

174 – Our Friend, the Lich I

Our carriage was stopped as we were passing through Main Gate and we all initially assumed the worst, but when we saw that it was Finnegan, First Lieutenant of the Peacekeepers, Renji hopped out and greeted him.

Emily and I joined him as well, both of us likewise greeting the Lieutenant.

“Leaving on another journey?” he asked us.

“We’re going to take on a Lich,” I told him candidly.

He paused for a second, seemingly unsure if I was joking or not. Then he cleared his throat and said, “I just wanted to tell you that we have apprehended two additional suspects in the Serenity serial-murderer case. All thanks to you, Eminent Renji and Initiate Emily.”

I didn’t realise Emily ranked-up. Must’ve been from the Scalebird quest.

“I’m glad you caught the rest,” Renji replied, gratefully.

Finnegan scratched the back of his head. “Oliver Smile dropped by our gaol and compelled the man you captured into revealing his co-conspirators.”

“My brother did?” Emily asked. “Why?”

“No idea, but he seemed in a good mood. He’s been helping with other unsolved crimes in the city lately...”

He must’ve realised how selfish he acted in the single-minded pursuit of the Demonologist, and decided to become an exemplar of his Order.

Sometime later, as the black carriage rolled up the slope that led away from Evergreen and to the southeast, I was seated by a café table opposite Ludwig. Saoirse had once again altered the interior space and now it resembled a great plaza, with white-marbled walls within which were fitted small cafes, and which surrounded a central courtyard where the rest of my Party were practising.

Armen and Renji were moving as one, swinging mace and gauntleted fist against shadowy skeletal knights that the Dullahan was conjuring in ever-increasing waves, while Jules was keeping up with them and finally able to display his true swordsmanship. Elye and Emily were provided ranged a barrage to handle skeletal archers and mages mixed in amongst their foe, though the Spellhand was also utilising her wind to shield the vanguard or nudge them out of the way of incoming attacks. In short, it was quite a tremendous spectacle.

Caw... squawked Karasumany on my shoulder. It seemed that it wanted to join the fight as well, somehow.

“Alright so,” Ludwig said, pulling my focus back to the map I’d crudely drawn half an hour earlier, and tapping a pencil on the wide field before the Mossbloom Redoubt. “If the influence of the Lich—”

“Kumi.”

“...Right. The influence of Kumi, the Lich, is spreading out this far, then my guess is that she cannot fully control it. From what you told me of last time, it seemed that her power was the strongest within the fortress itself, which made me realise there’s a certain strategy we can use.”

I nodded for him to continue.

“Kumi is a Lich and not a Demon, but it’s clear that there are some Demonic forces mixed in with her powers, or perhaps the ritual she used was conjured by a Demon. Either way, she is able to exert her will onto reality and warping it through illusions and literal manifestations of physical change, like the dead grass you reported.

“Since that’s the case, it also means that she can innately feel her territory, which we can exploit to draw her attention away from you.

“And Renji,” I added.

“Listen, if you want this to go smoothly, I don’t advise you to bring him with you.”

“She knew him in the past, the three of us were friends. He is going with me.” I didn’t leave any room for negotiation on this point.

“We’ll have to make a pretty solid Ward to keep his brain from melting out his skull then, since he doesn’t have the same resistance that you and I possess.”

I nodded again. “So, how do you plan to exploit it?”

Ludwig pulled out his metal wand and swished it once, manifesting his Succubus, who appeared with her silver pipe in hand and the Red Haze dribbling out of its end. Her obedient Phantasm congealed into a blob and she sat down atop it, crossing her legs and smiling.

“Since it was your suggestion, Liw, why don’t you tell him the plan?”

“*Of course, Darling.*” She fixed me with her eyes and I realised they were completely black, except for a purple iris. Most of her teeth were normal, but her canines were elongated like a vampire’s.

“*Aren’t you a snack?*” she said, running a long purple tongue along her teeth.

I didn’t flinch, which only seemed to encourage her more.

“Liw, for fuck’s sake.”

“I’ll behave, dearest.”

“Tell me the plan,” I said.

