

Chapter Thirty-One: A Disappointing Start

Opening her eyes to the dark atmosphere of her inner world, Elinor looked into the flickering sapphire flames within the hearth, the ominous notes of a cathedral [organ](#) mixing with the thunder and rain outside. Her status menu appeared in front of her as she crossed her legs, scrolling through the tantalizing options that were now at her fingertips.

Outside, one hundred thousand people watched her, whispering to one another about the unprecedented event, and she couldn't restrain the anticipation welling up within her breast; at last, she'd obtained the means to fight her own battles.

She glanced through her Stat Sheet, making note of its distribution. **[Warlord: Soldier's Spirit]** made Grades irrelevant to a degree since she'd gain the attributes of whichever soldier she channeled. Of course, that also included their weaknesses, but it opened up the path to increase her Death Pool amount by a substantial margin. This evolution changed everything.

She placed four Stat Points into her Constitution, bringing it up to 10, where she discovered another interesting part of the System.

[Constitution advanced to +1, multiply Base Pool by 2x]

A curve came to Elinor's lips as she pondered the ramping scale that could come from specializing in specific fields of Stats. She was at the highest possible degree of Grade for her Constitution, which had given her 5 Death Orbs a point, bringing her to 50, yet with this bonus reward, that was bumped up to 10, raising her base to 100.

Her last point was placed into Endurance, bringing it up to 7; three more, and she would see if it was a product of her Maximum Constitution Grade or if Stat Upgrades worked the same for those of a lower Grade.

Sliding her finger to the side, she scanned down the rest of her Feats, gaining an overview of how many of her Tiers had increased since last she looked; they provided minor improvements to the Feats but nothing worthy of note that a Grade enhancement gave.

Not too interested to linger on the small bumps, Elinor's gaze flicked to the five **[Feat Extension]** points she had available before studying her sister's glamorous side of the room. Due to her continual absence, it was safe to say that she couldn't return at any time she wished, as Elinor could since she had to be connected to her Phylactery. That might change when building them a new home.

If Butter's butterfly body were destroyed, then she'd be forced back here; her sister had already proven that. However, the creation of a second resonating pair of gemstones, converted into a new residence, could provide new opportunities to discuss things over long distances; it would be far easier to find such items in this world than in the jungle.

Her focus centered back on **[Phylactery II]**, at S-tier, it wouldn't climb any higher until she managed to create a new home for them to swap between. She could bring **[Spirit Transport I]** to the next extension level, yet there were other things to consider, and reducing the damage caused to the phylacteries wasn't the most critical issue at the moment. No, the real fun was that while channeling her soldier's spirit, she could use her other Feats.

[Artificial Body I: Sturdy Build - Advanced to Grade II]

[Sturdy Build - Advanced to Grade III]

[Artificial Body: Sturdy Build has reached Max Grade - Significantly increase the construct's [Defense] and [Force]]

Her brow furrowed while looking closer at **[Warlord: Soldier's Spirit]**; it was the most complicated Feat with the most text thus far, and one of the caveats was that she could only channel 50% of her Minion's aptitude, which wouldn't do. Luckily, there was a fix to that inside her Extensions.

**[Warlord: Soldier's Spirit - Soul Synchrony I - Increases the soul unity to 60%]
[Soul Synchrony I - Advanced to Grade II]
[Soul Synchrony II - Advanced to Grade III]
[Soul Synchrony has Reached Max Grade - Increases the soul unity to 100%]**

Feat Extensions and Stat Points used, she scrolled down to her **[Limit Break]** options. A sudden idea made her teeth flash as the thunder outside came into the foreground, with the somber sound of violins and a piano taking the place of the organ. Butter would love the combination and synergies that the Warlord Evolution had given her.

[Empress: Minion Break II] - Advance all current Intelligent minions by two Tiers and Unintelligent minions by one Grade and two Tiers for ten minutes.

[Lich: Chain Break II] - Increase the number of chains the user can summon by 5, increase their distance by 5x, and double all users' Stats for ten minutes.

[Prose of the Potentate II] would no doubt jump up one or two Grades once she slotted in her new Queen of Alchemy with her wealth of language expertise. It would take one day to change it, and sadly, the only option to remove was Ina'ko, which would cause a bit of chaos within the fox-monkeys she'd brought to her side, but they would have to deal with it.

She freed up one of her two slots, starting the cooldown on this world; luckily, it's time was subject to where she was, and since this world had a faster passage of time, it likely wouldn't even be half a day on her 30-hour jungle home's timetable.

