

Volume 2 - Chapter 94 - Mysteries

"What do I want for my 'retirement'?"

He laughed for nearly a full minute before he answered.

"Just a grave. Not a crater, not a memorial wall, not a footnote in someone's after-action report... Just... A grave. With a name on it. And a body underneath it."

He died nine months later in a Void Eruption, leaving behind a crater.

There was no body below the grave.

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[Excerpt from "Last Quotes, An Anthology Of Loss" — Battlefield Psyker Inandris Ferana, in conversation with embedded journalist, PFC 812.]

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The Rune priest actually stood up from the armchair following her question, the void-black robes chiming with the sudden motion. Whatever excitement the topic had been generating in him had clearly tipped over the threshold where simply sitting and talking about it was no longer sufficient for him.

He clearly *needed* to move.

He started pacing back and forth in front of her, hands clasped behind his back, the chiming following him in an almost musical rhythm.

"First and foremost," he said, his pace settling into a comfortable rhythm, "I would actually like to divert this question away from the whole 'cold' aspect for the moment. We *will* absolutely get to it—do not worry, Thea. But I have the distinct feeling that the cold business is going to require considerably more hands-on experimentation than pure theory, and I do not want to start that experimentation until I have a few other things sorted out first."

He turned at the end of his short walking lane and started back the other way.

"So instead, let me ask a counter-question of my own. If you would permit me to?"

Thea blinked at him.

It felt extremely strange to be asked permission for *anything* by the Rune priest, given the sheer difference in power and rank between them. The man could presumably make her dance the Lumiosian Galliard with a single thought if the mood took him—which she would, of course, oblige, even if she was admittedly a bit rusty. Orders were orders, after all.

Yet here he was politely asking if it was *alright* to ask her a question, like she had any real way to deny him.

She just nodded in his direction, unsure of how to even answer this properly.

Truthfully, she'd already gotten through most of the major questions she actually wanted to ask anyway. After all, the *Æht* situation was still *far* too risky to bring up before she'd talked to Karania—until she had her best friend's read on whether the thing in her head was a threat, an ally, or something stranger than either, she couldn't even *begin* to figure out how to bring it up safely.

The Rune priest smiled broadly and nodded several times.

"Wonderful. *Wonderful*." He stopped briefly mid-pace, then resumed. "So. My question, Thea: How, *exactly*, does your [Glimpse] function? Walk me through a usage of it. In *excruciating* detail, if you would. Do not leave anything out, no matter how minor or how obvious you think it might be."

Thea was once again caught slightly off guard by the line of questioning.

She had to take a small mental pause to even start wrapping her head around what he was actually asking her to describe.

'What kind of question is that? How my [Glimpse] works, exactly...?'

She tried to conjure up the precise sequence of events from her most recent uses of [Glimpse]—the actual uses, not the failed ones during this session.

She sorted through how she decided on using it, the way it felt when she did, the precise order things happened in when she did and how it all manifested...

Meanwhile, the Rune priest, apparently mistaking her silence for either a question or just an opportunity to fill the space, kept talking as he paced.

"Now, I have my reasons for asking, of course. I have been speaking with Pale Watcher, a fellow Rune priest colleague of mine, about topics regarding you recently—"

Thea's eyes snapped up to him, widening.

She did *not* want to be the topic of conversation between a bunch of Rune priests.

That had *bad-things-coming-soon* written all over it in *extremely* large and bold letters.

The Rune priest immediately picked up on the reaction and raised both hands defensively, his pace slowing.

"Oh, no, no. Not by name, of course! Not even *hinting at you*, really. I have simply been asking academic questions of him, the way I sometimes do. He and I have a long-standing back-and-forth on certain theoretical matters—specifically the interactions between the

Veritas Inheritance and the Precognition Paths. He is, after all, a Veritas Precog himself, though his focus is on the Long-Term variant rather than your Short-Term one... Anyway.

