

Jaypeg II

Prologue

John felt his cocoon slow down and felt it hit the ground. He could just remember the Speenu from the dining room in the Fuvia-heq of Seron, he could remember the fighting in the barn, and he could remember the strange man before he fell. His memories jumbled up in a mix of space and time but he could at least remember them.

He could feel his heart beating and in an instance, he was claustrophobic and wanted to get out but he was too shocked to move. A voice swam through his head from outside, “Welcome to Mount Everest. Please take a breath and within a few seconds, you will be at the foot. Collect your passports.”

Before John could register that, he could feel his cocoon shake and he fell again.

When the cocoon stopped moving again, this time, stopping without a jerk, there were lights around him. They were dim and John adjusted to it quite well. The cocoon opened and the seatbelt disappeared.

John immediately gained the feeling of familiarity as it reminded him of his first ride to the Fuvia-heq through a car in the parking lots at the basement of the town square as it dropped into nothingness...

“Please exit the transporter and proceed to the next stop.”

The voice was not piercing, just commanding yet gentle. John tumbled out and he could feel stars sparkling before his eyes. For a moment, he thought he was about to say, “Pretty Starry” and that would have happened if he did not hear a soft thump behind him. His cocoon had left the spot and another cocoon replaced it, carrying another passenger. It was Yu Ping.

Yu Ping had her eyes closed and as the voice commanded her to leave the transporter, she opened her eyes slowly. They were gaping wide with fear like the three-year-old kid who lost his way at their science fair the previous year. The voice repeated its message patiently and Yu Ping stumbled out, John was not even sure if her legs could hold her as they looked ready to buckle.

Yu Ping turned round and saw John. She smiled her very weak smile and then something behind John caught her eye. She pointed at the direction and John turned

around. There was a large purple arrow above an even larger doorway, pointing down. It was about a meter wide and three times as tall. Over the arrow was some sort of logo, a large Orange circle with a much smaller green circle in the center. In between the circumference of these two circles were four pairs of parallel lines, one positioned at the top, one on the left, one on the right and the other at the bottom. Around the logo were the words “Fuvia Resenjo Puto” in bold, large black.

“What does that mean?” John asked, bewildered.

“Welcome to Earth, Fuvia. That was what they told me. Welcome to Earth,” said Yu Ping.

This is not going well, not only for me, the government, the people but also our own lads. Through the entire city, there are riots, unhappiness, and protests against the Fuvia-heq. There is bloodshed, each lad attacking the next. No amount of curfews can resist the emotions of our lads in Seron, battling each other to get a piece of me.

How could this have happened? First thing, we had been organizing for our six young lads to go down to Earth for an urgent mission and the next, without warning, without preparation, Dalax had to send them down.

Dalax...How long ago have I placed him at the back of my brain, trying my best to keep the thought of him away? I would have long forgotten about him. Now, he is back from the dead, I was not sure how or why but he is back.

“Destroying the unity of the Fuvias, what is in there for him?” I thought but nothing came out of it.

Without the Fuvias, the Earth will trap themselves, with no way of escape. They will be on their own to defend themselves from every threat. They will not even be aware of a threat that will be deadly and hidden. They need us for the job.

That was it. Within days, the commotion here will be known in every single Fuvia city, there could be widespread riots, corruption, even wars. By then, every one will be after me, there will be protests...

Chapter 1

Apple would have much preferred a warning before dropping through space. It was not as though she did have a choice. She could not have imagined herself screaming out of terror. She had not screamed like that before and instead of making her feel relieved, as she had heard that screaming would release tension and all, she felt as though she was hysterical and not knowing what was happening made it all the more unbearable.

“Thump!”

Apple opened her eyes and looked around at her new surroundings. She was almost expecting to have landed on some college student named Newton and was part of a new breakthrough. However, that did not happen and when she thought about it, no one can withstand her falling onto their head, especially in a rock-hard cocoon.

She could feel the top of the cocoon disappear although she could not see any difference as the roof was as clear as air. If she had not heard the cry, she would have thought that the roof was staying there forever.

“Apple!” cried John.

Apple was stunned and part of her was disappointed that she had not discovered gravity. Man, she thought, my brain has a mind of its own. With that, she giggled at her own joke.

Yu Ping and John walked over to the cocoon as the demanding voice told Apple to exit the transporter as politely as it could. Apple could hear Yu Ping say, “Apple look disoriented. Do you think she’s okay?” Apple knew that she was not okay and told her own brain to focus and to stop running about to the ends of the universe and back in maple syrup.

Apple made a conscientious effort to snap back to reality and Yu Ping’s constant waving in front of her gave her the final push off from potty land. The voices appeared once more, saying in a threatening and yet tired voice, “You have five, four, three, two...”

The cocoon disappeared suddenly and Apple landed on the soft circular area where the cocoon had been. This time, she was certain that she was awake. John tugged her off the spot and Apple rolled off and down beside John who fell backwards, landing on Yu Ping who fell with them.

In less than a split second or Apple would dare say, in about a hundredth of a second, a round container shaped like an egg came onto the spot where she had been just that short time ago.

George landed on the spot in his cocoon looking as though he was eating something sourer than lemon concentrate. His face slowly loosened up as he risked opening one eye and he looked around him with one eye before opening another. The voice told George patiently to get off.

Apple's mind wandered off to the point where she discovered gravity when George fell on her head and she was spending the rest of her life communicating through two fingers typing out the Morse code. She was losing it, she thought. Then she realised that George almost killed her and she could feel reality coming back to her. The numbness she had in her brain was almost over until she thought back on the scene at Seron's Fuvia-heq where she fell.

She could remember having helped caught the bank robbers of Seron and it turned out to be a fraud. She could also remember her father's face. Was it full of concern or had it been full of tired wrinkles? Maybe it was both. Either way, she could not have believed that he had been in on it all the while, without her knowing.

George managed to get out of the cocoon all on his own and seconds later, Peter's cocoon fell and landed. Peter was shocked and fascinated. He stepped out of the cocoon, much steadily than the others. Moments later, Esther's cocoon fell and John and Peter had to pull him out altogether.

They walked through the doorway above, which said, "Fuvia Resenjo Puto" and followed the big arrows which said, "Arrival" pasted all over the floor and entered a much smaller room.

They walked into the room and there was very little furniture there. In fact, apart from a desk and a chair, there was nothing else in there but yellow walls and a perfumed scent around it. A young man who sat in the chair behind the desk gave each of them a small book and a card with their face on it.

"These are your passports, and the smell is the perfume of the lad who came here with her purse full of branded perfume and tons of testing slips of perfume. Not a bad cocktail I should say but I am lucky not being able to smell it."

“Why?” asked John.

“I’m not really here. I am in and from Ukaland. You are new around here, right. How old are you?” asked the young man, peeking curiously at them.

“Ten,” said Esther as resentfully as he could muster.

“Well, actually, just going on nine,” said George.

“Do you always have to disagree with me?” snapped Esther.

“No, but it gives me the pleasure.”

“Whoa, nine,” said the young man. He sat back on his chair and looked up. Then, he moved his eyes to the floor and finally, he looked into their eyes. “Nine,” he repeated.

“There must be a pretty good reason behind this or that the world is in some serious crisis that needs you to sort it out or...” he paused here and his eyes looked somewhat afraid and then, a hint of sadness.

He continued, “If this was by accident... Our Fuvia-wheel needs some serious adjustments and before that...”

He looked at them seriously, and made Apple feel the hair, on her head, stand like that of an electrified hair. He added, “The cities will be in a mess if they learnt about this. Man, there could be riots, lynchings, massacres...” He shut his eyes and sat back.

“But your mission is not over and you would not be able to go back till it is. So, enjoy yourself and learn from the experience. Welcome to Earth.”

The young man pushed a button on the table and both the table and the chair disappeared. Surprisingly, he disappeared along and in the place of the furniture; six chairs appeared, ominously resembling that of the chair back at the dining room in Seron’s Fuvia-heq, which made them drop through the floor and into the foreign land so many miles below. The thought itself made them shiver and collapsible. By an unknown force, they found themselves strapped to the chair and the chair moved slowly out through another door, leading away from the transporter.

In the even smaller room, there was no light. Once the door closed, they could feel the chairs vibrate a little and the next few minutes were in dreadful silence.

This is my fault. How could I have agreed to send the six nine-year olds down to Earth? I laugh at the thought. The choice was final, they were meant to go on the mission, and there was nothing I could do about it.

This is what Dalax wanted, ever since he set foot here. Without his presence, we could have put an end to the two world wars but he was against it. He drove the Fuvia-wheel into chaos. He erased everyone's memory which lasted for a whole period of seventeen years, everyone had nowhere to go, or no idea if there was somewhere to go to. We did not even remember our names.

It had all worked out in the end when everyone regained their memories, and were pretty confused, having experienced two different lives as many had started a new life after losing their memories.

Chapter 2

Apple's brain was numb. She could not think about anything. Whatever she wanted to recall, she could not. She could feel herself in suspended animation. She willed herself to move but the darkness pressed down on her, holding her in place.

She could feel light through her eyelids and she risked opening them. She found herself on a simple wooden stool around her the height of her waist. She saw, in front of her, a sort of curtain, blue, suspended by circular hangers from a pole extending from one end of the cubicle to another. Cubicle... Apple turned around and found herself looking at a full-length mirror. She stood up and in a moment, she felt the weird sensation of being on the ground. She looked down at the tiled floor, trying to take everything into her brain of numbness.

The curtain ruffled a little and someone called out, "Anyone in there?"

"Yes, yes," Apple opened her mouth to say but nothing came out apart from the hiss of the letter 's' at the end of the words.

Apple slid the curtain open and looked out apprehensively. Once she had stepped out, a young woman about twice her age bustled in and closed the curtain. She carried what seemed like a whole stack of laundry.

The cubicle that Apple had just emerged from was a changing room as it seemed and she looked around at the ten or so changing rooms that lined both sides of the

corridor. She saw Yu Ping poke her head out of the changing room at the far end of the same row and she looked around just as Apple had before. Yu Ping slowly walked out and caught Apple's eye. Yu Ping walked up to Apple and looked around some more.

"Wow. What happened?" Yu Ping asked with a dazed look on her face.

"Earth. I suppose. Looks the same to me."

At that moment, Esther fell out of a cubicle and onto the floor, apparently shattered by seeing himself in the mirror in the cubicle. He scrambled to his feet and waved at them, then, he stumbled towards them, trying to keep a steady gaze.

People walked around them, in and out of the changing rooms, not noticing the three children who appeared from nowhere.

Peter, who had been the first to step out of the cubicle, was browsing or, more likely, admiring the shopping area, came to join them. Feeling rather disoriented, they decided to get some fresh air. That was when Apple asked, "Where's John?"

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John had found himself in another changing room in another apparel shop, as the changing rooms in the main shopping area, where the others were transported to, were full. He walked out of the changing room, feeling all alone and deserted, he walked towards the door that led to the outside to get some fresh air as he hoped it would clear up his brain.

Once he stepped outside, he could feel the heat from the sun, burning into his skin. He shielded his eyes from the sun and looked around him. There were many people. There were more people than John had ever seen in his life and he had the feeling that everyone was giving him hostile looks and no one looked him straight in the eye.

"Rio!" a voice called from not far away.

John looked at the person whom the voice had belonged to and he looked right back. It was a feeling of familiarity and it was not as hostile as the look the other people gave him. He did not hear exactly what the person had called him but he acknowledged with a smile.

John did not know what else to say but, "Have a nice day." When he realised that the stranger was glaring at his face with a weird expression, he was a little imitated and emitted a soft, "And why are you staring at me like so?"

“I see you have perfected your non-aging formula,” said the stranger.

The feeling of goodwill vanished in an instance like the breeze that stopped as suddenly as it had started without any of them realising that there was a breeze. John just wanted to get away now, uncertain of what may result from this conversation. “Who was this guy?” John thought to himself, “And what is he talking about?” Mentally, he told his own feet that at the count of three, to take a step back. However, his feet were disobedient.

He stammered, “My what? What are you talking about? I do not know you.”

The stranger paused for a while and he stared into John’s eyes, making him feel the same feeling as the sun had burned into his skin.

“Rio, Rio, how long has it been?” the stranger said, smirking.

John was startled and he swallowed a particular large chunk of saliva as he recognised his father’s name. Then again, there could be many people called Rio. With that thought, he tried to focus on the drop of sweat currently skiing down the stranger’s nose.

