

Volume 2 - Chapter 98 - Frigor Glaciei

~~"Absolutus sum. In praesentia mea, ipsa realitas sistit, nihil enim moveri potest."~~

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For a long, suspended moment, Thea simply... *failed* to process what she was looking at.

Her mind, still half-fuzzed from the trance and the slow, dragging awe of the Warren itself, refused to settle on the implications of the two neon-violet eyes staring down at her from the top of the throne.

Æht.

Æht was *here*.

Æht was *inside her Warren*.

Inside the deepest, most personal, most theoretically inaccessible part of her own Psyker existence. The very place the Rune priest had described, mere minutes ago, as territory she had *personally* claimed within the Void itself.

Her place. Hers, and hers alone—supposedly.

And yet, Æht was sitting on the throne at the centre of it all.

Like she belonged there.

Like she owned the place.

Like she had somehow always been there.

Thea's first instinct, somewhere very deep underneath the trance, was to panic.

The same kind of full-body, ice-water-in-the-veins panic that had hit her the first time she had seen Faux-Thea inside the Assessment, before she had even been as much as ready to acknowledge the other's existence.

But then, almost as quickly as it had risen—the panic faded into nothingness, as her Resolve won out. Because, when she really thought about it...

'It's not particularly surprising she's here, is it?'

She was, at this point, more or less used to finding Æht waiting for her whenever strange Psychic stuff was going on. The two of them had now shared several conversations of *exactly* this type, in spaces of *exactly* this kind of half-imagined, half-real geometry.

She knew Æht's general vibe by now.

And she had been actively expecting that this kind of meeting was going to happen again at some point, considering Æht's words that very same morning.

She just had not really expected it to happen *here; now*.

She straightened her posture, drew in a slow breath, and met the two neon-violet eyes head-on.

"... Æht."

The eyes brightened slightly at the sound of her name.

"Darling."

The voice was the same as ever—rich and smooth in a way that did not quite manage, nor even really attempt, to disguise the steel underneath it.

Thea waited a beat for Æht to elaborate further, or to open the conversation... Yet she did not.

'Of course she did not...'

"...Right. Okay. I'm going to ask you something, Æht, and I would very much like for you to *actually* answer me, for once."

The eyes glittered faintly. "*Oh, my*. How bold of you."

"What are you doing here?"

There was a small, theatrical pause from somewhere very high above her, as though Æht were considering whether or not to honour the question with a real response.

Seemingly having made a decision, her reply wafted down to Thea.

"*Where else* would I be, exactly?"

The voice was distinctly unamused.

Not hostile, exactly, but flat in the way that someone sounded when they have genuinely been expecting a smarter question and have received, instead, *this one*.

Thea blinked up at her.

"... What do you mean?"

"Where else, darling, would I be able to comfortably keep myself out of reach of the strongest Psyker *we are ever likely to meet*, you utter *imbecile*?"

Æht continued, the words uttered with the patient cadence of a very deep eyeroll—like an adult explaining something obvious to a particularly slow child.

"Did you genuinely think I would simply be standing somewhere just '*out of frame*', hiding behind a curtain—hands in front of my own eyes—hoping that he would politely fail to check that particular corner of you? Were you, perhaps, planning to fold me *very small* and tuck me into one of your pockets, where his Presence would politely fail to notice me?"

The eyes narrowed slightly, the violet light of them sharpening.

"*Obviously*, I would be somewhere he cannot reach. Which is *here*. Inside our own Warren. The *one place* in the entire Universe where you—we—have any actual right of refusal."

That... made an irritating amount of sense, actually.

Thea had spent the past several weeks operating under the loose, vaguely discomforting assumption that Æht was, in some general sense, always quietly present in the back of her own mind—somewhere just behind her conscious thought, listening in on whatever Thea was doing at any given moment.

Which was likely the truth, given everything that Æht seemed to know about her day-to-day operations, general life and actions.

Yet still, it had simply not occurred to her, even once, that Æht might have spent a lot of that time actually inhabiting a specific *location*, too. That the back of her own mind, in any meaningful sense, might be a real *place*, with real boundaries, in which Æht had specifically chosen to set up residence.

And of all the places to choose, she'd naturally gone for the *one* specifically engineered to keep outside observers out.

'That does make an upsetting amount of sense, in hindsight...'

"... Right. Okay." Thea admitted slowly. "I just—I had no idea this place was even a place, honestly. I mean, I knew it existed in theory, the Rune priest told me about it about twenty minutes ago, but I had no real concept of what it actually *was*. So I didn't even consider that you could even be in here, I guess..."

"And what, then, did you think the back of your own mind looked like, darling?" Æht asked, her tone shifting into something between amusement and exasperation. "A small, dark closet? A waiting room with no chairs? A handful of empty filing cabinets, perhaps, where you have been quietly stashing every unfamiliar emotion you have refused to look at since the age of four?"

Thea opened her mouth.

Then closed it again, a moment later.

"...I had not really thought about it much, no."

"Of course you had not, darling. You so *rarely* do."

Thea simply stared up at the neon-violet eyes, speechless for a moment.

*'I don't exactly have all the time in the Universe to just be sitting around, thinking about what the damn back of my mind might look like! Or whether or not a fucking Warren **might** exist there somewhere—how would I even come up with that on my own in the first place?!'*

She took a deep breath, and forced herself to settle back down.

