

Chapter Thirty-Four: Never Surrender!

The heated pulse within Elinor's core swelled as she held her arm behind her back and walked into her nest, webbing curling around to seal her inside. Her undead heart pounded like a slow beating drum, her channeled thélméthra spirit's instincts mixing with **[Warlord's Bloodlust]** to dredge up something buried deep within her soul.

Every step she took along the silk-covered tiles of the arena sent a shivering pulse through every fiber of her being; the world moved at a snail's pace, the cries of the teenagers blending with the City Guard, instructors, and audience. Each droplet of the restrained rain against the barrier above rippled through space to tickle her heating skin.

Darkness weaved out of an abyss sealed somewhere within to grip her mind: the burning chaos that brought evolution and order. An urge for conflict lifted Elinor's vision to the heavens as her casual manipulations fed through the web nexus, her dexterous fingers creating a rhythm to fill the nervous system with life.

Through each plucking thread, the battlefield bloomed into a symphony of moving parts. Remaining on the defensive was becoming a chore; she needed more, and a plan blossomed in a rush of anticipation as she met her illuminated crimson eyes in the hologram overhead, the lime green replaced by **[Warlord's Bloodlust]**.

The strum of instruments met her invisible expanding fingers, causing her fleshy digits to twitch into action as she spun in a gradual circle with the rising hum of the music. Her entire web infrastructure collapsed inward to fill her cocoon with what remained of her liquid silk, generating a stir outside that brought silent laughter rolling through her with the growling heavens.

The House applicants held their breath with apprehension, preparing themselves for another assault as the Magic Knights and Tempest formed a line between the two consolidated groups. The Alchemists and Conjurors rushed to complete their tasks on one side, providing healing for those harmed and rerouting the summoning gate to provide her an opponent that could ease the defensive line's struggle.

It wasn't enough, though, and striding forward, Elinor turned her ember eyes to Castria, a soft song in her throat. The sphere she created with her remaining liquid silk and already-crafted thread peeled back to look up at her Queen of Storms, appearing to phase through the container with a toothy grin.

"E-Empress?" the girl hesitantly asked, unable to restrain a nervous laugh. *"Why are you here... on this side? Your eyes..."*

Heather and Julian shivered at her exit, the Tempest guarding them floating back a little from the bloodlust she projected. She didn't have enough control, or the electrical generation needed to spark her plan into action from the limited abilities the Drone could project; such high-tier web manipulation was likely only possible for the queen or her daughters. Yet, she had her own power plant.

Hand raising into the air, everyone's focus darted to the thread attached to her fingers and the thin, crawling string inching around the entire circumference of the stadium's roof from the four structural pillars she'd set earlier.

Opening her tinted lips, Elinor chuckled, flaming eyes narrowing while looking right at her Monarch while setting her trap. Her cocoon pulsed like a heart to her manipulations, creating uneasy shifts from the teens as she fed the threads around the stadium. It crawled to her will,

molding into her desired framework. Within the slimy interior, her captured prisoners squirmed in their bound, trio groups. It was time to up the stakes.

“I have given you thirty minutes to test and plot against me; I have given you guidance from the Grandmasters. My goal in this exercise was to push you... To make it painfully clear what it is you will face in this kingdom’s coming trials... And what have you done with that time, Princess Castria?”

A lump formed in the Tempests’ throats as she answered her rhetorical question with mirth.

“You’ve charged up for a singular attack, waiting for the right opportunity to strike me, and look... it’s almost time,” she cooed, gesturing up at the hologram that showed the Conjurers lined up behind the most talented boy, activating the repurposed gate. “Only... did you think an enemy wouldn’t disrupt your efforts?”

“W-What?” Castria squeaked, flashes of the gathered electricity sparking around Castria’s figure and glowing, neon blue highlights; the girl’s necklace, a royal treasure, shimmered with the conductive mana she’d gathered from the other nobles, filling her with a giant pool of energy to use—for her to steal.

