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, it 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 Sargent 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 it 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 Sargent 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 though the lwas 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 wallless 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 uncomfortable close, closer than you probably want.”

Durand nodded, and continued his rowing.