



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

ARMIES OF DARKNESS

ZOHEB MASHIUR

The knights of the heroic king had come to the village. "Have no fear! We will liberate you from the forces of evil!" they cried, as they rode in with the dawn's light.

The old villagers looked at each other, mildly worried, but the children were excited. They ran around the knights, holding hands, dancing in circles. "Yay! Yay!" they cried, as children do in stories. "Who is it, who is the evil one today?"

The leader of the knights, a beautiful man with long hair, patted the cutest of the children on the head with his silver gauntlet. "Why, do you not know the servant of the dark lord who holds you all in thrall? The one whose black hand extends like a canker through the affairs of this —" he looked up, frowning slightly at the misshapen mud huts and the toothless

peasantry that occupied them, before rallying—"this beautiful village? The one whose machinations make old women weep, and young men cry honest tears as they wish someone would deliver them, crying for the light of dawn to shine through the grey clouds of war—"

"Sir, he's over there!" his lieutenant cried out, pointing at a bend in the village path. The lieutenant had been listening to his commander talk like that incessantly for the past two hours, and needed a break.

"The demon himself!" The leader unfurled his banner, the symbol of the heroic king threaded in gold, catching the light. "At him, brave knights!"

They charged at the Dark Lord's servant, the evildoer, the bringer of plagues and architect of the village's misery. The children cheered as the creature was destroyed by the blessed blades and lances of the heroic king's knights, and its body strung from a tree. The children danced beneath the corpse—they had never really liked their schoolmaster.

The old villagers shook their heads at the defeated schoolmaster as he dangled in the wind, but they kept their silence until the knights left.

"Shame," one muttered, an old woman who'd remembered the schoolmaster as a boy.

"Always said he'd come to a sticky end," another grumbled. "Always too much readin' and learnin', he did. Not a spoon's worth of sense in him."

"Remind me how he did, again?" The one who asked was a fisherman, who spent most his time in the water. He didn't have time to keep up with village affairs. "I don't remember him being a servant of evil or anything like that." It was true—when the heroic king had slain the dark lord and defeated the armies of darkness, the schoolmaster was still at the age where he was worried about girls not liking him.

"He wrote to the newsy-paper, he did," the grumbling one responded. "Talking all sorts of uppity rubbish, wonderin' who it was as chose the heroic king. Dummy, the king defeated the Dark Lord, and won the throne! It's his right to rule."

The body spun on the robe, twirling in the breeze. "Hmm." The fisherman was silent. He and the elders of the village had

lived through the tyranny of the Dark Lord and survived so far into the rule of the hero that had defeated him, while younger men and women perished. They'd done this because they were wise, and knew when to keep their mouths shut.

The knights of the heroic king sang as they rode back, their tunics wet with the blood of the enemy. The lieutenant alone sang a little quietly, though still loud enough to not be suspect. It was hard to judge the age of the schoolmaster, especially with his head cut open, but he could not have been much older than the lieutenant.

The lieutenant was just old enough to remember the Dark Lord's defeat at the hands of the heroic king. So inspired had he been, that he'd joined the knights. Yes, the armies of darkness were largely defeated, but everyone knew the work was unfinished. The orcs, the goblins, the trolls and giants that terrorised the land were slain, except in deep forests and swamps where they hid. But that was easy—they could not hide their nature. The Dark Lord had other servants, and these were more difficult to find—the vampires, the werewolves, the demons that wore the skins of men. The knights rode, and destroyed such things where they could be found hiding among the populations they preyed on.

And as these monstrous creatures were slain, the heroic king turned his knights' lances on the last of the enemy that still hid in his kingdom. These were the worst, and most insidious. The people like you and I, monsters in all but appearance. The people who'd aided the Dark Lord, fought in his armies, doubted the heroic king in his quest, and those who still doubted him. The lieutenant knew that their destruction was the most important—after all, who would listen to a goblin or a werewolf?

Yet, somehow, he doubted his quest. And this brought him fear. He sang with the others, and looked at the branches of the trees they rode past, imagining himself dangling from them.

Zoheb Mashiuris an artist and an MA candidate in International Migration at the University of Kent. Read more of this sort of thing in Disconnect: Collected Short Fiction.

CAPACITY BUILDING

RUMMAN R KALAM

I've been working at the Capacity Building for 10 years. I'd like to say that nothing surprises me anymore but then again, I live in Bangladesh.

My boss and I joined the office at the same time and on our first day, he called three general meetings. Selling insurance isn't an easy task; you have to call people and ask them to prepare for their deaths in the most roundabout manner. This was the second meeting of the day:

Our boss, Tarun Nayan Khan, was rubbing his hands in anticipation when we entered the conference room.

"We are going to digitise the entire office! The first thing I will ensure for all of you will be free Wi-Fi!"

We were all, of course, extremely happy to get free internet back in 2009. All three of us with smartphones in a

room of about sixty people.

We all clapped, nodded, said our thanks and went back to our desks. An hour later, we were called back into the conference room yet again.

"Glad to have such a dynamic team that can respond so quickly to summons," said Tarun jubilantly.

"There is a slight hitch with the budgeting for the free Wi-Fi thing. But I fought really hard with the CFO to ensure that it gets to happen. This is going to happen!"

Bablu from accounts scratched his belly and looked at the wall clock. 2:01 pm.

"Sir, lunch?" he asked with a yawn.

"Oh, thank you, Bablu. That reminds me, due to budgeting issues there will be no more lunch for you guys. We have

replaced it with coffee which has the added effect of increased productivity."

We all thought it was a practical joke and stared at him.

"Sir?" asked Rupai from HR.

"Yes, Rupai?"

"Sir, I think we should rather have lunch than free Wi-Fi."

Everyone in the room started nodding in agreement to this. Tarun sir scratched his chin.

"Okay, I see what's happening."

He emptied out a tissue box.

"Write lunch or Wi-Fi on a piece of tissue, fold it and drop it in this box. Let's convene after lunch and decide."

At 3:05 pm, we were all sitting in the conference room yet again, waiting for Tarun sir to finish counting the votes.

He entered a few minutes later, tissue box in hand.

"Done! Are you all ready for the results?" said Tarun, his eyes beaming.

"It's 80 people for free Wi-Fi and four people for free lunch! I knew you guys would change your mind."

Yes, Bablu bhai sure as hell needs free Wi-Fi on his Nokia 1100.

"Sir, please," Rupai interjected again.

"Yes, Rupai?"

"Sir, there are only 68 people working in this office. I..." she paused and bit her lips, "I think there is a mistake."

"Miss Rupai, please come to my office. And all of you stay here."

Half an hour later, Tarun sir showed up without Rupai this time.

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