

Chapter Forty-Nine: We Rise, And We Fall

Elinor stood still as the maids fussed with her clothes, stripping them to measure out her new body so they could discover the right outfit. Camellia mirrored her, paying close attention to every action she took, and Elinor was sure the thélméthra was doing the same to every person outside, given her powerful senses.

So, she began through the Nexus, provide me with a brief summary of what thélméthra are, your culture, death, and where your siblings and mother might be.

Camellia didn't hesitate, but there were a few giggles and twitches that came from the woman from the maid's tickling fingers against her bare skin.

"Thélméthra are the supreme species. We eat, adapt, and propagate the next generation to surpass the previous. We are world devourers, spreading from the Crystals that provide bridges to new feeding grounds. Our culture is fairly simple:

"At the end of The Harvest, all breedable Queens and Princesses fight until only ten remain. My grandmother was the ninth—a former Princess, not a Queen—in her world. Then, each one finds a Crystal to use, spreading to the new planet and beginning the cycle anew."

Interesting, Elinor butted in, her gaze drifting to one of the maids as they actively passed along her measurements through a private channel in the Nexus; her proportions had grown more than she'd anticipated. *And what if no Crystals appear?*

Camellia's head tilted to the side, seemingly confused by the question. *"No generation that I am aware of has come across such a scenario, but my mother taught us that should there be no food on a planet and no Crystal, we are to expand into space."*

So, your species does have an understanding of outer space, she thoughtfully nodded, growing more intrigued by the creatures the more she learned. *Your grandmother was the first to come to this planet. What happened to her? Do you have any aunts?*

"Two," the redhead said between fits of laughter. *"I'm sorry, Empress, this body is, umm, just very sensitive...I have never experienced this sensation before!"*

Take your time.

After a few seconds of enjoying the unusual interactions with the world-destroying spider, the arachnid managed to get herself under control.

"My mother killed my grandmother; it is a right of passage that the strongest of the brood is cemented atop the hierarchy, drinking their essence pouch to further strengthen the next generation. One of my aunts challenged my mother for prime land, and she was defeated, taking her brood to the southeast deserts. My other aunt decided to take a more aquatic approach, going to the western ocean to spread out her children."

And when was this?

"Mmm. I'm, umm, not quite sure, Empress," Camellia whispered, furrowed brow shifting to the shuttered windows. *"How long has it been since we have been dead?"*

Pondering the question for a second, she answered as best she could. *It has likely been a little over a century.*

"Oh, goodness!" the redhead jumped as one of the maids laid the measuring strip across her spread-out arms. *"If that is the case, then my aunt would have likely been eaten by her children, or is preparing them for it, such as what my mother was readying us for."*

I see. So there are other thélméthra broods elsewhere in the world. Good to know...and how did such a powerful species as yourselves all die? Was it Ke'Thra'Ma? Oh...why the guilt? she asked as the redhead's shoulders and eyes drooped to the floor, feeling her emotional turmoil.

“Our mother...told me and my sisters that we were not ready to face such an opponent as the powerful white ape...we were late bloomers, and required more experience. She said it would be beneficial to us in the end, but...I had my doubts.”

She shifted uncomfortably at the admission, somewhat feeling as if she were defective.

“Then again, to say I am right would mean my mother was wrong...and my mother is never wrong. She went off to face the White Ape alone to collect his essence for our last sister...her last viable Princess-Class offspring. And...and I convinced my sisters to follow me and to try to prove her wrong. My desire to be useful to her got my mother and sisters killed... If we weren't there...she would have won.”

A hopeful gleam lit in her eyes. *“Well, I am not sure she lost because...well, I died first, trusting my tough exoskeleton too much against the White Ape's blows. He used a power my mother understood, but I did not...the, umm...the oldest in a thélméthra brood tends to be...the weakest, and the youngest...the strongest.”*

Elinor could now understand the shame burning within the spider woman's chest, but the news only further heightened her internal excitement. If Camellia was considered weak as the firstborn, and she was considered a late bloomer, then the future potential they could bring to her empire could not be understated.

We all make mistakes.

“Mother doesn't...”

Hmm. I'm sure she might have a different perspective... In any case, can you find your dead siblings and mother?

