

Samantha dreaded her second meeting with Adrian Roderro. The first was a piece of suspense that even the most terrifying horror novels couldn't match. She felt like she was walking a tightrope, waiting to say the wrong thing and have him blow up at her or stomp away in a furious rage. No such thing happened, but the tension hung heavy over the study table for the entire session.

Even Samantha's legitimate interest in the topic of their project, agriculturalist and civil rights activist Clarine Klausner, could paper over the issues she had with him. His explosive temper and ill manners meant he argued with everybody, no matter what. He'd insulted Claude and Max several times before for no good reason.

Samantha focused on trying to get as much work done as possible within the hour so she could leave and be with better company. Adrian rarely had anything to offer for the presentation plan, aside from nodding and accepting various pieces to practise and recite to the class. Samantha placed the book down onto the table and finally spoke up; "Is there anything you'd like to add, Adrian?"

He shrugged, "You seem to have the whole thing under control. I thought you didn't want any of my input."

"I never said that – this is a team project after all. You don't seem very interested in having your say."

Adrian rolled his eyes, "I'm not much of a reading type. I get why you didn't ask me anything. You must think I'm some kind of raging bull."

Samantha's farm-girl honesty was on display, "I do. You've done nothing but pick fights since we started the year. Don't you get tired of always doing that?"

"I don't have a problem with you."

Samantha wanted to fire back by saying that it very much seemed that he did have a problem with everyone. He was extremely abrasive even when matters didn't call for it, the farmers in her home town were more welcoming than him – and they had a bad reputation for getting into all sorts of trouble with outsiders. Adrian could shoot a glare that immediately started problems, rather than ending them like Maria's did.

“I wasn’t trying to imply that we have such a hostile relationship,” Samantha said calmly, “It’s just odd. Why do you have such a negative reaction to Maria?”

Adrian scowled, “Why wouldn’t I? Maria goes out of her way to make my life as difficult as possible! I can’t even enjoy the art of shooting for sport without her crashing the party and making me look the fool. My Father threatened to pull me from competitions with her because he hated the sight of me losing.”

Samantha nodded in understanding, but she got the distinct impression that Adrian himself wasn’t aware of the full meaning of his words. It was a story that many of the noble children at the academy shared. Parents who were filled with expectations and who externalised their unfulfilled ambitions onto them. Adrian’s short temper was presumably a result of his Father’s behaviour. Adrian sounded like a gracious runner-up when he spoke with Samantha in private, but his actions said otherwise.

“I told him that it would be an even greater humiliation to turn tail and run whenever she showed her face. As much as we don’t get along, her skills with a gun are no joke. I tried to turn my mind away from that competitive nature and enjoy the game as it was, but it’s difficult when Maria makes such a show of things.”

Samantha fiddled with her pencil, “Maria isn’t a showboat. If anything, she seems to shy away from being in the spotlight.”

Adrian huffed, “That’s the problem! Because she never shows her hand to anybody, they’re free to project whatever values and legends they want onto her. She’s the school’s number one idol because she keeps away from others, a blank canvas for them to play with. It doesn’t help that she seems naturally talented at everything she takes on.”

She quickly cut to the point before the discussion headed out into the grievance-ridden weeds, “I don’t think that Maria cares so much about antagonising you. She only does this when you speak with her first. That’s the same thing she does to everybody else.”

Adrian sat back down from his forward position and crossed his arms again. Was it going to make him happier imagining that Maria didn’t care about him at all? So

much of his effort and self-worth was tied to beating her. Her not caring about that made him feel even angrier. Training his shooting skills obsessively, he'd never even gotten close to matching her best scores. The only time he succeeded in dethroning her was two years ago while she was stricken with an illness. Once it cleared up – she went right back to dismantling him as if nothing happened. One victory was nothing to Adrian. He wanted to prove that he was consistently capable of winning.

“As if a country girl would understand the pressure I’m under,” he said dismissively. It was too petty for Samantha to feel insulted by. Adrian was trying to worm his way out of arguing his perspective by throwing out vague platitudes. “I’m the heir to our house, I’m expected to be at the top of my game at all times.”

“But your grades aren’t very good,” Samantha replied pointedly.

“My grades don’t matter until our year-end exams. Everything until then is merely practice.” Samantha was certain that he wasn’t doing any practice like he claimed, his preliminary grades would have been better if he did.

“I’m sure Maria has a lot of responsibility to worry about too. That’s why she keeps herself out of trouble and her nose tucked firmly between the pages of our workbooks.”

