

Chapter 276 - Lurking Danger

Niel led the team up the steep ladder, sword and shield ready. The plumes of mist rolled over them, denser and colder with each floor they crossed. Stepping on the stone of the third chamber, high rectangular windows lined the walls with only smoky white swirls outside.

Beyond the visibility, Kai was more concerned about the impact on his skills. His bond with Hobbes was already weakening, his senses were restricted to a few meters, and Hallowed Intuition's whispers were growing fainter.

It's better than being out there alone...

While the trio were practically strangers, it was reassuring to have other human beings with him against the creatures lurking in the fog. Mari stood beside him, two more figures ahead of him with their weapons up.

"Now the fun begins," Niel muttered with a low tone, muffled by the fog. "Remember to not break formation, no matter what happens."

"We know," Caeli snorted. "Stop trying to be cool, you're not Kea."

"I wanted to keep up morale."

"And I'm *super* motivated." The girl gave him a light shove. "We just need to cut down those annoying bugs and find Kea before she decides to leave."

At Kai's side, Mari shook her head. "Stay focused, guys. They could attack us at any moment."

"Isn't that the point? We're trying to lure them in here." Caeli raised her voice and twirled her rapier. "C'mon, cowardly bugs! They should be able to hear us, right?"

"I think so..." Mari held her enchanted staff with both hands.

The team tensed, back to back to peer at the four windows; the whirling movements of the fog kept them on their toes. A creature could be hiding in front of them without any of them knowing. Kai gripped the blue enamel of his wand, ready to draw his sword if necessary. He'd rather not reveal his spatial artifact to three strangers in the middle of nowhere, though he might not get a choice.

"I don't think it's working." Caeli broke the silence after thirty seconds. She took a cautious step toward a window. "They weren't so timid the first time they attacked us here."

"Same for me," Kai muttered. Despite the magic within the fog interfering with Hallowed Intuition, he should be able to tell if a hostile beast came near. "They seemed pretty intent on ripping me apart regardless of the consequences."

“That’s why we should find out why they’re here. Cloud fairies are cautious beings by nature, they don’t attack humans unless provoked.”

“I know, Mari.” Neil didn’t lower his guard despite the quiet. “But whatever the reason, it doesn’t change our situation. We still need to get out of here and find Kea.”

“I don’t like it.” The girl gave a begrudging nod.

The trio was far more relaxed than Kai expected from someone facing a swarm of deadly beasts—it must not be their first experience. They spent a few more minutes trying to lure the cloud fairies inside; out of cunning or shyness, the wicked cotton balls weren’t biting.

“Guess we’re really doing this. We have to go outside. Me and Mat will go first, while you watch our backs,” Niel grunted with a glance at him. “Do you know how to climb? The walls are quite steep.”

“Yes, I’ll manage.” Kai was a little peeved at not being asked his opinion, though dividing the group between front liners and ranged made the most sense. Niel probably meant to do him a favor by not pairing him with Caeli. And whatever spells Mari could cast, he must consider her more reliable than him to protect their descent.

Let’s get this over.

Kai pushed the mist out of the chamber to let them regain their full visibility—there was no point holding back if those nightmare fairies weren’t coming. A series of gasps and surprised glances crossed the team, looking at the sudden clarity with mouths agape.

“You can *actually* cast magic without chants or skills.” Mari watched as if she were seeing him for the first time.

“Wow, boy. This is quite convenient.” Caeli clapped his back. “You’re a proper mage.”

I told you I could do it. Why do people always act surprised...

They must have thought him a half-mage only capable of cantrips outside his profession skills. He could see the questions crowding their gazes. The urgency of the situation spared him from answering. If they escaped this alive, there’d be time to think how to avoid them.

Kea first.

“We have to move fast. Those things probably could have noticed your spell too.” Niel hung the shield to his back and headed for the window with one wary glance. “Can you clear the mist to the ground?”

