

Volume 2 - Chapter 19 - Voidborn

Thea took a deep breath, inhaling the sterile, faintly metallic air of the training hall.

It was a distinct contrast to the simulated forest's atmosphere, utterly artificial yet somehow undeniably grounding. The subtle hum of the Sovereign's systems, the crispness of the ship's recycled oxygen—it all helped her shake off the lingering unease that had settled in her chest.

It was strange, really.

She *knew* the DDS wasn't real, that *everything* in it—right down to the scent of the forest and also the training hall she found herself in right now—had been manufactured by the ship's AI.

And yet, stepping back into the Sovereign's reality still brought a strange sense of stability.

Like her mind had been adrift in the chaos of the Awakening visions, and now she was finally back on solid ground.

Across from her, the Rune priest scanned the training hall, his gaze flicking around the space as if checking that everything was exactly as they had left it. Whatever he was looking for, he seemed to find it, because he gave a small nod before turning back to Thea.

"Well," he said, clapping his hands together lightly, "that sums up your Awakening memories. I hope we managed to clear up some of the more confusing aspects of that tangled mess." His lips quirked into an amused smirk before he continued, "Though, I imagine there's still plenty left to cover in future sessions. For that, I offer my apologies... and my genuine excitement."

There was a particular glint in his eyes, a spark of energy that took Thea slightly off guard.

His entire demeanor radiated an odd sort of enthusiasm, as though the sheer mystery of her Awakening had invigorated him more than anything else in the session.

"You see, I don't often run into Awakening visions that I don't have a ready answer for anymore," he admitted, voice carrying a rare sincerity beneath the ever-present amusement. "And yet, here we are. So, I must thank you for that one, my dear pupil. You've given me quite the puzzle to work with."

Thea blinked, caught between bewilderment and reluctant amusement at his clear giddiness. It was odd—most people would be deeply unsettled by something they didn't understand, especially when it came to something as dangerous as the Void and something that they had spent countless years with already.

But the Rune priest? He seemed to utterly thrive on it.

Still, she quickly collected herself and nodded. “Thank you, Rune priest. I sincerely appreciate your honesty and, of course, your patience in explaining all of this. The session was... interesting, to say the least. If a bit dense with information overall.”

She hesitated for a moment before adding, “And considering we didn’t even get through everything you originally planned to cover, I can already tell just how deep this entire... side of things really goes.”

She trailed off, feeling the words tangle on her tongue.

There was so much more she wanted to say—about how this session had made her feel, about how utterly overwhelming yet still clarifying and honestly relieving it had been, about how little she still knew in the grand scheme of things... But none of it quite fit into a neat sentence, so she simply let it rest.

The Rune priest, however, seemed to pick up on it anyway.

His smirk widened slightly, as if entertained by her attempt to process everything at once.

Trying to express gratitude to him—someone of his level and rank, with his depth of knowledge—felt impossible. She didn’t have much to offer in return for his time or expertise.

All she really had were the mysteries surrounding her Awakening, the oddities she had experienced over the past month, and the strange inconsistencies that even he couldn’t quite yet explain.

But judging by the way his eyes still gleamed with intrigue, that alone seemed to be more than enough to keep him interested.

*‘Lucky me... I got the **one** guy who actually lives and breathes strange fucking nonsense. I’ll have to thank Major Quinn personally for getting me in contact with the Rune priest at some point,’* Thea thought, a lopsided smile tugging at her lips.

The Rune priest, seemingly amused by something, easily waved off her thanks.

“Don’t mention it, kid.”

His casual tone made it clear he hadn’t done any of this for gratitude—he had simply enjoyed the challenge. But then, his demeanor shifted, the air around him sharpening as he focused back on the session as a whole.

