The high duke of Emlion surveyed the column that marched quietly below him. His house servant dared a quick look up at his master to see his mandibles twist slightly into just a hint of a sneer. Or was it disappointment? Very often the two traveled together with the duke. Was anything worthy of his notice?

“They're fools, the lot of them” The duke admitted quietly. His gestures were slow but precise. His servant stayed quiet. He knew better than to talk. He knew better than to move or even turn to his master. The duke was a particular man. It was rare for him to voice his opinions so openly.

“The Third Cohort is a shell of what it once was.” The duke gestured, then turned his upper segments slowly towards the servant and observed his posture. The servant was careful not to let anything slip.

“Hmm. Once, the noblest of fighting men would clamor to join its ranks. The scouts. The first to find danger, and the first to throw themselves at it. I applied myself but did not make it on account of my lost third leg.” He patted the segment where his well pressed uniform should have had an opening.

The servant nodded.

“Spent and gone now I'd think. Nothing to scout I suppose… All gone silent hmm? What do you think?”

A direct command was different. No avoiding talk now.

“I had heard they were putting down the remnants of the Radicals, all holed away up in Northersend.” The servant ventured, his movements shamefully clumsy compared to the Duke's smooth and measured talking.

“True, but old news. The heavy lifting has been done for years. They've just been doing cleanup. Nothing but police work.”

“You think they're unprepared?”

“I know so.” The duke said, rubbing his first and second hands together.

“Then why send them?” The servant swung. Had he gone too far in asking the question?

The duke bristled. His segments rustling beneath his precisely arranged uniform.

“They're the Third. They're the scouts. If we don't send them, who are we to send?”

“So do you think we'll see any of them?” Adam communicated hastily as they marched. The tall white stone of the compartments which lined the street were just barely covered in the light of the morning. The shutters on the tall windows were mercifully closed. For some reason the pressed dress uniform of the Third elicited some kind of nervousness. There had been many scouts in the past to wear the same green and blue, but it just didn't feel right on him.

“See who? The Ularch? I imagine we will. Perhaps get to kill a few.” Hector responded, not even trying to steady his gruff movements.

In front of them was the mighty curtain wall, whose enormous height surpassed even the buildings around it. They still several blocks away, but Hector could see the sentinels still atop its multiple stories. The whole parapet would be bristling with weapons, coilguns, searchlights, and the heavier stuff as well. Yet there was a stillness to the silhouettes that didn't sit right with him. If the scouts were rusty, the defenders were rust itself.

“You really think so? Do you know what they're like?” Adam asked, struggling to speak as they were marching.

“I haven't seen them myself. Only stories.” Hector replied.

That wasn't the response Adam wanted, or expected. There was a slight pause in his movement, and his eyes opened a bit as he clearly struggled to comprehend something.

“Keep moving!” Ableton yelled. The major was known for his keen attention to detail and exacting nature, especially when the Third performed any function where the general public would see them. This was no exception.

The curtain wall loomed over them as they arrived closer.

“Wow. Do you feel that? Are those the generators? We're still blocks away!” Adam said in amazement. “And there's the gate out of Aenglia...”

“Ever been outside before?” Hector asked quickly. The hum got louder.

“No. Never even been near the curtain.”

Hector shrugged his heavy segments. “Huh? Not even for training?”

Adam's response was shy. “They said they needed the men right now, and as a function of my family's station...”

Hector made some sort of indistinguishable hiss of disgust and kept moving.

Adam's mandibles quivered with displeasure, but he didn't reply. He was almost, but not quite completely, used to such dismissals from the Third's veterans. Yet… Hector had said even he hadn't seen the Ularch. Were any of the great generation even in service?

They came to a stop beneath the wall. It was nearly ten stories tall, and much taller than any buildings outside of the core. The hum was almost unbearable. Here and there throughout the cohort, the privates fidgeted as the vibration shook them.

Ableton's vocalizations were completely lost amid the generators, but Adam could make out his words through his body alone.

The speech was largely forgettable, with it spending just the right amount of time on the glory and the history of the Third while transitioning to how their current mission, the first major expedition out of Aenglia in a decade, was a testament to the Third's ability and competency.

