

Nia of Seahold was perfect, and none but Renault D'esprit appreciated her. He knew how the other boys at the College thought of women. How could she spend her time with them? Did she hate herself? Did she not own a looking glass? Did she not often remark how much nicer Renault was than other boys she knew?

"You must come to the feast Saturday," she said. "They're always such fun."

"I can't possibly wait that long. I must have you this instant or I shall surely die," is what Renault would have whispered, desperately, into Nia's ear, if he were the hero in one of the romantic songs, or if he were clever around girls like Xavier.

Instead, he sort of half-chuckled and then looked down at his lunch.

"Yeah, maybe."

"So my lectures are concluded for the day," Nia said. "Are yours?"

If only he'd found the right words then. A stupider man would have said to a lesser woman "Yes. May I buy you an ale?" but no such pedestrian overtures would do for Nia of Seahold. She of bright, full lips begging to be kissed. Of cream-and-coffee skin dying to be uncovered. How to make her understand how deeply he loved her? Words were a fickle mistress - always absent in moments of need, only to arrive later with some half-assed excuse.

"Where were you last night?" one might ask.

"Comforting an old friend," Words might answer.

"Did you 'comfort' him with your mouth or your arse, Words?"

"I can see you're upset, but I wish you'd learn to express your feelings constructively rather than attacking me."

"Oh yeah, Words? Well, I wish you'd...stop slutting it up all over town, you slutty slut. You're a slutty, slutty slut, Words!"

Such was the problem.

So, rather than profane Nia's splendor with anything less than perfect words, Renault muttered something resembling "enjoy your afternoon," and began to gather his books.

Nia suppressed what was almost a sigh.

"I'll see you for alchemy on Monday?" she asked, standing to leave.

"Wager on it."

Alchemy class would always be theirs. They were the smartest in their class by half. The only time they hadn't gotten along famously was when Renault had spoken an idle musing about necromancy. Nia had been quite disturbed by this "blasphemy." But Renault had only meant to illustrate how a formula for just about anything could, in theory, be deduced by a sharp enough mind.

If only love were like alchemy.



Renault attended the feast, but left after only half a flagon of mead. That was already enough time for Xavier to offer his customary counsel about “being one’s self,” and then go off somewhere with some girl. Xavier would never understand. By his bawdy Sunday morning boasts, Renault knew how little Xavier esteemed his “fair acquaintances.” But Renault could never conceive of Nia in such vulgar ways. He would go to Selbirin and back for her, and if he could only make her see it, she would be his forever.

But she was nowhere to be seen at the feast.

As he shuffled home through the cloister that ran between the mead hall and his dormitory, the sound of giggling wafted through the crisp autumn air. He ignored the noise until he realized, with a sick feeling, that he recognized the voice.

Nia stepped away from the man and crossed her arms. It was the closest Renault had ever seen her come to embarrassment.

“Renault, you know Frederik. From our alchemy lecture.”

There was a lump in Renault’s throat the size of a morningstar.

“He’s asked if I would help him with this week’s tutorial. You don’t mind do you?”

He couldn’t remember what he uttered in response before walking away as fast as legs could carry.

It was only later, as he retched in some dark corner, that he saw the dead mouse, and knew what he needed to do.

Texts on Necromancy were difficult - not impossible - to gather from the College of Armstrongard’s library. One had to do it behind the veil of anthropology or self-defense, lest too many eyebrows be raised.

Renault heard the hint of insecurity in their voices when they moralised. It was the same as when he had nine years and his tutors warned him not to make his own wound-cleansing salve. Sure, his face had scarred, but there was no infection, was there? Their true fear was that pupil would succeed where master failed.

She’d see. He was more than just smart. He was the greatest alchemist she’d ever meet. Hadn’t

she told him, when they first became friends, that she respected a man's mind above all other qualities?

"Sure," he thought. "I bet Frederik Iohannsen has a great mind. A great, big, throbbing mind." It was her lies that hurt the most. If she had just told him, "I don't care about a man's mind, or how deeply he loves me. I just want a right good fuck" at least he'd have known not to waste his time.

In honesty, the mice were easy. It took him less than a week to concoct a suitable blood substitute. His first formula was too corrosive, and sped the decay of flesh, but he soon ironed out that wrinkle. After that, a small spark enchantment applied near the heart, and a spell to remind the brain of life, got the mouse moving. The most encouraging discovery was that his tiny subjects seemed to retain some of their instincts from life. Within a month, they could be counted on to amble towards a morsel of cheese. By the end of the semester, they were scurrying around as though still alive.

Renault would admit some pride in his progress thus far, but he knew if he never progressed past mice, his skills would be considered, at best, a macabre party trick.

He needed human specimens.

He couldn't recall where or when he first read about the Cairn - time was hazy then - but he immediately recognized it as perfect. Full of suitable specimens, and far from any meddlesome questions. And all because of some preposterous "curse." Not that curses were preposterous *in general*, mind you. Renault himself had successfully afflicted Frederik Iohannsen with a diarrheal curse not long ago. But to believe that a curse could still retain any potency, when no one had set foot in the allegedly cursed place for more than a millenium, was the basest kind of superstition.

But their foolishness would be his gain; he would have all the time he needed to perfect his craft. In Renault's estimation, necromancy was like fiddle-playing: awe-inspiring once mastery is achieved, but horrifying any sooner.

