

Arc 1 - Chapter 123 - Madness

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

Having prepared herself for this moment for almost two days straight, as well as during the duration of Thea's emotional outburst, Selene nevertheless took a moment to once again centre herself. The raw emotion that had spilled forth from Thea had been taxing, even for someone as experienced as Selene.

There was another emotion inside of her, however, one that far eclipsed the exhaustion she felt: Excitement.

It was finally her turn in this conversation; her time to actually do what she came for rather than simply be a trauma dump target for Thea—as valuable as that could be to a person.

Meeting Thea's unnaturally still gaze, Selene finally began to speak. "Thank you for trusting me with all of this, Thea. By the sound of it, it has not been easy at all. You're absolutely in the right to be angry about a lot of this. Just hearing about it second-hand from you made my blood boil in some cases, so I really can't imagine what it was like to actually go through that yourself."

The first step was to reassure Thea that her feelings were valid; for all feelings were valid, no matter their origin.

Feelings and emotions were natural consequences of how humans perceived the world, yet many people still believed that showing these emotions would, somehow, invalidate their opinions in the eyes of others.

Selene had long learned that the truth was quite the opposite: Emotions *were* the truth.

No matter whether someone felt hurt by words that weren't meant to hurt, or felt sad about something that wasn't meant to be sad; the intent behind it didn't matter to the outcome.

Emotions were the outcome; the truth of an act as seen through a subjective lens.

They never lied and they were never wrong; they might simply be misguided and in need of shepherding.

"I have indeed received access to the assessment recordings and some basic briefing on what has happened around you since we last spoke back in the Cube Trial, including the reasons for why we have found ourselves here together," Selene continued, making sure to affirm Thea's thoughts and hopes.

Self-esteem was crucial for someone like Thea in her current situation.

Even if she hadn't been briefed, Selene would have found a way to spin the reality in a way that would affirm Thea's beliefs—not lie, of course, but make sure that the words *sounded* like she had been briefed enough to give her the answers she was looking for.

“The whole series of events that has led to you feeling the way you do is beyond regrettable, no matter how anyone might look at it. You are right to feel betrayed, considering what was promised and who it was promised by, especially considering you kept your end of the deal the entire way through, despite your doubts, fears, and questions. It is a remarkable show of will, Thea. Don’t let anyone take that from you, no matter what.”

Selene was metaphorically holding her hand over the flame, drawing out the moment where she’d have to break the news and answer Thea’s question directly.

It wasn’t to torment the girl, of course, but rather because she was in a position of power for the first time in this entire conversation—a position of power that she needed to let Thea believe she wasn’t in.

When Thea posed the question, the natural instinct was to assume that the questioner was in command; but in this instance, the answer was the actual point of power, not the question.

So Selene needed to hold the answer back just long enough to simultaneously build a minimum level of rapport with Thea while she was still hanging on her every word, waiting for the answer she so desperately needed, before she could give away that tool.

Without that rapport, any attempts at continued talks were unlikely to be successful.

The biggest issue Selene faced right now, however, was the unnatural stillness that had grasped Thea’s entire body.

There was not a single change in her demeanour, not a single twitch of a muscle or even a blink; she was simply still like a statue—no micro-expressions for Selene to read, no way to gauge how far she could push.

The only reason she hadn’t called in a medical team yet was that she could still see Thea’s eyes attentively following her every word; the cold anger behind them was still alive as ever.

“I had several conversations with Major Quinn earlier today, and you came up frequently during our discussions about the post-assessment wrap-up. She wanted me to express her sincerest apologies for the mistakes that have been made. She also wanted to be here to say so in person, but regulations prevent her from doing so—only psychologists like myself are allowed into the post-assessment rooms.

"However, she wanted me to extend an invitation for a one-on-one talk with her once we are done here. She feels responsible for many of the difficulties you've faced and wants to address any questions or concerns you might have that I cannot answer. In case you weren't aware, Major Quinn is technically your direct superior officer, which is why she feels a strong sense of accountability for your experience."

This one was a bit of a heavy gamble, but one that Selene didn’t mind taking—she wasn’t the one putting herself in the line of fire, after all.

