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.” Micah 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, Samuel, 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, Tobias, 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 emitter 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 yelled, firing his gun. There was a horrifing wrenching sound, punctuated with Andrei's screams. The remains of the privates legs went soaring past Hector as he rushed the beast.

“Fuck you!” He yelled, grabbing at the ramcore which had embedded itself into the beast's back carapace. With his lower legs, he stabbed at the thing's hind legs and was rewarded with the electric blade sinking into the meat of the massive leg.

It bellowed and stepped off Samuel, rearing its body in an attempt to get its passenger off of it. Its mighty pincers swept again and again over Hector, but because of its heavily reinforced carapace, on its front and back, the legs didn't have enough angle to actually reach him. The husk bellowed in frustration.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Hector could see Adam emerging from the swamp.

“Run dammit! I'll try to hold it. You get others!” He vocalized, hanging on for dear life as the husk shook him back and forth violently.

It let out a roar and started charging the new target.

“No, fuck you! Adam, Run!” Hector yelled, climbing higher on the monster's back, both holding on for dear life and trying to get an angle that he could stab at the thing's joints or face, which he assumed were unarmored.

But the private was too scared. He had never seen half of the things they had encountered on this journey, and this included enemies. And this was no normal enemy. Husks were the boogeymen that were whispered of. The government simultaneously used them in its iconography to symbolize the otherness and bestiality of its enemies, while assuring the populace that the rest of them had been destroyed in the war. But now here was one, both horrifying in its physical appearance and capabilities, but also horrifying in what it represented, the lies that it implied.

Adam was lifted off his feet like Hector had been, but this time the beast followed through with its attack and tried to trample him in the mud he had just risen out of.

Now that the husk was focusing on running the hapless private down, Hector though had been able to get purchase on the edge of the husk's shell. Peering down, he saw that the area between the neck and the rest of the body was not armored, presumably to allow it to turn its head. He plunged the knife into the spot and started to sever the tendons in the neck. Clear ichor squirted out over Hectors hands, and the beast bellowed again.

Adam did the only intelligent thing he had done so far, and hid beneath the waters. In its rage, the husk stamped and shook its body, vocalizing all the while. It stamped its feet, splashing stagnant water and muck into the air.

Across the swamp, the rest of the third had reacted to the attack. Shots rang out in the air around hector, bouncing off and sometimes sticking into the husk. One of them, struck him though as he clambered to yet again get a better angle on the beast.

He let out a choked yell and almost fell off the beast. The pain was exquisite and ran up from his thorax through his entire body. He didn't want to look down to see the damage. But the fact that he wasn't simply blown away meant the shot was either made at low charge or at distance, likely both.

Adam's luck ran out and the beast swept its pincers through the water, catching him as he tried to evade. It lifted him off his feet and threw him beside it onto harder ground were the private couldn't hide. The force of the blow stunned Adam, who twitched prone for a moment. Hector could only stare and watch in horror, desperately trying to stop the beast with the knife.

The neck was too thick, even though he had sawed almost a third in. The beast was almost certainly dead from loss eventually, but it would take some time for its size. He decided to risk it for Adam and grabbed on to the husk's head. He swung his body around, the knife now in his lower legs.

The husk came down on Adam, and once again, Hector heard a sickening crunch.

Hector stabbed the knife into the thing's complex eye, plunging into through with all his might. Now the beast truly yelled. He twisted it deeper and deeper. It had to have a brain in there somewhere! He flicked the power to over maximum just as it wrenched its head upwards in pain. Hector was airborne again, and landed on his last good middle leg, which crumpled beneath his weight. He felt his shell crack, and a worrying numbness was spreading over him from the ramcore.

The beast had time to come down on Adam once more before the cells in the blade overheated into runaway. A brief, but powerful shock of light came from the things head before it vaporized, spraying armor fragments and internal juices around them. Then, finally, it fell to the ground, twitching.

Hector choked, and realized that it was ichor coming from his mouth. His hole body was pain. He tried to move to see if there was something he could do for Adam or Samuel, but he when he did, the agony was so intense that he lost consciousness for a second. His shell must have cracked.

