Ruling 1801

Chapter 1801

Upon reaching the estate, Alejandro disembarked and went straight into the house.

Melanie tailed him nonchalantly. The quieter he was, the more it boded ill, like the calm before a storm. It was simply not Alejandro's nature to be so quiet, especially since the tirade Melanie had recounted to Jett should have lit up his fuse and caused him to erupt twice over.

Hearing their footsteps, Melissa sprung out to meet them. "Daddy! Mommy!"

Alejandro lifted the little girl into his arms and pecked her on the cheek. "Daddy's a bit tired today; gotta catch some rest. You will have to play alone today, Millie."

Melanie, however, waved at the girl. "Come here. Mommy will be your playmate today."

Alejandro later vanished into the stairs without asking her anything or even showing the telltale signs of an incoming altercation.

Melanie was starting to feel the dissonance of him being out-of-character. How was a man so known for his hair-triggering temper suddenly as calm as still water?

While Melanie held Melissa in her arms while sitting on a swing in the yard, Melissa suddenly asked, "Mommy, you and Daddy fight, right?"

Melanie was startled. “Er, why do you ask?”

“Because, every time Mommy-Daddy fight, you are sad,” Melissa replied matter-of-factly. “And you are sad now. I don’t want Mommy and Daddy to fight.”

Melanie regarded her daughter in her arms carefully, noticing for the first time that her little girl was growing up and watching them. Melanie had a duty not to show much of these nasty, messy, negative emotions common in an adult’s life in front of her.

“Mommy’s sorry, Millie. I shouldn’t have neglected you. From now on, Mommy and Daddy won’t ever fight in front of you ever again, okay?” she replied. “But you’ll need to do one thing for me, too—can you forget all the bad, sad stuff from before? Forget ‘em all, okay?”

Melissa closed her eyes playfully and made a show of shaking her head. “Abadada-kadabarara! Magic! Okay, I forgot already.”

Alejandro spied Melanie and Melissa’s interaction in the yard from his window and let out a helpless sigh. He was admittedly furious when he had looked for Melanie back there, but then he remembered what Arianne said, and he suppressed it.

Every time he was close to erupting, he would hear Arianne’s words again: ‘Just treat her the same way she used to treat you.”

This was how she had reacted in the past, had she not? Always so unaffected, so placid. But Alejandro wondered, would his sacrifice—him suppressing his rage and exasperation—really bring him Melanie's genuine smile?

He hated how Melanie continued to visit Mateo, but all the fights that ensued only served to widen the gulf between them; there was just nothing good to come out of it. Then, of course, there was always a mind-draining fatigue resulting from all these tiffs.

It was dinnertime. Melanie suddenly paused mid-meal and looked at him. "If you're upset and you wanna throw a tantrum at me, please be wise enough to hold that off until we're both in the room," she began. "There's no need to put on that stink-eye in front of a child. Millie is growing up; she can read faces now."

Alejandro froze in slight bafflement. "Who's interested in throwing a tantrum at you—or shooting you a stink-eye for that matter, huh? Sure, I'm upset that you went to Mateo's restaurant, but I thought about it after coming home and judged that there was no need to flip. Really, you can't possibly think my reaction, then, should be clapping my hands shouting 'Bravo!', right? I guess, as long as you're not seeing him alone, I figure I can tolerate this antic a little bit."

It was Melanie's voice that turned cold. "I wasn't seeing him; I was eating at the place he owns. Set your facts straight."

Alejandro massaged his forehead. "Okay, sure, whatever you say. Not 'seeing' him; just 'eating'. Happy? Good. I'm skipping the word game with you… God, you women are such a drag."

Melissa chimed in weakly, "Am I a drag too?"

“Christ, since when are you a woman?” Alejandro rejoined, amused and helpless. “You’ve only just graduated from being a baby, Millie. You’re basically a toddler! Either way, don’t be like your mother when you grow up, please? You’ll be ticking everyone off otherwise!”

…

It was Monday already, and Smore’s dream of going to school had finally arrived.

It was the first day of their son’s schooling, so despite knowing it was not yet his formal class, Arianne was still pretty worried. Her little boy might be unaccustomed to his new environment, which would end in a sniveling Smore howling about wanting to go home.

The reality could not be further from her expectation. Smore had been excited for his class since the morning just broke, showing not a lick of anxiety or skittishness. In fact, once he found himself stepping on school grounds, he immediately sprung ahead giddily, leaving Arianne and Mark in the dust without sparing them so much as a glance looking back.

Chapter 1802

Just look at the other kids! All of them were holding their parents’ hands as they regarded the foreign environment with childlike repulsion. Only a handful of them seemed to welcome the brave, new world sprawling before them.

Mark was already showing signs of bailing out of there. “Seriously, can’t you just bring him inside, leave some words to him, and then mission accomplished, we go home? When it’s time, we come back and take him home. Simple as that,” he suggested. “It’s becoming pretty apparent now, hasn’t it? He’s not the slightest bit ill at ease! I can’t believe your anxiety eclipsed his!”

Arianne rolled her eyes at him. “Don’t sugarcoat it; you’re just growing impatient! I can’t believe you’re impatient with your own son! And also, just because he isn’t anxious now doesn’t mean he won’t be missing home after a while. What happens if he starts to cry, huh? Besides, look around you, mister—none of them decided to just leave after dumping their kid here, right? Just be there for your son on the first day of school, Mark. Is that too much to ask?”

Unable to offer a repartee, as well as feeling he was above quarreling with a woman, Mark relented and continued tailing Smore.

Smore had not once stopped looking around, his curiosity on everything about his school evident. Along the way, some of the children began approaching him in a show of camaraderie. They were met with an expression of disgust that immediately settled on his face before Smore walked away, leaving the children confused and even dejected.

