

Arc 1 - Chapter 125 - Patefactio

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

Selene's mind raced, a million thoughts per second, as she stared down whatever this thing was that had invaded her mindscape.

*'How is this possible?! This whole situation isn't even real; how can this **thing** be here?!'*

Her heart pounded in her chest, and she struggled to focus on any particular thought as torrents of adrenaline surged through her body—both inside the mindscape and in the real one, of that, she was certain.

Meanwhile, the girl—no, *the thing*—holding the knife to her throat squirmed in amusement at Selene's obvious distress.

Decades of experience in schooling her own bodily reactions and micro-expressions had all but vanished in the sheer terror she felt at this entity's blatant violation of every conceivable rule she had thought to be true about her own abilities and the Allbright System as a whole.

Seeing the thing wearing Thea's skin squirm in amusement at her reactions, Selene managed to claw back a fraction of sanity from the brink; forcing herself to calm down as she finally broke eye-contact with the neon-violet orbs that were still trained on her.

'Think, Selene,' she reminded herself as she took a deep, quivering breath. *'Everything you know about this world says this shouldn't be possible—so, the question becomes: Is it? Is it really impossible? Or is what I'm seeing right now possible under the rules that I'm aware of?'*

[Echo Trauma] was the most powerful ability Selene personally had access to and ever been subjected to; so it was the highest grade of access to the Allbright System she could reference.

The System was unfathomably powerful—truly—but there were clear limitations to what it could do, both from a logical standpoint and from self-admissions by the System itself over the past centuries.

For one, the System could not grant abilities that allowed someone to directly interface with another person's thoughts.

The closest it could do was something like [Echo Trauma], which created a perfect copy of someone's psyche to let you experiment with—a tool that, while functionally similar for most use cases, was distinctly different in its implications.

Another aspect of the System that had been proven true over the recent centuries was that the System refused—either because it couldn't or wouldn't—to violate its own previously established ruleset, even at higher tiers of rarity or power.

If something had been established by the System as a core, fundamental rule of the powers it granted, then that wouldn't change at higher tiers either.

This meant that even if there was a more powerful version of [Echo Trauma] out there—at the Galactium-Rarity or maybe even Unique-Rarity level—it couldn't *truly* allow someone to read another person's mind.

Given these two truths and the fact that Selene was still inside her own mindscape, which functioned outside of time and space—making outside interference all but impossible—it followed that she wasn't actually dealing with anything real.

Whatever this thing was, it was still bound by the rules of Selene's mindscape and the power granted to her by the [Echo Trauma] ability.

'But if that's truly the case, then how is it threatening me with a knife right now?'

The sheer deviousness and ruthlessness of the psyche in front of her was something Selene had never experienced before.

She had dealt with psychopaths, lunatics, and downright manic individuals whose only thoughts and desires were to kill whatever they could get their hands on.

But even those had shown a more varied response to the emotional stimuli and experiments that Selene had refined over the past few decades inside her [Echo Trauma] than whatever this thing was that was threatening her now.

Not to mention, far less hostility.

Realising that she was slipping again, Selene forced herself to meet the thing's eyes as she willed the knife out of existence. Much to her elation and relief, she felt the cold plasteel against her throat simply disappear in an instant, as if it had never existed to begin with.

This was a small victory, but it gave her a critical insight.

Meanwhile, Thea's face—or rather, the thing wearing her skin's—dropped slightly at the sight before it backed off a few steps, as if it had lost all interest in threatening Selene.

"You really are a smart one, huh?" it said with a crooked, toothy smile.

Selene noted that the teeth it was showing were far too pointy and sharp to truly belong to a human being, sending a renewed shiver down her spine.

Just what in the Emperor's holy name was this thing?!

"Not many people would have realised they aren't actually powerless in a situation like this... But I guess you aren't a high-level psychologist for nothing, huh?" it continued, completely ignoring Selene's stares.

"What... What are you?" Selene repeated her previous question, forcing more conviction into her voice than she truly felt.

She was still utterly shaken by the turn of events, but she knew she had to try and hide this weakness as best she could if she wanted to figure out what was actually going on.

The thing merely glared at Selene for long, arduous seconds before finally replying, “You should know *exactly* what I am, Silly Sele. This is *your* place, no?”

It turned around and leisurely strolled over to the second cushioned chair, taking a relaxed seat by throwing its legs over the side and practically lying down.

It felt exceedingly *wrong* to see something that looked exactly like Thea simply commandeer the girl’s body with such ease, as if it was born to it, downright *entitled* to it.

Pushing those thoughts aside for now, Selene focused on what the thing had said instead.

‘I should know...? Because this is “my place”? What does that even mean...?’ she thought, trying to piece together whatever the thing was referring to.