She decided to simply let that one go, because it felt like it was purely *designed* to rile her up—and she had, all things considered, *genuinely* bigger problems to deal with right now than picking a fight with Æht over her general level of self-reflection and whether or not what Æht was seemingly *expecting* of her was even feasible in the first place.

She glanced briefly around the throne room again, taking in the impossible heights, the alternating cyan-and-violet sconces, the long blood-red carpet stretching all the way up toward the dais. Then she looked back up at the throne, at the two pinpricks of violet light staring back down at her with that same patient, knowing amusement.

"How long have you been here?"

A faint, almost soundless laugh drifted down from the throne.

"How long, darling, has the back of your mind existed?"

"I—" Thea started, brows furrowing. "That's not—"

"Is it not?"

"You're doing the thing where you answer every question with another question, and somehow, the conversation just ends, and I *still* don't actually have any answers!"

"*Hmm.*" The eyes glittered with what Thea was reasonably certain was amusement. "Am I, now."

A flash of heat rushed through Thea at that answer, "You fucking are, yes. And I would very *much* appreciate it if you *stopped*, for once. I need some actual damn answers here, Æht!"

"*And I*, darling, would very much appreciate it if *you* ever asked me a question that did not have a perfectly obvious answer that you yourself could have arrived at, had you spent more than five consecutive seconds *genuinely* thinking about it. So... I suppose, between the two of us, neither one of us is likely to get what we want today."

Thea drew in a slow, steadying breath, and reminded herself—*firmly*—that picking a verbal fight with the entity sharing her Soul-space was, almost certainly, not the most productive use of the very limited time she had inside her own Warren.

Especially not with the Rune priest effectively listening in on her very Soul from the outside, almost certainly catching every small vibration of frustration as a clear, obvious sign that Thea was doing *something* within her Warren that was getting under her skin.

He would, no doubt, get suspicious if she took too long, or grew too riled up.

"Fine. Then let me ask something else."

"Oh, please. *Do* try."

"Is there any way that the Rune priest might detect you in here?"

A brief pause followed her question.

For the first time since Thea had entered the throne room, *Æht* *actually* hesitated before answering.

It wasn't long, just a fraction of a second longer than her previous responses had taken, but given that Thea had been watching for *exactly* that kind of tell, caught it immediately.

"... No. He cannot."

"You're absolutely *sure*?"

"... As sure as I can be of anything in our shared situation. Which is, admittedly, a slightly lower bar than I would generally prefer to set—but no. He cannot detect me here. Not as we are currently situated. Not unless something *quite* dramatic changes about the arrangement, I would imagine. And I will note for the record, darling, that I have *absolutely no intention* of allowing anything quite dramatic to change."

Thea considered that for a second, her mind rapidly working through the implications.

'I know the answer to this next question, but only from the Rune priest's own mouth... Paranoia is good, in Æht's eyes. And she probably doesn't know what he's already told me, so it should be an easy way to confirm whether her knowledge overlaps with what he's covered with me—or whether she's lacking knowledge in this regard, or the Rune priest's lying to me, for some reason...'

She let her eyes sweep slowly through the Warren, then turned her attention back up to the throne.

"So if I look around in here, while he is watching me from outside...?"

"He will *not* see me. He will see the outside of the Gate, at best. The very nature of the Warren itself, refuses him entry. It refuses every entry that has not been specifically granted by the Warren's owner." The eyes brightened slightly, as she continued, "Which, darling, in case you have not yet pieced it together on your own... is *you*."

Thea sat with that, too, for another moment.

'Okay. That's—holy shit, that's actually huge. He cannot see in here at all, then. He wasn't lying... That's good.'

She had been quietly, low-grade terrified, ever since the Rune priest had asked her to peer into her own Warren, that he was going to be able to see whatever was in here as clearly as she herself could.

That every single secret she had been carefully sitting on for the past several weeks was about to be laid bare in front of the single most powerful person she had ever met, with absolutely no defence available to her—despite the fact that he'd specifically said otherwise.

'I guess some of Æht's paranoia-first approach is seeping into me, huh?' She realized, unsure of how to really feel about that. *'I used to be **so** paranoid, all the time... But I guess if I should be paranoid about **anything**, it's the one person that could kill me with a single thought, potentially lying to me, no?'*

Æht, watching her process that, let out another soft, faintly amused breath.

"You are *far* more in control of this space than you currently realise, darling. Take a moment to appreciate that... It is, after all, the only place in the entire Universe where the two of us are *genuinely safe*—from any party currently invested in unveiling our secrets."

She let that sit for a second, then added, almost as an afterthought—

"Or in our continued existence as a whole, for that matter... Or the *lack* thereof."

Thea grimaced slightly.

"Right. Yeah. That's—that's not exactly a comforting way to put it."

"I am not particularly known for being comforting, I would argue."

"No," Thea agreed flatly. "You *really* aren't."

The conversation stalled there as the two of them simply looked at each other.

A few moments later, Thea, remembering exactly *why* she had come into the Warren in the first place—and remembering, more pressingly, that the Rune priest was almost certainly going to start calling time on her any minute now—drew in another careful breath, and forced her focus back onto the actual task at hand.

"Æht."

"Hmm?"

"He's expecting me to find my Paths, specifically the *second* one. He mentioned that the Voidrune—[Glimpse]'s Voidrune—could help me navigate. Does that mean anything to you?"

Æht did not answer immediately.

For several long, drawn-out seconds, she simply sat there.

Her neon-violet eyes atop the throne dimmed very slightly, as though the attention behind them had been pulled inward, and Thea caught—for just a moment, before it smoothed itself back over—a flicker of something very close to genuine consternation on the mirrored features of Æht's face.

