Ruling 1851

Chapter 1851

The old woman followed her out of the room a while later. “Miss Wynn, when you’re finally hungry, just tell me and I’ll make you something nice for that empty stomach. House rules, sweetie: you can move around and do whatever you like within this house, but you should give up on getting outside, you know? You ain’t gonna leave the house.”

“Are you a member of the Rodriguez family?” Arianne asked tentatively. “Is Mateo’s family the people behind this?”

Never mind how Geralt had promised Arianne that Mrs. Rodriguez would never trouble her again…

The old woman’s answer sounded as canned as it could get. “Sorry, sweetie, but I’m just an old woman who’s doing the job she’s been asked to do for money. I have no idea about this whole thing so you’re not gonna get anything of worth from asking me. Oh, but I’m handy with housekeeping duties—meals, cleaning, you name ‘em. Anytime you need me, just give a holler.”

Arianne was clearly not going to extract any information from her, so she gave up.

The night was long. So long that it felt like despair itself had stretched along with it.

She had spent the longest night sitting on her bed, watching the sky outside until the first crack of dawn. Then, the first ray of the new day graced the land… and yet nothing about the light gave her hope.

She had not eaten nor had a sip of water since yesterday. By now, she was both hungry and thirsty, and it was quite the torment. Arianne knew better than to die like this; knew that her priority was keeping herself alive. Only by being alive would the hope of returning home remain. Only then she could return to Mark and Smore.

Arianne had the old woman prepare some food for her. However, while she was chowing down, the old woman retreated to one side, gawking at her.

She felt mild discomfort. “What, you think I might choke on my food and die? Seriously, is watching me while I eat even necessary?”

The old woman slowly turned her back against her. “How about this, hon? You just pretend I’m not here.”

Arianne lowered her head and continued her breakfast, her mind racing. The mystery had thickened; her captor had not tormented her so far, and now they had apparently hired a housekeeper of some sort to serve her every need. Was she going to be bound in this house forever? For what?

If her captor was someone form the Rodriguez family, then her captor should act more like Mrs. Rodriguez from last time, completely controlled by their grief to the point of planning to murder her, right? Did that mean whoever was behind her abduction was not a member of the Rodriguez family?

…Could that mean it was one of Mark’s enemies? Could it be that they were waiting for the optimum chance to deliver that critical blow to Mark through her?!

The more Arianne thought about it, the more believable this particular speculation became-it must be an enemy of Mark Tremont. The sort of extreme methods he used must have doubtlessly sired quite a gallery of enemies, Arianne reckoned. It was only a coincidence that their revenge plan coincided with Mateo's incident, which meant that the Rodriguez family's suspicion should be removed.

After her meal, the old woman cleaned up her utensils and went to the kitchen. Arianne feigned bored curiosity and followed her. Other than herself, the old woman was the only other living inhabitant in this entire house; Arianne was sure she would go mad if she went on without having anyone to talk to.

The old woman heard her footsteps behind her and said flatly without turning to face Arianne, “You should take some rest, Miss Wynn.”

Arianne walked up to the fridge and easily yanked its door open, grabbing an apple. “Please, I’m not a pig. Or at the very least, there’s more to life than eating and sleeping back-to-back. Anyway, I get that you don’t want to tell me things, but it shouldn’t hurt to tell me where am I, right? Am I still inside the Capital?”

The old woman said nothing. In fact, she pretended not to hear her.

Spleen burst out of Arianne's chest, but it was not the time for her to express it. She washed the apple clean and bit a hard chunk out. "There isn't even a damn phone here! What do you think I can do even if I know where I am? 1 literally have no way of asking for help she said. "Besides, von have a family and kids of your own. Right? Then you'll know how it feels to miss your son so desperately right now... Every second lost without seeing him is like a torture to me!"

The old woman merely stared at her without saying a word.

Arianne took a deep breath to force the furious flames in her down. So, this hag had a mouth as tight as glue, huh? She was certainly difficult enough that Arianne could not bait anything out of her. Other than that the fact that they were the only two in this house meant that the old woman must own something similar to a phone to contact someone out there. She must have the ability to report their situation to the mastermind of this abduction.

She was just a typically-built hag. Arianne was strong enough to knock her down, right? Then she just had to find that phone and call 911, and this nightmare would end.

Chapter 1852

Any less desperate than she was right now would have made harming an old lady a gigantic “no!” to Arianne—but desperate times call for desperate measures. Who could tell the motives behind whoever her mysterious captor was at this point? Arianne was not going to just twiddle her thumb and wait!

At that thought, she scanned her surroundings to locate the perfect weapon. Ideally, it would be something that could bludgeon someone unconscious rather than outright fatal; even now, Arianne was not ready to have someone’s life on her hand.

Before she could even make her first move, however, the old woman suddenly spoke, “Miss Wynn, I can see what’s brewing in your head, and you’re spot on: I’m just an old, powerless granny you can easily take on. But my master apparently doesn’t want to see you as of now. He ain’t gonna just show himself to you just because a senior citizen died here. On the other hand, he will come to you when the time is right, guaranteed,” she intoned. “You have fresh, clean clothes in your room, hon. Go on, get yourself washed and cleaned.”

