# **Vignettes**

## Promises

**Merovan Capital (208 years ago)**

“We must have one strong hand to lead us!”.

With his outstretched hands flung up dramatically the Duke of Red River paused, his red cape fluttering back. His position, atop the great red granite block of the Settler’s Stone, put him equal with the eyes of every noble in the chamber.

“My people suffer at the hands of dire wolves and the two legged wolves of the Vairmen. This must end, and it will only end when we have one who is first among equals. For myself, I care not who that is, but we shall not leave this chamber until we have that one.”

The white and rose granite hall was silent, each of the other 35 dukes and their retinues looked on in silence.

Red River judged his moment, and then struck. “We are the Dukes, our people are our charge and none …”

The pounding knock cut across his words. All heads turned towards the ceremonial entrance. Its massive iron and bronze doors shook with a second knock. Another pause and the doors bowed inward, its crossbar bending and groaning with the strain.

To a man, all of the Dukes stood and drew their swords.

The snap of the crossbar, when it came, was quieter than all of the preceding groaning. The doors swung slowly open revealing a group of ten. In the blinding sunlight were nine men and one woman of the Hairochon. All 6 ½ feet tall or more, broad, brown skinned with masklike facial tattoos. All carried staves save one. That one bore a sword upon his back. To his side and slightly behind him stood an older woman, white-haired but upright.

The reaction rang out. “How dare you .. Why have.. Unacceptable…!” Red River held up his hand and silence slowly settled. His words were smoothly polite. “It is a given that those of our allies the Hairochan are always welcome in these chambers. What need mandates the use of the great doors rather than the more customary methods of entrance?”

The sword bearer among them looked out at all the Dukes and his deep voice rolled forward in ritual voice.

“I am Stone Strikes Swiftly and I am not the least among us. In this time; In this place; I speak for the Hairoch and none shall gain say this speaking. I call upon the Dukes of Merova to honor their word.”

Red River looked to his fellow dukes. Seeing no answers in their faces he looked back to the ten.

“What promise have we made you?”

The sword bearer turned and looked at the woman. She closed her eyes. Her voice was not that of a woman.

“You-our allies and our saviors. You have saved our people from extinction. On this field of battle I say to you that we owe you that which can never be repaid. Your people can call on mine. In your hour of need we are yours to command. So say I and so say we all.”

When she opened her eyes she spoke and the voice was clearly her own.

“So spoke Duc Cheval Blanc on the battlefield that this building stands on. He was standing on the Settlers Stone. That was 413 years ago”

Red River stepped down and walked forward. He planted himself in front of the sword bearer. Looking up he half asked and half declared “You know that we are not those men?’

The Hairochon looked him in the eye and asked “Do you acknowledge and honor your promise?”

Without looking back the Duke squared his shoulders and said “Let it never be said that Dukes of Merova break faith with their ancestors. We will honor their promises. In your hour of need we are yours to command.”

With a gesture towards the Settler’s Stone. “Speak your needs.”

Walking forward, the Hairochon drew the sword. With a flash of green steel he thrust the sword into the Settler’s Stone. With his eyes on the quivering sword hilt he spoke.

“This is Sargon. The one who draws her shall be the true born King of Merova and a sword and shield for her people in their time of greatest need. Until that time no Duke shall be set above another nor strive for the same.”

He stepped back three paces and all of his brothers and sisters braced. In unison from their throats and from thousands of throats outside rang three words.

“This shall be”.

They turned and left, pulling the doors slowly shut behind them. They had not even come to rest before the rush to the stone began.

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## Unto the breach

**Thenea (16 months ago)**

They were so young. So painfully new. She was convinced they squeaked when they walked. They were in two lines down the length of the entrance corridor. The young women on the left and the young men on the right. All of them had shown up in their very best fighting clothes that glittered and shone in the morning sun. As if they were on parade.

She and her partner stepped out from behind the screen the side of the hall and with hands clasped together bowed in unison. She could see the looks of puzzlement on their faces as both groups took in the simple unadorned white training uniforms. Behind her she could feel her brothers and sisters waiting behind the door.

She said “I am Abene and this is Ander. Welcome to the Monastery. We are your Ishi Sensei or first teachers.”

She took a breath..

