

Full Excerpt: The Long March Back — Vol 4.

Vonn: “You've agreed to speak specifically about your first encounter with a Psyker in a combat environment—which is something we don't get often.

Just for the record—could you start by just walking me through what that word, “*Psyker*,” meant to you before you *actually* met one? Before you ever deployed?”

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[Pause]

Mrek: “Psyker... Yeah... I mean, what *did* it mean, right?

It meant the thing on the holo-screens when I was seven years old watching *Sons of the Void* with my dad. The guy in the series—Vareth, or whatever his name was—he'd hold out one hand and an entire dropship would just freeze in the air.

That kind of thing. Y'know... *Movie* stuff. *Cool* movie stuff.

Ultimately stuff that you watch and you think, “*okay, sure, they had fun with the lore there, very dramatic,*” and then you close the screen and go eat dinner.

Then growing up you'd see it in the news occasionally—“UHF Battlefield Psyker deployed in the Veskian Corridor,” something like that.

Maybe a short clip attached if you were lucky, usually just a crater and a lot of smoke and some anchor explaining that yes, these are real, yes, the UHF employs them, yes, the Stellar Republic and the Celestial Dominion, and Emperor knows who else, all have their own.

And that's... *that*. That's the whole thing.

You close the screen and you go eat dinner again, y'know?

Then you enlist.

And they give you the briefings.

There's a whole damn lecture, with several follow-up classes on it at some point during the first year—I want to say it was maybe week three or four for us—about Psykers and what they are and what they can do and all that stuff.

You've got a Professor up the front of the room with the big datascreen, a very official tone and he's going through their classifications, talking about *Wielders*, *Inheritances* and *Paths*, then adds on the probability statistics for encountering one at T1, and you're just sitting there with a stylus half paying attention because you're really, *really* tired and your bunk smells like someone else's feet, and the whole time your brain is just... It's filing it under the same drawer as the holoscreen-stuff, y'know? The same drawer as Vareth holding the dropship.

You hear the words.

You understand them, *technically*.

You even think—“*sure, yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.*”

But none of it is *real* yet. Nothing *makes* it real.

How could it, right? You live in the same physical world as *everybody* else still. Sure, you got the System now and all that, but the general rules of the universe still apply the same way as before—just a bit fancier in edge cases: You catch transport ships and eat reconstituted protein and argue about card games at 0200.

Nothing in that world actually tells you what it means when a person can reach out with their mind and pop the atoms in someone else simply because they *willed* it so.”

—

Vonn: “When did it become *real*, then?”

—

Mrek: “PFC 931.

We were about six weeks into a mid-Tier push on the outskirts of a settlement called Tauven Crossing, on a moon I will absolutely never willingly revisit for the rest of my life.

It was a grinding kind of campaign—nothing glamorous. Like nothing that was going to end up as a segment on APNN or UHFNN or anything, y’know?

Just the super ugly work of clearing a series of industrial compounds one sector at a time while the main force held the highway corridor further south.

We were... third in the column. I think... Yeah, third.

Behind us it was mostly just logistics and support.

Ahead of us were two squads—Thirteenth and Sixth, I remember—good squads, good people, nothing I would’ve looked at and thought there was any particular reason to worry.

[Long pause.]

I was in the middle of complaining to Sergeant Oresh about the Emperor-damned mud.

We were up to our knees in it, genuine fucking moon-mud, and the heating element in my left boot had stopped working two days earlier so it was just cold and wet *every* step.

And I was going on about this to her, and she was being exactly as sympathetic as the Sergeant always was, which is to say she was completely ignoring me, y’know? And—

And then Thirteenth Squad just... *stopped*.

And I mean, like, not like the column slowed or they hit a wall or took fire or anything.

They just stopped... *being*. Mid-stride.

There was no sound, no flash, *nothing* I could point to afterward and say I saw *that* and then *this* happened.

One moment they were there—seven people I knew by name, knew their card-playing habits, their favourite foods, moving through the grey light of early morning—and then *suddenly* the column had a gap in it, and the gap was filled with things that *used* to be people.

I don't want to be too specific about what it looked like, y'know?

I'll just say—there was no *inward*. Everything went out—all at once.

That's the only way I can put it without going somewhere I'd really rather not.

Everything went *out*, very fast, in every direction simultaneously.

My... My legs stopped working, then.

I'm not gonna sugar-coat it, and I'm not trying to be poetic about it either—they *literally* stopped working. My knees *went* and I went down in the mud with them.

