

## Chapter 1: Even Utnapishtim Can't Carry You Animals

“-. 1048 IC .-“

The Graelings were not the worst Norscan tribe, and in terms of physicality they were quite possibly the best.

Contrary to the Chaos Gods' pathological need to steal the credit for everything, Norscans were not so big, strong and vigorous because of some blessing of theirs. The superior Norse physique was just the inherent adaptability of humanity, and more specifically the mitochondria. Over the generations, it allowed the Northmen to incorporate the much higher concentration of magic in the air – and water and food – as an environmental *aide* rather than stressor.

The Aethyr flowed through all things, with all the consequences thereof, so it stood to reason that more of it meant stronger outward effects. Since Norscans were humans – living beings that retained their ability to pack bond with animals – they were naturally most influenced by Ghyran (the Jade Wind of Life) and Ghur (the Amber Wind of Beasts).

A superabundance of free energy allowed the cells to work off magic too. Usually partially, but sometimes even exclusively. For the most 'blessed' of Chaos Lords, many of whose helmets didn't have separate visors or faceplates, it was practically necessary to subsist entirely on magic, after their armor became fused to their flesh and it became impossible for them to eat.

Or shit, for that matter.

There was, however, one thing that *was* unquestionably owed to Chaos – mutation. The Norscans had the greatest rate of mutations among all strains of man on Mallus. Or, rather, they used to. When the northern Warp Gate was destroyed, the rate of mutations dropped from the greatest to the lower range of percentiles in the world. Not overnight, it took about a year for the Warp stuff in the air to dilute, but there was no longer a gaping wound in the world, flooding the materium with Dhar and allowing the Chaos Gods' will to delay its dispersing into the Eight Colors.

The warpstone in the ground would take longer to deplete, depending on how far off the rails the Skaven would go when they realized it was now a finite resource in the North hemisphere. But it probably wouldn't take more than a generation, possibly much less. This was due to the perpetual flames, those ever-burning pyres dotting the Chaos Wastes, which burned hotter and for much longer than almost any fuel in the realms of Norsca, or even anywhere further south. They were the most important resource in Norscan smithing, as a fire that burns hotter for longer could create much harder weapons and armor.

Obtaining the embers was already difficult. Transporting them was complicated, and very few individuals actually entered the Chaos Wastes and returned to tell the tale. Or, again, that's how it used to be. Now it was easier and safer since the number of chaos spawn and other mutants was also a finite resource. More of them died after coming back now, usually intercepted and murdered a day out by bondsmen sworn to secrecy, lest the news get out about the Chaos Wastes becoming normal Wastes. The shamans were the only ones more invested in that cover-up than the King and Jarls, especially the ones who'd seen visions of the Gate's destruction just as it happened.

The ever-burning pyres were a finite resource now, after thirteen years. They dwindled fastest of all of Chaos' 'gifts.' Since all fire needed fuel, in this case dhar (dark magic), that meant the warpstone – literally

solidified dhar – was getting consumed too. As such, their embers were becoming so rare as to be very precious. Not unattainable *yet*, especially for the largest and most prominent tribes like the Graelings, but it wouldn't take more than another generation if nothing changed.

The Four were merely establishing a new order, it was claimed. After all, what else could explain this? This was the opposite of excess so it couldn't be Lanshor (Slaanesh). There had also been no omens from Tzeentch ever since the Silence, at least none that any shaman or sorcerer was prepared to swear by. You didn't take the Gods' names in vain without dooming yourself to eternal torment. With the Blood God also out, that seemingly left one option. After all, who could have enacted the decay of all the other gods' power, if not Grandfather Crow?

Some variation of this story was constantly pushed by the sorcerer-shamans, who'd lost the most due to the Silence, both in influence and power. 'Silence' didn't entirely fit as a name, you could still hear a faint whistling buzz in your ear. Chaos had been practically screaming in people's ears before, the sorcerers said. Surely, they would be able to start hearing the Gods again after they got used to the fainter noise. After all, a lesser din would only make them even easier to understand.

Moreover, Tchar (Tzeentch) was known to be fickle and duplicitous, so the Silence could *technically* be slanted as a plan by him. Even if spells were weaker, and the strongest ones nigh impossible to cast now, the role of the mystics would be preserved if only they regained their soothsaying.

Unfortunately, such blandishments were finding less and less purchase every season. If the shamans and sorcerers becoming almost deaf to the Gods and their Spirits was considered a bad omen, the perpetual flames going out was seen as nigh apocalyptic. Such an undignified demise for the resource most important to Norscan ability to engage in warfare was nothing but an ill omen from Kharnath.

Or, based on whispers uttered only where no one but an imperceptible disembodied spirit could spy it, Lord Kharnath's *failure*.

No one outside a couple of Bjornlings – the Graelings' neighbouring clan – had dared suggest the weak gods of the South had finally prevailed over the True Gods, even now. But mutterings about and against the shamans were a different matter. Whatever the Silence was, it *had* come with a massive drop in the powers that even the oldest and most powerful of them could manifest. And if this wasn't enough by itself, losing almost all ability to predict the future – which was almost always just being informed of far-off present events – most definitely was. The shamans' role as advisors to chieftains and jarls was entrenched in centuries of tradition, but if you couldn't advise you weren't worth the title, were you?

Among the Graelings, such mutterings were even being made out in the open, which led to some darkly ironic consequences. Unlike other crimes, offenses against shamans were not prosecuted in Norscan society, except *maybe* if someone succeeded in murdering one. It was taken for granted that anyone stupid enough to wrong a shaman or sorcerer would incur a fate worse than death at the hands of the spirits. Shaman-Sorcerers were practiced murderers, and they got all their power through dark pacts and bargains with Daemons of Chaos, even those who thought they were communing with Ancestor Spirits or Land Fae. Even the pettiest entities gave them arcane powers, and their prophetic influence was what guided the tribes of the Northmen during both peace and war. Usually *towards* war.

So, naturally, when such consequences *stopped* happening, especially coupled with the abysmal failure of shamans to stay ahead of the news anymore, all but the densest fool took notice after a couple of seasons.

It had been thirteen years.

Thirteen years of even Nurgle remaining silent, and mutation wasn't even the biggest nail in that coffin. The occurrence and *recurrence* of disease and plague had dropped as well, in beasts and humans both. The Norscan people had never been so healthy for such a long stretch of time. They didn't even know this sort of general health was what the other realms of man considered normal. Sure, there was still the cold, flu, pox, infections and the childhood diseases, but even those were almost easy to overcome now, and only a fraction of people died. Most amazingly, not one of them had spawned a nurgling in almost a decade.

