Ruling 1871

Chapter 1871

After saying that, Alejandro got up and was just about to leave when Tiffany suddenly asked, “Where’s Melanie? I haven’t seen her recently, and she didn’t even reply to my texts.”

Alejandro paused for a moment. “She doesn’t have the courage to meet you all. After all… Mateo was her childhood friend and she had even suspected Mark whilst being blinded from the truth. Plus, she blames herself for not staying beside Arianne on the day of the funeral.”

Tiffany helplessly said, “No one’s blaming her. If it were me, I would also be blinded by Mateo. He was really good at hiding his thoughts; when Ari and I interacted with him those few times, neither of us could tell that the person he fancied was Ari, even going as far as to cause such a huge commotion.”

Alejandro shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do, perhaps she’ll recover after some time.”

Tiffany was slightly angry. “She’s your woman, how could there be nothing you could do? You should console her and persuade her, that’s your job! Can you not let her feel that being with you was her biggest mistake right till the end? At least do something humane for once!”

Alejandro suddenly turned silent. ‘Does she regret being with me because of how I treated her in the past?’

Jackson grabbed onto Tiffany’s sleeve and mumbled, “Why do you care so much?”

Alejandro suddenly let out a heartfelt laugh. “I understand, I’ll try and persuade her. I’m leaving now.”

Jackson was especially unhappy because of how Alejandro would be so obedient towards Tiffany despite his hot temper; no one would hope for their woman to be in someone else’s mind. However, Jackson kept his thoughts to himself. Based on Tiffany’s character, she would only think that Jackson was just trying to pick on bones, so it would not be worth causing a scene.

In the beginning of September, Smore returned to school and Mark could finally heave a sigh of relief. Otherwise, he would have had to bring Smore with him to his office everyday, which was a bother.

As for Arianne… She still did not seem to be waking up anytime soon. Both she and Aery were on the same path, but Arianne’s was much worse. At least there was still hope for Aery to regain consciousness, but Arianne’s was like a hopeless dream.

However, the saving grace was that Arianne was out of intensive care at that time, so she could now be taken care of by her family and could be visited everyday. It was a miracle enough for her to still be alive after falling from such a high place.

Smore also visited Arianne a few times, but when he realized that Arianne was always asleep, the little boy stopped wanting to go anymore. However, it was not known what the little boy was thinking in his mind. Coincidentally, Mark once saw the little boy secretly wiping away his tears when they left the hospital. Therefore, ever since then, he did not ask Smore to visit Arianne anymore.

It was not until the end of September that Helen finally found out about the news of Arianne’s incident. She hurriedly rushed back.

That was the first time she had left Aery's side and rushed to Arianne. However, it was a pity that Arianne was in a coma and knew nothing about it.

When she saw Arianne laying in bed, Helen's eyes turned red. "Ari… I'm so sorry… I didn't even know that you were in trouble after such a long time has passed. I owe you too much…"

Arianne was not able to stare into Helen's eyes coldly like she used to do, nor was she able to say anything hurtful. Her stubbornness had all but been retracted, sealed away in a, bottomless abyss. During that time, Arianne had grown thin at a rapid rate, and her originally slender body had become even more fragile. Coupled with her pale face, Helen did not have the courage to look at her for a moment longer, as it would only hurt her heart even more.

Mark, who was standing to the side, consoled Helen as he said, "I was too busy all this time and also thought you wouldn't be free, so I didn't inform you. I'm partly responsible for Ari's current I situation is because I wasn't detailed enough that she's now suffering like this. Don't worry, I'll do everything I can to provide her with. the best treatment in the hospital. I believe that she'll wake up someday. She wouldn't leave me and Smore behind..." Comment by Fo Nix: ?

Chapter 1872

Helen reined her emotions in. "Where are you taking her?"

Mark already had a place in mind. "Switzerland. I've heard of a hospital there with a stellar reputation, and I've sent some of my people to help facilitate her eventual staying-in. Right now, I'm making necessary arrangements to my company—I'll be leaving some of my work to Jackson while I'm away. Naturally, I'm not inclined to hand over my duty to him. I simply am not physically available for many of my business dealings."

Helen's eyebrows creased. "Passing some of your work to Jackson might be fine and all, but what about Little Smore? Is he joining you as well?"

It was the million-dollar question that had bedeviled Mark for too many days and nights. "I… Well… To be frank, I don't plan to bring him with us. My purpose of going there is to have Ari's malady remedied, so bringing a child with us would only be an inconvenience. Honestly, I think it's better to just leave him at home," he explained. "Jackson has two children of his own, so I figured… adding another one into the mix isn't exactly too burdensome. If Smore resists, he can stay in Tremont Estate where Mary and Henry could look after him. Considering Ari's state, I'm afraid this is the best arrangement for him. There's just no other choice."

Helen offered no stance of her own. "Okay, I'll leave it to you, then; I believe in your ability to make the best of arrangements. Sorry I can't help you in any way… I myself am trapped in a tight spot, as you can tell."

"There really is no need to worry for me," he replied humbly. "If you ever need any help at your side, all you need to do is as. I've hired someone to look after Ari in the hospital, and at this moment, I think she needs peace and quiet the most. We should return."

On the night before Mark left with Arianne, Alejandro suddenly called him. It was completely unexpected from Mark's side, so he had waited for a moment before finally picking it up.

"Hello? What is it?"

