

Interlude - Reunion

The party was in the full swing, and it showed no signs of stopping even though the middle of the night had already passed. It was... annoying in a way, at least to her. She looked around the great hall, taking in the ornery decorations mounted on the walls, priceless art pieces made by high tiered individuals, all of it surrounded the floor where people from all across the core mingled. The music filled the hall, a human/demasi fusion of sound. The traditional demasi instrument, veres, with its long glass tubes and their melodic sounds met the soft sound of the human string instruments, violins and cellos. Not everything survived the old worlds, and not everything that was remembered could be replicated in this world. But some things, like music, did endure. She did not know how similar the music of this day and age was to that which existed before. She was no great scholar or historian to search the few records or interview the old Rankers that still remembered. Still, she did enjoy the music, the soft tones made a perfect melody to slow dance to. Which the people were taking advantage off in the middle of the hall on the dance floor.

Most were from the sects, wearing their elaborate robes in the colors of their factions, but some were from non-sect factions. Just being invited here was a great honor, a declaration that one had influence and prestige. Women of most races walked and danced in stunning dresses, presenting themselves to other guests. The demasi and humans dominated, as was to be expected, Zenshuen was a demasi and human sect, and most of the people in the hall were from the many families that comprised the sect. She looked around, seeing the women who attempted lure drunken scions of great sects or influential faction members out of the hall, to the dark corridors where they might attempt to use their bodies to gain just a tiny bit of an advantage. Others looked dignified standing next to their partners and looking down on the rest. A few were alone, no suitors approaching them, nor did they seek anything of the sort.

Selia was one of those, she stood in the corner of the room looking out expressionlessly. She did not enjoy these kinds of events, she much preferred

peace and quiet. Responsibilities however, forced her to attend events such as these, even though the noise almost made her head hurt. They were all so wrapped up in their own lives, into their need to be seen and known. Seeking prestige and influence, as if it was the only thing that mattered. It was why they were weak, why it took them so long to gain power.

She restrained herself from sneering at them, she couldn't let them see her true feelings. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a new group enter, the colors of their robes immediately caught her eyes. She suppressed the desire to scowl in annoyance as her father, uncle now, entered the room. The group around him was familiar to her, even though she hadn't spoken with them in a long time, not since she had gotten the name Ha Jhan and was adopted into the main family.

She didn't know how they had managed to get an invitation to the event, their branch of the family was low on the totem pole, far too weak and poor to be granted an honor such as this. Once, Selia would've felt better inclined toward them, but that was before she learned of the things they had done.

She knew that they were only here to seek her out, to try and wrest anything that they could from her. Using their blood connection to try and gain more prestige and influence. She knew exactly what they had done in the past, how they were using her name to open doors that would've otherwise been bared to them. The only reason she hadn't put a stop to it was because they were yet to cross the line, but she knew that it was only a matter of time. They were getting close to it already.

She looked around, trying to find the quickest way through the crowd and out of their sight. Unfortunately, she was too late, and they spotted her and headed her way. Her fa—uncle led the way, a big fake smile on his face. Once they reached her he hesitated, just a bit longer than was proper, and then Kerial Elhan bowed. The two people surrounding him did the same. On his right was his sister, Selia's aunt, and on his right his eldest son, now Selia's cousin.

"Greetings daughter, pardon, niece," he said, correcting himself, as if he could have forgotten. He did it on purpose, trying to remind her of where she came from. More fool him, she never could forget. Even calling her niece was pushing it, to him she should be only Sect Leader.

“Uncle,” she said evenly, keeping any emotion out of her voice. She didn’t respond with to his bow, not even with an inclination of her head. Letting him know exactly what she thought of his games.

She saw his face twist into a scowl for just a moment before it cleared up, and got replaced by his fake mask again.

“It is a great event,” he said, looking around. “Many powerful individuals in attendance.”

Selia didn’t respond. Her uncle waited for an answer in vain, and then sighed. He walked over to stand next to her and look out at the part alongside her.

