

# Fiction

Group 4



# Enviromental Nightmare

American International School, Patel, Kathryn – 15

Xuanzang woke up in a daze, and although there were no candles, the room he was in was strangely bright. He closed his eyes for a moment before reopening them. When he finally looked around, he saw the room he was in was unfamiliar.

He looked up, expecting to see the sun illuminating the room, but instead saw a tube of pure light. *What is this sorcery?* he thought, unable to comprehend what he saw.

He realized the room wasn't as clean as he'd assumed. The floor was made of cracked tiles, and the walls were peeling. Even the air smelled a little dirty, like he breathed in grit with every inhalation. *I need to get up.* Xuanzang thought with a start.

He pushed himself to his feet and felt a wave of dizziness. Despite the roiling in his stomach, he managed to stagger through the doorway. A long hall led to a sign in strange illuminated characters. He pushed open the door underneath it and was hit with a wave of color and noise.

People flooded the narrow walkways, and strange metal carts sped down the roads without the help of oxen.

Even the people looked strange. Women wore short trousers that exposed an indecent amount of skin. Many wore expensive shades of blue and purple. He decided he must be the wealthy part of the city because the cost to blend metals into blue pigment was so expensive that only emperors and the ridiculously wealthy could afford it. Everywhere he looked, he saw a riot of color. It was so overwhelming that he stumbled right into someone.

An angry looking man shouted, "Hey! Watch where you're going!" Xuanzang could understand him, but he knew that this man was not speaking the way he did. When he looked around again, he realized that even the characters were different, but he could still read them. He apologized to the man and then started aimlessly walking down the street.

Although this was disorienting, it was not scary. He'd faced demons, and this paled in comparison. He let himself be swept in the current of the crowd, going where everyone else was. He tried to take in his surroundings without becoming overwhelmed. He was trying so hard not to panic that he failed to see the metal cart speeding right at him.

Just as he was turning towards it and the strange noise it was making, he was yanked off of his feet. He found himself flat on his back, staring at a girl maybe a couple years younger than he. She was saying something to him, but he had to ask her to repeat herself.

She exclaimed, "Are you okay? You wandered right into the road!"

Xuanzang nodded and got to his feet. "If I may ask, where are we?"

She moved to let him stand, gesturing at his saffron robes and shaved head. "I knew you monks were isolated, but I didn't realize how much." The girl continued, "We're in Beijing. You know, the capital of China."

He glanced around, confused. He knew she was saying that he was in Peking, but this was nothing like the city he was used to. This was all metal towers that blocked his view of the sky. His line of thinking was interrupted when he was seized by a fit of coughs.

"Why is it so hard to breathe?" Xuanzang inquired. Every breath felt like he was breathing in smoke and dirt.

The girl pointed to her face mask. "The air pollution is really bad today. It's been like this for a couple days. Are you new to the city?"

"I have been here before, but it is much changed. Do you live here?"

"Yeah, I'm actually on my way to work," she answered, checking her watch. "We should probably start walking. I don't want to block the sidewalk."

He noticed her rectangular bag, and her strange outfit. "Where do you work?" he queried as they began to walk.

"I work with the All China Environment Federation. I try to solve issues like the air pollution in Beijing."

"Are you able to?" he asked with a frown.

"Able to what?"

"Solve issues like air pollution."

Her brows drew together as she contemplated his question. "I don't know if we can solve all of these problems completely, but what we're doing is better than doing nothing."

They stopped in front of a squat gray building. Before Xuanzang could thank the woman and leave, he heard someone shout his name.

The front door of the building was thrown open, and when he saw the face in the doorway, he jumped. Smiling at him was Sun Wukong, looking strangely human. The girl looked on in obvious confusion.

She turned towards Xuanzang. "Do you two know each other?"

"Yes, we travelled together not too long ago."

Sun Wukong motioned for both of them to enter the building. His signature staff was now a much shorter walking stick, but Xuanzang had no doubt it could be a weapon if needed.

"Xuanzang! It's been too long!" Sun Wukong boomed.

He had to smile at how his friend remained unchanged. "I agree, friend. If I am being frank, this was the last place I expected to find you. Even so, I am very glad to see you."

"I imagine that you are very confused by what you've seen, but there is a reason we are here. This is my assistant Li Meiwen. She will soon be leaving to collect data from other countries about the state of the environment and how they are combating pollution. I was wondering if you would go as well."

Xuanzang blinked. "Go where? Back to India?" He had spent so much time there, only having returned two years ago. After he and Sun Wukong achieved Buddhahood, they had not talked much. It was not due to ill will, rather that they were both busy and had little chance to interact.

"Yes, and another place. It will be a somewhere you have never been, so someone will meet you there. Li Meiwen, you're departing tomorrow afternoon. Feel free to take the rest of today off to prepare."

She dipped her head and left, softly shutting the door behind her. As soon as she did, both men relaxed a little. They were now able to speak more freely about the situation.

"What is this place? It looks nothing like Peking. Those strange carts are unlike anything I have seen, and the air is filled with grit! Why are we here?" Xuanzang's voice had risen in pitch and volume as he spoke, the confusion of the day finally catching up with him.

"I believe that this is our future. Distant, but not distant enough. I conferenced with the Jade Emperor before I woke here. I think he's still a bit mad at me, but he said, 'The respect for the world and nature is fading. Restore it.' Since I arrived here, that is what I have tried to do." He swiped his hand across his forehead, as if wiping away sweat. "I already was the head of this organization when I woke up, so I've used that position to find out as much as I can about this world and what the people here are doing."

"Aside from India, where am I going tomorrow?"

Wukong took a map from a drawer in his desk. "This map will look very strange to you, but there are lands further west than India. You will be assessing the environment there. You may see some old friends along the way. Try to act normal." He said with a smile.

"I'll be fine. I just don't understand why I'm supposed to do this."

"You need to trust me and see the damage I speak of. You can stay in the hotel down the street until tomorrow. There will be a packed bag prepared for you. You'll have to relinquish your sacred robes until you return. I want you to blend in as much as possible."

Xuanzang nodded and stepped into the corridor. While he did not know how to navigate this strange incarnation of Peking, he could clearly see the hotel down the street. He stepped away from the window and left the building.

While he waited in the lobby of the hotel, he stood awkwardly, unsure of how to proceed. In moments, a smiling man made his way over to Xuanzang. He wore a pressed jacket over a formal looking tunic, giving him an authoritative air.

"You must be Xuanzang! I can take you to your room. Follow me." The man strode off at a quick clip.

Xuanzang followed him into a strange metal room, trying not to look unsettled when it began to rise. When the strange contraption stopped rising, the doors opened again. He was led down the corridor to a door with the number 1502 on a metal plaque above the doorknob. He thanked the manager and went inside.

He woke up the next morning to a rapping sound. He didn't even remember falling asleep, so he assumed he just fell into bed from sheer exhaustion. Xuanzang rushed to the door, pulling it open. Li Meiwen stood in front of the door, a small smile playing at her lips.

"Sir! I see that you are already dressed." He glanced down at his attire, which was similar to that of the hotel manager. When had he changed? "I have your bag in the car, so we can leave now if you are ready."

He nodded, an image of the metal carts popping into his head at the word car. He followed her down the corridor and back into the metal room. They descended into the lobby and walked right out the door to the car. At their approach, the driver got out to open the doors to the backseat.

Soon, the car was speeding down the road, and he took in the strange city. All too soon, they were in front of a metal building filled with people and luggage. Li Meiwen led them straight past the entry area to stand in a line, handing him his bag in the process.

"This is the security line, we'll only be here a moment. Where's your passport?" At his blank look, she took his bag and fished a slim booklet out of the front pocket. "This is how we travel between countries. *Do not* lose this." She put a piece of paper between the pages and handed the passport back to him. "That piece of paper is your boarding pass. Don't lose that either."

They made their way through the line quickly, and he passed through an arch that made beeping noises. They both passed through without incident, and he put his passport bag in his back. He tried to focus on getting to India to prevent becoming overwhelmed.

Xuanzang followed Li Meiwen to a sitting area where a voice announced when “flights” were boarding. He did not understand what they meant by flight, as only birds flew, certainly not humans. When they finally stood up and followed the people in his sitting area, he understood.

They entered what looked like a huge, metal bird. It was referred to as an airplane by other passengers. He took his seat next to Li Meiwen and stared at the other airplanes through the window.

With a jolt, the airplane began to move down the runway. It accelerated and pushed him further into his seat as it lifted into the sky. He gripped the armrests and let his mind wander.

Many hours later, the plane made a quick descent through another smog filled sky. After rushing through the airport, he was ushered into yet another car. They drove through a crowded city that she called Delhi.

They finally arrived in an even more crowded part of the city, and they exited the car to walk around. The people in this area were less finely dressed, and the houses were closer together and shoddily crafted. Trashed lined the streets, so unlike the cleaner streets near the airport.

They were greeted by a face that was familiar to him. A lumbering figure waved to Xuanzang, then walked forward to introduce himself to Li Meiwen.

“You must be Li Meiwen. I am Sandy.” His formal speech was tempered by a shy but genuine smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sandy,” she replied, smiling.

“Why is it so much dirtier here?” Xuanzang asked Sandy, who looked on with sad eyes.

“You were in New Delhi, but this is what the rest of the city is like. Waste management here is out of hand. Only New Delhi’s waste management is really working.”

“Why are they so much better off?”

“The New Delhi Municipal Council takes care of them, but the other 96% of the city is divided up by three other councils. They claim that New Delhi is better managed because it is more developed than the rest of Delhi.” He let out an angry breath. “While that may be partially the case, the bodies in charge of the rest of Delhi do not ensure that the rest of Delhi receives regular trash collection, so they are forced to dump their trash anywhere they can.”

“What is being done about this?” he wondered, worry coloring his voice.

“They are trying to implement better technology to improve waste management, but many officials do not acknowledge the issue at all.”

“Why are you here?”

Before Sandy could reply, he ran right into a fencepost. When Xuanzang had finished laughing, Sandy shot him a dirty look and said, “Do you remember why I was exiled into the mortal world?”

“Of course. You dropped that crystal goblet, and clearly you’re still klutzy,” he softened the words with a kind smile.

“I’m not quite so uncoordinated anymore. Anyways, we will have to part ways sooner than I would like. You’ll stay here tonight, but your flight to Paris is in the morning.”

Xuanzang nodded and let himself be led into the hotel, despite not knowing what Paris was. Like yesterday, he woke up in the morning with little recollection of when he fell asleep. The day was another rush of airports and airplanes, and he managed only a brief farewell to Sandy. He pondered what awaited him next as he stared out of the airplane window.

After arriving in Paris, they rode a strange metal tube to a large building. He did not get a very good look at the exterior before he was rushed inside. He found himself watching as Li Meiwen opened a large wooden door and quietly walked inside a large room filled with angry people. They were all arguing with each other, but the room fell silent when one man spoke.

“The United States is leaving, so what we need to focus on now is fixing what we can. China is taking strides to eliminate air pollution, and we have 172 participants of this accord. We should stop talking about what we’re losing and start talking about what we can gain.”

The other representatives nodded and resumed speaking, but he could not stop looking at the man who’d spoken. He looked disturbingly familiar. It was only when the meeting adjourned and the man went to the food table that Xuanzang recognized him.

“Zhu Bajie!” he cried, rushing to his side.

“Xuanzang! I was waiting for you to show up. You must be the lovely Li Meiwen,” he said, turning to her. “I was glad to get your call yesterday, but you are even more beautiful in person.”

She blushed and stuttered her thanks, agreeing to meet later to discuss some official business. When she was gone, Xuanzang shot Bajie a glare.

“You still can’t stay away from the ladies.”

“True, but we have more important issues to discuss.”

“Indeed. What do you do in this group? What is the goal?”

“I represent Germany in this group, which hopes to lessen and eventually eliminate pollution and other environmental issues.” Bajie said proudly.

“What exactly does this “accord” mean?”

“The countries that participate have to show a national effort record and share data about their emissions and progress on what they implement.”

“Is it working?”

“Somewhat. Air pollution in China has lessened, and European countries are increasing the use of electric cars and passing other eco-friendly laws. Would you come with me to meet other representatives?” His eyes filled with hope.

“Of course, just let me use the restroom.”

He opened the door and slipped inside. When he passed the mirror, he realized his reflection looked distorted. He looked in another mirror to see if it was also warped. Before he could look, he felt the floor drop from under him as the world went black.


When he reopened his eyes, he was in his own bed. He gasped for breath and stumbled out of his tent. *Just a dream.*

He reassured himself as he looked for Wukong, who was visiting him today. Xuanzang went to greet him as he saw

Wukong approaching.

“Welcome back, friend,” he said, clasping hands with the monkey.

“Are you well? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”



“I’m fine, I just had a strange dream.”

“Tell me about it. It might help you sort through some of your own thoughts.”

“I was in this strange version of Peking, and I went on another journey to the west, but even farther.”

Before

Wukong could interrupt him, he continued. “I know there isn’t much farther west, but there was. The people treated nature abominably.”

“That sounds distressing.” his friend intoned.

“I’m just glad that’s not reality.”

“You must be very out of sorts to have dreams like that. You even forgot your robes!”

Xuanzang’s heart plummeted as he looked at his attire. *No. It can’t be.* he thought, blinking as if to ward off what he saw.

He was wearing his clothes from the dream world.



## The West II

*Buddhist Sin Tak College, Chung, Cheuk Kwan – 15*

Sun Wukong has led Xuanzang on a trip to India during the 800s. They had successfully reached India before and found The Wests, Buddhist scriptures. After thousands of years, there was another new book called the West II. Xuanzang was interested in that book. So he decided to go on a journey with Sun Wukong again.

The West II was part two of The West. It could provide more information to Xuanzang about Buddhism, as he wanted to know more. Sun Wukong was his devoted disciple and he only trusted Wukong, so naturally he was the only one who travelled with him.

At the beginning, the trip went well. They started the trip in China. They chose to walk to India. Sun Wukong thought that this was his second time to journey to The West so he thought the trip would be easy.

Suddenly, there was a monster called Black Snake. The monster blocked the road. Sun Wukong knew he had to fight it so that he could pass and continue the trip. Sun Wukong thought the journey would be easy this time around so he did not bring anything useful weapons. He decided to fight him with his bare hands. He flew around the monster. The monster focused on him. After a while, Black Snake got dizzy and fainted. Sun Wukong made it use his magical powers to shrink Black Snake and stored him in a transparent bottle, so that others could see him clearly.

Since Black Snake was one of the most dangerous monsters in the world, no one wanted to attack Xuanzang and Sun Wukong because they thought they were so powerful they could even kill Black Snake. Their trip went smoothly again after this dangerous encounter. Nobody disturbed them. They used one year to arrive in India. Then they used one month to find the location of the book.

Finally, they found The West II. It had five thousand pages. Xuanzang asked Wukong to read the book together but Wukong said it was boring. Xuanzang was angry and said that no food would be given to Wukong if he did not read the book with him. Wukong loved food so he sat for five years to read the West II with Xuanzang. After reading the book, they understood more about Buddhism. They found another tip which was about another book. They wanted to find this book. But before they did that, Wukong needed to eat lots of food because it hadn't have any food to eat for several years.



# New Journey to the West

*Buddhist Sin Tak College, Kwok, Yuki – 15*

It had been a year since Xuanzang ,the Monkey King ,the Friar and the Talking Pig had finished their journeys to the India. After the hard years which they had undergone 81 difficulties , they finally can become gods and live in the heaven .

Xuanzang ,the assiduous monk and the Friar were still dedicated to studying the buddhist scriptures and preaching the theories of the Buddha to people. However,on the other hand ,Xuanzang's other two apprentices,the Monkey King and the Talking Pig had never been working for the Buddhism anymore since they became the gods. Moreover ,they started to indulge themselves. For all that they had promised to keep the rules of being a Buddhist , they started to wine and eat meat . They even did not respect their mentor,Xuanzang anymore.

'I am also a god now .we are same .There is no reason for me to respect and please you anymore.'the Monkey King shouted to Xuanzang loudly

The situation is getting worse thus the Jade Emperor was beside himself with fury and decided to remove their titles of god and send them to the hell . Guanyin ,the beautiful god who always helped the Monkey King when he got large problems before could not bare to punish them by sending them to the hell ,so she wanted to undeceive the three apprentices with their problems as quickly as possible.

Therefore , Guanyin sent them to the man's world and let them to overcome more difficulties to be undeceived .

'Is she crazy or something ?why would her send us to the world again ?' the Talking Pig yelled.

'Oh please , we are the gods ,there is no reason for us to stay in this terrible and disgusting world.'

'Hey ,don't be so angry first .Maybe she was just too careless and sent wrong people .' the Monkey King responded , showing his disdain.

'No ,not really,' a pleasant sound from the sky answered peacefully 'You guys should know why are you here and what had you done wrongly.Listen, you will lose your god's power in a minute and you will become normal people completely if you cannot realize what had you done so wrong in 3 days.'

'What? wait,wait!' theMonkey King and the Talking Pig shouted at the same time but no one answered them this time.

'Does it mean that we were wrong before ? Nonsense!' the Talking Pig murmured , rolling hid eyes.

'Well, there is no time for us to compline, let's find a place to rest first and talk about what should we do next.' the Monkey King said helplessly.

After walking in the forest for half day ,they finally found a school that with some people inside.

'Please ,can you give us some help ,we... em... get lost in the forest.' the Monkey King pleaded.

'Yes ,we are so tired and hungry ,can you give us some food?' the Talking Pig went along with the Monkey King.

'Em...okay ,we can offer you some food and if you can help me with the school's problem ,we will offer you a room to stay also.' one of the teachers replied.

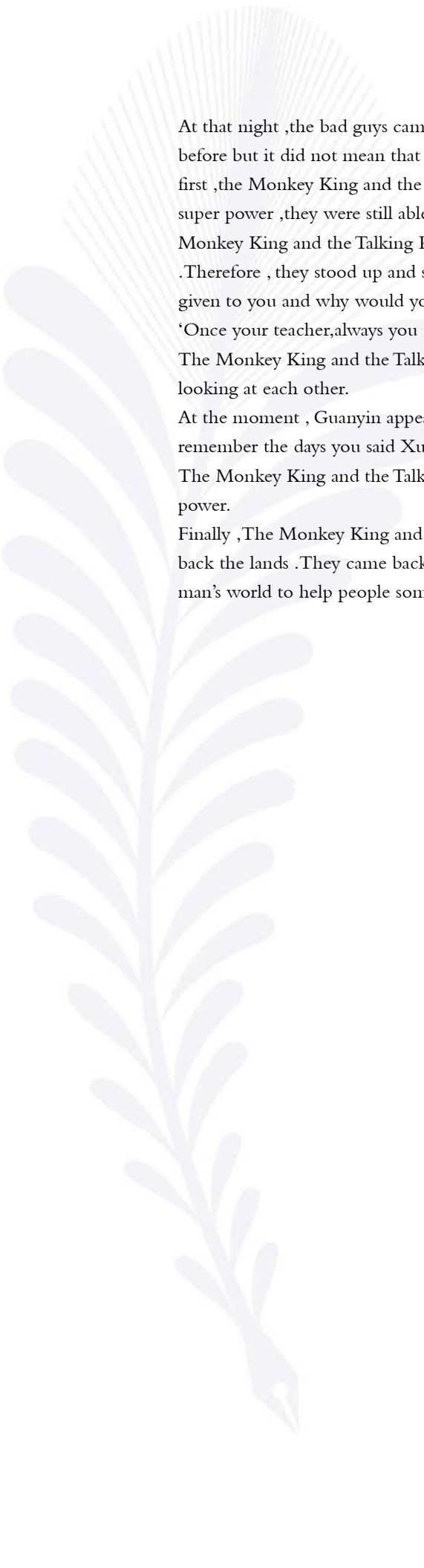
It turned out that the school is closing and the children in the nearest village had no where to learn after the school closed .The reason why the school is closing is because of some local bad guy wanted to occupy the school area and the school cannot stop it because they did not have money and also strong people to fight with them.

'Sure , we can help you.' the silly Taling Pig promised.

'Are you crazy?we do not have any power now! How can we help them?'the Monkey King whispered.

'Oh ,I've totally forgot' said the Talking Pig ,with a repentant tone.

Reluctantly, they started to think about the solutions of the problem. It appeared that they cannot solve the problem with either money or violence.So what could they do ?



At that night ,the bad guys came . To all people's surprise , the bad guys were the students of the school before but it did not mean that they would give up the great chance of occupying such a big area of lands.At first ,the Monkey King and the Talking Pig want to fight it out with them .Although they did not have the super power ,they were still able to have a fight. However , the amount of bad guys was too large , the Monkey King and the Talking Pig were soon at a disadvantage.They understood that they could not win .Therefore , they stood up and shouted ' Stop! do you guys remember what the school and the teachers had given to you and why would you bite the hand that feeds you?' All people became silent.

'Once your teacher,always you teacher !' the Monkey King continued .

The Monkey King and the Talking Pig suddenly understood something .They stood with silence and looking at each other.

At the moment , Guanyin appeared and said 'Have you guys known what you had done wrongly. Do you still remember the days you said Xuanzang and the Buddhism are your teacher of life?'

The Monkey King and the Talking Pig bowed and said nothing. Guanyin smiled and gave them back their power.

Finally , The Monkey King and the Talking Pig won in the fight with the power and help the school to get back the lands .They came back to the heaven and studied the buddhist scriptures hard again and go to the man's world to help people sometimes just like the years before.

# New Journey to the West

*Buddhist Sin Tak College, Lee, Jana – 15*

After suffering 81 disasters, the group of four were finally back to god's palace. "You are finally back, Xuanzang. You guys have done a good job," praised Guan Yin. "However, it's not the end," Guan Yin continued, with a mysterious smile. "The time you are promoted will be the time you overcome the last disaster."

"You're a liar! You said we only had to suffer 81 disasters! You lied" growled the Monkey, champing with rage.

Suddenly, the Monkey King felt an unprecedentedly strong force and fainted. When he opened his eyes, he found he was surrounded by people.

"Who are you? How dare you look at me so close?" yelled the Monkey King. But all he heard was just the cry of a baby.

"Monkey, don't you know what is the scariest thing in the world?" asked Guan Yin calmly.

"What do you mean?" answered the Monkey King.

"I hope you will find out the answer after this short journey," said the Guan Yin softly, disappearing.

Barely understanding Guan Yin, the Monkey set off for the 82<sup>nd</sup> disaster, in search of danger, survival, salvation, and whatever came their way.

The Monkey King became as normal as any given human being on Earth. He couldn't even use his powers. He grew up in a foreign country in a time full of wars. He almost forgot he was once a god. He had the gift of a kind mind and a robust physique. He was once wronged by his friend and forced to join a group of hitman. They killed everyone, virtually whoever it was, whether it was a child or a notorious boss, to earn money. The monkey had forgotten he was once a kind and pure person.

His was in a team now where the leader was a smart but quiet man. He had three partners. One was lazy and troubling, one was not talkative but quite hard-working and one was strong physically but didn't contribute much to the team.


One day, they were told to assassinate the president of the opposing of the government party. The pay was attractive but their client told them that if they couldn't assassinate the president successfully, they wouldn't get paid. Also, they could be promoted after additionally with power and money. The team was so ambitious to complete this project.

"Let's do it! After finishing this project, we will be powerful and rich!" shouted the leader. All the members of the team had already been blinded by greed.

The president enjoyed his popularity, thanks to being such a helpful and warm-hearted president. However, no matter how popular you are, you will also be hated, and the mastermind of the assassination hated the beloved president.

Heavily guarded, the president was not an easy victim. Monkey and his fellow gang members had risked their own lives to protect. They prepared for the assassination very carefully.

They took each step with care. The group of hitman followed the plan. They lurked in different positions and were waiting for the best time to kill the president. However, things didn't run smoothly. They were discovered. They didn't give up. They only thought of what they could get after the fight.



The group was attacked by the guards. They started to fight. One after another fell in a hail of bullets. At that moment, the monkey failed to see the loss of life. In his mind there was nothing but the cash reward.

“You know what the scariest thing in the world is, Monkey? It’s greediness of people! It can destroy everything. Actually you didn’t experience this disaster alone, your group of four experienced this disaster together. The leader was actually your teacher Xuanzang and your colleagues were also your partners of the journey to the west. You guys didn’t even realized it. See, even the kindest person like your teacher will be swallowed by greediness like a sheep being swallowed by a snake. You guys have already experienced it! People were all kind and pure at first .They changed and forgot how they were so there is no eternity in the human world. But as gods, we can see all the changes in the world. We are eternal. Remember what I have said today,” said Guan Yin sincerely.

The group of four had experienced such dangerous, challenging and inspiring disasters. They had encountered both normal people and goblins, both kindness and greediness. They became the most well-known and most worshipped gods in the God’s palace and even in the mortal world.

# A Journey to the west

*Buddhist Sin Tak College, Shiu, Haruka – 15*

‘Dad, I hate you!’ yelled Mia as she stormed out of the house.  
‘Mia! We can negotiate!’ James howled.

Mia got into her car and shot an angry look to her father. ‘If you truly care about me, dad, you will let me go.’ She shot one last look to her father and her partner drove away on full speed.

James shook his head and sighed. Her daughter was a hot tempered girl, yet he knew his daughter will come back home after a day or two eventually. It has always been like that.

That gave James a little hope, like always, but little did he know, his daughter will never come back.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

A loud knock awoke James, who was sleeping. He thought Mia would be at the doorstep, but instead he found two grim-faced policemen waiting outside and three police cars waiting next to the garden.

‘NYPD, we would like to know if Mr. James Stone is here,’ One policeman flashed his badge.

‘I am,’ hesitated James.

‘We have news to deliver, Mr Stone,’ another policeman replied.

‘Mia, is dead?’ James muttered silently. He was arguing with her two days ago. Her voice still present in his head, the fierce look she gave still lingering in his eyes. James tried to figure out what was happening but his brain somehow shut down. All he could think of was blank, nothing more.

‘We found her body in the Mermen Lake, we found her ID card in her pocket, we believe she drowned... sir? Sir?’

However, the policeman’s voice only slipped through James’ ears, like a breeze of wind. He lost track of time and fell into an endless black hole which was just only him and the darkness. All the comfort words he heard were only heartless buzzes of a broken machine to him.

The police ruled Mia’s death as an accident and the case was closed. Mia’s poor body was cremated with James keeping her ashes and built a grave next to her deceased mother. Every day, James lived in the shadow of guilt and grief. He was also exhausted from the interrogations by the police. However, James hid one thing from the police: an unspoken truth.

After Mia’s funeral, James submerged himself into endless heavy alcohol drinking. He lost himself in he darkness without Mia, life was meaningless for James.

‘Hey,’ a voice drew James’ attention from work. ‘Are you ok? How are you holding up?’ She asked as she took a seat next to James, she had a calm face and showed sympathy.

‘Who are you?’ James asked suspiciously, he was quite certain he had never seen her before but her voice was familiar.

‘Oh James,’ the woman sighed. ‘Don’t let sorrow rule over your mind. I am your colleague, Brigid, and I care about you. I know a great friend who can ease your pain, she is kind of a therapist yet she is great.’

She grabbed a piece of paper and wrote down something quickly and gave the memo to James.

'Thank you,' was all James was able to say. The memo read: 'Dr Mnemosyne, 108, East Side Street, Manhattan, NY'.

In that evening James stood in front of the address Brigid had given him. It was a small cottage which gave James a comfortable vibe. James took a deep breath and stepped into the house.

The house was filled with soft orange lights and the smell of wood filling in the air, making James feel cozy. 'Hello?' James called, but there was no response.

A woman came out behind the curtains. 'Hello, sorry for you to wait so long, I'm Dr Mnemosyne, nice to meet you,' the doctor smiled gently.

'I'm James,' James introduced himself as he reached out his hand to shake hands. The doctor shook his hand and showed an empathetic look.

'I am sorry you went through these horrible situations, James. Please come,' Dr Mnemosyne elegantly took the other seat and explained the therapy to James.

'I felt guilt and grief in you, James. Guilt tends to be hard to say out loud, so I am going to have you close your eyes, relax and let me see your memories.' She tried to touch James' hand but James wriggled off.

'What is this?' demanded James, as he stood up abruptly. 'I thought it was some kind of psychological therapy, not some silly mumbo-jumbo-jujumbo witchcraft!' the enraged James tried to leave and Dr Mnemosyne didn't stop him. Instead, she uttered, 'If you truly care about me, dad, you will let me go.'

James froze, his raging blood racing through his heart stopped instantly. It was the very last words Mia said to him.

'I have seen and experienced things you wouldn't believe. And I cannot forget anything that I saw and experienced. That's why I understand what you are going through and how you are feeling right now. So trust me,' Dr Mnemosyne guide the lost James back to the chair.

