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Masters of Creative Writing and Wellbeing

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Assessment

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1. The Split

Vivian Loo stared at her computer in frustration. She moved the mouse and hit her keyboard, but there was no response. She picked up her the phone on her desk and pressed a button. Her secretary would usually answer within three rings, but the line now was dead. “Sammi?” she half-raised her voice, but there was no reply.

She slammed down the handset to its base and walked out of her office.

“Sammi?” she called again. Her office sits on one end of the 66th floor in the Lee Building. At her calling, her secretary stumbled out of a glass office adjacent to hers, carrying a load of files.

“The files that you wanted, Ms Loo.” Sammi said, panting heavily.

“Leave them on my desk, please.” Vivian said rather dismissively. “I need you to look at my system. It's crazy.”

Sammi stumbled over to Vivian's desk, placed the files on the table, and peered at the computer screen. Vivian was beginning to look at Sammi with concern.

“My system is not responding too.” Sammi said as she swayed a little, her eyes half closing. Vivian quickly caught hold of her arm. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Sammi smiled sheepishly. “I'm okay. Just a little drowsy. Been like this for the past 2 days. Must be the weather...” she tailed off.

Vivian felt Sammi's forehead with the back of her hand and patted her face “You look a little pale.” Looking more intently at Sammi's face, she asked, “Is that the lipstick we bought last week?”

Sammi nodded with a smile “Is the colour too bright?”

Vivian frowned, but quickly forced a smile. “No, it's just right. Why don't you take the rest of the day off? I can't work with the systems fried anyway.”

Sammi nodded again appreciatively. “All right, thanks Ms Loo.”

“Is the Chairman in his office?” she asked as Sammi proceeded to leave.

Sammi nodded rather sleepily, before half stumbling out.

Vivian looked worried. She set behind her desk and tried to garner a response from the system but to no avail. She sighed and made her way out of her CEO office. The rain had become heavier, pelting relentlessly at the floor-to-ceiling glass panels. Vivian stopped to look at the unfriendly weather outside. Lightning streaked across the dark grey skies,

brightening up the entire floor in a split second. She looked solemn as she turned and continued her way to the end of the floor. More lightning followed by thunder raged outside. The ceiling lights shimmered slightly. Vivian walked past the meeting and conference rooms, the lift lobby, and arrived at the only other office at the other end of the oval-shaped floor. The door of the office was open, and she entered as she gave a gentle knock on the door.

Her husband's leaf-shaped office is bigger with a massive sweeping glass facade which was now covered completely by electric blinds.

“My system is not responding.” Jonas said in frustration.

Vivian walked over to look at his monitor. She frowned and crossed her arms.

Jonas pointed at the monitor and said grimly “The system is not merely unresponsive. It seems to have collapsed! Look at the frames. They now look distorted with strange symbols all over.”

“With this and the strange weather...” Vivian said. “Did you see how bad it is outside?” She reached and flicked a switch by his desk and all the blinds began retracting.

“Vivian!” Jonas exclaimed. He tried to reach for switch, but it would be too late. He rushed over and enveloped her in his arms. “Don't look!” he whispered.

“What, what?” Vivian asked anxiously, with her face pressed against Jonas's chest. “What's outside the window?”

Jonas did not reply for a moment. He exhaled heavily and said gently, “There is a split in the sky. Don't be scared, all right?”

Vivian pushed herself slightly from Jonas and stared at him. “A split? In the sky?”

Jonas held her tighter. She felt him nodding and heard him say “Easy, ok?”

Vivian frowned in puzzlement. She slowly emerged from the bulky shoulder of Jonas and peered at the window. Then she saw it.

A dark void had streaked across the horizon with the sky on both side of the void appearing to be at different heights.

Vivian looked stunned. “What...is that?” she mumbled.

Jonas quickly reached for the switch by his desk and the blinds lowered themselves again.

“It's all right, I am here.” Jonas said, giving Vivian's shoulder a little squeeze.

Vivian looked at Jonas and asked, “Is H.Y in trouble?”

“H.Y?” Jonas asked sharply. “You think this has got something to do with him?”

“The world is like...breaking down.” Vivian said, and with a slight sob “What do we do? Jeremy is only five, Jonas!”

Jonas continued to pat her on the back, saying softly “It'll be fine, we'll be all right.”

“Wendy texted a few days ago to say that she is coming back with Ern, but I can't get to her on her mobile.” Vivian said. “What's happening?”

“Did she say they are coming back?” Jonas asked.

Vivian nodded. She seemed to recall something, “And yes, she mentioned that she has something important to tell us.”

“Is it about H.Y?” Jonas asked.

“I am not sure,” Vivian replied hurriedly. “She said she was finding out something in New York and would inform us to make preparations.”

Jonas tsked with impatience. “What is my dotty sister up to now?” He looked at Vivian with concern and said, “It's coming to six, let's call it a day and go home, okay?”

Vivian nodded resignedly.

The lift brought Jonas and Vivian to the upper split level of the banking hall on the ground floor. They continued their way on the escalator down to the lower level, accompanied by guards. There were noticeably fewer customers today, but the banking hall of Lee Bank was as brightly lighted as ever. As usual, Jonas and Vivian held hands on the escalator. Staff who saw them nodded or waved in respect. They returned the gestures with a smile. The usual robust ambience of the banking hall put Vivian more at ease. Jonas led her towards their usual exit, where a black limousine was waiting. As they were entering the car, the skyline caught the eye of Vivian.

“What happened to those?” Vivian asked, pointing at some buildings that were now looking dilapidated. “They were fine a couple of days ago!”

Jonas looked around and pointed to some other buildings on the other side of the road and exclaimed “The Citi and HSBC buildings look okay!”

Vivian's troubled expression returned.

“Come.” Jonas coaxed as he led her into the car. Being taller, he could see the streak of void approaching the pinnacle of the Lee Bank building. Pete, the driver, navigated the limousine deftly out of the sheltered lobby, and towards the direction of Orchard Road.

The rain got heavier, traffic moved slowly, and Orchard Road remained crowded as usual. Looking out of the window, Vivian gave a sigh as she snuggled deeper into her seat. As the car turned into Nassim Road, she sat up sharply and looked around.

“It is happening here too?” she exclaimed. The condominiums and houses appeared to have lost half their usual colour and looked unoccupied. The wind gusted and the road ahead looked much darker than before.

“Master Jonas...” Pete asked uncertainly, and he began to cough.

“Carry on,” Jonas answered urgently. “We need to return home. Mum and Jeremy are still in the house!”

Pete stepped on the accelerator and the car surged ahead. Vivian looked around in a panic as the sky grew ever darker. Pete continued to cough as he held on tightly to the steering wheel. There were no other cars, and the usual estates and mansions looked abandoned. The car reached number sixty-eight on Nassim Road at last. The stone-like gates were wide-open, and the large fountain beyond the gates was still and lifeless. The mansion at the end of the estate looked dark and uninhabited. They could hear the winds howling outside the car with an enveloping darkness swiftly building.

Pete gave a last cough before slumping on the steering wheel just as the car came to a stop. Vivian fled out of the car and ran towards the house. Jonas tore after her in alarm. “Vivian!” he yelled.

Just then, Ernie was running out of the house at top speed. He slowed down and made a grab for Vivian, yelling “No, we must go!”

Vivian struggled to get away from him, her eyes fixated on the house, screaming “Jeremy! Jeremy is in there!” Her movements halted suddenly, and her eyes closed. Jonas caught her just in time from behind as she lost consciousness.

“We must go!” Ernie yelled to Jonas. “I sent your mum and Jeremy away in a cab!”

Jonas nodded and picked up Vivian into his arms. They rushed back to the car as fast as they could. Ernie sprinted ahead and threw open the back door for Jonas to put Vivian into the back passenger seat. He rushed to the driver's side door, half-pulled the motionless Pete out and dragged him to the front passenger side. He shoved him roughly into the car before darting back to the driver's seat. Jonas had just settled Vivian and he heard Ernie's yell. “Get in!” He jumped into car just as Ernie floored the accelerator and the car leapt off from sixty-eight Nassim Road.

“Aren't we going back?” Jonas asked, holding on to Vivian and pointing back towards the direction of Orchard Road.

“No, we are going to the nearest main road!” Ernie said as the car swerved left and right at top speed along the narrow Nassim Road. Jonas brushed his dripping fringe from his eyes and looked back in terror as darkness was fast building behind them.

“Step on it, Ern!” he yelled.

The car turned into Evans Road at the Botanical Gardens with the engines roaring. The car stormed past a speed hump and almost took off from the road. There was a terrific jolt before it came to a stop at the end of the road that led into Bukit Timah Road, a major carriage way. Jonas looked behind and the darkness was gone. Even the rain has stopped.

Vivian sat up in a shock. “What happened? Where are we?” she looked around, and asked Jonas urgently “Where is Jeremy?”

“It's okay. He had left with Mum on a cab.” Jonas replied soothingly.

“Where to?” Vivian asked.

“I..” Jonas began before he realised that he had no answer. He slapped on the headrest of the driver's seat and asked, “Where did my son go in the cab?”

“Changi Airport hotel.” Ernie growled a reply.

“Ern?” Vivian leaned to one side to look at the rear-view mirror. She saw Ernie beamed at her and looked relieved. “Where's Wendy? Where are we going?”

“We are going to Old Airport Road first,” Ernie replied. “Wendy said bro and I have to stay there for now. You will join bro's mum and Jeremy at Changi Airport hotel.”

“Wendy knows what is going on? With H.Y?” Vivian asked eagerly.

It was Pete's turn to wake up with a cough at this time. He looked around and sat up in shock as he saw Ernie in the driver seat. “Master Ern!”

Ernie flashed a slight smile. “Relax. You take over when we get to Old Airport. This car is quite easy to drive for a first timer.”

“What? First timer?” Jonas asked in disbelief. He wanted to raise an objection, but it was too late. The lights turned green, and the engine of the car roared as the Mercedes lurched ahead again and sped madly into Bukit Timah Road, oblivious of the angry horns and high-beam flashes following the car as it raced towards Old Airport Road.

“Gosh, I could do with a nap.” Vivian said and promptly fell asleep, leaving Jonas hanging on to the overhead handle for dear life.

2. Old Airport Road again

A black limousine turned into the car park of Dakota Crescent at a furious pace. It travelled on the dividing lane for a moment before making a sudden and awkward correction into the left lane. It went past a few parking lots before coming to an abrupt stop. It then reversed

clumsily into the middle of two parking lots. The brakes screeched just millimetres before the back wheels touched the curb.

Pete staggered out of the car from the front passenger seat, trying to shake off his dizziness. The back door flew open and Jonas alighted the car in a hurry. He rushed to the drain by the car and vomited.

Ernie alighted from the driver seat and looked rather sheepish. He went over to Jonas and patted him on the back.

Jonas looked at him with distaste. "Where did you learn your driving?" he demanded, before promptly throwing up again.

"Is Madam all right?" Pete asked.

Jonas took a facial tissue that Ernie was holding out to him, "Think she must have lost consciousness again after the crazy ride..."

The passenger car door opened, and Vivian stepped out smartly. She stretched and looked refreshed. "That was a good nap." She saw her husband squatting by the drain and rushed over, "What happened to you, dear?"

Jonas looked incredulously at her but straightened himself quickly. He looked at Ernie and demanded, "Why do we have to come back here?"

Ernie pointed to the Old Airport cooked food centre beyond the busy Mountbatten Road ahead of them. It was shimmering with colour and life. Old Airport was the site of Singapore's first airport, now decommissioned more than half a century ago.

"It's bustling." Vivian said as she watched with relief. She turned to Ernie. "Does this place have anything to do with H.Y?"

Ernie nodded. "This is one of his favourite places. Wendy wants bro and I to be here, now that things...are not stable."

"Why just the two of us?" Jonas demanded again.

Vivian raised her eyebrows, "It's H.Y isn't it?"

"Wendy thinks he is not in the mood lately." Ernie said uneasily.

Jonas looked angry. "Does it mean that we have to run here every time he's not happy?"

Ernie shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Wendy is not sure either. She is visiting a Professor at the New York University to find out. That's why I am back first."

Jonas swore under his breath. Suddenly, there was a series of beeping and tones from different mobile phones. Vivian and Jonas took out their mobile phones and smiles broke all around.

“Network is up!” Vivian said excitedly. “Wendy was right to bring the two of you back here!”

“Isn’t she?” Jonas muttered, looking gleefully at his phone.

Ernie looked at his watch and told Vivian, “Better get back to Jeremy. We will join you at the Airport after Wendy arrives.”

Vivian nodded. He patted him in his arm and asked, “You will be okay here?”

Ernie nodded. Vivian gave him a hug “So good to see you home.”

Ernie nodded again and blushed a little.

Jonas still looked mutinous and held on to his wife. “You get to stay in a hotel? And I have to stay here?”

He looked around at what must be public flats that were even older than the country. He had stayed here for a month with Ernie five years ago, a feat which impressed himself and others, but he didn't care to do it again.

