

Volume 2 - Chapter 87 - Pleasant Walk

Article written by Dr. Seylun Morigan, Department of Applied Psychic Theory

To begin with, I must confess something that might be considered *improper* for the opening of an academic paper: I am almost *certain* that I do not understand what I am about to explain.

I have spent fifty-four years studying Psychic phenomena, forty-one within Precognition specifically.

I have co-authored the UHF's standard Psyker classification taxonomy and interviewed over six hundred active-duty Precognition Psykers across nine Inheritances. And I am telling you, plainly, that the Veritas Short-Term Precognition interaction does *not* make sense.

It functions. It is reproducible.

And it *should not* work.

Let me begin with what *does* make sense:

Most Inheritance and Path combinations follow an internally consistent logic.

A Perditio Precog activates [Glimpse] and sees the future filtered through destruction—aim a weapon, peer forward, and the Void shows you where to shoot for maximum devastation.

The Path provides temporal perception; the Inheritance provides the filter. Simple.

An Aurae Precog sees several futures simultaneously, each tinted in a different Inheritance's colour: A Perditio-hued future shows destruction. A Nihilus-hued future shows entropy. A Veritas-hued future among the set indicates the *most likely* outcome—but even that is merely probability, not certainty.

The Aurae Precog must choose which to act on, with incomplete information.

Not simple, but understandable.

A Mutatio Precog never sees the True future at all.

They see an alternate one—a future that *should not* exist, accompanied by the exact action required to *force* it into being. They are shown how to change the ordained outcome without ever knowing *what* it even was. They break a future they have never witnessed and replace it with one that should not exist.

Strange, but the logic traces from premise to conclusion.

Now. Veritas...

The Veritas [Glimpse] reveals *one* future—the *True* future, as the Void perceives it.

Not probability. Not weighted outcomes. One *pre-ordained, inevitable* future.

This is because the Void does not contain Time. It does not experience causality.

Everything that will happen has, from the Void's perspective, *already* happened.

A Veritas Precog is not *predicting*, but merely *observing* something that, to the Void, *has already occurred*.

This is strange, but not where things break.

The part that breaks is what happens when a sufficiently experienced Veritas Precog learns to game the very universe—or *universes*, in this case—itself.

Documented in roughly one out of every twelve to fifteen practitioners, the technique operates as follows: The Psyker commits to an action with *genuine, complete* intent—bringing themselves to approximately ninety-nine percent completion.

At that threshold, they activate [Glimpse].

The Void, perceiving an action that *has already been completed* from its timeless perspective, shows the True future resulting from it. The Psyker then exits the [Glimpse], pulls back that final one percent, and *aborts*—using the knowledge gained to redirect entirely.

The True future they just witnessed immediately *ceases* to be true.

This *should not* work.

The Void has no Time: It *has already seen* everything, including the Psyker's *decision to abort*. The [Glimpse] should have shown the future in which they pull back, not the future in which they follow through.

A timeless plane that can be *surprised* by a change of mind is a contradiction so *fundamental* it should collapse our entire framework for understanding Void phenomena.

And yet the technique works.

Repeatedly. Demonstrably. Under *every* controlled condition required for scientific proof.

What *is* verifiable, however, is why so few Psykers ever manage it.

The [Glimpse] must activate at a point where the action is so *close* to completion that reversing it is nearly impossible.

I use an analogy with my students to illustrate it: Imagine standing on one leg, transferring your weight to the other. By the time ninety-nine percent has shifted—*just before* the foot touches ground—you decide to reverse. To stay on the original leg.

Try it.

You will discover it is functionally impossible for most people.

Momentum, committed musculature, the sheer *physics* of what you have already set in motion—all of it fights the reversal.

And that is a simple physical action on a single axis.

Now apply that requirement to a combat action under fire, involving Psychic energy manipulation and Gate control, where the margin between "committed enough to fool the Void" and "committed enough that you cannot pull back" is measured in *fractions of intent* we lack the very language to even *describe*.

The Psyker must *genuinely intend* to complete the action—not pretend, not perform, but *genuinely decide to do it, with every fiber of their being*—and then, at the last possible instant, simply... *decide* not to, instead. Somehow.

I began by confessing I do not understand what I have spent fifty-four years studying.

I will end by suggesting that perhaps that is the point.

The Void does not operate on principles that beings bound to causality can fully comprehend.

The Veritas Precognition interaction is not a puzzle waiting to be solved.

It is a reminder that our framework has edges—and that some of the most powerful phenomena in our universe exist precisely there, in the space between what *should not* be possible and what *demonstrably is*.

