Arc 1 - Chapter 126 - Dazzling

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

Selene's mind raced, her thoughts scrambling to make sense of the abrupt end of her [Echo Trauma] and the terrifying encounter with Æht.

The entity she had faced was unlike anything she had ever encountered—something she couldn't have prepared for, something beyond her comprehension. The sheer power it had radiated when it revealed its true nature had nearly shattered her mindscape without the need for physical force.

It was a raw, overwhelming presence that had left her shaken to the very core.

Yet, despite the violence—the piercing of her throat, the snapping of her neck—Selene couldn't shake the feeling that Æht hadn't acted out of malice.

The way it had ended her simulation felt almost… *merciful*.

As though Æht had been sparing her from something far worse, a fate tied to the unravelling of the [Echo Trauma] under the weight of its true nature. It was a thought that both unsettled and confused her, leaving her with far more questions than answers.

But now, back in the real world, there was no time to dwell on the encounter at all.

Thea stood before her, concern etched on her face, her steps hesitant as she slowly moved closer, clearly wanting to help but not really knowing how. Selene knew she couldn't let Thea see the cracks in her own composure—not if she still intended on getting the girl out of this situation in as good of a condition as she could muster.

'*I don't have time to figure out what in the Emperor's cursed toenail all of that was right now,*' Selene resolved, swallowing hard, forcing herself to push the fear and confusion deep down.

She needed to regain control, to project the calm, authoritative presence Thea needed from her.

With a steadying breath, she rose from the armchair, willing her trembling hands and legs to obey her command.

"Ahh, don't worry, Thea. I'm absolutely fine, just had a brief dizzy spell from one of my Abilities," she said, her voice smooth and controlled. She quickly reached out to Thea, hands extended to create a reassuring distance, subtly keeping them from getting too close.

Despite the turmoil raging inside her, Selene knew she had to maintain the facade of stability and competence.

Thea *needed* that.

And Selene, now more than ever, also needed to believe she could still provide it.

At the same time, keeping Thea at arm's length served multiple purposes—ones she couldn't ignore, no matter how much she wanted to.

Firstly, it was to conceal just how tense she had to be to keep her body from betraying her with uncontrollable shakes or outright collapse. Her nerves were frayed, her thoughts a tangled mess, but she couldn't let Thea see any of that. The girl needed someone strong, someone stable, and Selene had to play that role, even if it took everything she had.

Secondly, Selene had noticed that Thea wasn't someone who welcomed physical closeness, at least not with someone she barely knew. The girl's guarded nature had been apparent from the start, and Selene was determined to respect that boundary, to make Thea as comfortable as possible in this unsettling moment; even if it was Thea that was trying to help.

And lastly—though it was something Selene would never openly admit, not even under threat of torture—she was genuinely afraid of getting too close to Thea after what she had just experienced.

Whatever that Æht entity was, it was undeniably a part of Thea.

That much was now a horrifying truth in Selene's mind.

Her [Empathetic Resonance] was still locked onto the same cold, calculated emotions it had mirrored before the [Echo Trauma] incident, proving that Æht was still present, lurking somewhere just beneath the surface. It was impossible for Selene to gauge Thea's true mental state with her usual Abilities, leaving her vulnerable and thoroughly unnerved.

To divert Thea's attention away from her own internal struggle, Selene quickly shifted the focus back to the girl.

"What did you mean by that warning, by the way? Should I be concerned about something…?" Selene asked, keeping her voice steady even though her heart pounded heavily beneath the calm facade.

The question seemed to catch Thea off guard, and she froze mid-step, her expression faltering for a moment.

"Ah… There…" Thea stuttered, struggling to find her words. Selene, grateful for the brief respite, used the time to further steady her own frayed nerves. "Do you know about my Psychic Powers? I'd assume so, considering they let you in here."

Selene nodded, encouraging Thea to continue.

"Then yeah… I had a brief notion of you activating some kind of Ability—I'm guessing here—which led you to wildly lash out in panic… You kind of… Hit me by accident? Not that I blame you, of course! Whatever you did seemed thoroughly terrifying!"

