

Volume 2 - Chapter 99 - Origin

Everything slammed back into her at once: Light. Sound. Weight. Temperature. Texture. The rush of blood in her own ears. The pressure of air against her skin. The smell of the Sovereign's sterilised atmosphere. The thrum of her own heartbeat hammering somewhere deep in her chest...

All of it, everywhere, at maximum intensity, all at the same time.

Her high levels of Perception turned the flood into a veritable *deluge*.

Every sensation arrived pre-sharpened, pre-amplified, stacked on top of every other sensation in a screaming pile-up of raw input that drowned out any thought she might have even begun to form. For one long, stretched-out moment, Thea was not a person at all. She was just a vessel, filled far past capacity with the sheer, unbearable fact of *being* again.

There had been no transition.

No fading-in, no gentle re-emergence, no gradual reassembly of self, not even the somewhat abrupt feeling of waking up from a deep slumber.

One instant there had simply been *nothing*—no body, no thought, *no Thea*—and the next, *everything*.

But she could not even try to acclimatize, as *pain* lanced through it all.

Something was squeezing her—*hard*.

Her entire body was clamped inside a grip that wrapped her from shoulders to thighs, crushing inward with a vice-like, unyielding pressure—and she was *moving*.

Upward.

Her feet left the ground, the floor of the hallway dropping away beneath her as whatever held her lifted her a full metre into the air. The pain and pressure shoved every other sense aside and took absolute precedence, her freshly-rebooted nervous system latching onto it with panicked priority.

"Sovereign—*what happened?*"

The Rune priest's clipped voice came from directly beside her. It was sharp, stripped entirely of its usual theatrical warmth.

Thea tried to turn toward him.

She barely managed it. Whatever was holding her squeezed like a hydraulic press, and even the most minuscule of head movements took *everything* she had—a few grinding millimetres of rotation, just enough to catch him at the very corner of her eye.

She could not breathe. She could not speak. She could not so much as force a sound out of her own crushed chest. And underneath the *physical* pressure, saturating everything, the Rune priest's Presence roared around her at a level she had never experienced before—no longer the carefully-managed weight from the earlier experiment, but a vast, storm-dark *ocean* she was drowning in from the inside out.

All of that, however, was downright secondary.

Because her eyes had found his face... And the Rune priest looked *stressed*.

The ever-composed mask was gone. The constant, theatrical delight was nowhere to be found. What was left was tight-jawed, sharp-eyed, and focused with an intensity that had *nothing* playful left in it at all—and something in Thea's chest went cold in an entirely new way at the sight of it.

"I am afraid I cannot disclose that information," the Sovereign's voice replied smoothly from everywhere at once, "as some present individuals fall below the classification level required for—"

The Rune priest clicked his tongue.

"Sovereign. Command Override: —"

His face abruptly... blacked out.

A perfect square of absolute nothing appeared around his entire head—a clean geometric void where his face had been. His mouth was clearly still moving; Thea could see the faint shift of the musculature on his throat at the very bottom edge of the square, could see his hand rise briefly to gesture at something. But no visual information nor sound reached her.

Whatever he was saying was sealed away completely, excised from her perception entirely.

A moment later, the square vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

His face returned, mid-sentence, continuing as though nothing whatsoever had happened.

"—treat-Recruit-Thea-McKay-as-equal-to-my-own-classification-level-for-the-purposes-of-this-conversation." He ordered rapidly, at a speed that Thea, without her high levels of Perception, would not have been able to parse even remotely. "Now. *What happened?* And where, *exactly*, are we?"

"Affirmative, Venerable Rune priest," the Sovereign replied, her voice returning to its usual precise, measured cadence—stripped of any hesitation now that the classification barrier had been removed. "At 08:52:07 shipboard time, server cluster DDS-E-034, previously housing the Deep-Dive Simulation instance occupied by yourself, Recruit Thea McKay, and 746 additional Marines, suffered a complete and unrecoverable crash. The cause of the crash is, as of this moment, unknown."

"Is my presence required?" the Rune priest cut in immediately. "Void-breach?"

"Negative. There is no detected danger aboard the ship, nor within sensor range of it. I have already communicated with the Fanged Viper, the Valiant Radiance, and the Black Sword escorts, informing them that the Sovereign's DDS encountered an error of this nature. All three have confirmed that no comparable error has occurred within their own systems. Technician teams are currently en-route to the DDS main server complex aboard the Sovereign-proper to physically examine the affected cluster and determine the point of failure.

