

## Arc 1 - Chapter 121 - Anger

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

Preparing for the upcoming talk over the past 46 hours had been an absolute fever dream for Selene. The intense preparation had pushed her to her limits, both mentally and emotionally.

While she had previously seen some highlights of Thea's assessment, having access to the full record, including her profile and all the notes from various Majors, Lieutenants, and even a select few Colonels, had been surreal.

In all her years serving as a chief psychologist for prospective Recruits and active Recruits, she had never encountered a profile so packed with diverse, often contradictory information.

The notes ranged from calls to essentially confine Thea indefinitely and exploit her potential Class-related knowledge, to official requests advocating for her education and resource allocation to her Squad Officers.

The breadth of opinions and recommendations was staggering.

Most of these notes had long since been edited, removed, or purged entirely from the profile.

Still, her current mission granted her unprecedented access to even the deleted parts that no one was supposed to see anymore.

To say she felt intimidated would be an understatement.

Yet, amidst the chaos, she felt strangely calm about the upcoming conversation.

After all, she was here to talk to and help Thea, not to navigate the tangled web of military bureaucracy and its often overzealous officers or the politics they seemed to enjoy all too much.

One aspect that *did* make her seriously nervous, however, was the Gold-Level Lock Major Quinn had mentioned.

Her mission afforded her privileges she had never even dreamt of, but even these heightened clearances didn't come close to granting access to the Gold-Level Lock on part of Thea's assessment experience.

Considering the hazardous and traumatic events that had already warranted Black-Level locks, Selene struggled to fathom what could have possibly even necessitated a Gold-Level Lock to be ordered in the first place.

Selene had sat down with Major Quinn for half an hour just a few hours ago to discuss the Gold-Level Lock and its implications, as she hadn't even known such a classification existed before this to begin with.

What the Major had revealed about them was disturbing enough that Selene knew she would need several sessions with her *own* psychologist to fully process.

Gold-Level Locks, according to Major Quinn, represented the second highest level of security the UHF could impose on information, with only the O13-Lock being known as above it, which could exclusively be placed or removed by the ruling council of the UHF itself.

The sinister nature of Gold-Level Locks went beyond mere clearance issues, however.

They equated to a literal purge order.

Anyone without the requisite clearance who knew the contents of the lock, or was even *suspected* of having potential knowledge about it, would be purged. In UHF terms, a purge meant the forced Zeroing of an individual, rendering resurrection impossible.

The rationale behind this drastic measure was even more chilling: A Gold-Level Lock was placed on information that needed to be kept secret from *Terra* itself.

This fact alone was something Selene would have to guard for the rest of her life.

Major Quinn had only been able to share this with her because of close connections with higher-ups. If Selene were to reveal this information, a court-martial would be the least of her worries.

And while Selene had been granted temporary Gold-Level clearance for the duration of her talk with Thea, it was only effective once she entered the room.

She had no actual idea what the lock concealed in the first place.

The Sovereign's AI, governing this section of the DDS, had also been given temporary clearance and knew what the lock was protecting.

This meant Selene was entering a situation blind; she had no idea what topics to avoid.

If she stumbled upon the locked information, the AI would forcibly inject her with Mnemorix S-IF14 upon leaving the room—the most powerful memory wipe drug the UHF possessed.

It was proven to work on even General Tier Marines, which guaranteed that if Selene was injected with it, she wouldn't remember anything about her conversation with Thea at all—and likely just about anything else that had happened over the past week or so.

As if that wasn't enough, S-IF14 was also not very gentle in the way that it purged memories, so permanent brain damage was all but expected as well.

It still beat getting purged, of course, but Selene couldn't exactly fault herself for being more than just a little nervous considering the stakes.

*'If Thea talks about the wrong thing, I get my memory wiped, receive permanent brain damage, and likely won't be able to ever be considered for a promotion again—can't have*

*anyone with potential knowledge out of their sights after all, even if S-IF14 is supposed to be infallible. There's no shot they'd ever let me into a room with anyone unsupervised again,'* Selene thought to herself with trepidation.

