

## Garden 116

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Aged stone buildings stood in a row facing the narrow road. The sun was high in the sky, but it struggled to reach the five-story buildings that pierced the sky. A sliver of light barely reached the street.

The disinteresting wooden door, which could have been anywhere on a street crowded with carriages, was darkened by the weight of the wood. Above the door gleamed a square copper plaque.

[Legal Advisor Office, K. Bendike].

Aeroc placed his hand on the heavy ironwork, but he couldn't knock on it. It had taken him a week to get here after deciding to visit this place. He'd arrived on this street in the morning fog, and by the time he'd made it up the stairs, it was already nearly midday. Aeroc's carriage was waiting by the side of the road, ready to pick him up and return at any moment. Every passing in the narrowness of the street made the coachman frown in his direction. Gentlemen and ladies passing on the narrow sidewalks also regarded Aeroc strangely as he hesitated at the door. Rather than being misunderstood as suspicious, they were simply curious about a man lingering in front of a famous lawyer's office.

As time passed, the number of passersby on the street increased, as did the frequency of stares in his direction. Aeroc had to make a decision, and quickly. Grab the door and knock vigorously, or hurry back to the estate with the carriage.

Should he just go back?

In fact, from the moment Aeroc left the estate, he already wanted to go back. He wanted to go back to the library, which boasted a magnificent collection of books, and finish the book he had left off while

sipping tea. Or he could go back to practising the violin piece he'd been struggling with all week. If not, he could go to the art gallery and look at paintings and sculptures. Even going to see a terrible, bad play would be better than knocking on this door.

Aeroc loved books. Music, art. He revered and cherished all things that could be labeled as art. He also loved the Teiwind Count's venerable rose garden and the banquets held there. There was much in the world that Aeroc liked, and little that he disliked. The same was true of people. A day was not long enough for communion where nothing but goodwill was exchanged, and so it was a very unhappy day when he had to meet the most unpleasant person to look at. In order to do something he did not want to do.

If you've ever had a financial problem to deal with, go and meet Kloff Bendyke.

Aeroc had already been told by three different people that if there was one competent financial lawyer in the hundreds of thousands of people in the vast capital who could help Aeroc, it was Bendyke. So said the Viscount Derbyshire, an elderly man who worked closely with his late father and was always available to lend his wisdom. The Viscount Westport, his only relative in the capital, also mentioned Bendyke. The most surprising of the three recommendations was that of the Marquis Wolflake. Recommendation aside, he was shocked to learn that the Marquis knew Bendyke well. When did he make a connection with Wolflake?

Although Bendyke came from a baron family, he was the second son, so he didn't have a title, and even if he did, it wouldn't be a big one. The Bendykes were frugal, to say it positively, and poor, to say it negatively, with an estate in a very remote mountainous area. Not to mention the family's reputation. How they came to be associated with the Marquis Wolflake, the closest member of the imperial family and a man of great fame and wealth, was beyond Aeroc. The Viscount Derbyshire, who had a natural talent for increasing his wealth, liked this guy enough to write him a letter of introduction.

What on earth was so desirable about him?

Aeroc's hand slid down from the handle. Not today, after all. It would be better to bring someone else next time. He was just about to turn around. Suddenly, the door flew open. Aeroc almost jumped in place in surprise. If it weren't for his late father's strict teaching, he would have screamed.

It was none other than Kloff Bendyke, who grabbed the doorknob and spoke coldly.

"Stop troubling so many people and just come in."

Startled, Aeroc let out a pathetic cry.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I'm not so insensitive as to not notice a carriage that's been standing there all morning."

A sneer flashed across the masculine face with dark chestnut hair and a slight tan, and the moment Aeroc recognised him, he wanted to scream that he would never again in his life speak to a moribund creature like this man. However, Aeroc couldn't bring himself to do it. Before he knew it, his legs were moving of their own accord.

The man who looked more like a soldier than a lawyer, or perhaps a pirate captain, allowed only the minimum of space between them. The space between them narrowed as they stepped through the door. Aeroc was impeccably dressed in shirt, vest, and jacket. Bendyke, coming out of his office, wore a shirt and vest. Even with five layers of fabric between them, the radiant heat from the other's body was

raising Aeroc's body temperature. The skin on his face, unprotected by any shield, tingled from the heat. Unable to bear it, Aeroc turned his head away first.