Camellia shifted uncomfortably, rubbing her bare arm as the maids tried to get her to put on a robe again after they finished taking her measurements. *“I, umm, I could try to find them through their lingering threads and scent, but to be sure, I would need to go back to the scene of the battle below the surface of their black fortress.”*

A mission for another day, Elinor chimed, happy at the interaction rather than disappointed. *You did well, Camellia.*

The arachnid perked up at the praise as if she'd rubbed her head and called her a good girl. *“Is there anything else you wish of me, Empress?”*

She spotted the maids sorting through a few garments, going for a sports bra, shorts, and tank top—the same as her—to have a more battle-able outfit. The items were coveted by the human women while working in the humid jungle heat. Luckily, they were getting close to pumping out the prototype silk and cloth Tiffany's busy witches had been slaving on over the past few months.

Allow the maids to teach you about our customary outfits, and our reason for wearing them. After that, your initial mission resumes...and, Camellia?

“Yes, Empress?” she chirped, practically bouncing up and down, still getting used to her human form.

Have fun. Eat. Enjoy life again...and know that for every ally you save and enemy you slay, the more proud I am. You're precious to me, Camellia. You are unique. And you have your own worth within this empire.

She could visibly see the woman vibrating with motivation, and not long after learning about human clothing, she was set loose on their enemies. Elinor wanted to see the looks on the ri'bot and human faces as Camellia rushed into the jungle; despite being restricted to Rare-Grade, she knew the arachnid was on a whole different level.

When Theresa had discovered the proper outfit and finished dressing her, Elinor returned outside. Her smile lingered on Quin as the giant ape child waited to be useful. She was a little surprised to see even more of a crowd had formed since she'd entered.

Her gaze drifted between the undead and the living, seeing hope in their eyes for further updates as to Butter and her activities. She knew word would spread, and it would be good to show the results of their progress, and she had the rest of the day to get to the arena. Several minutes spent uplifting the humans and ri'bot that put their faith in her was worth the time.

Elinor centered on the two girls who had the skillset that she required. "[Alisa](#), [Esmeralda](#)."

The two witches stepped forward, and she saw the White Witch give Sal, her boyfriend, a nervous glance while presenting herself. If she remembered right, both of them would have likely turned sixteen by this point. Sal had grown an inch or two over the week she'd been gone, and she could sense his faith in her rebounding, filling him with power. It wasn't quite as much as Valentina, but it was close.

She was sure Sal was worried about his big sister, as well, since Adoncia had gone north with Butter to act as her maid. So far as her status sheet showed, the young woman was still alive and good. In fact, she'd advanced to **[Uncommon-F]** and Level 17. It seemed she was putting in work for her sister.

Breathing out a short sigh, she held her hands at her front as the girls approached. "Is there a ritual already prepared that will allow me to address everyone around the lake?"

Both teens lit up at the question, and Esmeralda was the first to respond, her sandy-blonde ponytail bobbing with her head. "Absolutely, Empress! My coven can have everything activated in less than a minute. Will we be receiving updates on Queen Tiffany's whereabouts?"

"That and much more," she said, suddenly seeing a split within the witch camp as Alisa piped up next, clearly unsure if she should speak but charging forward nonetheless.

"And High Queen Butter? We can have it up in less than thirty seconds if my coven helps her; ours don't require live sacrifice and are ready to activate whenever."

Knowing the girl was asking for her boyfriend's sake, Elinor chuckled, seeing the slight annoyance from Esmeralda, likely thinking the teen was trying to compete with her.

"Good. I'll wait for you two to prepare it for me. In the meantime, Lucky..."

"I am here, Empress!" the charming brown-haired Publicist chimed, his bleached streaks still showing after his raising.

"Use the Nexus and have every undead spread the news that I will be addressing the lake in five minutes, so there is no need to rush, girls," she added to the witches, who still had yet to be dismissed. "Coordinate with Gwen to pull in as many humans from their tasks, as well."

"Understood!"

Gwen beamed, her bright-red hair drawn back into a bun and sporting a bright-yellow Sunday dress that was quite dirtied by this point.

Elinor motioned to Quin, snatching the giant gorilla child's attention. "Inform me when everything is ready. I will be checking a few things in the meantime."

"Yes, Empress!" she stated, holding out her hand so Elinor could transfer onto the ape's powerful palm. "It is so wonderful that you are back."

"It is nice to be back..."

Maintaining her standing position as the gorilla lifted her up before she needed to, Elinor let the quen'talrat do what she wanted. Closing her eyes, she entered her internal world to study a few names she wanted to report on.

