

# Jaypeg I

## Prologue

The morning streets came to life as the sun rises in the small town of Seron with a population of about nine hundred. The children awoke to their morning calls and got ready for school. Shops stocked up their shelves, cars pulled into the main roads, lights lit up in the many convenience stores around, all ready to go. It was a fine city, though not too dense with human traffic. Buildings reached only to a height about ten storeys and there was only one stadium right in the middle of this small city where people go for recreation or when there was a huge event worth celebrating. The city itself is surrounded by trees and nature and many memories of the time before becoming an industrial community.

Science has become a daily aspect of life there as everything was automatic. The shop door opened with a push of a button, the cars drove along by themselves as the car owner laid back to catch some morning Zs. Accidents hardly ever happen on the roads unless the car was accidentally told to drive into a building and not into the road it was on. Although there were still some manual cars around, the majority was automatic.

Just before noon, the day had settled itself into a peaceful drag. Out of a dilapidate hut on a small hill, hidden from view by trees, came two men wearing masks, armed with shotguns and equipped with huge sacks. They drove swiftly around the corner in their car into Maysir Street. They burst into the central bank, screaming orders at the people. Shots were heard, terrified screams rang through the air. The robbers made off with their sacks of money. The alarm rang madly and someone went to get the police.

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“Rob, hey, um...I just want to say, I’m truly grateful for all you’ve done for me and my family and here’s a token of my appreciation.”

He fumbled in his bag and held out a phone to me. It was sleek black, classy and it even had a phone strap. I saw him buy it a few days ago and he loved it so much he took great care of it. He never lets it out of his sight and he is giving it to me?

Well, it was a great phone with multiple latest camera functions like the camera function, recording functions, all new ringtones and beautiful background, and it was the newest model in the shop.

I could not take it from him.

“Why?” I asked.

“I just owe you too much, Rob, take it.”

I liked the phone but did not have much money to my name. Now, it is presented right in my face and I was hesitating. I mean, he had been my friend for ages. I helped him climb that ladder of success, even if it had meant being the ladder myself. I looked up at him and he smiled and forced the phone into my hands.

“Take it or else,” he joked.

I flipped it repeatedly in my hands, not really looking at it but just thinking about what to say to him.

“Thanks.” I felt very lame saying that but I felt for just once in my entire life that I could actually have a friend. It did not matter to me much to be in possession of the phone but it was the first time I’ve ever received a present from someone as a friend.

“Well, I’ve got to go now. Enjoy your present!” he chirped. He waved once more and disappeared through the crowd. He must be going back to Seron, I thought, his mission was long over and he could not stay on Earth for too long a time. I waved back at him and pocketed the phone, hoping that I would see him soon.

It was at that moment. I heard the sound, so dreadful, erupting from just a block away. It sent people running, screaming and scattering in so many directions. There was panic.

“Boom!”

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## **Chapter 1**

The school bell rang. Usually, this meant that the corridors would soon be flooded with students as the classroom doors swing open releasing the students into their first classes. Today, no footsteps were heard nor a piece of worksheet was found there. Today was different. The annual science fair, the greatest event of the year, was going on in the great hall and school was out for that day at Goldfields High.

Goldfields High was in fact an elementary school, the only one in Seron. In Seron, the children spend their first three years of school in elementary school, fourth grade to the tenth grade in grade school and anything beyond that was for further studies which would mean government studies.

“Have you chosen who to be in the club you told me about yesterday? The one you are going to set up. What are you going to call it?” inquired Esther as he stepped back to avoid getting hit by a fellow school mate who was chasing after a rabbit. He hurried to catch up with John who was a few feet in front of him. John, lugging his science project along smiled, “I’ll have to decide on the name of the club after I had found its members. Besides, I

do not know who to choose to be in this club.” This was his last year at Goldfields High and before he had tougher competition to face in grade school, he wants to rock the fair in elementary school. He set up his stall and placed his science project on the table. He placed the remote by the video camera like device and connected some wires between them. Then he picked up the remote and stood behind the camera.

‘Click’, John pressed the big red button on the remote and the hall was immediately filled with hologram trees, blossoming and then bearing fruits. These ‘trees’ cannot be touched and did not take up any space. Esther reached up into a tree and tried to grab a fruit, only touching air. There was a deafening silence as the student body stood stunned by the huge array of trees of different colours. A few birds flew into the trees and nested there. The eggs hatched and the young birds flew out to eat the fruit on the trees. Animals appeared under the trees and in the treetops. More trees appear to complete the forest. ‘Click’ and the trees and animals were gone. A moment of silence hung in the air for a split second until it was broken by the applause and cheering from the students and teachers at the fair.

John smiled broadly and glimpse through the crowd. There was a girl who had not joined in the applause and cheers but was concentrating on setting up her own project. She was just a few centimeters shorter than John, had deep brown eyes and matching short, brown hair. She was Apple, John’s only worthy rival in science. John made a mental note to approach her later to invite her to his club.

Apple stood her experiment on the table and clapped her hands once. A black cloud appeared over her stall and slowly spread through the fair. She opened an umbrella next to her and held it over her head. A split second after, it started to rain and there were a few shouts as lightning strike a few stalls. John heard a dazzled Esther say, “Golly my!” as Apple clapped her hands twice and the clouds cleared and a miniature sun rose above the stall. Sunshine filled the convention and the puddles of rain dried up. She clapped her hands trice and it started to snow. Then, she summoned the sun again with two claps and the snow melted, eventually drying it up. The hall was ringing with applause and cheers once more only spiced up with shouts of “1<sup>st</sup> prize! 1<sup>st</sup> prize!” John applauded along and grinned.

After the hullabaloo had died down, John walked up to Apple with the intention of extending his invitation to his club to her. He never expected that Apple would agree and when she gave the nod, he was so happy that he got his tongue tied. “Wow! That was a ...an...um...impressive display,” he blushed and returned to his stall. Halfway, he turned back and walked back towards Apple’s stall. He said, “Could you help me pull more people into the club? Esther is also in it. We are short of people.” John was amazed by how steady

he sounded when he said that and silently heaved a sigh of relief, trying to control his heart from jumping out of its cage at the same time.

“Sure!” was the reply.

“Thanks!”

John returned to his stall and told Esther about the new arrival to the club. Esther gasped, “But she is your arch rival in Science!”

John smiled, “I’d love a challenge.”

Just then, the two teacher judges of the fair, Mr. Protocol and Miss Losle, went towards his stall and looked at his science project. Miss Losle wrote fervently on the paper on the clipboard in front of her. Mr. Protocol scanned through John’s science report, smiled and nodded. Then, they proceeded to the next stall. With Apple’s competition this year, looks like I would have to settle for second place, thought John.

The teachers did their rounds and walked past John’s stall once again to leave the hall. John caught something the teacher said, he heard clearly the word ‘fuvia’ and out of curiosity, he strained his ears to listen to the conversation.

Apparently sensing some discomfort, Miss Losle shushed Mr. Protocol and quietly, they walked out of the hall. Claiming that he needed the toilet, he left Esther in charge of his stall for a while, and headed out the hall behind the teachers. Once they had left the hall, Mr. Protocol shook his head and gave a small sigh.

“Our third grade lads can come up with anything better than those people, and the people won’t even know about it.”

Miss Losle placed a hand on Mr. Protocol’s shoulder and stopped him outside the toilet. John hid around a corner and listened. She smiled with almost annoyance and said, most seriously, “You know, Simon, this can’t be helped. There’s nothing we can do. All we can do is get them prepared for the future. They’ll have to deal with it themselves,” she paused and looked down at her shoes and thought, then she faced Mr. Protocol again, “It’s our job, Simon.”

“The sad thing is, by fourth grade, our little lads would have to learn about the Fuvia system.”

There it was again, thought John.

“The people need us. They’ll learn to accept it.”

“It’s just so...unfair that they have to be thrown into the world at a young age of ten. They’re going to face what they’ve never dreamt of.”

Mr. Protocol walked off, away from the hall, his pace was quick and John almost

wondered that Mr. Protocol might be crying as Miss Losle rushed to keep up with him. Turning around, John headed back towards the hall, making a mental note to find out what 'fuvia' means.

Soon, it was over. Everybody packed their experiments up and headed out the door, discussing and joking over the day's event. Apple strode over to John and Esther and introduced somebody to them. "Peter here is pretty interested in joining our club," she said. Peter had a gentle appearance and yet had big triceps and biceps that could make a grown man tremble with fear. John shook Peter's hand but released quickly as his grip was very tight and painful. Esther swallowed real hard and mustered up every ounce of courage he had in him and managed to blurt out a 'Hi'.

John said quietly to Apple as Peter and Esther tried to get acquainted, "You heard of the Fuvia system before?"

"No," snapped Apple, "Why do you ask?"

"Nothing."

The four of them strolled out of the hall together, talking about the meeting place, logo, name and motto for their club. Soon it was decided that the meeting place be at the small hut in Apple's backyard. Apple came from one of the richest families in Seron and no one questioned how big it was and whether it could accommodate four or more people. Their chat was interrupted by police sirens by police cars as they brushed past them and screeched down the road.

"Probably chasing a speeding car," suggested John.

"More like chasing a jet plane," joked Esther.

"Do you even need to speed in Seron? I mean you can reach it ends by foot. Why do we even have cars?" Apple asked.

"Fashion, hobby, liking," John said simply.

They shrugged their shoulders and headed out towards the restaurant just across the street.

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"He set me up, he set me up, he set me up," that was all that has gone through my mind for the past ten hours and counting. Why must he do this? We were the best of all pals and then just one day after he learnt about my... Is it just all about keeping your own people now?

Thanks to him, I have to go into hiding. Yes, they are all looking for me. All they said was, “You are still accepted and we want you back.” Right, as if I could trust them, if my best pal can do this to me, I do not suppose there is anybody else in the world that I can put my trust on.

He killed that girl, Ella, and thrown the murder weapon in my face. Now, I have both the Earth and Fuvia authorities after me. I can see it ever so clearly now, the way he hesitated before handing that phone over to me, the way the blast erupted just one block away ten minutes after, the moment I saw that the phone was programmed with a timed call.

I am so sorry Ella, if I could, I would have stopped it. They are out to get me, every single one of them.

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## **Chapter 2**

The next day, school was back to normal. Students burst into the corridors from every corner, rushing to their first-period classes before the first bell of the day rang. Teachers carried huge stacks of books as they swirled around, trying to get past many students on skate boards or anything with wheels. Shouting after the students to see them after school, the teachers sighed and smiled a little smile and proceeded towards the classes.

About one minute into first-period, the morning announcement was made by the secretary over the public announcement system. The gentle yet firm voice of Miss Yert called over the speakers, “Students are to keep out the west side of the school till the renovation of the library is over...” this was followed by a few new rules-of-the-year, and finally, “the 3<sup>rd</sup> prize winner of the science fair is Sonny Junes, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize goes to John Waser,” John banged his head on the table. There was a short pause and then, “And the 1<sup>st</sup> prize goes to Apple Yong...” the rest of it was drowned as everyone in the class stood up, cheered and applauded for Apple. John looked at Apple who was sitting behind him and shook her hand.

“Congratulations. Next year I’m going to get you.”

“Thanks...I think,” said Apple.

John sat back down as the teacher tapped on the table to quiet the class down. He silently made a resolution to at least get a better project than Apple next year.

During lunch break, John tried to discuss with Apple over some homework and about the club. However it was almost impossible to get anywhere near her as she was surrounded by practically half the student body congratulating her or trying to get an interview on her science fair experiment.

John found an empty table and miserably sat down to lunch. He poked his mashed potato on his plate and made many holes in it, jabbering under his breath. After swallowing a particularly big piece of carrot, Apple arrived at his table with Peter.

“May we sit?” she asked.

John calmed himself mentally and nodded. They sat down beside him and started to dig in to their lunch. “Where are your fans?” said John, almost resentfully.

“They scrambled when Peter here showed up,” she grinned, unable to pick up John’s hint of misery.

“Better luck next time John!” Peter said and attempt to tap John’s back, using as little strength as he could. John, being pushed a little forward, was amazed at Peter’s soft spoken voice as it was the first time he had heard Peter talk. It was such an unusual tone for a guy his size and build.

Before John could gather himself enough to speak, Esther joined the trio, muttering vulgarities. His blonde hair shook as he sat down beside John, staring at his clenched fists and started punching the table. John waited for Esther to explain as he knew it would be coming out of him anytime soon. Sure enough, Esther took a deep breath and began, “That old hag! Wait till I get my hands on that obnoxious, filthy...” Figuring it would kill his appetite, John did not want to hear what was filthy and he held up his hand to shut Esther up.

Apple asked, “What happened?”

Esther took another deep breath and continued, “It is George! That George Singleton! He copied my assignment totally and made it seem like I copied his! I put a lot of effort into this assignment! I took three long nights and days to finish it. Miss Hay did not believe that I did it and George always scored much better than me! That old hag made me stay back to write her an apology letter! And one to Georgia-the-innocent too!” Esther swallowed and added, “I just wrote it as if I did copy George’s work as I did not want any trouble...”

At that, George ambled over to their table and grinned with malice, “How’s our little crybaby,” he crooned, “too bad for you that Mrs. Hay Hagger believes me.” George turned around and swung his hands. Before anyone could do anything, he smacked Esther’s eye with his left hand. George turned around and said, “Oh dear, dear, dear... I’m so sorry. Accidents happen once in a while” George burst out laughing.

Fuming with anger, Esther got up but Peter got there first. He gave George a black eye and pushed him backwards, almost knocking him out. “Peter!” shouted John and Apple in

unison and restrained Peter, although with much difficulty. There was deadly silence in the cafeteria and a boy fetched for a teacher. After the teacher was able to cool Peter down, the five of them were brought to the principal's office.

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It was just two hours later, I have the whole police squad after me, the army and I could even bet on the CIA's involvement in this. They have traced the location of the call, the call that I have not even known to be on the phone screen. One of his most brilliant programming skills I see. I have been sitting in that coffee house, listening to all the commotion that seemed just a meter away. Then, I realized it was. The sound of cars, men, the running of the footsteps, pounded closer each second.

