

Volume 2 - Chapter 96 - Rules of Engagement

Beyond the Gate, the Warren waits—
a hollow room beyond the dark,
that knew your name before you came,
that held your shape before your spark.

You step inside. The walls are warm.
They breathe the way your mother sighed
the night she watched beside your bed
and told you nothing was awry.

You know this place. You've always known.
You knew it as a child of three,
when dreams would leave you thrown,
with iron taste and bended knee.

Here time forgets to keep its watch.
Here distance pools like standing rain.

You have been here, alone, always.
You have been here, not once, again.

You shape the air.
You shape the floor.
You carve a window in the wall,
what looks inside will lay you bare.

The Warren is your only room.
The Warren is your only home.
The Warren is your only crown—
and it has worn you, like a plume.

You will return. You always do.
You will refine your halls, your gates,
your altars and your stained-glass eyes,
your countless quiet thrones and slates.

Yet one day late, you'll lift your head
and notice that the door is gone.
And you will smile, because by then,
you will not wish to carry on...

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[Excerpt from, "Voidsongs: Verses of the Damned, Volume 1," a collection of anonymous poems gathered from the personal effects of UHF Battlefield Psykers across multiple centuries, PFC 875, Editor's note: Of the forty-seven poems in this volume, "Beyond the

Gate" is the most frequently recurring—appearing, in fragmentary or full form, in the journals of nineteen separate Psykers across at least four generations. None of them are recorded as ever having read it before writing their own version of it.]

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Thea felt thoroughly drained.

The adrenaline that had spiked through her veins during the Rune priest's questioning hadn't fully drained back out yet, and the leftover thrumming of it pulsed dully through the side of her skull in rhythm with her heart—each beat sending a low, dragging throb just behind her right eye that she was reasonably certain would be there for a few more minutes at the very least.

Her hands, which she only now noticed she had not yet released from the armrests of her chair, were trembling very slightly when she finally pried them loose.

She took several slow breaths.

She tried to think through her options.

'Realistically... I don't have very many, do I?'

The Rune priest was, very visibly, watching her with complete confidence—as he so often did.

He already knew *exactly* what answer he was going to receive and was simply giving her the courtesy of arriving at it on her own. At least the cold mask had fully receded by now, replaced with that almost-amused, half-considering expression of his—but the underlying fact of the matter hadn't actually shifted.

He *wanted* to do this. He was *going* to do this.

The only real question left on the table was whether she'd cooperate gracefully, or kick up a fuss first and then cooperate afterwards anyway.

Thea exhaled slowly.

With all the resignation she felt and very little attempt to hide it, she said, "Well... Not like I have much of a choice here anyway, do I?"

The Rune priest gave her a small, rueful smile and inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement.

"I'm afraid not on this one, Thea. No."

He let the denial rest for a moment, then continued, his tone lighter now—but still genuine.

"For what it is worth to you, my dear pupil, I would actually quite like to be able to offer you a real option, here. I do not particularly enjoy backing my pupils into corners on questions of consent on experiments—especially this early in our working relationship, when trust is still being built. But *this particular* mystery is, I am afraid, far too important to simply leave sitting on the table unexplored. The risk of doing so vastly outweighs the discomfort of my having to push you into it now."

He spread his hands slightly.

"And, quite frankly—you asked the question yourself, Thea. *You* came into this lesson wanting answers about your cold-and-ice situation. I rather suspect you want to know what is going on, here, every bit as much as I do—if not more."

...Which, Thea had to grudgingly admit, she could not actually deny.

She *wanted* to know. She *needed* to know, honestly.

The not-knowing had been, on some level, gnawing at the back of her mind for weeks now. If there really was a chance that the Rune priest could clear some of it up in a single session—

'He's right.'

She nodded slowly, then she straightened in her chair, drew in another steadying breath, and met his eyes again.

"Alright. Fine. How are we doing this then, *exactly*? Because, as I said earlier—I don't actually know *anything* about Delving at all. You haven't covered it yet barring several mentions of its existence."

The Rune priest's expression brightened immediately, a small, pleased grin returning to his features.

"Now *that*, my dear pupil, is the easy part! I shall be the one doing most of the actual heavy lifting on the safekeeping side of things. You, on your end, will simply need to sit still, hold yourself open, and allow me to guide the process. The experience itself will be, in most respects, comparable to your level-up session with Private Zachary during your Assessment. If you remember it."

The mention landed harder than Thea had expected.