The words sounded nice, as Hector heard them, but it was all ruined by a slight motion. During the climax of the speech, assuring that the soldiers before him were destined for greatness, his eyes lifted a bit too high, revealing his true target. Hector's eyes followed the Major's. High above them, on his balcony was a figure, flanked by a smaller man. It only took a moment to make out the colors of the uniform. The duke.

The speech was not for them at all. They were not the ones who needed assuring. Who needed assuring was apparently their benefactor, the one who had been able to drag them out of Northersend. Hector didn't know to feel disgusted at the politics or grateful for leaving that horrible place.

But in some sense it didn't matter. Before them were the gates. The true home of the scouts was always outside the curtain, and above interior politics. Hector felt better than he had in many long years of violence. The doors opened, the generators stopped, and the rising sun came through the opened marchway. This was less an assignment and more of a correction in Hector's mind. They were coming home.

The once vibrant and eager force had slowed in the hot sun. March was confined to evening hours. They were helped by the tall tropical trees overhead. Their dark thick leaves at least gave shade. But nothing could shelter them from the heat. The air was thick with the smell of the unknown forest, a mix of decaying vegetation layered with a palpable blanket of heat and humidity. The sun filtered down in columns amid smoky air. All around them the hum of the jungle met the hum of generators.

“Give me a hand with those boxes.” Hector motioned to Adam. The younger man slumped in the hot midday heat. He ran a hand over his carapace, the once bright and clean uniform had degraded into filth.

“Fine. Fine. I'm moving. Any word on the nectar? I haven't eaten in forever...”

“Thats utter bullshit. We all ate yesterday.” Hector wrapped his middle legs around the heavy metal crate and gestured with his fore ones. “We're to take these to the mess.”

“Thank heavens. We might have eaten on paper, but it was nothing. Presumably this is more nectar?” He followed Hector through the camp, lugging the heavy box with some effort.

All around them, soldiers grumbled amid hastily constructed tents and boxes. They had been here for two days and their pace was miserable. The smell of dissatisfaction joined that of the forest.

“Hmm. Lets get these boxes open.” Major Ableton said. He stood on the top of the hill overlooking the whole assembly. He looked impassive, but Hector could tell he was irritable. Who could blame him?

“Ah, sir.” Hector saluted with his free arms, then glared at Adam to do the same.

“Don't bother. Save the show for when it matters. Right now we have the most important and least interesting problem, that of logistics.”

The major climbed over the recent set of boxes and inspected the markings on the side.

An aide marched rigidly into the meeting.

“I have a report regarding the nectar dispensers.” He paused and waited.

“Yes?” Ableton frowned.

“1st and 2nd company's dispensers are operational. 3rd company's dispenser is slightly malfunctioning and the technicians say it can only be run at half speed. The auxiliary dispenser was broken during transit. The engineers are looking at it.”

Ableton paused and something rippled across his face before his composure was regained.

“Hmm. I see. Thank you Clement. Four hundred people need nectar. Each dispenser should be able to provide a hundred people's worth of nectar given the right input and power. Sounds about right huh?” He turned on Adam.

“Does that sound right private?”

Adam's color paled from his face.

“I s-suppose so sir. Were they all functional of course. Four hundred people, four hundred generation units.”

Ableton shook his head. “Its an easy mistake. One that would be made by bean counters and clerks. You always must build in contingency into any operation. Why? The price for failure is high. The price to plan ahead, low. Out in the field, things break. Things get lost. Destroyed upon contact with the enemy. Raids. You must plan ahead. Surely they could have spared an additional dispenser.”

“So what will we do sir? There is not enough nectar.”

“Luckily, I had foreseen this eventuality. Open those crates that you have there. Luckily I... convinced some lower ranking officials to augment our nectar dispensers.”

Adam's face lit up and he and hector pried open the crates.

But there was no salvation there.

“What is this?” Ableton said, his disgust now visible.

He strode forward and shifted aside the packing.

