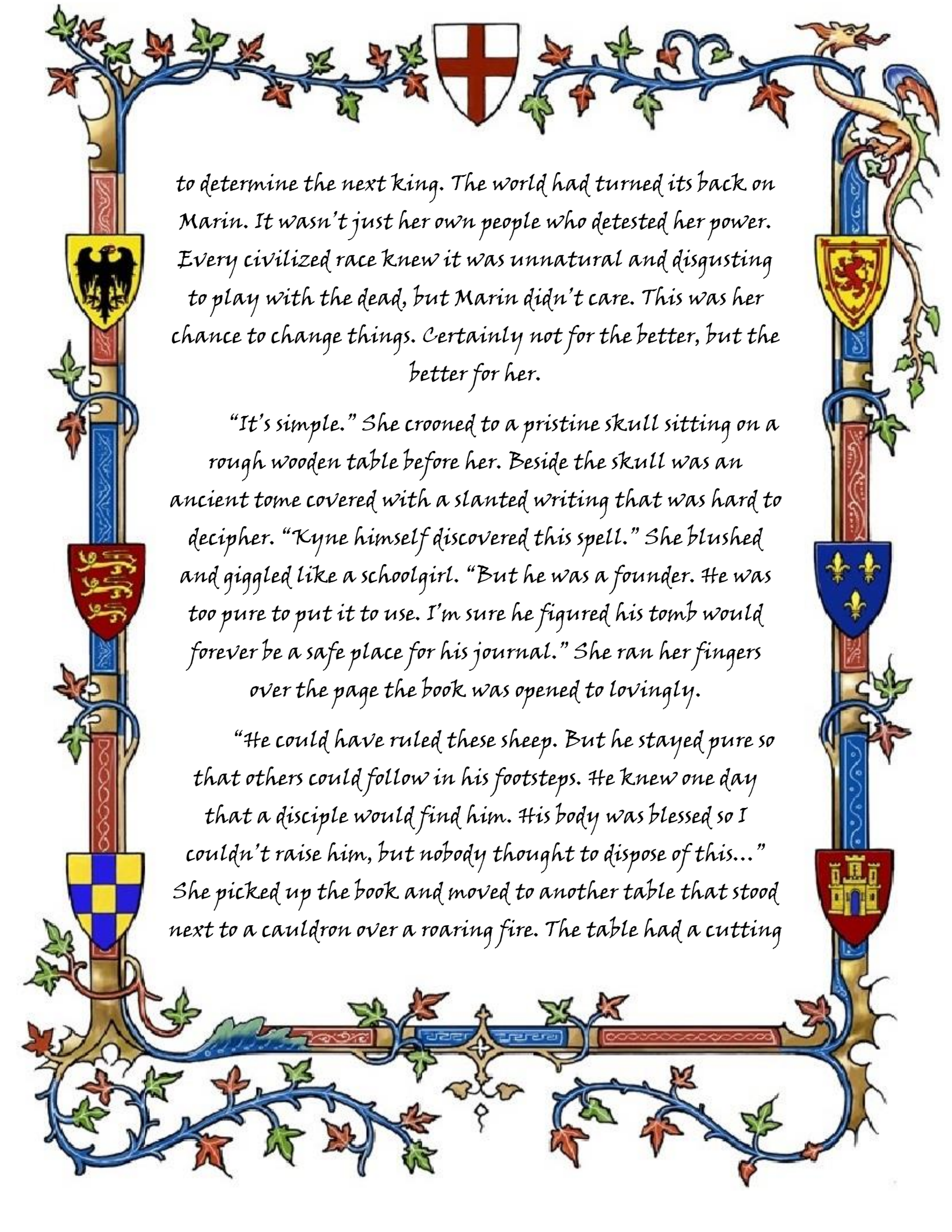
*“Disgusting,” Kyne spat on the corpse in front of him. “I guess the stories were true.” He sheathed his blade and looked at his hand. It was unblemished, just like before, but obviously he was different. “But if they can be controlled like that, they’re not so hard to handle. This town won’t have to worry about the undead as long as I’m here.” He smiled, and if anyone had been there to see it they’d see that he didn’t look so different from the undead he’d taken control of. That smile was just as unsettling, and hinted at a future just as dark and macabre. That future began here with the founder who would come to be known as Kyne the Grim.*