The stranger moved towards John and said, “Do not think that you can escape me by pretending to be a ten-year old kid. I knew you since you were a pea and shall be able to recognise you until you turn to ashes. Right now, I have no wish to recognize you.”

John finally took a step back but he did not feel any better. He shook his head in disbelief, “I’m not Rio, I’m John and I’m only going on nine years old.”

The stranger looked angrier and John cowered, and hoped to be able to take ten steps back and run away but his feet planted him on the ground with their final attempt at defiance. John could see the many people walking back and forth all around him and wanted to be part of that hostile group instead of talking to dangerous lunatic who mistook him for another person.

“I’m not Rio, I’m John,” he repeated again, his voice almost at a breaking point of fright. The stranger kept quiet for a while as though deep in thought. Then he looked down, then up again.

“Your shoelaces are undone,” the stranger said and John looked down, realising immediately that he was wearing shoes with Velcro stick-on. John looked up and saw the

stranger walking away. There was something strange about him. It was not only what he said or how he said it. John did not know and he could not figure out why.

“John!”

John turned around to see Yu Ping and the other members of his club jog up to him. “John!” repeated Yu Ping. John could not think properly but he accepted this greeting warmly and was so relieved that he could have cried.

Then, John recalled something that his mother had said to him. “If you can look directly into his eyes, he’s a Fuvia like you,” John muttered under his breath and it brought to him a sudden realisation.

“I saw a fellow Fuvia!” said John excitedly and filled them with the details.

The wars ended on their own after wiping out hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. No one had seen Dalax again and no one actually knew of him as he worked in the dark, secretly plotting. I was the only one who saw him activate that machine, I was the only who knew what happened.

I wish I could just forget about this whole business.

Forget. That machine Dalax used. It is still here in Seron’s Fuvia-heq! If I could just make a few adjustments to the machine, I might be able to make everyone forget about the six young lads. This could put an end to all these nonsense.

“Bam!”

I heard the arrival of the car seats on the arrival patch. Who could it be? The Fuvia-heq has been cordoned off and I was the only one in here, and shame to say, to hide.

I scrambled from my chair and I left my bedroom, and there they are. Standing right before me was the head of our Fuvia-wheel, from the greatest city, Penato, and his associates.

“Hello, Hasher,” the head said, I could not see his eyes behind those dark sunglasses but I could feel that they are cold, unfeeling and dying to kill me.

This is so not the time to arrest me. I have found a way to stop all these nonsense. I could bring this city back to life if only I can get to the machine to make them forget all these had ever happened.

Chapter 3

“What are we going to do now?” asked Yu Ping and everyone turned to look at her. Apple knew that if Yu Ping did not know what to do, the rest of them will be at a loss. In fact, Yu Ping was supposed to be the one with the most knowledge of being a Fuvia.

“We should be asking you that question,” Apple said, wiping sweat away from her forehead. They have proceeded into the shade of an orange covered-shelter and had sat on the orange seats for about half an hour, wondering what was going on, or more specifically, wondering about what they could do, what they have to do, and how they are going to do it. A white bus with what seemed to be a commercial for a brand of a contraption for washing clothes drove past them.

“I heard that you cannot contact anyone from the Fuvia-heqs. It would be too easy to intercept the transmission and we’ll be known to the people,” said Yu Ping, adding to their depressing mood.

Apple thought that being known to the people might not be such a bad idea. However, her trail of thought ended there and was filled with immediate worry and anxiety.

“There must be a way of contact. I do not believe that they would send lads down here to fend for themselves. Yu Ping, you must have known something which might help,” said John.

Yu Ping was silent, and this silence was almost filled with hope and anticipation.

“I can’t remember anything. Oh no, oh no,” said Yu Ping said softly. She closed her eyes and held her head. Her face scrunched up and her hands shook her head roughly and everyone else felt at a loss.

A thought struck Esther. “Isn’t Yu Ping a...” he said. Apple turned to look at Yu Ping who had now stopped shaking her head but still had the tension pulling at all parts of her face as though she was trying very hard to do something. If Yu Ping could tell what was happening in Seron at the moment, they could be able to find some way to contact the Fuvias, either by watching the briefing of other Fuvias before they come down to Earth or if by any chance, see a Fuvia contact another Fuvia on Earth.

After what seemed like the time needed for the Earth to experience another ice age, Yu Ping's eyes snapped open and she looked at the others with a blank gaze and then she looked down and mumbled something which was too muffled for anyone to hear.

"What, what is it? Did you manage to..." said Esther, chalking up a habit of not finishing off his sentences.

Yu Ping looked up sadly at Esther then at Peter, John and Apple. "My ability cannot be used here to contact with the Fuvia-wheel," Yu Ping said, even more depressingly, "Looks like I can only see things happening on this level, the ground floor of Earth."

"But that will mean that we're..." said Esther.

"Stuck here till I'm about twelve years of age," replied Yu Ping.

"Twelve years of age?" asked Apple.

"My ability will strengthen as I grow older and I had been told by my brother that I would most likely be able to see places despite of the different levels when I reach something called 'puberty'. And when I'm twenty, I would be able to see onto different Fuvia-wheels. When I'm thirty, other Fuvia-circles," explained Yu Ping and Peter moved to sit next to her and instinctively, Yu Ping put her head onto his shoulder and started to sob.

Apple could not stand the thought of having to stay down here till she was married with ten children. She felt depressed that she cannot do anything about anything and she felt more helpless than she ever had before. In fact, she had never felt helpless before.

Two buses passed by the bus stop which they were taking shelter in and left, emitting a black smoke as they maneuvered forwards into another road. Once, a bus stopped at the bus stop and a few teenagers alighted, chatting and laughing.

Apple thought off the irony that older people ought to be more dead and lifeless but watching these fifteen-year-olds walk past them, she felt that her solemn level was ten times their height. In moments, she found herself hoping that she was from Earth and she felt really awkward at the thought. She had been priding herself as a person from Earth since the first time she opened her eyes and had only learnt not long ago that she and her kind were in charge of saving the Earth from itself.

Yu Ping had stopped sobbing and was asleep on Peter's shoulder and Peter was regarding every structure in the area, seemingly very interested in what he was seeing.

Apple could not see what was so amazing about the high-rise buildings, the shops and the vehicles that swam past them every so often. She had seen city structures like this before in Penato, the biggest city in the world, or more so, the biggest city in the Fuvia-wheel. The thought made her brain numb. The only difference was that the buildings and structures here are much shabbier than in Penato and the vehicles less stylish than those from home. What surprised Apple most was the fact that there were trees in the area. She did not notice any trees in Penato.

“John!”

A voice cried out from not far away and everyone turned their heads in the direction of the young man now running towards them. Apple caught his eye and he nodded with a smile.

There is no time to lose. I have to do it now. I could even get these people off my backs.

“Do you mind if I go to the washroom before continuing the journey? I do suppose you're here to arrest me,” I say, trying to keep my face from trembling.

I thought I was insane to want to go through with this under the nose of the highest authority here but I am desperate. If they took me away now, there will be no more hope from Seron and the head is known to have demolished cities deemed useless to the council.

With them here, I could even erase their memories of this never happening. I have them in my hands. It is now or never.

“Go ahead,” said the head.

My heartbeat pumped at the speed of sound and I hoped I did not show it. I walked slowly to the toilet cubicle and put my hand on the cold door knob.

It is now or never.

Chapter 4

“Ah, so you’re the lads sent down to help me! Good, you’re the best for the job and I believe you’re one of the best,” the young stranger said.

He was dressed in a collared-tee shirt, his complexion, similar to many of those Apple had seen today, the look on his face, natural and accommodating, but there was more behind that. She shook off the thought with the conclusion that she was getting paranoid but she could not help remembering the first encounter John with the man. Did he have some kind of feud with John’s father? What was it that triggered so much emotion in him? Most importantly, why was it that he now had a change of attitude?

“Hi to you too,” said Apple. The rest introduced themselves and they exchanged hand shakes.

For a while, the stranger, who introduced himself as Ray, avoided John’s eye and they something came over him in an instance and he looked directly at John. John held his hands together behind him and looked back at Ray and told him, “We’ve been sent here to look for you and...”

“Help finish my mission, right?” finished Ray.

“So, what is your mission?” asked Apple.

“The earth is at war with itself, terrorists, bombings, assaults, abductions, killings...it’s just a big mess. Everyone fears every turn they take, unsure of what they’ll find beyond the turn. These terrorists could be anyone with a new faith, to seek and destroy. It could be me, it could be you, we would never know,” explained Ray.

He paced to the corner of the shelter and back again to them. He said, “So, I’m working on a potion, an antidote to all those mixed feelings. It’ll calm them, tell them that the world is the same; everyone on it is the same. When they realize that everyone is the same as they are, they’ll put down their weapons and hopefully, life goes on with fewer mess ups.”

“What if that doesn’t work out?” asked Apple.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” replied Ray.

Ray gestured to them to follow him and they followed, there was nothing else they could do.

Ray said, “You lads can stay at my place, or actually, it’s a friend’s place and I need to know your details and forge you a people-identity. If you’re found not to be part

of this nation, you'll most likely to be kicked out. Also, they've increased security, to prevent trouble-makers from entering and you could be on their 'wanted' list if you're not careful."

Apple nodded and glanced around her. On her right, John was looking all around him, taking in the sights, yet, the look on his face suggested that he was either relieved or apprehensive of what lies ahead. On her left, Peter was admiring the concrete pavement and the occasional dried leaves on the ground; he stepped on all of them, making crunching sounds as he went along. Behind her, Esther and Yu Ping walked side-by-side, looking blankly at their surroundings.

That was when Apple realized that it was no longer as hot as before and the weather was cooling down. She looked up in the sky and noticed the dark clouds that covered it, curious that the clouds have overcast the sky without being noticed by her. With that, Ray quickly beckoned them into the shelter of a high-rise building as it started to drizzle. In an instance, it started to pour and the ground moaned with an oh-great-not-again sort of silence.

They wound through the shelter paths between the buildings, which they realize to be apartments where the people lived in, and finally, they stopped at one. There was a metal door encased into the concrete walls and when Ray pushed the metal button beside it, it opened with a shuffling sound and Ray motioned for them to get in. They did not move.

"I know, I don't like it either but it's the 14th floor and unless you want to take the stairs, this lift is the only way up," said Ray.

They figured that Ray could be trusted on this since he was in it already. They entered and the lift's doors closed with a sickening 'thud'. Ray pushed a button in on some sort of control area with many buttons, each with either a number or a picture on it which much explained itself. The numbers were the number of the different floors, the red bell-shaped picture represented the emergency alarm, and the two buttons above it, the one on the left with two arrows pointing away from a single line in between them and the other with two arrows pointing towards the single line in between them which Apple figured it meant the opening and closing of the doors.

The lift vibrated all the way up, making Apple hope that there was something in it to hold on to. Suddenly, it jerked to a stop.

Apple could see off the ledge of the corridor, air. Beyond the air, a large collection of similar buildings, some brown in colour, made with bricks and a small number of buildings in the further distance, made her fear of height escalate. To Apple, the buildings felt as though they had a tendency to fall, with their centre of gravity so high up and with such a narrow base. In short, she had not seen any buildings as tall as such. The height in which she thought a building should have should not exceed the maximum of seven storeys. Also, she found herself questioning the stability and structure of the building. “How many times does a building collapse?” she asked herself. She almost laughed at herself.

“Only once,” said Yu Ping.

Apple looked at her and said the first thing that came to her mind, “You read minds too?”

“No, you were talking aloud.”

Apple did not feel any better with that reply, instead, she felt much worse.

She replied, “Great help.”

Ray led them towards a door at the end of the corridor and pushed a round button to its left. A bell sounded behind the door, making Apple’s heart pound faster than it already was. She asked herself if this stranger could be trusted. She asked herself why they had believed him and followed him up the building. The thought of it made her dizzy as she glanced off the corridor and down onto the ground that seemed miles below her. She did not feel that way when he saw Earth up at the Fuvia-heq.

Earth. Soon, it was safe to say that she hated Earth more and more especially with the insecurity she felt in her. She reminded herself that she had trusted in Ray as there was nothing else they could do about their situation. That was not a truly happy thought but at least, Ray looked rather trustable, was he? Apple felt nervous once more. Here she was, standing in front of the door that would be opened in a few moments, with no warning as to what laid beyond it. Apple had never jumped into situations that were out of her control. Then she remembered that just a few days or was it just a few hours ago that she ran empty-handed into a trio team with guns. Apple reassured herself that those

'crooks' were with the P.F.A, Protection of Fuvias Association and were unlikely to harm her.

