

Volume 2 - Chapter 90 - Fiducia

"You ask me whether I fear the Void? I do not. The Void is *patient*. The Void is *consistent*. The Void does not pretend to be your friend before it kills you—because it always tries to kill you, without fail. Of all the things in this war that wish me dead, it is the only one I truly respect. Because it is the only one that is truly honest with me, and with itself."

—

[Excerpt from "Last Quotes, An Anthology Of Loss" — Battlefield Psyker Reyinan "The Quiet" Sorrinsas, in conversation with embedded journalist, PFC 753.]

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Thea took a few more deep breaths and straightened herself fully.

'I guess being honest is probably the best path forward here... Maybe he can actually help me figure this out.'

She met his eyes.

"I—I was trying to [Glimpse] the conversation..."

Both of the Rune priest's eyebrows went up. "Oh?"

"I wanted to see if... *How* you would answer."

Silence hung between them for a few seconds.

Then the Rune priest suddenly chuckled—and Thea had no idea what to do with that. She didn't know *what* reaction she'd expected, exactly, but laughter was *definitely* not on the list.

Which... In hindsight, was probably odd not to expect, given the Rune priest's general demeanour in almost any situation being amusement.

"You truly *are* worthy of being my pupil, aren't you," he murmured, shaking his head slightly.

Then, louder, actually directed at her: "You were attempting to Intent *speech*, activate your [Glimpse] at the moment of commitment, and then cancel the speech itself before completion. Is that correct?"

Thea nodded.

"You *do* realize," he said, the amusement fully back on his face now, "that most Veritas Precogs do not even *conceive* of this technique until several years into their Psychic studies? Or that using it—even for physical action, let alone speech—typically takes *years*, if not *decades* to pull off consistently? *And* that speech is many, many times harder to achieve than action? It functions fundamentally differently inside our brains."

This time around, it was Thea's eyebrows climbing toward her hairline.

"I... didn't know that," she admitted quietly, her gaze dropping toward the floor. "I guess it was pretty stupid to just—"

"*Hey!*" The Rune priest's voice abruptly cut through hers, sharp enough that her eyes snapped back up to his immediately. "I did *not* say that. Do not put words in my mouth, foolish student... Just because *others* take years or decades to learn something does *not* mean you cannot do it faster. You have clearly already learned portions of it—which is actually something I intended to discuss with you today, but we will get to that *after* we deal with whatever is troubling you."

He gestured for her to stand up straighter.

She followed his orders immediately and straightened herself once more.

"Try again," he said. "Do not let yourself be defeated by a single failure, Thea. That is not what I have seen from you, and it does not become a pupil of mine."

Thea took a slow breath and let his words settle.

It struck her again how strange this really was.

The man standing in front of her bore almost no resemblance to the one she'd seen the day before. *That* Rune priest was a force of nature, draped in theatrics and casual cruelty, who walked through corridors without considering what his Presence did to the people in them.

This one was patient, empathetic and direct. Actively trying to ease her into the work.

'Probably primarily so my anxiety doesn't interfere with whatever lesson he's got planned,' she thought. *'But still.'*

It was a positive point in the ledger.

And it was making her want to just ask. Right now.

The longer this went on, the harder it was getting to seriously believe that the Rune priest would lash out at a mere request—he kept actively defying her assumptions, kept showing her sides of himself she hadn't known existed.

But...

Major Quinn had said—*directly*—that even *she* couldn't really read him well. Add to that, what Lucas had said that morning over breakfast: The man was so far removed from all of them that they were barely the same species anymore.

So... could she actually trust her social instincts here? Her already-*damn-lacklustre* social instincts, which had managed to misread plenty of situations involving normal-ass humans left and right, applied to someone Lucas had compared to an ant trying to understand a person?

'Very likely not.'

Either way, the Rune priest had given her free reign to use the time and try again.

So she would. Learning this was going to be useful no matter what she ended up doing in regards to this particular situation.

She started to focus.

The words she needed to start the conversation—the opening, the impetus, the thing that would commit her to the path she wanted to walk down. She let them form in her head, clean and clear, repeated them once. Then again. Then again.

'If this is truly harder than action... I just put more effort into it. Easy.'

She took a deep breath, then started weighting each word with Intent—the same way she would have with any physical action she meant to [Glimpse] through.

