

120 – Blossoms

I couldn't help but feel a bit like a fool, as I sat on the floor of the carriage and used the bench seat as a makeshift table. I'd utterly forgotten to take the proper precautions against illusions, because I had underestimated my opponent.

“What are those for?” Emily asked, watching as I used a brush she had bought to make two wards with strips of paper torn from a page of my mostly-empty Encyclopaedia.

“I'm not entirely sure what *this one* does, but my Mentor used it to ward off the illusion of a Demon, although it didn't work *that* well.”

“And the other one?”

“It's actually meant to counter mind control and hypnosis, but I'm thinking that if I use both I might be okay. I'll also be maintaining a Soul Barrier while Armen protects me.”

“I have that ability as well,” she commented. “I haven't tried using it though.”

“If you want, we can try to practice together later.”

“That would be nice. I was wondering though, why are you just making one of each? Is Armen immune to illusions?”

“I have no idea,” I told her.

The Crusader opened the door to the carriage from the outside, letting a brisk morning wind into the interior, as well as some of the dawn's light.

“In life I had no special powers, but it seems that the imperviousness is one of the few perks of becoming an apparition.”

Even as a True Undead you get to keep that immunity. I'm a bit jealous.

Armen cast me a glance and I knew what he'd say before he said it.

“Mortality is preferable. I would give away these meagre boons to once more become human.”

“Where's Saoirse?” asked Emily.

“She remains within the Redoubt,” he answered.

She hadn't contacted me through our soul-bond, which made me slightly fearful, but I doubted the Lich could actually harm her, though I still questioned whether or not the Dullahan was actually incapable of killing the Lich for good. It just seemed peculiar, but perhaps I was missing some key component as to why.

I finished painting the lines of the last ward.

“Alright, I think I’m ready to go back in.”

We stood near the border to the Lich’s domain, where the pale-grey grass helpfully showed the boundary line. The two wards I’d made were affixed to the front of my robe-coat and the Barrier Ring Focus lay in my right hand, while I held the Singing Branch in my left.

I squeezed my fingers around the Focus and fed it a portion of my energy, while imagining a bubble forming around my head to defend against illusions and any other attacks on my mental faculties.

Then I took a step forward.

A pressure fell on my shoulders, like a weighted blanket tossed over my head, but the heady perfume-like scent wasn’t there this time. Simultaneously, both of my wards lit up with a sickly violet glow.

I moved across the open field before the moat surrounding the Redoubt, with Armen quickly coming up next to me, before repositioning himself at the front. Meigetsu, the Moonlight Dancer, was circling me in a tight orbit, and Kōtama was primed to dispel any illusion that tried to overwhelm me.

The ground below our feet began to tremble slightly, as Armen had warned that it would.

“**Here they come,**” he said. His weapons were still a sword and shield, since Saoirse had transformed his mace yesterday and hadn’t yet returned it to its prior shape, on account of the fact that she was MIA. But, in his hands, it was nonetheless a fearsome weapon.

I looked to the distant bridge and gate of the fortress, seeing how shapes were coming out through the opening and then making their way towards us with broken bodies and shambling legs.

“I think I understand why Necromancers get such a bad rep,” I mused, as we continued on a collision course with the monsters that sought to keep us out.

“**To many of this world, dealing with spirits is no less unsavoury.**”

“I hope this line of thinking will change. Exorcising a wayward soul ought to be celebrated like the work performed by priests at a burial. Undead are an affront to the people they were before they died, my work is not the same.”

Armen prepared his blade as the distance between us and the bridge grew shorter, the shambling horde coming nearer with every passing moment. “**You utilise these wayward souls in your line of work; I believe this is what makes your countenance offensive to the people of this world.**”

“I suppose you’re right.”

I lifted my Singing Branch with my left hand, while continuing to channel a slight bit of energy into the Focus that lay in my right palm.

“Repel,” I said and from the tip of my staff flew a broad wave of energy that was tainted with Saoirse’s black smoke.

As the spell washed over the vanguard of the horde, a pause rippled through them.

