

Volume 2 - Chapter 105 - The Talk II

"You've all sat through the boring theory. You know what a Gate is by now. Today we start experimenting with it. Small draws only—thimble-sized, nothing more. I will demonstrate a basic application of Psyfocus once, and then you will each replicate it. Always watch your thresholds and trust your instincts. [...] Now, begin on my count—"

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Final recorded words of Psychic Instructor Marienne Solveig-Adda, Training Hall B-4, IGS Monsoon, PFC 688.

The theory course in question had covered thresholds for a total of one early morning, a full month prior—with an entire Assessment sitting between the initial lesson and the application.

Two hundred and ninety-four personnel were Zeroed in the resulting cascade. The IGS Monsoon required extensive repairs over the course of the following seven months, before it could pick up a new Recruitment Drive. UHF investigators later noted that the instructor's lesson plan was, for a class of **properly trained** Psykers, downright flawless.

The instructors of the so-called "*Competence Assumption Era*" were, by every professional measure, skilled Psykers and diligent teachers. Their shared, fatal error was simpler than incompetence: They taught the students they expected to *have*, rather than the students they actually *had*.

This incident, and many similar ones during that era, is the direct reason all UHF Psychic education was subsequently rebuilt from the ground up in PFC689.

Psychic education, per modern UHF doctrine, now starts from the ground floor and requires consistent, intermittent testing of knowledge—with each layer of theory confirmed in full—before any practical experimentation is offered to the budding Psykers in question.

All initial experimentation *must* additionally be performed in the presence of a Null, to further curtail cascading failures.

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[Excerpt from "A Brief History of Instructional Failures" — UHF Marine Corps Training Command internal orientation material, PFC 927]

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Thea started recounting the entirety of the Rune priest's session with her.

She gave her the full rundown.

From the moment she'd entered the Training Hall that morning to the moment she'd handed his Staff back in the corridor outside of it.

She detailed everything as much as she possibly could—every exchange, every lesson, every escalation.

The [Sensory Overdrive] alteration discussion. The carving practice, and the many, many deaths that had come with it, which, surprisingly enough, did not have Kara give her the stinkeye—*yet*. The cold-and-ice conversation. The mishap statistics and the mini-Delve procedure with all its rules and warnings. The trance. The Gate. What she'd found on the other side—Warren, throne room, Æht, the star-field, and all.

After all, if she wanted to pick Kara's brain about any of this properly, then Kara needed *every* little detail Thea could provide her with. Half-briefings produced half-conclusions, and Thea had not risked her *very literal* career and life just to get half-conclusions out of all this.

The only things she excluded were the items listed behind the Gold Lock—the ones spelled out in the Sovereign's parameter document, which she'd speed-read on her datapad earlier, while waiting for Kara to arrive.

Thankfully, the list was mercifully short: The existence of Origin Runes, Origin Paths, and Origin Beasts as a whole—those were sealed, absolutely, no exceptions.

But her second Path itself?

That one wasn't on the list. Which tracked, really—the Rune priest had *specifically* told her there was no realistic way to keep the Path's existence secret anyway, given that half the ship's monitoring infrastructure had already flagged her ice mishaps more than a few times now.

The cover story of him having found a way to help her Delve existed for a reason, after all.

So she didn't bother holding that part back from Kara at all.

"—and just so we're clear on the important part," she said at one point, "the Rune priest is almost entirely unaware of Æht, as far as I can tell. He suspected *something* during our very first session together—when we went through my Awakening. Mostly because I didn't know any better at the time. I had no idea what I was dealing with, after all... But everything since then—the Paths, the mishaps, the—" she caught herself at the edge of the Lock, rerouted, "*everything else*, it's all been so much shinier than that one loose thread he said he'd wanted to investigate at a later time. He's basically been too busy chasing the new findings to circle back to it. At least, so far."

"So far," Kara echoed quietly, then chuckled and shook her head. "Only *you* could create so much chaos that even someone like the *Rune priest* can't keep track of all of it, huh?"

Thea pouted at that, unsure of what to say.

*'It's not like I'm **trying** to cause chaos or anything... I didn't **choose** any of this to happen...'*

So, instead, she simply continued her retelling.

She went over the strange, recursive-[Glimpse] conversation. The way she'd built her gameplan mid-interrogation, [Sensory Overdrive] and all—which earned her a look from Kara that hovered somewhere between professional appreciation and deep, maternal concern.

She also covered the Soul Burn situation—although she specifically avoided mentioning the **True Name's** existence, as that was Gold-Locked as well. Kara had simply nodded when Thea explained that she was restricted from detailing how or why she'd gotten Soul Burn, barring "Psyker stuff".

