What Lies Beneath

She walked through the arena, slowly, ignored by all. She was no one, just a face wearing a Warden's badge and cloak. A face that was different than the one she had worn before, a different shape. She was a human now, with pointed ears and long black hair, unremarkable. A part of her was struggling with having to switch to a new body. She hadn't spent much time in this one, it was making her feel... shaky.

The fact that she wasn't near Zach was only making things worse. She hadn't realized just how much she relied on him being near her to anchor her. She had... episodes. Moment where she nearly lost control and slipped. Thankfully she had managed to remain in control, but she shuddered to think on what would've happened if they hadn't removed her Cultivation.

She hurried to one of the Warden's arena spots, she needed to see him. Since she came back, they had spent only a few short hours together. Just one patrol, during which they had to pretend not to know each other. It was excruciating, not being able to reach out and touch him, hold him. Not being able to go to sleep next to him at night. But they had to keep up appearances. He and Nyathulla had officially broken their partnership up, both romantically and professionally. Nyathulla was now officially on a mission, and will lose her life in a couple of months, long enough that Naha's presence here couldn't in any way be linked with her.

She wasn't an idiot; Naha was aware that this was just another test. The Warden Commander split them apart on purpose, she wanted to see what Naha would do without Zach around. And Naha knew that just one slip up would mean her death. The Warden Commander might be willing to overlook what she had done when she had been under the influence of her madness, but now... Naha was better, she wouldn't slip up, it would not only mean her death but would also break Zach. He had put everything he had in trying to make her better. Because he had been failing for what he felt his entire life, because he needed to succeed at something.

She worried about him; she had only spent a few hours with him, but she could see that he wasn't right. He was struggling with everything that had

happened recently, with finding his former friend. With being pulled into the inner circle of a High Ranker, trying to find himself among so many things that pulled on him from all sides.

She reached the Warden area, and barely greeted the other wardens watching the tournament. She had gained access from the Warden Commander's assistant—Bera. The identity she had taken on was that of Lira Windfall, a body that she hadn't used often. The name was a fabrication, nothing like the name of the original owner of the body, but Naha had acquired this body a long time ago. It was the only body that she had that was completely clean, she hadn't acquired it through force or blood, her family had sold Naha the right to use it after the woman's death—but that had been in her early days in the Infinite Realm, when she had still been sane.

As she settled in the chair and looked at the screens she sighed in relief that she hadn't been late. She had worried about that. Zach's team was already in the arena, but the match was yet to start. The Wandering Drake spoke, announcing the teams and then asking them if they were ready. Naha barely heard him; all of her attention was on Zach. His team was around him looking ready for a fight. Zach wore his white armor and had his **Ethereal Sword** in his hand.

The arena was the same as it had been during the Free for All fight in the High Division, a large area with a lot of different terrain. Suddenly they sprang into motion, moving forward quickly. Naha kept her eyes on Zach until he split off and went on his own. Their team tactics hadn't changed much since last time. Although Naha knew that they had trained a lot more together, his team was now aware of the things Zach was capable off, or at least what he had shown them. But their tactic was still sound.

The team they were fighting was from the Adventurer's Guild, a monster hunting team. It meant that the Warden team should have a slight advantage, in theory at least, since their opponents are more used to hunting monsters.

Naha watched with anxiety, waiting for Zach to reappear. She wasn't sure how he was going to perform in the fight with everything he had bouncing in his head. She couldn't help but worry about him. The two teams met up in the middle of the arena, and the Adventuring Team made the first

attack. They had a standard monster hunting team composition, a large war form kreacean in front, wearing plates of metal over his body augmenting his already tough natural defenses, fulfilling the teams tank role. A step behind him came a human wearing light armor and a large two handed spear, a quick melee damage dealer. Supporting them were two long range damage dealers, a demasi with a staff, probably a mage type and a ravzor with large crossbow in his hands. The last member of their team was a healer, a karura flying above them outside of the combat range.

