

Volume 2 - Intermission 102.5 - Protocol

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 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, hooked into life-assisting machinery that breathes for them and feeds them, are the people who make our interstellar civilization possible.

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

Void travel is conducted through pre-charted Voidlanes or 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 a mere week ago.

So every transit begins with *verification*—the work of the Thread-Path Psyker, who spends staggering quantities of Psyfocus running their Soul's perception down the corridor's full length.

For a short hop, this is taxing.

For the longest corridors, recovery from a single chart can take months or years.

There are Thread Psykers who have spent most of their careers recovering rather than charting—and the Navy considers this an acceptable ratio, because the alternative is sending tens of thousands of crew into the Voidlanes on 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.

Then the ship enters the Void, and the Echo takes over.

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

Their mind works around the clock, reinforcing the tunnel's walls, holding the passage steady against a medium that erodes it by simply *existing*. Parts of their Soul are cast forward into the Void itself, holding a lonely vigil 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.

A ship inside a Void tunnel cannot simply *turn*—breaching the walls spikes the Repulsor-Field and invites the Entities always waiting outside, and beyond the walls the ship's meager pocket of borrowed Reality guarantees *nothing*.

Departure from a charted tunnel remains the single leading cause of ships and crew lost irretrievably to the Void.

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

The Repulsor-Field takes—repairable—damage, yet the Echo Psyker 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. The backlash arrives with the full weight of everything they were holding—Soul Burn is expected, and fleet doctrine *requires* a Null standing by before the portal opens.

And the ship *still* is not on its new course.

That requires the Thread Psyker to chart again—this time from *Blank-space*, with no mapped starting point. In the words of one fleet medical officer: "The single most reliable generator of Soul Burn we have ever documented."

The fleet calls the full sequence a "*Burning of the Astros*."

It is why modern doctrine mandates shorter transits with more scheduled stops—so a change of destination costs nothing but time, instead of the two most valuable people in the Quiet Rooms.

A retired Echo Psyker I once interviewed had been through a Burning.

I asked what she remembered.

"Nothing," she said. "That's the only mercy I received. I remember holding the tunnel—and then 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. For being fast enough. I was made to sign the recommendation myself... once my hands had started working again."

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[Shortened Excerpt from "The Quiet Rooms" — UHF Long Watch News, Investigative Features, Issue #2,847, PFC 924]

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PoV: Zephyr "The Nullwarden" Quinn

"Blank Protocol in progress. Do not leave your current position. Blank Protocol in progress."

The emergency system blared its endless loop into the corridors of the Sovereign, the announcement repeating ad nauseam over blinding white strobes of light that alternated with brief, total stretches of pitch darkness.

Zephyr's armoured boots clanged against the deck plating with every step—not that she could hear much of it beneath the din. Not that she was trying to anyway.

Inside her combat regalia, precious little of the chaos actually reached her.

Her helmet adjusted automatically to the strobing, flattening the violent swings between blinding white and absolute black into a clean, stable image. The audio filtering worked the same way—the announcements were there if she cared to focus on them, and functionally nonexistent if she didn't. Which, naturally, she didn't bother to.

After all, the Blank Protocol was about *her*.

She turned her head slightly, the heavy helmet of her Nullwarden Regalia barely registering as a presence at all—its entire field of view unobstructed from the inside, as though she wasn't wearing several kilograms of some of the most advanced protective equipment the UHF had ever produced on her skull.

Her eyes swept briefly over her shoulder, double-checking the two massive figures trailing behind her.

They were still there.

She knew, of course, that they were.

She *could not* have missed their departure if she'd tried—she felt their tremendous pull on her Gate with every single step, a constant, grinding drag against the very core of her being, and her durasteel-clad will was wound around the both of them so tightly that neither could have affected so much as a dust mote without her explicit say-so.

So, of course, she knew.

If she had lost track of them for even a single moment, she would already be dead, after all.

But she always visually double-checked anyway. Old habits from even older Battlefields—ones that had kept her alive long enough to become what she was.