Dr Mnemosyne reached her hand out and touched James' forehead lightly. The instant she touched his forehead, James suddenly felt he was pushed into a hole of memories with no boundaries. The memories of Mia came back like flashbacks, he felt like he was watching a supercut of all those sweet and bitter memories of Mia. Mia's first step, the first time she smiled, the grieve-stricken face she showed when her mother passed away, her graduation... James couldn't contain his tears and started to cry.

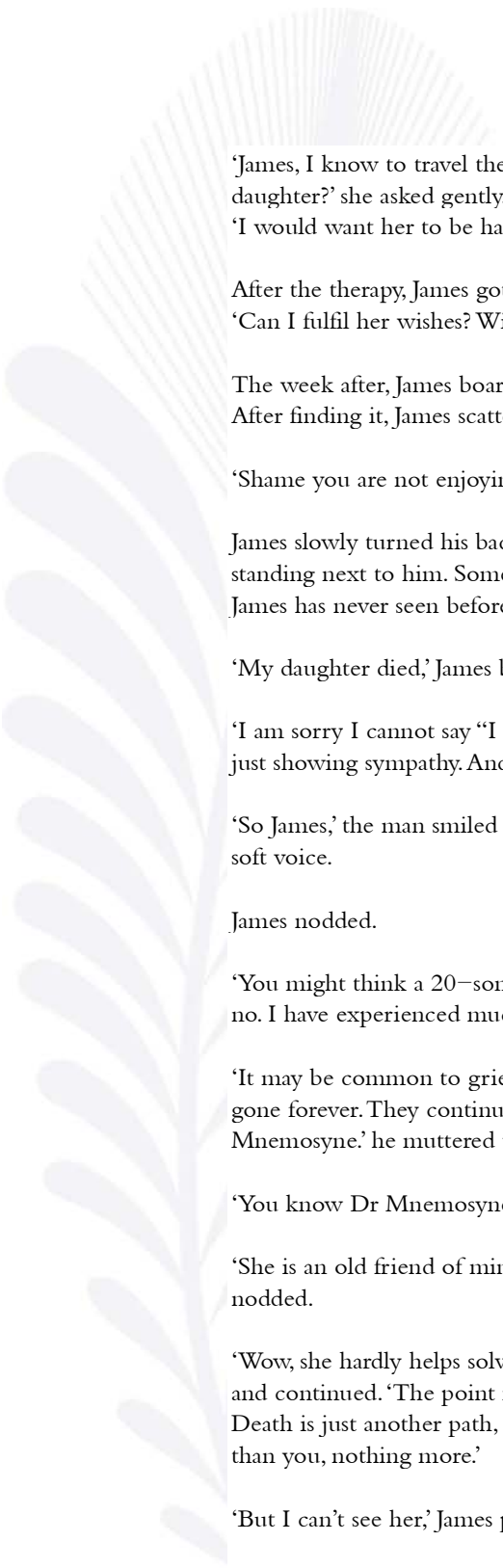
After coming back home, James opened a bottle of whiskey and drank from the bottle. All those mental pain he had gone through was too much for him. Just when he was about to go to the second bottle, he noticed a notebook stacked right under a bunch of unread newspapers.

James picked the notebook up and flipped it over, but he regretted doing so because it belonged to Mia. There were many sketches of the Parthenon and an ancient temple drawn by Mia. They reminded him of one of the memories he saw during the therapy- the real reason they fought the day she left.

He shoved the journal into his bag, and went to meet Dr Mnemosyne the next day.

'Beautiful,' Dr Mnemosyne smiled as she flipped through Mia's journal the very next day. 'Perhaps you can visit these places to fulfil your daughter's wishes.'

'Greece and Tibet? They are too far away and costs a fortune, that's why I didn't let Mia go...' James' voice trailed off as he remembered the day he didn't stop Mia from driving away to her death. Guilt and sorrow started to take over him again.



'James, I know to travel these places it can cost a fortune. However, what is the most important thing to your daughter?' she asked gently.

'I would want her to be happy and her wishes coming true,' James sighed.

After the therapy, James got lost in his thoughts. He looked at his daughter's journal and stood for a while. 'Can I fulfil her wishes? Will she be happy?' he thought. Moments after, he headed into a travel agency.

The week after, James boarded a plane to Greece. He opened Mia's journal and searched for the Parthenon. After finding it, James scattered some of Mia's ashes at the Parthenon and sighed.

'Shame you are not enjoying or looking at the Parthenon seriously,' a young man spoke.

James slowly turned his back and saw a young greek man in his late 20's with olive skin and a baseball cap on standing next to him. Somehow, the young man was familiar to James, but he had pure black eyes which James has never seen before.

'My daughter died,' James blurted out but the young man had no response.

'I am sorry I cannot say "I am sorry for your loss", because it is useless. I cannot resurrect dead people from just showing sympathy. And it's not really a loss,' the young man explained.

'So James,' the man smiled a little. 'I know you're grieving over your daughter, isn't it?' he said with a very soft voice.

James nodded.

'You might think a 20-something-year-old boy never really experienced these dramatic changes in life, but no. I have experienced much more than you know,' he carried on.

'It may be common to grieve over your loved ones but I want you to know, James, your lost loved ones aren't gone forever. They continue to live in your memories, they are not gone. Gosh! I am starting to sound like Mnemosyne.' he muttered the last sentence to himself but James has already heard the last sentence.

'You know Dr Mnemosyne? How do you know my name?' James asked suspiciously.

'She is an old friend of mine. Wait, is Dr Mnemosyne your therapist?' asked the young man and James nodded.

'Wow, she hardly helps solving people's problems, you are lucky,' the young man ignored the other question and continued. 'The point is, you don't have to grieve for them. The journey of life doesn't end with dying. Death is just another path, one that all must take. Your daughter is just simply starting her new journey faster than you, nothing more.'

'But I can't see her,' James protested.

'Oh, James,' the youngster sighed. 'Look at the stars upon the sky.'

James did as he told and saw thousands of stars glistening like crystals in the darkness. It was a breathtaking view.

'People who passed away are like stars,' the man told James. 'Stars shine 24 hours a day but you can only see them at night, yet you know they are still shining at midday. You just can't see them.'

'Your loved ones are always by your side, James,' the young man smiled at James sincerely. 'So stop grieving, be happy for them. Bless them for their new journey.'



‘Wait,’ James called to the mysterious man, ‘What’s your name?’

The young lad stopped and answered without turning back. ‘Thanatos.’

James watched him go and gazed upon the stars. Tears started running down as he reached his hand out to try touch the stars as if it was his daughter Mia.

The very next day, James board a plane to his final destination – Tibet. For the first month in months, he started to stop himself from grabbing alcohols to intoxicate his brain.

He opened Mia’s journal and there was a drawing of an ancient monastery, but James didn’t know where it was. James knew Mia wanted to come here the most, judging by how detailed she drew it.

After landing on Tibet, James started to show the drawing of the temple to the locals but everybody shook their head and walked away.

Just when he was about to give up, a voice called behind him.

‘Wow, that’s a captivating picture.’ James turned around and saw a woman in her early thirties looking at Mia’s drawing James was holding. James couldn’t guess her ethnicity but something about her calmed James’ unsettling heart.

‘Do you know this place?’ James asked anxiously,

‘I do,’ the woman smiled. ‘Follow me,’ Before James could say anything, she elegantly turned around and started walking, yet she quickly disappeared.

Another voice called James. ‘James Stone,’ James looked around and saw a local woman in her late 20s was looking straight into James’ eyes and smirked. She had the same feature as the woman who volunteered to lead James to the old temple but instead had a striking black hair, with all black clothing and had a pair of fierce red eyes like burning fire. Her feature was rather scary but simply bewitching.

The woman walked near James and whispered in his ears, ‘Follow me, I know what you desire the most. I can solve you suspicion. You think Mia’s partner, who was the one driving away murdered your daughter, isn’t it? ’

James froze. It was the one truth he didn’t tell the cops. ‘How could this mysterious woman know this?’ He didn’t hesitate and followed the young woman. Soon, James saw the old temple drawn by Mia in the journal appeared in front of him.

‘This is the old temple you were looking for, and guess what? ’ she pointed toward the temple and whispered, ‘He’s there, the one who drove Mia to her death.’

James felt his chest on fire, he couldn’t contain his anger and without hesitation he stormed into the temple. His motivated revenge was burning like hell.

When he entered the ancient temple, he saw a long haired young man sobbing in front of a god statue. He grabbed the young man’s collar and roared.

‘Why did you kill my daughter?!’

‘I ... I ... ’ the shocked man stammered.

James was about to punch his face when he heard a voice he has yearned and dreamed of for many months.

‘Dad, what are you doing?’

James rage turned to ice, he heard the voice from behind and slowly turned back.

James' breath was taken away when he saw what he saw: there she was, Mia, standing in her favourite outfit, looking fine than ever yet transparent.

'Mia? Mia!' James blurted out. He rushed to hug her but his hands swooped through Mia's body, causing him to stumble.

'Dad, be careful!' Mia spoke.

'Mia, I missed you so much.' James choked with tears.

'Dad, thank you for everything.' Mia started to cry a bit but then gently smiled at James.

'Thank you for bring me to Greece and here, now I can go aboard the ship to my next journey with all my wishes coming true. Don't worry, Dad, Mom will take care of me.'

Yet James shook his head , 'No, don't go away, Mia, my life is meaningless without you.'

Mia spoke. 'Don't worry, Dad, I am always here,' she then pointed at James' heart. 'I'll be right here waiting for you, always. Be happy for me, as I can explore my brand new journey, don't be sad.'

'Dad, I have to go and board the ship, will you let me go?' Mia asked gently, her fiery temper was nowhere to be seen.

James carefully examined the transparent Mia's face, it was undoubtedly Mia, not some holograms. He was holding Mia's hand and not letting her go but his mind recalled the last sentence said by Mia the day she left. His biggest guilt and regret was not letting her go on the trip. After a while, he released Mia's hand and she faded away along the wind.

For a very long time, James didn't move. It was too much for him to meet his daughter again. However, the heavy weight of sadness and guilt on his shoulders started to lift up. He was sad but he knew it was the right thing to do.

James came out of the temple. 'So you are feeling OK?' the woman who volunteered first to lead James to the temple asked gently.

'Yes,' James replied.

'Good, let's get you back,' she smiled.

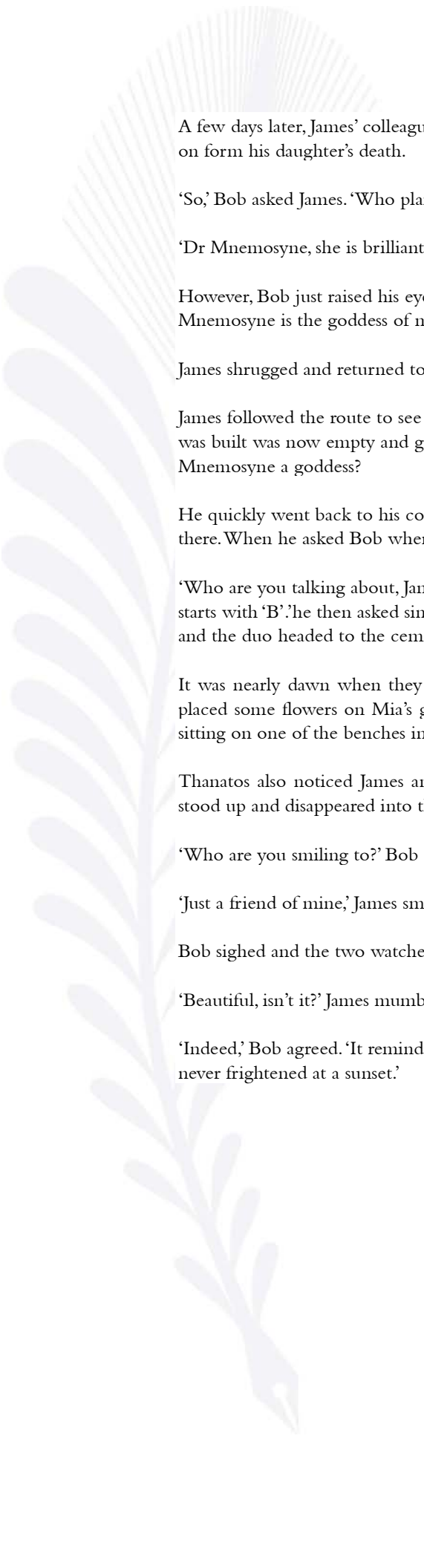
After following her a while, James couldn't resist but to ask her. 'Was the Mia I met in the temple real? Was she a ghost?'

The woman stopped walking and answered. 'If you think she was real, she is real. If you don't, it's up to you.' and started walking again.

'What's your name?' James asked.

'Chérznik, the one you met before was Pratikarodevata, my evil twin sister.' she replied.

They arrived at the city centre and Chérznik spoke, 'Well, I am going to leave you on you own from here.' she then smiled happily and said, 'James, love knows no boundaries. It goes beyond gender, ethnicity and the line between life and death. Let us always meet each other with smile, for the smile is the beginning of love.' She then turned around and disappeared into the crowds.



A few days later, James' colleague Bob saw James coming to work. He was surprised to see James was moving on from his daughter's death.

'So,' Bob asked James. 'Who planned this incredible trip?'

'Dr Mnemosyne, she is brilliant,' James replied with a smile.

However, Bob just raised his eyebrows and asked. 'Is that a pseudonym? No one is named Mnemosyne. Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory in ancient Greece.'

James shrugged and returned to work, yet he decided to pay a visit to Dr Mnemosyne after work.

James followed the route to see Dr Mnemosyne. But to his shock, the place where Dr Mnemosyne's cottage was built was now empty and gone. James was startled. The question Bob asked him came to his mind. Was Mnemosyne a goddess?

He quickly went back to his company to find Brigid, who introduced Dr Mnemosyne to him, but she wasn't there. When he asked Bob where Brigid was, he again raised his eyebrows and answered.

'Who are you talking about, James? There is no Brigid here in the company, there is only me whose name starts with 'B'.' he then asked sincerely, 'Is it OK if I visit Mia's grave today? She was very sweet.' James nodded and the duo headed to the cemetery where Mia's grave was laid.

It was nearly dawn when they finished visiting Mia's grave. The air was getting colder by the minute. Bob placed some flowers on Mia's grave and James was watching the dazzling sunset when he noticed Thanatos sitting on one of the benches in the cemetery.

Thanatos also noticed James and winked at him. James replied with a smile. Thanatos also smiled, he then stood up and disappeared into thin air.

'Who are you smiling to?' Bob asked James.

'Just a friend of mine,' James smiled lightly.

Bob sighed and the two watched the beautiful sunset dominating the sky.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' James mumbled.

'Indeed,' Bob agreed. 'It reminds of George MacDonald's quote – How strange this fear of death is! We are never frightened at a sunset.'

# New Journey to the West

*Buddhist Sin Tak College, Yeung, Ching Tung – 15*

I can feel an itch on my arms. What is it? I slowly open my eyes. Two sturdy men are holding my arms, one on the left and one on the right, dragging me on a bridge. “Men” shouldn’t be the right word to describe them. They don’t look like human beings. Human beings don’t have a horse’s head. But who are they? Wait, haven’t I died already? Where am I?

I shake my arms and try to get rid of them. But to my surprise, they are way too strong, I can barely move my arms. “Cough, cough.” The smoke from the nearby fire stimulates my throat. Suddenly, the two “men” stop. Stifling my fear, I finally decide to look up. In front of me is a temple made of red bricks. In fact, everything in this place is made of red bricks. The word “hell” pops up in my head immediately. Red bricks, fire everywhere, horse-head men, what else can this place be?

A tall, dignified man appears in front of me all of a sudden. I can’t help but to swallow hard because of the man’s imposing manner. The man is in good shape, even though he looks like he is middle aged. He must be the Yama.

The man glares at me. The fierce look in his eyes makes me swallow again. I can feel his anger by the way he looks at me.

“Chan, do you know what you have done?” he asks in his hoarse, deep voice.

Feeling a shiver, I mutter in fear, “killed a man...” I keep my head down, hoping to avoid eye contact with him.

“This is not your first time, Chan.” He sighs and turns around. I look up in confusion.

Not my first time? What does he mean? The guy who raped my girlfriend is the only one I killed. He deserved to die anyway.

“You have accumulated way too much karma.” He frowns and shakes his head. “In order to atone your sins, you will reincarnate as a monk named Xuanzang together with your memories from your former life. Your mission is to travel from China to India and bring a Buddhist scripture back for the sake of Buddhism in China. You won’t be able to die unless you finish your mission.”

What? Reincarnate with my former lifetime’s memories? I can’t imagine how life will be like living with those painful memories. Why am I sentenced to such a brutal punishment? Because I killed a rapist who deserved to die? “But why ...” the man snaps his fingers before I can finish my question.

A bright white light enters my eyes, forcing me to close my eyes. After a few seconds of dizziness, I can finally open them. Ouch. My head aches. I find myself laying on a wooden bed.

“Xuanzang, you have finally woken up.” An old voice enters my ears. I sit up on the bed and stare at the man. He is a monk, I can tell from his shaven head and what he wears – an orange kasaya. Just then I realize I literally have the same look as him – my head feels kinds of cold. I’m wearing an orange kasaya too.

“How are you feeling, Xuanzang?” the old monk looks a little worried. “You have been in a coma for an entire week.”

“Good.” Not good at all. My head keeps aching. I can’t help but to frown.

"Here, have some water." He passes me a bowl of water. "But, you should leave soon." Leave? To where? I look at him in total incomprehension. He sighs, "Did you really forget what Master Lee has said? Master said you need to travel to India for a Buddhist scripture, as punishment." The old monk stares at me in sympathy.

"We will both be punished if Master finds out you're here. You should go now. I'll lead you out. Come on," He speaks as he's walking out of the door. I nod and follow him.

"West, should be the way to India. There, do you see that mountain? Keep walking that way and you will arrive in one day." He points at a mountain far away. "Take care, Xuanzang. You shall encounter many dangers on your journey." The old monk claps his hands twice. A monkey appears out of nowhere. "His name is Wukong. Don't underestimate him. He's more than just a monkey. Take him with you. I suppose he will be helpful in your upcoming journey." He says with a smirk. I frown again. How would a monkey be helpful?

"Thank you." I give the old monk a smile, and set off for the journey to the west.

After a while, about a few hours later, I sit down next to a tree to rest. To my surprise, that monkey called Wukong appears the moment I sit down. I stare at him blankly. Was he following me all this time? I pet his head gently. "Good boy, Wukong," well, I guess it won't be too boring now that I have a company. Wukong gives me a pure grin.

Suddenly, I hear a sound of drumming coming from my tummy. Oh god, I totally forgot about food. I look around worriedly. There's obviously nothing for me to eat. "What to do, Wu—" I turn my head to Wukong, who is holding a piece of meat in his hands. I am dumbfounded by what I see. Where in the world does this meat come from? Wukong hands the meat to me. It's even cooked. I stare at the meat in hesitation. Is it okay for me to eat it? Wukong seems to understand what I was uncertain about it. He grabs the meat in my hands and swallows the whole thing in a second. I am shocked again by his action. "What do I eat then if you eat my food?" I shake my head and laugh. A cooked piece of meat appears in front of me again as he holds it in his hands. I gasp in surprise and take the meat slowly. What an extraordinary monkey. Well then, I think at least I don't have to worry about being starved to death.

Time flies, a few months pass, we cross through forest after forest, and climb through mountain after mountain. Thanks to Wukong, I haven't been bored during this journey. Almost every risk and danger was solved by Wukong. Speaking of Wukong, I'm really thankful to that old monk for giving me this magical monkey.

Just when I think I will have to endure another long walk, I hear some noises from not so far away. A grin rests on my lips with amusement. Is that a village over there? I rush there in excitement, ignoring the deportment that a monk should have. I slow down at the entrance of the village, panting.

Wukong catches up from behind and jumps on my shoulder. Sitting on my shoulder has become his habit over these few months. Three men are chatting next to a well. I try to hold my nerves and walk towards them.

"Excuse me sir? Where is this place?" I look at them nervously.

The three men stare at me in shock. "What do you mean?" one man replies.

"Umm...I mean, am I in India?" I ask carefully.

They now look even more shocked. I guess my question leaves them completely speechless. "Of course this is India. Where else do you think this is?" only after a while, the man answers with confusion on his face.

"Thank you sir. Thank you so much." My mouth seems to be out of control and grins again.

The moment I turn around to leave, something in the corner catches my eyes. A girl is kneeling in front of a grave. The picture on the grave is what catches my eyes. It's the man who raped my girlfriend. The man I killed. The girl looks like she's in her 20s, which reminds me of my sister. Is she the man's sister?

I decide to walk towards her and have a chat with her.

"Are you okay?" I pat her shoulder gently.

She looks up. Her eyes are red and there're tears on her cheeks. She stands up and forces a smile on her face, "I'm fine, thank you."

"Was that your...brother?" I ask softly. She nods. "I'm so sorry...for your loss," a pang of guilt runs through my heart as I speak. "This may be a little rude, but may I ask... how did your brother die?"

"It's okay. My brother... did something bad. The victim's brother murdered him out of revenge." The girl turns her head and stares at the picture on the grave with sadness.

"Do you... hate the killer?" I realize what a stupid question it is as soon as it leaves my lips.

But what she was about to say would surprise me, "No." She looks at me and shakes her head. "I don't blame the killer. Besides, everyone in this world will die one day, sooner or later. It's just a matter of time." She turns around again and looks at the grave.

"Aren't you a monk? You should be very clear that nothing in this world ever truly exists by itself according to Buddhism. If something has to happen then nothing can stop it from happening. It has all been arranged already. The only thing that we can do is to accept, and to adapt," the girl speaks peacefully. "I understand it's useless to feel upset about the death of my brother. Still, I can't help to feel sad because I miss him. I'm learning to let go even though it's difficult to do so. But really, I don't blame the murderer. Death is for everyone, the only question is when."

I am completely speechless. Yes, I understand what the girl is saying. Everything in this world is composed of separate elements. If these elements disappear, the "product" disappears. So why was my former self so stubborn to seek revenge? My mind wanders away until I realize the girl has left already.

I turn around, and continue my journey to the west.

At last of course, with the help of Wukong, I eventually bring back the Buddhist scripture to China. Yet I still choose to be a monk even after I have completed my mission. Those memories from my last lifetime are not "painful" anymore. They are just... memories, nothing more than that.

Apparently, "letting go" is my mantra.



# Dimensions without a Tale

*Canadian International School, Sharkey, Arabella – 14*

**T**he remarkable possibility of a tale being written in certain dimensions of space and time is very likely given our understanding of the universe.

Imagine a dimension where Journey to the West was not written. The original author, Wu Cheng'en, chose another path. But as all wonders are inevitable, if fate doesn't gift it to us earlier then the infinite nature of time will ensure its creation.

In this alternative dimension someone is about to be a miracle, a miracle that creates a miracle; Journey to the West. Yet, unlike others, this particular miracle isn't as visionary and spectacular as historians would wish.

Under a beautiful cherry blossom tree in a small sleepy farming village in China, sat a boy, aged fifteen. He dreamt of writing tales, but his thoughts swirled obliviously in his mind and his ideas, unlike the tree above him, never saw spring. As historians would come to speak of him at this moment, they would glorify his name, stating that he was born a genius. To the contrary, this boy was nothing of a genius and although his mind was filled with wondrous stories, he found no interest in writing them down. This boy's name was Jin.

Unlike the majestic tale we know written by Wu Cheng'en, what inspired Jin to write his tale was no grand adventure. During a traditional Chinese holiday when Jin was off school and his parents needed to work, he stayed with his Aunt Lihua. Jin always joked about how Aunt Lihua was far too traditional. Possibly because she had always lived in a small rural village she refused to learn about new inventions. For her 50th birthday, Jin's parents bought her a coal-fired heater as gift. However, during the winter they were astonished to find that Aunt Lihua had not used the heater but instead relied on a beautiful painting of a fire to keep her warm. "New things are for young people", Aunt Lihua exclaimed. "The fire in the painting gives me all the warmth I need". Aunt Lihua experienced life at a level that most of us will never attain.

Aunt Lihua told Jin that modern things can ruin youngsters' minds, enticing and trapping them in a superficial world and preventing them from appreciating the beauty of the real world around them. When Jin questioned her use of the painting of fire that obviously gave off no physical heat she wisely replied "It's the beauty and warmth it brings within, not the warmth it gives you from outside. I don't need a modern heater to keep me warm because with this painting I can reminisce about old times, as a child looking at the family fire burn in a warm living room."

From this spiritual approach to life had Jin learned something from Aunt Lihua. What reminded Aunt Lihua of her childhood was the warmth of the fire in her family house. "What was the fire in my mind when I was younger?" Jin asked himself. Immediately his mind thought of the monkey that Aunt Lihua kept as a pet. One of the many reasons Jin enjoyed visiting Aunt Lihua was that although she lived on a farm, she kept an animal that didn't quite belong there; a monkey.

Jin had no idea how Aunt Lihua had managed to get and look after a monkey, but every time he visited his aunt he would dash straight to the cage to see the curious little creature. Aunt Lihua had named her little pet Sun Wukong. But this monkey, like every other monkey, was nothing but ordinary and had no special powers. Jin had always dismissed tales of myth as he saw himself quite the scientist. What fascinated Jin about the monkey, wasn't its looks or how it might have special powers, but the concept that humans had evolved from monkeys.



The monkey's cage was next to the cherry blossom tree under which Jin was sitting. Jin lifted himself from his slumber to take a closer look at the monkey. Sun Wukong was peeling a banana that he had been given by Aunt Lihua. Jin was mesmerized with how capable the monkey was. He was able to peel the banana with one hand without giving it a second thought. This made Jin wonder if monkeys had the same mental capacity as humans.

Mesmerized by the monkey, Jin didn't notice that the world around him had slowly blurred until he woke up. He had been sleeping. It must have been the sun's heat that made him pass out. When he woke he heard the sound of rocks crashing. He looked around startled. He then noticed by his aunt's gate two mischievous looking young boys who were throwing rocks at Sun Wukong's cage. Sun Wukong was yelping, jumping around in a very alarmed state.

"Stop!" Jin yelled. They immediately stopped and dropped their rocks having not noticed Jin until now. Jin stomped towards them in anger.

"Why are you doing this?" Jin questioned the younger smaller boy who was wearing what were clearly 'hand me down' clothes that were far too large for him. The small boy stood there shaking and looked up at the older and larger boy who Jin thought must be his elder brother and the original owner of those baggy clothes. The older boy just shrugged and said, "We just saw the monkey and thought it would be funny to throw rocks at it."


Jin frowned "But that's not your monkey, it belongs to my Aunt Lihua. Can't you have some respect for the monkey and for her?" The two boys glanced nervously at each other and it was obvious to Jin that they had no respect for the monkey or anyone else. This was when Jin suddenly had an idea. "Well..." he said carefully. "This is no ordinary monkey. This is Sun Wukong, remember his name, you won't regret it." The boys nodded seeming to have registered this and then scurried away.

Jin now had a plan. He was going to write a tale about this monkey. He was then going to find a way to publish it until it was known across the whole of China. He was going to write an extraordinary story that even those two mischievous boys who had dared to sneak up with no respect for the monkey or its owner would read and be amazed by. At last, Jin was going to do something for the greater good. The story would be like Aunt Lihua's beautiful painting of a fire. It would bring warmth to people from the inside and take their spirit to a better place not possible by physical means.

Jin spent the rest of the holiday writing this story. It was no easy task. During the process of writing this tale he was tempted by many side tracks. Things that would try to lure his mind and body away from the task at hand. Other boys playing, a fishing trip, a chance to go to the market to eat his favorite dumplings. Jin never let these things distract him. He just kept writing like it was his heart's desire.

When Jin's tale was published, people couldn't believe what they were reading. A tale about the insignificant people with a past of sin, assembled to go on a journey, seeking a greater good for themselves and others. On this journey they would fight hard, not only physically with the monsters in their way, but also internally with their own doubts and weaknesses; the monsters within. Sun Wukong was a central character in this magnificent tale. By finding the Buddhist scriptures of the Lei Yin Temple, Sun Wukong changed the world for the better. Although the story, and path within it was long, it drew people in as they felt they were apart this journey to the west.

"I believe we all have bad in our life." Jin quoted. "However, if we learn to turn that bad into something good, then we can achieve the happiness we desire. Like not having a fire and instead using the power of our imagination and the love in our hearts to keep us warm".



A year later Jin returned to visit Aunt Lihua. She told him that Sun Wukong had escaped his cage. However, as a memory of him, and out of respect, inside his cage she had left a copy of *Journey to the West* that Jin had published. Jin was now a little older and wiser. He wasn't disappointed by the absence of the curious little monkey. "Anyone can achieve a greater good", he remembered once saying. Maybe this little monkey had evolved into something greater, had desired a world outside of its cage, had transcended its boundaries.

