

Hunter 931

Chapter 931: The Prima Guardian Event Begins

Countless planets across the ninety-third universe got this message at the exact same time. Countless planets were steeling themselves to face what many believed would be the final system event of the early period of the newly initiated universe... all waiting to realize their fates and to see if they were viable to continue existing going forward.

Some faced this challenge with excitement, expectations, and a bright look toward the future. Others with doubt, fear, and even a sense of helplessness, as they doubted they stood a chance against whatever monster would arrive. Alliances did help, but not every galaxy had powerful alliances. Some had even come into conflict with other planets already, killing all hopes of working together.

No matter what, one thing was clear: this system event would determine the fate of many planets. If they would become worlds ruled by enlightened individuals or one with monsters in charge. Millions of civilizations would fall, as planets would be overrun by Prima Guardians who would then take charge of the Planetary Pylon, making it a world hostile to the enlightened.

In some ways, this could be viewed as a test if the populations of every planet had reached a satisfactory power level, or were due for a reset. Perhaps new enlightened races would appear there in the future, or maybe they wouldn't.

Each galaxy had different circumstances, but one stood out more than any other. A galaxy with not one, but two Chosen of pinnacle gods in it, with people who were not only the strongest C-grades of this generation but of all generations in the history of the multiverse – at least if one went by the Nevermore Leaderboards.

While the vast majority of galaxies had borderline zero divine attention, the same couldn't be said about the Milky Way, which had all eyes on it to see what many believed would be yet another showdown between the two Chosen, who had recently also faced off in Nevermore.

It was a chance for Ell'Hakan to reclaim some of the prestige he had lost in Nevermore... or for the Chosen of the Malefic One to fully prove his superiority. Some would argue this competition wasn't entirely fair, though, as this wasn't a one-on-one duel, but each Chosen had a whole swath of allies. And especially when it came to these allies, there was an imbalance.

Even the gods couldn't agree on who had the advantage, though. Because one side had the entire Prima Guardian Alliance... while Earth had Earth.

Ell'Hakan flew to the exact spot the Prima Guardian would arrive at, followed by thirty other people. Five of them were from his own planet, while the rest of them hailed from the Prima Guardian Alliance. They were the strongest of their own planets, and while none truly reached the peak level, many were quite strong in their own rights.

Tens of thousands of elites from the Prima Guardian Alliance had also arrived to help secure the perimeter, limiting the damage the system event could cause. As the leader of the alliance, it was only to be expected he would make use of his position.

Their plan was quite simple. They had gathered this elite team to take down the Prima Guardian on Ell'Hakan's planet first, before they would move to others, taking down Prima Guardians and regular Primas one after another. The teleportation network provided by the system allowed them to teleport between every member planet incredibly simply, if a bit limited, due to each planet only generally having one teleporter. This was heavily remedied by effective teleportation networks on the different planets, but it could be a pain, especially on the less developed worlds where the alliance had less time to put down solid networks.

On the many respective planets of the alliance, they had also enacted protocols to condense and secure the populace, so even if the elites of the planet were gone, the damage would be minimized. Some defenders did also remain on each planet, but just enough to handle a few wayward Primas.

It was quickly confirmed these Prima Guardians would always appear nearly directly on the other side of the planet from where most enlightened lived, which was both a curse and a blessing. A blessing because it meant the Primas wouldn't reach the enlightened within a short period and likely be very scattered once they did, and a curse because it meant going to face off against the Prima Guardian would take longer in pure travel time.

Time was certainly a big constraint in this event, but it didn't bother Ell'Hakan too much. He had already designated the planets with the least usefulness and low populations, and it was only to be expected some couldn't be saved. Not even the greatest hero could save everyone every time. Sacrifices would also only make those he did save view him more favorably, as they could directly see the unfortunate fate of those who didn't get his help.

Refocusing, he soon arrived at the spot where the Prima Guardian would land together with his elite team who began setting down a formation. As he stood there, he felt the belief of the planet and all

other planets he had also begun to influence coursing through his body. He looked up as the sun's rays warmed and empowered his body, the twin moons hidden right now but always there. As one would expect of parents looking after their child.

He felt strong and confident in his plan. Besides, Earth, the planet belonging to the Chosen of the Malefic One, was ultimately still only one planet. El'Hakan had the powers of hundreds behind him. Smiling, he felt it was almost a certainty.

We shall be the ones to claim first blood. We have to.

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Back on Earth, no one even seemed to be thinking about some grand universe-wide competition as they were too busy doing their own thing.

With it now fully confirmed that the spot Jacob had picked out was indeed where the Prima Guardian would appear, everyone got to work making their own preparations. The Sword Saint painted a picture of the desert to allow him to teleport back there should something unforeseen happen, Carmen did some small ritual and sacrificed some bones, Arnold began to send out drones and even shot up small satellite-like things, Maria prepared arrows by infusing them with firebombs, Caleb began charging what looked like small bombs, and Casper spread out traps in the area... everyone did something.

Jake also prepared his own Protean Arrow despite not knowing the exact nature of what they would face. He wanted to make a rather basic arrow that would work against most things, so it ended up consisting primarily of purely destructive arcane energy. It was far from ideal, and he could have made a better one if he could confirm what kind of creature the Prima could be. He chose to go with the most all-purpose one, though, because he didn't want to risk making some arrow specialized in killing flesh and blood creatures only for some large elemental to appear, making Jake look like a complete moron when his arrow would fly harmlessly straight through its body.

Vesperia also did her thing. She sent out practically all of her C-grade drones in one direction where she had been assigned to make a defensive line, keeping only her four Queen's Guards with her for this battle. Even the Royal Guards were too weak to be of proper help during the fight that was to come without getting the way, so they joined the regular drones. This section she would be in charge of was definitely one of the most robust ones, showing Vesperia indeed was a one-woman army in that she could literally summon an army.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

A few people didn't have anything to prepare at all. The Fallen King simply floated there while Eron was reading a small book on a summoned chair. Sylphie was also just flying around, getting a feel for the area, occasionally complaining about how still the wind was in the desert.

After around fifty minutes of preparation and relaxation, as the boss grew ever nearer, yet another system message appeared before every person on the planet. It was finally the "real" announcement of the event.

The Prima Guardian Event Shall Begin Shortly.

From the vastness of space, a Prima Vessel is bound for Earth, carrying with it Primas who have been empowered within the Seal of the Exalted Prima and the Prima Guardian itself. Seek out where it lands and prepare to fight, flee, and defend what is worth protecting, or find any other strategy to face the Guardian. Do this with the knowledge you have time.

The Prima Guardian will be sealed within the Prima Vessel for the first 1000 days after arrival. Each day that passes, the Prima Guardian shall break one of the chains sealing it, expending some of its power to regain its freedom. While sealed, the Prima Guardian cannot leave the Prima Vessel, and none can enter the Vessel either, except for the Key Holder carrying the First Key (current World Leader, Jake Thayne).

Even as the Prima Guardian remains sealed, the Primas that have arrived alongside it shall roam free, bringing with them their armies. Defend, attack, and hunt down every Prima, knowing that every slain Prima empowers the remaining seals on the Prima Guardian, forcing it to expend even more energy to regain its freedom, thus making it weaker once fully unsealed.

Once the Prima Guardian is free, it shall seek to hunt down the other Key Holder and claim the Planetary Pylon. After 5 years of the Prima Guardian's release, the barrier protecting Earth's Planetary Core will naturally disperse, allowing any with a key to claim it. Current Key Holders on Earth: Jake Thayne. Prima Guardian of Earth (upon arrival).

Due to the exceptional performance of Earth in prior system events and the number of Primas slain during the first period of this event, the Prima Guardian is significantly more powerful than usual. The

hundreds of chains broken before time from the slain Primas allow the Prima Guardian to absorb the Records and energies while expending less energy to break free overall.

The faster the Prima Guardian is slain, the greater the reward. Once the Prima Guardian has been slain, Earth will naturally be enrolled in the Prima Guardian Alliance. Participating in the alliance is entirely voluntary but may result in improved event rewards.

Let the true battle for who shall ultimately claim dominion of the Planetary Pylon begin.

WARNING: Should the Key Holder choose to enter the Prima Vessel before the 1000 days are over, all seals limiting the Prima Guardian are instantaneously broken, and the Prima Guardian is set free. If the Prima Guardian is unsealed before all chains are broken, it will not expend any of its saved-up power doing so, leaving it far more powerful. Caution is heavily advised.

All rewards from this event shall be given once all Prima Guardians of the Milky Way Galaxy have been slain or at the event's natural expiration five years after all Prima Guardians have been released. Rewards are based both on the performance of every individual and the planet's performance as a whole.

Prima Guardian Arrival: 9:57

Just as this message came, Jake felt something. A faint sliver of energy had gathered, and when Jake looked at the back of his hand, a small golden glowing sigil had appeared. Instantly, he knew this was the key spoken about in the system message. One part of what would ultimately allow him to unlock the barrier around the Planetary Pylon, with the other one held by the Prima Guardian.

Everyone quickly read the system message while gathering around, and Jake felt all eyes turn to him. Jake just gave a knowing smile. "I don't think it needs to be said, right? I'm storming head-first into that Prima Vessel the second I can to free the damn thing. No way we're waiting a thousand days."

No one said anything, as this was entirely what they had expected. The system even directly told them that killing the Prima Guardian as quickly as possible would lead to better rewards, and everyone else knew that the system always put a lot of stock on things like being the first to do something.

And there was no fucking way Jake or anyone else wanted to risk someone like Ell'Hakan snagging the first kill. Jake could almost imagine the smug fuck standing somewhere, with a dumb smile on his face, feeling all confident.

Besides... unsealing the Prima Guardian fast would make it stronger, resulting in a more difficult fight, and difficult fights were more fun. Honestly, there were only upsides!

Floating over, the Fallen King regarded Jake and saw the glowing symbol on his hand. "Do you intend to enter yourself? If the key can be transferred, perhaps it would be better if someone else goes, and you can make distance to strike more efficiently."

"Maybe I can transfer it, but I see no reason to even try," Jake said, shaking his head. "Say this Prima Guardian turns out to be far more dangerous than we believe, I think it's best I'm the one going into this Vessel. Outside of Eron, I'm the one who's the hardest to take down, and out of everyone, I'm the one who can escape the easiest while not dying in the process."

There was also the fact that Jake's danger sense would warn him before things even got too dangerous. He truly believed that out of everyone, it was best if he was the one to enter. Besides, as the World Leader, he had to take responsibility and risk sometimes, right?

"Your logic is sound, very well," the Fallen King simply said.

"Ree?" Sylphie questioned, flying over.

"No, I'll enter alone," Jake shook his head.

"Ree..." Sylphie screeched a bit sadly as Carmen went over and comforted the bird with a pat on the head. Jake got a look from Vesperia, but he decided now wasn't the time.

The entire strike team stood together, ready to face what was to come as the timer slowly ticked down until finally...

Prima Guardian Arrival: 0:01

Jake stared up into the cloudless sky as he saw beyond the atmosphere of the planet. There, something warped. Bent. Space itself seemed to collapse in upon itself for a brief moment as reality shattered. Pure darkness remained... until something emerged from this newly formed hole in space.

Something grayish and metallic floated out and began to accelerate straight down toward Earth. It was shaped almost like an egg, with perfectly smooth sides and not a single opening anywhere. The entire thing was at least a few kilometers long and wide, making it about the size Jake would have expected, if maybe a little on the smaller side, considering the many Primas it had to transport alongside their armies.

Even from this distance, Jake could tell with utter certainty that no attack he or anyone else on Earth was capable of could leave a single mark on what he was certain was the Prima Vessel.

The gap in space behind it closed just as quickly as it had come, as the Prima Vessel began flying faster and faster down toward Earth. Soon, it reached the atmosphere as it began to burn, but it effortlessly broke through every layer in its ceaseless descent.

"Be ready, everyone," the Sword Saint said, one hand on his sword as they all stood there and looked at it descending, with it about to land only a few kilometers ahead of them. Everything was ready as the desert lit up from the burning metal vessel coming down like a meteor, until finally, the impact.

A massive wave of sand and wind rushed past them as the shockwave washed over them, with barriers of magic sprung already up to absorb some of the impact. All of them stood still, except for one person who was already charging forward before the Prima Vessel had even hit the ground.

Because Jake wasn't even going to wait for the sand to settle or the Prima Vessel to cool down, as he stormed toward it, the symbol on his hand glowing as a small opening appeared towards its base.

At the same time, many more openings appeared all over the Vessel. Hundreds of them at once began to spew out creatures, with the first one exiting right as Jake entered the Prima Vessel and triggered the final boss fight to claim the Planetary Pylon of Earth.

One thing became clear immediately: this Prima Vessel was far larger on the inside than it appeared. As hundreds of Primas flew out of the many holes covering its surface, they were far from alone. Entire armies followed them, with some having thousands of their kin.

Some of these creatures even grew in size as they flew out. One of these that instantly caught the attention of many was an utterly massive bird with a wingspan of more than two kilometers, followed by nearly a hundred other birds about half its size. Thunderclaps echoed in their wake with every wingbeat as they headed toward the skies.

From below, many Identified them to get a general idea as to the level of these Primas, and while some took a deep breath and frowned... someone like Jake would have found themselves disappointed.

[Thunderstorm Roc Prima – lvl 294]

[Thunderstorm Roc – lvl 281]

These Primas did not get far before a dark curtain fell upon them. Black beams shot up from below as shadowy figures appeared out of nowhere among them, wielding magical firearms and daggers. The regular Thunderstorm Rocs were torn apart as the Prima reacted quickly, summoning a storm worthy of its name.

However, its struggle had only begun. A thin beam shot up from a sniper rifle below, piercing straight through its mid-section as a man used two daggers to nearly tear off one of its wings. It quickly tried to retaliate, but the forces led by Matteo and Nadia from the Court of Shadows were more than powerful enough to utterly overwhelm it.

Not powerful enough to kill it quickly, though. The Prima was almost overflowing with vital energy, and even as it was gravely wounded, it began to heal at an alarming rate. It was as if its health pool was many times larger than usual, making the fights longer. Still, there was no cause for concern.

Similar scenes played out all around as the Primas met the vanguard of Earth. All the factions had shown up in force, and even if there were hundreds of Primas, they had quite the wall to overcome if they wanted to spread themselves across the planet.

This wasn't even to mention that the most powerful people on the planet didn't engage these Primas... instead, they were waiting, conserving their energy, as the World Leader entered the Prima Vessel to unseal and awaken the Prima Guardian.

Jake entered the odd egg-shaped structure and instantly felt space around him warp as the key on his hand was glowing. The very next second, he stood in a long white hallway, leading only one way. As he stood there, he also felt the aura of the being deeper within.

He couldn't quite estimate its strength as it seemed to be fluctuating and incredibly unstable. Nevertheless, he didn't hesitate for a single moment before he stormed forward, even using One Step. Jake had almost expected some traps on the way, but he encountered nothing besides the sterile, long white hallway, with locked double doors to both sides, leading into entirely empty rooms.

Soon, he approached his destination as a final large gate appeared. Jake practically drop-kicked it open to get inside, as finally, the boss they would face was revealed in all its glory.

Within a massive circular chamber, sealed within a thin barrier, a single being sat in the middle. Black chains hung from all the walls surrounding it, with hooks piercing into its body while passing through the barrier as if it wasn't even there. Jake counted around a thousand... no, nine hundred and ninety-nine hooked chains.

The creature itself looked like nothing more than a massive blop of flesh. Jake didn't even know what kind of creature it was or if it was even sapient. There was nothing discernable about it at all except for the presence of the other key clearly emanating from the creature.

Using Identify... Jake frowned.

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvl 320]

This... felt wrong. Level 320 was lower than the Twinhead Emperor's level, and they faced that one with five people. Now, they had all gotten a few more levels, not to speak of the Nevermore titles and improved equipment. Sure, the Twinhead Emperor was powerful enough to defeat the combined fighting force of nearly all newly integrated planets, but this was supposed to be Earth's super-hard challenge.

It just didn't make any-

Crack

A single chain cracked as it fell limp to the floor before turning into pure energy that rushed into the mass of flesh. A second crack sounded out a moment later, making a second chain fall. Then a third, a fourth... until an entire cascade of chains broke one by one. Jake quickly used Identify on the boss again as he felt something odd.