It embarrassed Arianne a little. “Mark Tremont, what is up with your son?” she asked in an undertone. “Why does he seem to reject playing with other kids? That’s not very nice. It’s actually pretty hurtful, even…”

Mark replied nonchalantly, “I was like this too when I was his age; I don’t see the problem. Maybe he’s disgusted by how ugly other people seem to look; maybe he judges others’ appearance to be below his standards. Either way, it didn’t matter how young a kid is—they will always want to associate only with people that make them feel at ease. They are no different from adults in this regard.”

Arianne reeled back from him. She stilled herself from the shock and hurried forward to grab Smore by his hand. “Slow down, whoa! There’s a lot of people here, you might get lost in there. Hold Mommy’s hand, come on.”

Smore, however, balked at her gesture. “I’m already going to school, Mom! I’m not a kid anymore! Holding hands like that is making me look childish!”

Arianne was aghast. “You are literally a child! That’s what the ‘child’ in ‘childish’ implies! For God’s sake, your school is just a preschool and you’re only three years old! Who taught you to speak like this, huh? I’m telling you, your dad took a break from work today just to see you go to school. Behave yourself or risk getting punched in the face by him!”

Smore eyed Mark before declaring, “I didn’t ask him to come. I can do this myself; I don’t need anyone’s help! I’m old enough already, so can you please get off my back? Urgh, and ‘punch me,’ really? So vulgar!”

Arianne was so enraged by his backtalk that she could only stare at him, stupefied. Yet, Mark, who was watching from the side, laughed. “Smore’s right. Punching people is wrong and utterly vulgar. That’s your mom right there, little man, being overly cautious. Women just love worrying themselves sick, don’t they?”

“Don’t call me by my nickname when I’m at school! I have a real name!” Smore immediately corrected. “I don’t want people to know what my nickname is—it’s too stupid!”

A very mystified Arianne leaned close to Mark’s ear. “That’s it. Did him being at school somehow unleash his true nature? I thought he was a quiet boy, but wow, am I wrong! Look at him inheriting your cocky, tsundere little quirk. Why didn’t he inherit your taciturn nature, too, huh? And look at the way he sasses his parents back—it’s your fault for not disciplining him at home, and now, he thinks he’s emperor!”

Mark shot her a sideway leer. “I have a hard time deciding if you’re complimenting me or bashing me, because it sounds oddly like someone is blaming me for everything that’s bad about him. Sure, I hardly discipline him at home, but that’s because I interact with him for far less than you do, which means… I didn’t teach him any of this. It’s either your fault, or this is his nature. No matter how I look at it, it’s just not my fault, and I’m not taking it up.”

Before the parents could finish murmuring to themselves, a very snappish Smore had already begun to shout, “Oh my God, can you two stop being such a drag and be quick? You two are adults and you’re still whispering secrets? Are you not ashamed of yourself?”

Mark and Arianne could only gawk at him.

Chapter 1803

Smore followed the rest of his class into his classroom. Arianne followed suit later to talk to the teacher, though she could not help but notice Smore incessantly gesturing to her to get out of the classroom with the same snappish impatience.

For the first time, Arianne felt so unwanted… by Smore, no less!

Since all the other kids’ parents had taken to watching from outside the class, Arianne—who was still feeling a little hung up—decided to observe her son from a spot where he could not see. Her purpose? Trying to see if the kid would eventually break down to tears!

As many kids were wont to do on the first day of school, they were unaccustomed to leaving on their own without their parents in the vicinity. Many were so downright reluctant to step inside the classroom that one might suspect that they thought they were being thrown into a prison where dangerous, terrifying things lurked. The teachers tried hard to pacify them but to no avail.

The longer Smore looked at the crying kids, the deeper the scowl of contempt in his face.

Slowly but surely, every kid in the class finally relented and made their way inside, though their cries stubbornly remained for a far longer period. Fortunately, the teachers, aided with the patience of a professional, tirelessly mollified each and every one of the kids until the bawls gradually lessened.

Unfortunately, this was also when Smore exhausted his last ounce of control. He walloped his desk, leaped to his feet with a loud thud, and bellowed, “Shut—up—! God, all of you! Childish, childish, childish! What are you people, babies?!”

The room was shocked into abject silence for a few seconds until one of the children broke out a choked sob—and the rest of the children immediately joined in to form a hurricane of keening, bawling chaos.

Poor teachers could only gawk at the sudden turn of events, stupefied, as the sinking feeling of their previous mollification efforts blown up in smoke dawned on them!

Some of the parents’ attention quickly seized on Smore. “Whoa, that kiddo’s something, isn’t he? Everyone else is crying except him… He must feel like the only grown-up in the room, huh?”

Neither Arianne nor Mark took that remark as a compliment. After all, thanks to Smore’s outburst, the whole class had descended completely into disarray. It suddenly seemed like a pretty bad idea to admit that son was theirs, so the pair opted to quietly retreat to a corner out of guilt instead.

The day moved on by the minutes, and soon, it was noontime. Smore was still as calm and unperturbed as he started, which gave Mark the reason to pull Arianne away. “What’s there to be hung up about? Look at him. Does he look like he needs your companionship? In fact, I’m of the opinion that his predilection removes any reason for us to worry. If you really are that goosey about this, you could always arrange Mary to take our spot as the observer tomorrow.”

Frankly, Arianne was not that worried, either. This was the best preschool in the entire metropolis, and Mark had already made his demands clear to the school’s administration. As long as their son remained within schoolground, Smore would always be safe.

The thing that really bothered her was why Smore was so different from all the other kids.

Mark returned to his office by late afternoon, so when school was over, it was Henry who accompanied Arianne in taking Smore home.

The boy immediately dozed off as soon as he got into the car. True to being his father’s son, he demonstrated a need to look graceful even when he napped, folding his hands neatly on his lap and leaning into the seat with his eyes gently closed. Anytime the rocking car knocked him slightly askew from his posture, he would wake up just to re-adjust himself.

