

Late the following morning, I am ready to leave. Bitterness sours my mouth. With nothing said between the three of us, I secure the straps on my packhorse and mount up. Curtis still smiles like he did last night.

To hell with U, Curtis. U will have your day. And I will be there to see it.  
With not even a nod or slight wave of the hand, I ride off.

The fresh air from the bland countryside does little to free me. I am simply riding off to another prison. An unshakable monotony plagues me like a nagging headache. Each jarring step of the horse leads to another.

I hunger to wander the streets of Tours. Hell, I hunger to wander thru any town. I yearn to hold a sweet little lady in my arms. My body aches. My fingers bleed from biting anticipation. God! This is madness.

Still, I trek across country. I won't travel the main roads, southwest toward Locminé.

When I was a boy, I had heard too many stories about that monastery, one founded by Columbanus. Town folk talk of monks chained up and forgotten in their cells. To hell with that, I don't want to go anywhere near there. Thank god I got to go to Tours instead of there for schooling. I know they would have locked me up in one of those cells.

I try to follow the various creeks thru the thick forests and hearth land.

Father and I had hunted these southern woods hard for many years. So much so that the thrill of hunting has been gone long before I went to Tours the first time. There's nothing exciting or pleasing in killing only surviving. How ironic. Something must die for something to live.

Many of the tributaries overrun their banks, now. My mount and my trailing pack horse move slow across this land. I feel turned around. The sun makes my face flush with sweat. I wish this trip was thru.

Shit, then, my servitude begins. Hah, this is a no win situation.

Still, I wish I could travel the roads. But, this is dangerous country. No travelers can be trusted. All of them would kill for the coins I carry. Though only nine of the thirty shekels, I'm sure men have been killed for less.

Slowly, the day melts into the evening. The sun engulfs the distant trees. As it sinks, the air cools. Shadows haze-out the horizon. Forty yards in front of me blurs to black.

I have to stop for the night. Sooner would be better. It's always easier lighting a fire with a little light instead of no light. I don't need a big one. That would just draw attention. I just need one to keep away the evening's chill.

Drained, I bed down. Sleep consumes me with ease. Silent is the night.

Though nothing interferes with my dreams, I fail to remember them. Gathering my few things, I head out on the final stretch of my journey.

The ride drags on. The high noon sun warms the nap of my neck as the horses and I wend our way thru the woods.

When will I reach the road connecting Hennebont, Auray and Vannes? From there it is several more miles, at least.

Damn it! I wish I could travel on the road but there is no sense in that. Three men on foot could effectively take me.

Gradual, the countryside transforms from thickets and lean trees to long meadows. I travel along the western woods of these fields. The forest-edge provides cover but still allows me to view the open land. Travel is easier. I drive the horses forward.

As midday fades out so does its strong sun. A low cold gray overcast rolls in.

Please don't rain.

Where is the road connecting the three towns?

At a slow trot, a great oak forms on the horizon. Alone, its treetop grows from a speck into an emerald island in the sky. Its dark brown branches flow crookedly down from its spring canopy. From its wide center, the roots pour out across the soil around it.

Just beyond the tree, exposed dry dirt catches my attention.

Is it the road? Look at the way it runs. It's got to be the road. I know I'm right from the way it lines up with the path of the sun. Finally.

Running northwest to my right the road heads up to Hennebont. Traveling down my left, it leads to Auray.

I stare toward the road while stopped at the forest's edge. Still some distance away, I scan the surroundings. Matted grass carpets all around the old oak and the well-worn road. Running in both directions the road doesn't meet up with the woods for quite some distance. A sea of green grass pours out across at least forty acres on either side of the road.

I don't like it. I don't want to ride out in the open like this. Things have been smooth so far and I want to keep it that way.

Seeing no sign of life, though, I ride fast down to the edge of the road and stop before it. Without stirring any dirt, I cross the road. Reaching the other side, I spur my mount to a quick trot and head for the distant trees.

Reaching them, I ride thru the thickening forest in the direction of Belz, parallel with the road connecting Auray and Carnac.

