

Volume 2 - Chapter 93 - Simple Questions

Document Cluster: Disciplinary Complaints & Command Review PFC840 – PFC865

Subject File: Rune priest Anrake "The Black Sigil" Vedun

Classification: F-9 — Strategic Personnel Sensitivity Selected excerpts.

Full archive accessible only via Strategic Command credential tier Black+.

COMPLAINT #4587-PFC865

Filed by: Commander [REDACTED], 9th Forward Operations Group

Subject: Refusal to retreat from contested position and subsequent submission of falsified authorization documentation — Brelan Sector Engagement

Rune priest Vedun, attached to the 9th FOG for the duration of the Brelan Sector engagement, was issued a direct retreat order at the eighteen-hour mark following intelligence indicating an incoming Stellar Republic reinforcement wave of overwhelming numerical superiority. Commander [REDACTED] issued the retreat order through proper channels, attached the supporting intelligence packet, and requested confirmation of receipt.

Confirmation was received within twenty-two seconds.

The reply consisted of a single attached document, formatted to all proper specifications, bearing what appeared at first inspection to be an authentic O-13 Council seal and the corresponding cryptographic signature chain.

The document read, in its entirety:

"He can do what he wants."

It was signed, sealed and was, by every visible verification metric, authentic.

Commander [REDACTED] requested verification of the signature chain through the appropriate command channels due to the strange nature of the order.

Verification was not immediately forthcoming.

The signature chain was found to be **Black-classification locked**, requiring explicit consent from the originating department before its provenance could be traced.

The process took approximately seven minutes of active back-and-forth between the 9th FOG command structure, Strategic Command, the relevant verification division, and—eventually—the Black-classification clearance authority itself.

The signature, upon successful verification, was confirmed as authentic.

It had been authored, sealed, and signed by Rune priest Anrake "The Black Sigil" Vedun himself.

Rune priest Vedun holds, per Accord 7-VII and its subsequent amendments, a personal Black-classification authorship credential equivalent in cryptographic weight to the O-13 Council's collective seal.

The signature was therefore not falsified. It was, technically, valid.

When contacted directly by Commander [REDACTED] upon discovery of this fact, the Rune priest reportedly replied:

*"Commander. I would **never** falsify an O-13 order. That would be **quite** illegal and deeply disrespectful to a body of governance I hold in the highest possible regard. The order you received was, instead, authored by me, personally, under credentials that I am entirely entitled to use. I do hope this clears up any confusion. The reinforcements arrived approximately two minutes ago, by the way. They are, in-fact, no longer a concern. You may proceed with the original operational plan at your earliest convenience."*

Upon further inquiry as to why the Rune priest had not simply replied with a standard refusal, he stated:

*"Because, my dear Commander, a standard refusal would have invited a second order, and then a third, and then a fourth, and I simply did not have interest in the bureaucracy. The signed document, by contrast, was self-terminating. It ended the conversation. I find such efficiencies **essential** when one is in the middle of such entertainment."*

The entertainment in question likely referred to the approaching enemy reinforcements.

Command Review Annotation: Complaint acknowledged.

Strategic Command notes that, while the use of personal Black-classification credentials to terminate a chain-of-command exchange is technically permitted under Accord 7-VII, the practice is **strongly** discouraged and has been quietly added to the standing list of behaviours upon which the Rune priest has been informally requested to refrain.

The Rune priest has, per longstanding pattern, acknowledged the request and has since ignored it at every opportunity.

Commander [REDACTED] has been privately briefed on the limits of his recourse.

Complaint filed. No further action.

[Shortened Excerpt from "UHF Marine Corps Classified Internal Archive — Subject File: Rune priest Anrake 'The Black Sigil' Vedun", PFC840 – PFC865]

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Thea nodded slowly at the Rune priest's answer, filing it away in the back of her head as something she'd want to come back to later, several times—whenever she got lost on what to focus on next. For now, however, it gave her the natural opening to ask about something she'd wanted to ask anyway.

"Speaking of Voidrunes, then—" she said, leaning forward slightly. "What does the training side of it actually look like, *exactly*? Are we going to have dedicated sessions where we work on carving the ones I'm supposed to have? Or am I supposed to be doing this on my own time or something else entirely...?"

The Rune priest waved a hand lazily, the void-black robes chiming with the motion.

