

Garden 124

Vol. 5 ITRG Volume 5 Chapter 4.3

Aeroc shouldn't have gotten into this unreasonable negotiation in the first place. To make matters worse, despite all the unpleasant encounters and conversations they'd had so far, the shrewd lust of the man at the peak of his alpha male instincts had rubbed off on Aeroc. The heat from their clashing lower bodies gnawed at Aeroc's patience. His brain, dulled by years of tension and sleep deprivation, was about to make a foolish decision.

"Do you hate me?"

"If I do, will you regard the contract as if it never happened?"

"No."

"Then don't ask that."

Aeroc looked directly into the eyes of his blatant flirter. The man's pupils, sunken to near black with desire, reflected a troubled, pathetic reflection of him. Slightly disheveled hair, slightly flushed cheeks, and the tip of his nose. His lips, reddened by repeated chewing, were pressed together in a tight line. It wasn't the proper etiquette of a well-groomed aristocrat. It was even less appropriate looking for an alpha male.

"I'll ask you one last question. Answer me truthfully."

“What?”

“Why me? There are many other wealthy aristocrats, even Omegas too, who are promised vast inheritances. You’d be better off wooing and marrying one of them.”

“I appreciate your advice, but they are not you.”

The conversation spun out of control. Aeroc leaned in close and glared at the man who was exploring the nape of his neck closely like a beast. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Bendyke pressed his lips to Aeroc’s ear and whispered.

“I fell in love with you at first sight.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I agree. I must definitely be crazy to have gotten myself into this mess again.”

Aeroc’s will to resist the endless taunts was slowly fading. As an aristocrat, his pride fought a hard battle alone, but it was too late to turn the tide.

“I’ll set the terms.”

“As you wish.”

Faced with the irresistible tide, the last resistance Aeroc could muster was to emphasize the prerequisite of the problem.

“I’ll draft a contract and send it to you.”

After getting what he wanted, Bendyke slowly backed away. A sudden chill came over Aeroc, making him feel naked despite the layers of clothing he wore. Long fingers hovered over his ears. Every time he felt the slightest gesture, the pit of Aeroc’s stomach clenched and unclenched. It wasn’t just fear that made him nervous. It was the realization that the one-sided intimate touch by the hateful man wasn’t as horrifying as he had imagined. Even in the bright daylight, Bendyke’s eyes looked dreamy. Then, Bendyke brought his head closer again. Just as their lips were about to touch, just as his heart was about to explode, Bendyke asked a ridiculous question.

“Can I kiss you?”

“Oh, of course not.”

The rejection was coming obviously, so obvious that Aeroc expected it to be ignored. But Bendyke didn’t come any closer. He grasped Aeroc’s chin in a very regretful way, struggled for a moment, and then pulled away completely. Aeroc’s teeth clenched, annoyed that Bendyke was acting like a gentleman who had suddenly realized his manners.

“Our business is done, get the hell out of my house.”

“As a hired servant, I’ll follow the words of my master.”

With that, he kissed the back of Aeroc’s hand, the way a medieval knight would kiss his master. After leaving the hot stamp, the rude hired hand gave a light greeting with his eyes and disappeared.

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Aeroc didn’t know if Bendyke was teasing or serious, but two days later, a copy of the abbreviated contract arrived. It was only a minor agreement, yet it was written in the careful language of a national treaty.

Bendyke’s agreement was both specific and vague. Specific was the work he would do for Aeroc: as the chief financial manager of Teiwind, he was to do everything in his power to ensure their financial stability. The contracts that needed to be settled immediately, and the damage that needed to be minimized, were specified in specific numbers, standards so stringent that even Aeroc, who was weak for numbers, felt it was impossible. If it could be accomplished, Aeroc would have to rethink a great deal about the capabilities of the man known as Kloff Bendyke.

