

## Chapter 4 – Atra-Hasis Envious Your Easy Service

“-. Hrami .-“

The trees spoke to him.

They told him of people approaching, too few to be the bulk of the clans, too many to risk ignoring. Hrami was glad he'd already grown new grass over the many caches of lanterns and blasting powder. They were carefully spaced so the latter wouldn't easily destroy the former, and with thick shells of hard wood magically grown around the lanterns for good measure. He'd also stashed the cart behind the Monolith, under a wall of brambles he made look as natural as possible.

There were a lot of brambles around the place already, despite that the Monolith was a lone, isolated pillar at the center of a loose stone circle on top of a round hill with no other living things for five hundred paces in every direction. Well, nothing until he arrived and made the whole place green and flowery, though that was as much as he dared risk with the tainted emanations of the Monolith so close.

The trees spoke to him, but he had to walk quite a ways to get to them first.

Hrami himself settled down at the foot of the monolith, and spent the day it took the newcomers to arrive on spreading well-fed roots all through the ground for a mile around him, ready to take the load off some of his spells. Well, one of them. There should be ways to conjure throngs of gnarled beasties even without them, or a forest of thorns depending on what worked. He hadn't been able to experiment with all possible spells of the Green Wind, but it wasn't like he could do that much more permanent harm to himself than he already had.

Short of death, anyway.

The thought made a shiver of dread rush through him. More so now than before, when he was still fool enough to look forward to the Schemer's 'reward' once he died and the monster claimed his soul.

He'd known that his former peers would be the most immediate threats we would face. But he'd also thought they'd have no more than the usual reasons to measure egos. His experience as the Liar's servant should have let him play at being his old self, work with them to prepare the grounds until the time came to strike. With the shamans of the Stormravens and Crow-Brothers off on the raids, there would have been no Tzeenethians to see through him, other than maybe the odd apprentice whose threat was inconsequential.

He was sitting on a Throne of Vines when the newcomers finally stepped into sight. A score of them divided into four groups, not evenly but each led by one of four chaos sorcerers. They'd timed their arrival to just after the sun became visible in the sky, when the morning mists were thickest. That way, when they became visible to the naked eye they were already close enough to cast.

Hrami had tracked their every step regardless, because the grass spoke to him too, especially the one he grew himself over the past few days.

He had half a mind to play his role anyway. Greet his rival shamans with the expected mix of respect and mockery, maybe joke about them paying homage before his throne. It would be what the old him would have done.

But the trees of Norsca had deep roots, and they talked to each other in great detail even if they didn't know what was important and what not. He knew these men had intercepted the others in his party and extracted what they wanted from them.

He just sat in his throne, eyes closed, seemingly asleep.

"Hrami of the Mammoth Rider clan," one of them said, the Nurglite of the Gift Givers called Groven 'Leper-Face'. One of five vitki pretenders that were all chaos sorcerers in truth, like he had been. "We know your plight."

"Bullshit." Hrami didn't move, even to open his eyes. "We never know half the shit we claim."

"Weak faith is hardly uncommon these days," said Beata of the Man-Flayers, the greatest threat among all of them. He'd know the voice of that wanton Slaaneshi whore anywhere. "I'm not surprised you'd be one of them, though, with the way you look."

Green skin, sharp fangs, constantly growing hair and even faster growing nails, Hrami did look a sight.

"Still smells better than you do," the third among them told the whore, himself another nurglite. Hrami didn't know this one, which meant he was a weakling "But she speaks true twice over, even if she doesn't know it, Mammoth Rider."

"We know your plans," the first fuck spoke again.

"You don't know shit." There were no spells working to undo the wooden shells around the lanterns, or holes dug up where the blasting powder had been buried, they'd even walked over several spots on the way over.

"Come back to the Four, Mammoth Rider," Leper-Face pressed with a buzzing undertone to his voice. "The Gods do not forget, but may yet forgive."

For a moment, Hrami honestly considered it even though he knew the Four didn't forgive. Ever.

The New God might, but...

Hrami had shut that door in his own face.

"The Four are full of shit," Hrami shocked both them and himself by saying. "What do they do for us that we don't have to pay ten times over the worth of? Or is it a hundredfold now?"

"You are truly so mad as to discount their power-?"

"They don't have power for shit if one of us doesn't give ours so they can pass their wind on this side, and you all know it."

Their silence was as damning as their subtle movements were a signal to their apprentices to begin coven casting. Not that their words were any better, they weren't even trying to convince him, it was the Ritual of Broken faith. The moment it concluded they'd all be subject to Malediction Undivided, cutting all who'd turned on the Gods from their bonded spirits.

