

First Match

The arena was filled with people. Not quite full, but enough that the noise filled the area. Pavilions or large tents were set up all around it, people standing in front of theirs or sitting in chairs. Few of them were looking at the arena, but instead watched the projection that was at the edge of the arena. Projected onto something that resembled glass, but probably wasn't, a zoomed in view of the dance happening in the center of the arena.

A extremely well-choreographed dance was taking place by a group dressed in elaborate costumes. It was unlike anything that Zach had ever seen before. It showed not only skill, but great mastery of their powers. The dancers were incredible, better than anything that people on Earth could do, as was the music. It was... strange, and yet pleasing. It seemed almost as if it was resonating within him, which it possibly was. Perks could do strange things.

"It's almost time, we should go," Okim said as he tapped Zach on the shoulder.

Zach nodded his head and then cast one last look across the arena stands, seeing so many different colored tents and people looking, waiting. The qualifiers for the Low Division hadn't been all that interesting, and the arena hadn't been filled then. Not that it was full now. Some were here and watching, interested to see who potential, to figure out who to bet on in the future, or just looking to see what the other factions could offer. But Okim had told him that few faction leaders would attend the qualifiers. They had underlings for that.

The Mid Division Qualifiers might be a bit more interesting, with people that were more powerful, but they were still in the early stages. Once the best of the best were left, then it would be another thing entirely.

He shook his head and glanced at Naha. They were in the Warden pavilion, a massive space with the area bigger than some houses Zach had seen. None of the really powerful people were here, the Warden Commander was busy with overseeing everything, and the others were on patrols. Event

times were the busiest time for them, as that was when people thought they could get away with breaking the peace.

“Wish me luck,” Zach told her.

Her face tendrils twitched in what Zach knew to be a smile. “You don’t need it,” she said.

He returned her smile and then walked away, catching up to his team. They were led by a karura that had a blue ribbon tied around his hand, indicating that he was part of the tournament staff. They went down a tunnel that led beneath the stands and then beneath the arena floor itself. Formations were carved into the hard rock, deep enough that Zach wondered who had done it. He knew that the ground in this territory was incredibly tough. He could barely scratch stone even if he swung with all of his strength. He pushed the thought out of his mind, scratching at his shoulder where he had a talisman implanted. It was supposed to prevent death, but they had all signed contracts declaring their understanding that accidents could happen. There was no scar and he didn’t feel anything, but he couldn’t shake the sensation of having something there. He shook his head and forced his hand away as he focused on what was coming ahead.

The last two weeks had been spent in training and going over what they knew about their opponents. They had, on Zach’s insistence sparred together, once. But it was clear that they wouldn’t be getting anything really out of that type of training. Zach wasn’t part of their group, trying to forcibly add him to their dynamic now so late in the game would only lower their team’s overall effectiveness. They had agreed that Zach would act independently in true team battles which would come later. So their training sessions contained mostly tactics and planning for the first qualifier match, and a only a few real training sessions, during which Zach had been left on the sidelines, watching and learning their tempo. So that he could better understand their team dynamic and be able to work around them a bit more. But they mostly focused on individual training and preparation to take on their first opponents. He had also decided not to level, not yet at least. He wanted to see how he matched up against these people before he leveled. He did keep the Essence though, planning to use it once their opponents became more powerful.

They reached a large domed room, and a teleporter platform beneath. They didn't have to wait for long before they were told to step on it, and then everything turned white.

A moment later they found themselves inside the arena floor. All around him he heard cheering, somehow he could hear them perfectly despite the distance involved.

In front of them was a large stage, raised ground to his waist height. A geomancer stood nearby, probably the one who raised the stage since it hadn't been there before they went underground. The fights don't always have the stage, depending on the fight the arena could be changed as needed. He knew that the proper tournament matches for the Mid and High Divisions would be held in the entire arena. But for this match they would have the stage, as well as rules. The stage was maybe two hundred meters across, and the rules were simple. To win, one needed to do one of three things, knock the opponent out of the stage, make them unable to continue fighting, or force them to surrender. It was the second option that had a caveat, because make them unable to continue fighting did include death. The talismans were supposed to prevent that, but... Zach didn't know just how safe those were. At least there was one more failsafe.

Zach glanced to the side where a tall green scaled drake stood along with a small group of healers. He looked a bit different than the drakes that Zach had seen before. His features more like those of a crocodile than draconian. He was the arbiter of the fights, and had the right to interfere. He was there to prevent death, at least officially. From what Zach learned, he was one of the most powerful beings in the world, a Ranker of the Second Iteration, and a High Ranker as well.

