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 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 nessesary 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.