

261: Omen

Countries and Settlements of Bellost - Sadiir

Compiled by Reece

Sadiir is a large, powerful country in the north-east of the continent. Sadiir is also the capital of said country, called 'Sadiir City' when the distinction is necessary. Other large cities in its orbit include Wentu, Anena, and Riverdown. No, I won't be giving you individual entries for them. You're not going to visit. Don't be greedy.

Sadiir was founded by the appropriately named Sadiir, a goldplate Guilder, approximately seven hundred years ago, though 'founded' implies no one lived there before. What really happened was that Sadiir rebelled against the Guild of the time, forming her own independent mercenary organization and claiming all territory between the Rustpeak Mountains, the (former) Salt Sea, and the northern ocean.

Through brute force, aggressive recruiting, and promises of special treatment, she incrementally expelled the Guild from this claimed zone, forging her own state. This ended with Sadiir's (the person's) death by (supposed) assassination while on a trip to the depths, Sadiir's (the country's) collapse, and Sadiir's (the city's) period of successful resistance under Sadiir II's (the son and also the supposed assassin's) reign.

Over hundreds of years and hundreds of heirs, the Sadiir family regained all of their founder's claimed territory, and their brute rulership over it has transitioned into more traditional governance. The Sadiir family of today functions as a meritocratic monarchy, the highest-leveled family member overseeing subordinate lower-leveled sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and nibblings. This system causes no internal strife whatsoever, and the continued relevance of competing pseudo-military mercenary bands is entirely a coincidence.

The current top dog is one Kennagosi Sadiir, a level sixty-four Worldwright, 'Worldwright' being the Legendary Geomancer class name adopted by Sadiir family members since they collectively decided the Salt Sea had to go. While unquestionably strong, beyond even what his level would suggest, Kennagosi is not in the Big Leagues. He has demonstrated oversoul and is able to break the damage limit, but these activities visibly tax him to an excessive degree, proving he lacks the core understanding of what he is doing and how to best remodel his soul for essence refinement. He doesn't rate a full dossier, so don't bother me.

Relations between Sadiir and the Guild of today are cordial despite the rocky events of

the past, though Guilders tend not to find much success in Sadiir owing to competition. Relations with their neighbors—the Shadevale Dominion in the south and various large and middling city-states in the west—are likewise cordial, owing to a policy of non-expansion rooted in Sadiir I's original claim (which included the Salt Sea, naturally, and don't you dare imply anyone else was using it). Both the Watch and the Bank operate in Sadiir without drama, now and historically, maintaining a presence in all cities named above. Unawakened are treated well enough and comprise over ninety-five percent of the population.

In summary, stay out of any sibling spats and/or civil wars, and you should be fine.

Stint's breath came out in a plume as he stepped out of the inn where he and the rest of his team were staying between daily expeditions into the Gap. He still didn't know who Etter had been and what they'd done to get a gigantic fissure named after them, nor did he really care. What he knew was it had taken far too long to get here and that it was far too cold in the mountains. At more sensible elevations—and latitudes, for that matter—Frostfall was the month dividing autumn from winter. Here, the division wasn't between freezing and not. It was between freezing and freezing more.

Today. Today, we'll get a blue. Maybe then I'll be motivated enough to think of a better metaphor.

Snow crunching beneath his boots, Stint made his way around the building toward the stable, thankful for his awakened constitution. Compared to him in his Ascension jacket, the locals were clad much more heavily with furs. It looked miserable. He was sure nobody would live here, given the choice, if not for the proximity of the ranked zone and the prosperity that it offered.

Opening the stable side door with a creak, Stint stepped quickly inside and closed it after him before too much warmth escaped. The tired Heater Plate at the back of the room was barely up to the task of keeping the interior at a comfortable temperature as it was.

Dust, of course, told Stint as much with a horsey sigh of discontent as he approached his stall.

"Yeah, yeah, but my room's not much better," Stint said, opening the gate and snagging a horse brush from the wall. "Price of keeping a low profile. How about I make it up to you with some spa service before I get your breakfast? Lady V won't be up for hours, and I've had enough of the common room for this and my next two lifetimes."

Dust gave a single, disdainful snort but trotted out into the central area without any goading.

"Thanks for not unlatching yourself this time," Stint said, starting his work with the brush. "You know we can't afford the trouble."

Dust gave another disdainful snort, pressing his powerful head against Stint's side and making the grooming difficult.