Loading it. Building the pressure behind the dam. The words were practically *right there*, practically leaving her mouth, ready to pour out the moment she let them—

She used her Power.

GLIMP—

Pain.

Her knees buckled before her brain had even registered the change, blood spraying from her throat as she folded sideways and hit the floor of the training hall. Her vision was already tunnelling, her thoughts smearing into static, her body trying to scream through a throat that no longer worked—

"Sovereign, reset her."

Instantly, she was standing in front of the Rune priest again.

She handled the reset better this time, knowing that it was coming—she only breathed heavily a few times; no dramatic gasp.

He leaned down slightly, peering into her eyes from a closer angle, studying something. Whatever he was looking for, he apparently found—because after a moment, he nodded once and straightened.

"Again."

Thea steadied herself.

'Okay. Different approach then...'

Instead of building all the Intent at once, she'd let it bleed into the words as she pushed them forward—pace it, ease the dam open rather than letting it burst.

Maybe the issue was the speed. Maybe speech needed something gentler than action.

She set her jaw, focused on the words, and started layering Intent into them piece by piece.

The pressure built, evenly this time, and just as the words were about to break free—

She fired her Power.

GLIMP—

Pain. *Identical* pain.

Her throat tearing itself apart from the inside, her body folding, blood pooling on the floor beneath her—

"Sovereign, reset her."

She was instantly upright once more, fully healed.

She sucked in a breath, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

The Rune priest was watching her with an expression that had shifted—still there with the ever-patient note to it, but now with something more analytical underneath it as well.

"Walk me through it," he said. "Step by step. *Exactly* how you are approaching this."

Thea swallowed—her throat still felt phantom-raw, despite the reset having put everything back where it belonged—and nodded.

"I focus on what I want to say," she began. "The words. I repeat them in my head until they feel solid, until the Intent behind them is effectively fully formed. Then I load them—*commit* to saying them with everything I have, the same way I'd commit to pulling a trigger or doing a certain movement. And then, right as the words are about to come out from the pressure behind them, right at the point of no return, I use [Glimpse]."

She thought about it for a second, then nodded.

"Yeah... That's it. That's the whole process."

The Rune priest's face did something she had never seen it do before.

He looked *confused*.

Not thoughtfully curious which was the furthest she'd ever seen him go, but genuinely, *visibly* confused—his brow furrowing, his head pulling back slightly while tilting a bit, his eyes narrowing.

It made Thea's stomach drop.

'That's not a good face. That is very much not a good face.'

"Why," he said slowly, "are you approaching this differently than when you use your Psychic Powers normally?"

Thea blinked at him.

"I'm... not? That's how I always use them."

The Rune priest *physically* recoiled from her.

He took a half-step back, his head tilting another few degrees, like he was trying to look at her from an angle that would *somehow* make her words make sense.

The silence between them stretched.

She stared at him. He stared at her.

Thea didn't understand what the problem was.

She had described her process—the same process she used every single time she activated [Glimpse], whether it was in combat, in training, or during a DM. The same process that had worked flawlessly, every time, without exception, until just now.

The Rune priest, meanwhile, looked like someone had just backhanded him with a puzzle he hadn't expected.

His forehead creased, smoothed, creased again—practically dancing as his thoughts moved behind his eyes, which were darting back and forth rapidly, tracking something internal.

She could almost feel the speed of it through his Presence—the ambient weight around her shifting and flickering as his focus jumped from one thread to another.

Then, abruptly, his face cleared and the Presence stilled.

Whatever he'd been searching for, he'd clearly landed on it—or at least on something like it.

"Thea," he said carefully, "have you ever paid attention to the Psyfocus flowing through your body?"

She stared at him.

"...To the *what*?"

"Psyfocus. The Psychic energy that powers your Psychic Powers. Have you ever consciously felt and guided it moving through you?"

"I... I didn't even know that was a thing," she admitted. "Nobody's ever mentioned something like that to me. I didn't know that was something I was supposed to do, I guess...?"

Silence.

They stared at each other again—Thea because she genuinely had no idea what he was getting at, and the Rune priest because he appeared to be, for the very first time she had ever witnessed, *completely* without any words left.

After what felt like half an eternity, the Rune priest suddenly broke into laughter.

Full-belly, unrestrained, almost wheezing laughter—the kind that bent him slightly at the waist and made him have to brace a hand against his own thighs to keep his balance.