Alejandro sounded as though he was "just asking". "So… Heard you're bringing Arianne to Switzerland. Bet you can't predict when you're coming home, huh? So, what about the young'un? Bringing him with you, or what?"

Mark did not expect him to have asked such a question, but he answered candidly either way, “I’m leaving him at home. Smore’s willing to stay with Jackson, so there’s that.”

Alejandro sneered. "Why didn't you ask me? Worried that I might eat your precious marshmallow for dinner? I've got nothing to complain about delegating Jackson to take care of your company-hell, you could literally beg me to take over and I still wouldn't-but the I young un? Do you really have to worry about me when it comes to kids? Of course, I'm not the one insisting, just to be clear. It's Melanie's idea. She thinks she owes you and Arianne a lot, and she wants to pay it back by raising your son for you."

Mark turned to checking his suitcases as he continued the conversation. "Jackson's home is manned with people whose job it is to care for children. On the other hand, if I send him to you, well... he'll likely deprive Melanie time to breathe, so maybe not an good idea. Besides, even if Smore's with Jackson, I know he will still need your help somewhere," he replied. "While I'm away, please help take care of incoming troubles for me, all right?"

It was the first time Mark had ever spoken to Alejandro with this much amicability. It even made the latter fall into drawn-out silence.

In the end, it was Alejandro himself who broke the stillness. "Fine, I get. it," he said, his voice strangely hesitant as though embarrassed Bon voyage, I voyage, I guess. I'm telling you now because I don't have the time to see you off from the airport tomorrow. That's all. Bye."

The call ended, yet something strange started within Mark’s heart right at its tail. It was bizarre and rather indescribable, but the one quality Mark could feel from it was—

Warmth. It was something he had not felt for so, so long. Perhaps this was what familial bond, something he had been denied for so long, felt like.

With Arianne in his care, Mark departed to Switzerland on the very next day. No one sent them off, and the modest retinue he brought consisted of merely a nanny and two bodyguards for Arianne's caretaking needs and security measures respectively.

Mary had wanted to come with them, but Mark knew from her advanced age and the uncertainty of their return that bringing her to a foreig country would simply distress the senior citizen. So, after some struggle, he managed to talk the old woman out of it.

Chapter 1873

Perhaps the underpinning of Mark's rationale was Mary's age. She was so old, she could possibly die before the couple ever returned to their home country, thus dooming her to die in a foreign land.

It was a rather cruel prospect that begged to be considered. Hence, in the end, Mark reasoned that it would be better for her to stay behind with Henry as the keepers of Tremont Estate.

At first, Mark was worried that Smore might throw crying fits during his first few days with Jackson's family, so he made it a routine to video call the kid since he touched down in Switzerland. That habit did not last long, because Mark soon realized the full extent of his son's apathy—the brat never thought of talking to him or Arianne during their calls, let alone throw a fit over missing them!

Time flew. Never in Mark's wildest imagination would he have thought that he would stay in Switzerland for nineteen long years.

…

Nineteen years later, in the same old White Water Bay Villa, Tiffany Lane West was urging the kitchen staff to be quicker with his work while she anxiously eyed the clock on the wall every few minutes.

Said “kitchen staff”—more well-known as Jackson West—was so irritated by her incessant nagging that his head finally peered out of the kitchen door while he held a frying pan.

“—Excuse moi, but he isn’t even here yet, is he? Jesus, all this nagging! As if cooking isn’t a delicate art that needs le time and le soul,” he snapped. “You gotta remember how long I haven’t been working in the kitchen, Tiffie. If I made anything less than Michelin-five-stars, you’d be the first one to rant!”

Tiffany pursed her lips into a sneer. “I just miss him, okay? Besides, look at the time! It’s getting dark and yet, where’s our Smore? He told us it’s today, right? He even promised he’s gonna have dinner with us!”

“Honey, he ain’t a three-year-old anymore, so maybe drop the nickname for the grown man’s sake, hmm? Also, how come you don’t miss your own flesh and blood that much, huh? He’s studying abroad too, for the record,” Jackson replied a little helplessly. “Anyway, I’m about to be done, so go get Cindy out of her room and tell her to get down here right now. God, I swear, no one knows what that young woman’s doing all cooped up in her room all day like that.”

Bringing up her daughter’s name was a surefire way of refreshing Tiffany’s steam. In a flash, the mother had stormed all the way up to the daughter’s room before banging on her door. “Miss Cynthia West, what are you doing in there?! Your brother’s coming home today and you’re cooped up inside? Go and check if his room’s all prepared, young lady; keep ‘em tidy or whatever! Seriously, I can’t go on three days without shouting at you!”

From inside the room came the frantic voice of a slightly panicking young woman, “Oh, oh-uhhh... C-Coming, Mom! I heard you so you can, uh, get back to whatever it is that you’re busy with! Just a minute and I’ll be there!”

Nineteen years ago, her doctor had proclaimed that Cynthia was 90% likely to suffer from cognitive impairments growing up, yet as time passed, Tiffany discovered-to her joy that her daughter was only slower than other kids during early childhood. In fact, she never did show signs of possessing lower-than-average intelligence Then, as she grew older, Cynthia's cognitive abilities caught up to her more normal peers to the point that she now showed no difference. If Tiffany had to identify any remnant of her earlier impairs, though, then it would probably be her weak memory, as the girl had a forgetful predilection.

Sometimes, luck could really make all the difference.

Cynthia waited until her mother's thunderous footsteps faded downstairs before opening her door furtively. She did not come out of her room the instance her mother asked her to because she did not want Tiffany to know that she was secretly putting on make-up.

