

Chapter 671 Gauntlet

Ilea rushed past the beam, moving into it for the last few meters. She could feel her ash getting stripped away, her skin hit by the death magic and slowly decaying. Her fist came in an uppercut, hitting the monster's barely attached jaw and slamming it upwards, its mouth shut as the rest of its spell burst out through from the sides, its head punched upwards.

She spread her ash and set it alight, her wounds slowly recovering as she changed her strikes to purely physical attacks. Her next fist sent splintered teeth flying to each side, Ilea jumping up before she aimed at its eyes.

Flesh was squashed and bones were broken, each strike sending vibrations through her arms as she felt her own muscles ripping and tearing, the injuries healing faster than the ones caused by the monster's spells.

Ilea jumped back when she got a confusing feedback from her precognition, her head cocking to the side as she watched the creature's eyes glow with purple flames. Dark blood dripped down from its mangled jaw.

She prepared to attack when she tasted blood in her mouth, some of it dripping down to the ground below her. *Hmm*, she mused, seeing a magical connection within her dominion. "Now what's that about?" she asked as the monster charged at her, purple flames forming on its whole body.

Ilea watched her mantle decay, her skin fighting against death magic that gripped her from all around. *Suppose there's no way around it*, she thought with a smirk and charged.

She dodged under the partial jaw, her fist slamming into the monster's massive chest before she vanished, appearing above it where her own chest dented inward slightly. She coughed up blood and sent her charged flames onto its back, feeling heat and death burn into her own. A few seconds passed as she healed with her third tier, the effects slowed down considerably but still enough to deal with her injuries as she dodged the frenzied attacks of the creature. She laughed when she noticed its own injuries not healing.

Now that, she thought and came down with her charged fists, purposely not aiming for its head with any of her attacks as her physical hits slammed into its spine. *Is a fatal flaw*.

A few more strikes landed, finally splintering its spine below the purple flames. Ilea's hands were stripped of flesh, her own spine refusing to shatter as she continued her relentless strikes, hitting dozens of times until the monster fell forward, unable to move its legs or wings anymore. She bathed in the flames, healing herself as she absorbed every shred of mana she could gather up.

Ilea sat down on the monster's neck, her mantle reforming within the flames of death, her white fires spreading out and slowly overtaking the heavily injured enemy.

"What terrifying might!" Death spoke, slapping to the ground after it managed to get out of the wall, slowly floating up before it spoke once more. "Now finish it, wanderer, destroy that which failed before you and claim victory!"

"I'm burning it down," she said, healing herself against the still transferred damage, her flames of creation pushing against the purple fires as the creature was slowly weakened.

It was barely alive at this point but its pure magical might was still above hers, which made the undeath struggle a prolonged conflict. Ilea just wanted to focus on her third Class to get the most experience for it out of the battle. By now she was pretty sure the others weren't in immediate danger, and they could still call for her.

"Why do you put creatures that invade your dungeon on these paths?" she asked after a while of burning.

The lich fragment had crossed its arms by now, its eyes flickering with swaying blue light. "To see them fight of course, to see them struggle, and to see them die. There is nothing more glorious, and meaningful in life, and death."

"You're not annoyed that I destroy your undead creatures?" Ilea asked.

"They are not alive. No more. True purpose can only come from those living," it said.

"Depends if there's a will and mind remaining. As with you. Would you say your existence has no purpose?" Ilea asked, cutting into the creature below her with her ashen limbs and spears to speed up the process.

"I reached for immortality, and was confined here. Would you not say that is punishment for my arrogance? And yet... when I see those of life... struggling against their fate, it brings back something," it said and laughed, the sound turning into a mad cackling.

"How long exactly have you been down here?" Ilea asked, a ding finally resounding within her mind.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Winged Death of the North – lvl 1008]'

'ding' 'The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 504 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 501 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 467 – One stat point awarded'

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 468 – One stat point awarded'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6'

'ding' 'Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 19'

'ding' 'You have effortlessly slaughtered a four mark creature – One Core skill point awarded'

We're at that point now, Ilea thought with a grin.

“The passing of time has no bearing on me, I am immortal after all,” the lich fragment answered after it had stopped cackling.

It had lead Ilea onward into a broad corridor of ice, various enchantments now instantly noticeable to her. *Bunch of traps*, she thought, not spotting any creatures or signs of anyone having ever set foot into the area.

“What am I supposed to do, just walk through?” she asked, already walking.

“Indeed,” the being said and resumed its cackling.

