

To Addis al'Rayun

Addie, here are the documents you requested. I've compiled them in an order of lessons for the children. I put in everything you wanted about history, geography, and economics, but I omitted the things about the poor state of the country and the temple, the food shortage, the dying land, and the slow disappearance of magic. Children should not know such things at as young an age as they are. I also gathered an amount of wisdom from many merchants and travelers. I hope that your sons find it useful when they embark on their pilgrimage from Hakeshet.

Go with God, my friend,

Mosher ibn'Ahaz

The Lesson Plan- History and Culture

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A Dissertation on the Land of Vasena

Children, you sit around your master, gathered together to learn about the greatness of your nation. Truly, you should be proud to live in a place so wondrous as Vasena, a land of great magics and even greater mysteries, a land built upon centuries of history and culture reaching back to the founding of our great kingdom. You are lucky, for ours is a land full of scholars who have kept accurate records reaching back into the dawn of our people, so we have a clear look into the past. Now, let us peer into the deepest reaches of memory.

The Dawning of the Nation of Vasena

Though it may seem difficult to ascertain, Vasena has not always been as it was. If the nation at times feels divided in some ways, it's because the land once housed many countries, all of whom would play a part in the birthing of our single land. So different was it back then, one might not believe that human men and women like ourselves did not always rule in whole. Oh, no. Vasena has an expansive legacy shaped by many peoples, both human and non-human, and we have all of these to thank for the interesting history buried beneath the sands.

Looking back to the earliest point in recorded memory, it seems reasonable to scholars that the humans of Vasena have not always lived here, but poured east from the jungles around Vajunaptra. How so many people could grow out from a single city is lost to us, but the lay of our cities suggests that even our most ancient places: the palace at Ber-Ismah, the temple complex north of

Jerich, the pillars of Hakeshet, were all set upon more ancient ruins that are unfamiliar to us. Whatever kingdom once existed is long gone, but the sizes of the stones they cut suggest beings of tremendous size, possibly titans or walking gods of some kind, though we may never know.

What we do know is that the lamia kingdoms once stretched from the western jungles to the eastern mountain ranges, and that these serpent-folk, though initially only cautious about humans, became increasingly violent as our numbers grew and our influence spread. The lamia races, in league with the trolls as some sort of "lesser" or "servile class", waged bitter war with the scattered human tribes for a number of decades. It was not until around fifteen-hundred years ago that a sheik, Ahmesseker the Feared, united several clans and drove the serpents to the north and east. He carved out a safe haven for our kind near the mouth of the forest, and thus was borne the Age of Sultans.

In that day, we had not crossed the great river and had no true cities of our own. Lamias were an ever-present threat, as well as the trolls who lumbered across the countryside. In his twilight years, Bar-Ammos, the grandson of Ahmesseker, began a campaign to wipe the trolls from the earth and drive the lamias to the far reaches of the desert. It was in this time that the first cities were founded: Ber-Ismah at the heart of the human territory, the port city of Gath, Meshba, where the four highways meet, and Hakeshet, in the doorway to the eastern lands. With these four bastions standing proudly, the descendants of Bar-Ammos had brought the beast-folk under heel in only a century.

Within two-hundred years, the humans had created two kingdoms- Vajra to the west of the great river, and Susa to the east. As they began to war with each other, the lamia tribes took another opportunity to strike, bringing their own armies and the subservient trolls against mankind, and the whole land descended into bloodshed until one man stepped forward. Nhali-Ra, unifier king, who with only diplomacy and wisdom ushered in an age of peace that Vasena has not seen

since. He befriended the lamia races and quelled their thirst for blood, then founded Meshom at the Delta al-Hyat. It would be two-hundred years after his passing that the nation would divide itself once more.

Between six and seven-hundred years ago, in the fifteenth year of Ishak Balba's reign, a man from the east called Runnar Darsidda brought a terrible war to the entire world. Seizing opportunity, one of the sultan's retainers, Addis Amran, slew his master and tried to usurp power over all Vasena, but he was cut down by a priest, a young man named Ahrik, and a defense was organized. After consolidating the nation beneath a single throne in Meshom, Ahrik moved the people to campaign against Runnar and stop his advance. A site was chosen- the temple at Hakeshet, and Ibrahim al'Basir used a powerful magic to raise the Iron Wall from the depths of the desert. With popular support at his side, Ahrik deified himself and the title of pharaoh and became the first effective ruler in decades. Since the end of the Age of Sultans, kingship has been divine, and Pharaoh has been the vessel.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Geographical Features of Vasena

For how short and simple this lesson is, I feel almost silly deliberating on it for as long as I do, but understanding the geography of Vasena isn't merely important for knowing trade routes. It's needed for survival. With a great many land features divided by great tracts of desert, identifying your surroundings is the difference between selling rope fibers in Gath and dying in the al-Muat.

I mention that name. The al-Muat is the single-largest land feature in all Vasena. Divided by three rivers and spanning a continent, the name literally means "The Death", and its suitable. Other than the plants that cling tightly along the water's edge, al-Muat is an all-consuming beast that has always eaten away at the heart of our great land. For every devil, though, there is a savior. Piercing through the heart of the vast expanse is the life source for all the land- al-Hyat.

With a name meaning "The Life", the waters of al-Hyat are a natural contrast to the parched, dangerous wilderness. Many people believe that there are three rivers in Vasena that source from near Meshom, but the water actually runs east from Vajunaptra before splitting near the capital and traveling north and south to the seas. To the north, the river spills into the cooler Silver Sea, while the southern mouth is found near Akstet in the Sea of Fire. Apart from these waters, known geographic features include the Kashur Mountains to the west, the Iron Mountains to the east, and the Pale Lake near Vajunaptra. As a scholar, it's embarrassing to say, but for centuries, Vasena has lacked both the means and the will to explore into the dense forests beyond the holy city, but we hope to know someday what lies on the other side of Vajunaptra, our ancestral home.

Beyond the Iron Wall

To be truthful, much of the knowledge we have about the world east of the wall is from the age before we were separated. The last we knew of the world, Runnar was facing the armies of the fey and barbarian hordes, and we were struggling to build a united country. Much can change in centuries, and I can imagine any prior information on the easterlands would be unreliable.

From our vantage point along certain portions of the wall, we are able to see the goings-on of two very specific groups. Near East Gate, one can look over the edge and see the cut-off portion of Hakeshet still surviving as a residence, but for the people of the east. Toward Akstet fortress, South Gate watches over the very ancient Kourmar and the ghostly people and strange monsters that inhabit it. At these great distances, we cannot know much, but it must be more than they know of us.

The creatures of their world are all thickly hairy and covered with antlers, horns, teeth, and claws. They are reminiscent of trolls, even the creatures they hunt, and there is no variation. For as far as our men were able to see from South Gate, rich plant life went on in perpetuity save the highest reaches of the mountains, but take no offense, children. Their forests are as dangerous as our own jungle, though significantly less contained. Vasena is better for it, and so are you.

To point, it is believed that the people beyond the wall are of a pinkish pallor, looking sickly and weak instead of having normal flesh like our own. Men and women alike dress themselves in very heavy clothing, and it looks as if all the eastern peoples engage in shepherding of some kind. Their buildings are similar to ours, though quarried from granite instead of sandstone and significantly less beautiful. From this little that we have seen, we may only assume that these people live lives similar to our own, but less interesting, more miserable, and probably shorter.

Again, Vasena is superior, and you are fortunate.

Creatures that Exist in Vasena- Man-Beasts

In no wasted word, man-beasts once had a much greater presence in Vasena than they do today and, though we are largely at fault for it, has Vasena truly lost anything with the destruction of these cultures? Our own history is as complete as it will be, and we need not concern ourselves with the study of the weak and inferior, but for the sake of education, I shall indulge any whimsies you may have about our other inhabitants, and I shall do so in short order.

The lamias, so much speaking about their tribes, the Leyl and the Nar, I wish to be done with them. Having once been unified as we humans find ourselves today, the Leyl Agaani were the scribes, merchants, and priest class of their ancient society. By contrast, the Nar found themselves to be skilled in methods of war, mechanical and architectural feats, and anything that valued physical ability alongside mental acuity. I have communicated with lamias at several points, but I could never be bothered with their "songs" or political turmoil, and I feel as if I've missed nothing important by omitting them largely from the lesson plan. If you wish to learn, there's a world to explore.