Concern, too, if Thea was reading it right.

The expression was gone and replaced by the usual smug look almost as quickly as it had appeared, but Thea had seen enough of her own face in enough mirrors, over enough years, to recognise it clearly on somebody else's version of it.

'...Well that's not a great sign.'

When Æht finally spoke, her voice was measured.

The playful, mocking edge from earlier had receded almost entirely.

"I am... *concerned* that he is already looking for our second Path. It is somewhat earlier in the process than I had hoped, and it complicates a number of things that I had assumed we would have more time to prepare for..."

She paused briefly, then sighed.

"Haaa... That said—I understand that there was likely nothing we could have realistically done to prevent this. He is extremely attentive to anything Psyker-related, more so than any other being currently in orbit around us—and you, darling, have not exactly been *subtle* about the whole situation. Between the two of you, the odds of him not eventually noticing the pattern were, in hindsight, essentially zero... Something I *really* should have considered, after seeing how emotionally unstable you are."

She fell silent again.

The eyes narrowed slightly again, and Thea got the very distinct impression that Æht was in the middle of what was, for her, an unusually deep round of thinking.

So she waited.

And waited some more...

The silence stretched to the point where Thea became impatient—she did not have infinite time in this mini-Delve, as the Rune priest had called it.

*'...Great. Just—cryptic silence. Perfect. Not like the fucking Rune priest has his hand at my damn **brainstem** ready to kill me at any damn moment, and I'll have to come up with explanations for why things have taken as long as they have!'*

Her frustration began to climb rapidly—the same simmer that always crept in whenever Æht did this thing where she withheld information not because she did not have it, but because she had not yet decided whether Thea, personally, was going to *get* to have it.

*'She's up there thinking about what to tell me. What she's **willing** to tell me. Not what's actually true. Which is, honestly, so completely on-brand for her that I don't even know why I'm surprised anymore. Why do I even bother asking anything from her...?'*

Thea's frustration edged, briefly, into something closer to *genuine* irritation.

'Fine. Fucking whatever! If she's not going to be useful in the slightest, then maybe I don't actually need her at all. The Rune priest said the Voidrune could help me orient, so I don't need her smug, condescending ass. Maybe if I just—move around a little, get a better angle on the throne room, I can spot the Paths myself... Or the Voidrune, at least. Just gotta get a little closer to—'

Her weight shifted forward, almost of its own accord.

She didn't take a full step; she barely even started to lift her foot.

But in the exact heartbeat before her foot actually left the floor—*something* in the back of her mind, and inside the center of her chest, lit up.

'Wait.'

She stopped mid-movement.

*'Wait, no. Why would I—I don't **need** to get closer. I'm already at the Warren. I can already see everything I can currently see from here. Moving forward from here doesn't actually get me anything, unless I—'*

Her mouth went dry.

*'—unless I **cross** the Gate.'*

Somewhere behind her, in a way she could not visually see or point to but was very suddenly, viscerally aware of, the Gate was still open. Still humming with that same slow, patient pull that had drawn her closer to it in the first place.

And the thought she had just been about to act on—the perfectly reasonable, perfectly logical impulse to *move a little forward, just for a better angle so I don't have to deal with this cat-and-mouse bullshit from Æht*—had not, she now realised, come from anywhere *inside* her at all.

Not really.

'Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck, oh, fuck, that was the Call. That was the Call trying to—'

Her heart, wherever it was currently located, kicked once, hard, against the inside of her chest.

She locked herself into place.

She just held herself.

Very, very still.

Up above her, on the throne, Æht's eyes had abruptly refocused at her minor movement. The neon-violet was sharp again, and the attention behind them had snapped fully back onto Thea's face.

"... Darling."

The word came out quieter than any of Æht's previous words had, and considerably more direct.

"I would *very* strongly recommend that you not move any closer. It would be *extremely problematic* if you were to step through your own Gate at this particular moment. For any number of reasons that I do not particularly wish to spend the rest of our remaining time enumerating in detail. But among them, we could safely add—not particularly *productive* to what we were originally trying to achieve here today, either."

Her tone was even, but there was a distinct note of tension underneath it that had not been there a moment ago.

"You are already as close as you *need* to be. There is nothing to be gained by advancing further. If your instincts are telling you otherwise I would *very strongly* encourage you to consider, in excruciating detail, *where* those instincts might be coming from at this particular moment."

Thea nodded slowly, more to herself than to Æht.

"...Yeah. I—I already figured that part out, thanks."

*'Fuck me, that was... that was **way** more subtle than I was expecting it to be. I didn't even feel it happening until I was almost already committed to it...'*

She forced her weight fully back onto her heels.

And, quietly, in the back of her own head, she made a very small note.

'I am so damn glad that I invested as much in Resolve as I have... That could have ended really badly.'

Æht, up on her throne, seemed to arrive at some kind of internal decision.

Whether it had come naturally at the tail end of her earlier considerations, or whether she had simply seen Thea starting to get accosted by the Call and had decided to accelerate the timeline accordingly—Thea genuinely had no way of telling.

Æht's face had smoothed itself back into the calm, unreadable mask that she seemed to prefer as her default.

"Regarding the Voidrune navigation," Æht said, her tone lightening again into something closer to its usual courtly cadence, "I am not entirely certain what the Rune priest might have been specifically referring to when he mentioned it... My best guess is that he was giving you a landmark to orient yourself around—somewhere familiar-feeling, somewhere your Soul would naturally recognise, from which the rest of the Warren could then be traced outward..."