That was the moment. I dropped the phone and ran. Present, he said it was, for me for helping him get that promotion in the mechanics company. Great present it was. The greatest mistake of all that was trusting in him, no, it was even trying to be part of his community and I thought the reason why we have such a clear view of the earth is that we can see through the fog. The fog of communism, racism, riots, war, terrorism...

It was later did I realize, if I had kept my mind straight for just another second, I could have wiped off all the fingerprints on the phone and walked out. Running is the sure first sign of guilt. He had been making use of me all along, taking advantage of my guile, of my inexperience. He will pay.

He set me up.

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### **Chapter 3**

The principal's office was the last place every student wished to go and John could see why. The office was in such a cube-like shape that it felt so much like the interior of a dice. The white-washed walls were free of any posters. A shelf stood at a corner, bearing books that looked like they were all encyclopedias. A ceiling fan hung on the ceiling, spinning in a very noisy fashion. John came to one conclusion, this office needed a renovation.

In the middle of the room was the principal's desk. Behind it sat a grouchy man whose moustache gave him a look of one not to be messed with. "Can anyone tell me what happened?" he asked and John tried to focus on Principal Wesber's expensive looking coat, almost willing it to catch fire.



Apple raised her hand and opened her mouth to explain when Esther's it's-no-use expression caused her to put down hand. She pouted and rolled her eyes. Principal Wesber folded his arms and said calmly, "If no one explains, all of you will get one week's detention." George, who was still nursing his eye, immediately sputtered, "They accused me of copying Esther's assignment and got muscle man here to beat me up!" At this unfairness, John opened his mouth to argue but thought better of it as George had the upper hand.

After a while, Principal Wesber made up his mind and said, "George, you can go. And for the rest of you, you all shall receive one week's detention and the task of cleaning up the cafeteria." The gang resigned to their fate and left to get some mops and towels to clean the cafeteria. George sat on one of the cafeteria tables and smirked at them. He said, "Guess the Fuvias are not on your side, are they?"

An urge engulfed him as he heard the word but John suppressed his beating heart trying not to show it.

"Bet you don't know about the Fuvias do you?" said George.

John managed a composed expression and said, "So you're saying you know about it, humor me." George folded his arms and said, "Well, I'll tell you kids anyway. My dad told me about it long ago. The Fuvias are the ones who protect all that's living. They stop every disaster they could and do what they think best for the people."

"So they're like guardian angels?" asked John, practically dying to know more but dare not push his luck as he tackled a stubborn stain on the floor.

Apparently enjoying the superiority of knowledge over John, he said, "Yup, only they exist not only in people's minds but they're real."

"Sounds like a bedtime story to me," said Esther with a snort.

"Suit yourself, I'm out of here," George stride out of the cafeteria, leaving John more puzzled than ever.

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I have decided and it was not hard to do so. I changed my name, no more the old Robert, now, I am Raymond.

As a Fuvia, the changing of my name would mean severing any ties I have with the Fuvia-set. Wow, come to think of it, I might actually be the first Fuvia who decided to stay on Earth, with all the war and going-ons... Then again, there is not much of a reason. I left the immigration building, glad that I have finally made that decision.

I have not seen my father ever since I was probably seven and now, I am not even sure about how he looked like. Was he fat? Was he tall? What did he do for a living? My

mother have never talked about him since we moved to Seron, and sometimes, I could hear her sobbing in the night whenever I passed by her room. They and their protocols, the Fuvias have torn our family apart and I am left to find the pieces.

Seeing as the Fuvias have a great view of the world, knowledge every little detail of each continent and the power to sit on the fence and retain the balance of the lives of the people, they are seriously narrow-minded.

A Fuvia is only accepted if only he is purely Fuvia. How much difference is that compared to the racism of the Earth people? The difference between the whites and the blacks, the latter being of a 'lower class' and how many whites do you see starving compared to the blacks?

I feel that I was trapped. To the Fuvias, I am a traitor. Now, the Fuvias would have every reason to come after me, the people here are also tracing all over the roads, combing the streets, watching any trickle of threat that tries to sieve through.

It is time to continue on the invention that I have not finished since putting the idea away back in grade school.

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#### **Chapter 4**

Soon, the weekends arrived and the gang had their first meeting place at Apple's place. The hut was much bigger than what any of them had expected. It could have easily housed six people and big enough for these six people to camp in. It was made of wood and the walls were a light brown. A shelf ringed the interior just above their heads and was pink. On it was stationery and much other odd stuff that John supposed was Apple's work space for science.

There were four cushions on the floor and the gang settled down and discussed the name of the club. It was a pretty hard choice but they eventually decided on using the first letter of their names, period. They wrote on a piece of paper the few possibilities of the arrangement of the letters.

“‘E-jap’ or ‘E-paj’ makes Esther sound apart.”

“‘Paje’ sounds like a cat's name.”

“‘Jape’ sounds a little better.”

They voted and it was soon decided on ‘Jape’ for the time being. There was a knock on the door and Apple's mother came in with some snacks. “Chips anyone?” she smiled, “Try not to disturb your dad. He's with an important guest. He had been in his study even before I was awake.” Apple's mother shook her head and smiled, “They'll probably be there

till night time. If his friend is anywhere good looking, I'll date him to spite your father. He's not spending much time with his family, is he?" She sighed and left the hut. Apple looked somehow embarrassed and picked up a bear-shaped cookie and grinned sheepishly, "Looks nice." After a hearty laugh, they dug in.

Later in the afternoon, Apple's father came in to see how they were doing and handed Apple a wad of dollar bills to deposit in the bank as he said that he was not free to do it himself. "I'm a busy business man, you know," he said and exited the hut.

The gang left Apple's home and headed for the North view bank which was the nearest bank to them. The bank was rather crowded because it was a weekend and everyone had come to deposit their week's savings. Apple went in to deposit the money while the rest waited outside. John had to use the toilet and went into the bank too, leaving poor Esther with Peter. Peter, seeing that Esther was apparently afraid of him, took the initiative and said, "Come on, I'll treat you to an ice cream." Esther, feeling a little ashamed of himself for being such a coward, agreed and both of them went across the street to an ice cream man.

While Peter was paying for the ice cream, a black car stopped in front of the bank and two masked man alighted. Each of them was armed with guns and had a huge sack over his shoulders. They pulled on a mask and ran towards the bank. Esther tapped Peter on the back and pointed at the men. Peter dropped the ice cream and told Esther to get the police and he dashed into the bank after the two men. Esther got himself together and ran towards the nearby police post.

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I looked in the store window and had the shock of my life. I ran my fingers down my new dark hair, I touched the end of my smaller nose, I blinked my now rounded eyes, I pulled on my new slightly brown skin. It is like I was seeing myself for the first time. I have done it. It may have taken a long time and all the money I have with me to buy the equipment to make it but I did it.

When I turned around, I saw this person standing behind me. He was wearing a brown leather jacket, his eyes concealed behind his dark sunglasses with the dollar sign hologram in each lens; he also had an earring and a gold watch to match. That must be pretty expensive, I thought. It reminded me of the watch my father always wore to his dinner parties back when I was about five years old.

"Like it?" he said.

"Looks cool, must be expensive."

“You can have it,” he said without batting an eyelid.

I cannot believe it, “Really?”

He smiled and removed the watch and handed it to me.

As I reached out and touched the smooth cold surface of the watch, he said, “We could use a talent like you.”

I drew my hand back. How did he know?

“No worries, I have reliable informants and I always seek to understand the person before I recruit them,” he said.

“Recruit?” I was confused yet curious.

“It’s not safe to talk here.”

He took my hand and placed the watch into it.

“Besides, it’s yours,” he said, nodding at the watch.

I flipped to the back of the watch and to my surprise and shock, there were the initials M.C. carved on it. They were my father’s initials.

He turned and motioned for me to follow. I had my doubts about him but there was just this familiarity about him, this feeling that we had known each other and the truly odd feeling that...

“Uncle Dill?”

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## **Chapter 5**

Meanwhile, Peter was in the bank dealing with one of the robbers. He served a few punch and kicks onto the robber and he stumbled and fell. He lifted the robber into the air like a doll while the other robber filled his sack. The robber saw the state his partner was in and he immediately pulled out his gun, took aim and shot. Peter fell to the ground, releasing the robber.

The robber Peter attacked filled his sack with money and the duo made their way out. Just then, Esther arrived with the police. The police officers held guns and within seconds, they have sealed the exits of the bank.

“Surrender and no one gets hurt,” a police officer said.

“Try and make me, officers,” said the second robber.

He grabbed a girl, who had come to deposit money in the bank, and pointed his gun at her. The girl squirmed and kicked but the robber held fast. Peter tried to move but the pain was just too much. “Don’t come closer or this girl’s history!” the robber barked, tightening

his grip on the girl, his eyes flashing around wildly, trying to find a possible exit. The police stepped back and tried to persuade the robber to surrender though it did not really help.

Just as the situation was getting intense, John who had been in the toilet came out and in an instance, was glad he did not choose to leap out of the toilet. He looked at the robber than at Peter who was groaning on the floor, bleeding profusely. It did not take a genius to realize what was happening. Part of him wanted to run while part of him wanted to do Peter justice.

He took a deep breath and leaped onto the robber's back, knocking the gun from his hand. He was surprised that he actually did such a thing. The robber shook violently and John fell off his back and onto the wooden floor. The robber released the terrified girl, picked up his gun and turned to shoot at John. John backed away with fright. He stuttered, "You're n-not going t-to use that right? I me-mean you're only after the m-money."

"I've got nothing to lose, boy," smirked the robber in reply as John felt himself tremble.

Just as the robber was going to pull the trigger, Apple who was watching from one corner threw her shoe at the robber, hoping to knock the gun from his hands but it only directed his attention to her. Apple gulped and the robber swiftly grabbed her and made her his next hostage. The police was stunned by the series of events but came around soon enough to watch Peter throw his shoe at the robber's head. This knocked the robber out and he released Apple, his bullet missed his aim and shot towards the lights above, blacking one out.

The police immediately arrested the robber and his partner who was squirming on the floor from Peter's attack and sent Peter to the hospital.

"Don't worry, it is all over now," the police officer said to the patrons in the bank and everyone got up and left with a rather stony look of relief on their faces.

John, Apple and Esther was taken in for questioning and soon learnt that the robbers might have been related to a recent bank robbery of central bank. According to the robbers' statement, they were working under somebody but they were not revealing anything other than that the person behind it was 'The Boss'. The gang was also told not to reveal anything about this and although they found the request strange, they heeded to it.

The gang left after the questioning for the hospital to visit Peter. Anyone who had been shot would most likely lose consciousness but not Peter! He sat there smiling as the gang entered and said, "The doc said I will be fine."

An old lady was sitting beside him. She was dark skinned and her hair was as white as the walls behind her. “This is my dear grandmother,” introduced Peter cheerfully.

Peter’s grandmother shook her head slowly and said, her voice breaking down, “This boy, always so impulsive.” As the gang left Peter for him to get some rest, they overheard him trying to convince his poor grandmother that he was alright.

They walked down the hospital’s corridor, all too exhausted to talk and too shocked to move faster than a slow walk. As they were about to leave the hospital, someone shouted to them from behind.

“Wait!” it was the girl from the bank, “Wait!” The gang turned around. The girl ran to them, panting and shouting all the way.

“Girl! This is a hospital!” hissed Apple while the guys tried to suppress their urge to burst out with laughter. “This reminds me of Marry Poppins,” choked Esther as he tried to breathe, “Am I floating already?”

The girl stopped in front of them and at once, the gang saw that she was very small-sized and her clothes looked old and oversized.

Before John could ask Esther the reason behind relating this to Mary Poppins, the girl caught her breath and cleared her throat, as though about to give an important speech and said, “Thank you so, so much for helping me today. If I had not deposited that money, that old uncle that lives across the street will surely get to me. You guys were so brave! May I know your names? Can I be friends with you? Where do you go to school? Where do you stay?” she said all of this in one breath which left the gang, even Apple, speechless.

After a long awkward pause, John finally broke the silence, “Which question do you want us to answer first?”

Perkily, the girl replied a really irrelevant answer, “I’m from Goldfields High and my name is Yu Ping and may I say how nice it is to be able to meet you.”

The gang looked at one another and Apple announced, “We are also from Goldfields High!” A grin spread on Yu Ping’s face.

“There is only one elementary school in Seron though,” said John

Esther stepped forward and introduced them, “I am Esther, and this is John and Apple.” With that, the girl extended her hand and shook the hands of the gang. Esther added, “And the guy in hospital is Peter.” The girl stopped smiling and muttered, “Is he alright?”

“Yup, he’s fine. He’s indestructible,” Apple shrugged, a hint of sarcasm in the comment. Then John said something which he had seemed to have thought of for a long

time, “Would you like to join our club? It’s a small one but heck, all clubs have to start somewhere.”

Yu Ping looked as though she had become the president and given a whole year worth of ice cream. She said, almost shouting, “I’d love to! Thank you ever so much and...”

“Shush!” hissed Apple once again, “We are still in a hospital!”

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He stopped and looked at me, then, he removed his sunglasses and I could see his brown eyes. They looked just as I remembered before moving to Seron. They looked tired yet they had this soft charm around them that always makes me feel protected and believe that everything would turn out fine.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“No one else would actually go for the dollar-sign-pasted-all-over-their-sunglasses look,” I joked. He was always the fun guy, the clown in the family. He was the one who changed his name from Dill C. to Dilli C. Why? He said the letters stand for “Do I Look Like I Care?” Yes, he was a weird one and creative too, I mean, who else could have thought up the many recipes of dishes so that we could sample a different dish everyday?

“What happened to my father?”

“I will tell you when I should.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you soon enough, I promise. But not yet as it may compromise me.”

As much as I would like to get my father’s whereabouts out of him, I could see that he was in no mood to answer that question. In grade school, we learned where and when to let go of situations.

Now, the only question left to ask was...

“What do you want from me?”

