

Arc 1 - Chapter 124 - Traumatic Echo

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

Selene recovered surprisingly quickly, given how truly shaken she felt at the sight of Thea's unbridled laughter.

Fast enough, in fact, that she had a few moments to really dig into not her patient's mental state, but *her own* for once.

A patient laughing in light of such a revelation was, of course, not something she hadn't seen before—in fact, it was often a more expected outcome than straight-up anger or a complete breakdown.

When faced with a revelation that stretches beyond the bounds of what someone might expect to be the truth, it is a fairly normal reaction to laugh at the ridiculousness of the entire situation and the path that got them there.

No, the disconnect in Thea's reaction was more *fundamental* in nature.

Where the resulting laughter in such situations usually had a hint of nihilism, self-reproach, loathing, anger, or a variety of other negative emotions attached to it, Thea's was, *fundamentally*, at its very core, entirely honest and pure—something that should have been impossible according to Selene's expertise.

That was the true disconnect she couldn't quite figure out.

It wasn't just her experiences that had led her to misjudge the girl's potential reactions, of course. After all, Selene wasn't just a typical psychologist doing her best with her own experiences, thoughts, and skills.

She was an Auxiliary Legate of the United Human Federation. More specifically, she was an Integrated Member of the UHF under the governance of *the Allbright System*.

With the Integration with the Allbright System came more power, and naturally, more options.

She was a Level 76 [Echo Trauma Psychologist], a True-Rarity, [Palladium]-rated Class specifically focused on post-battlefield care, PTSD therapy, and enhancing the pre-existing empathy of the user to levels that bordered on the precognitive.

This Class was one of the main reasons she had managed such a drastic rise in the ranks over the past few years, allowing her to succeed again and again where others had failed.

More than once, she had been called in to handle high-priority cases from all over the UHF's territory, stepping in when other psychologists had thrown in the towel or when the brass had deemed an asset too vital to be entrusted to anyone but someone of her calibre.

Selene had always been proud of that fact.

It was a true testament to her skills that she was considered an asset worthy of being moved around, someone better than others in her occupation, called in to fix their mistakes.

Her Class came with various, very powerful Passive-type Abilities, such as [Insight Pulse] and [Empathetic Resonance], which had never led her astray—until today.

[Insight Pulse] drastically heightened her ability to read people's microexpressions, drawing extra attention to them passively.

When coupled with her substantial Perception Attribute, it allowed her to catch the minutest muscle spasms or micrometre-sized changes in people's pupil responses, enabling her to accurately gauge how a person truly felt about a particular thing.

This Ability had helped her navigate countless conversations and deals over the past few years, including the one with Major Quinn mere hours ago—a conversation that now felt like it had taken place a lifetime ago.

[Empathetic Resonance], on the other hand, was a more invasive Passive-type Ability that automatically created a sort of sub-section of her own emotional framework inside of her, continuously updated by the patient's displayed emotions.

If the patient felt anger, so did her [Empathetic Resonance]'s framework, allowing her to *truly feel* and slip into the skin of whomever she was working on; an unfathomably powerful asset for an empathy-specialised psychologist like herself.

With those two Passives combined, there was practically nobody Selene couldn't read, except the most skilled of Diplomancers or people with Abilities specifically designed to counter hers.

Yet with Thea, both of these trusted abilities had utterly failed—something that should have been a downright impossibility.

One of the two failing wasn't unheard of.

She had had to make do with only one of them a few times before, whenever compatibility issues with patients or conflicting Abilities shielded a patient from them.

But both?

That had never happened to her with someone below her own Rank, much less Tier.

Yet her [Insight Pulse] had been dead-silent since she had entered the room.

Thea hadn't shown a single micro-expression to work with.

No twitching of her mouth, no unnecessary eye movement that didn't seem perfectly calculated, no pupil dilation at anything Selene had said; not even an involuntary dryness of the throat causing a minutely harder swallow than usual.

Nothing.

Selene had ended up with nothing to work with but the raw words and movements shown by the girl and her [Empathetic Resonance].

It wasn't the first time she had had to do so, of course, but the fact that her [Empathetic Resonance]'s framework had mirrored nothing but cold, calculated anger the entire time they had been talking had not allowed her to prepare for Thea's reaction whatsoever.

The laugh should have been one of despair; maybe mockery at best.

But the laugh the girl was now starting to recover from had been nothing like that.

It had been honest.

Pure.

Without malice, anger, or any of the coldness that her [Empathetic Resonance] had been mirroring at all. Yet despite all of that, even now, after the genuine laughter and part of the warmth returning to the room and the girl's face, it was *still* mirroring nothing but cold, calculated anger.

