

## Garden 123

Vol. 5 ITRG Volume 5 Chapter 4.2

Just when Aeroc thought this man was getting away with being a lunatic, the asshole fired an unnecessary confirmation shot. His offensive attitude was always the same. Only today, he didn't even bother to 'pretend' to be professional. Aeroc started to become very irritated. There wouldn't be another guy who can piss him off from the moment you meet him face-to-face and exchange a couple of words. A part of him wanted to throw Bendyke out right then and there, but Aeroc had no choice but to have him here. Aeroc took a deep breath to calm his irritation and handed Bendyke the contract and a stack of solicitation letters from the company.

"This is for today."

Sitting down on the couch, Bendyke took the papers as if they were a treat and quickly scanned through the dozens of pages. Even though he tried not to, Aeroc found himself looking at the other person's reaction.

The cold man flipped through the first few pages absentmindedly, his coolly straight eyebrows arched slightly. Then he snorted at the next pages. His eyes flicked to Aeroc, and one corner of his mouth quirked up. It was clear that he was sneering. Trying to ignore the heat rising in his face, Aeroc looked the other way and lifted his teacup.

Bendyke grew graver by the minute, until the financial manager candidate eventually let out a low groan when he saw the conclusive letter that forced Aeroc to admit his incompetence in financial matters. He put down the other papers and read it twice over. He stroked his chin with his hand, then rubbed his lower lip with his long index finger.

The silent response stiffened an otherwise tense atmosphere. This was no time for leisurely sipping tea. Eventually, Aeroc spoke first.

"If possible, I'd prefer to settle this with the income from the estate, so give me your advice. I mean, Mr. Bendyke."

Aeroc said with a straight face and the bare minimum of politeness.

"Pfft."

Bendyke sneered at his words. It was more like he was laughing at the ridiculousness of this than enjoying mocking Aeroc. To have one's intellect insulted, or one's stupidity exposed, was more humiliating to the stomach than an open insult. Aeroc could not bear to show his flushed face. He set the teacup down and went to the window. He'd like to believe he was acting natural, but he knew that was impossible. The stare at the back of his head stung. The bastard was thoroughly enjoying Aeroc's embarrassment.

"So?"

Aeroc jerked back at the question that flew out of Bendyke's mouth.

"What?"

"So what's the actual matter?"

Aeroc had shown his embarrassment long enough. He didn't know why Bendyke was repeating his question.

"That's the matter."

"No. That's the problem, and the matter is, what are you willing to pay for me to solve that problem?"

"Can you solve it?"

It seemed like such a serious problem, and Aeroc couldn't see a way to solve it, he had just invited the most unwanted person into the estate. Aeroc's heart leaped with honest joy at the mention of a solution, and then Bendyke threw him a crafty glare.

Realizing he had acted like a child, Aeroc coughed and returned to his expressionless face.

"I'll pay your fee, no matter how much it is."

No matter how high a financial manager's fee was, it was the salary of a mere hireling. It was nothing a Count's income couldn't cover, and Aeroc knew this. His arrogant opponent's tightly closed lips twitched slightly, his eyes like a wolf staring down its prey.

There was a tension in the air unlike anything Aeroc had ever seen. His fur stood on end. He had no desire to know what the lunatic would demand in return. Aeroc struck before he could bullshit.

“A hundred, two hundred, or three hundred?”

He called out a sum that could buy a few pieces of art at his favorite museum. It was more than Hugo’s weekly paycheck. Aeroc thought that would be enough, and Bendyke just wiggled his eyebrows.

“Is that not enough? I can’t give you more than five hundred. The income from the estate pays the weekly wages of the estate’s employees and covers social events. And.....”

Just as Aeroc was about to give an excuse for not being able to give more, Bendyke interrupted him again.

“And you’ve got new paintings to buy, musical instruments to collect. If you don’t have statues yet, it’s because you haven’t found a place to put them in the estate. With a little trimming here and there of the overgrown rose garden, you could put marble statues everywhere.”

