

## **Volume 2 - Chapter 104 - The Talk I**

**!!! ATTENTION, MARINE !!!**

"SO YOU'VE COOKED YOUR SOUL!"

A Friendly Guide to SOUL BURN, brought to you by the UHF Marine Corps Psychic Health & Wellness Division!

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### **WHAT IS SOUL BURN?**

Did you push a little too much Psyfocus through that Gate of yours? Reach for an esoteric Power that was *juuuust* a bit above your pay grade? Suffer a teensy-weensy Psychic mishap in front of your entire squad that killed half of them in the process?

Congratulations, Marine—you've earned yourself a genuine, Corps-certified case of *SOUL BURN!*

That's right! That searing, full-body ache that no painkiller can touch?

That's not your body hurting, that's *you* hurting! The *real* you! The one underneath all that meat! The one that gets transferred into new Shells—pain and all!

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### **KNOW THE SIGNS!**

1. Pain radiating through your entire body that medical says "isn't technically there!"
2. Feeling more erratic than a fresh Recruit on Assessment day!
3. Snapping at your (remaining) squadmates over absolutely nothing!
4. The unshakeable sensation that your insides have been lightly toasted by something that does not quite respect physics nor personal boundaries!

If you checked two or more boxes: That's likely to be Soul Burn, baby!

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### **WHAT CAN I TAKE FOR IT?**

Great question, Marine! The answer is: *NOTHING!*

That's right! Centuries of the finest military medical science in the galaxy have produced a treatment list consisting of:

1. Rest
2. Good Food
3. The company of people who can tolerate you!
4. The Void's very own, real-space grown, natural predator: Time!

That's it! That's the whole list! No pills! No stims! No injections!

Your Soul doesn't have a prescription pad, and frankly, it wouldn't honor one anyway!

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### **WHAT SHOULD I DO?!**

**DO** report to your squad medic! (They can't fix you, but they love the paperwork!)

**DO** eat every meal like it's a mission objective!

**DO** let your squadmates keep you company! Yes, even the annoying one! *Especially* the annoying one!

**DON'T** open your Gate "just to check if it still hurts!" (It does! It will! Trust us!)

**DON'T** attempt to "push through it!" Your Soul is not a muscle, Marine! It does not respond to grit!

**DON'T** be a hero! You already were one! That's how you got here in the first place (at least we will *pretend* you didn't mess up your Soul by being a complete moron)!

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### **REMEMBER!**

Soul Burn goes away on its own—usually within a few weeks!

Until then, your job is simple: Rest. Eat. Annoy your friends. Repeat.

Your Soul carried you through the fight, Marine. Now carry *it* to the mess hall.

And always remember: "*A Rested Soul Is A Ready Soul!*"

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*(Printed on recycled ration packaging. The Division thanks you for your service and reminds you that the pain is just, technically, all in your Soul.)*

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*[Excerpt from "SO YOU'VE COOKED YOUR SOUL" — UHF-MC Psychic Health & Wellness Division, Pamphlet #77-C, Revised Edition, PFC 927]*

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Thea felt lighter than she had in weeks.

It was a strange, downright physical sensation—as though somebody had reached into her chest and removed a dense, misshapen mass she'd grown so accustomed to carrying that she'd forgotten it was even there.

The Soul Burn, of course, still throbbed its dull, patient rhythm underneath everything, and her body still felt like it had been run through an industrial press—which, in fairness, it metaphorically had—but underneath all of that, for the first time in what felt like forever...

She just felt *free*.

Because she could finally *talk*.

About the Psychic side of things. About the Warren. About the mishaps, the ice, the second Path, the whole spiralling *mess* of impossibilities that had been piling up around her since the Assessment... And *especially* about *Æht*.

The general twinge of nervousness was still there, of course—that low, ever-familiar anxiety of not really knowing how or what, exactly, to say.

Where did one even *start* with something like this?

*"Hey, Kara, so there's a mirror-copy of myself living in my head that talks to me"?*

*"Fun fact, I have a fucked-up looking throne room inside my Soul and it's kind of occupied"?*

Every possible opening had sounded utterly *deranged* the moment she'd rehearsed it internally over the last few minutes, trying to prepare for this exact moment.

But given that they were both inside her room now, fully sealed off from even the Sovereign itself—that worry was so miniscule, *so utterly trivial*, compared to the mountain of anxiety she'd been hauling up to the Rune priest when she'd first asked for this opportunity, that she could barely even feel it.

She was undeniably curious about the Sovereign situation, though.

This had obviously been the first time she'd ever actually used the command the Rune priest had ordered into place for her, and she hadn't been entirely sure what to expect from it.