Later during the holiday, Jin sat under the cherry blossom tree and looked up into the lush green mountains. He wasn't sure, maybe it was a trick of the eye, but Jin swore he saw the outline of a monkey swinging freely, from branch to branch through the highest tree tops. Was it Sun Wukong? Was it his ghost? It didn't matter. It represented the future for his tale *Journey to the West*. Alike a monkey leaping from branch to branch, from tree to tree, *Journey to the West* will be passed from generation to generation, from culture to culture, bringing light into people's lives and warmth to their hearts. In this dimension, and in all dimensions.

# The Children of War

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Cheng, Janice – 16*

The last ray of sunlight finally melted into the golden dusts of Simbakoro. One by one, the small windows of the village houses illuminated with flickering lights. Zainab climbed onto a narrow ledge, grabbing hold of the window with one hand and fighting off the swarming moths with the other. She stared out into the dark forest where her father would come through after his long day of work at the nearby diamond-mining town. “Allah, please bring Father home safely,” she murmured to herself over and over again.

The civil war had been going on for seven years, the Revolutionary United Front targeted the rich diamond fields of Sierra Leone and showed no mercy to the children and women of their motherland. There was not a day where Zainab lived without fear.

A strong gust of Harmattan wind awakened the monstrous Bombax trees. The sound of crackling fire filled the atmosphere like giant cicadas. A loud thud startled Zainab. She turned around. It was only her mother plopping down the pot of steamy rice.

“What are you staring at? You don’t want rice?” she said mockingly.

Zainab knew not to say anything. She turned back towards the window. A tall and slender figure appeared amidst the short forest bushes. Zainab recognised her father’s untypical figure and let out a sigh of relief.

The family gathered around the pot for dinner. Father got the first choice for food, followed by Ahmed, Mother then Zainab.

“Take the tidbit of meat, Zainab,” Father gestured as she reached out to the pot.

“Abdullah, you must not spoil her like that. She is just a little girl,” Mother admonished.

“Mahfuzah, Zainab is a growing child. Just four years old, yet she already has to do many chores during the day. She should at least get enough food.”

Father and Mother were polar opposites. Father came from an ill-fated family: He had thirteen siblings and yet only three of them were males. When his elder brother died, he was pressured into marrying his widow and taking care of the precious male infant she had named Ahmed. Father treated Ahmed like one of his own, teaching him the Arabic alphabets and reading the Quran to him everyday. When Zainab was born, he treated her no differently. He never stood without flinching when watching his father beat his sisters.

“Be realistic Abdullah, don’t you realise the rebels may come one day? What would a spoiled, untamed child be able to do then?”

“Don’t worry, Allah will take care of us.”

The following morning was gloomy. Howling cries in the distance woke Zainab, but inside her home, it was dead silent.

“Mother? Ahmed?” There was no answer. She walked outside her home and around the village. Still, she could not find them.

“Zainab, what are you still doing here?” a passing neighbour asked, “Go home and pack up, leave with your mother as soon as possible.”

She stood there silently, puzzled.

“Didn’t you hear? The rebels came to the mines today. It won’t be long until they arrive here.”

“But... I can’t find my mother, I can’t find Ahmed. When is my father coming back?”

“Zainab, they shot all the workers,” the neighbour murmured.

“Father! No! Not Father!” Zainab wailed and wailed. The sky shattered on her, but deep down she had always prepared for this day.

A few hours passed by and no one came back for Zainab. The neighbouring family took her and they started their journey away from Simbakoro and the Koidu diamond fields. By evening, they arrived in Tefeya.

“Welcome to the Mercy Children’s Orphanage.”

"Girls, come back by sunset, or else the rebels are going to take you," warned Mrs. Kamara.

Zainab and Alia ran out to the fields. They had not gone out in many days, rain had been pouring down non-stop, flooding much of the Tefeya fields. People rejoiced as fruit would finally begin to grow, but children were saddened by the darkness.

"Alia, let's go find some pebbles and play Oware." They headed down to the river and carried two large handfuls of pebbles back to the field. The game required two rows of six holes, so the girls began digging holes in the earth. The deposited soil created a small hill.

"Look at that ant! She can't climb up the hill!" Alia laughed.

"Where? No, look at that one, she's digging a tunnel!"

"How do you know she's a girl?"

"I don't know, Alia, she just looks like a girl." They giggled and continued their little ant talk.

Zainab and Alia had a special bond, one that was rare in the orphanage. Despite their ill fates, the girls lived like normal children when they were together.

"Wait, Alia, look there," Zainab pointed at the bottom of the hill, "why's the soil shining?"

She scooped the soil into her hands. The sparkling rock revealed itself.

"E! A diamond! A diamond!" Alia exclaimed.

"Hush! People are going to hear you."

"Someone must have buried it here."

"I doubt it, who would give up such a precious stone?"

"Zainab, let's sell it when we are fifteen and go to France! I heard that in France, you can see flowers blooming everywhere, people dancing under the Eiffel Tower, bikes, food! *Bonjour, je m'appelle Alia!*"

It was just another day at the orphanage, the children finished school in the morning and were doing chores in the afternoon. Zainab helped set up the outdoor fire for cooking and Alia went out to pick fruits.

Zainab stared at the scintillating fire. Sweat trickled down her face and into her frizzy sideburns. *France*, she thought, *what would I do there? Would I have a home there? Mrs. Kamara said one time that she would send us to the United States of America. What is it like there? It must be very far away, we would probably have to walk for a year! Would I get a family there?*

Suddenly, Mrs. Kamara came running towards the orphanage, screaming "It's bad! It's bad!"

Zainab followed her immediately. When she got there, Mr. Kamara came bursting out of the door. Chaos was not unusual at Mercy Children's Orphanage, so she simply stood at the side, waiting to see what had happened.

Moments later, Mr. Kamara walked in with a girl in his arms. Her hand had been cut off and blood flowed down her arm like a waterfall, leaving a red trail on the floor. *No, it couldn't be Alia*, she told herself. The girl screamed and cried, gasping for air in between, "I was just... holding... the fruit they... wanted, I was going to... give it... to them..."

"Shh, Alia, a doctor is going to come soon, hold on." Flaming hot tears instantly gushed out of Zainab's eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she ran towards her crippling friend.

Doctors in Sierra Leone were often poorly trained. Even though the doctor stopped the bleeding, he informed them that she would likely get an infection. That night, Zainab's heart ached knowing that her friend would not make it. All she wanted to do was to give Alia a last embrace, a last word. She sneaked into the isolated room where Alia stayed.

"Alia! Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Do you really think I could fall asleep with such pain? Come here Zainab," Alia whispered back.

Zainab climbed into her bed and laid beside her. Her skin burned against Zainab's.

"When this is over, I will wake up on a grassland in France, looking up at the star-filled sky, I will name all of them, I will name one Zainab, I will name one Alia, one Papa, one Mama. Zainab?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you miss your family?"

"I think about my father everyday... He is tall and always smiled at me. When you see him one day, you will definitely agree with me."

"I wish I could remember how mine looked like."

"I also used to play with my brother sometimes, but now he is gone and I don't know where he is."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find him one day."

"Oh Allah, please give us bravery to face a new day."

“Ameen. Goodnight, Zainab.”

“Goodnight, Alia.”

—

Since Alia’s death, more rebels had arrived in Tefeya. Sounds of gunshots flooded the atmosphere. The children’s stomachs began bloating as the soldiers raided the marketplace. They stayed in the orphanage all day and night, in scarce of sunlight and fresh air. The Revolutionary United Front often kidnapped children: boys were intoxicated and turned into child soldiers, while girls were raped and killed. Everyday, the children were told horrifying stories of the war, many of which haunted them in their nightmares. The orphanage became crowded and the air was filled with foul smells. Zainab would sit in the corner alone as her hope drained from her like her skin and bone.

As usual, Zainab went out to the backyard to set up the fire for cooking in the afternoon. Suddenly, she heard shouting coming from the east side. The orphanage was located at the very edge of the town, it was unusual for people to go near such a noisy building. Zainab headed towards the noise and peeked through the branches.

A tarp was set up in front of the palm tree forest. Six men, dressed in camouflage, were sitting on the stumps, smoking. Another one came out of the forest, dragging with him a boy, who was also wearing a camouflage shirt, and a crying man. A white patch on the boy’s shin caught Zainab’s eyes. She gulped and looked up to his face.

It was Ahmed. *This must not be*, she told herself. Her heart started pounding against her fragile ribs. The days that she played with her father and brother. The brother who left her.

“Blindfold them!” one hollered.

“Yeah! Blindfold them!” others followed. The standing man took out two cloths and tied them around their eyes. He pushed the crying man against the tree and made Ahmed turn around.

“Now give the boy a gun,” he seemed like the commander. The standing man reached for a rifle nearly the size of Ahmed and slumped it over his body.

“I bet five thousand leones that the boy can’t kill the man with his first shot,” the commander said.

“I bet three thousand leones that he can.” Others named their bets.

“Now shoot boy,” the commander yelled.

Ahmed slowly raised the rifle. The men cheered and hollered. Zainab tensed and her legs began shaking. She stared at the scene wide-eyed.

With the weight of the rifle and the sweat on his palms, Ahmed lowered the weapon. The men grunted. After a few short breaths, he raised it again. He rested his finger on the rifle. *Mother’s son. My half-brother. Still by blood, my family.* His shaking became visible. The cloth dampened from his silent tears. He pressed into the trigger a little bit more.

“This boy is pathetic!” Ahmed lifted his finger.

“Boy! Are you going to shoot or not?” the commander shouted impatiently.

“If you don’t shoot in three, I’m going to shoot you!” The men hollered in accordance.

“Three...” The man raised his pistol.

“Two...” The man loaded the pistol.

“Stop!” The bullet fired into the forest. Zainab raced towards the tarp, “release Ahmed!”

“Who are you? Why should we listen to you?” the commander stared down at her, “shoot her!”

“Wait!” Zainab reached into her pocket and carefully pulled out a wrapped up piece of rag. *“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll find him one day”, oh dear Alia, I would not be able to go to France now, but France would not be great anyways without you, please let this all work out.* She slowly unraveled it, revealing the diamond.

“Release Ahmed and I will give you the diamond!” Her loud shout overshadowed her tiny body. The soldiers stopped for a moment.

“No. One more question, little girl, where did you find that diamond?”

Zainab hesitated. “In Baadu”, she lied.

“Okay, release the boy. Let’s go.” They removed his blindfold and spat on him one final time.

Zainab took Ahmed’s hand and ran.

That night, most of the rebels left Tefeya. Ahmed broke down in tears beside Zainab, a sight she had never seen before.

—



“Ahmed, look at this, Mrs. Kamara gave it to me just now,” Zainab said as she carried their photo book to her brother, “she said that our American parents sent it to us.” She sat beside her curled up brother and opened the book on her lap.

The first picture was of Mr. and Mrs. Parker. Mr. Parker was smiling at the camera, revealing the wrinkles around his hooded eyes. Mrs. Parker had blonde and straight hair, and her teeth were neat and perfectly white.

“Why are their skins so light?” Ahmed was puzzled.

“I don’t know, it’s weird, isn’t it?”

Zainab flipped to the next page. The colour of the photo was faded, but the blue sky still popped against the dusty red buildings of Manhattan. Mrs. Parker stood across the harbour, wearing a striped tank top and tinted sunglasses.

“Wow, there are so many buildings, and they are all so tall!”

The two siblings continued to look through the pages. They learned the faces of their new home, car, dog, etcetera, but despite their amazement of the Western world, they were hesitant about a new environment.

It was one month later when Zainab and Ahmed headed to the city to meet their new parents. *Alia, I wish you were here with me today. What if my new parents are monsters? What would happen if I get lost in the streets?* Zainab squeezed Ahmed’s hand.

“Father always said as long as we are still young, we still have hope,” Zainab reminded Ahmed.

From afar, they recognised the distinctive faces of their parents. They wore the same big smile as they did in the photo book.

Mrs. Parker kneeled down and welcomed the children with open arms, “Hi!” Her voice was sweet and soothing. Mr. Parker came forward and offered them lollipops, then picked them up. In the flesh, he seemed much taller. His chest shielded the children from the noise and erased them from discomfort. Sitting in his arms, the children started their venture to America.

—

The Parker family lived in a small town in New Jersey, where the children had much space to play and run in. The park was their favourite place, they loved to be surrounded by many other kids. They indulged in the limitless and rich food everyday, and slowly the hollow spaces between their ribs began to fill up.

During one of the humid days of July, Zainab and Ahmed travelled to New York City for the first time, where their dad had business to do. Ahmed held his Mom’s hand tightly as the traffic light turned green and a smoke-scented breeze blew in their direction. Streets smelled like sweat as pedestrians raced past each other.

“Mom? Why are the billboards all lit up? It’s barely evening!”

“Well Zainab, this is New York!”

The family continued sightseeing as they headed down towards the Financial District. They walked passed a few alleys in East Village.

Suddenly, Ahmed stopped and let go of his mom’s hand. He stared into the alleyway across the street, where a group of African American workers smoked.

“Ahmed, look! They just came from the construction site here,” Dad pointed behind him.

Ahmed did not move.

The construction noises grew louder and louder.

Like thunder.

Like gunshots.

Smell of marijuana.

Confined space.

Paralysed.

Soldiers. Gunshots. Killing. Blood. War. Chaos. Tears. Anger. Soldiers. Gunshots. Killing. Blood. War. Chaos. Tears. Anger. Soldiers. Gunshots. Killing. Blood. War. Chaos. Tears. Anger. Soldiers.

Ahmed raged towards them.

The traffic lights turned green.

# Journey to the Western World

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Gershon, Lily – 14*

Whether to return to the western world was always a taboo topic to be discussed. Might I say it was something many of us would only dream of during the war; however, that sense of reality gradually vanished through our fingertips as our home slowly transformed into death camps. Never in my life did I know I would end up like this. No, never would I think that I would be leaving my home, life, and my childhood to live in a ghetto in the eastern parts of the world. But, the war was now over, leaving us Jews in a state of confusion. Should we stay or must we go? Shanghai had become our home; the essence of novelty had worn off.

“Out! Out! You filthy animals, you lot can return home now,” shouted the German troops. “Führer Hitler died; you worthless lot can leave but don’t cause trouble again!”

The banging sounds got louder and louder and they gave trills down my spine. We were free to live our lives, lives that are no longer being lived in tyranny. The Germans and Chinese rushed everyone out of the ghetto. The stomping of families leaving the ghetto masked the sounds of screaming from confused children. I stood in the middle of this chaos, suddenly time stood still. I was caught in a moment of tension: what was I going to do with my life? I was longing for an adventure into the real world; however, I felt I could not be welcomed by anyone anywhere. If I could not be accepted in my own home in Poland, was it even possible to be accepted anywhere else? I screamed. I opened my eyes, and I was safe, still here in the ghetto. I decided to get ready for the day ahead. I couldn’t stay in bed when there was a whole world out there yearning to be explored. I could even go home! I rapidly changed into daytime clothes and went downstairs to meet with the other Jews in the ghetto.

It was a new dawn, a new day. The news that Führer Hitler died had spread as fast as the speed of light. The news that the war had ended jumped around the ghetto, enlightening everyone’s spirits — it gave everyone the returning longing sense of hope for the future. The problem we, the Jews in the ghetto, faced now was, what do we do now?

“Well, what more is left to say, Dalia? Our home back in Europe has been utterly destroyed. No, no use, you may as well stay here and live out the rest of your life in Shanghai, after all, we have made this area into our own,” said Mrs Kaminsky. She was always a funny one, never has she ever once missed an opportunity to be cynical.

“But Mrs, have you ever pondered what has happened to Europe? Perhaps I can discover a new world out there. The nature of us living here has become a habit, but I feel the world’s eagerness telling me to leave the ghetto and get out there! I am going to make a journey to the west!” I replied, whilst jumping out my seat.

“Is that so, Ms. Dalia Aderman? What about the funds to be able to travel? A young girl like you is not able to travel unaccompanied! Where are you going to go? My dear, I believe you are living in a fantasy,” said Mrs Alberstain. These comments circled the room as if everyone was mirrored, and the comments they spoke of reflected everyone else. I began to feel myself bubbling with frustration.

“I am not concerned with all those matters. I’m concerned that I am going to be trapped in this ghetto when there is a whole world out there! Why waste this opportunity to be free from the mental slavery of being forced into one place when we now can live our lives free?” I replied. “Someone has to understand my thoughts! Well, I cannot stay here much longer. I am going to leave.”

I began to gather my belongings, packing away my memories, and storing away everything I learnt from living in the ghetto. I felt a sense of sadness and guilt. I was leaving the place that welcomed me with open arms to go into the unknown. I felt numb; I was at last able to live a life not in fear. This felt strange. I slowly walked down the stairs and looked beyond the ghetto.

“Ms Aderman! Come here, darling girl. Take this. You may need it as you embark on your journey,” shouted Mrs Beranstein. Mrs Beranstein, the humble old lady, handed me a grey coloured knitted scarf. I put it around my neck and immediately felt comforted.

“Dear Mrs Beranstein,” I said whilst hugging her, “I shall write to you whenever I can. Oh, will I miss you! Thank you for everything.”

Mrs Beranstein and I exchanged smiles and then I walked out of the ghetto. I turned around and took in a final glimpse of the ghetto. I nodded and smiled, then began my journey.



I turned and observed my surroundings as the novelty of being free began to set in. As I walked through the busy streets of Shanghai, I started to think of ways that I can return to the west. Perhaps travel by plane? But I could only wish to have enough to afford a flight. I continued pacing around the city; then I saw an advertisement placed onto a pole.

“What is this?” I asked myself. I stepped closer towards the advertisement.

“A ship to the new world,” I gasped. “The boat leaves from Shanghai’s Port 5 after midday today.”

I looked for the time; the town clock read midday. I panicked. I immediately rushed towards the port. I ran faster and faster until I could see the ship on the horizon. As I reached the port, I accidentally bumped into a young gentleman.

“Oh, my! Please accept my apologies,” said the young gentleman as he was helping me up.

“I accept your apologies, kind Sir, but do excuse me I have a ship to board,” I replied, as I brushed myself off.

This gentleman and I grinned to one another; then I rushed to board the ship to the western world. As I approached the boat, I retrieved my passport, one that was custom made for me so that I was able to escape the hell that was Europe. I handed it to the immigration officer for it to be stamped. The energy on the boat was thrilling, everyone ever so eager and greedy to set sail for the new world. The anticipation finally ended. Cheers and applause could be heard from miles away. I waved a farewell to those at the dock. I remembered my scarf, and noticed the warmth that it was giving me, making me feel hopeful for a successful future.

I headed towards the bow of the ship so that I was able to better view the waters. I let the composition of the sparkling water and the glistening sun sink in. I read the clock; the time was quarter past four in the afternoon. I decided that it was time to settle in and explore the ship. As I turned around, I bumped into a young gentleman.

“So we meet again Ms.,” said this gentleman. “Oh, how rude can a person be? My name is Eli Bissinger.”

“Mr Bissinger, a pleasure to acquaint with you once more. I’m Dalia, Dalia Aderman.”

“Ms Dalia Aderman, what brings you to this ship?”

“Well I was going to ask the same the question of you, kind sir,” I responded. “I just fled the Hongkew ghetto; now that Jews are no longer being held hostage from our freedom, I have taken it upon myself to return to the western world and make new discoveries of my own.”

“I admire your bravery, Ms Aderman. May I say we are on the boat for the same reason? I myself escaped from Europe as a young child and I have always yearned to explore the world, since I never quite understood the situation in Europe when I was a young fellow. I believe in seeing the greatness of the world, I desire to leave these horrific memories behind me and to form a bright future.”

I listened to every word that this clever young man had to convey. Finally, someone who shared my feelings and beliefs.

As we strolled across the deck, I reflected on the luck that I was having. Being able to flee the ghetto was considered unrealistic; yet, I had finally done it! I reflected on the moment I arrived in Shanghai, off the loud train and into the unknown. I could not comprehend how I as now sailing to the western world. I walked into my room and settled in. This was my home for the next fortnight or two. I decided it is for the best that I lay down for a little.

I suddenly woke up and realised it was dinnertime. I shut the door and walked to the restaurant. On my way, I saw a flier which read: “This ship will sail to Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and finally, the United States of America.” I am in utter awe. Never had I once thought that I would be able to travel across the seven to a new world. My body fills with excitement. I take the flyer and run as fast as the speed of light, dropping my knitted scarf and leaving it behind.

I paced around in the hope of finding Eli. I saw a man in a trench coat and thought that, perhaps, that could be Eli. I approached the man and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Oh, Ms Aderman! I have been looking for you.”

“Mr Bissinger, I have news to share! It never occurred to me that we would be sailing to so many varied places; we are going to visit countries and places I never thought I would see with my own eyes!”

I handed Eli the flyer. As he began to read the information, his face showed worry.

“Mr Bissinger, is something the matter?” I inquired. He looked back at me.

“No, no everything is alright,” Eli responded. “Come, and let us enjoy the night.”

That night was one that I will never forget! My heart filled with joy and I was beaming with happiness. Music played until dawn, people were up on their feet dancing to music. I've never been so happy; it was an overwhelming experience. I truly felt that I was embarking on my journey. Yet as I walked back to my room, I noticed that my scarf was missing. I began to panic. This scarf was something that was sentimental to me. I rushed through the halls of the ship in hope of finding it. Whilst looking, Eli caught my eye.

"Eli," I screamed. "My scarf, it's gone!" As I was trying to calm myself, Eli handed me my scarf.

"No need to worry, Ms Aderman. I found this on my way to my room. I was trying find you to return it to its rightful owner," said Eli.

I began to feel a grin on my face. I had never before been so pleased to flee from that depressing ghetto.

A fortnight passed. So far on this voyage, I had travelled far and wide across the seven seas. I had visited places such as Italy and Spain. It was magical, to say the least. However, an eerie atmosphere was lurking; the ship had become a lot more spacious, with many passengers departing. I shook this thought from my mind, though, and prepared for the day ahead. Today was an exciting day: the ship was arriving in London, England. I was thrilled, to say the least, to be arriving in London; it had always been a destination I desired to visit. I looked around the ship in the hope of finding Eli. After searching for what felt like hours, I eventually found him — he had his entire luggage with him.

"Mr Bissinger, why, may I ask do you hold all your luggage?"

Eli began to frown, which, as a result, made me frown as well.

"Ms Aderman, this boat is not a boat to experience a holiday on. This boat's purpose is to ship people to the western world to begin their new lives. I shall begin my new life in London, a place where I know I will be accepted," Eli answered.

I was shocked. Yet, suddenly this all made sense. This must be the reason Eli responded in such a depressed manner when I handed him the flyer.

"I must accompany you, Mr Bissinger," I uttered. Eli's face began to drop.

"Ms Dalia Aderman, I'm afraid this place is too daunting for such a person like yourself."

"Well, sir, you must not know me well enough, as I will take on any challenge. After all, I took the biggest risk of my life by boarding this ship. I shall come with you."

Eli and I looked at each other and exchanged smiles.

I gathered my belongings, wrapped my scarf around my neck and walked out to the streets of London with Eli.

I shall never forget the sights of London. The beautiful architecture filled my mind with wonder. As I began to let the surroundings sink in, an arrogant immigration officer stopped Eli and I.

"What do you lot think you're doing here?" shouted the officer.

"Sir, we have just arrived in London. London shall become our new home."

The officer promptly pulled a disgusted face, causing me to tremble with fear. I quickly hid my Star of David necklace underneath my scarf.

"You two are Jews, aren't you?" questioned the officer. I hid behind Eli; Eli's face dropped.

"You do understand the amount of anti-Semitism in the United Kingdom, don't you? Sure, you lot could live here, but it will not be the wisest decisions. I am doing you a favour; go back to where you came from and leave this place at once!"

I was utterly disgusted. I gathered my luggage and returned to the ship.


Once back on the ship, I began to cry. I felt defeated; the people of the ghetto were correct, no place would ever accept me. I had never felt so beaten down. I looked up to see Eli.

"Ms Aderman, there is no reason to sob; there is hope. Believe in this once more, I beg of you," Eli suggested.

"Mr Bissinger," I cried, "how am I able to live without a home? I have nowhere to go!"

"Don't be so foolish, Dalia! There is still hope; I grant you this. This ship has one last destination to reach, the United States of America. We shall disembark from this boat and make America our home!" promised Eli. I looked into Eli's eyes; I could see how passionate he was about his statement.

"I shall take your word on this, Mr Bissinger," I pledged. "I will travel to America with you."



It took another four weeks to arrive in America. But finally came the day where the ship arrived in New York. I felt something special from the moment I arrived. I promptly rushed through immigration and began to live my new life, in the western world.

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It's 60 years since the day Eli and I got wed. We had children of our own and created a future for ourselves. Sadly, Mr Bissinger has recently passed away. I now live my life every day with Eli kept in my heart; after all, he got me to America. Transforming from apprehension to hopefulness was once impossible.

I shall never forget my journey. I feel fortunate. This has been my journey to the west.

# New Jounrey to the West

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Xiang, Scott – 14

## Chapter 1 — Inception: Isaac Solomon

I left our city thinking I was ready, fool that I was. Behind us, the silhouette of the city fades against the growing light: a forlorn outline sandwiched between an endless duet of land and sky. As the sun climbs its way to the peak of the sky, we drive past a graveyard of buildings, all of which are torn and heavily weather-worn, many reduced to ghostly frames, yet some with remnants of cement still clung to the skeletal-like structures of these former giants. It awes me to find signs of life clutched in the grips of these ghostly ruins, often existing in forms of gaunt trees or bristly weed. I could've sworn I saw flickers of movement behind crumpled walls and eyes peering from dark crevices as we drove by.

On my side, Adar's eyes were fixed on the road ahead, his arms propped against the steering wheel. Ajax emerges from the back quarters of the landmaster, landing on a seat behind me, tightly fixed on his arms were a set of compound utility armband. Ajax is a kid of fifteen – hot-headed and overly eager only as fifteen-year-olds could be; yet his skills in firearms and martial arts are unparalleled and furthermore, his natural strength and endurance make him a valued player in this game of success or oblivion.

Heading into my quarters located in the abdomen of the moving station (the landmaster), I soon drift off into a light sleep, only to be woken by a jolt in the vehicle. Turned out my 'light sleep' spanned over the course of six hours; I found my team engaged in conversation inside the vehicle cabin. Adar looked half-asleep as I reclaimed my seat beside him, his monotonous voice gracing the cabin for the first time of the day.

"We have arrived at the border of the Gobi desert, I suggest we perform a data collection out here."

"And leave the safety of the landmaster? No way! There is barely any worthwhile data that could be collected out in this wasteland!" Noah argued. Noah is the engineer of the landmaster, a boy of nineteen with extensive knowledge of engineering.

"I share Noah's concerns. The Gobi desert is treacherous with little data to be collected from the old era, there is no need to take unnecessary risks, we shall drive overnight," I told them. "We can collect data once we leave the Gobi."

"I'll take the shift, let Adar rest and continue the drive tomorrow," Ajax said.

"No, the Gobi desert landscape is rugged and treacherous, I will drive," insisted Adar.

"Then we rest through the night and continue tomorrow."

"Agreed."

We started early the next morning. The next three days were long and dull, the heat of the desert sun invading into even the comforts of our landmaster.

~

LOG ENTRY: Journey across continents

REGISTER: Noah Bolo

Date:	Day:	Statistics	Notes:
04/08/151	1	15:41 of driving Covered distance of current day $\approx$ 440 miles 440 miles from outpost city: New Mongolia 1345 miles to outpost city: New Tajikistan Terrain: Slightly mountainous	Adar is a resilient driver with adequate skills.
05/08/151	2	16:06 of driving Covered distance of current day $\approx$ 304 miles 744 miles from outpost city: New Mongolia 1041 miles to outpost city: New Tajikistan Terrain: Rugged and Sandy	Sand dunes and rock formations are all the Gobi have to offer, it would seem.

06/08/151	3	10:05 of driving Covered distance of current day $\approx$ 178 miles 922 miles from outpost city: New Mongolia 863 miles to outpost city: New Tajikistan Terrain = Rugged and Sandy	The day was cut short, allowing Adar more rest.
07/08/151	4	11:19 of driving Covered distance of current day $\approx$ 324 miles 1246 miles from outpost city: New Mongolia 539 miles to outpost city: New Tajikistan Terrain = Sloped and mountainous	Leaving the Gobi desert, we enter the flaming mountains.

~

## Chapter 2 — Apocalypse: Isaac Solomon

Time melted into an agonizing obstacle, the Gobi desert stretched across over a thousand miles, and it seemed the landscape of monstrous sand dunes would simply stretch onwards to the edge of the world. It was by nightfall that we left the Gobi desert, into a mountainous region known as the flaming mountains.

Reading became my salvation.

