

Undead 691

Chapter 691: Convincing Ancient Scholars! (2)

...

No one expected the mundane hook that Aurolio threw to completely obliterate the head of the ugly blue creature that had been relieved from its frozen state. Not Ryte, not the five Mages, not Gillewart and certainly not Skullius.

While he hadn't witnessed what the Null Badubs could do first hand, the verbal hype around them even from Arch-Mages had led him to believe that to kill one of these bastards, even Aurolio needed to exert some effort.

But no.

The pale man swung his arm and dark blood splattered on the floor of the dark cube.

"Impossible!" one of the Grandmaster Mages remarked while slack jawed.

The others held their tongues and continued observing, their shock hidden behind shaken faces.

Ryte narrowed his eyes, and glanced at Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman whom he had expected to have already been aware of the prowess of the pale fellow he came with, also showed surprise, which answered quite a bit of the questions he had.

One of the other Arch-Mages, an elderly woman with chocolate brown hair stepped forward. She reached near the corpse of the Null Badub and crouched down to dip her finger into the creature's sprawled blood.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Aurolio warned, prompting the Arch-Mage to stop.

The elderly woman looked at Aurolio with a calm expression and said:

"Enlighten me."

The pale man swiped away the blood on his hand and walked closer to the Arch-Mage.

"The blood is poisonous. You can take a sample if you like. You're into that stuff, right? Also, as shady as it sounds, I advise that you stop your attempts at killing these beasts. In the event that you are successful, you may die."

...!

Surprise coursed through the group.

Killing the Null Badubs was fatal in itself?

Skullius didn't believe it. How would Aurolio even know something like that? Or was he perhaps hypothesising? Or bluffing?

The female Arch-Mage gave him a curious look.

"So you're the one who killed one of them before?"

"Yes," Aurolio replied while flashing her a smile. "And I just happen to be an expert."

Everyone including RYTE and Skullius looked at Aurolio with suspicion.

The pale man decided to add more substantial fluff to clear their doubts and make his case.

"My name is Aurolio Velanqi, Head of the Velanqi Family. Some of you know me. My technique makes it so that I can never be defeated, even against powerful opponents. Also, contingencies that some unique beasts or men have... they are rendered powerless in the face of my technique, and if my overall strength is similar to that of the enemy, their durability barely matters when I go in for an attack."

The elderly female Arch-Mage rose and narrowed her eyes.

"So you are the one? I've heard of you," she said with a scoff. "Your reputation precedes you."

"It does," Aurolio said with a smile before turning to the other Mages who had doubts in their eyes but did not voice them. "Since you're having difficulty killing these monsters, and some of you see no value in studying them to an... excessive degree, let me get them off your hands. I can kill them all just as easily as I killed this one... and the last."

One of the other Arch-Mage looked at Aurolio and blinked a couple of times.

"On the contrary... we are interested in these beasts. Most of us are. Sure, they are worth more than a little trouble to some more than others..." the Arch-Mage said while glancing at Ryte, "...but why would we discard an opportunity to exhaust our thirst on studying something so unfathomably unique when compared to most other creatures here?"

In the past three hours, every esteemed Mage in the Academy came down here to do an extensive experiment of their own, and as we speak, some of the more enthusiastic folk are compiling theses on the subject! And you want us to 'let you get them off our hands' because 'killing them MAY be lethal to the killer'?"

"Precisely," Aurolio said shamelessly.

Everyone was baffled.

Before anyone else had a chance to speak, Ryte intervened.

"Are you certain of what you're saying?" the Arch-Mage asked the pale man. "What led you to the conclusion that these beasts have such a frightening trait?"

Aurolio took a shallow breath and crouched down over the corpse of the dead Null Badub. He then ran his finger over the creature's skin.

"As you may have noticed, there is not a single trace of mana on this beast or within it. It is not made of from any energy any of you can recognise. Twice now, I've felt fragments of the essence

that makes up these beasts beating against me when they die. If not for my technique, I'm convinced I would have died."

Skullius frowned.

Really?

Was that really a thing?

If he thought back to the Null beasts he had summoned before...

The blue skinned winged creature he had called on back in the Fire Breeder Cluster which the Grand Flame Bringer had killed...

Nothing happened to the Cluster General afterwards.

The dozen legged beast he had summoned during his evaluation at the Guilds Association, which Alaris had killed...

Nothing had happened to the examination officer afterwards.

So, was Aurolio telling the truth?

If the expansion on this supposed technique of Aurolio's was true, and that was a big IF, then it could make sense. The Null Badubs were brought here by the Null Devil King. Skullius had confirmed this after the bastard had said:

'I'll leave my unwanted followers, six Null Badubs for you to deal with. Surely YOU take care of that much.'

So perhaps they were different.

Heck, they were different!

No one but Aurolio had managed to kill them until now, and it made sense that he wouldn't die from their post-death trait, if it was real. After all, the pale man had a natural counter in Voided Death Essence which he seemingly could manipulate infinitely better than Skullius could manipulate Null Life Essence.

"To be frank, maybe it's just me. Maybe powerful benders of energies like yourselves could survive after FINALLY managing to kill one of these beasts through harsh effort..." Aurolio stressed, which bought him a few cross looks from the Mages, "... If that is the case, then great. But if you're not as invulnerable as you think, what will you do if one of you drops dead?"

While most experts would have been made to at least feel the slightest hints of fear from Aurolio's words, the Mages didn't seem all that concerned with their lives. Most of them here had lived for a very long time, and weren't adverse to the death in the natural sense. It was the purpose of the death that mattered to them, rather than the thought of dying.

Truly, if one of them died just for these blue bastards, then that would be... a waste.

"What do you think?" Arch-Mage RYTE turned to Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman was startled.

He thought RYTE was asking his peers, but no, the esteemed Energy Former was looking to him since he was the one who had come partnered with Aurolio.

Weirdly enough, Skullius felt like RYTE didn't like Aurolio very much, given the several unpleasant glances he had shot at the pale man.

But that wasn't important. If his say could bring about some measure of sway, then...

Skullius was silent for a few seconds as all eyes turned to him.

"<Ahem>. If I understand this correctly, all of you would like to do some extensive experimentation on these beasts, right? That's reasonable, considering what they are capable of. However, you don't need all four of them, considering the dangers they pose."

Suddenly, one of the Arch-Mages shot Skullius a glare and boomed:

"Is that right? Don't think we haven't noticed! You get something out of this, don't you? Why else would you be so hell bent on killing these beasts otherwise? Ooh, and don't patronise me by claiming it's for the good and safety of the city! Both your eyes speak nothing of blamelessly good nature."

'Of course not,' Skullius thought.

And to think Aurolio thought these old fogeys would allow him to do as he pleased just because he had killed one of the Null Badubs?

Mages were too damn stubborn!

Clearing his throat, Skullius gave a reply.

"If it wasn't obvious, sir Mage, we want to grow. Maybe for you, cumulative mana experience is easy to acquire, but for us, it's not. I'm merely at the Advancement Stage as a Swordsman and Aurolio, while powerful, is still at the Master Stage with barely any opportunities to reach the Incandescent Stage because of his ridiculous technique."

The honest truth was the Hybrid Luman's reply. Well, some of it.

Aurolio was surprised that Skullius gave that away, but it seemed to be a rather convincing argument.

The Mages seemed to look at them in a different light.

It was true that for these powerful Mages, acquiring experience wasn't that difficult and for the most part, they barely focused on their Stages and instead made it a point to increase their skill in magecraft.

For non-Mages, things were different. Any category of classes that wasn't Energy Forming – Arma using and Form Using – did not have quite as robust potential for growth after all, and most with these classes were left depending on Stages when things were rough.

The amount of experience these beasts gave must have been attractive for these two hunt them down.

The female Arch-Mage narrowed her eyes. As she looked at Aurolio now, she seemed convinced with this reason than the former.

While it seemed contradictory for Aurolio to be having trouble getting experience with his technique, given his current circumstances as a participant in the Premium Age Royale, it actually made sense.

Long journeys to find sufficiently powerful Cluster beasts and all would be close to impossible. So, the pale man finding a close source of cumulative mana experience and doing his best to attain it wasn't impossible.

Ryte nodded to Skullius, and then turned to Aurolio.

"You said there are no traces of mana within these beasts. And it's true, we noticed the same. So how exactly are you acquiring this mana experience, which is what you so dearly desire?" he asked.

The other Mages had noted this detail, but had thought there was something they were missing.

Now that Ryte had mentioned it...

"My technique-"

"Of course it is!" Ryte interrupted Aurolio with an exasperated cry and the wave of his hand.

The other Mages seemed to be fed up with this as well.

What kind of technique was this?!

Maybe they should study Aurolio instead of the Null beasts? How about that?!

Some of the Mages knew of Aurolio, and his title as the strongest among the Families, including some of the Incandescent Stage Family Heads out there, so him claiming to have a technique that closed the gap between him and monstrous foes wasn't a reach.

It was just annoying to hear him blurt out about it over and over again.

Also, since they couldn't confirm for sure if his technique also somehow counted a beast without traces of mana to his growth, they gave up trying to argue.

If the older Arch-Mages advocating for these beasts to be killed off heard of what Aurolio had said, the matter would have been done anyway.

Skullius then chipped in.

"As I was saying. You don't need all four remaining beasts. You could allow us to handle three and leave you the one to do whatever you want with it. Even the burden then would be a bit manageable for you, right, Arch-Mage RYTE?"

The esteemed Energy Former looked to Skullius and chuckled.

He faced his peers.

"I've been against keeping these beasts here since we discovered how powerful they are. You know this. I for one am willing to concede, unlike the others. This compromise is a better fit, if you are unwilling to let them go entirely. Don't you think?" he said.

The Mages looked at each other, reluctance glowing in their sights.

