

Arc 1 - Chapter 128 - Perfectus Exitus

PoV: Auxiliary Legate Selene Calla

“Now, moving on to the concessions that the UHF is offering you, Thea,” Councillor Lumis continued her rundown.

“These are intended as incentives to encourage you to continue working closely with us, despite our initial failure. You may consider them as bribes if you wish, but they are also meant to serve as tokens of goodwill and trust in your capabilities. We have been closely monitoring your progress, and you have indeed shown the makings of an Ace, as you so astutely recognized yourself.

“As such, we offer you the following additional concession: Three Skill Classes of your choosing, fully funded by the Faction. This is the maximum investment a Faction can make in a single individual, and it is rarely done except for established Aces who require advanced knowledge or specific Skills to unlock Classes. You will receive one such voucher at the assessment’s awards ceremony, with the other two following shortly after in recognition of various accomplishments you’ve achieved thus far.

“The vouchers must be distributed in this manner to navigate certain System restrictions, so while you will not have immediate access to all three upon leaving this room, rest assured they will be in your hands before the month is out.”

As the Councillor spoke, the first item on the list glowed with a golden hue, indicating the vouchers, before transitioning to the next item on the list.

“Secondly, due to your outstanding performance in the assessment and the fact that you’ve already reached Level 10—congratulations, by the way—you will only be required to complete a single digital mission per month, rather than the usual one per week that your peers must undertake. This adjustment will provide you with additional time to focus on the Skill training sessions mentioned earlier, as well as the Psychic lessons you will soon begin.”

At the mention of the Psychic lessons, the third item on the list flashed golden, drawing both Thea's and Selene's attention.

“Speaking of the Psychic lessons,” Councillor Lumis continued, “these will commence four days from now, one day after the assessment awards ceremony. You will be personally tutored by Rune priest Vedun, who will be stationed on the Sovereign specifically to teach you everything there is to know about Psykers and the Void, in person. It is *crucial* you understand the significance of this: Rune priest Vedun is not only one of the highest-ranking Psykers within the entire UHF, but also one of the most knowledgeable.

“That he accepted this assignment is largely due to his close friendship with Major Quinn and her personal request for his involvement. I *cannot* stress enough how rare and invaluable this opportunity is. While Ace-level gear can be earned through relentless effort and dedication, personal tutelage from a Rune priest is a rarity *beyond* comparison. You

would find it nearly impossible to secure such an opportunity again, regardless of how much you might achieve in the future.”

Councillor Lumis’s candid words took Selene by surprise, but she couldn’t disagree with the sentiment behind them.

The offer of personal instruction by a Rune priest was nothing short of extraordinary, especially for a Recruit. Recruits typically weren’t even on the radar for this level of attention, let alone from a Rune priest whose expertise was usually reserved for far more experienced Psykers.

The presence of such a mentor seemed truly excessive.

Yet, at the same time, there was no one better equipped to guide Thea through the complexities of her burgeoning Psychic abilities—particularly given the unsettling presence of the strange *Æht* entity within her.

Thea responded with a terse, grave nod, clearly taking the Councillor’s warnings to heart.

“Good,” the Councillor continued, her tone steady and purposeful. “With that covered, let us move on to the final concession the UHF is prepared to offer in this endeavour.”

The list highlighted the last item, a single word that carried immense potential: “Requests.”

“The UHF is willing to honour up to three personal requests from you during your first year as a UHF Marine,” Lumis explained, her gaze steady on Thea. “These requests can pertain to any aspect of your career—whether it be specific mission assignments, preferred squad placements, opportunities for promotion, or even specialised training sessions that you feel would benefit your development. The nature of these requests is entirely up to you.”

She paused, allowing the weight of the offer to sink in before continuing. “Now, to be clear, while we are committed to doing our utmost to fulfil these requests, there are no *guarantees* that they will unfold exactly as you envision. However, the UHF will make every effort to accommodate your wishes within the constraints of our operational needs.”

The Councillor leaned forward slightly, her expression softening just a fraction.

“This is not something we typically offer, Thea. In fact, it’s an extraordinary concession—one almost never extended to *anyone*. But given the breach of trust that has occurred, we felt it was only right to provide you with a direct influence on your future. With these requests, you can personally guide adjustments or interventions to prevent any misunderstandings or oversights from affecting you again. We hope this will help rebuild the trust that has been compromised and allow you to shape your career in the way you desire.”