The doorknob jerked and the door opened with a start which made Apple jump. She could feel a drip of sweat rolling down her face and into her shirt. The door creaked open at the corner and an eye appeared in the tiny slot. It caught Ray's eye and it swung open fully, welcoming them into the apartment.

The eye, as Apple saw, belonged to a middle-aged woman who looked, coincidentally, like Apple's mother, maybe not so but the air she emitted was somehow alike. Apple scrutinized her but when the woman looked back at her, she did not seem to be able to catch her eye. Instead, the woman looked through her as though she was a transparent wall.

After exchanging a few words with the woman, Ray ushered them into a room. Feeling weak in the legs, Apple sat down on the first chair she saw. Ray said, "You can stay here for as long as you want, free of charge."

"Really?" said George.

"Yes and I would even show you around now. Bring along your passports."

"Passports?" asked John.

"Don't you have them?"

"Right, got them," said John and pulled the book they had been given not long ago.

"Follow me then."

Apple patted her pocket to check that her passport was still there and looked around everyone else. Peter had a look on his face that said, well, nothing. John had a look of excitement. George was rather awed by everything, including the tiled floor beneath his feet. Yu Ping looked happy enough although she looked like Peter's expression. Esther was on his feet and looked ready to jump into anything. One thing they had in common was the sweat that was trickling down their faces and necks.

A loud thunder outside jerked Apple back to her senses, it was followed by torrential rainfall. Ray rushed to the window and shut it.

"Looks like the outing is off, maybe tomorrow," said Ray.

I took a small breath and then I took off, running towards the escape hatch where the machine is kept. I crashed through the briefing room and ran into the stairs. I could hear the many panicked footsteps behind me; they were coming close very quickly. What was I thinking? I have no idea and I am no Olympic runner.

I was too close to the goal to give up. I kept on running to the machine. It was a very small device with a screen like a computer. It does not belong here. It belonged to where Dalax came from which is still a mystery to me.

Chapter 5

It was the first time Apple had ever slept so well through the night. At least, that was what she thought she did for when she woke up, the day was still dark. She could still feel the fried noodles they had for dinner and the taste in her mouth. Out the window, there was nothing but black darkness and the rumbling sound of traffic. An extremely long sound as though that of an electric shaver sounded and it ended as though into a distance.

In a while, her eyes adjusted to the darkness and the door to the room opened, letting in a dim stream of light. A figure entered, took an unidentified bottle from the drawer of the table at the corner of the room and left, bringing the room back to darkness. All the while, Apple had kept herself from moving, partly from surprise and another part from common sense. For whatever reason, Apple reasoned, if he got up in the middle of the night to do something, it was not one to be known. Then again, she could just be paranoid. The door opened again and Apple froze. She could make out the outline of an adult, definitely Ray, she thought. Ray placed the bottle back into the drawer and locked it and tied the key around the chain around his neck. That, Apple thought, she had not seen before. Ray turned around to get out and the light from outside shone on his face. He looked to the left of Apple and then to the drawer. Then, his face had a sad smile. He looked outside then left again, closing the door behind him.

Apple looked to her left and saw John's face facing her and a thumb was in his mouth. Gross, thought Apple, then second thought that John was a baby. She double-checked it with her previous experiences with him and agreed to her final decision. She felt herself yawn and her eyelids slipping down. In a moment, she was fast asleep.

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“Here. This is Milo, a drink you have with breakfast,” said Ray, giving each of them a cup with great smelling brown liquid in it.

It was a fine day outside, the sky, the sun, the clouds, the sun, the traffic, the sun, the birds and the sun. Ray had bought them face towels and toothbrushes and labeled each with each of their names and placed them in the toilet the day before. Apple felt herself being dragged out of the mattress they had been using as a bed the previous night. Yu Ping shook her till she was awake and in a daze, Peter led her to the toilet and after a fog of washing and cleaning, she had found herself sitting at the round table in the kitchen. Ray had said that the owner of the house wanted them to be out of the house before she awakened. “Not to high about kids” that was what Ray had said about her.

Apple had sat down next to Yu Ping who seemed to be as lively as the early bird and was putting a spread on a slice of bread. That was when she realized that there was a sliced loaf of bread in front of her. Yu Ping handed the bread that she was applying butter on to Apple. With a small ‘thanks’, she accepted it and placed it inside her mouth while having her early morning daze.

Apple could have sworn that Ray hesitated before handing one of the cups to John. Apple told herself again, not to get herself get paranoid. Suddenly, John crouched over and held his stomach and ran into the toilet. Apple saw that John had not touched his drink and silently felt relieved.

“Are you alright, John?” asked Ray, knocking on the door.

“Fine, only the opposite,” replied John.

“Must be something he ate,” said Ray to the rest of them, “I’ll give him some medicine later. Come on, have some breakfast, we’re going out soon.”

Apple chewed on her bread, feeling much awake every minute. She started on her Milo and after drinking much of it in one gulp, she decided that it tasted good and cleaned it from the cup. Ray stuffed a slice of bread into his mouth as the toilet door opened and went into the room. He took out a bottle and poured a pill into his hand. Then he brought it to John and passed him his cup of Milo.

“Swallow it and you’ll feel better.”

“No thanks, I’m fine. This happens all the time,” said John, pushing off the pill and the drink.

“You sure about that?”

“Yes. Sure, no problem.”

“Okay.”

Ray brought the bottle back into the room. Apple thought that he had looked disappointed yet he seemed greatly relieved. Apple heard the drawer click and lock shut.

It was easy enough to figure out and I realized that it had been set to the right people I want to make disappear from everyone’s memories. There, on the screen, said, “John, Apple, Yu Ping, Peter, Esther, George. Click to confirm action.” There is no time to lose. The head’s associates were all over me. I held my breath and hit the big purple button that was blinking continuously and a colourless gas escaped and hit the big city lads around me. They fell back against the walls with a blank expression and looked around, confused and lost.

I knew of a passage way from this escape hatch to the reservoir. Still holding my breath, I opened a door to the left and placed it in the passage way and quickly sealed it. I took my breath and crashed against the wall. Exhausted did not half cover my feelings.

I led the confused head and his associates to the transporting machine and they followed behind in a single file, looking around as though amazed with a dumb look on their faces. If I was not so nervous, I could have laughed at the scene of the greatest minds being stupefied.

I walk with them into the underground transporter as quickly as I can before they realize what I’ve done. After punching the code number on the access pad, the door swung open and I tell them to sit on the chairs that were in there. There were four of them and five chairs but that did not matter at all. They obliged, a little apprehensive of the chairs. I went over to the control board and typed in “Penato City, Fuvia-heq”.

Chapter 6

“Magic?” asked Esther.

One bright sunny day, as more than usual, they made their way through the streets.

“Yes. Believe it or not, your choice,” replied Ray.

“Where?”

“Just there.”

After stepping into the shade, Ray stepped into a small shop at the end of the line of shops. The small red bells hanging on the handles of the door tingled as he pushed against it.

“Here to watch my television again?” asked the counter lady, arranging some boxes on the shelves behind her. Ray shrugged and the lady smiled at him then turned to Apple then looked at the other five behind her. “You brought company too,” said the lady, smiling.

There was a clinical smell to the place, one of fresh paper towels and a dash of flower fragrance. Sure enough, there was a large vase of bright flowers on the table against the wall.

“Say, “hello, auntie,”” said Ray, turning to face the six lads beside him.

After doing as they were told, they followed Ray’s gesture as he beckoned them towards a few chairs at another table further into the shop where a television sat. Apple almost wondered why she had not noticed it when they first stepped into the shop but she sat down to enjoy whatever Ray was so excited to show them.

There was a stage. There was a man on the stage. There was a man dressed in a tuxedo on the stage. That man was holding a large red handkerchief. He shook it in front of him as if to an audience and turned it to its back. He shook the handkerchief again as if determined to prove that it was just an ordinary cloth. He held the handkerchief in his left hand and with his right hand, he pointed a finger towards the audience then withdrew it and placed, palm up, underneath the handkerchief. With a swift flick of his hand, he pulled the handkerchief down and away from his hand and on his palm stood a pink dove. It fluttered and ruffled its wings. The man placed the index finger of his right hand in front of the pink dove and it stepped on. Instantly, there was a roar of applause from whatever audience he had in front of him.

He walked towards the side of the stage where a small table was and placed the dove in the cage on the table. The man whipped out another handkerchief, blue this time, from his pocket with his right hand and waved it over his other hand and in an instant; a blue-coloured dove appeared. With flourish, he brought even more and more doves into existence. In less than a few minutes, he had a cage full of doves on the table.

“How did he do that?” asked John.

“That’s magic,” replied Ray simply.

“I bet he tricked us. I bet he had secret compartments, secret mirrors. No way he could have pulled it if it was meant to be real,” said John, shaking his head.

“And that’s why the sky is falling,” said Ray with a dark expression on his face, as though he was thinking very hard or had a total distaste as to what he heard.

“How so? I mean, why?” Apple asked.

“Because people are telling their kids that these aren’t real. That these are all out to trick the dumb and innocent and their only purpose is to show how smooth they can pull a trick and how they can make it seem so real. All you have to do is to pull a kid any older than five or six and he’ll tell you that he was not fooled by the trick master,” said Ray, his voice still as indifferent but his words were filled with sadness and disappointment.

Apple wondered why Ray seemed so disappointed. Then again, she thought, he never seemed like the happiest person in the world. Whatever it was, she thought that he had so much in him that he had not told them, so many secrets that he had set out to keep. How he could keep so much to himself that made him such a sad strange man, she could not make out but there was... anger, yes, that was it, anger, in his eyes. Apple had never seen that emotion before but she knew it was true, something told her that it was true and she believed it.

The man had already left the stage and another guy entered. He pushed a box, twice as long as it was high, on some sort of trolley, onto stage. He opened it and they heard a sound as though that of opening a lock and then, he separated the box into two. Raising both his hands to the audience, he asked for a volunteer. “Would anyone want to help me here,” he said and suddenly, he pointed towards his right. The camera swung

towards the audience and Apple saw the audience, adults, children and a couple of elderly people. "Come on, yes, you."

Immediately, the camera zoomed in on an individual and a light shone on her. It was a young woman of about twenty and she looked very surprised and almost reluctant to go on stage but the crowd cheered her on. She left her seat and walked towards the aisle and jogged down the stairs to the stage where the magician pulled her on.

"Welcome, ma'am. I'll just be conducting a small experiment; I've been saving my first try for this show. If anything goes wrong, the paramedics will be waiting outside with the ambulance," said the magician, shaking the woman's hand.

The woman made a gesture as if she wanted to go back but the magician held her back. "It's going to be fine, I've seen it being done loads of time and most of the time, it works," said the magician. That must be very consoling, thought Apple with sarcasm.

Eventually, the magician got her to lie down inside the rectangular box which he had joined together again. There was a hole for her head to go through and another two smaller holes for her ankles. He covered the box and walked behind it to face the audience. He took out a very large saw and started to saw through the middle of the big box. At some point, he would stop as though it was very hard to saw through and finally, he made it through the height of the box. A person, dressed in black, walked out from the side of the stage and passed him two pieces of metallic board and he walked held them up with both hands. He placed the boards, one at a time into the centre of the rectangular box and Apple could very much feel her stomach turn.

The magician pulled one end of the box and separated the two halves. Apple felt relieved as she saw that the head of the woman was looking around and her ankles shaking as though trying to assure their presence. There was another round of applause from the audience. As though in rewind, the magician put the woman back together again and removed the boards. Then he opened the box and the woman stepped out and the magician held her hand and bowed. It was then followed by a commercial on a big sale.

Ray got up and went out of the shop and a short while later, brought back a can of coke and gave it to the counter lady.

Ray beckoned to them and they walked out of the shop after saying goodbye to the counter lady, whom by now, Apple concluded to be also the owner of the shop. They walked out into the sunshine.

“That’s it? You brought us here just to watch a few people do a few tricks?” asked John.

“Tricks? Tricks! No. That you see is the most fundamental, the most basic center of life on this earth. And there’s people like you who will send this planet to its own destruction,” said Ray, looking at John in disgust.

“Hey, no need to lose your temper,” said Apple.

“Listen kid, one day you’ll understand. There’s this bond between the people, a bond that if broken will break them apart. It’s a rule, also a promise, a prophecy, an aura that surrounds everything here. Don’t look down on it.”

Apple swore that she did not understand what Ray was saying as he looked far into the distance and walked. Apple had to hurry to keep in step with him.