"Your own time, mostly. Unless you *specifically* need my help with something, in which case you simply ask, and I will make time, of course. But the carving work itself is, fundamentally, *your* work. I cannot do it for you, and watching me do my own Voidrunes would not particularly help you with yours—not that I'm currently working on any."

He shifted slightly in the armchair.

"You can simply ask the Sovereign to reset you any time something goes wrong. As long as you do not actually push Psyfocus through the Voidrune before it is fully complete, there is no real risk of anything going catastrophically wrong. The mishaps you experienced today are about as bad as it's gonna get."

His eyes narrowed slightly at her.

The amusement was still there, but a sharper edge had crept in underneath it.

"You will, of course, *not* be pushing a lot of Psyfocus through an incomplete Voidrune, *will you*, Thea?"

Thea shook her head profusely. "No! Absolutely not! Of course, not! I have had quite enough Psychic mishaps for one lifetime already, thank you. And if you're saying it's a bad idea, I'll trust that it's a bad idea."

'Not to mention Kara would fucking kill me if I did anything reckless like that again...'

"Excellent." The grin returned. "I thought we were on the same page about that."

He stretched lightly in the armchair, the robes chiming once more with every movement—it was somewhat relaxing and melodic for Thea to listen to, at this point. At some stage, she realized then, it had turned from slightly annoying to downright meditative.

"You should *probably* inform the rest of Alpha Squad before you begin, however. So they know what to expect, and so nobody walks in on you mid-mishap and panics. *And* I would recommend doing the actual work in your squad's training room rather than your bunk or any of the common areas. The training rooms are specifically configured to make resets easier for the Sovereign to perform. She can reset you *anywhere* inside the DDS, of course, but the training rooms reduce the strain on her processing quite significantly."

A small smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"*Although*—if you really feel like it, by all means, go right ahead and do it elsewhere. It'll annoy her quite a lot, I'm sure."

He offered a small shrug for the second half, as if he hadn't just casually indicated that needlessly annoying the ship's AI was something he had no particular feelings about—or maybe even felt mischievous about it, based on the smirk...?

Thea hesitated slightly at all of that.

Karania's words from weeks ago surfaced in her head, unbidden—the quiet, careful warnings the Squad Medic had given her about how much she actually trusted the Sovereign as an entity.

Or, more accurately, how much she *didn't*. And how Thea should not either.

The Rune priest seemed to pick up on the hesitation almost immediately. His head tilted slightly, and he simply added:

"You can trust the Sovereign on this one, Thea. She will not interfere with *anything* involving your training. We have an agreement, the two of us, regarding that. A quite clear one, at that."

His tone carried such absolute confidence that Thea found it genuinely difficult to second-guess him.

Whatever the *agreement* actually was, he clearly considered it beyond ironclad.

'That's the second time he's mentioned that,' she noted quietly. *'An **agreement** between him and the Sovereign... Specifically about her not interfering with my training.'*

It was a strange phrasing for an officer of the UHF to use.

The Rune priest was clearly above the Sovereign in the chain of command structure aboard this ship—in a way that should have allowed him to simply issue *orders* rather than *negotiate agreements*. So why frame it that way?

Why use the word *agreement* at all?

'Maybe it's just a turn of phrase...?' She thought. *'Maybe the "agreement" is the literal order he's already given her, and he's just phrasing it strangely...?'*

Or maybe it was something else entirely. Something she didn't have the context to understand, which was, in all honesty, far more likely, given that she lacked a lot of context for all sorts of things within the UHF's Command structure.

Either way—she had remarkably little reason to doubt his word on it.

Not after the whole oath he'd *Sworn* earlier, and after watching him spend half an hour patiently letting her die over and over without complaint.

The man had earned at least this much benefit of the doubt.

"Got it," she said simply. "I'll set it up in the squad's training room. And I'll let the others know what to expect before I start."

"Excellent." The Rune priest nodded approvingly.

Thea took a small, steadying breath.

The next question on her mental list was one she'd been embarrassed about since the moment it had first occurred to her, but the embarrassment was, ultimately, not going to outweigh her *need* for an actual answer.

She fidgeted very slightly with the edge of her sleeve.

"So... have you—uh. Have you, by chance, watched any of my DMs? The recordings, I mean."

She knew the answer, of course.

The Sovereign had even read one of the Rune priest's comments about her first DM to her.

