

178 – Our Friend, the Lich V

The arrow stuck in the target down the range returned to her hand with a blink, and she prepared to fire it again, lifting the bow up in front of her.

“Which version of Kumi is this?” Renji asked in a whisper.

“Maybe the competitive one,” I muttered.

“The other fragment let me absorb her,” I then said out loud. “She warned that the last one remaining would fight hard to prevent us from getting to her.”

Fwoosh!

The arrow flew down the range and struck the target mid-centre. In the real world, Kumi had never been this good at Kyūdō, but it was possible that this fragment had practised all this time to achieve such a level of accuracy.

“It’s a survival mechanism of any creature,” Kumi replied without turning her attention away from the target. The arrow reappeared in her hand and she repeated the motions to fire it.

“Will you go willingly?”

“We’re trying to help you,” Renji added.

Fwoosh!

“No.”

I bit my lip. “Kumi, please.”

“Don’t lie to me Ryūta. If you want to help me, then why did you bring your Reaper *girlfriend* here to kill me?” she asked in a mocking tone.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I said.

“Then what is she?”

“My Soul-Pacted Companion,” I replied.

“Hah.”

“I can’t control her! But, she promised me that she would let me try to save you, so I don’t know why she changed her mind.”

“More lies. It’s all you ever do. Lie, lie, lie.”

I took a deep breath, then tried to change tactics.

“How did you cheat her Scythe?”

“It was easy.”

“Really?”

“Arrogance is any powerful creature’s weak-point. Just like humans, they believe they are indestructible. They don’t consider the small insects and bacteria that live in the same world as them, and thus they forget that even the smallest being can have a profoundly devastating effect on their lives.

“They look down at us, but also wish to walk amongst us. To them, we are entertainment and wish-fulfilment. We are their playthings, and yet they never consider that we might know their weaknesses. They study us and never expect us to study them. Their power makes them blind and careless.”

“So you used her arrogance against her?” Renji asked.

Fwoosh!

Another arrow struck the target perfectly in the middle.

“If she hasn’t told you herself, it is because she is ashamed. It is honestly hilarious, even if tragic.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

Kumi lowered her bow and turned to look at us finally. A sickening grin adorned her face.

“I told her I would be her friend if she spared me,” she said.

It felt as though a ball of disgust and horror was forming in my chest, curling all my organs around it. This wasn’t Kumi’s competitiveness. In truth she’d never been a competitive person and she’d only joined the Kyūdō club because her Grandmother asked her to.

No. The fragment in front of me was all of Kumi’s worst traits. All the things I had never seen. These existed in any person, but were normally kept at bay by the counterbalancing elements like kindness, selflessness, and happiness.

The first fragment had been lonely, distraught, and angry at the world and me. The second had been introspective, sad, and, for the most part, tranquil. This fragment was evil, jealous, and cruel.

Saoirse hadn’t expressed anything towards me to indicate how Kumi had tricked her, but I now understood why she was so hellbent on trying to Reap her, since she probably felt cheated by the promise of friendship, only to learn that it was all a ruse.

“Why is Saoirse unable to find you?” Renji asked. His aura was showing a similar emotional turmoil as what I felt.

Kumi laughed. It wasn’t a laughter like anything I’d ever heard from her before.

“I trapped her in her own little magical nightmare. She, with all her powers, cannot figure out the way past it. If she wasn’t so proud, she would’ve curled up in a ball and cried until I let her go.”

I swung my staff up towards her head, but before I could send out my Draining attack, the surroundings warped.

The wooden floor became stone, with water reaching up to my ankles. The walls around us were replaced with large barrels for storage, and the courtyard with targets was an open room full of skeletally-thin undead that was charging straight for us.

Renji moved forward to meet them with his devastating punches, each impact breaking them apart. At the far back was the Lich fragment, swinging a wand around. It had both of its arms, but everything below the abdomen was gone. It didn't matter though, as she was held aloft on the shoulders of two brutish servants.

I flung several Repels at the fragment in quick succession and managed to score a hit on one of the two brutes, sending the legless fragment toppling to the ground alongside it. Before the other brute could pick her up from the flooded floor, I struck it as well. With the bond-disabling effect that my Death's Hand carried, the brutes lost their ability to stand and just collapsed to the floor. However, the other servants that I struck didn't topple over, but instead just froze in place.

Renji hopped back a step, cocking his right fist back behind his head. All the tremors in the floor, the sounds in the air, and the thrum of spells ceased immediately, as these vibrations were absorbed into his gauntlet. He'd had them reworked to withstand his new Affinity, but I was surprised to notice that the rework actually seemed to intensify the absorbed vibrations, producing a rattling metallic whine.

I swung my staff and launched a wide-targeting Repel against the frontmost servants to stall for time, as he built up his attack.

“Get ready!” Renji yelled, as the whine of his gauntlet reached a pitch so high that I could feel it in the bones of my face like a stinging ache.

The disabled servants began to regain their control from their puppeteer, but this seemed to be the cue that he'd been waiting for.

With a large step forward, he hammered his fist into one of the gangly undead.

“Devastation!”

The whole underground bunker shook. The water in front of him shot forward in a storm of tiny droplets, and in a cone from where he struck, everything was reduced to nothingness, every gangly body, storage crate and barrel, and encroaching plant. All of it became tiny nearly-indistinguishable fragments that blended together and rained down across the storage room, light enough for the backwash of air to carry.

The Spellfist stumbled back a step, as the displaced water rebounded off the walls and returned to us in a knee-high wave. He lifted his right hand and did a thumbs-up.

“I’m still standing upright,” he said.

That was the only cue I needed and I moved forward through the water to where the fragment of Kumi’s split soul had fallen. To my naked eye it looked like a small glass gem the size of a bead, but in my left eye, which yet utilised the power of my Observer, I saw the roiling soul mass that it housed.

I pointed my staff down at it.

“Drain Spirit.”