The excessive fuss about it all prompted Arianne to roll her eyes. “Seriously, what kinda juju did Mark put in you? You’re acting more and more like him by the second! Well? Were you good at school today, or did you stir up troubles?”

Smore shut his eyes impatiently and snapped, “I didn’t stir up any trouble. I am different from those babies! Don’t you make sweeping statements like that!”

Sweeping statements?! Arianne was flabbergasted at the expanse of his vocabulary—and how he had used it correctly… He had just recently turned three! She still remembered how the boy used to spend minutes just trying to construct a complete, cohesive sentence, but now, one day at school later, here he was, using a big word?

Henry smiled in pride. “Young Master Aristotle is quite the prodigy—the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, after all. He truly is a child of the Tremont Family.”

Arianne suddenly wondered if she had ruined the Tremonts’ supreme genetics with her own less… sterling ones. She had been a rather normal child who threw quite the crying fit for days since joining preschool. She was far from the independence and aplomb Smore had demonstrated. And since she had not been putting effort into shaping the boy’s character, she was sure this was his nature on display.

Arianne had no idea if it was ultimately a blessing or a curse. If they managed to shape him well, Smore would be one of the most promising talents in the country; otherwise, he would be a bane to society—just like the many, many examples of spoilt, amoral scumbags who act with impunity simply because they thought they can with their inherited wealth.

Chapter 1804

By the time they reached home, Smore was no longer somnolent. He carried his little backpack and started on completing his first homework: an arts-and-craft project.

Arianne snuck up to him and cast a question, “What did the teacher teach you today, Son?”

Smore pouted in disdain. “Nothing! All she did was busy herself pleading those babies to just stop crying already—it’s just soooo annoying! And then she wanted me to play with them, too! Urgh, as if I wanna! Those babies should go home and go back to drinking their mommy’s milk!”

Arianne paused before replying, “Hey, hey, hey! Hold on a minute, young man. You grew up being breastfed too, you know? How can you look at your peers this way? It’s normal for young kids your age to be attached to their parents. Just because you’re different doesn’t mean you have the right to hate them for it, ok?”

Smore shot a side-eye leer at Arianne’s bosom and declared, “I don’t believe you. There’s no way you’ve got milk in there.”

First, Arianne was stupefied. Then, her blood broiled, and she leaped to her feet and dialed Mark’s numbers. “You! Come home, right now! This son of yours is driving me up the wall… He’s beyond me now!”

Smore did not look the slightest bit uneased. “Hmph? Calling for backup already? I’m not scared. Sorry you can’t handle the truth!”

Arianne took off her shoe and raised it in preparation for a good smack. Before she could do anything, though, Mary had stepped in and stropped her. “Madam! Young Master Aristotle is still young… He doesn’t know right or wrong yet; you ain’t supposed to take his words to heart! No, you can’t hit him! You can’t!”

Arianne’s blood was boiling so much, steam might as well be coming out of her ears. “Why are you so goddamned protective of him, Mary? If you don’t have the heart to discipline him when he needs it, one day, he will be our undoing! Just look at him right now! He’s openly dissing and looking down on other

people, and now he's sassing his own mother! You know what this means? It means this punk is due for a good spank!"

Mary quickly shot Smore a look. "Shoo, go play outside or something and stop ticking your mom off. Unless you want her to punch you in the face?"

Smore shrugged with a helpless expression. He packed his project and tools back into his backpack and headed to the yard.

Arianne was so livid that she felt like the thinking part of her had been completely shut down. All of a sudden, she was so jealous of Tiffany for being blessed with an adorable daughter—unlike sons, daughters would always be the apples of their parents' eyes!

After hearing about Smore's participation in his preschool's summer class, Tiffany immediately planned to send her son to the same school to be Smore's schoolmate.

Lil' P, who was younger than Smore, supposedly had a few more months before he should begin his formal education. But after bullying his sister into tears for about a gazillion times, even Summer admitted fatigue and defeat, so sending him to school early became the plan.

The Wests acted on their decision instantly. By Smore's third day at school, Lil' P was sent there, too. The two amigos were finally reunited with the only other person of their kind; from then onward, Smore would only play with Lil' P.

It had looked like a good arrangement at first, but no sooner after that, the school called Arianne. “Mrs. Tremont? Your son! He, uh, hit someone at school. Please spare some time and come to the school immediately!”

The teacher’s voice seemed to be quivering over the phone. Arianne felt her heart pounding along, and before she knew it, she had packed up all of her things before arriving at the preschool from Tremont Tower.

She found Smore and Lil’ P standing right outside the teachers’ office. Apparently, the two were being punished by being isolated in a corner while the victim’s parent was in the middle of a tearful complaint. The victim himself was absent; he was apparently sent to the hospital.

Arianne could feel a headache weighing on her. With an awkward, rueful smile, she asked, “Hey, uh, so what just happened?”

The teacher stood and dragged a chair for Arianne. She poured her a cup of drink before finally recounting, “See, a bit of physical confrontations between children is quite commonplace. The problem is that the one we’re currently dealing with is a bit more severe than its garden variety… Let’s just say some blood appeared. This is why we’ve deemed it very important to summon you for the matter.”

Perhaps sensing an obsequious undertone in the teacher’s manners, the victim’s mother erupted, “Commonplace? Commonplace?! Are you implying that my kid simply deserved to be hit like that? No one at home has ever harmed a single hair on him! Hey, listen, pal. I get that anyone who could get their kids signed up here has deep pockets, so tell me: why are you so openly biased to the other side, huh? Is it because they’ve stuffed you a few extra benjamins? Jesus Christ, you’re a teacher! Where’s your sense of shame?!

“If the real way of getting this solved is for me to offer a counter amount to you, then just fess it up directly offered!”

