

## Arc 1 - Chapter 122 - Why?

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

Swallowing hard, Selene maintained her carefully crafted mask of outward sympathy, righteous anger, and slight pity.

Over decades as a psychologist, she had found this expression immensely useful.

It was crucial to share your patient's righteous anger—and it was *a/ways* righteous, regardless of the actual cause—while also signalling that anger was not the ultimate solution.

A hint of pity, used sparingly and mixed with outward sympathy, could blunt and cushion someone's anger just as effectively as a cold compress on a headache.

Selene wanted to intervene, to steer the conversation into a different area and let the flames die down. However, she knew that speaking up now would not help her case in the slightest.

Thea wasn't finished with her story, and Selene's job was to listen and understand—so listen and understand she would.

"It was Major Quinn who was there, you know?" Thea continued, standing up from the cushioned chair without realising it. Selene knew this was an involuntary action, caused by the overbearing energy coursing through the girl's very veins.

"She was there, asking us to trust the UHF implicitly. I knew something bad was going to happen; Precog," Thea pointed at her head. "If not for my father's words, who had mirrored Major Quinn's bid for trust, I would have bolted then and there. But I didn't. I put my trust in the UHF, just like I had been asked to."

Selene could see Thea's usually so perfectly calm hands, the very tools of a sniper such as her, *shake* at the memory as she continued to recall it. The memory clearly haunted her.

"I was so, so scared, Selene..."

Her voice was weak, wavering with every word. The pure terror was downright palpable, wrenching Selene's heart.

"My Psychic Senses, which I didn't even know about at the time, were guaranteeing me that I was going to die; urging me to run away, to hide... I knew what was going to happen seconds before the beam even started. I felt the heat atomize my body moments before it even got close to me. Every single cell in my body was crying, yelling, *screaming* at me to run. But I didn't. I trusted the UHF's words; trusted my father's..."

Her words trailed off, leaving a heavy silence hanging in the air around them. The silence didn't last long, however, as a cold, hollow chuckle formed in Thea's throat.

“Then I woke up from the nightmare—or so I thought. On the Sovereign, I got a new, more powerful body and was officially welcomed into the UHF. I was put in Alpha Squad; can you believe that? Me? A random rat from an undercity in Alpha Squad of all available options?! It was a dream come true, even despite the assholes; despite the people who hated me for the simple fact that I wasn’t born on a different planet, that my mother hadn’t survived my birth.”

Thea’s words poured forth like a dam breaking, gaining momentum with each passing second as she recalled her early days in the UHF for Selene.

The psychologist listened intently to every inflection, every word spoken, every expression revealed, and every hidden meaning exposed. It was all going to be crucial in trying to guide Thea back to a more stable state of mind—one that could be reasoned with and healed.

Selene wanted to hug the girl, to cry with her for all the ways she had been wronged.

But that wasn’t her role.

She needed to listen and understand; to be the rock against which Thea’s tsunami of emotions could crash again and again until one of them finally broke.

She just hoped her rock was stronger than the waves of Thea’s rage.

“I really loved it here. I even managed to score high on a shooting range and get a pretty massive bonus before the first assessment—a major advantage, I thought!” Thea smiled at the memory, but the smile was lopsided, *wrong*. Something fundamental had broken, making it impossible for her to genuinely remember it as a good thing.

“And then I was offered a *deal*,” Thea continued, her voice flipping from warm reminiscence to an ice-cold blade that cut through the air. “Turns out, Selene, that my Attribute makeup is special in some way. I don’t know all the details, I’m sure, but it’s got to do with my Perception and Resolve stats. They’re exceedingly high for a Recruit, and the UHF brass figured I was the perfect candidate for a bit of a test.”

The way she phrased it, Selene realised, made it sound like the UHF had used her like a lab rat, with no regard for her feelings or safety. Based on the information she had, Selene couldn’t deny it either.

“Naturally, they didn’t make it sound like that, no, no. Not at all. I was special, you see? The only one that could save the UHF from their own ignorance. But don’t worry, Selene, it was all my own choice,” Thea chuckled, but the sound was wrong once again; it was more like dry crying than any expression of joy or elation.

