

Volume 2 - Chapter 95 - ... Complex Answers

KORREV: Doctor, I'd like to talk about HOLLOW. The Serum, specifically.

VOTHEL: [Long pause.] Ask me what you want and I'll tell you what I can. Hundreds of years too early for the NDA to pass, son, but they're not gonna come stick a needle in an old man... So what do I really have to lose, eh?

KORREV: Where did the program actually start?

VOTHEL: Unofficially, about thirty years before the funding line opened, when a Captain Ilane Maro filed a Battlefield request for "any chemical, biological, electromagnetic, surgical, or otherwise plausible intervention that could allow her Marines to fight a Pyrokinetic without, simultaneously, all of them being on fire." She spent thirty years writing follow-ups. The last one was just four words. "*Hurry the fuck up.*" By the time we got the funding, we were two generations of dead Marines behind where we should have been. She died to a Psyker—because of course she did. Never got a medal for any of it.

KORREV: When did the breakthrough come?

VOTHEL: PFC 291. We'd been working with a captured Null for about eight months.

KORREV: A captured Null? That's not in the public record.

VOTHEL: I know it's not. I'm telling you anyway. The kid was nine when they brought him in. Died at fourteen. Best care you've ever heard of. He still just died.

KORREV: How did the first field deployment go?

VOTHEL: Badly. PFC 304. Dose was wrong, we *knew* it was wrong, but the unit was in contact with a Telekinetic Ace. Three out of seven Marines died on the spot. The other four killed the Telekinetic and died hours later. It was logged as a massive success—because, frankly, it was. They *killed* a Psychic Ace, son. The math fucking *worked*... I was the dosing recommendation during that mission. I made the calls. Couldn't sleep for two months, then went back to work, because the alternative was Marines having nothing the next time a Telekinetic cracked open a transport.

KORREV: Doctor, the Serum is, by most reasonable measures, the most important piece of anti-Psyker work humanity has ever produced. And it came out of the UHF Defence Bioscience Division, not Terra. That's always been one of the quietly impressive things about HOLLOW.

VOTHEL: [Long silence.] ...Mmm. In a way, son, it *was* Terra.

KORREV: I don't follow.

VOTHEL: We did the synthesis. We did the dosing. We took the first heat when Marines started dying. But—and this is the part you won't find written down anywhere—almost every major breakthrough on HOLLOW followed about six to eighteen months after an

"unexpected delivery" of foundational research materials from a source the manifests refused to name. Reagents we couldn't have synthesised ourselves. Theoretical frameworks that weren't in any UHF literature. Tissue stabilisation protocols that predated our own science by two or three decades. The project was Black-locked the entire time. Terra should not have had the faintest idea what we were doing. Every time we hit a wall, a package showed up on the loading dock with exactly what we needed.

KORREV: And you took them.

VOTHEL: What were we going to do? Refuse? Send them back? To whom? Marines were *dying*, son. We stopped asking questions about the loading dock somewhere around year four.

KORREV: There's been speculation that the Serum involves more than synthesised compounds. That the manufacturing chain contains material—

VOTHEL: It does, yes. The Serum contains, very literally, parts of a Null. Tissue cultures, propagated from the original samples and from every Null brought into Authority custody since. We keep them alive. We have to. The active compound doesn't synthesise from scratch—we tried.

KORREV: And the rest?

VOTHEL: [Very long pause.] What you are really asking, son, is whether the active compound contains ██████████ ██████████.

KORREV: I am.

VOTHEL: [Pause. Then a nod.] It contains ██████████ ██████████. We do not use that terminology anywhere in the official manufacturing chain. There are very specific reasons. Some legal. Some theological. Some I am not going to discuss with a military historian on tape. But yes. The reason a Null is what they are is downstream of how their ██████████ functions, and the Serum works by giving the recipient a temporary, very partial, very crude reflection of that same ██████████. You cannot get it from synthesis. You can only get it from a ██████████ that once was part of a Null.

KORREV: Are you telling me—

VOTHEL: *Stop*. Don't finish that question, son. The redactions in the published transcript will tell you exactly where the line is.