[**Butter** - Mythickin Saintess Empress - High Monarch - Female - Level 25]

[**White** - Rare E-tier - Military Court - Female - Level 21]

[**Mika** - Uncommon A-tier - Military Court - Female - Level 19]

[**Angélica Tesoro** - Uncommon E-tier - Serving Court - Female - Level 19]

[**Adoncia Vences** - Uncommon F-tier - Serving Court - Female - Level 17]

Elinor leaned against the side of her throne, a small smile on her lips while fixating on her sister's revealed class. It all made sense as to why they hated each other. Butter was a Saintess Empress, and she was a Lich Empress.

Butter is whole. She has a body. I bet she's so excited...I kind of don't want to send her off as soon as she gets home...but I may have to. I'd like to better explore our new relationship as sisters. Mom is coming back...a mom she's only met once. Hopefully, there will be a little time to explore more of our family dynamics.

Losing herself in her daydreams, she was a little amused when Quin informed her that everything was ready. When did she start dreaming like this again? When was it since she last had these teenage desires? Maybe things were going a little too well lately, but she'd ride that smooth wave as long as it carried her.

Opening her eyes, she felt tingles run down her arms upon seeing the sea of people waiting for her around the lake, awaiting her voice. One look and it was hard to catch her breath. She could feel their longing for relief, hopeful for a proper place to call their home.

Elinor could look into the throng and see the tears and prayers of individuals, waiting for her to look into their eyes and tell them it would be okay. The group had truly become her citizens, looking to her to lead them into a better life from the hell they'd been plunged into. There was a hunger in them for success...for life. It was ironic that they looked toward an empress of the dead, yet look to her they did.

She released the pressure that collected in her lungs as Garu swung up Quin's right two arms to deliver a cute wooden microphone that she just knew Alisia had crafted. Accepting it, she examined its carefully carved symbols, glowing with a light-orange hue. She could see the brunette White Witch laughing with her coven friends while engaged in their rituals, imbuing her hope into every stroke of her knife against the wood.

I'm not only carrying my own dreams for the future. Is this the weight of what it feels like to be a leader? She looked out across the sea of her excited citizens. Their numbers had grown, and she saw a few women with plump bellies, bringing the next generation.

These strong women had carried an extra body all the way from their world to this lake—having Tiffany and her rituals to thank for getting them through the rough three months. For all The Witch claimed she had lost her humanity and her love of death, she was surprisingly caring and nurturing.

There is no room for failure.

Quin lifted her up over six meters above the ground, extending her arms as high as they would go. Elinor maintained her balance, letting her presence be felt for several seconds before beginning her speech, her words projected all across the Wixum main settlement.

“I will not bore you with fancy words. There is only one thing to impart... We’re winning. We’re winning...and we will continue to rise because of the support you have given me. We are winning...”

Instead of cheers, Elinor’s undead heart felt punched as joyous tears mixed into the crowd’s emotionally overwhelmed response. It was as if they’d been waiting for months for her to tell them they’d done a good job, and so she continued—that they’d be okay.

“When I look upon you...upon your cracked hearts and the shadows behind your eyes, I have a few words that come to my mind... You’re fighters. You persevere... You’re worthy, and you have a hunger to live...to live well. I am here to tell you...it is going to be okay. Tell your children that everything is going to be okay, and know it is not a lie. Empress Elinor said change is coming. And all of you have a part in that.”

She let her words sink into their burning hearts, seeing many unable to stand any longer, falling to their knees. Elinor saw a future these ri’bot and humans couldn’t, though; a future that surpassed the Kaspir Kingdom, and it was set in the black citadel standing firm inside her valley.

Standing tall, she continued her report to her citizens. “I’ve gained the power required to bring you into that future, and without you as my foundation, none of it would have been possible...”

“The silk plants are growing, providing us trading partners and goods that will bring us wealth and unique products we cannot obtain ourselves.

“You’ve learned about this world’s seeds, sowed them, but faith is not blind belief. You’re out in those fields, diligently tending to them, learning...growing, having hope that they’ll bear fruit. This may not be the world many of you were born into, but we will conquer its challenges. We haven’t let it crush or ground our spirits. We are taking into the sky to claim what is ours, and we are not alone.”

She gestured to the clusters of ri’bot, mainly females, that surrounded the lake. “The Wixum Clan has thrown their support behind me. The Roxim have pledged themselves to our banner. And by tonight, three more clans will have joined hands with us.”

This time, cheers erupted from her citizens, building from her building speech.