*A thousand years went by, and Kyne's name became infamous. There were scores of warriors who'd taken after him and courted death. One of the multitude was an Elven woman named Marin. She herself was rather infamous, and was known far and wide as Baneblade. She was cruel and cunning, and took delight in the perverse nature of the powers that had awoken within her. It wasn't just the humans who'd awakened power all those centuries ago; all the races under the sky and under the ground had gained power as well. And some of them reveled in it.*

*Marin Baneblade was currently comfortable in a deep cavern under the ground, furnished like a cozy living room. Most Elves would abhor the underground, but Marin was a different sort. Once she awakened her powers she was banished from her Elven settlement. The long-living creatures thought her powers were an abomination. She'd long since abandoned the forests and went to places where her powers would better suit her. There were plenty of long forgotten bodies interred in the ground.*

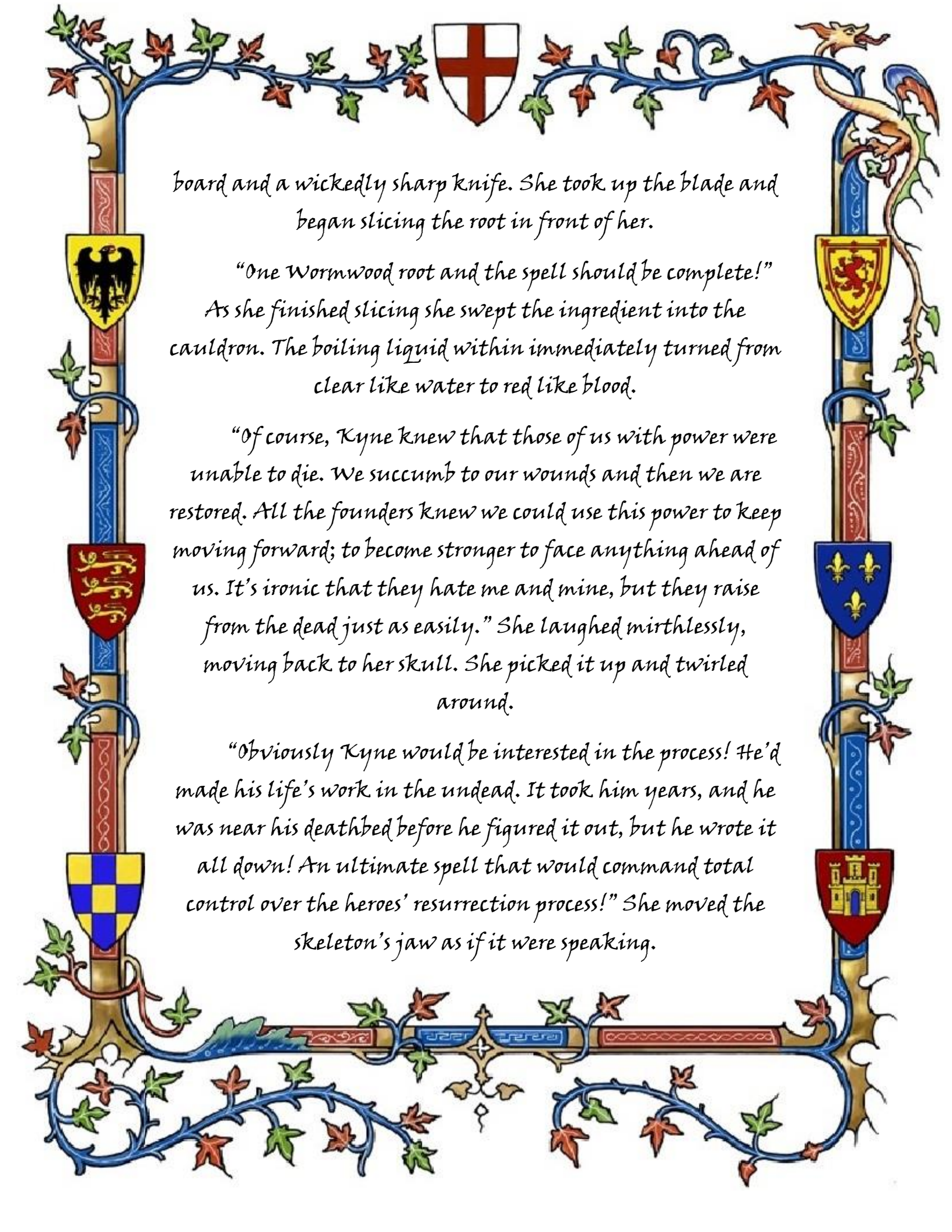
*At that moment, Marin was hatching a plot. Weeks ago the word had gone out all around the country; it was time*