A strange silence consumes the darkening woods rolling in like evening fog.

I notice only the infrequent far-off calls of unseen birds breaking this sleep-like silence. An unnerving emptiness swells within me.

I pray for safe passage.

Instead, the old story about a Welsh monk named Cadoc bum-rushes my thoughts.

Cadoc founded a priory near Belz, not too far from here. It's said that Satan constructed the causeway between the mainland and the islet.

This Templar monk promised Satan the soul of the causeway's first foot-traveler. Satan finished the task in a night. The following morning, though, Cadoc took his black cat and allowed it to cross the causeway.

Tricked and enraged, Satan tried to destroy the land-bridge between the islet and the shore. Miraculously, Cadoc wrestled Satan down in the heated battle. As they struggled, the high-tide rolled in and swept Satan and Cadoc off the causeway and out to sea.

From that day forth, the Templar priory is only accessible during low-tide.

Damn it. This whole bloody countryside is cursed from the standing stones of Carnac to the Faerie Stone of Locmariaquer.

For God's sake, tell me that they are natural. What or who could do such a thing? The giant menhir is at least four rods high and weighing some ungodly amount. It's a wonder that it's never been struck down by lightning.

I need to let go of these thoughts of superstitions and just pay attention to the task at hand. I am getting worked up for no reason.

Not wanting to pass the road that cuts over toward the estate, I rein-in the horse. I shift direction and kick the mount to a quick motion.

A short distance later, I reach the road connecting Auray to Carnac. Stopping for a moment, I unsheathe my sword. I hold it up by my side ready for anything.

Seeing no one, I head south underneath the road's canopy of trees.

About an hour later, I reach the eastbound road just north of Carnac. Nearing the tail-end of the trip, I put away my sword and spur my mount on.

Fast I ride.

Quickly as I come around a thick wooded corner of the road, a small stone bridge appears. Ambush points lay on the other side of the fieldstone bridge.

Taking no chances, I slow my approach. I unsheathe my sword.

Crossing with no trouble, though, I pick up my pace. Only a mile or so ahead, I pass by an open field of standing stones.

Petrified pagans, please! What tales I've been told and read.

According to some, the standing stones were an army of pagan warriors. As they chased after Saint Cornelius, they were turned into those standing stones by the rising sun.

Without slowing, I ride on. I have neither the time nor the desire to dwell in this place.

Some distance later, I come across a narrow road heading south. I halt the horses in front of it.

Is this the road that leads to Lady Melusiné's estate? It's got to be.

The coming nightfall and the tall looming treetops shroud the road. With only a moment's hesitation, I veer down the dark path.

Without warning, my mount rears and jerks at the reins. I struggle to remain on it, at first. Leaning against the horse, I clutch my sword in one hand and hold onto the reins with the other. Spooked by my mount, the packhorse jerks on the leather lead. This spins my unsteady mount in place.

As quick as possible, I sheathe my sword. Turning in my saddle, I snatch hold of the packhorse's reins and yank hard on the straps.

"Whoa, damn it! Whoa! Settled down, girls! Settle down."

After a few more minutes fighting with the horses, I rein them into submission. Something or someone has them spooked.

A cold chill rolls over me like a dead man dangling.

Slowly we go down the root-rippled road. From both sides of the road, the tall elms taunt the animals. The long shadows sway in front of the skittish horses, too often causing them to stutter-step. The moody beasts tax my attention.

Looking forward, I spot a flickering light in between the trees.

My heart pounds hard. I halt the horses.

Is it a light from the estate or... something else?

I don't hear any horses, carts or people.

So what is it?

The light has to be stationary. It isn't growing closer as I wait here wondering.

I ride on. The road leads toward the light. Suddenly thru the trees, the light reveals its keeper.

I stop.

It's a hooded priest holding up a lit lantern from the tip of his rod.

My heart races but then subsides as I realize that the priest is a stone statue mounted over the tall archway of the estate's gate. It leaves an unsettling feeling just the same. I slow my approach.