How ironic that Hrami already labored under that handicap.

"Friends," Hrami spoke one last time, one lone attempt to reason with people he was no friend with, but compared to whom he himself was no less damned. "On account of our shared suffering, I ask you – please,

stand down and let us have peace. It will be earned in carnage, as all the times before. But this time it will be honest, and it will last.”

It had to. For everything he’d gone through to be worth it, it had to. What he was about to-

“You would have us forsake our ways?”

*Yes.* “I would have us return to our *true* ways, those of our ancestors who knew better than to willingly become the slaves of spirits whose only purpose is to damn the world and themselves.”

The laughter that served as reply came with a stench of rancid musk. “Unbelievable,” the whore gasped when her fit finished, tossing her disgustingly perfect hair. “You aren’t even trying to hide your heresy. Do you even hear yourself? Where is the great schemer of the Mammoths? Your cleverness has passed along with your sense. To think you yourself said that the servants of the Raven Lord would always know better, ha!”

“I did, and you didn’t know whether to kill or fuck me for -“ Hrami’s eyes snapped open and felt like they melded together before unleashing a beam of deadly emerald energy right in the whore’s face.

The whore died from an exploding head, along with all her apprentices as Hrami turned his head. The sweeping beam got the second nurglite shaman too, and all of *his* apprentices before the power burst ran out. Twelve and two down despite the strongest magical wards he’d ever seen even before the Silence, the Four themselves must be helping them but his spell still won. It would’ve won even without the entire day’s worth of power collected in his throne.

*Fuck me, I really could’ve killed the New God!*

His throne sprouted a halo of thorns just in time to skewer the ageing touch spell of a fourth nurglite and a *fifth* man he’d not perceived at all before that point – the Grey Wind! The last power left in his throne went into a massive spike erupting from its back, skewering that one just before he would’ve disappeared from his senses again. Then Hrami barely had time to drop down through the throne and into the ground, before a stream of blue and green flies spewed where he’d just been from the mouth of the first and most dangerous left.

*Four nurgle sorcerers in one place, Hrami thoughts with disdain. Two now, the king still hasn’t forgiven them for doing more harm to us than the enemy, the last couple of raids.*

A shame their miscasting problems wouldn’t put him in any less danger here.

Hrami burst out of the earthgate far enough that the mist concealed him. A wall of thorns conjured in the opposite direction distracted from the noise of his re-emergence, but even so he barely had time to manifest a leaf whirlwind and prepare a second spell before he was dodging a stinking jet of putrid blood, pus, maggots, and slime.

Loose drops still reached him, but just barely, and where his clothes didn’t eat the damage his thick hair did, his arcane mutations helping him for once. The Life Wind rebuffed the attached curse of nausea, and the Curse of Thorns he unleashed in response found its mark better. First blood was his thrice over, and now so were the first screams.

That was when the cloud of flies swarmed him from all directions. Only half of them were stymied by the whirling leaves, and his attempt to dismantle the spell only rebuffed it temporarily.

“YoU wiLl bEcoME ToDaY’S saCRifiCe!”

Hrami's eyes bulged and he almost overdrew on Ghyran in his haste to escape the things through another earthgate.

*A repurposed message spell, clever fuck, he thought with a racing heart as he burst from the ground elsewhere, feeling light-headed. They'd have burrowed into me through every hole after they were done talking.*

Now he felt nauseous, but he forced it down and managed to dispel a sudden, combined casting attempt to inflict him with pestilence. He used earthgate again to vanish and burst from the ground right in the middle of the apprentices, who'd all joined together in one big coven of hangers-on. The Winds of Magic decided to blow weakly then, not enough to let him dispel such a strong channeling. But this was still the height of summer when Ghyran was strongest, and even if his attack spells were so much more costly, Hrami had clever ways of his own too.

He collected what power he could, and unleashed an indiscriminate spell to cure blights in all directions.

The adepts of the Plaguefather fell down screaming in horror as Nurgle's many 'gifts' were purged from their bodies all at once.

*Not as present as you'd like, eh 'Grandfather?'*

Unfortunately, they didn't just fumble the spell they were mingled in, the gathered power erupted in a bright flare of cascading chaos that left Hrami momentarily blind and his ears ringing with a sharp whine and distant screams.

This time, the stream of putrid blood caught him in the chest. Hrami's roar was as pained as it was enraged, but the foreign screaming in his ears got louder too. The attack had been indiscriminate, half the apprentices were dying agonizing deaths. Hrami threw the Green Wind into the one who'd already died, twisted the Ghyran through his fading life force, and send the newly animated corpse running for his master with intent to hug and spread his agony just like Grandfather Nurgle taught. This worked as a human shield too, but only from the front.

