

Coming out of a drunken haze of dreams, my eyes roll open. Dry and cloudy, crust cakes the corners of them.

Where am I?

Feeling something on the side of my cheek, I peel away brown flakes from my face. It's the remnants of last night's gravy.

Great. My dinner plate had served as my pillow.

Oh. Already, my head throbs. God, I need more sleep. That's what I need. My sour stomach churns.

I close and rub my eyes. I try to block out the pain aching in my head. If I could just lose my head, I would be alright.

Damn, I feel like shit.

I slouch back in the tall-back wooden seat. My muscles feel sore. My arms hang over the sides of the chair. Alone, I sit in the silence of this strange house.

Slowly, I stand up.

"Awh!"

Something sharp and metal jabs my head. I drop back into the chair. My hands brace my head. I feel blood. Looking up, I find the lowered chandelier swaying side to side.

Damn it, woman. Why the hell did U leave that down after extinguishing the candles? Damn it.

Ducking to the side, I step away from the table, ready to strangle the woman. A half-empty pitcher of wine sits unattended on the table a short reach from my plate. Next to it, my toppled goblet of wine has stained the white table linen a regal purple.

That's going to leave a mark.

Stepping closer to the table, I grab the pitcher and pour a fresh cup of wine. Drinking down the last of it, the wet wine washes away the dry pasty taste coating my tongue and throat.

I need a couple more pitchers of this wine and more sleep. Yes, more sleep.

Hah. Look how quick that bed up in the tower seems inviting.

I move toward the tower.

Liquid stars roll over my eyes. A head rush. The light blankets me. Tingling points needle my eyes. Staggering side to side, I cannot control my body. I stop as I reach the threshold of the adjacent room. Grabbing the narrow stone wall that forms the side of the archway, I try to steady myself. I am blind. I turn my head toward the wall. I shield my eyes until they adjust to the early morning light.

Taking my hands away, I look ahead. I stare thru the tall open doorway. The white blossoms glisten like fresh snow on the treetops outside. A foggy sunrise cast a milky mist over much of the orchard.

I draw closer.

A gentle breeze blows in the sweet scent of flowers. The morning air cools my senses. Closing my eyes, I draw in the refreshing breeze.

The moment of peace fades. Pain throbs thru me. I turn and walk away.

I need more sleep.

Slowly, I walk over to the spiral staircase. Burnt-out, the torches at the base and halfway up the dark stairwell serve as no help. Running my hand along the wall, I use it as my guide. Reaching the room halfway up the tower, I only remove my boots before crawling into the bed.

In the blackness of the room, I slip into unconsciousness.

Shattering my slumber, a bell rings out. Though distant and faint, it tolls too many times to ignore.

It feels as though I had just fallen asleep a moment ago. I cover my head with the quilt. I slip off to sleep as the house falls silent, once more.

And for a little while longer, I escape the pulsating pain in my head.

“Young lord! Young lord! The fields need tending. Young lord! Young lord! Time to get up. Young lord!”

Persistent, louder and louder the words become, until it’s impossible to block them out. Opening my eyes, I find the old woman standing over me with a burning torch in one hand while she prods my shoulder with the other.

Still feeling the lingering effects of my hangover, I push away her intrusive hand.

“I am awake. I am awake,” I bark.

I massage my throbbing head. Running my fingers thru my hair and rubbing the back of my neck, I release some of the soreness I feel.

“What part of the day is it?” I ask.

“It’s afternoon, young lord. Most of the day has already been wasted.”

“Oh brother,” I grumble.

Standing over me, the old woman stares at me as if I had to get up at that instance.

“I am up. I will be downstairs in a few moments. I can find my own way down. Okay?”

“Yes, sir. That is no problem,” the old lady replies as she turns to leave.

Upon reaching the stairs, the old woman turns back and asks, “Did U want me to prepare anything for U to eat, right now?”

“No. That’s not necessary,” I reply.

As the darkness of the tower engulfs me once more, I relax there on the straw-stuffed mattress.

I don’t feel like doing a damn thing, today. My mind bleeds.

Reluctantly, I roll over and out of bed. Still dressed from last night, I slip my long, leather, riding boots on and go downstairs.

I find everything the way it was when I first arrived, with only one exception. No candle burning. Even the chandelier has been raised up to its original height. No stained table cloth covers the bare dark oak table.

Slowly, I walk thru the different rooms hunting for the old woman. Reaching the study and still not finding her, I stop my search. Over the fireplace hangs a large map of the world. It’s much like the map that Bishop of Le Mans has. The books draw my attention, though. Astonished, I stare at the vast volumes pertaining to every subject of applied sciences and rhetoric imaginable. There’s an entire section with books written in languages I don’t recognize. Rows and rows of books fill the wooden shelves that completely line two walls of the room and sections of the two remaining walls. Instead of tapestries, maps of foreign lands cover the walls above some of the cases.

