

The Glass Empire (No 4 Novella)

The Glass Circle

By

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1. The Spilt

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 limousine 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 Wendy past a few parking lots before coming to an abrupt stop. It then reversed quickly into the parking lanes, cutting across two parking lots. The brakes screeched just millimetres before the back wheels touched the curb.

Pu 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 rather sheepishly. He Wendy over to Jonas and patted him on the back.

Jonas looked at him with distaste. "If we were not escaping, I would have..." he showed his fist at Ernie, but promptly threw up again.

"Is Madam all right?" Pu asked as he panted.

Jonas took a facial tissue that Ernie was handing out to him and said while cleaning himself, "Think she must have lost consciousness again, after the ride..."

The last car door opened, and Vivian stepped out. She stretched and looked refreshed. "That was a good nap," she said. She turned and saw her husband squatting by the drain and asked "What happened to you, dear?"

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

Ernie pointed to the Old Airport cooked food centre beyond the busy Mountbatten Road not far away.

"It's bustling." Vivian said with relieve, as she pushed her fringe that has fallen over her eyes to the back of her ears. She smiled with satisfaction. She turned to Ernie "Does this place has anything to do with H.Y?"

Ernie nodded. "This is one of his favourite places. We should take refuge here, now that things...are not stable."

Vivian raised her eyebrows "Its H.Y isn't it?"

"Wendydy thinks he is not in stable mood lately."

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

Ernie shrugged. "I don't know. Wendydy 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. Vivian looked away awkwardly. Pu gave a little sigh, keeping his head down. Suddenly, there was a series of beeping and tones from different mobile phones. Vivian and Jonas quickly took out their mobile phones and a smile broke on their faces.

"Network is up!" Vivian said excitedly. "Wendydy was right after all! "

"She will be arriving tomorrow." Jonas said, looking at his phone.

Ernie took a deep breath and told Vivian "Better get back to Jeremy. We will join you at the Airport after Wendydy arrives."

Vivian nodded. She patted him in his arm. "You will be okay here?"

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

Ernie gave a rare smile with a little blush.

Jonas still looked mutinous. "You get to stay in a hotel?" he asked. "And I have to stay here?" He looked around at what must be the oldest public flats in Singapore, which even predates the country's independence. He had stayed here for about a month 5 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 at this point Jonas noticed how tired Ernie looked. He quietened down and pretended to look elsewhere.

Vivian caught the cue and said brightly "I'll be off then. See you guys tomorrow."

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

"I'll be off Master Jonas and Master Ern." Pu said as he quickly took the driver's seat and drove off.

Jonas looked around before asking Ernie "What is our unit number?"

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 Uncle Kim to deliver some dinner to us. Any cravings?"

He won a smile from Ernie, and he exhaled in relief. 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 pressed himself to the wall in a hurry. "I had almost forgotten the 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 a shriek before dashing out of the lift after Ernie. Ernie was focusing on briefing Jonas on the accommodation arrangements. "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..."

"You did so many things? When did you arrive?" Jonas asked as he followed Ernie along the narrow corridor filled with sudden turns and apartments that opened at awkward places.

"This morning." Ernie replied. "And this company was the only one I could get through from the US."

"What company is that?" Jonas asked. "My lines and comms were completely down these two days."

Cheng ern turned to Jonas and answered as a matter-of-factly. "Ikea."

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

"Promising." Ernie said, looking slightly relieved.

Jonas looked rather apprehensive as he entered the apartment behind Ernie. It looked nothing like the decaying unit he stayed in 5 years ago. It was still the same studio-layout, but the furniture was minimalist, Scandinavian-styled, with artistic lamps, thick avant-garde patterned carpets to give the unit a very lounge and homely feel. A portable air-conditioner was operating on one side of the apartment.

Jonas looked at Ernie and gave a "Wow."

"I asked the movers to move some of our things here." Ernie said as he pointed to the open wardrobe at a corner.

Jonas turned to look at the only large bed and looked incredulous. "We are sleeping together again?"

Ernie looked awkward. "The tenant allowed us to decorate but not 2 single beds as he is a single." awkwardly.

"Of course." Jonas said as a 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 suggested.

Jonas laughed to himself, remembering how Ernie had to boil water for him 5 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 a familiar sight - the lean and almost bony back of his brother. He remembered this similar scene half a decade ago, when he began staying with a young man whom his dying father told him was his half-brother. Jonas gave a self-depreciating 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 are therefore not blood related are now seeing each other. A knock on the door broke him out from his thoughts. The long-awaited Uncle Kim has arrived.

Ernie cleaned up the dining table after dinner while Jonas was in the shower. Jonas had his nose wrinkled when he appeared out of the bathroom later. "Ern, the sewage smell is still there.

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 outside has all but slowed to a drizzle.

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, both asked together "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 on the same bed?" Ernie said with a laugh.

"Has it been 5 years since you left for the US? How long does it take to be a doctor, anyway?"

"I'm completed the PhD part of the program, and 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's eyes twinkled. "People would have to call you Doctor twice? As if they were stammering? Like: Doctor Doctor, I got a flu?"

Ernie looked utterly bemused.

"And you get Microsoft Word underlying the second 'doctor' whenever anyone writes to you?" Jonas continued.

Ernie broke into silent laughter. Jonas looked pleased with himself.

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

"I miss you too." Jonas turned clumsily on the bed towards his brother. "Were you worried about me staying here?"

Ernie nodded slightly. Jonas closed his eyes and said rather proudly "Remember your bro started out as a teller behind a counter." He opened his eyes and looked at Ernie and said, "Thanks for thinking about me."

Ernie gave a hollow cough and looked amused. He was about to go back to his book before he recalled. "Oh! I need to tell you something."

Jonas looked at Ernie expectantly, and Ernie said "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. "You got married and I didn't know? Till now? You mean Wendy..." 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 are staying alone in the US, so I thought our relationship should be official..."

Jonas looked approvingly at his brother. "That's a responsible chap. You take care of your lady."

"She is 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 ..."

"Oh yes." Ernie said more seriously. "I have arranged to complete my remaining medical studies here and..."

There was silence. Ernie turned to look at Jonas, who has fallen soundly into a snoring sleep.

3. The Glass Circle

Ernie woke up in a shock. He had heard a loud, dreadful howl. He looked around, only to see Jonas stretching himself on the bed, and there was the same horrific howling 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 and they peered out together.

Jonas’s eyes narrowed. “The rain has stopped. 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!”

“Wendt has arrived, and she is at the airport hotel with your mum.” A smile broke on his chiselled face. “Come on.”

“Come on?” Jonas asked. “Come on what?”

“We need to get to the airport hotel and meet them.” Ernie said, as he went over to the open wardrobe.

“You are just dying to meet your wife.” Jonas said a little scornfully. “Your brother is hungry you know.”

Ernie took a towel and headed for the bathroom, saying “We’ll eat at the hawker centre before we go.”

Jonas looked appeased. “I’ll call Pu to fetch us then.”

An hour later, Jonas and Ernie stood at the corner of hawker centre, waiting for Pu to pick them up. Jonas was looking at his phone and scrolling the screen with his thumb. “Pu will be here soon.” he mumbled.

Ernie was looking at the sky. “Think the rain has stopped for now.” He pointed towards the east, “There is even some sun there.”

Jonas’s eyes flicked up at the direction Ernie pointed and went back to his phone the next instant.

“We could go on our own, could we?” Ernie suggested.

Jonas looked up at Ernie and gave a sigh as he rolled his eyes. “How would Pu feel if he knows that we took a bus to the airport?”

“Is his name...just ‘Pu’?” Ernie asked. “It means servant in Chinese, doesn’t it?”

Jonas looked interested. "We didn't talk about this before? I always known him as Pu because he calls himself that."

Ernie frowned. "You don't know his real name?"

Jonas laughed. "Of course I do."

"He told you?" Ernie asked.

"No, the PI." Jonas replied casually.

Ernie looked stunned. "You hired a private investigator to check on him?"

Jonas looked up, and said seriously "Of course I did! He served Pa for decades and probably knows more things about us than all of us put together. I can't have people like that in such proximity unless I can trust them completely."

Ernie looked curious. "He is trustable then? Did you check on me too?"

Jonas looked amused. He put his hand around Ernie's shoulders and said, "I don't have to." At this moment, he noticed a black limousine turning into the narrow carpark of the hawker centre. "Pu is here." he said.

Pu seemed to know exactly where they were. He drove the car to the corner they were at. Ernie started to move towards the car door, but Jonas held him back. Pu alighted from the driver's seat and opened the passenger door for them to get in.

"Let him do it, or he will be displeased." Jonas said rapidly under his breath after Pu closed the passenger door.

Pu returned to the driver seat. "Good morning, Master Jonas and Master Ern." he greeted.

"How are you feeling?" Jonas asked.

"I am all right now." Pu replied, and he put on his seat belt and began to drive off.

"Madam told you about the arrangement for the next few days?" Jonas asked.

"Yes, Master Jonas." Pu replied. "I will be staying at the airport hotel with Madam and the rest."

"We can't return home for now." Jonas said. "I have transferred some money to your account. Buy whatever you need. Tell me if you need more."

Pu looked into the rear-view mirror and said hurriedly, "There is no need, Master Jonas!"

"Keep it." Jonas said simply.

Pu looked appreciative and replied "All right. Thank you, Master Jonas."

Ernie looked at Jonas with some admiration. Jonas gave him a conceited blink in return.

The car pulled up to the lobby of the Crown Plaza at Changi Airport. Jonas and Ernie alighted and proceeded into the hotel quickly. From 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 opened. 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 her 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?" Vivian asked.

"I had, with Ern."

"But where is he?" Vivian asked, looking around.

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

They ventured out of the room onto the hotel corridor. They saw Ernie and Wendy 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 from the point 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 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. In fact, the entire road looks different.”

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 in our circle.” 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 at him and said “Exactly.” She turned to Jonas, “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 said as a matter-of fact as she flapped her arms.

4. The Glass Phoenix

The Imperial Tai restaurant has its own building near the crossroads of Chinatown and Shenton Way. Zach sat at the counter looking gloomy. For the umpteenth time, he picked up the phone to call again. But the outcome was the same: the ringing tone sounded for a few times before the call ending on its own.

Pree marched to the counter, the sound of her high heels announcing her arrival. She fumed as she looked down at the sitting Zach.

“The Indian tour group is coming in 2 hours!” she said exasperatedly. “Are the repair folks coming or not?”

“I can’t get anyone!” Zach said as exasperatedly. “The lines are not connecting!”

Pree rolled her eyes and bite her lips. She held up her phone and took a deep breath and said, “Half of the tour group who made bookings seemed to have disappeared. I can’t get them. This is the first one this weekend, and its already Sunday afternoon! They have 86 people and we can’t host them if we can’t get the leaking roof fixed!”

“Priyanka...” Zach sighed as he said.

Pree raised her hands to her cheeks and shrieked “Don’t call me that! It’s always bad news when you call my full name!”

“We will open the VIP rooms for them, if they turn up.” Zach said resignedly. He took out a piece of paper and checked. “Only the chicken deliveries are still happening on schedule.” He banged his fist on the table, “what is happening?”

“At least we won’t die of hunger then,” she said as she looked out at the stormy weather. She suddenly turned to him and hissed, “But you will continue to pay me, aren’t you?”

Zach gave her a pained expression.

“Come on!” Pree said with gusto. “The lines are not working but we are! Go to the repairs company and get help!”

“Uncle Qi is out at the suppliers with the van.” Zach said resignedly. “I can’t reach him.”

Pree looked undefeatable and boomed “Get out there and hail a cab!”