“Don't worry, I've done up a place.” Ernie said a little wearily. It was only now that Jonas finally noticed how tired Ernie looked. He kept quiet and shrugged his shoulders.

Vivian caught the cue. “I'll be off then,” she said brightly, as she gave Jonas a quick kiss. “See you guys tomorrow.”

Pete nodded and opened the back passenger door for her. She jumped into the car and waved at them.

“I'll be off Master Jonas and Master Ern.” Pete quickly took the driver's seat and drove off.

Jonas looked around before asking Ernie brightly, “So, what would be our unit number this time?”

Ernie fumbled out a key with a tag. “6B” he replied almost sullenly.

Jonas put his arm around his brother's shoulder and whipped out his phone, saying “I am calling Kim at the food centre to deliver some dinner. Any cravings?”

He won a smile from Ernie, which was the answer Jonas wanted. He laughed and half-yelled into the phone “Uncle Kim? I'm Jonas! I need a delivery, but to Old Airport Road. Yes, Kallang Airport. Don't ask, just come.” he laughed again. “Crabs, you say?”

He had just about finished ordering before he entered the lift with Ernie. The door of the lift closed with a loud clang, and there was a sudden jerk upwards. Jonas shrieked and pressed himself against the wall in a hurry. “I had almost forgotten this feeling!” he gasped. “We can't have a ground floor unit?” he asked pathetically.

Ernie looked amused. “We could have this 6B unit because Wendy knows the tenant. These are all rental flights for the needy, not for your kind of...”

“You better watch what you say, the-brother-of-whatever-kind-of-people you are talking about!” Jonas interjected fiercely.

Ernie raised his eyebrows and continued, “...successful, kind, handsome....”

Jonas guffawed and made a grab for Ernie's head who deftly dodged. The lift reached the 6th floor and made a thunderous jerk again.

Jonas gave an audible gasp before running after Ernie out of the lift. Ernie dug keys out of his pocket, “We persuaded the tenant to let us stay in his unit for some time while we put him up at a hotel and paid for his meals. I also asked a furniture company to do up the place in the shortest possible time...”

They turned to a unit with a short corridor in front of it. The corridor was decorated with a shoe rack, bench and hanging plants.

“Promising.” Jonas’s eyebrows rose.

Ernie gave a weary smile and led Jonas into the apartment. It looked nothing like the decaying unit he stayed in five years ago. It was still the same studio-layout, but the furniture was minimalist and Scandinavian-styled. Artistic lamps and thick avant-garde patterned carpets gave the unit a lounge and homely feel. A portable air-conditioner was operating on one side of the apartment.

Jonas looked at Ernie and gave a “Wow.”

“The movers moved some of our things here earlier.” Ernie said as he pointed to the open wardrobe at a corner.

Jonas looked impressed but he scowled as he looked at the bed. “We are sleeping together again?”

“The tenant allowed us to decorate but not put two single beds here as he is a single.” Ernie said awkwardly.

“Of course.” Jonas replied matter-of-factly. He sat down at the small dining table and looked relaxed.

“You want to take a shower? There is a heater installed.” Ernie said.

Jonas laughed to himself, remembering how Ernie had to boil water for him five years ago.

“You go ahead.” he said. “I will wait for Uncle Kim to deliver the food.”

Ernie nodded. He took off his shirt and grabbed a towel from the open wardrobe and proceeded to the bathroom. Jonas stared at the lean and almost bony back of his brother. He remembered this similar sight half a decade ago, staying with a young man whom his dying father told him was his half-brother. Jonas gave a self-deprecating laugh when he thought of his siblings. His brother was born to a different mother, while his sister was born to a

different father. His brother and sister who were therefore not blood related are seeing each other. A knock on the door broke his train of thoughts. The long-awaited Uncle Kim has arrived.

After dinner, it was Jonas's turn to take a shower while Ernie cleaned up the dining table. Jonas had his nose wrinkled when he appeared out of the bathroom later.

"Ern, the sewage smell is still there." he lamented.

Ernie was reading a book on the bed with his back against the headboard. "This building is older than Singapore, bro." he said without taking his eyes off his book.

"I know." Jonas said easily. He went over to the window to look. The rain has finally stopped for the night.

Jonas stretched a little and jumped onto bed. He placed his hands behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. They didn't speak for a while.

Just as Ernie flipped a page, they asked each other in unison, "How have you been?"

They laughed, and Ernie clapped his book shut.

"We haven't talk like this for years." Jonas said.

"You mean while in bed together." Ernie said with a laugh. "That was when we first met."

"You left for the US quite shortly after." Jonas fidgeted on the bed. "Has it been five years? How long does it take to be a doctor anyway?"

"I've completed the PhD part of the program. I will start my clinical rotation shortly before I get my medical degree." Ernie explained.

"A PhD holder is a 'doctor'?" Jonas asked.

"Yes."

"A medical doctor is also a 'doctor'?" Jonas asked again.

Ernie looked amused. "What's your question?"

Jonas paused for a moment for saying innocently, "People would have to call you Doctor twice? As if they were stammering? Like: Doctor Doctor, I got a flu?"

Ernie laughed soundlessly with his shoulders shaking.

"And you get Microsoft Word underlying the second 'doctor' every time anyone writes you something?" Jonas continued.

Ernie curled up in silent laughter. Jonas looked pleased with himself.

Ernie recovered his breath after a moment. "I miss your jokes." he croaked.

“I miss you.” Jonas said.

Ernie beamed but did not reply. He twiddled the edge of his book before saying, “I need to tell you something.”

Jonas turned to look at Ernie expectantly. Ernie stared at his brother for a moment before blurting, “I am married.”

There was a crash, as Jonas had rolled onto the floor.

Ernie hurried to pick up his brother in amusement. “You are always doing that.”

Jonas looked shaken and said “You got married and I didn’t know? You are only telling me now? And Wendy...wait a minute.” he stopped and looked at Ernie suspiciously before grabbing him by the neck “You got married to Wendy, didn’t you?”

Ernie threw off his hand before retorting “Of course I married Wendy.” He suddenly turned red and said a little gruffly, “We were staying alone in the US, so I thought our relationship should be ...erm...official...”

Jonas looked approvingly at his brother. “That’s a responsible chap. You take care of your lady.”

“She was all right with it, actually.” Ernie said sheepishly. “It was me who wanted something official...”

Jonas closed his eyes and laughed. “You are such a ...”

Ernie looked more serious. “Oh yes, I have arranged...”

He was interrupted by what sounded like a choked trumpet. Ernie turned to look down at Jonas, who had fallen soundly into a snoring sleep.

3. The Circles

Ernie woke up in shock. He had heard a loud, dreadful howl. He looked around, only to see Jonas stretching himself on the bed, and then letting out the same horrific howl again.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ernie growled.

“Just stretching.” Jonas said with a yawn. He remembered something and lumbered out of bed, dashed to the window and pulled the curtains apart.

Ernie was next to him in an instant. “The rain has stopped.” he said as both of them peered through the window.

Jonas’s eyes narrowed. “It’s not because of us spending a night here, is it?”

Ernie and Jonas looked at each other. "Phone." they said together and made another dash for their phones on the dining table.

"Everything is normal." Jonas said jubilantly, as he went through the apps in his phone. "Stocks...stocks...exchange rates...emails...all good!"

"Wendy has arrived, and she is at the airport hotel with your mum." A smile broke on Ernie's chiselled face. "Come on."

Jonas challenged, "Come on? Come on what?"

"We need to get to the airport hotel and meet them." Ernie said, as he rushed to the open wardrobe.

Jonas looked scornful, "You are just dying to meet your wife. Your brother is hungry you know."

Ernie laughed soundlessly. He took a towel and headed for the bathroom, saying "We'll eat at the food centre before we go."

Jonas looked appeased. "I'll call Pete to fetch us then."

The limousine pulled up to the lobby of the Crown Plaza at Changi Airport. Jonas and Ernie proceeded into the hotel with urgency. Through the glass panels at the lobby, they could see that it was starting to drizzle again. They quickened their pace to the meeting room on the first floor. The door of the meeting room was open. As they entered, Vivian and Wendy came to meet them. Vivian and Jonas exchanged a brief kiss. "Everything okay?" Jonas asked. "Where is mum and Jeremy?"

"In the room." Vivian replied. "I don't want mum to worry. I thought it will be better for us to be here on our own."

Jonas nodded. "Have you eaten?"

"We had. How about you?"

"I had, with Ern." Jonas said.

"Where is he?" Vivian asked looking around.

"What do you mean? He was just..." Jonas trailed off as he looked around. Only Vivian and him were in the meeting room. "Where is Wendy?" he asked in surprise.

They ventured out of the room onto the hotel corridor. Ernie and Wendy were by the side of the corridor, against the wall, deep in embrace, kissing passionately.

Jonas and Vivian smiled resignedly. As Vivian pulled Jonas back into the meeting room, Jonas half-bellowed "We have a meeting, guys!"

The four of them sat on each side of the long meeting table. Wendy and Ernie looked a little sheepish.

Vivian looked around and said brightly to Wendy “You were telling me about this theory...?”

Wendy cleared her throat, “Ah yes.” She took some papers out from her bag and continued, “We all know about H.Y, don’t we?” Everyone looked around and nodded uncertainly. Wendy continued, “Why do we know about him when we have never talked about him?”

“He is a person, right?” Jonas suggested. “I am not very familiar with the concept of ‘H.Y’”.

Vivian looked at Wendy and said “You are right. This seems to be something we had always knew, even though we don’t talk about it.”

Wendy looked at the three of them intently and said “I suspect we are products of H.Y’s imagination.”

Jonas looked agitated and asked “What do you mean? We are fake? We are not real? We in a movie and people are watching us?” He started looking around as if there were hidden cameras everywhere.

Wendy smiled, “I don’t think we are fake, but our environment could be.”

“This is that one part that I don’t really understand.” Vivian said with a frown.

Wendy took out a large and thick laptop from her bag. She turned it on and waited a moment before pressing a few keys. She turned the laptop to face all of them and a website appeared.

“The Glass Empire?” they read. Wendy tapped on the sensor pad apprehensively, and another page appeared.

“The Glass Ship?” Vivian read.

“What’s The Glass Ship? And The Glass empire, you said?” Vivian asked.

“The Glass Empire is a collection of novels. There are three of them now, and the Glass Ship is one of them.” Wendy replied. “We are in the Glass Ship.”

Ernie took over the papers with a deep frown and glanced over them.

“About us? What does it say?” Jonas asked, pointing at the stack of papers.

“I read it while I was coming back on the plane.” Wendy said. “It starts just before Father passed away about five years ago and ends about a year after that. There are some flash backs that went back even earlier in time.”

“We are all in a story?” Vivian asked in disbelief. “H.Y is a writer who wrote about us, which is why we are here?”

“What does this mean? He is our creator? We don’t really exist, except in a novel?” Jonas asked in indignation.

Wendy looked frustrated. “I don’t know. With the freak weather and the things looking like their disintegrating, it does appear that some things may not be real.”

“Exactly!” Jonas said. “We are alive and thinking, aren’t we? I don’t believe a writer can create people or things just like that.”

“How can we not be real?” Wendy turned to Ernie, and touched his face and whispered, “How can you not be real?”

Ernie smiled dreamily and held her hand in his own.

“How did you find out about this? The Glass Empire and all?” Vivian asked, interrupting them.

“I didn’t”. Wendy said, turning away from Ernie. “Professor Davidoff did.”

“Professor who?” Ernie asked.

Wendy explained, “Professor Davidoff was a guest speaker at my university. He spoke on topics about reality and alternate reality...”

“What is that?” Jonas asked in a shocked high-pitch tone. Ernie giggled soundlessly at him.

Wendy ignored him. “Anyway, Professor Davidoff found this laptop in an unused locker by accident. As it has a New York University logo, which is where he is working, he decided to switch on the laptop to find out who the laptop belongs to. On the same New York University homepage that every school laptop opens by default, he could not locate himself or any of his colleagues. It was like the university was being operated by a completely different group of people...”

Vivian laughed a little uneasily. “That is a little scary.”

“The Glass Empire website was the first item on the list of favourites of the browser. And Professor Davidoff found me in the Glass Ship. He had known me from some of the papers I have published. He contacted me to meet him urgently in New York to show me this laptop. In fact, I think this laptop belongs to H.Y.”

Jonas and Vivian cowered away, looking at the laptop with fear and disgust.

“I found Word files of The Glass Empire in the laptop that completely matches the three novels published online. There are a couple of other working files that looked like scattered writing of ideas that did not develop into a full novel. It’s a very ‘clean’ laptop, there are no other files other than H.Y’s writings.”

“Do you think he wants this laptop to be found by us?” Vivian asked with a frown. “Is something happening to H.Y or is he trying to tell us something?”

Wendy nodded. “He could even be asking for help. Professor Davidoff thinks there is an alternate reality out there, and there are ways these realities are being connected.” Wendy said and she took out a piece of paper from her bag, which showed 2 overlapping circles. “What do you guys see?”