“...Yes, we will soon control much of the valley, but it is the first step in a grander plan. I have discovered a portal to another world—a dying world, which I have pledged to support for their material aid. A kingdom of powerful weather manipulators, who will join our banner in time. I bring crops and goods from their home that we can develop here, furthering our empire’s growth.”

Shock swept her citizens at that report, but she wasn’t finished.

“As many of you know, Butter has traveled to the northwest of the valley, and she has been engaged in a vicious war between worlds. A Crystal attack—much like the one we suffered through. She will return victorious, bringing more to the empire, and that is what I pledge to all of you... Wherever we go, the Undying Empire will uplift, we will build friendships where we can, and serve those who seek us harm fire and brimstone to the very bedrock!”

Her building emotion carried through the undead and living. “War is coming! Evil rises to once again take everything from you, but I will stand in their way! They will not so much as touch a hair upon your head—I swear it.”

Passion to protect and build a new home sparked within her citizens as she finished her speech, directing them to Quin, the proud four-armed gorilla puffing up her chest with pride.

“You stand on the shoulders of literal giants! A home is here for us...a future. I will build our home on the ashes of those who dare rise against you, and we will accept all who will come

for shelter and peace. There is no need to hide...because we are strong. So tell me, do you want a bright future, where you have food...where you have shelter...where you have safety?"

Cheers came with each pause she gave, and she let the crowd settle down.

"...Good...good. I am fighting for you...for us...and I am not alone. So, to conclude this meeting before I go off to war on your behalf, allow me to put some of your hearts at ease."

She glanced down at Alisa with a soft smile, the attention almost making the witch lose control of her ritual. "So far as I can tell, not one soul has been lost in the expedition to the northwest: Butter, White, Mika, Angélica...and Adoncia are safe."

Relief visibly came over Alisa and Sal. Virgil slapped the teenage boy on the back with a short laugh, and several of his knight buddies nudged him, making his face flush.

"For those waiting on news from the Deep South—nalvean territory—from what I have read, all those maids and butlers that have been sent to support Ambassador Klaus Klossner and Head Maid Emelina De La Vega are in perfect health."

Spotting some of the apprehension passing through the throng, likely hearing stories about the scaled salamander-like species from the Wixum, Elinor pressed on.

"Negotiations are still being ironed out between the Clavex Clan and our ambassador, but headway is being made. That being said, I understand that some rumors are circulating regarding a large ri'bot clan in the southeast of the valley preparing for war... It is true."

She paused, allowing the whispers to settle. "The Xaltan Clan has chosen to attack the Roxim, who have allied themselves to us. Many of you saw Queen Camellia, that gigantic metal spider that ran into the jungle to the east...she is our newest member of the Royal Court... The Monarch of the Hunt."

Nodding as she saw excitement more than fear embrace her citizens, happy to have another powerful name added amongst the Monarchs that Tiffany and Edmon had largely built up to be a big deal, considering their contributions to their daily way of life.

"...Queen Camellia is a *very* mighty asset who has gone on ahead to prepare the way for us. Queen Tiffany is working with a new ally of ours in a secret location on powerful weapons and gateways for more resources for us to use in the future. Great things are coming!

"The Xaltan will be crushed within a week! I swear it. And you will not see the flames of war as I am unlike any other ruler, for I will not put them in the ground..."

"No, your enemies will see no rest, for they will be on the front lines against the Great Clans should they choose to attack the valley from the plains—should they choose to attack our home. By this time next month, I will guide you into a home you can be proud of...a home you can feel safe in... That is my word."

On prompt, Quin lowered her to the ground as she was serenaded with praise for her work and dedication. Elinor handed the wooden microphone to Alisa, the teenage girl practically glowing at the report, setting her heart at ease.

Esmeralda was quick to jog over, her glowing orange irises brimming with an unholy desire that reflected her idol. "Empress, please allow me to support Queen Tiffany; I will not be a burden, I swear!"

"Me, too, Empress!"

"Me, as well!"

The coven heads of the warlocks and a few other witch groups joined them, feverish eyes wanting more than just being botanists, tending the fields, or healing wounds. Their cheer dampened as Elinor slowly shook her head.

“I need the witches here, girls... However, the warlocks may make the journey since they are more offensive-based.”

“Yes! Hah. In your face, Goldie Girl!” one boy laughed, clearly having some kind of rivalry or grudge against the most prominent witch student.

Elinor caught the cringe from Alisa and a few of the other witch coven leaders; Esmeralda’s smile hadn’t changed in the slightest as she turned to the seventeen-year-old boy.