Further, there are two other races that I consider man-like at all, and I only do so out of respect for their walking upright. The jungle troll, seeing as the rest have been wiped from the desert, are a foul lot: massive, brutish, foul-smelling, and of poor intellect, I know not why God would cast them to this world other than to become a great joke, fade, perish, and disappear into memory lost. They

truly are a pitiable creature. By contrast, I am greatly curious about a creature that I have not even clearly seen. In both seas that contain us, I have seen shadows and shapes that moved as if a great number of fish was swimming as one, but upon emergence, I find these "fish" to be something else entirely. Bluish, ugly, and standing up like men, I know not what these creatures are- if they are anything more than an older man's mind failing him, or if these are a race I must take the time to learn about.

I tell you, judging by their manners and habits alone, I would decline, but one among them intrigued me by staring at me from a great distance for some time. It was eerie. Too human.

Creatures that Exist in Vasena- Common Beasts

While there is no short supply of the mythical and magical in Vasena, common beasts are a part of daily life and are far more noticed, though less thought about, than our creatures of legend. These, I refer to as common beasts- animals that are found regularly and have no special properties. For our purposes, I will go into only the detail that is necessary for your understanding.

Domestic Animals

Domestic animals are self-explanatory. They include pets, food animals, and the more common natural pests. Here in eastern Vasena, most people will have a dog, and wealthier people will have cats. Whereas dogs are useful shepherding creatures and hardy, cats are idolized, at times worshiped, and bred for a pristine appearance. In much of western Vasena, the opposite is true. Few people had cats, to my surprise, and dogs were unlike our own, being a sharp-looking beast

with short hair and narrow features. Beyond these common creatures, the richest will import creatures from the jungle to include exotic birds, terrifying monsters, and greater cats that deserve only the utmost respect.

Other animals one might encounter include cattle, sheep, goats, domestic chickens, wild chickens, peacocks, cranes by the water's edge, horses, and oxen. Common farm pests include rats, the very painful scorpions, scarab beetles, the deadly widowing spider with its single, green stripe, and coyotes, which are more harmless than they appear. Further out into the world, one might also see lesser wolves, which are dangerous in packs, a variety of other insects, and large predators near the jungles. Take note to avoid herds of wild cattle, as a stampede can be dangerous. Also, avoid wild horses, watch out for serpents, and always test water for the presence of crocodiles.

More Dangerous Animals

The aforementioned animals, though dangerous, can often be easily avoided and require no amount of combat ingenuity to manage. While some beasts, like dire wolves and rats, are merely larger cousins of the common variety, there are a number of monsters that one must take special care in dealing with.

The first type of animal I'll outline is the vulture, which comes in two varieties: the savanna vulture, and the high steppe condor. Each is a carrion feeder, but the vulture will pick at live prey as well, while the fearful condor will only feed on decaying flesh. The condor's telltale sign is a plume of red on its underbelly, along with its longest wing feathers having a beautiful bluish hue. By contrast, the vulture is an uglier beast with grey feathers and a white underbelly. When encountering vultures, be sure not to appear weakened, avoid any carrion near the road, and dispose of all waste, including excrement, dead animals, and food waste. In a fight, I'm told that it's easiest to clip one of the vultures' wings to slow its advance and make it an easy target.

Another beast to look out for, if you ever make the pilgrimage to Vajunaptra, is the animal called the 'blood ape'. Towering, wide, and covered with thick, red-orange fur, the blood ape is territorial, extremely aggressive, and sports a pair of horns that it uses to gore its foes and challenge other males for breeding dominance. Because of their vicious nature, it was assumed that blood apes were man eaters, but many scholars now believe them to be merely protecting their homes.

Another sort of creature to be aware of is the greater insect, coming in two varieties. There is the walking sort, resembling a wolf-sized ant, and a flying sort, which is about as big as a vulture. In both cases, the monsters are covered in a thick armor, and their heads are all but invulnerable to direct attacks. In these instances, it's important to remain with a larger caravan and avoid any unnatural looking hills. As long as main highways are adhered to and you seek refuge with local priests, any of these wretched creatures should serve no issue.

In the past, many other creatures threatened humanity, but they have since been erased from the world. At one time, the Vasenian wilds were inhabited by lions, jackals, giant scorpions and other great devils, but the priesthood and its various sects have done well to eradicate the most heinous of monsters from the world and drive them to extinction. Now, we shall discuss creatures that never existed at all.

Creatures that Exist in Vasena- The Imaginary

For all the wondrous inhabitants that Vasena possesses, many people are given to thoughts of wild and fantastical creatures of many natures and compositions. For every real living thing, there are ten inventions of the mind, beings of such myriad natures as it would be ridiculous if they were real. These are creatures of legend, and though it is thought that they once roamed the

landscape, we have no evidence that any such creatures existed. In other instances, such beings are an invention of the mind. Existing in some form, the spoken word has taken the truth of reality and stretched it to a point beyond recognition. Such is the nature of humanity, to make something of nothing.

To point, I shall begin with creations of human imagination, stuffs that never existed, but are so ubiquitous to our people as to be mistaken for truth. The first of these, of course, are the djinn. It was said that djinn were of many types and inhabited many forms, and that they were capable of altering form as they saw fit. While nearly limitless in scope of power, the djinn were said to have been kept in check by contracts with various gods, which begs the question of how djinn were able to be trapped in agreements in the first place. It is thought that they were not always beings of great magic, that they were something else entirely, and that they gave up what they once were in exchange for the powers they possess, sacrificing infinite freedom for nearly-infinite power. To the scholar, this seems like a foolish endeavor at face value, to gain power only to have it bent to the wills of others, but power is an alluring serpent, and like a snake, its bite is deadly and unexpected.

In order to maintain the concept of djinn despite their absence in our world, many superstitious people and even scholars have given strength to the notion that djinn lie dormant in various locations, artifacts, and other vessels, waiting for the right combination of actions to set them free once more. There are tales of enchanted buildings, treasures, and even a story I know about a curse-bearing coin to explain the restriction of their power to manifest. Whatever logic and information is thrown at the adherents of these tales, they pile excuse after excuse to distract from their unfounded ideas. Whatever is thought about these beings, one must be sure to remember that legend is just that - legend.

Though there are many tales of djinn and the nature of them in both fictional and educational texts, there has been no report of a djinn sighting in

nearly seven-hundred years. If such power had once existed in any creature, surely they would not disappear all at once. While many natural natural occurrences were thought to be of magical nature (such as the bringing of rain, natural disasters, and even seasonal patterns), these are now known to be of geological origin or acts of God himself. With much of our ancient knowledge supplanted by modern science, the djinn have no place in our thoughts.

Another ridiculous creation of the mind is the sand worm, an animal that was truly once thought to exist. Though we can now look back on such ideas and laugh, there was a time when Vasenians truly feared giant worms ripping from the earth and consuming livestock, caravans, and entire towns. I know it must sound silly to you, children, but the scholars of today believe these ideas to be sightings of the now-extinct antlion run amok. It is easy to see how the uneducated mind might fear whatever tale it is told, but you are capable of using greater logic, so I know you are with me in seeing how foolish such notions might seem. Once thought to appear at random in the world to feed and quickly disappear, you may rest assured with the understanding that no such creature has ever existed or ever will.

We come into another nightmare grounded in reality but stretched into falsehood. Werebeasts are another creature once thought to exist, but driven from our lands. In reality, it's quite impossible for anyone to be a true shape-shifter, as no such magic exists. Even further, it is believed that these beasts were humans incapable of controlling their abilities; by that logic, shape-shifting would be some form of disease, which is even more laughable than voluntary magic. The ability to become a wolf, a lion, a serpent, or any other form of animal is a ludicrous notion that must be tossed aside.

Taking another step, I will touch on something that does exist, but has been exaggerated to a point beyond rationality. It's true that undead exist. Every so often, through dark magics or an unyielding force of will, a human may live on

after death, their husk serving as no shell of the former self, but using only primary motor skills and basic instinct to wander the land. These are sad beings with no sense of self, and though once a serious threat to the world, the priesthood does an excellent job of culling their numbers. Taking from truth, though, we come into the wraith, a dark creature invented to scare truants into obedience. With powers on par with lesser gods, the existence of these monsters is a thinly-veiled lie. If anyone tells you that a wraith or daemon exists, you need only shake your head, laugh, and go on ignoring them.

