

The house was far enough from the road it was hid by the wheat until they reached the gravel path cutting through the field, there the structure became visible in the distance.

The walk had taken slightly less than a week from Novus Roma. Seven days, instead of nine, and the trip had been good. It had given Michael and his contubernium time to get use to their two new members. Dervel, a dour looking man who preferred fighting with his fists and Bantia, slim woman with a easy smile and quick with her jokes, which both contubernium seemed to find hilarious, but even after a few months here, Michael didn't have all the context to understand them.

His second contubernium was composed of eight legionnaires who'd only recently returned from their first tour at an outpost. They'd seen some combat in the form of wandering bands of monsters, and a few groups of robbers, so were no longer green, but they hadn't seen large scale combat yet, and Michael hoped they wouldn't ever.

"Dervel, you, Bantian, Faust and Pompeia take the other contubernium and spread around the house. The five of us will go in and search. Anyone who comes running out detain them, but be careful. Right now we don't know for sure anything wrong's taken place here.

The house was large, three stories high, something that could house two dozen people, Michael thought, mostly field stones and timber with sheet of some tan material that might be hide, but seemed to be too sturdy. Some local material he hadn't seen yet, he decided.

Michael climbs the porch and banged on the door to announce his presence. He felt he needed to say something, if only to honor all the cap show he'd watched.

"Is anyone home?" he asked loudly. "We're with the Cosconian Army. The Praetor sent us to check in on you." No one replied, and he heard no movement.

"A farm like this would always have someone at the house," Caius said. "People preparing the next meal, repairing broken tools, mending clothing. Farm houses are never quiet."

Michael tried the door, and it opened. "Joran and I will clear the ground floor, Lierin and Faust, the second, Causis and Pompeia the third."

They carefully checked each rooms on the way to the back, where they found a large eating area and kitchen with benches overturned, a pot overturned on the floor with it's content spread, dried and rotten. Plates with half eaten food were scattered on the long table. The back door was ripped off and one of the legionnaire pointed to broken wheat making a path through the field when Michael looked out.

"There's signs of fighting," Faust said as he returned, "but no blood."

"I'd say this was about taking prisoners," Lierin added.

"So bandits?" Michael asked.

"Nothing was taken," Joran indicated the pots on the counter, the pants hanging from the wall. "Bandits will clean a place out of anything they can sell."

"And bandits aren't in the trade of people," Pompeia said, entering the kitchen with Caius. "The Praetor has no tolerance for anyone who would sell people."

“Does it happen in other kingdoms?” Michale asked, stepping outside.

“You hear stories from travelers,” Lierin said. “And the Elves have something similar.” She shrugged at Michael’s look. “My mother had difficulty getting used to not being able to buy a prisoner to serve as he servant. She had to adapt, but I remember screaming matched between her and my father, both calling the other barbaric for the practice.”

“Prefect,” Devel called, running toward them. “You need to come see this.” He led them to a large barn with a dozen empty stalls, and two that weren’t empty.

At first Michael thought he was looking at a dead woman, her throat slashed, a pool of dried blood on the floor, but he took in her head, the muzzle, the higher, triangular ears.

“Beastkin,” Joran said.

“Why kill her?” Michael asked.

“There’s another one in the other stall,” Devel said. Michael looked, this was one was male, with horns on his head.

Caius looked the woman over. “It’s old.” He indicated the sagging breasts, the skin on her face. “If I have to make a guess it’s too old to do any work.” He looked over the other stall. “Same with that one. They were probably kept to help look after the animals.”

“Were they all beastkin?” Michael indicated the empty stalls.

“No,” one of the legionnaire said, looking them over. “Looks like they had fore other kin, the rest was for animals.”

“It’s looking like bandits,” Joran said. “They took the kin and animals.”

“And the people,” Pompeia said. “The Praetor needs to know there are slavers in the territory.”

Quest	Protect Cosconius, 5	Type	Path, Continuation
The farm the Praetor asked to you check on is empty with signs of fighting. All signs point to slavers having taken the residents. Will you rescue them?			
Do you accept this quest?			

Michael accepted the quest without hesitation. “We’re going after them.”

“They have a week’s advance, if not more,” Faust said. “The best thing to do is tell the Praetor so he can warn the outposts in the area.”

“Does the farm have messenger birds?” Michael asked.

“They do,” Pompeia replied, “but as far as I know none of us have the training to get them to go where their needed. The closest town would be the more likely place they’ll go.”

“They’d be able to sent a bird to Novus Roma,” Joran said, “the closest town is what, an hour away by flight?”

“Okay, Lierin, write a message had have bird carry it,” Michael said. “The rest of us will follow the path through the field, then track them through the forest. If they have

two dozen prisoners, they're going to be a lot slower than we can will. Hopefully we'll catch up to them."

He looked at the beastkin and wondered if they should be buried. Joran said they were nothing more than animals, but they looked human enough it felt wrong to just leave them like this.

"Michael?" Joran asked.

He shook himself. Even if they were human, he had more pressing things to do.