I like to imagine this adventure as a saga scripting the journey of our companionship, similar to that of “Journey to the West” – a popular novel written around 700 years ago that lasted through different eras, with copies surviving the apocalypse in year 2052AC and making it into the world of today. The tale depicts the epic adventure of a fellowship comprised of a monk, a monkey king, a talking pig and a resilient friar, to a mystical place called Nalanda, into the Western Paradise of heaven. Coincidentally, Nalanda is located near the outpost city of New Tajikistan today.

Might we be too late to help out the outpost city of New Tajikistan? Nothing is certain.

No sources had exact corroboration with one another, but one thing was clear: the infrastructure of humanity met its end in the year of 2052 AC, just when society was at its golden age of prosperity, and machines and artificial intelligence served all basic human needs. Lax was humanity, until the coming of the apocalypse.

Early Spring 2052 AC: A virus scientists were testing to genetically enhance the human body leaked through a slip-up and spread like wildfire into the world.

The virus infected the world population in mere days, altering the DNA of all infected hosts, whether the mutations be drastic or minuscule. The transmutation virus soon modified the human’s bodily functions, in many cases, death was the result. Yet in some cases, the mutation changed a set of vital functions that triggered predatory instincts hidden within the human brain.

Enhanced predator-like humans were on the loose. Those infected humans became hypervores suffering from constant hunger, of which only marrow adipose tissue from bone marrow can resolve. The virus infected hosts and evolved, jumping the species barrier, resulting in the mutation of animals, slowly imposing unnatural impacts onto the hosts. Mass extinction took place over the course of weeks, with only the most resistant species surviving the virus, adapting to reject the delving effects of the virus. The only saving grace was how not all humans had a high affinity for the virus, most survivors suffering almost no mutations from the virus.

From the 9.7 billion humans that populated the earth, only a struggling 20 thousand survived without facing drastic mutations or death. Over the years 5 factions sprouted from the surviving human population, forming 5 major outpost cities over the globe. Miraculously, the initial apocalypse was halted, with the virus eventually neutralized itself to become docile. With the help of medication and drugs, the virus can be entirely rooted, keeping the host virus-free.

But that was 150 years ago.

A week ago, we received disturbing reports from the city New Tajikistan, stating several rangers have been found to contain an active virus causing aggressive transmutation to the metabolisms of the rangers: they needed urgent assistance.

This was the deliverance I have been waiting for – to fulfill a role destiny had for me. I believe in legacy, and to build an immortal legacy for myself shall I need to serve all of mankind, to ensure the continuation of humanity. I see it as my duty to free humanity from the chains of the apocalypse. The team stays unknowing of the true purpose of this journey, believing it to be simply a novelty of travel and



expedition made in this new era. What they do not know won't hurt them. This journey to the west is a game of divinity or oblivion, and what a strange thought – Isaac Solomon, once the outcast and dreamer, might just become celebrated as divine.  
The year is 151 After Apocalypse, also known as the year 2203 AC.

### Chapter 3 — Boredom: Ajax Query

The fifth day of continuous driving: this journey is boring me to death. I begged in vain for Isaac to let me out of the landmaster for one night, just to explore this outside world I have never been in contact with. I was never even familiar with the city New Mongolia; I was raised and trained in a military camp close to New Mongolia, where I spent the first 14 years of my life. The days of my youth were chopped into blocks of training, eating, sleeping and then training again.

But training against what? As far as I know, the virus was stabilized, and no outpost cities were in danger. This era is yet young and full of dangers, but explorations such as this journey to the west will surely breed enlightenment for humanity, fueled by a growing sense of hope and confidence.

With my own eyes have I witnessed the horrors of the mutated ex-humans that yet conquer the planet: the gaunt shapes of these mutation-driven beings barely remind you they were once human. Extended spines and extraordinarily long limbs are the common traits shared between these creatures, whilst bulky tongues protruding from twisted faces only add to the features of alienation of these ex-humans. “They” all stood solid and frozen, unaffected by changes in space or time; The mutation not only enhances physical abilities but also extends the lifespan of hosts.

In a sick and twisted sense, this was evolution.

Noah says these mutated beings are simply in coma-like trances, waiting for set conditions to trigger them. Once awoken, the creatures will spring into their hypervore stances, fueled by hunger. The creatures possessed poor vision but strong smelling capabilities, fortunately was the landmaster coated with scent blocker to prevent any predatory arousal from these mutated beings.

~

LOG ENTRY: Journey across continents

REGISTER: Noah Bolo

Date:	Day:	Statistics	Notes:
08/08/151	5	12:32 of driving Covered distance of current day $\approx$ 505 miles Total covered distance $\approx$ 1751 miles 1751 miles from outpost city: New Mongolia 34 miles to outpost city: New Tajikistan Terrain = Slightly sloped	Getting close to New Tajikistan.

~

### Chapter 4 — Macabre: Noah Bolo

It was obvious something was wrong when we approached registered territory of the outpost city New Tajikistan. There was signal yet no connection to the communications hub of the city. At first I thought they might have mistaken us for rogues. Gaining distance into the territory of the city, we could see the outline of the city due northwest, dark against the blood red colors of a sunset sky, slowing down the vehicle, we issue a docking report to the city requesting allowance into the city borders. Ten seconds... a minute ... two minutes ... five minutes... and no response came. Anxious, we sat tensely inside the driving cabin of the landmaster.

“I’ll venture into the city and register a docking permit,” I volunteered.

“Permission granted, Ajax will accompany you,” came the response from Isaac.

Armored in lightweight protection suits, Ajax and I step onto the dirt bikes set out for us by Adar, making our way towards the city. Ajax was clearly stoked as he raced his dirt bike into the leaning shadow of the city. I caught up with Ajax before entering the city gates, where we then proceeded to drive through a long tunnel into the massive dome of the city’s center. We were blinded by the bright light that graced us upon our arrival into the city, as a thousand eyes instantly turned and gazed upon us.

Eyes – but not the eyes of humans. Peeking through windows and occupying the streets were twisted, bloodied monsters – mutated humans, and this time they weren't frozen in either space or time.

“Run!” screamed Ajax at the top of his lungs.

A thousand voices screamed back with the sheer force of doom. Ajax darted out of the city gates on his dirt bike, as the mutated creatures began closing in on us. I accelerated my dirt bike to max speed.

I ran over an entire column of these creatures, but there were just too many. A parade of these demons blocked my path to the exterior of the city, as I sank into a state of trepidation. Something terribly sharp and terribly cold stabbed into my back, and all faded to black.

## Chapter 5 — Divinity or Oblivion: Isaac Solomon

The pain on Ajax's face was terrifying to behold as he proclaimed the words: “He didn't make it.”

But that was a week in the past, nothing we do would ever change the past. My mind raced through the memories and events that occurred on the night of Noah's death:

As Noah and Ajax left for the city New Tajikistan, we intercepted a message from the communications hub to all of humanities' other outposts:

*It is too late for me, soon shall I slip into oblivion, yet humanity must endure onwards. Our top secret missions have uncovered the truth of the apocalypse occurring in the year 2052 AC, and now I relay our discoveries to all of humanities' remaining outposts: 150 years ago the faction of Martell scientists have originally released the virus in hopes of destroying the world and forging a new era with themselves as ruler. Today their descendants have produced a newly developed virus, pursuing their ancestor's ploy of humanity. New Tajikistan was infected through a Trojan horse ploy which led the virus to the safety of our haven.*

*The Martell headquarter is hidden in a place formerly known as Israel, 2000 miles due southwest to New Tajikistan. God save humanity.*

The message was sent by the leader of New Tajikistan just moments before his demise. As I reflected upon the reality of the apocalypse come again, I realized what perils Ajax and Noah were in. Noah! Ajax! I ran out into the opening, peering into the direction of the city, as Ajax maneuvered a sudden brake on his dirt bike just inches away from my face.

I yet remember innocently asking Ajax, “Where is Noah?”

Forwarding a week into the future from the night of Noah's demise, we discovered the Martell faction city along the coast of the Gaza lands, in a place formerly known as Israel. The Martell city actually remained unbeknownst to all the existing 5 outpost cities, until its discovery via top-secret missions conducted by the rangers of New Tajikistan.

Martell city consisted of a large dome with its interior tightly packed with buildings and labs. We decided to break into the city by force: the element of surprise was very much beneficial to us as we stormed the city with the blasters atop the landmaster, blowing through compounds of buildings as if they were made of dirt and wood. Before long, we demolished all the major infrastructure in the city, save one.

A giant of steel and titanium stand before us, blast resistant to the missiles we launched and resilient to the pounding of the battering ram on our landmaster. Knocking down the main entrance to the building, Ajax leads Adar and me into the massive expanse of a scientific laboratory within the stomach of this titanic building, face to face with the leading masterminds of the Martell faction.


As I burst into the room, the venom-green eyes of Abaddon Martell met my own, as a chill spread throughout my body. The supreme leader of the Martell faction and descendant of the Martell scientists who initiated the apocalypse in the year 2052AC – Abaddon Martell, is a tall, slender, broad-shouldered man in his fifties, with prominent golden side-whiskers, with emerald green eyes that seemingly penetrated my soul as he stared into my eyes.

“Warm welcomes and greetings to my city,” Abaddon's voice was sharp and icy. “I trust you have taken a look around?”

Ajax simply couldn't help but scream. “Monster! You damned devil! I hope you relish the ruins of your city and the death of your people!”

A man like Abaddon Martell never smiled, yet the prospect of him smiling here was terrible to behold. “Fools, in my hands lay the Pandora's box of a new era, concealed within it the newly evolved *Neurosis* virus that shall wipe the earth clean of any opposition towards my rule.” The pleasure was dripping from his ice-cold tone, “One step forward, and I shall release this virus into your precious world, yet I believe you have more purpose to fulfill than becoming a mindless zombie. Join me, and your name shall be glorified as part of my legacy.”





My mind fluttered back to the original “Journey to the West”. What would the companions have done? What is the good of picking false divinity over oblivion?

Revelation.

In the original “Journey to the West”, the companions travel towards the west and into the Western Paradise, our journey has similarly brought us to divinity, and I know what must be done. Humanity shall endure and prosper, and my purpose of serving greater good shall be fulfilled.

“Leave the regions of this city now in the landmaster and do not come back for me.” I bid my two companions. “Godspeed, Ajax and Adar.”

There were tears in my eyes.

They understood.

As I watched my two companions drive off into the distance, I smiled, fingering the device hidden within my breast pocket: a vaporizer bomb capable of completely vaporizing all matter within a half-mile radius, with the ability to completely disintegrate a virus.

All I had to do was to pull the trigger, and the virus shall cease to plague humanity.

“Join and rule, or refuse and die. Divinity or oblivion?” Abaddon Martell was practically leering.

Divinity or oblivion? I knew the answer: sometimes, certain oblivion meant divinity, and certain divinity meant oblivion. Funny isn’t it?

Closing my eyes for one last time, I launched myself into Abaddon Martell, pulling on the trigger of the vaporizer device, as the heavens rushed in

# New Journeys to the West

*Cheung Chuk Shan College, Ng, Cecilia – 15*

The sound of waves became louder and louder, it seemed that it was almost time for arrival. I took a quick look out of the window, the light of the city like the stars brought the brightness to the island. I hop down the ship and started the journey on the island I never knew.

The people there had blonde hair like topaz, unlike me I had black hair like the coals. They were speaking in a language I didn't 100% know. I could sense someone giggling at me though. I was starving and tired so I thought I should go to an inn to have some rest. Luckily I knew the word inn, in their language and could find one easily.

I booked a space in the inn, even though there rooms were small and moody, the bed was hard, the inn was old but the workers there were nice which made me feel pleased and comfortable. They had delicious dishes too. I liked the baked potato with sour cream and the mac and cheese. I didn't want to leave. But I needed to go tomorrow. I finished the meal and slept and covered myself in my thick black coat.

I left the inn really early at like 4:00 am and tried not to make a sound before I left. I found a hill and reached the top of it. I only found one peak insight. So I rushed in that direction as fast as I could. It was 4:30 when I arrived, but it seemed hard to reach the top easily. But I still tried to do it and saw if I could reach the top before 6:00 am. It was hard to reach the top on time with my heavy belongings and it started snowing which made it harder and harder. My heart pumped faster and I found it harder to breathe until I reached the top finally.

It was 6:00 am and the sun came out, that's what I wanted to see. On this snowy day watching a sunrise was amazing and also exciting. Even though I could have just watched it from the inn, I preferred to watch it from the hill since there was nothing blocking the sight and I could enjoy the magnificent view all by myself. I smiled at satisfied smile and started another part of the journey. I didn't know what would happen or who I would meet. I was just so delighted to be on the next journey.

# New Journeys to the West

*Cheung Chuk Shan College, Ng, Cynthia – 15*

It was a day when birds finally chirped. Megan was startled by a deafening roar that made her hair stand on end. Slowly and quietly, she managed to stand on her feet, but her soul was still whirling about how she had arrived at this spooky forest, and..... how she survived without being attacked when she was still asleep.

Making her careful steps towards the cave exit, Megan fell into deep thoughts. She started to recall and analyze what she had done. In her mind, she saw a faint image of herself taking a pill that had written on it “eat me”, and the next second falling into a coma. “That must have been my fantasy, like the tale Alice in Wonderland,” Megan reminded herself. Stunned by the surroundings but still bursting with curiosity, Megan took her first step into the leafy woods.

What she saw then fascinated her, a cat that disappears and reappears, teacups that have legs and were dashing around in her sight and seven little dwarfs marching along the branches high up the tree. Longing to meet snow white in person, Megan followed the tiny dwarfs until she reached a hole, more or less the identical one she learnt in the story Alice in Wonderland when she was just a child.

“Ouch” pain struck Megan down her spine and by the time she was able to figure out the sudden fright, she was sent down and down the hole with almost no end. She yelped and struggled frantically, but again what she saw miraculously calmed her soul. Deep inside the muddy hole, she saw pictures of herself falling from above, from her infancy to her childhood and lastly adolescents. She tried to grasp them, but they disappear whenever she reached her hands for them. Puzzled, she stared into the deep end. “When would it ever be the end?” she realized and gasped. Just then, she landed on a pile of leaves with a “thump!” She got on her feet and again, she was in another great cave, and “Whoosh!” she arrived at the Louvre! Though Megan was bewildered, she still decided to wander through the gorgeous building and enjoying herself in the breathtaking scenes in paintings and sculptures. There she felt she spent the whole days, travelling through rooms and corridors, imagining herself in the famous artwork the Mona Lisa and so many others! She was so overjoyed that made her reluctant to return.

“Ring ring.....” The alarm clock brought Megan back to reality. “Time for school!” came her mother’s voice from the kitchen. Unwilling to leave the amazing “trip”, Megan rubbed her eyes and pinched herself. How she wished she could go on another “adventure”!! Still, she got up and smiled, thinking of all her encounters in the western fantasy world and the western grand architecture. “May I go for another journey to the west tonight?” She laughed and left her cozy bed.

# New Journey to the West

*Cheung Chuk Shan College, O'Brien, Kieran – 15*

Wukong frantically looked around, hoping to see any trace of his master. His master. His eyes should be the best in the world. He should be able to find him in no time, but the truth is far from it.

“Can you see him, Wukong?” Pig Bajie asked nervously.

“I can’t! Don’t bother me and go away!” Wukong shouted.

No one was in a good mood. If they can’t find their master, they can never obtain the scroll of Zen. The three of them will never be able to lift their curses.

It all started three months ago, when the emperor of the Tang Dynasty at the time gave a monk a challenging task. Obtaining the scroll of Zen is no easy task because one must first pass through the desert next to the Tang Kingdom. Terrifying creatures resided in this desert. To make sure the monk, Sanzhuang, could pass through the desert, the emperor gave him a huge monkey and a golden ring.

“This monkey was originally a man, but was cursed by someone and he turned into a monkey. Use the ring to restrict him if you need to,” the emperor explained. The monk passed his finger through the ring. He can feel power surging in it. “Now, mutter something holy.” The emperor said.

The monk said his usual prayer. The monkey started screaming in pain and Sanzhuang immediately stopped and started apologizing to the monkey.

“Thank you, your highness, but I hope I won’t need to use it often,” said, Sanzhuang politely.

The emperor gave the monkey a chest-plate and a sword, then gave Sanzhuang some money and a horse. Thus, the two started their journey towards India, where the scroll was said to be.

“So, Mr, what is your name?” Sanzhuang asked.

“I am Wukong,” he replied, glaring at Sanzhuang. If aggressive staring can kill, the Sanzhuang would be dead.

“I am sorry for that, I didn’t think that would happen.” Said Sanzhuang, feeling sorry for the pain he caused.

The gate closed behind them, and they started slowly walking towards the west.

## Nice is Nice?

*French International School, Rajesh, Akash – 14*

Someone shouted that it was my turn to go on. Suddenly, I was shoved onto the brightly lit stage and I proceeded to do what I usually do when thrust in front of an audience. Sweat, panic. My heart raced (it did the 100m faster than Usain Bolt), my palms were sweaty (like the Eminem song : "knees weak, arms were heavy"). I just stood there and stared at all the people in my school, all staring right back at me. And then I did what I did best. Talk.

"Hey everybody. My name's Shaka. People call me a nerd, but I'm not. I'm just a jock who's too cool for sports".

A few chuckles.

"Either way, last year I went on the annual trip to France. It was memorable, exciting and just downright amazing. I recommend it to everyone...but I digress. A lot of stuff happened on that trip and I learned more over those two weeks than I do in most months of just school. I also saw some hilarious things; people falling off boats, a girl trying to fight a crow for a cup of frozen yoghurt and what an Indian dream smells like. Naturally, I'm doing some stand up comedy today, interested, listen on...

The blue skies of the Cote d'Azur welcomed us as we exited the Nice airport. Laden down with my heavy bag and running on caffeine, the warm weather was like a breath of fresh air. I wasn't left speechless often but I just stood there, letting everything sink in.

"This place is amazing!" someone to my left exclaimed.

I didn't bother looking. Waste of energy.

"Hmm. This place is nice." I commented.

Everyone within earshot simultaneously groaned (see what I did there; Nice, nice...).

"Nice joke mate."

I sighed. Bad enough I had to listen to this fake accent for the first flight from Hong Kong to Dubai. Along with the four hour wait in Dubai and the second flight from Dubai to Nice. Now, I would probably have to endure this for the whole bus ride. Typical of my luck. One more round of Australian slang and I was going to spontaneously combust. Naturally, my friends got to sit next to each other. Just another day in the life of me, Shaka. I would have responded (probably with a "shrimp on the barbie" joke) if Lea hadn't arrived. Lea was one of my best friends and we talked a lot (often getting told off for our loud laughing). She also was the only one who would actually save me from the clutches of Brian, this wild Australian (my other friends would be too busy laughing at my plight). She quickly pulled me into a seat next to her on the bus.

"You can thank me later." she whispered into my ear

Four days later, I was sailing off the coast of Monaco. Sailing is fun. Well, when there's wind.

Unsurprisingly, we got to use the paddles we had brought along in case of an emergency. Funnily enough, we were the only group that had brought paddles along. This meant me and my crew of hardened sea dogs blitzed the initial races. I could imagine myself at the helm of an ancient pirate vessel. Racing away from the Roman Navy pursuing us through the Mediterranean, just out of range of their puny cannons. The...I get carried away often. Anyway, it seemed too perfect when the wind began to pick up after just half an hour of hard paddling. I could feel the wind rushing through my crew cut as our little catamaran skipped over the azure blue waves of the Mediterranean.

"You see those handholds. Grab those and lean out over the side." Leo said from somewhere behind me.

"Hmmm, let me think. That's an instant no," I replied. "Also, it's pointless."

"A ha! It isn't pointless. See, when you lean over either side, the mast's angle shifts due to the movement of the center of mass. When you do it right, you can significantly increase speed and improve stability. It's called heeling and is done by professionals."

He took a deep breath and promptly swallowed half the Mediterranean, nearly falling off the boat.

"Also, Lea is on the boat over there." he said with a smirk (after he stopped choking).

Peter chuckled from the other side of the boat. He had a perfectly built body, is pretty smart (not as smart as yours truly) and has a great sense of humour. Naturally, he turned girls' heads wherever he went and he didn't really understand my or Leo's plights. Either way, I couldn't refuse that offer. All the physics checked out with me and our instructor had said prizes would be given to the first boat to complete the course, which is why I wanted to win so badly (definitely not because Lea was watching). How badly wrong could it possibly go?

I grabbed the handholds and threw myself overboard. For a fleeting second, I was skimming over the water line, like a cast skipping stone. I swung back onto the boat.

"Don't throw yourself overboard like Lea's in the water. Move gently and perpendicular to the direction of travel."

I ignored the remark about Lea, took a deep breath and tried again – to no avail. I had more luck on the third try, though (third time lucky, I suppose). The sensation of flying over the waves of the Mediterranean sea, glittering in the noon sunlight, is a feeling you can't replicate anywhere else in the world.

"Woah, can I...Ahhhhhh," Peter cried out.

My entire body was soaked in the salty sea water as the boat hit a particularly large crest.

"You idiot!" Leo shouted, "Alright, let the sails out and steer hard to slow down"

Then he jumped off the boat with a perfect swan dive. I swung back onto the boat and took stock of the situation and quickly grabbed the mainsheet (nautical terms for the rope that controlled the mainsail) and quickly began to let it out. With one arm, I opened the jib (the small sail at the front) and with my feet I wildly swerved the boat left and right. Shouts and screams behind me. The girls must have realized what had happened. I need to thank them for their help.

The next few minutes passed quickly. Weaving madly, trying to slow down the boat. Helping Leo and Peter out of the water. Getting back up to speed. The girls had long since left us behind. They had seen that I was handling the situation and had sped off towards the prize. The humorous mood from before had changed to an air of grim determination aboard the SS Unfortunate. None of us liked to lose and we were still a good hundred metres behind the boats ahead of us. However, all three of us weighed little and Leo had found the perfect angle to maximize the wind.

"I never had a chance to say thanks to both of you." Peter said suddenly.

"It was nothing." I replied

"Yeah, you sailed a boat all on your own and managed to keep us on the right course while saving me."

"And," Leo added, "Lea was watching that."

I thought about the incident. I couldn't remember much apart from sailing the boat but I knew she had seen. I couldn't think very long, though. We were approaching the final leg, a tricky section of turns leading to the entrance of the harbour. The wind would be against us as we entered the harbour making life harder. We took our positions and began preparing.

Nice was a great city. Especially exploring after we won the sailing race the day before from a distant last place. Surprised? Things do go right for me occasionally. Unfortunately, my friends weren't in the same group as me. Things do also go wrong quite often. I had more pressing matters on my hands, though. The "confectionerie" (French sweet shop) we were visiting was amazing. I was literally a kid in a candy store. Running around and tasting everything in sight. Strangely enough, it reminded me of the story of Willy Wonka and the Chocolate factory (I would probably be that girl who suddenly inflated like a balloon. Seriously! I was having trouble squeezing into my pants every morning. I hoped nothing would break, at least until I was safely home in Hong Kong).

Lunch was on a hill which my teachers (all French) insisted on calling a colline. The first time they dropped it in conversation (I'm not exactly the greatest at French), I thought the hill had a name. Anyway, it was a pack lunch of a scrumptiously dry baguette sandwich and an apple for dessert. We even got chips! What a luxury (that was sarcasm in case you didn't notice). Thankfully, we went for ice cream afterwards. Now, when you think of an ice cream parlour, you imagine maybe 10 flavours; strawberry, vanilla, chocolate, double chocolate, etc. This would be the norm in every other countries' ice cream shops. Not in a French glacier (no, not the ice flow. 'Glacé' means ice cream in French). It reminded me oddly off Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. The flavours in this insane shop included: kinder surprise, durian, grapefruit, strawberry cheesecake and I kid you not, cactus. How is the flavour of cactus possibly desirable?! Then again, I nearly bought a scoop of some cactus ice cream (just out curiosity) so I probably shouldn't judge. I didn't, simply because I don't like ice cream. Please don't kill me! I'm entitled to my own opinion...I hope? Anyway, I find it too cold and...creamy. I abstained and instead went with Lea to buy some frozen yogurt in the neighbouring shop. Lea was a health freak so she wouldn't eat ice cream (which idiot wouldn't buy ice cream on a day like this?)



Even after five long minutes of bargaining with the shopkeeper (for fifty cents), most of the group hadn't gotten their ice cream. I innocently suggested that if they'd make an orderly line, maybe they'd get their cold, disgusting slop on a cone faster (sorry, I meant ice cream). It didn't take me much to give up (hey, I had my fro-yo. It was their loss). Lea and I hung out in the shade of a nearby square. A murder of crows (yep, that's the collective noun for a group of crows) was pecking at some grains thrown out by a baker.

"They look cool," Lea said suddenly.

"The crows? Why?" I asked, curious.

"They're jet black and look pretty aerodynamic. It reminds of that plane, the Blackbird."

"Why don't you feed them some fro-yo," I asked mockingly.

"Sure. I doubt there'll be any takers though." She held the cup above her head and began shouting, "Hey crows! Over here! I got some fro-yo for you."

She turned back to me with her hands still above her head.

"See. They never would...Hey," she cried.

The guilty crow sat on the tarpaulin covering above the ice cream shop (where the line was still long in case anyone was wondering). His shiny black beak was now covered in pink, strawberry frozen yogurt.

"A little help here." Lea said, looking pointedly at me.

I was too busy laughing, rolling on the floor and choking on my fro-yo. I doubted that I would help her even if I could. The standoff was pretty funny. A short girl, hands on her hips with a look that would have cowed a bull, staring at a small black crow, with dark beady eyes and a beak covered in a pink cream. Our group noticed the commotion (well, me rolling on the floor of a dusty open air square) and most of them stepped out to examine the problem. Neither of the contestants had moved. Lea had somehow managed to intensify her already intense glare. The crow stared right back, her reflection in its glossy eyes.

"This does seem to be a problem," someone noted drily.

I stopped rolling enough to see one of the French teachers examining the problem critically.

"Maybe they're like monkeys. If you gesture like you're letting go, they will too."

He moved to the edge of the tarpaulin and shook it gently to get its attention. I had finally got myself up to my feet with the help of Charles. We both turned and watched the situation unfold.

The crow turned its feathery head towards Monsieur Fanny (again, not kidding with the French madness). He lifted both his hands above his head and gestured like he was letting go of something. The crow seemed to be nodding and suddenly, it let go of the cup of the fateful frozen yoghurt. Time seemed to slow down (like my computer when I'm playing a video game. One second it's running sixty frames per second, the next it's stuttering and stammering like an engine on a cold morning. Anyway...). The crow let go of the cup. The cup slid down the tarpaulin. Monsieur Fanny begins to lower his hand. The cup flies off the edge of the tarpaulin. Monsieur Fanny's hands are still only at eye level. And...SPLAT! I dropped back onto the dusty cobblestones, rolling with laughter. Did I know that my clothes were getting dirty? Well, yes. Did I care? No! Charles was on his knees next to me, looking like he was dying (I doubted I looked any better). In the corner of my vision, I could see Lea crying (with laughter of course), the fro-yo forgotten. It took everyone a good five minutes to get up and recompose ourselves though it was exceptionally difficult. Monsieur Fanny's shirt was ruined but he was laughing as hard as any of us. Lastly and probably the most miraculously, my cup of frozen yogurt still rested on the table where I had left it. I grabbed it and lifted a spoon full of the creamy goodness to my mouth. It nearly made it before it was snatched out of my hand (it reminds me of that idiom "slip between the cup and the lip". Except here it's more of a snatch than a slip).

"Man, yours tastes good." Lea exclaimed. I groaned but didn't bother fighting (resistance is futile). I knew she only ate tiny portions. Sure enough, she only took a few spoonfuls before relinquishing control of the cup to me.

Our last stop of the trip would be at a perfume factory near a fort overlooking a picturesque harbour. The bus pulled up at the gates of the parfumerie and everyone piled out of the bus. The sea seemed to be blushing from everyone's compliments, reflecting the setting sun's hues of scarlet and gold. Sailboats, looking like toys from the height we were at, sported colourful sails, dipping and curving over the waves, leaving shadows as long as their wakes. I could imagine an armada of ancient wooden vessels leaving this harbour and sailing out into the gold sunset. The docks covered in joyous people sending them off. And...

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Lea asked.

I turned to look at her. Her face glowed in the sunlight and her freckles stood out on her tanned face. I opened my mouth to respond...

"SMILE!" someone shouted behind me.

I turned to face the camera. That photo of me, jaw open in shock and Lea, scowling at the camera has been seen by everyone from our grade and some others as well.

"Alright, let's give the lovebirds some space," somebody else shouted.

I heard quite a few snickers and chuckles (wish I'd get those when I do stand up) but everybody cleared off.

"We're just friends!" Lea shouted at the receding group.

I felt a pang of sadness. Then I felt angry for feeling sad.

"What do you want to tell me?" I asked.

"How do you...It's nothing."

