

Jhalmuri for the hollowed in-between

FATIUL HUQ SUJOY

"To what do I owe today's melancholy call?"

"There's talks of a dive tonight, in the hollows."

"Ah. And you're obviously staying put, safe in your room, miles away from the mines?"

The jhalmuri mama handed Troity her jhalmuri in a paper cone with a square card on top as a spoon.

"Extra ghugni, no chilis," he confirmed, his cyber-enhanced eyes ever judging. Troity nodded, transferred the credits and headed towards the gate. Even from her vantage through narrow alleys a hundred strides off, the gate towered like a monstrosity in silence. Enormous slabs, of iron and wood, sat closed and plastered against the rocky cliff. Near the top, inscribed in bronze, and nearly hidden behind the glowing moss grown in decades' abandon, were the letters Kh-ee. Kh-ee, it'd been named, the fourth gate of the city's second mine.

"I sure am," came Troity's reply from the other end, munching on something.

Trameli felt offended at her younger sister's sad effort at a lie. Months apart, and Troity forgot who'd been the real deviant of the family.

"So, apu, the dives reminded me – I always wanted to ask you something..." Troity began.

"Here we go," Trameli sighed to herself. She looked at the time and at the piles of empty forms scattered on her desk, in between beakers, flasks and other equipment of her lab. There were experiments, commitments and deadlines. But this was her sister.

"What?" she interjected, hoisting her backpack and lunch, and leaving her desk, "Whether you were adopted? The answer's obvious, no?"

"Here I thought a placement in a research facility, in the upper city no less, would improve your sense of humor."

"Hope it improved your sense of worth, now that I'm not there overshadowing you."

Troity went silent.

"I'm obviously joking, Troo." She wanted to slap herself. "But I guess the melancholy gets the better of you near the mines."

After a pause, Troity said, "Don't call mom and dad, okay?"

"Don't do anything that demands it."

Trameli marched past her busy lab-mates and out of the lab, as casually as she could manage, and headed towards the nearest balcony.

"What was it you wanted to ask?"

"Why didn't you take the power she offered?" Troity asked.

"She?"

"The hollows."

Troity could hear Trameli's sigh through the earpiece. "First of all, the hollows don't offer anything to anyone. It's not sentient."

"Debatable," Troity said, as she jumped over a few cracks, careful not to spill the jhalmuri. She felt that familiar sensation, even beside these cracks. Thin and shallow, these reached like outstretched fingers, or at least like the veins that make them, towards the many alleys of the city behind her. In front of her, they merged and deepened, returning to the mountain, behind the gates where the hollows rested.

"I was young, Troo. I was too young for powers like that."

"But they're harmless."

In the late afternoon light, under

the early tungsten of the street, Troity studied her jhalmuri cone. As usual, it was a page from a school textbook. The equations were clearly from the Chemistry book, fifth subject in their college curriculum – above her grade. Class 11 or 12? The page number, however – she carefully opened a corner fold – was 33.

"I don't mean what it does to your body," Trameli said, munching on something herself. "It takes a bigger toll in other aspects of your life. The power changes everything. Your responsibilities, your purpose. What is expected of you, and what you must become. I didn't feel I was ready to be a hero, a guardian of this city."

"And so, you chose which life instead?"

Troity reached the end of the road, where the city dissolved and the gates awaited. The enormity of the gates did not distract her, as she'd been here before, several times. She scanned around it instead. From both sides of the gate, latching onto the mountain wall, spread the

miner's quarters. Little hovels, of brick, earth and bamboo, stacked on top of each other for rows and rows. Strips of bridges and ladders connected them. Chaotic in their make, yet, Troity could discern with her trained eyes an ordered division, into mohollas, floors, and homes.

Then she let her other eyes, the ones also cyber-enhanced, scan for police and spies. She spotted a few dozen drones, crept up in the shadows, waiting for the evening's delinquents. "The life of a scientist? A lover, albeit short lasting? Or simply of a sold-out soul?"

"The life of my own choice. Not dealt to me by some power from the shadows beneath."

Trameli was practically running now.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

The facility was a maze of marble. If it wasn't for her frequent visits, from her regular longing to view the cityscape, to breathe in the clouds, then she wouldn't have found the nearest balcony in time.

"But what if the powers were there to help? They're just instruments, to reach your true purpose."

"What guardian propaganda have you bee-"

"You remember, um, the equation for glucose metabolism? Which grade did you read that in?"

"Huh?"

"C'mon, use that researcher brain."

"12, why?"

"Great, one extra ladder. Anyway, it's not propaganda. It's what I feel."

"What you... You're not thinking of diving, are you?"

"The hollows beckon me, apu. I know it. I yearn it with all my being. I feel the

same sensation you did, from the depths."

"It's so different now, my love. It's not magic tricks anymore, or schoolyard flex. The upper city council sees the guardians as genuine threats. They're thwarting, and arresting and... and worse."

"It is an exercise in bittersweet, apu, every time I match her pulse, and every time I miss. I understand your caution, your reluctance, I truly do. But to me, she holds my calling, and I want to lose myself to her."

Troity pushed open the trapdoor beside house 3, floor 12, moholla 5. She was smart enough to use the modulus key, a "%10H" jotted down on the card spoon. She followed the narrow cave behind the trapdoor, already treaded, and awaiting new arrivals throughout the evening.

"You are so brave, Troo. But courage blinds."

Troity reached the end of the cavern, which opened up to the mine's inside.

Beneath her laid her salvation – the hollow's gaping maw, a continuous crooked chasm of rock and darkness.

"It is so so scary, apu, the depths."

Chitchat of those anticipating the night's dive echoed around the inner halls.

She spotted traces of leaping golds and gliding silvers, blurs of guardians in the air, supervising and preparing.

"Oh, my sweet..."

"It's comforting, apu, your voice, even if it's so far away." She breathed in the air, heavy above the hollows' pull. She swore she could see pulses of shadow in the cavern walls. She sensed her beckon.

"Stay with me for a bit?"

"Forever and more," replied Trameli, wearing her mask. "Don't dive until we finish talking." She grasped at the wisps of cloud in the balcony, that crossed over the high safety wall. Using powers kept secret for years, she leapt in the air.

"No worries, I have the perfect snack to keep me busy."

Trameli dreaded the confrontation. Would she save her sister, or would the lies cut deeper? She wondered, as she conversed with Troity. "Curious, are you in Kh-i, Kh-ee or Kh-u?"

She made her wait, until she could whisk her away from a hero's folly.

Guided by the clouds' own secret, trained by nights of escape, Trameli hopped over the wall and dashed through the open air. Her silver trace – a falling star, from the heavens back to the depths.