

## Interlude – Selia II

Selia walked into the small clearing alongside Erdania. Neither of them wore their masks, there was no need for it. This meeting was technically related to Cabal matters. In the clearing, two people waited for them. One was tall, with blond hair and straight back. Sigmund held his hands behind his back, looking up at the moon and the crest of the territory owner above. It was his territory, a small outpost that he barely ever used.

Selia and Erdania approached, their footsteps announcing their presence. The second person in the clearing glanced in their direction. He didn't wear a mask, but Selia knew him.

“Vryull,” she nodded in his direction. Using Void's real name.

“Selia, Erdania,” he nodded back.

Sigmund turned around and looked at them.

“What is this about?” Erdania asked in a slightly annoyed. The last couple of months had been hard on both of them.

Sigmund didn't seem to mind the tone. He raised his hands and signed.

*“This is concerning the mission to the Third Empire.”*

“We already gave you our answer, we can't—” Selia started, but Sigmund stopped her with a hand and signed again.

*“That was before you lost your sect.”*

Selia felt Erdania stiffen beside her and raised her hand. What Sigmund said was true, and she knew that he was often too direct. He was careful with his words, signed or spoken.

He waited to see if they would speak, and then he continued.

*“I know where you are going, I know what you hope to do. Recover, plan, and return to take your sect back,”* he shook his head. *“When you joined the League, and even the Cabal, you made a choice to put the greater good above all else. I know that you both feel like you failed, that you wish to restore your sect. But there are more important things that we need to deal with, because if we don't, no one else will. You know how the others are, and you know that there must be some force that is pushing them to act even more recklessly. The dome is the only thing that matters now, and there are*

*few people that I can trust to go to the Empire. The others who might be strong enough all have a history with them, we, I, need you.”*

Selia turned and meet Erdania’s gaze. The two of them had so many plans, and all of them revolved around getting their sect back. They had lost the war, and their people.

The sect wars were not the brutal and barbaric wars of the other factions. They did not spill the blood of their armies unless there was a blood debt incurred that could only be repaid by death. The sects valued honor, they valued face and displays of power.

With the death of her grandfather, the Sect Head, and all the other more senior Sect Heads, things had gotten difficult fast. Selia had been the one to take the leadership of the sect, amidst hundreds of little factions seeking to improve their standing in the sect. In a way, what happened was inevitable. Their enemies attacked, and their allies switched sides. Factions inside the sect that wanted more turned coat, and Selia was left with trying to put out a thousand little fires.

She and Erdania had power, they could go against any of their foes, but in the end, they were just two people. They couldn’t be everywhere. An army would invade a territory, their best would fight her best and if they won, the territory would surrender. The people would swear loyalty to the winners, as they should. If their sect couldn’t protect them, if they weren’t strong enough to keep them, then they didn’t deserve to lead them. And even if her people managed to defend a territory, there were always more people coming to challenge them.

It had happened slowly. She would lose a territory, then try and take it back. Sometimes she succeeded, but she never held it for long. Over the years, she was bleeding territories, and the faith of her people in her leadership. It... everything just snowballed out of control. More and more people made deals with those who could provide them with better leadership, and in a way Selia didn’t begrudge them that.

At least her war hadn’t turned as violent as what was happening in the rest of the core. She had heard stories about entire kingdoms getting razed to the ground. It was times like these that she thanked the heavens that she had been born in a sect. The other factions liked to call them brutal and

violent, but at least they didn't murder everyone in their way when they wanted something. Warriors fought, and warriors died. If one was met with a clearly superior opponent, they submitted, there was no point in fighting a battle that could cost them lives.

People died, that was true. And sometimes blood was drawn. But it was all about face. To take over people and territories without killing gave more honor. And sadly, Selia had failed. Perhaps if she had decided to throw her honor away, she could've held the sect together, slaughtered their armies, but that would've only lost her respect of the people in the sect.

"We..." Selia started, but then she saw the look in Sigmund's eyes.

*"If we do not deal with the forces of this dome, then you getting your sect back will not matter at all,"* Sigmund signed.

"The world is tearing itself apart," Vryull added, and Selia turned to look at the cthul's eyes. "And there are more domes just waiting to be opened. What does ruling a scant few territories mean in the face of that?"

Selia closed her eyes, she understood, and yet the sect had been her home.

"I wish that I just killed them all," Erdania whispered, sounding defeated.

The two of them had made a choice not to break the rules of war as their grandfather understood them.