Adrian shook his head, “Her Father is more lenient than mine. The way she was admitted to the shooting society, she must have begged and pleaded with him until he cracked. She was nearly thrown off her damn feet the first time she pulled the trigger. How did a hapless girl like her start sweeping every contest in just a few months?”

Samantha was too focused on writing down her notes, “Cheating?”

“Maria wouldn’t stoop to that - and I’ve seen her do it first-hand. There are very few ways to cheat in a shooting competition. They’ve seen all of those tricks before and will spot it right away. It’s a pure, untainted sport! The only measure of victory is speed and accuracy.”

Samantha highly doubted that. Even the most skill-based disciplines could suffer from matching fixing or other unhandled tactics. She allowed Adrian to have his moment on the podium before drawing his gaze back down to the paper they were writing onto.

“Do you really have nothing to add? What part would you like to read?”

Adrian deflated and sat back down as his grand speech was ignored, “I don’t know, just split it down the middle. I’ll read the second half and you can do the first.”

“You’d know if you listened to what I was saying when we were putting the presentation together,” Samantha griped, “But I suppose that is the easiest way to handle things.”

Adrian was happy to let Samantha handle all of the boring grunt work. He never found the theory lessons to be interesting, and it was even worse when the teachers tried to drill the importance of long dead people into their heads. What good would knowing about someone already buried six feet under do for him? If they were so important – why didn’t he know about them already through osmosis?

Samantha finished with one of the books and reached over to grab another, “Did you see anything interesting at the Booker’s party?”

Adrian laughed derisively, “Aside from a gang of armed thugs forcing their way into the hall? No, not particularly. I wonder what in the Goddess’ name her Father was thinking hiring that uncouth lot. They had the smell of trouble all over them.”

But not enough to raise his suspicions, Samantha replied in her head. It was so easy to posit that you would have done the right thing in someone else’s shoes. Samantha spoke with Beatrice about it, and according to her the men came with a personal recommendation from one of his top men; that same person was now under investigation for being a part of the assassination plot.

“If I was there with a gun, they wouldn’t have a prayer of getting out of that mansion in one piece,” he boasted.

“If you started a gunfight in the hall more people would have been hurt,” Samantha frowned.

Adrian’s cocky grin faltered and he sank back down onto his seat with a dismissive shrug, “And how did you know that they weren’t going to just start killing people?”

They looked like bad news. The only reason nobody was hurt was because the police showed up.”

“People did get hurt. There were bodies everywhere.”

“Whatever, that’s what they get for trying to do something so horrible. Don’t wave a gun in someone’s face if you aren’t ready to be on the receiving end in return.”

It was callous, but Samantha couldn’t pretend that this mindset was exclusive to him. Her Father was very zealous in protecting their property from thieves and vandals, and so were many of the other farmers in her community. It was an old-fashioned kind of justice, a system of crime and punishment that was simple and fast to dole out to any who were caught red-handed. Samantha was raised in a generation where people were taught to rely on the police instead. Mob justice could only go so far and sometimes it made mistakes. A cursory investigation of the crime cut down on the number of false accusations significantly. But you couldn’t take the bullet back after it was fired, not unless the target was undergoing an autopsy.

Adrian took things a step further, “If I met the person who did that – I’d shake their hand for a job well done.”

“There’s no need to be so callous about it.”

Samantha imagined the hypothetical meeting. Her mind filled in the blank space where the shooter stood with Maria, thanks to Claude’s endless babble about how she was responsible and suspicious and what have you. Adrian would bust a blood vessel if the supposed object of his admiration turned out to be her. She did have the gun skills to match, and if Claude wasn’t just seeing things on the day...

Samantha stopped herself – why was she starting to come around to his insane theories? This was the girl she was trying to befriend for goodness sake! Not that she’d made any progress on that front. Maria was an elusive quarry, always slipping away at the end of lessons and isolating herself to quiet areas of the academy so nobody could disrupt her studies.

Samantha was so swamped with work, studying, and recovering from the prior that she could hardly find time for herself anymore. She envied Maria’s ability to take

things in stride and get everything done in a timely manner. She needed to open up a window of opportunity and get close to her. She missed her chance when Jennings paired her with Adrian. She wanted Maria, that would have made life so much easier. She couldn't run away to the darkest corner of the campus when they needed to work together on their presentation.

Samantha continued reading and found a line that interested her; "Oh, it says here that Clarine really loved cats and owned several of them."