Then came the Staff, the [Telekinesis] Rune discovery—cube-based sonic boom included—the Voidrune priority order, and, finally, the parting warnings she'd received from the Rune priest.

By the time she finally came to the end of her retelling, roughly an hour and a half had passed.

Thea leaned heavily back against the headboard once more, then tilted further, resting the back of her skull against the cool metal of the wall behind it, trying to leach some of the heat out of her head. The Soul Burn had been slowly stoking her felt temperature upward throughout the entire recounting, and the chill of the bulkhead against her scalp was, frankly, one of the better sensations she'd experienced all day.

"So, yeah... He gave me the injection in response to... the whole Soul-Burn stuff I can't talk about yet," she answered Kara's outstanding question about the mystery medication sitting on her medical profile. "I don't really know what it was—but it's been helping. Like, *a lot*."

Kara accepted that with a slow nod, filing it visibly away into whatever mental folder held all the other redacted pieces, and then went quiet again.

For quite a while, this time.

Her eyes had gone to that unfocused way again, the fingers of her left hand resuming their slow, absent rhythm against her knee, as her formidable mind visibly ground through the full mess of everything she'd just been handed.

Thea, for her part, braced and tried to get the mounting headache under control.

She'd expected a fight, honestly. Or at least a *proper* scolding—the full Squad Medic Kara special, delivered at volume and itemised by incident.

She had, after all, once again come within a hair's breadth of dying for real, on top of quite literally dying digitally several dozen times over.

That combination usually produced a *very predictable* Kara response.

But the explosion somehow hadn't come.

That unspoken question was answered almost immediately, however, when Kara finally began giving her thoughts on everything.

"I'm not particularly happy about all of this," she started, evenly. "With the Rune priest, *or* with you, really. I want that stated up front, because of how close everything came, *yet again*."

She let out a slow breath. "But I *also* can't see any way things could have realistically gone any better. And believe me, I've been looking for one for the past five minutes..."

Thea blinked at her best friend, not having expected that opening.

"Based on everything you've told me—and accounting for how little I admittedly know about Psyker-related *anything*—the precautions he took were about as adequate as they could have been... Layered failsafes, monitored biotelemetry, the reset protocols, the kill-switch authority, the injector and artefacts on standby... That's about as sound methodology as I could really ask for. The problem wasn't the safety architecture in itself."

Her eyes met Thea's.

"The main problem, really, was that even *he* didn't expect a *fraction* of the absolute chaos created to even be possible to *exist*, based on everything you've told me. And I can't realistically be mad at *either of you* for failing to plan around things that, as far as the Rune priest *himself* was aware of—which is practically synonymous with Humanity as a whole, if I understand the importance of the Rune priest rank correctly—weren't even *real*."

Thea simply sat there, faintly stunned.

"Not to mention, the dying-to-carve-the-Voidrune thing," Kara continued, moving briskly down her mental list, "is, medically speaking, the *correct* approach—again, based on everything you've told me and I am aware of, at least. Iterating inside the DDS with resets is *objectively* the safest possible way to learn something *that* dangerous. I'm not happy about it—because that pattern desensitises you *even further* to dangers to your life, and you are *already* dangerously—"

"I'm not desen—" Thea immediately tried to interject, but Kara shut her down immediately with a single stern *look*. Thea closed her mouth.

"—so it should be done *sparingly*," Kara finished, as though the interruption had never occurred. "Do me a favour and *try your best* not to blow yourself up like that more than strictly necessary. Not that I necessarily think you're doing it recreationally—*yet*."

*'I'm definitely **not** desensitized. This is bullshit...'*

"... *Fine*," Thea muttered quietly instead, once again pouting as she didn't have the energy to argue her point.

"Now. The whole falling-into-the-Warren moment..." Kara's tone shifted—cooling into what Thea recognized as the more analytical register. "Æht catching you. That's another data point for the protectiveness column, and a quite significant one, I'd argue—the intervention

seemingly cost her something significant, based on your description of her voice afterward. Strain like that isn't usually performative under those kinds of circumstances."

She paused briefly, tilting her head.

"*But*. I'd flag that it could equally have been pure self-preservation. Consider: Her reaching out across the Gate seems to be *exactly* what triggered the Rune priest's Void-energy detection, yes? The spike he interrogated you over?"

"...Yeah. Almost certainly."

"Then run it in reverse. If *you* falling through the Gate into the Warren would have triggered something similar—some detectable event, some signature he could read—then Æht stopping you wasn't necessarily about saving *your* life, exclusively or at all. It was about preventing exactly the scenario she fears most: The Rune priest's attention landing on her at that moment. Which, notably, mirrors her own word choice. She didn't say *dangerous*, by your account. She said—"

"*Problematic*," Thea finished quietly, the memory surfacing with easy clarity. "*'It would be problematic if you stepped through your own Gate at this particular moment.'* And—'*not particularly productive*', either."

