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KALLANG BASIN ADAGIO

A NOVEL

KHOR KUAN LIANG



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BASIN
ADAGIO

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FOR THE CHILDREN OF TOMORROW

**“MUSIC EXPRESSES THAT WHICH
CANNOT BE SAID AND ON WHICH
IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO BE SILENT.”**

—VICTOR HUGO

**“AND THOSE WHO WERE SEEN
DANCING WERE THOUGHT TO
BE INSANE BY THOSE WHO
COULD NOT HEAR THE MUSIC.”**

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

A bright, secluded garden was her home during the earliest years of her existence. The sunshine, golden and diffused through the garden's glass canopy, sparkled upon her being, which seemed to materialise only in the concentrated spectrum of natural light. She was a centrepiece enveloped by a gentle mixture of sound: the soft sprinkle of the fountain's waters and the occasional fluttering of butterfly wings; the chirping of animated insects and the croaking of bowl-eyed frogs that floated on the lily pads.

At specified times she would add her own harmonies to the symphonies around her. This was her function. The moment would arise when she leaned forward and placed her hands upon the keys and the notes would flow from her mind, onto the keys and across the garden, a tender caress of sound.

It was sound as transient as a trickle of tears, as ethereal as the lingering sensation of a last kiss.

The man would come and observe her regularly. He would never announce his arrival and she would never acknowledge it. He would listen to her play and often he would sob to himself. But this she did not see; could not see. All she knew was the sound, and even that knowledge had limitations.

So, she would play when she was supposed to, oblivious to any audience that might be present.

One day the man had brought another with him, and the two stood quietly in the garden, amidst the glow of sunlight and the soft chorus of sound, listening while she played. The men talked to one another as she executed her task, and there was quivering exhilaration in their voices that she could not hear. When she was finished with her performance the men left, exchanging excited whispers.

Days passed before the man came again. Quietly, he opened the panels that led into the garden. Then the man came for her.

Gently he lifted her from the podium where she usually played. Her porcelain face stared up at her surroundings, unseeing, unknowing of the passions that burned in the places beyond the garden's canopy. And in the man's heart.

He kissed her cheek, softly, affectionately, for she was special to him.

"Time to wake," he whispered, though she would not hear.

Then, cradling her in his arms, he carried her out of the garden and into the world beyond...

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The rising path disappeared into spirals of white blurriness. Withered trees, their blackened and skeletal trunks spiked with icicles, jutted from the frosty ground. The gale hissed between the leafless branches, sending the exhalations of a wrathful storm whistling through the wreckage of ancient ruins, and over the frozen grave of destroyed technology. Thunderheads raged above while, on the tremulous horizon, tunnels of black clouds shot intermittently from the skies, smacking the earth and then moving rapidly over the barren rocky surface before dispersing, once again, into the violence of the storm. The raw furies of the Gods were unleashed on the defenceless earth, heedless of the wanderers lumbering through the frosty landscape.

Kenji leaned his rugged body against the combined forces of wind and snow, his head bent low. The coming storm seemed to be a particularly fearsome one, a Boomer, and it had advanced upon them without much warning. But they had survived such storms before. Adamantly, the man burrowed his way through the onslaught. Behind him the others did the same, the lining of their heavy fur coats barely keeping the winds at bay. Their voices reached Kenji over the rage of the storm as they called their names and positions, so none would be lost.

Sofia called out first, her statuesque frame thrust against the stinging snow. She pulled her hood up when she called, to ensure she was heard, and then dropped it quickly to keep the winds from lashing at her face. She dragged a sled behind her, carrying the dwindling provisions the travellers had to live on until the next hunt.

Tommy called next. He walked in the rear of the group, supporting his gangly frame with a long spear. The wind whipped his fuzzy

beard from the sides of his hood and it fell back, revealing a wrinkled, angular face.

Rosa yelled into the storm. Her voice was almost consumed by the roar as her wavy ginger hair undulated like flames at the edge of her hood.

After a moment Ling called wearily over the chaos. She moved her lean body forward in a quick leap, and then stopped for the others to call their positions.

Otter called out after her, raising his spear above his head to show his position along the edge of the trail. Then “Miguel!” barked his name, voicing his location near Kenji, who stood expectantly, waiting for the count to be complete. With these calls, two of the Tribe’s young men were accounted for. But a final voice failed to join the procession, and Kenji turned to check. Wrapped in their furry cloaks, the Tribe appeared to him as indistinct ghosts in the frenzy of snow that was descending from above.

