

Zenker

Zenker jumped from rock pillar to rock pillar, keeping his eyes on the battles around him. He... didn't quite hate being an arbiter, but it wasn't his favorite thing to do. He wore his **Armor of the Crimson Depths Set**, not the best thing he had available but sufficient for the task. Not that he believed anyone would be stupid enough and try to attack him—he had a big glowing orb above his head that clearly marked him as an arbiter.

He used his **|Perfect Sound Tracking|** as well as his **|Perfect Spatial Sense|** to monitor what was happening around him. He didn't need those two skills to know what was happening, his tier 9 skill told him everything. But he was practicing, soon he would need to evolve them so that he could create another tier 8 skill. He had filled all of his slots and was now on the last stretch of his advancement. He had spent a thousand years preparing, learning, understanding. A base skill could be something that anyone could do, a simple action like swipe or aim. And one could train it without having the skill. He had mastered every action that he wanted to make into a skill, taking it and pushing it to its perfect form was easy.

He had to be careful, to be smart about things. He had seen what happened with those who pushed powerful skills to tier 9. The more esoteric a skill, the greater the price one had to pay for its tier 9 power. His **|I Saw A World Entire|** had a tiny drawback, nothing compared to Sigmund, who couldn't speak without his skill twisting reality based on his words. Zenker's skill simply meant a slightly greater load on his mind.

Soon, he would combine the rest of his skills, and then at last he would push the last stretch to the end.

He focused back on the fights happening all around him. Thousands were shaking the arena with their power. And thousands were losing every minute, he knew that soon only those smart enough to stay out of the initial chaos would remain, and then the match would really begin. A contestant, a kracean warform, thundered through a large pillar of stone as he struggled to escape the combined power of several other contestants. A group of about a dozen of the fighter had decided to take down the greater threat together.

The krecean didn't last long. On the other side of the arena, a human with a rifle shot glowing bullets at a fighter that took to the sky, hitting him from half the arena away, taking advantage of his long range.

"Section 37, true death danger," a voice spoke inside Zenker's ear. The communication arrays that the arbiters used were something new, not yet released to the public. They were good, but could just barely cover the arena.

Zenker turned and jumped with his **|My Path, Unstoppable Thorns|** he blasted through a mountain, after making sure that there was no one in the area, of course. He reached the section 37 area and immediately noticed the other arbiter, a glowing orb flying above his head. Each arbiter knew that they could lose their life during the tournament, they were all old and powerful, but accidents did happen. And the contestants weren't weak.

The arbiter didn't seem to be in a rush so Zenker just stepped next to him, watching the battle taking place in front of them.

"Report," Zenker said.

"One of the fighters is using a powerful soul damaging weapon, and he isn't taking any precautions to limit the damage," the other arbiter said.

Zenker turned his head and immediately saw a battle between a drake and a ravzor. The Ravzor held a large two handed weapon in his hand, a darc'ar—a drake weapon. It was surprising, most people used human invented weapons. Their kind had much more warlike history than the other races, as far as inventing weaponry was concerned. The Cthul had probably been more warlike, but their weapons and ideas didn't work here, Zenker shuddered at the thought. Just from the stories he heard from the Cthul Rankers, he knew that he didn't want them to succeed. The Infinite Realm gave out weapon rewards based on the person, or a team, as well as the current technological level of the Infinite Realm. The materials and effects that the item rewards were made a thousand years ago were not the same as they were today. Every time someone in the Infinite Realm invented something new, it was added to the reward pool. There had been more items modeled after the inventions from other worlds, but in the end, the human weapons were adopted and slowly the other weapons abandoned for the most part. The human weapons were easier to make, simple and fairly effective.

Not that there weren't still weapons from other races, as demonstrated by the fight unfolding in front of him, they were just rarer.

The darc'ar in the ravzor's hand was a long two handed weapon. A metal rod carried the head of the weapon, a nasty assortment of long talon like blades. It looked like a bush made out of metal with wicked thorns and nasty branches. A hit with it would rend anything it touched, turn the skin to mincemeat. The ravzor's opponent was lucky that he wore heavy armor, but Zenker could see that he had suffered at least one attack that had savaged his armor and messed up the scales and flesh beneath.

They continued to watch the battle, seeing how it was progressing. Through his visor, Zenker could see souls, and he knew that the ravzor's weapon ripped pieces of it with every strike that damaged the flesh. All contestants were warned that attempting to cause true death was against the rules. Accidents did happen, but that was why they had arbiters around. The ravzor was yet to make a lethal attack, but with his weapon it would only take a good strike against the center mass. Zenker's ring showed him the drake's full screens, bypassing whatever countermeasures he had. Few had countermeasures for masterwork items. Zenker could see that the drake's immortality wouldn't survive such damage to the soul, nor did he have any other defenses against soul damage.

The ravzor had the advantage, his weapon whirling around him and smashing the drake's shield away, rending the metal apart. The drake collapsed, and the ravzor pounced, his weapon raised high. Zenker moved. In an instant he was in between them, he caught the ravzor's swing by grabbing the shaft of the weapon, and holding it in place. The ravzor tried to pull back, but he couldn't get it out of Zenker's grasp.