Chapter 1805

The woman’s harangue left the teacher’s face completely flushed. For a moment, the poor teacher stammered as words failed her.

Arianne drew a sharp breath. “Excuse me, ma’am, but what you’ve accused just now was pure slander. Look, they are kids about two- or three-years-old; they got into a bit of a scuffle, but there's still nothing a mutual cooperation between parents cannot achieve, right? You putting on this overdramatic attitude is a bit excessive, ma’am. Sure, I’ll be mad if my son was the one being hit too, but what’s done is done. The only thing left for us to do is to get together calmly and solve this together; a verbiage just isn’t helpful.”

“Yes, Mrs. Tremont has got a point,” the teacher quickly piggybacked on Arianne’s rejoinder. “Especially when it really isn’t as serious as you’re making it out to be, ma’am. Just a bit of a nosebleed, honestly. If the medical check-up revealed nothing serious, then I think some medical compensation as well as a private talk with your children should suffice. “Look, I’ve been in the business of young children’s education for many years—I’ve seen a lion’s share of similar incidents. Really, there is no need to fan this into an issue of hurt feelings and resentment, yes? Children are unpredictable this way, and we adults often don’t understand their reasoning. The only way we can play a role is in guiding them.”

Unfortunately, no matter how hard they tried, the victim’s mother refused to relent and concede. She reacted as if the wounded child was the emperor of their household, and any physical attack was a severe crime that should only be settled by a large sum of compensation and a retaliatory action—the woman threatened to persuade the pre-school into suspending Smore and Lil’ P.

Arianne was not in the mood to argue with shrews like these. From the looks of it, she was a woman in her thirties who dressed extravagantly enough to imply that she might belong to the upper-class.

Regretfully, none of her effort to look the part imbibed the couth and grace of the class she so desperately tried to portray; instead, she acted like a boorish harpy.

Arianne's head was just about to hum when Tiffany had arrived. Seeing her friend inside the office, the two exchanged an embarrassed smile. "Hi?"

Tiffany's first reaction was to question her son first. "What did you do? You literally just enrolled into the school and already you punched someone in the face?"

Before Lil' P could answer her, though, the victim's mother interjected with a disdainful snort. "And the mother turns out to be another young woman. Why am I surprised?" she gibed. "My guess is that they were young homewreckers who managed to seduce some rich old sugar-daddies into making them official. No wonder you girls don't deal with reason… You girls even have the audacity to put on airs despite being wrong!"

Tiffany's eyes widened in choler. In a flash, she had pushed her cuffs up to her elbows as though she was about to duke it out, Rambo-styled. Fortunately, the teacher stopped her with a well-timed grip on her shoulders. "Please, Mrs. West! Don't be heedless! This is a school. The children are watching. As the adults, we have a duty to set good examples for them, so please, do not make this physical!

"Now, since our parley is obviously unfruitful, then maybe we should talk in separate groups. Before the two of you came, I had a long talk with the other parent, so now, please stay with Mrs. Tremont while we comb through what happened. After that, we'll head to the hospital to check on the injured child. Is that all right?"

Tiffany trained her finger at the mother's face and glowered, "You better watch the way you talk, pal. Spew another load of bull again, and I'll slap your mouth off your face!"

The woman simply reacted with an eye roll of contempt before turning away.

Seeing Tiffany regain her composure relieved the teacher, who exhaled a sigh. “All right, I’ve checked our CCTV footage and here’s what it shows. During their class, her son had snatched Plato’s toy. Likely owing to how young he is, Plato couldn’t get the toy back, so he went to his best friend, Aristotle, and he… Well, Aristotle threw a punch on her son’s face,” she recounted. After a pause, she added, “Mrs. Tremont, if I may be frank—I think your son has quite an anger management issue. Beating people up isn’t the way to solve disputes, so please, talk to him about this at home, okay? You’ve seen how the child’s mother reacted, too, which is also… less than stellar, I’d say? Either way, we should all strive for concession in harmony; that makes things much easier to solve, too.”

Never in a million years did Arianne ever imagine Smore to be the instigator, and now, she was embarrassed. “I... see. Thank you for letting me know. I’ll definitely educate him about this properly.”

Smore suddenly sneered. “Educate me, why? I mean, only a dirt-poor hobo would snatch someone’s toy... What a barbarian!”

Chapter 1806

Arianne was starting to see red. Smore’s worldview was a little too awry for her liking. “Aristotle Tremont, what is the meaning of this? A toy can be shared with everyone; whether anyone can play with it or not shouldn’t have anything to do with how rich they are! Also, you started hitting people first, young man, and that makes you firmly in the wrong. If someone else started this, I wouldn’t have asked you to suck that up, but this isn’t the case now, is it? You hit someone first—and that makes you wrong, period!” she chided. “You know what I’m getting from you? I’m seeing a brat who’s so spared by the rod he’s turned spoilt. Just you wait; that will be rectified tonight!”

Tiffany quickly moved in and yanked her friend’s shoulder. “Whoa, whoaaa! Ari, chill! Smore was only trying to help my son because they are homies; ya know that, right? Now turn that frown upside down and y’all talk about this calmly when y’all go home, okay? No smacking,” she said appealingly. “I know

you're super pissed right now, hon, so let me treat you to dinner tonight, okay? Just think about it—if Mark was the one who's gotten bullied, do you think Jackson's could've held himself, stand there, and not rearrange that no-good-punk's face right there and then?"

She might be right on one hand, but that did not absolve the fact that Smore was wrong in his method, especially when said method was "punching a young kid in the nose." The more the idea settled in Arianne's mind, the more exasperated she became—there was always someone at home protecting Smore from his just deserts, and now, out here, Tiffany was doing it too. Arianne had no predilection for violence, and honestly, it pained her to be rough with her son. But a timely, interventive discipline could save several heartaches down the road, especially if those heartaches were from Smore being an arse who could do everything he wanted beyond reproach.