He counted. Then he counted again, to be sure, confirming the numbers with his fingers.

6 “Six,” he said to himself. “*Enrique!*” the Chief yelled, hearing his call fail on the braying winds. There was no reply.

The procession knelt down as Kenji counted them. “Damn to you, Enrique!” he muttered. “Stay where you are!” he ordered, walking among the kneeling Tribesmen, recounting their numbers. Enrique was definitely missing.

“Tommy! What were you *doing* back there?” Kenji asked irritably. Tommy was a senior, like himself; he was supposed to assume this responsibility.

“I didn’t see anything!” Tommy yelled against the unrelenting wind. “You know how he is,” he added after a tense moment.

Kenji only grunted and waved his hand as if to bat off a pesky insect. He knew too well how Enrique could be. He wanted to be angry with Tommy; it was easier to have a target to vent his frustration. But he knew it was unjust. He hurriedly scanned the horizon.

“This is the last time,” he muttered to himself, knowing it was not true. “When I find that boy, I will...” But Kenji ceased his complaints when something caught his eyes. The others followed their Chief’s gaze

to see a dark shape, silhouetted against a snow bank.

“It’s him!” Sofia yelled. They rose from the snow, relieved that the count was complete. Enrique had been found. All that was left was the scolding he was bound to receive from Kenji.

“Damn to you, Enrique!” Kenji shouted, the exasperation evident in his voice despite the surge of relief he felt. He waved his arms, commanding the young man to get back in line. But Enrique did not come. Instead, he made a beckoning gesture. Perhaps he had discovered something, Kenji reasoned, maybe food or a useful artefact.

“Stay here!” he said to the others before he trod towards the vague outline of ruins that lay shrouded in snow.

Sofia caught Tommy’s attention and made an urgent gesture with her hand. Tommy understood. She wanted him to follow. His presence would prevent Kenji from inflicting any undue punishment. The man rose on shaky legs and moved quickly after their Chief, who had already vanished behind the ancient, crumbling walls.

Tommy arrived not a moment too soon, for, as he dashed around the corner and beyond the shrill whining of the wind, he heard Kenji’s 7 raised voice and saw him shaking Enrique with one strong arm, rapping his knuckles against the young man’s hooded head with the other. Enrique made no move to deflect the strokes, but Tommy could see the annoyance in the smooth darkness of his face.

“I am telling you *what* again?” Kenji yelled as he struck. “Is your brain in there now? Can anybody hear me call?”

Enrique’s lips curled and he snarled like a cornered animal. But he still made no move to divert Kenji’s blows.

“Stop that, Kenji!” Tommy shouted. “It is enough!”

Kenji glanced over his shoulder, as if awakening from a daze. He yanked his hands away from Enrique, his expression and body language uncertain for a moment. But his anger returned almost instantly, and he thrust an accusing finger at Enrique’s face.

“To lead you must first learn to *follow!* To command you must learn to *obey!*” Kenji felt as if he’d repeated this phrase every single day of their arduous journey from Melaka Town. “Shelter is *that* way,” he said, pointing at the caves that dotted the higher ground towards

which they were headed. "Searching around for you only leaves us in the storm longer!"

"Are you finished now?" Enrique said. His voice was calm, his body language submissive. But his eyes were aflame, his pupils contracted with frustration. Kenji waited for some sort of defiant retort, but after a moment it was apparent that Enrique had more important concerns.

The confrontation was over. For now.

Kenji took a deep breath. "What?" he asked.

Enrique nodded towards a section of the ancient wall before them. "It's a door," he said.

Kenji walked to the spot where the young man had gestured. At the end of the enclosure lay a broad bank of snow that nearly blanketed a low set building. From the trail outside, it had appeared as mere wreckage. But from here he could see the building was mostly intact. Set in the middle of the ice-encrusted mass was a wide door. It was blackened by age, and looked as if fire had once scoured its gnarled surface. At the foot of the door the snow was cleared and a crystal sheet of ice lay like a walkway before it. Enrique did not have to explain his urgency. The area had been trodden upon recently. A set of small footprints led away from the door while another set of similar footprints led towards the door; someone had left and someone had entered this place.