Selene's eyes widened in shock. The idea of hitting a patient, even unintentionally, was utterly abhorrent to her. The mere thought of causing harm like that was beyond anything she considered acceptable.

Yet, if it hadn't been for Æht's way of ending the [Echo Trauma], along with the cryptic request to keep its presence hidden from Thea, Selene wasn't sure just how she *would* have processed everything.

Perhaps Thea's warning had indeed influenced her reaction, preventing her from completely losing control upon her abrupt return to the real world.

"Rest assured, Thea, I would never intentionally harm you—the very thought is unthinkable to me," Selene responded with a light incline of her head, aiming to convey both sincerity and authority without overplaying her hand. "I'm glad that whatever might have occurred in your vision didn't come to pass, and I truly appreciate the warning."

Thea now stood awkwardly between the two chairs, torn between wanting to help Selene and realising that the situation no longer called for it. Her uncertainty was obvious, her body language a mix of hesitation and concern.

Understanding Thea's predicament, Selene gestured towards the chair and offered a warm smile. "Please, take a seat, Thea. Let's continue where we left off before all of this—I apologise for the interruption. I was merely using an Ability to check on your overall mental state, to gauge how the assessment has impacted you. It's part of my post-assessment care, but I underestimated just how much you've been through. I ended up getting hit with more than I expected."

Selene let out a soft, fabricated giggle, lightly covering her mouth with her hand—a subtle move she often used to convey a sense of embarrassment and camaraderie.

It was one of her go-to strategies for putting people at ease, making them feel more comfortable and connected.

The explanation seemed to relax Thea, who returned Selene's smile and finally decided to sit down for the first time since Selene had entered the room.

To Selene, this was a significant win.

It meant she could continue with her primary mission: Helping Thea and figuring out how to reconcile the issues between her and the greater UHF.

Whether Æht was still present or not, Selene resolved to rely on her actual skills and experience, setting aside her Passive Abilities for the time being. It had been a while since she'd worked without them, but she was confident she could manage.

"To get back to the matter at hand," Selene began, her voice steady as she returned to the core issue. "As I mentioned previously, the reason you were sent into the assessment without any information is because the people responsible for disseminating that information simply forgot to do so. As ridiculous as that sounds, it is actually the truth, based on everything I've been able to gather."

She knew the importance of re-emphasizing key points, especially in emotionally charged situations like this one. It was essential that both of them were on the same page, minimizing any chance of misunderstanding. When emotions were running high, clarity was paramount.

“The UHF is fully aware of how unprofessional and downright unfair this was for you, especially since you were essentially handicapped throughout the entire assessment. Rest assured, they do not expect you to simply ‘forgive and forget,’ as some might suggest. The brass is prepared to offer concessions; but before we delve into that, I want to make sure you fully understand the situation.”

Selene paused for a moment, letting her words sink in. This wasn’t just about offering reparations; it was about making sure Thea knew what was on the table and why.

“These concessions are not intended to buy your forgiveness or to make you keep quiet. They are meant to fulfil the UHF’s part of the deal, a part that they have failed to uphold until now. They are, in essence, compensation for the UHF’s shortcomings, but they will not impact your ongoing deal with them in any way.

“Whatever concessions you choose to accept or deny, and even those offered without your explicit consent, are purely gestures of goodwill. They are attempts to rebuild the trust that has understandably been damaged between you and the UHF brass.”

Selene allowed a brief pause, giving Thea time to process everything.

Just as she prepared to continue, a message suddenly appeared in her vision, almost derailing her composed exterior. But she held firm, maintaining control over her body, suppressing the natural urge to react with alarm.

Thea didn’t seem to notice the digital text that appeared a mere metre in front of Selene, confirming that it was visible only to her.

The message was succinct but heavy with significance:

[Sovereign: Is the patient stable enough for a conversation about the concessions? Councillor Lumis would like to take part and directly offer them, if you deem it viable.]

Selene’s mind raced as she considered the implications.

She had to quickly assess Thea’s current mental state and determine whether involving Councillor Lumis—the very person indirectly responsible for much of Thea’s ordeal—would help or hinder the situation.

On one hand, Thea appeared to be surprisingly stable, given everything she had endured. Selene herself would have been furious if she had gone through what Thea had; she wouldn’t have been able to laugh it off as Thea had done.

