

Lore Chapter: Final Testimony

[Transcript — Personal Recording, UHF-MC Datacard, recovered from the personal effects of Battlefield Psyker (Sgt.) Lirae Vesken Orath, Venator Squad, IGS *Unbroken Dawn*. Recorded approximately nine hours before the commencement of Operation Sunken Garden, PFC 932. Initial Classification: RESTRICTED — Reclassified to LIMITED ACADEMIC USE, PFC 941.]

[Recording begins. Quiet background hum of a ship ventilation system. A chair adjusts. Silence for several seconds before speaking begins.]

"I... don't know how to start these things. I never have.

"I've recorded maybe five or six of these over the past two years and deleted every single one of them, because every time I listen back it just sounds like I'm being whiny and dramatic. And... I'm not—or I guess I'm trying not to be, at least.

"But... this one I'm keeping.

"Because I'm pretty sure this is the last time I'll be recording one.

"So. Ahem... Right. This—This is Sergeant Lirae Vesken Orath, Venator Squad, currently stationed aboard the *Unbroken Dawn*. The date is the 14th of Sixth Month, PFC 932.

"In approximately nine hours, I'll be deploying planet-side to Kelvaan as part of Operation Sunken Garden. I have already informed my commanding officer, Major Shan, that I am operating at the final stage of sustainable function and that a Null should be requisitioned and standing by at the forward operating base before I arrive.

"He... agreed. He didn't argue. He didn't try to talk me out of it or offer alternatives or *anything*... I—I think that's how I truly know.

"I guess, deep inside, we both knew there wasn't anything left to talk about...

"Anyway... The operation is an important one. Really big.

"There's a civilian water-processing district in the southern basin—Tessara, I think it's called—that the Stellar Republic has been using as a staging ground for the past three weeks. They moved in after the initial bombardment and started routing armored columns through the district's underground pipeline network, using the civilian infrastructure as cover because they know the UHF won't level it.

"Not with two-hundred and sixty thousand people still living above it. The AD can't get at them through the pipes without collapsing the entire basin floor, and infantry can't push in without getting chewed apart by whatever they've got dug in down there.

"So they're sending me with a few squads.

"A strike-squad with a Battlefield Psyker can clear a tunnel network like that in minutes. That's the pitch. That's the justification. And they're right—I can... I *will*.

[Several second long pause.]

"But I'll be honest. Because this is the last one of these, and if I can't be honest now, then when, huh?

"I don't really give a fuck about Tessara. I know I *should*.

"I *know* two-hundred and sixty thousand people is a number that's supposed to *mean* something, and it *does*, somewhere in the part of me that still works the way it used to. But... I'm—I'm not doing this for *them*.

"I—I just want my life to have mattered...

"That's it. That's... That's the whole thing. I'm twenty-nine years old—chronologically speaking—and I can feel the edge of it, and I want to go out doing something that *counts*.

"That's all. Tessara is the opportunity. If it wasn't Tessara, it would be something else.

"I just need it to *be something*.

[A long exhale. The chair shifts.]

"People... People often ask what the Call feels like to us. Non-Psykers, mostly—sometimes journalists, sometimes new officers who've never worked with one of us before, sometimes just Marines who are curious and don't know any better than to ask outright.

"And... I never know how to answer them, because the *honest* answer sounds insane and the polite answer doesn't *mean* anything.

"So... I guess here's the honest one, since nobody's going to hear this until I'm gone anyway:

"It doesn't start as a voice. Everyone *thinks* it does—like there's some dark whisper in the back of your mind telling you to do terrible things. That's the holo-drama version.

"The reality is *so much worse* than that.

"Because it starts as *you*.

"It starts as *your* own thoughts, thinking things that *you* would think, in contexts where they almost make sense. Like—you're in a firefight and your Gate is open and the energy is flowing and somewhere in the back of your mind there's a thought that says, *just a little more*.

"And that thought is *yours*. It *sounds* like you. It *feels* like you. It even makes tactical sense in the same exact way that it *would* make to you in the moment—a little more energy, a little more reach, push the Gate open just a *fraction* wider and you could end this faster, cleaner, with fewer casualties on your side.

"It's a good thought. A helpful thought, even.

"And the first hundred times, maybe the first thousand times, you don't even *notice* it. Because why would you? It's your thought. You thought it. It came from inside your own head, wearing your own voice, structured in your own patterns, using your own logic.

"It takes *years* to even learn how to tell the difference.

"And then one day you suddenly do. One day you catch it.

"Some little micro-adjustment in the reasoning that doesn't quite land the way your thoughts usually land, some faint aftertaste of something underneath the logic that wasn't there before.

"And that's when it stops being background noise and starts being existentially *terrifying*—not because it's gotten louder, but because you suddenly realize *how long* it's already *been* talking and how many times you've *already listened* without knowing.

"After that, everything changes.

"Once you can hear it, it knows you can hear it. I don't know how else to describe that.

