

The Life of The Party

It was the end of another brutal week where it seemed to run the gamut in terms of what Sean had been called on to deal with. “Thank GOD this day is over,” he said to no one in particular. His cell phone went off, blasting the ringtone of Cypress Hill's *Insane in the Membrane*. That would be Ben calling, wondering what they were going to do tonight. He grabbed the phone and answered it as he made his way to the bathroom to grab a towel. “Hey Man, what’s the word?” he said, as he ran the towel down his face.

“Sean my lad, another work week from hell is over, and I have a surprise for you.”

Sean rolled his eyes at this, somehow knowing his evening was going to be interesting. “Yeah, what’s that?” he asked hesitantly.

“Make sure you get nice and clean after your day of sitting idle on your ass doing nothing. We’re heading to a party tonight.”

Sean groaned inwardly. “A party? what kind?”

“This isn’t going to be the usual thing, you know a bunch of folks, stuffed into some small apartment trying to out wine-snob the others,” said Ben.

“Ohh? I thought you liked those. You’ve said, and I quote, ‘Those are the sophisticated kind of shindigs where the smart chicks hang.’ ”

There was a short pause on the line, “...Well, they do,” Ben said somewhat defensively. “Anyway, this is a party being held by a friend of a friend of mine from the club, so it’s going to be one of those dress-up kinds.”

Sean dropped his shoulders and rolled his eyes. He *hated* having to don a suit. “I gotta put on my funeral clothes?” he asked incredulously.

“Naw, nothing that high-browed,” said Ben. “It’s more like work slacks and dress shirt kind of thing... you know, the kind of clothes that we *ordinary* working stiffs have to wear to the office every day?” The tone in Ben’s voice was sarcastic, tinged with a bit of jealousy.

“Hey, it’s not my fault that you never decided to branch out on your own. You really ought to try it. Like shedding the weight of the corporate world from your shoulders. And I gotta tell ya, there’s *nothing* quite like working from your house man,” said Sean with a smile in his voice.

“Yeah, yeah... whatever, look, just be ready at seven.”

“Fine, see you at seven,” said Sean, tapping the end call button. He had to admit, it was kind of intriguing, yet a bit scary at the same time. It’s not that he was a total social reject, so much as he was not the most gregarious personality in the room. That was usually where his friend, Ben came in. He was more the life of the party; the kind of person who immediately takes control of the room whenever he enters. Sean didn’t mind this so much; it allowed him to hang back and go along for the ride.

He walked into the closet to choose his outfit for the evening, considering the dark jeans he would have typically opted for in a given social situation, then turned around to look at the other side of his closet where his business attire hung. Staring at the spartan layout of his wardrobe, Sean’s vision blurred somewhat but snapped back into focus when he heard the familiar sound of a Dos Equis commercial playing in the background.

“...His organ donor card also lists his beard. He can cure narcolepsy just by walking into the room. He once cheated death, and death was perfectly ok with that. He is... The Most Interesting Man in the World.”

Yeah, why not Sean thought as he thumbed through his minuscule collection of slacks and dress shirts. The idea of going to the party as an unknown now had him thoroughly intrigued. *Why should Ben always be the life of the party? Tonight, you’re going to be the ‘Most Interesting Man in the World!’* He chuckled to himself as he got dressed.



They arrived at the party on the outskirts of town at some huge estate on what looked like several acres. Palm trees aligned the driveway as they pulled up in Sean's convertible Porsche 911 Carrera to the front gate. The guard at the gate gave them a menacing stare as Sean held out his hand to Ben to receive the invitation for the party.

“A little dark for sunglasses, isn't it?” the gate guard asked Sean. He gave the guard a toothy grin as he handed over the invitation, but said nothing. The guard seemed to be waiting for a reply, but when none was forthcoming, he mumbled something under his breath, but took the invitation from Sean and glanced at it. “Ok, pull forward, Ms. Blackstone is expecting you.” He had barely handed back the invitation in time before Sean revved the engine and squealed the tires tearing off down the driveway.