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvl 328]

Its aura began to grow rapidly as the chains all around Jake shattered and turned into energy. Jake could only stare at the wriggling mass of flesh as fewer and fewer chains hooked into its body, and the flesh wriggled, grew, and began to take shape as its level just kept increasing. During all this, Jake kept intermittently using Identify.

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvl 336]

The shape it took didn't make any sense to Jake yet... but that was when he heard a voice, not from the creature itself but seemingly from the Prima Vessel all around him.

"A decision made; perhaps an incompetent leader."

Jake frowned at the words as the being began to take even more shape. More than half of the chains had broken by now.

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvl 343]

"Power corrupts. Makes arrogant. Overconfident."

Jake didn't counter – as countering a big egg-shaped spacefaring vessel didn't make much sense - as he just prepared himself. The level of the Prima Guardian was still growing, and he already felt pretty sure where it would end. The mass of flesh had soon grown what looked like a few legs as it raised itself up.

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvi 346]

“The folly of humanity. You: Living proof.”

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Arms appeared... and not just two of them. Jake counted a dozen arms growing out of the wriggling flesh as its body began to take a shape reminiscent of a cat or a dog or something, except with more legs and arms growing everywhere. Several long tails also extended, and parts of the exposed flesh got covered with flesh, while other places had scales.

“Yet... bravery. A wish to overcome. A Path to true power.”

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvi 348]

By now, Jake realized what kind of creature this was... and he had kind of encountered one before with Eternal Hunger. It was more of a classification of creatures rather than a single race. It was a kind of being that one could never truly understand, as no two were alike... seeing as this was a collection of many different creatures, all in one.

A chimera... and Jake recognized one of the horns growing out of a newly appeared head that reminded Jake of a wyvern or perhaps even a dragon. It was the horn of the Gazelle Prima Jake had encountered while adventuring with Carmen. Jake wasn't one to forget an aura, and he felt the aura of this chimera be a mix of so many, some of which he recognized.

Rather than just a chimera of random creatures, it was the fusion of all the slain Primas during the first part of this event.

Then, the final chain broke, and Jake used Identify to confirm its level as a small smile appeared on his lips before shaking his head.

[Revered Prima Guardian – lvi 349]

The Prima Guardian slowly began to stand up as Jake prepared himself to kite the Guardian out of the Vessel and face it with the others. It was definitely the strongest C-grade Jake had ever seen, and it could put up a good fight for sure, but it wasn't anything he feared.

As Jake was preparing himself... everything just seemed to stop for a moment. He felt as if time slowed down, yet the environmental mana seemed normal. That's when something appeared within his Sphere of Perception. His gaze darted upwards and spotted a floating metal ball with a blue eye-like thing in it. One he recognized from the time he went to the Seat of the Exalted Prima for the system event.

[Prima Watcher of Earth - ?]

That's when Jake realized that what had slowed down wasn't Jake. Only the Prima Guardian seemed frozen in time as this Prima Watcher observed Jake silently for several seconds before its mechanical voice echoed.

"Greetings, Administrator Candidate," the Watcher spoke, the voice different than the earlier calling him overconfident.

"Hi?" Jake said, confused. No system messages had said anything about this happening.

"The planet Earth and you as its leader have been deemed qualified by the Exalted Prima to experience the Accelerated Difficulty Prima Guardian Protocol. Be aware this will increase your potential to become an Administrator and all rewards gained should you succeed. As the World Leader, do you wish to accept the accelerated protocol?"

Now, this was perhaps one of the times when Jake should have tried to use his Golden Mark to communicate with his team or to think carefully about this choice... but in his defense, he was cut off and couldn't communicate with the outside world right now. As for the part about thinking carefully? Well, that had never been Jake's strong suit to begin with.

"Not gonna say no to an improved challenge," Jake responded with a big smile.

The Watcher looked at him for a second more before its eye flashed blue for a second. "Acknowledged. Applying Accelerated Difficulty Prima Guardian Protocol. Good luck."

With that, the Watcher disappeared as if it had never been there, and Jake felt something come alive within the room. Magical scripts, placed where all the chains had been attached to the walls, suddenly lit up as beams of energy shot toward the boss. The entire body of the Prima Guardian exploded with light. A kind of light that even blinded Jake's Sphere of Perception... the kind he only ever saw when a creature was born or evolved.

Then... Jake heard a different voice than any prior.

"Prove thyself, leader of man. Best mine Exalted Guardian."

Jake felt a sense of utter power within the voice as he instinctively knew he had just heard the Exalted Prima itself – the one he and Villy theorized to be the Bound God of the Seat of the Exalted Prima. However, he didn't have much time to think about any of that as the light faded, and the Prima Guardian was revealed once more. It looked about the same, but its aura had just risen to a whole new level, as it had indeed just evolved.

[Exalted Prima Guardian – lvl 349]

At the same time, a message from the system also arrived, and not just to Jake but everyone else on the entire planet, too.

Message to all residents of Earth: the Prima Guardian has been freed from its seals and can now roam the planet freely. Defeating Primas will no longer serve to weaken the Prima Guardian.

WARNING: Through the decision of the World Leader, the Accelerated Difficulty Prima Guardian Protocol has been engaged. Revered Prima Guardian evolved to Exalted Prima Guardian. The Prima Guardian has grown substantially in power, but so have the rewards for defeating it. The Exalted Prima wishes the denizens of Earth luck.

Within the Prima Vessel, Jake scanned this message as he felt eyes lock in on him. The Prima Guardian had finally settled on a form as a monstrosity stood before him. It had eight legs, with four like that of a

cat, with two more growing out on each of its sides, seemingly just dangling there. Three heads with the necks of snakes and the heads of dragons showed its front side, while the behind had five tails... reminding Jake a bit of the very first Prima monkey he had killed.

From its back, countless tentacle-like grows spurted out, many of them looking like arms due to the hands at their ends. Some parts of its large body were covered with scales, while others had skin, with the chimera clearly not having settled on any kind of consistent color. The random horns and bones sticking out in random places didn't help it look pretty, either. The entire creature looked mismatched and broken... but its aura definitely told another story.

It was strong enough for Jake to quickly make his decision as he stepped down and teleported backward down the hallway he had arrived from. He saw that the Prima Guardian didn't move after him immediately, likely because it couldn't. There was still a very thin barrier around it that was growing ever-thinner by the second. By the time Jake turned a corner, it fell entirely.

At least, that's what Jake assumed happened when he heard a loud roar that sent a shockwave through the entire Prima Vessel right before he reached the exit and flew out.

Appearing in the real world, he was instantly reconnected to everyone through his Golden Mark, and he didn't delay a single moment.

"Brace yourselves, boss incoming!"

The entire strike team was already staring either at Jake or the exit of the Prima Vessel, which proved to be a good thing, as Jake had barely gotten out when a head flew out of the doorway that was practically a portal. It extended far out, like that of a hydra, as it moved to attack.

Jake had to quickly dodge to the side as a breath of pure light shot after him, but before the chimera could even fully unleash its attack, it stopped as a swordsman appeared at its side with his sword raised high. He cut down as a curtain of water fell, and blood sprayed into the air as the head was nearly entirely cut off.

Before the swordsman could follow up, a second head poked out before a third also appeared. Everyone began to move as they charged, and Sylphie even managed to fly down and, using the cut left by the Sword Saint, severed the head of the chimera entirely.

Not that this seemed to bother the Prima Guardian much as its entire body soon emerged. It was around fifteen meters long, not counting the heads and tails, and everyone took a second and stopped to observe the beast they were facing, as Carmen couldn't hold herself back.

"Damn, it's ugly."

"Definitely doesn't give off any exalted vibes, that's for sure," Caleb agreed, as he lifted his staff and dark lightning began to charge up.

Jake was flying away at full speed as all the melee fighters engaged the Prima Guardian. A few burning arrows struck it in the side as Maria unleashed a barrage, with the Fallen King shooting a golden beam straight at one of the heads.

However, the beam never arrived as a barrier of magic appeared, blocking the blow. The flesh on the severed neck also wriggled as a new head promptly emerged, so fast the Sword Saint barely had time to dodge out of the way and make some distance.

The initial exchange had been brief, and far from everyone had time to even do anything yet. However, they were all aware immediately. This could perhaps have been an easy fight, but Jake just had to go and activate some super-difficulty protocol. This turned the fight from a simple show of force and utter dominance...

Into something that could actually be a bit of fun.

Chapter 933: Prima Guardian (1)

Jake took to the air as he made some distance from the Prima Guardian, his boosting skill activating during his ascent. The creature wasn't following him, as it had plenty of other dangerous foes to contend with, all of whom had also activated their own boosting skills, though not at the highest level. They had all felt the aura of the chimera and knew that holding back too much wouldn't end well for them.

Carmen quickly closed in, joined by the Sword Saint and Vesperia who had already entered her warrior form, flanked by her four Queen's Guards. Sylphie and Caleb would adopt a more hit-and-run style,

while Maria and Jake would bombard it from range. Casper was more a control and ritual-type fighter, and was working on curses, while the Fallen King used his mid-range attacks, staying semi-melee to step in when needed.

Eron was naturally the healer of the group, and Arnold... well, he was doing stuff Jake was sure.

This was their fundamental strategy for dealing with the Prima Guardian they had discussed during the flight there. The power of the Prima Guardian was perhaps a bit higher than expected, but that didn't really impact how they would handle it at all.

As Carmen and the Sword Saint got close, Jake also finally saw the meaning of those legs on its sides as it attacked with its claws. The three heads also worked in unison as the chimera's flesh rippled and seemed to be in a constant state of change.

Magical barriers sprung up here and there, blocking the attacks of Maria and the Fallen King, but Carmen managed to slip through and land a punch on the newly regenerated head. Another head tried to attack, but four stingers impaled it from different sides as the four Queen's Guards struck, with Vesperia coming in a second later to land the most devastating blow.

The Sword Saint tried to deal with the final head, but a barrage of bone spurs erupted from the chimera's body, pushing him back momentarily. Not that the final head had time to do anything, as a staff slammed into its skull with the sound of thunder as black lighting spread out from the impact. At the same time, a whirlwind of wind tore through the entire creature's body, and hundreds of small cuts were left everywhere.

Yet, even so, the Guardian was undeterred as it struck back.

Dozens of hands growing out its back began to glow with energy as each of them began casting magic. All sorts of magic schools, even ones usually in conflict, were cast once, pushing back all the melee fighters in a giant explosion of pure mana.

Before anyone even had a chance to strike again, the heads were all fully healed, as three breaths were unleashed upon their group, with one of them hitting Caleb mid-retreat, singeing his body. Jake was still flying up but soon stopped as he judged the distance good enough and began his own preparations.

"This being is utterly overflowing with vital energies, far more than such a vessel can usually inhabit," Eron spoke through the Golden Mark to the entire group while already healing Caleb.

"Its soul is also ridiculously dense and robust, and it appears to be in constant flux,"

the Fallen King also added. "None of my soul attacks have any effect as of yet... in fact, I feel like striking its soul is counterproductive."

The conclusion was pretty simple: they would have to kill this Prima Guardian a lot more times than any usual C-grade. This was truly a boss monster, especially in the sense that such a creature usually wouldn't exist in the wild. It was also infused with too much energy for it to handle, but the system allowed it, stabilizing the chimera. The Prima Guardian effectively had several full health pools and likely more mana and stamina, too, making it an incredibly durable and resilient creature.

That wasn't a big problem, though. At least not if they went by what the chimera had shown so far. All it meant was that the fight would take longer.

Jake was already charging his Arcane Powershot with his pre-prepared Protean Arrow as the melee fighters closed in again. The Fallen King joined them, this time fully, as he unleashed his golden claw, tearing up the Guardian's side and sending blood spewing up before switching to his hammers. The others also attacked, landing blow after blow while defending themselves from any counterattack. Any attacks they did fail to fully dodge, Eron quickly healed, allowing them all to stay constantly engaged.

Soon enough, Jake was also ready as he loosed his arrow. A pillar of pure destructive arcane energy descended from above, and for the first time, the Prima attempted to dodge. However, Casper came in clutch as dark chains suddenly appeared all over its body, locking it down in both body and soul for just long enough.

The arrow struck the chimera right in its mid-section and, without stopping, was on track to penetrate straight through. Jake didn't let it, though, as he exploded the Protean Arrow inside of the massive chimera's body. The explosion temporarily lit up its body as beams of light shot out of holes all across its body from the destructive arcane energies burning it from within.

Others also took advantage of this opening, as they attacked all at once. Stingers, wooden stakes, and arrows penetrated, two of the three heads were cut off, and over a dozen arms and hands were torn up, smashed, or severed. Jake also released a follow-up, as he could practically feel the chimera's vital energy being consumed, the creature constantly healing itself.

Then... something unexpected. One of the heads had just regenerated, and the Sword Saint quickly moved to cut it off, but when he swung down his blade, it failed to cut but just slid across the newly formed metallic scales on its neck. As he was taken by surprise, the old man had the very same head he failed to cut slam into him, sending him reeling back.

Carmen also tried to hit the chimera from below, but as her fist made contact, it simply sank into the Guardian's body as if it were soft clay, trapping her. Maria's flaming allows also suddenly failed to do much damage, as a weird gel-like substance was excreted from its skin, seemingly nullifying the fire damage.

Even Jake experienced something he had never thought he would see. One of the hands that regenerated began to glow in a familiar pink-purple glow as a barrier of stable arcane mana appeared, perfectly blocking his destructive arcane energy.

One of the other heads that had also just regenerated also turned toward Casper, who barely had time to react before a breath of black lightning washed over him. Eron reacted quickly and sent out a healing pulse, only to find himself pushed back with a wave of force tinged with gold.

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Floating far above, Jake opened his eyes wide as he saw all this happen, and pretty much all of them spoke at once through the Golden Mark.

"It's adapting."

From being completely on the defensive, the Prima Guardian now attacked, having chosen Eron as its first target. Sound logic, usually. He was the healer of their group, and it was only basic logic to always get rid of the healer first, something even mindless beasts seemed to understand instinctively. And while this chimera had yet to show great signs of intelligence, it was far from a dumb beast.

In this one instance, targeting the healer wasn't the wisest move, though.

Before any of them could help, the Prima Guardian sank its teeth into Eron, tearing his body apart and chomping down his entire upper body. A blast of destructive arcane mana destroyed the rest... only for the man to pop back into existence a few meters away as he raised a hand and unleashed a torrent of white flames.

The chimera roared loudly, as the flames sure seemed to work well. However, the offensive might of Eron wasn't that great, and the Guardian quickly turned and swiped its tail, destroying the man's body again. Right as he regenerated, a blast of golden force shot down from above, but Sylphie arrived just in time and blasted it apart with a gust of wind.

Caleb also struck quickly, smashing through one of the barriers of stable arcane energy on its back and into its soft body that exploded with blood flying everywhere. An arrow from Jake also arrived, having flown around the barriers to strike one of the tails, easily penetrating before it exploded, blowing off the tail entirely. A second arrow arrived a moment later, striking where Caleb had just shattered a barrier, but this one did far less damage as Jake reached a realization Arnold shared with the group in more detail than Jake would have given.

"Local adaptation. Particular sections or body parts can adapt to damage taken, as it absorb all we throw at it. However, no defense is absolute... strike where the defenses aren't made to counter you," Arnold sent, standing a good distance away, just holding a tablet and seemingly not part of the fight.

The Sword Saint was the first to take this advice to heart. Carmen, who still had an arm stuck in the creature, tried to free herself as the Sword Saint teleported down and cut upwards. His blade easily tore through the soft flesh made to nullify the blunt fists of Carmen, and the Runemaiden quickly got the gist of it. Once freed, the old man gave her a boost as he launched her toward the head he had failed to cut, only to see Carmen's fist shatter the tough scales like they were made of glass.

Shifting their strategy a bit, their group began to attack different areas, never allowing the Guardian to adapt in time. With so many different forms of attack, it couldn't keep up in the first place, as it honestly felt like they were just beating up a spikey punching bag, where you only sometimes had to be careful not to punch something sharp on accident. Not that the only person actually punching in their group cared much about the horns or spikes.

Still, it was unquestionable that the Prima Guardian had grown stronger, and with every attack it suffered, it continued to grow. Rather than having any kind of traditional boosting skill, it instead absorbed a bit of energy every time it took damage, growing that way.

As for its adaptability... it was far superior to anything Jake could have expected.

Jake continued bombarding with arrows from above, even switching up his poisons to combat the internal adaptability of the chimera. Right as he was about to loose another arrow, he had to rapidly dodge as an arrow flew up toward him, followed by a dozen more.