The Warden team's minotaur leader, Okim Rockhands clashed with the enemy tank. His two-handed hammer meeting the kreacean's large club. Okim had to dodge in order to avoid the counterattack, while Ilina Tessel, the Warden team's demasi shadow mage gestured at the the war form's shadow. Chains of black shadow rose from the kreacean's own shadow and grabbed hold of him, while Okim attacked. The chains held for barely a moment before they broke and the war form blocked Okim's attack, then from behind him came the Adventuring Team's human spear wielder. Abilities and perks were used in quick succession, and the end result was a spear punching through Okim's shoulder. Shkok Evasi, the Warden team's kreacean blade master jumped in, forcing the human back, even as two of his hands deflected crossbow bolts from the opposing team's ravzor. The crossbow was a repeater, with a magazine, allowing for an incredible rate of fire. The ravzor had to have activated some ability or perk, because his bolts started to glow and pelt both Shkok and Okim. Ovlia Werta, the Warden team's healer used her abilities, and blasts of yellow light hit her teammates, healing them as they were pelted with crossbow bolts. Illina used her shadows to protect them as the Adventurer Team's demagi mage threw spikes made out of earth at them from a distance.

The exchange in the middle ended with injuries on both sides, and the karura healer floated down to heal his teammates. That was when Zach struck. He jumped from the top of a stone pillar, his hands spread and the fabric between his arms and torso extended. She knew that he had to have used his Wind Form to help him move, because he flew quickly and accurately. He stabbed with his **Ethereal Sword**, catching the karura off guard. The karura opened his beak wide in pain, and then a pillar of light hit

him, blasting Zach away with enough force that he smashed through the side of a pillar, sending cracks through it.

Naha's breath hitched, and she followed Zach's form as he flew away. She knew that he could survive that, but she couldn't help but feel fear.

A moment later the pillar collapsed and started to fall on top of the combatants in the middle. The war form bellowed and smashed the floor, sending cracks and causing both Okim and Shkok to stumble. The Adventurers back line pressed forward, firing their great powers. Earth wall rose behind Okim and Shkok cutting them off from their support and cutting off their avenue of escape. Okim's hammer blazed with light as the pillar of stone collapsed on top of them. He smashed it upward with enough force that the falling stone burst apart and exploded upward, showering everyone with debris.

They didn't have much time to recover, the human spear wielder appeared among them, and he danced. His spear tip trailed light as he cut through Okim incredibly fast. A moment later the minotaur's body flashed, and he was gone.

Shkok attacked, forcing the human back with whirling strikes of his blades, but then a crossbow bolt hit him in the shoulder making him miss a block. The spear took him in the thigh and then the war form's club smashed on top of him from above. The flash of light announced his elimination too. The wall of earth collapsed, and the two advanced on Ovlia and Illina.

Ilina used her shadows, a big attack that sent a field of shadow spears from every shadow around her, she perforated the war form, blood spilling from a dozen wounds. The human danced and blocked the shadows with his spear and managed to get out unscathed.

They didn't last for long, the Adventurer's mage raised his hands, and the stone all around them suddenly imploded toward the spot where the two wardens stood, smashing them to bits. Naha grimaced, that had to have been a very powerful perk, which meant a longer cooldown. She looked at the screens, knowing that now Zach was the last one left. She kept her eyes glued to the screen, waiting for him to show up.

Zach

Zach shook his head as he pushed himself from the rubble he landed in. He grimaced at the pain in his ribs, he didn't think that he cracked them, but definitely bruised. As soon as he got to his feet, he moved, running around the natural obstacles heading back to the battle. He reached it just in time to see the last of his team flash with light and get teleported out. They lost, he sighed, disappointed. His job had been to take care of the healer, but he hadn't managed to do that. He looked at his opponents, seeing that most of them were injured, the large war form kreacean was worst off. His armor was filled with holes with yellowish blood seeping through them. The karura was on the ground, limping, the wound on his side that Zach had inflicted closed but obviously not fully healed. The healer was heading for the war form, probably to heal him. Zach was impressed that the war form was still standing.