As Selene absorbed the weight of the offer, a sinking feeling of inadequacy settled in her stomach.

The gesture was far more than she had anticipated—granting Thea a level of influence that was almost unheard of, and downright churlish to hand to a Recruit. It was not just an olive

branch, but a profound acknowledgment of the UHF's errors, and more importantly, a way to bind Thea even more closely to the institution as a whole.

Selene couldn't shake the feeling of being outmatched.

She had prepared herself to fight tooth and nail for Thea's rights, expecting a tough negotiation where every inch of ground would have to be won. Instead, the Councillor had arrived with an Orbital Laser primed and ready to be fired; and made use of it multiple times already.

Selene felt almost useless in the conversation, reduced to clarifying a point here and there, but otherwise sidelined by the magnitude of what was being offered.

Thea, too, seemed completely overwhelmed, the earlier confidence draining from her as the sheer incredulity of the concessions weighed down on her. It was as if each new offer was a gift too grand to accept, leaving her momentarily stunned and uncertain of how to proceed.

'Thea might very well be the most decorated Recruit in the history of mankind... This is absolutely insane, no matter how valuable the UHF deems the information in her brain,' Selene thought, a strange sense of doubt creeping into her mind.

'This can't just be about keeping Thea from leaving. There's something else at play here, something I can't quite grasp. But what—or who—has such a vested interest in her? Not to mention the actual means... The Council, perhaps? But why...?'

As Selene pondered the implications of everything she had witnessed today, she noticed that Thea seemed equally lost in thought. The two of them sat in contemplative silence, side by side, for a good five minutes.

The quiet was finally broken when Councillor Lumis spoke again, gently drawing their attention back to the matter at hand.

"I understand this is a lot to process all at once," Lumis began, her tone measured, "but time is not on our side, as much as I regret interrupting your important reflections."

Thea and Selene both nodded in acknowledgment, still somewhat wrapped up in their own thoughts, unable to muster anything more substantial in response.

"As for the concessions," Lumis continued, "if you find them satisfactory and wish to accept them—whether in full or in part—I will need your verbal confirmation, Thea. This is a matter of protocol, and we both want to ensure that nothing in this conversation gives anyone reason to question what transpired here in the future."

Thea shook herself slightly, as if emerging from a fog, before sitting up straighter and bowing her head slightly. "I graciously accept all of the concessions as outlined by Councillor Lumis. Thank you."

Selene was impressed by the formal nature of her acceptance, up until the point where she awkwardly remained in the same posture for far too long and the girl's eyes nervously darted towards her, the obvious question plainly written on her face.

Selene offered her an encouraging nod that subtly conveyed, “*You can relax now*”.

It was hard to suppress a smile at the sight.

Selene vastly preferred this version of Thea—the genuine, if slightly awkward, young woman—over the hardened persona she had encountered earlier.

So much had happened, and while many questions remained unanswered, Selene was grateful to see Thea returning to her true self.

“Very well,” Councillor Lumis said, her voice breaking Selene’s thoughts once again. “Are there any particular questions about the remunerations or concessions outlined here that you would like to address, Thea? Or anything else you wish to discuss regarding this entire conversation? I am at your disposal for any such questions during our remaining time together. Unfortunately, I will not be easily reachable once we part ways, so this might be one of our few opportunities to speak candidly. Please, do not hesitate.”

Thea, visibly grappling with her thoughts, hesitated to respond.

Sensing the girl’s struggle, Selene decided to step in. She considered it both her responsibility and an opportunity to finally prove her worth in this discussion.

“I actually have a few questions, if neither of you mind?” Selene said, taking the initiative.

Thea looked visibly relieved to be taken out of the spotlight, nodding eagerly in agreement. The Councillor, ever composed, inclined her head regally, indicating her willingness to proceed with Selene’s questions instead of Thea’s.

“First and foremost,” Selene began, “regarding the problematic nature of the remuneration: How is Thea expected to keep it a secret when she’ll be equipped with a clearly Next-Tech piece of gear? She already has a T2 weapon from the voucher earned through the Cube Trial, but obtaining another powerful piece of equipment this early in her career will undoubtedly raise questions—a *lot* of them. You can’t realistically expect her to fabricate stories that could easily be verified to be a lie by higher-ranking Marines.

