

Chapter Thirty-Seven: House Selection

The light breeze cycling through the coliseum tickled Elinor's skin as she studied the space beside the Quiltra that had pledged himself to her; she hadn't been able to follow his swift, expert movements, instantaneously shutting down the Magic Knights.

However, it wasn't his skill or strength that made her grip her shin or drown out the chatter of the citizens, buzzing at the idea of this mythical hare man serving the Raven Empress. No, her bright green eyes were on the violet-haired ghostly [teenage](#) girl who flittered into existence the second she accepted him, standing beside the hare. Not a soul reacted to her mysterious appearance, she was only visible to her.

It was as if she knew the girl from somewhere long ago, and the image of the phantom-like figure mixed with unending amethyst chains. One name came to mind, punching her in the chest: Nungal. She blinked, and the image was gone, leaving her in the stunned realization of what this meant and why the Scarlet Hand wanted her gone from Earth.

Trapped divinity... Divinity circling me... Somehow, I'm connected to a higher plane of existence, which is why I've been changing so much after getting this Greater Seed.

Hand pressing against her breast as she watched the hare leave the stage to make his way up to her, she completely checked out of the coming prisoner slaughter event; her meeting with the hag took on a whole new meaning.

Damn... She knows who I really am... who I was before being born on Earth... who Butter is to me... Everything. Autumn can give me those answers... for a price.

She drew into her inner world again, subconsciously moving her chair back from the hearth to create more chairs, and filling them with the individuals on her mind.

What do I know? Her little [sister's](#) golden radiance sat in a regal way, giving her a glowing smile. Butter and I aren't necessarily goddesses... but we are connected to the divine realm somehow. We were at war before this incarnation, I suppose we'd call it, and I won... I always win. Then... this Seed gets implanted in us, rekindling Butter's spirit.

I don't act like a 16-year-old because the Seed is unlocking pieces of my dormant spirit, bringing me further into the realization of who I really am. Perhaps I fought against the gods or goddesses? Is Nungal here to finish the job or help me?

Her eyes creased, suspicious glare drifting to the image she had of the teenage goddess she'd seen for only a few seconds, yet uncovering something within her core; the strumming bled through the [background](#), and **[Strategic Mind I]** combined with the music helped to keep her focused, the Feat increasing in Tiers rapidly as she connected the dots.

Grace called her The Chain, The Jailor, The Judge, The Keeper of Life... I wish I would have paid more attention to the deities of different religions. Autumn said I have 'trapped divinity' within me, but that is so vague and leading that it could mean any number of things.

I could be divine myself and have some deity trapped or imprisoned inside of me. It's obvious that Autumn knew about the goddess the Quiltra worshiped, and it wouldn't be a stretch to think that deities span multiple worlds and dimensions. I've already witnessed Shade's power, and he is practically a chained god inside this planet... a prison planet.

The Scarlet Hand had detailed information on me and several others to rid themselves of us the moment this Seeding Event happened. Now, they're trying to fight me away from where I could interrupt their plans on Earth. The question is... why not kill me?

Her gaze shifted to the illusion of her little sister, now passively grooming her liquid-like golden locks. *If I die, maybe Butter gets released, causing a bigger problem... Hmm. But*

Butter felt like we would both die if she hadn't stepped in, so that isn't likely. Something has to happen that makes my death trouble for the Scarlet Hand, which... makes one wonder why they didn't try to imprison me...

Did I have too much background support on Earth to contain me safely? Nungal seems to have found a person to stick near me, but I still don't know her reasons... and there's this feeling of... competitiveness... frustration... when I look at her. In the end, I don't think the knowledge of who I am will do me much good at this time... It's better to be in the dark and keep Autumn in my debt. She mentioned it herself; I'm not capable of setting terms... I can refuse them, though.

Swiping away the illusions with a small smile, her curiosity sparked, Elinor did a quick check on her increased Feats and Tiers.

A little mystery is always fun to have. Why ruin the enjoyment of discovering it for myself? Plus, this opens up a whole new world to explore on the side. After all, my main objective is to bolster my strength and solidify my empire. I have eternity to dig into this deeper plot in my life... if I survive, which Autumn has a vested interest in. Butter is going to be so jealous of what she missed.