Kenji made a hasty hand signal to Tommy, indicating the need to act with covertness. Enrique snorted. "Anyone around here would have already heard your big mouth, Kenji!" he said, not bothering to mask his contempt.

Kenji glared at the younger man for a moment before fixing an eye on Tommy, who knelt to inspect the icy tracks.

"Only one...maybe two people," he said, after a moment. "Small feet; a child, perhaps." He rose then, stepping away from the footprints. "Definitely since sunrise."

"Get Miguel and Ling," Kenji said, parting his bear-hide fur and reaching for his sheath. "Tell the others to come and wait for us here." Enrique started to move but Kenji grabbed his arm. "Stay," he ordered as Tommy left.

Kenji turned his attention back to the door. Sealed on its surface were

upraised letters embossed on a plaque of rusted metal, which may have once glittered in the light. Kenji fingered the inscription. "A message?" he asked.

Enrique stifled his frustration again and studied the writing. "It says: Gallery of *something*, Kenji. I do not know this last word. There are many letters that make no sense together."

"Is it like the 'danger' or 'keep out' words?" Kenji asked cautiously.

Enrique shook his head. "No, no. It is no warning. I have not seen this before. It is not the common talk, whatever it says."

Kenji raised a sceptical brow. "If you do not know what it says, then how do you know what it *does not say*?" he reasoned.

But Enrique dismissed the point. "Kenji, why would someone write something as important as 'danger' in words that no one can make sense of?"

Kenji considered this. It was practical thinking, he decided. It satisfied his concerns. He held a gloved hand out to Enrique. "Light," he commanded.

Enrique reached into his coat and extracted a small silver-grey orb, just about the size of his palm. Kenji took it promptly, and gestured for Enrique to stand away from the door. As if on cue, Tommy, Miguel and Ling rushed around the corner, stepping quickly but quietly, their breaths forming a frosty mist in the air. They surveyed the scene, nodded to their Chief and swiftly withdrew sharp blades from their heavy furs. They were ready.

Just before he moved on the old door, Kenji turned and fastened his followers with a stern look. "Remember that we are not Raiders," he said firmly. "We do not strike unless attacked." When they had acknowledged this, he waved them back from the door. Storage places were known to have traps for inattentive explorers, and he would not allow anyone to get hurt. He wrapped his hand cautiously around the thick metal handle in the centre of the portal, and pulled.

There was a squeal of complaints from the rusted hinges; the sound filled the enclosure like the cries of a tormented creature. Kenji pushed and pulled until he felt the door give way. Then he shoved his weight against it, and ducked as it fell open. He stood on springy steps, his

stance defensive; poised to dodge anything that might fly towards him he raised his sword, ready to strike. Behind him the others were in their positions, watching for anything shifting in the darkness beyond the door, listening for the sound of feet pattering, or the hiss of an arrow slicing through the frosty air.

But they were met only by an odour from the dark interior of the ancient structure.

“Something’s dead in there,” Enrique pointed out. Kenji shushed him with an impatient look. He knew that odour. They all did. The reek that smacked their nostrils was sufficient warning to leave this place, and he could tell by the expression of his followers that they were eager to take off. But Kenji had to consider the storm outside. He cast a confident gaze on his followers. “If someone died here, then someone lived here,” he reasoned. “And if someone lived here, there might still be food somewhere inside.” No one spoke as this point was considered. Eventually they nodded.

10 Kenji moved to the opening. The silence beyond was as thick as the stagnant air that hung throughout the room. He flicked his thumb against the orb in his hand and it sprang to life, illuminating his immediate surroundings in a silvery glow. He cupped the light in his palm and turned it, so that it would not hinder his vision. Then he held it up, into the darkness beyond the door, and passed through.

The storm was instantly muffled by the thick walls. In the orb’s glow, Kenji could see that the floor beyond was level, so he knelt and rolled the light into the room. The darkness seemed to consume its radiance at first, but then his eyes adjusted and the Chief gasped. So vast were the dimensions of the place that the light was barely strong enough to reveal the towering walls and ceiling. The room seemed much too large in comparison with its exterior, but this must have been an illusion of the frosty dimness. Kenji stepped forward, his blade thrust before him, his palm raised behind, signalling the others to wait.