I just sat there, and I remember thinking, *very* clearly, the exact same thought I'd had a hundred times watching Vareth on the holo-screen when I was seven—

"Oh. Cool movie stuff."

Like my brain refused to even categorize it any other way, y'know?

Refused to let it be *real*, even though I was sitting in the mud watching the evidence of it not even fifteen meters ahead of me. Like the only way *it* could survive the next thirty seconds was to pretend it was still fiction, and whatever input it had just received was nothing but, y'know?"

—

Vonn: "That kind of dissociation in response to extreme shock is something we've documented quite extensively—"

—

Mrek: *"I know."*

I know that now.

At the time, though, I just thought I was going *mad*.

Oresh—Ehh... Sergeant Oresh—grabbed me by the collar and hauled me sideways into cover before I'd even registered that she was moving. She was shouting *something* at me and I remember reading her mouth, but not hearing any of it, y'know?

Sixth Squad took about half a second longer—two of them got close enough to the edge of whatever the range was—I'm not going into *that* either.

The whole engagement was maybe... four minutes long? Maybe less.

Our Lieutenant figured out the angle of origin, we had three Null-Serums between the whole column, so we got them deployed, we got suppressive fire going on the building they'd apparently taken position in.

Four minutes...

The Psyker—or whatever they were, we never saw them, we got *nothing* but the clean evidence of what they'd done—they were gone by the time we pushed in.

Just *gone*, y'know?

It was just suddenly quiet again at some point.

Same grey light from before.

Same Emperor-damned moon-mud.

Same cold in my boot... Just without Thirteenth and parts of Sixth.”

—

Vonn: “What changed after that, for you?”

—

Mrek: “What changed?”

[Quiet laugh, no humor in it]

“Well, I suddenly became *very* interested in Resolve, y'know?

Which every veteran you talk to about this will tell you too, and which is both completely rational and also, in practice, almost *entirely* a waste of time. And I say that not to be *discouraging* or anything, but because it's just true and I wish someone had sat me down and told me clearly at the time—Actually... they did, I guess.

Build advisors and psychologists. They did tell me, afterwards.

Or they *tried*, at least...”

[Clears throat.]

“Listen... You meet a combat-focused Psyker—an *actual* one, not just one of the precogs, or someone with a bit of Telekinesis who knocks your coffee over—but a *real* one, a full Battlefield-Psyker type, the kind that can just *end* a squad with intent and nothing else?

Your *entire* relationship with your Attribute allocation changes overnight.

You go back to your bunk and you sit there and you think, “*I need to fix this! I need to prioritize Resolve above everything! And I need to do it now! Because that thing is out there and if I run into it again without preparation then what just happened to Thirteenth Squad is going to happen to me and I will not even understand it as it happens!*”

So you do it, y’know? You invest your points.

You trim other things that felt important before and you pile points into Resolve like you’re building a wall and the whole time you’re thinking, “*this is the right call, this is absolutely the right call—*”

—

Vonn: “And then?”

—

Mrek: “And then you don’t see another one of those monsters.”

[Another quiet laugh. Again, no humor in it]

“Not for two years. Not for four.

You run into precogs sometimes, usually on your side—there were two in my company at one point, both of them on the Short-Term path. Nice people, completely uninteresting in terms of what they could do to a Battlefield beyond saving our asses from an ambush here and there—which, I’m grateful for, don’t get me wrong.

But it doesn’t really make that Resolve investment feel worthwhile, y’know?

You might hear about a Telekinetic on the front four sectors over, someday.

You get a briefing once about an Obscuritas-type operating in the region and then *nothing* comes of it because they’re gone before anyone gets close—Obscuritas things, y’know?

And the whole time, your whole damn existence is just *war*. Normal-ass war.

People shooting at other people with things that make *physical sense*.

You can look at a railgun and understand what it does and why it does it, y’know? You can look at a grenade and trace the *physics*, if you got the Skill for it.

Everything in your day-to-day is comprehensible, every threat has a *mechanism* you can point at or research to understand.

You grow up understanding, at some very basic level, that the universe *has* these rules.

Not philosophical ones—*physical* ones.

Cause and effect, y'know? You push something and it moves. Light travels at a certain speed. Two objects cannot occupy the same space, all that stuff.

These aren't things you *think* about consciously, they're just the bones underneath everything, the floor you've been standing on since the day you were born.

You don't notice them the same way you don't notice gravity until something falls *wrong*.

A Psyker simply doesn't really play by them the same way you do, y'know?

