

FICTION

Saints of gold

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SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

It was another early sunset on a rainy day in Dhaka. Alamin was walking with a polythene bag of groceries back to his small, rented apartment. Well, not his apartment, but he'd lived there for so long that it felt like his. The rain soaked his hair and dripped into his eyes, but he barely noticed. Saad baba should be hungry by now.

The moment he pushed the front door open, he was greeted with a shout, "Alamin mama?" from the back of the apartment.

"Ji, baba. I'm home. Your food will be ready soon."

"Thank god. I'm starving, mama."

Alamin laughed. "I know."

"Bring it down here, please, when you're done."

"Of course."

He bustled around the kitchen, tinkering with pots and pans and his small arsenal of spoons and forks. Within a few minutes, the smell of hot spices and sizzling oil permeated the tiny home he'd shared with his young charge for the past 10 years. It was hard to believe that the fumbling little boy he'd carried around on his shoulders now stood taller than him, but that was the way of life.

Balancing the heavy tray on one hand, Alamin knocked on Saad's door.

"Come in, mama."

As usual, the room was a mess. Shaking his head, Alamin cleared the nearest table as much as possible and set the tray down. Saad was sitting cross-legged on the floor, at the feet of one of the statues, his back to Alamin.

"Mama, did you speak to the vendor?" he asked.

"I did, choto baba. The delivery will be next week."

There was a moment of silence, and Alamin sighed internally. He had displeased his young master with his answer. He'd known it would. Perhaps he should've prepared the chains in advance. Saad baba liked things to be done before he asked for them.

Saad turned around slowly.

He was a handsome young man, 23 years of age, with a shock of pitch-black hair and the most probing eyes Alamin



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

had ever seen. Even as a child, Saad's eyes had had that peculiar light in them, as if they could see things others could not.

"I need the delivery tomorrow, mama", Saad said slowly. "I told you that before you went out."

His skin was pale. Almost unnaturally so. He had not felt the touch of sunlight for almost a decade now.

"I know, choto baba," Alamin said, hanging his head. "But the man had been sick, and—"

"The saints do not care for the sick", Saad said softly. "They care only for the strong and the devoted. Are you not devoted, mama?"

Alamin's heart stuttered. "I am, Saad baba. I always was."

That was a lie. It had taken some time for Alamin to accept young Saad's peculiarities, and even longer to realise that this young man was gifted in ways most people would never believe. The Holy Touch, he called it. Anointed by the Great Saints.

"Then I want the delivery tomorrow. The Second demands another coating."

Saad reverently touched the ankle of the statue he was sitting near. The gold shimmered in the dim light. "You will pay penance for your lack of faith tonight, mama. Four stripes should do it."

The skin on Alamin's back prickled in fear, but he was careful to keep his face calm. "Of course, choto baba. I brought your dinner."

Saad smiled. And just like that, that harsh, cold face transformed into a beautiful young man, intelligent and sharp-eyed.

That night, after Alamin had whipped himself four times and washed and bandaged the cuts on his back, he sat in his usual corner and watched as Saad worked on the statues until dawn. Even after all these years, he still wondered how the boy handled the molten gold with no protection. The skin on his hands had burned off long ago, and were now permanently coated with a thin layer of gold extending halfway up to his elbows. At times, in the dark red glow of the lamps, it almost seemed like Saad was slowly transmuting to gold himself.

Even as Alamin watched, the young man scooped a cupped handful of smoking, molten gold and lathered it onto the already-thick layer on the Second Saint's left arm. This was the third coating in six months. There had been a time when they could afford a full coating on all three saints every month, back when the family wealth had seemed inexhaustible. Only a small amount of it was now left. Gold was expensive. How the years had changed...

"Mama." Alamin jerked out of yellowed memories. "Ji, baba?"

"I must kill the gold vendor. The Second says so."

"Is he holy enough to join their ranks, baba?" Alamin said, frowning. The vendor was a goldsmith, skilled in making jewellery but he had nothing to make him stand out.

The other Saints were special. The First was Saad's father, or what remained of his corpse after the 12-year-old Saad had killed him and coated him in gold as the First Saint. The Second was his mother,

killed two years later. The Third was their landlord, strangled a month after they'd moved to this city. The landlord's wife was meant to be the Fourth Saint, but her body had decomposed before the vendor could deliver the gold for the first coating. She'd been discarded, and the ranks of the Saints had remained unfinished ever since.

"He gave us gold when we asked for it", Saad said softly, scooping up another handful of steaming gold. "He has earned his place."

"He never knew why we bought so much gold, though, baba," Alamin sighed.

"And he was smart enough never to ask. And for this, mama, the Holy Saints of Gold have decided to reward him. He will be the Fifth."

Alamin shivered. His throat was tight with joy. Could it be? Had the Saints finally heard his prayers? "Fifth? What about the Fourth, baba?"

Saad turned around and smiled gently at his old caretaker.

Alamin's eyes welled with joy as he nodded.

"Tonight?"

Another nod. Alamin nearly stumbled and fell as he ran out of the room and into the kitchen. The ceremony required a special knife, so he picked the oldest one they had. The one he'd used to slice and dice food for his young charge for over 20 years. Yes, a holy knife. Perfect.