“Before we wrap things up, are there any lingering questions from what we’ve discussed today?” His voice was firm but open, inviting any last clarifications. “We’ll be covering Delves, Paths, and Powers in our next session, along with some practical demonstrations and training. For now, though, I’m only asking about what we covered today—specifically, the Inheritances and anything directly tied to them. If there’s something you’re still unsure about, now’s the time to ask. Otherwise, I’ll end today’s session here, and we can both move on with the rest of our duties.”

Thea cupped her chin, falling into thought.

This was undoubtedly an important moment. Who knew when exactly the Rune priest would schedule the next session? If she left any gaps in her understanding now, she might be stuck waiting for weeks—maybe longer—before getting another chance to ask.

'Alright, what do I need to lock in?' she asked herself. 'I have to make sure I understand everything about how the general idea of Powers works so far... More importantly, how the Inheritances change those Powers... That's going to be critical for Alpha Squad, not just me. If I can't break this down clearly for them, they won't be able to use this information effectively.'

Her brows furrowed as she ran through everything they had covered, her mind racing to piece it all together in a way that made sense. The implications of just the Veritas Inheritance alone had already given her a mountain of things to think about, and now she had to make sure she wasn't missing anything else critical.

'Inheritance Polarities are opposite forces that cannibalize and destroy each other... The Star makes referencing that pretty easy, so it should be simple enough to explain to the others. The whole Presence thing might be a bit trickier to break down, but I'm sure Kara will jump in and explain once she wraps her huge brain around it, so that should be covered,' Thea thought, methodically running through each part in her head, making sure there were no gaps in her understanding.

Next, she mentally pulled up her own internal notes on each Inheritance, a neatly arranged catalog she had been building since the Rune priest's lecture had begun.

It helped immensely that he had framed them almost like ability trees or class archetypes in a game, making it easy to visualize and categorize everything.

That alone had made all the information significantly easier to digest.

She had spent years upon years theorycrafting in countless games—analyzing stats, memorizing the most minute optimizations, stacking combos with perfect frame timing.

Compared to that, a list of twelve Inheritances with percentage distributions, Polarities, Delve locations, and Star placements was practically child's play.

She ran through the entire thing once, then a second time, just to be sure.

'Yep. Got it down cold.'

Delve Position 1: Perditio - "Destruction" - Colour: Crimson Red ([AN: #980001])

13.23%

Star Position: 12 o'clock - Opposite: Creatio.

Delve Position 2: Discordia - "Conflict" - Colour: Dark Green ([AN: #314f40])

7.49%

Star Position: 1 o'clock - Opposite: Concordia.

Delve Position 3: Mutatio - "Change" - Colour: Iridescent Green ([AN: #48c072])
5.12%
Star Position: 2 o'clock - Opposite: Permaneo.

Delve Position 4: Aurae - "Aura" - Colour: Radiant Gold ([AN: #DCA442])
16.67% (most common)
Star Position: 3 o'clock - Opposite: Nihilus.

Delve Position 5: Concordia - "Harmony" - Colour: Cerulean Blue ([AN: #9bb7d4])
8.49%
Star Position: 7 o'clock - Opposite: Discordia.

Delve Position 6: Fames - "Hunger" - Colour: Deep Amber ([AN: #654c00])
5.86%
Star Position: 4 o'clock - Opposite: Comedo.

Delve Position 7: Comedo - "Consume" - Colour: Molten Orange ([AN: #ff5906])
7.66%
Star Position: 10 o'clock - Opposite: Fames.

Delve Position 8: Permaneo - "Persistence" - Colour: Steel Grey ([AN: #43464b])
9.12%
Star Position: 8 o'clock - Opposite: Mutatio.

Delve Position 9: Nihilus - "Absence" - Colour: Abyss Black ([AN: #0c0c0e])
7.22%
Star Position: 9 o'clock - Opposite: Aurae.

Delve Position 10: Obscuritas - "Darkness" - Colour: Royal Purple ([AN: #7851A9])
9.86%
Star Position: 5 o'clock - Opposite: Veritas.