She had never seen nor heard of anything like this before; not that she had a lot of people to ask about [Echo Trauma], of course, but even other psychologists’ reports using their own Abilities to decipher the true nature of somebody’s emotions and thoughts had never come even remotely close to describing something as thoroughly problematic as this situation.

For now, she wanted to ask more questions; understand more of what the thing was, what it wanted, and why it existed. But there was also one other, vastly more important question that she struggled to answer: How had the thing slipped her grasp so thoroughly? How had it surprised and threatened her when this was all Selene’s own mindscape?

It shouldn’t be possible.

So far, the thing had seemed exceedingly vain and proud in the way it had talked down to “others” that weren’t Selene. Calling her “Silly Sele” had furthered that idea in Selene’s mind, leading her to suspect that the thing she was dealing with had a form of superiority complex that she might be able to exploit for information.

It was extremely thin ice she was treading on with the limited information she had about what was going on, but it was something. And working with something—doing anything and trying to claw back some semblance of control—was better than letting her thoughts spiral into dead ends.

“How did you threaten me? If this is ‘my place,’ like you said, then how come you were able to do that?” Selene asked directly, infusing her voice with a modicum of the self-doubt she felt to feed into the thing’s feeling of pride.

Portraying herself as scared, confused, and helpless was likely going to tickle the thing in just the right way to hopefully have it reveal more information—that was her thought process, at least. But she also realised that she couldn’t show how *truly* lost she felt in this moment, as the thing was definitely, squarely, and utterly on the “predator” side of things.

Showing too much vulnerability might just lead to more adverse reactions than Selene could handle, especially as she couldn't yet pin down the thing's origin nor what its powers actually were in this realm.

A crooked eyebrow was the only answer Selene received for a good minute before the thing in Thea's skin breathed a heavy sigh, its smile fading into an expression of mock sympathy and then disappointment.

"Silly Sele... I really thought you were a smart one; I even complimented you just earlier, didn't I? Why are you making me into a liar now?" Abruptly, Thea's face twisted in violent anger, her brows furrowing, her too-sharp teeth bared, and her eyes piercing Selene's with a promise of pain and death that made the psychologist flinch.

"I *never* lie," the thing added pointedly, but the voice had warped from Thea's own, sounding almost like the guttural roar of an animal rather than human speech.

As abruptly as the rage had appeared on Thea's face, it dissipated, leaving behind the same smug smile that the thing had worn since it had sat down.

The anger seemed completely forgotten.

"Think, Silly Sele. Isn't that what you should be good at—thinking? *What* is this place? *How* does it work? *Think*, darling!" it added, articulating each sentence animatedly with Thea's hands like it was struggling to keep its emotions in check—something Selene was seriously doubting after the display just now.

Selene swallowed a lump in her throat, the sudden outburst of anger earlier catching her thoroughly off-guard.

There had been no indications of it happening, no prior signs of the thing turning angry or preparing for an outburst—no micro-expressions her [Insight Pulse] drew attention to, but her [Empathetic Resonance] had definitely felt it being real.

It had been the first time since she had entered the room with Thea that her [Empathetic Resonance] had shown anything but cold, calculated malice: Burning fury.

And it had thoroughly scorched Selene's mind, she could already tell.

There was a level of insecurity, of self-doubt, that had never existed within her mind before, that had rapidly gained control over her thoughts when the thing had displayed its brief outburst.

Where Selene should have been secure in the knowledge that this was her mindscape, that she could control whatever happened in it, the insecurity the unknown thing before her had caused in her mind was making her hesitate, question her own thoughts and feelings at every step.

She wanted nothing more than to simply collapse the Ability, leave this place, leave the room and Thea behind, go hide in her quarters and cry and just stop thinking altogether.

But she knew that this wasn't an option.

Not if she wanted to truly make a difference.

Not if she wanted to retain a sliver of self-respect.

Not if she wanted to ever look into a mirror again without feeling the urge to end it all.

She had promised herself she would help Thea, no matter the cost.

That promise was what kept her thoughts from slipping too far; it allowed her to claw them back whenever they started to escape her grasp.

Focusing on that very promise, Selene reviewed the thing's words carefully.

'What is this place? My mindscape; the world of [Echo Trauma] powered by the Allbright System and my own mind... How does it work?' Selene thought, struggling to figure out what the thing might have wanted her to find. The questions were too broad, too unspecific to really get a grasp on what it was trying to make her think about.

'It works by creating a perfect replica psyche based on the System's data about a person's past, present, and future; to simulate their consciousness down to the most basic of levels... But that doesn't really apply here, does it? The thing clearly is not Thea; whatever it is.'