Only two places in the study do not have books. One is where the fireplace is at. The second occurs in the corner where a large caramel desk sits under open shutters. The two large windows illuminate the desk and give a perfect view of the front gate.

Before inspecting more, I catch movement in the corner of my eye. Turning towards the door, I spot as the old woman approaches. With a mute look on her face, she says nothing as she slowly moves closer to me.

“I was looking for U,” I remark. “I didn’t see U though, so I just started browsing the books. I figured U would eventually show up.”

“That’s fine. We had to come in here so U could see the list of chores, anyways.”

A couch and chairs circle together in the middle of the room separating us. She walks around them and meets me over at the desk. She picks up a folded piece of parchment. I stand over the woman’s shoulder looking at the back of the letter. The list looks long from the amount of ink that had bled thru it.

The old lady unfolds the letter. Quickly I realize that Lady Melusin e’s script is simply large but impeccable. Now, the list seems quite a bit smaller. In fact, there is only a list of four things written on it. Holding onto the piece of paper, the old woman heads for the hallway.

“The other day,” she declares as I follow her, “when Lady Melusin e was here, she asked me about your father’s letter. I explained to her that your father was punishing U. Unfortunately she saw it fitting to follow your father’s wishes. I didn’t think that she was going to be as harsh as she was. I am sorry for that. Don’t worry, though. Fortunately, U will have some help.”

“Oh really? Who? U? Are U going to go out and sweat in the fields with me?” I ask.

“Oh no, no, no!” the old woman declares. “I must stay here and take care of the house. This is my assigned area.”

Without clarifying her answer any further, she simply continues with her slow methodical walk. Passing thru the dining room, the old woman heads for the hallway, just beyond the portraits.

As we go by the paintings, I feel their penetrating eyes on me. I turn and stare at them. No matter the angle I look, one set of eyes from the painting glare at me. Unnerved, I close my eyes and shake my head to break free of their stares.

Picking up my pace, I catch up to the old woman as she turns down the south hall.

Four high arched windows evenly spaced in the style of a courtyard arcade run down the east wall providing an incredible view of the orchard. Thru open shutters, I notice that the early morning mist has vanished. Even in the clarity of the afternoon sun, though, I cannot see the end of Lady Melusin e’s lands. The orchard continues on for such a distance that eventually the sky and the far off treetops fuse together on the distant horizon. Walking down the hallway, the true extent of her lands becomes painfully clear.

Traveling more than halfway down the long hall, a rather large wooden door appears in the west wall.

Even before I ask, the old woman declares, “That’s the door to Lady Melusin e’s quarters. Never go in there, for any reason.”

Saying nothing, I follow the woman out the door at the south end of the hallway.

Exiting the house, a cool breeze greets me. Its gentle hand messes with my hair as I stand on the cobblestone patio. The size of the orchard amazes me. As far as I can see, nothing indicates the end of the estate. Miles span both south and east, seeming to go on forever. The trees of the orchard simply fuses with the sky.

With a sad expression on her face, the old woman turns to me and remarks, “I am truly sorry to tax U with this burden but there is nothing I can do about it. Unfortunately, all the work that Lady Melusin e wants U to do is quite necessary.”

Watching her step, the woman walks a short distance off the patio. Stopping, she waits for me. As I reach her side, she points down one of the many rows of trees. In the far distance, I see a gray dot in the middle of the wide row.

As her short stubby finger points at the speck, she declares, “Down at the end of this row of trees is a barn. It marks the beginning of the southern fields of this estate. Unfortunately, though, much of the land has not been plowed since the men had to depart for Angers. Time is running out. If the soil is not tilled and the seeds sown, this season’s crops will surely be destroyed by an early frost.

“None of the people still here at the estate can handle the plow oxen. Lady Melusiné wants U to till the rest of the southern fields. U don’t have to plant the seeds. Others will handle that task. Luckily for U, the larger eastern fields of the estate lay fallow this season. The men prepared that part of the land before they left. Everything that U will need is in that barn to complete the task.

“This job will definitely take at least a whole week to complete. That’s if we have good weather the whole time. Much of the standing water has dried up. If we get a couple more dry days, the soil will be perfect for seeding.

“Each day, though, she wants U to take time to complete a set of daily chores. She wants U to feed and water all of the livestock on the estate. This includes the chickens, the milking cows, the hogs, the oxen and horses. The horses and the cows need their stalls stripped every other day. And the cows need to be milked daily.”

“What are U talking about? There is no livestock in those stables over there.”

“Oh, I know that. I wasn’t talking about that barn. Lady Melusiné has twenty horses and cows down in that barn by the southern fields.”

“Next, I suppose, she wants me to prune all of the damn trees on this entire estate.” I snap.