The two figures were clad in Ultra-Heavy Power Armour: Effectively just walking blocks of high-Tier armour plating strapped to every square centimetre of their beings, more mobile bunker than person.

The entire colour scheme of both suits was kept in a blinding, immaculate white, and they radiated light outward in every direction—so aggressively clean, so *deliberately* pristine, that nobody aboard could ever mistake them for anything other than *exactly* what they were.

Looking at them directly would have physically hurt her eyes, were it not for her own armour's built-in filtering.

Her own Regalia, meanwhile, carried that same white—the exact same shade, split across the plating of her full Heavy-type Power Armour in stark, clean fields—but broken up by equally deep swathes of black, the two shades divided along sharp lines running the length of the suit's frame.

Where their armours *radiated light*, hers *absorbed and reflected* instead. And where theirs bore nothing but the white, hers carried the black and select aspects of neon-violet woven throughout as well: Thin seams of it tracing the joints and the sigil-works across the chestplate and pauldrons, glowing faintly with every step she took.

"Two more sections," she informed them over comms, her voice level. "Just two more, then you can go back to resting."

Two confirmation pips answered her over the comms.

It was about the only way the people inside those armours could reasonably give their assent. The Ultra-Heavy-type armour they were wearing was not built with conversation in mind, so the pips were their only real means of assent—and its occupants were rarely in a state for talking anyway.

Her attention returned to the front as she continued leading the two shining beacons through the Sovereign's corridors, her pace steady, yet as brisk as the two behind her could manage.

"Blank Protocol in progress. Do not leave your current position."

The system blared once more as the trio stepped through yet another bulkhead door, the strobing in the corridor behind them cutting off the moment they had passed through, as if stepping over an invisible threshold. The next stretch of hallway picked the pattern right back up, however—white, black, white, black.

'Still no sign of any combat, intruders, or anything else...' Zephyr thought grimly, her right hand continuing its patient hover over the hilt of her hardlight Laring, her eyes attentively scanning every seam, every vent, every shadowed junction the corridor offered her. *'Ten minutes, and not a single damn hint of **anything**. Just what is going on here...'*

She'd been searching for signs of foul play from the very first second.

She had been shunted—with no warning, transition protocol or courtesy ping to speak of—straight out of the confines of her office inside the DDS and directly into her real-life body, which had been waiting for her fully equipped in the Nullwarden Combat-Regalia, exactly as her standing contingencies dictated.

That alone had told her plenty about the situation.

The ship AI did *not* execute an emergency extraction of the Nullwarden lightly.

Something had tripped the ship's deepest protocols *hard* enough that the AI had decided that not only was Major Quinn's presence required, but the Nullwarden's, *specifically*.

And yet...

She'd seen no signs of combat, nor any breach alarms beyond the Blank Protocol itself.

Neither had there been any casualty reports, no requests for reinforcements, nor any other form of communication forthcoming from the rest of the crew aboard the ship that might have pointed toward whatever had initially caused the emergency.

And the AI itself was being conspicuously unhelpful about *all* of it.

"Sovereign," Zephyr tried once more, keeping her voice even. "What caused the emergency? Has a cause been identified?"

The Sovereign answered immediately, as it always did.

"I am currently unable to access relevant information regarding the originating cause of the emergency, Nullwarden. Technician teams remain on-site at the affected DDS server complex. Their preliminary assessment confirms that server cluster DDS-E-014 suffered an abrupt and catastrophic crash, with total loss of all diagnostic telemetry. Forensic analysis of the physical hardware is still ongoing. No cause has been conclusively identified at this time."

Zephyr's jaw tightened behind her helmet.

"Unable to access relevant information."

She'd been dealing with UHF ship AIs for the entirety of her career, and she had long ago learned to parse their phrasing the way other officers parsed enemy troop movements.

There was a universe of difference between *"no information exists"* and *"I am unable to access it."*

The former was an evident absence. The latter was architectet—information that existed *somewhere*, behind some wall, that the AI either *could* not or *would* not walk through.