A confirmation chime, maybe. A brief affirmation, potentially. But definitely *something*.

Instead she'd received absolutely *nothing*.

The eerie quiet that had followed her words, with the Sovereign not even confirming receipt of the order, simply felt... *wrong*.

The Sovereign always answered—*always*.

The only time Thea could ever remember the ship's AI *not* answering had been during the Void Storm a few weeks back—when the residual Psychic turbulence had nearly killed every person inside the DDS, and the silence from the Sovereign had been one of the most terrifying parts of the entire ordeal back then.

"Sovereign? Can you confirm that you've received the order?" Thea tentatively asked, catching Karania's *thoroughly* confused look out of the corner of her eye.

They both waited—impatiently.

Yet no answer came. Even after several long, silent seconds, the Sovereign did not reply—nor give any indication whatsoever that she was even still *around*.

The room simply sat there, quiet in a way that no room aboard the Sovereign *ever* truly was.

"Wow..." Thea couldn't stop herself from breathing.

"H—Hold on!" Karania cut in, holding both hands up in front of her. "What, *exactly*, is going on here, Thea? Can I get some kind of *explanation*?!"

Her voice had twinged upward at the end—pitched in a way Thea had never really heard from her before. Kara was clearly operating well past "simply confused" at this point.

Which was probably extremely fair, given... well everything, really.

Thea took a deep breath, bracing herself for impact.

"I asked the Rune priest for a way to talk to somebody—*unspecified*—without the Sovereign, or any other person, being able to listen in at all."

Karania's eyes shot *wide* immediately, almost bulging out of her head.

She stared at Thea, mouth opening slightly, yet failed to produce anything in reply.

"I was honestly hoping, *best-case scenario*, that he'd offer some specifically sealed-off room or something," Thea continued with a shrug, trying to lighten the mood. "But... *Instead*, he kind of... Immediately ordered the Sovereign to just—at any point when I speak those specific words—*completely* stop monitoring whatever room I'm currently in. No recording, no listening, and no trying to reconstruct what might have been said after the fact, either. It supposedly lasts until I leave the room... It's the first time I've ever actually tried it, though."

"Thea..." Karania started, and Thea could hear the tremble sitting underneath her best friend's voice. "Are you—and I'm asking this with *all* the love and care I can muster here... Have you lost your *fucking* mind? Are you *actually* insane?"

Thea held Kara's eyes, genuinely unsure what to answer.

She didn't *feel* particularly insane.

But then again—she had *also* burnt her own Soul roughly twenty minutes ago by speaking the **True Name** of some kind of primordial origin-creature-thing residing behind, or inside, her Gate, alongside a mirror-copy of *herself* who had downright casually handed her a similarly impossible Origin Rune that had *crashed* the DDS servers so catastrophically that even the damn *Sovereign* hadn't been able to tell the Rune priest what had actually happened when *directly prompted*.

So... Maybe she *was*, in fact, insane, and none of this had actually happened.

It wouldn't exactly be the first time Thea had needed to seriously audit her own mental faculties since Integration.

*'But I at least don't **feel** insane... Not that I guess I'd be able to tell if I was truly was. Kind of the problem with—'*

"Do you have *any* fucking idea how dangerous a question like that is?!" Kara downright yelled at her from point-blank range, her hands flaring out in open exasperation. "He could have court-martialled you for that! *Killed* you, even, Thea! *Zero'ed* you! Are you even aware of the implications—"

"Yes, Kara. I know. Or... I *knew*, when I asked, I guess," Thea interrupted her, calmly.

She'd fully expected this line of inquiry—had rehearsed for it internally on the walk over, even—so its arrival didn't surprise her in the slightest. The sheer, raw *emotion* packed into Kara's delivery, however, was still a fair bit more than she'd braced for.

"I was *extremely* scared going into that session with the Rune priest today, not gonna lie," she continued on regardless. "*Believe me*. But... I thought about it. Like *a lot*. And... Honestly, this was the *only* option. I couldn't risk talking to you about any of this before—and I'm *one-hundred-percent confident* you'll agree with me on that, once you hear me out. It was a *necessary* risk. One medium-sized risk—just taken this once—so that *everything else* becomes far less risky moving forward."

She held Kara's eyes. "I won't have to make decisions about all of this shit alone anymore. Not now that I can talk to you about them without the Sovereign logging every word. We can brainstorm—and your big brain is going to be super helpful. Seriously."

Karania's exasperated look held itself in place for a few more long moments.

Then she took a deep breath—one of her deliberate, Karania-patented, medical-grade, resetting-the-nervous-system breaths—and quietly seemed to resign herself to whatever was about to happen.