Zach gestured to her with a nod of his head towards the direction of the door. Pree turned defiantly and made for the door. A gust of wind hit in the face. Her neat, perfectly straightened hair was blown across her face. When she opened her eyes to look, the street was completely devoid of human and vehicular traffic. The traffic lights changed colours aimlessly and a silence loomed overcast. Pree darted back into the building and slammed the door shut. She panted in shock as she looked at Zach, her hair now in an utter mess.

“Even the trains are not running.” Zach told her.

Her phone rang at that instant. She saw the number and answered eagerly. "What? Really?" she held the phone to her palm and asked Zach excitedly, "Can we manage 120? They have one more tour bus..."

At that moment there was a cracking sound on the roof, and a torrent of water came crashing down onto one of the tables. The crockery was washed off the table with a terrific din, and a persistent shower-like drizzle continued over the table. Pree looked on with an expressionless face, her mouth slightly twitching. A tear fell from her eye just as she let her phone dropped to the floor.

Zach looked at her awkwardly and said "Go change and call it a day, shall we? No one will be coming today." With that, Zach strolled heavily out of the restaurant and into the heavy winds.

At Koon's kitchen, Yolander was carefully tasting the chicken broth simmering in a huge pot. Her chefs gathered around her, anxiously waiting for her verdict.

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

The few chefs didn't seem too worried. "It's better to have something missing than to have things we don't know that's in there."

"Yes," another one said. "We can add to the taste, but taking taste out will be messy."

A waitress rushed into the kitchen and announced in a panic, "The Le Franc people are here."

There was an audible inhale of breaths. Yolander looked at her pot of stock and thought, "Call Shanghai again," she told the waitress.

"It's not connecting!" the waitress shrieked, waving a cordless handset. "I have been trying the whole day!"

Yolander glared at her with frustration. She took over the handset and dialled in a number. The line was dead after two rings.

"See?" the waitress bellowed. "It doesn't get through."

Yolander looked worriedly towards the restaurant floor. She told the rest of the staff "We can't let her be heard. Get her out by the back. Quick."

The waitress cried as she was being let out forcefully, "It's not my fault! The line wouldn't get through and I didn't cause your soup to taste weird!"

Yolander panted as the waitress was being let out. She knew it was too late and was sure the commotion must have reached some of the diners outside. She looked at the huge pot dejectedly, and rammed her fist onto the stainless-steel table in frustration. Puffing loudly, she grabbed a spoon and tasted the stock again. She sighed and threw the spoon onto the counter.

The chefs returned to the kitchen, looking rather crestfallen. Yolander looked at them and pondered. She went to the kitchen door and looked at the dining area through the circular glass panel.

"Extract a portion of the stock, add mandarin peel, and serve." she ordered.

“We could lose our Le Franc Star!” Chef Addy half-sobbed.

“We will lose it if we don’t serve anything. We take a gamble when we serve it,” Yolander said icily. She sighed and told them, “Do as I say.”

She looked through the circular glass panel again and watched two Caucasian diners tasting the broth. The rest of the chefs squeezed in behind her to watch.

“Maybe there are not from Le France!” Chef Addy said hopefully.

“Look at the pin he is wearing,” Yolander said, as she squinted her eyes to see. “He is not merely from Le France, he is one of the master judges.”

“Master Judge? Here? There are only four of them in the entire Le Franc!” Chef Hardy said. He suddenly seemed excited and said, “Should we go and take a picture?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Chef Jenny chided. “You want a picture to commemorate the loss of our star?”

“Maybe they will like it?” Chef Addy suggested hopefully again.

Everyone turned to look at him with loath.

“Look, look!” Chef Jenny said, pointing to the glass panel.

“That master chef is shaking his head!” Chef Hardy said in dismay.

“They are leaving?” Chef Addy said in disbelief. “He only took three spoonful!”

Yimin backed away from the glass panel and shook her head. “It’s almost time, let’s call it a day.”

In an hour’s time, the lights of Koon’s kitchen dimmed. Yolander sat on one of the diner seats. She stared glumly at the laptop displaying the accounts for the month. Chef Hardy appeared from the kitchen in casual wear and proceeded sheepishly towards her. Yolander turned, forced a smile as she closed her laptop shut.

“Boss...” Chef Hardy said awkwardly.

“I know.” Yolander said tightly. She forced a smile again and told him “It’s all right.”

“You know?” Chef Hardy asked incredulously.

Yolander gave a genuine laugh. “We have been working together for the last few years, of course I will know.”

“I’m so sorry,” Chef Hardy said, his voice quivering a little.

Yolander’s eyes reddened, and she shook her head in self-depreciation. “We have come to this stage under my watch. I’m sorry for not being able to keep you.” She blinked away her tears and said, “I really hope you are going to a better restaurant.”

Chef Hardy shook his head and wiped away his tears. “There is no better place than here,” he said. “But I think it is better for me to return to Malaysia for now. My mother has a stall in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.”

Yolander looked at him for a moment. Chef Hardy decided to look away. Yolander said, "You are not doing it for yourself, aren't you? You are doing it for me."

Chef Hardy looked back at Yolander as if he wanted to say something, but decided to look away instead.

Yolander laughed. "I shouldn't have poked that balloon. But I want to thank you for thinking about me."

Chef Hardy shrugged and gave a helpless smile.

Yolander looked at him intently, and said "I will get you back as soon as I can. Hang on, for me."

Chef Hardy looked at Yolander, and gave her a resolute nod.

"Go, and don't say goodbye." Yolander told him with gusto. Chef Hardy turned and walked towards the front door in broad steps. He opened the door, and the sound of rain gushed into the restaurant. He walked away into the rain without hesitation, and without turning back.

Yolander fell back to her seat and began to cry helplessly.

After a while, Yolander recollected herself. She got up and proceeded to lock the front door, but someone was pushing at the door just before she could turn the key. The man gave her a smile, but Yolander looked crossed. She folded her arms but allowed the beefy man to push open the door.

"What do you want?" Yolander asked sharply.

"I just wanted to see you," Zach said and took a step towards her. He put his hand gently on her shoulder, but she shook it away. He looked closely at her and asked softly "You have been crying?"

Yolander stalked off a few steps, and said fiercely, "We have broken up! Stop this!"

"We are still friends, aren't we?" Zach said in a gentle croon.

Yolander looked at him in disbelief. "We have broken up! How do we break up if you are here all the time?"

Zach looked at her for a while. "Let's not break up, then. I can be here all the time again too."

Yolander's eyes shot daggers at him as she yelled "Stop it! You go say all the nice things to all the other women and leave me alone!"

"But I don't have other women!" Zach pleaded. Lightning flashed across the skies and the thunder roared.

Yolander gave a cynical laugh. "Even the heavens don't believe you." She pointed at him, and said, "I saw you, holding hands with..."

"With Y.S, right?" Zach said, almost eagerly. "It was our reunion for that play we did in final year five years ago, remember? We asked you, but you were too busy to come."

"I did in the end!" Yolander said angrily. "I saw you kissing her!"

Zach grew red, and said quickly "William left early with the others, and Y.S needed someone to talk to..."

"Is that a reason or excuse?" Yolander asked in disbelief. "You hit on with everybody, even Pree!"

"It was our company's night, and we had a drop too much..." Zach uncomfortably. "It was just in a moment of fun..."

Yolander did not reply. She sat down on one of the seats and began to sob "I can't manage," she said in almost a whisper. "I have to keep the one Le Franc star that my mother earned before she left for Shanghai. I have to worry about the women that you are always swarmed with..." She looked up at Zach and said "And I am just one person..."

Zach approached her and patted her on the back, and said "You don't have to worry about me, ever. We know, right? You are my precious Concubine Pearl, aren't you? My heart is always with you."

"I don't want to be Concubine Pearl!" Yolander said miserably. "I only want to be a wife."

"You are my everything," he coaxed. "I will always be with you."

"You regard yourself like an emperor who wants to be around women all the time," Yolander retorted. "I don't want to feel like I have to share you with others all the time!"

He took her hand to his chest, and said, "You don't have to share my heart. There's only you."

Yolander looked at him for a moment before taking her hand back. She sighed and said "Let's not talk about this anymore. I am really exhausted today."

Zach nodded and sat down next to Yolander. "I know. Hardy quitted?"

"How did you know?" Yolander asked in surprise.

"I ran into him just outside," Zach explained. "I waited with him for a cab, but the app wasn't working and calls for a taxi did not get through."

Yolander sighed again. "He quitted to help me. Koon's kitchen has been in the red for months. Everything is breaking apart. The Le Franc Star is about to fall, customers are dwindling, and even the taste of our broth is fading."

"Your signature broth?" Zach asked in shock.

Yolander nodded. "Mum created our signature broth when we stopped selling the Glass Phoenix five years ago. Broths are a perpetual cooking process for restaurants with signature broths. We never stop. We just add new ingredients and water to the remainder at the end of the day. The taste has been consistent, building up to a richness over the years, but today it was just so off."

Zach sighed, and said, "My side is no better. I came over because I have to close the Imperial Tai, for a while, at least."

"What happened?" .

"Part of the roof collapsed, and the rain flooded the dining area." Zach replied gloomily.

Yolander looked bewildered. "What are you going to do?"

“My parents are still in Europe with Uncle Westy. But all the communication lines are...”

“Down, yes.” Yolander said in frustration.

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

“Who is that?” Zach asked.

“Traffic has been so quiet lately; this feels like a shocker.” Yolander said, peering at the car.

The elderly driver alighted from the car, opened an umbrella, before proceeding to open the rear passenger door. Two men alighted from the rear. The taller and bigger sized man turned towards the direction of Koon’s Kitchen and stared at it for a few moments. He took over the umbrella, before letting the driver returned into the car. He put his arm around a smaller man and they began walking towards the restaurant. Zi-yuan 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 asked 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?”

There was another knock, 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 off three of them, Your Majesty.” Yolander suggested brightly.

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.

5. The Visit

“Sold out! Five years ago!” Zach bellowed, as he pushed the door closed. The strangers were no match for his brute strength. The door creaked to a shut and Zach turned to lean 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, they stopped selling the Glass Phoenix five years ago...”

“I would have asked Uncle L’ie to come along. He is their regular, but he is not in town!”

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

“Will it help? Our lines are down again. Otherwise, I am sure I can even get that strange Qing Dynasty princess with my China contacts!”

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 look for them, not the Princess!”

“These are the two who love to pretend to be the emperor and concubine isn’t it?”

Yolander’s breath drew in sharply.

“It was their school play...”

“The princess should have left them in the hills in Beijing for good!”

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

Yolander stood with her back straight and said clearly. “I am Yolander Sheh, the owner of the Koon Kitchen.”

Zach hurried moved to stand in front of her and announced “I am Loong 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 Loong 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 “You know Mr Leonard L’ie? How did you know about the princess?”

The bigger man took out name cards from his jacket pocket and said “I am Jonas, 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. "H.Y is 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 be staying here."

"Here?" Zach and Yolander asked together.

"What about the Imperial Tai?" Zach asked.

"In H.Y's circle, the Imperial Tai's location does not exist." Ernie explained. "But Koon's Kitchen location here in Chimes exists in both circles..."

"Which is the common area that you were talking about, right?" Yolander asked.

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

"A little." Yolander looked a little pleased with herself.

"Could both of you come to the airport hotel for a meeting tomorrow?" 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.

Yolander let out a long sigh after Jonas and Ernie left.

"You want a drink?" Zach suggested gently.

Yolander looked at him for a moment. Her eyebrow twitched, "Why not?"

Zach looked happy as he went to get glasses and wine.

"Get the Bordeaux." Yolander called out.

“Okay.” Zach replied. He reached for the cabinets outside the kitchen with obvious familiarity and he soon returned with two glasses in one hand and a bottle in the other.

Yolander sat back and watched him dug up a wine opener from his pocket. His arm tensed as he drove the opener into the cork and extracted it deftly. Yolander couldn’t help but gave him a clap. “Reaching the standard of your Uncle Westy, I must say.”

