

Volume 2 - Chapter 89 - Backlash

There is a persistent misconception that a Wielder designation automatically translates to battlefield superiority. The reality is considerably more nuanced—and considerably less exciting.

A Wielder is a pre-Awakening Psyker: Someone who, before Integration, already possesses their Inheritance, a General Psychic Power, and a starting Path Power.

They don't choose these. They're born with them and simply unlock them earlier than most.

And critically, they fuel these Powers through *Focus*—the same finite resource every Marine relies on for their standard Allbright System Abilities—not a proper Psychic Resource.

Every recorded Wielder also has a minimum base Resolve of 4.00, compared to the average Recruit's 1.50 to 2.50. Meaningful, certainly, but passive—and rarely dramatic when most early engagements don't even involve Psykers in the first place.

So are Wielders actually stronger than their fellow Marines? It depends entirely on whether their Inheritance and Path combination happens to be combat-relevant.

Most of the time, it isn't.

An Obscuritas Scrying Wielder has no meaningful advantage in a CQC class.

Their Power doesn't apply.

These Wielders settle in the middle of the pack, indistinguishable from peers except on paper. The designation gets mentioned once and quietly forgotten.

But every once in a while, a Wielder gets *lucky*.

A Veritas Short-Term Precognition Wielder has a combat-relevant sixth sense from day one.

A Perditio Pyrokinesis Wielder can throw fire bombs before anyone else even understands what a Gate is.

These individuals don't simply compete, they utterly dominate.

Where every other Marine is capped at five Active Abilities, they effectively operate with two additional Powers on top of that.

The result is predictable: They end up in Alpha Squad, because the gap is simply too large.

This is where the excitement ends.

By T1 Prime—roughly two to three years in—the field levels significantly.

Other Marines develop their Abilities, invest in Attributes, some even Awaken as Psykers themselves. The Wielder's early edge shrinks into a comparatively smaller percentage of total capability.

And most Wielders never even practiced their Powers before Integration anyway—doing so without a System-provided Focus pool burns raw biomass or their very Soul.

The "extra years of experience" people assume they have is largely fictional.

The real advantage window is one to two years, for a combat-relevant subset that represents less than one percent of all Wielders.

After that, the designation becomes *functionally irrelevant*.

Which brings me to the more interesting observation: **Wielders are**, structurally, **inverse Legacies**.

Legacies enter with institutional knowledge, generational Build expertise, and familial infrastructure—but even Prime Legacies can't reliably produce Gold-rarity Starting Abilities or guarantee exceptional Attributes. Their advantage is a slow-burn investment that compounds over time, paying off at T1 Prime and beyond.

Legacies start slow and finish strong.

Wielders start strong and level off.

The natural question that follows is this: What happens when you combine the two?

A **Legacy Wielder**—someone with both the institutional knowledge *and* pre-Awakening Psychic access.

It has been attempted, of course, many times even, across centuries, by multiple Factions.

The UHF's own experiments were officially discontinued in PFC 814; details remain classified. Other Factions have been less forthcoming about whether theirs are still active.

The results, where accessible, are *not* negligible in my opinion.

Confirmed Legacy Wielders show *extraordinary* early-career performance *without* exception.

By T1 Prime, they all sit at the very top of their formations.

But the sample size is vanishingly small, and the cost of the programs—in resources, failed attempts, and human cost that classification prevents me from elaborating on—has been judged *disproportionate*.

The question persists, though: If you could *reliably guarantee* exceptional Battlefield Aces from the start, would that not be worth more than tens of thousands of mediocre Marines?

On paper, almost certainly yes.

In practice—that's *exactly* why the programs were ultimately shut down...

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[Shortened Excerpt from "*On Wielders: The Inverse Legacy Problem*" — UHF Veritas Post, Opinion & Analysis by Undena Sollias, Senior Researcher, PFC 931]

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The conversation wound down fairly quickly after that, as Lucas and Desmond had to leave a bit earlier than Thea—the walk to the classrooms was quite a bit longer than the one to the training hall the Rune priest had reserved for the two of them.

"...and remember to take lots of notes for me!" she called after them as they headed for the door.

