

Volume 2 - Chapter 100 - Burn

“Friends. Colleagues. Academic rivals.

Let us begin, as we always do, with the admission that keeps our field humble:

We do not know what an Inheritance is.

Do not mistake my opening for despair, for we know a great deal *about* them.

We know there are twelve—thirteen, if we count the unlucky few who never see the other side of their Awakening.

We know their occurrence rates across four centuries of census.

We know their Polarity pairings, their cannibalization behaviours, their colour signatures through a Gate.

And we know when they are assigned.

This is, perhaps, the most remarkable thing we *believe* to know.

The Inheritance is not given at Awakening. Not at Integration. Not at the first breath.

It is *set* the moment the Soul returns, cleansed, from the Maelstrom—before the person it will belong to exists in any form whatsoever. Before conception. Before their parents have met.

The Soul comes back already carrying its Inheritance, the way a coin comes from the mint already carrying its face.

At birth, the Soul attaches to the body—and the person, unknowing, is already spoken for.

Most carry it to the grave without ever once touching it.

A lens, ground, polished and fitted, through which no light is ever shone.

Which brings us to the question that has consumed this symposium for four hundred and twelve consecutive years: ***Why?***

The Paths, as best we can determine, are the fundamental laws of the Void and of Reality itself—the deep grammar of what is possible.

The Inheritance is the lens through which a given Soul is permitted to read them.

Two Psykers on the same Path, bearing different Inheritances, are not using the same Power differently—not fundamentally, at least. Their Intent and Will might be directly aligned, with the only difference being the lens they’re channeled through.

They are, in some sense that our understanding gestures at but cannot fully hold, using wholly different Powers that merely *appear* to share a name, when one observes their outcomes side by side.

Which raises an uncomfortable structural question: Can a law truly be called a law, when it is inherently mutable by the one interpreting it?

This line of thinking leads us to some of the major questions of our field:

Why should the laws require lenses at all? And why should a Soul be fitted with one before it is even a person? Or be fitted with one at all?

On this, we have differing schools of thought.

Let me be even-handed in my disservice to all of them.

The ***Multiplicity school*** holds that the Inheritances are simply the natural facets of each law—twelve ways any law can be read, the way a single word carries different meanings in different mouths.

It's elegant. Tidy, even. And it explains, in my estimation, nothing about why the assignment happens in the Maelstrom, of all places.

The ***Sacrosanct school*** holds that the Inheritances are components of a design—that their distribution is not statistical noise but architecture. The eerie stability of the occurrence rates troubles me too.

But a design requires a designer, and on that subject the Sacrosanct school falls conspicuously silent.

The ***Factional school*** draws the analogy to our own Galactic War: The Inheritances as banners of the Void's own denizens—twelve ideals whose rivalries we perceive only as colours bleeding through our Gates.

Every Soul returning from the Maelstrom is, in this telling, *conscripted*. Stamped with an allegiance to a conflict it will never see, on behalf of a party it will never meet.

I personally find this school the most disquieting of them all—and for precisely that reason, I give it the greatest weight in my own deliberations.

Call it a scholar's failing, if you like.

But I have found, across a long career, that comfort has rarely been a property of true things.

The ideas that unsettle and disquiet us most are seldom wrong merely because we wish them to be. And so I have made it my practice to weigh the least comforting explanations the highest—not because discomfort *proves* truth, but because our instinct to look away from them proves nothing at all...

And yet there are smaller camps still.

The ***Resonance school*** proposes the Inheritance is not assigned but *acquired*—the Maelstrom's cleansing not a washing but a tempering. Your Inheritance is a *scar*.

A record of something that happened to you before you were.

And the ***Mirror school***, smallest of all, holds that the Inheritance is what the Soul *is*—the twelve *kinds of things* a Soul can *fundamentally be*, and that everything else we call a person is merely weather moving across that fixed terrain.

Every one of these schools is a theory about *intent*, constructed by creatures who cannot verify that intent even exists.

We are reading the face of the coin and arguing about the mind of the mint...