The gray area was the fee Aeroc would have to pay. He had no clue about this sort of minor agreement, but he used his humanistic knowledge and literary imagination to make a guess. Usually, those who demand such things stipulate a number of times. Or time. Bendyke chose the latter.

The term that Aeroc found hard to understand was the place for this fee. He wanted it to happen in the Teiwind estate. Aeroc didn’t want to bring this messy behavior into his space. Space sucked up the

remnants of emotions and deeds, releasing them in unexpected ways one day. If they did it here, even after the deal was completely done, Aeroc might have to occasionally remind himself of the horrors that were to come. It was horrible even just thinking about it.

Facing Bendyke, who had come to revise the terms of the agreement, Aeroc pointed it out.

“It can’t be in my house.”

Bendyke responded nonchalantly.

“How about my house? Or my office?”

Aeroc naturally thought of a hotel or another home of his. Bendyke snorted at that.

“Do you want to do it on the streets, then?”

Aeroc’s mouth dropped open in disbelief.

“What?”

“I suppose we could find a suitable corner if we searched the bottom place.”

The bottom place. Bendyke was a master of insults. Aeroc’s mouth dropped open at the unimaginable words. As if he wasn’t joking, he raised his pen to make a correction about the place. Aeroc quickly stopped him. A fair, ungloved hand touched Bendyke’s hard, thick, tendon-studded wrist.

“How does not letting it happen in the estate suddenly mean we’re going to go to the bottom..... the streets? There are other places, and I’m sure there’s a suitable place on the Royal Crossroad.”

Royal Crossroad was the busiest street in the capital, leading to the royal palace. Dozens of carriages were still traveling up and down the street, carrying many socialites to and from the luxury hotels that catered to the lesser aristocracy, wealthy commoners, and those of limited means who wanted to enjoy a modicum of freedom when the palace didn’t provide rooms. There was even a hotel there that Aeroc occasionally used, not for any particular reason, but because it was a site of a social gathering.

“The Royal Crossroad? What do you think will happen if the Count and I meet in a place, where if just sneezing a little makes one’s name appear in the obituary tomorrow morning? You might as well gather all the socialites and make a public announcement about this agreement.”

A stinging, but terribly pertinent point. Bendyke maintained a stoic expression the entire time, even as Aeroc’s complexion turned pale.

“Not that I care about it.”

Aeroc couldn’t bring himself to ask if it was okay for them to go there, or if it was okay to make a public announcement to his social circle. Aeroc let go of Bendyke’s wrist.

“It would be better not to fix the terms.”

Aeroc had no other option but to say so.

“Don’t worry too much, it’ll be better for the Count this way.”

“It’s already a bad deal to begin with, do you think I need your consolation?”

The questioning voice was sharper than necessary. Fortunately, Bendyke kept his mouth shut. Though one corner of his mouth twitched upward.

The long-awaited contract was finally finalized. Aeroc signed one copy for himself to keep and another for Bendyke. Despite his misgivings, he decided not to have it notarized. There was no one else they could trust with this, so they made a rare agreement.

“You better honor the contract.”

“That’s for me to say, Count.”

This time, Bendyke didn't ask for permission and kissed Aeroc lightly on the cheek. Like a mature alpha caring for a young omega fiancé, Bendyke chuckled to himself.

"Don't do anything creepily unlike you."

"That's pretty hurtful."

When Aeroc pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his cheeks as if wiping away filth, Bendyke exaggerated his posture like a theater actor. There was mischief in his eyes, too.

"I'm not in the mood to joke around."

"I'm not joking."

With that, Bendyke casually hugged Aeroc. It was so natural, Aeroc was stunned. He unknowingly snorted and pushed Bendyke away.

"You're acting like my lover."

"I'm about to be."

“Stop your delusion.”

“We’ll see if it’s a delusion or not.”

Bendyke dared to kiss Aeroc’s throbbing temple. When Aeroc screamed at him to get lost, he chuckled and disappeared. Aeroc didn’t understand what was so funny.