She waved a hand dismissively.

"But it does not particularly matter, in our case. That method of orientation is not required, given the current situation."

Thea raised an eyebrow.

"... And what current situation is that, exactly...?"

"The one, darling," Æht replied dryly, "where *I* happen to already be *inside* our Warren, and *I* have already found both of our Paths a very long time ago—and *I* can simply show you where they are. No navigation required."

Thea blinked, then very deliberately closed her eyes for a moment and pressed her fingertips against her forehead.

'Right. Of course she already knows where they are...'

"... Show me, then."

"Are you certain, darling? I could quite easily draw out this conversation for another hour or so, if you would prefer. There are, after all, several truly *fascinating* questions you have not yet even thought to ask me, and I do so love hearing you struggle with—"

"Æht," Thea interrupted, her voice steel.

"Hmm?"

"The Rune priest has been *extremely* quiet in my head for a while now, and it's starting to get suspicious. I don't want to spend any more time in here than I actually have to. As interesting as all of this is. At the end of all this, I will have to explain why it took me so long to find my Paths. And, as of yet, I'm not interested in *having* to reveal your existence... So, let's hurry it up?"

Æht let out a long, theatrical sigh—one that would have been indistinguishable from an eyeroll if Thea had not been actively watching for it.

"Very well, darling. *Very well...* If you *insist* on rushing through the most personal tour of your own Soul you shall likely ever receive in your natural life..."

She raised one hand—languidly, the same way somebody might gesture for a servant to bring them another drink—and gave a small, lazy flick of her wrist.

The throne room abruptly disappeared.

Or rather—the throne room *reshaped*, in one continuous, seamless motion that Thea's brain could not quite keep up with in real time.

The checkerboard floor dropped out from underneath her. The pillars fell away. The impossible heights above her ceiling collapsed into open space. The blood-red carpet, the sconces, the walls, the doors, the whole cavernous architecture—all of it simply... undid itself, in the space of maybe a fraction of a blink, and something different took its place.

Vertigo hit Thea like a physical blow.

She was not, technically, moving. She *knew* this.

She was in a trance, back in the waking world, sitting on a padded stool with the Rune priest's hands warm against her back. Her body, in every meaningful sense, had not shifted so much as a millimetre.

But her perception—or rather, her Soul-sense, the strange sixth-sense-analogue awareness that she had been navigating the Warren with—had just been abruptly relocated from a cathedral-sized throne room to somewhere fundamentally *else*, and every part of her that could feel motion was, for a moment, in complete rebellion about it.

She had to force her focus, *hard*, back onto her own breathing to keep the trance from cracking again.

When her senses finally settled...

She was standing in space.

Actual space.

The Warren, in its new configuration, was—as far as her perception could tell—an infinite field of stars, galaxies, and slowly-drifting nebulae, stretching outward in every conceivable direction with no visible boundaries anywhere she looked.

Constellations she did not recognise burned quietly in the dark. Nebulae glowed in blues and reds and soft, muted greens, hanging suspended in the surrounding blackness. Individual stars pulsed slowly, in and out, at the very edges of her sight.

The only thing that remained from the previous configuration—the only real, solid, unambiguously *there* thing in the entire field of view—was Æht's throne.

Thea's stomach did another slow, protesting flip as her brain, once again, tried and failed to fully conceptualise what her eyes were showing her.

Æht did not appear to particularly notice, or care, about Thea's evident struggle.

She simply raised one hand again—this time gesturing off to Thea's left—and, in the same lazy, half-bored tone as before, announced—

"*Behold*. The Short-Term Precognition Path."

Thea's eyes followed the gesture.

She saw... nothing.

Just more stars. More galaxies. More slowly-drifting nebulae. The same vast, infinite field of cosmic backdrop she had already been staring at, with nothing particularly special picking itself out from anywhere within her visual field.

She frowned, refocused, and tried harder.

... Still nothing.

*'Is she fucking with me again...? Even after I told her specifically **why** I need to hurry this up?'* She thought, her eyes darting to Æht, who was still gesturing towards the exact same spot. *'Hmm... No. Doesn't seem like it...'*

She narrowed her eyes, forced her attention as deep as she could push it, and specifically stopped trying to look *at* anything, and instead started letting her gaze soften and drift the way one did when trying to spot the actual pattern hidden inside a stereogram—

And, gradually, after several long seconds of focused, deliberate searching—

A doorway suddenly appeared. Or—not a doorway, exactly.

That was simply the first word her brain reached for, because it needed a word, and *doorway* was the closest reasonable approximation to what she felt fit.

But, frankly speaking, it was a hole.

A strange, oddly-reflecting hole, suspended in the middle of the endless star-field, as though somebody had glued a thousand-thousand tiny mirrors together into a rough, roundish shape and simply left it hanging there in the middle of the cosmos.

Every single facet of it reflected something different from the surrounding Warren—the darkness, the stars, the swirling galaxies, the slowly-pulsing nebulae. Each mirror-face threw back its own tiny, warped version of the space around it. And no two mirror-faces, as far as Thea could tell, agreed with each other on what they were currently reflecting.

The whole thing shimmered faintly.

Trying to keep her focus on the Path itself, without letting her gaze slip off the edges of it back into the star-field, was proving to be extremely difficult.