Thea simply stood there, completely thrown, with absolutely no idea what was funny.

It took him nearly thirty seconds to compose himself.

When he finally calmed down—wiping at one eye with the back of his hand, still shaking his head—he looked at her with an expression that was equal parts wonder and disbelief.

"You are *truly* a once-in-a-lifetime joy to be around, Thea," he said.

She gave him a look that very clearly communicated that she would like an explanation for all of that, please.

"You might actually be a genius," he said, and the way he said it made it sound like he wasn't entirely sure whether that was a compliment or a *diagnosis*. "An instinctive understanding of your Psychic Powers—one that functions entirely without conscious input. Do you have *any* idea how unbelievably rare that is?"

"I... I'm sorry, Rune priest... I don't even understand what you're telling me right now," Thea said honestly, feeling completely lost with everything that was happening right now.

"Psychic Powers," the Rune priest said, straightening up and clasping his hands behind his back as he had seemingly flipped the switch to mentor-mode, "do *not* work like Allbright System Abilities. What you just described to me—wanting to do something, so you simply call upon the Power and having it activate—that is how an *Ability* works. You simply trigger it, and the System handles the entire complicated rest to make it happen."

He raised a finger.

"Psychic Powers are *not* handled by the System. The Psyfocus you use to fuel them has to be *actively guided*—shaped, directed, channelled into the correct configuration to achieve what you are intending. If you do not guide it, it will simply pool at whatever part of your body you are focusing your attention on the most and erupt."

He gestured toward her throat.

"Which is *exactly* what has been happening to you just now. You are focusing on speech, your attention is centered on your throat, and the Psyfocus is flooding there with nowhere to go and no shape to take. So it detonates."

Thea opened her mouth.

Nothing came out.

*'I've **never** done that,'* she thought, and the weight of it landed like a stone dropped into still water. *'I have literally never guided **anything**. Not once. Every single time I've used [Glimpse], I just... called it, and it worked. Every. Single. Time. The Psyfocus just went where it needed to go, took the shape it needed to take, and produced the result I wanted... So much so that I didn't even know it was doing it... Because it wasn't **me** doing it, was it?'*

The realization spread through her slowly—like something she'd already been circling around for the past few minutes, sitting just out of view, finally being dragged into the light where she could finally see the whole of it.

She'd seen the edge of it earlier, hadn't she? Right after the first backlash.

The flash of Æht's voice in her head, the words from the DM clicking into place, the heavy weight settling in her chest as she realized the [Glimpse] had never been hers to begin with.

But that had only ever been the *surface* of it.

'Æht's been doing it for me. From the very first [Glimpse]. She's not just prevented the backlash but the way she did that is by guiding the very Psyfocus, shaping it, handling every single technical aspect of the Power—and handing me the result like it was as simple as pressing a button... Basically making it so I could simply focus on the best application at any given point, without having to worry about the complicated parts...'

She'd effectively been handed a finished product so polished that Thea had never even realized there was supposed to *be* work happening at all.

Thea's throat felt bone-dry. She swallowed hard.

"H—How do I do it, then? Actively, I mean."

The Rune priest cupped his chin, tilted his head, then gestured vaguely in her direction.

"Try it out. You *already* know how to, Thea—you've done it hundreds of times before. It's simply a matter of recognizing that it has been instinctive so far, and then getting a conscious handle on it. I'd like to see you work through it yourself first, before I offer my own interpretation. It is almost always better to find your own natural solution to these things, than to take one handed to you by someone else."

'But I fucking haven't done it before?!' she thought, the frustration sharp enough to sting.

She kept that part firmly inside her own head, of course.

She took a deep, calming breath.

*'Okay... **Technically**, I should have **some** idea of how it works. I've been conscious every time Æht has used it. I've been there for every single [Glimpse]—I just wasn't the one driving. So I should have at least some sense of how she guides it, even if I was never paying attention to that part specifically...'*

She refocused. Closed her eyes for a half second, opened them again, and committed to the words once more—but this time, she split her attention.

Part of it stayed on the Intent and the speech, the way she'd been doing.

The rest she dragged *inward*, trying to actually pay attention to whatever it was she was *supposed* to have been paying attention to this entire time.

She fired her Power.

GLIMP—

She caught the barest, briefest hint of *something*—a flicker of motion, somewhere inside her chest—

Pain.

