

THE UNWANTED DAUGHTER: WHEN LOVE COMES TOO LATE

Left Behind 231

Besides that piece, two other works were hot on its heels.

One was called “Ripples,” based on water elements—a ring with an overall teardrop shape, the main stone at the center surrounded by cascading waves.

The other was “Nebula,” a brooch shaped like an irregular star cluster with an opal at the center like the nebula’s core, titanium framework outlining the contours, dotted with diamonds and colored gems.

Voting lasted three days. Rachel sat in the study, her tablet showing the competition’s voting page.

“Ripples” was her latest work.

Water—looks weak but can cut through stone; looks calm but can create tsunamis.

So this piece represented gentle yet unstoppable power.

Right now, “Ripples” was steadily climbing, getting dangerously close to Sophie’s “Thornbird.”

But another piece was no joke either—“Nebula” was running neck and neck with “Ripples.”

The platform used anonymous voting, so except for Sophie’s public entry, nobody knew who created what. Made the voting totally fair.

And ironically, both “Ripples” and “Thornbird” were her pieces.

She found herself curious about whoever made “Nebula.”

She lightly tapped the screen where those designs were displayed, her finger making soft clicking sounds.

Her phone buzzed-Nicolas had texted: "Sophie's trying to dig up info on the 'Ripples' creator, but don't sweat it. She won't find jack."

Rachel was kinda surprised Sophie had moved so fast.

She texted back "ok" and walked to the window.

This whole anonymous thing felt incredible-nobody knew she was the Leroix heiress, nobody knew she'd even entered this competition.

Just had to wait for that moment when everything got revealed.

She remembered what they'd said at the Leroix house: "Without this family, you're nothing."

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But hey, dear brother, you seeing this?

Without the Leroix name, my work can still claim the crown.

On the final voting day, "Ripples" had almost caught up to "Thornbird."

Rachel watched the numbers constantly updating when she spotted something sketchy-

"Thornbird's" vote count had suddenly jumped by 200,000 between 3 and 5 AM!

"She's buying votes!" Rachel immediately found Nicolas.

Nicolas checked the data and asked, "Bust her now?"

Rachel shook her head: “If we call her out now, she’ll just claim someone’s setting her up. Let’s wait till the final results drop, then let the numbers do the talking.”

Nicolas flashed this knowing smile: “Smart move.”

Let the drama unfold.

Seemed like that hotheaded kid had finally learned some strategy.

Meanwhile, Sophie was still stuck in the hospital, frantically watching the data.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

She’d already bought nearly 800,000 votes but still couldn’t pull ahead decisively!

That damn “Ripples” piece was breathing down her neck!

Plus, she’d just gotten another call from the vote-buying company saying “Ripples” was climbing too fast and suggesting another 500,000 votes.

“Do it!” Sophie screamed into the phone. “I don’t give a damn what it costs—we’re keeping first place!”

She glared at that water-themed ring, anxiety creeping up her spine.

Who the hell made “Ripples”?

Why couldn’t they find any info on this person?

In this world, if you threw enough money around, you could uncover anyone’s secrets. But this author? Complete ghost.

She stared at that design. This style, this way of handling water elements... a terrifying thought crept into her

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head.

“No way...” she whispered. “That loser should’ve given up ages ago... just three days, she couldn’t have...”

She zoomed in, studying every detail of “Ripples.”

The ring was sleek and sophisticated but packed with intricate details.

The wave patterns on the band looked like they were actually moving, the sapphire catching light like ocean swells. This design approach, this attention to detail...

Sophie’s hands started trembling.

Who... was this person!

Once midnight hit, voting closed.

The nail-biting voting phase was finally over, and Maëlys’s studio quickly dropped the top ten results.

This time, Maëlys herself went live on the studio’s account.

Even though it was the middle of the night, hardcore fans were wide awake and ready.

“Huge thanks to all the designers who participated, and to everyone who voted...”

Maëlys had this smooth, intellectual voice. She wasn’t rushing anything, keeping everyone on the edge of their seats.

“Time for the final results. Tenth place goes to...”

Preliminaries picked ten finalists who'd compete live to choose three designers for the studio.

Maëlys was all about quality over quantity. She wanted the cream of the crop, so only three spots.

