

Garden 120

Vol. 5 ITRG Volume 5 Chapter 3.1

It's a chilly winter afternoon. While having some tea with Viscount Derbyshire, he mentioned a name Aeroc had never heard before.

"Do you know Bendyke?"

Aeroc answered honestly.

"I've never heard the name before."

"You mean you don't know the man who is the big talk of the capital's social circles these days?"

Then, Viscount Derbyshire proceeded to describe him excitedly. A young alpha male who had graduated with honors at the capital university. Handsome and well-built. A manly personality. A man whose innate investment sense and cynical humor had won over many nobles of all genders.

Aeroc enjoyed the hobby of collecting, with an interest in rare books and works of art, much in the same way that Viscount Derbyshire enjoyed collecting talented newcomers. A social butterfly with a wide network of contacts, he met newcomers through many avenues, gauging their prospects and actively backing them when he saw their potential.

"I see."

“I don’t know about anyone else, but you should meet this man. I especially want to introduce him to you.”

Having five bodies wouldn’t even be enough if he had to meet all the people the Viscount Derbyshire collected, and Aeroc did not enjoy dealing with strangers. It was because many despicable people clung to his wealth, fame, and good looks. The Viscount knew this, and when he introduced someone to him, it was usually at a dinner or tea party where many people were gathered at the same time. Rarely did the Viscount suggest he meet someone in private. His emphasis was puzzling.

“I’m hosting a dinner at my house soon, and you’re very much invited. Talk to Bendyke and you’ll see why I’m doing this.”

“I understand.”

It was a request from an elderly gentleman who had been a close acquaintance of his late father. He had no particular agenda, just pure affection and interest in Aeroc for his own sake. So Aeroc promised to do so willingly.

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Besides the invitation from Viscount Derbyshire, other invitations often arrived. Most of them Aeroc politely declined, but there were some that he could never refuse. Such were the invitations to dinners from the Duchess of Clayton, with whom he was not close enough to be personally acquainted, but who wielded so much authority and influence that the invitation was literally a formality, it was more like a notice of his required attendance.

The old lady of great age had a hobby similar to that of the Viscount Derbyshire, but a little more strange. The childless duchess had lived alone and freely for so long after the death of her husband, the duke, more than twenty years earlier, that she often threw very grand dinners. She would invite all the curious socialites she could find, especially young people who could be around the age of her children or grandchildren. She hoped that, as is often the case at large family gatherings in families with many offspring, something would spark between the attendees, whether it was a spark of affection, envy, or jealousy.

The reason for her inviting Aeroc was to hopefully spark something. This was a very annoying invitation for Aeroc, as there were quite a few instances where this actually happened. He really wanted to decline, but he didn't know what kind of rumors would be spread in his absence if he used the excuse of being sick.

Aeroc was determined to arrive and leave as quietly as possible, without causing the slightest trouble, but fate was not on his side. The carriage, which had always been in perfect working order, ran into trouble on the way to the Duchess Clayton. For some reason, the carriage bounced along the road and one of the wheels twisted violently. It could no longer move.

"I'll call another carriage."

The coachman tried to catch a carriage on the street. But there were no suitable carriages in the suburbs, far from the city center. The coachman tried his best, gesturing this way and that.

"It doesn't seem to be easy to call one here. I'm sure there's an empty carriage a little further down the road."

“I’m sorry, Master.”

“It can’t be helped. You just stay here. I can go on my own.”

Aeroc walked quickly, leaving the apologetic coachman behind. It was quite difficult to catch a carriage, and only after walking for a long time did he manage to catch an empty one. By the time he reached the duchess place, the feast had already begun.

A solemn-looking servant of the Duchess escorted him to the banquet hall. Through the doors the servant opened for him, Aeroc found himself in a large room with five huge chandeliers. The table was long, and the people seated at the opposite end looked like tiny, miniature dolls.

“Count Teiwind has arrived.”

A servant announced Aeroc’s arrival, and the Duchess of Clayton, seated at the head table farthest from the door, waved a handkerchief in her hand. The servant gestured toward her.

“This way.”

Aeroc’s seat had to be close to hers. It was an unusually generous gesture for someone who was late. Dozens of people held their breath and glanced at Aeroc as he made his way across the long banquet hall. As expected, the room was filled with young alphas and omegas. He recognized some faces, but most were strangers.

“Aeroc, you’re late.”

“I apologize, Your Grace, but my carriage had some trouble.”

When the duchess hosting the dinner reprimanded him in an elegant voice, Aeroc apologized with a suitable excuse.

“I forgive you, for I have seen your graceful march. I’m glad you came before the serving began, so we’ll have plenty of time to enjoy our conversation.”

With that, the old lady extended her hand with a handkerchief and invited Aeroc to greet her, a slightly awkward but affectionate gesture that involved bending down and kissing her on both cheeks before taking a seat at the table.

“There are a lot of interesting characters here today, so if you see anyone who passes your cynical standards, be sure to let me know. Finding someone you like is my goal for today.”

The Duchess told Aeroc to be open and evaluate others. The people in attendance had ears to hear and egos to defend, but the royalty, the third highest ranking person in the kingdom with no one to bow to except the king and his family, didn’t seem to be worthy of respect. In fact, no one batted an eyelid at the arrogant remark.

Aeroc was not amused by the situation. The Duchess was playing the role of a grandmother who was displaying toys to her young grandson and sweetly telling him to pick his favorite, but if the toys were people, it would only make him feel creeped out.

Heehee.

That's when a low chuckle from nearby gave him the creepy feeling. As funny as the Duchess's bizarre behavior was, the fact that one was laughing so casually in the presence of a person who was supposed to be an honored person of the King was remarkable. Curious about the laughter, Aeroc turned his gaze toward that side.

Clang.

