

Volume 2 - Chapter 5 - Presence

Thea blinked, momentarily stunned by the Rune priest's thoroughly odd entrance, but one thing in particular had stuck out to her as even more weird than the rest.

In the silence that followed his delivery, which he clearly wanted Thea to fill by way of him simply staring at her for the brief moment after his last words, she decided that it was as good a start as any to simply ask about.

"I'm not sure what this '*Harbinger*' thing is all about, Sir—" she began, but before she could finish, the Rune priest's entire demeanor changed.

He recoiled sharply, as if her words had physically struck him across the face, his expression twisting into something between frustration and exasperation.

"Alright," he said, his voice cutting through the air like a blade, "we *have* to fix *that* first and foremost!"

There was an undeniable authority in his tone, the kind that left no room for argument.

"No more '*Sir's*,' no '*Venerable Rune priest*,' none of that rank-and-file nonsense. Do you hear me, Miss McKay? *None of it*. You will address me as Anrake, Vedun, or simply Rune priest if you absolutely *must* cling to something formal. But if we're going to be spending any significant amount of time together, I can't have you groveling before me every time we interact. Understood?"

Thea opened her mouth to respond, still processing his abrupt interruption, but he plowed on without giving her a chance to speak.

"Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, as though struck by a revelation.

His sharp features softened slightly, and a grin spread across his face. It was the kind of grin that managed to be both disarming and deeply unsettling. "I've got it! In exchange, I'll simply call you *Thea* as well. While you're not officially my pupil yet, we may as well dispense with the tiresome social nonsense from the start. Of course, if you turn out to be a massive disappointment, we can always revisit the groveling arrangement later."

Thea blinked again, her thoughts spinning as she tried to parse his rapid-fire delivery. She tilted her head slightly, studying him as though trying to discern whether or not he was joking.

"So..." she ventured hesitantly, her tone tinged with skepticism, "you're saying you don't want me to use ranks for now... but if I fail some kind of test, I have to go back to—what? Calling you '*Sir*'...?"

Anrake's grin widened, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Exactly, *Thea*. You're catching on quickly. See? I knew we'd get along *just* fine."

Her brows knit together as she tried to gauge whether or not this man was *completely* insane. Whatever she'd expected from the person heralded as the "most powerful person in the entire UHF", this *really* wasn't it.

At the end of the day, however, he was still her superior officer—far, far, far superior officer—in one way or another. So, his order to dispense with formalities was no different from what Major Quinn had done just moments earlier.

'Apparently, it is a bit of a theme with these two, isn't it?' Thea thought wryly.

They seemed to share a disdain for the rigid, formal rank structure of the UHF. Perhaps it was something Major Quinn had picked up during her time as the Rune priest's pupil, or something that just came naturally with age.

"Understood, Rune priest," she replied with a nod, keeping her tone neutral.

She decided to treat his eccentricities as though they were completely normal—for now.

If she was already feeling this unbalanced by a simple conversation, there was no way she'd survive whatever chaos he had planned for her next.

"Wonderful!" Anrake said with a broad grin, his enthusiasm almost unnerving.

Then, as if a switch had flipped, his tone softened, and he studied her intently, his gaze sharp and probing, like he was searching for something beneath the surface.

"Now, as for your earlier question..." He trailed off, his voice momentarily distant, before returning with a measured calm. "It is of no real consequence. Let this old man's ramblings drift past you like a gentle rain. Pay them no mind for now. You'll understand one day—but today is not that day."

Thea barely had time to process the cryptic dismissal before his demeanor shifted yet again.

His grin turned toothy, almost predatory, as he stepped slightly closer.

The strange, oppressive gravity she felt increased markedly, making the air feel heavier and Thea's breath hitch in her chest.

"Now, what *is* of utmost import," he continued, his voice low and deliberate, "is deciding what to *do* with you, now that you are here. Zephyr requested I be your mentor, and I find myself unable to refuse my favorite pupil... So here we both are, unable to refuse her requests—or orders, in your case, I guess. And with both of us present, there's nothing really stopping us from diving right in, is there?"

Thea hesitated, unsure if the question was rhetorical or if he actually expected an answer.

The pause stretched just long enough to make her question herself and consider an answer before he moved on.

"No, *of course* not!" he exclaimed, his energy bounding back like a spring. "The earlier, the better!"

With a snap of his fingers, the sterile training hall dissolved, replaced by a sun-dappled forest clearing. Two plush chairs appeared as if conjured from the air itself.