She did not want her deep-seated excitement to be too overt, but every time she remembered that today was when her half-adopted brother, Aristotle Tremont, was coming home, her heart felt like bursting in jubilance.

Aristotle had been studying in France since his senior year back then. Then, as if in a blink of an eye, years had passed without her ever seeing him again. Surely Cynthia could not be at fault for being a little nervous.

The doorbell rang exactly when the clock struck seven.

Jackson was the first to react by striding toward the main door with his long steps. Tiffany could not help but snark, “Oh, wow! I thought one of us is the calm and composed one!”

“Excuse you, but I practically raised him as my son. Would you really believe me if I said I’m not excited at all?!”

Jackson yanked the door open and immediately found his eyes landing on the man's chest. It took him a second to realize what happened, to raise his head, and finally, admire the man before him as Aristotle's face fell into his sight. Jackson had forgotten that it had been years since the boy departed for France, and that by now, he was about the same height as Jackson himself.

“Oh, hey. Welcome home, buddy. Come in,” he said warmly. For all of his built-up ardor, Jackson ended up falling back to the most quotidian greeting a parent could give.

Still, one could not unhear the mélange of the man’s sentiments perduring through his every word.

Chapter 1874

Aristotle rejected Jackson’s offer to lift his suitcases for him. “It’s fine, I can do it myself. Really, it’s only packed with gifts for all of you, and they are hardly heavy. By the way, Pa West? You haven’t changed a bit—look like you just leaped out of my last memory of seeing you. Where’s Aunt Tiffany and Cindy?”

Jackson silently conceded that, as the child had now aged into a full-fledged grown-up, he should not insist on helping him with things he could rightly do by himself. “Well, they are waiting for you right inside,” he said instead. “Look at you! You’re home now. And Lil’ P is coming home soon, too… God, by next month, the three of you are officially reunited once more.”

Aristotle smiled wordlessly and sauntered into the villa's interior.

It was but a split second, yet as Jackson stared at the young man's back, his eyes saw Mark Tremont instead. Aristotle had too much of his father in him, and it was especially evident when one looked at him from behind. Jackson even wondered if Aristotle was sculpted from the very same mold used for his old friend.

Tiffany's eyes reddened the moment Aristotle fell into her line of sight. "Oh my God! Aww, honey, get over here, would you? Let your Aunt Tiffany take a good look at chu'!" she gushed. "Gosh, you're thinner than I remember, aren't you?"

Aristotle approached her obediently and threw his arms around her shoulders, squeezing her into a hug. "I'm home, Aunt Tiffany."

The older woman tugged on the young man's hand and, in a pang, realized that it had grown so much larger that it now eclipsed hers.

"Aww, that's all I ever wanted from you, honey. It must have been tough being outside, all alone! God, I swear, you're never leaving me ever again!"

The commotion downstairs quickly reached the occupant on the first floor, prompting the young woman to rush down the stairs like a gale as her mind kept replaying imagined scenarios of their reunion over and over again in her head.

However, right at the moment she saw Aristotle, Cynthia acted against her practiced response by pumping the brakes of her sprint until she stopped right before him. Then, she spoke, but only a quiet, bashful mewling came out. “U-Um, m-m-maybe we should s-s-start our d-dinner first?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Allow me to wash my hands.”

Tiffany waited until he was inside. the bathroom before giving her daughter's butt a loud, playful smack. "Oh ho ho, so this is why you locked yourself in that dang room all day! You've been dolling up to look snazzy for the occasion, aye? Really though, what was with the 'unuh, ummmm back there? Aristotle grew up with you since you were just a bean, sweetheart. You really think he has no idea what kinda person you reaaally are by now?"

Cynthia mumbled something under her breath in displeasure while her eyes ogled the bathroom against her conscious control. Still, no matter how hard she stared, the instance Aristotle was outside and joining them at the table, the poor girl went back to avoiding him once more. She even opted to stare at her steak without lifting her head once throughout dinner!

Tiffany asked between bites, “So… You ever went to Switzerland to check on your pa and ma, Smore?”

Aristotle had not heard anyone called him by that nickname for so long that the mention of it made him cringe a little. “Aunt Tiffany! I’m twenty-two already. I’m a bit too old to still be called Smore, right?” he protested, before adding, “The answer’s no, though. I haven’t been there. I... haven’t had the time.”

‘I haven’t had the time’—it was a phrase that jabbed straight into the heart.

Ever since Mark left for Switzerland with Arianne, most of the company's business had been delegated to Jackson, who now had to devote his time to both Tremont Enterprise and West Industries. It was a mammoth and herculean undertaking, one that spurred a young Aristotle to mature precociously. The boy was markedly enterprising in his studies, and when he was in his senior year, he suggested furthering his studies in France.

It was all because he wanted to spare Jackson from the backbreaking workload by inheriting his birthright as soon as possible. With his schedule packed to the brim—even the hours of his bedrest and leisure were calculated carefully—Aristotle was left with no time to visit Mark and Arianne in Switzerland.

Just like that, the young man had not seen his biological parents for nineteen long years.

Tiffany and Jackson sank into a deep, resonating silence. Arianne's accident on that fateful summer had sealed Aristotle's life to be one fraught with monumental pressure, and despite the couple's efforts in providing the child a serene, warm environment, reality still found a way to crack their noble but imposible aspiration to shield the young boy. Aristotle was the only heir to the Tremont empire, after all. It was only a matter of time before the heavy crown fell onto the boy's head, no matter how young he still was.

