

Frederica's main job was making sure that everybody was happy with their living situation, and she was the one in charge of finding people housing when they arrived in town. The first real test of her house selling prowess had arrived suddenly and with little warning. The people were going to trickle in throughout the day.

I stood back at our spot near the main road into the residential area and allowed her to work her magic. It was the first time that I'd delegated major decision making to another person. Amelie found the concept somewhat novel, as if she'd only just realized that they actually had authority over other people.

"So, these ministers... they're like your court?"

"It's not really a *court*, it's just a group of volunteers designated to help manage things."

A small wagon with a family of five arrived around the bend, quickly being intercepted and greeted by Frederica. We'd cleared a small space in the main square for them to park their belongings for the moment until they found a house. These people seemed better off than the ones who founded the town months earlier.

Polemarch had indicated that the houses were for sale. They were, and they were cheaper than what you'd find in the modern world. It was a lot more realistic to see people move from one place to another. We'd be attracting people with money to spend – which was fine by me.

Amelie shrugged, "What's the difference?"

"Aren't the people in courts usually lower level nobles and clergymen?"

She nodded, "Yes."

"Well, ministers aren't rulers. They're in charge of organizing a specific area of interest. For that matter, I'm only a count anyway; I'd be hard pressed to find anyone willing to serve under me with noble heritage."

"Would I be a member of your court? I am from a noble family after all."

"Would your Father even let me?"

She laughed, "No. He would not, lest it was as your wife."

Frederica had wrangled a few of her housewife friends into the scheme. When the visitors had secured their belongings by the guards we'd assigned, they were escorted down the street and towards the second residential area that we were constructing. It was very similar to the first, though without the garden square in the centre we could fit a lot more houses in the same space.

I'd designed the blocks carefully. They were spaced far enough apart to prevent the spread of fire, were surrounded on all sides by road access, and had small front or back gardens that would allow the residents to grow some of their own food. Unlike my old world that was still common practice for families to do.

Food security, space, sanitation. These were houses that you might expect a middle-class person to live in – at least judging by the short time I spent in the capital city. Despite the additional luxuries, they had a similar footprint and size. Another cart arrived soon enough, again manned by a family of four. The parents and two young children.

Frederica gave them the welcoming treatment, though no homemaker was waiting to give them the tour. I approached the parking area to keep them occupied for the time being. When the man saw me, his face lit up in happiness.

“Count Blackwood!”

“Ah, it’s Lord-Mayor, actually. You can just call me Shane.”

He frowned, “But that sounds rather disrespectful, Sir Blackwood.”

That was easier on the tongue than ‘The Rightfully Appointed Lord-Mayor Blackwood,’ at least. I smiled and reached out for a handshake, “Welcome to Celeste’s Landing.”

“The pleasure is all ours, I assure you. I’m Donovan Baker – I believe that you’re acquainted with my cousin?”

Every cell in my brain fired at full strength to remember his name; “Oh, you’re related to Mark?”

“Aye, that I am. This is my wife Sonia, and our kids – Benjamin and Dale.”

Benjamin was a pale, red-headed boy with freckle covered cheeks and shoulder length hair. His brother was much the same, but with a shorter, neater trim. Benjamin leaned over the edge of the cart and grinned, “Hello! I’ve never met a real noble before!”

“I’m not that exciting,” I murmured. Dale seemed much less fussed about the entire thing and remained silent. “So, you’ve heard good things about the town, I hope.”

Donovan laughed, “Mark sent me a letter and I’ve never seen him happier, like a pig in muck he is. Since we were already planning on relocating from the capital, we decided that this town seemed as good a place as any!”

Sonia held a hand to her chest, “And the trouble over there was getting simply unbearable. Every day you’d hear another story of some poor family being harassed or having their houses vandalized.”

This religious rift was one that I’d yet to fully understand myself. Celeste was one of the patron goddesses of the main church body in Lunarmar. But from what I did know, Laddites were followers of a practice initiated by the titular Kerstin Laddite, a devoted follower of Celeste specifically. It became extremely popular amongst farmers and agricultural workers who believed that their specific affiliation with Celeste brought good harvests.

But some of their beliefs and communal practices offended the Lunarmar Church and undercut their institutional power. They didn’t donate to the church, or follow the edicts of its priests and ministers. Things had further splintered into three different factions, the anti-Laddites in the church, the pro-reconciliation members of the church, and the Laddites themselves.

What this meant in practice was that many Laddites faced persecution and suspicion in heavily church-loyal areas. If someone were to say, offer them a Laddite majority settlement to live in, then they’d flock here in droves. That wasn’t a sustainable solution though.

Laddites were a minority, and some of them would evade the brunt of the problem through luck or keeping it hidden. Building a large city or trading port would require melding different cultures and religions together without stepping on any toes in the process.

“We haven’t had any trouble here – so I hope that you’ll find the perfect place and make it your new home.”