“Take a good look at us and each other. And then look back. For we and those around you will be the whole of your world for the next two years. And that will be the least of the changes. You are about to enter a completely different world…and become part of it.”

“You all know the story, the prophecy, and you are convinced that you are here standing between your people and the prophecy. No matter what the cost. We are here to make sure you understand what the cost will be and then you will have the opportunity to choose.”

“You have heard that the Circle of Captains chose to create a weapon against the threat in the prophecy. And you have answered that call to be that weapon. Then you came here to learn the outlander’s martial skills, to become better weapons. But the choice the circle made was far harder than that. For the prophecy made it clear that Thenea alone could not answer the threat. So the decision was that you would become something other than Thenean.”

“Look about you. And look at yourselves. Each of you, both sisterhood and brotherhood, eying each other with wariness because you know in your heart of hearts that the other cannot be trusted. So it has been since the first landing. And yet to thwart the prophecy brother and sister must be united.”in

“Thus when the outlander was approached by the Circle he was offered gold, silk, and gems. He declined them all. He demanded but one payment. That when you enter these doors you are no longer bound to clan or Captain; You are his. He is O’Sensei or “Great Teacher.”

“When you pass the doors you enter another world. There is no magic, Your manners do not fit. All of your centuries-old rivalries are the toys and petty complaints of children. Your sureties of place and worth are unknown and unseen by your teachers. You will be handled in a way that would require a challenge to a duel outside these walls. Your teachers will tell you things that make no sense.You will be confused, exhausted, enraged and outraged and lonely. ”

“And if you live to walk beyond these walls, none but your brothers and sisters of the Way will understand you. Others will defer to you but you will be a Landsman among your clan. You will look at the world in ways wider than the most experienced Captain. You will see and hear things they cannot see or hear. If you marry it will only be among other followers of the Way for no others will be able to be with you.”

“And when you breathe your last breath your last thought will be that death is lighter than a feather and duty is the heaviest weight that anyone can bear.”

“I now offer you the opportunity to go back to your loved ones and your home. There shall be no other. To take this opportunity you need only walk out the door into the sunlight.”

She paused again. One breath, two, and a sigh.

“May Zenncha have mercy on your soul”.

Ander stepped back and tapped once on the door.

The doors swung open.

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## Sanctity

**Merova (Present Day)**

“I cried justice. I asked for justice for my daughter. This is not it.” and

The woman had a few years behind her and her clothes, face and hands showed all the marks of having worked hard as a Tanners wife. She stood in marked contrast to the pair in front of her. The young priest and priestess of Borders Hollow had no more than two score years between them. And what years they had, had treated them kindly. They were pink cheeked with the glow that indicated that while they worked, they also never went without .

The priest shifted forward and placed his hands on her shoulders. The Tanners wife’s attempt to shift away was blocked by the strength of that grip. His voice and manner betokened no compassion.

“Your friends and family begged you not to cry justice. Your town headman begged you to negotiate slowly. The Duke begged you to bargain with him so that his son might be rehabilitated. I warned you that what you would get is justice as the Lord and the Lady see fit, not as you would will it. You cried justice. You got it.”

She slumped in his hands and mumbled to the ground.

“My daughter has no means of support and a baby is coming. That babe’s father has been banished and no sense of when he will come back. How shall the child be cared for?”

The priest’s face shifted. If anything, there was more frustration visible in the look he gave the mother.

“You did not listen to the judgment. Your daughter’s rapist shall never return from the border. He will die in his second year while fighting for the March Hawkstrike. Such is ***their*** judgment and it shall not be gainsayed. The Duke is left without a son, your grandson is left without a father, and you are left without means to take care of your grandson. ***They*** have assured us that his death shall serve great purpose and protect many; The Duke takes solace in that.”

She did not lift her head. They could barely hear her words.

“This is not fair.”

The priestess, with two fingers on his sleeve, pulled her male counterpart back so that she could step forward.

“No, it is not fair. It is just, though harsh. It is a judgment that looks to the good of the Merovan people and land without regard to the impact on the people involved. What I’m about to tell you is even less fair but I ask that you listen up and listen well. If you finally listen there is a chance for all involved.”

“I have talked to the Duke and Headman Vorst. The Duke offers you this: He offers to have his son and your daughter married on the morrow. “

The mother shifted her back and straightened in outrage. The priestesses voice cut across the word she was about to say.