“As if a new Recruit would be able to actually make any informed decisions on the matter. As if a new Recruit would have any recourse against a fucking Councillor appearing on the ship in a flash of light—like one of the gods of old. As if a new Recruit would have any chance to actually say ‘no’ when offered preferential treatment and told that it was only because they were special; only because they were the *only one* that could do it.”

The air around Selene turned colder with every word, and she felt pinpricks needling her skin as the temperature continued to fall, becoming more dangerous with each passing moment.

Her body screamed at her to move, to react, to stop whatever was hurting it, but her ironclad mind held her instincts in check. She couldn't flinch, couldn't retreat, couldn't show weakness in the face of Thea's trauma.

If she did, she would lose all rapport in the girl's eyes.

Not consciously, of course, for Thea was too kind a soul to think that showing weakness in the face of what was happening was bad. But subconsciously.

Subconsciously, the girl would never trust her again, would never trust herself to be vulnerable around her, to be angry, to really let her emotions run free without holding back.

And that was something Selene couldn't afford, no matter the cost.

No matter the pain, she would not let Thea down—for somebody had to be the rock, lest the girl drowned in her own waves.

Thinking about it, however, she realised immediately that her previous thought had been wrong.

*"Somebody"* was incorrect.

It had to be her.

Thea was her patient. Her work. Her responsibility.

Anybody else might have gotten it wrong.

"And so, naturally, I agreed. As if I truly had any other choice," Thea's voice brought Selene's attention back from her own mind, her resolve stronger than ever to see things through, no matter the outcome.

"I made a deal with the UHF, Selene. With the very Faction that I had wanted to be a part of my whole life. The very Faction that had somehow sent down an angel to save me when I needed it most. When I was cold, starving, and dying as a child in some backwater's undercity. An old, retired Marine that had saved my life from the very Faction that I was now getting to serve like nobody else could."

Thea's eyes met Selene's for the first time since her rant had started, and Selene almost faltered in her resolve; almost flinched and looked away, for the emotions inside of them were too heavy to bear.

But she somehow persevered once more, pouring every fibre of her being into keeping pace with the raging storm, holding the girl's gaze with her own.

"I thought I was dreaming. Like it was too good to be true... And it turns out I was right on both counts; in a way. I truly *had* been dreaming, but the dream turned out to be a nightmare. The deal was a farce, the reasons for which I can't even begin to understand..."

Thea became more animated as she continued, her body doing as much of the talking as her mouth did, as she paced back and forth in front of Selene.

“I was to become a Psyker. That was the deal. Put all of my points into Perception and Resolve, unlock the Psychic Attribute and relay whatever Class information I was offered by the Allbright System... Naturally, it wasn't without risks or sacrifices. I'd need to up my Vitality quite a lot and there's only really one way to do that, which I am sure you know.”

The implied, persistent torture was not lost on Selene, of course.

It wasn't a rare occurrence by any stretch to offer it to Recruits that had reached their limits prior to the end of the year; but to essentially make it mandatory was something entirely else.

“But that was fine. I could handle a bit of pain, if it meant helping the very Faction that had saved and shaped my life since I wanted to remember. My father had often spoken about the UHF and his time there, although never too in-depth—so I guess in a way, I always believed him to be a part of it still, even if he had retired. I believed that they shared the same values that he had...”

Momentarily, the girl's rage had abated markedly, her voice softening drastically.

The moment she talked about her adoptive father, it was as if the earlier anger had never existed—something that Selene could potentially use to help the girl. An emotional connection to family and a carefully crafted appeal to recognize it was a tried and tested way of blunting other emotions.

As quickly as the rage had abated, however, it returned with a vengeance, the sheer weight of it feeling like a physical presence in the room.

“Regardless of the risks, I agreed. I thought that the Councillor laying out everything like this was a concession, to make sure I made an informed decision... It was not. It was merely a ploy to make it seem like I had been informed, I now realise. To get me to agree, to risk myself in this way.”

Thea stilled and turned towards Selene, their eyes meeting once again.

“Do you know what it *means* to become a Psyker, Selene? To invest all of your points into Perception and Resolve? To glimpse what lies beyond the known world?”

For the first time in a while, Selene had a turn in this conversation; not one she could exercise, but a rhetorical question on Thea's behalf, a bid for control, to make herself feel less helpless and lost. Thea knew the answer before she asked the question; knew what Selene would say, but asked it anyway.

