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JAMES SWALLOW

THE VOICE

IN SILENCE, ONLY truth remains.

But to find it; ah, there is the task. For, one must ask herself, what place is truly silent? Where can the absolute stillness of tranquillity be found?

The question was a common one placed to novices at the very start of their induction, and it was a rare aspirant who showed the wisdom to come even close to the correct answer.

Many would look to the stars, through the portals of the great ebon-hulled craft they found themselves aboard, and they would point to the void. Out there, they would say. In the airless dark, there is silence. No atmosphere to carry the vibrations of sound, no passage there for voice nor song nor shout nor scream. The void is silence, they would say.

And they would be corrected. For even where there is no air to breathe, there is still clamour, the… chaos, as it were. Even there, broadcast across wavelengths that unaugmented humans could not perceive, there was the riot of cosmic radiation and the constant rumble of the universe's great stellar engines as it turned and aged. Even darkness itself had a sound, if one had the ears with which to hear it.

So then. The question again. Where is silence?

Here. Leilani Mollitas mouthed the words, her voice stilled. It is here, within me. She touched her chest with both hands, palms flat and blades of fingers extended, thumbs crossed in the shape of the great Aquila. Inside her thoughts, behind her closed eyes, beyond the rush of blood in her veins, the novice strained to listen and find the tranquillity of self; for it was only within the human heart that the absolute purity of silence could be found, the peace that only the mute could know.

A frown grew upon her pale, pleasant face. She could not reach it. Even as that thought formed in Leilani's mind, she knew she was lost to the moment. The perfect embrace of serenity faded from her and she allowed a breath to escape her lips.

In the flat hush of the sanctum the noise of her exhalation was like the rush of a wave breaking against a shore, and she felt her cheeks colour slightly. Her eyes snapped open and she blinked, displeased with herself.

Her mentor stood a few feet away, observing her with the same perpetually watchful air that was the very meter of her character. The other woman moved her head slightly, the top-knot of purple-black hair about her otherwise shorn scalp shifting to pool on the shoulders of her golden battle-bodice. Below the flexible duty armour, reinforced red thigh-boots and studded gloves covered her limbs, with more plate metal for her sleeves and a snake-skin of dense mail as leggings. Tabards hung free from her waist and she was without weapons, her helmet or the finery of her furred combat cloak.

Amendera Kendel of the Storm Dagger cadre, Oblivion Knight and Sister of Silence, stood before her without a sound. Her amber eyes betrayed a teacher's concern for a promising student.

Leilani smothered her startled reaction quickly. She had thought herself alone in the Black Ship's meditation chamber, utterly unaware of the other woman's arrival. The girl could not help but wonder how long Kendel had been there, how long she had been studying her as she tried and failed to find her inner focus. By contrast, the novice was dressed only in her mail undersuit and the lightweight hooded robe of an unvowed aspirant. Leilani raised her bare hands and began to sign, but her mistress halted her with a short shake of the head. Instead the woman held the tips of two fingers to her chin. Give voice, commanded the gesture.

The novice's lips thinned. She longed for the day when words would no longer pass from her mouth, but as she had just demonstrated, it would not be today. At this moment, Novice-Sister Leilani Mollitas felt further away from taking the Oath of Tranquillity than she ever had before.

'Sister Amendera,' she began, and even her whispers rose to fill every corner of the cavernous Sanctum Aphonorium, 'How may I be of service to you?'

Kendel's hand fell to the crimson leather of her belt and her fingers toyed with it a moment; Leilani knew the subtle cue from her many months of service as the Oblivion Knight's adjutant. Her mistress was framing her thoughts, marshalling them into ready formations in much the same way she commanded her Witchseeker squads. The novice wondered if Kendel had ever made an ill-considered statement in her entire life.

~You continue to be troubled.~ The Knight spoke in ThoughtMark, one of the symbolic sign languages employed by the Silent Sisterhood. Small in scale, full of delicate gestures of finger and thumb, it served to convey concepts of great subtlety or intricate nature. It was far more graceful than the large, sharp motions of BattleMark, the command language used by the Sisters to communicate on the field of conflict, far more complex and nuanced. Many of the fine inferences of Kendel's intent could not have been translated directly into spoken Imperial Gothic. There were shades of degree in her statement that no human voice could ever have delivered, and thus

Leilani felt hobbled as she replied with crude words.

‘It is so,’ she agreed. ‘The news from the outer rim is difficult for me to assimilate.’ The words tumbled out of her in a rush, echoing slightly off the curved steel walls of the meditation chamber. The novice was feeling increasingly uncomfortable speaking out loud in this hallowed place. The Aeria Gloris, as with every starship in service with the Divisio Astra Telepathica, was equipped with aphonoria, great spaces within their hulls where sound-deadening technologies rendered the closest equivalent to absolute quiet. To break that silence seemed an obscenity, a defacement; yet Sister Amendera made no move to step aside and usher Leilani into the nearby antechamber, concealed from them by ornate curtains of black and gold.

Perhaps it was some sort of test, like the question? Yes, that had to be it. Kendel had made it clear during Leilani’s duty under her command that she expected much from the young aspirant, and not for the first time the novice-sister wondered if she would be found wanting. ‘What we witnessed in the Somnus Citadel,’ she continued, ‘the… creature brought back from Isstvan aboard the starship Eisenstein.’ The girl shook her head, recalling a mutated Astartes warrior that had run riot across the Sisterhood’s lunar stronghold, the freakish aberration that had once been a loyal warrior of the Emperor. ‘These things pull at my reason, mistress, and I find it difficult to hold my mind upon the tasks at hand.’ She looked away, to the steel decking beneath her boots. ‘All this talk of traitors and heresy. Horus…’

The Warmaster’s name left her lips and it seemed louder than a gunshot. She stumbled over her thoughts and looked up once more.

Kendel nodded once. ~These reports of his rebellion are hard news. It would be a lie to say that no sister remains unaffected by the terrible duplicity that is said to be unfolding.~

‘It has robbed me of my focus,’ Leilani admitted. ‘I think of good men, of the noble Astartes we have often fought alongside, and then to conscience such monstrous deceit among their ranks…’ She shivered. ‘The Astartes and the primarchs are line kindred of the Emperor of Mankind himself, and if they are wracked by such division then…’ The novice’s throat went dry as she tried to utter the words. ‘What if such horror reaches our ranks, mistress?’

The other woman looked away. ~You would not be aware,~ she signed, ~but I met him once, the Warmaster. He was everything they say of him. And if he truly has turned his face from the rule of Terra, then it will be the war to end all wars to give him his censure.~

Leilani felt sobered by the Oblivion Knight’s direct statement. In her service to the Sisters of Silence, the novice had been exposed to many sights – psykers driven insane

by their ability to touch the churning madness of the warp, human beings whose flesh and minds had been twisted beyond all recognition, things less than alive that boiled with infernal psychic power – but all these were enemies she could understand, they were foes that, although reviled, Leilani could grasp in her reason. But the traitors? What possible motive could they have? This was the greatest era of humankind, with the galaxy turning at their feet and the Great Crusade at its height; why would one so highly placed as the Warmaster Horus wish to put a match to the Emperor's Utopia, when its completion was so close at hand?

~Who can know?~ replied Sister Amendera.

The novice blushed, suddenly aware of the echo around her, realising that she had voiced those last few thoughts aloud.

The swish of the fine silk curtains hanging across the chamber entrance drew the attention of both women, as the Null Maiden Sister Thessaly Nortor entered. Her taut, scar-sharpened face was drawn in a scowl and she gave a blunt BattleMark reply, clearly having heard the novice's last words. ~Target Warmaster. Traitor. Uprising status Flawed/In Error Condition. Insurrection will be Terminated in short order before Rebellion can Expand/Cause Collateral Damage.~

Nortor shot Leilani a hard look, a clear scolding in her eyes. The second-in-command of the Storm Dagger cadre had made no secret of her disdainful opinions of the Warmaster's mutiny. The other woman's breath rasped quietly through the mechanical apparatus at her neck; where Mollitas and Kendel showed bare flesh, almost three-quarters of Nortor's throat had been replaced with a mechanical augment. Made of a polished silver-steel, her artificial implant served the function of flesh destroyed during an engagement against the Jorgalli, inside one of the xenos's bottle-worlds. As well as her neck, much of the Null Maiden's lungs were also synthetic proxies assembled by the Sisterhood's biologians. On one level, Leilani was privately envious of the dour Sister Thessaly; Nortor's larynx had been lost to the acidic bite of the bottle-world's alien atmosphere, and she had refused to allow her augmentation to be fitted with an artificial replacement. The woman was as silent a Sister as was humanly possible.

'We can only hope that the Warmaster sees the error of his ways,' offered Leilani, but even as she said the words they seemed little more than weak and foolish optimism.

~He must recant.~ Nortor's obvious annoyance calmed slightly and she switched to the more reasoned language of ThoughtMark. ~To oppose the Emperor is the height of madness. The only explanation is that the Warmaster has grown envious of his father's greatness.~

She shook her head. ~That, or he has lost his mind.~

In the other Sister’s retort, the novice heard the echo of similar words that had chimed from elsewhere in the Sisterhood. Even as news of the rebellion spread, so too there was the talk of a different movement in motion: a growing sect of veneration for the leader of humankind. Such reverence seemed ill-fitting; Leilani balked at the use of the term “worship” in connection with a being so avowed to a secular path for his people, and yet this so-called Lectitio Divinitatus was raising its head in the strangest of places. If anything, the novice found the question of this school of thought almost as hard to swallow as the concept of Horus’s perfidy; and yet, while the Emperor was no deity, it could not be denied that his magnificence was so great that granting him such exalted status was at least an understandable mistake. But it was something to be expected of common, unsophisticated tribals from the feral worlds, not the educated men and women of the Imperium.

Sister Amendera became aware of a pict-slate in her subordinate’s white-knuckled grip, and she gave her a quizzical look. In turn, Sister Thessaly bowed slightly and offered the device to her commander. Leilani could guess what the slate contained – an updated skein of mission orders from the command stratum of the Sisterhood on Luna, sent directly from the high offices of the Departmento Investigates.