Chuckling at the prospect of her puffy-cheeked little sister, annoyed that she'd missed the comfort and shopping ventures in Roman's failing universe, Elinor scrolled through her upgrades from all the fighting she'd done. Yet, one obscure notification caught her interest; she hadn't noticed the option with Nungal's enigmatic appearance.

[Devout Follower Accepted: Grace, The Wanderer]

[Accept Grace's Prayers: Yes or No?]

Tapping the question box itself to get more of an explanation, the black-and-white System Menu expanded, making her lips tilt into a half-smile.

A Devout Follower isn't connected to my Nexus but to me, hmm? I can accept their prayers or reject them. I can't peer into their minds. I can also respond to them if they are seeking guidance, knowing the intended desire of their heart... Does this mean no one in my empire is a Devout Follower yet? Disappointing.

She pressed the **[Yes]** icon and felt a private branch split off from the Nexus that she could access. *The question is... can Grace obtain the Classes that the Royal Court can grant without being dead? I suppose I have a new reason to discover a way to take people outside of this universe with me.*

Elinor did one last scan of her Feats:

Base Feats

[Monarch of Death IV - Increased to E-tier]

[Death Pool II - Increased to S-tier]

[Life Tap III - Increased to B-tier]

[Darkness Vision III - Increased to E-tier]

Equipped Feats

[Butterfly III - Increased to B-tier]

[Artificial Body III - Increased to D-tier]

[Enhance Construct II - Increased to C-tier]

[Strategic Mind I - Increased to C-tier]

Achievement Feats

[Chains of the Damned II - Increased to A-tier]

Elinor's vision cleared to the bloody scene of the 18 and 19-year-old teens executing criminals in the ring. She had to admit, to a typical person on Earth, this would be barbaric, yet in a world rife with war, limited resources, and a population that had no religious framework to attach value to life, death was perfectly normal.

These murderers and rapists knew exactly what would come to them if they followed through, no matter their reasons. Apparently, falsely accusing someone of such a crime carried with it the same punishment; liars were swiftly dealt with if evidence was discovered of their falsehoods. She was sure there were drawbacks to having such a system, but it seemed to work for the population.

Surprisingly, the crowd was loving it. Then again, if you lived in the Middle Ages, without internet access, video games, or a wealth of books to read on a whim for entertainment, this was as good as it got. People saw their streets becoming safer while seeing justice or vengeance served. Plus, it gave their inexperienced soldiers the taste of the toll taking a life did on the soul.

Castria and Heather seemed to be enjoying the show, but Elinor liked the aspect of being in the fight rather than watching it. Mind turning away from the slaughter, she looked up to see Queen Alivau was no longer where she'd stood when watching the Quiltra; the redhead was probably licking her wounds.

Breathing out a sigh, she sent a link to Black, rescinding her previous order. *The hag is too cautious and dangerous to tail without her knowing. Where are you at in the mission?*

The thin woman's raspy voice had a touch of disappointment in it. *"I've already paid the men, which did give me a chance to confirm a few things with their boss. We're on the way to what appears to be one of the hidden entrances smugglers use to bring contraband between districts; there's an entire labyrinth underneath the city that supposedly changes every day."*

More things to explore, Elinor mused. Let them tail her, and when they inevitably die. Confront her directly and give her this message: I will discover the truth about myself in my own way and time. You don't need to tell me anything more. I will save your life, putting you in a life debt to me. You know what actions will void this contract, so don't test me.

Black's tone held a smile. *"I like it, Empress. I'll report back when it's done. What should I do with the bodies... if there are bodies?"*

Leave them. Just make sure you're not caught. Countess Autumn is tying up loose ends. So long as it doesn't affect us, then I don't want to poke her too much, and she doesn't want to poke me since I'm her best ticket out... We'll discuss more about adventuring when this event is over.

Cutting the connection to look at Grace as the Paladins allowed him inside, she tapped her foot against the side of the stone railing she sat on, dress fluttering at her shins. "Welcome to the Undying Empire, Grace. Is there anything you'd like to say?"

The hare's graceful cadence and unbothered expression held a happy note. "Nothing other than to ask what it is you wish me to accomplish, My Empress. Nungal has given me explicit instructions to act as if your orders are hers."

