

## Chapter 773 Seamless Cooperation

"Davin, I understand you've managed ceremonial matters for the Griffiths family before—weddings, funerals, that sort of thing?" Elliana asked.

Seeing Elliana shift topics so smoothly, Davin recognized the gesture for what it was: she wasn't going to punish him for his earlier deception. Relief washed through him, quiet but unmistakable. He arranged his features into a professional smile. "Yes. How may I assist you?"

"I need you to oversee Maxine's funeral," Elliana said, her voice carrying the unmistakable weight of command. "I'm not a Griffiths by blood, and I wasn't raised in your traditions. There are still customs I don't understand. As the new head of this family, I want Maxine laid to rest with proper dignity—exactly as tradition demands. I'm placing these arrangements in your hands."

Davin inclined his head. "Consider it done. I'll give this matter my complete attention."

Elliana nodded and then turned to Anita. "Do you have any particular requests?"

"Handle it as you think best. I trust your judgment," Anita replied, her smile radiating warmth. She had been watching Elliana's every word and action, and her admiration had grown with each passing moment.

At first, despite respecting Maxine's final wish and accepting Elliana as the new leader, Anita had wrestled with doubt. How could she not? Elliana was only twenty years old and an outsider to their world. Could someone so young, so unfamiliar with their ways, truly guide the family forward?

But now, watching Elliana take command with such natural authority, Anita understood her concerns had been groundless. Elliana wasn't merely capable of leading the Griffiths family—Elliana might actually surpass both her and Maxine in that role. No wonder Elliana had achieved



extraordinary things across multiple fields and even founded Thorn Rose while still in her youth. She was a genuine prodigy.

Maxine had always been headstrong, even reckless at times, but her instinct for recognizing talent had been flawless. Anita knew she needed to trust the successor her daughter had chosen with her final breath. The thought made her smile grow even warmer.

Sensing that approval radiating from Anita, Elliana returned the gesture with a gentle smile of her own before addressing the council of elders, "Do any of you wish to add anything?"

These elders, who should have been weathered by age, instead possessed an ageless quality that defied expectations. Rather than finding them marked by time, Elliana saw women who moved with a grace that seemed timeless, almost otherworldly. Had she not been standing in the council hall itself, watching them preside from the head table with centuries of accumulated authority behind every gesture, she never would have guessed these women had witnessed the family's dynamics for several decades.

Like Anita, the elders had been observing Elliana with sharp attention, weighing each decision Elliana made. They had all arrived at the same verdict. They were satisfied with her capabilities and prepared to follow her guidance without resistance.

One after another, the elders offered approving smiles. "We defer to whatever arrangements you make."

Elliana accepted their endorsement with grace and then directed her attention to the younger generation scattered across the hall. "Does anyone else have something they wish to say?"

The council hall teemed with women—well over a hundred packed into the space. Davin, who oversaw the family's administrative affairs, stood as the sole man present.

It confirmed what Elliana had suspected. Men occupied an astonishingly diminished position in this family's power structure. They weren't even allowed to cross the threshold into the council hall, much less voice opinions on family governance. Cole, her own companion, had been barred at the entrance without ceremony.

As Elliana's gaze traveled across the sea of female faces, a question planted itself in her mind and refused to be dismissed. What would happen if she dismantled these ancient matriarchal structures entirely and established equality? Would the clan fracture into chaos?

She had felt no urge to interfere with family traditions before assuming this position, but now, imagining her own daughter one day standing in this very spot, she experienced a fierce determination to enact fundamental reform. Without substantial change to the Griffiths family, her daughter would never know what it meant to build a true partnership with a husband, to stand beside someone as an equal. Any son her daughter might bear would face systematic prejudice within this family, diminished simply by virtue of his sex. She refused to let that future unfold.

But the Griffiths family's traditions reached back nearly a millennium, their roots driven deep into centuries-hardened ground. Tearing them out would be neither simple nor safe, regardless of how much authority she wielded as head. She couldn't afford haste or heavy-handedness. This required patience and strategic thinking—the methodical approach of gradually warming water until change became irreversible. She would introduce reforms incrementally, alterations small enough to seem harmless individually, allowing the clan to adapt without grasping the full scope of transformation until it had already reshaped their world.

Fortunately, her daughter remained young, years away from inheriting any real responsibility. Elliana felt confident she possessed sufficient time to rebuild the Griffiths family's foundation completely before her daughter reached maturity and took her place at this table.

Of course, no one gathered in that hall could have possibly guessed the revolutionary vision crystallizing behind Elliana's composed, perfectly controlled expression.

The elders had already demonstrated profound respect for Elliana's authority, and the younger generations understood better than to challenge a new leader on her first day. They answered in perfect unison, their voices blending into a single declaration, "We will follow your arrangements."

Elliana found herself caught off guard. She'd anticipated resistance, perhaps even veiled hostility, yet instead found herself met with seamless cooperation.

With Maxine's affairs resolved, Elliana turned to her next concern—the fate of Sophie and Aubrie. Her voice was steady as she addressed the assembly, "While Sophie and Aubrie did violate clan rules, they've endured their punishment for many years. The time has come for mercy. I want them welcomed back into the family, their past transgressions forgiven. Does anyone object?"

It was hardly a provocative proposal. To challenge the new leader on her inaugural day—especially over an act of clemency—would be monumentally foolish. This was a gesture of goodwill that demanded nothing of them, and no one present was inclined to refuse it.

A murmur of agreement swept through the hall like a gentle tide. "We respect your decision."

...

The matter closed without opposition.

