

122 – Loathed

Transparent red tendrils leapt from the tip of my Singing Branch, reaching like hungry lampreys for the Lich seated in the large brute’s embrace. As they connected, dark energy flowed back along them, staining them a different colour.

A shriek like that of a banshee emerged from the apparition.

I gritted my teeth, as I kept up the attack, while Armen cleft the undead apart with his golden-glowing sword.

She’s no longer the person I knew, I repeated internally like a mantra, as the black stuff went into my staff and the limbless creature writhed.

Then she became like ashes and vanished. In the same moment, the brute stood to its full height, the dome of its bald stitched-together head scraping against the ceiling.

“She vanished!” I yelled, letting desperation and fear fill my voice. “Did I do it!? Did I kill her!?”

“A Lich cannot die by such simple means. What we saw was not its heart, but perhaps it contained a fragment of her soul,” Armen explained as he was clearing a path towards a tunnel behind us.

I aimed my staff at the giant brute and released a Repel, momentarily stunning it. It could no doubt easily bring down the ceiling on us with its strength.

“This way,” the Crusader said, understanding my desire to escape without me needing to utter it.

Chunks of undead covered the floor, along with dead blood, but I pushed through it to get to the opening he’d made. Behind us, the brute was starting to move again, so I spun on my heel and released a wide cone version of my Repel, making the front ranks of the undead lock-up.

“Consecration!” Armen said and dropped a holy barrier to keep them from chasing us easily.

“If that was not its heart, then where could it be hiding??”

“Perhaps the Dullahan knows.”

“We should head to the centre of the Redoubt so you can try utilising your Smite to cleanse the fortress.”

“Understood.”

As we ran down the tunnel, which sloped up slightly and promised freedom from the oppressive darkness, I sent out a mental nudge to Saoirse.

Where are you!?

I am in a fascinating place.

Where??

I do not know, but there are trees and buildings the likes of which I’ve never seen before.

Are you stuck in an illusion??

That would seem likely, yes.

Can you break free??

Of course.

...Then why haven’t you?

I am enjoying myself.

I frowned as the air in my lungs was starting to catch fire and my throat closed up from the exertion.

Armen and I are heading to the centre of the Redoubt to try and wipe out the undead.

She will make more, this Lich.

Are you really not going to help exorcise her?

I would love nothing more, but it hides its heart well and its soul is scattered across the area.

I already captured one of the fragments with my staff.

That is a terrible idea, she commented. Get rid of it.

Won’t she be able to recover then?

Of course, but its spirit will corrupt your staff and in turn corrupt you.

...How do I expel it? It has already been absorbed.

Tell your staff to do it for you.

I didn’t know what that meant, but I could already feel what she was warning me about, as the wood bucked and warped in my hands, as though experiencing the same writhing pains as the copy of the Lich that I’d Drained the spirit from.

“Armen, stop,” I said and came to a halt, breathing quickly.

“What is it?”

“Saoirse says I need to get rid of the spirit I absorbed with my staff.”

He looked at the Singing Branch in my hand.

“Do you want me to try and Bless or Sanctify it?”

“Do you think that’d work?”

“A Lich is a type of undead, it should be weak to my magic.”

I thought about it. A part of me was worried that using Sanctify on the staff would ‘purify’ it to the point of uselessness, as the glimmer of sentience it carried might be extinguished, in turn rendering it basically inert.

“Try Bless.”

“**Understood.**”

Armen reached out with his black gauntlets and I handed him the staff. As it lay in his palms, golden energy built in both of his gauntlets, before spreading to the heartwood of the Branch and moving down its length like a cleansing fire. I had no idea how Bless differed from Sanctify, but I was fairly sure, by its name, that it was less about purifying and more about imbuing something with holy magic.

When the light died down, I took the staff back, but I could immediately tell it hadn’t worked.

From down the way we’d come flowed the sound of hundreds of shambling feet.

“I wanna try something else,” I told him, “But let’s get out of here first. We’re too exposed.”

We continued along the tunnel for a couple minutes more, before a sharp left turn sent us into a roundish chamber of sorts. Immediately, the surroundings warped and transformed, the gloomy dark walls becoming white and the empty floor filling with chairs and tables, by which sat many students, busy talking while eating lunch.

“**Another illusion,**” Armen grumbled.

As one, the students all turned their heads to look at us.

Kōtama, dispel this illusion!

Light cascaded outward from the ring on my hand and washed away the scene before us, the staring students becoming like smoke that was quick to dissipate. However, the area behind where we’d come also changed and suddenly the large brute was upon us, thundering across the tunnel on all fours.

Armen was quick to get in its way.

With an upward chop of his glowing sword, he severed the thick right arm that was swung his way, but an instant later a left hook caught him in the side of his helmet and smashed him into the nearby stone wall.