The female Arch-Mage sighed.

"I have no qualms with it. I was already done anyway," she said while wiggling a vial full of the dark blood from the dead Null Badub which Aurolio had said was poisonous.

The others didn't seem opposed to it either, mainly because RYTE was supporting this decision, and it wouldn't be too bad.

"Good then," Arch-Mage Ryte said before turning to Skullius, and telling him he and Aurolio had their answer.

The Hybrid Luman sighed.

It seemed that it wasn't logic that won the war in the end.

Even claiming that murder was fatal wasn't enough to dissuade the Mages!

It took support from someone whom they respected, honesty and an appeal for compromise!

What a hefty price to pay!

And it was both more and less than what Skullius had expected to fork out for the Tie of Exchange between him and Aurolio.

Worse yet, he wasn't done working his ass off!

Now came the time for him to know why exactly Aurolio wanted him here.

Chapter 692: Killing Kin

Before long, Skullius and Aurolio were standing side by side, the Mages acting as their audience from behind.

Many things were left unsaid that they hadn't wanted to squeeze into the earlier argument. There were many holes which they would have wanted to be clarified, but since Ryte supported these two men and the verdict hadn't left them with too much of a disadvantage, they conceded.

Maybe by watching these two men, while at same time wondering why Skullius was relevant unless he too was the owner of an unreasonably powerful technique, they would get answers as to why they couldn't identify the energy that made up these monsters, which only Aurolio and Skullius alone could seemingly perceive, for instance.

Their collective eyes keenly paid attention.

Skullius felt uncomfortable under the burning attention, but there was nothing he could do about it. There was way to do this in secret within the spiral abode of Mages.

"So, what do you want me to do?" Skullius asked Aurolio.

The pale man remained silent for a while, his eyes focusing on the four spheres yet to be dispelled.

Then he answered.

"Null Life Essence... When you confirmed for me that these creatures made from it, I knew that what I had read was true, simply killing these things, while profitable, was far less beneficial than..."

"Than what?" Skullius asked with a frown.

He kept giving focus to the old fogeys at the back, and this time, since Aurolio hadn't erected some form of barrier to prevent anyone from hearing their conversation...

The looks on the faces of the Mages seemed to change.

Skullius gulped.

Perhaps he shouldn't have asked.

But still, he doubted these guys would understand what they were saying if they didn't continue feeding each other information without preventative means around them.

Aurolio didn't seem too on guard against the listening Mages on this particular subject. He was too absorbed with the prospects of the task at hand.

"You have a way to kill them on your own, right?" Aurolio suddenly asked.

Skullius gave him a strange look.

He actually wasn't sure.

In fact, between him, Aurolio and the Null Devil King, it seemed like only Skullius had this doubt.

"I... think so?" he answered, not sure himself if what he said was question or answer.

"I need you to kill them all. Preferably in a way that doesn't erase their corpses."

"Huh?"

Skullius donned a look of confusion.

The pale man didn't give him time to ask why though. He turned to RYTE and gave a nod.

The Arch-Mage gestured with his hand, and one of the spheres vanished, revealing the tall and thick blue Null Badub within it.

The Hybrid Luman sighed in annoyance.

Could he really kill these beasts on his own?

The question brought to mind the Null Devil King's application of Null Life Essence.

Yes.

Skullius hadn't been oblivious to it.

He had seen the creature use a familiar skill in fact.

[Static Limbo]!

Unlike how it worked for him in his Penetrator form – with a limit of one target at a time – the Null Devil King had used it to keep the exploding bits of the Bryne Family mansion in place, and to then bring them back together to recreate the large structure without a single spot of the previous damage!

Skullius didn't know the skill could do that. He doubted he could use it like that, after all, [Static Limbo] couldn't be upgraded or evolved like [Unbound].

This aside, he did have something he could try.

With a thought, Skullius summoned the Bashful Abomination. For everyone's safety, he had wrapped it up in a cloth once again, since finding a sheath for a sword this long was not a simple matter, especially given the rough line of events he had to deal with.

"Dear Master! What do you need? Are we going to do something exciting like before? That was a very unique experience!"

"Luckily for you... We're doing the exact same thing. Every. Single. Detail," Skullius whispered as he channelled Null Life Essence into the zhanmadao.

The Bashful Abomination turned giddy, remembering that calamitous slash Skullius had used against the Null Devil King!

Doing that again... was going to be too thrilling!

The Null Badub before Skullius remained dazed for a little while, but when it saw him who was closest in view – since Aurolio had moved back to give him space – it reacted strangely.

It opened its mouth and...

"Kin..."

...it spoke.

Skullius got into a stance and groaned.

He hadn't expected the Null Badub to speak, but this wasn't the first or second time this was happening.

Every Null beast seemed to recognise him and use the word 'Kin' to refer to him.

Thank goodness no one could understand what it just said!

Quickly, before unwrapping the cloth around the Bashful Abomination, Skullius gave a warning to the onlookers.

"Uh... Please close your eyes. This weapon hurts anyone who looks at it. Don't say I didn't warn you."

After that Skullius focused on the Null Badub that maintained a calm stare at him. Then it looked at the second closest thing to it.

Aurolio.

In a blink, the creature's attitude changed. It snarled, its body growing tense.

Skullius' instincts flared, and just like last time, he activated [Swordmaster's Quiescence] immediately.

Instantly, the Hybrid Luman's consciousness dulled, replaced by the instinct of a butcher well versed in slicing and dicing all things asunder!

The moment the Null Badub lunged hard, its body exploded forward with tremendous momentum that even the world around it couldn't recognise, everyone tensed!

Aurolio decked himself in Voided Death Essence, preparing to receive the blow since Skullius, whom he had given the task to slay the Null Badub hadn't reacted.

The tall blue creature had shot past him and he remained still without moving an inch.

Yet...

In front of the pale man.

In front of the Mages.

The Null Badub which had passed Skullius' stationary body and reached Aurolio within fractions of half of breath... was beheaded.

In one moment it was shrieking in fury, and in the next, its head, fixed with a ferocious expression, was on the floor, its body flying without purpose towards Aurolio who steadied his stance and bashed it backwards.

Ryte jerked his head back.

"Dear me..." he said, surprised at what he had just witnessed, much like all the others.

They had all 'seen' it.

The one to dispatch the Null Badub so cleanly... was Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman was still standing in place like he had been before, but the only difference was that this time, he was holding out the chipped blade of his long sword that was removed from the veiling of a thick!

Of course, looking directly at the blade would have caused a deadly attack to befall everyone, but thankfully, the old scholars weren't senile or dead. They heard Skullius' warning. Thankfully, they didn't need their eyes to witness what was happening. So they resorted to other, more efficient means that didn't require the eyes.

"Goodness... It's like another Bloodless Steel Phantom has been born. Only, this one can kill monsters that even we can't so casually, and with style!" the female Mage said with unveiled shock.

At the same time, Aurolio wore a smile. He too had listened to Skullius' warning and kept his gaze off the sword.

'Of course you can,' he thought to himself before wiping away the curve of his mouth and focusing on the corpse of the Null Badub.

There it was!

As it was said in the Book of Alignment.

Unseen by the Mages, something rose from the body of the Null Badub.

Something that hadn't happened when Aurolio had killed the other Null Badubs!

Skullius' consciousness returned after the Bashful Abomination adhered to his instruction, and jolted him back from the influence of [Swordmaster's Quiescence]... just in time to see what Aurolio saw.

From the body of the Null Badub, a pristine soul rose up into the air.

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[Author's Note]

[Swordmaster's Quiescence (Special) | Lv.31]

A sword master, after reaching a certain calibre can enter a state of flow, peace and immersion within their mastered craft. This state is only a once in a lifetime opportunity for most practitioners but for a true sword master, it is an ability used through simple choice.

Mana Requirements: 20,000 (I) Mana, 1500 (I) every minute.

Duration: 10 minutes

Cooldown: 20 hours

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Chapter 693: Killing Kin Anyway!

A soul?

Skullius wondered in shock.

It didn't look like how a soul should, at least from what he had seen. Souls usually had a similar look to the body, like his own – even though it had a different look to it because of undeath related circumstances.

This one though...

It look like a simple luminous ball, with a blue glare around it that seemed to announce something Skullius wasn't aware of.

What was this?

The Hybrid Luman ignored the blinking notification in his face, swiping it away.

'Did I trigger something? This didn't happen when Aurolio—'

Cutting off Skullius' thoughts, Aurolio flashed up to the rising soul, gripped it in his hand, and swallowed it.

...

Skullius looked on in shock.

His attention then subconsciously sped to the onlookers, but instead of donning the same look of surprise he had, they looked puzzled instead!

Wait!

Had they not seen the soul that Aurolio had just gobbled up just now?

No way!

Skullius turned to the pale man and saw him closing his eyes, his focus obviously being on something deep within him. Something sliding down his gullet, as bizarre as it seemed.

In the next moment, a fierce blast of power that only Skullius could feel shot from Aurolio, turning the Hybrid Luman's face pale!

It was a wild burst of Voided Death Essence!

'What... is this?' Skullius thought in horror.

With just the reading of the gushing foreign essence alone, Aurolio seemed to be far stronger than what a Master Stage should be! And if the same feel that mana gave could be used to judge how much he had in the way of quantity in Voided Death Essence compared, then the pale man had close to as much mana Vali had!

That was ridiculous!

Was this a mirror of how far Aurolio was in terms of his progress in his Existential Parallel abilities?

Skullius remained still and slack jawed, admitting to himself that if this was the case...

The outburst of power didn't last for long. In a few seconds, Aurolio's body returned to being the human frame from which nothingness spilled out, as if he wasn't the overpowered monstrosity slowly being sculpted in Skullius' mind.

The pale man then opened his eyes and looked at Skullius.