“Have you learnt the new nature of your possessed hand?”

I nodded. “I have some guesses at least. Saoirse told me that it does not contain her power of Death, but that was not entirely true.”

My eyes wandered over the undead. They were motionless where they stood.

“What it kills is not the soul, but rather the invisible bonds connected to it. Although...”

The horde began stirring and a moment later they were shambling forward again.

“The duration is short.”

“Indeed. But a potent power nonetheless.”

Armen squeezed the handle of his sword tightly, then strode forward with loping steps, while I continued to follow him at a walking pace.

“I still need to figure out how Infuse Spirit works,” I said to myself. Given that Reforge Spirit was similar to Contain Spirit, I wondered if Infuse didn’t also share some similarities with Contain or other of my abilities, like Unleash.

The Crusader’s shining blade tore through the front of the undead horde, slaying four of the shamblers in a single stroke. They had no sense of self-preservation, and, unlike Mortl’s undead, they were not guided well.

“Infuse is like imbuing an object with something, right?”

“That would be my guess,” Armen replied, his voice crystal-clear in my head, even though he was twenty metres out in front of me and in the middle of clearing a path.

Duck, I told him through my thoughts and fired off another Repel, feeding it enough energy that it should be able to cover at least half of the horde directly before us.

As the spell washed over them, they all froze in place again, as though their puppet-strings had been snipped. It was strange how calm I felt as I strode past the front of their disorderly ranks, following in the footsteps of Armen, who stood in the middle of the bridge leading across the sludge moat.

“There’s something I want to try,” I told him and came over to where he waited for me, a small clearing created by his sword and slain undead at his feet. I put my right hand on his shoulder, after returning my Focus to a pocket for a moment, then I tapped the tip of my staff into the ground. “Cast Repulse.”

“Understood.”

Light built-up in Armen’s left hand and spread out from his gauntlet to suffuse his shield, before he slapped the flat of his sword against its face and said, **“Repulse.”**

Amplified by my Singing Branch, his ability sent a tidal wave of golden energy outward from his shield, which crashed against the horde that was only just then recovering from my Repel. As the wave of energy collided with their bodies, they were forcefully pushed aside.

Sixty undead or more were immediately tossed off the side of the simple moss-covered stone bridge and fell silently down into the moat, where I doubted they could ever escape from.

“Fascinating. I had no idea it worked in such a manner, your staff I mean.”

“It seems to amplify the energy of anything channelled through it, at least to some extent.”

“It seems I owe the Elfin an apology. Their magical tools are quite potent, even if their people are bizarre.”

I grinned at his sincerity.

We continued towards the gate of the Redoubt and I kept my hand on Armen, as he released Repulse after Repulse, shoving the encroaching undead aside with his amplified spell. It seemed that my wards held up against the illusions and mind fog even without the addition of my Soul Barrier, but it was also possible that Armen’s holy magic was keeping it at bay for now.

With over a hundred of the undead tossed over the side of the bridge, and twice that number behind us, we made it to the narrow opening of the fortress entrance, where a small door in the large gate was left ajar.

“This is a good bottleneck,” Armen commented, before invoking another spell. **“Consecration!”**

A golden circle formed on the ground around the doorway, and as the undead outside tried to follow after us, they were repelled by its holy barrier.

“What would I do without you?” I commented, half-joking and half-sincere.

“I am uniquely suited for these undead, it’s true. When we reach the centre of the Redoubt, I should be able to cast a Smite on the entire fortress, which would wipe out most of the undead.”

“I wonder why no one else has tried that before.”

As the words left my mouth, I saw how the fortress past the gate started to shift and transform, as illusions came to life. Since our minds could not be affected, it seemed they sought the other route of obfuscating our surroundings.

I was about to invoke Kōtama’s illusion-dispelling powers, when I saw what came to life.

Sakura trees sprouted from the ground, the well-trampled earth became like the paving of a pedestrian crossing, and the large blocky buildings turned into a familiar visage.

Words eluded me as I took in a sight of something I hadn’t seen in almost a year.

It was my old high school in Spring.