She'd even said she'd rather take one perfect commission per year than compromise on standards. Numbers

didn't matter to her.

She announced rankings from bottom to top, revealing the designers behind each piece.

When she got to the top three, she paused dramatically, grinning: "Third place is..."

Rachel was glued to her tablet, watching the livestream.

"Nebula' by Yara Adams!"

"Second place goes to..." she dragged it out, "the piece 'Ripples'! Created by... anonymous contestant

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'Daughter of the Sea'!"

The chat exploded:

[Anonymous entry? That's so badass!]

[Now THATS a real artist!]

[Ripples' is absolutely gorgeous, totally earned it!]

Sophie's smile died on her face.

She never would've guessed someone entered anonymously!

"This can't be happening!" Sophie shrieked.

The stream kept rolling: “Before we announce first place, we need to address something important. Our tech team found massive amounts of suspicious voting activity. After cleaning up the data, some vote counts have changed significantly.”

The screen behind Maëlys lit up with comparison charts-“Thornbird’s” votes nosedived while “Ripples” stayed rock solid.

Sophie went white as a sheet.

“Per competition rules, purchased votes are void, so Sophie’s ‘Thornbird’ is now tied with ‘Ripples’!”

The second she finished talking, the chat went absolutely mental:

“Wait, what? Sophie cheated?”

“Kick Sophie out! Disqualify her ass!”

“Sophie’s results should be thrown out!”

Outside the livestream, Sophie collapsed on her hospital bed: “No fucking way...”

Then she spotted the wave patterns on that ring-those familiar curves hit her like a freight train.

“It’s... it’s her...” Sophie muttered. “That worthless bitch...”

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“It’s... it’s her...” Sophie muttered. “That worthless bitch...”

She frantically grabbed her backup phone and opened social inedia.

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The trending topics were already exploding with #Sophie BoughtVotes.

The comments were filled with pissed-off users:

【This is what passes for a rich heiress?】

[Disgusting, buying votes while acting all innocent!]

【So her “first place” was just bought with money!】

Sophie’s fingers trembled as she scrolled down, suddenly spotting a comment: “Am I the only one who thinks ‘Ripples’ is way more sophisticated than ‘Thornbird’? Those wave patterns are incredible!”

This comment had thousands of replies, mostly agreeing.

Sophie felt dizzy.

No... this wasn’t the outcome she wanted!

With shaking hands, she closed the app and tried to dial a familiar number, her fingers slipping on the

screen several times.

“Yvonne! You’re supposed to be good at digging up info, right? Find out who this ‘Daughter of the Sea’ really

is!” she screamed into the phone.

A hesitant voice came through: “Babe, not gonna lie-I started investigating the moment Maëlys announced the list. I tried everything, but...”

“But what?”

“This ‘Daughter of the Sea’ person is protected way too well. I can’t find any leads.”

No leads...

And coincidentally, Rachel had no traceable info either.

Could it really be her?

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Was the world really this full of coincidences?

Sophie slumped to the floor.

Why... why did Rachel have to show up again even after leaving the Leroix family!

“Babe, is there any chance... that Rachel actually is ‘Daughter of the Sea’?”

Before Yvonne could finish, Sophie hurled her phone to the ground and let out a shriek:
“AHHH-”

She grabbed everything within reach and threw it all on the floor.

When she ran out of things to smash, she started clawing at her own hair.

“Why...” she clutched her head, “why do you keep haunting me...”

Yvonne heard the commotion and called out worriedly, but got no response.

When she tried calling back, it just rang and rang.

The livestream continued.

Maëlys’s voice echoed through the stream, calm but with an edge of cold steel: “After careful consideration, we’ve decided to keep Miss Sophie’s qualification. After all, artistic creation itself is pure...”

The tablet still streaming nearby made Sophie’s body go rigid. ‘She grabbed it in disbelief, staring at the

screen.

She hadn’t misheard, right? They were keeping her in the competition?

But before she could get too excited, the chat absolutely lost it.

Comments flooded in like a tsunami;

[How much did the organizers get paid?]

[Vote buying and she still gets to compete? Is there any fairness left?)

[The 'Ripples' creator got screwed over by this nepotism bullshit.]