“I said listen well.”

A pause, and when the priestess was convinced there would be no further interruptions.

“They need only see each other for the ceremony and then no longer. We arranged they would not even need to speak the words to each other only to us when we preside. The Duke will recognize the child as his grandson and train him to rule. Your daughter shall be honored as a na-Duke’s wife and when her husband dies in two years hence he will arrange a marriage to a promising young knight pleasing to her.”

“The Headman has arranged for you to move to Spring’s Field to the north in Duke Red River’s demesne. You cannot stay here, Border’s Hollow does not need a tanner with a na-Duchess for a daughter. Of course, Spring’s Field would welcome a Tanner of your husband’s skill and they have several good sites in the town. ”

“The Duke is willing to negotiate some variation on this and a lot depends on your daughter but the Duke is adamant that your daughter and her desires comes first over your’s and your husband’s. She was the one wronged and he feels he owes her redress, not you.“

“You have one day and the Duke is sending a scribe to negotiate with your daughter on the hour, you have that much time to choose your bargaining position”.

“Go. And choose wisely”

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## Where the women are strong and the men good looking.

**Koth (Present day)**

Adalwolf dropped to a crouch without a hint of sound. All the Thanes around him did the same. He could feel the heat of them behind him as well as the strained quiet.This was Ansgar God Spear’s village and Ansgar’s thanes were not the kind to sleep on duty.

Each one behind him was standing on the edge between boyhood and manhood. This was their chance for a wife not chosen by their mothers. They had all come through the village in the last two weeks with trade goods and talked with all the young maids. If their hopes were true, those same maidens were waiting in the unmarried quarters for them to come and carry them away. If their hopes were false, the best they could hope for was the alarm to be called and for them to be run out of the village. Broken bones were possible. The worst would be to be captured and sold back to their own village. The scolding and ribbing could take years to die down. Broken bones were preferable.

The air was cold and smoky. The wildfires of two days ago still left its mark. It had taken the shamans hours to bring them under control.

Adalwolf gestured with his capped spear. Each of the men had leather wrapped sticks, No need to take the chance of injuring a future bride’s relative. Either there was just enough resistance to let them know that they had earned their bride or enough resistance to cause them to run. In either case anything more than a leather wrapped stick was not going to be of much help. His gesture pointed them in the direction of the unmarried quarters. As they stalked stealthily off he started toward his destination.

Of course, he had much less to hope for than they did. Freja. Ansgar’s daughter. The few times he talked to her she did acknowledge his existence so he was pretty sure she knew who he was. Admittedly he probably didn’t make a good impression as he stared in awe at her archery. He was pretty sure that he’d had not actually drooled when he saw her in a dress sitting next to her father at the chieftain’s table. No matter what he was fairly sure he had not made a world shaking impression. She had.

He had described her to his mother without telling her who she was and he was pretty sure his mother had been laughing at him the whole time in that way she had. Adalwolf meant “Noble Wolf” but he was convinced that she heard it as “Boot Chewing Puppy”.

He couldn’t help it. His best hope was to impress Freja by sneaking past the guards to have a conversation with her. Of course, there was a part of him that had the sneaking suspicion that this might not be the best idea he’d ever had. Of course, as his brothers had pointed out to him more than once, ideas were not his greatest strength.

He came even with the moot hall. He could see the Chief’s hall beyond it. He came to rest in a crouch again. As he put his hand down to the ground he felt it. A paw print larger than a hand and a half. He explored it carefully. It was a dire beast’s. The wildfire must have forced it out of its domain from the smoke must have covered its scent.

For half a moment he had a thought. If he climbed into the Chief’s Hall and got to Freja and told her he would be a hero in her eyes. Then he gently shook his head. For a split second he could hear his father’s voice and feel his father’s hand cuff him at the back of the head.

“Fool boy! This is not some fantasy story, where the hero kills the dragon! This is real life where the dragon eats you and any other idiot blinded by glory rather than duty.”

He smoothly rose and turned in one continuous move while stripping the cap from his spear. He trotted back towards the unmarried quarters while casting his eyes about quickly. The minute the noise of the raid was heard the beast would strike.

He was heartbeats away from the quarters when three things happened. The girl's giggles and screams started coming from the other side of the building just as a sentry walking past spotted Adalwolf moving towards him. And finally, he saw the beast. It was preparing to leap to the top of the unmarried quarters. As it leapt, Adalwolf went into a flat-out sprint.