*'A full server cluster doesn't **just** die, Sovereign. Not on a ship like this. Not with the crazy amount of redundancies surrounding the servers... Seven hundred and forty-some Marines were in that instance, and the whole thing went dark so fast that not **one** of your failsafes caught a single byte on the way down?'*

She filed the thought away with all the others and kept walking, refocusing on her sweep.

"Blank Protocol in progress. Do not leave your current position."

The corridors they passed through were empty—*properly* empty, in the way only the Blank Protocol could make them in a situation like this.

Every Marine, every crewmember, every technician was locked down wherever the alarm had caught them: In mess halls, in quarters, in maintenance shafts, behind sealed doors that would not open again until the all-clear.

An entire Recruitment Ship, tens of thousands of souls, holding perfectly still.

All so that *three people* could walk through it unseen, unbothered.

That was the actual function of the strobing lights and the blaring audio, of course.

They were intended to blind, more so than simply warn.

Any camera feed, any curious eye pressed to a viewport, any sensor not explicitly whitelisted would catch nothing but white-out and black-out in violent alternation. Nobody aboard the Sovereign would ever be able to reliably say *what* had moved through these corridors today.

Nobody was ever supposed to.

*'And that's the part that actually worries me,' Zephyr admitted to herself, her eyes performing another slow, methodical sweep of the junction ahead before she led her charges through it. 'I'm burning a full Blank Protocol escorting these two across half the ship, because a DDS cluster died and nobody can tell me Emperor-damned **why**. If this turns out to be some kind of freak false alarm scenario, I've spent a very expensive card on nothing.'*

Her hand settled a fraction closer to the Laring's hilt.

*'But if it turns out to be **something**...'*

She thought of the classified report still sitting on her desk.

The Monarch, torn into drifting pieces in open real-space. No survivors. A breached Sanctum, its contents simply *gone*. The conclusion glowing on her datapad, marked for *Kuigon Proprietor Eyes Only*, that she had been brooding over for *days* without finding a single acceptable way to act on it from her current position.

A Titanicus-level Void Entity, confirmed operating somewhere in the Sector-cluster.

And now the Sovereign's own DDS—the single most redundant, most failsafe-laden system aboard the *entire* vessel—had suffered a catastrophic failure that its governing AI could not explain, for one reason or another, on the same ship that carried the damned *Harbinger's* daughter, the Black Sigil himself, and enough classified complications to keep an entire O-13 subcommittee employed for a century...

'No such thing as coincidence.'

"Blank Protocol in progress. Do not leave your current position."

"Yes, thank you," she muttered under her breath, her eyes continuing to rapidly roam the empty corridors in front of her, "I'm aware."

One of the confirmation pips chirped behind her—a double-tap this time.

If she hadn't known better, she'd have called it amusement.

"Eyes forward," she said dryly. "One more bulkhead."

They pressed on through the strobing white and black, three figures moving through a ship holding its breath—two of them shining like small suns, and one of them, hand resting on her blade, quietly running through every scenario in which this day got worse.

There were, she had found, always more of those than expected—and always too many to adequately prepare for—

"—Zephyr."

Her comms abruptly came to life with the deep, baritone voice of the one person she'd been hoping to hear from ten minutes ago.

"Anrake. Report," she replied immediately, then delivered her own without waiting. "Blank Protocol active on Deck E. Hallways forty through eighty-six cleared. No signs of hostile intrusion."

"You can remove the Blank Protocol, Zephyr," the Rune priest's voice answered over the comms, his cadence calm and in control. "There are no enemies aboard, as far as I can tell."

Zephyr took a moment to consider the implications of that phrasing.

'As far as he can tell... From him, that means he's already checked—thoroughly.'

Which made this many things—but still not a false alarm. Otherwise he would have said so.

Which made sense, because a full server cluster did not *catastrophically die*, trigger her emergency extraction, and lock down the entire ship like this over *nothing*.

Something *had* happened.

Her old mentor simply wasn't specifically saying *what* over open comms.