【Wait, didn't you guys notice? Sophie broke the rules from the start and still got to compete. Vote buying is nothing compared to that. If you know, you know.】

Sophie sat dazed on the floor, the phone screen's glow reflecting off her pale face.

She watched those brutal comments, feeling like she couldn't breathe. Suddenly, one comment caught her

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just kicking her out..."

She shot upright, staring at that comment.

Yeah, why was Maëlys doing this?

She didn't know Maëlys well, but word was she was decisive and ruthless. With her personality, shouldn't she have just disqualified Sophie outright?

She completely missed whatever Maëlys said after that.

The livestream finally ended with viewers still cursing up a storm.

The moment the stream cut off, Maëlys called Nicolas.

"Mr. Rothschild, per your instructions, I let Sophie advance and exposed all her little 'tricks.' Can you finally tell me why we're doing this?"

"Mm." Just a cold response came through, like he couldn't care less about any of it.

After waiting forever for more explanation, Maëlys knew she wouldn't get the answer she wanted.

When Nicolas didn't want to talk, nobody could pry his mouth open.

After hanging up, Nicolas tossed his phone aside.

He really didn't give a damn about Sophie. With his personality, he'd just crush her completely.

But this was all Rachel's idea.

She wanted to keep Sophie around.

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, New York sparkled with lights, but none could match the dark intensity in his eyes.

"Knock knock-"

The bedroom door was gently pushed open as Rachel walked in carrying coffee.

These past few days living here, she'd gotten into the habit of just walking into his bedroom without waiting for permission.

Today she wore a cream knit sweater, the soft fabric hugging her slender waist.

Nicolas's gaze lingered on her for a second before casually looking away.

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Rachel set the coffee in front of him, her voice soft: "Thank you."

Nicolas picked up the cup-the handle still seemed to carry warmth from her fingertips. He unconsciously

traced it a few times.

"You sure you want to do this?" He looked up at her. "I could make her disappear forever."

Rachel shook her head: "Making her disappear would be too easy."

Her gaze drifted to the window: "I want her to watch everything she cares about crumble, piece by piece."

Nicolas's lips curved into the faintest smile.

He loved seeing her like this-like an elegant cat who could kill with one strike but preferred to toy with her prey instead.

"Aren't you worried she'll bite back?"

"With you here, what do I have to worry about?" Rachel realized how suggestive that sounded the moment

she said it, her ears turning pink.

Nicolas set down his coffee and stood, walking over to her.

His tall frame towered over her as Rachel caught his subtle cologne.

“You really know how to use me,” his voice was low and dangerous.

Rachel looked up to meet his intense gaze: “So would Mr. Rothschild mind being used by me?”

Nicolas leaned down until they were close enough to feel each other’s breath.

His long fingers tilted up her chin: “I’d be delighted.”

Rachel opened her mouth but no sound came out. She could feel Nicolas’s breath on her cheek, burning hot.

“Nicolas, it’s getting late, you should rest...” she said stiffly.

“Hmm?” Nicolas’s tone lifted slightly. His eyes flicked to the coffee cup with a teasing glint:

“Didn’t someone just bring me coffee? I thought you didn’t want me to sleep.”

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Rachel’s fingertips unconsciously fidgeted with the hem of her sweater, her cheeks burning red from his

question.

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Nicolas’s thumb was still pressed against her jaw, applying just enough pressure to force her to tilt her head at an even more vulnerable angle.

Seeming to notice her trembling body, he chuckled softly, his Adam’s apple vibrating: “Your hands were so

steady when you brought the coffee, so why are you shaking all over now?”

Just as Rachel was about to argue back, her lower back suddenly hit the desk edge.

The coffee cup rippled with dark brown waves, some even spilling over.

Nicolas reached out to steady it, but his palm ended up covering her hand that was clutching a tissue.

“Don’t move.” He pulled away the crumpled tissue, the slight friction sound particularly clear in their intimate atmosphere.

Rachel held her breath, watching the man’s pale fingers clean the table with deliberate slowness. But as she

watched those movements, her mind started wandering in ways she couldn’t control.

Those hands were really beautiful,

“You got some here too.” Suddenly, Nicolas spoke, then his fingertip traced across her collarbone with the

faintest touch.

But there was no coffee stain there at all.

Rachel raised her hand to push him away, but her palm pressed against his rapidly rising chest.