“These are supposed to be *portable* dispensers. Handhold, wheels. They should be the same type as the ones we already have. I explicitly asked for portable units. What is this?”

Clement, the aide, leaned over another one of the crates.

“The contents of this crate are different than the one you opened.”

Ableton appeared behind him and peered into the box.

“Right you are. Someone has made a mistake.”

Hector and Adam shared a glance. The major had not dismissed them but things were likely to get unpleasant.

“Based on the configuration of the items, and my little knowledge of the devices, I would say that these are separate pieces of a nectar dispenser. A stationary one.”

“Gods. What incompetence. I thought I had prepared. No one can prepare for this level of stupidity. We're supposed to be mobile! We're damn scouts!” He looked over the crates and murmured to himself.

“If all of these are pieces of the same device… we're looking at a dispenser the size of a small shack. There's no way it can be moved when its assembled. This will significantly hinder our operations. Alright. Fine. Private, corporal, get the head of engineering over here. I need to ask them questions about this dispenser. You're dismissed.”

The major was still murmuring as the two slunk away into the heart of the heat drenched camp.

“Clement, make a note of this. I want this all recorded. My gods. I thought I had planned around them.”

The land sloped downward from atop the plateau of champions down into the jungle. Then the jungle sank too, giving way to marshes. Then to swamp. They were close. So close.

Hector stalked through the miserable swamp they had found themselves in before slumping himself down into one of the improvised seats near the stalker's tents. Micah, the head of the elite platoon, had heard him, and came out of his tent.

“What a shit hole this is.” The older man said, spitting onto the moist ground.

They were perched atop a small rise in the swamp. All around them two segment deep muck, some combination of sediment, decaying rotting vegetation and stagnant water. Lessers buzzed around them, sometimes even daring to perch on their carapaces.

Micah stopped for a second as another one of the damned things landed on him. In one swift and deadly movement of his head, he twitched, forcing the lesser into the air. As it tried futilely to lift into the air on its wings, he continued through his movement, catching it in his mandibles, forcing it into his mouth where he ate it in several crunching bites.

“God that’s terrible.” He said, coughing out some of the shell.

“It wasn't like this the last time.” He commented, throwing himself onto a seat opposite Hector.

“No? We didn't come close enough for training. Mostly up north.”

“Of course not. You wouldn't train private by throwing them into enemy territory, would you?” A hacking cough came from his thorax.

“Course that’s exactly what they've done. What a fucking nightmare. Major's made the best of a truly shitty hand.”

“You're getting enough nectar?” Hector said, the cough on his mind.

A wry smile creeped across Micah's mouth.

“Who'd have pegged you of all people for a sweetheart?”

For the first time since the early days, Hector found himself exuding embarrassment. Micah must have tasted it.

“Oh, you've still got your crunchy, cold killer exterior. I've seen the way that useless private looks up to you. What I'd give for a whole company of you. No one seems to have any fucking backbone anymore these days.” Micha said, shifting his lower segments in the chair.

“Not everyone went through what I did. They've grown up with the spoils of the victor and the ease of life in the city. Can you believe Adam hadn't even seen the curtain until we left?”

“Yes, well, I should remind you that your own experiences, while rare these days, were much more common place in the past. I complain now, but that was a true nightmare. There were times no one was sure we would survive, either during the war, or after it.”

“We owe a lot to the technocracy, even with their politics.” Hector ventured.

“Fine. They're making some interesting stuff. Those omniculars, the dispensers, the headsets, the curtain, some other toys they've given us... Now I wish they could innovate a way to get their heads out of their own fucking asses.”

“Micah!” Hector straightened and looked around the stalker camp.

“Don't worry. I'm too old for them to give a shit about me. I'll say what I want. I'll be gone soon enough. They're all the vanguard. Some of them are even Queensguard, the ancient ones like that duke of ours. They literally don't make them like that any more.”

“You're not queenborn?” Hector asked, before regretting it. He had no reason to pry so deeply at the old man's history.

