

Hunter 951

Chapter 951: A Gray Flag

Olliandra sat in the clock tower, contemplating the final words of the Chosen as well as the entire conversation before it. His warning at the end was also pretty clear in intent: reconsider aligning yourself with Ell'Hakan. In fact, she should reconsider if she wanted to align their planet with anyone if she could avoid it. Olliandra felt like a conflict was definitely brewing, and having seen the power of the Viper's Chosen, she didn't want to fight against him. On the other hand, she also didn't dare risk making the Chosen of Yip of Yore an outright enemy. This was a conflict far beyond what she or anyone else should get involved in, and her biggest hope was that they could watch it safely from the sidelines.

She also felt embarrassed she hadn't realized he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper when he introduced himself. In her defense, she hadn't gone to see the Leaderboards even after finishing Nevermore. Only the space mage and a few others had decided to check it out, primarily to see if the Celestial Child – or Ell'Hakan, as it was perhaps more proper to call him – had achieved a good placement. Seeing those Leaderboards was mostly for vanity, after all, as she had never expected to meet anyone who would appear on it outside of Ell'Hakan.

After hearing the mention of emotional manipulation, she also felt a bit more suspicious than before as she looked at the space mage. "You have attended several meetings with Yip of Yore's Chosen present without me... can you lend any validity to him having a Bloodline capable of swaying emotions?"

The space mage, who had long been her most trusted comrade, looked deep in thought, seriously considering her question before answering: "The fact I cannot outright deny it frightens me. Reflecting on my own impression of the Celestial Child, I do find myself questioning my own emotions on the matter. I cannot logically place why I felt such respect and reverence toward him. He is powerful, yes, but my own emotions do feel unnatural in retrospect. I cannot say for sure if this is due to some level of manipulation or if I simply acted irrationally, but I would veer on the side of caution."

Olliandra was a bit taken aback by the response. She had honestly expected him to say that he hadn't noticed anything and that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was just trying to make them view Ell'Hakan more negatively due to his own personal bias. For quite a while, the mage had been a big fan of Ell'Hakan, talking about him being a great leader of the alliance and definitely the one to unite their galaxy under one banner.

However, now he looked full of doubt. Olliandra also admittedly believed Ell'Hakan would have been the one to unite them, but now she doubted that was going to happen... and if it did happen, it wouldn't be

through a peaceful expansion of the alliance and every planet choosing to align themselves with him willingly.

"What do you think our approach should be to these Chosen?" she chose to ask him.

"For now, we should address the Prima problems and claim the Planetary Core," the space mage said. "When it comes to the two Chosen... we are already considered part of the Celestial Child's alliance on paper. Trying to at least probe what a relationship with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper would look like seems wise. Perhaps sending a delegation to this planet Earth could be considered. If it's discovered and we are scrutinized by the rest of the alliance, we can always claim we did so because we were fearful of what would happen if we didn't, or even excuse it as an attempt to gather information on a potential foe."

"That strikes me as risky," Olliandra responded. "Trying to play both sides may result in us simply making both view us unfavorably. What's more, if El'Hakan can truly manipulate emotions through a Bloodline, there is a big chance he can easily see through lies or deceit. I also would be cautious about trying to deceive the Viper's Chosen and his faction... from what I heard, many talented individuals are aligned with him, some of which may discover any underhanded intentions."

"Would it perhaps then be best to do nothing?" the space mage asked.

"No..." Olliandra shook her head. "It's unquestionable that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper saved our lives and our planet, while El'Hakan and his alliance did nothing, not even send a representative to hear us out. To not at least try to repay such a favor wouldn't sit right with me. While it won't be much, we will send a delegation to his planet and try to offer some token of our gratitude. If that ends up aligning us with him over El'Hakan... then so be it."

Olliandra couldn't help but think what would have happened if she hadn't so stupidly chosen to release the Prima Guardian, which led to all this... and she genuinely couldn't tell if this was a better outcome in the long run.

She also didn't know who would win between the two Chosen. All she knew was that while El'Hakan and Lord Thayne were both considered peak geniuses of the multiverse... she had only seen one of them shatter her perception of what a C-grade would be capable of.

Jake finally discovered the first of the special privileges granted by the otherwise entirely useless ring he'd been rewarded with while in the Prima Vessel. After he'd left the clock tower, he had headed back

toward the teleporter that could eventually take him back to the inter-galaxy teleporter. However, he came to learn all of that wasn't necessary when the ring suddenly gave him some instinctive knowledge when he considered getting back to Earth.

His ring turned out to have the ability to teleport him back to the Prima Vessel on Earth. It wasn't some instant teleportation, but Jake had to channel energy into the item for a bit over five minutes as it slowly formed a teleportation circle beneath him before finally triggering and taking him home. While that wasn't as convenient as instant teleportation and could even be slower than the "official" way in some instances, it was still pretty damn neat, and it meant Jake didn't risk getting stuck on a planet.

Anyway, that's what Jake did, as he was whisked through space and returned to Earth again, not even a full day after he left in the first place. Appearing back in the room within the Prima Vessel, he startled some poor space mage he didn't even recognize who was scribbling down some of the runes of the magic circle, likely at the behest of Arnold or someone else trying to figure out more about how these teleporters worked.

Jake gave the guy a quick nod before he headed off to quickly talk to Miranda about what had transpired on the planet he'd totally forgotten to even get the name of. As a pleasant surprise, a teleportation circle that had been set up right outside the Prima Vessel, connecting it to the rest of the planet. He knew they had a bunch of quick-to-set-up circles ready, but it was still good to see they had placed one at the Vessel to make travel easier.

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While leaving the Prima Vessel, he saw Arnold busy in one of the rooms, with dozens of mages running around. He even saw Sandy inside a room, and he considered going in to say hello but decided not to. Again, he'd not even been gone for a day, and they looked very busy.

Arriving back in Haven shortly after, Jake made his way to Miranda who was back in her office, looking just as busy as Arnold. The perfect time for Jake to stop by and drop some information on her. When he entered the building, he got a few surprised gazes, and when he knocked and entered her office, she also looked up perplexed.

"I thought you had gone to assist some extremely desperate planet?" she asked, a bit confused.

"Oh, I did, and they were very desperate indeed. The World Leader decided she and her allies could totally take on the Prima Guardian on their own. Spoiler warning: they couldn't. Ended up killing the Prima Guardian and talking a bit with the World Leader. Things went pretty well if I say so myself, and..."

Jake quickly gave an overview of what had happened and explained what he had talked about with Olliandra, as well as what he inferred about Ell'Hakan from their conversation. Miranda seemed pleased enough with how Jake handled things, though she did find his final comment a bit questionable, as threatening them wasn't necessary in her eyes, though she doubted it had done much harm.

They also talked about Jake's fuck-up when he introduced himself as Thayne – though Miranda did add that Jake really had no reason to try and hide his identity but should just flaunt it if he so wished. His identity as Jake Thayne, that is. When Jake expressed his surprise the World Leader hadn't realized who he was earlier, considering the Leaderboards and all that, Miranda was far from as surprised.

"That is one thing you need to consider when you visit these other planets... so far, you've been used to interacting with individuals already familiar with the multiverse. People from Nevermore or large factions. Those blessed by gods who at least bestow some level of understanding upon their subjects. However, these are in the vast, vast minority in the multiverse. From here on out, chances are the ones you meet know nearly nothing besides what they potentially learned at Nevermore or second-hand from friends. Perhaps they only have some surface-level knowledge about twelve Primordials existing, but that's it," Miranda explained, Jake nodding along.

"I also noticed that the information they had seemed a bit... biased," Jake added.

"Because much of it likely stems from Ell'Hakan or others in the alliance who were originally told by him. While I wouldn't say it's a safe assumption to make, I do think it's very probable that the vast majority of multiversal knowledge these members of the Prima Guardian Alliance have is given by Ell'Hakan. I would expect most of what he's given them to be true, but only to hide the half-truths and deceit more easily. Also, I will add that even if they haven't been told lies by Ell'Hakan... it isn't hard to believe that the Chosen of someone called the Malefic Viper isn't the nicest guy and doesn't have your best interest at heart. Let's not pretend like The Viper is known as some altruistic being, so no one would expect his Chosen to be some hero."

"Well, good, because I'm not," Jake shrugged. "I'm hunting down Prima Guardians purely out of selfishness. Potentially saving a few planets in the process is just a happy little coincidence."

"Yeah, maybe don't outright state that. At least let people be under the illusion you truly moved with intentions of saving them and that you genuinely care for the betterment of the galaxy," Miranda sighed.

"I did call it a happy little coincidence," Jake pointed out with a smile. "If the choice is between killing two Prima Guardians, and killing one will save a bunch of people while killing the other won't, I'll go for the first one."

"That's good enough, I guess," Miranda said. "I would also just continue to call yourself Thayne or Lord Thayne or whatever. Just avoid introducing yourself as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Make it clear you are more than the rumors compel them to believe and that you are acting as the World Leader of Earth, not the Chosen of a Primordial. If they don't connect the dots while you are there but only learn of your identity later... great. That will just confuse them and contradict what they've been fed by Ell'Hakan. If they do figure it out, do something similar to what you did here and have a calm discussion about Ell'Hakan if they initiate it. If not, no need to even talk about the guy."

Jake nodded along, taking in her words. He still sucked at politics in his own eyes, so any advice he could get was more than welcome. There was one thing about this entire scenario that did make him question what he was currently doing, though. One Miranda's question about helping out people sparked.

Why did they even need to be on good terms with the other planets of the galaxy in the first place? Why was it a problem if Ell'Hakan managed to claim the entire alliance for himself? Just because it made the other Chosen stronger? Even if that was the case, Jake genuinely believed Earth alone could face down the rest of the galaxy single-handedly.

Alright, In truth, he did know the answer. If they just let Ell'Hakan roam free, there was a good chance they would one day be put in a scenario where they would have to fight the rest of their galaxy. However, that wouldn't benefit them in any way, either. In fact, all that would do was leave them with a barren galaxy with a bunch of ruined planets and potentially a lot of enemies, as there would definitely still be survivors from all those planets split across the multiverse. Then, there was also the fact it would help Ell'Hakan spread the story that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was a maniac who destroyed his own galaxy, but Jake honestly didn't care much about that anymore.

Either way, it would be better if Ell'Hakan just never managed to unite the galaxy. Jake also didn't see much sense in just letting the guy do as he wanted if they could stop it. Plus, he and the others did genuinely want to hunt down Prima Guardians, so it wasn't like they lost out by making a few friends and allies along the way.

As he had said to Miranda, if he had the choice, he would prefer to save as many planets across the galaxy as he could. Assuming it didn't cause any harm to himself and those he cared about, that is.

After he and Miranda spoke a bit more, she sent Jake off once more to try and save more planets from their big bad Prima invasion. Before he left, Miranda had even given him a new message to paste into his applications to hopefully get a better acceptance rate. He wasn't a big fan of how it read, but he could see how it would work better... even if it was kind of lying:

"High-level hunter seeking to assist in slaying Primas. Would prefer to operate alone. Spent the full duration in Nevermore and is confident in taking down Primas solo if necessary. No compensation is required, acting solely to increase rewards from the system event."

Perhaps saying it was kind of lying wasn't entirely correct either... Prima Guardians were technically Primas. The rest of it was also true. Alongside this small blurb, it also contained some other information and what looked like a letter of recommendation from Miranda. All in all, the message was a lot longer, far more so than Jake believed necessary... but if it helped him get to kill more Primas, then so be it. All he needed the message to do was bring him to the planet, not like they could forcibly remove him once he was there.

Getting back to the Prima Vessel once more, Jake headed inside and went straight to the teleporter and the big map showing all the available planets.

Jake quickly looked at the map as he saw it. All the usual flags for planets were there. Red for those fighting the Primas without the alliance, green for those who had already dealt with their Guardian – with the one he had just visited now marked green - and blue for those part of the Prima Alliance. However, now there was a new color.

One of the flags had turned gray. One of those that had been red before. When Jake focused on the flag, he saw what the color meant:

The first planet of the Milky Way had officially fallen to a Prima invasion.

Chapter 952: A Bright World

It was inevitable not all planets would survive this system event, especially not the planets that chose to face the event alone. On Olliandra's planet, Jake learned that some World Leaders had truly become drunk with their measly power, believing themselves capable of things way outside their capabilities. She had just been lucky that she had only gotten too overconfident after also deciding to join the alliance.

The planet that had fallen was one that wasn't part of the alliance, so it wasn't even as if anyone could have saved it, even if they wanted it.

One of the first things Jake checked was the information provided by the system that gave a general overview of the planet. What he saw wasn't very positive. According to the report, the number of enlightened people still alive was a bit less than a million. A meager number for an entire planet.

Next up, he checked something else: the possibility of teleporting there. However, as they had not been part of the alliance, they had never received or created the teleportation circle provided to those part of the alliance. They naturally also hadn't claimed the Prima Vessel either, meaning there was no easy way to get there... at least not without the teleporter Arnold was working on.

Jake also considered for a moment what would happen on the gray-flag planet now. The Prima Guardian would have gained its second key and gone to claim the Planetary Pylon, and once that was done... Jake wasn't entirely certain what would happen next.

If the Prima Guardian was like the two other ones he had seen, it would die by itself after some time due to the instability of its soul. When that happened, the planet would be left in the hands of the Primas. It was also a good question if they would remain Primas after the event ended. Perhaps they just wouldn't be able to have offspring that was also considered Primas, meaning the variant would die with them, and in only a single generation, the planet would be dominated solely by beasts and monsters, many of which had Prima parents.

With the Prima Guardian claiming the Planetary Pylon, the Pylon would also be transformed back into simply being a Planetary Core. For the planet itself, this wouldn't matter, all it did was reduce the value of the planet for any enlightened who wished to claim it. If this reversal to a normal Planetary Core happened after the Prima Guardian died, Jake wasn't sure.

All he knew was that monsters couldn't claim and control Planetary Pylons. At least not usually. It required a certain level of nobility title to do so, and since monsters couldn't get nobility titles, they

couldn't claim it. Well, the King was an outlier, but he was also literally a Unique Lifeform, so him having unique circumstances shouldn't come as a surprise.

This isn't to say that claiming a Planetary Core wasn't valuable to a monster. One could just look at the Ghostvine on the moon that had claimed the moon's core that wasn't even a real Planetary Core. The core was a wellspring of pretty much infinite energy and a top-tier natural treasure for any monster that claimed it and slowly absorbed its energies to grow. The only downside of a Planetary Core was that it was really hard to move around, and moving it would often end up ruining it.

While thinking, Jake even began to theorize part of the reason these Prima Guardians were even a thing was to make sure the Planetary Pylons were turned into Planetary Cores should the planet lose during the system event. However, even if the Pylon was turned into a core, that didn't mean all enlightened died, right?

Let's hope the remaining survivors can survive till the planet potentially opens up or until Arnold finds success... maybe the regular Primas aren't as aggressive toward people after the Planetary Pylon has been claimed... for their sake, I hope that's the case, Jake thought, though he knew it was very hopeful thinking.

This was the risk one faced if they chose to take on the Prima Guardian alone. It was scary to consider that the choices of one incompetent World Leader could doom an entire civilization in such a direct way, and Jake was happy he had chosen to divvy out any such responsibilities and decision-making. Oh, and that when he did make unilateral decisions, he was at least strong enough to back up his own choices.

Then again... perhaps that is also what the now-dead World Leader of the fallen planet had believed.

Shaking his head, Jake focused on helping out where he could actually do something. He began quickly checking out planets to apply to, and shortly after, he found one that seemed worth visiting. Having actually read the descriptions, this one mentioned the World Leader's intentions to face the Prima Guardian as soon as they believed they had gathered a powerful enough force, and they were recruiting anyone willing to join them from the galaxy. No mentions of El'Hakan anywhere, either.

In fact, it mentioned that it was open for debate for people to be able to stay after the event, with even offers of high-ranking positions up for grabs. All of this seemed great, and the planet seemed interesting, but one thing caught his attention more than anything else... the population.

A hundred and seventy-two billion people.