Smiling to himself, Stint set about doing a thorough job, his mood improving until it came crashing back down with the slamming open of the door. In walked a pair of mercenaries, the same pair who'd been disturbing the predawn quiet of the common room with their loud voices. The conversation was apparently still ongoing.

"War's coming, I'm telling you," said one, a Spearwoman by the weapon she carried.

"And I'm telling you, war's always coming on Rellagia," said the other, a male Mage. "Fighting there's like winter here. Never knows when to leave."

"Oh, shut up about the cold, will you? And you know I don't mean one of their little border conflicts. I mean a real one. Theocracy's gonna make a move. Why else would their queen have sent an ambassador here? Won't be long before she tries to hire a band or two for her conquest."

"The ambassador can hire me any time she wants. Saw her down in the city last month before I got booted up here. Just about had an indecent incident on the spot, I did."

The Spearwoman made a disgusted noise, but Stint's ears had pricked up—as had his too-smart horse's in a more literal sense. Both listened intently as the Mage began describing the ambassador in increasingly lurid detail, to his companion's increasing annoyance.

Interesting.

Stint and Dust shared a look. Rain's report from his time in Xiugaaraa had mentioned a suspiciously attractive ambassador—though a male one—from the Entin Theocracy. The captain had apparently suspected the man was up to no good but hadn't been able to investigate without borrowing a flagon of trouble. This obviously wasn't the same ambassador, but from the Mage's description, the female version was no less a perfect specimen of beauty than the male one had been.

Suspicious. Do they just pick pretty people for the job, or...?

Stint found he was smiling. Not at the crude conversation—which had devolved back into an argument—but because whatever the ambassador's presence meant, it was *strange news*. There was a bounty for strange news concerning the Entin Theocracy. Rumor was it had something to do with Ameliah's past, but he had too much respect for her to have pried for details.

Should I pry with these two?

"Shut your flapping mouth hole, or I'll stitch it shut with your guts," said the Spearwoman.

Ah, they probably don't know anything else anyway.

Stint continued listening for the next few minutes on the off chance the loud pair's conversation would return to the subject, but he had no luck. Soon, they were back on baseless rumors of the goings on within the former DKE—of anarchy, cannibalism, mass executions, starvation, monster rampages, and every other awful thing the mind could imagine. True or not—and it was probably not, here on the other side of the civilized world—such talk was just depressing.

Ascension wasn't strong enough to stick its nose into that pile of Dunch clippings. Before they'd left, there'd been some talk of recruiting from the refugees in Freetown, but that had been as far as it went.

Finally, *mercifully*, the argument came to an end, though it was replaced by something nearly as upsetting. Stint and Dust shared another look at the wet sounds coming from the stall where the pair had retreated, answering the unspoken question of what they'd come out here for.

That, itself, was a bit surprising, given everything up until now.

Don't they have a room? Why didn't they just—? Stint shook his head. *Not my problem.*

He quietly replaced the brush on its hook—not that it appeared the pair cared about his presence—then addressed Dust in a whisper. “How about a nice walk before breakfast?”

Dust snorted in agreement, and the pair of them walked softly for the main door.

Before they got there, something odd happened.

—WARN—

As soon as it appeared, the message was gone, and Stint would have sworn he'd imagined it if not for the sudden pop of released suction, followed by a thunk of a skull against wood.

"Did you see that?" demanded the Spearwoman's muffled voice from within the stall.

"My head!" complained the Mage.

"Nobody cares about your head! Did you see it?!" There was a rattle of the latch, and the door to the stall was abruptly torn open. The Spearwoman poked her head out, her hair in more disarray than Stint remembered. She quickly found him staring at her. "You, did *you* see it?"

"I...yeah," Stint said, licking his lips. "Some kind of warning message." He turned to Dust. "What about you?"

Dust blew out a negative. From the direction of the inn grew the sound of a developing commotion.

The Spearwoman blinked, looking between him and the horse, then shook her head. "Hells," she cursed once more, then retreated into the stall.

Accurate, Stint thought as he headed for the door. "Stay here and have some oats or something," he said to Dust, praying the troublesome horse would listen. He had bigger problems to deal with.

"Okay," Velika said, getting to her feet. "This changes nothing. Let's go."

"But—" Gigs began.

"I'm sorry, did I ask for a vote?" Velika snapped.

Stint sat quietly, staying out of it as the rest of the group argued. As the only Aspirant other than their marginally unstable guide and his former boss, he didn't feel like he got a say. He was only here because he knew how to ride the one horse that wouldn't panic in a fight—and because nobody else eligible for the ranged party slot had been available or willing to come.