He thought about what he should do, he was all alone, unlikely to be able to do anything by himself. He knew that surrendering would be the best course of action, there was no need for him to struggle. And yet, he couldn't stop. He felt his heart rate spike, and anger rise up inside of him. He remembered what Ryun had accomplished, his fights in the qualifiers, and he felt... inadequate. He saw and remembered him, as overwhelming as he had been on Earth. His anger churned inside. He wanted... so many things.

Naha was in the audience watching, the entire Infinite Realm was watching. He had heard the whispers, the rumors, about a Seventh Iteration Ranker who fought in the High Division, who qualified for the tournament itself. But Zach was... forgotten, overshadowed. He was nothing. It shouldn't matter, his worth shouldn't be what others thought about him, and yet...

He looked at the opposing team, injured but still all five of them in the match. They had fought hard to get here; they deserved the win. But a part of Zach didn't want to just lay down and let them win. He wanted to show everyone what he could do, no holding back. Even though it wasn't smart and

would let other know what he could do. Yet, his time as a warden was not going to last. Whatever the Warden Commander wanted from him and Naha would not involve policing the populace.

Zach closed his eyes and then let his anger bubble to the surface. Anger at Ryun for what he had done and for how he had managed to just move on with his life as if nothing happened. Anger at himself for letting Earth weigh on him so much. Anger at so many things that he couldn't even articulate properly. He needed this, to unleash everything that he could do and show to everyone who he was, to show himself. He was a Ranker, he had survived the Ethereal Dungeon, he had fought and struggled. He had earned his power.

The opposing team was looking around, searching for him. The match wasn't over, so they knew that he was still in the fight.

Zach glanced in the direction of the stands, he couldn't see anything of course, but he knew that Naha was watching.

The **Last Heir of Terra** was singing in his head, getting louder. The masters of Earth did not like to lose, they did not like to give up. Zach turned around and ran away.

He put distance between himself and the other team, and he activated his **[Planar True Sight]** looking, searching for a weak spot. He didn't have to search for long before he found what he was looking for. There were several weak spots leading to the Ethereal Realm, but what Zach was looking for was a weak spot leading to the Earth Essence Plane. First, he activated his **Essence Sense**, triggering a sense based on the Real—physical Plane. It gave him a broad sense of everything around him, not particularly precise but a necessity when he couldn't use his ordinary senses. Then he used **Planar Blink** and pushed through the weak spot, entering the other plane. Immediately the suffocation and pressure of a high tier Essence plane assaulted him from all sides. He activated his **Essence Elemental** perk, and immediately felt the transformation take place. His bruised ribs healed, his mind cleared, and he became something else.

Immediately he left the plane, returning back to the Real Plane. His **Riftborn** attunement activated increasing his stats by 20% and lowering his cooldowns. He charged, back to where his opponents were. He sensed them closer than where he had left them. All five of them approaching. He

increased his speed and used his **[Plannar Wings]**, wings of stone sprung from his back, he was too heavy to fly but he had two extra limbs now. He beat them, as he jumped at his opponents. They were waiting for him, the war form in front. They had to have heard him thunder as he smashed his way through the arena.

The war form was braced, but Zach wasn't aiming at him, not exactly. He spread his wings and his arms, using the great size and the weight of his **Earth Elemental** form to his advantage. The Adventurers realized what he was doing too late. Zach smashed into the war form, his wings beating at the others around them as he embraced the war form kreacean and pinned him. One of his wings forced the spear wielding human to dash back in a cloud of fast-moving smoke. His other wing was hit by a pillar of earth cast by the demasi mage—his wing and the pillar burst into pieces and pelted the mage and the healer. Exploding crossbow bolts were hitting his body, but the stone he was made out of was tough. He used his **[Planar Binding Chains]** and chains made out of stone links erupted around the war form, the stone tightening and racking his armor.

