

176 – Our Friend, the Lich III

Knocking on my door awoke me from my sleep, and as soon as I’d sat up, Renji came into my room. The cover slid off me, though I couldn’t remember having actually gone to bed. Next to my nightstand sat Jules, who, mysteriously, also seemed to have slept through the night.

“It’s almost noon,” Renji said, sounding worried.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to sleep that long,” I replied, slightly embarrassed.

“You weren’t the only one. Ludwig, Elye, Emily, myself, and *even* Armen all overslept as well!”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously.

“Where’s Saoirse?”

“Gone.”

“Fuck... we need to get going right away.”

We all gathered outside. Everyone was in the same position as me: confused about how they’d fallen asleep, but also well-rested.

“Fool I was to think my mind was safe within the abode of a Dullahan,” Ludwig muttered. He was supposed to be the one amongst us that was most resilient to such tricks and yet he had been no less susceptible.

“I thought you were resistant to the charms of Demons, thanks to your Succubus,” I remarked.

“Well, for starters, a Dullahan isn’t a Demon. And secondly, my damn familiar was also put to sleep!”

“It does not matter now,” Armen said firmly. **“We must perform our tasks as agreed upon yesterday, regardless of the Dullahan’s actions.”**

“I think she might be trying to get rid of Kumi,” I replied.

“Do you think she would do that?” Renji asked. “Maybe she’s just laying the groundwork for us.”

Ludwig shook his head. “Let’s focus on what we know and not get lost in speculation.”

He handed Renji a metal wafer the size of an envelope. Upon it was intricate and tight sigils that wove together in a complex pattern, almost like a maze. It shared some similarities with the Ward that he had made for Finnegan and I during the Humming Haunter’s exorcism, but was different in several ways that made me think it was meant to counter a Lich specifically, although I couldn’t fully explain how I got this impression.

“Take this. Put it on the front of your body somewhere or hang it around your neck. *Don’t* lose it.”

Renji took the proffered wafer and strapped it to the front of his leather chestpiece, using several strings that seemed originally designed to secure knives, pouches, flasks, or other such small objects.

“Is it an Anti-Lich Ward?” I asked him.

“Essentially.”

“What metal is this?” The Spellfist asked. “It feels weird.”

“Tungsten. That wafer alone costs a minor fortune, but the Ward won’t tarnish, though it requires energy to function. Ryūta will recharge it if it runs out.”

“Do I get one as well?” I asked.

“Do I look like fucking Santa Clause to you?”

“I think that means ‘No’,” Renji said with a nervous grin.

“You’re an Exorcist. Almost Rank IV as well. Prove it by protecting your own mind. Your Siren’s Kiss ability, plus your Soul Barrier should be enough.”

I frowned, but knew he was right. Relying on Wards meant I was unprepared for protecting myself if the circumstances changed. Renji had access to the Soul Barrier as well, now that he was a Spellfist, but he hadn’t practiced with it much, hence the Ward.

“Alright, Renji and Ryūta will enter the Redoubt. The rest of you stick with Liw, she’ll safeguard your minds from the Lich’s powers. If you leave her side, you will die. So don’t.”

It was harsh, but everyone accepted the fact that this was a life-or-death situation they were getting themselves into. I felt bad for having dragged Emily and Elye into this. They were both so young and it seemed reckless to put them in harm’s way like this, even if they both expressed a desire to help me with the Lich.

Armen put a hand on my shoulder. “**Trust your friends. They have prepared for this moment.**”

I nodded.

“Is everyone ready?” I asked.

Ludwig brought out his metal wand and Liw the Succubus appeared beside him, drowsy-looking and rubbing her eyes.

“*What time is it, baby?*”

“Showtime,” he replied.

Renji laughed then brought his gauntleted fists together. “Let’s do this!”

Ludwig sent Liw ahead of the rest of us and she was the first to trespass onto the pale-grey ‘dead’ grass, which demarcated the half-a-kilometre radius surrounding the Mossbloom Redoubt. As she casually walked into hostile territory, the silver pipe dribbled the Red Haze Phantasm in her wake and it quickly grew into a pink-ish mist around her cloven hooves.

The Barrier Ring Focus I’d gotten back in Lundia was cupped in my left hand, while the writhing Singing Branch was gripped firmly in my right.

Renji looked at the staff. I had told him every detail I could think of when I described the last attempt to Exorcise her, but he still managed to ask a question I hadn’t even considered. “Was she happy to see you again?”

