

Volume 2 - Chapter 52 - Unleash

Thea jerked back from the scope so fast she completely let go of her rifle, barely managing to twist out of the sling, stumbling and scrambling like the ground had turned to ice beneath her boots. She half-crawled, half-fell over Chester's frozen body, her breath ragged as her back slammed against the trench wall.

Her eyes were continuously locked on the impossible sight before her: Her Gram, hanging weightless in mid-air, and from it, a shape was peeling out of reality itself.

It was *her*.

Or close enough to twist her gut into knots.

Every line of the figure was hers—the same armor, the same cloak, the same small details down to the way her bangs fell slightly over one side of her face.

But the eyes gave it away.

They glowed neon violet, cutting through the frozen, monochrome world like a pair of molten blades, and the sheer *wrongness* of them made her stomach churn dangerously.

Her throat felt tight, words jammed there uselessly as Faux-Thea drifted forward, smooth and unhurried, circling Chester's crouched form as if she had all the time in the universe.

"Now, why are you running away from me like this, darling?" the double teased, her voice a distorted mirror of Thea's, except richer, smoother and far too calm compared to her own.

"*You're* the one who called me, not the other way around. Unless my memory's faulty—though we both know it isn't, don't we?"

She halted beside Chester and, without a flicker of hesitation, lowered herself into a sitting position on top of him like he was nothing more than a piece of conveniently placed furniture.

One leg crossed over the other, her posture flawless, she rested an elbow against her knee and her chin on her fist, gazing down at Thea with a patient, thoroughly unnerving smile.

Like a queen waiting for her subject to finally speak.

Thea's mind reeled, thoughts tripping over each other in a frantic scramble.

Seeing her Faux-Self here, in the middle of a Digital Mission, dredged up the memory of their last meeting in the Assessment—right before the enemy Psyker had ended her run. The shock of it left her chest tight, her lungs struggling to pull in enough air to steady herself.

"Wh—Who are you?" she stammered, words clumsy, buying herself precious seconds just to breathe and grasp at the edges of what was happening.

Faux-Thea let out a long, almost theatrical sigh, her expression shifting into weary annoyance. "I was *really* hoping for a more engaging opening, darling. Something with a little

wit, maybe even some pizzazz. You do always manage to disappoint me in new and unique ways, don't you... Listen, it isn't exactly easy to meet with you like this, yet every time I manage it, you insist on being *utterly* unreasonable."

She shook her head slowly, violet eyes sparking faintly like lightning caught in glass, before pinning Thea with a sharp look again.

"But fine. If humouring your pitiful little stalling tactics helps your poor brain catch up, I guess I shall indulge your requests momentarily."

With inhuman grace, Æht rose from her seat on Chester's frozen back, her movements flowing like liquid shadow.

She dipped into a courtly curtsy, posture flawless, her eyes never leaving Thea's.

"You may call me Æht, darling. Much less of a mouthful than '*Faux-Thea*,' or whatever tired description you were about to slap on me. Besides... you'll need a proper name when you go running to Kara about me after the DM is over."

Thea's eyes flew wide, her pulse hammering all over again. "H...How do you know about Kara?!"

Æht rolled her eyes, dropping back into her throne-like perch atop Chester's frame with exaggerated languor. "If we're really going to go through *every single thing* step by step, we'll be here until the stars burn out, darling. Try to keep up, would you?"

She raised a finger, pointing first at herself, then lazily flicking it toward Thea. "I am you. You are me. We are one. If you talk to Kara, I'm there. Listening. Talking. Breathing the same air in your headspace, so to speak. Simple enough?"

Settling back into her previous pose, chin on her fist, she gazed down at Thea still pressed tight against the trench wall like a trapped animal.

"Now, darling, since we've cleared *that* up, can we finally get to the actual point?"

Thea forced herself to take a slow breath, dragging her spine straighter until she no longer looked quite so much like a cornered rat.

Her thoughts still ran wild, spinning circles around themselves.

'She is me. I am her.... What does that even mean? The Rune priest said visions were part of Precognition, but this doesn't feel like precognition at all. Unless I've completely misunderstood what the word even means... What the fuck is happening here?'

Her mouth was dry when she finally asked, "Then... what do you want from me, exactly?"