The massive room whispered of ancient elements: of forgotten sciences scrolled into indecipherable patterns on microfiche and shrivelled paper; of protocols hardwired into the brains of machines that could no longer accept requests from the descendants of their creators, their batteries

drained or stolen, their access codes lost in a mire of forgotten languages. The only sound was that of the wind moaning beyond the enclosure, and the scuffle of his feet on the tiled floor. Around him, revealed in the silver glow, Kenji could see walls lined with cluttered shelves, stacked high with the cobwebbed relics of a more literate age.

“What...what is this place?” he said to the silence. Nothing answered. Behind him, the others slipped quietly into the room, awed by its withered majesty.

Enrique stepped close to Kenji. “It looks like a library,” he whispered, his voice disrupting the still air. “A place that keeps the old science.”

Kenji grunted an acknowledgement and gestured for the others to come forward. They obeyed, forming a wide circle around the light. The reek of death grew stronger with every step.

“No traps,” Kenji said in a satisfied tone. “We’ll have to find the dead one before we can bring in the others. There could be food in here. Artefacts, and batteries, maybe.” He turned to Enrique, the slightest hint of an apology on his face. “You may have saved us the climb,” he admitted. “We can camp here till the Boomer is gone.”

But Enrique was not listening. He gaze went beyond Kenji. His brow narrowed and he pointed at something illuminated weakly at the edge of the orb’s glow. “What is that?” he asked, evidently alarmed. The others turned at once, their swords poised and ready. Enrique moved slowly towards the dark shape. It seemed familiar somehow and, as he moved closer, he suddenly became aware of what he was seeing.

“Woman!” he yelled. He fell into a crouch, thrusting his weapon towards the apparition. The others immediately began moving away from the light where they would be easy targets.

Only Kenji stood his ground. He had seen the shape. It was set in folds of white that cascaded down onto the dark, cold floor, the folds of white that gathered elegantly at the base of the chair in which she sat. He stepped towards her, ignoring the protests of warning from his followers.

“You can relax,” Kenji said. “She’s no threat to anyone. Not anymore.”

He kicked the orb so that it rolled across the floor and stopped near the folds of the woman’s dress. She was lit in the glow, her eyes fixed on some point beyond the men.

“She’s dead,” he said.

“But her eyes, Kenji,” Enrique whispered urgently.

Kenji shrugged. “I have seen this before, the dead with opened eyes. We are not so much different, maybe.” He knelt before the woman, and studied her face. She had been beautiful in life. Her face bore delicate, oval features; the exposed patches of her skin glimmered with the polished shine. Her lips were rosy and full, her eyes wide rings of brown. Her gaze was set on the eternity beyond the mortal world, into the realm of Shadows. Her hands were folded in the lap of her white gown, as if she had been awaiting something. Or someone, perhaps.

Her hair, caked with the frozen moisture of the room, was a shining black that ran down the length of her body in thick ribbons. If not for the icy moisture that wreathed her skin, Kenji would have thought her alive.

“No signs of the rot,” he said. Yet she could not have died of hunger, he thought, for her body appeared to be in the pink of health and manifested no sign of starvation. “There must be food supplies somewhere,” he said.

“Maybe the food killed her,” Tommy grunted. “Toxics. Better for us to eat our own hunt.”

“Maybe her people did it, whoever they are,” Ling suggested, disturbed by the woman’s stare. Who could hurt such a harmless looking creature as this?

Tommy moved closer, to gain a clearer look at the unmoving woman. There was something amiss here.

“Why is she dressed so?” Miguel wondered, casting a wary glance into the ominous darkness about them. “Shouldn’t she be wearing thicker clothes? I feel as though there’s something bad lurking in this place,” he said.

“Maybe this, maybe that,” Kenji replied. “I think she just froze here. It’s easy to do.” He turned to look at his followers. “You grow warm before you succumb to the freeze. It gets comfortable, and you fall asleep. Then you just...” Kenji swallowed the quaver in his voice as an anguished memory evoked images like wisps of smoke from a locked room that was burning from within. He blotted out those images, turning to gaze on the unmoving woman’s face.