A high perimeter wall surrounds the main house and the few smaller buildings near it. The dark gray stone used to build everything seems ancient as if grown from the ground, itself. Rows of bricks link together like the rings of trees. Yellow and white lichens cling to the stone in spots. The large wooden gate stands wide open as if anticipating my late arrival.

I ride thru the high-arched gate. Inside I dismount and draw my sword.

Where is everyone? Hell! Are they all dead? There's no sign of a struggle, though.

I walk toward the large south lawn between the main house and the stables to the right. Looking to the left for an outside kitchen, I see none but I smell cooking. Some distance past the edge of the small château, the lawn turns into a large white-blossoming orchard. The sweet but strong fragrance of orchard flowers hangs in the air.

"Monsieur Lusingna?"

Startled, I spin half way around. At once, I see the old woman from the other night. She wears the same faded black dress of hers. She stands over by the corner of the cobblestone manor. Shadows shroud her like the shawl she wears.

"I was beginning to think that there wasn't a single soul in this entire county," I declare.

Laughing lightly, the old lady replies, "Yes at times, it feels that way. Especially now."

Sheathing my sword, I walk back toward the horses. Reaching them, I remove my gear and loosen the straps on the saddle of my mount.

Looking up at the old woman as she approaches, I declare, "I need to take care of my horses. Is there any room in the stables for them?"

"Yes. Lady Melusiné is the only one that keeps her horses up here by the house. And, at the moment, she is not here."

"Oh, really?" I ask. "Are U expecting her arrival anytime soon?"

"I am not sure when she is coming back. Lord Raymond called her to Angers. Yesterday when I finally made it here, she was prepared to depart. After speaking to me regarding U, she left for Angers. She informed me that she would return as soon as she could," the old lady replies.

The short old woman waddles past me. Going into the barn alone, the old lady opens the double doors from the inside. Holding onto the reins of the two horses I guide them into the barn. She opens two unoccupied stalls for me.

After taking care of the horses, I head out of the barn with the old woman in front of me. With nightfall complete by this time, the only visible light comes from the flickering flames of the torches on both sides of the manor's door. The old woman had closed and bolted the front gate as well as lowered and extinguished the hanging lantern.

With a light smile, the old woman turns and walks toward the west end of the manor. As she stands in between the two blazing torches, the wide woman opens the small-framed door.

Damn. Is she going to get wedge in the doorway? If she does, I guess I will just have to kick her in the ass. Oh hell, I can't do that. The size of that thing, my foot would get stuck in it. Aw, Saul. There U go being mean again.

I was just joking.

I follow the old woman. Entering the small château, I close the door. Immediately to my right, a door-less opening gives access to a spacious kitchen.

A kitchen inside? That's odd. It doesn't seem too safe having it a part of the manor.

In the center of this room hang black wrought-iron pots and pans. A well-suited hearth sits in the southwest corner of the kitchen, straight in-line with the hallway opening.

As we travel east down the short hall, the next door that we come to is to the left. Partially ajar, I stare inside the room. Illuminated by numerous glowing candles, I spy several bookshelves, and liquor sitting on top of a large dark brown desk. Behind it, shuttered windows keep the light from escaping to the outside.

My god! She has hundreds of books and maps covering the walls.

Looking forward once more, I trail behind the old woman. Silently she guides me thru the house. Next, we enter what is obviously the dining room.

Stopping for a moment, I look around the amazing room. Suspended above the middle of the long dark-stained dining table, a large candle chandelier glimmers and flickers like a tiny sun. Ten chairs sit at the hand-carved table. At each end sits a single chair. Four chairs line the length of the table on both sides.

In three of the four corners of this large rectangular room, suits of armor stand guard. The one in the northeast corner appears to be holding the rope that lowers and raises the chandelier. In between it and the one in the northwest corner sits an enormous hearth. A tall man could lay flat inside of it. Above this fireplace appears to be Lady Melusiné's coat of arms. From this distance I can only make out the silhouette of a fair-haired woman painted in the center of the large shield. Crossing just below the tip of the shield as a wide X, a short sword and a long spear arm the wall.