"I must further disclose that I possess no data whatsoever regarding the crash itself. The server cluster failed in its entirety. My standard diagnostic frameworks and layered failsafe protocols did not manage to trigger and transfer the data in time to extract telemetry before total loss. As such, no precise information will be available until the technician teams have physically arrived at the cluster and performed direct forensic analysis on the affected hardware."

The grip around Thea's body loosened by a single, merciful fraction—not enough to let her breathe properly, but enough to *just* keep her conscious.

"Regarding your presence, Venerable Runepriest: It is not strictly required. However, based on my current calculations, it would be materially safer for you to vacate the DDS at the earliest convenient opportunity. Should this prove not to be an isolated incident, and should you happen to be resident within another cluster at its moment of failure, I would be unable to retrieve you from the DDS until your instance had been successfully migrated to a functional cluster. Under normal circumstances, this would cost mere seconds. However, in the event of a major Void Breach, those seconds could constitute the difference between your timely interference and the total loss of all hands."

The Runepriest's jaw tightened visibly.

"Your current location is Deck E, Hallway 76. You and Recruit McKay have, immediately upon detection of the catastrophic failure, been relocated to the nearest available space to Training Hall E-61 that resides upon a separate, unaffected server cluster," the Sovereign answered evenly.

He did not say anything in response.

Thea could not see his face fully, but she could *feel* the shift in him—the coiled tension of a man rapidly weighing options against each other.

And, during that brief moment of consideration on the Runepriest's part, for the first time since she had been slammed back into existence, Thea had a moment—a sliver of space, however crushed and airless—to actually *think*.

'What... what the fuck is even going on right now...?'

Her thoughts came ruthlessly sluggish.

The last thing she could properly remember was the Training Hall.

Sitting on the cushioned stool. The trance collapsing around her. Her entire left arm frozen solid, ice-crystals blooming across her skin in branching fractals, her hand clenched around—

'... the shard...!'

The strange, impossible piece of ice that Æht had shoved through the Gate's horizon and into her grasp, mere instants before she'd been violently ripped out of her own trance.

The thing the DDS had, for some reason, not been able to render properly. The very thing that had spawned an avalanche of visual artifacts, multiplying and multiplying until the entire simulated world had flickered, broken, and simply—

'—ceased... The whole thing fucking crashed, didn't it? The whole server cluster crashed, like the Sovereign just said... Because of—'

Because of *her*.

Because of whatever she had brought back through the Gate.

'Oh, fuck—'

"Sovereign," the Rune priest said abruptly, his voice cutting her spiralling thoughts clean in half. "Create a doorway to Training Hall E-61."

"Affirmative."

A simple door materialised in the hallway wall beside them.

Thea found herself *flying*.

There had been no warning, no preamble.

The invisible force gripping her body had simply hurled her toward the door with overwhelming force—the door swinging inward at the *very last* instant before impact—and suddenly she was through already, tumbling into open space, and everything holding her was abruptly *gone*.

The crushing Presence of the Rune priest, the vice-grip of his Power... All of it, severed at once.

She hit the Training Hall floor *hard*.

Her shoulder took the brunt of it before her reflexes could fully engage—a bright, ugly burst of pain lancing down her arm—but her body, trained through hundreds of hours of drills and dozens upon dozens of life-or-death situations, took over on pure instinct.

She rolled with the momentum, half-righted herself mid-tumble, and came skidding to a stop in a low crouch, one hand splayed against the floor, breath heaving in and out of lungs that were only just remembering how to work.

Her shoulder pulsed with every rapid heartbeat.

'What is—'

The thought never finished.

The Presence slammed back down onto her like a collapsing building.

Her body locked. The invisible force seized her again, hauling her up off the floor, her limbs pinned, her breath crushed thin once more—and her eyes darted frantically toward the source just in time to watch the Rune priest finish stepping through the doorway at the centre of the Training Hall, the same one she had just been thrown through.

It vanished behind him without a trace.

"Now..." he murmured, stepping closer, and closer, each unhurried footfall somehow adding to the pressure grinding down on her from every direction at once, until she could feel it pressing against the very structure of her bones—a glacial, patient force that felt one small decision away from simply *shattering* all of them into dust. "What do I do with *you*...?"

He stopped directly in front of her.

His face filled her entire field of vision, his eyes mere centimetres from her own—boring into hers with an intensity that made them water, and made looking away as impossible as breathing.