“Maybe she finds herself alone one cold night,” he mused aloud. “All

her men and family gone away. And her dreams just disappear. So she sits here in the cold, and waits for—”

The woman’s eyes suddenly turned on Kenji. The man jumped backwards as the woman fixed him with a look of electric intensity. Her head snapped to life, moving to and fro swiftly. Her face twisted into an expression of agitation, breaking the thin film of frost that coated her flesh. The men recoiled from her, quivering with terrified disbelief.

“She lives!” Enrique gasped in awe.

Tommy had known something was wrong. His heart spluttered at the sight of her. He did not believe in the trapped spirits that were said to haunt the realm of mortals, but his mind could not make any sense of this creature. “Who are you?” he asked, cloaking himself in the dimness beyond the orb’s glow.

The woman glanced quickly towards his voice, but she made no response. Then her expression changed. The suspicion evaporated from her face, and she tilted her head in apparent curiosity. A soft smile grew at the corners of her mouth, which only caused Tommy to cringe.

Meanwhile, Kenji had recovered from his initial shock. He did not believe in ghosts. There were many dangers in this world, dangers that were all too real. He regained his composure and instead of shrinking backwards, stepped towards the impossible woman.

“Your name!” he ordered. But as he spoke he gave an involuntary shudder that mortified him.

The woman’s response was the same as Tommy had received: a vacant smile and curious twist of the head. “Name yourself!” Kenji said again, asserting himself with greater conviction. But the woman simply returned his stare for a moment, before turning towards the dimness where Miguel and Ling stood poised for fight or flight.

“Devil,” Miguel whispered. He had heard of spirits that populated the nether regions of the world, but he had never witnessed one for himself. Ling deftly moved towards the door, her sword held steadily at the woman.

Enrique stepped into the radius of light, undaunted by the mysterious woman. The evil spirits were lies that parents used to keep errant children from straying into the areas contaminated by nuclear toxins, lies that

hoarders used to keep travellers from infringing on their gatherings. There had to be an explanation. She watched Enrique impassively as he approached and he relented under the intensity of her gaze. Then he noticed motion in the folds of her dress.

“Her hands,” Enrique said, gesturing to the woman’s lap where her fingers moved in a slow rhythmic dance, rippling like leaves in a breeze.

Kenji set his fears and embarrassment aside. If this woman was not the dead one, then whose reek filled the room? “Who died in here?” he asked. She did not answer, but her eyes turned to him.

“I know you can hear me,” he said.

The others came forward, emboldened by their Chief.

“We are just tired travellers,” Kenji explained, holding his palm upraised, to show he was friendly. “Just looking for a place to rest,” he said. “We are not here to hurt you or take your things.” He knelt beside her, eliciting warnings from Tommy. “Why don’t you speak to us?” he asked gently, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

A shrill noise broke out from somewhere in the darkness. “Nooooo...”

14 Kenji ducked a second later, as something flew from the space beyond the woman and brushed by his head to clatter loudly on the ground behind him. The men instantly formed a protective circle around their Chief.

“Step away from her!” a high-pitched voice rang out. “Don’t touch her! She is not for that!”

Enrique kicked at the orb, so that it went spinning towards the direction of the voice. Zigzagging shapes smudged the walls and ceiling as the rotating orb revealed the dark recesses of the room. A small figure dashed out of the sudden light, upsetting tables and piles of dusty machinery.

“Go back out now! Get away from her!” the voice shrieked. A chunk of metallic debris flew out from the dimness, and Miguel swung his sword, intercepting its flight. It crashed against a wall, shattering into fragments that clattered to the floor.

“*There is nothing here for you!*”

Enrique raised his blade and moved towards the frantic voice. But he was halted by a tug on his arm.

“No,” Kenji whispered, pulling Enrique back. “It’s only a child.” He waved his arm to call off his men. Then he calmly held his hands out to his sides, to show them free of weapons as he stepped into the light.

“Listen!” he said. “We are not here to steal. We want nothing from you or your woman.”

Enrique hissed. “You are going to get injured, Kenji!” he warned.

But the Chief continued confidently. “We are just seeking cover!” he explained. “You must know how bad it is outside! We will not—”

A frenzied bundle scampered out of the darkness towards Kenji, something sharp glinting in its upraised hand. “Leave us alone!” the small figure screamed, slicing at the air wildly as it came.

Kenji sidestepped the attack and pushed the child aside, simultaneously trying to intercept Enrique’s blow.