A transparent cover closed over their heads and a strap appeared from the top right hand of the chair and strapped them in. The lights went off and they dropped even lower underground to the common rail where they will be transported back to their own city.

Once it is complete, the lights came back on and I headed to the reservoir. Even if the lads did not drink the water, the water vapour produced when the water evaporated, carries the product of the memory-erasing device.

It is time to go up and check on the situation.

There is a change. Lads holding poles and stones did not know why they were holding them and they dropped them. As though synchronized, they walked back home or to work, as though nothing has happened before that.

They carried on with their lives.

All this time, I held my breath and after one minute, I got back into the car and head back down to the Fuvia-heq.

I go back into the escape hatch and take the device out of the passage. It had an automatic deactivation sequence and it deactivated. Then, it hit me that someone had

actually set the device to do the job. I was frantic. I looked at the screen and the words that I feared so much appeared.

Duration of consequence: Eternal.

Chapter 7

“These are shops. Grocery stores, appliance stores, bakery, clinics, hawker centre...” said Ray as they walked along a whole line of stores. People walked in and out of them, holding onto plastic bags with shopping in them.

“...and that is the wet market. That’s where you buy fish, poultry, seafood, fruits, and vegetables, anything that would fit into the cooking pot.”

It was only about seven or eight in the morning and there were many people, haggling, buying, walking about, browsing, and in general, grocery shopping. The sounds of plastic bags, people talking, chatting filled the air. The smell stung Apple’s nose but the overall experience took its permanent place in her memory.

“There could be more people here. Wait here for me while I pick up some meat for the land lady.” Ray took off into the wet market while they hung around, watching the many little swallows and mynahs hop around the grass, picking at trash, looking for breakfast. A middle-aged couple walked past them, chatting, and swinging their bags of shopping beside them. Apple could not understand anything they had said and it gave her a headache.

Ray came back soon after with two red translucent plastic bags and walked back to the flat where they stayed the previous night. They hurried along silently. There was nothing to say and no one had anything on their minds to say. Apple started to miss home and wondered. What if we never make it back to Seron? What if we were stuck here? What do we have to do? What if we could not finish whatever mission we have come for? Then Apple remembered that they were here to look for the missing Fuvia. Was it Ray?

Apple almost stopped in her tracks as he looked at Ray’s back before her. If he was the person they were looking for, did it mean that their job was done? If they could find him so easily, what trouble did the Fuvias have in contacting him? Was he sent down to help them? If so, why were they not informed of it? The biggest question of all sent shivers down her spine, “Who is he?”

In a slight daze, Apple only remembered Ray's mouth moving and then he went up the lift with the grocery bags. She hardly noticed when John waved a hand in front of her. "Phew!" he said, "I thought we've lost you."

Then John had a weird expression on his face and he looked at the other four. Peter was walking around in circles with his eyes on the floor, Yu Ping was watching the clouds in the sky, Esther was kicking a tiny rock on the floor and George was lying against a pillar with his eyes closed. John looked down on the ground then at Apple and Apple felt a little uneasy.

"I'm sorry that I've said those bad things about you. I'm sorry that I... I'm sorry that I lost control over a little argument. I... I feel ridiculous saying this and I've no idea why I'm saying this and yup, I'd better stop talking," he said. He scratched his head then looked away.

Apple was startled. "No... what? Oh, that. Right, no problems," stuttered Apple. She had almost forgotten what had made her so angry the day before. She hardly forgets things like that and she could fume over it for a long time. This time, she actually forgot. That really startled her. Then she regained herself and said, "No, I'm not one for grudges and it's not the biggest thing in the world or anything. No problem. Don't worry about it and...I'd better stop talking."

John looked up at Apple and they laughed.

"What's so funny?" said Esther as he walked over to them.

"Nothing," said Apple and John together and they laughed again.

Just then, the lift rumbled to a stop and Ray got out. He smiled at them and said, "Come on, I'll bring you to a great place."

They stopped by a machine and Ray asked them for their passports. Apple took hers out of her pocket and realized that there was a green card in a plastic pocket stuck to the back page. Ray told them to take the green card out of the pocket and to pass it to him. Ray placed Apple's card into the machine and pushed a few buttons. In a few seconds, paper money appeared in the slot beneath the slot which he had inserted the card. He repeated the same procedure with everybody's card. He walked off again and Jaypeg followed close behind. Ray led them into a shop. On the walls hung a lot of bags

and there was a table against a wall holding boxes of wallets, pencil boxes, stationery and key chains.

“Choose a bag and a wallet that you’ll be using to carry things around. If you’re wondering, this is not the great place but it’s essential,” said Ray and he bought a few packets of sweets from the counter.

“Apple?” said John.

“Yes?”

“If Seron is one thousand years ahead of their time, why isn’t it any different? The roads look the same, what they sell are the same... We just have more advanced technology but it doesn’t seem as though to be a thousand years apart.”

“You think that because you’ve never been to a real, um, Fuvia city before. Seron is considered one of the more rural areas, at least one of the most rural one that I’ve ever been to.” John looked satisfied at the answer but still had a curious look on his face.

Apple felt that she was not yet comfortable about not living on earth. Every year, their family traveling brings her to many places, each with flying vehicles, automated everything and she had thought of Seron to be nothing else but homey. Coming down to earth had not made her home sickness feel any better. As far as she was concerned, the Fuvias’ technology was very far ahead than the people’s.

“Hey guys,” said Yu Ping, “Why don’t we buy the same type of backpack? Same pattern, same colour, just with different key chains on them. We’re a team right? Let’s have a team bag.”

Apple saw no vice in it and they chose the same bags. Apple suggested buying a keychain with their initials on it and she chose an ‘A’ with a cartoon character hugging it. Soon, they picked their bags and chose their wallets. Ray paid with the paper money and split the money into six portions and gave each of Jaypeg one to keep in their wallets. Apple packed the money neatly into her stripy orange wallet and kept it in her bag.

“That’s your money. Try not to waste it unless necessary. If you need anymore, just pass me your card and I’ll help you withdraw it. And keep it safe. Security’s rather tight around here so you’d be a loser to be able to lose that money,” said Ray and they left the shop and walked a short distance into some sort of structure.

“This is the MRT station. MRT stands for Mass Rapid Transit. It’s just the train that brings people and us around the country, one of the simplest methods of transport. The green card has a lot of programming in it and could be used to take any public transport that requires a card, piece of cake.” They walked towards a row of metallic container with some sort of sliding opening in front. Many people walked by them and tapped a card on a small pad and the door opened for them to go through. Ray tapped his green card on the pad and was into the other side. He waited as Jaypeg followed and soon, everyone went pass successfully and were on the train.

They are going to forget that the six young lads have ever existed, forever.

Not only so but the memory-erasing agent is infectious. A cough could spread it to tens of people and then more tens of people and...

This is not good. I searched every corner of the screen, pressed every corner and button available. I needed to find a counter antidote. I fumbled with the device, doing everything I can and every single method available to crack through the system. I worked till my hands were numb, I can no longer think properly. It has to be in there somewhere. I know if I keep looking I can find it. No matter what, it has to be done.

Chapter 8

Apple was very much amused at they sat on the train. The number of people in front of her, behind her, all around her could as much add up to more than the small population of Seron.

Slowly, bit by bit, the people left the train at every stop, jotting awake every time the delightful voice of a woman lighted up the MRT train. Realising that they have not arrived at their stop, most people just nod their heads back to sleep again.

“Marina Bay,” a crisp sound sounded. This time, the train was almost empty. Ray got up and Jaypeg followed behind. This day was bright and sunny, clear, with very little clouds in the sky.

“Welcome to a games arcade where you play games,” said Ray as they enter a reasonably bright room where there were games machines almost everywhere. A particular machine caught Apple’s eye. It was a drumming machine and a boy was

playing it, hitting the drum that corresponds with the lights on the screen to a certain joyful music. After finishing the song, the boy left the machines and began to wander around.

Apple walked up to the machine and looked at the patterns dancing on the screen. “Would you like to try it?” asked Ray.

“No, no, no, it seems rather hard,” said Apple, dying to try it.

Ray inserted two coins into a slot on the machine, somewhere about Apple’s knee level and a selection page appeared on the screen. Ray explained, “Choose a song, any song.”

Apple was having the time of her life. In fact, she had never tried these games before and she had a great time. Although she must admit that she could not get most of the hits right but it was fun all the same. By the time she had finished off her ten coins, the rest of Jaypeg had already tried the other games in the arcade. She had almost felt herself blushing when she saw two girls waiting for their turn, standing by the doorway that led to a bowling arcade.

Apple had seen bowling arcades before at one of the Fuvia cities where she had gone for a holiday. Although it was much sleeker, the design much nicer, the atmosphere much stronger, she must admit that the structure was kept very much the same.

Apple decided that she needed the restroom and went out in search of one, briefly telling Ray who was shooting something on a game machine. Ray pointed in a general direction with his right hand for a split second and returned to his gaming. Apple followed his direction and walked straight on and faster when she saw the universal restroom sign hanging from the room. A man and a woman, with a bold line in between, seemed to be the timeless symbol of the restroom. What the man sees in his part of the restroom was therefore not to the liberty of the woman and vice versa.

Apple walked towards the sign and just out of the corner of her eye, she saw a keychain with the letter ‘G’ on it out of the glass door at the end of the walkway. Apple jogged a little towards it and she saw George standing outside looking down at something in his hand.

“Hey,” said Apple, pushing the door opened.

George jumped and was very surprised but he did not hide what he held in his hands. He studied Apple for a while then decided that he could share his mystery item with her.

George looked down at his hands and then opened it and held it where both of them could see it. It was an ordinary photo covered a rather hard transparent plastic sheet. In the photo, there were many games machine although it looked much emptier than the arcade. In fact, there was no one else but the main characters of the picture, in the center of the photo stood two adults and a child.

“This is a magik picture; we bought it at the games arcade in Wierns when I was five. We were so happy, we had so much fun. It was the first time we could afford a trip overseas and with a tour group,” said George, his voice was very strained as though he was stopping himself from crying.

He smiled a little and closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them, they were glistening with tears. He sniffed and said, “We went with a lot of people, couples on their honeymoon, old couples, families, young kids...”

Apple was not sure how to react as George paused, sniffed again and held the edge of the photo more tightly. He continued, “This is a magik picture. It only keeps the images of those who are still alive.” He wiped off his tears with the back of his left hand. “And the arcade was full of people.”

George looked at Apple sadly and said, “They vanished all in one day. My dad and I left the arcade for a short while to get some drinks... The moment we came back, no one was there anymore and everyone disappeared from the picture. Even my mother was gone.” George started to cry again.

“But she’s still in the picture,” said Apple carefully, seeing as George was standing in the middle of two people, or lads, in the picture-One male and one female.

“That’s what made me keep hope that she is still alive... But if she was... I keep telling myself that she had not abandoned this family, that she was still somewhere, living her life. This is the last memory I had of her... Good times.”

“That odd guy, Uncle H, he said that my mum was in Seron,” said George suddenly and looked up at Apple. “Do you think it’s true?”

Apple shrugged and said, “Probably. He may be a weird guy but he’d never lie about something like that.”

“Really? You really think so?” said George, looking as though he was going to cry again. “He was going to tell me. He was going to tell me where my mother is,” he said.

Apple placed a hand on his shoulder and shook it. She said reassuringly, “I’m sure you would see your mother again. I’m sure you’d be back together soon.”

George smiled miserably and shook his head and said, “I’ve been waiting for that statement to come true for a long time. I remembered on the day that she was gone, my dad told me, “Don’t cry, mummy’s going to be back soon, everything would be okay.” He promised me everything.”

He trembled and sniffed again and said, “When he said it, he was crying. I’ve never seen him cry but he knew he was lying to me. She’s not coming back. Dad says that people are taken away from the face of the earth because they were needed some place else.”

“Maybe your dad was right,” said Apple, trying to console him and felt awkward at the same time.

“Maybe you’re right too,” said George, smiling.

“Beep!”

A sudden loud sound, sharp and detached, sounded beside my ears and I could feel my ear tingle. A face appeared on the wall in front of me, magnified and yet clearer than anything I have ever seen.

“Hasher,” it said, “What have you done.”

The voice was accusing and I can see panic behind his eyes.

“After coming back from your place, none of these top minds knew what they went there for and came back with nothing,” he continued in a near whisper, hissing as though he was a snake and in fact, the elongated, spectacled face looked very much like one. It is not as though he has myopia or required the use of spectacles in any sense but apparently, it came as a sort of fashion statement just days ago.