*'And the worst part is, I don't even know what topics to stay clear of, damnit! How did I end up in a situation like this?!*

Ultimately, however, she knew she'd just have to bite the bullet and try her best to steer Thea towards topics she had directly seen in the recordings or mentioned in the notes; they were Black-Level locked at worst, so she would be safe if they stayed on those.

The most important part for Selene, though, was to make sure that Thea got through all of this without any lasting issues.

She had shed more than a few tears reviewing the recordings and had cursed out the UHF leadership more times than she could count at their sheer and utter incompetence in handling the poor girl's post-integration.

While Selene could understand the pressure and issues that Major Quinn had faced, being essentially put forth as the sole person responsible for the entire drive of Recruits, it wasn't fair to Thea to simply be forgotten.

Saying "Oops, sorry, we kind of forgot to inform you that you might die doing what we asked you to do" was simply not a good argument, no matter whether a Lieutenant or a High-General said it.

Ultimately, the UHF's brass had "*fucked up*," as Major Quinn had aptly put it, with no acceptable reason to explain how or why it happened.

Even if the complex series of events, starting from the very moment that Major Daxton had apparently Black-Level Locked Thea's Cube Trial on Lumiosia, mere hours after Selene had sent Thea off with a smile, had led to this; there was no single person that Selene could assign blame to.

There were too many people involved; too many officers, too many Marines, that could have all stepped forward and said, "Hey wait a minute, don't we need to give her a basic rundown?"

But it hadn't happened, simply because it had been *forgotten*.

Routine had taken over due to the time pressure of getting the new Recruits ready for the assessment.

The special case of Thea herself had simply been put on the back burner after she agreed to help out the UHF in their research; the brass simply assumed it wouldn't be a problem to pull out her file after the assessment and give her all the necessary rundowns afterward.

Nobody had expected her to be as much of an outlier as she had proven to be.

The way events had spiralled out of control inside the assessment, with no way for anyone to realistically affect what happened once it had started, could potentially cost them not just an S-Class Strategic Asset, but also a thoroughly talented Marine as well.

These were the stakes Selene was dealing with; she had been chosen as the final arbiter for this whole mess, to try and bring Thea back into the arms of the UHF.

The sheer number of failure states in this mission was staggering and downright suffocating.

Selene would have to thread the needle to avoid any of them, as they ranged from “permanent brain damage” to downright apocalyptic on a scale that she couldn’t even truly comprehend if she tried.

There was but one true win for her to achieve: To make sure Thea calmed down, that they could talk it all out without Thea breaching the Gold-Level topic, and to get Thea to agree to some form of arbitration with the UHF.

Selene had been given quite a number of tools to try and rebuild goodwill with the girl, options she herself had never known existed. But she wasn’t sure if it would be enough—if her efforts would bear fruit and provide everyone involved with as happy an ending as could be achieved.

She’d try her best, but sometimes, even people’s bests simply weren’t enough; she was all too aware of this, having failed in somewhat similar situations a few times before.

She was ready to make concessions herself if it came to that—Thea needed her, and she wouldn’t let the girl down, no matter what.

*‘If I have to end up with some brain damage for Thea to get out of this okay... Then so be it. I’ve had a good run and saved more lives than I could have ever hoped for,’* Selene resolved herself as she stepped up to the door she had stood in front of just a little under two days prior on her first meeting with Major Quinn in two years.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she put her hand on the handle and immediately flinched as a stinging pain shot through her fingers. The handle wasn’t just cold; it was freezing beyond what Selene had ever thought possible.

Bits of skin had ripped off her hand as she instinctively pulled it back, frozen to the aluminium compound handle in the fraction of a second it took for her body to react to the intense cold.

“By the Emperor’s Light... Am I even going to be okay going in there?” Selene muttered to herself, staring incredulously at her injured hand.

She immediately regretted it as she was startled once again, this time by the Sovereign AI’s voice quietly ringing out in the corridor around her. “The interior of the room containing Recruit Thea McKay is currently uninhabitable, Auxiliary Legate Calla. If I were to deposit you inside, you would be considered irrevocably dead in 0.000317 seconds. However, given the nature of the Psychic Cold, there is a 99.99967% chance that it will dissipate the instant you open the door, returning the room to a chilly, but habitable, temperature.”

