

Chapter 250: Diplomatic Disaster

Valera chewed on her lower lip, worrying away at its frayed edges. The Little Guardian had been gone for a while now, and she was more than a little concerned. Sure, he could take care of himself - between his ability as a seer and his increasing strength in general, Valera doubted that he would run into something that would lead to his death.

Still, she worried. Less about what would happen to him, and more about what would *try* to happen to him. And how he would handle it. What would he do if someone attacked him? Sure, his cute little snake armor - and wasn't she so *glad* that she had that made for him now - might be enough of a hint that he was on friendly terms with humans in some way, considering he didn't even have the arms necessary to make the thing, but...

She was worried. People were stupid sometimes. She'd just have to hold out hope that, if he did see a future where he would be attacked by someone who didn't realize he was friendly, he'd just ignore it and go in another direction.

Because if he fought back...

He would win. Easily, she was willing to bet. He wasn't that same cute and tiny snake defending his equally-tiny Core anymore. He was dangerous. Deadly.

Still cute, though. Just...dangerously cute.

"And you're sure that it's going to be alright?" came the same question that she had already heard. Sylvia was even more worried than she was. She had been one of the three to invite them to Erandur; the Little Guardian suddenly going missing and whatever that ended up causing probably felt like it was partly her responsibility. She had almost outright said as much earlier, a few minutes after Valera first realized that he had left the tower.

Though Valera had the feeling that she was more worried about what might happen to the Little Guardian than what the Little Guardian might do to someone else. A few conversations had been more than Valera needed to realize that there was little love lost between the far-poorer people of her rickety wooden tower and the more opulent towers off in the distance. And that really wasn't surprising, if the things that she had been told were true.

Many of them had been pushed out of their homes in the other towers for one reason or another, and trying to make a new one wasn't easy. Especially when it was so ill-kept and poorly defended.

Valera eyed the too-small pond of null-water that sat at the tower's base once again, wondering if something of its size was even much of a threat to the stronger monsters. Not that it mattered, since it wasn't big enough to protect all of the tower's edges anyway. Honestly, she had half-expected to be needed to fight off a sudden invasion by now.

"It will," Valera finally answered. "Probably," she hedged. "If something goes wrong, we'll figure it out. It wouldn't be the first time that we've been separated, and everything turned out alright in the end last time. Even took down a Core along the way."

The woman looked a little starstruck at the casual mention of defeating a Core. Valera decided not to talk about the vision the Little Guardian had revealed of Valera's possible death when they caught up with him again. It wasn't really relevant, and she still wasn't entirely sure what that had meant, anyway. Maybe the Little Guardian was warning them of what would happen if they didn't help him destroy the Core immediately? He had been bigger in that vision - and also noticeably undead - so it could have been a far-off future that he was trying to avoid.

One where the Core was given more time to get stronger. With how strong it was already, Valera didn't doubt that things could have gotten much worse if they waited.

That was pretty amazing, actually, if the Little Guardian could see far enough into the future that he could prevent things that would happen when he was all grown and much larger. It made her a little less worried about his choice to wander off into the darkness around Erandur.

Maybe he had already looked ahead and there was some sort of reason for it. Maybe he knew what he was doing. She could only hope that was the case, and not that he had just started wandering because he was bored.

Valera opened her mouth to say something else, but a human shaped mana-light flashed in the corner of her eye. It quickly resolved into the glowing figure of Kala, who shook her head lightly. Still hadn't found him, then. Hopefully someone else would. Valera had run all the way across the length of Erandur, looking for the tell-tale glow of the Little Guardian's armor. Erik, Doran, Kala, and Elara had gone to check with the nearest groups of towers to find out if anyone had seen anything. Valera's mana-enhanced speed just meant that she could run across the City of One Hundred Towers and back faster than the other three could talk to the people of the disconnected city themselves; they weren't done yet. Though she doubted that he had found his way into any of the towers unless he somehow managed to sneak onto a boat or somebody decided to pick him up.

Valera sighed, resigning herself to worry for at least a little longer.

Hopefully, wherever he was, the Little Guardian wasn't getting into *too* much trouble. And hey, if he did, maybe they could smooth over the problems with the gift of a free Guardian Statue or two. Orken's Council would be upset at the loss of potential negotiating power, but they'd get over it. Probably.

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David shuffled forward, trying his best to ignore just how *close* the Ascended's fangs were to his face. He had seen what those things could do to a man. More than once, too. *Significantly* more than once.

After the battle in the infirmary, the tiny snake had - to everyone's amazement - conjured up a crude image of people walking with a snake down a tunnel. It was actually pretty well done; they weren't perfectly accurate, but they were close enough that there was no question about what the Ascended wanted.

He wanted them to follow. Which was promising, since David had been planning on doing that anyway. The Ascended had proven itself willing and able to heal people who got hurt - as long as they didn't attack it, anyway - and David wasn't much of a fighter, even with his newly acquired gear. Even if he might have been able to make it out of the mines himself, why take the risk of getting caught and finding himself in a fight that he couldn't handle? It was better to just go along with the friendly, stupidly powerful monster's wishes. Besides, what exactly would he do if he got out? The moment anyone in Erandur saw his armor and weapon, they'd know where it was from. They'd know that he shouldn't have it. And if he wasn't willing to brave the mines by himself, he *definitely* wasn't willing to take on the far more dangerous tunnels of the World Dungeon.

Still...why did I do this to myself?

David had thought it would be a good idea to make sure the Ascended knew they were friends - so when the snake started to slither far slower than the humans around it could walk, David had carefully picked it up and put it on his shoulder. And that had worked. It was fine. He was safe, they were moving faster, and everything was going well; the snake was even able to keep 'telling' them where to go with its conjured light, not that David needed the directions.

Apparently the snake had been hearing the prisoners' pickaxes and wanted to go find them. David wasn't planning on stopping it. Not that he could. It would probably turn out fine, anyway; as long as they were warned not to do anything stupid, the snake most likely wasn't a danger to any of the prisoners.

To the lone guard that was still watching over them, though...that might be different.

The Ascended hissed in his ear again, and David involuntarily jumped.

Friendly or not, the thing was just way too close for comfort.