Arianne’s heart skipped a beat. She had not even moved a finger and already the old woman knew what was going on in her mind?

And to tell her to clean and get change—was it because she was starting to smell now?

She raised her arm in skepticism and smelled the mild but tangible sweaty odor from herself. She had not showered since someone had so rudely manhandled her.

Arianne tossed her half-eaten apple away and returned to her room, searching for that fresh set of clothes. Before she began her shower, she scrutinized every area of the bathroom. After making sure there were no hidden cameras in it, she breathed a sigh of relief.

The next thing Arianne did after bathing was to kick back in the living room and turn on the TV. It was the only thing that could provide a modicum of entertainment in this godforsaken house, as well as being the only source of outside information she had.

It was through the news that Arianne realized that Mark had been at the funeral on the day she went missing. Looking at images of how panicked he was instantly made her eyes well up in tears. She could not reach him through the TV's icy screen no matter how hard she tried. It was the first time Arianne had ever yearned so much to return to his side.

To throw her arms around him and draw him into her again—

The old woman proved herself to be adept at raising Arianne's ire. Suddenly, the screen was supplanted by pitch-black nothingness, prompting her to turn back and catch the old woman turning it off.

She still bore the same blank expression and monotone voice. “You didn't rest at all last night, sweetie. Now is a good time for some shut-eye. It’s better not to look at things you’re not supposed to go lookin’; don’t want you contracting the blues now.”

Arianne had been thought rather highly of her mental fortitude-since waking up to herself being abducted, she had not lost control of herself at all - but this was her last straw- Broiling, she swept the cups on the coffee table to the floor into a smash and bellowed, "Just who the f**k is doing this to me?! What the f**k does he want with me?! Tell him to get on with killing me already!"

The old woman, creepily, was not at all provoked. She simply crouched and picked up the mess on the floor in silence.

Anger overwhelmed Arianne from inside out. She picked up one of the pieces and sliced it across her wrist. Redness immediately rushed out of her.

The old woman was finally shocked. “What’s this?!”

Arianne quickly stumbled backward to avoid the old woman's touch. "Unless I'm mistaken, whoever this bastard is wants me to remain alive, doesn't he? Otherwise, why would I get someone to serve me with food and all that crap, huh? I'll be frank with you, ma'am, I can't bring myself. to hurt your any way. But what if die here, today, hmm? Will that bastard remained unperturbed enough to not show his f**king face?!"

The old woman's eyebrows were scrunched in the middle. "Bless your heart, have you gone bonkers? My¨¨ master told me I can't let anything happen to you... God, I guess I have to call him about this. In the meantime, you better not take the stupid way out, sweetie-death is final and irreversible. You'd lose everything... and you won't ever see the people you wanna see the most no more."

Arianne remained nonchalant, but inwardly, she was breathing a huge sigh of relief. Her gambit had worked perfectly.

Of course, she was not idiotic enough to end her life for real! Her goal was to identify the mastermind behind her abduction—and to determine just what on Earth his motive was!

The old woman vanished upstairs for a while before coming down again. “Master said I should help you with your wound for now. He will make his appearance a little later.”

Chapter 1853

Arianne cast away the broken shard in her hand and sat so that the old woman could tend to her wound. She had accidentally applied a bit more force than she had intended for the performance, resulting in a deeper cut than required. The silver lining was that sharp pain was all she had to endure, since the bleeding stopped without fail.

All this time she wondered when that scumbag would show himself. As she waited, though, sleepiness gradually conquered her. She slept not a wink last night, and when combining that with the psychological torment she had endured, Arianne lost the fight against her bleariness and succumbed to sleep.

Back in Tremont Tower, Mark was sitting behind his usual desk, his face fraught with worry. His eyes had never left his phone.

There was still no news of Arianne. That was despite all of the efforts of their search party.

The widespread, unsavory news about his conduct at Mateo's funeral was long below his attention; no, what drove him to nigh madness was the unpacifiable pain of losing the most significant part of his soul.

She had been there just minutes ago! Right under his nose! He watched her, he was there, so how? Who? Who cut her away from him?!

There was a knock on his office door.

“Come in,” he muttered gloomily.

Jackson opened the door and walked in, causing a weak glimmer of hope to flicker in Mark’s eyes. “You found anything?!”

His friend shook his head, blowing the kindling in Mark’s eyes away. “Then go back to looking! What are you here for?”

Jackson strode toward him and patted his shoulder. “Trust me, we are. We have never stopped looking. But right now, I’m here to tell you my working theory, Mark,” he replied. “This isn’t just any abduction case, methinks. To be able to take an adult woman away while you were watching her like a hawk suggests that the criminal was fully-prepared. According to my people, the car that had taken Arianne away from the funeral spotted a fake license. After leaving the site with Arianne, the car quickly got off the grid. It was finally rediscovered in a remote, unpopulated area, with the driver long gone.”

