

121 – A Lich’s Heart

The chime rang out across the courtyard and the ramp that led up to the school entrance. There were no people here, only Armen and I, with Meigetsu floating around nearby. Petals from the Sakura blossoms that lined the road showered down around us like pink snow, as we walked up to the entrance.

“You should dispel this illusion,” Armen advised. **“I cannot see our enemies.”**

“Not yet,” I replied.

The illusion already confirmed my suspicion, but I wanted to know more.

As we came to the entrance gate, it was still open, despite the chime having finished ringing. We walked through, the petals of the Sakura scattered on the stone paving.

“Do you know this place?” Armen asked.

“I do. And so does the Lich.”

“Truly?”

“When I had that illusion yesterday, I heard the Witch Hunters call her ‘Necromancer Kumi’. Inoue Kumi was someone I knew when I went to high school. This high school, specifically. I once confessed my love to her.”

“If she is indeed the Lich, then...”

I frowned. “Yeah, then she too was transported to this world. Similar to Renji, except she arrived here much earlier than him.”

“The Gods of this world are cruel.”

“To know that she ended up here, became an Exorcist like me, and was hunted down like a beast for choosing to become a Necromancer... it hurts my heart. She did not deserve such a fate. I will put her out of her misery.”

“Liches are famously difficult to slay.”

“Perhaps I can convince her to let go.”

“She might despise you.”

I shook my head. “Kumi was not that kind of person.”

“Your tone belies your words. You do not believe that, do you?”

I gritted my teeth.

Tears stung the corners of my eyes, while the nostalgia of my high school made my chest ache with a longing for an easier time. I’d forgotten what it felt like, thanks to the constant stress and life-or-death situations, but, while I’d been a high school student, I’d been truly happy. I realised that now. Renji had been by my side, steadfast and unwavering, while Kumi had always brightened my days with her smile and laughter.

“It must have been hard for her,” I said. She had been given the same Role as me and had no doubt been subjected to similar unwarranted hatred, or perhaps even more, given that she was a woman. I wondered if she’d even had any friends to rely on here, or if she had, like Leopold or the Demonologist, been led astray by evil Gods.

The sound of bare feet running on floorboards came from inside the main building of the high school, and I instinctively moved to investigate. I’d pulled out my Barrier Ring Focus again and was making sure my mind would not fall into another trapping illusion of the past.

“Ryuta, you should dispel this veil of falsehoods.”

“Not yet,” I told him, stubbornly.

We came in through the glass doors of the main building, where rows of cabinets full of shoeboxes with names on them lined the entrance. Armen and I walked past them without taking off our shoes, stepping out onto the floor where only uwabaki were meant to be used.

The sound of running came from the hallway to the right, and I followed after it, with Armen staying close behind. The rational part of my mind wondered where exactly I was going in the real world, but I paid it little attention.

Footsteps flowed up a staircase nearby and I turned to pursue, hearing them continue along the floor above, running like playful children trying to hide from me. On the wall of the stairwell were fliers for various after-school clubs, like a history research club, a baseball club, a manga club, and others. Though, when I stopped to look closely at them, the text became blurred and twisted, as though I was in a dream that lacked object permanence.

As we made it to the first floor, the footsteps rounded the corner into a classroom.

“This is a trap,” Armen commented.

“I know,” I replied. “But I still need to see her. I know she’s waiting for me in there.”

I know because that’s our old classroom...

Each footstep on the hallway floor produced a loud *creak*. Our high school had been older than most in the area, so it still had wooden floors, but they’d never been this noisy. Though it was a minor thing, it was enough to ground me in the realisation that this was all just an illusion.

I stopped in front of the door to the classroom. It was closed. The wall had windows that allowed the interior to be viewed, but the glass was hazy and impossible to spy through. I grabbed the sliding door and carefully pulled it aside. As soon as the door was fully open, all the chairs slid back from the orderly rows of desks, as though invisible students were standing up to greet the teacher.

Only one chair did not move, and in it sat a woman, who looked exactly like what I’d imagine Kumi would end up looking like as an adult. Her long silky and glossy black hair, her prominent jawline, her narrow and pointed chin, her soft apple cheeks, the mole under her left ear, everything was like I remembered. I’d once thought about her so much, but now it seemed as though I’d forgotten about her for long enough that she’d become a woman in the meantime. But of course, the reality was far crueller than that.

“...Kumi? Is that really you?” I asked, hovering in the threshold of the door.

“You were gone, for so long. I counted every day. Every hour. Every minute. Every second.”

I swallowed hard.

“What took you so long?” she asked. It was a simple question, but her tone was terrifying. It was clear that there was a lot of animosity behind her words.

I took a step into the room.

“I have come to release you from your pain,” I said.

“Release me from my pain? When you are its source?”

“What do you mean?”

“I spent all this time looking for you. I never gave up. But because of searching for you, I came here. Everything is your fault! You left me! You told me you loved me and then you abandoned me! You threw me away! I hate you! I HATE YOU!! I HATE YOU!!!”

I gritted my teeth, as Kumi got up from her seat and her screaming voice grew louder-and-louder, repeating the same three words again-and-again.

Kōtama, please, banish this illusion.

Light blossomed to life on my left hand, before spreading outwards to encompass the room, burning away the powerful transformation built upon our shared past. Armen came up beside me, his weapons held ready. I shifted my Focus to my left palm and hefted the staff in my right.

As the illusion was dispelled, I saw that I was in a dark room. A few black candles burned here-and-there, but the light was scarcely enough to illuminate the chamber. With a jab of phantom pain, I realised this was the same room that I’d seen in the first illusion, and as I looked at where Kumi had

sat, I saw that she was replaced by a large ogre-like undead brute, who carried her limbless body in its arms.

“Don’t look at me like that!” yelled the pitiful creature, her voice hoarse.

“...Kumi. Don’t you wish we could rewind time and go back to high school?”

I felt as Armen tensed next to me. A quick glance around the chamber made me realise it was full of powerful-looking undead, all of whom had a large decorative iron nail pierced through the forehead. Saoirse was nowhere to be seen however.

A sigh escaped the Lich’s lips.

“I dream about it all the time.”

“Don’t you think it’s time to return there?”

“You’ve come to kill me.”

“You are already dead. What I’ve come to do is exorcise you.”

“We are both unlucky, aren’t we?”

“Seems so.”

“Even though it was lonesome, life as an Exorcist wasn’t bad. I had fun.”

“You know, Renji came to this world as well.”

There was an uncomfortably-long pause.

“Is he also an Exorcist?”

“No, he’s a Brawler.”

Kumi laughed. **“How like him.”**

“But I envy you.”

“You get to go on adventures with your friend.”

“I was alone this whole time.”

“Everyone I trusted betrayed me or used me for their own gain.”

“The rest tried to imprison or kill me.”

“The first time I felt any power was when I cheated a Reaper by surviving its scythe.”

“Enslaved to this useless body as I now am, I feel freedom at last.”

“Do not take this from me.”

“Let me have my memories and my illusions, they give me peace.”

It felt like a hand was squeezing my organs tightly as I listened to her. This wasn’t the Kumi I’d known. Life in this world, and all its hardships, had changed her. Corrupted her.

“And then what? I leave you here forever?”

“You should stay, we can indulge in this listlessness together. Forever.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then leave!”

Her voice hit me like a hammer and all the undead in the chamber came to life, charging for us.

I aimed my Singing Branch at her.

Get ready, I told Armen.

“Drain Spirit!” I yelled, as stinging tears flowed down my cheeks.