

Chapter 274 - Swirling Mists

“Hurry!” Kai ignored the warning from Hallowed Intuition and ran toward the looming shadow. His skin tingled in the cold air. From the echoes of the frantic scream, Kea could be in danger at this moment.

The mist thickened till he lost track of what he thought was the tower.

Dammit.

Everything was covered in a veil of swirling white. He squinted and strained his ears for the person who screamed. “Do you see anything?”

Failing to get an answer, he turned to his companions only to find an impenetrable wall of fog. Over half the ambient mana had turned into Water motes with a considerable chunk of Shadow and other churning elements he couldn’t quite identify.

“Flynn? Rain!” He shouted at the top of his lungs.

No one answered. Not the shadow of movement or a faraway echo. Nothing. They had been following right behind him, and the siren should be quick enough to stop him if they didn’t wish to come.

“Fuck!” An eerie silence dampened his voice. He couldn’t see his own feet, and Mana Observer was restricted to a few meters around him.

The mist around the lake had muffled his senses but nothing to this degree. It couldn’t be a coincidence it worsened just as they heard the scream coming from the tower.

Did that girl at the Hall set us up?

Belice couldn’t have known they’d run straight here. The trap must have been for Kea’s team. And if it wasn’t designed for them, they’d have better chances to escape—though it also meant his sister was in danger.

There would be no point maintaining this setup if she was already dead.

Kai grasped at the conjecture, knowing how flimsy it was. He had no idea who or *what* arranged this trap. It could even be some kind of magical phenomenon of the Lake of Myst or the mist wraith that guard mentioned.

And that’s why you look for information before acting.

Not that foresight would make him behave any differently. Kea’s group had come here yesterday; there wasn’t time for an extensive investigation.

“Can anyone hear?” His calls were only answered with silence. Kai tried to run in a straight line for five minutes; his surroundings remained unchanged. While Hallowed Intuition’s whispers lingered, it offered no clue as to how to get away either.

Great.

He crouched with a sharp exhale and lay his palm on the wet grass to scan his terrain with a pulse of Earth Magic. He furrowed his brow at the result. The spell expanded a little more than five meters before it fizzled out, devoured by the ground itself.

If it was some kind of mist creature, how could it also affect the earth? Even a stray Yellow beast from a higher area shouldn't be capable of something like this.

Hallowed Intuition should have reacted more strongly if that were the case...

Channeling more notes into the ground slightly increased his range at the price of consuming several times more mana. There was no way to brute force his way through with an Orange skill.

What do I do?

Even his bond with Hobbes was somehow muted as if he had moved a thousand miles away. Kai meandered aimlessly through the swirling mist, hoping to lure out the entity responsible for the trap. If the mastermind was watching, they must have decided to wait till he exhausted himself.

Fine. You aren't the only one with tricks up their sleeves.

The potential danger to his sister pressed his thoughts.

Kai waved his hand through the chilly fog. It was nothing more than water vapor, clenching his fingers, he ripped a chunk to condense it. The dense ambient essence squirmed under his grip as if it had a will of its own.

This can't be natural.

This time brute strength worked wonderfully to net him a fistful of droplets. His triumph was short-lived when the fog rushed to refill the empty spot with no noticeable effect.

I can't empty the Lake of Myst a handful at a time.

Pushing back the mist brought similar disappointing results. He could clear a bubble around him, but if he expanded the range more than a couple meters, the pressure spiked the cost out of control.

I can't see through it and I can't destroy it...

Kai channeled his Nature mana through his legs to probe the grass; the ambient density resisted him again before he could reach much farther. Frustrated, he sprouted a path of weeds in a straight line.

If I keep going I must get somewhere eventually.

The mist couldn't erase physical objects as far as he could tell, and the shadow of the tower had looked relatively close. Hope was swelling in his chest when he noticed his path of weeds on the ground ahead of him.

Dammit. I'm walking in circles.