“Chanel logo and a little more.” Vivian quickly volunteered

“Audi logo short of 2 rings.“ Jonas suggested too.

Ernie sank into a soundless laugh again.

Wendy smiled and explained. “The circle on the left is H.Y’s world. The circle on the right is our world, which is the world of Glass Empire created from his writings...”

“We are created by him, then?” Jonas demanded to know. “I am not really happy with that.”

“We come to that a bit later, shall we?” Wendy coaxed. She continued with her diagram “You can see that there is this overlapping area, which is like a common area that exists in both circles.”

“How would we know which is a common area, and what is an exclusive area of either circle?” Vivian asked.

Wendy held up the laptop. “With this!” she said excitedly. “Our Lee Bank is exclusive to the Glass Circle, because we are not in HY’s circle at all.”

The rest gathered around her to watch the screen of the laptop.

“Can you search for our home address? What does it show?” Jonas asked.

Wendy pushed the laptop towards Jonas and said “See? There is no house here. It’s just someone’s backyard.

Ernie pointed at the map, “But the botanical gardens is there, which means that it is a common area.”

Jonas took over the keyboard and pressed a few keys. “Citi is there. HSBC too.” he mumbled. He snapped his fingers and told Vivian “This explains why their buildings look normal unlike those you saw!”

“And this will explain why we are seeing the sky split and the mad weather patterns.” Vivian said. “Colours seem to be deteriorating, and people seems to be...” Vivian’s hand waved around, as she tried to find a word to describe what she wanted to say.

“Extinguishing.” Ernie said.

Vivian pointed to him and said “Exactly.” She turned to Jonas and said “I remembered the colour of Sammi’s lipstick. It was fresh red when I bought it with her, but it was in a much darker shade yesterday.”

“The picture is quite clear now.” Jonas said heavily. “H.Y created this Glass Circle, but something is happening to it.”

“Can we do something?” Vivian asked. “Or do we sit around and hope for the best because it was H.Y who created our world?”

Jonas swore under his breath. “This is the part I cannot accept. I refused to accept that I am created by another person’s imagination. How can everything that goes on here not be real?” He put his hand on the table and tapped with every word, “I-cannot-accept-that.”

“Did the professor mention anything about this?” Vivian asked.

“Not much.” Wendy said with a smile. “Some things could get too abstract for the human mind. He simply said it depends on H.Y’s frame of mind.”

Jonas muttered something rude under his breath. Vivian patted him on arm.

“But I discovered something.” Wendy said a little playfully.

“What?” Vivian asked eagerly.

“H.Y’s blog.”

“What?” everyone exclaimed.

“There is a link from his website which was quite well hidden.” Wendy said brightly.

“Do you think he intended for us to see his blog?” Vivian asked.

Ernie’s deep voice suddenly boomed. “This could also be a coincidence or a natural occurrence. Something could be happening to H.Y as a person or his environment, like a war. But Citi and HSBC are doing ok, aren’t they? Things should still be well if the common areas are generally ok. And I presume that Old Airport Road would be a common area too?”

Wendy looked at Ernie like a ripe tomato waiting to be eaten, “You are so good.”

Ernie went redder still, if it was possible. Jonas laughed, and asked “What do we do now?”

“Let’s sum up what we have got, shall we?” Vivian said professionally. “We are in this Glass Circle created by H.Y and it is collapsing. “

Jonas snapped. “I still protest the fact that we could be created by him.”

“Why does that bother you that much?” Vivian asked, amused.

“He is just a person, right? Not a big deal of a chap, right? How can he create me?” Jonas asked, pointing at his own chest. He turned to Vivian and whined, “You said I was so good in bed two nights ago, didn’t you? How could that be created by someone else?”

Everyone laughed as Vivian slapped Jonas’s shoulder in mock indignation.

Wendy said. “Anyway, I agree with Ern that whatever that is happening to H.Y is more likely to be personal to him rather than something immediately catastrophic, which means that it is likely that we can do something about it.”

“I totally agree.” Vivian said resolutely. “It is after all our lives and our world.”

“How should we do that now?” Jonas asked.

“We may need to approach him.” Wendy said simply.

“H.Y?” they asked in unison.

“I need to study his blog further before coming up with a concrete plan. But before that, we need more hands.” She wrote down an address on a piece of paper and handed it over to Jonas. “Could you and Ern visit this place and get Zach and Yolander here?”

Ernie leaned over to Jonas to look at the address and read the header. “The Glass Phoenix...?” they read.

“That’s HY’s second novel with Zach and Yolander in there.” Wendy explained. “The Glass Phoenix is a dish in the story.”

“What’s that?” Ernie asked with a frown.

“Chicken.” Wendy flapped her arms and said as a matter-of fact.

4. The Glass Phoenix

At Koon’s Kitchen, Yolander was carefully tasting the chicken broth simmering in a huge pot. Zach looked at her intently, anxiously waiting for her verdict.

Yolander smacked her lips and frowned. “Something is missing,” she concluded.

Zach seemed relieved. “I’d much rather have something missing, than to have something we don’t know that’s in there.

“True,” Yolander said. “We can add to the flavour, but taking flavour out will be messy.”

Yolander looked at the huge pot dejectedly and rammed her fist onto the stainless-steel table. She grabbed a spoon and tasted the stock again. She sighed and threw the spoon onto the counter. Zach looked around the kitchen, looking rather sullen.

Yolander went to the kitchen door and looked at the empty dining area through the circular glass panel. She sighed. “Let’s call it a day. There are no customers anyway.”

In an hour’s time, the lights of Koon’s kitchen were switched off and a “close” sign hung lifelessly at the front door. Yolander sat on one of the diner seats, staring glumly at the laptop displaying the accounts for the month. She slumped into her seat and began to cry helplessly.

Zach came over to pat her on her back. “We did our best. You did more than your best.”

“Koon’s Kitchen has been in the red for months. Everything is breaking apart. Customers are disappearing, and even the taste of our broth is fading,” she sobbed.

“Could we create the broth again, from scratch?” Zach asked sadly.

Yolander shook her head. “My mum created our signature broth when we stopped selling the Glass Phoenix five years ago. Broths come from a perpetual cooking process. We never stop.

We just add new ingredients and water to the remainder at the end of the day. The taste builds to a consistent richness over the years, but today it was just so off.”

Zach said gently, “We will try to reach your mum in Shanghai again. I am sure she can help us.”

“I am sorry I got you into this.” Yolander cried. “You closed the Imperial Tai to help me with Koon’s Kitchen, but I am just screwing up everything.”

Zach took her into his arms. “It’s not your fault. The strange weather, no customers and the taste...” he shook his head as words failed him.

At this moment a black Mercedes pulled into the carpark outside Koon’s Kitchen.

“Who is that?” Zach asked as he went over to the entrance of the restaurant.

Yolander followed closely behind, “Traffic has been so quiet lately, this feels like a shocker.”

An elderly driver alighted from the car, opened an umbrella, and proceeded to open the rear passenger door. Two men alighted from the car. The taller and bigger-sized man turned towards the direction of Koon’s Kitchen for a few moments. He took over the umbrella, before letting the driver return to the car. He put his arm around a smaller man, and they began walking towards the restaurant. Zach and Yolander retreated to a table behind a cabinet, and with most of the lights switched off, they were almost completely hidden from view.

“Who are they? Are they coming here?” Yolander whispered a little anxiously.

“Such grandiose.” Zach said with a little enviousness. “It’s been so strange lately that I am no longer surprised at anything.”

The two men stopped at the entrance of Koon’s restaurant and knocked.

“What should we do?” Zach whispered.

“You are asking me?” Yolander hissed. “I thought you are no longer surprised by anything?”

The knocks sounded again, more adamant this time.

“It can’t be worse than now, right?” Zach said. “It’s two against two in the worst scenario.”

“You can fight three of them,” Yolander coaxed, before adding “easily, Your Majesty.”

Zach nodded impressively and stood up very straight. He puffed out his chest and walked to front door. He opened slightly and said meekly, “We are closed!”

Yolander let out a scornful laugh.

Zach was about to close the door again when the men held the door and one of them asked, “Are you guys from the Glass Phoenix?”

Zach and Yolander looked at each other in surprise.

“Sold out! Five years ago!” Zach bellowed in fright, as he pushed the door closed. The strangers were no match for his brute strength. The door creaked to a shut and Zach turned his hefty back onto the door.

The knocking came again. Yolander appeared out of the shadows behind the cabinet. She looked on curiously at the unexpected strangers talking about a dish her restaurant has stopped selling five years ago.

“What crazy people!” the bigger man exclaimed.

“You shouldn’t have asked like that...” the smaller man with a deep voice said. “Look, according to ‘The Glass Phoenix’ novel, they stopped selling the dish five years ago...”

“Let me check the novel to see if there are other people we know...”

“How about the strange Manchurian princess in the story?”

Yolander’s frowns turned deeper. She looked at Zach who was looking at her in shock. Yolander came closer to the front door to better listen to their banter.

“Wendy said we should be looking for Yolander and Zachary, not the Princess!”

“That’s the two who love pretending to be the emperor and concubine isn’t it?”

Yolander’s breath drew in sharply as she listened intently.

“That was part of their school play...”

“What do we do now? Call the princess or something?”

Yolander pulled Zach gently away from the door. She opened the door and looked at the two strangers, who seemed surprised to see her amid their banter.

Yolander stood with her back straight and announced. “I am Yolander Sheh, the owner of the Koon’s Kitchen.”

Zach scrambled to stand in front of her and said, “I am Zach Long of Imperial Tai.”

“Check.” The bigger man told the smaller skinhead who was holding a sheaf of papers.

The smaller man went through a few pages and nodded. “Yolander Sheh of Koon Kitchen and Zach Long of Imperial Tai.” He turned to the bigger man with relief, ‘It’s them.’

Yolander pulled Zach out of the way again, and asked with curiosity “How did you know about us? How did you know about our encounter with the princess?”

The bigger man took out two name cards from his coat pocket, “I am Jonas Lee, and this is my brother, Ernie.”

Yolander looked at the name card and asked in surprise, “Bank Lee?”

“You are the Chairman?” Zach asked in awe.

“Can we come in?” Jonas asked with a slight, eager smile.

“I don’t understand.” Zach said for the umpteenth time.

Jonas looked at him with impatience. “Gosh, H.Y was right about you.”

Ernie objected, “Bro, H.Y imagined his character, so he can’t be wrong or right.”

Jonas looked unconvinced “Does it work that way now? I thought he was merely describing people who are already here.”

“What did he say about me?” Zach asked curiously.

Everyone ignored him. Yolander asked, “What are we supposed to do now?”

Ernie pulled out a check list from his file. “First is to keep safe. My wife thinks both of you should not be staying here.”

“Why not?” Zach and Yolander asked together.

“In H.Y’s circle, Koon’s Kitchen does not exist.” Ernie explained. “It is better if you moved into the airport hotel with us.

“Which is in the common area that you were talking about?” Yolander asked.

“You understand all this?” Zach asked incredulously, looking at Yolander.

“A little.” Yolander looked a little pleased with herself.

“Shall we proceed then?” Ernie asked.

Yolander and Zach looked at each other. Yolander turned and said with certainty, “All right. I have a lot of questions that need answers.”

Jonas and Ernie nodded with relieved smiles.

In the meeting room of the Crowne Plaza, the discussion was gaining intensity.

“So, this H.Y created everything that we know...” Yolander said slowly, her brows deeply frowning.

“And there is something wrong with him that this creation that we are in is going kaput.” Zach said with some aspiration.

“Is there anything we can explain further to both of you?” Vivian asked with an air of professionalism that was barely masking her impatience.

Zach replied resentfully. “But we don’t know who this H.Y is. You claimed that you guys have known about him since...” he waved his arm with an incredulous expression. “...ever. But we don’t. How are we going to believe that this strange weather and missing people on

the streets is the result of ...” he pointed to the overlapping circle diagram, and continued “...our circle going under?”

Wendy looked indignant. Vivian tapped Wendy’s leg under the table and replied swiftly, “Zach, there are many things we don’t know too and cannot explain. But we did find the both of you from H.Y’s website, which would not be possible if this Glass Circle theory is a just hoax. We are worried about what we are seeing and want to salvage the situation, or to save people if we can.”

Zach looked unconvinced and folded his arm.

“Do you guys have a plan?” Yolander asked.

Vivian looked at Wendy who took the cue to begin. “My theory is: something or things could be bothering H.Y, which in turn is affecting us. To see if we can mitigate or even reverse any of those things, I began analysing H.Y’s identity and personality from his blog and website using H.Y’s laptop.”

“You mean he is a real person?” Zach asked. “As in a human being?”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“That’s what we have been saying all this time.” Jonas said calmly, but his seething frustration was evident.

Zach pouted and looked away.

“So, about this H.Y,” Wendy continued tightly. “As far as we know he is teaching in this kind of institution called a polytechnic, which is not in our Circle.”

“I assume that would be lower than a university?” Yolander asked.