“We all have our strengths...I hope you make it there without your food being poisoned...or a curse finding its way under your pillow.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep yappin’. Thank you, Empress! Let’s go, boys! We’re on an adventure.”

Several of the girls glared at the boys, and some of the older warlocks chastised the younger, gifted boy, who refused to apologize. Elinor was sure they were worried about becoming collateral damage in the certain war between factions that was bound to happen.

She sighed and gave the grinning, sandy-blonde teen a look.

Esmeralda giggled and winked. “Queen Tiffany made me very aware of what lines I can and cannot cross. Don’t worry about us, Empress. I’m not so thin-skinned...but I do get my pound of flesh. Hehehe.”

“Witches will be witches,” she mumbled. “Just be aware we are at war...and now you two want your turn?” she asked as Gloria and Virgil approached. “I really must be going.”

Her gaze darted to Lucky as he posed a question from Gwen that was important to answer that she’d forgotten to address.

Yes, let everyone know that when I return, I will be doing a mass resurrection ceremony. I’ve become far stronger and capable of returning a great number of loved ones.

“You are merciful, Empress!” the charming brunette laughed. “We will further refine the priority list before your return.”

Virgil cleared his throat as Gloria glanced at him, keeping her mouth shut to likely not waste more time than was necessary. “We’d just like to know if we’d have our place in the coming war. Our boys and ladies have been practicing hard these last few months.”

Elinor’s focus drifted to the stiff and at-attention boy knights and female paladins; they’d seemingly split into their own paths on their own. “Hmm...perhaps as a supportive role in the backlines. King Edmon is your general, though. I will take his opinion at the end of the day, so be sure to impress him.”

“Understood, Empress,” he said with a casual wave and smile that was very unlike his formal-looking wife next to him—she’d heard about their cute wedding through the Nexus, done on the lake. “We’ll redouble our training efforts. Give ‘em hell for us.”

“Oh...I will,” she chuckled.

She had Theresa join her on one of Quin’s extra hands; the Head Maid was now wearing a backpack with extra goods in case she needed them. Quin took them into the jungle with a word as Garu contacted her.

Organize a defensive network around the Wixim camp.

“Mmm. I was wondering what my task might be,” he whispered. “You think the Delthax Chief may attack while you’re away?”

I don’t need to be certain it will happen to play into the possibility, she returned with a low growl. Quin is with me. War and Camellia are with the Roxim. Carlos is taking his forces to the east. Tiffany and Edmon are working on a secret project. Grace, Famine, and Death are handling the Clanless recruiting. While Butter, Mika, and Conquest are in the northwest...

“I see,” the Ethereal ri’bot agreed. *“We’re stretched too thin with our officers. I’m the only one left to defend the citizens. I’ll work with Virgil, Grace, and the witches to further fortify the area. May your blade never chip, Empress.”*

Oh...I think there will be quite a few chipped blades when I am done, Elinor chuckled. *We are going to war, after all. I only hope—Quin, get to the top of the canopy!”*

[Mika has returned to the void]

A familiar, chest-gripping claw sank into her heart, twisting Elinor’s abdomen...the feeling she had when Raul—her first Ghost soldier—had been purified by the Clavex Priestesses.

“Is something wrong, Empress?” Garu darkly returned.

Quin repositioned a surprised Theresa against her chest. Tail looping around a branch, g-forces hit them as she launched into the sky, swinging tree to tree to break through the canopy high above. A chain shot out of the sky, attaching her to hand; the clattering chain launched her upward into the heavens.

Wind whipped past Elinor as she used another chain to hang in the air, a fear she hadn’t felt in a while, clutching at her breast while staring at the northwest—Mika’s chains holding her to this world had shattered—Mika, her first raised ri’bot...was gone, and right after they’d returned from the Earth Crystal, showing up on her radar.

Butter...what is happening? Don’t you die on me, Sister!

Her gut cramped as she felt a holy resonance deep within her core, and her sister’s voice struck her chest like a speeding train.

“Twin Soul Expansion: Heaven’s Domain.”

Fire erupted in Elinor’s chest; it was uncomfortable, and she grimaced as she lifted her free hand to her damaged left earring—the holy energy was further eroding its stability—and then...it shattered, leaving her sister without a place to return if her body failed her. A shift happened within her soul, making her wince; they were still connected but in a far more loose way that could easily unravel.

Dammit, Butter!