He found he could at least move his head, and his eyes had somehow been undamaged. He dragged it around with his mandibles to see what had become of the privates.

Samuel was gone. His body ruptured into two. The remains strung between the two segments, his face had a serene look on it as if in his last seconds he happen upon some mind shattering epiphany.

Adam was still alive, for now, but his shell was cracked as well. Hector could make out the pale pulsating of organs that rightly belonged inside the body. Andrei's entire set of legs were completely gone, and the ground stained with the liquid which ran from the stumps. The private was spazing in pain, probably not even fully conscious, curling and uncurling his segments amid meaningless screaming vocalizations.

But hector had seen people survive such injuries.

“Adam!” He weezed, pain suddenly flaring to excruciating degrees, making his vision waver. He could not gesture, he couldn't even vocalize properly, but he hummed at the private, who could hopefully still hear him.

“Its… ok. You're going to make it. Friends!” He managed.

And friends indeed. A grey cloaked figure of one of the stalkers ran up beside them, and several more followed suit. Hector blacked out for a second again, but he saw Micah standing over him, whistling.

“You're damn lucky the husk didn't have back spines… Looks like you got him though.”

Hector attempted a weak smile.

“Don't try to move. I think we can get you and the boy at least. Sweet queen mother, this one's got no legs. This one...” Micah looked over at Samuel, “its too late for him. Here, we have combat nectar.”

Micah forced something viscous down hectors mouth and pain radiated from the ramcore shot. He could feel the liquid radiating through his system though, in a peacefully numbing wave. Then he fell unconscious.

He woke up. Light filtered through holes in the wood ceiling. He had seen that ceiling before somewhere. The shack. He was in the shack.

He groaned but found that his legs and entire middle were heavily bandaged and restrained. After staring at the ceiling for a period of time he lost consciousness.

He came around for a second time to see Micah.

“Well you did manage to kill it. That's something. Shame about the privates though. Not sure there was anything you could have done. Looks like they were keeping it as some sort of pet.” Micah glanced over at the pit beside the staircase behind them.

Around them were the groans of other people bandaged and restrained, a jerryrig of hexagonal mesh was strung throughout the place, and medics cambered dutifully up and down to the patients.

“How... many of them made it?” Hector managed, pain still shooting from his thorax as he spoke. He didn't even try to gesture, but Micah seemed to understand him anyways.

“Samuel didn't make it. He was dead when we got there. Andrei, he's alive but in a bad shape. They have to force feed him larvae nectar. All of his limbs gone…They think he'll live, but if he'd want to, limbless and all, that’s another question.”

“We caught the last one, Tobias, trying to run. We'd have Weatherby deal with him, if the old bastard wasn't caught running himself. The major is having to deal with them lot. There are murmurs of summary execution, but he probably won't do it. Both of them have high families, and he'll need all the leverage he can get when we get back from this.”

“...which leaves the situation how its always been. The weak and privileged alive and well and the brave and hapless torn and broken.”

“Where is Adam…?”

Micah shook his head.

He was cracked more than you. That husk must have weighed as much as twenty men. They were able to get the internal bleeding under control but he developed a fast acting infection. There was nothing anyone could do.

Hector let out a choke and tried to turn over. The restraints did their job and he was unable to move.

“Its… regrettable but”

“Damn! Damn! Damn! If only I hadn't fallen unconscious. I've seen people like that and survive.”

“I know-”

“I can't believe it. The bastard was so young, so useless, and he didn't even get to prove himself.” Hector wailed.

“It happens. During the war-” Micah started.

“Fuck the war. Its not the fucking war any more. What a fucking joke. They sent us to die.”

“...”

Hector tried to roll over again, and was again stopped.

“I'll forget I heard that.”

Hector fell silent.

“Andrei is still alive. And major is going to need someone to discipline Tobias.”

Hector coughed a deep hacking cough.

“Well. You'll be happy to learn that they say you'll be on your feet in the next couple of days.”

“Really?” Hector said, disbelief in his voice.

“They sealed the cracks in your carapace. It didn't damage your organs. The ramcore didn't get anything important. Sorry about that by the way. It might have been me. We didn't see you on that thing.”

“Its fine, I should have gotten them to run. I could have held it until you came. Everyone would still be alive.”