And Selene would play her part perfectly.

Giving a neutral nod, she answered, “I do, although I don't know all the specifics or the more in-depth mechanics of it all.”

She needed to be neutral here, to remain neither too friendly and sympathetic as to seem condescending, nor too hostile and confrontational. She only spoke the words necessary, ceding her turn back to Thea once again as was expected of her.

She did not include any further information; didn't explain that she had unlocked her own Psychic Attribute, seen the horror of the Awakening, nor that she had received her Psychic 101 and gotten the rundown of all the things the UHF deemed important for new Psykers to know.

For doing so would have invariably ended in tragedy.

Thea's grin turned predatory as she stepped closer towards Selene, and for a moment, Selene thought she had messed up. But the logical part of her brain told her that this was all still within her calculations—this reaction was not outside what she had expected.

"Then let me paint you a picture," Thea continued, now mere inches away from Selene's face. The breath hitting her face was like a blizzard in the coldest of winters, threatening to freeze her eyes shut with every word spoken.

"I followed the UHF's words to the very letter, investing all my points into Perception and Resolve, not knowing that these were the exact two Attributes that governed your recognition of the Gate. Why, you'd ask? Because the UHF hadn't *bothered* to inform me of it. Hadn't *bothered* to let me know that my natural psychic powers and high Resolve would practically *force* me to overdraw my Focus and that it could actually kill me for real inside the DDS. Hadn't *bothered* to tell me, '*Hey Thea, by the way, be careful when you increase your Attributes, you might accidentally stumble upon this lil' miniscule problem called the fucking Awakening.*'"

Abruptly, Thea spun away from Selene and began pacing again.

Selene took the short moment where the girl wasn't focused on her to take a deep breath, trying to regain some of the lost feeling in her face that had been numbed by the freezing cold.

"As a natural consequence, I *Awakened*," Thea continued, stopping dead in her tracks as she said the word "Awakened."

"Supposedly every Psyker has a different experience, or so I've been told. Not by the UHF, mind you. Of course not. By a Private called Zach, a slightly more experienced Psyker than I. I had to search for him myself, in order to claw some answers out of the very fabric that was meant to support me. Because it would have been too fucking easy to sit me down for an hour and give me a rundown, I guess."

Suddenly clawing and swiping at the air as if trying to dispel a swarm of hungry mosquitoes, Thea shook her head violently.

"*Not important. Focus...*" she whispered to herself, and a cold shiver ran down Selene's spine.

'*She's losing control...*' Selene realised in abject horror, understanding the severe repercussions if Thea lost herself completely.

The problem was, it wasn't her turn yet.

Any attempt to intervene prematurely could set Thea off even more.

'*Hold on, Thea. I'm here for you... Just a bit longer, please,*' Selene pleaded internally, genuinely scared for the first time since entering the room. She wasn't scared for herself, as she had set aside her personal existence at the door, but for Thea.

"The Awakening was... indescribable. I would love to share it with you, make you understand, but... it's difficult. There were visions, each one more horrific than the last. Visions of death, of suffering, of unspeakable horrors and... impossible things. A great pair of eyes staring down at me... my own, in a way. Merely observing the one that observed, forever..."

Selene noted the choice of words in the first part, "*make* you understand," not "help you understand" or "allow you to understand." It was a forceful proposition, giving a terrifying insight into Thea's current psyche.

'*Please, Thea,*' she thought to herself, keeping her face in the same range of emotion she had started with: Neutral, open, slightly pitying, and sympathetic. '*You're stronger than you think... Please, fight it.*'

Thea's eyes darted over to her abruptly, a feverish glint in them now. "I survived, somehow. I don't know how long I was there... If you can even be inside a vision, that is. I have no idea because nobody has talked to me about it at all, even after it happened. Kara was the only one I could confide in."

At the mention of her squadmate, Thea's eyes regained a significant portion of clarity and warmth, almost like when she talked about her adoptive father.

Selene noted the change immediately and internally breathed a sigh of relief.