But she didn't know how else to start on the topic.

The Rune priest's face, meanwhile, broke into a wide, goofy grin almost the instant she finished the question.

"All of them," he said cheerfully. "Multiple times each, in some cases! They have been utterly fascinating and frequently *hilarious*—truly top-tier entertainment, my dear pupil. I have not had this much fun reviewing operational footage in decades! Thank you, sincerely, for that. I'm looking forward to the upcoming DMs, and the Challenge that you're a part of as well. That one is surely going to be peak entertainment."

Thea cringed visibly, recalling some of the more... colourful moments of those particular sessions. But she pushed through it regardless.

Embarrassment was a small price to pay if it got her *actual* answers.

"Right. Okay. So." She cleared her throat. "During my first DM, I figured out the... yelling thing. The whole shouting-the-name-of-the-Power thing... I even ended up using my nanobot swarm to amplify my own voice when I needed extra effect on a [Glimpse]. And it worked. It actually worked *really* well, honestly. But my question is... *why* did it work?"

She gestured loosely in the air, struggling to articulate the question cleanly.

"Surely the Void doesn't actually care about the *volume* a Power is used at, right? Like—Psychic Powers function in the vacuum of space, even. So it's *obviously* not based on sound waves. So why does *yelling* actually change anything?"

The Rune priest chuckled at that, the deep rumble making the void-black robes chime softly.

He leaned forward slightly in the armchair, his expression sliding back into the pleased, animated state he wore whenever he got to actually teach something.

"No," he said. "It does indeed not work via sound waves. You are entirely correct on that front. The Void could not possibly care less how *loud* you are, when you use your Powers."

He waved one hand in the air.

A small object shimmered into existence above his palm—a translucent, slowly rotating geometric shape Thea couldn't quite name, all sharp edges and curves that didn't quite fit together in three dimensions.

He held it casually, like a lecturer holding up a pen for emphasis.

"What you are actually doing, when you yell the name of a Power, is something rather more interesting. It is all to do with Intent and Will."

The shape rotated a fraction faster.

"Humans, like a great many other animals, channel an enormous amount of emotional throughput through the act of producing sound. This is not unique to Psykers, or even to soldiers. Even your most casual of civilians has the inherent, biologically-ingrained function within them to make sound when attempting something difficult. Martial artists are a great example of this, as well. They often pair specific shouts with specific strikes—they call it *kiai*, *kihap*, or some equivalent—some don't name it at all, but still practice it. The shout or sound produced creates a brief moment of *autohypnosis*. It tells the body: *This is the moment. Commit fully. Do not hold back.*"

He tilted his hand, and the shape pulsed briefly with a faint blue glow.

"Psykers can leverage exactly the same neurological shortcut. By yelling the name of the Power you are activating, you are essentially proving your commitment to it. To the Power. To the Voidrune. To the Void itself, if you want to be poetic about it. The shout forces your Intent and Will into a sharper, more concentrated state than you could comfortably reach through pure mental discipline alone."

He gestured loosely.

"It is, however, just that: A shortcut—a crutch, of sorts. A useful one in the early stages of a Psyker's career, when their Intent and Will are not yet refined enough to channel the Power cleanly without external scaffolding, no doubt. But the moment you learn to wield your Intent, your Will, and the Voidrune of your Power properly—the moment you can hold all three of those things in your mind simultaneously, in their proper proportions, without *needing* the shout to boost them for you—the benefit simply vanishes."

The translucent shape rotated again, then dissolved into nothing as he closed his hand.

"With *one* notable exception."

A second object appeared, this one a small, ornate-looking key with no obvious function.

He turned it slowly between his fingers.

"The *name* of your Power still carries very real weight. You will not need to yell it, certainly, and you definitely will not need to amplify it with a swarm of personal nanobots like a sort of superstar on a stage—" his eyebrow climbed slightly at that part, and Thea felt her face heat up rapidly, "—but the mere *act* of saying it aloud, while channeling the Voidrune with proper Intent and Will, can still genuinely improve the output of the Power. The Voidrune has a name. And not just a name, but a *Name*. The *Name* is part of what binds it to your Soul. Speaking it activates an additional layer of resonance that cannot be accessed otherwise."

The key glowed faintly, then dimmed.