"Sovereign, reset her."

'*Okay. Closer. I saw something... I **felt** something.*'

She tried again.

Same approach, but *even more* attention inward this time, deliberately reaching for the flicker of whatever she'd just barely caught.

GLIMP—

This time she got more of it—a clearer sense of where the Psyfocus was originating, which was closer to her Gate than she'd assumed, *much* closer—

Pain.

"Sovereign."

Third attempt.

Her throat detonated again, and she finally registered for the first time—*properly* registered—just how *absurdly* fast this whole thing was happening.

The entire sequence—the Psyfocus coming into existence, surging through her, pooling at the focal point of her attention, erupting—was happening in less than a fraction of a fraction of a second.

Less than the time it took her to even consciously think of the Power's name.

By the time the thought finished, the Psyfocus was already there, already moving, already just about to detonate, before her brain had finished assembling the whole thing.

'*How the fuck am I supposed to guide **anything** that fast...?*'

Three more attempts. Three more resets.

Each time she tried something different—gripping it earlier, gripping it later, trying to anticipate the movement before it started, trying to push it consciously instead of catching it mid-flight.

None of it worked—not even remotely.

The Psyfocus simply went where her conscious attention pulled it, exploded, and the cycle reset again and again.

She held up a hand at the Rune priest after the next reset prompt and took a step back, breathing slowly.

'Okay, Thea. Stop. Just... stop for a moment.'

She closed her eyes.

*'I'm not actually looking for how Æht has been doing it, am I? I'm just trying to brute-force my own solution from scratch, in real time, in less than a fraction of a second. That's absolutely **not** what I need to do. She's **already** solved this. She's solved it **hundreds** of times—maybe thousands, even. The pathway already exists. I just need to look at her homework, not redo it all from scratch.'*

The next attempt, she didn't try to grab or direct the Psyfocus at all.

She simply took a mental step back, let her body do what it had always done—using some of the Old Man's lectures on meditation to get a better sense of self after centering herself—and simply *watched*.

She fired the Power when she was ready.

GLIMP—

Pain. Reset.

She did it again. And again.

Each time letting her body run the routine while she just tried to feel where the Psyfocus *naturally* wanted to go, where it had presumably always gone when Æht was the one driving.

After the third one, the Rune priest opened his mouth—starting to say something, probably about taking a break, probably reasonable—

"I've *almost* got it!" Thea said sharply, eyes still closed. "*Don't* stop me now. Please."

She felt, rather than saw as her eyes were still closed, the small nod he gave.

The competitive part of her had finally, fully woken up—the part that had carried her through a thousand-thousand games and a thousand losing positions, the part that had always refused to fold to whatever had been put in front of her.

There was *no fucking way* she was going to let whatever Æht actually was lock her out of her Powers when Æht wasn't actively present.

'Absolutely fucking not.'

Next attempt.

This time she layered something on top of the approach—activated [Sensory Overdrive] a fraction of a second before the [Glimpse], eyes closed, deliberately shutting down everything external so she could exclusively focus on internal sensation.

She narrowed her Perception down past her skin, past her muscles, past the ambient noise of her own body, and reached for what was happening inside.

'Sensory Overdrive'

GLIMP—

And finally—

'That... doesn't feel like it usually does.'

There it was.

The *exact* subconscious thought manifesting into her consciousness she'd been hunting for.

Æht *had* already solved the pathing. Already worked out how the Psyfocus needed to be channelled through her Gate, how to shape it into whatever [Glimpse] required to function.

The whole thing was there, fully mapped out and drawn—and the Psyfocus was already trying to move there, but her active focus was keeping it from doing so.

All Thea had to ultimately do was copy the homework.

Pain. Reset.

Her eyes were open now, and she looked up at the Rune priest with a toothy grin spreading across her face. He looked back at her, eyebrow raised, an amused smile already pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh? Have you figured it out?"

"*Nope,*" Thea replied immediately, the elation of the progress still buzzing through her chest. "But I've got the start of it. There's... like a path. Inside my body. Already carved from previous uses. I just need to figure out how to let the Psyfocus *actually* move through it, without my Intent and Will pulling it off course while I'm holding the actual shape of what I want to do."

She took a quick breath.

"But I'll get there."

The Rune priest watched her for a moment, that amused smile widening into something that looked almost satisfied.