“Thank you kindly,” Donovan said, “It’s very nice of you to come here and greet us personally.”

Amelie sighed, “He’s too nice for his own good. Don’t you have work to be doing, ‘Lord-Mayor?’”

“It’s just a short break!” I insisted, “Too much paperwork can break a man if you’re not careful.”

“I know – I’m the one managing the shipping manifests!” she scowled.

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So we headed back to the office. The rest of my working day was spent filling out the rest of my documents and anxiously glancing at my population tracker. The power of the King’s Eye meant that the moment a person decided to settle here for good, they’d be counted towards our total population. At least that’s how I thought it worked. Amelie would poke her head into the room every now and then to make sure I was actually doing what needed to be done.

We’d basically be doubling our population in the next week. I didn’t need to head down to the construction site to crack the whip, because all of them knew how important it was to rapidly expand our housing stock. New problems, new opportunities. I had my fingers crossed for them one them having a profession that we needed.

A large portion of them would be farmers, who had the support of our already booming rural community. More famers meant more food to export to Polemarch’s towns and cities. Our economy would grow and I’d have more room to manoeuvre and implement taxation policies. It was always going to be a bitter pill to swallow, but if we wanted to maintain our infrastructure, we needed to pay for wages and materials.

I intended to start on the low side. Low taxes would attract businesses and growth, especially considering our seaside location and port facilities. I also needed it to be unobtrusive and straightforward. It needed to be something that people at any level of education could understand.

I *could* use my King’s Eye to precisely calculate how much each family exported and the money they earned – but that would be an even larger invasion of privacy than it already was with my lists of stockpiled goods and population figures. It would also arouse undue suspicion about how I found the information used. It had to be done for real using an abacus and some cajoling.

My core idea was an export tax. With a bean counter down by the docks we could conceivably take a cut of any sales made to neighbouring counties. Anton had revealed in detail how much money each family was making at the moment. They were planning on reinvesting a lot of it into new equipment and seeds for crop rotations – maybe we could offer an exemption for people reinvesting back into the town.

What I didn’t want to do was spring a regular tax levy onto everyone living in the town. A lot of them didn’t have enough money to justify it, it could lead to deflation and put our own economy out of step with neighbouring ones.

I’d need to organize a town meeting to discuss the matter. Transparency would be the best way to assuage people’s concerns about taxation. If I could point to the sewer system and the new docks as a solid example of how taxation could help make the town a better place to live, I may just have a shot at getting something going.

I finished off my last paper and filed it away. I groaned and stretched out my idle body. As I walked out of my office into the main chamber of the building, I found that Amelie was nowhere to be seen. She must have been pulled away by someone concerned about shipping their goods overseas.

The room had sat empty ever since the majority of the townspeople moved out into their own homes. It was a long, rectangular space with nothing much in it aside from some leftover furniture. A row of similarly sized rooms sat beside my own against the back wall. I had offered my ministers the rooms as offices before, but they didn't see the need in them right now. It never hurt to be prepared though.

I envisioned a more permanent building taking over the land later on. The current one was made from timber and wouldn't stand up over time. My old hometown had a wonderful white stone hall in a classical style. Three floors, mock pillars, a clock tower, and rows of glass windows looking out onto a nicely landscaped plaza. But that'd be expensive and would take a long time to build; I put the idea away for when he had an influx of money and wanted to make things look nice for the people living nearby.

It pained me to leave good ground on the lot empty, but sacrifices had to be made.

Before I could step out onto the street and catch up with Frederica, she came through the open front door and waved to me. I must have cut a strange figure standing in a giant empty room, between a bundle of discarded chairs.

"What's the news?" I asked.

"Four families have arrived, and they say that even more are on their way at different paces. All four of them have made an offer of payment for some of the homes we have that just need finishing touches."

"That money's getting split between the builders and the miners and the loggers?"

"Yes, it is. They were very happy to be paid in Lune for once." ('Lu-ne' being the official name of Lunarmar's principle currency.)

"They deserve it for all the hard work they've done. What about the progress on the rest of them?"

"They're going to ensure that all of the homes are liveable, and then worry about the details later."

"Great. Hopefully everyone gives them a warm welcome!" Frederica had a pensive look on her face. "What's wrong?"

She waved her arms in defence, "Ah, it's nothing. I was just wondering why a young man like yourself doesn't have a lady yet."

I laughed it off, "I only became a noble a few days ago."

"That's beside the point – you're a handsome, eligible bachelor! You should be beating them off with a stick!"

I sighed, what a meddlesome housewife. There was only one person who fit the bill and that was Amelie. "The only single woman I've become acquainted with of late is Lady Amelie, and she has little interest in marriage at the moment. Not until she's shown her father what's what, anyway."

"Maybe we could organize a date for both of you!"

“Oh come off it. She’ll tell you to shove it where the sun doesn’t shine, to put it mildly.”

“She has a rather... colourful vocabulary for a noble.”

“Behind closed doors they’re not as refined as you might think.”