Laurent awoke.

The sun was barely risen, and yet his body had commanded him awake. He was fine with this turn of events. Although as Secretary to the Supreme Commander, he held an incredible amount of power, it was interesting how all that always seemed to turn to responsibility. As Durand once complained, if you are the one that gets to make the decision, you have to make the decision.

Responsibility, and today was no exception. Something dangerous today.

He sighed and shook his head. Light entered his room from half shuttered windows. It was fall and the smell of autumn, that crisp air… He threw open the shutters.

The walls of Illithar met his gaze. His window faced north, and the building in which he lived lay coincident to the massive constructions. Even in his three story house, he had to look up to see the dark grey blue walls. He crawled onto his simple bed and stuck his head out the window.

Above him he could make out the morning guard. The smartly uniformed men were interspersed along its width all the way to the Illith.

He heard a cry and directed his attention downwards. The building he was in was a small military barracks in the very bottom left corner of the city. Right in front of it, and around it were several large barracks, and between them and the wall was a small mustering area.

There was a formation of men down there, attending to some task. Raising an eyebrow he tried to hear what was going on. The sargeant shouted.

He chuckled and withdrew from the window. Some of his men had been caught drinking on patrol. The last thing he heard was “laps around the city”. He winced and half remembered his own military training.

Stretching, he scooted himself off his bed and looked quickly around the room for something presentable to wear. Theoretically he could afford accommodations much nicer than this. Theoretically he could have his own footman and a top floor place in the Parallels… well perhaps not the top floor, but at least second floor!

But it seemed such a waste of resources. He had never wanted for money once he acquired his position, and he had held it for almost a decade now. His apartment was plain and reasonable sized. It was also empty except for him, a fact he had been trying to rectify for years, but never seemed to catch anyone's eye.

It was just as well. His work was infinitely more important, especially on a day such as today. Approaching his wardrobe, he settled for a mundane blue uniform. For shoes, he almost had finished lacing up his normal dress boots when he recalled what day it was.

He laced up his traveling boots and was pleased to see that they still held dirt from his last excursion. It was far too long since he had been able to do field work. Desk work had its merits, and by all accounts he was good at it, but field work was what he had been advanced for, and he hated to think about his skills atrophying. As his late mother used to say when disappointed about his lack of wife: he certainly wasn't getting any younger.

Therefore, it was with a certain measure of excitement girded with knowing anticipation that he slipped on his brace of daggers below his travel cloak and attached his thin sword by his side. A pack finished off the equipment.

He backed out of his room and locked the door behind him, hearing the tumblers of the intriguing lock click into place behind him. Durand had made the thing himself, and Laurent dreaded the inevitable day when he lost his key, and no one but the Supreme commander himself could hope to open the door.

Satisfied, he made his way down the wooden, well trodden steps, past the other officer quarters. Laurent wasn't by his nature a very sociable man, but by his trade he had to be. He knew every man and woman who lived in the building, and even knew most of their ranks, if not their names. Some of them thought him a scribe in the Illith, and he did not attempt to dissuade them from that notion.

The main lobby, with its worn red carpet, fireplace and unfinished chairs was empty. He smiled sadly at the lack of people. Then, Laurent Carver, spymaster of the North walked out of the building.

The pale morning light fell on him as he exited, causing him to blind for a moment. Although ti was early, and the officers had not yet woken, from the buildings to his right he could hear stirrings, and from further in that direction the city already was rising to action.

He walked down the cobbled street for a ways, watching the sargeant order the misbehaving men towards the nearest access to the walls. He almost felt sorry for them.

He did not take a straight path to the Illith, and instead walked down a narrow passage between two barracks and emerged on the far side.

“Master Carver!” A familiar voice called to him.

He turned to see an old woman sweeping a small store front. She waved to him and motioned him closer.

“Going somewhere?” She asked, looking at his travel cloak.

“Oh these?” he said holding out the cloak as if surprised to see it, and looked back at his pack. “I wish. Just more paperwork for me I'm afraid. I sullied my last good jacket last night.” he lied.

Ms Menchel looked disapprovingly at the worn coat. “Laurent, you're never going to find anyone wearing things like that. You should let me make you something nice.”

Laurent smiled. “Thank you for the concern, but you needn't burden yourself.” He sighed. “I don't think clothes are the problem anyway.”

“Of course not. Its the fact that you do nothing but work yourself to death every day.” She said wagging a finger. “I suppose you work even longer than I do! At least for a shopkeep you can close down when it gets late, no one honest is out buying things then. But you always work by candlelight. You know you'll lose your eyesight doing that. Happened to one of my brothers. Now he can't read a damn thing.”

“So you keep saying Ms. Menchel. By the way, do you have any of those apples left from the other day?” he asked, fumbling around for this coinpurse.

“Sure do. Good thing to. They're good for the teeth and taste good too. How many do you want?”

“Just two, but Ill be sure to direct more officers your way.”

The old woman, nodded and laid the broom down at the stoop and went back into the very small and crowded shop, passing her finger over barrels and boxes scatter about, on on top of one another.

“It would be easier to find things if you cleaned out old inventory.” He suggested.

“Hush.” She replied, peering at the lettering on a dark barrel. “I have a system.”

He shrugged, a small grin emerging onto his face. After a moment of letting the old woman search for the fruit, he pointed at a medium size box next to him.

“Hey, wasn't this the one?” He asked.

Ms. Menchel turned and looked.

“Of course, right under my nose. Its funny you know, sometimes the things closest to you are the hardest to find.” She said cackling, walking over to the box. She hoisted off the lid and revealed an assortment of golden and red apples. They looked delicious.

“Here you go Ms Menchel.” he said, holding out the appropriate payment.

“Thank you dear.” She said, nodding as he turned to leave. She picked up the broom again and began to sweep the step.

“Oh, Laurent.” She said as he was leaving. He stopped and turned around.

“I do appreciate you sending those officers my way. Even if its only pity, the business helps.”

“Pity, my dear? Never. With apples like these, you should have a line all the way out to the walls. I’m glad I can help.”

She smiled as he left.

He took a massive bite out of one of the apples and put the other one in his pack.

The Illith loomed over him, as it did over everything else in the city. Its walls were the same grey blue as the rest of them, but there was something different about the Illith. Firstly, it was unbelievably tall. Almost seven stories, it was easily taller than any other building in the city.

Unlike the other buildings though, it had no domes, or statues or painted stone. Instead, it was almost alien in its simplicity. It was a rectangle, right outside the walls, protecting the rarely used western exit.

It was a massive fortress, and probably the biggest in the known world, even when compared to some of the monstrosities in the south. Legend said that its walls were magically reinforced against attack which of course was a legend that seemed to spring up about any sufficiently large fortification, but at least some of that talk seemed to be true, for when the Southerners attacked more than a decade ago, not a single brick was knocked out of place in their assault, despite them unloading some serious magic against it.

But his concern was not the structural integrity of the fortifications. He would leave that to the military corps of engineers and their scholarly counterparts in the university.

Instead his concern was with the people who worked in this place. A fortification was only as good as its weakest link, as Dageric, the corps grandmaster had reminded the counsel again and again. And so, if the fortification was physically impenetrable, its weakest link were the people inside it.

He grabbed the massive wooden knocker and pulled.

He was overwhelmed with darkness as he traveled through the wall. This area was specifically unlit to keep people from blocking the entrance. On the far side of the stone passageway, massive stone doors lay open, providing access to the Illith. As far as he knew, they had never actually been closed, but it had been a close thing once or twice.

He walked into the Illith.

The Illith was a city within a city. It had four large buildings, the largest of which was where Laurent was heading.

Even this early in the morning, the Illith was alive. Aides and adjuncts walked briskly to and from the buildings. The Elite Guard, a somewhat contridiction of terms, and their matching blue grey uniforms, responsible for the protection of the Illith in peacetime, were no where to be seen.

Although the North wasn't technically at war, they might as well be. He knew how fast the information flowed now on both sides. It was not a war but a duel. Rather than full out attack, the sides had slunk back to their emplacements and constantly sent out intellegence officers, probing for weakness in their opponent's defenses.

And until recently, he recalled, noting a rather hurried aide who ran in front of him, and hurridly opened the door Laurent was about to open, he had thought that it was the North who had the edge in that contest of information.

The counts of the lowlands were perfidious at best, and it was no accident that that was where the line of contest had ended up. None of them were to be trusted, so the two sides had chosen to trust none of them, giving them semi independence, a move that was perhaps in hindsight misguided. The greedy bastards now labeled themselves dukes and apparently carried out independent trade negotiations with the Shani. He had counted this a somewhat victory, since nobility in general had historically hated the North, and its egalitarian regime.

And he had confirmed the existance of a southern spy organization, somewhat simmilar to their own. He had, infact, caught several of their agents. And while he too had lost men, he had made sure the ratio was always strictly in his favor.

Finally, after a month of negotiation with the Fartherners and a much longer period with the Shani, but other powers had agreed to stay out of the conflict, the Fartherners even agreeing to lend tacit help in the form of grain shipments, food being a constant trouble for the north.

And so, with these three accomplishments Laurent had prided himself, apparently not knowing what was actually happening. Durand had seen something that he had missed.

Laurent walked into the main building, and looked into the courtyard in its center. It was no empty but it usually held combat demonstrations. He followed the general flow of aides up a set of stone staircases on to the second level and into the General Chamber.

The familiar massive table met his eyes, along with many important people. His eyes landed on each one for a second as he shifted his way to the back of the room. The room was a rich dark wood, finished well with a lush red carpet and similar red chairs.

Although the table held spaces for nearly twenty people, they were hardly ever full. To do so would require the presence of every Commander and every Civil Potentate. That was an occurrence which Laurent never wanted to see, and actively worked to avoid, since it would only happen on a declaration of open war. That being said, there were certainly more than twenty people in the room, but most of them were other commander's aides, and they sat on simple wooden chairs against the wall. One of them, one of Laurent's informants, looked idly at one of the dual massive fireplaces.

Durand, seated in a plain chair at the head of the table, noted Laurent enter but did not speak to him at this time. Laurent got the message and seated himself in his usual seat behind the Supreme Commander, close enough to hand the commander needed papers, but also close enough to the back door to watch for any sudden movement. Assassination attempts against the Supreme Commander were rare but not unheard of.

Durand cleared his throat and motioned for the assembly to rise, which he did as well. The doors were closed hastely, and any poor aide stuck outside would be forced to wait till the conclusion of the rite.

Durand held out a hand towards the wall facing him.

Opposite the wall that Laurent sat at and above the main door into the room, there lay a ridiculously large tome, splayed open and affixed to the wall. It was the United Codex, the underpinning of Northern society. Although Laurent thought the laws contained within the massive tome were fair enough, the actual document, of which the one on the wall was one off three originals, was horribly ostentatious.

The cover was an intricate assembly of metal plates and vivid blue geometric patterns, risible even from where Laurent stood. It was artificially open to a specific page, and Durand read the passage there from memory.

“We Northerns, at this time, and cognizant of the circumstances of our nascent state, do regretfully create the United Military. May its ranks ever be pure, and may its institution last only until peace again rules this land.”

That had been almost a hundred years ago now. And there was certainly, and unfortunately no sign of that long awaited peace.

The placement of the book and Durand's insistence on reading it before every general assembly were very important to the man, as he had confided in Laurent. He saw himself standing opposite to the intentions of the founders and the core concepts of the country. And therefore, he on one side of the room, the furthest from the city, and the book on the other, closer to the city, and thus the people, the real source of power.

Durand sought to remind the Commanders, and frequently that their current situation, despite being present for almost a century, was an abnormal and undesirable one brought about only through desperate measure.