KORREV: Last question then, Doctor. Was it worth it?

VOTHEL: [Very long pause.] The Serum has saved more Marine lives than probably any other single piece of equipment in UHF history. It has also, between the field-trial casualties, the long-term effects on long-service Marines, and the rest of what we've just discussed, almost certainly cost more lives than any other single piece of equipment in UHF history. Both of those things are true. I gave up trying to weigh them against each other somewhere around PFC 340, when I realised I was just going to keep coming up with whichever answer let me sleep that particular week...

[Shortened Excerpt from "Edge of the Possible: The Twenty Programs That Made the Modern Marine, Vol. II — The Null Serum" — Senior Correspondent Marin Korrev, UHF Sundered Press, PFC 386. Original interview transcript declassified PFC 461 under the Public Knowledge Initiative of PFC 455. Several portions remain redacted under Archive Exemption 14.7.]

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The Rune priest's grin lingered for a moment longer, his eyes still bright with the wild, eager glee that, on anyone else, would have looked *entirely* out of place in the middle of a serious lesson. On him, though, it felt downright natural to Thea.

Slowly, however, it began to ebb away over the next few seconds.

It was a gradual, deliberate easing-down—the corners of his mouth lowering in stages, the teeth disappearing back behind his lips, the wild brightness in his eyes settling into something more contained, but no less sharp.

By the time he was done, his expression had returned to the calm, considered seriousness that Thea was starting to recognise as his actual baseline, even if he didn't seem to occupy it for particularly long stretches of time.

He clasped his hands together in his lap, leaned forward slightly, and met her eyes.

"Alas, my dear pupil..." he began, his voice lower now, more measured in tenor, "...we will not actually be able to do any *real* experimentation on any of this until you have finished your Voidrune."

Thea straightened slightly.

"Which means—and I want to be *very* clear about this, Thea—that completing your Voidrune is now to be your *single highest priority*. Above further DMs. Above further Skill Trainings. Above practically anything else that might come across your desk in the coming weeks. Are we clear on this?"

She nodded immediately.

"Yeah," she said, then immediately corrected herself. "Yes. We're clear, Rune priest. Honestly... I'd already been planning to push on it as my main focus anyway, so... that fits quite well."

The Rune priest's mouth twitched at the correction, but he simply gave her a small, satisfied nod and continued.

"Very good indeed. *But*—" he raised a single finger, "—and I want to be *equally clear* on this part—you are *not* to rush it."

Thea blinked at him. "*Hmm?*"

His finger remained raised, gently but firmly pointed at her.

"You are to take your time. You are to chart and re-chart the Voidrune through *several* different methods of your own devising, until you have an *actual* feel for which approach works best for *you, personally*. You are to experiment, *deliberately*, with the process itself before you settle on a single approach. *And—*" his expression sharpened, "*—you are to attempt the full-charting method first. Properly.* For at least a little while, before you fall back on whatever shortcut your instincts inevitably try to push you toward."

Thea opened her mouth to protest that she hadn't been planning on using any shortcuts—then immediately closed it again, because she absolutely would use shortcuts if she found them.

'Yeah... There's no shot that I wouldn't gravitate towards faster experience rates...'

He caught it on her face, and his expression cracked into something just shy of a smirk.

"I have said it before, Thea, and I will say it again, because it is one of the points I am *never* going to compromise on: It is absolutely *imperative* that any Psyker—Wielder or otherwise—understands how to *safely* chart new Voidrunes from the ground up. The full process. Not the abbreviated, instinctual version, no matter *how* naturally it might come to you."

He let his finger drop and gestured loosely into the room around them.

"You will not always have a DDS to soften the blow of a mishap. Out there, in the field, if you misalign a Voidrune carving while constructing a new Power—or, worse, while trying to *repair* a damaged one mid-engagement—you could easily injure yourself in ways that will *not* simply buff out on a respawn. You could rupture parts of your own Gate. You could, in truly unfortunate circumstances, do *considerably worse* than that. So when I say you are to learn the full method—*I mean it*. You will thank me for it later."