“Thats bullshit and you know it, but hey, if you want to go the self pity route, you have two orders. First, heal. Second- ”

“You're not my command. I don't have to take orders from you old man.”

Micah looked at him in bemusement. “Maybe that crack did hit your head. Talking to me like that… besides, I am your direct command. You took down a hulk. You're promoted to sergeant, at least temporarily.

“Promoted…?” he weezed. “I get my entire team killed and I get promoted?”

“Well, I did say it was temporary. Its the minimum rank to get into the stalkers. You don't want it? I can have them set it back I'm sure.”

“No… It's just...” Hector trailed off.

“Then rest. We have something interesting coming up next.”

Micah sat next to Hector. They were surrounded by scouts but no one was talking.

Before them was a wall, but not Aenglia's.

It arced upwards, stories tall, but besides that it was nothing like the other wall. Aenglia's curtain was structured, with sections that one could discern. This was one piece. One solid piece. But piece was the wrong word, since the object's end and beginning was difficult to discern. It was as if one had taken a gargantuan stone face, and melted it under hideous heat. It rippled, it bent and bowed in and out at times, shuddering forward and back. It was alive, yet frozen in place, at once distrubingly organic and frightfully still.

And it was open.

In clear sight, the melted twisted form of a gate was visible, amid what must have been several buldings worth of that twisted material. Sickly red vines grew up the side, and the swmp came right up to its edge.

“I never thought I would see this place again.” Micah said, surveying the wall.

“Is it as you remember?” Hector ventured. He noticed that none of the other stalkers seemed to talk much. Was his conversation a detriment? Or was it why Micah enjoyed his company in the first place?

“Yes and no. The basic form of the wall is the same, but all the details have vanished with time. There are no more patrols, there are no more gun emplacements, there are no more red chemical search lights, nor the heavy marching of husks. The place is quiet.”

“What is our goal here?” Hector asked.

“Just follow me.” Micah said swiftly. He loaded several rounds into the powerful looking coil he carried. “Did you put on that suit like I asked?”

“Yes, but...”

“Good. Close the helmet and give the headset a try. We should be able to hear you.”

“What is it?” Hector asked, fumbling with the strange equipment in front of his face.

“Allen, help him with that.”

Another of the stalkers came and adjusted the piece.

“You vocalize at this part here. It will relay the vocalizations to the rest of us. Keep all conversation to a minimum. Everyone can hear you, and you might find the voices discomforting.”

“You can hear the voices… but no gestures?”

“Correct. Like I said, its a bit strange, but not unlike the scout gestures, only this is solely vocalization.”

“Hmm.”

“One other thing, its possible to get more complicated with the electric interface. If you depress that blue thing there, you're voice will be automatically routed to only the person with the command set. Me.” Micah gestured at an additional knob.

“Finally. When you're ready, hit that red control there. Then we'll go in.”

“Wait. Go in?” Hector stopped playing with the controls and stared incredulously at the older man. He wasn't joking. “You're not serious! I haven't even used half this stuff! Go in?! Like we're going inside the Ularan wall?”

“Never struck me as a complainer, Hector. And yes. We're going to go inside the wall. In fact, this might be one of our best and only options to do so.”

“Hold on!”

But the stalkers were already closing their helmets.

A disconcerting ethereal voice sounded in the back of Hector's helmet. “Testing comms.” Other voices chimed in. The separation of vocalization was otherworldly and hard to follow. Hector kept on expecting, sometimes needed gesture to go along with what he was hearing. It was very hard to differentiate who was talking.

He flipped the blue control.

“Micah?” He asked, gesturing before realizing he didn't have to. That was going to take some getting used to, although the tactical benefit of being able to use both sets of legs were probalby astounding.

“I can hear you. Lets go.”

Then, one by one the stalkers around him vanished.

His eyes bulged and alarm spread through his body. The suit was all around him and the helmet restricted his vision. What was going on?

He spun wildly trying to see where the rest had gone. He felt a leg fall on his shoulder.

He looked over to the the form of Micah stading next to him. Or maybe the ghost of Micah? The magority of the older mans body he could see right through to the swamp vegetation and wall beyond. The edges of the man's form blured.