Castria’s nervousness spiked through the Nexus as she looked at the other Tempest. “Watch every angle—”

“Death in the air parading, and there’s nowhere to run...” Elinor interrupted, reading the wind pressure generated by the Wind-Users. Her index finger tugged at her strings, sending a pulse through the network to her thin, invisible noose that slid around the 17-year-old girl’s throat and yanked her upward. “Think you know your friends? What will you do when the darkness comes and all your plans fail?”

Julian and Heather flew into the air after the stunned teenage girl to cut the thread around Castria’s throat, the others nowhere near fast enough to stop the Tempest from being dragged to the ceiling; silk snaked down the tether, soaking up electricity as it attached to the artifact, filling her network with life.

Arms held high, she laughed as her cocoon was dragged into the sky right through the hologram to explode in a giant spider’s web that stretched across the entire stadium, blocking out the starry light of the dome and casting the audience in shadows.

Gasps and screams came from the crowd, pointed fingers drawing attention to the bundled prisoners as they dangled on thick ropes for all to see. The hologram projected a dull light throughout the stands as a hundred thousand onlookers saw the teenagers through the shifting display, with the ravens taking to the air to give them a full look at the situation: row upon row of applicants swayed, a hair’s breadth away from nooses closing around their throats.

Thunder crashed overhead as the dome of water broke, the Grand Duke no longer feeding it and allowing the water to splash over the spider’s web. Panic flooded Castria’s undead body and the other Tempest as it bounced, streams of liquid funneling through holes to drop into waterfalls that fell onto the stadium.

Jumping into the air, she landed on clinking chains that linked underneath her, looking upon the trembling Conjurers and Alchemists, the Tempest now gathering the anti-web liquid to spread. The entire arena was covered with layers of silk, thin threads rising to the top of the stadium and giving her the ability to take any action no matter where she stood.

Heather made it to Castria first, jets of frosted air breaking the noose binding her neck and feeding off of her amulet, but the damage was done. Her grin grew upon facing the

Conjurer's gateway, a vortex of black fire revealing a demonic entity of obsidian skin and ruby armaments.

"Gaze upon the eyes of Death, you're mesmerized!" Her voice projected through every bone like an arctic gust, directing their focus to the teenagers spread all along the ceiling. "Hanging heads and blood raining from the sky! Can't you see the world is changing—disintegrating? The flame of chaos never dies; it only terrifies! Hahaha! Everything you've planned is gone, Castria! How will you kill me now?"

A guttural laughter came from the gateway, projected as if from a volcano as the semi-elemental figure of the flickering Flame Demon strode onto the grass, instantly locking its focus on her; its frame erupted in a writhing black inferno as it spoke. "Ashes falling from the sky—a world wrapped in eternal gray—the Ebony Flame burns!"

Grandmaster Vesta choked. "Irkai, you gave them the schematics to summon a Duskan?! Are you insane?! They are only approved for war—the mana cost and concentration to upkeep it without contract repercussions—"

"It's fine, Vesta," the Conjunction Grandmaster returned, a grin on his face. "A Duskan male, hmm? Hah. They live for conflict and battle; it's a good thing it wasn't a female, or the kids could have been in trouble. So long as he is fed mana, he is the perfect counter to the Raven Empress. Ralna can handle it with the gate's assistance and Mana Gem."

Weaving red energy solidified at Elinor's back into two more spear-like legs as her four extra limbs spread out with her arms, welcoming the finale. "Save who you can, heroes! Entertain me!"

Elinor leaned back, spotting her red-faced Tempest as she launched into a dive bomb, green fire igniting around her.

"Empress!"

"Don't hold back, Castria!"

A lance of ice matching Drake's launched at her, followed by an emerald conflaguration. Red wisps embraced her hand, a chain connecting to her open palm; her face passed right by the spiked icicle, shards growing out to skate centimeters from her cheeks, and the links dragged her out of its range to the ground.