"Yeah, yeah," Desmond waved her off without turning around.

"Will do. No worries, Thea," Lucas offered with a warm smile and a wave before the door shut behind them.

The silence that followed the closing of the door was downright oppressive, with only Thea remaining inside the common room of Alpha Squad.

"Guess it's time," she muttered, finishing off the last of her breakfast pancakes.

She gestured that she was done and the plate, utensils, and any leftover crumbs disintegrated in front of her—still a somewhat strange thing to watch, even after all this time.

Her eyes drifted, almost on their own, toward Karania's door.

'Should I go say goodbye? If the Rune priest reacts badly... this might literally be the last time I ever get to talk to her...'

The knot in her chest pulled tighter.

She stood there for a few moments, staring at the door, before finally shaking her head.

'No point. If he Zeros me, it's not going to matter either way. Better to let her deal with whatever she's dealing with in peace...'

Whether that was actually the real reason—or whether she was simply too scared and too uncertain about what to even say—she decided not to spend any more energy thinking about.

She took a deep breath, let out a heavy sigh, then left the dorms and started walking through the Sovereign's corridors towards training hall E-31.

The route was the same one Major Quinn had taken her on weeks ago—the Major herself leading the way, back when Thea had no idea what she was being led toward.

She'd been nervous then too.

Especially when Major Quinn had revealed just *how much* personal capital she'd spent to make this whole thing with the Rune priest happen, how many favours she'd called in, and Thea had felt the weight of that the entire walk.

Yet... All that was still nothing compared to *this*.

The dread sat low in her chest, coiled tight and getting tighter with every step, and the nausea underneath it had nothing to do with the pancakes. The Sovereign didn't make mistakes on that front—every meal was perfect, without exception.

This was all her own thoughts and fears simply crushing her chest.

The corridors were mostly empty at this hour.

The occasional figure drifted past—a crew member, a Marine heading somewhere with purpose—but Thea didn't register any of them. Her eyes were forward, her feet were moving, and her thoughts were eating themselves alive.

*'Have I **actually** thought this through? All the way through...?'*

She had. She'd done nothing but think about it since the very first session she'd had with the Rune priest—off and on, whenever she'd had some moments to think.

*'But have I **really**?'*

Æht's words looped back through her head for what felt like the hundredth time since that morning.

"We have infinite time. The Allbright System will provide us with biological immortality in just a few short years. Do not risk this unless you are certain."

And, quieter, underneath that: *"Do **not** get us killed, darling."*

Thea's jaw tightened as she turned a corner, the newfound corridor stretching long and featureless ahead of her, like all the others before it.

*"She's not exactly wrong... We **do** have time. There is no real deadline on this... Nobody is forcing me to do this today, or this week, or even this year. I could walk to E-31 right now, have a perfectly normal session with the Rune priest, learn more about my Powers, and walk away without saying a word about any of it. That is technically an option.'*

Her steps didn't slow.

*'But the problem is **her**, isn't it?'*

That was the thing she kept circling back to, no matter how many times she tried to approach it from a different angle.

The true, fundamental problem was *Æht*. Her entire existence.

Not even because *Æht* was *necessarily* dangerous—though she might be—but because Thea couldn't figure that particular part out without help; without someone else providing input that didn't come from her own mind.

She had a *thing* of unknown power and means living inside her very head that could take over her mirror, hijack her Psychic Powers at effectively any point, speak inside her thoughts, and hide from a ship-wide AI.

A thing that claimed to *be* her, that knew what she knew to certain degrees—even if not all-encompassing as Thea had figured out just this morning—that watched through her eyes and listened through her ears.

'But I can't ask anyone about her without offering up trust first... That's just how it works. You don't get to walk up to someone and say "hey, I have a potentially dangerous entity sharing my skull, can you help me figure out if it's going to kill me" without first trusting that person not to put a bullet in you on the spot.'

She passed another intersection. The lighting here was starting to become slightly dimmer—closer to the training halls, further from the main residential corridors.