"Let's move on to the next one."

Skullius' eye twitched.

"What the flesh was that?!"

"I'll explain later. Let's get this done now first."

"Flesh you, you sockethole! Tell me right now!" Skullius cursed with a frown and stood straight in front of Aurolio.

The pale man gave Skullius a dark look, and for a full ten seconds, the two were locked in a staring contest with neither of them flinching or backing away in their stance.

...Until Aurolio finally gave in.

He sighed and lifted his hand.

This time around, Skullius didn't miss a spark of light that quickly disappeared, signalling that a thin barrier unseen by the Mages had been erected to mask what was about to be said between the two.

Aurolio scratched his head and smacked his lips.

"You're too ignorant for me to give a snappy explanation, Festos. Long story short, Null Life as an Existential Parallel, is acknowledged as the weakest among the three. At least that's how I've understood it. However, the thing is, Serenity, the progenitor of Null Life, has a treasure that the other two desire. It's a vast land. A world.

Or maybe bigger. Honestly, it's unclear. Within this world are eons of history and diverse creatures, all born from Null Life," Aurolio said.

Serenity's treasure?

Yes.

This subject had come into discussion before, at least between Somanda and Serenity.

And truly, it did seem like Somanda expressed interest in this so-called treasure he mentioned.

'Hmmm... A treasure? What can it be?... Wait! Serenity's... treasure...'

...!

Skullius felt like he had just found out what it was. Better yet, he felt like he had seen it before!

A blurry glimpse!

Before the Hybrid Luman had time to think this over in detail, Aurolio continued.

"From what I learned from the Book of Alignment, killing creatures from other Existential Parallels breeds greater growth. Even if they don't have mana, what they give counts as experience, even if its not cumulative mana experience. It's an advantage. Furthermore, for the creatures that come from Serenity's treasure...

"Their deeper components are guarded unless their demise is brought on by one of their kind...'  
That's what the Book said," Aurolio explained.

"Even though I had an idea, I hadn't confirmed that you and these beasts were the creatures from Serenity's treasure until we had our little chat. Like I said, the world is vast, Festos."

"I see," Skullius said with a hard face.

So that's what it was about.

At this moment, Skullius finally called back the notification that had come after he slew the Null Badub.

[You have killed your own kin. You are awarded nothing]

Skullius' face hardened even further.

That stung.

Just as Aurolio had said, only killing OTHER creatures blessed in Existential Parallels awarded high returns.

Figures.

Yet, Skullius imagined this only applied to a bearer of Serenity's will like him.

'Tsk. This leaves a bad taste in my mouth.'

The Hybrid Luman's attention returned to the Voided Deathform before him.

So, as it appeared, Aurolio was hunting the finer aspects of the Null beasts instead of just the experience they gave. And as a protection measure, it seemed that only a Null Lifeform could expose the ethereal innards of another Null Lifeform, like the soul for instance.

Once again, this left questions?

Why was only something like the soup protected?

Also, did Aurolio's Book of Alignment really tell him to swallow the souls of Null beasts?

The Hybrid Luman shook and gave Aurolio a cautious glare.

'That's right. It's clear now. We really are supposed to be enemies, as he said. It must be a form of motivation. Killing an opposing Parallel holds rewards...' Skullius thought.

As his mind steered to this, he suddenly felt like he was doing all sorts of wrong right now by helping Aurolio kill his own kind.

"Are you having second thoughts? That's fucking ridiculous, don't you think? You didn't have a problem with it before?" Aurolio said as his face drew closer to Skullius'.

The Hybrid Luman wasn't at all intimidated by this, but he felt his struggle getting exacerbated.

Damn it!

"It's too late for that, right?" he said to Aurolio.

Even if he wanted to, he couldn't back away now.

Not like this.

He had prepared the contingency, but this would be a lame way to back out for a plethora of reasons.

One of them was, breaking his word right here left Aurolio no reason to not kill him. After all, refusing to help with this meant that he wasn't willing to help with the rest of what they agreed.

And sure, he could ask for help from Arch-Mage RYTE, but he wasn't sure that was the best idea, given that the old Mage was just starting to warm up to him, and even if he did help, the Hybrid Luman would probably be stuck with a pending favour for the solid.

Sigh.

Not right now. He couldn't refuse right now.

He hated that he was helping this already powerful man become way stronger than he thought he was making him but...

No.

Instead...

"So by eating the souls of Null beasts, you strengthen your Void powers?" he asked.

"Simply put, yes. Though the 'eating the soul' part was improvised. It worked well still," Aurolio said, the dark air he exuded a second ago vanishing completely. "Now, let's get on with this, shall we? This seriously isn't the time to be having a long fucking chat."

The pale man dispelled the Voided Death Essence barrier and turned to Ryte.

"Sorry about that. We were just having a little lovers tiff. Can we carry on?" he said.

The Arch-Mage looked to his peers who seemed to know exactly what he was thinking.

Yes, there was a deeper secret they hadn't been told and they were curious to know.

However, if Ryte who had invited these two over had no intention of probing, they wouldn't either – even though they had attempted to re-establish the audio after it was suddenly hacked off.

Ryte nodded and dispelled the Shocked Time spell from another one of the Null Badubs.

As the creature shook itself out of having its senses stalled, Skullius' internal struggle had yet to be extinguished.

For some reason, the words of the Null Devil King echoed in his mind repeatedly with the ongoing events:

'Are you ashamed of your true form perhaps? Or are you afraid that the humans in this world will hunt you down if you show your true self? If so, I can't help but feel my respect for Serenity drown even further...'

These words shouted a vibrant wave of ridicule towards Skullius' decision, making his grip over the Bashful Abomination waver.

But only for a second.

In the next moment, he brandished the sword and grit his teeth.

'I'm not ashamed, and neither will I regret this!' he thought.

What followed, under the closely attentive perception of the Mages, was a culling of two more Null Badubs, the follow-ups which seemed to be the most important bits, going over their heads.

Chapter 694: Enough For Today

One by one, Skullius watched as the rising souls of his kin were devoured by Aurolio. He suppressed the itching guilt and took comfort in the fact that this end of his deal was finally done with, though simply ignoring a conscience he didn't even know he had in the first place was a very tall task.

Aurolio took a deep breath and wore a satisfied smile.

"Thanks, partner," he said.

Skullius twisted his lip and then gave a shallow nod, not willing to waste a verbal 'welcome' on the pale man.

In any case, the harder part was done, and only the annoying part remained.

As Skullius and Aurolio came out of the large cube, the former went up to Arch-Mage Ryte and gave a light bow. He knew that his arrogant 'business partner' wasn't going to express gratitude. At least not in a way that anyone with common sense would appreciate.

"Thank you very much, Arch-Mage Ryte," he said, limiting his gratitude to simplicity, since additions like "words cannot express how grateful we are" or "if you need anything in the future, I'll do my best to help" would make way for... unintended nuances. The fact that he and Aurolio owed Ryte remained, but it was best not to mention it.

"Very well," Ryte said with a shallow smile.

Skullius waited for a follow-up, but it didn't come. He had expected the Arch-Mage to ask questions but no. The old man did not say anything else, which made the Hybrid Luman extremely nervous.

Surely, according to Skullius, the Arch-Mage would have loved to inquire about the little spat between Skullius and Aurolio, or about the discrepancies in their story, right?

Yet no such thing came up, and the other Mages didn't address it either.

They only gave keen bursts of attention to the duo without a word.

Skullius shivered.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt like Ryte would eventually inquire about this detail.

Wait!

Could that be the reason why he so wholesome invited him to come see him as he pleased?!

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Outside the Reacher Academy, Skullius, Aurolio and Gillewart gave a final, collective gaze at the Academy.

"You still have more to say?" Aurolio asked the City Guardian.

"Not particularly. Just lingering interest. But it doesn't matter now," Gillewart said as he turned to walk away. "Though, if something like this happens again, I know who to ask."

Aurolio chuckled and then faced Skullius who did not wear the same fleshly amusement on his face.

"Lighten up. I can practically feel the curiosity you're lugging around your throat. They'll be a time for questions in the future. I'd say we've had enough of each other for today, right?" the pale man said.

Skullius didn't give an answer to this particular question. Instead...

"Don't expect me to simply fall in line while you're getting stronger. And don't think for a moment that I don't have the same capacity to kill you, if you suddenly change your mind about all this. I just thought to make that clear," Skullius warned, a faint, blackish blue Aura appearing around his figure for a second.

Aurolio smirked.

"Why would I ever turn hostile towards you? I've already decided to give you – my partner and natural enemy – information that you can't find anywhere else. That should count for something," he said. "Besides... you're currently not worth killing, Festos."

Aurolio patted Skullius' shoulder and vanished.

The Hybrid Luman left alone, scoffed.

"Not worth killing, huh?"

A duplicate of himself out there abusing every means of strength possible to rise in power said otherwise.

The [Brisk Storm Avatar] Replicus!

~~~

[Brisk Storm Avatar (Special) | Lv.1]

An unlimited range copy of the user is created, bearing the same energy signature as that the original and a convincing authentic copy of the original's soul that can go through changes just as well.

The only thing that can be shared between the original and the copy without any barrier form – distance or space – is EXP and Null Life Essence, with things such as skill progress, skill attainment and evolutions only capable of being shared once the two come into contact.

-

-Caution-

- The copy, upon emergence, is equipped with only half of the original's stats.
- The copy is incapable of casting complex class related skills while in 'Hybrid Luman' form.
- A chain reaction will ensue when a large disparity exists between the original and copy at the moment of contact/fusion, creating a cataclysmic effect of gains if said disparity is wide enough.

-

-Caution-

Current limit – 1/1

-

Mana Requirements : 1200 (I) Mana Points, 150 (I) Mana Points a day to keep active

Duration : ---

Cooldown : None

~~~

When the time came, all he needed was to fuse with Replicus, and their combined differences in skills and power would create an explosive growth spurt depending on the width of disparity between their separate abilities as the skill promised.