The shamans did attempt to take credit for this, or rather claimed it was owed to the various clans' tutelary spirits, and it even worked for a while in the beginning.

But again. It had been thirteen years.

On that note, our own shaman's life had been particularly fraught recently. It seemed to be looking up for him at the start of the year. Despite that we were a middling clan among the Graelings tribe, he seemed to have gained uncommon favor with our tutelary spirit, the Mammoth-Rider from whom our clan got its name. He was beginning to hear its voice again, he claimed, and even the voices of his other contracted spirits. Some of his spells began to regain their strength, which gave credence to his claim. He was even convinced that Tzeentch himself was sending him signs by the time of New Year's Eve. When he made a prophecy that the Silence was about to be over, most in our clan even believed him.

So it was quite a shock when, the morning after Geheimnismacht, the clan gathered for the New Year's blood sacrifice only to find our venerable shaman's apprentices and thralls in bloody chunks, and the shaman himself moaning in the snow with half his previous number of arms, only one eye, and green all over.

In his zeal to reestablish his connection with the Otherworld, he'd walked out into the open on the one date everyone stayed indoors, and drew on Morrslieb's power until his blood sacrifice blew them all up.

Our shaman was carried off ranting about imposters and dream visitors that misled him with false visions and soothsayings. Which was at *least* half wrong. The revered shaman hadn't been wrong to believe the 'dream visitor's' claims that Ghyran was the power of gods. All the Winds came from the Warp in the end, before this time capsule of a world did... whatever it does to split magic into eight. Also, I promised to teach him how to perform magic through his own power instead of relying on intermediaries, and I delivered.

I even showed him everything I could do at this point. I'd only recently grown enough in spirit to be able to work magic again. Worse, while learning the Winds was proving much easier and safer than recreating the spells I'd once known from my past lives, most of my data came from observing the likes of *him* at work. Since most shaman spells were actually performed by petty spirits he channeled, I was having to design most of mine from first principles.

It did go much faster than in past lives when I had just raw Warp matter or psyker powers to base everything on, never mind throwing bones. It spoke well of whatever the Old Ones had done to disrupt psyker and sorcery powers here, and even better of the Winds' utility.

It did *not* speak well of the Winds' applicability in the broader galaxy, but that was the future's problem.

Astral projection had been available to me all the while, but I'd not dared to do that before. As a soul I could be imperceptible, but without a commensurate level of spiritual power I wouldn't be able to protect my body while I was gone, never mind kick out a possessing entity that might decide to take it as their new meat suit. Chaos was weak but not *gone*.

Now that I was astrally projecting again, though, I was finally able to dreamwalk, and otherwise explore the world even as my body slept at home. This, of course, meant I was now able to spy on magic practitioners from farther off.

I was taking it slow and steady. I didn't want to more than dabble lest I lock myself into a specialization. Also, I didn't share all the languages or the mindsets of the people I was watching, so I was having to learn those too. I'd already gone through this song and dance in a past life, but I lost a lot in order to turn my soul into an Akashic terminal, including all the arcane mechanisms and mystical traits I'd painstakingly sublimated into my soul over the many millennia. Also, reality was thinner, and magic more inherently dangerous. All of my spell matrices had to be redone.

Moreover, the memetic hazards of the Ruinous Powers meant I had to be doubly careful how I applied my math. Symmetry was crucial in sacred geometry, but there were whole numerological trines that were problematic now also. 888 was an open invitation for a bronze skull to the face at the worst time, for example. Also, there were four Ruinous Powers now, so I had to account not just for the added problematic numerology, but for the new skew between the materium and immaterium too. Base ten mathematics didn't cut it anymore.

I also had many reasons to suspect that Teclis was wrong about humans being limited to a single Wind. Psykers weren't limited to a single discipline, so there should be a way for us to use multiple winds of magic too, or even all of them. Most importantly, petty spells could be cast by any mage on this planet, and those things ranged from light tricks to elemental control and invisibility. Even creating living creatures to pull out of a hat! You could actually eat those things and derive nourishment from them, so either you were teleporting them in from somewhere or *creating life*.

In any case, I wanted a firm grounding in all eight winds, at least in terms of theory, before I did anything adventurous.

It was proving a daunting task, unfortunately. I'd done a flyover of the Empire and found that the Colleges of Magic didn't exist yet. Far as I could tell, it wasn't even the Era of Three Emperors yet, it was before even Magnus the Pious. According to town criers, it was the year 1048 IC, but whether that matched the timeline I knew from the Age of Unacknowledged Prophecies – my personal label for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century back on Terra – I couldn't be sure. I did find some hedge mages and alchemists with less than perfect warding, and some that did their practice outside.

Unfortunately, the elemental theory of magic didn't exist yet either, since we were centuries before Berthold Fessbinder too. That was something Teclis was *definitely* wrong to dismiss, both from what I remembered and what I was learning now.

All in all, I only had the basics of Ghyran to impart to my 'contracted' shaman. But it was still more than he had before.

It wasn't my fault he assumed the Life's jade and Morrslieb's warpstone green were the same color. I'd been *trying* to manipulate him into overdrawing on Ghyran, the backlash of which would have drained him of life and turned him and anyone near enough to him into desiccated husks. He even made me think he bought everything I was selling, my ability to dissect intension in the spiritual realm was another thing I was still assimilating into this incarnation, never mind the real soul arts.

Instead, since I'd passed myself as the Mammoth Rider, and the real Mammoth Rider ancestor spirit had either never existed or been devoured and replaced by a daemon long ago, our shaman assumed – rightly – that I was setting him up for something. Or planning to. Tzeentch-leaning cultists were masters of the twice-

right broken clock like that. He intended to turn the tables on me by breaking away from our 'pact' on the one night when he could access power comparable to what he had before.

Whether he thought he'd protect himself from the backlash of our broken pact that never really existed, or believed he'd be able to bind me like he did other petty daemons, I couldn't say.

Either way, we both came out of it disappointed. He wanted power, I wanted him dead, and neither of us got what we wanted.