From the flesh of the Guardian, hands wielding bows of bone and sinew had grown, with the arrows made of horns or antlers. What's more, he saw Caleb be pushed back when long tentacle-like arms wielding swords chased after him, as suddenly, the boss was wielding a whole slew of different weapons.

This didn't mean its usual offenses were gone, as the three heads persisted and caused trouble for everyone. Vesperia managed to land quite a few good hits, especially when she shifted to her ranged form and shot what looked like a railgun of stingers, penetrating deep into the boss with every shot.

Sadly, this was where they had their first major casualty.

Out of nowhere, a hole opened up in the side of the boss. The inside of the hole glowed golden as a blast erupted straight toward the True Royal faster than she could react. Luckily, one of her Queen's Guards was ready and moved in front of her, getting half its body blown apart in the process but leaving Vesperia unscathed.

Still, the investment in this attack meant the Prima Guardian took many blows in return, including Casper, who had been cooking up a big attack of his own. Nine wooden stakes slammed into the chimera's side, seemingly ignoring the piercing-resistant skin, as they all glowed with scripts of pure death energy. Casper summoned a magic circle beneath himself as the ghost of his girlfriend overlapped with his body as he made some odd seal.

These nine stakes instantly extended, piercing all the way through the chimera, and with another motion of Casper, all sprouted thorns, making them harder to remove, even as they pumped out curse energy. Roaring, the boss tried to attack the Risen, but the Fallen King, Sword Saint, Carmen, Sylphie, Vesperia, and Caleb all got in the way.

The poor boss didn't react properly to the attack from above either. A large ball of stable arcane energy fell toward it, a few bone arrows striking it mid-air... which definitely was a mistake on the Prima Guardian's side. The ball exploded as the liquid within was released.

A large splash of sizzling acid struck the chimera, making its skin bubble and burn, followed by bottles of Heartrot Poison dropping into the newly opened wounds. While it could certainly adapt to his poison, it still had to burn through a shitload of vital energy before doing so.

The melee fighters once more took advantage, and soon, another three heads had been crushed, and not even the tails had time to attack, as Maria managed to blow one of them off, while two Queen's Guards restricted another.

More than thirty tentacles shot out from the Guardian, wielding staves, swords, bows, and wooden stakes as it swung them for the vanguard. The Fallen King raised barriers to one side while Carmen released an explosive fist to the other, allowing everyone else to strike the Prima Guardian freely.

It had begun taking far less damage due to its adaptability, but it was still suffering devastating blow after devastating blow, as its flesh was torn off or exploded repeatedly. By now, it had to have lost its entire mass in flesh and blood a couple of times over, but it showed no signs of weakening in the slightest, continually trying to counterattack. Sometimes, it was even successful, but Eron quickly healed any injuries.

Jake had also switched to Arcane Powershots now, having realized another truth. While the chimera could adapt to attacks to better block them, this could still be overcome by just making the attack powerful enough to break through even what naturally defended against it. His arrows struck one after another, many of them piercing straight through and into the ground below, as Jake was pretty damn sure any normal C-grade would be dead by now.

The fight had entered a standstill that was incredibly advantageous to their strike team. Yet Jake didn't really ever think the Prima Guardian was weak in any way... in fact, it was incredibly powerful. If Jake had to fight it alone, he wouldn't even be sure how to do it, as adapting to a single foe was far easier than around a dozen. They had too many forms of attack for the chimera to properly adapt, too many angles of attack for it to defend, and too many people for the boss to ever properly lock down one target for long enough to do meaningful damage without five other people stepping in.

It was almost an inevitable outcome at this point, yet something still bothered Jake. The Prima Guardian wasn't the smartest, that was certain, but it wasn't stupid either. There had to be a method to the madness he just hadn't figured out yet.

Then, the Prima Guardian finally did something. It began glowing with magic as it exploded, sending out a shockwave of many schools of magic at once, pushing everyone back and deflecting any ranged attacks coming toward it.

And then... then the Guardian ran away.

Straight back into the Prima Vessel, their entire strike team was dumbfounded momentarily before Carmen asked.

"Do we follow or what?"

Jake frowned and answered: "Let's go; it may just be trying to regenerate or something."

Spoiler... it wasn't "just" trying to regenerate.

Chapter 934: Prima Guardian (2)

While the strike team was dealing with the Exalted Prima Guardian, the rest of Earth's fighting force was busy with all the regular Primas that had exited the Prima Vessel and were now attempting to spread across the planet. Also, even if the main boss had increased in difficulty significantly, the same wasn't true for the hundreds of Primas, which was definitely lucky, as dealing with them all was already extremely difficult as things were.

The Primas tended to be around level 280 to 300, with some going close to 310. They were also powerful variants for their levels, making it difficult even for the elites of Earth to deal with them one-on-one. There were still a few who could, primarily those who had been shortlisted from the strike team.

On the side of the Holy Church, Bertram was a machine, cleaving down several Primas alone while dealing with their armies. All the ones Jacob had arrived with were also some of the best natives of Earth the Church had recruited, providing excellent help.

The same was true for the Risen, led by Priscilla, who by now almost acted toward Casper the same way Miranda worked with Jake. Her plans of seduction had definitely died entirely, as she obviously couldn't compete with a ghost girlfriend. When Casper had been recruited to do Nevermore with the top team of the Risen, she had fully realized he wasn't someone she should try to bring to her side but someone she had to solely function as support for.

Not that she was weak in her own right, as she led the Risen expertly in the war efforts, making their section solidly defended.

Of course, when it came to war, Valhal proved themselves just as competent as one would expect. Sven took the frontlines as he led the group of warriors, and even if they had far fewer fighters than many other factions for the territory they were supposed to defend, not a single Prima managed to slip through. As for the regular monsters that managed to get by them... well, that was why there was a third wall of fighters behind the second vanguard.

The Noboru Clan also did extremely well, the prowess of the vampires on full display. Reika, the great-granddaughter of the Sword Saint who had gone to the Order of the Malefic Viper, also performed exceptionally as she rained down icy destruction upon large areas.

There were also a few sections where formerly enslaved people and some of those who had arrived due to Jake's Chosen Ceremony defended. These people wouldn't get any benefits from the system event, as this wasn't natively their own planet, but they still chose to fight.

Similar sections, mostly focused around individual factions, covered an entire circle around where the Prima Vessel had touched down, making three defensive barriers. The first was the strike team, then the second barrier with mostly elites, and then the third, which had far more people who were on the weaker end, primarily to deal with the stragglers that got through and to provide support where needed. And, of course, to make sure the second defensive line wasn't attacked from behind.

So far, everything was going pretty smoothly, as the "commander" of this entire war was busy making sure things didn't fall apart.

Miranda had set up her own small defensive zone, but used most of her time keeping track of everything going on as she stayed in contact with all the local leaders of the defensive sections. Her domains were practically passive at this point, trapping any Prima or monster that dared venture her way in a deadly swamp there was no escape from.

One of the big fears Miranda and others had was the underground, but the sand had proven to be a great boon. Very few Primas naturally lived in sand, and even those specialized in digging soil found themselves severely handicapped. There were still some, but nothing of great concern that a few dedicated earth mages couldn't handle.

What was a big problem was something they had kind of foreseen but hoped wouldn't be as big of a problem as it turned out to be: native monsters entering the fight. It was well known the Prima Guardian couldn't be fought by creatures who had consumed unique system-given items but only really had the choice to sit out or ally with the Primas. With all their efforts to make monsters around the world sit out, they had succeeded in doing so that there were no reported attacks on human settlements yet, and none of her pre-prepared traps or triggers had activated in the area surrounding Haven either.

Still, they ended up struggling with constant attacks on their backline in this fight with the Primas, which should perhaps have been expected, as even if they had another few decades of preparation, they couldn't have ensured every monster wouldn't choose badly who to ally with.

"Attacks from behind section three-four, danger level low, may become intermediate," the voice of a leader from the former United Cities Alliance informed her as Miranda quickly picked up her communication device.

"Noboru squad six, disengage and assist section three-four," she quickly sent, getting a confirmation back as another one came.

"Overwhelming attack on section two-eleven, peak-tier Prima appeared."

"Holstred, go."

"Fast monsters are approaching section eight. Might get through," someone from Valhal informed her.

"Court of Shadows, your neighbors need ranged support," Miranda quickly decided as she looked at what was effectively a three-dimensional map in front of her. She barely had time to do any killing herself, as there was always some kind of emergency. Still, some sections did manage extremely well on their own, and she could almost ignore them.

One such section was the one defended by Vesperia. Sure, she wasn't there herself, but her army of wasps formed a tight wall, led by her Royal Guards in slaughtering and holding back all Primas and monsters that came their way. It did help that they had far more numbers than any other section for the size of their area, which helped their intimidation factor and made some Primas choose to attack another area instead.

A section with the exact opposite situation to the Vespernat Hive's was one with only a few dozen people. It was a section that Miranda honestly had little hope in, as it was the one where they threw all the more... problematic individuals. People who were clearly powerful but sucked at working with others or had some serious issues that made others not trust them.

The clear stand-out here was the newcomer. Someone she hadn't even considered for this fight in the first place, as he had only returned to Earth a single day before the event. It was naturally William, the metal and karma mage, who Miranda truly hadn't known what was capable of.

But now that she saw his performance... she realized the only reason he wasn't part of the strike team was because Jake didn't like him.

A storm of metal wires covered an area of several cubic kilometers, cutting and restraining any living being that dared enter it. Primas could deal with the wires somewhat but still struggled to deal with their limited movement as the metal mage moved to strike them down one after another, as he commanded hundreds of spear-like projectiles to fly all around. He was like a maestro within his own domain of metal death. He proved himself so overwhelming the other people in his section barely had to - or dared to - do anything.

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Everything was indeed going pretty well, even if they certainly did have casualties. Nothing over the expected, though. Looking at the map of battles, Miranda suddenly frowned as she noticed the entire strike team supposed to handle the Prima all fly toward the Prima Vessel before disappearing.

What the hell are they up to now?

--

Remember Jake's initial surprise the Prima Vessel was just entirely empty and didn't even have any traps? Well, at least the latter one of those had now been amended. The moment Jake entered the Prima Vessel, he saw Carmen retreat with a metal spike poking out of her shoulder, having managed to penetrate her incredibly resilient body.

Having seen this, none of the others had charged forward either before Jake had time to enter. He was the last one to arrive as he had been the furthest way and had to fly there first. Alright, technically, Arnold was the last one to arrive, but that was because he chose to stay outside, still doing... yeah, definitely doing something.

"Where did the Prima Guardian go?" the Sword Saint asked Jake right after he entered, the old man fully aware of Jake's Sphere of Perception. He would have been very dense if he hadn't realized after decades in Nevermore together.

"It's ahead of us, but not in the same room I released it from," Jake frowned. "The path is shifting."

"What do you mean?" Casper asked, walking up.

"I'm saying the inside of this entire cube is moving around, shuffling giant cubes of near-indestructible metal around," Jake clarified. With great timing, too, as the path in front of them suddenly disappeared as a wall blocked their progress before getting replaced with an entirely different hallway.

"A fucking puzzle labyrinth, really?" Carmen cursed, having just had her shoulder healed by Eron. "This is giving me flashbacks to Nevermore."

"Not really a labyrinth," Jake shook his head. "Just a delay tactic and a way to bait us into traps."

"Sounds like a labyrinth to me," Carmen muttered, dissatisfied.

Through his Pulse – as the Guardian was too far away for his passive sphere to reach – he had spotted the chimera, standing on what looked like a disc of some sort. He could see the movements of energy, too, as it was most definitely doing something. Its shifting flesh and morphing body were further proof.

“Why delay us? To recover?” Caleb asked.

“It’s digesting,” Jake said with a frown. “Absorbing everything we just threw at it... and evolving again. Alright, probably not an actual evolution, but it’s definitely changing. Some form of metamorphosis.”

“Doesn’t that mean we should hurry?” Vesperia questioned.

“We are already taking the fastest path there,” Jake said as he crossed his arms. “Be ready to sprint forward in seven seconds, and watch any traps from the right side.”

No one questioned him as they got ready. Seven seconds later, the hallway in front of them was replaced once more, and they all charged in before Jake spoke again as four layers of barriers blocked a barrage of metal spikes from the right.

“Left in four... actually, just follow behind me and keep up. I will warn about traps only.”

It hadn’t taken Jake long to see the pattern in how all the cubes moved around. It was very predictable, and he reckoned most people would figure it out easily within half an hour. Now, the traps when they entered every cube did get a little annoying,

Jake estimated these traps were just here to slow them down and try to make them waste resources. This entire Prima Guardian battle had been one of endurance so far, and Jake could see other planets struggle immensely trying to overcome the ludicrous durability of the chimera without running out of mana or stamina.

Adding on this damn Prima Vessel, things only got worse. Jake couldn’t tell if the Prima Guardian was actually regenerating its resources or just transforming, but if left alone long enough, it would likely recover. Jake even got the feeling it would have stayed inside the Prima Vessel to recover fully, likely not leaving for many hours to maybe over a full day.

Clearly, they had a choice here. Nothing forced them to chase into the Vessel after the boss and face all these damn trap cubes... but not doing so would be slower. And being slower meant there was a bigger chance others killed the Prima Guardian first. So, was charging into the Vessel really a choice?

“More traps than usual left, magic explosion, to the right, we got metal spikes again. Also, watch the ground here,” Jake repeatedly warned as they went through cube after cube, seemingly moving up and down in a random pattern, getting closer and closer to where the Prima Guardian was. Through his Pulses, he tried to keep an eye on it, and with every snapshot, he saw it change.

However, it had gotten difficult to truly identify its form, as the energy around it was so damn dense it made half the room look like one huge object. One thing he could tell for sure, though: the chimera was growing smaller. A lot smaller.

A good choice by the Prima Guardian.

Having a large body did come with some advantages, especially for a creature like a chimera with ridiculous vital energy. In many instances, having a massive body was even a requirement to house that much vital energy.

However, it also came with the obvious drawbacks of having a large body. There was more surface area to defend, which especially became a problem against multiple opponents who could take advantage. In this fight in particular, the large size of the Prima Guardian had only been a boon to Earth’s fighters, as it allowed them all to attack simultaneously without getting in the way of one another.

Then there was, of course, the lower speed that often came as the result of a larger body. This wasn’t a universal rule, but it was pretty universal that a larger creature making itself smaller would help increase its speed as long as it maintained the same general level of power.

As Jake kept warning everyone about potential traps, he split some of his attention to the Golden Mark and informed the others of what he had seen:

“The Prima Guardian appears to be condensing its body while undergoing some form of change. Be extra careful when we encounter it; I would expect more power and significantly increased speed,” Jake warned them all.

“So, a second phase, with this Prima Vessel cube-puzzle being some kind of intermission between phase one and two?” Casper clarified.

“Pretty much.”

It did end up taking them a bit to reach the Prima Guardian, simply due to how the Vessel worked. With how it shuffled, they even had to wait a bit within some of the cubes before moving on. It was even possible to stay within the same cube, and eventually, it would appear right in front of the Prima Guardian. That would be a lot slower than following Jake, but it was an option.

Soon, they were only three more cubes away. Their party wasn't much worse for wear, despite the hundreds of traps they had to deal with, as Jake's warnings and the party's defensive capabilities had made most of what the Prima Vessel could throw at them relatively trivial. Without the element of surprise, most of the traps just sucked.

Passing through the second-to-last cube, the tension of the group rose. When they entered the last one, they were all ready as can be. A few seconds later, the hallway leading to the boss revealed itself as they all went through.

“No traps here,” Jake said as they walked forward. Behind them, all the shuffling suddenly just stopped. The hallways they were in extended backward all the way to the exit, giving them a clear and easy path out of the Prima Vessel once more. It was a long-ass hallway, but at least they didn't have to go through the entire puzzle on their way out again.

A gate and a few dozen meters of hallway were now all that stood between them and the Prima Guardian. The energy within the room ahead had also died down, and the gate slowly began to open in expectation of their arrival.

“It's still fucking ugly,” Carmen muttered as the Prima Guardian was revealed, making Jake nod and frown at the same time.

A humanoid being, only about two and a half meters tall, stood on the platform. It had four human-like arms, wielding different weapons of bone, and on its back, four wings sprung, two with feathers and two reminiscent of Vesperia's.