Thea blinked, startled, as her senses were suddenly flooded with the crisp scent of pine and the gentle murmur of a breeze rustling through the treetops. The fresh air tasted clean and vivid, a marked contrast to the recycled oxygen she was used to aboard the ship, despite the Sovereign's best efforts to keep the air feeling natural inside the DDS.

"Take a seat, and we can get started," Anrake offered casually, throwing himself onto one of the chairs with a dramatic flourish.

The armoured robes he wore rippled wildly with his erratic movements and in the gentle breeze of the clearing, yet the sound its overlapping plates were making was strangely harmonious, as if their clinking and clattering were part of the natural ambiance.

Thea stood just a few meters away from her own chair, but the distance felt insurmountable.

The ever-present, crushing gravity bore down on her like a physical weight, each step forward seeming like a monumental effort. She flexed her fingers absently, trying to work up the energy to make the trek, but her legs already trembled with the strain of simply standing upright.

Her mind raced for a reason behind the overwhelming force.

'Is this some kind of test from the Rune priest...?'

It seemed possible at first, but the more she thought about it, the less sense it made.

What would Strength investment have to do with a Psychic mentor's curriculum? Nothing she had ever heard about the Psychic side of things, neither from Viladia nor from Zach, had indicated that physical prowess had *any* bearing on a Psyker's capabilities whatsoever.

So there really wasn't any reason she could think of at the moment, why it would need to stick around either.

"W... Would it be possible to reduce the gravity settings somewhat...?" she finally asked, her voice hesitant but polite, afraid of offending him. Her chest tightened as she continued, "If it's not part of some kind of test, I would *really* appreciate it, Rune priest. I... didn't invest any of my Attribute Points into Strength, so the added strain is *really* draining."

"Gravity...?" The Rune priest echoed, tilting his head as if puzzled by the concept itself.

Then, as though the realization struck him all at once, he chuckled softly to himself. "Ah, *of course*. It seems I've overlooked something rather fundamental. Well, no matter. This is as good a place to start as any, I think."

He leaned forward slightly, his piercing gaze locking onto Thea.

“Very well, Thea,” he said, his tone light but firm. “Let’s make things a touch more comfortable for you, shall we?”

With a casual tone, he addressed the room itself. “Sovereign, disable all artificial gravity in Training Hall E-31.”

The Sovereign’s voice responded immediately, neutral and efficient as always. “Artificial gravity has been disabled in Training Hall E-31.”

The change was instant.

Thea felt the ground lose its grip on her, and within moments, her feet lifted ever so slightly from the floor.

Her body began to float gently, weightless in the sudden absence of gravity.

A leaf that had been lazily drifting downward in her field of view now hung suspended in the air, motionless and frozen as though caught in time.

But *something* was clearly wrong.

Despite the lack of gravity, the oppressive weight she’d felt earlier didn’t seem to dissipate.

If anything, the sensation of extreme gravity pressing down on her remained *exactly* as intense. Her muscles still strained as if she were under four, maybe five times the usual gravitational force, even as she floated freely above the ground.

The contradiction sent her mind spinning, making her feel sick to her stomach.

“What...?” Thea muttered, her voice tinged with confusion.

She reached out instinctively, brushing her hand against the edge of the nearest tree for stability, only to realize she didn’t need it. Her body was perfectly suspended, yet the crushing weight she felt in her chest and limbs persisted, defying all logic.

Anrake observed her with an amused glint in his eyes, his arms crossed lazily as he lounged in his chair. “A fascinating phenomenon, isn’t it?”

Thea frowned, her confusion deepening. “I... I honestly don’t know. What *is* this? There’s no gravity acting on me anymore, but... I still *feel* it. Like it’s everywhere, pressing down on me from every direction, but there clearly is no gravity in the room anymore...”

“Not quite correct, but close enough,” Anrake replied with a grin. “Welcome to the realm of *Presence*, Thea. You’re not feeling *gravity* in the traditional sense. What you’re experiencing is *me*—the force of my will, my essence, my very *existence* exerting itself upon you. It is *gravity*, in the metaphorical sense. My Soul’s gravity, to be specific. It’s not bound by physical laws, and no amount of artificial systems, like the Sovereign’s gravity generators, could ever remove or lessen it.”

Thea blinked, utterly baffled.

Her thoughts raced to make sense of the Rune priest's words, but they collided like crashing waves, leaving her no clearer than before.

