

Chapter 240: Erandur, The City of One Hundred Towers

In recent days, ever since we had left the many-nest in search of another - because, even if I couldn't understand the Coreless' not-hisses, I could feel the connection to a cluster of distant **[Little Guardian's Totem]**s growing closer - we had been traveling through the World Dungeon on a well-worn path. The stone was scuffed and weathered, like a giant serpent had slithered down its length, rough scales carving out a long notch in the stone to form something resembling a tunnel - but not *quite* one. Instead, it was closer to a floor-crack. One that was massive enough that our large group - me, my disciples, and a number of other new Coreless - could easily pass through. Smooth walls rose up around us, curving upwards at an angle, as if the stone that formed them wanted to touch, but never could. Then, at around two not-Needles high, the walls disappeared, and the caverns that the floor-crack often ran through started to become visible.

There wasn't much to see. Not for the most part; sometimes, we could travel for countless slithers before I saw anything move at all. And that was with **[Ambusher's Vision]** beating back the darkness. I doubted my Coreless ever saw anything at all. They just heard the skitters and the clicks and the clacks of scurrying bad-things as they moved through the caverns that we passed, sometimes fighting and sometimes not.

There was something interesting, though, beyond the occasional bad-thing that scurried about in the far-off distance. Something that, I was fairly sure, was the reason for the bad-things keeping their distance.

The floor-crack was more than it seemed. Unpredictably dangerous - the random bits of black-water that had appeared, small yet numerous, made it so. Forced me - and any nearby bad-things - to move cautiously.

I slithered along, carefully avoiding another small puddle of black-water, reaching out to press my tongue-flesh lightly against stone. The Coreless waited around me, eyes fixated on the newest set of **[Little Guardian's Focus]**es - or what would *become* them. I hadn't finished. Not yet.

[The Golem's Fading Heart] smoothed out the Coreless' failures; fixed a stone-scale here, altered the curve of the statue's tail there. Until, finally, the future **[Little Guardian's Focus]**es were as ready as they would be.

"The little guy's a bit particular, isn't he?" one of the new Coreless - a male from the group that had spent so long talking to not-Needle and the portly Coreless before - murmured to another, watching my progress. I ignored it; over the recent days, I had created enough **[Little Guardian's Focus]**es that there wasn't much to be gained from trying to find meaning in the emotions that the Coreless' **[Little Guardian's Totem]**s linked to me. And even those had dampened, the **[awe]** that their creation had once engendered changing to something closer to **[comfort]**. Still positive, but not quite so much. That bothered me, but not enough to stop what I was doing. The Death Core had taught me the benefit of always having a **[Little Guardian's Focus]** nearby.

"It's kinda cute," another said. "Very earnest. Not what you'd expect." I wasn't paying attention to who it was, but the tinge of **[adoration]** made me set my scale-flesh sparkling with a flash of **[Illusion Spark]**, the light perfectly timed with the creation of the first **[Little Guardian's Focus]**. The stone serpent, previously a dull and drab gray, turned black and glossy. Flames

burst into life within its mouth, and the representation of the Great Core upon its head-scales erupted into radiant light. Not enough, in my opinion, but it was the closest to the Great Core that the Coreless could get.

They stepped forward, thrusting **[Little Guardian's Totem]**-filled hands into the flickering flames without any hesitation, more than used to them by now. The flames writhed around each one in turn. My disciples followed just behind them, reaching out with their own **[Little Guardian's Totem]**s.

While they were busy, I slithered to the side, winding my way around another tiny puddle of black-water. It was uncomfortably close, though smaller than even me. Almost not worth noticing. A ridge of stone bordered the puddle's edges, as if the black-water had melted its way into the ground. I nervously glanced upwards, half expecting to see black-water dripping down from somewhere above. It wasn't, thank the Great Core.

I didn't think a few drops of black-water would be enough to kill me, but it wouldn't be pleasant.

With an increasingly familiar flex of my will, I pushed past the resistance that came with forming a **[Little Guardian's Focus]** so close to another. It shattered like the most brittle of scales, and another beacon of light appeared beside me. Beautifully resplendent, like anything representing the Great Core should be.

The next was no different, even if it strained me significantly more. That done, I started to slither away again, no longer as bothered by the bits of black-water that threatened to drip against my scale-flesh. I found that I liked the contrast between the black-water and the new **[Little Guardian's Focus]**es; if anything, the tiny puddles of the dangerous stuff that occasionally dotted the ground only made the light they gave off more magnificent.

The-female-who-was-not-Needle picked me back up before I grew tired of it. She turned towards the newest of the Coreless, babbling something that I couldn't understand, my coils finding their place to wrap around her shoulder. Safe from the puddles of black-water below yet again.

Seeing how many waited ahead of us, I was glad that I wasn't bound to the ground.

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Valera absent-mindedly brushed at the Little Guardian's scales as she walked, stepping over yet another puddle of null-water. They seemed to be growing more frequent as they came closer to their destination; it was curious. Uncommon. Most of the null-water that Valera had ever seen was in great lakes, each large enough to form a bastion of humanity.

Not that Valera was particularly well-traveled, at least when it came to seeing other cities. In fact, being a Seeker typically meant that she was *less* likely to visit other settlements; her duties were elsewhere, out in the untamed tunnels of the World Dungeon.