Smiling with a great deal of pride, the old lady declares as she slowly walks forward, "This is quite an impressive room, is it not? Lady Melusiné likes it this way. Impeccable."

I remain silent and go out around the table.

Upon leaving the dining room, we enter an open area in the house with the doors in front and to the sides of us. At first, it seems quite unappealing with two closed wooden doors to my left. Immediately to the right, I notice what appears to be a small closet without a door. Mostly hidden by the shadows, I see steps spiraling up into the darkness and disappearing out of sight. Left of this opening, a tall stone wall runs east and stops just short of the far wall, forming a sharp corner with a southbound hallway.

For the first time, I notice paint on the wall.

Three large painted portraits fill the emptiness of the wall. Never have I ever seen any artwork that compares to its brilliance, its realism. It's nearly alive.

Entranced by the brushed beauty, I step back to break free for a moment.

Instead, the painting hits me, full-force. A living-breathing jungle engulfs the entire wall behind them. Amazing details fly out at me. Exotically colored birds flap their feathered wings as flying insects buzz about the glistening water. Three mysterious people form a huge portrait when looked at as a whole.

Many striking similarities between them stand out. At the same time they remain quite unique. All three have raven black hair, though in different amounts and conditions. Long locks of feathery hair drape over the woman's plump breast. She stands with her back to a pool of blue in the center of the painting.

To her right, a misty waterfall sparkles in a bright white haze.

The milky shroud drifts up around a tall, wide-shouldered man dressed in a leopard-like cloak and loincloth. He stands on a cliff overseeing it all. From his smoothly shaved head, a single long lock of braided hair hangs down across his chest.

To this man's far left on the opposite side of the woman, a man cloaked in a thick black robe stands in the dark forefront. Though the length and fullness of the woman's hair, this man's hair appears clotted together. Shadows of the jungle consume much of the painting surrounding him. His beady little eyes leave an unsettling feeling within me. It is the shadow of death with a sinister smile. He appears to be the hooded priest from over the front gate.

Their olive skin remains the same though the internal lighting of the painting shifts drastically. Though obviously from foreign soil, I can not place their ethnicity.

From descriptions given in ancient manuscripts, they appear to be from the jungles of Bangladesh. But if the man is a king from that foreign land, he should have a cape of a man-eating tiger, instead of a strangely spotted leopard. Right?

Breaking the silence, the old woman calls out, "Lady Melusiné is a magnificent artist. Is she not?"

"Yes, she is truly beauty," I remark.

"Oh yes, U're right. She is beautiful. But what I said was she's an incredible painter."

"What!?! Lady Melusiné did this?" I ask, astonished.

"Yes," the old woman declares with a smile.

"That's absolutely incredible," I remark. Staring at the amazing artwork, I ask, "So, which one is Raymond of Poitiers?"

"Neither of them. The one to the upper left, once, was Lady Melusiné's lover and lord while the other to the lower right was her brother."

"Oh," I mumble.

Though I wait, she explains no further.

Shifting my attention, I look beyond the old lady toward a tall open archway. It takes up much of the eastern wall of the room. Thru it, I glimpse a patio shaded by extremely close trees from the orchard.

Pointing at the first door to my left, the old woman calls out, "That one right there is my room. The one just beyond it is a spare room."

I lug my belongings in that direction.

"Where are U going, monsieur Lusingna?" the old woman asks. "Your room is up in the tower."

"What?!" I exclaim. "I thought U said that the far one is the spare."

"Yes, it is the spare. It's empty," the old woman declares.

"Why am I not staying in there?" I ask. "Why do I have to sleep in the tower?"

"Lady Melusiné wills it."

Though seeming to be senseless, I accept her decree. Tired, I follow the old lady as she heads back for the stairs. Near the opening, she lifts the lit torch out of the iron-ring wall mount. With the aid of its light, she and I spiral up the narrow staircase. On the way up, she sets ablaze a stationary torch to light the stairwell.