“Its a new technology.” Micah gestured. “Stalkers are Quiet and unseen.”

Hector calmed a bit as the group started to move out. He flipped the red switch. The action on it was hard. Whoever had designed it wanted to make sure the user knew what they were doing.

He felt the battery on his back heat up. All around him, he felt a strange charged sensation, like if he reached out and touched something it would shock him.

He looked over his legs and segments as the field increased in strength. The suits normal grey color blurred, and the greens of the grass started to blur through. Within seconds, he couldn't see his own body.

Stalkers truly now, the group invisibly and silently crept forward into the jaws of their arch enemy.

Hector was having trouble understanding what he was seeing. The group originally planned on sneaking around the side of the inner wall, where in Aenglia there were mantaince sheds and backups for the generators. However, upon entering the wall, a different sight met them.

Hexigonal stone pilars rose two or three stories, samwhich together in every direction. The remains of webbing which would have held it all together littered the ground. Vacant dark and empty hols in the structures yawned back at them. There was no movement.

Every structure was as the wall itself: bent, twisted and deformed. The swamp was prevalent even here in what was supposed to be a city. Thankfully the muck was not think in the main throughoughfaire, but colors swirled on the surface which made Hector think that the liquid was more than just water. He was suddenly very happy for the suit which covered him, strange as it was.

“No signs of enemy.” A ghostly voice ran through his head.

He twitched and tried to find gestures, but of course there were none. Dampened movement of water was the only sign of their passing. It seemed the field extended beyond the suit, and water couldn't find purchase on it. Perhaps the technology was like the wall generators, only smaller.

“Six marks left of field.” Another voice said.

Micah responded. “Lets not waste any time. It seems that there is no one here. But do not let your guard down for any reason. I want three teams. 1st, check out these buildings. 2nd, inspect the wall behind us. Tech wants samples. 3rd, come with me. We will meet back here in exactly three marks. Synchronize your chronoscopes. It is now seven marks and three divisions from celestial max.”

“I want a clear notification if anyone sees, let alone engages with hostiles. I don't want a replay of our swamp battle here.”

Hector vaguely imagined the squads separating up and marching off. They were deadly silent though, and it took him a moment to realize that he didn't know which group he was supposed to be in.

He looked around at the looming dead buildings and a shiver ran through him. His ramcore injury twinged. He went to try to raise Micah.

Once again he felt an arm on his shoulder. An invisible one though. He jumped.

“They take some getting used to. But are unparallelled weapons, these suits. You're coming with me and the rest.”

Hector nodded and realized that the gesture was useless. No wonder the stalkers were so quiet all the time. Gestures in the suits were meaningless and vocalization became strange in the radios.

Nevertheless, he followed them, which was in and of itself a hard task, since he couldn't actually see any of them. However, as time went on, he got more and more aware of the field both around him and the others, what it was capable of but more importantly, what it was not. Liquid ran off it, but splash too much and your footsteps could be seen. Dust was repulsed, but that itself left a void that could be seen. Finally, technological advancement aside, running into debris still moved it and the are was covered with the shattered stone webbing.

The state of abandonment somehow got worse as they got deeper into the city. The main road now separated into tiny streets which danced around their surrounding hexagonal towers. The average height rose to four stories, then five. Water pooled in the road, making movement slower. They were now in a trench, sky relegated to the thin ribbon which zigzagged above them.

Buildings were crumbling. Whatever strange rocklike material they were made out of seemed to not age well, and sections of the hexagonal structures had fallen into the street, which they now had to climb over. Throughout it all there was a horrible sense of silence, for such a large city.

“I found something.” One of the other stalkers said. “The marked door.” Half a knife suddenly blurred into existence and etched a small mark above an open doorway.

They moved over and found a dead Ularch lying on the floor. It was in horrible shape, and could barely be called a person. The bottoms of their legs, and carapace, along with other bit were there, but lying motionless on the ground. When Hector got closer, he saw the carapace was empty.

Fear ran through him. The body must have been here a long time. The light just barely filtered through the doorway. The rest of the building lay in shadow.