The sentry crouched, his spear straight and his large round shield scooping upwards to toss Adalwolf over his shoulder. Adalwolf used his spear to vault across and over the shield and arched his shoulder and back to get as much distance from the sentry’s throw as possible. He hit the lower edge of the roof and kept rolling upward releasing a wordless howl the whole time. Ideas might not be his strength but this is what he was born for.

He came to rest on all fours 12 feet from the beast. It had turned to face him and its powerful haunches were already bunching for a leap to kill. It only needed a second to use its weight to bring him to the ground so that it could use its 9 inch fangs to open him up and end him. He could not let it pin him. As it leapt, he leapt. Backwards. Arching and twisting to try and ensure that he was not underneath when they landed. He wasn’t, quite. The beast landed on the paved wash area next to the quarters with Adalwolf thrown onto the hitching fence next to it.

They both staggered upright. He knew that at least some ribs were broken. The beast appeared to have lost most of its right fang and its hide was twitching with either anger or pain. He slowly drew his dagger. The sentry came to stand next to him with a spear in hand.

One breath. Two.

It leapt. He thrust. The sentry braced. They all went over. He couldn’t even roll out of it, he just hit the stone. Something else broke. He didn’t know what. He came to a kneeling position and the cat was there less than 10 feet from them. His dagger was embedded in front of its shoulder.

He pulled himself upright. He had no weapons. So he raised his hands and howled.

The beast took three steps backwards, whirled and ran.

He staggered to the side and knelt next to the sentry. The man’s eyes were rolled back into his head and it looked like he had at least a concussion.

When Adalwolf next looked up he saw all of his raiding party standing with their maids in various states of dress, armor, and undress. They weren’t looking at him or the sentry. It took him a few minutes, but he decided to try and figure out what they were looking at. He slowly turned his head. That hurt too much. So he turned his body instead.

When he came to rest and looked he saw her coming out of the Chief’s hall, buckling on armor and heading towards him. He was still watching her when he heard a noise next to his head. A look down revealed a shaman smiling up at him.

“I am Frode and you are dying unless I can get you to lay down so I can repair you.”

“Dying?”

And the lights went out....

He awoke to the sounds of partying. He was pretty sure wherever he was it wasn’t too far from the moot Hall. With his eyes closed he tried to figure out how badly he was hurt. All he was clear on was that his back was on fire and his shoulders were sore and his legs were screaming. So he opened his eyes.

It was daylight. On benches next to his bed there were three large Thanes talking among themselves. When he turned his head all three of them turned to look at him. Adalwolf stifled a groan, for the oldest and the biggest was Ansgar himself.

Which meant that Adalwolf’s father was going to kill him. The raid geld, or ransom for him was not going to be cheap. His father and Ansgar had been rivals for a long time.

Ansgar gestured his two companions out of the room. He had a look on his face that would’ve made the dire beast run before the combat. He looked at Adalwolf and tugged on his beard. A slight tic animated his cheek.

“Adalwolf Augustson, you look like that beast ate you up and shat you out.”

“I was tempted to torment you a little. Making noises about what the raid geld would be for raiding my village and trying to take my daughter. I was going to add a few noises about how you were lucky to get off with just raid geld rather than a real punishment. I was even looking forward to getting a few digs in on your father, maybe send a message describing the outrages committed. Then, when I was all done, I was going to graciously let you go free, knowing how much it would completely frost your father. I was figuring his beard would go red again. ”

“Unfortunately Ingrid, my wife, and my daughter have made it very clear that how well I sleep depends on how well you sleep. I suppose I can live with that. It’s probably just as well, you will be staying with us for at least a month while you recover. I don’t think you’ll be overly comfortable the first week anyways. I think my daughter is saving up all sorts of descriptions of how stupid your actions were. I don’t think she’ll repeat herself for the full week. But either way this isn’t turning out the way I thought I might. Instead of getting raid geld out of your father, it looks like I’ll be paying a dowry”

He heaved himself to his feet and headed towards the door. He turned and looked at his future son-in-law.

“By all the God’s boy, did you ever once just consider bringing flowers?”

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## Asking the right questions.