"Alright... *Fine*. I'll humour you on this for now." She levelled a very threatening, very pointy finger directly at Thea's face. "But I *swear*, Thea, if I end up not agreeing with your reasoning on this... I'll... I'll find *something*!"

Thea nodded profusely, swallowing a small lump in her throat.

Because as somewhat funny as it was to have Kara on the back foot for once—flustered, downright *improvising* threats, visibly scrambling to keep up—Thea knew far, *far* better than to risk her best friend's—or in this case, her *Squad Medic's*—genuine ire.

That was a recipe for disaster she understood on a bone-deep, instinctual level, even without the Old Man having practically bashed it into her skull through half a million variations of "*Do not **ever** anger your squad medic, missy*" over all the years growing up.

Some lessons didn't need learning twice.

Some lessons didn't even need learning *once*, if you had functioning survival instincts.

That latter part was something that Thea liked to believe she had a decent amount of—even if not all her actions might have been directly underscoring that fact over the past few weeks and months. But she *was* still alive, so she couldn't have done *too* badly.

Thea immediately dove in.

"Okay. I'm very much aware this isn't the *best* place to start for all this to make sense—there's context that would make it land *a lot* better, I'm sure—but it's very time-sensitive, for reasons that'll become clear as I explain. So just... trust me on the ordering for now, alright?"

Kara nodded, tentatively.

"Do you remember the last day of the Assessment? Specifically—when we were storming the final compound, and I passed out for a moment there on the second floor? Then woke up and told you about that strange experience: The other-Thea inside my head. The one that *was taunting* me about missing something. Where we, as a squad, ultimately decided to keep me away from everyone and not use any Psychic Powers until we could get an actual Psyker to talk to me about everything?"

"This didn't stay an isolated incident, did it?" she prompted immediately, nodding slowly, her eyes already sharpening—clearly having concluded *exactly* where Thea was going with this.

Thea smiled an easy smile at her, a warm flush of relief spreading through her chest.

*'There she is.'*

This was *exactly* what she'd been missing all this time, in terms of everything Psyker and Æht related. The kind of quick-thinking she *needed* available to her, to have any hope of making heads or tails of everything going on.

"It was *not* an isolated incident," Thea confirmed, then she gave her *all* of it.

She walked Kara through everything that had happened since—every encounter, every appearance, every strange, reality-adjacent conversation with the mirror-copy of herself.

The mindscape meetings, the mirror-based communications, the taunts, the demands, the reluctant assistance... She kept the rundown as fast and dense as she could manage, compressing *weeks* of accumulated secrets into minutes, her still somewhat scratchy voice working overtime.

"—her name is Æht, by the way. She told me herself—"

And on and on she went.

How Æht showed up most reliably around [Glimpse] usage, or in the vicinity of *significant* Psychic phenomena caused by Thea.

How her presence had gone from the initial hostile taunting to something closer to a wary, transactional partnership.

How she seemed to know things about Thea's own Powers that Thea herself didn't.

How she'd seemingly been the one actually operating [Glimpse] behind the scenes, which was its own entire *situation* that Thea would definitely circle back to, at Karania's raised eyebrow.

Even how she *spoke*—the strange, no-contractions thing, the whole "darling" shtick, the way she never, *ever* answered a direct question when a leading counter-question was available...

And, finally, how she was deathly, *genuinely* afraid of the Rune priest.

Thea gave Kara *everything* she could think of, until, finally, she concluded, taking a deep, *deep* breath after pushing through the entire thing as fast as her lungs would let her.

"—and the last thing—the most important thing, really. The reason I led with all of this." She met Kara's eyes. "Æht is *not around right now*. She's *hiding*—behind the Gate, inside the Warren. Which, *I know*, means nothing to you quite yet, I'll get to what those actually are later. But the short version's this: She's *hiding* from the Rune priest, and she probably will be for a while. Hours, maybe even days... I'm not entirely sure how time works in the Warren and how Æht will actually know to come back or not... But, regardless, *that's* why I wanted to lead with her, while she's not around to hear any of it. So you could give me your honest opinion—your actual, unfiltered read on what she might be, what I should do about her, and such—*without* it potentially souring whatever tentative relationship Æht and I have got going on."

At some point during the rundown, the two of them had migrated to sitting on the bed, Thea cross-legged against the headboard and Kara perched near the foot of it, her posture growing steadily more still as the information had continued to pile up.

Kara had asked very few clarifying questions throughout.

A specific word choice of Æht's, here or there—and once, a precise, targeted question about the exact mechanism of Æht's appearances: Whether she simply *arrived*, or *surfaced* from somewhere, or some combination thereof, and whether Thea could feel a difference between the two, if so.

