

The Top Fighters

The battle that was taking place on the screen was holding all of Nayra's attention. She even tuned out Anrosh narrating the fight to Ryun as she watched. Lesamitrius' battle was incredibly captivating. She had sparred and trained with him for a while now, but she hadn't ever seen him really fight for real. His style was completely different than anything she had seen before. He had his scimitar in his hand, ready to be used if his opponent managed to close the distance, but that wasn't his main offensive tool. His path was the Path of the Green Rain, and with it he could call down a rain of acid. She watched as the ground itself sizzled and melted from the green rain that poured down on both him and his opponent.

Sadly, it didn't look like Lesamitrius was doing much damage. His Qi was powerful, but his opponent was defense oriented. Her armor was sizzling, melting in places, but not fast enough. And Lesamitrius was having trouble keeping out of her range. She had caught him once, and while he had managed to get away by sending a stream of acid from his mouth directly at her face, she had somehow managed to heal the damage he had done and nearly break him. Her mace had smashed into a boulder and pulverized it.

Lesamitrius used his sword from a distance, since aside from being a weapon, it was also a focus for his Qi. He sent bolts of concentrated acid at her from a distance. His opponent knew better than to let them hit, the acid that fell all around them had already weakened her armor and it made all his other acid attacks stronger. She had taken a few of those bolts on her shield before, it was how she had lost it. Lesamitrius' attacks had eaten through it, forcing her to abandon it.

The battle was a race to see if Lesamitrius would manage to stay ahead of her or if she would manage to catch him before his acid ate through her defenses. She had to be burning through her resources and perks quickly to have been able to resist the acid effects for so long.

The match continued, with Lesamitrius staying one step ahead. His opponent had tried to get out of the range of his rain a few times, but Lesamitrius was faster, all he had to do was follow and she would remain in

the rain. She could resist for a long time, but she had to know that the only way she could win was to reach him and defeat him before his acid prevailed.

With a burst of speed, the armored woman flew through the air, straight at Lesamitrius. It surprised him; he didn't manage to move out of the way fast enough. Nayra watched a quick exchange with their weapons. Lesamitrius was weaker than his opponent and got pushed back. Then swiped with his sword and all the acid on the ground around them, brought there by the acid rain, moved. The liquid shifted like a river and smashed into the woman's side. She went tumbling, and Lesamitrius followed.

Too late, he saw the trap. As he prepared to end the fight, his opponent gestured with her hand. Nayra didn't quite catch what happened, there was a blast of force that sent the acid rain flying away from them, clearing the air and creating a dome that was safe from the rain. And then Lesamitrius' body was blown back. He flashed with light midair, losing the match.

An hour later, Nayra stood in front of the infirmary watching as Lesamitrius walked out of it, healed.

He looked at the ground, but his body was turned in Ryun's direction. "Sect Head," he bowed over his hands. "Forgiveness. I've failed."

Nayra glanced at Ryun, trying to see what he was thinking. She didn't have to wonder for long.

"You've done well, Lesamitrius. Our Sect had shown great qualities. All of us who joined the tournament managed to qualify, that is more than enough."

Nayra could see that Lesamitrius wasn't convinced, but there was nothing that he could really say. Lesamitrius was sect-grown, he couldn't even imagine talking back to his Sect Head. He looked ashamed, and perhaps even frustrated.

"You've done our sect proud," Ryun said, then turned to look at Nayra. "Both of you."

Nayra shrugged uncomfortably. She had reached the top 32 fighters in her category, an achievement for sure. She knew that she had one of the best educations one could possibly have. She didn't dismiss the power that she now held because of it—she had disagreed with the direction her own life

should take. She wasn't accustomed to being praised; she didn't know what to say.

And praise seemed to be the last thing that Lesamitrius wanted now.

Thankfully for them, Ryun wasn't the most observant person around. He turned and all of them followed him back to their compound in silence.

Nayra closed her eyes as the teleporting platform sent her into the arena. It was a week after her last match, and it was time for her next one. She had prepared as much as she could, but she knew that her most powerful cards had been shown to everyone. While she knew little about her opponent. He hadn't been one of the people that anyone really expected to qualify, and Lesamitrus had been too busy preparing for his own match to learn more. Anrosh had sent people to watch all the matches, but her opponent hadn't shown that much in his match. He won quickly and easily. The only thing that Nayra knew about him was that he was a drake and that he fought with his claws.

She appeared in the arena, her spear and shield in her hands, ready for battle.

The arbiter stood nearby, and again asked if she was ready. She nodded and got ready as another voice echoed through the arena.

“Nayra Ornn, Sect Leader of the Twilight Melody Sect, versus Basthec Fusesorch of the Scorch Hunting Guild. You may begin!”

Nayra jumped forward, moving quickly. She knew that her opponent would probably expect for her to search for a good battlefield, so she decided to do the opposite.