The abrupt shroud of silence caused Cynthia to perk up from her steak in curiosity. Unexpectedly for her, however, the first thing her eyes linked to was Aristotle’s cryptic, half-smiling ones instead.

Chapter 1875

In a millisecond, Cynthia’s cheeks burned bright red and she ducked her head in panic. Her heart, like a maddened buck, refused to be still inside the cage she called her chest.

Growing up, everyone had always teased Cynthia and Aristotle as some sort of one true pair. Back then, it did not mean anything to her; she was just an innocent child who had no inkling of what the adults really meant. Of course, Aristotle was always the kind-hearted, caring big brother in her life, so she slowly came to accept the bond they shared and rationalized it as the way their interaction should be.

As for the adults' suggestion, Cynthia admitted that it had also taken root in her mind. It was only after she grew up when memories of those teasing suddenly made her feel very, very self-conscious.

It was undeniable. Aristotle Tremont had matured into a fine, young man—emphasis on "fine". He had inherited every physical trait that cemented Mark and Arianne as beautiful people. Look at his piercing eyes, aquiline nose, and flawless facial features. His body figure straddling the line to perfection, his skin so fair and yet without any blemish. And let's not forget his long, lean fingers with their chiseled segments. Cynthia was even jealous of the fork and knife Aristotle was using, simply because they got to enjoy being fondled by those sexy hands!

Aristotle had left for France still looking a little green around his ears, while Cynthia herself was no older than an age when an oblivious girl might still be clueless about the affairs of the heart. A few years passed, and now he returned as a young man with broader shoulders, whereas she learned what "growing up" really entailed. It meant that they could no longer squeeze into a single bed and whisper secrets in each other's ears. It meant he could no longer give her a little kiss on the cheek whenever he wanted to comfort her.

Tiffany began ushering Aristotle to check into his room after dinner, as she hoped he could have an early rest.

Cynthia was secretly giddy about it. She was the one who prepared Aristotle's room for his return, so she anticipated getting his praises for knowing his preference and taste like the back of her hand.

Contrary to her wish, however, Aristotle answered, “I won’t be staying for the night, I’m afraid, because I’m returning to the Tremont Estate later. It’s been a while since I’ve left... I think it’s high time I move back to where I started. Pa West, Aunt Tiffany? Thank you for all the loving care you’ve shown me all these years. I’m all grown-up now; it’s my turn to take care of you two.”

Tiffany and Jackson exchanged befuddled glances. They expected Aristotle to stay in their house after his return just as before. Because of that presumption, this separation came as a shock to them.

Of course, Cynthia was the most upset by his announcement. He had not even seen her handiwork and hardwork yet!

She was just about to raise an objection when Aristotle’s phone suddenly rang. He pulled it out, but before he answered it, she sniped a glance at the screen as it showed the caller’s name: “Rey”.

That was a girl’s name—and an affectionate nickname, at that! Cynthia opened her mouth to say something, but any word she had was already disintegrated into air.

After answering his call, Aristotle bade the Wests farewell and left.

Cynthia returned to her room and threw herself to the bed, lying on her stomach motionlessly. “Rey” kept hijacking her train of thoughts and she wondered, could Aristotle’s time in France have brought him a girlfriend?!

The more she ruminated on it, the more anxious she became. It finally came to a breaking point when she video-called her real brother for some confirmation.

It took a long while before the call was finally connected, and Plato West's handsome features—though scrunched into a frown of contempt—leaped into her screen. "...The hell? I'm busy, man. Get to the damn point."

Cynthia had grown so accustomed to her brother's very public detest of her since they were children that she was basically immune to it by now. "Question: does Aristotle have a girlfriend from France?"

Plato rolled his eyes. "How should I bloody know? I'm all the way in Her Royal Majesty's Great Britain while- he spends his time in France, mate. You can't possibly think he's gonna tell me his every dirty little secret, right?...Wait a minute, what's going on? Did you uncover something juicy? Or... No way! Don't tell me you really think our parents adopted him just to groom him into marrying you! He's the golden kid of the Noble House of Tremont', darling! Who are we peasants to groom such a royalty into becoming your unfortunate husband?"

Cynthia was exasperated. "Plato West, you're a frickin' douchebag who just won't leave anyone alone! I dare you to get stuck there and not come back—like, ever!"

She terminated the call immediately after the outburst. Part of her wondered about the disparity of her feelings toward the two men frøt then from her childhood. On one hand, Aristotle was too hot for his own good; it was to the point that it was impossible to not have her heart pound whenever she looked at him.

But Plato? Screw her "biological" brother! He could be as handsome as mortally possible, and Cynthia would still only see a douchebag with a face that begged to be slammed against a wall. His every fiber pissed her off-that jerk had always driven her nuts since they were just children!

Chapter 1876

It was thanks to this unknown, faceless “Rey”—who had somehow taken up space in her head—that Cynthia’s sleep that night turned fretful.

Her peaceful slumber came later, yet as soon as the morning broke, she was rudely roused from her sleep by Tiffany’s wallop, causing the groggy young woman to catapult out of her bed.

“Urgh, Mooooom?! What now?” she wailed. “Geez, are you even my real mother? You just can’t go on a day without picking on me in some ways, can you? I swear, I only look hideous because of your trigger-happy hands!!”