A dull pang threaded through her chest at the name—grief and regret that had mostly receded over the past few weeks, but never quite all the way, and was apparently still *entirely* capable of reasserting itself at the slightest provocation.

She had to take a moment to steady herself before she could trust her voice again.

When she did, it came out quiet.

"...Yeah. I remember..."

The Rune priest either did not notice the emotional shift, or, more likely, chose to keep moving past it without commentary. Either way, he simply gave her a small nod of acknowledgement and turned partially away from her, his attention angling upward toward the chamber ceiling.

"Sovereign—a back-less chair, suitable for my pupil. And make it *comfortable*. I do not want her sitting on some piece of uncomfortable dreck while she is attempting to solve the mysteries of the Void for me."

A faint, near-imperceptible chime answered him in confirmation.

A moment later, a low, padded, back-less stool materialised on the floor beside him—soft-looking and entirely solid, with a wide enough seat to be properly comfortable and just enough cushioning to make the prospect of sitting still on it for an extended period feel actually survivable.

The Rune priest gestured toward it with a small, open-handed flourish, and stepped slightly aside to make room.

Thea understood immediately what he was going for.

The memory rose very vividly: Zach, stepping up behind her in the small room of the forward operating base, his hands hovering carefully but firmly near her back as she'd worked her way through her first proper round of Attribute level-ups since her Awakening. The way he'd been there, ready to intercede, the moment things had started going wrong... The way he *had*, in fact, intervened—pulling her back from a catastrophic Void event that, by all accounts, would have killed her outright if he hadn't been standing exactly where he'd been standing.

'Thank you, Zach...' she thought quietly to herself as she rose from her armchair and crossed over to the stool. *'For everything. For real...'*

She lowered herself onto the cushioned seat, found a comfortable upright posture, and braced herself.

The Rune priest stepped up behind her.

And the moment he did, Thea noted, with no small amount of relief, that his Presence was nowhere near the crushing weight it had been only minutes earlier.

It was still there, of course—it would *always* be there, in some form, given his sheer raw power—but it had retreated significantly. Compared to the moment when he'd been standing directly in front of her with cold-blooded interrogation in his eyes, this was practically gentle.

'...So it's like I figured,' she thought, the realisation settling in alongside the slowing of her heartbeat. *'It was an interrogation. He needed to be sure. He needed to put enough pressure on me to know whether I was telling the truth, and the only way to do that was to make sure I genuinely couldn't lie my way through it... I guess that makes sense, on some level. He'd have been an idiot not to.'*

She grimaced slightly at the fresh memory anyway.

'Would very much prefer if he doesn't ever do that again, though.'

The Rune priest gave her a small, satisfied nod, then settled himself into what Thea was starting to recognise as his proper lecturing register.

"Now, then. To the actual procedure: I have noticed on your profile that you possess the [Meditation Focus] Ability—which means I will assume, correctly I hope, that you already know how to put yourself into a proper trance and reach a state of deep meditation. Yes?"

"Yeah," Thea confirmed. "My Fat—Old Man taught me. I can manage that part, easily."

"E—Excellent." There was a faint hint of relief—and what sounded like a stifled chuckle—in his voice. He cleared his throat, then said, "That, on its own, makes this entire process *considerably* easier on both of us. So. To begin—you will put yourself into deep meditation, using whatever methodology works best for you. Once you have reached that state, and have held it for long enough to be properly stable in it, you will begin paying *deliberate*, focused attention to your Gate. And, as you do so, you will naturally find yourself drawn closer toward it—the way iron is drawn to a magnet, only in your own internal Soul-space rather than the physical world around you."

He paced a slow half-step behind her chair as he spoke.

"What I need you to do from there, Thea, is *approach* your Gate as closely as you possibly can—*without* touching it. Get right up to the threshold. Close enough that you can see it and everything around it clearly. Close enough that you can perceive what lies on the *opposite side* of it. But *you will not* touch it. And, far more importantly—"

His tone sharpened noticeably here, dropping into something flat, cold and entirely unambiguous.

"—you will *not*, under *any circumstances whatsoever*, cross your Gate."

Thea straightened slightly at the sharp shift in his voice.

"I want to be perfectly clear on this point, Thea, so I will repeat it again: *Do not, under any circumstances, cross your Gate*. The moment you do, your Soul will be thrown directly into the Void itself, and there is, very literally, *nothing* I—or anyone else—will be able to do to bring you back. Not from the other side of that hard line. You will be gone, and you will stay gone. Are we *absolutely* clear on this?"

Thea nodded so quickly that it nearly made her dizzy.