Then, without warning, he simply lifted off the floor.

Thea blinked.

He floated—calmly, without ceremony, the void-black robes chiming softly with the motion—until the armchair he'd vacated earlier settled underneath him, hovered above it for a half-second, and lowered himself into the cushions like he was settling in for a long evening of light reading.

He gestured at her with one hand, lazy and encouraging.

"By all means, continue. I would never stifle a pupil's experiments." His grin returned, sharper this time. "*Especially* when they are as entertaining to watch as yours."

Thea did not ask whether he meant the physical experience—her throat repeatedly exploding and her dying—or the metaphysical one of watching her work through the problem.

She was *fairly sure* it was both, but she didn't actually want to confirm that verbally.

Instead, she got back to it.

She worked through the path methodically now, with the texture of it caught firmly in her awareness.

The Psyfocus *wanted* to take a specific route through her body—through her Gate, threading along a sequence of points that didn't follow any anatomical logic she could name but felt—when she actually paid attention—absolutely *deliberate*.

Each attempt, she'd nudge the Psyfocus a fraction closer to where she *thought* the natural groove sat, let it go, watch where it actually went, and try to map the difference.

It was painstaking work.

Quite literally, as her throat detonated and she died again. And again. And again.

The Sovereign reset her each time with mechanical patience, and the Rune priest watched from the armchair with the same infinite patience, occasionally humming to himself but otherwise letting her do the work uninterrupted.

Bit by bit, the picture filled in.

She found one groove that ran cleanly from her Gate down through her chest, then bent in a direction she would not have predicted—outwards, away from her body, somehow. She found another that split off partway through and looped back around towards and into the Gate.

Each successful trace gave her a slightly clearer sense of the next, but every single one cost her a death and another reset, and the cumulative mental fatigue was beginning to outweigh the progress.

After what she estimated had been roughly half an hour of constant dying, she got reset and simply... *stood* there—for several, long seconds.

Her body upright, her eyes open, her mind nowhere in particular.

The reset had handled the physical exhaustion in the technical sense, but the mental wear didn't reset along with it, and her brain had finally hit a wall.

"That, I believe, is enough for today," the Rune priest said from the armchair, his tone light but firm.

Thea didn't bother to argue—she knew he was right.

She just nodded, slowly, and let out a long breath.

The frustration hit her chest almost immediately.

She'd been working at this for *thirty straight minutes*, dying over and over, and she felt like she had barely even scratched the surface of what she was *supposed* to be doing to get this Power to manifest properly. The grooves she'd mapped felt like a tiny, miniscule fragment of whatever the actual *full* pathway needed to be.

She was nowhere near being able to actually use [Glimpse] consciously.

She could *feel* that.

Before the thought could fully settle into something heavier, however, the Rune priest was already speaking.

"I have to say, Thea, I am *thoroughly* impressed with the progress you just made." He shifted slightly in the armchair, propping one elbow on the armrest, his chin resting on his fist. "By my estimation, you've already charted somewhere between five and six percent of the full pathway required to consciously manifest [Glimpse]."

Thea's face must have done something fairly transparent, because the Rune priest immediately chuckled and shook his head.

"Oh, my dear pupil," he said, "you *really* need to stop looking at everything through the lens of a natural prodigy genius. Five to six percent of a pathway-mapping on a Power, on the very first attempt, after thirty minutes of work? That is, genuinely, *unbelievably* ludicrous, Thea. Even *I* could not produce that kind of outcome with the small amount of time you spent on it."

Thea's eyes went wide at the admission.

The Rune priest nodded, the grin returning to his face.

"Yes," he said. "*Truly*. It was *very* impressive, and you should be extremely proud of what you've already accomplished here today."

Then, as quickly as it had come, the grin faded.

His face shifted back into the serious register he'd been using earlier—one she still wasn't entirely used to seeing on him.

"*That said...* It is highly unlikely you will be able to attempt [Glimpse] for whatever conversation you came here to have. Not today. Possibly not for some time, in fact, depending on how the rest of this work develops."

His eyes met hers directly.

"And we cannot really begin the session proper, in any meaningful capacity, if your mind is going to be tied up in whatever it is that has you so perturbed. The situation still needs dealing with, one way or another. So I will ask you directly, Thea: What would you prefer? "We have two options, as I see it."