*'And I need trust back, too. Because whatever *Æht* is... I'm **pretty** sure it's not normal in the least. I'm pretty sure it's not something that just **happens** to every Wielder, or every Psyker, or every **anything**. The Rune priest was **already** confused by some of the things I described to him during our sessions. If I add this on top...'*

Her stomach turned once again and she had to take a few moments to simply take deep breaths, to calm her nerves.

'It could go very, very badly.'

With every step she took, she could feel the training hall getting closer.

'So the choice is ultimately this,' she thought, laying it out as cleanly as she could, the way she'd normally lay out a foundational Build decision: Two paths—Pick one.

*'Path one: I trust *Æht*. I keep hiding her. I keep pretending nothing is wrong, keep having normal sessions with the Rune priest, and *Æht* and I figure it out together over time. We watch him, we test him, we wait until we're **absolutely** sure he's safe before we reveal anything.'*

She turned another corner, passed through another corridor, then turned one more corner.

*'Problem: I **seriously** doubt that's going to work for much longer. The Rune priest is too interested in me. Too interested in whatever is going on with my Powers... He's **already** probing, already asking questions I don't have any damn answers for. And the more*

sessions we have, the closer he gets to figuring it out on his own—and **when**, not if, he figures it out before I tell him, that's worse... That's so much fucking worse. Because then I'm the pupil who was **hiding** something from him, rather than the pupil who came to him for help...

She moved through yet another corridor, then finally turned the final corner.

The training hall door was visible at the end of the corridor she stood in now.

Her heart rate climbed even further, despite her best efforts to try and calm herself.

*'And that path also requires trusting Æht **implicitly**. Trusting that she's being honest about her motivations, that she **actually** has my best interests in mind, that the thing living inside my head isn't just telling me what I want to hear so I keep it hidden for its own reasons... I have zero way to verify **any** of that on my own. Absolutely none.'*

She grimaced at that.

'If only I could figure this out on my own...'

But there was no way to do that. There never had been.

That was always the fundamental problem with things *that lived inside your head*—you couldn't get an objective view on them, because the very tool you'd use to examine them was the same tool they were compromising in the first place.

The Call of the Void was so insidious for *exactly* that reason. Psykers couldn't tell where they ended and the Call began, because it wore their own thoughts like a mask. Æht was the same problem with a different face—if she wasn't simply a more aggressive or internal form of it, in the first place.

'So... Path two: I trust Major Quinn's judgment instead.'

It was a fundamentally different question that was being asked here, as this was simply a matter of trust in another person. Something that, while difficult, was actually possible to do, in the right circumstances.

'The Old Man told me Major Quinn was likely someone worth trusting due to her friendship with his own pupil... He was pretty damn explicit about it, actually. And Major Quinn trusts the Rune priest. She set this whole mentor/pupil thing up, after all... She wouldn't have done that if she thought there was a serious chance the man would kill me... But then again, Major Quinn didn't really know what's going on with me—nobody does. I don't even fucking know, really!'

She sighed once more, massaging her temples.

'So if I trust Major Quinn—and... I do, because the Old Man told me to and the Old Man has not fundamentally been wrong about a single fucking thing since the day he picked me up—then it follows that the Rune priest is, at minimum, not going to Zero me for asking a question... Even a risky one.'

The door to E-31 was twenty meters away now.

'The part that Æht probably didn't think through in all of this...'

Something almost like a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, but it was grim and didn't last longer than a fraction of a moment.

*'Is that it genuinely was her own words that pushed me here... During that DM, she called me out for ignoring the Old Man's advice. For not following his Golden Rules. For being careless and blind and trusting too much... And not putting my trust in the right people. And honestly... She was right about that. She was **completely** right.'*

'But, ultimately, the person the Old Man told me to trust is Major Quinn. And Major Quinn trusts the Runepriest. So... In a way, Æht's own arguments lead me here. To this door. To this decision. Whether she intended that or not.'

Thea stopped in front of the giant bulkhead-like door of E-31.

The door was closed. The corridor around her to all sides was empty.

Her heartbeat was loud enough that she could *feel* it in her fingertips.