He must have slowly curved the path and looped around, tricked by the dense mist obstructing his vision.

It's so much easier when I can cleave a beast in two to solve the problem...

He could try growing a grid of vines to slowly work his way out. But that would take hours if not days. The Nature mana was too scarce and there were no trees to drain.

"Are you scared or what?" Kai taunted the fogs. "Come out, you asshole!"

Predictably, no one answered. He was like a caged mouse, waiting for the trapper to deal with him. It was grating on his nerves.

Just you wait.

Kai was about to shred the ground and mist apart in the hope of provoking a reaction when he realized his bag of tricks wasn't empty. Shadow would be no help, but he had *one* other element.

Space Magic was so clunky to cast that his mind automatically excluded it. This might be the perfect opportunity for it. If he couldn't rely on his physical and mana senses to orient himself, perhaps he could look at the fabric of reality itself.

C'mon, I didn't push you to Yellow for nothing.

To teleport an object, he couldn't always aim with sight alone. Closing his eyes, Astral Pathway made the iridescent motes beneath the veil of reality flicker to the forefront with neon colors. There were no spatial disturbances he could detect—whatever created the mist worked on different principles.

Now for the hard part.

The Guide called Spatial Attunement an instinctive understanding of the cosmos; while Zervathi called it a crutch for his lacking intellect. With every other element, Kai could use his knowledge from Earth to cast more efficient spells; Space Magic was different.

He stopped trying to make sense of what he perceived and grasped his position with more dimensions than his brain was built to understand. Fixing a random point in the distance, he took a step forward and then another.

His body told him he was turning too much to the right, and then the left in a twisting path. He fought down his impulses to open his eyes and trusted his boon.

This better be—

A chorus of whispers rose. The dense mists swirled in a vortex in front of him. Kai was squinting to see when a nebulous shape flew for his head with a shriek. He took out his sword and leaped back, mana surging into his legs. Something slimy and sharp clacked against the blade, cutting into his fingers before he flung it away in a panic.

The bulbous shape disappeared into the fog, the hand wielding the sword was bleeding and covered in a greenish mucus. One whiff of the rotten substance was enough to make him retch.

Kai cast a blob of water to wash his fingers, praying it wasn't poisonous—from the burning tingle, his chances weren't good. He searched his ring for an antidote. After scouring every shop in Varsea, he had realized how extraordinary Dora's universal cure had been. Unfortunately, he had consumed every vial in her parting gift to survive in the Sanctuary.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Without knowing the nature of the toxin, he uncorked three vials with his teeth and downed them. The alchemical concoctions burned his throat with no clue as if they'd actually work.

The murmurs soared again without a distinct direction. Kai pushed the mists back for two meters around him, outside everything swirled in white. Just as he wondered if he had scared the thing off, he whirled with his sword. A puffy cloud flew to his face with a howling scream.

His blade clinked against something hard that carried more strength than its small figure suggested. Unable to slice through, he used his sword like a baseball bat to swing the creature away. Mana Observer couldn't glimpse the monstrosity hidden inside, though from the brightness it was firmly into Yellow.

Just my luck.

His injured hand was going numb in spite of the antidotes; the tingling had climbed up his right arm. He had one good hand left, and no idea how to kill the beast.

If it was slimy, it must have some weak spots. I just—

The shrieking cotton ball shot for his back.

You're getting predictable.

Kai pivoted to slash, his arms swelled with Body Augmentation. Elemental Swordsman lit his blade with a blue and earthy glow. He slammed the creature to the ground. Vines rose to wrap around it while he hurled a volley of ice needles from every direction.

Judging by the piercing scream, he had hit something soft. The wispy cloud buzzed and sliced through the vines to flee.

Uncertain if a slash would have any effect, Kai cast a flood of water, intent on freezing it solid. The unnatural mist shrunk, still clinging to the creature.

Ice cracked from the surface of the water sphere toward the beast in its center.