Simply glaring at the space around her, Selene shook her head.

*'Fucking AIs... I really didn't need to know that first part; you could've just said I would be fine, damnit!'*

"I would, however, recommend gloves," the AI added after a moment.

Selene could almost swear she heard smugness in its voice. A notion that, of course, was utterly ridiculous, but her decades of human psychology experience were screaming at her that she was being mocked.

Suppressing the urge to respond to the AI's implied attitude, Selene pulled out a pair of insulated gloves from her belt and slipped them on. She was thankful that her usual outfit included some thick gloves, as her hands often ended up getting cold for no good reason.

Taking another deep breath, she gripped the handle firmly and quickly opened the door, feeling the intense cold through the gloves but managing to let go before her fingers turned to icicles.

As the door swung open, there was a brief moment in which the room seemed utterly frozen in time. The moment was so imperceptibly short, however, that Selene couldn't be sure it had even really happened or if it was simply a trick of her eyes adjusting to the new environment.

And what an environment it was.

The room, based on the very template Selene had created over decades for her own personal psychology sessions with prospective UHF candidates and Recruits alike, was utterly beyond recognition.

Frost covered every surface, from the walls to the ceiling to the floor, turning the once warm and inviting space into an icy wasteland.

The normally soft, plush chairs were nowhere to be seen, but shards of similarly coloured wood were strewn about the room, telling Selene everything she needed to know about their state. The shelves that had once tactfully pulled the room together by presenting calming, yet low-key objects on the walls had been ripped down and thrown across the room.

The bookshelf and all its contents had been similarly torn apart and devastated beyond recognition. Shards of glass, wood, and ceramic littered every wall and the ceiling, either frozen in place or embedded deeply into the surfaces, speaking volumes about the violent upheaval that had occurred.

But the most telling of all, the centrepiece of the room and the first thing that caught Selene's attention immediately, was Thea herself.

Around her, in a roughly five-metre radius, nothing had remained.

No debris, no piece of wood, no shard of glass, *nothing*.

It was as if everything had simply been obliterated into another dimension, so thorough was the absence of anything around the girl.

Yet the most startling thing of all were the eyes that stared back at Selene from the centre of the room. Eyes that thoroughly froze every drop of blood in her body in an instant.

Selene felt like she was unable to breathe, move, or even think as the pure, unadulterated anger in Thea's cyan-coloured eyes bore into her very soul.

The intensity of Thea's gaze was unlike anything Selene had ever encountered.

It was a chilling reminder of the raw power and fury contained within this young Recruit, highlighting the danger she posed in her current state—the very problem she was here to tackle.

For an instant, Selene felt utterly inadequate for what she had been asked to do.

The doubt vanished just as quickly as it had come, however, as Selene forced herself to step into the room, despite the bone-chilling anger bearing down on her.

“Hello there, Thea,” she offered with a genuine smile, putting her entire being into keeping the strained aspect of it hidden. “I’m not sure if you remember... But we met before, around two years ago on Lumiosia. I was the officer responsible for covering your basic weapon training and the psychological after-care after the Cube Trial had—”

“Selene...?” Thea's voice was weak and raw, almost like she had been screaming and crying non-stop for days. The raging inferno behind Thea's eyes abruptly disappeared, replaced by an almost haunting hollowness as recognition seemed to seep in.

Selene didn't know which she preferred, for the look that Thea gave her now was threatening to truly break her heart—a lost, sad and utterly exhausted child, feeling betrayed by the very people she trusted implicitly.

“I... I wanted to send you a message, but the whole integration thing and... I'm sorry,” Thea continued, losing her words somewhere around the middle and finding herself unable to meet Selene's gaze any longer, directing her eyes towards the ground.

Mustering up every ounce of courage and energy in her body, Selene crossed the distance between them in a few quick strides and simply threw her arms around the girl, pulling her into a deep hug.