Kai went to lean beside him and strained Mana Observer to reach the ground—more than fifteen meters below. It was a deadly fall even for him. He could use Water Magic to carry him down if he were alone, but that would leave him more exposed if the shrieking cotton balls attacked.

“It’s too far.” He shook his head, opening a vertical corridor till the midway point among the mist. The strange ambient essence kept consuming his own the farther he pushed. “That’s my limit. I can’t keep this up for long.”

“Uh, it’s already better than I hoped.” Niel gave him a curt nod and swung one of his legs outside with surprising nimbleness, soon followed by his whole body. “Watch my back.” The young man climbed down, grasping the seams between the boulders that made up the tower—one hand still holding the sword.

“He does like to show off, doesn’t he?” Caeli stood beside the window with Mari. “Your turn boy. Scream if something bites you. I’ll jump down to save you.”

Should I worry that she’s really going to do it?

“Thanks,” Kai held the wand between his teeth and hopped outside. The handholds were shallower than Niel made them look; he channeled Body Augmentation in his fingers to hold his weight.

He descended to the halfway point when the girls watching were swallowed by the fog. Then the whispers brushed his thoughts.

Shit.

Danger buzzed louder each second, impossible to say how far. Kai wanted to scream a warning, but if those creatures were cunning enough to ambush them at the most vulnerable moment, a shout might call them down sooner. His spell had cleared a cone of mist to the weeds below.

Almost there—

The murmurs spiked, leaving no doubts. “They’re here!”

“What—” Niel watched him with a frown, his head jolting toward the mist. “Fuck!” The man threw a measuring glance at the seven meters separating them from the ground and back at him. “I’m—”

“Jump!” With one front covered by the tower, Kai released a fan of ice needles at the mists, hoping Luck would skew the odds in his favor. He channeled more mana into Body Augmentation to reinforce his body and loosened his grip.

Niel was already falling with no need for further encouragement. His body glowed with a skill while the shield on his back scraped the tower to slow the plunge.

The ground was almost upon them when two fluffy clouds shot out of the fog. Kai knew he’d never make it. Perhaps believing him an easier target or holding a grudge, they flew to intercept him.

Cautious beings my ass.

Two meters above the ground, Kai summoned a horizontal wall of water and ice to arrest his fall. The abrupt stop rocked his insides and blacked his vision for a moment; the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. A shattering of ice and a hard crash below soothed his pain.

I don't fall for the same tricks twice.

The fairies could pack quite the punch when they dove, but they weren't the most maneuverable and struggled to regain speed once stopped.

Channeling Water mana through the wand, he turned the broken shield into a flood of freezing water to carry him down together with the dazed creatures. One fairy whizzed away with an erratic pattern, though the one that had slammed into the stone failed to escape the deluge.

The impact on the ground almost shattered the spell. Kai gritted his teeth and slammed the trapped creature against the earth. Sharp roots grew to stab the creatures from below while blades of water slashed from every other side. He had to finish it before—

Another whisper soared among the chaos. The second fairy flew for his head with an enraged scream. *Fuck*. The water prison and the tower at his back restricted his ability to dodge. He was about to redirect his defenses when Niel stepped between them.

"I've got it." He stood low to brace for impact. A layer of shimmering ice coated his shield.

Kai only heard the cracking impact and a grunt. His attention went to the captive misty cloud thrashing with the might of a raging bull. Foreign mana pushed against him to rip away the control of the water.

That's. Mine. Back off!

Niel struggled to keep one engaged, too slow to hit the fairy, he could only tank blow after blow. More murmurs rose to herald the arrival of the rest of the swarm.

They wouldn't get a better chance to finish one off. If the fairies assembled, one nick from the slimy beasts would be enough to incapacitate them, and there was no way to climb back into the tower.

Kai disregarded the warning and bore down his skills in a battle of wills. The trio had come outside because of him. He had thought them cowardly without realizing what he had asked them.