Thea nodded, slower this time, her mind working through the implications of what could possibly be "considerably worse" than rupturing your own Gate, but coming up empty.

"That said—" his tone eased slightly, "*—I do not, in any way, expect this part to take you very long. You demonstrated more than enough natural feel for the carving process earlier that I am not concerned about your ability to internalise the safe method quickly in the least. And once you have a firm grasp on it—once you are confident that you understand the principles well enough to recognise when you are doing something risky—you may immediately fall back on whichever charting and carving approach works fastest and best for you in the moment. I do not need you to fight with both hands tied behind your back for the rest of your career, my dear pupil. All I need from you is to know what your hands are doing in the first place, before I untie them.*"

Thea nodded again, more confident this time.

"That's very fair," she said. "I can do that."

"Excellent." He clapped his hands together once, the sharp sound cutting briefly through the quiet of the chamber, then settled back into his armchair.

"Now—back to the matter of your strange, recursive [Glimpse]. Without your Voidrune fully completed, we cannot, in any meaningful sense, experiment on the Power itself. You understand why, I assume?"

Thea hesitated, then shook her head slightly.

She had ideas, of course. But nothing concrete beyond that she couldn't actually really use the Power right now, much less control it effectively.

"Not... entirely."

He nodded, as if he'd been half-expecting that.

"The reason is this." He laced his fingers together in front of his chest. "Your [Glimpse], as it currently exists within you, is operating on what I would describe as approximately eighty percent instinct, fifteen percent active shaping, and five percent dumb luck. The actual conscious Intent-and-Will mechanisms that a fully-trained Psyker uses to direct a Power are, in your specific case, being almost entirely substituted on the back end by the instinctive portion of you. That part of your mind—the part that you do not consciously control, that nonetheless '*knows*' how to use the Power, because the Power is, fundamentally, baked into you—is doing the work that a conscious mind *should* otherwise be doing."

He waved a hand in a small circle.

"Which is fine, don't get me wrong. That is, in fact, *exactly* how a Wielder is supposed to work, in the early stages. It is one of the great advantages of being a Wielder in the first place. You do not have to understand a Power in order to use it competently."

He paused briefly, then added, with a touch more weight—

"*But* you cannot *meaningfully* experiment with a Power that you do not consciously understand. And right now, my dear pupil... you do not consciously *understand* [Glimpse]. You merely have an *instinct* for it. That is, emphatically, *not* the same thing fundamentally."

Thea sat with that information for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"So until I finish the Voidrune, and... get a conscious handle on what the Power is *actually* meant to be doing—"

"—we have nothing meaningful to manipulate," he finished for her. "Yes. Exactly. We *could* poke at it, in the meantime, and watch you make minor changes to *your usage* of it, but we would be doing so blind. We would not know *what* we were actually adjusting, or by how much. And in Psyker work, blind experimentation is, on a sufficient enough scale, *very* quickly extremely fatal."

He smiled drily—almost apologetic—at her for a brief moment, before it was gone again in an instant.

"*All of that said*—I do want to be entirely clear about one thing." He raised his finger again, just briefly. "It is *very likely* that what you have done with your [Glimpse] is simply find a new way to use the Power. One that no other Veritas Precog before you has managed to stumble into. Or, at the very least, no Veritas Precog who lived long enough to actually report it afterwards, that is."

Thea blinked at him.

She had not been expecting that. Hadn't even thought that it might even be a possibility.

*'A new way to use a Power...? Surely they're all entirely mapped by now. It's been **thousands** of years since Psykers started showing up. And at least 900+ years of System-enhanced Psykers...'*

The Rune priest caught the surprise on her face and chuckled, waving it off with a lazy flick of his hand.

"Ohhh, you really shouldn't be so surprised by that. The fact of the matter is that people can only meaningfully experiment with things that they already understand—can they not? You cannot push the limits of something whose limits you have not yet mapped. And in Psyker work, specifically, the cost of experimenting incorrectly is not just a wasted afternoon, or a failed prototype, or a research paper that gets quietly rescinded a few years later. The cost, very often, is rupturing your very *Soul*."

