

'Skatter'

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Ajith chewed the skin on the inside of his cheek as he looked out through the window closest to his desk, lost in thought and not even bothering to pretend that he was paying attention to his teacher's lecture. The view from his seat was necessarily restricted; it was a common architectural detail to install outstretched awnings between the thick buttresses outside most buildings in the City, blocking direct sight of the sky above as much as possible. Where the awnings failed to prevent a glimpse of the silver mist high above them, the strange hunched gait the denizens walked with did the rest of the work. Those more predisposed towards paranoia even covered their eyes completely as they crossed the wide, unprotected avenues as if even accidental contact with the heavens might kill them on the spot — Ajith croaked a squeak of laughter as two denizens, hurrying across the street in exactly that manner, slammed into one another and scattered the groceries they carried all over the cobbled street beneath them.

It was usually only a province of the common people to subscribe to the superstitions surrounding the Nihility that choked their City in grey death; his father, for example, mocked the commonly-held belief that sight alone was sufficient for the poisonous cloud around them to work its evil. The Nihility was an obstacle to overcome, Ajith had been taught, and nothing more sentient than that.

A pair of black-clad Peacekeeper guards hurried over at once, ever eager to make use of their authority over the peasantry. Ajith's grin at the strangers' misfortune turned to a frown as the closest guard smacked one of the women across the back of her head with the hard metal baton in his hand.

Ajith jerked with surprise as a black object whizzed past his head and crashed into the wall behind him. He turned his attention to the front of the room to see his lecturer regarding him foully, picking up another eraser and brandishing it as a weapon.

"I had not realised you found our discussion of the Greater Houses and Lesser Guilds so amusing, Mr. Sadao," she said tersely, tossing the eraser into the air like a ball. Most of the other students wisely ignored the exchange, though a few snickered quietly as the teacher stared at him with irritation.

The shock of her aggressive rebuke fading, Ajith's face reddened as the true affront of her actions sunk in. "You're a denizen, you can't throw things at me," he said quietly, though the words were braver than the conviction he had behind them.

"The eraser slipped out of my hand," she replied flatly, prompting another round of snickering from his fellow classmates. More of them joined in this time. Ajith expended considerable willpower biting his tongue, knowing that though by rights the older woman had crossed a considerable line, any action he took now would simply encourage the school's hostility towards him — it was truly unusual for a citizen to attend a school reserved for denizens, much less a citizen who belonged to the House he did. They'd been contemptuous of him from the start, students and administration alike, and his father refused to let him transfer schools even when the stress of it began to affect his studies. *The Houses are too stuck up their own arses*, he'd said, surprising Ajith at the time with his low-class language. *No son of mine will grow up to be one of the egotistical idiots I have to put up with in the Council every day*. And so he obeyed, as was his obligation, even though he loathed every moment of it.

Ajith stared the woman down but said nothing. Finally she cleared her throat. "If your silence can be interpreted as permission to continue the lesson, perhaps you'd like to tell us about your family's Guild personally. After all, it's not often we have an actual Shaper in class to educate us," she said with false sincerity, prompting most of the class to giggle quite openly now. They all knew he wasn't actually a Shaper — his aptitude tests weren't until the end of the year and he was still too young to apply for a position in the Guild whether or not his lineage all but guaranteed a role within it.

He ignored her bait, looking back out through the window next to him. The Peacekeepers had dealt with the "disturbance" of the colliding women and the street was calm once more.

"What is there to say?" Ajith replied softly as his gaze unwittingly roamed up to the silver mist clouding the sky above the City. The sun was out there — dimly — barely visible as a dull bronze coin shrouded by the poisonous dust that suffocated the territory just outside the boundaries of the Wall. Though kilometres of buildings stood between his desk and the nearest Gate, he knew his family's true lineage was manifest in the several-metres-high statues of living stone that protected him, the students — and everyone else he could

care less about — from the danger outside of the City.