He chuckled and looked at me as though I have just asked if the Earth was flat. He said, “I’ve always thought you were a genius. One thing’s for sure, your latest experiment cleared up your acne scars and any traces of your previous DNA that builds up your face.”

“So, what do you want from me?” I repeat.

“We want you to join us...”he started.

I cut in, “Define ‘we’.”

He continued, “I tell you. We are this group of people who aims for world peace and we need help in carrying out our plans...”

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## **Chapter 6**

Soon, the weekend was over and everyone got ready for the following week of studying. With Yu Ping now in the club, 'Jape' club was also officially named 'Jaype' to include Yu Ping. Peter had also turned up for school, heavily bandaged as though he had just robbed the hospital of its supply of bandages. John was the first to react and said with a little amusement, "You've got to be kidding. You have to wait for that to heal!"

When the rest of the gang looked at him with 'unbelievable' sketched all over their faces, Peter shrugged and said, "I do not want to miss classes, and of course, having detention with you guys."

"You sure you're okay?" asked Apple.

"No problem," smiled Peter.

They introduced Yu Ping to Peter. As Apple, John and Esther headed to class, Yu Ping whispered to Peter, "Tell your grandmother I said 'Hi'."

"You know my grandmother?"

"Just thought you looked like someone with one," replied Yu Ping and headed to class too, Peter looking incredulously at her then it struck him that she could have seen his grandmother in the hospital. He shrugged and followed along.

Unsurprisingly, not long after, the five became pretty close friends.

Their effort in the bank robbery was in the news that day. Front page! By the end of the day, the whole school wanted to be in their club, even George Singleton. Well, it was not as though he said it but he did a few things that expressed it so. He helped Esther pick up his books when he dropped them although with a oh-I-did-not-know-this-is-yours-if-not-I-would-not-have-picked-it-up and refrained from pushing John on his way to class.

After a long day at school, after a longer day of being hounded by fans and the school paper journalists, John still had a detention to look forward to. He started to compose a little tune and sang under his breath, "Detention, how sweet is the sound that starts with a 'D' and ends with an 'N'." Apple caught his vibe and soon the four of them broke into song as they headed towards the detention room.

Principal Wesber paced up and down the detention room, making John really dizzy. "Well," he said slowly, "the heroes in detention. Think you're so smart eh?" John felt that the principal hated them as his eyes pierced through John and he felt goose bumps on his arms. It was also the way he said it, like he was glad that they were in detention but not happy that he was in there with them. It was like there was something on Principal Wesber's



mind but he dismissed the thought and rested his elbows on the table and his face in his palms, as he watched Principal Wesber pace up and down, willing himself to get hypnotized.

Principal Wesber added, “There is to be no talking, no eating, no drinking and no walking around. You are to read books or do your homework and reflect upon your behavior,” sounding like some routine he had done his entire life. With that, he left the room to get some coffee, locking the room on his way out, muttering, “Who do they think they are.” Once in a safe distance, Apple stuck her tongue out after him and followed John’s position.

After detention, the gang made their way out of the school, and chatted on and on about everything like old friends. Walking along, John expressed what he felt about Principal Wesber. “Who cares if he hates us? I bet he hates every kid in this school. Who cares if he is sad or something’s troubling him?” retorted Apple, and Ester and Peter nodded in agreement. When John was about to say something, Yu Ping who had been standing by the school gate ran up to them.

“Why are you still here?” asked Esther.

“You guys saved my life remember?” said Yu Ping happily, “I cannot just leave you alone. Besides, we are a club and we shall always stick together. Oh, Peter, you sure you are alright? You should seriously get some rest...”

Feeling that Yu Ping was going seriously out of the subject as she started talking about some home remedies that could help Peter with his wound, John said, “Come on, who’s up for some pizza? Last one there will buy it.” Grinning broadly in the face, the five raced towards the nearby pizza stand.

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I opened my mouth to ask about the plans and in general, about this group of people, but he held up his hands and placed his right forefinger to his lips and shook it from left to right.

I closed my mouth and listened.

“As I was saying, we have realized that for people to live in peace and not to treat others unfairly, we have to make all of them experience the same thing, own the same things... bottom line is, we need your help. We could use some science expertise in the process. Are you with me?”

Heck, I thought, since I was not with the Fuvias anymore and if the people here are more able to appreciate me then...

“Why not?” I smiled. Uncle Dilli looked pleased.

“Come on, let’s get out of here, matey” he said in his best croaky pirate voice which always made me laugh. In an instance, his eyes shone and he cracked up.

I am now officially one of them.

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## **Chapter 7**

The next day in school was the same and so was the next. In fact, each day was the same throughout the week, so much that it began to feel monotonous. After a long dreary morning of algebra, history and everything else that made Jack a dull boy, the bell finally rang for lunch period.

“Today is such a great day! People coming up, trying to get close to you, teachers directing every question to me! Never felt better my entire life,” said Apple desperately, slamming her tray onto an empty table, her drink hopped and toppled.

“Hey, no worries, it’ll soon be over,” remarked John as he set his tray onto the table as Esther, Peter and Yu Ping approached the table with their trays. Walking across a crowd these days were hard without having someone walking beside them trying to start a conversation or everyone else staring and pointing at them. John added, “You’d think nothing big ever happens in Seron. So everyone’s real excited.”

It was the last straw for the gang when they were approached for autographs. “That does it!” said Apple, smacking the table with her hand, “I need a little privacy!” The sun bore on outside, making the heat and emotions much more unbearable.

Standing up abruptly, Esther added, “I agree with you so much right now, totally!” Suddenly, an idea shocked its way into Yu Ping’s mind...

“Follow me! I know a great place by the shed in the school garden. There’s no one... I mean I think there should be no one there at this time. It’s got cool air, fresh air and definitely crowd-free air. It should get these excited people out of our hair for a while. What do you think?” She led the gang towards the side door with the help of Peter who scared the fans away from them. Finally, they managed to leave the cafeteria.

They moved towards the shed, shading the sun from their eyes with one hand while the other carried a sandwich. By the shed was a very tall tree and they settled down quickly in the shade. “This is the life, peace, quiet...” cooed Esther, he leant his back against the tree trunk and began munching on his sandwich. The whole gang was basking in their new found freedom, except John, who was standing with his ears pressed against the shed door. He held up his hand to stop the sounds of the other’s movements and beckoned them

towards the door. They treaded carefully around the dried leaves and circle the shed, looking for any small opening to peek or listen through.

They could roughly make out a voice arguing with someone, most probably on the phone as only one voice was heard. As they listen to the loud and aggressive one way argument, the speaker's voice turned low and he said, "grass is green not on the other side, judge not a book by its cover, under where under is red." The voiced stopped and footsteps neared the door.

With John taking the lead, they ran back to the cafeteria, huffing and puffing, relieved to have got away. John said, "Sounds like there's something going on in this school." After catching his breath, Esther stared around at the others and muttered, "That, was freaky, makes no sense, no sense at all."

That night, John rolled over in his bed. He thought and thought. He got out of bed and hurriedly jot down what he had heard on a piece of paper, in case he forgot what it was. "Grass is green not on the other side, judge not a book by its cover, under where under is red," he repeated to himself. Then, he got an idea. He translated it to simpler English, minus the distorted proverbs, and wrote down, "It is green here, something hidden from sight and is underneath something under something red." John kept it safe in his homework file and went back to bed. He laid on his back and thought, "What's red with something underneath it which is not on the surface? Green..."

Unable to fall asleep, he got out of his room and watched the midnight news, which his parents were watching, on the stairs. "South view bank was robbed this afternoon by masked men... third bank robbery this year...with information call the police at 1600-111-1112." John went back to his bed and wondered that there have to be someone behind all these robberies. Starting to develop a headache, he shook of the thought and decided to call up a club meeting.

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"Next stop, Singapore." said Uncle Dilli.

I have heard of that place. Small, surrounded with water and, what was it again? Man, I need to catch up on my geography.

"Why did you choose Singapore?" I asked.

"No seasons," he said simply.

I could have chuckled. I remembered the time in our old home in the United States when it started to snow. Uncle Dilli fell into a puddle and came down with hypothermia. Since then, his birthday wishes were related, in one way or another, to live in a nice, tropical

climate where it is sunny all year round. That was it! Singapore is the sunny island near the equator and... I do not remember covering anything else on it.

I have never been on a plane, and this is definitely nerve wrecking. I could feel the gentle vibration of the seat and the moment I saw clouds outside the window, I held on real tight to the sides of the chair.

“Relax. Relax,” said Uncle Dilli, unfolding the in-flight magazine.

Right, relax, I tell myself, I can hardly trust these people contraptions, and never would, we could crash. Then, I told myself that if we do crash, there is nothing I can do about it. It may not be the happiest thought in the world but I can almost feel the tension leaving.

The three hour flight, well, considered rather uneventful, unless counting the times I felt airsick and had to barf. These contraptions need a better stabilizer.

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## **Chapter 8**

After a history pop quiz the next day, the afternoon seemed weary and depressed. “Hey,” called Apple from behind. John continued staring into space. “What’s up with you, you look like you need the school nurse, or are you a clone that John made to come to school on his behalf?” asked Apple, snickering.

“Nothing,” said John

“Very funny, daze-boy, what are you thinking about?”

“Let’s have a club meeting over at your place this evening.”

“Okay!” snapped Apple, “You go inform the guys, I’ll inform Yu Ping.” So it was settled and the gang strolled down the main corridor to the door once school was over. Apple was chatting with Esther on some geography project; Peter and Yu Ping were playing ‘rock, paper, scissors’ and Yu Ping seemed to be winning all the time. Suddenly, John tapped Apple and pointed in a direction. Esther, Peter and Yu Ping also stopped talking and glanced over to where John was pointing.

“What’s up with you? That’s just Wesber telling the janitor how good his cleaning is,” said Apple, attempting to put her palm on John’s forehead, just to see if he was heating up. “I’ll explain later,” hissed John and pushed Apple’s hand away. Apple stuck her tongue at him then folded her arms, and they walked in tensed silence to Apple’s house.

The mood did not lighten up until they reached the small hut in Apple’s backyard. “Wow! Apple, your house is so big! Is your family very rich? You even have a hut? What are those shelves for? Can all of us fit in? You know, I once saw a hut, but, of course,

bigger, than this somewhere on the hill side in New Zealand...Not that I've been there or anything... By the way, where do you find a place like...," Yu Ping blabbered on and on like the day the gang first met her. Apple put up a hand and covered Yu Ping's mouth, muffling her words. Then Yu Ping stopped, pushed Apple's hand away and beamed, "Nice place you got."

"Now," said John in a business like tone, "back to the issue." Everyone stared at John. He ignored it. He told them what had gone through his mind the previous night. "So from what I see, the person in that shed in the school might be up to something and I'll bet that it has something to do with the recent spate of robberies. I'm suspecting that Wesber has something to do with this." John concluded. Looking at the glazed look on the others' faces, he continued, "Think, when have you seen Wesber bothering about his staff or technically anyone who happens to be in his radar screen? One day after that phone call, Wesber and the janitor are like pals. We must find out when and where the syndicate's next target will be. There was only a short time between the first three robberies and now that the police are on a look out and stepped up on security, they might not be in too much of a hurry to strike next. That gives us time to think about this. It had hit central bank as a first target and followed by North and South view banks. If they are following the North, South, East, West order, their next target should be East view bank in Kentucky Road."

Just as he finished the last sentence, they heard a rustle behind the hut. They looked out of the window and saw a man running away into the street, turned a corner and disappear. Apple looked at John and asked, "How can you be so sure they'll strike East view bank? I mean, they could not possibly be as dumb as to follow the most obvious sequence, could they?"

John said, "Haven't you notice how practical everyone in this town's like? Even what they teach at school, how everything revolves around science and math? How often do we have an art fair or a history project? It's like they're getting everyone of us here to win the Nobel Prize for science or for some research."

"Now that you mentioned it, I think you're right. I see the adults or just simply anyone who left elementary school and into grade school having this grim just-get-on-with-life look on their faces. But I still think you are jumping to big conclusions. I mean, how could one be so sure about something like that? Hey, we have the police to investigate these things. Even they have to do a lot to be able to reach a certain conclusion. And of all people, if that was no good guy, why would he come to eavesdrop on us?" said Apple.

“We must be on to something,” said John seriously and Apple looked down and shook her head.

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When we finally arrived, I could feel myself dozing off. I was really tired. It was almost midnight. There was not any time difference but who could actually fall asleep on that turbulent, shivering, hovering contraption. Maybe, the answer was anyone on the plane but me.

We went to get our luggage from the conveyor belt that is turning round and round around a pillar, slowly, steadily but it does not seem to be able to win any race. Great, now we have to wait for the bags to come out. There it is! I spot my luggage and pull it off. I did not have many things with me and other than a few clothes, underwear, socks and toiletries; the remaining space is cramped with instant noodles.

Uncle Dilli had his bag a long time ago and he beckons me towards the door that leads out of the arrival area.

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## **Chapter 9**

A month has passed since the club meeting, the detentions had long ended and the first of the total of five exams in the year was just around the corner. The bell rang for lunch and the gang met at their regular lunch table. “Good thing the whole student body stopped crowding around us. Studying for the exams is frustrating enough,” said Apple almost gratefully. She placed her sandwich on the table and looked around, she said, “Funny thing though, did anyone see Yu Ping around at lunch this week? Is she dieting or what?”

“Speak of the devil,” said Esther, looking up.

John spurned around to see Yu Ping walking towards their table followed by...George Singleton. “Can we join the table? George was giving me some tuition for the exams. You know, he’s really smart and I learned lots of things from him. I know...you guys do not like him but he’s not such a bad guy once you get to know him. And he told me that he copied your work the other time because you placed gum on his chair and he took so long to fix his pants that he did not have time to do his work...”

Esther shot up and spurted, “You stuck my text books together! Besides, we were given a week to do that assignment! How long do you need to wash that pants anyway... Just get your mum to do it!”

George looked real angry when Esther finished off the last sentence. He grunted, “At least my mum looks better than your mum!” He turned his head quickly and snorted, and then he stomped away.