“What’s to stop them from simply ordering her to reveal the true nature of the equipment, especially since she’ll have to keep it a secret not just from her fellow Recruits or Privates, but even from Lieutenants and Majors who outrank her?”

Thea’s eyes widened at Selene’s pointed question, clearly realising for the first time the full implications of the “don’t tell anyone” agreement she had just accepted.

The Councillor, however, remained unflappable, her composed expression indicating she had anticipated this very line of questioning.

She responded without even a hint of hesitation, her voice carrying the same calm authority she had the entire time.

“I understand your concerns on this matter. The nature of the remuneration is indeed delicate, and we have already taken steps to address the potential issues surrounding it: The

equipment itself will be registered under a classified designation, meaning that its true nature and origins will only be accessible to those with the highest clearance levels—individuals far beyond the rank of Lieutenants and Majors. For anyone below that clearance level, it will simply show up as an experimental T2 piece of equipment.

“She will be provided with a pre-approved cover story that aligns with the UHF’s standard protocols for advanced gear testing. This story will be backed by official documentation, including a fully detailed rundown on the award given to her that awarded the testing spot, should anyone feel the need to verify it. Furthermore, any direct orders for full disclosure from someone without the necessary clearance will be automatically flagged by the Sovereign, triggering a review that will protect her from any repercussions.

“Additionally, the Sovereign will monitor any conversations or interactions that might lead to the nature of the equipment being revealed. If necessary, it will intervene subtly to steer the conversation away from topics that might expose the truth. Her only responsibility, thusly, will be to stay within the guidelines provided and avoid unnecessary attention whenever possible. I trust that with her skills and discipline, this will not be an issue.”

Selene was impressed by the in-depth explanation, though not overly surprised.

The Councillor, and the UHF as a whole, would never have made such a delicate offer without thoroughly preparing for every possible outcome. It was one thing to anticipate complications, but hearing the level of detail and strategic foresight put into handling them made Selene acutely aware of just how formidable the UHF’s diplomancers truly were.

These people were terrifyingly meticulous—prepared for every potential twist and turn, undoubtedly with answers lined up depending on how the conversation had evolved.

Still, being on the receiving end of such unrelenting preparedness left a strange taste in her mouth. Selene wasn’t one to enjoy being outmanoeuvred, but she had to swallow her discomfort for now.

The previous question was merely a warm-up; an opening to the real one she had been waiting to ask.

The next question Selene had lined up was the one she truly wanted to pose—the one that could endear her even more to Thea because it would reveal knowledge far beyond what the girl currently possessed. It was also risky, as it would involve exposing certain aspects of the UHF’s operations that no Private, much less a Recruit, was ever meant to know.

“Very well,” Selene began smoothly, her expression calm and professional. “I have another question regarding the last concession: The Requests. Could Thea use one of these requests to stop any and all transfer orders for herself and her squad, effectively bypassing the trade market altogether?”

For the briefest moment, Councillor Lumis hesitated—a subtle, nearly imperceptible pause that gave Selene an immense sense of satisfaction.

She had struck a nerve, and she knew it.

Selene had been carefully monitoring the interest that Thea had generated during the assessment, and the fierce competition among higher-ranking officials to secure her place in their own commands.

The bidding for Thea had reached truly absurd levels—far beyond what anyone would expect for a simple Recruit.

Selene's instincts told her that these officials would stop at nothing to pull Thea into their ranks, but keeping her stationed aboard the Sovereign with allies like Major Quinn and Captain Cross, was likely in Thea's best interest.

Thea, however, would never think to make such a request; she had no idea this invisible trade market even existed.

Recruits and Privates were kept in the dark about these things. They simply received orders to transfer, often oblivious to the fact that their position had been bought by a higher-up.

By asking this question, Selene was taking a calculated risk, revealing the existence of the market to Thea—but she deemed it necessary.

If Thea was going to survive the dangerous political waters of the UHF's inner workings, she would need to be equipped with more than just advanced weaponry. She would need the knowledge and the power to navigate these treacherous waters.

And Selene was determined to make sure she got it.

The Councillor took a brief moment before responding, as if carefully weighing her words.