"Excuse me."

The words were meant to be an invitation to back off, but Bendyke didn't move an inch, his body as rigid as a stone devil statue preying on a restless soul. Aeroc glanced up, and a small smile tugged at his tightly closed lips.

Shit. Maybe he should have said nothing and walked past.

Aeroc paced quickly, inwardly regretting his decision. He'd tried to put as much distance between them as possible, but the traditional porch couldn't accommodate two alpha males at the same place. A shoulder wrapped in soft silk touched the other man's chest. That man should have been pushed back naturally, but he was like a solid rock, and Aeroc bounced back slightly. The sensation of contact was uncannily sharp, sending a chill down his spine.

Unlike Aeroc, who was like a glass hit against a silver spoon, there was no sign of agitation from the tall man. The rude bastard, incapable of showing any consideration except the bare minimum of courtesy, was often deliberately provocative. Even now, as the man closed the door, he deliberately stretched his arm over Aeroc's shoulder. The man's shirt almost brushed against his cheek.

Bang. Whump.

Bendyke shut the door firmly behind him. A law office was supposed to be a place where important documents were kept. But to Aeroc, it felt like a sinister ploy to isolate him from the world. It was an

anxiety-inducing imagination, showing how much Aeroc was uncomfortable with the man known as Kloff Bendyke.

“This way.”

As he spoke, Bendyke stretched out his arm to indicate the direction, but did not lead the way. Aeroc was the Teiwind Count. Wherever and whoever he met, he commanded the deepest respect. He didn’t remember chasing anyone’s tail through the narrow passageways. And yet, for this moment, Aeroc wished he was a worker, not even a gentleman, and that Bendyke walked at his front side.

“Count?”

It was a simple call, with no honorifics attached. It was a very arrogant thing to say, considering their difference in status, but Aeroc missed the chance to argue. He was forced to follow the unspoken order. The few steps from the front door to the office felt like the thorny path of a persecuted outcast.

Aeroc hated the way the other man looked at him. More precisely, Aeroc hated the way the man’s gaze swept over his entire body. The opium-glazed gaze had followed Aeroc from the moment they first met. It was lustful, and it didn’t hesitate to gaze at his private parts. Its hostility was palpable.

Once inside the office, the door slammed shut again. With the closing of just those two doors, Aeroc was trapped in Bendyke’s territory. His breath caught in his throat. His instinct urged him to scream and run, but his reasoning reminded him of his responsibilities as the head of a family and scolded him not to be weak.

“Sit.”

The owner of the office was seated in a leather-wrapped, armless chair. An inkwell and pens, various leather notebooks, and a thick book that appeared to be a law book sat in front of a cluttered desk. Bendyke sank into a heavy chair behind the desk. It seemed like he had no intention of making tea.

Aeroc braced his buttocks against the chair and straightened his back as best he could. Not only was he not in a position to lean back against the well-worn chair back, but the mere fact that he was in unwelcome alpha territory made him nervous.

The man who had created the icy atmosphere shifted his gaze to the papers on his desk, as if he didn't see Aeroc. He scribbled something with foul-smelling ink.

Scribble. The grip of his large hand was strong, and the sound of the nib scratching the paper was clear. It was a common quill, but as it sliced through the colourful feathers, it felt like a knife slicing through the air. Caught up in the tension, Aeroc stared at it mesmerised, suspended in thought. He felt afraid of that hand. It looked like it could tear through his body at a moment's notice and grasp at his very source of life.

"Didn't you come here to talk about something?"

A low voice woke Aeroc. The pen stopped and a pair of fierce eyes stared back at him, blatant hostility in them. Aeroc curled his hand into an involuntary fist. If he hadn't been wearing soft sheepskin gloves, his sweaty palms would have dried on his trousers.

"Make it quick, I'm busy."

There was a hint of annoyance in his tone. For a moment, Aeroc blushed. He wasn't the type of person to be so blasé as to think nothing of the unrefined way he was being looked at and spoken to. He was insulted enough, but the only reason he didn't storm out was because he was in desperate need.

