

Mercifully a servant gave me some directions when I split from the Duke. She led me up two flights of stairs to the first floor where the guest rooms were located. As we passed by the glass doors that led out onto the front balcony, I noticed that Amelie was standing out there, looking out across the gardens and to the waterfront city beyond. I thanked the servant for their assistance and worked my way outside.

“Enjoying the view?”

Amelie didn’t turn to look at me, “Yes. As much as I can enjoy the sight of intense urban sprawl. Don’t you think that this coastline would have been better left preserved?”

“Maybe. But what’s done is done.”

I walked up and leaned against the stone bannister. She had a pensive look on her face, “I’d just like to thank you again for assigning me as one of your ministers. Not many would be willing to place the responsibility in the hands of the likes of me.”

I shrugged, “There’s no need to, it’s a job like any other.”

She belaboured the point, “A job that most people would shy away from giving to a woman, never mind one as young as I. My father has never once believed in my abilities. I shouldn’t be surprised – noble society believes that a woman’s only responsibility is to produce heirs for their husband. Even commoners get the freedom to choose their own path, yet despite all of my supposed wealth and influence, I am destined to be pushed onto the highest bidder.”

“And you didn’t want that.”

“No. Not in the slightest. My true romance was leading. Whenever I had the chance I’d sneak away from my handlers and tutors to read books I wasn’t supposed to from the library. I became infatuated with the concepts they presented to me.”

“So that’s where you learned how to build a dock.”

“And many other things,” she adds, “Hopefully my hard work will pay dividends in the end, and father will realize that I’m worth more than he thinks I am.”

I doubted that her father would ever think that way. He had benefitted from the system as it was for his entire life. “Some people are too stuck in their ways. You’ve been doing an amazing job, I’d be totally lost if you weren’t here to give me a hand.”

She smirked and cupped her ear, “Oh, is that thankfulness I hear from my mayor?”

“Don’t get used to it,” I grumbled.

We headed to our respective bedchambers to prepare for the meeting. The room was very impressive, with a huge wooden canopy bed, crimson wallpaper and a window looking out into the back garden.

The ‘present’ that Duke Polemarch had left me was a suit that presumably cost an eye-watering amount of money. Each piece had been carefully laid out onto the bed. There was a black jacket, a white dress shirt, a blue *cravat*, a deeper blue waistcoat and a matching pair of black trousers. The jacket had slate details embedded onto it that resembled flowers, you could only see them when they reflected the light. My foot brushed against something that had been tucked under the bed. It was a pair of formal shoes to go with the suit.

I hung my godly coat from the door and started the arduous process of getting changed. There was a reason that most people on Earth didn't dress like this. It was a tremendous effort. Layers upon layers upon layers. I didn't want to go asking Amelie for help to dress myself, so I did the best I could. When I looked at myself in the room's mirror, I was happy with the result. As long as the suit didn't explode from my body because I put it on wrong.

I looked somewhat presentable. I visited the town's barber shop before I departed to trim my wild locks. The eyepatch made me look like a villain from a cheap spy movie. Before I knew it, it was time for me to head downstairs to the meeting. A guard knocked on my door, "Are you prepared, Sir Blackwood? The Duke requests your presence."

"That I am. Lead the way."

I followed him back down the way I came, down stairs and through long, winding corridors. The smell of the carpeted floor was ever-present. When we returned to the long chamber on the ground floor, I noticed that two new guards had been posted at either side of the double doors. I could hear Polemarch speaking through them.

"Before you all take your seats, I am sure all of you have noted the new addition to our meeting room. After a grand performance in front of the royal court, he was appointed as the leader of Celeste's Landing and placed under my leadership. If you'd please!" The guards pulled the door open. I stepped into the room and every single eye locked onto me. A bevy of different noblemen scrutinized me and my appearance, before offering an extremely light applause.

"Lord-Mayor Shane Blackwood."

I bowed my head in deference and walk to my seat at the table. I could already feel a cold sweat break out and dribbling down the back of my neck. I hated this. I hated pretending to know how to act as a noble. One wrong move and I was sure that these vultures would pick me apart. Polemarch was very pleased to see yet another man join his ranks as a vassal.

"I suppose introductions are in order. The man you see here is my brother, Count Samuel Polemarch."

I noticed the resemblance as he bowed his head to me, "A pleasure." He was much skinnier than his bearded brother.

Polemarch then motioned to the man sat next to him, all three had banners that closely resembled each other. "This is my eldest son, Johan. He's currently preparing to take on his first responsibilities as a Count." Unlike Samuel, Johan seemed a little peeved that some total stranger waltzed in and supplanted him. He bowed his head and said nothing.