“Ha! As if. First generation. Well, first after they worked out the kinks. I reckon I have a couple of decades left in me.” He patted his middle segment and reached for his coil gun and started to work it apart. He reached for a cloth with one hand and an oil can with the other, and started to work at it.

“So what news have you overheard of the other companies?”

“I should ask you that myself. You're the one who said he wanted to be a stalker huh? Thats part of the task, information. Or at least it was. Number of times I've gone over a god damn wall.”

“2nd company is not looking good. They're mostly fifth generation. Even younger than Adam. Most of them are out lying in their tents. Some disease.”

“Hmm. And the dispenser? What a fucking mess eh?”

“Its up and running. Don't know how. But we can't move it. I overheard some of the engineers worrying about the power draw. Theoretically it could feed us all, at least going by size. Either its damn old, or they aren't juicing it fully.”

“Probably can't. My knowledge of these batteries is limited, but I doubt we can run something like that monster at full for long. Ha, we still need some for the guns right?” he motioned at the coil, now being reassembled again in his hands.

“They say...” Hector hesitated, not sure he should scare the old man, “that the 2nd was so hungry that they got to drinking water straight, chewing the bark and the like.”

“Just like fucking lessers. And now look at them. Sick and twitching. Still, I suppose its better than during the war.”

“Thats good. The information anyways. When the shock block comes down on us, we'll need to be on the tips of our feet to escape it.”

“What do you mean?” Hector asked, shifting uncomfortably. He had escaped the shock block once. His luck probably didn't hold a second brush with death.

“Oh, there will be consequences when we get back. How many of the newer ones, younger ones have died already?”

“A handful?”

“Exactly. Fifth generation again. And it won't end so long as we're out here in the real world: food shortages and the swamp, diseases and the lessers.”

“They're pathetic.” Hector said and spat.

But Hector shook his head. “They are. But they are what they are. They didn't have any choice over their circumstances, just like you had no control over your own. But that won't stop the damn dukes and bureaucrats from screaming when we come back with causalities. They're used to that police work they had you doing in the Northersend. They might even have the major's rank.”

“They wouldn't!” Hector cried, jumping to his feet. His segments bristled. The

“Quiet. And yes. They would. They don't understand it would destroy one of the best pieces they have left in their whole damn army. They look at numbers and they see numbers. Ten dead? After a couple of months, its going to be fifty.”

“Fuck. You're right.”

“Keep your eyes open. Maybe make a couple of copies of that Clements notes. The heads will surely destroy them. Easier to pin everything on one person. It doesn't matter if we see the Ularch, the real fight will happen when we get back.”

A silence settled over the two. A small group of stalkers appeared behind them. They didn't waste any time with formalities before launching into their report.

“We've completed our survey sir. We're likely a days journey from Ulara. The terrain is all changed from whats on the maps. Geography's the same, hill is a hill, but the streams and vegetation has all changed. The whole area is a swamp. Less running water. Pretty much everything noted as farmland on the map is all swamp.”

“Hmm. Ok. I'll pass it on. Good work. Did you see any of the enemy?”

“No. Although we did see a few tracks on the high ground. It all seems quiet.”

Micah nodded and motioned to dismiss them.

They started moving further into the camp.

“Hey. Make sure to get that muck off of you. I don't like the feel of this place.”

They nodded and departed.

“All this used to be farmland. Split between Ulara and Aenglia. What has happened here?”

“Could this be the Ularch's doing?” Hector asked, eying the murky waters and swatting another lesser away from his head.

“I suppose. Its tough to say.”

“Didn't you see them. You're one of the few who has.”

“Fine. But I killed them. I never invited a couple of them over for nectar. You want to know what they look like on the inside? I can tell you that. Their carapace is slightly thicker than yours, at least the regular ones, but a coil shot or a blade to the thorax is just as deadly. Some of them have poisonous spittle. Their guns can kill just as ours can. Now the husks on the other hand...”

“They don't have any more husks.”

“Gods, I hope you're right. Those we would need the larger weapons for.”

“I thought they just got the overheating problem on the larger coils down. How did you deal with them.”

Micah looked off into the swamp at some sound.

“We swarmed them. Horrible stuff. So many dead.”

