

Excerpts from Chapter 2 of Deadly Secrets

A short while later and some distance away, a man waited alone. Watching from his high stone stairway that led into his enormous four-tower castle, this old but well-weathered man stood resilient as an oak. Solid as one, also, age only enhanced his qualities of honor and servitude. Standing the sheer test of time, his loyalty to Armorica had grown to legendary status.

Over a quarter of a century ago, his short silver hair had hung long and black as a crow. Then, a thick long black beard grew on his face. Now, a closely trimmed smoky gray one covered his sun-darken face. Living in a world where the average man hovered around five feet, this nobly born man towered above them at six feet. Every bit of 250 pounds, his healthy, well-sculptured body didn't appear a day over thirty. In fact, though, this man did not have an easy life. Conditioned through hard times, he had paid his dues, honorably.

From the age of eighteen to the age of forty-five, Duc de Paimpont had furiously battled his world's tyrannies and injustices. Gathering with King Ban, his lord, young Jean-Claude and many others like him forged the human sledge that hammered back the Scourge of God. Within the Keltic clans for centuries to come, his feats would fill their fables. Already, anyone in Armorica would proudly say that it was the Kymric Knights that held strong when the king of the Goths lay dead on the battlefield. And if this was not awe-inspiring enough, this valiant warrior never accepted the rule of a usurper no matter how it might have benefited him. Four times Jean-Claude had raised his sword and fought in wars for the rightful rulers as they protected their respective lands.

And now, Duc de Paimpont stared eastward as he waited by the large front door of Château de Paimpont. Though the northern wind blew a considerable chill at that moment, Jean-Claude stood unfazed in his long warm deep-purple jerkin. Insulating the old duc even more was his black gorget trimmed with silver fox fur. With this, he draped the soft pelt around his neck to keep out the nipping breeze. Armed with a sturdy short sword, Jean-Claude wore a soldier's leather girdle. The Duc motioned to his Master of the Stables, Marshall. He was the eldest son of Paimpont's former horse-keeper, Roy, who had died a short time ago. Seeing Duc de Paimpont wave him over, the good horse-keeper went to him.

As the young man did, a ten-man squad of cavalry escorting a jet-black carriage drawn by four foam-flecked midnight-black mares appeared in the distance. With a wide turn the unit raced around the lower north-east corner of the old duc's lake. The four carriage wheels and the fifty-six horseshoes kicked up a choking cloud of dust. Watching it roll out across the water like a raging storm, the old duc rubbed his beard and warily wondered, "Why is Cronus here? What evil does he seek now? Peaceruns short it seems. This little fat man epitomizes his family and its long Imperial history. I don't like it. It seems that he is intent on placing the yoke of Caesar over Armorica. Freed from Rome some sixty years ago by the great King Constans, I will be damned to let it happen during my lifetime.

"Already, Cronus gloats on presumed power and will not stop until he has achieved true power. And I fear that he may have found it in Vannes.

"I should have attended to my affairs better in Vannes before I left fourteen years ago. Maybe if I had done things differently, they wouldn't have fallen so easily into that Roman's greedy little hands. I thought that the mercantile clans of Morbihan would have ended up better off than they did. I had hoped that someone from the Veneti or the Burgher clans would have been able to step up and take charge. But instead, they bickered blindly between themselves. Unfortunately their petty power struggles nullified their resources and Vannes became vulnerable to Cronus and his usurious ways.

"Left in this bitter resolve, much of the indebted simpletons of the area eagerly accepted Cronus' bail-outs during the hard years that followed the feuding. In no time though, Cronus has acquired the capital to buy the damn Duchy of Vannes in its entirety.

"And now. Now, he's here in Paimpont. I don't like this in the least. He already wants more. I wonder what it is now. Maybe, Ploërmel."