"It's not intelligent—not in any way I can define—but it... adapts. It stops pretending to be subtle in the way that it used to be. It stops threading itself into your tactical reasoning and starts just... *being* there. *Constantly*.

"A pressure at the edges of your awareness, like standing in shallow water that's slowly, slowly rising. Not fast enough to drown you. Never fast enough for that. Just fast enough that every single day the waterline is a little higher than it was yesterday and you can measure the difference if you pay attention.

"And you *do* pay attention. You can't not, once you know.

"At year one after realizing, it was a thought I'd catch every few weeks.

"At year three, it was *daily*. Sometimes several times a day. I could feel it testing the walls, pressing gently at the places where I was tired or frustrated or afraid, looking for the gap.

"At year five—which was about eight months ago—it became *constant*.

"It's like an ambient pull toward something I can't see, tugging at me every second of every day with a patience that nothing human has ever had.

"It doesn't get tired. It doesn't get frustrated. It doesn't give up and try again later.

"It just pulls, evenly, *forever*, and the only variable is how much of me is left to pull against it.

"And the answer to that gets smaller every day...

"But... it's not even that *simple*. Because if it was just constant—if it was just loud, all the time, forever—you could almost learn to live with it. The way you learn to live with tinnitus or chronic pain. It would become background. Horrible, horrible background, but *background*.

"It doesn't even let you have that.

"After weeks, sometimes months, of being constant—of hammering at you every waking second until you can barely hear yourself think over the pressure of it—it just... *stops*.

"Goes quiet. Goes back to what it was at the beginning: Your own thoughts. Your own logic.

"Little suggestions threaded in so gently that they don't even register as foreign anymore, because you've spent *so long* bracing against the loud version that you've completely forgotten it could do this. You've forgotten it ever was *just this*.

"And that's when you slip.

"Or—not slip, exactly. You just... *listen*.

"Because it sounds *right*. It sounds like *you*. And you're so tired from fighting the loud version for so long that when a thought comes along that feels like yours and makes sense and doesn't hurt, you just follow it. Just a little.

"You open the Gate just a fraction wider than you should, push just a bit harder than the situation calls for. And... it *works*. And the Call goes away!

"Not quieter, but *away*. *Completely*. For hours, sometimes a full day. Just... *silence*. Real silence, the kind you haven't felt in *years*, and it's so good that you could cry from the relief of it—I did. Several times... *Every time*.

"But... then it comes back. Slightly louder than before.

"So you do it again. You feed it a little, *just* enough, just to buy yourself another few hours of quiet. And it works again... And it comes back again. Louder. And you keep doing that, because the alternative is sitting in the noise *forever*, and you start telling yourself that you're managing it—that this is a strategy, that you're trading small concessions for functional time, that you *know* what you're doing because you're careful about it...

"You *do not* know what you're doing—I don't... I didn't.

"Then one day it's constant again, louder than it's ever been, and you're fighting it with everything you have—*genuinely everything*, every scrap of Resolve, every wall you've ever built—and you're holding, *barely*, but you're holding. And you think, okay. This is the worst of it. If I can survive this, I can survive anything.

"And then it goes subtle again. And you're so not ready for it.

"You're so locked into fighting the loud version, so braced against the pressure at that stage, that when it pulls back and puts on your voice and starts thinking your thoughts for you, you

don't even notice. You just... act. Because the thought made sense and you were already fighting the Call, so it can't possibly be the Call, right? Because it was *your* thought mid-fight.

"*That's* where I'm at.

"My last deployment—Dillus Four, three weeks ago—I had a *very* close call. I don't mean a close call in the way that people normally use that phrase.

"I mean I was mid-engagement and the Call told me to open my Gate all the way and I was *already* doing it before I realized anything was wrong. It didn't feel like the Call. It just felt like solid tactics. Like the *right, perfect* move. I was halfway through it and there was *nothing* in my head telling me to stop—

"A stray explosion knocked me out.

"That's it. *That's* what saved me.

"Not my training, not my Resolve, not any of the thousand hours of mental conditioning they put us through. A random shell that hit too close and put me on the ground before I could finish following an instruction I didn't even know I was following. I only realized it was the Call afterward, when I reviewed the situation from the outside and saw what I'd been about to do.

"And that's the part I need to say out loud, because it's the part that made me file this recording.

"I—I can't tell the difference anymore.

"Between me and... *it*. Between my thoughts and the Call's voice. Where I end and where the Void begins.

"I—I don't know. I *genuinely, honestly* do not know anymore...

"E—Every thought I have could be mine or it could be the *thing* wearing my voice, and I have no way to check. *None!* The tools I used to have for telling them apart—the little aftertaste, the micro-adjustment in the logic—those are *gone*. E—Either I've lost the ability to detect them or the Call has learned to just stop leaving them.

"I—I honestly don't know which one is worse...

[*Several second pause.*]

"Just... *That's* what I'd want people to understand, if they ever ask: It's not a battle. Battles end. They have a victory condition.