Chapter 9

It was the ninth of August. It had been just a few days after the Jaypegs had landed on the island city of Singapore. Coincidentally, it was the country's birthday, or so to say...

"Her day of independence from other colonial countries," said Ray as he led them through the crowds in Yishun, an area in Singapore which was celebrating its birthday as well.

Crowded would not have been the exact words to fit the scenario. Apple would much prefer to it as an engulfing experience. Everyone was trying their best to do something around them, there was movement in preparation, there were sudden cheers and laughter and most of all, almost everyone were in red tops and white bottoms, the two colours on the Singapore flag. The evening before, they had gone shopping for their dual-colour clothes. Although Apple's shirt was not fully red, it was mostly red with a big picture of a cannon ball framed by a white rectangular box.

Apple looked around her again as they walked out of the crowds and continued to walk parallel to the backs of the people standing around waiting for the celebrations to begin. "Best way to keep yourself alive when the tide pushes you away from the shore is to swim parallel to it until the tide subsides. Then you swim back to shore," said Esther as he walked next to Apple.

Apple gave him a quizzical look and he turned away. "That was random," said Esther simply. Apple had thought the same thing. They walked till they reached what seemed to be the middle of the long line of crowds. Ray stopped suddenly and then turned round to face them.

"Stay here for a while, the celebration is going to start and I will be right back," said Ray. Apple realized that her shoelaces were undone and bent down to tie them. When she looked up, she saw John walking away from her and towards Ray who was already a hundred meters away from any of them. Immediately, Apple hurried after him, not failing though, to recognize that Esther, George, Peter and Yu Ping were directly behind them, following in a bee-line. Ray turned a corner and disappeared into a phone booth. John crept up beside the phone booth and held a finger to his lips to tell the rest

not to make any noise. Apple walked as quietly as she could to stand beside John and listened in on Ray.

Apple had thought that Ray would definitely realize that they were there but he did not and his facial expression was that of full focus on what he was doing.

“Okay, just as planned. Guy, you will take Jurong East. Pao, you and Cao take care of Tampines. Tell Uncle D. to station at the Padang. I’ll take Yishun. Wait for my signal on that square pager I gave you the other day. Green light for a ‘go’ and red light for a ‘no go’. Clear?”

There was silence for a while then Ray nodded and said, “Okay, let’s get this right the first time.” He hung up the phone and as quietly as they could, the Jaypegs walked away. First at a reasonable pace to remain silent and then they broke into a run together to get back to the place where Ray had left them. Apple looked behind her and saw Ray’s back towards them as he remained in the phone booth. She turned back and followed John who was leading the way. “He knows his directions, doesn’t he?” Apple muttered to herself. There was no way she could have recognized which direction to take and which way to run. She had always thought that just running in a straight line would take you somewhere in the end as long as you are not running in circles.

In no time at all, Apple found herself at the same spot where Ray had left them and a minute later, Ray walked towards them. John said loudly over the noise of the crowds, “This looks like one big celebration. We should introduce this to Seron!”

Ray lifted an eyebrow and said, “You really think that these people are enjoying themselves? I think that they’re putting on a show. Love for the country, no way, everyone is leaving it.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Apple.

“Isn’t it so, they…” Ray said then stopped. He said, “You wouldn’t understand anyway.”

Apple felt almost sickened by what Ray said. She had heard so many times that she was too young to do anything. She wanted to grow older, bigger and better and she could not wait for it to happen. Then, she was suddenly confused about why they were on Earth in the first place and most importantly, why was Ray here? If they were sent down to help him, why was Uncle H. so anxious to find him and get him back? Then it

occurred to Apple that this was not his mission and they were there to stop him. They were there to stop his plans and bring him back to Seron. Oh no, thought Apple, maybe he had tricked them.

John had obviously figured that out a long time ago. Apple was amazed at herself for not noticing. She was even more amazed when she realized that John was arguing with angry whispers with Ray right before her and she did not even notice.

“John! You cannot make me change my mind.”

“So you’re going to poison this whole place with so many people?”

“No, I’m going to heal this whole place, this whole country and its people.”

“What makes you think you could do that?”

“We have it all planned out already. It’s foolproof and nothing you’re going to say can stop me.”

“So you would rather believe a bunch of fools and believe that it’s foolproof.”

“They are no bunch of fools. They are smarter than all of you put together.”

“Do you know them very well? They are just taking advantage of you.”

“You have no right to speak to me like that!”

“So you think you can change the world? No one person can do that so give it up.”

“I’m not a person. I’m a Fuvia and tell your dad that when you have a chance! If you survive Earth, that is.”

“My dad? What are you talking about? What’s my dad got to do with all these?”

“Your dad is the reason why I’m doing all these.”

“I don’t get it, you’re lying.”

“Oh really? Your dad thinks he’s so great, living his great life at other’s expense. He’s just a sharp criminal!”

“No he isn’t and you have no right to say that about him.”

“You have no right to stop me. Don’t make me hurt you.”

“Why don’t you try? I bet you couldn’t.”

“Don’t mess with things you do not understand. Do you think you can out smart me? You’re not even ten years old. Keep this up and that would be the nearest birthday you would ever get to.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s a kind advice. You should be happy that I did not blow you up the time I saw you because that’s what people like you deserve and people like your dad deserves.”

“Why would we deserve that?”

“Because you’re despicable.”

“Like you or less despicable than you?”

“Ask your dad.”

“And how do you suppose I do that?”

“Fine. Just stop talking. After today, my job will be done.”

“And you’ll go back to Seron?” said Apple.

Ray and John turned to look at her. Then Ray said angrily, “No. I don’t belong there anymore.”

Apple could almost feel her tears form around her eye. Ray pulled out a device from his pocket. It was a coarse black with a button set into the hard plastic and two small lights at the corner of it. He pulled out a pencil and pushed the button once. A light lit up and it was red in colour. Immediately, John tried to knock the device out of Ray’s hands but Ray held it out of his reach. Apple realized that Ray was pretty tall, how could she have not noticed it before?

Apple could vaguely hear herself shouting at Ray as the noise of the crowd picked up. The celebrations were about to start. She shouted, “Why are you doing this? Would you be able to live with your conscience if you ruin everything?”

“I’m not going to ruin everything. Nobody will get hurt.”

“How do you know?”

“How do you know I will hurt someone?”

“Look at how excited the people are. They are enjoying themselves.”

“They just like the celebration.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“They might not even know the purpose of this day.”

“Might? What makes you think they don’t? Every poster, every banner, the big screen, the clothes...they are all about the country’s fortieth birthday. Only a fool will miss it.”

“You can’t talk me out of this.”

“Do you have any idea why you’re doing this? What do you know? Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“So tell me if what you’re doing is worth... Wait. What exactly are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” said Ray softly and his hand seemed to lower.

John who had been looking at Apple with his mouth agape finally realized it and closed his mouth. The rest, however, had not found control over their mouth muscles to shut their’s.

Ray lowered his hand and shook the device and the red light went off. He placed it back into his pocket and discarded the pencil on the ground. The tip of the pencil broke off and was immediately trampled on by someone. Turning on his heels, he started to walk away from the crowds and back the direction they had came this afternoon.

“Yes, yes, I know,” I say. There was nothing else to say except that.

This was still not the time for damage control or to show how hard I am trying to salvage the problem. This is the time to fight for some time.

“Well, what do you have to say for yourself and what is going on with the head and his associates?” the face asked impatiently. The face straining in an effort to keep straight and every corner of skin on the face appears to be vibrating and shivering.

“No problem, it is only temporary. It was an accident and once they recover, you can come for me again. So don’t worry about it,” I said as seriously as I can, keeping my eyes steady in order not to betray any trace of thought or lie.

The face looked relieved and a slight smile appeared on it.

“As long as they are fine, this will all be alright. Yes, it will be, so, thanks, right, so, see you,” he said.

The face disappeared in an instance and I breathed. There is no time to lose. I examined the device once more but it did not budge. I contemplate destroying it but I cannot do it. If there was an antidote in there somewhere, I will be giving up on all hope of fixing this. I will continue working on it first thing next morning.

Chapter 10

When they have finally reached the place they had called their temporary home, Ray opened the lock of the door with a big ‘Clang!’ and ushered the Jaypegs into the flat. They had kept silent throughout the walk back and had exchanged many glances with each other after the failed attempt. Once inside, the Jaypegs walked into the room and looked back at Ray who had not followed but was leaning outside on the corridor’s railings with his eyes closed.

John came into the room last and shut the door behind him. He looked at Apple then tore his gaze at her, and to be fair, he looked at everyone in turn. For a while, they said nothing. Then Apple reached for her pillow, placed it on her lap and without a sound, stuffed her face into it and screamed. Everyone else looked at her, most out of amusement than off surprise.

“What was that for?” asked John with a short laugh.

“To start a conversation without me opening my mouth first,” replied Apple, throwing her pillow behind her.

“Well, it worked,” said John.

Apple stood up and walked towards the drawer of the table against the wall of the room. She pulled at it but it did not budge. John tried as well but it was of no use. Esther walked over and took a paper clip from the table and straightened it out at the end. Within a minute or two, he had the lock open and he pulled the drawer out in a flourish. He smiled at the others who were staring at him with the expression, similar to that of wonderment. “Hobby,” said Esther simply as he shrugged his shoulders. Apple was the first to break out of her trance and she looked into the drawer. What she saw was simply a bottle that said that it was green paint and she brought it out. The glass of the bottle was transparent and what they could see through it was, well, green paint.

“Go on, open it,” whispered Yu Ping, rocking back and forth with her arms around her knees. Thinking that if Ray could just open it and not be affected, as he must have opened it on the first night they had arrived, she could too. Suddenly, they heard a shout outside.

Peter opened the door, walked a little out so that he could have a good view of the door. The rest of them walked out from behind him and looked at what the commotion

was all about. Ray was standing just beside the door frame and Uncle D. was standing in front of him, pointing at him, pointing to his left, pointing to his right and was shouting all the time. Ray did not say anything but just stood there and took it and if anything, there was a bored and irritated look on his face.

Apple ushered them back into the room and Peter retreated back into the room as well, closing the door behind him. They could still hear the very angry man shouting and silently thanked that it was just late in the afternoon and not early in the morning or late at night. They could almost imagine the complaints if they were to be arguing at the time when everyone in the flat was tired and sleepy. When they were inside the room, everyone but Apple retook their sit on the wooden floor.

Apple looked down at her hand at the green bottle. She looked at the rest and they gave a slight unanimous nod. She held her breath and slowly twisted open the bottle cap. The mixture inside was a light blue, not that of the sky but that of dark blue that had been diluted. Astonished, Apple twisted the cap back on and swirled the bottle while looking at the formula on the outside. It seemed like green paint was rocking about inside the bottle. Apple sat down on the floor and opened the bottle again. The colour of the inside had not changed and Apple realized that the glass of the bottle was not tinted.

John reached out his hand and Apple gave him the bottle and he admired at it for a while then placed it on the floor in the middle of their little circle. They sat in silence for a while as Yu Ping picked up the bottle, scrutinized it and passed it to Peter and Peter to George and then George to Esther. Esther left the bottle open for quite a long time and the formula started to drift upwards. Esther quickly placed the bottle cap back on, pushing down the vapour that was escaping as he did so.

“We should try to change the formula. We cannot possibly make it stronger but we can make it weaker or totally change the purpose of it,” said John, after a long consideration.

“But how? And what do we change it to? Perfume?” asked Apple.

“That’s a good idea, if you can make it,” said John.

“Why don’t we just mix in a few other ingredients and hope that it does not blow up on us?” said Yu Ping.

“Great idea!” said everyone else and Yu Ping gave them an incredulous look.

Immediately, John picked up the bottle and opened the door softly. However, any sound that he could have made would have been covered by the shouting that was still going on outside. This time, Ray had started shouting back at Uncle D. and luckily, they have not come to blows with each other. John ran into the toilet in the kitchen and poured a bit of shampoo into the bottle. Then he went into the kitchen and searched the cabinets. He pulled out a bottle with black coloured liquid in it and poured the liquid into the paint bottle. He then opened up the freezer, took a long time to decide but eventually, he placed an ice cube inside the paint bottle.

He closed the bottle and ran back to the room. Everyone gathered around the bottle and waited for something to happen. The formula looked as it was before, except there was a slight increase in the level of the liquid inside. Esther picked it up and looked at it thoughtfully, and shook it as hard as he could.