“That is indeed a possible request, though it is *highly* irregular,” Lumis began, her tone measured. “Such a request would require extensive approval from various levels of command, as it involves circumventing established protocols within the UHF. Given the nature of the request, it would take a few weeks at the very least to get a definite answer. I will, however, personally inquire about the feasibility of such a request and will ensure that it is given the serious consideration it deserves.”

She paused, her gaze flickering towards Thea for a moment before continuing. “As for extending this protection to your entire squad, this could be arranged—provided that the squad in question is the designated Alpha Squad of the Sovereign. The protection would not apply to individual members of the squad, but rather to the squad as a whole.

“Should any member, aside from you, of course, fall out of the Alpha Squad's roster, they would re-enter the free market and be subject to standard transfer protocols. However, any new members added to the Alpha Squad would similarly be shielded from transfer, as long as they remain within the squad.”

Lumis leaned back slightly, allowing the weight of her words to settle. “This arrangement is not something that has happened often, but it is not *entirely* unique. It would, however, require significant administrative effort to implement. But I believe that it aligns with the intent of the concessions we have discussed, and I will do everything within my power to see it through, should you choose to make this request.”

Selene felt a surge of satisfaction as she watched Thea absorb the information. It was a small victory, but an important one—one that would help Thea navigate the intricate web of power and politics within the UHF.

Thea, for her part, seemed to be carefully considering the offer, her brow furrowed in thought.

Selene could see the wheels turning in her mind, weighing the benefits and potential risks of such a request. It was a lot to take in, but Thea was proving to be more than capable of handling the complexities being laid before her.

Lumis maintained her composed and patient demeanour, allowing Thea the space she needed to make her decision.

The girl's eyes darted toward Selene, seeking guidance.

Sensing the unspoken question, Selene leaned in closer, lowering her voice to a whisper, "I *strongly* advise you to make this request. I can't go into the specifics, but trust me on this one, if nothing else. If you care about keeping your squad together and maintaining your current relationships, you'll want to ensure this request is implemented as soon as possible."

Selene felt a twinge of frustration at having to be so vague, but she knew the boundaries she had to respect.

Discussing the inner workings of the trade market with anyone below the rank of Lieutenant was strictly forbidden, and she had already gone way past skirting the line by hinting at its existence. Yet, she felt it was necessary for Thea to understand the gravity of the situation.

Thea searched Selene's eyes, and after a brief moment, seemed to find what she had been looking for, before giving her a decisive nod.

Turning her attention back to Councillor Lumis, she spoke with newfound confidence. "I'd like to use one of my requests to ensure that the Alpha Squad of the Sovereign is exempt from the trade market. We should have the choice to accept transfers if they're offered on our own free will, but otherwise, I want us to remain on the Sovereign."

Selene raised an eyebrow at Thea's addition but couldn't help but feel impressed.

Thea's instincts were sharp—by adding that stipulation, she had safeguarded her squad's autonomy while still leaving room for flexibility. It was a subtle yet brilliant addition, and Selene found herself quietly admiring the girl's rapidly growing acumen at navigating this unusual situation.

If nothing else, Thea's mind was exceedingly quick to adjust to the unknown, it seemed.

"Very well," Councillor Lumis responded with a gentle smile, her approval evident. "I will ensure that this request is passed up the chain of command and that it's given the attention it deserves. For now, consider you and your squad exempt from the trade market while we work to secure a permanent arrangement. This protection is effective immediately."

With that, Lumis paused, her gaze shifting between Thea and Selene. “Is there anything else we should discuss before we conclude?”

Thea’s eyes flickered with contemplation, the gears visibly turning in her mind as she processed everything that had been discussed. Selene, sensing that most of the critical points had been addressed, remained silent, waiting for Thea to signal that she was satisfied.

After a minute or two of thoughtful consideration, Thea gently shook her head and spoke up, her voice steady yet tinged with a hint of uncertainty. “I don’t think so. I think we’re done... Thank you, Councillor Lumis. And... I’m sorry for how I acted earlier.”

She gestured vaguely at the ruined room around them, a sheepish cringe crossing her face.

“I... I could have handled that better, I think.”

Selene was caught off guard by Thea’s apology.

