

## Naha

She shivered against Zach's chest; she hadn't realized just how much she had missed his touch until the moment they had managed to get a private moment. They were on the ground, naked and uncomfortable but neither of them really cared. Their lovemaking had been urgent, full of need from both of them. And now they rested. They were in a private training room, since no one would blink twice at them training together—they had been partnered for patrols. And it was known that Zach trained often.

Her hands ran across his dark skin, as she relaxed in his arms. She had been closer to the edge than she had known. He was her anchor, the one person that made everything better. She didn't want to imagine what would've happened if they had been forced to remain apart for much longer. Her hold on her sanity had been slipping, but at least it wasn't anything like what it used to be.

She raised her head and rested her chin on his chest, looking at his face. His eyes were closed, his expression calm. But she knew that there was a storm beneath. He had shown it in his last match. There was no mistaking it, everyone had seen it in the way he fought. He had been unrelenting, precise, and overwhelming. It had been glorious to watch him, to see him cut lose and do what he did best. The way his blades moved, the way his body turned, the way he chose his attacks—it made her blood run hot just from watching. She loved that part of him. She loved all parts of him, but she rarely got to see that one.

She had known that he was feeling angry, that he was feeling helpless. The other Seventh Iteration Ranker was within his grasp and he couldn't do anything about him. He had to put all that had happened to him behind, to forget if not forgive. It was... harsh. She understood it, she had to do the same. She too had to abandon her desire to get revenge on the High Ranker that caused the deaths of her people. It was not something that she could accomplish, not without causing more death and suffering—the same as Zach.

He was someone who believed strongly, who tried to do the best that he could.

"How are you feeling?" Naha asked.

Zach smiled and opened his eyes. "Exhausted."

Naha rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant."

Zach's smile faded, and he shrugged. "I know, yes. I feel... less angry I guess. I needed that, but..."

"Something is missing," Naha finished for him.

"Something is missing," Zach agreed.

She understood that, perhaps better than anyone else could.

"This tournament is... a distraction, it isn't what I am meant to do," Zach said after a minute.

"Your quest, our goal," Naha said.

"Yes," Zach nodded his head. "Only now we have a High Ranker invested in us. The Warden Commander will want things from us."

"She has always been invested," Naha added. "We just didn't know it."

Zach grimaced. "Point."

He grew quiet again, and Naha searched for the words to make him feel better. In the end she couldn't find them, the only thing she could do was be here, near him.

"Did you hear what they are calling you?" Naha said, switching the topic.

Zach grimaced, looking uncomfortable. She smiled, this was a very different type of discomfort. His last match had been a big hit, as was Zach himself. Taking on an entire team by himself was impressive, worthy of notice. People in the city had clearly enjoyed the match, enough that he had earned a nickname—Wardens Tempest. It wasn't the most flashy one there is, but this was how legends were made.

"I barely won," Zach said.

Naha nodded her head. "We still have a long road ahead of us, but we will get there eventually."

Zach sighed and put his hands around her pulling her up and then kissed her. She was in her human body, with black hair and pale skin. She knew that he preferred her demasi—Quell—body, but neither of them had wanted to wait. They were all over each other the moment they had privacy. Now, after their kiss he pushed her back, his hands on her face. His fingertips traced lines on her body, and his eyes took everything in. She knew that this body was unfamiliar to him. Lira was taller than Quell, had more visible muscle, the previous owner had been a warrior with perks and stats that had shaped her body into a weapon, unlike Quell's body. A part of her had worried that he might not like it, not for her to use for longer periods of time. He had seen it only once before and a long time ago.

"No matter what body you wear, I can always see you," Zach told her as his eyes bored into hers.

She felt her heart skip a beat and she relaxed. That was one of the reasons why she loved him, he could see beyond the flesh. He could accept her in whatever body she currently was, seeing her and not just the external shell that she wore.

She settled back down on top of him, and they just held each other for a few minutes.

Finally, Naha broke the silence. "Are you ready for your next match?" She asked.

His win had allowed the Warden team to advance to the next round, they were now one of the top 64 teams in the Infinite Realm. The reward for getting that far was Essence, a lot of Essence. Zach's share had been two hundred thousand Celestial Essence. It was almost an insane amount of Essence. But now... now they would face a real team, and no one on his team thought that they could win.

Zach took a deep breath. "I am as ready as I can be. The others intend to give a good showing, but they have already given up, I can see it in their eyes."