“Jesus man, you in some kind of hurry to get there?” asked Ben as he glanced back over his shoulder at the gate guard. Sean looked at him through his sunglasses and flashed a bright smile. “Hey, whoa man, slow down. You're about to run out of driveway pretty quick,” said Ben with rising alarm. He instinctively dug his fingers into the dashboard bracing himself. Sean proceeded to whip the steering wheel hard to the left while yanking hard on the emergency brake. “OH HELL!” screamed Ben, as the car went into a partial

spin but came to a halt neatly between two parked SUVs. Sean smiled despite Ben's look of utter shock, shaking his head as his friend's chest heaved in and out in audible gasps.

A moment later, Sean got out of the car and grabbed the bottle wrapped in a paper bag, along with his jacket from the back seat. He'd been hesitant to put on a suit but decided if it was going to be dressed up for this thing, might as well go all out. "You coming?" he asked Ben in a casual voice?" completely ignoring Ben's wide-eyed look of surprise. "C'mon, man get the lead out, the night's not getting any younger." With this, he strode off to the front door.

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Ben finally caught his breath, and slowly exited the car, all the while checking to make sure he hadn't had an accident. He looked around but saw no sign of Sean. *Thanks for waiting for me, jackass.* He reached into the back seat to pull out the bottle of wine that he'd brought for his hostess, surprised that it hadn't gotten damaged in that parking stunt that Sean had just pulled. *What the hell is up with that guy tonight.* Ben shook off the moment and headed for the front door. When he got there, there was no sign of Sean anywhere. He rang the doorbell and stepped back to take one more look for his friend.

The door opened, and Ben stared, slack-jawed at a gorgeous blonde, dressed in a form-fitting floor-length red gown. She looked up at Ben with her soft blue eyes which were somewhat veiled by her long eyelashes and smiled.

"Ben, so glad you could make it," said the woman, familiarly reaching up to hug him. With a perplexed look on her face, she asked, "Where's your friend?"

"Hey Heather," said Ben returning her hug." To be honest, I have no idea where he is. Didn't he already come inside?" he asked with a look of concern.

"I haven't *seen* anyone come in within the last several minutes, but I confess, I just happened to be walking by the front door when you rang the bell." Ben shrugged, utterly perplexed as to where his friend had gone.

There was the sound of several people talking excitedly coming from the next room where the distinct melody of *La Cumparsita* emanated. The excitement of the crowd was electric, and it seemed to be drawing more people in with each passing moment. Heather made her way into the room, followed by Ben, who abruptly stopped and stared, eyes agog as stared the scene in front of him. Heather stepped up next to him and fixed him with a quizzical stare. Ben hadn't noticed.

"What in *the hell* is he up to?" asked Ben, staring intently at the scene in the center of the room.

Following Ben's gaze to the center of the dance floor, Heather exclaimed, "Wow!" clearly impressed at the spectacle. "I had no idea Zhou could move like that. *Who* the hell is that guy?" she asked, though the question came out more like a whisper than anything.

The pair were the only couple dancing on the floor, performing intricate, synchronous moves that could only have come with countless hours of rehearsal. Like a single entity, their legs complimented one another, each responding to the other's call. Words failed Ben when he tried to think of the proper description of what occurred not twenty feet from him. The only thing that came close was that of a ribbon dancer's silk ribbon, flowing and twirling in an expression of joy and grace that had no rival. Ben watched spellbound. He could tell Sean's dance partner was nothing short of enraptured and that her comfort level with him was something akin to a lifelong lover.

Ben felt someone tugging at his sleeve, but he was having difficulty tearing his attention away from his friend's performance.

"Ben?... *Ben!*" said a familiar voice.

He blinked and came out of his trance-like state and looked at Heather.

"Do you *know* that guy?" asked Heather. Ben didn't say anything but nodded slightly. "Well? who is he?"

Still awestruck, Ben answered in a low tone, "That's my friend... Sean."



The song ended, and Sean smiled casually at his dance partner, and said, "Xièxiè nǐ. Wǒ hěn gāo xìng rén shì nǐ," (*Thank you, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance*).

Zhou smiled widely, understanding his flawless Mandarin. "Wow, you speak beautifully," she said as he held her hand up and kissed it lightly.

His smile became self-deprecating as he held up a hand in a placating fashion. "No, it's ok. I'm still working on it. The tones you know, they can be pretty tricky. Although, not *nearly* as tricky as Cantonese."