The glass in front of Aeroc shook violently. It didn't knock over, but it was loud enough to draw the attention of everyone else in the room.

"Aeroc?"

The Duchess looked a little startled, and put a hand to her chest. A wrinkled hand with a jeweled ring reached out, and the layered pearl necklace clinked against it. Aeroc was surprised, too. In a voice low enough to be heard only by the Duchess, he asked.

"Why is that person here?"

"Who, Knight Capri?"

“No, that guy next to him. The one who just laughed.”

“Aha. Mr. Bendyke.”

Despite his quiet question, the Duchess indicated him clearly. Her ruddy lips curved into a crescent, and she openly looked at him. This startled Aeroc even more.

“Bendyke?”

From what Aeroc knew, the man was a violent lunatic. The Bendyke that the Viscount Derbyshire had spoken of was a brilliant lawyer specializing in economics, a high-profile investor, and a new socialite. How could they be the same person? It was clear that the impostor was pretending to be a socialite.

“That can’t be the same Bendyke.”

“What do you mean?”

The Duchess’s eyes twinkled. She looked back and forth between that man and Aeroc. The Duchess wasn’t the only one watching with interest. Not wanting to cause a scene, Aeroc whispered quickly, in a low voice.

“The man is a lunatic fraud.”

“Hooo.”

As if surprised, the Duchess cast an exaggerated glance in that man’s direction. He must have heard Aeroc’s words, but he smiled casually, as if he didn’t care.

“There was a misunderstanding.”

“What do you mean, a misunderstanding? Twice, you...!”

“Twice, you?”

Aeroc was about to raise his voice, but he clamped his mouth shut. He didn’t need to say out loud that he was almost attacked by that man. But the duchess kept waiting to hear the end. There was no avoiding it.

“We have met twice.”

It was that man who answered the Duchess’s question.

“But the encounters were not very pleasant. I’m sure you’re curious, but for the sake of Your Grace’s dignity, it would be best if we spoke later, in private.”

The words, spoken in a slow but sure tone, were polite but commanding. It was shockingly arrogant for someone to address the Duchess. But Aeroc seemed to be the only one who found that man’s tone foreign. Even the Duchess nodded nonchalantly.

“I would like to hear it now, but since Mr. Bendyke says so, it will have to wait.”

The Duchess even referred to him as Mr. Bendyke. She might call Aeroc by his first name in a friendly way, but she never called him Count, a discrepancy that surprised Aeroc even more. What kind of fraud could this man be, that the Viscount Derbyshire would praise him with his own tongue, and this eccentric, demanding old woman would honor him. What had happened to society since Aeroc had stopped paying attention to it?

“If you guys are acquainted, I need not introduce you guys again.”

“We haven’t got to exchange names yet.”

“Really, even if you’ve met twice?”

The Duchess added and had her curiosity increased. Aeroc closed his mouth in frustration and frowned. The man watched with amusement. The nonchalant gaze, with all its ulterior motives, was a source of great displeasure. It was in line with his hostility.

“We haven’t had the time to do that before, so I’ll take this opportunity to introduce myself.”

This time, that man interrupted first.

“Do we even have to exchange names in the first place?”

Aeroc snapped. The mood quickly turned sour. It was hard to believe that it came from the mouth of the Count of Teiwind, who had set an excellent example to the rest of the aristocrats. Even if he had unpleasant memories of that man, there was no need to show such low-level contempt in public. But even at the risk of a bit of gibberish, Aeroc wanted to humiliate him, hoping that the public humiliation would enrage him enough to reveal his true colors. A raging lunatic.

Despite Aeroc’s secret hope, the man’s smile remained unchanged as he looked this way, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly, like a fierce beast watching the silly defiance of its prey. He didn’t care if Aeroc glared at him or not.

“Kloff Bendyke. I run a small law practice. I’ve heard of Count Teiwind’s stature, especially since the current Count is said to have a great mind of his own, but I’ve also heard that he possesses the beauty of a rose, and from what I’ve seen of you today, you are indeed a rose, and not just in appearance.”

After his brief introduction, Aeroc was the one who felt ridiculous. Not only did that man act sarcastic while making his arrogant and condescending demeanor sound clever, but that man also mocked Aeroc for looking like a flower despite him being an alpha, as if pricking him. His anger flared and his eyes sparked. Aeroc responded with the same easy smile. If he could, he would punch that man’s shameless face again and again.

The eyes of bystanders darted dizzily between the two of them. Aeroc wanted to add another remark, but before he could, the Duchess interrupted.

“Now, enough greetings, it’s time to eat. It would be nice to have a cheerful mood when we eat, otherwise you’ll get indigestion.”

The Duchess skillfully intervened at just the right moment, and as she spoke, a line of fierce servants came flying in with plates. The conversation quickly turned to praise for the quality of the food and drink. But Aeroc wasn’t having fun at all with the fine food and drink. It was because of the man sitting diagonally across from him.

That day, the entire time during the dinner felt uncomfortable. Several times the Duchess, who was very interested in Aeroc’s relationship with the man who identified himself as Bendyke, tried to trap him, but Aeroc cleverly avoided the topic. He realized that complete ignorance would only encourage gossip, so he would only occasionally respond to Bendyke’s comments.

The mood was cordial. Not only did Bendyke have done enough with the earlier insults, but he was also looking for a chance to make an attack at Aeroc. He glanced over at Aeroc throughout the dinner, showing a keen interest in him. The easy smile that flitted across his face, accompanied by a deep gaze, bordered on mockery. Aeroc wasn’t accustomed to being insulted, but being mocked was downright terrible. But that man was only hurting himself, for there was no honor or dignity in confronting Aeroc. Aeroc continued to drink alcohol, trying to soothe the disgust and anger in his stomach.