Her emerald eyes moved on to her two Equipable Feat options, cycling through what she had available. Now that she had a new Slot she could stick one into, it had to be good.

The Warlord Evolution had given her new options, proving it had been the right decision to save up instead of wasting them on less potent Feats. As her soul strengthened from this Seed, new, more powerful Feats would unlock. Naturally, she chose what would help her in the upcoming battles.

[Mental Acceleration I - Reactive - F-tier - Warlord - 0DO - 1 Slot - Accelerates the user's mind in short bursts]

[Strategic Mind I - Passive - F-tier - Warlord - 0DO - 1 Slot - Increases the user's mental aptitude, memory, ability to adapt to new circumstances, and process a large amount of information in a tactical manner.]

She'd need to swap between **[Strategic Mind]** and **[Mental Acceleration]**; the latter would probably be her go-to in typical combat, but given how new she was to **[Warlord: Soldier's Spirit]** and using foreign abilities, **[Strategic Mind]** was the play.

Slotting it in, she felt her thélméthra nearing. It was sooner than she'd anticipated due to her increased Nexus range from its Grade Advancement: her reach now extended to 4 kilometers. It would be instrumental to her communication network on the battlefield.

Elinor browsed through the changes to her Death Pool, tapping the icon to see the breakdown of her current limit while waiting for her metallic spider to reach her. The Base upgrade from her Constitution, plus the multiplier from her Warlord Evolution had increased her limit by a substantial margin:

[Base Death Pool: 38]
[Constitution: 100]
[Rising Empire: 1st Petal: 45]
[Warlord Evolution: x2]
[Artificial Construct: -10]
[Total: 366 (356)]

She'd more than tripled her original Death Pool and increased her Efficiency from her evolution, which meant her empire-building was on point to expand when she returned. In fact, there were a few tests she could run in this kingdom with the several days she had remaining here. It would only improve when her Endurance Stat reached 10, but by how much?

A cold flame lit in Elinor's heart as her soldier came into range; it was time to experiment:

[Warlord: Soldier's Spirit: Activated]

A heat bloomed within her chest as her thélméthra came into range, bringing the creature into her somber room. Emerald fire ignited her spirit as Elinor lifted to her feet to look at the flame-enshrouded, 3-meter-tall spider; it bowed to her as she approached it in the expansive space. Her fingers touched its smooth black head, and power flooded her entire being, leaving her breathless.

[Worker Drone - Serving Court - Rare E - Nest Worker/Assassin - Genderless Thélméthra - Level 1: Selected.]

[Soul Synchronization Failure]

Elinor's skin prickled as the energy surrounding them dispersed, stripping her of the intense strength she'd experienced. The spider shivered, remaining stationary with her hand on its head.

"What happened?" she whispered, mind kicking into gear as she pulled her fingers away to look at her status window. "What limitation did I miss?"

Her fingers paused over the Feat as she read it again and looked at the incredible specimen in front of her, a caustic laugh bubbling up her tight chest. "How funny..."

Flipping to her Warlord Evolution abilities, she scanned down them again to spot the solution: Conscription.

"You are in the Serving Court, hehe, which means I cannot synchronize with you since you are not a soldier. However... I can change your role. Hmm..."

Her father's voice entered her mind. *"Elinor, five minutes is almost up."*

"More than enough."

Swiftly glancing over the conditions and requirements of Conscription, she confirmed the drone more than met them. There was one catch, though... Elinor brought up her Minion Sheet and selected the thélméthra, tapping on the options beside its name to hit one of the few colored text in the black-and-white menu, labeled red:

[Warning: Conscribed Units cannot return to their Serving Role and will not receive their benefits once invoked into military service. Do you wish to proceed?]

Elinor tapped on **[Yes]** without hesitation, changing the spider's location within her command structure and redirecting its diminished, Serving Court attributes into a Rare, E-tier Soldier. Its body ignited in lime-green fire, reforming its spirit.

"Now, let's try this again..."

[Warlord: Soldier's Spirit: Activated]

[Soul Secrynoization Success: [100%](#)]

[Time Remaining: 59:99]

A tremor shook through her phylactery, the thélméthra converting into pure energy to be absorbed into her soul. Power far beyond what she'd previously experienced erupted within her breast, her mind opening, her senses expanding, and a wealth of information budding inside her core.

Opening her eyes to the outside world, her vision pulled back, allowing her to see everything within her peripheral, but it was so much more.