In his mind, he and Dust were very much here to carry the bags. The latter explicitly so upon special insistence by their eccentric captain. Rain had also set up the posting to require a Healer, a ranged specialist, and so forth.

Stint, at least, had a combat class. It wasn't much against the gigantic beasts Velika had been tearing through, but it was something, and he couldn't imagine what Mereck, Ruce, and Meloni were feeling. Honestly, all of them were below their depth—whether by combat ability or by aptitude for working with a team.

In total, the party consisted of Velika, a level 53 Inheritor of Osar, whatever that was; Telen, a level 9 Rogue; Gigs, a level 9 Tortugo; Meloni, a level 9 Chemist; Ruce, a level 9 Diviner; Val, a level 8 Contender of Light, again, whatever that was; Mereck, a level 5 Healer, and himself, a level 5 Sharpshooter.

Dust would tell you he counted, but Dust was, in fact, a horse.

With an average level of thirteen and change, they were already flouting the standard guidance by exploring a rank twenty-five zone. Velika routinely bisected everything that even got close, but still. The zone *itself* was dangerous. The cold up here in the Sadiiri stronghold was *nothing* compared to the cold at the bottom of the canyon. Down there, the walls were ice, prone to sudden cracking and collapse, and the air was beyond frigid. Without Rain's Immolate anchor, which he would only activate when they were away from prying eyes, exposed skin would lose all feeling within minutes.

And then there was the area's rank itself. It didn't bother any of the awakened, but Dust...

The stubborn animal clearly suffered as the rank rose. And yet, he basically pitched a fit whenever they attempted to leave him behind.

What was Rain thinking? We could have carried the gear ourselves...

"ENOUGH!" Velika roared loud enough to shake the rafters—and him out of his thoughts. She stabbed the table with a finger as everyone muttered and rubbed their ears. "The system sent that warning to *everyone*. It's nothing local and nothing to do with us. Are any of you system administrators? No? Didn't think so. We don't know what it was, and we couldn't fix it if we did, so it changes nothing. I'm going. Anyone who doesn't come with me had better hope our competition's even more craven than they are. I know I'm counting on that. We've got a chance here to get ahead, and I won't let fear of the system crapping out on me stop me from taking it." She stood and strode for the door. "I'm leaving in five minutes. Meet me outside if you want a blue, or stay here and miss out."

Silence fell over the room as the door boomed closed.

"Should...we try Rain again?" asked Gigs after a moment.

Mereck shook his head. "He said it was her call. Special expedition lead."

"She has to protect us, though," said Meloni. "If we all stay, then she won't have any choice but to— Wait, where are you going?"

"With her, obviously," Stint said, his fingers trembling slightly as they found the doorknob. He firmed his grip, then pushed it open and turned, putting on a smile. "She's right, I think. What's a little risk in our business?" He shook his head, returning to seriousness. "I've worked with her before. Trust me, after a speech like that, she's going to give it her all. If you think she was decimating the wildlife before, just wait, but not too long, yeah?" He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Five minutes. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've gotta get the horse."

"They're coming again! Stint!"

Okay, I admit it, I should have stayed at the inn, Stint thought, drawing fletching to ear. He released, Seeker Shot correcting his aim and sending one of Tallheart's adamant arrows streaking into the glowing blue bird monster.

Snow Jays, they were called, and they were tougher than they looked for their size. It regularly took three good hits to bring one down now that the elemental enchantments on his arrows were depleted. The monster he'd chosen to target had already taken a few shots, though. It exploded in a puff of snow as Stint dove from the rocky outcrop to dodge the rest of the swooping swarm.

Your party has slain a level-14 Snow Jay
Your Contribution: 44%

"Rahhh!" Mereck roared wordlessly, flailing with the flaming branch he held, exploiting the monsters' aversion to fire to herd them away from himself, Meloni, Ruce, and Dust. A series of metallic pings sounded, announcing the impact of several Snow Jays on Gigs's shield, those he'd managed to catch with Taunting Shout through their resistance. Val—currently invisible—sniped two more of the things as they flew away, wheeling for another pass, though only one succumbed to the sourceless beams of Light Magic.

Your party has slain a level-14 Snow Jay
Your Contribution: 12%

"Gods damn it!" Telen shouted, scrambling to collect the daggers he'd thrown unsuccessfully.

"That fucking asshole!"