His tone was light, but the content of it had gone properly grim.

The words did make sense to Thea, however.

When the risk of a failed experiment wasn't just wasted time, but very literal Soul-death... Yeah. That *would* dampen the experimental spirit quite a bit.

"As such, the truly senior Psykers among us—the Rune priests, the *Pale Watchers* of the universe, the ones who have spent centuries learning what they can and cannot do safely—are, ironically, also the most *cautious*. We do not simply throw things at the wall and see what sticks, as they say. We do not run wild experiments on our own Powers, *just* to see what happens. Instead, we chart. We model. We hypothesise, we cross-reference, we verify. We discuss between each other and peer-review all experiments several times, before ever attempting them. And then, *sometimes*, after all of that, we make a very small, very deliberate change. And we celebrate when it produces a result that we did not entirely anticipate, yet leaves us alive."

He spread his hands.

"Which, ultimately, means that most of the truly novel applications of Powers, in the recorded history of Psychic Powers, do not actually come from the senior Psykers at all. They come from newly-minted Wielders and Psykers, who do not yet have the framework to know what their Powers are '*supposed*' to do, and whose own Intent and Will, working entirely behind the scenes, is quietly morphing their Powers as much as it possibly can be morphed—into whatever shape will best satisfy the thing the user actually *wants* to achieve. Whether the Power can actually do that, or not."

His grin returned in an almost wry way.

"In other words—the people doing *the most* experimentation are the ones who do not realise they are experimenting *at all*. Their instincts are doing far more, behind the curtain, than they themselves are aware of. And because their instincts simply do not *know* any better, they do not hesitate to attempt things that a trained Rune priest would never even *consider* trying on themselves. The combination of that ignorance, that instinct, and that need to have their Power do what they want it to do produces, more or less reliably, the single largest source of new information on the practical edges of Psychic Powers that any Psykers have access to."

He gestured vaguely at her.

"And, my dear pupil, in case it is not yet entirely clear from my words—you are, almost certainly, currently producing *one* of those very important data points."

Thea sat with those words for a while.

It was, she had to admit, a much better-feeling explanation than the one she had been spiralling toward in her own head only a few minutes earlier.

'Maybe it's not something extremely strange, then. Not something Æht's existence has necessarily caused or changed, but just a different way to use [Glimpse] altogether...'

The thought was, somehow, both reassuring and faintly disappointing at once, in ways Thea couldn't really put into words.

The Rune priest, watching the slow shift in her expression, chuckled softly to himself.

"[Glimpse], in particular," he continued, "is one of the most popular dip-Powers among Veritas Inheritance Psykers. It is widely taught, widely used, widely written about. And yet—precisely *because* it is widely understood, in the abstract, as a 'simple' Short-Term Precognition Power—almost nobody who picks it up ever truly bothers to take it to its actual limits. Most Psykers learn the standard usage, integrate it into their kits, and never push further than that. Because they do not *need* to. The standard usage is already extremely useful and sufficiently powerful for their use cases."

He shrugged, the small flick of his shoulders dislodging a faint melodic chime from his robes.

"Which leaves the door wide open for someone like *you*, Thea. Someone whose Intent and Will, working entirely on instinct, has apparently morphed the underlying Voidrune of [Glimpse] into something capable of producing recursive, paradox-level precognition loops..."

He grinned at her, and his teeth caught the overhead light of the hall in a way that made Thea's earlier unease prick faintly at the edges of her chest again.

"And that is *exactly* why I am so excited about all of this. Because once the methodology of your usage of the Power is properly understood, it can be sent out to all the other Veritas Psykers within the UHF—and, given your level of success in fighting the Stellar Republic's

Duplicators with it already? We might very well have a bit of a game-changer on our hands here, my dear pupil."

Thea's eyes widened at that.

'If a fully-fledged Psyker, with an actual Psyfocus pool, could do the same type of [Glimpse]s I can... or even better, a damn Battlefield Ace...?!'