Yu Ping shouted after George to wait up and then turned to Esther and said, “Could you just have kept your stinking mouth shut! He...” She shook her head in an attempt to keep herself from saying something she may live to regret. Then she started after George, shouting at him to cool down.

That was the first time anyone saw George lose his cool and it was the first time any of them heard the word “stinking” coming from Yu Ping’s mouth. “I think I have a talent,” muttered Esther as munched off his hamburger in huge bites although keeping his expression indifferent.

“So, let’s talk about the robbery case, shall we,” said Apple in attempt to change the subject and to break the awkward silence. “Good idea,” responded John, cooperatively, let’s list out all the possible places that is green.” He managed to find a receipt in his pocket and took out his pen from his front pocket. He wrote down his idea and then passed it on to Apple. It worked, sort of. Everyone wrote a suggestion down as they passed the pen and paper around. All was well until John saw what came back to him. “Okay, let’s see, we have mountains, fields, park, and recycling factory?” listed John from the paper. Esther muttered angrily in an audible whisper, “I was going to put “George Singleton after being pounded by Esther Lee, but recycling factory sounds more... polite.”

“Um...,” said Apple unsurely, trying to find another subject to talk about while John squashed the list into his pocket, “My dad is opening a bank with a friend, some guy called Wales Roden. They always meet in my dad’s study, almost everyday! I have never seed this guy before as he arrives while I’m in school and leaves when I’m asleep. He’s always in the study with my dad. But, I learnt that my father can be so devoted to his career. This bank is going to have the highest security in the whole of Seron. I would like to see the robbers rob this bank. You cannot even step into the bank with a weapon and not expect the police to be all over you. Wow, could you imagine? A bank! He’s opening a bank!” said Apple, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“That’s great!” “Cool!” “Unbelievable!” chorused the other, including Esther.

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I followed Uncle Dilli into this high-rise building and immediately, I contracted the fear of heights. Should this building collapse...I do not even want to think about what may

happen. That was not all; Uncle Dilli tried convincing me to step into this small metal container and said that it was going to take us upstairs.

What if this contraption breaks down? What if it sends me to an endless abyss of nothing? There was no way I'm going in there. Unless someone drags me in. That was what Uncle Dilli did, he dragged me in.

The door closed and the container rumbled and I look around it. Noticing the many parts of the container was rusty, I decide to close my eyes and wait for the impact. It came as a small jerk and the door opened. Uncle Dilli stepped out and I follow close after.

I walk into the corridor. What do I see? Doors of different colours, barricaded by gates of different colours and there were locks of different kinds hanging with chains over it.

We stop at a door towards the end of the corridor. It is white and the gate is brown with paint peeling off it leaving patches of beige.

Uncle Dilli pressed a button, which I think, is a bell and sure enough, I can hear the chime ringing through the apartment, announcing our arrival. A young man opened the door, turned his head back into the apartment and shouted, "Ma! The guests are here."

Then the reply came but as it was part of more than one language, the language chip in my brain cannot decipher it. The chip in my brain was implanted into my brain when I moved to Seron. Other kids have them installed while they were just born. It gives the ability to understand languages and even allows you to think in them. For instance, if the person you are talking to speaks in French, you start talking and thinking in French. It will just come naturally. This is the first time my language chip has let me down.

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## **Chapter 10**

It was a hot day but the air was cooling and fresh as the last days of the exams ended. Children rushed out of school and to their favourite play-spots. "Which of your parents will be turning up for the parent-teacher meeting session tomorrow?" asked John as they strolled out of school.

Apple said, "My mum will be going. My dad will be busy, as usual. You know, I suppose he has never met the principal before. I've been thinking though, how many banks does a small town like ours need? North, South, East, West, we had them covered, not to mention the central bank."

"My dad'll be coming, he's free on Saturdays," said John.



They discussed about the parent-teacher meeting all the way to the school gate, until, “Where’s Yu Ping?” asked Peter.

Esther snapped, “Probably hanging out with Forge Fingerson.” Sensing a possible rainstorm, Apple pointed out a nearby ice cream stand and the gang went over. Out of the blue, there came a shout, “Rodney! How are you today, honey?” The gang turned to the direction of the shout and saw Principal Wesber hugging a lady near his age. They chatted and made their way to Principal Wesber’s car.

“Eew... that’s a sight I can do without. There goes my appetite for dinner,” said Apple sticking out her tongue in disgust

“Well, I don’t suppose you have an appetite for an ice-cream cone, do you?” laughed John.

“Bring it on, no principal’s ever spoilt my appetite for a snack,” said Apple as she marched towards the ice-cream stand.

Paying for the ice-cream, they sat down in the shade of a tree and enjoyed their ice-cream. Suddenly, Yu Ping walked to them, shading the sun from her eyes. In an unusual low and spiritless tone, she said, “Hey.”

They looked up, all surprised to see her.

“What do you want?” asked Esther unpleasantly.

“Old man who lives across the street wants to see you,” Yu Ping said tonelessly, she closed her eyes and turned away. “Follow me.” If this was a cartoon of the west, a bale of hay would be pictured, rolling across the empty streets, thought John.

Totally put off yet petrified by this sudden change of attitude in a friend, they looked at each other in much confusing terror. Finally, they got up and they followed her through the many streets, finishing up their ice-cream cones on the way. She led them to the main square of the town, just beside the central bank. She walked into the grand shopping complex at the corner of the square. Silently, they followed her into the lift. Yu Ping pressed the button for the basement, where all the cars were parked. The lift jerked and then smoothly descended and stopped. The door opened and Yu Ping stepped out and so did the rest of her company. Once the lift door shut and the lift left, Apple reached out and patted Yu Ping on the back. Yu Ping stopped and stood half opening the door to the car area. Apple asked, “Are you alright?”

Surprised, Yu Ping answered, “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

Then, she pulled the door opened and stepped into the car area. There were a reasonable number of cars there and it was about one quarter empty. Her pace quickened

and she walked briskly to a dark blue car at the far end from the lift. John hurried to keep up and the rest also shuffled along. The car was an old fashion, manual five-sitter car with a huge sticker that said 'Kick you' stuck to the back screen. Reaching the car, she took a quick look around the surrounding area; she pulled out a key from her pocket and unlocked the car. She opened the driver door and entered the car.

She placed her palm on the steering wheel and it lit up in a fluorescent orange. In a serious, clear voice, she said, "Yu Ping with four lads." The light on the steering wheel turned green and she removed her palm. A split second after she did, the dark blue car turned dark red. The sign on the back screen was replaced by a sticker that said 'Lions are big cats'. Too shocked to say anything, John, Apple, Peter and Esther glanced at each other.

"Hop on," said Yu Ping.

Apple made the first move and sat at the front passenger seat beside Yu Ping. The rest of the gang slid into the back seats. Yu Ping buckled up her seatbelt and the rest followed suit, thinking that if Yu Ping was going to drive, necessary precautions have to be taken. Suddenly, the roof of the car seemed to be moving further and further away from their heads. Just as they realized the seats were moving downwards, it fell like a stone. John felt his ears pop and before he had any time to scream, the seats hit earth with a loud 'thud'. John almost bounced off his seat yet the seatbelt kept him in.

It happened so quickly and without warning. Blinking, he remembered where he was before falling, Yu Ping and... He looked around him. He looked up at the place where he had fallen through and saw nothing as it was pitch black. "Remove your seatbelts," said a voice so familiar yet alien to him. He removed his seatbelt and heard clicking in the dark as the others did the same. "Step out," Yu Ping commanded and John got off his seat and onto something soft. Someone knocked into him from behind and he moved a few more steps forward.

There was a loud 'swoosh' followed shortly by a distant 'bang'. The lights came on, dim at first and slowly getting brighter. Esther looked as though he was about to faint as he sat on the soft ground behind John. The car seats have already gone and John could not see where they had fallen through. As the lights became bright enough to be comfortable in, John felt the ground he was standing on move a little, like it was...deflating? The thing they were standing on deflated to a thin sheet of plastic on the real ground. "Air-cushions," explained a voice and John snapped back into reality. Yu Ping smiled at them and said, "Welcome to the fuvia-heq of Seron."

Maybe this is not reality after all, thought John as he looked at his friends and where he was in. He was standing on a rectangular platform. At each of the four edges of the platform, was a narrow corridor that linked to another platform similar to the one they were on and each of these platforms branched off in to more platforms and so on. The platforms covered to beyond as far as their eyes could see. Yu Ping walked towards the railed corridor to the left of John and they followed in a single file, trying to take in everything they saw. The first thing John noticed about the corridors was that a protective railing about his shoulder's height ran along the side of them. It was only when he stepped onto one when he realized the corridors were no where near the ground. He looked down and immediately regretted doing so. Below his feet, through the narrow gaps in the corridor, he saw something that almost made him fell backwards onto Esther.

Spinning at a snail's pace and with misty clouds swirling translucently around it, was a globe. Earth. Convincing himself that it was just some interior design, he tried to shake the nauseous feeling in his head and followed Yu Ping onto the next platform. As steadily as they could, they walked in a bee-line behind Yu Ping as she led them through the many platforms and into an area where the platform was tiled with cream white marble tiles. To one side of it was a row of machines and a desk in the middle, and right in front of the machinery was a huge world map with blinking red dots scattered all around it. A grey-haired man sat in front of the desk surveying the map.

"Uncle H. here's the lads you wanted," said Yu Ping.

The man stood up and turned towards them, and smiled. He said, "Do you know why you're here?"

"No," muttered John, feeling even confused by the seconds, "I suppose you should tell me."

Apple stuttered, "So, w-what's with th-this fuvia business?" Taking a deep breath, she continued, "I mean, you drag us all the way here..."

Uncle H. interrupted, "I know this will be tough to accept but we need young lads like you for this mission. We know you have not been to grade school so you lads will be the inexperienced and well, young... You see, we are the fuvias, we need to, it's our duty to help the people, help them make the right choices they won't regret."

John tried to clear the headache clotting his brain but failed to, so he turned to Apple. Apple had a dazed look on her face and John was surprised as he had never remembered seeing Apple dazed. She caught John eyes and shrugged her shoulders.

Uncle H. continued, “That planet you see down there, over the railings, that’s the Earth. The real Earth.”

“What do you mean the real Earth?”asked Apple.

“It means we do not live on it.”

“We don’t live on Earth? Are we aliens?”

“No, we just don’t live there and the people on Earth have no idea we’re floating over their heads.”

“What does it mean?”

“We are not in their data bases, nor is anyone of us getting a nobel prize.”

“But it’s impossible. We know we’re here...”

“They don’t”

Something dawned on John and he tried to force it away and yet the truth crept closer and closer and Apple finished his thought, “Don’t you get it yet, if we do not live with the people on Earth, we...”

“...don’t exist,” concluded Yu Ping.

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The young man held the door open for us and I step in. It is a real simple apartment, lounge, television, fan, and a coffee table. There was a fish tank near the windows. The windows are grilled and there are bamboo poles outside the window, holding up the laundry to dry.

This place is hot! I meant that literally. It is steaming hot. I can feel myself sweating under the heat and Uncle Dilli turned on the fan. Struggling to cool down, I sit down in front of it.

The host comes out with two glasses of iced water and sat down on the sofa perpendicular to us. She started chatting to Uncle Dilli and the chip in my brain was going haywire. I could feel a switch to Chinese, to good old English then Malay then I had no idea as to what they are saying. I need to do something about this.

“Please translate,” I say to Uncle Dilli.

He tells me that he has asked the woman, Mrs. Tao, if we can stay here for a while until we can find another accommodation.

“How much will it cost to stay here for a month?” he asks Mrs. Tao.

That, I could understand.

Then she replied in a mixture of language that I cannot understand.

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## **Chapter 11**

“What do you mean that we don’t exist?” John asked, alarmed.

“It just means that we do not belong on Earth and to the people there, we don’t exist,” said Yu Ping, fidgeting on the spot.

“How can we not exist? We are here! I know I am here and...”

“Cool down, take a breath John. You know you exist but not everyone has that view. I’ll let you know the details in due time.”

Uncle H. ran his fingers through his hair and said, “Let me introduce myself, I’m Hasher Poe, assigner of this fuvia-headquarters, which means I’m the one who assign each mission to each person and brief them on the mission before they head off. By the way, everyone here calls me Uncle H.” He paused and continued, “Where you are standing on is the control platform of this headquarters and all the other platforms you see around you are either a meeting area for some discussions or used for some other purposes like... Well, to your left is where our government operates, and to your right, are the sleeping quarters for the few of us who lives here. The platform behind you holds the machinery that transports us down to the Earth or to other fuvia-heqs all over the galaxy. The link ways that join the platforms are more commonly called ‘streets’ around here. Keeps this place homely.”

He smiled and turned towards the screen. He took a breath and said, “You see, we need you for this mission to go down there and stop this group of people from destroying themselves and their people. We have allowed two world wars get by us before and I’m not letting it happen the third time. What we need you to do is go down there and in whatever way you can, stop them.”

Apple asked, “Why us? Don’t you have more experienced people to do the job? Oh, I bet this is what they learn in grade school. Why don’t you send them?” John was surprised at how quickly Apple could understand the situation. He was stuck at the point where they landed on the arrival platform.

Uncle H. seemed impressed turned to face them again and said, “You’re rather smart, aren’t you. Yes, we teach you lads about the real world down there in grade school and we usually send them down after they have graduated. The problem is that I’m not the one to choose who goes for what mission. The role is played by the bordout in the fuvia city over northern China. She can see into the future and she gets to choose the best for the job. Now, she sees the five of you in this future.”

“Hold on there, what’s a bordout?” asked Apple.

Uncle H. said, "You sure got a lot of questions, kid. Well, a bordout is what we call someone with unusual powers, such as they can do some things most of us cannot. Some can move things with their minds, some can work like a satellite and know what is happening at that time at some other place and some can see into the future. Every fuvia city can have only one bordout. Should another bordout appear in the city and become a citizen, the previous bordout would have only one more year to live before he or she...has to leave. Two or more bordouts in a city can mean big trouble."

"Oh my, who's our bordout?" asked Esther. John was feeling very left behind and he just could not get his brains to work.