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[Shortened Excerpt from "On the Paradox of Veritas Precognition" — The Journal of Psychic Studies, Vol. 89, Intoresta Academic Institute, PFC 928]

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Thea did her best to keep her expression neutral while Major Quinn finished the rest of the announcement—three more faculty members, all instructors.

She tried to ignore the whispers around her from the Marines who had caught her earlier slip, but it was harder than it should have been. They clearly weren't used to being around someone with her level of Perception, and weren't nearly as quiet as they thought they were.

"—did you see that? Something happened with the Alpha girl—"

"—yeah, she just kind of slumped over. The medic was all over her—"

"—was it just me or did it get really cold for a second there? Like, *actually* cold—"

"—felt like my arm was gonna fall off for a second there, what the fuck was that—"

Thea kept her gaze *fixed* on the stage and let none of it show on her face.

'This is your own fault,' she told herself flatly. *'Every single bit of this.'*

She'd drawn attention to herself—visible, *avoidable* attention—in the middle of a hall full of Marines, during the Major's assembly, because she couldn't keep her emotions under control for five seconds.

She'd frosted part of Karania's arm. She'd damn near passed out. She'd forced Major Quinn herself to *personally* intervene with targeted Presence just to stop her from turning the surrounding rows into a freezer.

And all because she saw something upsetting she hadn't been expecting.

'You've never been good at this,' she thought—the frustration behind it old, familiar and very much aimed entirely at herself. *'But you should be better at it by now. You really, really should...'*

It wasn't merely embarrassment that was annoying her, but the fact that it was the practical reality of *what* she was—her entire Psychic framework relied on her having a handle on her emotional state.

Her Gate, her [Glimpse], her ability to function as a Psyker *at all* without becoming a danger to the people standing next to her—all of it was downstream of control.

Emotional control, specifically.

The one thing she had never once in her life been particularly good at.

'You can't keep doing this. You know that, right?'

She *did* know that.

Knowing it and actually fixing it were, unfortunately, turning out to be very different things.

'I really need the Rune priest to make time for me,' she thought, letting out a slow breath through her nose. *'And soon. There's gotta be **something** he can teach me about keeping this stuff in check. No way a guy like him hasn't dealt with the same problem at some point—he's way too weird not to have...'*

Finally, however, after a few more minutes, Major Quinn closed the assembly with a final, clipped nod, and the hall immediately began to disperse.

Or—some of it did, at least. A vast majority of the Recruits didn't head for the exits first.

They went for the datascreens arrayed along the walls of the hall, clustering around them in tight groups, scrolling through the full leaderboard to find their own names and numbers.

The excited murmurs and occasional groans that followed were loud enough that Alpha Squad was able to slip out through the main exit without anyone paying them much attention for once.

The corridor outside was *mercifully* quiet by comparison.

Isabella and Desmond had picked up right where they'd left off before Quinn's Presence had shut them down—something about betting when nobody was offering a counter-bet vs *'the principle of the thing'* that Thea was fairly sure neither of them was going to win, because neither of them was actually listening to the other.

"—there doesn't *need* to be someone betting against! It's about the principle of calling it! If I say she's going to double and she doubles, then I was right and that should count for something—"

"Count for *what*, Desmond? Count for what, exactly? There's no pot! There's nothing to win! You just yelled a number and the number happened to be correct—"

"And that's not worth anything to you?! The sheer predictive accuracy of it?!"

"No! That's literally what 'no bet' means!"

Thea let their voices wash over her without engaging.

Her attention kept drifting to Corvus, who was walking slightly ahead and to the right, visibly somewhere else.

His posture was fine—perfect, as always—but his eyes very much told her that he was running something behind his eyes and had been for a while.

'The Evelyn situation, almost assuredly. The Sen thing...'

Whatever that meant, exactly, because she still didn't actually know.

'Another thing I need to sit down and think about properly,' she sighed to herself. *'Add it to the ever-growing list, I guess...'*

And the worst part was that she hadn't even gotten his advice on the Kara situation before the whole thing had derailed. The Telepathic link had run out of duration, the assembly had consumed everything after that, and now Corvus looked like he was processing something that was going to take *him* a while.

'It's all just a mess. Everything is just—'

Something hit her in the chest like a hammer—not pain, nor the sharp pang of alarm of her Precognition firing, but something deeper and more persistent. A pressure that started at the center of her ribcage and radiated outward, heavy in a way she had only felt *twice* before in her life.

She knew exactly what it meant.

