

The day after the meal, Polemarch decided to humour me and Amelie's requests for a quick tour of his town, albeit with the presence of Count Whemis. It was more for her benefit than my own. She was the one with the engineering experience to understand what we were seeing. I didn't need to read a lot of books to comprehend the rest of the walk though.

The city was built from heavy brick and black wood architecture. In a stark contrast to the capitol, even the middle and lower class areas enjoyed the presence of glass windows for their homes. According to Amelie it was due to the plentiful quantity of sand and glassworks in the duchy that brought prices down.

While they had *that*, what they didn't have was more worrying. The houses were tightly packed – with only an occasional opening into a dark alleyway allowing movement between blocks. This was the perfect environment for a fire to break out and spread between buildings. Additionally, there were only small trenches on each side of the street for water and waste to flow into. Even in the higher-class areas you could smell excrement at all times.

That wasn't what Amelie was looking for though, she wanted to see the dockyards. The Black Cove boasted the largest and most sophisticated waterfront industry in the known world. It was at the forefront of many technological and industrial innovations, and accepted hundreds of thousands of visitors every month.

The smell of the sea soon overpowered everything else. We broke free from the dark clutches of the urban jungle and spilled outwards onto the waterfront. The Black Cove's main harbour was an awe-inspiring sight. It was a construction that defied even the loftiest of competitors, and to describe its scale would be an injustice to the experience of seeing it for yourself. I quickly realized just how inadequate our tiny wood and stone pontoon really was. Dozens of utterly gigantic trading and warships were moored in a row – with hundreds of sailors, traders and visitors crowding the cobble pathways.

Amelie was the most excited to see it. Her eyes glittered with a child-like fascination. "This is it... the famous Black Cove Dockyards. What an exceptional piece of engineering!"

Whemis was quick to try and put her down after staying his tongue for so long; "For what reason is this problem child present at this tour? Surely she has aught to learn from the experience."

I rounded on him, "She's with me."

"Pah. My point stands – I have to question your choice in companionship."

"Amelie has been an invaluable member of my team for months now," I replied tersely, "Her qualifications are self-evident."

He seemed taken aback by the way I snapped in response to his boorish comments about her intelligence. Red faced and embarrassed, he didn't see fit to continue the needless argument any further. That was probably for the best. Amelie gave me a look that was a confounded mixture of thankfulness and annoyance. Perhaps I had spoken for her a little too strongly.

"Now, now. There's no need to quarrel during the tour," Polemarch commented, "This is the single most important part of my city and the duchy as a whole. From here we command the seas surrounding our beautiful and wild coastline."

We followed him down deeper into the area, the crowd parting as the guards in front passed by to allow the Duke passage. Some of them murmured to each other about seeing the Duke out and

about with their own eyes. It must have been a rare occurrence indeed. Amelie was taking full advantage of the opportunity, barraging him with questions about the way the dockyard was constructed, how many men it took, what kind of materials and techniques were used, and about the wooden cranes that were being used to load goods onto the boats.

My eye was caught by some of those ships. They were huge, with ornate decoration and bright painted colours. The one before me at that moment was a gigantic frigate. It was painted a bright yellow colour with black stripes running along the top. It reminded me of a big angry bee. A wooden carving of a roaring lion hung from the bow. Lions weren't known for their seafaring aptitude, but there was a story behind that.

Beside the ship was one of the cranes. It was a very tall, three story bundle of wooden planks and tangled rope. On the back side was an equally huge wooden wheel, which was being turned to lift the palettes up and down onto the desk. Three men stood at the edge of the deck, reaching out and pulling the loads to their destination.

Polemarch had to speak up to be heard over the crowd, "These cranes were designed by the Capitol Academy years ago, they use some sophisticated 'forces' to make lifting even the heaviest of loads easy and efficient."

"And how hard are they to construct?" Amelie queried.

Polemarch stroked his beard, "Well, they take a good amount of investment, and you need to have some trained operators to really get the most out of it. I don't think your current port can handle something this heavy." He was right about that. To make any further improvements to our own port, we needed to have a stronger foundation.

I was more interested in the variety of different businesses that ran along the waterfront area. There was some sophisticated heavy industry there, or at least as industrial as things could get in a nation with a sub-optimal technology level. There was a large building that seemed to be some variety of dyeworks. Huge bronze tubs steamed upwards, tended to by men in aprons with long sticks. Someone had recently applied for permission to build a similar business in our town.