That question, Thea had only realised then, was something she'd never *once* bothered to ask herself or even really pay attention to. But as far as she could tell, it was the second option—Æht always seemed to *surface* from somewhere.

She never seemed to simply *appear*.

The only exception had been when she'd surprised Thea from inside the mirror before the Rune priest session, but Thea hadn't exactly been keeping an eye on the mirror the entire time to know whether Æht had magically appeared there, or surfaced *into it*, somehow.

Either way, Thea had no idea *why* that distinction might matter—but it was an interesting thing to note, nevertheless—and Kara clearly had some kind of idea she was working on, for her to ask that kind of pointed question.

However, ever since Thea had ended her rundown, Kara had gone completely quiet.

*Uncharacteristically* so.

Because Kara *always* had an answer. Basically immediately.

It was one of the load-bearing constants of Thea's entire life aboard the Sovereign, alongside the Sovereign's immediate replies as well—ask Kara a question, receive a response, usually a correct one, generally before you'd even finished asking.

Watching her now, sitting perfectly still at the foot of the bed, eyes unfocused, fingers of her left hand tapping out a slow, absent rhythm against her knee while whatever formidable machinery lived behind her eyes churned through the data—

It was *thoroughly* strange.

'*It is a lot to digest though... Can't exactly blame her for taking a bit,*' Thea had to quietly admit. '*Even for her.*'

Finally, however, Kara moved.

She let out a long, controlled breath, straightened her spine, and turned toward Thea with the expression she usually reserved for particularly complicated diagnostics.

"Alright. I don't know what to make of it all," she admitted plainly. "I want that on the record first and foremost. *Everything else* I'm about to say is built on incomplete data, secondhand testimony, and a field of study I know functionally *nothing* about. So don't treat any of it as more than educated guessing. Understood?"

"Got it," Thea agreed easily.

She hadn't *really* expected otherwise, honestly.

As brilliant as Kara was, she knew even less about Psychic phenomena than Thea did at this point—which, considering Thea's own knowledge amounted to a handful of Rune priest sessions and a *lot* of terrifyingly dangerous improvisation, was saying quite something.

"Good. Then—questions first." Kara raised her right hand and started ticking off fingers. "One. You said she's been operating your [Glimpse] behind the scenes this entire time. When you use the passive version—the one we considered basically automatic so far—is there *any* appreciable delay? Any perceptible gap between stimulus and '*pang*' at all?"



Thea blinked. "I... no? It's basically instant. Otherwise I would've probably died like *dozens* of times during the Assessment, the DMs, training and so on... Why?"

"Reaction latency. If she were merely processing your sensory input and *then* triggering the Power, there'd be lag—even *miniscule* lag, and you'd likely notice miniscule lag by now, with your Perception levels. *No* lag means she's not sitting *downstream* of your senses. She's either parallel to them or, somehow, *upstream* of them." Kara was already moving on before Thea could even *begin* to unpack that terrifying idea.

"Two. When you had that dread response after the 'Voidstorm', as the Sovereign called it—the one that abruptly vanished, like a switch flipping. Was that *her* doing?"

"I—what? I don't... I never thought about that—"

"Because a fear response that terminates *instantly* isn't how fear works, Thea. I've been thinking about it for a while, but figured it might just be Psyker-related stuff I don't know about yet. But adrenaline itself has a half-life. Cortisol has a clearance rate. If this *was* biological after all... Terror doesn't just switch off like that, Thea—it *decays*. Unless *something* is actively regulating it."

Kara's eyes had now taken on a particular, dangerous gleam.

"Something with direct access to the systems producing it and handling it. *Three*. Your temperature regulation incident during the DM. The one where you cooled yourself down but have no memory of doing it or how. Was *Æht* present in any of your interactions immediately *before or after* that window?"

"She—" Thea's mind raced backward through the timeline. "Yeah. She was there when I figured out the whole '*yelling the Power makes it stronger*' thing, remember? It was that time where she forced me to dance, it was *really* weird—"

"—Right." Kara nodded once, sharply, like a checkbox being ticked. "So, to recap: She operates a Power you own but can't consciously access yet, she can modulate your autonomic stress responses faster than biochemistry should allow, *and* she takes almost executive-level controls during *exactly* the windows where your conscious recall fails—potentially even causing the memory holes themselves. Do you not see the pattern here?"

Thea simply stared at her for a moment.

"...No? Kara, I have *no fucking idea* what you're talking about! Smaller steps, please?!"

Kara exhaled through her nose, visibly downshifting.