After a while, Skullius wasn't very demanding of cumulative mana experience, but every now and then, Replicus would send tens of thousands experience his way, as they had arranged on the day the duplicate had been made.

This was one of the reasons why Skullius had jumped in his levels relatively quickly. It wasn't that easy to cover the distance he had power wise, after all.

The fact that Replicus had that much spare EXP spoke volumes about how strong he had gotten.

But not yet.

It wasn't time for fusion yet.

When that time came...

"We'll see if you'll still be looking down on me then," Skullius declared.

For now, he had managed to not create an immediate enemy. That was the goal of this entire arrangement, after all, benefits aside.

And with this done for now, Skullius headed into the still standing commercial districts within the city.

There was a little mundane task he needed to get done before going home.

Soon, he found the place and person he had been hunting for, and gave him precise measurements as well as enough coin to ensure that the material used was of the highest quality. Skullius didn't specify any particular design, but the amount he paid motivated the craftsman he was dealing with to get...creative.

Surely, what would be born from spending 82,000 gold coins would be a perfect custom sheath for the Bashful Abomination. Finally.

The sword deserved it.

After placing his order, Skullius first dropped by the remains of the Bryne Family mansion. The rebuilding of the vast structure was already in progress, but Skullius wasn't sure it would be the same after all that had happened.

This was especially true when he thought about the little girl Terese, who had once again been taken away by Daggs on an unknown trip on Stylla's orders. If the redhead was still in her right mind, Skullius was certain that she would have been relieved that her younger sister was not here for the earlier events.

Tearing himself away from the old, Skullius visited the Governor's Manor.

Since he had Seville help Ed and the others find a place to live while the mansion was being reconstructed, he headed to the esteemed abode to inquire.

To his surprise...

"Sir Festos, welcome," a guard greeted him. "Your Family is being hosted in the Governor's mansion until a convenient space has been procured for you. Enjoy your stay."

Skullius hadn't thought the entire Family would be allowed to live here!

Even if they had been an especially important Family, the Hybrid Luman doubted it would have been that simple to be accommodated in such a central construct in the City.

Either the Governor was that generous, or someone with enough persuasive sway had...

Of course it was the latter!

It had to be Darwel!

Skullius stormed into the Manor – respectfully – and reached the El Sif's spacious quarters where he was welcomed by Seville who stood outside it with a bow.

Upon entering, Skullius felt a strange sensation radiating through the entire room.

A sunflower by the window in a vase was dispensing flakes of gold within the well furnished space, dulling the strange, ominous gloom he perceived hanging in the air.

Darwel who sat on her spacious bed with a book in her hand wore a big smile when she saw him.

"You finally came of your own volition," she said happily.

"That's a reach," Skullius said with a sigh. "Why does something feel off in here?"

Darwel looked to her sunflower and thought for a bit.

"Well, a crazy assassin did burst in and try to kill me," she replied. "This was definitely the closest anyone's gotten to killing me."

Chapter 695: Scurry Away Lord Luminant!

"Huh?!" Skullius mouthed in disbelief. "No way!"

"Yes way!" Darwel said before crawling off the bed and flinging her book down. "I would have died if that scary woman's surprise attack had been a bit quicker. Viccil even lost an arm to it. <Sigh>. The weapon she carried had a disgusting scent. I'm trying to clear the remains it left behind in my precious air."

Skullius couldn't believe Darwel was serious.

For real?

An assassin? And what's more, she had almost been killed?

This was especially surprising when Skullius considered that Viccil and Seville were Incandescent Stage experts. So... did this mean an Incandescent Stage assassin came to kill Darwel?

"That's crazy. I never pictured Incandescent Stage experts making big moves like that," the Hybrid Luman said, a little concern showing in his eyes. He turned to Viccil who seemed to have had her arm restored already and then to Seville outside.

There's no way Seville would have come to help if she knew Darwel was being attacked right? So did Darwel's actions almost cause her own demise?

Said El Sif looked a bit confused at Skullius' statement before a look of a realisation showed on her face.

"Oh, I see what you mean. Incandescent Stage experts don't move on a whim. You're right about that. This assassin was a Master Stage expert," she said.

"Huh?!" Skullius voiced his disbelief once again.

From here, Viccil intervened.

"I was surprised too, Lord Luminant. She was extremely resilient. It was likely the weapon she had, an axe, giving her a substantial increase in power on top of its extreme effects," the veiled guard explained, her tone a bit subdued, as if her pride had been stolen. "Unfortunately, unlike Seville, without nature by my side, I'm only left with my physical strength and close combat skill.

So this enemy, who could even lock down entry and exit in the area, was difficult for me to beat."

The Hybrid Luman focused on the guard for a few seconds.

Well, he remembered being told that styles of strength differed with the history of an area.

For instance, the focus of humans in Pelian when it came to increasing their power, was different from that of Emeradis and Maqi. Skullius could only imagine how different the Sif's cultivation of power was from that of humans in general.

But still.

Even with a Mythical Grade tool, he wasn't sure many Masters would be inclined to face an Incandescent Stage expert, especially given the calibre of Viccil and Seville. He had felt their powers before. At their full strength, they were monsters among monsters!

Also...

"How did you almost get killed? Don't you have like millions of artefacts that your family gave you for protection?" Skullius asked Darwel.

The El Sif burst into laughter.

"That's what you think? Humans truly have a strange way of viewing things," she said. "Royalty isn't some sheltered sheep on Opungale. Being royalty means you stand on the front lines. You contribute openly, and you hold your own. While I have my fair share of qualms concerning the circumstances around the way I was sent here, I know it is my duty.

Actually, you can think of me as expendable. After all, I'm not the only spawn of the High Family on Opungale."

"Really? I always thought you were kind of... spoiled, like an only child," Skullius said bluntly

Darwel shrugged.

"What kind of spoiled brat would be sent on her lonesome to establish diplomatic relations with a nation full of humans who more than likely hate her guts? The absence of a large entourage was supposed to make me appear sincere. And for me to woman up."

Skullius scoffed.

What a weird strategy. It certainly screamed suicidal in his ears.

"Anyway, how did you convince the Governor to let the Family stay here? That's too high a privilege. Too high profile."

"Yeah, that's the point. It's for your own good. High profile, in this case, is good for you, for several reasons. Especially given what just happened. Which brings me to ask... what in the clear waters happened?!" Darwel asked.

Skullius was puzzled at first, then he remembered that he hadn't shared any detail with Sevil, and in turn she hadn't been able to enlighten or comfort the anxious El Sif.

Like many, she had seen that there was a second threat within the city. One that assaulted the Bryne Family mansion.

'Yeah...'

Even if he mostly considered Darwel a nuisance until he needed her, maybe it was time for Skullius to play it smart and give her a reason not to turn into a borderline hostile motherly figure, as she had promised.

So, Skullius took a first step.

"The truth is, with how unique I am, certain enemies are drawn to me. That was one of them. Explaining what it was will probably not do you any good. Or me for that matter. But I can say, that thing which attacked me is bad news. I may need your help with it in the future," Skullius explained.

Darwel shivered and a broad grin appeared on her face.

Suddenly, she leapt on Skullius and embraced him tightly!

The Hybrid Luman was awe struck.

'Damn you [Primal Caution]! No warning to me about this? Seriously?!' he thought while his face was mashed up against Darwel's generous chest.

"I knew you'd come to your senses soon enough! Now I have something to work with!" Darwel yelled.

"Says the girl who almost got killed today!" Skullius shot at her while pushing her away.

Darwel reluctantly crawled away from the Hybrid Luman and sat on the bed.

"Well obviously I'm not the one who can help with something like this, but my people can. If you're finally seeing me in a positive light, then maybe we can finally discuss going to Opungale. It didn't seem relevant for now, but since the Premium Age Royale will be over soon, we can make the trip home," the princess said.

Skullius gave it some thought.

That wasn't a bad idea.

After the Royale was over was the perfect time to make the trip East of Aigas. There were many reasons to go than otherwise actually!

"Alright. That's not a bad idea," he said much to Darwel and Viccil's relief.

That said...

"I have a question though," Skullius said, his expression turning intensely serious. "About the Luminants. Did they ever mention anything about a Deity? A different one from the four in Aigas."

Darwel was surprised by this inquiry.

Where had it even come from?

She gave it some thought and answered.

"Like I said before, very little could be drawn from the Luminants. They were very secretive and preferred to move on from their 'past lives' as they said. But they did mention bits of something like a common supreme being that they revered over the many, disconnected conversations throughout time.

The Sif pieced an insignificant amount of their history together and it was passed down through our generations."

"I see..." Skullius said while scratching his chin.

Curious.

Only he knew the amount of stimulation to his mind the existence of a certain page within his storage was causing him every single time he was free to divide his thoughts with the Omniscient Thought Cracker.

The Hybrid Luman was hunting any information he could get about Deities, since Aurolio wasn't up for more probing for the day. He wasn't willing to hear the pale man's voice for the rest of the day either.

It seemed not much was known of the Luminants, whom he thought had a Deity named Luserus, something he derived from the elusive racial skill he had – [Son of Luserus].

"I think things to do with that are in the parchment I gave you yesterday. Haven't you read it, with how greedy you are?" Darwel asked.

"Oh. That's right!" Skullius said, a fist of recollection smashing his face.

Darwel had given him a parchment that had several pieces of Sif knowledge after proving that she was stalker indeed. Sadly, Skullius hadn't gotten the time to go through it and had forgotten about it later on.

"Thanks for reminding me. I'll look into it first then," Skullius said as he stood up.

