

Shingara before the end of times

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The incessant drone of car horns and rickshaw bells from the street below was drowned out by a series of four thunderous blasts from high above. Booming echoes lingered, shaking the foundations of the lower city. Lights in the street, in the neighbourhood homes and in this fast food corner shop went out instantly, like clockwork. However, during the darkness before the *harikens* were lit up, while the flurry of rubble rained down on the plastic sheets covering the shop's caved in walls, as masks were put on and glasses worn for the imminent dust clouds, the chatter of those who feasted and those who waited did not cease for even a moment.

"If my watch is working," said Nrityo, tapping on her bare wrist, "then it's been a hundred and thirty-seven hours since we ordered our shingara."

"Imagine if the city's supply chain broke down again right before they started your order," said Bhupon.

"Imagine your neck broke right as I slap you."

"Imagine you two shut up so we can concentrate?" said Kripa, buried in stacks of paper sprawled across the table.

"Don't worry," said Bhupon, pointing at Onteem, who was examining papers in the *hariken* light, jotting down notes, striking out lines and adjusting her glasses in between. "She thrives in the cozy coffee shop ambience of relaxing pitter-patter of debris and chitter-chatter of strangers."

"I myself thrive with shingaras in my mouth." Nrityo was glaring at the counter.

"...shards of a broken sky. Hmm and then what? The sky... falling?" Onteem murmured.

"You know, I actually liked the Forewarn more as a concept than this fine print," continued Bhupon, picking up a stray piece of paper. "It used to be a mystery, a speculation! 'Is the Forewarn real? Did the oracles of the city council, hired for their deep wisdom and deeper pockets, really predict the fall of our glorious city? What omens did their three eyes foresee? How soon will it all happen? How many holidays will the end of times include?' The whole city waited together, for weeks, afraid to even gasp. And now look at it, now it's just a chore."

"I actually enjoy deciphering the riddles and runes the oracles write in," said Kripa, without the smallest hint of irony.

"And how many have you deciphered so far?"

"One left," said Onteem, writing down another omen. "And on the eighteenth hour of the eighteenth omen..."

Police sirens zoomed past the shop. The drones were back on their patrol. The upper city had just suffered another strike, so it was time to scour the lower one

in search of the perpetrator. Where else would they find a criminal, other than in the back alleys where the sun hadn't reached for years, where the half-dead struggled in the flooded sewage for a scrap of euphoria. In the back pocket of their half-torn *lungi* and in the folds of their graying balding braids, they hid weapons that blasted away the white marble of the council, the mammoths of concrete that reached for the heavens.

"Hey you," interrupted Nrityo, standing up. "Where'd you get that?" She pointed at a guy passing with a plate of *shingaras*. "At the counter?" he shrugged and kept on walking.

"I think he can't even make it for the end of times."

"Did the traffic really not move an inch for two days straight?"

"Call him. Ask him if he can take a detour through the flood." Bhupon pulled out his phone to show the red network bar.

"Embers in the dark. Little hopes, for what?" Onteem wrote on her list.

"Have you made any plans yet? When the city, like, falls. Where do you want to vacay?" "You think we'll get a paid leave?" They laughed. Kripa sighed. "I'm kinda scared."

"Shells and shadows will be left. But for

will disperse once the eighteen are fulfilled." "Selfish cowards!" "Then we should leave with them."

"We can't be late."

"No, we can't be late."

They watched in silence as police drones flew in through the shop's hollowed walls. Eyes of the council, their lights searched for victims and criminals all mangled together under the wreckage, of council homes and council offices.

"Got one, finally!" Nrityo emerged from the wreckage, clutching a plate with a singular shingara. Both her and her food were covered in dust and dipped in red.

Bhupon pulled up a chair and swung at



ILLUSTRATION: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

"He came here after us, no?" Nrityo consulted with the group. "That's our *shingara*!"

"I don't think," Bhupon pleaded, but Nrityo was already running after him, pushing and shoving through the evening crowd, and mumbling, "I saved up two month's pay for this."

"Is an animalistic craving for cheap meat stuffed in dusty flour fried in used oil one of the omens?" asked Bhupon. "If you count the sickness," said Kripa. "I thought that was about these bloody leeches." She swatted at a mosquito by her ear. Its companions hung above her head. A few flies joined in.

"Air that reeks and chokes, okay. Then families in fire? No, then the waves below. Yes. But before all?" replied Onteem, to no one.

"You think Ashhar can join us before the shingaras?"

whom?"

"Why? It's obviously council propaganda." "Then why did they hide it for weeks?"

"There's *eighteen* omens? The improbability. The years it'll take..." "Onteem, you're done?"

Onteem looked up slowly. "There's a nineteenth."

The still air shuddered with another set of blasts from the upper city. This time more than four, this time nearer.

"It's when they leave," she pointed up.

A boulder crashed through the shop's wall – a chunk of marble structure. More followed, crushing those who gathered near the wall, muting those who stood there conversing. The rest stopped to look. Some tried helping those who reached out, others resumed.

"The council, and all its instruments,

the nearest drone, smashing it midair, its parts scattering around. The other drones should've reacted instantly, immobilising him, arresting and pulling him up to court. But they did not move. They hung there unperturbed, tethered to no hands and no command.

There was a sob from behind. Nrityo was trying to pull away parts of the drone that dropped on her *shingara*. Amidst the murmur of conversation resuming in the shop, amidst the whizzing of the drones, the buzzing of the insects and the beeping of vehicles below, Nrityo started screaming. The sounds around her never paused, and neither did she.

Fatiul Huq Sujoy spends idle hours preparing for his urban surroundings to finally turn into a fantasy setting. Send him pictures of your rakkhosh-spotting at s.f.huq11@gmail.com