Our last gaze into the stuff of legend is the mummy, a figure that is very real but has been twisted and mangled beyond recognition. In truth, mummies are dead bodies that have been formally prepared, wrapped in special linens, and buried in a ceremonious fashion. According to eastern Vasenian religion, these bodies will literally rise into an afterlife and continue on as if they had not died at all. To the rest of us, they're merely dead, and their spirits ascend to the next plane of existence. For the superstitious, these corpses are capable of rising as undead and carrying on, keeping the intelligence of their former lives, but also somehow gaining power through undeath. The knowledgeable see folly in such thought, and it's important that you discount these vacuous beliefs.

Vasena, the Nation- Important Cities and Places

As inheritors of great wealth, you are both blessed and cursed to lives infinitely more complex and demanding than those of the lower castes. As future merchants, scholars, and priests in your own right, you will find yourselves in a variety of places all across our great land. For the duties you will have to perform, it is important that you have a general understanding of these places. You are the

generation to come, the influential names and faces to be. The destiny of Vasena will rest upon your narrow shoulders, so you must prepare your minds with an intricate understanding of the world around you. Bearing this in mind, we begin our introductory lesson on political geography.

Places of Import Relative to the Children of Merchants

Beyond being born into or finding yourselves selected to join the ruling class, the world of mercantile trade will be one of the most profitable, rewarding, and precarious career paths you find yourselves in. As inheritors of Vasena's great legacy of capital commerce, you will be exposed to ideas as ancient as traveling in large groups and as new as controlling market prices on commodity goods through creating artificial scarcity. These are higher concepts not intended for this basic level of education, but they're a window into how well you must understand the world in order to achieve success. For this lesson, I will only touch on places relevant to you.

As much as Meshom is the literal and spiritual capital of the nation, Meshba to the east is the financial capital. Nestled on the high plains east of the Fortress of Jerich, Meshba is the beating heart of our trade economy, and it is the place through where most commodity goods pass on their journey to other places. Once approved through inspection by the Administration of Goods Consumption, these many products find themselves sold much faster than if they had not been inspected. Because of this, most non-food goods are brought all the way to Meshba from the far corners of the kingdom only to see slowly trickle back after approval. Entire industries are based on this trade foundation.

Besides Meshba, other cities share the burden of economic importance in near-equal part. For example, the southwestern port of Gath is seen as the main window to the sparsely-populated islands in the Sea of Fire. Though it imports many of the resources it requires, it sports an abundance of sea life, gems, and obsidian, and it is our nation's only source of whale oil and squid ink. On the

opposite side of the country, al-Murrat is where Vasena desperately-needed precious metals are dredged and minted. As the only reliable source for silver, spelter, tungsten, and other alchemy metals, al-Murrat is an essential part of Vasena's trade industry.

Often ignored, Ber-Kamal is more a village than a city, but its importance cannot be denied. Set into the north end of the Kashur Mountains, Ber-Kamal is as vital to our ancestral history as it is to our economy. The great cave systems that the city watches over are an untouched window into our ancient past and serve to this day as the silent homes of many goods. When surplus commodities cannot find sale, or when an economic shortfall occurs, these items will find refuge in the dry, cool spaces that once housed our earliest settlers. Set into the mountains, the people who carve deeper into the stone not only make more room to store goods, they also quarry more than half of Vasena's sandstone and limestone.

Places of Import Relative to the Children of Priests

As valuable as commerce is to the spirit of Vasena, the dominance of the priesthood in daily life is what truly defines our people. While only the wealthy and educated or privy to the world of capital markets, every living being in the country belongs to one religion or another. With an official religious center and entire major cities dedicated to the worship of gods, Vasena is built to accommodate the ideals of Holy Rite and Holy Pilgrimage, each of which are adhered to by most everyone today. To simplify this lesson, we will discuss the cities in order of visitation along the standard pilgrimage.

The starting point for most everyone on their religious journey is the city of Hakeshet. Built into the side of the Iron Wall itself, it is seen as both the literal beginning of the country and the figurative beginning of the journey toward enlightenment. There, one can lay eyes upon the Garden of the Dais, a sacred place where none may enter, said to hold the secret to the wall's power. Within

the city also lies the main convent for the Order of the Eye of the Falcon, Sinan, a sect of warrior priests whose primary responsibility is the regular culling of threats to the local populace and maintaining the Garden of the Dais. After staying in the city for three days, pilgrims regularly make the journey west in groups of one-hundred or more at a time.

Moving from there, we come to Meshba once more, a short stop on the pilgrimage. It's not the main city itself that people come to, but the Temple of the Order of the Serpent, home of the Thu'bani. Another sect of Vasena's polytheistic mythology, the Thu'bani are a group of sorcerers and priests dedicated to the understanding of magic and its influence on our world. Led by the very wise Imran al-Hayyah, the Temple houses the Obelisk of Hathoth, the patron god of luck. After receiving the blessing of the Thu'bani and resupplying in Meshba, the journey continues toward the capital.

Nestled on the quiet waters of al-Hyat where it splits, the city of Meshom serves as both our nation's seat of power and religious center. With many temples, ancient places, and an entire industry founded on the Holy Pilgrimage, its importance in this practice cannot be stressed enough. Housing the royal residence of Pharaoh, who is believed by many to be some sort of incarnate god, multitudes gather to look upon him when he makes his weekly address to the priest collective. The city is also home to the Order of the Crocodile, the Sophek'hi, who are responsible for the legal and administrative proceedings of all priests in Vasena. They also prepare Pharaoh for the afterlife and, when a new one is selected, help transfer the spirit of the living god into its next vessel.

The next step on the journey west is the capital of western Vasena and our home, Ber-Ismah. Stewarded by the sultan, a nominal title for the governor of the region, our city is important as both the gateway to the west and home of the Order of the Sun, the Osin'ni, the people responsible for the collection of tithes, the distribution of taxes, and the management of the priesthoods' finances. In

addition to serving the national religion, Ber-Ismah is the home of our own religion, the Mu'mia, the only true religion that serves the only true god. For the followers of Mu'mia, the Mu'min, Ber-Ismah is the last stop on their journey across Vasena, but for the rest, there is one last city to move on to.

Because of its location and the dangers associated with traveling there, few pilgrims actually visit the Holy City of Vajunaptra, instead opting to return home from Ber-Ismah. A quiet place seated on the Pale Lake, it serves as home to the Order of the Jackal, the followers of the god Keset, who are tasked with watching over a number of sacred relics and artifacts of power. Its temple complex is as vast as it is unknown, and many vines choke at its remains. Hidden away in a thicket of trees and wicked monsters, the city has slowly been consumed by the creeping jungles, a relic of its former self with little inkling of what once was. If you find yourselves making the journey out there to complete a pilgrimage or for any other reason, be very aware. Be stringently aware.

Places of Import Relative to the Children of Soldiers

Frankly, students, we may be short with this section. Since the fortified cities of Vasena are so similar, and their functions obvious, we need only touch lightly on their relative locations, importance, and uses relative to the workings of our nation and your future careers. Wardened by commanders, each fortress is the heart of a larger city, and each is an important point in the north-south commercial trade of Vasena, in addition to beings its primary system of defense from threats on either side of the country. Having not seen real war of any sort in half a millennium, the usefulness of these places as actual castle defenses has diminished, but they are excellent methods for deterring banditry on the Silver Road.

Beginning in the north, Pria Fortress is a shorter structure with a large number of gates. Seated on a shelf of exposed sedimentary rock, it is most important for being the first secure place that dredgers can rest going south on

the Silver Road. Because of the large presence of civilians around the fortress and the scope of the city of Pria beyond, security is more relaxed than you might find elsewhere. Taxes in Pria are also significantly lower, but the presence of outlaws is greater for it.

Taking the next step along the route, you'll arrive at the Fortress of Jerich, sitting high on Barous Hill in Meshom's east end. A highly-militarized area and the castle for the capital and countryside, you'll find refuge in one of dozens of inns in the city, but housing will be both small and expensive. The nature of business in Jerich and Meshom means that there are few opportunities to expand, but it's an ideal place to apprentice, especially if you wish to train under a master. Jerich is also the city that houses the Jal'Ayla War College, the Ministry of Sorcerers, and the main office for the Stonemasons' League, so there are opportunities for a variety of students.

