

Aftermath

Selia walked among the people. The Sects had started making camp in the ruins of Emaros, even as sweeping teams moved through, taking anything of worth. The Exalted Empire and its allies have moved their forces beyond the Citadel, while leaving some of their forces in it. The Sect teams were moving in there with them as well. The situation was still tense, but at least they weren't fighting.

She turned her attentions to the people. She walked with her mask on, *Acceptance*, and she... talked with people. Her awakened object wasn't a combat one, what it did was help her and others deal with... sorrow, with pain. So, she moved from one group of warriors to another, talking with them. Using **Soothe Pain** for those who mourned friends, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers.

Selia knelt next to a warrior sitting against the crumbling walls of Emaros, holding a broken spear in his hands. He was weeping, and with her ideal she could feel his sorrow. She didn't reach out with her ideal, it would make her experience his memories of the event that caused him such sorrow. Instead, she talked with him, comforting him as **Soothe Pain** did its work. It was hard, especially for those among the army who were like him. Ghosts walked among the living, talking, and smiling, even those without immortalities.

People talked with their fallen, and even though there was sadness, there was also joy and acceptance. They had the time to say goodbye, and death was not the end, they would meet again in the afterlife. It made the contrast oh so much darker. In that darkness, Selia walked, talking with those who wept alone. Those for whom there were no ghosts to talk with, those whose loss was permanent—those who had died a True Death.

Her mask hid her face, but she knew that it made the other feel at ease in her presence. It let them talk, made them open up, and helped them close those wounds. The same as she had healed of her own over time. It wasn't easy, but it was something that she wanted to do. Not just because of what they had decided, how it would help them and their future, but how it helped others.

The veil of war and combat had lifted, and now it was time for reality to rear its head back, for people to realize what they had lost. She walked from person to person, from Sect to Sect, talking and helping them recover.

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Erdania watched Selia from a distance, she didn't interfere with her work. She had always been the more emotional one of the two of them. Erdania worked off her pain in other ways. She glanced to the side, where Ryun stood next to her. They were in the Twilight Melody Camp, up on a part of the wall that still stood.

“So, you bullied the Exalted Empire into pulling back,” Erdania commented.

Ryun chuckled. “I wonder.”

Erdania glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. He didn't need to look at her to notice the gesture.

“I don't know,” Ryun said. “Forget I said anything.”

Erdania dropped it and turned her eyes back to the field where Selia walked among the people. Things were looking good for them, for the first time in a long time. Their standings in the Sects had risen high, and Selia's work down below would give her the love of the people—even though Erdania knew that it wasn't what Selia was after, she just wanted to help.

Still, they had done it. After years, finally the threat of the Dome and its monsters was over.

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A few days after the battle was done, Selia stood in a tent with Ryun, Erdania, and Nayra.

“Are you sure about this?” Nayra asked the demasi woman.

Selia nodded. “I am,” she answered. “I need more strength, to better understand my power if I am ever to advance beyond Ascended. This feels like a good opportunity.”

Erdania grimaced and Selia put a hand on her shoulder. “I don't like this,” Erdania said.

“It will be fine,” Selia smiled. Days of walking among the people had given her time to think about her own life. “I need this, and the two of you need it too,” she looked at Erdania and Ryun. “What Ryun and I did made us... one. It was a hard experience for me,” she admitted. “We need time apart, for a little while at least, I think. Besides, it will give the two

of you a chance to grow closer. I know how you've been feeling with our connection."

Erdania opened her mouth to protest, but Selia put a finger on her lips. "It's all right, I understand. It is only natural. We just need to work on things a bit harder if this is going to work out."

Ryun nodded. "I agree," he said. "You've been living with the bond for less time than I have, being on your own might give you a better understanding of it."

"Fine," Erdania said at last.

Selia nodded, pulled both in for a hug, then gave them each a gentle kiss on the lips. "Don't worry, I'll be back soon."

She turned to look at Nayra and spoke. "I'm ready."