He used an earthgate to change location again.

He almost didn't manage to come back out of the ground because of the sudden lurch in his stomach and dizziness.

"Nurgleth tua gumuzi henna wurtu!"

*Fuck Nurgle's blessings!* Hrami tried to curse only for his words to slur as his tongue rapidly swelled and he felt his insides begin to bloat, his eyes began to bleed –

*M-manifest sacred geometry!*

The Jade Wind churned inside him. He didn't know if he pictured the shapes right, or if he was just so lucky that the right sounds came out his mouth from pure luck. The spell of pestilence was broken, but he felt a bit of that corruption settle in him long-term, and the yelling in his ears begin to form something almost resembling proper words. His dizziness was veering into complete shakes, and his nausea was only growing worse.

"Finally feeling it, are you?"

"When-did you-?"

“Every time you fled through the earth.”

What-? Plague winds! These were Nurgle’s minions, the foul winds of Neiglish Rot should have been their opening move, but he didn’t – they didn’t- “You – cast it down – underground-“ Plague winds – no, the Miasma of Pestilence, the foul green mist was finally seeping up from the soil. “Miasma – rot – my roots-” Hrami had spread them throughout the area so he didn’t need to waste spells on moving from place to place-

“Not a bad plan to embed them in the ground ahead of time, being able to change location and cast at the same time might have won you the day. As is, every time you passed through them, you accepted a bit of Nurgle’s gift.” The fucker came over, shaking his head in pity. “Abandoning a mastered lore for a new one, how foolish. It was never going to work in a fight with equals, never mind superiors. Certainly not with just a few weeks’ worth of practice.”

*The voice*, Hrami thought as the foreign tongue ranted in his ears from no one alive. *It’s coming from inside the Monolith*. Hrami tried to climb back to his feet, he’d fallen down.

“Bind him.”

Hrami roared in rage and lunged. The unknown Nurglite shaman was too close to escape Hrami’s claws from splitting his throat, and Leper-Face barely had time to widen his own eyes when Hrami was on him, beating him down with his fists, blow after blow after blow even as the last two lads jumped on him, grabbed his arms to try and pull him off, even as the poxy fucker vomited acid and spewed poison and swarms of bloodflies amidst blow after blow after screaming blow-

The man’s skull turned to pulp under his fists.

But fate didn’t consider Hrami’s victory bitter enough, so the fucker broke apart completely in his death throes, bursting into a ravenous cloud of flies and hornets that enveloped him and the last apprentices. The swarm feasted on all of them now, sucking out human blood and injecting rot and poison back in its place. And when they were full, they also burst into splatters of spume and all manner of plagues and venoms, steaming and smoking as flesh sizzled and melted them alive.

Blind, half-deaf and screaming, Hrami didn’t know how he managed to channel Ghyran through any of that. Even then, it only barely kept him alive, writhing on the ground like a squirming maggot until the pain went beyond excruciating into the numb heat of rot all through his flesh. Just prolonged his agony as he died, screaming with the pain and dread of what was waiting for him on the other side, worthless like the rest of his kind, all alone – abandoned-

“You could’ve blown up one or two of the caches,” the voice he hated for so long spoke to him. To his spirit, because Hrami’s eardrums had melted.

Did – did he hear that right? He – wasn’t hallucinat-?

“Even keeping one or two of the gunpowder bombs on hand would’ve been better than this.”

Hrami stared at the ghost-like sandals in front of him. He didn’t know how he pushed himself on his back, but it was the last thing that arm would ever do. “Would’ve – ruined – y’r plans,” he slurred, not sure if the words made it all the way past his tongue.

“Not by much.”

Little Nimrod stood over him in the spirit world and... he... didn't look little at all anymore. Didn't look all that divine either, but then... Hrami had never really been able to tell, had he? He'd been worshipping trash spongers.

"If you're going to turn your back on the crow bastard, then stop setting yourself up to fail and use everything at your disposal."

"Ends nev'r just'fy th' means," Hrami slurred the god's words back in his face. "Cuz – noth'n ev'r ends."

"Twist the spirit of my words to the very end, will you?"

"Not – g'nna – live 'nyway-"

"Yes." The New God looked down at him, haloed by the bright rising sun. "You will."

A bloody, mad laugh somehow burbled out of Hrami's guttering throat. "Sure I am," his disbelieving laugh turned into a retch. When it finally stopped, he didn't know how he was still alive. "... Y' came."

"I did."

Hrami's chest tightened, and not from his rattling heart.

"You went and got me worried for you."

His eyes stung, and not from acid fumes. "G'nna – save m' soul too?"