THE FULL SCOPE and range of the Black Ships and their duties were known only to a select few among the upper tiers of the Silent Sisterhood, the lords of the great Council of Terra and the Emperor himself, but the basic tenet of their works were well recognised.

The exact number and disposition of Black Ships that prowled the galaxy purposely remained an unknown; all that could be certain was that the worlds of the Imperium would witness one of them appear in their skies at a preordained time of tithing, ready to accept their cargo. The vessels did not take tribute in the form of riches or chattel – as much as they were warships, the Aeria Gloris and her sister-craft were also great asylum-barges where those revealed to show the taint of the pskyer were interred. Every world beneath the Emperor’s light was duty-bound to give up those of its populace marked with the potential – latent or not – for psychic talent; and those that were not given freely, those that escaped the net, these too were the quarry of the Black Ships and the Sisterhood.

In the dark holds of their dungeon decks, psykers of every stripe and power were corralled and tested. Many did not endure the process well, and perished under the harsh glare of the Vigilators and Prosecutors. Others, those too damaged by their own warped psyches or too dangerous to be allowed to live, would quietly be put down and the ashes of their corpses cast into suns.

The ones who were strong enough to survive and pliant enough to accede to the will of the Imperium were the lucky few. For them, further, harder testing lay ahead in the

ironclad mind-halls of the City of Sight on Terra itself, the headquarters of the Divisio Astra Telepathica. There, they would take the first steps upon the road to the ritual of soul-binding and recruitment into the ranks of the astropathic choirs.

The duty of the hunt and the stewardship was a harsh one that no ordinary human could hope to accomplish; indeed, to even conceive of crewing a Black Ship with mere troopers from the Imperial Army, or even the great Astartes, would be a path to ruin. Such were the powers of some psykers that the perceptions of a mind could be twisted and reordered to their will. It was not uncommon for the worst of the psi-witches to cloud thoughts, to coerce and control through pure exercise of will. A normal man could be made to unlock cages and think no ill deed done, never knowing that he had freed a monster. Mindless servitors alone could not be trusted to deal with so complex an obligation. Only the Sisterhood, who brought with them the gift of Silence, had the strength to hold the witches in check.

This they did through fealty to the Emperor, this they did through the very action of their beating hearts and the blood in their veins.

This duty they marked with their vow never to speak.

For the Sisters of Silence were poison to witchkind. Chance mutation within the human genome, once in every million, might create a psyker; but in once in several billion would yield the precious jewel of the Pariah gene, the Untouchable. It was the cold logic of evolution that brought them forth. If the unfettered mental power of a psyker existed, then in balance there had to be those at the opposite end of the genetic spectrum – those whose minds were the absolute antithesis of the warp-touched, whose presence alone was enough to nullify the raging psi-fire. Each Sister was an Untouchable, a psychic blank forever protected from the sorcery of the witches they hunted. Immune to psychic attack, their very aura enough to disrupt and distress their prey, there were no better warriors to fulfil this great duty.

But still, at day’s end, they were not superhuman. Trained hard to fight alongside the elite of the Emperor’s military, certainly, respected and venerated by all, undoubtedly, but still human. Still weighed down with human doubts and human fears.

AMENDERA KENDEL CONSIDERED this as she weighed the pict-slate in her hand, watching Novice-Sister Leilani and the churn of thoughts writ large across her face. She did not need the preternatural power of a telepath to read the girl’s mind. The great dread over the rebellion of Horus hung across everything like a dark cloak, blotting out the light with a haze of confusion. Every Sister aboard the ship, if she admitted it or not, found her thoughts turning to the matter of this unprecedented event in moments of introspection. In the hush of the Aeria Gloris, it was easy to find oneself drifting into reverie, for the mind to fill in the stillness with thoughts and wondering that, if left unchecked, could spiral out of control. Typically, the iron

discipline of the Sisterhood and the call of their duties tempered such things; but the sheer scope of the Warmaster's rebellion… of his heresy… It tore at reason and composure like a wild, clawed thing.

Kendel forced the thoughts away and glanced down at the pict-slate, drawing her focus back to the mission at hand. Upon it she glimpsed the seal of Celia Harroda, the Witchseeker Pursuivant, and above it a notation from the high office of Sister-Commander Jenetia Krole. She licked dry lips. Krole, mistress of the Raptor Guard and one of the Emperor's personal battle confidantes, was the highest-ranking Sister alive. The mark of her notice upon this operation made the gravity of the situation clear, in no uncertain terms.

She removed a glove and placed her bare skin on the sensing pad, letting the slate prick her finger. A moment later the blood-lock released the cipher that untwisted the text from encoded gibberish back into readable Gothic.

The first few pages reiterated what Kendel had already been told in her earlier briefing at Evangelion Station. The Aeria Gloris had been called from its normal circuit pattern and placed under an emergency re-tasking diktat, dropping from the warp to hastily resupply at the orbital platform before making space for the Opalun Sector. The Black Ship had only just begun its tithe cruise, and as such the dungeon decks were practically empty; Kendel suspected this was an important factor in the choice of the Aeria Gloris for this task, but she had not made mention of it.

The orders were deceptively direct. One of their sister-craft, an older, larger vessel called the Validus, had failed to make three scheduled astropathic check-ins and was now officially logged as missing, status unknown. The Validus, in contrast to Kendel's ship, was at the end of her cruise, her decks groaning with a bounty of telepaths, pyrokenes, kineticates, dreamers and mind-witches of every stripe. She should have hove to in Luna's orbit one month ago. Sister-Senior Harroda had commanded Kendel in brisk, severe BattleMark. ~Mission/Task: seek-Iocate-evaluate. Determine cause of anomaly. Recover if possible.~

Those words encompassed a multitude of possibilities. Black Ships had gone missing in the past, on more than one occasion. For all their combat capability and advanced stealth technologies, the craft in service to the Astra Telepathica were not invulnerable. They largely travelled alone for good reason, but this also meant that they could fall prey to enemy craft in greater numbers or become mired if caught by stellar phenomena. She remembered the Honour Haltis, ambushed and obliterated in battle with eldar reavers; the White Sun, taken by warp storms, and all the others.

But a missing Black Ship also conjured up the very worst of possibilities: a breakout. On a vessel laden with witches, such a thing was a true horror to consider. As such, Harroda's orders had concealed the implication that, if needed, Sister Kendel's remit

would stretch to the application of a most final end to the voyages of the Validus.

The Aeria Gloris was now only hours from the area confirmed as the last known location of the errant vessel, and with each passing moment Amendera Kendel felt her unease grow. She chided herself that the source of her concern was not simply the obvious matter of what caused the craft to go dark, but also a trivial personal disquiet. She felt slightly guilty at her outward treatment of her adjutant.

Novice-Sister Leilani had allowed her anxiety over the Warmaster's rebellion to occupy too much of her thoughts and it was affecting her meditation; but by the same token, Kendel dwelled on something that was, in all honesty, far more inconsequential.

The Validus carried the flag of the Oblivion Knight Sister Emrilia Herkaaze, and the woman was not unknown to Amendera Kendel.

Far from it; they had first met in the dark iron halls of a Black Ship just like this one, both of them drawn to the notice of the Sisters of Silence as children. Each of them recruited from worlds in the Belladone Reach, Kendel and Herkaaze had shared a vague kinship throughout their aspirant trials, but as they had grown into full Sisterhood, the women's early friendship soured. Now, years later, they were bitter rivals, each nursing antipathy for the other. She refused to draw up the reasons from her memory, instead letting them bubble and churn just below the surface of her thoughts. To dwell on such things would only dilute her focus still further.

Sister Amendera wondered if the Witchseeker Harroda was aware of their ill-feeling towards one another; she thought it likely, as little seemed to pass beneath the notice of Sister-Senior Celia's diamond-sharp gaze unnoticed. Perhaps, in its way, this was a test for her. Ever since the incident at the Somnus Citadel and her involvement with the renegade Death Guard Garro, Kendel had become aware that she was being scrutinised by her peers. To what end, she could not be certain.

The Knight became aware of her adjutant and her second watching her intently, waiting for her to proceed. She nodded and scrolled further on through the data encoded on the pict-slate. ~This is confirmation of what we have already been told,~ she signed with her free hand. ~Records of the ship's tithe and previous ports. Estimation of current weapons load-out and systems capacities—~

She halted abruptly. The dense data transmission sent out to them via machine-call vox had some additional matter appended, key among them a single digitised datum captured from a partial astropathic communication. The protocols associated with Black Ship signals were completely absent; normally, any communication sent from vessel to vessel would be prefixed with a number of codicils and ciphers. There were none. The message had been sent uncoded, in the clear. Out loud.

Kendel pushed the “execute” key and the slate replayed the datum. In the quiet of the Aphonorium it seemed like shouting.

A woman’s words, rough and strangely toned, as if it had been a very long time since she had used them and could not quite remember how to speak. Two words. Just two words, but they brimmed with a terror so powerful that Sister Amendera felt her hands contract into fists, and she saw Nortor and Mollitas fall breathless.

‘The voice…’ said the woman. ‘The voice…’ And then once more, as a ragged scream. ‘The voice!’

‘What does it mean?’ The novice blinked and frowned, staring at the pict-slate. ‘It must have been a sister, but she spoke the words… She spoke them aloud.’

At her side, the Null Maiden nodded slowly. Typically, Sisterhood transmissions sent to locales beyond line-of-sight were despatched not with words but in an ancient machine-readable variant of ThoughtMark known as Orskode, a mechanical rattle of clicking that to untrained ears would resemble the sounds of turning cogwheels. For this woman, undoubtedly one of Herkaaze’s cadre, to not only eschew that but to willingly break her Oath of Tranquillity… The implications were ominous.

~The ship never exited the empyrean,~ noted Thessaly. ~We can only guess at what they might have encountered in warp space.~

Amendera felt a cold chill across her, as one might feel on a summer’s day if a shadow passed before the face of the sun. She remembered the stink of death and decay in the corridors of the Somnus Citadel, a fly-swarmed man-shape of something insectile and foul, killing and corrupting with every clawed footstep.