“Well, just the ones that really need it,” the old woman declares with a frown.

“U got to be kidding.” I remark.

Quickly I walk down the long row of trees toward the distant barn. The old woman slowly follows.

Yelling, I question, “Is this lady crazy? Already, I have counted well over twelve trees on one side, alone. And hell, I haven’t even reached the halfway point. There is no way I can do all this crap. I am just one man.”

Silent, I keep walking.

A short distance later, I spot people working out in the field. Reaching the end of the row, I stand in the shade of a single oak tree. Angry sweat drips from my brow. I stew in full view of the southern fields. Waist-high hedges divide the fields into more manageable tracts of land. There are three lots stacked up in front of me. And to the east, two more make the total amount of tilling unbelievable. Easily, they encompass more land than I want to deal with.

Turning, I glare at the old woman. She pays me no heed as she removes her hair bonnet to cool down.

How does Melusiné expect me to do all of this work? How long will this take?

Forever.

Coming out of the sweltering sun, some field workers gather near the old woman. As they all remove their white lace headdresses, I realize they are a trio of young girls in the group.

At first glance, none of them seem related, though two of them are about the same height and weight.

I say nothing. They are the first women I have seen in days. Well, except for the old woman but she really don’t count.

They tell the old woman some problem they are having. Their words fade to the background, though.

I lust for them.

A fiery-brown hair girl voices the group's complaints. Easily, she stands a tall five and half foot high. Though not fat, she has a large firm body, probably much like the old woman when she was a lot younger.

To the girl's right stands a younger female of similar height and built. Instead of dark hair, though, this girl has straw-blonde locks cropped off at her shoulders. The two girls do not appear to be related from looking at the first two faces. If they are, they are distant cousins, then. The blonde has slate blue eyes while the first has rich brown. With breasts only slightly smaller than the first, I would need both hands and my mouth to cover one of them.

They are sweet.

Behind them stands the fairest of the three, though.

She has short blonde hair, a little lighter shade than the second. With lighter eyebrows, also, she has a soft gaze with her sky-blue eyes.

She says nothing but nods sometimes in agreement with the others. This small-frame beauty entices me with her little pink lips and lightly freckled cheeks. Though quite thin when compared to the other two, she gives no impression of frailty. Instead, she carries herself with an air of confidence and conviction.

Sweat beads on her forehead.

Oh, let me take care of that for U, little girl. Let me pour some cool water all over your body. Awh, U are flawless. Girl, I want to tear your clothes off and run my tongue over every inch of your body.

Saul, U know U shouldn't think such things. That's how U get yourself into trouble.

But Jesus, that girl is perfect. Her breasts are so plump and firm. For God's sake, her little nipples are sticking out. Oh sweet Mary, forgive me but I must have her.

"Yes, this is the young man that is going to till the fields for Lady Melusin . His name is Saul Lusingna of Josselin. He's the son to the count of Porho t, Lord Raymond's cousin."

As if I had just dropped a couple coins on cobblestone, the first two girls close in. They look intently at me with their best smiles.

Looking past them, I find the third staring at me. Her look piercing. Judgmental. She studies the girls and my reaction to them. Surely, she has not heard of the others.

Why such a stare, if she has not?

I smile at her. The other two girls beam with excitement. She does nothing.

The old woman stands between me and my little beauty.

Casually I step toward the old woman. The old woman steps to the side and allows me to be closer to the girls.

To the little blonde, I offer my hand.

"Hah," she laughs. "I highly doubt that such formal greeting is necessary for me, young lord."

"Oh contraire, true beauty is rare in this Age of Darkness. I would kiss the very land that has sprung U if U were to deny me your hand."

"Hah! Right!" she laughs.

Never losing eye contact, blush rushes to her cheeks as I gaze deep into her eyes. With a soft smile, she gives her hand.

I hold the little blonde's open hand. Still soft from youth, her hand slides across my fingertips. Raising her hand to my lips, I lightly kiss her salty skin.

I release her hand, smile and slightly bow to her. Smiling back, she curtsies.

Chiming in with the cordial greetings, the old woman remarks, "This young blossom is Chloe."

"That's Daphne," the old lady declares pointing at the other blonde

Adding in a single breath and a shift of the hand, the woman remarks, "And this is Sherri. They come from various families around the estate. As U have seen, all of them are helping out."

Pointing to the scattered few in the fields, the old woman declares, "Some of them out there are the grandmothers, mothers, wives and widows of the warriors that went to Angers.

"Feel free to ask anyone here for help with any problem, young lord," the old lady adds. "Unfortunately, for the next couple of days, I am going to be quite busy preparing for the return of Lady Melusin . For the most part, I will only see U when U are in the house eating."

"That's fine, dear lady. I am sure that I will not have any trouble finding help around here," I declare.