"Yes," That one word felt like it could make fate itself stop in place. "I will."

Hrami didn't know if he was blinking away blood or tears. "Does – tha' mean I'm – more th'n 'n an'mal?"

"Yes." Nimrod sighed in... exasperation? "And if you are, then the rest of you might just be too, curse my soft heart."

"Then – tha's – 'nuff-"

"No it's not. Don't mind the manticore."

"Whu?"

The vision of the New God melted away into the sky, just in time for the real one to land in the same spot in the flesh, glowing like sunflame from within. "Don't resist," he commanded as he landed on one knee. "You don't have time for it."

Nimrod *stabbed* his bare fingers into Hrami's pus and acid-spewing chest, pried his ribcage open, then used a glowing nail to carve a word into his heart. The thing – the feeling –

*This is how he did it?* The man thought faintly. *How he – again – what use even am I like th-?*

"Do you know why humans can't use more than one Wind of Magic?"

Hrami jolted awake from – out of – what-?

"It's not just a matter of study time, or those geniuses that master a wind in a year or two would have all eight under their belt by the time they're twenty. No, the reason is different, and it's a large part of why I passed on to you every spell and trick of Ghyran as soon as I learned them in my astral wonderings. I wanted to figure it out, and you were the perfect opportunity to observe the effects as they came. Now, I understand

– the human tendency toward crippling overspecialization isn't a flaw, it's a feature. Just like the body creates scabs to seal open wounds, or antibodies to fight illness and prevent their return, the Arcane Mark is the spirit's own autoimmune response."

Magic – was dangerous – even minor miscasts could be disastrous –

"Yes, the Arcane Mark not only reduces the consequences from fumbled casting, it outright prevents someone from accessing any of the other seven winds at all."

The New God... Hrami could feel him now, like he used to before, but it didn't feel as oppressive even... even as his spirit grew, and Hrami's own grew alongside even though he was dyi-

"I first thought it was a sign of the person becoming closer to an elemental being, but it's the opposite – the Warp *tries* to create one out of us, an elemental or daemon will even attempt to possess or fuse with the person in the most extreme cases of overdrawing on the Winds. But the spirit acts on our instincts of self-preservation and selfhood, and when it fails to outright expel the energy because we – *it* – is the one actively pulling it in, it settles for the least bad alternative. Twists that energy into a defense mechanism instead."

Hrami felt a different twist in him. With impossible clarity and understanding, he felt the Jade Mark unwind and dissolve, along with his uncontrollable hair growth and green skin and sharp fangs and nails, and all the protections it gave from fumbled spells too – no, not just unwind, *reknit* somehow as-

"In this way, the one wind we pulled too much of into ourselves becomes the power source for the permanent insulation from all the others. *This* is why humans can't access multiple winds after that, and also... where resistance to spells and magic originates."

As Nimrod drew – made *Hrami* draw – *overdraw* on a completely different Wind, an all-new arcane mark formed, colored purple like sunset. It felt like the inexorable passing of time. Hrami felt it as he became insulated from the Jade Wind he'd used all this time too, but only for a moment. The Shyish arcane mark was undone just like the first.

With such speed that Hrami felt his Ond grow sore in ways he never thought it could, Nimrod locked him into and out of all eight winds one after another...

Then he drew on all of them at once, such that Hrami felt he might explode as *eight* arcane marks formed at the same time, before Nimrod himself drew on dhar and fed it to... so much... impossibly balanced, no misalignment or corrupting taint-

The presence of all eight arcane marks resonated as a single structure, and suddenly Hrami felt himself, body soul and spirit, shake loose every last spell, curse and corruptive contagion afflicting him. All the lingering weaves, and all the traces of a lifetime of wallowing in the spume of the Ruinous Powers.

*Did – did he just make me immune to magic?*

Nimrod all but confirmed it by having to physically roll Hrami out of the pool of blood and acid spume instead of using spells, except for... some water manipulation to clean him and all the space nearby of all remaining sickness, poison and filth.

*The eight winds – he can – he just – getting all the marks cuts you off from all of them? Protects you from all of them, from magic being used on you at all? Not makes you a stronger caster? But then – the elves-?*

"Troublesome," Nimrod frowned. "It's too power-intensive to make permanent, even now that your spirit has grown this much. Don't know enough to make it stick *and* allow magic at the same time either, yet.

Well, except dhar I suppose. Following the same logic, the eight-fold mark might just be the best and safest way to use it, even the dark elves I spied didn't have such an easy time with it, that's why they still need the cult of Khaine and all the rest. I wonder if this is how Nagash did it."

