

Celeste's Landing

Bustling Village

Total Population:	238
Active Workers:	147

Things started to steady out after that. The trickle of Laddite immigrants continued unabated for several weeks, with our builders, miners and woodcutters working at full speed to try and keep up with demand. They were handsomely rewarded with a large amount of Lune for the house purchases. Since we didn't implement a sales tax during the last meeting, the government didn't get a sniff of it.

I looked down at my logbook, turning over to our new budget page. I flipped up my eyepatch and watched as the numbers faded into being. The table would update automatically when we made changes.

	Quantity	Cost	Total / per month
Watchman	5	280	1400
Public Sector Worker	3	250	750
Total	8		2150

We presently weren't paying any material costs, but that would change in the future if stones started to crack or break. They were cheap enough and with the small budget surplus we were maintaining we could afford it should the worst come to worst.

I was very pleased to discover that nobody had a bad word to spare about the new watchmen. All of them were warmly received, and had been praised for doing a good job. One of the empty rooms in the town hall had been turned into Donovan's office. Every morning he'd gather the men in there and lay out the day's plan for them. It was nice to have someone else using the building with me.

As for forming the town guard, we settled on a slightly higher wage as a bonus for putting themselves in danger. Several people who had been drifting between jobs applied to take the position on full-time. When Donovan had chosen his men, we cracked open the crate I'd been hiding in the empty room that would become his office and handed out the goods.

Polemarch had been presumptuous enough to include a set of tabards for them with the weapon shipment. In the end they were equipped with chainmail, pot helmets, short iron swords and spears, and a black and white, four-part checkerboard cloth tabard that slipped on over their heads and hung down to their knees.

It was designed to match my 'family' colours and banner, though they had simplified things by removing the silhouetted trees. I would complain about it being boring to look at, but Duke Polemarch's men allegedly wore a plain black tabard instead. I didn't really have room to whine when they took the name 'Black Cove' so literally. Would it kill them to add some blue?

We had all of the basics that people expected from a small town, and some things that people didn't even get in the biggest cities. It was a solid start. I slammed the book shut and put it back into my pocket, next to the guidebook that Celeste had given me. I wasn't in my office, in fact, I wasn't even

in Celeste's Landing at all. I was in a carriage - one sent by Duke Polemarch to bring me and Amelie over to his capital city. He'd blindsided me the day before with a letter asking for my attendance at a semi-annual meeting of all of his vassals.

I'd called upon Amelie's services as my designated 'noble-whisperer' once more. I got the distinct impression that she was enjoying her work as our public works co-ordinator more than being a piece of noble eye-candy. She'd been so immersed in it that it felt like she'd forgotten that she was from an influential family.

I had to wonder how she really felt about everything - she was very resistant to staying when her brother left her in Celeste's Landing. Was that just because she knew what her father was trying to make her do? Her words about it being a hamlet in the middle of nowhere were not untruthful, but her 'objections' came off more as her trying to get out of the situation rather than malice. She was flourishing in the role now that things had picked up. She'd even earned the trust of some of the townspeople.

"So what should I expect from the Duke when we arrive?"

"I'm not certain. But I've heard from others that Polemarch enjoys keeping a tight leash on his rowdier vassals. These meetings give him the chance to assess their ambitions and motivations, as well as to steer them in the direction he desires."

"Is that unusual?"

"To an extent. Many rulers are content to leave things as-is, and to whittle away their days eating, drinking and partying within their estates. It's a disease of apathy that has swept over many areas of the Kingdom. The reason the war effort is going so poorly is because many of the officers leading our soldiers are those very same nobles, ones with no experience on the battlefield."

"Hm. Hopefully he won't have anything to say about our deal, unless it's positive that is."

"He won't renege on the deal, he isn't that kind of man. I think this is an opportunity for you to exchange ideas with him, and to see how the growth of a city will affect the landscape of Celeste's Landing."

It was going to be a learning experience all right. It'd be the first time I really stepped foot into a city of this world. I knew that they weren't exactly the best in terms of living standards; but the economic opportunities you could find here were too good for most people to pass up. At the end of the day this was a society where cash was king. It determined nearly everything about the standard of living you had.

My body shifted as the carriage rolled to a stop. We had arrived at Polemarch's manor.

Finding a place big enough to place such a large building in such a dense city was a challenge, it must have been built decades before the place exploded in population. It had a much more modest appearance than the noble quarter I'd seen in the Capitol. It was four stories tall and box shaped. A pair of staircases led up to the first floor, embracing another entrance below that led onto the ground floor. It was like a French chateau. Perfectly placed windows ran along the outside. The building itself was painted a pleasant cream-white. Two tall chimneys sprouted from the black-slate roof like a pair of ears.

