

# Chapter Thirty

## The Worst

Rachel stood before the flickering library fire, the silence heavy since Anthony's departure, pondering his visit and the implications for a time. She'd been compiling everything since shortly after everything calmed down four days ago, and the fruit of her labor showed in what she'd put together.

Now, she just needed to put the rest of her conclusions into ink. Rachel took the next few hours to sit down and finish writing everything, and once finished she found herself once again in front of the crackling hearth. She glanced at the magical stones that kept it lit before turning to her stack of papers.

Flipped through the one-hundred-and-fifty-page report, frustration growing with each page. Releasing a sigh, she tossed the papers into the hearth, watching the flames consume them. She had it backed up in her Soul Sanctuary written on a tablet.

*Why did I put all of this on paper... It's far too much to pass through conventional or even military channels.* She watched the edges of the pages curl and blacken while the flames consumed them. *I need to discuss this in person with Tom or the President. No way around it.*

Her gaze shifted to the wall, where the orange light of the moon cast a Halloween glow over the books, reminding her of Hrisu and his barony of fear. They'd become somewhat reluctant allies of Elizabeth after Rachel used their own fear against them to impersonate their vampiric god.

Reflecting inwardly, she closed her eyes and drifted into her Soul Expanse. The familiar sensation of her consciousness shifting enveloped her as she found herself standing in the serene environment of her mindscape.

She smiled at Nia's handiwork: her little room was now a tranquil garden, lush with vibrant, otherworldly flora, perfect for the little bunny girl. The garden glowed softly under a perpetual twilight sky, adorned with moons she'd absorbed energy from.

*Nia really knows how to lift my spirits. She probably got inspired by Persephone.* She shook her head. *The newest goddess auntie figure; she really is such a kid.*

A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of ancient trees around the cleared glade she'd crafted, their trunks entwined with vines that shimmered in various hues and provided a veil-like wall. The air was filled with the subtle fragrance of blooming flowers, lending an air of peace to the glowing bed at its center, where Nike rested.

Sitting in the chair beside the Personification, Rachel leaned against the armrest and stared at the soft complexion of the aspect of victory.

"Dionysus really did a number on you, didn't he," she whispered, lowering the chair and ground with a thought to observe how her recovery was coming. "Wow. Your wings actually look a little like wings now... I'd say it won't be long now. What will happen when you wake up? There's something about..."

Rachel's brow furrowed, spotting a strange golden honey slathered at the base of the girl's wings. Standing up, she moved closer and examined the sticky liquid; it wasn't from Nike herself, and Nia certainly didn't do it without telling her.

“Where did this come from?” she asked, being careful while lightly touching the area; Nike’s feathers quivered at the contact but settled as Rachel pulled away. “Some kind of godly restorative salve?”

Returning the ground and chair to their normal height, she gently pulled back the tight covers wrapped around the divine woman to look at her other wounds. Rachel’s mouth bunched to the side upon seeing the same honey, Positive Force, worked into her recovering hands, feet, and belly; it was as if some holy doctor had made a visit without them knowing...yet there was a distinctive chaotic vibe that lingered on the substance.

*The salve was probably created by someone else, and this...chaotic entity applied it. Well, that’s not concerning.*

Tucking the sheets back in, Rachel chewed on her bottom lip for a moment before sitting down, crossing her legs, and summoning the tablet to which she’d transferred all the information she’d collected thus far. She went over it one last time, identifying the bullet points she’d made and their conclusions:

### **The Scarlet Hand:**

*I still believe the Scarlet Hand is the most pressing threat we currently have, yet due to a string of ‘unfortunate events,’ they’ve lost a lot of weight. That being said, Elizabeth does not doubt they will swiftly recover and cut off fat. Twilight has been holding them off and disrupting their network for this very event.*

*Their plan was to unseal Scarlet’s Seed, which they manipulated during The Oscillation, in order to destroy the boundaries between dimensions, allowing the Outer Eldritch Gods to enter what we’re calling the Maelstrom. I’ve detailed it earlier in the report within a section, but I don’t think the scale is crucial right now due to Scarlet’s barriers. So long as they stay active, then we have time to get stronger and reach that level.*

*The Scarlet Hand remains our biggest threat. They have multiple contingency plans and are currently consolidating power in the UK, likely around the World Tree, according to Merlin’s intel. They fear me and my misfortune, which is why they’ve been trying to distract me.*