By this point, dawn's first pale light had begun seeping through the hall's windows. Elliana had stayed awake for more than twenty-four hours, and exhaustion had begun to sink its claws deep into her body.

"If there are no further objections," she announced, fighting to keep the weariness from bleeding into her tone, "we'll adjourn for today. Our immediate priority is Maxine's funeral. Everything else can wait."

The meeting should have concluded there.

But just as relief began settling over the room, shoulders relaxed and people prepared to depart, Anita rose from her seat. "I have one small request," she said, her voice slicing cleanly through the emerging murmurs.

## Chapter 774 Disrespect

Elliana was about to leave, her daughter cradled in her arms, when Anita's voice cut through the silence. She paused and turned. "Yes?"

Anita's gaze dropped to the baby. "May I... May I hold her?" The request emerged hesitant, almost fragile.

Elliana had braced herself for something far weightier. A simple request to hold her daughter caught her off guard in the best way possible. She smiled and gently transferred the baby into Anita's waiting arms.

"Oh," Anita breathed, the word escaping like a prayer.

Despite having raised a child of her own, uncertainty flooded through Anita as she received the tiny infant. Her arms felt clumsy, unpracticed.

Nearly eighty years had passed since she'd last held her own daughter, Maxine. The memories had faded into a distant haze, blurred by time. The practical skills of motherhood had grown rusty, but the instinct—that fierce, protective maternal love—remained as potent as ever.

The sight before them was profoundly moving: a 102-year-old woman cradling a one-month-old baby, two generations separated by nearly a century meeting in a single moment.

Anita gazed down at Beatrice's delicate face, and her features softened into something luminous. Faint images of infant Maxine drifted through her mind like wisps of smoke, and for one precious moment, she saw infant Maxine reflected in the baby she held. She cherished the feeling, reluctant to let go of either the baby or the memory.

The others drifted closer, pulled by invisible threads, their faces alight with joy as they admired Beatrice. Like Anita, they were entranced by this new arrival—a little girl who embodied the future of the Griffiths family.

"Good heavens, the future leader of our family is absolutely gorgeous! I've never laid eyes on such a stunning baby!"

"Oh, wait! She's stirring—her eyes are beginning to open!"

"Those eyes are so big and brilliant! You can see the intelligence shining in them."

"Naturally, she's sharp! With those parents, she's inherited the finest qualities from several exceptional bloodlines."

"Without question—her genes are remarkable!"

Elliana recognized their sincere affection for Beatrice and hung back, watching them shower her daughter with adoration. But the offhand mention of genes sent ice shooting through her veins. She was a Campbell. The Campbells and the Griffithses had been mortal enemies for generations, their history written in blood. How would she bridge the chasm between their two families? And what did the Griffiths family truly think now?

While these thoughts spiraled through Elliana's mind, Anita glanced up, her smile radiant. "Since this little darling will one day lead the Griffiths family, it's only fitting she truly belongs to it. Shouldn't she carry the Griffiths surname?"

Beatrice, a Griffiths? Elliana's expression hardened. Though she had accepted the mantle of leadership, she hadn't truly woven herself into the fabric of the clan. In her heart, Beatrice belonged to her alone. Her precious daughter was no one else's to claim.

A wave of approval swept through the family members, their voices rising in agreement.

"Precisely! The future leader of the Griffiths family must bear the Griffiths name. If two leaders in a row don't share our surname, we'll be the laughingstock!"

"The future leader carries Griffiths' blood in her veins. It's only natural she bears the Griffiths name, don't you think?"

Elliana found herself speechless. She couldn't dispute their reasoning. The request was reasonable. She had given Maxine her word that Beatrice would one day command the Griffiths family, and claiming the Griffiths surname formed an essential part of that inheritance. But Beatrice wasn't solely hers to decide for. Cole held equal claim to their

daughter's future, and she refused to make this choice without his voice in it.

As though her thoughts had conjured him from thin air, Cole burst into the council hall.

The guards stationed at the entrance lunged to stop him, but he swept them aside like leaves.

The status of men in the Griffiths family ranked somewhere below contemptible. For generations, not one had been allowed to cross the threshold of the council hall. Cole's intrusion wasn't merely a violation of protocol—it was nothing short of blasphemy.

Cole radiated raw, untamed masculine power, his face carved from stone and fury. His presence instantly obliterated the delicate feminine atmosphere and ripped the peaceful scene to shreds.

The Griffiths women, spanning generations, froze in collective shock.

Elliana, however, felt satisfaction curl at the corners of her mouth. Clearly, Cole had heard everything from beyond those doors. He'd come to wage this war on their daughter's behalf.

"The nerve!" one woman spat. "A man violating the council hall? Even Griffiths men are barred from entering, much less some outsider! This disrespect is staggering!"

"Does he imagine that being the leader's husband grants him permission to trample our customs?" another snapped, her voice razor-sharp. "We cannot and will not tolerate this insolence! Remove him this instant!"

A more measured voice cut through. "He's the head of the Evans clan and the leader of the Blaze Wraith. Physically expelling him won't be straightforward. And he is our leader's husband. Some measure of respect is due."

"So we simply stand aside while he crushes our traditions beneath his heel?"

"He's Sophie's son! Someone fetch her to rein him in! Where has Sophie gone?"

Near the edge of the gathering, Sophie and Aubrie locked eyes, their

expressions mirroring shock. They were as blindsided as everyone else, but they harbored zero desire to intervene. On the contrary, they were absolutely delighted to witness Cole like this—commanding, fearless, magnificently dominant. To them, he'd never looked more devastatingly attractive.

When her name rang out, Sophie immediately shrank backward, desperate to vanish into the shadows.