Delve Position 11: Veritas - "Truth" - Colour: Luminous White ([AN: #f5f3f5])
5.90%
Star Position: 11 o'clock - Opposite: Obscuritas.

Delve Position 12: Creatio - "Creation" - Colour: Night Blue ([AN: #00479b])
3.25% (absolute rarest)
Star Position: 6 o'clock - Opposite: Perditio.

Her lips twitched into a grin. *'Kara might be the genius, but when it comes to this kind of stuff? I'd like to believe I can at least be considered on-par...'*

There was one thing in the list that had caught her attention, no matter how many times she revisited it. Even after a second, third, and fourth pass, she couldn't figure out where she was going wrong.

She exhaled sharply through her nose, frustration creeping in, before shifting her gaze back to the Rune priest. "Alright," she said, straightening slightly. "I've got a few things to clarify before we call it here, if that's alright with you."

The Runepriest simply nodded, giving her an easy wave to continue.

"I think I've got just about everything down, but either I misremembered something from the Inheritance breakdown, or my math skills are worse than I thought..." Thea admitted, a faint edge of embarrassment in her voice.

She had the nagging suspicion it might be a mix of both.

"When I added up all the percentage values you gave for Inheritance occurrences, they don't sum up to 100%. They stop at 99.87%. Is that a mistake on my end, or are there rounding errors in the numbers you provided?"

She had double-checked her calculations more times than she cared to admit, and the missing fraction of a percent was bothering her far more than it had any right to. If there was a rounding error, she could live with it.

But if there was something she had missed—some overlooked detail—she needed to know.

She couldn't give Alpha Squad an exact rundown if there were errors in it; that would lead to them all working under false assumptions, which could be catastrophic.

While she couldn't immediately imagine how getting a few percentages wrong on Psyker Inheritance distributions could cause problems, that didn't mean it wouldn't be important in some future scenario—some niche situation she couldn't even think of, much less predict, right now.

The Runepriest blinked at her, clearly caught off guard by the question.

Thea cringed internally, half-expecting him to point out some obvious mistake she had made. But as a grin slowly spread across his face, she relaxed slightly.

"That... is something I did not expect you to catch this early—or at all, really," he admitted, his grin widening with every word. "I'm honestly impressed... You memorized all the percentages and added them up in your head on the fly? That's... definitely going to be useful for you going forward. Keep that level of attention up, and we'll get through these sessions a lot faster than I thought we would."

A rush of warmth spread through Thea's chest, her face heating ever so slightly.

She hadn't expected praise for asking a question about possibly getting something wrong—but she couldn't deny that it felt good.

"To answer your question," the Runepriest continued, his tone shifting back to its usual lecture-like cadence, "there is no mistake. Neither a rounding error nor a miscalculation on your part."

Thea stared at him, waiting for the explanation.

But he didn't continue.

Instead, his expression shifted, his grin fading slightly as he cupped his chin, sinking into thought.

'What does that even mean?' Thea thought, her brows knitting together. *'If there's no mistake in the numbers, then the missing fraction of a percent is intentional...? But if there was a thirteenth Inheritance, he would've mentioned it. Or at least hinted at it. So why the secrecy...?'*

That didn't fit his personality at all.

The Rune priest had been open about everything so far—sometimes even too damn open with the way he dumped the most horrifying of thoughts, revelations and information onto her.

But now, he was hesitating.

Whatever the missing percentage represented, it wasn't something he could answer immediately. That meant it was either classified, dangerous, or something he wasn't sure she was ready to hear.

Thea stayed silent, forcing herself to be patient, watching as he weighed his options. Whatever his verdict was, she didn't really have a way to argue against it anyway.

The Rune priest let out a slow, measured breath, his expression shifting from indecision to something heavier—resignation, maybe.

His gaze locked onto Thea's, searching for any last hesitation in her stance.