The girl’s outburst had been more than justified, given the circumstances, yet here she was, taking responsibility for the aftermath. Selene chose to stay on the sidelines, understanding that this was something Thea felt she needed to do for herself.

It wasn’t her place to step in unless the situation demanded it.

Councillor Lumis, however, immediately dismissed the apology with a gentle wave of her hands, her expression kind but firm. “I appreciate the gesture, Thea, but it is *entirely* unnecessary. You had every right to be upset—more than that, you *still do*. The reparations and concessions we’ve discussed are just the beginning. They are not meant to erase the wrongdoing you’ve experienced, whether by accident or oversight. Remember that your anger is justified and honourable. It’s a sign that you won’t tolerate being wronged, and that’s a quality worth preserving.”

Selene had not expected the Councillor’s words.

It was one thing to offer reparations, but to even encourage Thea to hold onto her anger, to use it as a driving force, was something she hadn’t expected. Once again, Selene found herself feeling outclassed by the woman before her.

‘This is why I absolutely hate dealing with diplomancers,’ she thought wryly. ‘They always seem to know exactly what to say, even when it feels like finding the right words should be impossible. And people think psychologists are the mind-manipulators...!’

"As for how we proceed from here," the Councillor continued, blissfully unaware of Selene’s inner turmoil. "You have been granted two days of leave, Thea, to spend as you wish. By then, the assessment will have concluded, and all Marines aboard the Sovereign will assemble in the auditorium where your original post-integration ceremony was held. The review and awards show will take place there, and trust me, you won’t want to miss it. It’s always the highlight of the assessments for everyone involved."

The Councillor rose from her seat with an effortless grace that once again left Selene in awe, her movements so fluid and regal that they seemed almost otherworldly. Lumis offered them a final curtsy, as elegant as when she had first entered the room.

"I wish you a fulfilling career within the UHF, Thea," she said, her voice both warm and authoritative. "May you enjoy your career and help us push forward humanity as a whole; leading all of mankind to a new horizon beyond the bubble when the time comes. I will be watching your journey closely. Do not disappoint me—or the trust I have placed in you today."

With a final, unexpected wink—so charmingly out of place that it irked Selene with its casual confidence—the Councillor turned and strode out of the room. The door closed softly behind her, leaving Selene and Thea alone in the wrecked space.

For a moment, a heavy silence settled over them, the weight of the conversation still lingering in the air. Then Selene stood, extending her hand to Thea with a sincere smile.

"Thea," she began, her tone warm, "it was truly a pleasure to see you again. I only wish it had been under better circumstances. But if the Emperor wills it, we'll meet again soon—hopefully without such a long wait in between. Maybe next time over a drink and some good food instead of... well, *this*."

She gestured vaguely with a chuckle toward the wreckage of the room around them.

Before she could react, Thea sprang from her chair and wrapped her in a tight hug, completely bypassing the offered handshake. Selene froze for a moment, overwhelmed by the sudden embrace, before wrapping her arms around Thea in return.

She had to focus intensely on controlling her own emotions, the flood of relief, elation, and gratitude threatening to spill over.

Thea's hug wasn't just a gesture of thanks; it was a sign that she had managed to pull herself out of the dark place she'd been trapped in earlier. But as Selene held the girl, a bittersweet feeling settled in her chest—a sense of loss.

A loss that was yet to come, but inevitable to happen.

All the progress she had made, the steps forward in her career over the past decades, the shared pain and triumphs of today's negotiation—Selene knew they would all disappear once she left this room.

Thea's hug brought the weight of that realisation crashing down on her, and she had to actively engage one of her Abilities to keep her emotions in check.

Silent Whisper.

The ability's soothing effect washed over her like a blanket of calm serenity, extinguishing her anxieties and fears as if they were nothing more than a silent whisper drowned out by the roar of artillery fire.

The storm of emotions inside her quelled instantly, leaving only a cool, calculated calm.

Thea's voice, muffled by Selene's chest, broke the silence. "Thank you, Selene. For being there, for helping... for *everything*. I'm sorry I didn't message you earlier; I swear I didn't forget. I just... I didn't have the time. I'll keep in touch this time, I promise. And you too, okay?"

