

Volume 2 - Chapter 97 - Warren

"Do not approach your Gate when you are tired. Do not approach your Gate when you are angry. Do not approach your Gate when you are lonely, or hungry, or in love, or grieving. Do not approach your Gate when you are bored. Do not, under any circumstances, approach your Gate when you have a question you are afraid to ask aloud.

There is no good time to approach your Gate. There is only a time when you *must*.

Live the difference.

—

[Excerpt from "Inscription above the entry of every sanctioned UHF Psyker Training Hall," Authorship attributed to Rune priest Halvenne the Worn, PFC 411, though the phrasing appears in fragments dating considerably earlier.]

=====

=====

The Rune priest did not waste any further time with preamble.

"I am about to allow *considerably* more of my Presence out into the immediate area around you, Thea. Brace yourself."

She did, as best she could.

A heartbeat later, it hit her.

It was not, in any meaningful sense, comparable to *anything* she had ever experienced before. Not Major Quinn's pressure. Not to the Rune priest's own Presence the first time they had met. Not even what she'd felt of the Rune priest only a few minutes prior, when he had loomed over her in an active interrogation.

None of those compared. *Not even close.*

It felt, in the most literal terms her mind could manage, as though somebody had detonated half a thousand concussive grenades against her back, all at once, all aimed at *exactly* the same point between her shoulder blades.

She physically lurched forward on the chair.

Her hands shot out instinctively to brace herself against falling—catching empty.

Yet, somehow, she didn't fall.

The breath inside her lungs, however, was forcibly expelled in a single, ragged rush, leaving her chest entirely empty in an instant, as her ears felt as though they had been packed full of warm blood—the world around her dropping into a thick, muffled silence that left her able to

perceive almost nothing of what was actually happening beyond the immediate weight on her back.

Through the muffling, the Rune priest's voice barely managed to reach her.

"*Focus*, Thea. It is just Presence. You can handle this much."

She tried.

She *genuinely* tried.

Her lungs were already beginning to burn from the lack of oxygen, the empty cavity of her chest spasming against itself in helpless little jerks as her body tried to draw in air that the weight on her back was, apparently, simply not permitting to enter.

Her ribs ached. Her diaphragm refused to respond properly.

The edges of her vision started to grey out again, the same encroaching tunnel that had nearly claimed her during the interrogation reasserting itself in rapid increments.

She forced her attention back to her own body anyway.

*'Just—breathe. One breath. Just one. Doesn't have to be deep. Just... **Something!**'*

Slowly, painfully, after what felt to her like a much longer stretch than the thirty-odd seconds it probably actually was, she managed to drag in a single, miniscule, shaky breath through her nose.

Far too small to be anything close to functional. Nowhere near enough to alleviate the dizziness or the panic clawing at the back of her skull.

But enough to take the very worst edge off the burning in her chest.

She held it. Then forced another, slightly larger one in behind it.

After a full minute of continuous, grinding effort, her breaths had finally grown deep enough that her vision began to clear, the grey at the edges of her sight retreating outward incrementally—far slower than it had appeared, but undeniably still.

Another minute past that, she managed to push herself fully upright on the stool again.

The weight on her back did not lessen. Not by a single increment.

It simply sat there, immovable, like a literal damn *mountain* had been positioned across her shoulders and the back of her neck, pressing down on her with a force that was, by any reasonable measure, simply impossible for her to physically counter.

And yet—*somehow*—she was countering it.

She had no idea how. She had no idea where, exactly, in her body or her Soul, she was drawing the strength to keep her spine upright underneath all of that. But she *was* doing it.

Her shoulders were level. Her head was up.

Her breathing, miraculously, was approaching something resembling steady.

It took her, in total, around five full minutes to arrive at a state where she could simply exist underneath the Rune priest's Presence at this level without *actively* dying from it.

When she finally got there, she said quietly—

"I think I'm as good as I'm gonna get here..."