The liquid inside started to bubble and he dropped it on the floor immediately. Once the white bubbles subsided, the colour of the bottle started to fade to a light green. Then it vibrated a little and it changed into a faded yellow. Within seconds, the formula became, invisible. John picked up the bottle carefully and felt that it weighed lighter than before. He looked into the bottle and shook it a bit but saw nothing.

Just then, the shouting stopped and Ray entered the room and saw them with the bottle. His face that was already flushed red by arguing with Uncle D. turned redder as he saw them. He snatched the bottle up and looked into it. “Where and what happened to my formula?” he muttered furiously through clenched teeth.

“We brought it to the top floor and opened it and everything escaped,” said John simply.

Ray stomped out of the room and out of the flat with the bottle and John got up to follow. Soon, everyone was racing to keep up with Ray as he took two flights of stairs to get to the roof. He twisted open the bottle cap and raised it above his head.

“You just did this and let it all out?” he shouted.

“How else could we have done it?” said John.

All of them could see a thin yellow wisp of vapour escape from the mouth of the bottle and it drifted out towards the clouds but Ray did not notice it. When the vapour

stopped to rise out of the bottle, he brought it down in front of him and looked into it. He said, "I can always make more."

He stomped back the way that he came and the Jaypegs followed, silently hoping that since the vapor only drifts upwards and as there were nobody on the roof, nobody would be affected by the formula that had just went into the atmosphere.

In the flat, Ray shut the door at them once he entered and locked them outside. They shrugged and sat on the sofa in front of the television set and went to sleep.

"Is it morning already?" I ask myself and saw that it was. I have been so tired the night before and yet, I could not have slept a wink.

Something told me to check the birth counter, also known as the population counter. I walk over to the main control station, placed the device on the chair in front of it and I scroll through all the names of the few hundred lads living in Seron. The six young lads' names were still on the list, as much as the device can wipe out their existence in others minds, it cannot affect the computer and I tell myself that I have to bring these people on the list back here where they belong.

Chapter 11

It was ten the next morning when the room door swung open and crashed against the wall inside of the room as Ray stomped out. Esther jerked awake to see Ray walking quickly out of the flat. He shook John and then, he shook Peter and they stood up from their seat. Within seconds, all six of them were up and out of the flat.

They ran quickly to the elevator but it took long to arrive. So, the Jaypegs ran down the stairs. It was not tiring but Apple felt going down in circles rather dizzying. They jumped the last three steps and John ran out of the void deck and looked around. Ray was just twenty meters away from them. Relieved, they took off after him.

Every time they were about ten meters away, they stopped to make sure that there was pillar nearby for them to hide behind. Apple could feel something tingle in her spine, like a bad feeling, like a night after sleeping in the wrong position but worse. Her throat was dry and she could feel her heart beat powerfully. Her mind was blank as they stalked

Ray. All she knew was that whenever Ray turned around, she must hide and that they could not lose sight of him.

They walked past the bus stop near the flat and there was a man sitting on a bench. He looked up as Ray neared him.

“Uncle D.” muttered Apple soundlessly.

It looked as though Ray had given in after the argument. In his hand was the paint bottle with the same green liquid as before. Apple’s heart sank.

As quietly as they could, the Jaypegs maintained a good distance away from the duo. It was hard to stick together and not make any sound and at the same time, prepared to hide every time Ray and Uncle D turn around. However, they never did.

The Jaypegs followed the duo into a shopping centre. Ray walked to the center of the ground floor of the shopping centre where there was a large area for a stage and small mobile stalls. There was only one ceiling in the area which was four floors above, the main ceiling for the whole shopping centre.

There were a few families around, mostly with small children and the elderly. People walked about mostly in twos, looking at items through the shop window and admiring the expensive jewelry in the jewelry shops. Some held bags in their hands already.

Somewhere to their right, they heard a child’s cry and Apple looked. The little boy was bawling at the top of his little lungs and he was all alone. Then, a woman ran towards him and carried him up, immediately the boy stopped crying and hugged his mother. His mother took out a paper handkerchief and gently dabbed at the little boy’s eye and patted him on his back in order to calm him down.

Apple looked back to her front and saw that Uncle D was looking at the little boy. The side of his mouth twitched into a smile and his eyes drooped as he gazed at the boy. She tore her stare from Uncle D and looked for Ray who had not changed his position. He was almost ready to open the bottle. Beside her, John looked as though he was going to dash at Ray as Ray placed his hand over the cap.

Time seemed to slow immensely as George ran suddenly at him. After what seemed like a few minutes, George reached Ray who looked up, surprised, and attempted

to pry the bottle from his hands. Without much effort, Ray pushed George to the floor and held the bottle out of his reach.

Uncle D came in from the corner of Apple's eye as he ran in the same slow mode towards Ray. In a swift move, he grabbed the bottle from Ray. The speed of time went back to normal and the Jaypegs moved closer towards Ray, Uncle D and George. Yu Ping helped George to his feet and bombarded him with a lot of care and concern.

"Don't do this Ray, we should give this up," said Uncle D.

"Why? You're the one who said that this was necessary," said Ray.

"Your father would have never wanted you to do this, Ray. You're your father's only son. I cannot let you do anything you would regret later."

"That's not what you said earlier. You said this was good."

"If other people do this, I wouldn't care less but you're family."

"What difference does it make?"

"Ray, just listen to me. Do not get involved. Go back home."

"They don't want me home. They set me up. They gave me no choice."

"No they didn't..."

"Don't try to talk me out of this. Give me back the bottle," said Ray and he made a swipe for the bottle.

Uncle D turned around immediately and ran for the elevators. Ray chased after him. Just as he reached the elevator, it was closing. Uncle D squeezed into the last amount of space left in the elevator. The door closed before Ray got in.

The lift went up and Ray went the stairs and stopped the lift as it opened on the second floor. Uncle D came out, saw Ray and ran for the escalators. Ray chased Uncle D until he went through the large area in the ground floor again and zoomed past the Jaypegs. Apple ran to keep up with them with the others close behind. She was confused and did not know what to think.

There were five new names blinking at the bottom of the list. Usually, these blinking names would refer to the lads that are not yet born but in the womb of mothers, waiting to be brought out into this world. I do not remember any cases of pregnancy in

Seron for a long time. This time, there are not only one but four children at the same time.

Pregnancy can be detected within a day in Seron and this would mean that these embryos started growing only yesterday. Immediately after they had been found, their parents would give their child a name and the computer will register it. We have found that instead of finding an embryo in a mother's body only two to three months after it started growing, we have developed a system to detect would-be mothers once their child started to grow. So, either these four would-be children are quadruplets, or there is a major coincidence happening here.

Chapter 12

Outside, Ray had managed to get hold of Uncle D and pinned him against a wall by standing in front of him to prevent him from moving out. Ray demanded breathlessly, "Give me the bottle."

"No."

"Give it to me," said Ray impatiently.

"No, your father would not have wanted me to."

"Why? I thought he was in all this? I thought he was fighting the same way as you guys for the same purpose? Why would he be against it?"

"His last wish was not to involve you. I was wrong to..."

"I'll make him proud."

"No you won't. He died, failing to protect you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He did not cooperate, Ray. He knew too much."

Ray's face turned suddenly white and he said softly, "So you killed him, didn't you?" His face turned a bright red as his eyes flashed with anger.

"I didn't mean to. I was wrong; I knew that I shouldn't..."

"But you did, didn't you. Man, he was your brother!"

"I'm sorry..." said Uncle D sadly.

Ray stepped back away from Uncle D, turned and ran without looking behind him or anywhere around him. This time, it was Uncle D's turn to chase after Ray. Ray just

kept running and running until he was in front of the road where pedestrians were waiting for the green light signal for them to cross. The Jaypegs struggled to keep up with him and Uncle D as Apple heard her stomach grumble. They have not had breakfast that morning.

Ray turned around and saw Uncle D coming closer and closer to him. Ray willed the traffic lights to switch and let the pedestrians cross but it did not budge. As Uncle D was only a few meters away from him, he took a quick glance to his left to see that there was no car at the moment. He dashed across the road.

Around the corner came a white car, the driver talking on his phone. He saw Ray dash across the road but he was too near to break. Apple shouted at Ray, feeling suddenly awake, her heart had to work twice as fast as they had ever done before. Ray did not know. He did not realize the car speed towards him. Uncle D ran across the road and pushed Ray in front of him. Ray fell on his knees then rolled onto his bottom and rolled to the other side of the road. The white car stopped and Ray got up. The driver of the white car got out of the car as people gathered around them, some writing something down on a piece of paper while somebody called for the ambulance.

Ray took a last look at Uncle D and ran once more. The Jaypegs ran after him blindly as Apple looked back at Uncle D who was lying in a pool of blood in the middle of the road. She did not feel like eating anymore.

I click on the first name, Casey, with my finger and the words on the screen vanished except for the name and it opened up into some sort of profile.

“Full name: Casey Waser

Siblings: John Waser

Family of Rio Waser”

Something is not right. I quickly close the window and clicked on the second name.

“Full name: Jerry Yong

Siblings: Apple Yong

Family of Oscar Yong”

Desperately, I click on the last two names and what appeared almost made me collapse onto the floor.

“Full name: Megan Oron

Siblings: Esther Oron

Family of Lloyd Oron”

“Full name: Laura Sailor

Sibling: Peter Sailor

Family of Lenny Sailor”

It makes all the sense. Since their memories have been free of the six lads, they picked off where they had started, the day before they realize they are going to have a child. Yu Ping cannot have parents who will give birth to another child as she is a bordout and George’s mother is here in the Fuvia-heq as a sane-keeper. Should the whole Fuvia-heq get invaded, she would be the one to go for help and it was most important to keep her safe and unknown to the invaders. For a reason, she would be the backup plan of Seron if everything goes wrong.

Chapter 13

The moment they had passed by a 7-eleven shop, John went in to buy a loaf of white bread before rejoining their trudging line. After he had opened it, he offered a slice to Apple with a strong smile on his face. Apple felt her mouth twitching into a smile as she accepted the bread. She bit a small bit off the side of the bread and it tasted so soft and comforting.

John lingered back and forth from offering Ray a slice of bread too. Like a cat moving up to a tiger to ask if they were family, he said softly, “Ray?” Ray looked forward and ignored him as he could not hear the very soft call.

“Ray?” said John, a little louder.

Ray stopped and turned around and for a moment, they faced each other. “Bread?” asked John and held out a hand with the slice on bread clasped between his thumb and his palm.

Ray shook his head and said, “No thanks, you can have it.” With that, he was silent again as they walked on the street alongside a busy road. Not long later, they turned

into a corner and walked into an area surround by groups of residential flats. From the corner of his eye, he could see a crowd of people gathering under a block of flats not far away. In fact, it was just another block of flats away. Curious, John walked towards the commotion. Apple munched on her last piece of bread in her mouth and then followed as she saw what John had seen.

As they neared the scene, John broke into a small run and stood behind a group of aunties, talking and pointing to something above their heads. Apple rolled her eyes and joined him. She could hear soft thumps on the ground behind her and saw Yu Ping running towards them with George, Esther and Peter following in a straight row behind. Not long later, Ray came into view with the same expression on his face, the non-existence expression that gave his eyes a scary, empty look.

John looked up and Apple did too. A woman sat at the edge of the roof, her feet dangling over the side. She rocked left and right while looking up at the sky in front of her as though in a spell. She was sobbing. She had placed her hands to the side of her knees to hold her place on the edge of the roof. She was clad in slippers, a baggy shirt and a pair of pants that were dotted with flowers. It was a sweet light pink and yet, there was something sinister in the way they fluttered in the breeze.

In front of the gossiping aunties, an old couple stood. They were bawling. There was a sort of fear in their eyes and their faces had desperation written all over. The old woman had her mouth wide open. "Come down," she yelled, but it was a soft murmur. Her voice was hoarse and the moisture needed to nourish her throat went the wrong way down from her eyes. The old man had his right arm around her, his mouth muscles could hardly work to keep his jaws together. Suddenly, he looked to the right of his wife and shouted at a young man standing beside him. The young man looked at him. There was no desperation in his eyes but there was a look of concern and a stormy sea behind them.

"Get her down! You're the only one who can get her down! I don't care what's happen to the two of you but she's your responsibility. Get her down or I'll never forgive you!" the old man sobbed. He hugged his wife more tightly and looked pleadingly at the young man.

The young man looked around him. He looked at the woman on the roof. He looked at the couple. He started to look helpless. He started to worry and looked once again around him. “Go up! Go to your wife! Get her down!” said a man from the crowd.

