

179 – Our Friend, the Lich VI

We had found our way back up above ground quickly, thanks to a tunnel that’d collapsed to form an almost-perfect ramp to freedom, and moved onwards to the third corner.

But, as we went through there, no illusions were triggered, though the pressure building on us seemed to grow stronger as time passed. Or, more likely, it only felt that way because I was starting to feel the tremendous strain of keeping Soul Barrier active nonstop.

Although it still actively glowed, I refuelled Renji’s Ward as we moved on to the fourth corner of the Redoubt. He seemed to be faring better than me, in terms of the pressure he experienced, but he’d definitely slowed down a lot as well. I was starting to consider that maybe there was another kind of influence affecting us, besides the hallucinations slamming against our mental barricades. It could perhaps explain why the air felt so peculiar within the Lich’s domain and why Renji’s Magic Sense wasn’t reliable.

Armen, how does your group fare?

“We are holding strong, but the Succubus is warning us from straying onto the bridge. It seems that the Lich is intensifying its magical assault in response to your actions.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, as it essentially cut us off from our only reinforcement. To make matters worse, every time I’d tried to get in contact with Saoirse, only silence had met me.

Saoirse, please, abandon your attempts to slay Kumi and join us instead!

Once again, there was no response.

“Are you okay, Ryūta?” Renji asked.

“I was just trying to get in contact with Saoirse.”

He frowned. “I couldn’t even tell. I don’t know what is wrong with my Magic Sense today...”

Before we even got halfway to the fourth corner, our surroundings warped and changed. A warm late-summer breeze washed over us and the sand-like ground we’d been trudging across became grey stone steps leading up a small incline. The sky above was stained orange-amber from the sun setting behind a mountain on the horizon.

We both paused and looked around, recognising the area.

It was a graveyard in Kyōto.

Behind us, at the foot of the hill, was the main temple building, and on either side of the stone path were rows of polished dark-grey stones, edged with names. Most had incense cups and flowers, but some also had candles.

Renji and I shared a glance, before following the path towards the crest of the hill. As we walked, we looked around for any sign of Kumi’s soul fragment.

“What do you think this fragment will be like?” he asked me.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure how a graveyard plays a big role in her life or matches any of her personality traits.”

“You think the Kyūdō version was a big part of her?”

“I think most people have hidden sides that no one knows about, and if they are made the core of their being, they become ugly and vicious creatures.”

“I remember her as kind, funny, and smart. I never thought much about why we’d find her in the garden so often. I feel bad about that. Can I really call myself her friend?”

I shook my head. “You *can’t* read minds, so how would you know if she did not talk about her troubles?”

He nudged me with an elbow. “And you *can*?”

“No. I didn’t think much about it either.”

We reached the top of the grave hill. Kumi wasn’t to be found here, but as we scanned the whole of the graveyard from this vantage, Renji spotted her.

Although I wanted to run to her and get this over with, since time seemed to be running out for us, something about the surroundings and the atmosphere restrained me. We followed the path down the other side of the hill past five rows of graves, and found her while she was washing a dark-grey stone with a name etched into the front, using a ladle and a bucket of water.

“Is that really her?” Renji asked.

I had the same doubts, as the person we were looking at was a child perhaps no older than seven, who was struggling to reach the top of the grave with her water, standing on the tips of her toes. But there wasn’t anyone else within this illusionary space, so we cautiously approached.

“Kumi?” I asked. “Is that really you?”

She didn’t immediately answer, but just kept cleaning the grave meticulously, following some kind of ingrained pattern that it seemed she’d learnt long ago.

I looked at the name on the grave:

井
上
勇
人

“*Inoue Hayato*,” I read out loud.

The name immediately froze the child in her tracks.

“Why did you come here?” she asked. The voice that came out of her mouth was the same as the other fragments’, and it wasn’t until now that I realised the voice was that of the grown-up Kumi, who I’d first seen in the illusion of our high school.

“We’re trying to save you.”

“I can’t be saved.”