She did not need to guess at what horrors the warp could hold. She had already seen them, spilled out into the real world.

A MADDENED SEA of blood-churned surf, curtains of nameless and impossible colour, great howling halls of flayed emotion; the hellish nightmare of the immaterium raged around the Aeria Gloris as the Black Ship closed the distance towards its drifting sister-vessel. The incalculable monstrosity of warp space thundered and screamed, beating at the energy bubble of the Geller field, clawing at the craft that dared to penetrate this realm of pure psychic force; even the massed numbers of Untouchables aboard were not enough to hold such energies at bay. Without the protective barrier, the Aeria Gloris would be engulfed.

The Validus floated there, the only sign of any life the dull emerald glow from the emitter coils visible about her warp motors. Power still flowed through the derelict, but the craft made no moves to turn to meet them, nor to offer communication through

vox or tight-beam laser. Alive and yet dead, the Validus floated, serene against the madness.

If the two vessels had met in normal space, it would have been policy to send across a scout party on a boarding craft, allowing the Aeria Gloris to stand off and bring her cannons and torpedo launchers to bear, lest the Validus suddenly become a threat worth terminating. But here inside the screaming caverns of the empyrean such protocols could not be followed. Instead, an altogether more delicate approach was required.

With care, the shipmaster's bridge crew brought the Aeria Gloris closer and closer until the glimmering non-matter of her Geller field brushed that of the Validus. Cogitators programmed for just such tasks passed orders, via festoons of golden commwire and mechadendrites, to servitors using scrying scopes to measure the energy spectra being broadcast from the other Black Ship. By agonising moments, they brought the vessel's protective envelope into synchrony with its neighbour. Like two bubbles meeting on the surface of a pond, they touched one another, shifted and finally merged. Such an operation was a difficult one, but then the Black Ships were crewed by some of the finest crop of thinking serfs available to the Imperium. It would take their constant stewardship to maintain the merging of fields; a single miscalculation would collapse both, and open the starships to the ocean of insanity lapping at their keels.

And yet the Validus drifted as if upon a calm sea. Seasoned veterans among the crew serfs talked among themselves and spoke ill of such unusual circumstance. Some, those who thought themselves safe to do so beyond the sight of the Sisters, even bent at the knee and offered a prayer to Terra and the Emperor.

The warp was rage, and constant with it. But here, in this place, there was a cavity within the churn and thunder, an expanse where all seemed becalmed. If it had been the surface of a planetary ocean, then there would have been no breath of air, only glassy water from horizon to horizon. Such things were unknown by the shipmaster, and with the tradition of all sailors dating back to the times of mankind's first voyages in craft of wood and sail, he and his men feared and cursed it.

Elsewhere, on the lower decks of the Aeria Gloris, power moved to mechanisms capable of tunnelling through the layers of space-time, and a great flare of boiling light enveloped the ship's teleportarium stage. The women stood upon it shimmered like mirages and were gone.

THE TRANSITION FLASH faded into the darkness and Sister Amendera gestured with her drawn sword. To her right, Leilani held a bolt pistol in one hand and an auspex in the other, her attention on the chiming reports of the sensor device.

To her left, Thessaly was already cutting order-gestures in the air, flinging the shapes towards the three Sister-Vigilators that had accompanied them.

Kendel ran a finger over her forehead without conscious thought, absently tracing the red lines of the Aquila tattoo there. She took a careful breath, glancing around the low, wide corridor they had appeared in. The Knight had expected to find the chamber cold, perhaps the air inside thin from slowed life support functions and proximity to the outer hull; she had ordered the teleport servitor not to target them too deeply into the Validus's mass, for fear that the risk of a mis-integration would grow with the distance of projection.

But the air here was warm and dry, like a desert just after sunset. And more than that, there was peculiar stillness to it, as if the motes of dust around them were suspended in some sluggish fluid.

Kendel stepped forwards, letting her blade lead her, making small, experimental cuts in the air. Despite her faint discomfort, she couldn't find anything immediately wrong. The gravity seemed normal, and she could smell… nothing.

'Thermal blooms in that direction,' offered Sister Leilani, her voice strangely flat. She pointed ahead, towards the end of the corridor.

Ahead there were shapes piled untidily beyond the low greenish glow of the lumes in the walls, sharp-edged metal frames of tubes and wire.

~Cages,~ signed Nortor.

The Knight nodded and advanced. She had ventured no more than a few steps when a gasp of alarm made her turn about. One of the Vigilators had approached a support pillar made of iron, which extended from the deck to the ceiling above. Her hand was in a fist and she opened it to her commander. Amendera watched a rain of metal sand fall lazily from her fingers, glittering in the lume-light. The Vigilator gestured to the pillar and showed where she had touched it. The Sister's gloves had left dents in the iron. It crumbled beneath even the lightest of touches, becoming more powder.

Kendel snapped her fingers and Sister Leilani dutifully moved to the stanchion, tracing the scanning device over its length. She frowned and repeated the action, clearly unhappy with the initial reading. 'Odd,' she admitted, her words dulled and distant-sounding.

'The auspex suggests that this piece of the ship's structure is far older than the rest of the metal in this corridor…' Her frown deepened.

'By the order of several million years.'

The Knight allowed herself the rarity of a faint grunt of dismissal and beckoned her troop onwards. Strange as that was, it would not do to become bogged down in such minutiae so quickly. The group moved on, towards the discarded cages, and at once Kendel understood exactly where the teleport flash had deposited them. They were at the perimeter of the Validus's husbandry yards, where the hunting animals deployed by the ship's prosecutor squads would be corralled.

The thought had only just occurred to her as she crossed some invisible membrane and a barrage of sensation suddenly assaulted her.

There was no force-field barrier, no detectable wall to divide one section of the corridor from another; it was simply that one moment the air about her was dead and quiescent and the next it was dense with smells and sounds. Perhaps, like the warping of time around the metal stanchion, the two ends of the passageway existed in differing states.

Nortor came to her side and she saw the other Sister's face wrinkle in faint disgust. Here, the air was thick with the coppery stink of old, spilled blood, a heavy perfume of rust that almost concealed other, earthier stenches of rotten meat and faeces. The tainted air here also carried sound differently; it was clearer, harsher on the ears. Kendel heard a scraping, a dripping, from one of the shadowed corners. She stepped over a flattened enclosure, seeing a mush of small bones, flesh and white feathers inside. Among the pieces of the dead raptor were shiny golden psiber circuits that flashed as they caught the light.

One of the Sister-Vigilators aimed her bolter in the direction of the sound and thumbed a switch on the weapon's flank; an illuminator rod fixed to the barrel snapped on, casing a cold oval of white light before it. The scraping paused, and there at the edge of the torchlight a pair of eyes glowed. More beams stabbed out to reveal a large, pale-furred mastiff as it sniffed in the direction of the women. The snout of the enhanced canine was brown and wet, and as it panted, the glassy vials of accelerant fluids implanted in its back clinked together. To one side, Nortor snapped her fingers in a command string, but the animal ignored her. After a moment, the hound looked away and bowed its head, returning to its task. Kendel took a careful step closer and the animal was fully revealed, lapping at a wide comma of blood pooled about the head and neck of a crew serf. The top of the man's skull was open, and in one hand he held a Sisterhood-issue stake-thrower. She studied him for a moment; he appeared to have used the weapon first to nail his legs to the deck by firing a long quarrel through each ankle, then one more through his other hand.

'He tried to crucify himself,' said Leilani.

The en-dog was looking up at them again, and slowly its lips drew back to show metal

teeth, a low growl building in its throat. Kendel heard the fluid in the tubes bubble and hiss. She had seen the damage these animals could do firsthand when she herself had given orders to release them. The Knight threw a glance at Sister Thessaly and made an open-handed gesture.

~Flamer.~

There was a snap-hiss as the pilot lamp lit, and Nortor brought her weapon off the strap and around in one smooth action. Before the en-dog had the chance to rock forwards off its steel-clawed feet, the Sister squeezed the trigger bar and bathed the animal in a cloud of burning promethium. It died with a squeal and they left it where it fell, moving on towards a bank of access shafts.

Kendel saw her novice dally a moment around the animal's corpse and snapped her fingers. Leilani's head bobbed in acknowledgement, and she followed.

The light from the gun torches swept left and right around them as Kendel gave the other woman a sideways look. ~That will not be the only death we see this day,~ she signed. ~Look.~

The Vigilators moved on, and in heaps here and there, piled up against the walls or amid the smashed cages, there were dead after dead. Raptors, hounds and servitors.

But not a single Sister.

THE DECK PLANS of the Validus had been encoded into the memory tubes of Leilani's auspex, and once the boarding party had found their bearings, it was a simple matter to orientate themselves in order to scale the Black Ship's inner tiers towards the commandery and bridge. Sister Thessaly took a moment to send a vox message back to the Aeria Gloris, a staccato chatter of clicks that signified all was well, that the mission was proceeding as planned; but the novice could not help but wonder how anything they encountered here could be "as planned".

The Validus was a death ship, a floating tomb, and if it had not been silent before, then it truly was so now. Leilani knew the emergency protocols as well as any Sister. The standing orders aboard Black Ships were rigid and unchangeable: in the event of any shipboard catastrophe of such magnitude that the command crew could not overcome it, failsafe switches would flood the dungeon decks with Life-Eater, a bio-weapon of terrible swiftness and horrific virulence. If the Sisters aboard this ship were as dead as the serfs they had found, then so were the witches. It had to be so; if it were not, then why were the boarding party still alive, why had they not been attacked the moment they teleported aboard? Moreover, she knew that whatever had killed the unfortunates they had found had been no gas or bio-weapon.

They moved deeper into the Black Ship's interior, past long corridors of testing cells walled in with spherical shields made of psi-toxic phase-iron, across the gantries between the utility decks. Overhead, stalled carriages on angular rail channels that in other times would shuttle crew and material from tier to tier and down the city's-length of the vessel were frozen in mid-journey, faint lights burning inside. Along the way they found more signs of curious phenomena: other places where hull metal had been turned into dust or wet slurry by means unknown, one section where the air was hazed by a smoke that hung like a frozen image until they passed through it, and chambers where the walls, floor and ceiling were painted over with a molecule-thin layer of human blood. It seemed without rhyme or reason to Leilani; perhaps it was the touch of the warp at the hand of these things.

