

Cool strands of spring-air brush across my naked shoulders. I awake with a shiver. From my bed, I stare across the room. The double doors leading to my cliff-side balcony stand open letting in a whore of a draft, blowing cold and hard. Even under my many fur-blankets, it chills me. I glance at the blacken hearth sleeping silently, long since expired.

I need to escape this cold.

Can I leave yet? Is... is my chamber door still locked?

Wrapping up in a thick wolf blanket, I creep toward the tall, oak door. The cold cobblestone curls my toes.

I yank on the door handle.

Damn it. It's still locked.

I remain under house arrest.

Each day has been the same. I wake with my chamber door bolted on the outside only opening at odd times when I am sitting out on that damn balcony.

It's Curtis entering, doing Father's dirty work like an old maid. He leaves my daily meals and, then, slams the door shut and locks it.

Yesterday, that old shit had the gall to call me out as he stood there smiling in the hall with his hand on the door. When I ran at him, he nearly smashed my fingers in the slamming door. He grinned even more, then that son of a bitch.

It satisfies him to see me in trouble. It always has. At least, he doesn't torture me with his cooking, anymore. Hell that would require work. Right.

So, this is my existence. Or it has been for the last few days since I was drug back home from Tours by Mother and Curtis.

God, I miss that place. The women, the wine, they were so intoxicating. Living in Josselin has never been like living in Tours. I know it isn't a rival to Rome but, still things are happening there just the same.

The work I turned out with others like me has exemplified that school started by Alcuin. We have transcribed generations upon generations of thoughts and facts.

The learning in that school was godly but I struggled to put up with their strict code.

Holy servitude is much like this cold silent room, its emptiness chills me.

I need to be around warm crowds and enjoyable conversations. I would rather live and laugh with the sinners than pray and die with the saints. Mother would gasp in horror if she heard that. That's why she always preaches the bad and never praises the good. She lives by too rigid of rules. She's just not realistic.

So once again, Mother has found it necessary to discipline me unjustly. She has a bad habit of driving home her point even after someone concedes to her judgment. This is how it has always been, Mother's Rules.

Forget her. I waste time thinking on that sad subject. Let me be done with her. Let me try to enjoy this day. I shall dress, take a book out on the balcony and hopefully bask in the sun. And maybe, if I am lucky, the young maidens will be washing their clothes in the river, today.

Now there's something to look for while my imprisonment drags on.

Finished dressing, I walk in front of my bed toward the balcony. To the right and in the corner stands my small book shelf. I go to it. I search for a title that will help pass the day. The only problem is I have read all of them and even copied some of them while working in Tours.

There is not a one I haven't se...

What's this?

A thin stack of loose-leaf parchment lies on an empty section of the bookshelf.

This isn't mine. What is it? Is it some sad attempt at a charter?

No. That's not what it is. It looks more like an extensive inventory list than privileges granted in a charter.

God, what has someone entitled this thing? Whoever wrote this should be banished from the scriptorium. I can barely read this hen scratch.

*The Imperial Assessment of the County of Porhoët in the year 840 AD*

Is that what it says?

Whoa, is this a complete list of Father's assets? Well at least from a year ago, anyways.

I need better light to read this.

Rolling up the parchment, I head for the terrace. Reaching the double doors, I stop.

God this is an incredible view.

Thirty to forty feet below me, the Oust River runs. It snakes thru much of the rich county of Porhoët. A light mist hangs at the base of the trees near the river's edge. The rush of water over the mill-dam and the slow methodic churning of the water-wheel mumble to each other as the sleepy town of Josselin starts to stir.

On both sides and in all directions of this dark placid river the House of Lusingna controls. I stand to inherit a great deal when Father passes on. Directly or indirectly, much of Porhoët already lies in the hands of my family.

These papers document the extent that it manages, from the vast tracts of farmland to the richly endowed churches that bless them. For God's sake, look who witnessed the assessment. Not only Bishop Aldric of Le Mans but also Adalhard the seneschal signed it. It's beautiful.

Unlike the clan of Nominoë, the House of Lusingna is held in high regards by the House of Charlemagne. And now young Charles, Charlemagne's grandson, has direct sovereignty over the realm. It can only get better.