"There is no mistake," he repeated, his voice quieter this time, the usual confidence giving way to something more solemn. "Because I haven't covered a certain section of the Awakening and Inheritances yet. A section I'm not sure I should bring up here and now, as it could change the way you look at the other Marines you know—including the rest of your squad."

He paused, as if weighing his next words carefully before continuing, "So... I'm giving you the choice. Do you want to hear it? It might change how you see them, maybe even for the worse. But it might also prepare you for something you won't want to face unprepared."

Thea frowned, caught off guard by the sudden weight of the decision being placed in her hands.

Did she want to know?

She had spent the last month growing closer to Alpha Squad, turning what had once been just a collection of strangers into something that felt, almost, like a real team.

Almost like a family.

That wasn't something she had ever experienced before.

She had found herself trusting Isabella, Karania, even Corvus and Lucas. Desmond was the only one she still struggled to connect with, but even he was slowly becoming more tolerable.

They had each other's backs, watched out for one another.

And yet...

'If this information changes everything... is it worth knowing?' she thought, her fingers curling into a loose fist at her side.

The Rune priest wouldn't be giving her this choice unless it *meant* something.

Unless it had the potential to break whatever fragile stability she had built within Alpha Squad. But at the same time, if it was important enough to affect her relationships with them, wouldn't it be better to know now?

Before she got *too* attached?

She swallowed hard, her mind racing.

"Does knowing this information allow me to influence the outcome of whatever it means...?" she finally asked, her voice quieter than before.

The Rune priest didn't hesitate.

"No, it won't," he said, his tone final. There was a weight to his words, an unshakable certainty that made her stomach twist.

That only made the decision harder.

'Then what's the point?!' her thoughts snapped, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. *'If I can't do anything with this information, why should I let it weigh on me?!'*

But another part of her whispered back—*'Because you need to be ready.'*

It was a part that she had listened to countless times, that had kept her alive throughout all her years inside the undercity.

The part that made sure she survived, no matter what.

She wasn't naïve enough to think that everything in Alpha Squad would stay the same forever. This life—the life of a Marine—was *brutal*. Friendships, alliances, even rivalries were fleeting. People could disappear in an instant.

If this information meant that Karania, Isabella, or any of the others would eventually be ripped away from her—wasn't it better to be prepared for that possibility?

It sounded horrible in her own mind to put it like that, but at the end of the day, she didn't know any of the other members of Alpha Squad that well.

While Isabella and Karania were extremely close to her, especially Karania, and she could almost not remember a life without her—she *still could*.

But how long would that feeling last? How long until she *could no longer*?

She met the Rune priest's gaze, her expression firm.

"Tell me," she said, her voice steady despite the knot forming in her stomach. "I want to know, even if I can't change anything. What do the missing percentages mean?"

The Rune priest exhaled slowly, rubbing his temples before meeting Thea's eyes again.

There was no amusement in his expression now, no excitement at an unsolved mystery—only a quiet, tired kind of resignation.

"You asked for the truth," he said, his voice measured, almost reluctant. "The missing 0.13% isn't an error, nor is it something that can be corrected. It exists because there is a small, unavoidable fraction of Psykers who... don't come back."

He let that sit for a moment, as if giving her time to process the weight behind those words before he elaborated further—not that the words meant anything to Thea as is.

"These Psykers—if you can even call them that anymore—are known as *Voidborn*. They are the ones who, during their Awakening, lose themselves entirely. Their mind, their will, their very sense of self—all of it is stripped away, consumed by the Void. Their Gate doesn't rip apart in a psychic explosion. It doesn't overload in the usual ways you saw in your Awakening. No, it simply opens all the way. *Permanently*."

His voice was quiet, but there was something almost haunted in the way he spoke, like this wasn't just theory to him.

Like he had seen it before. Like he had dealt with it. Like he had dealt with it more than one too many times...

"Their bodies remain. Their Powers remain. But *they* are gone."

Thea felt a cold chill settle deep into her bones, a feeling of unease crawling up her spine like a shadowy tendril wrapping around her throat.