Zach looked elated, and flashed a subdued, boyish smile. With one hand behind his back, he poured wine into the glasses and handed one of them to Yolander. They swirled and held the glasses close to their nose.

“This is from the Glass Red, isn’t it?” Yolander asked.

Zach nodded. “Yes, Uncle Westy gave this to me from his shop for my last birthday.”

Yolander swirled the wine a little more, put it to her nose, closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Zach watched her and his fists slowly clenched as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

Yolander held out her glass towards him. Zach picked up his glass in a hurry and clinked glasses. Yolander smiled and took a first sip.

“Supple, but needs a little more time,” she said.

Zach took a cautious sip and nodded.

“Is this real?” Yolander asked with a self-deprecating laugh, looking around. “That this is someone’s imagination?”

“I don’t understand,” Zach said. “It’s real to me.” He looked at Yolander and said quietly “You are real.”

Yolander took a larger sip, closed her eyes and smiled. She exhaled deeply and leaned on Zach’s shoulder. He immediately opened his arm to let her rest on his chest. Yolander gave another laugh and said, “Not real enough.”

Zach looked pained. He lowered his face to her head and gave her kiss before whispering “I’m sorry.”

Yolander didn’t seem to hear, she drained her wine glass, before settling into Zach’s embrace. She closed her eyes and fell asleep. Zach took her wine glass gently out of her hand. He pondered at Yolander’s exhausted look. Before long, he gave a little sigh, picked up his own glass of wine and began to drink.

“Your majesty!” the eunuch bellowed as he fell to his knees in the emperor’s chambers. “The old buddha is here!”

Zach is awakened from his slumbers. Yolander remained asleep, lying in his embrace.

“My love...” he whispered gently.

But Yolander remained soundly sleep.

“Your majesty!” the eunuch said urgently. “The old Buddha must not see the Her Highness here! Imperial concubines cannot spend the night in the emperor’s chambers!”

Zach looked irate and said, “I know, all right?” He looked at the sleeping Yolander and demanded “Can’t you do something and help Her Highness off me?”

“The Old Buddha is here!” someone announced. A formidable looking lady in Manchu regalia entered the chamber.

“Imperial father!” Zach spluttered and swallowed hastily, resulting in a coughing fit.

“The emperor is unwell,” Cixi, the Empress Dowager said. Looking at Yolander, she said, “Arrest her and confined her movements to her chamber!”

Guards and eunuchs yelled a “Zha!” in salute to an imperial order and moved to grabbed Yolander off Zach. Within moments, she was carried out of the chamber, leaving Zach looking shaky and frightened.

Another eunuch announced, “Lady Tatala, the Concubine Zhen has committed herself against the rules of the inner palace, first by staying overnight in the chambers of the emperor, and by jealousy...”

“Jealousy?” Zach asked in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“It was because of her jealousy that the emperor is neglecting the empress and other ladies of the inner palace.” Cixi said.

“Empress?” Zach said chokingly.

“Summon them!” Cixi ordered.

An announcement was heard, “Her majesty, the empress, and Lady Tatala, the Concubine Jin!”

Two ladies entered the chamber. Zach looked unbelievably at Pree in empress regalia. Pree waved shyly at him. Standing next to her was Y.S, who was looking smugly at him smiling, while playing with her long pearl necklace.

“I have prepared an edict for the emperor to demote the Concubine Zhen.” Cixi said. “Will the emperor announce it?”

A eunuch presented an edict to Zach who opened the scroll with trembling hands. With a shaky voice, Zach pleaded “I beg for your mercy, Imperial Father! Today is the birthday of Concubine Zhen!”

“Announce it, Your Majesty!” Cixi ordered. Pree and Y.S stood behind, smiling in glee and performing the action of stamping the imperial seal in unison.

Zach was filled with anguish, as tears fell from his eyes. Cixi tapped on the side table impatiently. “Make haste!” she said sternly.

The sound of tapping reverberated around the chamber as Zach trembled in fear.

The sound of tapping reverberated in Koon Kitchen. Yolander sprang up in surprise. She has been sleeping all night in the arms of Zach. Zach rubbed his eyes and purred in sleepiness. Yolander went over to the front door, unlocked it and yanked it open in a hurry. A ray of sunlight fell on her face. She was not prepared for that, and she used her hand for shade in surprise.

“Miss Sheh?” an elderly gentleman in a smart jacket asked.

Yolander recognised him as the elderly driver of Jonas and Ernie the night before.

“Hi,” she said hastily, trying belatedly to straighten her hair.

“My name is Pu,” the gentleman said with a kindly smile. “Master Jonas asked me to fetch you and Mr Loong to the airport hotel.” He saw Yolander’s anxious expression and said assured her “We are not in a hurry. Why don’t I come in to take a seat while you take your time?”

Yolander was clearly relieved, and stood aside to let Pu in. “Of course! And, have a cup of coffee please.”

“Thank you.” Pu replied and entered the restaurant. He waved politely to Zach who was stretching himself, before taking a seat at one of the tables.

“Hi there.” Zach said.

The coffee machine awoken into action as Yolander pressed a few buttons. “Let me do it,” Zach said. “I need a coffee fix myself. You go prepare.”

Yolander nodded with a smile and rushed off to her room in the back office.

Before long, Zach brought 2 cups of coffee to the table that Pu was sitting. “You want milk for the coffee?”

“Coffee black will do.” Pu replied with a smile.

“Same for me. There you go.” Zach said as he set a cup before Pu.

They both took a sip and sighed with pleasure.

“How do I address you, uncle?” Zach asked.

“Pu.” Pu replied simply.

“Pu?” Zach asked in wonder. “As in servant?”

“I will always be the servant of Old Master Lee.” Pu said softly.

“That will be Jonas Lee’s father, right?” Zach asked.

Pu nodded his head gently.

They sipped their coffee quietly and didn’t speak for some time.

“So, you know about all this?” Zach asked, breaking the silence.

Pu didn’t seem to know what to reply. He nodded a little and looked guarded.

Zach sniggered. "All this about H.Y. If I could get my hands on him..." he said as Pu looked at him with increasing incredulity. "Who does he think he is?" Zach said, waving his hand in a dismissive fashion. "I'd love to tell him what I think of him!"

Pu found his head shaking a little.

"You don't think so?" Zach asked. "Your two masters made him up to be some kind of god. What can he do? Melt me down, or burn me up?" Zach sniggered again.

Pu's eyes opened wider

"OK, I am done!" Yolander's cheery voice came as she appeared in a fresh T-shirt and pants. "You want to go wash up?" she asked Zach.

Zach gave a gargantuan yawn and heaved himself out of the seat. He gave himself a stretch before lumbering off to the back office.

"What were you guys talking about?" Yolander asked a little excitedly, obviously feeling refreshed from a much-needed shower.

Pu shook his head uneasily and gave a strained smile.

6. Plan A

A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds as the limousine approached the airport hotel. Zach and Yolander alighted from the car and proceeded to the meeting room. An hour later, 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.

As the black limousine pulled out of the Crowne Plaza, Yolander looked worryingly at Zach.

"You sure about tomorrow?" Yolander asked.

"I didn't want to do it," Zach said with some confidence. "But that doctor said he is testing it out first."

Pu looked sharply into the rear-view mirror.

"That made you changed your mind?" Yolander asked.

"They obviously adore that him." Zach said. "He can even tell his chairman brother what to do. I do hope he is a real doctor." He tapped on the driver seat. "Hey uncle, is that young man with a scar a doctor?"

Pu looked stunned as he gazed at Zach from the mirror.

Yolander tapped Zach's arm and said gently, "He probably wouldn't know."

Zach nodded a little sheepishly. He looked at Yolander with a smile and said, "My only worry is what might happen upon the first contact with H.Y."

"So that would be taken care of by the doctor." Yolander said thoughtfully.

"Exactly," Zach said a little smugly. "I will abort action if anything goes wrong. And I want to have a word or two with that H.Y."

"Don't be rash!" Yolander said. "We may still not completely know what is going on, even if it is possible to see or even approach him."

"It's all that man's problem, isn't it?" Zach said angrily.

"You believe?" Yolander asked a little wearily. "That our world is imagined and controlled by a person from another Circle or dimension?"

Zach took a deep breath, and replied, "Now that you put it this way...". He turned and looked intently at Yolander. "There are many things that could not be explained. Like this freak weather, like us in a story on a website!"

"You are right on that one." Yolander said with a sigh.

"Do you remember the dates that the novels were completed?" Zach asked. "It was 2015. And he stopped writing after that. Nothing happened to us then, didn't it? But something is happening now, three years later, and suddenly at it."

"What do you mean?" Yolander asked with new curiosity.

Zach frowned and said with some confidence. "I feel that our current is not merely the result of this H.Y stopping his writing, but..."

"...because something is happening to H.Y?" Yolander completed for him. Yolander smiled to herself and continued excitedly, "This is why you want to talk to H.Y?"

"Isn't he the problem?" Zach said belligerently. "Things could have been the same without him!"

"Don't be too agonised now." Yolander comforted. "Just let the doctor test it out first, and you do a run with him. Let them worry about other things." She patted him on his arm, and added a deliberate "Okay?"

Zach gave a relented smile and nodded.

A few minutes later, Zach and Yolander alighted from the limousine and walked briskly to Koon's Kitchen. Rain drops were falling again.

"Weather was all right at the airport." Yolander said worriedly. "It's beginning to deteriorate again."

“No wonder most of them are hiding at the airport.” Zach said.

“Let’s hope weather holds up for tomorrow.” Yolander said heavily.

“Yes,” Zach agreed. “This kind of weather is depressing for me.”

Yolander turned to Zach and half yelled, “Sweetheart, H.Y can’t be running in this kind of weather! And the plan will come to nothing!” She rolled her eyes, shook her head and half-ran into the restaurant.

Zach’s face brightened up. “Am I sweetheart now?” he asked happily and followed Yolander with large, excited steps.

7. The Run

The meeting room was quiet after Zach and Yolander left 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.

8. The Void

Back at the airport hotel, Wendy stumbled out of the limousine and gasped for breath, looking quite ill.

Ernie rushed out from the driver's seat to her side. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"You are not doing too badly," Jonas emerged from the car and told her dryly. "I threw up last year's breakfast when I was his passenger during his first drive."

Wendy laughed, despite her discomfort, and gave Jonas a gentle slap on the arm.

"Can't we stay here together?" Ernie asked, holding on to Wendy's arm.

Wendy held Ernie's hand in hers and said "The split is occurring again. I need you guys to keep Old Airport Road going for us."

"I know." Ernie said very unhappily. "But you are not feeling well."

Wendy looked sheepish and said, "It's just the ride. I will be fine."

"I will take care of her." Vivian said, putting her hands on Wendy's shoulders. "It's just for the next few days, right?"

Wendy forced a smile and nodded. "Give me a call when you reach Old Airport." she told Ernie.

Ernie nodded. He looked intently at Wendy for some time before he returned to the driver's seat. Jonas exchanged some quick words with Vivian before returning to the car.

The limousine was on the only car on the road back to Old Airport. The bright LED handlamps and daylight running lights throwing light on the gloomy road ahead. They spotted the huge spilt across the horizon as they approached the city fringe on the East Coast Expressway.

"This is looking much more serious than a few days ago." Jonas said, looking all around. He pointed to the south, and exclaimed. "What is that?"

Ernie took a glance and decided to stop the car on the road shoulder. He opened the car door and walked towards the side of the road to take a closer look of the coast. Jonas left his seat too and went outside.

"It's like a black plane of void that is extending from the split to the sea." Ernie said.

The brothers exchanged uneasy glances.

"It looks like it's coming ashore." Jonas said. "Do you think this is happening because we made a move on H.Y today?"

