

180 – Amongst the Spider Lilies

I pumped more energy into the Focus to bolster my Soul Barrier while rolling out of the way, just as the Lich’s staff unleashed another Repel. Earth and crushed Higanbana showered me, but I managed to get to my knees and fling a Repel right back at her.

Instead of attempting to block my black projectile, she moved behind me in an instant.

“*Drain!*” she yelled, but I spun around to meet her, knocking her staff away with my own. Dark tendrils whipped out from the eye sockets and mouth of the skull on her staff, but none of them touched me.

In response to my deflect, she used her left hand to blast me point-blank with an unfocused Repel that pummelled me into the ground.

I gasped.

Such power!

Although the blast couldn’t pierce my Barrier, it was able to push me back with its overwhelming force.

She raised her staff and prepared to club me with it, but I kicked her in the leg, sending her off-balance. Then I swung my staff up into her abdomen.

“Dra—!”

Before the words could even exit my mouth, the Lich vanished, reappearing at the top of the hill.

I got to my feet, only to be immediately hit with a Repel, but my Soul Barrier absorbed the blow and I was only sent staggering back a single step. Determined, I pumped more energy into it, but I could tell I was beginning to scrape the bottom of my reserves.

Nami! I need your power!

The Drowned familiar did not appear.

What is wrong with this place!? Why am I alone present within?? Have my protections already faltered and all I see is a hallucination!?

I launched a Repel forward to clash with the one fired my way, while shooting off a second one and sending it on a curving trajectory.

The air was filled with a strange *thrum* as the two spells collided, but the Lich was not so easily distracted that she failed to notice the second Repel. She vanished from its path, reappearing behind me.

But I was ready for it, ducking low to avoid her surprise attack, and using the Focus in my left hand to send a Repel into her legs.

While her own spell ruffled my hair but missed, mine struck her with enough power to knock her backwards and down the hill.

Except.

She disappeared mid-fall, and appeared behind me again, swinging the staff in the very same moment.

This time I wasn't prepared, and I had to protect my face with my right arm.

Crunch!

The impact broke *something* in my forearm, though I couldn't tell what. My grip on the Singing Branch didn't falter though, perhaps because this amount of pain was nothing to me.

I fired another Repel at her with my left hand, going for spread over precision, but she vanished before it could hit.

It was clear that I couldn't last like this, so while I spun around, trying to find her new location, I wracked my brain for ideas. It was clear that she didn't have a vast arsenal of spells, since I'd only seen her use Repel and Drain Spirit, but she was very powerful, even with just these two. Necromancers weren't known as spellcasters, but rather ones who could field a veritable army of undead to do their bidding, such as what Mortl exemplified.

The real issue was the teleportation. That didn't seem like an actual magical ability, but rather something akin to manipulating the strange realm we were in. It was clear that the rules of this place full of red Higanbana was not the real world, but some figment of the Lich's power.

But how do I defeat it??

I spotted her at the top of a different hill with one of the large spikes upon which a body was adorned, just in time to throw myself to the side as a charged Repel was flung towards me.

As it struck the hill that I was on, it bit a huge chunk out of the earth.

I settled on an idea, while I quickly got back to my feet.

“Is that all you can do!?” I yelled at her, my voice echoing strangely within this place.

She didn't respond to my taunt, and just fired off another spell that I narrowly avoided, before it took another chunk out of the hill.

“The fragments were right!” I continued.

Another spell followed, nearly punching a hole through my torso, but instead only grazing my shoulder, though completely tearing the fabric of my robe-coat and flensing my skin painfully.

“You really are a coward! Even within your own domain!!”

The assault stopped.

Then, just as the Lich’s figure disappeared from the hill, I was struck in the right side of my leg with enough force to send me to the ground. She immediately stepped on the wrist of my right arm, the pain from the broken bone flaring up and making me unable to move my hand.

“You don’t know what I went through.”

I gasped as the staff struck me in the same spot a second time.

As I tried to hit her with a Repel, one from her free hand hit my left arm with such force that my index and middle fingers dislocated and the Barrier Ring Focus shot out of my hand.

“I fought every day to survive.”

