

We had our first test of the dock two days later, when Duke Polemarch returned on board a medium sized ship to visit the town. The process of mooring it went smoothly enough thanks to the assistance of his crew. We were going to the capital city the following day. Polemarch was eager to solve the problem as quickly as possible thanks to the King's imposed deadline.

He was even kind enough to bring me some dress clothes for when I was presented to the court. My godly jacket was nice, but probably not up to their standards. Polemarch was overjoyed to hear our collective affirmation to his plan. He'd managed to provisionally snatch the town from under the Lomarc's noses. I 'owed' him a favour, which would be paid forward in us presenting ourselves to him as a new vassal town under his Duchy.

That didn't mean everything was going to go smoothly. Polemarch echoes many of the same concerns that Amelie had. They'd try to use every underhanded trick in the book to get one over on me. Polemarch and the King could head off most of those attempts easily using their influence, but in his own words, "Some of them are still stupid enough to try."

I certainly wasn't under threat of being stabbed, because Polemarch assigned no less than five of his personal guards to keep an eye on me as we trundle towards the capital city in the back of a carriage. Amelie had elected to come with me and guide me through the messy undergrowth of noble politics.

I didn't get a good shot of the city from inside the rocking carriage, but I could tell by the length of the journey that this was a big, big place. The glimpses I did see through the windows painted a picture of a tightly packed city bursting to at the seams. Three story houses lay on both sides of the stone road, with only the occasional small alleyway breaking them up.

The more affluent areas of the city had sewers and drains running down each side of the road, but that privilege wasn't extended to the other districts. I could smell the stench of refuse that had been thrown down onto the streets through the doors.

My sightseeing was cut off as we passed through a large pair of heavily guarded gates and emerged out into a large palace garden. Finely trimmed hedges and marble statues replaced shops and homes. The horse-drawn carriage came to a halt at the foot of the steps leading up to the main building. The front façade reminded me of a Greek temple, with tall pillars and a triangular roof.

"Here we are, the palace of the King," Amelie said witheringly.

"It's... impressive," but not very wheelchair accessible.

Polemarch didn't seem to enthused about the building either, "This is where the business happens. The west wing of the palace is where court is held. But first... King Sebtländer has requested a personal meeting with you. He wishes to ascertain your suitability for the job."

"No pressure, huh?"

"Don't worry. I handed him a report on your work. Win or lose, it'll be decided by his gut."

That didn't reassure me at all. My future, and the future of the town were down to a King's whimsy. We followed Polemarch up the stairs and into the grand lobby. A huge pair of staircases wended up and around to the second and third floors. Another flight of tall steps, hooking a right, walking down a long, long corridor lined with entryways on both sides.

Finally, we came upon an unassuming wooden doorway. Polemarch nodded to me, and knocked three times.

“King Sebtlander, I’m here with Sir Blackwood.”

He answered immediately, “Enter!”

He turned to face me, “Mind your manners, and this should be no problem.”

He unlocked the door and waved me in. Amelie had to stay outside.

The room was not the grand throne room I expected to be shown to upon my arrival. It was a comfortable and personal office space that had clearly seen much use. There was a large, ornate wooden desk at the back side of the chamber, topped with an oil light and a fountain pen. The walls were covered with stuffed bookshelves.

Hunched over in a tall-backed leather chair was an old man wearing a red silk robe. He was bundled up as if winter had descended over the interior of the palace. An open fire roared against the left wall and cast the wood-lined chamber in a deep yellow glow.

I was unsure of what to do. I pretended that I was in a period drama and did what I thought was appropriate. I approached the King and bowed as deeply as my back allowed, “It’s an honour to meet you, your highness.”

He ignored my greeting and looked onto the Duke beside me, “This is the man you spoke of? He’s barely even a boy!”

Polemarch shrugged, “Young or not, the report I presented to you was truthful. With the benefit of experience – I have no doubt he could be an excellent Count.” The King’s deep-set eyes scrutinized me closely. I felt myself tense up, not wanting to cause offense.

“Hmph. Looks like he has some spine,” he punctuated the sentence by coughing into his hand, “Better than those idiots who call themselves leaders...”

Polemarch leaned into my ear, “That means he likes you.”

“I have to admit, it’s very unusual to see a young man like yourself doing something as an affront to the Kingdom.”

I stood at attention. “Ah. I didn’t intend to be in charge originally. I simply came across the caravan as it was travelling.”

“You’re not a Laddite?”

I grimaced, “No. No I am not. Though I suppose you could say I’m a believer.”