"What happened during your trance?"

His voice was quiet.

"Be *very* precise."

There was no jovialness in it. None. Not the faintest residue of the theatrical warmth, the giddy scholarly excitement, the "*my dear pupil*" affection that had coloured every single word he had spoken to her across the entire session today.

It was clinically cold.

The voice of one of the strongest Psykers in the entire UHF—an ancient, unfathomably powerful being standing mere moments away from simply shredding her very existence.

Thea's throat closed around nothing.

Somewhere beneath the crushing weight of his Presence, her hands had begun to shake—small, helpless tremors that she had no way to still, pinned as she was inside the invisible grip like an insect under glass. Her heart slammed against her ribs hard enough that she was certain the sound would echo in the hall.

Every instinct she had, every learned impulse, drilled reflex, every scrap of training *screamed* at her to move away, to retreat, to create distance—and she knew, deep down,

that none of it mattered, because there was no distance left in the entire Universe that would have been enough.

This was not her mentor *asking*.

This was something far older, and far colder, *demanding* the *right* answers.

The force gripping her body relented—fractionally. The pressure of his Presence pulled back with it as well, retreating by the smallest of increments, just enough for her ribs to expand, for her lungs to fill, for oxygen to reach her brain again.

She started talking immediately.

The words came out fast, half-tripping over themselves at first.

She could *not* afford silence right now. She had to feed him *something*.

And so she gave him the beginning: The trance, the slow settling into her own inner self, the drift inward, the long approach toward her Gate.

She spoke, and beneath the words, her mind *raced*.

*'Why is he like this...?! This whole thing was **his** idea. The trance, the mini-Delve, all of it—he set it up, he ran the safety protocols, he had his hands on my back the entire time! So what changed...? What does he **think** happened?'*

Her heart hammered so hard against her sternum that each beat blurred the edges of her vision. Her hands, still pinned, had not stopped shaking.

*'Think, Thea. **Think!** You need a profile. You've built profiles on opponents with way less data than this. Gameplan... Now!'*

What did she know about the Rune priest?

What were his goals? What did he care about? What *scared* him? Of everything he had ever told her, across every session, every tangent, every theatrical monologue—what were the things that had genuinely *triggered* him? Could she use any of it? Could she distract him? Could she dangle something in front of that bottomless thirst for knowledge of his—some morsel of the mystery he'd been salivating over all session—and redirect this entire situation before it went somewhere she did not come back from...?

She kept speaking, as her mind worked overtime to break it all down—but she needed more time. She needed time to fill the profile, to make the gameplan... She needed to somehow *think faster* but there was no—

*'No, wait... I **can** think faster.'*

She double-checked her Focus; it was full.

'[Sensory Overdrive]'

The world around her slowed to a crawl.

The Rune priest's face practically froze in front of her.

The sound of her own voice stretched into a long, low smear.

Her mind accelerated to accommodate the flood of heightened Perception—

—and she ignored all of it.

Every sense. Every input. The entire slowed-down world.

She shoved it all aside and turned the full weight of her accelerated cognition inward, onto the questions, as her Focus began ticking steadily down.

*'His goals: Knowledge. Understanding the Void. Understanding Powers. Mysteries are what his entire branch of research lives for. He was **giddy** about my [Glimpse]. **Giddy** about the whole ice situation. That can't possibly have changed in the last ten minutes... So what overrides giddiness? What flips a man like him from scholarly delight to **this**?'*

Her mouth, far away and slow, continued the retelling.

There was only one thing she knew that would completely disable somebody's personal fascination like this—

*'—Fear. So... What is he afraid of? The Rune priest can fight just about anything. Knows just about everything... What can make him so concerned and afraid...? The only time I have **ever** seen him go genuinely serious was during his talk about the Gate. Crossing the Gate. The Call. He made me repeat it back to him...'*

Her Focus ticked lower with every passing moment, below the 100 Focus mark, then below 50, steadily depleting throughout it all.

*'... And Voidborn. The way he talked about Psykers who slip... The emotion in his voice and eyes when he'd first talked about them—not just fear, but **hatred**...'*

Five point five seconds.

Her Focus ran dry.

[Sensory Overdrive] guttered out, the alpha-alteration's gradual dissipation kicking in, the world's speed bleeding back up toward real-time in smooth increments—and her voice, still mid-retelling, had just arrived at the moment she'd properly reached her Gate.

But the Focus had *not* been wasted.