“It’s only a boy!” the Chief shouted, ducking just in time to hear the child’s blade swish by his head. The child scampered back into the darkness and crouched behind an overturned table. Tommy, Miguel and Ling could hear his ragged breathing as he sought cover from them. The mysterious woman sat calmly, observing the confrontation with a disinterested smile, as if the scene unfolding before her was none of her concern.

“Stop this, boy!” Kenji said in a stern voice. “Look at us! You are outnumbered! If we wanted your woman we would just take her!”

The boy whined from his hiding place. “We don’t have anything for you!” he cried. “No guns! No food! Go away!” There was weariness now, obvious in his desperate pleas.

“We have food, boy,” Kenji replied. “We have enough to share with you.”

“You lie!” the boy accused, and something else flew out of the dark. But it was only a small object that bounced on the floor.

Kenji turned to Enrique. “Give me something!” he whispered. The two men exchanged quick glances before Enrique reluctantly parted the heavy fur of his jacket and retrieved a strip of salt-dried meat. He tossed it to Kenji, who held it up for the boy to see.

“Look, boy,” he said, “I have something for you.” He walked back into the glow of the orb and knelt, dangling the tangled piece of jerky

before him. “Good meat, from a wild boar.” He took a bite and chewed. “Mmmm,” he said, rubbing his stomach with exaggeration.

There was no reaction at first, only the boy’s troubled breathing. Then a whimper broke out, and Kenji knelt to greet the child who came skulking meekly towards him.

He was in his tenth year, maybe, well before his bloom; bundled in soiled rags of clothing that were musky from wear. His face was haggard and bony; his skin, pale and sallow. He needed sun. He needed a bath. His black hair was unkempt and dirty, his body thin and malnourished.

But his eyes! Though weary and squinted in suspicion, they were the deepest shade of brown Kenji had ever seen. They seemed to penetrate the gloom, darting back and forth between Kenji’s face and the jerky he held in hand.

“Here,” Kenji coaxed. “We won’t hurt you.” The boy stopped, inches from the meat dangling from Kenji’s hand. After a moment of apprehensive hesitation, he reached out, snatched the stick and scrambled back. Then he began to gnaw at the meat.

16 Kenji relaxed. They all did. This was an encouraging sign.

“Easy, boy,” Kenji warned, holding up his hands in a gesture to slow down. “Not too fast or you’ll retch everything back out.” Ling, Tommy and Miguel laughed among themselves; they lowered their weapons as they stepped into the light to watch the famished child devour the meat. Kenji waved them back. “You’ll scare him,” he whispered.

In moments the stick was gone. Kenji beckoned for another. One was passed to him, from Ling this time. It met a similar fate.

The boy was slowing now, as his stomach filled. He looked up at the Chief with a fatigued expression of resignation.

“What do I call you?” Kenji asked, not daring to approach lest he scare the boy off.

“Uncle calls me Daniel,” the boy replied, after a moment’s consideration. He spoke in a civil tone now that he was no longer trying to chase anyone away.

“Uncle?” Kenji inquired.

The boy chewed another mouthful of jerky before he responded. He gestured towards the darkness behind him. “Uncle is asleep,” he said

feebly, and his eyes started to flutter. “He won’t wake up and...” Daniel’s head slumped forward to his chest and his knees buckled, but he quickly righted himself.

“And her?” Enrique asked, gesturing to the silent woman. She seemed oblivious to the scuffle between Kenji and the boy.

Daniel’s eyes grew suspicious and his lips curled into a snarl. “She’s not to be touched,” he said in a trembling growl.

“We will not hurt her, child,” Kenji said, his tone assuring. “We just want to know what to call her.”

“My name is Daniel, not *child!*” the boy replied testily.

Kenji made a calming motion with his hands. “All right, Daniel,” he said. “What is your friend called, and why is she fed while you go hungry?”

Daniel looked hard into Kenji’s eyes. The man was stocky, perhaps as strong as the bear from which he must have gotten the fur of his coat. His voice was deep and gruff, his skin swarthy. Despite his calm demeanour, his serious countenance and furrowed forehead was forbidding, as was his direct, unwavering stare. Yet there was something gentle there too.

17

“She is called Doll,” Daniel said, when whatever he saw in Kenji’s eyes disarmed him. “She’s the only one of her kind and she needs no food from you. She eats from the sun.”