For an instant, she felt Thea tense up, pinpricks of pain wrecking through Selene's entire body, like ice crystals forming where her blood was supposed to be. But another moment later, everything turned back to normal and she felt the girl gently sink into her arms.

Thea didn't cry.

She didn't move, didn't say anything.

She didn't reciprocate the hug either, but simply stood there, like a broken, stringless puppet, exclusively held up by Selene's embrace.

She had been prepared to deal with an angry Thea, but what she encountered had far exceeded anything she could have anticipated.

To call it anger would be like calling the Emperor's War a minor scuffle—simple fisticuffs.

But even that, she might have been able to handle her with the plans she had prepared ahead of time.

The Thea in her arms right now, however? That was something she hadn't expected whatsoever; had no real recourse to as she was right now.

How was she supposed to claw back Thea from this stage?

Selene had no idea, but she knew that giving up was not an option.

She needed a plan.

And so they remained like this for more than ten minutes, Selene using the time to cobble together a plan of attack to try and salvage the situation. The hug had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, but now it proved more than worth its weight in gold for the time it afforded her.

Raising her head ever so slightly, she mouthed the words "chairs, close together" into the air, trusting the Sovereign's AI to understand her implicit bid for assistance.

She knew the AI was paying attention to her every move, to every word spoken and every breath taken in this room, ensuring the Gold-Level Lock was not broken.

Two cushioned armchairs appeared next to them a moment later and Selene let out an inaudible breath of relief—it seemed that the AI was more than willing to work with her.

Whether it was due to their shared mission, an explicit order, or maybe the Emperor himself reaching down with a golden olive branch, she didn't care at the moment. What mattered was that she wasn't entirely alone and could off-load some of the heavy lifting—in some cases quite literally—to the AI if need be.

It was imperative for Selene to establish herself as an unmistakable ally in Thea's mind.

While she had no idea how far gone the girl truly was, everything she had read and seen about her indicated that she needed someone to truly be on her side for once, with no strings attached.

Wetting her throat carefully, so as not to startle the fragile girl in her arms with a sudden, raspy voice, Selene quietly asked, "How about we sit down for a moment? I could do with a cushioned seat to relax while we catch up. How about it?"

Every word she spoke was deliberate and pre-planned, ensuring that Thea didn't feel pressured into anything but was still encouraged to follow along with Selene's plan, at least for now.

She didn't particularly think that Thea was in any state to deny anything she asked, but when dealing with anger, emotional exhaustion, and subsequent fragility, she didn't want to leave anything to chance.

"Mhm," Thea murmured, tensing up slightly as her muscles seemed to fight an unwinnable war to keep her upright without the full strength of Selene's embrace. Selene gently helped her into the cushioned chair, guiding her with care, before taking a seat in the chair right next to it.

The chairs had been arranged exactly how Selene would have done it if she had been given the opportunity, and she silently praised and thanked the AI for catching on to her ideas so readily.

They were positioned close enough for her to touch Thea but not so close as to infringe on her personal space directly. Not facing each other, but still close enough in angle to look at each other without straining if they wanted to.

Selene had always liked this particular setup for the versatility and intimacy it afforded, and she affectionately called it "The Personal Touch" style of chair positioning.

Now seated, the real mission had to begin. The first thing Selene needed was to ensure that Thea would engage with her in any meaningful way—an appeal to emotion was needed.

"It's been a while, huh? I actually wondered if you still remembered me from all those years ago; I was worried you might have forgotten about me, considering the short amount of time we spent together during the Cube Trial," Selene started, her voice soft but carrying an even strength that gave it weight in the devastated room.

She made sure not to mention Thea's promise to contact her—guilt was the last thing the girl needed right now. Even if there wasn't any real guilt to go around, the human mind didn't play by logic.

"I'm glad to see you again, Thea. My last two years have been utterly routine, overseeing Cube Trials all over UHF space and helping out with assessments for Recruits. I thought I was going to lose my mind with the monotony," Selene chuckled, injecting a bit of levity into the chilling air.

"When I heard you were part of this assessment, I made sure to come on over so we could have another chat. It's not often that somebody truly sticks in my mind, but you definitely did back then. I remember it like it was yesterday."