“No signs of trauma. This stuff below him may have once been some kind of furniture. He has no uniform. The shape of the carapace is not that of a soldier. This was a drone.”

“Acknowledged.” A voice replied. Hector was getting better at recognizing individual voices, and thought it was Micah. “Keep moving.”

But the silence only got worse as the group continued. It was clear that the buildings used to get taller towards the middle, and more dense. He saw ramps coming up from both sides, leading into only ruins. Now the buildings had fallen, only adding to the huge amount of debris and ruin they had to climb through.

“This rocrete is brittle. It shouldn't be like this.” An invisible hand mark suddenly appeared on the edge of a wall as bits of it fell into the swirling chromatic waters.

“This water is not natural either.”

“Try to stay out of the more vibrantly colored parts. The Ularchs dealt in chemicals as we dealt in brass and spark.” Micah responded.

They continued on.

Now the whole city bent. Water ran, slowly at first, then increasingly siwft towards some lower point in front of them. The ground was shattered and broken, forcing them to slow even more. The buildings were now nothing more than ruins, which began further degrading. Their once clear hexagonal sides were melting into the ground and swamp around them.

And the bodies.

The Ularch near the doorway was only the first. More and more started showing, lying mostly strewn throughout the buildings, but sometimes piled in horrible stacks, such that you couldn't tell one body from another, simply a jumble of pieces.

“Something horrible happened here.” He ventured.

“It must have been the war. Perhaps they've been dead all along? Ran out of nectar?”

“No. We ran into them even after the war, infrequently. And the Ularchs don't use nectar. They had their own vile concoction which they pumped out in massive quantities. Stuff tasted like mush.”

Hector decided not to ask how Micah knew that.

“Here's a soldier here. Still has a uniform on him. But they're definitely rarer. These are mostly drones. My god, this must be all of them.”

“What could do this? Are you sure we didn't hit them with some weapon?”

“Not as far as I know, or as I was told. The last I saw of them was fifteen years ago right at the beginning of the Radicals, right as the high council decided to close the gates. Their wall was intact then, and we still had to kill a couple of patrols to get as close as we did today.”

“Four marks left on the field.” Another voice chimed in. There was concern in the voice. Hector was starting to pick up on more subtle variation in vocalizations, things that would normally have been gestured.

“We have to keep on moving. If we want to get out of here as quiet as we came in, which I do, we only have one mark left.”

“Where are we going?” Hector asked.

“Just follow. Its important.” Micah replied.

The ground now angled towards that distant lower point, and Hector could start to make out a massive bowl. The buildings were all melted around them, and red vines twisted and ran through out the crumbled rocrete and empty shells of the Ularchs equally.

“The Chamber should be up ahead.” one of the stalker voices said.

The ground gave way suddenly before them. A massive sink hole opened up, with the rocrete of the road dangling off into the abyss. Water poured over its edge, running down the ruined debris below.

At the center was a massive building, darker in color than the others. It seemed to survive destruction perhaps though its incredible size. But that didn't mean it was complete unharmed. It seemed to sink into the ground, although as far as Hector could tell, the ground was solid stone. Its form was a half dome, but the outside was so uneven and distorted, as if melted, that he couldn't be sure that it hadn't looked like something else once.

“I never thought I'd live to see this place. Eyes open. This is the heart of it. Lets go.” Micah said, pointing to the crater.

The pooled water in the crater shone iridescent color and something about it gave Hector a bad feeling. But down he went, with the others helping each other one foot and hand hold at a time.

The air was different down in the crater. Not the smell, since the helmet successfully blocked any of that, but the feel to it. The light felt...thinner in some way. Only a handful of rays seemed to get through as if there were some massive lens above them, diverting the light to elsewhere. That which remained flickered off the ruined debris and slid ephemerally over the liquid soaked remnant of the place.

True to their professionalism, the stalkers didn't say much, even down here, but the boot falls in the liquid seemed much more cautious than above. Perhaps there had been an element of victory from them, in entering the city and being able to step so easily into the center of their former enemies heartland. Now though, that swagger had dissipated, bled off in bits and pieces as the strangeness of their circumstances pressed more and more against their suits.