She left the rest of the thought unspoken inside her own head. She didn't need to voice it all out to realise that the Rune priest was absolutely right on this one.

This really was going to be a game-changer for the UHF.

The Rune priest abruptly straightened in his armchair, the cheerful intensity of a moment ago seeming to evaporate off him in a single beat, replaced by something faintly apologetic in nature.

He let out a slow, rueful sigh, and inclined his head ever so slightly toward her.

"I do apologise for getting somewhat carried away just now. I am also more than aware that, despite the lengthy discussions we've had so far, I have not actually provided you with any *real* answers regarding anything you might actually be able to use—"

Thea immediately waved him off.

"No, no, it's completely fi—"

"—which is why," he continued smoothly, simply overrunning her words as though she hadn't spoken at all, "I believe it is high time I did some of that, instead."

He clapped his hands together once, the sharp sound cutting through the chamber.

"So. Let us talk about your cold-and-ice situation."

Thea locked in instantly.

The lingering, strange feelings from the recursive-[Glimpse] conversation, the open-ended unease of being told her Power was working in ways no one understood—all of it simply evaporated under the promise of getting some answers about what she'd actually come here to ask about in the first place.

She straightened in her chair, leaned forward slightly, and met his eyes with full attention.

The Rune priest gave her a small, satisfied nod at the visible shift in her focus, then settled himself back in his armchair, cupping his beardless chin between his thumb and forefinger as he gathered his thoughts.

"First and foremost—I am now *entirely certain* that there is, in fact, something very strange going on with you, in this particular regard, Thea."

Thea's stomach dropped slightly, but she kept her face neutral.

"At first, neither I nor anyone else within the UHF who has been keeping an eye on your file was particularly concerned about the matter. Mishaps that manifest in eruptions of cold, ice, or similar low-temperature effects are not, in and of themselves, particularly rare or unlikely to occur. Plenty of Psykers and Wielders have such things show up in their files, here and there. So when the first incidents happened during your Assessment, and then another shortly after it ended, that on its own was not really enough to raise an eyebrow over."

He tilted his head slightly.

"But then it *kept* happening. And it kept happening *the same way*. Which, for mishaps in particular... is *extremely* uncommon."

He let that sit for a beat.

"You see, mishaps are, by their very nature, random. They are essentially the Void venting Energy through whichever crack in your control happens to be most available at that particular moment. They *do* tend, in most Psykers, to be flavoured by the individual, of course. My own mishaps, for example, tend to gravitate toward sensory distortions—colours shifting around me, sounds going strange, occasionally the world taking on textures that are not quite right. That is the personal flavour of my Soul's interaction with the Void, manifesting in the cracks. *But—*" he raised a finger, "*—that does not, in any meaningful sense, preclude me from occasionally experiencing a more explosive mishap instead. Nor does it mean that the sensory distortion I do produce is always the same kind, in the same direction, with the same intensity. Mishaps vary considerably; that is their very nature.*"

He let his hand drop and met her eyes again.

"And yet, in your particular case, Thea, every single mishap that has been recorded on your file—*every single one of them*—has been of nearly the exact same type and manifestation. Abrupt, localised cold. Variations in degree, certainly. But never in kind, character or flavour."

His expression sharpened slightly.

"Which, now that we have substantially more data points than just the two or three from the Assessment would, statistically speaking, have to be one of two things."

He held up a single finger.

"Either it is a truly *astronomically unlikely* coincidence. The same roll of the dice, hit *exactly*, more than half a dozen times in a row, on a roll that would individually only land on that particular result one time in a thousand..."

He raised a second finger.

"Or... it is not a coincidence at all. And what we are actually looking at is a hitherto-unknown mechanic, manifesting consistently in you, that we simply do not yet have a framework for."

He let the two fingers stand for a moment, then slowly lowered his hand.

"And every statistician in the universe, Thea, would be willing to bet their very *Souls* on that latter option being the correct one. Without exception."

Thea swallowed.

She'd known, intellectually, that the pattern was odd. She had not, until this exact moment, realized just how thoroughly the rest of the UHF Brass must already be aware of *how odd* it actually was.