Ernie did not reply. He continued to stare rather unhappily at the void. "Let's go back," he said after a while.

"All right." Jonas said, taking a curious glance at Ernie. He got into the car, and it moved stealthily towards Old Airport Road.

Jonas could not remember when Ernie is not reading something before he sleeps. But today was the exception. He laid flat on his side of the bed, the back of his hand on his forehead as he stared at the ceiling.

Jonas sat up against the headboard, his thumbs rubbing against each other. He took momentary looks at Ernie, before he finally asked "You ok? You didn't eat much dinner."

"No appetite," Ernie said in a very raspy voice.

"I know dinner was not so nice," Jonas mumbled. "The hawker centre was quite empty, and this stall happened to have some food..."

Ernie made a growling sound as a reply.

"Don't worry all right?" Jonas said. "Things are a bit strange now, but I am sure..."

Ernie suddenly sat up, and stare at Ernie without expression.

"What...?" Jonas asked, looking rather taken aback.

"Is my driving really bad?" Ernie croaked.

"Your...driving?" Jonas asked incredulously. He thought for a while and began to laugh to himself, shaking his head in disbelief. He got out of bed laughing uncontrollably and walked towards the open kitchen, holding his tummy.

Ernie scowled. "What? Why are you laughing?"

Jonas calmed himself down. He poured a glass of water and handed to Ernie, who took it unwillingly. Ernie laughed to himself again and said "I thought you were worried about the weather and the voids appearing."

Ernie scowled even deeper. "Wendy is not feeling well. That's more important."

Jonas nodded. Then he noticed Ernie still staring at him. He broke into a laugh again, before gasping, "What?"

"Am I a bad driver?" Ernie asked almost urgently.

Jonas mustered himself for some seriousness. Then he nodded before breaking into helpless laughter again. When he recovered, he saw Ernie still scowling at him. "You can't accept that you are not too good in something after becoming a double doctor?" Jonas teased.

"It's not that," Ernie said. "I feel bad making Wendy sick."

Jonas threw a pillow at him. "Your brother threw up like a Merlion after taking your car and you gave no hoots about it!"

Ernie stared at Jonas blankly. He suddenly turned red and broke into a smile.

Jonas shook his head in mock disbelief. He walked over to the window and peered out of the curtains.

"The rain seems to be stopping," he said with a sigh. He went back to his side of the bed and jumped onto it and closed his eyes.

Now it was Ernie's turn to look at his brother pretending to sleep.

"You are worried?" Ernie asked.

Jonas's eyes opened wide. "How not to?" he said with another sigh. "I can handle anything in a bank, but this is...crazy."

"Sorry I was too engrossed with my driving." Ernie said sombrely.

Jonas made to say something before aborting abruptly.

"What did you want to say?" Ernie asked.

Jonas sighed, and said gloomily. "I meant to ask you to take some driving lessons from Pu. But I don't even know where he is now."

Ernie exhaled heavily. "Today was a mess."

"We gained nothing, and the situation got worse." Jonas said. "But at least I know it's real now."

"What's real?" Ernie asked.

"This Glass Circle theory..." Jonas said as he looked heavily at Ernie. "Something is really happening. It's not just freak weather."

Ernie's phone sounded. He grabbed it and told Jonas, "Wendy said she got news for us, and we can plan the next stage of action. We'll meet at the airport tomorrow."

Jonas raised his eyebrows and nodded. "I hope Zach and Yolander are all right."

A red Audi cabriolet stopped outside the Imperial Tai. Zach got out from the car in shock. There seems to be a dark, semi-opaque screen that stood before the restaurant. The screen extends skywards from the part of the spilt in the sky that was now appearing like cracks across the entire sky.

"What is happening?" Yolander cried as she rushed down from the car.

"Beyond the screen, Zach and Yolander could see shadows of workers and Pree who was moving slowly, and seemingly talking in muffled sound.

Zach yelled and waved to them, but there was no response at all. Zach extend his hand towards the screen in desperation, but Yolander pulled him back hurriedly.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

Zach panted and he looked at her. He raised his last finger on his right hand and told her "I am going to see what happens."

"No!" Yolander said. "What if something nasty happens?"

“They are my workers.” Zach said heavily. “I need to at least try to know what happened.” He grabbed Yolander by the shoulder “Just a finger, let me try.”

Tears ran down from Yolander’s beseeching eyes. But she nodded.

Zach began to put his last finger forward towards the screen. Sweat appeared on his forehead while Yolander held on to his other arm. With less than an inch from the screen, Zach breathed heavily and made contact most gently. Instead of something solid, the top of his finger disappeared into the screen as if it were gas. Zach quickly retracted his hand, and Yolander pulled him away from the screen. The top of his finger which was inserted looked opaque for a moment before it regained solidity. Zach stumbled backwards and put his hand to his head.

“What’s wrong?” Yolander asked as she struggled to hold up Zach’s hefty frame.

“Giddy...” Zach mumbled as he tried to steady himself. He shook his head, turned to Yolander and said a little weakly. “It seems to suck energy out of me.”

“You look quite pale.” Yolander said worriedly. “Let’s go back to Koon’s Kitchen. I’ll drive.”

She led Zach back to the car and helped him into the passenger seat. She went around the car, gave the screen a last look before climbing into the passenger seat. Before long, the Audi was speeding to Koon’s kitchen on empty roads.

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

“So you were saying you touched the Void?” Vivian asked him.

He nodded eagerly as he slurped up the last bit of noodles in the plastic bowl. He chewed and swallowed hard before saying “It didn’t feel anything at first, but I felt giddy after that, like a sudden loss of energy.”

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

“So we should all avoid these screens that is appearing from nowhere.” Jonas said. “I knew it’s not good when I first saw them out at sea.”

Yolander nodded. “Thankfully, some of them seemed to have disappeared this morning. But the one at the Imperial Tai was still there when we passed by this morning.”

“Do you think it’s the sun?” Vivian asked, sipping coffee. “There is finally some sun today, and those splits in the sky have disappeared again.”

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 and asked ‘Is everyone all right?’

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

Wendy smiled and said "Great. Is everyone else all right?"

Everyone looked around and nodded. Yolander asked her in return "Are you ok? You looked quite pale when we left the reservoir yesterday."

Wendy nodded and replied "I'm fine now. A good sleep does marvel." She laughed and continued, "All right, about yesterday..." The room went quiet and everyone began to focus 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!"

"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 said warmly.

"But our problems are not over." Wendy said on a serious note. "Pu has mysteriously disappeared, and the big weather deteriorated to a stage that we have never seen."

"The voids are appearing too." Jonas said.

"We need to try again," Wendy said. "I am sure we can do better now, with what we have learnt so far."

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

Wendy looked upbeat. "I am quite confident that we are on the same physical plane."

"What does that mean?" Zach asked.

"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 ask you out for a meeting?”

“So what’s your plan?” Jonas asked.

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

9. 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 10 years. Time to get things resolved!

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

Ernie gave a large soundless laugh.

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

“I tried.” Wendy said tightly. She looked tired with bags under her eyes. “This H.Y doesn’t label-tag his entries 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, “What does that mean?”

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

Wendy looked frustrated and said dismissively. “He’s a fan of air travel.” She made a few more clicks “I did a search using the site engine and it doesn’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 off her concerns, saying rather grouchy, “I can’t get to sleep anyway.”

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

Wendy looked at Zach and nodded with the faintest of smiles. She looked at the laptop screen “I can’t see what is H.Y trying to resolve, but there are some clues. Whatever that happened, took place 12 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, and said, “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 one of the most stable and defined routines of a person that I know. His relationships are very clear too, as he is quite highly skilled in staying away from problematic relationships.” She looked up at all of them “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, and said, "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 exist on the same plane of reality with him. We can approach him, and he can fully sense us, all without detrimental effects on us. I am very confident that we can talk to him." The room became impossibly quieter as tension filled everyone's faces. Wendy took a deep breath and said quickly "But it shouldn't be one of us here."

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. 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 will have deeper impression of us. 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." Vivian nodded and said.

"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 said.

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

Vivian laughed. "Madam Quincey is a Singaporean. But she has worked for us in Shanghai for almost three decades since our branch's opening 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 told him dismissively. 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 place that I am seeing. So it spans across the three areas between our two circles.” Wendy said.

“From our experience at the reservoir, we won’t be able to contact H.Y once he gets into his hotel. We need to make clear to Madam Quincey where she should try to engage H.Y at the Jin Mao tower before he reaches his hotel.” Jonas said urgently, and added “The question is how.”

“How much are we going to tell her?” Vivian asked. “Because this could be almost as good as telling her everything.”

“Does this mean that Madam Quincey can only approach H.Y at the lobby of the Jin Mao tower?” Yolander asked.

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

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

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

Wendy did some quick clicks to the laptop and answered quickly. “Yes, it is. He is taking the overnight to Shanghai, so we have some time.”

“Would we know what seat he is in?” Vivian said. “We could choose a seat that is close to him.”

“All right.” Wendy said, and sounding under tremendous pressure. She turned to Vivian and said, “Can you get Madam Chin’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 here?”

“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, saying “It will be up to the two of you. Talk about it on the way there.” She turned to Jonas “You can endure his driving now?” She was pointing at Ernie who looked tremendously dismayed.

Jonas pretended to look horrified and made to go immediately. “Yes, yes,” he said easily. “We are going now.” He put his arms around the forlorn Ernie and half-dragged him out of the room.

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

Yolander looked uneasy and smiled at her. Zach said awkwardly “Looks like we are out of the picture for this round...”.

Wendy extract a piece of paper from her file and held it up. Zach came over uncertainly to collect it. He looked at the paper and asked, “Who is this?”

“Go look for her quickly,” Wendy said. “It’s our Plan C.”

“Plan C?” Yolander asked. “What about this Plan B? It’s not even over yet.”

Wendy suddenly looked pained. “Just go,” she said urgently. “I can’t hold on for very much longer.”

“Are you all right?” Yolander asked anxiously.

“Should we call a ...” Zach said before pausing and pointing outside. “Your guy is a doctor, right? And you just sent him out. Shall I go get him? I can still make it.”

Wendy looked tremendously angst as she told them “Just go and find her. It will help us all, all right?”

“All right, we will be off then.” Yolander said, pulling Zach along.

“Leave her in this state...?” Zach asked Yolander uncertainly as he stumbled after her.

Vivian finished her conversation and came towards Wendy happily. “I got her. The boys will be picking her any minute now...What’s wrong with you?”

Wendy got up and made a dash for the door. “I need to go to the toilet, and the two imperials were so slow to get going!”

Vivian looked at Wendy curiously and smiled.

The black limousine cruised along the East Coast Expressway towards Changi Airport. There were more cars today and the weather was cloudy with occasional sunlight shining 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 fringe in front. She wore dark rimmed glasses with a necklace that extended from it. Her face was meticulously made-up complete 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, aren’t you?”

Ernie looked painfully at Jonas, and did not respond. Jonas smiled and said, "He stayed here for more than 20 years before going to the US, Quincey."

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

Jonas noticed that Ernie was gradually increasing the speed of the car. 10 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.

Madam Quincey was still talking to Ernie, and oblivious to everything else. "So have you met Master Jonas's father at all? Did you guys talk? Did Master Jonas know that you guys met?"

"Quincey, we are here." Jonas said breathlessly.

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

Jonas shook his finger at Ernie and gave him a dirty look before he stumbled out of the car. Ernie looked sheepish as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. He waited for Jonas and Madam Quincey to enter the hotel lobby before driving the car away to park.

A few hours later, Madam Quincey and Vivian walked towards the check in counters from the airport hotel. Vivian was repeatedly telling her, "Remember, don't disclose or mention our bank's name at all. Just ask about what he is doing in Shanghai and try to have a drink with him on the plane or something. Do not engage him beyond the lobby at Jin Mao." Vivian said.