The inscrutable woman turned when the boy spoke her name. A new smile broke on her lips and she adjusted her torso in the chair so that she was facing Daniel. Still, she did not speak.

“Eats from the sun?” Enrique mocked and the others shared a baffled chuckle. But they were silenced by a grunt from Kenji.

“What is wrong with her, Daniel?” the Chief asked.

“Nothing. I am all right now,” Daniel replied matter-of-factly, holding up his forefinger in a resolute gesture. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “I thank you sincerely. You’ve been most helpful and can go now. I...I will...” He trailed off as his eyes fluttered shut. Then his head tilted, and he fell forward. Kenji had to jump quickly to catch the boy before his scrawny body hit the floor.

He had passed out completely.

Kenji took Daniel’s limp frame into his lap. He placed his head

against the dirty cloth that covered the boy's chest, and listened. The young heart was beating rapidly. His breathing was thick, but unbroken. The boy's hunger was a positive sign that he had not been afflicted with the rot. But Kenji had to check his face and hands, searching for holes in the flesh, or telltale splotches of darkness. With Ling's assistance, Kenji loosed the boy's soiled clothing and inspected his emaciated frame. Tommy, Enrique and Miguel knew what it was the Chief sought.

"Nothing," Kenji said, audibly relieved, as he and Ling gently laid the boy on the floor. The others nodded, acknowledging the credence of this information. Had anything been detected on the boy's body, there would be nothing they could do to save the child.

Kenji stood and considered the inscrutable woman. She gazed up at him, smiling with detached curiosity. Her gaze truly unnerved him, everything about her did. But he also sensed that she posed no danger. Strange and requiring an explanation, indeed, but not dangerous.

"Call in the others," he said finally.

18

— — —
It is not sleep from which she has been awakened, but it is as close as she can come to that state. There is nothing like time for her in this blankness. A thousand years is no different than a day.

The activity that ignites her awakening ceases as the men retreat, their faces contorted into that pattern she knows as fear. They assumed she could not see them in the dark. But she does, and she wonders at their panic.

She watched serenely as the boy emerged from under a table to defend her, throwing broken machinery at the intruders. But eventually he collapsed from the effects of his exertion.

Others soon enter. Wrapped tightly in dirty animal hides and hooded against the cold, they trudge in from the storm. They bring light and sound with them, the bustle of their entry, the murmur of their furry coats against the walls of the place, and the thud of their packs dropping to the floor. They bring their weariness and anxiety too. Their words fill the room as they discuss the many things of their concern, matters unimportant to her.

"What is that smell?" asks one. "Is there food here?" asks another. "Who is she?" and "Are there others?" they ask in unison.

She has no answers for these questions, so she makes no reply. She adopts the "smile" face as they study her warily. But her welcoming expression does nothing to affect their caution.

The younger ones among them take the sleeping boy and place him in the folds of thick blankets. They huddle over the bundled child, emitting squealing sounds as they fuss about him.

But the child does not respond. The child has become unconscious, as did the man who had cared for her, before he fell into that sleep from which his type never wakes.

The strangers search the area and find the fallen man slumped in an armchair.

The room is lit now by their illuminating devices. It grows warm with their presence. Not that the temperature concerns her either way. They know this about her, she can tell. They know she is different. They cast a myriad of looks at her as they settle for the night. Their eyes send a multitude of coded signals.

Trepidation.

Wariness.

Confusion.

Curiosity.

Worry.

Soon more questions will come.

19

CHAPTER 2

The gale had been reduced a low thrum, muffled by the thick walls of their new sanctuary. The men had found the body of the one called “Uncle”, and had taken the body into the snows outside; the reek of the corpse passing by contrasted with the aroma of burning fat that filled the enclosed air of the room. Sofia had pulled a large cooking pot from her pack, and a small fire was soon crackling as the animal fat cooked. The warmth of the flickering flames grew as the Tribe huddled close to the fire, shedding the exertion of their journey. Later they would explore the place. Perhaps valuable artefacts such as batteries and even weapons might be found in its darkened halls. But for now they were content to take refuge from the bitter cold, to gather around the heat of the fire.

The mysterious silent woman had not moved from her chair. She showed no reluctance to their occupation, merely a smile that was disquieting in its unguarded curiosity. Her vivid brown eyes were childlike, as intense on them as theirs on her.