She struck me in the leg again, producing a dull *crunch* as something broke.

Despite the pain, I grinned.

“So did I,” I told her. My voice was coarsy and rough.

“Don’t pretend as if we are the same. You were surrounded by people and you are worthless without them.”

“And you had to make your own friends, because everyone else was repulsed by you,” I shot back.

She paused, then smiled sadistically.

“I won’t let you die quickly. And even after your death, I will bring you back. Again, again, and again.”

I’d realised something, as the pain flooded my mind.

“Unleash,” I said, clenching the Singing Branch in my right hand.

She didn’t understand my words, and just prepared to swing for my other leg.

Inside the staff, the fragments I’d collected were unleashed from their prison in some ethereal form, though they emerged as four separate entities, each bearing the distinct appearances of Kumi that I’d encountered on my way here.

The cruel one with the bow laughed as she kicked the Lich in the chest and followed up with a ghostly arrowed point-blank into her torso.

Before the Lich could blink away to safety, the adult Kumi from the classroom, the very first fragment I’d collected, appeared behind her and put her arms around the Lich’s neck, locking her in place.

The young Kumi from the graveyard shrugged, then splashed the Lich with water.

The last one, Kumi from the temple garden, put a reassuring hand on me where I lay, and it felt as though all my pain was washed away.

Slowly, with her help, I got to my feet, while the three other fragments were keeping the Lich in place.

“I wasn’t lying,” I told them, even though I wasn’t sure they could fully perceive my words.

I lifted my Singing Branch and pointed it right at the torso of the Lich.

“Drain Spirit.”

Dark-purple energy shot out like grasping hands, eager to reclaim their missing body, and the Lich was absorbed into the staff completely, with not even her own weapon being left behind.

Around me, the Higanbana seemed to glow brightly-red for an instant, before the light died and they turned to ash.

Along with the dying flowers came the death of the Lich’s hidden world, not to mention the pervasive pressure that was threatening to tear me apart.

I blinked just once and found myself knelt on the ground in the very centre of the Redoubt, where I’d seen Kumi fight the Witch Hunters in a vision of the past.

Meigetsu was hovering around me, Nami stood nearby, Karasumany was on my shoulder, and Renji came running over.

“Ryūta! Are you okay!?”

He took in my appearance.

“What happened!?”

“I’m fine.”

“**Did you do it?**” came Armen’s voice, clear in my mind,

Are the undead gone? I asked him.

“**Several became like ash, the rest simply collapsed.**”

“We need to get you out of here,” Renji said, seemingly preparing to lift me onto his back.

“Not yet,” I told him.

I placed the Singing Branch in front of where I was kneeling and pointed my hands at it.

Unlike the flowers of the Lich’s hidden realm, my injuries were very real.

I’m injured. Please come to the centre of the fortress.

“**We are on our way,**” Armen replied.

“What are you doing?” Renji asked, looking at me and the staff. “Did you get all the fragments?”

I noticed that there were scores of undead around us, all showing signs of being beaten to a pulp by the Spellfist. He was mostly-unscathed, apart from some scratches and a cut on the left side of his brow.

“I’m going to bring her back,” I told him.

Then I directed all of my attention at the staff.

With the last dregs of my energy, I used my Reforge Spirit, the silver energy beginning to infuse the Singing Branch that held the scattered parts of our friend. I had no idea how to word the incantation to match my intention, so I instead filled it with all my conviction, hoping whatever Deity was listening would excuse my lack of rhymes.

“Thou once were a companion to us, but you were lost to Time’s cruel trick.”

“Thy visage was peaceful and kind, but it became hostile and cold.”

“Thou soul was pure and radiant, but is now broken into pieces.”

“A soul does not forget its shape, once more will it become whole.”

“A person is changed by life, though memories shall remain.”

“A companion may be lost in time, but what is lost can be found.”

“Thy True Name to me is known and in mine heart beholden.”

“Reforged by mine touch, return to thine True visage.”

“Our fates intertwined, until mine soul expire.”

My energy guttered like a dying flame.

Then darkness took me.

In the pitch-black of unconsciousness, I could’ve sworn I saw a silver star.