"Good. With that being settled, I will be going," the old woman states as she turns and heads for the house.

"Take care."

For the next few days, I seek Chloe's assistance with everything. Only while I plow I don't have her by my side. Together, we feed the livestock. At times, I splash Chloe with cold well water. I try to work past her very formal front. Coyly I compliment her when I can. But still, I haven't gotten any further with her since the first day I met her.

Not helping matters, Daphne and Sherri never leave Chloe alone with me. And from the way they behave, I know that they both want me, or at least what my family has to offer. Either way I know I can get what I want. But I don't want to mess up my chance with Chloe, just yet. She's the one I really want. It's becoming harder and harder to ignore the other girls, though. They rub too closely for me to resist much longer.

On the fifth day as everyone labors hard underneath the afternoon sun, the old woman rides hard for the barn. The old woman doesn't stop until she reaches it.

Immediately catching everyone's attention we gather over by its doors where the old woman had dismounted and entered the barn.

Moments later, the old woman exits, guiding out a fresh horse.

Quickly pulling off the saddle from my steed and putting it on the other horse, the old woman explains, "I must leave. My family in Carnac desperately needs me. Fear not, I expect Lady Melusin  shall be arriving home, soon."

Looking at me as I wipe off my sweaty brow, the old woman adds, "I am sorry, young lord. But for the next couple of days, U are going to have to fend for yourself. U shouldn't have any trouble finding something to eat, though. Check in the cold storage beneath the kitchen for meat to cook and wine to drink. Okay?"

"That will be no problem," I reply.

The old woman mounts up and rides off on the other horse.

Without much discussion, the crowd scatters like sun-dried leaves across the turned earth.

Gliding up by Chloe's side, I whisper, "Has anyone ever treated U the way U should be treated, like a princess?"

Though smiling, Chloe remains silent as we cross the field.

“Has anyone ever seasoned and cooked a roast specifically how U want it? Have U tasted the best wine that Brittany has to offer?” I add.

With a small smirk on her lips, she asks, “What are U talking about, Lusingna?”

“Let me cook dinner for U. Tonight,” I remark.

Slowly though, her small smile turns to a frown. In a low tense tone, she asks, “In Lady Melusiné’s home!?”

“Where else? In the barn? How else can I treat U like the sweet little princess U are?” I remark.

Stopping, she spins in her tracks and faces me. Looking up in my eyes, she barks, “That’s Lady Melusiné’s home. U cannot openly defy that woman and expect to get away with it. It is as if the land listens and watches for her while she is away.”

“What are U talking about? How is having dinner in an otherwise empty house disrespectful to anyone? I truly don’t understand your reasoning, sometimes,” I declare.

Laughing at me, Chloe shakes her head and starts walking across the field, once more.

Catching up with her, I wonder what to say.

“Do I really appear dumb to U?” she asks. “Do U think that nobody knows the real reason why U are here? Everyone does, Saul. Everyone. Your letter is legendary; your list went on and on. Everyone knows why U had to write it. The mothers and grandmothers of the estate remind us, daily about your lustful trysts. Just today, someone mentioned your affair with the niece of Bishop Theodulf,” she declares. “Am I even near her beauty or have U lowered your standard.

I stop in my tracks as she shatters what little mystery I thought I had. I stand there dumbfounded for a moment.

In her normal carefree tone, she adds without breaking stride, “Oh come on, don’t worry, Lusingna. I don’t think any less of U. I just consider the source. U are a nobleman.”

“So does that mean we are going to have dinner, tonight?”

“No.” she reaffirms with a smile.

On the third day after the old woman had left for her family, the blue skies retreat inland north of the estate. Rolling in hard from the sea, thunder crackles and booms overhead. The afternoon sky erupts over the estate and a downpour ensues. Everyone abandons the fields and head for the comfort of their homes. After putting away the plow ox I follow suit and run for the house.

The rain echoes as it pelts the leaves above me. Solitary drops drip down as I run.

Leaving its protective canopy, the blowing rain slams across me in the open lawn. I charge to the cobblestone patio. Puddles of rainwater flood the threshold of the door. Turning toward the strong storm, I force the wind back out of the house like an intrusive tax-collector.

Cold and wet, I head for the tower. Going up the south hall, the smell of smoke halts me. I stand in front of Lady Melusiné’s door.

Is she finally home?

I wonder what she looks like. If she’s anything like the painting, she’s beautiful.

For a moment, I listen but hear nothing. A big brick wall stands between me and her chambers.

The smell is strong, though. It concerns me.

I hurry down the hall. The distinct aroma lingers as I move away from the door. I find the open rooms of the estate empty, though. Finishing my search in the study, I go to the shuttered windows. Opening one of them, I stare thru the downpour at the front gate. It stands shut and barred. No fresh tracks mark up the roadway as rain pelts the ground.