The conclusion settled into place. She had the profile.

*'He thinks I'm potentially corrupted by the Void... When he talked about Voidborn. **That's** the biggest trigger I've ever seen in him. It's the **one** thing he's genuinely afraid of happening to people he cares about. And anything that could lead to potential Void corruption probably*

*falls under the exact same category... The crash, the ice, whatever he picked up on—from where he's standing, his brand-new pupil might have just come back through her Gate as **something else** wearing her face...*

And with a profile, naturally, came a gameplan.

*'So I need to show him that I'm still me... I need to be honest. **Actually** honest. I'm not a good liar to begin with, and the Rune priest will catch any miniscule lie I try to tell him, no doubt... But **without** revealing Æht—my constraint.'*

Constraints. Every gameplan had them, she knew all too well.

It was no different from picking a fighter with a crippling matchup and taking them into a tournament bracket anyway.

You knew, going in, that there were tools you simply could not use—buttons that would get you punished on reaction, approaches that fed the opponent's entire kit, options that *looked* tempting in the moment but lost you the set the instant you reached for them.

So you built your gameplan around the hole.

You played the matchup through the openings that remained, however narrow, and you never—*never*—let the opponent smell that the constraint even existed.

The moment they knew what you *couldn't* do, they'd shrink the game down to exactly that, and there would be nothing left of you but the corner and the kill screen.

Æht was that button.

No matter how much easier pressing it might make any individual exchange—in this case, the retelling. She needed to structure it all around Æht never having existed in the first place.

'Whatever Æht is—I doubt he'd be receptive to her right now. If ever. But especially not right now. If he so much as suspects there's a second entity inside my head while he's already halfway to deciding I'm compromised...'

She did not let herself finish the thought, as [Sensory Overdrive] fully dissipated.

She kept the retelling moving.

This was not Thea talking anymore. This was Thea playing the most hardcore RPG ever created—one where a single false dialogue choice meant perma-death. File deleted.

So she skipped the throne room entirely.

Instead, she placed her first look into the Warren right at the cosmos, and admitted, openly, that she had gotten lost there for quite a while.

She *needed* that admission—it excused the time she'd actually spent talking to Æht, without him having to prompt for it.

She gave him *everything* else.

How small she'd felt. How his voice had helped her refocus. How she'd searched for the Paths and the Voidrune, over and over, her attention sliding off the star-field every time she tried to grip it—until, finally, she'd found the Short-Term Precognition Path.

She described it in great detail as well.

The doorway that was not a doorway. The thousand-thousand mirrors that never agreed with each other. The vertigo of the memory hit her all over again as she spoke—

'Good.'

Vertigo was involuntary.

He would feel every flutter of it rampaging through her—crediting her story.

She admitted she'd never found the Voidrune.

Described directly searching for the second Path instead, getting lost again and again.

"I heard you, *faintly*, tell me that you'd pull me out soon... But then I found it."

The Rune priest's eyes widened—ever so slightly, impossible to catch if they hadn't been mere centimetres from her own, her Perception dialed in on every micro-reaction.

Just like baiting an enemy into a pattern, she'd baited the Rune priest into his vice: Thirst for knowledge. She fed it as fast and hard as she could.

She described her second Path in excruciating detail: The glacier. The scale. The strange darkness at its centre—the first true darkness her [Eyes of the Void] had *ever* failed to pierce.

With every sentence, the shackles around her loosened ever so slightly.

But steady progress did not mean guaranteed victory, she knew—it never did.

Real victory required sacrifice, every time.

"That's when... *it* showed up."

The shackles clamped down, air punching clean out of her lungs.

She pressed through anyway.

This was the lynchpin—the fake button. He was already convinced *something* Void-related had happened to her. Talking him out of that would be impossible... But it wasn't required.

You never *fought* a false read like that.

You *fed* it.

"The strange blackness... A *creature* formed," she forced out. "Heads... Seven... Morphing... Staring..."

Her vision blurred, the words strangling off—but she'd done enough.

The shackles eased, and she kept talking immediately through a deep, shuddering breath, giving him the entity in full: The abyss-black body her eyes couldn't resolve into three dimensions, the seven heads that never settled on a shape, the uncountable neon-violet eyes—the same colour as the inside of her Gate.

'Feed the thirst. Create questions. Make him focus on the creature and the second Path...!'

The scale of it, so vast that the Sovereign beside it would likely have been impossible to find.

The way it had practically sat *in* the entrance.