I shook my head. “She wanted me to stay with her forever. Within her illusionary world of the past. She said she hated me for leaving her behind and that she waited all this time for me.”

“Do you really think you can save her?”

“I hope so.”

“And if you can’t?”

“Then she deserves to be put out of her misery, rather than being stuck here.”

He gave me an uncomfortable look. “You’ve changed,” he then said.

I wanted to deny it, but I couldn’t. Instead I just replied, “We all have.”

When the Succubus’ subservient haze filled the entire area surrounding the Redoubt, like some encroaching sickness, we began moving towards the bridge that crossed the moat full of sludge. Ludwig was at the back of our group, while Armen and Jules moved at the front. Along with Emily and Elye, they would break open a path for us.

The undead servants of the Lich were already piling out from its gate and storming across the field towards us, but the Spellhand was utilising her wind to slow their approach. Renji looked poised to join Armen and Jules, but he was conserving his strength.

Meanwhile, I was focusing my energy into the Barrier Ring, the effort making it spin and susurrate gently, while Soul Barrier safeguarded me from Kumi’s hallucinations. The pressure from her aura was felt even out here, but Liw’s haze was insulating us from its full force, so long as we remained close to her where it was thickest.

With a loping stride, Armen moved forward and swept his mace through the front of the undead, all of which had a decorative iron nail piercing their foreheads. Jules followed right behind him,

sweeping his tin sword in the opposite direction, while also manipulating Elye’s arrows to pierce through rows of the tightly-packed zombies.

A *woosh* came from the side of the bridge and more than ten of the undead were tossed off the side and down into the sludge, from which they were unable to escape. But Emily wasn’t done, as she moved forward and opened her Caged Spell-Tome, directing her powerful Crushing spell onto the middle of the bridge.

The sound of thirty zombies being crushed simultaneously was deeply unsettling, and it seemed to echo across the pale-grey grass clearing within which the Redoubt resided.

Armen and Jules moved forward through the crushed servants, clearing the way for Renji and I to follow. I was already breathing hard from keeping up with them, but took a quick swig of a Vitality Potion that Ludwig had bought for me and immediately felt myself reinvigorated.

With the way through the gate momentarily cleared, Renji moved in front of me, while I pulled Meigetsu in close. Karasumany sat on my shoulder and supplied its vision into my damaged left eye, and I used this supernatural sight to try and spot the ‘seams’ of the illusions we were heading into.

Although we were protected from forced hallucinations, such as the ones that’d made me enter a sleep-like state the first time I was here, we still had to contend with visual trickery.

“Left!” I yelled to Renji and he immediately followed my directions.

From what Armen had told me of the first time we entered the Redoubt, we had found the remnant memory of the school when we went into the bottom-right corner of the fortress. I wasn’t sure if there was a logic to the location of the fragments and the illusions that possibly housed them, but if there were, then it seemed obvious to try each of the five corners of the earth-swallowed fortress.

As I went through the gate, following in the footsteps of the Spellfist, an intense pressure hit my Soul Barrier, forcing me to stop as though I’d slammed into a physical wall. I doubled my energy into the Focus in my left hand and pushed the oppressive weight off of me, then caught up with Renji.

We moved at a steady pace down a narrow tunnel that followed the sloped Redoubt wall to our left and a building to our right that might’ve been a barracks or storage. There were, strangely, none of the nail-pierced servants around us.

Renji seemed about to point out this peculiarity to me, when our surroundings changed. The earth and stone walls, the dry sand-like ground beneath us, all of it fell away to an idyllic path of stones that followed a small stream down to a little pond.

The water moved down stone steps within a little channel surrounded by rocks, while we followed a gravel path next to it that was surrounded by low perfectly-trimmed bushes. Taller bushes rose from behind them, and trees walled in the path and pond.

“I recognise this place,” Renji said.

“Me too.”

There was a bench under a scaffolding made of bamboo and from which hung blue wisterias. In front of the bench was the little pond, where Koi fish swam around lazily, each a mix of white and orange.

I turned around and looked for the path that was partially-hidden behind the bench and the wisteria. It was just a few stone steps up to a slightly elevated building, within which was an open wall that faced out into the garden we’d walked through, as well as the pond and the little stream.

On the tatami floor within sat Kumi, wearing her spring high school clothes and drinking some tea. The fragment in my staff bucked and writhed as I walked closer, but when I sat down on the floor next to her, it went completely still.

“You’re back,” said Inoue Kumi.