Going up another full coil, we reach the first floor of the tall tower. Opening up, the amber glow of the torch fills the musty room. The hand-held torch reveals a wide but low-framed bed in the center of the room. A small end table sits beside the straw-stuffed bed. The old woman walks over to another torch positioned in another iron-ring, opposite of the bed. Holding hers next to it, the thick flame engulfs the tip of the torch. Lacking all privacy, anyone traveling the steps of the tower has full-view of the room. Wonderful.

Turning to me, the old woman remarks, “Well, here U go, young lord. I will let U get settled in. And while U are done doing that, I will be just downstairs in the kitchen, preparing U something to eat. U must be starving, by now.”

“Yes, I’m hungry but... but... but U gotta be joking about this room. Hell, the room doesn’t even have a hearth or a single window. What is Lady Melusin  trying to do, drive me insane?”

Laughing lightly, the old woman smiles and replies, “Of course not, young lord. Besides, the tower’s next level has the best view of the entire estate. Well, except for maybe the south hall with its splendid view of the eastern orchard.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing.”

“Well then, I will be downstairs. When U are ready, just come down and take a seat at the dining table.”

I taste sourness in the back of my throat like bad wine I partially swallowed. I want to leave already. I unpack my few belongings. Quickly, I fish out the second scroll from the other night in one hand and the nine shekels with the other.

Where can I hide these so I’ll have them when I need them?

If this room is an indication of things to come, I’ll be leaving soon enough.

I walk about the room searching for a hiding spot. Having no real options, I tuck the scroll and coins underneath the mattress of straw. Lying the loose stuffing back flat, I pat the area down around the corner of the bed.

What’s that? The old lady has already started roasting? Awh, that hearty smell is killing me. I head downstairs.

Candles in the chandelier banish the shadows to the far corners of the dining room. Its roaring fireplace beats back the bitter draft as the suits of armor retain their posts. Noise drifts out of the kitchen like a clattering aroma. Walking to its doorway, I find the old lady standing in front of the open hearth. Spoon in hand, she stirs the hanging pot.

Without a word, I turn away. Going to the hallway leading to the west-side entrance, I look at the fire. Turning away, I walk on down the hall. Reaching the door to the library, I push it all the way open.

Incredible. She has a map of the world above her fireplace with a window over it. It’s... it’s... it’s like the universe with the stars of heaven over the world with the flames of hell roaring below it. Jerusalem stands at the center like that in Bishop Theodulf of Orleans map.

Hah. I wonder if Mecca stands at the center of a Muslim’s map.

Drawn in by the room, I step forward to enter the room but stop when I catch some movement in the corner of my eye.

“Young lord.”

Turning I see the old woman holding a plate in hand. Steam rolls up over it.

“Dinner is ready,” she remarks.

I follow her to the table.

Alone, I sit and eat a feast fit for a king. In my moments of solitude, contentment comes over me as I devour all that the old lady brings. Only occasionally interrupting the meal the old lady checks in to see if anything else is needed. Washing down the fine cuisine, I consume pitcher after pitcher of quality red wine. Oh, this wine is incredible. This is paradise.

God, I feel my body swaying side to side as I sit here. I should move but I'm not sure if I can. At any moment, I might just burst.

God, I ate too much.

My eyes close and my saddle-sore muscles hum. That's good wine.

I try to stand but sit back down. Holding onto the large dark oak table with both hands, I steady myself. I lick my dry drunken lips. Slowly, my eyes roll back and my lids fall shut.

Opening them, a spinning world greets my return. As that drunken floating feeling frees my flesh, I smile. Oh, I love fine wine.

The warmth and glow rains down from the candle chandelier. I stare straight up at the red-fiery flames swirling above me. The smallest things entrance me. Like rings of fire, the candles flicker and melt together as the metal-framed chandelier seems to spin like a huge fireball above me.

Damn. I'm drunk. If I close my eyes one more time, they might not open until morning. Hah. More like afternoon from the way I'm feeling.

The humming alcohol swallows my mind.

And then, there is nothing.