That was more than twenty times the people Earth had before the integration, with that number lower now due to the many deaths. Sure, in the future, Jake didn't doubt their population would balloon, especially with how big Earth was now, but for a planet to have this extreme population numbers now must have meant they had a huge population before the system.

He did question why they didn't believe they had a big enough force to face the Prima Guardian with that many to choose from, but he would probably learn why shortly if they accepted him.

Applying to the planet, Jake waited for a few minutes with nothing happening. Sighing, he began to look for other places to go instead, but just then, a notification appeared, informing him his application had been accepted. He had been a bit worried his title as World Leader would prove a problem, but luckily that wasn't the case.

In fact, maybe it even proved to be a boon.

Using the teleporter, Jake was whisked through space across the galaxy for the third time that day. Luckily, the teleportation was always instant, as his vision only turned black for less than a second before he found himself standing on top of a large teleportation circle. Through a Pulse he immediately released upon arrival, he saw he was within a large dome of metal, not unlike the one Arnold had made. This dome was placed in the middle of nowhere, as only pure wasteland could be seen all around.

The teleporter itself was in a room in the center of the dome. Jake also quickly noticed that this wasn't the only one. Several teleportation circles were placed on different floors on top of one another, seemingly all linked together somehow. As he arrived, he saw three people walking toward him. All of them were elves, wearing similar white and gray robes, with the woman in the middle having a slightly more elaborate robe with two men at her side wearing simpler ones. Yep, definitely a clear sign the woman was of higher rank than the two dudes.

"Greetings, hunter. Or should I say, World Leader," the woman said with a smile as she approached. Her way of greeting made it clear she had fuck-all idea who Jake was besides the information he'd given.

"Greetings," Jake responded with a nod. "I believe my application made my purpose for coming clear?"

He had added a little extra in there besides what Miranda had given him.

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"You wish to join the team that will take on the Prima Guardian. However, before that, allow me to invite you to the Council Estate, where you can receive the proper welcome of a World Leader," the woman said. "Do not worry. The team for the Prima Guardian is still being assembled as we are hoping more capable mercenaries will appear."

"I assume this Council Estate houses the current leadership of this planet?" Jake asked clarifyingly.

"Certainly. Rather than rely on the judgment of a single World Leader, we have chosen to adopt a council to make more informed decisions in unison and to ensure the unity of every country," the woman answered. "I am sure the council will be more than happy to explain further once you arrive."

"Not that dissimilar to my world, then. We also have a council of representatives," Jake said, getting an approving look from the woman. Jake saw no reason not to at least make himself a bit more relatable by sharing minor details like that.

The three elves proceeded to escort Jake out of the large metal dome that Jake assumed was constructed for safety should a troublemaker arrive. Toward the outer edges of the dome, teleportation circles were set up to take people elsewhere on the planet, one of which they quickly went to and teleported to the capital city.

Now, Jake had wondered why so many planets had been medieval before... it turns out far from all of them were. Perhaps the metal dome should have been a clue, but the moment he appeared in the capital, he was overwhelmed by what he saw. He was also practically blinded.

Massive highrises filled the skyline, and every single building gave off an intense white light as if coming from a far too powerful LED. The entire city was bathed in this white light, making it look even more sterile than it already did, considering every single building was also white, amplifying the light. Everything was just white on white, with the most daring colors off-white or gray here and there. Oh, and they really loved reflective surfaces.

"Interesting architectural choices," Jake commented as he was led unto a floating disc that would transport them to the Council Estate. Naturally, the disc was also glowing.

"Others have made similar comments," the elven woman responded. "We simply choose to embrace the light. There are many cultural, historical and religious reasons for this I will not bother you with, but our post-system logic is the increased appearance of young ones with the light affinity."

"I see," Jake nodded. That... kind of made sense. Exposing people a lot to one affinity could lead to it appearing in them, especially children. So, living in an environment filled with intense light energy would help if that was something they wanted. As for Jake, who decidedly did not have the light affinity, it was just annoying. Luckily, his high Perception allowed him to easily filter out the light enough to still see without any problems.

After flying through the high-tech planet for a while, they arrived at a massive building with several glowing spires on top of it. It was naturally the Council Estate, and Jake was led inside to meet with the council. On the way through the city, he saw millions of elves, all wearing similar clothes, and he really wanted to question what kind of society they were building but began to feel like there were a lot of... cultural issues that could pop up if he asked too many questions.

Better to just focus on the Prima Guardian. If Miranda then decided establishing positive relations with this planet was worth it afterward, so be it.

Inside the Council Estate building, Jake finally saw people who clearly weren't from the planet. The building was large enough to have several wings, and within one of these wings, he saw about fifty people, all within different private rooms. Some of them were together in small groups, while others were alone, and all wore various equipment and were of multiple races. It was definitely the other mercenaries the planet had recruited so far to fight the Prima Guardian.

"How many mercenaries have you recruited so far?" Jake asked while they walked.

"A few hundred, with most of them out there fighting the Primas along with the armies," the elf responded.

Jake nodded as they continued to walk in silence until they reached a large semi-circular meeting room. Within, Jake saw quite a few people already gathered, while he saw magical constructs occupying other spots. Clearly, they were waiting for his arrival, and the escorting elf motioned for Jake to enter, which he promptly did.

The room's design was pretty interesting in that it didn't use height to place the council members higher up than anyone visiting – a very popular design choice that even the system used during the World Congress.

Inside, Jake found himself standing before twenty-nine elves who were there in person and exactly fifty who were there only as projections, likely because they were busy elsewhere. Again, that made sense, seeing as they had a Prima invasion to deal with.

"Greetings, World Leader," one of the elves who were there in person said. "I am the representative of sector nineteen and shall serve as the speaker of the council for this meeting. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I go by Thayne; it's a pleasure to meet you all, too," Jake nodded in greeting as he quickly did a scan of the room and noticed something a bit odd. While he couldn't see the levels of the projected elves, he did see the ones of the elves present, and they were all surprisingly low. Not a single one of them was even above level 230.

Perhaps this was also why no one reacted when Jake introduced himself. He had very much expected at least one of them to recognize who he was, but nope.

"This may seem a bit direct, but may I ask why another World Leader has chosen to volunteer himself to help another planet fight their Prima Guardian? Much less why he has decided to do so on his lonesome?" the representative asked Jake.

Honestly, that was a pretty legit question, as it definitely was weird for a World Leader to act like Jake did. As for how he would answer, he saw no reason to lie.

"I have already led the forces of my planet to slay the Prima Guardian and all other Primas and now seek to hunt down more Prima Guardians as per the event to increase my own reward," Jake answered, finally getting an emotional reaction from the people there as a lot of their facial expressions warped for a moment. Some with shock, others with disbelief, and quite a few with suspicion. Again, pretty fair. So was the next question.

"Truly?" the representative asked. "To have completed the event already on your planet is truly impressive. If almost a little unbelievable."

Jake just looked up at the council member, not answering, prompting them to continue.

"How are you affiliated with the one who calls himself the Celestial Child?" the speaker questioned, and from the tone, Jake instantly inferred these people were definitely not allied with him.

"I'm not," Jake simply answered. "I would also like to turn that question back on you. How is this planet related to him?"

"He attempted to have us join his course, but by the guidance of the Great Bright One, we chose to reject such propositions," the council member and speaker answered with a bit of disdain in their voice.

Jake wanted to ask about this Great Bright One right away but chose not to do so immediately. Instead, he nodded and asked some more general questions about how the efforts against the Primas were going and about the planet in general.

What he did do was use Identify a few more times. Usually, Jake didn't look for Blessings, as the more he tried to see with Identify, the more likely its usage was to be detected. However, this time, he made an exception and...

[Elf – lvl 214 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

[Elf – lvl 219 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

[Elf – lvl 217 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

[Elf – lvl 215 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

Clearly, a god had a great hold on this planet. But, again, Jake chose to not pry too much. Who their Patron was shouldn't matter too much if all he wanted to do was kill the Prima Guardian.

After Jake spoke with the council a bit longer, they seemed satisfied enough, as the speaker smiled.

"If you are truly as capable as you claim, would you be willing to prove it to us? Before we take the massive risk of activating the Prima Guardian, we will need some kind of assurance," the elf asked.

Jake nodded, seeing no reason not to reject this. "Very well."

"Great," the representative smiled. "The attendant waiting outside can take you to one of our battlefields where you can prove your prowess. If the general approves, we can proceed to engage the Prima Guardian afterward."

"Sounds good," Jake said, relieved that the process of convincing them seemed quite simple.

"Irrelevant to your performance, we also see opportunities for diplomatic relations with your homeworld and would love to send a delegation once things are concluded here," the speaker continued. Jake nodded once more, feeling pretty good about how things were going. He had even managed to do some good politicking.

"I'm certain we can figure something out," Jake responded, as he asked something he could perhaps come to regret. "Now, if I may... could you tell me a bit about the Great Bright One you mentioned?"

"Hm? This is surprising; I would have thought you had heard the divine one, seeing as you are not related to the heretic who calls himself the Celestial Child," the speaker responded in a casual tone, still not hiding their disdain for Ell'Hakan. "But allow me to enlighten you about the Great Bright One, the Creator of Light and Life and maker of the system itself."

Oh... oh, great.

Yep, this pretty much confirmed it. Jake was dealing with a delusional cult.

Chapter 953: It's Hard Being This Weak

Maybe Jake was a bit hypocritical for calling the Great Bright One believers a cult, considering he was part of a faction that worshipped a giant snake god. Then again, the Malefic Viper's organization was called an Order. Did he have a cult in the past? Yes, but now he had an Order, so it wasn't the same thing.

As for how he would deal with them... time would tell. Jake wasn't going to be antagonistic for no reason, though. Before he decided what he would do, he definitely needed some more information.

"I must admit I'm not that knowledgeable about this Great Bright One," Jake said, as he tried to be a bit careful with his words. "But you said you expected me to know, considering I am not related to the one who calls himself the Celestial Child... what do you mean by that?"

The speaker seemed to confer with the others in the room for a moment before she answered. "This Ell'Hakan follows a god by the name of Yip of Yore. That in itself is no problem, but he has taken a rather fanatical approach and believes his god is superior to all others despite only having risen to godhood through the grace of the system made by the Great Bright One. To work with such an individual who is so deep in his delusions would be difficult for us. Don't misunderstand; belief in the many gods of the multiverse and ignorance of the Great Bright One is not an issue, but someone who so blatantly disregards the Great Bright One isn't someone we would want to work with."

Alright, so they do acknowledge the existence of other gods... man, this is weird.

"I see," Jake slowly nodded.

"Might I ask, seeing as you do not know of the Great Bright One, what does your planet believe in?" the speaker asked curiously. There didn't seem to be any malicious intentions behind the question, so Jake answered truthfully.

"People are allowed to believe in whatever they want on my planet, as long as their beliefs do not cause harm to others," Jake said. "Perhaps there are even followers of the Great Bright One."

He seriously doubted it, but he couldn't really know, now could he?

"Do you personally follow a god?" the speaker continued.

“No, not really,” Jake answered with a shrug.

What? Sure, he was the Chosen of Villy, but Jake wouldn’t say he “followed” the Malefic Viper in any way. Jake was more of a freeloader who yinked some Records and enjoyed all the benefits like the good little heretic he was.

“If you want to, I’m sure the Voice of the One would gladly speak to you about the Great Bright One. Ah, the Voice of the One is the one who holds the title of World Leader here on our planet,” the speaker said, finally also speaking about the World Leader.

“Is the World Leader not on the council?” Jake asked curiously.

“He has an honorable position where he offers advice and input, but he rarely makes use of the powers bestowed upon him as the World Leader and trusts the council for all decisions. His participation is limited, though, as his role as the Voice of the One requires him to focus on listening to the guidance of the Great Bright One. However, I’m sure he would spare another World Leader some of his valuable time if you desire a meeting,” the speaker explained.

“Does he communicate with the Great Bright One even now?” Jake asked, trying to act impressed.

“Of course. The Voice of the One has been in communion for the past day to discuss when we are ready to face the Prima Guardian,” the speaker said in a revering voice. “His communion should be done by the end of the day, and we shall inform him of your arrival then. Until such a time, let us proceed with having you prove your prowess and capabilities to face the Prima Guardian. Let me also be transparent that we require more of you than the average mercenary, as we cannot in good consciousness risk your death, considering your identity as a World Leader.”

“That’s fair,” Jake nodded, as he believed he didn’t really have more to discuss with the council for now. He did have a lot of questions, but he chose to not ask any of them as he saw no reason to risk turning them hostile. At least not before he met this Voice of the One.

“Thank you all for this meeting; it was very enlightening,” Jake continued and couldn’t help but make a small pun. “I wish you all well. I shall now go see how powerful these Primas of your world truly are.”

“May the light of the Great Bright One guide your Path,” the speaker said with a bow, Jake nodding in acknowledgment as he walked out of the room. Outside, the attendant who had originally brought him there was waiting, and based on how her face had changed at times throughout the conversation he had with the council, she had definitely heard everything they said.

There was a lot to take in. Clearly, this Great Bright One had a firm hold on the population of the planet, and they all held unswayable faith. Yet they also didn’t seem hostile or even like they expected Jake or anyone else to believe the same thing they did, though they did expect people to recognize their beliefs. Clearly, they also knew of the existence of other gods. It was all just very weird, and Jake hoped the Voice of the One could shed some light on the situation. If not him, then maybe the attendant who was waiting for him.

Exiting the conference room, the attendant naturally stood ready and bowed in greeting. “I hope your meeting with the council proceeded well. I will admit I heard most of what was said, including that you are to prove your power by slaying a Prima. Do you wish for me to lead you to one of the battlefields immediately? I have one in mind, commanded by our top general. If you impress him, his word will hold more sway than anyone else’s. Besides that of the Voice of the One, of course.”

She said the last part jokingly, as if it was a given. Jake responded by nodding, agreeing to her proposal. “Please lead me there.”

With an enthusiastic nod, the elven attendant led Jake away from the Council Estate, seemingly in a better mood than when they arrived. She was also a lot more talkative on the way through the city as they headed for the military’s teleportation center – because, apparently, they kept those separate from the civilian ones on this planet.

Jake tried to probe as much as he could to learn more about the planet and the Great Bright One, even playing the part of an interested potential believer at times. The elven attendant gladly answered everything and volunteered much information Jake hadn’t even asked about. Jake knew she was probably trying to make the planet seem a lot better than it actually was, but it all sounded kind of... nice?

He had called them a cult, but he didn’t really hear anything cult-like outside of their looney beliefs. They didn’t force people into particular Paths like the Holy Church either or required absolute obedience and faith. Based on what Jake saw when he scouted with his Pulse, everything also seemed to track with what the attendant said. What was the most surprising was that people were allowed to freely leave without any problems, with a lot of people having chosen to do so, especially those who went to

Nevermore. Of course, Jake couldn't confirm these people chose to leave, but the attendant didn't seem like she was lying.

The only real crime Jake would say the planet committed was being weak. Because he really didn't see a lot of powerful people. After they teleported to the frontlines and Jake saw the so-called top general of the entire planet, this was further cemented.

[Elf – lvl 270 – Minor Blessing of the Great Bright One]

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

Sure, his level wasn't atrocious, but he was weak. Jake didn't feel any threat from the guy, and compared to the World Leader Olliandra on the last planet, this guy really sucked... and it wasn't even like she was that strong either.

There was one thing, though. For him to reach that level, he had to have gone to Nevermore, right? Jake wondered how the extreme beliefs of the ones on this planet meshed with that. Jake could understand people leaving, but when he did a few scans here on the frontlines, he saw many who had gone to Nevermore. Really odd.

Jake had lots of questions, but he'd chosen to save them all for the Voice of the One. For now, he was there to prove he was strong enough to help with the Prima Guardian.

"Ah, you must be that solo World Leader I heard about," the general said when Jake entered a large temporary building that looked like it was made out of white plastic and plexiglass.

"That would be me," Jake confirmed. "I heard you have some Primas for me to hunt?"

"That's quite the understatement," the man chuckled, stroking his blonde beard. "We have managed to funnel them into this area pretty well with different lures and scouting teams, making this the single-largest battlefield on the planet for regular monsters and Primas both."

