

Dream Defenders

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The Asia Foundation



Dream Defenders by Maria Riaz



Once upon a time in a land far away, a young boy named Dilawar lived in a small house by a stream. His community was called the Neighborhood of Dreams. It was filled with small houses and tiny streets where kids ran and vendors sold vegetables, goods, and sweets. The houses were so closely packed together that sunlight struggled to reach the neighborhood. Dilawar was a

brave child who wanted to help anyone in need.



Dilawar had three friends, Beena, Nomi, and Chotu. He loved to play with them. His friends each carried a big, heavy backpack and wouldn't let anyone see what was inside.



Dilawar could tell that these backpacks were full of secrets, and he knew that not all secrets were happy secrets. Today he and his friends were playing together under a huge banyan tree. This was their favorite spot to play marbles and Gulli

Danda. Beena was laughing, but Dilawar noticed bruises on her arms that told another story. Chotu, whose sad eyes were surrounded by dark circles, seemed to shrink under the weight of his heavy backpack. And Nomi was lost in thought.



Dilawar knew something was wrong and his friends needed help, but they would not share what was in their bags. Dilawar thought hard about what his friends might want. Beena might like some more colorful crayons, he thought with a smile.

Chotu always seems so sad, and laddus might remind him of the fun moments he could have. But for Nomi, Dilawar couldn't figure out what would make him happy.



Dilawar shared his plan for an activity with his friends. The idea was simple: the treats could be traded for items from their backpacks. Beena, Chotu, and Nomi thought it over and then searched their bags for something suitable to exchange with Dilawar.



“I have found something,” Chotu said innocently. It was a crystal ball filled with the image of a dark, secretive place. Chotu’s hands shook as he held it. “It’s a nightmare,” he said, “one that I don’t want anyone to see or know about. But I’m sharing it

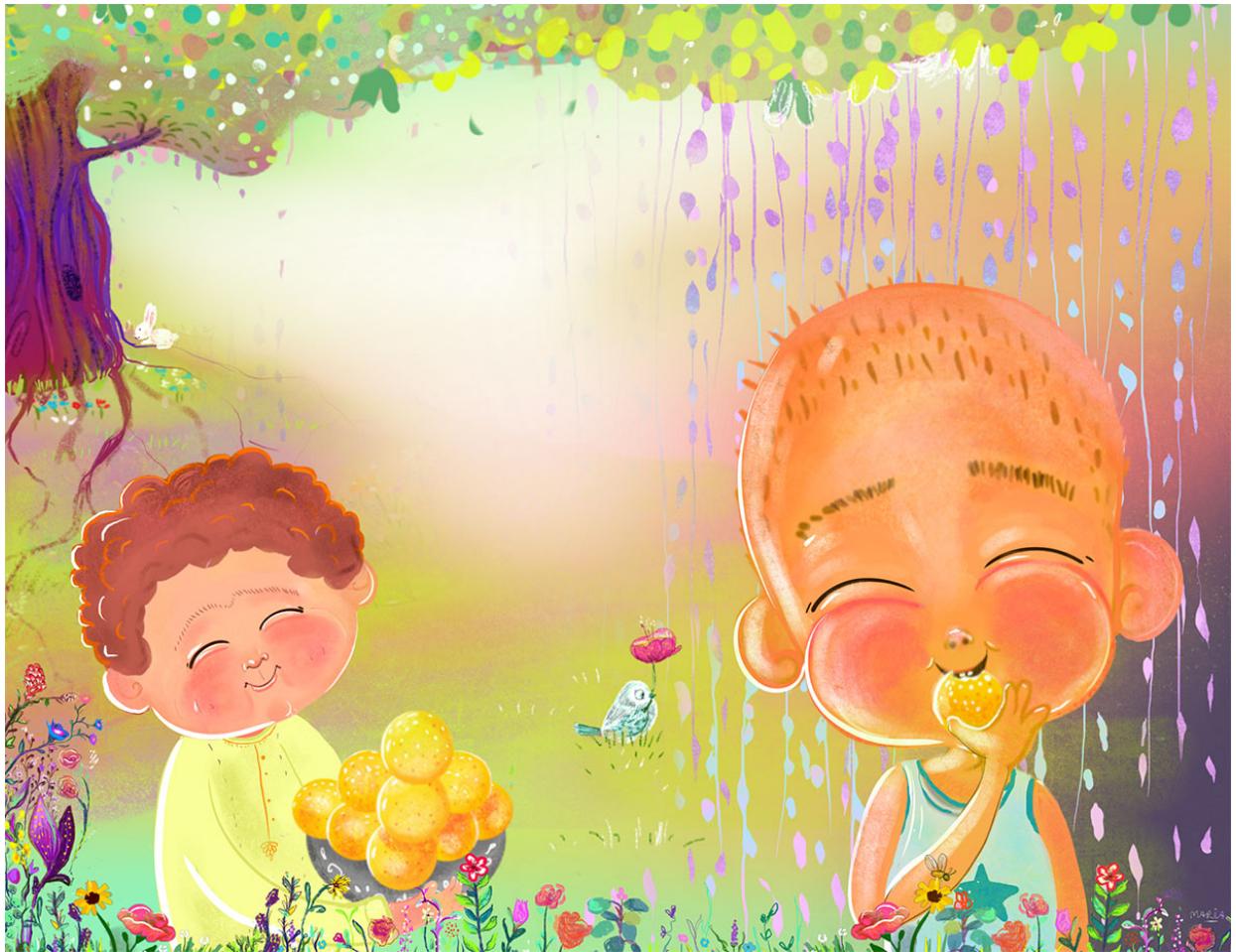
because you are my friends.” All of them stared at the crystal ball intently, but little did they know that this nightmare would suck them in.