The shaman went off into seclusion 'to reconnect with the spirits' a few days later, muttering and threatening curses on everyone who looked at his stiff wood-grown fake arm. Alone. Into the wilderness. After a long and private talk with our chieftain. Who also left with our best bondsmen the next day to visit 'kin'. Up the road leading to the nearest Graeling settlements that *didn't* have any of his kin, but did happen to include the shaman with the highest number of apprentices that anyone knew within a week's distance.

Thus it was that Clan Mammoth Rider were left with neither chieftain nor shaman to mind them.

It wasn't an hour before almost everyone was gathered in the longhouse to gossip like women on sewing night.

Many brawls were started in those days, and more than one ended only after the other man's neck had been torn open with just teeth. No one called the shaman's newly green skin a *blessing*, never mind how he'd grown a full mane of shaggy hair in just mere days, and nails as long as his fingers. Still, most of the clan was willing to take anything at this point, as proof that the Gods' power was returning.

In this, too, they were half wrong, but not how they thought. *Magical* power was indeed returning, but it wasn't the Chaos Gods doing it. It wasn't even Morrslieb, this once.

Morrslieb was indeed most accursed, it had been formed from the solidified warp energies when Chaos first burst upon the mortal world through the Polar Gates. The first incursion of the Primordial Annihilator had turned the entire north pole into warpstone, whereupon the continent-sized chunk was hurled up into space to become the second moon.

But Morrslieb's power wasn't so daunting anymore, even though it technically *hadn't* waned at all in the intervening years. Sure, Geheimnisnacht – the Night of Mystery – was still the day when Morrslieb was closest to the planet, so its presence weakened the borders between reality and the Realm of Chaos. Used to be that direct exposure to its green light on that date would curse or mutate you, even turn you into a beastman on the spot. With the Gate gone, though, the day was barely any worse than the average day in the Chaos Wastes before its destruction.

Granted, that was still worse than the average day *here*. After all, Norsca wasn't the Chaos Wastes – which I suppose were just the Wastes, now. It was merely the place closest to it, and there was the entire Frozen Sea between here and there.

But with the dark magic from the Gate gone, Morrslieb had nothing to add onto. A pregnant woman, say, might still have her child mutate in the womb if she walked out in Morrslieb's light on New Year's like our shaman did. But the moon's emissions merely filled a dry river bed, instead of dumping sulfurous lava on top of snowmelt to make floods of poison. And it was just one day, instead of all the time.

No, the reason magic was coming back was because of the Eldar.

Those damn elves!

They lived on the other side of the world across several oceans and continents, and somehow they still managed to cause the largest Norscan invasion of the last twenty years.

Not that I had anyone to explain this to, even if I wanted to. Which I didn't.

I was just a blacksmith's apprentice, and everyone I'd ever spoken to in this life deserved to die screaming.

"By order of the King!" Our chieftain shouted upon riding back into the village on his return, before even dismounting from his horse. He was days early and had no shaman with him. "A Great Onslaught has been called, for all warriors of true grit in the sight of the gods. If any among you would defy the Master of Maelstroms to prove yourselves in the eyes of the Mammoth Rider, pledge your axe and your arm and you will have a place at my table tonight!"

The gathered men erupted in cheers that were loud and bellowing and hungry for much more besides blood.

'All warriors of true grit' really meant 'at least one man from each household or else.' The Master of Maelstroms was Manann, the Lord of the Seas, so this was a sea raid. No mention of Stromfels, the evil sea god of storms and sharks, so this wasn't a raid where we allied with any pirates. Since no great raid stuck close to home, this meant the aim was to sail at least as far as Tilea and Sartosa, and pirates were to be considered plunder as well, this time. Interestingly, Sartosa was controlled by Arabyan corsairs at the moment.

Finally, the fact the chief made this announcement *ahead* of the customary on-the-eve-of-departure feast was even more meaningful. A transparent – at least to me – ploy to lure more volunteers out with food.

These days, the Graelings had to do around twice as many coastal raids as prior years. Officially it was a bid to 'once more' prove ourselves to Kharnath (Khorne), but more pragmatically it was to secure food and weapons. The unprecedented health of all Norscans meant there were more mouths to feed than usual, and so more than one household had found itself running out of food too soon the past few winters. The Chief's share was starting to be seen with more and more envy every year.

We weren't *completely* lacking options in terms of crops, but our sustenance was still as dependent on might and magic as everything else in this boreal taiga. With the amount of magic in the air so much less, the shamans had a hell of a time boosting crop growth, never mind infusing it with magic to make up for the nutrients they lacked. Also, beasts and monsters tended to randomly attack anyone going out to hunt moose or seals. Or whales.

*Not* openly acknowledged was that trade routes to the Darklands were shut because of turmoil between the tribes to the East, so the arms and armors of the Chaos Dwarfs didn't reach us anymore. The Chaos Wastes had managed to vomit out two Chaos Warriors before reality finally started sinking in, and they were both making a bid for Chaos Chosen at the moment.

The way the call just went out for warriors had a lot to do with all that. The chief framed the obligatory feast as a generous act, and also promised plunder that would keep them fed through the winter too, at least this time. As far as killing two birds with one stone, it wasn't the worst I'd seen in a tribal society.

Unfortunately, while this new development boded well enough for me since I was still too small to go on a raid – if barely, at thirteen, I was always something of a late bloomer in order to make my foundation as strong and sturdy as possible – the same didn't go for my parents.

"Now you be sure to stay out of the way of those miscreants while I'm gone," my father told me as I helped him shine his armor. Being the runt of the tribe, he actually fit inside the suit of plate he looted off a

Brettonian knight in his first raid. It was the first and best loot he'd ever gotten. "Look after your mother and keep learning from the blacksmith as much as you can. Once you're a proper smith, no one will be able to question your place in the clan."

*Unlike me*, were the man's unspoken words.

"For all *that's* worth," my mother muttered as she only dared behind closed doors, from where she was kneeling at the hearth. "You should just take him with you and lose him somewhere, even if it kills him. That's the best either of you can hope for."

"Shut it, woman," the man ground through clenched teeth, dropping the bracer he'd been working on in disgust. "I hear that poison enough out there, I don't want it in here. You, boy, don't you ever repeat what she just said, you hear me?"

"I hear you."

Dad grunted and didn't say anything else for the rest of the day.