The last leg of the trade route ends in Akstet, with the fortress overlooking the delta. Since it sits on no natural hill, the walls are built tall, wide, and deep into the ground. With most merchants growing tired and complacent on the Silver Road, the south end is the most likely place to encounter criminals, so the fortress regularly sends archer patrols and hires mercenaries to watch the northern reaches. As for the city itself, an arm of the Stonemasons' Guild has an office that specializes in mud bricks, which are used in ornamentation, and a guild that manages architecture for public buildings. Directly across the river, the town of Keshva guards South Gate, a portion of the wall that goes largely ignored, much like to town itself. Because of the locations of these cities and the money invested in local security, they're some of the safest and quietest regions in the kingdom.

Vasena, the Nation- Continuing Divisions

Even in this age of stability and calm, divisions remain in our quiet nation. Being a place of great wealth, Vasena is also host to many sorts of criminals, all of whom are a thorn in the side of the common good and the rule of law, and all of whom force us to build infrastructure to accommodate their ill means. While any nation must have its police, its roaming patrols, and its standing armies, Vasena is unique in that it attempts to mesh two different cultures into one, so even these like forces must come into conflict with each other at some point. Naturally, this creates many social, cultural, and religious conflicts that persist even into the modern age.

As much as Nhali-Ra had worked to unify the kingdoms, and though Ahrik did so once more in recent memory, the kingdoms of Vajra and Susa seem as divided to scholars and political analysts as they had been before. This separation of kingdoms and cultures is clearly-defined to those wise enough to recognize it and occurs for a variety of reasons. Economics have a heavy hand in this, as they do in so many other aspects of Vasenian life; while the west prides itself in the manufacture and export of exotic and artisan goods, the east trades in commodities and precious metals. The east produces much of the nation's food, timber, and wine, but the west is the largest source of meat and the only source of the marble quarried for fine homes and monuments. The shift in importance away from western exports has caused a rift between traders from both sides of al-Hyat.

Culture plays another important part in the division between the halves of our nation. Though brought together under two pharaohs and having had the age of sultan ruling authority brought to an end centuries ago, western Vasena has clung tightly to its past and seems as Vajran as history claims it was. Mu'mia is as alive as it has always been, though Pharaoh attempts to stamp it out. Our men

wear the conservative dress of the past and shun eastern Vasena's decadence and defiance of the will of God. Our women are family women and understand their place in society, unlike the unruly and troublesome women of the east who bring wrath down upon the heads of their families. Though the east threatens to subdue the will of the west, it has remained resilient in adherence to the ways of our fathers.

You have noticed by now a continuing pattern in the points of conflict between sections of Vasena. For all our talk, much of the differences between us stem from a single subject: the religious. Without Mu'mia to stand upon, our people would easily flee to the impurities of Susa's way of life (I use the name 'Susa' in reference to eastern Vasena, a shortening of the term). If there was no fear of the wrath of an almighty god, how quickly would the people of Vajra dip their hands, and then whole arms, into the sins of the east? Indeed, the false pagan deities that so many dynasties are built upon invite concepts like self-service, living for pleasure, lives that are focus not on dutiful appropriation, but on entertainment and the lust of enjoyment. Almost the antithesis of the Mu'min, the way of life for Pharaonic mythology is incompatible with western thought.

As you age, remember always the lessons of your fathers. Enemies will come at you from all sides, but you must steel your hearts against their evil, or you will be tempted to walk beside them as friends. This aside is not for your education, but because I care for you, children. You will be exposed to great evils, for evil is the prevailing rule of law in our nation, but if you remain true to these words and your siring, you will have peace, success, and long life. Adhere, children. Adhere and obey, and I promise you better lives than all the wonders, women, and works of man that Susa can provide.

I have spoken long on the religious differences between our nations, and though true, not all of it has been objective. For the sake of your unbiased understanding, so you may see truth, I will introduce you to the history and

teachings of the prevailing religions and a few lesser ones, that you might decide for yourselves what truth is and not follow blindly, but with your hearts. In addition, I will whet your appetites on two subjects that have always defined our nation with great clarity above all other nations: education and economics.

Pay careful attention.

Vasena, the Nation- The Religious, Education, and Economics

Though I find myself tingling with excitement to discuss the Mu'mia with young minds, I would be remiss not to first teach you about other religions that exist. Many of them have been around far longer than the Mu'min have existed, but I teach in this order not without some amount of bias. It is my hope that you will see the logic in our way against the tapestry of foolishness that the others compose. By the end of this lesson, the learned student will point and laugh at how ridiculous these other schools of thought are compared to our own.

A Short Lesson on Religions About Which We Know Little

Since our knowledge on the subject is so limited, I will be short with the many religions that existed before the dawn of Man in Vasena. We know that

whatever Titan society existed before had its own religion, as evidenced by the number of ruins built in intricate formations. As older parts of our cities that were built upon these ruins have needed repair, the ruling class has seen fit to cordon off areas of archaeological import for study. After noting patterns in the size, arrangement, and configuration of many of these buildings, we find them oriented in observance of celestial bodies, seasonal patterns, and day-night cycles. Whomever these great creatures were, it appears to us that they worshiped a combination of the sun, moon, and certain heavenly bodies to include the planets Seton, Titan, and Cain. Beyond that, their religion is unknown to us.

The trolls are another race about whom we know little from our own findings. Instead, I procured information from Hamza al-Fulani, a friend I share with the lamia races. His studies on their teachings and their knowledge of others is the source of this short lesson. According to Hamza, troll religion is a dying teaching among their dying kind, one of naturism, an idea that spirits inhabit all things and are released upon death, where they are reincarnated into other natural essences. Sometimes, living things can embody many spirits, and it is thought that great people, rivers, and even mountains can be the inheritors of this myriad life force. The idea of reincarnation is not an uncommon one, as you'll see in the paragraphs to follow.

A Note on the Religion of the Lamia Peoples

Stepping further into known territory, Hamza learned much of the lamias' school of thought and has shared a great deal with me. From what he said, their society is founded upon a religion that has two opposing sides: Leyl and Nar, darkness and light, night and day, the brightness of fire and the sun. Not to be confused with our own concepts of light and dark as good and evil, the Leyl, people of the Night Song, live according to their definition of darkness and the night, lives of tranquility, calm, and understanding. Their side of the shared religion is that wisdom and being slow to act are respectable courses, that the lives of others and conservative ideals must be taken seriously, and that their way

of life must be observed unchanged via strict adherence to their peaceful way of life.

The other side of this coin is the Nar, people of the Fire Song, what we would consider the light. Again, throw away the concept that light is inherently good, as the Nar Agaani are a loud and boisterous race that values action, strength, and the ability to affect change. Like the Leyl Agaani, the Nar require a life dedicated to following the established norm, but their status quo involves solving conflict with war, living lives of great individual meaning, and proving themselves through adversity to a point of fault. As opposite as these schools of thought may seem, their foundations and self-identities are remarkably similar. The lamias are a secluded people who shun outsiders of all kinds. They have great respect for elders, traditions, and their shared past, and each side takes great pride in its beliefs. They also live communally, each individual having few personal possessions. Because of this lifestyle, trust and honor are revered in both cultures, and those who break the ideal are exiled forthwith.

A Lesson on the Lie of Atumsi

We now step into the modern age and its current religions. I ignore such schools as the Oracle of the Moon, the Countenance, and the worshipers of the beasts of the gods, as these are so heavily discounted and have so few followers, it would be a waste of our time to speak on them at length. Instead, let us turn our attention to an equally-false teaching that I give credit to only because it has the largest following in all Vasena- Pharaonic mythology. They call it something else, the Atumsi, which means 'those who follow the king', but their chief god Atum is as much a king as he is real, which is to say not at all. I call it mythology because that's what it is, but I digress.

In an age before the dawn of modern science, a collection of ruling bodies created Pharaonic mythology for two reasons: to explain the workings of nature in a way the uneducated could understand, and to give heavenly approval to their

assumed authority. The ploy worked magnificently and, though they have had some amount of contraction with the dawn of rational thought, many remain followers out of habit and as a requirement by law in some areas. Whether or not one accepts the existence of their pantheon as fact, every Vasenian is forced to recognize the authority of Pharaoh and speak of his deification despite the lunacy of the concept.

