

Chapter 275 - The Tower

Muffled voices stirred Kai awake. Shadows and lights danced beyond his eyelids. He was lying on a cold stone floor. Despite his dazed head and heavy limbs, he had all his fingers and toes. Whatever toxin he got injected with, it wasn't lethal, or the potions had an effect.

I can't believe that worked. Thank you, Hobbes.

His familiar sent back a regal acknowledgment, their bond still working. The furball paced outside the swirling fog, less than five hundred meters from him. Perceiving the magic in the mist, he was hesitant to come closer.

Don't worry, I'll be okay. I'll reach you once I fix this.

A rock was digging into his back. Kai reached to dislodge it when something sharp brushed his neck.

"Don't move!" The face of a girl about eighteen with delicate pale features and sharp eyebrows came into view. She stood over him with a rapier pointed at his nose, her dark hair tied in a ponytail. "Did you follow us here?"

"Stop that, Caeli." A male shadow with the wavy brown curls typical of the archipelago walked behind her. "He's just a boy."

"We've already discussed this. He popped out of nowhere!" She gestured with her blade too close to him for comfort. "It could be another trick of the mist. We can't trust anything in this place."

"We also agreed this place is protected. The cloud fairies can't come to the tower."

"We can't be sure." Caeli snorted and continued to squabble.

Where is Kea?

Across the bare stone chamber, a young woman with shoulder-length hair and green eyes sat reading a book—not his sister. An enchanted staff rested on the wall beside her. She gave him an exasperated smile as if to say he shouldn't mind the other two. There was no one else.

Still lying on his back, Kai propped himself up on his elbows to stand up. The rapier whistled back to his nose.

"I said to not move!" Caeli coldly watched him. "Who are you? Did someone pay you to follow us here? It's that slimy weasel, isn't it? If you think killing us will be so easy, you don't know who you're dealing with!"

“Uhm...” Kai cleared his throat, his tongue still somewhat unresponsive. “Ima domeehn...”

“What language is that?” The dark-haired girl narrowed her eyes and pressed the rapier against his chest. “Do you think I won’t do it after what you did to Caeden?”

“Calm down, Caeli.” The young man pulled her arm back before turning to Kai with a studious gaze. “I don’t think you’re a spy. But you must tell us who you are and how you got here.”

“Imasht.” Kai clenched his jaw to hide his frustration in case they interpreted it as a hostile move.

Caeli’s blue eyes gleamed dangerously. “Are you making fun of us?”

“I don’t think he’s doing it on purpose.” The young woman closed her book and walked closer. “He must have been poisoned by the cloud fairies.” She pointed to the blood on his hands.

“That’s not possible.”

“Caeli’s right, Mari.” The man begrudgingly said. “He would have been unconscious for hours, not twenty minutes.”

“He has probably drunk some potion, and his race is at yellow.” Mari waved at Kai’s face as if that explained everything, a Mana Sense passing through him

Hey, didn't they tell you it's rude to snoop?

The mention of his grade made Caeli raise her rapier while the young man reached for the sword at his side.

Repaying the favor, Kai found all three were at the peak of Orange with their profession in the mid to high levels—quite impressive for their age. This could only be his sister’s team, but when he extended Mana Observer through the tower, Kea was still nowhere to be found.

She can't be dead. They don't look distraught.

The fastest way to get answers lay in the three wary humans. Kai slowly cross-legged on the stone floor to look non-threatening, and carefully channeled Body Augmentation in his facial muscles.

“I’m Mat,” he articulated. “I don’t mean any harm.”

The squabbling duo cast a glance at the quiet woman. When Mari gave a light nod, they visibly relaxed, though Caeli didn’t lower her rapier. They must have some kind of skill to gauge his intentions.

This complicates things...

“Oh, I’m Niel. And these are Caeli and Mari.” The young man pointed at his companions. “Sorry for the rude welcome, Mat. If you’ve seen what’s outside, you’ll understand why we’re all a little jumpy. Why are *you* here?”

With the possibility of a lie-sensing skill, Kai carefully chose his words. “The clerk at the Hall of Seekers told us a team came here to investigate a disappearance and didn’t come back. Me and my team got separated in the mist.”