Mark hated listening to details like these; they were fanning the growing nightmare gnawing in his heart. “What else did you guys find out?” he cried. “I swear to God—as soon as that perpetrator is found, I will make sure he begs me for death!”

“Hey, man. I think you should probably think hard about this,” Jackson suggested in the most indirect way he could. “Do you have any enemies who might pull off something like this?”

Mark narrowed his eyes. "Enemies? There are plenty-or more accurately, more than plenty. So many of them that I don't even know how many exactly... But I can assure you that there are likely very few of them who dare take out their grievance this flagrantly I'll do my best to compile a list for you, and you'll help me investigate every single one of them. I know we will find him."

Jackson stared at him, almost speechless. “A godforsaken list? Goddamned it, Mark, ever regret making so many enemies throughout your life yet? Lord Almighty, this is such a severe lesson to learn, even for you. You should really consider avoiding making enemies, man.”

Avoid making enemies? Was that even possible, even if Mark wanted it? "Lightning always strikes the tallest tree," or so he heard, and he wondered if this was the position he was in Mark was not the type to start a feud but troubles and enemies somehow found a way to get him; it was simply outside his control. It always looked like he was the one who started it, but in reality, he was always just reacting

Once again, the night had fallen.

It was one in the morning. An exhausted Mark dragged his feet back home to his well-lit Tremont Estate. The house looked almost no different from two days ago and before, and yet the gulf between its past and present was too de to cross. The woman he yearned for was still missing, her whereabouts unknown, her fate virtually uncertain

Mark was terrified of his icy, lonely bedroom. Petrified by the ticking of seconds counting on how long he had been parted with Arianne. There was a void inside of him, as though his innards had all been sucked out of his husk, and now every moment was hell enough to make death seem like a better deal.

Henry, his stalwart butler, immediately greeted him as soon as he stepped through the door. “Mr. Tremont…”

Mark tossed his blazer to the man automatically. “At what time did Smore go to sleep?”

“Slightly past nine, sir,” came the answer. “However, it was not without a tantrum demanding for his mother. There’s no news on Madam, yet… And I’m afraid that as time trickles, her fate becomes fickle.”

Chapter 1854

Mark could feel his chest tightening until even breathing itself had become difficult. “Have any questionable people contacted us over these two days? There’s bound to be a phone call or something for ransom in a typical abduction, right?”

By this point, he wished this was about money, because at least he could have her back through an exchange of money. At the very least, that would be miles better than not knowing where Arianne was, or how she was at all.

Henry shook his head. “I’m afraid there is none. I’ve paid my utmost attention, and there hasn’t been any strange number ringing us. If I may, Mr. Tremont—you overtax yourself. You need respite; leave this to me,” he admonished. “I may be old, but something like this is still well within my capabilities. As long as Madam has a sliver of chance of being alive, I won’t even hesitate to trade my life to save her.”

Mark said nothing.

Any news would be good. Just any news, however small.

But there was none for him. All there was left was a long, grinding wait—the kind a patient with late-stage cancer took up while the Reaper came.

The kind that had only despair as its companion.

…

All the way in the mansion, Arianne had a fretful sleep despite her exhaustion. First, it was because of the strange environment; secondly, it was because of the quandary that had trapped her.

After hours of disjointed nightmares, Arianne woke up in cold sweat.

She barely sat up from her bed when she noticed a humanoid silhouette sitting next to her bed. Unpleasantly shocked, she grabbed a pillow nearby even if it made for a crappy weapon. “Who’s there?!”

The room was tenebrious. It might have rained a while earlier, because even the moon had abandoned the night.

It felt like a man—his statute was too different from the old woman from before that identifying his gender was not an issue.

Hearing her voice, the man by the bedside moved his body slightly. “You’re awake, fair lady?”

Simple words in a low, hushed voice.

Familiar—there was something familiar about it, and it intensified Arianne’s suspicion. So, this was the guy who had abducted her? She reached for the lights in the room, but the man grabbed her by the wrist.

The warmth from his touch seeped into her skin. She struggled against him anxiously. "Don't! Touch! Me! Who the hell are you?! Are you trying to wield me against Mark Tremont? Because if that's what you're going for... huge mistake, p-pal!" -

A soft breath reminiscent of a sigh escaped from the man; he sounded helpless. “No, not that at all… Don’t be scared. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Now that he spoke more, Arianne could confirm that it was a voice she had heard before… and soon, to whom it belonged to. She was shocked, bamboozled, and in disbelief.

“M-Mateo Rodriguez?! B-B-But you’re supposed to be dead!”

A dead man in the middle of the night, right in front of her—?!

She was petrified as her mind raced with Geralt’s words: Mateo’s thumb was severed from his dead body by his captors before it was sent to the Rodriguez’s residence. Mateo was dead!

But he was here in front of her, decidedly not dead! Was she… looking at a ghost?!

Darkness surrounding her added more force to the skyrocketing fear within her Like a terrified rabbit, Arianne leaped out of her bed and squeezed herself into a corner of the Wall just to put as much distance between the ghost in the dark and herself.