“What do you think they're up to? I heard the major say that they haven't seen an Ularch in years.”

“Heh. We used to see too many of them. Now we want to see them? Probably closed their walls like we did and fought among themselves. Maybe their Radicals won and they all died. Maybe they found a queen and migrated.”

Hector shook his head. “They couldn't have their own queen. They were the whole cause of the death anyway.”

“You never know. They are just as smart as us. Don't believe a word of the propaganda the government puts out. Only the husks were crazy brutes. They were bred for it. Their engineers and scientists worked just as hard as we did.”

“So why didn't they realize the wall was killing them? All those chemicals?”

“They probably did. But you and I can only guess what their reaction was. I suppose that’s why we're out here. Everyone's in the dark. Better send the scouts right?”

“Hmm.”

“You'd better get back to your own position. You're not a stalker. Not yet. Teach those privates a thing or two and I'll talk with the major.”

Hector looked up, surprised.

“Thank you sir.” He saluted and prepared himself for walking back through the swamp.

Hector peered through the tendrils of moss. His lower legs along with his bottom segments were firmly sunken into the muck. Beside him, Adam went to make some noise or something equivalently stupid, and he had to lay one of his free legs on the boy, silencing him.

“There is someone out there.” Hector said without vocalizing.

Adam and the other two privates crept closer to him, trying to make out what he was looking at.

He silently took off the omniculars and passed them to Adam.

“At noon sun, thirty rods distant. Dark carapace. An Ularch… Perhaps.” He gestured.

Out in that direction, hidden among the vines and growth of the swamp, there was a shadowy figure, bent over something on the ground. Behind him was a shack, which almost went without notice, as it was made of the same wood that was all around them, and vines ran up it as well.

Adam adjusted the omniculars, which hummed softly, lens reconfiguring for the smaller person.

“I see it.” Adam said, with vocalization, yet softly. It seemed the private had yet to become comfortable with the signage of the scouts.

Once satisfied, they trudged through the swamp waters, emerging on the other side.

The insufferable lieutenant Weatherby was waiting for them. His expression held a mixture of impatience and excitement.

“So what did you find? Ularch?” He fidgeted with his coil rifle.

Hector noticed that somehow, the older man had been able to keep his uniform not only dry, but also free of stains walking through the swamp. My god, the priority of some people.

But he still saluted and made sure the other privates did the same.

“Suspected Ularch. Some sort of building. A shack. We could engage or go around. We only saw one.”

Weatherby let out a coughing hum and scratched the side of his face with his mandible.

“What to do? What to do indeed. High command would love to see some prisoners taken alive. We haven't had any to put in front of the great hall of justice for quite a long time. Even running low on Radicals… I'll ask the major.”

Weatherby always asked the major. And it was a good thing too. Unfortunately for them, the decision was taken out of their hands.

A cry arose from their left. Far off, they could see the suspected Ularch run for the building.

“Damn it. Everyone get your coils ready and charged! Orders sir?” Hector turned to Weatherby.

But the man was gone. Cursing, Hector could see the flash of the man's blue uniform.

“Damn it! Ok, fan out. Five paces apart.”

“Do we have permission to shoot sir?” one of the other privates asked.

Hector paused for a second as the five of them started back into the swamp.

“Yes. Shoot on sight.”

There were cries now on both sides of them, but none of the five had actually seen anything that looked like a threat. In the distance was still the shack that the original figure had retreated to.

“Stay low. There's not much cover in the open here.” Hector said, going down on all legs, almost complete immersed in the mud of the swamp.

The others were disgusted but followed his lead.

Like that, the crawled to the edge of the rise the shack was on. They saw dark shapes moving far off to their sides and the recognizable swift pop of the coil guns.

The Ularch came out of the shack.

There was a loud pop and something flung itself quickly past Hector's head.

The Ularch's head disappeared. The thorax and legs fell over, guts spilling out of the newly created hole.

“Ok. Form up. They could be around us now. Who got that shot?”

But the private was staring at the body. His coilgun had fallen from his hands into the water.