*'I don't know if she saw this coming. I don't know if she's smart enough—or whatever-she-is enough—to have planned for this... Maybe she even did. Maybe this is **exactly** what she wanted, and the whole performance this morning was designed to push me in this direction while making me think it was my own decision... Or maybe she genuinely didn't consider it. Maybe she's as blind to her own contradictions as she keeps telling me I am to mine... Which—Would probably make sense. Because **she is me**, according to herself.'*

Thea shook her head with a tired smile. All this circular thinking was... exhausting.

'Either way, I guess... I'm here. Please don't let this be the last thing I ever do...'

The bulkhead door opened automatically as she stepped forward, the heavy metal sliding apart with a low hum that she felt more in her chest than her ears.

The Runpriest's Presence hit her immediately.

It was the pulled-back version of it, thankfully—the one they'd agreed on during the last session, the one the Runepriest had begrudgingly conceded to after Thea had pointed out that she couldn't actually learn anything if she was spending ninety percent of her mental capacity just staying conscious. But even pulled back, it was still *his* Presence.

She hardened her spine, set her jaw, and kept walking.

The training hall stretched out ahead of her—the same cavernous space she remembered from the first time Major Quinn had brought her here.

Except now there was a large, deeply cushioned armchair at the far end that had absolutely not been there before, and a coffee table beside it that the Rune priest had apparently decided to have the Sovereign fabricate for him, because *of course* he had.

The man himself was draped across the armchair with the boneless ease of someone who had never once in his life been uncomfortable in any environment, a large datapad hovering in front of his face, suspended by nothing visible.

Every step closer was harder than the last.

Not because the Presence was increasing—it wasn't, as far as she could tell—but because the thing coiled in her chest was tightening with every meter of distance she closed, and fighting the Rune priest's ambient weight on top of that was absolutely *not* helping.

She could feel herself wanting to lean forward, to brace against it like walking into a gale, and she forced herself to stay upright as she closed the distance.

In a strange way, though, having the Presence to push against gave her something concrete to focus on. Something physical and immediate, instead of the spiralling what-ifs that had been chewing through her head for the entire walk over.

She stopped a few meters from the armchair.

"Rune priest."

He turned towards her immediately—whatever he'd been reading on the datapad forgotten in an instant. The pad drifted downward on its own, settling gently onto the coffee table without a sound, as if it had simply decided to stop floating.

"My most interesting and entertaining pupil!" His face split into a wide, genuine smile, arms stretching out in that expansive way he had, the void-black robes chiming softly with the movement. "Welcome, welcome! I have *so very* much missed your presence these past days... or was it weeks? It felt like months, even! *Ha!*"

He rose from the chair with a fluidity that no person his apparent age should have possessed and dipped his head slightly.

"I apologize again for not being around more recently. Things have been... a bit *hectic*, shall we say. Lots of things happening, lots of things needing dealing with—you know how it is, I'm sure."

He waved it all off with one hand, as if they did not matter anymore, for they were in the past.

Then his gaze settled on her properly.

She *felt* it, even—the Presence narrowing, tightening around her like a lens being focused. Not deliberately, she didn't think. It felt less like he was *choosing* to press down on her and more like this was simply what happened when the Rune priest paid attention to something.

His focus and his Presence were apparently two sides of the same coin, and anything he looked at closely got part of the weight of both whether he intended it or not.

She held her ground. She'd handled this before, and she'd had quite a bit more time to come to terms with the Psyker side of things since their first meeting.

The pressure was heavy, but it was far more familiar now.

What she was *not* prepared for, however, was what he said next.

"You are even more anxious than you were the first time around, Thea..."

His tone had changed entirely.

The mirth was gone—all of it, completely, like someone had reached behind his face and switched it off. The playful theatricality, the grandiose gestures, the performative warmth—none of it.

What was left was quiet, direct, and surprisingly... *careful*.

"Is everything alright? Did something happen?"

For a moment, Thea just stood there.

She had not, at any point in their acquaintance, considered the Rune priest a particularly *empathetic* person. Eccentric, yes. Brilliant, obviously. Terrifying, absolutely.

But empathetic?