Looking him up and down before glancing to the right, where she caught Tiffany peeking out to stare at his bare, muscular chest, Elinor chuckled. “And while I am curious about you and Nungal, I have a *very* important task that will test how useful you can be to me.”

“My ears are always listening,” the man said, a hand on his hip with his other arm resting on the hilt of his sheathed sword.

Elinor leaned back to study the giant, colorful dome of water the Grand Duke maintained, bathing the area in light. “Is it possible to receive answers and speak to your goddess?”

Grace’s head tilted to the side, silver eyes shifting to look at the Witch Queen, who quickly ducked back into the waterfall room to continue her contract project. “Depending on several factors, it can be easier or more challenging. Generally, it is more of an impression than words.”

“I see...” Her focus drifted to the red-stoned shackles he wore on his ankles and wrists; their crimson glow had faded. She activated their tied connection from his devotion to her, speaking to his spirit to not give away her plan to any listening ears.

Ask Nungal how I can bring you and the hag with me back to my world. How long will you need to receive an answer, and do you think she will give me an answer? You can speak aloud since you can only communicate to me as a prayer in this manner.

He reached up to scratch at one of the nasty scars on his left breast, large, frayed ears tilting in various directions as he listened to distant conversations. “Hmm. It is hard to say, Empress. Nungal can be fickle when she is in one of her moods, but I feel she is quite pleased at this time. If you give me leave, then I can gather the materials I need to make myself available to hear her voice.”

Do that. I need a response as soon as possible.

“I will see it done, Empress,” he bowed, ears folding with his torso before promptly turning and walking out.

Immediately, her father’s voice entered her mind, now standing where the queen had been. “*I heard about the hare. Tiffany seems far too excited to have him near you. We know nothing about this man, and what do we know about this goddess? Do you have any insight, Lilya?*”

Elinor let them speak while letting her eyes and mind wander between the crowd, House candidates, and nobility. There were a lot of things she could do in the next seven days, mainly stocking up on supplies, and luckily, she could likely use her reputation now to extort some money from the Great Houses or king. Plenty of people would be throwing money at their new House to gain favor, after all.

“*Nungal is an ancient deity,*” Lilya explained, in the process of making notes on a piece of paper while scrutinizing the teens who wanted to join a House; this would be the first time the students got to choose where they went.

“*I do not know much about her, other than her strong connection to the Quiltra. If she gravitated to that particular race, then it says a lot about what she values... discipline, honor, and grace above all else.*”

Her father growled as he silently communicated with Tiffany, learning about his sudden departure. “*What are you doing behind my back again, Elinor... I thought you weren’t going to hide anything from me anymore. Haven’t I shown you that I do trust you? I am your father, though, no matter how many people you rule over.*”

Pulling her knee up to her chest, Elinor laughed quietly while focusing on the Death Knight in the box above all others.

I'm telling you everything you need to know, Dad, and I haven't forgotten where I came from. That being said, there are things that I do need to keep from you, and I never said I wouldn't hide anything from you; that's more projection on your part, but trust that I am doing everything in our best interest.

We have too much happening right now, and you're doing great bonding with the king and High Nobility... Ask if we can get some money. We need supplies, and I'd like to go shopping tomorrow. As for Nungal, I'm all for you learning everything you can about her.

"And why did you send him off?" her dad pressed, clearly wanting to be kept in the loop. She had to keep him focused, and if he knew the disastrous and amazing news about her mother—his wife—then it could cause a lot of unneeded pressure.

To ask Nungal if there is a way that I can bring people from this world back to our new one. It could open up a whole new level of support that Roman... honestly could leverage against us, but we're already partners at this point. He needs me. I need him.

"Roman... I still don't trust him. Where is he, and what is he doing anyway? He just dumped this whole Legend Quest on us and took off somewhere."

Elinor's cheer fell slightly, thinking back to the private conversation he'd had with the Legendkin general.

Shockingly... his information gathering proved so much more useful than I thought it would, which does make me worry about how far ahead he's been able to foresee. He's looking for somewhere to plant his loyalties, and I'd rather it be with us, even if it opens us up a little for being betrayed since... he could be working with the Scarlet Hand from the start.