Aeroc wanted to start the conversation with gratitude and praise for the other man. Not because he liked Bendyke, but because it was polite to do so. He would usually begin with a reference to the tea and teacup he had been served, or, if he could, the weather. This time, a mention of the weather wasn't appropriate, as the office windows were curtained, let alone tea, which the owner had no intention of serving. After some thought, he came up with a suitable topic.

"Your office is very..... academic, I'm surprised."

It's not easy to compliment an office filled with law books, documents and the smell of ink and paper. As a scholarly space, it's easy to be respectful, but with Bendyke as the owner, it took Aeroc a while to get a positive word out of his mouth that didn't imply a particular meaning.

"I don't have time for you to talk about an office you don't care about, and it's not like we're meeting for close-knitted socialising."

Bendyke's brow creased. He did not conceal his slightest displeasure. It seemed like Aeroc had offended him. Aeroc thought about what he had done, but his refined self hadn't done anything wrong.

"Excuse me?"

Just as Aeroc couldn't hold it any longer and was about to say something rude, Bendyke threw down his pen and leaned back. The large-backed leather chair, unlike the guest chair, tipped over with a loud clatter. That made Bendyke's unusually broad shoulders seem even broader.

"How much did you lose?"

Bendyke didn't give him a moment's pause, and Aeroc, stunned by the bluntness of the question, clamped his mouth shut and glared at the other man. Bendyke's eyes pierced through him, their depths unknown, like a swamp hidden in a dark demon forest. He felt like an animal shot with a poisoned arrow. His thighs tightened of their own accord.

"How rude."

Aeroc snapped back coldly. But the predator smirked, the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

"Judging by the fact that you've come for a rude penny pincher who has no honour and only follows the trail of money, you must be in serious trouble, so why waste your time? You don't want to have a long meeting with the detestable human being, do you? I share that same sentiment."

Aeroc had called Bendyke that once, and the fact that he hadn't forgotten it only increased Aeroc's disgust for him. And that same sentiment? He's only Kloff Bendyke's, yet how dare he speak of his dislike of this Aeroc Teiwind? It was not the devil who could vent his dislike, but himself, who was in so much trouble that he had to hold the devil's hand, that he had to visit an office that was like the devil's lair. He had shown the least sincerity in wrapping his dislike in civility, which was Aeroc's birthright, and yet the insolent man had lowered himself to his level with the word 'same sentiment'.

It was an intolerable insult. Even in the midst of a great economic crisis, a man of honour and dignity could not allow himself to be entangled with such a person.

“I don’t think this is something to discuss with you.”

Aeroc scrambled to his feet. He hadn’t taken off his hat or gloves anyway. All he had to do was turn back.

Bendyke cupped his chin in his hand. A towering nose, a strong jaw. And the fact that he used his coolly drawn lips only for sarcasm like that was a special, and unique, trick.

“Are you running away?”

“Watch your mouth.”

Aeroc’s cobwebbed patience snapped. His hostility was blatant.

“It’s my fault for coming to a bastard like you in the first place.”

“That’s quite hurtful. I’m only sorry that I’m so happy to have the Count here.”

In terms of sarcasm, this guy had to be one of the top in the capital, if not the empire. It was a foolish act to deal with him.

Aeroc stormed out of the office. Or he tried to, but he couldn't get the lock right. It clanked several times, until Bendyke stepped in and unlocked it for him. Aeroc didn't even bother to thank him.

Fortunately, the front door swung open with the turn of a knob. He ran down the short flight of stairs and into the carriage.

"Master?"

When the coachman asked what was going on, he simply replied, "To the estate." Aeroc slammed the carriage door shut and sat down in a chair to cool his boiling stomach. As he cast his gaze out the carriage window, his eyes naturally fell on the office window. The half-light cotton curtains were parted slightly, creating a gap through which Aeroc could see that man. Aeroc stared at him, his eyes locked on the man's.

"Hurry up and go!"

Aeroc barked at the coachman.

Giddy-up.

The coachman's voice rang loudly as he roused the horses. Trot, trot, trot. The carriage started down the road. The further they travelled from the demon's lair, the more loosened his breathing became, and the more he relaxed. But the strange indignity of entering his space, of being covered from head to toe, continued to cause a small tremor. The sensation was akin to sexual embarrassment.

"Filthy bastard."

Biting his lip at the end of the word, Aeroc tried to push the sensation of shame and humiliation out of his body. It was not easy.