The Rune priest continued, his expression darkening.

"The Psyker that went into the Awakening never comes out. Instead, what steps forward is something wholly different—something Void-controlled. A *thing* fully in service of the Void, driven only by its desires, its hunger, its endless purpose. There is no humanity left in them. No emotions. No recognition of who they once were. Just a singular instinct."

He paused, his gaze heavy.

"To annihilate."

Thea swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry.

“Annihilate *who?*” she asked, barely above a whisper.

“Anyone. Everyone. Whatever and whoever they can before they’re stopped.”

Thea’s fingers twitched at her sides, hands clenching into tight fists as the weight of the information pressed down on her like a vice.

The Rune priest gave her a moment to absorb it before continuing.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you, Thea. Because this isn’t something that can be prevented. There’s no cure, no countermeasure, no way to stop it from happening. 0.13% of all Psykers simply will become Voidborn the moment they Awaken, and there is *nothing* that can be done about it.”

His words sent an icy spike of dread through her chest, but he wasn’t done.

“And that includes every single member of Alpha Squad.”

Thea’s breath hitched.

Her mind instantly rebelled against the thought, grasping for some kind of reassurance, some way to push the idea aside.

None of them had any interest in becoming Psykers as it was anyway!

“But—”

The Rune priest cut her off, shaking his head.

“Not *yet*. Maybe not even for a long time. Some Marines Awaken early, like you did. Others don’t hit their Awakening until later—sometimes not until T1, T2, even T3. But by the time they reach T4?” His gaze locked onto hers, unwavering. “Every single last one of them *will* have their Awakening. And that means that every single last one of them has a chance of not coming back.”

Her heart pounded in her ears, loud enough that she almost missed his next words.

“And when they *don’t* come back, Thea, it won’t be the kind of loss you can handle nor mourn.” His voice was quieter now, more deliberate. “It won’t be like losing a teammate in battle. Not like watching them die in some hopeless fight. Not like losing them to a Void eruption as a result of them losing the fight with the Awakening. No. It’ll be far, far worse...”

Thea’s breathing slowed, controlled, as she forced herself to listen.

“They won’t die, not truly. Their bodies will live. They’ll speak, they’ll move, they’ll fight. They’ll even sound like themselves. They’ll even remember every single interaction they had with you, using that emotional connection to get to you.” His expression darkened. “But they won’t *be* themselves. And they will turn on you.”

Thea clenched her jaw, her entire body stiffening.

“Be it your squadmates. Your friends. Your best friend. Your *lover*...”

He trailed off for a second, before gently shaking his head and continuing, “It doesn’t matter how much you cared for them or how much they cared for you. The second they become Voidborn, they are *gone*. And what remains is an enemy. Nothing but a thing that needs to be destroyed.”

A pit formed in her stomach, heavy and suffocating.

She tried to find some flaw in the logic, some way that this could be avoided, but the Rune priest was already cutting off every possible argument before she could even think of them, much less voice them.

“There is *no* way to see it coming. Marines don’t have a visible Inheritance before their Awakening. Not even Wielders. Your Inheritance coloured your Powers before it, yes, but it was never able to be fully confirmed until you Awakened. And it’s the same for everyone else. No one can tell ahead of time if they’ll fall into that 0.13%. It’s like an invisible genetic curse, lying dormant until the moment their Awakening strikes.”

He exhaled slowly, watching her carefully.

“And when it happens, Thea, the only thing left to do is zero them, before they zero you.”

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Thea felt her heartbeat thudding against her ribs like war drums, her mind racing with a thousand thoughts she couldn’t even process properly.

Any of them. Any one of them could end up like this.

Karania. Isabella. Lucas. Corvus. Desmond...

She thought back to Karania’s grin, the unshakable energy that never seemed to fade. She thought of Isabella’s brash confidence, Lucas’ steady presence, Corvus’ unyielding leadership. Even Desmond’s annoying face.