The only honest sentence in our entire field remains the one I began with:

We do not know what an Inheritance is.

We know only that, before any of us drew breath, it was decided that we would be permitted to see through them.

Enjoy the symposium.”

—

[Shortened Excerpt from "On the Question of the Lens" — Opening Address by Professor Emerita Savenna Ilyth-Kor, 412th Symposium on Void-Theoretical Studies, Intoresta Academic Institute, PFC 914]

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Thea forced herself up onto her knees, then, shakily, to her feet.

'Confidence. Come on, Thea. You've got the momentum. Don't fumble it now.'

The problem was that the Rune priest's Presence was *gone*.

And that, somehow, was worse than the crushing weight had ever been.

She had spent the past every waking minute around the Rune priest simply drowning in it to varying degrees, and now the ocean had simply *vanished*—leaving a silence around him so total, so unnaturally absolute, that every instinct she had was screaming at her that she was standing next to a hole in the Universe wearing the shape of a man.

And she'd seen how difficult it was for him to reduce his Presence to the level that he'd normally kept it at for their lessons—removing it entirely... That was a deliberate, incredibly difficult action on his part.

She swallowed, then reiterated her earlier words.

"I—I think I know its **Name**."

The Rune priest simply stared at her with wide eyes.

"During the trance..." she continued, carefully, "I was looking in, and when the beast appeared, I... I just *knew*. The very moment I looked at it. And... The moment I realised its **Name**, all of its heads and eyes snapped towards me—it's when I heard your voice, telling me to never do '*that*' again. Whatever that means, exactly...?"

She left it hanging, trailing off deliberately.

The Rune priest's eyes widened further with every single word she spoke.

She wasn't entirely sure it was smart to keep talking—but as long as she *was* talking, he wasn't going down whatever train of thought he'd been on before.

So she kept going with the only natural part to continue with, to try and see if he might know something about the strange creature.

"Its name is... "

His eyes blew wide into saucers, and his entire form *blurred*—

"... **G—**"

"—!"

Thea abruptly found herself standing roughly two metres further away... Watching her own body crumple to the ground in front of her.

The head was entirely missing.

"Don't!"

The Rune priest's command, which Thea had not heard prior, echoed off the distant walls, cracking through the Training Hall like a gunshot.

Thea stared at her own collapsing corpse for a fraction of a second, her mind completely blank, utterly unable to process the sequence of events her eyes had just delivered to her—

—and then *pain* hit.

It came out of nowhere, all at once, indescribable—a tearing, shredding *agony* that ripped through her throat and chest as though something inside her was pulling itself apart along every seam simultaneously.

She doubled over.

Blood surged up her throat and burst out of her mouth in a hot torrent, splattering across the pristine floor, pouring from her nose in thick rivulets.

She went down onto her knees, crimson spewing out of her in waves, and the sounds that tore out of her between them were not words—not even close.

They were animal-like screams, each one shredding her ruined throat further on its way out.

"Sovereign—my equipment, *now!*"

The Rune priest's voice barely reached her, muffled and distorted, as though arriving from underwater.

The world smeared into blurs of light and colour.

The floor tilted.

Her arms gave out, and she crumpled fully onto the ground in the rapidly spreading pool of her own blood, still not understanding what was happening to her—the pain pulsing in worsening waves, burning through her throat and chest like she'd swallowed IgT, each pulse whiting out a little more of her vision.

The cascading, burning pain took *everything*.

Her name went first. Then the Training Hall.

Then the concept of a body, of a floor, of blood, of the Rune priest, of time itself.

There was no Thea anymore—no self left to be in pain, only the pain itself, existing on its own terms, pulsing, burning and expanding to fill *every corner* of whatever remained.

How long it lasted, she would never be able to say. Seconds... Hours... Days.

There was no measurement left to measure it with.

Then just as abruptly it had begun, it stopped.

All of it, all at once.

But what it left behind was not relief.

