

Amelie knew that this was coming. Her father, Frank, had called upon her the moment she set foot into the Palace. After parting ways with Shane and Polemarch, she marched down the halls like a woman possessed. The Lomarc family had a parlour in the palace used for just this purpose.

Frank was waiting for her. He stood from the armchair he was sat in and motioned to give his favourite daughter a familial hug. "Darling, I'm so happy to see you! How was the trip?" Amelie had to stop herself from gagging. So eager to be nice when she was face to face with him, after ditching her in the middle of nowhere for weeks.

She replied tersely, "Yes father, it is wonderful to see you too." She didn't want to, but she humoured the old man and embraced him in a quick greeting. Father and Daughter sat across from each other. A cup of warm tea had already been prepared and placed on the table next to Amelie.

She didn't wait long to air her grievances. "Father. I wish to know your full reasoning. Why did you think it was worth the time to send me there?"

Frank steepled his hands together, "The King gave me a task, one which I honestly had no idea how to complete. I settled on dispatching you to the area. It was only when your brother returned that I learned of the true nature of the 'town' which had enraptured the court so."

"An easy way to be rid of me."

Frank was hurt by the accusation, "You *are* my favourite daughter. So bright and beautiful. You're the envy of the entire court! I'd never do something so callous."

"That didn't stop you from trying to pawn me off to the first man who grabbed a piece of land."

"Amelie, darling, you know that I only want the best for you! A man of status at any level is a worthy match for your intelligence and looks. Those chances come by so very rarely."

Amelie masked her real intentions with some well-placed lies, "He's not a man of status, father. And the County you seem so intent on capturing for our family is little more than a hamlet. Why does your *favoured* daughter have to be used in such a crude way?"

The truth was that she had no intention of marrying anyone he chose, no matter their wealth or power. Years of being directed to act in the interest of her father and brothers had hardened Amelie's fledgling sense of rebellion.

"I was sure that he'd be happy to have you..."

"Father, let us leave these honied words for the public eye. The man, Shane Blackwood, is too aware to fall for such a trick. There was little hope of me 'seducing him' from the start. He has enough self-restraint to resist falling into a lust-fuelled frenzy the moment he lays eyes on me. I cannot say the same for the sons and daughters in this court."

"I see." Frank exhaled from his nose and deflated in his seat, "I think I know why they called us here. I'm not happy about it, but if the King's favour lies with someone else, there is aught for me to do about it."

"Yes. Duke Polemarch has vouched for his ascension into rulership. A shrewd piece of negotiation."

"But to offer such a gift to a commoner, at a time like this? My objections are weaker than others, but even still I find it hard to stomach. This threatens the cohesion of the court at a time of war."

She was unsympathetic, "Surely a problem to be resolved amongst themselves."

"If only things were that easy. I'd be lying if I said that I never fell to such prideful lows myself. The Lomarac family is everything to me. My sons, my daughters, even my cousins and the distant branches. We vie for supremacy, wealth, power, influence, to have our crest hung from the rafters and held in high regard."

"It is none of my concern," Amelie said, intending to cut things off there. "I am nothing more than your daughter. There is little role for me in these proceedings."

"...I see. Your usual room has been prepared by the servants, if you wish to rest after the long journey here."

Amelie finished the last of her tea, stood, and bowed to her father. Even as she tried to stand apart from him there were some habits she just couldn't break. She left the room in a huff and leaned against the outside wall. The meeting was about what she expected. Her father would rather die than ever admit wrongdoing.

There was an acute possibility that one of her brothers had suggested her exile. Luc was too spineless for something like that; It had to be Louis or Hugo. Her father couldn't say no to them and that was one of Amelie's key frustrations. They'd even tried to exert influence over the younger sister's education years ago – implying that homemaking would be her only responsibility.

She never forgot.

If anything, it only made her desire to show them up even stronger. She started sneaking into the library when nobody was around and reading books that had been regarded as too masculine for her. That old, slovenly, carefree Amelie was replaced by one that was reading material for people several years her senior. She found a particular fascination with boats and ports, from the economic effects of them to the engineering that constructed them.

She was the first lady in her family to attend the Royal College. And though she was kept separated from the male side of things in both dorms and lessons, she took full advantage of the opportunity – earning top marks in every subject she studied. The goading, the teasing, the minimization. They had all hard-pressed her stone into diamond. She was a prodigy.

That momentum had come to a crushing halt.