How could I not believe when I had met the goddess of the religion myself? She was the one who sent me here in the first place. Still, to describe myself as a Laddite would be strange and unfitting. I knew nothing about their traditions or customs, I didn’t attend their sermons or understand their teachings. Yet here I was, their voice in a Kingdom that had spurned them in so many ways.

“...They’ll give you trouble, that’s for sure. As long as you stand straight up and face them head on, I’ll be thankful for it. They’ve grown too comfortable with things around here. They believe that they’re owed everything and more. I have no place for people who cannot pull their own weight. If they think that they can rely on the Azel Church to secure their position, they have another thing coming. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

"You started this," he warned me, "For good or ill, you must be the one to finish it. Whether it's a grand success, or an early grave – there's no turning back from it now. Knowing this, would you accept my blessings and become the count of this new settlement?"

"I will, but they call me the Mayor."

"...I see. I have my answer. Polemarch has told me many things, I trust his words. As such, I will accept his judgement. You will be the Lord-Mayor of Celeste's Landing. The Blackwood family, as small as it is, will stand shoulder to shoulder with the others."

I bowed again.

"Don't disappoint me. The court will assemble tomorrow."

With nothing else to say, Polemarch tugged on my shoulder and led me back out of the room. Amelie was on top of me in a moment, "Did it go well?"

"Aye lass. The King approves. But that isn't the tough part. As soon as one of their insiders spots you, they'll know what's going on. It'll be a scramble to see who can get their hooks into you. It would probably be safer just to stay in your chamber until I come for you."

His words only served to enflame a newly developing sense of paranoia. The palace was huge yet isolating at the same time. Long sightlines that stretched from end to end of each wing, hundreds of doorways closing in on your left and right. And now the potential of being kidnapped or killed by a jealous noble's hitman.

We followed the mountain of a man deeper into the winding corridors of the castle. It stretched on and on, so much so that I was surprised when we finally came to a stop outside of another door. He opened it and waved me inside. It was a bed-chamber, similar in design to the office that the King was working in. Red carpet, wooden furnishing and silver trim. It was cosy, and a far cry from sleeping on the floor of my own office in a bag.

I sat down on the end and sighed, rubbing my eyes clear.

I couldn't expect Polemarch to speak frankly. He wasn't doing all of this out of the kindness of his heart. He wanted to secure his position within the Kingdom, and I was a means to do just that. By gaining control over our part of the coast, he could protect his precious trade routes from interference by others.

"Can they do anything to stop this?" I asked again.

"No. Not with me and the King backing you. Killing you would put a lot of heat on them too, so they're going to try and win you over."

"Like you did?"

"I didn't win you over like *they* do. I offered you a mutually beneficial deal. These people are all about arranged marriages and ostentatious gifts. Things that don't require effort, compromise or sacrifice on their part. That's why I'm the Duke of the Black Cove, and they're not."

Polemarch could insist he was different all he wanted, the end results were still the same, as was the motivation. "How is this ceremony going to go?"

"You won't have to do much. You'll be presented before the court as the candidate for assuming the countship. The King will name you, the area in question, and ask for objections from the assembled

nobles. Of course – they'll have plenty. Just keep your head down while they get it out of their system."

"And then?"

"After the public facing part of the process, your name will be entered into the registry as a new ruling family. They'll also pester you to make a family crest, probably."

"I'm no artist."

"They'll commission one of the King's to make one for you."

Not to mention that I had no intention of turning into a noble anyway. Though for the sake of keeping up appearances I had to go on with whatever they wanted me to do, within reason. I had to play by their rules. Getting upset and trying to make a point would get me nowhere. I bit my tongue for the time being.

"After that, official authority over the territory will be handed to you. You will be recognized as the King's representative, and have all of the benefits that come from it – including support from our military. I wouldn't rely on them right now though."

"I know. They're busy."

"That's... an understatement. We don't have enough men to protect our own towns and cities, never mind attack the enemy."

"A defensive advantage can't be understated."

"They won't pull back," he said, "they've invested too much into this campaign to come home with nothing. If we had more rational people like you in court, maybe things would be different."

"Can't the King demand that they come home?"

"Not without a formal peace offering. Ultimately, the control over our military is divided between the nobles and the King. The nobles are the ones who pay their wage, so they command a lot of authority and loyalty with them."

"Men," Amelie scoffed.

Men indeed. There was too much masculine pride on the line to make the right choice.

"Lady Amelie, allow me to show you to your chamber-"

"I know where it is. Just make sure that my 'future husband' here doesn't turn up dead before the council meets."

Polemarch chuckled, "Of course."