"Your existence as my pupil is very much a secret within the UHF at large, and it will remain so for quite some time, if I have anything to say about it. The political inter-Faction headache that would erupt the moment your name became attached to mine, in any official capacity, is simply not something I am inclined to deal with at the present moment."

Thea's stomach dropped slightly at that last part.

Because she had, in fact, been telling people he was her mentor pretty much since their first session—casually, conversationally, throughout normal squad chatter.

All of Alpha Squad *certainly* knew, ever since yesterday if not before.

And Evelyne, even more concerningly, knew too, since their last training with Lucas.

After seeing how downright scared Corvus had gone the moment he realized who Evelyne *actually* was, the idea of Evelyne also knowing that the Rune priest was Thea's personal teacher was... Probably a problem.

She quickly held up a hand, interrupting him as he started spinning back up into his monologue.

"Uhm... Rune priest? I *might* have mentioned that you're my mentor to a few other Recruits... I didn't know it was supposed to be a secret..."

He paused mid-pace and turned to look at her—clearly surprised to have been interrupted, but visibly not upset about it. After a second or two, he simply waved her concerns off with one hand, completely unbothered.

"Ah, no worries at all. Their information will not leave the Sovereign without my permission, Thea. Do not worry about it one bit. We will address that issue if it ever actually becomes one... Which it will not."

And, just like that, he was already back to pacing and back to his monologue, as if the interruption had never happened.

"As I was saying. I have been talking to Pale Watcher about a particular theoretical question that has been nagging at me after our first session, and—"

Thea was only half-listening now, because that was the *third* time.

The Rune priest had now invoked his peculiar arrangement with the Sovereign *three separate times* across three different operational contexts—once about her ability to have a fully private conversation with whoever she chose, once about the AI not interfering with his training of her, and now about the AI being fundamentally incapable of leaking information he had not specifically authorized for release.

An arrangement that broad and strangely specific went *well* beyond anything Thea understood the operational hierarchy of this ship to actually allow.

The level of control the Rune priest was casually demonstrating over a Ship-class AI like the Sovereign should not have been possible for a single officer to hold, regardless of rank or title unless they were the Captain of the ship—including a Rune priest, and even including *this specific* Rune priest in particular.

The Sovereign's loyalty was supposed to run to the UHF as an institution, not to individual personnel, after all—at least, as far as Thea understood it.

'Unless the AI considers the Rune priest's actions and opinions to be effectively those of the UHF itself...? That would make sense, kind of, given his position. But still—'

She caught herself drifting and forcibly pulled her focus back. She was already missing chunks of whatever the Rune priest was currently saying, and that was a *far* more important thread to be tracking than this strange little piece of background trivia.

'I'm absolutely going to be mentioning this to Kara alongside everything else... As soon as I possibly can. But until then, I need to focus up.'

She pulled her attention back to the Rune priest, who was, mercifully, still mid-monologue and showed no signs of having noticed her drift.

"—was asking him, *specifically*, about the efficacy of Short-Term Precognition in active combat against the Stellar Republic and its forces. Pale Watcher and I have had this particular argument for..." he paused, doing a quick mental tally as he paced, "...well, several decades now. He has always held the position that, for a Veritas-Inheritance Psyker, there are *vastly* superior combat options available than the Short-Term Precognition Path. He considers it, frankly, somewhat wasteful as a combat specialization for that particular Inheritance pairing.

"And I had, frankly, accepted that position from him for a great many of those decades," the Rune priest continued, still pacing back and forth. "His arguments are sound, his framework is consistent, and I had no real counter-example to point at. Especially as he is a Veritas Precog himself, so what could I really say to him, that would contradict his personal experiences? *Until* I started reviewing your operational footage, Thea."

He looked at her briefly, their eyes meeting, before continuing on his way.

"Now, after watching some of what you have done over these past months, I found myself *genuinely* curious about Pale Watcher's claim—because there was very little a Wielder with a Veritas Inheritance and any given Path-Power combination *should* have been able to do that would rival what you have already pulled off. This early in a Psyker's career, at least. And yet—" he gestured vaguely toward her, "*—you have.*"

He turned again, the robes chiming melodically.