"Sovereign," she said, keying her command code through her suit's interface. "Begin winding down Blank Protocol. Staged deactivation, standard sequence."

"Affirmative, Major Quinn. Staged deactivation initiated."

Which meant, in turn, that her current task had just changed: The two Nulls behind her needed to go back to their holding chambers before the ship woke up around them.

"Anrake," she said over comms. "What happened?"

"*Something* went wrong," his voice returned—deliberately and artfully non-descript. "I am about to go and fix parts of it. Meet me at Deck C, Section 4, Archival Vault 117-Theta."

Zephyr sent her assent via comm pips and turned her small procession around, setting a brisk pace back through the corridors toward the nearest Null Chambers.

The strobing lights of the Blank Protocol still flashed around the three of them—the staged deactivation keeping their movements hidden for the remainder of the walk—but the blaring announcements had already cut off, leaving the corridors in an eerie, flickering silence broken only by the heavy staccato clang of armoured boots.

As she walked, she pulled up her mental map of the Sovereign's blueprints and started working through them, deck by deck, section by section.

'Deck C, Section 4. Archival. Vault 117-Theta specifically... What's special about that one?'

It didn't take her long to connect the dots.

'That's... one of the physical DDS backups.'

Which only made her more confused.

'The physical backups...? Why would he need those? Does he hope to find answers in them—data that got lost when the main servers broke?'

She turned the idea over for all of two seconds before throwing it out entirely.

No. That didn't make sense at all.

Anrake had sounded *certain*. Completely, utterly certain that there was no danger aboard—which meant he already *knew exactly* what had happened, in full, without needing a single byte from any backup.

He wasn't looking for answers.

Which meant the only reason he would need physical access to the one part of the archive the Sovereign could not touch on its own...

...was to *delete* them.

Immediately, the puzzle pieces started clicking together, one after another, into a picture she recognised far, far too well by now.

Zephyr stopped dead in her tracks.

Her eyes rolled up toward the flickering ceiling, and she let out a long, deeply drained sigh from the very bottom of her lungs.

"... What did she do *this* time," she quietly muttered. "And Emperor-damned **how**?!"

Then she kept walking toward the closest Null Chambers...

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"You know," Anrake's voice greeted her several minutes later, before she'd even fully cleared the final corner into Deck C, Section 4, "it has been far, *far* too long since I last saw you in the Nullwarden Regalia."

There was a distinct note of awe woven through the casualness of it—genuine and entirely unbothered by the fact that he was openly admiring military hardware in the middle of a still active incident.

Not that his own armoured robes were particularly less impressive than her Regalia.

The void-black layers of them shifted and resettled with his every smallest movement, dense with faintly glinting Void-script and interwoven plating that had turned aside countless blows no Power Armour ever could, the soft chimes produced by it ringing quietly in the pressurised stillness of the corridor.

The contrast between them, Zephyr noted absently—the blindingly white fields of her armour against his ebony skin and the absolute black of his robes—would have made for a genuinely stunning visual, had anyone been around to see it.

Yet nobody was.

He had likely already dismissed the two dozen guards normally stationed in this particular section before she had even arrived, leaving the two of them as the only people here.

Which, in turn, only sharpened that familiar, low-grade unease she felt about wearing the Nullwarden Regalia at all—as the incident *clearly* hadn't required it.

Instead of dignifying his admiration of it with an answer, she simply gave him a *look*.

She flashed her visor to two-way transparency for a brief moment, just long enough for him to catch the unfiltered weight of the expression underneath.

Anrake sighed, shaking his head slightly.

"Still as stuck-up as ever about using what is rightfully yours, I see."

"It is the UHF's," Zephyr snapped back, her voice flat through the helmet's speakers. "I am merely its most qualified owner at this particular point in time. I should not—and *will not*—use it frivolously."

He held up both hands in easy defeat, conceding the point with a simple nod.

"Of course, of course. You are right, as always."

Zephyr harrumphed, before the levity drained out of her posture entirely, and she turned to face him properly.