Still, it was apparently very hard to kill people in the tournament. Aside from the Healer and her faction being on call, and the talismans, there were also formations beneath the and around the arena that could catch a soul if a body was destroyed. Resurrection did exist in this world after all, at least until the soul passed on. The Tournament Association did guarantee that if it was possible they would recreate the contestants body and put the soul back in. It was Zach's understanding that there were only a few people who could do that, and that their services were... expensive. Again, all of it had

caveats, soul damaging powers did exist, and nothing was forbidden in the tournament.

Across the stage, on the other side stood their opponents. Five people, warriors of a small kingdom far in the north, near the frontier. They weren't particularly influential or powerful, but their warriors did look tough. They were ravor and drakes, three white and gray furred big cat people and two pale scaled drakes. Most of them looked like they were warrior types, with armor and weapons in their hands. One of them was an archer, and another something that probably resembled a healing warrior, a paladin or cleric from the games back on Earth.

The info that the Wardens had on them was extensive, the team knew their weapons, basic ability descriptions and some of their perks as well as exact focus composition. All were classers with cultivation as secondary and skills to round them off.

“Everyone ready?” Okim asked as he turned to look at the team.

Zach and the other nodded their heads.

Then, the drake spoke. “Next match is between the Jerova Kingdom Team and the Wardens Guild Team,” the drake glanced at the two team leaders. “Are both teams ready?”

His voice echoed across the arena, being picked up by the formations, arrays, or some kind of perks and then transmitted everywhere.

It was strange to Zach, to know that this was watched by literal billions across the world. That the Infinite Realm had something that resembled television from Earth, just made through different means. He was still unable to quite accept the disparity sometimes. Everything looked and felt somewhat more primitive, but appearances were incredibly deceiving.

Once both team leaders gave their response the drake spoke again.

“Make your choices, and enter the arena,” the drake said as he waved a hand, a curtain of black rose in the center of the stage, making them unable to see the other team and their choice.

Okim turned around, and looked at them, they had already decided on their first combatant. The match type mean that they needed to gamble in a way. They had to be careful, sending their strongest first might be a good strategy, if the other team sent someone less powerful, they would get their

first win. But the opponents pick might be a sacrifice, which would mean that they wasted their strongest on the opponent's weakest.

They had debated a lot about who they would send, since one fighter could only fight once, and in the end it was agreed that it would be Ilina, their caster. She was somewhere in the middle of their group, not counting Zach since they hadn't really worked that hard to find his place in the group rankings. Zach was their wild card, not that important. They hoped that Zach could win against his opponent, but they weren't going to be surprised if he lost.

As Ilina walked up to the stage, Zach cleared his mind and settled in to watch.

Once Ilina reached her spot on the stage, the black curtain dissipated, revealing her opponent. It was a drake, wearing tough looking plate armor and holding a large halberd in his arms.

"Regor," Okim whispered the drake's name. "Not a bad match up for us, but he is too tough for Ilina to take down."

Her opponent was that fast, and he relied more on his strength and toughness to get through battles. Ilina on the other hand was a shadow caster. Her abilities and perks focused more on control of the battle field and misdirection than actually dealing damage. In a team battle she was indispensable.

It wasn't going to be an easy fight for her.

"Contestants, are you ready?" the drake called.

Once both gave their response, he spoke again. "Begin!"

Ilina's opponent moved immediately, charging across the stage with great speed, immediately using his movement ability. Ilina raised her hands, and arrows made out of shadow toward the charging drake. Unfortunately her offensive ability was more of a nuisance for him than anything else. Her **[Shadow Bolts]** weren't all that powerful. Shadow was insubstantial in most cases, and while her ability did add some punch to them, it wasn't nearly enough. The drake didn't even bother to avoid her attack.

Once he got close enough he roared and sent a blast of force forward. It was his **Stunning Roar** perk, which could stun or at least distract opponent's that had low intelligence. Ilina had high enough stat that she

didn't bother to dodge. Once the blast hit her she stumbled back, which made Zach frown, as she shouldn't have been affected.

The drake took advantage he jumped forward and swung his halberd, intent on ending the match quickly. His halberd struck its target and cut through. Zach nearly yelped as he saw Ilina get cut in half, but then he realized that something was wrong. The drake lost his footing and stumbled forward through the two parts of Ilina that split and turned into shadow. It hadn't been the real her, but just a shadow clone. Zach was surprised at that, he hadn't even noticed that she had used her support ability. Then she appeared behind her opponent, who was still to regain his balance and was stumbling forward.

In an instant a hand made out of shadow rose out of the ground and caught the drake around his waist, without sure footing he didn't have the chance to react as the hand picked him up and threw him.

