

Chapter 609 Obsession

The Griffiths, a family with nearly a millennium of heritage and control over the enigmatic, powerful Serpent Society, enforced merciless standards whenever the question of succession arose. Not every daughter of the Griffiths line was deemed worthy of the role.

To become the heir, a candidate had to pass a grueling series of assessments.

Chief among these trials was the mastery of the Medical Codex, a legendary tome left by the Griffiths' ancestors. Each heir bore the duty of carrying its knowledge forward, flawless and intact.

Because of this mandate, every heir of the Griffiths family was a healer of formidable renown.

Maxine had triumphed over a host of rivals to earn her crown. Her unmatched grasp of the Medical Codex had transformed her into a physician of extraordinary talent.

Moments after swallowing the pill Maxine offered, Jules felt relief wash over him. He lowered himself into a deep bow. "Thank you."

She responded with little more than a distant look, prepared to dismiss him. But then something pricked at her senses. A faint odor drifted past, and in an instant, her demeanor shifted. She straightened sharply, her eyes narrowing. "What is that smell on you?"

Jules froze, confused. After the failed mission, he and Katrina had rushed back to report to Maxine without a chance to change or bathe. The remnants of the night were still on them. Dust. Sweat. Ash. Any of them could have clung to his clothes. He had no idea what Maxine meant.

Her patience snapped before Jules could answer. She reached out, caught his lapel, and scraped a residue from the cloth. She examined it for a moment before bringing it to her nose. Her expression shifted, her eyes widening in disbelief. "Soulscorch?"

Soulscorch was no ordinary substance. It was a potent compound refined according to the records in the Poison Volume of the Medical Codex. Only someone with access to the Codex could create it.

Maxine's own studies of the Medical Codex had etched the formula of Soulscorch into her memory. Besides her, the only other person who could concoct it was Rita—the very successor she had designated to inherit the Medical Codex. Why would Jules bear the trace of such a rare drug?

Maxine's gaze cut into him like a blade. "Jules, why do you have Soulscorch on you?"

Jules had never heard of Soulscorch before. Confused by the question and unnerved by her piercing stare, he began to tremble. "I... I swear, I don't know what you're talking about."

Without a word, Maxine scraped another fleck of powder from his clothes and held it out for him to see. "Where did this come from?"

At last, memory struck. Jules recalled the moment Elliana had flung a cloud of dust at him and Katrina, dropping them both into unconsciousness.

After his story tumbled out, Maxine's expression was graver than ever. "Every detail you've spoken—can you swear it is the truth?"

Jules, still unsure of Maxine's intention, darted a glance toward Katrina. "It's the truth. Katrina carries the same powder on her clothes."

Maxine's gaze shifted to Katrina.

Katrina wouldn't dare hide anything. "Yes, Grandma," she confirmed immediately. "Elliana threw that powder at us."

The confession settled over the room like a stone sinking into water. Maxine leaned back, her expression distant, her thoughts sealed away behind unreadable eyes.

An unnatural stillness stretched between them.

Jules kept his head bowed. Katrina watched Maxine's face, her breath held. Neither of them dared to make a sound.

Maxine's temper was notoriously unpredictable. Everyone in her service walked on eggshells, terrified of displeasing her.

Among all the Griffiths heirs, Maxine stood out. Tradition dictated that every Griffiths heir traveled far, sought out a partner of impeccable bloodline, and bore a daughter worthy of the mantle. For generations, this duty was upheld without fail. But Maxine defied that legacy.

During her younger years, Maxine had spent three long years abroad, yet returned empty-handed, without either a partner or a child. Alarmed, the family had scrambled to arrange suitors for her.

But Maxine had rejected every suitor they presented. Time had passed, her youth had waned, and the hope of a natural-born heir had slipped away.

In the end, Maxine never had a biological child of her own.

To preserve the family's lineage, Maxine had forged another path. She took in her nephew Miguel Griffiths and later adopted a gifted girl, hoping the two would wed and provide the next successor.

That adopted daughter was Rita—Elliana's mother.

Found as an infant during Maxine's travels, Rita's parentage had been cloaked in mystery. No record of her origins existed, and no one dared question how Maxine had come to find her.

From the start, Maxine had treated Rita as though she were her own blood. She'd guided Rita personally, molding her talents, and ultimately entrusted her with the sacred teachings of the Medical Codex. Rita had become the chosen heir.

Rita had rewarded that trust with brilliance. Her intelligence and skill had elevated her above every expectation until her name became legend among the Griffiths. But in one matter, she failed Maxine—she did not fall in love with Miguel. No effort from Maxine could change that.

Miguel, on the other hand, had adored Rita with a desperate intensity. From childhood, he had viewed her as his, and that affection had twisted into an obsession that only grew darker with time.