

## 177 – Our Friend, the Lich IV

“Kumi, it’s really you?” Renji asked. He didn’t sit down next to us, but remained standing just outside the building and its tatami floor.

She glanced up at him. Her appearance was just like I remembered from the first grade of high school, but her demeanour was much different. Her dark eyes appraised him, before moving on to me.

“Did you arrive before Ryūta as well?”

“Two-and-a-half years, give or take,” he said. From his aura, it was clear that he couldn’t shake the uncanny feeling of talking to our old friend, while knowing she’d become a monster.

“Did you search for him?”

“Of course.”

She nodded to herself, seeming pleased with the answer.

“Have you come to stay with me in my listless paradise?”

Renji tensed up at the innocent-sounding words, knowing the trap that lay beneath.

“We’re here to save you,” I told her.

Kumi put her teacup down on the lacquered tray in front of her.

“You wish to kill me? Exorcise me like a bad spirit?”

“No,” I told her. “I have the power to make you whole again. Make you human.”

She laughed mockingly.

“How convenient that you discovered such a power in the interim before returning here.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Renji said. His aura read only one thing: disgust. He was repulsed by what she had become and the way her beautiful spirit had withered.

Kumi looked at him. “You’ve gotten better at lying.”

“Won’t you trust us?” he pleaded with her. “Things could go back to how they were.”

“LIAR! It can never be the same!”

I swallowed, afraid it would end up like last time.

In a vain attempt to placate her, I placed my hand on hers.

Kumi immediately froze.

“You’re right,” I said. “We can’t ever go back to high school. The future that we could have faced together is forever changed. Our memories of that time won’t ever leave us though. Renji and I still recall our time together. And while this isn’t our world, I think we could be friends again.”

Tears fell from Kumi’s eyes and down onto the tatami beneath her, where it gathered into solid droplets. “It wouldn’t work. Even if I want to believe your sweet lies, I know it is too late. Look at me. I’m damaged. I’m not the person you know. A lifetime has passed since I was the one you fell in love with.”

“You still remember it though,” I countered, gesturing around the idyllic temple garden. “Otherwise, why would you memorialise all the places that mattered? This garden where you always used to go before your exams, and where we’d come to find you whenever you were feeling down. The classroom where we always used to meet, and where the two of us would laugh together as Renji arrived late after staying up all-night with some new game he bought.”

A deep sigh escaped her lips.

Then our surroundings changed.

The garden was replaced by a wall of stone and the tatami became a concrete floor covered in corpses. Her body was different from the first fragment I’d encountered, though no less disturbing. It was pale and frail-looking, lacking her beautiful hair and twisted by starvation. She had two legs, but her arms were gone.

I immediately got to my feet after realising she and I were sitting on the back of her incapacitated servants.

***“Hurry up and steal me away, before I realise your lie is too sweet to believe in.”***

She had disabled all her own protectors, because of us.

“It’s not a lie,” I told her resolutely, before aiming the Singing Branch at her and activating Drain Spirit.

As dark-purple energy leapt out from the crystal of my staff, I knew it was the other fragment within seeking to be united with its sibling.

Before it could fully absorb her essence, she said, ***“The other fragments won’t like what you’re doing. When only one remains, she will make it very difficult for you. We were not split apart evenly—”***

Then she was gone, before her warning was finished, absorbed into my wooden staff, which began to writhe violently, only to immediately calm down. It seemed this second fragment was one of a tranquil mind, unlike the first.

“Does each fragment have a mind of its own?” Renji asked, clearly worried.

Before I could answer his speculation, the corpses on the ground began to move.

“We need to head for the next area!” I told him.

He looked around, but there was no obvious exit in sight.

“Get behind me!” he said, as the nail-pierced servants started to move towards us.

*Kōtama banish the illusions around me!*

The Gravelight Ring on my left hand lit up, awoken by my command. It expanded outward with a sphere of light large enough to touch the ceiling, before sending a cascade of light in all directions like a massive lamp. The shadows it touched were wiped away and the wall behind us disappeared as well.

“It’s an illusion!” I told Renji. “Come on!”

With a series of punches, he created distance between us and the zombies, leaving a few in broken heaps, before turning on his heel and following behind me.

“Sorry! I couldn’t sense anything for some reason!” Renji said.

The pressure seemed to grow, rather than dissipate, as we moved through some underground tunnel, no doubt thanks to the Lich redoubling its attention on us now that we’d stolen a fragment of its whole.

“It’s okay, that’s why I’ve got my Gravelight,” I replied.

Though I wouldn’t be able to keep up with him if he really started to sprint as fast as he could, I was glad to know that the Vitality Potion was keeping me from full-on exhaustion for the moment. But it wouldn’t last forever.

“Where do we go from here?” he asked, as the tunnel branched off into three paths in each direction.

“Does your Magic Sense tell you anything?”

“No. I can’t even sense a draft. It’s like there’s no airflow at all down here. How did we even get here from above?”

I had no answer for that, but an idea hit me.

*Kōtama, can you guide us to the surface?*

The bubble of light around us blinked, before retracting into itself to become like a floating lantern and moving down the left-going tunnel.

“I didn’t know it could do that,” Renji said in surprise.

“Me neither,” I admitted.

“It’s leading us out, right?”

“Hopefully.”

As we followed the light, it led us through a series of corridors, dispelling fake walls and dead-ends when they blocked our way. All the while, the sound of stomping and shuffling feet echoed down every path we didn't take. It was truly impressive how Armen had managed to navigate this labyrinth last time, while carrying my unconscious body.

After ten minutes of non-stop moving, the Gravelight stopped in front of stone steps leading up.

*Return to the ring*, I commanded it and it immediately obeyed, maintaining a small glow on my hand, while I kept pumping energy into the Focus to stave off the building pressure.

While we moved up the steps to the outside, I checked Renji's tungsten Ward. It was glowing, but I couldn't tell if it had a lot of energy remaining or not, so I stopped him halfway up and filled it with a bit of my own.

“Don't overdo it,” he told me. “I don't want to carry you the rest of the way.”

I grinned despite it all. “Shouldn't I be saying that to you? Last I checked, you were the one with the fainting spells.”

“It only happened twice during practice!” he argued, but he was also grinning.

With his Ward topped up, we went up the last few steps and got our bearings. We'd come out from just below one of the nondescript bunker-like stone buildings, and when I looked at the position of the sun above, I knew we were still on the western side and just had to head north to get to the second corner.

Renji realised the same thing and we moved without even needing to discuss it. The area we'd come out into was slightly wider than the narrow corridor bordering the wall, but it still spelled trouble if the zombies began to clog these paths. I had no doubt that this would be the exact strategy that the Lich would use to stop us.

“Time is still on our side,” I told Renji as we moved towards the next corner and its building.

I saw steps leading down below the next building as we neared it, but before we even reached them, our surroundings warped again.

The sandy ground gave way to a polished wooden floor. We had entered into a building I recognised immediately. It was the Kyūdō club. There was a rectangular room with an open front leading to a square courtyard at the end of which stood several targets.

Ahead of us, in the centre of the shooting platform, stood Kumi. She looked older than the one we'd just been talking to in the little tea hut by the pond.

She lifted her longbow, holding the knocked arrow with the other hand, then slowly pulled the bow down to her eye-level, while pushing the grip away from her, tensioning the string and building up force.

*Fwoosh!*

The arrow flew from her bow and struck a target down at the far end of the range, hitting it right in the middle.

“I wondered when you would show up here,” she said in a displeased tone.