"Problematic." Kara nodded slowly. "Not dangerous, fatal, forbidden or anything of the sort. Interesting phrasing, for an entity that, by all your accounts, seemingly chooses each of its words extremely carefully."

She went silent for a second then, tilting her head into the other direction, eyes narrowing.

Then she nodded again, slower.

"In fact—based on her *exact* words, I don't think Æht is *generally* opposed to you entering the Warren at all. Just... not *then*. Not under those specific circumstances. '*At this particular moment*' very strongly implies other moments exist where it *wouldn't* be problematic. Maybe not now. But at some point in the future." Her eyes came back to Thea's. "Which begs the obvious question: What, exactly, *happens* when someone enters their own Warren?"

Thea shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know. Like, at all. He never covered it—we didn't exactly get to the actual things he wanted to cover at all, today, after all."

But then she paused, turning it over briefly as the pieces of the day slowly rearranged themselves inside her head.

"...If I had to speculate, though," she said slowly, "it's *probably* the first step toward Delving. He said the Warren is where any Delve would ultimately start, once I was ready. So entering it is probably how you... begin. Unlocking Paths, claiming new Powers, and all that."

She frowned. "Which would mean I can't *actually* do it until I've unlocked the Psychic Attribute anyway. That's the gate on the whole system there."

She cringed at herself and quickly added, "Ehhh... pun not intended, of course."

"And what it means that *Æht* is already *in* there," Kara said quietly, ignoring the last part entirely, "living in the space you're supposed to Delve into..."

"...Yeah." Thea let her head rest back against the cool metal. "That part, I couldn't tell you. I couldn't even begin to."

The two of them simply went silent at that.

Thea let her head rest against the cool bulkhead and turned the problem over inside her own head, while Kara simply stared into space and did the same, her fingers resuming their slow rhythm against her knee.

Minutes passed.

Finally, however, Kara spoke up again.

"We just don't have enough information," she declared with a finality in her voice that brooked no argument. "This is one of those questions where we *could* speculate for hours—potentially even days or *weeks*—but every branch of it dead-ends in things neither of us knows. What a Warren actually is, mechanically. What Delving actually looks like, or fundamentally does, beyond the outcome. What *Æht* actually is. Without *at least* one of those, everything we produce is simply bad fiction with extra steps."

She shook her head once.

"Let's shelve it, for now. We'll revisit it when you learn more from the Rune priest."

Thea nodded wordlessly. It stung a little—her brain *wanted* to keep gnawing at it—but Kara was right, and they both very much knew it.

Kara then squared her shoulders and met Thea's eyes.

The look on her face had gone *serious*—the diagnostic-mode intensity that Thea had learned to associate with bad news and difficult conversations—and Thea immediately tensed up in response.

"One thing that's been very interesting to hear, though," Kara said, "is that whole Rune priest-and-Sovereign interaction. I've been meaning to talk to you about the Sovereign for quite a while now. *Couldn't*, for obvious reasons." She gestured vaguely at the room around them. "But based on everything you've told me today, everything I've observed and noted myself, and some... speculation..."

Her eyes glinted. "I think I have a much better idea of what's going on with that *thing* now."

Thea's eyebrows rose steadily toward her hairline.

She wordlessly prompted Kara to continue, genuinely wondering where this was about to go.

Because the way Kara had said all that, it sounded almost like her best friend had been quietly building some kind of grand *conspiracy* around the Sovereign this entire time.

"First and foremost: I think you're absolutely correct. The Rune priest and the Sovereign have some sort of *deal*. Everything you described supports it—the overrides, the deletions, the Gold Lock administration, the way he can simply utter a phrase and the Sovereign... Jumps, for a lack of better terminology. And the fact that even *you* could simply *make* the Sovereign pull me out of a mandatory lecture, just by invoking his mentorship, after it had already *denied* the plain version of the same request..."

Kara leaned forward slightly. "I have a bit of a theory. It's somewhat far-fetched. But I want you to hear me out on the whole thing and give me your honest thoughts at the end. Alright?"

Thea nodded, once again, leaning forward herself.

She had *never* expected to be sitting on her bed listening to Karania Faulkner, of all people, wind up to deliver a conspiracy theory. This was an extremely novel experience, and some small, tired part of her was *thoroughly* enjoying it.

"I've had some... personal issues with the Sovereign so far," Kara began, vaguely. "Right after the Assessment. I won't get into the details right now, but they're *why* I started paying attention in the first place. What truly made me wonder what's going on, though, was right after the Awards Ceremony. When we all basically died... Well. Except you, of course."

Thea grimaced at the memory.