Zhou's expression changed to a look of awe, "You speak Cantonese too?"

"Well, yes, yes I do. I also speak Russian, Japanese, French, and a bit of Tagalog too. At any rate, it was a pleasure dancing with you," said Sean. He winked at her. Then, leaning in, he took her hand, brushing his lips against her skin with a breath of a kiss, then walked off the dance floor.

Sean heard someone calling out to him, but it came out as a raspy whisper.

“Sean, *Sean!*”

Sean looked up to see Ben motioning to him. “Oh, hey man. What took you so long. This place is *really* jumping.”

Ben stared at him for a moment, then asked, pointing to the dance floor. “what was *that?*”

“Umm, dancing??? The uh, oh what was it called?... oh yeah! It was *La Cumparsita*, by Gerardo Matos Rodríguez I believe.”

Ben stared at him as if he were a complete stranger. “And just when the hell did you learn to dance like that?”

“Oh, back in college. Never really had an opportunity to use it until tonight to tell you the truth.” Sean looked past Ben's shoulder to see the blonde in the red evening gown.

“Ben, aren't you going to introduce us?” asked Heather, as she came to stand next to him.

“Hmm? Oh, uh, right. Yeah, uh, Heather, this is my good friend whom I apparently know nothing about, Sean Edison.”

She held her hand up allowing Sean to take it. Instead of shaking the proffered hand as was expected, Sean grasped it lightly and brought it up to his lips and kissed gently. “A pleasure Miss?”

Heather gulped, somewhat taken back but the charm that poured forth from this stranger. She gave Ben a questioning look before she looked back to Sean. “Umm, you can call me Heather, “she said somewhat breathlessly.

“Ah, Heather, it's an absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance. You have a lovely home.”

She blushed slightly at this, momentarily at a loss for words, “Well, thank you. I'm happy to meet you as well. But I must confess, this is not *my* house. It belongs to my friend Genevieve Blackstone.

Sean gave Heather a winning smile, “Well, I'll have to go and meet your friend now, won't I.” She made to respond, but he was already walking away before she could utter another word.

“He's... intriguing...” said Heather, making the statement sound more like a question.

Ben watched his friend walk away saying, “Yeah, intriguing.” He trailed off.



“So, tell me about your friend,” said Heather as they walked.

“Hmm, well, he's a computer geek, uh well which is to say, he works on computer networks and does Cybersecurity, has his own “firm” as he calls it.”

“Oh? And you didn't know about his dancing skills?” she said over her shoulder.

“Yeah, that one took me totally by surprise. Had noooo idea about that at all.”

As they walked, they heard what sounded like an argument coming from one of the rooms off of the main hall. They detoured to see what was going on. They entered a room full of spectators surrounding two chess tables set up in the center. On one side of each of the tables sat a guest, but on the opposite side, in between the two chess boards, sat Sean. They seemed to be playing blitz matches, each move taking less than ten seconds to complete. The crowd gathered around the one side of the room were completely enthralled.

Mutterings of, “Isn't he the guy who was just dancing the tango with that lovely Asian gal?” could be heard, as well as, “Jesus, how is he able to concentrate on *both* games at the same time?” Though, this wasn't half as interesting as the conversation that Sean was having with his opponents. One of them was interrogating him about the differences and pros and cons regarding symmetric encryption, while the other seemed to be speaking with him in French about God knows what.

From Sean's expression, he was having quite the time of it, because the smile never left his face as he deftly executed move after move.

Someone in the crowd asked, “Who the hell *is* this guy?” Ben kept quiet as not to take the attention off of his friend. Heather gave him a sidelong glance. “What?” she asked him, seeing him bowing his head in disbelief.

“Yeah, nooo idea on this one either,” he said, as he turned to walk out of the room with Heather following closely after him.

“Where are you going?” she asked, not having anything better to say.

“Well, I was hoping to meet the hostess, and give her this bottle of wine. Any idea where she might be?”

“Sure, she's probably down the hall in the library.”



Back in the other room, the chess matches drew to a close, with one win and one loss. It seemed Sean had let his geek flag fly a bit too much as his focus shifted away from the one game in favor of supporting his arguments regarding cybersecurity. His French-speaking opponent saw a flaw in his play and moved in for the kill. A moment later, he made a surprising move that took his other opponent off guard, allowing him to make the decisive blow. Overall, both matches lasted all of about ten minutes. In the end, all three participants rose from their seats to the sound of applause coming from the spectators in the room. It took them somewhat by surprise, but they managed to play it off as if rehearsed.