*Therefore, I suggest moving my parents into protective custody...possibly completely out of the US. It is something we can discuss later. There is also the option of using the Scarlet Hand’s own properties and resources that were transferred to Scarlet. The Scarlet Hand isn’t the only possible threat toward my family.*

*One might think that the Scarlet Hand was the primary manipulator involved in Elizabeth’s Legend Quest at first glance, but it wasn’t long before I realized Twilight was the orchestrator, and it wasn’t just the Scarlet Hand who were pulled into her web.*

*Twilight was the one who uncovered the traitor in Elizabeth’s organization. Twilight manipulated Illa and Selene to drink the same bottle at the same time, bringing them into each other’s dreams for Illa to kill her. It may have even triggered Illa’s Seed Awakening. It is as if Scarlet’s father created Twilight to be the perfect counter to the organization he helped to found.*

Rachel rubbed her temple, recalling the conversation between her grandmother and mom. Her mom’s shamanistic powers and mysterious past were something they’d need to deal with at some point. Right now, they had their hands full. Tom might have a list of Legend, Myth, or even Mystickin who she could pull into Omen. It was food for thought.

### **Omen, Ireland, EU, Fiona and Anthony:**

*Omen will be splitting up to tackle a few critical goals. Fiona and Anthony have a vested interest in Ireland, as has been outlined in the full report. There are things I cannot disclose regarding Anthony. However, I do believe he must go to Ireland now.*

*We need to start expanding our reach and identifying newly discovered threats within the area, as well. They know they are 'supposed' to not engage in active-combat roles but more intelligence and support. Not that I expect that to play out 100% that way; Selvaria can be a loose cannon. Anthony will keep them 'mostly' straight, though.*

*Due to its maritime objectives and coastlines, Selvaria and Cahira will be pivotal in joining Anthony and Fiona. In addition, Cahira's pirate abilities allow her to get past the barrier. They're going to provide further intel on the World Tree and UK before beginning their mission to infiltrate Ireland, which could change our opinions on the next path forward when Montana is solved. Results pending.*

*Catherine entrusting the conclusion of her mission to Maria, provides us with a unique opportunity to further Omen and the US' relations with not only the Vatican but also France. We don't have the time to deliver the relics, but if Catherine would have entrusted anyone else with the artifacts, then it would have been Jeanne. This will further solidify our relationship with a famous figure, while informing the Vatican we will pay them a visit.*

*We are continuing to recruit new members and expand our influence to further support the US' activities in places it cannot venture politically. One such place is Elizabeth's addition to our company. There are risks with her promise to Twilight, but Twilight herself is an enigma that I'm still puzzling out.*

*My current plan is for Elizabeth to use her influence to provide a morally dubious, publicly viewed villainess, as a spy in back-channels to give us further intel. It is important to note that her somewhat-friendly connection to Empress Wu could also provide us more insight into China's current situation.*

### **Montana Crystal and Crystals in General:**

*Rachel tapped her chin while deep in thought as she read her own summary:*

*It appears that the Scarlet Hand had a direct part in distracting Omen away from Montana. It is fair to assume their influence has taken a significant hit compared to their previous world power. I know there are two Eldritch factions that are opposed from what Anthony recounted, and one may be involved with the Seeds, the other the Crystals.*

*The general public's opinion is moving toward safety and handling the Crystals after everything was released in the recent presidential address. A failure in Montana would be a major blow against the current administration, weakening trust the government can handle the current issues.*

*It is critical it is successful with how much attention is on Montana. Moving a hundred thousand people out of their homes within a week causes waves and distrust. It could also be a huge victory for the current administration and the changed who helped in general.*

*From Black's files and knowledge, it's possible that White and Fable itself was targeted by the Scarlet Hand. Maneuvering Dracula to a close enough place for Red and Black to hunt wasn't random but planned. In the end, Billings is a mandatory military and political objective. Astra is bound to be there to gather information for the Scarlet Hand.*

*As I mentioned before, Izanami warned me through Mei that the Montana Crystal spooked the higher deities. Personally, through everything I've gathered, I don't think the force Izanami is talking about is the killing type and more the dominating type. If so, we can hope that our forces on the other side, if worse turns to worse, are somewhat safe to be rescued for that reason. We're using Elizabeth's time-accelerated world to further prepare for Montana.*