Her voice came out thinner than she would have liked.

The Rune priest gave a satisfied hum somewhere directly behind her.

"Good. Very good... I think so as well. You adapted considerably faster than I had been expecting, my dear pupil. Well done."

He let her enjoy the praise for a second, then continued.

"Now—I am going to place my hands on your back, in just a moment. One at the base of your neck, just below the hairline. The other directly behind your heart. Do not be alarmed."

Thea nodded.

A heartbeat later, she felt two firm, warm points of contact resting against her back through the fabric of her uniform, exactly where he had said they would be.

She shuddered slightly at the touch despite herself.

Personal physical contact was not, in any meaningful sense, something she was particularly used to. She had her squad, of course—Karanja's casual closeness, Isabella's enormous, all-encompassing hugs, Corvus's measured shoulder-pats—but the Rune priest was, by any reasonable definition, not her squad.

He was barely even her mentor yet, considering they've had exactly one session together.

So, even with the explicit warning he'd given her a moment beforehand, she had *not* been entirely able to brace herself for the actual feeling of it.

Thankfully, he waited until the small shudder had fully passed and Thea had re-centered herself again, then continued in the same even tone as before.

"Now—close your eyes. Begin focusing on yourself, on the rhythm of your breathing, and start your meditation process at your own pace. There is no rush. Once you have reached your usual depth, you will begin the slow drift toward your Gate. And remember the rules we have established, Thea. *Especially* the most important one."

Thea closed her eyes at his words, then drew in a slow, steady breath.

"...Never, *ever* cross the Gate," she echoed back to him quietly, the words coming out almost like a small prayer to herself.

"Precisely so. Now—begin, my dear pupil. I am right here. You are safe. This, I promise."

She drew in another breath, slower and deeper than the last.

Then another. Slower still.

She tried to fall into the rhythm of her [Meditation Focus] the way she usually did—steady and measured, the breath gradually lengthening and the world gradually receding.

It was the pattern she had used dozens of times by now, in her bunk, in the showers, in the brief windows of quiet between training rotations or during the Assessment's longer patrol routes.

She knew it well. Her body knew it even better.

The Rune priest's Presence, however, was making the whole exercise *significantly* harder.

She could barely manage to push her breaths to about a third of the depth she normally hit when she meditated properly. The pressure on her chest, the constant low background hum of mental strain from holding her Resolve up against the Rune priest's Soul-weight—none of it was, by any reasonable measure, conducive to actually settling into a meditative state.

Every time she felt herself beginning to slip downward into the trance, the weight on her back would shift slightly, or the pressure on her ribs would draw her attention back to the simple act of breathing, and she would have to start over from somewhere closer to the surface.

She kept trying anyway.

A few minutes of patient, grinding effort later, she slowly, *finally*, began to feel the trance start to take hold.

She leaned hard, in the back of her mind, on the Old Man's teachings to get her there.

Specifically the ones about battlefield meditation—the ones she had, at the time, completely failed to appreciate the value of; as she had with so many of his teachings over the years.

*"You can't always hope to have a quiet or low-pressure environment to meditate in, missy. Sometimes you need a refresher out in the field, while explosions are going off ten metres away from your head. So you'd better learn how to find the still part of yourself when the rest of the world is actively trying to kill you. Because if you can only meditate when it's **convenient** to do so, you can't meditate at all."*

The memory came back to her almost word for word, the Old Man's voice as rough and dry as it had ever been in real life.

'I hate how you're always right, Old Man...' she thought ruefully, her chest aching with something only partially related to the Rune priest's Presence.

And then, with one more slow, steady breath—

She felt herself finally drop properly into the trance.

For a few seconds, Thea simply... let herself settle.

She did not push toward the next step. She did not start searching for her Gate, or scanning her own Soul-space for entrances, or anything else the Rune priest had talked to her about.

She simply held the trance, and let the sheer relief of it wash over her in slow waves.