"How many have you slain so far? Primas, that is," Jake asked curiously.

“Based on the newest report, eighty-six. Mainly the more speedy types who got here from the Prima Vessel first. We make use of their differing speeds to not get overwhelmed with too many at a time, and so far, it’s working,” the general explained.

Jake nodded, having also done a few Pulses to see the base camp and some of the battlefield. Things were honestly pretty well organized, especially when one considered the massive advantage this planet had: pure fucking numbers. Jake wasn’t even talking about C-grades here. They had millions of D-grades also helping in this war, primarily serving to help amplify magical formations or defensive barriers.

“Just point me to the Prima you want dead, and I’ll handle it. Alone. My Path allows me to land incredibly powerful blows from stealth and then leverage that into an advantage, using a bow,” Jake said, explaining a bit of his Path. It wasn’t like he would have hidden this part anyway, and he saw no harm in telling the general to earn some trust points.

“Alright... sounds like you would do well against mage types,” the man nodded. The table in front of him changed as a 3D map was shown of the nearby battlefield. A section of it was highlighted, as the general explained. “We got one such Prima in this area. Hidden pretty well, and very annoying when it shows up. It also seems a lot more intelligent and cautious than most other Primas. It was one of the first to arrive, but the problem is that every time we tried to move in on it, it retreated to recover, only to return shortly after to unleash a few skills. It has done this four times so far and has caused a few thousand casualties already.”

“Sounds like a good target,” Jake agreed, a bit impressed with the Prima for acting like that. Were the ones on Earth also that smart? C-grades did tend to all be smart, so probably? Chances are, the ones on Earth never had the chance to show off just how bright they were due to dying too fast.

The general seemed pleased as another 3D model appeared, this one showing a thin, kind of humanoid creature that looked like the mix between a jellyfish and an octopus. At least it had a mix of feelers and tentacles instead of arms and legs, with a few also just extending out here and there from its body.

“This is the newest scan we have of it. It possesses space magic and some form of force magic we believe. Perhaps just a derivative of space magic, our data is inconclusive on that front. Our original plan was to prepare a team of rogueish fighters to take it down, but if you can do it, that would be more than welcome,” the general continued.

Honestly, all of this was unnecessary, but Jake chose to act as if this was all critical information as he nodded along. He wanted to learn more about what was going on with this planet and this Great Bright One, and Jake was pretty sure proving himself too strong could make that very hard.

That's why he had decided to prove himself strong but not overpowered. He would also make it look like he was a one-trick pony who only really had the strategy of landing powerful blows from stealth and then just shooting a few more arrows afterward, hoping it would be enough. Alright, that kind of was his strategy most of the time... moving on.

After a bit more briefing, the general was suddenly interrupted as some magic message seemed to arrive. "New attack incoming... and it looks like your target may also be on its way based on our scanners."

"I'll get set up right away," Jake nodded.

"Be aware I will have a scout keep an eye on you during all this," the man noted. "She will keep her distance to not reveal your position, but we naturally need someone to witness and attest to your abilities."

"That's only to be expected," Jake agreed. "I'll head out. Good luck on the frontlines."

"And good luck to you," the general nodded. "May the Great Bright One bless your quest."

Jake simply nodded and headed out to take down the Prima. On the way out, he got a mini projector thing that could show a map of the battlefield, and it was even live-updated with the estimated position of the Prima he was to kill.

Honestly, it was all some impressive tech, and Jake felt like Arnold would have liked things on this planet... though he would probably also think they were simplistic and didn't have enough void magic.

While making his way forward, he also briefly made eye contact with the scout who was to keep an eye on him, the woman not trying to hide what she was doing. Jake just gave her a brief nod as she followed behind him at a good distance, using okay-ish stealth skills. He also used his own stealth skills, though he didn't go full-on Unseen Hunter.

Getting to the battlefield didn't take long, and Jake observed things for a while to see how the elves fought. As expected, lots of light magic was going on, with burning rays filling the air and scorching beasts in droves.

Some of this light magic came from towers constructed near the frontlines, with each of these towers having a group of five C-grades at the top, while the inside was filled with D-grades and magical scripts, making these D-grades effectively serve as batteries and amplifiers. A few D-grades wouldn't help much... but stuff a few thousand into a tower, and it could do some work. Again, seeing how a planet with such a huge population had adapted to fight was very interesting.

Jake kept looking as he made his way forward, being careful with his speed so the scout could keep up, and he didn't show off too much. Soon enough, he spotted his target in the distance, and as the general had said, it definitely played things safe. Its way of fighting also reminded Jake a bit of the Fallen King, as it sent out blasts of force here and there, though it was definitely more specialized for long-range combat rather than mid-range.

He took a bit longer to find a good vantage point, at which point he began setting up. To sell his one-trick style of combat, Jake began to put down a magic circle around him before he would shoot. What did this circle do? Nothing, Jake just made up some bullshit, but he kept the runes super fucking complicated to make sure the scout couldn't see he was faking it.

After about a minute of setting up the fake magic circle, Jake finally took out his bow. He had considered it and decided to still use a Protean Arrow, though he wouldn't make one with full power. His reason for using one was more for aesthetic reasons. It just made more sense that a big arrow would do way more damage than a small arrow.

Finally, Jake nocked the arrow and began to charge Arcane Powershot. He very carefully estimated how much power he put in before he released the string and sent the arrow flying. The Prima he targeted noticed the attack coming its way and tried to react, but Jake used Gaze to ensure it would hit.

The arrow struck the Prima right in the chest before exploding, sending it flying backward as parts of its body were blown apart. Jake had very deliberately ensured he wouldn't one-shot it, just get very close.

He followed up with three more arrows before the Prima could recover, finally taking it down for good.

You have slain [Tencufi Prima – lvl 279]

Jake nodded, satisfied with his performance. However, when he saw the scout, she looked on with wide eyes while gawking.

Seriously? Jake questioned. He had held back so much... did she have any idea how difficult it was to not one-shot something below his own level like that? It was really bloody hard to be that weak!

Either way, he hoped he hadn't overdone it. Still, to buy some more good guy points, Jake unleashed a few more attacks, killing regular monsters that looked like they were causing problems for the many elven fighters. He only stopped when a group of winged beasts began to head his way, retreating as he quickly made his way back toward the general, trying to look extremely tired from this whole ordeal.

Jake had the scout go ahead as he made himself a lot slower to get back. He needed to give the scout some time to report while also hopefully selling that he was kind of tired. When he finally arrived and saw the very pleased look on the face of the general, Jake believed he had succeeded.

"Truly impressive... you might just be the strongest mercenary to have arrived thus far," the general said. "At least you have the single-strongest attack I've seen. Very useful for hunting powerful monsters, for sure.

"I do have some more cards hidden that I've saved specifically for the Prima Guardian," Jake shared, also trying to bring the topic back to the Prima Guardian. While the planet was interesting, his main objective was still to kill the big boss, after all.

"Certainly, we are one step closer to facing the Guardian, but to release it is not my decision, but up to the discretion of the Voice of the One and the guidance he receives from the Great Bright One," the general shook his head before smiling. "Luckily for you, I got a report just before you returned... the Voice of the One has agreed to see you."

Chapter 954: Voice of the One

Finally Jake would have a meeting with the World Leader of the humongously populated elven planet. He needed the guy to agree to engage the Prima Guardian, so this was what he had been waiting for. It was also why Jake had been holding back so far.

Jake felt pretty damn certain that had he gone full power from the get-go and flexed all over the elves, he would have never gotten a meeting with the Voice of the One unless he forced his way to one. Even so, there was a chance Jake would have to kill a lot of elves to get what he wanted... and he really didn't see any need to do that.

People tended to fear people who were too strong. What Jake had presented proved that he was powerful, yes, perhaps even the most powerful individual on the planet... but not so strong that the general and others felt like they couldn't still handle Jake should he choose to turn hostile.

To clarify, Jake didn't see a world where they could handle him at full power if they did end up in a conflict. This was a big reason why he wanted to avoid having to fight in the first place.

It wasn't like acting weaker than he actually was felt like a slight to his honor or anything. He would reveal himself soon enough when the time was right. All of this was just a strategy to most effectively get what he wanted without also doing a genocide.

Miranda also wouldn't like it if Jake did a genocide. Definitely wouldn't look good either from an outside perspective if Jake went to some peaceful elven planet and just started blasting. Ell'Hakan could definitely use that to spin his story about how truly evil Jake was. Last but not least... Jake just didn't want to kill a bunch of weaklings for no damn reason if he could avoid it. It just felt icky.

Either way, operation "strong but not too strong" had succeeded, and Jake was on his way to a meeting with the Voice of the One. The attendant escorted him with much delight while praising how powerful he was. She also really laid it on thick how awesome the Great Bright One was, and her intent for Jake to join them was utterly shameless. Honestly, Jake respected the grift.

Once they arrived back in the capital city, they were soon joined by a group of elves to take Jake the rest of the way. However, in addition to these, Jake also saw a few of the mercenaries around, keeping an eye on things. Together with the elven escort that was definitely in the higher echelons of power of the planet and the mercenaries... yep, these were definitely the people meant to ensure Jake wouldn't try anything.

Certainly wouldn't have allowed me within a hundred kilometers of the Voice of the One if they thought I was a risk to his life, Jake thought confidently as he politely greeted the escort and followed them. Surprisingly, they left the capital city again and headed toward a large mountain Jake had spotted in the distance before but hadn't really thought more about.

Jake flew with the same pace as his escorts, the mercenaries not even trying to hide they were also there. It didn't take long before they arrived at the mountain, where Jake saw even more guards around. These were stronger than his escort, too.

What's more, Jake couldn't remember when he had last seen so many magical barriers and formations in one place. Mind you, this wasn't because this was the most impressive Jake had seen, just that most seemed to prioritize quality over quantity, and because maintaining this many formations had to be expensive as hell.

He also saw that the mountain had been hollowed out, with a structure built within. In the center of the construction, Jake saw a room with a single person sitting inside. The man Jake was to speak with, he reckoned.

"The Voice of the One awaits inside," one of the guards at the main gate said, as he carefully looked over Jake.

"I'm happy to have been allowed this meeting," Jake said, continuing to play his role.

The guard just nodded and threw a glance at his partner. The two of them took out a token each as they lit up, making the door also light up, and a hallway filled with light appeared in front of Jake. It was so damn bright it looked like a laser shot out of the hallway, attempting to blind Jake.

Bloody hell, Jake cursed internally as he walked into the hallway of light. Once inside, he saw that the source of light was magic circles placed on every wall, with a one-way mirror placed in front of it so it would both send out and reflect light. It was so goddamn extreme and stupid Jake almost found it funny. Almost. If Jake had been a D-grade still, he was pretty damn sure he would have been burned to a crisp just walking through the hallway with his non-existent light affinity.

Now, he was fine, though. Not that it wasn't annoying to walk through it, and he wondered how anyone could live there.

This hallway continued for nearly a hundred meters into the mountain, with a few paths off to the side here and there on the way, all covered with barriers of light that looked identical to the mirrors, making them incredibly hard to spot within the light-filled hallway. Behind these barriers, Jake also finally saw one of the reasons for the design of this place.

They had been pretty hard to see due to their incorporeal forms... but the mountain had quite a few light elementals within it. These elementals fed on the heavy light affinity mana to grow stronger, and Jake wouldn't be surprised if they were somehow tied to the Voice of the One or even the Great Bright One.

Having reached the end of the hallway, it was time to find out what he was dealing with. A door opened up at the end of the hallway, and Jake walked inside and found himself in a small room with a couch and a chair that, for one, wasn't filled with light. The door behind him closed as another one opened up in front of him, leading into where the Voice of the One sat.

Jake had been surprised at, and even praised, the way the Council Estate had designed their meeting room. He liked that they didn't use height to indicate they had a higher position than any guests visiting. This was clearly not a sentiment shared by the Voice of the One.

The entire room was large and circular, with a large raised platform in the middle with a circular bed. On top of this bed, an elven man sat with his eyes closed, light mana revolving around him. He had long blonde hair that spilled out onto the bed, and he wore a bright white robe with intricate patterns on it. Entering the room, Jake quickly used Identify.

[Elf – lvl 287 – Greater Blessing of the Great Bright One]

Right as he did, the elf also opened his eyes, both shooting out beams of light for a moment. Jake immediately felt an Identify on him, and he felt pretty happy he had masked his true level before going to the planet. He was also impressed that the elf had a higher level than himself... though Jake wouldn't comment on the power level he felt from the elf.

Alright, he would. Stronger than Olliandra but way weaker than Jake. Weaker than anyone on Earth's strike team, too. Maybe around the level of Reika?

“Welcome, World Leader from across the stars,” the Voice of the One said in a voice that echoed throughout the hall.

“Hello there,” Jake said with a smile, also noting the Greater Blessing on the guy. A Greater Blessing was enough to allow someone to directly communicate with a god, albeit not very effectively. Usually, those blessed could only talk with their gods through rituals, prayers, some forms of meditation, or other unique circumstances where the god directly reached out. The higher your rank of Blessing was, the easier it was to hear the words of a god, and the easier it was to reach out.

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Jake being able to directly talk with Villy was definitely not normal in the slightest... especially not these days.

“I hear you have proven yourself not only a leader but a hunter of impressive power. Thank you for offering your assistance to us,” the elven man said, nodding his head slightly in acknowledgment. “I was also told you wish to engage the Prima Guardian soon rather than later. However, after conferring with the Great Bright One, I must sadly inform you that this is not possible. It’s too soon, and we cannot be blinded by ambition and move too fast.”

And this was where Jake believed his role of being “strong but not too strong” ended, and his role as a “terrifying existence who can kill your Prima Guardian and threatens the entire planet if you piss him off too much” began.

Jake smiled as he looked at the Voice of the One.

“Impressive theatrics... this entire setup is indeed very elaborate. Definitely convincing to the masses,” Jake spoke, his tone and demeanor changed. Something the Voice of the One clearly noticed.

“I do not know what you are-”

“You said you just talked to the Great Bright One, right?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

The elf nodded and was about to answer, but Jake cut him off before he had a chance to.

“See, that’s a little weird, isn’t it... considering I haven’t been able to reach out to the god who blessed me ever since the system event began,” Jake said, in a very much accusatory tone.

This was something Jake hadn’t really commented on, and it had even taken him a moment to notice... but ever since the Prima Guardian arrived on Earth and the event officially began, he had been cut off from Villy. Perhaps it was his time in Nevermore, where he spent fifty years cut off from the god, that had made it not feel that weird anymore not to have Villy observing anymore.

Considering it was a system event, perhaps this shouldn’t be overly surprising, but the event did feel different in that he could still travel around and even go to other universes. At least he believed he could, though he hadn’t tried. Either way... point was that the Voice of the One was full of shit when he said he had been talking to his god.

The atmosphere in the room changed with Jake’s accusation, and he got the feeling the elf was about to do something as Jake, for the first time since arriving on the planet, didn’t hold back at all. He fully unleashed his aura, mixing in a bit of Pride.

“I wouldn’t do anything stupid,” Jake said in a cold tone. “We’re just talking here, right?”

Staring down at Jake with wide eyes, the Voice of the One was visibly shaking. “You... you were sent here by Ell’Hakan, weren’t you?”

... what?

Alright... alright, he could try and roll with this.

“You know why I’m here,” Jake tried to act menacingly. Which, unsurprisingly, wasn’t very hard when the elf was already shaking in fear. At least he was for a moment, but he seemed to gather himself rather quickly and regained some dignity as he answered.

"I... we never intended to get into any conflict with the Prima Guardian Alliance, and there is no cause for this. We may not be working with you, but that does not make us enemies. All we want is to continue our peaceful existence and remain neutral," the elf said.

Jake definitely felt like the villain in this situation, threatening the leader of a peaceful faction, but he still kept pressing.

"You paint yourself some peaceful leader, yet you rule through deceit and lies, making your entire planet believe this Great Bright One is some supreme god and creator of the system. Did you really think that would have no consequences?" Jake asked, trying to remain cold. "Also, do you truly think Ell'Hakan will allow you to just sit on the sidelines?"