"You can trust me. Besides who would I tell?" I was hooked now.

"Well, I haven't told anyone. I'm going..."

She was interrupted by Monsieur Fanny calling us to come inside the parfumerie.

"Come on," she grabbed my hand and pulled me along, "I'll tell you later."

I was suddenly pulled out my memory and into the present. Hundreds of eyes were on me.

"We never talked after that. It wasn't my fault I swear! I mean, I hope my breath isn't that bad." I said, acting shocked and trying to smell my breath.

Everybody was laughing and some were even rolling in the aisles. I could make out Peter and Leo near the back. They were only recognizable by their matching neon "Go SHAKA" caps.

"Seriously though, she seemed to be avoiding me. I only found out the reason about two weeks ago. Now is probably a good time to mention that I'm not a cool kid and I generally don't know things that are going on (ie, gossip). The day after the trip ended she and a guy from our grade became an official couple."

Everybody sighed sympathetically. My heart was pretty tied up and my tongue felt like was deflating (sorry, other way around).

"I've held half a regret and half a grudge ever since and I learned an important lesson on the trip, my "Journey to the West", my Odyssey; don't hold regrets. Regrets don't help. They're simply emotional baggage you carry around and that weigh you down. They make you lose track of your goals, so don't. Let it go (I'm not turning into Elsa, don't worry everybody), and let humour and friendship fill the gaps. Thanks everybody, my name's Shaka and have a great day."

As I walked off the stage, I received a standing ovation from the audience but I didn't hear it. All I could feel was the regrets lifting off my chest. Maybe I was right sometimes and maybe sometimes things do go well for me.

# The Last Jade Shard

German Swiss International School, Chan, Elvis – 15

*“The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trial.”*

—Confucius

★ ★ ★

*Shanghai*

I stumbled forward as an agonizing pain pierced into my lower back. Struggling to regain my composure, I grasped my sword defensively in front of my chest.

“Stop...please...” I whimpered, struggling to choke back the tears that were clouding my vision. *Why were my parents cruel enough to send me to this martial arts academy?* I thought to myself, cursing under my breath as I swung around blindly. In my nebulous daze, I faintly made out the glint of the sword before it struck me.

★ ★ ★

The first shafts of sunlight trickled through the dust-covered windows into the otherwise unlit infirmary room, capturing the specks of dust in its frozen embrace. The moth-eaten curtains drooped to the ground, poised like phantoms hidden in the shadows.

As the days went on, some gashes healed while new ones were opened. It was an unending cycle of pain and recovery, of being beaten down and then getting back onto my feet. Over time, the art of coping with pain became easier. I won more often than I lost; less time was spent in the infirmary.

New Years finally came; the only time students of the academy could visit their parents. Although I was eager to leave this prison of an institution, there was a bitter resentment towards my father for sending me away.

I cycled along the Huangpu River, mesmerised by its dazzling shade of emerald. A chime signaled my arrival as I walked into my father’s jade shop in a narrow alleyway on the Bund. Father was sitting behind the counter, his eyes fixated on a small piece of jade that he cradled in his palms.

“What’s so fascinating about that rock?” I asked, my voice tinged with irritation.

“This piece of jade is incredibly special. I first found it as a child in the rivers of Xinjiang and it has been with me ever since, through the ups and downs of life,” he muttered, as if to himself.

After a prolonged silence, he finally looked up and beckoned me to come closer. “We’re going back to our hometown in Xinjiang this year,” he said. “I can tell you the stories along the way.”

★ ★ ★

*Luoyang, Hunan*

I watched as the jagged verdant landscape on the raw piece of jade was gently smoothed out into rolling ridges with snow-capped peaks. Placed against the rotary disc, the chafing spewed out fine particulates of ash. In the midst of the snowstorm, I saw two figures huddled together on the ground. Their complexions were wan and ashen, melting into the colourless landscape. The howling wind threatened to pry open their clothing, eager to lash at their frail bodies. Grains of snow thrashed at any exposed skin, but they were too numb to feel any pain.

A lone passerby proffered a sack of rice, for which they were immensely grateful. In their ravenous state, the grains of rice were precious pieces of jade, glinting in the muted wintry sun.

“When we first moved to the city, we were too poor to afford food, let alone a home,” he recalled, his eyes welling up. “That winter was one of the most difficult ones we had ever experienced; at the time we thought we weren’t going to survive.”

★ ★ ★

He stared intently as he chipped away at the edges of the piece of jade, carving deep niches and grooves in their place. Each act of hitting was accompanied by a crisp knell, their haunting words of derision reverberating in his skull.

“Country boy,” one taunted.

“You’ll never have what it takes,” another added.

When he first started his apprenticeship as a jade craftsman, he was often the laughingstock of his colleagues. At first his colleagues’ caustic remarks hardly fazed him at all, as he brushed them off with relative ease. He learnt to steel himself against their constant blows. But he felt weakened with the passing of time; these words seemed to become more real. He began to worry that they were speaking the truth. He feared that with enough excoriation, the imperfections engrained within him would be revealed.

Yet the most painful attacks came from the ones that he held closest to his heart. He never thought to guard himself against them, so their assaults came when he was least expecting it. He felt sharp pangs of pain coursing through his body as he remembered their scathing comments, each one lacerating his heart until he was left tender and bloodied, with a throbbing pain in his chest.

“Quit daydreaming,” urged his mother.

“You’re doing it all wrong,” his teacher reprimanded.

He was no longer the perfect piece of jade that his mentor had chosen years ago. Yet he subsisted on his naivety and unwavering sense of purpose. “I was a strong piece of jade; no matter how much their broke off me, they could not twist me into quitting,” he recollected, his eyes glassy and distant.

“I learnt that the people closest to you could hurt you the most. I decided that I didn’t want that to happen to you, so I sent you away to the martial arts academy from a young age. I would allow strangers to attack you, to lessen the sting,” he said, looking at me. As I stared back at his forlorn eyes, it was like delving into his soul and uncovering his darkest memories. Some of my anger dissipated into pity, but the bruises on my body stung in protest.

★ ★ ★

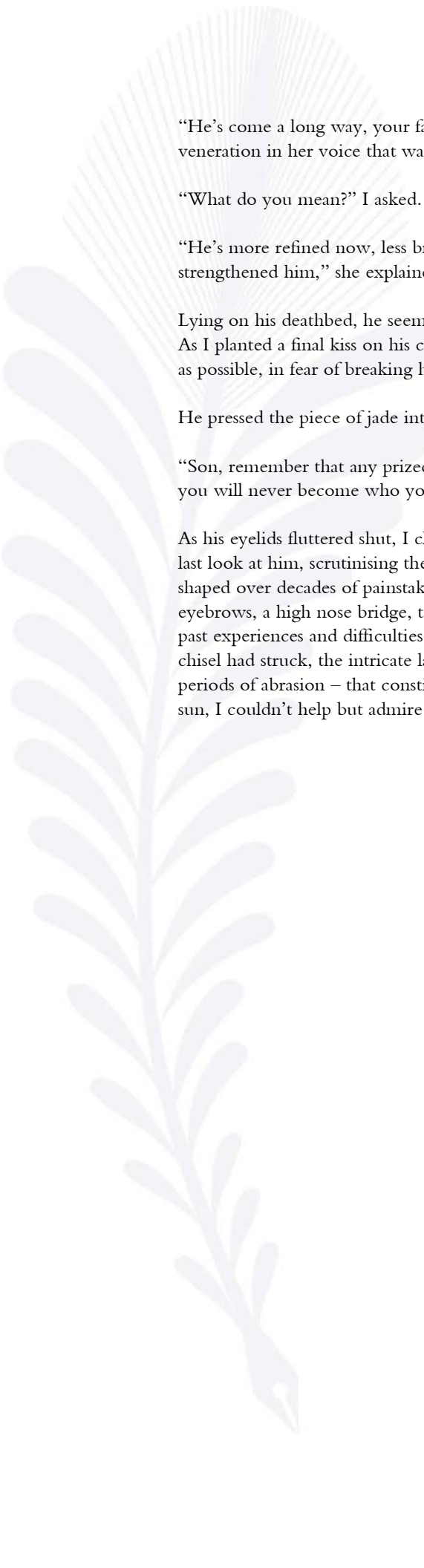
*Hetian, Xinjiang*

He was hunched over the desk, piece of jade in hand, as he rubbed furiously with a threadbare piece of cloth. The opaque piece of rock adopted a translucent quality, revealing the interweaved striations that ran through the center.

“Here lies the problem,” the doctor said, pointing to a particularly engorged vein on the X-ray. “You have a weeks to live at most, sir.”

The intensity of his rubbing increased, leaving a glossy sheen on the surface. He felt his heart drop, beads of sweat forming on his forehead as panic coursed through him.

★ ★ ★



“He’s come a long way, your father,” my aunt whispered to me with a wistful smile. There was a certain veneration in her voice that was difficult to pinpoint.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s more refined now, less brash and more self-assured. The failures and adversities have made strengthened him,” she explained.

Lying on his deathbed, he seemed tranquil and angelic. His pallid complexion was waxen, almost jade-like. As I planted a final kiss on his cheek, I couldn’t help but notice how brittle he seemed. I tried to be as gentle as possible, in fear of breaking him. I winced as his numbing coldness drained the warmth from my lips.

He pressed the piece of jade into my hand and clasped it shut.

“Son, remember that any prized piece of jade is a result of masterful carving and polishing. Without pain, you will never become who you were destined to be. Goodbye, my *magnum opus*.”

As his eyelids fluttered shut, I clutched onto his piece of jade and helplessly watched my tears fall. I took one last look at him, scrutinising the finesse of the craftsmanship on his face like a fine piece of art, molded and shaped over decades of painstaking work. My eyes traced the contours of his facial features: prominent eyebrows, a high nose bridge, taut lips. Each of the wrinkles that were etched into his skin held stories of past experiences and difficulties that he encountered. It was this sustained pain – the grooves where the chisel had struck, the intricate lattice of veins that ran through him, the smooth undulations created by long periods of abrasion – that constituted such a strong and whole person. Basked in the last rays of the setting sun, I couldn’t help but admire how beautiful of a creation my father was.



# A Real Storyteller

German Swiss International School, Wan, Rachel – 15

The doctors told Sun Yi she only had two months to live. It was something in her gall bladder that complicated the situation. Sun Yi was calm when she heard the news. She didn't really pay attention to her diagnosis; all she knew was that her end was nigh.

The next morning, Sun Yi walked around the *hu-tong*<sup>1</sup>, keeping a hand pressed to her back. She had gotten used to the lingering back aches which only seemed to get worse every spring. With one hand to her back and the other holding her handkerchief, broom, incense sticks, and newspapers, Sun Yi let her mind wander. Lately, she had been thinking more about her daughter, about how they would reunite soon. She was seventy years old, with bound feet and a pair of chopsticks on her head in a knotted bun. To *Tai-tai*<sup>2</sup> she was a hardworking maid and spinster. In fact, *Tai-tai* hadn't needed Sun Yi to work ever since she had turned sixty, but her magnificent storytelling skills had made *Tai-tai* keep her on the job. She could entrance anyone, telling tales of girls and gods, of affection and animosity. At sunset she would gather the children and tell them stories. Her chronicles captivated not only the children but the entire *hu-tong*.

"My daughter married a general. Before I gave her away I bathed her in milk and unbound her feet. Her feet were as soft as silk..." Here Sun Yi paused, evened out her breath, and told the children to count the days she had left. Each day nearer to her death, she looked more contented. "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west", she would say. "Just as the sun gracefully ebbs into oblivion, so too am I almost reaching the west, children... I am almost dying." Almost as if to punctuate her statement, she coughed. "I am too weak. If only before my death, I could see my daughter once again."

Whether there was any truth to Sun Yi's tales, no one knew. Sun Yi would sweep floors, cook meals, and sleep on the rooftop with her incense sticks and newspapers. At night she would look at her handkerchief for hours under the moonlight. Still, her neighbours could not fathom why Sun Yi was spending her last two months so mundanely. Whispers unfolded as people brushed past her through the throng.

"Why are you still staying here? Shouldn't you go back to the village, where you are from?" the children asked innocently as they walked to the market square. Sun Yi would pull the chopsticks out of her bun and say, "Why leave? This *hu-tong* has the art of making a transient and chaotic life seem orderly and predictable."

Sun Yi's job as a storyteller increased in importance, as her stories were the only thing that were colourful in this monochromatic *hu-tong*. Though under any circumstances she could spend her last days back at the village and not as a maid, she honoured her responsibility of a lifetime. She told stories everyday, even on days when her back aches seemed intolerable.

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*Tai-tai* was having none of this two-month nonsense, so she called all the neighbours to convince Sun Yi to return to the countryside. The neighbours all believed that Sun Yi's resting place should be where she was born, reflecting the circle of life. Hastily the neighbours carried Sun Yi up the stairs to the roof, where they planted her on one side of the clothesline and started yelling on top of each other.

"What is all this fuss?" Sun Yi cried.

"Sun Yi, you must leave this stifling *hu-tong* and go back to your village! You shouldn't waste your last days working as a maid for us!" *Tai-tai* exclaimed.

"Your journey in life should be as radiant and purposeful as the sun!" another hollered, tears spluttering unattractively down her red cheeks.

"Sun Yi, I think you are too afraid to leave this place; you are too afraid to return to your past. But what is life if it is not an exhilarating journey? What is life if you do not return to your roots? What is life if you spend fifty years being a maid?" a third questioned.



At this Sun Yi shook her head so hard the chopsticks in her hair rattled. She put a finger to her lips, contemplating a reply before she spoke. "Everyone is telling me I cannot find my purpose in life because I spent half a century caring for other people that I forgot about myself. They don't understand. Life doesn't have to be thrilling to be meaningful. Sometimes, it can just be simple."

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The rain had stopped and now a sour smell, rising from damp leaves, hung low over the alley. The neighbours, figuring their advice to Sun Yi was futile, gave up. Sun Yi's back continued aching and she continued telling stories. Her stories were a juxtaposition to her lustreless life. They were exciting escapisms and absurdist fantasies about monsters eating flesh and mountains adorned with flowers and fruit.

More rains came, but Sun Yi no longer felt bothered by the dripping water that passed over her head. She circled the same street in the afternoons. Reed broom in hand, white shoes smeared from newspaper ink, she snaked around the dilapidated buildings. It was a routine of hers to buy a packet of puffed rice and a cup of sugarcane juice as she strolled.

*Tai-tai* was waiting for Sun Yi when she returned one afternoon. People whispered as she arrived, all echoing the same news: this was the sixty-first day; the last day in two months. As they all gathered on the rooftop, Sun Yi suddenly said, "I have something to tell."

There was a staggering silence as everyone waited.

"I will soon embark on a new journey to the west. The journey to death. I am not fearful for mortality as I will meet my daughter in heaven. Death is a solitary experience, one that, no matter how many stories I tell in my lifetime, I cannot prepare myself for," she whispered. "We all experience two journeys. One during life and one after it. This life I was destined to be a caretaker, but not a mother. I did not live among gentry, but I did live a simple life. And to me, that is enough."

It turns out Sun Yi's daughter was already dead, she died of scarlet fever after three months of living. The handkerchief that Sun Yi held every night was the one that wrapped around her daughter's body when she was ill. The stories Sun Yi told of her daughter were her own imaginations of what she wanted her daughter to become. Sun Yi's whole life had been one futile journey spent seeking for something that no longer existed. Her whole life was spent taking care of other people because she never had the chance to take care of her own. Maybe her stories were that captivating because it was to fill a void in her. It was a journey into fantasy, but one that was so fleeting it never gave Sun Yi any enlightenment.

So she told the neighbours to disband, leaving her in solitary peace. As she sat down on the concrete, Sun Yi tried to reknit her bun, but now her hair was too thin to hold the chopsticks securely.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Traditional Peking Village

<sup>2</sup> Wife or madam

# Seeking the Truth

Harrow Beijing, Yao, Caitlin – 15

Luoyang, 618

The trees rustled as a breeze slithered through their leaves, whispering to the birds who chirped cheerfully in response. They greeted the dawn and the pale blue sky dappled with clouds coloured in amaranth pink.

A monastery stood amidst the trees. The first rays of light were scattered on the ridges of its gabled roof and reached the courtyard in front of the prayer hall. The silhouette which stood there in the darkness had now become a small, lean figure wearing an ill-fitting robe; a jade pendant hung from her neck.

She stood quietly outside the hall, holding a piece of *Xuan* paper rolled up like a scroll in her hands.

When the monks emerged from the hall the girl turned towards them, her brown eyes glinted with happiness as she spotted who she was looking for; she tiptoed to him.

He turned to her when she was still some distance away. He was walking beside his brother, holding the Mahayana Sutra he copied faithfully.

“It’s you.” He hesitated before he greeted her, “What brings you here?”

The girl unrolled the paper in her hand, a painting slowly unfolded in front of her, “I painted this last night.” She took a deep breath, “Would you like to have a look?” She approached him apprehensively as she asked.

He took the painting in his hands; it was a *shanshui* painting, an imaginary landscape. Although both the rocky mountains and the meandering river are all painted with rather soft, gentle brushstrokes, their essence were captured very well.

“It’s wonderful.” He remarked.

She didn’t reply. Despite his compliment she could tell that he regarded her painting with indifference, “You’re leaving Luoyang soon, this might be the last time you ever see my painting.”

“I will have a good look at it, then.” He smiled.

“Do you really have to leave?” She pursed her lips.

His eyes widened, “Of course.” He said, his voice quivering a little, “*A Mi Tuo Fo!* How could one possibly keep their mind solely on the study of Buddhism with this turmoil gripping Luoyang?”

She nodded in agreement but remained silent, his lips parted, wanting to say something more but no words came out.

“Xuanzang.” The abbot in the monastery called him at that moment, his sonorous voice echoed in the monastery. She watched him walk away after he bid her goodbye, still clutching the sutra tightly in his hands.

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After her visit to the monastery her mind turned to the time when she first met him.

It was a summer evening many years ago, when she had been a little ragamuffin running barefoot in the village. He encountered her on a dirt path, when she was drawing on it with a twig.

She raised her head when he asked her what she was drawing. He was not much older than her, wearing a grey robe and Buddhist prayer beads.

“A tree.” She mumbled.

His eyes fell on her thick, tousled hair and her ragged clothes that seemed like a coarse burlap. “Do you live in the village?”

“Why should I tell you?” She said with a defiant glare.

“You don’t look like you have anyone to take care of you.”

She felt her hands touching the jade pendant she wore on her neck.

“No one takes care of me.”

“*A Mi Tuo Fo.*” He exclaimed, sounding deeply disturbed.

She fiddled with the pendant in her hands, not knowing what to say. To her he was merely a passer-by, perhaps a monk from a nearby monastery. He gazed at her for a while and left before they could exchange a greeting.

The next day she wandered to the same spot, half hoping to see him again. It's been a long time since anyone had talked to her.

He was there, accompanied by another woman who seemed like a nun.

He had introduced himself as a disciple from Jingtu monastery and the nun as *Jing-Ci Shitai*, the abbess of the only Buddhist nunnery in the village.

She cast a curious glance at the abbess, who then smiled benevolently and took the girl's bony hands in her wrinkled ones.

"*Jing-Ci Shitai* will take care of you. You will go live with her and the other nuns." He said gently just as she tried to withdraw her hands from the stranger.

"What?" She was shocked and couldn't believe someone whom she had just met on the previous day had found a home for her. She looked at the two of them, bewildered.

"When I heard about you I just made up my mind about taking you with me." The abbess said amiably, "I cannot bear to leave a little girl like you alone."

Her hands trembled a little, nobody had thought that about her; certainly not her parents whom she had never known. She gazed at the abbess, whose smile possessed a magical quality. She had seen sincerity in the upturned corners of her mouth and genuine sympathy in her eyes.

She decided to follow her. Nothing could be worse than fighting for food with the hens and getting beaten up by some violent villagers.

She had been living in the nunnery under the care of the nuns since then. The abbess had even given her a real brush instead of a twig and taught her to paint on real paper.

She had paid him a visit, too. He had told her about the sutras he had been studying, about his childhood, about his Confucian father and Buddhist brother. She listened intently and thanked him for everything.

Why, she asked, why would you bother to find me a home, you don't even know me.

It is wrong to turn a blind eye to someone who is suffering. He replied.

She had visited him frequently afterwards, each time bringing a painting. They exchanged long conversations in the courtyard; he listened to everything she said, no matter how trivial they are. His eyes lit up when he saw her paintings, especially the landscapes.

The visits had given her something to look forward to everyday.

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Many years had passed since then. Luoyang was now gripped by endless warfare.

He was convinced that their dynasty was collapsing. There was a discernable uncertainty in his voice when he spoke of the future.

He was no longer interested in her paintings; his mind was focused only on Buddhism and where that would take him.

She sighed as she rolled up the painting, wondering what fate had in store for her. A sense of hopelessness hit her at the thought of him leaving soon.

She touched the jade pendant again, an oddly luxurious thing compared to the rest of her belongings. She vaguely recalled that her aunt, who raised her for only a few years, told her that it was the only thing her mother had left her.

She toyed with the pendant. *Mother* meant nothing more than a stranger to her, but secretly she was intrigued by her. If her aunt's words had been true, the pendant was almost like a clue her mother had left her, somehow urging her to find this woman.

A frightening idea suddenly flashed across her mind, she shuddered at it but couldn't stop it from drifting back to her. She turned to the window in her room; stared at the trees outside and the mountain ranges stretching endlessly beyond. It was such a captivating sight.

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When the abbess entered her room the next morning after noticing her absence during the morning prayer, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Should we go look for her?" A nun whispered.

"I doubt we will have much luck with that." The abbess sighed. There was a piece of torn paper lying on the wooden table that caught her attention.

Forgive me, it said, one day I will repay your kindness with everything I could.

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*Seattle, 2018*

11:30pm. Helen reluctantly put her book down as she realized how late it was.

She couldn't remember how many times she had flipped through the pages of this book till late night and still felt she hadn't read enough of it. *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*. She admired Xuanzang, the monk who made a brave journey in pursuit of the essence of Buddhism and wrote this book.

As a professor of Asian studies the book provided a valuable insight into ancient China for her, but as a child of two Chinese migrants, Xuanzang's resilient spirit resonated with her parents. The hardship they had experienced on this land that never welcomed them was difficult for Helen to put into words.

Helen kept the thought about her parents to herself, for she knows that neither her husband nor her daughter Laurie would understand. As she held the book in her hands she thought about Laurie, whose interest in connecting with the Chinese culture had diminished as she immersed herself in the world of the Americans.

Deep down Helen had always feared that Laurie would eventually lose her Chinese identity, she knew she would be helpless when that day comes.

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*Chang'an, 628*

"Is it...really you?"

She asked in a fleeting whisper. Part of her was telling her to deny the appearance of this monk in front of her, he seemed more like an apparition to her.

"Yes." His voice was calm as usual, "It's me."

When she first left the nunnery she had no particular destinations in mind. At first she walked to wherever her instincts took her; her mind still lingering on the abbess and the nuns. Guilt had gnawed a hole in her stomach after she left them without a second thought.

She had thought about going back when she collapsed due to starvation on the side of a path, or lost her directions in the darkness, but she would instantly change her mind every time she saw the pendant.

It was as if she was enthralled by the idea that it was the embodiment of her mysterious mother, now calling for her in somewhere afar.

Then one night she remembered Chang'an, a place that people thought would be the new capital of the dynasty that was to come. She had made Chang'an her destination, for it gave her a sense of purposefulness if she had a place in mind.

On the way there she was appalled by the people's condition during the years of warfare. She saw peasants in a famine lying on the infertile soil, gasping in despair; she drifted forward among the people who had lost everything, their vacant eyes still haunted her; even herself had narrowly escaped the soldiers' spears. The further she went, the more painful she felt.

It was a miracle that she made it into Chang'an. It had occurred to her that it was the time to end her impulsive journey. She had become the apprentice of a tailor there, who had taken her in with sympathy.

During the years she spent here she had often laughed at herself. What made her think that she could find someone whose whereabouts are unknown to her? Perhaps her aunt was not even telling the truth.

Tears welled up in her eyes every time the thought came to her.

"How did you make it this far?" He asked.

"I don't know." She stared blankly into the space in front of her, "I ate bark and grass roots; somehow I survived and made it here."

He paused, "Jing-Ci Shitai would cry her heart out if she had known."

"I owe her an apology." She whispered, "She had cared for me for so many years, yet I left her, just like that..."

For a moment they were both lost in thought.

"Do you think I'm silly?" She suddenly asked.

"Well, perhaps a few years ago I would, but now I understand the willingness to do anything for your beliefs. You have travelled this far to find your mother, and I'm about to..." He swallowed hard and said, "Go to *Tian-Zhu*. It's the cradle of Buddhism."

Her widened in shock. It sounded like a strange and foreign land to her, located somewhere extremely remote. "Why?"

"The sutras, they are mistranslated." He said worriedly, "It causes long-standing conflicts between the northern and southern Buddhists. If this divergence becomes prominent, then we wouldn't be able to practice our religion as devoted Buddhist." He paused, "I have to go and decode the sacred sutras from where they originated."

"The Emperor had banned foreign travel." He took a deep breath, but his face broke into a smile as he said that, "But things will eventually work out, as long as you really want them to."

His eyes glinted with determination as he spoke of Buddhism. She knew that nobody could stop him. Her reunion with him was a pure coincidence, he was fully ordained as a monk in one of the many monasteries she went to do her prayers. The joy she felt had not yet receded, yet she had to say goodbye again.

Perhaps this time it would be a farewell.

"All the best." She said, forcing a smile. He had stood up now, she raised her head to look at him and their eyes met. She gazed at him wonderingly just as she had done as a little child.

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As she sat measuring the fabrics she thought about him. A pious monk who had dedicated so much to his belief was bound to be remembered.

Others would only see him as a courageous monk who made contributions to Buddhism, she thought, but to her he was far more than that.

He had found her a home when he had never known her

She had always seen it as a good deed he did like many Buddhists would, it's an idea that is embedded in this religion.

No matter what his intention was, it had brought a tremendous impact on her.

She stopped her work with the fabric, took a calligraphy brush and a stack of papers; she grinded some ink and started writing ferociously. She suddenly decided that she would write everything about him, the abess and the nunnery.

She knew nobody would ever read them, she could only silently acknowledge their significance in her life.

The Buddhists believe in the idea of rebirth. That there will always be an afterlife until you reach enlightenment. She hoped that she would still be able to remember them in an afterlife.

\*\*\*


*Seattle, 2018*

When Laurie heard the door of her mother's bedroom close she crept out of bed and tiptoed to Helen's study, holding a torch in her hand. She turned the torch on as she approached the bookshelf; light illuminated the spine of some books.

She shifted the torch until light fell on the book she looked for. She reached for it, trying to make as little noise as possible, then went stealthily back into her room.

*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*. She had been reading this book secretly under her bedside lamp for days now. It was a book her mother loved too, but she dared not to read it in front of her mother. She had always made a big deal about how Laurie had lacked the interest for learning the history of China and would probably shed tears of joy if Laurie had told her she enjoyed the book. Laurie cringed at the thought.

It had taken a tremendous amount of time for Laurie just to get through the first few pages, for she could hardly pinpoint the exact meaning of those Chinese words. She didn't know where exactly her interests had stemmed from.



She closed the door and opened her bedside lamp. Then she sat on her bed and turned to the page where she left off last time.

There were a few torn, yellowed papers in it. There seem to be Chinese characters written on it with ink.

Laurie had never seen them before; she thought her mother had bought some new, creative bookmarks again, but just as she touched the papers, they glowed.

She thought she had a hallucination, but when she rubbed her eyes and looked closely again, the glow was still there.



## New Journeys to the West

*Heep Yunn School, Leung, Angie Lok Sze – 15*

“Where’s daddy?” Ting piped up, a reedy little voice that seemed to echo further than it should, bouncing off the walls of the tottering houses, snaking up the charred structures to seep through the bullet holes that peppered the walls, like an old rag that had been bitten one too many times by fleas. “Where’s daddy?” she bleated, and Zilan repressed the urge to claw wildly at the air, so that she might snatch the deceitful word before it drifted too wide, too far, to too many people in uniforms who would stare at them with hard, apathetic eyes...

“Daddy had to go somewhere else,” she told her little girl, who stared up at her innocently, with eyes that held not a stint of malice, only an uncomfortable bewilderment. Ting curled her hand into a tiny fist, the skin smooth like silk within her own gnarly, wrinkled claws that had seen a decade of stinging lye water and the splash of hissing oil. The years of bitter resilience now reflected in Zilan’s hardened mouth as she said sharply, “He told us we would meet up in Hong Kong, so walk faster if you want to see him sooner.” She quickened her pace, forcefully dragging Ting along so that her feet stumbled over the debris, kicking up puffs of ash and rubble.