The second she touched the arena, her four arms closed into an x, an obsidian blade lusting for her flesh to cleave her in two; the force dropped her to one knee, and her teeth flashed at the pressure that pushed her into the stone.

Vision locking with the demons, she laughed at the aura of spiritually corrupting flames that licked against her frame; such attacks were useless against her already ruined soul, yet she was being physically overpowered as the creature's muscles flexed.

Excitement rushed through her veins while staring into the Duskan's grinning face, fangs glistening in the overhead green tint that bathed them in light. Time hyper-slowed to her focused mind, the demon continued to gain ground by the millisecond, his heated crystal blade starting to melt into her exoskeleton; he was strong, and the shiver that ran down her spine said Julian, Castria, and, surprisingly, Heather were launching a joint attack.

She was losing [control](#) of her thirst for combat, feeling like a stranger in her own skin with the thélméthra's nature closing in on her from all sides. Steam passed through her hot lips, her crimson eyes widening with glee as a surge of power bloomed within her, stopping the Duskan's advance and making his face morph into a monstrous, fanged grin.

[Empress: Minion Break II: Activated]

[Lich: Chain Break II: Activated]

Chains broke through space from opposite directions, latching onto the black sword and her shoulder, tearing them apart as a hail of icicles peppered the stage; the crystals bit into the web-filled tile, spreading a frosty layer as she went into acrobatic twists across the arena.

She passively sensed the Magic Knights and Tempest attempting to save her prey above, but the drum of war in her chest brought her focus back to the Duskan as he entered striking range. A trail of black flames followed the slowed, razor's edge that passed by her eyes, palm shoving it away; it felt like she was ready to die at any second without a second thought with the Drone's suicidal impulses to eliminate the threat to the hive.

She dropped to her butt, wrapping her leg around the demon's advance with a whirlwind of emerald death swirling down from above; twisting to the Duskan's back, three of her spear-like appendages sank into its flesh, searing their exterior from the creature's infernal blood, yet she pushed into it, using another leg to trip him into a tumble.

"Slippery creatu—agh!"

Using the snarling demon as a shield, Castria and Heather's green fire tornado crashed over them. She winced as part of the inferno managed to slip underneath him, burning part of her face. She kicked the demon toward the black-haired Sorceress, dislodging her spikes from the demon's tough hide; she'd only managed to carve a light wound.

Haha! Taking no prisoners! She laughed through the Nexus to her Monarch, jade flames dispersing as Heather tackled Castria out of the monster's path. *Watch yourself. You're really taking inspiration from the High Noble teens?!*

"I have to stop you from killing the others!"

Doing a back walkover, followed by a back handspring, she spun around the flowing water Julian manipulated. In the light reflection in the smooth liquid, she saw her half-charred face and still-burning hair, now shoulder-length and swaying across her vision. Chains launched her up, dodging the demon's cleaving swing as his fire-laced wings carried him through the air to strike her.

Good luck!

"Empress, no!" Castria screamed.

Her clawed fingernails went right for Julian's wide eyes, spears aiming for his limbs; a streak of strong wind carried the undead girl into her path, and Elinor's nails tore a line down her Monarch's back as she slid by, taking Julian to the grass to tumble over one another.

Flipping around in the air, links exited space, connecting at her feet and bowing slightly as she put pressure on the chains, bringing her to a stop. She aimed right at the coughing pair, Castria's mind still in a bewildered haze, she generated a weak crystal shell in their defense; it couldn't stop her. The Monarch was still petrified that she'd gone for the kill against her crush.

"Wait!"

Do something—

All the hair on Elinor's body stood on end, her extra eyes spotting Heather near one of the waterfalls, focused desperation on her face as sparks of lightning danced around her frame. Silk would be too slow to reach the arena to carry her away.

The clinking of chains brought a link to her palm as a second exited space near her hand to latch onto the swinging Duskan's blade; it connected, and she grabbed the tether to create a ground to the demon, a grin splitting her lips. Yet, the creature's own mouth peeled back as Heather let a wild flash of electricity erupt from her directed hand, and the Duskan let go of his weapon.