"This... is just erosion. You are like a cliff face and the tide comes in and goes out and comes in and goes out and every time it recedes there is slightly less of you than there was before, and no amount of Resolve or willpower or training changes the underlying math.

"It just buys you time.

"But... The funny part is that you're trying to buy time against the Void. A place that does not even consider time to exist in the first place... So... What are you even really buying here...?"

[Silence. Eight seconds. When she continues, her voice is quieter.]

"I've made my peace with it.

"Or something close enough to peace that I can function, at least.

"I know roughly where the line is. I know approximately how much I have left in me before the water reaches a level I can't push back against, and it's less than I would need to do this a second time.

"So... this is the one. Tessara is the one.

"I will open my Gate as far as it has ever been and I will pour *everything* I have into those tunnels and I *will* clear them, and if the Call takes me while I'm doing it, the Null will be there and that will be the end of it.

"There are worse endings, I suppose...

[Another pause. Longer. The sound of a slow, unsteady breath.]

"I, umm...

"I want to say some things to some people, since... I might not get the chance to say them any other way. And if this recording makes it to them eventually—through Command, or through the archive, or however these things move after we're gone—then at least it's somewhere, I guess.

[Her voice wavers slightly here, for the first time.]

"Mum... I know you moved to Cresswall after Dad. I know you changed your name and I know you probably assumed that meant I couldn't find you, but I could. I always could... I just didn't want to show up and make it harder. You left for a reason, and I understood that reason now, even if it took me a long time.

"I—I hope Cresswall is good. I hope the weather is better than Varnun. I—I hope you're growing things—you always talked about growing things, when I was small, and I hope you finally got to.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry I didn't write more. I'm sorry I didn't write *at all*, honestly. Every time I sat down to do it, I couldn't figure out what to say that wouldn't just make you worry, and the last thing I wanted was to give you one more thing to carry...

[A sharp intake of breath. A pause that stretches longer than the others.]

"Ren. You absolute disaster of a human being.

[A wet laugh.]

"You—you were the best thing about the *Dawn*, you know that? Every single day aboard this ship that was worth a damn had *you* somewhere in it.

"I know you're going to be angry when you hear this. I know you're going to say I should have told you, should have let you be there, should have—whatever you're going to say.

"And you'd be right... But I couldn't.

"I—I couldn't sit across from you and tell you what I'm telling this datacard right now, b—because if I saw your face while I said it I wouldn't be able to finish, and I *need* to finish.

[Another short pause. Wet sobs.]

"You... made the water rise slower, Ren. I don't know if that makes sense to you. But you *did*.

"The days I spent with you were the days it pulled the least, and I don't know if that's something Psykers are supposed to say out loud, but it's true, and you should know it.

[Her voice breaks here. Several seconds pass. When she speaks again, she is audibly crying, but continues.]

"A—And Hassani... You're the best damn squad leader I've ever served under, and I know you'll blame yourself for this, because that's what you do, and I *need* you to hear me say—*very clearly*—that you don't *get to*.

"You don't *get to* carry this one. *I chose this*. Every step of it. From the day I committed to become a Battlefield Psyker to this very morning when I filed the deployment request.

"*None of this* is yours. It's just mine.

"Live well, Hassani... Thank you for everything.

[Unsteady breathing for several seconds.]

"I, umm...

[She stops. Starts again.]

"I hope...

[Stops again. A long, shaking exhale.]

"I hope my life *mattered*. I hope I—

"I hope it was enough. What I did.

"The people I kept alive by being where I was, when I was there. I—I don't need a medal or a—*a mention somewhere*.

"I just need it to have meant *something... Anything*.

"I—I hope I made you proud. All of you.

"Mum and—and Ren and Hassani and everyone I ever stood next to in the mud. I hope you will look back and think... 'Yeah. Yeah, she was—she was one of the good ones.'

[Audible crying. Long, wet sobs. Three minutes and twenty-two seconds pass.]

"That's... That's all, I think.

[Deep breath. Then an almost inaudible addition.]

"Oh, fuck... Thi—This is really it, huh?

[Another deep breath. Her voice is strong and certain.]

"Sergeant Orath, out."

[Recording ends.]

Sergeant Lirae Vesken Orath, Perditio Pyrokinesis Battlefield Psyker, successfully cleared the Tessara pipeline network during Operation Sunken Garden on the 15th of Sixth Month, PFC 932.

She was neutralized by Null operative Furrion Kreig approximately four minutes after the final tunnel section was confirmed clear, following a catastrophic Gate failure consistent with terminal-stage Call of the Void succession.

The civilian population of the Tessara basin—261,421 individuals—were kept secure within the operational window her action created.

Her service record was commended posthumously. This recording was recovered during personal effects processing and held under restricted classification until PFC 941.

[Full Excerpt from "Transcript: Final Testimony," UHF-MC Classified Archive, Reclassified for Academic Use, PFC 941]