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.”

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.

“So you have a feeling about something? 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. There… might be a new player here.” He said with a slit 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 seperate 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 suppose to recon for them? Not army recon, our friends in black. In fact, one of the turncloack's brothers is the man in charge. That took some investigating.