The pattering of rain on the dome above and the slightest breeze that touched her skin spiked every hair on her body with an explosion of flavor and information. **[Strategic Mind]** helped to mitigate the overwhelming sensations that assaulted every fiber of her being. Jade fire slid down her figure, reforming her Artificial Body, and Death Energy created new organs for her to use, hidden underneath her skin as her entire being was reforged.

[Thélméthra Physiology I: Active]

Pushing off of her chains, Elinor recalled them while smiling down at the nervous teenagers. She could hear every whisper like hot breath against her ears, and the mouth-watering taste of their fear-induced hormones mixing into the air.

Her hologram mirrored her above, causing the stadium to hush as she spread out her hands, laughter in her voice.

"I have given you time to prepare, but I am a generous woman. First, as the House of Raven depends on it... I will allow Lord Drake Tarnash and Lady Anala Tarkov to prove to Grandmaster Lilya that they deserve a room in the House. I do not accept those who fail to meet expectations, no matter their rank or file."

She pivoted to walk around the stadium, making most of the Tempest breathe out sighs of relief; Julian and Castria were still trying to support Princess Heather as she recovered from her faint, panic gripping her. The pressure must have been immense from the tantalizing flavor the girl's hot skin released that tickled her tongue; her new senses could acutely identify every individual, including insects in the air, if she concentrated.

"I will give the opportunity for *all* of you to prove your worth to this kingdom and its future. Know that I only acknowledge those who put in their full effort... and then exceed it! If you want to test your prowess against the impossible, then I offer you this opportunity."

She let her statement hang as she stopped in front of the Alchemist group, in notably less stylish and fancy clothes. "I will even allow the Grandmasters to offer you advice to see how well you can handle following instructions under pressure. Watch Lady Anala and Lord Drake carefully, *class*, because once I have had my fun with them... it will be your turn."

Elinor took one last look at the apprehensive throng, the ravens fluttering down to capture every angle as the hologram zoomed out to show a more balanced view of the stage for those too high to gain a proper understanding of the fight.

"I have severely altered my body and fighting style for this event, Citizens of Kaspir, and I suggest your future defenders and scholars not hold back... Any words of advice for your children, High Lord Yeven, High Lord Debro?"

The fire-haired man was encased with purple flames that sputtered white from time to time. “Hahaha! Have fun, My Little Spitfire, and show her the ferocity of the Great House of Tarkov.”

Anala stretched amongst the nobles, the teens backing away from the girl when yellow fire changed the color of her red locks. Elinor could smell the girl’s anticipation as she unfastened a ribbon from around her arm to tie her thick hair into a high ponytail.

A calm, calculating tone followed, the frosty look of High Lord Yeven and his family fixated on her as their children whispered to one another, attempting to calculate their brother’s odds. “As the Empress stated earlier, patience is hard, Drake, but it pays to remain calm. Show our people what the Great House of Tarnash’s principles are.”

“I’m going to come at you with everything I have, Empress!” Anala shouted, launching onto the platform’s edge as Elinor made her way to the center.

Elinor’s smile lifted as she saw Drake take a far more cautious approach, the wind carrying him into the air to flutter his noble attire; he hovered at the edge of the coliseum, taking her back as Elinor faced the girl who would launch forward the moment the match started.

The previously charismatic tone of the boy was more guarded, yet he was internally just as excited as Anala to test his prowess against the famed Raven Empress. “I look forward to seeing how you battle, Empress. To clarify, are we allowed to go for killing blows?”

“I expect that at a minimum,” Elinor chortled, shifting a tad to look at him from an angle. She clasped her hands behind her back as the gentle breeze cycling through the stadium increased, fluttering her black dress. “Grand Duke, would you do the honors?”

The older man leered down at them, likely having already sensed her spider’s stalled movements at the outskirts of the city, buried within the earth. A stillness came over the crowd, and her lips peeled back into a gleaming smile as the orchestra’s gentle sounds returned, showing the college rector was feeding into the show.

Elinor could hear the gulps and nervous shifts from the crowd, Anala and Drake’s pumping hearts, and the murmurs from the nobles, but perhaps the most fascinating words from over a hundred thousand people came from a womanly voice in a Countess’ box.

“Fascinating use of souls, Empress...” The disguised hag whispered. “You have piqued my curiosity.”

Anala’s legs tensed as a voice rang out throughout the coliseum before the flame-enchanted girl fumbled her sorcery and tumbled halfway to Elinor, landing on her back with a growl that had the crowd chuckling; it wasn’t the Grand Duke’s signal to start.

“Empress,” High Lady Julia Proltis curtly interjected, “might my granddaughter, Lady Aura, join this trial to show her merits for the House of Tempest?”