Its head – if one could truly call it that - did not have a nose or most usual features. Instead, it was just a sphere with dozens of eyes on the top part, going all around, as a large fanged mouth rested beneath.

Its body was covered in an odd mixture of scales, skin, feathers, bark-like skin, and even had some metal here and there. The frame of the creature was relatively thin, with its legs an odd merge between gazelle, goat, deer, and human. The feet were entirely human, though, looking very freaky. It also looked like the chimera was sleeping, with its eyes closed, and while it looked humanoid, it definitely also looked distinctively monstrous.

Something else was also monstrous as Jake's frown deepened, and he took a defensive stance and pulled out his katars in preparation. "Be very careful... it feels a lot more dangerous."

They all listened, and as if on cue, a familiar voice echoed throughout the Prima Vessel.

"First Phase: Analysis Stage has been completed. Adaption complete. Initiating Phase Two: Extermination."

With those words, all the chimera's eyes opened at once, and without further warning, the creature took a step forward and disappeared as Jake felt a familiar ripple in space.

Chapter 935: Prima Guardian (3)

Jake was the first to react as a katar shot out right as the Prima Guardian appeared amidst their group. It quickly blocked with one of its bone swords, but Jake's quick movement had awakened everyone to react appropriately, making distance from the chimera.

Following up, Jake released two more blows before retreating, the Sword Saint and Carmen now actively engaging the boss. Its four arms moved unnaturally to defend against them as the formerly large and bulky creature turned agile and flexible, even dodging an attempt from Sylphie.

The creature smiled, showing a maw full of teeth as what looked like hand palms grew on its skin, shooting beams of magic toward the charging Caleb and Fallen King. Both were taken by surprise and had to block, sending them flying back from the impact. Stepping down once more, the chimera teleported after Caleb, but Vesperia had predicted this movement and charged in to defend Jake's brother.

Somehow, the Prima Guardian still dodged the stab of her stinger-like lance and responded with a kick that looked far too short to reach. However, as it raised its leg, the entire thing grew several meters in

length and hit Vesperia like a whip, sending her crashing into the wall of the hallway before her Queen's Guard could even react.

Cursing, Jake pulled out his bow and shot a barrage of arrows, joined by Maria doing the same. The eyes on the back of the chimera proved extremely annoying as the damn thing saw everything coming, and two of the eyes even began to glow as a blast of telekinetic force tinged in gold shot through the hallway, repelling some of the arrows.

"The movement skill it's using-" Jake began.

"It's yours," the Sword Saint interrupted Jake as he sent a thin stream of water toward the Prima Guardian, making it dodge out of the way and also giving Caleb and Vesperia some time to stabilize.

The old man was entirely correct. The damn Prima Guardian was clearly using his One Step to teleport around, making Jake even more perplexed. Before, he thought it only copied forms of mana... but this was straight-up copying a skill.

That had... a lot of implications.

None of them were good.

They also realized that fighting in this hallway was problematic, as while it did limit the movements of the Prima Guardian, it also boxed in the strike team and made it hard for them to assist one another. This only got worse when the Guardian decided to blast Eron out of the Prima Vessel entirely, as it condensed a golden barrier and pushed it all the way down the hallway with their healer stuck to it.

"Get out of here!"

Casper yelled telepathically as he knelt down and made the white tiled floor erupt with wooden spikes all around the Prima Guardian, making it dodge back while cutting down the stakes to avoid getting impaled to the ceiling.

Everyone began to move away, and Jake quickly caught Casper by the nape of his neck to toss him away just as a beam of black lightning shot his way from one of the four arms. The Risen threw Jake an offended but thankful look as he ran down the hallway, Jake staying back to make sure they all made it out. Not alone, though, as Sylphie chose to also stay for a moment to keep the Guardian at bay.

Magic began to revolve around the Prima Guardian as it raised another arm that rapidly began to morph into the head of a wyvern. Jake didn't let that happen as he teleported forward, punching upwards into the dragon arm and redirecting the beam of energy toward the ceiling.

Sylphie also struck as a massive windstorm hit Jake from behind, not affecting him at all but lifting the Guardian off its feet as it began tumbling backward. It quickly reacted as two of its arms extended and turned into grappling claws that caught onto the walls.

Jake swiftly shot an arrow into one of the arms, making the chimera lose grip and fly down the hallway for a little as he exchanged a glance with Sylphie. Together, they turned heel and talon before sprinting down the lengths of the hallway,

Mana gathered behind them as they ran, forcing them to dodge bolts of all sorts of affinities exploding in their wake. A few moments later, the Prima got return fire, as at the exit of the Prima Vessel, Maria, the Fallen King, and Caleb had stopped and released attacks toward the Guardian, buying Jake and Sylphie a bit more time.

When Jake and Sylphie got close enough to the exit, Maria and the Fallen King exited, with Caleb doing out a moment later alongside Jake and Sylphie. When they got out, they kept flying, and Jake felt the movements of energy both beneath and above them right at the exit.

A second later, the Prima Guardian also flew out. The moment it did, the magical circle above the exit triggered, exploding with cursed energy and sending the Prima Guardian tumbling downwards, followed by Vesperia, Carmen, and the Sword Saint, who released a barrage of attacks.

Massive amounts of sand exploded upwards when the Prima hit the desert with a loud thump. However, while in mid-air, all the sand began to move as it shot up toward Jake and the others, the tips turning into spears of glass. Below, the Prima Guardian erupted upwards, challenging the three melee fighters directly as it wielded a sword, a staff, a wooden stake, and a lance.

Each weapon moved almost independently as they still worked together to push back the Sword Saint and Carmen, but Vesperia managed to land a blow with her longer reach, sending the Guardian spinning. Sylphie also expertly dodged around all the sand spears and collided directly with the chimera, cutting up one of its arms.

Turning in the air, it pointed its staff toward Sylphie as the air mana around Sylphie was infused with energy. A loud screech instantly pushed away the chimera's influence as a barrage of wind bullets was returned. Perhaps the Prima Guardian could mimic many things, but it had a limit... trying to imitate an Authority was certainly one such limit.

During this exchange with Sylphie, the Guardian didn't stop fighting everyone else as it kept manipulating the sand and swinging its other weapons, not to mention the eyes that shot out beams or the magic circles that appeared in the air, shooting out bolts everywhere.

Jake dodged everything and released a few arrows, two of which got blocked before the third one hit the Guardian in the chest, barely penetrating its thick skin. A follow-up arrow hit right around the same area but was completely repelled, as the skin there had adapted to resist piercing attacks.

Using the skill in a way he rarely did, Jake summoned a Penetrating Arrow instead of infusing it into another skill, shooting it the Prima Guardian's way. As expected, it wanted to repel the blow by blocking it with its strengthened skin, taking it by surprise when the arrow penetrated deeply into its chest.

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That also allowed Jake to confirm something else. This arrow had been coated in his blood, as he wanted to see if the chimera had adapted and mimicked Palate... to which the answer was no. It did still build up resistance to any particular type of poison he used, but Jake could get around that by simply using his blood and changing its variety slightly with each blow.

Nocking another arrow, Jake wanted to do more damage but found himself pushed back by a large gust of wind mixed with a blast of force, just pushing him away without truly doing any damage. A similar blast had hit Maria, Eron, Caleb, and Casper, forcing them back to give the Guardian some space as it disengaged from the specialized melee fighters.

The Fallen King proved to be its next target as the chimera teleported up and appeared right behind the Unique Lifeform. The King responded fast and summoned a barrier along with a golden claw, but the chimera was faster. A staff hit the King in the side, a stake stabbed through his stomach, and a lance penetrated his leg, as finally, the sword tried to cut off his neck. In the final moment, the Fallen King angled his head, making the sword hit his mask, deflecting it at the same time as he released a golden explosion from the claw impacting the Guardian, allowing the King to gain some distance.

Before the Prima Guardian could continue its assault, the Sword Saint and Sylphie arrived, and with the Unique Lifeform, they held on long enough for more assistance to step in. Eron quickly came over and began mending the Fallen King's body, though especially the cursed wooden stake proved difficult to deal with, as the damage simply wouldn't heal properly. Not that the poisoned stinger-like lance that had penetrated straight through his legs did him any good.

This brief exchange with the Fallen King also truly confirmed to them all that this Prima Guardian in its second phase was far more dangerous. A point that got further hammered home when Carmen had to block a heavy blow from a staff wrapped in black lighting, making her forearm crack as a bit of the insidious energy entered her body.

Ranged attacks flew for the Guardian again, as Jake managed to land an arrow on one of the chimera's eyes, and Maria attempted to find a good opening as most of her arrows were deflected, though at least distracting the boss a bit. The smaller form of the chimera proved challenging, as it was hard to land ranged blows without risking hitting any of the melee fighters, especially when the boss moved around so much. It was incredibly fast, and they had to try and stick semi-close together to not risk getting singled out like the King had.

The only ones comfortable with being singled out were Jake and Eron. One of them because he felt comfortable not getting hit, and the other because he felt comfortable even if he got hit. Based on what the healer said, many of his weaknesses before were now addressed, and he seemed empty of fear of whatever the Prima could throw at him.

Working together, the melee fighters managed to buy good time for Eron to heal the King, and the chimera clearly noticed this standstill was not to its advantage as it switched target, going for Casper instead. It tried to do a repeat of the clash with the Fallen King, but Casper's body turned ethereal right as it was hit, the sword phasing right throw.

With a second swing, this time wrapped in lightning-infused water, Casper did seem to take some minor damage, but Maria had time to help as she released a massive arrow that looked like a bird of flames, forcing the Guardian to defend. Jake also took this chance and landed another two arrows, each exploding with destructive arcane energy.

My turn now, Jake thought, as his danger sense warned him right as the Guardian stepped down again. It appeared right behind Jake, who already had both his katars in hand as he ducked under the staff and

spun his body around while avoiding the sword. Leaning into the boss, he made it awkward to use the lance, as he only had to sway to dodge the stake as he stabbed the boss with Eternal Hunger.

It didn't even flinch from the blow as its flesh morphed, and two small hands grew out, grasping Jake's forearm right as he penetrated the Guardian's chest. Jake quickly twisted his wrist, getting free and letting go of the cursed weapon as he blocked the wooden stake with his Voidblade. Opening his eyes wide, Jake quickly raised a foot to stop the Guardian from kicking as its entire leg morphed into one massive curved blade.

Jake was hit on the sole of his foot by the sharp blade as he was launched upwards. Not a single drop of blood was spilled, but Jake felt as if something had broken within his boots. As for the boots themselves? Completely unscathed. There naturally wasn't even a small mark on them, as how could something like the Prima Guardian possibly damage his boots?

Vesperia arrived just then, stabbing forward with her lance, making the Guardian parry, only to get struck from above by a descending bird, leaving a cut down its back. Caleb also snuck out of a shadow left by the huge wave of sand still whirling around, striking the Prima on the leg, throwing it off-balance just in time for a golden beam from the Fallen King to nail it, blasting it down back into the dunes.

"Restrict its movements if possible."

The voice came over the Golden Mark, and Jake reacted along with everyone else. A cursed ritual circle appeared, followed by a suppressing golden presence. Sylphie also quickly released a tunnel of wind to push the boss down, as Jake chose to release a wave of powerful destructive arcane mana. Not against the boss itself but against the environment itself, disrupting nearby space and making teleportation harder.

"Impact in three."

Even this was not enough to stop it, as the Guardian was about to launch itself upwards. That's when three large wasps appeared from below the sand, all grabbing onto the boss. The Prima Guardian responded by cutting the legs off one and nearly smashing the head of another, but the Queen's Guards refused to let go even if not doing so meant their deaths.

"Two. Make distance."

They did as told, all continuing to keep the Prima Guardian down, as another Queen's Guard died, with the second of the three not long for this world. None of them were giving up, as it appeared Arnold was finally about to make his move, and it had to be a good one with all that build-up, right?

"One."

A second Queen's Guard died, with the third one barely hanging on. Jake kept disrupting space, and he saw the Fallen King and Casper struggle as the Guardian fought back. They were all doing their best, but they didn't have long. That's when Jake saw something out of the corner of his eye breaking through the clouds far above. It looked like a-

In the very next moment, his vision was filled with sand that turned to glass in mid-air from sheer heat as something struck the ground with more force than a dozen fully powered Arcane Powershots combined.

Rods from God.

At least, that was what this weapon was called in the common tongue or among enthusiasts. Arnold preferred simply referring to it as kinetic orbital bombardment. It was a theoretical weapon that had interested Arnold ever since he was a child, and seeing it in action left him pleasantly surprised.

It was perhaps the most simplistic weapon imaginable, at least on paper. It was nothing more than a long metal rod coated in material allowing it space flight and reducing friction. The metal, in this case, was synthesized with inspiration from the staff Jake carried around for a while with the ability to change its weight based on the mana infused.

From there, all he had to do was attach thrusters and have it speed up while orbiting around Earth a few dozen times before finally using its rudimentary and mostly manual targeting system to strike. A strike that proved most successful, as a shield activated around Arnold, blocking the sand, whipping past him faster than speeding bullets.

This was the primary weapon Arnold had prepared for this Prima Guardian, with the hope that it could slay the event boss in one go. It hadn't been fast enough to arrive for the first phase, but here for the

second one. Based on the feedback from one of his skills, the damage done had been utterly tremendous, however...

Its durability is far above expectations... to think this would barely stop it for a moment.

As he had that thought, a broken mess of a creature appeared behind Arnold. More than half of its body was gone, with the rest bent and broken in unnatural ways, as it had indeed taken tremendous damage. Without its cheat-like vitality, it would have been dead... but it wasn't.

It wasn't even enough to truly weaken the creature as the Prima Guardian was still more than deadly as its blade descended upon him before the scientist had a chance to react. His defensive barrier was cleaved straight through as Arnold felt the bone sword penetrate through his skull as his entire body was cut cleanly in two.

Arnold's final thoughts as his consciousness faded were filled with nothing but regret...

Regret that he hadn't made a more durable android for this battle.

Alas... it was difficult to add proper defensive capabilities when he also had to make space for all the explosives.

Chapter 936: Prima Guardian (4)

Jake was a moment too late as he saw Arnold get attacked. The man had stayed a reasonable distance away and even applied some stealth field around himself during the fight so far. However, when the Prima Guardian - whom Jake could barely believe was still able to move around so fast - teleported behind him, the man had no time to react as the blade fell.

For a brief moment, Jake was filled with panic as he saw the scientist get cleaved in two... until the sky exploded, getting bathed in a blue blast of fire and electricity. Jake momentarily saw a spark before the explosion, as the inside of Arnold's body did not have any flesh and blood to be seen. Instead, it had apparently been all explosives.

"What the hell just happened!?" Carmen yelled through her Golden Mark.

"I just felt the Mark upon the mechanic disappear," the Fallen King responded before Jake quickly clarified the situation.

"It was a robot of some kind; I would assume the real Arnold is fine," Jake clarified as he shot out a barrage of arrows almost instinctively while he was in a bit of turmoil internally, trying to figure out how the hell the scientist had pulled this off.

Jake... hadn't noticed it wasn't the real Arnold. He questioned how the hell he hadn't, but he tried to excuse it by never looking that closely at Arnold. Due to how souls worked, the Soulshape was almost just one big entity, and Arnold had looked entirely like a real person to most of his senses. The man had felt "metallic," if that makes sense, but wasn't that also pretty damn normal? That this feel came from his armor or something? Wouldn't it be a normal assumption that the man wasn't actually a robot apparently made up primarily of explosive material?

He also saw what exactly Arnold had hit the boss with. It was a large metal pole, about ten meters in length, now entirely bent and twisted as it lay in a massive crater in the sand, already getting covered as it turned all the sand that was near it liquid simply due to how hot it had been upon impact.

"Do not let your minds wander. The Guardian is far from defeated," the Sword Saint sent through the Golden Mark, making Jake also abandon his silly thoughts as he focused on controlling the arrows he had fired.

The chimera was pushed back as its body was filled with electrical burns and blue fire from Arnold blowing up his "body," and it didn't react in time as the barrage of arrows struck it in the back. Some of them were repelled, but some penetrated where the creature had adapted to deal with Caleb and Carmen's attacks.

Speaking of Caleb, he and Sylphie struck just then, breaking through some of the still-falling glassified sand, landing a hit each as the Guardian only had one functional arm. It also only had one leg, but its flesh was quivering and moving, making Jake and the others certain its heavily damaged state wasn't long for this world.

So they had to take full advantage while they could.