The Voice of the One clenched his fists when Jake said this. For a moment, he seemed to reflect on something before he looked up at Jake with steeled eyes. "Says you, the servant of some delusional fucking lunatic who abuses his Bloodline to create fanatics to fight some other Chosen. And for what? To help his equally delusional Patron try and kill a Primordial? It's lunacy, and yet you dare accuse me of anything. Did I lie? Yes, yes, I fucking did! How else was I supposed to get seventy-nine damn countries in one room and united under one banner? We would have destroyed ourselves before this event even started if I hadn't! They needed something to gather around, some sense of certainty. Do I think this is ideal? Of course I don't, but it's not something I can fix right now, not when the entire damn galaxy is trapped between two Chosen trying to compete on who can be the biggest menace to the multiverse."

To say he went off would be an understatement, as the Voice of the One yelled practically everything. Jake was honestly taken aback at the sheer fervor displayed by the elf, but more than that... he really hated Ell'Hakan, didn't he? Not that he sounded like a massive fan of Jake, either.

The elf also clearly wasn't done as he stood up. In all of the rooms within the mountain, Jake felt the light elementals stir as the Voice of the One prepared to call upon them. "I may not be as powerful as you, but even if I die, I sha-

"No, we're good," Jake interrupted the guy as he raised a hand.

"... what?"

"We good," Jake repeated. "Though I would recommend 'orange fuck' over Ell'Hakan."

A brief pause followed.

“Who are you?” the elf just stared confused.

“Thayne,” he finally introduced himself. Having revealed his power, keeping his name a secret didn’t matter much anymore, and it would also be nice to see if the guy recognized him.

“That name... you’re the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?” the Voice of the One asked with wide eyes.

“The one and only,” Jake answered nonchalantly. “Though I guess that isn’t super impressive in retrospect. Compared to the Great Bright One, the Malefic Viper is just some nobody, right?”

“I... that was never something I claimed...” the elf said, back to acting pretty damn fearful. “All I said was that the system was granted to us by the Great Bright One. Our Tutorial was organized by this god, and I did well and managed to get my Blessing there, and with it being the only divine influence anyone knew of... I will admit I took advantage to try and make the Great Bright One look far more impressive than any god can possibly be. However, I never claimed anything regarding power. I even tried to make them think of the Great Bright One as more like a concept than an actual living being.”

“Sounds like there is an entire story behind this entire Great Bright One thing,” Jake commented. “I may be interested in hearing it later, but for now, I’m far more interested in your little outburst regarding Ell’Hakan earlier.”

The elf hesitated but still answered after a few seconds. “The Chosen of Yip of Yore tried to recruit us for his alliance, and at first, I considered it... but the Great Bright One warned me. In retrospect, something certainly was wrong during our meeting, and after the Great Bright One explained his Bloodline, I understood what he did. Joining hands with him isn’t actually joining hands, but collaring yourself. A collar that may become a noose at any moment should Ell’Hakan so desire.”

Jake nodded at the pretty expected explanation as he asked a follow-up question: “How does the Great Bright One know so much about his Bloodline?”

“The Great Bright One was once a light elemental that has often worked with the Holy Church, even if he isn’t a member. From my understanding, he learned about Ell’Hakan through someone he knew in the Church.”

“I see,” Jake nodded. That did make sense. “Now, not to put you on the spot... but what are your thoughts on the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?”

It was definitely a bit cheeky to ask that, but Jake couldn’t help himself.

“In truth, not very positive. All I know of you is that you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, a god not known as the kindest or most merciful, and that you are by proxy in a conflict with Ell’Hakan due to your Patron. Nothing indicates to me your presence here isn’t an existential threat,” the elf answered.

Jake nodded, considering all of this from the elf’s perspective. It definitely had to suck being stuck in the middle like this while you just wanted to remain neutral.

“Fair enough. But I was truthful when I said I doubt Ell’Hakan will allow you to remain on the sidelines. Perhaps he would for a while, but his ambitions and Path require him to expand his influence and control,” Jake said.

“I’m well aware,” the elf sighed. “It truly is a choice between two evils, huh? Either we subjugate ourselves to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper or a maniac who uses his Bloodline to control your emotions.”

“No?” Jake asked, confused.

“What?” the elf said, equally confused.

“I don’t care if you remain neutral,” Jake shrugged. “Might it be necessary to recognize that you are living within the territory of the Order at some point? Sure, but I’m not sure I would call that subjugating.”

"If... if you're not here to suppress us, why did you sneak in to have a meeting with me like this in the first place?" the elven World Leader questioned.

"Oh, I've been very upfront about that from the beginning. I need you to release the Prima Guardian from the Prima Vessel so I can kill it. Afterward, I promise to return to my own planet and not bother you further. Not saying there can't be political talk after that, but it would be with my right hand," Jake said.

"... are you really just here to kill the Prima Guardian?" the elf asked in disbelief.

"Yep, and now that we've made that clear, you have no reason to refuse, right?" Jake asked with a cheeky smile as he looked forward to taking down a third Guardian.

Chapter 955: Equal Contributors

All's well that ends well. At least, Jake thought so after he had expertly politicked his way into convincing the other World Leader to release the Prima Guardian. What's more, it turns out the elven World Leader was way more decent than Jake had initially expected.

It hadn't taken much convincing to make the guy agree to activate the Prima Guardian, not after he knew Jake's identity. In the words of the elf, if Jake couldn't beat the Prima Guardian as the top-ranking person on the Nevermore Leaderboard, then they wouldn't have stood a chance either way and would have faced total annihilation.

There was one minor issue, though.

"The Prima Vessel struck down on the other side of the planet from the capital, and while we have populated much of this world and have some forward bases, there is still a vast area of wilderness between the nearest teleportation circle and the Vessel," the elven World Leader explained.

"How long do you reckon it will take to reach it?" Jake questioned.

"With my speed, around half a day. We could also try and find a space mage to make things faster, but I doubt I would want to. I know that the Primas made use of those with the space affinity among them to

reach out defensive positions faster, but I'm not sure if bringing along a third person would be wise," the elf said, shaking his head.

"Why not?" Jake asked. If they could get there faster, that would just be great.

"It would risk exposing things," the elf said as he seemed to think for a while. "This may seem presumptuous, but would it be fine if the story after this becomes that the two of us faced the Prima Guardian together?"

"Will we face it together?" Jake questioned. "Not gonna lie, I feel like you would be more of a liability than any kind of help. In fact, I'm positively certain you would cause more harm than good."

No way Lone Hunter would work if he did actually fight with the guy, even if he was a lot weaker. Also, while Jake said the elf felt about as strong as Reika, he questioned how good the guy would actually be at fighting if he had just been the spiritual leader for his planet this entire time. He definitely specialized in a Path revolving around being the Voice of the One rather than a fighter.

"That's a bit insulting but probably also true," the elf sighed. "My point is that should you just kill the Prima Guardian alone, there will be many questions, while if I say we killed it together, there will be far fewer who raise any issues. I want to keep it entirely ambiguous who contributed the most, allowing everyone here to believe I was the one who did the most, while anyone else who hears about it will naturally know I was just a tag-along required to release the boss."

"We can talk about that on the way," Jake said, not outright rejecting the idea as he did want to ask some more questions about this entire planet, and seeing as they had quite a few hours of traveling through the wilderness together, he reckoned there would be plenty of time for that.

"Very well," the elven World Leader nodded. "By the way, I noticed I never introduced myself. Name's Kindroth, Son of Kindrothar... yes, my father didn't have a lot of imagination when it came to names. Ah, but please avoid using my name when around others. No one has actually called me by it ever since I got the title of Voice of the One."

"I guess you already know, but my full name's Jake Thayne, no idea where the Thayne comes from," Jake also reintroduced himself. "Now, how do you want to approach going out there, oh Voice of the One?"

Kindroth smiled a bit at Jake's mocking tone as he got down and stood beside Jake. "Again, I must act presumptuously and make it look like we're walking out there as equals. If not, it will just cause undue trouble I don't think either of us want."

"I genuinely don't care," Jake shrugged, the elf looking relieved at the answer. "I do care a little how you will introduce me, though. Because there's no way I'm going to let you tell everyone I'm some agent sent by the Great Bright One. Oh, and also, I already told that council of yours I don't follow a god, so that may cause some problems."

"Is that because you don't want others to know you are the Chosen?" Kindroth questioned, surprised.

"At the time, I wanted to avoid it," Jake shrugged. "I get the feeling they wouldn't have allowed me to see you had I introduced myself as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

"True, they would have likely tried to evacuate a very willing me to some safehouse while trying to make you leave the planet... something I don't imagine would have ended well for them, seeing as you need me to free the Prima Guardian and you don't strike me as the sort who would have just left," Kindroth nodded. "But if you are fine with people knowing now, let me formally introduce you. As for what you said to the council... well, you don't exactly follow the Malefic Viper, now do you? You instead embody his will and act as his mortal representative. Merely saying you follow the Malefic One doesn't do such a vital role justice, so you never lied in the slightest."

Jake looked at the elf a bit and saw him flash a familiar smile he had seen Miranda with several times. The guy really was good at lying and twisting the truth, which shouldn't be that surprising considering what he had accomplished on the planet.

With a plan of sorts, the two of them walked back through the hallway of light, and as they passed the different rooms with light elementals inside, Kindroth held out his hands as each elemental turned into a beam that light that shot toward him and formed a small rune upon landing on his body. The elf obviously noticed Jake's interested gaze as he explained:

"I am able to absorb and use light elementals, and quite honestly, I'm pretty useless without them," he said with a wry smile. "It does fit me pretty well thematically, though. Summoning a light elemental as the voice of someone called the Great Bright One is very convincing."

Jake didn't comment but just nodded as they soon reached the exit of the mountain. Outside, the entire escort group, mercenaries, and guards waited. When the gate swung open, and they all saw the Voice of the One, they all instantly fell to their knees, with even the mercenaries acting overly respectful.

"We greet the Voice of the One," the two guards said in unison.

"At ease," Kindroth said as he raised a hand and he turned to look at Jake. "This man and I are on our way to release the Prima Guardian now and slay it."

His words were incredibly direct, earning him many confused gazes as one of the mercenaries stepped forward. "Excuse me, but weren't you recruiting us to help face the Guardian?"

Kindroth looked at the mercenary and nodded. "That is true. However, things have changed. I would welcome you all to continue helping against the Primas, but the Prima Guardian shall be handled by the two of us."

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"I don't mean to question you, but I have heard these Prima Guardians are not to be underestimated..." the mercenary said, and Jake detected some genuine worry from the guy. Jake wasn't sure if it was because he was a decent guy who wanted to warn another person or that he realized shit would hit the fan if the Voice of the One went and got himself killed, but it didn't matter either way.

"Your worry is entirely needless. This is the will of the Great Bright One, and besides, I do not go alone," the Voice of the One said, looking back to Jake. "Introductions may be late, but allow me to anyway: This man is the Chosen of the Malefic One, the pinnacle of our Era. With him at my side, what do I have to fear?"

Jake saw Kindroth give him a subtle wink, and Jake instantly understood. His aura flared as the mercenary stumbled back in fright along with the escort group and guards. The guards even seemed to take a defensive stance but didn't go further than that as the Voice of the One spoke.

"I believe there shall be no further objections? Good. Now we shall be off; there is no reason to delay needlessly," the elf said, turning to leave.

Jake just gave them all a nod as he followed, deciding to not say or do anything that could disturb whatever ploy the elf was cooking up.

None of them dared say anything, though they definitely looked like they wanted to, as Jake and the Voice of the One headed toward the capital city, flying at a steady pace. Once there, Kindroth had them stop by the Council Estate to explain their plans, and all of the council members were shocked when they learned who Jake really was. Any kind of worry that Jake could be a danger was also shut down by the Voice of the One, allowing the two of them to leave quickly and really showing how much damn influence the elf had. Even if he didn't officially lead the planet, it was clear his word was law, and if he told them to jump, the only question they would ask was how high.

A few teleports later, they finally reached a forward base wherefrom they would head into the wilderness. Every person they met on the way there bowed in reverence toward Kindroth, with the elf responding with kind words every time without missing a beat.

However, once they were out of the cities and made their way a bit into the wilderness, the elf let out a huge sigh. "How do you keep up with it?"

"What?" Jake asked.

"Being more of a figurehead than a person," Kindroth said. "It's exhausting. The constant expectations of perfection and flawless modicum in any situation, the fact anyone believes anything you say is pure fact and won't even argue back or advise you on anything even when what you say is dumb as fuck... for a while, I thought it was great, but now all it does is tire me out. You know, that's one of the reasons I was keen on having a council and rarely get involved with anything they do. I'm sure they can govern way better than I can, and I can just act like some benevolent semi-divine existence without them questioning anything."

"If it's any consolation, going by how things are here, they definitely can rule the planet better than you as a council," Jake shrugged. "As for your question... I kind of don't feel like that? It's probably because you are a public figure, while I remain very much private. Those I do choose to interact with on a regular basis I view more as equals, with them also treating me as a person."

"Sounds nice," Kindroth said with a dry smile. "You're the first person I've had a normal conversation with where I don't have to pretend for... well, ever since Nevermore. I went there with a group

organized with input from my Patron, so I could act pretty normal there. Now that I'm back here, though..."

As the two of them continued their journey, they continued having small talk. Jake was also surprised at how casually the elf had quickly begun to treat Jake, as he was also used to people acting weird once they knew he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Perhaps it was because he had been socially starved, or just that he was so used to never being viewed as beneath anyone, so he wasn't really thinking about it, but the elf seemed more than happy to treat Jake as an equal.

Another positive thing about the Elven World Leader was his speed, which genuinely impressed Jake. As a light magic user, Jake had expected him to be pretty fast, but he surpassed expectations and could keep up with Jake pretty damn well. The fact Jake still couldn't summon his wings did slow him down a little, but just using One Step and flying normally, Jake was still pretty damn speedy.

Jake and Kindroth did encounter a few Primas on the way, but Jake easily handled them one after another. They were all pretty damn weak, and based on Jake's estimates, he didn't even think the Prima Guardian would be stronger on this planet than on Olliandra's. It would probably be dependent on how many Primas had died.

There was one time when they were attacked by four Primas at once that Jake let Kindroth handle one of them on his own, and as expected... he kinda sucked in combat. His offensive power basically came down to summoning light elementals and basic magic attacks, and that was about it.

On the defensive side, he was pretty fucking good, though. The Primas couldn't even try to catch him, and Jake understood why the guy hadn't seemed worried about getting killed by the Prima Guardian before Jake could help. He was a man fully specialized in conning the populace and being really good at running away.

As Kindroth had said, it ended up taking them about half a day to reach the Prima Vessel. Once there, the two of them briefly discussed their approach before Jake headed up into the sky as the elf entered the Vessel.

The plan was simple: Jake would go stealth and prepare his strongest attack far up in the sky, while Kindroth would go trigger the Prima Guardian and then quickly run out of the Vessel, never once attacking or directly engaging the Guardian with the hope this wouldn't interfere with Lone Hunter.

It was indeed a simple plan, thought up by a simple hunter who soon stopped once he was above a few layers of clouds as he got ready. He proceeded to make his Protean Arrow, specializing it to kill flesh and blood lifeforms as practically every Prima they had seen was one, and he even put on his best Heartrot Poison to really ensure it would be a real killer.

Nocking the Protean Arrow, Jake held nothing back as he began charging his attack with Arcane Awakening fully activated. The arcane energies revolved around him while Arcane Powershot built up power, and just then, a beam of light flew out of the Prima Vessel.

A moment later, another figure followed. The Prima Guardian that appeared reminded Jake a bit of a lamia, actually, with a squid-like bottom and a kind of more humanoid top section, though it was still a bit away from actually looking like an elf or human. Not that its appearance was that important, considering Jake nor anyone else wouldn't be looking at it for long.

Kindroth, as the target of the Prima Guardian, kept dodging away as it chased him, having turned himself into a living beam of light. Jake took his time to fully charge the attack, as the elf really didn't look like he was in any danger. On a side note here... Lone Hunter was still active, though Jake really didn't have much time to consider if it really should be.