"So I went to him with the question directly. Pale Watcher's response was that accurately identifying which units in a formation are Duplicators and which are mere Duplicates is only

useful at small operational scales, as in, squad-sized—because [Glimpse] simply cannot operate at the kind of throughput required to make any kind of meaningful Battlefield impact at-scale. That has, in-fact, been his consistent position, and he held to it this time around as well."

He stopped briefly, frowning at the floor.

"That was the point at which I had to ask him to clarify in detail. Because *clearly*, what you have been doing in your DMs—and in the Assessment, for that matter—has not been *exclusively* small-scale. You have, on multiple recorded occasions, dropped dozens or even *hundreds* of enemies in rapid succession by chaining your [Glimpse] activations together. That is *not* what is generally considered as small-scale engagements."

He resumed pacing, but slower now, his movements more measured than before.

"Pale Watcher then walked me through the actual operational limits of [Glimpse] as he understands them. The duration, the cooldown, the cognitive load required per activation, the temporal-perception bandwidth ceiling... The whole framework, essentially. And on paper—*on paper*, mind you—what he was saying made complete sense. It lined up with everything I have ever read on the subject, everything I have ever heard from other Veritas Short-Term Precogs over the centuries. Every single thing added up cleanly."

He paused mid-step.

"And yet, when I went back and rewatched your first DM again with that framework in mind—"

He turned to face her directly. He had stopped entirely now.

"—the framework did not fit with your actions. What you have done in that DM *should* have been impossible."

He fixed his full attention on her then, sharper than at any point during the entire session—the look of someone who had been turning a problem over in his head for weeks and was finally about to get the piece he'd been missing.

"Something does *not* add up, Thea."

He pointed at her.

"Which brings me back to my original request: Tell me, in *excruciating detail*, how your [Glimpse] manifests. What it feels like. What you actually perceive when you activate it. The duration. The clarity. The cognitive cost. The cooldown. *Everything* you can put into words, and several things you probably cannot."

His eyes locked on hers, sharp and completely focused on her.

"Leave *nothing* out."

Thea's stomach dropped.

The weight settled in her chest immediately—not the precognitive pang she was used to, but something heavier, slower, and far more uncomfortable. It pressed in from every direction at once, squeezing her lungs just enough to make the next breath feel like work.

'Oh, fuck...'

Because if Pale Watcher—a Rune priest with her own Inheritance, a Veritas Precog who had spent decades, maybe even centuries working in the exact same colour of Power that she was working in—wasn't experiencing what she was experiencing... then *what the actual fuck* was even going on with her [Glimpse]—with her *whole* Psychic Powerset?!

Her mind raced through the implications faster than she could keep up with them.

[Glimpse] wasn't working how it should be working.

That, in and of itself, was already a problem—but it was a problem she could maybe stomach as just another mystery she'd have to live with until she could find answers to it, if she didn't already know—or rather, have a very strong suspicion as to—exactly *why* that was the case.

The reason was sitting somewhere deep inside her right now, hidden away from the Rune priest's senses.

'She's the one actually using it... Not me. Not really, at least. I just call it up, and she does the work behind the scenes...'

The thought was sour enough on its own, but the bigger problem was the one slowly tightening her ribs: *'I cannot tell him that... Like at all.'*

Not without revealing Æht.

And revealing Æht was, without question, not going to happen before she'd talked to Kara about it all. Dropping that particular bomb on the Rune priest, of all people, before she had a clear read on whether Æht was a threat, an ally, or whatever else, and before she'd had at least one other pair of eyes—and a *massive* brain—look over it all...

That would be downright suicidal.

Worse, however, was that his sudden, sharp-eyed fascination with how [Glimpse] worked for her wasn't exactly making it easier to keep her composure either.

The more interested he became, the more pressure she felt to give him something real—and the more pressure she felt, the more obvious it would be if she started fumbling around the parts she couldn't actually answer.