*Who?*

With that same... impossible ability to just change what a spirit did, Nimrod dispersed all of Hrami's arcane marks again, undid all the... protections? Impairments? Until Hrami's spirit was... impossibly clean and raw, restored... *unspoiled* like... like...

Like in his earliest, most terrifying memory when he was given to the old sorcerer to train. When he hadn't yet drawn on the Warp, or any of the Winds or spirits enough to... do anything. Not even to himself.

When Nimrod withdrew his name out of Hrami's heart, when he released his claim on his self so that Hrami was his own person once again, the man felt a lot more conflicted than the first time around.

But the flood of Ghyran Nimrod sent into him right after washed even that away in a wave of relief so strong that he thought he might start weeping and never stop. It... felt so good to have eyes again. Ears. Innards, lungs, they worked. His skin... it grew back. No pain, gods, there was no more pain.

"This is the best I can do at the moment." Nimrod sat down next to where Hrami was curled up in a naked, trembling heap because his clothes had been melted along with his skin. His old skin. "Be proud, studying your experience with the Jade Wind is what gave me the most insight required to learn all this. All the same, though, from now on I'll run these experiments on myself." The little godling conjured the biggest, fluffiest blanket Hrami had ever touched and wrapped him in it like he was a newborn swaddled for the first time.

He... he couldn't begrudge it. Kindness, charity, he'd never begrudge them again. A helpless newborn was exactly what he felt like. "You're-" he coughed more from shock that he could breathe and speak without agony again, more than anything. "You're a hard god to please."

"Am I?"

Hrami felt a shiver wrack his body. He pulled the blanket tighter. If being Tzeentch's servant taught him any lesson worth keeping, it was to never speak impulsively, especially when answering questions. "I guess not," he finally admitted. "Not like I proved anything in the end." Hrami had set himself up to fail. The New God was right, he really shouldn't have done that. When he gave himself away when talking to that little girl, when he went forward with Nimrod's plans, it made a deadly confrontation with the others inevitable. Turned the whole mess into a fight of measly survival. Didn't prove anything, wasn't shit in anyone's eyes, never mind a god's. Except Khorne, maybe, but he didn't count.

"I'm not Tzeentch. I won't order you to never lie, but do keep this in mind – if you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." Nimrod put a hand on Hrami's forehead and sent a soothing wave of Aqshy into him, banishing the weakness and the cold. "Rest."

"Aye, Lord."

Nimrod huffed. "I didn't ask for worship, I asked you to make me believe in *you*."

*If only the gods were all like you. "...Did I?"*

"Barely."



Nimrod made to rise, but stopped and looked down at him. Slowly, he reached into a pouch at his belt and pulled out one of those lanterns of his, except tiny and hanging from a chain. A pendant. It felt... Like home never did.

What a sorry life he's lived.

"Delusional Bird or his minion no doubt has the piece of you that you traded for that crow familiar, so he still has first claim when you die. Since I'm not divine yet, your best hope for a less hellish afterlife is a healthy relationship with someone who is. I recommend the White Dove, she refuses to give up on you lot up here for whatever reason. But I'll do the best I can by you too. In case my vague plans to summon your pact demon and reclaim that bit don't work out, though, don't forget to jump *inside* the lantern if the time comes."

Hrami accepted the gift and decided he'd never again look down on pity either.

He watched the little master rise, turn and walk to –

A manticore. It was just over there, snarling and thrashing furiously while bound in a myriad vines. Where did it come from? When? Hrami hadn't heard anything...

Yes, didn't *hear* anything was right. He was blind and deaf until just a minute ago, and the god child did say something about it, right? It wasn't a hallucination...

"How the fuck?" Hrami still muttered, not seeing anything odd except the vines, even with witchsight. "No way a manticore wouldn't break out of those things, what did you do to it?"

"Nothing actually, it's just exhausted," Nimrod replied in between futile spittle from the thrashing beast. "Dumb thing's been chasing me for the last hundred and twenty kilometers. It's the same one that lives in the cave near the Mammoth Rider settlement, not sure what the hell it was doing so far south." The Amber Wind of magic collected in Nimrod then, concentrating around his eyes and throat. Next time he spoke, instead of words there were growls, hisses, and even a roar when the beast got particularly uppity. It wasn't particularly easy to understand what was happening mystically, Nimrod glowed fairly bright hot and red for some reason that... didn't seem to excite the Red Wind. But Hrami experienced the same thing several times over just now, so he could still comprehend the major things.

An arcane mark formed in Nimrod's aura when he overdrew on the Ghur and transformed into a manticore himself, briefly, to beat and roar the other one into submission. But when he transformed back into a human, Hrami also saw the mark be dissolved and the God child's spirit returning to its prior, falsely nondescript state.