The man who had casually walked through a corridor and nearly killed her entire squad without even noticing? The man who treated most human interaction like a particularly entertaining stage production starring himself in the main role?

And yet he had caught it immediately. Not just *noticed* that something was off, but stopped everything—dropped the theatrics, dropped the performance—and asked her about it *directly*.

That was very surprising.

But the surprise didn't save her from the fact that this was *it*.

There was no more corridor to walk. No more turns to take before reaching the door, because she was already through the door, and the man was standing right in front of her, waiting for her to say something.

She took a deep breath.

"There's something I need help with."

The Rune priest straightened.

Not dramatically, nor with any of his usual flair—he simply stood up fully, shoulders squaring, his weight shifting forward onto the balls of his feet in a way that reminded her, uncomfortably, of a fighter settling into a ready stance.

Whatever she was about to say, he was apparently prepared to deal with it *right now*.

That caught her off guard once more.

"N—Nothing happened to me!" She added quickly, before he could start scanning the room for threats or whatever a Psyker of his calibre did when they thought their student was in danger. "It's more of a... larger problem. A *general* one. But I don't really know how to bring it up without sounding..."

She trailed off.

Seditious. Treasonous.

She couldn't say either of those words.

Major Quinn had been fairly clear about the Rune priest's character—that he was someone who believed in the UHF's institutions, fundamentally and completely, whether or not he personally followed every rule they set. He was with them. Through and through. And Thea simply could not bring herself to cross that line without knowing how he'd react.

"Hmm." The Rune priest cupped his chin—smooth, perpetually beardless, same as always—and tilted his head slightly to one side.

Like he was trying to get a different angle on something he couldn't quite see straight-on.

"You are clearly very perturbed by whatever this is," he said. "I would normally say: Just tell me what's on your mind and we will figure it out together. But I suspect it is not that simple for you... You are an overly polite young woman, after all."

Thea's eyes snapped to him. Her mouth was already halfway through forming the words "***what do you mean*** *overly polite*"—before she stopped herself.

Bit it back. Swallowed it.

'Not the time.'

"Would it help you," the Rune priest said, his tone shifting slightly, becoming more deliberate, "if I promised—no, *swore*—that whatever you say here would not leave this room?"

Thea closed her eyes for a few seconds.

"Not really," she said quietly.

"I figured as much." He nodded once. "So *I* am the problem, then."

Thea's eyes flew open.

'No—wait, that's not—'

But before she could take anything back, correct anything, salvage anything, he was already continuing.

"If it is not something that happened to you," he said, his voice steady and precise, ticking through the logic like he was working a proof, "but it is still a larger problem that needs addressing—yet you, of all people, are hesitant to bring it up, and the promise that it stays between us does not help—then the only logical conclusion, my dear pupil, is that you are afraid of me. Or, more specifically, of my judgement regarding whatever it is you are attempting to say."

His eyes were locked on hers.

They looked serious, honest, and patient in a way she had not known he was capable of.

'If only there was a way to know how he'd react before I actually say it,' she thought, the frustration thick and bitter. *'That would make this so much—'*

Her eyes went wide.

*'Wait. I'm a fucking **Precognition** Psyker! There IS a way...!'*

"Oh?" The Rune priest's eyebrows rose, and despite everything, an amused smile broke through the seriousness. "It seems you've figured something out. I'm all ears, my dear pupil."

Thea squared her shoulders.

The Rune priest watched her, head still slightly tilted, saying nothing. Waiting.

'Alright,' she thought, pulling the plan together piece by piece. *'Just like when you shoot a gun. Except you speak. Intent the words, commit to saying them, but cut it right as the [Glimpse] fires. You've done this a thousand times with shooting, with moving, with all kinds of things. Speaking can't be that much harder... Right?'*

She looked up at the Rune priest, towering above her, his dark eyes patient and curious and far too perceptive for her comfort.

'I only have about half a second. Maybe less. The window to cancel before the [Glimpse] locks in won't last any longer than that. But as long as I get the opening right—the first few words—the rest of the conversation should follow from there. I just need to get the start right...'

She ran the words through her head one more time.