The mythology is founded upon a variety of gods: twenty-nine in all, and all of them having the shapes of different animals impressed upon the forms of men. Rather than being all-encompassing, each of these has a sphere of influence under their control, and instead of being benevolent like our own God, they are petty beings given to fits of base human activity, flawed in their design and thought. They make war with each other, the explanation the temple gives for conflicting weather patterns and natural disasters, and they show displeasure to their followers through famine, disease, and other lesser hardships. In an attempt to appease these perfectly-natural occurrences, followers have been given over the years to rituals of many kinds including stripping naked and covering themselves with ashes, burning vast quantities of food and livestock, starving themselves, and drowning their very children in the waters of al-Hyat. To the outside, these pathetic attempts at pleasing gods that don't exist seem insane, but to the uneducated mind, any act can be permissible if it can be explained.

Without going too far into detail about the nature of their mythology, for it is so complex, I will touch on the basics. Within the house of the twenty-nine gods exists the supreme god, Atum, after whom the current pharaoh Atum-Rah, takes his name (an act of incredible arrogance). When the previous pharaoh dies, it is believed that Atum ascends from the body and waits until the next pharaoh takes the throne, at which time he descends and lives on through the next divine king. What becomes of the body of each pharaoh is where the teachings get ridiculous. Though Atum leaves the husk, the spirit of the man himself still inhabits it and is capable of living on into a higher form of undeath through

embalming. This is a ritual used only for the wealthiest, most-important Vasenians, meaning that in their religion, heavenly ascension can only be achieved through the accumulation of worldly riches.

I know you're laughing by now. I am, too. For the sake of argument, I think we've covered the subject of Pharaoic mythology enough. With nothing of the false teaching from before remaining, let us take steps forward into matters of truth and logic- Mu'mia.

Teachings on the Truth of Mu'mia

You have been brought up in the ways of our people, so I know that I need only touch lightly on the subject for your understanding, but many Mu'min know nothing about the founding of our way, the origins of many of its teachings, or the Prophet Khalid bin'Khomeini. In order to further open your eyes to the knowledge you've already received, we will start with a history of the way, followed by the influence it has had on our nation and the importance of making sure it remains alive, despite what the rest of the country may attempt to do.

Only a hundred years or so after the death of Pharaoh Nhali-Ra, Vasena had fallen into a poor state of moral bankruptcy that threatened to consume the nation. There was no respect between brothers, life had no value, and the rule of law was treated with little importance; the throne found difficulty exacting its will without the use of martial force and constant public executions, and the court system was laughable and approached dissolution. This period of history is what is known as the Twenty-King Dynasty, a sixty-year period during which eighteen different men held the reins of the nation. Of these men, five ruled for less than one year, the shortest of which was Pharaoh Nefresi III, who was assassinated eleven days after his coronation. The architect of his death, Pharaoh Amraset II, would be murdered only four months later. It is into this period that our great prophet was born for the purpose of saving our people from despair.

A commoner and an orphan among the Khomeini tribe near Gath, Khalid was a pious man who, through his will and the hand of the Almighty, gained great renown and became a powerful merchant, a feat unheard of at the time. Within twenty years of his birth, Khalid commanded a shipping empire that ran barges between Gath, Meshom, and the city of Pria; by the time he was forty, southwest Vasena essentially belonged to him, so great was his material wealth, but he looked out at the world of decadence and found only sorrow in himself. Dissatisfied with what the promises of pagan gods had given him, he retreated to his olive groves, which is where our story begins.

Beneath the branches of an olive tree, it is said that a dove alighted from the heavens, took an olive branch in its beak, and rested on Khalid's hand. Taking this as a sign of peace and understanding from God, he forsook many of his worldly possessions and retreated into a cave on Mt. Safir for six months, during which his many servants tended to him and begged for him to return. After the half-year, Khalid walked out of the cave a new man; in his hands, he carried a book that he'd written, a collection of teachings heard directly from the mouth of God, the Holy <word for pages>. With this book of teachings, he sought to undo the great evils that he saw in the world.

Through the power of God, the voices of many stood with Khalid, and he began to spread the word of the Way, the Mu'mia, to the disaffected people of Vasena. Traveling to the city of Ber-Ismah, by then an unimportant place, he received support from the local governate to build the first temple, making the city his seat of operations. By his fortieth year, western Vasena obeyed his solemn word, the abandoning of the degeneracy of Atumsi caused the region to flourish, and Pharaoh's rule was threatened for the first time in ages. To stave Khalid's power, armies were sent from Jerich, Meshom, and Keshva. They met him in battle on the fields east of the city; they outnumbered the prophet five-to-one, but their resolve was weak and God was with Khalid. The armies of Pharaoh were crushed and driven all the way to the capital. Khalid drew his sword against

Pharaoh, who vowed to leave the region be if his life was spared. In that day, Vajra was born once more, and it would remain so for centuries thereafter.

Mu'mia reversed the way of life for many followers of the way, but for their benefit. The roles of men and women in the family unit were restructured into something solid, and strict laws founded on the unbreakable word of God and not on fallible man ushered in an age of lawful obedience that caused Ber-Ismaah to become the most desirable place to live in all Vasena. A massive temple complex was built on the site of the great battle with Pharaoh's armies, and Khalid bin'Khomeini would live another thirty years thereafter in his palace nearby. With his life in its twilight moments, the prophet gave a final address to reaffirm the teachings of the way and give peace to those who would mourn him. Then, at the age of seventy-seven, Khalid retreated into his private living area, where his family remained with him until God called him away. Though the man died, his legacy still lives on in us.

Mu'mia has always been a stronger belief system than the others because it demands only the best from humanity - piety, discipline, and lives given in servitude to the way and to others. Through these ideals of self-sacrifice and nobility, Vajra entered a golden age that ended only by the rising of Runnar Darsiddus, during which our people, fearful that God would not protect them, cast their lot in with Pharaoh Ahrik the Protector and united under a common Vasenian flag once more. Ever since, the quality of life for our people has slowly deteriorated, for we have forsaken the will of God. Let that be a lesson to you, children. Do not turn away. Do not turn away.

A Lesson on the Importance of Education to Vasenian Youth

Not for the sake of puffing ourselves up, I defer to the importance of education to you young ones who now sit around your master. For a few of you, this is an opportunity missed by many others in your families, and your fathers paid a great price for your learning, so you appreciate the gift of knowledge; for

most of you, however, schooling is a boring activity about which you are not serious and have little interest. You are fools. Idiots. You should be thoroughly beaten to right your minds, that you might not waste the possibilities that rest at your fingertips. Our social structure is such that you can ascend to great heights from nothingness, but to do so, you must be men of great import, and the only way to achieve this is through knowledge, through education.

The social structure of Vasena exists in a way similar to the many pyramids that dot the eastern half of the nation. There is a massive labor base that makes up nearly all of the country's work force. Since most farmers grow only enough to feed their families and purchase little else, I will omit them from our statistics, as they are a non-factor. Instead, let us focus on the laymen, the rudest of individuals who lay brick and mortar, who cart, who carry messages, and who harvest the materials that compose the commodities market. These people perform jobs that anyone can do with little skill and training, and they live at the bottom of our system, having lives so unimportant that their deaths would not so much as be a blink in our economic system. We move upward.

It is my understanding that in other cultures, the soldier is a highly-valued individual in a class on its own. This is not the case in Vasena. Since service is involuntary and conscripts are regulated by poverty and homelessness, the lowest tier of soldier is seen as little more than a laymen with a different set of tools. After their service is completed, these individuals are released to society, while the top five percent are offered positions in the enlisted class, which we will discuss later. Above the soldier, we have uneducated craftsmen and vending merchants, and hawkers. These are people who provide goods that are of a quality fit for the lower classes, and they require some amount of training, but no formal education. These bottom levels make up nearly the entire population of the country.

Our next steps on the pyramid are nearly-matched in prestige. Entry-level

priests and servants are servile classes who need no education, but the genteel and specialized natures of their work beg some amount of respect. In the past, servants were spat upon, but a new class has separated itself from the old, these people of refinement, cup-bearers, tutors, and personal attendants who manage the households of their masters with deftness. In the opposite way, priesthood was unattainable to all but the ruling class, but a need for warrior-priests to police the roads with arsenals of magic and weaponry gave birth to the lower priest, who serves no religious function, but must be confirmed into priesthood after undergoing extensive training in the arcane arts. Only the best of these will ascend. When they do, they become priest-commanders, directly above enlisted soldiers and directly below officers.