"True Death is forbidden in this tournament, you've won," Zenker said slowly.

The ravzor's eyes narrowed but he knew who Zenker was, with a curt nod he acknowledged Zenker's words, who then released the weapon. With one last look at the drake, the ravzor turned and walked away. Zenker glanced behind himself at the drake breathing heavily on the ground, with a small exertion of will into the ring on one of his fingers Zenker activated the drake's talisman remotely, teleporting him to the healers.

He sighed, then moved, looking for more signs of trouble.

Ryun

Ryun jumped to the side as a halberd came down from behind him, evading the attack was easy when he had seen it coming. He jumped forward, even as he raised a wall behind his back, obscuring his view from his attacker. The karura beat her wings attempting to fly over the wall. Ryun pulled one of his javelins out of storage, moved his bonus to strength and then threw it. Just as the karura rose above the top of the wall the javelin smashed into her chest faster than she could react. She flew back, carried by it and got impaled into the stone pillar behind her.

She screamed, or rather squawked in pain. Ryun dropped his wall, then sent two spikes to finish her off. She twirled her halberd breaking both of them even as she was still impaled. She swiped and sent a blade of wind cutting toward Ryun through the air, forcing him to raise another wall to defend. With his sense he saw her pull herself from the javelin and then fly away, running.

He didn't pursue, there was no sense in wasting his Qi. He climbed the pillar with his void steps and retrieved his javelin. Then he jumped back down. He had seen fliers get picked off the moment they took to the sky, and he knew that his best course was to stay close to the ground.

He didn't know how many people were left in the tournament, but battles were taking place all around him. He was even sensing what appeared to be people fighting in groups. He had been warned that that would happen, that some factions had gotten several people through in order to make one pass this stage for certain.

With his range he was able to see people coming, so he continued following his plan to avoid fighting and conserve his power as much as possible.

For hours he avoided people, moving so that he was always in the pockets where there was no one. As the competitors started to drop out and less and less people remained, it actually started to be harder. Others obviously had sensory powers like his, and without other targets, they would usually head toward him. Without being able to avoid a fight, he started leading groups into each other, forcing them to fight against themselves and leaving him alone.

Finally, a couple hours later, he was unable to escape a group pursuing him. A karura flyer found him first, quickly followed by the rest of their group. Three more people ran into the area surrounded by four natural stone pillars, making it a four on one.

“You’ve made quite a mess for us, coward,” the drake among them said. He was wearing light armor, and had a long staff in his hand with a gemstone set as its head. Flanking him were two fighter types a human and a minotaur, one carrying a large axe and the other a two handed sword. The karura had landed on one of the stone pillars, with and held a bow and arrow pointed in Ryun’s direction. Obviously they were one of the people that had put competitors in just to guarantee one of them getting through.

“What, too scared to talk?” the minotaur asked, laughing.

Ryun didn’t feel the need to indulge them. Based on the fights that they had been in before, he already knew their powers and focuses, and he had some idea of their stats. They were dangerous, but they were spent. Their armors covered in blood and grime, breathing harder, their muscles twitching from exertion. They were classers and had been in hard battles, so he was sure that they had burned through their more powerful attacks.

Ryun on the other hand was still fresh, his armor was a sheathing him in Void Qi, and already he had recovered what Qi he had lost to create it and fight. The only question for him was how he was going to go about this. He knew that there were still hundreds of fighters, and the ones that were left now would be the smartest and perhaps the strongest ones. He was not yet at the point where he could fight without a care. So, that left him with a fast and hard approach. He would need to show one more technique if he planned on doing that, but he had no choice.

He pulled his Qi out of his core pulled his mantle around him and switched everything to wisdom, then started building another technique.

“No matter,” the drake said then raised his staff, commanding an attack.

Ryun used [Inevitable Step] and closed the distance quickly, [Bringer of Sorrow] and Reaper’s Aura billowed out of him for a second, stunning his opponents for that one moment. The karura above him let his arrow fly, but it was already too late. Ryun released his technique and {Staggered End} billowed out. The two melee fighters had jumped forward close to him, as they shook off the effects on their mind, they were the closest to him. The first blast of Void hit them right in the face, disintegrating and pushing them back. Surprisingly, they survived that, their armor held. The drake pulled his staff close and a bubble of energy formed around him just in time to block the first wave. But then the second exploded out of him. The arrow in the air managed to push through the first wave, but the second disintegrated it a meter away from his head. The two fighters who managed to get to their feet and brace got hit with the second wave, their armor collapsed, their skin turned to dust and they flashed with white light, teleporting out. He didn’t know if they had been alive or not. The drake caster survived both blasts behind his shield, even as the ground and the base of the four stone pillars around them didn’t. The third wave exploded out of him and the shield collapsed, the Void smashed into the caster who looked straight at the curtain of black Qi with his eyes open wide.

He didn’t last long before he too flashed with white light.