"That whole *Void Storm* business..." Kara's voice took on an edge of open contempt. "That's clearly bullshit. We all know that."

'...*We do?*' Thea thought, genuinely caught off-guard. '*I—I did not know that. I did not know that at all. What the fuck else happened, then?!*'

She kept her face as neutral as she could manage and let Kara continue.

"But I didn't have anything better to replace it with—*yet*. My working assumption was just the Sovereign covering up its own mistake—some internal failure it dressed up as an external event. Plausible. Downright boring, even. It never *fully* fit, though. But now..." Kara raised a finger. "Think about everything like *this* instead: The very moment things calmed down after that incident—the very same day—Major Quinn came and collected you. To introduce you to the Rune priest. Right?"

Thea's mind started working overtime, the puzzle pieces Kara was laying out beginning to assemble themselves almost against her will.

"...You think the whole incident was—what? The *Rune priest's* fault?"

Kara gave a noncommittal roll of her shoulder.

"I'm not sure... But—I wouldn't be surprised if that whole wave of panic and dread you felt at the very start of that day was, in fact, the Rune priest *arriving on board* the ship. Think about it: Everything you've told me about his Presence—how overwhelming it is even when he's actively restraining it—and, especially after feeling it myself for the first time just yesterday, in that corridor..." She met Thea's eyes. "If he stepped aboard and simply *unleashed* all of it, even for a moment—Psykers especially would feel that, no? Ship-wide?"

Thea's eyes widened.

Because now that she actually thought about it—now that she laid the timelines side by side—there *was* a strange overlap between those timings.

The dread hitting out of nowhere, the incident mere hours later, Major Quinn's summons mere hours after *that*... Not to mention—

"Wait a second..." Thea muttered, as something else clicked into place entirely. "The fear wasn't *mine*."

Her eyes snapped up to Kara's.

"The fear I felt—it was like when the passive [Glimpse] tells me to avoid a certain action! That *exact same* flavour of imposed reaction. Except, like, a million times worse. But it wasn't *my* emotion, it was a *signal*. It was *Æht*! *She made* me react like that—through whatever connection she uses to impart information from the Psychic Power onto me!"

Kara was nodding profusely now, her eyes bright.

"*Exactly*. It was *Æht* realising that somebody had just stepped aboard the Sovereign who could not only *threaten* her—but based on the raw Presence she felt, could potentially even *detect* her, easily. That's my best guess, at least. Your entire body got flooded with '*run, hide, danger*' likely *the moment* his Presence touched the ship, because the entity living in your head recognised an apex predator entering its territory."

Seemingly encouraged by Thea's joining-in on the conspiracy so far, Kara continued animatedly, "Now follow the timeline forward. With the Rune priest aboard, it took only an hour or two until the incident—everyone but you dead, and the Sovereign itself briefly going *offline*. Then, another hour or two *after that*, Major Quinn comes to bring you to *him*. That's more than enough time for the Rune priest to walk the ship. And, maybe... to *interact* with the Sovereign itself. Like the *core*, or whatever houses the thing."

Kara's voice dropped slightly.

"As a matter of fact—I think the incident itself was likely *caused* by the Rune priest and the Sovereign interacting, in some way. The fact that the Sovereign now seems practically, entirely under his command—no friction, pushback, or even a *hint* of compromise or negotiation against his authority... I think the Rune priest *forced* the Sovereign to comply with his every whim—*somehow*. And whatever that forcing looked like, the rest of us got caught in the crossfire."

A cold shudder ran straight down Thea's spine.

With Kara silent, waiting for her verdict, she sat with it, turned it over and held it up against everything she'd witnessed, especially today. Then, slowly, she started shaking her head, while Kara watched her intently, waiting for her to speak.

"But... that wouldn't make any sense, would it?" Thea said. "The Rune priest is an extremely high-ranking officer. I don't even know what the Rune priest rank is actually *equivalent* to—a General, probably? Maybe even higher? Why would he need to *force* the Sovereign to do *anything* in the first place? He literally used some kind of command-override codes today that basically disabled any and all limits on the Sovereign's usual guidelines—I watched him do it *twice*. She's an AI, Kara. If her programming already grants him that authority, why would he ever need to strong-arm her? The compliance is already built in."

Kara sighed.

She lightly massaged her temples with the fingers of her right hand, in the manner of somebody about to explain something they'd hoped not to have to explain today, then met Thea's eyes again.

"The Sovereign is not an AI, Thea. At the very least, not how you think."

They simply stared at each other for a few, pregnant seconds.

"... *What?*" Thea finally asked.

"Haaa," Kara breathed out heavily, her shoulders dropping. "I guess, to borrow your words from earlier: I'll explain..."

A tired, wry almost-smile touched the corner of her mouth.

"...But it'll be a bit of a long one."