Eventually, he went out to make an appearance at the leaving feast. Not doing so wouldn't have been much of a social blow, he was already the clan's designated punching bag. The one time he'd stayed home, though, his 'old friends' came for a visit and taught him a painful lesson right on our doorstep, then they had the gall to drag his battered body off for 'friendly' drinks where they changed his mead for horse piss and forced him to drink all of it. He never got over the humiliation, or the many before.

The breach of property rights alone was deserving of serious weregild, but father didn't bring the matter before the chief. Even if he'd won, which he wouldn't have because the chief was among the ones laughing at his plight, the escalation would have been worse. It takes a village to shatter a spirit.

I was surprised they didn't come in to rape my mother too.

That time, at least.

In a culture where might makes right, the childhood bully didn't *always* grow up to be the clan's tyrant, but it happened often. When it didn't, it was usually because he died somehow. Our clan was particularly proud of its up-and-coming psychopath, and especially happy that he enjoyed having minions more than he wanted to be alone at the top. With such loyal battle brothers he'd be as great a chief as they could ever hope for, everyone said.

That wasn't sarcasm, the clan actually thought that way, the whole tribe did, and they made sure to teach their children – my generation – to think the same way too.

"That's what you're going to be too, if you keep listening to him," mother told me after we were alone. She pulled the cauldron off the fire, poured herself a bowl of soup and went to the windowsill to eat without doing the same for me. "It'll serve both of you right. Thrall's son from a thrall's son"

I didn't say anything and just went to pour some food for myself. You never missed a meal in Norsca, especially in times like these. Besides, there was nothing to salvage of this family.

Different tribes had different rites to be recognized as a warrior. The Bjornlings, Vargs and Aeslings had three tests: the Test of Strength, the Test of Skill and the Test of Courage. The Baersonlings sent their candidates armed only with a spear in order to slay Trolls, Chaos Spawn, Daemons, Ymir, or some other manner of great beast. 'Us' Graelings, though, had a fake village that we populated with thralls armed with

shields and clubs. The aspiring warriors then have to raid the 'village,' slaying all within in order to recover a prize, such as gold, meat, ale, or a female thrall for those too incapable of wooing a real woman.

Father had been born of such a thrall, and now so had I.

The poor man had tried to be good to the woman in his own way, and there had been a while there after my birth where they might have made *something* work. Mother was a captive from Nordland and proved an able homemaker if only for my sake. Unfortunately, treating a concubine like a real wife was bad form in Norscan society, and only made everything worse. Especially when the 'real' women boiled over with envy at her much superior threadwork and garden. It's an ill omen, they would say. That she still lives at all is one, they would say.

The clan agreed, of course. Norscans believed that no life can be had without death, so every birth had to be paid with a sacrifice. Dad didn't have a thrall to sacrifice when I was born, except for my mother herself, which he refused. It had been the second and last time in his entire life that he had his way in anything.

I didn't help things any, with my 'prophetic' dreams to them about what my name should be. Flush from my great triumph back then, I decided that 'Nimrod' would be the only name sufficiently ironic. I regretted it now, but it was too late for that.

Even being apprenticed to the blacksmith got spun poorly, to the malicious vindication of clansmen and their sons. While smithing was a most valued skill among Northmen, most blacksmiths were also thralls. So that made me the child of thralls three times over.

No wonder so many Chaos Champions needed the Chaos Gods to grow their armor right out of their own blood's iron, if these evil folk were all like this. It put a new spin in why they were all so bloodthirsty and covered in it all the time, Khorne's or not.

I finished eating, cleaned my plate and left through the back door. "I'm going out."

Like all Northern settlements, the Mammoth Rider clan enclave was built on the tallest plateau in the area. It didn't have sea access, unlike half of our closest neighbours, or a river deep enough to sail on. What we did have was everything else. To the west were hills we *could* be using to cultivate frost corn and barley if we hadn't ruined it digging for metal, and to the North there were mountains covered in forest that went on for weeks. The trees were old, many of them so thick it took several men with outstretched arms to surround them. Needless to say, many were also extremely tall.

Since father had once thought he might as well be a farmer since he wasn't much good anywhere else, he'd built his home an hour's ride west from the main enclave, so I had a bit of a walk to get to the woods. This distance was also why he'd dared hope no one would bother him if he missed the feast, that first time. It didn't work then, and I knew it wouldn't work for us either, when he was gone tomorrow. It never had.

I climbed a tree that had a particularly thick canopy, hung out my hammock made to look like branchy leaves from below, settled in, and closed my eyes. Normally, this would be when I looked outward and left my body to go wandering. Not this once.

It was time to see if having a direct plug into the akashic records of all existence was worth the price and effort.

I turned inward, pulling deep, deep, deep inside myself until I eventually had nothing to perceive *except* myself. My own Form, bearing my Full True Name. The one I'd sealed, and the additional word coming



together to embody the essence of my newest incarnation. It was like I was in another world, one made entirely out of the Forms once spoken of by ancient Terran philosophers.

I invoked the anima I had banked, like a drop of crystal-clear water for the entirety of existence to reflect into, like the world reflected in a drop of rain. The Form of all existence as it conceived *itself*. I'd banked my anima enough for... four times the absolute minimum I needed to fathom the more basic Forms, if my estimates were right.

When the first concept poured in, every other concept making it up followed with it, until I was fathoming the warmth of hope so pure and indefatigable that I almost didn't want to Enunciate its Name, lest I snuff out its wonder.

~One Hundred Benevolences of the Moon Sailing Across the Firmament~

*Sometimes all one needs is magic from the mind. Self-confidence. Hope. Or maybe just to feel a little better. Every time she said the word 'abracadabra' to herself, she found that her mood, self-confidence, and hope would temporarily lift. It didn't assure her victory, and neither was the effect itself actually magical. But it always helped her if she was a little down on yourself, or at least alleviated her unhappiness. A little reassurance always went a long way.*

... How the hell is this supposed to qualify as enlightenment?

“-. .-“

'A mixed bag' was just about the perfect choice of words for my first dive into the World of Forms. The first one was practically useless, even before you considered that I already knew much better self-hypnosis, and I also hadn't needed it in over thirty thousand years.

The second attempt broke me out of the meditation with harsh enough abruptness that I needed almost fifteen minutes to get back in. I'd glimpsed parts, the concepts of home and unlimited growth somehow woven together, but the Form was twice as ample as the amount of anima I still had.