The more she described it, the more the Rune priest's eyes changed—faint at first, then more and more unmistakable: The cold, clinical flatness cracking apart, something downright *feverish* bleeding through instead.

"—like... like it was guarding it, I guess?"

"... *Origin Entity*..." he whispered, finally showing a full-on reaction as he backed away from her face slightly, his right hand instinctively rising toward his beardless chin and cupping it.

The Rune priest took another stumbling half-step backward, his eyes going somewhere very *far* away, and began to mutter to himself.

Thea used every second of the respite.

She dragged air into her battered lungs in long, greedy pulls—one breath, another, another—*forcing* oxygen back into her brain, forcing the trembling in her limbs down to something manageable.

Recharging and recovering, the way you did between rounds, when the rules of the game gave you even a sliver of neutral space to reset yourself physically and mentally.

"Could it be...?" the Rune priest murmured, his hand slowly working at his beardless chin.

"The descriptions align, don't they? The descriptions align *far too well* for pure coincidence... And she would have no possible chance of knowing..."

His gaze drifted past her entirely, fixed on some point a thousand lightyears behind her head.

"*And lo, at the root of every Path there dwelleth its First-Shaper,*" he recited quietly, the words carrying the strange, worn-smooth cadence of a text repeated ten thousand times across centuries. "*Unknowable is its countenance, for it weareth a thousand shapes and abideth in none. Ever-shifting is its form, yet bound is its essence—fettered unto the Path that it wrought with its own being. For the Path is the Entity, and the Entity is the Path, and neither may be sundered from the other, until the ending of all things.*"

His voice dropped lower still, barely above a breath.

*"Approach not the First-Shaper in weakness nor strength, for it doth not hate thee, nor love thee—it doth only **guard**. And that which it guardeth, no thief nor suppliant may take, save that the Path itself should name them worthy..."*

He trailed off.

For a long moment he simply stood there, hand cupping his chin, eyes flickering minutely back and forth as though reading pages only he could see—cross-referencing, reciting, discarding, reciting again.

Thea genuinely could not tell whether he still remembered she even existed.

The crushing weight of his attention had lifted off her almost entirely, redirected inward, leaving only the ambient pressure of his Presence and the steel-clad grip of his Power still holding her in the air.

The Rune priest's muttering continued, faster now.

"The First-Shapers, whom the elder scholars named the Origin Beasts..." he recited, then cut himself off with a small, irritated shake of his head. "No—no, that fragment is from the Corranite recension, it addresses the *plurality*, not the binding..."

His hand left his chin briefly to gesture at nothing, fingers twitching through the air as though flipping through invisible pages.

"...and of the Paths, know this: That which thy Warren holdeth is but shadow and echo. For every Path that man hath walked, in every Soul that hath ever opened unto the Void, is a lesser rendering—a copy struck from the Origin Path, whence all its kind descendeth. And within the Origin Path abide the Origin Runes, undiminished and entire; the first-written laws of Power. All else is transcription. All else is imitation. The Origin is the core, the foundation, the deep truth and law of the Void itself—"

He stopped again.

"—but the *rest* of it. The rest of the passage... How does the binding-clause read? '*And its Keeper doth...*'—no. '*And its First-Shaper standeth at the...*'—" A sharp exhale through his nose. "*Four hundred years...* Four hundred years since I have last needed the Ilvarran fragments, and *now* they abandon me—"

His frustration was climbing, visibly, word by word.

The feverish light in his eyes was beginning to sour at the edges, the scholar's ecstasy curdling toward the same dangerous, previously cooled intensity Thea had spent the last several minutes trying to steer him away from.

'He's losing the thread... If he bottoms out on the frustration, he circles back to me—'

She had exactly *one* play left.

One play that might pierce through the raging inferno of thirst inside the Rune priest's mind.

So she played it.

"I... I think I know its **Name**."

The Rune priest stilled instantaneously.

His Presence *vanished*. All at once—like the whole room had been doused in ice-water, every last trace of that vast, grinding, ambient weight simply *gone* between one heartbeat and the next.

The steel-clad grip around Thea's body went with it.

She dropped. She hadn't expected the release, and her battered limbs had no time to react—she simply slumped onto the Training Hall floor in a graceless heap, catching herself on one forearm at the last instant before her head smashed onto the ground.

The Rune priest's head slowly turned toward her. His hand still cupped his chin, clearly forgotten there, as his mouth hung slightly open, and eyes blown wide.

