

R. Garden 45

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The year after his ailing but otherwise healthy father died for no particular reason, the first rose garden tea party hosted by Aeroc as the Count of Teiwind was in full swing after he took over the family crest in his early twenties.

A time-honored tradition, the midday banquet was ostensibly an ordinary garden tea party, a time for socialising, but in reality it was a human arena where people were valued, labeled, invested in, or even got their names remembered . It was also a place where greedy calculations were made about the likelihood of some significant emotional relationship between two people, and whether it would be okay to declare their union in the name of God. With considerations of how it would benefit their family.

While acknowledging the best of the best in his acquaintances, strangers, and himself, Aeroc was uncomfortable with the mix of flattery, envy, and jealousy. With a high sense of self-respect, a broad and deep education, and a rich artistic sensibility that is the very essence of aristocracy, he found the sight of such naked greed deeply offensive. Were it not for family tradition, he would never have organized such a laborious market himself, and he rarely accepted event invitations from other families.

“I hope it’ll be over soon.”

The scent of roses was headache-inducingly strong today. Aeroc escaped the rose garden and found a spot with fresh tree dreadlocks. Unlike the gardens, which were open to visitors, there were trails that were only used by members of the family and close friends. He had distant relatives, but none he interacted with often, so it was safe to say the place was solely for Aeroc’s use for now.

Cool giant trees, their towering trunks reaching for the sky, lined both sides of the gravel path. Stomp. The crisp echo of the stones combined with the wind rushing through the millions of leaves at the same time was refreshing. Aeroc walked slowly, breathing in the fresh air. It washed his lungs from the poison of humans who were losing their innocence and filled him with the freshness of nature instead. The gills of his soul flapped eagerly, unable to contain their joy.

The sun's rays, like special lights on a theater stage, pierced through the clusters of green foliage and struck the ground. At the end of the path, where the beams of light were thick, there stood someone. It was a man he'd never seen before.

Aeroc knew he was an Alpha in just one look, his massive body looking as if he was a cedar tree incarnate. That person was glaring towards this side. His pupils, which looked like they'd been chiseled out of an abyss, held a fearsome aura. His instincts sensed danger. Aeroc ignored the warning to retrace his steps and return to the estate, for his late father's strict teachings were still his most important principles. The vast estate, including the trails, belonged to Teiwind. The Teiwind had stood firm and unwavering throughout the ages, now he was the lord of this rose kingdom. It was simply not possible for Aeroc to give up the trails that belonged to him for the sake of a stray visitor.

As Aeroc closed the distance, the outline of the unwelcome visitor came into view. The man's eyes were well above his head, forcing him to lift his chin and look up, even though Aeroc was by no means short. His dark suit was shapeless, emphasizing his towering frame and coolly outstretched legs. With his head held high, the man had a piercing, intense gaze. If one wasn't a king or a prima donna accustomed to the intense gaze, they would have shivered, unable to resist the fearsome stare that immediately followed. But more than anyone else, Aeroc was used to that glare. Especially from a man like him, who didn't know his own standing and judgement. To a newbie who showed an obsession and possessiveness to someone he shouldn't dare to look at.

The way he stood like a statue the entire time he watched Aeroc approach was annoying, as was the cocky look in his eyes. It was like a master waiting to be worshiped by a servant. It was clear that he misunderstood Aeroc as someone else. Aeroc was going to give him a mild warning and move on, but then he decided to humiliate this man.

The distance grew closer. Aeroc turned away from that man and threw his gaze farther ahead. He kept up his walking pace. As the distance between them began to disappear and reappear, Aeroc warned in a cold tone.

“This place is only for our aristocracy.”

He looked like any other poor aristocrat or gentry. But Aeroc had no intention of treating him as such. This man was stupid and pathetic, but Aeroc wouldn't have treated him like a lowlife if he'd known his own place. Aeroc smirked to himself and brushed past the man.

“I knew you'd be the one to greet me.”