Glancing back at the papers in hand, I flip thru them. Taxes from tenants, mills and merchants cover several sheets while the others pertain to church and monastic stats.

Over and over I review the papers for hours.

The last bit of shade fades from my cliff-side balcony. No dew remains on the ivy leaves that carpet the terrace. The late spring sun suffocates me with its hot blanketing rays. Sweat slithers down the side of my brow.

The minutes of the morning painfully melt into the hours of the afternoon. Boredom is a heavy burden. The world goes on without me.

Throughout the day, at different times, groups of girls come to the river to toil with their families' laundry. At times, some of the sisters splash one another.

Oh how sweet it would be to have one of those little ladies holding me tight. We'd ride like hell out of here. The wind would rush over us as we escape to one of my lodges along the Oust.

I could live freely at any one of them with no assistance from Mother or Father. Besides the endless game, there is a forest of nuts, berries and fruit that can be picked and eaten. Starvation is a distant concern. I could spend the end of my days living like that.

Mother's philosophy and mine are completely different, though. She's so sober, caught up in the trappings of court and customs. If no one's hurt, do as U will. But, that's not proper says Mother.

Damn it all. This is absurd. What is so outrageous about my behavior, anyways? For God's sake, I am a man. Christ Almighty has put me in this very position. With His boundless wisdom, He saw it fitting. Unfortunately, Mother does not adhere to such divine logic.

Damn, Mother and Her Rules. They can both go to hell. I pace back and forth on this balcony like a goddamn animal. She tries to break me. I know this. And that's why it won't work. I remain a prisoner just the same, though.

I had gone too far this time, she said. There is no easing up on my punishment she said. That righteous wench demands that I see the magnitude of my actions.

For God's sakes, it was just sex. She acts like she never done it. If that's the case, where the hell did I come from then? Please spare me.

It is unfortunate, my circumstances. How could I have known that I would find two sweet flowers begging to be plucked from two separate households? What luck? God has given me a sweet life to live so I have tried to enjoy it and be grateful for it. It is just so unfortunate that each girl has blossomed into motherhood, though. I think the fact that the last girl was promised to another is what really sent Mother off the deep end.

Mother is so intent on punishing me. She is making such a spectacle of this. That's why she forced me to sit in the back of the cart for the whole trip home from Tours. She did it to humiliate me. There is no other reason.

Why doesn't Father stop this and stand up against Mother? Damn it, is he not a man? He should know of all people. Love enslaves both peasant and prince. A man's pent-up passions will control and manipulate the mind if not kept in check. And when it's not, a man is put into compromising positions.

God! I hear Mother as if she is harping this instant. Her nasal words nag me.

Oh, Father, we have been too easy on sweet Saul for far too long. And for that Father, our only child has repaid us with another bastard grandchild. This time, this time, the babe of a woman has been spoken for. Who knows what we shall have to sacrifice this time to set things straight?

To hell with her! She has no clue! The... the pressure, the strain pent-up passion creates. It's just not healthy.

Father should allow me such freedoms. It's the privilege of nobility. Unfortunately for him, I am the first generation of Lusingna to enjoy such rights gained from our unwavering support of the House of Charlemagne. Father should be proud that he has provided such things. Though vicariously thru me, Father still will experience what he never could. Isn't that what being a parent is all about, anyways, giving all to the next generation?

The sound of spring blares out an irritating concert of crickets and chirping birds. I grow impatient. I clench my fists and pace. Pausing, I stare out across the countryside.

I would almost welcome Death, if it would take away this damn boredom.

Another wasted day dies a slow agonizing death. The blood of the sun pours across the spring sky. Night cloaks the evening. In the consuming darkness, two maidens hurry along the narrow road in between the castle and the river. They head for the bridge.

Neither of them return my stare just as all of the others throughout the day did not. Why do none of them even glance at me? Do they not know who I am and all that can be seen from this balcony shall be mine, one day? God, what is the deal?

They, purposely, keep their eyes hid from me. Why?

Mother is behind this. I would bet my soul on it. She must be. None of the servant girls will look at me, not even the little sweeties that have eagerly pleased my needs in the past. Mother's scorn knows no bounds.

