

Passage by Tuhin A. Sinha and K. A. Ritley

In the middle of the flight, Kiara woke up to go to the washroom. When she returned, she was too lazy to push her way into the middle seat. And with Rishaan readily offering to shift seats, the seating arrangement changed. With 20 minutes still remaining for the flight to land, a sleep starved Kiara took another power nap, this time holding Rishaan's right hand more firmly. Rishaan's other hand, though, nervously moved to touch Diya's. Her heart skipped a beat. Diya pulled her hand away. But a defiant Rishaan held her wrist again, this time firmly and more reassuringly. The changing behavioral dynamics between the three perhaps gave out a foreboding of what was to come in Goa.

When the flight landed at the Dabolim Airport, Rishaan felt uncanny...his excitement seemed replaced by an unknown fear that he found very difficult to decipher.

Dabolim Airport, as locals in New Goa called it, was really the Dabolim Federation Spaceport, and as they alighted from the shuttle the warm, steamy heat of New Goa hit them full force, redolent of both saline from the extraction swamps and the lavender smelling bacteria that extracted it. It might be an asteroid, but still it was good to be home.

“First class is the best!” little Diya squealed to her mother. Yes, Kiara thought, and they owed it all to the Summons Dial. It came in the post on Diya’s fourth birthday, addressed to Diya and promising the family an all expenses-paid trip to the Federation capital. It was an official invite from the Office of the Chief Minister (there

could be no counterfeiting a Dial) but oddly there were just two words engraved in its ultrahard titantium surface: *Diya*, and *Passage*. So they knew who sent it – and what “The Passage” was – was still a mystery to them all.

“Auto!” Rishaan screamed above the cacophonous roar in the arrivals hall. And at once three hover-autos slowly descended upon him, each with their loud and aggressive servo-wallahs explaining the reasons Rishaan should choose his conveyance above the others. In normal times there would have been no fewer than six or seven autos upon him. It reminded him that these were not normal times, and this was why Rishaan was here. Into the slot in the seat back he inserted the Summons Dial with Diya’s name, and on the black meter simply appeared the word “Ministry – no fee.”

The unknown fear that Rishaan felt on the transport was quickly replaced by panic as the hover-auto with his family glided frictionlessly into the city center.

“I know,” said Kiara, resting her head against his shoulder. “I see it, too. Try to hold your breath and relax.”

“But look around us! We’ve come ten kilometers in just under four minutes, without stopping! This is my home. I grew up here! This road should be packed wall to wall! This can only mean – ”

Kiara pressed her head tightly against him and squeezed him hard. As a mother she was certainly more worried than he was, but now she needed to be a pillar of strength.

The auto slowed as it approached the Ministry Complex, a huge, sprawling conglomerate of skyscrapers that was the seat of the Federation government for the outer system. The young Diya strained her neck to look up at them and take it all in. She'd never been here before, and it was amazing to see the buildings joined in such strange ways, with their curvy walking bridges and winding arches. But she was especially thrilled to see the two white marble buildings in front, their massive Greek columns rising high into the sky, as the hover-auto effortlessly glided between them. "Look, Daddy, Vidhana and Vikasa Soudha!"

"Well," Rishaan smiled, for a brief minute forgetting his fear. Diya was only four, and he was amazed his daughter could remember their trip to Bengaluru two years ago, much less the names of its parliament building. "It's as close as you can get. The Ministry is located in Karnataka sector, so the architects thought it would be fitting." *It's not amazing. Maybe for any other child, but not for Diya. That's the problem. That's why we we're here,* he thought, as his fear again turned to panic.

He couldn't remember stepping out of the auto, or the magnificent views as the glass lift sped to the top (on the higher floors the curvature of the asteroid could be seen), or the long walk escorted by servo-police into the Chief Minister's office. But as bad as his fear was, his heart stopped completely as the office door opened and an elderly man with soft white hair and beard, clad in a stunning pin-striped suit, approached him with his hand extended. *After all these years, centuries even, could this really be . . . ?* The old man's touch was warm and his skin was wrinkled. "Yes, it is really me." The old man then turned to Kiara and lightly bowed,

and his old hands trembled slightly as he pressed them together.
“Namaskar.”

“I think you expected the Chief Minister, no less,” said the old man, lightly touching the monogram on his suit for effect, and smiling. “Well, just for you we’ve upgraded to Prime!” He had used this joke often to relieve the stress, but it didn’t work here. “Please, sit down. Thank you for coming. I am sure there is much you want to know.”

The servo-police took their stations at the walls, and a servo-waiter approached with a plate of hot tea on fine china. Kiara was not surprised to see her own hands shaking as she reached for a cup.

“But first, please, tell me what you have observed so far?”