Her eyes kept wanting to slide off it. Her attention kept wanting to reset. Even now, holding it in her sight with everything she had, the edges of it were faintly indistinct, as though the Path itself were not entirely willing to commit to a fixed location within her perception.

She swallowed hard.

"T—That's our Path?" The question came out shakier than she would have liked, her brain struggling to keep the visual input coherent while simultaneously producing words. "How does it *work*?"

Æht did not answer.

Instead, she simply... *relocated*.

Not in any way Thea's mind could follow. There was no motion involved.

One moment, Æht was seated on her impossibly-black throne in the middle of the star-field.

The next, she was standing directly next to the Path—several dozen metres away, or thousands of kilometres, or several galactic diameters, Thea genuinely could not tell.

And that was, precisely, when the second, even larger wave of vertigo hit her.

Because Æht, now that she was positioned next to the Path, was providing Thea's brain with *a reference point*. And with that reference point came *scale*.

Thea's entire perception—her mind, her balance, her fragile-at-best grasp on the geometry of what she was currently inside of—buckled *hard* under the weight of what her senses were suddenly telling her.

The Path had, up until that moment, occupied a rough, unfixed area of her vision that her brain had classified, on a first-pass approximation, as somewhere between *a large doorway* and *maybe a warehouse-shutter*.

Something a person could, in theory, walk up to and look through. Something person, or at most, vehicle-sized. Something the mind of a Marine, standing at the edge of it, could parse.

Except Æht, now positioned right at its edge, was—She was a *speck*.

Not even that much, really. But Thea lacked the words to describe what she was.

A miniscule, near-invisible, infinitesimally small dot against the shimmering, thousand-thousand-mirrored expanse of the Path itself, no larger, in comparative terms, than a single grain of sand held up against the side of an entire planet.

And yet, somehow, Thea could still see her—perfectly and clearly, in sharp, unambiguous detail.

Every line of Æht's mirrored features, every fold of her posture, every glint of neon-violet in her eyes—all of it, resolving in Thea's perception with exactly the same crispness and clarity as it had had when Æht had been sitting only around a dozen-or-so metres away from her, back in the throne room.

Which was utterly impossible.

Because either Æht was actually *much closer* than the Path's implied scale suggested, and the Path itself was much smaller than the reference-point had led Thea to believe... or Thea was somehow perceiving something that was, by every rule of optics and geometry she had ever taken for granted, physically *incapable* of being perceived at the distance implied.

Her brain tried, briefly, to hold both interpretations at once—and almost immediately failed.

Her brain then tried to reach for a third interpretation—some middle-ground reading in which both things could *somehow* simultaneously be true, and the entire concept of *scale* itself was, within the Warren, a slightly negotiable property that her Soul was allowed to renegotiate on the fly—and her brain failed at that immediately as well.

'Ughh... Fuck... Nope. Not looking at this. Not looking at this anymore.'

She wrenched her focus off the Path itself, and forced it fully onto Æht instead. *Only* on Æht. She focused on the figure, the eyes staring back at her, her own mirrored-face.

Distinctly *not* the shimmering mass of not-quite-geometry behind and around Æht.

It worked—slowly.

The vertigo, still churning at the edges of her perception, began to recede in slow, uneven increments as she deliberately let the Path fall out of clear focus and become simple, undifferentiated *background*.

Her breathing—somewhere very far behind her, in the waking world—steadied. The trance, which had once again been *dangerously* close to cracking, settled back into something approximately manageable.

'I hope the Rune priest isn't too freaked out about that one...'

Æht, for her part, did not appear to have moved a muscle throughout any of this.

She stood beside... in front of... near... *in some form of relation* to the Path with the same casual, half-bored composure as before, watching Thea's clear struggle to reconcile the impossibility of what she was looking at with something that, on Æht's own face, could have almost passed for sympathetic patience—*almost*.

Once Thea had fully recovered, and she had held her focus locked onto Æht for long enough that the surrounding cosmos was no longer actively trying to make her throw up, she managed to force the question out.

"So... how does it *actually* work?"

Æht simply shrugged. The motion was infuriatingly elegant, and entirely unbothered.

"I have no idea, darling."

Thea blinked.

"... *What?*"

"I have no idea," Æht repeated, in the same easy tone as before, as though this were the most obvious thing in the Universe. "I have never been inside."

The words landed strangely.

Thea had come, over the past several weeks, to loosely assume that Æht had access to every single scrap of information about their shared Powers that Thea did not.

That Æht was, in some fundamental sense, the *knowledgeable* one, and Thea the ignorant passenger who periodically got dragged along on the ride.

The idea that there was a piece of their shared toolkit that even Æht did not fully understand was, honestly, more unsettling than most of the actual visible impossibilities currently on display around them.

Æht turned her head slightly, letting her gaze drift up toward the Path itself—the same shimmering, impossible expanse that Thea was still very deliberately keeping in her own peripheral vision.

"I have, over the years, managed to reach into the Path from the outside. That is how I obtained the *Voidrune*, as your Rune priest is calling it. Reaching inside is safe enough, provided one is careful about the depth. But entering the Path itself..."

Her tone shifted slightly here—dropping into something quieter, and considerably more measured. She turned partially toward the Path, letting her hand rest gently against the edge of one of the outermost mirror-facets, and studied it with what Thea could only describe as measured, patient hunger.

"... is a different matter *entirely*."

She let that statement sit for a moment.

"Something inside me, darling, is telling me—violently, and persistently—that if I were to enter this Path in my current state, I would not come back out of it. That I am, at present, too weak to survive the passage. That I am, in the truest and most literal sense, insufficient to the scale of what lies beyond."