Then the brute turned on me and came forward with such speed that I didn’t have time to fire off a Repel. With its left hand, it tore at the front of my robe-coat, but then I heard Armen’s voice fill the room.

“**Judgement!**”

An explosion of energy went off, forcing me to shield my eyes. I heard the sound of sizzling flesh and a loud *thunk*, followed by the smell of burnt ashes.

When I opened my eyes again, a phantom image was almost seared into my vision, but I saw that the smouldering remains of the brute lay before me, shorn in two from shoulder to hip.

“**Are you okay?**” Armen asked, coming closer.

“I’m fine,” I said, “Just a bit shocked.”

“**Your Lifeward did not protect you this time.**”

I realised with sudden dread that he was right. Looking around, I saw no sign of it whatsoever.

Meigetsu, come to me!

“**Your wards are gone,**” he then added.

...*Shit.*

By the time I had started pumping energy into my Barrier Ring Focus and tried to utilise Soul Barrier, it was already too late, because perfume flooded my nostrils. I realised, belatedly, that it was a distilled fragrance of Sakura flowers.

Then—

She didn’t mind if I took a bit extra. That was the nice part about working for someone like her. Outcasts were all like this. Half the time, the job was just to keep them company. But I didn’t mind. Mercenary work was dangerous, so it was good with something like this once in a while, and, besides, she was good to look at, even if her personality was rotten.

“What next?” I asked, as I finished looting the highwaymen, who had all succumbed by the hands of her servants with ease.

The Necromancer reached into a bag carried by one of her unsettling familiars, pulling out a bundle of decorative iron nails. She handed them to me and our fingers briefly touched. There was no warmth in her skin, as though she was as dead as her servants.

“Hammer these into their skulls,” she instructed me.

She was screaming again.

Every night was like this.

“That fucking Exorcist better shut the hell up!” I complained to the Vanguard who slept in the same tent as me. We were too poor to have our own personal ones, but that was why we’d joined her for this Quest. What a mistake that’d been.

“You know she has night terrors,” he said, trying to be the bigger person, but I could tell he was tired of this too.

“Why are we even accompanying her?” I asked. After two weeks of this shit, I was certain that I’d never be in a Party with another Exorcist ever again.

The Vanguard grinned. “You know why.”

“That woman is as frigid as a rock. She’d never let you touch her.”

“Who said she had a say in it?” he replied, letting his true colours show.

Ah, he’s that sort of bastard... I realised internally.

And yet, I found that I didn’t care. I just wanted to go back to Evergreen and find a new Party.

I saw the look people gave her. I understood it well. She was a bad omen, everyone knew. The rumours of her last Party’s demise were the only thing people talked about lately.

She was pretty, but I’d never once seen her smile.

Such beauty was wasted on a person like her.

An Exorcist shouldn’t be pretty. They should be hideous to match their true nature.

I put on a fake smile as she came up to the counter I was standing behind.

“Have any new people shown up today?” she asked, hopeful. It was the same question every day.

My duty was to answer, but I loathed talking to her.

“Eight new members have signed up today. Unfortunately, none of them had your friend’s name.”

“...I see. Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

I wanted nothing more than for her to die on some Quest, so I didn’t have to talk to her every day like this. I couldn’t even remember the name she had asked me to keep a lookout for, but I also didn’t care.

“You know...” she started, her eyes piercing right into mine.

I felt my body grow cold, as though my lungs were filled with ice.

“...I can see your true thoughts in your aura. I know you hate me. Just like everyone else.”

I spasmed awake with a gasp and quickly realised I was being carried in the arms of someone clad in black armour. I looked up and saw that it was Saoirse.

From nearby came the sounds of fighting.

I wanted to get out of her arms, but my body was sore and exhausted.

“You spent all your energy,” she said, her tone indifferent. “You would’ve died without me.”

We passed through the gate leading out of the Redoubt and the heavy scent of perfume still clogged my nostrils, but no more visions overtook me for now.

“Why did you save me? I thought you didn’t care if I lived or died.”

“I don’t, but you need to exorcise this Lich.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Perhaps not today, or tomorrow, but I’m willing to wait for it to happen.”

“So you’ll keep me alive until then?” I wondered.

“Maybe, but don’t count on it.”

I looked down my body and saw the big tear in the front of my coat.

“I need new clothes,” I said with a sigh.

Nearby floated Meigetsu, as though the Moonlight Dancer hadn’t failed me when I needed it most. I’d have to figure out what exactly happened.

And also.

I felt how the Singing Branch, which lay in my arms, was writhing and squirming, as though the roots and wood it was formed from had come to life.

I need to figure out what to do with this fragment of Kumi’s soul...