Warden Commander Yirrel Annsi

Yirrel watched the screen in front of her large pavilion. She held the largest plot in the arena’s stands, and a massive structure of cloth stretched behind her, filled with attendants doing everything from preparing food, to

writing down what they were seeing on the screen. It wasn't the only plot that the Wardens possessed of course; they had smaller ones that she liked to give access to the wardens that had proven themselves, or to people whose favor she needed.

She sat beneath a canopy, her ever present assistant—Bera—stood a step behind her, her glasses on top of her head as she watched the screen. Many underestimated her, but that was because they didn't understand what she was, a high level support class can do many things, and Bera was unmatched in her field. Yirrel's guest sat on her right, watching the screen with the most interesting battles taking place in the arena displayed on it.

Currently, that was a fight between a group of four fighters from the Kingdom of Aner, a powerful kingdom at the edge of the core. Their four combatants had been featured often on the screens as they went around the arena fighting and eliminating other contestants. In comparison, their opponent was only now featured for the first time. She recognized him immediately, not because she had seen him before, but because Bera had kept her eyes on both Seventh Iteration fighters and given her reports on them. The Void Qi armor around him was unique, not something that he had shown prior to now, but she had known that he could do it. She had a full list of his screens from Zenker. She was very much interested to see how the fight would go. Zenker had given his thoughts, but none of the others had yet made their mind about the other Ranker. Yirrel had assured them that she would guide and watch over the one in her organization carefully, and today was a big part of her plans.

The battle turned out to be short. The Ranker closed the distance and blasted the three fighters on the ground, dispatching them quickly and without remorse. The stone pillar on top of which the karura had stood and shot his arrows at the Ranker collapsed as its base was destroyed and it started to crumble. He took to the sky, shakily, but the Ranker was already turning toward him. A javelin appeared in his hand and then he threw it with such precision that it flew in between the crumbling stone to smash into the karura trying to get away. His wing got pinned to his hip and with only one wing the karura started to fall.

The Ranker didn't bother catching up to finish the job, instead he turned in the other direction and walked away smartly. Others would be drawn in by the sound of battle soon enough, and the Free For All was not just about power.

The arena roared their approval, but then the screen changed showing a more interesting battle.

Yirrel glanced to the side to look at her guest. The Grey Horde had been leaned forward, looking at the screen with interest.

"That one is dangerous," she said finally as she leaned back. Looking at her she couldn't help but be amazed. Such a small creature, such a beautiful creature, and yet she was one of the most powerful beings in the world. Her body was small, with white chitin with twig like hands that held so much power. Around her neck she had a fluff of fur-like material framing her triangular head with small mandibles and big round eyes that blazed with pink light. Her antennae were long and twitching constantly, and behind her long and delicate looking white wings were folded behind her chair.

"What makes you say that?" Yirrel asked.

"A lot of damage, in a short amount of time, great amount of Qi control," the Grey Horde commented, but to her it wasn't all that impressive, what she spoke about was more of an observation. Yirrel wondered what she would say once she found out that the man she had just watched was the Ranker of the Seventh Iteration.

The Grey Horde herself was not a cultivator, none of the skreen were. They had difficulties with inspiration, as well as Qi control and drawing in. The insect-like race was not made for contemplation and meditation.

"Your champions are doing well," Yirrel said, changing the topic. The Triumphant Hive had brought only two champions for the High Division. It was more than they had ever had, the Grey Horde's skreen were isolationists for the most part. Content to live in the great swath territory they had taken for themselves. Yirrel much preferred the Blue Forest Hive with whom the Elder Kingdom had relations. Regardless, they needed the Grey Horde. Yirrel glanced up behind the Queen of the Triumphant Hive at her protector, the hulking Champion of her hive—Trklak, the Horde Itself stood motionless behind his queen.

“Naturally,” The Grey Horde said. She wouldn’t have allowed her champions to compete if she didn’t think that they were a match for the strongest of the rest of the world.

Still, as much as Yirrel would like to put things off, she had invited the Grey Horde here for a reason.

“Sigmund said that you spoke, you have an answer for us?” Yirrel asked.

The Grey Horde turned her hand and met Yirrel’s eyes, then the queen nodded her head. “Yes,” she said. “The Voice was convincing, I do not agree with all of your reasoning, but I will provide aid.”

Yirrel forced herself not to sigh in relief. “That is good, as soon as you can send orders back to your territory, we can have Eratemus help with the deployment.”

“I will go myself,” The Grey Horde said.

Yirrel blinked. “What?” she asked, taken by surprise.

“You underestimate the threat, just him and my armies will not be enough.”

“We do not think that it will come to that,” Yirrel added.

“You think wrong,” The Grey Horde said.

Yirrel waited for her to clarify, but she realized that the queen didn’t think there was anything else to say.

Yirrel opened her mouth, and then closed it. They had gotten what they wanted, there was nothing else to say.

She focused back on the screens seeing the number above tick down to almost a hundred. They were in the last stretch of the Free for All match, and so she turned her thoughts to other things. She wondered if the other human Ranker was in the stands, watching. She had given him access, put things into motion. She wondered if he would recognize the other, if she would finally see if he was worthy of her favor. Either way, soon enough she would have her answer.