She could feel her father's tension through his voice and the Nexus. *"At least you're strong enough to handle yourself if needed now... I'm at least grateful for that. Just... be careful. I don't want to see you get hurt again..."*

Her thoughts turned toward her mother, and the sacrifice she made to free her from Shade. It wasn't over, though. Her mother was still inside Tiffany, yet now she had to find a way to keep them both since the witch had become a vital part of her empire; most of it would collapse without her rituals and general versatility in academic knowledge that had jumpstarted so many projects.

Pain is a part of life, Dad... We just need to handle what's in front of us, and we're through the toughest part now. Have fun! Spend some time going over the engineering and rebuilding stuff. Maybe you should see if Julian can be added to the conversation about retaking his march? I've passively heard about his uncle taking control until he's through the academy, but it'll be important for him to have a role in it.

"Agreed," her dad said, tension leaving his voice. *"They're good kids... even if they've grown up in a different... very different and brutal world. We're doing good work, Elinor. I just wish..."*

Yeah... that Mom was here. Don't give up hope.

"...Like I ever could. Alright, I'll trust you. Just... trust me."

I know...

Letting the link between them fade, she wandered into her own mind as the ceremony reached its conclusion, and she smiled at the excitement and apprehension that filled the throng when it finally became time to select who would join each House.

The dome above peeled back as the grandmasters stood in unison, the storm had broken, the sun sending rays of light upon the masses. Floating out of the king's box, Grand Duke Logan

hovered over the candidates, each of them lining up on the broken arena, awaiting the verdict on their trial against the Raven Empress.

A hushed atmosphere took the coliseum after Tempests had cleaned off the gore from the Magic Knight's slaughter, and all eyes were on the elderly sage. Hands held behind his back, the lake of water over them swirled upward in a flower-like pattern, his voice was soft, projected to every ear in the stadium.

"As we come to the conclusion of this year's unique Selection Ceremony, I once again wish to thank the Raven Empress for providing such an astounding performance for our citizen's entertainment... This projection that allows everyone to see with such clarity will be sorely missed in the following years."

Laughter and agreement swept the throng, the positive vibes of a hundred thousand people radiating like a wave, yet the educator wasn't finished stroking her ego. His hands detached to make a gesture at her.

"It is not every day that an empress descends from upon high to please the people of another kingdom. Empress Elinor, your humility and strength are something to learn from. I do not doubt that this Selection Ceremony will be something groundbreaking within our kingdom's history that will be spoken of for centuries to come."

Figuring it was her turn to respond as Tiffany's ravens brought her into focus, she added a mysterious half-smile to further sell her image. "Who knows, maybe the House of Ravens will have Witches under its roof, come time this next year. Queen Tiffany will leave behind the methods required to create such a ritual, and establish a more... permanent infrastructure should make it possible. I have *mostly* enjoyed my stay, thus far. Your princess is delightful."

Her stomach shook with silent laughter as a raven swapped the camera to Heather, Castria beaming and waving at the crowd; the abused princess' face turned the color of her hair, having her disheveled appearance projected to such a huge congregation of her citizens.

It only lasted a second before it was back on Elinor for her closing response, still resting against the pillar of her box. "You will see me in *all* districts, poor and noble, since I will be buying all kinds of goodies to return home with. I hope to show the bounty Kaspir has to the Raven Empire since we have become friends."

She moved her head to survey the happy crowd. "I look forward to continuing to enjoy Lumina's hospitality for the remaining week I plan to stay within your walls; this city has been most welcoming."

The Grand Duke lifted his hands into the air, pulling the cameras as the flowery structure of water spread out high above them. "We look forward to our future relations, Empress, and are thrilled to have Princess Castria join our academy. With that being said, let the harvest season and selection begin!"

In an awe-striking display of power, the petals launched out across the landscape, no doubt spreading water to areas that didn't have enough rainfall due to Lumina sucking up so much of it. As the watery flower dispersed, eight bridging rainbows twinkled into existence, spreading out in all directions to leave twinkling mist to disperse across the city.

The House of Tempest started the selection, and, to no one's surprise, Grandmaster Vesta's focus was on the second girl in the first column. "Princess Castria, I understand you will more than likely choose the House started by your Empress, but I will offer a warm invitation to the House that *will* provide you with the highest level of Tempest education."