"Yeah. Yep. Yes. Not crossing the Gate. Got it. Not going to cross the Gate, under any circumstances, whatsoever."

"Good." His voice eased back down a notch. "And do bear in mind that while you are standing there at the threshold, the Void itself will *very likely* begin whispering into your head."

Suggesting things. Encouraging you. Reasoning with you, in your own voice, using your own internal logic. It will be *quite* persuasive. But, it is *not* your own idea—"

A finger rose in the air behind her, briefly visible in the corner of her vision.

"—it is the Call telling you to do it. *Not* you. It will dress itself in your own words, your own desires, your own justifications, every single time. That is what it does. Are we clear on this part as well?"

"Crystal clear," Thea said. Then, just to be entirely sure, repeated his words back to him, "Anything that tries to convince me to cross the Gate—even if it sounds like me—*isn't* me. It's the Call. Ignore it. No matter what it sounds like."

"Excellent."

The finger lowered, and Thea could hear the small, pleased smile in his voice even without turning around to see it.

"Now—I will, throughout the entire process, be monitoring your progress directly. Which, I am afraid, is going to be somewhat uncomfortable for you. I will need to allow my Presence to settle considerably closer to you than I have generally permitted it to do so far since we first met, in order to maintain the proper level of oversight. I am not going to be able to keep it as restrained as I have until now. I would ask that you simply bear with it to the best of your ability."

He paused for a brief beat.

"I heard from Zephyr—Ehh, Major Quinn, as you call her—that she did something not entirely dissimilar with you for your Level 10 level up. So I trust you can keep it together for the duration of this experiment, on roughly the same basis."

Thea swallowed hard.

The memory of Major Quinn's Presence pinning her in place—the sheer *crushing* weight of it, the way she had barely been able to breathe under it, the way it had left her hollow and shaking afterwards—was not, in fact, a memory she had been particularly eager to revisit any time soon.

And the Rune priest's Presence, she was painfully aware, *dwarfed* Major Quinn's by a substantial margin in absolute terms.

But she wasn't really in a position to argue the point.

'...At least it'll be more passive. He's not going to be actively bearing down on me... I hope. Hopefully that's more manageable than what Major Quinn did.'

"I'll manage—or try to, at least."

"Good." His tone warmed slightly again. "Now—to the actual objective of the exercise: Once you are at the Gate and have made the approach safely, what I need you to do is, in simple terms... *peer through* it. Look at what lies on the opposite side."

He let her sit with that for a beat before continuing.

"What you will see on the opposite side of your Gate is what we refer to, in our field of study, as your *Psychic Warren*. The Warren is, in simple terms, the territory you have personally claimed for yourself within the Void itself. The conceptual landscape that has shaped itself around your Soul, that belongs to you, and that no other being in the Universe has any access to without your direct invitation. It is, in a very real sense, your home within the Void."

He paced another slow arc behind her.

"Within your Warren, you will find your Paths. Your Voidrunes. The fundamental structures that underlie every Power you have ever charted or carved. And it is, ultimately, also where any Delve you might one day perform will begin, once you are properly prepared for it."

His voice took on a slightly sharper edge again here, briefly.

"Which—to be *entirely clear again*—you will *not* be attempting today. I have not yet covered the actual methodology of Delving with you. I will not be covering it today either. If you attempt one anyway, on your own initiative, it *will* kill you. Almost certainly painfully. And almost certainly while I am directly watching it happen—which would be very upsetting to me on quite a number of levels. My efforts here would, after all, have gone entirely to waste."

Thea didn't bother to respond to that one.

She had already, by her count, asserted at least three or four separate times throughout the session that she did not, in fact, know *how* to Delve in the first place. Adding a fifth would not actually move the conversation forward in any meaningful sense.

The Rune priest, apparently satisfied with her silence on the matter, simply moved on.

"So. Once you are at the Gate and have begun peering through it, you will want to take a few moments to properly get your bearings. The Warren can be quite disorienting at first. The geometry of it does not always respect ordinary physical sense, and the first time anyone looks at one—their own or otherwise—is generally something of an adjustment period. Give yourself the time you need to settle into it."

He paused, then added—

"Once you have your bearings, you should be able to make out your Paths fairly easily, however. I am not, unfortunately, going to be able to give you a useful description of what they will look like to you specifically—they tend to appear quite differently to every individual Psyker, depending on the shape of their Soul, the character of their Inheritance and the Path in question itself. But you will not, in any case, miss them. Trust me on that. You *will* know them when you see them. They are not easy to overlook at all."