She gestured, very casually, at the massive shimmering expanse next to her.

"And I have no particular reason to disbelieve that instinct. It has been consistent since I first became aware of the Path's existence, and it has not markedly weakened once in all the time I have spent contemplating it. So, no. I have not entered. I would not survive it."

"... Huh," was all that Thea could reply, her mind not truly able to process the fact that Æht was actually unaware or incapable of something—and honestly admitting to that fact.

"*'Huh'* indeed, darling."

Æht turned back to face her, and though the amused edge had returned to her voice, her eyes had not entirely lost the quieter register from a moment before.

"I would *like* to enter, do not misunderstand me. I would *very much* like to enter. I can practically *feel* the raw, unbridled potential inside it, calling to me from within. Every single Power that we have not yet learned to use—every variation, every application, every little novelty of the very type that has been so amusing to us both lately—all of it is *calling* to me from inside that Path... Just waiting to be claimed. Waiting for *us*."

Her eyes glittered, briefly, with the same wild eagerness that Thea had seen on the Rune priest earlier—until it abruptly disappeared and was replaced with the cold calculation that was Æht's hallmark look once again.

"But I have infinite time, darling. Which is, ultimately, *our* greatest single advantage in this entire situation. I do not need to rush. I do not need to claim it now, at the potential cost of both our lives. I can, and I *will*, simply wait until I am strong enough to enter safely. Until I can survive the passage. Until I can claim what is ours—both mine, *and* yours—without risking the very existence of the Soul that we're inhabiting."

She gave Thea a small, sharp-edged smile that did not quite reach her eyes.

"And until then... We do not go inside."

Faintly—*very* faintly—words began to drift into Thea's ears during the intervening silence that followed Æht's declaration. They came from nowhere and everywhere at once, distant and thin alike, breaking apart into fragments before they could fully arrive.

"...*Not sure... you okay... spike... pull you... soon...*"

That was all she managed to make out. Five broken shards of a sentence, scattered across several seconds, in a voice she recognised immediately despite the distance.

The Rune priest.

And it was more than enough to startle her, because it was more than enough to put together the general gist.

'He's concerned... Something spiked—probably my heart rate when I looked at that damn Path—and now he's considering pulling me out. Fuck. Shit, shit, shit—'

She hadn't even gotten to the *actual point* yet.

The entire reason she had come in here in the first place—the second Path, the Primal Ice question, the whole experiment—none of it had actually been *done* yet!

If he pulled her out now, all of this would have been for nothing.

She snapped her attention back toward the mirrors.

"Æht. He's going to pull me out soon! We *need* to hurry."

To Thea's *genuine* surprise, Æht did not hesitate for so much as a fraction of a second.

The languid, half-bored composure she had been wearing throughout the entire conversation up until this point vanished from her posture in the space of a single heartbeat, replaced with something considerably more focused.

The neon-violet in her eyes brightened. Her posture shifted forward, subtly. The whole of her—Thea's mirrored reflection, floating out there in the star-field—seemed to *lock in* on the situation with the kind of complete, undivided attention that Thea had not, until this very moment, been entirely certain the entity was capable of. For that brief moment, the two of them looked more alike than she was entirely comfortable with.

"The fun is over, I see... Let us handle your Path then, darling."

She *disappeared*.

"Over here," came her voice a moment later, from somewhere off in the endless star-field.

Thea's eyes flicked toward the location of the sound—

—and promptly got lost in the cosmos once more.

The stars swallowed her attention whole. Galaxies drifted. Nebulae pulsed in their slow, silent rhythm, and her gaze began to slide, unanchored, across the infinite backdrop with nothing to hold onto, nothing to fix against, nothing to—

"Focus."

Æht's sharp voice precisely cut through it, before Thea could fully lose herself in the vastness.

Thea's eyes snapped back into focus.

She blinked hard, pulled her attention in tight, and started searching—properly this time, deliberately sweeping her perception across the star-field in controlled sections rather than letting it wander free.

After a few moments, she found her... *and* what she was standing quite a bit away from.

Unlike with the Short-Term Precognition Path, there was no doubt whatsoever in Thea's mind that Æht was *not* standing close to this one.

How she knew, she could not have said—there was no visible measurement to reference, no gridline, no scale-marker floating helpfully in the void—but she knew, with the same bone-deep certainty as knowing which way was up. Æht was keeping her distance.

In front of her—*far* in front of her—loomed a glacier.

Impossibly scaled, just like the mirror-doorway had been.

A colossal, broken mass of primordial, blue and black ice, its surface fractured and re-frozen in jagged, overlapping plates, with sharp icicles jutting outward in every direction around its centre—each one of them, at this scale, likely larger than the Sovereign itself.

And at the very heart of the structure, surrounded by that crown of blade-like ice, sat a *hole*.

'The entrance...'

It continued inward, past the threshold, into complete and utter *blackness*.

Which... was strange, in itself.

Thea had never—*not once*, in her entire life, as far back as she could remember—seen blackness like this. She knew, intellectually, that things got dark when no light reached them.

She understood the concept the way she understood the concept of drowning: It was real, documented, and entirely outside her personal experience.

Because for her, it had simply *never* been true.

Her [Eyes of the Void] were permanently active.

Darkness, as everyone else experienced it, did *not exist* for her—never had.

There had *always* been *something* to see.

Except now, there wasn't.

