



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

Box office nation

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Vik cut in before the voice could finish. "For the entire Army. And 5% of the deal for you on top of that. In exchange, I get the copyright on the story and sequel rights. We'll get a journalist to write a book about the operation by this summer and release the film based on that book next year."

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

When Mr. Vik Roman looked at the time with flinching eyes, it was around 3:30 am. At this point, the entire industry knows that his days of late-night parties were past him. He'd been trying to detox himself since his wedding two years ago. It was his third one, but a friend had told him: *third time's the charm*. For his father, though, it was the fifth time that worked—since that was the only one that lasted.

He was born on a film set—and not as a metaphor. Vik's mother had been on the set of one of the films his father was producing, trying to debunk the rumours that her husband was having a fling with the lead actress. While peeking into the heroine's green room, her water broke, and Roman was delivered right then and there—on the sets of the 1983 blockbuster, 'Queen of Passion'. Thus, Vik becoming the future owner and CEO of the production house, Roman Studios, was written in the stars.

And even the haters would agree that Vik, albeit a product of nepotism, was one of the most capable producers in the industry. Even with his minuscule understanding of cinema as an art form (a trait he had inherited), he managed to turn Roman Studios into a multi-million-dollar company. Vik's success lay in his ability to catch trends before anyone else and develop formulas for churning out box office blockbusters. He had sold everything that made money over the years: romance remakes, biopics, family dramas, teenage angst, right-wing or left-wing propaganda, liberal propaganda, conservative propaganda—you name it. Roman Studios was a shop that sold everything to everyone.

And now, one of those commodities was waiting for him on the other end of the phone. A call that could potentially make him at least 500 million in the opening weekend at the worldwide box office; the holy grail for producers: patriotism.

"This better be important," growled Mr. Roman.

"Mr. Roman, this is the Chief of Staff speaking," the voice said.

"Yes, sir," Vik coughed and cleared his throat. "How can I help?"

"Actually, I believe it is I who can help you this time around," said the voice on the other end. "But it's going to cost, of course."

"Unfortunately, I can't confirm any payment before hearing you out," Vik replied with a smile. Years of dealing with people in uniform had taught him never to give them any room to breathe—you had to meet them as an equal.

"This is highly confidential," the voice said. "So be very careful with this. We're going to attack the neighbours across the river early this morning. Only five people, including you, me, the Prime Minister, and the Chief of Army Staff, know about it."

With dilated pupils, Vik's heart began thumping with excitement. He could already visualise crowds at the theatres, flags waving, sirens blaring, and the money pouring in. After the success of the first film, they would announce a sequel at the success party. And if the second film worked—with some inflated, manipulated box office numbers—it could even become a franchise. But Vik had to maintain composure and act as though the proposition only mildly interested him.

"You, me, the PM, and the Chief of Army—that makes four," Vik replied. "Who's the fifth?"

"Mr. Goldstein of Goldstein Brothers Pictures," the voice replied. "I'm sorry, Mr. Roman. Despite our past transactions, I have to keep my options open. And might I remind you—Mr. Goldstein is very eager, and your offer will have to be quite hefty to match his."

"Text the operation details to my co-producer. You have his number," Vik said, clenching his fist in anger. "I'll have to talk to him before I can confirm anything."

15 minutes later, his co-producer, Arindam Bose, called. A Bengali and a Cornell graduate, Bose had the attention span to go through basic documentation and contracts—skills Roman severely lacked. Together, they made a deadly combo.

"Bose, shoot," said Vik as he picked up.

"It's a safe bet," Bose replied, sipping his midnight coffee. "A covert air force operation—bombing the neighbours in revenge for their attacks—it's the perfect story. We could take a few cues from *Top Gun* and churn out our own version."

"But?" asked Vik. Years of working with Bose had taught him—there was always a *but*.

"But the operation's being led by two female fighter pilots," said Bose. "Apparently, they're the best we've got."

"There's no way this is going to work in theatres with two heroines in a cockpit!" Vik shouted.

"Maybe we can cast one of the stars as the mission commander—someone handling everything from HQ," Bose suggested. "Make him a veteran war hero behind the scenes—with more screen time, of course. Sideline the women, cast a few newcomers as the pilots so they don't attract much attention."

"No, Bose. It's got to be the star entering enemy territory and risking his life!" Vik shouted.

snapped. "With all due respect to women, who's going to pay a dime to watch them save the day? No—we have to do something."

"Did you ever watch *I'm Not There*?" Bose asked. "Cate Blanchett plays Bob Dylan. If an actress can play a male character in a biopic, maybe we can get Vikram Khanna to cross-dress and play one of the pilots."

Vik hung up in disgust and dialled the Chief of Staff. "You have to change the pilots, and we've got a deal."

"Change the pilots? The operation's in less than two hours," the Chief said. "The planes are fuelled and the pilots have been briefed."

"No one's going to pay to watch female pilots on screen!" Vik shouted. "I respect that cinema's not your field, but even you should realise how this won't work at the box office."

"I'm not going to change my pilots solely because of your—"

"200 million," Vik cut in before the voice could finish. "For the entire Army. And 5% of the deal for you on top of that. In exchange, I get the copyright on the story and sequel rights. We'll get a journalist to write a book about the operation by this summer and release the film based on that book next year."

The amount silenced the Chief. Before he could think, Vik continued. "The pilots don't matter anyway, sir—you know that. Even if the operation fails, the public will never know. By tomorrow evening, the media will have declared an all-out victory. The story stays the same, the celebrations stay the same—only the players change. I'll personally talk to the pilots and compensate them handsomely."