Laurent knew for a fact that although some of the Commanders felt the same way, there were some, especially the younger ones, who had grown as the sons or daughters of mean and women who had never known anything other than military rule. He knew that these people said the words along with Durand, but at best thought of the military as essential to the identity of the North, and at worst, thought it should have full control over civil institutions as well.

But that was a concern for another time, and peace would have to be achieved for it to become a worry. Small steps.

“I have important news, not to leave this room.” Durand said, starting the discussion.

Several heads turned. Interestingly enough, one of the commanders did not seem surprised. That person was Commander Otker Bleomedes, former adventurer and commander of the First. Laurent noted this.

“I am leaving on a matter of state concern this day, right after this meeting. I will be gone no longer than a week. Otker is acting Sumpreme Commander until my return.”

Ah, that was why. Durand must have talked to him earlier about this. Laurent also agreed with his decision, Leodulf was still young, and although his actions and leadership were unquestionable, the title of Supreme Commander implicitly carried more responsibilities than just martial ones. Adala, a bit of a hot head, wouldn't have been a good choice either.

Rathar Cuebonh might have been a good choice as well, if he didn't already hold two incredibly powerful titles. Laurent tried to gauge the man's reaction to the news, but found that he looked unsurprised. That was for the best. As head of university and the potentate of Illithar, any perceived favoritism towards him was probably feared among all other choices. Therefore, for the same reason he was skipped in becoming the next Supreme Commander, Durand never gave him even temporary control. But all that to say that he probably, circumstances nonwithstanding would have been the best choice.

“If there is a special emergency requiring my direct presence, Laurent, my secretary, will be responsible for contacting me.” Laurent nodded slightly at the group.

The inclusion of his title, along with the implication that Laurent would not be joining him, were part of the ploy in having his Secretary also be his spymaster. The whole point was to hopefully keep that fact from others, although it lead to complicated situations like this one.

“Sir, if you don't mind me asking, what is so important as to require your personal attention. Is there a matter so grave of a concern to the state that you must see to it yourself? Did we… uh… miss something?” Adala asked, visibly concerned.

Adala was a boot licker, always there to 'offer help' or curry favor. In addition, Laurent suspected that her previous position as Lieutenant was obtained through looks and perhaps other mitigating factors rather than performance, as the man she eventually replaced had eventually been caught for graft. That being said, she seemed eager and competent enough, so Laruent had advised Durand to advance her to fill the spot. At worst, they had information on her if she ever decided to step out of line.

Durand shook his head. “This is something small, or rather it could be. Its simply a lead I have been investigating.”

“Perhaps another case of graft?” Leodulf said dryly, making sure to look at Adala when he did so. She gritted her teeth but said nothing.

“Nothing more than that I hope.” Durand replied vaguely.

“I will fill the role to the best of my abilities. Thank you Sir.” Otker said, ignoring the spat between the other commanders, and also subtly ending discussion on the topic. Furthermore, as he said this, he looked directly as Laurent.

Laurent smiled at him in return, but beneath the smile, gears were turning.

It was possible that Otker know, or perhaps had suspicions. He had been around for a long time. A very long time, longer than either Laurent or Durand had held their current positions. It was fair to say that he was a solid core of the army. However, men changed when they got older. Something that you at one time thought impossible… Ah, perhaps he saw shadows where there were none.

But he was definitely going to have one of his men keep an eye on both Adala and Otker.

Then discussion turned to more routine matters, problems with logistics, training, organization, promotions. There was even a moment at the end of one more procedural matter that Rathar brought up the recent interpretation of a specific law.

As the Potentate, he was the sun to the Judges moon, and had the most interaction with civil law out of any of the people in the room, excepting perhaps Durand himself, who was known to have memorized the whole Codex.

However, Laurent quickly grew bored. And so, when, an hour later, they finally got out of the room, laurent was all to eager.

Durand caught him before he could slip out the back.

“I meant to ask. How was your fishing trip?” Durand said, as the rest of the Commanders and importants filed out of the room or milled about, talking to one another.

“Ah, it was pretty relaxing.” Laurent said. “But my boat sprung a leak about halfway through. I had to bail water out all the way back!”

“Did you manage to catch anything?” Durand asked, leaning over the table, gathering up a dossier of files.

“One or two small things. Fishing has never been my strong suit.” Laurent admitted.

“Well perhaps next summer I can join you.” Durand said. “You know how it is, winter is always hard logistically.” Laurent nodded and the two split ways.

Even as supposed (and actual) secretary, Laurent tried to stay ahead of any suspicion. Therefore, Durand and he had worked out a loose code to communicate.

So it was only a further hour later that Laurent found Durand, wrapped in a tattered cloak with a hood, by the shore of the river.

The sun was rising into the sky, and most people would still have been getting ready for the day. The merchants were already out though. Smaller craft and one larger grain barge were maneuvering on the docks opposite their position. The docks almost the whole length of the city, and were the main method of transportation for goods.

Behind the docks were a series of warehouses, mostly for gain, Laurent remembered. He could just barely make out the guards he had specifically posted next to them to prevent poisoners. The warf was active but nowhere near the crowd that it would attract later in the day.

Their side of the river was relatively sedate though. The steep hills down the river and rocky soil had done an effective job of deterring the expansion of the city to the south, new development was generally to the East instead. That was just as well. If the Southerners ever managed to come back this far North, the hills behind him would become one large battlefield, just like they had before. And when that happened, he didn't want to have to think of how to defend a wall-less hamlet on the wrong side of the river.

Above them loomed Illithar atop its hill. The Illith stuck out, a pillar of stone, even though they were on the wrong side. The walls certainly looked formidable, as they were designed to do. Durand on the other hand, despite his size, appeared not the least bit formidable in his stained cloak.

“The look becomes you, Lord Supreme Commander.” Laurent snickered softly as he approached.

There was a sudden shocked look on Durand's face, before he quickly looked around the dock conspiratorially.

This particular dock was an old one, separated from the main assembly and much further upstream than the usual river barge docking. It also was on the other side of the river and surrounded by a copse of tall willows, making it ideal for those who wanted to pass relatively unseen.

“Hush, Laurent. You know I didn't want to attract suspicion.”

Laurent looked around the deserted dock. “Suspicion effectively repulsed sir. No one is here. There is a reason I use this dock. No one takes the southern road any more.”

Durand scratched his beard and continued looking for unwanted eyes. “I suppose so. Still, it pays to be cautious… Stop calling me sir.”

“Of course sir.” Laurent said with another grin.

Durand shot him a deathly serious look, which he maintained until the both of them started grinning.

“Fine. You *are* right. It does pay to be cautious. Still… the thought of one so high a position rafting down the river on such a craft...” Laurent nudged the tiny rowboat with his toe.

“Please. I have done field work before with you. Why are you pulling out all the cynicism now?” Durand asked, undoing a series of ropes tying the boat to the dock.

“You do realize the last time you went on field work with me was two years ago right?” Laurent said, helping Durand with the ropes.

Durand startled and looked up. “Has it really been so long? Gods the paperwork just never ends doesn't it...”

“You're preaching to the converted my friend. Need I remind you how many additional papers never even make it to your desk?”

“Ah. Of course. A better secretary a man could not ask for.”

Laurent bowed and presented the boat. “But of course. Your ride, your highness...”

Durand stiffened, and the smile vanished quickly from his face.

“My ride indeed, one I often wonder if I can't get off.” Durand said, pushing the boat into the water.

“Do you really mean that?” Laurent asked, securing the ropes behind them.

“At times.” Durand admitted, looking around and over his shoulder for the oars.

“They're on the side of the dock there.” Laurent said, pointing to a certain place on the pier.

“Got it.” Durand grunted, hefting the oars into the boat.

“Is that why you shut yourself away so often? You go out so infrequently in public, some people might think that you'd already stepped down; passed the title off to someone else, hmm?”

But Durand shook his head as he got into the boat, dragging his back in after him.

“Its not completely intensional. This constant state of almost war is horrible. It has only negatives for trade, and everyone is on edge. Hells, I'm on edge.”

“You're always on edge. You're like one massive sword. Are you trying to convince people that the sword of the North has been sheathed?” Laurent said, joining Durand, facing him and also dragging in his pack.

“It wouldn't hurt for people to forget about me for a bit.” Durand admitted.

“But my and our friends in black have been doing a fair job. Its not like during the war, when men were coming after you every week. You don't need to hide!” Laruant said, forcing the boat off of the dock with the last word.

The conversation paused breifly as the two took a look at the state of the river. Once they had drifted a bit down stream, Durand shifted and produced the oars from under him. Laurent once again noted the humor in the fact that Durand was the one to paddle.

“Its not about hiding from enemies.” Durand said, contemplating his words, pausing breifly in his oaring.

“It more like… well, its been so long now under the military, and things haven't gone disasterously, but they haven't been going splendidly. If at all possible, I want to back off and let the people handle things, like the North was meant to be run.”

“Even with the military situation as it is?” Laurent asked, as they joined the rest of the river traffic.

“I suppose so. It means a lot to me and I think to many people. You jokingly called me highness earlier, but I'm afraid of that.”

“Of people making you into a king?” Laurent noted.

“Or at least forgetting what it was like for a people to govern themselves.” Durand said, continuing his broad strokes.

Laurent counted the boats and noted their type as he thought.

“There are people who wouldn't be disappointed with a king.” Laurent warned, leaning a bit closer.

“You know as well as I that such a thing would be the death of this country. I'm well aware of Leodulf and Adala's positions.” Durand said.

“Well, at least you will be happy to hear that they do not yet command the majority of opinion within the military. But in a few years? The veterans, those whose fathers and grandfathers remembered and passed on the heritage of a different North, they're getting older Durand. The younger generation hasn't known a time free of the threat of war. To them, such a situation calls for more centralized leadership. Those who haven't fled east want decisive action.”

“I know Laurent. But… But perhaps that can be an issue for a further day? Just thinking about the ramifications depresses me, more so if I try to consider how I would factor into a possible future: a tyrant? A bystander to one? A martyr? None particularly suit me.”

“Another day.” Laurent said. “But one that will come uncomfortably close, closer than you probably want.”

Durand nodded, and continued his rowing.

The river opened up as they rowed, the sun had now completely risen and it was about noon. The banks growing wider and wider, as various other smaller rivets converged into its flow. The land here was fertile and extensively farmed.

Laurent could see white plaster and wood houses dotting the shore, some with their own docks. He knew this would continue until they came to the first real town, Merin's Ford, when the river narrowed again; but that would not be until the end of the day, even with their pace.

Durand was rowing, but his eyes followed the people on the shore.

“This is good Laurent.” he said softly.

Laurent continued to watch him. “It gives you perspective, doesn't it? The lives and fates that we can, must influence?”

“Yes. And it is just as well to remember that each of them has their on families, ambitions and goals. For sure, war is not among them.” Durand said, staring at children playing on the banks.

“When plans are drawn, it can be so easy to externalize it all, to stare at the numbers and the figures, and say, yes, that sounds reasonable, a hundred men here, two hundred there. Its absurd. It really is, Laurent. Single men like us have no right to have such power.”

“It is a necessary evil.” Laurent said.

“Maybe. But that doesn't mean we should grow accustomed to it, nor should we allow anyone else. In that aspect we have already failed.”

“But that is why we are here, right? To find the ringleader? To expose the plot? To end all this tension?” Laurent said, motioning to the oars. “Come, give me a turn, you've been going all morning.”

“Ah, fine.” Durand said, passing the oars to the other man who started rowing. Durand stretched, careful not to disturb the tiny boat, and rubbed his arms.

“So. This informant you have in Swan, what sort of information does he have?” Durand asked.

“Well, I wouldn't call him an informant. He's the Civil Potentate of Swan. He just came across some interesting information.”

“The ship?” Durand said, thinking back to the breifing that Laurent had given him weeks ago when they were still pondering their unknown actions.