Since her laughing fit, Thea had seemed content, almost at peace, and much more receptive to Selene’s words.

She was starting to resemble the girl Selene had first met over two years ago.

The girl Selene had first met over two years ago wouldn’t have minded Councillor Lumis being present.

But now, knowing that it was Lumis who had made the original deal and then seemingly forgotten about the UHF's responsibilities, Selene couldn't imagine this going over well with Thea. There was bound to be some tension between them.

The real question was whether that tension was a problem or an opportunity.

While Thea's current relaxed and amicable demeanour seemed positive on the surface, Selene knew better.

That behaviour was, in fact, unhealthy.

Thea *should* be feeling some tension, some anger—bottling up those emotions would only cause them to fester and grow. And it was Selene's job to make sure that didn't happen.

So, having Councillor Lumis present to stir the pot a little might actually be beneficial, as long as it didn't push Thea too far.

Selene reflected on Thea's behaviour since she had entered the room.

The girl hadn't displayed any explosive anger, not even a hint of the intense emotions that had apparently been present before Selene's arrival. To Selene, Thea didn't seem like the type to lash out impulsively, even with powers she didn't fully understand; unless pushed to do so.

But a bit of prodding at the mental seems should not count towards that, if her interactions with the girl earlier were anything to go by, when she had withheld the information for a few extra minutes to speak her mind.

This gamble, then, seemed like one worth taking.

And if it *didn't* work out, Selene could always use Lumis as a scapegoat, which might even strengthen her bond with Thea, opening up more avenues for progress later on.

Switching gears quickly, Selene pretended to receive a call, raising a finger to Thea, who looked surprised by the sudden interruption. Selene offered an apologetic smile, paired with a subtly annoyed expression, as though she was thoroughly frustrated by the intrusion.

"Yes, I understand," she said into the imaginary call. "I don't… Yes. No. No, I don't think so… Let me ask. No, I *will* ask first. It's the least you can do, to give her a choice; considering everything, don't you think? Yes… Thank you. I will be in touch."

Selene played out the one-sided conversation with just enough detail to let Thea infer what was being discussed while ensuring that she appeared to be advocating for Thea's autonomy.

When she finally ended the "call," she sighed—a genuine sigh this time, as the exhausting mental gymnastics were starting to wear on her.

"I apologise for the interruption," Selene said, turning to Thea with a weary smile. "The brass is getting anxious, especially with the talk about concessions. They're asking if you'd be

willing to have a direct conversation with one of their members. It would be an eye-to-eye discussion—an opportunity to ask any lingering questions and figure out how they can make things right."

She paused for a moment to let Thea digest the information before continuing, "It would be someone you're familiar with, if only briefly: Councillor Lumis. She specifically requested the chance to speak with you, if you're up for it… From my perspective as a psychologist, I think there's value in it.

"Talking directly with the person who played a large part in this situation might help you understand what happened and why—maybe even answer a few extra questions you might have—and how everyone can move forward without lingering resentment. But ultimately, the decision is *yours*, Thea. *Truly* yours. I made that very clear to the brass. The last thing I want is for you to feel like you don't have a choice—*again*. And, of course, I will be here alongside you the entire time, if you want that."

Thea paused, her gaze dropping to the floor as she considered Selene's words.

Her expression was no longer the cold, impenetrable mask that had unnerved Selene earlier.

Now, it was as though a floodgate had opened, and micro-expressions flickered across her face in rapid succession—uncertainty, frustration, curiosity, and something akin to hope.

Selene watched intently, her heart rate finally beginning to steady as she noted these changes. It was a relief, a welcome return to familiar territory, where she could actually read and respond to what her patient was feeling.

For a moment, Selene allowed herself to breathe a silent sigh of relief.

She could finally see beyond the cold exterior Thea had presented earlier. The girl's thoughts were now plainly visible, playing out on her face in a way that Selene could interpret and navigate.

This transparency was a victory in itself, a sign that something had fundamentally changed in the girl's mental state and overall attitude towards this whole situation.

