

Sunlight illuminated the sand covered stone grounds, various targets lying in burning splinters. Anticipation was written on the faces of the silent spectators, sweat dripping from their brows.

Ilea shot her third arrow but it was already too late. She hadn't been fast enough, the enormous weaponry simply not made to be shot in quick succession. The arrow missed its target by more than a meter, exploding against a barrier that flared up to protect the spectators.

"Fuck," she murmured, squinting her eyes at the last round target. *I could crush you so easily.*

You dare defy me?

The target did not respond. It did however seem more than a little smug.

She realized some of the other contestants sighed breaths of relief. She had gotten into the top twenty but it seemed this was her limit with both her skill and equipment. The crowd was silent. Ilea could swear she saw tears on some of their faces. Definitely tears. She too was devastated at the loss. "Whelp. Good luck everyone, it was fun!" she exclaimed and waved at the people, many now standing up to clap. "Enjoy the tournaments!"

Some of the other bowmen and women clapped as well, others congratulating her on getting this far.

"And that was contestant Lilith. A considerable effort, though I believe her equipment held her back. What do you think Charles?" one of the announcers spoke through the voice enhancer.

"Vera, I can't say I'm surprised. Lilith is known for her prowess in fighting unbelievable creatures in the wild. An explosive greatbow like the one she likes to use is certainly effective against a horde of demons, but in a contest of speed and accuracy, it may just not be the best choice," the man explained.

Ilea didn't much care about their commentary, already back in another arena. This one had adventurers throwing things at various targets. She settled down on a random spot between spectators and summoned herself a bottle of ale.

"Did he just throw eight axes?" she asked the man sitting next to her.

He smiled and shook his head. "I couldn't follow that at all. Most of them move too fast. There are eight axes in the targets though... so yes. I think those were all his," he said and squinted his eyes to see the sand covered grounds.

Right. I remember when I was blown away by fire wings. Those Elves were absolute killing machines too. Don't think any of those would pose much of a threat to these events.

She watched a woman throw a few spears in quick succession, the projectiles piercing through the entirety of the plate armor targets. *Nice.*

Lily stood up when her name was called out. She took a deep breath and looked at the man that stood up on the other side of the large hall.

He was quite a bit older than her, some gray hairs already visible. He wore light armor made of leather, steel bits visible to protect his vitals. Her opponent wore no weapons in a visible manner, his black eyes finding her, a light smile coming to his face but his expression remained serious enough.

Mage. Or someone rich enough for some kind of storage enchantment or item. The former is more likely. He looks down on me but it doesn't seem like arrogance. He's experienced. She saw the light damage on his armor too, fixed as well as could be done but the signs of battle were there. He had no scars that she could see but that didn't mean much. If a healer was reached in a few days, they normally didn't form. It did tell her some things about his preferred work environment. Closer to settlements, large ones too. He didn't take risks. That or he never got injured badly enough to form a scar on his face.

[Fire Mage – lvl 187]

That's high.

She was at one sixty eight herself. Nineteen levels were not a massive difference but he was nearly as strong as a Shadow. Lily touched the dagger on her belt. *Calm down. You have your pack. You've fought monsters and people at a higher difference. And you have your second tier Heat Resistance.*

“You're quite young,” the man said when they stepped through the gates and onto a platform. He didn't sound condescending, more just making a statement.

Lily didn't know what he was trying. So she didn't reply.

The platform started moving upwards. The ceiling opened up, sunlight streaming in with some sand falling down onto the stone elevator. Chatter and cheers resounded from outside.

Lily could feel her heart beating in her chest. She was used to fighting. She was used to surviving. But there was usually nobody watching. The sounds made her nervous.

“I didn't mean to insult you. Just letting you know that I won't hold back. Make sure to signal when you want to give up. I know how painful fire can be,” the man said.

“I know that too,” Lily said in a calm voice, her eyes focused upwards.

“Good luck,” he said when their heads reached the ground level, the platform moving farther up until it lined up with the grounds of the arena. A loud click resounded when the elevator stopped.

Lily stood unmoving. She watched the expanding stone, lightly covered with sand, at least fifty meters in every direction. It was a massive space for just two people to fight in. Beyond that was a near five meter high circular wall, magical runes etched into the surface, all of it glowing lightly with power. Above expanded the stands, seating for hundreds if not thousands of people reaching upwards all around. All of the seats were taken.

She gulped, turning around herself as she heard the heartbeat in her ears, one of them starting to ring. It was hot. And loud. She wanted to run away, wanted to hide. Wanted to find Ro- No. Lily closed her eyes and gripped her dagger. She let it go and uncoiled the Alpha Hound's trinket from her wrist. The motion was automatic, something she had done a hundred times before. She raised it

up and grabbed her wild and unkempt hair, moving the metal necklace around to bind it. Lily checked and knew it would hold.