to determine the next king. The world had turned its back on Marin. It wasn't just her own people who detested her power. Every civilized race knew it was unnatural and disgusting to play with the dead, but Marin didn't care. This was her chance to change things. Certainly not for the better, but the better for her.

"It's simple." She crooned to a pristine skull sitting on a rough wooden table before her. Beside the skull was an ancient tome covered with a slanted writing that was hard to decipher. "Kyne himself discovered this spell." She blushed and giggled like a schoolgirl. "But he was a founder. He was too pure to put it to use. I'm sure he figured his tomb would forever be a safe place for his journal." She ran her fingers over the page the book was opened to lovingly.

"He could have ruled these sheep. But he stayed pure so that others could follow in his footsteps. He knew one day that a disciple would find him. His body was blessed so I couldn't raise him, but nobody thought to dispose of this..." She picked up the book and moved to another table that stood next to a cauldron over a roaring fire. The table had a cutting

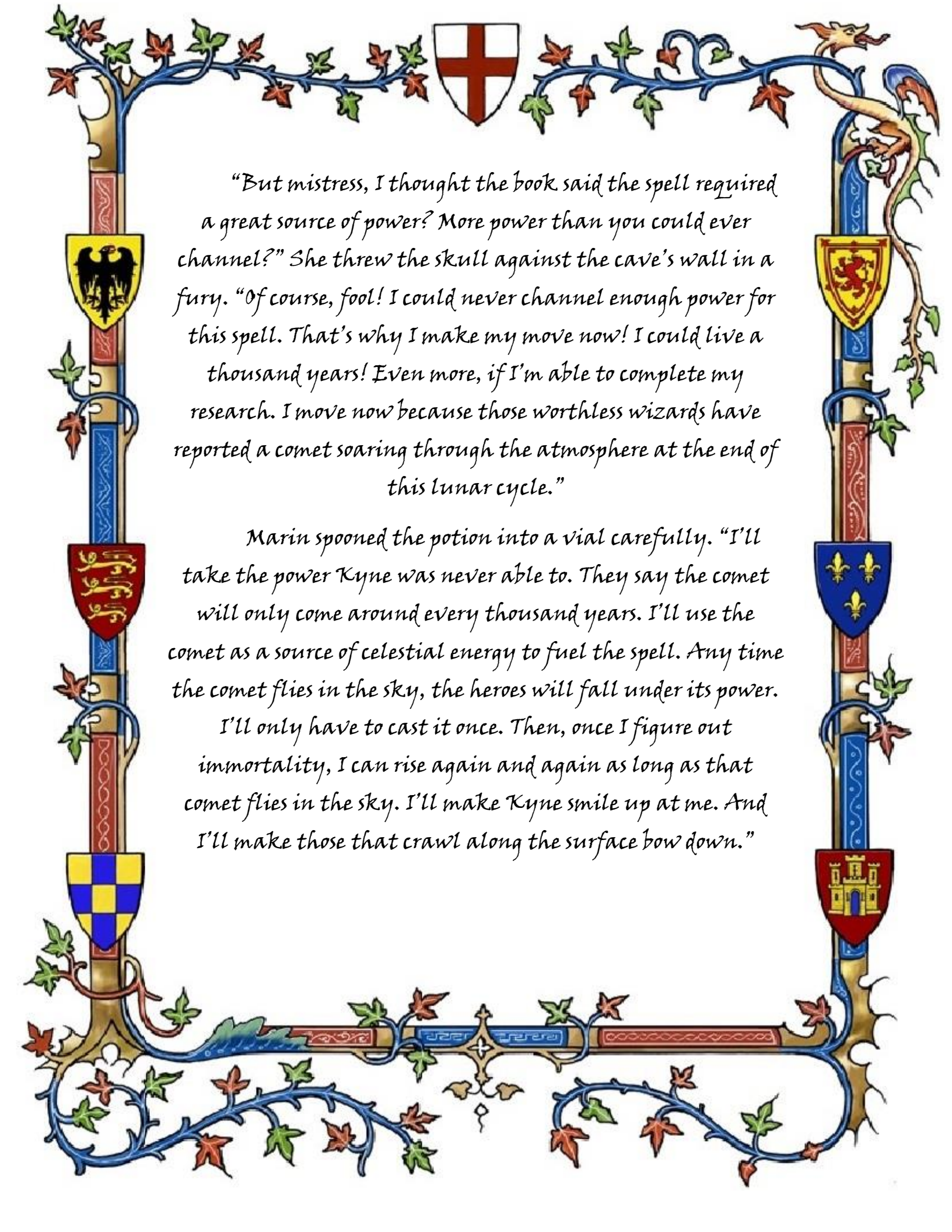


*board and a wickedly sharp knife. She took up the blade and began slicing the root in front of her.*

*“One Wormwood root and the spell should be complete!”  
As she finished slicing she swept the ingredient into the cauldron. The boiling liquid within immediately turned from clear like water to red like blood.*

*“Of course, Kyne knew that those of us with power were unable to die. We succumb to our wounds and then we are restored. All the founders knew we could use this power to keep moving forward; to become stronger to face anything ahead of us. It’s ironic that they hate me and mine, but they raise from the dead just as easily.” She laughed mirthlessly, moving back to her skull. She picked it up and twirled around.*

*“Obviously Kyne would be interested in the process! He’d made his life’s work in the undead. It took him years, and he was near his deathbed before he figured it out, but he wrote it all down! An ultimate spell that would command total control over the heroes’ resurrection process!” She moved the skeleton’s jaw as if it were speaking.*