'His Soul's gravity? What the fuck does that even mean...?'

How could someone's *existence* exert this kind of weight?

Was this what being a Psyker truly entailed?

If so, she felt even more out of her depth than she had imagined.

"Sovereign," Anrake said suddenly, cutting through her spiraling thoughts, "reinstate artificial gravity in Training Hall E-31."

"Confirmed," came the Sovereign's neutral reply.

Thea felt her body abruptly reconnect with the ground as the artificial gravity resumed.

She staggered slightly but managed to steady herself, her boots once again rooted to the solid floor. Yet the oppressive sensation remained, though she could breathe a little easier without the disorienting weightlessness causing her stomach to threaten to rebel.

Anrake tilted his head, studying her reaction.

"You *are* correct, of course," he said, his tone light. "It's not exactly conducive to mentoring if the mentee can't even stand up straight, let alone breathe properly. But you must forgive me—I can't exactly reduce my Presence any further than this without a concerted effort of will. My nature, as it were, is rather... Let's say, *robust*."

He offered her a lopsided smile, one that carried an edge of both apology and amusement.

"But alas," he continued with a dramatic sigh, "what is the point of being a mentor if you can't suffer a little for your pupils every now and then, hmm? It's only fair."

With those words, he closed his eyes briefly, his brow furrowing in visible strain.

Thea watched as his face tightened, the sheer force of whatever he was doing evident in the faint sheen of sweat that immediately formed on his brow. For a moment, the air seemed to ripple faintly, and then the crushing weight pressing down on her lessened noticeably.

It wasn't gone—not entirely.

She could still feel it, like an invisible blanket of pressure weighing on her shoulders and chest, but it had eased *significantly*, down to something she estimated at about 1.5 to 2 times the usual gravitational force.

It was manageable now, though still not something she would call comfortable.

Anrake opened his eyes, exhaling softly.

“There,” he said, his tone slightly winded but satisfied. “This is as far as I can push it. You’ll simply have to accept this as the best compromise I can offer.”

Anrake’s grin returned, a spark of humor dancing in his sharp eyes. “Think of it this way, Thea—we’ll *both* suffer like this. A little bonding experience, if you will. I think that’s beautiful, in its own, unique way, no?”

Thea, still catching her breath from the lingering strain, managed a faint nod. “Thank you.”

She could barely string the words together, her mind racing to process everything that had just happened.

Trying to keep up with the Rune priest’s chaotic conversation style was proving almost as exhausting as the crushing gravity itself, she realized with a growing sense of dread.

If this was how her entire Psyker training would go, she’d need to seriously strengthen her mental stamina—or her “social batteries,” as she thought of it—just to survive.

She quickly made her way over towards the chair that had been waiting for her all this time and took a seat, prompting a satisfied nod from the Rune priest.

One thing *had* stood out to her about him, though: The only time his frenetic nature seemed to calm, even briefly, was when he explained something.

Earlier, when he’d spoken about Presence, it had been the only moment she didn’t feel like he might leap to an entirely different topic mid-sentence.

That brief clarity was a lifeline in his tempestuous energy.

Figuring it couldn’t hurt to learn more—and perhaps slow him down in the process and give her some time to recover—Thea decided to press him on the subject.

“Rune priest,” she began, hesitating for a moment before continuing, “this... *Presence* thing you mentioned. Can you explain it more? I mean, you said it’s tied to your Soul, but... what does that actually *mean*? Is it something I’ll have to deal with as a Psyker too? What is it used for? I’m sure it has *some* kind of use, right?”

Her words felt clumsy as they spilled out, but the spark of interest that lit up in Anrake’s sharp eyes reassured her that she’d chosen the right path.

“Ah, Presence,” he said, his tone shifting to one of almost reverent enthusiasm. “Now that’s a topic worth diving into, indeed! Although, I have to admit, it’s not the best topic to start with... But I guess that’s entirely on me, so no harm, no foul, really. I’ll give you the basic rundown, but it won’t actually become relevant to you until quite a while from now, my dear would-be-pupil!”

Thea raised an eyebrow, already feeling a bit overwhelmed by the Rune priest’s whirlwind of words and ideas, but she stayed silent, hoping for something resembling clarity.