After the past several minutes of the Rune priest's Presence grinding down on every nerve she had—after the gradual, brutal effort of just keeping her ribs upright underneath the weight of his Soul—the trance felt, by sharp contrast, like floating in warm water in absolute silence.

There was no weight in here. There was no pressure on her back. There was no burning ache in her lungs, and no encroaching tunnel slowly creeping in on her vision whenever she wasn't forcing herself to breathe with all the might her mind could bring to bear.

Just the gentle, distant rhythm of her own breathing, the soft pulse of her own heart, and a wide, weightless emptiness all around her that felt, for the first time in what seemed like hours, genuinely relaxing.

She drew the warmth of it around herself like a blanket.

'Haaa...' she thought slowly, her thoughts coming sluggish and easy under the heavy weight of the trance. *'I kinda don't want to do any actual work and just... stay here for a while, honestly...'*

The temptation to drift was *very* real.

It was, in fact, the most genuinely comfortable she had felt at any point since the Rune priest's session had begun—possibly since she had woken up that morning, even—if not longer. It had been quite a while since she'd actually meditated like this.

'I should add this to my daily routine... Not just a short mindfulness exercise in the morning, but a full-on deep trance meditation.'

Lying there in the soft, formless centre of her own mind, with no pressure on her shoulders and no expectations on her chest, the idea of simply... not moving for a while had a real, distinct pull to it.

But the part of her that had spent the past several weeks fiending—genuinely *fiending*—for some actual damn answers about what was going on with her was not, in any meaningful sense, willing to let this opportunity slide.

So, after another moment or two of letting herself enjoy the silence, she pushed her attention outward.

Gingerly, at first. Then a little harder.

Straight toward her Gate.

She had been, she realised somewhere underneath the trance, actively avoiding paying any real attention to her Gate ever since her first post-Awakening event.

The single time she had focused on it *directly*, it had very nearly killed her. It had drawn her in with that strange, terrible fascination, and only Zach being there—physically present, ready to slap her back from the brink—had stopped it from finishing the job.

So now, deliberately pulling her own focus toward it for the first time since then...

Honestly, it felt downright sacrilegious.

It also felt, somewhere underneath that, a little like turning her face toward a flame she had spent a very long time training herself, consciously *and* subconsciously, not to look at.

But it was what she *needed* to do. She knew that.

As her attention was drawn inevitably toward it, her trance began to recede in a slow, gradual unspooling of the deep stillness she had spent the past several minutes carefully constructing. But instead of returning her to the waking world, with the Rune priest's mountain-weight Presence bearing down on her back, she found herself, instead, rapidly closing in on her Gate from somewhere within her own Soul-space.

The giant construct of it loomed up in front of her, suddenly enormous and entirely impossible to ignore—she could not even tell what the Soul-space actually looked like around the Gate, for it was all-encompassing in her focus.

The massive iris of blades, arrayed in a perfect ring around the brilliant, neon-violet whirlpool at the very centre of her being. It was about a fourth of the way opened.

The same position she generally kept it at—the position that felt the most natural, the most comfortable, the most *hers*.

It was just enough to power her passive [Glimpse] without dipping into her Focus, to catch the faint Gate-ripples of other Psykers if she paid close enough attention to her surroundings, and to keep her broadly functional as a Wielder without simultaneously broadcasting to every Soul within sensing range that she was, in fact, one of them.

*'Or at least not **too much**, anyway...'*

The closer she drifted to it, the more defined the Gate became.

The blades sharpened. The whirlpool deepened. The colours intensified.

And the sheer, breathtaking impossibility of the thing pressed in against her perception in ways that the conscious, waking version of her had never, in any of her brief and fleeting glances at it before, fully appreciated.

It was, she could not, in honesty, deny—indescribably *beautiful*.