Nicolas let out a muffled groan, his breathing suddenly rough: “Rachel.”

“What?” Her voice trembled.

Nicolas’s Adam’s apple rolled heavily, and just as he moved to cradle the back of her head, Rachel suddenly turned and bit his earlobe: “Nicolas, your heart’s beating so fast.”

Nicolas hadn’t expected Rachel to turn the tables on him and suddenly laughed softly.

Rachel gripped the back of his shirt, the expensive fabric bunching up in her palm.

The feeling of taut muscle under her fingertips made them tingle, and before she knew it, Nicolas’s knee had

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pressed between her legs.

“Nicolas...” her voice took on an unfamiliar softness even to herself, “the coffee’s getting cold.”

The man suddenly stepped back half a pace, casually straightening himself out.

Before Rachel could find her balance in the void, he swept her up in his arms.

“Then we’ll make fresh.” Nicolas kicked open her bedroom door, dark currents surging in his eyes. “Coffee for all-night conversations should be slowly brewed in a siphon pot.”

At the same time, Sophie was doxxed for being hospitalized, with people posting the exact hospital address.

Left with no choice, the Leroix family brought her home overnight, with the family doctor handling her

recovery.

Sophie curled up on the couch, her eyes red and swollen from crying.

Joanne sat beside her, gently patting her back.

“Sophie, stop crying,” Joanne’s voice was full of heartache. “It’s just a competition. We don’t have to

participate.”

David stood by the window, his brow deeply furrowed.

“What the hell happened? How did this turn into such a huge scandal?”

“Dad!” Sophie lifted her head, her voice thick with tears. “It’s Rachel! It has to be her! That ‘Daughter of the

Sea’ is definitely her!”

“Nonsense!” David spun around sharply. “Your sister left the Leroix family ages ago. How could she possibly enter the competition?”

“It IS her!” Sophie screamed hysterically. “That design, that attention to detail-only she could do it! I’ve studied her work for years, I know her better than anyone!”

Joanne quickly hugged Sophie: “Okay, okay, stop talking. Your sister...”

Before she could finish, Sophie cut her off: “Why does sister have to compete with me for everything!”

David’s expression instantly darkened.

“Enough!” Arthur slammed his hand on the coffee table. “Look at yourself right now!”

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Sophie froze. She’d never seen her father this angry.

Joanne quickly stood up to mediate: “Alright, alright, everyone stop fighting. Sophie, go to your room and

rest.”

Sophie bit her lip as tears flowed again.

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She couldn’t argue with David, so she could only nod and head upstairs with Arthur’s support.

Joanne sighed, looking at David: “You didn’t have to get so angry.”

David rubbed his temples: “This is completely unacceptable. This incident has totally embarrassed the

Leroix family.”

“You’re the one who spoiled her,” Joanne muttered under her breath.

David didn’t respond. He walked to the window, looking out at the night.

The media was going crazy, all reporting on Leroix family drama.

And people had already dug up Rachel’s public break with the family at the funeral- everyone was waiting

to see the Leroix family’s downfall.

He suddenly remembered the day Rachel left.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t looked for her, but she couldn’t be found.

“Joanne,” David suddenly spoke, “do you think we made a mistake?”

Joanne was stunned: “What do you mean?”

David shook his head without answering.

Forget it, no point dwelling on this. Anyone who embarrassed the Leroix family was definitely in the wrong.

The next day.

Jaxon stood at the Leroix mansion entrance, his long fingers pressing the doorbell.

The door opened, and Joanne enthusiastically brought him inside, then pointed upstairs and sighed: “Sophie’s in a bad mood. Maybe... you could go see her?”

Jaxon set down the fruit basket he’d brought and nodded.

Going upstairs, he walked to Sophie’s room and knocked.

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A loud crash came from inside, followed by Sophie’s voice: “I said I’m not seeing anyone!”

“Sophie, it’s me.” Jaxon’s voice was calm and patient.

The room went quiet for two seconds, then moments later, the door opened.

Sophie appeared in the doorway with red, swollen eyes.

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She wore a wrinkled nightgown, her hair disheveled, completely lacking her usual polished appearance.

“Jaxon...” her voice was tearful as she threw herself into his arms.