"Is this really Polemarch's home?" I asked.

"Yes. Supposedly his father had an interest in foreign architecture."

Just because it was modest by noble standards didn't mean it was small. There was another basement floor hidden beneath, hinted at with thin windows that allowed natural light inside. It needed to house his family, the servants, and the guests. A group of those servants quickly hurried to the carriage and took our luggage – we didn't have much of it though. Getting new clothes was actually something I really needed to do.

We were escorted inside to the ground floor, which was an airy and bright sitting area that led out into the back garden. Several tables, couches and chairs were scattered around for people to use. Duke Polemarch was already waiting for us.

“Lord-Mayor Blackwood! I'm glad to see that you could make it.”

I shook his hand, “Thank you for the invitation.”

His eyes drifted to the blonde noble stood beside me, “And Lady Amelie, it's a pleasure to see you too. You've grown tall since last I saw you!”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she said politely.

“I'm surprised to see you here,” he continued, “Is that oaf Frank trying to be rid of you again?”

She was not offended by his unflattering description of her father; “Unfortunately. But Sir Blackwood has been kind enough to appoint me as his trade minister, I have a surplus of work to do as a result.” Polemarch surely knew this already – he was just killing time and making conversation. We followed him through another door and into a long corridor.

“I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce you to your fellow leaders. It's a rare occurrence that everyone is together in one place.” He brought us into a lengthy room that was double the height of the others. Huge arched windows look out into the garden beyond. A long wooden table ran down the middle of the space, with a large throne at the head. All of the other chairs were the same size.

Each chair was accompanied by a banner that hung down from the wall behind them. I didn't recognize the designs aside from one that sat at the far end. It was my banner, the one that they'd hoisted upon me when I became a noble. The banners shared some commonalities, being made from strong greens, blues, blacks and whites. Some had rolling waves, others were clearly derived from each other. I counted ten banners in total, including mine.

“You get to join some fine company,” Polemarch smiled, “I have a chair for every vassal of mine.”

“And I suppose this is my seat?” I asked, running my hand across the varnished wood.

“Indeed.”

Amelie had run away at some point along the way to manage her luggage, leaving me alone with the Duke. I scratched my skin, “We haven't had the chance to speak in a personal capacity yet, have we?”

Polemarch chewed on his lip, “Well, in this life there's no such thing as an innocent conversation. As much trust as I place in the men under my command, I don't extol every tale and happening to them. For example – that eyepatch of yours. I haven't asked you about it.”

“That's right, you haven't.”

He wagged his finger at me, "Because I know that losing an eye is something personal. What would come from asking you of how it happened? I don't have a particular interest in seeing the wound that lies beneath."

I shook my head, "I'm not a soldier, if that's what you're thinking."

"I never said you were. There's a great many reasons why a man can lose a piece of himself, even the workers down at the docks may be separated from a finger or foot. I think that everyone should be happy to keep their secrets, and not to pry into others. Though I tend to find that the people most eager to exploit our pasts are the ones who despise it happening to them in return. They believe that they have a unique right to hold something over others."

"Words of wisdom, Sir Polemarch."

"It *is* rather characterful though. The nobles back at the Capitol are already working themselves up into a blind fury about it. They say it's disrespectful, or that you're a former pirate on the run."

"Aye, it surely would be more respectful to show the King my empty eye-socket..."

Polemarch guffawed. He had a big funny bone. "You need not worry about that down here. Everyone in the Black Cove is a hard worker, even the folk in charge. I'm more than a mite happy to have you here, and not just because of the value of Celeste's Cove."

"The feeling's mutual," I insisted, "The people there have a distaste for noble and church politics. I want to keep our relationship... practical. If you understand my meaning."

He nodded, "I've always been at odds with the church over this matter. Too many decent folks were being turned out from their businesses and homes. Though perhaps it's merely in my character to value the physical over the spiritual. Birds of a feather flock together and all that."

"When is the meeting?"

"Later tonight. We're already preparing a great feast. Food, merriment, and then a little business to sober everyone up. I've left a welcome present for you in your guest room, you don't have the money to fill a wardrobe at the moment – do you?"

"Ah, not really."

"Something formal will fit you nicely. I'll leave you to clean up and get ready."

"Thank you sir. I'll see you again soon."

The next challenge was navigating my way there...