And your brain *knows* that, somehow. It knows it even when the Psyker is just *standing there* eating their rations and complaining about the same mud you're complaining about.

Some part of you is watching them from the corner of its eye and running the numbers and coming back with a result it can't file anywhere useful.

*"Wrong. This one is wrong. Not necessarily bad. Not necessarily dangerous. Just **wrong**."*

The floor you've been standing on your whole life—they don't *need* it the same way you do, y'know? They're just politely using it anyway, because it's more convenient than the alternative.

And all the while—during the normal-ass war, where these things are slowly but surely leaving your memory—the Resolve investments just *sit* there.

And you *keep* telling yourself they're *definitely* worth it, y'know?

But two years in, three years in, you are fighting twelve hours a day in the mud and you are not spending a single moment of it thinking about Psykers. Instead, you're thinking about how nice those extra six points would have been in Recovery right about now—Vitality, even.

And by that point, you've almost forgotten what it felt like. *Almost*.

There's a guy in my squad now—Private Teln, fresh from his Recruit phase—who told me in the mess that one of his squad members during the Assessment might have been a *Wielder*.

Some very mild Telekinesis, apparently.

A few little things early on that you could've written off as coincidence but once you knew, you knew, nothing major. Teln said the guy ended up somewhere around the middle of the rankings, nothing that jumped out, and then after T1 it stops mattering as a designation anyway, y'know?

And then Teln said that he's not really scared of Psykers. Cause, y'know, he *met* the Wielder; even beat their score in several Assessments.

"A bit of telekinesis got nothing on my rifle," that kinda talk, y'know?

I didn't really know *what* to tell him about it all, then.

"Good for you," I just said eventually. Because it was. Truly.

I was glad that he had made a positive experience like that.

But for the *actual* Battlefield Psyker types—the *real* ones, the ones that can reach across a training yard and *decide* your squad just stops existing—they're so rare that by the time you might meet your second one, you've spent years quietly feeling like you utterly wasted those Resolve points. Feeling like maybe you let a bad day make a bad decision.

You *didn't*, by the way. The Resolve is *still* worth having.

But I understand why people phase it out, y'know?

I understand *why* it stops feeling urgent and why it isn't generally recommended on Builds to invest in it in the first place.

Because, statistically speaking, that first Psyker encounter was already a massive outlier and anomaly. The chances to meet another Psyker capable of similar feats as that one, for me, after I invested several Levels worth of points into Resolve? Astronomically low.

Because the urgency itself can only come from the memory, and the memory was *four minutes* out of *thousands of days* of service, and the human brain is not built to stay frightened of something it can't see anymore, y'know?"

—

Vonn: "Is the memory still with you?"

—

Mrek: *[Long pause. He looks at the table for a moment.]*

"My old man did three full rotations and a partial fourth before he mustered out.

He's a ninety-three now and spends most of his time growing things on a small plot outside Rein-Casset.

Genuinely the most settled person I ever met, y'know?

Met him for a holiday about... three? years back and we were sitting out in the evening and I mentioned—offhand, not really thinking about it—that I'd been in a sector the week before where there had reportedly been Psyker activity: Support type, nothing like what *I'd* seen back on that first encounter, just a precog feeding information to the other side.

And suddenly he got *very* still. Wasn't upset or frightened or anything.

Just *still*, the way a person gets still when something old moves in them.

And then he said to me, "You don't forget, kiddo."

Very simple. "You think you do... You *don't*."

He told me he met one at his own Tier once. Late in his second rotation.

Nothing like my first time, in terms of what they actually did—different output, different style, different scale entirely.

Not a squad in front of him turning inside out. Far subtle than that, y'know?

But just as *wrong*. Maybe wronger, in some ways, because it was... quieter? about it.

And he said the *exact* same thing hit him that hit me that morning in the mud.

The exact same thought: "*Oh. Cool movie stuff.*"

Because your brain never really builds the drawer for it, y'know?

It *never* finds the right place to file it all, because it's not meant to be filed. It's all *wrong*.

You spend your whole life watching things like that through screens, in stories, in games where it's got rules and logic and can be countered with the right loadout—and then you stand in front of the *real* thing and the part of you that's still seven years old watching *Sons of the Void* with your dad just insists on calling it fiction, 'yknow?

Even when it isn't.

Even when it always will be.

Even when the evidence of it is *right there* in front of you."

[*Pause.*]

"He said, "You *don't* forget," back then.

And honestly? I believe him.

I haven't forgotten yet either..."

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