

Volume 2 - Chapter 92 - Wielder

cold

cold and the wall is wet against my shoulder and the wall does not feel like a wall it feels like skin and the skin is breathing and i should move i should

Move!

i moved

the alley is longer than it was. it was thirty steps. i counted them.

i counted them when i came in but i have been walking for longer than thirty steps and the alley is longer than it was and the bins are different bins and the bins were red and now they are not red they are a colour i can't say. i can't say the colour.

the colour has no name. the colour has a name but it isn't a name a mouth can hold.

something is dripping.

drip

drip

it isn't water. water sounds like water and this sounds like

drip

—

i haven't eaten. my stomach has stopped asking. my stomach asked for a long time and then it stopped and the quiet is worse than the asking was.

mum used to make the bread on sundays.

was that mum? i think it was mum... do i have a mum? it might just have been the woman.

it might have been the woman before mum... or after mum?

there was a woman. her hands smelled like

her hands

—

a voice

not in front of me. behind me. inside me. behind the inside of me. it is speaking a word i almost recognize. almost in my language but not quite.

iiiiirrrroonnnaaahhdddzzznaaeeiii

i don't know that word but my throat knows it.

my throat tried to say it back and i pressed my hand against my throat and told my throat **no**.

my hand is dirty. my hand is so dirty.

i don't remember when my hand got dirty.

—

something is following me.

i won't turn around. if i turn around it will know that i looked and the next time i turn around it will be there.

i will count my steps.

one

two

three

four

five

five

five

i cannot get past five. every time i try to say six the word goes somewhere else.

the word goes into the wall and the wall accepts the word and the wall is breathing again and i should not be touching the wall but i am because if i don't touch the wall i will fall down and if i fall down then the thing behind me

the thing behind me

the thing

—

i saw a light.

it was a long way away and it was the wrong colour. lights are yellow or white or sometimes blue. this light was the colour the bins had become. it made my eyes hurt in the back of them, the inside of them, the place behind them where the dreams come from.

i did not go to the light.

i am proud of that.

i held the pride in my chest for a few steps and then it slipped out through a hole in my shirt and now it's on the ground somewhere behind me and the thing behind me is probably eating it and that is fine

that is fine

that is

that

—

[inaudible whispering]

don't run. you are safe. just rest.

[whispering in a language I do not understand]

twenty-six

—

it said **my name**.

the name was the name the woman called me when i was small and she was angry but not very angry and the voice was hers except for the part in the middle where the voice was not a voice but the something *underneath* a voice.

and i wanted to answer it.

i wanted to answer it so badly that my mouth opened and i had to put my whole hand inside my mouth and bite down on my fingers and the taste of the dirt on my fingers and the blood seeping from them was the only thing that kept me from answering and i cried a little bit i think because there was something wet on my face and it wasn't rain

—

the alley ends here.

it ends in a wall.

the same wall i came in through. i think.

the walls are all the same wall now.

i think they always were.

—

my legs decided to sit.

my legs have been deciding things without me for a while.

i should be angry at them but i am not because they did so much. they did so much.

they walked me through the alley a second time and a third time and they only stopped because they couldn't go any further

that is fair.

—

there are shapes at the edges.

they were always this close. i just couldn't see them. they have been standing at the edges of every room i have ever been in and i never looked sideways enough to notice and now my eyes are sideways

[a description that cannot be held in a sentence]

—

drip

drip

twenty-six [in her voice]

twenty-six [in a voice that is not hers and never was]

—

mum

—

my eyes are closing.

i didn't decide that. my eyes decided. the shapes at the edges are not at the edges anymore they are

they are closer

they are

—

—

—

[Shortened Excerpt from [Source Unknown], [Author Unknown], date uncertain, presumed PFC 929 after post-cognitive analysis.]

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"So..." Thea broke the brief silence that had settled in after the Rune priest's praise. "I'm sure this is asked fairly often—at least by Psykers on any of the Precog Paths, I'd imagine—but I have to ask anyway. What, *exactly*, stops me from using that mishap-method to get my Voidrunes, but instead of actually causing the mishap, I just [Glimpse] it? And if [Glimpse] doesn't last long enough on its own, surely there's another Power somewhere in this Path that would be a little more lenient on the duration...?"