'*Thank the Emperor... She managed to make an emotional connection to at least one other person in the UHF,*' she thought, almost crossing her fists over her chest in worship but stopping herself before she could move. '*Hope, however foolish. I will need to thank this Kara in some way in the future, if possible...*'

"Kara helped me so much... Always there for me, making sure I was okay," Thea continued, straying off the previous topic and reminiscing about her squadmate.

A thoroughly positive evolution in Selene's eyes. Even if only for a moment, the interruption was worth more than its weight in Galactium for Thea's mental state.

"She kept me alive during my first Focus Overdraw and helped calm me down whenever I had an episode with the Psychic world. I owe her so much..."

For Selene, those words jostled a memory about the assessment's report. *'This "Kara" is Recruit Karania Faulkner, then, of the same squad. Noted.'*

Thea stayed silent for a short moment, looking confused, as if she lost track of what she was talking about. Then, she shook her head and seemed to refocus on what she wanted to say and continued.

"Following my Awakening, I was too scared to open my Gate; too scared to use my powers the way that I should have been able to. I was handicapped, throughout the *entire* damned assessment. The very same assessment that I was told was all-important... How is that fair, Selene? How could the UHF tell me, on one hand, that they'd support me unconditionally and that the first assessment was going to be the most important one we'd likely have, and then rip my arms out and push me down a canyon?"

Their eyes met once again, but this time, Selene remained silent.

It was a true rhetorical question, not intended to be answered.

She could tell by the way that Thea's chest was heaving, the air being drawn in to continue her rant, and the way that her eyes were cold and hard—far from the momentary softness that had accompanied the earlier call for an answer.

"And then we walked into two enemy Psykers... We had no idea what was happening. It was so fucking terrifying. Desmond died, just like that, without us having any idea of what was going on. We scrambled, we fought, and ultimately we won. But everyone died; it was just me... again. Nobody had explained anything about Psykers at all; we didn't even really think about meeting any in the assessment as a result... And then I died, too.

"We failed our very first major mission as a result. Once again, because we were lacking intel. I don't know if other squads faced the same issues of not knowing fuck-all, but we definitely did—I did. That was when I said that enough was enough. The lack of intel had handicapped me for the majority of the assessment, and the UHF clearly was not interested in keeping up their end of the fucking deal."

*'And that's the crux of it all, isn't it?' Selene thought to herself, sympathy suffusing her mind and body. 'You feel betrayed because you were owed answers to all these questions before they could become questions in the first place. Because the brass promised to support you and pushed you into this role... Instead, you had to go out yourself and search for answers after suffering consequences not of your own making—but you still tried. You still tried to uphold your end of the bargain, despite it all, because you **trusted** them. Just like you were taught to.'*

"So I met Zach, and he shared all the knowledge he could at the time... I still have to thank him. Again, rather. I thanked him more than once, but it doesn't feel enough. He was the only one, Selene. The only one who bothered to sit down and talk to me about this. And then... I hurt him."

Selene's eyes widened, her facade cracking for the first time during the entire conversation at the sudden revelation. Her heart began to race, and despite her best efforts to remain composed, she knew that Thea's high Perception would likely pick up on her distress.

*'Fuck!'*

Selene rarely swore, but no other word could adequately capture her thoughts in that moment.

*'Thea never hurt Zach in the reports and recordings I saw. This isn't part of what I was told, which only leaves one option...'*

She left the last words unspoken, hoping against hope that the AI hadn't caught onto her realisation. Maybe if she stayed quiet, even within her own mind, it would all turn out fine.

Fortunately, Thea seemed too absorbed in her own story to notice the turmoil within Selene.

The girl simply continued.

"It wasn't on purpose, of course. And I barely remember anything, but I'm 100% certain it was me that hurt him. I needed answers, and I wanted to use my points like the UHF had told me to—Perception and Resolve, always those two. Zach said it would be fine to use all my points... He thought I had maybe a level's worth, maybe two at most. I didn't. I had way more... But he was prepared; he had a knockout injector in case I lost control over my Gate—he had explained, you see? Explained how it all worked, how dangerous it could be."

Thea's voice wavered, a mixture of guilt and frustration. She could see the pain in her eyes, the self-recrimination threatening to consume her.