### **Babel:**

*Twilight is the primary source for this information, through Elizabeth. One such likely threat is Illa, who had leprechaun gold, and did mention to Maria that she went to Ireland. They possibly have the ability identify Dormant Seed holders, like Illa. Her motives, whether Illa's herself or whoever turned her, is likely solely involving Scarlet. Elizabeth suspects she was a part of Babel but it is more of a hunch based on Twilight's comments.*

*I also took the leprechaun gold during my 'dance' with Seed-Scarlet. Why, I'm not sure yet, and didn't tell Anthony. As for Illa, I am unsure what happened to the girl, but with the evidence I've laid out in the report, I'm somewhat confident she was somehow affiliated with Babel.*

*One person Elizabeth can confirm is in Babel is Ying Yue, the Chinese Hopping Vampire. She is a rare combination of Mystic and Mythickin, being the Mystic of Nüba. She failed to retrieve the artifacts the Saints stole from China and will likely be punished when she returns. She doesn't know who the vampire serves, but knows he controlled the north of China.*

*The Legend of Black Beard seems to have some connection to either Northern China, Ying Yue herself, or Babel since she was picked up by the pirate. Maria doesn't believe they're done trying to get Christ's thorns, but things have been quiet since the end of the conflict.*

### **Fable:**

*Full disclosure: I did try to poach Red and Black. After my talk with Black, I'm more inclined to support the organization and be friendly; I would also be open to working on joint operations with them. It would give me more chances to poach their talent! I hope to see Black and Red in Montana with their direct superiors due to the ominous vibes this Crystal gives. Maybe you could make something happen.*

### **Aurora Mystery:**

*Yes, I will put Aurora in her own category, even after all the theories I've already noted in the full report. Reportedly, she is loosely tied to the Scarlet Hand through her lord in Scotland. Yet, I don't think she was acting in the Scarlet Hand's best interests looking back, and she didn't blink an eye at Selene's murder. In fact, I'd say she was happy the teen vampire had died because it meant she could be attached to my side.*

*It's obvious Aurora's target was me. I'm not convinced it was on the Scarlet Hand's orders, though...or even if Aurora was really Aurora. She's possibly the most frustrating part about this whole complicated web of interactions, plots, and background forces.*

Rachel's focus shifted to the side of the glade, where the charming fey succubus appeared, all innocent smiles. Running through all their unfortunate time together as if on a TV screen, she shook her head at the drama and stopped at their dance.

*From Selvaria and Cahira's report, I learned that Selene was on the ship, not Aurora, which is impossible. Selene is 100% dead. So, logically, Aurora took the form of Selene and played that role perfectly, according to Selvaria...causing a lot of trouble between Dracula and his wives...*

*If there is one thing I do know about Aurora, it's that she is a walking hurricane of chaos that can even affect my own misfortune to some extent... Possibly because she understands my abilities better than I do. How? I have no clue, and that is aggravating.*

*Was her goal to eventually infiltrate Dracula's court this whole time? How did she leave Elizabeth's Legend Quest on her own? Who really is Aurora? The odd part is that...I believe our last conversation was genuine, and that could be her most dangerous aspect.*

*She's a master of disguise and manipulation...better than Illa, but Illa's target was Scarlet, not me. Aurora had her fangs on me. 120%. I think Aurora got exactly what she wanted and left. I hate to admit it, I really do...but I think she won our exchange. She maneuvered herself perfectly, and escaped with her foggy veil intact. I believe she'll find me again, and the frightening part is I'm not sure if I'll know it's her.*

### **Dracula's Attack on Miami:**

*Dracula wasn't as invested in the Scarlet Hand's cause as I first thought. He was already planning on going to Miami for an artifact; he's a powerful mythology figure, and Selene was close enough to get the Scarlet Hand's target... Scarlet's dad. It doesn't make sense that he'd be closely tied to the Scarlet Hand if he sent some newly created concubines to get their prized possession. That's all there is to it...and maybe Aurora was targeting him. I don't have a lot more, honestly, which does seem strange... Were Twilight and Aurora working together to give her a way inside his inner circle? I can see it.*

### **Deity Struggle:**

*Despite what we think about godly figures who could shape planets and solar systems, the life of a deity seems rather bleak from all my interactions with them.*