Naha knew that Zach disliked those who wouldn't take advantage of opportunities in front of them. And his team had joined the tournament without any real goal to win. It was to be expected, they were not the best that the Wardens had to offer, aside from perhaps Zach. But Naha figured that that was the point. It was so strange to look back in hindsight and see just how much the Warden Commander had nudged things in order to see how Zach and she reacted. She had put him in a team that was weaker, she wanted to see what he would do. Tests within tests. She wondered why she was doing all of that.

"They are strong, probably the strongest team in the tournament," Naha said. "Losing won't be held against you."

“It is not about that, it is about them not even trying,” Zach sighed. “But I understand, being how they are is just easier.”

“What will you do?” Naha asked.

Zach smiled at her. “Fight, of course. I am done doing things half-way. Well, mostly done.”

Naha understood, he had kept some of his powers a secret in his last match.

“You could go and buy some equipment, elixirs maybe. It could help,” Naha suggested.

“No,” Zach shook his head. “Not now at least. The tournament is important to me, but it is not so important that I should spend my Essence just to try and win it. No, that Essence will be better spent after, when I begin working on my Class Quest.”

Naha nodded her head; it was a good decision. A part of her was looking forward to his next match, she wanted to see how he would handle himself against such opponents. After all, Dragon Heart Sect held some of the most powerful warriors in the world.

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## **Anrosh**

Their group walked into the arena, Anrosh and Ryun in front, with Nayra and Lesamitrius following a step behind them. Another two warriors flanked them as they made their way to their spot in the stands. As they walked in between the Sect pavilions and warriors, she saw them looking at them. Some even bowed to Ryun. The Twilight Melody Sect popularity had changed over night with Ryun’s getting through the qualifiers. The fact that he was the Seventh Iteration Ranker only made him that much more interesting. Someone who had been in the Infinite Realm for barely any time at all had managed to qualify. It made people take notice.

Their compound in the city had been getting visitors almost all the time. Other Sects coming to seek favor, some to check out the competition. Anrosh and Nayra had their hands full dealing with all of that. So much that she hadn’t been able to quite keep an eye on Ryun. Anrosh tried not to glance at Ryun, he had been... a bit more distant since they’ve encountered the second Ranker from his Earth. Anrosh had known about what he had done on there, but she hadn’t really thought about someone else living through it. Looking at Ryun with such hate in his eyes. It was... eyeopening.

She had tried to engage Ryun, to see if he was alright, but he had just spent time alone—training. Then, he had suddenly asked to go the arena, to the other Ranker’s match. Anrosh remembered that match, it had been eye-opening. It showed her a tiny glimpse of someone who was like Ryun, who came from the same place. He didn’t disappoint. She had seen the same things she had seen in Ryun, got the same sense of overwhelming power that she always felt when she watched Ryun fight.

The other Ranker, Zacharia Gardner, had fought an entire team on his own. It had been a marvel to watch, to see such great mastery.

They reached their spot and settled in their chairs. Nayra sitting next to Ryun and Anrosh taking a seat on his other side. The warriors and Lesamitrius stood behind them, as guards. The match was about to start, the Warden Team stood on their side of the arena, while their opponents the Dragon Heart Sect Team stood on the other side.

“The match is about to begin,” Anrosh whispered to Ryun. He of course couldn’t see the match. The teams were too far away for his sense to catch and his eyes couldn’t see what was on the screens. She had never really given much thought to all the things he had to give up when he chose to have those eyes. Even when he had no eyes, he always knew everything that happened around him. It never really seemed like an issue for him. But as she had learned in time, there were things that he could no longer see. Reading things that had been created through abilities or perks was something he couldn’t do. Seeing color, or at least color as she and every other person saw it. He couldn’t even see that far in the distance, he said that it just got too muddled with all the Essence filling everything.

And he couldn’t see the screens, the incredible invention that quite frankly still boggled Anrosh’s mind. Ryun had told her that they had something like it on Earth, before the Framework, which seemed so unbelievable to her. How could they project image without Essence? Without formations and arrays? Crazy.

She and Nayra had narrated the last match that the Warden Zacharia was in. And his reaction had been... confusing. He had seemed almost glad at what happened, but when asked why he just shook his head and didn’t answer. She knew that meeting the warden had brought up a lot of things for him. Memories and emotions. She knew enough to give him space, but she was starting to worry about him.

Still, she would give it a bit more time.

The match start was announced, and Anrosh spoke.

“It is starting,” she said, needlessly, he probably heard the announcements. Ryun had his eyes closed, and was leaned back in his chair, listening.

“What are the teams doing?” Ryun asked.

“The Wardens are staying where they are,” Anrosh told him. “His teammates are in formation, while he moved behind a stone pillar.”

There was no need for her to clarify on who *he* was.