"Huh." The boy was more bewildered by an animal than he'd ever been by any human, that Hrami knew of. It would hurt his pride something fierce if he still had one. "It was looking for its old pack, or pride. Whatever this thing was before it was mutated into this creature, it must have lived near or in Bjornling territory before, or was a migratory species. I wonder..." The god child weighed some great decision. "Well, it's worth testing at least, best do it in controlled conditions instead of a crisis later. Come over here, will you Hrami?"

... That was the first time the god child ever called him by name.

Embarrassingly, Hrami almost couldn't disentangle the blanket enough to walk properly, almost had to crawl over like a worm. It was all he could do to shuffle over on his feet before falling back down on his arse.

Hrami had no idea what it was that he saw next.

Something that *wasn't* the Ond but definitely *was* Nimrod... extended from nimrod until it engulfed both of them and the creature. Then he-

-said *something* that did something to the space inside whatever it was and...

And the manticore aged in reverse, getting smaller and smaller until it squirmed and twisted and fumed a hazy, purple-greenish mist that suddenly popped like a bubble, leaving behind an egg. A great, big egg as big as Nimrod's head.

"Agh-hnnn," the boy listed where he stood with a frighteningly real groan. "That... was a lot. Enforcing outcomes against the will of gods is really that hard, huh? Even the most debased of them..."

What was he talking about? What was that? What had he done?

"Huh," Nimrod said on finally seeing the result of his...

Not a spell, it was more than a spell, this was a miracle.

The boy picked up the egg.

The egg promptly hatched explosively into...

"Wark!"

A baby griffon.

The Small Lord had just turned a chaos monster back into the creature it came from by *reversing age*.

*Not divine my arse.*

"Huh," Nimrod repeated himself, another thing he'd never done with a human. Guess that when he said some animals were more noble than people, he'd been as truthful as every other time. Apparently.

The god child held up the wet, baby lion eagle from under the arms. It wiggled. "So *that's* where manticores come from."

Chaos stealing babies. A tale as old as the Eye in the North. Even older, now that the thing was gone.

Good riddance.

"I wonder if manticores can spawn from other things, do you know?"

Hrami only belatedly realized he was the one being addressed. "That's the prevailing wisdom, but some think it's them sorcerers in the fortresses up in the Chaos Wastes that make'em."

Well, used to make, maybe, with the Chaos Wastes being just normal wastes now. Or soon would be.

"Perhaps the variance in manticore anatomy is caused by the different animals they mutate from. Ah well." The boy cradled the... actually very large creature to his chest with some difficulty, the cub was almost as big as a grown dog. Only a middling sized dog, but still a dog. "Even as a mutated monster you looked for your family, huh? Lions live in prides and eagles mate for life, guess even the Runious Powers can't completely twist such a strong blend of instincts. That's a good... girl, apparently." The boy had no trouble

holding it with a single arm while the other scratched it under the beak. “Who’s a good girl? You’re a good girl, that’s right, you are, that’s who.”

“Wark!”

“Look, Hrami, isn’t she cute? This is why the Ruinous Powers are complete morons, who’d want to lose all this just to make a scary rage monster? I’m going to make you sapient the first chance I get, oh yes I will. Then I’ll find a boy griffon and make him into a person too, and then you can be fruitful and multiply into a whole race of wonder griffons.”

Hrami was hard-pressed not to gape.

*Holy shit, he thought in realization. He isn’t just pretending to be a child, he really is one!*

The rest of what happened until the return of the raid didn’t make much more sense. Nimrod made Hrami show and explain where and why he buried what he buried, and he thought it was well enough done. The blasting powder was scattered around where the King, Jarls and most distinguished warriors generally stood during the events, most of the lanterns under where the sacrifice was going to be to save as many of the souls as possible.

Despite that, the Small Lord decided they wouldn’t be going through with it.

“What?” Hrami was dumbfounded. “Why? I mean, not that this isn’t exactly what I wanted—“ But was it really?

“It’s well done, don’t worry. It’s not easy to change the entire course of your life, especially when it goes against everything you’ve been so abusively indoctrinated into. It’s not you, it’s me. I’m not weak enough anymore, that I need to settle for just choosing between bad options. I’ll just make a new option of my own. I know exactly how to do it.”

“How’s that?”

“By taking a page from the book that my father was wise enough to leave unwritten.” Which explained absolutely nothing. “Just the one though.”

Nirod didn’t explain anything else, but he did lead him off on a circuitous path through hills and woods until they were on the opposite side of Graelholm from the Monolith. It was a good day’s march, but it finally made the ranting in Hrami’s ears disappear. He’d thought it was warp corruption from the fumbled spells earlier, but apparently not.