*Cerridwen sacrificed herself to the Outer Gods in order to give me the power to distract Seed-Scarlet. Without her, everything might have been ultimately worthless... Twilight had her priorities straight, and Cerridwen chose me for a reason, the woman being in contact with the other Eldritch party. It most likely has to do with my proximity to Scarlet.*

*It might come as a shock, but my godly circle is growing. Now I have Athena and Selene (the Greek Personification of the moon), who have rallied to me because I rescued Nike. I have yet to meet them, other than using Selene's moon in Dionysus' games (I do like the Blood Moon). As for Athena, I only briefly saw her among the other Greek pantheons.*

*Persephone and Hades' addition is welcomed, considering I died. Having the support of the rulers of Yomi and Hades has its perks, it seems. Although, the price was a couple of rowdy Hellhounds; at least they keep Nia busy. By the way, Persephone and Hades are relationship goals. Bitter and sweet. Not what I expected.*

*Speaking about Yomi... The Japanese goddess of the underworld is still somewhat of a dubious woman. I get the feeling she'll try to conquer Earth if I don't somehow get Yseress (one of Yomi's princesses) to accept me. There's a strange dynamic between them I haven't cracked yet. I need to figure out where she is at some point before she does something drastic.*

*Chang'e and Eostre are working in the background, possibly with Persephone, Athena, and Selene, but I'm not certain. Last I heard, they were trying to move the Graceful Moon into orbit...presumably for the Montana Crystal. I'll have to investigate that further. It shouldn't be a problem...unless Mei kills Moongmor for his...fetishes.*

*As a final report on Nike, I've just learned that she's recovering faster than I thought. I don't know how, but a salve has been placed on the wounds Dionysus gave her. I'm still looking into it.*

*I hope to learn more about this Native American Mystickin and his guardian deity that Black told me about. It may help put some things into perspective... I forgot to add Relica into the discussion. Apparently, she is one of the rare combinations of Mystickin and Mythickin—the Mystic of Hecate, who serves Persephone. I have to think more on that one.*

*One thing I'm also unsure of with all this information is... The Oscillation didn't only affect us. Through talking with several higher entities, it's obvious that they suffered a heavy price when all the universes were squished together...and that likely happened through Scarlet's actions, even if she, herself, isn't aware of it.*

*I don't want to tell Scarlet that. Maybe I should, though... I'm undecided. I've gotten a lot of support from the higher deities, and that also makes me wonder if their true objective is Scarlet in the end... I know that's what I would do if someone caused me that much heartache.*

### **The Eldritch and Bigger Board:**

*Beyond the deities, we have these other, larger players. I told Anthony when under the effects of the Black Moon, the Eldritch have some critical role in the Crystals as a breaching mechanism of sorts, sending in their forces. I saw it first-hand with House Bruhl in Elizabeth's world. It proves they can infect Legendkin Quests and corrupt them...*

Rachel brought the tablet up to tap against her forehead with a groan. There were so many threads and players working in the background, and their powers were phenomenal, yet Scarlet was somehow holding *everything* back. It made sense that the Scarlet Hand were so focused on getting their claws on her, and that they'd manipulated everything to give themselves control over Scarlet growing up.

As much as she'd wanted to pick Illa up and throw her out of the boat, the provocative vampire girl had managed to break some of Scarlet's bad personality traits; she was beginning to trust herself and her power.

Vision opening, she returned to her report.

*It is likely Dionysus was snatched by an Eldritch hand... It certainly looked like one. These Seeds may be corrupted by the 'bad' side trying to break in and attack Scarlet. I can't be sure if Cerridwen or the other Eldritch creatures are antagonistic. All I know now is that the 'bad' ones want to break everything down to get to Scarlet.*

*I'm not positive about Mythic or Mystickin, either, but I'm fairly certain at this point that Legends could be taken over as hosts for the Eldritch and go after Scarlet at some point. It is something to keep in mind and hedge against.*

*According to Black Moon Rachel (it's weird talking about myself in the 3rd person), there are multiple factions outside of the Maelstrom. At least two opposing Eldritch factions. Cerridwen was on the side supporting Scarlet and me while the other one tried to use us to spread their taint further through the Red Sea (another word for the Maelstrom).*