The Rune priest chuckled at that, the deep rumble in his chest making the armour chime.

"Very, very good," he nodded sagely. "Yes, you are correct, my dear pupil. It is, in-fact, a question that comes up almost every single time there's a Precog Psyker involved—though primarily when it's a Veritas one. You would be surprised how relatively rare that particular Inheritance and Path combination actually is, despite how powerful the pairing happens to be."

He waved a hand. "Anyway. The answer is fairly simple: You cannot Intent and Will your way into a mishap, and then *also* cancel it."

He shrugged, as if to say *that's all there is to it*.

"If you think speech precognition is already difficult, you have seen absolutely *nothing* when it comes to the Veritas Paradox—which, incidentally, is how your particular method of breaking the True future is known in academia. The more complex the action you intend on performing, the more effort it requires to stop yourself after the Power has resolved. And Psychic Mishaps are, unequivocally, one of the most complicated and complex interactions in the entire universe. Even the Voidspeaker themselves, if they happened to be a Veritas Precog—which I'm fairly certain they are not—would lack both the expertise and the mental fortitude to attempt even a minor mishap, much less a major one of the kind the technique actually requires."

'Damn... no free Voidrunes, I guess.'

Just as the thought finished, his eyes met hers, and he added, "Do *not* attempt it, Thea. It is a *very* quick path toward a truly disastrous outcome, and I would be quite cross if all the effort I am putting into your education here ended up being wasted on something as preventable and wasteful as that."

Thea filed the warning away without comment, then frowned slightly.

"Speaking of mishaps in general," she said slowly, "I feel like I have to ask... So far they don't seem... *that* bad? I mean, I've experienced a fair number of them today, and yeah, dying repeatedly isn't pleasant, but the DDS just resets me. If that's the whole of it, why do

you sound so opposed to me trying anything that involves them? What actually *is* a mishap, fundamentally? How do they happen, what do they look like, and how do you stop them?"

The Rune priest's grin widened slightly. He shifted in the cushioned armchair, the void-black robes chiming softly, and leaned back into full Lecture Mode.

"Another very good question! Let me answer it with another question first—what do you think mishaps are *not*?"

Thea opened her mouth, closed it again, and just looked at him with a frown, unsure of how to even begin to answer that.

"*Exactly*," he said, satisfied. "Because the answer is: Not much. Mishaps are, essentially, *anything* you can imagine a Psyker being capable of. They are an accidental discharge of Psychic Energy into a random Voidrune that the Psyker did not consciously choose to activate."

He held up one hand and gestured vaguely.

"Whenever a Psyker allows parts of the Void into real-space—when they Open their Gate to refill their Psyfocus reservoir, or when they push energy through one of the Voidrunes engraved on their own Soul to activate a Power—they are, in essence, briefly *usurping* reality from the universe itself. They are replacing a small piece of the material plane with a small piece of the Void."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Just as when *we*, as beings native to the material plane, enter the Void, we bring our reality with us. Time. Causality. Sequential order. None of these things exist within the Void naturally. They come with us, when we go, because they are part of what we are."

Thea nodded slowly. She remembered reading some of that about the mechanics of Voidtravel before—a topic she'd definitely have to revisit at some point... But there was just so much to read up on after Integration, it was absolutely crazy.

"So," he continued, "when we Psykers do the opposite—when we bring the Void *here*—the Void's inherent strangeness comes along with it. And if your Psychic Energy goes wild, rather than being properly controlled and filling the specific Voidrune you intended it to fill... for example, if the rune is incomplete, or if you crack it with too much power being shoved through, or if your Intent slips midway through the channeling... then the leftover energy goes haywire. It seeks *something* to do, like electricity searching the path of least resistance to ground. And the universe, regrettably, cannot do anything but accommodate it, because you have usurped reality from it—you've disabled all the safety features by channeling the Void."

He tapped one finger against the armrest.