Shit.

Her mind went blank, and her vision blackened as energy ripped through her chains and into her body. Spots dotted her sight, ears deafened, and senses momentarily frazzled; the Duskan's deep laughter filtered through her fractured mind as his clasped hands came down on her chest like a maul, crushing her ribs and throwing her into the arena.

Dust erupted from the impact, and stone broke apart as all the air in her lungs exited her mouth, but she didn't need to breathe to function; a thrown sword sank into her chest to be sure of it, barely missing her heart.

"Hahaha!"

Body half-broken from the combination attack, she choked a laugh and pushed her core upward as the demon landed over her to gloat. The surprised Duskan tried to grab his sword's hilt as her legs rose to wrap around his waist, the blade digging through her chest while she used her thélméthra's enhanced strength to slam him to his side.

Her Death Pool was getting too low to refresh her frame without a thought; she forced herself upward with her semi-damaged spider legs, the blade sliding to its hilt against her breast as she twitched, muscles still experiencing the surge of lightning that had torn through her dead body.

"What manner of thing are you—argh!" the demon snarled, fighting the webs Elinor sent from the stage floor to pin him in place while drawing the blade out of her chest, the crowd on their feet in disbelief. "I will not be pinned!"

"And I won't surrender!"

She strained a smile, holding her hand up and stumbling back, the obsidian sword in hand as she reapplied her silken top and bottom; an aura of black flames cracked the very stone the Duskan was stuck to, blasting her tethers.

Elinor flipped the blade around to catch the spray of lightning that Heather projected at her again, sending it into her web network to entangle the three Tempest. A quarter of her prisoners above had been rescued, and she used Heather's energy to sever part of the supportive rope that kept them from being strangled to death.

The anti-web substance entered her internal silk nexus along the stadium ceiling, flames now breaking out across the whole superstructure to send ashes raining down on them.

"Tempest, keep them in the air!"

"Control that fire!"

"We need Water Tempests here!"

"M-My neck—I-I can't breathe!"

"Freeze it off!"

Elinor rolled around her neck and twirled the Duskan's sword as Castria and the others tried to untangle themselves; the virus-like substance was spreading throughout her whole network. She could quarantine sections and stop it; although, at this point, it was already a lost cause to put her attention on.

Her healing factor was fighting the black flames, but it was a far cry from outpacing its destruction as the creature rose to his full 2-meter height to leer down at her. She choked a laugh as crimson flames embraced her, rebuilding her artificial body and restoring her to full fighting strength.

"Catch!"

"Hahaha. Not bad, little—agh!" He snarled as she threw his sword at the Conjuror, keeping his black, swirling gateway open. "Coward!"

Wings flaring, a flash burn of flames launched the demon to the side to snatch his obsidian blade out of the air, stopping the tip only feet from splitting the sweating boy's head in two. He flipped around with a snarl, jaw slackening in disbelief as her spread fingers and peeled-back lips met his gaze, chains bringing her into close range.

A thick glob of silk wrapped around his face to slide down to his throat, twirling into a rope at the impulse she sent through the web. Slipping between his wings, her bare feet landed against the lip of the gateway, and she shot right back, heel landing between the demon's shoulders and giving him a mouth full of dirt as she rode him across the grass.

Flicking ember flakes blanketed the arena from the inferno above, the instruments reaching a crescendo as she planted her feet against the choking demon's back. Crossing the thread, she continued to twist it finer and finer until it was like a piano wire; her muscles tensed as she pulled upward, using all the leverage she could.

"Is this it? Aaaaah-haha!" She screamed, strained laughter mixing with her shaking muscles; the silk bit deeper and deeper into the demon's burning, semi-corporeal form, and her spider-like legs jabbed into his thick hide, peppering his flesh for a weakness. "Can you even d—"

The tension vanished, vision going wide as the Duskan's body became smoke, the sulfuric fog rushing past her, filling her lungs with a blazing inferno. Now totally airborne, she felt him materializing behind her, his ethereal blade coming down to slice her in half. Yet, she wasn't done. The fire in her veins became magma, the thrill of being caught off-guard spurring her to action.