The fourth attempt manifested as the knowledge of how to attain – or induce – a mystical trait whose Name came together as Arcane Illusion Unto the World of Darkness. It would make it extremely difficult to be remembered or detected when I didn't want to be, and also provided a degree of protection against sympathetic magic. This, unfortunately, was also useless to me. Having sealed my True Name gave me a form of mystical concealment and defense that was literally absolute and just as adjustable. Perhaps if I had someone to put through the ritual or teach, but I didn't. No one I'd met in this life had earned enough of my respect to even acknowledge their names.

The fifth and last Form I'd managed to fathom was Quality Exemplar of Efficient Design. This one *would* be useful to me, but likely only in the future. Knowing how to make the best designs better, and ensure that all equipment in use is ergonomic, streamlined, and efficient, it all was a very useful talent. Just not one with world-shaking applications to iron age technology.

The third, though...

Integrating any these basic boons would take me about a day's worth of sleep, increasingly more the grander the Form. But there was no contest that the Third was going first.

Guiding Lantern Dreaming Golden Skies for the Dead.

The third Form I Named was not only the most immediately useful, but potentially paradigm-shifting. For the entirety of mankind. Even the galaxy.

Guide lanterns. For lost folk and lost *souls*. Illuminating mundane pathways for the living, and the pathway towards another world for the dead. Guide markers, and more. They could not just guide souls to the Otherworld, but calm undead beasts and spirits. Even *hold them*. Comfortably. Peacefully.

They didn't provide particularly strong defenses against hostile action, not by the standards of the galaxy as it was now. But my own talent with spell creation and adaptation was already taking care of that, chiefly, in showing me how I could use other types of vessel. If Efficient Design turns out to not be strictly limited to technology and machinery, I might even come up with further refinements on that front too, once I integrate it.

I had just learned how to make soul containers.

Out of *rocks*.

“-. .-“

A sudden and shocking breach in the kennels killed the kennel master, and delayed the departure of the warriors by a couple of days. Everyone was pressed into helping to catch and corral the various war beasts that escaped. The Mammoths were a wash, gathering them back into a herd was going to take weeks for those who stayed behind. That wasn't ruinous by itself, they were not the sort of creature you could take on a wolfship. But the clan couldn't afford to go without the warhounds and ice wolves. Especially when other clans had trolls and feral manticores.

The kennel master's thralls that still lived were killed in punishment, and weregild imposed on the kennel guards left for not properly watching over the beasts. This did not stop the cursing and grumbling about ill omens. The Jarl could no longer suppress them, especially now that we had no shaman to beware curses and hexes from.

I quietly sent my apologies to the thralls who paid the price, but I needed the time and could not afford to be discovered when I was still so underpowered. Fortunately, as the blacksmith apprentice that everyone begrudgingly agreed was extremely good at what I did, I was not made to go out with the rest of the boys to 'prove my valor.' I just helped the smith make new chains, collars, locks and hinges, and used the nights to make good on my new knowledge.

The warriors were finally ready to leave on the third day. That morning, I approached my father while mother was baking outside, out of sight and hearing, and held out my offering.

“What's this?” The man asked, inspecting the highly detailed miniature stone lantern on a chain I had made as a pedant. “Fancy yourself a Bjornling now, boy, taking up jewelcraft? This is-“

“A refuge for your soul in case you die.”

The man's face snapped to mine, and then he froze in fear when he saw the jade glow in my eyes.

“Everything the shamans claim are lies, everything the tribe believes is false, everything you do is in service of evil. But you tried to be kind to this child, and even your woman in what ways you had left. If you don’t survive, let the lantern take you in and even Chaos won’t be able to touch you.”

I could make it work even if the wearer was unwilling or too distracted to do it by himself, but in this case I didn’t. For my part in his woes, I was going to give free will a one last chance. Give him one chance to become more than worthless.

One.

Father pulled away from me until his back hit the wall, staring at me wide-eyed while unconsciously clutching my gift to his chest in a tight fist.

I let all magical glow fade. “Father, is something wrong?” I pretended not to be aware of what I’d just done. “Why are you looking at me like that?” The man didn’t say anything, and when I was sure he’d bought my act, I shrugged. “Whatever. I’ll watch your departure from the smithy roof.”

Breakfast was tense, and father didn’t speak a word to me or mother when he left to take his place with the departing men. But he didn’t throw the charm away.

Since mother was a thrall, she wasn’t allowed to be part of the crowd seeing them off, but that was better for her. Her old comeliness had been washed away long ago, but that didn’t mean she was safe. In a people that stoned its homosexuals to death and pissed on the corpses, cuckoldry remained the ultimate way to assert dominance over another man. The children of dad’s old ‘friends’ were cut from the same cloth as their fathers. They weren’t all scum in the same way, but just the one was enough.

The smithy roof allowed me a good enough vantage to see if and when anyone broke from the crowd of well-wishers. The sights and sounds of the departing warriors had barely faded when a certain group of boys – who *had* all had their growth spurts, unlike me – left the enclave on the footpath leading to our home.

There was no shaman around to sense magic anymore, and in any case I could obscure my spells almost as easily as I could skip words and gestures, at least for the small things. For now. If not escape detection, I could still disguise the feel of my magic – and myself – as something or someone else. My perfect memory let me remember the auric flavors of everyone and everything whose spirit had ever touched mine. Evoking one of those was how I’d been able to fool the shaman in the first place.

I used a petty spell of stealth to sneak away from the enclave after them. I knew the ways to get to get well ahead of the cretins. Just to be thorough, I conjured an illusion of the group kitted for a hunt, and had them go in the opposite direction in full view of the dispersing crowd. Nobody would be able to tell they didn’t have shadows at that distance.

I was home almost half an hour before the four came into view. I’d told mother to hide in the secret hiding place under the floor, where she and father usually hid me. That she agreed without a fight showed just how resigned she was to not caring about anything besides breathing.

“Well look what we have here,” came the unpleasant voice of the oldest of the four boys, the son of the next chief himself. The sons of those four who had made it their life’s work to make father’s life hell, including preventing him from keeping most of the better spoils after the first raid. “If it isn’t-“

“The second best,” I interrupted him where I sat on top of our fence. “Told to stay home like a little boy even though you’re old enough to be a man grown yourself, so you won’t steal your brother’s glory.” Sixteen winters was considered old enough to take the trials in Norscan society. “

The four were struck speechless at my uncharacteristic attack, I suspected some people actually thought I was a mute.