"No, you don't," Selia told her.

"Are you certain that we should be going and helping the Third?" Erdania asked.

"We know that something or someone has been fanning the flames among the core," Vryull said. "But we've been unable to identify just what it is exactly. But the effects are obvious if one looks closely enough. The leader of the dome is the most likely suspect."

"From across the world?" Erdania asked.

"We just don't know," Vryull said. "Regardless, killing the leader should weaken the rest of the dome's forces, if what the Third believes is right. You know what the future holds, we need to get ready, we need to deal with this dome and then focus on uniting the core. Your sect can wait until then."

"What even is the plan? Who are we sending?" Erdania asked.

Vryull glanced at Sigmund who raised his hands and turned to look at Selia as he signed.

*“I do not know much of the Empire’s side, only that they will have a few High Ranker level people ready. Eratemus will be sending one of his vessels, and I’ve picked Vryull and Maleatus to go as well. The two of you if you agree. Bera has recommended someone who can get us in and out of the Ethereal Realm and who has experience fighting this foe and I believe that his partner will be coming as well. And I wanted to speak with you about the last member.”*

Selia tilted her. The look in his eyes made her suspicious. “What do you mean?”

*“I respect your privacy, but the events at the arena were seen by many, as were your fights over the last three years.”*

Selia looked at him blankly, and when she didn’t comment he continued.

*“You’ve demonstrated a... unique new power, and I know that you haven’t advanced yet. I also know that another had done the same in the arena, the Undying Void. The two of you alone held off an army of hundreds of thousands. Be honest with me, how are you connected to one another?”*

Selia grimaced and glanced at Erdania. The two of them hadn’t spoken much about what had happened. She had tried to ignore the sensation inside her mind, but even now she could tell where he was, how he was feeling. With every step that they had taken in his direction, the sensation had gotten stronger. Everything was still muted, but she could tell some things from time to time. Most of the time she felt a vast sense of calm. There was this thing between her and Erdania, that they didn’t talk about, and that had... it hadn’t affected them much, they just ignored it. She had spoken with Ryun only a handful of times, when they were about to use their perks. He had warned her, and she had done the same in turn.

She was grateful for what he had shared, and at the time it had been necessary. She had made this choice, and she didn’t regret it, though it had made things somewhat awkward. Erdania had her own history with Ryun, brief though it was.

“We...” Selia turned her eyes from Erdania to meet Sigmund’s gaze. “Yes, we are connected. He shared a powerful power with me.”

*“I assumed that was the case,” Sigmund singed. “And am I wrong in believing that together you would be at your most powerful?”*

Selia sighed. She could already see where this was going. “Yes, that’s correct.”

*“You are heading in his direction, you are planning on bringing your people to his sect, aren’t you?”*

Selia didn’t answer.

“We are,” it was Erdania who spoke. “We need someone who has no real ties to our sect and who would be willing to allow us to stay and recover. Or rather, we needed that. I assume that we are going to the Third Iteration now?”

Selia knew that the question was for her. “We... You want him to come with us?”

Sigmund nodded. *“We will need people that can hold back armies, I doubt that the dome leader will be unprotected. Do you think that you could convince him to come?”*

Selia shrugged. “I don’t really know. But... I know what you are saying Sigmund, I understand. I’ve been wrapped up in the matters of my sect, just like everyone else had been looking only for their own faction. Perhaps we could look beyond our greed, we would’ve already dealt with the dome,” She sighed. “You are right. We need to do this.”

Vryull stepped forward. “We don’t plan on abandoning the core, the others will be trying to restore order and figure out how exactly others are getting influenced. Fenera and Sigmund will make sure of it.”

“Yes,” Sigmund signed. *“My territories have remained relatively secure; I will attempt to gather allies and hunt for whatever is manipulating others.”*

“Why are you not coming with us?” Erdania asked. “You are their descendant.”

Sigmund waved his hand. *“I cannot afford to. With the loss that the Cabal suffered I am needed. If we stopped interceding behind closed doors the state of the core would be much worse. Dracael will be transporting you,*

*and Eratemus might be able to move between here and the Third, but he will still be distracted. And the rest of the League is tasked with monitoring the Tournament City. We... there are reports of entire towns going missing. Something is happening there, and we can't get anyone close enough to learn what."*

"So, what do you want us to do?" Selia asked.