"Move!" She was already pushing forward, shoving past Lucas before he could react—his surprised "Thea?!" barely registering—and planting herself at the front of the squad.

She turned to face the corridor, arms out.

"Behind me. Tight formation. *Now!*"

To their credit, nobody asked questions before acting.

The words landed and training took over—bodies shifted, spacing collapsed, and within less than a second Alpha Squad had fully compressed into a tight cluster behind her.

"What's happening?" Lucas asked, his voice controlled but his eyes sharp.

"Resolve check," Thea said, fast. "Something's coming—ehhh, *someone*. Lucas, I have no idea if your Ability works against this, but it's worth testing. Activate it."

"On it." He didn't hesitate.

"Everyone else, behind Lucas. Stay tight. Do *not* spread out."

Desmond's voice cracked slightly as he asked, "What the fuck is a *Resolve* ch—"

"Just stay tight, Desmond!"

They arranged themselves—Lucas directly behind Thea, the rest of the squad packed in behind him—and for a few seconds, nothing happened.

The corridor was dead quiet.

Isabella's breathing was audible. Corvus, she noted from the corner of her eye, had snapped entirely out of whatever he'd been thinking about and was watching the corridor ahead with an expression she'd never seen on him before.

Then it finally hit.

The pressure she'd been tracking in her chest swelled outward, climbing, and she could tell the exact moment it reached the rest of the squad because they all stumbled backward almost in unison, like they'd walked into a wall that wasn't there.

"What the—" Isabella's voice came out strangled.

"Oh fuck," Desmond whispered. "Oh fuck, *oh fuck—*"

"Stay behind me!" Thea snapped, but she was already doing something she had never actually attempted before—trying to push her own Resolve outward, extending whatever protection it gave her to the people standing behind her.

She had no idea if it worked like that.

She had no framework for it, no training, no instruction from the Rune priest about whether the dampening effect of high Resolve could even be *actively* shared like this. But the rest of the squad's Resolve was still painfully low compared to hers, and if she didn't at least try—

She stepped backward, pressing her back into Lucas' chest, arms stretched out to the left and right as if she could physically shield them from something that had no physical form.

She *willed* it—whatever intangible barrier her Resolve created around her—to stretch, to extend, to cover them the way it covered her.

'Come on,' she thought desperately, feeling the Presence continue to grow. *'Come on, come on, come on—work. Just fucking work for once... Please!'*

"Is this—is this a *person*?!" Corvus managed, and the fact that even Corvus sounded genuinely rattled sent a spike of severe annoyance through Thea's chest.

'Why the fuck is the Rune priest just walking around the corridors like some kind of roaming end boss in a dungeon?!' she thought, annoyance spiking hard. *'If he runs into any of the other Marines out here with his Presence blasting like this, the Sovereign's going to be reviving people off the floor for the rest of the day... What the fuck is he even doing?!'*

A few moments later, she heard the chimes—the faint, metallic ringing of his armoured robes, carrying through the corridor well ahead of the man himself.

Then the Rune priest rounded the far end of the intersection and stopped.

He looked at Alpha Squad. At their formation. At Thea standing at the front with her arms outstretched like she was trying to physically hold back the tide.

"Huh," he said, from across the corridor. "What's all this, then?"

He turned and walked straight toward them.

With every step, Thea could hear the heartbeat of everyone behind her climb.

Five meters closer and the beats were hammering.

Three meters closer again and they were starting to lose rhythm entirely.

When the Rune priest was ten meters out, she heard Desmond start gasping for air.

'Come on—further, stretch further—!'

She pushed everything she had into the Resolve bubble, willing it wider, harder, trying to cover Desmond's position more fully.

Sweat was beading on her forehead now, running down her temples.

"Oh?" came the Rune priest's voice, and the amusement in it was unmistakable.

He stopped about three meters away.

Behind her, she saw out of the corner of her eyes how Desmond had stopped breathing entirely and was starting to turn blue. Lucas and Isabella were on their knees. Karania's breath was coming in short, laboured pulls. Only Corvus was still standing—barely—upright with a half-slack jaw, staring at the man in front of them.

"Rune priest," Thea managed, as politely as the strain allowed. She gave him a tight nod.

"My *favourite* pupil!" He replied, his face breaking into a warm, broad smile, arms spreading wide as the void-black robes chimed with every movement. "What a pleasant surprise! How are things? How did the Public Leaderboards look?"

'Are you fucking serious right now? You want to do small talk while Desmond is actively dying three meters behind me?!'

She wanted to scream it at him... She didn't.

