

As the first rays of sunlight terminated the night's darkness, and the morning dew started to rise, the mighty gong boomed!

**CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!**

Final preparations could now, finally, begin.

Standing near the crowd entrance to her arena, the renowned warrior, Nemesis, observed the rapidly awakening camps of today's competitors with her dark, cold eyes.

Of the 12 challengers, Larinae, Quindum, Melody and Grindle Goldhammer were the clear finalists from the preliminary rounds. They were an interesting mix; Larinae – a stately female Elf Fighter, Quindum – a haphazard – but deadly - male Elfin Wizard, Melody – a meticulous Elf Wizard and Grindle – a powerful Dwarf Fighter. Three Elves and a Dwarf. This contest could have the 3 elves attack the dwarf, or the fighters vs the wizards, or it could turn into a fierce free-for-all with everyone fighting each other. It would be interesting – and her cut of the wagers would be substantial!

Larinae's camp was the most organized. Her 3 healers were preparing spells and potions in the far back corner, while a lithe young woman in black practiced gymnastic combat maneuvers in the center of camp. A strong male fighter with a great shield on his back shadowed her every move. The rest of Larinae's support party prepared her weapons and armor and guarded a large closed chest. Her cook had a hearty breakfast prepared and served to all. Larinae appeared highly energetic and eager to start the Game.

Quindum's camp was the most disorganized. His people scurried everywhere, often into each other! He was nervous and full of energy and could not stop scurrying about and directing everyone and everything. His trio of Healers were trying to calm him while his Shield Squire kept his distance. It was hard to tell what the rest of Quindum's support party was doing, but they were very busy doing it.

Melody's camp reminded Nemesis of the camps she used to run. Organized just enough to maintain control with a constantly growing excitement as the noon start approached. Her primary support party equaled Larinae's with 3 Healers, an Assassin and a Shield Squire. All were eating a light breakfast as they prepared for the battle. Melody was confident; again, like Nemesis.

Grindle Goldhammer's camp was coldly efficient. His blacksmiths were sharpening his array of deadly axes, daggers and swords while other retainers tightened and tested his armor. Grindle's trio of healers huddled together, planning strategy, while a thin, hooded lady in black skin-tight garb consulted privately with him. Breakfast of combat rations was passed around while everyone kept to their assigned tasks. Cold, Efficient. Deadly. Nemesis would be watching him.

Nemesis silently observed everything around her. Her 4 battle hardened body guards formed a square around her with their large, armored bodies; within striking distance but not close enough to impede any defensive moves she might be forced to make. Strange, well used weapons hung within her easy reach. Constantly moving eyes searched in all directions. She felt safe, at peace. This was her arena, and no one ever survived attacking her within it!

Several years ago, after parting ways with Didi Aminate the Butcher, a hard and cruel human without feelings for anyone lesser than himself, and his war party, Nemesis used her accumulated fortune to

establish the Combat Circle that grew into this arena. Mortal combat was exciting for all and could be highly profitable!

At the beginning, SHE was the sole challenger and covered all wagers from her personal funds. Many 'would be' champions accepted her challenge with its accompanying high-stake wager of 100 gold. Very few saw past the long legged, scantily clad woman armed only with a few glass and flint daggers. Her physical stature should have given many contenders concern. She was 6' 3" tall and a well-proportioned, very solid 200 pounds. Back then, her armor was very simple leather without adornments.

She always insisted on several witnesses and paid a Healer to be on hand at the combat end. No one was supposed to die, and Nemesis assured that she lived on. Her attackers were normally shocked to discover that this fierce looking fighter never used metallic weapons nor armor nor the Crimson Force. Too late, they discovered her mastery of the Cobalt Blue wizard energy! Though very well trained and fast with double glass daggers, she was a Master Wizard!

Her reputation and fortune rapidly increased through the years.

Now at 57 years of age, with short cropped whitish gray hair and an additional 20 pounds of 'muscle', Nemesis arranges for others to compete and she simply collects her 'Fair' share of all monies involved.

The arena had developed from a plain grassy valley into a large pit-like amphitheater 120 feet across and 12 feet below the ground level. The floor was smooth raked hard dirt and the walls were unclimbable concrete. Entrance was only by ladder or rope. Around the perimeter above the pit were 5 equal divided areas. 4 were for the competing parties to camp and make ready and the 5<sup>th</sup> was the single crowd entrance where Nemesis now stood.

She reserved and enforced limiting the best viewing places to those with the largest wagers. Spectators were welcome to stand behind and beyond a ring of fences. All disqualified contenders were invited to join her guards and received the right to observe from her prime vantage point.

Even though older in years, Nemesis with her body guards would have no trouble putting down any of the competing parties and THEY knew it!

Noon was approaching. The sky was bright and clear. A gentle breeze stirred the numerous pennants atop the tents. Each of the 4 contenders had lowered their weapons, armor and single trunk of additional combat materials into the pit using the ropes at each camp. They arranged the weapons and armor in the racks against the pit wall with the first few pieces visible and the rest hidden by dark cloths. The equipment trunk with its undeclared content was within easy reach. The party members, henchmen and healers, stood at the ready. The last to descend into the pit were the competitors. Amid loud riotous cheers each made their entrance, flourished their weapons for the crowd and positioned themselves at the center of their party. All faced the center of the pit. All faced each other with visibly intense concentration.

This was real! Real razor-sharp weapons. Real spells. Real blood and occasionally real death!

As the sun reached its highest point, on the day of the full moon, cold, deathly silence filled the arena. All were ready. All were waiting. Once started this contest would continue until only one remained. The crowd hushed in deathly anticipation – and continued to place their final bets.

Upon the prearranged signal, the competitor who earned the right of first attack would start the contest with but a single body movement.

All competitors were motionless. Waiting.

A single rock wrapped in a red flowing cloth was tossed high into the arena by Nemesis. It arced through the air with its red tail flying brightly. It struck the ground with a soft thud. Then ... !!!!!

Select YOUR combatant. Prepare YOUR deck. Are YOU Larinae, Quindum, Melody or Grindle or another yet unnamed combatant? Will YOU be victorious? Will YOU win the prizes from the fallen ones?