"W-wait! You'd rather read a paper than just have me explain it to you? The parchment was bait to lure you here!" Darwel said with shock written over her visage.

Skullius paused.

"...I'll read the parchment instead."

Darwel face palmed.

As the Hybrid Luman walked towards the door, the gorgeous El Sif stood from her bed and threw at him a bombshell as a retort to his hurtful statement.

"Scurry along to your new home, Lord Luminant!" she yelled in a whiny maiden's voice. "Some old man who was in love with his bed is waiting for you~!"

...!

As Skullius' face was painted in excessive surprise, Darwel's turned victorious!

#### Chapter 696: Meeting Theurien (1)

All Skullius could do was imagine how this was going to be like. He had a full imagined version of the possible first things that he was going to hear from Theurien, Stylla's father, and how he would respond to said things.

Most of these hypothetical scenarios weren't thrilling by any means. In fact, Skullius didn't expect anything good to come out of this first meeting at all, mainly because of the emotion he imagined Theurien to be carrying.

As he walked through the wide, carpeted halls of the Governor's mansion, Skullius played out the possible reactions the Head of the Bryne Family was going to unleash. He had no doubt his existence had already been made known to the man, since, according to Darwel – the petty scoundrel – he had awoken an hour ago.

The disappearance of his Stylla.

Setkh's betrayal.

All of it was likely spinning in Theurien's head right now.

Scenario one:

"So I hear you took over my Family and somehow my two children ended up disappearing."

"Uhhh...."

Scenario two:

"You damned sockethole! You renovated my favourite mansion and now it's a nest for wild beasts?!"

"Uhhh..."

Scenario three:

"Sir Festos, I presume. I have heard a great deal of the deeds you did. You saved my Family and have been working tirelessly, selflessly, to bring it out of the bottom wrung of Family circles. I was doubtful at first, but even Ed spoke highly of you. I have no reason to believe you are anything but a good man. Thank you."

"Oh. No big deal. I was just paying my dues as someone part of the Family now."

"Hmmm. I see. Speaking of... I don't approve of you taking my daughter."

"Huh..."

Skullius shook his head.

Most of these scenarios were silly and unrealistic but he couldn't help it. He had no idea what kind of a person Theurien was. No matter what Stylla had said, raising her father on a mental pedestal was natural. However, the treatment someone like him would receive was going to be incredibly different.

He was an entity that was invited into the Family by Stylla, but many of the things he did could only be expressed by the maidservants and Ed, individuals whom he didn't know if they had that much weight in words to Theurien.

Family Heads were supposed to be headstrong, prideful monsters that were very critical, and Skullius should know since he had met two of them, both with an interest in him.

An interest that he wanted to purge because of how annoying it was.

Aurolio Velanqi and Vali Kinn.

"Let's just get this over with. I have many ways to stand firm with my case," Skullius convinced himself as he marched over in the direction of the new settlement designated for the Bryne Family.

As he moved through the halls, he noticed that there were many rooms, each customisable through a set of arrays to increase size and to create divisions within – walls.

This was a very useful feature that the Governor had had set in place both for casual convenience and for emergencies.

The reason why the civilians had been evacuated to the centre of the City during the invasion was so that this special mechanism of the Governor's Manor could be used to keep the millions of people safe in the wide array of rooms. That was if the situation reached a very dire turn.

Of course, the manor wasn't created in a way that made it fit to endure battles, as evidence by how the tall woman, the assassin from Maqi had easily entered through the window, but if all the city's forces could work without worrying about the defenceless people behind them, it would do a lot of good.

That said, Skullius had been right to think the Governor was just that generous to let the Bryne Family stay here, even though the one to prompt the decision was Darwel. Of course, she had mostly done it for his sake.

As Skullius appreciated the building – a cheap attempt to distract his mind before the inevitable encounter with a man who might think the Hybrid Luman was some money hungry, self imposed son-in-law – he finally reached the wide doors to the new compressed abode of the Family.

The Hybrid Luman took a deep breath.

This was unusual for him. He didn't really understand why he was so nervous.

Maybe it was because the hype Stylla had shed surrounding her father was starting to appear more real. Too real.

Theurien was the strongest user of the Bryne Family's Technique, according to Stylla. While the redhead acknowledged that her application of it to fire and water to generate steam was sub par, her praise for her father's utilisation was sometimes overbearing.

Now, Skullius was about to witness it first hand.

Maybe he would be on the receiving end.

Phew.

Skullius knocked on the door.

Almost immediately, it was opened wide, much to his displeasure, and a guard who was stationed on the other side bowed upon seeing him.

Skullius didn't pay him much attention. Instead he marvelled at the decor behind the armoured man.

If Skullius didn't know any better, he would have thought he had just slipped into the Bryne mansion which had been destroyed hours ago!

The designs and all were almost exactly the same. When he walked into the house, he found a familiar lounge to the distant left and to the right – since this wasn't a storied arrangement – there was a hall that led to a myriad of rooms.

'Did Darwel had this done too?' Skullius asked himself. It wasn't impossible. In fact, it was likely that he was right.

The Hybrid Luman was doubtful that it could have been Ed who had been leading the group in his stead who made a request to whomever allocated this room to have it customised.

Speaking of the loyal guard, Ed approached Skullius with quick steps seconds later.

"Sir Festos!"

"Yeah. Is everything in order?" Skullius pretended to have his shit together.

"More than, sir! Please come with me quickly! Lord Theurien has woken up!" Ed said while trying to conceal his joy – an bitterly dismal attempt at maintaining his professionalism.

Skullius could 'see' through it though and he didn't say another word, merely gesturing for the excited guard to lead the way.

Through the halls within the room that was practically a mansion of its own the two went and with each second that passed, Skullius felt extremely tense.

As they drew close to their destination, the Hybrid Luman's [Graceless Hunter] picked up on a powerful presence hidden within a large enclosure, and seated on a large bed.

It was him.

Theurien Bryne.

The pressure he exuded, even from a distance was fitting for a Family Head.

Skullius immediately deduced that this man was definitely at the Peak of Master Stage, and his vibrant core that flared like a miniature sun seemed to be ready to spill its blue lustre for a purple one at any time.

On one hand, Skullius was relieved and on the other, he was unsettled.

Unfortunately for him, time seemed to skip over some frames so as to accelerate his meeting with the powerful man.

The moment the duo reached the door to Theurien's room, a subdued, yet refined voice called before Ed could even knock.

"Come in."

Skullius wore an exaggerated smile as Ed quickly marched into the room, and he followed.

The large space became clearer to Skullius... especially the vibrant man seated on the bed.

Theurien had medium length fiery hair, and a moderately thick beard of matching colour. Now, with his eyes open, one could see their ocean blue hue that held an extraordinary depth to them, as if they were indeed bottomless pools of estranged waters.

He had high cheekbones that were accentuated by his sunken cheeks, and his skin which hadn't been washed naturally in a long time, had a peculiar sheen to it, likely because it had been tended to my mana all this time.

His body still looked fit, but wrinkles on particular positions showed that he had lost some muscle mass despite actually being healthy, and his frame overall seemed quite sturdy.

Truly, the body of a Peak Master Stage expert could withstand most things.

One wouldn't believe Theurien had been under the cruel effect of a dreadful curse all this time.

Theurien gave his full attention to Skullius.

His eyes gleamed as he appraised the man.

"Lord Theurien. Festos Dawn Bryne," Ed gave a timely introduction.

Skullius wanted to murder him for it, but he held himself back.

What's the rush, dammit?!

Theurien nodded, his eyes turning dark.

Skullius gulped.

A vast amount of mana poured from the man's core and focused around his legs and feet!

The motion was so sudden and robust that Skullius was caught off-guard, almost bringing up his arms to guard against one of the hypothetical scenarios he had imagined, which began much like this!

But he held himself.

There was no need to be so on edge, right?

Theurien wobbled a bit and then stood up, with his legs practically becoming two shining pillars of light.

He took steps closer to the duo, with Ed dismissing himself instantly, much to Skullius' spiritual calls that the loyal guard was a coward!

Now only him and Theurien remained.

And...

"So I hear you took the reins to the Family, and both my eldest children's whereabouts are unknown..."

'Oh for Somanda's sake!'

Skullius screamed internally.

Chapter 697: Meeting Theurien (2)

"So I hear you took the reins to the Family, and both my eldest children's whereabouts are unknown..."

Skullius grimaced visibly, anticipating the worst, and yet...

Theurien wore a similar expression, much to the Hybrid Luman's surprise.

"Setkh turns out to be the one responsible for my curse, and Stylla is one who finally removed it somehow, and then she, flew away, as I've been told..." Theurien gave a hollow laugh. "...Absurd."

Skullius opened his mouth to speak, but quickly held his tongue. The man before him wasn't committing to scenario one as he had assumed. It was just that the weight of the changes he had been told bore down on him too heavily, and unlike when he was in the presence of familiar faces that looked up to him, he seemed to be more comfortable showing a semblance of vulnerability to a stranger.

Theurien wobbled once again, but remained steady on his feet.

"When I first heard that Setkh returned to the Family months after I was bedridden, I was overjoyed. Even now, I wish the summary of events I've been told ended there. I almost started to believe that I could get a chance to have a heart to heart with my son... To explain why I didn't stop him from leaving...

the great burden in my heart that I felt from hearing that he wanted nothing more than to live in a place where he wasn't a permanent second."

Theurien shook his head while biting his lips.

"I should have known that was too good to be true."

The eyes of the man clearly haunted by immense sorrow unflinchingly kept their focus on Skullius.

"Please... give me your version of the story. The truth."

Skullius sighed.

If that was it for a first request, he could do that much... with sprinkles of necessary lies where needed.

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Twenty minutes later.

"I see," Theurien said.

A bout of silence followed, creating a rather necessary atmosphere of seriousness within the room.