“Correct,” Wendy replied. “He is 40, single, and living quite well. He has his own place but is living with his parents.”

“That’s not too bad at all!” Yolander exclaimed. “Why is he upset?”

“That could also mean that the problems could be deeper than apparent, which can make it harder to resolve.” Wendy said heavily.

“Why is he not married?” Zach demanded.

Wendy nodded with approval, “This is exactly what I was coming to.” She looked at everyone and said, “My theory is: the Glass Circle is breaking down because H.Y is somehow too bothered to continue sustaining it. He is simply retreating into his own Circle.”

“You think that by arresting those causes, we could reverse the situation?” Yolander asked.

Wendy smiled and nodded heavily. “That is what I am hoping.” She looked more serious and said “I have a plan...”

Zach half-raised his hand and asked “What happens when H.Y is no longer around? Does it mean our Glass Circle has a limited lifespan?”

Everyone turned to look at him with a blank expression. He shrugged his shoulders and waved his own question away.

Wendy continued, “This H.Y is quite a writer who keeps a blog which is like his own diary. There are more than a thousand entries over an eight-year period. Let me show you this one.”

Wendy flashed a screen-grab picture via the overhead projector, and it was part of a page with the following written:

It was another strange dream

I was in a block of flats and was being followed by a person I don't know who or where he was. I decided to take refuge with somebody that I know but feel a little hesitant of.

I knocked onto a plain unit door, with my heart pounding, and I could feel the follower nearing. The person who opened the door was a man, heavily built like a bear. He looks like a north Asian with a slight beard on his otherwise fair complexion. He has a cap on and was wearing an oversized tank with red running shorts which exposed his huge arms and massive trunk-like legs. He gave me a slight smirk and a welcoming smile. From the corner of my eye, the follower fled, and I felt relieved and safe with this man.

Everyone was quiet for a moment as they read the screen grab. Frowns appeared on most faces.

“So, what’s the plan?” Zach asked, rubbing his hands.

Wendy looked at Zach uneasily, “I think we need to approach him.”

There was silence in the room. Zach seemed to get the point after a moment and bellowed, “Me?”

Wendy made a few clicks with her mouse and the screen grab flashed across the screen on the wall again. “Look at the description,” she said quietly. “Anyone here looks like that man in his dream, except for you?”

Zach looked incredulous. “What are you asking me to do?”

“See if you can approach him, since he feels safe with a person who looks like you.” Vivian said comfortingly.

Zach eyes widened further. “And what do I do after that?”

“Chat him up.” Vivian said impatiently. “See if there is something we can do for him.”

“If he is happy again, we can go back to our lives.” Jonas said with frivolity. “If not...we have to think of something else.”

“Is it safe?” Yolander interjected. “Will something happen if someone from our Circle approaches H.Y?”

Wendy nodded, “Yes, your questions are valid.” She shuffled some paper and looked at Yolander heavily. “We are not even sure if we can see him, let alone approach him.” She looked at Zach, “The idea, however, is to try and initiate contact.”

“How do we do this?” Zach asked. “I talk to girls in a pub...” He caught himself, gave a quick side look at Yolander and continued hurriedly, “...what does he do or where does he go for fun?”

Wendy gave a wry smile. “He is quite boring.” She clicked on the mouse to reveal a weekly timetable. “His activities when he is not working include exercising, meeting his friends occasionally, and drinking wine on his own.”

“What a loser.” Zach jeered.

“He doesn’t go out?” Yolander asked.

“You won’t believe it.” Vivian said with a chuckle. “He goes to the supermarket and cooks at home for himself or his friends.”

“The thing is,” Wendy said with a frown. “Most of the places H.Y goes to are not in the common area. This supermarket, which is run by a union, called ‘Fairprice’, is not available in our circle. Even the place he works at is not.”

“Where does he work? What does he do for a living?” Zach asked with curiosity.

“He is a lecturer.” Wendy replied, looking at some papers in her hand.

“You mean he’s a professor?” Yolander asked.

“No,” Wendy said. “He has 2 master’s degrees though. He teaches at a lower tertiary institution that is not in our Circle.”

“So how can we get to him if he is hiding in his Circle all the time?” Zach asked.

“There is one place that he goes quite consistently for his runs.” Wendy said. “The reservoir next to your alma mater.”

“The reservoir at RU?” Yolander asked.

“Yes.” Wendy replied, pushing her glasses higher. “It’s the Reservoir University in our Circle, but it’s something called a poly-technic in his.”

There was silence in the room, and Zach and Yolander look dumbfounded.

“This is too...” Yolander closed her eyes, looking a little overwhelmed.

Zach nodded, “If we can’t see him when he is in his circle, would he just appear out of the blue?”

“We don’t know. If that’s the case, we should be seeing a lot of people appearing out of the blue because H.Y can’t be the only person in his circle, right?” Yolander said very quickly with her eyes closed and her hand at her forehead.

“If our Circle is the work of H.Y, he could be controlling access to it.” Wendy said thoughtfully. She saw everyone look at her in puzzlement. She stopped, gathered her thoughts and said slowly. “H.Y is just a human being in his world. He might not even know we exist, at least, in this form. We could be the work of his subconsciousness, which means that he wished for, rather than deliberately made us.”

“Is every writer like that?” Zach asked in frustration. “There is a Harry Potter Circle somewhere out there then?”

Wendy gave a laugh “You don’t look like the sort, but you ask very difficult questions.”

Zach looked flattered.

“Let’s not think too much or we will lose ourselves.” Vivian said. “I am not a philosophical person myself, but this is how I understand this whole thing. This is something between us and H.Y. What exists out there is anybody’s guess, but not mine. I just want to get back to leading that life before all these things started.”

There was quietness in the room as if everyone was contemplating what Vivian has said.

“What’s the plan?” Zach finally asked.

Wendy looked sombre and shuffled through her notes again. “Basically, you will do a run around the reservoir with him.”

“A run?” Zach asked in wonder.

“Yes,” Wendy replied. “Pace him, not too far but near enough for him to notice. He could run 2 rounds, which makes it close to ten kilometres.” Wendy peered at Zach and asked, “Are you up to it?”

“Me?” Zach looked incredulous and he flexed his arms.

“Put your arm on the table,” a deep, growling voice said.

Zach jumped. He turned and saw Ernie looking at him expressionlessly. “What’s up?” he asked.

“He is a doctor.” Jonas said with a laugh. “Let him run a brief check on you.”

Ernie pulled out a blood pressure reader from nowhere and wrapped it around Zach’s arm. “Relax.” Ernie said. He controlled the pressure on Zach’s arm and kept his eye on the reading. He put on his stethoscope and placed it near Zach’s wrist. He looked at his watch for a while. Finally, he released the pressure and took off his stethoscope.

“When was the last time you’ve done a blood test?” Ernie asked.

“About six months ago.” Zach replied a little nervously.

“Any diabetic readings or other problems?” Ernie asked.

“No.” Zach said.

“This is just a very brief check,” Ernie said as he kept his equipment. “No problems, but his blood pressure is 130/85, just a little on the high side.”

“I exercise regularly.” Zach reported.

“I can tell.” Ernie said approvingly. “The pressure could be due to clinical stress as some people will exhibit.” Ernie said, looking around. “Make sure you warm up before you run.”

“Wait,” Yolander said. “I thought we were not sure if we could see or even approach H.Y.”

“Which is why we will all be there, and we will first test out to see if we can see or approach him.” Wendy said.

“Test? How?” Zach asked doubtfully.

“Leave it to me.” Ernie growled.

Zach jumped again. He turned to Ernie, “You? Why you?”

“I am a doctor, and more sensitive to physical and biological effects of approaching H.Y, if there are any.” Ernie said simply.

“He is also the youngest here and can try to look like a student,” Vivian said with a laugh. “We don’t want to alarm or set off H.Y in any way.”

“When are you guys thinking of executing the plan?” Yolander asked.

“I checked his blog.” Wendy said. “He should be running at the reservoir at about 5pm every Wednesday.”

“Wednesday? That will be tomorrow?” Zach asked.

“We know it’s a bit rushed.” Vivian said. “But I’d rather sooner than later. You can of course take time to consider. We will still go ahead to see if we can see and approach him.”

Zach frowned and looked glum.

5. The Run

The meeting room was quiet after Zach and Yolander left for their room in the hotel.

“What an oaf.” Jonas said under his breath. Vivian smiled and rubbed his back.

“He is not stupid, you know.” Wendy said as she gathered her papers on the table. “H.Y made him out to be someone who could sit on the dragon throne in The Glass Phoenix. Intelligent, but short on maturity and patience. He asked some good questions!”

Jonas looked uncomfortable. “What is the plan here? Are we really going to approach H.Y? This philosophical whirlpool is driving me nuts.”

Wendy closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and began “I believe we exist as a function of H.Y consciousness. This consciousness is the link between the two circles. Without the same consciousness, no one from H.Y’s circle will be able to access our circle even if they know about us. By the same explanation, we can access the common area, knowing that it is part of a circle that does not belong to us, because we are conscious about it. Others without this consciousness in our circle will not be able to perceive anything beyond it. So, it all comes down to H.Y and us.”

Jonas looked highly disturbed. “Gosh, quit it! You looked possessed when you talk like that.”

“Hang on.” Vivian interjected. “Why do we have this consciousness that others around us don’t?”

Wendy opened her eyes and smiled. “I don’t know for sure. I think we are connected to H.Y in ways that we don’t fully know. And it’s not a one-way relationship. I am sure we affect him too.”

“Which is why we want to take a chance tomorrow,” Ernie said, looking adoringly at Wendy before continuing, “isn’t it?”

“I don’t get it.” Jonas said with disgust.

“And you called Zachary an oaf!” Vivian laughed.

“I meant the two of them.” Jonas said pointing to Ernie and Wendy. “When did they become so obnoxious?”

They blinked at Jonas with a nonchalant smile.

The weather was cloudy the next day at half past four in the afternoon, with rays of sun occasionally bursting through the thick clouds. At the reservoir, the group was ready. The reservoir was a rough oval shape tracked by a wide sandy pathway that was mostly even with little elevation. There was a persistent breeze that seemed to fuel the anticipation.

“If this weather is not good for running, I don’t know what is.” Wendy said dryly into her Bluetooth earpiece. Everyone was stationed at different locations around the reservoir and connected by a group call. Wendy was standing under one of the small pavilions that was closest to the gate of R.U. Separated by a cycling track, Ernie was diagonally opposite Wendy. He wore a low cap and was doing some simple stretches.

“I am at the 2-kilometre point.” Vivian said from another pavilion further down the sandy path.

“I am here at the 3-kilometre point.” Jonas said as he stretched out on a bench by a slope that overlooked a long stretch of the sandy path.

“We are at the car park of the reservoir.” Yolander said. “We are about two hundred metres before the gate.

“How is our star runner doing?” Wendy asked brightly.

Everyone heard Zach panting slightly as he boomed, “I am great. Ready to go!”

“He’s doing some warmup exercises.” Yolander explained with a little laugh.

“I am going through our plan again.” Wendy said. “I will sight him when he is out, and Ern will confirm that it is safe to run with him. Zach will then set off to pace him. This is monitored by Vivian at the two-kilometre mark, Jonas at the three-kilometre mark and Yolander near the end of the run.”

“We are so ready to do this! Yeah!” Vivian declared.

“Yeah!” The others responded with varying enthusiasm.

Twenty minutes later, there was sighs of boredom all around.

“Is he out yet?” somebody asked again on the group call.

“No,” the deep voice of Ernie responded immediately.

“Is the gate of R.U and that whatever technic at the same place?” Zach asked.

“Yes!” Wendy replied. “I took a screen print of both schools, and they look the same! Even the sports singlet that the students wear look the same, except theirs has a ‘Temasek’ on it, and not the ‘R.U’ that...”

“‘Temasek?’” Ernie asked in shock. “There was someone who went past me with the word ‘Temasek’ on his singlet. I didn’t know the poly-tech has a name to it! I thought he was just another student!”

“Oh no!” Wendy cried. “I must have missed him, or he could have exited campus by another gate!”

“What are the two of you doing?” Zach roared. “What do I do now?”

“Can Vivian and Jonas spot H.Y from your positions?” Wendy asked urgently.

“He’s almost bald, right?” Vivian asked.

“He was wearing a cap.” Ernie added quickly.

“Didn’t you guys say he is 40? How could you not tell that he is not a student?” Yolander asked angrily.

“I’m sorry,” Ernie said. “He had a very average body shape like the students, and he was wearing a cap which covered his bald head and most of his face.”

“Were there a lot of people wearing that kind of singlet?” Jonas asked.

“Yes,” Ernie said, “but it was only him with the ‘Temasek’ on his singlet.”

“He has to be H.Y because ‘Temasek’ is not in our circle, is it?” Vivian suggested.

“How long has he passed? What was his pace like?” Jonas asked again.

“About ten minutes.” Ernie replied with no hesitation. “He was running at a very leisurely pace.”

“How long does it take to run around the reservoir?” Jonas asked.