“Ah, that’s a great idea. Why didn’t I think of that? I’m going to hold a summer soiree in the rose garden, so I might as well buy a few to decorate before then.”

The unexpected suggestion made Aeroc think of a few statues he’d been eyeing. As he pondered, a shadow suddenly fell over him. He looked up to see Bendyke, who had come close to him, trapping Aeroc in his arms again.

Thud.

He backed away, hesitantly, and the glass hit his back. Aeroc stared up at his opponent, eyes wide. Bendyke was a man of great length and stature, enough to surprise anyone. Aeroc was by no means small by usual standards, but he seemed like a child compared to his opponent. Bendyke knew how to use his overwhelming size to his advantage, closing the gap with the ease of a predator backing its prey into a corner.

Why had he been here alone? He should have called for Hugo, or at least one of the maids, Aeroc belatedly regretted. But it was too late. His heart was beating wildly. It felt like it was going to crack his ribs and pop out. The sound of the alpha's snarl shook him out of his reverie. Stepping back, unable to find space, Aeroc stood on his tiptoes and felt the cold window sill against his butt.

Bendyke lifted his arm and gripped the glass pane with his hand. Leaning closer, he whispered in a low voice.

"I didn't ask you how much you'd pay. I asked you what you'd pay."

"What?"

"I don't want money."

"Then, a land?"

“I can obtain that without the help of a Count.”

“Then our deal for today is off.”

Aeroc quickly concluded. He could sell a few paintings and buy it back when he's better off. Or mortgage them. He knew a few people who could provide the cash. However, Bendyke didn't seem to give up on their negotiations. He turned to Aeroc.

“If you show your problem to anyone else, you'll just get rejected.”

Suddenly, Aeroc remembered what he'd heard before.

“So you're the one who's been spreading rumors about me hiring you.”

As expected, this man was the one who made all the other financial managers turn him down. Aeroc wanted to vent his frustration. He knew he was at a physical disadvantage, so he tried to at least point a finger and say something mean and accusatory. But it was all in the wind. Bendyke didn't give him the time to do so.

“That's a misunderstanding. I didn't do that, it's the meddlesome old man.”

“Don’t blame others. You’re the one who knew there was a misunderstanding and didn’t correct it.”

“Well, that’s true.”

With that, Bendyke continued to push closer towards Aeroc. Aeroc’s upper body was better positioned against the window, but his lower body was no match for it. It was hard to tell if the heat on his thighs was his own or his opponent’s.

“But it’s also true that it’s a problem that only I can solve, because these fraudulent contracts can’t be solved with just a pen and tongue.”

If not a pen and tongue, then a lawsuit? No, he definitely meant not through the legal way. It was the kind of thing only a lunatic would do, and if that were the case, then Bendyke was right, only he could solve it. If it was a violent and inhumane solution, the fee would be just as violent and inhumane.

“So what do you want?”

“Count, I want something that only you can pay for.”

Though he hadn’t experienced it beforehand, Aeroc wasn’t unaware of the implications of those words. Aeroc was no fool. No, he was a fool himself. This man was shrewdly ambitious from the first time they met. It was just a matter of whether or not he expressed it in a violent way. He always only had one goal. Damn it.

Conflict, both within and outside his body, raged through Aeroc. The blade-like bridge of Bendyke's nose brushed against his pale cheeks. A thick arm wrapped around his waist like a rope tying the center mast of a sailboat. At the same time, a skinny hand wrapped around Aeroc's neck and chin. The other's palm was burning hot.

"I'm an alpha."

"That's great."

With the simple answer, the demon bringing misfortune shattered Aeroc's shield of providence. This man had no morals, no ethics, and no benevolence.

"It's bad enough that you're a rude lunatic, but you're also a pervert with an abnormal sexual desire. What a waste of a handsome face."

"Do you like my face?"

"I didn't say that."