

Beatrice and her Father were better at damage control than the police were. All it took to take the student body's mind off of the grisly murder that had occurred in the gardens was to promise a grand ball almost immediately afterwards. Everybody was excited to show off their most expensive clothes and chatter the night away in a gaggle of talking heads. More than anything it presented a chance for the cream of the crop to cement their position on top of the proverbial food chain.

I already knew how this was going to go. Everyone had done their bit to turn me into an almost mythical figure among the academy's students. The ice-cold noble with the ruby eyes and onyx-black hair, the girl who went around the country winning shooting competitions, the one who was simply too good to bother with having a circle of friends. What I chose to wear did not matter. I could walk into that hall wearing a plastic bag and they'd find a way to praise it as daring and innovative.

I liked to look good – so I wasn't going to half-ass my big ball debut. I was not spoilt for choice, as my luggage had been filled with items that were more essential than dresses and gowns. Black and red were the colours of the day. Comparing them, I decided that the black dress was a little too morbid for the atmosphere of a ball, so I went with the red one.

But a dress did not a lady-in-waiting make. I already had some matching shoes to go with it, and I'd long ago learned how to apply makeup as well. Once everything was in place, I stood before the mirror and took a moment to reckon with the figure that stood reflected in front of me. A doe-faced teenager with curly black hair, wearing a frilly red dress that would only be considered fashionable one hundred years before my time.

Well, at least it wasn't the most embarrassing thing I had ever worn.

It helped that Maria Walston-Carter was expected to wear something like this. If I was still in my old body, that would have elicited a very different reaction. The hem of the skirt was high enough that I couldn't safely bring my gun with me without running the risk of something seeing it. You just never know what's going to happen when you're around other people. A simple slip and fall could be extremely untimely when hiding something against your thigh.

I had reached out to my Father once again and procured the family carriage for the trip to Beatrice's estate. Many of the wealthier students would be doing the same, resulting in a calamitous traffic jam down the full length of the main driveway. It was only by the grace of the Headmaster that they had permission to enter the grounds, as it served as a convenient

distraction from the whole murder issue. The parents would have a thing or two to say at the next meeting regardless of what he tried.

Beatrice invited most of the first-year students to come along. The addition of my name to the roster had encouraged several fence-sitters to accept invitations in the hopes of sucking up to me. As I perched at the top of the main stairs and looked out onto the sun-drenched cobbles, the full scale of the mess that she had unleashed came into sharp focus. There were dozens and dozens of carriages waiting for their turn to leave the grounds. I sighed and descended the stairs, heading out to where my carriage was parked and waiting. It was just me and the driver this time around; of whom I was not familiar with. They rotated in and out depending on who was willing to employ them.

It was a relatively short journey through the hills to reach the Booker estate. The Walston-Carter compound was large enough already, but the Bookers were very auspicious and wanted to show it. Their mansion was easily twice the size of our own, and the gardens were far beyond the maintenance capabilities of a single person. I hopped down from the carriage and took a moment to scout the exterior of the building. A large balcony covered the second of three floors. There were tall windows covering every side, but I had been led to believe that the actual hall where the event was being held was towards the back side, which faced a steep downward slope. That would make it harder for a sniper to shoot through them and hit somebody.

I made sure to get a clear view of all of the points of interest. The main lobby was similar to my home – with a large staircase in the centre that split outwards into two different wings. A pair of double doors beneath each branch allowed entry to the bowels of the building where the staff would navigate and sometimes sleep if the owner desired them to be on-site. With all of the money in the world, the big families would still chase the same trends in design and construction. Almost every house I'd visited sported a similar layout. It did make things easier for me knowing that they were following the same rulebook.

The main difference was the size of each room. Smaller manors would open up the lounges to their guests so that they could get away from the crowds and have a private discussion. The Bookers had no need to do such a thing, though they would surely allow us to do so if we asked. The manor had been decorated appropriately to welcome the students and their parents. Colourful bunting and flaming torches were used to give off a festival-like atmosphere outside, while the interior was meticulously cleaned and presented. Every room was decked out with lavish wooden furniture and golden trim that reflected light everywhere.