A dozen or so seconds passed with the Prima Guardian trying to chase down Kindroth, until Jake felt his body reach its limits. With a final deep breath, Jake released the string as the attack descended, parting the clouds in its wake as it left a trail of destructive energies.

To make sure he would hit, he naturally also made sure to use a Primal Gaze on the Guardian as it froze up, stopping its chase. Kindroth barely had time to materialize to see Jake's arrow strike true.

Perhaps it was because the Prima Guardian didn't have any time to adapt and improve, or maybe it was its slightly lower level... but this time around, Jake didn't end up needing any follow-up arrows. The attack hit the Prima Guardian right on top of its head, blowing it apart entirely before continuing through its body, destroying it from within as more than eighty percent of its body mass was destroyed with that one arrow – its surviving flesh infected with Heartrot Poison.

It was pretty satisfying seeing Kindroth gawk in awe as Jake got his notification.

You have slain [Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 315]– Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Satisfied, Jake descended toward the elven World Leader. As he did... Jake actually felt a bit nervous that the elf would start to act weird, as he had enjoyed their more casual interactions over the last day or so. However, that proved to not be a problem. Right when Jake got close, the elf exclaimed loudly.

"You are fucking overpowered, you know that right? Damn, now it makes sense why the final message I got from my Patron was to not piss you off; you're more dangerous than this entire bloody Prima Invasion."

Jake couldn't help but smile as he shot back. "And yet we were somehow equal contributors to the outcome of this fight."

"I know, right? How nice of me to give you credit despite doing most of the work," the elf smirked, staring at the huge crater left behind by the remnant energy of Jake's arrow after it had destroyed the supposedly planet-threatening Prima Guardian.

Chapter 956: A Bright Near Future

Ell'Hakan received the report as he was on the move, and after scanning it briefly, he nodded, satisfied with the results so far. A second Prima Guardian had been slain without his personal involvement, helping speed things up and further cementing trust in the Prima Guardian Alliance. They now had two confirmed teams capable of handling Prima Guardians, though the report did state they lost two fighters, so they would need replacements before engaging the next one.

Naturally, that didn't mean Ell'Hakan was lazing about. He was currently on his way to yet another Prima Vessel, the local World Leader and a party of fighters already waiting at it and ready for his arrival. The Prima Guardian he'd faced on his own planet had been far more difficult than any of these other ones and was something he could easily handle on his lonesome. Such personal displays of strength were always useful to the alliance, too, and he wasn't going to complain about the improved system reward at the end of the event either.

Despite things going well so far, he was far from without worries... and the Malefic Viper's Chosen wasn't even the only cause of it.

This "I" character who'd seemingly performed as well as himself and the Viper's Chosen was still a complete mystery, and with him cut off from Yip of Yore, he couldn't get any divine information on who it may be either. What's more... he had his suspicions that this person or creature was no longer on its homeworld anymore. He did not need this chaotic element.

While considering this, he got another message sent to him.

He scanned the new message briefly. The Prima Guardian Alliance had managed to sneak in a group of mercenaries to the planet of this Great Bright One – a world Ell'Hakan was very much interested in due to its extremely high population and homogeneity – and that message briefly outlined that a certain Chosen had made a visit.

The mercenaries sent only knew that the Chosen had gone to meet with the elf who called himself the "Voice of the One" and nothing more, but that in itself was already... concerning.

Ell'Hakan wasn't just interested in the planet due to its properties, but due to this Voice of the One and his abilities. Few World Leaders had impressed him, and he'd met quite a few of them during the Prima Alliance talk, and out of everyone, the elf was the one Ell'Hakan regarded the highest. It was someone Ell'Hakan had very much wanted in his inner circle, and before this message arrived, he'd still believed it would be possible.

There was no way the mercenaries they'd gathered could take down the Prima Guardian, and Ell'Hakan believed that after their failure, the Voice of the One would be a lot more receptive to further negotiations. Ell'Hakan could respect that the elf didn't like him and was wary, but he still believed that should he face the choice between facing annihilation at the hands of the Prima Guardian and joining hands with the Prima Guardian Alliance, the Voice of the One would make the right choice and come to Ell'Hakan for help.

However... now that didn't seem like it would happen. Not to say this was necessarily a bad outcome. Ell'Hakan saw it very likely that this would all result in the Chosen of the Malefic Viper slaying the Voice of the One due to his personal disagreement with how the planet was ruled or because the World Leader refused to release the Prima Guardian.

If that happened, the Chosen would be forced to engage in quite the slaughter, not just slowing him down during this system event but even giving Ell'Hakan plenty of ammunition to work with and back up the story that the Chosen was a danger to the Prima Guardian Alliance and in no way someone they could even attempt to talk to.

As for the Voice of the One and the Chosen of the Malefic Viper striking some kind of deal or working together, Ell'Hakan considered the chances of that happening pretty low. Now, should it happen, that would undoubtedly end up being a little annoying, but it shouldn't really impact things that much, right?

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"Congratulations, you are now one of the premiere owners of real estate in this entire universe," Jake said with a smile as Kindroth claimed ownership of the Planetary Pylon, thus fully taking the planet as his own.

They were naturally within the core chamber of the planet, having teleported there using the Prima Vessel after the Guardian had died.

"One of the first things I did was abolish private land ownership and claimed that everything the light touched belonged to the Great Bright One, as one of the primary causes of discord before the system was territorial disputes," the elven World Leader answered in a deadpan voice.

"In other words, you fully monopolized the real estate market, truly a genius business move," Jake joked with the guy. "I do wonder how you plan on getting out of all the bullshit you filled the populace with, though. This delusional level of belief in the Great Bright One can't continue forever."

"I'm well aware," Kindroth sighed. "And I can't see an immediate solution either. I do have a plan in mind, though. Scrubbing the planet of the influence of the Great Bright One isn't possible, nor something I want, as I am still a follower of my Patron, and my job is to gather faith for him, but I will begin to address the more extreme beliefs. It will be a subtle process that will take many years, at least decades if not centuries, but I hope I can bring it to a healthy level eventually. May have to push a few people off the levitator in the process, and some political figures may die as I blame them for having twisted my words and the Words of the Great Bright One, but that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

Jake looked at the elf for a moment before just shaking his head. When joking around and being casual, he sometimes forgot this was a man who had somehow managed to unite over a hundred billion elves by getting all of the different country leaders in the same room together and somehow walked out with every single one loyal to him. Jake sucked at politics, something that certainly couldn't be said about Kindroth.

"Like it or not, the planet belongs to you now. At least according to the system it does, and is there really a higher authority?" Jake commented.

"Let's just be honest with ourselves... is it really mine?" the elf raised an eyebrow. "There is no way Ell'Hakan would ever allow our continued existence, even if I do try and improve things, and despite your words or intentions, should you win out, we will be considered under the influence of the Order merely by existing within the same galaxy as the home planet of the Malefic Viper's Chosen."

"What others think and the actual truth is far from always the same," Jake shook his head. "I truly, genuinely, have no interest in ruling the galaxy. Shit, I don't have any interest in ruling my own damn planet. You are right that it will probably still end up being considered my territory, but there's really nothing I can do about that. All I can say is that I have no plans of controlling what others do, as long as they don't do anything too fucked up."

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"Oh, don't get me wrong, I wasn't complaining," Kindroth grinned. "You know, the Great Bright One did brief me on his intentions when I was first blessed, and back then, before he or barely anyone knew about you and Ell'Hakan, the plan was to co-exist with the Holy Church, as assumptions were they would end up ruling the galaxy in the end. Based on what I heard about the Church, I'm not sure being under the thumb of the Order of the Malefic Viper is that much worse."

"How exactly would your way of leading this planet have worked out with the Holy Church?" Jake questioned.

"By now, I hope it's pretty clear I was spitballing most of what I did to unite the planet, with little forethought or long-term planning in the mix during those early days," Kindroth shook his head and sighed. "So you ask how it would work? It fucking wouldn't, but just as I'm willing to sacrifice a few politicians, so the Bright One would also have been willing to sacrifice me by branding me a false prophet. If I got lucky, exile would have been a good outcome from that... but even if I died, it wouldn't really have been that bad. I did what I thought I had to do to save my planet, it worked out, and if my death could secure a better future for everyone, that wouldn't be the worst way to go. We all have to die one day; may as well make it a good death."

"Surprisingly altruistic," Jake said in genuine surprise. Especially because he felt like those weren't empty words, and when he remembered that Kindroth had been willing to fight Jake even after feeling

his aura... yeah, Jake believed him. He didn't agree with the "everyone dies one day" part, but it wasn't something worth really discussing.

"You do strike me as the kind of person that if you had the choice between burning down your own planet or dying, you'd start throwing fireballs... or shooting burning arrows in your case, I guess," the elf smiled. "Anyway, let's get out of here and back to talk to those mercenaries."

Jake followed the elf back to the Prima Vessel to teleport back topside, looking confused at the elf. "Why would we need to talk to them?"

"Huh, I guess no one told you... one of the reasons why we gathered a lot of mercenaries and why the mercenaries even came here was to see if a team that couldn't help just us but several planets out there could be assembled. Think of it as a worse version of the Prima Guardian Alliance that Ell'Hakan has formed, filled with a lot more naivety and delusion," Kindroth explained as he shook his head. "Having seen the Prima Guardian... pretty sure if we all those mercenaries had engaged it, the lot of them would have died. Which is great for you because that means the planets all these people come from definitely need help."

"You're saying there's a bunch of people openly looking for help just sitting around waiting for us to return? That's... convenient," Jake said, surprised.

"Almost suspiciously so," the elf smiled. "But, in truth, you just happened to get incredibly lucky that a plan thought up by the council happened to be highly ill-advised. Oh, and I'm more than happy to be your wingman in this scenario, giving you a glowing recommendation that you are indeed the top Prima Guardian hunter in the galaxy, nay, the universe."

The two of them kept talking as they teleported back to the surface and headed out to return to the nearest teleportation circle.

"As I assume you're not coming along to all these other planets, won't it ruin your story of us being equal contributors if I head off and kill a bunch of Prima Guardians alone, proving you are full of shit?" Jake questioned.

"It'll be fine, and let's not act like any efforts of mine could keep your level of power hidden. Everyone, even those on this planet, will learn of you and just how capable you truly are whether I want them to or

not,” Kindroth said. “When it comes to how much they will learn and how everything is framed... I believe you said her name was Miranda? The de-facto leader of your planet? Yeah, I think I’ll go have a discussion with her. Going by how she’s managed to put up with you as the official World Leader, and your planet hasn’t been the victim of a planetary sacrificial ritual yet, she must be quite capable.”

“You’re awfully casual when it comes to insulting the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his court witch,” Jake commented, trying to sound serious.

“First of all, I was praising her, and secondly, nothing I said was untrue,” Kindroth chuckled. “Now, let’s pick up the pace and get back quickly. See if you can keep up.”

The cheeky bastard picked up speed, flying even faster than before as he turned his body into light form. On the way to the Prima Vessel, they had to deal with Primas a few times, so saving their resources at least a little was advised, but that wasn’t an issue on the way back. With the regular Primas also weakened due to the death of the Guardian, Kindroth wasn’t worried about the forces of the planet either. While he did recognize that they didn’t have many outstanding fighters, they did have a stupidly big army.

Jake responded to the elf’s speed in kind as he also began pushing his One Step further, the two of them shooting into the horizon. This planet, despite its far higher population, was still quite a bit smaller than Earth in size. In fact, Jake hadn’t heard of anyone with larger planets than Earth in the galaxy yet, with William also reporting that Ell’Hakan’s planet was smaller. It was honestly kind of nice because if some of them were larger, Jake could definitely need to drag Sandy along so he wouldn’t have to potentially end up running for weeks to reach the Prima Vessels, dragging along some weak World Leader.

There wasn’t much banter for the rest of the way back, as the two of them soon reached the teleportation circle where they were received by an entire goddamn army who had been awaiting the return of the Voice of the One and his “helper,” the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Once more, Kindroth put on his persona as he masterfully – and swiftly – handled the crowd and allowed Jake and him to pass and return to the capital. Once back, they made a brief visit to the Council Estate to report their success and were also told that the general had already sent a message that the Primas had all gotten significantly weaker.

A bit more stupid politicking later, Jake and the Voice of the One managed to gather the mercenaries representing different planets. Very few people traveled alone like Jake had, but instead went around in parties or even small companies. Some were sent there alone, acting more like envoys or ambassadors

rather than mercenaries, which was also why these mercenaries were stationed in the Council Estate in the first place – something Jake hadn't really questioned but really should have in retrospect.

Jake and Kindroth only needed one person from each other planet, who hopefully held some level of influence back home. These people were all considered within the stronger echelon of their planets, and none of them had engaged the Prima Guardians on their worlds yet. Some of them were still struggling, though, not even able to handle the regular Primas. These mercenaries had pretty much given up on their homeworlds, believing it was doomed. They were helpless and had tried to run to this planet as an escape, perhaps only holding a faint hope deep in their heart that someone would help them.

That was awesome, right?

Because these people took no convincing or wing-manning from the Voice of the One at all. In fact, the moment they heard that all Jake cared about was hunting down Prima Guardians and how killing the Guardian would weaken all the regular Primas and even allow the native monster population to turn and fight the Primas, they were fully on board.

Jake had believed finding a bunch of planets to hunt Prima Guardians on would be difficult. However, as Kindroth said, he'd ended up seriously lucking out by going to this particular elven planet. Jake, a whole bunch of mercenaries, as well as the Voice of the One – who announced he'd been given a quest to confer with the "Witch of Verdant Origins" – all headed toward the large metal dome allowing people to teleport to and from the planet.

The near future was really looking bright for Jake, and when all was said and done, he had a list of at least a dozen planets who were more than happy to have a hunter endorsed by the Voice of the One come to kill their Prima Guardian for them. Even those who knew he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper were convinced by Kindroth, the elf taking advantage of the fact that most mortals really had fuck-all idea about how gods worked and just knew that Jake was some big-shot from the Order of some evil snake god... but if someone named the Voice of the One, representing a god of light said it was fine, it had to be fine, right? He was also a big-shot, after all.

One thing was for sure... due to Kindroth, Jake had a lot of Prima Guardian to kill, and Miranda had quite an interesting meeting ahead of her.

Chapter 957: Methodologies of War

"Fire," Caleb said as a string of black beams shot out, landing on the creature as it roared in anger and pain. It turned toward the position of the snipers and began charging their way as Caleb spoke again. "Activate illusory array four."

A second later, the entire area seemed to warp slightly. The charging Prima Guardian didn't even look like it noticed as it kept charging... but rather than head toward the snipers, it began to slightly curve to one side, with it soon running an entirely wrong way.

The array wouldn't last long before the Guardian noticed, but it was good enough for now. Caleb directed the thirteenth and eighteenth squads of assassins to move in while the Guardian was distracted as ten people erupted from the shadows and attacked the boss, each unleashing powerful skills right away. Caleb also took the chance to glance at the boss yet another time, noting its growing injuries while also throwing in another Identify for the heck of it... and because he wanted to make sure this one couldn't somehow evolve mid-combat, primarily because he remembered the one on Earth having a different name.

[Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 323]

Turning to look at the people that attacked it, the Guardian was faced with only shadows as the ten assassins retreated once more. Another barrage of sniper fire hit a moment later, this time from across the valley from the exact opposite side as the first attack.

Having noticed something was wrong, the Guardian began to release pulses of mana, both analyzing and disrupting the formations and arrays they had placed down in a massive area around the Prima Vessel. The response was quick, as the mages of the Court responded by disabling some of the magic circles temporarily, fooling the Prima into thinking it had destroyed them.

This was the first planet he had gone to after leaving Earth to help the Court of Shadows, and so far, he would say things were going well. The Prima Guardian was also surprisingly weak compared to the one he had fought before, yet pretty damn strong if the planet was meant to have faced it by itself.