“About thirty minutes.” Wendy replied quickly. “He said so in his blog.”

“Zach,” Jonas said. “I don’t think you should try to catch him up now. It will take him another twenty minutes before he reaches your location. Could you run in the opposite direction for say five minutes and join him halfway? At least we know we can see him now, and it is safe to approach him.”

“Ok, I got you.” Zach said. After about 5 minutes, Zach puffed “I am standing on a stairway by the running path. I am back-facing him, so he won’t be able to notice me.”

“Anyone spotted him yet?” Wendy asked.

There was an unnerving silence for the next 15 minutes. Zach’s random “Tsk!” could be faintly heard.

After another 5 minutes, Jonas’s voice boomed “I spotted him. Zach, he should be at your position very shortly.”

“Could he be seen at the two-kilometre mark?” Yolander sounded perplexed.

“Sorry, I must have missed him.” Vivian said sombrely.

“He is wearing a black-coloured singlet with a cap. He should be easy to spot because there is no one around him.” Jonas said.

After a minute, Zach reported “I see him.”

“Careful now, follow at a distance.” Wendy said.

“It’s going to be difficult...” Zach said. “He’s so slow!”

“Yolander, can you see H.Y coming towards you?” Wendy asked.

“Hang on,” Yolander replied. She paused for a moment before continuing, “Yes, I see them. Gosh, he’s awfully slow. Dear, you are too close.”

“Am I?” Zach slowed down a little. “Any slower, I will be walking!”

“It looks all right now. You look good, dear.” Yolander said with a snigger.

“I know.” Zach panted.

After a moment, Wendy reported “I can see both of you now. I think he is going for a second round, that’s why he is running so slowly. Zach, back off a little please, I think you are too close.”

Zach slowed down a little more.

“How is he going to be noticed if he is not near enough?” Yolander questioned.

Nobody seemed to have an answer to that.

“I see he’s continuing.” Wendy said. “Zach, are you ok to go another round with him?”

“Yeah,” he growled.

Ten minutes later, Vivian sounded in the group chat “They have entered my area now.” She spotted through her binoculars, before saying “Zach, he is turning his head slightly in your direction. He may be noticing your presence.”

“Zach, try not to be in his line of sight.” Wendy said quickly. “We still want to play safe.”

“Ok.” Zach tried to whisper as he fell back slightly.

“He seems to be varying his running speed.” Vivian said.

“Yes,” Zach said angrily as he panted. “Either he wants to test me out or shake me off.”

“Keep a distance so that...” Vivian gave a scream and put down her binoculars. “Did he see you?” she asked.

There were more than a few “What? What happened?”

“H.Y turned suddenly in Zach’s direction!” Vivian exclaimed. “Luckily, Zach was just slowing down.”

“Are you all right, dear?” Yolander asked anxiously.

“Yeah.” Zach replied quickly. “That...” he swore badly.

Vivian looked through the binoculars anxiously, “H.Y is speeding up again.”

Zach dashed ahead, following closely.

“What are you doing?” Vivian asked in horror.

“What’s he doing?” Jonas asked, followed by others repeating the same thing.

“He is racing after H.Y!” Vivian squealed.

“Oh no, stop!” Wendy cried. “It might get out of hand!”

“Dear, do not be rash!” Yolander said urgently.

Vivian was glued to her binoculars as she exclaimed “Gosh! Zach has thrown off his Bluetooth earpiece! What kind of madness is this?”

“Cool it!” Jonas said. “Let me see what’s going on.”

The next 5 minutes seemed to take forever.

“I see them now.” Jonas said with relief. “They are on a very slow pace again though.”

Murmurings came from the group call.

“This is the second round for H.Y,” Wendy said. “He could be out of breath.”

“Everything is ok.” Jonas assured the group. “Zach is following him from about 2 metres behind.”

“I am coming back now then. My car is just by the side of the road.” Vivian said. “I will fetch you along the way.

“Ok.” Jonas replied.

“I will monitor until H.Y returns to campus. Ern is here with me.” Wendy said.

Five minutes later, Yolander’s voice sounded on the group call. “H.Y has abruptly stopped running.”

“What?” Wendy asked. “How about Zach?”

“He is continuing. They are just about a hundred metres from me.” Yolander said. “All right, Zach is coming in safe and sound.”

“I have just picked up Jonas.” Vivian said. “We are coming into the carpark.”

Just then, there was a massive yell from Vivian and Jonas on the group call.

“Gosh, you guys like to shout.” Yolander said as she took off her earpiece for a moment.

“Sorry, we nearly collided with that Mercedes!” Vivian said in shock.

“It’s all right now.” Jonas sounded shaken.

“Are you guys all right?” Wendy asked anxiously. “I am coming over!”

Everyone gathered at the carpark in a conspicuously foul mood.

“Are you guys all right?” Wendy asked as she ran over to their car.

“We are all right,” Jonas said. “A Mercedes went rushing out from the car park like it was on fire. It would have hit us if it didn’t swerve at the last minute.”

“What happened to that H.Y?” a heavily perspiring Zach asked.

“What do you mean?” Wendy asked.

“You were supposed to see how he got back into the campus, weren’t you?” Yolander said belligerently.

Wendy looked incredulous. “My brother and sister-in-law nearly had an accident! I should be here as soon as I can, shouldn’t I?”

“Your doctor boyfriend missed him coming out, and you missed him going in, and that auntie missed him passing right under her nose!” Zach blurted out angrily, pointing to her, Ernie and Vivian in turn.

Wendy made to retort, but Ernie pulled her back and stood in front of her.

“We didn’t miss him on purpose, but you threw away your earpiece deliberately!” Vivian retorted. “And I will sue you if you call me an auntie again!”

“You planned the easy stuff for yourself on purpose in the first place!” Yolander shrieked.

“Look,” Jonas said, his temper fast rising.

Zach came before him and poked him in the chest. “You go run behind that slimy bald head like a clown before asking me to look!” He turned and spat on the ground, before swearing audibly.

Jonas blew up and raised his voice, saying “If that gorilla swears at me again...”

“Who are you calling a gorilla?” Zach bellowed savagely.

“Where’s Pete?” Ernie asked.

Everyone paused their squabble in a hurry.

“He drove us here, and was supposed to be here, waiting for us.” Wendy said. She turned to Yolander and asked, “Did you see him leaving?”

“No,” Yolander said. “I was looking at the running path in the other direction.”

“Look, the car is over there.” Ernie said, pointing to the corner of the car park.

Everyone rushed to the limousine, and to their horror, the driver’s side door was left opened.

“Where is he?” Jonas asked worriedly, looking around. He took out his phone to call.

Ernie pointed to the seat belt. “It has been cut!”

Vivian looked closely into the cabin. “There are scratch marks on the steering wheel too.”

“His phone is switched off!” Jonas said. He saw a handkerchief on the floor and picked it up. “This is Pete’s. He usually leaves it on the side mirror of the car when he cannot contact me and needs to be away for a moment.”

“What does this mean?” Wendy asked. “He was in some kind of emergency?”

“He must have been taken away by force.” Ernie said. “The hanky is crumpled up.”

Zach touched the severed seat belts and said gravely “It takes equipment to cut these thick belts. Whoever came, came prepared.”

“Who could have known that we’ll be here?” Yolander asked, looking frightfully around.

Lighting streaked across the sky, and a huge thunder boomed. The constant breeze strengthened into a strong wind, and drops of rain began to fall from the thick, dark grey clouds that had appeared from seemingly nowhere.

The group looked around and realised that they were now utterly alone in the car park. The main road was quiet without a pedestrian or vehicle.

“It’s happening again.” Jonas looked around and said with urgency “Let’s go back.”

Vivian took out her car key and held it to Zach. “Here, take my car. Just in case something happens to us again.”

Zach looked moved. “What about you guys? Your driver is gone!”

“There is another key in the glove box.” Ernie said quickly.

Lighting flashed in greater intensity, and a line was rapidly appearing on the horizon.

“We better go.” Jonas said hurriedly.

Zach reached out to tap both Ernie and Jonas on the shoulder, and Yolander and Vivian briefly held hands. All animosity that raged just a moment ago seemed to be swept by the spilt that was now clearly forming across the sky once more.

6. Plan B

Everyone met at the meeting room of the hotel the next morning. There was a generous amount of food on the table, and everyone was eating something. Zach, especially, ate ravenously.

Ernie sat beside him to check on his pulse. Zach tried to mimic his poker expression while munching on a burger.

Everyone broke into small talks. Ernie began to measure the blood pressure of Zach.

“All right, can we get started?” Wendy called, and everyone began to turn towards the screen that is showing the projected image from Wendy’s laptop. She looked around “Is everyone all right?”

Ernie released the Velcro band from Zach’s arm and said “He’s ok. All normal.”

Wendy nodded and continued “All right, about yesterday...” The room went quiet, and everyone focused intently on Wendy. “It didn’t go very well,” she said awkwardly. “I did a screen grab of H.Y’s blog. This was what he wrote after the run.”

A paragraph was displayed on the screen:

I ran in the afternoon today and almost completed 2 rounds. I reckoned I ran about 9km and feel like dead now. But something interesting happened at the reservoir. Someone started shadowing me when I started my second round. It's no biggie really, but the consistency of this shadowing was unprecedented. He maintained at a constant 1-2m distance behind me on the left side. When I vary my speed a little, so did he. When I glanced towards him a little, I thought he was Big Guy playing a fool again, because of the very similar build. I slowed down significantly when I had nearly finish to let him to run past me. When he did, he turned out to be someone else - big build and handsome. It was lucky I didn't start talking to him before I could see his face. When I started thinking about it later, it's quite creepy to have a stranger running so close. Didn't like it one bit.

Everyone stared at the screen with a frown.

“He thinks I am handsome?” Zach asked with elation.

“He thought you were his friend!” Yolander said in wonder and exasperation. “No wonder he varied his pace. It was simply for fun!”

“Who is this Big Guy?” Vivian asked.

“I did a search,” Wendy said as she made some clicks on her mouse. “This is what he says about Big Guy.”

He is immensely confident and self-assured. He is also cool and relaxed about things. He is highly skilled with a very sharp mind. I would think it would be a very stressful thing to be working with him. But as we become closer friends, he radiates a tremendous sense of security. He thinks well of me, and we enjoy going out together.

Zach pointed to the screen and said, “Doesn't he sound like a lonely person?”

“Or just plain weird.” Jonas said, shaking his head.

“I must apologise for the direction of our attempt yesterday. I admit I was just taking a chance.” Wendy said.

“You were trying to help.” Yolander consoled.

“But our problems are not over.” Wendy said on a serious note. “Pete has mysteriously disappeared, and the weather deteriorated big time.”

“We need to try again,” Vivian said enthusiastically. “With what we have learnt now, I am sure we can do better, won't we?”

“You mean now that we can see H.Y?” Jonas asked.

Wendy exhaled and said “I am quite confident that we are on the same physical plane.”

Zach frowned deeply, “What does that mean?”

“That means he is like any other human being in our Circle,” Wendy point to everyone in the room. “Like you and I.”

“Which means that we could perhaps talk to him?” Vivian said.

“Yes.” Wendy replied. “I am quite confident about that.”

“So do we ask him over for a meeting, like what we are doing now?” Zach asked.

“I want to take some precautions.” Wendy said. “Can you imagine how a person would feel if your novel characters asked you out for a meeting?”

“What’s your plan?” Jonas asked.

“He just took off for Shanghai this morning.” Wendy said. “It’s time for Plan B.”

“Shanghai?” Jonas asked. “What’s he doing there?”

Wendy made a few clicks and the following flashed across the screen:

I am going to Shanghai today, a city that I have avoided for more than ten years. Time to get things resolved!

“Resolve what?” Zach asked, before bellowing “This guy is full of problems!”

“Did you manage to uncover anything from his blog?” Vivian asked Wendy.

“I tried.” Wendy said tightly. “This H.Y doesn’t label-tag or use clear headers in his entries.” She made some clicks in frustration. “Look at this.” A page of the blog flashed on the screen.

“‘Fasten seat belt sign on’?” Vivian read out. She looked around the room, “What does that mean?”

Jonas read and said incredulously, “A flu? What has this got to do with seat belts?”

Wendy looked frustrated and winced. “He’s a fan of air travel.” She made a few more clicks. “I did a search using the site engine and it didn’t work very well.”

Ernie stared unblinkingly at Wendy. “Are you feeling ok?” he tried to ask quietly. But his deep voice easily resonated around the room.

“She has been working on H.Y’s blog around the clock.” Vivian said, looking at Wendy with concern.

Wendy waved them off and said grouchily, “I can’t get to sleep anyway.”

Zach looked rather uncomfortable, saying “Maybe we can get on with this, and you can take a rest?”

Wendy looked at Zach and nodded with the faintest of smiles. She peered at the laptop screen, “I can’t see what H.Y is trying to resolve, but there are some clues. Whatever that happened, took place twelve years ago, and he will be staying at the Jin Mao tower for one of the nights.”