“I don’t know her! I’m not married. She’s not my wife! How can she be my wife if I don’t know her?” shouted the young man, tears forming in his eyes as he backed away from the crowd. He shook his head in denial.

There was a soft thud but it made everyone jump. A slipper had fallen. In an instance, there was a lot of reaction. The old woman bawled even louder and her hand started to gesture. She crossed and uncrossed her hands in a desperate signal of “No” but it was no use. Suddenly, the old man’s face became expressionless and he released his grip on his wife’s shoulder. Without warning, he fell backwards and everyone stepped backwards and they talked even more. The young man quickly ran forwards, sat down and held the old man’s head in his lap. The old woman started to shake his husband. First, it was a soft shake but later, the shakes became more and more violent. Then she turned to the young man and she shook him as well but even harder. “Get your wife down. Get Ying down! Please, I beg you!” she cried and went on her knees. Immediately, the young man went on his knees as well after laying the old man on the floor. He looked very confused with all that was happening to him. All he could remember was what had happened since he had gotten out from the lift after a random trip to the mall...

The woman had been waiting for him outside and she had grabbed his arm. He had never seen her before but she was holding him like they had known each other for a long time, with an affection more than just plain friends. He had pushed her away and asked who she was. He had walked away. She had followed after him. She had asked him what was wrong. He had thought that she was crazy. One thing led to another and now here he was, in the weirdest scenario he could never have thought of. He had thought that the woman was crazy but everyone in his block said that they knew that they were a couple. They had been married a long time ago. Most surprisingly and frightening was the fact that she had the same key as him, the same key ring, the same wedding ring and they lived in the same apartment. The young man looked down and closed his eyes. His eyebrows tightened into a frown and then he looked up.

“Ying!” he shouted, “Dad has fainted! Come down to him! I remember you, you’re my wife. I love you!” Once he had said that, the woman looked down and then backed off the side of the building. Within a few seconds, her legs were finally off the edge of the building and she stood a safe distance from the edge but enough to see clearly what was going on downstairs.

Within a minute, she joined her family and she hugged the old lady and cried. “Call the ambulance!” shouted the young man to the women still gossiping behind him. One of the women took out a hand phone and started to dial. When the young man looked away from her, she stuck a tongue at him and said, “No big, no small.” Still, she talked to the operator on the other side of the phone. The young man shook the old man lightly for any reaction. For a moment, the old man looked at his daughter and before his mouth could move into a smile, his face muscles relaxed and the smile was gone. The young man placed a finger to the old man’s nose to try for a hint of breathing but he was gone. Ying hugged the young man and sobbed. The young man awkwardly wrapped his arms around Ying as she cried.

“Don’t do that again. Never ever do that again,” panted the young man between tears.

Ying hugged the young man more tightly than ever and cried, “Father had gone! He’ll never come back. It’s my fault.”

The crowd dispersed eventually. Apple felt hot tears on her cheeks and her face was burning red. She could not even hear herself sobbing. It was like she was never part of this world. Her feet were numb and she felt paralyzed. She could not feel John tapping her on her shoulder until he had to practically drag her away.

I feel sad for George and his father. It had to be done; she was the most reliable person for the job. There was nothing else to it, she was the most reliable one of all the Fuvias and we needed her.

Selfish, yes, but it was for the good of the entire city. Every city must have a backup plan. Although Seron has the weakest defenses, the lowest technology and the smallest of all population, this call of security is our only hope in face of destruction.

Destruction is not a harsh word. It is a fact that must be stopped. For the people, for the children...

Children. What would happen if the six young lads return to find their family leading their perfect lives, without them? What would happen if I could not stop this mess? What if it all goes wrong?

Chapter 14

Ray walked fast. Apple could not walk as fast. Neither John nor Yu Ping nor Esther nor Peter nor George could walk as fast. So, they ran after Ray. It had been many days of following and running after the only person who was their only contact on earth. Without him, they would not have known what they had to do. As annoying and pathetic it seemed, they had no choice but to follow this only person who could some day bring them home. They got into the lift silently and Apple caught her breath. Her mind was full of thoughts of nothing, as though there was a jam as many thoughts struggled to be the first through her mind.

There was an awkward closeness in the lift as they stood almost side by side in it. Ray refused to look any of them in the eye and focused only on the little red light that lit up under a number whenever they pass by that number of floors. At that moment, the little red light was under the number "8".

Once the lift door opened, Ray strode out and walked quickly to the apartment. He knocked on the door twice and a few moments later, a middle-aged woman appeared at the door. "So early?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. She was clad in a long pajama-dress that fitted around her hips. She took a key from behind the door and unlocked it. Then in an annoyed tone, she started to mumble and nagged at Ray who simply ignored her. Apple wondered what language she was speaking as it had only made her head hurt more than ever. Then, she reasoned that apart from a few people they had met, she had not been able to identify with what language other people were conversing with.

Ray went into the room and, to Apple's despair, came out with a familiar bottle clasped in his hand. Obviously, he had made a backup copy of the formula. He walked out of the apartment without looking neither at any of the Jaypegs nor at the woman who

was calling him loudly. John rushed forwards to grab his arm but Ray shook him off easily.

“Hey!” shouted John. Ray turned to look at John with a tired look of annoyance, like someone being told a thousand times not to leave his clothes lying around.

“Why don’t you just go back and bring us with you? No matter what you’ve done, we could help you. We could help you put in a good word and you can come back!” said John quickly.

“I’m not going back,” said Ray angrily and turned away.

Apple found an urge to say something but could not. She decided to let John do the talking instead. John might say the wrong thing sometimes but he could make a lot of sense when he wanted to. John called, “Why not? What have any of us done to offend you? What have any of the Fuvias done to you?” Behind him, the woman slammed the door shut.

“Ask your father.”

“How? I’m here and unless you tell me, how am I going to find out?” said John with a tired laugh.

“He made me kill someone.”

“What? No way, my dad will never do something like that.”

“What do you know?” said Ray and he turned around to face them. He said, “He made me blow up his partner. He planted the evidence of the crime on me. He forced me to stay here. I can’t go back and I don’t want to.”

“What?”

Ray’s face became a sudden red as he tried hard to control his voice as he said, “Don’t you get it? Your father set me up! For what reason? I was different from him. My mother is a Fuvia but my father is a person from earth. They don’t expect much from people like me. They want to know where my loyalties lie and when I tell them, they’d think I was lying. Do you think I do not wish to return to Seron? Do you think I would prefer to live my life running away, harming people and taking gambles with people’s lives?” Ray breathed and then said softly but with menace, “I suppose you’d be like Rio huh? Once you have the chance, you’d get rid of me. To you, I’m probably just a threat, a

madman who will do anything to get what I want. Guess what? You're probably right. I don't belong in Seron and neither will the Fuvias think that I belong either. Good bye!"

Ray turned and walked off. John could not say anything. There was nothing much he could say. All that he knew was what Ray had told him and he could not believe a word of it. No son could have believed that his father would actually set someone up and kill somebody else. No son could have believed a story that far-fetched beyond his imagination, especially from someone he had just met not long ago.

"John," said Peter. He stuck out his hand towards John. There was a yellow book in his hand with a dark green leaf pattern on the cover page. "Uncle D's diary," said Peter simply. John looked at Peter then chuckled, "What for?" Although he was trying to look as though he had thought nothing about what Ray had said to him, John's quivering voice gave him away almost instantly. Peter gave a soft "hmm" and flipped through the pages. His eyes widen as he found what he was looking for and begun to read.

"I killed my brother today. I did not do it directly, neither did I plan it. I killed him without realising until the last minute. I had made Neil join us and I told him everything about us. He had wanted to quit. Although he said that he would never give us away but he knew too much.

"I was against it, really, I was. Who would want anyone so close to you to come to any harm? He was my brother. He was the responsible one, the only one who would make the right decisions and the only one who would cover for me whenever I did something wrong. He had been giving in to me since as long as I could remember. He was the good man. The only time he was wrong was when he had chosen to go against us and our cause. If he hadn't, he could still be around. They decided to kill him without consulting me. What am I supposed to do now? Assume that they've done the right thing and...thank them? Say they've done a good job?

"Neil just wanted his son out of this. He wanted to let him be happy. He told me that he did not want to have anything happen to him. He wanted to live. He wanted to be a father. He wanted to see his son again. I know about his secret, about his wife not being from earth and everything. He had confided in me, he had trusted in me...yet, I did not save him. Maybe if I tried, I might've. He didn't tell me much. He just told me to let his son go.

“I did not plan this but they’ve somehow planted the bomb on Roland, my nephew. They said that they had planted the trigger device on his friend and knew that this friend would pass it to him. Once it was done, the device would send a message to another deadlier device that blew Neil up. Am I a bad person? His face keeps haunting me, every time I see the face, it was never angry but it was that of disappointment. He would never forgive me. I knew he did not blame me. Did he? I don’t know. I really don’t.

“No man or animal would kill its own brother. Did I kill him? No. They killed him, not me. It was not my fault. I did not do it. I could have guessed though. I could’ve stopped them. They’d’ve listened to me, right? It’s my entire fault.

“I miss him already. Dad had told me that Neil and I came from the same place before, we had a destiny together and we were supposed to share what we had. No matter what, we were never to fight with each other. He said that we should know how to die for each other. He tried to change me but I was afraid to offend the other people. There’s no telling what they would do.

“I must never let Roland know. He must never know that he killed his own father. There’s no way I would let it happen even if I’m dead. He’ll never forgive me. Neil, I’m so sorry.”

Peter’s face started to shake under the pressure of stopping his tears from flowing out of his eyes and onto the big cursive handwriting in the diary. Apple could not cry, she did not feel a thing. In fact, she felt the urge to just throw the book over the side of the building. John had grabbed the book and scanned through the pages again. He snapped the book shut and ran towards the lift. He pushed the button and said, “We’ve got to find him.”

He turned, looked and saw the stairs and within moments, he was running down the steps as fast as he could, jumping every last few steps. Once again, Apple followed as quickly as she could.

There were considerably few people in the streets and they headed for the MRT station as they saw Ray disappear into the station. Quickly, they jogged towards it, panting and sweating. Pushing their way through a few people going into the station, Apple finally switched to “Action” mode and started looking around for Ray. She spotted

Ray in front of the control station, looking innocently at the map of train routes as he turned around. Apple shouted to the others and Ray jumped as well. Apple ran for Ray with all her might and grabbed the bottle from his hand. Apple could just remember a blur as Ray knocked into her and grabbed the bottle back. From behind, Peter had grabbed Ray by the waist and was pulling him down with his weight but Ray was much heavier and stronger and just shook him off. Then, he ran. He ran outside and up the escalator. Apple and Peter followed after him as the rest took the time to catch up. Once they were on the escalator, Ray immediately ran downwards again and brushed by them, almost knocking into another person. John had reached the bottom and knocked as hard as he could into Ray and snatched the bottle from him again. However, Ray kept a strong grip on the bottle and there was no way he could pry it from his hands alone.

Esther kicked Ray in the shin and Ray's leg buckled. Taking the chance, John ripped the bottle from his hands. At this moment, many people had looked at them curiously and were pointing fingers at them. The train arrived and many people flooded out of the station. Distracted, John allowed Ray to knock into him. The bottle slipped from his hand and landed onto the concrete floor and broke.

Something that is happening down on earth now just did not seem right. What had happened to caused peace to topple, if there was any in the first place? Simple question, there must be a simple answer. But now, it is not the question of the difficulty of the answer but the non-existence of the answer.

What could have caused the imbalance? Dalax? No. I may not have agreed to the way he goes about doing things and whatever the cranks in his head are telling him to do but he had always meant for the good of the people. He had always believed in independency. I should know. I went to Alpha University with him. He was always a lone person, never liked to ask anyone for anything. That, I supposed, was his philosophy in life. He may believe that organisms depend on each other to survive but he always said that the only dependency allowed was when it was needed to, and only to, survive. If I could have calculated the times he had counseled people who tried to get a favour out of him, I would have lost count.

Dalax is a bordout. In the first few weeks that I have gotten to know him, he scared me tons, popping out of nowhere then disappearing in a blink of an eye. Once I got used to it, it seemed like a handy trick to get into class on time. I would not have minded being a bordout. Every time I pleaded with him to pull me along to class on time, he would turn me down. He always said something about my responsibility which was to get to class on time. Since he was a bordout, he could afford not to rush to class. It sickened me but now, it seems that he was right. Instead, truth to say, that sickens me even more.