Then, when she had the chance, she quickly pressed on the switch connected to the lamp next to the headboard, and the room lit up.. Perhaps being in the darkness for the darkness for too long had amplified the strength of the light-both of them squinted at the same time.

A clearer look at Mateo’s face only made her hair stand on ends. Arianne was more partial to the natural explanation rather than the supernatural, which meant Mateo was… not dead? But how?!

Perhaps he read the question from her face, or maybe he had always wanted to give her an explanation. Either way, Mateo paused for a beat before speaking, “Yes. I’m very much not dead. All of this is really a scheme… My scheme.”

Arianne gripped the edge of her dress unconsciously. “But why? Why do this?”

Chapter 1855

Mateo’s eyes were bright—almost dazzling—when he looked at her. “Because… you.

“I thought that I would finally be able to move on after a hug from you. But when your body collapsed into my arms, I had a revelation—I can never move on; it’s impossible. At that moment, I felt as though my one true dream had finally come true,” he explained. “I demand more. There is no way I can let you go like this… So, I want to take you with me, to a place where no one knows us, and I will use the rest of my life to make you love me. I’ve already spent so many years bound to you; adding the rest of my life into it is a small feat.”

Arianne’s mind was a mess, but as she worked hard to connect the dots, the truth slowly reared its head in her own. “And Geralt Bernard knew about this all along, didn’t he? He helped you fake your death. He then came to save me from your mother when she abducted me, because he was privy to your scheme. The things he said to me—and that time he brought me to that so-called ‘crime scene’! It was all to make me believe that Mark did it! It was to make me feel guilty, to be frightened of Mark, to make me want to leave him. Isn’t that right?”

Mateo did not confirm nor deny her, but the blinding twinkle in his eyes were enough testimony.

Geralt was confident that Mrs. Rodriguez would never trouble her again because that letter told her his son never died.

Mark was innocent from the outset! It was Mateo’s obsession—his harrowing obsession!

Arianne focused on the man’s fingers at that thought. Just as expected, to complete his foul play, the man had severed his own thumb. The reason why the police could not find the captors nor the dead body was because there was never any of these things. Mateo was never dead.

Her thoughts went to the funeral. The look on Geralt's face when he saw her had been so bizarre; and the night before it, too, when that same Geralt had called her and given her a long spiel with an undertone of discouragement. But all that subtlety was missed, and Arianne went to the funeral despite his warning. This was how she ended up a prisoner here!

It took Ariannè quite a long time to recover from her shock, but the firmness in her tone was almost immediate. "You're not taking me; anywhere, and I'm not going with you. Over my dead body! You're the one who chose to trap your mind with this obsession for years San now you're gonna trap my body the same way? I owe you nothing, Mateo! And I've never wanted you to do any of this! You're the only one who's too stubborn to move on! and

“I have my loved ones. I have a home, a husband, and a son. You can’t take me anywhere! And Mark… He will eventually find this place and find you. He will come and save me!”

Hearing Mark’s name brought a blizzard to Mateo’s complexion. “Him again? Tell me, what about him enthralls you so much? I’ll be better than him by a thousand or even a million times! And I know, one day, you will find love… And I will possess your heart.

“Of course, I know that as long as I remain here, he will find me somehow—and very soon, too. This is why I’ve decided to move over these few days… I’ll be taking you abroad.”

Contempt filled Arianne’s eyes. “And how do you expect to do that? You’re a goddamned dead person in the eyes of the law, anyway. And I have no documents with me. What, are we gonna be illegal

immigrants now?” she sniped. “Your stupid fake death is costing you everything you ever had until this point! How is this worth jack?!”

"It is worth everything!” he proclaimed with not a wrinkle of hesitation "As long as I have you, as long as you're mine, all of this is worth the sacrifice. To everyone else, Tam dead. Nothing that used to belong to me is mine anymore but that's okay. I have prepared my new identity, and for the rest of my life, I will let you live in comfort and excess and happiness. Everything you want-everything that Mark Tremont could give you-I can, too! As for your, well, documents... they are currently in my safekeeping. So relax and come with me, my fair lady."

Chapter 1856

Shock stimulated her memory, and Arianne remembered losing her handbag when Mrs. Rodriguez abducted her. All of her identification documents had been inside. But later, Geralt told her he had gotten those things all “cleaned up”, which was why she had not…

…That was a lie too, wasn’t it? Arianne was only stymied from replacing her lost ID and whatnot because this debacle had been developing at breakneck speed since then.

Damn Mateo and his watertight scheme! Just the suggestion—that she might never see Mark and Smore ever again in her life—coursed into her chest before sharpening into an acute agony mangling her heart.

“No! Never—! I’ll never leave with you unless I’m dead! Noooo!”

Mateo let her hysterics roll past him without effect. He announced calmly, “You should rest; I have something to attend to, so please excuse me. Friendly reminder: don’t waste time and effort trying to escape this place, fair lady; it’s futile. When we’re finally abroad, I’ll help you reinvent a new identity, complete with a new name. That way, Mark will never be able to find you.