**Thenean Capital (Present Day)**

The stone was melted and frozen in mid splash, a giant clawed footstep embedded in liquid rock locked in a single moment in the sun; filled with sand, stone and trees. Like the house that surrounded it, it provided the face of serenity wrapping something far less peaceful.

The man looking at the garden had his own facade, Glee, and mischief and ease visible to the outside world acting as a rice paper screen for the ruthless interior. He shook his head, 'Dark thoughts Zato , now you are thinking of yourself as a agricultural nightmare. Master Ishida would be glaring at you if he could hear your thoughts.' He couldn't help it. He looked around guiltily and then sighed. '750 years and then man still makes me feel like a witless turtle. Of course, if Ishidas memory doesn't do it I have Domcho Sensei to take up the slack. And Osumi. Ack, do I pick the people in my life so,that they can make me feel guilty?'

His senses caused him to turn and face away from the garden. He bowed deeply to the man in front of him. Takeda Daimyo

The man's eyebrow arched and a rare crooked smile showed up. It lasted but an instant, for the face was not comfortable with that expression.

"So formal Zato San? Are you mulling over past sins? Do you have some grave error you need to Lay before me? By all means tell all".

He waited, still in a way that Zato so envied.

Zato said nothing.

His lord sat. Zato swore he could see the sitting man become part of the stone.

"Zato San, this morning my lady wife and Zencha woke me with the news that the house acquired a new child in the infirmary. I have seen the child and healing was Granted. It buzzes with wild magic and mischief but it no longer threatens to tear into the structure of the world as it did. "

"The child has informed me that my reality needs to be reminded that it is real."

He paused and gestured to the benches.

"Sit Zato San. I think it is time you told me about your pet project. "

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The sun was high when he was finished. His lord had walked him through every step, every interaction, and speculation. Never fast in thought, his lord, but always thorough. Incredibly thorough.

His Lord rose, walked to the corona of the melted stone. He touched the stone and rubbed it.

"Zato, every Samurai trains with a single living purpose. His life is his lords to spend as needed. Everything comes down to a moment. All the training , all the will, ... Each moment is perfect, each stroke is perfect. All comes down to a single instant. "

He turned and Zato went still.

"When you asked me to go with you, it all came down to an instant."

"Know thought, know sword. No thought, no sword."

"Summon my Lady, Domcho Sensei, the Oracle and your lady wife. "

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Hours later they sat at the table.

Domcho was the first to bring up the central point. His voice was solid and clear despite his age.

"And what are you going to tell the Thenean houses? You cannot have the child as Takeda, except possibly as a mascot. Yet you want our interest clear to them. I suggest something straight forward and simple, otherwise they might miss the message. "

Lady Takeda spoke.

"Give him the house badge to wear. It is appropriate and will serve as a sign. A declaration would serve as a challenge. Every Thenean instinct for treachery and territoriality would be aroused. The badge shows interest without exposing intent. We have always protected our own and nothing new would be discovered if we did so again."

His lord nodded.

"Lady Osumi, have your Ichiban escort the child until he Is united with his guardians. If any interfere I want them handled flawlessly. Overawed if possible, put down if not. No half measures when a weapon is drawn. As for the rest, Zato, you have my permission to continue, but the rest of them must demonstrate their will."

## “We Dare.”

**Thenean Capital (Present Day)**

**"**Your Lordship? May I speak with you a moment?"

Aquila sighed and stopped, pausing for Caliante to come alongside. "Good morning" he said politely. "Our business this morning?"

"A few words on the matter lying between Aquila and Delleste, your lordship. I have taken the liberty of ordering mage blocks on all Aquila houses.

Aquila raised a hand. "Caliente, My regrets. We are due to break into the bay in a few minutes. Duty calls me to the deck."

The gentleman tilted his head forward and murmured. "May I walk with your lordship?"

There was no escape. Aquila inclined his head. "Certainly, sir." He moved while sternly suppressing a desire to continue at his usual long stride.

"I am certain that your lordship will inform Delleste of the action I have taken. Also, it is necessary to ascertain whether she has notified her House of the fact that it is partnered with Aquila in a venture of honor.

They came to the captains stairs. Caliente cleared his throat.

"Your lordship has done quite well in the initial moves. The warnings will cost Argenti and Berberini much in time, flexibility, and money.