"I belong to House Sadao of the Shaper Guild," he said at last, turning to his teacher and throwing her a superior glare. "We invented the golems that keep people like you safe from being ripped apart cell by cell inside of the Nihility," he said, looking at her beneath narrowed eyes.

"I think we've covered enough in class today," she said finally.

Strictly speaking, the City had another name — Kamah, though most people didn't use it. When the Nihility expanded to encompass most of the known world and it became unreliable to pass messages between the last bastions of civilisation, it was eventually assumed that other population centres had fallen to the encroaching silver that sat outside their own Walls. There was little sense in differentiating one city from another with something like a name when there were no other names to tell them apart from. So Kamah became simply *the City*, and subsequent generations eventually came to accept that they were the last living humans on the planet — when decades, then centuries went by without any contact from others, that conjecture became less of a guess. Through the clever inventions of the Shaper guild the City expanded its territory beyond the few square-kilometres it started out with. Walls were erected, houses were built to take advantage of the new space, and farms were planted to provide food for the growing population. Life continued, in its own way, and people forgot how things had been in the ages past save for the ever-present silver poison that surrounded their dominion.

Ajith wasted no time lingering around at school after dismissal from his final lesson. He left the squat, plain building behind him as he walked out onto the street and avoided a ramshackle automobile that rumbled by blaring its horn loudly. The vehicle — ugly and patched-together as it was — had to belong to a citizen of some wealthy House; fuel for cars cost too much for most families' budgets. Ajith wasn't sure why a citizen would brazenly drive it around in a poor neighbourhood in the middle of the denizens' district, but it was a common pastime for rich sons to show off their family privilege in obnoxious ways. Other students poured out of the school around him, full of animated laughter and excited talking now that class was finished for the day. He kept his head down and ignored them, not wanting to make himself a target for their harassment now that he was outside the direct protection of

faculty. No one would risk hurting him outright — the burden of proof for a citizen was considerably low, and his accusation alone would be enough to cause his bullies legal punishment — but they could upset him in other ways if given the chance. At first opportunity he turned down a side-street from the main road and continued along his way.

The sky suddenly darkened considerably and took on a greenish hue; Ajith looked up in dismay as he realised the afternoon ion storm would arrive much earlier than normal. A flash of azure lightning rippled across the sky and streetlamps nearby flickered as the magnetic effects of the oncoming weather disrupted electricity momentarily. He groaned out loud as this development added to his already poor day; usually he had no trouble getting home before the weather fouled, but the forecast seemed to have no regard for his schedule.

A denizen woman nearby drew his attention when she hissed loudly and made a warding-sign with her fingers after realising he was openly staring at the heavens. He rolled his eyes and disregarded her as she shaded her face and hurried away. Ajith adjusted his backpack and sprinted down the street, thinking of the fastest way to get home before the searing rain began to fall.

He ran down the sidewalk, weaving between people and vendor stalls with ease that any street urchin would envy as he made his way to the closest embarkation station. He usually had enough time to simply walk home before the daily storm, but its sudden arrival today necessitated the use of public transportation. It took almost fifteen minutes of hard running before he got to the terminal; he bent over, resting his hands on his knees and panting hard.

"No need for such a rush, boy," a stranger grunted at him from a stall selling some foul-smelling street food. "The storm won't hit for at least an hour." The speaker was an old man with several missing teeth, stirring a pot of some ichor-coloured stew with a long wooden spoon. The contents of the pot bubbled slowly, looking to Ajith like more of a bacterial pool than anything resembling food, and he withheld the desire to wrinkle his nose in distaste. His clothing was ratty and torn, in sharp contrast to the finery Ajith had on; while Ajith tried not to dress "up" and further ostracise himself from denizens on his school days, even his plain clothing made him feel ostentatious compared to the rags the majority of the City usually wore.

Ajith regarded him wearily and gave only a perfunctory nod in response; he was too used to being contemplated strangely by denizens due to his

family's status to treat unknown interactions with anything but discomfort. Still, the old man had a point about when the storm would actually break — he'd have time to spare if he wasn't delayed by anything, and it would be better to be inside when the shower started instead of needing to huddle for an hour inside of one of the many shelters spread across the City.

