

Full Excerpt: The Quiet Rooms

Astro-Path Psykers are the lifeblood of every fleet.

Every ship of the line has them, yet most of the crew never sees them.

They sit somewhere near the vessel's core, behind bulkheads thicker than the ones protecting the bridge, in chambers the deck plans label simply as *Astro-Navigation*.

The crews call them the "*Quiet Rooms*."

Inside them, hooked into life-assisting machinery that breathes for them, feeds them, and turns their bodies on schedule to prevent atrophy, are the people who make our interstellar civilization possible.

Yet almost nobody outside the Navy knows what their work actually *costs*.

Void travel, as every halfway learned individual knows, is conducted through pre-charted Voidlanes, also colloquially simply called tunnels—stable corridors through a plane of existence that does *not* want us in it.

What the literature mentions less often is that "stable" is a courtesy term. Tunnels shift. Void Entities move in. Anomalies bloom in corridors that were clean mere a week ago, despite the Faction's Echo Psykers best attempts at keeping the Voidlanes stable.

Therefore, every transit begins with *verification*—and that verification is the work of the Thread-Path Psyker aboard the ship.

A Thread Psyker charts the tunnel ahead of the jump, spending truly *staggering* quantities of Psyfocus to run their Soul's perception down the corridor's full length and confirm that the conditions the Navy's maps promise are the conditions that actually exist.

For a short hop, this is very taxing. For a long transit, the recovery from a *single* full chart can take weeks. For the longest corridors on the naval registry, months or even years.

There are Thread Psykers in the UHF Navy who have spent the vast majority of their careers *recovering* from charts rather than *performing* them—and the Navy considers this a more than acceptable ratio, because the sole alternative is sending tens of thousands of crew into the Voidlanes on pure faith alone.

And faith, as so many of humanity's past attempted doctrines have shown, offers no protection against the realities—or *unrealities*—of our existence.

Following the Thread's efforts and successful verification, the ship enters the Void, which means the Echo takes over.

And if the Thread Psyker's work is akin to a sprint... The Echo Psyker's is something for which we *simply do not have a word*.

Once transit begins, the Echo Psyker descends into a working trance and does not come out of it until the journey *ends*—weeks later, months later, and on the deepest corridors, years later.

Their mind works around the clock, without rest and without relief, reinforcing the tunnel's walls around the moving ship, smoothing the transit, holding the passage steady against a medium that erodes it by simply existing. The machinery they are hooked up to keeps their bodies alive, yet nothing keeps their mind company.

They are alone inside the trance, parts of their Soul are cast forward into the Void itself, holding a lonely vigil day and night, with no rest, no respite, and no allies to reach out to.

Even when several Echo Psykers are reinforcing the same tunnel at once, they cannot communicate.

It is inside this arrangement that the true cost of course changes becomes clear—and why every navigator in the fleet treats them as something between a last resort and a curse.

A ship inside a Void tunnel cannot simply *turn*.

Breaching the tunnel walls spikes the Repulsor-Field violently, opening seams that Void Entities are always, impatiently, waiting for.

And *beyond* the walls there is nothing to even navigate *by*—the bubble of borrowed Reality a ship carries with it, the thing that lets navigators promise a transit will take around eighty days rather than an undeterminable amount of time, extends no further than the Voidlane, the tunnel itself. Beyond the walls, the ship's own meager pocket of Reality is *all* that exists, and it is not enough to guarantee *anything*—not duration, not direction, not arrival.

Departure from a charted tunnel remains, by an overwhelming margin, the leading cause of ships lost irretrievably to the Void.

So, instead, a course change means leaving the Void entirely: The ship's systems violently rip open a portal back into Real-space and force the vessel through.

The Repulsor-Field takes damage—expected, of course, and generally repairable. But inside Real-space, it is not a necessity as it is within the Void, so damage to it is not as catastrophic.

The Echo Psyker, however, takes the worst of it.

There is no way to warn a mind in working trance that the tunnel it is holding is about to cease to exist. There is no gentle exit for them.

When the ship tears out of the Void, the Psyker's ongoing work—their very Soul extended into the tunnel from their physical bodies to achieve the required effects—is *severed* mid-thought, and the backlash arrives with the full weight of *everything* they were holding in their mind. Massive Psychic backlash is not simply a risk of the maneuver, but a component.

Soul Burn is *expected*.

A catastrophic mishap is sufficiently likely enough that fleet doctrine *requires* a Null standing by in the Quiet Room before the portal is opened—because the chance of an Echo Psyker detonating during an emergency exit is higher than during nearly *any other* maneuver in the naval catalogue.

And yet... The ship *still* is not on its new course.

That requires the Thread Psyker—already the most recently exhausted person aboard—to chart once again.

But this time, without a mapped starting point, jumping from what navigators call *Blank-space*: A stretch of nothing with no pre-existing tunnels, reaching for a corridor network that was never meant to be entered from this particular direction.

The strain of a Blank-space chart is, in the words of one fleet medical officer, "the single most reliable generator of Soul Burn we have *ever* documented."

The fleet has a name for the full sequence of events—emergency exit, Null on standby, Blank-space chart, two broken Astro-Paths, and a ship limping toward a corridor it was never supposed to need.

They aptly call it a "*Burning of the Astros*."

It is why modern doctrine mandates shorter transits with more scheduled stops, even at the cost of months of additional travel time. So that when the war inevitably demands a change of destination, the order can wait for the next charted exit—and cost nothing but time, instead of costing the two most valuable people in the Quiet Rooms.

A retired Echo Psyker I once interviewed had been through one Burning, in her third decade of service. I asked her what she remembered of it.

"Nothing," she said. "That's the mercy of it. I remember the tunnel—and then I remember the medical bay, six months later, waking up from the coma."

She was quiet for a moment.

"They gave the Null who stopped my partner a posthumous commendation, you know. For being fast enough. I was made to sign the recommendation myself... Once my hands had started working again."

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