He stumbled back into Saad's room and handed the knife to him carefully. And then he laid himself down on the floor, full-length. His heart was hammering with excitement. At last, at last! Oh, it was happening at last!

Saad studied Alamin for a moment, and then rose to his knees and lifted the knife over the old man's throat. He smiled slightly. "I will miss your cooking, mama."

Alamin sobbed in ecstasy. "But I will watch over you, choto baba, as the Fourth Saint."

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PHOTO: AMRIN TASNIM RAFA

Letting my eyes adjust to the darkness, I stepped in front of the reception desk and rang the bell. Immediately, a candle was lit out of thin air and put into a portable holder.

AAQIB HASIB

An uncomfortable stillness emanated in the air around Rajpath road. I stood there with my suitcase in my hand, the hair on the back of my neck standing on edge. Glancing left then right, I crossed the road and entered the premises of Hotel Kaalipara.

Just six months or so back, my childhood friend Sejuti had told me about this oh-so-famous institution.

"So, what's so famous about this hotel?" I asked, smiling at her.

"Well, it's haunted. Famously. Like if you go there and sign your own name on the guest sign-up sheet, you become stuck there forever. Many people have gone missing there, but the police never found anything during their investigation.

That's because they didn't sign their names on the sheet."

"What do you think I should do about it?"

"You do go around telling people you're an experienced individual when it comes to things occult or supernatural. You say that it's how you wrote all of your famous books. So, why not help some people out and also get another book out of it?" she replied, giving me that flirtatious smile I had seen one too many times.

Stepping inside the malevolent structure, I immediately noticed that the power was out.

Letting my eyes adjust to the darkness, I stepped in front of the reception desk and rang the bell. Immediately, a candle was lit out of thin air and put into a portable holder.

"Sir, if you could kindly sign your name here

and state how long you would ideally like to be here for", said the front desk employee.

His hair looked mangled and even in the yellow light of the candle, his skin looked grey and moulding.

I took out my trusty Parker fountain pen, the same one I had passed my matric exam with and signed with my pseudonym, Oshim Chaudhury.

"Sir, if you could kindly give me an ID card so I can verify your information."

"Well, I actually forgot my ID card on the train. But here is 100 taka. It should cover my stay for a few weeks. I am actually a writer and want to write a book about this place..."

Before I could finish, he grabbed the money out of my hand, thanked me, blew out the candle and left. I could hear his footsteps dragging away slowly. Baffled, I lit the candle he had just put out and went looking for my room.

"So, have you been there before?" I asked.

"To Kaalipara? Only once. I kind of regret it."

"Why?"

"Well, for one I can't fall asleep without getting that weird feeling like there's something there, watching and observing me from somewhere hidden."

As I strolled through the corridors of the hotel, I couldn't help but feel that eerie phenomenon Sejuti had mentioned.

Entering room 505, I put my luggage aside and prepped my tools—one large flashlight, an audio recorder and a holy pendant.

Venturing back out into the halls, I could not

spot a single soul. I decided to go downstairs, as Sejuti had mentioned something about the basement.

The stairs creaked with each step I took and I could hear voices in the distance. Finally reaching the basement door, I turned the knob slowly and pushed the door slightly ajar to get a view of what was happening.

I could see the back of the receptionist, holding another candle, murmuring some incantations. As my eyes drifted to the floor in front of him, sprawled out on all six legs from what it seemed, was some grey skinned entity. Hair draped over its head as it turned in a circle.

For a second, my heart froze. I could no longer feel a beat, as the creature turned and one lone eye stared at me from underneath the dark pile of hair. The next second, I was running towards the basement stairs.

Behind me, I could feel the vibration of six limbs chasing me. As I made it halfway up the staircase, one cold, skinny hand grabbed my ankle, holding me in place. I turned around and threw my pendant at it. Its skin burned in the darkness, but it refused to let go.

Just as I thought it was all over, another hand grabbed mine from atop the staircase and forced the creature to relinquish its grip on me.

The next moment, we were standing outside in the hotel's yard, breathing heavily. Me and my saviour Sejuti. As we caught our breath, we looked at each other and laughed.

"Damn, I thought I was done for. In no universe had I expected you to turn up", I said, relieved.

She looked up at me, smiling. The colour seemed to have drained from her face from all the running, but we were out now. She tossed me the log book which I had signed in earlier in the day.

"So, if you sign your name in here, you're stuck forever. I don't know what kind of magic it is, but it works," she said, looking at the hotel entrance.

I turned over the pages to see an endless list of names. Turning and turning, I found one that stood out to me.

Sejuti Saha. "I thought you didn't sign your real name."

"I didn't."

I turned to the last page of the book, Oshim Chaudhury was now replaced by Debashish Roy.

As I looked back up, her beautiful dotting eyes were gone, replaced by black spheres of an endless void. She grabbed my arm with claw-like hands, pulling me closer.

Her beautiful lips were long gone, replaced by this gaping hole that now bore fangs. Only one noise escaped her mouth, the kind of sound you hear when someone drags their nails across a chalkboard.

Krrr-klrrrr-klrrr

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