

They were fencing and, as before, Cornelius was always left the victor in every match. He would laugh cruelly when his friends fell, chiding them ruthlessly, calling them names and tearing apart their lineage with his cutting remarks.

His friends, in their turn, would laugh soullessly at his hateful sarcasm, though their mirth sounded a little shallow and forced to my ears. Not for the first time I wondered just why in this world my hateful cousin had any friends at all while I, who had never offended anyone in all my small life, didn't have one.

Small, even steps echoed down the corridor, and I looked behind me to see a slender form of perfection make her way towards us. A woman joined our group, a familiar face whom I recognised to be the same woman who had been so casually draped on my cousin's arm at the 'gathering'.

She was wearing a purple dress of a different fabric this time, the colour a gaudy, overpowering shade. Her lips were coloured in almost exactly the same grape dye. She waltzed up to Cornelius, who was standing over his latest slain comrade, his sword pointed with bored precision at Frederick's heart, and she wrapped her long, bare arms around his neck. She kissed Cornelius's cheek boldly, leaving the imprint of her lips upon his face, which he left there like a trophy.

"Here, Lucinda," Frederick called up from the floor to her. "Why don't you give a dead man a sweet kiss too?"

She gave him a half-smile, and with a fairly sharp and heavy step, she kicked him in the side, and Frederick moaned a little before laughing at her jest. Though, from the way he stood up from his position on the floor, I suspected the heave of her shoe to be a lot heavier than it needed to be.

"Now, now, Lucinda," Cornelius said to her, in mock chastisement. "One shouldn't be so rude to the host's guests, especially if one is a lady."

"Then it's a good thing," she replied, "that I'm not."

There was some twittering at this revelation amongst Cornelius's friends, and the non-Lady Lucinda languidly draped herself over Cornelius and rested her head against his neck. She had small, quick features, a sharp nose and tiny, thin lips that seemed pursed in a permanent sultry smile.

Her eyes, a violet shade, took in the forms of Cornelius's laughing friends with obvious disdain, and that same assessing gaze went over all the walls at the pictures of our forefathers. It was clear from her expression that she found them lacking.

Her stare travelled slowly downwards, until her violet eyes finally rested on me. She peered at me, seeming to measure me in her curt method of assessment, but I could not read what it was she thought of me.

"You're a strange one," she said, by manner of clarification. She left Cornelius's arms to approach me. "What are you? You're so pale and dark all at the same time, you look like you stepped out of a ghost story."

"He has consumption," Cornelius shouted to her.

Lucinda merely shrugged. "Who doesn't, these days?"

She approached me, and I was instantly assailed by the overpowering scent of her perfume, distinctively spicy, like musk. She smiled with predatory grace, and took my arm into hers.

"And what might you be called?" she asked.

"I might be called a man," I answered. "But if you are asking after my name, it is Adrian."

Lucinda chuckled at this and pushed back a couple of locks of my hair with her graceful hand, though even her stubborn advance refused to tame it. She rested her head on my shoulder and peered rudely into my face, studying it intently.

“You know,” she said, in a near whisper, “you cut a rather romantic figure ...”

Cornelius stepped up to the fore then, his face a mask of calm, but the red blotches that stained his cheeks were clear indications of his hidden rage.

“It never ceases to amaze me,” he said, “how women latch on to sick and diseased creatures and harbour nothing but positive emotions for the vile beasts. I half-wonder if you’re all bewitched by death.”

“Oh, we are,” Lucinda replied, her voice still carrying its sultry tone. “Life, with all its familiar appearances, though lovely to look at, can bore us with its obviousness. Death, however, that grand mystery is always beyond our understanding, and it is our nature to need to understand. It has a fascination, we know nothing of it, but we must learn, and of course,” she chuckled, “we have too much common sense to search for it ourselves.”

I flinched a little at this comment, and wondered if she knew about my father.

She stared directly into my eyes then, and I shuddered at the contact of her gaze. It held no warmth, only a seething coldness that I doubted any other living thing could possibly possess. She pinched my chin with her long fingertips and forced me to stare back at her.