'Just focus. Honest about what I can be honest about. Vague about the parts I can't... He already accepted that there's people with some inherent understanding of how to use Powers, surely he wouldn't expect a person like that to be able to give a full accounting of how it all worked... Right?'

It was the best she had.

She forced her breathing slower. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

The way the Old Man had drilled into her, years and years ago.

'In. Out... In. Out.'

The weight in her chest didn't vanish—it never really did when she needed it to—but it eased back to something manageable. Something she could actually function around.

She met the Rune priest's eyes, and started explaining.

"Alright. So. There's, uh... a few different ways I use it, really. Depending on the situation."

The Rune priest nodded once, just enough to confirm he was listening, then settled himself back into a stillness that was almost unsettling.

Thea had noticed this about him before—he could go from his usual restless, theatrical pacing to dead-still attention in less than a second, with no visible transition, as long as it was something that genuinely caught and held his attention.

It was like a switch flipping.

"The baseline version—the one I use most often, just in normal combat or even just walking around the ship—is mostly... passive? For lack of a better word. I don't really activate it the way I do the bigger versions. It's more like... it's just on. Always. Like [Eyes of the Void] is for me."

She paused, trying to find the right words.

"When something is about to happen to me—a shot coming in, somebody about to swing at me, anything along those lines—there's this... *pang*. Sharp and deep, right here." She tapped her chest, just below her sternum. "It doesn't really hurt, but it's undeniably noticeable. Nothing has the same kind of feeling that I've ever felt. And it's always in the same spot, always feels the same way. Right at my Gate."

The Rune priest hummed thoughtfully, nodding.

"That does line up with what Pale Watcher mentioned about his own [Glimpse]... Almost all Psychic Powers have some sort of low-Psyfocus-cost 'passive' version, as you call it. Powers that create a fireball can keep you warm, Powers that create illusions might change your appearance slightly, and so on. [Glimpse] is known to offer up to around half a second of passive foresight. It's a very popular dip for Veritas Inheritance Psykers as a result," he explained, then gestured for her to continue.

"Well... I basically just get a flash, when something happens. Not a long one—maybe a quarter of a second in the future, maybe half a second at most, like you mentioned. Just enough to see what's about to happen to me. The flash is, uh... monochrome? Just black,

white, and grey. No colour to it at all. And it's not like I'm just watching from the outside or anything—it's still from my own eyes, my own perspective..."

She gestured vaguely, trying to convey the angle.

"Like... I *see* what I see, I *feel* what I feel. But I don't have any control over the body. It just moves, and I'm along for the ride. Every step, every shift in weight, every twitch of my finger on the trigger—I feel all of it happen, exactly the way it's about to happen. I try my best to copy the muscle memory into my brain as it all happens. That's how I can copy it so precisely afterwards and benefit from the longer, more powerful versions of [Glimpse]. My brain effectively already knows what it's supposed to do, because *it already did it once*, in the vision, if that makes sense?"

The Rune priest nodded sagely and asked a few clarifying questions about the passive version—mostly whether she'd ever felt it "turn off," and whether she'd ever wanted to.

She hadn't, to both—especially the second.

It was by far her best defensive and offensive tool, after all.

She walked him through the active, fully voiced version next—the deliberate internal call of the Power's name, the wider vision window, the ability to line up multiple targets and fire on them in sequence afterwards, and the noticeable jump in Focus cost.

The Rune priest cut in once to ask how exactly she "called" the Power internally, and she did her best to explain it, fully knowing now that it wasn't really her doing the using of the Power: "I guess I just kind of will into existence... and it just happens?"

He seemed to take that explanation at face-value, not letting his face reveal anything of the contrary, which Thea took as a win.

She then moved on to also mention the hitch she'd been running into more often lately—the weapon cycle time becoming a major bottleneck when she used the more powerful versions of [Glimpse]. Hence the recent shift toward laser-types in those scenarios.

The Rune priest made a small, considering sound at that with an eyebrow raising slightly, but didn't interrupt or comment on it otherwise.

