



AT THE CROSSROADS

MOCKINGJAY

Rafi waved his hands absent-mindedly as if tracing complex patterns in the air. Mahir and Salim sat perched atop the only bed, strewn with the familiar debris of any dorm room: two soiled shirts, a half-eaten pack of *chanachur*, and a newspaper dated February 20, 1952.

"The wait is the worst," Nadim's voice was harsh in the eerie quiet. Salim shifted uncomfortably; they hadn't had much sleep.

"No one likes to wait. But let's see what everyone has to say," Salim looked out the window. "It'll be dawn soon."

"What's there to say? I'll speak what I want, how I want. 'What freedom hath thou been given, if thou hath not ye freedom to speak?'" Rafi exhaled.

Mahir seemed unconvinced. He was tensed. "I'm just not sure how it'll turn out," he admitted quietly. "I'm all for freedom of speech, but I don't think meeting at *Bot-tola* during 144 is a good idea."

Nadim flared up: "If not there, then where? If not us, then WHO?" He sat up straight, eyes blazing. "I don't care how it turns out. A small part of me *wants* them to make one wrong move – give me an excuse to do something."

"Wake up, Mahir – no one is going to do anything about this. You want your freedom; well, you'll have to take it."

Rafi's voice was calm.

Salim chuckled. Shuffling up, he walked over to Rafi.

"Relax. We're going to meet, and everyone's going to talk. We'll decide the best way to handle this and how to talk it out with the authorities."

His face lit up with genuine warmth.

"It's going to be fine," he said.

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"In here!" A voice yelled through the shadows, barely audible over the crack of two dozen Sten guns. Flames whipped nightmarishly above the perimeter huts. Nakib saw the world in split seconds: blood on a palm tree, lifeless eyes upturned, a mother clinging onto her torn *sari*, three screaming calves tied to the lawn.

And all drowned by the piercing screeches of the wounded.

Nakib was yanked into one of the huts, shuffled through doors, and thrown into a camouflaged hole. The figure pulled a trapdoor shut over them.

Instantly Nakib aimed his weapon at the man; his rifle had jammed but the bayonet could still pierce a man's heart.

"Identify yourself!" He growled.

"Quiet! That rifle's no good if those dogs find us." Handing Nakib some gauze and water, the man said, "Clean up the blood on your forehead. It's tell-tale sign of a *Muktijoddha*." He turned and offered half-eaten a *ruti* and eggs. "We shouldn't light a fire, so make do in the dark."

Warily, Nakib grabbed the food. He studied his captor and saviour; the man seemed even younger than his 25 years.

"I think they're gone," the boy said, straining to hear.

"No. They're baiting us." Nakib was familiar with the military's tactics; he'd lost enough friends to know.

"How did you all get caught?" The boy had tired, but sharp eyes.

"We snuck over to the river." He took another bite. "They push supplies to three sectors through that confluence. But the *dogs* had the outpost well camouflaged."

"Did you find the outpost, then? What happens now?"

"Nothing happens! The mission's off," Nakib grumbled. "We have munitions and explosives stashed, but no man to blow the damned place up. Even if we did, we have no idea where the post is," He slouched back in defeat.

"I know where it is," the boy stated. "Where're the explosives?"

Nakib turned abruptly, surprised. "Behind the lone hut down the road, the one with the *gawalghor*. But you know where it is?"

"Yes. Let's go finish the mission."

The boy's eyes blazed with strange energy. Nakib was unmoved; he'd seen such eyes turn lifeless too many times.

"No. It's not possible, not without more men, without distractions. We'll wait."

The boy stood up impatiently. Nakib yanked onto his hand, hissing fiercely, "Don't be stupid! You'll throw your life for nothing."

Jerking free, the boy said, "Don't get out till dawn. I'll be back." In one swift motion he was out of the hole and closed the door back on Nakib.

Silence engulfed the tiny dark space again.

Nakib hadn't even asked him his name.

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This was a work of fiction, but it takes place in real history. This is a tribute to the youth of our country, who have been elemental in Bangladesh's progress. We are at a crossroads. This is a shout out – to you to lead the way.