It is at this point the pyramid becomes very narrow. In any field, formal education is necessary to ascend, and if one is not a member of a noble family, the cost will be out of pocket or often through a benefactor, either a person or an institution, who fronts the tuition in confidence to the bearer. So complex is the system of sponsors and benefactors that entire legal processes are dedicated to its implementation. At the lowest level, we have military officers that scale in prestige by rank. These are respected, landed individuals whose place on the pyramid walks to the second-highest level. Beside these officers are skilled artisans and the merchants who sell their wares. Understanding Vasenian finance can be such a difficult endeavor, one must be knowledgeable to be effective, and selling goods that appeal to the upper crust is so daunting a task, it takes years of dedicated work to achieve anything meaningful. The best of these groups can also ascend the pyramid.

Above even these great people is the high priest. This is anyone above priest-commander, to include those who manage temples, roads, and the courts for a city, regardless of which of the two religions they subscribe to. As members of the temple, these people receive little money as salary, but many become wealthy through gifts of land, objects, and titles as thanks for their work. Finally,

above all these, we have the high citizens, those who sit directly below the throne in influence and means. Through any path of life, this status can be achieved if one has the skill, tenacity, and, most importantly, the education to achieve the station. As high citizens, they are the best of the best, with a body of works so widely recognized as great that their status cannot be denied. Any greater station is one of royalty is beyond one's reach and can only be achieved through appointment by Pharaoh.

As you can see, children, regardless of the life you choose, the gap between the educated and the rude is wide and only growing. It's important that you take education seriously for the sake of yourselves and the honor of your families. The scarcity of knowledge is something important that must be preserved for the good of our social structure, but it's normal for you to wonder why such restrictions exist at all. This will be outlined below in economics.

The Functioning of Economic Systems in Vasena

As noted above, gathering knowledge is an important part of being successful and taking advantage of Vasena's economic structure, but what is it about our nation that causes education to be so important? Surely, doing your job and doing it well should be enough to achieve a place of good standing, and it was many years ago, but a bureaucratic web now stands between the majority of people and any economic progress, and while it seems like this would impede our progress, it's necessary to preserve the institutions so familiar to our way of life. If education and success were available to everyone, our way of life would be undone overnight. No, it must be regulated by the many barriers in place, barriers that give you the advantages you should be grateful for as the privileged class.

For this lesson, let us start with the difference between guilds and administrations. As the sons of guildmasters and the like, you're all familiar with the concept of the guild- a collective of professionals who form a union to ensure

the quality, availability, and price of a good or service across an area of influence. Without getting too deep into the structure of a guild, let's look at what a basic guild would do. The Stonecutters' Guild would be men from Ber-Kamal and the surrounding areas who control production, availability, and cost of most sandstone and limestone from their region. They make sure the stone is of a guaranteed quality and is no more expensive than an agreed upon price. All workers are paid a standard wage at a standard hour, and the mountains are quarried in a specific fashion to maintain safety and organization. This control allows a high level of production with little effort or oversight, and the stone passes into the hands of another guild, driving the cycle forward.

With guilds being privately owned, administrations are publicly owned and operated either by the throne out of Meshom or through local governments, funded through taxes and run by appointed officials. Administrations guarantee a level of quality for public works like roads, city fountains, and pit lavatories. When it is proved that the private sector cannot handle a task efficiently, as was the case with the Decade Famine, something like the Ministry of Agriculture will be created to make sure proper practices are adhered to when sowing, irrigating, and storing crops, even those held by private landowners. Since the prestige of a pharaoh is directly tied to the efficiency of his administrations, it's in the throne's interest to have them running effectively to avoid the ire of his people. Many of the assassinations of the Twenty-King Dynasty were brought on by dissatisfied upper classes against a ruler with ineffective administrations.

To point, there are far more guilds than administrations, but the latter are much more powerful than the former. For instance, the method for keeping guilds in check reverts directly to the people who use them. If there is enough public outcry against a guild, it can be disbanded by the Ministry of Guilds and Companies, resulting in heavy fines for all ruling bodies in the guild and possible imprisonment if certain criteria are met. It's because of this governance that guilds are careful to maintain a level of quality in their work, and it is because of

this that education is so unattainable for most. Anyone who wants an education that means anything on paper must receive it through an accredited teacher, and all teachers must be certified through the Educators' Guilds.

So you get a grasp of this, to receive my accreditation, I first had to study the sciences under a tutor until I became a master of economics, which I had to take a test for and receive a certification. Following this, I had to pay for lessons specifically to learn how to teach, then I had to pay for lessons cover areas about which I was ignorant, such as history and politics. Once I was certified to teach in these areas, I then had to shadow a tutor for a year and receive his approval, then take another test to review my retention of my studies. Now that I'm an instructor, I have to pay for examinations and reviews every three years to keep my certification, and I've spent upwards of ten-thousand denarii on it, which is what most commoners will make in thirty years of work. I am expensive because my occupation is expensive, but the bureaucracy ensures quality, or at least I believe so.

Now that you see how complex the minutest details of our systems can be, you can appreciate how amazing it is that they interlock as fluidly as they do. An understanding of these principles, of which you'll learn far more in the years to come, will allow you to predict changes in market behavior and take advantage of market peaks and troughs. Those of you who step into mercantile trade will either see yourselves managing caravans or storefronts, but you will need these lessons in both cases if you wish to amount to anything. A person of any greater wealth of knowledge than you will take advantage of you if you do not.

Law

Though not outlined in the lesson plan, I'm reminded how important local law is in dictating your financial practices. Especially if your endeavors reach outside of western Vasena, it is imperative that you understand the regional customs, courtesies, and mandates that will influence your work. If these are

ignored, the results can vary from you looking like a fool to dying in prison, so the information is good to have. Like in Ber-Ismaah, there is usually a barker at every major intersection giving out both daily news and any changes in law. A bulletin can take between ten minutes and a half-hour, but you'll want to be around for the whole thing. In cities that can afford them, you'll find a book or collection of scrolls containing all local laws and customs in the ruling building. In towns that cannot, there is usually a large stone with the same information carved into its side; these will be found either in the largest square or the eldest, and the government is under divine authority to maintain these records for public reference. I reiterate, you must memorize and abide these codes of law.

In the event that you cross the ill end of the law, remember that as men, you have inherent rights above women and slaves, and as the sons of rulers and members of the upper tier yourselves, you have access to privileges that other citizens do not. Above women and slaves, you have the right to appeal to court if you're caught in a criminal act. Punishment for you need not be immediate, and you can defer to the magistrate, who will then defer to the local lord about your noble status. As long as you don't have a record as a troublemaker, you can commit a number of lesser and non-violent crimes with no repercussions, but this is not a pattern you will want to repeat, as disowning by your family will strip you of your status and all its privileges.

Even more, as members of nobility, you may be exempt from many crimes, unless local law dictates otherwise. For instance, as educated nobles, you're allowed to beat anyone of the lower classes for an infraction, as long as it does not maim or kill them. However, do this too much or to the wrong person, and a petition for repealing your status can be put forth, after which you'll be faced by an angry mob. Beyond that, you're exempt from such punishment, many taxes will not apply to you, and you may receive favor with certain groups as an influential figure. As long as you're careful not to be cruel beyond your means to control, you can maintain both the respect of your peers and the discipline of your

inferiors. This is also the example set forth by the Prophet Khalid, so duly mind it.

A Collection of Wise Musings for the Sons of Addis al'Rayun

Young men, you are the children of a friend who is very dear to me. In our youth, your father and I went on a great many adventures across the land and enjoyed the company of a variety of companions who each offered something to the group. In my elder years as I, with no children of my own, have watched you grow, and I have seen the world in which that you are coming into your own. The Vasena of today, though still a glistening symbol of our wisdom, might, and the righteousness of our ways, is not the place your father and I journeyed across as we made our fortunes. No, this Vasena is one about which I have a strange and unidentifiable feeling, an ill that concerns me, but these are only the ramblings of an old fool. The world is yours to discover and enliven yourselves into, and the advice I have collected from among our number is a pittance compared to what

you will learn in the years to come. My only hope is that it serves to guide you enough to see you grow on your own.

From Rehkan of Meshba, the Sword-Arm

Children, though I have never met you, I care for you no less. I hope that my small wisdom might see you avoid many of the perils I had to endure. In your journeys, if you do not practice the use of arms yourselves, be sure to have people among you that do. Whether in the city streets or on seemingly-empty roads, you may be approached at any time by people who would just as soon skin you as shake your hand. With the threat of such people as assured as it is, be sure to equip yourselves with the means to survive.