She activated her **Dawnfire Wings** and took to the sky. She flew above the stone pillars, but still near them enough that she wouldn't be visible from a great distance. She used them for cover as she searched for her opponent. Finally, she saw him in the distance, running over the ground. She banked in the air, moving Qi through her body. She activated her **{Mantle**

of the Rising Mists} and prepared her **{Curtain of Mist Petals}**. She felt her strength and dexterity rise with her technique and she triggered her boosting perks—**Valkyrie’s Swiftiness, Valkyrie’s Avatar of Fire, and Valkyrie’s Might**. She beat her wings and blasted through the air.

In moments the form of her foe grew larger in her vision and she activated her **{Curtain of Mist Petals}** and mist flew out of her forming petals that shot down with her spear.

Her opponent dodged, his body twisting out of the way in a manner that looked unnatural. Her spear and petals hit stone, the mist Qi exploding and blowing holes in the ground sending debris flying everywhere. She raised her head and saw that a few of her petals had gotten her opponent, blood was flowing down his arm, his armor blown away. Before she could react his armor shifted and repaired itself, and cracks that resembled breaking of bone and tearing of flesh came from his back. She followed as he jumped back, attacking with **|Swipe|** in front of her. Wings like those of a large bat sprang from his back and with one mighty beat he blew her back and got out of the range of her attack. The second beat put him into the air and he flew up above the stone pillars. She jumped after him, beating her wings made out of fire, blasting through the air. She exploded above a pillar and looked around, searching for her opponent.

She found him quickly, he wasn’t even trying to hide. He floated in the air with his lips pulled in an expression that showed all of his teeth.

She pulled her Qi readying another technique when her opponent did something that she didn’t expect, he spoke.

“That was so awesome!” He said, and she blinked, taken off-guard. “The way you came down like whoosh, and then boom! Didn’t even see you until it was almost too late! I nearly lost the match right then and there!”

Nayra blinked, her body shrouded in golden fire, and watched her opponent as he made gestures with his hands, miming something swooping down followed by an explosion.

“Uh...” Nayra said uncertainly. “Thanks?” None of her opponents had spoken to her, in any of her matches. It was to be expected, they weren’t there to talk, they were there to fight.

“I got to learn how to do that,” he mused, mostly to himself.

“Uh...” Nayra wasn’t quite sure what to do, so she hefted her spear and got ready.

“Ah, right! Fight,” her foe said. “I’ve been looking forward to this for the entire week, ever since I learned you were my opponent.”

“You have?” Nayra said before she could stop herself. Then grimaced and decided that she needed to cover up her slip. “Actually, I don’t even know who you are.”

It was a bit of a lie, she knew his name and some basic, but not much else.

“What? I am Basthec Fusesorch! The man who will be the greatest Monster Hunter in the Infinite Realm.”

Nayra shook her head. “Okaaay, enough talk,” she said and activated her **[Shimmering Burst]**. She flew straight at him, her body shimmering, she sent a **[Dawnfire Mirage]** ahead of herself, and then banked hard to the side. Basthec’s armor shifted, and a tendril grew out of it, snapping forward to block her mirage’s spear. It passed through it, the dawnfire burning it slightly. He realized that it was an illusion, but she already had her opening. She used **[Dawn Dash]** and closed the distance from his side. She stabbed with her spear, he blocked with one arm, pushing her spear off-course. But she triggered her awakened weapon’s ability and it twisted around it and stabbed into his shoulder.

He grimaced, but then his body rippled, and webs shot out of his hands, snaring her. A moment later his wings beat and he swooped down toward the ground, pulling her down with him. The webs were burning up in her fire, but it was enough to disorient her. She got free before they reached the ground, and she beat her wings to reorient herself. Basthec turned midair, his tail rippled and changed. It split into sections, now resembling something like a scorpion’s tail with a vicious stinger at the end.

Nayra was still falling, and he lashed out with his tail. She moved her shield in the way and used **[Block]**, taking the hit on it. Then she triggered her **[Dawnfire Immolation]** and opened her mouth, releasing a **Valkyrie’s Shout**. Her attack stunned him visibly, his wings freezing up. It let Nayra catch up and stab with her spear.

The tip of Er'ishi Resav punched through and into his chest, but then his armor rippled, and her attack was thrown aside. Her momentum still carried her forward and she smashed into him. Dawnfire burning him. His scales rippled, becoming darker and larger, and she saw that her fire no longer burned him. She realized that he had to be some kind of a shifter, someone that could take on the properties of different monsters.

They smashed into the ground, the force of impact separating them. She rolled across the ground and then quickly stood up, her **|Greater Pain Tolerance|** making her able to ignore her injuries.

“Ha ha ha!” Basthec yelled out. Nayra raised her eyes and saw him charging at her. “That was awesome!”

She didn't have the time to answer before his claws extended and got sharper, a moment later he was close enough and she was forced to defend.