Jaxon gently patted her back, but his gaze moved past her shoulder to the design sketches scattered across the living room floor.

On those papers, the wave patterns of “Ripples” were clearly visible.

“Don’t be sad.” He gently patted Sophie’s back, then supported her, guiding her downstairs to sit on the

couch.

Joanne had already left to give them privacy.

She wouldn't be any help staying anyway-better to leave it to Jaxon.

Sophie curled up on the couch, hugging a pillow.

"Jaxon, I'm finished..." she sobbed. "Everyone knows I bought votes, I..."

"But you weren't disqualified." Jaxon said, his voice gentle but firm. "Since the organizers gave you this chance, why not try?"

Sophie looked up at him through teary eyes: "But the online comments..."

"Do those comments matter?" Jaxon sat beside her. "What matters is the finals. If you can prove yourself in the finals, those comments will naturally disappear."

Sophie bit her lip, hesitating, then suddenly grabbed Jaxon's hand.

"Jaxon, I think... I think that 'Daughter of the Sea' is sister!"

Jaxon's fingers trembled slightly, a hard-to-catch glint flashing in his eyes.

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Before Sophie could even catch on, Jaxon had already pulled himself together. "What makes you think that?"

Sophie's eyes darted away. "Just a hunch, I guess... You know how it is with sisters-after all these years, you pick up on things."

Facing Jaxon always made her feel guilty. Not just because of the whole design mess, but because she'd never told him about Rachel being locked up at the Leroix house. And she knew damn well he'd been looking for Rachel.

Thing was, she didn't want him to find her. So she'd kept her mouth shut on purpose.

Jaxon studied her shifty behavior, fighting to keep the chaos inside him under control.

Was that anonymous contestant really Rachel?

All this time searching, and not a single trace! Never would've thought she'd enter some competition and make such a splash.

"Even more reason to go to the finals then." His voice was quiet. "I'll come with you."

Sophie's face lit up instantly. She practically launched herself into his arms, squeezing him tight. "Thank you, Jaxon... God, you're amazing."

Jaxon rubbed her back gently, but his eyes were already looking past her shoulder, up toward that corner room upstairs.

His mind drifted back to Donald's funeral.

Rachel standing there in all black, looking pale as death. The way she'd walked away-so final, like she was done with everything.

That was the last time he'd seen her.

"Jaxon?" Sophie's voice snapped him back.

"Yeah?"

"What's going through your head?"

Jaxon looked down at her, managing a soft smile. "Just thinking about the finals."

Sophie nestled against his shoulder, eyes closed.

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"As long as you're there, I'm good."

Jaxon didn't say anything back, just kept stroking her hair.

Rachel, looks like we're finally gonna see each other.

Finals were in three days, downtown at the Grand Theater.

Rachel was up with the sun.

No sign of Nicolas-probably already gone.

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She threw on a simple white dress, left her hair loose over her shoulders.

Quick wash-up, grabbed her bag, and headed out.

Downstairs, there was Matt by a black car, holding some fancy gift box.

“Morning, Miss Leroix,” Matt said with a smile.

“Matt?” Rachel blinked. “What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Rothschild’s got this huge meeting today-can’t make it to the finals with you.” Matt held out the box. “He wanted me to bring you this.”

Rachel took it and peeked inside. A pale blue dress.

The bottom had these detailed wave patterns that caught the light just right.

“Oh, and this.” Matt handed over a smaller box.

Rachel opened it, curious, then just stared..

A ring. Her own design-“Ripples.”

The wave patterns were catching the sunlight, throwing off this soft glow that matched the dress perfectly.

Rachel’s hands were actually shaking a little as she picked up the ring. There was something engraved inside: “To my muse.”

“This is...” She looked up at Matt, voice catching,

Matt grinned. “Mr. Rothschild figured since it’s your design, you should be the first one to wear it.”

“He also said,” Matt went on, “he hopes it brings you luck.”

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Rachel slipped the ring on-perfect fit.

She stared at those wave patterns, couldn't help but smile.

"Matt," she said quietly, "tell him thanks for me."

Matt chuckled. "You can tell him yourself. Oh, and he said don't stress about it."

Rachel went upstairs to change. The pale blue dress hugged her just right, showed off her figure without being over the top.

