

Garden 118

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“Master?”

The voice from the other side belonged to a gardener working in the estate.

“Help! There’s a madman here!”

“Shut up. I am the master of this house.”

“Let go!”

Aeroc flailed his gripped arms wildly, but the man didn’t let go of him. Aeroc’s shoulder felt like it was going to fall off. Aeroc kicked the man’s log-like shins and stomped on his foot. Aeroc tried to kick him in the groin, but the distance between them was too close for that.

“Master!”

The gardener rushed over, his eyes widening at the sight of the struggling Aeroc. When the man spotted the gardener, he frowned.

“Who are you? I don’t remember hiring someone like you.”

“He’s a madman! Get him out of here!”

“Please let go!”

The gardener lunged at him, trying to wrestle him away from his master. The old gardener was stronger than Aeroc, but he was no match for the madman. Still, this was two men against one. Aeroc thought it would be easy to get apart. But no matter how Aeroc resisted as best he could and the gardener getting between them, he couldn’t shake the man off.

“Is anyone there? There’s a madman here! Master is in danger!”

Finally, the gardener gave up trying and ran to call for help. The servants, who had been all over the garden for a tea party in the rose garden, heard the cry and appeared one by one. It took the returning gardener and two young men to pull him off the ground.

“Are you all right?”

The startled gardener looked worriedly at Aeroc, who was breathing heavily. Aeroc hadn’t bothered to straighten his crumpled clothes. He stumbled backward, fed up with the man’s struggle to get to him, even though he was being held back by two men.

“This place has become the devil’s lair.”

Gritting his teeth, the man continued to reach for Aeroc. Those who had noticed the commotion rushed over. It took four or five men to subdue him once and for all.

“Aeroc!”

A terrifying voice called his name. Aeroc swept a shaky hand through his tangled hair. His palms glistened with sweat from his forehead. As he reached for a handkerchief to wipe his hands, his vision spun and his legs wobbled. After slowing his breathing, Aeroc turned to the gardener standing beside him and quietly ordered.

“He must be a madman sneaking in during the tea party. Get him out of here before the guests realize it.”

The gardener nodded and walked over to the men who were struggling to subdue the madman and relayed his master’s words.

“You devil, don’t think this is the end of it, not even in hell!”

That man cursed something, a soul-crushing voice that haunted Aeroc long after he’d turned away from the rows of cypress.

Sitting in his study, the place where he felt most secure, Aeroc closed his eyes and caught his breath. As his rapidly rising pulse slowly found its rhythm, Hugo came in with a hot cup of tea, a rich brew that was overflowing with a luscious aroma. Aeroc's hands no longer trembled as he accepted the mug.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course, don't worry."

"I've selected a few of the more able-bodied men to check around the estate, inside and out."

It was quite a shock. But it wasn't entirely unexpected, which was why Aeroc hadn't been neglecting his physical fitness and honing his swordsmanship and marksmanship. It was just that it was so sudden, and he hadn't expected to be attacked in the safety of his estate, which was why he hadn't reacted quickly enough. When the hot tea in his mouth was just at the right temperature, Aeroc swallowed slowly. The flavorful tea slid down his esophagus, and with it, the final aftermath from the madman dissolved.

"I once encountered an insolent baron at Duchess Clayton's party."

Aeroc was reminded of the incident. The guy had been so shallow and devoid of charm that Aeroc hadn't even given him a second glance, and the guy had half-turned and attacked him while secretly admiring him. The guy was dead drunk, and it took place at the Duchess of Clayton's mansion, so Aeroc handled it quietly for her dignity's sake, making not many people know about it. It only served to make the Duchess, who had always been fond of Aeroc, pay more attention to him.

"However, this is the first time it happened inside this estate."

“He must have snuck in during a tea party. He might even have forged an invitation.”

At that, Hugo nodded for a moment. Even if Aeroc didn’t tell him to, the butler would check the invitations against each other to find out who he was.

“I don’t want to know his name. It’s obviously a ploy by those people. It’s better to forget it altogether.”

“I understand.”

After that, Hugo never mentioned this incident again. From then on, the gatekeepers at the estate would stop all carriages, including the familiar ones, and check to see who they were.

The season passed, and winter set in. Aeroc had, as he said, forgotten all about it. His life was all music, art, books, tea. His life was so filled with clever friends and loving relatives that he had no reason to care about such an unsavory incident.

Aeroc braved the bitter wind to visit the Royal Conservatory of Music. It was to attend the last concert of the conductor, one of the best violinists to Aeroc, now a revered maestro. He had the best seat in the house for the entire performance. Aeroc marveled, sighed, and smiled countless times at the symphony’s magnificent harmonies, the soloist’s delicate phrasing, and the conductor’s impeccable interpretation of the piece.

During the encore, Aeroc clapped until his palms tingled. The musician was busy traveling the world, but while he's in the capital, Aeroc would like to invite him to the estate for a chat, and if possible, ask him for guidance as a violinist. As soon as the curtain came down after the encore, Aeroc hurried backstage, which was only open to the high-end members of the Royal Conservatory's generous patrons, but today the King and Queen beat him to it.

It had been a long time since he had seen the King, who was old and not in the best of health, looking so relaxed. Perhaps the conductor would be invited to the palace. Alas, one can't stand up to His Majesty, so Aeroc would have to find the secretary, give his business card, and turn around.

Normally, Alpha and Omegas traveled to concerts in pairs; in aristocratic society, where open romance was almost impossible before betrothal, concerts at night were a great opportunity to get to know someone you liked and strike up a casual relationship.

Aeroc, however, preferred to go alone, as having someone beside him meant he had to be considerate and share his assessment of the music, which would distract from his appreciation. It would be difficult to find the backstage area after the performance, and often he would have to go back early if the other person became unwell. That would be a definite downer, so Aeroc preferred to be alone.

"Today's performance was especially wonderful."

Accepting the coat, silk hat, and cane he'd entrusted to the Conservatory's serving steward, Aeroc stepped out through the grand hall, which was decorated in the golden colors of the Royal Conservatory. A fairly wide staircase led from the white marble entrance of the conservatory to the carriage way.

"Here!"

“Master!”

“My lady, this way!”

The concert had just ended, and the coachmen were busy peering into the distance, searching for their masters among the roaring crowd. It was horrible to think of himself struggling and getting knocked around in all that chaos. Aeroc slipped to the edge of the stairs and walked through the little clearing. Knowing all too well how this would turn out, Aeroc had already had his coachman wait a short distance away.

As he walked down the dimly lit street, Aeroc thought again of the soulful melody of the music. He was particularly fond of the melodious solo part. His hand that wasn't holding the cane plucked invisible chords of its own accord. Instead of strings, the cane swayed slightly back and forth.

His chest heaved and his heart clenched. It was like falling in love. The only things that gave him this sensation were melodies from instruments, the words on pages, and the colors on canvases.

As he followed the tune in his head with a low hum, he awoke to find himself in an unfamiliar place. Aeroc read a nearby sign and realized he was way past the allocated location.

“Oh my.”

Aeroc muttered, feeling a little embarrassed that he'd gotten so caught up in the invisible music. Aeroc quickly turned around. The path wasn't that narrow, but there were two elders walking side by side in

the middle of the street, there wasn't much room for all of them to pass. Moreover, they were walking too slowly. Aeroc had no choice but to cross between them.

"Excuse me."

Aeroc grabbed his hat, bowed his head slightly, and nudged them both slightly. Most of the time, they would just apologize and part ways. If they were offended, they'd just curse a little.