And Father! He simply follows suit with whatever Mother says. Why doesn't he recognize and appreciate the chance I have? Jesus, I will never understand him. The treasures of Christendom lay open to our family and still I'm denied what is rightfully mine.

Lothar must have felt the same way with that self-righteous Louis. No wonder Lothar raised arms against his own father. I almost feel driven to that point.

Bad words drift and fade but bitterness lingers.

The front gate bell tolls out its faint but distinct report.

Immediately, I turn and march toward the door but stop.

My quick steps come to a sudden halt. I stare into the darkness of my chambers. The shadows taunt me. My arms drop down to my sides. I remember that the door is locked. Defeated, I return to the balcony.

Who has come to the House of Lusingna so late? Is it just a messenger?

On the backside of the castle facing the river, I have no view of the front gate. I am ignorant of the comings and goings of travelers from the north and east.

Returning to the stone bench out on the porch, I plop down and swing my legs up on top of it. Leaning against the side of the terrace, I prop my head on my left hand.

I watch the sun die. It sinks into a burning funeral pyre on top of the western woods. Songbirds whistle their mournful melody for the dying light.

A moment of solace sinks in.

A sharp rap on my chamber door snaps me straight to my feet, though.

I leave the fading light of the balcony and enter the complete darkness of my chamber.

I had failed to light a fire in the daylight.

Candlelight pours in as the door gives way like a breaking levee. Anxious, I wait to see who comes to visit.

Disappointment curdles my stomach. In the flickering orb of candlelight, Curtis stands. The man-servant stares at me with that evil smirk of his. It's the same one he used to wear when he dragged my ass in front of Mother to be whipped when I was a boy.

Irritated by his sneer, I bark, "Whatever has happened, I didn't do it. Though U may have trouble believing it, I have stayed in my room for the last few days just as Mother has ordered. I have not escaped the confinements of my room at any time. Yes. Yes. I know I could have simply returned undetected, but I didn't. So U can run along and inform Father, now."

His glare hardens.

U glare at me as if U wish me dead. Oh! I've pissed U off with my little comment. Good. To hell with U, Curtis. U've always been a thorn in my side.

Sharp in tone, Curtis snaps, "Count Lusingna requests your presence. He is in the study, downstairs. Waiting."

That evil smirk returns to your lips, Curtis. Why? U smile like U know something I don't. What is it? It has to do with the late visitor. What news concerns me at this hour? Could it do with the nobleman and his deflowered maiden? He can't be that offended. Hell, I did the man a favor. Now, he has a reason for not marrying her. Though eager to please, she was uglier than one would believe. Nothing like Lilly, the niece of Bishop Aldric, now, she was a prize.

"Are U coming?" Curtis barks from out in the wide hall.

Startled, I look up to find Curtis staring at me.

I don't like the feeling I am getting from U, Curtis. What is it?

Sourness lingers at the back of my throat. I can taste something foul in the air.

Reluctant, I follow Curtis walking in the tail-end of his candlelight. Silent, we wind thru the long hallways and down the wide staircase of the large castle. We make our way to Father's study. That's where Father always meets with visitors or announces my punishment.

Unnoticed we enter the large hot room.

I never really liked this room. Though the best place in the house when winter came, the fireplace suffocates the room now. The only time there's not a fire burning is during the Feast of Beltane when all fires are extinguished and re-lit according to tradition. God, I hate waiting in this room.

Why does Father make me wait?

Father just stands there facing away from the doorway. Where is the visitor? Maybe it was just a messenger. Father holds his hands behind his waist. Silent, he stares out the large window as night approaches relentless as always.

I move out around the arranged furniture away from the hearth. I step into the corner of Father's line of sight.

Turning and facing me, a severe look hangs on Father's face, one of great contemplation. Peering at me, this tall but reserved man remains silent, deep in thought.

"Yes, Father?"

He answers with silence and an arched glance. His stare bothers me. Turning slightly, I glance at Curtis positioned back behind me.

What's happening here?

Silence unnerves me. Going to say something more to Father, I stop when I see Curtis step away from the door.