The drake flew across the stage and landed near the edge, tumbling across the stone as he tried to halt himself and prevent his body from falling out of the ring. Ilina used her movement ability and fell through her shadow, coming out of the ground near the rolling drake. Immediately she started firing her **[Shadow Bolts]** making him roll again, with that one roll he tumbled out of the ring and onto the ground.

For a moment there was silence, and then a roar filled the arena, and the drake announced the victor.

“Winner, Ilina Tessel of the Wardens Guild!”

For the second match Okim decided to send Ovlia, hoping that the other team would send their healer as well. Ovlia was a shield wielding healer. Meaning that she could throw out shields on her allies that would heal them for the percentage done to the shields, as well as protect them from damage. She was also a fairly good with her staff. They hoped that she could take the other team's healer if they faced each other. With her shields she was about as tanky as the other healer was, and she had a few powerful attacks that could take him off guard.

Unfortunately the other team didn't comply. They sent in one of their weaker combat specialists, but he still won against Ovlia, easily.

"Damn," Okim said as the score evened out at one-one. He smiled at Ovlia as she returned to their side after getting healed by the healing group.

"Sorry," Ovlia said, her face still pale. Her opponent had skewered her through the chest and stomach. Her clothes were still wet with blood.

"It's okay, we expected this," Okim said, then turned around. "Zach, you're up."

Zach took a deep breath and then nodded. He stepped up and climbed the stairs. The curtain prevented him from seeing his opponent, but he could still see the arbiter and the healers, standing to the side. The drake was looking at Zach intently. He had noticed the drake glancing in his direction before but he didn't really know why. He wasn't sure if he was imagining it or if the drake was keeping an eye on him for some reason. He pushed those thoughts out of his head as the curtain lowered and his opponent was revealed.

It was a ravzor, his fur and features looking like that of a snow leopard. He was taller than Zach, and armored in a light armor curiass with one pauldron over his right shoulder. He had a large bow in his hands and a quiver on one hip. Zach grimaced, his opponent was one of the stronger foes he could face. He was the second in command of the opposing team and had a lot of movement and misdirect abilities that he could use to create distance while pummeling his foes with devastating attacks.

Zach knew that he couldn't allow him to do that, the rules of this match didn't allow for healing potions or any kind of buffing ones. They could only use the gear that they registered and their powers. If he got hit by even one of his arrows, he would be greatly reduced, unless his opponent triggered something like his **Second Chance**.

Zach did have a plan, he had studied all of his opponents and the archer was no exception. His strategy was simple really. He only needed a moment to put into reality. Before the match started, Zach had debated on which plane he should visit before entering the match, and therefore what type of damage his powers would do. Because most of his opponents were physical fighters, he had decided to remain with the physical realm. This meant that

he didn't need to worry about overwriting his bonus. He also knew that he didn't want to show all of his cards, all of their future opponents would be watching this match after all. There was already very little information on Zach and his powers, there was no need for him to give them something to look over. He was lucky that he had a wide array of powers to chose from, he could use his powerful powers without quite revealing what his focus was.

“Contestants, are you ready?” the drake asked.

Both Zach and his opponent nodded.

“Begin!”

Zach immediately lowered his knees, his hand rising as if he was preparing to strike. In the same instant he triggered several of his perks.

Last Heir of Terra activated and his stats doubled. The knowledge of the old masters filled him, made him sure of his plan.

Phantom Avatar followed and his stats increased by 20% of his total and then another 10% because of his **Planar Mantle**.

Then he activated **Old Heritage**, and his stats increased by another 100% of his total.

The ravzor had raised his bow and had a glowing arrow pointed at Zach. It was impressive, he had managed it in less than the instant it took Zach to activate his boosts. The ravzor let the arrow fly, it broke the sound barrier, flying toward him. But Zach had anticipated that. His **|Perfect Tempest Dance: My Art, Whirling Tempest|** had already put his body in an attack position.

As the arrow neared him, Zach triggered his **Planar Blink**. In an instant he was behind the ravzor, pirouetting and his hand already stabbing down, his **|Greater Vulnerability Sense|** guiding his attack.

He triggered his **Ethereal Sword**, and a short gladius-like sword manifested in his hand as he slammed his attack straight through the back of the ravzor's neck and out his throat, severing the spine. His opponent's body twitched and then slumped down, sliding from his blade.

Before the ravzor even hit the ground, the healers blinked inside, and he stepped away letting his sword dissolve. One of the healers put his hand

on the ravzor's head while the other poured a red potion over the wound. A moment later they blinked away with the ravzor in tow.

Silence filled the arena, a voice pierced through it.

“Winner, Zacharia Gardner of the Wardens Guild.”

As Zach looked around, a roar erupted, filling everything.