Out of the Mouths of Babes

I am on duty, monitoring the information relayed by the millions of sophisticated sensors deployed in disaster-hit areas. Neon statistics, colour-coded based on severity, quiver in front of me on a holographic screen. Sitting in my Aeromobile, I'm ready to swing into action at a moment's notice.

Earthquake, magnitude 8.9, together with tsunami. 50 people missing, presumed dead…

The text is bright orange. Not severe enough for my team. Another team will respond.

A line of red comes into view.

Hurricane, category 7. 75 people confirmed dead, 200 people missing, young children among them…

The red is my cue to embark on a rescue mission "Take me there," I instruct the Aeromobile. I enter a knock code on the virtual screen which immediately sends a message to the rest of my team, informing them where I'm going and instructing them on the necessary equipment to bring.

With natural disasters becoming more and more frequent in the recent years, there have been many initiatives focusing on disaster prevention – with limited success. However, there have been considerable strides made in disaster mitigation and recovery. I am chief

search-and-rescue officer, or SRO, of the government-run organisation that deals with natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and hurricanes. My job is to go to the red coded disaster sites and bring the survivors back to headquarters.

I concentrate on the traffic. Airspace is so crowded nowadays. Practically everyone has their own ergonomically designed Aeromobile. It's definitely better than travelling on the ground though, where there's not an inch of space. There are simply too many people on Earth.

Despite the hurricane site being almost on the verge of my 16 million square kilometer patrol area, I arrive within five minutes. The sight that I witness is, as always, terrible. The destructive power of nature which yields such catastrophic losses hits me yet again. The sky is still grey. Entire buildings have collapsed – stacks and stacks of those trendy solar-powered, double-layered living pods. Most of the oxygen-emitting artificial plants have been uprooted. It's awful. This was a town touted as being resistant to the forces of nature. Building materials incorporating space minerals with the durability and strength of titanium had been used. I am not really shocked that the buildings haven't held out as weather patterns have become more violent and devastating over the years, going far beyond what people a generation ago could have imagined. I cannot believe that even with the growing number of successful initiatives to slow down global warming, the

primary cause of natural disasters, tragedies such as these still have such calamitous impacts.

I begin by mentally turning on my specialised search-and-rescue (SR) chip. The SR chip, which is implanted in my brain in addition to my other information chips, will automatically connect with sensors on the ground and give me detailed and precise information about the situation. It will also link up with the identity chips of people on the site, enabling other SROs and I to locate them and assess their condition quickly, as well as the SR chips of other SROs.

I swing into action prompted by the information leads from my SR chip. Other SROs are moving around, locating survivors to be fitted into body cases. Only survivors who have more than a seventy percent chance of survival (as calculated by the SR chip) are rescued. This may seem inhumane, but with the multitude of disasters occurring, a perverse sort of triage is practiced – medical intervention only for those who will probably survive. Precious resources cannot be gambled on those who have merely a slim chance of survival.

The body cases are initially the size of a multi-vitamin capsule, which all SROs carry in a rescue kit. When the capsule is opened near a survivor, the sensors on the case assess the

injured person's body shape and weight and thereafter it adjusts itself to fit the person's body. Once fitted, it goes straight back to headquarters.

I walk around, surveying the area, doing a final scan with my SR chip, just in case we missed someone. Just when I think that everyone has been picked up, I sense… a child. I voice-command the mechanical shovels to dig. They pop out of my belt, expand and start digging. I was correct - it is a child. She is no more than five or six, with a mass of black curls nesting on her head and rosy cheeks. My heart melts. She reminds me of a friend's daughter. Both mother and child were killed by an earthquake, fifteen years ago. Below the girl, my SR chip picks up on three dormant identity chips – those of a man, a woman, and an older girl. Their chip identity codes are very similar to the girl's. A feeling of hopelessness washes over me, and looking at this girl's innocent face makes it worse. What did she ever do to deserve this? What is the world coming to? I disregard the fact that the girl's survival rating is only 57%. Going against the reason I was assigned to this job in the first place, I make the rare decision based on humanity rather than my SR chip data and parameters.

Headquarters. Three months later.

I resigned as chief SRO after the hurricane mission and became head of rehabilitation at the organisation. That mission opened a floodgate of emotions which made it too painful to have to search for survivors in a ruined landscape again.

At the rehabilitation centre, I head over to check on Eva, the girl I found. She's bubbly and contagiously positive. I've never had a particular attraction to children, but I love being with Eva. She rarely ever gets upset, though she has good reason to, considering what she's been through.

"Hello, Eva," I say with a bright voice, walking into her cubicle. Eva's lying on the floor, snacking on strawberry-flavoured compressed nutrients.

"Auntie Nydia!" she says cheerfully, waving her new prosthetic arm, recently replaced after outgrowing the previous one. She's drawing, as usual, in the air matter in front of her - a virtual screen. The colours are lively and sunny, just like her. She shows me her drawings, changing the images with a gesture.

She starts describing her drawings to me in her eager voice. Surprisingly, Eva adapted quickly when she came to the rehabilitation centre. She handled the loss of her family in a very stoic manner. Perhaps her drawings have helped. The way she draws and talks about her family is so vivid that it's almost like they're right beside her.

Eva has even won over Professor Alden, the strict head of Research and Development. The first time they met, Professor Alden was analysing her ophthalmic implant to check for records of how Eva and her family had reacted to the hurricane. The Professor had to smile at Eva's sweetness, despite the grim images he obtained.

"…and that's the rocket… auntie Nydia?" Eva says, shaking my arm and bringing me back to reality.

This time, Eva is not showing me her family drawings. "It's the rocket. Superheroes inside the rocket will use their superpowers to defeat the scary thunderstorm! Then there will be no more thunder, no more rain, and Eva can have fun again!" she chants. I smile. The merest seed of an idea implants itself in my head. Storm-defeating superheroes, huh? Good idea…

Two years later…

Eva comes up to me.

"Auntie Nydia, is it true you came up with an idea to stop the hurricane?"

I beam, as I always do whenever I see her.

"Yes, it's true. All thanks to you."

You see, Eva's 'storm superheroes' gave me an idea. Something similar had been done in the past – cloud seeding. After discussions with Professor Alden and his team, we came up with a device that dissipates storms. It's simple. The machine sends powerful sonic waves into the troposphere, and the vibrations from the waves push the storm particles further and further away, until they are almost in the mesosphere. Then, most of the storm particles dissipate. We've been trying it out. Whenever our meteorologists predict a storm, we just send a sonic wave into space and boom! No more catastrophic storms. This has worked with a 76% success rate so far, and with a few more improvements, I'm sure extreme storms can be stopped. It's really amazing, what humans can do to stop these disastrous forces of nature, if we try hard enough. The most rewarding part of it is that so many children like Eva are being saved.

Statistical data indicates the correlation between global warming and increased frequency of natural disasters. While it is critical to continue research on how to reduce the effects

of global warming, such as how we have helped to avert extreme storms, it is imperative to relentlessly tackle the root causes of global warming.

Come join the fight.