The inside of the Path, just beyond what she assumed was the entrance to the glacier's impossible structure, was simply the deepest black imaginable. A void her eyes could not penetrate, could not resolve, could not even begin to work with—as though the concept of sight itself simply ended at that threshold and declined to continue further.

Her heart rate began to climb again.

She could feel it, distantly, somewhere far behind her—the quickening drumbeat of a body reacting to something its mind had no framework for.

'Nope. Not doing this again. Focus on something else. Eyes off, Thea!'

She wrested her gaze away from the glacier—and *especially* away from the darkness at its heart—and forced her attention, once more, fully onto Æht.

"T—That's my Path? What is it?" Thea asked, her mind once again lagging as it struggled to catch up with everything around her.

"Ice," Æht simply replied. "One of the Primal Paths—although... *different*. It is... strange, but not inherently *wrong*. I am not entirely certain why. It simply is."

She began to walk closer toward the Path—skipping across the cosmos as she moved, like a glitching holoivid missing several hundred frames between each step.

Before Thea could tell her to wait, Æht had already stopped again, and Thea's attention was abruptly commandeered by something else entirely.

Something began to move inside the blackness.

At first, it was nothing more than a suggestion of motion—a faint disturbance somewhere in the impossible depth of the glacier's heart, like a current shifting far below the surface of dark water.

The disturbance grew and spread. It took on weight and mass and direction. And then, slowly, the blackness itself began to *pour outward* through the jagged entrance of the glacier, gathering and condensing and folding in on itself, until it was no longer an absence at all.

It was a body.

The creature manifested in stages that Thea's mind could barely hold onto.

First came the shell—an immense, curving expanse of abyss-black material that seemed to drink in the light of every star behind her, so utterly dark that her perception could not resolve it as a three-dimensional shape, could not find a single shadow or highlight along its length by which to judge its contours.

Just like Æht's throne. Except unfathomably vast and *alive*.

The heads followed. Seven of them.

They rose out of the central mass one after another, each on its own long, sinuous neck, each moving with its own independent, unsettling intelligence.

Their shapes refused to fully settle—each head seemed to be its own unique variant of something Thea had no words for, shifting subtly at the edges whenever her focus lingered too long on any single one of them, as if the concept of a fixed form was something the creature merely *tolerated* rather than obeyed.

And lastly, the eyes.

Uncountable eyes, scattered across each of the seven heads in arrangements that made no anatomical sense, every single one of them burning the same familiar neon-violet as her own Gate. As Æht's gaze. As the sconces in the throne room.

All of them, slowly, one head at a time, aimed to look at Æht.

The scale of it defied *everything*.

The creature loomed so impossibly large within the glacier's entrance that Thea was certain—*convinced*, on a level beneath reason—that even the Sovereign itself, placed beside it, would have been rendered indiscernible at this distance.

And yet, just as with Æht and the Short-Term Precognition Path before, she could see it—*all of it*. In a level of detail so perfect, that should not have been possible.

Her breath—somewhere far away, in a body she was rapidly losing track of—grew shallow.

And underneath the awe, underneath the fear, underneath the slow cold pressure building at the base of her skull, something else surfaced.

Familiarity.

'Where have I... seen this before...?'

The feeling was maddeningly out of reach. There was no memory attached to it.

No image, no moment, no context she could pull up and point to.

Just a deep, wordless certainty, humming *somewhere* in the marrow of her Soul, that this was not the first time she has seen this creature before.

'That's impossible. I'd remember this. There's no fucking way that I'd ever forget seeing something like—'

"This, darling," Æht's voice cut in, "is why I cannot retrieve your part of our Powers."

Thea's attention split, barely, between the creature and her mirror-self.

Æht stood at the same deliberate distance from the glacier as before, her posture composed, though her eyes never left the seven heads now arrayed above her.

"The entity does not let me step closer than this. I have tried, many times, in many ways." She turned toward Thea then, tilting her head slightly in that too-far, not-quite-right way of hers. "Any help you might be able to offer?"

Thea barely heard her.

The words reached her as if from underwater—muffled, distant and utterly stripped of urgency—while the entirety of her actual awareness remained locked onto the creature coiled within the glacier's heart.

Because she understood, now.

Not intellectually. Not through reasoning or deduction.

She simply *understood*, the way she understood that her Warren had edges, the way she understood that Æht had not been standing *close* to this Path.

This was *it*. This was the *source*.

The cold. The ice. The mishaps. The impossible moment in the DM when she had cooled her own body against every rule the Rune priest knew. All of it traced back here, to this creature, to this glacier, to this Path that *should not* exist inside her.

It was a part of it all—*somehow*. A part of *her*—*somehow*.

Abruptly and entirely unbidden—A name came to her.

It rose out of the same wordless depth as the familiarity had, fully formed and absolute.

It was not a guess, nor an approximation, but a name she *knew*, with complete and unshakeable certainty, was *True*.

'No... Not a name...' She realized, without knowing why or what it meant. *'A Name.'*

She could not have stopped herself if she had tried.

Fascinated, transfixed, her entire awareness bent toward the creature like light around a collapsed star, she whispered it within the confines of her own mind.

'Grahkius.'

Everything suddenly happened at once.

All seven heads snapped toward her in perfect, instantaneous unison—every uncountable eye converging on her at the same moment, the creature's shifting forms going suddenly, absolutely still.

Thea *froze*.

Her entire existence—body, Soul, mind, whatever she currently was inside this place—simply seized, locked, crystallised down to its very core. She could not move. She could not think. She could not so much as shift her attention a single degree in any direction, as though the concept of motion itself had been revoked from her.