Tiffany considered her half-asleep daughter’s dowdy state, her loose, baggy nightshirt, and the chaotic mane she called “hair”. Were it not for her objectively good looks, Tiffany would not even want to admit Cynthia was her daughter.

“Well, get your lazy bum up and send this apple pie to Aristotle! Lemme tell you, hon, I woke up early today just to bake this for him. He hasn’t been able to enjoy good o’ American staples for years while he was stuck in France, has he? So, get up and get to it already!”

Hearing she was on delivery duty to Aristotle worked wonders in dispelling Cynthia’s sleep. “Ohhhh! Is that why? Could have told me earlier… Yep, I’m up now!”

The young woman proceeded to spend some time dolling herself up. After a few careful examinations in the mirror to ensure she looked flawless, Cynthia grabbed the bag packed with her mother’s pie to begin her delivery journey.

While in their family's basement, she picked a white sports car as her ride. She had always loved the color white; it was one of the preferences she shared with Aristotle.

She reached the Tremont Estate. Without missing a beat, she punched in the password to unlock the door. Honestly, coming to the Tremont Estate was akin to going back to her second home.

Tremont Estate had not been inhabited for quite some years by now. Only two members of the original retinue remained, and thus, the lack of staff contributed to the house's somber air of desertion. Within the span of nineteen years, Mary and Henry had both passed away, leaving the estate alone, sullen and quiet.

However, as she was about to step into the entrance, Cynthia espied an extra pair of shoes parked just outside the door—a woman's shoes. Judging from the size, the owner bore feet that were even more delicate than Cynthia's own, and it did not take her a long time to guess that she must be a petite one.

Her heart skipped a beat.

So, Aristotle did not just have a girlfriend—he also brought her back home. No wonder he had been adamant in rejecting the offer to stay in White Water Bay Villa last night. Or insisting that he should return to his childhood home…

Suddenly, an internal debate about whether Cynthia should go upstairs to meet him sprung into life. What if she accidentally bumped into some, uh, "explicit scenes" she had no business seeing?

Her mind wandered to her brother's comment from last night. Yes, she conceded that the West family was inferior in social standing; it would be laughable if they tried striking up an engagement with a

family as eminent as the Tremonts. Aristotle might have been raised with the family, but it did not mean Cynthia had any control over his life.

In the end, she chose to sit in the living room without breaking the house's silence, hugging the bag in her embrace. She waited, and waited, and waited… until the clock struck eleven.

It was then that Aristotle descended the stairs with a towel grazing his wet, matted hair. From the looks of it, he had only just taken a bath.

Noticing a guest in the living room, he paused in his track. "…Cindy? When did you come? Why didn't you wake me up?" he asked. "My apologies. Got a case of jet lag since I've only just returned, so I woke up late."

"Meh, it's... Pssh, it's fine," she mumbled. "I'm gonna give you a slice of this apple pie, then, though I gotta warn you it's grown a little bit colder than it started out to be by now. But anyway, Mom woke up earlier than usual today just to bake one for ya..."

Then all because she wanted to deliver a pie to him, Cynthia had not even had her breakfast yet.

She rose to her feet and headed toward the kitchen, unaware that Aristotle had tailed her. Halfway in, the young woman remembered her wearing a new skirt today, and to avoid stains, she should put on an apron.

With that thought, Cynthia spun sharply on her heels—and immediately bummed into his chest.

A blend of refreshing soapy scent and his native odor washed over Cynthia like a wave of fine wine. It was so intoxicating that the pang flaring within her nose failed to reach her—

Aristotle’s arm held Cynthia’s back, stopping her from toppling backward out of the resultant force. He leaned his head close to her.

“Are you hurt?” he breathed.

Hot air escaped his mouth and swept across her cheeks like a breeze, tucking a quiet tinge of fresh peppermint in its wings. Cynthia felt her senses turning hazy, and in that dreamlike state her eyes fell naturally ahead... and landed on his collar bone.

“K-Kinda hurts…” she murmured.

Suddenly, Aristotle leaned even closer, his stipple lips dabbing on the tip of her scrunched nose. "You should be more careful next time; Cindy don't be heedless, okay? Didn't you know I was following you from behind? wanted to tell you that I can cut a stice myself, especially since I'm quite ravenous right now. Hmm," he muttered, "After a slice of your mom's pie, perhaps. you could join me for brunch?"

Chapter 1877

Cynthia felt as though her heart was going to leap out of her throat right there and then, but she channeled that panic into a frantic shove instead. “Okay, okay! You deal with the pie yourself while I… I… uh, I’ll check and see if the flowers need watering!”

A shadow of unnoticeable emotion briefly crossed Aristotle's eyes. "All right," he replied. "Say, Cindy… You've grown, haven't you? Taller. Older."

Cynthia, failing to ponder more deeply about his remark, replied without sparing him a look, "I mean, duh? How many years has it been? You got a growth spurt yourself, you know. And now I can't even reach your face anymore... Anyway, e-enough chit-chat! Go enjoy yourself!"

She escaped to the yard and finally let out the breath she had been holding.

She supposed folk wisdom was right: the nature of a relationship changes when people are separated from one another for too long. Even a bond that started out as inseparable could devolve into people playing out self-restraining courtesies with one another, their previous intimacy long gone. Two people who might once enjoy uninhibited teasing and ribbings could also regress into clinging to a façade of decorum after a few years of separation.

Honestly, those were just two of the many examples highlighting the effects of distance between people in relationship dynamics.