Anrake continued, his tone growing more animated. “Presence is the Attribute that unlocks the moment you hit Tier 3. That pesky little ‘TBD’ you’ve probably noticed lurking at the very bottom of your System profile, right below the Psychic one. Annoying, isn’t it? Like a little *tease*, dangling there, waiting for you to figure out what it is. And the lecturers aren’t allowed to tell you what it is until you’re closer to Tier 3 either, ha! But I have no such stipulations; so yeah...”

He leaned back, the faint smile on his face shifting into something more contemplative.

“Presence measures the gravity of your Soul, as we have already established. Not gravity in the ‘falling off a cliff’ sense—gravity as in *weight* or *meaning*. The sheer, raw energy of your very existence. It’s not just an Attribute like Strength or Resolve that you can slap points into whenever you level up. No, no... Presence is *entirely* natural. It grows with you, with your experiences, your struggles, your triumphs. And unlike other Attributes, its natural growth doesn’t cap out either. Where other Attributes struggle to go beyond the 3.00 mark, Presence just keeps building. There’s no real limit to how far Presence can develop—though trust me on this, the higher it gets, the harder it becomes to keep in check.”

Now that the Rune priest had mentioned it, Thea *did* remember that Professor Pierce had hinted that the last remaining Attribute would unlock at Tier 3.

It must have been Presence, that he had been unwilling—or maybe unable—to elaborate on during the System 101 lecture.

She tilted her head, trying to wrap her mind around the concept, silently wishing that Kara was there to apply her genius to the explanation the Rune priest was giving her—and then give an even easier explanation to Thea in turn, so she could actually understand what was going on.

“So... What does it *do*, exactly? I mean, if you can’t invest in it, how does it... work?”

“Excellent question!” Anrake said, snapping his fingers as though she’d just passed some invisible test. “Presence is, at its core, a multiplier. It doesn’t exist in isolation—it instead enhances *everything* else. For Psykers like us, it amplifies the effects of our Psychic Powers; it does so even more effectively than Resolve, mind you, which up until that point will have been your bread-and-butter Attribute for anything Psychic-multiplier-related. For non-Psykers, it’s the same story, really—it takes whatever strengths they have, whatever tools the System has granted them, and pushes them to entirely new heights.”

He gestured vaguely toward the training hall’s illusionary forest around them, as if the air itself held the answers. “The simplest way to think of it is this: The higher your Presence, the more powerful you are within the System as a whole. Every swing of a sword, every ounce of Strength, every application of Vitality or Focus—it’s *all* bolstered by your Presence. For us Psykers, though...”

He trailed off, his grin turning almost predatory. “Let’s just say Presence is the ultimate key to becoming a *true* wielder of the Void’s fundamental powers.”

Thea’s mind reeled as she tried to absorb the Rune priest’s words.

The thought of unlocking an entirely new Attribute, one tied so intrinsically, so *directly* to her growth and potential, sent a faint thrill through her despite her lingering confusion and the knowledge that it wouldn't happen for quite some time yet.

"So, in a way," Anrake continued, leaning forward with an almost conspiratorial gleam in his eye, "Presence is your Soul given both physical and metaphysical weight. Trust me when I say this, Thea—when you unlock it, you'll *know*. It's not subtle. And when it starts to grow? Oh, you'll *feel* it. Every step of the way."

His toothy grin softened slightly, turning into something more measured. "Of course, I've only scratched the surface here. You might notice I've deliberately avoided going into too much depth about its more... *practical* uses. There's a good reason for that, likely the same reason that the lecturer's aren't really covering it—it's ultimately pointless to give you a full rundown when you won't be interacting with any significant amount of Presence for at least a few years anyway. Right now, it would be like trying to explain how to pilot a starship to someone who's still learning how to ride a bike."

Anrake leaned back in his chair, his armored robes shifting with a faint metallic hum as the breeze played with their edges. "The most Presence you'll likely encounter on this ship is from Captain Cross. He has the highest Presence aboard, apart from myself, of course. If you've ever been in a room with him, you've probably felt it—a subtle pressure, a sense that the very air bends around him in deference to his will, like his gaze is just that little bit more suffocating to endure than others. That's, in a sentence, what a high Presence does: It asserts itself."

He studied her for a moment, his sharp gaze seeming to assess how much of this she was absorbing. "But I digress. Presence, in all its forms, is a power you will come to understand in time. For now, just know that it exists, that it is within you as a seed waiting to sprout, and that one day, if you continue to grow, it will be a cornerstone of everything you do."