Everyone attacked at once, as the Prima Guardian defended itself primarily with magic. It created barriers of stable arcane energy, golden force, wind, water, and fire, trying to limit any damage it took. While it did help, it was far from enough. Carmen punched it square in the face with a heavily empowered blow, the Sword Saint cut its stomach, Vesperia pierced it through what was left of its chest, and Sylphie managed to shred the remaining arm, nearly cutting it entirely off. The damage it took from the assault of them all made the creature rapidly grow out a new foot, only to step down and teleport.

Right as it appeared again, a thunderclap sounded out as a dark pillar of black lightning descended, sending the boss reeling back down into the sand. Jake, Maria, and Casper followed up with an Arcane Powershot, a massive fire arrow, and a wooden stake that looked more like a large pillar. These attacks all fell upon the chimera, making the ground explode a mere moment after the boss landed.

“Don’t give it time to rest,” Jake quickly said as he continued shooting arrows. Others also threw all they had at the boss while it was crowded, Eron confirming to the group they were doing damage as the chimera just seemed to take the beating for a little while... preparing.

As Jake nocked another arrow, he noticed it had become overcast. He threw a quick glance the way of the Sword Saint, wondering if he had used a skill to make it rain, but the old man looked just as perplexed as Jake. That’s when a raindrop fell on Jake’s arm, and he instantly felt it sizzle and burn his clothes.

Oh... fuck.

Jake wasn’t even the one to warn them all first as the Fallen King spoke.

“Acid rain.”

However, he did add something: “Don’t hold anything back anymore... it’s third phase time.”

Arcane Awakening activated, Jake pushing it all the way as he felt a real sense of danger. Not just from the clouds above, but the Prima below. Everyone had stopped attacking for a moment to deal with the rain that had begun to pour down, as they all fully activated their boosting skills, the sky lighting up from everyone, unleashing their energy. This brief moment of dealing with the rain wasn’t even a full second... but it had been enough for the Prima Guardian as its body exploded with power.

A small shockwave sent sand flying as the chimera shot into the air, burning with power as it revealed its healed form. The four arms had become only two, one of them with a staff and the other not wielding anything. Its legs now just looked like two long, curved, single-edged blades, and on its back, the wings it hadn't used before had been replaced with four long necks extending out, each with wyvern-like heads. The only thing that remained kind of identical to before was the eye-filled head.

Its entire body also looked far more uniform, no longer a mix of scales, skin, and bark. Now, it only had a single slightly golden tinge to it that Jake recognized immediately... the runic tattoos also quite the giveaway. It had mimicked something Jake wasn't even sure could even be mimicked: the natural defenses of a Runemaiden.

Except without any of the drawbacks, as mana whirled around the Prima Guardian. It was truly a ridiculous creature that couldn't exist under any normal circumstances. Jake was ready to defend as he felt a gaze land on him. One of the wyvern heads opened its maw and released a ball of fire his way, the other three heads also attacking others.

Jake dodged, knocking an arrow, as the boss suddenly disappeared. There were no ripples in space this time, and Jake's eyes opened wide when he realized what happened, as he felt a slightly familiar form of energy. Caleb had recognized it a moment before Jake and quickly yelled.

"It's using the sha-"

However, before Caleb could fully warn them, it was too late.

Casper had been preparing another minor ritual as the Prima Guardian appeared behind him. The overcast skies had made the entire area overcast and unnaturally dark... leading to plenty of shadows for the chimera to travel through.

The Risen tried to react, even turning ethereal, but he wasn't fully in time. A staff slammed into his stomach, an audible crack sounding out as his body turned ghostly. He tried to get away, but the chimera punched with its other hand as it turned golden, unleashing what was effectively a Golden Claw. Jake quickly stepped in before it could land a third attack, making visual contact with the Guardian as it momentarily froze.

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Primal Gaze activated as Jake felt his own soul clash with the monstrosity before him. What he felt was utterly unnatural, a mismatch of pieces that were forcibly held together by a fuckload of system-made duct tape. That's also when Jake knew that the system never planned on having these Prima Guardians rule any planets... because Jake wouldn't even give this chimera a decade before its Truesoul would fall apart. In other words, it wasn't built to last at all and only persisted by the grace of the system's direct interference. For now, it was stable, though, and Jake felt quite the backlash as Primal Gaze nevertheless worked.

Casper exploded with cursed mana, taking the chance as four massive ghostly wooden stakes appeared behind him. With a yell, he shot them all forward, and all four pierced through the body of the Guardian before fading away.

That's also when the Prima could move again, and it tried to strike Casper once more, but the Sword Saint released a piercing stab, making the chimera address him instead. Carmen and Vesperia joined the old man as they faced the Guardian with a united front.

Eron was already flying over and healing Casper, who looked to be in quite a bad state, as the three melee fighters tried to restrain the chimera... and things weren't going super well.

With a kick, the chimera landed a large cut on Vesperia, shattering part of her natural armor, as the Sword Saint was forced to block the staff, smashing him down into the ground. Carmen's fist clashed directly with the Prima's, as she was the one who got pushed back, only to find herself on the receiving end of a wyvern's breath.

Vesperia tried to take advantage, but the chimera dodged her blow expertly, only to counter her instead, sending her reeling back. That's when Sylphie struck, proving once more she was the fastest in their group as she cut off one of the wyvern's necks with a flyby.

Maria also tried to land an arrow, but it was swatted away by the staff. The fire archer was having a harder time than everyone else with the constant acid rain, as not only was the rain aspect bad for her, but the acid also proved very effective against her defensive skill.

Perhaps the Guardian noticed this, as it pointed the staff it had just used to destroy her attack, as the clouds above rumbled. A black lightning strike descended, taking Maria by surprise as she was struck directly. Before she could properly comprehend what had happened, the Guardian appeared right before her, proving it still had One Step available.

Jake had already shot an arrow that he redirected, but the Prima Guardian chose to ignore it and instead attacked. Maria exploded with flames that the chimera just pushed through as it punched her in the chest, its fist piercing straight through, sending blood and bone flying before unnaturally bending, grasping her hair in its hand as it pulled backward. The giant maw on its head then opened as it bit down, with Maria barely forcing her head out of the way in time by burning away her own hair as half her neck and her entire shoulder were torn off, parts of her arm falling toward the ground.

“Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut.”

The Sword Saint appeared below the two of them as he cut upwards, the clouds momentarily parting and the blade sinking into flesh as the arm holding Maria was cut cleanly off. Jake’s arrow also arrived, striking the Prima in the head and piercing one of its eyes before exploding, making the Prima stumble a slight bit.

This left Maria with a tiny opening as she kicked off the chimera and turned into a ball of fire that shot away right before one of the wyvern heads could grasp her. It instead chose to just shoot a beam of energy her way that Sylphie flew in front of to redirect with a large blast of wind.

“I... need to retreat... Its teeth are fucking poisoned and cursed... good luck,” Maria spoke, shooting into the distance. Perhaps Eron could have healed her and allowed her to keep fighting, but she knew that the current situation wasn’t favorable for her, and with her weakened after using her escape skill, she knew her contributions to the fight had ended.

The first of their fighters was officially eliminated – if one didn’t count the four Queen’s Guards that had all died too. Maybe Arnold was also out of the fight? At least he had lost his robot... but that didn’t mean Jake was going to write him off.

Refocusing on the Prima Guardian, it switched its attention to Eron again to stop him from healing Casper as the healer faced the chimera. Waves of white flames washed over the boss as it flashed its blade legs a few times, cutting Eron up. It first tried to cut off his limbs, but Eron responded by blowing up his own body whenever his movement got too impaired, making the chimera switch its strategy slightly. Instead of directly fighting him, it created a tunnel of wind before blasting him away within a

bubble of stable arcane energy and golden force, sending him flying all the way to one of the sections where people were fighting the regular Primas.

“Do not fret,” Eron spoke while flying away. “Its power surges as its spark wanes. It’s burning through its very own life with every passing moment. Keep going.”

Jake didn’t need to be told that twice as he released an Arcane Powershot, blasting the Guardian in the shoulder and sending it spinning, Carmen flying over, her fist burning with power. It appeared as if the Guardian welcomed another clash as it punched toward her while spinning, but the Runemaiden wasn’t just throwing a casual punch this time around.

A skill Jake recognized as Fist of Ragnarok roared out as an explosion lit up the sky, the impact sending blood and bone flying everywhere as the Guardian tumbled through the sky, its entire arm broken and twisted. Carmen was also blasted back, her arm bent at an unnatural angle.

She threw Caleb, who was beside her where she stopped, a glance, and he quickly understood as he slammed his staff into her side, pushing the bone back in place as the Runemaiden flinched.

Back at the Guardian, it quickly stopped itself in mid-air, as it cut off its own limb before a new arm regenerated in less than a second, ready to receive the attack of Sylphie and Vesperia while even counterattacking, landing a nasty cut on Vesperia and a wyvern’s breath on Sylphie.

Several more breaths also flew out, aimed at Jake, who dodged, and Casper, who was already struggling due to his previous injuries. The Fallen King stepped in to defend the Risen, but it was clear Casper was overdrawing on his own power to stay in this fight. Still, he looked like he wanted to get in at least one more big contribution.

The fight was at a stage where every moment was perilous. If the Prima Guardian had its way with someone for even a full second, they could take lethal damage easily, while their party just had to slowly land blow after blow, trying to whittle down the chimera’s resources. All while dealing with it still adapting to everything they were doing, though to a lesser degree. Oh yeah, and then there was the constant acid rain. While Jake could block it with the passive barrier from Arcane Awakening, and someone like Carmen was entirely unaffected, everyone else had to, at the very least, expend energy to not be negatively affected.

Nevertheless, they held on as they repeatedly clashed with the Prima Guardian over and over, dealing solid damage themselves but also taking quite a beating in return. Casper did manage to get his final attack off as he activated the marks left by the four large stakes earlier, leaving a curse of weakness upon the Prima. It wouldn't last long, but it gave them some reprieve as it slowed down the boss while it was slowly adapting to deal with the curse.

After that, Casper became the second one to exit the fight as he had to retreat. Eron also tried to return to them, but it appeared as if the Prima Guardian did have some level of control over the regular Primas, as a few of them disengaged from their existing fights with the rest of Earth's forces purely to lock down Eron. It was annoying, as without their healer, things became a lot more risky.

Luckily, their core group of melee fighters remained, as Carmen, the Sword Saint, and Vesperia did wonders, keeping the Prima Guardian at bay most of the time. The Fallen King also stayed close to melee, assisting the group with barriers and occasional blasts, while Sylphie and Caleb functioned as a hit-and-run team, both showing off their speed.

As for Jake... well, he was the only one doing any solid damage, as the Prima Guardian was too busy dealing with the other six to handle his curving arrows and powerful Arcane Powershots. The chimera did try to go for Jake a few times, as he was isolated alone, but he proved himself a bad target every single time when he responded by pulling out his katars and engaging it until help arrived, without taking any meaningful injuries in the process. On the contrary, the boss took plenty of damage from this decision, as Prima attacking Jake freed up everyone else to attack.

A tightrope was walked as the fight was barely balanced, with any little thing able to tip it over. Jake felt the words of Eron ring true as the Prima Guardian was burning through its life and resources at an alarming rate, especially as it had to regenerate all the time from the constant damage it took. At the same time, any minor mistake from any of them could result in the balance instantly tipping if another fighter was put out of commission...

Ultimately, it turned out the tipping point didn't come from a mistake any of them made but from a severe miscalculation.

As the Sword Saint managed to land a blow, and Carmen blocked one of the leg-blades, Vesperia was slated to avoid the swing of the staff. She was clearly ready for it and was already retreating slightly away from the swing as suddenly, all of the Prima Guardian's eyes opened wide...

Without any warning, they all morphed into yellow bestial eyes that seemed to stare into your very soul, their gaze freezing not just Vesperia but the Fallen King, Carmen, Sword Saint, and even Caleb, who had just been about to land another sneaky blow from behind.

What happened next was just one brief moment... but that was all it took for the tight balance of the fight to shift entirely.

Chapter 937: Prima Guardian (5)

A lot of things happened at once. More than a dozen of the Prima Guardian's eyes exploded as it used Gaze on so many powerful people at once, but that didn't stop it from moving its body. It attacked the five people who weren't able to defend themselves with reckless abandon, Jake, a moment too late to interfere.

Vesperia was struck with its staff on the side of her head, sending blood, bone, and brain matter flying as nearly her entire skull was crushed, and the Sword Saint couldn't dodge as a leg blade swept up, cutting off one of his arms and legs. The Fallen King had the other leg-blade sweep in from the side, trying to cut him in two but only getting around halfway as the Unique Lifeform was nevertheless still left with a nasty injury and a blade stuck in his body.

For Carmen, the chimera chose to only punch her in the chest to send her away, perhaps knowing it couldn't deal meaningful damage with a single blow.

Caleb was a bit further away but was still struck with three breath attacks at the same time. However, luckily, what the Prima Guardian had done wasn't a Primal Gaze, but only a normal Gaze of the Apex Predator, allowing Caleb to partially fade into the shadows, avoiding taking too much damage.

The others had also moved a slight bit right at the end, using their mana, avoiding potential death. But, the Prima Guardian wasn't done. Its maw opened as it moved to bite down on the Fallen King right as Jake struck.

He attacked with his own Primal Gaze as he made eye contact with some of the remaining glowing eyes. This stopped the Prima Guardian long enough for everyone to retreat slightly, as blood began to roll down Jake's cheeks from using the skill.

This creature's soul was just ridiculous. It hadn't taken any meaningful soul damage even after using Gaze on five extremely powerful people, and if Jake had tried the same thing, he was pretty sure things wouldn't have gone well for him. Still, the Prima had been smart by not using Gaze on Jake. If it had, things wouldn't have gone this well for it. Even so, he knew that the Prima wouldn't be able to use Gaze again. He would make sure of that.

Despite hitting his Primal Gaze, no one could take advantage as Sylphie chose to help evacuate those injured, blasting them all away with a great gust of wind. The Fallen King also took this chance and released a golden explosion, getting himself free as he staggered back. Gritting his teeth, Jake cursed internally at how shitty things were going... as a black line impacted the Guardian, cutting across Jake's vision.

A hole about the size of a fist was left in the chest of the Prima Guardian, as Jake saw its very soul have a part of it sheared right off. He also recognized where it had come from, as Jake couldn't help but flash a brief smile. There was only one person he knew with the power to shoot a goddamn void beam from who-the-fuck-knows-where.

Still, the situation wasn't great, as Jake felt forced to teleport forward as he appeared right in front of the Prima Guardian. Pulling out both his katars – Eternal Hunger easily reclaimed as it was part of his soul even if he had left it within the Prima before – as he entered melee with the boss.

The attack from Arnold had done great damage, but the chimera wasn't a creature that made any sense, and Jake doubted it would stop unless fully killed. Fighting it alone wasn't something Jake felt confident doing, but he felt as if he didn't have any other choice. At least if he was in melee, he could ensure it wasn't going to use Gaze because he fucking dared it to try to use his own skill on him.

He would need to buy some time for the others to at least recover a little. Vesperia didn't look like she could even fly straight, nearly her entire head gone, and the Sword Saint naturally couldn't fight with half his limbs cut off. Carmen and Caleb were still able to fight, though Caleb wasn't in a great state either. The Fallen King would clearly also need a bit, which left only Sylphie, Jake, and Carmen.

Fully focusing, Jake pushed his Arcane Awakening as far it could go – and perhaps a bit further - barely avoiding the attacks of the Prima Guardian. Its leg blades shot up at unpredictable times, bending unnaturally as they moved almost autonomously. All the meanwhile, Jake had to not get caught by the Guardian's punches or the staff, not to mention the occasional magical attack.

At least the wyvern heads on its back didn't attack Jake but went for the others who were dealing with their injuries, with Sylphie protecting them. Not wanting the Guardian to disengage when it realized it couldn't deal any meaningful damage to Jake quickly, he began to go more on the offensive.

Baiting it in, the boss thought it caught Jake in its grasp, only to find the version of Jake it had in its hand dissolve into cursed energy, allowing Jake to land a Piercing Fang with his Voidblade, tearing another hole in the Prima's chest. His opponent responded by releasing a golden explosion of force, making Jake stumble back as the Prima counterattacked instantly, forcing Jake to block the staff as he felt his arms buckle from the impact, his bones cracking.