As Thea continued to mull over the offer, Selene remained patient, resisting the urge to push further. She had done her part; now it was up to Thea to make the decision; either way she decided, Selene would come out ahead.

After what felt like an eternity, Thea lifted her gaze, her eyes meeting Selene's with a newfound clarity. There was a hint of vulnerability there, but also a determination that hadn't been present before.

"All right," Thea finally said, her voice steady but soft. "I'll talk to Councillor Lumis. But… I'd like you to stay with me during the discussion. Help me make sure I don't miss anything important. Can you do that?"

Selene's heart skipped a beat, a surge of excitement rushing through her veins.

Thea's request was more than just a simple ask for support—it was a sign of trust, a bridge being built between them. It was exactly what Selene had been hoping for, a clear indication that she had successfully ingratiated herself with the girl.

"Of course," Selene replied warmly, her voice calm but inwardly, she was ecstatic. "I'll be right here with you, Thea. Every step of the way. We'll make sure you get the answers you deserve."

Internally, Selene was practically glowing with satisfaction.

Thea trusting her enough to ask for help like this boded incredibly well for her overall mission.

If she could keep nurturing this bond, there was no telling how far she could take it.

Thea had endured more than most could imagine, but with Selene's guidance, there was a genuine opportunity to help steer Thea's future.

This, of course, wasn't *just* about ensuring Thea would be okay—though that was a significant part of it—but also about fulfilling the UHF's need to regain the girl's trust.

Both objectives were intertwined, and Selene knew she had to tread carefully to achieve them.

"Sovereign, could we arrange another chair next to mine, please? And inform Councillor Lumis that she's cleared to enter," Selene requested, directing her attention to the ship's AI.

Within moments, another cushioned armchair materialised beside her own.

Selene gestured for Thea to sit next to her, offering a reassuring smile as they both settled in to await the Councillor's arrival.

As she waited, Selene's thoughts turned to Councillor Lumis, a figure who remained something of a mystery to her.

Despite her extensive research and access to the UHF's vast databases, she had found little information on this enigmatic woman. Beyond the name, a photograph, and the recorded conversation in which Lumis had brokered the original deal with Thea, there was nothing—no background, no service record, no identifiable history.

It was as if Councillor Lumis existed only within the narrow confines of Thea's experience.

This in itself wasn't entirely out of the ordinary; there were many aspects of Thea's career that Selene didn't have clearance to investigate.

However, the complete absence of *any* additional data on Lumis was unsettling.

The fact that Selene had never even *heard* of a rank titled "Councillor" within the UHF was particularly troubling.

None of the UHF's branches—whether Army, Navy, Armored Division, Auxiliary, or Civilian—had a rank by that name, yet it was clearly being used as such in Lumis' case.

The most obvious connection Selene could draw was to the O-13 Council, the highest governing body in the UHF.

But the idea that Lumis could be part of that elite group seemed absurd.

For one, it was highly unlikely that a true Council Member wouldn't have known about Thea's existence when the deal was made. Furthermore, the fact that Selene had been unable to uncover anything about Lumis only deepened her suspicion.

The UHF was a meritocracy through and through, and Council Members *earned* their positions through a storied history of exceptional service—a history that couldn't simply be erased.

This, ultimately, was the biggest question mark in Selene's mind as they waited: Who exactly was Councillor Lumis, and what were her true intentions?

Finally, Selene and Thea heard the door creak open, the hinges still damaged from the cold and frost that had frozen them shut before Selene had managed to enter the room.

They both stared at the door as a woman entered—Councillor Lumis, instantly recognizable to both of them. Selene had seen Lumis on the recording brokering the deal with Thea just over a month ago, but meeting her in person was an entirely different experience.

The moment Lumis stepped into the room, Selene was struck by the sheer *presence* the woman exuded.

Lumis's eyes were the first thing Selene noticed—deep, compelling blue, like a clear summer sky, drawing her in with an almost magnetic pull. Her skin was smooth and unblemished, emitting a soft iridescent glow that seemed to come from within.

Even her hair, cascading down her shoulders and ending just above her waist, shimmered with a luminescence that shifted subtly between hues of gold and silver, like a living waterfall of light.