When selecting gear, be sure to wear what's appropriate for what you'll be doing and where you'll find yourselves. It may surprise you, but even hiding behind the ranks of warriors will do you little good if your enemy knows a spell. Prepare for contingencies. I carried a great sword for many years that wore my hands down and caused my bones to ache. If you carry a smaller weapon, carry a shield as well. You'll be glad when a fireball doesn't take off your eyebrows like one did to mine. When selecting a shield and weapon, bear in mind the fighting style you'll implement.

If you refine your skills as a guardian, you'll find yourself under attack often. Rather than try to dodge everything, focus on heavy armors and shields

that will help you deflect blows away from yourself and your allies. Remember, it's less important that you do damage and more important that you survive.

However, you could also go the opposite way and play the roguish type, dressed in gear that protects against soft blows, but allows you the range of motion necessary to parry and counter an attack. I know little of this style, but I recommend it to anyone with a strong constitution, for it takes great personal strength to not fear being injured. There's also the middle ground that I chose - remaining clad in heavy armor, I wore a light helmet that did not obscure my vision and wielded whichever weapon I had with both hands, allowing me to strike heavily and break enemy blocks with a powerful berserk attack.

Fortunately, we had a healer to save me from spells.

If I had to recommend anything in particular, never underestimate the power of hunting. I did, and it cost me dearly until I joined your father's group. In my prior travels, I was always very careful to stock myself with enough supplies for the journey, but on one occasion, a portion of my food spoiled in the middle of the desert, then I was robbed by a group of bandits who took most of my supplies. Had I not met your father, I would have died. His prowess in hunting was so great that we had no want for food; our stocks so overflowed with meat and furs that we made a tidy profit in the markets in addition to selling our carried goods. Invest in survival skills and other such useful abilities, children, or you will not last in the sands. The desert does not care how wealthy your family is.

From Ishak Toma, the Silver-Tongue

Children of Addis, I have not seen you since you were too small to remember, and for the youngest of you, I have never seen you at all. I was contacted by my friend, your tutor Mosher, who asked me to leave behind some inkling of wisdom to take with you on whatever endeavors you pursue. I laughed out loud at this, for I thought myself no more wise than the next man, but obliged his well-meaning gesture. I will impart upon you the strength of my survivorship as it relates to traveling on my own and in the company of your fathers. In each case, my role was different, but in both cases, I did well enough on my own to have made my way.

Many will tell you that the ability to bend people to your will with force is power, but I tell you, the true power lies in making people do what you want and having them think it's also what they want. In this case, not only have you won a victory, you've won a mind, and you've made the other person feel like they won, too. To that end, I cannot stress enough the importance of being able to persuade people to your cause. As a man of fortune stepping into the world, I was able to avoid many conflicts and create opportunities for myself with a silver tongue and the confidence to assert that I was correct. Convincing someone else to do something is an art, and its mastery is a life-long endeavor. As a merchant among merchants, persuasion is as essential a skill as breathing, and you will not get far without the ability to manipulate. This does not mean you need to lie, for that is

against Mu'mia, and you are faithful Mu'min, but there is no divine law against shifting truth in your favor.

As for maintaining yourself in a fight, know who you are. Know your strengths and weaknesses, identify your fighting style by how it relates to your personality and fears. I am a confident man; I am not physically strong, but I didn't need to be. In the way that I manipulated people with my words, swords can be toyed with in the same manner. As a slight man, I wore thin armor and carried a small shield that covered from hip to shoulder, along with a curved blade that I used to sleight attacks against the shield and counter hard. With this technique, I used my thin frame to get near an opponent's weaknesses, then felled him while his attack missed me entirely. If you're someone who's comfortable with yourself, I would recommend this course of action, as your fearlessness will take advantage of openings your opponents leave in their defenses just as your confidence will line your pockets with the money of many foolish foes on the market floor.

Apart from this, my advice would be to neither overburden yourselves with gold or supplies. Carry enough, but never too much. You do not know what the future may hold. There may be an oasis around the bend with a hundred gazelle to hunt, or there may be a sandstorm that sweeps away all your worldly possessions, either way, you will be glad you were not overburdened. Only fools fear tomorrow; you should not fear what you cannot control. Also, always have an

extra horse with you. It doesn't even have to be an exceptional breed or size. You'll be glad if you lose one and don't have to walk all the way to the next town on-foot.

From Barabus Amarant, the Scholar

Children, has it been three summers already? I hope this sees you well, but the purpose of this note is not to catch up. We'll save that for the Feast of Leavening. If I'm to impart anything of value, I must be short in doing so, for there is much to say. For my part in working with your father, and then later being my own man, I've learned to value two things above all others: seeing opportunities where others do not, and making opportunities where none exist. By opening the world for yourselves, you'll face no competition in whichever field you choose, and people will not be able to replicate your work. If you manage yourselves carefully and judge your actions before you take them, you will look like a walking miracle in the eyes of your contemporaries.

I identified within myself at a young age that I was a feeble man and was afraid of being injured, a fear that nearly drove me to hide away from the world where I read book upon book, developing my mind for an adventure I was never to embark upon. When your father found me, I was living the life of a mad hermit, a mystery to society and an embarrassment to my family. I had a breadth of knowledge that I was wasting by doing nothing, which is where my wisdom to you comes into play. Though you may have fears, do not let them rule you; it is

wise to identify your fears and take precautions, but you can never be completely safe, and the attempt to do so will undo you.

For the merchant lifestyle that no doubt lies before you, I recommend you develop your perceptiveness, your ability to discern. It will help you see truth where it may be clouded, and where others behold an impossible situation, you will find advantage for yourselves. Where others falter and fail, you will triumph and collect the assets of the many who crumble around you, and they will be puzzled when they think back on your methods for success and find nothing concrete. Be cautious about how much of yourselves you reveal, for in the same way you learn about others, wise foes will do the same to you. Be an impenetrable wall to those who would do you harm.

The environments you will be crossing on the Limestone Highway will be many, but they will all have one thing in common- extreme heat and a lack of drinkable water. Between the jungles, the deserts, and the open savanna, you will find that the water you see is often unfit to drink if there's any at all, and you'll be amazed at how quickly a body can dry up in the blazing sun. This is another area where discernment can help you. Not only will you identify the reality from the mirage, you'll often correctly judge the fitness of your resources, sparing yourselves a great deal of waste.

In addition, I mention water as the most important resource you can have,

and this is truth. Regardless of your other needs, water will always be an essential, and it can be found in surprising abundance in the many plants that coat the landscape. Whereas water may be buried in the ground or unfit for drinking, Vasena's flora have no qualms, and will absorb it just as well. It's from these plants: the prickly pear, the aloe, the djinn hair, and many like them, that you will find more water than you can drink along with an abundance of food, but you must know how to look. With proper training in plant identification and alchemy, you will see yourselves wanting for nothing.

From Betshalel of Hakeshet, the Shade-Walker

Children, you have never known me, nor will you ever, but your father is a man in whom I place my full confidence. To serve his interests and lend worth to my respect for him, I will lend you the most meaningful of my knowledge, that you might twist it into something of use. There are things about the world that you must know and master, so you are not taken by surprise, as surprise is the ultimate advantage for you and disadvantage against you. That you might be aware and never taken off-guard, I will impart a wealth of knowledge on this subject and how you might employ it.

Before your father, I lived a life that I will not discuss the nature of, but it involved a great deal of bowmanship, so that is my area of expertise. When you attack from afar, you always have the advantage over the sword, as he must come to you first before attacking. If many come, a frenzied assault can bring

down their great numbers or wound them enough that they can be finished off with ease. When a single greater opponent is faced, precision and finesse are needed. A thousand scattered spears will fall dead against the flesh of a great monster, but a single arrow to the eye can fell the beast. This is a modicum by which you may live your life. Go for efficiency.

In all my dealings on my own, I also found poison to be of great use. A man of no magical skill, I instead relied on enchantments that would eat away at the lives of my enemies, and those who survived knew by their scars that I was not to approach. Through a combination of poison and using the appropriate skills against the appropriate foe, no enemy can stand against you. If you are not careful, quick, and effective at the beginning of the fight, you only heap coals upon your heads. Then again, it is your father's greatest wish, and by extension my own, that you may never have to fight.