Chapter 15

There was nothing they could do as the gas seeped out. Almost instantly, everyone in the station stood in a trance for a second. Then, they started moving, walking in the same direction but with an odd look on their faces. Parents who had been with small children walked away from them without realising they had done so. Little children started to cry. Teenagers with friends simply carried on doing what they were doing while families walked away from one another in a different direction.

A man with a sad look on his face took out a black object from his bag and aimed it at his own head. He had been thinking about suicide but had not killed himself because he had a family to look after. Now, there was nothing holding him back. A few teenaged girls saw the gun and screamed. There was a few moments difference when the man pulled the trigger and shot himself in the head. There were more screams and people ran in different directions, each fleeing from the scene but fleeing to nowhere.

Chaos started. A few teenagers started to rob old ladies of their money, drew on walls and started making out with their girlfriend or boyfriend with their parents not far away but not realising that they had kids. A few men started to fight with these teenagers; they started to shout at them to stop.

John stood up immediately and looked at Ray who was smiling slightly at the scene before him. Apple felt herself getting really angry at Ray. How could he smile at a time like this? John looked back and fro from the scene to Ray and said urgently, “Do something!”

As though he had just noticed, Ray looked at the dead body of the man who committed suicide at the centre of the station. His smile was gone and was replaced with a straight line. “Ray!” shouted John and Esther together.

“What could I do?” asked Ray and his hand started to make helpless gestures. There was no fear in his eyes, more of one of helplessness. There was no longer anger but pure panic. Apple had known that he was not meant to be the bad guy.

“For one, you can do magic,” said Yu Ping. She reached out to Ray with her small hand and pulled him as hard as she could to the center of the station. Ray followed obediently and his face lit up suddenly.

“That’s it! How could I have forgotten? But how...” said Ray and started to look worried again.

“Just do something! After watching all those TV shows with magic, don’t tell me you’ve not learnt a trick or two?” said Yu Ping, her voice almost breaking.

“Right, right. I should know something,” said Ray and his eyebrows tightened together as he thought.

“Hurry up!” shouted Yu Ping over the noise that had started to accelerate and did not seem to be near any peak.

Reluctantly, Ray stood awkwardly in the center of the station and held up both his hands.

“Crash!” Oh my hat! The device laid in two pieces on the floor and the screen was out. I pick them up gingerly in my hands and saw the two catches that joined the device together. Immediately, I clicked them together and prayed as I turned it over. I heaved a sigh of relief when I saw words appearing across the screen. “Instructions of use...”

It feels like a blessing in disguise. Like that time when I went down with flu and could not go to an outing in elementary school and it rained the whole day. No blessing for those who went swimming in the makeshift sea at the edges of the city.

“All choices non-refundable, all actions cannot be undone.” Oh hat.

“Antidote not discovered yet as inventor is long dead.” Oh great hat.

“Any action to erase memory of anyone or anything will eventually make all memories disappear in a year...” Oh my great fat hat... What!

Words appeared on the screen warning about side-effects and possible annihilation of the planet but no part of my brain received the information. I know that fact already and knowing is not always a good thing.

I. Am. So. Dead. I tore towards the transporter and transported myself to Penato City.

Chapter 16

Ray looked at Yu Ping and Yu Ping mouthed, “Do something!”

Ray moved in front of a place piece of wall and turned around. He placed his left thumb into his left palm to hide it from view. Then, he tucked his right thumb in between the index and middle finger of his right hand and clenched it. He placed his right fist to the side of the opened palm of his left hand and moved his fist up and down. Apparently, he was trying to make it look as though he had dislocated his thumb.

Yu Ping rolled her eyes and said, “Is that the best he could do?” Apple looked at Yu Ping with questioning eyes and immediately, Yu Ping knew her question.

She explained, “The core of Earth is its magic. Other fuvia-wheels have different cores. As with all the other fuvia-wheels and system, as long as you know the core, you can use it to buy some time.”

John said blatantly, “What?”

“Do some magic and the people get distracted immediately and stop for awhile.”

“Simple logic. I knew that,” said Apple blankly and more to herself than to anyone else.

Ray moved his right palm down and then removed his right thumb slowly and at the same time, revealing the left thumb slowly. As though in a trance, everybody in the MRT station stopped what they were doing and looked blankly at Ray who looked almost shocked and frightened.

Ray breathed and heaved a sigh of relief. “As long as it works, it’s fine with me,” said Ray.

Yu Ping looked at him as though an adult looking at a defiant child, she said, “That’s not going to hold them for more than ten minutes. Not even enough time for us to draw markings around their eyes!”

Esther chuckled and said, “Why would you want to draw markings around their eyes in the first place?”

Yu Ping rolled her eyes again and suddenly, there was a loud siren outside. They exchanged looks and in an instance, were out of the station and into the streets. There was a fire just to their right. A temporary booth was burning and the heat was almost intolerable. A fire engine had arrived and a man was holding on to a fire hose, one leg placed in front of the other and aiming at the fire. There was a moment’s confusion as the fireman let go of the hose and the water hosed down the surroundings without mercy.

The fireman began to fight for the hose as the contagious disease spread through the streets. Everywhere, families were splitting up and cars were honking at people who crossed the street while in the one second’s trance. Suddenly, a helicopter sounded overhead and two men dropped down in a parachute. As though it was already prepared a long time ago, a stage appeared in the middle of the street.

In a blink of an eye, one man was dressed in a dark and sparkly purple robe, held a wand in his right hand and wore a top hat on his head. He waved his hands effortlessly and a dove appeared on his left hand.

Unanimously, all life stopped. In the once busy roads and street, not one person was moving, not one car was inching on the jammed roads, not one tree was shaking to the wind and not one sound was heard except from that of the skies. It was thundering as though threatening to pour the Nile all over the country.

The other man ran into the station as the man on the stage did his next trick. He aimed his wand at a few objects that had suddenly appeared in front of him and elevated them one by one until they were all in the air. Calmly, he placed the dove into his hat and then waved his right hand. Immediately, the objects started to juggle themselves in the air and moved wherever the magician was pointing.

There were loud thuds as more men jumped from the helicopter. All of them were equipped with masks and each was dressed in black, covering every part of their body, even the eyes did not have holes in the fabric to peep through.

Oh no, I cannot believe this. The door was about to open when I realize that I did not have any protection kit with me. If the virus, or whatever it was called, maybe,

disease, have spread throughout Penato city, it would hit me hard when the door opens. I held my breath and my head threatened to burst on me, not very much from holding my breath as I suppose I could hold for more than ten seconds but because of all the stress that bubbling inside of me.

Chapter 17

The army spread all around the streets, roads and the station. They shut off the water hose and placed it into the fireman's hand. Some removed sticks from some teenagers and some went around with an odd device that made family walk back to family. Some headed into the station to help the situation there just as the people were being distracted by the second man who landed who was also doing magic tricks.

John turned to Ray and asked, "Do you have an antidote?"

Ray hesitated, sweat started to roll down his already sweaty face.

"Come on!" said Esther.

"My dad did not set you up. I believe he would never do such a thing. His your friend, why don't you believe him? Have he ever said anything to you to make you feel that he is not a friend? I know he is still upset over the death of his partner. Although I do not know what actually happened but I am sure that he did not kill her, set you up or blow up anyone!" persuaded John.

"Why do you trust so much in him? He could be lying, fuvias lie!" said Ray angrily.

"He's my dad and no one's to say that about him. I know him," said John.

"I thought I knew my dad too but he was helping them."

"He knew he was wrong. He did not want things to turn out the way it did."

Ray started to think again, harder than he had ever done in his life. Peter walked up to Ray and looked him in the eye. After getting Ray's attention, he said, "Mr. Waser did not frame you."

"How would you know?" asked Ray and laughed a short laugh.

"Uncle D wrote inside his diary about how he set you up so that he could get you to join and how... he did not stop you from..."

"From what?" asked Ray impatiently.

Peter took a deep breath and said quickly, “Hemadeyoublowupyourdad!”

“What?”

“He could not stop you from blowing up your father,” said Peter and looked away immediately.

Ray shook his head violently and shut his eyes. Then he stopped and opened his eyes and behind them was a determination that no one had seen before. He smiled sadly and said, “I’ve trusted the wrong person.” He bent his leg and squatted on the concrete floor.

“He would’ve never wanted you to turn out like this,” said John.

Apple placed a hand on Ray’s shoulder and said gently, “You cannot turn back the clock Ray, but you can wind it up again.” Ray reached into his pocket and took out a small packet, the size of small, individual packed sugar that people use in their coffee or tea. “Just open it, it’s contagious too,” said Ray, his voice trembled.

I start to squirm; my heart beat twice as fast as it should have been or more. I could feel my face turn red. I start to wish that I have not fallen for Dalax’s tricks. I should have just left that missing Fuvia on earth rather than send the young lads down. At this point of time, I would have done anything to salvage the situation.

Chapter 18

Apple received the small pack of antidote from Ray and Esther took it from her. Esther ran over to one of the men in black and explained to him what it was. The man thanked him and within moments, the pack was examined by another man in black who gave in the thumbs up.

The man tore open the pack and a lot of smoke came out from the package and formed a big cloud of dust which dispersed as quickly as it appeared. The man on the stage had packed up and helicopters lowered to allow the men to climb aboard using a rope ladder suspended from them.

There were a few awkward minutes but everyone awoke from their trance and carried on what they were doing without hitches. It was as though nothing had happened. The fireman, though, was wondering what he was aiming his hose at.

Ray stood up and smiled. Apple gave everyone else a high-five and there were smiles of success on everyone's face. Esther, however, was looking glum.

"What's wrong?" asked Yu Ping.

Esther held out a piece of paper the size of an adult's palm and read, "There's a disease in Seron that have spread to other fuvia-heqs and subsequently, other fuvia-cities. The fuvia-wheel is in trouble but we cannot help because we have our own problems. You're the only fuvias from earth who are free of this disease. The disease had not been passed on to anybody for more than three hours and those infected will not be contagious to you anymore. Go back and help. Regards, Saturn's army."

"What disease is that?" asked Yu Ping.

"They did not say," said Esther. He shook the paper, as though hoping something else would fall out of it.

"How are we supposed to go back?" asked Yu Ping.

Esther shrugged and said, "Well, the army would take us back but everyone must agree to go first." He looked deliberately at Ray who shook his head and turned away.

Apple exchanged looks with John. John said, "Go back. We need an experienced adult. There's no way we can solve that big a problem on our own. We've not even gone to grade school."

Ray hesitated and folded his arms. John continued to persuade him, "You know that no one in Seron is against you. My father did not set you up. We don't care where you're really from but you are definitely a fuvia. We want you home."

Ray turned back to look at John. His expression was undecipherable. Then he smiled and said, "I suppose you're right. I've known Seron my whole life. And I can't stand these people contraptions. One can get use to it but I'll definitely not love it." He chuckled.

"I don't like it," said Apple.

"Who could actually stand the elevator?" said Yu Ping.

"The cars here smoke too much."

"There're too many people."

"I miss home."

They said everything they could think off and Ray appeared to have softened.

Ray nodded his head in agreement.

As soon as he did, Apple felt her head going dizzy and she fell asleep.

Who was going to solve the problem after this? The door opens and I hold my breath. Maybe I could transport myself back but there was also nothing I could do. It was worth a try, I could go back and inform Esther's mother. Yes, she would know what to do, she might be able to help, I hope. The control to the transporter is just outside, all I had to do was go out and press a button.

Epilogue

When Apple woke up, she could not recognize the place she was in. She was still in a standing position which she found was very odd. She blinked and looked down and saw the Earth spinning through the gaps on the ground. Taken aback, she walked backwards, knocked into something solid and heard a scream. She screamed as well and turned around and saw Yu Ping.

"We're back in Seron," said Yu Ping happily. Esther, George, Peter and John ran towards them from their right.

"What happened? I heard screams," said George.

"No, I just scare Yu Ping and she scared me back," explained Apple.

"We're back in Seron!" repeated Yu Ping to the four boys...

I dash for it, and hit the button 'start' and a screen showed up; I scrolled to the option that said, "Seron City" and clicked the big red button at the side of the rectangular stand. The door to the transporter closed as it reprogrammed itself. There was a loud sound and I turn myself around. It sounded like glass cracking on something else solid.

A man in a tuxedo staggered towards me with a beer bottle in his hand. I run towards the transporter as the door of the transporter opens. It was just centimeters away from me but the man knocked into me and hugged me around my belly. He dragged me down onto the ground with him and I breathed...