Æht's lips curved into something between amusement and mockery, one brow lifting. "What do *I* want from *you*? Darling, you're the one that dragged me here. Shouldn't *you* know the answer better than I do?"

Thea blinked, words catching. “I... I called you? When? How?! I was just experimenting with my Psychic Powers—and then you just appeared! I wasn’t even *thinking* about you!”

“You mean *my* Powers,” Æht replied, her voice velvet-smooth yet edged like a knife. She fixed Thea with a pointed look, every word dripping with quiet condescension. “You were experimenting with *my* Psychic Powers, darling. And with the sheer amount of energy you hurled into it—enough to rattle me from the deepest corners of ourself—I assumed you had a reason. A *real* purpose.”

Her lips curled faintly, the smirk not quite reaching her piercing eyes. “But it seems I may have overestimated you. *Again*.”

She tilted her head with an almost birdlike sharpness, studying Thea as though peeling her apart layer by layer. After a beat, she sighed, long and theatrical. “You still don’t have the faintest idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Thea’s pulse raced. *‘She doesn’t seem hostile... not yet. If she wanted me dead, she could’ve already done it. Better to play along—get something useful out of her. Maybe something the Rune priest can make sense of later...!’*

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she gave a small, hesitant shake of her head.

Æht rose from her makeshift throne with the same liquid grace she had shown before, every movement too smooth, too perfect.

She drifted toward Thea, the air around her carrying the faintest ripple of air.

Thea’s body immediately screamed at her to bolt—down the trench tunnel, anywhere away from this *thing* wearing her face.

Her thoughts snarled in panic: *‘Run, you idiot! Fucking run!’*

Yet her legs betrayed her, frozen in place as if chained by invisible hands.

She couldn’t move, couldn’t even breathe properly.

Æht reached her, taking Thea’s hands in her own. Her touch was deceptively gentle as she pulled Thea up to her feet, then slid an arm around her waist, guiding her with unshakable certainty back toward the pillbox’s center.

Thea stumbled, fighting the grip, but every resistance was effortlessly redirected.

And then Æht pulled her even closer.

Their bodies locked together in a strange, involuntary rhythm.

Thea twisted, trying to break free, but Æht flowed with the motion, effortlessly turning her flailing steps and attempts to escape into part of an intimate dance—leading, until every attempt at struggle only drew them tighter together.

"Now, now, darling," Æht whispered, her lips brushing dangerously near Thea's ear. Her voice was rich, smooth—downright intoxicating. "There's no need to fear me. I told you, didn't I? *We are one*. I would never wish harm upon you."

Her grip tightened just slightly, forcing Thea to start matching her rhythm. "In truth, I am your only *true* ally—whether you understand this or not. But logically, you won't be able to deny me. After all, if we are one, then your growth is my growth. Your victories are mine. Your power..."

Her violet eyes flared as she leaned in even closer, her hot breath tickling the inside of Thea's ear, her tone softening to a dark purr. "...is *my* power."

Thea jerked instinctively at the uncomfortable intimacy, trying to rip herself free from the whisper that lingered like heat against her ear—and to her own shock, she actually managed to slip away.

For a split second she staggered back in a half-twirl, breath sharp in her chest, until she realized Æht had let her go; released her waist.

The brief taste of freedom didn't last.

Æht still had her hand caught in an iron grip, deceptively delicate fingers holding her like a shackle. With a casual pull she drew Thea forward again, catching her off balance and folding her back into the tightness of the embrace.

Thea's resistance only spun her half a step before Æht redirected it seamlessly once again, guiding the struggle into another flowing movement of their unnatural waltz. It was like every flinch, every attempt to break away, had already been written into the steps of the dance.

"Use your brain, darling," Æht murmured, her tone almost playful as she leaned closer, neon-violet eyes burning with calm amusement.

She pressed her forehead against Thea's temple, gaze boring into her eyes. "Stop panicking. Think about what I've just told you... and dance with me for a change."

Her voice was honey-smooth, but beneath it was an edge of command that made Thea's skin crawl, the kind of tone that didn't allow disobedience.

Her body kept moving even as her mind screamed to stop. Æht led her with practiced ease, humming a low, haunting tune that threaded through the frozen air.