At some point in those blurry days, Nia paid him a visit.

"You've been missed in class."

"By whom? Frederik?"

"Freder...oh by Galadon, I nearly forgot about him." She let out a self-effacing chortle. "You needn't have had a doctorate in divination to see that wasn't going far."

"I'm sure you let him go plenty far."

"That was a bit crass, Renault."

"You're a bit crass."

"I only came to inquire after your health" said Nia, with a tinge of hurt. "To make sure you weren't ill."

“I’m more well than I’ve ever been.”

“What happened, Renault? What happened to the boy I met in alchemy class?”

For barely a moment, Renault considered abandoning his whole endeavor, enrolling again for classes next semester, washing up, and inviting Nia out for that ale. Simply speaking with her, as friends, once more.

“Truth be told,” sighed Nia, “I came here because I missed his company.”

And with that, Renault’s anger boiled over again.

“Who!? Your dog-pup? Your foyer rug? He was weak and small and stupid, and he doesn’t live here anymore. So you’ll have to get your cruel thrills elsewhere!”

“I don’t know who in Selbirin you think you are, but tell Renault I asked after him!”

She slammed the door behind her.

Renault knew **exactly** who he was. And one day, so would Nia.



The Cairn of Evil Untold was exactly where the ancient and eldritch map pilfered from the library said it should be, its peaty portal wide open for anyone sufficiently motivated to walk through.

“*They’re almost like statues,*” he mused, as he followed the stairs down into “the bowels of treachery,” as the scrolls said. But he knew from his research that they weren’t statues. These were men who, for their roles in a crime so heinous that its details had been scoured from history, were impaled on swords and beheaded. As a final damnation, their eyes were cut out and their bodies burned. According to their heathen traditions, they thus could never reunite with their ancestors in Selbirin. But, being merely foot-soldiers in the Crime, they were burned *after* they’d been killed.

Not so for their chieftains. These sat around a table with their primeval armor melted to their flesh, their charred faces twisted in agony. At the head of the grisly table was their leader. Before the burning, he had been disemboweled, castrated, and seen his still-beating heart wrenched from his chest.

“*You and me both, friend.*”

The leader, or rather, the copper coronet he died holding, was the keystone. Assuming the chieftains retained instincts from life as the mice did, they would follow whomever held the coronet. And the rest would follow the chieftains, provided Renault could somehow re-attach their skulls.

A firm believer in trying the simplest method first, Renault first pulled on the coronet, but death’s rigor held firm. No matter. He concocted an earlier formula - a corrosive one - and pumped it

through his grisly antagonist's veins. It liquefied the corpse in minutes. As Renault held his newly earned crown, he allowed himself a brief moment of pride.

That's when he noticed the pressure plate on his late adversary's throne. And heard the cogs turning inside the walls.

He sprinted back up the stairs like a madman. He didn't realize how many gods-damned stairs there were on the way down.

His legs burned.

The cold, damp air was like razors in his throat.

His mantra as he ran through the pain was "*not like this, I've come too far.*"

But he was still 30 yards away when the massive stone door slammed shut across the exit.

"NIA!" he cried.

Then he collapsed to the floor, and wept until he could longer hold his eyes open. Then he slept.



As soon as one got used to bugs, there was plenty of food in the Cairn. Any nutrients which could not be obtained thusly were replaced by a potion of Renault's devising. This potion also caused most of his skin to rot off, but Renault was never especially vain.

The other good thing was that bug gut paste could be fermented and imbibed. This was especially useful because, his spells and formulae having worked exactly as predicted, Renault now commanded the semi-sentient corpses of dozens of damned ancient warriors. With very little warring to do, Renault passed most of his time in a haze of inebriation with the twelve chieftains.

"You know what your problem was?" hissed one, as it wagged a finger towards Renault and sloshed around a chalice of bug juice. "You were too nice."

"You know something, Cabhan?" slurred Renault. "You. Are. Right. You're gods-damned right."

"They never bed the nice guys."

"They say they want to meet a nice guy, so you're nice, and then what do you get?"

"I don't think of you that way," shrieked a chieftain, in a shrill, mocking voice. There was a chorus of assent.

"Do you really think 'nice' is the problem?" proffered one. "I'm pretty sure no woman *dislikes*

being treated with kindness.”

“Mag Uidhir, shut the fuck up.”

“They come to you in tears. ‘Ohhhh, I feel so safe around you.’ Not safe enough to fuck me though!”

“But that doesn’t--”

“--Shut the FUCK up, Mag Uidhir. Nobody assed you.”

“Did it ever occur to ANY of you, just mayhaps, that a woman’s affection isn’t some puzzle box to be unlocked, but rather the complex mental state of a full, complicated human being? And that if you resent her for that, might just be your attitude is the problem?”

For a moment, one could hear the worms in the walls.

“Did it ever occur to you to go fuck yourself, Mag Uidhir?”

“Yeah! Get the fuck out of here, pansy.”

“He’s just saying that so his ugly wife’ll fuck him once a year.”

“Ignore him, lad, and don’t fret. This Nia’ll wise up. She’ll appreciate you like you appreciate her. The stupid bitch.”

“Yeah” said Renault, as he nodded and gulped his drink. “Yeah. She’ll come around.”