An old short woman appears at the doorway. She wears a black, faded dress with a white apron in front. Her gown goes down to her ankles. She clutches a black wooden chest in her two chubby hands. Teetering side to side, she struggles with it. Her red cheeks puff and sputter as she pivots side to side not knowing where to set the foot by foot box.

Going to the woman, Curtis takes the heavy coffer from her. Quickly, he places it on the table in the middle of the room. Curtis stands over it like a looming vulture. Anxiously, he looks over at the old woman.

In turn, she intently glances at Father. Seeing this, Father simply nods his head. Immediately, Curtis flicks the latch loose and flips the lid up.

Dumbfounded, I stare at stacks and stacks of silver shiny coins. Jesus, silver coins completely fill the chest. God, they look like shekels.

"Sweet mother of Mary! Are those real, Father? They can't be. There is just so many of them. That's a king ransom. Whose are those, Father?"

Excited, I stare at Father for an explanation. There is none forth coming. Instead, his head drops as if disgraced by my comment. He turns away from me. Uncertainty forms a frown on Father's face. He peers out into the darkness, once more.

What's his problem?

My attention drifts back to those stacks of shekels. God! Are they real?

I pick up three coins from three separate piles.

Jesus, the silver coins all appear to be struck from the year of the Crucifixion. They feel heavy. One of these could actually be one of the silver coins used to pay for Judas's betrayal.

Right. The odds of that are staggering.

Christ!

Cla-clank!

I could buy my own castle.

Cla-clank!

And rule it like a goddamn king.

Cla-clank!

Turning with a sour stare, Father glares at me and then at the coins rolling in my hand. Knowing his silent intent, I drop the coins back in the chest.

Content, Father speaks, "At one time before the complete chaos in the House of Charlemagne, I humored the thought that U would be anointed with the office of missi dominici. Hah! What a joke that has become. Besides that Christendom crumbles away, how could someone lawless ensure the rule of law? U can't.

Saul, U had so much potential when U were younger. But that ended when U discovered the pleasures of women and wine.

"I had hoped U would settle into some secular role. After your latest escapade, I wondered what office U could even handle here, in Josselin."

"What?" I bark.

"U truly do not realize how much U have destroyed. Do U, Saul? Generations of planning have been blown to the waste side.

But for some reason the god of fortune has graced U, once more, with another chance.

"Even after I had explained to this dear woman that U were incapable or unwilling to care for yourself, she still insisted that Lady Melusiné believes that U can run her entire estate.

"Lady Who?"

"Let me explain. Raymond..."

"... of Poitou?"

"Yes, Saul, my brother your uncle, the viscount over Angers. During the past winter, Raymond married Lady Melusiné. She comes from an old powerful family that dates back to antiquity. I believe her father had connections with the Widonid clan, also."

"Her father once possessed vast tracts of land in the county of Vannes near Carnac and the Great Bay." Father declares. "Having no sons though, the estate went under Lady Melusiné's control. This happened years ago. The local nobles have honored her strong sovereignty ever since. Where others failed, she has succeeded in revitalizing the area.

"But with the mounting trouble in Aquitaine..."

"What trouble?"

"What trouble? What do U mean, Saul? Where have U been?"

"Locked up."

"Hah! Please spare us your sad story. It's civil war, Saul, brother against brother. Christian against Christian. That rotten Lothar shall tear apart the Holy Empire. He cannot possibly control all of Christendom but he still seeks to deprive his brothers of their rightful inheritance. If that were not enough, Vikings raid and plunder at will. Saul, U were closer to the turmoil and U still had no clue.

"Young Charles's forces have crossed the Seine and met up with his half-brother, Louis, near Auxerre. The Bavarian king defeated the duke of Austrasia a short while ago. Charles' and Louis' bishops have appealed for a Judgment of God against Lothar.

"Lady Melusiné has levied the support of all her own vassals near Carnac to fortify Raymond's position at Angers.

“Though her personal estate is off the beaten path and requires little up keep, the lack of manpower has compromised it just the same.”

“Lady Melusiné wants me to work the estate?”

“Yes,” chirps the old lady.

“Conduct business and supervise its daily activities?”

“No,” Father corrects. “U are to tend to the orchards and the livestock.”

