

"Truly a magnificent display of ability, wouldn't you say?" Tahl, the lumbering minotaur, exclaimed as he took the scene.

Letting the crowd roar in acknowledging excitement, Tahl gestured to the new set of apparatus and items being rolled in by the staff.

"Now, we've completed the two first categories of might and agility, and I must say the results have come out splendidly surprising!" He smiled broadly. "But my fellow monsters, the show isn't over, we still have two more categories left~"

Pausing, he turned to the many booths filled with monsters lining the scene.

"I must ask all challengers of the magic category to step up!" He announced.

I shared a deep kiss with Mia.

"Go get em" I smiled to her as she got to her feet.

Pausing before she stepped out, she grinned back at me.

"Of course." She stated simply, confidence radiating off her.

Watching her saunter up to the stage, I scouted out her competition for this magic test. This time around, there were quite a few oddballs mixed into the crowd. Some like Mia were hiding their identities with cowls and cloaks, and others were just plain weird.

For those wearing apparel to hide their faces and figures, it wasn't surprising as simply being known as someone possessing a core was enough to paint a target on your back. And if you also didn't have a sufficiently strong enough faction behind you to ward off any opportunistic monsters, you might be bringing down hell upon you by revealing the fact that you walked around with one in you.

As for the other... weirder monsters, there was this arachnid creature, part human, part spider. Well 'part human' was putting it gently. While it definitely had some humanoid shape, it definitely was anything but. Essentially, the creature was just as if the upper half of some humanoid arachnid had been sewn onto the thorax of an eerily large spider.

While there had been two similar monsters to this creature in the agility test, however, none this big.

But then there was this other monster... one who actually gave me pause.

Wisened, thin, and wretched in appearance, this creature looked as if it were the corpse of an old person that had just crawled out of their coffin. But the most disturbing thing about this creature was the sensations I was getting from the aura of the creature.

Pure disgust and utter wrongness.

For a lack of better terms, it felt like this creature went against all that I stood for. Not theologically, but on a deeper, spiritual level. In my mind, I knew this was just like any other grotesque monster, but in my soul, I wanted nothing more than to eradicate its... wrong existence.

Staunching my tumbling thoughts, I realized that I had crushed and splintered the head of my armrest without noticing it.

"Masta?" A worried voice asked.

Looking towards the big brute, Bob, I sighed deeply, allowing the tension to flow out of me.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine..." I said.

The mere sight of that vile creature had upset me much more than it should have, and I had no idea why...

Pulling up its status, I hoped for better insight into why or what this feeling might've been.

-Appraisal!-

Appraisal - Zerith					
Information		Attributes		Traits, Titles, and Skills	
-Name-	"Zerith"	STR	21	Skills	???
-Race-	Wight	VIT	55	Traits	???
-Sex-	Male	AGI	40	Titles	???
-Rank-	D	DEX	38	Resistances	
-Level-	38/50	INT	82		
Health	311/311	CHR	???	Physical Resistance	8
Stamina	175/175	WILL	???	Magical Resistance	17
Mana	532/532	MAG	95	Mental Resistance	???

"A wight..." I muttered, cringing as even the name alone was enough to tarnish my tongue.

But yet again, there was no specific reason as to why I instinctively reacted as such.

"They're undead right?" I pondered. "He certainly looks like a walking dead..."

Whether or not this instinctive disgust was due to him being an undead monster, I did not know. But it certainly pointed in that direction. However, then it stood to question, why did Bob not feel repulsive to me? Was he different because of the circumstance of which he became a Draugr, or might he in fact not be undead at all?

Thinking back, I realized that I hadn't seen this creature amongst the large influx of contestants when the tournament was about to start, making it reasonable that it must've been because this creature was one of this city's nobles seeing as they had special areas and entrances of which they could make use of. Like we did with the carriage that had escorted us to the plaza.

Those tumbling thoughts occupied my attention so fully that I had barely realized that the contest had already started.

Standing in rows as they had with the strength test, monsters of all varieties were facing some odd cylindrical apparatuses. With a tube made of glass, it was filled with what I guessed to be simply water. However, inside this tube, six different spheres lay at the bottom. One fist-sized one, and five small marble-sized ones.

As I saw the first contestant walking up and putting their palms face-down onto the indents on the sides of the apparatus, it quickly became apparent what this test was about even though I had missed the introduction and explanation.

Those balls when infused with mana had unique properties like that of the Abyssal Bedrock, but instead of hardening, they began to float when infused. Although I didn't know if this effect was induced by the mana somehow lessening the sphere's mass or something else, that didn't really matter.

But what was clear was that this was a test of magical power and finesse. That one ball would undoubtedly require a lot of power and mana to keep it afloat and make it go high enough, whereas doing that simultaneously while lifting additional marble-sized spheres would require a stupendous amount of magical control.