She was under no illusions about it. Out of the hundreds of nobles who stood in the court, only a handful of them were women. Women who had the great misfortune of living in a family without a direct male heir. To be appointed to the court through merit, or to even earn the recognition of her own family was a big ask. Beautiful women like her were destined for political marriages with some slovenly, unappealing son.

But Shane had offered her a chance. It was a complete coincidence, luck of the draw, but it was there. An opportunity to show her family just how good a leader she really was. Shane's success had become intertwined with her own. She was one of his ministers, and in his own words the most important one of the lot. What she always wanted was now within reach. All she had to do was help shepherd him through the difficult process of establishing his County. Make a case for being inserted into an even *more* important position.

Amelie couldn't stop the smile spreading on her face. Maybe being left behind by Luc was a good thing – not that she was going to give the men of the family any credit for accidentally helping her. Their intent was to shove her into a dark corner of the continent where they didn't have to deal with her directly anymore.

She wandered down the corridors of the palace in the direction of her private chamber. The footprint of the building was immense, merely so that each visitor could have a room of their own when court was assembled. What a waste of time and money. On the other hand, most of the male nobles Amelie had met were lecherous fools and the prospect of sleeping near them made her shudder. Their usual introductions punctuated by staring at her chest and trying to compliment her, hoping for an easy lay with a pretty woman.

Shane didn't do that, though she could see him struggling to not look down when they first met. In that way it was almost amusing. An old tutor always told her that her looks were a deadly weapon. She always thought it was a deeply cynical idea - but her recent experiences in court had only given that theory more credence.

Amelie's walk was interrupted as two men emerged from around the corner in front of her. The first, a blonde permed cockroach with no chin and long red coat - was Phillip Damaran. The son of William and heir to the Eastern Duchy. The other who was rotund and balding, Steven Damaran, his cousin. Steven had the misfortune of looking twenty years older than he really was.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Phillip mused, stalking towards her with long, exaggerated steps.

"As if this day couldn't get any worse."

"You wound me, my fair lady! Is that any way to talk to a future Duke?"

"Seen as though you haven't yet ascended to the position, I only think it's appropriate. You sweep through like a bout of infectious disease, though a man with the runs still manages to have better hygiene."

Phillip tried to laugh off the insult, "That sharp tongue of yours is very charming. Your father seems oddly resistant to accepting my marriage offer."

"Is that so?" Amelie sighed, "Tis' a shame. Perhaps you should change targets to a woman who can stand to be in your presence? Instead of incessantly following me around like a lost mongrel."

Steven turned to his cousin, "They must have taught her some new insults out in the countryside."

"No. She always swears like a sailor - your brother had the right idea when he said that learning about ships wasn't right for a young girl."

"Noted," Amelie glowered.

Phillip turned from flirting to politics, "I've heard rumours about your new friend being inducted to the court. You do realize what an affront such a plan is to the families and their children? Poor Jean is being passed over again! You must feel bad for your brother."

"Not particularly. I don't know what you hope to gain by offering fake sympathy for my brother, you two are always at each other's throats."

"A little friendly rivalry never hurt anyone. I'm merely concerned for the precedent this will set - how will the many sons of the court handle being rejected for their rightful positions as leaders?"

"Yes, a shame. To continue leeching off the goodwill of their parents like a gaggle of blood-sucking parasites. Truly the people will weep at your plight."

Phillip's face flashed in outrage, "Watch your tongue! I could have you drawn and quartered if I wished!" He closed the distance between them and looked down on her from above. Amelie wasn't

going to back down to his usual threats, she stood her ground even as he tried to intimidate her with his height.

“You lay so much as finger on me and my dad will *bury* you. They’ll never find the body.”

Steven became increasingly unsettled as the standoff continued. He tugged on Phillip’s sleeve, “Let it go Phillip. It’s not worth the trouble.”

“I’ll be keeping a close eye on this boy of yours. The moment he slips up, I’ll cut his fucking neck. There’s no room for pretenders in our court.”

“You don’t have the balls to try.”

Phillip opened his mouth to speak again, but fell back and restrained himself. With the last word said, the terrible twosome meandered back the way they came. They were waiting there for her to come by just to speak with her.

“I hate those two,” she muttered. Why was he even interested in Celeste’s Landing? Even if he managed to secure the county for himself, he’d end up under the command of Duke Polemarch. His father would never allow it. Trouble was heading Shane’s way, and she wasn’t confident that he had the skills and wit to handle it.

Time would tell.