Major Quinn had offered to help in any way during their talks, so Selene had suggested using the Major as a potential scapegoat for Thea's undirected anger.

Being angry at an entire faction wasn't conducive to any sort of healing, as Thea needed a tangible target for her anger.

By giving her one, in this case, Major Quinn, Selene could facilitate a reconciliation with the greater faction as a whole and work through the anger step-by-step.

Adding phrases like "offering her sincerest apologies" was meant to gently prod Thea into channelling that anger toward the person who had offered it. There was nothing more meaningless than an apology delivered through someone else, after all.

Selene watched Thea closely, looking for any sign of how she was processing this information, but all she saw was the same attentiveness and cold anger in the girl's eyes.

"I think it is quite remarkable how much—" Selene began anew, but Thea's quiet interruption stopped her mid-sentence.

"Selene."

Thea's voice echoed through Selene's mind like a thunderclap, despite its neutral and quiet tone. Perhaps it was exactly *because* of that neutrality that it felt so very unsettling.

It wasn't an angry interruption, nor did it convey discontent.

It was so thoroughly neutral in every conceivable way, from the tone to the single word just being her name, that it sent a wave of dread down Selene's spine.

She had held her hand above the fire for too long, and it had briefly licked her palm to remind her of the danger.

"The reason the UHF has not provided the information you were lacking inside the assessment, Thea, is that they *forgot*," Selene finally answered the question honestly.

She needed to be entirely truthful here, for there would be no point otherwise.

"To elaborate a bit, as simply forgetting sounds rather ridiculous, no matter how true it is: The recruitment drive you are a part of ended up in a very unfortunate situation where the quarterly assessments were just around the corner when you were all integrated. That meant the UHF members aboard the Sovereign and its sister ships only had about a week to get *every single* Recruit up to speed with what it meant to be an Integrated Marine.

"Your profile, since the Cube Trial, has had a Black-Level Lock on it as a result of a single Major's overreach, meaning that nobody aboard the Sovereign was able to get any real information on what happened during your Cube Trial—mainly the Focus Overdraws you dealt with inside of them. As a result, that aspect of conversation never came up until you were already inside the assessment and did it again, almost resulting in your potential death."

Selene continued to talk, giving brief pauses for Thea to potentially interject, but the girl simply listened, her eyes still as attentive as before.

“When the brass made their deal with you, they also requested the transfer of one of the highest-ranked Psykers in the entire Faction to the Sovereign, to provide you with a comprehensive and all-encompassing rundown and education about all things psychic. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints, that Psyker hadn’t arrived by the time you went into the assessment.

“For the brass and the commanding officers aboard the ship, however, the general thought process was that the issue was dealt with, as a result of the transfer. After all, they had an expert en route to brief you on everything, so there was no further need to do anything extra. As a result, your case fell to the wayside and was forgotten until shortly after the assessment began and you started showing unprecedented levels of psychic acumen.”

Selene drew from her countless hours of expertise in delivering bad news, breaking it down into manageable parts to lessen the overall impact. She knew that inundating patients with detailed information could help soften the blow.

“The commanding officers and the brass simply fell into a routine they had run through thousands of times before. They were checking off mark after mark of their usual procedures, ensuring the massive influx of new Marines was ready for the assessment. Amid all this, you, as the complete outlier and unprecedented person that you are, were unfortunately overlooked.

“Mind you, this isn’t an excuse. Do not misunderstand me here. It’s merely to elaborate on *why* and *how* it all happened, so that you can accept this answer for the truth that it is, as unbelievable and unfortunate as it may be. There was no malicious intent behind this; no greater plan to keep you in the dark and risk your life; no actual thought behind it all—which ended up being the whole problem, really.”

Selene waited for a moment, observing Thea’s eyes still following her, clearly expecting more. Taking a deep breath, she continued, adding one last crucial bit.

“That’s what I gathered from the reports and briefings I’ve received. I personally double-checked with thirteen of the Majors aboard the Sovereign—all that I could reach in the short time I’ve had on the ship—as well as Captain Cross himself and another two dozen Lieutenants to confirm this information. As embarrassing and unfathomable as it is to believe, the answer is just as simple as: They forgot.