Skullius kept familiarising himself with the fiery haired man, taking into account all his little movements and mannerisms. Soon, he discovered that Theurien was quite gentle in nature, and strangely emotional.

That wasn't what he had expected.

Theurien soon broke the tranquility with his voice.

"I never imagined Stylla was so full of self doubt. Perhaps my presence is the one that gave her the ample confidence I always saw in her. Like me, she must have been clinging to hope with Setkh back by her side. I can't imagine how she felt when she found out..." he said, cutting off the sentence abruptly. "...You did well to keep her safe and contained, Festos. For that, I'm grateful."

Skullius didn't know how to feel.

He felt a little pride glowing within him, as if he was a child being praised for doing good by a guardian.

Where did this feeling come from?

"Well, like I said. I was just paying my dues as someone part of this Family," the Hybrid Luman said... before realising that he hadn't actually said this to Theurien in reality. He had only told him this in scenario three!

The man didn't seem too concerned with it, however, which was good news.

"Do you have any idea where Stylla might be? Any.. location this creature that changed her could have taken her?" Theurien asked.

Skullius strained.

"No. Not at the moment," he replied.

So that things would line up, Skullius had told Theurien the version of the story that he had told Arch-Mage Ryte – about the shield. Since the two were friends, it seemed, he decided that it was best to ensure that the two knew the same things.

His reply just now still wasn't a lie though.

How could he possibly know where the Null Devil King was?

His best bet would be, just like Aurolio had told enlightened him about, that the creature was headed for whatever could be found within a Rich World like Aigas, but he didn't know what that could be and where to find it.

"And Setkh?"

"I don't know either," he said. "The others said he wasn't there during the Preliminaries today, which is unusual."

Theurien's face hardened.

"What does that mean?" he asked with a heavy tone.

Skullius sighed.

"The workings of the Control Seal are complex, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't transport corpses to the Venue of the Royale. It's either that... or Setkh found a way to resist being called to the Venue. The group he was working for... they might be capable of doing something like that. In my opinion, there's an equal chance for either possibility."

Theurien nodded.

Since Skullius had explained in detail about the Premium Age Royale and its rules, the fiery haired man had an idea about what Skullius was talking about.

Honestly, the circumstances around Setkh wouldn't make his untimely death impossible, and on the other hand, him desperately trying to find a way to not have to see Stylla's grudge ridden eyes every two days wasn't that unlikely either.

For the Hybrid Luman though, the former seemed more likely.

Theurien seemed to anticipate that dark reality too.

That said, to the older man, having his son die without some form of closure was absolutely harrowing. He'd rather have the young man scream some last words of hatred in his face than for him to die out there alone.

But that would be too fortunate a reality, the world decided.

Theurien moved away from the more morbid discussion.

"Very well. So the estate...?"

"Ah yes. After the attack, Stylla and I made some renovations. Maybe it's better if you come and see it for yourself. It won't take that long to get there," Skullius said, emphasising the fact that Stylla had a hand in it.

Theurien smiled.

"Alright. Let's go see it," he said.

Skullius grinned within.

While he did feel a sense of pride over how much he had invested into the Bryne estate as well as the results, this wasn't his entire reasoning for wanting to speed up his interaction with Theurien.

Skullius had wanted to do a lot of things at the Estate before eventually having to deal with the stuff related to Aurolio. And now, he could handle Theurien and everything he was planning to do in one fell swoop.

There was plenty of time for Theurien to be brought up to speed, but Skullius' schedule was too flexibly inflexible. Change was a norm, and he had to get some small tasks done before large shifts in the status quo occurred.

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A few minutes later, Theurien was standing in the wide space created by the cordon of trees along with Skullius, Ed, Head maid Arisa and Skullius. A look of longing was on his face, even though to him, the passage of time hadn't been as tremendous.

The look of the Estate he knew was vastly different, as even when he saw the view from outside, with the walls and gates – after Skullius had dispelled [Boundless Evil] – he had been perplexed.

Guards he wasn't familiar with, the thick greenery he didn't remember, powerful beasts that patrolled the beautiful expansive crop fields and lastly, the massive mansion with an austere air about it at the end of the corridor in between lush trees...

This place looked better than he imagined.

"Goodness. When you said some improvements, this is not what I expected," Theurien remarked.

"It's only a few hundred thousand Plasma coins lost. Not big deal," Skullius said with a thick smile.

Theurien grimaced.

His head moved to and fro as he took in everything with great focus.

He looked rather pleased. At least as pleased as he could be in the moment. The news of the tragedies that befell the Family in his absence still weighed on his capacity to enjoy what he was looking at.

If not for his powerful body and rich experience in both the good and bad that life had to offer, one would expect a man who had woken up to terrible news about his children to want some time to himself.

That was what Skullius had thought too initially.

Yet, Theurien still held his own against it all.

'Thankfully, none of the scenarios ended up happening in the end,' Skullius thought as they approached the mansion.

At the same time, a stream of people poured out of the mansion with Red Rage and Silrat leading them.

Skullius' heart almost skipped a beat.

'Already? It's over?! Did something bad happen?!' he thought.

How could a meeting to discuss future collaborations and plenty of intricate negotiations last for roughly 45 minutes?!

Something was definitely wrong!

Yet, opposite to what the Hybrid Luman was thinking, there was only smiles and laughter among the numerous people exiting the Bryne Family Estate.

Most of them were directed towards Red Rage, but there didn't seem to be any negative vibes from the group, which was strange considering...

"Th-Theurien...?" a person from this group, the tall woman who had been salty before meeting Red Rage, suddenly stopped and looked at Theurien with a startled expression.

The short old man who was accompanied two beautiful ladies was also stumped, and his face turned pale as he saw Theurien's figure.

The hell?

Skullius' neck creaked to the side as he turned to Theurien, hoping to whatever accursed Deity was in his storage that this wasn't an instance of tragic luck.

Theurien looked at the two... and wore an indecipherable expression.

"Well, well, well..." he said in a chilly voice.

Chapter 698: Security Detail First (1)

"Well, well, well..." Theurien said with hints of ridicule oozing from his voice as he alternated his gaze between two familiar, shaken faces. "...Jadin, Somwell... So you do have an interest in my Family after all. Haha."

The air shifted to a darker tone with Theurien's words, tinges of various emotions spilling from the several people discovering two things for the first time.

One that Theurien had awakened, and the other, that Theurien was very familiar with these new business partners. Not in a good way.

The tall woman, Jadin, stammered before turning to Silrat who looked just as surprised as she was at what was before. The look on his face made everything she wanted to say with the fierce frown she had donned dry up like the bits of amusement she had been feeling moments ago.

Somwell on the other hand – the short, older man – breathed out a harsh breath and scratched his chin to maintain composure.

"Theurien... As I live and breathe. I imagined you had been sealed to your bed for eternity," he said with a subtle, nervous cough hidden behind his words.

The fiery haired man chuckled.

"So did I..." he said, allowing Somwell to derail the subject he had invoked. "Being trapped in a long dream has its merits, though if I had been conscious, I would have asked to be killed instead of continuing to be a burden."

Somwell gave a sombre look to the Theurien and then to Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman was doing everything in his power not to slap his own face.

Why hadn't he thought of this before bringing Theurien here?

Of course he'd know some of these people, and of course he might not have a good relationship with them!

Even if it was Stylla who invited them, it didn't mean Theurien's view of them was the same as hers!

Blasted sockets!

Jadin also looked to Skullius who donned a stone-like calm facade, but she remained particularly flustered about seeing Theurien than Somwell, and thus remained silent.

"How about the three of us catch up, hmm? I would love for us to reminisce about old times," Theurien proposed with a smile, much to Jadin and Somwell's discomfort. There was no friendliness in the man's voice at all.

Nostalgia, but not friendliness.

It wasn't only these two who felt this.

The other guests who did know about Theurien, but didn't have a personal connection with him could only look on from the side and wonder if this quasi-hostile air was going to be bad for business.

Fortunately for them, the fiery haired man cleared it up while Skullius and Silrat were trying to find ways to save their investment that was likely to crumble because of this unforeseen circumstance.

"Don't be so tense. Luckily for you, my Family is currently in foreign hands and I have no intention of disturbing the flow of events since my... incapacitation. So, feel free to join me," Theurien said to everyone, and then to Jadin and Somwell while walking past the group and heading into the mansion with graceful steps.

Ed and Arisa followed, leaving Skullius rooted to his position.

'I should probably stay out of this one,' the Hybrid Luman thought to himself.

Jadin composed herself and turned together with her entourage, and moments later, Somwell too. Soon, all that was left was a strange void despite there being plenty of confusion and people to go around.

Thankfully, Silrat retained his senses and took charge.

"Come, dear friends. Let me escort you to your carriages," he said, urging the rest of the Family partners onward.

As he did, he gave Skullius a series of hidden gestures that inquired a variety of questions, each only fully understood by the Hybrid Luman.

Skullius sighed.

'I wish I had thought about it sooner.'

He conveyed his ignorance subtly, to which Silrat nodded with suspicion. Clearly, the Supervising Overseer had been shaken, and it would take a verbal back and forth to calm him down, but that was for another time.

Red Rage walked up to Skullius.

As the only party not too invested in the current events, he retained a carefree attitude.

"Is that who I think it is, Master?"

"You bet your sockets it is," Skullius replied with the click of his tongue.

Strangely, Theurien seemed to want to keep the status quo as it was. Him declaring that he wouldn't disturb the current developments was good, but also anxiety-inducing.

For how long would that remain the case?

Several carriages passed by Skullius and Red Rage, all carrying the various Families that had decided to partake in relations with the Bryne Family. Skullius folded his arms.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like many of them were too rattled, especially after Theurien's statement, and from the look of Silrat's face who was approaching, he had realised it too.