Not too fancy-could wear it anywhere, really.

Simple V-neck that showed off her collarbones. Sleeves tapered at the wrists, made her hands look even more delicate. The fabric felt like nothing.

When she came back down, even Matt did a double-take.

"Miss Leroix, ready to go?"

Rachel got in the car, fingers running over the dress fabric.

It smelled faintly of cedar-exactly like Nicolas.

"Matt," she said suddenly, "got anything to... cover my face with?"

Matt caught her eye in the rearview mirror, totally getting it.

"Mr. Rothschild's got you covered."

At the next red light, he reached into the glove compartment and handed her another box.

Inside was a pale blue silk scarf, same material as the dress.

The edges had the same intricate wave patterns. Rachel traced them with her fingers, feeling her eyes get

hot.

He'd thought of everything.

"Mr. Rothschild said if you don't want to show your face yet, you could use this," Matt's voice had this amused tone. "He picked it out himself."

Rachel wrapped the scarf around her head a couple times, just her eyes showing.

They pulled into the parking garage. Thought they were early, but the reporters beat them to it.

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Soon as they saw the fancy car, journalists swarmed like vultures. Camera flashes going off everywhere, microphones practically scratching the windows.

“You a contestant?”

“Can we get an interview?”

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“What do you think about your chances?”

Matt’s face darkened. “Miss Leroix, stay in the car. I’ll deal with these guys.”

Rachel nodded, watching Matt get out. The reporters mobbed him immediately.

“Who’s in the car?”

“Come on, just a quick interview?”

Matt smiled, but his tone was steel. “Sorry, but the lady’s not doing interviews.”

“Why not? She hiding something?” one reporter pushed?

“Please focus on the actual competition. My lady’s privacy isn’t up for discussion. Thanks.”

Matt was getting overwhelmed, so Rachel opened her door and stepped out.

There she was in that pale blue dress, face covered except for her eyes.

The reporters froze for a second, then came at her like sharks.

“What’s your contestant number?”

“Why the face covering? You got something to hide?”

The questions were brutal. Matt’s expression went ice-cold. “My lady has sensitive skin-can’t handle direct sunlight. That’s why the scarf.”

The reporters weren’t buying it, shooting each other looks.

One of them actually pushed past Matt, shoving a microphone right in Rachel's face. "How about sharing your design philosophy?"

Matt threw himself between them, using his arms to block the aggressive crowd. His voice turned deadly serious: "Sorry, but you're looking at Miss Rothschild-of the New York Rothschild family."

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The reporters went dead silent.

The New York Rothschild family. Nicolas Rothschild-that titan of the business world.

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Nobody wanted to mess with the Rothschilds, especially when this "Miss Rothschild" clearly wasn't even a contestant.

"Sorry, didn't mean to bother you."

"We'll get out of your way."

The reporters scattered like cockroaches, clearing a path for Rachel.

Matt escorted her into the venue, and only relaxed once he was sure no reporters had followed them.

"Miss Leroix, sorry about that whole-".

Rachel shook her head, eyes twinkling with amusement. "You did great. The Rothschild name definitely comes in handy."

Just then, another black sedan pulled up.

The door opened and Sophie stepped out in four-inch heels, moving with practiced grace.

She wore a silver gown with flawless makeup, though it couldn't quite hide the exhaustion in her eyes.

The reporters immediately swarmed like sharks smelling blood.

"Miss Leroix, care to explain the vote manipulation scandal?"

"Do you think it's fair that the organizers kept you in the competition?"

"Any truth to rumors about financial backers supporting you?"

Sophie's face went ghost white. She stumbled backward, nearly twisting her ankle in those heels.

A lean hand caught her waist.

Jaxon stepped out of the car, his gaze cutting through the crowd like a blade,

"Gentlemen," his eyes swept over each reporter, "give the lady some space."

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The reporters hesitated, but seeing Jaxon's face made them even more excited.

"Mr. Rothschild! We've heard about your relationship with Miss Leroix-what exactly is going on between

you two?"

"Are you here to support her?"

“Is it true you’re engaged, like the rumors say?”

The question made Sophie’s whole body tense with excitement.

Jaxon smiled slightly, but his eyes were ice-cold. “Miss Leroix and I are old friends. I’m just here to cheer her on.”