Already in the first round of challengers, there wasn't a single monster who could lift more than the initial sphere to higher than half-way up the tube.

But that quickly changed though as one specific cloaked figure stepped up and with a clear display of great mental effort, managed to keep afloat not only the main sphere and on subsidiary marble, but a whole two marbles including the main sphere.

I honestly hadn't the faintest idea how well I would last in this kind of test as both I had never tried to utilize my mana through such an odd apparatus, but also because the grasp of my own magical capabilities had gotten foggy over the last month. With all my new increases in power, and still learning how to properly use my **[Heirloom of Sanguinity]**, just how efficient and with how much finesse I could use my magic compared to others remained a mystery.

But one thing that had become clear to me was the fact that Mia had already surpassed me in my ability to control magic. While I still had a ridiculous abundance of magical power to draw upon which she didn't, it was still obvious that her magical talent was shining through with her new evolution.

Watching the challengers go up to try and see how well they could score, time went by until a certain individual made me perk up. It was finally that arachnid's turn. But before it was to step up, it sent a gaze out into the crowd of the other contestant booths. Following its gaze, I saw a group of curious figures.

Two arachnid monsters, those very same as the ones who had competed in the category of agility. A giant armored in dark metal plating from head to toe who gave me the same disgusting feeling that I got from the wight. But most eye-catching of them all was the other, arachnid monster sitting at the head, clearly being the leader.

However, this spider monster was unlike the other arachnids. Instead of simply possessing the upper torso of some humanoid arachnid, this monster's humanoid figure was much more... human or rather dark elf-like with its darkened skin and pointy ears.

But other than his appearance, the air about him gave me an odd sense of familiarity, or rather that I could somehow innately recognize his power as someone of leadership. Adding

this to another bout of sensations that I had no rhyme or reason for, I simply tried to use **Appraisal** on the monster.

However, to my displeasure, the annoying momentary headache that came with failed attempts of using **Appraisal** on magically warded monsters terrorized my mind for the umpteenth time today. I had hoped I would get lucky this time around seeing as I was successful with that wight monster who didn't have any obvious defenses against divining skills, but this one definitely had.

Also, not to my surprise, the arachnid monster immediately shot a scathing glare in my direction. Although many talismans and spells could block or detect my **Appraisal**, it oftentimes just left the target bewildered as to who might've done it. However, once in a while, I would stumble upon certain individuals like this fella, who could instantaneously pinpoint my location simply based on a failed skill.

The spider-guy was clearly peeved by the fact that I had the audacity to attempt to do something so brazen, but I honestly didn't give a flying fuck. He couldn't do anything about it, which was quite evident by the fact that he dropped the glare with a harrumph before directing his attention back to his follower up upon the scene.

As I was noting yet another individual of power in this city in the back of my mind, I was suddenly drawn out of my thoughts by the awed exclamations coming from the crowd.

Looking towards the commotion, I found the arachnid creature standing before one of those apparatuses, clawed hands pressed onto the indentations as a dark glow was given off from underneath.

Within the tube, however, was something even more impressive than the monster's mana signature. There was the main sphere that was afloat, and not just one additional marble, not two, but three marbles. But it didn't stop there. There were all, in fact, floating at the very top of the tube. Displaying not only the monster's formidable magical power, but also finesse.

This lasted for a whole fifteen minutes, which was another factor of how high he would score.

After another round of applause, the challengers went on until within mere five minutes of the arachnid's display, a similar scene played out when a cowled figure stepped up to the apparatus. But instead of one of those who hid their identities for safety's sake, this individual was undoubtedly one of the same faction of the two who had escorted us here, and the very same that Executrix Lana was a part of.

But different from the arachnid, this cowled figure actually managed to make three of those marbles orbit the main sphere, something that seemed wholly outrageous. None before now had even managed to do anything more than simply make the spheres float, and even I hadn't the faintest idea of how to do that.

Although the magical fluctuation was clear before me, I couldn't figure out the method used...

But surprisingly enough, this was the exact same time Mia was up. However, she didn't care for gawking at the cowled figure's display like all the other challengers as she simply walked up, put her hands on the apparatus, and infused her mana.

First, the main sphere began rising.

It rose, and it rose - until it stopped at barely more than above the half-way mark. It simply bobbed there in the water, not rising nor falling lower.

But just as seemed she was done, another sphere began to become afloat as she infused mana into it, matching the main sphere as it floated beside it.

Then another...

A third...

A fourth...

And then the last, fifth sphere...

All six spheres were clearly and visibly floating beside each other within that transparent tube of water. And the resulting cacophony of murmurs that was elicited once the crowd peeled their attention from the cowled figure's display was deafening.