

Samantha was not prepared for such a display of avarice and splendour when she agreed to attend her first ball. Her farmhouse was much larger than the homes you would find in the city, but the Booker's mansion put it to shame in terms of scale. It was gigantic, capable of housing dozens of separate families comfortably, yet it was dedicated to only one. Then there was the finely detailed interior, expensive furnishings, and the individual preparations that had been made solely for the purpose of the party she now attended. It boggled her mind to imagine how much had been spent on it.

Samantha made the right call in putting on her finest dress. Even then, she felt somewhat undressed in comparison to the flashy and modern designs that some of the other girls were so eager to show off in a display of social superiority. She stuck close to Max and Claude as they escorted her to a quieter area away from the chaos on the central floor. Max was their designated guide for the evening, as the only one from the trio who'd been to balls in the past.

Max adjusted his bow tie and cast a curious glance at Claude, who was anxiously hovering by his side and watching the crowd as they jostled for position in the grand hall. "I don't understand why you decided to come with us. I told you that it wasn't going to be anything exciting. They host balls like this every other week."

Claude smirked and tapped his temple; "Naturally, wherever my prime suspect goes I must follow. You never know when she'll choose to strike again."

"I'm starting to think that you have a crush on her," Max chuckled.

"I do not!" Claudius snapped back with rose-tinted cheeks. He wouldn't be alone if that was really the case. Most of the boys in his year found her attractive from afar, though her prickly personality was bound to complicate matters if one were to try and approach her. "Shouldn't you be paying more attention to the girl you brought with you?" he shot back.

"Samantha isn't my date. I'm just escorting her for the evening."

"Yeah – in other words, a date."

Samantha was completely tuned out of the conversation, which brought great relief to both young men who had entered a state of mutually assured destruction through their argument. She smiled at both of them and clasped her hands together, "This hall is amazing. I've seen similar rooms in books before, but it's even more dazzling in person."

Max exhaled, "I remember when I used to feel the same way before I had to attend dozens of these things for the sake of my Father."

“Oh, do you dislike them?”

“I wouldn’t say that I dislike them. They become routine if you are invited to too many. My singular hope is that the food is good.”

Claude nodded, “And we get some in-party entertainment, like some of the girls getting into a tussle on the dance floor.”

Samantha tilted her head, “Does that happen often?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Max wracked his brain for an illustrative example. One of the girls on the periphery of the main huddle provided it for him. “That girl there, her name is Gertrude Farhan. Two years ago, she got into a real fight with Caroline Bohn because she insulted her fiancé. They were on the floor, punching, kicking, and when they came back up she walked away with a black eye while Caroline had a bloody nose.”

“Wow.”

“That’s what happens when there’s so much money and power on the line. Even the nobles our age get wrapped up in trying to come out on top. It’s still pretty unusual for things to devolve into fisticuffs though.”

That was news to Samantha, whose country-girl upbringing had insulated her from the reality of what the noble class was really like. Her experiences in the school, and now here at the ball had demonstrated that they could be just as impulsive, petty or rage-fuelled as someone without their wealth. Maria was the only girl who lined up with those assumptions, and even she was exceptional in a way that the others were not. To be the storybook noble demanded a level of isolation that no others were willing to endure.

At least she could appreciate the lovely dresses that the girls were wearing without having to worry about that kind of thing. Samantha verbalised her awe with a series of strange, high-pitched noises as they walked past. The colours were so vibrant and the stitching so finely placed. It was a veritable gallery of different styles in almost every shade and shade. Frills seemed to be the current trend, with big skirts and shoulders being common features.

Max nudged her, “Don’t worry about feeling out of place. I think your dress is nice too.”

“Not a date, he says...” Claude grumbled.

Samantha couldn't ignore the flash of ruby red that lay on the periphery of her vision. The girl wearing such a bold dress was unmistakable. It was Maria – standing alone with an empty radius around her that gave off the impression of some kind of magical force field. It was almost enough to make her heart skip a beat. The combination of tasteful dress and understated makeup only enhanced her natural beauty, nothing at all like Samantha's sun-touched skin and sharp features. Most of the male eyes in the room were laser-focused on her.

"Jeeze, You'd think that Maria was hosting this thing with how everyone is treating her," Max commented, "Too perfect to speak with, or even approach."

"Do you know much about her?" Samantha inquired.

"Not much, just the usual sensationalist rumours you hear from the other students. I have to admit that she lived up to most of them. My Father talked about dealing with her family a few times in the past but I was never listening too closely. It didn't seem important at the time."

Claude smirked, "If you need to know anything about her I'm the man to ask. Call me a Maria historian, if you will."

"We're not calling you that, Claude. Are you sure that all of this information is even legitimate? I know you too well to believe anything you tell me without question."

Claude nodded, "Trust me – I've gone above and beyond to make sure that everything I learned was one-hundred percent verifiable. I'm taking this very seriously."

"Wouldn't it be easier to speak with her in person and ask?" Samantha suggested.

"Does she strike you as the kind of girl to tell you that kind of personal stuff?" Max said.

