

## Holocaust Borneo

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The air-pod's windscreen wipers smear the dirt on the glass. The rain has come and gone all too briefly. The heat is relentless and the sky, near and far, is a haze. Down below, the landscape is brown and grey, with rare flashes of movement amid crumbled ruins. Jia-Hao can't tell if they're animal-scavengers or people daring to forage in the open. Her vehicle feels as sluggish as the Tabuan River. From above, she can see the brown water trickling along the old riverbed. Despite all efforts, nothing survives in the slush that scarcely moves.

Finally, she sees the small patch of green. It's not a moment too soon. The fuel gauge on her Swoop's control panel is past the red line. Clearly, her navigation instruments are still working, but she can't see any updates about the air quality today nor the numbers waiting their turn at the forest globes. As her air-pod approaches the patch of green, she sees branches and leaves blowing gently. It's a real mixed dipterocarp forest; secondary forest, partially logged in the past, but a beautiful relief amid the grey and brown dust. Somehow, the Park Wardens, foresters and scientists had managed to keep it and a few other forest and farm globes alive throughout the Bornean Holocaust and its aftermath when humans struggled to survive. Her grandparents had told her of the farmers, engineers and park rangers who had worked together desperately to keep plant life going in the globes. They told her of a time when humans and animals could breathe easily outside the globes. Borneo had been one of the last places on Earth where that could still happen.

Now, with the Stutong Forest Globe in sight, her shoulders feel lighter and she straightens her back with a rare smile on her lips. Maybe she'll be lucky enough to see a pitcher plant or a red palm while collecting her share of clean air. She loved to examine the moss on the tree trunks and the pools of reddish water amongst the leaves on the forest floor. Even a common fern would be a joy. Her grandparents had told her about the edible ferns, *pakuikan* and *pakupakis*, but these have disappeared like so many other species.

Carefully, Jia-Hao manoeuvres her Swoop to hover above the air-collectors' parking area. The second-generation air-pod is emitting the clunky sound it makes when it needs a good overhaul. The journey from Kota Samarahan has been a strain on the old vehicle. A two-seater air-pod, the Swoop's designer had taken a whimsical fancy to the once common Magpie Robin

and it had that distinctive perky tail, white scooped underbelly and rounded black top. It barely looks related to the newer air-pods with their sleek and aerodynamic designs, but it is sturdy. Jia-Hao has had some offers to buy her Swoop, but she never considers them. Her Swoop is more than a mode of transportation; it's her trusty companion as she forages among the junkyards and sleazy barter-trade night markets. Looking down through the dirty windscreen as the air-pod descends, Jia-Hao sees that strangely, there are no other Swoops in the area; only a few ancient commuter transporters that don't seem to have moved for a while. She parks carefully.

Fastening her third-generation breathlizer securely, she gets out of the Swoop. The equipment is old, but still works. She can breathe, but the heat around her intensifies immediately. The cooling system had failed a few months ago, and no one in the Kota Samarahan shelter knows how to fix it. Jia-Hao adjusts her air cache on her back and secures the band around her waist, locking her Swoop remotely.

She makes her way quickly to the entrance of the forest globe. The panel is shut; the counter empty. Lights flash on the signboard: "Stutong Forest Globe is closed for repairs. Kubah Forest Globe is closed due to leaks and contamination. Matang Forest Globe is the nearest alternative for fresh air. Clean air levels are highest around Bako Forest Globe. Have a pleasant day." These are all the messages that her Swoop control panel had failed to register.

Jia-Hao turns back slowly to her vehicle. There's not enough fuel to get to Matang Forest Globe, not to mention Bako Forest Globe. And her air cache doesn't have enough for her to get to the re-fill station to power up her Swoop and on to Matang Forest Globe. She'll have to make the journey without the air cache. How many years will be burned away from her lungs by breathing in the air in the open environment? She doesn't know, but it won't matter. She has to try even though she can remember her parents coughing up their blood and lungs, wheezing and struggling to breathe until they couldn't fight it anymore.