Ting blinked, but kept her mouth shut. Young as she was, even she could sense it in the air—an oppression so sharp that she could feel it nicking her skin, drawing tiny pinpricks of blood.

“Hurry,” Zilan urged, desperation tainting her voice. They turned at a corner and started down a narrow forest road, the once vibrant greenery now covered by an achromic ash that settled down on the smothered leaves as lightly as fallen snow.

But it was a bridge, and at the end of that crumbling, treacherous passage stood their last hope. It was better than the utter nullity that they had just left behind.

They had gotten no further away than six miles before the village erupted into a blaze of fire, the sweltering heat scorching their skin even from a distance. Zilan forged on—there were no other survivors in the remnants of their village anyways. Ting dared a glance back, and flames danced in two pools of dark brown, before they dwindled, sputtered, and petered out.

A single strand of smoke spiralled languidly into the air.

They spent a week stumbling down the forest path, forging through the shrubs that hooked onto their cheongsams and sliced thin red lines across their arms and legs. The woody biome slowed them down. Each snap, each sneeze and each cough might send a soldier running, for one never knew where they would be listening, when they would be listening. To Ting, it had felt like a century before they finally burst out of the woodland, the narrow path opening up into a wider road.

“We’ll stay for one night, and no more,” Zilan warned as they approached Shenzhen and a city loomed into view.

Perhaps it was Zilan’s tired eyes playing tricks on her, but under the afternoon sun, the city seemed nothing less than an idyllic bubble compared to the devastated ruins they had left behind. Golden rays cascaded down, bathing the streets in a warm, hypnotic glow while the calls of merchants rang across the street, selling their wares. Intertwining with the voices of those who responded, it promptly spiralled upwards into the air, a lively foxtrot that hopped and waltzed over the hustle—and-bustle of those on the cobbled road. Zilan and Ting passed a donkey with a cart attached to its harness, clippity-clopping down the road as its tail moved in rhythm to swat the cloud of flies surrounding it. Two girls fell in stride with them for a heartbeat, before the younger one suddenly dashed forwards only to return to the older one who shouted after her crossly, her pigtails and the ends of her crumpled cheongsam flying out as she merrily skipped back to her sister. They passed fruit vendors and shoe-shiners and a barbers, where Ting saw the hairdresser raise a pair of rusted scissors and snip off the thick, oiled braid of a young man sitting on the stool.

No one went up to them or made a comment, yet Zilan could feel the eyes on them, gliding over their tattered dresses, taking in their soot-stained faces, noting the bruises and welts that had cropped up on their feet. No one spoke, none proffered their pity or unveiled their repulsion, for the stench of fear radiated off each and every observer.

Ting sneezed. “Their looks are itchy,” she mumbled, rubbing her nose on her sleeve, only to succeed in further smudging her face with soot. Zilan bent down and scooped her up. “No matter,” she said, straightening up. Ting’s tiny feet dangled in the air, black and blue patches with angry welts on both toes. An exhausted head lay limply on Zilan’s chest, and out of the corner of her eye, Zilan saw a young mother grab the hand of her child and vanish into a hidden alleyway.

She murmured, "It is not us they see, but rather ominous tidings dressed in the colors of invasion."  
"The sun may continue to shine, but winter marches ever closer."

They left the city not long after, choosing to flee through the passage of Shekou. The city gradually faded out of sight, as though it had been naught but a mirage shimmering in the far distance, a fleeting image of an oasis in the barren desert. Some days, it squirmed like a ravenous tapeworm at the back of Zilan's mind, that perhaps, just perhaps, it would be the same no matter where they went. There would be no escape from the invaders, and their last beacon of hope would eventually crumble, and fall from that great height into murky, hopeless waters, its shining beam of light extinguished with a final resounding *hiss*.

At least their luck hadn't failed them. So far, they had yet to encounter any passing soldiers, but they had heard stories from the occasional deserter that the army was hot on their tails--dozens had been hunted down and captured or shot on the spot.

*Falter in our step, and they will be upon us.*

The mangroves welcomed them with open arms, folding out the sunlight with their flat and dark leaves as they tread deeper into the undergrowth, until the only light remaining were the few iridescent spots drizzled across the ashen bark.

"Mommy," Ting said. She pointed to moving silhouettes in front of them. In the dim light, Zilan had to squint for the shadows to finally take the form of people.

Deserters. Tens of hundreds of desperate souls were making their way through the forest like a flock of startled geese that had taken flight at the sound of a gunshot. As Ting watched in amazement, they moved through the obscure path as water trickles into streams, congregating without agreement in advance. All were on the same wavelength, driven by the same manic depression, the urgent need to *get out of here*. With a start, Ting realised that they probably looked like them--exhausted, weary and in dire need of food and rest. How long had it been since she had last bathed? Hunger pangs roiled in her stomach with every step she took, and her hair hung in limp strands around her shoulders. Perhaps if she nibbled the dirt crusted around her fingernails...

"Ow!" A stabbing pain shot up her toe, and Ting wriggled it in response, too drained to lift her foot.

"Ting?" Zilan asked. Turning around to look at Ting, she winced at the state of her daughter's shoes. The satin footwear had all but frayed to less than a soiled rag, and Ting's pale toes were poking through its remains, scratched and bleeding from the unrelenting trek. Even if her shoes had not broken, she was simply too young to make the hike. *Would it have been better, Zilan wondered, to have left her at the doorstep of some wealthy family instead?*

Ting's voice cut through her trance. "I can still walk," she promised.

Zilan looked at her for a moment. "You can?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Alright." Zilan took off her shoes. "Wear this." She dropped them in front of Ting's feet.

While Ting dutifully slipped them on, Zilan pushed her feet into Ting's shoes. It was slightly cramped, but they would have to make do.

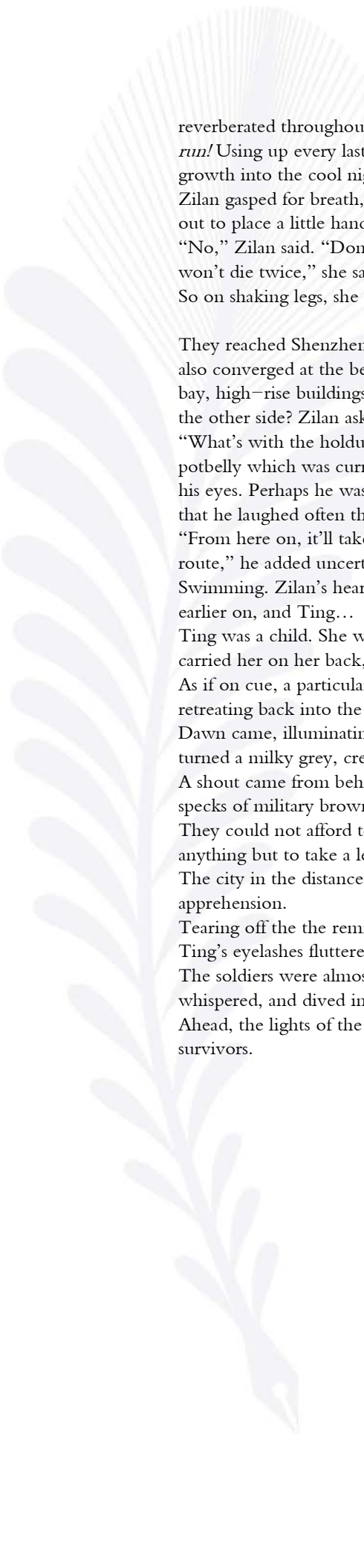
"Let's go." Zilan held out her hand, and Ting grasped it quickly.

Further in, queer objects started to appear on both sides of the roads. First it was a book, then a hat, then a basket of flowers upturned on one side, cream-colored daisies spilling out on the other side, its petals scattered around the flowers and turning brown. Along the path, the dross grew in size, number and whimsy. Broken down carts appeared, one wheel sagging uselessly into the mud. Discarded pennies and copper coins winked at passersby while freed chickens ran around their legs in a feathery, clucking frenzy. Mules snickered and chewed at cud next to the broken shards of smashed wine bottles. China plates and cups, placed neatly on a rock as though its owner had been reluctant to part with his treasure. Gold chopsticks and wooden wardrobes and headrests and rotting fruits, it seemed to Zilan that the mountains of trash would come crashing down at any second, forever burying them in the wasteland of shattered dreams. She rifled through the clothing for shoes. Nothing. Once, they passed by two inconspicuous bundles nestled among the roots of a great oak. It wasn't until the bundles opened their mouths and wailed that Ting realised they were a pair of twins, no older than five months.

Their mother was nowhere in sight. Ting shuddered and squeezed Zilan's hand tightly. "Mommy--"

*BANG.*

The sound ripped through the air like lightning. A single spiral of smoke rose languorously into the air, accompanied by a jumbled mixture of agonized screams behind them. Zilan's throat dried. "Run!" she said hoarsely, tugging Ting along. More gunshots rang in the air and more shrieks erupted. Zilan scooped Ting up and started sprinting, shoving aside other panicked deserters. *Run*, her brain told her. Explosions



reverberated throughout the forest. She could see the trees opening up ahead of her. *Run run run survive run!* Using up every last ounce of energy she had, she put on one final spurt— and burst through the growth into the cool night air.

Zilan gasped for breath, her lungs aching as she tried to steady her pulse. “Mommy!” Ting cried, reaching out to place a little hand on her cheek. “I’ll get down and walk—”

“No,” Zilan said. “Don’t squirm.” She shifted so that Ting was secured in her arms. “The people they shot won’t die twice,” she said. “They’ll be here soon.”

So on shaking legs, she clumsily skidded away before they could catch her.

They reached Shenzhen Bay just before dusk. A few deserters who had similarly survived the shooting had also converged at the beach, milling about aimlessly. Occasionally, they would stare at the city across the bay, high-rise buildings clustered together to create a distant, bizarre creature. What would life be like on the other side? Zilan asked herself, and received nothing but silence.

“What’s with the holdup?” Zilan asked the man nearby. He was a middle-aged man with a hint of a former potbelly which was currently nowhere to be seen. Ting noted that laugh lines were deeply etched around his eyes. Perhaps he was a merry fellow before the war. The gaunt look he had on his face didn’t suggest that he laughed often these days.

“From here on, it’ll take around an hour to reach Hong Kong by swimming,” he answered. “It’s the safest route,” he added uncertainly. “We’re just waiting for daybreak to warm the waters.”

Swimming. Zilan’s heart froze and dropped into her stomach. She was already worn out from the chase earlier on, and Ting...

Ting was a child. She wouldn’t be able to make it to seven miles before her little body gave out, and if Zilan carried her on her back, they would both sink into the dark recesses of the sea.

As if on cue, a particularly large wave reared out of the murky water and slapped the shore roughly, before retreating back into the inky blackness.

Dawn came, illuminating the shore with a rosy, tranquil glow that filled Zilan with dread. Up ahead, the sea turned a milky grey, creating soft splashes as the others delved into the sea.

A shout came from behind them. Zilan whirled around, and nearly choked in terror when she saw the specks of military brown running towards them.

They could not afford to wait. They had come so far, and there would be no return. There was no time for anything but to take a leap of faith.

The city in the distance was shrouded in mist, a hazy silhouette that filled her with uncertainty, and apprehension.

Tearing off the remnants of the hem of her dress, she tied Ting to her waist. “Hold on tightly,” she said. Ting’s eyelashes fluttered once, twice. She sidled up to Zilan.

The soldiers were almost upon them. Zilan squeezed her eyes shut. “The Celestial Emperor protect us,” she whispered, and dived into the freezing water with Ting in tow.

Ahead, the lights of the city gradually flickered on, awaiting a new day, new tidings, and a new wave of survivors.

# Lost in the Clouds

Heep Yunn School, Lin, Bernice Wen – 15

## Flight CX830 – ETA: 16 Hours

Okay, so I'm on a plane to John F. Kennedy International Airport, located in one of the greatest cities in the world. I'm so excited! This is the first time I'm really heading for the West – I haven't left Asia before. Now I'll finally be able to see the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building in person, rather than simply admire them from afar.

For some reason, my mom and dad never take me anywhere fun, except once when they brought me to Korea for skiing and that one time we went to Hokkaido. Most trips, we only ever go to the Mainland, so I'm glad to have a change of pace.

The only thing that I'm bummed about is that I'm supposed to spend some time reading this book on the way there, *Journey to the West*. My marks for the recent Chinese test weren't the best, so Mom's been hovering over my shoulder since the beginning of the holidays. Ugh. And then she recommended that I get an early start on my homework with her favourite story from when she was young. I know that it's a "classic" or whatever, but I don't get why there are still people mooning over a talking monkey.

## ETA: 14 Hours

The sunset is beautiful from up here. I'd bet the Monkey King and his motley crew had never been able to behold something as breathtaking as this.

To the east, it's a roiling mass of dark blue and purple splotches with only the barest flints of faint yellow, but to my left the sky is in full bloom. The clouds have been dyed lavender or lilac or maybe rose. Pastel hues of periwinkle and pink are a subtle backdrop to the golden halo that's painted across the horizon.

I can't take my eyes off of it. A moth drawn to a flame of shining, searing red and orange and amber. It's bright, far brighter than the signal lights on the runway, than the fluorescent lights in our apartment, than the neon lights that construe the Pearl of the Orient's famous night views.

I don't think I'll ever see a prettier picture. It's a shame that it's disappearing so soon.

## ETA: 13 Hours

I forgot that there's something else I'm not too pleased about: my grandparents are tagging along on this trip.

Look, it's not that I don't like them. They always smile when they see me and give me gifts and all that. It's just that they're loud. Really loud. I went with Mom to meet them at the airport a day ago for their stopover, and we accompanied them on their one-day shopping spree. They shopped their way through Polo Ralph Lauren, Kate Spade, Nike and more, and swept away all manner of items. All the way through they never stopped talking.

Near the end, I swore that I could feel a dozen eyes glaring at us. The saleslady at that last store was definitely sounding a little exasperated as she carefully bit out Mandarin sentences which seemed to go over my grandparents' heads, but honestly, who could blame her? My face was burning the entire time. I was the first one out of the shopping mall door.

So yeah. Now they're speaking again, and every time I try to focus on the tiny characters printed on the page, their conversation ends up shoving itself into my ears. Don't feel like turning around and asking them to be quiet, though. I can't understand how everyone else is sleeping.

Scratch that. Mom is still awake. Better get back to it.



### ETA: 11 Hours

Thank God, she's finally drifted off. Now I'll be able to put on a movie. I've been waiting to do that since I first boarded this plane and caught sight of all the monitors. My eyes are feeling kind of itchy and gummy. I think I'm starting to go blind from attempting to make sense of my reading material.

Now, what do we have here? Hmm, "Chinese Cinema". Everything here is really boring. *Red Cliff*? Thanks, but I've had enough of the classics for today. A bunch of guys plotting to kill each other is hardly the most creative idea under the sun. I haven't heard much about these other titles either, so they can't be that good.

"Western Cinema", then. Oh, cool. I've been meaning to watch more Marvel movies. Their trailers always look and sound awesome – very, well, cinematic and grand. I'd prefer to watch them in order of continuity, though, and not all of them are offered here, so maybe later. And hey, so that's the one Dad was saying he watched before on his business trip flight to Sweden. The thumbnail looks decent, too, and there's Gerard Butler and Morgan Freeman... Might as well give it a try.

I tap the touchscreen. *London Has Fallen* is starting, so I settle in my seat and ready myself for an enjoyable one hour and thirty-nine minutes of action-thriller relaxation.

### ETA: 8 Hours

...There are people chatting. What time is it? Must have fallen asleep.

The world's all blurry. Someone's turned on an overhead light in the front. It's stabbing through my eyelids. My head aches. My back is sore. There's a crick in my neck. I turn over. The left arm rest jabs into my ribs. A giggle floats its way over. Who's awake at this ungodly hour?

I turn over again and try to get comfortable. I fail. Giving up sleep as a bad job, I sit up and open my eyes. Someone laughs. It echoes through the still air of the air cabin. A series of incomprehensible noises follows. Only after a moment does my tired brain realise that it's some girl speaking English.

"He dies at the end of that episode," she reveals, grave and serious, like she's imparting the secrets of the universe. I peek out towards the front aisle, and spot a head full of glimmering golden curls bobbing under the light. I'd love to have hair like that. Besides me, the corners of Mom's eyes twitch a little.

"No!" A scandalised gasp, mixed with choked cackling. "Stop it with the spoilers, Lizzie, you're killing me," says the second girl. She sighs, long and deep, full of soulful disappointment. "I was so rooting for him to take the throne, too." Her words are clear, distinct and well-rounded, with a nice throaty undertone and an unidentifiable something to it that makes me want to nod along. I frown. I would never be able to sound that way, with such lightness, with such confidence, as if the world were at my feet.

"Hmm, sure." I practically hear the first girl smiling. "By the way, next episode, there's an attack on—" She's interrupted by an urgent shriek. They're scuffling now, I can tell, from the shadows they're casting and the scraping of fingernails on cloth. Mom pushes herself up and peers over to the front. She's squinting.

"Go back to sleep," she offhandedly orders, "It's late."

I roll my eyes, but I comply. They're still chattering. It's kind of like the background noise you can find in Hollywood films. Soothing, almost. I run over my list of things to do and people to see once we're at New York, and gradually enter the sweet embrace of slumber.

### ETA: 5 Hours

It's unfortunate me for that Mom's an early riser. I'd been hoping to watch another movie after thoroughly enjoying my previous pick – maybe *Independence Day: Resurgence*, since I saw a lot of posters for it back when it was still showing in cinemas. Can't exactly do that with her gazing expectantly at me right now. Back to work, then.

My nap hasn't done much for the entertainment value of this book. Xuanzang does something dumb, Sun Wukong has to go save his master, he fights whatever monster is in his way, he kills the monster, they continue on – and the cycle starts again. That's an awful lot of trouble to get to some dusty old religious scrolls, if you ask me. More importantly, it's a pain for me to trawl through a gazillion repetitions of the same thing. Still don't understand what anyone sees in this book.

I must've made a face, because Mom's staring at me again. "What's wrong?" she asks.

Might as well just spit it out. "This has got to be the duller thing I've ever read." Immediately, she begins to radiate disapproval, and I brace myself for the brewing lecture.

Sure enough, Mom opens her mouth. "Maybe it's not really your cup of tea at the moment," she says, condescendingly, "I know that it took me some time to learn to appreciate it. But really, there's a lot of meaning and depth to it – you could learn a lot about the social circumstances of the time and develop a better understanding of traditional spiritual beliefs..."

In one ear, out the other. I resist the urge to yawn. I really, really regret going along with her choice of reading material now. Should've selected one of the others on the list instead. Then again, I don't much fancy any of the other titles either. Doesn't matter whether the author hails from the mainland or Hong Kong – the recommended book is always as dry as it's dusty. Decades-old, hefty volumes of sheer blather. Who has the patience to read through a dozen torturous monologues on the many failings of society and the true importance of culture? Not me, anyway.

I've got better things to do. My mind is a thousand miles away, dreaming yet again of how perfect this upcoming trip will be. I've got everything planned and prepared. Now, if only we'd just get there already.

### ETA: 3 Hours

Oh, boy, they're talking again. Grandma's complaining about how the seat doesn't do her ancient bones good or something like that and they just keep going on about it. I seriously don't think the repetition of the exact same point is necessary at all, but that's old people for you in a nutshell, I guess.

I turn my eyes back down towards the page. Since Mom's mini-speech, I've been manhandled into reading again. She definitely needs to stop with the tiger parenting, but it'd be awkward to make a scene on a plane, in spite of how tired and grouchy I am. I've been sitting here for around 10 hours, for Christ's sake.

Right as I've almost finally finished processing the last sentence of page 167, a jolt shudders its way through the air cabin. Air turbulence. We're passing through a never-ending area of it. Never thought I'd want to throttle clouds so much before. And, of course, Grandfather joins in on the grouching at that.

Another sudden tremble. This one lodges itself in my head and continues rattling on in there. What I wouldn't give to see solid ground.

The plane lurches again. My heart leaps to my mouth. My grandparents grumble some more.

Somewhere in the front, a middle-aged lady withdraws from her conversation. She tosses out a long, piercing "Shh!". It slices through all the background murmuring, through the heavy air, through everything. For a moment, I think those narrowed blue eyes and that pinched expression are directed at me, but they're not. She's looking behind me. Then I let out my breath and revel in the blessed silence.

No pins drop. A few ticks of the clock pass. A quiet sputtering noise makes itself known. I swivel around to observe the source. My grandmother, a woman of seventy-eight years, who's brought up four hungry young mouths to feed, who's supported her family through thick and thin and who's pulled them through some of the most difficult circumstances, cannot conquer the triviality of a well-meant reminder. I watch as her mouth forms wordless shapes, struggling to remember whatever scraps she knows of international language – I cringe inwardly. Next to her, Grandfather is conspicuously, suspiciously silent.



Pre-emptive second-hand embarrassment pools in my stomach. I stand up and take a step towards the toilet at the end of the hallway. As I pass by them, I attempt to ignore them as best as I can.

A rumble. The world goes off-balance. I stumble backwards, but before I can fall, someone's shoved their arm out behind me.

"Nothing is wrong, yes?" Grandmother's face is crinkled up with concern. She carefully examines me up and down for injuries. It occurs to me that I'm taller than her, so why do I feel so small? Curious gazes prickle my neck. That middle-aged woman's still going 'tut, tut, tut'. My face burns.

"Fine," I mumble, and hurry off to the bathroom without a single backwards glance.

#### ETA: 2 Hours

Mom's in a bad mood. So she takes it out on me and demands that I do my homework or else. And I am doing it. I've skipped to the end of *Journey to the West*, though, because honestly, I can't suffer through any more of it.

The ending's probably the worst part of the book, and that's saying something. The travelers finally reach their sacred West and request to receive the texts, but they're refused by who I think are two of the disciples of the Buddha because they didn't bribe them beforehand. It's only after Xuanzang and his servants relent to give them a precious gift they received from the Emperor that they can get what they came for. What's that even supposed to mean?

After all those trials and tribulations they've undergone, all the perils they've escaped or confronted? That's it? That's the reception they're met with at their supposed holy land? How great can those scriptures be if they're from a place like that? Makes all their toils and ideals seem really extraneous and unrewarding. Ugh. I just don't like this story.

Never mind, I'm free of it until I actually have to put pen to paper for the book report, so I should stop ruminating on a glorified travelogue and start thinking about happier things. We're almost there now!

#### ETA: 1 Hour


There's been a half-hour delay since the airport over there is sorting through some issue or another, but we're so close to landing. I'm so, so excited!

I can't help but look out the window every couple of seconds. I want to be there, and I want to be there now. Despite that, the day's lovely enough that I barely begrudge the fact that I haven't spotted any sign of New York just yet. Blue skies as far as the eye can see, and the clouds are all soft and puffy like cotton.

If there's one good thing that came from wasting my time on that book, it's the knowledge of how, even though I'm going to have to do a full series of stretches as soon as I finally step off this plane, flying's much more pleasant than the prospect of battling and journeying through the country wilds at a time when air conditioning didn't exist.

Blue skies, white clouds, the gentle brush of air running through my hair. If I pretend hard enough, I could almost imagine myself as a bird, an eagle perhaps, beating my powerful wings and soaring with impossible grace, an infinite stretch of space unfolding wide below me, journeying towards the land of my dreams.

Almost there.



ETA: N/A

We're here! Oh God, we're here!

I've grabbed hold of my stuff and we're slowly but surely shuffling offboard. There's been a few missteps here and there, like where the guy in front of me suddenly stopped short and I narrowly avoided bashing my head into him, and the blond kid at my back keeps stepping on my heels accidentally. The weather's taken a turn for the worse, too – what was previously a drizzle is now rapidly morphing into pouring rain, but none of that can dampen my enthusiasm.

Because, in just a few short moments, I'll be brought down to American soil, and it's going to be everything I've ever wanted.

# The Timeless Feather

*Hoi Ping Chamber of Commerce Secondary School, Yau, Ts Yung – 15*

The shrill screams of Sun Wukong died down and the dark cave regained its silence. Sun's hand trembled as he released his grip from his pounding head. 'Forgive me, Master!' Sun breathed gasps, head bowing down. The only light that shone through the cave was from above, where Master Xuanzang sat on his steed, looking down the hole.

'Obey yourself, Sun,' Xuan loosened his fist. The glowing of the arc on Sun's head turned dull. Sun coughed and sputtered, thanking master again. Xuan waited until Sun's strength came back and spoke, 'I received orders. We were to travel to the West again, to retrieve the stolen items—'

'It's the lock and key, right?' Zhu Bajie spoke, releasing a yawn as he patted his pants and stood up. He had slept on the spot where Sun got punished.

'Well no, your news is quite outdated. We're getting back the—'

'The Timeless Feather?' Sha Wujing blurted out, eyes fixed on the shiny blade of his weapon as he sharpened the edges with a rock, glancing up for a second before he continued.

'Let me finish,' Xuan sighed. 'Yes, we're getting back the Timeless Feather. We have thirty days. We're leaving to the Western Mountains. It's said to be there by the secret spies. This is the first time the feather got stolen. Prepare yourselves, lads. It might be a bit more challenging this time. We're moving after sunset, which is right...' Xuan paused. Silence engulfed the group as they overlooked the horizon, where the blazing orange yolk sank back behind the mountains in slow motion. 'Now,' Zhu who just woke up from their afternoon nap groaned. With a huff, they hurled Sun out of the under cave and set foot on their journey to the West, where they sought to retrieve the stolen feather.

Over winding tall mountains, crossing streams filled with alligators, crossing dry deserts with extreme bipolar weather and walking through arduous roads, they were lucky to have gotten so far without any monsters and demons baring their teeth for Xuan's meat.

'Are we there yet?' Zhu whined, his mud rake ploughing the sand. 'It's been five days,'

'Can you stop whining? You're a major headache,' Sun complained, scratching his ears.

'But I'm sweating like a pig already,' Zhu huffed, puffing out his tomato red face.

'I see what you did there, Zhu. Hilarious,' Sun said, stifling a laugh seeing Zhu's puzzled face. Xuan fanned himself smiling. 'You're already a pig, Zhu. What a joke!' Sun continued. The others burst out laughing watching Zhu's expression change from confused to 'oh—I-made-a-joke-and-everyone-laughed' proud face.

'Maybe talking would be a good pastime,' Sha stated.

'But remember not to let your guard down. We're extremely lucky to have crossed so far peacefully,' Xuan reasoned.

'Or maybe they're having a seasonal rest. Besides, I don't think anyone would want to capture you here on this hot steamy day,' Sun shrugged, swallowing a gulp of saliva, throat dry from talking too much.

'Safe your breaths. Whatever monster or demon or spirit that lay ahead wouldn't be easily defeated. Let's get physically and mentally prepared before we face them. Stay focused. Anything could happen,' Xuan warned, resting his hand on his white horse, which immediately neighed upon the contact.

The group hiked for days and endured through endless sleepless nights with rounds of shifts to guard Xuan as he slept. Tired of the journey, Zhu craved for his entertainment and food, Sha missed his river home and Sun longed to see his relatives and to take a bite of his hometown's juicy fruits. On the twelfth day, they reached the Western Mountains. Continuing further up, Xuan and the three disciples pushed forward, forging ahead as they scanned for signs of trouble.

'I see no thief, nor monster here. Are you sure, Xuan?' Sun squinted, scanning the area with his eyes.

'Patience, Sun. Patience. You'll feel their presence. My sixth sense told me we're getting into trouble sooner or later,' Xuan said calmly. The group continued in utter silence, heart hammering their chests as the fog thickens as they hiked upwards. Sun swiped his golden staff, clearing some of the smog as they walked, eyes focused on the front, while Sha guarded the back and Zhu the sides.

'I still see no thief, Master,' Sun swiped his staff again. 'But I sense their presence—' A loud squawk and an ear-deafening wham thundered across the mountain. The smell of burnt snow and toxic wafted through their nose. Screeches and hissing sounds of toxic snow filled the once dead-silent mountain. Sun's senses buzzed alive. With a light swipe, the smog to his left subsided, revealing a shadow— or shadows of gigantic creatures.

'Uh, Master?' Sha swallowed. 'What should—'

'Let's hide behind that bush. White horsey stay behind that large rock. I'll clear up more of the fog. My senses are tickling,' Sun licked his lips, veins burning with excitement from the new challenge after boring days of walking. Xuan slowly dismounted from his travelling horse with the helping hands of Sha, and hurriedly crept towards the lush bush layered with snow. Another swipe cleared a small area of fog, revealing a creature they've never seen.

'See that there?' Everyone's eyes followed Xuan's fingers, as it landed on the voracious bird with bronze beaks and sharp metallic feathers that gleamed under the afternoon sun. 'It's the Western Bird. I heard myths and stories about them but I haven't seen them with my naked eye. Such a beauty,' Xuan sucked in a breath observing the bird. 'If I'm not wrong, try not to fire at them as it does no harm and might bounce back, hurting you instead. Aim for their flesh instead and avoid their smelly poisonous dungs,' Xuan continued. Sun's sensitive nose wrinkled at the mention of dung.