Whatever Aquila was about to say was swallowed in the noise of the ships klaxon and Acquila was gone, leaping up the stairs.

He was greeted by the sun rising over the bay and three Merashi ships rounding the hills.

"Well done, Helm!." His hand closed on the Helm’s shoulder as he shouted. "Ballista one to six, swing front. . .Wind weavers stand to AND STRIKE! ”

The wind whipped from the west with snap and the ships were locked in stays.

The voice of Aquila rang out augmented by his magery. “The ships are Aquila. You may state your business!”.

A swarthy face appears above the Captain’s peak on the first ship.

"Nothing personal, Captain. A contract."

"A contract," Aquila repeated. "With whom?"

The face grinned and shook his head "Not mine to say. But I can tell you this: he wanted you and your sister out of the water, he truly did."

"Did he? I hope you received your payment in cash and up front, sir. No?" He shook his head at the look of sudden dismay on the mercenary’s face. "That was careless of you. I suppose you're sure that you have the right ship?"

"He gave me arrival time, your colors..."

"But he gave you no name? And you didn't ask—no, why should you? This is the Alba D’Oro *,* sir. Casa Aquila. The Kraken. Please stop me when you hear something familiar."

*"We Dare."* The voice of an unseen man was breathless with awe or terror.

"A student of Thenea? Exactly. 'We Dare.' "

The face seemed uncomfortable. His shoulders slumped. "All right, Aqila, what's the deal? You've got the ballista and the mages to back it. Will you use it?"

"That depends on you, doesn't it? I suppose you wouldn't be betraying a confidence if I asked if the name of the man you spoke with was Indrah*?* You needn't say yes, only no."

There was silence.

Shan shook his head. "I hope you got at least half of your money in advance, sir. No?*"*

He laughed chillingly at the distress on the other man's face. "Less than fifty percent down on a job that would mark you all for the rest of your lives? Ask your crew member there if he believes a house with 'We Dare' for a motto would let you rest if you'd completed your mission successfully."

The mercenary shrugged. "There wasn't a contract," he said sheepishly. "It was a gentleman's agreement. But I know where to find him."

"No doubt you do," Aquila said cordially "I wish you the veriest Fortuna itself."

The mercenary bowed his head. "And?"

"Get out of here," Aquila snapped, his voice hard-edged and cold. "We know your ships. Your faces are known. I advise you to take up a different line of work…. now."

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With the ships sails vanishing over the horizon Aquila turned to Caliente.

“And which sister do you think he was speaking of? Have Amalia or Lutziana taken up assassination in their spare time? Have Rihana’s card shark friends taken out contracts on her ?”

Caliente turned his head to the side. Aquila eyes gleamed.

“What do you know?”

“Know? I am certain of nothing. But cousin Salvador did note that Ethel is coming back the lands.”

“Ethel!....Ethel?....Really? Ethel?”

“That is correct Signore.”

“Fortuna help us all.”

## “Changing of the Guard”

**Fort Mayne Archduchy (Present Day)**

The morning sun warmed the dining area table.

Santra selected a seat near the oven. Gracing the tabletop, books vied with loaves of bread and platters of ham. A giant mug of tea hit the table at the same time she came to rest in the chair.

With a quick smile to the native borne server she lifted the mug and savored her first sip.

Droit appeared, spotted her —well, maybe it was the ham, and trotted over.

Droit sat down, swept up the mug, took a swig, and grimaced. Droit was a bit of a gourmet, finicky in his tastes for food and drink. Santra didn't think the flavor was so bad especially since she always had a triple strength mug .

"Sorry I'm late," said Droit. "I had to get a cut stitched. I had a vision during sparring."

Santra nodded understanding. She asked “Is there anything I should know?”

Droit sighed.

"Good news or bad news?"

He smiled wryly. “New images. Same old confusion.”

Droit didn't sound especially discouraged.

Santra, listening, raised her mug in salute and drank.

"What's next for you?"

“I was thinking of storming the Lord and Ladies summer home gates and howling outside their door until they explain it all.”

“Good luck with that. Any clues for our lost ducklings?”

Droit rubbed his knuckles across his mouth, frowning. “There is nothing concrete enough to hand them”

“You do realize nothing will be concrete enough for some of them.”

“I will bring that up to the appropriate authorities when howling”

“And do you have any more explanation for why these particular people?”