*"But mistress, I thought the book said the spell required a great source of power? More power than you could ever channel?" She threw the skull against the cave's wall in a fury. "Of course, fool! I could never channel enough power for this spell. That's why I make my move now! I could live a thousand years! Even more, if I'm able to complete my research. I move now because those worthless wizards have reported a comet soaring through the atmosphere at the end of this lunar cycle."*

*Marin spooned the potion into a vial carefully. "I'll take the power Kyne was never able to. They say the comet will only come around every thousand years. I'll use the comet as a source of celestial energy to fuel the spell. Any time the comet flies in the sky, the heroes will fall under its power.*

*I'll only have to cast it once. Then, once I figure out immortality, I can rise again and again as long as that comet flies in the sky. I'll make Kyne smile up at me. And I'll make those that crawl along the surface bow down."*



*It was the day everyone in the realm had been waiting for, the day a new king or queen was crowned. The wizards who'd foreseen the comet called it a good omen, and so the current king and his council had set the next contest for the day where it would be directly overhead. Heroes gathered from all over the land, men and women of every race were represented. Elves shook their heads in disgust and dismay when they saw Marin Baneblade strut through the battlefield to take a starting position.*

*She was a striking figure, clad in shining black armor. A skull gleamed at the center of her breastplate, a pentagram of blood inked on the forehead. A sable cloak of raven feathers rolled from her shoulders, and an obsidian circlet nestled in her platinum blonde hair. A shield of wood stained dark hung over her shoulder with a stone skull set in the center and a long, thin, jagged blade was sheathed at her waist. She smiled magnanimously at every hero she passed, reveling in the feeling of all eyes on her.*

*After an hour or so, when all the heroes expected had taken their places, a town crier stepped into the middle of the field close to where Marin had taken her place. He waved his*



hands and a platform of rock rose under his feet to elevate him above the others where he could be seen. "Welcome!" He exclaimed with a magnified voice. "The time has come! Centuries past, the country crowned its first king, Baltigo! It was decreed by a council of heroes that we would be governed by the strongest of us, so that we would always have powerful leadership in times of crisis! It was determined that a king or queen could only rule if they could keep proving they were the strongest!