She still couldn't understand what exactly had happened; how the thing had gotten inside of her [Echo Trauma]. It should be impossible since the System generally did a good job of interpreting her desires and intents when it came to using an Ability, so it should have targeted Thea with all of them, not whatever this thing was.

Yet, somehow, it *had* happened.

Clawing back her thoughts again, realising she was drifting off to unproductive places again, Selene aimed them back towards the question at hand: *How* had the thing slipped her control?

Then, all of a sudden, it struck her.

Like an orbital laser from Terra's flagship itself, the answer came to her mind, almost blinding her with its simplicity.

"I forgot to rescind the order of freetime..." Selene whispered out loud, unable to keep the incredulous truth to herself.

Thea's face split into a toothy, mocking grin, as the thing began clapping with Thea's hands. "Bravo, Silly Sele! You've figured it out! I am in awe of your intellect, darling. Truly a marvellous display of expertise, careful thought, and unfathomable genius."

She ignored the mocking comments, a more pressing series of thoughts coalescing in her mind instead.

'I never had to rescind an order because the psyches never acted without being specifically ordered to do so... I didn't even think it was necessary, considering that this is all technically running inside of my own mind. If I didn't want the thing to move, it shouldn't be able to move... right?' But Selene already knew this wasn't the case.

It *couldn't* be; otherwise, none of the tests she had designed for the various psyches would ever work.

There needed to be an element of "free" will for them to truly display emotions and reactions to what Selene was putting them through. Otherwise, the Ability itself would serve no purpose if all it did was give her a playground where she controlled absolutely everything.

That realisation sparked an even more horrific one, however; one that threatened to upend Selene's entire understanding of just about everything she had ever believed in.

*'This thing is **self-aware**. It **knows** this is all a construct of my mind. It **knows** it is inside of an Ability...!'*

Her eyes involuntarily widened in abject terror at the realisation, leading to the thing's smile growing even wider, clearly revelling in Selene's unadulterated horror.

Selene's breath quickened, her mind racing to catch up with the implications of what she had just realised.

If the psyche mirror was self-aware, it meant she had lost control in a way she had never even imagined *possible*. It wasn't just an anomaly; it was a fundamental break in her understanding of the [Echo Trauma] Ability and its limitations.

Her entire framework of how the Ability functioned was crumbling before her very eyes.

Recognizing that she was slipping, she forced herself once again to stay calm.

She tried to analyse the situation logically rather than giving in to the primal aspects of her mind that were screaming at her to run, to hide, to disappear.

'[Echo Trauma] is designed to simulate and replicate the subject's psyche with near-perfect accuracy... Assuming that this thing was created instead of Thea, however that might have happened notwithstanding, then it follows that this thing is essentially a 1:1 reproduction of the real thing,' she thought to herself, laying out the facts as she had learned decades ago when she first went into the field of psychology at the university.

Her first professor had coined this the "back-to-basics" approach.

Whenever she felt completely lost and on the verge of giving up, simply breaking the problem down into what she knew to be true, what she was hoping to be true, and what she was fearing to be true would help organise her thoughts and get her back on track.

'I know these previous things to be true. I hope that I have full control over this world, including the thing's psyche, and I fear that I do not. Those should be the basics.'

Her thoughts had become somewhat cyclical, constantly returning to whether [Echo Trauma] was working in the same way it always had or if it was functioning differently altogether as a result of the thing's existence.

This was something she would have to simply make a call on because the risk of playing her hand—commanding the thing to do something and it somehow resisting or not being affected—was too high.

If the thing thought she had control, then she had to do everything in her power to let it continue believing so, even if she herself didn't know whether or not it was the truth.

*'If this is a replica of the real thing, then it's very, **very** smart. It practically knew immediately that this was an Ability, a Mindscape of sorts, the instant I started using [Echo Trauma]... Going by the recordings, the first time it displayed an obvious non-ordered movement was merely seconds after the Ability took hold,'* Selene recalled, feeling a sense of order return to her mind.

'Nothing in the Ability description says that the psyche can't figure out they're artificial, so it's technically not impossible... Just extremely unlikely. What kind of being would immediately assume itself to be an artificial creation, rather than the real thing, though...?'

She felt a chill run down her spine as she contemplated this last thought.

The realisation that the thing might be a highly intelligent and self-aware entity operating within her Ability was disturbing on a level she hadn't experienced before. It meant that the thing had a level of consciousness and awareness that rivalled, if not far surpassed, that of a human's.

The implications of this were far too staggering to truly contemplate; so she rapidly locked those thoughts away for when she was in a safer place to truly think about them.

Meeting the strange thing's eyes once again after steeling her mind as best she could, Selene asked, "So, what exactly are you then? Outside of an artificial psyche created by my [Echo Trauma], of course. What's the *real* you?"