“I have speculation, but explanation ? No. They appear to be particularly competent, though erratic in coordination. And they don’t fit. Most of them don’t fit in their own culture much less ours. I have the glimmer of a theory. “

Santra’s eyes widened. “Really? That is new. Say more please.”

“I said a glimmer, not a full theory. And the closest I can come to it is to point out the one thing every member of that oddball set of has in common: They rise to the occasion and they seem to learn quickly. If they have anything in common it is that.“

Santra sat bemused and the corner of her mouth quirked up.

“Well brother, it may be time to change the topic. What of your lady wife.”

Droit sat back with a laugh. “Did you really just do that ?”

She grinned. “So what’s your greatest fear now that you are soon to be a parent.?”

"What if . . ." Droit pulled at his chin, looking around furtively. "What if my children find out I'm not really a grownup? How disappointed would they be?"

Santra laughed out loud. Droit smiled ruefully.

"I think your wife already knows," said Santra.

"I'm afraid so."

Santra stiffened, peering out the kitchen door.

"What?" said Droit.

"There's Headman Chavan," Santra answered. "Wonder what he wants?"

Droit leaned to the side and craned to see. The Headman was usually not at the Desmene house.

…...

## “It Pleased Him”

**Southern Merash (Present Day)**

He was male, though that rarely mattered to him. Indeed, he was hardly male at all, in the sense of a Direcat, or stud horse. What mattered more to him was his name, a recording of deeds that would take several hours if he was to speak it in a human tongue. For purposes of address there were many short forms of his name, synonymous with terror in their respective tongues, which pleased him. Among his own, his name was "Ruthless Player", which also pleased him. He was majestic, as befitted one of his deeds and his 930 years, though among his race he was known as powerfully pragmatic and lethal in the great games. He played deep in the game, it was a source of pride that his blows were unpredictable, uncanny.

And now he was entering his greatest endgame. Several prongs were coming together and should see their finish within the next 15 years. It was time to bring his clan into his plans.

With him now traveled others of his spawn. The Watcher, The Selector, and FireSeer. With them were their spawn, though few were in evidence in the lush green of the shore. So far, they had spent seven years preparing, and he was confident that another seven would yield the explosive results he desired.

His strength lay in his cunning, not in his mass. But as they walked out of the jungle onto the shore, the humans around him backed up and threw themselves to the ground. As the human terror and awe washed over him, he fed. So fragile the humans, and yet a source of so much sustenance.

He always ensured that he met with his humans in person. There were those that argued that the sustenance and the other results could be attained without meeting the humans; that the brief nature of the interaction hardly justified traveling such a distance. But he took joy in the shortsightedness of that view. What so many of his peers failed to grasp was that in the briefness that was a human life, a single meeting in person produced a lasting shift in the path of a single human's life and in the generations that followed that human. A single appearance, managed skillfully, could redirect whole cultures. And, as he believed, so did his spawn. Especially now that they saw the scope of his plan.

In front of him, though he saw fear, there were no trappings of sacrifice. None of their spawn to be given up. True, there was no deliciously tortured mothers psyche to feed from, but that was the secret. Others demanded sacrifice, he granted boons, and asked for faith. Others wanted the powers of the Gods, but did not bother to understand godhood. Ruthless Player played a bigger game.

He was a belted knight with 15 years on the Marches.

His breath caught in

60 miles north of Meara

A new vignette.  
The nativeborn are linked together by the grafting of a new world. Crafting and weaving is there wife's blood  
  
The women are linked together at various levels by this grand plan and the men of the nativeborn are the (relatively speaking) expendable Richards  
  
It is the native Moran's intention to weave together all who come into one a whole just as it is the Perricone's intention to hold the entire world intact. The hair a on or about the world, the nativeborn are about the people  
  
The nativeborn symbolism for their gods is very down-to-earth and very related to hasn't and human life  
  
For example the Lord and the lady I referred to by the many crafts people they are the lady in her incarnation as Weaver, painter,and the military aspects are encompassed has guarding or protecting such as referring to the lady as the bitch guarding the home. Or referring to the Lord and his military aspect as the Shepherd  
  
The nativeborn have an unnerving habit of referring to communal actions. For example "we leave", we weave, we defend  
  
For the nativeborn women speak and decide to strategy, men decide to tactics