“Little Lichie Girl won’t like if I takeover her territory, so that is what I will do. The field before her lair will become mine and she will fight to get it back.”

“You think that will work?”

“I listened to your recounting of the past, and this is my assessment of the facts.” Though she was playful ninety-nine percent of the time, this sentence came out like the wisdom of a veteran tactician. I didn’t know a lot about Demons, but from what I’d read, it seemed as though the realms they called home put them in a never-ending struggle for dominancy. Such ceaseless warring with their neighbouring kin would explain why they were so disruptive when brought to Mondus.

Ludwig added, “With Liw working her magic, the illusions and disruptive powers of the Lich shouldn’t affect anyone not within the fortress.”

“Because of the Red Haze?”

“My little babies will safeguard your harem, as you face the Lich within.”

I blinked in confusion at her description of my Party.

“It’s not a harem!” Ludwig told her in a scolding voice. “How many times do I have to explain platonic relationships to you!?”

“They are women, following this boy’s every whim. If it is not a harem, then what is it?”

Ludwig became so flustered on my behalf that he immediately made he go incorporeal.

“Sorry about that. Never in my life thought that I’d have to teach a Lust Demon about the concept of friendships, but she’s been going on-and-on about it every since I met you and your friends.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Sometime later, Saoirse had gotten clued in on the strategy and she was altering the foes that my friends were facing in the vast courtyard. She had pulled Renji out of their group and placed him in a section separated from them by a wall that split the area, where she kept pitting towering hulks of muscle against him. These hulks were similar to the one Armen and I had faced after I absorbed the first fragment of Kumi’s soul.

Armen and Jules had struggled to match each other’s rhythms at first, but now they were taking turns striking against the never-ending horde of shadowy shamblers. There were no longer any archers or mages in the mix, since Kumi’s nailed-pierced zombies hadn’t possessed such power, but the sheer

number of them was making up for that. However, the mass of bodies made them a perfect target for Emily’s new Crushing spell, and the one time she’d used it, it had destroyed thirteen enemies at once.

Jules was exhibiting a new level of fine manipulation that I hadn’t realised he was capable of, as he would take the arrows that Elye fired, and use his Wood Affinity to propel them at nearly twice their original speeds, while aiming them through the heads of several zombies in succession, before returning them to the archer, such that she never ran out of ammunition.

Though it was a different style than when Renji’s devastating power was in the mix, the four of them were complimenting each other almost perfectly, and their individual stamina and energy consumptions weren’t as drastic, meaning they could probably hold the line like this for upwards of three hours, before needing a break.

“The idea is that Renji, Saoirse, and I go into the fortress,” I said. “I’ll also bring my Observer and my Caster, as well as my Lifeward of course.”

Ludwig nodded.

“Armen, Jules, Emily, and Elye will fight off the zombies that Kumi will send to retake the field that Liw is taking over with the Red Haze and her unique power.”

“And I’ll hand back, in case things go to shit and you need an extraction.”

“You seem much more prepared this time,” Saoirse commented and I was proud that she thought so.

“Do you think it is enough?” I asked her.

“Your harem—”

“Oy,” Ludwig said.

“Sorry, I meant, your Party,” she corrected with a lascivious grin, “cannot hold off the servants of the Lich forever, and she has many hundreds at her command, with some uncanny ability to conjure more on the spot, needing just some bones to pull it off. It is a skill almost similar to my own power of creation.”

I frowned. I hadn’t realised she possessed such a thing, and had just assumed she’d stockpiled zombies for a long time. When I thought back however, it had never seemed as though her army would run out of servants, so this meant that we had a pretty firm deadline to pull off the plan.

“But if you can gather her soul fragments before your Party expires, you can win.”

“You don’t have to do it all at once,” Ludwig reminded me. “You could return after acquiring a fragment, and we could repeat the strategy the following day.”

“Don’t you think she would learn how to counter it? Or maybe she would leave traps in the field or something to trip us up.”

“Hmm, you’re right. But do you think you can get all the fragments in one go? It’ll be dangerous.”

“I’ll just have to try.”