“Blah!” Anala barked, swiping her now extinguished hair out of her face to glare up at the Great House box. “Ehh?! No, this isn’t about the stupid House of Tempest; stay in your lane instead of trying to take my fire! Aura is terrible at offense anyway.”

Elinor lifted an eyebrow at the mouthy redhead’s shouts up at the rival Great House, her father cheering her on. Tiffany’s chuckles came through the Nexus.

“The shade! Her father’s right, she is a little spitfire. She’ll throw hands at anyone!”

Castria forced a laugh. *“I... don’t think Lady Aura liked that very much.”*

A green-haired girl floated into the air, arms crossed under her bust as she glared at the redhead, who returned the heat. Elinor responded, letting her unfiltered, entertained voice snatch their gaze.

“I welcome it. In fact, once I’m finished with these three, I’ll even allow the other candidates to rescue them to rejoin the fight.” She flexed her fingers, feeling the sticky thread that she could produce; it had several attributes that made it a phenomenal tool and weapon. “I will say that when this is done... you will put your differences aside to try and attack me together.”

“No disrespect, Empress,” Aura said as the three took a triangle position around her, “but Lady Anala would die several times over before her thick skull accepted any kind of help.”

A playful twist lifted the corner of Elinor’s lips as she kicked off her heels and flexed her toes against the ground, clinging to the stadium tile. “We will see.”

The choir’s hums and strum of instruments returned for a short, tense pause before Logan’s calm voice spoke the fateful words throughout the coliseum.

“Begin.”

A sharp gale swirled around Anala, taking her into the sky, orange fire magnifying and turning yellow as she fed it with the dualistic channel of elements. A sphere the size of a carriage grew within seconds as she threw it right at her, the other two remaining still and observing.

“Bye-bye!” she chirped.

Elinor remained where she stood, fine, nearly invisible threads snaking up her arm to weave together as she fed the semi-liquid silk in its malleable form, growing like a plant to encase her chest and hips.

“Hmm-hmm-hmm. So confident...” Heat exploded around her, the intense flames attempting to fling her away, yet she didn’t budge, laughter shaking her frame. “Is this... it?”

Immune to pain in her artificial body, shock replaced Anala’s confidence as her flames melted Elinor’s skin and ate away her dress, only for new skin to grow; it wasn’t as fast as it was destroyed, but more than enough for the short burst of heat.

The thélméthra’s regenerative attributes took over as she gripped her gown’s front and ripped the burning article off, dispersing the flames, gradually turning red upon cooling. In its place, she fashioned a somewhat fire-resistant strap of gray silk around her privates.

Skin mending before her audience’s eyes, she shook her head as Anala recovered, flaming yellow hair brightening. “Next.”

[Enhance Construct II: Activated]

Elinor held up her arm, fragments of ice skating across her face as she shattered the icy sword in Drake’s hand, having used a concussive burst of wind to attack from her blind spot; unfortunately, in this state, she had none.

“Aiming for the neck, hmm?” Elinor mused, eyes drifting to her left as the boy slid by on a sheet of ice that had increased his speed in an impressive combination before collecting atmospheric dew to fire icicles at her in his retreat. “Precise and cautious,” she noted, allowing the spikes to strike and shatter against her frame. “Sadly, you’re going to need a lot more power behind those projectiles to do damage to my shield.”

The daggers bit into her skin, only to shatter against the malleable exoskeleton underneath, hardening the moment she sensed danger in that area. Yet again, her skin began to repair itself, feeding off her Death Energy.

Aura didn’t make a move, flying around the edge of the arena and observing the other two High Nobles probe her for weaknesses. Anala was quick to jump back into the fight, this time, coming in close.

“Perhaps I should stop playing with my food,” Elinor hummed, dancing back as the girl snarled with a grin and tried to box her. “An interesting tactic.”

She easily side-stepped her flame-embraced jabs, the girl manipulating wind to try and force her into a bad position before spinning in a tight circle; her ponytail became a whip of condensed, green energy, tapping into the rare stage of fire for her age to dice her into pieces.

“Try to regenerate from—”

Elinor spun in a barrel roll to slide between the spiral flames, feet kicking out to connect with the girl’s chest and taking the air out of her lungs. Only applying a tiny bit of pressure not to crush her ribcage, she launched the girl back, breaking her concentration while attaching tiny threads to her outfit, now somewhat singed from her inability to control her fire.