“The monolith is more than you know,” Nimrod said cryptically. “It certainly doesn’t belong to this Katam fellow, he just got his skull bound to the thing somehow, was probably trying to become immortal. He got his wish, after a fashion.”

Katam? The legendary sorcerer was alive? No, a talking skull? Bound to the monolith somehow? What the fuck? Where? It’s not like the thing had space inside, it was just a damn pillar made of rock, not even that girthy.

“We’ll have plenty of time to look into it when you can defend yourself properly again. Or just after the raid returns, depending on how things go. Until then, you and this little one are better off without his hysterics rattling your brains.”

That, at least, made sense. Not that Hrami was going to give him any grief over it, he was past that stupidity now. He hoped.

The raid finally returned a couple of days later. Just enough time for Hrami to earn himself the Ghyran arcane mark again, though without the physical mutations this time, thank goodness.

The whole time, the Small Lord did... almost nothing at all besides feeding and playing with that griffon baby of. Hrami had to do all the hunting, foraging and cooking for all of them. Or maybe not, Nimrod didn't tell him to do any of it, he hadn't... given any new orders at all, actually. Hrami just... felt charitable enough to do it without being asked.

It didn't make him feel disgusted with himself anymore.

Hrami did get worried when Nimrod didn't seem inclined to wake up from his meditative trance, though, that morning. The Small Lord just sat there, eyes closed and cross-legged with his hands on his knees, breathing deeply and slowly. Completely heedless of the little griffon crawling up and down his front and back and head, and down and back up again in growing frustration at being ignored.

The man was weighing the costs and risks of shaking him awake when Nimrod tensed, clenched his fists, and snapped awake with a face twisted into something that could only be angry self-recrimination.

"Dammit," the Small God punched the earth. "I just couldn't help myself, I just had to play around with the Tongue on a whim. I should've waited."

Hrami cautiously stayed silent.

"No, no. *No.*" Nimrod seemed to be trying to persuade himself of... of what? Hrami didn't know. "No, it's not a lost opportunity. Not forever, it can't be, not completely, it might come up again. It has to come up again. If it doesn't, I'll just make a path to it myself. There has to be away. There *is* a way, I saw it."

Hrami stayed quiet and didn't move, even as the baby griffon sensed the change in atmosphere and hopped away from his parent to hide behind his legs instead.

"And of course, after I try and fail to grasp the slightest ember of light even with everything I have, I learn how to be a ninja for free."

A ninja? What's that? And what light was he talking about?

What could he have just seen, to make him sound so bitter?

With a hollow sigh, Nimrod climbed to his feet. The little griffon seemed to decide that meant things were safe, so he pranced over to be picked up. It didn't cheer the boy up, but he did pick up the little beast and grabbed his beak. Seemed to be the equivalent of a hug for the thing, like biting each other's snout was for wolves. "Come on, my evil man who wants to be good, let's you and me go meet the King. Don't worry, I won't take this out on you, or anyone."

*'This' being what?* "Might be a very short meeting anyway," Hrami warily said instead, falling in step next to the little god.

"That's fine, I'm not here for him."

"... You really think you can get through to them?" Even after whatever that was?

“If it was just me, no. Contrary to whatever impression I may or may not given, I’ve never been a particularly gifted speaker. If I were, I wouldn’t have lost the first time.”

Excuse him?

“However, this won’t be the first occasion where I win over a crowd that completely hates me. I’ve lived for so long, witnessed and memorized the words of so many orators far superior to myself, that I have something for just about any situation. Now hold onto this while I do something to banish this foul mood.”

Hrami stared at the baby griffon suddenly in his face.

“Wark.”

“The same to you, brat.” He grabbed the thing as gently as he could. Big mistake, it immediately escaped and sent him on a mad chase up and down the forest all the way to the Grael Hold’s gates.

When he finally caught the thing in a vine trap, when he realized what a complete spectacle he made of himself in front of the gate guards, Hrami the Green swore that would be the first and only time he played such an embarrassing distraction for anyone, god or not.

“- Nimrod .-“

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I saw the Flame Imperishable and fell short.

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“- Mechanics Discerned .-“

### **Enforce Decree**

Nimrod can spend CP to either force a Eununcia success, make a success into a critical success, or to make a successful Eununcia outcome permanent, all *without* inviting disproportionate backlash (such as from causality, probability, fate or pissed off hell gods). Cost is 100 CP per syllable, plus an additional 100 CP multiplied by the difference in size category between Nimrod and target, plus an additional 100 CP for every layer of Veil degradation. Basically, Nimrod is combining Eununcia with the Sealed True Name safeguards and Arcane anti-sympathy trait to make the affected thing count as separate from the rest of the universe for the duration of the Eununciation.