“Either way, If I were you, I’d waste no time immortalizing the scent and feel of this city for these few days… Because once we leave, see, we’re never coming back.”

He turned on his heels and left the room, locking the door shut from the outside on his way.

Arianne’s knees gave out and she crashed onto the floor, shellshocked and drained. Melanie had no idea that her childhood friend was the monster behind this inhumane scheme, did she? Mateo… He had fooled and played everyone around him like a grandmaster and his pawns; apart from Geralt, everyone else had been an unwitting player in his ploy. This was a testament to his darkly artifice!

Since coming to know about the truth, Arianne had stopped eating or drinking altogether.

It was her way of striking out against Mateo. Previously, she thought she was going up against one of the Tremonts’ enemies braying for blood, but now that she knew it was Mateo, the way to fight back had become clear to her: the best way to go against him was to hurt herself.

She refused to eat, but the old woman—the hired housekeeper—would eschew coaxing her and leave her without another word. After a while when it was the time for the next meal again, she would bring her a new set of fresh, warm food once more.

It was an uphill battle to deny herself the basal, human need to eat when a plate full of delicacies was sitting right beside her, more so when hunger was beginning to gnaw her. She managed to grit through it without succumbing, however, because she believed that whether she could escape or not hinged on this last-ditch protest she had left. It was a hunger strike created in the hopes that Mateo's infatuation

for her could ferry whatever remained of his humanity, and he would finally heed her desperate plea to let her go.

On the second day of her hunger strike, someone came to visit her. It was not Mateo but Geralt Bernard.

As the man was a co-conspirator to Mateo’s plan, to her, he was just as undeserving of her better temperament.

Geralt strode toward the window and drew the disheveled curtains open, letting sunlight spray inside through the window glass panes. It exorcised the repressive sullenness of the room somewhat, replacing it with a bit of hope.

"Teo knows you refuse to see him, so here I am, he explained. "I know what you're trying to do, but it's not going to work. If anything, it will only drive him into thinking he should skip town and leave this country with you sooner than he had planned. To be frank, when Teo first told me about his... master plan, | was against the entirety of it. It's so bafflingly audacious that it crosses into insanity. Not to mention it's downright cruel to you. But for some reason, in the end, I found myself agreeing to help... I don't know why. wonder... Is it because he's the most cherished friend I have?"

Arianne remained mute, deadpanned. She wanted a savior, not a shill.

Geralt poured a glass of water for her. "Even if you refuse to eat, you should at least have some water. In weather like this, neglecting to stay hydrated-coupled with your current, enfeebled body-will probably propel you to eventually faint and get sick faster. Of course, the problem here is that even if you've fallen ill, Teo would still refuse to send you to a hospital simply because he would not risk even the faintest chance of Mark Tremont getting a whiff of your whereabouts. At most, he would settle

down with bringing a doctor all the way here to you," he added. "If I were you, I wouldn't underestimate the lengths a man. possessed by passion and obsession could go. You won't win."

Arianne smote the cup away from his hand. “Even if I won’t win, I won’t lose, either! I’d rather die than leave with him!” she fumed. “And you…! You’re a forensic doctor! I can’t believe you would betray your profession for a friend like that. You should quit your job after all of this, because you don’t deserve to work in forensics! You knew the truth of whether that thumb was severed before or after Mateo’s death; you goddamned knew! But you lied to everyone!”

Chapter 1857

Geralt took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’ve lost the credibility to remain in this profession, which is why I submitted my resignation letter just yesterday. Even before you attended that funeral, I thought about rattling the truth out to you, yet… I cannot find it in me to betray Teo. For that, I’m truly, deeply sorry,” he explained. “I know your hatred is directed at me just as much as at him, so I won’t denigrate us both by trying to appeal to some sort of favorable impression in your mind. Instead, what do you say about a parley? You’ll begin to eat something, and I’ll help you pass a thing to Mark to let him know that you’re still alive.”

Arianne reeled back in shock. Was he not the least bit worried that she might seize this chance to inform him her location?

Of course, it did not take her long to realize how impossible it was to relay any useful information—even Arianne herself had no idea where this place was, let alone tell Mark anything concrete. One look outside the window and all she saw was a concentrated sea of verdant forest. Every unit in this environment around her was utterly alien; it was to the point where she began questioning whether she was still even within the Capital’s boundary by now.

Arianne mulled over the option for a while; finally, she decided to assent to Geralt’s barter. As of now, it really was the only way she could let Mark know she was still alive. At the very least, it could relieve him, however slightly…

Of course, she was not going to agree to this without some forewords. “And how would I know that you’ll do as you said you would and pass my thing to Mark? What if you lie to me, hmm? How on Earth do you expect me to trust you again?”

Geralt raised his hand. “I solemnly swear on my mother’s name, I’ll never lie to you again.”