“So you are saying that this Shanghai mystery could be a cause for the breakdown of our Circle?” Vivian asked.

Wendy thought for a moment. “There is a chance.” She exhaled, before continuing with a frown, “This H.Y is a very simple and complicated person at the same time. He has a very stable and defined routine. His relationships are very clear too, as he has a habit of, and quite highly skilled in, I must say, staying away from problematic relationships.” She looked up at all of them and said, “There is no indication at all, that he is currently affected by anything that could have happened 12 years ago, and in Shanghai.”

“What’s your plan?” Yolander asked curiously.

Wendy took a deep breath, “Someone from our side needs to talk to him.” The room suddenly turned silent. Wendy noted the response and continued calmly, “We now know that we can approach him, and he can fully sense us, all without detrimental effects on us, or him. I am very confident that we can talk to him.” The room became impossibly quieter as tension filled everyone’s faces. “But it shouldn’t be one of us here,” she quickly added.

A massive sigh of relief filled the room. There was laughter as they made fun of one another in jest. Even Wendy shook her head and laughed.

“So, who should do it?” Vivian asked.

“He’s going to Shanghai,” Wendy replied swiftly. “Bank Lee has a regional headquarters there, doesn’t it? Get a bank staff to do it.”

“Our bank staff?” Jonas asked in wonder.

“Isn’t that very risky?” Vivian asked.

Wendy looked more serious as she replied “All of us here are the main characters in HY’s Glass Empire project. He has a much deeper impression of us than others. It may be easier for a secondary character to help us approach him.”

Wendy looked expectantly at Jonas and Vivian, who were both frowning and thinking hard.

“What do you think?” Jonas asked Vivian.

“Has to be her, then” Vivian nodded.

“Who?” Zach asked curiously, as Yolander tapped his hand to quieten him.

“Madam Quincey.” Jonas and Vivian said together.

“Madam?” Zach asked.

“Quincey?” Yolander asked at the same time.

“Ah.” Wendy said with approval.

“You know who she is?” Ernie asked Wendy in amazement.

“She is the General Manager of our bank in Shanghai. I read that in the Glass Ship.” Wendy looked pleased with herself again.

“I don’t like the way you need to know our business affairs from a third party.” Jonas said indignantly.

Vivian laughed, and explained “Madam Quincey is a Singaporean. But she has worked for us in Shanghai for almost three decades since we opened a branch there. Her social network in Shanghai is unrivaled in the bank.”

“But she has retired for some months now.” Jonas said uncertainly.

“She maintains residence here and in Shanghai.” Vivian said. “She is in Singapore now, and I am sure we can get her to approach H.Y for us.”

“Are we going to tell her everything?” Jonas asked apprehensively. “She sure can talk but she is superstitious and can’t handle strange things like this one.”

“What do you think?” Vivian asked Wendy.

“I only know her from reading *The Glass Ship*.” Wendy said awkwardly. “But I think she is a good choice. We need someone older, humourous, and good natured who can put people at ease.” She looked around and said “But there is a problem.”

“What?” everyone asked.

“Jin Mao Tower is in the common area of our two Circles, and luck is our side. H.Y is going stay in the building while he is in Shanghai. But the hotels in there are different in our two Circles.” Wendy said, pushing up her glasses.

“Different?” Jonas asked.

“In our Circle, it is the Royal Clariton.” Wendy said, and Jonas nodded as a matter-of-factly. “It’s the Grand Hyatt in his.”

“Hyatt?” Jonas asked. “Is it named after someone?”

“That’s not the point, is it?” Vivian snapped. She turned to Wendy and asked, “What should we do then?”

“H.Y mentioned Shanghai briefly in a couple of chapters, so there is not a lot of content that we can search for common areas. The Jin Mao tower is the only common place that I am seeing.” Wendy replied.

“From our experience at the reservoir, we won’t be able to contact H.Y once he gets into his hotel, which is not in our circle. We need to make it clear to Madam Quincey that she must try to engage H.Y before he reaches his hotel.” Jonas said urgently.

“How much are we going to disclose to her?” Vivian asked. “Because this could mean telling her everything.”

“Must this Madam Quincey approach H.Y only at the Jin Mao tower?” Yolander asked.

“She can catch the same flight as him.” Zach blurted. Yolander gave him an excited thumbs up.

“Can she?” Jonas asked with his eyes widened.

“Is Singapore Airlines a common area?” Vivian asked urgently.

She typed quickly onto the keyboard and said “Yes, it is.”

“Would we know what seat he is in?” Vivian said. “We could get her on the same flight.”

Wendy turned to Vivian and asked, “Can you get Madam Quincey’s details, so that I could make a booking for her?” Vivian nodded and quickly went aside to make a call. Vivian turned to Jonas and Ernie “Can you guys go get her?”

“What do we tell her?” Jonas asked.

Wendy closed her eyes with obvious agitation. But she opened them again in a moment wearing a smile, “Two of you talk about it on the way there, would you?”

Jonas nodded and made to set off immediately. “Yes, yes,” he said easily. “We are going now.” He put his arms around Ernie and they left the room together.

Wendy turned to look at Zach and Yolander with the stare of an exhausted soldier.

Yolander looked uneasy and smiled at her. Zach said awkwardly “Looks like we can take a break for this round...”

Wendy shook her head with a mocking sweet smile. She extracted a piece of paper from her file and held it towards Zach and Yolander. Zach came over uncertainly to collect it. He looked at the paper and asked, “Who is this?”

“Go look for her quickly, we need her to get to Aileen. She is in The Glass Key, H.Y’s third novel, and a close friend of H.Y” Wendy said. “This is our Plan C.”

Yolander’s eyes widened “Plan C? What about Plan B? We have barely started!”

Wendy’s eyes sparkled. “Plan B is a diversion.”

The black limousine cruised along the East Coast Expressway towards Changi Airport. There were more cars on the road and the weather was cloudy with occasional sunlight through the clouds.

“Ah, the weather is better today, isn’t it?” a lady in her sixties said. She looked well-kept for her age; her jet-black hair tied into a bun with a huge fringe in front. She wore dark rimmed glasses with a necklace that extended from it. Her face was meticulously made-up and topped off with red lipstick. “Ha, Master Ernie seems to know the directions well. Aren’t you in the US for some years now, I heard? And you are a professor now, aren’t you?”

Ernie looked painfully at Jonas, and did not respond. Jonas smiled and said, “He stayed here for more than twenty years before going to the US, Quincey.”

“Oh yes,” Quincey laughed to herself and continued. “How was life when you were in Singapore? I heard you stayed at Old Airport Road? Was it hard? I do eat at the food centre there for time to time...”

Jonas noticed that Ernie was gradually increasing the speed of the car. Ten minutes later, the Mercedes swerved wildly into the lobby driveway of the airport hotel. Both Jonas and Ernie were panting and sweating as if they had just run a race.

Quincey was still talking to Ernie, oblivious to everything else. “Have you met Master Jonas’s father at all? Did you guys talk? Was he very moved to see you?”

“Quincey, we are here.” Jonas said breathlessly.

“Oh, we are.” Quincey said happily as she began to alight from the car. “Thanks for fetching me. Let’s chat again next time.”

Vivian was waiting for them and met Quincey warmly. Jonas and Vivian exchanged a meaningful glance as Vivian led Quincey into the terminal. As soon as he could, Ernie sped off to the airport car park.

As Quincey and Vivian walked towards the check in counters, Vivian repeatedly told her, “Remember, don’t disclose our bank’s name at all. Just try to engage him and find out what he is doing in Shanghai. Do not engage him beyond the lobby at Jin Mao.” Vivian said urgently.

Madam Quincey smiled as she replied, “I know. He’s our potential joint venture partner, isn’t he? I should try to dig up on him, shouldn’t I? And then see if he wants to work with us, isn’t it?”

“No, no, no. Quincey, listen to me.” Vivian said exasperatedly. “You only need to find out why he is going to Shanghai. Something may have happened many years ago, see if he would tell you.”

“Yes, I know.” Madam Quincey rumbled on happily. “See what is troubling him and see if we can help him out?”

Vivian put her hands on Madam Quincey’s shoulder, and said slowly, “Quincey, you mustn’t say anything about yourself or where you work or what you do. Just tell him you are a clerk or something. Your job is to dig up on his story, without telling yours.”

“I know. You want me to be his aunt agony, don’t you?” she said smilingly. “Don’t worry, I know how to talk to the young, troubled, and restless. If he wants to settle down, I do know a few good girls in our bank. All right, I am going in. Don’t worry about me, I will know what to do.”

Following that, Madam Quincey turned and walked towards the passenger check point, smiling and muttering to herself.

Vivian stopped and looked on worriedly.

Ernie was parking the car in the airport's underground car park when a Mercedes swung out from a corner at high speed, deftly avoided their car before racing to the lift lobby. A tall man in jacket alighted from the driver's seat holding onto a small hand carry bag. Slim and agile, he ran easily into a waiting lift in the lift lobby. The lift door closed, and he disappeared out of sight. To their amazement, the car continued to park itself into a lot. Before long, the headlights switched off and the car had seemingly turned itself off.

Jonas and Ernie walked cautiously to the parked car. It was a Mercedes painted in electric blue.

"What's wrong with it?" Ernie asked.

"This was the car that almost ran us over at the reservoir!" Jonas said. He quickly used his phone to take some pictures. "I have never seen Mercedes in this kind of weird body shape," he said half excitedly.

"Is this a new model or something?" Ernie asked.

Jonas continued to take pictures of the interior, "Look at the aircon vents! It's like the SLS! But there are some cheap looking plastics in there too."

"What do we do now?" Ernie asked.

"We need to tell the girls. Let's go back to the meeting room!" Jonas said excitedly.

Back in the meeting room, Wendy sat up as she heard about the encounter in the car park. "The Mercedes? He was in a hurry, you said?"

"He was in a great hurry yesterday too, wasn't he?" Jonas said to Vivian, who nodded.

"What do you think?" Vivian asked Wendy. "Who is this strange man in the strange Mercedes?"

With her face lighting up, Wendy told Vivian. "Call Quincey. She might be in trouble now."

Vivian looked puzzled, and before she could call, her phone had begun to ring. "It's Quincey!" she received the call and began "Quincey? Are you...?" she stopped in mid-sentence. She frowned before looking incredulous. "What? You are arrested by the police? Why?" Vivian looked frustrated as she listened on. "Quincey, I am asking why you are arrested." she asked again. She listened and exclaimed. "What? You are a panda smuggler? Hang on, hallo? Hallo?"

And then the line was dead.

"What's going on?" Jonas asked.

“Quincey said she has been arrested by the airport police for panda smuggling. There were some papers that was found in her bag...” Vivian looked around the room and asked in disbelief.

Wendy looked excited. She grabbed her phone and called. “Yolander? Can you guys come back? I found a way to contact H.Y while he is Shanghai.” She paused, and said with deliberate clarity, “Yes, it’s the coffee house in the Glass Key novel. We will have a discussion here before setting off together.” She nodded and ended the call. She told the rest of them “They are on their way back.”

“What’s the plan?” Jonas asked.

Wendy looked pleased with herself as she told Jonas and Ernie. “Can the two of you go to the arrival hall and see if you can spot the Mercedes man again? He will need to pass here to get back to the lift lobby, doesn’t he? Ambush him and bring him here.”

“What’s with the Mercedes man?” Ernie asked.

“I am sure he knows what is going on.” Wendy said with her eyes narrowed. “Oh, I hope Yolander and Zach make it back in time. We will need every manpower we’ve got. Just in case.”

“Should I text them to hurry?” Vivian asked, holding up her phone.

She grabbed Vivian’s hands “No, no.” Her eyes narrowed again as she pointed to their phones “I think we are being monitored.”

“What?” everyone exclaimed.

7. Finale

Yang hurried through the arrival hall, muttering to himself. His phone vibrated and he looked at the screen. “Gosh, those numbskulls are on it again,” he lamented. He quickened his pace towards the hotel lift lobby. Before he knew it, a rope fell over him, and a luggage trolley rammed him from behind. He fell heavily onto the trolley. He looked up and saw Zach holding on to the rope, his eyes blazing. With the catch in tow, Jonas pushed the trolley towards the meeting room. Ernie dashed ahead to open the room door as the trolley was wheeled in.

The room erupted in cheers.

“We got the bad man!” Wendy said, clapping hard.

“Why are you such a bad man?” Yolander wagged her finger at him.

Yang looked around and saw six unfriendly faces glaring at him.

“Let me go!” he yelled.

“Tell us who you are and why you are sabotaging our efforts to get to H.Y.” Wendy demanded.

Yang looked around in terror and lowered his head.

Jonas considered Yang for a moment and said with a cold hiss. “Speak, or I will ram that Mercedes of yours to pieces with my limousine.”

“No, no! I will never be in a novel if the car is gone!” he cried.

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

“Just who are you?” Wendy asked again.

Yang looked around again and relented. “All right, I am Yang, a cameo in the Glass Key, H.Y’s third novel.”