He quickly cycled through the remaining attendees, "And then we have Count Arden of Redmond, Count Whemis of Dalay, and Count Francs of Burry." They all repeated the process and bowed their heads in deference. The three men all had a similar manner of appearance. Thick moustaches, brown hair and neatly gelled hair.

Arden chuckled and spoke first, "I must say – things are going to become lively with someone like you around. What a show you put on at the court."

Francs did not share his compatriot's jolly nature. "Are you certain that appointing a commoner was the correct course of action? What of your poor son?"

Polemarch shut him down in short order; “Johan will be more than a Count in due time. I can teach him those lessons without appointing him to a newly founded settlement. Sir Blackwood presented us with a perfect opportunity to lay claim to the land we’ve coveted so. Johan, listen closely, compromise is always a weapon in your arsenal.”

Johan nodded – seemingly calmed by his words, “I understand father.”

“Now our borders have grown, our trade is secure, and we have a sharp new fellow amongst our number. Additionally, this presents us with a unique window to exploit the church’s turmoil back in the capitol.”

“Ah, I see. Creating a safe place for the Laddites to live without scrutiny. An astute decision,” Whemis grumbled under his breath. “With time this new village will grow to be a powerful outpost and trade hub for us.”

“Are you certain that this course of action will not cause problems, Sire?” Francs asked again. “Surely those buffoons within the church will accuse us of amassing some kind of ‘Laddite army’ to attack them with.”

Polemarch shook his head, “Bah. Let them talk! The King knows where his power comes from, and it isn’t the likes of them. It’s powerful duchies like ours.”

Whemis turned his gaze to me, “Sir Blackwood. I’ve heard much of the town that you’ve constructed there. Is it true that there are sewers within the common district?”

We didn’t really have a ‘common district,’ I mused. Very few of the people who lived in our town had a major amount of wealth stashed away, and if they did they were new arrivals who happily bought homes within the residential areas. That’s how nice they were.

“Ah, yes. Consider it an experiment on my part. The provision of public services such as that, paid for through taxation.”

“A novel approach,” he added. “But do not neglect the importance of security. You never know when a jealous competitor may choose to use violent means to achieve their ends.”

Polemarch cut in, “I have given Sir Blackwood permission to pursue his new design. I believe that we can learn lessons from the construction of this new settlement, ones that we can apply to our own domains.”

Whemis leaned back in his chair and got comfortable. “I *am* rather tired of the profuse amount of dirt on my streets. Perhaps this common sewer concept is worth the investment.”

“Happy people are productive people,” I explained, “My plan is to attract new residents with a town unlike any other, and wow them with services they can’t find anywhere else. That should lead to a rapid expansion of the economy, and therefore the weight we can throw around on a national level.”

“Are you certain this man is a commoner, Sir Francs? He speaks like a scholar!” Whemis guffawed.

Polemarch gave me an approving glance. It seemed that I had settled into the court smoothly enough. I couldn’t let my guard down. A lifetime of media portraying nobles, dukes and kings as bloodthirsty murderers played through my mind again and again. These people all had their own motivations, and not all of them were going to play nice to get what they wanted.

The meeting shifted from pestering me about my crazy modern ideas to something much drier and boring. Polemarch shifted from person to person, querying them on the goings on inside of their respective territories and making sure that they had collected the tax money needed to keep things moving. I didn't need to worry about paying my dues to Polemarch just yet – our deal made sure of that.

I tried to get a handle on the men who now surrounded me as they spoke. Francs was the cynical, worrisome type that always wanted to triple-check that everything was okay. Arden was much peppier and willing to forge tradition as long as it was entertaining. Whemis was the big unknown, nothing he has said to me gave me a grip on his personality like the other two did.

Polemarch's brother and son mostly kept to themselves. No doubt they spoke to him frequently outside of these meetings. Johan didn't have a county of his own, that would cause some tension between us in the future. I'd be happy if my prediction was wrong though. I didn't want a crazy outpouring of conflict from the people who were supposed to be on my side.

Problems for another day. Once the formalities were over Polemarch clapped his hand and dismissed one of the servants. A few moments later several more re-entered the room with several trays of food for us, as well as wooden tankards with some variety of beer inside. The mood lightened and he egged us on to enjoy the feast. It was time to put my gut to the test.

In-between mouthfuls I kept my head down and focused on talking about the town. I didn't want to give anything away about myself so easily again like I did with Amelie. Deftly navigating the hard world of dinnertime conversation – I think I did a pretty good job! I managed to avoid offending any of them, and showed off my chops as a leader of men and women.

Whether that precedent would hold was yet to be seen.