“And for round eighteen in the pre two hundred single preliminaries,” a loud voice called out from various sound devices.

Lily was sure they were mounted to the very top of the arena. It sounded strange hearing the sounds from near the center of the circular fighting grounds. As if a dozen voices all came together.

“Jeremia of Nipha, part of the sapphire adventuring team Silver Hawk, will be facing his black haired opponent who chose to remain anonymous,” the speaker said. “Remember the rules. Prepare yourselves. Show the best of what you can do, and prevail, warriors of Elos!”

Lily took a few steps, each one with more confidence. She glanced up to the terrace looming above the rest of the stands. Sunlight reflected off of shiny armors and bright white dresses, the very elite of the Plains, watching those who had chosen to partake. She couldn't see her, but it didn't matter. Lily looked instead to her opponent, the man now about fifteen meters away from her. Her world became smaller as she focused, magic flowing through her body.

She could feel her nails sharpen, her canines growing out. Already she was in a light crouch. She could smell him. His sweat. The sands. She could hear his steps, could see the focus in his eyes.
Prey.

“Let the fight... begin!” the loud voice called out but to her it sounded dulled.

Jeremia moved immediately, his hands flicking forward with bright spheres of fire coming to life.

Lily stepped into the shadows, moving to the side before she came out into the open, the spheres exploding into bright flames where she had stood. She looked at her opponent as the crowd cheered, a long slightly curved blade now in his hands, the steel erupting in fire.

She grit her teeth and unsheathed her knife, pushing off the ground and running towards him. She jumped and twirled to the side, a large sphere of fire rushing past, slightly singeing her hair. Three of her wolves stepped out of the shadows, fanning out to distract the sword wielding mage. She teleported past another sphere, coming close to his range. Lily watched him swing, the angle too wide. Her instincts screamed and she ducked, something moving past above.

He vanished just before she reached him.

Lily turned, her three wolves slowing down as she looked at the mage a dozen meters away. *That was his sword. It suddenly sped up.*

Jeremia smiled before he raised his blade, crouching down in a stance.

Lily did the same and rushed forward yet again. She watched as he swung his long blade, lines of fire flaring up and rushing to meet her. She dodged long before they would've reached her, one of them speeding up about halfway towards her. *He's manipulating the speed? Time itself? But I'm not faster. It's just him or his magic.*

More wolves rushed out of the shadows, two of them cut through by a swing of his sword, the man forced to teleport when four more wolves were about to reach him, one already leaping. Lily watched and teleported to where he appeared. She struck at his vulnerable side with her dagger, the man spinning with an unnatural motion before his flaming sword collided with her weapon.

She jumped back but found him following with fast steps, his arm raised where a torrent of fire erupted outwards. Lily raised her arms to take some of the heat, her pack rushing at the man until he

teleported yet again. Breathing hurt, her arms red and her hair on fire. She used her healing to deal with the damage as her shade like wolves formed a circle to protect her, all ten of them out now.

She looked at the man now. *This isn't working. He's way too careful.* Once again he was using his ranged attacks to push her to action. She dodged and ran, teleporting when she couldn't get away from the strangely fast moving spheres.

Let's use the ace. She circled him and rushed forward, straight at him. A teleport brought her behind one of his flame slashes but not close enough to force him to teleport. A surge of mana flowed through her when she activated her beast form, muscles bulging as her hair grew out in a split second. Broad claws clashed with the burning sword as her form expanded, her large wolf maw biting down towards his shoulder before he sped up and rushed away, just barely dodging out of the way.

Lily followed, on all fours now as she and her pack moved as one, the wolves dodging the blade and spells as they pressured the opponent. She felt the air pressure with every powerful step. Lily reached his form, ignoring the blade that cut into her side as she used her speed and weight to slam into him. She heard the crack of bones and stayed behind his rolling form, slashing down with her claws. She growled with joy when she felt the resistance, blood now coloring the sands with red. Her spell wavered before she returned to her human form, collapsing to one knee. Her opponent had already teleported away, staggering slightly with one hand to his bleeding side.

The man hissed, fire around his hand as he seared the wounds shut.

She looked at him with a grin, her vision blurring slightly. *Too long.* She steadied herself and took a deep breath, two of her wolves returning to the shadows when they blocked the incoming spheres of fire coming at her.

Lily crouched and vanished as the rest of her pack rushed at the man. She appeared in front of him, tilting her body to the side to avoid the torrent of flames he sent out from his hand. His blade came down and she deflected it with her dagger. *One hand only.* She stepped forward, just when one of her wolves bit into his leg. Her dagger flipped in her hand before she slammed it into his side, another dose of her paralyzing agent flowing into him. The knife came out bloodied, just in time for her to teleport away from his second swing.

