Codename: Phoenix

Here comes the rain.

Julian Tang

It was blisteringly hot. The air shimmered above the desert sand.

The UN secretary-general and the country's leader stood just inside a large, battered, corrugated metal hangar. Their respective, air-conditioned limousines were parked farther inside.

They watched as a small propeller plane landed on the short airstrip outside. A young woman and a small boy, holding her hand, came carefully down the steps, out on to the hot sand.

The woman was dressed in a one-piece, white, sleeveless cotton dress and sandals. Her dark hair was cropped short. She looked sad and resigned. In the hand not holding onto the boy, she carried what looked like a large, square skateboard.

The boy seemed to be about five years old, with short brown hair, wearing a faded red-and-blue Spider-Man T-shirt with matching red shorts and sandals. In contrast to the woman, who must have been his mother, he looked around with the interest and fascination of any young child in new surroundings.

The leader looked sideways at his colleague.

"Just watch," the secretary-general said. "And whatever you see, whatever happens, do not interfere," he finished in a warning tone, glancing at the leader briefly to make sure he had been understood.

A quick nod from the leader satisfied him.

By now, the woman had put the skateboard on the sand between the plane and the hangar. She then returned to the plane and simply sat on the steps, watching the boy with some concern.

The boy took off his T-shirt, sandals and shorts and put them on the skateboard, making a kind of cushion for himself and sat down, cross-legged, now dressed only in his underwear. His manner suggested that this was a long-familiar routine. Then he just closed his eyes, rested his hands on his knees and faced up into the noon-day sun.

"This is crazy," whispered the leader. "He'll burn out there. We have to stop this."

He started forward, but the secretary-general put a firm hand on his arm to hold him back. "Remember what I said," he whispered back, fiercely.

"Whatever you see, do *not* interfere — otherwise I will ask my assistant to restrain you." He nodded back towards his limo, where his assistant-driver-bodyguard had already got out and was now waiting by the car.

The leader nodded again in acceptance and stepped back into the hangar.

After about half an hour, the boy's skin began to turn pink. After another half hour, it became bright red.

The mother appeared to be weeping, but continued to watch the boy.

Almost imperceptibly, it seemed that the sky had become darker.

The leader looked up and saw that heavy rain clouds had gathered, as if from nowhere. Shortly after this, there were flashes of cloud-to-cloud lightning followed by distant thunder. The sun was now completely hidden. The boy's posture did not change.

Soon there was a torrential rain. Large water droplets began hammering down on the hangar roof creating a cacophonous din.

The rain did not stop for six days.

During this time, the woman stayed inside the plane with the pilot. They had both been through this before — the plane seemed to be well-stocked.

The leader had no provisions with him, but the secretary-general shared his with him. There was an old chemical toilet at the back of the hangar, but no shower.

The rain was so heavy that they could hardly see the boy, let alone the plane.

The sand seemed to be saturated with water. New vegetation and wildlife had started appearing in the areas around the hangar that were visible to them. There were probably desert species taking sudden opportunistic advantage of the deluge.

The rain continued.

The leader thought that the air smelled different, fresher and greener, now with a cool breeze blowing in from across the desert.

After sleeping in his limo, he got out on the morning of the seventh day to find that the rain had stopped. He could hear birds singing. Looking out of the hangar in amazement, it seemed as if Eden had appeared just outside the door. The whole area, as far as the eye could see was now open grassland with small bushes and young trees scattered about. Running water could be heard coming from behind the hangar. Except for a small patch of sand underneath and around the skateboard and the plane, everything had been transformed into a green paradise.

On the skateboard were the remains of the boy.

In horror, the leader forgot himself and dashed out to the sandy patch and helplessly stared down at the blackened, burnt husk of what had been a healthy five-year old. He had a young son of about the same age.

He felt a gentle touch on his arm. "It's OK," the woman said quietly, looking kindly up into his face. "He'll be fine."

He looked down and saw that she had a wooden box in her hand. He then watched in disbelief as she used it to cover the body of the child, clipping it into position over the skateboard base then wheeling it to the back of the plane, over the new grass and up the cargo ramp.

The pilot returned to the cockpit and closed the cargo bay. Sitting inside, he saw the woman raise a hand to the UN secretary-general, who nodded in acknowledgement and gratitude. It seemed that they were old friends.

As the plane taxied away to prepare for take-off, the young boy, perfectly healthy again, appeared at the window and smiled and waved at him.

Julian Tang is a clinical/academic virologist. He would like to dedicate this story to his mum, who, like the mother in this story, was always standing by, ready to save her sons whenever required.

JACEY