They now stood in Chotu's room. They saw hands emerging from the looming shadows as Chotu trembled with fear and covered his eyes. Dilawar looked at Beena and Nomi and said, "We should help save Chotu from this shadow man."



Dilawar, Beena, and Nomi ran toward Chotu to rescue him. “Stop! You can’t frighten him anymore,” Beena said. “We are here to protect him.” “Light, oh, light, light of our dreams, light of love and humanity, lift these shadows and set us free,” Dilawar whispered.



When Chotu's backpack vanished, a big burden was lifted off his shoulders. He smiled with relief when Dilawar handed him his promised laddus. "I never knew laddus tasted this good!" Chotu exclaimed.



“I have a story to share, in exchange for the crayons,” Beena told Dilawar. “Amma and Abba are unhappy and often get very angry at each other and even me.” Beena turned pale and started crying as she said this. Chotu looked down at the laddu he was

eating, thought for a moment, and said, “Beena, I was so scared before I talked about my problems. I thought nothing could help, but help is always there, if we choose to seek it.” Beena looked up at Chotu with surprise and then slowly smiled.



“We will help you,” Dilawar promised. He, Chotu, and Nomi formed a circle around Beena, who stopped crying. “Let’s find a way to talk to your parents.” Chotu closed his eyes and said, “Oh, fairies of

dreamland, protect us from anger that
blocks love in our homes.



Suddenly colorful fairies appeared to protect Beena. Amma, Abba, and Beena shared a big hug. “Thank you for reminding us that we all matter. We should have realized that our actions were affecting you,” her father said.



And then Beena's bag disappeared.
With her gift of crayons from Dilawar,
she drew the prettiest butterflies,
which flew around her.



“My turn now!” Nomi says. “I’m feeling very sad for my older sister. She was walking back from school and some boys tried to steal her bag. Now she’s too afraid to go out. And Ami thinks that girls should not go to school.”



“That’s not what Brave Baji says,” Beena said. “Brave Baji?” the boys asked in surprise, their mouths agape. “Yes, she’s the smartest, strongest person I know. Let me call her!” Nomi’s backpack disappeared

with the mere mention of Brave Baji's
name



A little while later, Dilawar, Chotu, and Nomi peeked around the corner. They saw Brave Baji sitting with Beena and Nomi's sister in a room with other girls and women. "Girls can do anything they want, even protect themselves. I will show you

how!” Brave Baji said. Nomi is happy to see his older sister smile after so long. “Yes, you’re no longer alone!” a woman cried out.



Afterward, Chotu asked, “Oh, Brave Baji! Can you please teach me to protect myself, too? I promise I will share my prized laddus with you!” Everyone laughed, and Brave Baji replied, “Of course, Chotu!

Learning self-defense is everyone's right!"



Dilawar, Beena, Chotu, and Nomi created a team called Dream Defenders that keeps watch in their neighborhood now.



Discussion Questions Should we talk to someone about a problem no matter how afraid we are? Is it okay to share our feelings with our families? Should we know how to protect ourselves? Should we help others in need?



Do you feel any burdens on your shoulders, as if you are carrying a heavy backpack? This is your backpack. Do you want to share the secret you are keeping? This backpack belongs to _____.

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