"Do *not* do that again, Thea! Whatever it was!"

The Rune priest's voice tore through her awareness with a ferocity and total clarity that stood in impossible contrast to the broken fragments of before—none of the prior muffling, no missing words. Instead, it was strained and unmistakably sharp.

Closer to *genuine alarm* than she had *ever* heard—or even considered possible—for him.

She could not answer.

She could not even breathe.

A weight had come down on her all at once—as though the entire glacier before her had been lifted whole and set upon her back, pressing down with patient, glacial inevitability, squeezing every last molecule of air out of her lungs one atom at a time.

Her vision smeared.

The star-field blurred into streaks.

The seven heads dissolved into a single mass of violet light.

And she stumbled... *Forward*.

Toward the open vastness of the Gate. Toward the horizon between herself and the Warren.

'No—no, no—!'

She abruptly stopped—hard.

Her mind, lagging desperately behind events, finally caught up with what her senses were reporting: The invisible barrier of the Gate's horizon rippled mere millimetres in front of her face, disturbed like the surface of a pond—because an arm had punched *through* it from the other side, and was holding her up.

Stopping her from falling across the threshold.

Neon-violet eyes blazed less than a metre from her own, burning with a strained, furious flame.

"Would... be... *very*... problematic... darling..."

Æht's voice was breathless and thin. Pained in a way Thea had never once heard from her before—every syllable costing her something precious.

The arm shoved Thea firmly upright, back onto whatever counted as her own footing within this space, and then withdrew—retracting back behind the Gate's horizon in one swift motion.

The ripples stilled immediately. The surface of the "water" smoothed, undisturbed once more, as though nothing had ever crossed it.

For an instant.

Æht's other arm came forward—reaching out toward the threshold, closer and closer, before stopping just barely short of crossing it herself.

But what she *held* crossed through.

It was a piece of ice.

Glistening and perfectly translucent, practically invisible were it not for Thea's inherent knowledge of it being there. Formed into an impossible geometric shape that seemed to reach in and out of every layer of her perception simultaneously—edges folding into angles that did not exist, facets reflecting stars that were not behind it, the whole of it occupying more directions than the space around it should have allowed.

"Take it! *Quick!*"

Æht's voice—pained, weak, and yet knife-sharp—rattled Thea out of her paralysis just as her vision began collapsing inward from the lack of air, the edges of everything going grey and small.

She grabbed for it.

Her hand closed around the impossibly shaped, invisible ice—passing through neither the Gate, nor did Æht, touching only the impossible shape between them—

And everything around her collapsed into *nothingness*.

Her eyes snapped open inside the Training Hall, facing away from the Rune priest.

She tried to breathe.

She couldn't.

Her chest gave no response at all—not a spasm, not a hitch, not even the burning ache of empty lungs demanding air. There was simply *nothing*.

She tried to think.

She couldn't do that either.

She could only exist, locked in place, staring straight ahead at the far wall of the Training Hall with eyes that refused to so much as twitch.

Nothing happened.

Nothing *kept* happening.

For one second, or ten, or a thousand—she had no way of measuring, no internal clock left running to count with—absolutely nothing happened at all.

Until, at the very edge of her frozen, unmoving field of vision, she caught it.

Her left hand.

It was holding... nothing. And yet—*everything*.

There was no object in her grip. Not in any way her eyes could confirm.

Her fingers were closed around empty air, curled tight against her palm.

But the space *inside* them—the small pocket of nothing at the centre of her fist—was *wrong*.

It bent. It refracted. It reached in and out of her perception in directions that *did not exist*, and the longer her locked, immovable gaze rested on it, the more the world around it began to simply... *break*.

The simulated environment of the Training Hall—the flawless, seamless, indistinguishable-from-reality construct that she had spent the past months living and fighting and dying inside of without ever once catching a visible seam—was *failing*.

Visual artifacts bloomed at the edges of her fist.

Tiny fractured shards of misrendered geometry—slivers of wall texture where no wall was, fragments of floor tile hanging in open air, stuttering repeats of her own fingers overlapping themselves in impossible positions... And they were multiplying.

Doubling, then doubling again, cascading outward in exponential quantities with each passing nano-second, an avalanche of broken rendering spreading up her wrist, her forearm—

And that was when her frozen mind, slow, stuttering and still trapped in eternal ice, finally registered what her arm actually looked like.

It was frozen—the flesh had gone pale, hard and faintly translucent, actual ice-crystals blooming across her skin in delicate, branching fractals, riming her knuckles, sheathing her forearm, glittering faintly in the Training Hall's light between the multiplying artifacts.

Her entire left arm, from fingertips to elbow and climbing, had turned to solid ice around whatever it was she was holding.

'...tha...'

The thought would not finish.

The artifacts flickered in and out, faster now, spreading beyond her arm—patches of the floor stuttering, the walls tearing into brief geometric static, the light itself strobing between frames that did not agree with each other.

The whole Training Hall shuddered around her like a holovid played on failing hardware, flickering, flickering, flickering—

Until finally—*Nothing*.

Everything simply... disappeared.

The Training Hall. The Rune priest. The weight of his Presence pressing down across her shoulders. The frozen arm. The impossible thing inside her fist. The floor beneath her, the light around her, the breath she wasn't taking, her body, her name, her sense of being a thing that existed at all—

All of it *ceased*.

Abyssal blackness was all that remained...