What's the deal? Why do I smell smoke outside her door? What's burning? Shit.

I return to her door.

I know I shouldn't go in her chamber but I'll be damned if I'm going to just let this place burn down.

What could it hurt to check it out, anyways?

With light pressure placed on the door, it opens. I enter a finely furnished bedroom. Fur pelts carpet the entire room. Crackling wood burns an amber glow to my right. Looking in that direction, it comes from an adjacent room. The flickering shadow of the fire dances in the crack of the doorway. Cautious, I creep up to it. I stare into the room.

Astounded, I see Chloe, Chloe combing her rain-drenched hair in front of a large mirror.

Caught by the mirror, my sudden reflection startles Chloe. She gives out a light scream and drops her brush. Standing up and spinning in my direction, she knocks over the chair she sat in.

"Who's there?" she questions.

Without a word, I answer by stepping out from behind the door.

Her tense frown softens to a small smile. Lightly, she shakes her head.

"For a moment, I thought the worst. Marauders," she remarks.

"So how long have U been spying on me, Saul?" she adds with a slight smirk. "I hope U know this isn't the best way of convincing me to have dinner with U."

"What are U doing in Lady Melusiné's personal chamber?" I question. "U're the one that's crazy,"

Laughing for a moment, she smiles and shakes her head.

Looking at her, I wait for her answer.

Smirking, she declares, "Why do U think the old lady told U not to come into these quarters, silly boy? I have been sleeping and eating in this house even before U arrived."

"What!? That can't be. I just thought U were a..." I trail off.

"I am just what, Saul? Hah! Don't worry, young lord. I know U only see me as a peasant. Even though U say U want to treat me as a princess. I know it would be just for one night."

"What!?" I exclaim. "Hold on. U're twisting my words, now."

Starting straight into my eyes, she remarks, "Before both of us catch our death in our wet clothes, why don't we both go and change into something dry? Afterwards, we will meet in the dining room. Okay?"

"Sure, my lady. Your wish is my desire." I declare.

"Spare me, Saul," she says with a smile.

Smiling back, I lean-in to kiss her cheek.

She turns away and reaches for the door. She closes the door with a loud thud.

I hurry to the tower. Charging up the steps, I quickly remove my wet clothing. Drying off, I put on a warm set of clothes. Running my hands thru my hair a few times, I straighten it as best I can in the darkness of the tower.

She's so sweet. Damn, she's like a little Viking princess. She's... she's staying in the Lady's private chambers. Why does Lady Melusiné have her hid away? What's going on here? Where is Chloe really from?

So many questions and no real answers.

I make my way downstairs to the dining room. Finding the large room empty I pace about it for a moment or two. The shadows of the room crowd me. The storm outside has caused night to fall sooner than usual.

I go to the massive hearth in the north wall. Like a throne, it sits between two suits of armor. Lady Melusiné's coat of arms crowns its mantle. For the first time, I notice what is painted on the shield. It is done with the same brilliant, detailed stroke as those on the wall.

It is strange, indeed.

Instead of two legs, the blonde beauty has two long serpent tails in place of them. Coiled up, one holds a shield in front of her while the other holds a torch above her. In her human hands, she holds the long spear in her right and the short sword in her left. Her black beady little eyes pierce me like that of the robed man in the painting.

I break free of the shield and turn my attention to making a fire.

Within a few minutes, there is one roaring.

I lower the chandelier. Going back to the fireplace, I take a long stick and jab it in the coals. With crackling steps, the flame walks up its brown bark. I pull it out of the fire and light some of the remaining candles. Returning to the hearth, I pitch the stick into the fire.

I go to the rope that holds the chandelier. Slowly, I raise it up to a safe level. Quickly, I wrap the rope around the wall anchor. Looking up, I test the tension of the rope. Satisfied that it is tight and secure, I leave it.

Turning to head for the kitchen, I stop. I notice Chloe, for the first time. Silently, she has been watching me. For how long, I do not know. I smile.

Slowly spinning full-circle, she asks, "Oh? Do U like this old black dress?"

Do I like it? I love it, girl. Where did U get it? I never saw anything so revealing.

The bottom of her dress fans out like a blossoming black flower. As she comes to a stop, her long blonde bangs fall loosely over the front of her face. Laughing, she whips back her hair with her hand. Gracefully parting down the middle, her long locks hang back over her small ears. Smiling for a moment, she lightly licks her lips. Thin shoulder straps secure the dress over her slender body. Her small plump breasts push out, barely covered by the front of her dress.

I yearn to slip the straps off her shoulders. Her dress would fall, allowing me to caress and kiss her breasts. God, she is beautiful.

Slowly walking up to her, my eyes never leave hers. With a smile, I reach out with a flat open hand and say, "Hello, I'm Saul Lusingna. Who may U be?"

