

CITY OF MAGIC

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It was summer and a Ramadan morning and Shafkat was on a dragon. Normally that'd be bad enough with the sun and sweat and the dragon intermittently breathing fire in its wake for no apparent reason. However his ride also lacked the canopy the government insisted every dragon had to have, exposing Shafkat and his fellow travellers to the elements. This was a major problem because the seats also lacked the harness straps designed to stop people falling off and into the ground. Presumably these had all been sold off to feed the dragon-driver's large sunglasses habit.

Risking his life Shafkat looked down at the street below him. It was a solid mass of cars, buses, giants, autorickshaws and a petni's *bot gachh* fitted with wheels. The cars were screeching and the giants were being rude about each other's mothers. Traffic was why Shafkat always picked the flyover and its death-trap dragons for his commute to university. He wished that he hadn't gotten one this terrible but he was going to be late for class anyway.

As if to punctuate that thought the dragon did an athletic mid-air barrel roll that the experienced commuters like Shafkat saw coming, managing to grip their seats for dear life. A few people, including almost everyone who'd been standing, fell off. The conductor looked annoyed and hit the dragon very hard, but not as hard as he would have if he hadn't already collected the fares.

To distract himself Shafkat studied the eye-level billboards. There were several advertisements for noodles and biscuits that suggested no human intelligence had made them, and when Shafkat noticed the large Ghran logo at the corner he realised no human intelligence had. There were hair tonic potions that displayed convincing before-and-after images, though Shafkat knew quite well that these worked by gradually transferring hair from various parts of the body to the scalp. His HSC tutor had taken some and been quite happy with the results though he never revealed where the hair had come from. Presumably his girlfriends did, which is why he never got a steady relationship.

Then Shafkat noticed a fairness cream ad that always made him feel conflicted. He objected to that sort of thing on principle and the creams sometimes backfired and transformed users into fully reflective surfaces much prized in physics applications. However the model, Liza Kamal, reminded him very strongly of the girl he liked and secretly followed on Magebook. The dragon resolved Shafkat's moral dilemma by snorting fire at Liza's ivory-pale face and burning a hole clean through it.

When the dragon finally tipped him out onto the sidewalk near Best Magic University, Shafkat checked his wristwatch: 9:52. Shafkat had completely forgotten the Ramadan routine. He was late for PYR101.

As he sat getting yelled at by Agnipari Miss for being fifteen minutes late to class, he wondered why he had taken Introduction to Pyromancy in the Summer semester, and during Ramadan. As Shafkat was increasingly realising, the answer was that he was an idiot. His friend Nabila smiled at him, then grimaced as she got to smell him.

Agnipari Miss was going on and on about something beyond Shafkat's ability to follow. As usual his mind was on other matters: why was it that a professor of fire magic had such a name? Did her parents know in advance? Maybe they trained her from birth to go into this career path, like how his own brother was named Jadu despite having no ability in that area whatsoever. Shafkat's parents had already been disappointed in Jadu Bhaiya, even before he chose a career as motivational speaker.

Would Agnipari Miss' parents have disowned her

if she'd studied medicine instead?

By the end of the afternoon Shafkat had failed a potions quiz he'd forgotten to study for, slept through the bulk of a lecture explaining how Atlantis had disappeared as a way to dodge having to pay the national debt, and failed to understand anything taught in CWE240. The last one was a major problem for someone supposedly majoring in Computer Wizardry, but in his defence you should try coding when failing to close a loop could open a doorway to Hell.

To compensate for his soul-crushing day he bought sandwiches to feed BMU's resident street dogs. His favourite was the puppy Tinni, whose three heads always seemed happy to see him. As she ate he felt unusually hot. Shafkat turned to see that Selim Bhai was standing next to him.

"Hey, Bhaiya," he said. Nabila's boyfriend was their senior. Seventeen hundred years their senior in fact. Technically he didn't actually go to their university, being a student of the equivalent institution in his alternate reality – the Other Dhaka. Even so Selim Bhai occasionally liked to turn up to help juniors like Shafkat out.