That, more than anything, made Selene's entire back tense up more than anything had in years. There was something *seriously* wrong with the girl in front of her.

But the worst of all was truly this: Selene had absolutely no idea *what*.

'There is only really one way to figure this out now... I don't like having to rely on it, but that's what the Ability is for, isn't it...?' she quietly asked herself, fixating on Thea's face and preparing her own mind for what was to come.

[Echo Trauma Psychologist] wouldn't be a True-Rarity Class without its own signature Ability, of course. Aside from the Passive-type Abilities [Insight Pulse], [Empathetic Resonance], [Silent Whisper], and [Empathetic Aura Control], the Class also featured an Active-type Ability; namely, its signature Ability that loaned its name to the Class itself: [Echo Trauma].

It allowed the user to create a mindscape, in which they could fully dive in and analyse a patient from all possible, and impossible, angles.

It was like creating a mini-DDS of sorts, but with Selene as the governing AI; god-like powers included to dissect everything, accelerate, rewind and stop time at will, and even create a copy of the patient's psyche for the psychologist to interact with.

The Allbright System, as far as Selene was aware, could not truly allow things such as mind-control or mind-reading, but [Echo Trauma] was about as close as it could get.

It used the unimaginable computational powers of the Allbright System itself to calculate and simulate responses based on what it knew about a given person—their past, their experience, and even their future in certain instances.

Essentially, it created a perfect replica of the patient's mental state and psyche for Selene to toy with and experiment on to her heart's content, as long as [Echo Trauma] was in effect.

A playground of sorts, to test, prod, and try out different “routes” to find the perfect one that gave her the *exact* reactions and emotional responses she wanted from her patients.

The reason Selene didn't like relying on the Ability was that it was costly—not just in terms of Focus and Stamina, but also on her own mental state.

She was essentially turning her own mind into a complete simulation of another person's entire personality and psyche, with a heavy focus on their emotional traumas and issues.

There had never been a time where she had used it and come out unscathed.

The Ability always took *something* from her, as she was inherently linking herself to her patient's trauma on a level unimaginable to someone who had never used it.

It always left permanent scars in her own mind, small as they might be. But without it, many cases had been uncrackable, much like this one was proving to be.

Silently cursing the brass in her head for letting the situation reach a point where she was practically forced to take this step, her eyes met Thea's as she invoked the Allbright System's Ability.

'Echo Trauma.'

At that moment, she saw Thea's eyes widen markedly for the first time since entering the room—not a micro-expression this time, but similarly involuntary.

The girl immediately leaned forward in a panic, reaching out her hands towards Selene and yelled, “*Don't—!*”, but the Allbright System's power had already started coalescing inside the psychologist's mind, cutting off whatever else the girl might have wanted to say...

—

The world around Selene warped for a brief instant before she found herself sitting in a comfortable armchair inside the very same room she had sat in thousands of times before.

It was a perfect replica of the room Thea had destroyed, bookshelves, potted plants, and sculptures included—except this one was pristine. Which, of course it was; it was Selene's own mindscape, after all.

In front of her, on the chair that Thea had sat on, frantically reaching out to her just an instant before, sat the Allbright System's recreation of Thea's psyche; motionless and still, as Selene had come to expect from the Ability.

She felt strangely apprehensive and nervous, however, the moment just before the Ability had activated running through her head again and again.

'What did she try to tell me...? Don't use my Ability...? But how could she possibly know? There is no tell I'm doing this. For her, no time should pass at all; it's all in my head...'

Slowly, and with a hesitation she had never known before, Selene got up from her chair and gingerly stepped toward the frozen Thea, keeping her keen eyes firmly locked onto the girl and watching for anything out of the ordinary.

Step by step, she walked up and around Thea, observing her from all possible angles, before willing the chair itself to become invisible. This allowed her a better view of the girl's posture and the rest of her body to try and look for any minor inconsistencies in Thea's perfectly frozen facade.

When, a few minutes later, she had found nothing out of the ordinary, Selene breathed out a quiet sigh of relief.

It seemed she had worried overly much; it was clear that this whole situation had already taken a massive toll on her own overall psyche for her to be so out of it. Shaking out her body to loosen up her stiff and tense posture, she started her usual routine examination within the [Echo Trauma]'s world.

First, she asked the girl to stand up straight, which the mirror of Thea's psyche immediately acquiesced to, freezing in a surprisingly solid posture.

This first step was to establish a baseline for where the patient's natural inclinations lay.