“What? Like... like... a peasant? U can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

“I have no clue on how to do those things.”

“U will learn. U’re a smart boy.”

“It’s not hard, young lord,” the old woman adds.

“How long am I to help? It is not going to take that long, will it? Surely it won’t last past the year.”

Father lowers his head.

Candidly, though, the old maiden answers, “No, young Saul. It surely will not be that long. Lady Melusiné is convinced that the quarreling between Charlemagne’s grandsons’ will be settled by early autumn, well before the fall harvest.

“Lady Melusiné truly feels that U are needed in Carnac, though. Personally, I know that any help that the House of Lusingna can lend would be greatly appreciated.”

“Unfortunately, dear woman,” Father begins, “Our household is shorthanded, already. Lady Lusingna and much of the household have ventured to Rennes, trying to meet up with Duc Nominoë.”

“Huh? I thought they had gone to the Spring of Barenton northeast of here in the heart of the Brocéliande Forest,” I remark.

“Saul, she would have gone there but U had gotten yourself into trouble. Instead, Mother headed for Rennes to correct your mistake.”

Turning a softening glance to the old woman, Father declares, “Dear woman, please forgive us for speaking so frankly in front of U. But it seems that my son has no qualms in airing our affairs.

“Before she left for Rennes, Lady Lusingna and I decided to have Saul confined to his chambers to reflect on the serious situation that he has placed the House of Lusingna in.

“Under these dire circumstances, though, I am reconsidering things. I am quite sure that Mother will not have a problem with it.”

“What do U mean by that, Father?”

“What that means, Saul, U are going to Carnac and U will work as long and as hard as Lady Melusiné wants U to. In addition, U are going to work without payment.”

“What!? Surely, U jest! U can’t truly expect such a thing, Father,” I snap.

“I do and U will, Saul,” Father ordains.

Father stares at me. Fuming, I glare back at him. He steps closer as if to cuff me into submission. I bit my lip. He waits for me to argue. He wants an excuse to rip into me.

“Surely, dear Count,” the old woman calls out, “U will not make your own son work for free... like... like a peasant. I don’t believe this is what Lady Melusiné expected. The coins are now in the House of Lusingna.”

“To hell with those cursed coins,” Father bellows. “U see, my son is not working for free. By doing this penance, he is earning the Grace of God. Becoming a better man shall be Saul’s payment.”

Unable to stomach any more of Father's Christian crap, I lash out.

"Give it a rest, Father. U know damn well that Mother shall have U skinned alive if U let that old woman leave with those coins. And after Mother has your hide turned into leather straps, she will have U tied to one of your goddamn crosses and flogged, flogged until U repent for this stupidity."

A heavy hush falls over the study. I had gone too far.

To hell with it all. Father won't dictate bullshit to me and expect me to eat it like a worm. No way. That's not happening.

The look on Father's face reveals defeat. He knows I am right, though. There is no way Mother would ever forgive him. A king's ransom sits there in that black box.

Breaking the silence, Curtis begins, "Well sir, truly I doubt that Lady Lusingna would see a problem in taking the coins..."

"See, Father! See! Even Curtis sees the sense in what I am saying. U know that I am right when that happens. Just think on how much it can help the House of Lusingna." I cut-in.

"Yes," Curtis cuts me off. "All of those coins should do just nicely. That should be enough to cover the cost of Saul's latest inconvenience."

"U can't be serious, old man? Is everyone suddenly mad?" I scream, "We can't give them those coins. Anyways, I thought her parents were simply going to expose it and be done with it. Father, U can't possibly give that family all of that money. It would upset the balance of power, here, in the county. They could quickly become as wealth as the Lusingnas."

"Is this babbling buffoon my son?" Father asks looking at Curtis and the old woman.

Glaring back at me, Father barks, "U idiot! U have already tipped the scales of power when U got that poor girl pregnant. All that her parents have to do is keep THE CHILD, SAUL. And now, U have a bastard as an heir to your estate especially if THE CHILD is a boy."

"They can not do that, if U..."

"U are truly sick, Saul, if U think I would force them to kill a newborn," Father cut-in. "How could I ask such a thing and have a clear conscience before God?"