Madam Quincey smiled as she replied, "I know. He's our potential joint venture partner, right? I should try to dig up on him, right? And then see if he wants to work with our bank, right?"

"No, no, no. Quincey, listen to me." Vivian said exasperatedly. "You are only 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, right?"

Vivian stopped in her tracks. Madam Quincey turned to look at her in all her good naturedness. 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 his story, without telling yours."

"I know. Be his aunt agony, right?" 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.

“Where are we going?” Ernie asked as he got into the car with Jonas at the basement car park of the airport hotel.

“Just take a drive to get some food, shall we? I am feeling moody cooping in this strange...” he waved his hands as he looked around, seemingly at a loss for words. He gave up and said, “Oh, just drive.”

“Where are we going?” Ernie asked. “Why don’t you drive? I made you sick again earlier on,” he added sadly.

“Just go,” Jonas said dismissively. “We’ll go to Changi Village.”

“All right.” Ernie said dolefully and proceeded to move off.

At that moment, a Mercedes swung out from a corner at high speed, deftly avoiding their car which had just moved out from the parking lot. Ernie slammed the brakes as the Mercedes raced to the lift lobby where it parked swiftly into a vacant lot. A tall man in jacket alighted the car from the driver’s seat holding onto a small hand carry bag. Slim and agile, he ran easily into the lobby and a waiting lift. The lift door closed, and he disappeared out of sight.

“Quick, drive to that car.” Jonas said.

Ernie drove 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.

Jonas thought for a moment and said brightly, “He only just left. Come on, let’s try something!”

With that he ran into the lobby and pressed for the lift. Before long, Jonas ran from one end of terminal to the business class check in row, with Ernie following close behind.

He ran to one of the empty counters and asked a check-in staff as he panted heavily. “Did you see a tall gentleman spotting a crew cut, wearing an Armani jacket checking in? He left something at the café.”

The check in staff looked bewildered and looked towards the direction of the passenger check point.

“It’s to Shanghai, has he checked in already?” Jonas asked with mocked urgency. “Can you guys pass something to him?”

“We would have to inform the gate,” the staff said. “Can I...?”

“Hang on.” Jonas said dramatically. He dug out his phone and said excitedly “Where are you?” He paused, and continued, “All right, I am coming!”

With that, he thanked the staff and left quickly with Ernie following closely behind, looking absolutely baffled.

10. Plan C

Back at the hotel meeting room, Jonas pranced around as Wendy worked on her laptop, with Ernie sitting close to her.

“Is this it?” Wendy asked, pointing at the laptop screen.

“Yes, yes!” Jonas said excitedly. “What is it?”

“It’s a Mercedes B Class,” Wendy said. “It’s not in our Circle.”

“Then how is it appearing here?” Jonas asked. He quickly added “And the driver is on the heels of Quincey to Shanghai!”

“You sure?” Wendy asked.

“The check in folks at the counter will never disclose passenger details.” Jonas explained. “But they didn’t seem surprised when I asked them about him checking in to Shanghai. And they seemed relieved when I pretended to be on the phone with him. I can quite confirm that he is going to Shanghai too.

Wendy looked worried. “He was at the scene when Pu disappeared, and now he is going to Shanghai as well...”

“Could that auntie be in danger?” Ernie asked.

Wendy made a few taps on her phone and looked at them sombrely. “Her flight has just left the gate. “It’s almost midnight now, and she will arrive just before dawn.” She sighed and gave a yawn. “Let’s call it day. There is only that much I can do in a day.”

Ernie made a sound, but Wendy told him “Go back to Old Airport Road, both of you. I am going up to the room. Vivian is there already.”

Ernie made to protest, “Are you all right? You don’t look well.”

“I am fine.” Wendy said a little impatiently. As if to make Ernie feel better, she added “Come by earlier tomorrow morning. We need to start Plan C.”

“Plan C?” Jonas asked incredulously. “We hardly started Plan B!”

“What’s Plan C?” Ernie asked in seemingly deep worry.

“Let you know tomorrow.” Wendy said, mustering a little laugh. “Zach and Yolander are hard at work!”

Ernie looked at Wendy intently with a deep sense of foreboding.

“Finally!” Jonas exclaimed as he jumped on the bed.

Ernie was sitting on one side of the bed, deep in his thoughts.

"I am tired to the bone, you know." Jonas said. "First at the reservoir yesterday, and this today. You wonder what that Mercedes guy and Madam Quincey could be doing now if they are really on the same flight? Having champagne or strangling each other?" Jonas blabbered, half laughing.

Ernie continued to sit quietly at the side of the bed, half bend over his knees.

Jonas stopped and tapped him curiously on his shoulder. "Are you ok?" he asked.

Ernie wiped his eyes quickly and laid down on his side of the bed.

"What's wrong?" Jonas asked, looking concerned "Tell me."

Ernie turned to him with reddened eyes and said "I think Wendy is not feeling well. And she is not telling me."

Jonas looked a bit sheepish and said "Yes, she did look a bit pale and tired." But he quickly added with a positive note "Maybe she is just drained from doing all the planning for us?"

"She kept avoiding my glance these couple of days." Ernie said miserably.

"You guys were all over each other just a few days ago along the hotel corridor." Jonas said with a little laugh. Ernie looked a little happier. Jonas continued, "Everyone is under tremendous pressure, especially for her. Have some confidence, all right?"

"I am just worried." Ernie said quietly.

"The last few days have been crazy." Jonas said. "You know we have completely lost touch with the bank?"

"Really?" Ernie asked in shock.

"Nothing is communicating or working now," he said with a self-deprecating laugh. "The only thing I haven't done is to visit the bank. But Vivian and I made a point not to, and not to talk about it or not to think about it until this is over."

"Will this be over?" Ernie asked forlornly.

Jonas gave a short laugh. "Maybe it would." He looked at Ernie, and said brightly. "Let's sleep. Maybe it will all be what it once was when we wake up."

Ernie relented and closed his eyes with a sigh. Jonas's expression hardened. He looked around the room, and at his brother, who was now breathing heavily in sleep.

The next morning, Jonas paced around in the meeting room of the airport hotel.

"She has landed four hours ago but the line is not getting through." Jonas said in frustration.

Vivian was in a corner, talking on the phone. She ended the line and came over, saying "I called some colleagues in Shanghai and nobody had seen her."

At this time, Zach and Yolander rushed into the room, "We found her!" Yolander said excitedly.

"You found Quincey?" Jonas asked, puzzled.

"No, Dellen." Zach said, holding a piece of paper. "Dellen Ouyang-Jia."

"Who?" Vivian asked.

"What did she say?" Wendy ignored them and asked Zach.

"She'll meet us later after fetching her triplets from school." Zach replied.

"How did you get her to meet?" Wendy asked curiously.

"We told her that we are from some magazine and want to interview her and her triplets." Yolander said with a laugh.

"Who is this Dellen person?" Vivian asked.

"She is my Plan C." Wendy replied calmly. She looked at Vivian and Jonas before saying heavily "I think our Plan B has failed. Something must have happened to Madam Quincey the way something happened to Pu."

"Who is this Dellen? Why is she so important?" Jonas asked.

Wendy took a deep breath and said "She is an important character in The Glass Key. But she is not the person who can help us."

"Then why did you ask us to look for her?" Zach asked.

"To look for her best friend, Aileen." Wendy said. Looking at their puzzled face, she explained. "The Glass Key was the last novel H.Y wrote. According to his recount on his website, this was the most difficult novel that he has written. The entire story is about Aileen and her six love stories spanning more than 2 decades of her life, and yet she does not appear in the novel at all."

"Not appear at all? What does that mean?" Jonas asked.

"The entire story forms around others talking about her and mentioning her through their recollection, but he does not write about her directly." Wendy said. "He did that apparently because this Aileen is his friend in real-life and he wanted to spare themselves the awkwardness."

The room went quiet. Vivian turned to look at Jonas with a smile. "This H.Y is quite an interesting person."

Jonas nodded, "So you are thinking of using this Aileen to talk to H.Y?"

Wendy nodded. "I had a thought. I wondered if our failure at the reservoir was due to us wanting to approach H.Y directly. I had always thought about approaching him through Aileen if we somehow couldn't. His sudden trip to Shanghai gave us another opportunity."

"You mean that Plan B and C are actually concurrent plans?" Yolander asked.

Wendy smiled and nodded. "Plan B has a lower chance of success because Madam Quincey does not know H.Y at all, which heightens the risk. Aileen, on the other hand knows H.Y directly."

"Sounds good! No wonder you look better today." Yolander said.

"You do." Vivian agreed.

"I do," Wendy said, who looked coyly at Ernie. "I am better when I not disturbed that much."

Ernie looked depressed immediately. Jonas looked awkwardly at the two of them.

At this time, Vivian's phone rang. "It's a phone number from China." Vivian said as she quickly answered. Her face lighted up when she heard the voice from the other end. "Quincey? Where are you?" she shrieked anxiously. "Hang on, I'll put you on speaker. Everyone is here."

"Yes, yes, yes." Quincey's voice came. She sounded a bit sheepish as she said, "I am detained by the airport police."

"What happened to you?" Jonas asked.

"I was sitting beside this man on the plane..." Madam Quincey began.

"Was it H.Y.?" Vivian asked quickly.

"No, it was not." Madam Quincey said. "You showed me the picture of H.Y, right? The bald man, right? I saw him. He was on the plane. He was in economy class with some kids. I was in Business Class."

"So who was the man you were sitting with?" Zach asked with curiosity.

"He was quite tall and had a crew cut..." Madam Quincey began.

"Was he wearing an Armani jacket?" Jonas questioned eagerly.

"Yes, yes." Madam Quincey said. "With a black T shirt inside, right?"

"It's him!" Jonas said. "Did he tell you what car he was driving?"

"Why would they talk about that?" Vivian interjected impatiently.

"Yes, he is driving a Mercedes." Madam Quincey said. "It's a prototype and he is doing some testing for the company."

"You guys talked about that?" Jonas exclaimed in wonder.

"Why are you detained?" Vivian interrupted impatiently.

"My carry-on bag was searched, and they found some documents alleging that I am a Panda smuggler." Madam Quincey said as a matter-of-factly.

"Panda?" everyone exclaimed.

"Those cute little black and white fur balls, right? You guys don't know what a panda is?" she asked with a polite sneer.

Vivian rolled her eyes and continued asking "Why were all those documents with you?"

"I don't know." Madam Quincey replied. "I even thought that I might have mistakenly took someone else's bag for mine, but my other things were all in there."

Wendy paused everyone's else and asked a question. "Madam Quincey, did that man introduce himself to you?"

"Of course." Madam Quincey said. "His surname is Yang. He is an engineer by training."

Wendy nodded and immediately went back to her laptop.

"What's going to happen next?" Vivian asked.

"Oh, I happened to know one of the officers here, you see." Madam Quincey explained. "He has an Uncle whom I met with the cousin of one of our client Mr. Yow. He has a business partner who knows somebody in the aviation authority and..."

"Quincey, is anything going to happen to you?" Jonas pressed on.

"I was just talking about that, right?" Madam Quincey said laughingly. "As I was saying, the aviation authority chap has a university classmate in the police authority, and this classmate was trying to find out how to proceed when we realised his auntie's neighbour works in our bank!"

Zach and Yolander looked on in disbelief before covering their mouth to quieten their uncontrolled laughter.

"Anyway, they are going to send the papers to some authority to check the authenticity..." Madam Quincey said.

"Hey." Wendy said as she peered at the laptop. Everyone gathered around her. She pointed to the screen. "That Mercedes driver is a Circle character."

"Our Circle?" Vivian asked, as she turned off the speaker and held the phone at a distance.