“Yes. Im surprised you remember. I just asumed I was going to have to rebreif you on the way.” Laurent said. “There is another copy of the request in my pack there.”

“You brought something like that with you?” Durand asked, reaching for the pack and gently lifting a set of documents from one of the pockets.

“What do you want from me? We can't all commit things to memory Durand. At least its coded.”

“If only we could remember everything. No chance of interception. Its at least an interesting idea. Perhaps the university can come up with something like that.”

“Those fools care only for their books. Obscure rites and obscure phenomena. They should help out once and a while. We wouldn't need so many mages on the engineering payroll.” Laurent complained, punctuating his words with extra vigorous strokes of the oars.

“Give them some credit, they came to help during the seige.” Durand pointed out, looking up from the document.

“Its not like they had a choice,” Laurent said with a dry chuckle, “the city was surrounded. Also, are you trying to decipher that without using any tools? I have the code book in there as well. Not even you could do that!”

“Well, I almost had the first word. Its a good code system. Shame we can't use it more widely yet,” Durand said, rummaging through the pack for the code.

“And spoil the secret?” Laurent asked, passing a fishing boat at the widest part of the river.

“Here we go,” Durand said, extracting the small book. At first glance it looked like a list of herbal recipes, however, hidden in its letters were the key to the code he and Laurent used. He set about deciphering the message again.

“I really only remember some of it,” Durand said. “While I mess with the actual message, just to double check, can you paraphrase?”

“Sure. The Potentate received word that a ship of some sort is arriving from the south, but via the Shani islands. Certainly not suspicious by itself, the Shani do business with both sides. But the Potentate said that this ship is specifically owned by a Southern merchant.”

“Right. I remember now. Wasn't there something about the cargo as well?”

“Yes. Its billeted as carrying grain, but some of our friends in black say that it actually carries arms.” Laurent said.

Durand looked up from his work. “Damn smugglers.” He said, exhaling, before returning to the documents.

“Actually, because of that, I was surprised that you decided to come Durand. I myself was on the edge about going. I was just going to have on of my friends look into it. In fact, I was actually going to allow the trade to occur and order them to observe. This feels a bit like overkill.”

“Really? For what purpose? Shouldn't you try to stop this kind of thing? Every sword they steal from us ends up in the hands of a Southern soldier.” Durand noted.

“The thing is… You can't always play your hand. If we were to act on ever piece of information we received, well someone smart, someone who also keeps to the shadows, they might start to notice a pattern, and all of a sudden, the shipments stop coming, or change route, or someone ends up stabbed in the night.” Laurent explained.

“Well, that makes sense,” Durand said, confirming what Laurent just paraphrased. Satisfied, he ripped the translated sheet into small pieces and threw them into the river.

“But to answer your previous question, as to why did I decide to come, it was one of those feelings. And I know that's not very scientific. In addition, the person we want information on is probably the Southern spy master. My best guess is that its counselor Corlenos or someone directly below him. If we want to put together a puzzle, you have to start with the small pieces at the edge.” Durand said staring into the dark water.

“And who's responsible for smuggling arms?” Durand asked rehetorically.

“You think the Southern spy master?” Laurent said, scowling.

“Don't be silly. Thats way below him. You have to think like a noble: delegate some. Smugglers are petty thieves, you are a gentleman. We won't find the spymaster through this, but we will find someone, and we just need to go after him, and find out what he knows, who he works for, and continue the chain all the way to the top.” Durand said, clenching his hands.

“Its good to see you motivated. I was worried all this administration work was getting the best of you.” Laurent said with a grin.

Durand shook his head. “I'll admit, being supreme commander certainly sounds a lot more exciting than the job actually entails. And how about you, do you mind having your only real title being secretary?”

Laurent dismissed the concern with a shake of his head. “If I held any higher title, I couldn't be nearly as effective at my job. No one questions the secretary. 'Where are you going? This area is restricted'” Laurent said, mimicking a gruff soldier. “'Oh, I'm so sorry; see I was ordered here by supreme commander Durand personally and I just thought…'” He said obsequesously, this time mimiking himself. “I can get anywhere I like.”

“Huh. That really is something. I hope you don't throw my name around too commonly.” Durand said, a bit concerned.

“Nope, only when I'm caught, which is very rarely.” Laurent admitted.

“I do admit, after the tenth pile of paperwork, I start getting a bit lax in my responsibilities. But come on. Who wouldn't?”

“I knew it.” Durand said, under his breath.

Luarent grinned. “Actually I alleviate the boredom by doing field work.”

“So that’s where you go on the weekends.” Durand said, scratching his beard.

“Hey, you know about that? I have… friends fill in for my secretarial responsibilities.” Laurent said with another grin.

“Is that responsible?” Durand questioned, eyebrow raised.

“Eh. Looks like its worked well enough. Also, wait. How do you know where I go?” Laurent said, suddenly a bit more serious. “I've never told a soul other than those filling in for me; certainly not you!”

“Laurent, please, our offices are right across the hall from one another.” Durand pointed out, swatting a fly away from his face.

“But I sometime sneak out the window and at night for that matter!”

“Ah, well. I'm allowed to have my own secrets no? I was, after all, head intelligence officer under Supreme Commander Richer.”

Laurent eyed Durand suspiciously but said nothing.

“But what a day!” Durand said suddenly, very obviously changing the subject.

And so it was. The river was at low gauge but still you would have been a fool to try to cross it at their current position, here it was deep, Durand thought, glancing down at the waters beneath them. He idly remembered reading about the rocky chasm that the river sat atop and wondered how deep it actually was.

Deep enough fro a variety of fish, that was for sure. Although the area they were entering was becoming more hilly and the river narrowed, there were still a half dozen fisherman in sight, some on the shore, others in boats clogging areas of the river. They seemed to have lost the barges, which operated mostly near the shore with long poles.

The geography would become more mountainous, although nothing compared to what was just a few miles north. Hardy trees clogged the southern shore, but on the Northern side, the main road to Merin's ford and eventually Swan, hugged the river for a few more miles.

There were scattered houses and even the occasional inn, although most larger buildings were set far away from the shore. The river did flood, and when it did, you didn't want to be anywhere near it. The cost of the last major flood had demanded its own tax for a year to rebuild the river docks, and the merchants had been none too pleased about that.

Durand settled down into the boat. “You mind if I take a nap?” He asked Laurent.

Laurent agreed. “Sure, but you have to do all the rowing back.”

Durand fake winced. “I imagine this will be worth it.” he said, pulling the worn cloak's hood over his face.

When Durand awoke it was almost dusk. Laurent was prodding him awake.

“My gods, do you always sleep so?”

“Only when I haven't slept in a week, Durand said, rubbing his eyes.”

“A week!” Laurent said, shocked. “That’s impossible. I've seen you work late when I do as well, but no one can go without sleep for a week.”

“Perhaps I exaggerate.” Durand said, stirring and sitting up.

“I see its grown late. How far have we gotten?” he added.

“See for yourself.” Laurent said, gesturing to the town behind him.

Merin's ford was not an organized affair. Unlike Illithar, which had stood for centuries and had apparently been constructed as a fortress back before written history, or Dor's Crag which had its rich veins of ore, Merin's ford was a newer, more haphazard town.

It had emerged in the last century when trade with the Southerners had eclipsed that with the East. The original merchants had at first plied their boats all the way to the mouth of the river before coming down the coast.

But such a route was better suited for coastal trade only, and the main ports for political reasons soon turned more hostile to the Northerners. The inner towns of the South however, overflowing with grain and eying the masterful Northern metalwork picked up the slack.

Here, at Merin's Ford, the river split in two for some miles, making a large but narrow and swampy island. It was across this island that the second great bridge was built, the first of course being directly across from Illithar.

Naturally then, this crucial intersection, between those going to Swan or those turning southward grew in prominence. Its location, being within a day of Illithar going downstream, made it a desirable place for travelers.

Durand noted the sprawling haphazard streets, already lit and visible from the water. Most of the houses and shops were a signle story, with only a few in the densist areas reaching to two. Merin's ford grew outwards.

This fact Durand lamented repeatedly when he had to think of ways to defend the place. Being so focused on trade and physically almost three times the size of Illithar, despite its population being much smaller, it was impossible to contain within a wall of any reasonable size.

Therefore, Durand had thought it best to maintain a heavy garrison around the town, mostly to its south where he had ordered the restoration of those hill forts retaken after the counter attack following Gerrant siege of Illithar.

It was then with a bit of measured excitement that Durand lashed up the small boat, and tossed a coin to the “harbor master”, a no doubt plutocratic position dreamt up by the city's Civil Potentate.

Durand decided to ignore this overreach for now.

He and Laurent walked up the shore, passing through a cut in a large earthenwork. This one Durand knew was not for defense against the Southerners, but rather the river.

They found themselves being joined by people of all varieties. Durand noticed farmer families, some traveling with their children, bringing goods into the town in large wagons. As he followed them a detachment of soldiers caught his attention, returning from training in the hills to the north by the looks of it, their armor was covered with mud and they looked glad to be back in the town.

Finally, there were the merchants, wagons, horses, oxen, donkeys, all burdened with goods, some with guards.

Into this throng, Durand and Laurent were swept, hardly getting a chance to stop as they were pushed past excited shop keeps, extending their hands towards piles of ceramics, iron ingots, fresh vegtables and occasionally linen goods.

Merrin's ford, unlike Illithar had no wall, which meant no closing of the gates. Durand knew it would be still another hour before the shoopkeeps admitted defeat for the day and closed up.

The city itself though was a mess. Refuse piled in corners, sometimes next to merchandise. Beggars and more reclusive individuals sat in stoops carved into winding packed streets. It had rained a few days before and the ground in places was still wet. The streets, being only packed dirt were a churning mess of mud and unavoidably, with so many animals, excrement.

“I had forgotten how this place smelled.” Durand commented, holding his nose.

“I thought you wanted to experience your realm sir. Here it is. All however many square miles of narrow streets, crooked deals and the stink of the unwashed masses.” Laurent said, clapping Durand on the back.

Durand coughed. “This can't be a healthy place to live.”

“I imagine not. But, on the bright side, there are more than three alchemists who live in this town! That has to tip the scales in the other direction, no?” Laurent said. Then, more softly he admonished Durand.

“Get your hand off your nose. Everyone will know we're from Illithar. The rich city. The city of easy purses?” He reminded Durand.

Durand started and walked quickly to catch up with the other man.

“Ah, you're right. It has been a while since I traveled like this. Normally I only get to review garrisons, and the lieutenants always insist on giving me the best room in the place, even if its just a tent. Its making me fat and lazy I suppose.”

“Speaking of which. I have some business here that I must attend to.” Laurent said, suddenly looking over his shoulder.

Durand shrugged. “So be it. Where do you suggest we stay the night?” he said, looking at two inns on this street alone.

“Its got to be The Guardsman.” Laurent said, staring for a moment at a passerby, before focusing back on Durand.

“Whys that?” Durand asked, “business?”

“No. It just reasonably priced, near the river off to your left here, and umm” Laurent stopped, coughing for a moment.

Durand eyed him quizzically, until he realized the man was somewhat embarrassed.

“...umm well, its operated by family.” he admitted.

“Ha! I get to meet your family? This will be great!”

“Extended family. And don't dare tell them who you are or what you do, or what I do for that matter. Don't even talk to them. You don't know them. Hands always grasping for more coin… well they're family what can one do?” Laurent asked. “Now I've really got to go. I told a friend of mine I would meet them at a very particular time.”

“How did you know when we would get here?” Durand asked as the other man started walking away.

“Why do you think I asked to row? I'll meet you there in an hour.” Laurent responded, disappearing among the crowd. And then Durand was alone.

Well, not actually alone. He was surrounded by at least fifty people, but he didn't know any of them, and they weren't military, so he might have as well been in a foreign land.