Her mind drifted to his abrupt kiss—pretty sure that was it, a kiss—just now, and on cue, her heart lost its rhythm again. In the past, Cynthia would never reject a kiss from him; in fact, she would accept it, remain in his arms, and bask in the intimacy for a while longer. But now? Now, the reality of being separated for too many years had taken its toll. Habits and interactions she used to take for granted now felt different and unrecognizable, as their implications had mutated while she was not paying attention.

Cynthia could only bid her time as far as Aristotle finished dividing the pie before she had to return to the kitchen to watch him eat. Natch, it was on her mother's order; Tiffany had commanded Cynthia to

watch him finish and ask for his feedback. Had it not been these additional requirements to complete her quest, Cynthia would not have deigned herself to doing something this awkward and stupid.

Aristotle considered her unblinkingly staring at the pie on his plate and handed a slice to her. “Here. Want some, don’t you? Not that I fault you. It’s near noontime; I suspect you must be hungry by now,” he said. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have made you wait for so long… You’ve been here since morning, haven’t you?”

Cynthia swung her hands wildly in rejection. “I-I’m not hungry! J-Just… Get on with it, okay? Mom’s the one who insists that I watch you eat… Oh, speaking of which! Don’t you have someone else in the house with you? Are you sure you’re not gonna ask her if she wants a slice?”

“Don’t bother. She doesn’t like apple pies,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Besides, a few more minutes from now, and the housekeeper should begin preparing lunch for her.”

The grin in Cynthia's face hardened into a forced smile. Aristotle and she had basically acknowledged the existence of this other girl at this point, so what was stopping Aristotle from explaining who "she" was? Even if the entire "one true pair" schtick in the past was ultimately just bored adults teasing. and joking around, it did not change the fact that Aristotle and Cynthia had grown up together. They were, at the very least, family, right?

Aristotle gave no explanation even after they left the estate. On the other hand, “she” had not once descended from the stairs, too.

On their way to the diner, Cynthia offered gingerly, "You just had my mom's pie, so you can't be too hungry anymore, right? You really don't have to accompany me for lunch or anything. I'm gonna just pick something light and call it a day..."

Aristotle sniped a glance at her while driving. “Just because I’m not hungry doesn’t mean you aren’t. Keeping your company is simply something I should do so,” he replied. “What do you have in mind? I’ll bring you there.”

Oh, Cynthia had something in mind, all right. The problem was that she was not thinking about food at all, because her head was already filled with questions about that unknown, faceless owner of the shoes.

“Anything is fine, I guess…” she muttered.

Aristotle was just about to say something when his ringtone cut into the opening. It was a call all the way from Switzerland. Mark, his father.

He put on his Bluetooth headset and answered it with a markedly stiff tone. “Yes?”

"Back already? Did you visit the Wests before other things?" came Mark's trademark chilly voice. "Priorities, Aristotle. I expect you to already know how to set them without me Tou. In addition to that That woman you brought home. I want you to handle it already. Don't ask me to waste my time solving your problems. ازار

Aristotle frowned slightly. “I think you’re mistaken. See, I’m not the one who decided to waste his time on an irrelevant call,” he reparteed. “I know how to take care of my business, so don’t bother. I’m out.”

He hung up without wasting another beat, though the deepening creases between his eyebrows refused to relax.

Cynthia was not known to be good at reading the room, and right now, she had let her curiosity take over. “That was Uncle Mark, right? What did he say?”

Chapter 1878

There was a stoplight ahead. Aristotle stopped the car while it was red and gazed outside the window, his eyes grazing the stream of traffic.

“Nothing of importance. Just the usual load of bull that never fails to irritate me.”

He had had a rather strained relationship with Mark since he was a kid. More specifically, after he was three.

All these years, the Tremonts’ father and son were connected only by a thin thread, formed from distant phone calls and nothing else. Even if they had enjoyed a close bond before the incident, the fact that it had been so loosely maintained for so long could only have sped up its deterioration.

Every challenge, quandary, and storm Aristotle encountered in life, the young man had to brave through alone for nineteen long years. That was it; the toll of Mark’s steadfast commitment as a husband was negligence to his duty as a father. Aristotle had tried to be as charitable as he could, but it was an especially tall order when Aristotle himself suffered just much.

Not living together for so many years only made it difficult for the father and son to genuinely understand each other.

The pair finally reached their destination: a fine-dining restaurant. Aristotle ordered a bottle of red wine while Cynthia went for fruit juice. She watched him raise his glass and took a sip with a practiced flourish, and asked, “Wow. When did you learn to drink fine wine?”

“You have no idea,” came his placid reply. “I wasn’t living alone in France. Father had dispatched some of his underlings to watch me. Lessons on etiquettes of high society, classes on the know-how on how to manage the company, the likes of it. Now that I’m home, I can at least relax a little for a few days.”

Cynthia was not the least bit surprised. This was the Tremont Family they were talking about; no matter which corner of the globe Mark found himself in, he would always find a way to train his eyes on his only son.

So, she nodded and raised her glass to her lips for a sip. It shielded her eyes from catching Aristotle furtively sizing her up.

Out of nowhere, he asked, “You’re turning nineteen this year, aren’t you? Looks like I’m gonna be there for your birthday this time.”

Cynthia perked her head up in surprise. “You never remembered my birthday before. Is this an act?”

He smiled instead of answering her. After a second or two, he suddenly asked, “Boyfriend?”