Wendy nodded. "This character appeared briefly in one of the scenes of The Glass Key. He drives a Mercedes prototype as a testing vehicle."

"Look!" Jonas said, pointing to the screen. "A 1.6 litre turbocharged engine with 121 horsepower and 200 newton-metre of torque...a seven-speed dual clutch gearbox... It exactly fits the specs of the car found in H.Y's Circle website!"

"It fits the specs in the novel, and their identities are very similar." Wendy said to herself. She made a few more clicks, and then exclaimed. "This is the same car that H.Y is driving in his Circle!"

"What?" everyone exclaimed.

Wendy's eyes narrowed as she said, "I remember reading somewhere from HY's blog that he likes to put himself into the novels. This Yang fellow must be it. He has the same surname with H.Y isn't it?"

"So, this person is him? Or his alter ego?" Yolander asked with a frown.

"Remember, H.Y is a complex and simple person at the same time." Wendy said. "Yang may just be a character that is very much like him."

"But what is he trying to do now? Destroy our world and destroy us?" Zach said angrily.

"Is he in Shanghai?" Jonas asked urgently.

Vivian went back to the phone to hear Madam Quincey rambling "...so I told him to just let it go. You can't force love this way, right?"

“Quincey, did you see Yang after you were detained?” Vivian asked.

“Oh!” Madam Quincey said in surprise. “He boarded the next plane back to Singapore.”

“What?” Vivian exclaimed. “Why is he rushing back to Singapore?” Everyone in the room looked stunned. “You mean he told you?”

“Yes,” Madam Quincey said. “He was passing me by, and I asked him to help me contact some people in Shanghai. But he said he was going back to Singapore immediately.”

“Did he say why?” Vivian asked again.

“No,” Madam Quincey said. “He didn’t seem to have wanted to go back immediately at first. He saw something on his phone and said he needs to go back immediately. He looked really frustrated.”

“Did he...?” Vivian pressed on.

There was some talking in the background, before Madam Quincey came back again “Erm, I have to go,” she said. “The officer say I need to attend an interview...I...”

The line went dead.

“What do we do now?” Vivian asked in frustration.

“What time are we meeting Dellen?” Jonas asked.

“In an hour.” Zach said.

“Are we all going?” Yolander asked.

“We should.” Wendy said with vigour. “Plan A and B have failed anyway.”

“What time is that Yang returning?” Yolander asked.

“Quincey didn’t say!” Vivian said in frustration.

“The plane has just landed.” A deep voice said. Everyone jumped, and looked at Ernie, who was looking at the flight movement monitor along the hotel corridor. “Calculating the time, this flight should be the aircraft that took them there.”

“He can’t be back so quickly, right?” Vivian asked doubtfully.

Everyone looked at each other and then rushed out, making for the car park in a desperate dash.

At the car park, everyone looked around as Zach was showing the address of the meeting venue with Dallen to Ernie.

“Where is Yang’s car?” Vivian asked curiously.

Jonas pointed to the electric-blue Mercedes still parked at the same lot.

“This is the...what class...?” Vivian asked.

“B-class.” Jonas said with a slight sneer.

“Not so impressive.” Vivian said with a laugh.

The headlights of the car suddenly became lighted. Jonas and Vivian froze in their sneering smiles, their eyes reflecting their increasing terror. The lights of the car comprised of an LED daylight running light shaped like an inverted U, and a bi-xenon projector lamp below that. It looks like a pair of fierce looking eyes. The lights began to pulsate.

At this time, others have noticed the car. They gathered and cowered around their cars, looking curiously at the headlights of the Mercedes.

Ernie made to approach the car. “Be careful!” Wendy yelled.

Suddenly, the car engine fired alive. Jonas reached out and pulled Cheng-er back. The car moved out of its parking lot and towards them. The Mercedes came to a stop in front of their cars. Its lights pulsed again, and they crouched lower instinctively. In another second, it accelerated madly to the ramp and sped off.

Zach spat and cursed. “Is that thing challenging us?” he bellowed. “Let’s go!” He dashed into the red Audi and fired up the engine in an instant.

“Quick,” Vivian said quickly. “Let’s follow it.” She got into back seat of the limousine with Wendy while Jonas and Ernie took their usual positions in the front seats. In no time, the limousine sped off after the Audi. The 2 cars followed the Mercedes which drove itself towards the arrival hall of Changi Airport Terminal 3.

Jonas looked tensed and mumbled. “Let’s hope that oaf keeps a distance.”

“Yes, let’s hope he doesn’t go and confront that chap.” Vivian said worriedly.

Wendy out of the window. “He is slowing and stopping at a distance. Ern, stop behind Zach.”

Ernie growled a reply.

“There he is!” Jonas exclaimed. Walking out of the terminal in hurried footsteps was Yang, wearing the same clothes as the night before. He was walking towards the Mercedes when he suddenly stopped in his tracks. He took out his phone and looked intently at it. He suddenly turned towards the direction of the two cars in horror before giving a yell and making a mad dash towards the Mercedes. The rear passenger door opened on its own and he dived into the car. The Mercedes sped off as the door closed itself. It must have shocked everyone as it took a moment before the Audi began to dash after the Mercedes. Ernie floored the accelerator and raced after the Audi.

11. The third disappearance

The mood in the limousine was tense.

“Where are we meeting Dellen?” Jonas asked.

“A café in Tanjong Pagar.” Ernie said.

“Do you think that Yang is headed there?” Jonas asked. “He should then be using this East Coast Expressway all the way into town?”

Ernie stepped on the accelerator and the car surged ahead, easily passing the red Audi driven by Zach who looked at the passing limousine in surprise.

“We are going at 250km per hour!” Vivian exclaimed, looking at the speedometer “Will we be fined by the speed cameras?”

“Do you see traffic police for the past few days?” Jonas tried to shake himself from his dazzled state, “I have never seen the Singapore Flyer fly past so fast in my life.” He turned towards the back seat and half-yelled, “Sis, you ok?”

“Ok.” Wendy said tightly.

Ernie looked worriedly at the rear-view mirror. But he persevered, and the limousine sped along the expressway, through the suburbs.

“We are approaching the city!” Jonas exclaimed, pointing at the looming buildings in the distant Central Business District. The car turned into a ramp leading into the underground Marina Coastal Expressway.

“Are you all right?” Vivian asked Wendy. “You are turning green!”

“Hang on, we will be there soon!” Ernie said hoarsely.

The limousine shot through the length of the expressway before emerging like a jet onto the Keppel Viaduct. Ernie took the second exit and flew down the ramp towards the Cantonment area. He made a swift left turn and stopped before a shop house.

“We are here.” Ernie said in relief.

Wendy fumbled for the car door lever and dashed out of the car. She stumbled towards a pillar and threw up into the drain next to it. Ernie quickly came to her side and gently patted her back. Wendy looked at Ernie in anger and slapped him on the arm. Vivian and Jonas looked at them and around the café worriedly.

“We must get to her before that Yang chap.” Vivian said and quickly entered the café with Jonas.

There was only one customer sitting in the corner. She was a modestly dressed lady with a neat, neck-length hair. Vivian approached her cautiously. She saw them coming and stood up with a smile. “Hi, you guys from Babyhood?”

Jonas and Vivian looked at each other and laughed awkwardly.

"Yes." Vivian said.

"No." Jonas said at the same time.

"You guys called me last night, didn't you?" Dellen asked, her smile now faded slightly.

"No." Yanqi said.

"Yes." Jonas said at the same time.

Dellen frowned. Vivian shot a dirty look at Jonas who suavely fished out a name card and held it to Dellen.

"I am Jonas Lee of Bank Lee." Jonas.

Dellen's eyes widened. "You are Mr Lee?" She turned to Vivian and spotted her wedding band. "You are Mrs Lee?" she asked.

"Sorry, Mrs Ou-Yang." Jonas said easily. "We should have been clearer. The bank had just bought over Babyhood, and this is our first interview following that, so we want to be more careful and respectful to our interviewee, which is why we are here."

"Yes, we have some business dealing with O.Y Construction too. We are so happy to have you as the first interviewee after our purchase." Vivian quickly quipped.

"You are too nice." Dellen said, looking quite flattered. "I didn't know that both of you would be here, otherwise..."she took an awkward glance at her own dressing and the modest café.

The three of them broke into a rather awkward laugh.

Dellen looked around. "The two of you are not interviewing me, are you?"

"Oh, no." Jonas said, pointing outside. "Our two reporters are on the way."

"Not the two of them?" Dellen asked in wonder, pointing at Wendy who was still bended over the drain throwing up and trying to slap Ernie at the same time. Ernie was trying to pat her back while avoiding her slaps.

"Of course not." Vivian said smilingly. "Our writers are on the way."

Vivian and Jonas exchanged a dark look when Dellen was not looking.

The red Audi came to a screech outside the café, and Zach and Yolander came running out of the car. They stopped outside, looking at Wendy and Ernie with concern. Ernie waved them into the cafe.

"Was he here?" Zach blurted as he stormed into the cafe.

Dellen looked at them curiously. Vivian gave them a stern look, while Jonas jerked his head with a plastic smile. Zach and Yolander caught the cues and smiled awkwardly at Dellen.

"They are our writers, and they will be interviewing you, Mrs Ou-yang." Jonas said.

Zach and Yolander nodded, and they sprung into action.

“Yes, Mrs Ou-yang. Can we start? Where are you triplets? Can we take a picture with them?” Yolander asked with forced cheerfulness.

“Their school ran late today.” Dellen said. “I came here first and sent my helpers to fetch them.”

At this time, Dellen’s phone sounded. She held her phone to her ears and turned pale in an instant. “What do you mean? Who is it? Mercedes? What...?”

Everyone gathered towards her, looking worried,

Dellen was in tears when she ended her call. “A mysterious man came and fetched my babies from their school before my helpers reached them.”

Everyone looked shocked. “Why did the school release your children to a stranger?”

“They didn’t.” Dellen sobbed. “That man had papers to fetch another child but ended up with my kids instead!”

“Did you say he was driving a Mercedes?” Yolander asked.

“Yes.” Dellen howled. “My poor babies!”

“Must be that...!” Zach finished with a curse.

Dellen looked at them with building anger and fear. “Who exactly are all of you? My babies disappeared the moment we meet!”

“Mrs Ou-Yang...” Vivian began tightly.

But Dellen took her handbag and dashed out of the café without a word.

Everyone looked disappointed and upset.

“No wonder that chap turned into the Pan Island Expressway, instead of coming here.” Zach said angrily. “He was targeting at the babies to prevent Dellen from helping us!”

“You mean he turned into Pan Island Expressway?” Jonas asked.

“Yes, not long before you guys overtook me. I was wondering if I should follow him when you guys sped me by. I thought you guys must have learnt of something and decided to follow you here instead.” Zach said.

“We didn’t.” Vivian said exasperatedly. “We thought he had gone ahead and went full speed ahead too!”

“What should we do now?” Yolander asked. “Do you think the triplets are in danger?”

“Depends.” Jonas said gravely. “Madam Quincey is alive, but Pu is still missing. Gosh, I hate to have done this to Dellen. She must be worried sick for her kids.”

“If I can get my hands on that scum.” Zach said furiously, rubbing his knuckles. “What’s he trying to do? Sabotage and do all of us in?”

“Casualties are increasing with every plan that we carry out.” Vivian said heavily. “What should we do?”

"I think we need to get out of here." Yolander said. Everyone turned to look at her. She pointed to the outside sky.

"It's happening again." Jonas said as splits tear across the dark grey sky, and voids began to form.

'Let's go." Zach said urgently.

They went out of the café, just as Ernie was coming into the café, holding on to a rather pale Wendy.

"What's happening?" Ernie asked.

"Yang abducted Dellen's kids." Jonas said quickly. "Let's go back."