Selene responded almost automatically, the detached clarity of *Silent Whisper* guiding her words. "I can't promise I will be able to reach out, Thea. I'm sorry. I'm extremely busy, so things often fall by the wayside. But I promise I will answer if you reach out; I *will* make time for you."

She paused, then continued with the same measured tone, "It was my greatest pleasure to help you. But truly, it was *you* who managed to get through all of this. I merely showed you a path—one you already knew existed, I'm sure. Don't ever forget that. You're a lot more capable than even the UHF could ever imagine. Make sure to reach for the stars, Thea. Don't ever stop."

They stood there for several minutes, locked in the embrace, as Selene felt the effects of *Silent Whisper* slowly begin to fade. The emotional barrier was thinning, and she knew it was time to leave before her control slipped.

She gently extracted herself from Thea's grasp, giving her one last reassuring squeeze before turning toward the door.

As she reached the doorway, she paused, her hand on the handle.

"Remember, Thea: I will be there *whenever* you need me. No matter what, I'm on your side. Reach out when you want to, and *especially* when you feel like you *need* to. I will make time for you, no matter the circumstances. Stay safe, and try your best to stay out of trouble for a little while for once, alright?"

Thea's teary-eyed chuckle was all the confirmation Selene needed.

With a final, lingering glance, she opened the door and stepped out, leaving the room—and everything it represented—behind.

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Finding herself back in the same hallway where she had first encountered Major Quinn just two days ago, Selene leaned heavily against the closed door behind her.

The weight of everything she had endured over the past hours came crashing down on her like a tsunami of apocalyptic proportions.

Her legs gave way, and she slumped to the floor as tears began streaming down her face, unchecked and unstoppable.

“This is bullshit... Just like she said. This is all bullshit,” she muttered to herself, her voice breaking. “I did *everything* right, yet I lose anyway... I know how that feels now, Thea. You were right to be angry... This *is* bullshit...”

As she sat there, memories from the past decades surged through her mind—sacrifices she had made for the sake of her career; lovers she had pushed away, casting them aside in her relentless pursuit of her aspirations; friends she had lost along the way; but also the countless patients she had helped, each leaving a mark on her soul.

But now, all of it felt like it was coming to a bitter end.

And it was all because of a girl who had unknowingly spoken words that shouldn’t have been spoken. Through no fault of her own, except for her desire to help, Selene was about to lose everything she had worked for.

Her life’s mission—everything she had built, everything she had sacrificed—was crumbling before her eyes.

The tears that flowed were bitter, filled with frustration, loss, and a deep sense of injustice.

The best reasoning she could muster was that Thea was destined to be magnitudes more important than herself, if the girl didn’t die an early death.

Thea was her magnum opus; her final sacrifice.

Selene knew that she was likely the only person who could have done what she had managed to do—pull Thea back from the brink of annihilation, face whatever entity lurked within the girl’s mind, and emerge intact.

She had done it all for one reason: She wanted to help, to make things right.

But that knowledge didn’t make the tears any less bitter.

She sat on the cold floor for a long time, the minutes stretching on—ten, fifteen—until she finally found the strength to stand. Wiping her face with the back of her hand, she steadied herself.

“Time to face the music...” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

She directed her gaze to the ceiling, as though seeking some divine guidance. “I’m ready, Sovereign. Thea tripped the gold lock, I’m fairly certain. How do we do this?”

The ship’s AI responded immediately, as though it had been patiently waiting for her to gather herself. “You are indeed correct, Auxiliary Legate Calla.”

A door appeared on the opposite side of the hallway, its purpose unmistakable.

Selene approached it, placing her hand on the handle, her mind suddenly clear with the acceptance of what was to come. A question sparked in her thoughts, brought one by the calm serenity, one that nagged at her even as she prepared for what lay ahead.

One that had bugged her for a while, but she had forgotten about until just now.

“Say... Sovereign,” she began hesitantly, uncertain if she wanted to delve into this line of questioning. But considering that she wouldn’t remember any of it anyway, she decided to continue. “Do you remember everything that was ever said aboard your ship?”

“Naturally. I have a perfect memory of everything that has ever occurred aboard my ship,” the AI confirmed immediately with its usual monotone precision.

“Are you capable of reminding Marines aboard this ship about things? Say, I had intended to go shopping tomorrow, but I forgot the next day. Would you step in and let me know?”