"This is, however, very rarely done in practice. You will only really see it during the most intense Psyker-on-Psyker confrontations, where every available fraction of Psychic Energy is *required* to overpower the other side."

His tone shifted slightly.

A more serious note crept in underneath the casual lecture cadence.

"And *even then*, speaking your Voidrune's name aloud is a *significant risk*. Doing so reveals your *exact* Power to your opponent—which, depending on the situation, can be downright catastrophic. Many Voidrunes, when altered through sufficient Intent and Will, can produce outcomes that look identical from the outside, after all. A clever Psyker can completely hide what Voidrunes they are actually using to create the outcome behind those overlapping appearances. But the moment you name your Voidrune *aloud*, that camouflage is gone entirely. The enemy Psyker now knows *precisely* what your capability is. They know what you *can* do. They know what you *cannot* do. And they now also know how to counter you, if they're well-read—which you should always assume your enemy is."

He flipped the key once and caught it.

"For that reason, naming your Power aloud is reserved almost *exclusively* as a last resort. And it is generally only used when you can be reasonably certain the additional Psychic Energy released will be enough to end the engagement decisively. Anything less, and you have simply handed your opponent a road map of yourself for free."

The key dissolved.

Thea sat with the explanation for a moment, processing it.

The strangest part wasn't even the content of the answer itself—which was all very logical and reasonable. At least in the way that anything to do with the Void and Psykers was.

No, the strangest part was how *closely* it mirrored, almost word-for-word in places, what Karania had told her weeks ago when she'd quietly picked her best friend's brain on the same topic.

The structure of the explanation, the emphasis on Intent and Will as the actual operative mechanism, the bit about the shout being a crutch and even the example with the martial artists, specifically—all of it lined up with Kara's, *almost exactly*.

'Did he watch a recording of that conversation?' she wondered. 'Or does he and Kara just happen to break this concept down the exact same way...?'

She had no real way of knowing one or the other without specifically asking the Rune priest about it. And she was not going to do that. There was no useful reason to pull on that thread, and likely several reasons not to that she couldn't think of on the spot.

What mattered was that the explanation itself made sense.

The whole "yelling my Power's name like a Holo vid character" thing was, *mercifully*, just a crutch. It was something she could outgrow.

No, she *would* outgrow it.

The sooner she got the Voidrune, Intent, and Will combination locked down, the sooner she could stop being one of the more embarrassing footnotes of every DM recording she ever generated.

'Voidrune, Intent, Will... Voidrune, Intent, Will... Get them down as fast as possible.'

She filed it away as a quiet, internal vow.

'No more shouting shit. As soon as humanly—and safely, of course—as possible.'

"Got it on the Power name thing," Thea said, mostly to ground herself before she moved to the next thing on her list. "Different question—a bit less Psychic-Powers-y, this one."

That got the Rune priest's attention almost instantly.

His eyebrows climbed a fraction and he leaned forward in the armchair, the way he always seemed to when she pivoted to something he wasn't immediately expecting.

"Gear and equipment," she said. "Specifically for a new Psyker like me. Is there anything I should be on the lookout for to give myself an edge? Outside of Focus Boosters—I've already got those handled."

The Rune priest considered the question for a few moments, his fingers idly stroking his beardless jawline, before he ultimately shook his head.

"Not really. Not at your current stage, anyway." He tilted his hand back and forth slightly. "Any *real* Psyker-specific equipment tends to only come into play around Tier 3 and onward. Or once you have actually Delved properly and accumulated a more meaningful set of Voidrunes and Powers to build around. Before then, you simply do not have enough of a Power-footprint to actually warrant specialized gear. There is nothing yet to specialize toward."

He gestured loosely.

"Remember that Psyker duo from the Assessment you ran into? The auditory one in particular. He had an entire armour set specifically designed to enhance the operational range and clarity of his Powers through purely mundane mechanical means—amplifiers, resonators, directional shaping. That was him leveraging his particular Powerset, which he understood thoroughly, to extract additional output through technology. The technology itself was not Psy-sensitive, of course—that level of System Material only comes in at Tier 3 and up, as I mentioned. But *mundane* equipment can absolutely be used to improve a Psyker's capabilities, provided you understand your Powerset well enough to know what to amplify."

He pointed at her with one finger.