"Fine, damn it! Stop shielding him already. What, afraid I'd beat him to death or something? I just don't want my son to be some rich, sorry arse in the future," she retorted darkly. "My hands are off. I'll leave him to Mark."

After a while, Tiffany and Arianne went to the hospital with their kids in tow. Worried that a heated rhubarb might break out, the teacher followed suit.

The victim's family seemed to have all made a show. His parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents—relatives of all kinds and kins were present there, really—packed the hospital corridor outside. Any observer who knew nothing about what had transpired would have thought this was where the surgery studio was, even though all the kid suffered was a shallow wound.

The sheer multiplicity of the kid's family sapped quite some bravado from Tiffany and Arianne. The teacher had told them not to infringe upon the mob's vicinity precisely because they were bringing their kids with them, and the rabble was several their numbers. If their clash turned physical, the losing side would suffer a lot.

Unfortunately, even if the women tried, the mob seemed hellbent to dial the issue up to eleven, which was evident in the way they fanned out and walled them like a herd. The teacher panicked, but her professionalism acted as her scaffold when she braved the mob with the women behind her. “All right, everyone, please calm down! How is our little friend? Is he all right?”

The kid’s mother was furious enough back in the school’s office, but the father managed to eclipse her with his own flaring, roaring fire. Coupled that with his tall, large stature, he tugged the teacher aside with ease and bellowed crudely, “If you’re man enough to punch my son, then you’re man enough to show face! I don’t care if something happened to make it justified—my son isn’t nobody’s punching bag! Now stand up if you’re not wuss. I wanna see which brave twerp this is!”

Smore retorted, “Bah! Look at this big stupid gorilla! ‘Oooga-booga, I’m so ugly’!”

Arianne swore cold sweat broke through every single pore in her body. “Jesus H. Christ! What’s wrong with this brat…?!” Comment by Fo Nix: ? Comment by Lyndis Z. Yin: part of the full expression of "Jesus Christ" yo; his "fake" middle name! Probably means Holy?

The father was even more inflamed now. “Oh, so it’s you, you lil’ twerp? You punched my son, and now you insult me? Oh ho ho, the nerves! Let’s see if your mouth is as tough as you made it sound to be when I give you a nice, educating slap across it, then maybe I might consider letting this go!”

Arianne scowled. “Excuse me? This is a thing that happened between young kids. Do we adults really have to stoop low enough to join them? Really, are all of you so incapable of reason? Look, we’ll cover every medical expense coming out of this issue, and that includes whatever future medication or whatever your son needs because of this, however trivial. But to hit my son? I can’t allow you to do that, ever. Don’t you dare try to touch a single hair on my son’s head!”

The father jostled Arianne in ire. “And who the f**k are you? That son your little pipsqueak punched is a blessing I’ve waited well into the end of my thirties for, skank; you think he’s born to be your son’s toy? I’ve told my son since he was born that a man doesn’t get his face humiliated—he humiliates his enemies’ instead. Got that over your head, woman? Now that you people humiliated me, I’ll repay that kindness by making sure you're not leaving this hospital in one piece!”

Sensing the flaring hostility hurling toward the crescendo, Tiffany furtively dialed Jackson’s number but said not a word when it connected to avoid anyone noticing her. She simply let the threatening snarls and aggression speak for her.

Then, to make sure that Jackson knew exactly where they were, she sent him her GPS coordinates and hung up.

Chapter 1807

The commotion was sonorous enough that it attracted a doctor and a few nurses, but not one of them succeeded in de-escalation. The man was simply too drunk with the reciprocal, an-eye-for-an-eye justice that he ceased considering anything else.

“If you want to slap someone so badly, then slap me! If you’ve got the balls to do that, then come on, show me what you got!” Arianne snapped at the man as her patience ended in distress. “But this better be the end of this stupid feud between the kids, you hear? Once you hit me, anything that comes afterward is strictly between us adults!”

Tiffany swooped in and shielded Arianne. “What in actual hell! You trippin’, girl?! This guy you’re waving your red cloth at has the stature of a buffalo, for God’s sake! He can literally slap the living daylight out of you! Listen, hon, be patient; Jackson’s on the way. I’ve called him just now!”

Meanwhile, Smore—who had lived three years without bending to anyone's will—reacted to the threat hanging over his mother with a furious roar. "If any of you beat my Mom, I swear Dad's gonna kill all of you!"

The father, at the height of his fury and contempt, sputtered at the direction of the floor. "I don't even know who you daddy is! Lemme tell you, kiddo—in this part of the city, ain't no one ever means squat enough to warrant my attention! So, who's your oh-so-powerful pa, huh? What's his name? Tell me who I should remember to teach a lesson next time!"

Before Smore could answer him, Jackson's voice sounded out of a turning corner and reverberated through the hallway, announcing his arrival. "Oh, you're right about remembering names, all right—remembering who not to cross, for example. No one in this city means squat to you, Tough Guy? You sure about that?"

Eyes pivoted from whatever they were focusing on a millisecond ago to focus on the newcomer. Tiffany, in particular, threw her arms around him in an outpour of relief. "You—are—finally—here! Oh my God, I was sooo scared! They were so close… Sniff, sniff…. to going p-p-physical…"

Jackson patted Tiffany back to allay her fear. "There, there, sweetie. It's gonna be alright… I am here. No one's gonna touch you under my watch."

The man's arrival was not that relieving to Lil' P, though, who immediately dove behind Arianne's back, hoping that she would deter his father's punishment from reaching him. Smore, however, squared his shoulders and shielded his homie with his body. "Don't be scared! I'll protect you. It wasn't you who hit anyone—it was me! Your dad has no reason to do anything to you!"

