

Floating from room to room allowed me to keep a close eye on the staff as they worked to attend to the party's guests. I couldn't do so without attracting attention, but it was easy enough to wave them away with a sharp glare or a lame excuse about admiring the manor and seeing the sights. For my money, there was nothing amiss with the attendants I spied on. They went about their business without doing anything to catch my ire. I would have loved to have written it off as paranoia – but previous experience told me otherwise.

There were a lot of angles on offer that an assassin could use to get at Felipe or me. I'd personally avoid doing it in such a busy environment, but I couldn't project my own methods onto someone else so glibly. There were others in the same business that didn't care about protecting themselves and their identity. They'd kill in broad daylight or around other people, knowing full well that they were putting themselves at risk. They never lasted long. The police would find DNA evidence at the scene, or an eyewitness to pin the blame on them, or they'd simply accept a contract from an undercover police officer and walk away in cuffs before getting that far.

Poison wasn't a good call. A manor like this had very strict food handling policies, and the chaperones at each table weren't just there to keep the teenagers away from alcohol. A tester would make sure that every batch of food was uncontaminated by putting their own health at risk. It paid well enough for them to take that leap of faith and provide for their families. My Father employed one too, though some families preferred to have the chef take that responsibility.

A gunshot would be easy to hear even over the noise in the main hall. The sharp crack of a gun firing would cut through it like a knife and alert everyone to what was going on. Not to mention that the main floor was on an elevated piece of ground. You couldn't fire from the inside in and there was no elevation built into the structure itself. That left them with one practical option, to get their hands dirty, isolate the target and do it up close. Even that would pose some serious difficulties.

Felipe was rightly fearful of any more attempts on his life. He wasn't going to go anywhere in the manor without someone escorting him, and certainly not at the behest of someone he didn't trust. He and Beatrice were glued together at the hip. How could the killer pry them apart and get him into a good location? If I could figure that out, I could position myself to keep an eye on a chokepoint so nobody could follow him. My first thought was the bathroom. In terms of footfall over the evening - that would be the place where the best opportunity

would arise. Beatrice was unlikely to come with and the corridors would be mostly empty of other people.

I put myself into the killer's shoes again. Grab him, drag him into a room that I have access to and kill him quietly by covering his mouth. Leave the body and get out of dodge before somebody finds it. Trying to hide or move it was asking to get caught. I'd want free roam of the building to make it happen. The best way to get that would be to be employed within it. It was a trick I'd used dozens of times over the years, from small businesses to large office complexes. The reason I was so focused on the security guards was because they were the newest hires. They'd been brought in as a reaction to what happened on the campus. It was the perfect place to slip in.

But I couldn't discount the possibility that my target had accepted a different position. While many of the servants in a noble house would remain there for decades at a time, there was a small number who were hired on a 'as needed' basis. The servant's past work was essential to proving to the Master that you were who you claimed to be. A good reputation was what garnered the trust required to be around such important people. I now had evidence that suggested that the people trying to kill us could source that reputation and launder it through to the highest levels.

Prier was the real deal. He held a legitimate degree from a genuine university in Biology. That was how he infiltrated the academy and posed as a teacher for so long, because he was a real teacher. A teacher who had connections to a criminal organisation of some variety, but a teacher nonetheless. In comparison to that – bribing a few people to fluff up a resume was elementary. It only took one person with a need for cash to bring a supposedly secure system to its knees. Your defence is only as strong as the weakest point.

It frustrated me to no end to broaden the terms of my search even further but there was nothing I could do about it. Prier had revealed the bare minimum about what he was trying to do, and I was assuming that a follow-up attempt on Felipe's life would soon follow. The collective assets of the Booker family were worth too much to let bygones be bygones. Every noble who tried to secure a marriage to Beatrice had the motive to try and end their engagement. It would be faster to list the families that didn't try to secure the betrothal. It came as a surprise that it wasn't salacious rumours or political strong-arming that were deployed first.

I took a sip of my drink and continued to observe the man across the way. 'Baldy' was my current person of interest. He looked like the rough sort, with a shaved head, rotund body and

burly constitution. His nose was crooked, a sign that he'd been involved in a physical fight or two and was left with a broken face. His body language did not raise any concerns right away; he maintained a vigilant and stern stance with his eyes set straight ahead. If he was under any pressure he didn't show it.

I must have looked like the fool standing around on my lonesome like this. The high-and-mighty queen of the first-years made lonely by her reputation and little else. Even if I hadn't done my best to scare people away, this would have happened regardless. Everyone was looking at me, praising my appearance and fine upbringing, but none were bold enough to make those statements to my face. At school that was fine by me - but here it made me stand out.