Then again, they weren't meant to face it yet, but after potentially over two and a half years, during which they would wipe out most Primas, leading to a weaker Prima Guardian, too. If this wasn't the case, Caleb would have expected the majority of planets with enlightened across the universe to be wiped out, but as things were and the current rules... the Court of Shadows intelligence network put the expected percentage of planets who would end up "destroyed" at twenty-two percent.

It was yet undecided if the Milky Way would drag this stat up or down... but Caleb would do his utmost to ensure it would go the right way.

He continued to direct the flow of combat as more than four thousand members of the Court of Shadows participated in this Prima Guardian hunt. Many of them were supportive members, helping with the formations and arrays to control the Guardian, but there were still over five hundred melee assassins on the battlefield and about an equal number of ranged attackers.

Individually, none of them could do much to the Guardian. However, the Court of Shadows did have some unique abilities that allowed them to still participate. Out of perhaps every faction in the entire multiverse, the Court was the best at having their members be able to still deal damage to things they really shouldn't be able to even touch.

A random newly evolved D-grade attacking someone like Jake, more likely than not, wouldn't do any damage at all. That is to say, you could get a million of the same guy and have them all attack, and unless they used some means to combine their attacks through rituals or formations, none of them would cause any harm. Jake's durability would simply be too high for them. It was a threshold they couldn't pass.

The Court of Shadows had ways to circumvent this threshold. Shadows were slippery and ethereal and could penetrate even the natural defenses granted by the system, even if the damage would be incredibly minor. Even a skilled D-grade assassin could deal damage to a peak C-grade with a single sniper bullet or a stab of their dagger.

Now, the damage would be absolutely negligible. As in, perhaps not even doing one health point's worth of damage... but just the mere fact it did any kind of damage at all was massive.

Needless to say, a bunch of mid-tier C-grades attacking a late-tier C-grade could do far more than a single health point of damage with every blow, but individually, they really were too weak to stand a chance. Yet, in this battle, they were enabled and able to fully participate. All of this was part of the core strategy the Court of Shadows often deployed to take down dangerous foes:

Isolate, harass, kite, confuse, and wear down. If a target couldn't be killed quickly, kill them slowly in a dragged-out assassination where you controlled all factors. Use the shadows to limit their Perception and hide away, never giving them time to recover, and eventually, even someone far more powerful than the assassins would eventually fall.

Of course, if it was possible to go in with overwhelming power to kill the target instantly, that was preferable. In most cases, that is... this not being one of them, as the Prima Guardian wasn't a real target but a mere practice dummy.

Caleb could attack himself, and considering how much weaker this Prima Guardian was than the one on Earth, he reckoned he would have a good chance in a one-on-one. It could get a bit dicey due to its high durability and Caleb's fighting style relying on high burst damage, but he believed he could handle it alone.

That wasn't the point of this, though. This Prima Guardian system event was viewed as just another training exercise in the eyes of the higher-ups of the Court of Shadows, and Caleb going around killing by himself wouldn't really help the natives learn anything, right?

As a Judge, Caleb wasn't just meant to be a fighter but one of the leaders of the Court of Shadows here in the ninety-third universe. Helping the natives get stronger themselves would reflect well on him and earn him more favor than if he just went around killing everything... though if things got too dangerous, he would step in personally.

The battle continued on, the Prima Guardian getting more and more whittled down. It did adapt a little to their attacks, but they attempted to counter this with different elemental attacks carried out primarily through formations or ritual spells cast by some of the mages. Still, the affinities used were very similar, which did result in the fight dragging out.

After the battle had been ongoing for over ten hours with the Prima Guardian just slowly running out of steam, the entire reason why they needed these kinds of training exercises was shown. While there was a certain level of leeway in their strategy and many fail-safes, it was still possible for a group to fuck up enough so that everything fell apart.

And that's exactly what happened.

A squad of mages responsible for a formation messed up, with the backup casters not ready in time to react. The assassins that had just emerged to follow up the attack of a group of snipers found themselves fully exposed as the Prima Guardian turned toward them, light magic channeling as the shadows meant to protect them were dispersed.

Caleb considered giving them a moment to react on their own or maybe even make this a lesson, even if it would cost lives.. but as always, he was perhaps a bit too soft, as he quickly dispelled these thoughts and moved.

Besides... sometimes it was good to show off his power a bit, lest they forget the Judge wasn't just considered an administrative role.

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All his boosting skills were fully activated as Caleb shot across the battlefield, emerging behind the Prima Guardian before it even had time to kill the first assassin. He didn't mask his approach to make sure it wouldn't kill any of them, as it quickly spun around to face him, only to find itself faced with a torrent of black lightning.

Caleb passed through the boss in his transformed state before turning himself corporeal again, slamming his staff down as the ground below the Prima Guardian erupted with lightning, dark thunderclouds gathering above. Attacking again, Caleb landed several blows with his staff before the Guardian could properly adapt to his speed, the ground below the Prima Guardian exploding once more a moment later, sending a bolt of lightning flying toward the skies above.

Riding the lightning, Caleb merged with the thunderclouds for a moment as he channeled his energies and spoke, his words echoing through the clouds.

"Thunderfall of Tenlucis."

He descended in an instant, passing through the Prima Guardian as a pillar of black lightning consumed it. In its damaged state, it simply wasn't able to adapt to the oppressive powers of the black lightning as its body was burned from within, and its soul crumbled before the overwhelming pressure of the dark heavens.

You have slain [Honored Prima Guardian – lvl 323] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Caleb materialized himself in front of the burnt corpse of the Prima Guardian as he infused his voice with mana, addressing everyone.

"Good work from most of you, but a sloppy finale. I expect a full report from all responsible squad leaders within two hours, outlining what went wrong and how to ensure it won't happen again. We move to the next planet in ten hours, and I expect better the second time around. Dismissed."

Across the multiverse, there were many methodologies of war with some more alike than others.

The Holy Church and the Risen had quite a lot of things in common despite their antagonistic relationship, one of which was their hatred of being compared and people pointing out they had a lot of things in common.

Another big thing they had in common was their approach to combat. More accurately, how they viewed those participating in a fight. Many forces in the multiverse focused on elite groups, minimizing losses and only bringing those who could actually put up a proper fight to battle.

Neither the Risen nor the Holy Church had this approach, though it materialized differently. The Holy Church would gladly throw entire armies at singular, powerful people, sacrificing them all through rituals to empower their elites and bring victory. This had even been shown several times on Earth, both during the Treasure Hunt and the battle when the Risen were pushed off the planet during Ell'Hakan's invasion.

These people who gave their lives did so gladly and willingly, as without their active participation, the methods of the Holy Church simply wouldn't work. It was their faith that gave the Holy Church power, even in such rituals. Across the Milky Way Galaxy, rituals were carried out one after another to face not only Prima Guardians but regular Primas, billions dying as martyrs of the Holy Church.

The reason why they so gladly gave their lives was because, to many, what came after would be better. The Holyland would be an improved existence to their normal mortal lives, with many even viewing it as a privilege to be allowed to die in a ritual. Of course, to be allowed to be sacrificed, you needed to no longer be deemed a talent that could grow further to a higher grade, and the ones to go first tended to be those older and those who'd exhausted their talent.

One might view the way the Holy Church operated as insane or even evil when evaluated with Earth's morals... but the numbers simply didn't lie. A system event like this Prima Guardian one was far from the

first of its kind that had happened during the integration of a new universe, and in all those prior, the Holy Church held the record every single time for their planets doing the best, even surpassing Valhal, a purely combat-specialized faction.

It wasn't hard to understand why the Holy Church did so well, either. They were the best faction in the multiverse at making the "useless" useful in combat. Rather than large populations merely being statistics for an event boss to wipe out, they could be converted to tangible power that could help bring down the threat. Did this mean that sometimes, the majority of a planet's population got sacrificed? Yes... but ninety percent dying was better than a hundred.

The Holy Church truly embodied the concept of the "greater good" and could only truly exist due to the Holyland of the Holy Mother allowing those who died to enter it. With life after death, sacrificing yourself was seen as one of the most honorable ways to die, with your death only taking you to "paradise."

In this way, the Holy Church was one of the premier factions that actively used the deaths of the many to overcome their foes... the other one naturally being the Risen, though their method of taking advantage of the dead was quite different. After someone died, they couldn't become a Risen unless that death happened as part of a transformation ritual, but that didn't mean that the dead couldn't become undead.

Even the Risen could be raised once more when they fell, though it wouldn't be as what they were before. They wouldn't be the same people either, though there were some methods to preserve those who died by effectively saving their souls before they fully dispersed. The result wouldn't be like a full resurrection, and the souls would be permanently damaged, making a second resurrection absolutely impossible and often harming them in other ways, making this simply not worth it.

Either way, using other Risen was barely part of the methodology of the Risen. Why would it be, when in war, there was so much death to take advantage of? So many corpses to raise as mindless undead.

In this war against the Prima Guardians, the planets ruled by the Risen had the possibility of taking advantage of the many dead Primas and monsters during the event, raising them to be used as fodder against their former comrades. Any death on the enemy side would strengthen the Risen, truly making them a force to be reckoned with.

Of course, just throwing a bunch of raised monsters at a Prima Guardian wouldn't accomplish anything, as the raised ones were far weaker than when they were alive, and their power depended heavily on the one raising them as undead.

This is where the rituals came in.

Just like how the Holy Church could have thousands, millions, or even billions sacrifice themselves to create powerful effects, so could the Risen take a huge number of raised undead and combine their power. Sometimes, this took the form of rituals unleashing powerful attacks with their combined energies, but the most effective version was through the creation of flesh golems or ghostly amalgamations.

The forced fusion of countless undead into singular beings. Monstrosities containing countless souls, barely stitched together by talented necromancers. These types of undead could rarely persist for long due to their inherent instability... but for the time they "lived," they could be absolute menaces. As they were effectively summoned monsters, they didn't have the same restrictions as regular Truesouls either, meaning their levels of power could truly reach absurd levels. That is to say, it was entirely possible to create a flesh golem capable of fighting and killing the Prima Guardian on its lonesome.

That it was possible didn't mean that anyone was capable of doing so, though. This was where one of the big differences between the Church and the Risen came in: the requirement of skill. The Risen required skilled necromancers and intelligent undead to control and create their armies and monstrosities. Even if they could combine their powers, having hundreds of necromancers bind and control a flesh golem together, they still needed the skill to do all this. Because if they didn't control it... well, let's just say there were plenty of stories across the multiverse of people creating monsters they failed to control, ending in their own downfalls. So, skill was still a massive requirement.

Contrarily, the rituals and methods of the Holy Church were absurdly simplistic. It wasn't difficult at all to teach even average people to create some of their rituals, with practically no skill or power required from anyone in the process.

Of course, the effectiveness and efficiency would improve if those conducting the rituals were more skilled, and some of the more advanced methods did require skilled individuals, but the mere fact the average folk was given options to fight back by the Holy Church was massive, and the primary reason they could thrive in the multiverse – even if the price of that was extreme sacrifices.

Now, all of this isn't to say that these two factions preferred using means like this. Alright, the Risen would nearly always raise armies of undead; that was only to be expected, but if they could avoid the more risky rituals, they certainly would.

The Milky Way Galaxy was quite lucky in this regard. Working with Ell'Hakan and having a good pool of talented individuals, the Holy Church didn't need to sacrifice people but could hunt down the Guardians without taking any such methods into use.

In the same way, the one planet controlled by the Risen got help from Earth, which included Casper, a Risen blessed by the Blightfather himself and a powerful fighter in his own right. Additionally, if they needed more help, Casper could get it, as asking for Jake, the Sword Saint, or someone else to lend a hand was far preferable to taking the risk of creating some abomination of stitched-together flesh and souls.

Things were far from as positive across the rest of the universe, though, and many factions wished they had the methods of these two factions in their arsenal. Wished they at least had the option of giving their lives to kill the Prima Guardian and not just die in vain.

Alas... there was a reason the Court of Shadows reached that twenty-two percent evaluation.

Chapter 958: Black Flag

The ninety-third universe had entered its busiest period ever since the integration, at least from the perspective of the enlightened races. The vast, vast majority were fighting regular Primas in what most expected to be a years-long struggle to kill as many as they could before the Prima Guardian would be naturally released. At that point, the plan wasn't even necessarily to instantly engage the Prima Guardian but to keep hunting Primas and building strength to eventually beat the boss.

All across the universe, planets began to fall to the Prima Invasions. Others had joined their local galaxy's Prima Guardian Alliance to fight back in groups and make coalitions, while a third group had chosen to flee off their planets. Most planets who actively participated in the event had chosen to join the alliance, but many never even had the choice. Because World Leaders had one more shitty way to fuck over their own worlds.

Jake had never seen it himself as he hadn't elected to join the Prima Guardian Alliance, but if a planet that had earlier voted to join the alliance started the system event without the World Leader on the

planet, they would no longer be considered part of it. The teleportation circle would stop working, and they would not be able to get any help.

Rejoining the alliance was easy enough. The World Leader just had to return. Without them acting as Key Holders, the event simply couldn't function normally... but some World Leaders didn't care. They had abandoned their planets for good and looked to greener pastures elsewhere in the multiverse, leaving all those who once put their trust in them for dead.

That, or the entire planet had been evacuated... though this didn't really happen. Teleporting that many people to another universe or even another planet was just way too expensive and not worth it. An evacuation would only mean bringing along those of "value."

Those with high levels or with high potential, family members of these people, individuals with certain unique skills or abilities, people with relations to divine figures... but the common man? The median citizen? They would be left to face a Prima invasion all on their lonesome, utterly chanceless.

To clarify, this scenario was very rare. Most World Leaders wouldn't abandon their planets, as it would ruin their Paths, and even more didn't have the possibility of leaving in the first place. Those with the means of escape, more often than not, had responsibilities or divine factions expecting them to stay and secure the planet for them.

Plus, the event was designed to be beatable for the vast majority of planets. The system wasn't known to doom worlds that, at the very least, tried their best to fight back. This isn't to say many of these worlds wouldn't fall... but they would have at least stood a chance.

As an example, Olliandra's planet would have easily handled the event had she not idiotically released the Prima Guardian as soon as possible, making them face the strongest version their planet could ever see. If they had just killed Primas for a year or two before freeing the Prima Guardian, they would not only have grown stronger, but the Guardian would have weakened.

Luckily, most World Leaders were wiser and less drunk on success than Olliandra and approached the event carefully. Planets with divine influence seeped into their culture, and leadership had a far higher success rate, too. Plus, they had more wisdom granted by their gods telling them not to be idiots and take dumb chances.

In the ninety-third universe, there were nearly innumerable galaxies, more planets than anyone knew, and countless conflicts taking place between different factions... yet it wasn't hard to find the one galaxy

that most gods and factions generally paid the most attention to. With two Chosen of peak-level gods, it was only to be expected that something exciting was bound to happen, and truly, the Milky Way Galaxy did quickly prove itself a massive outlier, not only due to these two Chosen but a third anomaly nobody knew about:

The entity simply known as "I."

Jake had a rather unique perspective on this system event in that he found it somewhat counterintuitive by design. Most system events would naturally grow harder with time, but this one was quite the opposite. For every day that passed since it began, it only got easier. The Primas all seemed unable to progress or gain any levels, while the Prima Guardians only got weaker due to the event's design. Shit, just sitting around or hiding in a hole without killing any Primas would make the boss weaker once it naturally broke out, as per the description of the event:

"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..."

And then there was, of course, the second section that Jake and everyone had been actively taking much advantage of:

"...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..."

Despite what it said about having to break the chains, they had discovered slaying Primas before manually freeing the Prima Guardian also contributed to it coming out weakened. Why it worked exactly like that, Jake didn't know, and honestly, he wasn't going to look for logic when it came to stuff like those chains.

While the chains did seem to physically exist, they were as much metaphysical seals, seeped in system-fuckery, as they were actual constraints. All Jake knew was that the Prima Guardians got weaker with every passing day, no matter what, and killing a Prima would make the Guardian weaker still.

This did result in the last three months of Jake's life being a lot more boring than he'd hoped. The Prima Guardians just got easier and easier to kill, with most of his time spent just traveling around getting to the Prima Vessels with a slow World Leader.