Arianne reeled back and stared bemusedly into space. Smore's unrelenting faith in his capabilities was really just a corollary of his nature, huh?

Either way, Jackson's arrival allowed Arianne a chance to sigh in relief. Although the mob still outnumbered them, the possibility of escalation into violence had now become notably less certain now.

After getting the gist of why the conflict started, Jackson turned to the doctor-in-charge. "Kid's fine, right?"

"No severe problems found at all," she replied matter-of-factly. "You see, the nose has always been the… well, one of the squishiest parts of the face; any contact with it could easily cause it to bleed. Either way, we've administered appropriate treatment as well as performed a thorough inspection on his brain. No problem whatsoever."

Jackson stretched his lips into a brief smile. "Cool, thank you. Don't fret about this thing going on between us. We'll settle this privately."

He turned to the father. "It's uncivilized to cause a scene in a place like the hospital, no? Let's take this outside."

The man was hardly perturbed. "Whatever you like, princess. Better in an open space, too; I don't have to be restrained in teaching you douchebags how to show some respect. Meet you at the opening right outside the door so that anyone beaten to a near-death pulp is at least a stone's throw away from the emergency room, eh? You little sh*t, hurt my son and thought a little bit of cash is enough for this to be over with, din'ja? Then I'll beat the sh*t outta you, too, and then throw some cash on your face to call this a truce!"

A smug smile of contempt shadowed the corner of Jackson's quiet lips. Wordlessly, he turned away and started toward the destination.

Arianne, Tiffany, the children, and the hapless teacher, whose face was completely strewn with worry, trailed behind the group. "Are you sure this is gonna be all right? There's a lot of them, though… Goodness, where on Earth did this family's sense go? For them to think it's right to just… stubbornly burgeon a childish rough-and-tumble into a bona fide fray between supposedly mature adults! Gee, do they really believe they're the only ones that see their kid as this precious pumpkin in the world?"

"Huh, don't think I've ever seen them either. Their faces don't look like they belong to any big gun, that's for sure," Tiffany chimed in under her breath.

Arianne understood her implication. Anyone who was important and influential enough to be recognized as "the big guns" would have recognized Jackson immediately. The social circle of the elite one-percenter was neither small enough to be counted in one hand nor large enough to have members Arianne had never seen before; birds of a feather flock together, after all, so members of the circle had always been the same few familiar faces.

Everyone involved was finally outside the entrance to the hospital. The victim's father began without any preamble by extending an accusatory finger at Jackson.

Before he could make his badass boast, though, Jackson had caught the man's arm, dragged him close, and thrown him over his shoulder.

As the ground broke the man's fall, Jackson sneered, "Don't you point that finger of yours at me… Unless you want your entire hand to be crippled."

Chapter 1808

That single over-the-shoulder throw seemed to have thrown the father's bravado out of his skull. He laid on the ground, stunned for a few seconds, before scrambling to his feet. "You… You f**king cheated! You snuck on me!"

Jackson flicked a loose strand of his bangs away from his forehead, nonchalant. "Meh, you were just slow. You're welcome to try pointing at me again if you don't believe me. Personally? I maintain it's best to talk this out, but hey, if you want a tussle, who am I to deny ya'? Honestly, Jackson West has never lost to anyone in a fight."

Jackson… West? A strange, foggy sense of familiarity surfaced in the father's mind. He seized onto the vagueness and tried to conjure more details, but regrettably, the man turned out to have a skull several times too large for his brain. "Pahhh, you can be Jackie East or North or whatever for all I care! I can point at you however I want, man; what're you gonna do about that?! It's not like I'm desperate enough to be seduced by your money, and I'm definitely not letting this unforgivable humiliation against my son go unpunished. I'm gonna knock your f**king teeth out, pretty boy!"

Jackson curled his fingers in the man's direction as though beckoning him to come closer. "After you, tough guy. Is this gonna be a mano-a-mano or a foofaraw? Suits me fine either way—whoever ends up cry-dialing 911 is a p*ssy!"

The father, goaded, was just about to bust out an attack when one of the relatives suddenly paled.

He yanked the man out of the fight and warned him in an undertone, "Listen, you don't think… this could be the CEO of West Industries, do you? He looks frighteningly similar to that guy… I heard the CEO's got actual fighting skills, too, and judging from the way he threw you down just now, I'm really starting to wonder if we've accidentally pissed off the wrong sort of person, man. What was the surname of that brat who bloodied Chubby Chuck's nose again? It can't be… Tremont, right? Mate, I ain't pissing no Tremont off!"

The father's face turned into a death-like shade of ashen. "N-No bloody way it'd be that coincidental, right?"

Panic was practically carved into the relative's face by now. "You better check if we've waded into a minefield, man! Don't go digging our graves because you're too dumb to realize sh*t!"

The father, skeptical, turned to face Arianne. "What's your son's last name again?"

"Why would you like to know, jerk!" she snapped.

Smore, though, made a smug face. "The name's Tremont—Aristotle Tremont. Come on, I dare you; try to touch me! And then I'll order my dad to cook you for dinner!"

Arianne spanked the boy on his bottom with an intuitive swing. "Brag again, and you'll be grounded for a month!"

It was too late. The father suddenly felt as though the ground had given out under his feet. A Tremont... On top of a West?! This was seriously not looking like mere coincidence now… was it?

Everyone knew how tightly-knit the friendship between Mark Tremont and Jackson West was. And this school was the crème de la crème in the entire metropolis, which made it a popular choice often scrambled by every family with any cash to spare. Under a backdrop like that, why would a brush with the famous Tremont's son be outside the realm of possibility?