"So. My recommendation: Keep an open mind about where your Powerset takes you over the next year or so. Pay attention to what your Powers *actually* do, mechanically, and start thinking about ways that mundane equipment might extend their reach, their intensity, their precision—whatever the relevant axis happens to be."

He smiled slightly.

"In a way, your nanobot swarm is already one such thing. Even if, for now, it is primarily an enhancer for your crutch."

Thea flinched slightly at that.

"*It is*, however," the Rune priest continued, voice softening just a touch, "a *very* smart one. And not one you should feel as much shame about as you currently do, Thea. There is nothing shameful about surviving. There is nothing shameful about squeezing every last advantage out of what you have been given. Shame is exclusively reserved for those who do not do the same at every opportunity."

Thea blinked.

That was... not what she had expected to come out of his mouth. The seriousness of the delivery, the directness of it, the genuine almost-warmth underneath—

Before she could even fully digest what he'd just said, the Rune priest's expression flipped right back into mischief, that grin stretching wide.

"*That said*—it is still very, very funny to watch you belt out the Power name mid-DM. Especially when your Squad Medic got absolutely laid out by it? Pure hilarity. Top-tier stuff. And I *will* be enjoying every second of you continuing to do so until you grow out of it."

Thea felt her face heat up immediately.

"Right," she said, a little too quickly. "Okay... *Moving on*."

She powered through it before she could overthink it.

"What about games?"

That actually managed to surprise him. His eyebrow climbed.

"Games?"

"Yeah. I'm asking specifically about stuff from Terra. Is there anything you'd recommend for someone in my position? Something that might give me a leg up on different Paths, or that does a decent job simulating my Inheritance in some way? I've always learned best through games—it's just how my brain works."

The Rune priest's eyebrows climbed slightly higher.

"That is an unexpected angle to come at this from," he said.

"Although—" his head tilted, "—I suppose it tracks with what I have seen of you so far. You think in systems. Of course you would look for systems to practice in..."

He waved his hand, and a small holographic representation of a stylized game controller materialized above his palm for a brief moment before dissolving.

"Unfortunately, I regret to inform you that there is no real Psyker-specific game in the Terran catalogue. Or, indeed, in anyone's catalogue. None of the Major Factions have developed one. None of the smaller studios that ride the wake of the Major Factions have either."

Thea blinked. That genuinely surprised her.

"Why not?"

"The Psychic side of the war is, frankly, one of the more locked-down topics within the broader Galactic conflict. It is, paradoxically, also the most public—even Unintegrated civilians can read about Psykers without much interference from the Allbright System or its safeguards. Which is, funnily enough, *precisely* the problem."

He spread his hand.

"Releasing a detailed, well-simulated Psyker game—into a market that includes Unintegrated populations—would be functionally equivalent to releasing miniature time-bomb manuals. A game that taught its players which Powers and Inheritance combinations are most catastrophically destructive, in a context not subject to close observation by any Faction, is an extremely effective way of accidentally producing a great many Void Rifts and many, *many* unsupervised Psyker incidents."

He shook his head.

"So Terra has never published one. Nobody else has either. The closest thing in the entire industry is probably Krillson's Path—simply because of how staggeringly in-depth and all-encompassing it is. While it is not Psyker-specific, the abstraction layer it operates at is broad enough that the underlying lessons translate well to almost any complex magic system, including ours."

Thea nodded slowly. That confirmed what she'd already suspected.

She'd played through most of Terra's catalogue at this point, and *Krillson's Path* had consistently been the closest thing she'd found to genuinely useful preparation for navigating the Allbright System's deeper layers.

"Yeah," she said. "Figured as much. Was kind of hoping I'd missed something, but *KP's* been my best bet so far too."

"It would be."

She nodded once more, then took a breath and pulled up the [Sensory Overdrive] Major Alterations menu with a mental gesture.

The five options materialized in front of her, hovering between them:

Focus — Burst — Toggle — Charge — Re-Roll (0/3)

She turned it so the Rune priest could read it as well.

"Last one for this half, I think. Your opinion on these."

She paused, then added quickly—

"I've already got a favourite, by the way. I'm not just looking for someone to tell me what to pick. I just want to know what you'd go for in my position. And whether the Re-Roll is ever actually worth it."

The Rune priest's face betrayed nothing as he read through the list.

His eyes moved methodically, lingering on each option for roughly the same amount of time, before he leaned back into the armchair and gave a small, expressive hand-wobble with one hand. The classic *so-so* gesture.