"The pattern, Thea, is that *every single* confirmed capability she's demonstrated is *infrastructural*. She doesn't *act on* you from outside—she *acts through* systems you already have, at a level underneath your conscious access. Which tells me she's not a simple passenger... Passengers sit in the cabin, while she's somewhere in the *engine room*, Thea."

She paused, then added, quieter, "Though, I guess what actually matters is this: In every single instance you've shared so far—*every one*, I made sure and went through them all again while you were talking—her interventions have been either *neutral* or *protective*. Even the whole taunting aspects so far, had *operationally useful* content buried in it, every time. There is *not one incident* in your entire account where she used that access to harm you. And she's had... Thea, she's had *constant* opportunity, if I'm right about this..."

Kara sounded downright scared when she said that, which sent Thea's own heart beating into overdrive as well.

"So... As a third-person observer, working purely from behavioural data: *Whatever* she is, she does not currently *appear* to be an acute danger to you. And I want to be precise about the wording here—*currently*, *acute*, and *appear* are all *load-bearing* in this sentence. I—I think that, if she *wanted* you dead, you'd... You'd *already* be dead, Thea.

"When she said that she cares about you because she relies on your existence to also exist—like you said she mentioned... I *think* she was speaking the truth. It's the only logical conclusion I can come to, with the information I have so far. *Whatever* she is."

Thea let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding.

Hearing it from Kara—hearing her own half-formed, hopeful read of the situation reconstructed independently, from the outside, by the smartest person she knew—loosened something in her chest that had been clenched for weeks.

It still, however, did not help with the rapid beating of her heart at the idea that Æht had far more access and control over her faculties than she'd even feared so far.

But it was a start, at least.

"Okay," Thea said. "Yeah. That's... that's kind of where I'd landed too. I just didn't *trust* myself to be objective about it, you know?"

"You *shouldn't*. She lives in your head, Thea. Objectivity was *never* on the table for you." Kara said it without any softening whatsoever, then tilted her head. "Which brings me to the part I *don't* quite get yet: Her fear of the Rune priest. Walk me through that again—because from where I'm sitting, it doesn't really make sense? The Rune priest has been a big help to you so far in understanding your Psychic Powers and everything, no? And If she's as capable as the evidence suggests, and as well-hidden as today evidently proved, what does she *actually* have to fear from him? He can't *see* her. He can't even *reach* her, if what you briefly said about the Warren denying entry—which you still have to elaborate on, by the way—is true."

"It's... not exactly about him reaching *her*," Thea said quietly, unable to meet Kara's eyes directly at the admission.

Kara's eyes narrowed a fraction as she immediately caught on, "...It's about what he can do to *you*."

"Yeah." Thea picked at her sleeve.

"The way she frames it—the way she's *always* framed it—is that if the Rune priest learns she exists, his most likely response isn't curiosity, study or even containment." She met Kara's eyes then. "It's *Zeroing* me. Both of us. She thinks he'd sooner Zero me than listen to either of us for five seconds, after knowing of her existence—for whatever reason."

"That's *her* assessment," Kara said slowly, nodding. "An entity with obvious self-preservation incentives, characterising the *one* person capable of unilaterally threatening her as an unreasonable executioner. You see the conflict of interest there, yes?"

"I see it. I've *been* seeing it. Believe me, I've run the '*Æht is probably manipulating my threat model in regards to the Rune priest*' scenario about a hundred times by now." Thea let out a long, tired breath. "But here's the thing, Kara. After today..."

She paused briefly, once again unable to meet Kara's eyes at the admission.

"...I can't exactly say she *doesn't* have a bit of a point."

Kara raised an eyebrow at her. It was a very specific kind of eyebrow raise.

The '*you buried the lede and I know it*' Kara-special eyebrow.

The very same one that had preceded every single medical confession every member of Alpha Squad had ever been strong-armed into over the past two months.

Thea took another deep breath.

"The session today didn't exactly... go to plan," she said tentatively. "The way it ended—the things that happened in the last hour of it—after *all that*, I *genuinely* believe the Rune priest would not react kindly to that particular revelation... Or at least not yet. And I don't mean '*stern lecture*' unkindly. I mean—" she stopped, swallowed, and started again. "Kara, he almost Zero'ed me today. As a *safety measure*. And the terrifying part is that, in hindsight, he was probably completely *right* to react that way..."

Karania went very, very still and her eyes turned deadly serious.

"... Thea... What happened in that session today?"

"I'll explain," Thea sighed, deflating against the headboard of the bed, feeling the onset of another headache sneak its way through her Soul Burn-induced discomfort. "But it'll be a bit of a long one..."