Every detail of Lumis's appearance seemed meticulously crafted, from her high cheekbones to her gently arched brows, creating a harmony that transcended conventional beauty and bordered on the divine.

Draped in a flowing, floor-length robe that shimmered with colours reminiscent of the inside of a seashell, Lumis projected an aura of confidence and authority so powerful that Selene, despite her experience with high-Tiered entities within the UHF, felt an almost instinctive urge to bow before her.

The robe was cinched at her slender waist with a belt of interwoven silver strands, and intricate embroidery of unknown symbols sparkled along the edges like stars scattered across the night sky, pulsing faintly as if imbued with a power of their own.

Completing her ensemble was an elaborate collar-piece, part jewellery, part armour, made from silver with embedded stones that glowed with an inner light, extending down to her chest in intricate, light-catching patterns.

Selene couldn't help but feel a mixture of awe and a strange, inexplicable disgust. It was as if every fibre of her being was struggling to deny the reality of the woman standing before her.

Lumis strode through the ruined room with an effortless grace, stopping just a metre in front of Thea and Selene, before offering a high-society curtsy that was as flawless as the rest of her appearance.

“Greetings, Legate Selene; Recruit Thea,” Lumis began, her voice resonating in Selene’s mind—not ominously, but with a warmth and presence that felt almost overwhelming. Each word seemed infused with an immense power barely contained within her serene demeanour.

Turning her attention to Thea, she added with a light bow, “Thank you for agreeing to this meeting, despite the difficulties our last one caused you. I want to personally apologise for the unfortunate situation; it was not an intentional slight on our part but rather a truly regrettable series of events. This is not to say it could not have been avoided—it absolutely could have. We, as in the entire upper branch of the UHF, simply failed to do our due diligence and have caused you grief as a result. My sincerest apologies for this; let’s try to make amends, shall we?”

Lumis held her bow for the exact amount of time that Selene would have deemed appropriate, a subtle display of respect and understanding, before turning gracefully and taking the few steps to the remaining armchair—Thea’s previous seat—and sitting down with an elegance that seemed almost otherworldly.

Selene had to force herself to swallow, so overwhelmed was she by the sheer presence of the woman before her. The intensity of that reaction unnerved her deeply.

She had dealt with diplomancers before—people specialised in diplomacy, with Classes designed to manipulate trade, forge alliances, and navigate the complex webs of interpersonal relationships.

But Councillor Lumis was on an entirely different level, one that Selene couldn’t even begin to properly *gauge* despite her extensive experience in the field.

‘*No wonder Thea had no choice but to accept the deal,*’ Selene thought, her mind reeling. ‘*This really wasn’t fair from the UHF, no matter how badly they wanted the Class information. Sending someone like her to negotiate with a newly integrated Recruit? How in the Emperor’s golden blood was Thea supposed to make any decisions at all?!*’

“I am sure we are all fairly busy people and would like to get this over with as soon as possible, so let us not dawdle too much on pleasantries. I am sure you will all appreciate getting me out of your hair as soon as possible,” Councillor Lumis began, finishing with a giggle hidden behind her hand, so disarmingly charming that it managed to fluster even Selene.

But Selene's mind was racing for an entirely different reason.

Something about the way Councillor Lumis spoke, the way her expressions were so perfectly crafted and yet so blindingly apparent, felt fundamentally *wrong*.

The giggle at the end, in particular, rang false—not in sound or appearance, but in the very logic behind it. Selene knew it had to be a manipulation, something she herself would employ in similar circumstances, but emotionally, she couldn't discern it from the real thing.

Despite *knowing* it had to be false, she couldn't find a single flaw in it.

'*What is happening here…? Just who is this woman?!*' Selene's thoughts spiralled as she struggled to make sense of the surreal encounter.

But amidst the confusion, one thing became crystal clear: Whoever this woman truly was, Selene knew she would have to pull out all the stops to ensure Thea wasn't coerced into a bad deal.

The girl stood absolutely no chance of negotiating fairly against someone as formidable as Councillor Lumis on her own. Even with Selene here, however, she doubted that even the two of them combined, with all the advantages that Thea's unique situation afforded them, held any real cards against the enigmatic woman…