"The Void itself then, contains an essentially infinite number of wild, latent Voidrunes embedded within its very fabric. The runes you carve into your Soul are *deliberate* versions of these—shaped by you, owned by you, controllable by you. The wild ones are *not*. They

simply exist all around us. And when loose Psychic Energy escapes your control, it tends to find one of these wild runes and activate it."

He spread his hands.

"The outcome can be just about anything a Psyker could naturally produce: A small fireball, the size of a grenade. Localized gravity anomalies in a five-meter radius. A momentary inversion of biological matter on a city-wide scale. An orbital-scale cataclysm. The roof of the building you are standing in suddenly developing the property of *softness*... All fair game. All possible."

He tilted his head slightly, as if considering whether to soften the next part. Whether he actually chose to or not, Thea couldn't tell—neither by his demeanour nor his actual answer.

"More raw Psychic Power generally means more catastrophic potential outcomes, of course. Someone of your current capacity would not have the reserves to cause anything truly continental-scale—at least, not yet. But you would be surprised just how truly devastating even a fledgling Psyker's mishap can be when it all goes *truly* wrong. And if it goes *badly* enough..."

He paused for half a beat, then added, almost casually—

"...your Gate might rupture as well. Which is, of course, the end of everything."

Thea's stomach tightened.

He'd dropped the most catastrophic possible outcome into the conversation with such an offhand tone, and he didn't seem inclined to give her any time to actually digest it.

"Now, as for *prevention*," he continued breezily, "that part is rather simple. Do not lose control over your Powers."

Thea stared at him.

"...That's it?"

"That's it. Easier said than done, of course. But also not *particularly* complicated, conceptually speaking." He waved a lazy hand. "Stay focused. Hold your Intent cleanly. Maintain your Will throughout the entire channeling process. Do not attempt Powers you have not properly carved the Voidrune for. And, most importantly—stay away from Discordia Mentalists. Particularly *Witchglass*."

His expression shifted slightly.

A hint of something almost amused crossed it, mixed with what Thea could only describe as genuine professional respect, edged with a profound disapproval.

"Witchglass has, over her career, made it something of a *personal mission* to develop the most efficient methods of forcing other Psykers to detonate themselves like that. Mishap-induction, *at scale*, against an active Battlefield's worth of enemy Psykers... Luckily

she only ever does it to enemies of the UHF. But it is, regrettably or not, *extraordinarily* effective."

He shook his head once.

"Not a pretty sight. But damn if it isn't effective... She essentially turns enemy Psykers into nukes detonating inside their own lines—no casualties for our side at all. Officially, at least."

A flicker of annoyance crept into the Rune priest's voice as he continued, the playful edge in his expression dimming somewhat.

"... The amount of Void Rifts she leaves behind for other people to clean up afterwards, though? *That*, I would argue, very much *should* be counted as casualties on her head. We have lost an alarming number of Marines and Auxiliary personnel on cleanup missions following her engagements over the decades. Entire response squads, in some cases. Some of them quite experienced, too..."

He sighed lightly.

"But, well. Command does not particularly want to paint one of the UHF's most feared and celebrated Battlefield Aces in a less-than-flattering light. And so the official record reflects what the official record reflects. What can you do?"

He shrugged.

Thea watched him carefully.

There was clearly *something* there.

Something in the way he'd brought Witchglass up seemingly out of nowhere, the exact texture of his annoyance, the small fact that he'd been the one to introduce her name to the conversation rather than her coming up organically from a different angle.

The Rune priest had some kind of relationship with Witchglass beyond mere professional acquaintance—or, at the very least, an *opinion* about her that ran deeper than the others he'd been throwing around so casually.

But Thea did not, for the life of her, know how to ask about it.

Or whether she even should.

'Probably shouldn't toss a rock into that particular minefield without knowing where they're actually placed,' she decided. *'Tread elsewhere.'*

She redirected her attention back to the questions that had been burning under her fingernails for weeks now, and started with the one that had been quietly nagging at her ever since she'd first heard the term *Wielder* and learned that it applied to her.

"So. Speaking of designations..." She shifted slightly in her own armchair, leaning forward. "What, *exactly*, is a Wielder? I understand that it's a Psyker with early access to their initial

Power set—I've gotten that much explained to me a few different times now. But I don't actually understand the *how* or the *why* of it. How are they created? Why am I one, but somebody like Kara—Karanja—isn't? What's the actual difference between us, at a fundamental level, that makes this different for us?"