Her grandparents told her that in the past, people believed that when all else died, the plants would take over the Earth. They had truly believed it. But now, this outpost in Holocaust Borneo barely survives. Everyone in the remaining shelters knows that soon the First World leaders will seek more tithes. Each year, they exact more and each year, the Bornean survivors band together to pay them off. Last year, beyond the mountain ranges, the Kalimantan sector had defected. The desecration of the Bruneian stronghold had triggered the collapse of their resistance. Even the Sulu pirates in the waters off the Layang-Layang islands are staying clear of the Bornean mainland.

The Kota Samarahan sector buzzes with rumours of a real primary forest surviving in the interior Belaga sector where the Kayan people guard it with their primitive but somehow effective tribal customs and natural energy. The rumours even tell of wildlife in the primary forest; wildlife that weren't supposed to have survived the Bornean Holocaust but which somehow now thrive in the Belaga sector, apparently beyond the detection of modern technology. One day soon, Jia-Hao will take her little sister and her grandparents to the Belaga sector. She knows it's not a rumour nor a myth. She will find the way there.

Jia-Hao settles back into her Swoop and fastens her seat belt. There is no point lingering. She revs it up and keys in the coordinates for the nearest re-fill station. She must fuel-up the air-pod and make it to Matang Forest Globe to store as much air as she can. Her shelter is counting on her. Keeping the Swoop low over the trees and the abandoned buildings, Jia-Hao tries to breathe slowly and steadily. She focuses on manoeuvring the air-pod carefully as dark clouds are gathering and the wind is buffeting the small aircraft.

By the time her Swoop reaches the re-fill station, the air in her cache is below five percent. Jia-Hao knows there is no time to waste. Luckily, once her credit has been cleared, the automatic pump engages at the first try. It is only after the Swoop is airborne again and ten minutes into the chartered route to Matang Forest Globe that the air cache alarm is triggered on her breathlizer. The shrill sound pierces her helmet and Jia-Hao tries to keep her breath steady. She reaches up and switches off the alarm. The urgent sound dies, but the red light continues to blink.

In five minutes, the air cache is empty and she's dependent on the air in the Swoop. The dials on the control panel are faulty so she doesn't know how much longer she has before the atmosphere's toxic air will be flushed in automatically when the Swoop's computers detect a lack of oxygen in the cabin. With the wind behind her, she hopes to gain more speed in the old air-pod.

Matang Forest Globe is in sight when Jia-Hao starts to feel an itch in her throat and a streak of pain in her nose as she draws each breath. She tries to keep her breathing steady, but it's impossible as the pain intensifies. Focusing on the Swoop's controls, she keeps her hands steady and her eyes on the parking bay. In the corner on the west side of the bay, she finds an empty parking spot for her Swoop. With ragged breath, she manoeuvres the air-pod carefully into place. A trickle of sweat runs down her back and she wipes her brow as she gets out slowly. She rolls the air-tanks out of the Swoop and piles the oxygen-capacitators onto the trolley. When she reaches the registration counter with her equipment, she sees the queue. As she signs

in with her thumbprint and pays her credits, receiving a permission tablet, the elderly man in the queue in front of her turns to face her. He takes out a mini breathlizer that's used in emergencies.

"Take this," the old man says. "Use it. It will give you 15 minutes of air. And you can go first."

The other people in the queue nod and make way for her. They can all see she is out of fresh air and is breathing in the deadly toxins in the atmosphere. Only one person is hesitant to let her go forward, but the others move to let Jia-Hao through, and so he falls back as well. As Jia-Hao takes the mini breathlizer and first place in the queue, she feels her eyes tearing up. She can't take only her grandparents and her little sister to the Belaga sector. Somehow, she has to find a way to take all these people who are struggling as her family is. They're all in this together. She doesn't know how she will be able to take all these survivors to the Belaga safe haven without being detected by the First World leaders and their Smart Technology.