The unpleasant sarcasm stopped Aeroc in his tracks. Otherwise, there was no reason for him to pay attention to this young man. Just as Aeroc was about to turn around to see if the man was talking to him, an ugly hand reached out and gripped his upper arm firmly.

“You've gotten a lot better while I've been gone. Hell hath not welcomed you, cursed demon.”

The strong grip threatened to shatter Aeroc's bone and muscle. Aeroc was taken by surprise with the pain, but he was too stunned to respond.

The venom that poured from the two burning eyeballs was vile. And the thick fangs that sat between his twisted lips twitched as if they could chew on a raw heart. If this man was right, if there was indeed a damned demon that Hell welcomed, wouldn't that be this man himself?

“Let go.”

Aeroc barely managed to get the simple demand out. However, the strength he put into pulling his hand was totally resisted. His gripped arm grew numb from the pressure on his veins. Even in the midst of the tense struggle, the other person seemed relaxed. In fact, Aeroc was the only one using enough strength to actually lose his breathing.

The violent creature wasn't just big, he was actually frighteningly strong. Not only did he have no trouble holding the struggling adult alpha down, but he was also able to look him up and down with ease.

"Even though you're a fucking bastard, you're just so..... beautiful that I can't stop swearing."

"Hu..... go....."

Aeroc's stiffened tongue called out the name of the one he trusted most. But his voice didn't ring out loud enough as his whole body tensed in protest.

"Here you go again, acting like an arrogant aristocrat, with not the slightest hint of remorse..... You're just perfect at it."

Then he laughed with glee. With a maniacal grin on his face, he lowered his head. Aeroc felt like white teeth were going to bite the nape of his neck at any moment. When the man's hot breath actually touched the base of his neck, the hairs on his head stood on end.

“Still a selfish, self-centered, bloodless, tearless bastard, that’s what you are, Aeroc Teiwind, aren’t you? Almost got me fooled by the chiseled tombstone like a fool or something, expecting me to admit my defeat to a devil with a heart of ice.”

Then that man pressed his lips to Aeroc’s neck and under his jaw. They were so hot that it felt burning, but also cold enough to make his heart race. Aeroc’s brain refused to work with the difference in temperature between inside and out, and his reasoning was soon paralyzed. Just as the venomous creature’s lips were about to swallow his breath, Aeroc suddenly realized that his other arm was free.

Thud!

Aeroc slammed his fist into the other’s cheekbone. But his arm was still firmly held. Watching the head slowly turn, Aeroc swung his fist again.

Thud.

His wrist was caught. As a human, the opposite person also had two arms.

“I’ll have to remind you of your place.”

The man’s cheekbones must have hurt, and he glared at Aeroc in disgust. A cruel sneer crossed his backlit face. Aeroc’s ribs tightened and his lungs heaved. His pounding heart threatened to burst at the slightest shock. Fear rose from beneath Aeroc’s shuffling feet and threatened to engulf his entire body.

Suddenly, Aeroc heard a shuffling sound. There was someone on the other side of the cypresses that stretched along the trail that branched off from the boardwalk. The man must have noticed, too, because his gaze darted in that direction. Aeroc's instinct told him that this was his only chance.

"Hugo!"

Aeroc yelled with all his might. It was a desperate cry, enough to get the attention of the person on the other side, even if they weren't his trusted butler.

"I've long since kicked that old man out, don't you know that?"

"Hugo! Hugo!"

"You've abandoned me in this horrible living hell, and now you demon, you're merrily pretending that you know nothing. Just before, you tried to draw pity out of me with all sorts of pitiful pretenses, begging me to show you the children you've carried, but now, the name that you can think of in urgency is that old butler."

"You crazy bastard!"

"Why? Why don't you ask for Rapiel? You've been talking nonsense to that child, telling him you're his mother. Haven't you?"

This man was spouting nonsense. He was a brain-damaged madman, he seemed to think Aeroc was an omega who had fathered a child. This was horrible. Aeroc completely ignored the madman's words and screamed desperately, not forgetting to struggle.