The corner of Cynthia’s lips twitched. “Boyfriend? What a mysterious concept! Is it only attained by legends, or… is it just my mom who’s forcing me to remain single until I graduate high school” she intoned. “God, even now, she still has this stupid dream of me being with yo—”

Her mind caught up with her words, and her face suddenly flushed while clamping her mouth shut.

The mirth in Aristotle’s eyes seemed to have become even more striking. “Oh, that so? Even after all these years, Aunt Tiffany still dreams of that? …Well, what do you think?”

She looked at him, confused. “What do I think? Think of what?”

He leaned closer to her ever so slightly, his eyes piercing and unblinking. “You and me. What else could be the point of interest?”

Cynthia thought of “Rey” and immediately cast her eyes to the table. He must be joking; she was sure of it.

"Spare me from your teasing, would ya'? It has always been just a stupid joke; ain't no one's gonna take it seriously. You know what my mom's like, right? She skips the brain when she speaks. Personally, I can't believe she continued the same old joke for so many years is she stubborn or what?"

Aristotle looked away from her without saying a thing.

Cynthia, who inherited Tiffany’s imperceptive attitude and insensitivity, was utterly at a loss of what was brewing in the man’s mind. Suddenly, an awkward air shrouded them both.

When lunch was over, she piped up, "Your schedule's packed as eff, huh, Ares? I mean, you've just recently returned home and everything. Where are you heading next? Your company? Your house? If you're going to work just uber home. If you're going back to the estate though, I'm gonna hitch a ride. I mean, my car is still at your place, you know?"

“I’ll handle the company tomorrow; I’ve reserved today for some other matter. I’m going home, so come on. Oh, by the way, please let Pa West and Aunt Tiffany know that I’m coming over for dinner.”

A sweet grin blossomed on Cynthia's face. "Hee hee, it feels hella good to be eating with your family, huh? I know, I know. You look like the sort of introvert who just wants some quiet me-time, but deep down inside, you just wanna join in on the fun, don't you?" she teased. "When we were little, you loved complaining about me being noisy. ör rambunctious or whatever, even though you never stop having me around... Anyway, you don't have to worry about the menu. Dad knows your favorite food. I bet you haven't gotten to eat anything remotely as tasty as his cooking back in France!"

Chapter 1879

There was something infectious about Cynthia’s smile that made Aristotle’s lips quiver on his own. “Please, I’m only tolerating your noise because it’s you. If it were literally anyone else—well, I’d make sure they don't croak at all when I’m around. Come on.”

They returned to the Tremont Estate, and from there, Cynthia got into her car and drove away.

Aristotle stood by the door. He watched the car vanish into the distance before turning back into the house.

He was not the only audience, however, for another figure had been peering from the window upstairs, watching.

“Had she taken her lunch, Agnes?” Aristotle asked his housekeeper.

Agnes shot a helpless glance in the direction of the room upstairs.

“Uh, she hasn’t. Miss Leigh informed me she’s feeling unwell today, and hadn’t gotten the appetite. Really, the only meal she had today up until now is… well, a bowl of oatmeal she didn’t even finish,” the woman replied. “Um… She looks really pallid, Master Tremont. Could she have come down with some sorta sickness? I think it’s best if you take her to the hospital for some body checkups.”

Aristotle answered nothing. He already knew what malaised Raven Leigh—or, rather, he knew enough that it was not simply the sort that could be fixed with a single trip to the hospital.

He ascended the stairs to Raven’s room and stood outside the door. Then, he knocked as lightly as a feather.

“Is there anything you want for lunch?” he asked through the door. “If your coughs have gotten worse, please let me take you to the hospital.”

A feeble voice escaped through the door to answer him. “O-oh! I’m alright... Cough, cough! I don’t need to see a doctor, really… Cough, cough. But I… I would really appreciate it if you could—cough—have a chat with me for a bit? Sorry, but it’s pretty boring being all alone.”

He hesitated for about two seconds before pushing the door open. After taking a seat on a chair set the farthest away from bed, he began, “What’s the topic?”

Lying on top of the queen-sized bed, with her back against the headboard, was a meek, demure young woman with an ashen complexion the color of paper.s Glistening doe-eyes searched Aristotle before she pointed out, “I always imagined you as a taciturn introvert, but the girl who visited you just now Let me guess, She's your sister, right? Hee hee. I overheard your conversation with her and I admit, I was pleasantly surprised at how delighted you sounded. Really, I've never seen you acting remotely close to that before."

“You’re right. She’s my sister.” Short and simple. Aristotle decided to forgo the details.

It was precisely his penchant to be laconic that made sustaining conversations with him a challenge to most people, and Raven was not much of an exception. Her fingers began to dig in her hair to comb her mildly-disheveled locks before tucking a few strands behind her ears.

A slight smile shadowed her lips. “I see. Well, I personally wish… I could enjoy something like that too. I’m the only child at home, you see, so loneliness is all I’m used to growing up,” she replied. “Hmm. How come your sister doesn’t live with you?”

“She has her own family,” he answered flatly. “She’s not my actual sister.”

Though subtle, Raven's smile froze onto her lips for a second. "Oh? That's even more amazing, then! Despite not being your biological sister, the two of you still seem really close. That's a rare sight for you, really. So… she's your cousin, hmm?"

Her incessant, Inquisition-styled interrogation was not endearing herself to Aristotle, who was increasingly repulsed by her prying attempt. Quickly, he leaped to his feet and stated matter-of-factly, "You should rest. I still have things to handle, so you'll have to excuse me. Either way, if you feel any discomfort that may need a doctor to address, ask for me. I'll be in the study."