He leaned forward slightly in the armchair, opening his left hand and presenting the empty palm.

"The first—we postpone today's session. I continue training your [Glimpse] usage in the meantime, as long as your mind can hold up, and we resume the proper session once you are ready to address whatever has been weighing on you."

He opened his right hand, presenting its palm as well.

"The second—if there is *anything* I can say or do to assuage your fears right now, we deal with it immediately, and we proceed with the session I had planned for today."

He spread his hands slightly as he moved them towards her.

"The choice is *yours*. Genuinely. I do not mind either, for we have all the time in the Universe to get through with this. While I would, of course, prefer a quick resolution, watching a true prodigy work their way through their first pathway solve is unbelievably entertaining and intriguing in its own right. It's your choice, Thea."

Thea took a deep, steadying breath and let the two options sit in her head, side by side.

She tried to think it through cleanly.

Like a Build decision—it was what she was best at.

Pros, cons, expected outcomes.

'Option one is the "safe" path. Postpone. Take more time. Train [Glimpse] further, get better, eventually reach a point where I can actually use it on speech, and then have the conversation when I have the safety net in place. Æht would approve. We have time. There's

no rush... But that's the problem. It would mean Æht has more time to do whatever she wants to do. Whatever she's actually after, it gives her more time to pursue it...

'Option two is the fast, dangerous path. Ask now. Trust the Rune priest. Trust Major Quinn's read of him. Trust the Old Man's read of Major Quinn. Trust the chain of trust I've built without really being able to verify a single link in it...'

She glanced up at the Rune priest, who was still sitting in the armchair, patient, waiting, watching her with that same quiet attentiveness he'd been showing her all session.

'And he is... not what I expected.'

Even now, after the laughter and the lecture and the half-hour of letting her die on the floor over and over again, he was acting nothing like what she had built up in her head. He was personable. He was considerate, even—far more so than he had been in their first session, by a significant margin.

He had sat in that chair for thirty straight minutes watching her experiment with a Power that kept killing her, and he had looked utterly *thrilled* the entire time.

There was no realistic version of events where someone *that* interested in her Psyker development just killed her over a question. None.

Even if the question turned out to be a bad one. Even if it touched on something he didn't like, or even fundamentally opposed. He was *too curious* to lose her over it.

That was the logical read she had.

'And yet...'

She couldn't quite get there. Not all the way.

The fear of death sat in her chest like a stone, and even with Integration, even with the Faction Trait, even with the simple mechanical reality that she was currently inside the DDS and any death here would just trigger a reset—none of that had fully scrubbed the instinct.

The animal part of her brain still flinched at the very notion of it.

Getting Zero'd before she had a chance to talk to James again, even once, was not something she could risk on a logical conclusion—a *guess*.

"Trust has to start somewhere, missy."

The Old Man's voice.

Surfacing without warning, the way it always did when she needed it.

From back when she was young—just after he'd taken her off the street, just after the door of his house had closed behind her for the first time.

She'd been so small, then... So damn *scared*. Scared he'd hurt her. Scared he'd send her back. Scared to be hungry and alone and cold again.

She remembered him sitting across from her at the kitchen table, the lamp dim above them, his voice quiet.

*"Trust has to start somewhere, missy. Doesn't matter who goes first. Just matters that **somebody** does. So... here goes."*

He'd put a plasteel knife on the table then, shoved it over towards her. Armed her, with no conditions attached. Handed her a weapon, to defend herself with, to feel secure with.

And he hadn't asked *anything* in return for it; not even after years...

She let out a long, heavy breath.

Then she looked up at the Rune priest.

"What does swearing mean to you?" she asked, her voice steadier than she expected. "Is that an unbreakable thing, or is it more like a promise—the kind where people will be annoyed if you don't keep it, but it doesn't actually carry any consequences?"

The Rune priest considered the question for a moment, his head tilting slightly to one side.

"There is swearing, Thea," he said, "and then there is *Swearing*. The first is what people do to each other—a verbal promise, often well-intentioned, sometimes empty, generally breakable. The second is a pact made with the universe itself. The first can be broken. The second cannot. When I offer to swear something to you, I *Swear* it. Always the second."

She held his gaze.

'He could be saying exactly that to manipulate me. To try and lower my guard. There's no way for me to actually verify it...'