"I woke up and he was already bandaging himself," Thea continued, her voice turning pained as she relived the emotions of that moment. "He explained that something strange had happened, like some sort of frost had shattered the injector in his hands. He asked me if I remembered anything, but... I couldn't. I couldn't even remember hurting him, Selene... I was left with more questions, but this time, I had even hurt somebody who tried to help me because I didn't know any better. It could all have been avoided if the UHF had just done their part, don't you think?"

She looked at Selene with a mixture of pleading and pain, her eyes searching for validation, for some sense of understanding. The weight of her confession hung heavily in the air between them.

Selene had managed to calm herself down, accepting the inevitable when Thea began speaking of events that she hadn't been aware of.

In a way, she was thankful for it.

It meant she wouldn't have to live with the personal anguish and confusion Thea had experienced.

It was a cowardly thought, she knew, but that was okay—she wouldn't remember it anyway.



"It is possible, yes," Selene replied, playing her part as expected.

They were nearing the finale; she could tell.

Her turn was soon upon them.

The most dangerous part of the conversation had likely passed already, eased over by the memory of a squadmate. But she couldn't let down her guard just yet—the mission was simply too important to risk by being impatient.

"I thought... I thought after that, it would all be over. I knew a bit more about the Psychic stuff, I could function properly, actually show what I can do for the first time in the entire assessment," Thea continued almost immediately, her eyes reflecting Selene's reply with a hint of warmth and appreciation.

"And it worked. Alpha Squad worked together like never before after the main assault. We were unstoppable. Desmond's scouting and relaying of information had become second nature to him. Isabella's firepower had reached new heights. Lucas was an immovable wall of safety for all of us throughout it all. Corvus seemed to be on a roll with orders and strategies, testing out new ways of engaging the enemy with great success. And Karania, of course, was as unfathomably good as she always is—I have no idea how she does it."

Thea's eyes softened with a hidden warmth behind the glaciers of her raging emotions.

There was a light there, faint but steady, serving as the anchor that Selene needed to succeed in her mission.

"And then I had another vision, of sorts. Another me, telling me exactly what would happen and that I should trust them," Thea continued, spitting the word "trust" like a curse.

"I was half-inclined to agree, for the consequences... She promised I'd die if I didn't listen. But the risks were far too great, you see? If I die in the assessment, it sucks, but it's a lot less problematic than any Psyker-related incidents."

Selene nodded in agreement, understanding the gravity of Thea's decision. Given the girl's knowledge at the time, the way it had all played out was the only rational and logical choice the squad could have made.

"And then I died... Again. To more psychic bullshit. Because once again, I was missing information. Could I have listened to the other me? Had I been able to open my Gate like that without risking anything, like Zach had implied? But why open my Gate in that situation? How did that make sense? I didn't know... Couldn't know. Because nobody told me anything. I completed none of the major objectives in the assessment. And for what reason? Because I was set up to fail from the very start. How is this fair?"

Finally, Thea sat back down in her chair, her eyes locking onto Selene's once more.

Behind them, Selene saw a terrifying mixture of emotions, but this time they were different.

It wasn't the uncontrolled rage that had greeted her when she first entered the room, or the moments where anger had spiralled out of control.

No, this time, the emotions were *focused*.

There was a determination behind the barely restrained rage now, a drive to find answers, to right a perceived wrong through any means necessary—and that, in itself, was beyond terrifying.

"I know you've been briefed, Selene. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here," Thea continued, her words scarily neutral and level.

The sheer absence of emotion in them, the neutral state they were presented in, made Selene's blood freeze in her body. Considering the amount of willpower it would take to present a calm front like this, spoke volumes about Thea's raw potential as a Psyker and the devastation it would cause if she let go of that very will.

"So... tell me, then. Why? Why did this happen? Why did it all play out like this? What purpose did this all serve? Was this some sort of game from the brass? Am I just going to be thrown out of an airlock and marked as a failed test? Will they just throw me in a cell somewhere, far away from any prying eyes, to get the information they seek out of me? I'm sure they could; it's not like anybody cares about a random Recruit. Sure, Alpha Squad will probably say something, but they're just Recruits. Just random dreck like myself that doesn't matter in any capacity."

A slight hint of the earlier freezing cold entered her voice as she repeated the main part of her questions.

"Why wasn't I allowed to show what I could do, Selene? Why did the UHF betray me...?"