Sean shook his opponents' hands, thanked them, and walked out of the room. As he left, he heard one of them say, "Who the hell plays two matches of chess simultaneously?" said one of the spectators.

"Seems like the *Most Interesting Man in the World*," came a reply from someone else in the crowd. Sean laughed to himself at this as he made his way down the hall.



Ben and Heather walked out of the library, not having located Genevieve there. "Let's try down in her office," said Heather, as she turned into another room. They happened to glance in the corner of the room next to the bar and noticed Sean engaged in an animated conversation with a beautiful brunette wearing a midnight blue evening gown. Ben couldn't help rolling his eyes. *Of COURSE, he's there!*

"That's Genny," said Heather, "C'mon, I'll introduce you to her." She waved at her friend. "Genny, hey, this is my friend I was telling you about," said Heather motioning to Ben.

Ben offered up his hand in greeting. "I want to thank you for inviting us to your lovely home Ms. Blackstone. I see you met my friend, Sean Edison."

Genevieve smiled at the pair, and half-heartedly shook Ben's hand. "Charmed, I'm sure," she said, sparing only a glance at Ben before returning her gaze to Sean.

Ben had to fight the urge to reach out and punch his friend. Swallowing his ire, Ben held up the bottle of wine and presented it to Genevieve. Her smile widened, but only let her eyes off of Sean for a moment barely long enough to acknowledge Ben's gift. She returned her gaze to Sean who returned the smile, albeit in a much more subdued manner.

Again, Ben had to choke down the urge to scoff. *Nice attitude, missy*, he thought

inwardly. Outwardly, he said, "I hope you like red Ms. Blackstone," trying once more to recapture the hostess' attention. Seeing his efforts were going to go unrewarded, Ben let out an inaudible sigh.

Genevieve ignored Ben and kept her gaze fixed on Sean who shifted awkwardly from the attention. That he purposefully shifted his gaze to the proffered bottle held out for their hostess didn't go unnoticed by Ben. The move also broke Genevieve's attention, causing her to notice the offered gift in Ben's hand. Her smile diminished somewhat. "Oh thank you, Ben was it? You can give it to the bartender," said Genevieve, returning her gaze to Sean. A gleam shown in her eyes as she asked with thinly veiled excitement, "Now, what is this exquisite wine that you brought Sean?" Ben rolled his eyes.

Sean gave Ben a sheepish smile, who returned the gesture, though it didn't reach his eyes. Sean reached into the paper bag he was carrying and produced a Chateau Malescot St. Exupery Margaux 2009. Ben gasped and spluttered, practically choking on his glass of wine when his eyes fell upon the extremely rare wine.

"Oh my *GOD!*" exclaimed Genevieve. Is that really what I *think* it is?"

Sean smiled and handed the bottle to her. "It is. My brother is *really* into wine, and he's been trying for the longest time to get me into it. So I said what the heck, and bought this off an online auction. I understand it has a unique bouquet and has a wonderful inky/purple color is followed by notes of Asian plum sauce, forest floor, creme de cassis, black raspberries. Apparently, the floral component is quite unusual for a Margaux. From what I read about in *Wine Spectator*, the maturity on it is from 2018 until 2040. That said, I'd lay it down for at least a couple of years."

Genevieve raised an eyebrow. "Well, you certainly seem to know your wines, Mr. Edison."

Ben regarded the bottle of 2015 Stirling Cabernet Sauvignon he held in his hand. Compared to the Margaux, his wine was little more than unadulterated rat piss. He gave a derisive snort, then shot Sean a scornful look. He gained a modicum of satisfaction from the chagrined expression on Sean's face but resolved himself to the fact that he wasn't going to be able to tear Genevieve's attention away from Sean long enough to get a word in edgewise. He cleared his throat and excused himself, suddenly wanting to extricate himself from Sean's shadow which was expanding by degrees.