At last, they reached the command deck, another broad corridor that branched off into smaller ancillary chambers, with the open amphitheatre of the Validus's bridge at the far end. Lit in the yellow smoulder of the lumes were masses of bodies, piled atop one another in a disordered fashion, as if a thronging crowd had perished instantly on its feet and been left where they had fallen. Ahead of her, Sister Thessaly hesitated and held up a hand to halt the rest of the group. There was a strange murmur in the air, an ebb and flow like the sound of surf on a shore. It took a moment for the novice to realise that it was breathing.

She peered at a group of the bodies closest to her – they were crew serfs, their duty uniforms simple tan affairs with a minimum of braid and sigils – and was startled. They were not dead; none of them were. Instead, the whole mass of the crewmen lay, blank eyes seeing but not seeing as if in some form of catatonia.

Nortor prodded one of them with the tip of her boot. When there was no reaction, she reached down and took the hand of a serf.

Without pause, the Silent Sister broke the man's finger. The wet snap of bone sounded, but little else.

Sister Amendera picked her way through the bodies to peer into an open iris hatch on the far wall; Leilani followed her, recognising the doorway as the entrance to a saviour pod. There were more bodies inside, some of them strapped into the seats of the escape capsule, others lying on the floor where they had dropped. Like the serfs in the corridor, all of them were alive but insensate. The novice studied the face of one man, a bridge officer by the rank tabs on his shoulder boards. His eyes were those of a doll, glassy and infinitely empty.

'Whatever did this destroyed their minds.' She glanced around the corridor again. 'All of them. All at once.' Leilani's throat became arid as she imagined this scene replicated all through the Validus, with every crewmember reduced to a fleshy husk, minds ruined by some catastrophic, instantaneous flash of psychic force. 'In Terra's

name,’ she whispered, ‘what happened here?’

Further down the corridor, one of the Vigilators rapped on the steel wall to attract their attention. ~No Sisters,~ she signed.

~Onwards,~ ordered the Oblivion Knight.

THE VIGILATORS SHOULDERED away the bodies of fallen crew choking the entrance to the bridge proper, and the Silent Sisters entered with weapons at the ready, casting their sight into every shadowed corner on the ready for attack. A long platform that extended out over the main oval of the control pit several metres below, the bridge was designed in such a way that the Black Ship’s commanding officer could stand at the rail as if at the prow of an oceangoing vessel, and see his staff ranged out beneath him. Only the most senior crew had stations on this level, and the wide banners of flickering hololithic screens formed an arc of glassy lenses in the air above their consoles. Most of the monitors were little more than rains of static, but some still functioned, showing the process of autonomic systems inside the Black Ship’s drive core, the steady tick of life support. Leilani noticed one screen displaying a feed from an exterior camera; the blunt bow of the Aeria Gloris was visible, rendered in shadow against the churning red-purple hell of warp space. Other active screens were lined in dark crimson, trailing pennants of emergency warning glyphs. One of the Vigilators scrutinised an engineer’s panel, her long leather-clad fingers moving over the keys.

~The kill-switch was not activated,~ she signed. ~There was no release of the termination option here.~

Nortor looked up from a console by the command throne. ~Shipmaster’s log is intact.~

Kendel sheathed her sword with a grimace and gestured for Sister Thessaly to continue. The other woman tapped a string of keys on the console and a crackling hum issued out from vox grilles hidden in the steelwork.

Leilani caught sight of a man in a commander’s dark kepi, sprawled out on the deck in lee of a Y-shaped stanchion; it was this man’s voice that filled the dank air of the bridge as the data-spool rewound. Each entry was short and precise, punctuated by a clicking code indicating numerical data. The shipmaster spoke of an urgent signal that had reached them outside the normal strictures of contact protocol, a faint entreaty that the astropaths aboard the Validus had considered strangely phrased and slightly disturbing. The bonded psykers complained of their disquiet at the communiqué, and they were sickened by a peculiar resonance that clung to the signal, an echo of phasure displacement that troubled them greatly. And yet, the message was in order, bearing the ciphers that guaranteed the authority of the highest levels of the Silent Sisterhood. The novice saw her mistress scowl at this, her eyes narrowing. The

briefing imparted by Sister Harroda had mentioned nothing of any message sent to the craft before its disappearance.

The shipmaster spoke of a single, simple order contained in the transmission. The Validus's captain was commanded to bring the vessel to a halt in this region of the ever-turbulent warp and await further contact. This they had done, only to encounter the first incidents of the atemporal phenomena that the Sisters had witnessed on their passage through the lower decks. The entry ended, and after a pause Nortor triggered the next in the sequence.

~This is the last,~ she noted.

Again the voice of the shipmaster; but this time he seemed like a different man, the matter-of-fact clarity with which he had recorded his earlier logs gone. Leilani listened carefully and heard spikes of raw panic in the captain's words fighting to overwhelm his self-control. She heard him pause and mutter, his voice rising and falling as he fretted over the fate of his ship.

There, amid the sudden and alien calm, something had begun down on the dungeon decks. Moving like a tide, radiating like a nova, inside the iron holding cells the massed psyker cargo awoke as one, burning out the neuroshackles that held them in check, the potent dampening filters pumped into their bloodstreams becoming weak and ineffective. The Validus's astropathic choir began to scream.

There was weeping and bellowing and—

Silence.

~The final entry ends here,~ signed Sister Thessaly. ~There is nothing else.~

Leilani felt sickened, as if an invisible patina of dirt was suddenly coating her flesh. The idea of rampant, uncontrolled psykers in such number was utterly abhorrent to her. It was everything the Sisterhood stood against, and it made her feel soiled to think she was in close proximity to such a thing.

Fighting down a shudder, the novice-sister found her gaze drifting up to the gantry above the bridge platform. There was a single hatch up there, a thick disc of metal set in a heavy ring of black iron; beyond it would be a narrow tunnel leading to the astropath habitat, where the ship's tame psykers would parse messages for transmission across the interstellar deeps. Such sections of a starship were always heavily shielded, for even the smallest amount of telepathic interference could upset their delicate sensory paths; aboard a Black Ship, the matter was magnified a thousandfold.

Only the most highly trained, the most tightly controlled of the astropath kindred could ever serve aboard a vessel that was such a riot of psi-noise, and even then the life expectancy for them was a fraction of that of their fellows aboard normal ships of the line. Even their sanctorum, isolated from the rest of the craft through advanced technologies, energy fields and thick walls of psi-resistant metals, was pale shelter for them. Leilani could not help but wonder what had transpired in there after this… awakening.

She looked back to find the Oblivion Knight watching her. Sister Amendera gestured in BattleMark, having clearly come to the same conclusion. ~Investigate and evaluate~

Grimly, the novice accepted her orders with a nod and shucked off her cloak, so that she could more easily enter the narrow conduit overhead. Removing her bolt pistol, Leilani checked the weapon and reached for the access ladder, willing her hands not to tremble.

The hatch yawned open to present her with a shallow, gloomy tunnel lit from the far end by pale blue illuminators. Without looking back, she ascended, leading with her pistol. She smelled decay in the stalled, stagnant air.

The chamber was spherical and smooth-walled, the faint light spilling from oval lumes arranged in a ring around the interior equator.

The inner surface of the murky chamber glittered gently where intricate lines of microscopic text ranged around from pole to pole.

Leilani felt a moment of confusion, of wrongness, and in the next second she had the reason why.

‘Gravity,’ she said aloud. ‘There’s gravity in here.’

Usually, the astropaths aboard a craft of this class would live in a null-gee bubble, cut off from the graviton generators of the rest of the ship so that they could float freely without concern for the vagaries of something so base, so mundane as walking upon their feet.

But here, the nullifying field was inactive, and she sought and found a sparking control panel some distance up the curved walls where the command switches has been forcefully disabled.

It was then that she saw them, and understood. There were three astropaths in the choir of the Validus, and it appeared that, while afloat overhead, with great care they had removed their outer robes and fashioned them into nooses, fixing one end to the

upper ranges of the hollow chamber and the others about their necks. Then, one of them must have destroyed the controls and allowed the pull of gravity to reclaim their bodies, and snap their necks.

The corpses of the dead psykers swayed slightly in the flow of new air that had followed Leilani up the access tunnel. In the low light, she could not make out any features upon the three; their faces were puffy, blood-streaked orbs, turned to ribbons of wet meat where they had clawed at themselves in some sort of frenzy.

WHEN SISTER LEILANI returned to the bridge platform, Kendel read what the young woman had seen in the astropath chamber from the paleness of her face.

~All targets self-terminated.~ The novice-sister gave her report in BattleMark without thinking, but Kendel chose not to correct her.

The sight had shaken the girl. Mollitas was far stronger than she gave herself credit for – if she had not been, the Oblivion Knight would never have chosen her as her adjutant – but she was reluctant to test her own limits and, until she did, the Oath of Tranquillity, the mark of the Aquila and true Sisterhood would be beyond her reach.

~Orders?~ Sister Thessaly stood before her commander, toying with her weapon.

The Oblivion Knight hesitated for a moment, then nodded to the senior of the Sister-Vigilators. ~Split squads,~ she signed.

~Vigilators, aft approach.~ Kendel touched her chest. ~This unit, forwards. Descend and converge.~ She brought her hands together and clasped them. In one context the symbol could mean alliance, in another collision, or even amalgam. In this, it indicated a target to be located and isolated. It was not necessary for her to outline their objective; the last words of the shipmaster had made that certain.

She switched speech. ~We will find our sisters,~ she told them. ~This is our order and our obligation.~ Nortor made the sign of the Aquila.

‘In the Emperor’s name,’ whispered Mollitas.