It was the most excited she'd seen her project partner all day. Adrian's eyes lit up like fireworks as he leaned over to try and get a look, only to discover that there were no images showcasing her feline friends. Samantha stared a hole through the teenage boy as he slowly returned to his seat with an awkward cough and a follow-up question.

"She did?"

Samantha groaned, "Why is that the only part you listened to?"

Adrian was defensive, "There's nothing weird about liking cats."

"I never said there was. I just wish you'd get excited for the rest of this stuff as well."

She really struggled to get a handle on him.

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Fernando Escobarus cut an intimidating figure. Amongst the other nobles of the nation, he stood apart thanks to his tall stature and gaunt features. A bushy black moustache concealed his frown from outside observers. He was not a happy man, not after his future business partner inadvertently invited a gang of killers to guard his daughter's ball. If not for the intervention of an unseen hero, things could have ended in total disaster. It didn't need to be said that the arranged marriage between their children was in danger.

He couldn't understand why Geoffrey passed over taking a second look at the men he hired. Whether it was negligence or deception from one of his attendants, there was still no excusing the outcome. Felipe nearly died – they were moments away from finding him and doing Goddess knows what. Felipe sat across from him with his arms

folded into his lap. He'd pulled his son from the academy until he could be certain that was safe from further attempts on his life.

He snuffed out his cigar, "I'm afraid that your marriage to Beatrice is in jeopardy."

Felipe shook his head, "Why?"

"Because I'm seriously reconsidering whether it's worth the risk. There may be a lot of money on the table between Geoffrey and I, but there are some things that money cannot replace. My Father always told me that I should prioritise my family above all else. Now I see why he said those words to me. I can't bear the thought of you dying during my lifetime."

Felipe cut to the heart of the matter, "That's what they want you to do. That's why they attacked the ball, that's why they're trying to kill me. You could make this much easier by telling me who was fighting for Beatrice's hand back then."

"And what would you do with that information exactly? It would be more prudent for me to name the people who weren't interested in organising a marriage with her. The Bookers are, for better or worse, the big prize in the eyes of many."

"So big you were willing to make me a Booker too."

Fernando sighed, "You'll always be my son - no matter what name you may end up taking. I want what's best for you. Your older brother will be inheriting my position one day, and I'd like you to enjoy some level of freedom and influence apart from him."

Felipe bowed his head, "Sorry. I was lashing out. I appreciate it. Beatrice and I get along very well, which is why I cannot abide by the thought of breaking our arrangement. I am grateful that we were able to meet."

His Father smiled and turned to the family portrait that hung on the wall of his home office. There were several such paintings within the house covering the long history of the Escobarus clan. Some were painted back in their home country hundreds of years ago and were extremely valuable in their own right, but Fernando and no self-respecting family head would be willing to part with them. It catalogued the extensive

history of their relatives and kin. The latest contained Fernando, his wife, and their three children, alongside his brother and family.

They certainly weren't at the peak of their number. An unfortunate series of deaths had thinned their ranks in recent years, though the birth of Felipe and Talia promised a brighter future than was imagined two decades ago. Felipe understood full well how much he cared for the family.

"I don't know if the Royal Academy is a safe place for you to be."

Felipe objected, "The Booker's manor was a safe place until it wasn't any more. How can you be so confident that the same thing isn't going to happen here? I will not allow myself to be forced into a cage by these mad killers. I must return to the academy at once and finish my schooling."

"I know that I was the one who sent you there, but would a simple delay of your graduation not serve both our purposes?"

Felipe grit his teeth, "I promised Beatrice that we'd graduate together."

Fernando exhaled and turned to his young, foolish son; "Ah. You know exactly how to play me like a fine instrument, don't you Felipe? A promise is not something to be wielded like a weapon."

"You always told me that I needed to stand up and be proud of my family name. I'm not going to hide from this, and I'm not going to make Beatrice go through the last years of our education alone. That's a promise I am willing to die for."

Fernando considered his words for several minutes in silence. It was a great risk to send Felipe back to the academy after a previous attack was handled so poorly by the staff. Fernando was so outraged by the news that he almost commissioned a trip to the campus so that he could give them a piece of his mind. It was a sight to behold, his face reddened and his eyes quivering. None of the house attendants had ever seen him in such an incandescent mood.

Felipe was the only one who managed to calm him down again.