### **Soul Expansions:**

*Lastly, Scarlet explained the concept of Soul Expansion to us, which Twilight shared with her. It becomes available at level 25, and it isn't just some random number but a milestone.*

*It seems these Seeds have branched out within our souls, and that's why it has affected our mind, body, and spirit in such drastic ways. They are somehow acting as machines, expanding and growing our souls to push us toward some future evolution, is my guess. We could be food, like pigs being fattened up to be enjoyed, or it could be to give us the power to fight some threat another faction can't deal with themselves.*

*I believe that going off this logic, the Lesser Seeds, as I've heard them called, likely function in the same way. It's possible that they can't grow as much as the Greater Seeds, but I do think they can get to Level 25 and learn about Soul Expansion. I've detailed everything I've learned so far in the report for the President.*

*I've all but confirmed a lot of details revolving around our Seeds with my experiments. Scarlet's additional data from Twilight further reveals the elements involved in the Seeds. I'm sure they're unlocking hidden attributes in all of our souls, and everyone who was given a Greater Seed has some specific aspect that attracted the Seeds to them. Likewise, it would be the same for Dormant, Lesser Seeds, and blank Mystic Seeds the deities can influence—maybe the deities take over the Dormant Seeds before they sprout.*

*There is a real possibility that a class or tier system will develop out of this. No one is born equal. A man and woman can't fight on the same level in a normal setting, and this is no different. Some people will be stronger than others, and there are biological limits. However, getting ahead of this will be important in the public image.*

*Achievement Feats play an essential role since they're not adding anything to our souls, such as I believe happens with the Point System, but activate what is already there. It's something to consider and has a lot of implications.*

*When I talked to Black the first time, she refused to tell me anything about Fablekin or Dormant Seeds. I'm sure Fable has more information than they're letting on. It's something that might be bargained for.*

*That being said, Dormant Seeds add a layer of complexity. The Oscillation isn't over. There may even be a Second Awakening or Second Oscillation. I'm mostly concerned about Legendkin and the Eldritch's potential effects on them in the long run. They need to root them out in their worlds. It's something I'm going to tell all of Omen.*

*It's not something to keep hidden since it could trigger a massive Eldritch attack in the future out of nowhere, taking over the Legendkin. At least, that's my opinion.*

*As has been demonstrated already, higher beings can enhance and manipulate the Seeds to some extent. Although, it does come with risks, as we've seen with Dionysus. Those risks seem*

*far less evident in 6th and 7th-dimensional entities. The way I've come to see it is that at their most powerful, and this is still a guess:*

*Higher 3rd-dimensional beings, like Mei and Moongmor, can have some cosmic understanding, but on a scale of strength, may be more state-level. Still, being able to destroy Florida if using all their power is certainly something to be cautious of.*

*4th-dimensional higher beings, like Eostre, have continental, maybe world-ending power, if not blocked by the dimensional wall.*

*5th-dimensional is where we start getting to a ridiculous scale. Dionysus was able to control things on a 7th-dimensional level when given control over Conner's Seed. He wasn't proficient in it, but he had total control. I'd say he could easily destroy a planet, potentially the solar system, had the barrier not blocked him.*

*6th-dimensional deities, like Hecate and Chang'e—I'm just throwing out a scale here—but are probably galaxy-level.*

*7th-dimensional is easy... multiversal Creation Deities.*

*There is a hard barrier between the 5th and 6th dimensions, and the 7th and 8th. Everything below the 6th cannot interact with us in nearly any way without special circumstances, such as what I've been a part of.*

*Just the same, the 5th and 6th cannot interact with the 7th, which likely is where that giant six-fingered hand that took Dionysus came from. A breach in the Seed likely allowed it, as it allowed the 5th and 6th-dimensional pantheons to come to Izanami's gathering in a lower-dimensional layer of Conner's Seed.*

*It may be possible that these Seeds are trying to create deities or at least push us toward that route. There is a far bigger game at play here we can't see yet.*

She rubbed her cheek while scanning over the large document. There were many other minor details listed throughout it, including the involvement of other parties in Elizabeth's gathering, but the end was mainly to summarize the whole hundred-and-fifty-page report. It had been four long days of compiling.

Returning to her study of Nike, eyeing her covered wounds, Rachel mumbled, "Nia, can you come back for a second?"

A dazzle of lights almost immediately brought the snickering bunny girl to the opposite side of Nike. She folded down her ears, trying to be quiet, her eyes twinkling.