“Niece,” he started, again breaking with the protocol. Not that she cared much for it in the first place, she just didn’t want to talk with him. “I’m sure that you’ve heard about the Golden Sky Sect’s raids on our territories.”

Selia sighed, realizing that he wouldn’t stop until she acknowledged him. “I am,” she said, of course she was familiar with it. The Phoenix was insane, attacking without provocation too far. The Sect was yet to decide on what exactly they should do in response.

“Well,” her uncle started. “The family’s holdings had been impacted. We lost an entire village. With the way things had been going, that had been a large hit to our income. I was hoping that you might be able to provide some aid.”

She had known what he was going to ask the moment she saw him. The only thing her former family thought about was wealth and influence, nothing else. They had failed to protect what was theirs, and now they wanted her to bail them out, he probably imagined her going over and attacking the Phoenix in retaliation, as if she had nothing better to do than start a war over their worthless hides.

“An emissary was sent to the Golden Sky Sect, the matter will be resolved,” Selia said.

“Of course, but perhaps aid in the form of Essence might be in order, to help us repair the village. It isn’t much to ask, niece,” he said with a small smile on his face.

“Sect Leader,” Selia said slowly.

He blinked, and his eyes got hard. She glared down at him, knowing how much it ate him inside that she had escaped his clutches and his influence, that she was greater than him. That he couldn't touch her again.

"Sect Leader," he inclined his head, stiffly.

"It is being dealt with, I have better things to do than worry about one small insignificant village at the edge of our territory," Selia told him.

Kerial knew better than to speak again.

A few minutes of uncomfortable silence later, and her cousin cleared his throat then spoke. "I've heard that there will be a High Ranker Division this year. Are you going to participate, cousin?"

Selia glanced in his direction, then away. "No, I have no need to prove myself to others."

"Don't you want everyone to know—"

"—No."

Before anyone could speak again, a sect member dressed in red and gold, the colors of the Zenshuen main family approached. He wore servant's robes, and bowed deeply to her, ignoring the three standing next to her.

"Sect Leader, you are summoned to approach the throne," he said while bowed, respectfully and clearly.

Selia sighed in relief, then turned back to the three. "Duty calls," she said and then stepped forward without waiting for their response, glad to be rid of them.

The servant walked in front of her, two steps ahead and one to the right. "Thank you Feris," Selia whispered to him.

"It was your grandfather's idea," he whispered back with a knowing look before he schooled his expression back to its professional mask.

She walked behind him through the throng of people, seeing them look at her, studying her. Some looked with respect, others with fear, a few with lust. She tried to ignore them, but she couldn't suppress the feeling of disgust at their lecherous looks. They knew that she was taken, and they still couldn't control themselves.

She forcibly cleared her mind as they approached the throne, carved out of great red crystal, seamless and awe inspiring. It was the throne of Zenshuen, and it went wherever its owner went. In it sat Veriton Ha Jhan,

the Sect Head of Zenshuen Sect. He looked old, more so than anyone else that Selia had ever met. He had been that way for as long as she had known him. Shoulder length white hair was framed by two obsidian black horns that rose from his brows and stretched back nearly to the back of his head. His skin was wrinkled and pockmarked, leathery. It was the color of purest white, as new snow just fallen on the ground, a side effect of his True Body. He looked a wise and powerful, despite his aged appearance. A Ranker of the Second Iteration, a survivor and a great man. She approached the throne and bowed deeply before him.

“Sect Head,” she greeted him.

“Rise, granddaughter,” he said his tone soft and kind. “And it is grandfather to you, always. How many times must I remind you?”

Selia straightened and met his startlingly bright blue eyes. “At least once more, grandfather,” she smiled.

He shook his head and gestured for her to approach. She climbed the steps and got near him, with a wave of his hand the noise from the hall cut off as he activated a formation to prevent sound from entering and leaving their little bubble.

“Thank you for...” She trailed off, no need to name it.

Her grandfather nodded his head. “Of course, I know how family can be.”