The Rune priest simply shrugged.

"Luck," he said. "Or... *unluck*, I suppose. Depending entirely on your viewpoint."

He let that sit for a few seconds, then took a deep breath and shifted into the cadence he used when he was about to actually explain something properly.

"Ultimately, Wielders come into being as the result of a traumatic incident involving the Void. The specifics can vary. Sometimes it is a powerful Void Daemon managing to slip through the cracks and assault a city's denizens. Sometimes it is a Void Rift opening nearby. Sometimes it is a Psyker having their Awakening in close proximity to an unsuspecting civilian population, briefly fracturing the boundary between the Material Plane and the Void enough for the Void itself to seep through."

He waved a hand vaguely.

"The exact mechanism is *far* less important than the outcome. What all of these events have in common is that they function as a sort of... *anti-Awakening*, in almost every regard."

Thea tilted her head slightly.

"As you know," he continued, "an Awakening, is a Psyker's first conscious realization of their Gate's existence—the first time their mind *directly and consciously* perceives the channel between themselves and the Void. The Wielder's equivalent—we call it a *Repression Event*, for reasons I will get to shortly—is similar in that it is the first conscious recognition that there is *more* than just our reality. That *something else* exists, that it is much, much larger than us, and that *it* has briefly looked back."

He spread his hands.

"In most cases, that realization alone is enough to shatter a mind. Which is one of the primary reasons that Wielders cannot exist below a certain Resolve threshold. The vast majority of people who encounter such an event simply perish on the spot. Or have their minds broken to a degree where they would, frankly, be better off being put down."

His expression did something genuinely odd then.

Thea couldn't quite parse it—there was disgust in it, clearly.

But there was also a flicker of something almost like academic enthusiasm sitting right next to the disgust, the two emotions occupying the same face simultaneously.

"There have been..." he said carefully, "rather extensive *studies* done in this area."

He let that hang for a moment.

"Every Faction in the Galactic War has, at one point or another, attempted to forcibly produce Wielders. The math, on paper, is extremely tempting. Wielders are essentially a power multiplier for early-career Marines and Soldiers, which represent the *vast majority* of any Faction's military strength. Even though only roughly one in ten Wielders ever ends up with a truly combat-capable initial combination, even a ten-percent uplift across an entire fresh cohort would shift the strategic balance of the war *dramatically*."

Thea nodded slowly.

She knew that math, intuitively. She'd lived inside it for years.

Even a percent of a percent of variance, in the right system, over a large enough period of time, could entirely rewrite the tournament meta inside the Golden Age Arcade's many games. The Galactic War was the same logic operating at incomprehensibly larger scales—but the underlying principle was identical.

"The programs were largely shuttered, eventually," the Rune priest continued, his tone cooling slightly. "*Largely*, but never entirely. The official reason given was that the human cost was simply too high to justify the projected returns. Which, for once, was actually the truth. There is no reliable method of artificially raising a person's Resolve to a level high enough to *consistently* survive a Repression Event. So in practice, every induced event is functionally a dice roll. And the dice are not particularly favourable."

He paused.

"Roughly one in every thousand people who experience such an event becomes a Wielder—with some rather drastic variance depending on preparation, of course. The rest, however, simply perish or wish they did."

Thea's eyes widened.

She sat with that number for a moment.

'One in a thousand. And the other nine hundred and ninety-nine—'

She blinked, then frowned, replaying the conversation in her head.

"I... can't actually remember anything like that ever happening to me, though," she said slowly. "If it had—if I'd experienced something like a Void Daemon attack, or a Rift opening near me, or anything *even close* to that—I think I'd remember it. I'd remember *something* at least, no?"

The Rune priest simply smiled at her and nodded.

He didn't say anything else afterwards... He was clearly waiting.

He wanted *her* to figure it out on her own.

Thea reviewed his words again, more carefully this time. She turned them over in her head, looking for the seam, the thread, the piece she'd glossed over the first time through.

She found it rather quickly.

"Anti-Awakening."