And then she imagined *them* standing across from her, their voices the same, their faces unchanged—but their eyes empty.

Hunting her. Coming for her. Trying to *end her, permanently*.

Her stomach twisted, nausea threatening to overtake her.

The Rune priest sighed again, softer this time, the intensity in his gaze dimming ever so slightly.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you,” he murmured. “Because now you know. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Thea’s mind churned, the weight of the Rune priest’s words settling in like lead in her gut.

But even as her thoughts tangled into knots, her training took over.

The ingrained reflexes, the drilled responses—they functioned as intended, even when her emotions threatened to paralyze her.

“I appreciate the candor, Rune priest. Thank you for indulging my curiosity on this. That should be all my questions answered for this session, and I’m very much looking forward to the next,” she said, her voice coming out smooth, controlled. Mechanical.

Her mind, however, was anything but.

What did this mean for her burgeoning friendships? *Did* it mean anything?

The Rune priest had made it clear—there was no way to predict it, no way to prevent it.

It was a cruel, cosmic dice roll.

If nothing could be done to change it, then was there even a point in worrying about it?

But if she didn’t—if she ignored it completely—then wouldn’t that be the same as handing an enemy a loaded gun? Wouldn’t she be giving them memories to use against her if they *did* turn Voidborn?

Was that a risk worth taking just for something as nebulous as the idea of a “friend”?

She had never had friends before. Had never needed them before.

Was it really worth giving an unfathomable enemy their most powerful weapon—herself—just for the fleeting comfort of companionship?

One part of her answered immediately, “No.”

Cold. Logical. Uncompromising.

But another part, quieter but having grown stronger with each passing week, whispered back just as firmly, “Yes. *Absolutely. Every time.*”

Logically speaking, 0.13% wasn’t much. Not when applied to just five people.

A 0.65% chance that *someone* in Alpha Squad would turn Voidborn. Less than one percent.

A fraction of a fraction. Statistically negligible.

But it wasn’t zero.

Would she trust a weapon that had a 0.65% chance to misfire at a critical moment?
No, of course not.

Would she wear armor that had a 0.65% chance to *fail* when she needed it most?
No, of course not.

It wasn't a perfect comparison—but the risk could be *entirely* avoided by simply keeping her distance.

Just don't get close. Just be squadmates. Nothing more.

Use them for their benefits, as they would use her for hers.

It was the most efficient, most logical course of action.

The course of action she would have taken without hesitation a month ago, in 100 out of 100 cases.

'Then why does it feel so fucking wrong to think like that now...?'

The Rune priest's voice cut through the whirlwind of thoughts in Thea's head, grounding her in the present. His tone carried a rare weight, a somberness hidden beneath his usual energy.

"Very well. Then I will make it official here and now: Recruit Thea McKay, I hereby accept you as my pupil henceforth. I will teach you in the ways of the Psykers, as I was taught and as I have learned over the past centuries. And I will do everything in my power to make you the best damned Psyker the UHF has ever seen."

The sudden shift in tone—the sheer *formality* of it—ripped her straight out of her autopilot.

'Wait. What?'

She blinked, barely processing what he had just said—only now slowly remembering that this whole session had been a sort-of-test to judge whether she was worthy of becoming his pupil or not—before he carried on as if he hadn't just altered the course of her life with a single sentence.

"We will end the session here for today, and I will message you once I have a timeframe for the next one," he continued, businesslike, as if this was just another routine conversation. "In the meantime, your focus should be on the fundamentals. Take those Skill classes as early as possible. The sooner you grasp the basics, the faster you'll unlock the full potential of your Inheritance."

He turned slightly, giving her a pointed look.

"And take part in a mission. Maybe two. Don't just rely on your Powers passively—use them. Experiment. Push their limits. Learn where they break and how they break. The more you understand now, the better prepared you'll be for what's coming."