Castria cleared her throat and peeked around Heather, unwillingly forced to be in the front since Castria wanted her to be proud of who she was. "Thank you for the invitation,

Grandmaster Vesta, but I go anywhere Princess Heather is since we've agreed to be roommates and friends! I've already learned so much from her, and she says she wants to join the House of Ravens."

"Haaa." Vesta looked rather bitter and annoyed on the display as she glanced to her right, where her former queen stood, waiting to welcome in many of the students she'd planned on accepting. "I... suppose it cannot be helped. Grandmaster Lilya, you were in favor of allowing the students to decide where to seek their education. I feel a rivalry growing."

Lilya showed an elegant smile as her illuminated brown irises moved to the Tempest. "Competition is an excellent motivator, which is why my instructor roster has become rather extensive. Perhaps your own House will begin to open up for more subjects as time goes on."

"We will see..." Vesta whispered. "You may go to your chosen House, Princess Castria and Princess Heather... Lady Aura, which House do you choose?"

The green-haired wind-user immediately flew to float underneath the grandmaster. "Naturally, the greatest and most prestigious House, which will dominate all metrics," the girl huffed. "I expect the *lesser* Tempest to flock to the House of Ravens since the House of Tempest only accepts the best."

Vesta's chest swelled as she turned to the other high-value Tempest in the lineup. "Lady Anala, I understand your oldest sister will be overseeing the training in the House of Ravens, and your father wants you to join the Empress' House, but you were never one to do what you were told... Will you join the House of Tempest?"

The redhead was in a new dress after her previous one was more or less totaled, and stood right beside Drake; Anala gave the tall boy a glance before a rosy smile brightened her cheeks, and she shook her head. "I am afraid I must decline. I will join the House of Ravens."

"And you... Lord Drake?" Vesta asked, clearly starting to become annoyed by the new House stealing all the main talent. "Your father has offered your family mansion inside the city, and your oldest brother is also an acting instructor, so I can assume you will be joining, as well?"

The dark-haired boy floated up with Anala, the redhead's heart no doubt racing; it wasn't hard to see their death battle against her had sparked something within the girl. Yet, she paused, confusion swirling in her eyes as Drake came to a stop beside Aura.

"I choose the House of Tempest."

Castria and almost everyone in the stadium who had seen their fight against the Raven Empress practically fell to the ground at the upset, Drake leaving Anala floating on her own halfway to Lilya, yet she couldn't change her answer now.

"What. The. Crap!" Her Monarch of Storms cried through the Nexus. *"Can he do that, Lilya? Didn't his dad want him to join us?! Oh, no... Anala. She's trying so hard not to cry... Why would he do that? It's obvious she wanted to be in the same House as him. Mmmgm!"*

The redhead's lips pulled in as she flew the rest of the way to hover behind Castria, holding her elbow and looking at the grass, no doubt lashing herself inside her mind and heart for being stupid. Elinor could see a different angle, though, spotting the look Drake's older brother gave him; it wasn't Anala's decision that had pushed him to join the House of Tempest, but what drama would spark from that decision.

"Well... we are glad to have you," Vesta said, vision darting to High Lord Yeven for confirmation, and he didn't raise any objections, remaining utterly stoic next to his wife. "And Marquess Julian Deleneer?"

"House of Ravens," he promptly stated, flying to the location without a second of hesitation.

“Right... Well, let’s continue with the rest of the selection. I think we can say that Grandmaster Lilya will accept *anyone* who is called, so we will let that go unsaid...”

Elinor lost interest after that, with the exception of a few individuals, such as the best Magic Knight candidate who had fought against her. When his turn came up, her eyes flicked to the boy; it would go a long way to convincing others to join her House if he chose Raven. Sadly, he chose the House of Magic Knights, but she should have expected that.

As could be expected, Elira, Castria’s Magic Knight older sister, was right by her side when it was her turn. Another upset came from the 3rd best Magic Knight candidate, who she’d taken out early in their fight, who had also chosen the House of Ravens with the second-best.

Eventually, the number was whittled down to those who showed little promise, all of whom had the chance to prove themselves on a merit basis in the first month of classes. And with that, the selection was complete.