Smiling, she places her hand in mine. Raising it, I lightly kiss her hand like the first time when I met her in the southern fields. This time, though, her hand tastes sweet as if soaked in the essences of berries.

Looking into my eyes, she declares, "U know who I am. I have no secrets. U just don't know all the details."

As I hold onto her hand, we walk over to the roaring fire. I look at Chloe as I wait for her explanation.

Smiling, she remains silent.

"Well?" I ask, unable to wait.

"Well, what?" she replies.

Shaking my head as she toys with me, I bark, "What are U doing in the house? How did U get away with this for so long without me knowing about it?"

“To save your pride, I am not going to answer your last question. Regarding your first one, though, I will tell U under one condition.”

“Sure. Just name it,” I declare.

“U must cook me something for dinner, right now. I am starving,” she adds with a smile.

“As U wish,” I reply.

Quickly, I get to work. In the center of the kitchen, the pots and pans dangle from a suspended rack. I fetch a large roasting pot that hangs by a thick wire handle. Going to the cupboard, I pull out a small wooden bowl. After placing it in the large pot, I take them both down into the dark cold storage.

Deep underneath the kitchen floor, I find two fully plucked birds hanging from the rafters. Silently, I thank the old woman for the prepared fowl. I take out the small bowl and then toss both of the birds into the large kettle. Gathering an assortment of vegetables, I throw them in the pot on the side. Collecting a handful of herbs and a small clove of garlic, I place them in the bowl and set it on top of the fowl and vegetables.

As I climb one-handed up the narrow ladder, the slender naked legs of Chloe come in view. I stop as my head nears the square hole in kitchen floor.

I stare up her legs as she looks down on me.

“Do U need some help?” she asks.

“Well, since U offer. Could U take this pot and place it over on that table? There are a few more things I need to grab, downstairs.”

“Sure,” she says.

Kneeling down to take the pot from my hands, she exposes all that she has to offer.

Hungrily, I eye her soft white breasts.

Jokingly, she adds, “Saul, U better pay attention to what U are doing.”

“Oh, I am. I am.”

“Quit messing around, Lusingna. I told U, I am hungry,” she barks.

Smiling, I salute her and start down the ladder without taking my eyes from her.

Just shaking her head, she remarks, “I hope this isn’t what U meant about treating me like some little princess.”

Laughing, I sink into the shadows of the subterranean storage, once more. I go for some wine. I fill two pitchers of red wine. Grabbing the two handles with one hand, I carry them back over to the ladder and go up.

Rising up out of the hole in the kitchen floor, I struggle not to spill the two pitchers of wine. I place them on the floor and then, glare at the silent smiling girl as I crawl out onto the floor.

With a fake sneer, I remark, “Well, U know, U could have helped me with those.”

“I would have but U didn’t ask. I thought U were a man who could handle his wine,” she quickly adds, “I hope U can cook a lot better than U can argue.”

Laughing and shaking my head, I pick up the pitchers of wine from the floor. Carrying both of them, I meet Chloe in the middle of the kitchen. After filling the glasses, I set down the pitchers. I take the goblet that Chloe holds out for me. With a smile, I sip the wine.

Finishing off much of her first glass already, I quickly top it off again. Sitting down the pitcher, I move closer to her. Staring at her, I say nothing. Smiling, she leans closer to me, so close that I can hear her breathing thru her small button nose.

Struggling, I resist the urge to kiss her.

She smiles. She enjoys teasing me.

I love it.

Following a light laugh, she leans in and kisses my smiling lips. Just as I return her embrace, she pulls away from my enclosing arms.

With her wine in her hand, Chloe walks away from me to leave the kitchen.

Stopping, she turns back and remarks, "Don't take forever."

Oh, she's mine tonight. She is going to be wild. Thank U, God! Oh, thank U!

With well-drawn water, I clean the vegetables and then chop them into bite-size bits. After placing the birds into the pot, I drop the diced celery, carrots and other edible roots in. I grind the herbs in the bottom of the bowl. With my other hand, I pick up the nearly empty pitcher of wine. I pour the remainder onto the two birds. Afterwards, I sprinkle the spices onto the wet fowl. Picking up the pot by its thick wire handle, I carry that and my glass of wine into the dining room.

Entering, I walk on the same side of the table that Chloe stands. As I go by her, I think of the first morning that I had spent here. Smelling as sweet as the orchard, Chloe intoxicates me. I walk to the fireplace. I glance back at her with a smile. Standing in front of the crackling fire, I slide the chain-mesh curtain to the side. Quickly, I hang the pot on a hook attached to the stationary spit. The pot dangles in the center of the raging flames. Needing time in the searing heat, I close the chain-mesh curtain and turn away from the fireplace.

I walk over to Chloe.

Standing close, I breathe her in. I am drunk with delight and desire. She excites me. I drown in her. I reach out for her thin naked arm.