She decided to voice her thoughts, seeing no reason not to.

"It *is* fairly uncommon," her answer quickly came, Sylvia - who Valera still felt a little guilty about threatening before, back when she had thought the woman was trying to *buy* the Little Guardian - answered. "Though judging by that question, I'm assuming you don't know all that much about our city."

“Just the name,” Valera replied, flushing. She didn’t want to offend the woman, but learning the finer details of other cities was always less interesting than learning about monsters and fighting, and that was the truth of it.

“I won’t hold that against you,” Sylvia said, smiling slightly. One hand crept towards the Little Guardian as they walked. “May I?” she asked.

“You don’t need my permission. Just his. Give it a few seconds for him to notice, I guess.”

A few seconds later, Sylvia was joyfully brushing at a tiny snake’s scales. It was a little awkward, given how close he was sitting to Valera’s face, but she understood the urge. He was just so damn cute. Eventually, the woman seemed to remember herself, beginning to speak again.

“We’re known as the City of One Hundred Towers,” she said. “There’s a reason for that name - and it’s not because we just like building towers. It’s because we *have* to build them.” Sylvia stopped scratching at the Little Guardian’s scales, waving a hand out in front of them. “As a whole, the null-water in this area is frequent, yet found in smaller quantities than the large lakes you might have seen. Have you heard of a marsh before?”

Valera shook her head.

“Well, I suppose it might not have been a good comparison, anyway. I’ve never seen one, obviously. Just read about it once. Still, I’d like to think that it’s something similar. Lots of water, but constantly broken up by bits of the land it covers, stopping it from ever becoming a greater whole. Except, in this case, the water is null-water. I doubt there were ever any *real* marshes filled with that.

“Because we don’t have the deep, vast lakes that other areas do, Erandur has had to make do with a different style of city, one that I think gives it a rather unique charm. I may be a little biased, though. Your Orken - like many cities - is, for the most part, one solid whole, surrounded by null-water on every side. Because it can be. Every building, every piece, carefully kept away from harm. Together.

“Erandur is different. We’re called the City of One Hundred Towers because that’s exactly what we *are*. A city formed of one hundred different towers - give or take a bit, the City of Eighty-Two-And-A-Half Towers doesn’t have the same ring to it - with each of those towers built upon their own personal patch of null-water. Like their own little kingdoms. Run like them, too,” Sylvia remarked. “There’s more than a little infighting, if I’m being honest. Different towers have different priorities, forming different factions among themselves, arguing for different goals...you understand, I’m sure.”

Sylvia paused, seeming to realize that she was getting carried away. “Look at me, I’m rambling. Anyway, there’s not really much point in explaining much further right now. You’ll see what I mean when we get there,”

They walked in silence for a long while, accompanied by the quiet murmur of other conversations and the steady clomp of boots upon stone. More and more, they were forced to move carefully to avoid increasingly-large patches of null-water, some so large that Valera worriedly glanced at the Little Guardian as they passed. He wouldn’t do well getting around on his own. Though, as long as there wasn’t any null-water hidden in the walls, she supposed that he could just slither through them. It was *probably* safe, but she didn’t exactly trust the weirdly sporadic null-water in the area. Even Valera was getting a little nervous, and null-water was

much safer for her to touch than it would be for the little guy, even if that touch would still be fairly agonizing. Luckily, there wasn't any need to find out.

Before Valera knew it, they had reached the outskirts of the city. It was easy to notice; the ravine-like tunnel that they had been walking finally opened up, spitting them out into a large cavern - one that nearly stretched further than Valera could see, the faint lights of glow-caps and light orbs growing dim in the distance.

Even without the man-made light orbs, though, the city would have been hard to miss. The Towers made sure of that; they were a varied bunch, each sprouting from the ground like a personal statement made by those that lived in it, though the towers nearest to each other tended to follow common themes. Some groups were clearly better off than others. None of those differences were more stark than that of the nearest and furthest groups; at the edge of her vision, where the light began to die, Valera could make out a group of opulent white towers. Their edges were clearly lined in mana-infused metal, the light that they gave off shining off of the white stone's surface in a dazzling display. One powerful enough that the set of towers was actually more visible than some of the groups that sat closer to Valera. The light they gave off was strong enough that she could even make out the null-water that rested underneath them, each pond large enough that the stark-white towers had room for a powerful base, letting them reach even higher without leaving the safety of the null-water.

The nearest set of Towers, however, were basically their opposite. Dark, dank, spindly, ragged towers that stretched out from tiny pools of null-water. Like the fingers of a drowning woman desperately reaching for the surface, unconcerned with grace when life was all that really mattered. The little ponds were barely large enough to contain the shoddy towers. She could even see parts where they *didn't*, exposing tiny pieces of the towers' surfaces. There were more than a few scratches in those spots. Monster attacks, she guessed.

Valera was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

"Which...*faction*...are you three a part of, then?"

"Ah," Sylvia replied, seeming slightly embarrassed. "That's us, right there."

"Ah," Valera murmured.

"Ah," Sylvia said again.

Valera was beginning to suspect that the negotiations with the City of One Hundred Towers would be a little more complicated than expected.