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*Was I overdoing it a tad?* wondered Sean, as he watched his friend walk away. *Probably should say something*, he resolved, unable to shake the guilty feeling for making his friend look bad. As carefully as he could, Sean freed his hand from Genevieve's, politely excused



himself and set out to find Ben.

Sean made his way back out to the main foyer, all the while keeping an eye out for his friend. He glanced around the room, taking in the full scene. *Man, there are a lot of people here*, he thought, really noticing the crowd for the first time. He suspected the majority of them as being some sort of professional or another; a doctor here, a lawyer there, the usual crowd at one of these soirees.

Seeing no sign of Ben, Sean shifted his focus to the grand staircase which descended from the upstairs in two separate locations where it culminated in a landing halfway up before dovetailing outward as it approached the lower floor. His eye drifted down the staircase, occasionally resting on the odd assortment of medieval weapons adorning both walls.

A sudden movement tore Sean's gaze away from a gruesome mace. He glanced up to see Ben up on the landing closely examining a particular weapon; a "hand and a half", or "bastard sword". Ben didn't seem angry per se, so much as just humdrum. Deciding the air needed clearing before the evening went any further, Sean made his way up the stairs. He glanced up briefly at his friend just long enough to see Ben glance over his shoulder, wearing a look that he'd never seen on the man's face; one of pure malice.

Before Sean could say anything, Ben ripped the sword off the wall and brought it down in an overhand stroke, aimed for the middle of Sean's head.

With no time to think, Sean reacted, grabbing the first item to hand. The Japanese katana slide from the wall with a slight "swish" as it glided from the silk backing it had heretofore rested against. The decision to grab the weapon saved his life as the bastard sword slammed down and embedded itself in the banister right where Sean had been standing not one second before. Sean returned the blow with one of his own, as his katana sang through the air and met Ben's blade dead on.

"Dude, what in *THE HELL* is wrong with you man?" bellowed Sean as he took a glance behind him.

"What the hell is wrong with *me*? What the hell is wrong with *you*?" fumed Ben. "First, you race in here like Mario Frigging Andretti and pull that weird Dukes of Hazzard parking stunt. Then you take off, not even bothering to wait for me. The next thing I see, you grab the nearest hottie to hand and proceed to dance a perfectly choreographed Tango like you'd been rehearsing all day." Ben's words came out in gasps as he pressed his attack. "Let see, oh yeah, then you amaze the *hell* out of everyone by playing not one, but two games of blitz chess... simultaneously, I might add, all while talking tech with your first opponent, and having a conversation in French with the second one," said Ben through gritted teeth as he heaved at the dislodged sword. With one good wrench, Ben tore the sword from the banister, then followed up with another swing that would have taken Sean's head off at the shoulders, had he not ducked.

"Well, so what!" replied Sean, panting from exertion. "I don't see what the big deal is. After all, *you're* always are the life of the party, and *you* always get the hot chicks. Hell,

*I'm lucky if I even get a phone number!"*

"Fine! What about the Tango then, eh?" spat Ben.

"What about it?" Sean scoffed. "Just 'cause I never had an opportunity to dance the tango at one of these lame parties I've gone to with you, doesn't mean I can't. And if you recall, I've tried to get you to play chess with me, but nooo, you always tell me it's for '*geeks and nerds*'."

Ben advanced, forcing Sean to back down the stairs carefully. Sean spared several quick glances, making sure to mind his surroundings, but he never let his guard down. Ben pressed on, waiting patiently for just the right opening, then opportunity knocked as Sean took an extra second to check his footing. Ben lunged, driving his sword straight for his friend's heart, but Sean recovered in time and parried Ben's strike, sending his sword straight into the wall.

"JESUS, MAN! What the hell is your deal? I was just having *fun*!" bellowed Sean.

"Well, you didn't have to be such a showoff with that bottle of wine that you brought. You don't even *like* wine!"

"So what? Even if I don't drink it all that often, I never said I didn't like it. Once again, you just assumed that I don't 'cause I rarely drink it at home," spat Sean. "And oh, by the way, I *love* lagers. They may not be what's hip, but who gives a damn? I like what I like."

Ben fainted left, then brought his blade across Sean's chest, narrowly missing. The overextended swing went careening into the light sconce in the wall. Sparks flew from the damaged fixture, as the lights in the stairwell flickered.