A perfect, immaculate circle. The blades arrayed around it in an unbroken iris, forged out of some material that she had no name for, and that she was reasonably certain humanity itself had no name for either—too smooth to be metal, too solid to be glass, too sharp at the edges to be either, and shimmering faintly with an internal non-iridescent light that did not seem to come from anywhere in particular. The infinite vortex of the Void's Energy whirling endlessly behind them in a slow, eternal cyclone of pure neon-violet.

There were twelve of them, making up the iris of the Gate. Twelve blades, one Gate.

Thea's mind froze for a split second.

'...*Twelve?*'

She looked at the blades. She looked at the Gate.

She let her perception—still drifting inexorably forward towards it—drink in the shape of it in its entirety, now that she was close enough and focused enough to actually take it all in.

'*Twelve-bladed iris,*' she catalogued slowly, '*surrounding the whirlpool. A Psyker's Gate.*'

She remembered the many times she had stared at the Rune priest's Inheritance Polarity Star during their previous lesson. The diagram he had presented her with. A perfect twelve-pointed ring of blades, arrayed exactly the way she was looking at her own Gate now.

An unmistakable, direct recreation of the structure she was currently staring at.

It matched *perfectly*.

'*So... why does it feel incomplete, then...?*'

She could not, for the life of her, work out where the thought was coming from.

Nothing about what she was actually seeing seemed wrong.

The blades were all there. The whirlpool was intact. The iris was working properly.

By every visible measure, by every cross-reference she could pull up out of her own memory, her Gate looked *exactly* like what a Gate was supposed to look like.

And yet—

It felt, somewhere underneath the trance and underneath the awe, like there was *something* missing. Not absent in any way she could point to. Not flawed in any structure she could identify. Not wrong in any tangible manner. Just... *incomplete*.

Right, yet somehow wrong, at the exact same time.

She kept drifting closer, unable to look away.

By the time she had moved close enough that it was no longer possible to hold the full Gate within her perception all at once—by the time the blades had grown so large in her sight that she could only really focus on parts of a single one at any given time, with the rest fading off into the unseen periphery of her own awareness—she suddenly heard a gentle, deep voice drift into her ears from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

"You are doing very well, Thea. Keep going. You need to be close enough that the whirlpool—the vortex inside the Gate itself—begins to collapse and disappear from your perception."

It took her around half a second to recognise it.

The Rune priest.

It was exactly as he had said it would be—distant, faint, almost ethereal, but unmistakably there. As though he were speaking to her from somewhere on the other side of a very thick wall, far away and yet still entirely clear if she even as much as faintly focused on it.

'Right...' she told herself, the realisation dropping into her with a quiet jolt of embarrassment. 'Stay focused, Thea. You're not just sightseeing here.'

Because she had, she now realised with no small amount of chagrin, already fallen prey to the Gate's fascination. She had *genuinely*, briefly forgotten *why* she had come here—*how* she had even gotten here in the first place.

The whole point of the exercise—the second Path, the Primal Ice question, the entire reason the Rune priest was standing behind her with his hands on her back and his Presence holding her steady against the slowly-grinding pressure of the Void—had all simply... faded out, somewhere along the drift. Replaced, gradually and entirely without her noticing, by the simple, transfixed act of staring at the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

*'...Yeah. He was right. This **is** fucking dangerous.'*

She forced herself to refocus, peeled her attention partially off the blades, and kept moving forward.

She did not let her attention drift back to the blades. She did not let it linger on the whirlpool. She did not allow herself to slip back into the slow, transfixed admiration of the structure itself. Instead, she kept repeating, internally, like a mantra—

'Find the Paths. Find the Paths. That's why you're here. Find the Paths.'

'Don't cross the Gate. Don't cross the Gate. Don't cross the Gate.'

The repetition helped.

It was, she realised at some point during the slow drift forward, much the same trick she used during long mechanical drills—the kind her Old man had drilled into her bones, back when she'd been little more than a kid. It was something that bored most people to tears, he'd said, but that she had learned to anchor herself with.