Before Raven could say anything more, Aristotle had spun on his heels and strode away. He did not even dole out a look.

Raven grabbed her nearest pillow and punched it, her force fueled by frustration. He was so close right now-literally right before her eyes and yet, he never once opened a crack on that stupid wall he built around his heart and showed her its: content. Hell, from the way he had acted, Raven wondered if he thought a friendly, two-way conversation between the two of them was an undeserved luxury on her part...

No! The road to realize her goal—her dream—was still beyond her reach!

Dusk fell. Aristotle was prepared for the journey to White Water Bay Villa when Raven was suddenly seized by an even more severe fit of coughs.

She had been sputtering for the entire day that by the evening, Agnes simply could not bear to hear it anymore. "Master Tremont, I really think you should bring Miss Leigh to the hospital," she implored. "I really think her coughs imply something more than the usual ones we know."

Aristotle listened to the barrage of coughs echoing through the first floor and paused for a moment. "No. She suffers from congenital lung malformation, Agnes. Combining that with the stab wound she sustained, and there's the malady you witness. It's not a problem a trip to the doctor will solve At most she can only get her symptoms slightly relieved," he replied. "You watch her and make sure she eats adequately and takes her meds afterward. If she remains coughing like that after an hour despite the medicine, then get someone to send her to the hospital. As for me, though, I personally have my own business to take care of."

Chapter 1880

Agnes let out a hum of assent and headed back into the kitchen, her mind already back to her duties.

It was then that, suddenly, Raven descended the stairs from the first floor. Her body, already frail, seemed to have become a lot more enervated by whatever diseases that plagued her. Even her gait gave the impression that walking itself was too strenuous for her if she did not help herself via the handrail.

“Ares! Where are you going?” she called out.

Aristotle paused in the middle of changing his shoes. “Dinner. Is there a problem? If you’re feeling really sick, I’ll order someone to send you to the hospital right now.”

Fear undergirded her eyes. “No, I don’t want to go to the hospital. You know it’s incurable, Ares. It won’t help, and I’m stuck like this forever. It’s just that… You brought me to a place that is very alien to me, and being alone gives me anxiety, you know? Must you go? Can’t you keep my company, please…?”

Her tone was so feeble, so close to pleading, that most men would have found it hard to reject her with some sort of stone-cold surety. Aristotle, however, was not most men; he hesitated for only about a second before doubling-down, “No, it is somewhere important that I need to go. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but while I’m away, you can get help from Agnes. Just a heads-up: you’re not the only one staying in this house. Now, please excuse me.”

Raven had tried, in multiple past instances, to win just a bit more affection from the cold, cold man through little tug-o-wars like these. None of them worked, though. Her scores had been an abysmal zero.

Not this time. This time, Raven was not going to yield.

Just as Aristotle opened the door, she closed her eyes, tipped to her side, and fell backward.

Agnes’s shriek compelled Aristotle to look back, and upon seeing the source of the commotion, panic filled his eyes. He strode toward Raven and scooped the young woman up in his arms. “Prepare the car. We’re heading to the hospital!”

Raven was silently relieved. Going to the hospital meant undergoing all sorts of excruciating checkups, but it was a small price to pay compared to the good it would bring to her grand plan.

She would have him when everything was said and done!

Since returning to the States and witnessing Cynthia’s debut, consternation had grown in Raven’s heart. She was worried that everything was steering further and further away from her intended path. Hopeful

at first, she had been trying to push Aristotle into confirming Cynthia as his biological sister, then later, his cousin. And yet, their relationship did not seem that way at all.

Then, an afternoon-worth of research into the Tremont family informed her that Aristotle was the family's only child. Adding to her horror was who Cynthia West really was.

Aristotle never withdrew his arms from around her while they were on their way to the hospital. Since she was "unconscious", the young woman could hot stop herself from bumping into things as the speeding car rocked.

Aristotle could not afford to have anything happening to her. After all, the reason why she was the way she was now… was because of him.

Aristotle and Raven had only known each other for half a year, despite the two of them studying in the same school. In fact, half a year ago, these two had no inkling of each other's existence.

He was the aloof, too-cool-for-you heir to a mammoth fortune, while she was so strapped for cash that she had to work as a part-timer in a library just to eke by.

They were two people from different worlds.

Then came one fateful night, and the two parallel lines met. It began when he found himself cornered in an alley by a gang of thugs; they were trying to rob him.

Granted, Aristotle had enough martial arts skills with him to save himself. Growing up with Jackson as his father figure had made him a fighter.

In the nick of time, however, Raven dove out of nowhere and sprinted toward them, screaming French at the top of her lungs about her already calling the police before diving into the fray as though she feared no death.

It summoned a strange feeling from deep inside of him. After spending his college years all on his own in a foreign land for about four to five: years, this was the first time anyone had so willingly thrown their life to save him, a stranger, whom she did. not know.

Her rescue rewarded her with a knife puncturing through her chest. It reached her already malformed lungs.

Her injury had been critical.

Fortunately, the incident shocked the thugs enough that they quickly fled the scene, scrambling before any of them removed the knife from Raven. It was ultimately a good thing, too; anyone with first-aid knowledge worth their salt would know that it was lethal to remove an embedded knife from her wounded lungs in one scenario, if the knife was removed from the victim's body and a certain period of time had passed without her getting to the hospital, accumulation of blood in the pleural cavity could cause haemothorax, therefore inducing breathing difficulty that finally leads to death.