She shrugged. They were no real family to her. The man in front of her was one of the very few that she considered as such. He wasn't truly her grandfather, more something like great great great grandfather. Kerial Elhan was born a sixth son of a third son of the Elhan family, their connection to the Sect Head was tenuous at best. The Elhan family was started by the Sect Head's great great grandson, who was the fifth son of his father, not even close to being in the main family.

Only the direct descendants, first sons of the first sons were considered of the Jhan family. Of course, the Sect Head did not turn away those from the branch families, if someone proved themselves strong and capable, then they could be adopted into one of three branches of the main Jhan family, as she had been. She had been adopted by the Sect Head's grandson, a great man who had led the Ha Jhan family for a long time. He had died, a few

decades ago, leaving Selia in charge of the Ha Jhan family, as the best candidate to be a Sect Leader.

She wouldn't have done half as well without her grandfather's guidance.

"You've been restless, granddaughter," he said, breaking the silence.

Selia considered brushing it off, but then shook her head, she only had one secret before her Sect Head. "Erdania hadn't checked in yet," she said slowly.

"Ah," he nodded his head. "It can be hard, being away from those we love."

"Yes," Selia nodded in agreement.

"Well, perhaps you might want to go and rest, who knows, you might feel better by the end of the night," he smiled at her.

Selia narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She knew him well enough to know when he knew more than she did, but she didn't press. She trusted him. She nodded her head, then leaned down and landed a soft kiss on his cheek. "Thank you grandfather," she straightened and bowed again. "With your leave, Sect Head?"

He rolled his eyes and waved his hand, dismissing her and the cone of silence around them.

She smiled as she turned around and left the party, glad that she didn't have to suffer it anymore.

She walked into her rooms and sighed in exhaustion. She did not enjoy being surrounded by so many people. It wasn't her idea of having a good time. And she definitely did not enjoy people looking at her.

She made her way into her living room when she stopped. In an instant he Qi flew through her conduits and she formed a technique **{Sanguine Silver Spear}**. Four spears appeared around her pointing to the side.

"Hey! Hey!" A familiar voice yelled out, and Selia sighed. The spears disappeared, and Selia glanced in the intruder's direction.

Erdania was lying on one of her couches, her legs sprawled across the armrest and her head dangling off the side, uncomfortably.

“Dani, you couldn’t have let me know that you were coming?” Selia asked. Her grandfather’s words now made more sense, he had probably known that she had arrived.

“What would be the fun in that?” Erdania grinned and then rolled over her head to the floor and stood up in one smooth action that defied gravity.

Selia rolled her eyes, but inside she was happy. It had been too long that they had been together. The secret meeting they had both attended hadn’t been a place for them to really interact.

“Selia, my love, I missed you,” Erdania said as she walked forward, her hands spread wide for a hug. Selia raised her hand and stopped her, her eyes narrowing. She hated this part, she hated feeling this way, but they had an agreement. And she would follow the rules of it.

“How many?” Selia asked.

Erdania’s expression fell and she let her arms drop to the side.

“Must we still do this? It’s been a long time now, you know that I love you. There is no need for you to torture yourself with knowing,” Erdania gave her a pained look.

“It is what we agreed to,” Selia responded.

Erdania held her eyes for a long moment, looking almost defiant, but then finally she deflated. “Fine,” Erdania said. “Nine.”

Selia blinked, their eyes locked. Nine... It was a larger number than she had expected, Erdania had only been gone for a few months. It made her angry, jealous, it made her feel like something was wrong with her. She knew it wasn’t true, of course, she just couldn’t help it. Before she realized what she had done her hand moved on impulse. The slap echoed in her room, and Erdania’s head twisted to the side.

“Fuck,” Erdania whispered, then shook her head. “Selia, I—”

Before she could say anything Selia stepped in and pulled Erdania close. “I’m sorry,” she whispered in her ear.

After a few moments, Erdania returned her embrace, although she didn’t relax completely. After a minute, they stepped away, looking at each other.

“I shouldn’t have hit you,” Selia said softly. “I just... nine men, in only a few months?”