Stint searched for his arrow with his eyes but didn't see it. With a curse, he drew the last one he had remaining. He had wooden arrows, yes, but those would do next to nothing.

Velika's irritated words echoed in his mind as he scrambled back atop the rock and readied his bow with numb fingers.

'Fuck this. I'm going further out. You're on your own for a bit.'

That had been two hours ago.

One hour ago, Rain's Immolate anchor had flickered and died.

If not for Mereck's healing, Meloni's stock of Ephemeral Oil, and the spare winter gear Dust had been carrying, they'd have succumbed to frostbite by now. Not that they weren't all going to die, regardless. The blessed opportunity afforded them by the system hiccup had turned to disaster.

They wouldn't last much longer, and there was no one down here to save them.

In the encounter before this one, Rain's Force Ward anchor had failed too. As a consequence, Telen had nearly lost an arm, crushed into a mangled mess. Saving it had taxed Mereck to the extreme, and the Healer had already been showing signs of potion sickness from all the alchemical concoctions he'd been chugging. Velika, damn her, had taken the Winter anchor.

And then there was Dust. The horse had needed healing a few times, and that had only placed more strain upon him. He was only standing against the crushing weight of the zone through pure grit and spite. As the battle continued, he'd kept snorting and tearing impotently at the frozen ground.

Even if we make it through this...

“El’s bollocks!” Gigs shouted, pointing behind them. Stint tore his eyes from the incoming flock to see an enormous, aoaka-like beast drop heavily to the ground from a ledge above them, landing with a booming roar of pain. One of its curved horns was broken, and its shaggy white fur was stained with red, reflected by its lowish health bar, but *red* wasn’t the color that nearly made Stint’s heart stop.

Lowland Frost Yak
Level 19

“B-b-blue!” Meloni shouted.

Stint goggled, almost losing his grip on his arrow before a cry from Val brought him back to the present.

“Stint! Kill the damn birds! Gigs! Get in front of it!”

Light Magic flashed, and another dialog appeared before Stint’s eyes.

Your party has slain a level-14 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 4%

With a curse, Stint dove, loosing in midair, his hesitation having thrown off his timing. The arrow struck true—gods bless Seeker Shot—but the snowbank he landed in took his breath away.

Your party has slain a level-14 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 84%

Your party has slain a level-13 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 5%

Your party has slain a level-14 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 9%

By the time he struggled free, there were only two left, and the blue, which slammed into Gigs as he watched in horror. The Tortugo went flying, brute strength or a monstrous ability overpowering Unyielding Defense and sending him slamming hard into the wall. Val blasted another of the Jays, not killing it, as Telen shouted and charged.

“High physical defense and Strength!” Ruce warned, feeding them information from Threat Assessment and Identify Weakness. “Weak to Heat! Weak to Chem! Telen, get out of there! Attack from range! Meloni! Hit it!”

“Just a second!” Meloni shouted, rummaging while Stint kicked at the snow, searching for an arrow. He didn’t see what it was that she threw, but the tinkle of breaking glass and the beast’s outraged bellow suggested a few possibilities.

Your party has slain a level-14 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 34%

Val must have taken out the second-to-last Jay. Stint rose with his arrow, but he was too slow to avoid the last one as its beak stabbed into his shoulder. His vague worry for Gigs vanished beneath the sudden, clenching freeze that gripped his chest, stealing the breath

from his lungs. The padded gambeson he wore beneath his jacket had softened the blow, but the monster's magic had reached his skin. The rings he wore blunted the elemental attack, but they weren't designed to handle something this strong. His health dropped from full to a third in an instant.

"Stint!" Mereck shouted from somewhere near where Gigs had crashed against the wall.

The Snow Jay tumbled away, flapping and shrieking as it rebounded from the impact, Stint's frozen blood painting its beak. Before it got back in the air, Dust got to it, stomping it mercilessly with a hoof. This only appeared to make it angrier, but a further three stomps kept it on the ground until Ruce got there, advancing with the burning branch. Dust retreated just in time to avoid getting burned.

Your party has slain a level-14 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 9%

All of this barely registered as Stint fumbled at his belt for a potion. He couldn't breathe. His lungs were frozen shut. Finally, he worked free the cork and poured the fruity liquid into his mouth, except he found he couldn't swallow. His throat was frozen too. Panic rose in him as his eyes flicked back to his health bar, which was creeping ever so slowly downward as the cold stole what was left of his life.

"I've got you!" Mereck yelled, appearing from nowhere and slamming his palm against the wound.

