

“...And that’s why I’m forwarding this offer to all of you. I’d be remiss to agree to such a thing behind your back.”

I had carefully explained the situation to all of the assembled townspeople. We were crammed inside the town hall, wall to wall, in an impromptu meeting about the future of Celeste’s Landing. I had managed to command their attention thus far – even as the more controversial elements of the offer came to light.

The room became louder as they discussed the matter between themselves. Emmerich stood beside me with a pensive stare. I wanted to resolve the matter simply and quickly, with a show of hands from the people in the room. I clutched a roll of parchment stored in my pocket. I allowed the discussion to continue for an hour, until holding up my arm and demanding their attention again.

“I’d like to put this to a vote. I will not air my own opinion here so as to not influence the results.”

“But you’re the Mayor,” Emmerich objected.

“I’m the Mayor, but I’m also an outsider. I will not return the yoke of the Kingdom so eagerly when so much trust has been placed into my leadership. This is a decision for the people of this town to make.”

“If you must...”

“All those in favour of re-joining with Lunarmar, agreeing to Duke Polemarch’s terms, and continuing under my leadership, please raise your hand.”

A flurry of movement followed as people pushed and shoved, trying to be seen. I pretended to count the raised arms, but in truth I didn’t need to. I quickly scribbled down a conditional tracker on the paper I brought and received an instant, accurate number of the votes for each option. To my surprise, the results were decisive. Sixty-five percent of the people wanted to accept and appoint me as Count.

I gave the room a moment to settle, “Final chance. Are we all happy with our choice?” A few hands switched positions as people had second thoughts, but ultimately the result remained the same.

“The ayes, sixty-four. The no’s, thirty-four. We will accept the Kingdom’s offer.” There was a cheer of jubilation from the successful voters. I could sense that some of the others still felt bitter about past events, the events that had led them to moving here in the first place. Others weren’t willing to let go of their past so easily.

“I will work hard and continue in the same capacity that I always have. It’s more important now than it ever has been for us to transform this untamed land into a wonderful town to live in. We’re going to set the standard for every town and city in the Kingdom to follow. But I can’t do that all by myself.”

I smiled and motioned to the small gaggle of people stood to my left, including Emmerich and Amelie. Just as I had expected, Jerimiah had rejected the offer to become my agricultural minister, instead putting forth a man named Arton. Emmerich had been chosen by the foresters and hunters. Amelie didn’t have any competition for the spot of trade minister, but I wasn’t torn about it given her extensive experience.

“I asked for volunteers and nominees to adopt a smaller, more focused role for our various industries. You already know them as members of the community – from now on, they’ll also act as

Ministers. Forward your ideas, problems and hopes to them and they will relay them to me. They have experience and talent, and I'm happy to have them on board."

The business, housing and mining minister were all people I wasn't very familiar with.

The business minister was a woman named Maggie Walton, a weaver who set up shop in the middle of town. She was a stern, busybody of a lady with curly hair and a robust body. My new housing minister was another woman, Frederica Sims, who was a homemaker and closely connected to many of the other wives in the town. Finally, there was the appropriately named Bradley Slate – he worked with the miners in extracting natural resources from the nearby hills and mountains.

A polite applause rained down as they bowed to the crowd. For the time being it was a voluntary position with little official responsibility, but if things grew quickly that would change.

"I have a lot of good news for everyone," I said, "Our housing project here in the middle of town is almost complete. Soon everyone will be able to move into their own homes, and out of this building."

Another cheer of jubilation. We'd been making rapid progress as our process for building sewers and houses developed under Amelie's leadership. Two dozen wood and stone, two story buildings now stretched out in the middle of the plains. Connected to the farms by dirt road, it was starting to turn into a real village.

"This building will be turned into a more permanent structure. For now, it's only serving as my office, but I'm open to hearing other ideas for how we can use the space. I appreciate everyone's patience. What we're doing here is very unorthodox, but it'll be worth it. Remember to pay it forward and be good to the others.

"If anyone has any further questions to ask me, please come forth and speak with me. I'll be happy to answer them."

I stepped down from my box and allowed the people to disperse. It was getting late and they needed to be up bright and early tomorrow for work. A dozen people remained. The questions were much along the lines that I expected when I extended the offer. A lot of them were worried about Lunarmar walking in and taking over again. The Laddites had been seeing increasingly persecution from the political and religious class over the past decade.

"This is our town," I replied, "Nothing major is going to change for at least a year. And Duke Polemarch seems to be less interested in religious warfare than the others. It's likely that the number of Laddite residents will only increase with time, as they learn that this is a safe place to make a livelihood."

That was enough for the time being. But greater and greater challenges would face us in the future. I had to focus on the upcoming meeting at the capitol. I turned to Amelie and invited her into my office so we could talk things out.

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Amelie gave me a rundown of everything I needed to know before Polemarch returned.

There were dozens of noble families that ran things in Lunarmar, with splinter families making things even more complicated. Their ultimate goal was to find their members land to rule over, no matter

how small or insignificant. There was a strong cultural incentive to do so – noble children were trained from a young age in a variety of leadership skills to prepare for the job.

Counts and upwards received a seat in the King's court, a quasi-parliament where they could advance laws of interest or lobby each other for deals and influence. The court would meet every month, though attendance was not mandatory unless explicitly stated.

There was the Lomarc family, to which Amelie was born as the daughter of the house head. They were one of the larger families in the court, with several sons in waiting to become counts themselves. But my Amelie's own description, her father had become increasingly disconnected with court politics over the years. They owned much of the fertile land in the centre and east of the Kingdom.

The Polemarchs were the most affluent. They had a reputation as intelligent and savvy dealmakers who always came out on top. Duke Polemarch was the head, and he had two young sons himself. There was a second Duke named Anton. In recent times their numbers had dwindled from over a hundred living members to a dozen. Despite that, they retained their position as one of the top three. They were our primary concern, as Duke Polemarch's main seat of power was right next to us.

The last of the major families were the Damarans. Duke William Damaran was the biggest hot-head and militarist in the nation. He had to be – he was the main holder of the incredibly contested lands to the East, under near constant attack by the Twin Kingdoms of Vand and Mandery.

All three would object to me being given land when they had family without. They were competitive and they weren't above dirty tricks to get what they wanted. Becoming the 'count' of Celeste's Landing and the surrounding territory would paint a target on my back. As a boring guy who lived in the modern world, the idea of court politics was something that made me shudder. This was going end in one of two ways, with me in charge, or face down with a dagger in my back.

But I couldn't back out now. People had entrusted me with the job, for better or worse. I had to get serious and face those challenges head on. Now I just had to wait for the day to arrive.