With that in mind, the principles I have spoken of remain steadfast, just as they did when I joined your father, but they take on a different form. As a merchant, be shrewd in your dealings; be cunning, silent, always listening, always watching. Do not be paranoid, but act as if you were pretending to do so. It is always better to enter a situation with the most information available instead of the least. While in the city, improve your dealings by refining your speech and manners. Have the appearance of being cultured, but do not come off as pompous, or you will make many enemies.

On the highway, be good at seeing further than you can truly see. Invest in a good spyglass, but do not use it as a crutch. You should be able to identify potential threats, impasses, and places of good fortune from a distance, that you might walk into these situations with the tools to manage or avoid them altogether. In both the city and the country, it can never hurt to be quiet. Invisible, if you must. It is better not to be seen than to be seen. As soon as you are seen, there is no surprise, you have played your hand, and you must wait on your rivals to act. If you cannot surprise them, let them act first, that you may respond appropriately and to powerful effect. Only a fool wastes this moment.

Above all, it is imperative to be safe. Take only the chances that you must, and walk away from unnecessary situations. It does you no benefit to risk death. You must live, children, for your father.

From Myself, Mosher ibn'Ahaz, the Sage

Having already read what the others prepared for you, I see in them greater wisdom than I possess. What else is there for me to say? I've done so much talking already, but I know there must be something more. I defer to the role of 'uncle', a title that I do not bear, but that I feel toward you, for your father is like a brother to me, and I have none of my own. I must impart sound information.

Children, you are becoming men faster than I can comprehend. Your father

is lucky to watch you grow, as I have seen you only in stages, each of you growing a foot or more every time I visit. You're like trees, and I am glad, but I'm also full of sorrow for you. You are coming of age in a world so different from the one we lived in. Surely it's as good and stable a nation as it always was, but I would be remiss to say it's safe. I want to see you become successful men of renown, better men than even your father, who was the best among us. This is a lesson into which I pour even a piece of myself.

For your benefit, children, I implore you to learn a variety of skills and spells, praying that you may never need them, that you might be prepared in the event that you do. If you have allies, make them different from you. Do not all be good at the same things, for if a foe is insurmountable to one of you, he will surely slaughter the rest. Have one man assigned to each role, everyone doing his part, and eliminate redundancies, a strategy that good businesses also employ. Conserve resources, do not be wasteful, and show kindness to others, for God Almighty will smile upon the kind-hearted, but he will turn a cruel hand against those who do the same to his servants.

In business, be intelligent and resourceful, but do not be deceitful. It would be better for you to lose some small amount of money than for your entire soul to be cast to evil. If you show mercy to your enemies and lend strength to those who need it, others will do the same for you in kind, and your generosity will be rewarded sevenfold, according to our teachings. Always have enough, but never

take too much. A heavy stock becomes a burden, and it is a curse to those who carry it. Treat your friends well, and be considerate to your servants and slaves; citizens or not, they fall under the watchful eye of God, and the evils that you do even against them shall be dealt unto you come Judgment Day.

If you must fight, do not hesitate, for it will cost you your lives if you hold back when you should not. If you don't know a spell, learn one. If you already know one, learn another, but do not learn too many. It is better to be good at a few things than to be poor at many things. With the same logic, have each of your companions given to a particular role and type of spell. Remember, not all types of magic will be useful to you, but it never hurts to have a number that do different things.

Fire may be the most damaging of harmful spells, but poison is reliable against many foes, ice can reduce a threat to a crawl, a wave of water can drag the greatest of monsters to its knees, and lightning can turn the thickest of armors into a death trap for its owner. If you're to become warriors in your adventures, think long about the sorts of warriors you wish to become, and do not hold back once you choose a path. You are better off walking the whole distance than making many short trips.

Spells of strength and weakness are always useful, as you can only grow the body and mind so much, naturally; there will be times where even a

temporary, magical augment can save your life. If you're to employ any of these, casting haste on a person who casts haste only hastens haste, and I reiterate the alliteration to highlight its importance. Learn Haste. Children. At least one of you, and learn it well. Also, they call it 'bless' because it's a blessing to have. And of course, have a person with knowledge of the arcane who is skilled in healing the wounded; then again, one can never have too many healers, but be careful that you stop your foes from attacking, as well.

Going on, when you are low on money, do what you can to survive. Purchase only what you need. If you can survive with your poor sword, perhaps the next bandit will have a better one on his person. If you need money, there are always people who need help, animals to be hunted, and ruffians to be ruffled; to be short, we did not make our initial fortunes selling precious metal bonds on the Meshba Stock Exchange. Once you have money, invest it in yourself. A bandit can steal a thousand gold from you, but not if you've spent the thousand gold enriching your knowledge. You can never, ever be too educated, and you can never be too skilled. You can always improve.

Avoid decadence. The 'priestesses' of the Temples of Comfort offer company, but it's a fleeting and empty experience that comes at a high cost. Wine can liven the mood, but drinking is an empty endeavor for empty minds. You are better than the common folk, children. Do not forget this. When better equipment is needed, you will be tempted by the highest quality available, but

there is a point at which the costs outweigh the benefits, unless you have a fortune to spend. If the choice is between a weapon or a piece of armor, finishing an opponent quickly is superior to being hurt less. If you can cut your foes down in a heartbeat, you'll take no damage at all.

For the quick-witted among you and those who fear injury as I did, wisdom and intellect are your fortes. Exploit them. Physical strength is something to be valued, but develop it only enough that you can defend yourselves. Anything more is a waste. For the rest of you, decide what sort of warrior you admire the most, examine the sorts of gear you'll see yourself equipping, and become powerful enough that you can wear it with little effort. Once you're there, dedicate yourselves to improving mobility and versatility. Your father's greatest strength laid in his many strengths, for he was a man of both quick and effective action, even though he carried the burdens of the rest of us on his shoulders. Whatever you do, be good at it. Whatever you do, children, be safe. Be safe.

From Your Father

Abel, Mosher, Harad, Jeshur, Bahir,

My sons,

I must be short, for I have little time.

Is your mother safe? How are your sisters? Is the house alright? I need you to give Gideon the letter I attached. He'll know what to do. When the household starts packing, I need you to make sure that you all make it to Gath, then to Akstet Fortress. Rustam al-Riyadhin is a good man. He will take care of things if the time comes.

Children, I'm still in Meshba. I don't know what's going on here, but something isn't right. There is an ill feeling in the air that a few others can sense, but no one is saying a word about it. I am receiving no information from the guard, even from Jerryn, who has always been so helpful. I have spoken to High Priest al-Hayyah a few times about this feeling in the past week, but he assures me that these omens are personal ills. But I am no fool. I believe I am beholden to some grand conspiracy, that Vasena is on the cusp of some great change, and I will not stand idly by while it happens.

My sons, I do not know what the days ahead will bring for all of us, but I want you to be prepared. Mosher ibn'Ahaz is a kind soul and a man after my own heart, but out of duty to me and his country, he blinds himself and threatens to blind you against the many evils that storm the gates even as I write this. Though I hate to so fervently stand against his wishes, I must in this instance for your sakes. It's the right thing to do.

Vasena is not some great kingdom. It was a great kingdom. It is a dying land ruled by a pompous, inept ruler through an ineffectual mess of officials and cobweb-coated, ancient fools too mindless to see the writing on the wall. Something is going to happen very soon, and I do not think it will be very good. It is under this shroud of darkness that I see you coming of age, my sons, and it will be a difficult journey for you not merely to attain the status and privileges that I've afforded our family, but merely to survive after whatever great cataclysm overtakes us.

Do not let the friendliness of my former companions cloud the truth of who and what we were. Adventurers are not merely good-natured souls who police the world and watch over the common good. Mosher likes to hide himself in Mu'mia to forget his past, but each of us has put a knife to an innocent person more than once for pocket change, and you must not be afraid to do the same. As your father, I'd rather you rob a caravan than die in the sands. I'd rather you butcher others and don their clothing as your own if it would protect you from the cruelties you will face. These are dark and terrible things I say, and they go against all I've ever taught you, but I feared the day when my past might become your own, and that past has come about full circle.

Whatever you do, children, you must survive. You must learn every skill you can, outfit yourselves as best you can, and learn how to make everything you will

need on your own, for these days of darkness that threaten to consume will not be merciful; only the strongest will survive, and you cannot relent. You must not kneel to its unending ruination. Do whatever it takes. Whatever it takes.

I am Addis al'Rayun, and you are my sons, whom I love. Survive.