Sitting on Kiara’s lap, Diya was the first to answer. “It’s slowing down!” she giggled. “The servos, the city, the world. Everything! It’s slowing down. It’s time for fresh batteries!”

Kiara stroked Diya’s soft hair. “Well, now, of course, it is the only thing people are talking about. But my husband Rishaan noticed it first. He is an IT manager, you see. *He* first noticed it a few months ago, in our servo-nanny. We saw slight hesitations from the nanny at first, but then we realized she was taking a bit longer to understand our commands and react to us.”

“Yes, we began the rationing with the low priority systems,” the PM said, smiling all the while at Diya. *Somehow, she knows*, he thought, and his warm gaze was now permanently fixed on Diya, “Do go on.”

Rishaan's anxiety turned to frustration. "And then all the servos slowed, and half the servos stopped working up altogether, and our work times were cut, and the Summon's Dial with Diya's name arrived – " He stood up, and the servo-police abruptly snapped their heads in his direction. "And today the bloody road in the capital city of the capital asteroid of the Federation was *empty!*" His frustration finally turned to anger. "Enough already!" What is this Passage? And tell us what Diya has to do with all this!"

The old PM said nothing but continued to smile at Diya. A lifetime spent in diplomacy – in fact, many lifetimes – gave him great power through body language and voice to diffuse the tensions of others, to change their moods, and even to change their opinions when the situation called for us. But this situation most certainly did not call for it. *Sweet, innocent Diya*, he thought. What was to be done must be done. *It matters not what your parents want.*

"Yes, quite right. There is much to learn, and now I shall bring you to those who will show you."

Outside of the office they were joined by three very tall, dark skinned elderly men, silent, barefoot and clad in long white robes, who escorted them to an interior elevator. It did not escape Kiara that their eyes never once landed on Diya. A strange question entered her mind: *To these old men, was Diya not worth looking at, or was she perhaps too holy to view?*

Before stepping into the elevator the men motioned to the family for them to remove their own shoes. "The cycle began with the Passage," said the first man. "The cycle continues with the

Passage,” said the second. “From the Passage flows the power,” said the third. The six of them stepped into the elevator, and just before it closed the PM, still smiling all the while at Diya, raised his voice and spoke a final time to Rishaan and Kiara: “Now I must also prepare. We shall see each other very soon. It happens very quickly, in the blink of an eye, really.” *Thankfully*, the PM thought to himself. And he was not referring to the elevator ride.

Rishaan surmised they were deep underground, perhaps kilometers. But he did not expect the sweet fragrances and warm, humid air as the elevators doors opened to a massive black chamber, dimly lit by oil lamps along the walls. *It’s a underground temple*, Rishaan thought. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness they saw three hallways, each terminated by a small stone arch, and without words each of their guides escorted a different member of the family into each passage.

Barely two meters in Rishaan stumbled across a small bench. He was very afraid, being separated from his family, but his fear subsided a bit when he was asked to remove his clothes and adorn a similar white robe.

After no more than five minutes waiting in the darkness and wearing the white robe, Rihaan’s elderly guide said “You’ve already noticed our infrastructure slowing down – but now, thankfully, full power has been restored. The passage is complete.” The hall lights suddenly snapped on, blinding him. He walked out of the tunnel to find his wife Kiara waiting, dressed similarly in a white robe, in a

bright white hall whose size they could not fathom. This was surely no temple.

For directly in front of them stood a five meter tall pillar, and on top of that pillar stood a figure of small woman also in a white robe, frozen and unmoving. Her hands were stretched out on each side, and upon her head was a golden crown, with hundreds of wires flowing out in all directions.

The PM emerged from a separate hallway, also wearing white.

Within seconds her eyes adjusted and the shocking, unbelievable truth hit Kiara hard. *That was no figure on the pedestal – that was their daughter, Diya!* Kiara screamed and ran to the pedestal.

“The problem is not electrical power,” the PM said. “Fusion generators are cheap and we can build as many as we like.”

It took a bit longer, but during Kiara’s scream this realization also came to Rishaan.

“And the problem is not computing power,” the PM continued. “Computers are cheap and we can also build as many as we like.”

“What . . . what . . . what . . . have . . . you . . . done?!” Rishaan dropped to his knees, breathless at the sight of his frozen daughter and the wires emanating from her head.

“The problem is obtaining a creative, hyper-intelligent spark – the flame, if you will, that is at the center of our IT network. Computers are too binary, too logical. For generations we have

needed that *human essence* to power our IT systems. Unfortunately, the people we choose do not live forever. But do not worry. Your daughter feels no pain, for all her neurons and brain cells are now fully occupied with other tasks. The pedestal will supply her with the nourishment she needs.”

The PM finished. “And now, for the rest of her life, little Diya will be the flame that powers our IT network. The Passage is complete.”

