Supreme Commander Durand sat by candlelight, deeply tucked away in the depths of the capitol's massive fortress. In a room with no windows and only one clear entrance, the leader of half of mankind stared, wiping the tiredness from his eyes as he went over another slip of paper, another missive from a garrison, another situation report, another tally, another…

Durand placed the stack of papers down on the table and stared off into thought, the flickering light of the sconce playing off the scars of campaigns past. It was a tired face. Yet beneath the tiredness lay something unfathomable and unyielding, as if the whole thing had been molded over some solid metal piece by an embarrassed artist, who was afraid to show the true nakedness of his design. It came out in his eyes, which flashed icy blue even in the tint of the light.

Still, a sigh appeared from the man.

Secretary Laurent looked aside from his own pile.

“Anything of note?” He asked, still half reading the inventory note which he held in his hand.

When no answer came readily from the large man, Laurent's pile went down as well. Secretary Laurent, administrative second and confidant regarded the man, the legend, in front of him.

The mountain that was Durand still held a quill, but forgotten, his gaze directed to one of the many clockwork models which sat around the room. A hand went out, and with surprising gentleness and care, slowly wound a miniscule winding arm on the model.

Laurent watched the Commander wordlessly. The model slowly slipped into action, hundreds of small pieces all interwoven with fascinating and incredible craftsmanship. It was merely a geometric assembly, no meaning at all, and had simply been the Commander's attempt at stretching his abilities at craftsmanship to their utter maximum.

The device was a marvel. The Commander's focus on it tonight rather than the papers at hand was worrying. There was something working there, in the man's mind, that went beyond Laurent, beyond even any of the other generals or merchant family patriarchs or southern lords. And he never strayed from his task, there was never distraction, only deeper contemplation. Laurent awaited Durand's pronouncement.

But all that came out was another sigh.

Laurent's heart sunk for a moment. This was most uncharacteristic.

Perhaps some motivation would help.

“...Sir? If I may?” Laurent spoke up, shattering the silence that had lain over the room for hours.

Durand slowly turned his head to the other man, but with half focus on the model, which still whirred and spun on its stand.

“Yes Laurent?”

“You seem...distracted sir. Is there something I can help with?” He ventured.

Durand paused and thought for a moment.

“I suppose I am distracted. I have been for a while.” He moved his chair back slightly and fully regarded Laurent.

“That's not like you, sir.” Laurent commented, also repositioning himself. The two men now were facing one another, with the desk in between them.

“I suppose it is not.” Durand admitted. “There's been something that has been on my mind for quite a long time. I'm not actually certain what it is. Its just… If I were to be aware of something, I should act on it right?”

It was unquestionable that Durand was a genius of the first order, but the boastful confidence never had come with his intelligence. Its was as if he were unsure of own abilities. In a man with very little self doubt in other facets of his life, his position as commander, his responsibilities, his combat prowess, he remained restrained with his own suspicions. It was Laurent's unspoken ability to coax the man to his true potential.

“Definitely.” Laurent said. “There is no man better suited for this position than you.” And he meant it. “If there were something amiss and… I suppose no one else has caught it? That’s why you are where you are. You see things other people, even I, don't.”

“An easy answer.” Durand said, waving the compliments away. “Both sides of the question must be explored. It is easy to call for action if one doesn't consider the cost. As you say, no man is as suited for this position as I. Unfortunately I agree with you. And what a position it is. I second guess my second guesses. One piece of gold misinvested, one soldier trusted, one patriarch ignored… ruin. Forget about balancing on a knife edge. I fell like I have been living there for years.” He sighed again.

“So, what if its started to get to me. What if I'm looking for patterns in the weave that don't exist? I'm not a young man; you know that. Forgetfulness, atrophy, these things happen to all men, great or simple...” He said, unsure.

“Just yesterday, you talked to the master engineer about his plans for a new seige engine, yes?” Laurent said. Durand nodded.

“And what happened?”

“That has nothing to do with what I'm talking about.” Durand countered.