He paused. “As for anything else, no comment.”

Sophie froze, managing an awkward smile.

Their relationship summed up as “no comment”?

Jaxon ignored the reporters and strode toward the venue, keeping Sophie close.

The journalists tried to follow but security blocked them.

Sophie gripped Jaxon’s arm tight, voice shaking. “Jaxon, thank you...”

Jaxon glanced down at her, but his gaze drifted past her shoulder, scanning the crowd.

When he’d gotten out of the car, he’d caught sight of someone in a pale blue dress who looked familiar...

“Don’t mention it.” His eyes kept searching, clearly distracted.

Sophie didn’t notice his preoccupation, still lost in her own gratitude. “I knew you wouldn’t abandon me.”

Jaxon didn’t respond because he’d spotted that figure again-just for a second before she disappeared around a corner.

Pale blue gown, silk scarf wrapped around her head like armor,

Could that really be... Rachel?

Jaxon's heart started racing.

"Jaxon, what are you looking at?" Sophie followed his gaze but only saw an empty hallway.

"Nothing," Jaxon pulled his attention back. "Let's go."

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He guided Sophie into the venue, mind already working.

If "Daughter of the Sea" really was Rachel, then this competition was about to get very interesting.

And finally-finally-he'd see Rachel again.

After Matt led her to the green room, Rachel pulled off her veil.

According to Matt, Nicolas had specifically contacted the organizers to reserve this room for her.

So she'd used his connections to get special treatment.

She didn't mind pulling strings. If you had connections, why not use them?

She picked up her phone and sent Nicolas a quick message.

"Thanks for the gifts. I love them."

Nicolas replied almost immediately: "Glad you like them."

She walked to the window, watching the crowd below.

The room was on the third floor with a perfect view of the scene outside.

Suddenly, she spotted Sophie clinging to Jaxon's arm as they headed upstairs.

Sophie's movements looked weak and unsteady-without Jaxon supporting her, she'd probably collapse.

Amazing how much Sophie had worn herself down in just a few days.

Knock knock.

"Miss Leroix, the competition's about to start," Matt's voice came through the door.

"Coming." Rachel took a deep breath, rewrapped the scarf around her head, grabbed her purse, and headed

for the door.

Matt was waiting in the hallway. Once she emerged, he escorted her toward the competition area.

The corridor buzzed with activity. Rachel kept her head down, trying to avoid contact with anyone.

Center stage featured ten design stations arranged in perfect rows, each equipped with exquisite tools and

materials.

The audience filled every seat, camera flashes popping constantly in the media section.

13:57

He Stole My Ticket. I Flew Private: Revenge Served Sky Higli

58.1%

Rachel found a seat toward the edge.

Looking around, she noticed Sophie positioned front and center, her gown practically glowing under the

lights.

“Contestants, please prepare yourselves,” a staff member announced. “We’re about to begin.”

Rachel adjusted her scarf, making sure only her eyes were visible.

She could feel curious stares from the other contestants, but nobody recognized her as “Daughter of the Sea.”

The stage lights dimmed, then blazed back to life, illuminating Maëlys in the center.

She wore a sharp black suit, microphone in hand.

•

“Ladies and gentlemen, media friends, welcome to the finals!” Maëlys’s voice boomed through the theater.

“After rigorous selection, ten top designers have emerged. Now, let’s meet them one by one!”

Spotlights swept across the contestant area.

Each name called brought a contestant to their feet and onto the stage.

They started from the bottom rankings, building excitement as they worked their way up.

Nine contestants had been revealed during the preliminaries, but the author of “Ripples”-Daughter of the

Sea-remained a mystery.

Everyone was dying to know who she was.

But after calling the third-place contestant to the stage, Maëlys didn’t follow the expected order. Instead of calling the second-place “Daughter of the Sea,” she skipped ahead and announced the first-place winner:

Sophie.

Sophie blinked in surprise when she heard her name.

She'd been hoping to finally see this mysterious "Daughter of the Sea," never expecting such secrecy.

But she quickly recovered, rising gracefully and waving to the audience with a smile. Her gaze swept the media section, then paused at a certain corner.

That figure in blue... could it be her?

58.3

13:57

He Stole My Ticket, I Flew Private: Revenge Served Sky High