She whistled in a low tone, her wolves rushing the man without regard for their own safety. She had a few seconds at most until he shook off the effects. Lily watched as two of her shade like animals were cut apart and vanished, one of them biting through the bracer protecting his right arm, burned away when he moaned and sent a torrent of flame over his own limb. Two more were biting into his legs, the man stumbling forward and falling to his knees. He blocked one of the wolves going for his throat and skewered a second one.

Lily waited for the start of his next swing and stepped into the shadows. She came out right behind his kneeling form and reached around. One hand grabbed his hair and ripped back his skull, the other one stabbing her blade into his throat.

Sound returned to her ears, the crowd entirely silent. She heard the pained moans of her foe and kept her dagger in place.

Three people in black appeared around them.

"He's alive," Lily said.

One of them chuckled, a Sentinel. "We know. Leave the blade in and step back."

[Battle Healer – lvl 245]

Lily didn't want to let go of her weapon but she didn't think she had a choice in the matter. She stepped back.

The Sentinel walked up to the man, holding a piece of wood out towards his mouth. "Bite down. This will hurt."

A collective groan went through the crowd when the Sentinel ripped out the dagger, healing the screaming man right after.

Lily watched. It was the first time someone had survived what she had just done. Normally she went for a slice instead of a stab. Killing wasn't allowed after all.

Jeremia collapsed on the ground and held his throat, the wound already gone. Tears fell to the sand.

"Well fought. Both of you," the Sentinel said and threw the dagger towards her. "Need a heal too?"

Lily caught the thing. "No," she answered and used her own ability. It wasn't as effective as what the Sentinel had just done to the man but she didn't want the help if she could fix it herself.

A Shadow crouched down next to Jeremia. "Can you stand? I can carry you."

The man raised a single finger.

The Shadow left him alone.

"And the winner is our anonymous black haired fighter! The savage wolf!" the announcer's voice roared through the arena, quickly followed by applause and cheers.

"Savage wolf. Fitting, I suppose," the other Sentinel said, looking at her with her piercing green eyes, ash armor covering the rest of her face.

[Battle Healer – lvl 238]

She looks so similar.

"You've grown," a voice resounded in her mind.

Lily tensed up and took a step back.

"No need to be afraid," the woman in front of her said in an amused tone.

Lily ignored her and looked at the cheering crowd, her eyes coming to a stop at the terrace. Dozens of people were watching from there.

"Do you mind if I join you? You can reply through the mental connection," the voice resounded again. A voice she hadn't heard in a long time.

Did she mind? Was she allowed to refuse at all? Was it the same woman? Or was it Lilith, the monster she had heard of in the many songs spreading through the plains? Lily looked at the dagger in her hand. A gift, given without asking anything in return. "I don't mind," she said, with her mind alone. A strange sensation, the words coming easier than when she spoke normally. She didn't know if she had said them if not for the strange connection. Lilith coming down to meet her would bring attention. Lily couldn't yet decide if it was a good idea or not, but a part of her didn't care. It was Ilea, one of the few people that had been kind to her after the destruction of Salia.

She watched the terrace when one figure jumped out, black ash spreading from her back. The woman flapped her wings in a powerful motion, flying down towards the sand covered grounds as the cheers continued.

Lilith landed a few meters away, the impact audible. She straightened as sand still flowed away, her large wings dissolving into nothing. Her armor looked smooth and savage at the same time. Perfected over the years and hundreds of battles. Horns grew out from her ash covered temples, bending forward in a sharp angle. Her every movement flowed with weight and magic.

The purely visual difference between the Sentinel in front of Lily and the woman she had once known was minimal, but they were worlds apart. She wanted to take a step back, wanted to run. Her instincts warned her of a monster unlike anything she had ever felt before.

“You look good,” the woman said, her blue eyes both terrifying and amused. “A little burnt. The long hair suits you.”

The Sentinel stepped away and bowed to the woman in a respectful manner. She gave Lily a considering look with her green eyes and joined the other two who tried to help the grumbling Jeremia.

Lily gulped. She had known that Ilea was here, had known about her reputation. But now that she stood in front of her. She didn't know what to do. Her instincts and magic told her that the songs were all true, but it wasn't fear she felt. She heard herself sob. Just once. The reaction was so surprising, she took a step back and wiped at her eyes, her vision blurring for some reason. *Why.*

“*It must've been tough,*” Ilea said.

Lily felt strong arms enveloping her, her wolves stepping out of the shadows to protect her but their growls and bites were ignored. She felt her arms growing weak. It was warm. She was pressed against the woman's chest, crying for the second time in the past two years.

It was nice. A little confusing too. For a moment, she felt like the little girl she had been back in Salia, running around through the streets and sewers. But that wasn't who she was now. Not anymore. She took in a deep breath and shuddered, pushing at the indestructible ash armor with a weak hand.

Ilea let her go and took a step back. “It's good to see you, Savage Wolf.”

Lily looked up and grinned.