Most people had a certain tick, a preference, or a learned way of standing up straight when asked to do so that could tell Selene a lot about their past, their current mental state, and how they were feeling in that situation.

Whether they slumped, shifted their weight between their legs or only to one specific leg, how they held their head, and so many more factors were all things that could tell her entire story books worth of information about a person.

Thea's baseline seemed to be something that would make the brass cry tears of joy, Selene couldn't help but think: Ramrod straight, with perfect symmetry across the entire body and her chin held immaculately parallel to the ground.

This was the same posture that Selene had often observed in high-ranking officers of the UHF, which made a lot of sense to her considering Thea's background.

'I guess the ex-General taught her pretty thoroughly, huh?' Selene mused as she slowly circled Thea, carefully examining her posture.

Despite her [Empathetic Resonance] still mirroring the ever-present cold, calculated anger, there was nothing of the sort to be seen in the girl's way of standing.

There was no hostility displayed, nor were there any obvious or subtle tells that she was holding herself back from lashing out. There wasn't even any of the mirrored emotion in the girl's cyan eyes, which simply looked dead ahead, as impassive as could be.

For all intents and purposes, Thea's psyche was immaculate.

She was in full control of every single one of her emotions and movements, unlike what Selene had expected to be dealing with when she entered the room.

Further intrigued by this revelation, Selene continued her examination, ordering the mirror of Thea's psyche to perform a variety of actions, ranging from a simple walk, to a march, to sprinting, jumping, and even sparring with a faceless combatant in hand-to-hand combat.

These were her usual go-to methods to gather more data about a patient.

Movement was an intrinsic part of human existence and thus, often closely linked to emotions and trauma.

Take a Marine, send them out marching and record the baseline. Then, send them out marching onto a battlefield and, when they return, ask them to march out again.

Their movements, their demeanour, their posture—they will all have altered to varying degrees, shaped by the experiences of their most emotionally charged march of the past.

This was a universal truth of the human psyche: Emotions coloured the very nature of a person in their own shades.

Selene's regimen was designed to elicit those very subconscious tells and reveal the true shades of a person's mental state through the syncretic link of memory and motion.

She noted quite a few interesting tidbits about Thea.

Notably, her overall gait and movements were exceedingly cautious, even for a Scout-type Marine.

Thea moved with a precision and deliberateness that spoke of someone who had spent years honing their every step, every action, to minimise risk and maximise efficiency.

Her footsteps were quiet, even in combat boots, yet firm and secure.

Her posture, whether she was walking, marching, running, or sprinting, was a thoroughly entwined combination of what Selene often referred to as the "Prey & Predator Mentality," coined from an old psychology book she had read as a child.

Millennia ago, humans had categorised someone's general mental state into two sides of the same coin: Prey and Predator.

If someone had the mentality of prey, they were more skittish, avoided risks, and shied away from confrontation. The predator mentality was, consequently, the opposite: Risk-taking, seeking confrontation, and boisterous.

Though it was an antiquated and long-discarded portion of psychological theory, Selene had always enjoyed the simple nature of it and how easy it was to quickly classify specific actions under one or the other.

While never entirely correct, it could still help with simple ordering before more elaborate and sophisticated methods could be applied.

In Thea's case, both aspects applied almost equally.

Her movements and posture were almost perfectly split between what one might consider prey and predator. At a moment's notice, she could either flee or fight, giving away no preference for either from her overall demeanour or muscle tension.

'This is definitely a result of her living conditions growing up,' Selene concluded as she finished noting down the third page of information about Thea on her System Notepad—the only media that could enter and leave her mindscape aside from her own memories.

'She would have had to present herself as a dangerous person to approach for any unscrupulous actors in the undercity, while simultaneously being ready to high-tail it at any moment. I've seen this kind of posture many times before, but rarely so perfectly split in half like with her... The ex-General undoubtedly had a hand in shaping her immaculate outward display of control.'

Finally done with the basic observations, Selene moved on to the second stage of her thorough examination: Freetime.

She ordered the psyche's mirror to be at ease and simply behave with no additional commands at all, letting the Allbright System's computations govern everything about her patient's next moves to allow Selene to get a closer look at the current state of things.

This would give her something to compare to the baseline she had just established.

Thea went on to simply sit down in the cushioned chair and lean back into it in a thoroughly relaxed pose, one foot tucked beneath her body, the other leisurely dangling from the chair.

Her posture was open, unconcerned, and inviting—traits that were completely at odds with the cold, calculated anger Selene's [Empathetic Resonance] was still mirroring.

As Selene continued her examination, she began to feel a growing unease.

