

I was being marched to the gallows.

That's what it felt like. I knew that in reality I was merely going to be presented before the assembled court, a collection of the most powerful, wealthy and psychopathic individuals in the Kingdom. This was not going to go down well with most of them. Polemarch and the King had promised their backing, but those promises were only on paper. If their positions became threatened, they'd turn on me in a moment.

Two guards watched me from my left and right flanks. Polemarch had to take his seat beneath the throne of the King. Amelie was also sat in the stands, as there was a dedicated section for non-landed guests and nobles. I was brought before a pair of tall wooden doors, engraved with a mural featuring warriors and kings battling various wonderous creatures like dragons and hydras.

The doors opened on their own, revealing the full length of the meeting chamber. I swallowed my nerves and stepped inside. There were nearly a thousand people sat around the four edges of the space. The King sat upon a throne of gold and silver. He had ditched his comfortable red silk robe for an eccentric, matching purple top and trousers. The crowd upon his head was so large and unwieldy that it threatened to break his old neck.

Sat at his feet were five smaller chairs. Only three of them were filled. Polemarch, and his two fellow Dukes. The uproar began the moment I stepped into the room. I ignored the jeers and screams – coming to a stop at a small wooden plinth placed close to the King's throne. I bowed respectfully and put myself into a stiff, 'polite' stance.

"Silence," Frederick demanded. The noise continued. "I said silence!" And again, they refused to listen. "So help me God, if you don't quieten down now, I'll strip you of your land and throw you into the black sea!"

I bit my lip and tried not to laugh as the noise cut off like an unplugged amplifier. They'd sooner be beheaded for treason than give up their wealth. The silence was almost unnerving. When the King was finally happy that he could speak over them without being interrupted, he looked down at me from above.

"I understand that many of you hold concerns about what will happen here today. Do not believe that this is precedent. We as a Kingdom are placed in a uniquely challenging position. The young man stood before us today has proven his skills in leadership, and with the support of Duke Polemarch, I have naught to argue. However, the floor is open to all of you. For the sake of the court, please state your name and residence."

"Shane Blackwood, Celeste's Landing."

Polemarch cleared his throat and bellowed, "Hands!"

Almost *every* person in the chamber raised their hand. I was going to be here all day...

Polemarch pointed to one of the men to my left, "Sir Phillip Damaran, you have the floor."

He stood from his chair, "Thank you Sir Polemarch. While I understand and appreciate the King's concession to some of our worries on this matter. I think I speak for many here when I say that we are presently in the midst of a problematic shortage of land. Many sons are being passed over, and yet this stranger is to be landed before them?"

Several dozen of those men cheered in ascent, "Aye!"

“While my own position in inheriting my father’s Duchy is assured, I cannot say the same for many other family members here. Every parcel is squabbled over with an intensity not seen for decades.”

“Aye!”

Polemarch nodded, “Sir Blackwood, your response?”

I took a moment to construct my argument, “Before we begin, the land we speak of is a small, new village on the coast of no more than two-hundred people. There is little benefit to settling this matter with force. Many of the citizens who live there still desire to be a part of the Kingdom. However, they have also lost a great amount of trust in the institutions they once held pride in.”

That ruffled a few feathers among the priests to my right. They knew exactly what I was talking about.

“In the absence of appointed leadership, I was selected to take on the job. The hamlet is extremely young, if I were replaced, there would no longer be a village to lead. They would pack their things and move on. Even if the matter were to be deferred to the military, could Sir Damaran assure the King that he has the men do to so?”

The elder Damaran’s visage had hardened, “I cannot.”

“Nor do I think it would be appropriate to dispatch soldiers to pacify a community of farmers. You are presented with two options, an empty patch of land with another person in charge, or a new village with me at the helm. Ultimately, it is down to whether you are willing to compromise on that principle of noble rule.”

Polemarch turned back to Phillip, “Is the honourable heir satisfied?”

Phillip nodded but I couldn’t get a read on his reaction, “Yes sir. The floor is free.” It seemed that my answer and his question had satisfied the curiosity of around half of the hands that had risen during the first round.

The head priest was the next to be singled out. “High-Chaplain John. The floor is yours.”

The very old and decrepit pile of fabric and laced gold cleared his throat and hacked out the next inquiry, “My King, I speak with all due respect – but I must question the wisdom of allowing the Laddites to form a community on the borders of our nation. I fear that over time tensions will fester, and that those living there will be placed into a position capable of harming others.”