Nonchalantly, she walks past me. Turning, I watch her go for the kitchen. Wondering what she's up to, I casually follow her out of the dining room.

As I stand at the doorway in between the two rooms watching, she slowly searches thru several drawers until she finds what she's looking for. Reaching in, she pulls out a long wooden ladle and metal fork.

Suddenly realizing what she's doing, I go to say something.

Cutting me off, she remarks, "I can see that the only way I am going to eat sometime tonight is if I cook it, myself."

Walking past me, she gently closes my mouth with her fingertips. Returning to the fireplace, she slides the mesh to the side. Next, she picks up the fork and then carefully flips the fowl. Using the ladle, Chloe bastes the birds with the bubbling broth. Lightly tapping the ladle on the side of the pot, she places it on top of the mantle. After putting the ladle next to the fork, she, then, quickly closes the chain-mesh curtain.

As she finishes fiddling with the food, I move up closer to her. Unable to resist her any longer, I hunger to kiss her.

As she turns from the fire, I lean-in to embrace her. Effectively evading me, she sways back away from my lips. She steps back toward the side of the fireplace. Out of reaching distance, she smiles. She glows and flickers in the flames of the fireplace.

Smiling, she asks, "So what was it that U wanted to know about me?"

I want nothing more than to touch U. I want to kiss U. I could care less on what U're thinking.

How shallow.

Oh well. All I know is that I want U, girl. And now I am speechless as U put me on the spot, once more.

"Oh yah," she remarks. "U wanted to know what I am doing, here."

“Yah, that’s right,” I quickly chime in, “Yes. What are U doing, here?”

“Well, I have been living in this house for nearly a year, now. My father sails for Lady Melusiné, U see. Lady Melusiné has ships that sail as far as Constantinople. U do know where that is, don’t U Saul.”

“Yes, dear Chloe. I am a student of a pupil to the great Alcuin. U do know who he is, don’t U?”

“Yah. Yah. Yah. I know, Saul. U went to Tours for schooling. But did U learn anything besides getting drunk?”

“That hurts and I am offended that U question my intelligence.”

“But anyways, Saul, my father sails in the northern seas for Melusiné. He sailed for Dublin last fall. He’s scheduled to return within the coming month,” Chloe declares with a bright smile.

“So that old lady that left the other day is your mother?” I ask.

Laughing, she remarks, “Please, boy. Not even giving birth to me could make someone that ugly.”

“So where is your mother, then?” I ask.

“U don’t usually see the obvious, do U?” Chloe observes.

“What do U mean by that? So that means Lady Melusiné is…” I start.

“God, no. Saul, my mother is dead,” she announces.

“Oh, I am sorry. I never thought…” I stutter.

“I know. It’s alright,” Chloe declares.

Turning her back to me for a moment, she adds, “I know it truly rotten to say but, I really don’t miss her all that much. Lady Melusiné has been more of a mother than she ever was.

“My mother was always so melodramatic, so nagging. She never gave Father or me a moment’s rest.”

“That sounds so familiar,” I add with a laugh.

“And even though Father says he misses her, I would swear that he is actually happier now than when she was alive.”

Quickly turning and facing me, she stares straight into my eyes.

“Oh Saul, please don’t think poorly of me,” she adds.

“I… I…” I stumble with my sympathy. “I understand how U feel. My mother is a lot like that.”

“Good so U can see where I am coming from then.”

“More than U know.”

With a light smile, she goes on, “While Father has been away, Lady Melusiné has been educating me with rhetoric and sciences. She is truly a kind soul, at times. But she does have her moment. At those times, she is someone completely different.”

As silence falls, I walk over to the table where our glasses sit neglected. Picking up the second pitcher, I pour more wine. Finished, I sit it down on the table and picked up the two glasses. Walking over to her, I hand Chloe her glass and then sip at mine.

Taking the long stem goblet from my hand, she remarks, “Thank U. I could use a drink, right about now.”

With a single swallow, she finishes off her wine. Heading for the table, she walks past me. Picking up the pitcher, she pours another glassful and drinks half of that. Refilling her glass once more, she puts down the pitcher before walking away from the table.

Withdrawing from me, she surveys the entire room in her normal silence. Her eyes follow the irregular patterns of stone floor trailing up the walls to the black wooden rafters.

Moments later, she remarks, “So what do U think?”

Thinking she is speaking about Lady Melusiné’s home, I reply, “Well it is much smaller than what I am use to, but I would say this manor is still big enough to raise a family.”

“What are U talking about? Are U losing it?” she asks. “Saul, I wasn’t talking about the house and surely not about any kids. I was asking about the food. What do U think? Is it ready, yet?”

“Ah, no. It’s not ready, just yet,” I remark. “I’ll go ahead and set the table. After that, dinner will be close to being ready. Okay?”