By this point, Arianne had to believe him, however forced her trust might be. “All right… I trust you. You do this for Mateo’s sake; and I for Mark’s. Look, I know it’s close to impossible, but I still hope you could talk him out of this for me. Just tell him to let me go, please. I also know that, between the lies, you tried warning me against attending the funeral, so I guess that’s one piece of proof that you aren’t exactly as rotten to the core as he is.”

Under Geralt’s watchful eyes, Arianne ended her hunger strike with a small bowl of oatmeal. After a period of starvation, she knew better than to leap straight back into heavy meals.

Arianne had not brought much with her on the day of her abduction, so now all she had was her earrings, one of which she took down and handed to Geralt. “Pass this to Mark and tell him I’m alive. This… is all I need you to do, okay? You don’t need to do anything else. Tell him to not get too distressed, okay? I… I’ll be f-f-fine, I know I will…”

Her voice broke. It faltered into a choked sob.

Moved, Geralt replied gently, "I'|| definitely pass your message, but I can't hand your thing to him with my own hands, do you understand? Mark will start to suspect me. So, instead, I'll hand it to him through

someone else. Either way, I do my best to ensure that your message is conveyed to him without a word missed."

It did not matter who the messenger was as long as the earring—the message—was passed to him.

Before he left, Geralt told the old woman to take even more of a watchful care of Arianne. It was a precaution informed by one of his biggest concerns: Geralt worried that she would turn to drastic; life-threatening methods as her duress built. They might not have interacted with one another over a long time, but he had a nagging feeling that her backbone was made out of flint-Arianne was definitely not someone who would cave and give up easily.

No sooner than Geralt entered his car that his phone rang. He looked and saw that it was Mateo. He dawdled a little while longer before finally picking it up.

“Yes, Teo? I’ve managed to coax her into eating again, yeah. Am on my way out.”

Mateo went straight to the point. “What did she ask you to do?”

Frankly, Geralt had not planned to tell Mateo about their little agreement at all, but the latter managed to accurately predict her exchange, either way. He began to waver in his answer before Mateo continued, "Samething about ber character tells me that she wouldn't agree if she didn't get anything out of it."

Geralt sighed. “That’s right. She wanted me to pass an earring to Mark. It’s meant to let him know that she’s still alive.”

Mateo's refusal was swift. "No, this won't do! You have to let that Tremont think she's dead, you got me? Doesn't matter if Tremont believes it; we just want his conviction to falter and lose force. The sooner he gives up, the better. C'mon, Ralt—just help me one last time."

Chapter 1858

Silence befell Geralt. Was this how it needed to be? Had all that had happened to Arianne not been sadistic enough already?

His lack of words, to Mateo, spoke volumes about his conviction—or rather, its faltering.

"Ralt, there is no turning back for me," Mateo said. "This is the only time I stopped being a nice guy; you understand why, don't you? I just want it to be her and me. Us, together. But I can't make that happen any other way. It's she who didn't want to leave Mark! After all that I've done for her, she just keeps clinging to this… faith in him! I have no other way! There's only one way to resolve this, Ralt, and it's to rescue her from here!"

Geralt drew a sharp inhale of breath. "The fact that she never thought of leaving Mark Tremont despite everything is a solid, irrevocable testimonial of her love for him, don't you see? What good do you think dragging her away from him is going to do? You will never possess her heart, Teo. The two of you will be doomed to grind out the rest of your days in a hell of your own making, and where's the sense in that? Honestly, I've been meaning to tell you to lay this obsession to rest for a long time now—"

"No! Never! I will make sure she finds love in me! I will!" he shouted, already near madness.

By the end of the call, Geralt found himself once again agreeing to his best friend's unhinged proposal. This was where he was now—not even at the fork of a road to choose his action. Arianne was pitiful... But so was Mateo.

The next day, Mark received an anonymous package while he was in his office.

The memory of Mateo's severed thumb being received in a parcel was still so fresh in his mind that it stifled Mark from opening it. He was petrified at the thought that it could contain Arianne's finger… or even other parts of her body.

It was such a small, unimposing parcel. It hardly covered the full width of his trembling palm. It was also near weightless, yet when Mark held it, he felt like only sinking gravity was pulling him down.

He trained his eyes on the parcel for minutes until, finally, he decided to have Davy open it.

The problem was that Davy himself knew of the infamous severed-thumb-in-a-box delivery that had plunged the Rodriguez family into horror. Now that Arianne was also missing, his fear became debilitating. "M-M-Mr. Tremont? I… I… I d-don't want to open it! —I mean, s-s-sir?"

His cowardice irked his boss, who responded by snippily jabbing his foot flat on the poor man's butt. "When I say you open it, I goddamned mean you open it without question or useless trifles! What use are you if you can't even open up a parcel, huh? Get to it already, you bozo!"

Poor Davy could only stuff that lump of being wronged back into his throat. As if he had the right to call him that when Mark himself was just as terrified of opening that parcel! Heck, both of them were just worried about the same dang thing!

Still, Davy was more terrified of having his backside kicked again, so he swallowed his anxiety and opened the parcel… with his eyes closed.