"Our king or queen is, therefore, determined by combat! Last Man Standing!" He threw his hands into the air and shimmering numbers appeared. "Raise your weapons when you're ready!" The numbers began to count down, and Marin knew it was her time. "Actually, noble crier, today things will be different!" She raised the potion to her lips and drained the vial. Her body began to glow as the numbers continued to count down.

She raised her thin blade to the sky and a red light burst forth from the sword tip. The comet overhead shimmered as the sky darkened to black as night. The comet became a huge moon in



*the sky, bathing everything in a bloody light. The numbers in the sky disappeared as a magical horn blast sounded.*

*“What have you done?!” Cried another elf as the other heroes began to move. “I’ve done what no-one has been able to do before! I’ve enslaved death!” She leaped forward nimbly and thrust her thin blade forward. In his panic the other elf didn’t get his guard up in time, and the point of her sword slid right between the coverage of his armor and into his ribcage. He gasped and doubled over. Marin stepped back. “Soul Stone!” she cried as the eye sockets of the stone skull in her shield glowed.*

*The male elf fell back dead. Marin waited, hardly breathing, to make sure the spell worked as it should. Normally it would take a few hours for a hero to come back from their wounds on the battlefield but she watched as the elf’s wound closed and the blood disappeared. His eyes opened and he clambered to his feet, sword in hand.*

*“I live again only to serve you, mistress.” He pledged. Marin smiled as she reached out to stroke his cheek. “I know you do, slave. Now come make me queen!” They moved forward together, striking out as one. Confusion was sown across the*





battlefield as heroes stood from the spots they were slain and cut down the ones who killed them. Each time a body fell to the ground the comet above pulsed briefly, and the corpses stood again with eyes glowing red. In minutes Marin stood at the head of an army of heroes, with one man left to oppose her.

"What have you done, vile witch?! Why are all these heroes killing for you?!" Marin laughed joyfully. "They've decided that I should be your queen. No, I should be your Goddess. It's hard to argue, since I've done something the founders couldn't do. They couldn't conquer death and make it their own." She pretended to think for a moment.

"Would you like to know how to end my spell?" The man's eyes widened. "Of course, witch!" She smiled. "You just have to kill me. If you do, all the heroes will drop dead. You'll be king." His face contorted into an ugly scowl. "How could I kill you when you stand at the head of an army, temptress! You give hope only to rip it away!" Marin laughed again.

"You flatter me. I would be a fair Goddess. In fact, I'll give you a chance. Single combat between the two of us. Tell me your name, hero." The man stood straight, proud. "I am Valyn Braveshield. And I would be honored to slay a Goddess." He



*spat. Marin's smile grew wider. She saw that his arm hung uselessly at his side and snapped her fingers.*

*"I need a healer. Fix him so I can break him again." A priest stepped forward, hands aglow with a white light. He ran his hands over Valyn's useless arm and the flesh knit back together. The healer moved back and Valyn flexed his arm, testing the range of motion. Nodding, he picked his shield back up and took a stance opposite Marin. At a thought the army surrounded the two of them, making a circle for them to do battle.*

*"No one is to interfere." Marin commanded. Each of them dropped their weapons. "Yes, mistress." The horde intoned. The elf brought her blade up and touched Valyn's blade with it. "To the victor." She said sweetly. And they clashed. She was very fast, despite all her armor. The elves were ferociously strong and quick, so the encumbrance didn't seem to faze her in the slightest. Valyn was a mighty warrior as well though. He was able to land hits on her, but they struck off her armor in showers of sparks. Marin's thin blade was quick as a whip and soon left shallow cuts all over Valyn's face and sword*



arm. She'd let to strike a fatal blow, but it was a matter of time before one overcame the other.