Landing on her feet and transferring the silk to her fingers, Elinor grinned as she set her ground and sent the electrical pulse through the string to spread out. Tension stopped the gagging girl in the air, the silk positioned like a puppeteer on her figure to not snap her bones or rip out sockets as they wrapped around her limbs and torso.

“Don’t die!” Elinor sang.

Jerking her upward, Elinor twisted to sling the stricken girl head-first into the stone. Thin ice sheets severed most of her string, wind cycling to catch the teary-eyed teen, choking and coughing for air, but there was too much momentum to break her fall; luckily, her prince came just in time.

Drake grunted as Anala landed on top of him, her head cradled against his chest as he broke her fall with wind and his body while managing to create an ice slide to carry them away.

“Creative!” Elinor complimented them, clapping and allowing the two House enemies to recover as she tested her flexibility, which had improved to insane levels. “How fortunate that your partner was able to save you.”

“Ack-ack! Get off me,” Anala choked, likely seeing spots and not totally stable as she rolled out of Drake’s arms to face-plant the tile. “W-What was that? How did she...”

“Don’t be your *typical* stupid, Anala,” Aura interjected, projecting her voice as Elinor put a hand on her hip and smiled at the green-haired teen. “She has inhuman control over her body, unnatural senses, and can use some kind of rope or sticky substance.”

“Ugh-ack! A thank you would be appreciated for saving your face, Lady Anala,” Drake grunted, picking himself out of his protective dome to the redhead’s red-faced glare, keeping both him and her in her vision. “Her body’s extremely durable, as well. I... don’t like our odds.”

“Hmmm?” Elinor tilted her head to the side as she brushed off a few ice shards that were still stuck inside her skin. “I’ll only give you a short break since you’re the first to test my abilities. Come up with a good strategy.”

She had to push her adaptability and prowess in this state while she had the chance, and giving the crowd more opportunities to be impressed and grow more favorable to her methods would likely pay off in the end.

“I’ll never work with—” Anala gagged as Elinor made a small gesture with her index finger, tightening the last sneaky thread she’d managed to keep out of Drake’s attack and jerking the redhead forward.

The ice-loving boy acted instantly, sending another thin sheet to snap it, yet it wasn’t that simple this time. Falling to her hands and knees, Anala clutched at her throat.

“I-I can’t... breathe! Something... my neck...”

Fire lit in her hand as she tried to burn it away, but Drake's hand prevented her palm from scorching her throat, seemingly having expected something more devious from Elinor. He winced as he fought off her struggles, her fire burning him a little, but his cool fingers firmly closed around the thrashing girl's throat, making her eyes go wide; Elinor's thread froze and shattered, freeing the haughty girl.

"Stop—I... ack... Y-You..."

Drake backed away, tearing off parts of his outfit that had been incinerated by her panicked retaliation; he didn't cry out at the second-degree burns on his chest and arm.

"Stop and think, Anala... This is the Raven Empress, not some thoughtless animal. You are strong, and your last attack was a threat to her, which was why she dodged it. She thinks ten moves ahead, so you have to expect her to lay traps. She's given us time to think... We won't get that on the battlefield."

"Tic-toc," Elinor said, chains exited behind her to let her sit while she appraised the three teens; the redhead's flushed cheeks darkened further at her follow-up comment. "If we're judging results thus far, Lord Drake has most definitely impressed me with how observant and action-oriented he is, while Aura left you to die, and you, Lady Anala, hehe, thrash about like a wild hog."

She shrugged at the sour expression on Aura's face at being given a failing grade, despite her observations. "Each of you has your strengths, so far as I've seen. Will you work together," her tone laced with poison, "or embarrass your House Heads and your entire kingdom?"

Lumps formed in their throats as the three teens glanced around at the crowd, and suddenly support came from the noble candidates.

Castria pulled Heather up to float beside her, still trying to process what she was going to be forced to do. "You can win! You don't have to beat her to claim victory. You only have to impress the Empress, and I was impressed by your last attack, Anala. I never thought about condensing my fire."

Heather sucked in a deep breath and eased it out, trying to put on a brave front. "The Empress is very confident in her own abilities... Use that against her."

"Times up!" Elinor's chest shook at their support, and she pushed herself off her chains, eyes narrowing. "Last chance to impress me, girls."

Aura shot toward Anala, condensing wind to whisper to her a plan that Drake swiftly amended; naturally, Elinor heard every word with the spider's phenomenal senses, which was probably its greatest ability.

Sticking her fingers together, she spread them out, to show thick webbing, which wouldn't be so easily cut by Drake's ice. "Try not to disappoint me again."