He saw the footfalls quicken a bit and realized he better keep up with the team. As he walked carefully over the broken drenched ground, he realized not all of the debris was structural in nature. Here and there there were small curves, atypical of the architecture he had seen earlier. Perhaps in a foolish action, he bent close to the ground to see what it was.

Bile rose in his mouth and he straightened, forcing his feet to speed their progress. His mandibles twisted into a ruinous frown. My god, it was pieces of shell. They were literally stepping over the remains of hundreds if not thousands of drones. But not even the carapace as seen before. These were just tiny parts of them, bent and twisted in the liquid. Hector ran a gloved hand on his suit, first in a gesture of thanks, but also in superstition. The last thing he would ever want to do was to be in this place without the suit he was wearing.

They approached the building. The doors were gone. He spotted pieces of them languishing in a deep puddle nearby. They were covered with some sort of dark reddish growth.

“Here we go. Weapons charged to high if you haven't set them already.”

Weapons? Could their even be anything alive in this place to harm them? He flipped the indicator, and felt the reassuring vibration of the weapon as its charge banks distributed to the coils.

“In on my mark. Ready? One, two, three!” The invisible form of Micah said.

There was something in his voice that wasn't there before. A quickness, yet also an uneasiness, possibly excitement as well. Whatever it was, Hector wanted to be done with the place and never return.

They slid into the building.

Perhaps the place once had internal hallways, or perhaps it had floor, alcoves, rooms, and all the trappings of a normal building. It was the center of command after all. If the Ularch were anything like them there would have been sections for drone servants, sections for soldiers, sections for the elite warriors, and for the nobles. Everything in its own place.

But there was nothing like that now, if it had ever existed.

Instead, there was simply darkness. Darkness with a small patch of light coming from the broken ceiling. There were no walls, or sections. It was a cavernous openness which met them.

And in that massive space was a pile. A pile of bodies. Yet no one body was distinguishable. The whole place was a disorganized horrific catacomb of sprawling limbs and severed head segments, mandibles and claws. Nor were they simply in pieces, the air wavered and flickered dangerously here. The boundary between the bodies and the air melded and the pieces of the former people ran, like the liquid from above, into and out of one another. Arms melting through heads, then through bodies, a mound of it ten stories tall, filling out a gruesome pyramid of death seemingly shaped only by gravity and force of years past. The bottom of the pyramid sank slowly into the ground, into a slurry which Hector implicitly understood was some sort of shell pulp.

He couldn't help himself. It was too much. “Gods Micah. He have to get out of here! Whatever happened here. I-Its not right.” His voice wavered in spite of himself. His foot landed on a body, which, instead of rolling aside, sank softly and silently into the mush underneath. He shivered.

The other stalkers didn't quite agree, but there were noncommittal murmurings on the radio following his outburst.

“No.” Came the stern reply.

“But sir, look at this place. We dont-”

“We'll leave. As soon as he complete our mission and not one second earlier, soldier. We didn't come all this way for fun. Look at the top of the pile.”

Hector forced his eyes to trace the horrifying sides of the carnal heap, up the wavering edgeless mass until they ran straight into the light coming from the top of the ceiling. There was a form there, shrouded in thin yet brilliant light, reflecting the rays off its large form.

“Is that-?”

“Get climbing.” Came the swift reply.

Hector tried his hardest to block the realization of what he was doing from his mind. There had been times, horrible times in the past, in the very sewers of Aenglia, fighting others for scraps of nectar soaked food and clothing. He had stabbed and been stabbed, starved, been beating senseless a number of times, had his shell broken and once even flayed off his body. And yet, in hindsight, he would have preferred all of those memories to what he was doing and where he was now.

They crowded around the object at the top of the pile. It was just large enough for them to cling on.

“Its the queen” Micah said, his voice shifted further away from that gruff yet joking manner that endeared him to Hector in the first place. It sounded thin yet amazed. For some reason, his exclamation opened the doors for the rest of the squad, which, until now had been silent.

“So they are real.” One of the others said.

“Look at the size of the thing.”

“Are we sure its dead?”

“Its definitely dead. Its head is gone. I can see through to its other side. Might be some tissue left in the middle.”

“Take as many samples as you can get.” Micah said. “Then lets get the fuck out of here.”