What it left behind was a consistent, growing and gnawing anxiety—a dread with no shape and no source, creeping in on her from all sides at once, pressing against the edges of her awareness like dark water against a cracking window.

"Sovereign, reset her again."

The Rune priest's voice reached her—muffled, strained.

An instant later, she found herself standing once more, stumbling half a step before her body caught itself on instinct.

"W—"

She stopped immediately. Chills spread down her back.

Her throat was no longer raw. She had *just* been reset—fresh body, fresh everything—yet her voice *still* refused to work properly. It came out hollow, weak and scratchy—not like her usual.

Which should *not* have been possible.

She had *just* been reset!

"*What... is happening...*" she managed to force out, her eyes darting frantically across the hall, trying to find the source of the dread still closing in around her from every angle.

There was nothing to find.

It was like a mid-grade pain, except without any characteristics at all—no heat, no sharpness, no location. Just indescribable, *untyped* pain, with no origin and no cause, radiating in from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"*Thea*. I need you to *listen* to me. Closely."

Her head snapped toward his voice, and she forced herself to look at him—*only* him—straining her Resolve to its absolute limit to shut out the creeping dread long enough to focus.

But—

He'd said her *name*.

For the first time since she'd come out of the trance, he had actually referred to her *directly*.

Not the cold, clinical nothing of the interrogation, but *Thea*.

It was the singular ray of hope in the entire situation, and she grasped for it with everything she had.

He'd gotten his answers. He was satisfied. She was his pupil again. He was going to help her—make sense of whatever this was, *fix* whatever was happening to her.

Only then did she register what he was holding.

An intricate, ornate staff in one hand—taller than he was, wrought in materials she couldn't name, dense with carved symbols that seemed to shift when she wasn't looking directly at it. And in the other, a similarly ornate bag, its surface worked with the same restless glyphs.

The Rune priest took a single breath.

"*Thea...* My *dearest*, most brilliant, most singularly gifted pupil. My *magnum opus* of an apprentice. Truly, in all my centuries—and there have been *many*, as you know—I have never once had the privilege, nay, the *honour*, of guiding a talent such as yours."

'What...?' Her brain took a few moments to register his words.

"Your *instincts*!" he continued, his voice swelling with theatrical warmth as he began, slowly, to circle her—staff clicking softly against the floor with each step. "*Unmatched*. Your courage in the face of the unknowable—*inspiring*. Do you know, I wept? *Genuinely* wept, watching your carving attempts earlier today. I told myself, '*Anrake, you old fool, you do not deserve a student of this calibre. The Void itself has smiled upon you.*' The finest Wielders I have trained across four hundred years could not hold a *candle*, Thea. Not a candle!"

"I—" Thea started, utterly lost, feeling heat rapidly rise up to her cheeks as her eyes widened.

"And your *mind*!" He pressed on, entirely uninterested in whatever she'd been about to say. "That beautiful, quicksilver mind of yours! The way you dissect a problem—the way you dissected *me*, just now, do not think for a moment I failed to notice, you clever, *clever* girl—*magnificent*. I confess it freely: I was outplayed. Me! By a Recruit not yet a year into her Awakening! I shall treasure the humiliation for the rest of my days. I shall have it *engraved* somewhere."

Thea's entire body was actively trying to fold in on itself.

Her shoulders had crept halfway up to her ears without her permission. Her hands had found each other somewhere in front of her stomach and were wringing themselves into knots.

The heat in her cheeks had spread to her ears, then down her neck, and she was reasonably certain that her face had, by this point, achieved a shade of red that Kara would have flagged as *medically concerning*.

She did not know where to look. She did not know where to put her arms.

Every individual compliment landed on her like a small, targeted strike against her ability to remain upright.

'*Stop... Stop talking?! Please, for the love of—I would rather do the interrogation again! I would genuinely rather do the interrogation again—*'

"I have taken the liberty," he continued, gesturing grandly with the ornate bag, "of informing Zephyr—several times, in fact, in writing—that you are, without exaggeration, the single most important discovery of my entire career. My proudest achievement. The *daughter* my work never gave me. The—"

Mid-word, mid-gesture, the Rune priest abruptly *stopped*.