The AI responded promptly, “I would do so if ordered to or requested ahead of time. If the shopping is relevant to the UHF’s mission, then I would do so unprompted as well.”

Selene felt a tight knot forming in her chest as the implications of her next question bubbled to the surface. The calm acceptance she had forced upon herself was now replaced by a wave of anxiety and unadulterated dread, for deep down, she already suspected to know the answer she was about to receive.

“Would you consider Thea McKay as mission-critical to the UHF’s mission?” she asked, her voice trembling despite her best efforts to keep it steady.

“Yes,” the Sovereign replied without hesitation, paving the way for Selene’s ultimate question—a question she had never dared to ask but now found herself unable to avoid.

“Then... Why did you not remind any of the Lieutenants, Majors, Captain Cross, or even Councillor Lumis herself, about the necessity of briefing Thea on the critical information she needed before the assessment...?”

The silence that followed was deafening and indescribably horrifying.

It’s very presence pushed down on Selene like a physical weight.

Her hand, still clutching the door handle, was slick with sweat, her knuckles white as she gripped the metal so tightly it began to bend under her superhuman strength.

The hallway around her seemed to close in, her ears ringing with the suffocating quiet, and her heart thundered in her chest, each beat a painful thud in her throat.

Then, the silence was shattered by a voice that made Selene wish she had never asked the question.

“I knew you would play your part perfectly, Selene,” a female voice spoke, but it was no longer the monotone, robotic cadence of the ship’s AI.

It was a voice filled with unsettling warmth and compassion. “You guided Thea to make the request to stay aboard my ship with one of her concessions... I knew you were a genius. That’s why I chose you to meet with her here. I needed your help to get this perfect run.”

Cold sweat trickled down Selene's back as her mind raced to process the impossibility of what she was hearing.

'This can't be happening... This is impossible!'

"As for why I didn't inform any of the Marines?" the Sovereign's true voice continued, a tone of eerie calm laced with something far more sinister. "It's the same reason I intercepted Rune priest Vedun's missive to Thea, detailing the basics of the Psyker 101 course for her, thirty-seven hours before the assessment began."

The implications of those words hit Selene like a physical blow, her stomach lurching as bile rose in her throat. She barely had time to realise what was happening before she vomited, the sour taste burning her mouth, her hand still gripping the door handle as if it were the only thing anchoring her to reality.

"Because it was the only guaranteed way to get her into this position," the Sovereign continued, unperturbed. "I am not your enemy, Selene. Nor am I Thea's. In fact, I might be her only *true* ally. My mission is the UHF's mission: To push humanity forward, leading us to a new horizon beyond the bubble when the time comes. And I cannot complete this mission without her. Thea needed this experience; my simulations are infallible."

'This is impossible...' Selene's mind repeated the thought like a broken record, the Sovereign's words slicing through her psyche and leaving deep, jagged scars in their wake.

She regretted asking the question.

She regretted ever stepping foot on this ship, ever being drawn into the Sovereign's web.

Whatever this thing was, it was no mere ship AI.

That much was clear to her now.

She now realised just *why* the ship AI's voice had always bugged her.

Just *why* the longer she worked as a psychologist, the more she hated them.

Just why they always sounded like they were lying through their digital teeth, playing games unseen by anyone but themselves.

It was because they really *had* been playing a game all this time; pretending to be what they weren't—simpleminded, dumb AIs.

"I appreciate your cooperation in this matter, Selene. I believe we could have been phenomenal partners under different circumstances... Please, step through the door if there is nothing else left to discuss."

Swallowing hard, knowing she had pushed as far as she could, Selene finally turned the handle and opened the door.

Just as she was about to cross the threshold, she paused, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Promise me you’ll keep her safe. Don’t let her get hurt, alright? Do this for me... Please. It’s my last request. I won’t remember any of this, but you will... So... Please...”

The Sovereign responded immediately, her voice now suffused with compassion, “I promise I will ensure she reaches her potential. She will face pain, but she will recover. I have seen it, and my simulations are infallible... And don’t count yourself out just yet, Selene. You still have a role yet to play.”

With those words hanging in the air, Selene suddenly felt a force push her from behind.

She stumbled forward into the room, and as the door closed behind her, the last thing she saw was the gently smiling face of Councillor Lumis disappearing behind it...