“What happened?” Laurent pressed.

“He had an error in his calculations. The engine would have come apart in testing.” Durand admitted. “Fine, fine. Perhaps it is not my day yet, to sink into the grey twilight of my later years. But at least consider…What if I'm chasing a ghost?”

“You think the problem is not real?”

“Oh, it might be real. But it might not be um… large?”

“Chasing an imp then.” Laurent said, chuckling.

“Yes, an imp.”

“Can imps not cast magic?” Laurent said, continuing the metaphor. But stopped when he saw Durand's sedate countenance. “Your expression betrays all. This is a big problem. So you have a feeling about something big? The patriarchs? The southerners?” Laurent ventured.

“The southerners definitely.” Durand said. “Its just something that has been showing up. Its very subtle whatever it is.” He said with a slight hesitation as he shuffled around papers, looking for a particular report.

“See here. Last week I dispatched two squads to recon the south border near St. Thomas's Hill. There had been sightings of possible movement there, reported by our friends in black. Completely silent.”

“Then, again, a shipment of arms from our agreement with the Fartherners. Disappeared. Waylaid along the way, throats cut, gold stolen. But the shipment was damaged also.”

“Finally, two more of our friends in black are suspected to have gone turncloak. What dangerous ice we walk on...”

Laurent swallowed. “Setbacks to be sure. But I fail to see the outward significance. These actions were all taken by what would seem to be separate groups. It seems completely unrelated.”

“I agree. Different places, different actors. But they are united in some way. They all are unbelievably important.” Durand revealed.

“That arms shipment? Upgrades for the Elite Guard who are set to defend… St. Thomas's hill in the event of an attack. Who is supposed to recon for them? Not army recon, our friends in black. In fact, one of the turncoat’s brothers is the man in charge. That took some investigating.”

“The point is, what connects these events is that they are lynchpoints. If I had not found their connection, the spring muster would be unsupplied. Our plans to advance this summer...”

“You think a spy?” Laurent asked.

“I know a spy. I know many spies. Some I even think work for me. None I trust. Except you.” Durand said simply. “With such grand plans, word must reach its way into corners at some point. That is an unfortunate truth of policy and war. Its the actions I am concerned with. Information is useless unless it can be condensed and acted on.”

“And you believe someone is taking advantage of us?” Laurent asked.

“Someone...” Durand said, slowly, turning the word around on his toungue and his mind. “Yes, Laurent. Perhaps someone… I had not thought...” He sprang up, rummaging through papers. “That reminds me of my first commission as leader of the north. I always thought there was something funny about Lord Gerrant's War.”

Laurent grimaced at the mention. “That was a horrible slog.” He admitted. “I wouldn’t wish the memories of those horrible three years on anyone. Some say the southerners would have come even into the capitol here if you hadn't stepped in. Some go so far as to say that it was good that the late...”

“No.” Durand said, turning suddenly. “Don't speak ill of my predecessor. He was a good man, if in an unwinnable position.”

Laurent was silent.

“But why was it unwinnable?” Durand said, half to himself, abandoning the desk and turning to cabinets of reams upon reams of paper. His large yet nimble fingers spied what he was looking for: a solid red tome.

“The...The report?” Laurent asked. “Everyone has to read that now in school I hear.”

“Yes. Also don't try to be sly. That was your idea, and a good one. Men should know of their failures as well as their successes.”

“So what in it is connected to this?” laurent asked, joining the large man in peering over The Report.

Durand gently flipped through the massive collection of records and analysis. The book in front of them was actually the original, the synthesis of over a hundred millitary minds and scribes. The North took its defeats seriously. It was not every day that you lost a fifth of your men to war.

“The cause? Do you remember it? Why was the position so bad?” Durand asked, a hint of excitement in his voice.

Laurent perked up at the sign. “Ah…” But then he became crestfallen. “No sir. It could not be the beggininng, the cause. It was just a series of unknowable problems. No man, not even you could have forseen that such insignificant...things could lead to such an outcome. There was something about a bridge?” Laurent ventured.