“You are a character too?” Yolander asked curiously.

“Just a cameo,” he said sulkily. “Not main characters like you guys.”

Jonas looked at Wendy. “Did you know about him?”

Wendy gave a sheepish smile. “I didn’t actually finish the Glass Key on the plane.” She did a quick search on the laptop. “There he is, in one of the last chapters.” she said.

“Why are you sabotaging us?” Zach demanded. “You think you can be a main character after getting rid of us?”

“All of us goes under if our circle collapses!” Wendy said angrily.

“What are you talking about now?” Yang asked, looking harassed.

Wendy showed him her diagram depicting the circles and explained the theoretical interpretations to Yang.

“What a load of” Yang began dismissively before stopping as he remembered the animosity around the room. He winced, “Look, can I be untied please? I want to show you something.”

Everyone else in the room looked uncertain. But Jonas gave a nod to Zach, who untied him swiftly. Yang grimaced and held his bottom as he got up with as much dignity as he could. He took out a US dollar bill from his wallet and pushed it across the table.

“You trying to buy us off?” Zach asked, cracking his knuckles.

Yang rolled his eyes. “The key here, is belief.”

Wendy looked at the note again. “In God we trust?”

Yang made to take a seat but thought the better of it. He held his bottom and continued, “H.Y does not think he created all of you. He thinks he ran into all of you. That is how he interprets creativity.”

Everyone in the room suddenly turned pensive.

Yang looked please with himself, as he continued. “It is his belief that all of you exist outside of his imagination.” He pointed to Wendy’s diagram. “Consciousness dies with a person. Belief, on the other hand...” he pointed to the bill. “...is eternal.”

Silence filled the room.

“What do we do then?” Wendy asked. “Sit back and watch everything disintegrate around us?”

“All of you are special to H.Y.” Yang replied. You have everything that he could not have in real life.” He pointed at Jonas and Ernie, “He wished he had a brother like how the two of you have each other.” He indicated everyone else in the room. “He wished he had your careers, your relationships and even your personalities. You mean more than something to H.Y.”

‘So, what do we do?’ Zach asked.

“Go and be more of that person that made you special in the eyes of H.Y. Be your best, and together at it. Strengthen his belief.” Yang told them.

Vivian looked impressed. “Who are you, besides being a cameo?”

Yang sighed. “I have to help out with the administration of the Glass Empire, while I wait to become a main character. I have to monitor everything...” He suddenly jumped and took out his phone from his pocket. “The cursed vibrating mode feels like electrocution.” He lamented. “I got another case. See you all then.”

With that Yang dashed out of the meeting room.

The six of them looked at one another in wonder.

“Be our best?” they asked one another.

(15,997 words)

B: Critical Commentary

1) Introduction

This critical commentary introduces the background to the writing of *The Circles*, and the various forms of stylistic influences from other writers and productions that I have attempted to incorporate in my work. In addition, two wellbeing aspects that are related to this work will be discussed: The first is the role of a journal and the second on creative writing in general. In these aspects, the role of the journal and creative writing with regards to the expression of the self, particularly distress, would be evaluated and reflected through the background and production experience of *The Circles*. The potential for further research will be discussed to complete the commentary.

2) Background

The Circles was adapted from an earlier personal work (*The Glass Circle*), completed in 2018. The writing of the *Glass Circle* was a response to an unhappy period of my life which was primarily why I selected it to be adapted for this project, and to critically review the relationship between creative writing and wellbeing.

I had embarked on a writing project in 2013 where a large community of characters is held together by a number of unrelated novellas. A character could be a main one in a story and a much lesser one in another. After completing three novellas in rapid fashion between 2013 and 2015, I encountered writer's block and began making many false starts and could not complete any work in the next few years. Prior to the writing *The Glass Circle*, I began to dismay over the possibility that the writing project was falling apart, and this community of novellas would never be created. The love for the characters in the first three novellas and the prevailing gloom of that time unexpectedly provided material for a new novella in the form of a reprise of my favourite characters. The apocalyptic backdrop of the story reflected this gloom of that time. A major link between the characters and me as the writer was the discovery of my blog by the characters in the story. The blog is my actual blog which is only accessible and viewed by me. The contents of the blog mentioned in *The Circles* were adapted from real blog entries. Trying to discover if there were links between the gradual degeneration of their world and my wellbeing from clues in the blog became the major theme of *The Circles*. I am H.Y in the story, and also appear as Yang in the finale. The Mercedes Benz B-class driven by Yang was a car I owned during the period I was writing *The Glass Circle*. It was so problematic that I imagined it to have a mind of its own, which seemed to be how it behaved in the story. I appear as Yang to air my views on how I see myself as a writer, and the writer's block where he was kept waiting in frustration to be a lead character involving the car. It was also an attempt to reconcile with the characters after the misery I caused them.

Despite being an adaptation of *The Glass Circle*, *The Circles* was almost completely re-written because of two reasons. *The Glass Circle* would have required readers to have read the three earlier completed novellas to fully understand the development of the story. With an allowed length of about 15,000 words for this assignment, or less than a fifth of *The Glass Circle*'s length, using the *Glass Circle* or its parts in the original form would be confusing to readers.

Secondly, *The Glass Circle* was my first novella written in English after the first three that were all written in Chinese. *The Glass Circle* became a crude attempt in moving the lingua franca of my writings to English, and this created challenges. For example, stylistic differences such as the names of the characters were translated using Wade-Giles which sounded odd and confusing although it was less awful compared to the modern hanyu pinyin translation. As a result, western and more common names were adapted for the characters in *The Circles*.

The ending of the story was also adjusted as the original story resolved the apocalyptic environment by being transported back to their familiarity reality as if nothing had happened at all. That would not be helpful for the purpose of this critical commentary in exploring any relationship between creative writing and wellbeing. Stopping the story at the point where the characters gained awareness of their impact on the writer by being their best would provide an appropriate start of a discussion on how the content reflects the state of the writer's wellbeing.

3) Influences

Sophie's World by Jostein Gaader¹ was one of the major influences of this work. It is an irony that this book left a lasting impression in my mind because I did not enjoy the reading experience when I read it for the first and only time in 1995. I was fascinated with the use of parallel realism where the main characters in the story were actually fictional creations of other writers. But the complexity of the plot, intertwined with a textbook-styled philosophical pursuit, proved to be a highly frustrating read. I had wished then that the element of abstract realism could have been better explained. This is why attention was devoted to *The Circles* to explain the abstract behind the story in language that was as plain as possible with the use of diagrams and a question-and-answer style of dialogue in a meeting room setting. The random appearance of characters from other stories in *Sophie's World* was highly inviting creatively but deeply dissatisfying due to the random disconnect. I therefore decided to use characters from stories written by me to achieve a more convincing and personal affinity. The main characters from my first two novellas were used for this.

The Circles opened with a world nearing apocalypse. Murakami is the source of inspiration for the visual interpretation of an alternate and somewhat perverse reality. In his novel *1Q84*,² the main character Tengo Kawana stumbled into an alternate reality called 1Q84 in the year 1984, with the 'Q' of 1Q84 sounding like 'nine' in the Japanese language, a clever twist to represent a parallel reality that was almost like the authentic reality of 1984, except for deeply perverse visuals such as the appearance of two moons in the sky. The oddity was stark, yet stunningly attractive with visuals bearing a touch of fantasy. I attempted to create a similar effect in *The Circles* in the form of a split sky, withering of buildings and gradual loss of colour. I do not, however, admire the literary style of Murakami which I find frighteningly eerie. For example, the appearance of an aggressive NHK subscription fee collector who hammered persistently at doors, and seemingly able to tell what the person in the house was doing and

¹ Jostein Gaader, *Sophie's World* (London: Phoenix, 1995)

² Haruki Murakami, *1Q84* (New York: Vintage International)

feeling.³ Like Gaader, Murakami does not explain abstract concepts such as the ‘Little People’ and ‘Air Chrysalis’ in his story, which evoked similar frustrations for this reader.

I am attracted by the idea of a group of characters on a mission or adventure with Enid Blyton’s Famous Five series and J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter stories exerting the greatest influence. I had encountered both writers during formative years in my early teens and early adulthood. At a personal level, a group setting represents a craving for similar idealistic relationships that usually result in a distinct fairytale type of ending. There is some reflection in *The Circles* with regards to this aspect. Yang explained to the characters in the finale that their existence was born out of imperfections in the writer’s (H.Y’s) personal life. I am also inspired by doomsday romanticism. For example, Ernie and Wendy enveloped each other into a deep kiss along the corridor the Crowne Plaza just as they were to start a sombre meeting to discuss the distressing signs of apocalypse was borrowed from Harry Potter where Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley decided to take time out for a kiss in the thick of a final battle with Voldermort.⁴

I deploy comedy and slapstick as a personal style of writing. The influence of came from watching American sitcoms such as *The Nanny*, and *Friends*. In addition, Stephen Chow who was largely credited with the popularising slapstick on Asian silver screen has been a huge influence since my formative years. In the literary world, the Harry Potter series by J.K Rowling was a major source of influence. The blowing up of a particular vicious, unkind and bullying Aunt Marge in Harry Potter⁵ is an example. She floated away like a balloon and her hefty brother rushed to hold her down by her ankle while fighting off her sister’s dog sniping at his leg is an example of dramatic, action-driven comedy that I am fond of. In *The Circles*, Jonas and Zach were the main characters who were usually written in this style due to the potential comic effect. Jonas, the distinguished CEO of a major bank in Singapore and looms physically large is often thrown off course by his academically brilliant but physically much smaller younger brother Ernie. He would tumble off the bed when Ernie brought him surprising news often in a deadpan manner, or scramble to throw up after sitting through a bout of his brother's horrendous driving. Similarly, Zach is a heavily built young man who would cower in fear over visiting strangers or fly into rage over ridiculous provocation such as someone calling him a gorilla. The discussion on the use of comedy in my writing will be further discussed in section 5.

4) **Journal and Wellbeing**

Bolton shared that journalling allowed her to break out of the “obsessing and ruminating “about matters that bugged her”.”⁶ She could disassociate herself from these matters by writing them down, from where the process of understanding can begin.⁷ She proposed four stages of

³ Ibid, p.849

⁴ J.K Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (London: Bloomsbury,2007) p.502

⁵ J.K Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) p.27

⁶ Gillie Bolton, *Reflective practice: writing and professional development* (SAGE, 2014). p 186.

⁷ Ibid.

journaling⁸ which begins with an account of the writer's experience, followed by reflexive exercise with some prompting questions⁹ on the account in stage two.¹⁰ Stage three requires the account to be told from the perspective of another person or a thing in the account. Finally, stage four in an in-depth reflexive exercise¹¹ carried out after the account has been written for some time.¹²

It was explained in *The Circles* that I keep a journal in the form of a blog that could only be assessed by me. In this way, my blog also serves as a personal diary. The few entries that I included in *The Circles* could be categorised as stage one of Bolton's model. The actual blog, however, contained other entries that fulfilled Stage two and four. For example, I reflected on why I had acted and thought in a certain way with related to the accounts in stage one. I had also reflected on myself by looking at the frequency of my entries, such as the number of times that I mentioned certain matters in a particular way. Stage three, however, was almost completely missing. Using creative writing as demonstrated in *The Circles*, I used a third-party perspective to explore how others would see the same event or me when they read how I journalise the accounts. For example, chapter 5 of *The Circles* was based on a real account of a stranger shadowing my run around the reservoir. Creative writing provides an avenue of fulfilling stage three based on writing what that person shadowing me could be thinking. I am generally supportive of Bolton's assertion that journalising could have a positive effect on wellbeing as it reduces the need to think about experiences repeatedly after it has been written down. I generally blog every day, and each day would usually see more than one entry. It has provided relief, especially when there are matters that triggered anxiety or other stressors.

Adams conceived a Journal Ladder, in which the writing style was measured according to varying levels of 'structure', 'pacing' and 'containment', as well as measurements between 'concrete' and 'abstract', and content type ranging from being 'informational' on one end to 'insightful' and finally 'intuitive' on the other.¹³ According to Adams, journal content on the lower rungs of the ladder have more structure, pacing, and containment, giving more concrete information. Methods supporting these rungs such as time-limited writing exercise are "by far the most accessible to the largest number of people", "quite disarming in their simplicity" and most suitable for those who are "analytically minded, as well as those who have higher levels of reluctance, timidity or resistance".¹⁴ At the other end of the ladder scale, the upper rungs of the ladder have content that are more abstract and intuitive, where techniques such as dialogue

⁸ Ibid, p 193.

⁹ Bolton suggested reflection through an active pursuit of the 'why' questions related to the accounts written in stage one, such as why the writer felt in a certain way, why some assumptions were made and why certain ethical values are evoked.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 195.