"It's much more reliable than listening to rumours," Samantha observed, "If she's so unwilling to speak with others, where did those claims even come from in the first place?"

Claude interjected, "Like I said, I separated the wheat from the chaff. Maria's been around so there are a lot of people who know who she is and have experience with her. I've got stories from shooting competitions, balls, and even from the academy."

Maxwell was pleasantly surprised at how reasonable Claude was sounding. He was the sort to unflinchingly believe anything as long as it supported the conclusion that his gut wanted to go with. Evidence could be bent and moulded to fit his needs, but his theories were much less malleable.

“On the shooting thing, a lot of people didn’t believe it at first, but Maria’s been an unstoppable monster in every competition she’s entered. She’s won trophies from here to the north coast, at every level of skill. Guess where Adrian’s animosity for her came from? She’s been showing him up for years now.”

Samantha was immediately interested in what he had to say, “Shooting. A strange hobby for a noble girl.”

“Correct. In fact, she’s one of the only women who participates in those competitions; and she’s definitely the youngest. There were a lot of accusations thrown around that she was bribing them to let her win. They had a lot to say about that, and the organisers couldn’t find any evidence that it was true.”

Claude continued to explore some of the stories he’d heard about Maria while Samantha and Max listened carefully. A lot of it was nothing that they couldn’t have figured out for themselves, but it was proof that Claude had done his homework instead of chasing down the most exciting stories to satisfy his theatrical personality. Samantha found a lot of it intriguing.

With new information in hand, she made a firm and shocking resolution.

“I’m going to speak with her.”

Max tried to stop her, “She’s not going to want to talk with us. You could ask her suitors to line up and they’d leave the hall and go out of the front door, and she doesn’t have time for any of them.”

“She doesn’t like suitors, then.”

Max’s mouth opened helplessly as Samantha turned and sought her out from the crowd. It was the kind of straight-to-the-point logic that she had often used like a blunt weapon against his well-reasoned warnings. Max considered himself one of the most down to earth members of the nobility, but Samantha still found ways to confound him with her stubbornness. He disliked it, but he couldn’t decry her for it either. Samantha had her own headstrong way of doing things. They followed her as they passed several dancing couples to try and find where she had gotten to.

“She’s clearly hiding from everyone,” Claude said, “She’s been loitering on the outside edge of the hall since we arrived.”

“Like I said – not interested in talking,” Max repeated in vain.

Samantha's persistence paid off in due order as they spotted her through a gap in the crowd. She locked on and charged forth like a proud member of the Walserian cavalry. Maria was taken aback as the much taller girl hounded her down and initiated a conversation.

"Hello, Maria!"

Maria didn't smile very often unless it was through enjoying someone's misfortune, but even now she seemed chillier than usual. Samantha had to suppress a shiver from running through her body as her red eyes focused on her face.

"Samantha."

Claude and Max finally caught up – but they could sense that Maria was in no mood for idle chatter at the moment. It did make them wonder why she had accepted Beatrice's invitation in the first place. Would it have not been more to her taste to avoid the crowds and refuse?

"Are you enjoying the party?" Samantha ventured. Maria's attention was aimed elsewhere, but Samantha couldn't figure out what she was looking at out of the corner of her eye. The only thing that remained between them and the exterior window was one of the people standing guard.

"It is about what I expected. You should enjoy yourself. You will only attend one of these balls for the first time once."

"I was hoping that we could add you to our group," Samantha smiled.

Maria's response was curt, "Apologies, but I have no interest in such an arrangement."

"Ah. That's okay. I just wanted to compliment your dress. It's very nice."

Samantha couldn't hide the disappointment she felt at being rejected so quickly. She knew it was coming before she even asked, but it still stung. Getting along with Maria wasn't going to be as simple as asking her time and time again. She needed a new approach that got to the heart of the matter.

"Thank you. You look good as well, Samantha. Now if you'll excuse me."

Maria left without a word, leaving Samantha and her friends in the dust. Max patted her on the shoulder in a poor attempt at consolation, "I told you. If Maria is lonesome normally, this kind of event is sure to put her in an even fouler mood than normal."

Samantha contested his characterisation, “She was being polite. I don’t see any reason why I can’t break through that outer shell of hers.”

“Sure, sure. Claude’s got a hundred tales about people being turned down for everything from group projects to marriage proposals. Isn’t that right?” Max turned to see that Claude had mysteriously disappeared from sight as well. He cranked his neck left and right to try and relocate him with no luck. “Where the hell did Claude run off to?”

“I didn’t see him leave.”

Max slicked back his hair and sighed in exasperation, “He’s probably trying to gather more dirt on Maria. We’d better enjoy the party and leave him to it. He’ll hopefully keep himself out of trouble.”

Samantha wasn’t certain that leaving him to his own devices was the correct course of action – but finding him again would be almost impossible with how large and busy the manor was at this point. There’d surely be another story added to the annals of Maria’s legend soon, one where Claude had overstepped her boundaries and walked back with a red slap mark on one of his cheeks.

On the other hand, the food on the buffet table looked delicious and she didn’t want to miss out.

“Let’s get something to eat,” she concluded.

“Yeah, sounds good to me.”

