

Interlude – Selia I

The party was in the full swing by the time the sun turned into the moon. Selia looked around, seeing all the people with their elaborate masks and their expensive and lavish outfits. Her own outfit and mask were elaborately crafted, it was one thing that she enjoyed about these events. No matter her thoughts on the way the sects were run, she had to admit that she did enjoy wearing the newest and the most expensive of dresses. The dress she wore now was a marvel, a sect style robe with long and wide sleeves, several layers folded over each other and a large sash that tied in a ribbon at the back. Crafter out of the finest Great Avanosian Spider Silk, a breed created by the Avanos Sect, the best monster breeders in the Settled Territories. Painted in her sect colors, of course—pearl and azure. Her mask was fashioned from the hide of a white-furred Elgazion—one of the most dangerous predators in the Infinite Realm. The particular monster was one that had been slain by her adoptive father a century ago.

The people in the hall kept their distance from her, as they usually did. The masks did little to hide people's identities. Those that attended events such as these more often than not had some type of sensory power that allowed them to identify people other than through their eyes, and some races relied on other senses more than others. A ravzor could identify someone by smell and a kreacan through their hearing. Even without, with their high stats they noted more things, their bodies saw and remembered. The way someone walked, the way they spoke, their body shape. No, the masks were there just so that they could let them pretend. To allow them to relax the customs that they had built their sects around, to let them enjoy a single night without having to worry about appearances and honor. To Selia it was... ironic in a way. They said that the masquerade freed them, and yet even here they had managed to bring in their philosophies. The way someone was dressed was noted, the craftsmanship that produced their masks, the materials, all of it was taken into account. Even if it was not mentioned, it would be remembered.

Selia would rather not be at the party at all, but as a Sect Leader she couldn't just ignore them. And she was at this party for an additional reason: the task granted to her by Command. She didn't know why he wanted the Seventh Iteration Ranker recruited. Their group was looking for more members, that was true, but they needed people who were strong, who could stand up to the Cabal. The Seventh Iteration Ranker was... not that. She had watched his first qualifier match, and hadn't been all that impressed. He had to have had some good sensory skill or perk, with the way he moved around his opponent, but most people who were powerful had the same. His technique was simple, and obviously a Qi drain, others might not have noticed, but she knew that he had nearly depleted himself by the end of the match. True, he had only used two techniques, a boosting one that probably not many people noticed him using, and his wall creating one. He had good control over his Qi, that much she would give him, and perhaps he was hiding his best powers—Command had to have given her an order for a reason.

For now, their most impressive thing about him was that he had achieved such power in such a short time, without anyone raising him. He was a Ranker, which Selia had heard made people... different. She wouldn't know, she wasn't one, and most of the Rankers she knew were from the fifth and the sixth Iterations. And of those who had managed to become immortal, few were really impressive. The only Ranker she was impressed by was her great grandfather, the Sect Head of Zenshuen, but the old man was unique.

She stood alone, Erdania had once again managed to get out of coming with her, not that Selia was going to press her. She knew why Erdania disliked these parties even more than Selia herself did. Erdania would much rather find a small bar and pretend to get wasted with low tiered warriors than stand before the arrogant rulers of the high society. It was people like this that had robbed her of her childhood, and Erdania would never forget that. Regardless, Selia could see that Erdania was shaken. Oh, she could hide it well, better than anyone Selia knew. But there was little that she could hide from her. Erdania hadn't told her everything about what happened in the dungeon, she glossed over the battle and everything else that had to do with the spirit that they encountered. So Selia was fine with letting her relax and

be lazy for a while, it was better than the other way that Erdania coped with her traumas.

Which meant that Selia would need to deal with this alone. She felt the Ranker arrive, her sensory skill was powerful and had a range of several hundred meters, a requirement for her build and path. She felt his Essence as he walked in, accompanied by a human woman and a ravzor man. She kept her watch on him as he entered the party and they made their way to the bar.

She didn't quite know how to approach him, not had she even decided if she would. She didn't know if she agreed with Command's order. For now, she would watch him and see if she could learn more about him. She could feel his Essence, his position in relation to her, but she couldn't hear what he was speaking about. Then, a familiar bundle of Essence approached and engaged them. Reki, the young Sect warrior, it didn't surprise her. Reki was likable and he liked meeting new people. He was the favorite to win the High Division, and nothing that Selia had heard or seen made her think otherwise. Reki was trained by the Nihal Ra Jhan himself, the Sect Leader and the head of the third main family of Zenshuen, the grandson of the old man himself. Selia doubted that anyone would be able to beat that kind of training.

Reki called out to someone, even on the other side of the hall she heard his voice. She watched through the throng of people as another person joined their group, recognizing him immediately. The double tails were a dead giveaway. It was Emar's nephew, his sect's representative. Emar had boasted about his nephew, and perhaps he could reach far, depending on his opponents. Emar was a master of the spear, perhaps as good as she was, he was a better teacher than she was, that was for certain.