"Do we go back to the airport hotel?" Yolander asked.

Wendy nodded sombrely.

A wind was rising. And they all scrambled into their cars.

"Can you drive, instead?" Ernie asked, looking at Jonas pleadingly.

"No, you drive!" Wendy said angrily, mustering whatever strength she had.

"All right, all right." Ernie said quickly in appeasement.

The party quickly departed the Cantonment area and returned to the Marina Coastal Expressway. On the way back to the airport, the sky grew so dark that it seemed like nighttime although it had just past noon. Huge planes of voids were forming, some translucent and others appearing with shiny black surface, some criss-crossing each other. The group in the limousine was silent as Ernie tried to drive cautiously towards the airport.

"Step on it." Wendy said impatiently to him. "What's wrong with you?"

"What?" Ernie said, stunned.

"Get back to the airport, quick!" Wendy said urgently, before appearing nauseous.

Ernie nodded dumbly. He took a deep breath and floored the accelerator. The limousine surged ahead.

"That doctor is racing back to the airport again." Zach said with a slight disapproval in his tone, as he watched the back of the limousine pulled ahead.

Yolander sighed, and said "The last couple of days were crazy. I kind of miss the days in the kitchen, you know"

"Treat it as a holiday." Zach said simply.

"Can we go back to our lives again after this?" Yolander asked softly.

Zach turned to look at her and saw that she was tearing.

Zach reached for her hand, and said firmly, "We will."

Yolander closed her eyes and grasped his hand tighter.

The group made their way back to the airport hotel, which now seems to be completely devoid of people. As they made their way back to the meeting room, they stared in shock at the state of the room. Wendy's stack of notes was thrown everywhere. She hurried to the laptop and found that it was badly burnt. She pressed on the power button, but nothing happened.

"This is the laptop from HY's Circle, isn't it?" Vivian asked in a shock.

Zach swore on top of his voice.

Everyone looked around in shock, with Vivian and Yolander looking most upset.

Wendy looked around, closed her eyes and lay quite still.

"Are you all right?" Ernie asked miserably.

Wendy suddenly opened her eyes. She reached for her phone and sent a message. Soon, everyone's phones sounded.

Jonas looked at his phone with a frown. "Why did you send this to the group chat?" He suddenly looked suspicious and whispered, "Are we being tapped or watched?"

Wendy laughed a little. "On the contrary," she held up her phone and said, "This is."

"Why are you asking us to go to Shanghai to look for H.Y.?" Zach asked as he looked at her message on his phone.

Wendy told Jonas. "Book the earliest possible flight. All of you can go wait for Yang at the check in counter."

"You mean..." Yolander said, not getting what she means.

"The flight app says that the next flight to Shanghai takes off in two hours. Are you sure about this?" Jonas asked Wendy.

"Do it." Wendy said. She turned to Zach and said with a slight venom, "Capture him when you see him. Then we will know what is going on for sure."

Jonas tapped furiously on this phone. He handed the phone to Zach and Yolander to fill up their details before completing the purchase.

"All right, its done." Jonas said. "I am sending the flight's screen grab to the group chat."

"Ok, all of you can go and wait for him at the check in counter."

Vivian looked her and said "You better not come with us. You still look quite sick."

"I know." Wendy said. She looked at Ernie and said coldly "The culprit will take care of me here."

Ernie looked absolutely beaten down. He nodded slightly.

The group left for the airport's departure hall, leaving Ernie and Wendy in the room. Wendy held out her hand.

Ernie took it but looked puzzled. "What is it?" he asked gently.

"Take me to the car," she said. "There is a burnt smell here."

Ernie and Wendy made their way slowly to the limousine in the basement car park. Ernie helped Wendy to settle into the front passenger seat before taking his seat in the driver's seat.

"Are the car lights off?" Wendy asked.

"Yes." Ernie said.

"Good." Wendy said. "We'll wait here. Let me rest." She closed her eyes and seemed to drift off to sleep. Ernie looked at her, looking worried, and keeping as quiet as he can be.

In a about half an hour, the Mercedes was moving down the ramp to the basement car park.

"He's here." Ernie said.

Wendy opened her eyes. "Is he driving it?" she asked.

Ernie looked on closely and nodded, "Yes, he's in there."

They watched the car moved to one of the lots that was closest to the lift lobby before parking itself. Yang alighted from the driver's seat, this time looking extremely harassed. He grabbed his carry-on bag and entered the lift lobby. There was a ding, and a lift door opened. He entered the lift and pressed the button repeatedly before the lift door closed.

"Do we need to tell them?" Ernie asked as he made to use his phone.

Wendy grabbed the phone from him and looked at him fiercely, saying "I said we were being monitored through the phone network and here you are..."

"I'm sorry!" Ernie said desperately. "You are not feeling well, and I am worried sick!"

"It's all your fault!" she hissed at him.

"I know." Ernie said, his face screwing up slightly. "My driving sucks..."

Wendy looked satisfied and said, "Send me to the hospital."

"What?" Ernie exclaimed, looked aghast.

12. The Capture

Yang muttered a little to himself as he proceeded to check-in, looking a little flustered and bad tempered. There was hardly anyone else in the entire check-in row for Business Class. He walked towards the only counter that was manned. But he never could reach the counter. Someone yanked his jacket collar from behind, and he stumbled backwards.

A large muscular man stood in front of him, eyes ablaze and spoiling for a fight. It suddenly dawned on Yang that something was amiss. He backed off as the man approached him with a sinister smile. Suddenly, there was a squeal and two ladies had rammed a trolley into him from behind. He fell backwards awkwardly onto the trolley and another man quickly tied him down with a rubber robe.

The large man approached him and petted him on his face. "Gotcha." he said with barely contained anger.

The two ladies cheered. "Let's push the bad man back to the room!" Yolander said.

"I want to push too!" Vivian said happily.

Jonas and Zach exchanged a high-five and walked on each side of the trolley, keeping a careful eye on their catch.

The group entered the meeting room.

"Where is Wendy?" Vivian asked.

"Maybe she is up in her room." Jonas said. "Don't worry, Ern is with her."

Vivian nodded and cast an angry eye at Yang, who is still tied on the trolley. "This is your handiwork? Thrashing our place?" she asked furiously.

"I didn't!" Yang cried, looking at all of them nervously.

"Speak! Did you kidnap Pu?" Vivian asked again.

"Did you frame Madam Quincey with the faked panda documents?" Jonas asked.

"Did you kidnap the three babies from Dellen?" Yolander asked.

"You better tell us truthfully or I am going to break your bones." Zach added, show off his knuckles.

Yang looked at them, gave a huge sighed and said, "We must not meet H.Y. We are of a different reality!"

There was a sudden silence in the room, as everyone contemplated what they have just heard.

"Can I sit down on a chair, please? This trolley has a metal part in the wrong place." he said as he shifted uncomfortably.

Yolander and Vivian looked at Jonas, who nodded slightly to Zach. Zach lifted him up from the trolley and placed him on a seat. Zach sat himself just in front of the door, glaring at Yang.

"What do you mean, 'different reality'?" Vivian asked Yang suspiciously.

"All of you should have known by now that we are characters in H.Y's novels? Our reality is his work of The Glass Empire." Yang said.

"Does this mean that we are really non-existent?" Yolander asked.

"Yes, does that mean that we are just mere creation of this H.Y?" Zach asked.

"Yes and no." Yang said patiently. "The Glass Empire is H.Y's work of imagination. Our reality came from there. But it does not mean that we don't exist."

Everyone frowned and looked troubled.

Yang turned to look at Zach. "Do you believe in belief?"

"What?" Zach gasped.

Yang tried to retrieve something from his pocket, but just realised that he was tied up. "Can I?" he asked.

Jonas relented and untied the rubber rope.

Yang took out his wallet. He extracted a US dollar bill and pushed across the table. "This is belief."

"In God we trust?" Vivian and Yolander read from the bill.

Yang smiled and nodded. "Our reality and us, came from H.Y's imagination. But he completely believes that we are real. The Glass Empire, each and every one of us, to him, exist on our own right. And this is H.Y's belief."

Everyone went silent again.

"I think I am getting there, but not quite yet." Jonas said slowly.

"H.Y is a complicated..." Yang began.

"...and a simple person at the same time." the others quipped.

Yang nodded, looking impressed. "Dr Lee is a very talented psychologist indeed. Yes, this is the simplistic part of H.Y. From the spark of inspiration that the Glass Empire was born, he genuinely believes that this reality exists, but it may be one that is outside of his own."

"That is the difference between him and a creator in the religious sense?" Zach asked.

"Exactly!" Yang boomed. "For H.Y, there was no plan and no intention to create another reality and all of you. In fact, H.Y sometimes feels that he discovered the Glass Empire from a spark of inspiration, rather than created it from a creator's perspective."

Zach nodded. "I can accept that."

"But it is from his spark of inspiration that make us invariably linked to H.Y, and his wellbeing in his reality." Yang said.

"And something is happening to him, isn't it?" Yolander asked eagerly. "Which is why our Circle is crashing?"

"Circle?" Yang asked.

Jonas rummaged around and found Wendy's diagram on the floor. He showed it to Yang.

"Gucci?" Yang asked.

"No," Jonas snapped. He explained Wendy's Glass Circle theory to Yang as simplistically as possible.

Yang nodded again. "I see. What would be closer to the situation would be this." He took out a pen from his jacket and began to draw.

"A dumbbell?" Zach asked.

"The two circles are separate but connected." Yang said. "It takes energy and effort to maintain this separation."

"Energy?" Vivian asked.

"Doesn't it take energy and effort to sustain our beliefs?" Yang asked.

Everyone nodded in unison.

Yang looked more serious as he said "Now this is the problem. When the energy is weak, the separation becomes weak too. And the two circles will begin to come nearer to each other."

"We will join H.Y's reality?" Yolander asked.

Yang smiled and pointed to the dollar bill again. "Belief and reality are different things. When our Circle come close to H.Y's Circle, we don't stand a chance."

Everyone seems to gasp.

"Everything gets engulfed by reality." Yang said simply. He continued, stressing on each word carefully. "The two circles are now near to each other, and Dr Lee may be right: there may already be some overlap of our Circles. And if you guys appear in H.Y's reality, there will no longer be any distinction or separation between the 2 Circles. The only outcome will be our complete annihilation by H.Y's reality."

"How?" Zach asked with a deep frown.

Vivian attempted to explain, "If you are a writer, and the characters in your stories started turning up at your door..."

"Gosh, I will freak out and never write again." Yolander said with a shiver.

"And we'll be dead meat!" Zach exclaimed.

Yang nodded. "Yes. His belief, which is our reality, will collapse immediately." He looked outside and said sombrely, "Which is half happening already."

"We understand the situation now." Vivian said. "What will happen to Pu, Madam Quincey and the babies?"

Yang gave a laugh. "Pu is in hospital."

“What?” everyone asked in surprise.

“Pu wanted to approach H.Y at the reservoir,” he said. “I tried to stop him while he was in the car. He had a heart attack as he was trying to drive off. So I cut his seatbelt and moved him to my car before sending him to hospital. He had emergency angioplasty and should be regaining consciousness soon.”

“How did you know that he wanted to approach H.Y?”

“I guessed.” Yang said with a laugh.

“From what?” Vivian pressed.

“From the looks of how you guys got me, Dr Lee must have guessed that I am monitoring all of you?” Yang asked.

“From our phones?” Jonas asked. “How did you guess that Pu wanted to approach H.Y?”

“He made searches for the maps of R.U on his phone, which is the poly-nic that H.Y is working in his Circle.” Yang said.

“It’s Poly-tech.” Vivian corrected, looking around impressively.