But he couldn't accept Felipe's claim that he was the one who was trying to avoid worrying him. He didn't understand how the game was played or what the motivations of the campus heads were. They were primarily interested in maintaining the flow of revenue they generated from tuition fees. It backfired. The coverup only accelerated the exodus of parents and their children from the school. The ones who remained were willing to risk their health for a world-beating qualification. It was difficult to blame them for sticking with it. They'd dedicated years of their lives and a hell of a lot of money.

"Very well. I will allow you to return to the academy, but I'd like to speak with the Headmaster personally and ensure that their security arrangements are effective. My decision will be based on what I see once we are there."

Felipe saw it as a level-headed compromise, "Thank you, Father."

"But I am worried about how the police are handling things. They haven't made much progress with their investigation at all, even with a captured suspect to question."

"They keep you abreast of developments?"

"Of course. As the Father of the intended victim, they are dispatching letters with their progress to me." He motioned to a small pile of papers that had been tucked onto the left side of his desk. Picking one from the top, he flipped it around to show Felipe. "According to the police – the man they apprehended claimed to know nothing of the person who initiated the scheme. They could only confirm that you are their target."

Felipe frowned, "It does worry me greatly, but to live in fear is not my aim. I feel that this self-imposed isolation is what they want. I would feel safer surrounded by the other students."

His Father avoided assigning a personal guard to Felipe while he was in the house. He was to be accompanied by no less than two guards, and they were not permitted to enter rooms with him. To know that they were capable of slipping their members into the hiring process was a serious problem. Fernando was thankful to have such long-term employees on his roster. He could trust them to some extent.

Felipe took the letter and inspected the dry prose for details. It was all very clinical and official sounds, with the police apologising to Fernando for not yet having the news he was hoping for.

“I think Claudius may be in with a better chance of finding the truth than them,” Felipe joked.

“Claudius? The Wile’s boy? I think his Father is involved in the investigation.”

“Does he talk about him often?”

“We’ve shared a few drinks, but I wouldn’t say that he’s a close friend.”

Felipe placed the paper back onto the pile and stood from his chair, “I will take my leave for now. Thank you very much for listening, Father.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I might still not be happy with how they decide to keep you safe while on their property. I have half a mind to send some men of our own to make sure things are kept under control.”

“I don’t believe they’ll allow outside guards into the buildings.”

Fernando grumbled, “They will once I get my hands on them...”

Felipe bowed and left the office. He straightened out his ruffled waistcoat and walked down the long, tiled corridor of his family home. The Escobarus family were not trend chasers. Felipe’s Grandfather built this house in the style of their country of origin, complete with flat roofs, white, organic-looking walls, and high wooden-arched windows. A few Walser touches allowed it to blend into the environment gracefully. It was a taste of a home that Felipe never knew. He was born and raised in Walser – and couldn’t recall the last time they visited Derengall. Without family on that side of the strait, there was no reason to go anymore.

The only thing he wanted from his Father was an assurance that he could visit the Academy again. Felipe had little faith in the school’s staff after the coverup of his first attack, but his desire to see the end of his education there outweighed those concerns. Fernando always emphasised the importance of promises. Felipe promised Beatrice that they’d walk down the aisle together and accept their qualifications, that would

presumably be followed by walking down a very different kind of aisle as they came of age.

This house, once warm and welcoming, felt more like a prison with every passing day. Being at the royal academy gave Felipe a taste of something he never knew he wanted. To be deprived of his independence now was a terrible feeling. It was the place where he could be himself without having to worry about his Father looking over his shoulder. It was where he'd delved deep into his love of the magic art, something which his Father was starting to wane on.

Felipe made it clear that he was only doing it because he enjoyed it. The market for skilled mages was consistently contracting every year, with new machines arriving to spread equity of production across industries and borders. Fernando was always motivated by the utility of any one decision or effort. Felipe only won the debate when he pointed out his Father's attachment to the portraits that lined the hallways of their house. They served to clear purpose – yet he was emotionally attached to them all the same.

Life couldn't be nought but work and worry. Fernando was in a tough position as the head man of the family. He'd struggled through some of their darkest years, trying to protect their businesses and ensure that enough children were being born to carry the name forward. That time had passed now, but he hadn't completely shed the hardened shell that formed around him. He was wealthy and surrounded by company, but remained unable to enjoy it in the ways that he should.

Call it a rebellious phase he may, but Felipe wasn't going to make the same mistake and forget to enjoy himself a little. The first step of his plan was in motion. He just needed to convince him that it was better to remain at the academy instead of hiding in the family house until the culprits were apprehended.