¹¹ Reflexive questions at stage four are more personal and generic. They differ from stage two questions by expanding the scope beyond the scope of the accounts that were written in stage one.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kathleen Adams, *Expressive Writing: foundations of practice* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2013) p 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 7.

and free writing “create pathways to the intuitive mind”.¹⁵ It becomes possible to “even access the same areas of the unconscious mind that are activated by dreamwork, mediation and prayer”.¹⁶ Between the lower and upper rungs of the Journal Ladder, Adams conceived the middle rungs where techniques provide insights to content and experiences “characterized by a sense of self-discovery”.¹⁷ Techniques such as character sketch and captured moments provide avenues to obtain these insights.

In *The Circles*, Wendy commented that my blog represented a person who is a very simple and complicated person at the same time. Excerpts of my blog mentioned in *The Circles* include content in the middle rungs of Adams’ Journal Ladder, such as a character sketch in the form of my description of a friend called Big Guy. That said, the higher rungs of the ladder seemed to be the norm of my blog where metaphors are frequently deployed, such as the fasten seat belt sign being switched on to depict a bout of illness, and particularly the description of dreams. The dream entry that was mentioned in chapter 4 was a deeply personal piece that seemed to indicate an intuitive exploration into issues such as anxiety and even sexuality that may not yet be fully understood by me at that time. Other unmentioned entries of my blog also included role-plays where I play the emperor talking to a long-serving eunuch. Such entries are written in the form of free writing where I have no visibility of how the entry might be concluded. As part of what Adams termed as Journal Therapy, journalising is an exercise “bearing fruits of healing and change for so many who pick up the pen and write”,¹⁸ whichever rung level the writer could be writing in.

5) Creative writing as an expression of distress

To Moskowitz, “Creative writing is almost always fuelled by personal experience”, and “inherent in the process is the power to transform, and make positive use of, some of life’s most perplexing and painful issues”.¹⁹ She developed a creative writing technique called ‘The Self as a Source’, in which the writer explores and reflects within themselves, where different faces of their personalities and lived experience create endless content possibilities.²⁰ This technique was conceived from Moskowitz’s working experience with a cancer patient who wanted to communicate her feelings using creative writing. Firstly, the patient used descriptors and images to represent different self(s) before and after the onset of illness. These created personalities were creatively developed and named by the patient. Lastly, these personalities were made to meet and exchange something of significance. According to Moskowitz, “fiction had rendered the truth more bearable and not only that but had offered up new and creative ways of coping with it”.²¹ Therefore creative writing serves two important functions for writers in distress: as a source of content, and as an enhancement of wellbeing.

¹⁵ Ibid, p 8.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg 7.

¹⁸ Ibid, pg 2.

¹⁹ Cheryl Moskowitz. “The Self as source: creative writing generated from personal reflection” in *The self on the Page*, ed. by Hunt, Celia & Sampson, Fiona (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998), p 35.

²⁰ Ibid, p 37.

²¹ Ibid, p 36.

As a writer, my experience concurs with Moskowitz on both counts, particularly in the writing of *The Circles* and its earlier rendition, *The Glass Circle*. As mentioned, the concept of *The Circles* was conceived out of a writer's block, where I decided to write on the writer's block itself. The process was, however, not similar to how Moskowitz had worked with the cancer client to develop creative content. Firstly, I selected suitable entries in my blog to be featured in the story as I wrote. Secondly, the writer's block was the result of an amalgamation of various personal difficulties that could not be compared to the severity of being struck with a terminal disease. Nevertheless, the point remains that the self is a source of creative content even in various degrees of distress. In addition, the ability to present what should be a distressing account as creative work became tremendous consolation, likely from a sense of great contentment and satisfaction.

In a qualitative research project aptly named 'Writing is a way of saying things I can't say', Bolton explored how creative writing served as a communication tool for those who were very sick to express thoughts and feelings that would otherwise be "found difficult to express and share".²² Bolton explained that the greater the distressing factor experienced, the more difficult verbal communication would become. Writing, including the form of fiction, allows the feelings and thoughts associated with the distress to be shared. In fact, she observed that some participants of the research project who did not usually write fiction chose this route to express themselves²³. She concluded that "an expression of the otherwise inexpressible seems to be enabled"²⁴. My experience concurred strongly with the findings of Bolton's research. In the production of *The Circles*, fiction was able to depict the breadth and the gravity of the distress that verbal communication could never match. The use of a looming apocalyptic background experienced by the characters represented the weight of the distress, and it was also a clear indication that the nature of distress was occurring in a specific part of my life. Similarly, the use of slapstick in my writing defines the narrative which I had no alternative in verbal communication. Slapstick presents a humorous parallel which breaks an otherwise monotonous picture, allowing communication to occur. For example, I have an inherent inability to communicate about pain, suffering and similar distress. The use of slapstick allows me to write about such feelings that I experienced or witnessed without the paralysis caused by the inability. The use of slapstick allows distress to be expressed, in addition to the fulfilment of artistry effects that I desire.

Frank explained why expressing distress is important in the field of creative writing. Using serious illness as a form of distress, he argues that the writer is placed in a state unlike the usual, where there is disruption and interruption to a norm. Yet this experience represents a truth of life, where distress could occur and affect anyone. The role of the writer is to provide stories of such, because "whether ill people want to tell stories or not, illness calls for stories."²⁵ In addition, the experience of distress is not merely a representation of the self but also part of a

²² Gillie Bolton. "Healing writing in Palliative Care" in *Dying, Bereavement and the Healing Arts*, ed by Gille Bolton (London, Jessica Kingsley, 2008), pp. 98-111 (p. 109).

²³ Ibid, p 111.

²⁴ Ibid, p 110.

²⁵ Arther W. Frank, *The wounded storyteller: body, illness and ethics* (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p.54.

formation process in which the self is constantly redefined.²⁶ Narration of distress is therefore a process that is integral to the life of a writer. In *The Circles*, Wendy observed some eccentricities in the manner I write in my blog, particularly in how I represent distress. She lamented that I used ‘fasten seat sign on’ to describe an account of flu. This means that the self of this writer is represented by these eccentricities, which takes shape from the distress that is experienced. Without distress and the response to the experience via creative writing, the self would not be what it is. As a writer, however, I would not be able to tell if my preference for slapstick, for example, stems from an innate self or a cognisant choice that I was making. The arguments of ‘self’ are beyond the scope of this assignment notwithstanding, I would agree that *The Circles* is at least a representation of (my) self.

6) Creative writing and wellbeing

The benefits of creative writing on wellbeing have been well researched and articulated. In research conducted by Pennebaker on students, writing in the form of disclosure of a traumatic event can bring about “significant improvements in physical health and grade point average”.²⁷ Robertson and Kadmos collaborated to write creatively about the death of their parent and concluded that the experience “help us understand and accept the mourning process”.²⁸ King, Neilson and White researched on how creative writing can play an important role in helping patients recover from severe mental illness such as schizophrenia.²⁹ Bertrand researched on using creative writing as a tool to manage distress in an episode of chronic illness.³⁰ Bolton describes it best for this writer: That “the very creative process made for pride and enhanced self-respect and confidence”³¹. Reflecting on the completion of *The Circles*, any feeling of negativity had dissipated when I could see how the experience of a writer’s block had in fact produced a creative work that became my fondest. It allowed me to accept the occurrence of distress, and gain confidence that the next episode of this sort can be potentially just as enriching. Therefore, this improvement in wellbeing is not limited to the alleviation of distress from a particular experience, but a buildup of resilience in wellbeing that will undoubtedly bring longer term benefits.

However, some have thrown caution on the process of creative writing, warning that a positive outcome may not always occur. Pert criticized that Bolton’s model of using creative writing as a therapeutic practice in the form that is unguided with no feedback provided to the writer “can

²⁶ Ibid, p.61.

²⁷ James W. Pennebaker, ‘Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process’, *Psychological Science*, 8 (1997), pp 162-166.

²⁸ Rachel Robertson & Helena Kadmos, ‘Crossing the shadow line: collaborative creative writing about grief’, *New Writing*, 17:2, (2020) pp. 214-225, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2019.1586955

²⁹ Robert King and others, ‘Creative Writing in recovery from severe mental illness’, *International journal of mental health Nursing*, 22, (2013) pp. 444-452, doi:10.1111/j.1447-0349.2012.00891.x

³⁰ Jennifer Bertrand, ‘These roots that bind us: using writing to process grief and reconstruct the self in chronic illness’, *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 49, (2021) pp.766-779, doi:10.1080/03069885.2021.1933382.

³¹ Bolton. “Healing writing in Palliative Care” (p. 109).

be incredibly dangerous”.³² She pointed out that notable writers such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath not only took their lives, but Sexton also tried unsuccessfully to alleviate the conditions of patients at a mental health institute with creative writing. Pert argued that Sexton’s effort may in fact be “actively psychologically harmful”³³ for patients. She noted that Sexton’s and Plath’s works “glorified and glamourised suicide”³⁴. Like Pert, Kohanyi also warned that creative writing may not always be beneficial to wellbeing, especially for those in distress. “Studies consistently found that from 50% to 80% of creative writers studied suffered from a mood disorder (in particular, bipolar disorder), as compared with around 1.5% (bipolar) and 10% (unipolar) of the general population”³⁵. This is despite the fact that creative writing affects the mood “mostly positively”³⁶. She noted from research that “participants writing about trauma felt worse than controls immediately after writing”, and certain type of creative writing yielded no positive effects, such as “skilled writers and those who usually wrote on their own”,³⁷ as well as those “instructed to write about neutral topics”.³⁸ She concluded that “what it is exactly about a narrative that is beneficial is not clearly understood”³⁹, and similar writing conditions can cause negative or positive outcome for different groups of people. For example, “although writing introspectively can be beneficial to mood, it is also plausible that very intense introspection can be harmful”.⁴⁰ She used poetry writing as an example, where introspection “can leave a poet feeling worse after the act of writing”.⁴¹ Pourjalali and others cited statistics where creative writers seemed to suffer from higher incidence of suicide rates and mental illness, with poets and female creative writers being the most affected.⁴² Interestingly, negative outcomes in wellbeing of the writer could be caused by “the frequent and unintentional cognition of negative memories and ideas”.⁴³

Reflecting on my works as a writer, I always create various forms of happy endings. I write to propagate an ideal that is lacking in my own life. In *The Circles*, Yang explained in the finale that I imagined characters and storylines that fulfil the absence of the ideal in my own life. That could possibly be why I relate more to the positive aspects of creative writing on my wellbeing. However, I agree with Pert that a structured approach to creative writing is more likely to yield

³² Rebecca Pert, “‘There Is No Map and There Is No Road’: Theorising Best Practice in the Provision of Creative Writing Therapy’ *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 06, (2013), p.165, doi: 10.2478/abcsj-2019-0014.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Adele Kohanyi, “The more I write, and the better I feel about myself”: Mood Variability and Mood Regulation in Student Journalists and Creative Writers” in *The Psychology of Creative Writing*, ed. Scott Barry Kaufman and James C. Kaufman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 41-42.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p.45.

³⁸ Ibid, p.46.

³⁹ Ibid, p 47.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Samaneh Pourjalali, E. M Skrzynecky, James C Kaufman. “The Creative Writer, Dysphoric Rumination, and Locus of Control” in *The Psychology of Creative Writing*, ed. Scott Barry Kaufman and James C. Kaufman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p 24-29.

⁴³ Ibid.

benefits. Therefore, writing with an intention to harness wellbeing in a controlled environment with guidance from a skilled facilitator may extract the most out of creative writing.

7) **Additional Research**

Despite the potential risks to wellbeing mentioned in section 6, it is largely recognised that creative writing and wellbeing have a largely positive relationship. I would agree with Pert that some structure in the deployment of creative writing as a therapeutic option to enhance wellbeing could achieve positive outcomes without the risk of intensifying distress, negativity or the possibility of losing one's life. Collaboration with other disciplines could be a possible solution that is both exciting and challenging. This could proliferate the use of creative writing as a therapeutic for wellbeing as demonstrated by Pennebaker in his use of tools and models from the field of psychology. The field of counselling could be another potential discipline for collaboration where methods such as Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)^{44 45} which focuses on the ideal 'magic' question to guide clients towards desired outcomes in a timely manner is a natural fit with creative writing. Deploying creative writing within the methodology of SFBT could avert possibilities which are negative and allows the benefits for creative writing in enhancing wellbeing to be extracted reliably.

Creative writing in the form of keeping a journal and writing novellas have been a cornerstone of my wellbeing as a writer. Further research in the form of exegesis and self-reflection could help solidify causation between creative writing and wellbeing.

8) **Conclusion**

In conclusion, as demonstrated by the discussion of research and critical commentary of my experience in writing *The Circles*, journal and creative writing has a largely positive relationship with wellbeing. Creative writing provides an avenue for expression especially in communicating various forms of distress, which is a process that is inherent to the self. As demonstrated by the examples raised, there are risks to wellbeing when creative writing is not deployed as it should. To harness the benefits of creative writing, a structured approach is the option that would likely yield the best results in enhancing the wellbeing of writers.

(4830 words)

⁴⁴ Debbie Hogan and others eds, *Solution Focused Practice in Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁴⁵ This writer is trained in trained in basic SFBT.

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