

The wind whipped the rain about, little spears of water biting at Shamiir's face in the swirling storm gusts fighting their way around the top of the building. It soaked them to the bone as they sat draped through the tube railing on the gantry. Below, wisps of black smoke fought to join their ominously dark kin in the oppressive, low hanging clouds above.

Few took the news well, the city's impending demise floating around overhead. Word came in the night, but real panic didn't set in until the familiar wedge caught the morning light just outside of atmosphere. It was surreal to see, at once obviously massive and not nearly big enough to do its deed.

Everything went to hell as the clouds slowly blotted it out. Standard fare. Desperate escapes, in various forms, with various levels of success. Riots, looting, heinous acts from those who barely kept themselves in check to begin with. Those with conviction threw themselves at the troopers, taking their pound of flesh where they could get it as the grunts regrouped to retreat.

A handful of intrepid pilots endeavored to leave their doomed enclave, the Empire's invisible hand swatting them from the sky in a flash. Anyone smart and near enough a way out left alone, on foot or with a speeder. A coordinated group fought their way through a blockade on the city's west side, and earned the first salvo from orbit in the process. Probably the same group of hot headed rebels who'd lit the hornet nest on fire. They'd been more and more aggressive as the Empire attempted to squeeze the city into submission - undoubtedly mistaking the pressure for tyrannical perversion instead of desperate clinging.

The goal for the Imperials was simple, retribution. Blood in exchange for blood, retrieved again ten thousand fold in response to what was taken. Shamiir had been here before, and every time they ended up here, high above the commotion. The clouds seemed lower this time though, almost in arms length.

They regarded this all with curiosity, watching the specks move about, new fires start only to be pummeled into a smoldering cinder by the rain. It was the entirety of the scene, and this perspective of it all, that drew them in. The Echani endeavored to find in all of it the things they'd learned of people from their own life. Who was unable to resist panic's puppet strings? Who remained resolute despite their certain death? Who clearly had a plan ahead of time? How much of what they knew imprinted itself here on this city?

Part of them wondered if they'd still maintain the sense of detachment if things were different, if more was at stake for them. Maybe the station hopper in them meant they'd watch it all go from the top of the world regardless, it wasn't like any place or its people meant anything to them. If it did though, the question was always valid. It was comfortable to think they'd be among those with a plan, but every time they set foot on some junker they went without one so who really knew.

The force was always striking, like the stories Shamiir had been told as a child but bigger. Not the thing that bound all things though, no, the literal application of power. The imperials paled in

comparison to their surroundings, even with their strength multiplied. Any intrepid band with a cunning leader could snap the head from the snake they watched all day. But the Imperials' infestation extended well beyond wherever they were. There was always another snake.

They'd never win, of course, the task was impossible. Many thousands of worlds and thousands of thousands of people. A stupid cabal of spineless worms attempting to clamber over the rotting carcass of a fleeting subversion of a dying institution could never. A competent force would at least balk at the prospect and decline to try. The second they turned their back their influence evaporated.

But what they turned to look at burned. Viciousness required little competency, and Shamiir didn't need stories to understand that.

It was noisier when the reminder of what was coming was still visible. As the clouds crept in eerie silence followed. The hum of engines dimmed as the number of transports dwindled. The whistle of the wind between the massive structures slithered into the soundscape as most people resigned themselves to whatever they'd found, waiting for whatever lurked beyond the canopy above. The driving rain buried everything else in an endless roar, and settled a horizon filled with the residue of conflagration.

Any minute now.

A couple Imperial shuttles battled the weather upwards, punching into the gray blanket.

A few eternities ticked past before the clouds exploded back down. The first streak of fire boiled a hole in the canopy, spilling a column of light onto the roiling ball of flame that expanded through the heart of the city where it landed. And then another, and another. Rays of light from the sky, cleaving buildings to bits.

The next found Shamiir's perch almost directly, the crackling energy tingling as it carved its way from top to bottom on the other side and landed with a gut pounding thud. The structure groaned for a moment, before lurching downward and beginning its slow fall.

And suddenly Shamiir was floating, watching the gantry fall away until - *bonk*.

The Echani floated from their bunk with a groan of their own, blinking into the dim red emergency lighting of their newest scrap heap assignment and gingerly testing the point at which their head had found the ceiling.

Power was clearly on the fritz again.