Now, there was actually a way to make this process faster, as Jake learned something after his fourth planet visit. Something that would certainly help contribute to people being afraid of another World Leader who had already killed their own Prima Guardian visiting.

Jake learned that another feature of his special ring was the ability to absorb the keys from other World Leaders. In other words, he had the option of killing other World Leaders if he so desired and stealing their key. Usually, when a World Leader died during the event, the key would simply go to the Prima Guardian, even if the Guardian didn't kill the World Leader personally.

When this knowledge began to spread across the communication channels of the Prima Guardian Alliance, everyone got a lot more reluctant to invite other World Leaders to their planets out of fear. Jake also heard a few instances of Ell'Hakan killing World Leaders and taking their keys, though it didn't seem to cause many issues for him, as his alliance of sycophants would let him do anything.

One would think that this revelation caused a lot of problems for Jake and his ability to find planets willing to have him visit, but that was far from the case.

Kindroth was a godsend when it came to handling the members of the system-made Prima Guardian Alliance. As the Voice of the One and leader of such a massive civilization, his word held a lot of sway, and as a member of the alliance for years, he had earned plenty of respect and possessed many allies. When the mercenaries and their planets began to also echo the elf's words, Jake had more planets than he had time to visit. Sure, inviting him was a risk, but so was getting slaughtered by Primas, and having someone kill the Prima Guardian for you to weaken all the regular Primas and allow the local wildlife to also fight back against the invasion was quite an attractive prospect.

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Jake also wasn't alone in helping out hunt down Primas for the alliance Kindroth had gained them access to. When the Sword Saint soon returned with a dead Guardian under his belt, Kindroth was initially skeptical until he learned the Sword Saint was also one of the top ten people of their universe. He was downright flabbergasted when he also met Vesperia, Sylphie, and the Fallen King, who'd stopped by

before heading to their next planet. When he later learned about all the others like Arnold... yeah, the guy didn't hold back.

"How in the fuck did you manage to gather a planet of freaks like this? No, why does the system even allow this to happen? Shit, when I imagine if I'd chosen to really go hard on the neutrality stance and risked having to face you and your freaky group... yeah, this is straight-up unfair," the elf had complained loudly while it was just the two of them, much to Jake's amusement.

Jake couldn't really say anything, though, as the situation was absurd. He could also give the guy who'd helped facilitate Jake clearing forty-three Prima Guardians in three months a bit of leeway, and from the looks of it, things were only speeding up.

Through Kindroth's efforts, the planets he had yet to get to began to actively prepare for Jake to head there, with the elf sending help to make that happen. They placed teleportation circles closer to the Prima Vessels and – annoyingly so – supported them in killing more Primas.

Okay, Jake shouldn't complain about them killing Primas, as that had to be done no matter what and to help reduce losses, but it just sucked for the released boss to get even weaker. It was bad enough that even the Sword Saint commented on the decreased difficulty.

All together, Earth had killed over a hundred Prima Guardians by now, and that wasn't counting those from the Holy Church who had left to help their faction and didn't return to Earth to check in or anything. It did count the planets Vesperia had visited with the others, the one handled by Casper and the Risen, and Caleb and Maria's efforts.

Things were definitely going well... but as expected, something unexpected had to happen.

Right at this very moment, Jake wasn't in a rush to head off to kill more Prima Guardians. After he returned to the Prima Vessel on Earth to check in with Arnold and the teleporter the scientist was working on, he was promptly called to the map by the Sword Saint, who'd returned not that much earlier.

Looking at it, the map had changed a lot since three months ago. So many planets were green now, having replaced the blue colors of before. When it came to the red ones, Jake wasn't even sure any of

them had been cleared outside of their own, though he was certain at least some of them had. A few of them had definitely fallen, though.

But that wasn't why Jake had been called to the map.

A new color had shown up on the map of the galaxy. They had seen green flags for cleared planets, red for those handling the event alone, blue for those who'd joined the system-made Prima Guardian Alliance, and finally, gray for the planets that had fallen to the invasion. Now, there was one more: black.

He was joined by the Sword Saint as the two of them looked at it, the old man asking with narrowed eyes. "How did this even happen?"

"I'm not sure," Jake said, shaking his head. "But I'm pretty sure it was green before, so..."

Frowning, the old man looked certain that the true answer wouldn't be something he liked.

The criteria for a planet turning black was something Jake wasn't sure could happen, and he certainly saw no reason why it would. A planet turning gray on the map meant the Prima Guardian had killed the World Leader and claimed the Planetary Pylon, while green meant the World Leader had killed the Guardian and claimed the planet...

Black meant no one had claimed the Pylon.

That no one would ever claim it... because it signified the destruction of the Planetary Core.

As for what planet it had happened on? The planet cleared first alongside Jake and Ell'Hakan's, done by the creature known as "I."

Miranda went over all the daily reports, of which there were honestly far too many due to recent happenings. She had to be quick, too, as she had several meetings lined up, courtesy of Jake and his pals, who'd been way too busy.

When they killed Prima Guardians and "saved" all these planets, the local World Leader's response was almost comically predictable. Every single time, a delegation would apply to visit Earth within a day or two, and Miranda naturally saw no cause to ever reject these. In fact, she welcomed them.

One part was definitely because it would actively hamper the efforts of Ell'Hakan and the story he was telling of uniting the galaxy under his influence and definitely also because it would give them potentially valuable allies should the conflict escalate further.

Secondly... this was really great for her Path. Miranda had gotten so many levels and learned a lot over these last few months. Having to deal with so many different cultures, World Leaders, and people of high political skill and standing was a constant challenge that repeatedly pushed her forward.

There was one person who pushed her more than anyone else, though.

Miranda had met a lot of different World Leaders and political figures, both on Earth and when she went to the Order. Within her dream skill granted by the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon, she also had many encounters... yet the most frightening political figure she had encountered thus far was the elf she had a meeting with in a few minutes.

She was painfully aware that the only reason things were going so well during this event wasn't due to her own political prowess but the skills of the one known as the Voice of the One. At first, based on Jake's description, she had expected a conman who'd hoodwinked his planet into thinking he was some semi-divine figure through lies and manipulation. It was not a good first impression.

However, when she met him, reality soon struck her. Miranda had believed herself pretty adept at dealing with other World Leaders and political figures of high influence, yet after her first meeting with Kindroth, Miranda felt she had a long way to go.

Uniting an entire planet with over a hundred billion citizens into a homogenous, well-functioning society was not a fluke. His ability to invoke trust in over two hundred World Leaders, making them allow Jake and others to teleport to their planets also wasn't luck. He was good, to the level of it being intimidating.

In the eyes of many, Miranda was the "leader" of this budding alliance, with Jake as the figurehead. But reality felt different, as Kindroth held a far more central position. He was the one the other World Leaders trusted and followed. He was the one they showed loyalty toward. Sure, they were afraid of and

almost seemed to revere people like Jake and the Sword Saint, but Kindroth ended up with much of the credit for their achievements as he was the one who introduced them as Prima Guardian slayers.

But... it wasn't like Miranda could really say anything. He always made sure to refer these World Leaders to her, and whenever they met, he was very respectful and made it clear he did view her as someone with a higher position in the hierarchy than him. Yet the lingering feeling she was slowly being replaced couldn't help but sneak up on her... at least until the meeting they had that day, as the elf entered the office right as she was done with her paperwork.

After a bit of small talk and discussing recent events, such as Arnold reporting he believed a special teleporter to reach all the planets was soon ready, Kindroth seemed to turn a bit more serious as he looked her in the eye.

"I want you to know I am no cause for concern," the elf said with a comforting smile. "And becoming one would be a foolish endeavor. You have the trust of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his comrades, making your position unshakeable. Right now, it may not seem that way, but this situation is only temporary. History will not speak of me as anything but the person who assisted the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his Court Witch in achieving their goals, and that is the position I am comfortable with. I have no ambitions of reaching for a position I do not belong in. Besides, who else could possibly deal with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as well as you? If it was me, I would actively feel my lifespan reducing with every report of his most recent shenanigans."

His words were exactly why Miranda found the elf frightening, because she found them genuinely comforting. Kindroth always seemed to know what to say and how to act around people. From Jake, she learned the guy was "pretty chill" and relaxed. He didn't realize this was part of what Kindroth could do. The elf had realized Jake wasn't a person who liked others being overly respectful, but preferred casualness, so he acted casual around Jake. His level of insight wasn't something a skill could grant; it was pure talent. So was his level of guts to stand up to Jake during their first encounter. That wasn't some act... though Miranda did suspect it was perhaps a gamble. One few would have dared to attempt.

Looking back at Kindroth, Miranda returned his smile. "Jake can indeed be a handful to deal with, but such is life. Thank you for your words, and I hope we can both continue carrying out our roles well. I look forward to learning from your continued exemplary performance."

"I shall do my utmost," Kindroth said as he stood up and bowed before saying their goodbyes, Miranda staring after the elf while he left.

Even if she remained cautious around the guy... she couldn't argue he was an incredibly valuable asset to their cause and she understood why he had been perhaps the top person in the universe that Ell'Hakan had been clamoring to get on his side.

Chapter 959: The Impetus Takes Flight

Question of the day: what happens when a Planetary Core breaks?

Nothing good would be the short answer. For a more detailed answer, it was all a bit more complicated, with many factors in play. One of the main factors was the method by which the core had been broken.

Breaking it through pure power wasn't something a C-grade was capable of. Not even a B-grade would be able to accomplish it, which quickly made Jake write off that the dead planet had its core outright destroyed. Instead, it was likely a method of more subtle means that had been deployed.

Jake knew annoyingly much about planet-wide sacrificial rituals due to Villy and his constant semi-joking, and one of the primary methods of doing such a ritual was using the core. The Planetary Core functioned as the wellspring of mana and energy for the entire planet, and it was what held the entire thing together. Corrupting it would thus lead to the corruption of the whole planet, and using the core as the catalyst for a massive ritual to kill every living being on a planet was truly the best method.

When the Planetary Core was transformed into a Planetary Pylon, things got even more complicated still. From Jake's talks with Kindroth and Miranda, he learned that it was entirely possible to use their influence and control over the Pylon to mess with it. Miranda even mentioned that one could likely rig the entire planet to blow only using the control granted by the Planetary Pylon.

This wouldn't be something that could happen in a day, though. Not a few months, either. This was why Jake was so confused about what had happened to the planet now turned black on the map. It was especially confusing why this creature known as "I" had done it. It had been the only living creature on the planet... why would it have to go out of its way to seemingly spend the last three months also destroying the core?

All that would accomplish was to make sure the planet would never recover. That no new life would appear. It would effectively just turn it into a giant dead rock, susceptible to the destructive forces floating in the universe, as one of the primary functions of the core was to maintain and regulate the atmosphere, and with that gone, it was open season for all kinds of meteorites and whatnot.

Jake was wracking his brain as to why anyone would bother with that, as the Sword Saint did offer some potential explanations.

“Is it possible the core was absorbed or transformed in some way? Perhaps this “I” was capable of devouring it?” the old man proposed.

“That isn’t possible,” Jake shook his head. “While there are creatures that can consume Planetary Cores out there, we would be utterly fucked if we were dealing with one here, as the power required to do something like that is ridiculous. If some kind of ritual had been used to absorb the core’s energy it would also have taken way longer than a few months. No, the core must have been corrupted somehow.”

“Would a C-grade truly be capable of such levels of magical corruption?” the Sword Saint questioned.

“I would be capable of doing it,” Jake just answered in a dry tone, earning him a judging glance.

“What? I didn’t say I would do it,” Jake muttered. If he remembered the work he’d done alongside Temlat and his study of planetary rituals the Viper made him do for funsies, he believed that if he used Eternal Hunger as a catalyst of corruption along with-

“Naturally, you would never do anything so crass,” the old man cut off Jake’s thoughts. “The question still remains, though. Why would someone who’d already taken control of their planet choose to destroy it?”

“The only explanation I can find is that it’s part of this creature’s Path. Clearly, it isn’t some unintelligent beast, as it requires more than just raw power to corrupt a core, especially when one considers that it must have entered the Prima Vessel after killing the Guardian, teleported to the core, and then done whatever it did there... in fact, the mere fact it was capable of doing that must mean this creature was the World Leader,” Jake frowned.

“Doesn’t that mean it’s enlightened?” the Sword Saint raised an eyebrow.

“I would assume so unless there are system rules we are not yet aware of,” Jake sighed. It was entirely possible there were rules or exceptions, especially on planets with so few people on them. Either way, this entire situation was one they had to watch closely.

“Definitely make sure Miranda doesn’t accept any applications from this creature to visit,” the Sword Saint said in a semi-joking tone, shaking his head.

“If I really had to tell her something like that, we would have even bigger problems to deal with.”

The two of them stayed there a bit longer, talking about the latest planets they had visited. No one else came to the Prima Vessel during this time, which was to be expected. Only people from Earth who had gone to help other planets used the Vessel, and they didn’t even have to do that anymore if they didn’t want to.

Originally, they didn’t have any plans of making a Prima Guardian Alliance teleportation circle to allow people to visit Earth from other planets in the Prima Guardian Alliance, but after some further deliberation, they made one anyway. In their first plan, Miranda wanted to send people to the planets they “saved” in order to not expose Earth to potential bad actors or to give away too much about their homeworld and its peculiarities. After the entire Ell’Hakan fiasco, people also weren’t that keen on the potential of people affiliated with the enemy Chosen sneaking in.

However, it quickly became clear Jake and the others were just too damn efficient in their work, and there was no way Miranda or those she trusted could keep up. When they established this new teleportation circle, they wanted it far away from the Prima Vessel. Making the circle had been incredibly easy as the system had made it to be, and they placed it in a secluded small city with teleporters capable of taking the visitors elsewhere on Earth while not taking them straight to Haven or another major city from the get-go.

As an added bonus, Arnold commented this process of making the magic circle had been beneficial for his research. So definitely worth it.

“I should head out again,” the Sword Saint said after they spoke a bit more. “Can’t fall behind Ell’Hakan and his alliance.”

“True, true,” Jake nodded, also preparing to go help out another world. The thing about keeping up with Ell’Hakan also wasn’t a joke. His alliance was clearing planets fast, and while Jake honestly didn’t have a complete overview of who had done more, he had a feeling the other Chosen wasn’t that far behind if he was behind at all.

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So, nothing to do but get back in the saddle and kill some more would-be word-ending bosses as if they were some annoying chore that had to be dealt with.

One thing did definitely suck. As was already touched upon, the Prima Guardians had just gotten easier and easier with time. Not only did this mean Ell’Hakan’s alliance could clear planets more easily with their elite teams, but it also meant that Jake’s experience gain had flatlined.

Maybe he shouldn’t complain too much, though... 3 levels – or 4 if he counted the first one on Olliandra’s planet – wasn’t bad progress at all in only three months.

‘DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 294 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

...

‘DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 296 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 286 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 287 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

System events were well-known for having what were effectively hidden experience amplifiers, primarily due to the many Records associated with any event. Knowing this, Jake wasn’t sure if he

should be happy or sad about his level gain, though he was fairly certain he wouldn't really get more than one, maybe two, more, even if he killed hundreds more Guardians.

While there certainly were extra Records associated with the event, Jake was still killing monsters he could pretty effortlessly slay, and their levels were only dropping the further the event went on. The uniqueness of the Records gained also reduced with every Prima Guardian kill, as while every Guardian was different, they still had many of their Records in common.

Killing one Prima Guardian was impressive... ten was incredible... but a hundred and it just turned into a regular unnoteworthy hunting trip. Jake effectively felt like a hunter regulating population numbers, with the desired population number of Prima Guardians equalling zero across the galaxy.

Jake saw the Sword Saint walk off as he quickly referred to the updated list of planets looking for help made by Kindroth and the associated code he was meant to put in the application description. With it mentally noted, he went toward the teleporter, ready to kill yet another Guardian and save yet another world. Truly not too dissimilar to a regular day job.

Kindroth smiled as he looked at the city called Haven, admiring its simplicity. The touch of magic was surprisingly light compared to his own world, but that did have its own charm. What was also very charming were the people of the planet. They were indeed an interesting bunch, from the monsters to the enlightened, who were quite frankly also rather monstrous in their own rights.

