

119 – Past Transgressions

I’d scanned the entire Redoubt with Karasumany’s clones, all of them surviving the ordeal, even though the Encyclopaedia had made it seem like a Lich defended its territory viciously. From all I’d seen, it was just an abandoned fort that nature had reclaimed. The trench-like claustrophobic passageways between the various buildings were full of pale weeds and roots; the stone buildings were sunken into the earthen ground and full of fissures that gnarled plants grew from, with grey moss covering their flat rooftops; the tunnels that connected to subterranean fortifications, depots, sleeping quarters, and prison cells were almost all blocked by one kind of obstruction or another; and when I did peer down into the underground areas, there was nothing that stood out.

“It’s utterly abandoned,” I concluded.

“**It may be an illusion,**” Armen commented.

“I’d have to get closer to find out,” I said, not relishing the idea. After all my Gravelight was tethered to my ring.

“Do you not wish to go?” asked Saoirse.

“Absolutely not, yeah.”

“**I would like to investigate it,**” Armen said, surprising me.

“Why?”

“**I have heard of Liches before, but I have never seen one. I would like to witness its power.**”

“That’s pretty reckless.”

“**To defeat a foe, you must first know them.**”

I thought about it for a bit. Given that Liches utilised the undead, they might be susceptible to the magic wielded by a Crusader. And all illusions could be dispelled with Kōtama’s light. It was the fact that Liches laid traps and were cunning that scared me. If they were compared to True Demons then I needed far more preparation to take one out than just the three of us and my meagre assortment of familiars.

“We’ll only stay until the sun sets, then we leave.”

Armen nodded. “**Understood.**”

“I must admit that I too am curious about this creature who eluded my Reaping.”

“Have you not dealt with Liches before?” I asked her.

“I have, but never have I encountered one which cheated me. I believe my Mark of Death to be final, so I wish to learn how it has been subverted, such that I do not repeat my mistake. Of course, I also wish to send this scheming soul to the Beyond, for anything less would tarnish my name.”

Together, we walked across the threshold marked by the pale-grey grass and I immediately felt a pressure descend upon me, similar to how I’d felt upon entering the Demon Galleon, but of a completely different nature. It was like breathing-in a potent perfume that sent my head spinning and made my eyes become sore and tired.

We had caught her at last. That monstrous Witch. For months the city of Evergreen and its Guilds had shielded her from retribution, but we’d been clever and lured her all the way out here to Mossbloom with a fake Guild Quest that she was perfectly suited to handle. We knew that the months hiding in the city had made her yearn for a new adventure, and we had studied her well enough to know exactly what she sought.

Once she had been an Exorcist, which was already cause enough for concern, as her ilk cavorted with the spawn of Demons and spoke to the dead. But then she had chosen the path of the Necromancer and that was when we had begun receiving the reports of vile behaviour, the tales of graverobbing and defilement of the sacred dead.

I was standing by the only entrance to Mossbloom Redoubt with five others of my order, our crests uniting us. Twelve more waited within. She would not elude us again this time.

No, this isn’t right... said a confused voice in my head, but it was quickly banished.

Attached to my right hand was the Gauntlet of Arri, my favoured Possessed Weapon, the claws of which bore a potent toxin that robbed any spellcaster of their energy. It was temperamental, but so long as it was fed daily, it would not fight back against my control.

One of the men from within came to the entrance and said, “It is time. She is occupied with speaking to the officer about the Quest.”

I nodded, before turning to my group. As one we spoke the litany of our Order:

“Hunters of Cursed Foe,”

“Watchful Eyes in the Dark,”

“We spark the flame,”

“Venator Maledictus.”

My mind sharpened to a single focused point, all emotions like fear and anxiety falling away, while my body filled with the chemicals of battle.

This isn't me! screamed a voice in my head, but it couldn't break through.

Kōtama, please, dispel this illusion! the voice continued to plead, but to no avail.

“Let us put this accursed Witch to the flame,” I said, and as one we pushed into the Redoubt.

The soldiers knew to stay out of our way, as the officers had already briefed them to vacate the premises as soon as they saw us. As we moved to the heart of the fortress, the rest of our Order came down the other passageways, the trap closing around the Necromancer.

We came to an intersection where all the paths connected and our quarry stood, the officer she was speaking to spotting us and tensing up. With her were two large brutes with discoloured and sewn-together patchwork skin, each carrying large black coffin sealed with thick decorative nails. Those very same nails were pierced through the front of the two servants' foreheads: the vile means by which the Witch controlled the dead.