'Oh, it's the feather!' Zhu gasped, nudging his head towards the direction of the nest, where it glowed with a bright yellow light, bathing the area around the nest in a soft yellowish glow.

'Now go! There's no time to spare,' Xuan shushed Zhu. 'Be careful!'

Sun somersaulted and morphed into an eagle, leaving his monkey tail which held his great weapon in double coils. With a loud hawking sound, he dived towards the nearest bronze bird, wings stuck to his body, tail spinning a thousand miles an hour. He then changed back into his original form in a millisecond and flung his staff against it, sending it flying a few meters away. The bird, however, just dazed but unhurt. 'Sha and White horsey, look out for Master!' Sun gave out orders as Sha held on tight to his double-headed staff and flashed his skeleton necklace hanging around his neck with a determined nod, and jogged towards the steed, hands holding onto Master as they went to hide behind the large rock protecting them. Sun transformed back into his normal self. 'Watch out. Pig.' He leapt and spun, releasing his magical needle-like hair. The birds screeched, the attack finally did some damage, grazing their skin. They're too fast. Way, way too fast. Sun puffed, lips forming a straight line. Never had he come across such monsters. His brain went through a haze as he brain stormed through his abilities, finding a specific one that could defeat them.

'Sun!' Sun eyed the shouting pig. 'Master said to confuse the birds!' Zhu shouted. Sun furrowed his eyebrows as he tried to figure out what Zhu meant, standing impatiently from his lack of explanation.

'Uh, forget it, be right back. Hold up for a minute, Sun! Sha would help with water attacks!' Zhu waved him off and he ran back to Master after a huge leap of faith towards the nearest bird and banging his rake on his metallic head. He went back as fast as his hooves can take him. Sun shrugged, not knowing what he meant as he continued the ever-going battle. Body started to ache, as the five birds guarding the nest charged towards Sun. But with the help of Sha, who came out and attacked with water needles, water ropes and strikes, Sun had less to take care of, lifting some burden off his sore shoulders.

'Hey you Monkey!' Another bellow brought Sun to his senses as he dodged a flying feather which zapped past him. "Bang your stick with that!" Without letting his brain process his sentence, a humongous piece of rock went flying towards him. Snatching it, Sun strengthened his stance on his fluff of cloud and clashed his staff and the heavy flattened stone together—non-stop, creating sounds even worse than Zhu's snores. The clashing sounds rippled through the area as the sound of birds shrieking echoed through the mountains. Sha's water arrows shot like fireworks, each bringing one bird down as the arrows went straight through their hearts. Ground-shaking thumps shook the dry earth as each lump of metal fell from more than a hundred feet in the air. Sun soon stopped, dropping the stone plate with a thud as he descended. Cheers and whoops from his fellow disciples welcomed him as he held his chin up high. But they soon died down when the clattering hooves grabbed everyone's attention.

'Great job there Sun and Sha, and thanks to Zhu, who for thinking about confusing the birds out of the blue—'

'That's totally not like him, are you just trying to give him credits?' Sun cocked his head and smirked, hands crossed over his chest as he eyed Zhu, who snorted.

'Why can't I be smart sometimes—?'

'Stop bickering. Get the feather and leave guys. Why would you start to bicker here,' Sha scowled and continued. 'Go on.' Sun nodded in response. With a roll of his eyes, Sun and Zhu headed towards the nest. They leapt, feet landing on the edge of the nest. Another jump brought them back to the nest. The scrunching sounds of their feet on wood echoed. The glowing feather floated in the middle, laid above others which were assumed to be feathers of the dead birds.

'Let's get out of here before we meet another metallic bird. I don't think they originated from this place. Metal birds though...' Sun trailed off. Both of them got out of the nest with a simple leap. Hands on the feather, Sun's empty hand gestured them to go back and down the mountain. The group hiked back, hearts contented and relieved to see everyone intact and safe.

Over hills, across rivers, and quick sand, the group went back, prize in hand, forgetting their tiredness.

'Can't believe we met the metal birds from the West,' Zhu chuckled.

'I didn't think we'd beat them too,' Sha added.

'With my help, how could we not beat them?' Sun grinned, full of his accomplishments. 'But why do they want to steal this? I don't think it's worth stealing. What are its powers though? I bet if it was a demon, I would win with just an attack,' Sun shrugged as he swiftly danced backwards, facing the group.

Just as Sun was still blabbering about his greatness, a cliff loomed ahead.

'Would books write about me and my greatness when I die? And our kids would be named... let me think, Sun Wukong the twentieth? Oh and I'll hide the feather where only my offspring will find,'

'But wait, Sun are you sure you'll get a wife?' Zhu snickered.

'Shut up Zhu—'

'Sun! Watch out—'

Xuan's words became a buzz of wind as Sun plummeted. He couldn't move as he free-fell, hands gripping on the feather, wishing everything would be fine and he'd be alive. He prayed for his immortality, which doesn't protect him in these situations, to kick in. Just at the worst moment, his head collided with a rock that extended out from the cliff. He cursed, as black spots and shadows danced across his closed eye lids.

'Sun? Can you hear me?' Xuan got off his horse and stepped near the cliff. 'Sun?' Only echoes of his voice answered him. He heard Xuan. He did, but his mouth could not form words, as he slipped into complete darkness. Down he fell, never-ending.

Down.

Down..

Down...

Sun opened his eyes. A strange environment greeted him. A blue room, with boxes and books in a corner, and clothes hung behind doors. There he sat on a bed, dumbfounded by his environment. Looking down, he saw a book opened to a page with words he barely understood. Then he tried to move, and he felt it. His eyes didn't look as clear, his nose and ears not as sensitive. He looked down, hands touching his face. Hands and legs and his tail... His tail! He whipped his head but all he saw were messy sheets and blankets. No sign of a tail.

'I'm...I'm a human?' Sun mumbled.

'Sun Wukong the twentieth. It's time for breakfast,' A knock on the door and in came a lady. 'Your great-great-great grandfather and more greats before grandfather ate a lot of fruits and veggies to grow tall and muscular. Come. Let's have our meal downstairs,' the lady gestured towards the door.

'I—I'm not h-hungry,' Sun stuttered.

'What are you reading again?' The lady came forward and looked at the book that lied across his lap. 'New Journey to the West? Aren't you tired of it? Now are you disobeying your mother?' The lady crossed her arms.

'Give me a minute,' Sun's head dipped down. The lady hummed as she left with a soft click of the door. Sun sighed. His head spinning from all the information he had to take in. His eyes roamed the room. 'Why did I end up here?' His eyes widened. 'The feather!' He whisper-shouted. Just as he was about to set the book aside, a stick stuck out from the inner pages. With sheer curiosity, Sun flipped open the pages.

'The feather...' There the white feather lay. His fingers caressed the soft, dull feather.

'Sun! Do I have to knock down your door?'

'Coming!' Sun replied. He took a last glance at the feather. 'I guess I underestimated you, dear Timeless Feather. I'm sorry. Please take me back,' Sun left. He paused halfway down, and rushed back upstairs, pushing open the door.

'I'll be back soon...' He poked his head inside and dashed back down.

And it glowed.



# The White Bone Demon

*Hong Kong International School (HKIS), Mak, Elana – 14*

The chill wind whipped past Monkey's face as he sped over the clouds. The tiger skin he wore created an orange-black blur as he flew across the azure sky. His teeth clenched when he remembered his master's last words, "I don't need a murderer like you, Monkey! Just leave!"

"I am going back home," Monkey told himself, "I'm finally free." So why did he feel so alone, racing towards his happiness?

He peered down at the mountains below, catching sight of a lake nearby a peach grove. Even for an Immortal, he had been travelling a long time and was beginning to feel exhausted. Perhaps he had fought too many battles with too many demons, or perhaps it was the weight of fending for fool friends too blind to protect themselves, or the constant questioning of his motives and character. Whatever the reason, Monkey felt too drained to continue his frenzied flight.

He flew down to the lake to take a drink. When he had quenched his thirst, he found a tree that provided fruit and shade. Resting his back against the tree trunk, he turned to ask his friend, Sandy, if he wanted to go for a swim together. He stopped himself when he realised that there was no one there. Monkey almost sighed, but he was not the sighing kind.

He closed his eyes. The setting sun's rays warmed his cheeks and gently soothed him to sleep.

"Monkey..." A soft voice was calling him. Groggy with sleep, he woke to see a willowy figure drawing near. He tried to rouse himself but his weary limbs felt heavy and lifeless. He couldn't be sure if he was awake or dreaming. His gaze cleared to meet the dark eyes of a beautiful girl. Her long, lustrous black hair was almost glowing under the moonlight. Her lips were cherry red against lily-white skin. Her sweet face seemed oddly familiar.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Monkey struggled to his feet. Breathing heavily, he replied, "I am going back home to Flower Fruit Mountain."

"Why are you going there?" the girl inquired further.

"To be reunited with my loyal monkey subjects... To have fun, get very drunk, and have the grandest celebrations in my honour... Lots of... fun..." By now, Monkey's senses were coming back to him and a vague feeling of disquiet prickled down the back of his neck.

"Reunited? Why? Where have you been, Monkey?"

This time, Monkey glared hard at the girl who smiled back most winsomely. She had now almost reached his side and was unmistakably lovely and out of place on the lonely mountainside. He gripped his cudgel tightly and spat out the words, "I was helping my former master, Tripitaka, until we encountered a White Bone Demon. She was a cunning and wily one. But I saw through her devices..."

In a flash, Monkey lifted his trusted weapon, Jingu Bang, and shoved the iron cudgel at the throat of the young maiden. "I know who you are," he growled, "And I have killed you already... How can you be here?"

"Did you miss me, Monkey?" Her girlish giggle deepened into a full-throated laugh that echoed down the mountainside. "You remember this illusion, don't you," she tossed back her silken locks and her deep laugh rang out again. She winked at him, her pretty mouth twisting into a leer, "A shame that Tripitaka didn't see through it and blamed you for slaughtering an innocent girl." She moved suddenly as if to strike. Like lightning, Monkey twirled Jingu Bang and brought it down to crush the skull of the White Bone Demon. But she vanished and his cudgel smashed the ground in a cloud of dust.



Suddenly a velvet voice breathed in his ear, “Silly Monkey... What you are doing here? Do you really think that when you find your simian friends... you will be happy?”

Monkey whirled around to face his invisible foe, “Of course I’ll be happy! What do you mean by that?!”

But she was gone.

In the distance, Monkey heard a cock crowing, welcoming the dawn.

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Monkey raised his goblet to the walls of the vast, empty cavern. His shadows flickered on the torchlit surfaces of the unoccupied tables and chairs. “Bottle number 53!” he sang. Spilling the wine all over his fur and clothes, he stumbled and laughed out loud, calling out to no one in particular, “Isn’t this fun?!” His voice echoed around the lonely halls. Waves of fatigue finally overcame him and he slumped into a drunken heap.

He did not know how long he had slept for, but when Monkey finally stirred, he sensed that he was not alone. Raising his throbbing head, he faced his visitor – a kindly-looking old lady who greeted him with a pleasant smile.

“You again...” he murmured, reaching for his cudgel. “Now you are dressed up in the skin of the girl’s mother.... I thought I killed you too...” Planting his foot firmly against the cavern floor he snarled, “No matter. I am quite prepared to kill you again!”

The old woman smiled and patted the seat next to her, “Come sit down, dearie, and tell Aunty what’s been troubling you. I thought you told me that you were going to have a grand, drunken celebration with your loyal subjects?” She chuckled in a conspiratorial fashion, “I see you are already very drunk, but where’s the rest of the party?”

Monkey snorted in annoyance, gesturing at the dark, barren halls, “Well, clearly there is nobody here or else there would a party!” He sat down again and reached for a flagon of wine next to him. “But,” Monkey smiled as he opened it and inhaled its heady fumes, “I can drink enough for everybody!”

“So where are your monkeys, Monkey?” the old woman persisted. “How awful it would be if something had happened to them...” Stroking her wrinkled chin thoughtfully, she said, “I wonder what made them leave your precious cave?... Poor lost little Monkey all alone... I wonder what or who is going to make you happy now?”

“Enough!” Monkey struck out at her. But she disappeared, leaving those parting words lingering in the air. Something akin to fear took hold of Monkey’s heart. Soaring out of the cave, he tore across Flower Fruit Mountain, calling the names of his faithful friends of old. Once again, he heard no response. He flew to the foothills of the mountain and continued calling until he eventually reached the villages on the plains far below. He landed when he heard two high-pitched voices calling, “Master! Master!”

“Topsy!” Monkey cried out joyfully. “What happened to all the hair at the top of your head? We must call you Baldy now!” he shouted, chortling gleefully at the sight of his long-lost friend. A young monkey stood beside Topsy, holding up the aged simian.

“Your Majesty!” old Topsy croaked in a quavering voice, “It has been over 500 years since you left. We all thought you were dead!” The frail, old monkey leaned heavily on his younger companion. His expression turned sorrowful as he said, “In your absence, your loyal servants have been decimated, and we are now on the brink of extinction. Even our best fighters from the good old days, Boggo, Mugsy, Tin-Ear, even Fluffy have been taken...” The hoary grey monkey’s tears fell as grief overcame his words.

The younger monkey, Buggy, took up the story, "Every day, hunters trap us for sport and meat. We hide out in the outskirts of the villages, far away from our ancestral home. Master Topsy and I are the only ones left here. The rest have been taken to the far north, where the barbarian hunters have their stronghold."

"How dare they mess with my subjects?!" Monkey thundered. Hungry for revenge and consumed with another feeling he could not name, he sped away in fiery pursuit of their captors. When he found them, the unfortunate barbarians did not know what hit them. Announcing himself as the Immortal Monkey King, the Great Sage Equal to Heaven and Destroyer of half of the same Heaven, Monkey took out his vengeance on the barbarians with swift and bloody dispatch. He made sure that many tasted the metal of Jingu Bang and all were so badly beaten that they swore never to approach the monkeys ever again.

Once he had freed his subjects from their enslavement, Monkey brought them back home to Waterfall Curtain Cave, in the depths of Flower Fruit Mountain. A most triumphant celebration was held in honour of their victorious king. But amidst the carousing and drunken merrymaking, Monkey caught sight of a cloaked figure at the entrance of the cave. Before he could get a closer look, his old friends had grabbed him and led him back into the crowds for more wild dancing and flagons of peach wine.

Many, many hours later, Monkey stumbled back into his royal chambers and fell into his bed. He woke with a start to find the cloaked silhouette sitting at the foot of his mattress. "Have you seen my wife and daughter?" the shroud moaned.

"Aaaaaarrgh!" Monkey screeched, falling off his bed. Fumbling to his feet, he grabbed his cudgel and swung it to meet the face of the old man in the cape. "Enough with the games! You are not the girl's father or the crone's husband. I have already killed you three times! Why can't you just stay dead?! Leave me alone or I will crush you like the bothersome bedbug you are!"

The grey-haired man sat still as a stone, unperturbed. Then he slowly started clapping, as if applauding Monkey. "Congratulations. You are a great hero, surrounded by adoring acolytes in the thousands. Are you happy now?" he asked. When Monkey didn't respond, he continued, "Did you find what you were looking for? Do you know your meaning and purpose now?"

Monkey drew himself to his full height and gripped his cudgel tighter, "Begone, Demon! I am perfectly happy here."

The old man chuckled, "I think you are a better liar than you are a fighter." He looked deeply into Monkey's eyes and whispered, "And the person you deceive the most... is yourself."

This time, Monkey did not attack the apparition. He was lost for words. Once again, the nameless feeling washed over him, and Monkey felt hot tears threatening to spill from his red-rimmed eyes.

The old man stood up suddenly. Dawn was seeping over the horizon. Turning to Monkey, he said, "It's good that you are not trying to kill me anymore... After all..." He pulled his hood over his head, as if to leave.

"After all what?" snapped Monkey, his voice suddenly hoarse.

"Why," he shrugged his shoulders, "I'm already dead."

Monkey's brow furrowed, "Then why do I still see you?"

"That's a very good question," said the figure, smiling mysteriously.

And with that, he vanished.

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The noonday sun was already blazing when Monkey awoke to Topsy's raspy voice calling him, "Please wake up, Your Majesty! A pig-like monster is at the entrance claiming that he knows you. He requests to see you!"

Monkey bolted upright, "Piggy, my Brother!" he cried, racing out of his chambers half-dressed to greet his former companion. "Whatever are you doing here?"

Piggy, clothes travel-stained and dust-covered, was looking ravenous and dishevelled. Seeing Monkey's joyful face, he opened and shut his mouth like a goldfish, but the words stayed caught in his throat. They had not parted on the best of terms, and Piggy was not sure what to say. However, he was glad to see that Monkey bore him no ill-will.

Monkey grabbed Piggy's sleeve, "Come eat and drink with me, and tell me all the adventures you have had since I left your company." They gorged on a feast of roasted meats, candied chestnuts, jellied fruits and rice wine, while Monkey entertained Piggy with very rude jokes. Piggy laughed like a drain and tried to retort as wittily. However, he was not his usual wise-cracking and insulting self. There was a restless desperation in his small black eyes. He could only eat a large dinner for three – which was like a fast for Piggy. When he could bear it no longer, the porcine fellow turned to Monkey and said, "Well, it's been awfully fun being here, but we should be getting back to our master now. He will be wondering why we've been gone for so long." He picked up his shabby belongings and started to walk to the cave entrance.

The rascal king guffawed out loud and shook his head vigorously, "Not me."

Piggy whipped around, looking horror-struck. He blubbered, "You're not coming?! Whyever not?! Tripitaka really misses you!! Why, he needs you!! He can't do without you!!!"

Monkey's eyes saddened, "Tripitaka definitely doesn't need me anymore, remember? He said so loud and clear when he banished me." Monkey stood up to say his goodbye, "Say Hi to Sandy for me... Oh, and tell Tripitaka not to bother me again. Tell him I'm very happy doing my own thing here." And just to emphasise the point, he brayed with laughter again. Stricken with fury and anguish, Piggy was left bereft of words as Monkey strode away without looking back.

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Monkey was biting into his peach when he heard a distant voice crying, "Insufferable ape... dishonourable, disloyal, disgusting..." A torrent of unrepeatable swearing ensued, bearing variations of Monkey's name.

Temper rising, Monkey sprinted out of the cave to find the culprit, and there he saw Piggy, halfway down the mountain, profanities in full flow. "He knows that I can hear him," Monkey muttered before yelling, "Topsy! Get some monkeys and bring that pig back here!"

When Piggy was forcibly carried back by eight monkeys groaning under his weight, Monkey roared, "You have no right insulting me, my Brother! I've saved your no-good sack of flesh countless times! Have you forgotten how I outsmarted the evil magician? Who cut off his own head and regrew it so that we could best the Tiger Demon, hmmm? Who sat in a vat of boiling oil for days to outwit the Ram Demon? I've vanquished every enemy that has crossed our path! And yet none of you believed me when I said the White Bone Demon had tricked you! You're the ones who are insufferable!!"

"Stop being so self-righteous! It's not all about you!" Piggy cried, "I have been dragged from my home, from my warm bed, my loving wife, my peaceful livelihood. This quest has robbed me of everything that I hold dear!"

"Oh ho ho!" Monkey laughed venomously, "Do you think that you're the only one who has lost everything? At least you have Tripitaka. At least you haven't lost his trust. At least he needs you!"

"Tripitaka's gone!" Piggy shouted, his voice breaking. The whole cavern suddenly filled with silence as the chattering monkeys froze to listen to his words.

“What do you mean, ‘gone?’” Monkey’s raging boom had dropped to a whisper.

Piggy whimpered, “He... he was captured by the Yellow Robe Demon. Sandy and I tried to save him. But we couldn’t get him out. We tried... we really tried.” He gulped and swallowed his tears, before shooting Monkey a reproachful look, “If only you had been there... We could’ve saved him if you’d been there...”

Grabbing Piggy by the ear, Monkey cried, “Fool Pig! Why didn’t you say so at the beginning! Let’s go!”  
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Monkey and Piggy had been flying for hours. Sleep was beginning to sting and then numb their eyes. The purple dusk had melted into midnight blue when Monkey realised that someone had joined them on their levitating cloud. He elbowed Piggy, but the swine was already drooling in deep sleep.

“So... Have you found what you were looking for?” the velvet voice purred, “Or... perhaps you are still lost...?”

Monkey turned coolly to look at the White Bone Demon. Her delicate features pale as porcelain, a smile playing on her lips. She floated gently beside him, her ivory silver hair streaking languidly across the dark canvas of the sky. “What? No illusions this time?” he asked.

“No need,” she gave a low peal of laughter, “You see through them all.”

Monkey resisted the urge to laugh alongside her.

“So where are you off to now?” She inquired conversationally.

Monkey stared at her. He was beginning to understand how she enthralled and entrapped her victims with her easy-going charm.

“I know what you are thinking...” her lips parted teasingly.

“And what am I thinking?”

“You’re wondering if I am really dead... If I am just a figment of your imagination... Or if I am actually alive and speaking to you...”

Monkey reached out to touch her. His fingers passed through nothing. His eyes widened in surprise. Would he have been more shocked if his hand had actually felt something? Chagrin, amusement, and bewilderment mingled confusingly in his chest. She continued hovering enigmatically in front of him, real yet unreal.

After a long pause, Monkey spoke, “I don’t know who or what you are, but I know what would make me happy right now. I want to save Tripitaka, and I want to complete our quest. That is my meaning and my purpose right now.”

“And what do you want after that?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know yet,” he answered truthfully.

“Well, in that case, perhaps you will be seeing me again...” She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper, “Will you miss me when I’m gone?”

“I won’t miss you at all,” Monkey cried, affecting a contemptuous sneer, “Just leave!”

She gave him a slow, inscrutable smile, “As you wish,” she said softly, “Goodbye, Monkey.” With those words, she leapt off the cloud, soaring down an abyss of black sky. As he watched her leave, a nameless feeling surged through Monkey for the third time. He couldn’t be sure. Was it dismay? Sorrow? Or regret?

# Acacia's Journey

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Chia, Jocelyn – 15*

Her mother named her after a beautiful tree she grew up with. She told her stories about her time spent reading her precious novels under the tree and when times were tough she would just sit there and everything would come to ease. Every night before she fell asleep her mother would tell her “Acacia Verlaine, when I’m with you, all of my worries would be forgotten. You are my safe place, I love you”.

Acacia never understood the importance of that tree and all she knew was that her mother was the most beautiful woman on the planet. She would make a big deal over her name. Acacia wondered why “Mother? If my name has a special meaning, then what does your name mean?”

“You are a very smart girl; my name is Lucerne. It was given to me by your great grandmother. She would tell me that I would bring light wherever I go. She was right, you are my light.”

That was Acacia’s fondest memory of her mother; all Acacia has left of her are memories. She likes to hide out there sometimes, when things were rough because her mother was her safe place. Acacia never let go of the fact that she is gone. Day after day for 2 years she would desperately ask her father “Why? Why did she have to leave? Why didn’t the hospital save her? Daddy...”

Her father was devastated when his wife died but he had to be strong for his daughter. So since then her father would cry quietly in his room as he stared at pictures of his wife. These of which Acacia didn’t know about. He then whispered, “I don’t know honey, I don’t know...”

Acacia has finally fallen out of her daydreaming as her father yelled “Acacia! Come on get out of the car! I can’t make it to work on time if you don’t get out!”

Acacia rolled her eyes in disgust and annoyance. At some point, she knew she had to get on with the day. She slowly slides her way out of the car and slammed the door shut, it even gave her father a shock.

She slowly and carelessly walked towards and through the school’s entrance. She never cared about the students that would make jokes and laugh in their little groups nor did she care about the boys that would stare at her and make mean comments. She looked like a mess, she has looked like this for two years already. Every day she would wear a worn out grey hoodie matched with black ripped jeans, her shoes were black with scratches and torn holes in the sides. Her appearance meant nothing to her.

She slowly managed through the day, it then came to fourth period. She would sit at the most back of the classroom with her hood up and just not bothering to listen to anyone. The teacher had called for her to answer a question she didn’t hear. Therefore, one girl with long dreads screams across the classroom “Hey! Girl with the dead mom! Your turn to answer!”

This immediately grabbed Acacia’s attention. She felt a mixed of emotions, she didn’t know if she should pluck out this girl’s eyes or run out of the class and cry. She chose to storm out of the classroom and instead of crying, she snuck into the art studio and took a few buckets of paint with a large paintbrush. She ran through the halls with lightning speed and went to the school’s main entrance and doused the whole wall with paint, the walls were filled with splatters of colorful paint.

Minutes after, Mr. Kenyatta the school’s principal caught her and brought her to his office. She sat impatiently outside his office as he called and brought my father in. She didn’t fear anything, she didn’t care about the punishment because deep down inside she felt that she had no meaning left in life and it doesn’t matter if anything happens to her.

“I hope to see you next time Mr. Verlaine preferably under different circumstances.” Mr. Kenyatta said cheerfully. With a bright smile Mr. Verlaine replied with delight “You too Mr. Kenyatta”. After a lengthy talk, her father came out and took her by the arm and dragged her out into his car. He was quiet throughout the whole drive, he didn’t know what to do because he knew very well why she is like this and he understood but on the other hand it was also wrong to do what she did. Acacia didn’t care about the silence, she enjoyed it. They eventually arrived home, her father quickly brought her in and carelessly shuts the door. He stares at her with anger, disappointment, and pity. After a extensive time of contemplating he finally spoke “How? How could you do something like this? Do you know what I had to put up with for the past two years! You have been nothing but a burden for me! You think you are the only one affected by her death! You are so selfish!”

Acacia still couldn’t grasp the error in her ways and furiously shouted back “I am the selfish one? What about you? You have never talked about her or even think about her anymore. It’s like you have erased her from your life! I spent two years not being able to tell anyone about this! Don’t you dare call me selfish!”

He got so infuriated at what she said, without a second thought he screamed back with all the bottled-up anger “I love your mother so much, and on her dying breath she told me to promise to stay strong and raise



you well. I am still keeping that promise, even until this day. But all you can see is all the pain you are in, not everything is about you! Grow up! I thought I had you left after Lucerne's death but I guess not! She was the love of my life and the only love of my life!" it seemed as though he was on the verge of crying. Acacia was left speechless; she had never been told the truth straight to her face before but she kept on a heartless face and headed up to her room. She feebly locked her door as her heart starts to crack little by little, as tears slowly ran down her pale slim face. She was named after a beautiful tree but ever since she lost her mother it felt as though her tree was slowly dying, day after day. She knew that she had no hope left, there is nothing left worth living for. But she knew she wasn't going to get any thinking done here, so she took her bag and climbed out of the window. She hurried and ran to the park four blocks away from her home, she had always found comfort there.

The park was quiet; when the wind blows she could hear the rustling of the dried leaves. When the winds move the swing, there would be screeches coming from the bolts that have been rusted. Nobody ever comes here anymore, it's abandoned she wondered maybe that's why she liked it so much. She found herself all alone, Acacia believed this was where she belongs.

"Ah!" Acacia screamed in shock and terror. As she turned around to see who was touching her. It was just a little girl around 10 years old, she whispered to her "Why are you crying? Please don't cry, you look prettier when you smile" She held the brightest smile, this was the kindest thing anyone had ever said to her in two years.

Acacia started to play with the little girl, the little girl had dark circles under her eyes and kept on coughing but managed to keep on a bright smile. It has been about thirty minutes and then the little girl collapsed and foamed started to ooze out of her mouth. Luckily Acacia knew a nearby hospital, she then picked her up and rushed her to the hospital. Her legs and arms were getting tired but she didn't care.

She finally arrived at the hospital and brought her straight to the emergency room, luckily a doctor saw us. She came straight to them and rushed us to her office. She took the little girl and handed her over to the nurses to get her checked out. Once assuring the child's safety, the doctor came to me "Hi, I'm Dr. Cynthia Jones. You may just call me Cynthia. May you explain to me the history of what I am assuming is your sister?"

Acacia didn't know what to tell her "I'm sorry but I don't know her, I just met her in the park and she suddenly fell ill"

"Oh well, I guess all we can do is to wait for the results. May you please wait outside of my office as I need to attend to other patients? I will inform you once I get her results." Cynthia supposed politely.

She escorts Acacia out of her office and onto one of those metal made chairs that absorbs the cold and freezes thighs when sat on. It's been an hour and Acacia is starting to get worried, and her father had been calling her non-stop; there were five miss calls by now. Acacia didn't care about what her father wanted; her mind was set on the little girl. Lastly, Cynthia calls my name and I head into her office with nervousness.