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Lierin rejoined them quickly, then it was a full day to cross the wheat field in the path the bandits had made. Michael studied the trail, hoping to get a sense of how many people had walked on it but it was just crushed wheat to him.

They made camp at the edge of the forest, and the next day started into it. Following the trail through the trees proved easier than Michael expected. Movies and TV shows had led him to believe trees could hide anyone's passage, forcing the pursuers to spend hours searching for the smallest clue, but it seemed that wasn't true. Broken branches marked where the bandits had gone. Trampled bushes and the ground. The path wasn't as clear as through the wheat, but it was enough they were able to keep a good pace. Michael was confident he'd catch up to them this way.

But he hadn't expected to catch up to them quite as quickly as they did.

On the third day, they heard sounds of a group ahead. Michael, Joran, Bantia and Lierin headed ahead and came to a clearing with a group of people, humans men, were building a small house out of lumber under the supervision of wolf people and cougar people. On the other side was another such building, clearly hastily put up. Next to it humans, adults and children, were tied to the trees. Those would be the farmers, and Michael moved on quickly to avoid taking in their injuries, especially the children's. In a pen of branches planted in the ground were where horses and cows, the kind Michael was familiar with. Next to them, huddled together, but not tied were what had to be the farm's beastkin.

Michael looked at Joran, indicating the wolves and cougars, and his friend's face was tight, worried. Bantia motioned to a group entering the clearing, squirrels, rodents, another wolf. They carried baskets of berries and dead animals over their shoulders.

Michael motioned for them to head back. He needed information and they couldn't talk this close to all those people.

Once they reached the others he had them travel back a full hour before he couldn't keep his curiosity and anger to himself.

"What was that?" Michael demanded. "You told me beastkin were farm animals."

The anger had Joran take a step back. "I never said that, Michael. We never had a discussion on what beastkin's are. I simply pointed to the one you saw and said it was a farm animal. Haven't you ask anyone about them? Didn't you and Praetor Granius discuss them that day?"

Michael forced himself to calm. Joran was right; Michael was the one who'd made assumptions. "We talked about his stance on them, not what they were." He let out

a breath. “Okay, what did we just see? That looked like more than wild animals on two legs. They had those people build housing, wild animals don’t need houses.”

“Beastkins aren’t like animals,” Joran said. “They aren’t people either,” he added as Michael opened his mouth. “They’re somewhere between. Some can be domesticated, and they’re smart enough they can do simple tasks, but they can be willful. It’s why the farm also has normal animals. You can domesticate four or five bulls, before you can get one beastkin bull to obey you, but the one bull can then do the work of those five, if not more. But they can’t all be domesticated.”

“The wildkins,” one of the legionnaires said. “That’s what we call them, back home.”

“They’re still just beastkin,” Joran continued, “but they hide in the wild, group together, use their cunning to avoid being found.”

“Are you telling me there’s a society of them out there?” Michael asked.

“Not a society, at least no more than a pack of wolves is a society.”

“They’re having houses built, Joran. That speaks to more than a pack of wild wolves.”

“They’re having them built. They’ve seen people live in them, and they have made the connection, but they couldn’t put one together themselves; they understand they offer protection, but they wouldn’t know what a house is, Michael.”

“So they’re like children?” Michael asked, finding the imagery disturbing, especially considering they had some tied up.

“If children had claws and lived to rend you apart.” The legionnaire said. “Back home, anytime a pack forms, they’ll attack anyone they can find, kill them, rip them apart. We have hunting parties to go after them, and we’ll be good for a season or two, but they always come back, and they’re vicious.”

“Isn’t the outpost handling them?” Caius asked.

“We’re far from everything,” the legionnaire said. “We find it easier to deal with them ourselves.”

“They aren’t children, Michael. You can’t pacify the wolves, the cougars, or even the rats, they aren’t like the horse, or goats or cows and bulls. They’re wild, dangerous, and that they are setting themselves in this forest worries me. They’ve realized there’s easy food at the farms.”

“Food that can also work,” Lierin added.

“You mean they’re going to eat the people?” Michael asked.

“Why else did you think they took them?” she replied,

“I was looking for bandits, slavers, not that, some of them came back with dead animals, aren’t they going to eat that?”

“While they can use the people,” the legionnaire said. “Once they can’t work anymore, I don’t think they’ll last long.”

Michael had difficulty accepting that, but Joran and Caius both nodded. “Okay.” He rubbed his face. “Okay, the priority is going to be freeing the prisoners, and regardless of how the beastkin behave, we do that with the minimum to death.”

“To the citizens,” Dervel said.

“To everyone. We’re not going to fell to their level, we’re not monsters or creatures.”

“Michael,” Joran said cautiously. “I am not certain you understand, giving them mercy will not help anyone, they are not tame beastkin, they are dangerous, wild. They look to want to establish here, if we let them, they’ll just go after one of the other farms. We can’t let them stay and endanger other people.”

“Then we scare them off, Joran, make sure they realize they aren’t wanted here.”

“They know about the farms now. They understand enough of what that means that they will return.”

Michael closed his eyes and reminded himself Joran knew more about those beings than he did. It was that they looked so much like people that threw him..