When he reached the Hybrid Luman's position, he exhaled his earlier, cultured pretence and grabbed Skullius' shoulder.

"I would have appreciated a heads up."

"With what I was dealing with for the past three quarters of an hour, this was an unwelcome surprise for me too," Skullius said.

Silrat puckered his lips.

"When did he even wake up?"

"Not too long ago. An hour, I guess. I'm sure it didn't look that way to everyone though. The man has too healthy of a body."

"You're telling me?" Silrat shook his head. "Why didn't you go inside with him?"

"Because it's your turn to introduce yourself. You at least have some connection with those other two. I don't. I'm done getting embroiled with personal dilemmas for a while. I'm the brawn, you're the brain. Now get to it."

"Wait now?"

"When else? The sooner he gets to know you and what you contribute, the better it is for both of us."

Silrat wore a dark look before turning to Red Rage and grasping his arm.

"Fine, but I'm going to need this tin can! He's like... portable luck and charm! If I want to make the best impression, I need him!" he said.

Skullius frowned.

"I came back here so I can finish my business with Red Rage! Go find your own luck and charm!" he barked.

"In your dreams!" Silrat hissed while pulling Red Rage. "You can have him later!"

The Apostle didn't resist either way he was swayed, and as he was pulled away, his greaves scraping against the dirt, Skullius slapped his own face.

Fine, damn it!

He relented. He could hold off on Red Rage since he had other matters to deal with still.

He regrettably let Red Rage go before heading to the wall where other desired task would begin.

After acquiring the Gravel Runes from Hobbu Gogo, Skullius had made various plans on how to apply them, some concrete, and some shaky. One was how he had used them to attempt to seal Null Life Essence in the full, severed arm he had given to Aurolio to actualize the Tie of Exchange, and the other was creating a Temporary storage which he had yet to exploit.

However, the best way to exploit having acquired these runes so far, was to use them to augment the Bryne Family Estate's security.

Just as he had seen the goblins from the most recent Cluster he had raided do, he was going to apply runes to the wall to reinforce it, and better yet, create a powerful dome that was capable of vetting who entered and who didn't.

The application of the latter was going to be complex, but Skullius knew the process, having absorbed Hobbu Gogo's memories and all.

As he reached the tall, thick construct, which with a closer look gave the impression that wouldn't offer much resistance when powerful enemies came by, Skullius sighed.

"Let's get to work," he said.

As a start, the Hybrid Luman pulled a pair of estocs from his storage, one of the weapons he had drawn against Hobbu Bobbu, the Finite Sword god but hadn't used.

These estocs were called the Paired Interregnum, and they were the first thing he needed before he began crafting a splendid security detail.