When the content was out of its packaging, he opened his eyes gingerly and quickly noticed the absence of gore Relieved, he called out, "Hey, why is there only one. small earring in this whole bag? Yo, Mr. Tremont! Did you buy a single earring from Amazon or what?"

Mark’s heart dropped to his stomach. He swiftly picked up the earring from the unboxed parcel. There it was, wrapped in clear plastic with a folded note attached.

He could not help but ignore the latter when his eyes stuck to the earring that was so familiar to him: that he remembered its last appearance: it had hung on his wife's earlobe before she attended that fateful, cursed funeral. It belonged in a pair, but only one of them was sent to him.

He balled his palm and squeezed the earring within until its pointy tip pierced the dermal layer of his skin.

A few moments passed. He opened the note, fully anticipating it being about ransom.

It was worse. He recognized her in the handwriting. ‘By the time you receive this, I’ll already be gone. There’s no need to look for me; you’ll do better pretending that I never existed. From now on, focus on raising Smore into a fine, young man.’

His eyes could not be torn from the paper even as his vision began to blur. What the hell was going on?! Who was taking her away? How could there be zero clue to her whereabouts after days of search?

Why was it that when he finally received any lead after days of drawing a blank, all it pointed to was death?!

He rejected the notion of her being dead. It could not be! He would double down on looking for her—be it a warm body, or a cold, lifeless corpse!

Mark tried to calm himself down but his body betrayed his deepest sentiment—he was shaking like a leaf.

Noticing his anguish, Davy quickly poured him a cup of hot tea. "H-Hey, Mr. Tremont, calm down, okay? I'm sure Madam is still alive! I-I mean, at the very least, she has to be alive to write a note like this, right? W We should continue to look for her, ok...?"

Chapter 1859

When Mark spoke, his voice was quaking as much as he was. “M-Must continue searching… T-Tell all of our people that we’ll… We’ll find her no matter how difficult it is, no matter the cost, no matter life or d-d-death… I want her found!”

How close to the truth the parcel implied was already beyond his care, for the note and the earring had defeated his mental fortress. It had been days since anxiety became his companion in the dark, denying him his nightly reprieve and forcing him to turn to medication just to emulate some form of emotional stability.

Home had become the den of his nightmares. He feared stepping inside the Tremont Estate because being in there, with emptiness surrounding him, forced him into confronting Arianne's absence. Then there was Smore's questioning; he feared the boy's endless pelts of "Where is Mom, Dad? Where is my mom?"

Deep down inside, he had become just a mortified man who wanted to run away from everything.

Mark had not told Jackson nor Tiffany about the earring. Alejandro, too, was none the wiser. Ever since Arianne went missing, Alejandro and his wife had been pouring aid into the search. The last thing Mark needed was one of them telling him that she might be dead and that he should "give up".

Night fell. For the most part, Tremont Tower had gone dark except a single, well-lit unit: Mark's office.

He could not stop himself from picking up the earring and examining it with his most attentiveness, because it made him feel like some of Arianne's warmth had endured.

In truth, only the coldness of metal reciprocated his touch.

It was a simple diamond earring of a minimalistic design. A little pendant. Her favorite style.

Mark wondered if his focus had blended into hallucinations, because he thought he saw some letters on the earring. Though it was rather common to have tiny inscriptions on expensive jewelries like this one, they were usually just meant to describe the diamond's weight or its serial number.

This one, however, immediately seemed different even to the naked eye. He grabbed a magnifying glass from the desk and brought the earring to the brightest spot in the office for a closer examination.

First, he was shocked. Then, he was relieved as a long sigh escaped him. Someone had engraved these words on the earring!

It was a very fine print, clearly with designs to not be spotted so easily. The marred vicinity around the engraving revealed that whoever did this was clearly no expert, since even with the help of dedicated tools, the letters were rather crude and clumsy.

Still, it was enough to make out the word “MTEO”.

Mark knew exactly what it meant, even if more questions than answers rose to his mind. Was this Mateo Rodriguez's doing? But how could a dead man do anything like this? Or could that "death" actually have been a smokescreen, meant as a cover for a conspiracy?

Had the engraving been "RODGUEZ” or something to similar effects, Mark's suspicion would, nine times out often have jumped to Mand Mrs. Rodriguez. But the anonymous informant chose "MTEO"-the connection to Mateo could not be. any more direct.

Mark also knew that Mateo loved Arianne. If she was in his hand, then she was alive and not in any imminent danger. This was why he let loose a sigh of relief.

As for that note, he had two hunches of what it was: either a diversion forged by someone who deliberately copied Arianne’s handwriting style, or Arianne wrote it to serve as a red herring.

Still, none of that mattered as much as the identity of her captor, or the fact that Arianne was still alive!

Galvanized by ecstasy, he called Jackson’s number straight away.

Ever since Arianne had gone missing, Jackson had been losing quite some sleep for days. Today was—supposedly—different, though, because he managed to rest earlier than usual. Of course, that ended abruptly by his phone’s ringing.