Unleashing the desperate will he honed in the Sanctuary gained him the upper hand, but the yellow creature fought with an equal desire to survive. Its wispy mist fluttered tighter, perhaps conscious it just had to drag the battle out to win.

Kai stripped the mist layer by layer to reveal the monstrous shape hidden inside. Four serrated limbs like a mantis and paper-thin wings flailed within the water. The bulbous body was covered with segmented plates up to a deformed human face jutting with needle-like teeth. The cloud fairy brought no resemblance to the dainty ivory body Zervathi had been trapped in.

He retched to think one of those had dug into his flesh when the whispers screamed to warn him of pressing dangers.

With its pale flesh exposed between the hardened exoskeleton, Kai abandoned the fight over the dominion of the water for an element the fairy had no control over. He twisted the roots around the defenses and pierced the pale flesh.

Submerged, the creature opened its jaws in a silent scream. The wild presence thrashing against him disappeared, letting the waters crush its body.

One down—

Harrowing shrieks pierced his ears, only matched by shouts of Hallowed Intuition. Three flaming presences were shooting for him. Kai froze a sphere of water around him that immediately cracked like an egg under the assault. The cloud fairies ripped apart his defenses and wrestled away his control of the spell to trap him inside his own defenses.

There was only a palm of ice between them when a new force cleaved the sphere in two. Free to move, Kai pushed himself backward and slammed his back against the stone of the tower.

“Are you alive, boy?” Caeli stood before him covered in a flaming aura. Mari dropped beside her a moment later, earthy motes whirling around her staff. Sharp rocks shot out of the ground to force the fairies back.

“I’m. Good.” Kai heaved. His fingers dug into the grass to wrap roots around the swarm. “Don’t let them escape!”

Caeli was already lunging forward to skewer one. The clack resounding with an almost metallic clash meant she hit the armored part, though it gave Niel the chance to slash down with his sword, scoring a hit. A hail of ice warded off the two free sprites while the chain of strikes finally found purchase into the flesh of the creatures.

The shriek of the fairies at another death carried a note of deep despair over the anger. Kai could almost feel bad about them if they hadn’t been trying to butcher him.

You gave the first blow. Don't blame me if I take the last.

With half their number dead, the mist appeared to lose part of its oppressive shroud, letting his senses reach farther and clear the mist. Kai drained the grass to recoup his Nature mana and raised his wand.

C'mon, let's finish this.

The two fairies buzzed circles around them. One swayed closer to attack when an acute pitch from the other made it retreat again.

“Not so eager now that you lost the numerical advantage, eh?” Caeli snorted.

With one last screech, the puffy clouds glided back into the mist. Kai worried they'd be forced into a battle of attrition when the murmurs also quietened.

“I think they're gone...”

“What?” Caeli blurted. “Are you sure? They could just be trying to ambush us.”

“I think he's right.” Mari lowered her staff. “Look.”

The fog was growing thinner yet. Swept back by a casual shove, it left the space empty with no fight.

Niel let out a relieved sigh. “It's probably better this way.”

“Yeah...” Kai had a thousand and one questions about the strangeness of everything going on. Too many things didn't add up, though first, he had a person to find. Mana Observer spread freely through the meadow around the tower, only struggling when it brushed the ground.

He barely paid attention when he locked onto two familiar figures; Rain and Flynn were both fine. A silver blink at the corner of his vision announced Hobbes' arrival, striding ahead of the group.

I told you there was nothing to worry...

Another signature appeared in his range. Despite two years gone, Kai could recognize every line of her mana veins.

A tall girl ran out of the mist with a drawn bow and cautious eyes. Kea still wore the same pixie cut with a new pair of sapphire earrings, her delicate features hardened by the sharp line of her pressed lips.

“Are any of you hurt?” She was about to head toward Caeli when she noticed him and froze on the spot. Her brows knitted together, eyes widened and index pointed in accusation.

“You!”