"Thalia can't be mad at me for teleporting away if you called me back—wait, did you tell Selv and Ms. Boob to go to Ireland with Sugar-Spice and Everything Nice?"

Rachel's brain came to a halt at the nicknames, quickly putting names to faces. "Uh... Yeah, Selv, Cahira, Fi, and Anthony are actually going to Miami with us to take a flight to the UK, but yes, they're going to Ireland."

"Aww. I like Fi being able to fly me around," Nia said with a sad sigh as she hopped over the bed to take a seat beside her. The 5-year-old tried to get a look at her report. "Are there pictures? I can add pictures! Fi's been teaching me how to draw anime."

"Shhhh," Rachel said, putting a finger to her lips and trying to calm down the hyperactive little girl after just getting pulled away from her games. "Here, you can draw in this app," she said, handing her the tablet so she could show off her skills and focus.

"I'm *really* good at bunnies and fairies now—watch..."

Her heart lightened as the girl stuck her tongue out and began using her finger to make a kid's drawing that somehow looked like a cross between an alligator and rabbit.



“Nia...did you apply any healing stuff to Nike’s wounds without telling me?”

Nia’s ears flew up, tossing the tablet into a beanbag she created out of thin air and swiftly crawling under the recovering woman’s bed, her tail wiggling.

“No, I didn’t... Oh, there is some golden stuff on her wing...”

Rachel’s ears stiffened. “Don’t eat—”

“Mmm. It tastes really sweet and—blah, my tongue’s numb, Cap’in!”

Grabbing the girl by her leg, Rachel pulled her out and held her up as Nia rolled around her mouth and garbled gibberish. “I should have expected you’d eat a little—how do you feel? What were you thinking? It’s not like we have poison control for this kind of stuff—consider how I feel a little sometimes. We should get Maria—”

Nia’s eyes started to spin, a blissful look on her face, and Rachel had to decipher her words.

“I thoughted you were ignoring her. The silly neigh-neigh has been waiting outside saying funning things about you—oh, I’m feeling better!” the bun chimed, quickly trying to lower her voice. “When I came back, I saw Mama Mari outside. On sec... Uh, she says I was on a Positive Energy high or something. It felt good,” she added, zoning out for a second.

“What? I don’t think it’s out of your system... Okay, go have fun again. I just wanted to know if you’d done it... Unless Older Nia did it when I was preoccupied, but no...she’d tell me.”

“So would I; I’m a good bunny,” Nia huffed, sticking out her tongue. “You never trust me with the big stuff—well, except for getting everyone out of the Blood Sea safely, but I think Everything Nice is making that up. It doesn’t sound like you at all.”

Rachel breathed out a long sigh, exiting her internal world to a fluffy butt in her face. Nia’s wagging tail leaped away as she jumped from standing on her chair to the library door.

“Thanks, Mama Mari; I’m going to go chase puppies now! I’m the big bad wolf—the infamous bunny wolf of the dreaded lands of eternal fluff!”

Maria’s scowl lifted into a smile as the bun howled her wolf blood through the halls, running to find her playmates.

“Damn, that girl knows how to get to me... On the other hand, a certain hare goes down the rabbit hole in her own damn head and leaves me hangin’ for forty minutes.”

“My bad,” Rachel chuckled, rubbing her neck and stretching out her stiff back; the latino was toning down her language for the little girl and wasn’t perfect at it. “You could have poked Nia and had her warn me, though.”

“Meh. I didn’t want to disrupt her fun or your brain doin’ brainy shit,” the Spanish woman said with a yawn. It wasn’t long before her scowl returned. “Aye, it gave me enough time to scribble this... Check it.”

Rachel accepted the two pages; she was slightly curious at the Unicorn’s desire to write when she’d made it clear she hated paperwork and technology in general, coming from a poor, old-school background. The handwriting was surprisingly beautiful and flowy, telling her that Maria may not like it, but it didn’t mean she didn’t do it.

Before long, Rachel sat straighter, reading the front and back of the report at a glance as **[Mental Acceleration]** quickened her mind. Cadence sobering, she folded the pages and tossed them into the fire to burn before staring at the Unicorn’s reflected expression.

“I get the secrecy, but there’s no one around. Then again, just to be safe, Elizabeth...”