His grin returned, this time tinged with a strange warmth. "So, does that answer your curiosity for the moment, or shall I keep rambling on until you fall asleep in that chair?"

Thea blinked, her mind racing to process everything he'd said.

And now that the Rune priest had mentioned it, she realized there *was* something oddly familiar about the sensation she was feeling with the whole Presence thing.

Her thoughts drifted back to the welcoming ceremony aboard the Sovereign momentarily, where she had first seen Captain Cross.

She remembered the suffocating feeling, like the air had thickened around her, pressing on her chest and making it difficult to even think clearly. At the time, she'd chalked it up to nerves or the sheer intensity of the moment, but now it all started to make a strange kind of sense.

"That actually explains a lot," she admitted, her voice carrying a note of appreciation. "Thank you for the explanations, Rune priest. I trust your judgment that I won't need to know much more about it for a while yet."

Anrake waved a hand dismissively, as if her gratitude were unnecessary. “Good. There’s no need to clutter your mind with advanced theory before you’re ready to apply it.”

Thea nodded but hesitated, her mind tugging at a question she wasn’t sure she should ask.

Would it be better to just assume and deal with the consequences later?

Or would erring on the side of caution save her a potential reprimand?

Ultimately, she decided to voice her concern—there was no benefit in squandering the Rune priest’s goodwill on something that could be cleared up ahead of time.

“Rune priest,” she began cautiously, “is there any sort of restriction on the things I learn from you? I mean, am I allowed to share this knowledge with my squad or other Marines who might benefit from it? Or is it something I need to keep to myself?”

The question seemed to catch him off guard, his expression flickering with mild surprise before settling into a thoughtful look.

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Honestly, I couldn’t care less, even if I tried. The UHF Brass might love to play their little games of secrecy, hoarding knowledge like misers with their gold, but I’ve never seen much rhyme or reason in keeping intelligent, driven youngsters from the knowledge they crave.”

His gaze sharpened slightly, his tone turning serious. “Knowledge is power, Thea. And if there’s one thing the UHF needs more than anything right now, it’s *power*. If sharing what you’ve learned with your squad or your friends helps them grow stronger, smarter, or more capable, then by all means, do so. Just make sure they don’t squander it—or use it to get themselves killed. That would be a waste.”

Thea relaxed slightly, a small weight lifting off her chest. “Understood. Thank you for trusting me with that decision.”

Anrake’s grin returned, the mischievous glint in his eye as sharp as ever. “Don’t thank me yet. I have a feeling your squad’s going to find themselves tangled in all sorts of chaos soon enough, and I’d bet good credits it’ll be courtesy of you. But hey, that’s part of the fun, isn’t it?”

Thea opened her mouth to ask what exactly he meant by that ominous statement, but before she could form the words, he continued, waving off her unspoken question as if he’d already anticipated it.

“Now, since we’re already in such a *trusting* mood today,” he said, leaning forward with an exaggerated flourish, “let’s keep that theme going, shall we? While I *technically* have a carefully crafted curriculum for this whole Psychic-mentorship endeavor, I’ve always found that self-driven learning tends to yield the most *interesting* results. So instead of me rattling off lessons like a boring old academy instructor, why don’t you tell me what *you* want to know about all this Psychic stuff, and we’ll start there?”

He paused, his grin widening as he gestured vaguely to the ethereal forest around them, the simulated environment shifting subtly with the breeze. “If we hit a snag or you end up asking the wrong questions—because trust me, that *will* happen—I can always drag us back to the basics. But I’d wager it’s much more intriguing to see where your curiosity leads us. After all, isn’t that the most exciting part of learning? Figuring out what you don’t know you don’t know or didn’t know you wanted to know?”

Thea blinked, trying to parse his words as her thoughts began to race.

How could she even begin to decide what to ask when she barely understood the scope of what being a Psyker entailed to begin with?

Still, the Rune priest’s confident, almost whimsical demeanor was oddly infectious, and despite her hesitation, a flicker of excitement stirred in her chest.

“I suppose that makes some sort of sense,” she said slowly. “But... Where do I even start? I honestly have no idea where to even begin. There’s so much I don’t know, and I don’t want to waste your time with questions that might seem... *obvious*.”

Anrake waved a hand dismissively.

“There are no stupid questions, Thea. Only *boring* ones. And boring questions,” he said with a theatrical shiver, “are the *real* waste of time. So, go on—ask away! Don’t overthink it. What’s the first thing you’re practically *dying* to know about...?”