“And what about her?” Otter asked, eyeing the woman suspiciously. “She shows no hunger.”

The Tribe offered muted sounds of acknowledgement, but no one answered. Miguel’s eyes turned to Kenji, who only shrugged and continued to gnaw a stick of dried meat. “She’s not dangerous,” he said, when Miguel’s gaze lingered. “Leave her be.”

Enrique rose and unfolded a blanket he had pulled from his pack. “She’s probably dumb or something,” he said, not caring that the woman would hear. “She just smiles that same silly smile.” He slipped beneath the blanket, humming a jovial tune under his breath. He was trying to catch Rosa’s ear, and then her eye. But she was hovering over the boy,

who was bundled tightly in animal hide. She clucked her tongue as she raked her hand through the sleeping child’s hair.

Miguel nervously fingered the black whiskers of his goatee. He had positioned himself on the far side of the fire, and would not get any closer until the enigmatic woman was explained. “Lock her in one of the other rooms, that’s what I say,” he suggested. “Then I’ll get some sleep.” He grunted a low verse, and made a warding gesture, placing his hand, palm out, to his chest and then opening it to the floor. With this he hoped to catch, and let fall, the dark spirit of the woman’s presence.

Otter, from his place near the fire, snickered at Miguel’s uneasiness. “Yes, Miguel,” he said. “She’s come to drag you into The Pit where she will cling to your body for all eternity. Be very afraid.”

The Tribe burst into laughter and Miguel glared at them. “Don’t make fun of what you don’t understand,” he warned over the noise of their teasing.

Tommy was huddled under a blanket, already on the verge of sleep, when the laughter rudely woke him. The senior man stifled a yawn and eyed the woman a moment before he spoke. “She doesn’t look like a Roamer to me,” he said. “In any case she looks as though she has been inside too long.”

“Yeah.” Tommy rose and walked to the sled, where he opened the salt pack. “She has just been in this place too long, eh?” he said, as he pulled a jerky stick from the salt pack. He bit into it and mumbled through a mouthful of meat, “I suppose so. People lose their brains in the wastes, you know.”

“Easy on that negative talk,” Kenji warned. “We’ve some way to go before we reach Kallang Basin.”

Tommy shrugged drowsily. Enrique jumped from his blanket and tapped the older man on the head. “I suppose you don’t hear well?” he asked in an antagonistic voice.

“Can you believe this youngster?” Tommy scoffed. “Thinks he’s already our new Chief!”

There was a tense silence as Tommy turned to stare up at the younger man. Kenji nodded to acknowledge Tommy, but decided to stay out of this particular confrontation. He had been keeping his eyes



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KHOR KUAN LIANG is an English Literature graduate of the National University of Singapore, and currently works as a primary school teacher. He has been published in *Reader's Digest Asia* and at Inconvenient Questions, a sociopolitical site about issues in Singapore and the region. *Kallang Basin Adagio* is his first novel.



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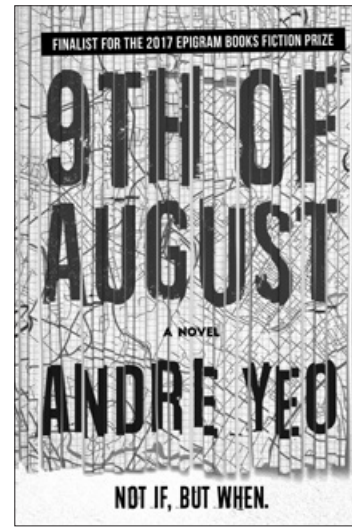
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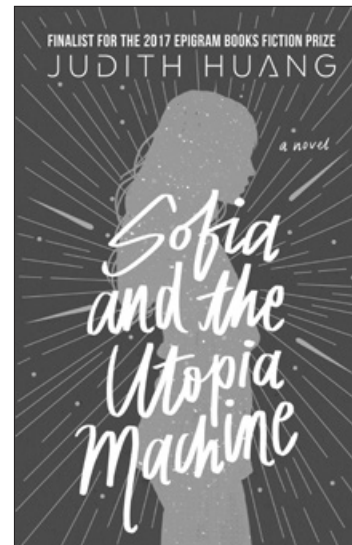


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