He'd said it almost in passing, but he'd phrased it like that deliberately.

She was certain of that now.

"It's an anti-Awakening in almost every regard," she said slowly, watching his face. "And a Psyker never forgets their own Awakening. *Ever.*"

The Rune priest's grin widened with every word.

"So the Repression Event—being the anti-Awakening—is something a Wielder can never *remember.*"

The Rune priest clapped his hands together once. The armour chimed brightly.

Then he pointed at her with both hands at once, fingers extended, his grin now reaching the full theatrical width she was used to.

"It is a *true joy* to have a pupil who can put one and one together," he announced. "It has been *quite* some time since I have had the pleasure. Even simple deductions like this one, my more recent students have struggled with significantly. They have not been particularly engaging to teach." He shook his head, almost wistfully. "Thank you, Thea, for not being a disappointment in that regard."

Thea had absolutely no idea what to do with that.

She tilted her head slightly and offered, after a half-second of stalled processing, "...You're welcome? I think?"

Seemingly ignoring her reply entirely, the Rune priest simply continued on as if nothing had happened.

"You are correct in that assumption. The Repression Event is called that because, ultimately, you also end up repressing the memory of the event itself. It's for your own good, really. After all, if you were able to consciously remember the existence and feeling of proximity to the Void..."

He let the sentence trail off, raising an eyebrow at her.

"...you'd trigger your Awakening before you were ready," Thea finished for him. "Because you'd inevitably realize the Gate is there, at some stage."

His face lit up again, and it felt strangely heart-warming to see her teacher—especially a scary man like the Rune priest—enjoy teaching her this much.

'A bit like with the Old Man,' she couldn't help but think. *'In a way...'*

'You're going to get such a damn earful when I can finally talk to you again, you old geezer. How dare you keep all this shit secret from me? Even with the System's rules, the fucking Legacies have clearly found ways around it, so why didn't you, huh?! You absolute asshole...'

She wasn't really mad at him, of course. It had simply been a long time since she'd had to sit through one of his stupid, annoying lectures, and the Rune priest was hitting some surprisingly similar notes—dredging up memories that had no real place in the current situation, but were there anyway.

Thankfully, the Rune priest didn't let the silence stretch on too long.

"So," he prompted. "Any other questions about Wielders? Or about anything else in general? As I said before—I am an open book for you to peruse at your leisure. Whatever questions you have, throw them at me."

Thea took a few moments to actually think it through.

There had been plenty of times in the past where she'd sat on the other side of this exact conversation, strangely enough.

Not about Psyker-related things, of course—but game-related ones.

Up-and-coming Build Makers who had wanted to pick MMM's brain about how to get started, which parts were the most important to focus on, what they should prioritize early. She'd answered some version of the same question hundreds of times.

She decided to go with a classic.

One of the ones she'd always enjoyed answering the most herself.

Her eyes met his again.

"What would you do, if you were a Wielder again? Knowing everything you know now—if someone dropped you back into the body of a Wielder at the start of their career, what would your main priorities be? What would you focus on, to get the most out of that period? To prepare for becoming a real Psyker later on, or even a Battlefield Psyker eventually?"

He hummed at the question, the smile never leaving his face.

It took him a few moments to actually answer.

"Voidrunes," he said, finally. "First and foremost. Voidrunes."

He held up one finger.

"I would dedicate the absolute majority of my early time and effort to ensuring that the Voidrunes for my initial Powers—my General Power, and my starting Path Power—were fully, properly, and completely carved into my Soul. Not simply *'good enough to function.'* Fully. Down to the last micro-fraction of every angle and every dimension."

He spread his hand slightly.

"Most Wielders never bother. They rely on the semi-instinctual usage their existence affords them and never sit down to do the actual foundational work beyond just "*getting them done*". They get away with it, mostly, because the instincts carry them through the early years. But the moment they hit a situation that pushes beyond what their instincts cover—the moment they need to *adapt*, to *modify*, to *consciously shape* their Powers—they discover, often catastrophically, that they have been building a house on sand. So, Voidrunes first. Always. Make those Powers inseparable from my very being."

He held up a second finger.