Changing the plan at the last moment cost Roman Studios some serious money—but it cost the Army even more. The replacement pilots, sent at the last minute, crashed in enemy territory with clear evidence of espionage. Over the following year, that one failed operation snowballed into a nuclear war between the two nations.

The movie *Operation Annihilation* created a tsunami at the box office. Right in the middle of the war, with nationalism on steroids, it broke every record. Exactly 14 months after the call that started it all, the Prime Minister was ready to drop the A-bomb on enemy territory. And right at midnight, as people on both sides of the border slept, the phone rang once more in the Roman household.

"Mr. Roman, I've got a proposition for the sequel to *Operation Annihilation*," the voice said.

Hasib Ur Rashid Ifti is a writer and a fresh graduate of engineering.

POETRY

Even in hell, chanachur

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Because my wife gets motion sickness, we booked two seats in a non-AC compartment of the Sagardari Express to Jashore—one of many such compartments, each filled with the same dust and stories.

When the train whistled, a dust haze rose inside, filling the cabin, turning everything white—not the white a man desires in a woman's skin when choosing a partner for life.

This was a choking white, a thick, post-apocalyptic veil that clung to the air, making it hard to see, harder to breathe.

Then, cutting through the haze, a voice: "Chaaanaachurrrrr!" A seller, undeterred by the dust, his call sharp, almost absurd. I thought, Who would eat here, where the air is a battlefield, where eyes sting and lungs rebel?

But I was wrong. Ten, fifteen packs—20 taka each—vanished into hands. And I realised: even in the line to hell, waiting for punishment, we'd still reach for chanachur. We'd still find comfort in the crunch of survival.

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DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

Things I have had to forfeit and things I am unable to find

RAIAN ABEDIN

Patience, like moss, that grows on red soil. Conversations with friends, like inadequate breakfast. Lengths of borders, names of capitals. Birds, on asphalt, outlined by pink ribbons. Languages in which I am still waiting for you to show me the shapes of your bruised toes (let me water them). Ankle-deep pools where I was taught yelling could mean joy. Lights dimly flooding our faces. Falling while falling. Sleeping on the couch. Sleeping on the floor. In the car, sleeping, like a memory. My mother clutched onto me. Imagining cities. Uncertain fingers finding bruises against the light. Kerosene

lamps, my mother called them hariken batis, and the way they tended to make an island for a family. We were an island with compositions of bickering and yelling. Occasional bruises. Drawn out silences. The absurdity of growth. Of it all, really. The absurdity of memory, of clinging on to Sunday evenings, and to the sting of saltwater, first in your ear canals, then in your lungs. Sinking. I dreamt I was a flower deep in the ocean. The soil and the mycelium in their everlasting drape. Inside of me, my bones decalcify. I will become a reef, falling steady in the water. A joy, a lack of silence. We are all yelling together when the dream ends. I am back to where my ankles kiss the soil. A chameleon looks at me and I look back. Both living, allowed to not forfeit, by the actions of holding on. Like that can be beautiful. Stay in touch. Tell me the next thing I will lose will be the last. And from my mouth will grow water lilies. If I am a garden, I will stand next to where my mother's shadow falls. Made human by reaching out. Resting underneath. The sun in our pockets. The light whittling down. Childhood homes at dusk. Occasional bruises. Drawn out silences. And then the rest of the poem.

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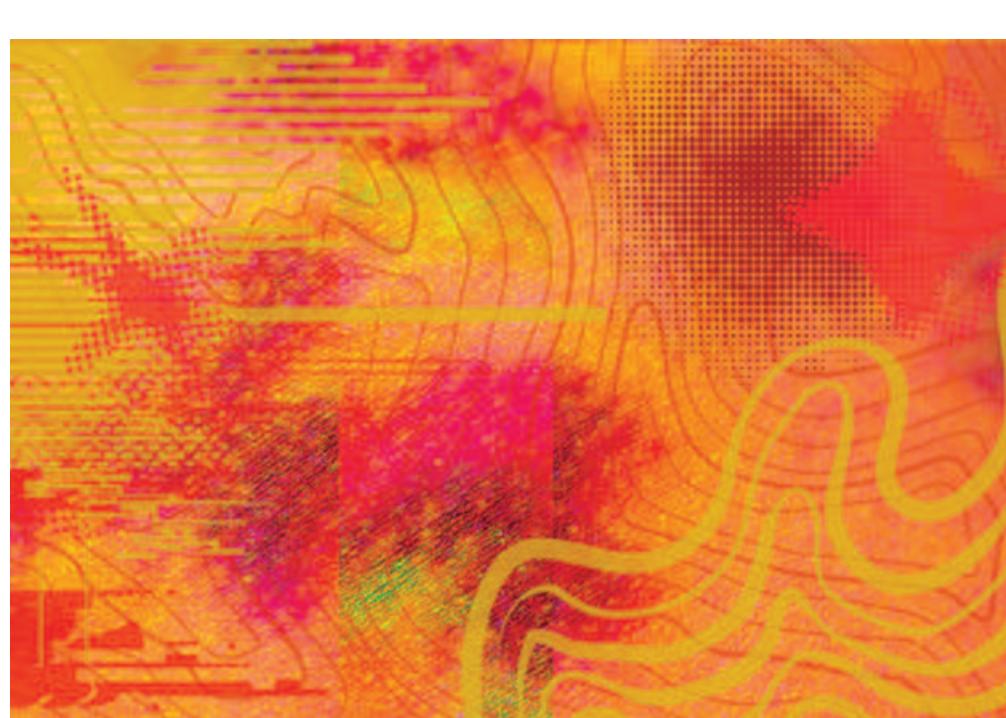


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