The air of the place jarred Hector's senses. The lines of objects, of the bodies beneath him and that of the queen shifted and wavered. The forms of his friends were like ghosts, the dust of the place running along the field lines as they gathered around the body, scraping and chiseling and collecting.

Hector increasingly tried to shudder the memories from his mind.

They climbed down. He stared down at his feet. Nothing to see. Vision went right through to the gaping skulls.

They went through the crater. The light was still strange, the colors in the water seemed more and more vibrant, perhaps having been disturbed.

They climbed back up, a harder process than the decent, yet he blocked it all. He had stepped on one of the bodies, and it had squished into the ground. All the ground had been shells at one point. It had to have been a foot thick. All bodies. My god all bodies.

They ran through the city, arriving at the meeting point just in time. They sounded off, still silent and invisible under Micah's orders. They were missing three stalkers. Two from Micah's group. No one could say where they had left. One thought he had heard one of them say something at the top of the pyramid, which, now came unbidden into Hector's mind. The light was still thin. The others were gone and he had gotten lost climbing back down the pyramid. He couldn't see the exit. The colors of the water now seeped through the holes in the ceiling and drafted ethereally in ribbons towards the Queen's body which was in pure white.

There was a creaking scuffling sound as the heads of the pile rotated inexorably and stared, dead and empty at Hector. He backed away, but his foot landed on something. The field didn't save him, he slipped and was falling. He landed in the muck, the colors now swirled around him. The ribbons ran around him, twisting through his legs. He was sinking. His suit was disintegrating, he could see it now, the gray giving way, shuddering, to the awesome colors of the place. The Queen was speaking to him. He stared transfixed, The eyes of the shattered head were massive and alight with pale pure flames, in which he could see every color. The suit melted around him. Then his body. Now free, he was lifted from his own shell, which lay behind, towards that of the Queen. Its presence pounded in his head. The colors and smell too vibrant to imagine. He tried to turn away but could not move; he hung in space before it. Its mouth opened, hung disconnected in their air, and it said-

He came upright, with a scream. His blanket was in his hand. He was in a tent. It was still night. He heard the sounds of the swamp. There was enough light to see the tents of the others beside him. For no reason, he ran his arms over his body. Segments were whole. No strange colors or smells. The suits had all been collected.

Humming with relief, he put on a light uniform and stepped out of his tent.

“That you?” Micah asked. Some of the other stalkers were with him. They were in front of a fire. They had been playing some sort of game.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Don't worry about it. The place gave me the damn willies as well. Damn idiots the lot of them, those Ularchs.”

“You know what they did?”

Micah twisted to address him better, the cards hovering in his hands.

“I know nothing of the sort. But it'd be just like them to go picking at something dangerous. Killed themselves I suppose.”

“How? And that place...”

“Don't really want to think of it rightly. I don't think we should talk of it. We saw something there no one has ever seen. The stories of the Queens are confirmed, as we suspected. We have the samples. We lost a few men. That hurts me. But in the end, they did their mission. We will remember them. We did our mission. Thats all there is.”

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing more. I'll leave it up to the damn techies and their tools to analyze all this. But I think you've earned your space here in the stalkers.”

The others nodded their heads.

“And the duke will be impressed. They all will. I suspect we'll be getting more missions like this shortly. Everyone will be curious. Everyone will want to know what's out there now, although I imagine they'll restrict the whole Ularch city. Dig your head in the sand for too long. Shut all the gates. Now the world is open again. And the scouts will be the first ones out, with us at the very front.” A smile came across the old man's face.

One of the other stalkers coughed violently, and spat up some liquid.

“Ha! Can't even hold your damn liquor huh?” Micah slapped the stalker on the back, who let out a smaller series of embarrassed coughs.

Hector stared at the tiny stain of spittle on the table where the cough had landed. For a second, the flames of the fire and the light left in the sky reflected a kaleidoscope of shining colors back at him. He blinked and it vanished.

Micah wiped the table with one sweep of his middle leg.

“Now, sit down and play a few rounds.” He said gesturing to an empty space near him.

Hector shook himself.

“I guess… Don't mind if I do!” And they played late into the night.