"Then—Intent and Will."

His expression sharpened slightly.

"Once the Voidrunes were properly cemented, I would spend an absurd amount of time simply... *playing* with them. Stretching them. Testing what the boundaries of Intent and Will actually were, within the framework those Powers gave me. How far could I push a given Power before it lost coherence? How subtly could I shape its outcome? What variables could I influence, and which ones were fixed? Could I make the same Power do slightly different things under slightly different conditions? Where, precisely, was the line between 'mastered' and 'broken'?"

He gestured loosely.

"Most Psykers *never* bother to find that line. They use their Powers the way they were taught, with some alterations here and there, and they *never truly* test the edges. But the *edges* are where everything *actually* interesting lives. Where the difference between a fledgling Wielder and a true Battlefield Psyker actually manifests. You truly master a Power not by using it correctly, but by understanding *exactly* how it breaks—and then refusing to let it."

He held up a third finger.

"And finally—mundane research."

Thea blinked, slightly thrown by the specificity of it.

"*Mundane* research?"

"Mundane research," he confirmed with a nod. "Not Void-related research. Not Psyker theory. Not anything you would expect in regards to being a Wielder either."

He leaned forward in the armchair, the void-black robes chiming.

"Laws of the universe. Physics. Mathematics. Chemistry. Thermodynamics. Biology. *All of it*. The mundane, baseline, well-understood laws that govern how reality works when no Psyker is actively interfering with it."

He raised his eyebrow at her confused expression.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because the laws of the universe and the Powers of a Psyker are not actually as separate as most people assume," he said. "A great deal of what happens around you, at any given moment, is governed by those laws. And, perhaps surprisingly, a great deal of what your Powers actually *do* is *also* governed by them—even though the Powers themselves are violations of them."

He held up a hand, before a miniature fireball came into existence above it.

"Take a fireball like this. A simple, straightforward, Pyrokinesis fireball. The act of creating it—out of thin air, with no fuel source, no chemical reaction, no thermal gradient—is a flagrant violation of the laws of physics, chemistry, and thermodynamics all at once. The fireball *should not* exist like this. The universe *should not* permit it. Yet it does, because the Void overrides the universe's permission, briefly, to allow it."

He let his hand drop slightly.

"But once the fireball *exists*—once it is in real-space, doing its job—what happens next is no longer Void-governed. It is almost entirely universe-governed. How it spreads. How it consumes oxygen. How it transfers heat to surrounding materials. How it burns through fabric, then skin, then muscle, then bone. How a body's biology shuts down when too much of that damage accumulates. How the resulting injuries compound. Almost all of that is governed by the laws of physics, biology, and chemistry—barring some alterations from certain Inheritances. But even those are generally at least *influenced* by the natural laws, not by the Void."

He tapped his finger against the armrest.

"Which means that a Psyker who understands the laws of the universe *deeply*, understands their own Powers far better than one who does not. Because every Power is essentially this same equation. A brief violation, followed by an extended cascade of consequences that obey the universe's normal rules. If you know the rules, you know what the cascade will look like. You can predict outcomes. You can shape them. You can use the same Power to achieve subtly different effects depending on which set of mundane laws you decide to leverage."

His eyes met hers directly.

"Knowing what the laws are—and *how* they govern the world—makes understanding the impact of *breaking* them infinitely easier, and *far* more accurate, than relying on guesswork. The Psykers who fight without that knowledge are throwing rocks in the dark and hoping for the best. The Psykers who fight with it are placing surgical instruments precisely where they will do the most work... And they also get to pick their toolset far more directly. Any Delve you do, you're offered a choice; a selection of Voidrunes to take from. If you can already understand how breaking certain laws with those Powers affects the world, before you have to actually test them out? You can make far more informed decisions."

He leaned back into the armchair.

"So... That is what I would do, Thea. Voidrunes. Mastery of Intent and Will inside their boundaries. And an obsessive, deep, *mundane* understanding of how the universe actually works underneath all of it."

He smiled slightly, clearly satisfied with his own answer—as was Thea, if she was being honest with herself.

"Not specifically in that rigid an order, but as a priority list. Many of those things can be done at the same time, after all..."