Every step seemed rehearsed, every twirl intentional—sometimes spinning Thea outward in a sweeping arc around Chester's frozen crouched form before pulling her back in like they had all the time in the universe, as if this dance was nothing more than a leisurely pastime for her.

Thea tried to force her breathing steady, her chest rising and falling in shallow bursts before she finally managed to slow it.

'Calm down. Think. There's got to be a way out of this weird fucking vision...'

Her eyes darted around the pillbox, searching for cracks in the scene, *something* that would give her a foothold. But everything was seamless, unnervingly real—the cold grit of stone under her boots, the faint echo of Æht’s hum vibrating in her ribs and skull, the phantom warmth of that too-familiar body pressed against her own.

Admitting defeat made bile rise in her throat, but the longer she struggled against Æht’s grasp, the more pointless it became.

This vision wasn’t breaking anytime soon.

‘Fine. If I can’t break it, then I should at least try to understand it...’

Her thoughts circled back to what Æht had said earlier—that these were *her* Powers, not Thea’s. That she had been the one called up from the depths of them, dragged into the light by Thea’s experiment with [Glimpse].

Thea clenched her jaw.

‘But that doesn’t make any fucking sense. I’m a Veritas Precog. That’s what the Rune priest said. That’s what everyone’s always said since this whole weirdness started popping up...’

[Glimpse] was part of her precognition Powers; the Rune priest had been *very* specific about this.

So why had Æht claimed it as her own?

Was it just raw arrogance, or was there something else...?

‘If I’m on that Path, then the Powers that come with it are naturally mine. Unless... I misunderstood the Rune priest about how this works...?’

She thought back to the Psychic lesson she had shared with the enigmatic man, but even at second and third recollection, she couldn’t find anything wrong with her thinking on the matter.

[Glimpse] was one of the first-tier Powers in the Short-Term Precognition Path. The Rune priest had been *very* clear about that when she had asked about what kind of Psychic Powers she might be able to use.

As a Wielder she only had one Power from the Path she was on; so there was no chance that it could be anything but [Glimpse], as she hadn’t Delved yet. There was no other way she could have gotten access to [Glimpse] but from the natural Wielder status.

Her steps faltered for a split second before Æht’s grip around her waist tightened again, forcing her back into rhythm, that lilting hum never once breaking pace, her eyes never once leaving Thea’s own.

Thea’s thoughts continued to churn as Æht guided her through another sweeping turn, boots scraping against the pillbox floor.

"I am you. You are me. We are one."

The words gnawed at her, looping over and over until they felt less like riddles and more like a solid weight pressing down on her chest.

She kept trying to pick them apart, but they only seemed to tangle tighter.

If Æht was her, then why did she feel so utterly alien?

If they were one, then why was there such a disparity in their understanding?

Her mind ran in circles, chewing on every phrase until her attention snagged on the last thing Æht had said before—about growth, victories, and power.

Thea replayed the words in her head: *"After all, if we are one, then your growth is my growth. Your victories are mine. Your power is my power."*

The thought looped, pressed deeper, until she found herself murmuring it aloud without even realizing:

"Your power is my power."

The words slipped out, barely audible, but Æht's eyes widened ever so slightly mid-step like she'd been waiting for them. A predatory grin broke wide across her mirrored face, effulgent eyes flaring briefly as the grip on Thea's hand softened.

The frantic pace of the dance slowed, melting back into something almost serene—her movements smooth, deliberate, as if rewarding Thea for finally finding the "right" line.

"There we are," Æht purred into Thea's ear, her hum shifting into something softer, almost coaxing. *"Now you're beginning to understand, darling."*

Thea's brows furrowed as her voice cut through the surreal quiet of the still world around them. "But... how could that even be true? I was using [Glimpse] before I even knew what it was—before the Assessment. The Rune priest told me my whole precognition was just [Glimpse], both the active and passive parts. I even had them before Integration, but *you*—you didn't show up until the Assessment. So how—"

Abruptly, Æht froze mid-step.

The abrupt halt nearly toppled Thea, her body stumbling forward without the hands guiding and rhythm to carry her anymore. Æht had released her waist and taken a deliberate step back, eyes narrowing, and for the first time Thea caught a flicker of something she hadn't expected.

Genuine emotion.

The expression didn't fit the *thing* that had been toying with her—it felt raw, and entirely *human*.

Her neon-violet eyes flickered, narrowing as venom seeped into her tone.