As she breathes in fresh air from the mini breathlizer, waiting for her turn, she remembers the old commuter transporters lying dormant at the Stutong Forest Globe. And she remembers what the rumours said about the Belaga sector: the Kayan people there thrive on their tribal customs and natural energy. Maybe the key is old or minimalist technology. That must be the way to get the survivors to the Belaga safe haven.

The Globe's exit panel slides open with a little hiss and clatter. A young couple pulls their trolley of canisters out. A toddler is strapped securely to the young man's torso. She has a dazed look on her face. It might have been her first glimpse of a Bornean rainforest. Jia-Hao remembers when her parents first brought her to a Forest Globe. That magic of being in a rainforest has not left her. Now, she leans forward to scan her permission tablet. The doors slide open and Jia-Hao steps into the Forest Globe, dragging her air-tanks and oxygen-capacitators up the ramp. As the doors slide shut, she unfastens her breathlizer and removes the borrowed mini, breathing in deeply the Forest Globe's fresh air. The moist atmosphere of a tropical rainforest envelopes her as she hurries to fasten her air-tanks and oxygen-capacitators to the station next to the great Yellow Meranti that stands at about 85 meters tall. Next to the instructions at the filling station, there's a little sign that says: "*Shorea faguetiana*, common name, Yellow Meranti, seeded from Danum Valley, Sabah in the year 2025, still growing."

*Still growing.* Jia-Hao looks up at the canopy of green and brown rustling gently high above her. A second notice remarks that in the year 2225, the canopy had spread over 40 meters in diameter. Like most islanders, Jia-Hao knows that the core of Matang Forest Globe was built

on the once existing wildlife centre that had housed all manner of wildlife native to Borneo. In those days, people had had the audacity to hunt wildlife to keep as exotic pets or trade them overseas; animals confiscated from the poachers and smugglers had been brought to Matang Wildlife Centre where they were being rehabilitated when the wars of recolonization broke out and the park wardens, foresters and scientists began creating the Forest Globes as safe havens from the toxic fallout of war. Myths handed down through the generations tell of wildlife that somehow survived the Holocaust and were lucky enough to be within the reach of the various Forest Globes scattered throughout Borneo. Some myths spoke of wildlife keepers who deliberately let the animals out of their enclosures into the hugely expanded Forest Globes; others were smuggled in as the wildlife fled the burning forests and steaming mountains into human settlements. These heroes are venerated in legends and song. In the bleak and grey landscapes born of the recolonization wars, pockets of colour peek out, created by artists who have painted murals of the unique animals that are believed to have escaped the Holocaust and are quietly surviving in hidden corners in the huge Forest Globes.

Some villagers mentioned seeing nests too large for birds in the canopy. It is a whisper of hope that no one dares speak aloud, but everyone who comes to this Forest Globe secretly searches the trees for bigger movements. Jia-Hao has never seen a mammal larger than a shrew or a bird larger than a yellow-breasted Bornean whistler, but she has taught herself to seek out nests in the canopy. She, like many others, longs for a glimpse of a shaggy red coat of the reclusive orang-utan; the creature that taught humans how to give birth naturally. The myths from ancient times say that the human race owes its survival to its cousin, the orang-utan. It could well be true, Jia-Hao thinks.

Now, in the Matang Forest Globe, Jia-Hao smiles for the first time today. How wonderful that the Yellow Meranti can thrive in the Forest Globe. That the park wardens, foresters and the scientists have been able to replicate a natural environment in these pockets of life so perfect despite the wars, the attempted recolonization and the deprivation. Jia-Hao thinks about her grandfather and her little sister, the old man who gave her his mini breathlizer, the toddler's dazed face as she came out of the Forest Globe, the resilience of plants and of the human spirit.

Jia-Hao knows it's time to tell a new story. It's a story that takes place in the natural rainforest in the Belaga sector.