Erdania grimaced. “We agreed Selia, I have needs and if you can’t meet them I—”

“—I know, I’m sorry. It’s just hard,” Selia said, bowing her head. It was her failing that made this necessary, of course. She knew that. And they had agreed. Erdania had put up with Selia for too long, suppressing who she was. It was unfair of her to ask Erdania to accept her as she was without her accepting Erdania for who she was in turn. She had tried to change, tried to be intimate in that manner with her. It just... never worked. It didn’t feel right to her. She enjoyed being close to her, enjoyed kissing at times, the feel of her touch on her skin as they embraced. But anything more than that and she just... she couldn’t.

Erdania had to have read something in her expression because she stepped forward, pulling them close again. “Hey, it’s okay, there is nothing wrong with you,” Erdania said and pulled her close for a soft kiss.

It was quick, and chaste, as Selia liked them. After, she looked in Erdania’s eyes. She had loved her for so long, since they were both just children. The day Erdania told her that she felt the same way was one of the happiest of her life. And yet, they had quickly discovered that there was one big issue between them. Erdania was... she was free, she enjoyed life and its pleasures. And Selia was... she was not.

“Selia, love,” Erdania said slowly. “If this hurts you so, perhaps it is time for us to try again?”

Selia’s immediate reaction was to shake her head. “No,” she said.

“We can find someone, I know it,” Erdania insisted. “We did it once before.”

“Terland was special,” Selia said. “There is no one else like him.”

Erdania didn’t look convinced. “It has been three hundred years since he died, we can’t go on like this, not if it hurts you so much.”

Selia turned away, she didn’t want to talk about it again. Terland’s death still hurt, she blamed herself for what happened to him. It was her constant pushing for him to take what she could offer, for her to raise him to a greater power that pushed him to try and prove himself. She should’ve left it alone, instead she pushed him to his death.

There was never going to be someone like him. He was... their great love. He loved them and accepted them as who they were. He loved Erdania in the way that she needed to be loved, and he loved Selia in another, accepting her for who she was.

None of the others that they had tried to bring in their relationship could ever do that. Oh, they said that they could, that they would. But she always knew, she could see their looks in her direction, thinking that they would be the one to change her. And she saw their resentment grow as they realized the truth. Both men and women had tried, and then when they inevitably failed, they always tried to take Erdania away from her.

"I'm tired, Dani, I can't go through all of that again," Selia shook her head. "What we have now works, it has to."

"I don't like seeing you hurt," Erdania said as she embraced her from behind and put her chin on her shoulder.

"I'm a big girl, I can handle it."

Erdania sighed. "Please, promise me that you'll at least think about it? We can take our time, we don't need to pick someone from the streets tomorrow. It would be a lot easier if we added a third again."

Selia sighed. "Fine, I'll think about it, if we change the topic." She knew that there was no winning against her, not when that matter was concerned.

Erdania held her for a long moment, and then finally released her and walked back to the couch.

"Well," Erdania started. "How was the party?"

Selia grimaced as she joined her on the couch, taking a seat next to her and leaning her head against her shoulder. "My father came," she said, there was no need to call him her uncle in Erdania's presence.

"Ah," Erdania said. "That had to have sucked, huh?"

"It did, he wanted what he always wants. Essence, power, influence," Selia shrugged.

"I should really kill him one of these days," Erdania said slowly.

"We talked about this," Selia added.

"I know, but he deserves it, especially after what he did to you," her voice was tinged with anger.

“Erdania,” Selia said softly. “There is no point now, it is a greater punishment for him to remain as he is, insignificant.”

“Maybe,” Erdania didn’t quite agree, Selia knew.

“What happened with your little mission?” Selia asked.

Erdania looked down with a raised eyebrow.

Selia gestured at the room around them. “I installed a cone of silence formation, no one can learn anything that we speak inside here.”

“Ah,” Erdania nodded. “Well, it was a disaster.”

“Really?” Selia asked, straightening and turning so that she could see her clearly.