The crowd began to return home, which seemed fairly early for something this massive to Elinor, but these people walked everywhere, and some had quite a distance to travel. In a world where darkness was still a threat, even in a guarded city, it was best to get home before the light faded. Elinor had her own plans, and Black made contact with the hag just as she prepared to leave.

“Empress...”

The amused, drawing laughter of the hag followed, hijacking the connection, and Elinor came to a stop just before exiting the large double doors, Paladins waiting to escort her. The powerful men and women glanced at each other at her narrowed eyes, centered on empty space, yet, to Elinor, there was someone there.

“Couldn’t help yourself, Dearie?” Autumn mused, materializing within her mind through the Nexus, her soft lips twisted in a thoughtful gleam. *“So... you chose to be in the dark, hmm? And if you wanted to know what I was up to, then all you had to do was ask.”*

And give you an opportunity to put more coins on your side of the scale? Elinor returned with a predatory smirk. *I don’t think I need any more from you at this time, Autumn. I merely wanted to let you know that, which is why I sent Black as a messenger. I hope you didn’t harm the people she’d hired to track you down... Wouldn’t that misunderstanding cost you a bit? After all, this was all done in good faith.*

The hag giggled. *“You are entertaining to watch, Empress... Your little schemes and plots spinning within your brain. I suppose I should start calling you my esteemed benefactor!”* She performed a perfect curtsy, head rising with a devilish tint in her revealed, golden irises.

“We can accomplish great things together. I look forward to the results of your efforts. I’ll send back your ‘tracking party’ in one piece. Until we next meet... Empress of Souls.”

She flickered and vanished.

“Empress?” one of the Paladins questioned. “Is there something that has upset you?”

Expression softening, Elinor turned to smile at the man as Tiffany jogged through the opening, a side bag slung over her shoulders; she was carrying a stack of paper and an ink bottle, writing all the fine details to the eventual contract that they’d sign with the hag to make it binding.

“Not anymore, Sir Issac. Take me to my stagecoach. We will be meeting one of my attendants in the city. After that, I will be having the City Guard take over my escort since I wish to give *each* branch of your city’s defenders an equal chance at my service... which reminds me, could you send a runner off to Captain Flera to join me? She will be more than enough.”

“As you command, Empress.”

She was impressed that the well-trained elite soldiers of the royal family hadn't so much as made a fuss about leaving her in someone else's hands, allowing her to proceed to her vehicle without a frustrating fight for who would guard her.

Castria, how are things going with Heather, and I saw you roping Anala into your little gang... Good girl.

"Eh-hehe. We're doing great, Empress. Well... I am. Anala's pissed that Drake, uh, yeah... and Heather is still scared of what will happen when she sees her mom... She sent a message to come to the palace at 9 p.m. Should... we go with her for support?"

Absolutely. Elinor snickered. Also, slip the meeting to Prince Drew somehow. Ask him to join you to explore the town and be your guide to show you around more.

"Uh... but I have Anala and Heather for that... Won't he get suspicious? Julian is already with us. Heather's been a bit... touchy with him... more than I'd like. She's known him for a long time, though, and they're good friends. I used to have to hide when she made surprise visits."

Uh-huh... Well, we are trying to make him suspicious. So, yes. Do that. Have fun! I'll be by your House so you can show me around tomorrow or the next day, so get things ready to show me something grand.

"Will do, Empress!"

Letting her go, she did a quick check-in with her dad. Her father was building quite a decent relationship with the king. Dubiously, he was also acting as a messenger to allow the man a chance to pass coded notes to his former wife; it was the scandalous thing her mother would have chewed on. Typically, this kind of behavior was *not* her dad, but few things pissed him off more than abusive parents, which put Queen Alivau on his shit list.

Elinor's mind was centered on another scandal, though, and one that was more than likely about to see a ton of patronage due to the smoke screen the event had caused.

Black... No issues?

"No, Empress. Other than the men I hired being in bed for a week experiencing what... sounds like a serious case of the crabs. I praise your name every day with this immortal, wonderful body you have gifted me, Empress, despite my... appetite."

I am glad to hear... So, let's talk about this noblewoman brothel, she segwayed into with a thoughtful grin. It sounds like an excellent place to find some extra, rather charitable hands to provide us with more spending money.