She felt a few of the enchantments activate, the ice cracking as mists of cold air flashed out, leaving frozen patches on her mantle. Ilea quickly discarded the damaged parts, healing her defenses as more spells activated around her. Her eyebrows quirked up as she noticed a familiar feel from one of the explosions near her. She decided not to dodge, instead analyzing the soul magic that flowed through her.

A lich, could've expected as much, I suppose, she thought, looking inward to see her essence slightly damaged. The pain was still there, an instinctual wrongness she'd likely never be able to shake. Her training with Seithir helped her deal with it however, the feeling wrong but familiar.

She couldn't exactly heal the damage but it would recover in time, and maybe she could get a few more levels to her resistance before she had to face the Lich fragment itself, if it really came to that.

Ilea side eyed the floating humanoid being, continuing her walk through the increasingly chaotic field of magical explosions. She made sure to leave no enchantment dormant, occasionally even sending an ashen limb into the ice to get the last ones out.

When she arrived on the other side, she had a slightly damaged soul, coupled with a bit of mana yet to be recovered due to her healing and reforming of her mantle. None of the spells managed to get through her defenses entirely, besides the soul magic of course.

'ding' 'Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14'

She could tell the Lich's enchantments were of a different quality than Seithir's spells but she lacked the understanding to differentiate the specifics. They enchantments had felt more chaotic, but with the explosive application, that seemed obvious.

“I did it,” she said in a monotone voice, turning around to face the being.

“Indeed. Splendid defenses you possess, wanderer. But I suppose it was a little underwhelming after your fight with the Winged Death. And yet, this hallway leads to the next battle on the Path of Death. All wanderers are required to go through,” it said.

Probably where most of them die, Ilea thought, remembering her first encounter with soul magic. She was glad it hadn't been here.

What followed were eighteen battle halls with increasingly dangerous undead monsters and humanoids taken from the northern regions, all interlinked by trap laden hallways. Ilea was mostly just surprised by how many creatures the Lich fragment had captured over the centuries, making sure with each kill that there was not a lot of connected physical matter left to raise the creatures

once more, though she had no idea how much of an undead was truly required to raise them again. Perhaps just the soul was enough and mana would fill in the rest. She hoped not.

As time went on, she got increasingly confident that the Lich fragment could somehow raise the monsters again, mostly due to the progressively higher level of the beings. If a single level six hundred Star Chaser arrived here, it would easily shred through the first ten or more halls that had been presented to her, excluding the four mark she had fought near the start.

Most of the creatures had only a few abilities and not many had answers against her healing or space magic, none had anything against both. All of them were overwhelmed by her mana intrusion at one point or the other. Some monsters she had to avoid, getting in hits with well timed teleportation while recovering both mana and health between strikes, others she could simply approach and punch until they were nothing but a lifeless pulp of bones and flesh.

“You have been most impressive, wanderer,” the being said when she finished the last level nine hundred Wyrmling, its head snapping to the side when she finally managed to overwhelm its continued regeneration.

Ilea herself had lost a good chunk of her mana in the fight, her wounds healing as she looked at the Lich fragment, checking her messages quickly to see how far she had come.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead hallowed beetle – lvl 628]’

...

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Undead Glacial Wyrmling – lvl 913]’

‘ding’ ‘The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 502 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 469 – One stat point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 470 – One stat point awarded – One Core skill point awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 476 – One stat point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 30’

‘ding’ ‘Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Blight Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2’

'ding' 'Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18'

'ding' 'Crystal Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15'

'ding' 'Dark Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Flesh Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Flesh Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Smoke Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4'

"You had quite the repertoire here, care to raise them all again for another round?" Ilea asked with a smile. Some time had passed and while Feyrair had moved quite a distance through the underground, the two Elders still remained in the very same place as they had several hours prior.

Really good for levels too, she thought, especially glad that Space Shift had finally reached the last level in the third tier. The fact that the Lich had so many creatures under its employ, willingly, or without possessing a will, meant she could try herself against a wide variety of unknowns. None had used magic entirely unfamiliar to her, or at least to her resistances, which made the whole process smoother than it could've been.

"You have proven your capabilities, wanderer. There is no need to redo what you have already accomplished. But now awaits your most dire task. A monster so gruesome none has slain it in all the time the paths have existed," it said with a vibrating whisper, the ground before them opening up to reveal a deep shaft of ice, changing to stone farther down.

Ilea noted that they were now quite a bit below the others. "You can't summon the creature in this area here?" she asked, using Eternal Huntress to see if she could see signs of a dangerous creature. The very air coming from the darkness below seemed to light up.

"The last battlefield is down below," Death said.

Oh really?