The Runepriest, watching her process that, continued.

"And this conclusion, ultimately, was confirmed during your first DM."

His voice was quieter and more measured now—the theatrical flourishes he'd held so far had drained almost entirely out of him.

Thea, meanwhile, nodded slowly, her own voice barely above a murmur as the realisation surfaced.

"When I cooled myself down..."

The Runepriest nodded as well, but his face was dead serious now—and somehow, that single shift unsettled Thea more than anything else he'd said in the entire session so far.

"When you cooled yourself down. Correct."

There was a brief moment of pregnant silence between them, before he continued.

"*That*, my dear pupil, should *not* be possible. Not under any reading of your file that I am able to construct."

He gestured vaguely toward her.

"You are a Veritas Short-Term Precognition Wielder. [Glimpse] is your Power. The entirety of your registered Psychic toolkit has precisely *nothing* to do with temperature. *Nothing*. Cold is not within the scope of what you should be capable of producing. Not as a Power. Not as a side-effect. Exclusively as a mishap, and only then completely at random and with great variance. Not as anything else."

He tapped a single finger on the armrest of his chair.

"*And yet*, based on the biotelemetry that the governing AIs recorded from you during that specific DM—and which, I should note, I have personally reviewed four times until now, just to make absolutely sure—you did, in fact, *somehow* cool yourself down. Deliberately and successfully. With measurable, externally-verified effect on your body's actual core temperature. It was not merely a hallucination produced by your severely impaired mental state at the time, however much that would, frankly, have been the easier conclusion for me to reach. It was a real, physical, actual thing that you did."

He held her eyes.

"Which, once again, *should not have been possible*."

The weight in Thea's chest tightened again.

"Even granting, for the sake of argument, that every single mishap on your file *did* somehow happen to hit that one-in-a-thousand roll, repeatedly, against all reasonable odds—" he raised his hand briefly, then let it fall, "—even granting *that*... This particular instance would still entirely nullify the theory. Because you should not, *under any circumstances*, be capable of controlling a mishap to that degree. Mishaps are, by definition, uncontrolled. The very moment you direct one with conscious intent... it is no longer a mishap."

He paused.

His expression did not change, but the weight behind his eyes did.

"Which, ultimately, leaves only one answer that I am able to think of. And that answer, in turn, leads me to having to ask you a very serious question, that I have to demand you answer honestly and to the fullest extent of your knowledge."

He rose slowly and deliberately from the armchair.

The void-black fabric of his robes shifted and resettled around him as he stood, the fabric's chimes ringing only faintly—as though even they understood the weight of the moment and had instinctively gone quieter.

He began to walk toward her.

Thea's stomach dropped even further as she felt his Presence shift with every step—gradual at first, then exponentially, as the distance between them closed.

The air around her seemed to grow heavier, denser, harder to breathe through, the weight of his Soul pressing down against her own in increasing levels with every step he took.

By the time he reached her chair, her grip on the armrests had tightened to the point that her knuckles had gone fully white, and she could no longer reliably tell which of the tremors in her chest were her own anxiety, and which were simply the brute fact of being *this close* to him.

He stopped just in front of her and looked down.

Their eyes met, and his bored straight into hers—calm, ice-cold—and Thea found herself unable to look away from them, no matter how badly she wanted to.

"Have you somehow Delved—" his voice low, level, and entirely without warmth, "—and obtained another Path, Thea? ...Despite my *explicit* orders?"

His face, throughout, was a perfect mask.

Not so much as a single muscle moved that Thea could catch.

Thea tried to speak.

Her mouth was already open—she'd opened it the moment he'd asked the question, because the answer was *no*, and she wanted to get the answer out as fast as humanly possible—but nothing actually came out for a long, agonising stretch of seconds.

The Rune priest's Presence pressed down on her like a physical weight, like somebody had stacked something the size of a small starship onto her shoulders and asked her to keep her posture straight underneath it.

Her chest felt like it was being slowly crushed inward.

She forced the air through her throat anyway.

"N—No."

The single syllable came out hoarse and rough, barely above a whisper.

