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The truth factory

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The Daily Star

FICTION

Fiction

The truth factory

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ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

By the year 2035, Dhaka forgets the scent of the Gulshan-Banani lake.

What once carried the rich tang of algae and the occasional breath of jasmine on humid evenings is now buried deep beneath slabs of concrete and webs of fiber optic cable. The old waterway still pulses faintly under the city, like a fading heartbeat that no one listens to anymore.

Above it, the skyline stretches sharp and blinding. Towers of chrome and mirrored glass catch the sun like blades. These are no ordinary office blocks—they are ministries with names so polished, so pristine, they almost ring false. One of them, taller than the rest, bears the name in silver letters: Shotto Karkhana.

'The Truth Factory'. It's not a metaphor.

In this version of the Republic, truth isn't something you search for. It's something you manufacture. You refine it. Wrap it. Export it. It goes out into the world like soap, or rice.

On the 39th floor, Mizan Rahman begins his day the same way he always does—quietly, with a cup of lukewarm tea.

He slides on his retinal visor, and the office around him shifts. The air flickers, then floods with ghostly projections—floating screens filled with voices, blurry images, and flagged posts. They hover in front of his eyes, tagged in red: TRUTH PENDING.

His job? To decide what version of reality the Republic will accept.

He's a Senior Content Sanitation Engineer. There is a fancy way of saying it: he's one of the last humans between the raw chaos of the world and the tidy, edible truths handed down to the people.

"Farmer suicides spike in Barisal due to fertiliser debt."

Mizan blinks.

Swipe.

"Rewritten: Rural Empowerment Credits Successfully Implemented in Barisal Region."

Approved.

No hesitation. No second glance. He moves quickly, calmly. The footage of crying children doesn't make him pause. Neither does the video of a woman holding up an empty water jug, or the charred remains of a public library in Kurigram.

Outside his office, the city hums with engineered calm. Billboards glow with holographic newsreaders who smile with mechanical serenity. Above every doorway, drones float quietly, flashing the day's Harmony Score: 99.2% emotionally compliant.

In Dhaka, feelings are monitored. Emotions are managed. Truth? It's no longer a question of right or wrong. It's just a job.

Mizan learned long ago to stop asking who it serves.

Three floors down, Anika Ahmed stares at her screen. A single blinking cursor waits for her to begin.

She is 26. Too young to be this tired, but too old to still be surprised. She clings to a fading version of herself—a girl who once recited Rabindranath in school, and who dreamed of a byline in an English daily.

Those dreams shattered quietly when journalism was folded into the Ministry of Harmony. They told her she could still write. And she does—sort of.

Her new title: Narrative Reframer.

Today's assignment is brutal. A voice clip from Rangpur. An old man speaks directly into the camera, his voice splintering like dry wood.

"They told us we'd be relocated. But they took our homes. Our water. And my son. Now they call it progress."

The words sting—but it's the silence between them that tightens Anika's throat. That hollow grief reminds her of something... no, someone.

Her father. He was a journalist once. One day, he simply didn't come home. No arrest. No funeral. No answers.

She still waits, some part of her.

Now, her task is to turn the farmer's agony into something palatable—a "gratitude reel." Script a few sunny lines for a Ministry-approved actor and to overlay smiling faces, images of food handouts, wide-eyed children in clean school uniforms.

She stares at the keyboard. Her fingers twitch.

"You can't keep doing this," she whispers.

But she starts typing anyway.

Because rent is due.

Because conviction doesn't pay for groceries.

Because someone else will tell the truth. Won't they?

Far from the gleaming towers, on the bruised edge of the city, a boy crouches beside a broken rice cooker. His name is Farhan. He's 17. His face is still soft, but his hands move like he's defusing a bomb. Inside the shell of the cooker, he fits a makeshift transmitter—scraps of drone hardware, scavenged motherboards, and hope. He calls his rig 'Kichu Kotha' (Some Words).

He doesn't need to be reminded why he's doing this.

He remembers his mother, screaming into a live camera when the officials came for his father.

"They said re-training," she cried. "But he reported on a school collapse. Now he's gone!"

Her voice was never broadcast. The footage vanished before it ever hit a feed.

But Farhan had saved it. He plays it back sometimes, just to remind himself that it was real.

Now, late at night, Kichu Kotha hisses to life on dead radio frequencies. It transmits scraps. Sighs. Half-sentences. Ghosts of voices the Republic thought it had buried.

"You are not alone."

"You're not broken."

"What they erased is still real."

He doesn't know who listens. Maybe no one. But he speaks anyway because silence is surrender.

One humid evening, Anika waits outside the Ministry gates for a rickshaw. A tea-vendor's stall crackles nearby, the static from his old transistor mixing with the heat.

Then—clear as breath—a voice breaks through: "They took our homes. But we are still here."

The voice. It's the Rangpur farmer.

Anika freezes.

Around her, the crowd murmurs. A child tugs at her mother's sari. "What did that voice mean?"

"Fake news," someone mutters.

But Anika's heart hammers. That clip was supposed to be gone. Deleted. Replaced. Sanitised.

So who brought it back?

Back in the Truth Factory, Mizan's visor flashes.

Alerts flood in.

Unapproved fragments are leaking through the firewall. Deleted images are reappearing. The sanitised protest he rewrote that morning—it's back. Raw. Unedited. Real. A boy's scorched face. A woman shouting into an unfiltered camera. The real camera.

And then something stranger—posts are being tagged automatically: resonating.

People aren't rejecting the unapproved truths. They're embracing them.

Truth, somehow, has become contagious.

Mizan tears off his visor. His own reflection stares back, worn and stunned. His eyes search the glass for answers he used to have.

For the first time in 15 years, he doesn't know what to do.

In a dim warehouse in Old Dhaka, Farhan gathers with others around a battered projector. An ex-professor is there, and a girl with a contraband camera. A tea-seller, strangers, all of them, yet bound by something heavier than fear.

They pass pen drives like prayer scrolls. Inside: deleted videos, lost poems, banned broadcasts.

Farhan sets the rice cooker down. Hits play. The room fills with breath, sorrow, fury—voices once erased.

No one speaks.

They listen.

Days pass.

Symbols begin appearing—drawn in chalk on sidewalks in Mirpur, scratched into school walls outside Khulna, sprayed under bridges on Shat Masjid Road.

Kichu Kotha.

The Ministry floods the city with alerts.

"Beware of unauthorised transmissions."

"Protect your Harmony Score."

"Report Misinformation."

But it's too late.

You can't unhear the truth.

The lie was never just in the stories they told. It was in the belief that people could forget how to feel.

By month's end, the Truth Factory falls silent.

Truth no longer arrives wrapped in approval tags or harmony metrics.

It crackles through old radios.

It whispers in alleyways.

It dances in chalk dust.

And in Dhaka, once again, people take the risk—because truth is not a script.

It's a protest. And protests don't ask for permission.

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