"Anrake. What—*exactly*—happened?"

He met her gaze... and held it.

Zephyr had known the man for the better part of her entire life.

She had spent decades as his personal student, learning to read the micro-expressions beneath the theatre—the minute tightening at the corner of his eyes, the fractional stillness

of his jaw, the quality of his silence when his mind was running at full speed behind a carefully composed face.

And what she was reading right now, clear as any written report, was *calculation*. He was weighing whether he should tell her. And, beneath that, *what* he would tell her.

Which, in itself, told her enough for her eyes to widen behind the visor.

'... *He's actually considering holding back. From me?!*'

This was *beyond* serious.

Anrake had no reason to lie to her—literally none.

Their technically massive gulf in rank meant nothing between the two of them—and more to the point, her Proprietor status made her privy to every piece of information inside the Kuigon Sector to begin with.

So even *if* Anrake had suddenly been struck by the Void's own ghost of adhering to protocol, for whatever Emperor-damned reason, there *still* should have been no wall for him to maintain here.

Only a very small handful of reasons existed, in the entire architecture of the UHF, for Anrake to hesitate before speaking to *her*—much less to the Kuigon Proprietor.

And every single one of them was *catastrophic*, to say the least.

Finally, however, he replied—each word placed with deliberate care.

"During my session with my newest pupil... something *unexpected* occurred. Something that, accidentally, overloaded the DDS server cluster hosting our particular instance."

He let that unhelpfully, extremely *vague* statement sit there for exactly one heartbeat, before he gestured toward the massive, secured bulkhead beside them.

"Your command code, if you would."

And without waiting, he turned toward the second terminal and began entering his own.

She hesitated for a moment, her mind still reeling from the torrent of implications packed into the unfathomably vague statement he had provided her as an "explanation", before finally moving to the first console.

The physical backups required two command codes to access—and for very good reason.

The archival vaults were both backups *and* black boxes, at the same time: Hardened, isolated, physically severed from every network aboard.

More often than not, they were the only things left intact when a ship of the line met a catastrophic end—whether in battle, or as a result of a Void event.

Entire boards of inquiry had been built on nothing but the contents of vaults like this one, recovered from wrecks that had nothing else left to say.

They were the ship's memory of last resort.

'*And Anrake,*' she noted grimly as she semi-reluctantly keyed in her code, '*has come here to make one forget.*'

But despite the evident oddness of the situation, the clear breach of critical protocol that deleting physical backups represented—guaranteed to end in a court martial should anyone ever learn of it—and his adamant refusal to explain himself... Zephyr knew Anrake better than to doubt his actions.

He was eccentric, cared little for rules or protocol, and was downright unhinged at times—but he did *not* do important things like this without a good reason.

Of that, she was entirely convinced.

Meanwhile, the bulkhead began to open.

It moved with a low, protracted groan, the massive plating sliding apart centimetre by centimetre while a deep hiss filled the corridor—the Sovereign pressurising the sealed vault beyond, flooding the long-dormant space with breathable air for the first time in what had likely been years, if not decades.

Anrake spoke over the sound.

"Thank you, Zephyr. For the trust." He sighed, then added, "And I am afraid I must ask for even more of it."

His gaze found hers through the helmet—he knew her well enough to place *exactly* where her eyes were, even through the fully opaque visor—and his golden eyes carried, once again, that level of seriousness that sent cold shivers running straight down her spine.

"I need you to convince Horatio to change course. We cannot remain on our current trajectory. At least three lanes of distance from our present route—and leave a warning buoy behind, timed for a month at minimum. *Burn the Astros*, Zephyr."

Zephyr felt the blood drain from her face.

The words landed like a physical blow to the gut—her stomach clenching inside the Regalia as her mind scrambled to catch up with what, *exactly*, he had just asked of her.

"We only have *one pair*, Anrake," she replied in a half-whisper.

He nodded. "I know."

"There is *no way* Horatio agrees to that, Anrake. Not without *some form* of evidence of necessity. He could be court-martialled for it!"