Miranda, the Court Witch, was also something of an interesting figure. He would readily admit she was more powerful than he was, and while she still had much room for growth in her role as the de facto leader of the planet, she was adequate, if still lacking. Unsurprising, considering her young age as a human. They only lived for a few decades before the system, after all. As an elf with quite a few centuries under his belt before the integration even arrived, he had relied on the wisdom of age during much of his Path.

Because of the value he put on wisdom, Kindroth did find it confusing why the Court Witch was the leader in the first place. While their interaction had been brief, Kindroth had met the swordsman people called the Sword Saint – a title nearly as arrogant as his own. Never had he thought he would meet a human from this new universe who made him feel like a young man once more, nor to meet someone so wise from age. This Sword Saint was a frightening existence in the eyes of Kindroth, possessing not only power but extreme political prowess and insight. If he had been the leader, it would have been fully understandable.

Sure, he was a member of this World Council and clearly held a lot of influence, but it would just make more sense if he was the dominant voice. From what Kindroth had gathered, though, the swordsman hadn't sought the position of leader but wished to focus on his blade. An odd sentiment, but likely what was required to reach his level of power.

Speaking of power... the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Jake Thayne. Kindroth had spent a good while with him but still couldn't get a full read on the man. He seemed simple. Oddly uncomplicated for someone of his status. If not for his overwhelming power, and the unsettling feeling he gave off when he looked at you, Kindroth could easily have confused him for a regular hunter. Clearly, he was far more than that, though.

The primary reason he was sure of that was due to El'Hakan. The Nahoom was the most self-assured and confident person Kindroth had ever met. Yet the elf had felt it when the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was mentioned during their meetings. There was a level of apprehension and doubt when it came to dealing with the hunter.

Then, there was, of course, the title of Harbinger of Primeval Origins. A title not claimed or taken by the hunter but granted and cemented by the system. Kindroth still wasn't entirely certain what it meant, but he did know it was related to the fact a True Royal and two other monsters of extreme power seemed to have been born or evolved into what they were due to this power.

For the Chosen to hold powers like that and also appear like a simple hunter was... puzzling.

As Kindroth was stuck in thought overlooking the city, he soon got a message that Jake had left the planet and where he'd gone. When Kindroth saw the planet he'd chosen, he couldn't help but let a small smile creep to his lips. Finally, the time had come, and he muttered to himself as he looked at the setting sun in the distance.

"And thus the impetus takes flight."

The scalekin lizard World Leader felt excitement in his heart when he heard they were next on the list. He had quickly gone to fetch his queen, a winged beastkin, and her response was equally elated and relieved.

They needed the help, and they needed it badly.

Their planet had, to put it nicely, not been united leading up to this Prima Guardian event at all. They had a mix of so many different races and could never truly get along and form one cohesive society. Before the system arrived, half of the world had been at war with one another, and the fact everyone got stats and power only escalated things. Entire races had already been wiped out or enslaved, and the fighting was far from done.

The only way the lizard man had managed to become the World Leader was because they had to pick one, and at that stage of their conflict, he had been the most influential. Since then, he had lost and gained power, with overall everything a mess.

It was so bad that many on their planet hadn't taken the entire event seriously, even if the scalekin and a few other leaders had tried to make them. Despite the Primas ravaging the planet, the war hadn't stopped... in fact, some factions took advantage of the chaos caused by the Primas to try and assassinate influential or powerful figures in other countries.

As things were going, they were headed toward destruction. It wasn't even certain the Prima Guardian needed to be released before they tore themselves apart. The only slightly positive thing was that some stability had begun to emerge in the last month and a half as factions banded together. The scalekin World Leader managed to leverage his position to gather a coalition of smaller forces, and in response, other factions had also come together to oppose him.

But then... then everything turned to shit. During all the commotion, no one had kept the Prima Guardian Alliance teleportation circles a secret, meaning many different factions had their own. This didn't seem like a big problem until one day, it suddenly was as the coalition that opposed the scalekin called in help from across the stars. The permission settings had been messed up for sure, as the scalekin had incompetently just not thought about it, which was the cause of his downfall.

In a single week, the scalekin was branded a usurper who had unrightfully claimed the title of World Leader. Two other World Leaders had appeared on the planet, and as things were, things were bleak... until the Voice of the One reached out.

He gave them hope. They had believed that fighting the opposing coalition would be impossible due to who they had allied with, but now the scalekin saw a chance.

For who would be better than the alliance formed by the Chosen of the Malefic One to defend them against those backed by the Celestial Child?

Chapter 960: Incompetence All Around

A large group was gathered in the spacious tent as the teleportation circle lit up. The scalekin World Leader stood side by side with his queen, surrounded by those who remained loyal to him and their tribal alliance. He knew many were skeptical when he told them help was coming, and when the teleportation circle fully activated, the disappointment from some of them was palpable.

A single figure appeared in the center of the circle, wearing a dark hooded cloak and a wood-like mask, revealing only two eyes reminiscent of a beast more than a human. In truth, he didn't strike the scalekin as that impressive, but he knew looks could be extremely deceiving in the multiverse. There was no way to tell how powerful someone truly was simply by looking at them.

"I greet the Chosen of the Malefic Viper," the scalekin World Leader bowed politely, his wife and others following suit despite their reservations. "We humbly welcome you to our planet."

The human quickly regarded the scalekin, and it felt as if his very soul was laid bare as the man responded. "You're the World Leader, I take it?"

"That is correct, my lord," the scalekin said, his respectful tone now even more genuine.

"Good, then let's not waste more time than necessary and head straight for the Prima Vessel," the Chosen continued, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone.

"That is..." the scalekin muttered.

“What is it? If there are no teleporters nearby and we have to travel a bit, that’s fine, I just hope you aren’t a slowpoke,” the human continued, still speaking so casually it was truly shocking. Perhaps... didn’t he know?

“The... the Prima Vessel is not currently under our control...”

A second passed before the human scratched the back of his head. “Alright... it’s pretty clear there’s a story here, so let me hear it.”

Jake would definitely come to regret hearing their story, as it was not only cliché but also pretty boring.

Warring factions, lots of racism because of the many different races who didn’t like how others looked, century-long blood feuds between different clans because some chick married one guy over another, and so many damn twists and turns around who different clans allied with at different times. Honestly, it was a shitshow.

All of which Jake, quite frankly, didn’t care about. He did care about the last part, though.

“They have invited other World Leaders from planets that have already cleared their own Prima Guardians and did this before the teleportation permissions were locked down... and while the lockdown does mean they can’t bring in more invaders, we remain severely outnumbered and have cause to believe these World Leader brought along powerful allies. With me being the World Leader, we are also disproportionately targeted by the Primas and are struggling,” the scalekin World Leader explained, Jake surprised at and only really noting the presence of two other World Leaders.

He didn't even need to be told where they were from either, as the answer was obvious. Still, the scalekin told him.

"These World Leaders are allies of the Celestial Child and are sent here to claim the planet. I... was also approached by the Chosen, and we had an agreement, which was why I kept teleportation open for all from the alliance, but..." the scalekin admitted, though he didn't look like he felt good about it.

"But you were betrayed. What a shocker," Jake sighed. He had already released a Pulse, and... he wouldn't even say he was in a city. It was just flatland with a few thousand tents and very temporary-looking buildings spread about. Clearly, this wasn't the most stable of factions.

The part about the teleportation circles was at least a bit understandable. The scalekin wouldn't have believed those who teleported there from planets part of the alliance would join the enemy, but here the guy was, very much regretting his prior choices.

From Ell'Hakan's point of view, siding with the other coalition of factions who fought the scalekin and his tribes probably made the most sense. They had more people, a stronger fighting force, and likely also a better leader than the scalekin Jake was looking at because the guy really didn't give off leader vibes. His level was pretty good, though.

[Scalekin – lvl 280]

In fact, the levels Jake saw when he briefly scanned people in the tent were pretty good. It turns out that being on a planet going through constant war with other factions ever since the integration was a great way to gain a lot of levels, even if it also meant the planet had pretty sucky population numbers.

“Yes, I was fooled, betrayed, and taken advantage of,” the scalekin nodded in shame as he clenched his fists. “I believed the words of the Celestial Child, that he would-”

“Why do you keep calling him that when he fucked you over?” Jake asked, raising an eyebrow. “No reason to show such respect for some manipulative sack of shit.”

The scalekin looked about to answer as someone from the back decided to get involved in the conversation. A large horned man who looked a bit like a minotaur stood up as he stared daggers at Jake. This minotaur-looking beastkin wasn't the only one either, as several more looked uncomfortable with what Jake had said, including even the queen at the World Leader's side, but it was only the minotaur guy who was dumb enough to yell loudly:

“How dare a mere human disrespect the Celestial Child! Your pathetic kind belong only in-”

Jake looked at the man, his eyes glowing for a second as he decided to be nice and only froze the guy. With a low sigh, Jake silenced the room entirely as he spoke calmly.

“One more interruption, and it won't end with a warning. That goes for all of you.”

The scalekin did react quickly as he seemingly sent some telepathic message, and two people grabbed the frozen and drooling minotaur and dragged him out of the tent. With him gone, the scalekin went as far as to go down on one knee, the shock from many of those there not something they could contain.

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"I sincerely apologize for the disrespect from both myself and the representative of the Iron Bull clan. While it is no excuse, we have a less-than-positive history with the human race who once lived here before they all died out a few decades before the integration. They had enslaved much of the planet a very long time ago, with our history books emphasizing the evil nature of man... of course, we now know better, and I can only beg for your forgiveness," the scalekin said, clearly trying to gather some sympathy points with his historical explanation.

Again, Jake seriously didn't care about the history lesson, he just wanted to get things moving and not have anyone and everyone interrupting him. Maybe he noticed Jake's disinterest, but at least the scalekin had the sense to continue without any prompting.

"As for the matters regarding the... other Chosen... I truly meant nothing by it. It's simply the title we referred to him as and the one he introduced himself with. That, and I cannot rule out the existence of Bloodline manipulation from his side, still controlling my mind and the minds of many others who have met him."

Okay, that last part was a bit bullshit. Ell'Hakan didn't control people's minds, just their emotions. Simply being aware of the Chosen's ability made it several times less effective, and often the negative emotions born from being told you had been manipulated into having a positive view of the orange fuck overshadowed any others, amplified or not. But Jake really didn't want to enter an entire conversation about that as he steered the topic toward why he was there.

"You said the Prima Vessel was under the control of these other clans and the two World Leaders helping them, correct?" Jake questioned.

“Yes, they are guarding it, so I cannot approach and enter,” the scalekin nodded.

“Are they afraid you will release the Prima Guardian?” Jake asked, trying to get a feel for how strong these two World Leaders who had arrived were.

“I do not believe that is what they fear. They instead don’t want me to hide in there and make it impossible for them to gain my key. I have heard they possess the ability to take the keys from other World Leaders if they slay them, and I fear that is what they plan to do. Afterward, they will likely release the Guardian, slay it, and... then I do not know their plan,” the World Leader admitted with a sigh.

“And why are they not just hunting you down?” Jake kept pressing.

“They have tried to a few times, but we move around and attempt to make ourselves difficult to pin down. Also, they do not appear to be in any kind of rush, as they keep gathering more unaffiliated clans and tribes under their banner as they slay Primas. Once more, I do not know the cause for their lack of urgency.”

Jake had a good theory of why they were not in a hurry... why would they with such an incompetent and cowardly World Leader? Shit, maybe they were even trying to... oh, yeah, that orange fuck would totally go for that kind of story.

There was a very good chance they weren’t necessarily aiming to even kill this World Leader but would instead wear him down until he surrendered and willingly submitted himself before them to save his own hide. Ell’Hakan was going for a story as the one who united the galaxy, and making a warring planet come together would definitely track. Also... being known for killing other World Leaders and “stealing” their planets would likely make it harder for Ell’Hakan to keep recruiting.

It also explained why they hadn't just killed this group if they were truly that much more superior. Of course, it could still be that the people Ell'Hakan had just sent were incompetent, but Jake liked his own theory better.

Not that any of it ultimately mattered. If Ell'Hakan's plans interfered with what Jake was there for, there was no way they could avoid getting into a scuffle.

"Let's not wait around any longer until they decide to come for you again, then," Jake said, seeing no reason to stay around any longer. At this point, he really just wanted to get moving... but life had other plans.

Jake saw the winged beastkin queen beside the World Leader shift a little, and he was pretty sure she sent some telepathic message to the scalekin, which made the guy hesitate. "Are... are you sure it's wise to not make a proper plan for our approach? Assess the situation properly first?"

For a second, Jake wondered if this entire thing was really worth it. Why was he even helping some clearly unpopular and untalented World Leader in the first place? He wouldn't kill the guy as that was one of the things he'd agreed with Kindroth, and Miranda would fuck up all their future plans as convincing a known killer of World Leaders to visit would be hard. Actually, this fitted well with why Ell'Hakan didn't just kill the guy, huh? Either way... man, did Jake just want to knock out the guy and drag him to the Vessel at this point.

"We do have a proper plan. Me. Now let's go," Jake insisted... yet the damn scalekin kept hesitating, and Jake was pretty damn sure he knew what caused it. More accurately, who caused it.

Turning to the winged beastkin woman, he stared straight at her as he caught her attention. She stared back, and Jake easily saw how damn nervous she was. She was way too nervous for this conversation, almost as if she didn't want any of this to be happening.

Not only is the World Leader incompetent, his own damn wife isn't even fully on his side, Jake sighed internally before she spoke in an accusatory tone.

"Or is there a reason people here wouldn't want you to go for some reason... now why would that be?" Jake said with a smile as he looked at the wife. "I do find it bold of you to try and hide in front of me so openly. Did you really think I wouldn't notice? I'm a hunter. I specialize in sensing clues and uncovering truth. So, do you want to take this opportunity to fess up yourself, or would you prefer my interpretation of what you've done?"

To be clear, Jake had no proof and was one hundred percent bluffing; he just knew she had done something shady. He wasn't even sure exactly what she had done, and outright accusing her of something specific could give away the fact he really had no idea. Luckily, the queen wasn't smarter than her dear husband. Jake's staredown probably also helped convince her.

Turning to her husband, who looked at her with utter confusion, she practically screamed her explanation.

"I... it was the only way! How long has this war been going on? How long can it continue? We need to unite, or this damned system event will be our end, and we have clearly shown we aren't capable of coming together without outside help. You know they promised stability and safety! Help with the Prima Guardian! Why are you so stubbornly resisting when assistance is offered!? You said they betrayed us first... nobody betrayed anyone. The Celestial Child made a deal with everyone, not just you! He made a promise to this planet, and you're the only one still refusing to see that! I... I will not raise our child in this kind of world!"

The scalekin looked at her with wide eyes. "You... you're with child? I..."

Watching this family drama unfold before him, Jake regretted his decision of not just kidnapping the World Leader and dragging him to the Prima Vessel. His patience was truly being tested, but he had to resist the urge to do anything.

Jake couldn't help but think about who the "good" guys truly were on this planet. One side had the majority of citizens and was still expanding, with more clans joining them all the time, while the other was ruled by a World Leader desperately holding onto what little power he had despite the popular opinion of the population.

But... all that wasn't really his problem. He looked on as the scalekin and winged beastkin were talking in a hushed tone, half of the conversation clearly also happening telepathically, as emotions were running high. Jake decided to give them a choice, as he cleared his throat, making the two of them shut up as they stared at Jake in fright, seemingly having forgotten he was even there.

"All of this strikes me as a waste of time, so let me offer you one of two options. Both include freeing the Prima Guardian. Either the two of you go to the Prima Vessel and meet these other World Leaders to reach some agreement, or he and I head off to the Prima Vessel. The first option also includes me coming along, but I will remain hidden unless I have a reason not to."

The two of them looked at Jake for a moment as the scalekin clenched his fists. "If... if there is a peaceful solution..."

"First option it is, then," Jake smiled. It was time to show that Ell'Hakan couldn't be the only scheming sleazebag around.