"Never surrender!" The demon shouted, wings closing in to trap her from escaping, but who was escaping?

Seven spikes pierced space, behind the Duskan, her chains penetrating his corrupted soul and jailing it in place; barely holding onto the prisoning ability through sheer willpower, Elinor locked his abilities, cutting off his aura of black flames. She spun around and pounced at the demon, sinking her spider-like fangs into his flesh to inject her neurotoxin.

Unable to counter it with its enhanced, infernal blood, she pumped the liquid into his veins, tasting rotten meat and brimstone burning her nostrils. His resistance lessened, allowing her to use his paralyzed frame as a platform to flip onto his shoulders.

Hair sweeping behind her, chest heaving with effort, Elinor wrapped the wire around his already cut neck, fitting it into the grooves. Face and cheeks half-melted away from just biting the demon, she forced a smile while ripping the Duskan's head from his body, cutting clean through bone and flesh.

Feeling a little shaky as she ran dangerously low on her Death Pool, she released her chains, dropping the Duskan's severed head to the grass. Reforming her body, Elinor landed on the creature's back, and the gateway behind them broke with its mana crystal.

Weak laughter shook her frame as her red eyes faded. The terrified Conjurors scrambled back after their creature had died; well, those that were still conscious, most already fainted from mana loss. However, Elinor's focus was on the army of City Guards, Tempests, and Magic Knights that now surrounded her, Castria hovering over them, wreathed in green fire.

Taking a deep breath, Elinor cracked her neck. "Hehe. Shall we continue?"

She could smell the nervous vibe that swept most of the throng, yet the king's voice filled the ensuing silence as the orchestra faded away.

"Empress, I think you have more than demonstrated what it means to stand as a shield to the citizens from enemies... external and otherwise. Are you satisfied?"

Lime-green eyes returned, they drifted between the mostly destroyed arena, stunned crowd, and the falling ash from the burning web overhead. A smirk lifted her lips. “I suppose I am,” she whispered through the raven speakers. “I had fun!”

Sweeping her wild hair back and letting go of a long stream of air while looking at those who had been ready to battle to the death, she couldn’t help but feel a little impressed; it was more than she would have guessed. Castria was still upset that she’d gone after her man, though, but that could be handled later.

With all attention on her, her vision wandered to each face as she spoke, reciting a figure she’d heard in her past that **[Strategic Mind]** and her Warlord Evolution brought back to her mind.

“Rejoice, people of Kaspir. If your soldiers survive your first few combat scenarios, statistically, they have a 90% increased chance of survival for future missions. This is why it is important for the House of Conjuration to present them with battle opportunities.”

Her gaze returned to Castria, still shaking a little from the fear of losing the noble boy she’d known most of her life. “You still have a few more missions to reach that number. Make sure never to forget what you’ve learned here, Class. Hehe. Know that your king and I will expect nothing but the best, no matter what House you join. Oh... and be sure to take care of those pretty necks,” she giggled, tracing a line across her own.

Their focus instantly went to the decapitated Duskan, getting a few gulps from those that had burn marks from her silk in the area. The clinking of chains fractured space as they brought her and her prize back into her private box, trailing inky blood.

She landed on the railing of her box, the projection exploding into dazzling light as the ravens burst into black feathers that mixed with the falling ash and embers. It seemed the majority of the crowd and those who had been in the ring to rest for a moment because the Grand Duke gave a thirty-minute break before the Selection Ceremony; food would be provided by the crown.

Feeling exhausted—far more than she felt like she should—Elinor took it as a sign that her soul wasn’t accustomed to channeling such a powerful spirit yet. Ash came in the nick of time, entering the room and walking right to her as Tiffany exited the waterfall room, hiding how drained she truly was after the complex ritual. It didn’t help with how many temporary familiars she’d had to summon for it.