*"Go to the Undying Void, ask him to join the mission. You may offer reward as well; my coffers are at your disposal. After that, make your way to the Golden Coast. Draceal will be waiting there for you with her fleet. You will make landfall beyond the eastern border of the Empire and make your way to them. Dracael will remain at sea waiting for you to return. The Empire will provide escort, but I am told that there might be a stretch where you could get attacked by the enemy. Their wall does not stretch beyond the mountains that flank their border. Once in the Empire, they will inform you of the exact plan."*

"We are to follow their plan?" Erdania asked.

*"The politics of all of this are... difficult. I am hoping that once there you will be able to give your input."*

"I will not be part of some elaborate way to kill myself," Erdania warned.

Selia nodded. "I understand that we will be going to their territory, but we are going to help, Erdania is right. Are we sure that their old... grudges, won't be an issue?"

*"As sure as we can be," Sigmund signed. "Eratemus was the one who was in contact with them. From what he told me... things are bad there; they need all the help that they can get."*

Selia had no choice but to trust that. "What are we doing about our... other plans?"

The League had its own goal, but they hadn't had many meetings since everything went down.

*"Everything is changed now. We cannot do anything that would jeopardize our survival. For now, we work on trying to help and unite everyone, after we may reevaluate and make a decision."*

There wasn't much to be said after that. Sigmund was their leader, they all followed and respected him.

“All right then,” Selia said. “We are still a few months away from the Twilight Melody Sect. Once we arrive, I will send a message back.”

*“I’ve arranged for a teleporter to be opened and cut your trip down significantly. Another route will be opened to take you to the Golden Coast once you are ready to depart. But please, don’t take too long.”*

The only thing that Selia could do was nod in gratitude. And then try to figure out what she was going to say to Ryun.

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Selia and Erdania stood on top of a hill watching as their people exited the teleporter. There was just over a thousand of them. The most loyal of them who had decided to come with them. She was grateful for them of course, but they were also a constant reminder of her failure. She hadn’t been able to hold what her grandfather had built, and that stung quite a bit. She knew that sect members saw her as powerful, but they also saw her as young. She had seen it during the last three years. It was... Infuriating. She had more than earned their respect, and yet comments and suggestions that tried to steer her in ways that benefited them had become present from the moment she took over the rule.

She had spent so much time trying to plan on how she was going to take her sect back that now when she had a different goal... she felt slightly lost. There was the mission, of course, but even that brought its own complications. She looked at Erdania standing next to her, looking straight ahead at their people. The route that Sigmund had secured had reduced their trip to just a few weeks.

She had planned on having more time to think, more time to plan on what she was going to say. Both to Erdania and Ryun. Now, though... they were almost there, and she could feel Ryun inside her head much more deeply. He was aware of them coming, and was... curious?

“Dani,” Selia started slowly.

Her partner turned and looked at her.

“I had hoped that we would have more time to... talk about all of this, but life rarely gives us what we want.”

“That’s an understatement if I ever heard one,” Erdania chuckled.

“We should talk about him and everything else.”

“I’ve wanted to say something for a while now,” Erdania started. “I... I wanted you to know that I understand, and that what I had with Ryun was just a short passing moment of fun. I am not going to lie and tell you that I wasn’t attracted to him, I was, am still probably. But you have this connection that I just don’t know what to do with now.”

“There is nothing to worry about,” Selia said, trying to control her emotions. “I... I am fine with the past. And I made this choice, I knew what it would entail. But now we are going to be near him again.”

Selia paused, trying to find the right words. The last three years had been so busy that they had barely had any time for themselves.

“Before all of this, we talked about finding someone else, a third,” Selia continued.

Erdania raised an eyebrow. “We are going on a mission that will probably end with us dying, and this is what you want to talk about?” She said, but her lips had turned up in a grin.

Selia smiled too. “If there is anything that the last three years taught me, it is that life is unpredictable and that everything can change in an instant. I think that we should strive to live life to the fullest, as if we are going to die tomorrow.”

It was something that Ryun had actually helped her rediscover. His outlook on the world and advancement was so much different than anything else. It was why she had made so much progress over the last three years in figuring out her Ascended Inspiration.

“We’ll see, first we should make sure that we are welcome. For all we know he might decide to just send us back home.”

The bond inside her head told her a lot about the way that Ryun was feeling.

“I don’t think that we need to worry about that,” Selia said.

They were only a few weeks away from the Twilight Melody Sect territories, and then... Well, as Erdania said, they would see.