The thing merely observed Selene for a while, its head bobbing and jerking in unnerving ways. The facade of simply being Thea had long fallen to the wayside.

Selene took the opportunity to really study the entity; to get a good look at what it was that she had inadvertently created inside of her own mind.

For all intents and purposes, it looked exactly like Thea down to the last hair. But that was only the initial impression Selene had originally had. Now that she had time to really sink her teeth into the thing, she found quite a few differences—likely because the thing had stopped pretending as much.

First and foremost, the thing didn't blink. Ever.

Its neon-violet eyes were simply staring at Selene with an unerring focus.

Furthermore, having the power of [Echo Trauma] on her side, she conjured up a recording for only herself to see of the moment the thing had burst out in anger; a moment that had seemed surprisingly genuine, if her [Empathetic Resonance] was anything to go by, even if it had only lasted for an instant.

Using the recording, she zoomed in further and was able to catch a brief glimpse, merely a single instance long, of what was likely the true eyes of the thing.

Instead of featuring a normal pupil and iris like Thea's, with the iris merely coloured violet instead of cyan, the thing's eyes had shown a striking sight instead: The pupil itself was a deep, radiant violet while the iris around it had the same neon-violet tones as it did now, except for the furthest edges, where it turned into the same kind of radiant violet of the pupils.

The truly captivating aspect, however, was that from the iris itself, a perfectly straight downward line ran towards the bottom of the eyes, like the very iris itself was bleeding colour into the sclera somehow.

Aside from the thing's eyes and teeth, however, there was no outward difference to the Thea that Selene had seen inside the room—whether the girl was truly herself or not notwithstanding.

There was, however, a large difference in its movements now compared to before it had revealed itself.

Before, it had mirrored exactly what Selene had expected Thea to move and behave like, but now, it was downright alien in its movements; jerky and unhinged at times, only for it to abruptly become impossibly smooth with all its movements, like a strange sort of robot programmed for perfect control.

To say that observing the thing was unnerving would be a massive understatement, but Selene could not stop herself from being utterly fascinated by what she was seeing.

Luckily, the thing seemed to have gathered its own thoughts—or rather; toyed enough with Selene—and finally answered the question.

"I could tell you," it started with a nonchalant, mocking tone. "But, as they say, I'd have to kill you if I did."

The matter-of-factness in the thing's voice was chilling, but Selene kept her eyes trained on its every movement.

A small pout formed on Thea's face. "No? No reaction? Boo! You're no fun, Silly Sele..."

Breathing a heavy, theatrical sigh, it moved and sat up straight for the first time since they had separated, properly leaning back in the cushioned armchair, feet dangling just slightly above the ground.

"You ask what the *real* me is? You would die if I told you. It is not a threat, merely a fact. But you were fun to play with, so I will give you a small glimpse; as a token of my friendship."

Then, the thing's eyes abruptly changed into what Selene had coined the "true" form, and she felt herself freeze as the thing began to speak again, its voice distorting more and more with every word it spoke.

"I am what you consider not to be."

"I am what gets things done."

"I am what you know to not be real."

"I am what is many and what is one."

"I am what is left when nothing else remains."

Selene suddenly felt hot liquid drip down her cheeks.

Her eyes hurt as if she were staring into the very corona of a supernova and her ears rang with impossible echoes of sounds that never could exist.

"I am what is needed and shall not be."

"I am what succeeded when all else failed."

"I am what will prevail against all odds."

Selene felt the world of the [Echo Trauma] around her rumble, crack, and shatter as the thing continued to speak.

She couldn't break her fascination to stop anything.

"I am what you simply cannot fathom."

In her half-lucid state, Selene realised that the thing had, at some stage, gotten up and moved towards her.

Thea's fingers, impossibly distorted into a triplet of claws, held her up a metre above the ground like she was a mere child, the sharp nails boring into her throat painfully.

The thing's eyes returned to normal as abruptly as they had changed the first time around, before it added in Thea's normal voice.

"You may call me Æht in the future, darling. We're friends, after all. But please, do me a favour?"

Selene felt her body lose more and more blood as the horrifying wounds in her throat pulsed out the liquid at a terrifying pace.

"Don't let poor Thea realise I was here, yeah? I'll make it up to you, darling, promise."

With a wink of the thing, Selene felt her neck snap at the base and the [Echo Trauma] shattered entirely.

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Thrown violently back into the real world, Selene heard the final words of the terrified Thea's warning, "—do whatever you're about to do!"

Stumbling and falling backward, Selene crashed heavily into the cushioned armchair, her mind and heart racing as adrenaline pumped through her body...