He climbed the stairs in front of him two at a time, moving out of the way of other passengers as they went around him at their slower pace. The ticketing agent stood in front of him with a bored expression on her face, collecting money from the few pedestrians who bothered being honest about paying the fare. Ajith dug around in his pants pocket for a handful of coins in the common currency — his House insignia would serve to get him on the transport free of charge, if he'd cared to use it, but he didn't want to draw more scrutiny than his garb already did — and gave them to the woman with shaking hands. Whether she even noticed his discomfort was unknown as she pursed her lips, metered out change and gave him a token that would serve to validate his payment if a guard bothered to check.

He hurried past her, looking at timetables for the next transport as he made his way to the stop he needed. The schedule was laid out on a flickering monitor, leaving Ajith squinting as the device struggled to function correctly in the face of the oncoming magnetic storm. Two different routes passed through this particular station but only one would bring him close enough to his family compound to see him safely inside before the rain began. With nothing more to do but wait, he took a seat on a bench beside the edge of the elevated platform and waited for his breathing to slow from the exertion he'd just undertaken. The anxiety and sense of being out of place he always felt in this district would lessen once he was back on the side of the City reserved for citizens, he reminded himself as he scrabbled for a sense of calm.

It didn't take very long for the transport to arrive. He heard it first — a scraping, scratching grind of stone on stone, even though the golem's matter was nothing so natural. Ajith turned in the direction of the sound and watched as the vessel came into view: it was an elongated tube nearly twenty metres long, rolling along its dedicated avenue on six wheels. The nose of the vessel almost resembled a face — a common aesthetic detail to Shaper constructs for reasons that Ajith had never fully understood; the Guild had evidently done studies many generations ago and determined that denizens and citizens alike preferred to interact with homunculi that more closely favoured themselves.

Thus, almost all golems had elements of human personification even when, functionally, there was no need for it.

Where "eyes" would be, glowing spheres had been inset into the golem's smooth, peach-coloured face. Ajith knew those were the powered cores of energy that allowed the golem to function in the first place. A venting grille had been placed where a creature would have a row of teeth, and in the middle of both sat the controller's cockpit. Behind a thick pane of glass, Ajith could just barely make out the silhouette of the Shaper that would be driving the golem back and forth across its circuit. His family's Guild was fanatical in protecting the tricks of its own trade; while denizens drove simple carriages powered with just livestock, and it might be presumed that directing a transport golem would be similarly menial, the Guild refused to permit anyone but a qualified Shaper to control their creations. Still, such tasks were resigned to the bottom-feeders of the sect; his father, irrespective of his disdain towards the haughty snobbery of his House compatriots, had little respect for the Shapers unskilled enough to do anything more difficult than steering glorified busses.

The transport came to a halt beside the platform and its outer skin dissolved away at regular intervals to permit entrance into the hollow centre of the golem. Ajith hurried into the construct and took a seat beside a window, hoping that the vessel wouldn't fill to capacity and force him to sit beside an unwanted companion. Just to be safe, he left his backpack on the chair next to his own.

Other passengers filed in quickly, taking seats around him and arranging their things accordingly. He noticed that most people immediately pulled down the shades over their windows, blocking out any possible glimpse of the sky above them. Ajith pointedly left his up — as much as he hated to draw attention to himself outside the company of other citizens, he felt some customs shouldn't go without sullen protest.

He looked through the plastic-covered opening next to him as the golem rumbled to life with a lurch, picking up momentum as it proceeded along to the next stop in its route. According to the timetable he'd seen at the station nearest his school, the total trip to his destination would take a quarter of an hour — respectably quick when one considered how many kilometres waited between him and his home. It typically took him two hours or more to walk home under no power but his own legs, but as he looked out across the City and saw with dismay how quickly pitch-black darkness was enveloping the

neighbourhood, he was thankful he'd decided to take the construct instead.