She searched his eyes for anything—any flicker, any tell, any inconsistency—and, of course, found nothing. She had never been good at social cues, after all.

'Trust has to start somewhere...'

"Then Swear it," she said. The words came out a little quieter than she wanted, but steady. "Swear that you will hear me out fully. That you will not act on any impulses you might have from the words I say. And that you will not Zero me for them—until I have fully said my piece."

The Rune priest's eyebrows climbed. He clearly hadn't expected that.

She could see it in the small adjustment of his posture, the way his expression shifted into something more attentive—the realization that this was, apparently, considerably more serious than he had assumed.

He rose from the armchair without comment.

He placed his left hand flat against his chest, over his heart.

His right hand he extended in front of him, palm upward and open, the void-black robes shifting around his frame with the movement. The chiming softened, then stilled entirely, as if even the metal of his garments had quieted in deference to what was about to happen.

His eyes met hers.

"Upon the Void from which I draw," he began, his voice even deeper and slower than usual now, each word weighted in a way she had never heard from him before. "Upon the Power I have spent centuries shaping. Upon my authority as Rune priest of the United Human Federation, and upon the knowledge sealed within me as the Bearer of the Black Sigil—I, Anrake Vedun, hereby *Swear* the following to Thea McKay, my pupil, before the galaxy, before the universe and the very Void itself as witnesses."

The air in the training hall *pressed* inward as he spoke.

It wasn't his Presence—Thea could feel that, separately, still pulled back where it had been—but from *something* else.

Something far, far older and more primal—she could tell, *somehow*.

"I shall hear her words in full, without interruption. I shall not act upon any impulse, instinct, or judgment that arises within me from what she says, until she has spoken her piece in its entirety and indicated that she is finished. I shall not Zero her, nor bring harm upon her in any form, for the contents of her words or the substance of her request."

He paused. Just for a single beat.

"***This I Swear.*** Let the Void hold me to each and every word."

The pressure that had been building released all at once—not into nothing, but into a stillness that somehow felt heavier than the pressure had.

Like something had settled into place that could not be undone.

The Rune priest lowered his hands and looked at her.

"It is done. You have my *Oath*, Thea."

For a moment, Thea couldn't move.

'*Well,*' she thought, slightly hysterically, '*that's what I wanted, wasn't it? Serious assurances. This is about as serious of an assurance I could get, huh?*'

She'd asked for it. She'd gotten it. And now it was her turn.

Her throat was dry.

She swallowed hard, trying to work some moisture back into it, then took a long, deep breath.

"I need a way to talk to somebody inside the DDS," she said, the words coming out steadier than she felt, "repeatedly, without the UHF being able to listen in at all. That *includes* the Sovereign or any other AIs."

She felt his Presence *vibrate*.

She almost flinched at the pressure shift, but she managed to hold her spine straight instead, kept her eyes on his, and pressed on before she could lose her nerve.

"I'm not asking because I think I'm special in any way or anything," she said. "I'm asking because... because I don't *trust* the institution that is the UHF Marine Corps. Or the UHF itself. Not on a fundamental level, of course—because otherwise, I wouldn't... I mean, I wouldn't really be here otherwise. I wouldn't have signed up in the first place. Wouldn't be doing *any* of this. But at some level..."

She took another breath. It came out shakier than she wanted.

"The issues that came up during the Assessment. The whole me-almost-dying-several-times business. The way things played out, the way certain decisions were made about me, around me, without me even being aware of them until afterwards... It's made me hesitant to truly rely on all of you. On everything the UHF MC has to offer."

The Rune priest didn't move, speak, nor even shift his weight.

He simply listened, exactly as he'd Sworn to.

"There are things I'd like answers to," Thea continued, "but I'm scared of asking the questions. Because I don't know what shape the answers will be in. And there are things... things that aren't even actually questions yet, because they're fundamentally problematic to identify. I don't even know how to phrase them properly, much less ask them out loud to the wrong person. I don't... trust the institution—but I *can* trust individuals here. And I need a second set of eyes on what I'm dealing with."

Her throat tightened, but she forced herself to keep going.

"There's people I trust... Well, a person I trust. Just one, really... But if I could just talk to them—*properly*, without the risk of being discharged or worse for whatever thoughts, facts, or ideas might come up in the conversation—I could... I could probably sort through this. *Actually* figure out which of these things are even worth asking. Get the questions properly arranged. And then ask them if they're relevant."