Luckily, he had bought enough time for Caleb to attack from behind, knocking the boss slightly to the side and buying Jake a moment to stabilize. Carmen also entered the fray to help Jake, as the two of them faced off against the Prima Guardian together.

While Jake managed to avoid nearly all attacks, only taking minor injuries himself, Carmen wasn't the same as she constantly had to take blows directly. Jake noticed how her skin had begun to crack in places, small fractures forming all over her body. He knew she couldn't keep this up forever, but in truth, they didn't really have a choice.

The Prima Guardian didn't come out of this unscathed either. The Fallen King had recovered enough to protect the injured, allowing Sylphie and Caleb to resume their strikes, though without Jake's constant harassment with arrows, their damage output had been severely reduced.

As Jake was struggling, he suddenly saw someone enter his sphere, and a calm aura fell over him. He felt his hurting body begin to mend as healing energy washed over their entire group. Their healer had returned to the battle and went all out as his body began to glow with a powerful healing aura. The Sword Saint, Vesperia, and Fallen King all started to heal in real-time, as even some of the fractures on Carmen healed rapidly.

With a moment to spare, he looked over where Eron had been sealed down by five Primas not even a dozen seconds earlier and saw metal reflecting the sunlight as a single mage faced off against four Primas on his own – the fifth one falling toward the ground, blood trailing its descent.

William held a lot of resentment toward Eversmile for making him miss several system events. He had been convinced that the Treasure Hunt, Myriad Paths, and even C-grade Nevermore weren't things he needed or should do. They were wastes of time for someone like him. To this day, he couldn't understand why his former "master" would even do that. Was he just trying to sabotage William for the

fun of it? Trying to hurt his Path? He had lost out on so many titles that would have made him stronger, and he felt so damn far behind.

But... that wasn't going to make him give up. How would he ever get his revenge on the Primordial by giving up?

One thing was for sure, he wasn't going to miss more events. As for this particular system event, he had chosen to just fall in line and do as Ms. Wells told him to. He was fully aware he wasn't in any kind of position to make any demands. It was already lucky they allowed him to take part, and he would do his utmost to be useful.

The section he had been assigned to defend wasn't particularly difficult, and the outcasts he had been grouped with barely had to do anything. Even if it wasn't hard, he was contributing, right? Things had been going smoothly until he suddenly noticed that one of the Primas flying toward his section suddenly changed direction, and not toward another section, but toward where the Prima Guardian was.

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He saw that it was going for the healer from the Dao Sect called Eron, who had been blasted their way by what looked like a giant golden barrier. Other Primas were also flying over, with five in total going for him.

Frowning, William wasn't sure what to do but quickly decided to step in. Especially when he saw these Primas weren't even truly fighting Eron; they were just trying to stop him from returning to the rest of the strike team.

"You all handle this area; I'll go help the healer," William said to his section mates as he shot after the Prima, going toward Eron while retracting his metal wires – the legendary weapon Eversmile had given him. It was one of the many mixed messages his old teacher had sent, where he, on the one hand, helped William a lot and, on the other, actively tried to sabotage him.

Catching up to the charging Prima, William summoned a spear and shot it toward the gorilla-looking thing. It quickly reacted and defended itself, William taking the chance to launch a barrage of ranged attacks toward those bothering Eron.

The healer was defending himself with an ocean of white flames, but the Primas mostly ignored this as they kept pushing Eron further and further away from the strike team. Despite blowing up his body like a balloon of blood several times, the man couldn't get any leeway. With time, he would surely win by burning down the Primas, but would the strike team hold on long enough?

By that, William didn't mean them losing. He couldn't imagine that monstrous hunter truly losing... but he could see a few of the others dying. Best to avoid that, William reckoned, as he finally got close to Eron and decided it was time to unleash his boosting skill.

A silver aura appeared around him as William released a web of strings, instantly forcing two Primas to react. These Primas seemed conflicted for a moment. William understood why, as he saw the almost tangible karmic thread between these Primas and the Prima Guardian look slightly different than usual. The karmic bond was one so strong that William had known from the beginning that these Primas were tied intrinsically to the Guardian. They wouldn't die if the Prima Guardian died, but they would find themselves severely weakened. This also meant that any orders given by the Prima Guardian were absolute, and defending against William likely clashed with their directive to keep the healer busy. This directive was also the cause of change in the karmic bond between these Primas and the Guardian, likely because these five were the only ones carrying out direct orders.

Something William gladly took full advantage of as he decided to make the coming fight a bit easier for himself. While the Primas were still trying to figure out what to do, William summoned a large silver spear that he promptly impaled the gorilla-looking Prima with. It stumbled back as William channeled his energy into the spear, the Prima's body slowly turning to metal as its energies fought against the intrusion.

Which left it distracted when the true attack arrived.

From below, a spinning thin disc of metal shot up, pulled by metal threads, as one of the gorilla's legs was cut off. A second disc struck it right on soon after, but the gorilla caught it with both hands... only to have a third one strike it from behind, blasting it toward the ground with a nasty cut right on its spine.

His attack finally caught the attention of the other four Primas as William worked his karmic magic. He pulled on the threads of karma and began tying them to himself. The resentment born from the attack was enough for him to take the attention of all the Primas as they all turned toward him, and for a moment, he became their main target.

“Get to the rest of the strike team now; I’ll keep these busy,” William said as he finished temporarily overriding the order the Primas had been given by the Guardian. It wouldn’t work for long, as he was effectively just jamming the order while drawing attention to himself.

Luckily, Eron quickly caught on and took the moment William had gifted him to pull out an item from his spatial storage that made space shiver around him for a moment before he picked up speed and began flying back to the strike team at a rapid pace.

William sighed as he cracked his neck with the four Primas now charging for him, the one below also far from dead. He was pretty confident in himself, but dealing with five Primas was perhaps a bit too much, seeing as just killing one was a damn struggle with their overflowing vital energies. Better kill that Guardian quickly...

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With Eron back on the field, the tides of battle began to shift once more. Having a healer just added so much value, and even if the Sword Saint and Vesperia wouldn’t be back in action instantly, the simple knowledge that they eventually would be able to contribute again held immense value.

Carmen could also hold on for far longer, as she and Jake kept the Prima Guardian busy, the Fallen King staying on pure defense. The wyvern heads kept shooting attacks toward him, but Sylphie and Caleb helped as they kept attacking from behind, focusing much of their attention on the wyverns.

The acid rain falling upon them was still a problem, but the Sword Saint focused on addressing it as he channeled his own mana to take over the skies. He wasn’t strong enough to entirely dispel the acid rain, but he could dilute the rain that fell while ruining the balance of the clouds, making the occasional black lightning strikes stop entirely. Even if he was heavily injured, he still wanted to contribute what he could.

Vesperia also clearly wanted to, and once some of her head was healed and she had one eye to see, she began to provide ranged support, shooting her stingers like a railgun.

Speaking of guns, Arnold had clearly set up somewhere, as the occasional black beam would pierce through the battlefield. His timing was always impeccable, happening just as the Prima Guardian was unable to move or in the middle of an attack.

The Prima Guardian was finally also showing clear signs of weakness. It regenerated slower than before, and while it was still incredibly dangerous, light was now at the end of the tunnel. They were still on a timer, though. They all had their boosting skills fully active, and while some of them had skills that they could keep active for a very long time without any problems, others couldn't. Jake was one of those people who had a boosting skill taking a toll on his body.

His skin had long begun to flay here and there as veins of destructive arcane energy lined his body, wreaking havoc within. Carmen was clearly also struggling, especially with all the hits she kept taking. Eron was doing his best, but there was only so much a healer could do against someone overdrawing their own power. However, no matter what, there was no backing down now... they had to finish it.

Picking up his pace even more, Jake began to take more risks as he landed several blows. He was waiting for the final opening to land a big finisher with the Protean Arrow he had been preparing in his quiver, to be fired alongside all the Hunting Momentum he had built up. It wasn't time yet, though, and Jake had to stay in melee to ensure Gaze wasn't even an option for the boss.

Carmen also got more reckless, with Eron now backing them. She gladly took three hits to land a punch of her own as the Guardian looked more and more beaten and bruised. Realizing this wasn't working for it, the Prima Guardian switched target and went for Vesperia, who was not yet fully healed, but she still managed to barely block the attack.

Jake quickly followed as the True Royal defended herself. The Sword Saint had a tired look as he nevertheless raised his blade, likely for the final time in this battle. The old man still only had one arm and leg, his aura wavering. Yet, at that very moment, his body burned with power as he prepared to stab forward. Jake knew what he was about to do, and he opened his eyes wide as they flashed.

The pain was instant as Jake used yet another Primal Gaze, and he felt his vision waver as his eyes took severe damage. However, it was good enough. The Sword Saint, Caleb, and Sylphie all took full advantage as three powerful attacks fell upon the boss at once.

"Glimpse of Spring: Erosion"

"Thunderfall of Tenlucis."

"Ree!"

A thin beam of water blasted off one of the Prima Guardian's arms as Caleb, wrapped in black lightning, descended from above along with Sylphie, both passing straight through the Guardian, roasting it from within and cutting up its body, sending blood flying everywhere. As a pleasant surprise, another void beam also hit the Guardian, taking off a leg.

Carmen and the Fallen King also wanted to join in, but the Prima Guardian exploded with pure mana at that very moment, as all of the wyvern heads self-destructed, pushing everyone back, including Jake. He had to use his scales to block the massive explosion as he saw it had knocked out the Sword Saint, and Vesperia looked much worse for wear, as everyone had taken a good bit of damage from the blast.

Stabilizing, Jake pulled out his bow in preparation to attack as he released a Pulse... and saw that on the back of the Prima Guardian, two wings had appeared. Two very familiar wings.

No... no fucking way.

A dark green bubble of poison appeared around the Prima Guardian before Jake or anyone else could strike... and with a single beat of these newly summoned wings, it activated Wings of the Malefic Viper's escape function and disappeared, fleeing the battle.

Not happening.

Without even a moment's hesitation, wings also appeared on Jake's back, and his body began to turn dark green. With a wingbeat of his own, he too disappeared in pursuit of the Prima Guardian, fully intent on hunting it down no matter where the bastard tried to escape to.

Chapter 938: Prima Guardian (6)

The entire world around Jake began to fade as all concepts in his surroundings were broken down into nothingness, and he shot after the Guardian. When using Wings of the Malefic Viper's escape function, he couldn't really do more than change the general direction he was going in, as he sacrificed all accuracy for pure speed and the ability to break through layers of space and anything else that might impede him.

However, this time, he wasn't just traveling randomly. Instead, he was in hot pursuit of the Prima Guardian as he honed in on the Mark he had left on it. He felt it ahead of him, with the exact distance impossible to determine due to how the skill worked. However, he knew that he wasn't willing to disengage his own use of Wings before he knew the Guardian had also stopped.

This proved... difficult. Jake was already beaten and battered, and as he chased the Prima Guardian, he felt his wings getting burned away, running out of energy. They were taking the brunt of everything, and it was clear the chimera's wings were just tougher than Jake's, likely due to its far higher stats.

Moreover, Jake guessed the Guardian knew he was chasing it. That, or it was just trying to get as far away as it possibly could, likely to recover before returning for a rematch. One that Jake naturally believed they would also win, but he wasn't about to risk it or give the chimera a longer life than absolutely necessary.

Gritting his teeth, Jake saw the world briefly flicker all around him, the escape skill about to come to an end. He would be thrown out into the real world, the Prima Guardian escaping to who-knows-where. Thinking fast about what to do, Jake tried to make his wings last longer. He actively controlled his vital energies as he sent more and more into them, trying to keep them from collapsing, but he was fighting a losing battle.

Just a bit longer, Jake thought desperately. One could still barely count the time Jake had been using his escape skill in seconds, but he was at the end of his ropes. Jake thought as quickly as he could, as he tried to think up new ways to make the wings last.

He covered them in a layer of stable arcane energy, and when that wasn't enough, he forcefully poured stable arcane mana into them in heavy supply. This appeared to only speed up their breakdown, but Jake forcefully stabilized all the mana within them, also inadvertently affecting the other energies in the wings. An almost reddish sheen began to cover them as Jake felt a change... one he leaned fully into as he explored it.

The wings had always been considered part of his body, but at the same time also separated due to their phantasmal nature. However, now, he felt a far stronger connection with them, especially when it came to pouring in his arcane energy. Skills had still affected the wings before, such as his boosting skill... yet it felt slightly different now. Like he had unclogged an otherwise blocked vein.

On his back, the reddish sheen finally changed and began to take shape as what looked like scales of arcane energy covered the surface of both wings. The wings also completely "locked" themselves as if

they were frozen... but they also remained incredibly stable as Jake continued his pursuit of the Prima Guardian.

A notification popped up in his head, and Jake briefly skimmed it as he dedicated a small part of his consciousness to see what it was about. Especially because with the notification, he felt himself increase in speed ever-so-slightly.

Skill upgraded (rarity unchanged):[Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – Sprout wings and take flight, and as the Malefic Viper, refuse to ever find yourself restrained to circumstances against your will. Allows the Alchemist to summon two phantasmal wings to take flight or fight. While active, you can burn the blood within the wings and release potent toxic fumes. The toxicity and effects of the poison are based on Blood of the Malefic Viper. The wings can also be infused with stable arcane energies, using the wings as a medium to create a powerful defensive barrier, benefitting from both your arcane energies and the properties of an empowered Scales of the Malefic Viper. When infused with stable arcane energies, the wings cannot move. The wings count as a phantasmal part of your body and are incredibly receptive to your arcane energies. Allows the Alchemist to further infuse and sacrifice both wings to create an opportunity to escape if in a perilous situation. Doing this makes resummoning the wings impossible for a variable duration, dependent on Agility and the amount of energy infused into the wings upon the sacrifice. Passively provides 9 Agility per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade variant). May the sight of your wings be the harbinger of death, an impenetrable defense, and instruments of escape to feed another day.

Jake had considered getting a dedicated defensive arcane barrier skill for a long time... and it looked like he had just gotten one. It was pretty much a side-effect of Jake wanting to protect his wings while using the escape function, but he wasn't going to complain. Chances are he had been pretty close to some kind of upgrade with his wings already, and it was only good to get it now, especially with the increased stats.

With this skill upgrade, Jake had bridged the gap between him and the Prima Guardian, as he was able to continue his pursuit. While he didn't have the same raw stats to match the durability of its wings, he now had superior wings in the quality department.

Still, it wasn't like he could keep using the skill forever, and neither could the Prima Guardian. Soon, Jake felt his opponent stop, which also put a stop to Jake dedicating any brainpower to the skill upgrade. Jake disengaged his use of wings a moment later as he emerged in the real world once more, the wings on his back burning away in the process, not to be summoned again for a good while.

He found himself surrounded by darkness, with nothing anywhere close. It wasn't hard to know where he was, either. The Prima Guardian hadn't tried to flee to the other side of the planet or anywhere,

really... it had just gone straight up. Straight into the emptiness of space, which was where Jake now found himself, the planet pretty damn far beneath him. It wasn't even like they had flown in the direction of the moon... there was just nothing.

The Prima was a few dozen kilometers away, and Jake saw that it looked just about to enter some form of meditation to recover. However, it immediately noticed his appearance as Jake pulled out a bow and nocked an arrow.

Jake was still on a timer with his boosting skill going strong, but he knew the Prima Guardian wasn't going well either. While it had regenerated its second arm, it still only had one leg, and none of the wyverns on its back looked like they were gonna get healed.

Shooting his arrow, the chimera was struck as it reeled back. For a moment, it looked like it considered running until it stopped itself. On the back of Jake's hand, the key to the Planetary Pylon gave off a faint glow, the Guardian giving off a similar aura. It recognized Jake was the Key Holder... and recognized that this was a golden opportunity for it.

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Never had its objective been to kill every powerful fighter on Earth. Just to obtain the second key held by the World Leader. And now that very same World Leader had isolated himself from all his allies in the middle of space, with no help anywhere to be seen.

The option of fleeing seemed to quickly leave the chimera's mind. It took the staff it had been holding and grasped it with both hands before splitting it in two, the two halves morphing into blades. Likely, it had judged that blunt weapons were no longer optimal for the fight that was to come, and the staff was too cumbersome against Jake.

Jake was also fully aware of the situation he had put himself in. This was indeed the best chance the Prima Guardian would ever get to "beat" Earth. The thing is... as long as its best option included killing Jake, it wouldn't ever be realistic.