“Yes, over the Wispering. They used defective bolts in its construction. So… careless. What you might not know, and what in fact is not in this book, is that the assistant carpenter's wife was unfaithful. Her lover was a Southerner sargeant right across the river. The story goes is that she used to visit him during night, running right across the bridge that her husband built, the same one that would later be swept away in that horrible deluge, trapping the counter attack behind its torrents.”

“Little problems, running together, little threads woven strong into one massive knot...” Durand said softly, closing the tome and returning it to its resting place.

“You said, even I couldn't have forseen those events. You are right. And that is what worries me. What has been worrying me Laurent. Do you realize?” Durand said, straightening, looking piercingly at Laurent.

Laurent's eyes widened. His breath stilled. “You don't mean...”

“Yes. Its happening again. Or I think so.” Durand said, an overcast expression rolling in over his brow.

“But this is talk of grand conspiracy! Plots and contingencies overlaid thousand-fold. We stop many of these events before they even happen. You and I have our friends in black, certainly that counts for something, no?” Laurent said, grasping for asuredness. Something in what Durand had suggested was a little too empty for his liking, as if the world he knew and understood had dropped through leaving only blackness.

“Something? No. A spy ring is just like a bridge. I see it now. One carpenters assistant's wife, or rather a hundred, and the link is bound to break. A bridge when we needed it, gone. A spy ring when we need it?” Durand let the implications hang in the air.

“Perhaps we give too much credit to our opponents.” Laurent ventured.

“Perhaps.” Durand agreed. “And that is what I fear as well: my mind doing flips and cartwheels while theirs think simply and only, of glory, yet in their own unknowable way.”

“Yes. Glory.” Laurent agreed. “To a plot, a face?” He suggested, splaying a hand of playing cards onto the desk.

“Ha. These again?” Durand, said, momentarily breaking from his glum state.

He picked up a few and shuffled through them. Instead of the normal charactures of nature, weapons and royalty which graced the standard cards, Laurent had crafted these himself. On each one was the face of a Southern Lord, surrounded by his known hobbies.

“Fine. I shall play your game.” Durand declared, laying down three similar looking faces. “I play the cabal of three, brothers in arms and war.”

“Bah.” Laurent dismissed his cards, laying down his own overtop Durand's. “The oafish King himself. The brother's plans have always been the expansion of their own lands. When the southern casualities started up again, Lord Gerrant showed that and his sons are no different. They care nothing for the South as a whole.”

“But the king? Simple though he might seem, there must be some intellegence there. A yearning for glory at least, like all of those damnable Southern lords.”

“I think not.” Durand said, chuckling now as well at the game. “Aspirations of a king may move a nation to war, but it takes the mind of a cunning man to pull knives in the night at the right time. I favor the henchman, Counselor Corlenos. His shiny bald head hides evil schemes of untold magnitude. We know he is the leader of the sliver hand. Who else to disrupt a spy ring, but the leader of another?”

“Ah!” Laurent said, faking a wound. “I have been beaten. Corlenos it must be. The rest of these are impossible.” He splayed the rest of his cards face down across the table. “You win this time Durand. A fine game.” He laughed.

But Durand was not laughing. The smile had melted off his face, and he stared ashen down at the desk.

“What?” Laurent said, following the other mans gaze.

All Laurents cards had been face down. All but one. The joker, a faceless mask grinned evilly up at them, surrounded with question marks.

“The joker...” Durand said, reaching out a hand for it.

A chill seemed to run through the room, though it must have been Laurent's imagination.

“A new player?” Laurent suggested, a sinking feeling starting to envelope him.

“Does one make a joker just to play a game of cards? No, this one was made with the deck… Its always been here.” Durand said, turning the card over and over within his fingers. “We have just… ignored it.”

“This is what I have felt nagging at me these months…The unknown man behind the mask.”

Laurent stared at the card as well. It fit the deck. He had made it well after all. Things were about to get significantly more interesting.