Thea nodded slowly, filing that information away.

'Can't miss it, huh? So something about as overwhelming as the Gate then? Fun...'

"I will give you a few minutes to search," he continued. "What I need you to do, in those few minutes, is look for *any and all* Paths that might be connected to your Warren, for one reason or another. Our working assumption is that there should be *exactly one* of them present—your Short-Term Precognition Path. The experiment is, very simply, to verify whether the Primal Ice Path—which is the Path that most closely resembles the 'mishaps', as we shall continue to call them for now, that you have been experiencing so far—might also be there alongside it, for whatever reason currently lies beyond our collective understanding."

He let that sit for a moment.

"Now... On the improbable chance that you *do* see more than one—*return immediately*. Do not investigate further on your own. Do not attempt to approach the second Path in any way. Do not interact with it. Simply note its existence, return to your Gate, and come back to me. We will discuss what to do from there, together, once you are safely out of the trance again."

He paused, then added, almost as an afterthought—

"Again... It should, mind you, be *entirely impossible* for there to be a second Path. By every existing framework we have access to, you are simply not capable of producing one yet, under any circumstance I am presently aware of. But—" his voice took on a small, dry edge here, "—I have not lived this long, my dear pupil, by simply pretending that a lack of knowledge—whether my own, or all of Humanity's combined—is in any way a guarantee of the absence of the thing being unknown. *The map is not the territory*. Just because we do not yet have a name for something, does not, in any meaningful sense, mean the thing itself does not still exist out there, waiting to be observed."

The Runepriest momentarily cupped his chin—Thea could tell, even without looking at him. The way his robes chimed and his voice slightly altered from the contact...

'He's totally doing it again...'

"*Assume* it is impossible. But *verify* any potential evidence to the contrary anyway. That, ultimately, is what this entire experiment is going to be about."

He came to a stop directly behind her stool.

"Any questions?"

Thea considered it for a moment.

There was, she suspected, a great deal she did not yet know that she ought to be asking. But most of it was not, in any meaningful sense, the type of thing she could really ask before she actually went in and saw it for herself—before the questions even really formed.

Only one practical question rose to the surface for her.

"How will I know when the few minutes are up?" she asked. "If I'm that deep in meditation, I'm not going to be tracking time in any reasonable way."

The Rune priest let out a small, pleased hum.

"Ah. That part is easy. I shall simply *tell you*. While you will not, of course, be able to respond to me directly—not in any way that I would be able to hear, at any rate—you will still be able to hear *me* speak. Faintly, distantly. As though from somewhere very far away. But the sound should still reach you. I will be guiding you throughout the entire process, keeping you updated on anything I might notice on my end, calling out timing as appropriate, and generally ensuring that you are not, at any point during all of this, alone in there. I will, however, not be able to see, hear or even really feel what you are experiencing. Does that answer the question?"

Thea nodded.

"Yeah. That works for me."

"Good. One final warning, then, before we begin."

His tone shifted slightly again—back toward serious, though nowhere near as sharp as it had been during the Gate-crossing warning.

"Once you are at the Gate, you will need to be prepared for the *fascination* of it to take hold of you. The Gate is, to put it very mildly, an *extremely* compelling thing to look at directly—as you have likely experienced several times before already. It *will* draw at you. It *will* whisper, very persuasively, that you should simply step through it, just for a moment, just to see what lies on the other side. You will need a substantial portion of your Resolve actively shielding you against that pull, the entire time you are there. Do *not* underestimate it. Do *not* assume that because you have managed your Gate at distance, you can manage it at the threshold. They are not the same thing—not anywhere close."

She nodded.

"Should I detect, at any point during the exercise, that you are beginning to lose control of yourself and drift too close to the Gate—I will *instantly* destroy your brainstem. You will not feel it. You will not even register it happening. It will simply occur, and the Sovereign will reset you immediately afterward, much as it did during the carving attempts earlier today. You will be perfectly fine when you come back. Slightly disoriented, perhaps. But fine. Just so we are clear on the safety procedure, my dear pupil. You *will* be safe. I promise you that much, on my very name."

'That... Actually helped,' Thea had to admit, much to her own surprise. *'I guess it doesn't hurt when the most powerful person you've ever met promises that you are going to be safe, as long as you follow their words... Just can't mess up the whole "crossing the Gate" part. But I know now that I should not do it. Just gotta... not listen to myself, while in there. I guess...?'*

She took a deep breath, then straightened up in her chair again.

“Alright. I’m ready. Let’s do this...”