THEY EMERGED INTO an icy cavern, boots crunching on rimes of hoarfrost and snow, the access channel to the dungeon decks carpeted with a blanket of oily grey slush. It was a peculiar sight to see inside the metal halls of a starship, more suited to a winter’s day upon some distant colony world. Kendel’s breath emerged from her mouth in trails of white and she threw a questioning look to the novice.

They were deep inside the Validus now, nowhere near the exterior hull where the leeching cold of space could reach them. The Knight raised a hand to her armoured

collar to toggle a vox control, intending to signal the Vigilators. Were they seeing the same thing? Was this yet another of the strange spot-effects that were scattered throughout the interior of the derelict Black Ship?

But a motion from Nortor made her hesitate. The other Sister nodded towards tall columns of dirty ice clustering in one corner. There was movement behind them and breath, white in the air.

‘Who is there?’ The novice-sister gave voice to the question. ‘Show yourself.’

Kendel felt a weak, familiar pressure at the back of her skull. It was like the sense of heaviness in the sky before a storm, or the very faintest of echoes. She was drawing her eagle-head sword when a figure suddenly bolted from between the ice pillars, half-running, half-skidding towards them.

A man in a frost-caked overall came at her, an iron manacle and length of broken chain clattering about one ankle. She saw a leering grin and eyes wide, showing too much white. Haloes of vapour formed around his hands and she felt the already-low temperature drop still further. He was conjuring snow out of the air, grabbing it and moulding it into blades of ice.

Kendel knew the kind well: a cryokene. She held up a hand to halt Nortor from placing a bolt shell through his breastbone as a matter of course, and let the psyker come on towards her, his bare feet slapping at the frozen deck plates.

In the man’s eyes she saw the moment, as she had so many times before with her other quarries, when understanding hit him. In mid-run, the psyker pushed into the edge, the faint, ghostly periphery where Kendel’s Pariah gene began to exert its influence upon him. He entered the invisible zone about her where the Sister’s Untouchable nature created a pool of nothingness in the shadow-space of the warp. Some of Amendera’s kindred were stronger in this than others, and in some the great gift of Silence manifested itself in different ways; for the Oblivion Knight it was an unseen sphere that extended beyond her flesh, dampening the power of any psyker with increasing severity the closer they came.

The cryokene stumbled, the ice storm he had been creating from thin air suddenly evaporating in his clawed hands, the ice shattering.

Kendel met his gaze with a warning glare and shook her head in mute censure.

The psyker bounced on the balls of his feet; even an animal would have had the sense to react to such a barrier, to be cowed and back off. But if reason had ever been in this man, it was long gone now. Undeterred, he screamed and threw himself at her, scratching at her eyes.

The Pariah effect, as potent as it was, could only protect against the sorcery of telepathic contact and other witch ploys. Against physical attack, against shot or blade or claw, it was no shield; but for those, the Sisters of Silence had their years of training in the schola bellus of Luna. Almost as an off-hand motion, Kendel creased the cryokene's scalp with the heavy brass crown on the pommel of her weapon. It connected with a dull crack and he went back to the deck on his haunches, sliding on the thin ice.

'Can you not see what we are?' called Sister Leilani. 'In our silence, you cannot harm us.'

'You cannot hear!' he shouted, his voice a sudden, atonal bark of sound. 'If I cannot hear, you must not!' He scrambled back to his feet, and again he threw himself towards Kendel. 'You must not hear!'

He was insane, that was not in doubt. Perhaps, whatever release of energy had killed the minds of the crew serfs and servitors had only scrambled the wits of this one, and in the disorder that followed he had found his escape from the Black Ship's cells. Not that it mattered. There would be nothing to glean from this witch.

The Oblivion Knight stepped into his attack, with her hand-and-a-half sword still held in a reversed grip. Turning, she brought the blade up to meet the cryokene's throat and took him there, decapitating his body with a lean stroke that let the victim's momentum do the work for her. Crimson fluid gouted briefly into the air, spattering across the grubby snow. Specks of blood dotted Kendel's golden cuirass, but the arterial spray was sporadic and quickly stilled.

She stepped over the corpse and walked on through the ice and snow as the last gushes of red pooled on the cold deck, a thin wisp of steam rising from the length of her sword blade.

~What did he mean?~ Sister Thessaly matched her pace, signing carefully. ~He spoke of hearing something. Perhaps there is a connection with the last words of communication from this ship?~

Kendel held the tips of two fingers to her chin, and Nortor nodded in slow agreement.

'Give voice,' murmured Sister Leilani. 'But to what?'

THE FURTHER THEY progressed, the stronger the sense became of a new, strange denseness in the atmosphere, a thickening of the air that brought with it a greasy, metallic tang that Leilani could not clear from her throat, no matter how many times she sipped water from the dispenser nozzle in her portcullis-shaped gorget. She knew

that the Oblivion Knight and the Null Maiden sensed it as well; their moods became wary and sullen as they passed through the outer sections of the holding areas, the cells where the less dangerous denizens of the dungeon decks were typically held. The novice chanced a look in through the locked doors of cells she chose at random; inside each there were odd, wet pastes of matter that might have been bodies, if flesh were wax and pressed to a flame. The air was unnaturally still, cloying to the point that it took on the properties of a membrane. Leilani felt the ghost-touch of it on her bare face, like the gossamer caress of spider webs.

Ahead, ever at the lead, Thessaly Nortor's boot scraped to a halt and the novice froze, ready for the next maddened psyker or freakish phenomenon to rear its ugly head. Instead, the Null Maiden turned towards the other two women and made the sign for Sister.

They came across her in the middle of the chamber; she sat cross-legged on the dark iron deck plates, her head bowed in concentration and her sword drawn, both hands clasped around the slim hilt. Leilani was aware of a peculiar calm that seemed to radiate from the woman's body, an absence of emotion or energy. A silence, for want of a better word.

Her mouth was moving but no sound emerged; still, the novice had only to read a word or two and she knew what litany was being unspoken. Without realising it, Leilani said the words aloud. 'We are Seekers and we shall find our Prey. We are Warriors and woe to those we Oppose…' She trailed off, her cheeks colouring.

A frown formed on Sister Amendera's face and Leilani looked again at the distaff Sister. The other woman had a top-knot of rust-red hair that hung loosely, lank and sweat-soaked, over her bald skull. There was a line of livid pink puckering down the left side of the Sister's face and neck from her cheekbone, pointing like an arrow towards the lightning-bolt symbols etched on her shoulder plates.

She bore the same rank as Kendel, and it was with that realisation that Leilani recognised the woman.

With a dry gasp, Sister Emrilia Herkaaze of the White Talons cadre opened her eyes, her battle meditation broken, and looked up at her. The woman's left eye, framed by the scarring, was an intricate augmentation of blue glass and golden clockwork. She gave Leilani a cold, evaluating once-over.

Herkaaze ignored the offer of Nortor's open hand and got to her feet, shrugging off stiffness. The Oblivion Knight turned her glare towards Kendel; the lower half of the woman's face was concealed behind a half-mask resembling barred gates, but the novice could tell her mouth was twisting in a sneer.

~I knew that someone would come,~ signed the other Knight, ~but I never would have expected it to be you.~

Kendel's expression cooled. ~The mission fell to us. The Storm Daggers go where they are sent.~

The tension between the two Knights was strong, and Leilani could not help but think back to the rumours she had heard about Kendel and Herkaaze's thorny rivalry. One story, told to her by another of the novices, said that the women had once fought with a fire-witch on Sheol Trinus; Herkaaze, unwilling to fall back before a powerful enemy and regroup, had been struck by burning debris and later turned the blame to Kendel for refusing to support her. Leilani had not believed the tale at the time, but now looking at Sister Emrilia's old wounds, she wondered if there might have been some truth in it.

Herkaaze caught her staring and pushed closer to the novice. ~Seen enough, speaker?~ She asked, her augmetic eye glittering. Leilani looked at the deck, cowed.

~I sense witchkind,~ noted Sister Thessaly. ~Close at hand ~

The scarred Knight nodded but did not address the other woman, instead focusing her intent back on her former comrade. ~Are you all there is? You three?~

Sister Amendera shook her head. ~A lance of Sister-Vigilators attend us. I sent them by a secondary path, via the aft decks—~

Herkaaze made a derisive noise in the back of her throat. ~You sent them to their deaths, then.~

At this, Nortor clasped her fist into her palm, tapping out an interrogative tone-message through the signal-generating touchpads on the knuckles of her glove. Leilani heard the short-range signal echo through the vox in her wargear. They waited for a moment for the standard "all-clear" reply from the other team, but there was only the hiss of static. Nortor paled slightly and shook her head.

~Horrors are loose aboard this ship. I lost many Sisters of my own to the witches who ran free in the madness.~ Herkaaze nodded to herself. ~We killed as many as we could.~

Anger flared on Kendel's face and she grabbed the other Knight's arm. She did not sign, but her question was clear.

With exaggerated care, Sister Emrilia peeled the other woman's hand from her grip. ~There was no time to send a full warning. We had to come here, to build the wall.

Else all would have been lost.~

‘The wall?’ Herkaaze winced at the sound of her voice, but Leilani ignored it. ‘I do not understand.’

Nortor folded her arms across her armoured breasts, fists to elbows. The sign meant wall but also bastion and enclosure.

‘What happened here?’ asked the novice.

~ Answer her,~ demanded Kendel.

Herkaaze shot the young woman an acid look, and finally nodded. She began to sign in ThoughtMark, quickly and sharply; the motions were so swift, so animated that to an unschooled observer they would have resembled the training kata of some dance-like martial art.

Sister Emrilia gathered up the threads of events left unwoven by the curious warning detected by Evangelion Station and the logs of the Validus’s shipmaster.

After the Black Ship had hove to and in turn been becalmed in this odd void-within-a-void, from all about the craft probing psychic impulses forced their way into the vessel. At first, some of the crew-serfs claimed to see ghosts stalking the corridors; such sightings were not uncommon on ships where the raw agony of caged telepaths left psychic stains upon the bulkheads, but these were no ordinary wraiths.