She also walked him through the feeling of using the nanobot-swarm-amplified version.

The Nano-Bot Swarm wrapping her in an orbit, the shouted Power name being multiplied a thousandfold through every one of them on the way out, the much stronger, much clearer, much longer vision that resulted and the way it allowed her to "paint" dozens of targets at once, easily.

Heat rose in her cheeks slightly as she admitted that, yes, she had also once or twice accidentally ruptured a friendly's eardrums with that variant.

The Rune priest's mouth twitched at the corners, but he simply asked, evenly, whether the damage had ever ended up being permanent. She confirmed it hadn't.

"Well, then I'd say it's nothing to worry about, yeah?" He waved a hand lazily. "I'd imagine your fellow Marines would not be too mad about having fewer Freaks to deal with, in exchange for a bit of temporary hearing loss."

'I guess...?' Thea thought, unable to really agree with that reasoning. 'Still kind of a dick move to injure friendlies though, even if you're ultimately causing a positive outcome... At least without their consent.'

She put the thought out of mind, and finished on the [Sensory Overdrive] combination.

The way it had the same monochrome vision, same passenger-perspective, but a far higher *resolution* that her brain could actually parse because the Allbright Ability was bumping her processing speed in parallel.

She also mentioned the downright brutal Focus cost, of course.

The upside being that everything she'd seen during the vision stayed clear in her head afterwards, and that the Sensory Overdrive layer didn't seem to "run out" mid-[Glimpse], even when the vision technically lasted longer than the Ability normally would.

She paused briefly afterwards, then forced herself to bring up the last thing she could think of that had always struck her as odd in regards to her [Glimpse]—a question that had been bugging her since her very first DM, and now seemed as good a time as any to actually voice.

"There's... something I've been meaning to ask in this regard, actually," she said carefully. "About how [Glimpse] even works, *fundamentally* speaking. Specifically the Active version, when I use it to identify Duplicators in a formation."

The Rune priest's attention sharpened even further—which Thea had figured was impossible, given his already intense focus on her every word—his head tilting slightly in interest.

"The way it works from my end is that I activate the Power, I get the vision, and I see myself shoot the right Duplicators out of a group, right? The real ones, I mean. Not any of the copies."

She frowned, trying to find the right words.

"But... the way I figure out which ones are the real ones, *in the vision*, is... I guess by precognitively watching myself figure it out in the future? Which I then do, after the vision ends, because I *just* saw myself do it. Which means the future me, I observe with [Glimpse] is also figuring it out using precognition. Otherwise it would be shooting duplicates, which would still tell me which ones weren't Duplicators, but also wouldn't lead to nearly as many explicit *confirmations* as [Glimpse] actually provides. The [Glimpse]-me never, ever makes a mistake. Which... Would mean that future-me is watching *even-further-future-me* figure it out, no? Like several times, even."

She gestured helplessly.

"Isn't that some kind of recursive precognitive loop? Like, the Power is, *fundamentally*, asking *itself* the answer to a question only it can answer in a future that hasn't happened yet, and *somehow* that simply resolves into the correct answer regardless. I've never been able to wrap my head around how that's actually supposed to work... It feels downright impossible the more I think about it. Does that make any sense...?"

The Rune priest's mouth twitched at the corners—a small, pleased sort of expression that didn't quite become a smile but very nearly did.

He held a single finger up to indicate he'd come back to that, but said nothing for the moment, his eyes glittering in a way that she couldn't really interpret beyond unadulterated fascination.

She let the quiet linger for a few moments, but when it was clear that the Rune priest had no intention of answering her question right now, she mentally ran through her recent uses to check she wasn't missing anything obvious.

"Those... Those are the main ways I've used it so far, I guess: Passive, Active, Active with Swarm, and Active with Overdrive. I haven't really tried Active with Swarm *and* Overdrive at the same time yet, but... It's probably the natural next step? I don't really think my Focus pool could survive it just yet, though."

She let her hand fall.