Durand looked around and chuckled. “Well what am I supposed to do for an hour?”

Picking a direction at random and relying on his sense of direction to allow him to get back, he decided to venture into the city core, where the largest and most opulent shops would be.

His nose did not lead him astray. At the center of town was the crimson street, called that actually because it was where they used to do executions during darker times, but now it retained the name because it was where the linen merchants congregated. Lined with actual stone unlike the rest of the muddy affairs in the town, it was easily the size of the main street in Illithar, if not quite as long or as grand.

Durand marveled at the rugs and ornaments, he even saw hints of gold and silver, always safely behind a counter or locked in barred cells. The merchants knew that many wandering eyes and hands were hidden among the crowds. Speaking of which…

Durand hastily checked his moneypurse, and breathed a sigh of relief to find that it was still there. It really had been a long time since he had ventured outside the capitol for civilian reasons. Well, technically he was still working.

He went from shop to shop, taking in all of the interesting goods. However, there seemed to be something wrong. It took Durand a moment and a couple of sharp looks to realize that the shoopkeeps didn't seem to like him.

Then he remembered what he was wearing. The tattered cloak instantly marked him as someone who wasn't going to be buying anything, let alone silver or finery.

He decided after a particularly irrate owner almost threatened Durand with the large thuggish looking guard standing by, that perhaps he should play the role his clothes allowed, never mind the fact that he did have a much nicer set of clothing in his pack, or the fact that he was the Supreme Commander of the North.

At the end of the Crimson street was a further paved area, a plaza whose name Durand could not recall. At its head was a clustering of fine buildings, all temples. The main one, the temple of Kerack, had previously belonged to the Lord of Opulence before his untimely demise at the hands of the Plotweaver. Although his followers had to admit there was nothing left of him, both he and Geremon maintained somewhat smaller shrines off to the side.

Durand knew though that the real patron of the city would not have a centralized temple like the ones before him. The Plotweaver only had overt places of worship in the Shani archipelago, where their mad king allowed such things.

Durand found himself staring at the old repurposed temple. It rose three stories, a veritable tower among the other buildings. It was also completely finished despite age wearing at it visably, another rarity in this matchstick town. It was in a rectangle, with gold painted domes on each corner. Odd rotund circular windows peeked out under every dome.

Just at that moment the double door to the place slammed open and a tough looking Southerner with a noticably ugly countanace staggered out.

He made it about halfway through the doorway before someone gave his a shove from behind and he fell before Durand's feet on the cobbles.

The man who had done the pushing, a wiry veteran by the looks of him sneered at the man on the ground. “Teaches you! We Northerners aren't 'quivering sacks of flesh' are we now?” And spat on the man while he was down.

The southerner groaned and slowly got to his feet, glaring at the man in the door.

“Want some more? Kerack will always relish a fight, but I will promise a fair one, even for you Southerners.”

“Nargggh.” The southern spat, wiping his mouth of blood. “No I've got my fight. Maybe this one…” He added slinking off into one of the darker alleyways.

The man at the door took a step forward to see Durand better.

“So what will it be? Interested? You look quite a bit tougher than most of the street rats we get here, although so did that Southerner. There is a nice prize if you're good enough to beat three of us, and we can give you lodging if you can take on two.”

“At once?” Durand asked, his mouth moving before he thought.

“What? No. Of course not. One at a time. We're not butchers. Its Kerack! He wants to see sport, not a beat down. This is his place don't you know.”

Durand nodded and glanced backward. “Thanks for the offer, but I think I will try someplace else.”

The other man shrugged. “Suit yourself.” he said, before going back inside and closing the door.

Durand heard sounds of cheering from inside and possibly the sound of metal on metal. Gods, those addled Kerack worshipers were having armed combat? The place must be completely destroyed on the inside.

Shaking his head, he walked back the way he had come.

It was later now, and the fine shops were closing down first. Many of the merchants, especially the finer ones, lived atop their shops and took all the most valuable things up with them when they retired.

The whole face of the town changed, lights went out, and the people living in the shadows started to emerge. Just as the town spanned both sides of the river, so too did its denizens span both sides of the law. Merchants were just as likely to become loan sharks, inn owners became gambling kingpins, and mercenaries, well they stayed mercenaries.

That Durand and his command had allowed the city to stay like this was what Laurent would have called a necessary evil. From its shadowy ranks came some of their best friends. It also helped that the threat and memory of Southern invasion was still fresh within their minds.

But as Durand walked purposefully down the quickly darkening street, he reminded himself that a necessary evil was still evil. One day he would tear this whole place down and build it from the ground up.

These thoughts pursued him as he attempted to retrace his steps from earlier in the day. After a few missed turns, and twice when he accidentally found himself at a dead end, he found himself in front of the Guardsman.

The building was another rarity. It was skinny and tall, just off the end of a street perpindicular to Crimson street . In fact, its name may have come from that fact. It stood out like a giant among a crowd.

There were quite a few people milling around the entrance, and it took Durand a few moments to notice that they were all wearing uniforms, even if they weren't nessecarily in parade condition. A quick glance to the sign hanging by the door confirmed his suspicions. A battered sheild hung from the place a sign should have been. The guardsman indeed, it was an in that specialized in serving the military!

Laurent picked him out from the crowd.

“Lieutenant Merrill!” He called. Durand happened to look up purely because of the noise, but he realized that Laurent had already chosen a cover for him. The other men stopped for a moment and saluted. He waved away their formality with a smile.

“Secretary?” He asked, waking forward as if greeting the other person for the first time.

“Close. *Adjunct* Laurent. I got your message just earlier today. I'm sorry to hear about the previous adjunct, I hope he makes a full recovery soon.”

“As do I.” Durand said, playing along.

“Shall I show you the place then?”

“That seems acceptable.” Durand said outloud. Then, softer and close to Laurent's ear, “What would you have done if there had been another Lieutenant here?”

“I knew there weren't any.” Laurent replied with a grin.

“Come on. Let me introduce you to my family.” he said, opening the door to the inn.

The interior was well lit and loud. It was clear from the moment that they walked in that the place was popular. Gruff veterans, overly loud recruit and one or two low ranking officers crowded the main bar with small groups at dirty windows on eaither side of the door.

Durand quickly looked around and noticed at least five or six bar maids, and two bartenders. In addition, two older people sometimes tended to the officers or one of the larger groups. He seemed to have lost Laurent as he stood there somewhat awkwardly.

Laurent approached an older woman, dressed in a long green outfit, with minor silver tracing.

She recognized him after he waved to her, and she enveloped him in a sincere looking hug. He looked a bit embarressed, but no one but Durand seemed to notice.

“Laurent!” She said, backing up and looking at him. She motioned to one of the barmaids, to take over for her on one of the groups.

“How have you been? Its been months!” She said.

“Yes, well, work has taken me elsewhere, usually in the capital.” He said, smiling. It looked authentic.

She looked up and noticed Durand.

“Sorry, one second, Laurent.” she walked past him and to Durand. “What can I do for you?” She asked.

As Durand tried to think of how to introduce himself, Laurent took over for him, approaching from behind.

“Actually Aunt, this is my commanding officer, Lieutenant Merrill.”

“Lieutenant.” She said, holding out a hand. “Its nice to meet you, although I must apologise, Laurent has been neglectful in keeping us up to date with his goings on, so I can't say I've heard of you.”

“Well, its all the same. Laurent was just assigned to my command, one of my previous adjuncts broke his leg after a nasty fall.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Although I'm glad our Laurent can be of use to you.” Magda said.

“I've heard good things from his previous assignment, I believe he will help keep things running.” Durand said.

“And what brings you to Merin's Ford, Lieutenant Merrill?” She asked, ushering them to a more private room.

“Well, its military business, so I can't go into details,” Durand cautioned, “but we have some supply work to do in Swan.” A quick glance told him that his fascade was acceptable with Laurent.

“But we obviously don't want to bore you with procedural things. The Guardsman, eh? I assume you get some raised eyebrows about that, if this is a military focused inn.”

Laurent winked and let Durand talk as the group sat down at a small circular table. It was plain wood, but the chairs were sturdy and the room was lit with a simple chandelier with several candles. There was no door to the room, but a heavy curtain seperated them from the main chamber.

“I mean,” Durand continued, “guardsman now referrs to the civil guard, but I imagine this inn dates back to before the distinction mattered.”

“Right you are! You seem to know your history.” Magda said, smiling. “You'd be amazed how many soldiers, even officers, question us about that. Obviously a inn for guardsman as the modern use has it would be quite rediculous as of course they live in the city they are defending. No it is as you describe, this inn dates back to a decade after the founding of Merin's Ford, and has been in the family ever since.”

“That is very impressive mam. I see that the place is very popular.” Durand said.

“Yes, although we have not figured out who will run it when Lucious and I grow too old. We never had any children you see, and Laurent seems to have chosen a different path in life.” She said, looking breifly at Laurent, who met her gaze. “...Not that there is anything wrong with a career in the military” She said, hastily trying not to hurt Durand's pride.

“I must admit. There are times I thought it would be better to own a shop or an inn.” Durand said, growing whistful.

“Ha!” Magda cackled, clapping her hands together. “Well, its settled then I suppose. You'll just have to take over for us when the time comes.” She said, winking to show she was just joking.

“Perhaps!” Durand laughed.

“Sir. Perhaps you'd like something to eat? We didn't stop at all on the way here.” Laurent offered.

“Actually...” Durand said, holding up a hand. But Magda was already off her seat.

“Is that the case?” She asked, I will have something made up for you in a hurry! Do you like lamb stew?” She said, presumably gesturing to where the kitchen was.

“Well, I was going to say I wasn't hungry, but that sounds pretty good right about now.” Durand admitted.

Magda beamed and dissapeared fromt eh room. Durand waited until he was sure she had left.

“Whats the deal Laurent? She seem s nice enough.”

“Oh, she's nice alright. You're a Lieutenant! She'd offer to scrape the mud from your boots if she'd thought it would help her in the long run. Its quite interesting, no matter how bad the grain shortages get, she always seems to be well stocked.” he said, stroking the place where a beard would be if he had one.

“She's the one you have to worry about. Her husband, Lucious, is an honestly nice man, and I always thought the marriage was a bit of a con. I can't imagine she's very pleasant to get along with after all the guests have gone.”

“So why come here at all?” Durand said, shrugging. “You'd only raise suspicion, you being related and all.”

Laruent grimaced. “She *knows* things, Durand. Things that you or I would find hard to figure out, or trivial: who is sleeping with whom, who has ambitions on what titles in the military… I learned some tricks from her along the years, and although I obviously haven't told her my true position, I come by once or twice a year to see what she has uncovered.”

“I see. And what does she get from all of this?” Durand said, eying the curtain, just in case Magda or one of the maids came in early.

“Why, she gets a visit from her favorite nephew!” Laurent said, putting on a cute impression. It was horrifying.

“But in actuality, since they have no children of their own, I think her matronly instincts have focused on me, especially since I'm the closest family member.”

“Really? You're into your thirties. You wouldn't think...”

“My own mother and father used to live down in a small town farther to the south, the closest large city being Westfield. When Gerrant started to make his aspersions clear, and when I was just a young adult, my family advised that I move north. I made my first connections with the military through Magad. So despite what I say about her. I do owe her a lot.”

“Fair enough...” Durand said, growing quiet when Magda came back in with bowls of stew and some bread atop a tin tray.

“Here you are.” She said, placing down the tray. “Now I must apologize, I would like nothing more than to hear more about you Lieutenant Merrill, but its a busy night tonight, and I have to see to other customers.”

She curtsied and walked swiftly out of the room.

“Hrm. Well. Lets see what she has cooked up.” Laurent said, poking the stew.

The stew, despite all of Laurent's warnings, was fantastic. It even had some simple spices which must have been local, since Durand hadn't tasted them before.