We were directed towards the dance hall at the back left of the building. It was a large, rectangular room used for these kinds of engagements, and you'd find them in almost every manor built in the last two hundred years. When not in use, they made for extremely impractical and overly large sitting rooms which were never chosen over the much better-designed lounges that every home came with four or five of. There were around one-hundred guests in total, consisting primarily of the students from our year who could be bothered to come, Beatrice's actual friends from her year, and some of their parents who wanted to glad-hand with one of the richest families in the country.

Even though I was dedicating all of my focus to learning the layout of the manor for later, it was impossible not to notice how everyone kept staring at me. That was nothing new – but now that I'd dressed myself up in some more feminine, they couldn't contain their adoration for my supposed beauty. Red was an unusual colour to use for a ball gown, as I had learned during my very first event. The fashion of the day was yellow, white, pearl or blue. I found that red complimented my dark hair better than those shades did. I don't know why I was so hung up on how I looked. It was in character for a noble lady to care about her appearance, but this felt more personal than just doing it to fit in.

I weaved my way through the crowd that had gathered by the main entrance and continued my inspection of the operation area. The Booker patriarch had spared no expense in making sure that the security was ironclad. Several armed guards had caught my eye before I even entered the main hall, and there were four unarmed men who were standing around and looking tough inside as well. It would be easy to pass it off as a precaution after what happened at the academy, but whether Beatrice had told her father about the attempt on Felipe's life was still unknown. One of them was in the unenviable position of watching the drinks table so that the students wouldn't steal some of the alcohol and start trouble.

The hall boasted two entrances, one which was for the guests and another on the other side that was being used by the staff members to restock the buffet table that had been placed against the right wall. A live band was already filling the room with the dulcet tones of classical music, but nobody had yet dared venture onto the floor as the first experiment. My first priority was getting my eyes on Felipe. This type of environment would be attractive to an idiot, with plenty of noise and potential witnesses to mask their amazing assassination. It was unlikely that a second killer could escape from this place without being caught, but that didn't mean that they couldn't charge at Felipe and do the job before that happened.

This was going to be challenging, not only did I have to worry about Felipe being stabbed or shot by an interloper, but there was a grand game playing out right in front of me. It was the most vicious, cruel and sadistic of all social contracts. To submerge oneself into the churning waters of noble pleasantries was to become something akin to a military leader. The battle lines would be drawn, some based on pre-existing friend circles from the academy, while others would generate spontaneously to provide strength in numbers. The weapons of war were not fired from the end of a gun, but with tongue and titter. Who needed a knife when you could insult someone's fashion sense behind their back?

For all the talk about this being a fun getaway for the first years to get acquainted, the reality was that these events were primarily hosted to grease the wheels. Business deals, marriages, hostile takeovers; they were the ultimate objective. The heavily biased guest list would not prevent this. The mere fact that some of the parents decided to come with their children was evidence enough. They'd filter out to one of the lounges and start doing their usual routine soon enough.

Business marriages were nothing unusual. It was the most common reason as to why someone my age would be betrothed. Unlike in my old world, Love Revolution had an interesting piece of lore that stated that while patrilineal marriages were preferred, it was also acceptable for non-inheriting children to marry matrilineally. That served as an excuse to have some of the negative characters change their name to match Samantha's and 'escape' the chains of family.

Beatrice and Felipe seemed rather taken with one another. They finally emerged from the staff door to polite applause from those who spotted them. Beatrice was relishing the attention but her other half could not hide how nervous he felt about being surrounded by so many people so soon. When his eyes landed on me, the sense of relief was visible on his face. I had underestimated just how badly the sniper attack affected him emotionally. I was used to getting shot at, but these kids had the good fortune not to have similar experiences.

"Thank you for coming, everyone!" Beatrice announced. It was difficult to hear her over so many voices. She walked up and down, shaking hands and greeting guests like a practiced hostess. Felipe stuck close to her but didn't have much to say. When the pair finally reached me, Beatrice had nothing but praise to share for my choice of dress.

"You look wonderful, Maria! It suits you perfectly, and I love your hair!"

I bowed my head, "Thank you. This is a lovely home, it's an honour to be invited."

“You don’t need to be so formal with us. Felipe told me that you’re one of the brightest from the magic class this year.”