“Yes, that.” Yang said dismissively. “I already knew that all of you were positioned at the reservoir from your conference call, but Pu began to do extensive search on R.U just a couple of hours before you guys began on your plan. It aroused my suspicions, so I monitored him.”

“I didn’t know that Pu was going to act.” Jonas said, looking quite moved.

“We could have added oil to fire, though.” Yolander said sheepishly, looking at Zach.

“Did we?” Zach asked in surprise.

“Pu was sending us back and we went on about how it was all H.Y’s fault, and we should talk the sense out of H.Y.” Yolander said awkwardly.

Zach nodded “Yes, we did.” He looked impressed. “Wow, that uncle is really something.”

“You are really something too.” Yang said sneeringly. “You nearly got all of us into trouble!”

“What did I do?” Zach asked with belligerence.

“He noticed you!” Yang retorted. “We got dragged so near to H.Y’s Circle in that instant. That’s why you see the weather deteriorating and the dividers forming!”

Zach looked away as he run his hand over his hair.

“What’s your role in this?” Vivian asked with curiosity. “How do you know all this? Why are you in this?”

“I am a minor character in The Glass Empire.” Yang said regretfully. I was supposed to have my own story, The Glass Eyes, but H.Y has never gotten to writing it.”

“The Glass Eyes?” Jonas asked. “You talking about the car? That Mercedes?”

Yang nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. This was H.Y's car in his Circle. He wanted to write about it. But he lost interest after the car gave him problems and he sold it after that."

"What has this got to with your role?" Vivian asked.

"Those with minor roles are tasked with administrative duties to see to the wellbeing of our Circle. I just happened to be on duty this week." he said, shrugging his shoulder.

"Tasked?" Vivian asked in disbelief. "There is an organisation somewhere?"

"Yes," Yang replied. "It's a kind of organisation at the supra-level where we are trained for the roles that we undertake. We are only activated when there is a danger. We have access to all infrastructure like satellite and everything else. Pioneer and main characters like you guys are excused. So you wouldn't know about this at all."

"Why couldn't you just come out and tell us all this?" Vivian asked. "We could have avoided this wild goose chase!"

"This is the first time that something like this has happened, where we are called into action for real." Yang said. "We took a while to get our operations procedures right. And you guys were initiating plan after plan every day. We needed to negate your actions first. We were planning to send you guys for training soon."

"I thought you said we don't have to perform 'duties' like you?" Jonas asked. "Who decides all these then?"

Yang replied with some disdain in his voice. "I am on duty because I don't have a major role for me to reinforce our Circle, which you guys have, and not doing too much about it, I can see."

"What do you mean by that?" Jonas asked in surprise.

"H.Y's spark of inspiration is largely drawn from the imperfections of his own reality." Yang said. "Things that he may want to have, but not having them, at least, not yet."

"What are those things?" Vivian asked.

"You saw his bio, didn't you?" Yang asked a little impatiently. "You don't see what is lacking?"

"He's not married!" Zach said excitedly.

"Yes," Yang said. "He also wished that he had a brother, or an industrial career, or financial security." He looked at them with an incredulous look. "Don't you find that your lives are very different from H.Y? All of you are part of what he deeply yearns for." He looked at Jonas and said, "Like he wished he had a brother, like how you and your brother have each other."

"Is that why the weather improves when I spend time with Ern? Is that why Wendy wanted us to stay at Old Airport Road?" Jonas asked.

"No, he wanted both of you to take refuge at Old Airport Road because it was one of H.Y's favourite places." Vivian corrected him, looking impressive again.

"You are both right. Old Airport Road is where H.Y had some of his fondest memories of family life." Yang said. "But it was the two of you too that made the difference, like how all of you, including

me..." he stressed "...are the wonderful people that H.Y lacked in his life. These give strength to H.Y's belief, which maintains and separate our Circle from H.Y's reality. "

"What can we do now?" Jonas asked.

"I don't know." Yang said. "This is the first time that we are in a crisis and it's such a serious one. We are not sure what the actual recovery measures are. I am not even sure if we have any! As the main characters in the Glass Empire, the rest will be up to you. But we don't have much time left. You see the deterioration all around us? When the voids overwhelm us, we will be..."

"What?" Yolander asked fearfully.

"Voided." Yang said.

Everyone in the room looks stunned.

"I have to go." Yang said with a sigh.

"Go?" Jonas asked. "Where to?"

"I need to return the triplets to their school. I left them at a childcare facility in R.U." Yang said. He looked outside and said bleakly. "I am not sure if we can survive long enough for Ou-yang to see her kids."

With that, he made for the door. Everyone was in the darkest of moods. Zach stood aside and did not stop Yang from leaving. "Oh yes, Madam Quincey will be all right. The panda documents referred to toy pandas. "

Everyone was too distraught to reply.

"See you then." Yang said, looking a little disappointed at the sudden lack of attention to him.

"Take care." Jonas said gloomily.

Yang brightened up. "I will. Send my regards to the doctors."

Jonas nodded. He watched Yang left the room and said, "Glad Wen and Ern didn't get to hear all these... stuff."

"What do we do now?" Yolander asked.

Jonas looked outside and said heavily "I believe we are out of time."

14. Reprise

A black limousine turned slowly into the car park at Dakota Crescent. It parked perfectly into one of the many empty lots next to a block of flats. An elderly driver came out to open the rear passenger door.

“Perfect!” said Jonas. “So glad to have you back. You don’t know who we had to live with all this time.”

Pu laughed. “Master Ernie is a new driver, Master Jonas.”

“True.” Jonas said. Before he left the car, he told Pu, “I may take a while.”

“Yes, Master Jonas.” Pu said.

Jonas walked along the block of flats. He reached the lift lobby and pressed for the lift. Before long, the lift door opened with a huge clang. Jonas looked startled. He looked at the lift with a gulp and decided to make for the stairs instead.

He reached the sixth floor with a slight pant. He looked around and proceeded towards unit 6B. He was about to insert his key when he noticed that the door was slightly ajar. He pushed the door open and saw Ernie by the open wardrobe, doing some packing.

“Oh, you are here,” Ernie said. “I thought you’d be earlier.”

“I was delayed by a meeting.” Jonas said as he took off his jacket. “What time do you have to hand over the unit?”

“Evening. So we have time.” He put some of the things he packed in a bag, and asked, “You want coffee?”

“All right.” Cheng yih said as he made himself comfortable on one of the two armchairs. “What time are you guys flying back to the US tonight?”

“Oh, it’s around midnight.” Ernie replied as he put a cup of steaming coffee on the coffee table next to Jonas.

“You finished packing?” Jonas asked as he took a sip.

“Almost.” Ernie said, looking around with his hands at his waist. “You think we will ever come back here again?”

Jonas gave a sigh of pleasure as he put down his coffee cup. “I read that the entire estate would be torn down, but it doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Yes, yes.” Ernie said, a little dismissively. “It’s the people that matters right? You said this many times.”

“What do you think happened to us?” Jonas asked. “How did we get back to our lives and hardly lost any time at all?”

“Wendy explained a little to me, but it’s out of my level.” Ernie laughed. He took a cup and sat down on the other armchair.

“Will you be back in time for the Zach and Yolander’s wedding?” Jonas asked.

“Are they doing it soon now? I heard Wendy said that the roof leak at Imperial Tai was real, and substantial repairs are needed.” Ernie said as he drank his coffee.

“Yes, his Uncle Westly finally came back from Europe with his parents.” Jonas said, picking up a magazine on the coffee table. “They are going to merge Westly’s Glass Red wine café with the Imperial Tai.” He made a soft whistle as he turned the magazine.

Ernie smiled as he looked at the page. “The long queue at Koon’s Kitchen? They retained the Le Franc Star, didn’t they?”

Jonas laughed. “Indeed! The master judge could not believe how good the broth was. He took three spoonful, shook his head in amazement and decided on the outcome. What a marvel an orange peel makes.”

“It was vintage peel, apparently.” Ernie said with a laugh.

Jonas thought for a moment, and said, “Zach said they got back here by running into the void. Did you?”

Ernie nodded. “Wen and I ran through one to retrieve the pregnancy test dipstick.”

Jonas frowned. “How did Vivian and I get back here, then?”

“How did you leave the airport?” Ernie asked.

“By train.” Jonas said simply. His eyes suddenly widened in excitement as he pointed to Ernie.

Ernie already knew. “The train went through a void,” he said, nodding.

“That was easy for me and Vivian.” Jonas said happily.

“We should have done it earlier, then.” Ernie said. “But we avoided those like a plague.”

“Do you think that was what those things were for?” Jonas asked. “To bring us back? But that was not what that Yang told us though.”

Ernie shrugged, and he smiled slightly as he said, “I don’t think any writer wants to destroy his own work.” He looked at Jonas almost shyly and continued, “I have written so many papers in the last few years. I wouldn’t want to send a superbug and destroy them all.”

Jonas laughed. “That’s true.” He drained his coffee cup and looked outside with a satisfied sigh. “We were a function of a writer just weeks ago. Now, it’s all back to normal.”

“Maybe we still are.” Ernie said. “His mood got better, maybe?”

“You know that all traces of what happened in the last few days have virtually disappeared?” Jonas said. “Mum and Jeremy were in the hotel room resting when I returned to the airport hotel, and they also said that just one night has passed since they checked in. The hotel has no record that we had ever used the meeting room.”

“Wen’s documents are all gone?” Ernie asked in wonder.

“Along with that laptop from the other Circle.” Jonas said with his eyes narrowed.

“That means that just the four of us, Zach and Yolander somehow experienced this.” Ernie said. He recalled something and asked Jonas quickly, “What did Pu say?”

Jonas’s expression turned incredulous. “You won’t believe it. He said that he was going to do a body check-up the day after you returned. The doctor discovered at the check-up that one of his main arteries was almost completely blocked and he underwent emergency surgery for that.”

“And I found him in the same hospital where Wendy was admitted!” Ernie said. “So he thinks he was there all along? He had no recollection of being at the reservoir?”

Jonas clicked his finger and said “Exactly.” He sat nearer to Ernie and said “Oh, and I ran into that Yang at Mercedes-Benz. He acted like he didn’t know me at all!”

“Is he pretending?” Ernie asked in disbelief. “Like he is not supposed to know us after his mission is over?”

“Take it from me,” Ernie tapped his own chest. “He really doesn’t know me now.”

Ernie gulped. He tried to take another sip from his cup and realised that it was empty.

“When will you be back?” Jonas asked.

“I need to complete the transfer applications for my medical training, and Wendy needs to finish her book soon.” Ernie said thoughtfully. “I would say in about two to three months.”

Jonas nodded. “Wendy should be back soon, or it will be difficult for her to travel.”

“Bro, I am a doctor.” Ernie said, a little less earnestly and a little more proudly than usual.

Jonas grabbed his head “A big deal, aren’t you now?”

Ernie laughed and dodged off. “Oh!” he said. “I wanted to ask you this the first night we were here. But you fell asleep.”

Jonas looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

“Wen and I will work to earn our own keep. But we would like to stay with you. Is that all right?” Ernie asked a little cautiously.

Jonas evaluated Ernie for a moment. Then he looked away and blinked hard. He didn’t reply for some time.

Ernie looked a bit nervous and added, “I will of course contribute...”

Jonas tuned to Ernie and talked over him, “Yes, of course you will need to contribute to the household...” Ernie gulped and nodded. Jonas continued, “You would have to see us in the family, medically, for free.”

Ernie beamed. “Of course!” he said eagerly.

Jonas looked at him, half-amused, and said, “No wonder that H.Y is having a bad mood.”

“Why? What do you know?” Ernie asked.

Jonas smiled and said smugly, “He wants but doesn’t have a brother like you.”

Ernie glowed like the evening sun outside, as he proceeded to pick up his bags. Jonas helped him and before long, departed from the apartment together for the last time.

(H.Y. October 30, 2018)