The theatrical warmth cut off as cleanly as a severed comm-line, and Thea, braced for the next barrage of mortifying praise, was left blinking at the sudden silence.

He looked at her carefully.

Studied her, *really*—his eyes moving across her flushed face, her knotted hands, her half-raised shoulders—with the focused attention of a man reading a diagnostic readout.

And then he let out a long, deep, *relieved*-sounding sigh.

"It *is* you, my dear pupil."

His voice had returned to its usual tenor and cadence—warm, measured, edged with theatre but no longer drowning in it.

His Presence slowly started blanketing her once more, settling over her shoulders with the same familiar pressure that every one of his lessons carried, and the slight strain that had been sitting at the corners of his face quietly disappeared.

Thea, now truly, *utterly confused*—and still thoroughly feeling the heat radiating through her entire chest and head—simply stared at him.

The Rune priest inclined into a small, genuine bow.

"I must apologise, Thea. Both for the rough handling after the trance... and for being too slow. I was caught off-guard by what you revealed to me—I admit this freely—and in that moment, I failed in my duties as your mentor to keep you safe. I should have killed you before you managed to voice even the first syllable... That you are experiencing any of it at all is a failure I will not repeat."

He stepped closer, looking down at her, and held the ornate staff out toward her.

"Take hold of it. It will help with the recovery."

Thea's brain was still frantically trying to play catch-up with the sheer whiplash of the past several moments—and so her body simply acted on its own, her hand rising on pure instinct to accept her mentor's equipment.

The second her fingers grazed the staff—

The dread massively receded in an instant.

The formless, burning anxiety that had been pressing in on her from all sides since the reset simply *pulled back*, retreating into the furthest corners of her mind like a tide going out, and Thea breathed out a long, shuddering exhale entirely without meaning to.

"Good," the Rune priest commented, a small smile finally playing across his face for the first time since the trance had ended. "I was somewhat worried the Staff might not work for you—it is my Bonded Artefact, after all. But it would seem that even its reduced powers should still help."

He waved his hand, and two cushioned armchairs—which had *definitely* not been in the room before, Thea was certain of it—appeared behind each of them.

"Sit. Recover," he ordered.

Thea followed the advice without argument, sinking into the cushioning as the heat from the barrage of compliments finally, slowly, began to recede from her face—though her grip on

the staff stayed white-knuckle tight, and her understanding of what was actually going on remained firmly at *zero*.

"Sovereign, *Command Override*," the Rune priest said abruptly.

Thea flinched slightly in her armchair as, once again, a perfect square of absolute nothing enveloped his head mid-sentence—his jaw still faintly working at the bottom edge of it, sealed away from her perception entirely.

Then his voice returned, mid-order.

"—delete *everything* you have recorded, and everything you will yet record, of this entire session between Recruit McKay and myself. From *everywhere*. All instances, all mirrors, all derivative logs. Additionally: Gold-Lock the existence of the Origin Path within Recruit Thea McKay, and—especially—the fact that she knows its Name, effective immediately and going forward. Not a single whisper of this is leaving the ship."

"Affirmative, Venerable Rune priest," the Sovereign's voice replied evenly. "Deletion protocols engaged. Gold-Lock classification applied."

"And the physical datavault backup, the portions you cannot delete yourself—from the start of this session up until this moment—where are they located?"

"Deck C, Section 4, Archival Vault 117-Theta."

The Rune priest gave a small, thoughtful hum, his eyes narrowing briefly in a way that suggested the information had been filed somewhere very deliberate.

He offered no explanation whatsoever.

"I must apologise as well," he simply continued instead, settling into his own armchair, "for the ambush just now."

"...The ambush...?" Thea repeated weakly, still thoroughly confused.

"During your trance, I felt a brief spike of Void energy. Energy that..." he paused, choosing the words with visible care, "...I have only ever felt in another Psyker at the precise moment they turned toward the Void. Became corrupted by it. Overtaken by it."