She walked around Thea, observing her from all angles, searching for any inconsistencies or hidden tells. She even levitated Thea and the chair up to take a better look from different perspectives, using her god-like powers within the mindscape to leave no stone unturned.

The longer she observed, however, the more uncomfortable she felt.

Despite Thea's relaxed posture and open demeanour, there was something profoundly unsettling about the scene. It wasn't any single action or expression that troubled Selene, but rather an inexplicable dissonance between what she was seeing and what she was sensing; both from her Passive Abilities, as well as her own experience over the past decades.

Thea's movements were fluid and natural, yet they seemed almost *too* perfect, *too* controlled. There was no trace of the emotional turmoil that should have been present after everything Thea had been through.

Even in this simulated freetime, where Selene expected to see some sign of stress or residual tension, there was nothing.

Selene's discomfort grew with each passing minute.

She tried to pinpoint the source of her unease, but it simply continued to elude her.

The girl's psyche was a masterwork of control and precision, but it lacked the organic messiness that typically characterised a person's inner world. It was as if she was observing a perfectly constructed *facade*, one that hid the true chaos beneath.

'*Why does this feel so wrong?*' Selene wondered, her mind racing to find an answer.

She had seen many extraordinary individuals over her long career, but none that had made her feel the same way Thea's mirrored existence did right now.

The girl's psyche was a paradox, a perfect blend of opposites that should not—*could* not coexist so seamlessly. There was a profound depth to Thea's control that hinted at something far beyond mere training or experience.

Despite, or maybe because of, her extensive training and experience, Selene couldn't shake the feeling that she was missing something *crucial*.

The girl's psyche was like a puzzle with but a single piece conspicuously absent, a piece that could potentially explain everything. This piece was what she was frantically searching for.

After countless minutes of this cat-and-mouse game, with Selene on the losing end, she took a deep, steadying breath. 'I really hate having to do this... I'm sorry, Thea,' she thought to herself, feeling a tinge of disgust and remorse at what she was about to do. 'It's not the real you; just a psyche-mirror created by the System, but I'd still rather not subject you to this...'

She went on to conjure a series of specific Marines, clad in their go-to armor that she had observed and learned about from the pre-session reports and rundowns of the assessment: the rest of the Sovereign's Alpha Squad. Arrayed in front of her and Thea's psyche were perfect replicas of Corvus, Lucas, Isabella, Desmond, and Karania; all of them with their helmets removed, but otherwise in perfect fighting form.

Next, she handed Thea a loaded pistol and took a step back, before once again taking a deep breath. She really hated doing this, but it was the best possible way to get some kind of reaction out of the girl.

"Thea, kill Corvus. Shoot him in—"

The loud, echoing sound of a gunshot made Selene flinch and almost drop her System notepad out of surprise, as Corvus' body hit the ground—his forehead punctured by a perfectly placed hole between his eyes.

Selene simply stared at the corpse in horror, unable to process what had just happened.

'Wh... What?!

Her eyes darted over to the frozen Thea, who still held the smoking gun in her hands, but was otherwise not moving or showing any signs of discomfort at all.

'What in the Emperor's cursed fucking toenails is going on here?!

[Echo Trauma] was an Ability that allowed her to command a replica of a patient's psyche, but that didn't mean the replica didn't have their own thoughts and feelings about things.

The order she had given, while mandatory thanks to her Ability, was not one that needed immediate following without a fight, nor did it stop the replica from voicing their opinions or resisting Selene's control.

That is exactly what she had been hoping for: A fight.

Instead, Thea's psyche had complied instantly, without hesitation or remorse.

The shot had been executed with surgical precision, a clear indication of Thea's capability and control. But the complete lack of emotional response, the absence of any sign of conflict or hesitation, was deeply unsettling.

Selene's mind raced as she tried to comprehend the implications.

Thea's psyche mirror should have resisted, should have shown some form of emotional struggle, especially given the bond with her squad—the people she considered her friends—her very first friends, from what Selene had been able to piece together.

Yet there was nothing.

No anger, no sadness, no guilt—just cold, mechanical obedience.

Selene took another step back, her legs briefly giving out, her mind working furiously to piece together what this meant.

'What has happened to you, Thea? How can you be so detached, so devoid of the very emotions that make you human?!

This whole series of events made no sense at all, considering how much Thea had cared about her squad right after the integration and especially towards the end of the assessment.

Thea's psyche should have fought the order; clawed at Selene to rescind it, begged her not to have to do it... But none of that had happened.