“Its the alchemists.” Laruent explained. “Magda helped them obtain licenses or something at some point and she got them all to pay her in spices. Also poisons.”

Durand sat down the food instantly and stared at it.

“Ha! Just joking! He said dunking a piece of bread into the stew. “That's something I get from them.” he said more quietly, eyes for a second darting to a pocket in his coat, than back up to Durand.

Durand finished the meal, realizing that perhaps all the things that Laurent said stemmed from the fact that he and Magda were actually more alike than the Secretary refused to accept.

They finished their meals. Just as Durand set down his bowl, Magda materialized, presumably having waited for the occasion.

“I suppose you'll want to see your quarters?” She said, tidying up the utensils.

They nodded, and she led them into them to a large staircase. Despite what Durand expected, the woodwork of the upper levels was quite well done. As they rounded past the first level, durand could see down the wallway to a window, on either side of the hallway were a half a dozen rooms with about the same number in the opposite direction.

The first level was plain, aside from aforementioned woodwork, but the second was more lavish. A simple and worn, but red carpet ran the length of the shorter hallway. There seemed to only be half a dozen rooms on this level, but the doors were more widely spaced indicating that each room was larger.

The candle sconses on the wall were also polished bronze and there were two or three pieces of art on the walls. Magda did want to impress it seemed.

“Lieutenant, your room is at the end of the hall here,” she said, escorting them to the end and opening up the door. The room was larger than he at first expected. It had its own stone fireplace and the bed itself was double the ordinary size. He suspected that it was quite comfortable. There was an antique desk at the far end of the room, near the double window from which one could see down into the street below. On the floor was a canvas rug, which had an interesting blue fringe and a geometric design stitched into it.

“Wow, this is quite something!” Durand said, looking around the room. “You didn't have to...”

“Nonsense.” Magda smiled. “I knew that as soon as Laurent mentioned you were coming, that he wanted to impress you. Only makes sense.” She said with a grin. “Here is your key. I understand that you two are regrettably leaving early tomorrow, just leave the key with anyone who is up when you leave.”

“Thank you Ms. Carver.” He said, giving a slight bow.

“Such a gentleman. If only Laurent could be so polite. Goodnight Lieutenant Merrill.” She said, the other two exiting the room.

Durand took off his pack and placed it on the floor and threw himself onto the bed. It was very comfortable.

Laurent shook his head. “You didn't have to bust out the nice room. Merrill is a understanding officer. He's probably more comfotable in a tent than a proper bed.” he expalined, as they walked down the hallway.

“You have to make a good first impression.” Magda admonished Laurent. “I've told you that again and again. By the way, did you have any choice about this posting? Merrill seems like a fine officer, polite, capable, so forth, but Laruent, he must be in his late forties or early fifties. He should be a colonel by now for sure. Did you read up on him before accepting the post? It seems that perhaps he is less popular than his outward appearance would indicate.” She warned him as the two walked down the stairs.

“Thank you for the concern, Aunt. I did look into his history. He has some Southern relatives which explains his status. But his history is spotless and he has a tendancy to get his adjuncts promoted after they work with him, so at least they respect his decisions on men.”

Magda nodded. “Well, that good I suppose. But you've always lacked ambition, Laurent. Adjunct? I know you're smarter than that. You yourself should be a Lieutenant. I know you could do it.” She said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I know some officers in Dor's Crag, I could...”

“Aunt. Thank you for the concern, but I am well aware of my career. This assignment with Merrill should be a short one. I suspect I am already on someone's short list, provided everything goes well.” he lied.

Magda nodded and smiled. “That's the Laury I taught.” She said as they came to the ground floor.

They slipped back into the room that Durand and Laurent had occupied earlier and talked for almost an hour about goings on in the town and in the neighboring areas. Finally Laurent had gotten at least some of what he wanted. He rose and Magda did as well.

Laurent looked around for a second. “Off topic, where will I be staying?” he asked.

Magda raised an eyebrow. “Why in your old room, of course.”

“My… Wait. You still keep that up? You could have turned it into an extra room ages ago.”

Magda looked sad for a moment. “I would never do that. Where would you stay when you came to visit me?” She asked, not meeting his gaze. “Plus its in the basement. People would be offended if I but them there.”

Laurent looked at the old woman with something like a new light. “Thats… really nice of you Aunt Magda. I… I'll have to come back here more often.” He said, a smile breaking out on his face.

“I'll leave you alone for now. You know where to go. Not much has changed down there. It was nice seeing you, I aplogise things are so busy tonight or we could talk for real.” She said.

Laruent ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Definitely, Aunt Magie. I'm sorry I've been so distant. I really have been working hard. If you only knew...” He said, as he started to descend down the stairs.

“Ah. One last thing Laurent.” She said, catching him before he left. “If you are leaving so early tomorrow, I will probably miss you, I have some errands myself quite early. But I just wanted to remind you, you're almost well through your thirties. I realize you've been focusing on your career, but I would think your mother would have liked you to have found someone by now.”

“I know.” He said, taking a step down the stairs. He looked back up at her. “I'll see what I can do.”

“Better.” She quipped. “I want to see grandnephews when you show up next time.” She said, smiling.

But something in the last smile hinted as some inner sadness, Laurent noticed, so as he turned away and descended to the basement, his own smile soon collapsed into a grim face. He pursed his lips as he walked down the old hallway past the store rooms to the door at the end.

“Huh.” he said to himself as he pushed on the door.

The old room was the same. The small bed in the corner, alcove above it filled with books on military history. The little lantern hanging from the ceiling that he always bumped into. The small table with writing implements. Despite the rugless cold stone floor, Laurent felt some kind of warmpth run through him, and as he too placed his pack on the floor and changed into bed clothes, he was caught off guard by the amount of nostalgia that surrounded the place.

He rolled into bed, and pressed on the old hidden compartment set into the alcove. The first set of knives he had ever owned came sliding out.

He held them above him, having them shine in the lantern light. He ran his finger along the now rusted flat of the blade. He had certainly chosen a different path for himself, for good or for ill.

He put them back with a sigh, and went up to turn the lantern off.

They awoke early and let themselves out the back entrance, just in case.

They said nothing, and Durand followed Laurent as he creept through twisting dark alleyways and passages before emerging apruptly to a tiny cut in the levies.

Laurent looked back at the alley they had just emerged through, and for a moment Durand thought he was going to say something. But instead, he just shook his head and walked to where they had tied up the boat.

It was still there. This in and of itself was not a certainty, but apparently a possibility that Laurent had accounted for, as Laurently slyly pointed to another simmilar boat hidden under one of the docks.

Laurent went to grab the oars, but Durand got them first. Laurent looked surprised for a second, but then shrugged and settled into the boat. Durand started rowing.

Even though it was still early fall, the morning was cold. Frost covered the grassy levy that separated the town from the river. Few people had risen as early as they, one or two other fisherman appeared apparently wanting to get a good start on the day.

Durand soon quickly outpaced these larger craft, leaving them alone on the river. They passed under both of Merrin Ford's bridges, breif shadows overhead, and they were gone.

The river converged quickly behind them, opening up into gentle farms. Durand knew that, despite his best efforts, the majority of grain eaten in Illithar grew in this area. The wide area surrounding the river was fertile, and it had been for centuries. Some families could trace their lands back to a time before the north and south had split, and some to even earlier than that, back when the elven nation had shared the river as its border with man.

Although the politics had certianly changed since that time, the geography hadn't. Small slopng hills covered with golden grain and pastures with fenced in animals stretched as far as he could see to the north. On the southern side there was a bit of farmland surrounding Merrin's Ford, but soon the terrain grew more hilly.

Once they crossed paths with the second island in the river though, both sides would be extensively farmed. For now, the lands to the south were nominally part of the North, an arbitrary line cast across the land where the battle lines had stagnated following their counter attack.

But these event had occurred year ago, and right now there was just him, Laurent, the boat and the river.

He soon slipped into a rhythm as he pumped the oars back and forth. The ripples in the water from his efforts disrupted the previously calm surface of the river. On the edges were several tall white wading birds, almost indistinguishable from the reeds in which they crouched, which arose and sounded calls when Durand slipped past.

The land here came right up to the river, with only a bank of a foot or two. Flooding would cause severe problems, as it always had. But that would come in the spring. For now things were calm. The river was calm, the nature around it was calm. Did he had a right to be calm as well?

Certainly not. He knew that despite the serene surroundings, there was a powerful flow right under their feet. As he recalled, he had fallen into the river once when he was a child. Despite everyone knowing how cautious one must be near the center of the river, he had fallen in. The further you went down, the deeper into the cleft you sank, the more powerful it became as it narrowed.

The current situation was like the river, he thought. On the surface, it seemed calm. There were no armies actively fighting, so mage fire or seige weapons arrayed at the capital. But the deeper and deeper you sank, the more turbulent and quickly the waters flowed. Knives in the dark, tension in the air. The armies might not be fighting but they were certainly mustered.

And right now, he and Laurent weren't coming to the surface, as he had so many years ago as a child, he knew that for certain. Quite the opposite in fact. They were swimming deeper, on purpose. They needed to know what lay at the bottom, where the currents and counter currents were inseparable from one another, where the light of the sun was no longer visible, and the pressure crushed you on all sides. That was where they were headed.

Such thoughts polluted his previously content mood, and the sour expression they left stayed with him as the day progressed.

As if generated from his emotions, the early crisp morning soon grew overcast. Durand looked at the clouds moving quickly overhead with a bit of concern. A storm now would delay them at least a day.

One could not traverse the river when the weather was bad. It would be a fools attempt. You might be able to get away with that sort of thing in the south, where the rain fell cheerfully through half sunny clouds, but not in the North. Here, the weather was sudden and unforgiving. The prevailing winds swept back and forth following the line of the river, but changing directions frequently, sometimes multiple times in the same day.

He scowled at the sky, and roused Laurent.

“Whats the situation?” the other man said, looking around at the empty river.

Durand shook his head and pointed to the sky. “What do you think of that?” he said, pointing to the clouds. As he did so, he noticed just how fast they were moving, this time from west to east inland.

“Eghh.” Laurent said, fiddling with his bag. He held up a small vial to the sky.

“You going to stop the rain?” Durand asked dryly, as Laurent peered into the container at some sort of liquid.

“If only I could do that. I'd have it rain nonstop on the southern recruits, and we'd win this damn stalemate in a matter of weeks. They'd all be so sodden they'd go home.” He said with a grin. “But no. This is apparently called a weather stop but it doesn't stop the weather. I picked it up in Merrin's Ford from one of the alchemists.”

“What does it do then?” Durand said, stopping paddling for a second, and shifted forward to try to see the vial for himself.

“Here, take a look yourself. If I understand how to use the thing correctly, despite the appearances, it won't rain until tonight.” Laurent said, passing the small vial to Durand.

Durand secured the oars and held the small vial in his hands. It was smaller than a potion vial, perhaps more on par with a perfume bottle. Interestingly enough, there didn't seem to be an opening.

“How do you use it?” Durand asked, peering into the turquise liquid that it held.

“I'm not quite sure.” Laurent admitted.

“You charlatan!” Durand said. “You made off like you knew all about the damn thing. How do you know that its not going to rain then?”

“I can't explain it, I just knew by looking at it. I'm sure it had to do something with the way the liquid moves inside the vial or the bubbles or something.” Laurent said.

“Intuition huh?” Durand said, trying to hold the thing up to the light like Laurent had. The liquid inside slushed back and forth against the sides of the container, expelling crystal bubbles that slowly floated to the top of the glass.

“Oh. I see it now.” Durand said, eyes widening.

“Wait really?” Laurent said, shifting so that he could see the vial as well, peering at it from below.

“Its so clear!” Durand cried, “Not only is it going to rain tonight, but I can tell that the wind is going to change direction. Its going to grow colder as well. We'd better stop early tonight.”