Then shrugged slightly.

"I think... That's everything...? If there's something specific you want me to dig into, I can try. But that's the whole picture, as far as I actually understand it myself so far..."

She fell silent.

The Rune priest had remained mostly quiet throughout the entire ten-odd minutes of her breakdown—nodding periodically, humming here and there, only cutting in once or twice to clarify a word or a sensation. Otherwise, he had simply listened.

Now, however, he finally moved.

Without a word, he walked the few steps back to his armchair, lowered himself into it with the same dramatic flourish as before, and cupped the bare, beardless line of his chin between his thumb and forefinger. His eyes settled somewhere very far away, attention pulled inward to a place Thea couldn't follow.

He didn't speak.

The silence stretched.

Thea waited, and as the seconds dragged on, her chest tightened by slow degrees. Her hand kept finding the edge of her sleeve again, picking at a loose thread that had only gotten worse over the course of the session.

'Did I say too much? Did I let something slip? Some detail that doesn't add up unless there's somebody else doing the work behind the curtain...?'

She ran back through the breakdown in her head as fast as she could, checking every section for cracks—anything that even hinted at *Æht*, anything that revealed too much about the seams between her actual experience and what she'd let the Rune priest see.

She couldn't find anything obvious.

That, somehow, did not make her feel *any* better.

The Rune priest's expression hadn't shifted at all—it was stone-faced and distant.

Not a hint of what was actually happening behind his eyes.

And then—slowly, almost imperceptibly at first—the corner of his mouth began to curl.

It was barely a twitch.

Then it became a faint smile... Then a wider one.

And then, with every passing second, the smile spread further across his face, until it was no longer a smile at all but a massive, toothy, downright *unhinged* grin, broad enough to make every bit of Thea's earlier unease feel, in retrospect, like a very gentle warm-up exercise.

"Thank you, Thea. *Truly*. For the detailed breakdown," he said warmly, his voice a low rumble of genuine delight. "The most interesting part, by far, is your question about the recursive nature of it... Because *that*, I do think, is the key to all of it."

He gestured vaguely at her.

"It is entirely at-odds with how the Power *should* be functioning, based on my own understanding of how [Glimpse] works. And that, my dearest pupil..." his grin widened even further, somehow, "...is very, very interesting."

Thea swallowed.

She had absolutely no idea what to do with that.

'...What does any of that actually mean...?'

She fidgeted in her chair, then forced herself to ask the actual question, because she very much *needed* an answer here.

"Wh—What does that all mean, then?" she asked, her voice coming out a little thinner than she'd meant it to. "For the Power, I mean...? How does it *actually* work?"

And, as if that had been the funniest thing anybody had ever asked him in his entire life, the Rune priest belted out a full, booming belly-laugh, his head thrown back, the void-black robes chiming wildly with the force of it.

"I have *no idea*!"

He flung his arms wide, jumped up from the armchair, and spun in a full circle, his armour chimes ringing furiously at the exaggerated motion.

"I have not a single clue, Thea! Not one! And isn't that just the most *wonderful* thing you have ever heard in your entire life?!"

His grin was practically splitting his face in two now.

"Not a single idea why your [Glimpse] would be different from everyone else's. Not the faintest hint of what the cause might be, or what the ultimate effect of that difference even is...! *Nothing*!"

He laughed again, the sound echoing through the empty training hall around them.

Then he abruptly *stopped*.

His full attention dropped down on her—Thea, who had, at some point during his eruption, retreated by several inches into the furthest depths of her armchair without entirely meaning to.

"A bona-fide *mystery*, Thea. *That* is what this means."

His grin sharpened into a predatory one now.

"And I simply *cannot* wait to sink my teeth into it and figure it all out! Pale Watcher is going to have to redo his past century of research by the time we are through with your strange Powers, my dear pupil. And his face—*ohhhh his face!*—when I finally show him the fruits of our labour here..."

He let out a delighted, almost giddy chuckle.

"...is going to be absolutely *glorious*!"