Namsa Kala Hata (Flesh Time Undone) = six syllables = 600 CP spent.

1100 CP – 600 = 500 CP

“- Forms and Failures .-“

**Expert Martial Form of the Shadow Emissary (Free, Ninja, Final Fantasy XI, Modus)** – Strict training in the forbidden arts of the Far East have transformed the Ninja into cold, hard killing machines. Capable

of evading most attacks thrown at them by deceiving their opponents with their mastery of shadows while dealing large amounts of damage with shuriken and spells, making them invaluable on higher level foes.

**Exemplary Mythic Path of the Unconquerable Anathema (Failed) (600, Adamant, MtG - Throne of Eldraine, Benevolence)** – Make no mistake. You are a hero. Within you is the potential to etch your name into the legends of Eldraine, alongside the men and women who carved the Realm from the Wilds and won the throne from the elven princes of eld. Ancient artifacts call for you, generational feuds mend under your hand, and winning the trust of fae, knight, and commoner alike comes naturally to you. The strength of your heart improves and empowers whatever amazing feats you've accomplished in your travels here in the following ways:

### **Giant Killer - > Resolute Rider (Selected) (Equivalent to Grail Knight Blessing)**

It is no longer just the tall and mighty that fail to shake you - you are able to withstand the twisting, corrupting nature of the Wilds Warp with the light of your soul, and in fact by summoning forth great righteousness you can create a wreath of power that actively causes further damage to mystical beings. In addition, you are capable of using the light of your soul to create a shield against the claws and spell of those very same beings.

~~Requires Giant Killer (MtG - Throne of Eldraine)~~ (Sealed True Name + Nimrod's sheer experience substitutes for this).

In Warhammer terms, Grail Knight Equivalent Ward Save and Chaos Resistance is just the beginning, for the Spirit AND Body, not just Soul as Nimrod had before. If he had this he could've come through the Time Capsule Wall instead of needing to come through the Gate and burn his spirit to cleanse himself. It's basically the Anathema flame, but at level 1 instead of Max like the Emperor has.

### **Loremage - > Arcanist of the Loch**

Your special expertise in both the history of Eldraine and the nature of the Fae has allowed you to go beyond mere gathering of knowledge - discovering ancient spells to add to your repertoire, utilizing natural ambient magic of an area to enhance your own capabilities, and discovering artifacts of power hidden from the past are all within your realm of expertise, allowing you to transform your knowledge into powerful magical capability. ~~Requires Loremage (MtG - Throne of Eldraine)~~ **(Unlocked by Synergy with Prior Forms)**

### **Oathsworn - > Deathless Knight (Equivalent Benefits provided by Prior Forms)**

Now this is just ridiculous. Simply put, your stores of vitality are genuinely through the roof. If Oathsworn were difficult to put down, you are (barring the use of annihilating flame or being reduced to nothing but pieces and paste) downright impossible to kill with mere blade and bow. You can heal from nearly any wound within a few moments, and your durability is such that the easiest and quickest way to kill you would have to be decapitation followed by the destruction of the head afterwards - one or the other would merely give you a chance to recover your head and place it back on. ~~Requires Oathsworn (MtG - Throne of Eldraine)~~ **(Unlocked by Prior Forms)**

### **Irencrag Feat - > Fireborn Knight (new)**

Beyond flame and light, you have tapped into a power of the heart that grants you the power of the heavens itself - you can call down lightning with similar capabilities as the Silverflame, and wreath your weapon in the same - in turn, enhancing the speed and power of your strikes to resemble that of the very electricity you call upon. Requires Irencrag Feat (MtG - Throne of Eldraine)

### **Tall as a Beanstalk -> Rampart Smasher (Covered by Prior Forms)**

If your strength was prodigious before, it's outright inane now. As a human, you're large enough to hold a horse beneath each arm, as well as capable of wielding ballista as a handheld weapon, shoulder tackling through solid stone walls, and breaking the necks of castle-destroying dragons with a twist of your wrist.  
~~Requires Tall as a Beanstalk (MtG—Throne of Eldraine)~~

Basically, Nimrod could have gotten four out of these five prestige classes, one of which is basically the first step on achieving the Anathema Power of the Emperor himself. Would also have given him the Grail Knight-level magic resistance that Extremis lacks, and the ability to weaponize it too.

Unfortunately, 500 CP was just not enough for the roll, to his (and my) vast disappointment.

Might just make for a better story this way, though.

...

Let me have my consolation prize, m'kay?