Just this momentary reconsideration was enough to temper all of the father's rage in a snap. Quickly, he fished out a box of premium cigarettes from his pocket and handed it to Jackson deferentially. "Hey man, you know what? This whole thing? It's too wack to be obsessed about. Now that I stop and think about it, I gotta admit—I must be on crack to be this mad over what's basically some kiddies' fight, yeah? Honestly, they should sort this out on their own… Anyway, when I'm home, I'll definitely teach my brat a good lesson about not starting trouble with other people, you bet!"

Jackson did not accept his gift. "No offense, but I stopped smoking ages ago. But I digress. See, isn't this so much better? It was never a big deal from the get-go, but you had to go ballistic over that nothingburger… and now I wasted valuable time coming here."

The father quickly nodded. "Oh yes, most definitely! This was my fault for sh*t sure. Er, just curious, sir… You're the CEO of West Industries, aren't you?"

Jackson cocked an eyebrow. "In the flesh. But you… who? I don't recognize you, and from your accent, I don't think you're local either. Small wonder why you were ballsy enough to challenge me—not many in this city still think that's remotely a good idea. Business is a little difficult this time of the year, see. If you get too cocky with fire, you might burn yourself into a crisp. Know your place, pal. Just my friendly warning, natch."

Beads of cold sweat broke out of the father's forehead at the last note. Then, before he knew it, Tiffany suddenly shoved him hard.

"This is for pushing Ari back in the hospital, jacka**! Mark my words, if Mark Tremont himself were here, your payback wouldn't be as simple as this!" she announced loudly—before ducking behind Jackson's back in fear of the man's retaliation.

She swore to God: knowing you have the back of an almighty pugilist to duck behind is the most empowering thing in the world!

The corner of Jackson's lips twitched involuntarily. It was so like his wife to remember every single transgression someone made just so she could make them taste retribution later!

When the mother watched her husband's new pretense as an obsequious yes-man despite them humiliating him, her growing spleen blew up. "Are you people bloody nuts? My son is the one who's the victim, yet you're asking us to say sorry and repay you?! And to touch my husband with that dirty han—"

Her husband cut her sentence short with a hard deck across her cheek. "The f**k do you know, woman?! Do you want to see me dead so soon?!"

Chapter 1809

One of the few things in life that lit up Arianne's fuse was seeing a man hit a woman. The very act of it stung her eyes and carved a frown on her face. "We'll pay for your son's medical bills, and that's our last word on the matter. Excuse us, we're not interested in your family's internal debacle—and really, those things belong to the confines of your house, don't you think? To bring it out on the streets like that—God, it's just so embarrassing! Honestly, if we're being strictly objective here, then everyone's got fault in this. All of us need to go home and teach our children proper manners."

Unfortunately, Arianne's plan was thwarted the moment they returned home—Smore had sprinted up the stairs to his room before bolting it shut from the inside. Arianne rapped on the door for a good few minutes, but the brat refused to answer. "Go away, Mom! I know you're gonna beat me up. I'm not stupid enough to open the door!"

Arianne could feel her hair bursting into flames of rage. This little twerp—he was only a bit older and already he was nigh-impossible to be disciplined! And now here he was, having picked up the habit of locking his mother outside the room!

It was not like Arianne genuinely intended to discipline her son physically; she only wanted to talk to him—correct him on his erroneous ways through good advice and whatnot, telling him not to go straight into bloodying someone's nose over a petty squabble. If the boy continued to act that way every time he met anything against his sensibilities, he would only create more mayhem than help.

Mark returned home around the evening that day, and Arianne welcomed him by slamming the full brunt of her unallayed rage at him. "You go talk to the fruit of your loins upstairs and do something about him, mister! Because apparently, teaching him to behave is beyond me now!"

Mark was bemused. "What… happened? I heard that you left the office earlier today before time, so where did you go? And what's wrong with Smore?"

In the same breath, Arianne recounted everything to Mark, whose silence and lack of reaction began to sow doubts in her mind about her husband's stance. When he still made no comment by the end, her ire was reignited.

"Okay, what's with the tight lips, huh? What, this whole thing's a trifle to you? Not enough to warrant your esteemed evaluation? I don't know if you've realized it, Mark, but your son is only three-years-old, and he's already acting like he's justified in dispensing punishment however he sees fit. Look at me and tell me you don't worry about his future behavior!"

Mark took a second before finally breaking his silence. "What grounds for worry are there, exactly? My father had taught me since I was a boy that I should never shackle myself from doing whatever I want as long as I know I'm capable of it. Why cripple yourself with these restraints and restrictions and limits;

what good are they for? We live in a dog-eat-dog society, Arianne. A jungle of prey and predators. Those who don't possess the slightest talent or power, yet bear the temerity to affront us predators... deserve nothing less than to be put down and crushed back into place. And now, look at me. There's not a single person in the entire Capital I cannot touch if I so please, is there?"

Arianne was stunned. So this… was the philosophy the Tremont Family had chosen to implant into their progenies' mind? It resembled nothing like the values she held dear to herself. She would never want Smore to grow up as someone like Mark—their son could be as good, talented, and successful in business like his father for all she cared, but she did not want to see him inhumane!

She snatched up her handbag snippily and stormed toward the door. While she was close, Mark's chiseled fingers closed around her slender arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

She swung herself clear off his grip. "I'm not gonna bother with this anymore, Mark. You can teach him whatever bull you subscribe to, including the one you Tremonts have apparently drilled into their young for generations! What else should I have expected? Tremonts are all senseless bullies anyway! You were like that, and now you want your son to follow in your footsteps too, don't you? Well, ex-cuuuu-se me for not buying your crap; I'm out! You do whatever you like with him from now on!

"For God's sake, Mark Tremont, he bloodied someone's nose at the age of three. By thirteen, he could be an arsonist or even a convicted murderer, you know that? And he'll have nothing to fear anyway, no consequences, nothing—why? Because the goddamned Tremont family and their 'influence' will always be behind him! Well, then, whatever floats your boat!"