She tried again, gathering what little spare attention she could behind the next words, forcing her Resolve against his Presence.

"No, I—I haven't Delved. I don't even know what that really *is* yet. You—haven't explained it to me yet."

The Rune priest said nothing. His eyes did not leave hers.

Thea swallowed hard, forced another breath, and pushed on.

"And the—the cold thing, in the DM, when I cooled myself down—I don't actually remember doing that. At all. The only reason I even *know* it happened is because I watched it in the recording afterwards, with Karania. I don't know *how* I did it. I can't repeat it. I don't even know *what I was doing* at the time well enough to try to repeat it. I just—" she struggled for the word, "—I just *did* it. *Somehow*."

The Rune priest remained silent and his Presence continued to bear down on her.

He did not move, nor blink.

Thea found herself unable to look away from his eyes—not because she wanted to keep looking at them, but because looking away felt like it would, somehow, confirm something she had not, in fact, done. So she held, and she met his gaze, tried to keep her breathing steady, and she tried not to flinch as the weight of his Soul ground further down against her own.

The silence between them stretched.

A second.

Then several more, what felt, to Thea, like an absolute eternity.

Sweat began to bead at her hairline.

Her pulse hammered against the inside of her temples in a low, insistent drumbeat that she could not, no matter how hard she tried, slow down.

The edges of her vision began to darken—in slow, encroaching increments, like a curtain being drawn inward from the sides of her sight. The room narrowed. The chamber walls greyed out. The only thing left in clear focus, after a few more seconds of this, was the Rune priest's face directly in front of her, and the cold, level eyes that had her pinned in place.

She bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep herself from passing out, and held.

And held, as blood started pooling in her mouth.

And held, as the last of her vision started to swim...

The pressure abruptly eased, as the Rune priest stepped back from her.

Thea sucked in a single, ragged, shuddering breath, the tunneling on her vision retreating outward almost immediately. Her chest spasmed once, then twice, before her breathing finally began catching up to where it should have been all along.

The Rune priest, for his part, was no longer looking at her at all.

He had turned partially away, one hand coming up to rub absently at his beardless chin as he paced a slow half-circle in front of her chair.

His expression had gone thoughtful again, the cold mask of a moment ago receding back into the considered, slightly distant intensity from before.

He spoke as much to himself as to her.

"Very well... Then we do have an even bigger mystery on our hands than I had originally anticipated..."

He paced another small arc, the chimes in his robes ringing very softly with the motion.

"You should not be capable of Delving at all yet. Which is, ultimately, why I did not truly believe the answer *would be* that you had. The mechanics simply do not allow for it at your current stage of development—not without the proper preparation, not without the proper guidance, and most assuredly not without me knowing about it after the fact. If you had managed it on your own, *somehow*, I would almost assuredly have felt it on you the very moment you walked into this chamber..."

His hand dropped from his chin.

"But that, in turn, leaves me without *any* actual explanation at all. Which... Feels even more problematic than you simply having found a way to Delve without the Psychic Attribute."

He let out a small, almost amused breath through his nose.

"Which is, in its own way, rather refreshing... It has been quite some time since I have encountered a *genuine* mystery like this in regards to Psychic Powers... One where I don't even have an inkling of an idea as to what might be going on."

He paced one more slow arc, then came to a stop and turned back toward her—fully, this time, his eyes meeting hers again.

The cold was entirely gone from them now.

In its place was something far closer to the wild, eager brightness from earlier, though tempered now with a thin layer of professional caution underneath it.

"So... as expected, my dear pupil..."

His mouth curled into a small, considering smile.

"...*experimentation* it will have to be. Some answers are too complex for a simple hypothesis, it seems..."

He spread his hands slightly, almost apologetically, and tilted his head toward her with a glint in his eye that did not entirely match the calm of his voice.

"Tell me, Thea—how would you feel about experiencing a bit of a *mini-Delve*? Without any of the actual dangers attached, of course. Just enough for the two of us to be able to check whether or not there is, in fact, a second Path lurking somewhere within you *somehow*..."