“I wonder what it would be like,” she mused to herself, “to actually watch a person die. I wonder what secrets would be revealed in their eyes as they fell.”

Her gaze abruptly turned upon Cornelius, whose rage was starting to creep out of its cage, and his unsmiling face stared at the pair of us, his body tense and ready to strike.

“Don’t you ever wonder, Cornelius?” she asked.

She broke her embrace from me, and I sighed with a vast measure of relief at the release. I decided I didn’t like her, not at all, and in fact considered that she and Cornelius were very well matched - two ugly souls together wrapped in lovely packaging.

I looked away from my angered cousin and wondered if there was some way I could make my escape back to my room once again. I toyed with the idea of faking a coughing seizure, but the action to do so would probably result in the occurrence of a real one. So, I could only sit and wait, perched on the bench away from Cornelius and his company and watch them as they played their sport, with Cornelius’s hateful jade-green eyes constantly sliding back to me.

The room, infused with light when the sun shone upon it, was now a dark and dreary affair, reflecting back the grey gloominess that overhung the sky. The vast windows in the room seemed to invite those black clouds right into the very house, and I half-expected it to start thundering and lightning, pouring rain onto the marble floor.

Even the snow outside had that aspect of grey, and I shivered in the room, though I should have been warm enough with the many layers of my wool clothes. It seemed my life had been bled dry of colour, leaving it in these dreary, dark, frigid tones. Even Lucinda’s gaudy purple dress had faded into the shades of a grey scale.

My cousin held his rapier in a tight fist and, as he had on our first day, he grabbed George’s sword and marched towards me with it. He forced the handle in my direction, but I refused it.

“What’s this?” Cornelius snarled. “Are you such an expert on mortality now that you can’t bother to play with it? You hardly have anything to lose.”

“On the contrary,” I said to him with an unaccustomed sharpness, “though it is true that I am in death’s company, I am not so foolish as to rush his pace. Though you may not believe it, cousin,” I touched my cheek with significance, “I am still alive enough to feel pain.”

“Take the sword, Adrian,” Cornelius ordered me. “Take it and strike at me. I promise to be kind to you.”

“I hardly trust your promises, Cornelius,” I said, glaring at him. I rose from my seat at the window and turned my back on him, an action that caused him to shout after me in blind rage.

“You sickening wretch!” he shouted at me. “You pathetic coward!”

How wrong my cousin was. I understood his furious wrath, and I knew I was only inviting more abuse upon my person by my actions. But his sour attitude and the demeanour of his vile nymph gave me a bravery I never knew I possessed, and it was with solid, determined steps that I walked back to the vast staircase and slowly made my way up.

I could still hear Cornelius's infuriated voice swearing and uttering my name between curses, but I chose to ignore him and continue my ascent. I was terrified that in his fury he would run up and push me down them, as he had seemed so resolved to do not three days ago.

But no pursuit followed me. By the time I reached my door, my heart was pounding so fast the blood was rushing in a torrent throughout my body. I collapsed on my back onto the bed with a heavy thump, and ran an exhausted hand over my face.

Now, in the dull comfort of my room, I found my miniature revolution to be a foolish action. Surely Cornelius would not be content to leave me now, not with that obvious slight I had shown him in front of all of his friends as well as his mistress. I knew I would not go unpunished for that particular crime. I glanced at my bedroom door fearfully, half-expecting Cornelius to come bursting through it at any moment and jump upon me and murder me. Or worse.

A thin, bitter tear left my eye, and trickled down the side of my face to rest at the rim of my ear.

"Death," I called, my voice weak and wheezing in the gloom, "if you have any kind of sympathy at all, you would take me now and be done with it, you cruel, vile thing ..."

"You are calling to things that do not exist."

I do believe my heart stopped at that moment, as I frantically turned my head to see who had entered my room. But the door was still closed, and the air as still as if nothing had moved within it.

Something *was* there, however. I could feel its presence like a compass guiding my soul. I slowly surveyed the room, my eye catching the dying embers of the fire, the heavy dull shadows of the curtains and the outline of a black and brooding sky outside the large window.