If there was one person aboard this ship she could *not* afford to disrespect—one person who existed so far above her that even the thought of raising her voice felt suicidal—it was this man.

"Things are fine," she said, clipped, a bead of sweat leaving her chin and hitting the corridor floor. "I would like to request another session soon, if you have the time. I have... a *lot* of questions."

If he was already here, torturing them all, she might as well use the encounter for *something*.

The Rune priest's smile widened into a full, toothy grin.

"Yes! *Wonderful!* I have been meaning to carve out some time for my favourite project as well. Do not worry yourself, my dear pupil—"

He flourished one arm wide, turning in a half-circle with a grandiosity that would have been theatrical if it weren't so clearly just how the man existed, the robes chiming with every degree of rotation.

Behind Thea, she heard Desmond choke.

"—I have *not* forgotten about you. It would be the very last thing I would do! How could I, when you are so endlessly *entertaining?!'*"

He stopped mid-turn, and his eyes found hers directly.

There was not a flinch. Not a flicker. Not even the faintest acknowledgement that meeting her gaze should have been uncomfortable in any way.

"Tomorrow," he said, and his tone shifted just enough to tell her this part was not negotiable. "The Psychic introductory classes begin for your fellow Marines. *You* will not be attending them. You will come to Training Hall E-31 instead, and we will continue where we left off."

The grin returned, sharper this time. "I have *quite* a few questions of my own that *need* answering. And, trust me when I say, I could *not* be more excited about it."

He chuckled—a sound that was, in Thea's professional opinion, at least forty percent unhinged—before his eyes finally drifted past her.

"If you want to expand your Resolve's reach going forward, my dear pupil, you will need to work on your Intent and Will significantly. This performance here—" He gestured at her outstretched arms with an expression that was visibly pretending to be fighting very hard not to be a smirk. "—while quite entertaining to look at, I must admit, is rather lacking overall."

Thea glared at him, and he tip-toed backwards a few steps.

"Hey, hey! No need for that kind of a look! I'm just kidding! It's a joke! Haha, right? Isn't your mentor a funny guy?"

Behind her, Desmond's body hit the floor.

She heard it—the dull impact, the way the last of his air left him—and then Karania moving, laboriously, dragging herself across the formation to check on him.

Every breath Kara took sounded like it cost her something.

Thea's hands were shaking. Not from the Resolve exertion—from something else entirely.

'He's standing there making jokes while my squad is choking to death behind me...?!'

"Haha! But truly, the attempt itself is commendable for someone your age, especially considering we haven't covered it yet, and—"

'Desmond is turning dying.'

"—we *will* work on the foundational aspects of Resolve projection tomorrow, I think, once we—"

'Ela, Lucas and Kara can barely breathe.'

The dam broke.

"Why are you even *here*?! " The words came out raw and far too loud, echoing off the corridor walls. "Even with your Presence pulled back like this, you're going to kill every single Recruit walking through these corridors! Are you fucking *insane*?!"

The Rune priest's expression snapped—like a mask being struck off, the warmth and theatricality vanishing in an instant, replaced by something very old and perfectly still.

Thea froze. The anger drained out of her so fast it left her dizzy.

'Oh no...'

"It has been a very long time," the Rune priest said quietly, "since anybody dared to speak to me like that."

She swallowed. Her mouth opened.

"I—"

He raised one hand. She stopped.

The silence stretched. Two seconds. Five. Ten.

He seemed to be considering something, his dark eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her feel like the corridor had shrunk to the size of a coffin.

She could feel the nausea building in her stomach.

She had *promised*. She had promised Major Quinn that she wouldn't destroy everything the Major had built for her, every favour called in, every arrangement made, and here she was, screaming at the *single most dangerous person* in the entire damn galaxy because she couldn't keep her stupid mouth shut for thirty seconds.

'I'm done. That's it. He's going to—'

"I suppose you *do* have a bit of a point, my dear pupil," he finally said.

"...Huh?"

"I guess I really hadn't quite considered," he continued, looking past her at the rest of Alpha Squad with what appeared to be genuine curiosity, "how truly abysmal most low-Tier Marines' Resolve *actually* is. That *is* indeed a bit of a problem, isn't it?"

He visibly studied Desmond—who was on the floor, Karania hunched over him—with the expression of someone who had just noticed an interesting looking insect.

"Hmm. I will have to find some way around this in the future, then. I refuse to be confined to specific quarters or sections of the ship on principle, but—" He waved a hand vaguely. "—/ *suppose* I can make temporary concessions. Haa... The sacrifices I endure for my dearest pupil."