Mark furrowed his eyebrows. "Is that what you see in me? Not dissimilar from an arsonist or a convicted murderer?"

Arianne did not miss that glimpse of hurt in his eyes, but her mind had room only for her ballooning, broiling rage and none of any other concerns. Without a word, she turned away from him and left.

Mark did not follow her out of the house. Glad, Arianne hailed an uber to the center of the city and wandered aimlessly.

A summer's breeze was not at all cool, even at night. It did horribly at assuaging the riot in a troubled woman's mind, too.

The car drove past a long lane where the periphery of Arianne's eyes caught Mateo's restaurant. She told the driver that would be her destination.

She strode inside and was immediately greeted by the sight of a packed interior. Heads bobbed in and out of her view; there was not a vacant table in sight… except for the table she had once dined at the last time she came. Oddly enough, it was currently barren and excluded from its packed surrounding, as though everyone had agreed not to touch it.

Arianne, intrigued, went to a waitress. "Excuse me, is this reserved?"

"Oh, it is reserved… for you. Our boss has made it very clear to us that this is a table reserved only for his close friends," she answered courteously. "And since you've been here—I remember—and are a friend of our boss, would you like to have dinner? Just take a seat right here, ma'am!"

Chapter 1810

Arianne nodded. "The menu, please. Pass it to me."

The waitress asked offhandedly, “You’re here alone, hmm?”

Arianne paused for a second. Honestly, she had always wanted to bring Mark along, but she never found the chance… And of course, they just had that blasted quarrel that weighed her heart down now that she remembered it. “Yeah… I guess I’ll be dining alone tonight. Simple dishes should suffice for someone who’s eating alone.”

After picking her dishes, she asked casually, “So, is your boss around? Ever since the restaurant’s opening, he always seems to be around, huh? But he’s not around right now though… Why is that?”

“He’s gone out around this afternoon,” the waitress answered with a smile. “Not sure if he’s gonna return at night, but if you’re looking for him right now, you could probably give him a ring.”

Arianne flashed her a smile. “Oh, it’s nothing. I was just asking. Anyway, don’t let me keep you.”

Service was fast; her awaited dishes were laid before her very soon. Strangely, watching rolling clouds of steam and heat emanating from the scrumptious food in front of her stole her appetite away rather than enhancing it.

Usually at this time, Arianne would be at home having dinner with Mark and Smore. But today—

“And why is this fair lady dining alone? Tiffany and Melanie not joining you today?”

Mateo appeared so suddenly it was as though he had just phased out of nowhere.

Arianne, shocked, had to quickly recollect her thoughts. “Oh, um, er… I was suddenly craving Chinese food so… I guess I came here all alone? Haha, I should really bring them along next time, huh? A-Anyway! I thought you weren’t here at all! When did you…?”

Mateo took the seat directly opposite her and answered her half-jokingly, “Just now. Maybe I had a premonition that you’d be around this evening, so I returned, just in time! Hee hee. Oh, right. We’re gonna add new dishes onto the menu soon, but I would love to have the kitchen prepare them now for you. This is the best time for me to get a bit of your precious review, my beta taster!”

Arianne intuitively rejected his offer. “Uh, maybe I shouldn’t…? I’ve ordered something already, you know, and if there’s an excess of dishes, I can’t possibly finish them, could I? That’ll be quite a waste, right? Maybe… we should hold this beta-tasting thing off until next time when Melanie and Tiffie are here with me?”

“Oh, it’ll be fine, Arianne. Your presence here today is just what I need right now,” Mateo answered staunchly. “It’s not that different to have you test it alone, you know. Besides, it’s not like I’m gonna add this to your bill—I should thank you for your invaluable role, in fact! So, here’s the deal! I’m gonna get the kitchen to start right away!”

Arianne could not convince Mateo, so she relented. To properly take on her role as the beta-taster, she even refrained from eating too much of the dishes she had ordered just to ensure that she would not be testing Mateo’s new recipes on a full stomach and contaminate her assessment of a given food.

What she did not expect, however, was that Mateo had prepared more than two new recipes for her to try—in fact, there were about eight of them in total!

Arianne gazed at a table full of Cantonese food and smiled to herself, embarrassed. God, had she known this would happen, she would not have ordered anything at all in the first place.

Mateo's chopsticks dropped a dollop of meat into her bowl. "Try this first."

Arianne felt a little… uncomfortable by his invitation. All her life, the only man who had ever grabbed any food specifically for her had been Mark, and to have any other guy doing something similar just chafed her somewhat. Still, Arianne knew that he was only doing it out of excitement of having someone try out his new recipe, so she fought her discomfort back and ate it.

It took only one bite for the praise to spring out of Arianne's throat from the bottom of her heart. "Okay, this is not half-bad at all! Good, it's good, and it tastes so good! …Alright, I admit, I'm not Gordon Ramsey here, so I really have no way or great descriptions to fully express my assessment. But! I know one thing—I personally love this. Seriously, I need to introduce this to Tiffie and Melanie the next time we're here!"

Mateo's lips broke out into an earnest, toothy grin. He grabbed a dollop of the next dish for her again. "Okay, now this one."

Arianne willed her focus to come back to her before taking a bite and savoring it with her heart. She quickly noticed that every single dish on the table satisfied her particular taste and preference to a tee. Mateo's new recipe seemed to possess the ability to seize and rule her heart the moment she put it in her mouth. It was even addicting, since she could not help but fantasize about having seconds.

“It’s very good. This is genuinely good,” she said.

The joy in Mateo’s eyes seemed to have become even sharper. “As long as it makes you happy, try it all. I just want your honest, objective opinion; don’t worry that the truth’s gonna hurt me or whatever. Facts don’t care about my feelings, man—if the fact is that it tastes good, say it. If it tastes like seasoned mud, then just give an honest negative review!”