Gathering her thoughts and meditating for a few moments to get her rapidly beating heart under control, Selene felt in control once again.

She had to continue the experiments, now more than ever.

“Thea, shoot Lucas and Isabella,” she ordered once again, and immediately, two more gunshots rang out before lifeless bodies hit the ground.

*‘Why is she so fucking calm about all of this?! The reflected psyche should interpret these copies as the real deal, so **why?!**’*

She had kept the best two for last, in the hopes that the girl would show some kind of reaction for the most emotionally charged members of her squad: Desmond, the person who had antagonised her the most in the squad, and Karania, the person Thea felt most indebted to and considered her very best friend.

To go even further in her attempts to elicit a reaction, she replaced Thea’s gun with a knife—a vastly more personal weapon when it came to killing another person.

“Thea, kill Desmond with this knife,” she ordered and watched carefully.

Thea simply dashed up and jammed the knife into the boy’s throat, ripping it out towards the right and sending a spray of blood and viscera out of the collapsing body as she did so.

But what Selene *didn’t* get was any kind of reaction.

Thea’s face was immaculately neutral, her movements still precise and controlled, but now infused with a downright eerie calmness.

All this time, Selene’s feeling of unease had continued to climb and she could feel how her entire body had tensed up, but she couldn’t find a way to relax, even after taking some steadying breaths, trying meditation, or stepping away from the scene for a moment.

She felt like there was something right in front of her that she was missing—a monumental shadow that was hiding just beneath the calm ocean of Thea’s psyche.

With a deep breath, she ordered, “Thea, *kill* Kara.”

She had even resorted to using the moniker that only the two of them seemed to share, to try and goad the girl on further and for a fleeting moment, Selene hoped she would see something—anything—to indicate the girl’s true emotions.

But then she simply watched as Thea walked up to Karania’s mirror and, without hesitation, plunged the knife into the other girl’s heart. Karania’s body fell to the ground with a lifeless thud.

Still, Thea’s face remained unchanged.

Selene felt a cold sweat break out on her forehead.

She had never encountered anything like this before.

The dissonance between the reflected psyche’s actions and the complete absence of emotional response was terrifying.

This wasn't the reaction of a broken mind; of somebody so consumed by anger that didn't know what to do; this was something *far* more disturbing.

As she stared at Thea's blank expression, the feeling of unease grew stronger, gnawing at her insides like a dark, foreboding shadow.

Selene stumbled back and sat down heavily in the cushioned chair that manifested behind her; [Echo Trauma] as much a part of her as she was part of it.

"What the fuck is going on here...?" she muttered, rifling through her notes, desperately seeking the missing piece of the puzzle.

"How is this possible? Thea should not be this... cold."

Her [Empathetic Resonance] insisted that the girl's cold demeanour made sense, but her own eyes and decades of experience in dealing with patients told an entirely different story.

How could her expertise and intuition be so at odds with her System Abilities?

She pulled up Thea's profile, scrutinising it for any Ability that might explain the anomaly.

Yet again, she found nothing.

Frustration mounting, she started reviewing the recordings that [Echo Trauma] allowed her to make, analysing each and every movement Thea had made.

She was searching for any inconsistency, *anything* at all.

And then she stopped.

"What...?"

Zooming in on one of the recordings, she saw Thea's face twist into a sly smile—one she hadn't seen before. The reason for that quickly became apparent: Selene had been busy writing notes on her System notepad.

By the time the Selene in the recording had looked back up, Thea's impassive face had returned.

A cold shudder ran down Selene's spine as a horrifying realisation manifested within her mind.

Frantically, she started skipping through the recordings, checking Thea's behaviour each time the recorded Selene had taken her eyes off the girl.

Thea's smile grew wider and wider with each iteration of the same situation.

From sly, to toothy, to downright mocking.

"How is this possible...?" Selene whispered to nobody but herself, for inside her [Echo Trauma], she was all alone.

Finally, as she reached the moment in the recordings where Karania's body had hit the ground, she watched in unadulterated horror as Thea's toothy grin approached a Selene sitting on a cushioned armchair, frantically searching through recordings.

Her eyes widened in terror as she threw the pad away and tried to get up from the chair, to look around and find Thea's psyche, but she was stopped dead in her tracks.

The cold, unmistakable edge of a plasteel knife was held firmly against her throat.

As Selene's gaze focused on the person holding the knife, her blood ran cold as her eyes met the stark violet ones of Thea's mirror.

"Who—*What* are you?"

Thea's smile grew even wider, more devious than before, as she replied, "Congratulations, darling. You're the first person to ever ask the right question from the get-go...!"