These ghosts moved in concert, intent on tasks that seemed more military than otherworldly. And soon, the rioting erupted across the dungeon decks. Many of the psykers killed themselves or died when the pulses of psi-force lashed their cells. Too late, Herkaaze admitted, she and her Sisters had realised that the probing attacks were not random, but targeted at the most powerful psykers aboard the Validus. Each impulse blew open cells and holding cordons – but when granted their sudden freedom the captured witches did not flee. Stranger still, they moved deeper into the dark prison spaces, seeking each other. A troop of Sister-Prosecutors dared to venture in and witness what sorcery the mutants were creating; those women died, but not before passing on reports of what they saw.

In her studies, Leilani had read many of the great texts in the towering stacks of the libraria in the Somnus Citadel, from the earliest volumes of the Psykana Occultis to the Voiceless Judgements of Melaena Verdthand. In these tomes of psychic research and lore, the young sister-in-waiting had learned much of the witch. She believed that faith in sword and bolter and silence were but one half of a sister’s armoury, that knowledge of their quarry carried equal weight. In this, she had read much of the strangest extremes of psykerkind; and so even as Kendel and Nortor watched

Herkaaze's terse report with growing disbelief, the novice found herself nodding, knowing that such freakish things were indeed possible.

The grim-faced woman continued. ~The very worst and the very strongest of the Validus's tithe of witchkind shambled together and became an amalgam.~ Sister Emrilia was very careful to use the sign-gesture for that word, bringing her hands together and clasping them. An amalgam, in the manner of fusion or joining.

Leilani felt her blood run cold. 'This I have read of,' she broke in. 'A group-mind, the spontaneous formation of a shared telepathic consciousness. On Ancient Terra, in the Age of Strife, the nation-state of the Jermani had a word for it. Gestalt.'

Sister Amendera took a warning step towards the other Knight. ~The Life-Eater,~ Kendel snapped her hands back and forth. ~Why was it not used?~

Herkaaze eyed her. ~Malfunction,~ she replied, ~Sabotage/Outside influence. Cause unknown.~

The four of them stood for a long moment, weighing the import of what had been described. Whatever the instigating force, whatever the impetus was that had created this freakish confluence of minds, the question now at hand was how to deal with it; how to kill it, Leilani corrected herself, for such a radical mutation would not be allowed to live in the Emperor's secular, ordered galaxy.

The scarred woman returned to her explanation, and this time she seemed less angry, more morose at the thought of what orders she had been forced to give. Knowing full well that the squads of Witchseekers, Vigilators and Prosecutors aboard the Validus could not hope to defeat a monster fuelled by the power of witches raised to such geometric heights, Sister Emrilia did the only thing that she could.

Her last order to her Sisters was to deploy about the dungeon decks, each of the warriors to find and take a space where they could kneel and recite the creed, a place where they could draw within and bring forth the gift of silence from themselves. There were some among the common citizenry who called the Sisterhood the "Daughters of the Gates", partially in respect to the half, three-quarter or full helmets they wore, fashioned in designs after the portcullises of archaic castles, but the name also came in respect to their mission – to stand as the barrier between the rampant insanity of unchained witches and the safety of the Imperium. In echo of this, Herkaaze gave the command to encircle the group-mind aboard the Validus and hold it in place. Each Sister of Silence, her Pariah's mark burning cold in the minds of the psyker freaks, was one bulwark in a ring the witches could not cross. However, by the same token, no Sister could step away. It was an impasse.

~But now you are here,~ Sister Emrilia signed, switching back to ThoughtMark once

again, ~and you can take my place while I move in and kill it.~

KENDEL'S LIPS THINNED. Her former comrade had not changed at all since Sheol; if anything, the beating she took on that desolate sphere had not humbled her, but instead hardened her intractable manner. Here they stood, Knight and Knight, their ranking equal and unquestioned, yet still Herkaaze spoke to her as if she were addressing an inferior.

~We are not here as your reinforcements,~ Kendel gestured. ~We are here to rescue you.~

The other woman glared at her, the old scar tissue on her cheek darkening. Like the eye she had replaced, it would have been a simple matter for the Sisterhood's chirurgeons to have patched and regrown the damaged flesh on Emrilia's face, to have made her seamless and whole again; but instead she wore the disfigurement visible to the world, as if it were some sort of badge of honour. Amendera's lip twisted; such a gesture was something she might have expected of an Astartes, but not a Sister.

~We cannot break the line.~ Herkaaze's body language was severe and accusatory. ~One severed link and that horror will be freed to prey upon the galaxy. This is the only option. I go in and I kill it.~

~We,~ corrected Kendel, drawing in all of them in one flick of her hand. ~We will kill it.~

Nortor was nodding. ~Mollitas can take the Knight's place here, in the ring. We three will venture deeper.~

Kendel glanced at the novice-sister and shook her head. For all her book-learning and potential, Sister Leilani was not ready for this challenge. She had too many doubts, too much churning inside her thoughts to find the serenity needed to truly bring forth the silence.

The Oblivion Knight indicated that the Null Maiden would take Herkaaze's place there and kneel on the deck.

For a moment, an instant so slight that one who did not know Thessaly Nortor would not have seen it, Kendel's second wavered; then she bowed and drew her sword, falling into the meditative stance. Before she bowed her head she drew her flamer and handed it to Mollitas without statement or ceremony.

Leilani took it with a nod, drawing herself up, digging deep for her courage. Sister Thessaly closed her eyes and began to mouth the words of the creed.

In the next second Herkaaze was stepping to stand in front of the other Knight. ~No support required.~ Her BattleMark was sharp and angry. ~Stand down.~

~In the past you censured me for failing to aid you. Now you will do the same when I make that offer freely?~ Kendel signed the words and watched the other Knight's scarring turn crimson, the old wound showing Herkaaze's anger like a beacon.

There was a moment when Sister Emrilia seemed on the edge of actually uttering her rebuke out loud; but then she turned away.

~Come, then. But this is my vessel and command here is mine.~ Herkaaze did not wait for Kendel to acknowledge her, and walked on, towards the far hatch.

~Confirmed.~ Sister Amendera made the cross-fingered gesture at her chest and looked up to find her adjutant watching her intently.

INSIDE HERKAAZE'S WALL there was madness; madness and phantoms.

The ghosts attacked them in a horde, coming out of the decking and the ceiling, falling out of shadows and from behind support pillars. They were shimmering and wailing, the noise of them at the furthest end of the spectrum from the Sisters.

Bolt shells and pulses of fire from the flamer moved through them, and swords were of little use. The wraiths closed and faded even as they screamed, evaporating like morning dew as their energies collided with the limits of the Pariah effect; but there were some that were flesh and blood, hidden in the morass like a dagger wrapped in a cloak. They were crewmen of the Validus, drained of mind like those on the upper decks, but unlike those poor fools, these were rendered into the bloody realms of psychosis. Concealed in the crush of their spectral doubles, they laid into Kendel, Herkaaze and Mollitas with clubs fashioned from broken pieces of metal or severed limbs.

Corralled inside the invisible barrier, the forces that had twisted the psyches of these serfs had turned upon themselves. Their minds like rabid animals trapped in a snare, they were gnawing upon their own reason, all trace of what made them men gone now. Inside those thought-hollowed skulls, there could be nothing but darkness and void. By chance Kendel matched gazes with a man in a shipfitter's tunic and she knew without doubt that he, like all of them, was ruined inside. It made her angry: these poor fools were not even the enemy, just the overspill of the witchery left to fester here in the bowels of the Validus. Still, she did not allow this emotion to prevent her from giving the mindless ones their due despatch. Her sword moved in flashing arcs, opening bodies to the air and sending aerosols of crimson to spatter across the walls.

The two Oblivion Knights fought as mirrors of one another, the ingrained training of

the Sisterhood's blade schola rising to the fore without the need to frame it in conscious thought. Behind them, Sister Leilani spent fire upon the foe in grunting chugs of exhaust from the flamer's bell-shaped mouth. They died as they were cut down or turned to shrieking torches. The bodies of the unreal became motes of dust in the still, stale air of the corridor, while the bodies of the real carpeted the decking.

Then there came the moment's pause, the three of them panting hard. Kendel watched Herkaaze clean her blade on the jacket of a dead serf and she wondered if the White Talon warrior had thought of these poor creatures in the same manner as she had. Amendera doubted it; Sister Emrilia had always been one for a singular worldview of black and white, good and bad. She did not have any room for shades of grey; that, if Kendel was honest with herself, was at the heart of the disputes they had shared more than any other matter.

Nearby, Sister Leilani returned Thessaly's flamer to its strap across her shoulder and blew out a shuddering breath. 'Throne's sake,' she husked. 'They swarmed upon us as soldier ants would those invading their mounds. I dread to think what force compelled them.'

Herkaaze gave the novice another disapproving look, as if she were trying to glare the younger woman into silence. Mollitas did not seem to notice, too caught up in the train of her own thoughts. The Knight saw her face grow pale as some terrible notion came upon her.

'Mistress,' she began, with a wary tone. 'What if this…' Leilani indicated the walls of the Black Ship. 'If all this is the framework of some gambit by the rebel Astartes?' Suddenly, words began to fall from her lips in a cascade. 'It is known that some of their Legions have been said to engage with witchery, and—'

The hard report of brass upon steel sounded, silencing the novice, and Kendel turned to see where Herkaaze had rapped the pommel of her sword against the deck. ~Must she speak so often?~ demanded the other Knight.

~Do you fear she may be right?~ Kendel signed the question back in reply.

Herkaaze did not even bother to grace her with an answer, and moved on. She pointed with her drawn blade, the tip aiming at a great oval hatch up ahead. The metallic stink of psyker spoor was strongest there, the echo of it throbbing at the base of Amendera's temples. Emrilia walked on towards the massive door, never looking back.

BEYOND THE HATCH was a chamber that ended in a smouldering molecular furnace. It was this sight that would be the last for the most powerful and unruly of the psyker-kind processed aboard the ship.

Executed here, on the iron deck, then cast into the open maw of the machine, their bodies would be reduced to ash; it was believed that no psychic could reconstitute themselves after such a killing.

