

Samantha was beginning to understand why Max was so dismissive of these parties.

While the sights and sounds provided their own share of novelty, in terms of having fun with friends they were less than ideal. The music was slow and atmospheric, and Samantha had never once danced to something like it in her life. The guests were all insulated within their own personal bubbles, speaking with pre-existing friends and spurning others without a second thought. It was completely different to what she was used to. Harvest festivals back in her home town were all about eating and dancing until you couldn't bear to move any longer.

Max had the dubious benefit of being a very eligible bachelor. Endless hordes of women approached from every corner of the hall when they noticed him, and all of them were looking for the same thing, an opportunity to get into his good graces and potentially marry into the family. Max remained polite at all times – gently rebuffing each advance and engaging in practised small talk to satisfy them. That didn't stop them from sending daggers her way as they left though.

“They must really think that we're here as a couple,” Max chuckled as he piled even more food onto a plate.

Samantha sighed and straightened out her bangs; “Do you find that idea offensive?”

Max leapt into damage control mode, “I don't mean it like that. I think that any man would be lucky to have you. There's just a big difference between having a female friend and deciding to start a relationship.”

“You sound like you have experience with it.”

He shrugged, “Not personally, but I've seen a lot of these marriages fall apart before they even get close to walking down the aisle together. Some people treat it frivolously, like the only thing they're thinking about is the money they stand to inherit on the other side. I think it's ridiculous. Everyone here has enough money to live comfortably for life six times over.”

“I find it strange. It's completely unheard of to do something like that where I come from.”

“You rural folk have the right idea,” Max said, “Why would you want to spend your entire life with someone you can’t stand?” Max’s expression was pensive. Samantha sensed that there was more to this story that he was unwilling to share. Samantha followed his lead and took some of the same food items to try while she had the chance. It wasn’t every day a high-quality buffet like this presented itself.

“Where do you think Claude ran off to?” she asked in an attempt to change the subject to something lighter.

“Knowing him – he’s probably knee deep in making up a murder plot to solve, that or making a personal enemy out of every noble in the building.”

“Are you sure it’s okay to leave him alone?”

Max nodded and scarfed down another piece of sausage without further comment. Samantha resigned herself to people-watching again. At least there was always something to see going on with the other attendees.

But the party was disrupted by a sudden burst of gunfire. Plaster fell down from the ceiling as a trio of shots ripped through into the upper floors. People screamed and scrambled out of the way as a mean-looking gentleman hopped up onto the stage and fired a revolver into the air. The panic was the point. With so many people seeking egress from the room, none would succeed. The doors were already packed to capacity with two or three trying to get through at once, and they were already being watched by more armed men.

“What the... those are the guards!” Maxwell hissed as he ducked for cover. Samantha huddled close to his side and tried to avoid attracting their attention. The man on the stage was waiting for everyone to quieten down before he explained himself. While he did – he loaded three rounds into his gun and observed the bedlam that he just unleashed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I please have your undivided attention? The man with the gun is speaking!”

His words cut through like a knife. The frantic movements of the revellers came to an abrupt end as they finally discovered that there were even more hostage-takers

watching the doors in and out of the hall. A silence settled over them that was entirely unnatural. Members of the band cowered behind the stage. He started to pace back and forth as he observed the assembled nobles.

“That’s better. There’s no need for all that panic now, is there?”

One of the other men joined him, with another pistol aimed squarely at the people still trapped near the dancefloor. He scratched his beard and spat out a glob of phlegm with no regard for where it landed.

“Where’s Felipe Escobarus? We know he’s here at this party. Just show yourself and let’s get this over with before somebody gets hurt on your behalf.”

Nobody saw fit to reveal where he was. They were nothing more than bystanders now, watching a man who had transformed from respectable to distasteful in an instant. He swaggered back and forth in front of them, lazily waving his gun around and threatening to unleash it upon the first person who rubbed him the wrong way.

“This is bad – those are the guards that they hired to try and stop this from happening,” Maxwell whispered.

“What? You’re saying that all of them are here to try and kidnap Felipe?”

“No, I think they’re here for something much worse than that.”

Samantha’s stomach dropped as the full implications became obvious. Felipe’s surrender was not just that, it was to sign his own death warrant in doing so. The guns were real, the trio of holes in the ceiling were evidence of that. There was not a soul in sight who even knew where he had gone, except for one girl whose face was twisted into a terrified stare. Beatrice Booker.

He noticed, “Oh, look who we have here! It’s the one and only Beatrice Booker herself. Come up here love, I’d like to have a chat with you.”

She shook her head mutely.

He pointed the gun away and waved her over, “There’s no need to be stubborn. I’m not gonna’ touch a single hair on that pretty little head of yours. I like having my bollocks attached - thank you very much.”

Beatrice had no choice. She shimmed herself away from her friends who were trying to hold her back and approached the stage. This was her party. As the host, it was her job to make sure that everyone went home without any incidents occurring. From where she was standing, mustering the courage to ascend the steps was the greatest challenge in her young life. Each movement felt like she was stabbing herself with another needle. The gunman pulled her by the arm and rolled his eyes, "I said I'm not gonna' hurt you! Stop wasting my bloody time and stand there!"