“Are you saying you came looking for *us*?” Caeli sounded quite skeptical. “Why would you care to do that?”

“I— We came to Limgrell to look for Keandra. I and one of my friends know her family. They had asked to check on her when we reached the mainland.” It was the truth, though not the whole of it. Telling them he was her brother would create too many issues with his identity to be worth it.

I hope Flynn and Rain didn’t follow me.

“You’re from the archipelago...?” Niel gave him a once-over.

Caeli lowered her blade and looked between him and the other two. “But he doesn’t look much like you.”

“One of his parents must be from the Republic,” Mari said, back to reading her book. “You know, just like Kea.”

Dammit.

Spending so little time outside, he had lost his tan; hopefully, they didn’t look too similar. “My father was also from the mainland.” Kai scowled to discourage any follow-up.

“Even if what you say is true, it doesn’t explain how you appeared from thin air.” Caeli crossed her arms. “You’re lucky I didn’t slice you up.”

“How did you do it?” Niel sounded more fascinated than wary. “It was like you teleported.”

“Well... I did.” Kai bit his cheek. “I was cornered by those mist abominations and I couldn’t find the entrance to the tower. It was my last resort.”

“Can you get us out of this trap?” The man’s gaze glimmered with hope.

“No, I only crossed a few meters. And it’s not something I can repeat.” Not without Hobbes’ last assistance and all his Favor.

Space Magic was too rare to pass unnoticed, and it wasn’t something Matthew should know. It was better to leave them guessing on a vague explanation. They’d sooner think he used some unique artifact than believe he cast the spell on his own.

“Where’s Keandra?” Kai used their silence to change subject. “She came here with you, right?”

The trio shared a guilty look, gathering in a corner of the chamber to gesture and whisper among themselves. “He could be lying. We don’t—” Caeli’s voice rose before she went back to murmur.

Coming to some sort of agreement, Caeli stood nailed in the corner, lips pursed, and Niel stepped forward. “Kea’s outside.”

Kai blinked. “What do you mean *outside*?” He stared daggers at them. How could they be so calm if she was with those monsters?

The man had the grace to look ashamed. “We tried to stop her, but we couldn’t follow her. She’s the only one with the skills to hide from the cloud fairies. She thought she could find a way out to call for help. And we know she’s alive. Mari has a skill for it.”

Of course, she ran into the mist like a reckless maniac.

He took a deep breath to sort through the information—it was just what he expected from his sister. But he wasn’t too late.

As long as she’s alive, I can find her.

The stone chamber of the tower had no features except a ramp of stairs leading up and one buried entrance in the floor. It must have sunk like the ruins on the archipelago. Even if he escaped the mists with Spatial Attunement, he had no way to find his sister. He needed more information.

“I assume the door is up there?” In his panic, he hadn’t thought to look up when he was attacked by those creatures.

“Yes, there are four more floors with openings to the outside,” Niel said. “Though the last one doesn’t have a roof.”

“How do you keep the mist out?” A pile of stone shouldn’t be able to stop a magical phenomenon.

“This floor is protected.” Mari looked up from the book she was scribbling in. “It must be some ancient enchantments that everyone has forgotten about. It’s the only reason we’re alive.” She tapped a silver pen on the stone floor. “I think the runes are buried somewhere below us. Or in the walls...”

Hmm... is that why my bond with Hobbes works again?

“You called those creatures cloud fairies?” Kai had no idea how those slimy beings could be mischievous sprites. The more he made them talk, the less he would have to reveal about himself. “I thought they were wraiths.”

And more importantly, how do I kill them?

Mari scrunched her nose. “People in Limgrell call any creatures that live in the fog a mist wraith. If they were truly wraiths, we’d already be dead. Cloud fairies are usually harmless scavengers until you go poke them.”

“They almost ripped me apart,” Kai tersely said.

Mari puffed her cheeks. “That’s because someone trapped them here. They live far deeper in the Lake of Myst where the mana is denser. They’re just scared and angry.”

So, someone really set a trap for them...

Kai wanted to know what was going on, but his sister took precedence. He’d untangle this mystery once they were all safe. “How do we get away from here?”