What a shock. If your lead church persecutes a group of people, they don’t like you very much.

“Sir Blackwood. Your response?”

I folded my arms and sighed, “Aside from the impracticalities of forming a Laddite militia using two-hundred people, I fully intend to abide by the intent and word of the law. A good portion of the people with us are not Laddite followers, and those who are, are primarily comprised of women and children. They have a variety of reasons to move there.”

“Yet the town is called Celeste’s Landing? To adorn a county within our borders with the name of that pretender-”

Polemarch cut in, “High-chaplain, may I remind you that while you are an important member of this council, it does not give you the authority to decide matters of law and morality for all. The

persecution of the Laddites is not the King's policy, and many of your priests have already fallen afoul of our lawmen for their actions. Please restrain your questioning to the matter at hand."

He shut that down fast. There was more contrition between the church and the King than I had first expected. That worked to my advantage. The King wasn't going to abide by this kind of fearmongering argument about the Laddites.

The questioning continued for nearly two hours. Sometimes they were angry, demanding and demeaning. Others tried to stay in the King's good graces by restraining their venom for later. They screwed into me for every little detail they could extract. Who I was, what my family was like, where I came from, and what my qualifications were. I'd constructed a detailed and convincing backstory using my little book. The authenticity of the statement wasn't important, I designed it to be as boring as possible.

Eventually the well ran dry, and there were no more questions to ask.

The King spoke, "Thank you for your careful consideration. The time for questions is over."

The silence was deafening.

"In troubling times like these, it is my duty as King to shoulder the burden of leading this great ship we call a nation. In doing so – I must make choices that are bound to upset, and shape a generation of politics here in the capital. Today I must make an unprecedented action, for which I beg your forgiveness. Yet I must remind thee that once upon a time all of your families were humble workers too. Living from the land we call our home."

I closed my eyes and waited.

"Shane Blackwood. Do you accept this appointment? To serve loyally and eternally as a leader of man?"

"...Yes."

"Then it is done. The name Blackwood shall be inscribed into the book of tolls, and the colours of your pride shall hang in this great hall till the day your last perishes. I hereby pronounce you, Lord Mayor of Celeste's Landing and the greater region that surrounds it; under the watchful eye of Duke Polemarch."

Several dozen of the nobles stood from their seats and chanted in unison, "It is so!"

The silence was over with. The hall descended into a cacophony of voices speaking about the proceedings they had just witnessed. The King and the other two Dukes speedily vacated their seats and left through the only other exit in the chamber. Polemarch descended the steps to the floor and patted me on the shoulder.

"I'll take care of you lad, sorry – Lord Mayor."

"Lord Mayor?"

He smirked, "I suggested it to him. All of these nobles have their pride on their sleeves, naming you a 'full count' would probably make them bust a blood vessel. It's the same thing, different in name only. The perfect type of compromise to make them passive."

"It's probably appropriate anyway. We haven't spread out and colonized the entire area, and probably won't for a long time."

“Heh. I’m not so sure.”

“Why not?”

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“I... may have sent some of my men to spread the word about the new town that’s accepting Laddite residents.”

I sighed and adjusted my hair, “I see.”

“Of course, nobody will be packing up and leaving right away.”

I looked to the daggers being stared at me from the elevated seats, “You do realize they might not be happy about us attracting all of their workers?”

“They aren’t happy about them being on ‘their’ land anyway. What right do they have to complain?”

That meant we needed to have a plan of action for when new residents moved in. I had been working overtime to carefully plan out plots for expansion in the agricultural and residential areas – but soon enough an IOU wouldn’t be enough to get houses built on those plots. We were going to have to transfer from a barter economy to a cash economy on the spot. Polemarch’s trading ships would be dropping by eventually.

They’d need to pay for materials and labour. Maybe I could convince the people involved to offer them a loan of some kind until they could it off, like a mortgage. Such financial concepts weren’t commonplace in a world where a large number of people still worked in farming instead of service industries.

“You look like one of those bright ideas is springing up again...”

“No, this is what I look like when I’m worried. We need to get some more houses up.”

Polemarch followed me through the main doors to the chamber, where I was intercepted by a nervous looking Amelie. “How does it feel to join the rat race?”

“Worrying.”