Stint coughed and spluttered as his frozen organs twitched, his health jumping back upward.

"Thing hits like Tallheart!" Gigs shouted from out of sight, proving he was okay. "Telen, stop that! It's slow, but it clips you, you're dead!"

"It's bleeding!" Telen shouted. "If I can hit it with Lingering Bleed, it might double—"

Your party has slain a level-13 **Snow Jay**
Your Contribution: 2%

Val flickered back into view as the flash of light faded, shouting over Telen. "Just lead it around! It's not worth going in! Hah!" Light stabbed from his extended hand, striking the shaggy beast on the flank. It didn't seem to notice. "Gigs, don't try to block it again. Bait it and run. Stint, stop dying and shoot it! Ruce, find him some damn arrows!"

"Right!" Ruce said as another crash of breaking glass signified the use of another alchemical grenade.

"Oi!" Gigs shouted, the cry echoing with magic. The beast snorted, then turned.

"Come on, get up," Mereck said, pulling on Stint's shoulder, having been healing him this whole time.

"He-hells," Stint coughed, grabbing his bow and accepting the Healer's help.

"Someone stop that damn horse!" Val shouted as Ruce appeared with a bundle of arrows.

Stint's eyes went wide. "Dust!" he shouted, but it was too late.

Not even half the size of the shaggy monster, the charging horse slammed into it from the side. Dust cried out in pain, tumbling away from the force of the impact, which had come with the sound of breaking bone. Not the monster's, from Dust's shriek of pain. The Yak merely

stumbled, then shook the air with its rage as it turned to face the unexpected assailant. Telen zipped in to drag his dagger across the beast's flank, but it ignored him.

Not remembering having drawn, Stint loosed a Piercing Shot that took the beast right in the eye. Almost as surprising as his panicked aim was the fact that the adamant shaft pierced the fleshy orb, the powerful monster's health apparently low enough for the skill to overcome its defenses where Telen had failed.

With a tortured cry of agony, the monster tripped over Dust's crumpled body, landing partially atop the horse as its brutish head slammed into the ground, driving the adamant arrow shaft the rest of the way into its brain and silencing its cry. It still had health left, but apparently not enough to survive that kind of injury.

Your party has slain a level-19 **Lowland Frost Yak**
Your Contribution: 26%
Level Up!

"YES!" Val roared.

"Dust!" Stint yelled at the same time, limping forward. "Mereck!"

"I'm going!" the Healer shouted, rushing out in front of him. "Gigs, help me!"

The chaos was suddenly joined by the sound of slow, powerful clapping, and despite his concern for Dust, it was enough to make Stint turn his head.

Velika stood there, wearing a self-satisfied smirk. "Well done," she said, lowering her hands to cross her arms. "Took you long enough."

"You!" he shouted dumbly before a cry of pain from Dust made him whip his head back around.

"Me," Velika agreed. "Sorry for abandoning you, but with me here and Rain's anchors in your pockets, there was a chance someone could get left out of the party." She uncrossed one arm to wave a hand. "Some of you were onto me, surely. Or onto the captain. Hopefully not both of us." She shrugged. "Well? Did it work? Everyone get a cap up?"

Sudden warmth interrupted Stint's planned reply, and he gasped, the snow melting around them as Rain's magic poured from the not-dead-after-all anchor in his pocket. The heat only grew hotter as it was joined by rage. If the Immolate anchor was working, then the Force Ward anchor probably was too. Velika tricking them was one thing, but the captain being in on it?

"He's okay!" Mereck called, the relief this generated only partly blunting Stint's indignation.

"You found it even before you left us, didn't you?" Val accused, brushing snow from his jacket like he hadn't spent most of the fight invisible and untouched. "That impatient fit you threw was all a show."

"Obviously," Velika said. "I had to catch it, weaken it, and dump it far enough so you wouldn't find it until you'd started to really believe I wasn't coming back. Let me tell you, keeping its mana drained while I waited was really annoy—"

"What the—!?" Mereck cried.

Stint looked to see Dust squirm out from under the monster corpse, the horse's broken bones apparently mended. What was more attention-grabbing, though, was the sudden and unexpected formation of a ball of flame beside the horse's head. The Firebolt—for that was

clearly what it was—went streaking off to slam into the canyon wall. Dust whinnied and reared before he took off, more flaming missiles streaking out from him in all directions as he raced in excitement through the melting snow.

Velika chuckled. "Nice. Eight for eight. This won't end badly at all."