Then Zach ended his **Essence Elemental** perk. The stone around him was pulled back into its own plane, and Zach moved kicking off the war form body flipping back through the air and evading crossbow bolts as he triggered **Phantom Avatar** and his **True Link—Nahamassa Plainrunner**. As soon as he landed he took a deep breath and used **Rift Shout**. A blast of Earth Essence hit the Adventurers, staggering them back and weakening the area in front of him, creating new weak spots. Before they could react, he picked a weak spot in the middle of their formation then extended his hand and pulled it back as he used **Forceful Rift**.

The rift leading to the Air Plane tore open, a gash in space close enough to the war form's back that it ripped half of his body apart as a blast of air essence exploded. All Adventurers were sent flying, the karura healer in the air was thrown tumbling through it and smashing into a stone pillar. Zach had been ready, so he recovered first. The Air rift was leaking a large amount of air essence, which manifested as an incredibly powerful air stream being continuously released from the tear. With his **Planar Blink**, he appeared next to the karura mid-air. His right hand shifted into a long blade of pale

green, his **Venom Aspect** blade form. He stabbed the karura through the stomach twisting and doing more damage, applying the debuff. Then he kicked off the stone and let the healer fall on his own. Crossbow bolt hit his shoulder and detonated blowing a hole in his armor and flesh beneath it. Zach grimaced and then blinked down, behind the crossbow user. His blade changed to a deep red color and appeared as if it was made out of liquid. He stabbed at the ravzor's neck from behind, where his helmet and leather armor beneath met. The liquid passed easily through, the **Blood Aspect** blade ripped his flesh apart and surged inside, pulling blood and life essence from the ravzor. The ravzor had some kind of a defensive perk, something close to Zach's second chance it appeared. His body twisted and he rolled away, his blood spilling all over the stone. Zach pointed his blade at him as he brought his crossbow to bear on him, before he could fire, Zach triggered **Sanguine Burst**. Blood exploded out of his back and his eyes rolled back into his head as he started to fall. Before he hit the ground he flashed with light.

A spear punched through Zach's back, through his heart and out of his chest. He screamed in pain and used |Spatial Evade| to slip free. The attack wasn't enough to immediately stop him, but it was a lethal attack that would kill him eventually, so **Second Chance** triggered. The spear wielder advanced, and Zach switched to his wind blade, pushing himself back out of the range of the spear and out of the way of a stone boulder that came flying at him. He pushed the wind around him, creating a whirlwind of it around him as he picked up dust and dirt from the floor, obscuring himself and the spear wielder. He figured that the mage wouldn't throw stones if he couldn't be sure not to hit his teammate. Then he moved forward. His |**Greater Vulnerability Sense**| and his |**Perfect Tempest Dance: My Art, Whirling Tempest**| guiding his steps. He summoned his **Ethereal Blade** and danced in the wind. His **Essence Sense** still on and telling him where his opponent was. The Adventurer could see or sense him too, his spear met Zach's attacks easily, blocking and attacking back. Zach waited, letting him press him and attack while he blocked. Then, his |**Greater Vulnerability Sense**| flashed and he used |Spatial Evade| again. He slipped to the side as the spear wielder used his own skill and what looked like ten spears

stabbed where he used to be. Then Zach triggered his **Consequence**. The spear wielder turned to smoke but Zach's attack and the wind around them sent it flying away. The spear user turned back solid and fell to the floor rolling out of the range of Zach's dirt and dust cover.

Immediately, a boulder of stone flew through the wind curtain Zach had raised. He jumped at it, activating his **[Planar Whirling Wing]** and phasing through it as he lashed out and broke it to pieces. A spear obscured by a curtain of smoke attacked the moment he was vulnerable again, but Zach triggered his **Old Heritage** and blocked by striking the spear with his **Dazzling Strike**. The spear wielder yelped in surprise as he was blinded, and Zach blinked away. He came out of it next to the mage who sent spikes of stone at him from the ground immediately after Zach appeared. Zach twisted out of the way, Naha's **Greater Reflexes** making him far quicker to react.