“How did you feel like it went, Empress?” the Horseman of Death asked.

Elinor breathed a sigh and placed a hand on his arm, absorbing 100 Death Orbs from the man—his limit. Immediately, she felt a little better, if a little sore.

It gave me a rough estimate of my current limit. I think... you damaged my earrings a little, Castria.

“Sorry, Empress...” the girl mumbled, *“but that was really mean to go for Julian like that—he’s shaking! Heather seems to be doing better, though...”*

Elinor shifted to sit on the railing and leaned against the support pillar to stare down at the crying and laughing applicants. Her senses began to spread out again now that she wasn’t totally focused on the Duskan and three Tempest. Heather had impressed her at the end, having actually landed an electrical attack on her to give the demon such a massive opening.

I’ll have to reward her somehow... How are they, Tiffany?

The Witch Queen was brushing back her loose hair to study her studded earrings. *“A... bit dusty and dirty, but the charm I cast to guard you from Shade prevented any damage. I will need to repair and strengthen it due to the damage done to it, which reminds me,”* the woman

huffed, putting her hands on her hips with a leery glare, *“we need to find you a second Phylactery. I know I can find one in this city; I can’t believe I couldn’t find one already!”*

Her small smile turned to the king’s box, sensing her father’s anxiety; he hadn’t said a word not to distract her, but he was as shaken as Julian. *Dad... thank you for trusting me.*

“We’ll need to talk about whatever your Evolution has done to you later,” he growled, hiding his true feelings behind a stoic facade; it made her wonder if he’d always been this emotionally torn up inside with worry when she was growing up. *“That being said, you were stunning.”*

Thanks, Dad.

Her gaze drifted to the Grandmasters’ section, where the teachers and House Leaders were a buzz of hushed discussion. However, Heather’s active role in moving between groups, personally bringing Alchemic potions to soothe those who were hurt momentarily snagged her attention. It appeared that the public humbling and dangerous experience had made a lasting change in the abused princess.

Hmm. How will things shape up with her mother after this? She pondered the topic for a time while observing the clean-up. According to her information, there was still one last event after the Selection Ceremony; a Death Row death match between those who have committed treason or severe crimes, such as mass murder. *How is it looking for the Houses, Lilya?*

The former queen of the kingdom streamed out a sad puff of air. *“There is pushback from your claim that even people without mana can join the House of Ravens, but I will smooth it out. With your presentation, in addition to the Grand Duke and the king’s support, there should only be minor resistance... Thank you, Empress.”*

For?

Lilya’s deep, feminine voice softened. *“For providing me a way to better the lives of my citizens when I didn’t have the authority to grant that wish when I was queen. From what I understand, you took a great risk to accomplish this, and for that, I am eternally grateful.”*

Feeling the warm fuzzies from her connection to her Queen of Alchemy, Elinor giggled, taking a more comfortable position while catching the eye of the disguised hag in her lower-positioned box to her right. Countess Evelyn Autumn would likely make her way up to chat sooner rather than later, or so she expected her to.

As a bonus, she could feel herself on the edge of Level 21, and her battle had given her quite a few upgrades to her Feats. That could come later, though.

Let me be perfectly clear, then... If you see an opportunity or have the desire to spend time with your husband, take it.

“Excuse me?” The bronze-skinned woman’s gaze lifted to stare at her, interrupting a conversation with her thrilled, former Alchemy student who took over her Grandmaster seat. *“Queen Alivau would burn me to cinders before allowing me to have a private discussion with Viri.”*

Aww, cute, you have a nickname for him, Elinor cooed, resting her cheek against her palm and drawn up knee as Tiffany went to fetch her some new garments. *I am not opposed to making Alivau my mortal enemy. I hate what she stands for and what she’s done to her daughter. I will make my order explicit... Destroy every dream she has and make Heather into a proper princess that her kingdom can be proud of.*

A gentle smile lifted the former queen’s lips. *“Order received, Empress. I will see to it.”*