'Repeat the goal. Repeat the rule. Repeat the next step.'

Let the conscious mind chew on the loop until the rest of her stopped trying to wander.

It worked here, too... *Mostly*.

The Rune priest's voice drifted into her ears again from nowhere and everywhere at once, soft and distant alike.

"You are getting close enough very soon. Be careful. Do *not* cross the Gate. Look for your Paths. If you can manage it—try also to find your Voidrune. The one you began carving earlier. It should help you orient yourself within the Warren once you can see it. But if you cannot find it, do not go out of your way to look for it. Focus on the Paths, Thea. Above everything else."

'Right. Paths. Voidrune if I see it, to orient with. Don't waste time hunting for it.'

She let her focus on the Gate continue to draw her closer.

And then—exactly as the Rune priest had said it would—the vortex abruptly *stopped*.

One moment it was rotating endlessly behind the blades of the iris, the slow, perfect cyclone of pure neon-violet Energy that she had been quietly admiring for the past several minutes.

The next, it simply... halted—mid-rotation. As though somebody had reached out and pressed pause on a video in the exact middle of playback.

And then it suddenly *fell backwards*.

That was the only way Thea could think to describe it.

The whirlpool, frozen mid-spin, simply receded away from the Gate, dropping back into a space she had not, until that exact moment, even registered existed.

Like perspective had suddenly decided to function properly. As if she had finally moved close enough to realise that the vortex was not, in fact, sitting *flush* against the back of the Gate at all, but had instead always been quite a long way away from it—and she was only now close enough to perceive the actual distance involved.

The vertigo of it all hit her instantly.

The trance around her cracked at the edges, the soft, comfortable warmth of it splintering into something far more brittle and far more strained.

Her breathing—real, physical and distantly-felt breathing, somewhere very far behind her, on a stool she had almost forgotten she was sitting on—began to quicken. She felt the muscles in her actual chest start to spasm, far away, on the other side of the trance.

'Breathe. Just breathe. Don't fall out. Don't fall out.'

She forced her focus back onto her own rhythm—*slow in, slow out, slow in, slow out*—and clamped down, hard, on the edges of the trance to keep them from continuing to crumble.

It held—barely. But it held.

When she looked back through the Gate—at the empty space where the whirlpool had been only seconds ago—her perception of what lay behind it had fundamentally shifted.

She was looking, now, into *impossible* geometry.

Nothingness, that was somehow, simultaneously, also a space.

She knew it, instinctively, the way one knows the shape of one's own hand without having to look at it. It was a *place*. It had edges. It had boundaries. It had a structure, somewhere underneath the apparent emptiness, that her eyes were not yet equipped to perceive, but that her deeper, more fundamental awareness was registering in some way she could not have explained out loud if her very life had depended on it.

She stopped drifting forward.

Her full attention, of its own accord, transferred from the Gate itself to the strange, indefinite space behind it.

It stretched out seemingly without end.

And yet—she was aware, *somehow*, of the edges of it.

She had a sixth sense, somewhere underneath her own conscious thoughts, that this was not, in fact, an infinite space at all. It only appeared infinite to her current perception.

Somewhere out there, beyond what her eyes could grasp, the Warren *ended*.

But where, or how, or in what direction—she could not tell.

Her eyes, in any case, could not perceive anything beyond the Gate's threshold itself. Just a vast, empty, undifferentiated absence. And yet it was somehow also filled with stuff. Like a paradox made real and poured directly into her eyes, defying both halves of itself at once.

'Focus, Thea. Focus.'

She could feel her Resolve straining now, working hard to keep her senses from giving out entirely under the weight of what she was trying to perceive.

Her own thoughts felt even more sluggish than before.

Even her trance felt *thinner*, somehow.

'Just a bit closer. I can't see anything from here...'