Drawn by the first sounds of the swords clanging and the intermittent flickering of the lights, people began to gather around at the base of the staircase. Sean caught the spectacle out of the corner of his eye. Though he couldn't spare it any of his attention, it struck him as odd that they didn't give any outward reaction other than the occasional quiet comment. It was as if they were watching a tennis match; such was the subdued reaction.

At a savage cry from Ben, Sean's concentration snapped back into place.

"Well, *why* did you have to outdo me with that wine then eh? You know I know wines, like wayyyy better than you do, and you have the gall to bring that amazingly sophisticated cab here tonight to a party that you were only invited to because *I* was!" sneered Ben. "You'd have spent the evening surfing the net, or binge-watching something on Netflix! Hell, without me, you'd be a *NOBODY*!"

The air of their entanglement had reached a heightened state, and Sean was sick of being on the defensive. Taking advantage of a slight pause between Ben's strikes, Sean changed tactics. He launched into a barrage of violent attacks, aimed at cleaving Ben from shoulder to pelvis. But Ben somehow had been prepared for the advance. He blocked the strike with

an off-kilter parry, successfully disarming Sean in the process.

Fortunately, Sean kept his cool, scanning his immediate surroundings for something with which to defend himself. From the landing above, a bystander surveying Ben's earlier damage to the railing pulled a rapier off the wall and threw it to Sean. "Here, man, Catch!" Sean looked up in time to pluck the rapier out of the air in time to redirect Ben's anticipated strike.

Sean could tell Ben's attacks seemed to be slowing. *His sword must be getting heavy from the repeated thrusts and strikes*, thought Sean. *I just have to hold on for a bit longer. He'll have to get rid of it.* Sean took the opportunity to push Ben back up to the staircase. He watched as Ben glanced at the wall, most likely in hopes of finding something lighter.

Seeing nothing close to hand, Sean smiled, knowing the bout would soon be at an end. The smile died on Sean's lips, however, when he heard the same gentlemen on the landing call out to Ben, then toss the second of the twin rapiers to him. He gulped audibly at the sight of his friend, now with a lighter sword in hand, launch himself with renewed enthusiasm.

The two men came together in a series of quick thrusts and cuts, almost too fast for the eye to see. Both men aped being masters, with their footwork precisely executed, and their thrusts, ripostes, and parries landing perfectly. They descended the stairs and slowly began to make their way into the ballroom where Sean had danced with Zhou, not a half hour before. The crowd kept well out of the way, enough to give them room to carry out their enraged duel, but followed like spectators at a golf match. They entered into the ballroom, short on the heels of Sean and Ben. Once inside, they surrounded the two men, jeering and chanting, egging both parties on.

Sean made a low lunge, then brought his blade up in an attempt to stab at Ben's shoulder with the intent to disarm his opponent, but was thwarted in his efforts as Ben parried and riposted with a short overhand stab that would have skewered Sean's eye had he not moved his head.

Just as the battle seemed to reach a fevered pitch, a voice shouted out, "FREEZE! POLICE! PUT THE SWORDS DOWN!"

Both men froze instantly, suddenly realizing just what a spectacle their outburst had become. They dropped their swords, looking ashamed, like a couple of schoolboys who'd just been busted for smoking in the bathroom. They raised their hands, as a pair of police officers moved in, taking advantage of the momentary detente to slap a pair of cuffs on each of the combatants.

At the sound of the "Click", the two combatants' mood broke. Sean looked down at his feet, Ben doing likewise. "Hey, listen, Sean, I'm sorry I lost it," Ben said giving his friend a sidelong glance. The police officers had surrounded the pair with guns raised ready to shoot.

"It's ok... I'm sorry I made you look like a heel by out wine-snobbing you."

The officer in charge motioned for officers to read them their rights. Sean looked up at

the ceiling and gave an exasperated sigh. “Man, what a *night*. It was going so *smoothly* for me.”

Ben chuckled at this, but offered up, “Yeah, man you truly were the life of the party tonight. You gotta show me those dance moves you were pulling out there.” The two officers that had them detained ushered them out the front door and into the night.

As they were helped into the back seat of the police cruiser, Sean sighed again. “Yep, it was some night. I really felt like the Most Interesting Man in the World.”

**Fin!**