Beatrice couldn't stop herself from shaking as he stalked around her, around and around and around. She found herself wondering why nobody was doing anything to stop them, but then she remembered that all of the men were holding weapons. They could easily kill anyone who tried to escape.

"Where's Felipe? That's all we want to know."

Beatrice couldn't hide the quiver in her voice, "Why do you want him?"

"That's for us to know and for you to find out. You just tell us where he's gone."

"He's not here!"

"I can tell that he's not bloody here!" the man snapped, "I've been looking through this crowd for a good while now and I can't see any sign of him, which means that he left the hall at some point. You're the one who's going to know, so now you're going to tell us, and all of you good folk can go home no harm no foul."

Beatrice was no fool. For such a violent and amoral man, harming others would be easy even with a verbal promise being offered. What was there to stop him from firing blindly into the crowd and killing several people? The moment he had the information he wanted, the matter would be firmly out of her control. Years of listening to her Father speak about his business endeavours meant that she understood fully the value of leverage. This was a negotiation, one done at the end of a gun, but a negotiation regardless.

She mustered what scant courage flickered in her chest and refused to provide an easy answer, "You're going to try and hurt Felipe, aren't you?"

The ringleader glanced at his companion, filled with exasperation. “Girlie – I don’t think you understand the situation you’re in here. This isn’t a game of tennis. I’m asking the questions. You have two choices. You tell me where he is, or I start firing at all of these lovely guests you’ve assembled for me.”

To punctuate his threat the other men drew their respective weapons and aimed them at the cowering crowd. A litany of screams and wails pushed her over the edge. She had to trust that Felipe would get to safety.

“Fine. I’ll tell you.”

The guns were lowered.

“He went to the staff washroom.”

The tension in the room was lowered somewhat as the imminent threat of more violence was defused. None of the people present would begrudge Beatrice for trying to protect them in this situation, but for her it felt similar to betraying Felipe.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it? Andrey, you’re coming with me.”

The second stage robber frowned, “Why the hell do I have to go with you?”

The leader was not amused in the slightest, he stormed past where Beatrice was standing and slapped him around the back of his head. The crack was nearly as loud as the gunshots that they had fired moments before. “You were supposed to be the one watching the staff door, and you let him get out! If I leave you in here unsupervised you’re gonna’ do something stupid!”

Andrey sulked like a child being denied dessert, but the fear he felt towards Eidos was enough to keep him in line. He’d much rather suffer from verbal abuse versus what he was really capable of. Eidos was one of the cruellest members of the gang. He held no qualms about harming bystanders if it helped him get his way. With that in mind, he acknowledged that Beatrice made the right decision by giving him the information quickly. His threat of killing the hostages was real.

“I’m not going to end up the butt of the joke like that idiot Prier did,” he muttered under his breath, “That asshole couldn’t even kill a schoolkid when he was working there as a teacher. He’s pathetic.”

Andrey shook his head, “But he was good at what he did. Don’t start acting like this is going to be easy just because you didn’t like him.”

Eidos rolled his eyes, “Don’t worry about it. All we need to do is find the kid and kill him. We’re the only armed guards on the property. We’ll be out of here before the police even know what’s happening. Not if you keep trying to hold me up with all this talk though. Get a bloody move on.”

Andrey nodded and hopped down from the stage with Eidos in pursuit. Before the gunmen could approach the staff door and start their search for Felipe, another figure staggered through – covered from head to toe in blood. More screams filled the air as one of their number collapsed onto his hands and knees. Andrey hurried to his side and tried to stop him from collapsing completely.

“What happened to you?” he cried.

“T-There’s... somebody in the corridors... she...”

“Oh God above, he can barely talk – Eidos!”

Eidos’ brow was furrowed. Erik was cautious at the best of times, and he’d only agreed to come with them because Eidos had meticulously planned the operation from top to bottom. No guns on site, no other guards to worry about, and an escape already arranged and ready to go. Now here he was – drenched in so much of his own blood that he was barely recognizable. Whoever was responsible had intended to send a message. The cuts that ran across his body were strategically placed to cause as much visual damage as possible without killing him. One across his forehead was particularly effective as an intimidation technique due to the blood flow that ran through it.

“Whoever did this knew what they were doing,” he concluded. Erik was too out of it to talk about the how or why. Eidos didn’t care. The person responsible was dead meat when he got his hands on them. Eidos pointed to a petrified staff member

waiting by the door, “You. Make sure that he doesn’t bleed out. If I don’t see a proper effort, you’ll end up the same way.”

They scrambled to do as he asked, ripping apart a piece of cloth and wrapping it around his head to try and stem the bleeding. Andrey swallowed and pulled the door open, revealing a long trail of blood that led from the kitchen. If they were smart, they’d have vacated the area already and set up another ambush.

“This is messed up,” Andrey worried, “They didn’t say nothing about some crazy bastard being at this party.”

Eidos shoved him out of the way and powered through; “Stop being such a pansy and follow me. They won’t last long once I get my hands on them.”