The table to my left rattled as a white lump leapt upwards onto it. My brain took a moment to catch up and identify it as a very fluffy and very well-groomed cat. The collar around its neck told me that it wasn't a stray that had broken into the building. I recalled Felipe mentioning something about a cat during one of our lessons together. Beatrice loved cats a whole lot, even if her Father was less than enthused with them. According to him, Beatrice would make a great mother in the future because she treated her cat like a baby. I reached out and stroked it on the head, quickly earning its undying loyalty and affection for the trouble.

"Do you want to be my escort for this party?" I said under my breath. The cat, obviously, didn't respond to my invitation. There were many weird and wonderful creatures that occupied this world of ours, but just as many mundane ones too. Cats, dogs, horses, translated one-for-one from my old world and used in the same manner.

And then everybody started talking.

"Lady Maria is playing with that cat..."

"I never liked cats, myself."

"I have a terrible allergy to them. Thank goodness the flea ball is staying there with her."

Zero to self-conscious in five seconds flat. I withdrew my hand from the purring feline and decided to move on to my next mark. Twitchy, as I had affectionately coined him, was the man who concerned me the most. He looked one scare away from going into a nervous breakdown. He was standing by the main door into the hall which connected to the lounge. I observed him for ten minutes without seeing anything of note.

This wasn't working. I decided to change course and focus on sticking close to Felipe instead. Finding him and Beatrice amongst the crowd was challenging. They were surrounded on all sides by fawning classmates and even some of the adults who were trying to get into their good graces for later. It would have been extremely ironic if one of those people were responsible for the assassination plot; always playing both sides of the issue to try and come out on top. I reached the core of the social jungle after much effort in making myself known to the people huddling around them. When I arrived, a boisterous nobleman was speaking of his great admiration for Beatrice's Father.

"He's a genius, of that I am entirely convinced. I make sure to follow every bit of business advice he gives and I'm a richer man for it. You should listen well, Lady Beatrice, his words are not those of a man without self-reflection. There is great wisdom in them."

Beatrice went along politely with him but was not interested in the slightest about what he thought of her Father. She must have heard this same speech a hundred times from a hundred different people before. Felipe spotted me hanging on the edge of the circle and waved me over in an effort to disrupt things before she said something regretful.

"Speaking of prodigies, it looks like Lady Walston-Carter has come to join us!"

The audience oo-ed and ahh-ed as I walked towards the pair and offered a curtsy to the nobleman who was dominating the conversation. "I'm afraid that we are not yet acquainted, sir."

He bowed to me in return, "I am Pheris Sykes, your Father and I are rather familiar with each other, though this is the first time I've been given the chance to meet his pride and joy. He was not understating your beauty or poise."

"You flatter me, sir."

Same old, same old...

"He also said that you're sure-hand with a firearm. He gave me the impression that you had a towering physique," he chuckled.

"It is a challenge to control an unwieldy implement like a rifle, yet that challenge is why I enjoy engaging with it as sport. My Father turned white as a sheet the first time I fell over from the recoil."

In reality, I'd damn nearly smashed my head against a rock. Even with my intense training, I was still caught off-guard by how powerful the kickback was from some of the weapons these

people used. Sophisticated recoil-dampening designs were not yet in widespread use. You felt every ounce of force that was shot from the other end, squaring up and keeping your body solid was essential. I stuck to competing in handgun categories until I got stronger, my Father wouldn't let me take part if I came home with a huge bruise on my shoulder every time.

"It's odd how every Father I've met can't help but follow the whims of his daughter, though owning a cat is a world away from hunting game."

Beatrice smiled, "That is an experience that only men with a daughter can attest to. We have ways of getting what we want, with honeyed words and a flutter of our eyes."

I crossed my arms and frowned, "I don't beg or flutter anything."

"You don't need to," she shot back, "You look amazing without even trying."

There was shared laughter from the surrounding socialites.

Felipe leaned into Beatrice's ear, "I'm stepping away for a moment."

This was my chance. As one of the servants weaved their way through the crowd with a tray of drinks in their hand, I subtly shifted the heel of my foot into their path. They yelped as the slight disruption caused them to go off balance. I reacted, swinging around and clutching the underside of the silver tray before its contents could shatter onto the floor. If I chose to leave things there then there'd be no harm. Instead, I tilted it towards me slightly, causing a thin cocktail glass to topple over and coat my arms in spilt alcohol.

"Ah, sorry." The servant regained his footing and corrected the glasses before any more could be lost. They looked mortified about making such an amateur mistake, but I held up my hand and demonstrated that it was no issue. Felipe had stopped to watch the entire thing play out. Perfect – exactly as I planned; "Felipe, may you show me where the washroom is?"

Felipe nodded, "Of course. We wouldn't want you smelling of wine for the rest of the evening. It's this way, I was just about to go as well."

I was escorted to the staff-side door as the servant in question tried to clean up the wine that had spilt onto the floor. I'd succeeded in creating an effective excuse to follow him, but it was only by happenstance. I could not rely on convenient circumstances to arise the next time he decided to step away from the party.