She couldn't hear their exchange, but it did seem like it was tense for a while. She knew that the sect that this Seventh Iteration Ranker conquered used to be a subordinate sect to the Onyx Fang Sect, and for a moment she wondered if she had made a mistake by inviting them. But then the situation seemed to resolve itself peacefully. Then, as the rest of the group watched the nephew leave, the Ranker moved.

He slipped between two people and got lost in the crowd. His people looked for him, but there were too many people in the hall, and he somehow

always had someone in between himself and his people when they looked in his direction.

It took her longer than she would admit to realize that he was making his way through the hall and heading for her. For a moment she doubted what her sense was telling her, but then she decided to test it. She moved into the crowd, watching with as he adjusted his route and followed after her. She was unsure why he would be coming after her. He didn't know who she was, they had never interacted, there was no reason for it. Unless, he had noticed her during his qualifier. That seemed... unlikely. She had been watching him from across the hall, both with her skill and her perks, for him to notice while fighting in his match... And then for him to recognize her... it would mean that his sensory power was incredibly powerful.

She grimaced, and then started walking toward the exit, trying to create a distance between them and perhaps lose him in the crowd. It didn't work, as she left the hall and moved down the corridor. Drunk guests stumbled around her, making her nose twitch. She never understood how people could do that, not even Erdania. There were people that specialized in lowering other people's resistances just so that they could get drunk, and those that made spirits that could kill even some immortals just for those that couldn't go without.

She debated just making her way to the restricted parts of the building—the party was held on the base floor. But she had invited the man here with the intent of checking him out from a distance, seeing how he would act surrounded by people so much stronger than him. So far, he had shown little regard for that, which could mean several things. In the end, she decided to lead him someplace private, where she could have a conversation without anyone overhearing. The gardens were the best place for that, it was what they were used for. Plants that devoured sound, as well as formations that prevented scrying and other powers from peeking in. It was one of the first things that was built. This might be a temporary home, but it required a bare minimum defenses. Everyone trusted the peace, but being prepared was just smart. She entered the garden, flowers and plants surrounded her, their beauty paling in comparison with the great gardens of home. But she forgave the gardeners that, it had been grown in a fraction of time.

The gardens were the preferred place where the old man liked to hold meetings, and so they were everywhere he went.

Selia found a secluded spot, a place away from the other guests exploring the garden. She stopped beneath a tall ekoa tree, a plant native to the demasi homeworld—Enhell. It could survive anywhere, and its bark was edible, not that it was any good. This variant was much improved on the plant that had come with the demasi Rankers, but it still retained its red leaves and black bark. A torch nearby gave her enough light that she could see her surroundings, but it was not necessary, aside from the moon the sight below her blazed with light as well.

The Seventh Iteration Ranker arrived, finding her with ease in the garden. He walked up and stopped next to her, his eyes glanced at the view before them, but quickly turned around to look at her. She was surprised, the view was quite impressive, one could see the entire Tournament City from here, stretching in the distance, the other cliffs where the rest of the great factions had their headquarters blazed like small suns in the middle of the dark. Even she was tempted to just look at it, take it all in for hours.

The man didn't speak, nor did Selia, she waited for him to make the first move.

Quickly, he seemed to lose patience and spoke. "You were there, during my match, watching me. Why?"

Selia blinked at the directness, but she did find it refreshing. She turned around and met his eyes through his mask. It hit her like a physical force, making her take a step back.

She was all his pain.

It whispered in her mind, an echo of an echo and she clamped down on her perk. He tilted his head at her and she quickly composed herself. It had been unexpected, the gaze had taken her off guard. It was so rare for her to meet someone who had experienced true sorrow. The eyes were the windows to the soul, and through them she could see it. She felt her perk inside her, wanting to reach out, but she pushed it down.

She had lived for hundreds of years, and looked in many eyes in that time. Only a few times had she felt what she had felt from this man. Most immortals had grown callous, jaded, they did not feel in the same manner.

They moved on. True sorrow, the loss that scared the soul, that was rare. And this man in front of her had felt it. It was... unexpected for someone so young, but she could see a weight in his eyes, if she didn't know better she would have thought him old. It was the same look that the old Rankers had, that they had always had. She had always assumed that it was just because they were old in truth, but perhaps... she couldn't imagine what living through the end of a world could feel like. The man himself didn't look all that impressive, he was wider in the shoulders and shorter than her, built stocky.

She realized that she hadn't answered his question. He just stood there, waiting. Again, surprisingly, another would've grown frustrated asked more questions. He seemed at ease with waiting.

"I watched all the competitors that day," Selia said slowly, a truth, only not all of it.

His pupil-less eyes, two dark orbs on nothingness stared at her. He saw right through her.

"You invited my sect to this party, yes?" He asked.