"What's happening? I repeat, what's happening?" the Fallen King asked through the Golden Mark, seemingly having asked quite a few times before. Likely while Jake was using wings to chase.

“Fighting the boss in space,” Jake just answered.

“Do you need assistance?”

“Yeah,” Jake answered. “Send Sandy to pick me up for when I’m done here. I’ll contact you when it’s dead.”

With that, Jake cut off the connection with the Golden Mark as he had a fight to attend.

Loosing another barrage of arrows, Jake took shots at the Prima as it flew toward him. Most of his arrows were deflected, but he hit a few before Jake dodged to the side as the Guardian stepped down and appeared right in front of him. He swayed out of the way as he decided to meet the boss in melee just like it wanted, taking out both of his katars.

Facing the boss alone was truly the best decision in Jake’s mind. He did have the possibility of summoning the Fallen King... but all that would do was put the Unique Lifeform in a tough spot. While Jake had confidence in keeping himself alive, he wasn’t confident in protecting the Fallen King in the slightest. Besides, if worst came to worst, Jake wanted to be the only one around for the end of the flight.

With no one else around, Jake could also fully focus only on the Prima Guardian. He didn’t have to dedicate even a smidgen of his attention to keeping others safe or consider if his actions would put others in challenging situations. It was just him, the chimera, and a vast open nothingness as far as the eye could see.

Jake gladly fought the Prima Guardian while the chimera’s two blades moved at incredible speeds as Jake dodged and weaved around them, counterattacking whenever possible. He parried and took advantage of its movements, as even if the chimera was adaptable and could move in unnatural ways, it still had patterns, and Jake could still read it.

The two of them flashed through space as they rapidly switched between who was on the offensive, pushing each other back, Jake landing blow after blow as he couldn’t avoid taking some damage himself. Blood began to fill the emptiness of their environment, along with the skin that flayed off Jake’s body as he truly pushed himself beyond his limits.

Even before he chased the Prima Guardian, he had to consume a stamina potion to keep himself from running out, and now his resources were draining even quicker. If the fight dragged on too long, Jake would more than likely be the first one to fall... so he had to be the one to finish the fight.

Eternal Hunger did help a bit to keep Jake in the game, its energy-stealing effect very effective against the monstrous resource pool of the Guardian. He landed several stabs with it, even if the Voidblade did more raw damage. The weapon from Arnold was honestly ridiculous in how good it was at cutting and stabbing, and it was responsible for many of the injuries marring the Prima Guardian's body.

Exchanging dozens of blows a second, Jake was waiting for his chance, as he had a trick up his sleeve he wanted to try. After a clash where Jake got a minor cut on his thigh in trade for a deep stab into the chest of the Prima Guardian, Jake initiated the plan. He instantly charged in again as he released a wave of arcane energy mixed with dark mana toward the boss, causing a giant explosion of destructive black mist.

The Prima kept an eye on Jake throughout as the katar-wielding hunter appeared from within the cloud behind the chimera. It responded quickly, turning around and cutting down with both swords... only to find the version of Jake it attacked, dispersing into a mist of cursed energy.

Rapidly turning around, the Prima Guardian looked for Jake, confused, as it released a shockwave of mana to disperse the black mist around it. As the black mist was pushed away, Jake was still nowhere to be seen, making the Prima Guardian respond by sending out crescent waves of water, cutting through space.

One of these waves suddenly struck something... a seemingly solid mass in the middle of the nothingness. The moment it did, and before the Prima Guardian could fully process that it had hit anything, an explosion of magic was released as an Arcane Powershot tore across space toward the Guardian. It wanted to dodge, but Jake used Primal Gaze one final time.

A Protean Arrow, with all of Jake's Hunting Momentum infused, struck the Prima Guardian right in its chest, piercing deeply into it before exploding. An arm and a leg were shot off into the vastness of space, and the creature was blown apart, blood and gore spread out everywhere.

Jake had done something he had long theorized. Using Eternal Shadow and obscuring the sight of his enemy, he had briefly managed to activate Unseen Hunter in the state where he had to stand still due to the boss losing sight of him. It was an incredibly tight timing, but Jake had a transcendent ability to know

when something or someone was looking at him, and the second he noticed the Guardian had shifted its entire attention to the Eternal Shadow, he used the skill and blended into space.

This allowed him to not only buy time to briefly charge an Arcane Powershot using his Protean Arrow but also to benefit from his Stealth Attack skill. If the Prima Guardian hadn't been swift to release a large area of effect attack to sniff him out, he could have charged the arrow for even longer... but this had to be good enough, right? Because Jake wasn't sure he had that much more in the tank.

At the same time as the Prima was blown apart, Jake's eyes cracked, as the irises in both fractured, turning him completely blind. He also felt the impact on his soul, having overdrawn himself far too much, as he felt an insane headache. His consciousness wavered... as something appeared behind him.

With nothing but a small part of its upper body, head, and one arm barely attached to its shoulder, the Prima Guardian had teleported behind Jake. The sword in its hand was gone, but it still struck forward, its hand glowing with the familiar aura of Carmen's most powerful strike: Fist of Ragnarok.

Jake didn't have time to think. Instinctively, he began to turn as the fist closed in on his head. Both katars appeared in Jake's hands as he roared while stabbing forward, the fist growing nearer... as time slowed down. Moment of the Primal Hunter activated, as Jake's katars were both giving off the aura of Piercing Fang, one aimed for what remained of the Guardian's chest and the other for the head.

With time on his side, Jake's attacks would arrive first... a strike that would no doubt be deadly toward the Guardian on its last legs. And in that final moment, the chimera tried to adapt one last time. Time began to bend around it as its own version of Moment of the Primal Hunter activated.

Jake felt his own heartbeat. A single thump of indignance... as the Prima Guardian just stopped. Its glowing fist lost all power, and white glowing fractures covered what was left of its body. The chimera's skin turned gray and wrinkly before its entire body turned to ashes before Jake's attack could even land. Time returned to normal, as all that remained was drifting dust that also soon disappeared into nothingness.

Instinctively, he knew... the Prima Guardian had tried to do something it simply shouldn't and couldn't do. It had simply faced the consequences of trying to overreach and escape the concept of time for even a moment. Well, the consequences if you didn't have an overpowered Bloodline, that is.

Chapter 939: Prima Guardian Aftermath

Not far from the Prima Vessel, most of the strike team had gathered after Jake and the Prima Guardian disappeared. Eron was busy healing those injured, as Sylphie had taken off to help deal with some of the regular Primas, having taken the least damage of them all. Well, not counting Eron, who seemed impervious to getting killed over and over again. But no one really counted him.

“Think he’ll be okay?” Carmen asked, a bit worried as they waited to hear something – anything – about what was going on far above them in space. Jake had cut off all communication as he focused on the fight, and no one could really fault her for not feeling entirely certain Jake would be fine. He was facing a peak creature at level 349, all alone. A creature that all of them had struggled against.

“He sounded confident,” the Fallen King said. “I find it difficult to imagine a scenario where he doesn’t win.”

“I think a bigger concern is how long it’ll take to fetch him,” Caleb said as he massaged his shoulder, addressing the swelling from overusing his boosting skill earlier.

“Sandy has been informed and is on their way,” the Sword Saint said, sitting in a chair he had taken out of his spatial storage.

“Right,” Carmen nodded as she sighed.

To say they didn’t all feel a bit conflicted that Jake was going to finish this fight alone was an understatement. However, they also recognized that Jake was the only one capable of chasing the chimera, and even the Fallen King knew that while he could be summoned to Jake’s side, he would likely be more of a burden than a boon.

Out of them all, Jake was the strongest in a regular fight; no one disagreed with that. Especially when facing off against a foe many levels higher than himself, he truly stood out. He walked a Path all about killing that which was stronger, making him incredibly suited for doing so. Unless the Sword Saint fully used his Transcendent skill, he wasn’t at all confident about fighting Jake. Not during the Treasure Hunt, and not now.

As they were all sitting there, they all suddenly felt the change. The Prima Vessel behind them began to glow as a beam of light shot toward the sky, and a new opening appeared on it. It wasn’t difficult to

figure out what had happened... especially not when she saw the system message that arrived alongside this change.

You have slain [Exalted Prima Guardian – lvl 349] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t have worried,” Carmen smiled.

“About us not getting any experience because they both ran the fuck away?” Caleb asked a bit cheekily.

“Oh, that too,” Carmen agreed.

“Did have me worried for a second,” the Sword Saint said with a sigh.

“In case anyone cares, Jake has confirmed the Prima Guardian is indeed dead and that he still lives,” the Fallen King shared. “But yes, it is good we didn’t miss out on the experience, as that would indicate our contributions weren’t recognized, which would prove detrimental to our Records and the overall rewards from this event.”

Truly, they were all focusing on what was most important.

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Miranda was sweating despite not doing anything physically strenuous. She had just been forced to focus a bit too much for a prolonged period as she kept directing the flow of the battle while maintaining the domain in her own defended section. The incredibly durable Primas resulted in it taking way too long to kill each one, and alongside their damn armies, she felt like they needed way more fighters.

Then again, this definitely wasn’t how this system event was meant to be beaten. One was meant to fight the Primas one by one after they spread out, killing them to weaken the Prima Guardian before finishing off the big bad boss.

They were effectively doing this boss on hard mode, using a strategy that made it even harder. In other words... the highest difficulty with speedrun tactics.

She wasn't sure what to think when she got the report that the Prima Guardian had fled the battlefield using some form of emergency escape skill... nor if it was a good or bad thing that Jake had chased without even hesitating. Probably good, right? Seeing as it was Jake who chose to chase.

Continuing to deal with all of the reports she got, Miranda kept sending reinforcements where needed. Lillian had formed a second strike team of sorts to quickly travel around and help where needed. Neil was even part of this team and served as their mode of travel as he rapidly took them around the battlefield using his space magic.

"Arrived at section nine and engaging the Prima... priority on suppressing it over killing," Lillian reported as one of the stronger Primas had been causing trouble.

"Keep safe for now; once section eight is secured, I'll send more assistance," Miranda answered, turning her attention elsewhere.

Similar reports came in from all around as Miranda felt the pressure mounting. Many sections were still doing fine, but far more were struggling. Even the section William had been expertly handling was now a bit of a shitshow, as the ones there couldn't work together to save their lives, and William himself had to deal with five Primas as he had gone to assist the Prima Guardian strike team indirectly. Was this going against his orders and their agreement? Yes. Was Miranda going to make a stink about it? No.

Sylphie going to help them was great, but she was still only one hawk. While she could certainly kill a few Primas, in the grand scheme of things, all she could do was lighten the load on a few sections. The same was true for the assistance Arnold had begun to provide, though based on what the scientist said, his contributions would be limited as he had spent quite a few resources already dealing with the Guardian.

All of this isn't to say that Earth was losing. The fight was just taking longer than Miranda had hoped, and they would incur more casualties than was optimal. Especially now that many were beginning to run out of mana and stamina.

However, suddenly, things changed. She saw the pillar of light that erupted from the Prima Vessel, and for a moment, all the Primas stopped. Hundreds of screeches and roars sounded out from all over the battlefield as Miranda saw the Primas shaking as something seemed to be leaving them. Some of them lost a bit in bulk, their injuries worsened, and their auras became far less imposing.

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

"The Prima has weakened significantly," Lillian informed Miranda right then, telling the witch something she already knew, courtesy of the fifty or so other reports she got at the same time. Sending a message to everyone at once, she held up the phone provided by Arnold.

"The Prima Guardian has been slain. I repeat, Prima Guardian is dead. However, don't lose focus, but make this cleanup smooth," Miranda said, as she suddenly got a message and smiled. "Oh, and if you are feeling tired, retreat. Reinforcements are incoming."

The system message for this event had said that beasts couldn't participate in fighting against the Prima Guardian if they consumed system-given unique items... but now there was no Prima Guardian. It was still a bit of a gamble if they could now participate, but the Sky Whale informed Miranda he felt like he could. So, with that in mind, he and an entire army of beasts and monsters arrived through the teleportation circle behind the backline.

Taking his true form, the massive whale took to the skies, as the frost wyvern Miranda remembered Jake mentioning also ventured forth, releasing its breath on the weakened Primas. Thousands of powerful beasts, all mid-tier C-grade or above, entered the battlefield, as this was indeed nothing more but a cleanup.

Many of the beasts that had arrived with the Primas began to flee, with a few of them even trying to surrender. The vast majority still fought alongside their Prima as they faced death together. Noble, perhaps, but Miranda didn't really want to think too much about stuff like that.

She was already looking forward to what came next. The Prima Guardian Alliance, the intergalactic politics, and the inevitable clash with Ell'Hakan and those who served or worked alongside him... there was still much to do in regards to this event.

Of course, before they could really do anything like that, they needed to claim the Planetary Pylon. And for that, they needed their World Leader, who was still floating somewhere in space, waiting for his giant space worm taxi to arrive.

Everything hurt, and Jake wasn't a big fan. After he deactivated his boosting skill with the confirmed death of the Prima Guardian, the pain really came rushing in. He was pretty much out of skin on his body at this point, and his internals looked like several bombs had gone off inside him.

But he lived, and at least his body was strong enough to survive outer space even when Jake was in his severely weakened post-Arcane Awakening state. That didn't mean he felt any less like shit, though, as he waited for Sandy to arrive. The Fallen King had already at least confirmed that the worm was on its way, so Jake wouldn't have to fly all the way down there himself. Something he really didn't do, and it wasn't like his wings would be available any time soon for an expedient return. The skill wasn't meant to be used for that kind of travel anyway, and chances are Jake would end up just appearing halfway inside the planet or still far away from it due to the severe lack of accuracy.

Still... it was a good upgrade, and without it, he wouldn't have caught the Prima Guardian. Stressful situations were truly the best time to upgrade skills. Also, while Jake was complaining, he was totally okay with having a moment to himself to properly digest the fight he had just been in.

Going back a bit to when the Prima Guardian died, Jake had honestly been perplexed what the hell had happened. Everything was still a bit blurry, and all he remembered was that he tried to stab the damn thing with time slowed, and right as the Guardian tried to also slow down, it just fucking died. Jake knew his Moment of the Primal Hunter was special, but not to the level of it being deadly for the chimera to try and mimic it.

Ultimately, the chimera effectively killing itself didn't change much. Jake's attack would have killed the Prima if it hadn't been able to use a skill like Moment anyway; it just sped up the process by half a second. From the looks of it, it wasn't like it hurt Jake's experience gained from the fight, either.

Oh yeah, and something Jake hadn't noticed earlier either... as always, with a skill upgrade to his Malefic Viper Legacy skills, there also came a nice reward of experience points, giving Jake even more levels.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 276 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 278 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

Three levels from upgrading his Wings of the Malefic Viper was more than he expected but not really more than he usually got. It was also a while since he last upgraded one of his Legacy skills, so perhaps that played into him getting more experience than usual. In either case, more levels were great, putting him closer to level 300.

Having killed the Prima Guardian, there was naturally also plenty of class experience to be gained.

You have slain [Exalted Prima Guardian – lvl 349] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 290 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 292 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

Alright, Jake said plenty, but in his opinion, 3 levels as someone who was nearly high-tier C-grade was a lot. Now, Jake would definitely have gotten a fuckload more if he had done this entire fight alone, but that was never going to happen. Jake also seriously doubted he could have beaten the chimera alone... though it was hard to say.

Its ability to adapt still confused him. He still wasn't sure if it could only use skills it had seen or if it could just use all sorts of skills based on the people it fought. Perhaps a combination of the two... or had they just all been scanned when they entered the Prima Vessel or something?

Perhaps if Jake had been the one to fight it alone, it wouldn't have been able to copy from anyone else but only him. That would have made it weaker, yes, but Jake wasn't sure by how much or if it would have copied more from him. Though, even if it had... Jake would have loved to see it try and copy him if Jake pulled out some Jake Juice, especially after what happened to it from trying to copy Moment.

Oh well, the thing was dead, so it didn't really matter anymore. It was not like Jake was ever going to encounter a similar creature, as the chimera wouldn't have been able to exist in the wild. It was purely an event boss created by the system to test Earth.

As a final thing in regards to levels, Jake had naturally also gained 3 race levels.

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 283 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 285 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Thinking about it, Jake getting 3 levels from this fight was 2% of all the levels he needed for C-grade, and all done in less than a day... so as long as Jake could find another Prima Guardian and convince everyone to fight it tomorrow, Jake could reach B-grade within a month easily! They could even take a few weekend breaks.