“I could try to defend them, say they had no way of knowing you would be such an outlier, because you really are, Thea—completely and utterly unprecedented within the UHF. I could tell you the stats on the few prior Tier 0 Gate openings and tell you how impossible it is for you to do so in your first assessment, or appeal to you to see their side of the story; but I won’t do that. Because, let’s be entirely honest here, it doesn’t matter, does it? This should never have happened in any sane universe. In any functioning Faction, this should never have happened.

“You put your trust in them; far more than what was ever expected or could have ever reasonably been asked, and yet you were repaid by being forgotten. That is as sick a joke as any I have ever heard and one that no amount of explanation, background information, or ‘unprecedentedness’ could ever turn into anything but an insult.”

Selene paused, letting her words sink in, hoping that Thea would see the sincerity and gravity in her explanation. The room felt pregnant with the silence that followed, but Selene knew she had to give Thea the space to process everything she had just heard.

Selene kept a close eye on the girl, who still sat as still as a statue, absorbing the answers she had been seeking for almost a month.

But she also knew the explanation was utterly and thoroughly unsatisfying.

An unsatisfying answer was often worse than none at all, but there was nothing she could do about it in this case. She could have tried talking Thea out of asking for any answer, but how would that realistically have helped anyone? The girl would have lived with resentment forever, with no real closure possible.

At the very least, an unsatisfying answer still offered that: Closure.

It was the best that Selene could hope for in this instance—that Thea would accept it as the ludicrous and horrendous mistake that it had been, and that she could somehow work through it; have the UHF make concessions, offer additional reparations, and promise to do better in the future.

It would take quite a while, no doubt, for Thea's trust had been irreparably misused and hurt as a result of sheer negligence, but it wasn't impossible—not if Selene had the time and space to fully work her magic.

She hadn't been slaving away as a psychologist dealing with newly integrated, unruly Marines for the better part of four decades just to get stumped by something like this, after all.

The tension in the room was downright crushing, and Selene could feel the weight of Thea's internal struggle without even needing to look at her. She had seen it countless times before—the moment when a patient teetered on the edge of acceptance or despair.

This was always a major point of contention in the discussions with her peers; whether one should intervene and guide or let the patient work through it themselves. Many studies had been done, but none were ever found conclusive enough to judge one way or another.

Selene, however, believed that it was important to let the patient handle this crucial moment on their own.

While it might lead to them spiralling into despair; if she simply helped guide the patient through it, then the patient would never truly be able to accept that they had dealt with it entirely. They'd always be left with a feeling of inadequacy, and that was something that Selene didn't wish on her patients, even if she had to risk them falling into despair.

At the end of the day, she would be there to help them climb out of the pit, if it came to it.

Selene remained still, her eyes never leaving Thea's face, silently conveying her unwavering support and readiness to assist, should the girl ask for it.

Finally, after what felt like a small eternity, Thea's eyes met hers again, and she simply asked, "They forgot? That's it? They simply... didn't think about telling me because they were busy with other things and thought somebody else was handling it?"

"Yes, that's all there is to it. They simply forgot," Selene replied firmly, once again underscoring the honesty in her voice.

It really was the truth, even if she wished it wasn't. It honestly would have been easier to explain a cruel ploy, a malicious superior wanting to ruin her for her talents, or even to explain potential enemy sabotage—but none of them were true.

It really was as stupidly simple as the commanding officer and the brass forgetting.

Selene watched as Thea's hands ever so slowly moved and gently cupped her face.

She decided to look away, remembering that the girl hadn't been very emotional back at the Cube Trial, to the point that she had to physically intervene to get her to open up about the emotions that had been building.

The girl had come a long way, being able to let out her emotions like this—the anger, the frustration, the hurt, and now, the thoroughly unsatisfying nature of emptiness.

Then, Thea made a noise, a first, almost hiccup-like sound that always precluded tears.

It felt utterly wrong, but what about Thea's current state had ever really been right? Her speech, her tone, her entire body's functions were all wrong in the strange psychic state she was in right now, so it was only natural that her crying would sound slightly altered as well.

The sound repeated once, twice, until suddenly, it erupted into a full-on cacophony of sounds that Selene failed to place at first.