Valyn had yet to use his power against Marin, because he only had a little left. He had to make sure he could finish her once he used the last of it. He saw a chance and took it, spinning to increase the force of his blow. Marin was taken by surprise at the bold move and took no move to take advantage. Valyn's sword came in a devastating arc and crashed against her shield as he cried "Annihilate!"

Marin felt as though Valyn's sword had exploded against her shield as it splintered, sending pieces flying everywhere. The stone skull dropped to her feet and she staggered back. Valyn threw his shield aside, took his blade in both hands, and lunged forward. The point of the blade punched through her armor like it was parchment and the two stood face to face. Valyn's face was locked in a triumphant snarl and Marin's eyes were wide with shock, a line of blood starting to trail from the corner of her mouth.

Valyn pulled his sword from her stomach and Marin dropped to her knees, fingers scrabbling through the dirt around her. Valyn stuck his sword into the ground and bent, reaching out



to grab Marin's chin. "Your spell is lifted, devil woman. I am your king, and I'm glad you're the first subject on your knees." Marin struggled to lift her hand, clutched in a fist over the stone skull from her shield.

"Soul....Stone..." The eyes of the skull glowed brightly for a second and red light enveloped Marin as she smashed the skull into Valyn's nose. The man reeled back, blood exploding from his face as Marin stood, body shaking from the wound closing. She recovered just as Valyn made a mad lunge for his sword. She rushed forward, bringing her sword down. Valyn threw out his left hand to catch Marin's sword as his right hand closed onto his own hilt.

Valyn screamed in pain as his left arm was slashed off at the wrist. In the same moment he spun around, tearing his sword from the ground and burying it into Marin's right side. The blade cut through the already damaged armor and stopped just inches from her spine. Valyn released the sword as Marin fell to her knees again. He reached down to pull the stone skull from her twitching fingers.

"You...won't be doing that...again." He muttered, tossing the skull away from her. She sat, gasping, and pulled the blade



from her body. Blood spurt out and painted the dirt. She motioned to two of her minions. "Raise me...to my feet. I-" she spat blood all over the front of her armor. "-I...refuse to kneel...as I die." The two minions moved forward and pulled her to her feet, arms around their necks. Her right hand still clutched her thin blade in a death grip.

"It is truly over now, monster." Valyn spat. He grabbed her by her hair and pulled her head back so their eyes met. She smiled at him. "You're right...Valyn...it...is. Sacrificial Rite!" Her left hand grabbed the chin of the minion holding her up on that side and jerked his head to the side, snapping his neck. She let the momentum slip her off his falling corpse as her wound knitted together again. She let gravity spin her to the ground as her sword was pulled into a deadly arc that bit into Valyn's neck and cut through diagonally, bisecting him at the shoulder. As he fell back Marin's sacrificial lamb was already climbing back to his feet, and within a few moments Valyn stood too, whole again.

Marin pointed her sword back to the comet and spoke an incantation. The red light faded as day returned to the battlefield, but the eyes of her army stayed red. The town



crier, still standing on the platform of rock he'd created, looked around in confusion. "What...what happened?"

"I'm you're queen now," Marin said, "that's what happened." She looked around at her minions. "Not to worry, the spell only lasts until the comet vanishes from the sky. They'll regain their senses in a day or two. Just in time for my coronation." She smiled widely. "I want them to be in their right minds when they kneel to me."





*That was how Marin Baneblade became our Queen. Her reign was terrible and bloody, but her power was absolute. As far as anyone knows she was never able to realize her dream of immortality. But that doesn't mean the heroes are safe. That doesn't mean her spell didn't work exactly as it was meant to. In a thousand years, when Marin's Comet comes back around, all the heroes could fall under her spell once again. Just because she may not be here to command them does not mean all is well. We may all become Minions again.*