Perhaps, then, it was fitting that they found the group mind here, the men and women that were its component parts huddled together in a crowd, some standing, others on the floor or lying against the walls in an unearthly accumulation. Unlike the mind-dead on the other tiers, these ones seemed on the surface to be animate and alive; in some ways that made the sight of them all the more horrible.

‘They have no faces,’ said Leilani. In fact, she was only half-correct. The hundredfold members of this unnatural psychic amalgam each had the suggestion of eyes, nose, a mouth, but they were in a constant flux, never settling to become anything like a human aspect. Instead, they were sketches, half-finished approximations of what a person might look like, all of them the same. One moment, long of nose and narrow of eye, then fatter about the cheeks and with a tiny moue of a mouth. Bone beneath their skins made ticking, popping sounds as the structure of their skulls was warped and altered, second by second, over and over again.

All of them turned to stare at the Sisters and cocked their heads in quizzical fashion. The novice grabbed for the flamer at her shoulder and flicked her gaze down at the volume meter: half-full. Her fingers found the trigger bar and the weapon’s emitter bell hissed in readiness.

~This is it,~ signed Herkaaze. ~This is the Voice.~

They advanced across the chamber and the pieces of the gestalt closest to them retreated, propelled back by the proximity of the Untouchables’ psi-toxic presence. The three women moved in a tight triangle, each watching an angle of attack.

But unlike the cryokene, unlike the en-dog, these shifting faces betrayed no clear intention, no emotion that could be read and predicted. They simply observed, with expressionless stares, the glimmer of intellect and intent broken into shards that barely registered in a hundred pairs of eyes.

Leilani began to wonder how such a thing could be killed; the weapons the Sisters carried with them were not enough to terminate so many at once. And if they began a cull piecemeal, how would the group-mind react?

The swaying, blank figures all took an abrupt breath, their faces shifting into a hatchet-browed aspect and solidifying.

‘Far enough.’ The rasping and atonal words were spoken by groups of them in a dislocated chorus that made her skin crawl; each syllable was uttered by a different

cluster of voices in unearthly harmony. ‘Stay your weapons—’

Leilani saw the expression on Herkaaze’s face twist into one of fury, incensed at the temerity of the demand. The Oblivion Knight surged forwards with a snarl, and the cluster of psykers nearest to her recoiled as she came at them. Sister Amendera reached out to hold her back, but she was not quick enough. Her sword still warm from earlier kills, Herkaaze struck out and carved into a woman in a prisoner’s shipsuit, the brand of a telekinetic on her forehead. The cut that ended her was a downwards slash that opened the woman’s torso, and without pause the scarred Knight extended and severed the hand of another psyker, this one a male. He fell to the floor, one arm ending in a red stump jetting fluid.

The other psykers moved with sudden speed, and Leilani recalled the flocking motion of arboreal birds on her home world. The disparate pieces of the group-mind moved like water, flowing away from the attacker, leaving the dead and injured among their number where they fell. Leilani realised she was already seeing them as a single entity, no longer thinking of the psykers as discrete people within a larger whole.

Cut off from the horde, the man with the missing hand suddenly screamed and there was cracking anew from the bones of his face as his flesh attempted to reset itself. Abandoned by his kind, he began to resemble the crazed remnant they had encountered outside.

Herkaaze silenced him by opening his throat with her blade-tip.

‘Stay your weapons!’ This time it was a shout, every member of the gestalt bellowing as loudly as their lungs would allow. The sound was so strong in the low-ceilinged furnace chamber that it gave the Sisters pause.

Leilani experienced a moment of confusion. Any handful of the psykers present in the chamber would have been more than a match for two Oblivion Knights and a novice-sister, and as one in this strange meta-concert, they doubtless wielded enough power to kill them all in an instant, crushing them by bringing down the deck above, by burning off all air in the chamber by pyrokene firestorm or any one of a dozen methods.

Why then were they still alive?

‘What do you want?’ she asked.

The answer from a myriad of throats made her blood chill. ‘Leilani Mollitas. Emrilia Herkaaze. Amendera Kendel. I have been waiting for you.’

‘They know our names…’ The novice’s words seemed tiny in comparison to the voice of

the crowd.

~Witchery!~ Herkaaze signed furiously. ~They have plundered our thoughts!~

~Impossible,~ Kendel replied silently. ~No telepath can penetrate the bastion of our minds. We are Untouchable. ~

‘I know who you are,’ echoed the chorus, ‘and I must speak with you.’ The faces of the assembled mass moved and altered again, melting and flowing in meter to the mood of the words.

With each utterance, Leilani felt the ebb and drag of psychic force shifting about her like an ocean of clear oil. The presence of the group-mind rebounded around them in captured echoes. The novice gripped the flamer tightly, and struggled to keep herself from shaking. First, in the things she had read in the libraria, then in the living, breathing madness she had witnessed in the transformed Astartes on Luna, and now here, before her in this ship… Every half-truth and myth Leilani had heard about the powers that lurked within the empyrean were made true.

~Whatever dark corner of the warp spawned you, creature, you will not manifest here.~ Kendel sheathed her blade and in its stead drew her bolter to the ready.

Laughter pealed around the crowd. ‘This is not the face of Chaos. What you see here is only a message and the messenger.’

~What message?~ Kendel demanded her answer with savage jabs of motion.

‘A message,’ repeated the voices. ‘Once before a message came and it was too late to change the pattern of things. You were there, Amendera Kendel. You saw this.’

Leilani saw the Knight nod slowly, making the sign for an Astartes. ‘Garro…’ whispered the novice.

‘A new message. A warning.’ The breathy choir paused. ‘For the ears of the Emperor of Mankind. Darkness comes, Sisters. The great eye opens and Horus rises. The history of tomorrow is known to me.’

Kendel exchanged glances with her subordinate. Precognition was a known and documented psionic effect, although extremely rare and difficult to interpret. Leilani could imagine her mistress turning the words over in her mind; if this confluence of psychic had power enough to pierce the veil, perhaps… perhaps they might have some insight into the skeins of events yet to occur.

Herkaaze spat noisily on the deck and brandished her sword. ~Destroy this

monstrosity!~ she signed. ~It is some ploy, either of the witches' origin or even the turncoat Warmaster himself! We cannot ferry this abhorrence into the Emperor's divine presence. It must be killed!~ She advanced with her blade raised high, head sweeping back and forth like a hunting hawk looking for her next prey.

Members of the group-mind broke apart from the main pack as she came at them, forming into smaller flocks that retreated from her along the ashen-stained walls. 'I am not your enemy!' came the multiple cry. 'The storm is about to break, but the course of things can be changed!'

Herkaaze's only answer was to lunge and strike down another psyker.

'Millennia of endless warfare can be prevented!' Panic and desperation entered the voice of the chorus. 'Believe me!'

From out of nowhere, a cluster of figures rushed towards Leilani and she raised the flamer, ready to immolate them in a heartbeat; but their flowing, waxen faces turned to her, imploring as they altered, begging her to hear them out. 'What do you want?' she screamed out the question again.

In turn, they howled back at her. 'I am only the portal, the messenger and the message. Across the madness of the warp, where time and space become unravelled and the tapestry of events falls apart. I call to you from then.' Hands grabbed at her robes. 'I warn you from your tomorrows. Your now is my past. I am living in the hell I wish you to uncreate, centuries gone and the fires still raging.'

AMENDERA KENDEL HAD once believed that the universe could do nothing to shock her; the horrors that she had witnessed in service to the Silent Sisterhood, the years that matured her from a callow novice to an Oblivion Knight of rank and stature, these things had shown her much, from the glories of the human heart to the very depths of monstrosity that nature could create. But she had lost that arrogance, truly lost it when word had come of the Heresy, when she had looked into the eyes of a creature cut from the raw matter of corruption. She had known then that there was more that moved upon the face of the universe than could be encompassed in her judgement.

And here, now, she found herself challenged again. It would be easy for her to take the path Emrilia followed, to decry and shout for death. To question and wonder, even for a moment, that was beyond Herkaaze's insight. There had been moments when Kendel had thought she too had become reactionary and hidebound – and this was one more reason why she selected the girl Leilani as her adjutant. At times, she saw the mirror of herself in the novice-sister, keeping her close so that she might reinforce that dormant sense of wonder.

But to comprehend this… A voice, speaking not from the here and now but a time yet

to happen. A future? Try as she might, Sister Amendera could not find it in herself to deny that such a thing, as incredible as it seemed, was not possible. It was the warp, after all; and in the warp, all things were malleable. Emotion, distance, thought, reality. If dimensions such as these were distorted here, then why not time itself?

‘This place and this instant,’ cried the psykers. ‘I am here as you are, peering in from my unfuture to the shifting sands of the past.’ All together, they moved their hands to their faces, the tips of two fingers to their chins. ‘To give voice.’

Herkaaze was frozen, kneading the hilt of her sword, turning in place, daring the witchkin to come within reach of a cut. She did not see the cluster grouping around Sister Leilani, entreating the girl with open hands and upturned faces. Kendel moved towards the girl, unsure of how to proceed.

‘You know me,’ they told the novice, flesh shifting again, bones crackling. ‘Look. See.’

There was something new in the chanted words, a cadence and pitch that seemed at once eerily familiar to Kendel, but unknown as well. Older, somehow. Her breath was struck from her lips as the group-mind’s aspect altered once again, the sketch of a face thickening, becoming firm and definite. A cold sensation crawled along the base of the Knight’s spine.

‘You know me,’ they said, and each one of them was the mirror of Leilani Mollitas.

THE NOVICE SCREAMED in fright at the faces surrounding her. They were some strange mimicking of her own plain features, but lined and aged by years and hardship. She looked and saw dozens of elder sketches of herself, renderings of what she might be should she live a hundred years. The timbre of the voices echoed in her memories, and she was suddenly thinking of her mother. The similarity was uncanny and it terrified her. She could not deny it: the voices were hers. The flamer dropped from her nerveless fingers to the deck, and she stumbled back a few steps. ‘How… can this be?’

The chorus inhaled together and replied. ‘I have done terrible things to get to this place,’ said the voice. ‘Pacts and accords that have scarred my soul.’

