

~ Day 116 ~

Before long, the massive plaza was filled to the brim with a veritable sea of monsters, of both grotesque and beautiful appearance. I hadn't seen such a gathering of monsters since witnessing the overpopulation of Maldrak and its cultural stigma of the arena bloodsports. However, unlike those ranks filled with puny orcs and weak hobs, here were true monsters of power in abundance.

You could find anything from a cunning gremlin to a lumbering bugbear, and they were in the tens of thousands. It was an awe-inspiring sight. One that only made me wonder even more as to who in this dog-eat-dog world could possibly be powerful enough to rule over all of them.

My musings were cut short, however, as the show before us picked up to a cadence that was enough to capture my rapt attention. Beautiful dancers, exciting music, and mesmerizing sparring like that of the martial art of capoeira were being performed before the eyes of hundreds of thousands. Everything was delightful and managed to contrast out the world as colors of vibrant reds and dark purples had been unfurled to hang with garlanders and lanterns across the plaza's majestic architecture.

But as the buzzing crowd died down with the ending of the show, the entertainers left to make way for an impressive and eye-catching figure.

Someone whose size managed to dwarf even Bob was clothed in gentleman attire, very much contrasting his otherwise savage and menacing stature. Covered in black fur with streaks of brown, hooves for feet, haunched two-jointed legs, a musculature that can only be found on a bull, and the horned bovine head to match.

It was undoubtedly a minotaur.

I was astounded by this monster as it was of course a well-recognized monster, however, I had never expected it to be so grand to witness it in reality. Although the description of these

infamous creatures always came in a wide array of varying appearances, I don't believe they've ever been described in such an overbearing way before, but now before my very eyes, this almost four-meter tall behemoth smiled cordially to all around.

-Appraisal!-

Appraisal - Tahl					
Information		Attributes		Traits, Titles, and Skills	
-Name-	"Tahl"	STR	135	Skills	???
-Race-	Minotaur	VIT	120	Traits	???
-Sex-	Male	AGI	???	Titles	???
-Rank-	D+	DEX	65	Resistances	
-Level-	50/50	INT	25		
Health	1401/1401	CHR	???	Physical Resistance	20
Stamina	805/806	WILL	???	Magical Resistance	8
Mana	0/0	MAG	???	Mental Resistance	???

"Monsters, from far and wide - we welcome you!" The massive bovine suddenly exclaimed, his voice deep and booming. "I, Tahl, will be your host during this tournament sponsored by Ebongrave's regent and benevolent ruler, Lord Nosferas."

Although his volume was definitely impressive on its own, it was clearly aided by magical means to allow all gathered to hear.

"This is a day of joyous events," He splayed his arms open, gesturing to everything around. "You've either come here today to prove your strength, your determination, your dominance, or to witness it all unfold as a gracious spectator."

"But either way, we welcome all." The cordial minotaur bowed with a finesse belying his massive figure.

"As this year's tournament is very different from previous years, with the stakes being at peaks they've rarely ever reached before - we have some truly outstanding prizes for all those with the will and determination to grasp them." He paused to expertly grasp the audience's bated attention. "One of those prizes, a mystical item of great power and renown. Something that our gracious Lord has put up for any who manage to achieve first place - a relic!"

Although this information was nothing new, it still got the crowd all riled up with the minotaur's experience handling. But an item like that of a relic was one of a great many legends and stories; how those grazed by the system could obtain relics to gain great power, were all stories of grand mystery so it wasn't surprising that its mere mention had brought so many monsters here today.

"As such, the rules of this tournament have changed to suit those stakes." The minotaur added, causing the sea of monsters gathered to suddenly fall into whispers and murmurs amongst each other.

I of course already knew of this due to that Grendor who came to register us into the tournament. He had explained, unlike previous of these tournaments held here in Ebongrave, where it would generally be battles of followers against followers until it finally came down to the leaders, this time around, the competition was a bit different.

"The tournament will be divided up into three parts," He explained. "A show of your follower's powers, group battle of followers, and to end it all off, a final battle between leaders."

"In the first round, each follower will be scored on how well they do in their respective categories. This will allow those who qualify to enter the group duels. And those groups who win a sufficient amount of battles will be allowed to go on to the third and final event. The battle of leaders."

"This way, we'll be able to fully showcase the many talents and abilities of all those monsters who've traveled from far and wide to compete in our humble city."

Falling silent, he let the crowd calm down before suddenly lifting a meaty hand into the air with the snap of his finger.

"Then without further ado, let the games - begin!" He announced.