"You're not coming down with me?" she asked.

"Indeed not. There is no ice. It's... uncomfortable," it answered, crossing its ethereal arms.

"Aha," Ilea mused. Her instincts informed her that whatever was waiting down below was considerably more dangerous than the creature hovering in front of her, though she didn't think it a pushover either, mostly due to the soul magic it wielded.

"And what's stopping me from just attacking you here and ending the path of death?" she asked. The main thing she thought suspicious was his sudden lack of interest in the battle he deemed so glorious before.

His eyes glowered as he spread his arms and cackled lightly. "Not a mere brute? Your... allies, friends, whatever they may be to you. I will hunt them down and kill them, while you fail to navigate these corridors to come and stop me. You possess defenses that may be enough to survive

a sustained battle with me, but they do not. And you know this. Go into the cavern, slay the monster, and be on your way, with your allies unharmed.”

“You overestimate your spacial abilities,” Ilea said, pretty sure she could just latch on to his teleportation.

“And you underestimate my destructive potential. I know your kind. You would risk much to protect your allies. And are you not interested? In the being that has kept even me at bay?” he asked.

Concentrated busts of soul magic could take the Elders out. Probably. No idea if they have resistances against it or not. But what about the other two fragments? Do they simply not care? Or would they fight us too if this one deems us enemies?

“I’m interested in good fights, sure, but I don’t like being threatened into them,” she said.

The fragment moved both hands to its head and bent over, producing a maddening screech. “So long.... So long.... So long... have I waited!!” he shouted, pointing at her. “And you! You are one that may succeed, where all others have failed. Regeneration, a mind to think, instincts honed in countless battles. You would jump down to face the monster. I knew it to be true. Why do you choose to mistrust when it’s all so close, so close to grasp?!”

“If I.. present... the essence of those you hold dear... to be kept here forever, or released... I will have to kill them,” he murmured and floated away.

Ilea prevented his teleport, causing him to look back in annoyance.

“Let them go now and I promise that I will try to fight whatever is down there. If I fail, I’ll come back when I’m stronger,” she said.

“You would have me abandon this path for a mere promise?” Death asked, eyes flickering.

“You said you knew my kind. Either you accept and get a chance at me fighting that thing, or I will kill you right here. And trust me, if you harm any of my allies, I will carve out this entire mountain to find and destroy everything that is a part of you,” she said, their eyes locking.

The Lich fragment considered for a moment. “Very well. I accept.”

It moved them both into the room where the Elders resided.

“... it is her whom I loved, and her for whom I chose this path of darkness and treachery. My choices I regret in every waking hour of this cursed existence, and yet my love for her will keep me sane, until the day I will finally find rest.” the other fragment finished with shaking whispered words, tears of blue light rolling down his ethereal form.

Ilea could hear teeth grinding from the fragment next to her as she looked at Pierce wiping away tears. Verena too seemed burdened, listening to the lich with a pained expression.

“These two will be released,” Death said.

“They are saved?” the fragment asked, glancing at Ilea. “A wind of hope flows through these ancient halls. Very well, I shall see them off,” the Lich said and vanished with the Elders in tow.

Ilea could see them appear far above before she latched on to the fragment that called itself death, appearing in a long hall filled with burning rocks, wooden bars and poles, ice splinters on the ground, and angled walls. An obstacle course, she surmised.

Feyrair dangled from one of the walls, his hand trying to reach a nearby crevice before he jumped and caught himself, giving off a joyous hiss.

The nearby fragment jumped in the air. “YES! You fucking did it! Well done ELF!!!”

“I know. I’m the best,” Fey mused.

What is even happening here? Ilea thought, glancing at the yet more annoyed fragment next to her.

“He is free to go, bring him out,” Death said in a commanding tone.

The other fragment glanced over. “Now that’s an interesting change of pace. Tired of killing?” it asked, giggling to itself before it vanished, Feyrair going with it.

“Why go to all this trouble?” Ilea asked when they were back in front of the hole.

“You do not need to know,” the being said. “Now go and slay the beast.”

“Care to give me some more information about it? If you want it dead, I might benefit from some clues,” she said.

“Reasonable. It’s at a higher level than I, it uses void magic, mindless but its instincts and ability to adapt are above what most monsters display. The area will be dark to your eyes, but the creature can see,” the being explained.

“Alright. Now you better not go back on the deal. I’ll check it out and if I can’t win, you’ll help me train,” she said.

“That was not part of the agreement,” the creature said.

“You want that thing dead, don’t you?” she asked.

Its eyes glowered, while it ground its invisible teeth.