“Do you truly believe that you’re some kind of universal prodigy, darling? That you just... *happened* to pick up Psychic Powers *perfectly*, from the very beginning? Without stumbling, without breaking yourself, without paying the *price* everyone else bleeds themselves for?!”

Thea froze, her mouth dry, but Æht pressed on, circling her now like a predator tearing into prey.

“Has it never crossed that oh-so-brilliant mind of yours that the reason you could use [Glimpse] so well—so easily—was because *I* was there, guiding you?”

Æht’s voice rose, sharp with accusation.

“That every ‘instinct,’ every perfect timing, every moment you *somehow* survived by a hair’s breadth—was *me*? That I’ve been by your side since the very beginning, long before you even knew what survival *meant*? Before you could even *remember* things for yourself?”

She took a step forward towards Thea, voice rising even further—almost shouting now—not in rage but in something else entirely. “I’ve toiled day and night for *both* of us! I’ve carried us through dangers you couldn’t even begin to comprehend as a child! I’ve saved us more times than you can count, more times than you will ever know! And now, after all of that, you look me in the eyes and call it your own brilliance?! You think I just appeared one day, like some kind of unbidden parasite?! I’ve been holding it all together when you didn’t even know there was something to hold!”

Thea’s mouth went dry, her thoughts stuttering into silence.

She had braced for taunts, for manipulation, for games.

But nothing even close to this.

Not the raw edge of emotion spilling out of her mirror-self.

She didn’t know what to say, didn’t even know if she could believe it—but the weight in Æht’s voice left her utterly stunned, her lungs tight with confusion and doubt.

Æht took a deep, shuddering breath, before continuing, the same venom still present but in a sharper, quieter voice now, “[Glimpse] is *my* Power, darling. It always has been. You are not a Short-Term Precog; *I am*. But we are one, so you get to use my Powers, just as I get to use yours. You haven’t even begun to start pulling your own weight, so *do not dare* to claim achievements that aren’t yours to claim.”

Thea stood there, stunned, her thoughts crashing into each other like waves against steel.

‘*Not mine...?*’

The claim was insane, yet instead of shattering her footing, it slotted into place *far* too neatly—like some buried part of her had already somehow known all of this.

Her certainty from moments ago cracked, and instead of denial, a strange, unnerving acceptance started to bleed through her.

“...Then what are *my* Powers?” The words slipped from her mouth before she even realized she’d spoken. “If I’m not a Short-Term Precog—if [Glimpse] isn’t mine—then what... am I?”

Æht’s eyes lingered on her for a long moment.

She drew in a steady breath, her shoulders straightening as the raw emotion drained away, replaced once more with that predator-like stillness, the mask of control snapping back into place.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, and though the words carried no shame, Thea felt the weight of them. “Your guard dog keeps me at bay, so I haven’t been able to look. But you should already know, darling. You’ve *felt* it. There’s only one other phenomenon that follows you when you burn too much Psychic Energy. And it has nothing to do with my precognition.”

Thea’s chest tightened. Her mind jumped instantly to the only thing it could be.

“...The Ice.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but the word hit like a gunshot in the silence between them. “That... that strange cold that leaks out of me sometimes.”

“Exactly.” Æht’s lips curved, not into a smile, but into something knowing. She tilted her head just so, eyes gleaming like cut amethyst. “You think I don’t feel it too? That frost crawling beneath our skin, that chill radiating outward when you strain yourself? That isn’t *mine*, darling. That’s *yours*.”

Thea swallowed hard. “So... I’m some kind of Ice-based Psyker, then?”

A shrug, elegant and dismissive all at once. “I don’t know. But it would be the most logical answer. Since we are one, we Inherited Veritas. And Veritas does *not* tolerate lies, not even in what we are. It would never allow anything but Truth to manifest. If the cold is there, then the cold is yours. Some Path of Ice, some Power bound to it—that is what you are. Whatever form it ultimately ends up being.”

Thea’s thoughts reeled, trying to stitch together all the fragments of truth Æht had just hurled at her.

But before she could even begin to digest it, Æht pressed forward, utterly relentless.

“I’ve answered plenty of your questions now. And you’ve given me *nothing* in return. Not even the courtesy of telling me why you called me here. But...”