The imperial woman's calm and powerful figure rose out of the crystal blood, a clone of her true body; the real Countess was engaged in politics and repairs. The mother sat in one of the armchairs and smoothed out her dress.

"What can I do for you, Rachel?"

"Can you apply that same dampening effect the previous castle had on this room, isolating us?"

The Countess' gaze drifted to the clouded ruby walls, where a surge of bubbling blood erupted within them, layers of crystal creeping over its surface.

"...It is done. Would you like your privacy?" she asked, liquid-like eyes showing light interest.

Rachel shook her head before looking at Maria. "Please, stay... Christ's thorns were taken off you, and Catherine's sword and shield were stolen from your Soul Sanctuary... Then, they ended up in your room on your bed with a letter? You didn't know it was even gone before seeing them, hmm? How is that possible; how weren't you aware? Wasn't it linked to your soul in a similar way Nia is to me?"

Maria breathed out a frustrated sigh while holding up her hand, showing the holy cross that illuminated on it before pulling out a second letter from inside her bust to pass over.

"The moment I touched them, they bound back to my soul, but yeah, shit's spooky. Somehow someone snatched them—I don't know this shit, Rachel. That's why I came to you. What the hell is going on? This was left behind when her sword and shield went back into my soul or whatever... I've got the thorns here, too... Some bitch stuck their hands between my breasts and stole it without me knowing shit. How pathetic is that..." she snarled. "Aye, can't you check the damn security cameras?"

Rachel accepted the paper, unfolded it, and smoothed it out as Elizabeth shook her head.

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that, darling. If I am paying attention or hear my name I can respond or spy, but it requires a lot of mental focus to spread one's mind over an entire castle the size of a city. It does invoke the topic of installing human surveillance systems, which is something I should invest in," she said with a thoughtful note. "What does it say?"

Resting her knuckles against her nose, Rachel read it aloud, feeling a familiar vibe from the cadence and showy penmanship:

"In the quiet moments when the mists of the sea have settled and the whispers of intrigue are but a distant echo, I find myself thinking of our tantalizing encounter on that yacht; your Queen's Gambit was sweet blood on my lips. Your resilience, your delectable aura, and the way your heartbeat quickened in my presence—such memories are like fine wine, growing richer with time.

"I must admit, there's a certain thrill in the chase, especially when the prey is as enchanting as you—joking! Joking! You know me. I can't help myself when I'm around you, my first and only friend. The way you handled our little dance was nothing short of impressive.

"However, my dear, you should tell your other friends to be careful with what one leaves unguarded or locked away in one's Soul Expanse. Consider this a parting gift—an intimate token of my affection and a gentle reminder of the games we play.

"You see, a certain little troublemaker from a tall tower has decided to make your attractive horned friend a target. You're lucky my sister was nearby. We had fun together! The webs we weave can be so intricate, can't they? But aren't you happy you have a friend like me to give you a heads-up? After all, it's always good to have someone watching your back—or, should I say, your soul.

“Love and kisses,  
“Your secret admirer and friend.”

Maria’s scowl somehow deepend. “That bitch... Ain’t no way in hell Aurora did this without something in return! She’s put me in her debt, if not stealing it herself—shit is just what a manipulative siren like that would do.”

Rachel couldn’t help the goosebumps, yet there was a small smile in her eyes. “As odd as it sounds, Maria... I think she’s being genuine. Damn. That one piece of info is...priceless. I’d put too much faith in the Soul Expanse, and she showed me a deadly vulnerability. There’s a lot we can learn from that, and she even revealed more about herself in good faith...” she trailed off and started to laugh, running her fingers through her hair.

“Aye, what’s the insanity, chica?” Maria growled. “It wasn’t your shit that was violated.”

“Sorry. Sorry, Maria,” she sighed, shaking her head and silently reading the message again. “Call it her dangerous and mysterious vibe...or that she knows exactly how to invoke a challenge within me—maybe I am being manipulated...”

“But I can’t help but see her more as an ally than an enemy. Something changed at some point, and I can’t tell exactly where yet. She didn’t do this for free. She did it as a show of friendship to me.

“At least, that’s the way it feels. In any case, this helps me better round out our Soul Expanse... And now I need to rewrite parts of my report,” she groaned, falling limp in her chair. “Aurora really is the worst... Relica should take notes.”