Joking aside, it didn't seem like much, but it was honest work.

After the Prima Guardian had truly died, Jake also saw that a second symbol had appeared on the back of his hand, signifying he now had both keys to the barrier around the Planetary Pylon. As long as he got back, it was ripe for the taking, and they would finally lay claim to the planet once and for all.

The second key was, sadly, the only loot Jake got from the boss. He didn't know if it was because of the way it died or because it was a system entity, but it left nothing behind. The Fallen King did mention that the Prima Vessel had opened up a new entrance back on Earth that none of them could enter due to a barrier. It was kind of assumed Jake would be able to go in, though, so maybe there was loot in there? One can only hope.

Entering meditation, Jake focused on healing for the next good while, as he at least wanted his body to stop hurting a little before he moved on to the next task. Because while Jake had “only” gained three levels, those three had made him pass an important threshold when he got to level 290 in his class.

That’s right: it was time for a skill selection!

And, to make things things even better, while waiting for Sandy to arrive, Jake had plenty of time to painstakingly go over every single skill choice in excruciating detail as Jake opened up the system menu once he felt well enough to think clearly.

Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge class skills available

Chapter 940: Level 290 Hunter Skill Selection

Most of the time, Jake felt like skill selections only really had one, maybe two, valid options. Other times, none of the skills were any good, such as Jake’s last skill selection for his class where he had gone back to pick Penetrating Arrow. Sure, the skill he had gained was great, but he had only chosen it because nothing better had been offered.

However... this time around, Jake didn’t find himself with a list like usual. He didn’t instantly see three options he wanted to write off. Instead, he saw a list of five pretty fucking awesome skills, all of high rarity and all with their own great aspects.

To set the stage, the very first skill offered was ancient rarity and looked incredibly useful.

[Disruptive Arrow of Arcane Shadows (Ancient)] – With a single arrow, cover the skies in arcane shadows as you fade into nothingness. Allows the hunter to shoot an arrow infused with arcane shadow energy, creating a large cloud of arcane shadows upon destruction. This arcane shadow cloud will obscure all senses, allowing none inside to look out or those outside to look in. Due to the disruptive nature of the arrow, many forms of magic are weakened or entirely nullified within. This effect is primarily focused on disrupting detection skills. The level of obscuration created by the shadow cloud is based on the disparity between your Perception and the targets. For a short period after shooting the arrow, the hunter can more easily activate any stealth skill as long as the target fully loses sight of him. Adds a bonus to the effects of Perception, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Agility when using Disruptive Arrow of Arcane Shadows.

So, to summarize... it was an arrow that messed with magic, messed with people's Perception, and allowed Jake to more easily enter stealth, all while scaling incredibly well with Perception. The only downside was that the Cloud of Arcane Shadows, as the skill called it, couldn't be looked inside easily... which was entirely counteracted by Jake's insane Perception.

Even if it wasn't, Hunter's Mark would still allow him to locate people. Oh yeah, and if that also failed, he had his damn Sphere of Perception. Hell, he could even see the skill being used to enhance his melee fighting style. Imagine it, a cloud of shadows with Jake stalking around within, striking from out of nowhere repeatedly. It sure gave Umbra vibes from the duel in the Colosseum of Mortals.

Then there was the awesome effect of allowing him to more easily enter stealth after using it. This skill was effectively what Jake had done against the Prima Guardian, except far more effectively. If he had this skill, then chances are he could have charged his Arcane Powershot for longer and killed the Guardian with his final Protean Arrow alone.

The benefits if he used this skill alongside Eternal Shadow were also easy to imagine... he could maybe enter his Unseen Hunter state several times throughout a fight. Sure, it would have the highest chance of working the first time around, but compared to now, he could see a world where it could work multiple times.

No matter what, he would have to take inspiration from this skill for some free-form magic. Maybe he could even design a Protean Arrow with these effects? Honestly, if this was the skill Jake had to pick, he would have been all fine and dandy. It was great... but the next skill looked at least as good. If for nothing else but its rarity, better.

Because, already at his second choice, he was offered a legendary skill, which truly boded well for the three final ones. Not to say this wouldn't be the one, as he really liked what he saw.

[Stealth Attack of the Unseen Arcane Hunter (Legendary)] - The strongest blow is one unseen before it's too late. Massively increase the power of the first attack made on an otherwise unaware foe, and any damage bonuses from Perception-scaling skills are significantly increased for a short duration after landing a successful Stealth Attack. If this attack is used in conjunction with Unseen Arcane Hunter, the attack will benefit from the effects of your stealth skill and be hidden from your foe's spectrum of Perception. Even if your Stealth attack is noticed before it lands, it retains all effects as long as it was made while unseen. Adds a stat bonus to the effects of Stealth Attack of the Unseen Arcane Hunter dependent on the nature of the attack. This effect is further improved by the level of Unseen Arcane Hunter.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your existing Superior Stealth Attack, resulting in the loss of the skill.

Stealth Attack was one of those skills Jake constantly reminded himself he had to remember to upgrade, but kept forgetting about actually upgrading. Much of the groundwork was definitely already laid, and this skill was built partly on top of that.

Jake's goal had always been to integrate it with Unseen Arcane Hunter somehow... and this was pretty much it. Exactly what he had been imagining and wanted. It would make his opening attack when he struck from stealth far more powerful than before and even allow him to deal bonus damage with all his bow-related skills – seeing as they all scaled with Perception – for a short time after hitting an arrow.

Oh yeah... and it would turn his attack invisible. Or, at the very least, it would make it so his target wouldn't be able to notice his arrow before it was too late. Trying to hide a massive Arcane Powershot barreling toward someone was pretty difficult, but from the looks of it, this skill could make it happen.

As with the skill prior, Jake would definitely need to take heavy inspiration from this one if he didn't end up picking it. It was a bit different from the one prior in one huge way, though: it was a skill upgrade. A skill upgrade meant he would lose a skill slot... but this was one of those situations where the upgrade was so massive it was worth considering. He would go from a rare to a legendary skill in one go.

Jake could only imagine getting both this skill and the Arrow of Arcane Shadows... the combination would be insane. Alas, he would have to pick only one – assuming he even picked any of them. Because the next option was also incredibly spicy.

Or, maybe he should call it cursed.

[Gluttonous Fangs of Eternal Hunger (Legendary)] – Your hunger remains eternal as you seek to consume any who dare enter the striking distance of your fangs. Allows the hunter to passively channel cursed energy from the mythical artifact Eternal Hunger into every strike made with melee weapons, allowing you to benefit from all its on-hit effects. Every strike made using this effect will help feed the artifact, growing the power of the Sin Curse. Significantly increases the offensive effects of the Sin Curse of Hunger. Increases restorative powers of the Sin Curse of Hunger. Every strike made with Eternal Hunger or any weapon benefitting from this skill will leave lingering curse energy for far longer, dealing continuous damage. All effects of this skill are dependent on the power of Eternal Hunger. As the Sin Curse grows, so does the requirement of your ability to keep it at bay.

WARNING: Should Eternal Hunger be lost, this skill will mutate or disappear entirely.

It really shouldn't come as a surprise Jake would get more skills related to the mythical weapon he had created. Especially seeing as how it had been tied even more deeply to him with the integration of Sim-Jake. The Sin Curse was now totally a part of him and his Path, and he recognized that.

He also recognized he had been shit at actually utilizing the curse energy he housed within his Soulspace. Eternal Hunger could definitely do a lot more than just be a durable and sharp weapon he liked to stab people with – something he had been exploring with his alchemy a bit. He had just never really explored any of the things he could make it do when it came to combat. Part of it was because Jake didn't want to force himself too far down a Path where he focused on curses over stuff like his arcane affinity, and part of it was that Jake had a hard time imagining exactly what to do.

Now, this skill wasn't really doing anything "new" per-se. It was effectively just a damage and energy-steal effect getting added to Jake's melee fighting style while allowing Eternal Hunger to absorb more energy and thus also upgrade itself faster. He did like that he could make his Voidblade – or any other melee weapon - essentially into another Eternal Hunger. Seeing as it used the word Fangs, there was perhaps even some synergy going on with Fangs of Man and Fangs of the Malefic Viper. It did suck that the skill didn't work with ranged attacks, but it would also be kind of weird if it had.

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Jake didn't really put much stock in the warnings on the skill, either. He knew that dealing with cursed stuff was dangerous, and he didn't have any plans of losing Eternal Hunger. If he did, his Eternal Shadow skill would also be fucked.

To conclude, this skill was great and would instantly make Jake quite a bit stronger. There wasn't much to learn from it he didn't already know, but it was probably still worth keeping what it did in mind when exploring opportunities to use Eternal Hunger in the future. As with the two prior skills, if Jake was forced to pick this, he would have been a-okay.

Who would ever be unhappy about getting a legendary skill that just made something you already did strictly better? Well... maybe you would if it meant passing up another legendary skill that made other things you already did strictly better.

[Lone Hunter of Horizon's Edge (Legendary)] – Hunting is a lonely endeavor, yet one best enjoyed alone, as there is only the hunter and his prey. As a Lone Hunter, you prefer the solitude found in a good hunt, and you specialize in facing your prey alone. Allows the hunter to gain certain benefits when hunting alone, but will have no effect if you work alongside others. Significantly increases all bonuses granted by your Big Game Hunter skill when hunting alone. When Lone Hunter of Horizon's Edge is active, all stealth-related skills are more effective. When hunting alone, Hunting Momentum is accumulated from Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter far faster, and less is lost when the hunter takes damage. As you walk down the Path of a Lone Hunter, more benefits may follow. Increases all experience gained from successful lone hunts. May you strike fear into the hearts of all who find themselves marked as the prey of the Lone Hunter of Horizon's Edge.

WARNING: This skill is exclusive and cannot be taken alongside Huntmaster of Horizon's Edge.

This was the second legendary skill directly related to his class Jake had been offered.

Lone Hunter of Horizon's Edge was clearly one well-suited to who he was. Reading it carefully, it did become clear pretty quickly that, on its own, the skill didn't really do anything. The only real benefit it gave on its lonesome was the increased experience gained when hunting alone.

The rest of it was all about making his other skills better. Relentless Hunt, all stealth skills, and from the looks of it, especially Big Game Hunter, would be strictly improved if he had this skill. Of course, it would only work if he was hunting alone.

Jake had very much expected the skill to then also come with a massive downside if he was fighting with others, but from the looks of it, the only downside was that the skill wouldn't do anything. That was... massive. While it was true Jake did hunt solo a lot, he also teamed up with others here and there. This Prima Guardian fight and much of Nevermore was proof of that. So to have a skill that would make him weaker when fighting with others would have sucked and been one he had to avoid.

Before Jake continued considering this skill more in-depth, he decided that doing it in conjunction with the last one was probably better. Because the warning of the skill also served as the prelude to the final skill offered... the counterpart to Lone Hunter and one mutually exclusive with it.

[Huntmaster of Horizon's Edge (Legendary)] – To hunt is a task for the many, as you successfully lead your hunting party to slay any prey you mark for death. As a Huntmaster, you are a hunter specialized in

hunting with a team of peers, allowing them to benefit from your expertise and skills as a hunter as long as they join your Hunting Party. Allows allies part of your Hunting Party to benefit from all effects of your Mark of the Horizon-Chasing Arcane Hunter. Any damage your Hunting Party does helps build your Hunting Momentum from Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. When facing higher-level foes, all members of your Hunting Party benefit from a lesser version of your Big Game Hunter skill. As you walk down the Path of a Huntmaster, more benefits may follow. You can have a total of 9 members in your Hunting Party (not including yourself). May your Hunting Party strike fear in the hearts of all who find themselves marked as prey by the Huntmaster of Horizon's Edge.

WARNING: This skill is exclusive and cannot be taken alongside Lone Hunter of Horizon's Edge.

If Lone Hunter made Jake the king of soloing, this skill made him everyone's favorite party member. Reading through the skill, the benefits were pretty damn good. Giving everyone a lesser version of Big Game Hunter meant they would just be straight-up stronger when facing opponents above their level while also providing them the passive presence resistance.

Then there was the fact it would help Jake build Hunting Momentum by just having his party members land hits. That in itself was pretty damn great. The biggest risk with Relentless Hunt had always been that he wouldn't be able to accumulate as much Hunting Momentum when he had to take hits during fights. However, with this skill, he could just outsource building his momentum to his party members. Especially seeing as it didn't mention him losing anything if they got hit.

Finally, the greatest part of this skill was allowing others to benefit from Hunter's Mark. Not just because of all the extra damage it would add to everyone's damage but because of an aspect of the skill he was certain would make him a top-rated party member: Increased experience gained.

This part of the skill wasn't one Jake really thought about much, as he always just marked targets, but he was certain others would be more than happy to get some extra experience. While Jake wasn't sure how much of an increase Hunter's Mark even gave, this was the kind of concept that could only be found in system-granted skills and considered pretty rare.

Considering the skill more deeply, it wasn't difficult to imagine the fighting style this skill catered to. It was one where Jake stood back and attacked without ever getting hit, thus never losing any Hunting Momentum. He would be the director of the battle, firing the occasional powerful blow with all the Hunting Momentum he constantly built up until, finally, the prey was dead. At which point, everyone would get more experience because the target had a Hunter's Mark and come pat their awesome Huntmaster on the back for another successful hunt.

Like the Lone Hunter skill, this one didn't have any downsides either, and it wasn't like it would make him incapable of solo hunting. Just better when doing it with a group. The only real negative to picking it was that he couldn't also pick Lone Hunter. Well, Lone Hunter or any of the other solid options he had been offered, but Lone Hunter would be permanently unavailable.

Having gone over both Lone Hunter and Huntmaster, he had to admit that on the surface, from a more objective perspective, Huntmaster was probably the better skill. At least, if he was asked which one of them was closest to being a mythical rarity skill, he would say Huntmaster. Both of them were awesome, though, and almost seemed like mini-classes or something.

Perhaps this assessment wasn't entirely incorrect either... because Jake had a feeling this decision would prove quite important for his Path. Their mutual exclusivity outlined this as a choice about what kind of hunter Jake wanted to be. It even pretty much said so with:

"As you walk down the Path of a Huntmaster/Lone Hunter, more benefits may follow."

Jake couldn't help but wonder... perhaps this choice had even been triggered by Jake kind of sending mixed messages about his own Path.

After the system arrived, Jake had primarily been a solo hunter. He was alone during the Tutorial, quickly abandoning his former colleagues. After returning to Earth, he kept hunting alone, only briefly teaming up with Hawkie for some flight lessons and elemental hunting. Outside of that, he was pretty much on his own all throughout E-grade.

D-grade wasn't that much different. Sure, Jake did a dungeon with Draskil and the others from the Order, but that was, again, only a brief interlude. All his greatest achievements in combat had been him fighting alone.

However, here in C-grade, things had been very different. He had done Nevermore with a party of five, and now this Prima Guardian event with a large group. He hadn't faced any strong opponents alone for a long time outside of a bit within some Challenge Dungeons. Nearly all his big fights in C-grade had been with a group: Minaga, the Twinhead Emperor, and the Prima Guardian. For solo fights, the only big one was Valdemar in the Colosseum, and that one had been under very odd circumstances, and he didn't even have his class during the fight.

Really thinking about everything, it wouldn't be wrong to say Jake was acting more like a Huntmaster rather than a Lone Hunter recently, and if he recalled the last few decades of his life, Huntmaster would definitely have been the most useful of the two. This wasn't a skill about the past, though.

It was about the kind of hunter Jake wanted to be in the future... and could Jake really know what the future would bring? Because while he could definitely see himself embracing the life of a Lone Hunter, he could also see himself adventuring plenty with Sylphie, Carmen, the Sword Saint, and all the others.

Of course, there was also another option: to not pick either of these two but just go with one of the two other legendary skills Jake had been offered. To simply not lock him into any kind of Path in the future and perhaps get offered a version of the skill that was a mix between Huntmaster and Lone Hunter, though he had a feeling that wasn't gonna happen, as the trade-off with these skills seemed to be that he had to pick one or the other.

Honestly, out of every class skill selection, this was perhaps the hardest. But Jake had to make a choice, and the question now was... what skill should he pick? Because he low-key wanted all of them... well, alright, he could be reasonable and not too greedy. Just getting four of them was also an acceptable outcome, as two were mutually exclusive.

Alas, he was forced to choose, and he could only be happy that he had plenty of time to decide, with Sandy still nowhere to be seen.