She tilted her head, her tone softening in a mockery of grace. “...since you apparently didn’t even know how our dynamic worked, I’ll let it slide. Just this *once*.”

Her gaze sharpened, pinning Thea in place. “But you *will* answer my next question, darling. And you’ll answer it truthfully.”

Thea’s throat felt dry, but she managed a small, hesitant nod. “...Okay.”

Æht’s voice shifted instantly, no longer smooth or mocking, but hard as iron. “What happened to you?”

Thea blinked, caught completely off guard. “What... do you mean?”

Æht leaned forward, her words cutting into her like a knife. “Where did your instincts go? All the teachings James drilled into you? All the lessons from years scraping through the Undercity together? Where did it all go, darling? Because the moment you walked into that UHF station, you started dulling. Piece by piece. You let it all slide until nothing was left but this... *hollow shell*.”

Disgust colored her tone now, disappointment dripping from every word.

Thea stammered, searching for words, “I... I don’t think I’ve changed that much. I don’t feel—”

“Don’t *feel*?!” Æht snapped, her voice cracking like a whip, making Thea flinch. “Then tell me why you thought spilling *everything* to the Rune priest was such a good idea, huh? After I *begged* you not to so much as glance at that man. Do you have any idea what kind of danger he is? Do you understand what I had to do—how far I had to crawl down into the dark—just to keep us hidden, so he wouldn’t drag you off to some lab table the moment he sniffed out *what* we are?”

Thea’s stomach twisted.

Æht leaned in, her eyes glowing violet like hot coals. “James’ Golden Rule. Number eleven. ‘*Fuck the brass’ orders, but always trust your SL.*’ Do you remember this? ‘*Always trust your SL.*’ Individuals. *Not* the brass. *Not* the system governing them. *Not* some unfathomably powerful Psyker you don’t even know. So tell me, darling—*why* did you ignore it? Why did you roll over and trust the brass that already failed you, time and time again?”

Thea opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Æht’s voice dropped lower, a hiss that carried venom. “What makes the Rune priest any different, huh? What stops him from simply killing us both the second he notices what we are? What we represent? What, darling, happened to the instincts that used to keep us alive? The ones that knew better than to trust *anyone* but our own? I understand wanting knowledge—but knowledge should *never* come at the cost of survival. You *knew* this—once. You *lived* this. So why?! Why forget, darling? Were two short years of safety all that was required to leash you that badly? Did they turn you into some kind of obedient little dog who doesn’t even realize when it’s being encircled to be shot and consumed for its meat?”

Her words landed heavy, leaving Thea’s chest tight, her mind scrambling for anything—*anything*—to defend herself.

But deep down, a sliver of doubt gnawed at her: What if Æht was right with her accusations...?

There was a part of her that couldn’t deny what had been said—the instincts she once relied on, the sharp edge she used to carry with her through every breath of the Undercity.

They *had* dulled. She *had* trusted where she shouldn’t have.

But at the same time, another, louder part of her burned with overwhelming curiosity.

Æht *knew* things—things Thea couldn't make sense of yet, but desperately *wanted* to.

She forced down the lump in her throat and asked, voice tight, "What... what *do* we represent? What, exactly, are we, then? Do you know?"

Æht sneered, stepping back from Thea as though she'd caught a strong whiff of rot. "You cannot be trusted with the knowledge."

The words landed like a slap, and Thea recoiled as if struck. The raw, unfiltered *Truth* laced into Æht's tone felt like a knife driven straight through her chest.

"I'll let you get back to your little experiments now, darling," Æht continued, her voice quieter now, exhausted but edged. "Don't get us killed. I *won't* allow it."

Thea's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

She wanted to argue, to shout, to demand more—but the weight of Æht's refusal still pressed down on her, stealing the words before they could form.

Æht turned away, moving with that same eerie smoothness toward the Gram still frozen mid-air where all of this had begun. Just before reaching it, she paused, twisting back with those glowing neon-violet eyes one last time.

Her voice dropped low, almost tender, but the command in it rang sharp as steel.

"Unleash yourself, Thea..."

And with that, she stepped backward into the waiting wall and rifle, her figure dissolving into the solid shape of the Gram and the dirt, metal and stone of the trench beyond, leaving Thea alone with her hammering heart and the echo of those words in her skull...