Die alrea—

A second screaming cloud flew out of the fog at his shoulders. Kai twisted and summoned a frozen shield that shattered before it could fully form. The creature clasped the back of his neck, needle-like blades twisting into his flesh.

Desperate, Kai stored his sword to grab the creature with both hands. His finger clawed at slimy flesh and solid appendages to find purchase. He surged his skills and pulled it off, heedless of the cuts he received.

With one angry shriek, the beast disappeared into the mist. The moments of distraction had allowed the first trapped creature to escape too.

He washed off the mucus coating his neck and hands—the damage was already done. The tingling was spreading and drinking two more healing potions made little difference. He could barely move his right hand, and he was feeling suddenly drowsy.

Kai bit his tongue to keep awake and pushed the mist further back to give him more time to react. Nebulous forms already circled the edges of his domain. With his body growing numb, he'd run out of time much sooner than mana.

Hallowed Intuition sang a slow requiem with no apparent solutions. "Come at me, you cowards!" He had to close this fast.

The wraith's cackling laughter echoed from the fog, content to wait him out.

Shit.

He couldn't chase them and he couldn't hide. With his time ticking away, Kai delved back into his spatial skills. The vibrant green, fuchsia and electric blue filled his mind. Without a way to say which direction he had been going, he bet on his Favor again.

Moving as fast as he dared, his mind split between guiding him and keeping spells ready at his numb fingertips. The mist wraiths suddenly changed their tune to a screech, unhappy with his decision.

Thanks for the encouragement.

Kai gave a weak smile, his lips unresponsive.

The aimless whispers swelled before two wicked cotton clouds came at him from opposite sides. He dove for the ground and cast a water bubble above him to trap the creatures. The impact splashed his spell; he struggled to keep them contained while crackling ice sealed the prison.

A furious buzzing shook the water as the stronger beast broke free. Holding into the weaker one, there was no chance he could finish it off before the other came back.

Kai flung away the spell. He was about to dive back into Spatial Attunement when the stronger wraith came howling at him. Still on the ground, he pushed his elemental mana downward to summon a wall of earth and swinging vines.

Retreating, his back hit something solid and coarse. Massive stone blocks rose and disappeared into the fog. He had found the tower. There was no entrance that he could see, and the mist beasts were unwilling to give him the chance to look for one.

Both angry clouds came, joined by a third to shred his wall of plants. Shoulders to the wall, Kai wove his elements to reinforce his defenses with Earth and Ice. He had lost any feeling for his entire upper body and his vision blurred.

Almost there.

Mana Observer crossed the thick walls of the building but failed to find an entrance. There wasn't time to circle it. Even through the adrenaline, his eyelids dropped, called to sleep. He pushed his legs close to his chest and used vines to wrap his arms around his body.

This better work.

Kai channeled every speck of Water mana into a shell of ice, muffling the wraiths' screeches. The beasts chipped away layer by layer. He ignored them, his mind busy weaving the most ambitious spell he had ever attempted.

Space Magic was finecky at the best of times. The largest object he had tried to teleport was a boulder half his size—that lost a good chunk somewhere along the way. Though losing a limb was still preferable to whatever the mist wraith would do to him.

C'mon, Hobbes does this in his sleep? How hard can it be?

Kai was surprised when the cat reached through their bond. There was no time to wonder how or way. A jumble of meaning flooded his mind to correct him.

I don't understa—

His ice shell cracked to signal the wraiths were almost through. Kai abandoned his attempts at interpretation and let his instincts guide the magic construct. Without giving the rational side of his mind time to mess things up, he released the spell.

There was no buildup. Iridescent lights flashed in his vision. One second he was watching three eldritch monsters chew through his defenses, the next he stared at a wide space with a gray stone ceiling. His body was too numb to say if he had lost any limbs.

As the tension left his body, darkness crowded his vision, soon joined by three human shadows.