“The Dragon Heart Team is heading for their location,” Anrosh watched the mostly drake team move. Coordinated and sure of themselves, they were crossing ground quickly. The Dragon Heart team had three heavy armor wearing front line warriors—all drakes. One carrying a large battle-axe, second a long halberd, and last a shield and a one-handed hammer. Behind them were two casters, a demasi with two wands, one in each of his hands, wearing a robe. And a human woman that didn’t seem to carry any weapon and wore an elaborate robe.

It didn’t take long for the the Dragon Heart Team to reach their opponents. As soon as they saw them the Warden Team braced, but then in an instant there was chaos. Anrosh barely followed what happened, it all played out so fast. The Dragon Heart Team executed an assault that was coordinated beyond anything she had seen before.

Fire serpents curved through the air, hitting the Warden Team from flanks, just as the ground rolled and staggered them. The human woman raised her hands and bolts of black light smashed into them. The shield wearing drake jumped into the Warden team, his entire body shining with translucent plates of red Qi. The fire obscured her view, but the drake somehow forced everyone to attack him.

The rest of the Dragon Heart Team moved around and through the wardens ignoring them completely.

“They clashed,” Anrosh said quickly as it all played out. “One of the drakes is holding four of the Warden Team all alone. The rest are—”

The axe wielding drake smashed through a stone pillar and she saw flashes of light. They had known where warden Zacharia was and had immediately attacked.

“The rest are fighting Zacharia,” Anrosh whispered, trying to see the fight. But it was all happening too fast. The rest of the Dragon Heart warriors were attacking, demonstrating a lot of power in short period of time as they tried to take out what they obviously believed to be the biggest threat.

Anrosh leaned forward on her seat, her mouth telling Ryun everything that she saw almost absentmindedly as her eyes soaked everything in. The display of power was amazing. The Ranker had managed to survive the first attack, but she could see that his armor was mangled. Serpents of fire were chasing him even as a rain of black bolts showered him from above. A halberd fell from above, which the warden parried just as the second drake approached and attacked with his axe. There was a whirlwind of movement from the warden and the two drakes attacking him.

Anrosh impressed, but it was obvious that he wouldn't be able to hold out for long. These warriors were not on the same level as those in his last match.

“He is getting pressed hard,” Anrosh said as the warden tried to do something, only to have his body thrown to the side by an explosion of a fire serpent near him. She could see the flow of battle, she knew that they were attacking him constantly, preventing him from using his most powerful abilities.

Wings grew on his back, and he blinked to the air, attempting to gain distance. It was the wrong move. A barrage of black bolts smashed into him from above throwing him back to the ground. He blinked away before he hit the ground.

“He is trying to get room,” Anrosh told Ryun who listened with his eyes closed. His team was occupied by one member of the Dragon Heart Team still, and it was obvious that he was trying to get back to them. It was just obvious that the Dragon Heart warriors were too good.

And then, there was a gasp from the arena. In an instant the warden blinked, and then moved in a blur that was almost too fast for her to follow. He attacked the axe-wielding drake, his extended blade and sword whirling around him. The drake was covered by frost in an instant, as his allies came to the rescue the warden blinked behind him and stabbed with his sword breaking through the armor on the drake's back. Then his blade turned red as blood and he punched it through the hole his sword made even as he executed another attack with his sword.

The drake flashed and then was gone, defeated.

For a moment Anrosh felt that perhaps he could win, but then the rest of the Dragon Heart Team retaliated. It was just a single moment when he had been pinned by his own attacks against the drake. A moment when he defeated one of them, and the Dragon Heart Team took advantage. They moved in position and the moment the light of their defeated team member flashed they attacked. Powers hit the warden from all sides, sending him flying to a stone pillar.

Anrosh waited for the flash of white, but it didn't come. The warden was lying on the ground, and a drake approached then stabbed his halberd into his chest. Then the warden flashed with white light and was gone.

“He... he lost,” Anrosh said. She had been narrating everything for Ryun, and now she paused, unsure as to what his reaction would be. “It was to be expected, the Dragon Heart are the favorites to win. Their warriors are the best of the best in their category.”

Ryun opened his eyes and then smiled.

“Four on one, against the best that the Infinite Realm has to offer,” Ryun whispered. “And he managed to take one out.” Anrosh blinked as she saw Ryun’s smile widen. “That’s why he had always been worthy of living. He never gives up.”

Ryun stood and then started walking toward the exit of the arena. Anrosh glanced at the screen, then at Nayra and the rest. She shrugged and followed after him, there wasn’t a need for them to continue watching, the outcome of the match was no longer in doubt nor was it at all important to them.