"An unwanted child should not suffer this World's scorn simply because of the sins of a parent, but I do not believe in exposing a child simply because it is an inconvenience.

"Besides, the real problem is not with the girl or her parents, it is more with the man arranged to marry the girl. The young man is said to be a close associate of Nominöë.

"Damn it, Saul. U have proven Mother right, once again. We have spoiled U, rotten."

Defeated, I fall silent.

The old woman steps close to Father's ear. Softly she remarks, "Please Count, I do not mean to be rude and push the point but time is of the essence for me. I must give an answer to Lady Melusiné by the morning."

"By morning? What!?" I blurt out, "This is absurd. Father, how can I be expected to gather all of my things and ride out tonight? U drive me from my own home."

"Please, young lord," the old woman declares, "U are not expected to leave with me, tonight. I am the one that must leave. I must deliver the Count's reply to a waiting horseman. There are several more riders en route to Carnac. Carried thru the midnight hours, Lord Lusingna's response shall reach Lady Melusiné before the crack of dawn. That is if I can have your father's answer."

"U do," Father orders. "My son shall leave for Carnac by tomorrow afternoon. Curtis, go and get a few sheets of parchment, a horn of ink and a writing quill. Saul shall write a letter,

telling Lady Melusiné that he will gladly do the work. This letter shall say that Saul is able to do all types of work. Also, she shall work Saul as hard as she wants and for as long as she wants.”

“I have to relieve myself before I do any of this bullshit,” I declare.

Standing up, I storm out of the study leaving everyone waiting.

To hell with them. Let them wonder if I will return on my own. I don’t care.

God! I could kill Father. How could he?

I reach the open courtyard near the study. I stare at the lion as it faces away from me.

When I was younger and I wanted to escape, I came to this open courtyard. It had always helped me feel free.

Tonight, it does little to cool my rage.

Father can’t be serious. He must be acting as he thinks Mother would want him. I bet he is just mad that I told him how foolish he was being about those coins.

God! Those coins! Jesus Christ! Those coins, they would compromise Father’s position as Count. Those coins. My god, I must have them. How can I get those coins?

Hold on. Am I not entitled to them, anyway? For I am the one being sold into servitude, am I not?

Father, U leave me no alternative. It must be this way. It saddens me to think that U are willfully driving me out. And for what, a mistake that I had committed in a fit of lust?

I will be damned if I will live by your ideals. I will not be forced to work as a slave and not get what I have coming. To hell with that and the world that thinks I should.

Father, I will write your damn letter. And while I’m at it, I’ll draft my pardoning papers. Afterwards, U will sign both of them. That old hag will take my letter of unlawful slavery, tonight. And the other will travel with me to Carnac tomorrow. And when I can no longer put up with this crap, I will set myself free from this absurd servitude.

Father, how can expect me to stand by while U belittle me like this? Because that is exactly what U are doing. I will not allow anyone to humiliate me like this. I am a grown man and I must be given the respect I deserve.

Returning to the study, I call out, “Forgive me. I just could not wait, any longer.”

“No problem, Saul. We understand. Curtis left the writing material over on top of the desk before he left.” Father replies.

“Okay.” I answer.

I turn away from Father and the old woman. I head for the desk. A sharp smirk tweaks my lips. I struggle not to laugh. This will work perfect.

Father babbles his redundant rhetoric.

Every guest seems to touch on one of three subjects, church/God, farming/the elements or taxes. Father structures his speak accordingly.

Quick I work. Scribbling out the message that will let me leave Carnac, the urgency in my script gives authenticity to the letter. Without drawing any attention, I shuffle the sheets. Calm and steady, I draft the letter that the old midwife will deliver to the waiting rider.

As I near the end of the lengthy letter, Father calls out, “Saul, what is taking so long? It’s just a confirmation letter. U are not writing capitularies for Charles the Bald.”

“Well, by the way U were carrying on earlier, I figured I better elaborate on all of the things that U think I can do. I even put in the letter that I am working free of charge, just like U wanted,” I declare.

“What!?” Father exclaims with a sudden sour look on his face.

“I thought, U said that it was wrong for taking the coins?” I question. “Fine, I will just rewrite it.”