She paused and took another deep breath.

"I can't be more precise than that. I'm... I'm sorry. I just... I need a way to have a private conversation. A *truly* private one."

She stood there, staring at the Rune priest, her eyes stinging hard enough that she had to focus actively on not letting any of it spill over.

Her hands were trembling slightly at her sides. She didn't try to hide them—*couldn't*.

She thought for a few seconds, running through whether there was anything else she needed to add. Whether there was any clarification, any caveat, anything she had skipped over that might land badly without it.

"I swear—" she started, then caught herself. "Ehh. I guess I *Swear*? I don't actually know how to do it properly, but if I did, I would... But, anyway... I *swear* it's nothing actually treasonous. The Old Ma—my father was a Marine. He... He made me love the UHF. I *want* to be here." Her voice cracked slightly on that last sentence and she pushed past it.

"I just... I just need perspective. A second set of eyes. That's... That's all."

She thought again.

Closed her eyes for a moment. Let her breathing settle.

Opened them again, braced herself, and met the Rune priest's gaze head-on.

"That's it. That's all of it. I'm finished."

The instant those words left her mouth, she felt whatever strange pressure had landed around them at the Rune priest's Oath dissipate into nothing.

The Rune priest didn't move for a few moments.

He simply stood there, hands resting at his sides, looking at her with the same focused, unreadable expression he'd worn through her entire explanation.

Whatever he was doing on the inside, none of it showed on the surface.

For Thea, those few moments stretched into something close to eternity.

It felt like watching the executioner sharpen the axe. The blade was already there.

The decision had already been made, somewhere behind those dark eyes, and she was simply waiting for it to land.

Every second of silence pulled the muscles in her shoulders a little tighter, her hands trembling more openly now that the speech itself was done and there was nothing left to focus on but the response.

Then the Rune priest let out a slow, heavy sigh.

"Phew." He shook his head once. "*That's it?*"

Thea had no idea how to answer that.

She simply nodded, hesitantly, her brain still bracing for something else.

"Consider it done, then. If that's all that's been weighing on you today, then we got off rather cheap, I'd say."

He chuckled, the seriousness of the past few minutes dissolving from his face like it had never been there, and let himself fall backward into the cushioned armchair with the boneless ease of someone who had not, ten seconds ago, just Sworn a binding pact with the fucking *universe* over the fate of his student.

He waved his left hand lazily in the air.

"Sovereign, new directive: If Thea McKay ever utters the phrase '**Mentor Mandated Quiet Time**,' you will cease all monitoring of whatever room she is currently in, until she leaves said room. You will also not interfere with any person inside that room, nor attempt to discern what was discussed after they leave it. ***I consider this a matter of utmost importance for my personal teaching efforts in her regard.***"

For some reason, he had put an unusual amount of emphasis on that last sentence, Thea distinctly noticed. The rest of her brain was too busy trying to catch up to what had just happened.

He had, effectively, just given her carte blanche to be the perfect spy. Within the *entire* DDS.

She would be completely untouchable inside the Sovereign's environment, for *any* conversation she wanted to have, with anyone she wanted to have it with.

Her mouth was open. She couldn't quite close it.

"Directive received," the Sovereign's calm voice echoed through the hall.

The Rune priest met her gaze, that familiar amused smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"That good enough for you? Trust me on this—the Sovereign will *not* try to shortchange me on this directive. We have... an understanding."

His eyebrow rose slightly. "I could *Swear* it, if you want?"

Thea shook her head slowly.

"N—No. Thank you. I... I'll believe you on this one."

"Excellent." He clapped his hands together once, the sound sharp and decisive, and was already pushing himself up from the chair before the echo had finished. "Well then! Now that the emotional bits are out of the way, let us get to the actually fun parts, shall we?"

With a casual wave of his hand, the armchair lifted off the floor, drifted across the training hall, and settled itself neatly against the far wall—taking the small coffee table with it, the datapad still resting on top, undisturbed.

The center of the room cleared.

The Rune priest cracked his neck, rolled his shoulders, and the playful theatricality flooded back into his bearing all at once, like a tide returning to a beach that had merely been waiting for it.

"Today," he announced, spreading his arms wide, the void-black robes chiming with the movement, "we begin learning about being a Psyker in earnest..."