She was like a rose with poisoned thorns. Her body was short and lithe like that of a dancer; her face was angular and charming; her black silky hair was like a funerary veil; and her dress was like that of an aristocrat. Most dangerous were her multihued eyes.

As all eighteen of us ringed around her, blocking all escape routes, the officer quickly left, and I said to her, “Necromancer Kumi, by the Order of Venator Maledictus, you stand accused of Witchcraft and crimes against the people of this nation! Surrender your weapons and familiars to us, lest they be taken from you by force.”

My Magic Sense picked up the moment she sent a command to her familiars.

She had given us no choice.

Death was the only outcome now.

All eighteen Witch Hunters charged for the Necromancer, even as the coffins carried by her hideous servants broke open and released blood-soaked fiends.

We fought to strike at the Witch in the midst of the monsters, but she kept us at bay with her staff made from the skull and spine of some poor soul, releasing blasts of energy that flung one of my fellows into a wall and broke his body.

But I was the leader for a reason, because, out of all of us, I was the strongest by some margin. As my team fought and died around me, I made it past the servants protecting the Necromancer and rammed my clawed gauntlet into her stomach, tearing a deep gouge.

Then the tide of the battle changed.

I gasped, regaining consciousness, blood spilling from my mouth. Nails like railroad spikes were punched through my thighs and shoulders, pinning me to a stone wall. The pain was so immense that I couldn't stop screaming, except no sound escaped my mouth.

My arm was torn from my body, as the Witch's servants fought to protect her, but even as I was pushed to the brink of death, the rest of my Order fell upon the monsters and slayed them. With the magic-leeching toxin of my Possessed Weapon in her body, she could no longer put up as strong a defence and though seven of our initial eighteen were dead or dying, myself included, it was too late for her to escape.

A smile formed on my lips, even as the blood left my body in an eager stream. For a Witch Hunter of Order Venator Maledictus, to die while taking a Witch to the grave with you was a great accomplishment. Even with my death, the world would be a safer place because of what I had achieved.

As I lay there, watching my fellows fight, I saw the Witch pull out a Spell-Tome and begin to invoke some ritual. I tried to yell at my comrades to stop her, but my voice would not come.

I gasped again, returning to a world of pain, but this time I was on a hard stone floor pinned by my hands and feet, through which were long spikes that locked me into a submissive position, while ahead of me a limbless creature sat in the embrace of a brutish stitched-together monster and watched me with sadistic glee.

Kōtama please, make it stop!

The ring on my hand lit up and suddenly—

I shot upright, my body lying in the pale-grey grass fifty metres from the bridge that led across the moat and into the Redoubt. Light shone from the ring on my hand and suffused my entire body. Armen was standing in front of me, fighting off skeletons and zombies that swarmed from the fortress in droves. Distinct between each of the undead were the single long decorative nail through the forehead.

“Armen!” I yelled to my familiar. “We need to get out of here!”

With his sword, the Crusader severed the head from the body of a zombie, then turned around and ran back towards me.

With shaky legs that still felt the phantom pains of the illusions I’d been subjected to, I struggled upright, Armen quickly coming to my side and helping me back towards the threshold of the Lich’s domain, which was demarcated by where the pale-grey dead grass ended.

As we half-ran, I pulled out my Barrier Ring Focus, which I hadn’t used in a long while. I fed it with my energy as I mentally imagined that a shield was protecting me from the powerful illusions.

“Are you okay?” Armen asked. **“We had only made it to the entrance before you collapsed.”**

“It was horrible,” I told him. “I think I saw the past, but from the perspective of a Witch Hunter. I was also somewhere dark, like a dungeon, where a figure was watching me bleed to death.”

“I am sorry for pushing this issue on you. I must admit that I got ahead of myself in my fascination with the unknown.”

“It’s not your fault,” I told him. “I was unprepared. I had entirely neglected to put up my Soul Barrier as I had somehow assumed that the Lich would not be capable of illusions *that* powerful. It was similar to the ones I experienced in the Galleon, where everything felt real.”

“I see. The Dullahan should be back later. She said she would speak with the Heart of the Lich, though I do not know what she meant by this.”

I frowned.

“We need to go back in,” I told him. “But first I need a break and time to prepare.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s something I need to confirm. Something I discovered in the visions of the past.”

“The sun is already setting.”

“Then we will go tomorrow morning.”

“Should we return to the carriage?” he asked, as we both saw the undead return into the Redoubt.

“Let’s do that, Emily is probably worried.”