

THE BANSHEE'S WAIL

UPOMA AZIZ

Salima didn't realise that she had fallen asleep.

She chided herself in her head for falling asleep at her desk again. Her back was killing her now. She marvelled at having woken up; she was an unusually deep sleeper. Then the shrill, frantic noise reached her ears and she froze in place. The rhythmic rise and fall of the tone sent a chill down her spine. Many couldn't tell the difference, but she could accurately distinguish between the sirens of a fire brigade troop from one of an ambulance, and usually, the former was followed by the latter.

Salima walked to her kitchen, then checked and double checked her burners. Everything seemed to be in order, but she couldn't convince herself that the burning flesh she could smell was from a memory in the past, and that it wasn't real.

While on the way back to her room, she jumped at the sound of someone crying. A deep heart wrenching sound. It was coming from downstairs. Probably her neighbour Areen, who'd been doing this every night for the past few weeks after her son died.

The sirens woke up Areen as well. She'd bolted upright, her mind racing. Why was Ratul crying? How many hours had passed since she fed him last? Was he in need of his diaper being changed? Or was it just a nightmare and he wanted his mother?

No matter how many times the realisation hit her, it hit hard. It knocked all the air out of her lungs and she collapsed to the floor, a guttural noise escaping her. She laid writhing in agony and sobbing into her pillow, and then she felt something soft at her feet.

It was her cat, staring at her with glassy, green eyes. Ever since she'd lost her kittens, the cat had been like that. She would lie somewhere, and be very still with her eyes closed, as if she too were playing dead. Areen had even seen the cat cry and it had shaken her to her core. The cat had suddenly

decided that life wasn't worth living anymore.

A week before Areen lost her infant, the cat lost her kittens. And Areen blamed herself for not noticing this omen, just as she blamed herself for the accident she couldn't stop. The accident which took the life of her child and crippled her husband.

The cat at her feet stirred and cried and Areen's heart did a somersault. Who knew that a cat's cry resembled a human's so much? Areen picked the cat up, carried it outside her room, and locked the door. Then she leaned against the cold smooth wood and sobbed, as the creature outside mewled.

Rahamat mewled too, his frail body trying to wriggle away from the side of the bench he slept in. The sixty-five year old was rigid with fear.

From somewhere in the distance, a dog howled, loud and clear, and soon a few more joined in. Rahamat shut his eyes tight, hoping for the sounds to go away. They didn't.

When bad times were up ahead, you'd be given time to prepare. This was one of the omens – dogs crying. The last time he had heard that many dogs cry at once was immediately before the war. So many had died, and so many were to die again. The festering smell of the catastrophe was in the air, like a tangible thing. And as for Rahamat, he was scared.

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The banshee moved around in the shadows, the hem of her long, white gown trailing her. Even after ages of sending out warnings to people, the banshee's voice had been intact, until recently. The death of so many people finally strained her voice and the banshee now lurked in silence.

She let out one last, long wail. One that could be the omen of either her death or of the world.

Upoma Aziz is a walking-talking-ticking time bomb going off at random detonators. Poke her at your own risk at www.fb.com/upoma.aziz