He placed the back of his hand against his forehead and leaned back.

"Truly, *woe* is me."

Then he straightened abruptly, and his face was serious again.

"You are right, Thea. I apologize for the ambush. I will send a message next time I wish to schedule a session, rather than simply walking the corridors until I stumble into you—until I figure out how to make my very existence not cause issues."

His gaze moved behind her.

"As for the rest of you, Alpha Squad—consider this a small, if admittedly unpleasant, lesson in why you need to keep your Resolve-buffer—" He nodded toward Thea. "—my dearest pupil here, safe and in good health above *all* else. If she had not been standing in front of you just now, every one of you would have simply died before I even turned that corner back there."

He pointed lazily over his shoulder.

"Do not, however, go dumping your Attribute Points into Resolve as a result! A few points here and there, distributed sensibly? Fine. Good, even. But unless you intend to become Battlefield Aces or pursue some manner of Anti-Psyker specialization, stick to your Builds as planned."

He glanced up at the ceiling for a moment, visibly running through something, then nodded to himself.

"Yes. That should be all, then." He clapped his hands once, the robes chiming. "Goodbye! I will see you tomorrow, my dear pupil. Training Hall E-31. Don't be late—we have a great deal to cover and mysteries to solve!"

He turned and walked back the way he had come with an exaggerated swagger in every step, the chiming fading meter by meter until he disappeared around the corner.

Thea tracked him for several seconds after that—felt him, the weight of his Presence slowly diminishing like a receding tide, growing smaller and smaller until it finally slipped past the edge of her awareness and was gone.

Her knees gave out immediately.

She hit the floor with nothing left.

For a long moment, nobody said anything. The corridor was quiet.

Lucas was the first to get back on his feet.

He managed it slowly, one hand braced against the corridor wall, and Thea could see the faint tremor running through his fingers even from the floor.

"What, in Xagis' name," he said, very carefully, "was *that*."

Isabella was still on her knees. She hadn't moved.

Her eyes were fixed on the corner where the Rune priest had disappeared, and her expression was one Thea had never seen on her before—and one she had no idea how to even begin to decipher.

"That was a *person*?" she said, her voice hollow. It wasn't *really* a question. It was more like she was testing the words to see if they collapsed under their own weight.

Corvus had lowered himself to a sitting position against the wall at some point during the encounter. He was breathing steadily now, but his hands were flat on the floor on either side of him, pressing down like he was making sure it was still there.

"Thea," he said quietly. "I'm pretty sure I know, but can you just confirm real quick... Who was that, exactly?"

She let out a long, slow breath from where she sat on the ground, legs folded under her, every muscle in her body feeling like it had been wrung out and hung up to dry.

"Rune priest Vedun," she said. "He's my Psychic mentor. Major Quinn arranged it for me after the Assessment."

Silence.

"Your *mentor*," Lucas repeated slowly.

"Yes."

"That thing—that *man* that just walked through here and nearly killed Desmond by *existing* in the same corridor as him—is your teacher."

"Yes."

Isabella let out a single, hollow laugh. "And I thought Major Quinn was bad..."

Corvus closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he looked at Thea with an expression that was equal parts concern and something she couldn't quite place.

"How many sessions have you had with him?"

"One."

"And you survived it."

"Obviously."

He considered that for a moment, then simply nodded, as if adding it to a very long list of things about Thea that he was choosing not to interrogate further than necessary.

Thea looked over at Karania and Desmond.

Kara was crouched over him, fingers at his neck, her face set in the focused, clinical mask she wore when things were serious enough that being worried was a luxury she couldn't afford.

Desmond was flat on his back, eyes closed, not moving.

His colour was wrong—too pale, with a faint bluish tint around his lips that Thea did not like at all.

'Right. Enough of this.'

"Sovereign," Thea said, raising her voice slightly and addressing the ceiling directly. "Can you reset Desmond? We're not inside a training module—this happened in the corridor. There shouldn't be any restrictions on a medical reset."

There was no verbal response.

An instant later, Desmond's eyes snapped open and he sucked in a breath so deep and so desperate that it sounded like a man who'd been held underwater for a full minute breaking the surface.

His hands clawed at the floor, his chest heaving, eyes wide and darting from face to face.

Karania sat back on her heels, exhaling slowly, one hand pressing briefly against her own chest.

Desmond looked up at the far-end corridor. Then at Thea. Then at the rest of the squad.

Then back at Thea.

"What, and I want to be absolutely clear about this here: *the fuck*, just happened...?!"