"Me," said Yu Ping and they all turned round and stared at her.

"So, you can..."said John.

"...know what's happening at another place," said Yu Ping, blushing a little at the attention.

Uncle H. waved his hands to get their attention again, "Yes, Yu Ping's our bordout. She stays here at this fuvia-heq. A bordout does not have a family. He or she just appears somewhere as a baby, when the previous bordout is dying. No one knows exactly where they came from. Well, back to the mission. You have three months to consider if you want to take on this mission. We would not force you if you do not want to go as, well, you are the youngest lads ever sent down to Earth on a mission. Make your decision."

"What's this mission? I mean like what exactly we are supposed to be doing?" asked John.

Uncle H ran his fingers through his hair and smiled, "Well, I suppose if we were to send you on this mission, we should try to trust each other with the details. However, if word gets out about this ...there goes our reputation," he hesitated, "The truth is, we have sent one of our lads down to earth to handle this but we seemed to have lost contact with him. This is the first time we have lost a Fuvia and your job here is to finish the mission for him and hopefully, find him."

"How are we supposed to know what to do?" asked John, more confused than ever.

"I don't know. Remember; never let this out or our reputation as a Fuvia-heq will be ruined. Never once had this happened and we never had a slip in our system until now. So, I hope you can make your decision as soon as possible and we all wish to bring this fuvia lad back safe and sound." He paused and breathed, "Well, that's all I can tell you for now. Yu Ping, can you show them around?"

"Sure," said Yu Ping. She turned to the others and said, "Come on, follow me."

“That’s it? You got us here to say that? I demand a more thorough explanation,” said Esther but Yu Ping ushered him off the platform.

John felt airsick the moment he stepped onto the street, as they called it, behind Yu Ping. Luckily, the metal below him seemed safe enough and was rather steady. Slowly, he got past the phobia. Besides, his head was clotted up and he did not have enough brain cells working to recognise his fear of heights.

John felt that Yu Ping was trying her best to remain cordial as they followed her across the streets. Across the street. He remembered something Yu Ping had said. Old man who lives across the street. So, Uncle H. and Yu Ping are neighbours. Happy that his head was beginning to function properly now, he tried to strike up a conversation with Yu Ping.

“So, you live here?” asked John.

“For as long as I can remember.”

“Come on, quit that solemn look on your face, we’re not being sent of to our graves you know.”

“Might be but...I guess you’re right. I’ll show you guys my room,” said Yu Ping, with a very weak smile that did not seem to be able to last long.

They arrived on a platform where there was a big metal container, practically filling up the whole platform. There were many other platforms like that in the area. All of the same shape and size. There was a door on the metal container before them. Yu Ping opened the door and stepped in. Inside, it looked so much bigger. The walls were painted in many different colours; a bed took up a corner, a closet stood against the wall and a desk was placed beside the closet, with a computer on it. Many sheets of paper were stuck to the walls with easy-remove tape from Poesy Stationery and on the paper were writings like class notes, doodles and a time planner.

“I decorated it. Isn’t it pretty?” said Yu Ping proudly.

“Nice,” said Apple as she went around reading the writing off the sheets of paper.

“Wow, I wish I could do all these to my room,” said Esther admirably, forgetting their disagreement over George.

“Something I meant to tell you Esther...” said Yu Ping.

“What?”

“As a friend so don’t go crazy over it.”

“What?”

“It is not very important here.”

“What?”

“You really want to know?”

“What?”

“On Earth ... Esther's a girl's name.”

“What!”

They burst into laughter as they walked out of Yu Ping's room, Esther fumed silently behind them.

They made their way back to their arrival platform which Yu Ping introduced as the arrival patch. Yu Ping tapped the ground two times with her left feet and the air-cushion started to inflate and the car seats dropped from above their heads onto the air-cushion. Yu Ping told them to get on and it was then did John realize that the seats were joined by a cable to the ceiling. Suddenly, the lights went off. They got on blindly and buckled their seat belts. “I'll show you guys around more some other day. It's getting late now,” said Yu Ping.

John could feel himself being lifted upwards and a jerk told him that the car has been locked and he could see the car basement as there were lights there. It suddenly occurred to him why the lights have to be switched off during their ride- so no one can see what was going on down there.

Feeling a little wobbly in his legs, he got out of the car. The others followed but Yu Ping remained in the car. She winded down the windscreen and said, “Go ask your parents to see if they would allow you guys to go down to Earth. Well, see you at school tomorrow.” At this, John remembered that Yu Ping lived in the fuvia-heq.

“By the way, before you go, I would like to tell you. George is also chosen for this mission. He does not know about it yet but I'll break it to him someday,” said Yu Ping.

“What!” blurted Esther with his current limited vocabulary of one word.

Yu Ping winded up the windscreen and placed her palm on the steering wheel. It lit up into a fluorescent orange as it had done before and John saw her mouth move into the words “Yu Ping”. The light turned to green and the car turned from the dark red car into a grey car and the sticker on the back disappeared and was replaced by a sticker that said “What are you looking at?” The windscreen turned opaque and John cannot see Yu Ping inside. A few seconds later, the windscreen cleared and she was not there anymore. John looked at Esther, Apple and Peter and they walked out of the car basement, into the lift and out into the open. The skies were darkening and they said their goodbyes and headed home.

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After a short while, Uncle Dilli and I have placed our baggage in a small room, just big enough for the both of us to sleep in. I follow Uncle Dilli out the door and back to the shaky contraption. “Think of a nickname you can live with,” he told me. Numerous names came into my head, Jake, Tim, Tom, Bill... “Ray,” I say.

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## **Chapter 12**

John could not fall asleep that night. He turned and turned and finally, he stood up and walked out of his bedroom for a glass of water. His heart leapt as he saw his father sitting on the sofa in front of the television broadcasting the news. At that moment, he felt that if he should seek any advice on taking up the mission, it would be from his parents. He walked slowly down the stairs and sat down beside his father.

“Hey son, what’s keeping you awake?”

“I know all about the fuvia business.”

John’s father turned the television off and turned to face John. His father looked into his eyes. He opened and then he shut his mouth. Finally, after a while, he asked softly, “How?”

John told him almost everything, about the car, about Yu Ping, about the fuvia-headquarters, about the mission. However, he kept his word to Uncle H. and said nothing about the missing fuvia. John felt relieved at getting so much out of his chest and gave a hint of smile. Then, he turned away from his father and leant back on the chair. He looked aimlessly at the ceiling and mouthed aloud, “What should I do? Should I go on this mission?” He closed his eyes for one second and the next he opened them, he had a thought, “Why me?”

John’s father looked at him, sat back and said, “That’s what we’d all like to know. But this is our job and as we have the liberty of doing something to help, we might as well.” Suddenly, as though he had just realized what John was saying, he remarked, “You’re not even in grade school yet!”

“Why do you think I’m confused?”

“They can’t send you down there, it’s too dangerous!”

“So, what should I do?”

“Do what?” said a voice and John turned his head towards the kitchen to see his mother walking towards them with a towel wrapped around her head.

“You tell her,” said John.

John's father repeated almost everything he had said and John was mildly surprised at his ability to remember so much with detail. His mother listened grimly and then sat down between him and his father.

She said, "It's up to you to decide for yourself. There's nothing we can do about it." She sighed and then smiled, "I remember it was pretty great down on earth. Different smells, different people and you might just learn a lot of things there."

"Are you nuts?" cried John's father, "With all that I hear is going on down there, it's mighty dangerous. No way am I letting my son down there."

"Come on, Rio, don't be so over protective. If fate shall have it, so be it."

"Not if I have a say in it."

"Don't you remember how much you liked it there?"

"But...no, it's just too dangerous, I won't let him."

"Mum! Dad!" shouted John over his parents' bickering. He never liked it when people talked about him as though he was not there. "Let me decide for me."

They stopped arguing and turned towards John. John's mother said, "One thing to remember is that we'll support your decision, whatever you choose." John's father got up and went up the stairs to their room and called, "Go to sleep soon," before shutting the bedroom door.

John's mother shook her head and smiled at John, "Give him a while to settle. Come on, it's time for bed, try to get some sleep." John nodded and got up. He stretched himself a little and emitted a huge yawn.

"I'll try."

She got up and walked towards the stairs when John said, "Mum, how do you tell the difference between a fuvia and a person down on earth?"

She stopped and looked at him, then, she said, "Nope, there's hardly any difference. Only way you can tell us apart is that we can catch each other's eye, not literally of course, when you can see directly into the eyes of that person and he can see right back. A fuvia can catch the eye of another fuvia but not of a person from earth. A person from earth cannot catch the eye of a fuvia but he can catch the eye of another person from earth."

"Makes no sense," said John.

"Yes it does, and that's just the way it is. Good night Johnnie dear."

John replied, "Good night, mum."

As she entered her bedroom, John realized how good he felt to hear his mother call him “Johnnie dear”. Surprised, he supposed, as he never liked her calling him that. Maybe he did not like to be called that in front of others but alone, it seemed fine to him.

As he passed by his parents’ bedroom on his way up, he heard them talking again.

“Rio, I know what you’ve been through but this sort of stuff does not happen to everyone.”

“But it could happen to anyone. Sending those youngsters down there, what are they thinking?”

“They choose the best people for the job. They mean well.”

“What about Ella? If she was the best for the job, why...”

“Rio, stop it, you should have gotten over it by now.”

“Right, get over it when your partner was dropped on her first mission.”

“Let’s not go into it okay?”

“Fine, let’s sleep.”

John saw the light go off at the bottom of the door. He walked quietly up to his bedroom and turned off his lights. As he lay down on his bed, he thought about his parents’ conversation. Some one had died on a mission, anyone could die on a mission and there was no telling what may happen. If this is the first time any fuvia city has lost a fuvia, it does not necessarily means he is dead. Fuvias had died before this and still, they were found. His head started to ache and he tried imagining sheep jumping over a fence in front of him. This obviously does not work, he thought, after counting to about a hundred and was still wide awake. Finally, he forced a blank inside his head and drifted off to sleep.

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We wind in and out of the blocks of high-rise building, so much that I am getting dizzy. They all look the same to me. Finally, we arrive at a lower building of only three storeys. The apartment that we are heading to is on the ground floor, luckily for me.

In the apartment, there are three people. They look friendly enough.

“Ray, this is Guy, Pao, and Cao.”

Weird names, I thought, but I do not suppose they are real. I whispered to Uncle Dilli, “What’s your name?”

“Dill.”

“Oh, figures.”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” jingled Dill.

“Now that everyone is here, we can talk about the plan,” said the person named Cao.

“So, we go on a full attack mode. Bring everyone down to the same equal level and leave the land to regenerate;” said Guy with a lot of enthusiasm, “We would need weapons. Weapons that is enough to tear the earth apart but not enough to wipe out the population.”

“The one thing that people can never hold against, no matter who you are, what you do or how strong you are, biochemical weapon. People have been experimenting with it, trying to make the best out of the best. If we could be the first to achieve that, with good intentions of course, we could bring history back on the right course,” Pao said, standing up.

“That’s where you come in,” Dill said to me.

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### **Chapter 13**

John had not been talking much all week. Every day of the week was of test papers and well, it was the week of the exams. March it was and hot it was. John could still not comprehend the fact that he did not exist and with the recent spate of exams and hot weather, he could not let himself go enough to speak.

The rest of the gang was not taking it much better either. Apple was always distraught and moody. She had even entered the boys’ bathroom without notice and screamed when she saw a boy in the toilet.

Esther had not come to terms with Yu Ping and his hate of George Singleton began to grow on him even further as he found out that they might just be working as a team anytime soon. Yu Ping kept an apologetic sort of look in her eyes, as though she was the cause of all their misery.

Peter was rather hysterical on the possibility of having his grandmother worry about him. John often wondered if this is what grade schoolers and adults feel most of the time. He had to be honest with himself, he was just too stubborn for change and he had always taken every thing for granted. Good grades, great environment, friends, family, now, he would do anything for these to actually be real. Yes, he knew he exists, he knew people exist, but there was just something so awkward about the whole thing and it made him feel miserable.

Finally, the exams were all over. Still, there was the geography project given to them, and surprisingly, John was paired up with Peter. The project was to research on any natural reserve in Seron. Esther was paired up with George Singleton and that really made him mad. “What! I got to do something with him?” Esther said, pointing a finger at George. “I wouldn’t go near him with a butcher knife! Teacher, my grade is at stake here!” However,

the teacher, Mr. Horan refuses to budge, so Esther resigned to his fate and tried to control his temper, muttering, "I'll get him some day," over and over again.

John began to wish they had something to work with that could help them on earth. They were being sent down to earth with no experience, no knowledge and absolutely no understanding about the people down there. Probably, they are a bunch of knuckle heads, low in intelligence, smelly and dirty, thought John. He shook his head with another thought, he did not have to go down there, he had a choice, or has he? He could feel his head falling apart with all the different thoughts and immediately wished for more brain space.

Still, as always, Jaype club walked out of the school gates together. Since it was the last day of the exams, it had been a unanimous decision to go to Polly's Drinks and Crackers to celebrate. It was already late in the afternoon and the sun had retreated from the skies. There was a breeze every now and then and it lifted John's spirits a little.

Esther kicked a little pebble along the path and suddenly, he started a conversation with Yu Ping. "How are you and George getting along now?" he asked.

"Fine, he was a lot of help in the exams," replied Yu Ping, a little surprised at Esther's sudden interest in George.

"Maybe I was wrong about that guy," said Esther casually.

John looked at him and was shocked by the statement until he reasoned with himself that Esther could never let go of George that easily. Esther was up to something and Yu Ping has no idea.

"Listen, have you learnt anything about him, like what he is interested in, you know, so that I can get to know him better," continued Esther.

"Well, he says that he likes fries and he's really afraid of cockroaches. He can cook and he can bake too and..."

Before she could finish, Esther dashed up the road away from Polly's and towards home. "Thanks for the cockroach tip!" he shouted back at them.

Realizing she had been had, Yu Ping took off after him shouting, "Hey, Esther! No!"

"Call me Eric!" shouted Esther, "I'm king of the world!"

