

REFUSE TO DEFUSE

NOX

In the Principal's office, Mr. Chowdhury was pacing back and forth in front of his desk. His secretary, Miss Luna, was nervously tapping her clipboard, while they waited for Raihan Rashid to turn up.

In a few minutes there was a knock on the door. Mr. Chowdhury hurried to open it himself, and let Raihan in, while asking Belal, the school caretaker, to stand outside.

"Good afternoon Mr. Chowdhury," said Raihan, "I was told you wanted to see me immediately."

"Yes Mr. Rashid," said the Principal, "You see, we have found ourselves in a tight spot, and frankly..." he stopped, and then sighed before continuing. "Frankly, we think you are the only one who can get us out of this embarrassing situation."

Raihan Rashid was the school's "prodigal child". He was a genius by every measure of the word, and the school practically counted their blessings just to have him there. Upon hearing Mr. Chowdhury's words, Raihan's eyebrows immediately drew together. He looked around the room to see Miss Luna looking harassed, her frizzy hair particularly on edge. Mr. Chowdhury was sweating bullets, his shirt collar rapidly dampening. The office was otherwise unremarkable, except for one thing. There was a strange looking device sitting on the Principal's desk.

"I don't follow Sir. What is this 'situation'?" asked Raihan.

Mr. Chowdhury walked towards the device on his desk. Raihan followed him, and saw that it was some kind of electrical apparatus with a digital clock face on it. The timer on it was counting down, and currently read "0 Days 1 Hours 20 Minutes 37 Seconds". It looked like some kind of bomb, but Raihan quickly realised that there could be no way that Mr. Chowdhury would speak so casually about such a thing. The logical conclusion was that this device was counting down to something else. Raihan instantly had a hunch what that might be, given the particular time of the school year, but he decided to wait for Mr. Chowdhury to reveal it. Sure enough, in a few seconds his suspicions were confirmed.

"You see, we received this device on my office's doorstep last week. It came with this note," said the Principal, handing it over. "It seems the graduating batch of this year has decided to take the senior prank tradition one step further," said Mr. Chowdhury, before reiterating the diabolical plan that was written in the note.

Mr. Chowdhury continued, "The senior prank is one of our oldest traditions, and as such I have taken it in stride to just let them get on with it every year. I braved through it the year that the doors of every single room in the building were glued shut. I endured it the year they decided to shut off the main power switch of the campus. I even turned a blind eye to the

chickens running through the halls last year.

"However, this year I cannot condone it. This threat seriously endangers the reputation of the school! And to top off the prank, they have sent this ticking timer, no doubt to have me agitated all week, dreading their plans coming to fruition!"

Raihan was secretly impressed. The seniors had seriously outdone themselves, he thought, as he read through the detailed plans outlined in the note. If they did indeed pull off this prank it would become an absolute school legend. Why Mr. Chowdhury had called him here was plain as well. The note said that if Mr. Chowdhury could find the way to stop the timer, without damaging the device, the seniors would surrender and the plans would be called off. Clearly Raihan was supposed to be the Principal's bomb disposal squad.

Raihan approached the device. He examined it carefully. After five minutes he said, "Hmm."

"What? Have you found something?" asked Mr. Chowdhury excitedly.

"No, no... Nothing," said Raihan, continuing to turn the device this way and that.

Half an hour passed. Miss Luna brought in some water for them, which they both ignored. Mr. Chowdhury was going redder by the minute, his veins visibly pulsating. "Have you found anything at all?" he kept asking Raihan every few seconds. Raihan simply shook his head every time and continued with his quiet examination.

An hour passed. Nothing changed except the atmosphere in the office, which was escalating to a silent but deadly tension. With ten minutes to go, Mr. Chowdhury lost all sense of propriety. He stopped pacing and wrenched the ticking device out of Raihan's hands, raising it high above his head.

"Mr. Chowdhury!" shrieked Miss Luna, "What are you doing sir?! Please

calm down!"

"No! I can't take it anymore! This whole week I've been on edge! I'm having nightmares about countdowns! Wherever I go the ticking of this timer seems to follow me. I see it in my sleep. I see it when I'm awake. I see it in front of the school, when I'm watching TV, even when I'm on the streets! I can't escape it!"

Mr. Chowdhury had a crazed look in his eyes now. He looked like a man possessed.

"Sir, please calm down!" said Raihan, now trying to wrestle the device out of his hands with the aid of Miss Luna.

"Let me go!" yelled the Principal, "If I can't win against them I'm not going to let them rob me of my sanity any longer! I might lose, but it will be on my terms!"

And with that proclamation he chucked the countdown device to the ground with all his force. Instantly it cracked and the screen, which was previously reading "0 Days 0 Hours 6 Minutes 20 Seconds", now went blank. Instantly, all three of them seized up. They waited, straining their ears for any noise. A few extremely tense seconds later, Mr. Chowdhury breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hah! I knew it! They were bluffing!" he said with gusto, as though he hadn't been losing his mind over this just a few minutes ago.

Raihan was disappointed. He had wished the seniors had found a way to actually set the prank up, impossible though it seemed, rather than it just being an empty threat.

"Sir, can I go back to class now?" he asked.

"Yes yes," Mr. Chowdhury said distractedly, before turning to Miss Luna and telling her to draft up a

speech about this whole incident which he could proudly deliver at tomorrow's morning assembly.

Just as Raihan was stepping out of the office though, he heard an ear-splitting bang coming from the north side of the building. As Mr. Chowdhury and Miss Luna pushed him aside in their hurry to leave the office, Raihan immediately turned around. He couldn't resist. He needed to know. Raihan went back to the timer and fiddled with the wires for a bit, and soon enough he had it running. It showed "0 Days 0 Hours 6 Minutes 20 Seconds" again and the countdown had resumed.

Now was the real test. Raihan turned the device and performed a complex manoeuvre switching a few different wires with each other. When he turned it back up to face him the dial had stopped flashing the time. The solution he had come up with in the first five minutes of examining the device had worked. Raihan smiled. Being right was just the best.

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