She refocused her attention back on the Gate itself—just for a moment, just to use it as a handhold—and let it draw her forward again.

*'Don't cross it. Just get a tiny bit closer. **Don't** cross it.'*

The mantra had become almost reflexive at this point.

'Don't cross it. Don't cross it. Don't cross it.'

After what could have been a few dozen metres of additional drift, or a few kilometres, or possibly even *lightyears*—Thea had genuinely no damn idea how distance worked in here, or whether it worked at all in the conventional sense, or whether 'travelling' was even the right—

'Focus! Stop drifting off!'

She forced her attention back onto the space behind the Gate.

And, gradually, the Warren began to take a shape her brain could actually contextualise.

It still wasn't a space that could exist in the real world.

It was fragmented in ways she had no words for, and wrong in ways that her conscious mind kept flinching away from each time she tried to examine them too directly. But it was no longer, on its own, impossible to hold inside her head all at once.

The more she focused, the more the fragments pulled together.

The more they pulled together, the more the Warren built itself into something whole.

The more it built itself into something whole, the more she could see...

By the time Thea realised that she had been staring through the Gate for who-knows-how-long, and jolted herself out of the accidental sub-trance she had drifted into without noticing—

—the Warren had fully manifested in front of her.

What she was looking at, she realised slowly, was a throne room.

A massive, cavernous one.

The floor stretched out in front of her in an immaculate, vast checkerboard pattern—polished tiles of perfect black and white, arranged with such mathematical precision that the regularity of it was, in itself, almost dizzying.

Enormous sconces lined the walls at intervals far too distant to be functional, their flames burning low and steady—cyan, then neon-violet, in perfect alternating cadence as far down the chamber as her eyes could trace them.

Pillars rose up from the floor at the edges of the chamber—each of them easily wide enough to swallow a transport, easily tall enough to dwarf any structure Thea had ever physically stood inside in her entire life—and continued rising. And rising. And rising...

She could not see where the ceiling was.

She *knew* it existed. She could *feel* it, somehow—that same sixth-sense awareness she had used to register the edges of the Warren itself.

There definitely *was* a ceiling. The space definitely *was* enclosed.

But it was so far above her that her eyes simply did not register it as anything more than darkness, fading upward into a place her perception did not yet reach.

Her gaze, drawn by something she could not entirely name, dropped from the impossible heights of the chamber down to the centre of the floor.

A long, crimson carpet stretched out across the throne room, bisecting the checkerboard pattern of the tiles in two perfect, mirrored halves. Deep, rich, blood-red—the colour of something old, well-cared-for, and impossibly well crafted.

It ran straight as a blade from the front of the chamber—despite Thea not having seen it, she knew that this was true—all the way to the back, where it terminated in a wide, low dais.

And on that dais—

Stood a throne.

It only gradually became perceivable to her, as her eyes adjusted to it.

Because the throne, Thea slowly realised with growing unease, was made of the blackest material her mind had ever been forced to try to contextualise.

It did not reflect light. It did not absorb light.

It did not, by any visible measure, interact with light in any way at all.

Her perception simply could not parse it as a three-dimensional object, for the lack of any internal shadows to define its shape. She could see *where* it was, in a flat, two-dimensional sort of way. She could tell *what* it was, because she could feel it with that strange sixth sense. But she could not, no matter how hard she tried, *perceive* it in its entirety.

Her eyes and brain refused to commit to a shape.

It was, in the truest sense of the word, *unfathomably* black.

And then she saw two small, coloured orbs manifest at the very top of the throne.

Neon-violet, the exact same shade as her Gate, sparkling down at her from somewhere very high up on the throne—where its occupant, presumably, was sitting, in a posture she could not see and a form she could not perceive.

Just the two slow, brilliant points of colour, locked unmistakably onto her, watching her with the patient, knowing recognition of something that had been waiting for her arrival.

A voice drifted down toward her.

"Welcome *home*, darling..."