She blocked or deflected claws swiped that could rend her armor and flesh apart, the heat of her fire no longer affecting him. It had to be his scales, somehow he had shifted them to a fire resistant variant. She did not enjoy being put on the back foot, and she knew that she couldn't let it continue. The moment she surrendered the initiative she was going to lose. Her stat boost was now on her secondary pair, her endurance and vitality, it made it easier to defend. But then the boost switched and she immediately triggered another technique. She stabbed forward, then turned to the side and with a beat of her wings and **{Mist Burst}** she dashed forward, away from her foe. A blast of **Scorching Mist** exploded out of her, through her skin and the dawnfire surrounding it. The fire that clung to her skin was blown away with the mist sending a blazing and expanding cloud of dawnfire and mist all around her. It obscured her opponent's sight of her and allowed her a moment to get to the sky again. It didn't give her as much time as she had hoped. He blasted out of the dawnfire mist and flew after her.

He had to have some pretty high fire and heat resistances to be able to handle that without burning up. It meant that her hardest hitting cards were useless against him.

“Here I come!” Basthec roared as he flew through the air.

Nayra banked between two pillars, then glanced behind her to see him following close behind. “Why are you announcing your attacks!?”

“Because it’s fun!” He said as he swiped at her with his claws. Nayra kicked his hand away and then pulled her wings close, shut her avatar off and flew through a gap in-between two pillars. She heard a smash and a curse from behind her and smiled. She was smaller than him, and the gap was just wide enough for her to pass through. She spread her wings and spun in air to look behind her. Basthec was falling to the ground, one of his wings broken.

She blasted after him, her spear ready, and Qi moving through her conduits. She reached him and attacked, **{Mesmerizing Mirage}** making her movements hard to follow and her **{Mist of the Scorching End}** ready. She stabbed with Er’ishi, her foe managed to move her spear off target, but she still hit his flesh, stabbing through his leg. Then she activated her fruit technique. The mist exploded out of her, filling the sphere around her with the Aspect of the **Scorching Mist**. She knew that the heat was unlikely to harm him with his resistances, but at least it would take care of some of his senses. Her spear was wrenched out of her hand and something smashed into her sending her tumbling to the floor. She realized too late that her **[Thermoception]** had a hard time tracking him. Whatever gave him his resistance also regulated his temperature, it was nearly the same as that of her mist now.

She had hoped to try and suffocate him with her Cloud form, but if she couldn’t see him with her heat sense, then she would have no way of knowing where to move when robbed of her other senses. As she tried to figure out what to do she heard his voice through the mist.

“It’s too bad that you are fire focused, I have so many fire-based attacks that I could’ve shown you.”

Nayra grimaced at that, it meant that he was like her with mostly fire based attacks. It explained why he could handle her own, it also meant that both of them were at a disadvantage, unable to use their most powerful attacks. She didn’t answer his words, instead she moved. She dashed through the mist, using her **[Dawnfire Mirage]** she sent an image of herself forward through the orange-tinted mist at the location where he had been last. She didn’t follow after it, instead she watched and listened carefully.

Then, she saw a shadow of a movement and heard steps on the ground, the whistle of claws passing through the air. She smiled as she heard Basthec's voice.

“Shit.”

With **Dawnfire Blink** she reached him in an instant. He had mistaken her image for her and attacked it, which meant that he too had trouble seeing well in her mist. She arrived next to him in a blast of dawnfire that blew the mist away from their position. She stabbed her spear and glazed his neck, spilling blood, she immediately followed up with her shield. The blade attached to the bottom of it caught his forearm, slicing through armor and scale.

He beat his one still functional wing and then smashed it on her shoulder, making her stumble. A moment later his claw rent through her helmet and cut through her eye and cheek, glancing off her teeth and breaking her jaw in the process. The pain nearly overwhelmed her, but as he pressed his advantage she turned into her Cloud form, her armor going into her ring in less than a second. The mist that had been blasted away surged back in, since the technique's anchor was still active. She pulled the mist in and healed herself as her shield and spear tumbled to the ground, her storage ring floated in the middle of her form. She surged forward, intent on trying to get inside of his lungs and suffocate him if she couldn't burn him, but then suddenly she could feel only pain.

It was so unexpected and intense that she immediately turned her cloud form off. She reformed and tumbled to the ground, naked, her muscles twitching. The mist around her was surrounded by flashes of bright blue lightning. Before she hit the ground something smashed into her, tackling and carrying her out of her mist that had started to dissipate anyway. She hit something with her back, hard, and felt her spine crack. She tasted blood in her mouth, and she tried to use a perk, ability, technique, anything, but was unable. Her body was twitching from the shock still, and the only thing she could see was her foe above her, his claws extended and sharp looking.

“That was a good fight,” Basthec said. “Maybe we can do it again sometime?”

Then his claws came down and everything went black.