Before the mage could attack again, Zach moved Qi through his body and attacked, the mage raised a wall of stone to protect himself, and Zach's **Ethereal Sword** stabbed into it lighting Qi discharging harmlessly. He dashed to the side, around the wall and cut low with his blade cutting into the mage's leg. The demasi screamed and the wall burst pelting Zach with fist sized rocks. He grimaced and moved his hands up, protecting his head as he was thrown to the side.

He rolled over the ground and came up just as a spear came down on his head. Zach felt the blade nick his cheek as he twisted out of the way and swiping with his weapons sending a gust of wind in his face.

The spear man closed his eyes for a moment, and that was enough for Zach to blink behind him. He switched his blade to **Blood** and stabbed through the neck. The blood blade only tore through skin, not materials, so he needed to target places where it was visible. The skin on the back of his neck split open and his blood blade slipped in, like a liquid shifting snake it pulled blood and life essence out of him. It didn't last for more than a few moments before the spear wielder burst into smoke and dashed away.

Zach immediately used **Sanguine Drink** healing some of his wounds.

He looked around, seeing that the karura healer was on the ground, light on his hands over the wound that Zach had inflicted—dealing with the

poison. The spear wielder was forming out of smoke, the mage was on one knee his staff raised and preparing to attack. The war form was on his knees, half of his side missing but still in the fight. Zach snarled behind his helmet and pushed himself forward, switching his blade to **Hunger Aspect**. The spear wielder and the mage tensed, but Zach ran away from them and toward the war form.

They hadn't expected that, and so they didn't react in time. He nearly lost his balance near the still open tear that was blowing air out of it, but he managed to get through. The war form tried to raise his arm, but he was too hurt to really do anything. Zach activated his |**Rending Strikes**| and his blade passed through the war form's body several times lowering his stats and increasing Zach's. He used the war form's body as cover while he drained him, preventing the mage from attacking, but the spear wielder came at him. As soon as he was near Zach triggered **Hungry Heart**, the stats he stole increased by five times and he slid out of the way of the spear cutting at his head.

He switched to his **Nature Blade** and struck the spear, the branch-like blade twisted on his will growing and twirling around the spear handle. His opponent tried to pull his weapon back, but Zach pulled with greater stats ripping the spear out of his hands. A moment later he attacked with his **Ethereal Sword**, twirling around and using **Double Planar Strike**. His two attacks cut across the spear man's chest opening it up. He let the spear go and then stabbed forward as he pressed his advantage and change his blade to **Fire**. He stabbed his blade through the open wounds on the man's chest, burning him from the inside. He flashed with light and was gone. He turned around and stabbed his sword through the war form's neck, making him flash with light as well.

A rain of stone spikes came at Zach, but he still had greater stats. He jumped forward and used his **[Planar Wings]** and real wings appeared on his back. He beat them and flew up as he pulled the air around him with **Wind Aspect** blade, helping him navigate faster and evade the spikes. He blasted toward the mage faster than the demasi could react, smashing into the mage and stabbing his blade and sword through his chest. A moment

later the mage flashed with light and Zach smashed into the ground, hard. He stayed there, breathing hard for a few moments.

He pushed himself up slowly, his head turning and seeing the karura healer standing to the side barely on his feet. Zach pulled from deep within himself and managed to stand, then stumbled in the karura's direction. The healer looked at him for a moment, and then raised his hands in the air. It took Zach a moment to realize that he was surrendering, then he flashed with light.

Zach blinked at the empty space where he used to be, then looked around himself at the empty, destroyed battlefield. A moment later the roar of the arena reached him, and he closed his eyes.