Erdania grimaced and nodded again. “Yeah, we went into the Ethereal Dungeon to scout it out, see what we would face. It was... a really bad call,” her eyes got unfocused as she remembered. “I went in with Shuffle, Horn, and a few of mercenaries we hired. At first we faced spirits, and low powered shades. It didn’t seem all that difficult, but then... Shades with nine or more rings started appearing and we knew that we needed to leave. We started losing people then, but it wasn’t until we nearly reached the exit that we really understood what we faced.”

Selia saw her expression darken. “What happened?”

“A spirit, a really powerful spirit. It shut us down, hard. We barely managed to get out. Shuffle took its attention, letting us escape, he lost an arm and a leg, and we barely managed to escape. It will take a lot more than what we can gather to conquer that dungeon. It is a death sentence for anyone right now.”

“Is he..?” Selia asked.

“He survived, the fucker can teleport out of any situation, but he was badly hurt. Horn took him to get healed, I got a message from him a few weeks back. Shuffle should be fine in a couple of months.”

Selia nodded her head, she didn’t particularly like Shuffle, but she didn’t want him dead either.

“So,” Erdania started looking back at Selia. “What’s new here?”

“The tournament is progressing as expected. Our Mid Division team qualified, and we have a few people in the Low Divisions that got through.

The first High Division qualifiers are next week, we'll see how our warriors perform.”

“And anything from, you know?” Erdania asked.

Selia grimaced. “Actually, yes. Command sent me a message, he wants me to recruit someone to our little club.”

Erdania blinked. “He found someone?”

“Yes,” Selia said slowly, not quite sure what to say. She had barely believed that the message Command had sent her was genuine.

“Who?” Erdania asked.

“A Ranker, Seventh Iteration one,” Selia said.

“What? Why would we want someone like that?” Erdania looked at her in confusion. A part of Selia agreed with the sentiment.

“Well, apparently, this Ranker is special. It's a human,” Selia said.

“Wait, didn't something happen with the humans? I heard that the skreen killed them all?”

Selia chuckled. “No, I have no idea how that particular rumor started. The truth is that only two humans arrived. Their world was apparently a lot more savage than those of other races, and these two... they were far stronger than any other Ranker that had ever arrived in the Infinite Realm. They were summoned and placed outside of the arrival zone.”

“Really? Well that is interesting, but I still don't see how that makes them a good fit. They can't be strong enough?”

“Well, that is the thing. The man that Command wants recruited has entered the High Division, he has nine tiers of power, and is an Immortal Realm Cultivator.”

Erdania blinked in shock. “What? No way?”

“Yes, way,” Selia said seriously. “I'm not sure just how powerful he could be with how fast he gained power, but... Command does tend to know better than most.”

“Yeah,” Erdania said. “Well, I guess that there is no harm in scouting him out a bit. If he is in the tournament, you'll get to see him fight.”

“I'll get to see him fight? You don't plan on helping me?” Selia quirked her eyebrow.

Erdania snorted. “Hells no, I just got back. I’m gonna be lazy and stay in our rooms sleeping for like a month. And you know that I don’t watch scrubs fight. I’ll come out once the tournament starts in truth.”

Selia rolled her eyes. She did know that Erdania could get easily bored. It was her job in the end.

“Fine, but if you are going to be staying here at the palace, you should really take some time to present yourself to the others. There are parties every night.”

“Ahhh, I hate those pretentious things, they’ll make me wear a dress,” Erdania complained.

Selia glanced at her barely covered form, then back up to her eyes. She knew why Erdania did what she did, it was why she could accept the things that she needed. Still, there were some things that even Erdania needed to respect.

“Grandfather will ask it of you, better that you do it yourself. That way you might redeem yourself a bit,” Selia said.

“The old man knows that I hate it,” Erdania said.

“He also has a sect to run, and you are one of its Sect Leaders, you have obligations. If I have to suffer through those parties, you must do it too.”

Erdania whined, but Selia knew that she would agree eventually. She always did.