Seeing that it was from Mark, Jackson knew better than to dawdle. He rolled out of his bed, clambering as he changed into his clothes, and answered, “Mark? You’ve got news? I’m going over to you as we speak—”

“Mateo Rodriguez isn’t dead!” came a quiet, but firm voice. “He’s the one who abducted Arianne!”

Half of Jackson's grogginess evaporated. The f**k?! You're not sleep-talking, are you? Mateo's dead, man. Everyone and their mom know that! You sure this isn't just you, you know, projecting?" he responded. "Mark, my man, I know you're devastated by Arianne's disappearance. But... you better have concrete proof for something like this, you get me?"

Chapter 1860

Tiffany was roused from her slumber by the commotion. “Mm? News of Ari? Oh, uh, wait! I’m—yawn—coming with, um, you...?”

Jackson took one glance at her eyelids, which refused to open, and tucked her back under the sheet. “It’s all right, honey. Go back to bed,” he cooed. “I can go there alone; I’m only heading to Mark’s place, anyway. But you, sweetheart? You better get enough sleep. Remember, we’ve got our brats to take care of during the day. Better not worry yourself dead over Arianne, okay?”

Without further ado, Jackson rushed to the Tremont Tower after the call. Turned out, a short drive was enough to make a man perk up and feel refreshed.

“Is Mateo really, well... not-dead?” he asked straight off the bat.

Mark passed the earring to him. “An anonymous sender delivered this to our doorstep today. It was one half of the pair Arianne was wearing on the day she went missing. I bought it for her, so I distinctly remember that there was no strange four-letter word on it during purchase. But now? The one delivered to me had an extra ‘M-T-E-O’ engraved on it. In addition to that, there was a note attached. Come, over here.”

Jackson took the jewelry from him and peered at it through Mark’s magnifying glass, and sure enough, he found the inscription of ‘MTEO’. After reading the note, he believed Mark’s conjecture. “Man... You don’t think this Mateo’s been planning this sh*t since the beginning, do you? Dude’s f**king insane—he’s so gung-ho about stealing Arianne for himself that he threw everything of his current life away and played frickin’ possum! He’s the only heir to the Rodriguez family, man! Man dooms himself from being with his family in the open on top of giving up this massive fortune that was supposed to be his birthright! The f**k is wrong with him? Christ!

“And if he wants to hide Arianne from prying eyes and ears, then he can’t stay in the Capital. Hell, he can’t even stay in the country for too long! Jesus Christ, we’re dealing with a loco!”

Compared to the abysmal despair he had felt back when there was no clue at all, this single lead had lifted much of the burdens off Mark's. shoulders. "Doesn't matter why he's doing it; all I know is that Mateo would never hurt Arianne. This means she's still alive and well-and we'll damn well find her that way. Well, well, well. This is turning out to be a far favorable development than the worst I've envisaged," he said. "From now on. redirect all attention to airports nationwide, big, and small. As long as it's a route that could take someone abroad, I want all eyes on them! Let's see how that bastard escapes me from under my nose!"

Jackson patted his back. "Mateo's legally dead by now, so he's gonna need time to find a way to skip town with her. Even if he's trying to go as soon as possible, for now, he must still be here, somewhere... So don't worry, man; I've got you covered. I'm gonna order my people to watch these places like they're goddamned hawks," he replied. "Now that we know Arianne's alive you should be relieved enough to take a good rest, right? I mean it, man; don't skip those shut-eyes. With Arianne gone and you avoiding home, how sad and alone must Smore be, huh? Just promise me that you're gonna go home tonight and have a good night's sleep. Then tomorrow, the battle resumes for you. In the meantime, I'll have my people on high alert starting tonight, so relax."

Mark’s gaze seemed to pierce Jackson’s face for about two seconds before he suddenly murmured, “Thank you, Jackson. Work’s holding me captive even at this moment too…So, honestly? To you, my friend, I have nothing but gratitude.”

Jackson could feel his skin crawling right on cue Er, excuse me?! The hell are you spouting? Man, you really think I'm not gonna lend you a hand in something this massive and important? 'Sides, I think your sugary gratitude speech should be reserved for Alejandro's ears, you know? Dude might be quiet, but he's been helping you in the dark-yeah, surprise, surprise; I've been talking to that guy about this privately for a while. Which reminds me... Now that we've got a lead, I gotta' tell him this later, too. Either way, you better not start acting out-of-character when you're with me, man. Don't weird me out!" he quipped.

Mark said nothing, though secretly, small but earnest gratitude for Alejandro’s help blossomed quietly in his heart. The two of them might still be bickering enemies, but now, he genuinely felt no revulsion whenever he considered Melanie as his sister-in-law.

The next morning, Mateo muttered something to the old woman in a rush as soon as he stepped through the door of the mansion. After that, the latter began to tell Arianne to pack up, even if the woman had almost nothing with her. The only belonging she had when she was forcibly stowed away was the mourning dress she wore that day, so the old woman had only needed to pack a few more new clothes for her.