Bringing out two complete place settings, I prepare the table. I sit out morning-baked bread. From the cold storage, I bring out freshly churned butter and another pitcher of wine. Taking the bowl, I go to the fireplace. As I stand there, I look in at the raging fire and see the boiling broth. I realize that I have nothing to handle the pot.

Damn, I’ll burn my hand if I grab it.

Stumped, I look around for some kind of quick solution. Standing silent with a shiny smirk, the armor-clad statue in the corner offers a hand. Walking over to it, I slip off his glove and put it on.

The metal glove will provide a momentary guard against the fire. I just have to be quick. Act fast or be fried.

I lift the hot heavy pot up off the hook. The fire radiates. I feel their searing heat. Carrying the pot over to the table, I sit it on the corner. Letting go of the handle, I snap my wrist.

All within that instance, the gauntlet flies across room.

Chloe laughs. She stands within reaching distance. Smiling, she hands me a large carving knife. Returning her smile, I take the long sharp blade from her and slice servings from the birds.

Sitting down at the same time, we start dinner.

Starving, I crave her. Hungrily, she finishes off the thin slices of bird on her plate. She mops up the thick broth with the bread and devours it. Gladly, I give her more.

In a short while, we pick the birds clean and polish off two more pitchers of wine.

Standing up from the table, she smiles, drunkenly. She amazes with me, never saying or acting as I expect. She’s smart as a scholar and sure as a sailor at sea. She’s just so damn beautiful. For one night with her, God, I’m not sure what I wouldn’t sacrifice.

Swaying side to side, she walks over to the fireplace. Turning, she faces me.

I lust for her. I stand up and step toward her.

Loudly as if separated by miles, she yells, “So, do U think I am drunk enough for U to take advantage of me? That is your plan, now, isn’t it, monsieur Lusingna?”

Falling silent, she walks towards me.

I go to say something.

Her lips lock onto mine. Her fingers clench my hair.

No tricks no games just the pure pleasing of passion.

I wrap my arms around her small-frame body and pick her up off the ground. Spinning her, I carry her off. She wraps her thin legs around my waist. Locked together, I rub against her. At the long table I stop. Towering over her, I cover her with kisses. Pulling up from her, I stare at her as she wildly smiles at me. Eager, I go to slip the straps of her shoulders.

Still smiling, she slaps my hand.

Looking me straight in the eyes, she remarks, “There is no way I am going to do this on this hard-ass table. I might be drunk but definitely not that drunk.”

Smiling, I reply, “As U wish.”

Effortlessly, I scoop Chloe up in my arms. I kiss her as I carry her out of the dining room.

Heading for my room in the tower, Chloe breaks her lips free and orders, “No. Go to my room.”

Reaching the south hall, she slips from my hands. Going to the bare wall, she runs her hand against it. With a slight difference between two stones, she pushes on one of them. Incredibly, an entire section of wall slides into Chloe’s chamber. Smiling, she grabs my hand and pulls me thru the secret door.

Standing in between me and the stone wall Chloe side-steps and hits the counter trigger. With a sudden scratching of stone on stone, the wall returns to its original position. I reach out to touch her. Smiling, she slaps at my hands as she walks toward me. Pushing on my chest, she backs me up to her bed. At the edge of it, she pushes me off-balance. Backwards, I fall with my arms wide open. Lying in a drunken buzz, I smile at her.

I stare fixated on her. She gleams as I study her every movement. Smiling, she slowly slides off the shoulder straps. Holding her arms straight above her head, she slowly sways side to side. Inch by inch, she works her dress down further and further the length of her slender body.

Within moments, Chloe stands completely naked in front of me. She steps over her dress lying on the floor. I stare at her. Starting to lean forward to touch her, she quickly pushes me back against the bed. Her hand slides across her inner thigh as she stands in front of me.

Smiling, I wait for her.

Kneeling down in front of me, she pulls off my boots.

As she begins to undress me, she allows my eager hands to fondle her soft curves. I touch her everywhere I can reach. She leans close to remove my shirt. Her firm nipple brushes against my face, my lips. I snatch a hold of Chloe unable to resist any longer. I bring her down on top of me.

Eagerly, she reaches into my trousers. She pulls out all that I have for her. Faster and faster she strokes me. Harder and harder I become.

Controlling me, she stares into my eyes as I lay on my back wanting. Seeing me nearing climax, she slows to a caressing churn.

Smiling and naked, she straddles over me. Wet and warm, she slides down on top of me. She bows back from me as she slides up and down every inch of me.

Slowly and slowly, she does it several times.

Leaning against me, faster she grinds. Her lips latch onto me.

I can take no more. My passion pours into her. She purrs and moans.

Pleased, she collapses onto my chest.

Slowly sleep wraps its comforting arms around us.