The catch was that they wanted to use Waldrum berries, a strongly coloured but highly poisonous type of flora. Three to four of them was enough to kill a fully grown adult. Constructing an orchard of the things required more than your average amount of security. A tall fence with something to keep people from climbing over for one, and signs warning people about the consequences on consuming them. The very last thing I wanted to deal with was one of the children sneaking through and trying them.

The prospective revenue from the project was very high though. Dye was always in high demand and commanded high prices on the markets. It was still feasible for us to produce it in the town and ship it off, still making a profit even with the fees put into consideration. I had picked a patch of fertile land away from the residential area and given tentative permission to start working on it.

There were a few advantages. The dye works didn't need too much in terms of input, and they could handle the orchard themselves. We wouldn't enjoy the same infrastructure or efficiency of the dyeworks in the Black Cove, but it was enough to support a few families, and that was what really mattered in the end. That dye could also be passed on to other businesses in town. We had a fairly strong collection of weavers and clothworkers. With the farmers starting to produce wool and even cotton, we could rely on them combining their efforts to create more profitable exports.

“Oh, what is that?”

I sighed. The group had already moved on without me while I wasn't looking. I hurried after Amelie and tried to keep my eyes on the goal of our trip...

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“It's a joke. What in the seven hells is Father thinking?”

Back at the Polemarch family manor, Johan, the youngest son of the clan – was in a furious mood. He paced back and forth within his chambers like a rumbling storm. His mind was awash with questions and objections that he was too polite to air in front of his older family members. Why had his Father and his Uncle taken to the commoner so quickly?

Johan didn't dislike commoners, he recognized that they served an important function to society. His frustration was more personal. Time and time again he had been passed over for positions within settlements big and small throughout the Duchy. His Father's insistence on making sure that they were a “good fit” for him had left him empty handed!

He couldn't understand it. From the moment that Johan could understand speech, his Father had drilled into him the importance of experience and knowledge, and how ruling over others would come to define his life much as it had his. So why, now, did he hesitate to hand a new town within their borders to him? No, not just the town – but the entire county! He wouldn't have been half as mad if Polemarch had simply put the new ‘Lord-Mayor’ under his command.

Count Francs reclined in one of his chairs with a pensive smile, “What do you suppose he should do? None of us have the men to fight and squabble over the territory at the present moment.”

Johan grunted as he collapsed down into the opposite seat. “I bet it was the King again. He's always had it out for the noble families. What a ridiculous notion – a ruler who spites his own people.”

“True. I believe he simply wished for a quick and simple resolution. I can't say I fully understand the logic behind appointing a commoner myself.”

“I'm tired of hearing promises of future ascension,” Johan griped, “Again and again, I hear of my destiny as the heir to this grand Duchy of ours. But when that day comes, who is to say that I will be chosen? Father will pass over me for a distant relative.” He didn't really believe that – but it felt like that was the natural progression of how things were headed.

“I do find it strange how Sir Polemarch extolls the virtues of finding you practical experience as the head of the ship, but refuses to push someone aside for that purpose,” Francs admitted. “Perhaps a more underhanded approach is needed to grease the wheels.”

Johan was adamant in his refusal; “I'm not *killing* him.”

Francs held up his hands, “No, no. I never said anything about that. I simply mean that we should find ways to suggest to your father that you're the right man for the job! And that removing Sir Blackwood from the post, or putting him under you, is the right decision to make.”

“...Making him my subordinate would be easier,” Johan murmured, “Allow me to speak with my father first before we take any rash action. I hope he will see sense this time.”

“Very well. What is your measure of the fellow, regardless?”

Johan thought back to the impression he made. The eyepatch indicated a spotty and colourful past, but he was young and fresh-faced, and bore no other visible injuries. Surely such a savaging as to

lose an eye would result in a few scars? He was rightly nervous upon his arrival into the meeting chamber, but was clearly well educated and considerate of his manners. What a strange man he was.

"I can't read him. He seems like a man split into two halves."

"I agree. I do have to wonder about his past, how did he lose his eye?"

Johan offered a simple plan, "Why don't you just ask him?"

Francs scoffed, "That would be mightily rude of me. I don't intend to pry too much without his ascent."

"That never stopped you before," Johan replied, "Whemis tells me that you're a deft hand in the art of gathering private information."

"The people I *pay* to do that are very good, yes. I fail to see the need to do the same to our new compatriot at the present time." Francs knew that things would likely change though. He kept his spies in mind for when Johan came calling.

Nothing sounded sweeter to him than the future Duke owing him a big favour.