Selia grimaced behind her mask, this was not how she wanted things to go. Recruiting people wasn't easy, but she was much more at ease when she had the advantage and now hers was lost.

"I did invite you, yes. Your sect used to be subordinate to the Onyx Fang Sect which is subordinate to mine. I wanted to get a chance to speak about your sect's intentions and plans." Truth again, only not all of it.

The Ranker didn't answer immediately, but then after a moment he spoke. "You obviously know who I am, where I come from it is considered rude not to introduce yourself, especially if you want something."

Selia blinked at that, taken aback. "I am Selia Ha Jhan, Sect Leader of Zenshuen," she said.

The man didn't immediately bow, nor did he react really in any manner that she expected. Then she remembered that he was a Ranker of the Seventh Iteration. "And you have no idea who I am," she realized that he had spent all his time on the frontier in a small sect. He knew nothing about what they called her or what it meant. It was... refreshing in a way.

"Ah," Ryun said, nodding. "This has happened to me before. Your name is familiar, but I am bad at remembering names," He shrugged. "I might have

overheard it somewhere in passing. Regardless, I don't know much about the core."

Selia looked at him, trying to see whatever it was that Command saw in the man. She could feel his core, just barely. He had great control of his Qi, in a few years he would probably be able to keep it hidden completely like she did. His aspect was that of the Void, and it was a high tier, it felt powerful. She saw cracks beneath his mask, a faint mist rising from them—the result of the forging of his body and aspect obviously. She couldn't know more about his power without peeking with her ring, but that would be rude, and probably wouldn't work as he had a ring on his finger to prevent such intrusions. Without knowing everything about his power, she couldn't evaluate if he would be a good addition. It was why she wanted to wait and observe, to see him in more matches. The invitation was so that she could see how he acted around the people that ran this world.

From the way he acted with her, she didn't think that he particularly cared for them. Or perhaps it was just ignorance, it would be hard to tell now. First, she needed to change the subject, try and learn more about him.

"You," she started. "Are a Ranker of the Seventh Iteration, correct?"

The man tilted his head again. "Yes."

She waited for a moment, but that was apparently all that he would say. She wondered if he was just rude or if it was something else.

"I have heard many rumors about what happened to the rest of the human Iteration, are you willing to tell me what really happened?" She did know the truth that only two humans arrived. Although she didn't know other details.

The man shrugged. "By the time we were transported here, there were only two of us left. We apparently did not arrive where we were supposed to."

Selia studied his gaze, wondering who this man was. Two years was all it took him to reach the Immortal Realm, she didn't know if someone had shared their inspiration with him, although she doubted that. Command wouldn't have asked for someone that weak to be recruited. He was impressive in that regard, that much she could admit. Still, they knew too little about him. It occurred to her then, that perhaps Command knew all of this as well. There were other people that he could've asked to recruit the

man, but he asked Selia. He knew her enough to know that she wouldn't move before she knew everything there was to know about the Ranker.

She was meant to learn about him. The question was, how best to go about it.

“Would you consider making your sect a subordinate of Zenshuen, not Onyx Fang, but directly to my sect, to me?” Any Sect Head in the world would jump at that offer.

Unsurprisingly though, Ryun shook his head. “I don't know you, I don't know your sect. And I value the freedom to do what I want.”

“The Zenshuen name could open many doors for you, get your sect invited to exclusive events, you will be made aware of great opportunities. We will provide you with Essence, resources, everything you need to succeed. You will have our protection.”

The man shrugged. “I have no need of such things,” he said. “And I don't like putting myself in others debt. What I would like to know is why you are even interested in us.”

He had no idea what he was turning down, and she doubted that she could convince him otherwise.

“We are always on the lookout for new talent. You are a Seventh Iteration Ranker, and you have advanced faster than any Ranker before you, it has drawn the eyes of many. Why wouldn't I be interested in you and your sect?”

He didn't seem to have an answer to that. Still, she knew that convincing him would be hard. For now she needed a reason to stay close, to interact and learn more about him.

“How about this? Agree to have our sect sponsor you personally during the tournament,” she raised her hand to stop him from refusing as he opened his mouth to speak. “I know, you don't want us to give you power, I can see that you are used to being on your own and making your way. If you don't want it, we will not force it on you. But our sponsorship can open other doors for you, access to items sold by the exclusive shops, invitation to the Grand Auction, things like that.”

She saw him think about it, but something told her that he was going to refuse again. She didn't let him.

“Think about it, talk with your subordinates. I don’t need an answer now,”

He grimaced and tilted his head. “Hm... Perhaps I should do that,” he sighed. “If you will excuse me, my party is searching for me, I should go.”

“Think about it,” she said as he turned and walked away. She frowned after he was gone, he had said that his party was searching for him, a statement not conjecture. It could mean that his sensory range was much larger than she initially thought, beyond even hers.

He was an interesting man, but she still didn’t see anything that would make him a good fit with the League. But perhaps she was wrong, only time would tell.