"Hello, Shafkat." Selim Bhai's voice was nasal. It would have been funny if he hadn't been capable of turning the entirety of Wireless to dust if he felt like it. "Have you seen Nabila?"

Selim Bhai was nothing but nice but Shafkat always thought it really sketchy that Nabila would date someone like him. He wasn't being prejudiced against non-humans, it was just that he was so old. His inner feminist thought it inappropriate.

Also the guy was disturbingly hot. Like, literally. Selim Bhai was a furnace in a bootleg "Why So Serious??" T-shirt.

"Nabila had to go help Aunty with something. She said she'd go home with her." Nabila's mother ran a nearby day-care centre catering to half-human children. Their parents ranged from rakkhosh to giants to mermaids and fairies. Aunty was good at her job but when dealing with toddlers twice her height or ones that keep trying to escape down the drainpipes or eat her alive, she often needed all hands on deck.

Selim Bhai looked disappointed, but then brightened up. "Say, how are you going home?"

Shafkat said he was thinking of taking the bus or something.

"Nonsense! You can go with me. You live in Dhanmondi, right? Near Fando's?"

"Uh, yeah..." Shafkat had never told Selim Bhai where he lived. In any case he didn't want to spend an already hot afternoon in a car with someone made of fire. "But it's OK, bhaiya, I can make it on my own."

"No, you can't." Selim Bhai matter-of-factly pointed at the road. A traffic policeman was loudly berating a CNG-driver for trying to use an unlicensed flight modification to his vehicle. The policeman had managed to catch him out of the sky by virtue of being four storeys tall, which made his decision to stand in the middle of the road arguing problematic.

Shafkat realised that the resultant traffic snarl would snake and snake all around and he wouldn't get home in time for iftar.

A friendly hand patted him on the back, leaving scorch marks on his Logan T-shirt. "Let's go."

It turned out Selim Bhai didn't drive. For the second time in the day Shafkat was flying over Dhaka. The djinn was holding him in the crook of his arm and at the speeds they flew in it wasn't that warm at all. In fact, Shafkat had to admit it was quite pleasant to be so high up, where the city didn't look so bad. The buildings with their naked, unfinished roofs, the mosques also perpetually in construction, Dhaka looked like what you'd see if you stumbled into a master painter's studio right after the first sketch was done. It promised something for the future.

The heat of the day was turning towards dark clouds, and Shafkat thought he could taste the rain. An elderly man on a flying carpet whooshed by, waving at them.

The first drops were falling when Shafkat arrived home. He thanked Selim Bhai, who winked and disappeared. Shaking his head he went upstairs to shower and get ready for iftar. His mother was at the table already. She was entrancingly beautiful, as all petnis could be when they felt like it, but Shafkat had gotten used to it. "Where is Abbuji?" Shafkat asked.

"He's having iftar at work," Jadu Bhaiya said. "He's waiting for a conference call from the British Embassy. Can you believe he'll get to talk to Merlin?"

"Wow," Shafkat said, unimpressed. He was never that interested in hero-worshipping Western wizards, it always felt colonial to him.

The adhan broke and the three of them ate with some light conversation. Jadu Bhaiya was explaining to their mother the intricacies of his new motivational segment, "How to Find Your Own Magic", part of a new culture of "start-up wizardry" that promised to bypass all the expensive schooling usually necessary. Their mother wasn't sure how Jadu Bhaiya, who couldn't convince a rabbit to come out of a hat even if he set the hat on fire, was qualified to teach such a thing, but she was happy her son was working. She tried to ask Shafkat how his day had gone, but one look was enough. Kindly she offered him one of her magic sweets. Shafkat smiled. No matter if they lived in a Dhanmondi flat or up on a bot gachh, if they wore a sari or jeans or watched *Grey's Anatomy*, you couldn't break a petni's habits.

As he ate his mother's sweets while a storm raged outside, Shafkat felt a peace come over him. He'd survived one more day in Jadur Shohor.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Zoheb Mashiur is a prematurely balding man with bad facial hair and so does his best to avoid people. Ruin his efforts by writing to zoheb.mashiur@gmail.com