‘We are Untouchable,’ Leilani husked. ‘They say we have no souls.’

‘We have,’ came the reply. ‘Else I would have had nothing to burn, no coin to pay my way here.’ She became aware of the Oblivion Knights either side of her, each watching with expressions of horror and wonderment. The voice pealed like a bell. ‘That price I… you paid willingly. Now trust me. Take me to him, and we will be able to reorder a galaxy yet unsullied by—’

There came a sound; not quite a howl, not a gasp or a cry but some strangled merging of all three. It burst from Herkaaze's mouth in a flash of spittle and rage. Her revulsion was so towering that she could not hold in the exhalation. Her free hand flew about her face in a wild dance.

~Traitor bitch!~ she signed, almost too fast for the eye to follow. ~If this insanity is to be believed, then you have consorted with mind-witches! You have betrayed your oath to the Throne of Terra and the Lord Emperor!~

Leilani tried to find the words to explain, but her thoughts were confused. It was not her, but some other possible incarnation of the woman she would become who had done this deed; and yet the novice shuddered as she looked wildly around at the psykers who wore her face. If such a thing had been done, what was the magnitude of these sinister pacts her elder self mentioned? Treating with witchkind was the least among them; in order to make this bridge across the warp, sorcery of the darkest stripe would be needed. Her Pariah gene, burned from her DNA. Her literal self, subsumed into a mass-mind for the sole purpose of punching a hole into the past.

What magnitude of event could have been so great to have made that choice seem a reasonable one?

The novice felt conflicted. Sickened by the scope of such mad sacrifice, it was all she could do not to retch, but even as she was revolted, Leilani found a kernel of understanding. 'Yes,' she whispered, 'I would do such a thing. If that was required of me, if the cost was so high, yes. I would do this deed.'

She turned her gaze inwards, and touched the tranquillity inside herself, newly revealed beneath a light of new self-knowledge. In Leilani's silence, only the truth of who she was remained.

It was this thought that followed her into darkness, as the tip of Herkaaze's sword carved through her spine and erupted from the chest plate of her battle-bodice.

KENDEL BARELY HELD in the scream, her mouth gaping open but the utterance smothered by the force of her sacred oath.

Sister Leilani's eyes rolled back and she coughed out a great tide of blood, her body collapsing as Herkaaze drew back her blade from where she had stabbed the girl in the back. The novice-sister fell in a clatter of armour and flesh against the corroded decking.

Crimson spread around her in a rippling halo.

The Knight brought up her bolter and aimed it at the other woman, the weapon

trembling in her grip. She felt wetness on her cheeks.

Why? Kendel mouthed the words, her other hand tight in a mailed fist. She wanted to shout the question, but her voice would not come.

~How can you ask that?~ Herkaaze gave her a defiant glare, daring her to shoot. ~I have stopped this monstrosity before it started. Strangled the horror in its crib.~

Around them the psykers were whispering, then mumbling, then speaking and finally screaming. They clawed and howled at each other, tearing the flesh of their faces into rags. Their cries were just one word, repeated until the chamber resonated with the sound.

'No. No no no no no no no no no—'

The air trembled and the deck groaned with it. Kendel ducked as one of the psykers, a pyrokene, suddenly erupted into flames and caught a cluster of his fellow prisoners alight. Elsewhere, a tornado of force flashed where a psychokinetic lost control of herself. As if they were untrained hounds whose leashes were suddenly cut, the witches were running wild. Mollitas's death tore them down, and the Oblivion Knight saw the group-mind fracturing, self-destructing.

Clipped by the psi-fires, pieces of the metal ceiling broke away and crashed to the ground. Plumes of gas and drifts of meat-smoke stinging her nostrils, Kendel saw Herkaaze disappear behind a cascade of tumbling pipes and spun away to avoid a gout of flame. The Validus trembled and moaned again; she thought of the calmed void outside in warp space. How long would it last now, with the witches in disarray?

She took two steps and hesitated, half-turning, remembering Leilani's corpse there on the deck, but all around her steel and iron was turning into ruins of gritty powder. Kendel thought she heard the echoing report of a bolter firing from deeper into the chamber; the Knight ignored it and fled, cutting down a pair of ferals who tried to block her path. Into the corridor beyond, she felt her boots slip and become mired as the deck softened beneath her steps. All over the walls, tendrils of decay snaked out, aging everything they touched. Time itself was digging its fangs into the hull of the Validus, the freakish effects no longer confined to locations here and there throughout the vessel.

Kendel's tapped out the emergency all-channel recall on her glove, searching the smoky gloom for any sign of Sister Thessaly or the White Talons who were still on the ship. Her vox crackled but no reply codes came. She reached beneath her combat cloak and her fingers touched her teleport recall beacon. The Oblivion Knight gripped the slim golden rod in her hand, her thumb hesitating over the activation stud. Why did Nortor fail to answer her? Where were the others? What mad hell had this death

ship come from?

Kendel spat and glared at the rod’s winking indicator; then the deck beneath her gave way, and she knew nothing else.

LIGHT CUT INTO her eyes and she coughed.

Blinking owlishly, Amendera Kendel became aware of a restraint harness around her and the thin whisper of liquids enveloping her body. She tried to focus, staring at a shimmering shape on a dark wall. After a while it resolved into a reflection, and she orientated her perceptions. She lay suspended in a bath of pale pink fluids, her body for the most part naked except for places where metal devices were joined with puckered, inflamed skin. A narthecia tank, a great cocktail of medicines and liquids that mended burned flesh or torn skin. The Knight had often seen the like in the medicae decks of the Aeria Gloris, but in all her service she had never found herself in one of them. The fluids resisted her attempts to move, pulling on her. She could shift a little, and then only her head and neck, raised above the enamelled steel walls of the tank.

The chamber was dim, lit only by the glow of a single lume set low and the red laser-optics of a hunchbacked servitor. It moved slowly just to her right, orbiting between two sculpted consoles that chimed in time with her heartbeat and breathing.

Kendel glanced down at her hand and saw a line of burn scarring across the palm that had held the teleport beacon. Not dead, then.

The sight seemed to be the final confirmation for her. She drew in a breath and found it hard to hold it; her lungs ached.

‘Awake.’

The word fell from the shadows beyond the far end of the tank. Kendel blinked and threw a look at the servitor, but the machine-helot did not appear to notice. The Knight pushed again at the restraints holding her in place, but they were of dense plastiform and immovable.

‘Don’t.’ The voice was harsh and broken. ‘You will reopen the wounds you have spent so long healing.’ Parts of the shadows detached from the dark and moved.

Kendel saw a figure, a woman, a Sister. The shapeless coils of a robe, the lume-light touching a shorn scalp and the cascade of a topknot beyond it. At once she was shocked; even in shadows, Kendel could see this was no unavowed novice but a ranked Sister of Silence. For a Sister to speak aloud was anathema.

The woman seemed to sense her amazement. When she spoke again, there was a cruelty in her words. ‘We are alone here, you and I. The servitor cannot report. None will know that I have given voice.’ In the dimness, the Sister touched two fingers to her chin. ‘You are aboard the Aeria Gloris,’ she continued. ‘That errant harpy Nortor came to your rescue as you lay insensate. The teleport recovered you.’ The figure shook its head once. ‘The Null Maiden did not survive the translation.’

A sharp tension twisted in Kendel’s chest. She had known Thessaly Nortor for many years, and her loss cut deeply.

‘Some of the White Talons escaped in saviour pods.’ Kendel heard a low, wry chuckle. ‘We were the lucky ones. Treated to such a show.’ The Sister spread her hands. ‘The Validus, consumed by a wash of psychic fury, eaten alive by rabid time. The vessel torn to shreds, the warp about it churned into a maelstrom. Ah.’ She shivered. ‘It is such a delicacy to say these things without gesture.’

In defiance, Kendel moved her right hand just enough that the other woman could read the signs. ~You sully your oath. You break the silence.~

‘He will forgive me.’ The woman stepped closer, and Emrilia Herkaaze’s face revealed itself. ‘It was He who guided me to the pods when you left me to die. He who guided my blade when I executed your errant novice. He, who saved me when you abandoned me on Sheol Trinus.’

The Knight snarled with fury and pulled at her restraints, the pink fluid splashing around her. Thin whorls of new blood issued out through the liquid from ruptured sutures. Disgust filled her at the towering injustice of it that this callous and narrow-hearted woman should live and poor Leilani perish.

Herkaaze came close and halted, bowing her head. ‘Whatever it was that we witnessed in there, I killed it as I said I would. Your novice, she had some connection to the monstrosity, that is not disputed.’ She sighed. ‘Perhaps there was some truth to the ravings of the voice. If it was indeed a messenger from our unbound future then her death here annulled that skein of time. Those events will not unfold.’ The other Knight nodded to herself. ‘In a way, I saved her from herself. She died unsullied, with the seed of corruption still dormant inside. And so the order of the universe is preserved.’

~The message,~ signed Kendel, wincing in pain. ~You killed the messenger. Whatever truth there was for us to learn goes unheard! She spoke of wars we could prevent, a great burning!~

Sister Emrilia shook her head. ‘No one will believe you if you make mention of that. Give voice to it and you will destroy your reputation, for I will decry you. At best you will ruin yourself. At worst, you will split the Sisterhood.’ She glared at the other

woman, dearly relishing the feel of words on her tongue. ‘Do you wish that, Amendera?’

~You are a blind fool. Arrogant and superiors.~ Kendel turned her head away. ~You and every one of your stripe are a cancer on the Imperium.~

‘I see better than you,’ she replied, walking back towards the shadows. ‘My eyes are open to the truth. Only one so divine as the God-Emperor has the right to tamper with the weave of history.’

At the utterance of the word “god”, Kendel turned back, a questioning look on her face; but the other woman was still walking, speaking almost to herself.

‘If there is to be war, it is because He wishes it. I am the vessel for His voice, sister, and all who are mute before His glory will not rise with me.’

Herkaaze vanished into the darkness and Kendel closed her eyes. Inside she sought out silence but it remained lost to her.