“By the Ivory One!” Was the attempted rejoinder. “Someone’s feeling brave! I say we-“

“All die.”

A sharp wooden spiked burst out of the ground and impaled the second coming of my family’s chief tormentor from crotch to neck. From up where I sat, I tossed a torc with a second miniature lantern built in. It caught on the spike and hooped around to settle over his mouth, where the spike had burst through. When it flared with an eerie green glow, I knew that it had worked.

The other three boys didn’t realize what had happened until I had already them tied up in vines. I tossed soul traps at them too, but otherwise didn’t spare them a second glance as my spell strangled them to death. They weren’t worth it. Barely older than me and they were already irredeemable. Some gods would disagree, maybe I would also disagree when I ascended to their ranks and beyond, but I wasn’t a god yet. Right now I was just a human, and this human had been trained out of giving the benefit of the doubt to these animals before my first year in this life was even done.

Besides, what would I even say? ‘Your fathers are jealous idiots who only abuse mine because he proved the best at having a life outside of war? Even *after* they completely broke him?’

“I should’ve spent more time looking for dead babies,” I muttered to myself as I dragged the bodies to the travoy I *would* use to drag our crops to market if we actually cultivated any. But we didn’t because every time dad tried, they all ‘mysteriously’ failed. The shaman had to prove *somehow* that dad had sinned by not sacrificing his only thrall when I was born, my mother. Only death can pay for life, say the spirits. “The Bjornlings aren’t half as horrible as this.”

The only reason we hadn’t been killed outright was because every clan needed a living example of why to conform.

After I had the bodies secured and spelled to not spoil with a spell of food preservation, I went inside and retrieved mother from her hiding place. “It’s safe now, mother.”

“What happened? Who was it? What did you do?”

“Best if you don’t know. Just in case, though, if anyone comes asking, nothing unusual happened and you don’t know anything about no missing boys.”

I left the house and departed with travoy in tow, not looking back with either normal or witch sight to see if she was watching.

Thanks to my copious astral wanderings around the area, I knew exactly where and how to go to get to where I wanted in the best time. And without anyone seeing me. I also knew where all the game trails and tracks were, even those no older than a day. It was a long way to drag four bodies on foot, even small ones. But short as I still was, I was still a Norscan with all it entailed for my biology. Also, I had Flight of Amar which made things weightless. Only for about ten seconds for most people, but I wasn’t most people. Any

temporary effect could become indefinite, you just needed to figure out how. And be willing to devote the concentration.

I dumped the bodies deep in the forest, right along the tracks leading to the lair of a mantichore that had recently appeared in the area, and which no one had been sent to test themselves against because a certain psychopath boasted that his son would be the one to do it. Well, here he was and the mantichore was still alive and free, instead of turned into a mantelpiece trophy and its young dragged along with the men that just went out to war.

Once I made sure the scene looked as close to a failed ambush as possible – the idiots had come with bows and axes so I didn't have to provide those too – I undid the spell of preservation, dispelled all traces of magic just in case, and left. I used magic to enhance my stealth again, even an added spell to prevent my scent from escaping just in case. I had one more important thing to do, too important to risk injury or retreat from a random encounter. Like that mantichore I'd just framed for murder.

Some hour and a half later, I was up in a tree, as well disguised as I could be through both mundane and magical means, watching the grotto that our shaman had retreated to.

Despite how he wasn't *supposed* to be worried about ambushes or attacks, thanks to his wards and crow familiar, the grove around the cave was wide enough that it was beyond the range of most bows, certainly beyond the one I had. Since I didn't want to do the stupid thing and attack him in his own lair, I settled in for a long wait.

Night time was always the best time to commune with spirits, and the current difficulties meant he wanted the conditions to be as right as possible. That meant fasting, potions brewed to perfections, and getting the fumes and scents in the air *just* right.

In other words, he had to come relieve himself outside if he didn't want to meditate in the smell of piss and shit instead of acacia bark.

As I waited, I turned the recently filled soul traps around in my hand and wondered what I would do with them. They were flimsy, rush jobs, not like the one I'd made for father, I'd need to make better ones and transfer the souls there soon. Even then, they were hardly impervious. But then what? I'd mainly trapped them so no one on the other side would be able to learn anything from their departing souls.

I did know how daemon or sentient weapons were made, in the broad strokes, but the notion wasn't all that alluring. There were degrees to my contempt, and I tried not to engage in casual cruelty. Ending a life wasn't on the same scale as tormenting a spirit, never mind all else I could think of doing. Similarly, treating spirits as disposable resources, never mind souls, was a quick and steady way to become like Neoth, or even the Chaos Gods themselves. I'd have to really think about this.

It was well past twilight when the Shaman came out of his cave. He scanned the area with his witchsight, his familiar's eyes and even some dedicated spells. I wasn't worried and he didn't see me. Tzeentch himself couldn't see me after I set him on fire.

He chose a spot where I still couldn't shoot him, but the same could not be said of his crow.

I considered the animal. Familiar spirits were normally invisible and practically invulnerable, but they also couldn't go more than five yards away from their druid. Unless, that is, you tamed a living version of the animal for it to hitch a ride in. Or, as Norscan shamans preferred to do because they couldn't *imagine* doing something without casual cruelty, one to outright possess.

If that animal was killed, though, the backlash tended to be painful.

I waited until the shaman was crouched down and mid-way through the act, then I shot the bird dead.

The shaman screamed in shock, and then in pain, and then even more in outrage at the indignity of soiling himself in his pain throes. Darkspeech poured out of his throat with anger and malice. The boundary churned around him. Magic was lessened but not gone, and he'd relearned his lessons well, including mine. He didn't know it, but he'd even taught me a trick or two, as generally happens. You haven't mastered a skill until you successfully taught it.

The tree I'd been in sprouted spikes half a foot long on every square foot of surface.

But I'd long since relocated. I'd been many things in my lives, but in my first my name *became* the word for 'hunter.' When the shaman pulled a giant's scalp out of his pouch, I shot it out of his hand before he could empower himself with its might.

He cursed in fury and ran to hide behind another tree. I still relocated in time to shoot the new thing he'd pulled, but this time I was out of luck. Spilling it was the whole point. A single drop and a wave of magic turned the ground as slippery as oil. Since it wasn't *actual* oil, I couldn't set it on fire. And since I wasn't here to kill him, I couldn't just shoot him and be done with it either. Fortunately, I was close enough now that I could toss some breakable containers of my own.