“Andrei. That was good. Don't worry about it. We can talk about it later, but right now I need you to pick your gun back up before shit gets into the firing hole.” Adam picked it up for him.

“Cover me, I'm going to open the door.” Hector said. The shack was a small affair compared to the buildings of the city, but it did have two stories.

He reached out to move the door, but something stopped him. Everywhere else in the building, small holes poked through the walls, allowing him to see light coming from some source in side. The door on the other hand looked more secure. Following his intuition, he stood far back from it and pushed at it with one leg.

The door swung open.

The house divided into three. The left looked like a primitive dispensery, the middle held a staircase upwards, but the right side wasn't familiar. It almost looked like some sort of hole, or a pen. The side of the house had been dug down into the mud. A sturdy looking fence sat between him and the pit. Something dark moved inside the pit.

“Everyone, move back. Set your guns to maximum velocity.” He said, retreating slowly from the doorway.

Then, the trap in the door fired. A jet of some liquid spurted towards him and he twisted trying to dodge it. He felt his arm begin to burn and he looked down in horror to find his middle arm covered in a strange viscous liquid. The heat turned to discomfort which rapidly turned to pain, which itself turned excruciating.

Hector yelled as the acid etched into his arm, and plunged it into the waters of the swamp. However, the acid stuck to his hand. He screamed and felt his body curl in pain, his legs flailing wildly.

As this was happening, the dark figure in the shack was alerted to intruders by the screaming. Its keen senses smelled enemies, something it had never encountered before, yet instinctually understood, on a deeply animalistic level.

It smashed the wood keeping it in its pit and dragged its body over the edge towards them.

“Shoot it!” hector ordered, in only vocalization. He was still trying desperately to brush off the acid with his other sets of arms beneath the water.

The rest of the privates opened up with their coil guns at close range. Through the lingering pain of the acid, Hector could see the ram-cores arcing off the beasts carapace as it charged him.

“Oh fuck. Its a husk.” He said, mostly to himself.

The beast exploded out of the house, taking pieces of the frame with it. Hector got off three solid shots before it hit him, all of which glanced off its armor.

He heard the privates screaming at him to run as one of his hands went to his knife.

The monstrosity hit him low to the ground and flipped him upwards. For a brief moment he was in the air tumbling uselessly before he slammed into the ground. The air was driven from his body, he heard a sickening cracking noise, and pain shot through the same leg. His ears rung as he tried to get up.

He was prone on the ground. He tried to get up, but found that not all of his legs were moving correctly. He had fallen on the one exposed to acid and could not feel anything from it.

The husk barreled past him and plowed into the privates. He saw Adam fall into the water, one of others trip backwards, another was crushed by the thing's feet.

Random coil guns fired. Gritting back the sharp and intense pain, he gathered himself up and fired his gun at the thing's back. The gun popped rapidly as the cores pinged off of its armor. It must have been inches thick. At best, one of the cores hit at a direct enough angle to lodge itself into its back, but it didn't look like it had done any damage.

Meanwhile, the poor private underfoot, Tobias, was being destroyed. His lower segment was stuck under the beast's feet and it was too heavy for the boy to break free. To his credit, the private tried to raise his coil, but the things arms caught his own and almost tore them straight off. The gun went flying into the mud.

Adam was nowhere to be seen, the fourth private, Samuel, was running away from the scene as fast as he could. Andrei, wracked with sheer terror, had his hand firmly pressed on the trigger of his coil, the rounds emptying mostly ineffectually into the beast.

Hector made a split decision, realizing it might be the last one he ever made, and found his knife. Thankfully the vibroemmitter on it wasn't broken and it arced to life, the ozone of electricity melting in with a thousand scents of death in Hector's taste. With it in hand he charged the beast.

However, it had other ideas. Samuel was no longer moving, having been stomped at least into unconsciousness if not worse. The beast realized this and focused on the next target, Andrei.

The thing grabbed Andrei's hands with one armored pincer and with the other, fastened itself around Andrei's body. As Hector sprinted to close the distance, the beast separated the two, even as the private screamed, firing his gun. There was