Nayra took a deep breath, glanced at the two behind her, then walked up and put her hand on Selia's shoulder. They had already talked about this, planned it. There was no need to delay any longer. The earlier she went, the quicker she would return.

Then, Nayra used her perk—**I Choose Who Dies**.

It happened fast, one moment they were inside the tent and in the next they were in a gray void, another soul standing across from her—Vanessa, Nayra's sister.

"You sure you want to do this?" Vanessa asked.

Nayra nodded. The woman's immortality had to do with her accumulating fire essence from the spirits in the Ethereal before she could return. And while it probably wouldn't take her that long to return,

they had to have powerful individuals in the Sect with Selia gone for a while.

“I am,” Selia said.

Nayra nodded and then her perk took hold. Selia felt her soul wrench away, traveling faster and faster, the world twisting around her. Then, she stopped, standing in front of a towering gate of an afterlife. With a deep breath she took a step and put her hand on the door, then pushed it open and entered, looking forward to meeting Laqrud.

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After seeing to it that Vanessa was returned to life, Nayra spent another week organizing the Sect and preparing for their return. In the end, there wasn't much that she could do that Lesamitrius couldn't, so she decided that it was time.

She said her goodbyes to Ryun, wrote a letter for Anrosh in case that she didn't come back before the army returned to the Sect and then stepped into the Ethereal.

She stepped into the Safe Haven created by her attunement—War and Death—and was met by the souls of all those who had died in the battle. Her mother stood at their head, wearing her full Valkyrie's regalia.

“You don't need to come with me,” Nayra said. “I know that you can return to the Real Realm easily enough.”

Her mother's Class was a Valkyrie one as well, their immortalities were mostly in the same vein. Though she knew that her mother had a perk that allowed her to circumvent her immortality if she so wished.

Her mother smiled at her. "It's been a long time since I've visited the afterlife, I want to see my son again."

"Thank you for helping," Nayra just said.

"Of course, daughter," Karya said.

Nayra looked over the army of souls that she had to escort through the Ethereal. So many souls would surely draw attention, and in here they didn't have their powers—most of them at least. Some had perks that worked. At least with her mother here she would have help.

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Ryun stood on top of the walls of Emaros, looking out in the distance. He had left the looting and decisions of who got what, to others, it wasn't like he knew what would be useful for them. Instead, he made sure that he was visible, and he listened in on the conversations. He had a plan, and to do it well, he would need people to know him beyond just a name on the High Ranker list. Already they whispered where they thought he couldn't hear. Stories of what Selia and he had done. There was fear, awe, and respect. Most importantly, the honor and the name of the Twilight Melody Sect had risen. Selia's and Erdania's names were on just as many lips as his was. Selia for her compassion, and Erdania for the feat of killing the Elder King and destroying half the city.

Things were good. Finally, they he would have the time to focus on other things. Grow the Sect, or at least bother Anrosh with it, and continue improving his Cultivation and smithing.

Then, something flashed before his eyes, a window and he blinked as he read it through.

World Event!

Ensure the safety of the Eight Iteration Arrivals.

Arrival: 7 days

Reward: Variable

Ryun smiled. It seemed like the Framework hated peace. He turned around and went to find Lesamitrius, they needed to organize a group. Ryun was not about to let the Rankers fall into any hands but his own, he knew their value better than anyone.

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Kael sat in a small room in their hidden fortress high up in the mountains. His people next to him.

“Are you sure?” Maya asked.

“I am,” Kael said. “We’ve worked so hard, trying to pull down the rulers of this world. To give everyone the freedom to choose and grow as they see fit. We failed, they are too ingrained, the people too blind to see what they are doing to them. The only path left is to burn the entire forest down, make room for new growth.”

“But...” Tellisa trailed off.

“I understand,” Kael said. “But no matter what we do, they won’t change. No matter how many on the top we kill, new ones just step in and do the same thing. We need to tear them all down. So, yes, go to your contacts, send out explorers. Find all the Domes.”

One had nearly brought the world to its knees. He will open them all, and once the world burned, something new and better could rise from the ashes.