“Wait. You're getting all that from the stop?” Laurent said, obviously jealous.

“Hold on. There's more! I'm getting the feeling that… This is a load of shit!” Durand said, howling with laughter at Laurent's concentration.

Betrayed, Laurent slunk to his side of the boat. “Hey come on. I really did think...”

“I'm sure you did. Come with being such a sneaky guy I'm sure.” Durand said, throwing the bobble at Laurent who scrambled to catch it.

“Its a great tool if it actually works. But if we want to train scouts to use it, you have to actually be able to explain how to use it...” Durand said.

“So you think it works?” Laurent said, putting the device carefully away in his bag, and glancing quickly again at the shifting sky.

“Who knows. Alchemy is always iffy, right? All depends on who put it together. At least with mages, you usually have something clear, either fire appears or it doesn't, right? Well, its an interesting tool. We'll keep an eye on the clouds and see how it does.”

Laurent agreed and looked around.

“We've gone a bit. Already past the second island?” He said, looking back the way they came.

“No, not yet, but soon I would think.” Durand replied, leaning to the side to look past Laurent.

“Then you shouldn't have woken me. This area is boring as all hell. Nothing here but farms.” Laurent said, as he laid back again in the boat.

And Laurent was right. Both as it turned out about the scenery and about the weather. Although the sky threatened all day as Durand paddled the craft down the endless river, it only sprinkled for a moment. The true fury seemed to be building, above them, above the very, very boring farms.

What at first seemed grounding and parochial to Durand quickly lost its emtional value after the first three hours.

Now, after nearly ten, as the day threatened to turn into night, and the clouds looked blacker than ever, Durand was somewhat glad they were going to have to take shelter. At least it would be a change of scenery.

And so, just as they got to the beginnings of the spires, and the river started to widen yet again, they had to quickly row to shore as the first drops started to fall.

If they weren't fairly confident in their survival abilities, they might have had a hard time of it. There weren't any houses near the area, as the shores near the spires were steep on both sides. On the north side, granite slabs all the way down into the channel beneath; on the south side, soft crumbly clay walls, full of nesting birds.

Thankfully they knew this ahead of time, and got off the river before they entered the spires. Just before the land sloped upwards, there was a small inlet from a stream. As it entered the river, it formed a small pool, with a shore that one could step out on. There were also trees nearby.

They wasted no time driving the boat to shore and jumping out. Already though they could see and feel the first raindrops. Ripples spread from the isolated impacts in the river, and quickened with every second.

“Oh, its going to come down hard!” Laurent warned. “Grab the back half of the boat!”

The hauled the boat out of the water with some effort, the shore was actually a semi solid loamy silt which threatened to suck their feet into itself. Once they moved to sturdier ground near the closest tree they were able to hal the boat ashore.

“Quick tie that end!” Laurent said, throwing a rope to Durand, who fastened it to part of the tree.

Laurent, taking no chances, tied off the oars as well.

“That'll have to be good enough. This way.” he said, pointing up towards the creek.

Durand heard a low rumble from somewhere behind them, and he could feel the air start to gust this way and that, shreading what leaves remained from the trees into the river. The patter of raindrop was constant now.

The two dashed up the creek a few hundred feet until they came to a rock face, where the creek gushed over the two story high drop.

“Where do you want to go?” Durand called over the increasingly load wind. “We should try to get to higher ground, but I'm not sure we have the time.”

But Laurent shook his head and started climbing the rock face.

“What are you doing?!” Durand yelled. “Come on, let just go around!” he said, pointing to a brush path to his left that seemed to wind up the small cliff.

“No. Its ok, just follow me.” Laurent said, looking carefully at his hand and foot holds.

“Oh, and you have to follow me exactly.” he warned.

Not completely convinced, but giving Laurent the benefit of the doubt, he followed Laurent, trying to remember where he had seen the other man put his arms and legs.

“Oh, not there!” Laurent said, reaching some sort of previously unseen alcove.

“What do you mean?” Startled Durand, who clung to the cliff as the wind wipped around him.

“Shit! Grab my hands and don't let go, ok?” Laurent said, extending his hands downward.

“This is insane!” Durand had the time to say, grabbing Laurent's hands all the same.

Durand suddenly got a vague but incredibly strong sense that he was in danger. He felt himself being dragged upward somehow by Laurent, but just in case, he lifted his feet up with his core muscles.

It was good that he did so. For not a second later, a dark jagged object seemed to leap from the wall outwards just where his left foot had been resting.

“Gods! Help me up!” Durand said, clinging friecly onto Laruent. The rain started to pour, threatening to soak both of them. Already, the ground, now half a story below them was soaked, and brown run off started splashing over the small falls.

With a combination of strength, cursing and mental effort, Laurent managed to wedge himself somehow into the alcove he was in enough to haul Durand upwards.

Barely had he gotten another foothold, then Laurent pulled him all the way in, the two stumbling backwards and fell into the alcove.

The floor was cold and wet. And uncomfortable. A… something was digging into Durand's back. When he went to rise, he realized that it was Laurent's boot.

The other man grumbled and shifted beneath Durand.

“Egh, what the hell?” Durand said, as his hand went into a cold puddle on the floor when he tried to right himself. “What is this?” he asked, forefitting his hand to the cold water, if only to push himself up.

“Its a cave.” Laurent said, also getting to his feet.

Right to his back he could hear and feel the wind get stronger as the storm arrived. A cold gust blasted its way into the cave.

Durand turned to see what they had fallen through.

It was a small opening the height of a doorway but not as wide. It was bad luck that Laurent had lost his balance. The edge of the opening was jagged, indicating that the entrance, if not the cave itself, was carved or bashed.

“Did you know this was here?” Durand said, peering into the darkness. Behind him rain was pouring down, swelling the creek. Part of the runoff was collecting in the entrance. Below that, Duran could see the small boat they had come in tied to the trees, the river just barely visible through the opening in the trees on the banks.

“Of course I did.” Laurent said indignantly, wiping muck from his pants and cloak. “Its part of the nationwide underground tunnel system.” He said, walking towards Durand.

“I'm sorry, the what?” Durand said.

Laurent passed Durand and took a look out of the opening before reaching towards something on the side of the opening. After messing with it for a moment, Laurent slid what could only be described as a door across the entrance. The slab of rock was rough, but the entire mechanism seemed to have been designed well as Laurent was able to do it with one hand.

When Laurent closed the door, they were cast into complete darkness. Durand could tell he was scowling, but obviously Laurent couldn't. As a former intelligence officer, he hated surprises like this.

“Oh, I haven't told you about the nationwide underground tunnel system? Kind of important. See, a bit ago we decided that moving around on the surface was too dangerous what with all the southern spies and all, so we connected all the major cities up with several hundred miles of tunnel, straight through the rock.” Laurent said, lighting a match and feeling around on the wall.

Durand could see Laruent's face with the match. It didn't look like he was lying, but how could such a thing be possible? And for that matter, escape his notice, or that of their enemies?

“Ah, here it is.” Laurent said, lighting a previously unseen lantern hanging on the right wall.

The room suddenly was lit up.

Durand looked around. The small space was only a few feet in each direction. He was also surprised to see that the usable space of the ceiling was only about head height, the rest taken up by an interesting array of stalactites, some of which had been broken off.

Although the cave continued off to the back, the large space must have only been about ten feet by ten feet. The ceiling very quickly descended until it would have been hard to fit a hand through the opening let alone a body. On the ground near the back there was a plain looking wooden box and a bed roll.

“So where does it connect with the rest of the tunnels?” Durand asked, running a hand over the back of the cave, half expecting some sort of illusion.

He heard an unidentifiable noise behind him, and turned to see Laurent crouching, hand over his mouth.

“What...”

“Hahah! You actually believed me? That’s great. I can't believe I was able to keep a straight face.”

“You… I can't believe I fell for that...” Durand said, facepalming his head into his glove before he remembered it was wet.

“I mean, a nationwide tunnel system? Not even with the best mages.” Laurent said, stifling laughter.

“Its just a bolt hole.” Laurent explained, gesturing to the now apparently tiny cave.

“Whats up with the door then?” Durand asked.

“To stop intruders or people from finding the place. I opened it coming in.” Laurent said. “Now if we're staying here the night, lets see what our friends left us.”

He walked over to the wooden crate and pried the lid off.

Durand inspected the entrance, interested by the opening mechanism while Laurent listed off the things he was finding in the crate.

“Lets see, we have some dried nuts, some very stale biscuts, dried fruit, nice, and some tools. Any water? Ah here we go. Oh and also I think there are some very thin bed rolls stuck in the crevice behind there.”

“Are we really going to sleep here?” Durand asked, mentally calculating how much of the room he would take up lying down. The bumpy ground looked cold and uninviting. Maybe he would stay awake.

“Unless you got any better ideas, yeah. The storm out there is crazy. We might loose some miles, but our pace was already pretty good, and the storm will be coming in to Swan by tonight as well, everyone will be delayed along with us.”

“Hmm. I suppose its pretty good this was here.”

“Strategically placed you might say?” Laruent said, helping himself to some of the dried fruit.

“Indeed.” Durand said, sitting against the wall, making sure he didn't do so in any puddles. “You go any more of these? A little nationwide bolt hole system perhaps?”

“I literally can't tell you that. Our friends and I, sworn to secrecy and all that.”

“Not even to the Supreme Commander?” Durand said, shifting his legs to get more comfortable.

“I don't know what you're talking about Lieutenant Merrill.” Laurent said, now going for the nuts.

“Better not eat all of those.” Durand warned.

“Of course not. And not leave some for others? I'll refill this on the way back. But to answer your question, its just better if you didn't know about all of our assets. Isn't it more mysterious like that? Plus it keep you from having to worry about us.”

“I don't doubt your suitability for the role Laurent. But are you sure you're not just shielding our friends from my micromanagement?”

“That’s a possibility.” Laurent admitted. “Also, you can't play politics with something you don't know about.”

Durand pursed his lips. So even Laurent kept some secrets. He had suspected that of course, they had agreed that the names of all the agents would be kept secret from Durand as well as each other. He supposed it was for the best.

Durand sighed. “Give me those nuts before you friggin eat all of them.” He said, holding out a hand.

Laurent slying looked over hid shoulder and slowly inserted another nut into his mouth, making sure that Durand could see him do it.

“That's an order secretary!” Durand said, keeping his hand outstretched.

Laurent reluctantly handed over the bag. “Mmmm,” Durand remarked loudly, shoveling a not insinificant amount into his mouth.

Laruent shrugged and changed the tone, drawing out a map from his pack. Although it had been kept in a fairly sealed container, it showed a bit of moisture on the edges which Laurent did the best to wipe off as he onrolled it.

“So we just made it to the Spires. With any luck we can make it through them with minimal effort.”

“You're not planning on taking us through them are you?” Durand asked, eyebrows raised.

“Heavens no.” Laruent said, shaking his head. He looked at the large marking obscuring the actual details of the Spires. The map maker had evidently given up actually mapping out the interior.

“Even though you and I could probably do it, it would require a bit more concentration than I think we want to spend on this leg of the trip. That would be an expidetion in and of itsef.” Laurent said, darkly.

“Then you believe the stories about that place?” Durand said, also looking at the map, dissapointed.

“Most of them are true, Durand. I swear I've seen the damn things move myself.”

“I suppose its possible. Earth magic perhaps. Something old? Once the wars over and we don't have to have all the geologists working in the mines, we can send a part over I supposed. For now, yeah, we should definitely go around.”

“Yeah, not worth our lives over a half a day delay like that. So we get through the spires and then continue on down the river. It will take us about half a week if we row the entire way. You up for that?” Laurent asked.