As the two of them raced away, John chuckled when he thought that Yu Ping will never catch up with Esther or Eric. Not a bad idea for a name, thought John. He caught Apple's eye and she shrugged. Peter was still giggling beside him. They knew Yu Ping would never get to Esther and that George Singleton was going to get the experience of his life.

John smiled and said, “Esth...No, I mean Eric, it’s hard to tell but when he gets his head into something, he could be pretty serious. Now, I sort of sympathize with George.”

Apple chuckled. “By the way, what are you guys going to research on for the geography assignment?”

“Vengeance Hill. I’ve did some thinking and realised that the red part in the code probably refers to the type of trees that grows only on that hill in Seron. “Under where under is red” the leaves there are green on the top and red below. It makes all the sense.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” rebutted Apple, “We’re going to be thrown down to that spinning orb beneath our feet and you’re thinking about solving a robbery case. Let the police handle it, besides, they have not struck for a long time.”

Suddenly, as they were turning into a street that led to Polly’s, they heard a gun shot. As though by instinct, Peter ran towards the sound of the gun shot. Apple and John followed close behind. John’s heart missed a beat when he made out the scene. A black car drove swiftly away from the West view bank. A crowd of people gathered around a certain spot and Peter dashed towards it before he or Apple could do anything about it.

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This could be dangerous. It will be dangerous and there is the possibility that we could be doing more harm than we expected but now, it seems like too good an opportunity to miss.

I am impressed by the group’s fire and spirit and for once, I can feel that I am needed by someone for some reason.

Still, it is too dangerous. We could be destroying families, tearing people apart causing havoc on the streets, resulting in more lives being lost. It may not be worth it after all.

“What if something goes wrong?” I ask as carefully as I can.

“Wrong? We have to take the risk, we have to make the first step or the world can live in darkness for the rest of their lives. We need to let them see the goodness in everyone and truly believe in it. We need the firepower to drive them to move forwards together. Besides, if a glitch does happen, we would just be sacrificing the life of a few. Should we risk these few lives or the happiness of half the world population?” Guy exclaimed.

There is nothing I can say. They have made up their mind. Guy did make some sense and I was almost ready to believe him. I cannot beat them and there is no reason to why I should so, I am ready to join them. At least they have the guts to do what they say they will do. Right?

They are putting me in charge of this. There could be something I can do, something enough to do the job. I'm sure I was not out to redeem myself, I see no need to answer to anyone. Sheer determination and believe that everything would turn out well for everyone? Yup, it was that thought, the most selfless yet the most foolish thought of all. I had an idea right behind my brain that might just work... Ultimately, I can prevent loss of any life.

"I'm in," I said.

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## **Chapter 14**

"Oh my, Westview bank," said Apple as they saw Peter walking alongside a stretcher, holding the hand of the person on it. John looked closer and saw that it was Peter's grandmother. In a few moments, they were in the ambulance and quickly, the ambulance disappeared down the road, past where they were standing.

Not knowing what came over him, John said furiously, "When I said they would strike again, who believed me? Nobody. Are they planning to just shut everything out and pretend nothing has happened? Or are they going to do something about the problem? They have to wait till someone gets killed before moving their butts and their brain."

John looked at Apple and before he could stop himself, he said, "Any you were saying what? They won't strike? Ha! I laugh."

Apple retorted, "Yeah right, you smart guy. You are the best; you're number one, okay? You happy?"

"I knew it," he said.

"So what? You just guessed it and it came true. You are just lucky," said Apple, going red in the face.

"I'll be lucky if you stop trying to discourage me. You with the thugs or the good guys? The way you say it..."

"So now you think I am helping them!" Apple shouted. They stared at each other until Apple turned and ran away.

John did not know what had come over him as he strided home, telling himself that if Apple had been nicer, he would not have quarrelled with her. Yet, he felt really bad at having said those nasty things about her. He decided to ignore the thought for a while and cool down.

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Adrenaline? It must be, having such a responsibility on my shoulders is not exactly a light sack to carry. I was ready to begin the moment I made that verbal agreement to help.

The work began and before long, I have begun to concoct the very best mixture I have ever set out to achieve. This mixture is strong enough to kill the smallest human but not strong enough to kill an adult. Theoretically, it should be the case.

I worked on the formula with the resources I could get my hands on but somehow, the mixture could not combine.

I decide to take a rest. I took out a slice of banana bread from the loaf that I bought yesterday at the store at the ground floor of the high-rise building that I came to know as a flat. I start to wonder. I had managed to understand what the three people have said. There was no jam. Does this mean that they were not Singaporeans? What do the people in Singapore do to make their language so hard to decipher by a Fuvia?

Jam, yes, that's what I need, something to jam my formula together. I like jam. Wait, I am off-tracking. I shook my head to clear it, the mind jam.

Maybe I should start working on a new brain chip. One that would allow me to understand the language of the natives. Tomorrow, I am going to tour the city.

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## **Chapter 15**

"Mail for you," said Mr. Waser as he handed the envelope to John. It did not have any stamp and words other than the simple "To: John W." written in black marker over the front. John turned it to the back and saw that the opening flap was sealed with a round sticker that was orange and yellow. The shapes that the yellow parts formed looked just like...

"The Earth," said Mr. Waser. John looked up at his father. His father turned away and started to seem very interested in the eggs on his plate. Mrs. Waser shot her husband a look and then turned sweetly to John.

"Why don't you open it, dear?"

John carefully removed the sticker and pulled out a slip of paper with hardly any words on it. He read, "Meet at the car park at one o'clock in the afternoon, you will begin your first official Fuvia lesson. Uncle H."

"Ah, Uncle H. I like that guy although he could get cranky when he's serious about something," chuckled Mrs. Waser.

"At least they are not sending our kid down without any preparation," grunted Mr. Waser and returned to his food immediately.



“Don’t be bitter,” said Mrs. Waser to her husband. She turned to John and said, “Give him just a little more time. Your dad’s always this stubborn.” John hardly heard a word she said. The excitement to learn more about the Earth, the anticipation of finally getting an update on the mission, and also, the fear of having to face Apple was practically too much for his brain to handle. “Why had I said those bad things about her?” thought John.

He was so immersed in his thoughts that he did not realise his mother waving her hand frantically in front of his face. Waving frantically, thought John hazily. Oh right, remembered John and snapped out off his trance.

“Phew, I thought you’d left us,” joked Mrs. Waser.

It was a bright Saturday morning yet nothing could lift John’s spirits. He decided that he was not upset, he was not feeling angry and he did not even know what he was feeling. It was a queer sensation that made him unable to clear his mind of jumbled thoughts and that sensation had him walking around his room every five minutes then staring at the clock for eternity, willing it to stop.

Half past noon and the sun streamed in through the windows. John grabbed a notebook and headed downstairs. Then, he realised that he had not had lunch and was very surprised that he did not smell his mother’s cooking and that she had not called him down for lunch which she had fixed to be at noon everyday. John jogged down the stairs. After checking every corner of the living room, he decided that his mother was not there. Besides, thought John, she was not an expert on hide-and-seek, she must have gone out.

John went into the kitchen and saw a few sandwiches by the stove with a slip of paper taped onto the table beside them. It said, “Your dad has a headache and I am bringing him over to the doctor in Penato City. Love, Mum.” Dad looked fine this morning, thought John. He grabbed the sandwiches and ate them on his way to the town centre.

Once again he was in the car basement. Apple was there already, leaning against a pillar a few meters away. Quietly, John leant against another pillar, trying his best to remain hidden till the rest of Jaype arrived. Soon, Peter and Yu Ping arrived. John heard them exchanging their ‘hi’s with Apple and decided that it was time to come out of his hiding place.

At the same time, Esther arrived in the basement and they met up, gave their little greetings and John avoided Apple’s eye as much as he could. Once, he caught her eye and he looked away immediately.

“Come on,” said Yu Ping. She led them to the car that was the same spot where they have taken their first ride. John felt nauseous. He wondered if it was the excitement of the

mysterious meeting or the fear of being taken on a ride like the last time. Learning that reality as he knew it did not exist, John was not really yearning for another reality check.

Once inside, they buckled their seatbelts, all too stiff to chat; they sat silently as Yu Ping talked to the steering wheel. Slowly, John could see the ceiling moving away from him and moments later, he could feel the stomach-turning free fall.

The landing did not feel as bad as the first time, thought John as he released himself from the seat. Still, he felt his legs turn to jelly as he stepped of the cushion. The lights came on slowly and the car seats were gone.

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This place is small but very busy, I thought as I saw the many people walk pass. The banners all around the area announced that the country will be forty this year. In a few short minutes, I have already figured out that the date of the country's birthday is on the ninth of august. Which meant it is just a week away.

This place is hot. I can already feel my sweat dripping down my forehead and I decided to head indoors.

It was about noon and I read the directory up and down until I found the food court where Dill had told me to go to for lunch. It is the largest area under a single name and I cannot be bothered enough to judge the reliability of his idea.

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## **Chapter 16**

“Lesson two, Things about Fuvia which you would not know,” said Uncle H, looking wearier than before as they arrived on the platform. There was a large screen in front of them and on the platform were a few chairs, which looked like normal plastic chairs from school. Somehow, this made John very disappointed.

John counted three chairs and was about to comment on it when Uncle H cut in.

“No worries, I'd draw up another three more chairs,” said Uncle H tiredly, turning to the console at the right side of the platform.

An image appeared on the screen and formed as though someone was drawing it. Slowly, there appeared a thin pole, then another three more poles formed on the screen and finally, an oval above it all.

“Nice chair,” said Yu Ping to Uncle H who smiled back at them.

John was about to say something like, “Hello!? We wanted to have chairs to seat on and since when did drawing a chair means...” “Draw”, thought John aloud to Esther. “Isn't that guy too old for these silly jokes?”

“Two things, John,” said Uncle H, “I’m not old, this is not silly, and it is not a joke.”

“That’s three things,” said Esther.

Uncle H ignored him and pressed a button on the console and if there was not a loud and satisfied “ding!” when a chair formed in front of them, John may not have realised it. It looked just like Uncle H’s drawing, too alike in that sense. It had an uneven outline and that was it. There was no filling in it, no material in the middle, nothing.

John looked back on the screen and saw the screen with the chair image still on it, by then, many rulers and markings have appeared all over the screen. “Just use the default design,” advised Yu Ping.

“But what will be the fun in that?” replied Uncle H, his face lightened up ever so slightly.

He started typing codes into the keyboard on the console to his left and slowly, the chair began to fill up with colours. Not only so, it really was filled up with colours. The colour of the seat, the colour of the chair legs was all different. Not only was it different but also not in solid colours. For instance, the seat of the chair was coloured in the shape of a target- blue on the outer ring, followed by orange, red then pink.

After the colours were done, a large window popped up to almost cover up the image of the chair. There was the description of wood on the screen and a button at the bottom right hand corner said, “Use”. Uncle H pressed on the button and immediately, the chair appeared in front of the window and the seat was selected.

Then, the large window appeared again and he scrolled through the choices till he found the one he liked and repeated the process on the legs of the chair.

Finally, the tiny word “Processing” appeared at the bottom of the screen which John had not noticed before. “Ding!” There was that sound again and they awed at the object that appeared before them- an exact replica of the image from the screen. If John had not been too shocked, he would have laughed. Only Yu Ping stood there looking on as though she had seen it for the whole of her life, which she might already did.

“Ding!” “Ding!” Two more chairs appeared and Uncle H motioned for them to take a seat. John had mentally made a note to take the plastic chairs but he realised that it had been taken up by Yu Ping, Peter and Apple.

John hesitated and looked at the odd chair.

“Don’t worry, it should be safe. The Loider always works,” said Yu Ping.

“Then why are you on the plastic chair? And why is it called the Loider?” rebutted John.

Before Yu Ping could say anything, Esther had already taken a seat and was beckoning John to take a seat too. Surprised that it was rather comfortable, John relaxed.

“As I was saying, Lesson two, things about Fuvia you would not know...” started Uncle H.

“Why lesson two?” Apple interrupted.

“You had lesson one already which will not be conveniently revealed now but in the fourth lesson,” said Uncle H.

“But you said ‘lesson one’ in the letter,” said Apple.

“No, I said ‘first official Fuvia lesson’”

“Yes, and you said ‘first’”

“Yes I did, but I’ve also said ‘official’” said Uncle H. irritably.

“Okay, whatever you say chief,” said Apple.

“Right,” continued Uncle H, “The fuvia-set had this amazing system. The presence of each underground headquarters are known as fuvia-heq, the group name of the fuvia-heqs surrounding Earth is known as a fuvia-wheel, the group name of these fuvia-wheels in our solar system is known as a fuvia-circle, the group name of the fuvia-circles in the whole universe is known as the fuvia-set. We have not found exactly how many fuvia-circles there are but we have a rough estimate of about one hundred. Each fuvia-circle belongs to a small group also known as a district. In this district, the fuvia-circles are the closest when help is needed and it is also easier to discuss some matters on the changes to the galaxy in a smaller group than having to invite the whole fuvia-set down to lunch.”

John knew he should have brought a notebook down to take this down but somehow, he left his brains at home. At this moment, however, it seemed okay as no one else brought something to write in. Then again, thought John, maybe everyone left their brains at home too.

Uncle H took a deep breath and continued, “We like to refer to fellow Fuvias as ‘lads’ and to the people down on Earth as ‘people’. It makes it less confusing for us. We have higher technology, higher intelligence and higher understanding of the world. It is easier, of course, if you are so close to the moon and so far away from the Earth.

“What gives us the edge is that we have arrived here thousands of years before the first human form appeared on Earth. Thus, we made fire long before they did and everything else long before the people did.”

Uncle H walked over to the console, hit a few buttons and the screen rolled upwards and after that, the rolled screen rolled to the left side on itself and deposited itself into a small box at the corner, suspended by a thread.

He motioned them to follow him and he led them on off the platform. Once they have stepped onto one street, John gasped in surprise at his clothes which had turned into bright colours, similar to the colour of the chair he had sat on, blue, and red, green, pink... John looked at Esther who was rather amused by the new fashion.