Thea swallowed down the lingering haze in her mind and nodded, making mental notes of everything.

"Understood."

Her voice was steadier than she expected it to be.

Then, after a moment, she added, “And... thank you, Rune priest. For everything. I promise I won’t squander this incredible opportunity.”

He waved her off lazily, his usual grin making its way back onto his face.

“No need to thank me,” he chuckled. “You’re the one blasting my decade-long boredom out of orbit with an Emperor-damned orbital beam. If anything, I should be thanking *you* for the entertainment.”

Without another word, he turned and strode toward the exit.

Thea remained standing there, still trying to process everything.

But just as the doors hissed open before him, the Rune priest stopped.

He didn’t turn, didn’t look back. His voice, when he spoke, was quieter.

“Don’t worry about the Voidborn thing too much, young pupil.”

Not soft, not kind—just *tired*.

“Life isn’t about the mistakes you make or the outcomes they lead to. It’s about whether you enjoyed making them, regardless of if you knew they were wrong or not.”

A pause.

“Don’t be afraid of the consequences. That kind of fear will only drag you down and make life not worth living.” Another pause. Then, quieter, almost as if speaking to himself, he added, “Don’t become old and bitter before your time. Leave that job to people like me.”

And with that, he stepped through the doorway.

The heavy doors slid shut behind him, leaving Thea alone in the vast, empty training hall...

—

The door to Alpha Squad’s dormitory slid open with its characteristic **whoosh**, and Thea stepped inside, the familiar scent of the shared living space washing over her. The kitchen to her left was empty, the faint hum of the fridge the only sign of life in the otherwise still room.

Her eyes quickly landed on the only person present, who was sprawled out on the living room sofa, a datapad resting in their hand as they skimmed through something with idle focus.

At the sound of the door, Karania glanced up, her face brightening with an easy grin. “Hey there. Welcome back.”

A beat of silence followed.

Thea stood in place, unmoving, her expression unreadable.

She had spent more than an hour walking back to the dorms, letting her feet carry her through the Sovereign's corridors while her mind churned over everything she had learned.

The Rune priest's lessons, the Voidborn, the weight of knowledge she now carried—it had all looped endlessly in her thoughts, but she still hadn't come to any solid conclusions.

And now, seeing Karania like this—relaxed, smiling, welcoming her back with the kind of casual ease that made this dorm feel less like just a place to sleep and more like something else entirely—Thea felt the Rune priest's words echo in her mind again.

"Life isn't about the mistakes you make or the outcomes they lead to. It's about if you enjoyed making them, regardless of if you knew they were wrong or not..."

A tired grin tugged at her lips. Without a second thought, she moved.

Karania barely had time to register the abrupt shift before Thea all but launched herself forward.

"Whaa—Wait—!"

Crash.

The impact wasn't exactly graceful. Thea flopped onto the couch, her head landing squarely in Karania's lap, the rest of her body stretching out along the cushions with a satisfied sigh.

"I'm tired," she declared, her voice dramatically petulant. "I require Kara-time."

Karania blinked down at her, one brow raised in amused disbelief.

"...Excuse you?"

Thea buried her face deeper into her friend's lap, her tone muffled but unwavering. "Stroke my hair. I've got a headache."

Silence.

Then, with a long-suffering sigh that carried more warmth than exasperation, Karania shifted slightly, settling more comfortably into the couch. One hand returned to her datapad while the other drifted down, fingers threading through Thea's hair in slow, soothing motions.

"I take it the session with the Rune priest was informative?" she asked dryly.

"Mhm," Thea hummed, eyes already drifting shut.

"You'll tell us all about it later?"

Another hum of affirmation.

"Alright then."

Karania chuckled softly before falling into a companionable silence, her fingers moving in steady, rhythmic strokes.

Thea let out a slow breath, the weight of the day finally easing, the tension melting away with every pass of Karania's hand.

For now, she could let it all go, whether it was a mistake to do so or not...