His eyes met hers evenly.

"I *had* to make sure it was you."

He smiled then, lopsidedly.

"The first thing that truly gave me a hint that it *was* you, was you straight-up attempting to speak a ***Verum Nomen*** aloud. No Void being would *ever* do such a thing. They would know far, far better... But I had to be absolutely *certain*."

He chuckled, shaking his head slowly.

"And the one thing that the Void—even with stolen knowledge, stolen memories, and everything else it acquires from a Psyker who falls to it—remains the absolute worst at replicating... is emotional reaction." His smile widened by a degree. "And you, my dear pupil, are one of the single easiest people to *get* that I have ever encountered. All one has to do is compliment you, thoroughly and loudly."

Thea simply stared at him, mouth open.

"I could not risk handing my bonded artefact to a Void-taken Psyker," he continued, entirely unbothered by her expression, gesturing loosely at the staff in her hands. "So I had to be *sure*, before it ever touched your fingers. I do apologise for the embarrassment—genuinely—but it was the fastest and easiest available test I could come up with on the spot."

He leaned back in his armchair, and the lopsided smile crept toward something almost fond.

"Luckily for both of us, you are thoroughly *terrible* at the entire social branch of things, Thea. Even if a Void being had somehow taken control of you, your reactions are far too... *you*... to be replicable in the short time since any potential usurpation. The attempt at disappearing into the floor, the way you don't know what to do with your hands, the specific shade of colour you turn... No entity in the Void could have faked *that* kind of particular disaster on such short notice."

Thea was completely at a loss for words.

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish on land. Nothing whatsoever came out of it.

Somewhere in the back of her head, several different responses fought each other for priority—outrage, embarrassment, a strangled "*what the actual fuck?!*"—and every single one of them lost.

The Rune priest, meanwhile, sobered up considerably.

"Once again—I am sorry for the rough handling, Thea. *Genuinely*. But it was for the safety of the ship, and everyone aboard. I hope, in time, you will understand why I did so, and agree with my decision that I would make the same choice again *without* hesitation."

He leaned back into his armchair, the frame creaking lightly under his weight, the armoured robe chiming gently with the shift, and cupped his beardless chin once more.

"Now... what, exactly, to do with you..." he mused, half to himself. "The Corrinite recension addresses the plurality, but not the binding... the Ilvaran consensus edition would have the relevant clauses, but I have not needed the exact words in—*hmm*... Four hundred plus years, give or take? Wherever did I..."

He trailed off, eyes narrowing, staring at nothing.

"I will have to do proper research on this. But I can hardly leave you sitting here with nothing at all to go off of, either—"

"...I, um," Thea interrupted.

He glanced at her.

"I wasn't... done. Telling my side of things, I mean," Thea said, meekly.

The Rune priest stilled and blinked at her a few times.

Finally, he gestured for her to continue, his full attention settling onto her once more.

"When I left the trance..." she began carefully, "I was holding *something*. In my left hand. Some kind of—strangely dimensioned *thing*. And the DDS..."

She grew quieter still, not really wanting to admit to her thoughts. "The DDS didn't seem to be able to *deal* with it, somehow. There were like... visual artifacts *everywhere*, multiplying,, and then everything just—flickered, and cut out? I... I think I might have broken the server with it..."

The Rune priest nodded slowly.

Then faster—his eyes sharpening as something visibly clicked into place behind them.

"It must have been an Origin Rune," he breathed, almost reverently. "I do not know *how* you acquired it... but it is what makes the most sense of everything, does it not...? The DDS would not be able to render it—because it has never encountered one before. The system has no actual reference for it. Nothing in its entire library of reality to approximate it with."

He cupped his chin again, his fingers drumming once against his jaw. "Of course the cluster failed, then. Of *course* it did..."

His eyes snapped back to hers.

"Thea. Do not, *under any circumstances*, pull that Rune out again. Not by accident. Not as a test. Not for any reason whatsoever. Do you hear me?"