Lamenting my lack of gunpowder weapons because of my failure to procure saltpeter *and* sulfur, I threw a pepper spray bomb instead and rushed in.

I *almost* closed in, but the shaman proved why you don't become one without strong willpower. Even as he coughed and stumbled, he forced his eyes open with a snarl, despite how blisteringly they stung, and unleashed the Fire of Vengeance right in my face.

Glowing green flames erupted from his eyes in a cone so wide I couldn't evade. Not completely. In my momentum, I jumped in feet first to slide past along the ground, but the flames still caught the side of my face. Pain – it was always an unfamiliar and distracting feeling the first few times, in every life.

But I was finally close enough.

I jumped to my feet, then on the back of the big, flailing man, and drove a long pin through his ear.

When it struck his hypothalamus, he went out like a light.

“Ugh,” I groaned as he collapsed to the ground with a thud underneath me.

I rolled over and fell with my back against the nearest tree not covered in dark spikes and cradled my face. The entire right side was one big a third-degree burn. That was... bad but not irreversible, the more my spiritual strength grew the better I healed, I could already feel the itch... But my eye had burst. Since I still didn't want to accidentally cripple myself for the next few years, waiting for that to regenerate without making dangerous experiments with the Wind of Life would take *months*. My spiritual power – and thus my regeneration – wouldn't peak for at least another ten years.

“If this is a middling hedge mage I sure have my work cut out for me,” I groaned, covering my socket. It leaked blood and humors like molasses, but bitter. “And you were at your worst ever too, fuck.”

I did have Eununcia for emergencies, but I didn't expect to be contemplating it quite so soon. Clearly, this world was more dangerous than I feared.

I used a salve on my face and put on some gauze and bandages. Then it was time to do what I *really* came here for.

I dragged the man inside his grotto.

Once inside, I lit up all the candles and withlights I could for the best light. I took out my sharpest knives. I took out a big set of surgical pliers too. I was a smith's apprentice, I could make stuff like this no problem.

"I'd say I'm sorry about this." My words were witnessed only by the crow spirit pecking uselessly at the walls of the voodoo net I'd caught it in. "But you and yours are the source of all evil up here, so I'll just make you lie for me from now on."

Long ago, I had sealed my True Name, through a process that may or may not have involved temporarily killing myself and carving a delicate series of runes into my own heart. The real ones, not the perversions propitiated in this land by men like this one. Every once in a while, I had to redo the procedure to seal any additional names I gained. I didn't need to do that yet, it didn't become a problem until I had more names unsealed than otherwise, and I had a very long true indeed at this point. Neoth's Custodes might be able to match me there, but it would be a tense bet.

But there were more uses to a name than self-defense.

The Lore of Bindings was known to me now. The shaman's practices were still imperfect and certainly profane, but also the ones I'd observed and understood the deepest in this lifetime. The only thing left that was needed was a way to get around his unwillingness.

The Form of the Guiding Lantern gave me better understanding of imposing action upon spirits than even I had before. It wasn't nearly enough, and I didn't have the mastery of the Winds to make up the difference with this new form of magic. Yet.

But I had just integrated the Form known as Arcane Illusion unto the World of Darkness. Comprehension of the similarity and sympathetic principle. Enough to know how to weaken it. And, thus, to do the reverse as well. And I never forgot all the things I did to discover my Name, and seal it evermore.

There were surely better ways to do this. I'd be locked out of performing any mystical arts for the duration, save those that didn't involve the spirit at all. Which meant I'd still be able to fly around as a soul, but naught else.

Despite all that, I felt an ancient stirring in my heart.

Working with incomplete information, relying on cobbled-together weaves from disparate disciplines, handicapping myself for the sake of ambition, even being the bait in my own trap! Not since my first life had things aligned in quite this way, I was even surrounded on all sides by acceptable targets! How nostalgic!

I cut into the man, pried his ribcage open, and carved my newest Name into *his* heart.

Slavery was a most contemptible practice, but turnabout was fair play.

The next day, back in the village, I had to make up a story about ‘accidentally’ burning myself, which the far too empathetic smith translated as ‘those four did me in again’ because today was far from the first time they’d made my life difficult. Everyone else was content to stare and express in various ways how ‘it just goes to show.’ Then they got entirely distracted when they discovered those four missing. It took two days to find the mostly eaten bodies, and much lamentations were expressed.

Three days after the men left, the Shaman returned to us with new power, new wisdom, and an all new arm made of wood that was just as dexterous and twice as strong as his old one. Because while I was being careful with my own future prospects, I had no qualms about using up his.

The shaman diverted everyone’s attention from the dead boys quite nicely. He made the whole settlement bloom as proof of his new might, ordered the stonecutters to gather and cut a large quantity of specific stone in specific shapes, and gave the blacksmith the biggest and strangest order anyone could remember. He had a number of very specific items that needed carving, he said, and they needed doing before the raids return.

The smith, in an uncharacteristic display of boldness that I had nothing to do with, said there was no way he could do that on top of his regular duties. The shaman was most wroth, and long sharp spikes grew from seemingly every wooden surface in sight as proof of his mighty rage.

Still, his mood cooled and the shaman begrudgingly agreed he was demanding mighty task, when the blacksmith always his hands full with nail work and war arms. It couldn’t be helped then. I, his only apprentice, would just have to pick up the slack and make all the stone lanterns myself.

Perhaps it was best, the shaman added, if I joined him in his steading for the while so he could instruct me properly. My father had been a fool to not pay for my right to live, but if the spirits hadn’t reclaimed my life, and I even seemed to have some talent, he may as well see for himself if I was worth anything. I clearly needed keeping an eye on, if I was even burning out my own eyes by ‘accident’ now.

He declared that my mother and I were now his servants, and had us move in with him in his steading.

Mother was terrified, but not so much that she would rather kill herself, and after a few days without being turned into a grizzly sacrifice, her nerves settled enough to act as a servant should. The shaman didn’t drive her too hard. Not a few times she sent stares my way, dreading, disbelieving, fearful, hope swiftly crushed under life’s harsh lessons. But she didn’t say anything.

I didn’t pretend obliviousness, but I didn’t volunteer anything either. I worked on my order by day, and scoured the world by night. Looking for mages to spy. Checking on father. Flying half-way across the world to Ulthuan, where the Eldar were hard at work shitting the bed.