“No. No. No. Don’t bother. Raymond and I will settle up on the coins, later. Just finish up sealing the letter and let this poor woman be on her way.”

“Yes, Father. I will hurry up. I’m sorry,” I reply.

Messily, I dip the quill and bring the second letter to Father, first. Father scribbles his signature.

Returning to the desk by the large open window, I gather the first prepared letter and place it with the signed one. Taking an extra blank sheet, I place it on the center of the desktop and position the open horn of ink extremely close to it.

As if cued, the old woman declares, “Please young lord, time grows short. Night has really settled in.”

I turn and answer, “Oh! I’m almost done. Just give me a moment.”

Spinning around to seal up the scroll, my hand knocks over the small well of ink. A pool of blackness quickly consumes the surface of the empty sheet. I pick up the parchment by a dry corner. The ink runs freely down the rest.

“Damn it, all!” I curse.

“What’s wrong, now?” Father calls out.

I hold the paper up higher so Father can see it.

“Saul!” Father curses. “U’re making a mess of my study. Throw that damn thing into the fire, for God’s sake.”

I carry the parchment over to the fireplace and pitch it in. The flames leap up and devour the document like a fiery hellhound. Grumbling to myself, I return to the desk.

“Don’t worry about it,” Father calls out. “Just clean up the mess and write another one. This time, keep it short.”

“Yes, Father. I will just say that I am leaving from home for Carnac, as soon as possible.” I remark.

“That’s fine,” Father replies before turning his attention back to the old woman.

I wipe up the small puddle of ink. Grabbing the letter I had already prepared, I act as though I am writing. Just like before, I dip the quill and carry it with the letter over to Father.

Glancing over the document, Father signs the letter and immediately hands it back.

Moments drip by. I stamp the second wax seal. Anxious, I wait for both of them to dry.

“Saul.”

Shit!

“What?”

No. My arm hit the scrolls!

They’re rolling!

Fuck! No! Don’t snatch at them. Watch them. Keep track of which one is which. Done.

Did anyone see them fall?

Slowly, I turn in the direction of the voice as my feet block the scrolls. Curtis stands at the doorway at the other side of the room. Father, furniture and the fat woman obscures Curtis’ view of me. I breathe out my relief.

Curtis simply bellows my name as if I were still a boy forced to heed his every call. What does that old bastard want, now?

“Young lord,” he says, “Do U want me to begin gathering some of your things for your departure,” Curtis asks.

“Sure, Curtis. That would be fine.” I reply. Anger tightens my lips.

Smirking at me, the old man disappears from the study, once more.

Yah, Curtis! Go right ahead and get my things. Your time is gonna come. U’ll get what U deserve. And don’t think that I am going to forgive and forget about those coins. Rightfully, those are mine but U’ve changed all of that.

Father stands with his back to me still. He talks to the old woman about Mont St.-Michel near Dol. The old woman hangs on Father’s every word. I squat down and grab both scrolls with my right hand. My body blocks their view. I place both of them back on the desk. I pick up the second letter I wrote with my left hand.

“Saul.”

“Yes, Father,” I reply.

I turn slightly to the left.

Jesus! Father stands directly in front of me. His eyes stare into mine. My eyes flutter.

Father had moved closer when my back was turned. I didn’t hear him.

His hand reaches for the scroll. I place it down on his wide palm.

With a sympathetic smile, Father declares, “Saul, this will be the best thing for U. I know it. Just apply yourself. U’ll see. After Carnac, U’ll be a changed man.”

Holding the bitterness to the back of my tongue, I remark, “Father, these last three days have forced me to see things in a new light.”

“Good,” Father added. “It’s a start, Saul, but it’s a long road to salvation.”

Father turns away, clutching the sealed scroll. He hands it to the old woman. Then, with one arm outstretched and the other around her back, Father escorts the woman out of the study.

Alone, I pick-up the other scroll and tuck it out of sight.

Heading for my room, I stop as my eyes fall on the shiny shekels. The coins. My coins!

Damn it! I can’t take the whole black box. But I be damned if I am leaving here empty handed. This might be the last time I ever have a chance like this.

I skim coins off the top of each stack, keeping them even. Clutching thirty shekels, I disappear out of the study.