“Sorry, I forgot to put in the settler which makes the colour stay put,” said Uncle H.

“I noticed,” said Yu Ping, giggling along with Apple, “It’ll wear out in about two hours.”

-----  
I took the elevator up to the floor and walked towards where the crowd was heading. I was no longer sweating as I headed in. I see many stalls. I see many different stalls. I see many different stalls selling different things.

There are Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Malay, Eurasian, Indian, and Peranakan food... it reminded me of the Speenu back home on Seron. I have decided to try every single dish from every stall but I guess I should try one dish per day or I shall die of binging.

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**Chapter 17**

“Do you mind if I switched to roboqmode?” asked Uncle H suddenly when they were crossing the street back to the arrival patch.

“Yes and get some sleep,” said Yu Ping.

“What is...” started John. He did not find his voice to ask on as he was given an on-the-spot demonstration. Uncle H closed his eyes and a split second later, it opened up and a smile appeared on his face.

“Come on! What are we waiting for? There’s so much to see, so much to see,” said Uncle H as he beckoned them towards the arrival patch.

“Explanation?” asked Esther.

“He just switched to roboqmode. Which means as he is getting some rest, the rest of his body is still functioning on his memory. He does this when there is no thinking needed and to him, touring this place is very monotonous. Besides, I like the roboqmode better than his human mode,” explained Yu Ping.

On the arrival patch, Uncle H turned around and waved at them to follow him and they did. Smiling very widely, Uncle H suddenly blabbered off, “From where you came

from, that is the briefing room. Under the briefing room, which cannot be seen at this level, is the emergency escape hatch. Next to the briefing room is the reservoir where we store the city's water and all measures are in store to make it clean, usable and friendly. It is also kept here so that it does not evaporate. The tube that you see leading up from the reservoir collects all the surface rainwater and send it down here, allowing the extra to go back up at the end of the day so that there could be evaporation and it shall rain."

John looked down at the huge dome next to him but below and could see much machinery at work. And there was a long pillar extending from the ceiling to the top of the dome and eventually, through it.

"The tube doubles as something for you to hold on to slide down to the emergency hatch even though I'd recommend the stairs from the briefing room," continued the roboq, "If you would come stand here with me, I'll show you more."

They moved to the controls surrounding the arrival patch and the roboq shot off again, "To the North, which is to the left side of you, is our archives and control rooms. Further in, there is a meeting room and a library of all our old records. To your right is the street leading towards the transport portal for transporting lads to Earth, to other fuvia-heq, fuvia-wheels, even to other fuvia-circles. It is seriously restricted to anyone other than those with a mission. Ah, and there you see is the guard post, guarded every second till the planet's destruction. I am just kidding."

"And beyond that will be the government working area. That area is also under tight surveillance and no unauthorised personnel allowed. That's where our beloved government makes the decisions for the people, including the flavour of ice cream allowed to be sold. We can't have innocent-looking mint ice cream to be actually cabbage-flavoured, can we?"

The roboq turned and walked forward. This area looks familiar, thought John. This was the bedroom section.

The roboq stopped where there was a container sticker out of the street and said in a whisper, "Any one needs to go?"

"Go where?" said John and Apple together.

"He meant the toilet," explained Yu Ping looking rather amused.

"No thanks then," said Apple.

"Good, let's carry on. Just tell me if you need to go as we have these cabies all around the place," said the roboq.

"Cabies," said Esther, chuckling.

"Don't argue with him. He likes giving things weird names," said Yu Ping.

The roboq raised both his arms at the area before him and said, “Announcing our sleeping mushrooms!”

“I know he’s weird, don’t say anything,” whispered Yu Ping.

The roboq continued, “Here stays the people who are in charge of keeping the fuvia-heq in shape and of course, the emergency crew, in case any emergency happens, they have to be here and not running towards here. For the inhabitants’ comfort, we have also, a dining room where they...dine. They are allowed to decorate their mushrooms anyway they like, to make it the home to live in. And of course, they can have the comfort of using the molarger!”

“The what?” asked John.

The molarger! Where what you create depends on your drawing skills,” said the roboq.

“He means the thing that created the chairs you sat on,” said Yu Ping.

“How can I forget,” said John, looking down at his clothes which colours are far from fading.

Chirpily, the roboq said, “Quiz time! What’s there to the North?”

Slowly, the roboq had all the answers he wanted.

Time passed quickly and it did pass. Soon, it was time to leave even though it was only half past two.

“How long more do we have before making the decision to go on that mission?” asked John.

“The situation has been deemed more urgent and thus, you have two more weeks left,” answered Yu Ping, trying not to look into his eyes.

“Two weeks!” the rest of them chorused. Peter, especially, looked worried. John knew that he could not leave his grandmother alone in Seron when she was injured.

They were on the arrival patch as the lights turned off and the base of the car landed in front of them. Blindly but more efficiently, they got into the car and buckled on the seat belts. A second later, John felt the familiar jerk which he would never get used to.

Dizzily, they got out and Yu Ping waved to them, changed the colour of the car and the sign on the back that now said, “I like peas”. The screen turned opaque and Yu Ping had gone.

Apple looked at John and John was unable to return the look. “Come on, Peter, we have time in the afternoon to work on our project,” said John. Apple was furious and she turned her back against them as John and Peter headed towards the lift and left.

“I’ve decided that since I have nothing on in the afternoon, maybe I can hang out with you,” said Yu Ping and they turned and saw her shut the door of the car and she walked towards them.

“Sure. We can go to Apple’s house. Do you agree, Apple?” said Esther to Apple.

“Sure, let’s go,” said Apple bitterly and walked towards the lift. Esther and Yu Ping hurried after her.

Yu Ping asked “What’s wrong with her?”

“No idea,” muttered Esther.

-----

I ordered a simple looking bowl of fish ball noodles from a stall after a long time of consideration, waited for a couple to finish their food, and took their sit. It is crowded.

Too many people in fact. It is hard to record everyone’s voice at once. I wanted to observe the trend in which these people talk and I hoped to compile it into my language chip. If I managed to do so, I may be the only Fuvia here who will be able to understand the local language. It is possible and I can digitalize them all out to analyse one at a time. No problem. I hope.

I turned on the recorder that I borrowed from Dill and started enjoying my meal. Previously, I had modified the recorder to be much more sensitive than per normal that meant that I could pick up voices from ten metres around. This meant that in this crowded area, I could pick up tens of voices.

Pao had a computer and I borrowed it. I did not have enough money to afford a new one or buy the parts to buy a new one. I tore the computer apart, bought a few small screws and wires, and created faster software. Sometimes, it helps just to have that bit of talent.

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## **Chapter 18**

“Are you sure about this?” Peter asked as he trekked through the vast of green at John’s heel.

“You do want to get those people for landing your grandmother in that hospital bed, don’t you?”

All was silent as Peter concentrated in getting the mosquitoes away from his arms and thought about what John had said. His grandmother was old and hurting an old lady is, well, despicable.



“Besides, we need to do some research for our project,” added John as he followed his compass, towards the west where there was supposed to be the area where the Yorasha trees grow, the leaves which were red on the underside and green on the other.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time of trekking, they reached the spot. “This must be it,” said Peter as he looked at the half-red leaves at his eye level. He reached for the camera around his neck for a few shots as John shuffled around, furiously taking notes on the trees and examining the leaves, branches and roots of the trees.

John walked straight forward until he had finished what he was writing and then... “Ah!” he screamed as he felt the floor give way under him and he fell into a dark pit below. “Peter! Help!” he shouted and Peter came running towards the call. The footsteps came faster and louder, John realised his folly and screamed, “Stop, Peter, stop!” However, it was too late and Peter fell through the hole alongside John.

+++

Back at school, George went to his locker to get the book he had forgotten to bring home. Only, something else was waiting for him. “Argh!” groaned George as he stepped away from the locker.

Tens of cockroaches scurried out of the metal locker, circled the tiles on the floor and left in different directions. By the time all the cockroaches had left the lockers, George had already burst through the main door, screaming bloody murder.

+++

Esther and Yu Ping exchanged looks as Apple slammed the table every time she removed a book from the shelves and onto the table. “That John - (bang!)-is so -(bang!)-conceited.(Bang!)”

Apple’s parents were out of town and had left a note to her saying that they had gone to Idagh for lunch and shopping.

After a few tensed moments, Esther smiled for having achieved his goal of getting George back and good. He could not wait for Monday when he would meet Esther’s planned fiasco and chuckled as he imagined the how George would look after seeing the cockroaches.

Yu Ping stared at Esther in horror and very disapprovingly. “What?” Esther said to Yu Ping. Then he remembered that Yu Ping would probably know of his sabotage.

“That was not very nice of you Esther...”

“Eric”

“Eric, like I care, what do you have against him? One day, you might have to trust your life onto him...”

“Who says that I’m ever going to trust him?”

“You will and you’re going to regret this if he holds a grudge. Maybe he could be trusted and you would have another friend to trust in...”

“Who needs a friend like him?”

“So you would prefer an enemy, is that what it is? We are going to be working together and this enmity isn’t going to solve anything for anybody and you could be wrecking the world instead of putting it together...”

Just then, the doorbell rang and Apple stormed to answer it, still steaming under her brown hair. Outside the door stood George sweating profusely and panting. He clenched his fists and sputtered, “Where is Esther?”

Tightening his jaws and looking as close as he could to a tiger, George spotted Esther and made his way towards him. “Your mum told me you were here,” gnarled George.

“Smart of you to know I did it,” quipped Esther as he spotted one of the cockroaches on George’s sock, “Sad thing that you had to open my present today, Monday would have been a much better day and I can share this entertainment with the whole school.”

“You are so dead!” threatened George but Esther kept his gaze on George’s sock. Looking at the direction Esther was looking, George screamed and kicked out. The poor cockroach landed halfway across the room and scurried away. It was definitely not its good day out.

This gave Esther time to run as George reared up and charged at him. Completely involved in the commotion, nobody, not even Apple, realised that Yu Ping had her hands on her head and her eyes were shut tight.

A blur image flashed through her mind. First, the green surroundings, then individual trees. Secondly, a big hole in the ground and two hands reaching up. Then two more hands reaching up the side as two people scrambled out. They were John and Peter. Two shadows in the distant crept into the picture from the left...

“George! Esther! Stop!” shrieked Yu Ping.

Blocking Esther from any more attacks by standing between the two of them, she turned to face Esther and motioned Apple to come join them.

After a few more minutes, or rather, what seemed like minutes, Yu Ping announced, “John and Peter are in trouble.” Then she filled them in with the details.

+++

John and Peter gasped for breath as they sat outside the pit. “What’s a hole doing here?” muttered Peter as they pulled each other onto their feet. It was already late into the afternoon and only a few dim rays of sunlight penetrated the canopy above.

Suddenly, there was a rustle in the leaves and they froze. The rustling got louder every second as they stared into the wall of green. Taking control over the situation, John tapped Peter’s back and walked quietly and quickly till he was well behind a very large Yorasha tree with Peter who was following behind.

Two men crept carefully towards the pit with guns in their hands. They looked into the pit and knelt down beside it as though hoping that there was something in it. The first man said, “Ha! I knew you would not catch anything.” He was wearing a dark green shirt with jeans and had a really disgusting pair of muddy yellow boots on. The second man, dressed completely in a dark shade of red (or was it just the light) had a black cap on. The second man shrugged his shoulders and stood up.

John leant against the tree, hoping that they would not be spotted and hoping that whatever guns those men were carrying, the bullets would not be able to pass through the tree. It was a big mistake. The tree broke in to two at a height just above John’s waist level, or at least it seemed to, as it hung open like a treasure chest. The men jumped and aimed their guns at them. Peter put his hands up in the air immediately while John, amazed at what he saw in the tree stub, did not realise the imminent attack. It was hollow and it was filled with cash and gold bars. “Do not judge a book by its cover,” whispered John blankly. Peter nudged John and snapping right back into reality. John raised his hands above his head too, feeling blur and numb. The first man walked towards the tree, pressed a different series of knobs and the tree closed, the gap camouflaged by the moss covering the area.

+++

“Are you sure about this?” asked George as they ran towards the road. “Trust me,” said Yu Ping, “It runs in the family.”

At the moment, Apple had forgotten her feud with John and she reasoned that she was doing this for Peter too.

“Hold on,” said Esther as he realised George was still on his radar screen, “He’s not coming.”

Yu Ping ignored Esther and took George aside and said something to him. George snorted and stared at Esther for a while before he started off in another direction. Yu Ping

jogged back to Apple and Esther and said, “He’s gone for the police.” Esther could not believe his ears and muttered, “We’re doomed.”

+++

As John shifted his legs to get comfortable with his hands and legs tied together. Around him was a barn like interior, haystacks occupying every corner and a ladder that led to the second floor which was just a balcony overlooking the ground.

Then, the huge barn door opened and a man, flanked by the two men from their jungle experience, entered. “Oh my! Principal Wesber!” muttered Peter, his eyes filled with shock and hatred willing his eyesight to pierce through Principal Wesber and cut him up. John was at the moment, thinking up names for the two men. He had decided to call the first one Square and the second one Maroon. Oh no, he thought, he must be catching on to Uncle H.

However, John was not as surprised. “Rodney Wesber or do you prefer that I call you Wales Rodner. Why go to this extent to open a bank?” said John, with so much steadiness that he could not believe, his hear beating overtime.

Principal Wesber’s lips cracked into a tired smile as he said, “John Waser, right? Knew you had talent in you when I saw your project at the science fair, but Apple Yong’s project just hit it out of the park and, may I say, in your face.” John swallowed.

Then in a more serious sad tone, Wesber added, “Being the principal is not fun anymore. The banks here in Seron have really relaxed security and the managers are too full with themselves. The robbing of the bank thirty years ago took every cent out of my father and he was left on his own to survive. My bank will have the best, toughest, security. The other banks would either have to buck up or go burst,” he created a mock explosion with his hands, smiling happily like a kid.

John retorted, “If you really think I am going to let you get away with this, you are so wrong. I’ll tell Apple about it and once her father knows what you’re up to...”