On cue with his words, a flurry of activity sprouted from many of the nearby buildings as multiple servants and laborers streamed out with various instruments and objects.

Before we even knew it, a wide array of contraptions and apparatus had been set up in the main square of the plaza. As the minotaur and our host, Tahl, went onto explain, this first round had four different categories in which one's followers could display their ability. The categories were strength, agility, magic, and endurance.

These weren't tests of literal attributes, however. The category of strength would test one's physical might, brawn, and destructive power. Agility was the category of speed, nimbleness, dexterity, and finesse. Magic was a test of control, magical prowess, and attunement. And lastly, endurance was the category of resilience, toughness, and the ability to take a hit.

Each follower was only allowed to take one test out of the four, so it was paramount that you matched your followers for the proper category to score the highest they could. Otherwise, you might not even be able to pass the preliminaries. Also, any magical item, artifact, or outside influence was strictly prohibited, but other than that, those were the ground rules.

"First up, the test of might - bring out your challengers!" Tahl announced.

Sharing a look with Bob, I simply nodded and he stood up from the chair next to us. Although Bob was extremely durable and able to stay in almost any fight indefinitely, that wasn't his strong suit. And besides, most of his durability came from the fact that he could sacrifice almost any part of his body and then reconstitute without barely any repercussions due to his skills as a Draugr.

Walking onto the stage of the main square that was hoisted up to allow all to see, Bob congregated with many hundreds of other monsters. Almost all the figures up there were hulking monsters, although there were a few odd ones that looked out of place amongst their towering competitors. However, I've long learned that appearance in this world all too often belied someone's true power.

Each contestant was then summarily guided by the many instructors and judges on the scene to stand in lines and queues before a row of large engraved boulders that were hooked up to some kind of odd apparatus manned by other monsters who all surprisingly emanated mana signatures; revealing their identity as mages.

"These large rocks are called Abyssal Bedrock," Tahl the minotaur exclaimed to once again capture the audience's attention, gesturing to the rows of boulders. "It's a material rarely found in the Abyss beneath our very feet, and the intriguing aspect of these rocks are not the fact that they're incredibly sturdy and shock-resistant, but that they're also amazing natural mana conductors."

"And when you channel mana directly into these rocks," He continued to explain. "They harden to inordinate levels of durability. So whenever struck while conducting mana through them, they will release some of it to compensate for the damage taken. Both the glow given off the rock by an attack and the amount of mana lost whilst reinforcing it will be the deciding factor for each individual's final score."

Giving a curt nod to the organizer of the many mages to his side, the mage called out to all the mage to start infusing the rocks with a steady stream of mana.

"Challengers may begin!" Tahl announced.

At first, there was clear apprehension and nervousness on many of those who were first in the queues. However, once the first challenger, a massive ogre, hefted his metal mace and swung it at the boulder, causing a loud boom to shake the immediate surroundings and give off a glow, everybody else also began attacking the seemingly immovable and indestructible rocks.

Even that first ogre, someone who could sunder a small crater the size of more than a meter on normal ground with the swing of such a hammer hadn't even left a dent or chipped off the rock. There was only a superfluous mark of where he had hit and a soft tender glow that was briefly given off.

After a few seconds of the mages manning the infusing of the rock discussing with the assigned judge, the ogre was asked if he wanted to forsake his current result for another

single try or keep this one. Of course, the brawn for brain ogre without hesitation accepted the offer as it had been insulted in the fact that the rock hadn't practically split open in front of its undeniable supreme might.

However, the second try yielded an even worse result than the first, and much to the ogre's severe displeasure, this was its final and unredeemable result.

As queues shrank, mighty monsters swinging at those nigh-indestructible rocks, there was an impressive show of might by two particular contestants.

The first was a scrawny-looking monster even smaller than me who managed to produce physical power at least tripling that of the first ogre's strike which quite astounded me and all the crowd around as you would've never been able to guess he could do that from appearance alone. Plus, this little bugger actually managed to scratch the rock, making it give off a soft but definite blue glow from its otherwise black-greyish exterior.

But the second eye-catching challenger had a much more impressive flat-out showing of power than that. A lumbering bugbear, equipped with a cudgel, slammed his weapon against the rock with such force that it silenced everything and everybody around, drawing all eyes to him and the rock of which he had just made a small crack in.

Exploding into cheering, the crowd was excited as that aftershock of force was felt by many. Honestly, even I myself was impressed by the amount of power displayed in that single destructive strike.

But from there, the monsters who finally showed themselves and stepped up to challenge the rocks only became ever more powerful.