He chuckled wryly. Like people were all nice, even back on Earth. It wasn’t monsters and creatures that had caused the wars and the murders. It was people.

“Michael?” Joran asked.

“I’m okay. I just keep forgetting this isn’t like back home.” He looked at the others, went over what he’d seen of the clearing and nodded. “Okay, this is how we’re going to do this.

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Returning to the clearing took longer since Michael wanted to ensure they were as quiet as possible. He sent the other contubernium around with Dervel and Bantia to rescue the people while the rest attacked as a distraction.

It had caused an argument, but Michael had been adamant that the priority was the rescue. The beastkin that escaped could be hunted down later, once everyone was safely away from here. Ideally back to Novus Roma. As the Prefect, Michael’s decision stood, But Joran and Caius weren’t happy about it. They saw them as pests, while the others were indifferent.

Michael watched the clearing while he waited. Two of the beastkins were fighting hard enough fur and blood were flying. Two less to worry about, Michael figured. He counted six wolves, four cougars, two boars, an easy dozen of the squirrels, and another of a mix of rats, some sleek animal Michael thought might be ferrets, and one that was definitely a beaver.

If not for the occasional cries of anguish from the prisoners and the now tired and bloody fighters, Michael could believe this was some sort of kid’s show.

Watching the beastkin eat their kills raw in front of the prisoners, snarl at them, as well as one another occasionally, force the prisoners to also eat raw meat was getting Michael to agree with Joran. They were worse than animals. He wanted to act now, instead of continuing to watch the mistreatment, but without a way to signal each other—and not risk giving away their presence—they’d agreed on two hours. Every time he checked with Joran, the man shook his head. Still more time to go.

Finally, Joran gave a nod, and with a yell, Michael ran in the clearing, the other five behind him. He batted the closest old with his shield, sending him flying. The next

one he sliced into two with one slash. He stabbed a cougar through the chest and the rest of the beastkin camp caught on to the attack.

After that, the fight was quickly over. Those who fought were no match for Michael and the others. He made sure to keep an eye on the prisoners, but Bantia and Dervel easily kept them at bay while the others freed the prisoners.

They lost three of the farmers, who'd been working on the structure when Michael attacked. Beastkins had ripped their throat out before launching themselves at the legionnaires.

In the end, it was a massacre, and Michael didn't care. Not after those three needless deaths.

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You are now level 38

Michael stared at the notification as silence fell on the clearing. How had he gained a level out of this? When had he gained his last one? However the system determined this, he felt like he hadn't deserved it.

He dismissed it, assigned one of five points to his strength, agility, and endurance as usual, and looked around. Dead beastkin littered the clearing. Lierin was going through them, making sure they were dead with a dispassionate knife.

He wondered what drove the beastkin to attack. Was some Outlander forcing them, or was it just in their nature, like Joran said. Michael tried to feel bad about the killing, but this had been justified. They'd brought it on themselves by abusing their prisoners, by coldly killing the three.

"Are you alright," Joran asked.

"I'm angry," Michael answered. "There was no need in killing those three, no point to it."

"It's what the beastkin are," the legionnaire answered coldly. "To expect anything else leads to this."

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. Maybe they would still be alive if I had."

"Do not put this on yourself, Michael. They did it, they are responsible, and they paid for their actions."

"Do you know how many fled?"

"Not many, but I did not count."

Michael didn't look, didn't count. He found he didn't want to know how many had escaped. "The prisoners?"

"I do not know," Joran answer with a chuckle. "The fighting has just ended."

"Right."

"You should see to your wounds, then we can join them and see how they are."

Michael glanced at the half dozen bleeding debuffs he had stacked. Looking down, he saw his hit point bar wasn't even close to the three-quarter mark. If he lost more hit points, would he feel like he deserved the level?

He shook his head to clear it and took out the pack of bandages. He wasn't some

masochist who needed pain to justify gain. This fight had just been the little needed to push him over the leveling threshold, nothing more, nothing less.

He cleaned his wounds and bandaged them, then headed for where the farmers were seated, being looked after by the legionnaires. They were malnourished, a few of them had broken arms and legs. After their state, the disparity in features surprised him the most. Despite the size of the house, he'd expected this to be one family, but some had what he'd considered Caucasian features, even under the dark skin, while others looked oriental and another group Michael couldn't place. Seventeen adults and five children, from various families and ethnicities working together. There was another way this place was better than Earth.

"How are they?" he asked.

"In rough shape," Batia answered, "but with help, they'll be able to travel."

"We must return to the farm," a heavysset older woman said. "We must harvest the fields."

Michael shook his head. "We're going to Novus Roma. The Praetor will want to make sure you're all well. And you're in no state to do the kind of work needed. We'll pass another farm on the way, we can see if they can handle it, or at least send a bird to the city to see how the Praetor wants to handle it."

She tried to argue but didn't have the strength to remain standing.

While they were tended, Michael and his contubernium gathered the beastkin in a pile and burned them. Biers were constructed for the three dead humans and they all gathered around as they burned, then began the trek back to Novus Roma.