Principal Wesber smiled again and this gave John the creeps, “He knows what I am doing and he is working with me. Once the bank opens next week, I’ll get rid of him. Make it look like an accident. I can’t have him sharing my profits, can I?”

+++

Having a map of Vengeance Hill, Apple, Esther and Yu Ping reached the spot where the Yorasha trees grown and followed the footprints, or more likely, the disruption caused on the jungle floor by movement, to the barn. Peeking through the small crack in the barn door, she smacked her head when she saw Principal Wesber chattering on and on about the

nasty things he could do to get rid of somebody. It was then that she heard it, “Mr. Yong will never see it coming.”

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The digitalising of the voices is the easiest part but the problem lies in figuring out what language is used in each context. I picked out a few most commonly used words like “jalan”, “makan”, “agar agar”, “bo heng” and “bo chap”. No matter what I did, I could not find a suitable meaning to fit the words “lah”, “lor” and “leh”.

I consult Dill on this and he told me that it did not mean anything. It was just something people put at the end of sentences.

That made sense. It gives the speaker a special attitude. Still, I included them into the chip.

However, no matter what I did, the frequency emitted from the chip is uneven and jams every now and then. There was only one way to learn the way of the locals. It is to start at the very beginning. Until then, I will “hire” Dill as my translator.

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## **Chapter 19**

Before anyone could stop her, Apple burst through the door, running straight for Principal Wesber, surprising him and knocking him over. Square and Maroon grabbed her by the arms and easily pinned her against the wall. Square motioned to Maroon to hold on to her as he went to check on Wesber.

Outside, Esther grabbed the biggest branch he could find and whispered to Yu Ping to do the same. For one moment, they were eye to eye and they knew that they had to work together. Esther took a deep breath and charged towards Square and Wesber yelling at the top of his voice, closing his eyes as he neared them, and waited for the impact. It never came. He opened his eyes to see Square charging at him from behind, his hand reached into something from his back.

“Watch out! He’s got a gun,” shouted John. Esther dropped his branch and placed his hands above his head stuttering, “O-OK! I’m not going to move,” there was a pause, “Really.”

Yu Ping made use of this little time and rushed to untie John and Peter. Yu Ping grabbed them both and they dashed for the entrance. Suddenly, John turned back and ran towards Apple. Peter grabbed Yu Ping’s arm and they left the barn. Peter pointed at the ground outside and said, “Stay here.” Then, he went back into the barn.

John and Esther were already against the wall as Square pointed his gun at them. Peter threw himself at him, knocking the gun from his hands. Square scrambled to his feet and reached out for the gun lying just twenty centimeters away.

Maroon was starting to get interested in the fight and Apple, taking his distraction as an advantage, kicked him in the groin and as he yelped in pain, she pushed him away and jumped onto the gun and kicked it towards a hay stack. Maroon turned to fire on Apple when Peter released Square and jumped onto him. John grabbed the gun from the disoriented guy and pulled Apple with him as he fled for the door. Only problem was that Wesber was blocking the way.

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That person looked so familiar. So very familiar that I am quite sure it is him.

“Rio,” I say aloud. I am furious; I can feel my face turn red. There was nothing that could stop me. I wanted revenge.

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## **Chapter 20**

Yu Ping ran towards the Yorasha trees and heaved a sigh of relief as she saw George running towards her with about five policemen at his heels. She led them quickly to the barn. Wesber was about to fire at John when the police came crashing through. John threw Maroon’s gun at Wesber’s head in triumph and missed.

The police quickly wrapped the place up and arrested Wesber and his friends. A policeman, obviously the one in charge shook John’s hands and introduced himself as Officer Tom Rock, “We were checking on Wales Rodner’s fortune for Mr. Yong. He was getting suspicious of Wesber’s wealth. That’s when your friend, George, came in. Well, I guess we’re one step behind you. He smiled and left the barn with the other policemen and the arrested men.

George turned to leave when Esther shouted, “Hey! I’m sorry for the cockroaches if you say you’re sorry for the homework copying!” George turned, confused.

John went up to him and shook his hand, “Whether you want it or not, welcome to Jaypeg.” George was stunned. John looked around at the rest of them with an expectant, “Well?”

“Welcome to the team, George,” said Apple.

“That is if you don’t find yourself too good for us,” said Esther.

Yu Ping glared at him.

“What? He might not agree,” explained Esther.

“Why wouldn’t I? I have a lot of free time,’ George said.

Happily they headed out of the barn and saw that the policemen and Square, Maroon, and Wesber were still there. Not only so but Uncle H and Mr. Yong had come to join the party.

Clearing his throat, Uncle H announced, “Lesson four, the need for the P.F.A.”

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I stared at him and he just smiled at me. What was his problem?

He said, “Have a nice day. And why are you staring at me like so?”

So, we were acting dumb. “I see you have perfected your non-aging formula.”

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

He did not look like he is kidding. I realised that this could all be a big mistake but I have been played too long.

“Rio, Rio, how long has it been?” I try to sound as menacing as I can.

He jumped and I could see his throat move. I had him where I wanted. I moved towards him 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.”

This was a mean thought but I hate him enough to want to use him as a guinea pig for my new and improved formula of mass destruction.

He takes a step back and shakes his head, “I’m not Rio, I’m John and I’m only going on nine years old.” I just remembered that I had changed my appearance, so okay, dumbness and shock is expected but he is denying it. This is too much.

I want to hit him hard and ask him the reason to why he had set me up but it was in the middle of Orchard Road and the roads are bustling with people. Hitting a seemingly young innocent kid in the middle of this road is not a good idea. Maybe that was what he wanted me to do. No way am I falling for it.

“I’m not Rio, I’m John,” he repeated again and I could see that he looked rather afraid and he looked rather innocent.

I knew of one way to test his identity. I needed his DNA. I looked down on his shoes and told him that the shoe laces were undone. He looked down and I used the scissors of the Swiss knife I have picked up a few days ago and clipped off a few strands of his hair. Then, I slipped a tracking chip into his hair. The tracking chip will stick to his hair and it should cling on for a few days. I turned and walked away. It was hard but I had to find out the truth first.

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## **Chapter 21**

“Lesson four?” asked John, wondering what was going on. He also wondered how George was taking this.

“Is this some kind of joke?” said George.

“P.F.A. Protection of Fuvias Association,” said Uncle H. He said to George, “I’ll fill you in on the previous lessons later.” He continued to the rest, “They don’t protect the Fuvias literally but they are here to remind us of the need to keep efficient and capable. The robbery, the kidnapping, the threatening are all part of their plan to bring security awareness to the public. They have to remind them not to relax on security issues. That brings us to the first lesson which is that there are bad rouges in our society and they could do anything.”

“Wait, isn’t this supposed to be a secret?” Apple asked as her eyes wandered in the direction of the ten people before them.

“Hold on while I go sit on a hay stack since I have no idea what is going on,” said George and went into the barn.

“So this was all an act? Why do I feel so used?” John asked.

“We had to make sure we had the right people. It is called ‘killing two birds with one stone’, reminding and testing,” said Uncle H.

Esther butted in, “But we have not even agreed to the mission yet!”

“We do not have much time left,” replied Uncle H.

“There’s still one thing I do not understand, are banks really important?” asked John.

“Yes, of course,” said Uncle H, “On Earth, money talks and you can withdraw money from your bank up here when you need it. Without the money, you’d be left somewhere in the streets begging for food. Even on a Fuvia city such as ours, we need money to buy things, for exchange, to keep the economy going. We had our share of the period when money talks and now, it is our job to make sure that people use it wisely too. And don’t worry, we’ll return the money to the banks soon, as long as they promise to step up on security. In fact, there are many other Fuvia cities much developed than us and if we could steal from our own Fuvias, it should mean more protection would be needed.”

“So Principal Wesber was working under you.”

“Is he working under me for this task? Yes. However, he is still the Principal of Goldfields High.”

“He looked worried after we busted the first robbery attempt...”

“Of course he was. He has to keep up to task.”



“Why did he use different names?”

“He has to act the mastermind and keep it that way to the end. He has to make the case look sinister and instill as much fear as he can to the lads in Seron.”

“What about the janitor?”

“The who?”

“The using of the secret codes, the good-job-well-done pats, the...”

“We try to keep it a secret and we have to really act the part and see who is lucky enough to notice.”

“What about the guns? Someone could get hurt and Peter’s grandmother...”

“She’s fine, she’s acting too. Together with Mr. Yong, your parents...”

“What about my parents?”

“They are just told not to tell you anything.”

“Oh, good. But the guns...”

“After the second robbery when Peter got hurt, we started using fake ones that gives of the sound and projects the image of the bullet. And we do not aim to kill.”

“But...nothing then.”

“Why don’t we go to the dingy room in the Fuvia-heq for dinner?” said Uncle H and told the rest of the people to leave and after he shouted out to George to come outside, they left for the town centre.

Uncle H walked ahead with George, telling him everything he can about being a Fuvia and George was taking it easier than he thought he would. Somehow, he did not mind not existing anymore since his mother left his family when he was six years old.

Reading his mind, Uncle H said, “Your mother is fine and she is here in Seron.”

George stopped so suddenly that John almost bumped into him.

Uncle H put his arm around George and said, “I’ll tell you more later.”

“We’ll have to take two trips,” said Yu Ping when they arrived at the car park. Yu Ping left with Peter, Esther and Apple first. Then, Uncle H, George and John got into the car and dropped.

John could tell that George was ready to puke when the lights came on and he told him to take a deep breath. Once they got off and walked a safe distance from the arrival patch, the light went off and seconds later, they were reunited with the other four.

“Come on,” said Uncle H and led them off to the right to the bedroom cabins. They passed by a cabin, then another cabin and then to a cabin that seemed larger than any of the other cabins and most obviously, it was the dining room as there were lads there, obviously,

dining. The sign at the entrance caught John's eye, "The Little Dingy", it was large and was as wide as the door frame.

John looked at it then at Uncle H then at Yu Ping and she returned him with a look that clearly said, "Don't ask." They walked in after Uncle H and were trying to look inconspicuous as the lads sitted at the tables looked menacing, probably because of the constant frown on their faces that said, "The food is... wait, and is this food?"

Uncle H had to make a grand entrance, "Hey! G'day mates!" Silence fell and the clinking of the knives and forks stopped. They walked through the middle aisle and everyone turned their heads to look at them which made John feel very awkward. They were led to the table closest the corner of the room and they sat around it. George sat down with a white, blank expression and they all felt it was right to leave him alone for a while. The noise continued, louder than before as they were now much nearer to it.

Uncle H tapped the table twice with the knuckles of his left hand and a hologram menu appeared in front of him. "It's a Speenu," explained Yu Ping, she called up the Speenu and told the others to try it. John knocked on the table and the menu appeared in front of him and he had almost fallen backwards in shock.

He saw many boxes on the Speenu and saw that they had words on them like "burgers", "hot drinks", "cold drinks", "noodles", and "exotics" which was followed by a list of different countries. There was one particular box with smaller headings which made John squint hard at it. It suddenly expanded to fit the whole screen and this time, John did fell of his chair. However, no one seemed to notice. He heard another crash right a split second after him and realised that George had, too, fell off his chair. Laughing nervously, they pulled themselves back.

On the screen, it said, "Instructions for new users. Hello! This is the Speenu instruction sheet. In order to read from a menu, stare hard at the heading box which you want to order from. Do not worry as you will get used to the staring soon enough. To go back to the main page, blink five times continuously and to order, read the number of the order and wink and blink accordingly. For example, dish number 19 is French fries, to order that, simply shut your eyes for two seconds once and then blink nine times continuously. The food shall be served in ten minutes." John blinked five times continuously and the main menu appeared. "Cool," he said.

"You guys should try to be more like me. Hold on to the table and you don't fall," said Esther, grinning happily at them.

“Seems like falling off the chair is a natural and normal thing to happen here,” said John.

“It is,” affirmed Yu Ping, who had a plate of spaghetti in front of her, she continued, “while you were on the floor, Uncle H said this was on him, so, pick anything you would like.”

John ordered something called “Udon” and when a bowl of green noodles appeared in front of him through a hatch on the table, he could feel his stomach turn.

He looked at the others and saw that Peter had ordered a beef steak, Apple has ordered an interesting ice cream sundae with so many colours, George had order some fries and Esther had a bowl of something which disgusted John.

“Pig liver? What is this?” he hissed.

John decided to try his noodles since it did not look as bad as Esther’s meal and realised that it tasted pretty good. He guessed that there must be another reason for the look on the faces of the other diners. A few minutes later, he heard Esther declare, “I love this food!” If he was not so busy laughing, he would have needed a barf bag.

Suddenly, the table and the chairs moved and John could see the ceiling leaving him. Seatbelts appeared at the sides of the seat and strapped them in and before anyone could say anything, they were hurled under the floor into darkness and landed on a sort of track. The table left them and the chairs lined themselves in a row and before John could see what was going on, he could feel the wind moving across his face and the chair was moving slightly.

Then, there was a jerk and the chairs stopped. John pulled at the seatbelts but to no avail. He heard the freaked-out voice of Uncle H erupt from somewhere behind him, “What are you doing? Stop this instance! You are not welcome here! What are you doing? Go! Go away!”

Whatever was happening, John did not like it and there was silence as though someone had muffled Uncle H.

A booming voice filled the underground, “Next stop, down to the peak of Mount Everest.”

“Everest...Isn’t that supposed to be up? No wait. It is down and...Uh-oh,” thought John as he felt the air pressure drop and he could see a clear cocoon forming around the seat, he saw a glimpse of his own terrified reflection before almost complete darkness enveloped him. Soon, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The cocoon around him was transparent and he could make out a figure standing in front of him. There was the voice again, “Collect your passports at the feet of Mount Everest before moving on. Have a nice

day.” The voice snickered and John could feel the chair shaking and then he fell. He screamed for a long time, had it been seconds, minutes, or was it hours? What was going to happen was going to happen soon.

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He’s Rio’s son. Rio tried to get rid of me and now it is payback time.  
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### **Epilogue**

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, he could remember the strange man before he fell. His memories were jumbled up 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...