She gave Thea ample time to interject after each sentence, not wanting to overrun her or make her feel pressured to join the conversation but enough time that she wouldn't feel bad for speaking out.



“The undercity mechanic with the cyan eyes; that’s what I initially thought when I saw you appear inside the DDS,” Selene recalled, forcibly pushing air out of her nose in amusement. “We didn’t have a lot of data on Lumiosia, much less the undercity, so that was about the entirety of what I knew about you before you showed up, you know?”

“Imagine my surprise when you utterly crushed the aiming exercises and didn’t even ask for a scope... I thought I was being the butt of a joke by the AI or something, but no, as it turned out, you were just far beyond normal—even for your circumstances.”

Selene watched Thea closely, hoping to see some sign of engagement, a micro-expression in her body or even a hint of recognition in her eyes—and she found it; at least some of it.

The more Selene talked, the more Thea seemed to perk up.

Ever so slowly, like a delicate flower having been caught in a blizzard but somehow persevering, the girl's eyes met Selene's once again.

Selene had to school herself thoroughly to not let out a visible reaction, as she could see the tiniest spark of life behind those eyes once again—there was hope.

“Do you remember that, Thea? How you simply asked me to stand aside so you could just go ham on the targets, not wanting to bother with my instructions or tutorials, because you just wanted to get into the action right away?” she asked with a big, genuine smile painted on her face.

A moment of silence and then... Thea's face split into the tiniest, weakest of smiles.

“I do,” she replied hoarsely, her quiet voice shattering the frigid atmosphere like a cannonball smashing through a window.

There was a warmth in there that Selene had feared would not come back; a warmth that almost made her believe Thea was going to be okay. “I remember it very clearly. It was one of the best days of my life... You were there to help me at the start and afterward too. I thought... I thought I could handle it, you know? The killing, the war... Just deal with it; handle it; bottle it up. But you taught and showed me that I didn’t have to.”

Her smile turned ever so slightly wider.

“I tried to keep that in mind; to be open like that... Vulnerable...”

Selene's whole body tensed up, realising the dangerous path that Thea's thoughts were going down.

She couldn't simply jump in and interrupt her, however, as the most important part was to be seen as an ally—if that meant allowing her to relapse, then she would have to weather the storm.

“It worked surprisingly well, for the most part—kept me sane, I would like to believe,” Thea continued unabated, her voice starting to pick up a certain amount of power as she did.

“You asked how my last two years have been... The answer is complicated. If you had asked me yesterday, I would have said downright dreamy. I’ve always wanted to be part of the UHF, you know?”

“My dad... He was part of the UHF once, but he left. I never really understood *why*, because he never talked about it.” Selene quietly swallowed a lump, preparing herself mentally and physically for where this conversation was going.

“But I think I’m starting to understand, Selene. To understand why he left; why he hated the war; why he wanted out.”

Thea’s eyes had once again ignited; a tiny spark turned into a similarly tiny flame, but it was growing—and fast.

“The training camp was fun, if lonely. ‘*No friends*’ was the clear design and policy—always seemed weird to me, but I’ve never really had friends, so it wasn’t a big deal. And then we all got killed, after being asked to trust in the UHF. Just like that. Slaughtered like dogs, fenced into a kennel,” Thea’s words were biting, with a strength and growing anger behind them that almost made Selene flinch.

“On Lumiosia, we often had to do that, did you know?” She asked, and Selene shook her head—she should have researched more about Thea’s hometown, she now realised.

“We would chase the dogs through the destroyed streets of the undercity; funnel them into large closed-off sections or bait them in with enticing pieces of meat. Once we had enough, we would close it all up and gun them down—food for the citizens. Once a week, sometimes twice, we’d do so. We did it because we *had* to; nutrient solutions are simply not enough to actually thrive on,” Thea explained almost nonchalantly.

And then, the fire erupted anew into a small portion of the inferno that Selene had seen when she had initially entered the room.

“Imagine my surprise, then, when after everything I had dreamed and worked for, after all the trust I had offered freely and willingly, I suddenly found myself as one of those very dogs...?”