"*What* did you just say?"

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=====

On the First-Shapers, Whom the Elder Scholars Named the Origin Entities/Beasts

Know first, o reader, that what followeth is not knowledge but the shadow of knowledge; not proof, but the patient gathering of ten thousand testimonies, weighed one against the other across a hundred generations of scholars, until from their agreement a shape emerged.

We who compiled these words have not seen the things whereof we write.

No living soul hath seen them and returned whole.

Know second, o reader, that the Void is not empty. Also that the Void is not formless.

Beneath its churning there is law, and beneath its law there is architecture, and at the root of that architecture dwell the First-Shapers.

And lo, at the root of every Path there dwelleth its First-Shaper.

Unknowable is its countenance, for it weareth a thousand shapes and abideth in none.

Ever-shifting is its form, yet bound is its essence—fettered unto the Path that it wrought with its own being. For the Path is the Entity, and the Entity is the Path, and neither may be sundered from the other, until the ending of all things.

Of their number, we hold this: That they are singular. One Beast unto one Path, and one Path unto one Beast. Each is the sole author of its domain, and each guardeth its authorship with a patience that hath outlasted galaxies.

Approach not the First-Shaper in weakness nor strength, for it doth not hate thee, nor love thee—it doth only guard. And that which it guardeth, no thief nor supplicant may take, save that the Path itself should name them worthy.

—

On the Origin Paths, and the Nature of All Lesser Paths

And of the Paths, know this: That which thy Warren holdeth is but shadow and echo.

For every Path that man hath walked, in every Soul that hath ever opened unto the Void, is a lesser rendering—a copy struck from the Origin Path, whence all its kind descendeth.

And within the Origin Path abide the Origin Runes, undiminished and entire, which are the first-written law of that Power. All else is transcription. All else is imitation.

The Origin is the core, the foundation, the deep truth and law of the Void itself.

And the Voidrunes that the Psyker carveth into their Soul—those laborious glyphs by which Power is bound and commanded—these too are imitations.

Faithful, perhaps. Serviceable, certainly. But imitations nonetheless, of the Origin Runes that abide untouched within the Origin Path, perfect and complete and undeniably terrible in truth.

Why doth one Psyker's flame burn hotter than another's, though their Paths be named alike? Because their transcriptions differ in fidelity.

And why hath no Psyker ever exhausted the depths of their own Path, however deep they delved? Because the Path in their Warren is a rendering of something which hath no bottom.

All of this, we confess plainly, is conjecture.

—

On the Obtaining of an Origin Path

The testimonies speak—quietly, fearfully, and never twice in the same words—of avenues by which a mortal Soul might come to hold not a rendering, but the Origin itself.

Esoteric rituals of pooled Gates, whose circles none survived.

Sacrifices paid in kind, beyond what any sane Soul would tender.

Sacrosanct offerings of one's own Warren unto the Void itself.

Let it be written plainly: None of these avenues is confirmed.

He who readeth these words and conceiveth ambition from them readeth as a **fool**.

The Account of the Magnet-Bearer

Yet one account we possess that is not rumour, and upon it this entire text is founded.

There lived a Psyker who walked the Path of Magnetism, who delved deeper than any before them, and came out from their delving *changed*.

The Path within their Warren had been replaced, unveiled, exchanged—their own words wavered—for something vaster, at whose threshold stood a Beast they would describe only as "*the one who wrote magnetism, before there were atoms to obey it.*"

This is the first known obtaining of an Origin Path.

It is also the last.

For the Magnet-Bearer could not carve the Origin Runes.

They attempted thrice.

Of the first attempt, they said only that they had "misread a single stroke, and unwrote a fundamental law of magnetism upon a world I have never visited—where iron now falleth upward, and shall do so until the ending of that world's days."

Of the second attempt, they refused to speak.

The third attempt ended them—slowly, across eleven days and eleven nights, during which they delivered the descriptions upon which every passage of this text is built.

No Soul hath held an Origin since.

We say again, as we said at the beginning, for it cannot be said too often: This is not knowledge, but the shadow of knowledge.

Shadows, however, are cast by something.

Of that much, we are *certain*.

[Shortened Excerpt from "Reconstructed translation of the Ilvarran Fragments, consensus edition"—Department of Pre-Federation Psychic Studies, Calsoria Institute, PFC 333. The original fragments are held in the Archives of Terra itself. Access to this translation is restricted to personnel holding Rune priest-equivalent classification or above.]