Her head snapped towards Thea in horror and found the girl leaned over, her body convulsing in spasms over and over again, like a daemon was trying to burst forth from her very skin.

The sounds she made were downright alien until Selene's brain suddenly caught up.

'She's... laughing...?!'

Thea was cackling, laughing and having trouble staying upright in the chair, tears streaming down her face as she did while her body continued to spasm in uncontrolled laughter.

At first, the sound had been hollow, but it had quickly morphed into a strange warmth that felt downright alien in the room, considering the previous cold that had enveloped the entire space.

Selene's thoughts simply ground to a halt, the reality of the situation catching her so thoroughly off-guard that her brain simply ceased to function.

'Thea... is laughing? But why...? That's not what should have happened...?'

She simply stared as the girl doubled over and completely lost herself in the moment, her laughter echoing off the walls and the broken shards and remnants of what had once been Selene's carefully crafted office.

To Selene's mind, the laughter sounded downright maddening, like the universe was tearing itself apart at the seams. It echoed inside her head like standing between the giant bells of the Grand Cathedral on Terra as they rang for a new galactic war.

But her eyes told a different story entirely: Thea really was laughing earnestly.

The maddening aspects were in her own mind, the disconnect between what she had expected reality to look like versus what she was now facing was driving *her* to the brink of momentary madness, *not* the girl.

Thea's laughter continued to echo throughout the room, only broken by her semi-successful attempts to breathe in between bouts of unadulterated, belly-cramping fits of hilarity.

"They—" Thea tried to articulate but was immediately overcome with another renewed bout of laughter.

She tried twice more until she finally managed to squeeze out an incredulous, "They fucking *forgot?!'*" between tear-filled attempts at breathing, that ended up more like groans of pain and wheezing at this stage.

Selene was at a loss for words.

She had no idea how to handle this situation; no plan for how to move forward.

This was complete and utter madness.

Thea should not have been laughing; it made no sense.

The girl had thought herself betrayed, she had been hurt, she had been used and discarded like a broken toy. And all she had been offered as an explanation was that she had been forgotten about. Not nearly enough to heal or tide over the girl's emotions.

Thea should have been a wreck, a complete and utter mess that needed to be put together again.

That's what Selene was here for.

She had never been under the impression that she could save Thea from falling apart; to save her from breaking into a million pieces. She had entered the room with the knowledge that Thea *would* break and that she had to guide the fault lines into a shape that would be easy enough for her to put together afterwards—to glue together again and make her whole.

This? This laughter? This uncaring, downright nihilistic enjoyment?

This was madness. Pure and utter mania.

But the worst part of all, the part that truly made Selene's blood freeze in her veins at the sheer impossibility of it all, was that Thea was *not* mad.

Selene knew madness.

She had faced it many times before.

Marines who had lost themselves and given into nihilism. Marines who had lost everything and whose emotions had simply overcome them, turning them into husks. Marines who had sacrificed everything to the cause until their minds had finally broken.

She had met them all and many more.

She had personally put down a great many of them at their own behest, had guided even more to a place of eternal inner peace and, on rare, special occasions, managed to bring a few back to the real world.

But what she had in front of her right now was something else entirely.

Thea *wasn't* mad.

She was fully, completely, and utterly lucid.

This wasn't mania; it wasn't nihilism; it wasn't the breakdown that Selene had known *would* happen.

It was simply laughter.

Laughter filled with nothing but elation, relief, and humour.

Its very existence was mocking Selene's experience, her expertise, her sacrifices over the years, in a way that wasn't malicious.

It simply *did*.

It was like the universe itself was showing Selene, that she had so much more to learn than she had ever thought necessary, for the girl simply refused to follow convention, precedent and experience—even hers.

She had thought the brass were fools, the commanders of the Sovereign negligent, the entire UHF involved in this whole mess utterly incompetent.

But the laughter in front of her, that rang through her mind and shook loose her preconceived notions of what her mission was inside this room, told her that no, it was just that Thea defied expectations on a level that made it downright impossible to anticipate what would happen once she got involved.

The laughter didn't represent the madness of the girl.

It represented the madness of the universe around her, which simply failed to keep up...