“If we knew we wouldn’t be stuck in here, would we?” Caeli grumbled, sitting on the stairs with her rapier. “We’re not fools or cowards.”

“My bad.” Kai raised his palms to pacify her. “Will the mist dissipate if we kill those... *fairies*?” Now that he knew their abilities, he was confident to squish them.

“Mhmm... From what I read, yes.” Mari grimaced, not a fan of the idea. “Cloud fairies thicken the mist to protect themselves from predators since they aren’t very strong on their own. But their abilities shouldn’t be able to trap us to this degree.”

“Yeah.” Niel drummed his fingers on the hilt of his sword. “When we tried to leave the tower, all our skills failed.”

“But without the mist, we could see where we’re going and leave.” Not that Kai needed that, but it might be the only way to find Kea.

“If we found what’s keeping them here, we could peacefully solve this,” Mari muttered.

“And do you know where we should look?” Caeli gestures to the bare stone around them. “We can’t leave this chamber.”

“No, but—”

“Then the boy is right. We should just crush those bugs to a pulp.” She pressed her fist in her palm. “No fairies, no mist. No mist, no problem.”

“And how do you plan to defeat a swarm of yellow creatures?” The bookish girl scowled. “They’re relatively weak for their grade but still lethal inside their natural environment.”

“We can’t just wait here either. You know Kea. She could arrive at the same conclusion and fight them on her own.”

Oh, fuck.

Worry pressed Kai to action. He stood up, heading for the stairs. “Do you know how many fairies there are? I’ve seen three.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to him. “How did you survive alone against that many?” Niel blurted.

“I got lucky. How many did you meet?”

“We saw four around the tower when the mist thickened.” He turned to Mari with an expectant look.

“Uh...” the girl bit her lip. “Swarms of cloud fairies should vary between three and six individuals. Four should be the most common number. But I still think this is a terrible idea.”

“Sometimes you only get to choose between bad and worse,” Kai mused. Even if he prepared, battling four of those creatures would be a challenge, worse if there were more. “I’m going out. Do any of you want to join?” He wasn’t in the position to refuse their help.

“I’m starting to like you, boy.” Caeli gripped her rapier with a fierce grin. “I’m coming too. We can’t let Kea have all the fun, can we?”

Yeah, I can see why you two teamed up...

Niel scrubbed a hand through his wavy hair and bent to grab a shield reinforced with enchanted steel. “And I can’t let you get yourself killed alone. This *is* a terrible idea, but the boy is also right. It’s the best we have got.”

Can you both stop calling me boy?

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” With a heavy sigh, Mari grabbed her staff off the wall. “We could try luring the fairies to the upper floors. Either way, we *must* stay close to the tower. It’s the only safe place if we get overwhelmed.”

The more the merrier.

Standing on the stairs, Kai could see plumes of wispy mist fill the floor above. A team would give him some degree of security if he got poisoned.

“What can you do, boy?” Niel stood behind him. “I can lend you something if you lose your weapon in the mist.”

“There is no need.” He summoned a globe of water in his palm, taking his wand out of his pocket with the ring.

Awed gasps filled the chamber, looking at him as if he had suddenly grown a second head.

“You’re a mage!” After three seconds of gaping, Niel closed his mouth with a serious frown. “It’s better if you stay behind me then. We need to change our battle formation. How many spells can you cast? Have you refilled your reserves? How many chants do you know?”

The bombardment of questions continued. Years of habit had made Kai cagey about his abilities, but the journey to the mainland had highlighted the importance of knowing the abilities of his companions. Fighting a swarm of yellow creatures while hiding his abilities would be madness.

Kea isn’t someone who gives her trust easily. They can’t be too bad...

Under their expectant gazes, he summarized his ability to use Water, Earth and Nature mana, and his Swordsmanship. He only underplayed the power of his spells since they wouldn’t believe him anyway. Half an hour later, he had also learned what the trio could do.

Despite his own fighting experience, Kai had to admit he was a newbie when it came to team tactics.

“Okay, let’s go. Don’t lose sight of your companions at any cost.” Niel took the vanguard with Caeli while Kai and Mari followed behind.

Together, they climbed the steps to dive back into the swirling mist.