Durand felt his shoulder with his other hand. It was not often he got to do physical tasks like that. He mostly was resigned to the occasional practice duel and had to keep up his muscle mass through training. He knew part of him longed to show Laurent that he could do it. Three or four days of rowing. It would be a challenge.

“Yes. I am. Do you have a plan for when we get to Swan?” Durand asked. “I was thinking of how to approach the info we've received.”

“I was just going to walk stright in and work from there.” Laurent admitted.

“Ha, you're usually craftier than that.” Durand said.

“Sure. I'll some up with something. Best not to worry about it until the time comes.” Laurent advised, rising and grabbing the afore mentioned bed rolls from the crevice at the end of the cave. They did not look very sturdy.

“Nothing to do but sleep eh?” Durand remarked as Laurent lay the roll out on the ground. “Weren't you sleeping all the time on the way here?”

“No that was napping. This is completely different. Plus me and Magda talked late into the night previous.”

“I see. Good night then.”

Laurent grunted and snuffed the lantern, plunging Durand into complete darkness.

Durand waited for a moment as his eyes grew accustomed to the dark. If Laruent had been awake, he would have seen Durand's Grey eyes glinting faintly in the blackness.

Durand ran his hand over the floor, thinking to himself, about their situation, political tasks that he left undone at the capitol, plans for the future. The thoughts were a torrent, not unlike the one happening right beyond the small slab of rock to his left.

He reached out and lay a hand on it, just reachable from his current position. He quietly listened to the rain outside, and thought.

Laurent woke early. For a moment, suspended in the dark of the cave, some more instinctiual part of him was shocked to find itself in pitch black. He had to consciously remind himself where he was.

He got to his feet, presuming that Durand was still asleep. Feeling his way over to the door, he opened it a crack. Pale, pre sunrise light flooded its way into the cave, illuminating Durand, still slumped against the wall. By his side there was an empty bag of nuts. Damn.

Outside, the storm had blown itself out. Looking skyward, he could see mostly cloud cover punctuated by occasional spots of clear, but the clouds were the kind of thick blanket before a snow, not like the storm laden ones of yesterday. It probably wouldn't rain today, but he could check the weather stop later.

The stream had subdued to its previous size. Leaning out of the entrance Laurent could see the splatter of water as it launched itself from its height down into the small pool below. The icy water was almost definitely snow melt, even now during harvest season. As it grew colder, the stream would lessen and lessen until probably ceasing altogether during the winter months.

The river, again only partially visible from their hideaway looked calm enough, but there wasn't anyone on it that Laurent could tell. That was good, they wanted to at least get away from the bolt hole before someone saw them emerge.

That reminded Laurent to check on their boat. The boat was still tied to the tree they had lashed it to, but one of the mooring lines had snapped or come undone. This had allowed the violent wind and rain to twist it around its final mooring line. This had the effect of allowing it to become filled with water, Laurent lamented.

Turning into the cave, he was going to wake Durand, but he remembered that he still hadn't really thought about a plan for when they entered Swan. In addition, by the amount of meagre light outside, it was at least an hour before sunrise.

He had time to think, and he thought better alone, when he could voice thoughts in his head. However, despite his best intentions his thoughts turn themselves to his commanding officer in front of him.

The older man stirred as if aware of this fact. Even though Laurent had known of the man for a full ten years, and had worked for him for five of those, there was still a fair amount about the Sumpremem Commander that Laurent didn't know.

Normally, this was to be expected, but for the man who was supposed to be spymaster, it was rather troubling. Not only was he curious, he felt like it was profesional failing on his part. For after all, if he didn't know all of Duran's flaws, how was her supposed to protect him from them? Simply put, they were supposed to be a team. But increasingly, Laurent felt like Durand was playing in a league of his own: one that Laurent just understood bits and pieces.

He shook his head. Regardless of the time, they should be moving. Information had a nasty way of dissapearing if you didn't act on it.

Laurent walked over to wake Durand but as Laurent got close, Durand woke himself.

“Ugh. I've had better nights. I'll admit.” Durand said, rubbing his back.

“Were you awake just then?” Laurent asked.

“Awake? I just woke up.” Durand said. “Are we headed out already?”

“… Yes we might as well.” Laurent said. “It will take us another five days to get to Swan. The ship isn't supposed to leave for another week, but I don't want to chance it.” Laurent explained, stuffing some food into him pack.

“Well then.” Durand said, rising to his feet.

Laurent tok a quick look out to the river to make sure there was no one passing by. When he confirmed that there wasn't, he flung open the opening all the way and started climbing down.

“Uh, hold on a moment. Back when we entered, there was something that lashed out from the rock...” Durand said, looking at the cliff face wearily.

“Oh that? Just follow in my hand and foot holds and everything should be fine.” Laurent said with a sly grin.

“Not that again. Last time it nearly took a piece of me off. You've got a blade hidden in there?”

“Several actually.” Laurent said, stopping for a moment, already halfway down. “Its the wet hold you want. All of the holds we carved into the face. The wet ones are fine. The dry ones are trapped. Oh also, can you close the door?”

Durand watched Laurent descend as he carefully closed the door.

“Wouldn't you want that switched?” Durand asked, studying the holds.

“Too easy to get it by accident that way. We figured that people would be naturally adverse to using the wet ones.”

They were both able to make it down the cliff without any trouble.

When Durand reached the bottom, he wiped his shirt and pants and looked up at the place they had started from. It was nearly imperceptable from the ground. It would have been impossible to spot from the river. They had done a good job.

“I'm intrigued by the mechanisms used in there. Did you hire a mage?” Durand asked.

Laurent reached the boat and frowned at the water inside of it. He flipped it over, making sure the oars were still around as well.

“A mage was involved, yes.” Laurent said.

“Was that person the machinist?” Durand asked, helping Laurent pull the boat to the water.

“Perhaps.” Laurent replied, as the craft slipped into the river.

“We've got to stop here on the way back. I want to study the devices.” Durand said.

“We will have to stop so I can refill the food stock, but I'd rather not hang around the place during the day. It brings too much unwanted attention.” Laurent said, the two of them paddling the craft into the center of the river.

“Fine.” Durand said, then changing the subject he waved his hand towards the mist obscured stack of granite before them, “Do you have any plan for getting through these?” Durand asked.

“Easy, we're going to go around.” Laurent said. “We talked about this before.”

“So we did.” Durand replied. “North or south?” He asked, looking at the two options.

“The river runs much closer to the spires on the north side and the current is much quicker. Lets take the south path. Its the path everyone takes. Its nearly as wide as the river usually is, so we shouldn’t have trouble staying clear of that place.”

Durand nodded and took the other paddle from Laurent. He started paddling them towards the south end.

About an hour in, when they were comfortably on their way, Durand took a moment to look into the Spires.

The place was a geographical anomaly: to their north, was the first of innumerable blades of rock which raised from the floor of the river. The one nearest them was only a story or so out fo the water, but as his gaze accustomed to peering through the mist, he could make out the shadows of larger ones in the distance. Something warned him that there were others as well, not quite as tall but perhaps more deadly, lurking right under the water line.

“You know anything about them?” Durand asked, his voice much more quiet than before. The calmness of the river seemed almost enforced at this point. There was not a person or house anywhere near the place that they could see.

“Just what everyone else talks about. They're spires. No idea what caused them. Some say the gods. Others say its just how the area's always been. Regardless of how they got there, they take up a good four or five times the normal width of the river and arrest its flow in this place, causing it to bulge. If they weren't here but the river stayed in the same course, we'd have one of the largest lakes in the north.”

“Hmm. I have heard the same I suppose. I was interested in them once, when I was younger. It seemed interesting that something so mysterious could lie right in the heart of civilized land. It seems out of place no?”

Laruent nodded. “You and I had the same reaction then. I looked once for people who had managed to go into it.”

“Did you find anything?” Durand asked, continuing to try to peer into the shroud surrounding the Spires.

“Oh, just the normal fishing stories. People saying they found treasure and whatnot. The more convincing ones were the ones from people that said they skirted the outside of the place. They were a little more cautious in what they said. Everyone remarked how it would have been suicide to go in there anyway, the river gets split up so many times, its hard to know if there's any safe path at all inside the thing. Everyone stays away.”

Durand's gaze was now complete fixed on the center of the place. He stopped rowing for a moment.

Laurent frowned and turned around. “Is there something wrong?” He asked. He stopped when he saw Durand's face; it was completely serious. The older man's eyes were directed straight into the heart of the place.

Laurent looked from side to side nervously watching Durand concentrate.

For a long moment, almost then minutes, the two sat in silence, drifting slowly by the spires.

Durand broke the silence. “Does the mist ever go away?”

“No.” Laruent said. “No one has ever seen it without the mist.”

As if on queue, a cold wind wrapped itself around them, issuing forth from the spires.

Durand stiffed. He leaned forward silently, and held the side of the boat as if he actually saw something amid the mist.

“Is there...”

“Shh.” Durand said, putting a finger up to his lips. The command was deadly quiet. “This place is … wrong.” They came the closest they had to a spire, and the boat accelerated as the current increased.

“I'm surprised no one has tried to… take care of it before. Do the nature walkers speak ever of this place? I can't say I have requested their counsel in a long time. Perhaps I should.”

“Durand...” Laurent said. The boat started to pick up more speed.

“Its in our damn river. Why didn't I do anything about it? No one has ever complained to the authorities or requested guards like they normally do...”

“Durand...” Laurent said again, staring at the water. “I have no idea what is going on here. But I think its best that you stop. There's something going on with the river.”

But Durand was fixated on the center of the mist.

“I can almost make it out: shapes among the spires. They're quick. It couldn't be human. If I could just…”

“Durand!” Laurent cried out, shaking the other man, not quite afraid but surely headed there.

“What?!” Durand asked loudly, finally distracted from his gaze. He looked at Laurent. The other man's eyes were wide and he had extended an arm pointing at something in front of them.

“We… We're headed right into it.” Laurent said.

Durand's eyes shot open, and he looked around. Sure enough, something had changed, either the flow of the water or the wind, which now emitted an eternal guttural sigh from somewhere in the spires.

Durand cursed and threw himself into the bottom of the boat, clutching the oars. “Damn, damn!” He cried, starting to row furiously in a direction that would take them slightly out of the spires.

The world seemed to close around Laurent. Durand was paddling wildly, his muscles straining as he displaced huge amounts of water with every stroke. Mist touched Laurent's skin and he had to cover his mouth to keep from crying out. It was unnaturally warm, almost like flesh.

His hair stood on end, and every animal instinct in him told him to run. For a second the irrational thought of jumping over the side came to his mind, anything to get away from the spires and that strange mist. But looking downward, Laurent saw that this outcome would only have ended in misery, the waters swirled and sucked at the boat in a strange matter, and Laurent did not doubt for amoment that he would get pulled somewhere unthinkably unpleasant if he entered their grasp.

So he had to hold on for dear life as Durand beat a savage tempo, struggling to get them out of the path of the current.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, they broke free. The current left them. They came out of the mist and Laurent took a deep breath, realizing that he had been holding it all the while, so as to not breathe in the unnatural mist.

Durand's edge lessened, but he did not stop rowing until they were clear almost on the other side of the river. When they finally got there, he let out a massive breath and threw down the oars.

They drifted for a moment.

“What the hell was that?” Laruent asked.

Durand caught his breath.

“I have no idea” he admitted. “I really did think I saw something in there. Something moving from spire to spire, clinging onto the ledge. I could sense some... prescense in there.”

“Something... evil?” Laurent asked cautiously, looking over his shoulder at the spires.

“I'm really not sure. It was only for a moment. What I do know is that if you hadn't warned me at the precise moment that you did, we probably would have been swept into that thing. And… and we probably would not have come out alive, evil prescense or no.”