#### Chapter 699: Security Detail First (2)

Between the Conforming Trickerteer and the Paired Interregnum, Skullius held the latter in higher regard. He appreciated what the slender armour could do, with its mimicking capabilities and all, but the pair of estocs right here were on a completely different level in terms of their functionality, which happened to be similar to that of the slender armour.

~~~

[Paired Interregnum]

<Legendary>

Fashioned by the Auspicious Mare, this pair of estocs is imbued with the natural ability to duplicate various kinds of phenomena – physical and conceptual – as per the user's wishes. The Mare was especially motivated when forging these two slender pieces.

-Damage-

287,500 – 298,000

-Durability-

345,950/346,000

-Special Effects-

- Doubles all stats with Absolute Conversion
- +200% reactionary instinct
- Concentrates Null Life Essence around the edges of the blades

[Skill: Duality]

Create a perfect replica of any construct magical or physical. With the insertion of 2,000 Null Life Essence points, said replica will be twice as powerful as the original. Creation lasts for 60 days. Usable on two targets at a time.

[Skill: Paired Grace]

The blades can impose a twofold variety to any phenomena and material of the user's choosing between – { durability, size, quantity and quality } – with the insertion of 4,000 Null Life Essence points. Effect lasts for 60 days. Usable on two targets at a time.

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Once again, Skullius printed a smile on his face. If not for the fact that he had to keep expending Null Life Essence while in the city to ward off Divination, he would have begun upgrading a lot of his weapons with the full 12,000 units of Null Life Essence points he had just to see what he could come up with.

Even if he had excess of the terrestrial energy though, he wouldn't choose to spend it trying to potentially spawn absurdly powerful tools for him to use. In his opinion, having a few select weapons that maximised his current skill set was better, and that had been what he was doing all along.

The results weren't bad at all, so he stuck with it.

"All right. Since I rarely use these, I might as well put them to go use here," Skullius said as he stuck the estocs into the firm ground.

Before exploiting their abilities, he had to make something worth empowering, and that something, was the runes.

Skullius was currently only limited to using the Mundane Gravel Runes for reinforcement, sealing, protection and temporary storage with the use of the skill [Lesser Gravel Rune Mastery], which he had extracted from Hobbu Gogo. But that was fine. It was enough for what he needed to do now.

And what he needed now was to increase the security around the Estate, first by reinforcing the wall.

The Hybrid Luman stepped over to the towering off-white mass that was hulking over several meters and touched it. It really was firm. As far as common, non-magical standards went, it was the pinnacle of sturdiness.

But that wasn't enough.

One of the things Skullius and Silrat had put on the table for possible negotiation options with interested Families, was the guarantee of a safe haven to all their partners.

While he wasn't involved with the many people who obliged to meet and discuss the terms himself, he knew that those who had been freaked out by the beasts roaming around before today, were

probably seeing them in a new light after the Silrat had introduced the idea of refuge here at the Bryne Estate in dire times.

But the beasts weren't all there was supposed to be, which was why Skullius was adding a few integral layers.

With his palm on the wall, Skullius injected mana onto the rough surface and then drew back his hand. A clear, sky blue hue attached itself to the wall, maintaining a quivering, unsteady form, with a thickness of ooze, like an ethereal gel.

This was the colour which manifested when one intended to mark Reinforcement with Gravel Runes, different from the red of Sealing.

With his finger, Skullius injected more mana and used the squirming gel-like substance, which was really just mana mutated into a form more likely to last for a longer period, to form a rune.

He pumped a large amount of mana from his core to craft a symbol akin to a 'P' drawn by a toddler, with a thin line crossing its half loop. When Skullius extended his mana output, the symbol grew larger and larger until it almost covered the entire portion of the wall from top to bottom.

In width, it was roughly seven meters, and its shape had turned firm without its previous restless budging of a whining infant.

Though the effect of this symbol wasn't apparent visually, Skullius knew that he had done a good job. He had used about four times the amount of mana the goblins used to craft three Reinforcement runes on their walls, and with what he knew, the difference was significant.

'When I'm done with it, Somanda himself will want to caress this wall!' Skullius chortled to himself.

Over the next dozen of minutes, the guards were puzzled by their employer's zipping from one part of the wall to the next, with a strange symbol left where he departed with a thick scent of mana. He looked quite enthusiastic about this activity too, and they wondered what it could be... and if they should be concerned.

When they had been scouted and offered contracts, it had seemed like the usual jolly opportunity to stand like a statue all day in places that barely anyone ever visited, but for some reason, this gig felt different.

Not only was it looking to be a long ride, it almost seemed like some time in the future, their skills would be exerted to a profound degree, and it wouldn't be just a handful of them standing on the wall on patrols in the long run.

The cheeky grin on their auburn haired employer's face promised this.

After about an hour, Skullius was done imprinting the runes on the inside and outside of the wall, each as majestic, foreign and grand as the last.

He beamed at the sight.

This wall was going to be legendary!

Hopefully.

'Now. For the battery. Wait... what's a battery?! Ah forget it!' Skullius thought while scratching his head.

He didn't know what a battery was – stupid word really – but what he needed now was something to power these runes so that they didn't fizzle out from having the energy within them (mana), run out.

His own mana was potent, but it wouldn't last forever, and for that reason...

Skullius rushed back to where he had first started, to the 'P' and grabbed the Paired Interregnum.

These swords, as a pair, could create a replica of most non-living things the user desired; material or otherwise through the skill [Duality]. On top of that, they could double aspects of a particular item or phenomena, such as the durability, quality, quantity or effectiveness using [Paired Graced].

The special effects of the Paired Interregnum on the user were splendid – mainly the damage and combat related ones – but Skullius saw it more efficient to exploit the actual skills the pair of estocs had on something else.

With a breath, Skullius summoned something from his spatial storage.

It was one of the glass boxes he and Red Rage had used to capture the abnormally unique goblins before. Now that the Apostle had found a home for all of them, Skullius had retrieved the boxes since they were quite useful.

He set the box down and sat behind it. The Hybrid Luman then jammed the two estocs deep into the ground on either side of the box until all that was left seen was the tips of their sunken hilts.

"I'm already burning through the reserves I had stored for the month. Tsk. Well, at least its going to be worth it," he said with a pained expression.

The Hybrid Luman had managed to store a vast amount of mana from foes of different kinds, all of which could be valued in the several millions, and in mostly blue quality. With the battle against the Null Devil King, he had expended some and now, he was about to spend a whole lot more.

With a thought, the inside of the glass box which was about the size of a large stool, a blinding white light shone within. At first, it appeared as a simple harmless, concentrated, starry point of luminance, but as the brightness grew, a certain groan of weight and authority bellowed.

The air wiggled around the box as it turned to a grand cubic glow within Skullius' hands, and the Hybrid Luman also seemed greatly unsettled by the cantankerous force in his hands.

However, his skill at handling mana was not so fickle that he could be overpowered by something he had robbed from humans and beasts alike millions of times, and made into a solar system around his mana core.

"[Greatest Mana Crafter]" Skullius called, as in an instant, the terrible radiance in his hands grew dull before forming into a large, blue sphere fitted perfectly within the glass box.

It was a mana core.

A real mana core with a Centre, Refinery and Shell like his own.

"Oh, my little beauty," Skullius said with shining blind eyes, and caressed the box.

A total of five million units of mana had been used to create this glowing ball, and it would serve as the energy source for all runes he was going to implement within the Estate.

He wondered if it would be enough, but this was a start.

The mana he had injected into the glass box had come from his Temporary Storage. He had stored half of all his excess mana within the unseen storage space, and him manifesting it only required a thought.

With the rune he had carved on his own skin – over his abdomen, close to his mana core – the emergence of anything in the Temporary Storage to where he wanted was rather impressively fast, only licks of time behind the speed of his spatial storage ring.

And now...

With his will, the Paired Interregnum jabbed into the ground accepted the mana core held within glass box as their target for the skill [Paired Grace].

A thrum like that of a vivacious heartbeat pumped from the glass box, and instantly, it grew twice as bright, its quality raised two fold.

Chapter 700: Security Detail First (3)

"There," Skullius said with a cheery smile.

The only thing missing from his current image; the dirt on his hands and knees, the pleased look on his face and the glow of the sun behind him, was a few drops of sweat and a straw hat. If only those two elements were added into the fold, one would think he was a farmer who had just finished planting seedlings for a fruitful year.

What he had dug into the earth though, wasn't a plant, but in a sense a seed.

Three hundred and forty meters deep, and close to the wall was the glass box containing a vibrant mana core. As company within the dirt, two slender swords were at its sides, and around them in turn was a collection of runes with a bright purple glow.

Protection runes.

In addition, another different assortment of the empowered symbols were mixed in, with their function different from the main four Skullius was currently capable of utilising.

These runes connected the mana core to all the runes on the wall, supplying them, with the same degree of quality and quantity Skullius intended, replenishment at all times – this was a basic function, unlike with the gleaming purple Protection runes Skullius had put in place with the obvious intent to protect the core and estocs.

The Hybrid Luman desired a constant supply of mana to all runes without any fluctuations, regardless of whatever mishaps occurred, and with that in mind, he predicted that the Reinforcement Runes on the wall would last for five to six months.

That was good.

Before the next month ended, Skullius was supposed to go and deal with his biggest headache, a potential literal one, in Doom Factor 2, which promised to drive him mad if he did not attain the other half of his soul.

Regardless of how long that took, whoever he wanted to protect would have a great degree of protection, though not from the walls alone, as there was something else he wanted to add. Something that would probably last for a similar length of time as the Reinforcement Runes, but with many fold a better level of defence. He hoped the expenditure would be friendly though.

Patting the inconspicuously covered ground where he had buried the mana core, Skullius rose and walked outside the Estate and travelled well beyond the gates.

He then stopped and reached in deep into his mind and drew a collection of memories from Hobbu Gogo's mind.

What he needed next was complex.

Just thinking about how it worked made him thank the few specks of good that trailed around his life and granted him the Omniscient Thought Cracker. Without it, it would taken at least a few hours in the day to sift through how exactly the elderly goblin had created such a powerful barrier around her private tower.

"All right, first, I need a huge amount of mana. How shocking," Skullius said with a deadpan face.

He extended his hands before him and concentrated a vicious outpour of mana into them.

Straining heavily, he activated [Lesser Gravel Rune Mastery], and the other rune related skill he had taken from Hobbu Gogo, [Rune Assimilation].

The combination of these two lesser versions of the Cluster General's original powers allowed him to bridge the gap between him and the hag in terms of power, efficiency and skill, but just barely. At most, he was able to create a barrier with similar functions, but with only up to 30% of the same effects.

Skullius had thought to wait until the night and use [Epiphany] which was in his arsenal as the Vehement Bone Nullmancer, but changed his mind. While the relatively unchanged skill had the effect of allowing the user to use any skill at an excess of 90% efficiency, the Paired Interregnum could double the efficiency of the result.

Normally, one would think to get the best of both worlds; using [Epiphany] to boost the efficiency of [Lesser Gravel Rune Mastery] and [Rune Assimilation] and then use the Paired Interregnum, but the former didn't have any guarantees.

In Skullius' previous evolution list which was bolstered by the STUPENDOUSLY DESIRABLE LUCK from the Chubby Remnant Child of Polarity, he had come across an evolutionary specie of Penetrator that focused on runes.

The Elder Sage of Penetration.

This particular species abandoned the use of skills and adopted the utilisation of runes for all combat and auxiliary purpose.

This had got Skullius thinking when he deep dived into the Rune skills he acquired.

'Is there that much of a difference between runes and skills? [Lesser Gravel Rune Mastery] allows me to DRAW individual runes of different types, but each caste of runes doesn't appear on the guidance field as skills... Curious. Does this mean skills like [Epiphany] can't give me much of a benefit with things like this? Other than making me a professional painter maybe?' he had thought.

Even for [Rune Assimilation], the sentiment was pretty much the same, as the skill allowed him to appreciate runes to a more profound degree, allowing him to bring the most out of each of them. Empowering the skill wouldn't help by much, since [Rune Assimilation]'s limit relied on [Lesser Gravel Rune Mastery]'s limit.

All this was to say, even if he waited until the night and used [Epiphany], there wasn't much benefit to look forward to.

And thus...

Skullius drew on the air.

The barrier he wanted to create incorporated Protection, Sealing, Reinforcement and Conjuring. Since he didn't have the Conjuring Runes yet, another degree of security was going to be lost, but it was alright for now. Perhaps he would add that in time.

The tips of Skullius' fingers livid with mana that was rapidly fashioned into thick, restless swaths of purple, red and blue, created a myriad of crooked, erect, hooked, looped and loop-hooked cursive hieroglyphics that rose into the air as soon as they were fully forged.

As Skullius drew, his mind was inflated with focus.

Something within him, like a large, warm balloon pressed against his senses, and made him feel an even amount of relaxation that also came with an astonishing level of attention. The pair was so potent that slowly, he began to hear whispers.

Whispers from the symbols he drew.

The guards behind him watched in awe as hundreds of colourful symbols scaled the air, first as fist sized markings, and then as bloated lumps that were saturated with as much mana as they could hold.

They couldn't understand it.

Skullius' figure whipped to the left and then to right and then left-right... no wait, there and there, to and fro...

Blurry after-images threatened to make every single one of the guards cross-eyed, but they remained glued to the scene all the same.

Time wasn't impressed however.

Even if it watched the dancing fool scribbling on its cousin's – space – canvas, it did not stop moving to its infinite yet singular destination.

A long stretch later, the sky was dyed with all manner of runes closely knit together in a massive, meshed page that covered hundreds of meters across the open air.

Skullius looked at this with a round 'O' shape on his lips, his head shaking in self-admiration. He had done his absolute best to create this thing, and it was nothing short of magnificent, like a tapestry from a colourful heaven.

But sadly, he wasn't done yet.

This was merely the halfway mark.

While maintaining [Lesser Rune Mastery], Skullius made a grasping gesture at the cascade of hues, and a thunderous boom crashed from everywhere as the large, mana-stuffed runes bashed against each other.

As they did, wilful sparks gushing from the joints, a semi-transparent, solid silver curtain was formed from the bottom of the colorful sheet going upwards. It bellowed as if flirted with by the wind and kept manifesting, replacing the tangling runes all the way to its top.

When it fully emerged, with a scaly texture upon closer inspection, Skullius spread his arms wide and expended another vast quantity of mana to spread it all right round the Bryne Estate in a large, spherical shape.

Indeed, even the underground wasn't spared, all the way down to the pulsing mana core – battery.

Above ground, the barrier was like a still dome, its visual intensity reduced, but its potency still defined.

Skullius nodded and whispered to himself, "Flesh Yeah."

With a direct translation from the Hau Kaka goblin dialect, this barrier was called the Chieftain Screen. Skullius was too lazy to change the name so as he passed by the stunned guards on the way back into the Estate, he told them it was called as such.

He explained what it and the other runes were in detail before leaving the guards looking at his back with shining eyes and burning vigour.

Skullius looked up at the dome and examined it thoroughly with his senses.

He couldn't see it, but he could feel the perfect balance in its energies. He had yet to configure whose authority it should allow to command it, asides from his of course, but it was already functional.

Unwanted guests who reached within four meters of its proximity would be clamped down by a vicious seal. The Chieftain Screen had an upper limit of roughly two hundred targets at full restrictive capacity, which was already incredible despite it being a lesser variant.

Asides from this, it could pretty much tank both magical and physical attacks of considerable degree, likely standard high level Master Stage level attacks with Auras included.

Additionally, it was incredibly restrictive. It resisted forceful entry even if the restrictive seal refused to work for whatever reason. That was what most of the firepower of the barrier was concentrated towards.

"All good, I guess, though I might have severely underestimated how much this thing sucks up mana. I might need a few more cores," the Hybrid Luman said thoughtfully. "Anyway, time to double down!"

With a thought, he assigned the Chieftain Screen as a target for the Paired Interregnum and the mana core.

The skills [Paired Grace] and [Duality] were used on it, and shockingly, a second, smaller Chieftain Screen appeared within the Estate, starting from the column of trees.

The skill [Paired Grace] gave it a twofold increase in efficiency, which doubled the efficacy of all its functions – indeed an increase in quality, and an increase in efficiency had different effects.

Skullius watched with a smile as it appeared.

It didn't look like a barrier.

He thought it would be in poor taste if it was actually as rigid as the one outside. Thus, he made it look like a hemispheric veil to a new world. It blurred the view of the Estate from the outside to a silvery Gaussian blur which would look extra gorgeous at night with the bokeh of artificial lights from the mansions.

"Perfect," said Skullius with a smile. "I'm sure Theurien would love to have his signature on this. Not a bad welcome back present, if I do say so myself."