The Eldar. Or Elves, they neither looked nor had all the same powers as the Eldar I knew, even though their gods were the same. They were some manner of subspecies, the Asur, the Druchii, the Asrai, all of them were different than the Eldar in the broader galaxy. A bit shorter. Less uncanny. Softer, for the most part.

Unfortunately, even this subspecies was determined to ruin things for everyone else.

When I destroyed the Northern Chaos Gate, it literally *halved* the amount of Warp seeping into the world, which reduced the scope of all magic because it halved the amount of Aethyr, the winds of magic themselves. In other words, the exact stuff that Elvish power and social order all relied on. So, naturally, the Elves of Ulthuan were now in the process of adjusting the power of the Vortex.

Being generous, it could be understandable if it’s true that Ulthuan will sink beneath the ocean without it. But I wasn’t sure I believed the Unlamented Prophecies about everything. There were *volcanic mountains*



in Caledor, it made no sense for it to be a floating island. Besides, the Elves have had how long to use geomancy to grow a new foundation for the place? Wouldn't they have? Any magical solution would be far more costly and irritating to apply, what would it even be? A forcefield pipe pulling lava from below like an oil tanker? Generating it *ex nihilo*? It would be a constant investment of energy and maintenance compared to just piling some extra rocks under your house to shore up the foundation.

Also, Ulthuan supposedly floated *before* the Vortex existed. Perhaps the Vortex was pushing too *much* power out of the world now, making the Winds weaker than before it existed? At least around Ulthuan... They didn't *seem* to be dealing with the aftereffects of partly-sinking disaster. At least nothing that couldn't be attributed to the lingering social and political shock from a Warp Gate stopping to be a problem. Maybe.

Alas, the elven language had far too much nuance for me to piece together a straight answer about that yet. Even when I did understand the surface words – very sporadic still – they all seemed to speak in multi-layered figures of speech all the time for some reason. They were also inherently secretive to the point where all the sensitive topics were only discussed where I couldn't get in to listen, as I was now. That, at least, made sense with all the divination magic used by the enemies of life. And the druchii. And each other.

Whatever their reasons, right now they were adjusting the power *downwards*. The Vortex primarily existed to shove excess magic back *into* the Warp, so now it was pushing more than the world took in. They were modifying it to be weaker than before.

I estimated a maximum of four, maybe five more years before they were finished, and the density of the Winds returned to what it was before my coming.

It was enough to make me wonder if I'd have Ulthuan to contend with, if and when I went and tried to blow up the southern stargate too.

Not at all coincidentally, four to five years was also the timeline I gave for a leader to be decided between the two would-be Chosen of Chaos to the far west of us.

With the Asur slowly returning the world to its previous lack of balance, communication from the other side was beginning to get through again. Hopelessly garbled and only once in a blue moon, but the Silence *was* training sorcerers to listen better. Also, the Chaos Warriors surely heard the Four at *least* as well as the Chaos cultists in Brettonia or the Empire. It should have been funny, that the southerners are better at falling to Chaos than the Norscans now, but it really wasn't.

Worse, the rate of mutations was now picking back up, which was beginning to tilt optics back in the favor of chaos worship too. And while it had personally worked in my favor with the shaman, the meddling of the Elves in the Vortex also brought a higher chance of spells miscasting all over the world. Up in Norsca, this was now being spun as the Gods getting ready to cast judgment on us for how we handled this long 'trial.'

All in all, the two Chaos Champions were seemingly being proven right. Enough so that it was finally paying off for them. One had 'unified' the Aeslings and Vargs last year, and the other was just about done subjugating the Sarls, after standing off the first one with just the Baersonlings for the past three years and a quarter. Either they'd fight it out now to decide who the Chaos Lord would be, or they'd seek further manpower first. In which case, either the Skaelings or us Graelings would be next.

Assuming they didn't run into Grimnir first. The Ancestor God walked the land with impunity and didn't care who got in his way. He was going to visit all the dwarf holds and nothing would stop him.

I wondered how much longer his loyal and devoted people will continue lying to him, before someone cracks and finally tells him about the Dawi-Zharr. I considered contacting him, he could see spirits just fine, I could give a warning at least. But it was an internal matter, the dwarves clearly needed a hard lesson if they were lying to their Acestor God's own face, and I just wasn't ready. Nor did I think I could contribute positively there, not right now.

I couldn't do anything about the Vortex either, and the really important places in Ulthuan were so well warded that it didn't matter how invisible I was, I couldn't get into them either. Not without shedding this life and its new Name completely, maybe, which wasn't worth it. That didn't stop me from watching them at work, though. Especially the younger elves that weren't old or skilled enough for high magic, so they still just trained and dueled with 'cantrips.' I paid very close attention to those indeed, there was always one or two practicing outside, where no wards hid them.

I never forgot about the raiders though, and they were doing well for themselves indeed, more's the pity. They were done with the Empire's coasts and were going further. The further south they traveled, the better the sorcerer-shamans heard the 'spirits' and the stronger their magic grew. It was taken as the best omen ever, and promised many distant raids in the future just like this one. Since I was not shy of discarding the mask indoors, I made sure to always be there in astral form to watch the battles themselves. After all, I had a vested interest.

Father had managed to survive so far, even though his 'friends' kept claiming his best loot on the flimsiest justifications. Every time it happened, he'd sit quiet and alone somewhere, touching the lantern charm around his neck when no one could see him.

It was a month before mother gathered the courage to speak up, when the shaman left to see to his regular duties one evening, leaving us on our own.

"Nimrod." She never called me 'son'. Not for over ten years. "What did you do?"

"Do you know what the Not-so-Great Schemer's biggest weakness is?" I asked instead of replying, not looking up from the stone I was chiseling. "He doesn't know fantasy from reality until someone *else* observes the event. Someone that actually has the judgment capacity to tell the difference."

She never brought it up again, and I didn't either. I just worked on my order of lanterns.

It was, through what could be nothing but complete coincidence, about the same amount as the number of people that could fit on the wolfships gone out on the raid, warriors and thralls both.

Several days later, in a great battle against the Decadent Pirate Principality of Sartosa, father finally took a mortal blow.

As with all battles before, I was there in spirit. I went down to watch what would unfold.

But it wouldn't change my current course in the least, no matter what happened.

The Graelings were not the worst Norscan tribe, but that wasn't anywhere near enough to make them redeemable.