

The Shard

He sat and stared with an expression of mild, apathetic disgust as his foot tapped a frantic rhythm on the floor of the train carriage. One hand clamped on his knee squeezing the restless limb into submission. The holo-displays on the opposite wall caught his gaze - maybe they could tell how much longer he had to go.

They disappointed by broadcasting some live program instead. It featured people dressed in clothes whose bright colours and elegant trim mocked the ragtag greys and washed out blacks of the passengers' ill-fitting wardrobes.

"What do you make of those Terian fanatics - waving flags around and claiming that the Return is coming?" the host asked over the rattle of the rusty train and the low hum of the crowd.

"Well Nester... "

He tuned out the guests answer and quickly scanned the tightly packed carriage, scrutinising the drawn faces of the working folk. The man wearing a mining respirator that covered the bottom half of this face was sitting four rows to his left. For a moment, the faces seemed to dance in an eerily macabre fashion as the sky outside switched colours in a rapid succession glitching from black to blue, then grey and back to black again.

It bothered him - that flickers happened more and more frequently with everyday that passed. It had started five years ago, an anomaly that Researchers failed to explain. At first the sky above the Shard would have a fit once a week. The religious nut jobs readily claimed the information vacuum and declared it a sign. Then it started to happen every day. The prophecy was true, they said. Now the disturbing celestial seizures were separated by minutes. He ground his teeth at the unpleasant goose bumps that the thought created. It was not the time to bother with Terian nonsense.

He stepped onto the station platform to another kaleidoscope of colours. The sky settled this time on an overcast grey causing people to squint at the light and cover their eyes. He strode briskly away from the station and into the city proper, in the direction of the Temple. The metropolis lurled with tension. Shoulders were slumped, hoods drawn up and eyes averted. None stopped on the streets unless forced to by circumstance. The inhabitants scrambled to get home as soon as possible. Mothers carried their children in their arms as they hurried to shelter inside and shopkeepers stowed away their wares in a chaotic effort. Thieves, cut-throats and opportunists lurked, stepping further out of the shadows than they have ever dared to.

"Dear citizens of the Shard" the Priestesse's monotone voice rang clear above the overall cacophony, distorted by the ugly metal loudspeakers dotted across the city "Please stay indoors. Remain calm and follow the guidance of the Holy Council. Help is on the way."

A careful glance over his shoulder. The man in the respirator walked twenty yards behind him. The colours shifted once more. For two heartbeats the street plunged into

darkness and he dipped into a side alley just before the lazy street lights came to life bathing them in a garish, erratically flickering yellow light.

The ground shifted under his boots as if the entire city jolted forward. Gravity reduced its grip for a split second and his body felt weightless before slamming back down. He stumbled awkwardly. A great screeching sound originated high above in the midst of elegant floating skyscrapers and insipid holo-advertisements that shoved some absolute necessity or other down the rich bastard's throats. One of the giant floating buildings tilted sideways like an enormous domino and toppled onto its neighbour in a deadly, festive explosion of sparks and flame. Debris rained on the Under City and panicked screams rose above the streets.

He hit his fist against the decrepit backdoor of the Temple. The effort was rewarded with more dust than sound but, nevertheless, just a few moments later the old plank of wood opened a crack.

"Viktor?" The voice was raspy and weak.

"Yes. Let me in, Father."

His name that day was Viktor.

Father John pulled the door inwards and he stepped inside. The tattered blue robe that identified Father John as a Reverent did little to hide his small and wiry complexion. Unseeing eyes with barely a hint of an iris loosely followed him.

"It's ready Viktor, my boy." the Reverent said and closed the door behind him.

He strode down the narrow corridor and into the mortuary chamber. Father John groaned and smacked his lips, contorted his toothless mouth into a parody of a smile and followed him doing his best to keep up as he ambled on unsteady legs.

"How have you been? How is your mother, Vik?"

"She is well."

He had no idea how Viktor's mother was. Or if she was alive at all. Viktor himself was most certainly not or he would not have been able to take his Name. It had been a technicality to convince the old Reverent. Folks like him believed what they wanted to believe. They were good to work with.