Ajith leaned against the soft, spongy matter that made up the vessel's chairs. It wasn't quite cloth or fabric but given the seamless way it sloped up out of the floor of the passenger cabin Ajith was certain the seats had been sculpted by a Shaper when the golem had been created. The ship picked up speed, gliding under its own locomotion across the rails beneath its heavy body. Kamah flew by in a monotonous blur of homogenous brown buildings and he rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand as the tension from another day of school finally began to abate.

He absently studied the architecture in this sector of the City, knowing the older buildings here had been erected by distant relatives of his several generations ago. These days the Shaper Guild usually only made its services available to those who had the money to afford it, but for a long period of the City's history they were a more altruistic institution. Belatedly, it occurred to Ajith that perhaps the denizens had the same sour resentment his father did towards the Guild's high council for directing their focus away from improving the City itself in favour of lucrative contracts from other Houses; even though House Sadao was highly influential within the Guild, even his father hadn't been able to divert the faction from its newfound pursuit of greed.

Ajith let his thoughts drift as the golem barrelled along its route. He mentally ticked each stop off against a map nearby, constantly eyeballing the number left until his transfer. He felt his centre of gravity elevate slightly and glanced out of the window just as the golem switched onto a bridge crossing one of the City's artificial rivers. All at once the roofs of the dweller homes and businesses were underneath, giving him a largely uninterrupted view of the City's skyline. The dweller territories were easy to pick out in their simplicity — buildings were smaller, but he knew they were far more crowded than the larger, gleaming towers comprising the citizen districts. In the poorest areas of the City, people lived three or four to a small room — such arrangements would be unheard of in the richer parts.

His eyes roamed the rooftops, taking in a sight he rarely saw. He generally avoided public transportation, but the early arrival of the day's storm changed his plans. Soon, he caught a view of the City's biggest landmark: an enormous, slender tower right at the centre of the metropolis. Known as the Builder's Spire, the Spire was an artefact left over from the earliest days of the Nihilism's encroachment. It was jet black, sticking straight out of the ground like

a weapon of the gods; part power plant and part protector, it generated the both the energy consumed by the City population as well as maintaining the barrier that shielded it from the Nihility's devastation.

And — sometime over the last decade — it was beginning to fail.

Other buildings butted up against the plaza where the Spire sat, growing in size the closer to the centre they existed. The neighbourhoods of the citizen districts were organised into neat, crisp avenues bordered by manicured gardens and parks; the avenues here were smaller than further out, reflecting the tendency of citizens to walk or ride electric cycles if they needed to travel further afield. Their apartment buildings were two or three times taller than even the tallest buildings in the dweller zones, allowing them the privilege of having rooms to themselves if they wished. Ajith knew the inequality of it, but he couldn't change the situation — it was just the arrangement that both sides had worked out, and things seemed to work out on the whole.

The Spire was ringed at regular intervals with slowly pulsing lights. They were one of the only features that lent any distinguishing detail to the structure; for the most part the building was matte black matter with the texture of concrete but stronger than any drill, saw or weapon possessed by the City. Many attempts had been made to enter the structure's base levels to figure out its functionality — particularly when it became obvious that the machinery wasn't working the way it used to — but nothing successfully forced the tower to yield.

A chime as the golem reached its stop snapped Ajith out of his daydream. He quickly gathered his things and raced out of the door, mindful of the darkening sky above him. The weather was deteriorating rapidly and a wriggling worry in the back of his mind was starting to take root — *what if I don't get home in time?* The transport station was elevated above the main thoroughfare and just before Ajith stepped onto the staircase leading down he had an unobstructed view of the avenue straight up to the border of the City itself and its Gate. It was a quirk of circumstance that caused him to look out in that direction, causing a serendipitous occurrence that he might have otherwise missed if he hadn't been in that very spot at that very moment.

Because, to his shock, someone was on the other side of the Gate and banging to be let in.