Checked them. Checked the intent behind them. Double-checked it all again.

'Okay... Here it goes.'

She took a deep breath.

Then she steeled her gaze, locked eyes with the Rune priest, and forced her entire body—her mind, her intent, *everything* she had—to commit to saying the words that had been sitting inside her skull for weeks now, pressing against the inside of her teeth, waiting.

She felt them rise.

Felt her mouth begin to open.

Felt the intent crystallize into something real and immediate and irreversible—

GLI—

Pain.

She couldn't breathe.

It took her a full second to even understand what was happening—her body was falling sideways and there was no air in her lungs and something was very, *very* wrong with her throat and there was blood, *a lot* of blood, she could see it on the floor and on her hands and—

'W... What... happened?!'

Her brain tried to assemble the pieces but couldn't find enough of them.

Meanwhile, the Rune priest had simply raised an eyebrow.

He was standing exactly where he'd been before, looking down at her with an expression that sat somewhere between genuine concern and academic fascination.

"Ehh—Sovereign, go ahead and reset my pupil for me."

Instantly, Thea was standing in front of him again—perfectly healthy.

She sucked in a breath so deep and so ragged that it burned all the way down, her eyes wide, her hands shaking, her heart slamming against a ribcage that had, apparently, only just been put back together.

"W—What the fuck just happened?" she managed to push out between panicked breaths.

"I was hoping *you* could tell me," the Rune priest said, tilting his head the other way now. "I can tell you tried to use a Psychic Power of some kind—and then you were immediately struck by the backlash of it. Quite violently, I might add."

He paused, his eyes narrowing slightly—not in suspicion, but in thought. "What, *exactly*, were you trying to do there?"

"Backlash...?" she echoed, her right hand at her throat, fingers pressing against the skin—checking. Making sure it was real, that it was whole, that everything was actually where it was supposed to be.

It had all happened so fast that her brain hadn't caught up yet.

"Yes, Thea. Backlash," the Rune priest said, one eyebrow climbing again. "You know. The thing Psykers deal with when a Power goes out of control. I understand that you are something of a prodigy when it comes to this, but backlash is one of the most *fundamental* aspects of Psychic Power usage. You should be able to identify it—even when it manifests as catastrophically as that one just did."

She stared at him. Her mind was turning, slowly, grinding through the pieces.

'Why did it fail? I did the same thing I always do... The only difference was speaking instead of taking an action. But the fundamental idea shouldn't change. It shouldn't have that much of an ef—'

Her eyes widened.

*'Æht. **She's** the one with the Precognition Powers.'*

The memory surfaced then: Æht's angry voice during the Digital Mission, still dripping with that particular condescension that Thea had dismissed at the time as just more of her posturing.

"Do you truly believe that you're some kind of universal prodigy, darling? That you just happened to pick up Psychic Powers perfectly, from the very beginning? Without stumbling, without breaking yourself, without paying the price everyone else bleeds themselves for?!"

It hadn't made sense to her back then. Not really. She'd filed it away as Æht being Æht—dramatic and condescending as ever, trying to make Thea feel small to achieve whatever purpose she was trying to achieve.

But now...

'Æht is the one who knows how to use [Glimpse] inside and out. Not me. I only use it as well as I do because she's been helping me this whole time...'

The reason she'd never experienced backlash before—hadn't even known it was a real thing until thirty seconds ago—was because Æht *had already* solved the problem for her.

Before it could ever become one.

Every [Glimpse] she'd ever fired, every perfectly timed precognitive dodge, every instinctive activation that had felt so natural, so effortless—

"Without stumbling, without breaking yourself, without paying the price everyone else bleeds themselves for..."

'She's done all that, hasn't she...? In the quiet of whatever place she comes from. She figured it out, she paid the cost, she smoothed out every edge—and then handed me the finished product to use like it was mine...'

A heavy weight settled in her chest. The feeling of realizing you'd been standing on a bridge that someone else had been holding up with their bare hands, and you'd never once thought to look down—even when they'd yelled up at you to do so.

The Rune priest, to his credit, was giving her all the time in the world to process all of this.

'What do I do...?'