Yet Anrake did not yield. He simply held her gaze, steady and unmoving.

"It is necessary, Zephyr. It is why I asked *you*, specifically. Even I cannot make him do this. Only you can." His voice dropped a fraction lower. "I need the Kuigon Sector's Proprietor for this one."

Zephyr's hands felt clammy inside the armour.

Her mind ran ragged through a million possibilities—Void Entities, Stellar Republic infiltration, Sanctum breaches, the Monarch, the Titanicus-class, every single catastrophic scenario in her considerable mental library—and fell short on every single one. Yet nothing fit.

Nothing explained why Anrake, of all people, would be requesting *this* of her.

Because this was beyond problematic, even for her.

Not to mention the entire "**ordering** one of your oldest friends to do something that could ruin his whole career, with no explanation, solely through force of rank" aspect of it all.

But even a Proprietor could not simply *burn* incredibly limited Navy resources—a full Astro-Path pair, the only one aboard—on the say-so of a single individual, Rune priest or not.

There were oversight mechanisms, inquiries, procedures, costs... The Astros themselves, whose Souls would pay the actual price.

Her visor turned fully translucent once more, and she held his eyes with her own.

"What—*exactly*—happened during that session?" Her voice was as level as she could manage, in an effort to keep the waver out of it. "I need to know. If I am to make this happen, I *need to know*, Anrake."

Anrake held her gaze for a while before he exhaled a long, slow and heavy sigh—heavier than she had heard from him in *decades*.

"I cannot. Not unless you are willing to join the political ring, Zephyr... I am going to request an O-13 Lock for what occurred during it."

Zephyr stumbled backwards a step—as though he had physically slapped her across the face—her expression collapsing into an open mix of disbelief, confusion, and something close to outright terror.

'An O-13 Lock?! He's requesting an O-13—'

The O-13 Lock was the highest clearance that existed inside the UHF. Bar none.

It outranked the Gold Lock—a singular one of which had already caused more than enough issues for her over the past few weeks—by *several orders* of magnitude.

And... that also meant Anrake was *right*.

If she wanted to know this—*now*, before the Lock came down—she would inevitably be dragged into the world she had spent her entire career deliberately avoiding as much as

possible. A Proprietor never fully escaped politics, of course; the role made that impossible. But there was still a *vast* difference between shouldering her responsibilities on the military side of the ledger, and *actively* descending into the nest of vipers that was the O-13 Council and the *true* political machinery of the UHF.

Anrake had the option to read her in right now. She knew it, and he knew she knew it.

Whatever had happened was, at this exact moment, at most Gold-Locked—a Lock that Anrake himself could place and her Proprietor status could still break, cleanly and legally.

But the O-13 Lock... That one, she could not.

Once it came down, there existed practically no realistic scenario in which she would *ever* be granted clearance. And considering *who* was requesting it—the *Black Sigil* himself—there was little doubt whatsoever that it *would* come down.

Which meant she had to decide, right here and right now, in front of an opening archival vault, inside an armour that suddenly felt *far too small and unimportant* for the first time in its existence.

Either she learned now, got grandfathered in—and was in the know.

Or she remained ignorant—almost certainly for the remainder of her life.

"I... Is the Kuigon Sector in danger? Does knowing what happened help, in some way, to prevent a disaster that would otherwise unfold? Is the UHF itself in danger? How dangerous *is* this, Anrake? What are we even talking about here?" she asked, desperate for some kind of hint that could make the decision for her.

But instead of an answer, Anrake simply held her gaze for a while.

And in his ancient, golden eyes, she saw a torrent of emotion—a mixture so potent and diffuse that it was difficult to identify any single one within it. Trust, excitement, eagerness... but also uncertainty, doubt, and—what made her blood run cold—*fear*.

Instead of reassurances or clear answers, when Anrake finally did speak up, he gave her the most terrifying response he *possibly* could have given in that moment—the most terrifying four words he had *ever* spoken to her—and admitted.

"I do not know."