She nodded immediately.

"Good. I will do some research on it... and the next session we have together, we will conduct *outside* the DDS entirely. We will take a closer look at your Rune then—if that is truly what it is. But until that time, I must *forbid* you from experimenting with it in its entirety. The risk is simply too great."

"Yes, sir," Thea agreed, nodding again.

"Now. To the **Name**."

His voice shifted into something even more deliberate and heavy.

"You are never, *ever*, to speak that **Name** out loud. What you are experiencing right now—the reason you very nearly died from uttering a single letter of it—is called Soul-Burn."

A cold sweat ran down Thea's back at that, and she went very, *very* still.

"Using a *Verum Nomen*—a *True Name*—of *anything* is extremely taxing," he explained.

"Were I to invoke the *True Name* of somebody like you, or any regular Recruit, even I would suffer *considerably* for the privilege. You, attempting to call upon the True Name of an *Origin Beast*..."

He shook his head slowly.

"I am not certain even *I* would survive such an attempt."

He let that settle for a moment before continuing, his tone easing back toward the professorial.

"As for *True Names* in general—that is far too large a topic to cover now. My time budget for today has become... *considerably tighter* than planned. And frankly, it is not something you should be concerning yourself with for many years to come. *Decades*, even."

He tilted his head slightly.

"How you *obtained* the True Name of an Origin Beast, however... now *that* is interesting. But also not something for *you* to worry about. I will research the topic. Consult my colleagues. Perhaps even the Voidspeaker, if it comes to it. This is an unprecedented situation, and it needs to be handled delicately—and above all else, *carefully*."

He gestured toward the staff in her hands.

"As for your current condition: Your Soul has taken severe *Burn* from the attempted invocation. It will likely persist for several days—possibly even weeks. The dread you are feeling, the weakness in your voice, the pain without source or type—all of it stems from that *Burn*. The Staff will, hopefully, help you recover enough over the remainder of our session here, to remain semi-functional afterwards until you have fully healed."

The Rune priest leaned forward then, elbows resting on his knees, and observed her carefully for a long moment.

"I would like to offer you a choice, Thea. An actual one."

She looked at him.

"By any honest accounting, this session has given you very little beyond injury and confusion. You came to me for answers, and instead you have died, bled, been interrogated, been embarrassed—" his mouth twitched faintly at that, "—and *Burnt* your very Soul. You have been *hurt*, more than you have been *taught*. That is a failure of the session, and I do not intend to pretend otherwise."

He gestured loosely between them.

"So. We could attempt to find *some* way for you to still extract something usable from today—some genuine step forward, however small—or large. I will admit, freely, that I would be *very* interested in doing so myself."

His eyes glinted briefly with the familiar scholarly hunger before he tamped it back down.

"But I also entirely and genuinely understand if you do not want to. Given everything you have just gone through, *no one*—least of all me—would fault you for ending here, taking the Staff, and going to rest. The choice is yours. Truly."

Thea considered it.

Actually, properly considered it, for a few long moments.

The sheer amount of *stuff* that had happened in this one session was downright ridiculous.

But...

Was she really going to say no to this now?

To potentially, *actually*, get something usable out of today—something beyond the carving of a Voidrune that Æht could already use anyway?

She knew the answer, of course.

She'd known it before he'd even finished the offer.

When had she *ever* given up an advantage? No matter how much it cost her. No matter how much she'd had to cry, sweat, and bleed to claw her way to it.

That was the entire foundation of *everything she was*—every tournament she'd ever won, every impossible bracket she'd ever fought through, every single lesson the Old Man had ever carved into her very being.

Giving up now—just because she'd died half a hundred times today, bled out on the ground through her own mouth and nose, been crushed, interrogated, thrown through a doorway, held in the air like a specimen by her own mentor—however reasonable it had all been in the moment—and had her very *Soul* set on *fucking fire* from the inside...

Was that really who Thea McKay was?

She couldn't help the small, lop-sided smile that crept onto her face as she met the Runepriest's waiting eyes...