"Re-Rolls can be good. *Sometimes*." He nodded thoughtfully. "But in approximately ninety-five percent of all cases, it is better to simply take what the System has decided is good. The Allbright System, Thea, is very, very smart. People underestimate exactly how truly *unfathomably smart* it is far more often than they should."

He pointed lightly at the Re-Roll option as it floated in front of them.

"The exception is when you already have a very specific Build or combo in mind, and none of the original four Alterations on offer actually fit that plan. In which case, Re-Rolling can be a worthwhile gamble—you are effectively mulliganing for an option that better matches your trajectory. But this particular selection of yours is genuinely good. You have several real choices here. Re-Roll would be wasted."

He gestured at the leftmost option.

"Focus, for instance, could be remarkably useful for you. Specifically for your Voidrune carving work."

Thea's eyes went wide.

She hadn't even thought of that yet.

But the moment he said it, it clicked—*of course*.

More directed Perception would make the internal mapping of a Voidrune *significantly* easier.

The fine-grained sensory work she'd been doing during the session today would be far less brutal with that kind of amplification on tap.

Before she could lose herself in that train of thought, the Rune priest cut back in.

"It would, however, come at the cost of sacrificing a *significant* portion of your combat potential. Which is *not* what you should be optimizing for at this stage."

He met her eyes directly.

"You are, fundamentally, a Marine first and a Psyker second. That is the correct order for a Wielder—especially one who has not even reached Tier 1 yet. Your Alterations and Abilities should prioritize making you a better *Marine*, and only tangentially consider Psyker-side improvements when the combat-side benefit is comparable or otherwise compelling."

He gestured to the next option over.

"Burst is excellent. *Genuinely* excellent. I have seen it deployed before, and the effect is extremely brutal. But it is not for you. Not at your current trajectory, anyway. Burst rewards close-range combat styles—up-close, decisive engagements where the additional surge of Perception is leveraged inside knife-fighting distance, and the subsequent Burst-effect is used to finish the fight. Unless you *intend* to start specializing in close-quarters combat in the near future?"

His eyebrow rose slightly.

Thea considered it for half a second, then shook her head.

"No," she said. "Isabella's already on that side of the squad. I don't need to step on her toes."

"*Excellent* self-assessment and delegation. Which leaves Charge and Toggle." He gestured to both at once. "These two ultimately do roughly the same thing from a high-level perspective—they provide cost reductions on activation. But Toggle has the higher ceiling between them. *Significantly* higher, if used cleverly."

His eyes settled on hers.

"And I have full confidence that you, Thea, will use it cleverly. If there is one thing I have learned about you across these sessions, it is that you are remarkably quick on the uptake. Which has been a genuine pleasure to teach toward."

Thea felt her stomach do an odd little flip at the open compliment.

She wasn't quite sure where to look for a second.

But she gladly accepted it.

She'd always quietly prided herself on her ability to make things work, after all. Even if hearing it said out loud, by someone as influential and powerful like the Rune priest himself, was more than just a *slightly* disorienting experience.

"Toggle it is, then," she said, locking in the choice. "It's what I had ended up with as well. I'm glad to see that I wasn't about to make any mistakes there. Thank you."

"Any time." He waved his hand lazily through the air.

Thea took a deep breath and braced herself mentally for the next one.

This was the question she was genuinely uneasy to hear the answer to, mostly because she had no idea what to expect—but she also knew she *had* to ask it, which is why she had kept it for last.

"*Alright...*" she said quietly.

She met his eyes. He looked back at her with his full attention, and she could tell he'd already picked up on the shift.

He knew this one was going to be a serious one.

"I *need* to know what's going on with this whole cold thing around me. Several times now—especially when I get upset—I end up creating some kind of... cold field, I guess, around myself. And it's hurting people. People I care about. Or just other Marines who happen to be nearby. Either of those is unacceptable to me."

Her jaw tightened slightly. "How do I *control* this? What even *is* it?"

The Rune priest's eyes lit up at the question.

He immediately scooted forward in his armchair, both pointer fingers aimed directly at her.

"*Yes!* Now *that*, my most favourite of pupils, is getting to the heart of the actually interesting questions!" His grin widened. "And it also happens to overlap rather neatly with one of *my* questions for you..."