Felipe nudged her shoulder, “Don’t tell her that.”

Beatrice laughed, “He’s so shy about this kind of thing.”

Her dress was similar to mine. A plunging neckline revealed the top of her chest and shoulders, with the main band wrapping around the chest and zipping up from behind. It was accented with lace and frills in a slightly lighter shade of blue than the body beneath. The multiple ruffled tiers spilled outwards from her waist and dangled below the knee, which was the main difference; I’d intentionally chosen a shorter dress when shopping for them with my Father a few months ago. If something bad were to happen it would allow me an increased degree of mobility, with the trade-off being an increased risk of someone seeing my bare legs. Some of the boys would be disappointed to find that most dresses came with privacy conscious designs that concealed the lady’s underwear from sight.

There was a colourful display of different gowns on offer for the aspiring fashionista. They came in all shapes and sizes, some slim and modern in form factor, or going all-out on curls and frills. But just as I predicted, I was the only one I could see wearing red. It was not helping me blend into the crowd.

Returning my focus to the young couple, I gave Felipe a knowing look to try and assure him that I was on his side. He cracked a small smile and put his hand on Beatrice’s shoulder, “We should go greet the rest of the attendees. Come find us and have a chat later, we’d love to speak with you.”

“I will.”

Beatrice gave me a small wave before being swallowed up by the crowd once more. I sighed and stayed on the far edge of the room where less of the footfall was concentrated. I could move back and forth by the table and keep an eye on them from a distance, but sticking close would be the best way to protect Felipe from any attempted assassinations. There were other familiar faces floating to and fro, including Samantha and her gang and some of the girls who had tried to ingratiate themselves with me earlier. For whatever reason Claudius had accepted an invitation to come too. He wouldn’t bother with a noble engagement like this without a motivating reason. Since it was him - it had to be related to a ‘mystery’ he was trying to crack.

If a killer were lurking in the manor, they would not be amongst the students. My initial concerns about Adrian and the shooting club members were unfounded. Whoever wanted Felipe dead had paid an outside group to execute the contract. Prier just so happened to have the credentials and position to try and kill him on the campus grounds. It was a modus operandi that I could follow to the next conclusion. The second person was going to try and get a job in the manor because the ball was no secret to people with working eyes and ears. Beatrice's father had splashed a lot of money on extra hands for the catering, music and security. Who was to say that the violinist wasn't hiding a gun in her dress?

If I had to pick a group that was easy to infiltrate, the security guards would be first on the list. I'd been memorising their faces and behaviour since the moment I stepped onto the property. They were all assigned an affectionate nickname. There were the likes of Twitchy, Baldy, Curly, Beardy and Lanky. Twitchy couldn't stay in place without flinching like an over-tuned neurotic mess. My eyes kept getting drawn to him as he'd move suddenly or start pacing back and forth by the window opposite. It was immensely distracting.

Before I could cross the room and get a closer look, someone bumped into me from behind.

"Hey! Why don't you watch where you're going!"

That growl was unmistakable. Adrian Rederro had walked straight into me, and in his usual manner, blamed the victim for his ignorance. The complaining came to a sudden and sharp end as he discovered who he had started berating out of the blue.

"I see that your manners are not improved even when forced into a suit."

"Why the hell did Beatrice invite you to this party?"

"We're friends. Felipe was the one who extended the invitation to me."

"You don't have any friends," he observed.

"Believe what you please. Does my presence here not provide the proof you need?"

Adrian was bitter, "You probably threatened to do something horrible. That's how you always get your way."

I had no idea what he was talking about but it wasn't worth the time to argue or procure examples of what exactly I had done that was so terrible. Adrian was a sore, sore loser. That was true whether he was dealing with Samantha or me. He was the designated bad boy of the

cast, having a similar arc to Theodore but without the charm or sympathy-earning vulnerability. He was abrasive and irritating but sported a legion of dedicated fans.

I had my fill of Adrian for the evening and we'd only been talking for a few seconds. I rolled my eyes at him and returned to what I was doing before he could drag me down to his level with more inane bickering. The abruptness of my disengagement left him standing there with his mouth open.

It was time to assassin-proof the ball.