“Whose grave is this?” Renji asked.

Child Kumi put down her bucket and ladle next to the stone grave, then turned to look at us.

“My older brother’s.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” I said.

“He died before I met you, right as I started Elementary School.”

“Why did you never tell us about him?” Renji asked.

“I was ashamed. My father and mother refused to visit his grave, so I always came here alone.”

“How did he die?”

She looked at me, then shook her head.

“Is it true that you can save me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“It would be better if you put me out of my misery. I do not know much of the other fragments’ motivations, but *I* want this endless loop to be over. I do not enjoy eternity in this place.”

I gritted my teeth, feeling as though my lungs were being squeezed by invisible hands.

“Are there anymore fragments left after you?” I asked.

“Just one.”

Renji and I looked at each other.

“She is the strongest, but she is also a coward. The four of us were meant to keep anyone from getting to her. If it had been anyone but you, we would have fought back harder.”

I let out a deep sigh. “I promise I’ll save you.”

“Would you mind if I finish cleaning his grave first?”

Neither of us stopped her. We just stood there, watching as the memory of Kumi’s childhood played out. It hurt to know that she’d never felt comfortable enough to share this side of herself with me. It made me wonder if her feelings for me hadn’t been as strong as mine were for her, as I’d shared everything about my father and the troubles with my mother.

It was likely that she would’ve rejected me if this cruel world hadn’t pulled us apart, but with no one to rely on thanks to her misfortune, and only her memories of the past to keep her company, perhaps her sense of our time together had warped into something romantic after a while. Only for it to sour when she was unable to find me in Mondus and, in the ensuing downfall that led to her splitting her soul, parts of her had started to blame me.

The *clunk* of the wooden ladle hitting the bottom of the empty bucket pulled me out of my thoughts and back to the girl standing in front of me expectantly.

I pulled the staff from my back. It had gone quiet, despite two of the fragments within hating my guts. I hoped it meant that, once combined, the fragments would return to a whole that was as I remembered.

“Drain Spirit,” I said and the dark-purple tendrils leapt out of the staff, grabbing a hold of the young girl. She desired to be put to rest, but I no longer wished to do such a thing, when salvation seemed possible.

As the fragment disappeared, the graveyard broke apart to reveal the real world again, except, it wasn’t as it’d been before.

I arrived on the precipice of a large crater in the middle of the Redoubt. The soil was black and from it grew red Higanbana, packed so tightly together that it made the ground appear as though covered in blood, while the petals curled up into the air like fingers.

The buildings had become hills themselves, and atop each of them was a large metal spike with a desiccated corpse stuck to it through the chest. The red flowers covered everything in sight and there was no trace of Renji, even though he’d been able to follow me through every illusion.

I was also horrified to realise that my familiars were gone. Karasumany no longer sat on my shoulder and the vision of my left eye was back to being distorted and broken. Meigetsu likewise didn’t orbit me, and even Nami the Drowned Caster wouldn’t appear at my side.

Armen?

Jules?

Saoirse!?

None of them responded. I was all by myself, with nothing but the clothes on my body, the Focus in my left hand, and the Singing Branch in my right.

I finally looked down at the centre of the crater, where stood a figure in black robes, wielding a staff with a skull at the end, and a large decorative nail protruding from her forehead.

It was the final fragment, but, unlike the others, she retained her full body. I had the sense that this was the fragment of her that represented everything that people hated, as the very sight of her upset me. It was Kumi the Necromancer, the way that the world had seen her, solidified into the unholy form of a Lich.

“The fragments were weak against your guile, but I will not be fooled.”

“I can make you human again!” I yelled to her from the top of the crater’s edge.

“Liar.”

The Lich turned towards me, swinging her staff and hitting me with a Repel that was powerful enough to penetrate my Soul Barrier. I was flung into the side of one of the hills that was a building in the real world.

All the air was knocked out of my lungs on impact, and before I could even move a muscle, she appeared right next to me, the skull staff pointed straight at my head.

“You should not have come here.”