“Well. I'm glad I asked when I did then.” Laurent said. “I will tell my friends to perhaps investigate this place from a far distance, perhaps the cliffs on the far side.” he said, rubbing his chin. “We might not be able to go into the thing, but perhaps we can map the outside. If I bring in a mage or two...”

“No.” Durand said quickly, turning to Laurent. “Relaly, really don't do that. Whatever this thing is, it responded quickly to my prying. It was like the deeper I tried to stare into it, the worse things got. Don't send your men into something like that.”

“Hmm.” Laurent said, sitting down. “Then what do you suggest doing about it?”

“There's a reason no one talks about it. There's a reason no one messes with it. Don't you see?” Durand asked, throwing his arm toawards the spires, “its just sitting there. And it will just sit there. There must be a hundred people or more who pass this place in the river a day, and yet, we hear nothing about it. It doesn't want to be noticed.”

“It...doesn't want to be noticed?” Laurent repeated sceptically.

“Well, perhaps that ascribes too much intellegence to whatever it is. I'm not convinced that there's something malign in there, or even something at all. It could just be a geographic anomality, we could have just strayed into a current I didn't see.” He said, half talking to himself.

“The point is,” Durand said, continuing, “it should be left alone for now. If and when we do something about it, I will go personally on the team.”

“Understood sir.” Laurent said.

“We should just count ourselves lucky. I'm sure there are those who were not as fortunate as us.” Durand said, picking up the oars again.

“But this was not our mission no?” he said, starting to row slowly down the river, being careful to not go anywhere towards the spires, and extra careful at observing the patterns of the current in the water.

“You're right. We should be off.” Laurent said.

They departed from the place, even though it took almost a half a day to clear the whole breath of the spires, when they finally left the last one behind them, there was a palpable sense of satisfaction. It was as if they had tensed themselves for all those hours, on guard, both mentally and physically for an attack that never came. They had not talked much during that time, and the few times that they did, it was short and procedural.

Laurent sighed. “Screw that place.” He said, raising a rude gesture towards the misty shadows, growing smaller and smaller behind them.

“Ha! You can say that again.” Durand said, looking up at the sky. At was late in the day, but the going had been good besides that first encounter. They had not seen anyone else on the river during that time but now that they were exiting the bowl created by the spires, they passed one or two fisherman. Their approach caused the men to call to them.

“You come through the spires?” One of them asked. Durand slowed the boat with about fifty feet between them and the closest other craft so that they could yell back and forth.

“Yes.” Laurent called back.

“Good thing you got through. Elder says that no one should go near them today.”

“Oh yeah? There were some strange currents we saw. Almost got swept into one.” Laurent called back.

“You really think its wise to say that?” Durand asked Laurent in a normal voice, so the others couldn't hear.

“Its ok. They live near here I believe. They probably know all about this thing, or know not to pry at it too much at least.”

The fishermen on the boat Laurent was talking to whispered among themselves.

“Then you're damn lucky. Its not always like this, but when the weather is in a certain way things get weird around there. Not everyone gets through.” The other man cautioned.

“Thank you for the warning. We will be more careful.” Laurent replied.

“Well met.” The fisherman waved as they passed.

They left the Spires and the fisherman behind them and passed on into a decidedly calmer part of their journey.

The next four days passed uneventfully. Durand kept their little boat going at a decent clip, probably one that would have been unsustainable by anyone else. He seemed to be trying to prove something to Laurent, for every time it seemed like he was flagging, he somehow obtained a new burst of energy from somewhere.

Laurent was sutability impressed. But he didn't want his partner in justice to be exhausted when they arrived. True, time was off the essence, but this journey was only the first part of their goal here. The second and more subtle part was only about to start.

All these things went through Laurent's mind as, after several days of traveling through gentle hilly, nondescript farmland, the came to the final bend in the river that signalled the environs of Swan.

The city had one single, very expensive bridge, which because of logistical problems, was wood. Laurent could see it now in the distance, a dark line against the sun, which was now on its way down.

He could just barely make out the large lifting towers. At someone's request, long before Durand was supreme commander, some mechanist had convinced the govnerment of the North, that perhaps in the future, it might be possible to get ocean sailing ships into the mouth of the river, almost like a harbor.

Perhaps because the idea seemed possible on a depth chart, the commander at the time had agreed, and the curiosity of the lifting bridge was born. Typically, if their ship were any larger, or if they needed to unload goods, they would have had to go under it, and around to where the great warfs sat, but because their craft was barely ten feet long and had no mast whatsoever, they could easily drag it to shore.

Therefore, before they even got to the bridge, they instead paddled up a small creek before the city. There were people about, even on the creek, although mostly fisherman with the occasional child. Swan was and had always been connected, both literally and culturally to the sea. Its inclusion in the North was one of mutual benefit: Swan was the entrance to the North. Even children learned how to ply a craft, and they were taught from a very young age.

As they passed the initial group of people, Laurent pointed out a willow tree near the shore about a hundred feet up, where some of the larger craft would have had a hard time.

“Another wilow tree?” Durand said, looking back at Laurent.

Laurent shrugged. “Coincidence.” he said, simply.

Durand and Laurent jumped out of the boat as soon as it hit the muddy banks. Their feet immeaditly went into about a half a foot of muck. They looked at one another and shook their heads. The two hauled their boat ashore through the mud and tied it to the far side of the willow tree.

There were about ten people that could have seen them, but most were too involved with their own activities.

Durand straightened and looked around.

They were in a depression through which the creek ran. Its banks were shallow on the south side, but steeper on the north side, the sandy soil still damp with the rains of the storm that had hit them days before.

Further up the hill the tall wooden outer wall of Swan loomed above them. Swan was built on and around a large hill: the further one went into the city, the more one had to climb. But right now they had to get in.

They followed creek up its path until the point where it split. Right before this point, there was a sturdy wooden footbridge across the creek and then steep path up to the back gate, not unlike Illithar's side entrance.

“You got a course of action? Everything all planned out?” Durand asked.

“Well, I was actually going to see what the Potentate had to say about the problem.” Laurent said, as they walked up the small rise.

Durand's eyes narrowed, but when Laruent looked closer, there was a grin on his face. “Didn't come up with anything?”

“Give me some credit.” Laurent said as they got in line to get into the city. The guard in front of them was checking the carts entering and checking the papers of those who looked like they might be Southerners.

Durand cast an eye upward and was pleased to see several other faces above them manning the gate. Swan's defenses had not been tested for some time, and he was wary as to what would happen when they were. Swan had outgrown its walls almost two centuries below, and Durand's predecessor, Richer, had started the construction of the present wooden emplacements.

They waited in the line for only a few moments, Durand seemed pleased by this fact.

“You from here?” The guard asked, looking at them. “You don't look like you're from Swan.”

Laurent did the talking. “No sir. We're adventurers. Heard that the Potentate here needed some men.” He said.

The guard nodded. “With so many men in the fort, we've been low staffed in the guard and on the docks. But before I can let you in, you got any notice or papers?”

“Sure thing. Here is the notice. I also have papers. We're from Mellont.”

The guard looked at the notice and nodded. “Welcome to Swan. Don't cause any trouble. Next!”

“Good thinking there with the notice. Did you actually get us adventurer's papers?” Durand whispered as they walked through the tall wooden doorway. Laurent told him to shut up with a look. But after they had passed a sufficient different he shook his head.

“No. I didn't, too much suspicion.”

“What would you have done if the guard had asked to see them?” Durand asked.

“I don't know. I would have come up with something.” Laurent admitted.

“But that’s not important.” Laurent said, gesturing to the buildings around them. “We're here.”

“Indeed we are.” Durand replied as they walked into Swan.

There were other people with them, similar to Merrin's Ford, but the entrance lacked the frenzy that that sprawl exhibited. They were on a large cobbled street, which ran before them for a few hundred feet before launching itself up a steep incline, beyond which Durand could not see.

The buildings in swan were of the same chaotic placement as Merrin's Ford, with odd spires and ramshackle alleys, but their construction was much different. It was as if they were seeing The Ford after about a hundred years of development and an immeasurably large amount of money had flowed through it: The foundations of most of the buildings was solid wood if not cobblestone.

The style seemed to be a raised foundation of stone, which extended into a sturdy white plaster exterior, peaked with a tall triangular roof tiled with slate, usually two stories tall. Plain wood windows rimmed with solid wood shutters accompanied some of these openings, but the weather had turned pleasant in the last day, so some were left open.

On their left was an open field, currently filled with guardsmen.

“Thats a lot of guards.” Durand remarked. “I suppose its different seeing them in real life, rather than on paper.”

“One tenth of the city, is it not?” Laurent said, also looking in that direction.

The well uniformed men were huddled in a circle talking about something. Their officer was nowhere to be seen. They were wearing dark leather armor with a smart looking vest, on the backs of which was a pale yellow circle surrounded by black.

“It is. Although an initiative is underway to attract more women to the more bureaucratic positions.”

“How egalitarian of you.” Laurent said, as they walked towards the first rise.

“Its about achieving the optimal utilization of resources.” Durand explained. “Although Shani are still barred admission.”

“I had heard that. Do you know the rationale?” Laurent said, peering into a dark alley on their right for a moment.

“Its the trade.” Durand said, moving out of the way as a large grain laden cart pushed past them, lead by two stout mules and a merchant in faded green dress.

“Sure, but shouldn't that be a reason to allow them?” Laurent said, pointing to the cart as it passed. “The Ford is on the rise, but almost a fourth of all the grain in the north comes through this harbor and most of the finished products not made in Dor's Crag.”

“I'm aware.” Durand said as they started up the long ramp like street. Ahead of them, there was simply a row of nondescript houses. Not how he would have structured the city. But then again, this was technically the back entrance. The “front” has always been the harbor.

“One second. Did you plan on going straight to the potentate?” Durand asked, pointing to the right, where the road split and extended up a second steeper rise.

“Yes, I suppose so. I have no pressing other matters here. How about you?” Laurent asked.

“None.” He said, leading the way towards the second rise. “Its been at least a year since I was in Swan proper, typically I visit Riverhold.” Durand explained. “But it is this way to the Seamount, right?” He said, pointing towards the second rise.”

“Yes. When in doubt in Swan, go upwards.” Laurent commented. “But you were explaining to me why the Shani aren't allowed in the guard.”

“Right. So with all the ocean trade from the Shani into Swan, the potentate, the merchant cadre who actually lives here and the fisherman's guild all got together and decided it was in their best interests to disallow the Shani from holding public office in the city for fear of collusion with Shani merchants, skipping tariff and the like.”

“And they got away with that power play? And does that include the guard then as well?” Laurent asked, narrowing his eyes. It was easy to change city bylaws, but typically statues about who could hold office had been decided a hundred years ago at the outset of the North.

“They did and it does. It turns out there was a loop hole of some sort in the language regarding public office. It said 'All men have right to public office according to their ability.' Unfortunately, they cleverly pointed out that Shani are not in fact men. They are, of course, Shani.”

“That doesn't seem in the spirit of things.” Laurent said glumly.

“That’s not how the North works. There is no spirit, only the letter. Thats the whole underpinning of things. We got lucky Atheneus and his advisers were so clever. If not we would have many more problems like this.”

“Hey, it could be worse, we could have a king.” Laurent said, a sly smile playing across his face as he watched Durand for his reaction.

“Don't even joke. You know how much I hate that title. When people suggest that, a part of me dies inside.”

Laurent didn't pursue the joke. Some topics it seemed really did distress the man who held the North on his shoulders.

Durand looked upward towards the Seamount.

“You can make it out from here.” he said, pointing to the collection of brilliant white buildings on the highest point of the city.

They could see a good part of the temple of the Deep and a bit of the courthouse. The potentate's office along with the rest of the civil bloc was also there, although it had been even longer than a year since Durand had actually been to that particular building, although he remembered appointing the current Potentate, Marellus Pacatain.