"Ok I'm just going to give it to you straight. The child is suffering for a rare disorder in her heart due to lack of a proper diet. We have asked the child; the child doesn't have parents and has been living on her own out in the streets. Therefore, this is what became of her health, this is a very severe case. She needs a heart transplant or else she will die...But we don't know who her parents are so the only other way for it to be possible is for it to be of the same blood type as her...AB negative..." Cynthia explained

Acacia didn't hesitate to say "I am a type AB negative, use me. Please give this girl a chance at life; my time was over a long time ago."

Cynthia looked as though she was going to object but she saw the kindness within Acacia's heart and softly nods. "Let's get on with the procedure then, but before that, is there anyone you would like to contact?"

"No there isn't, if someone comes asking about me, please tell them this is what I am meant to do and I love you" Acacia knew that her tree died a long time and now it's time for her to give it life again.

Acacia changed into medical clothing and laid calmly down on the bed, she was slightly afraid but it didn't change her mind. Once they entered the surgical theatre, Cynthia was preparing the anesthetic. "Don't worry Acacia, I promise you a peaceful and painless death. You are an amazing and brave person for doing this" She gave a warm smile as the mask was put on her and she started to fade off...

Mr. Verlaine rushed to the hospital only to find his daughter gone...he was in tears and he regretted never telling her that he loves her. Cynthia found him and told him everything and that gave him closure. He then went to the ward of the little girl. "Hi there, I'm Mr. Verlaine what's your name?"

The girl said shyly "Its Lucie"

The circle of life was then complete...



# A Salmon's Journey

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Lee, Seung Jun – 17*

It was raining on a summer day. To my misfortune, the umbrella I had was broken and I was soaking in the heavy rain. Suddenly I heard strange noises, I looked around only to see crows uttering furious cries as if they were scorning at me. “God damn crows!” I hit them using my umbrella and they immediately flew away. I should have realized that it was a bad omen and just have gone home. However, I could barely think at that time, so I stepped towards the office.

As soon as I entered the office, Mr. Lee began to throw a tantrum. “You arrived! Look at yourself, you look like a mouse soaked in water!” Mr. Lee mocked me. I tried explaining to him why I was late, but he refused to listen to my explanation and just sat down on his chair. To redeem myself for being left, I arranged the documents “perfectly” and went to Mr. Lee’s table. Contrary to my relaxed look, Mr. Lee looked serious on his phone.

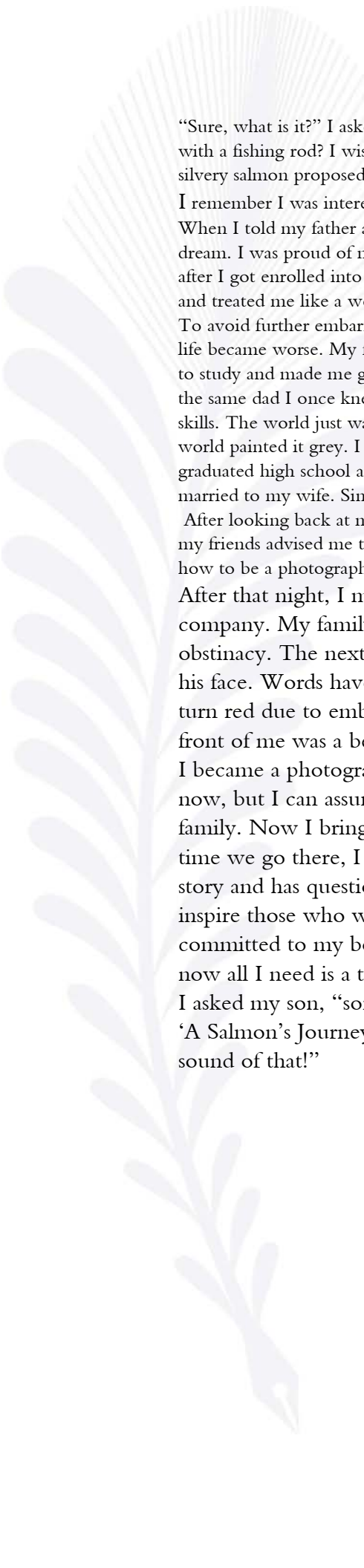
‘Damn, I came at the wrong time.’ Without surprise, Mr. Lee started yelling at me after his call was over. “You know what my boss just said about our post?” I shook my head to show him I didn’t know. “He said we are the worst in this company! What is this terrible document? Are you kidding me? Do it again!” Mr. Lee yelled and threw the documents I perfectly arranged at my face. I noticed that he didn’t even try to read my documents. It’s in situations like this where I wonder if I should leave this company? Even though I really want to, I can’t since I must earn for my family.

After I finished my daily work, I went to grab a beer with my old friend. “Friend, my life is so difficult these days. Mr. Lee blames me for everything I do and now I’m even afraid to go to company.” I complained about my life to my friend. “I think you should find a new job. What was your dream before?” He asked me. “It was to be a photographer.” I replied.

“Yeah! Photographer. Just leave that stupid company and do what you want.” He tried to give me tons of advices but I knew I couldn’t just listen to him and live free. “Shut up. I have my family! Suggest something realistic.” Even though I knew I shouldn’t have said that, I couldn’t control my anger so I stormed out of the bar.

My friend suggested that I take an umbrella, but I ignored him and began to walk home with faltering steps. When I got home, what I encountered was not a comfortable haven, but the anger of my wife. “How come your home so late? Did you drink with your friend again? Do you remember what day is today? Of course, you don’t” my wife whimpered and said to me. “Just a second, what’s the date today? July 26th.” Oh, no! Today was my wife’s birthday, I totally forgot about it. I went to our bedroom to apologize to her but she kicked me out. “Damn! What is wrong with my life! Maybe I need some sort of diversion.” I went to the computer room and booted up my computer. I looked through the news while smoking a cigarette. I knew it wasn’t good for my body, but this is the only way I could relieve my stress. When I was about to finish my third cigarette, I was scrolling down the news and one photo caught my eye. It was the photo of salmon swimming up the river.

This photo reminded me of something that happened when I was young. At that time, innocence and dream were still a thing to me. I went to the riverside with my father who was a photographer. He wanted to take pictures of salmon going back to the river. While my father set up the camera and tried to find a good place to take a photo, I was sitting beside the river and looking at the salmon. Between the group of salmon, one of the salmon caught my eyes. Its back was shiny like a silvery rug. I stood gazing at its beautiful color. To my surprise, that silvery salmon swam towards me. I was so surprised and couldn’t resist saying “hi” to the silvery salmon. I knew I shouldn’t expect a reply, but I heard something say hi back to me. In that time, I couldn’t believe my ears. I clapped 10 times to check if my ears were playing a trick on me; but there wasn’t a problem with my ears. “Are you talking to me, silvery salmon?” I asked to the voice that I assumed was that of the silvery salmon. “Yes, I am talking to you, little human. What are you doing over here?” Silvery salmon asked me. I noticed that it wasn’t actually talking with its mouth but rather communicating with telepathy. I was able to hear the salmon’s voice from my head and not from my ears. “I am waiting for my father! He came here to take picture of your friends because he is photographer!” I chattered to silvery salmon. “What is a photographer?” the silvery salmon inquired. “Umm... it is a human who holds a machine that can save appearance of other things.” I tried explaining as best as I could. “Oh, I heard about humans with machines from my friends. I like them because they respect our salmon not like human with a fishing rod” the silvery salmon exulted. “I have a question. How is your father? I am curious because salmon never meet with their parents” the silvery salmon asked in a sad tone. While I was thinking about how to comfort the poor thing, the silvery salmon said something. “Sorry, I think I have to go now. Little human, can you do me a favor?” The silvery salmon pleaded.



“Sure, what is it?” I asked. “If you are okay, could you become a human with a camera rather than a human with a fishing rod? I wish you would treat us as friends, not as food even when you become older.” The silvery salmon proposed and swam back into its group.

I remember I was interested in photography since that day. My dream was to become a photographer. When I told my father about my encounter with the salmon, he didn’t believe it, but he did encourage my dream. I was proud of my dream and my encounter with the silvery salmon. However, my mind changed after I got enrolled into school. Whenever I told my story and dream to my friends, they claimed I was a liar and treated me like a weird guy.

To avoid further embarrassment, I had to keep my story inside my head. After I entered middle school, my life became worse. My father lost his job, so the atmosphere of our family was terrible. My mom forced me to study and made me give up my dreams. I was tried to beg my father, but after he lost his job, he wasn’t the same dad I once knew. I was forced to study since the world only accepts knowledge and not any other skills. The world just wanted students that have good grades. If my life was the color blue before, then the world painted it grey. I gave up my dream and became a student who wasn’t different from others. I graduated high school and got accepted into a good university. After that I got a job in a company and got married to my wife. Since I might have a successful life, am I happy now? I’m not.

After looking back at my past, I felt emptiness and regret about my life. Those feelings collided with what my friends advised me to do, suddenly I did something that I never thought I would do again. I searched up how to be a photographer.

After that night, I met with my entire family and told them I will be resigning from my company. My family members were against my opinion, but they couldn’t break my obstinacy. The next day, I went into Mr. Lee’s office and threw my resignation form at his face. Words haven’t been made yet to explain how good I felt seeing Mr. Lee’s face turn red due to embarrassment. After I came out of the company, it stopped raining. In front of me was a beautiful rainbow.

I became a photographer who specializes in taking pictures of salmons. I earn less money now, but I can assure you that I am happy. Now, I am able to spend more time with my family. Now I bring my son to the riverside like my father used to do with me. Every time we go there, I remind him of my encounter with the silver salmon. He enjoys my story and has questions for me every time. I decided to write a book about my life to inspire those who were not able to follow their dreams. It might be because I was really committed to my book, but I was able to quickly finish it. I was done with everything and now all I need is a title. So,

I asked my son, “son, what are your suggestions for the title of my book?” “How about ‘A Salmon’s Journey’? I really like that title!” He replied. “A Salmon’s Journey”? I like the sound of that!”

# A Journey to the West

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Li, Emily – 16*

It was the first sunny day since I got back to Wuchang. After the rain had scoured the earth and washed away all of the filth, the city looked spotless. Spears of dawn light sprinkled the town with their magic, covering the farthest corner with its golden rays. I could smell the fresh scent of grass after rain with the fragrance of flowers. I could hear the chorus of birds and the happy woofing army dog of my father's running around in our garden. The student on the bike riding around in our neighborhood is yelling "Who wants newspaper! You only need a cent!" All of them called me to come out.

Before I even had time to finish getting dressed appropriately for breakfast, my door was burst open.

"Young master! You're up so early today! Look who's back!" One of my father's mistresses ran up to me.

My mother's maid came up with her, "Young master, I will help you getting dressed."

I moved slowly down the stairs steadily behind the mistress and the maid. There, I saw my father reading the newspaper with his normal grim and tied-together-brows, sipping on his tea. My mother was leaning forward, and having discussions with him when he makes light comments of the events. "Mother, Father," I walked up to them saying. They stopped their conversation and looked at me.

I saw my father's dark circles and lines on his face deeper than the last time I saw him, his lips were tightly stuck together in a line, and his eyes deep with a definition. People say that you could see a person's thoughts from his eyes, but you could never dare to look at his. He looked up at me, and for a moment my mind went blind.

"Look at me, son." "Y—yes, father." I forced myself to look at his eyes. My hands sweating was at the back, my feet were uncomfortable, and I felt my jade stick to my body uneasily. "Come with me to Shanghai next week. Jiang was hosting a banquet, and I could introduce you to your future companions." "Yes, father."

"Fujun, he's at the age of marriage. I think..." My mother said to my father. "Sure, there would be plenty of girls that we could get him to know there," my father said, and then looked at me, "go get breakfast." I bow at my father, "Thank you, father."

I walked to the large dining table to have breakfast while my parents continue their conversation. The kitchen nanny served me with wonton noodles and soy milk and dough sticks for breakfast. Well, this is my life, I don't even get to decide what I want to eat, not to mention my destiny. I wish I lived in a typical family, but I was born into this. Whenever I feel mistreated or lonely I would look at the jade on my neck, the only thing that accompanied me for twentyone years and never thought of leaving.

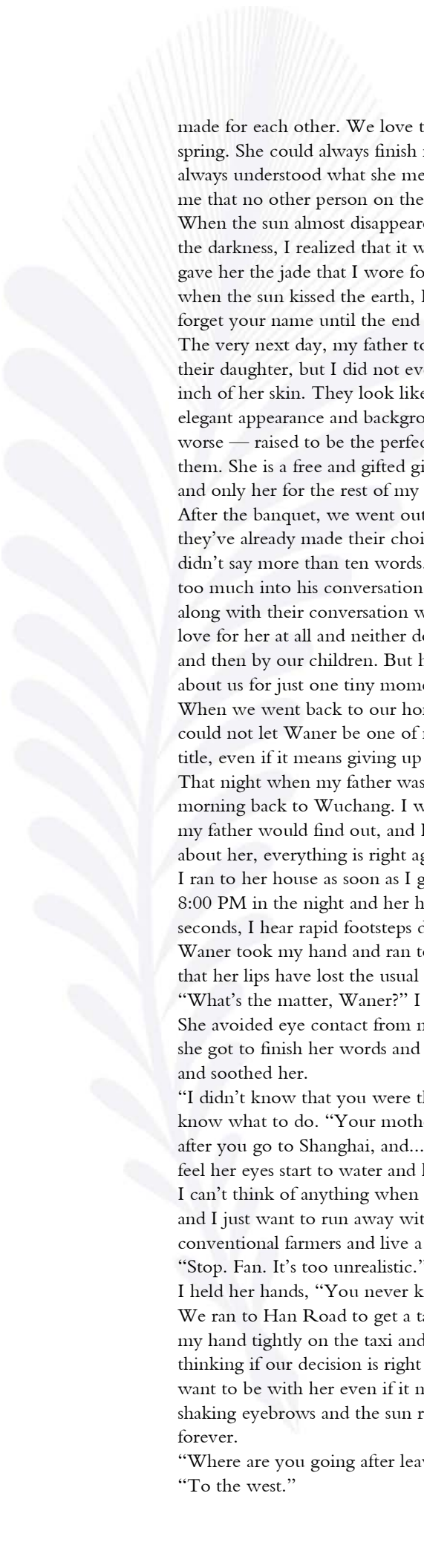
I informed my father and mother that I was going out and got rid of my driver right when we got out of our block. There was a fair in the city to celebrate the Chinese victory in the battle of Nujiang. I wandered through the market, looking at all the shops and the performances until a girl with two braids bumped into me running from the other side.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" The girl looked up at me after stepping back a few steps. Her roughly done dark braids braided in a pinch of golden sunlight, her skin pale with a hint of pink and not a bit of flaw. Her eyes are big pure, with a delicate almond color that shone brightly under the sun with long and curly eyelashes. Her nose just the right size, with delicate pink lips underneath that reminds me of cherries. I used to think that my parents would determine my life, but not anymore. She noticed that I was looking at her, and she blushed and looked down.

"No, I'm not okay," I said to her. She blushed and avoided eye contact. "What... do you mean? Do I need to..." "Oh, just tell me your name, and where you live." "LinWan. Wait, I don't even know you... I—I—I have to go!" And then she ran passed me, of course, I followed her. I ran after her, through the people and the markets and the shops, through the prosperous Han Road and the heart of the city, until she arrived in a small house on the edge of the city less than ten minutes from Han Road.

"So this is where you live!" I shouted from the back of her. She turned back with surprise, "Why did you follow me?" Before I had time to answer, a lovely old lady walked out of their courtyard. Unlike the elegant and calm character of my mother, this woman makes me feel warm. "Waner, is this your friend? Why don't we invite him for lunch?" I thought that it would be awkward if I stayed, but her mother and brother were very enthusiastic. It was the first time in my life that I've eaten with a family talking at the dinner table because we have rules in not to talk in our family. "Mom, can we go out this afternoon?" "Sure, you teenagers go do whatever you like." Her mother smiled of understanding, and then laughed under her breath to her brother, "I see pink bubbles in them." She blushed and took my hand and then ran off.

She took me to the enormous tree on the hill behind her house. We lied under the shades and talked about our childhood, our experiences, and our perspectives of the world. I was surprised to find someone that's from an entirely different family and background to have so much in common as me, and it's like we're



made for each other. We love the same poets and artists, we both love the smell of rain and the sound of spring. She could always finish my sentences, and I always understood what she meant from even an eyesight from her. It's like she speaks the same language as me that no other person on the planet could understand. Time had never passed so fast. When the sun almost disappeared in the horizon, and the orange burning clouds started to be swallowed by the darkness, I realized that it was time for me to go home. I promised to write to her when I'm away and gave her the jade that I wore for twenty-one years. We exchanged vows under the beautiful sunset, and when the sun kissed the earth, I kissed her on the forehead. Wan Er, what a lovely name. I would never forget your name until the end of my life.

The very next day, my father took me to Shanghai. Many generals and merchants came to my father with their daughter, but I did not even bother to look at any of them. To me, they're not even as beautiful as an inch of her skin. They look like they were carefully trying to be as graceful as they can, but under their elegant appearance and background, I could just see emptiness. They're just like me in some ways, but even worse — raised to be the perfect gift from a family to the other to create a companion. Waner is unlike them. She is a free and gifted girl with the most beautiful soul on the planet, and I've decided that it was her and only her for the rest of my life.

After the banquet, we went out with our family friend to get me to know their daughter. I guess that they've already made their choice in their daughter-in-law. I sat through their boring conversation and didn't say more than ten words. The thing is, my father didn't notice my change in attitude at all, he was too much into his conversation to notice anything about me. The girl is in a perfect but stiff smile and going along with their conversation when necessary. I cannot believe that I have to marry her because I have no love for her at all and neither does she to me. Our marriage would be first bonded together by our parents and then by our children. But have neither of them ever considered about our feelings? Did they ever think about us for just one tiny moment?

When we went back to our home in Shanghai, my mind exploded and didn't know what to do. I could not let Waner be one of my mistresses just like what my dad did to his lovers; I have to give her a title, even if it means giving up my future as the head of our family.

That night when my father was asleep, I took some money and ran off buying the earliest train ticket for the morning back to Wuchang. I was writing love letters and poems to her as time ticks away. I was afraid that my father would find out, and I was nervous and uneasy because my jade isn't with me, but when I thought about her, everything is right again.

I ran to her house as soon as I got off the train, which is not far away from the train station. It was already 8:00 PM in the night and her house is already dark. I whisper, "Waner, Waner, are you there?" After a few seconds, I hear rapid footsteps down the stairs, and the next thing I see is a gorgeous angel dressed in white. Waner took my hand and ran to the tree with me. When we got to the tree, I looked at her carefully to see that her lips have lost the usual red and her eyes are puffy and tired.

"What's the matter, Waner?" I asked with concern.

She avoided eye contact from me, "No, no, it's nothing... I just... I didn't..." I held her in my arms before she got to finish her words and felt the jade inside her dress stick to our skin. I patted her gently on the back and soothed her.

"I didn't know that you were the son of the general," She finally said. I felt blank for a moment and didn't know what to do. "Your mother came to me yesterday night and told me that you would have a fiancée after you go to Shanghai, and... and that we are from different worlds... we're not suitable for each other." I feel her eyes start to water and her body started shaking.

I can't think of anything when she's crying in front of me. My mind is blank of responsibilities and pressure, and I just want to run away with her. "Waner, let's run away. We would go to the countryside and be conventional farmers and live a normal and happy life. We could——"

"Stop. Fan. It's too unrealistic."

I held her hands, "You never know, we didn't even try."

We ran to Han Road to get a taxi and told the driver to drive as far from Wuchang as he can. Waner held my hand tightly on the taxi and leaned on my shoulder. I could feel her trembling with a million thoughts thinking if our decision is right or not and afraid that we would get caught. But I didn't regret at all, I just want to be with her even if it means that I have to give up all I have. All I can see now are her gently shaking eyebrows and the sun reflecting on her marble-like skin, and I felt that this is a treasure I shall keep forever.

"Where are you going after leaving the city?" The driver asked with curiosity.

"To the west."



# A Journey of a great player

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Li, Johnson – 16*

It is morning at Duke High school with the fresh warmth of a full summer day; the flowers are blossoming profusely and the grass is richly green. Everyone in the Duke High school is very excited. In each classroom, students are twittering, teachers are lectures, but no one listens. The bell ring.

“Ok! Class is over, you guys can go!” the teacher sighing unwillingly.

All the students run out of the classroom, like an arrow from the chord. The students are crowding through the hallway. This scene can only be seen on the summer vacation day or the final game of the basketball season.

Everyone is very busy because they are busy decorating the school and the East High School, who is their opponent, will come for the championship in the next 30 minutes. However, at this moment, in the basketball team’s locker room, the hot water vapor makes the locker room like a sauna, making people breathless. Sweat slowly trickles down from Abelard’s handsome face as this is the last game for him in all his high school life. He told himself earlier that he better win the game, but what a poor boy that he gets a fever today. He’s wondering if the coach will let him play the game or not.

“Hey, Abelard, I found you, buddy,” shouted the young coach as walks in the locker room with suits and tie.

He reaches out his big hand to Abelard as he wants to give the young man a high five. Coach James was a Rookie of NBA player, and he played well in his career, but he got injured. This is why he’s here as the coach of the Duke High School’s basketball team.

Abelard looked up with his tired blue eyes and mumbles “Hi, Mr. James!”

“Are you ok? Abelard?” the coach asks with concern.

“Yes, I’m fine, just got a fever, I can still play the game,” Abelard answers hoarsely.

“Ok, it’s up to you. Now, go change, and see you in warm up,” says Mr. James with little worried. He stares at the young man thoughtfully for a few seconds and stands up, then stride out the locker room.

Abelard rests for a while, and slowly walks to his locker, he takes a look at the number “1” on the locker, which is for each captain of the Duke High School basketball team. This locker has Abelard’s precious memories. He opens his locker and gets out his most honorable jersey. Abelard walks out of the locker room in the white jersey with a red number 23 and his name on his back. In the hallway to the Duke High school basketball arena, there is a row of showcases. All the school’s sports awards are shown in there, from the first award that the Duke high school got to the current award. This hallway is the only way to go from the locker room to the basketball arena. Every time before practice or game, Abelard will walk through here and every time he sees these awards, he remembers that he wants to help his school to get a championship, which is the goal he set to himself when he just joined the basketball team. The young man hasn’t achieved his goal yet and he knows that today’s game is the last step that he can achieve his goal and it is his only chance.

Abelard jogs into the basketball arena, he sees many jerseys were mounted in frames. Those jerseys were worn by the most valuable basketball player in the school history and the school decided to retire their jerseys. All of them brought the Duke High school a championship. The young man knows this a supreme honor and he's dreaming about the school hangs his jersey up.

"Captain! Why are you standing here? Come on, let's warm up! Yeah! It's the final game!" Shouted by a very excited seven-foot-tall man who's wearing a white jersey. Abelard's fantasy is interrupted by the shouting.

"Leo, don't you know our captain is dreaming about hanging up his jersey?" Laughs a man who has "Klaus" on the back of his white jersey.

"Hey! Don't laugh at me. Leo and Klaus, let's go warm up," Abelard says embarrassingly.

After twenty minutes, a voice appears. "Everyone's attention please!"

Everyone stops warm up and looks toward the source of the voice and they find that's Mr. James, who strides to the side of the court. Everybody jogging around. Leo, Klaus, and Abelard walk side by side, they are the "Big Three" of Duke High school.

"You three! Come here quickly!" Mr. James says a hurry, "The East High School arrives, let's be ready for the game."

"For now, I want you guys to use one-on-one defense and don't forget pick and roll," Mr. James says while he's drawing the tactics on the tactical board.

"Oh! Coach James, we meet again! This time, your team better beats mine," disdainfully says by an old man putting his hands on his back, like an old Chinese man and slowly walks to Mr. James with a grin on his face.

"Oh, let's see later!" Coach James replies like he doesn't mind the old man's impolite behavior.

The referee gives coach James and the East high school's old coach a signal that the game is about to start, and they reply with a 'good' gesture. Coach James lets everyone gathering around and asks them to put their hands together.

"Come-on guys, we get this! 'Duke' on three!" Mr. James shouts.

"One! Two! Three! Duke!" Everyone yells.

Cheering before the game starts is a routine of Duke High school because it makes everyone united, also makes them not afraid of any difficulties, so that the players can play a wonderful game. After the cheering, the starting players are going to their position, and ready to play this big game. Abelard walks at the end of the five starters, his hands' are shaking, sweat is running down from his short golden curly hair to his cheek, it's the first time that he feels nervous for the game.

"Hey, Abelard, come here for a second," coach James says in a loud voice.

"Yes, coach?" Abelard asks confusedly.



“Listen, buddy. Don’t worry about winning or losing, just try your best. Your teammates and I are your strongest backing,” Mr. James says to Abelard softly and gives him an encouraging eye.

“Ok, coach. I will try my best and won’t let you down.” Abelard answers confidently, then he runs to the basketball court.

“Uh, I know you won’t let me down,” coach James whispers while he’s watching the back of the best player that he’d ever coached.

Starting players are on the court and get into their position and the centers are ready for the jump ball. “Beep~” the exciting game starts. After the buzzer rang, the referee throws the ball into the air, every spectator holds their breath and staring at the ball spinning in the air, they want to see which team wins the jump ball. A big hand reaches the ball and flick it to the white team with his fingertip. “Whoopee!” The Duke high school gets the jump ball and the crowd burst into cheers. The ball bounces in the white team’s backcourt. Abelard picks up the ball and dribbles it to the frontcourt. As soon as Abelard gets into the frontcourt, one opponent comes up to defend him. But Abelard just ignores the defender and does a crossover, easily gets rid of the opponent and he makes an easy lay-up to score. East High school starts a fast break to get the two points back. One player from East high school wants to do a layup in front of Abelard, but Abelard gives him a big block shot. The ball is slapped by Abelard to the East high school’s bench, their team’s coach’s face is red like a monkey’s butt. Coach James looks at Abelard proudly and gives him a thumbs up.

“Beep!” The East High school calls a timeout; the coach wants to lay out a new tactic.

“Why are you doing that! Lay-up in front of Abelard and get a big block! You have shamed me to the ground,” The old man yells angrily, “And now, forget about that! Your job is to defend Abelard by double-team all the time. I don’t care about who, just double-team him and let him make mistakes and exhaust him.” The old man says to his members.

“Great job Abelard and keep it! Klaus, don’t forget to defend,” Coach James laughs. Klaus lowers his head and smiles shyly. Abelard gently hit him and laughs.

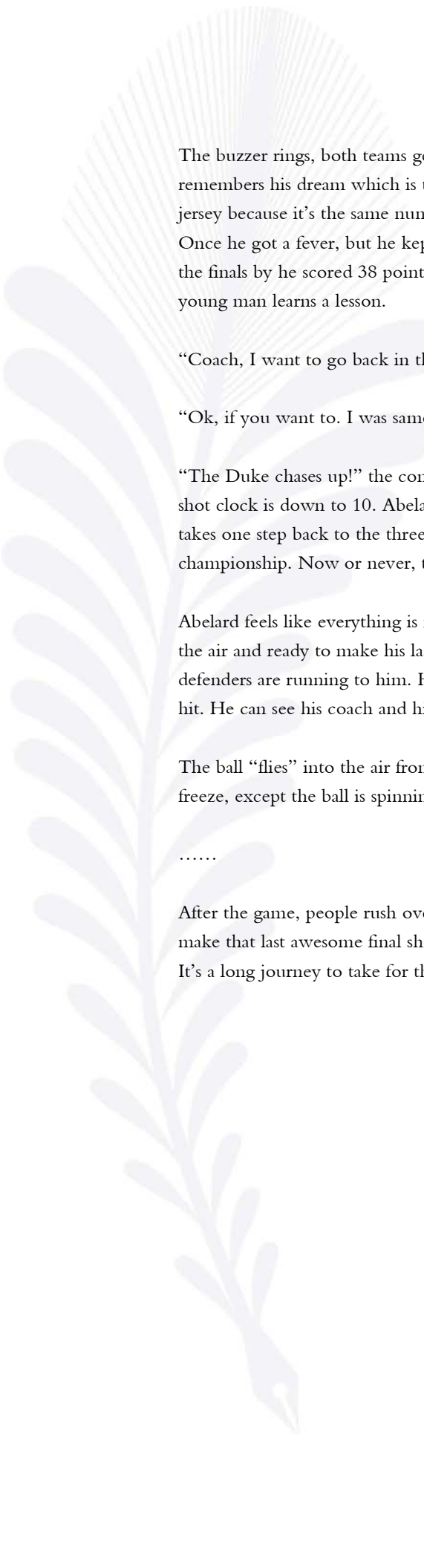
“Beep” the buzzer rings again, it’s time for the players go back to the court.

Until halftime, as long as Abelard holds the ball which will have two opponents running to double-team him and press hard. This makes ailing Abelard very tired that he makes many turnovers. At the end of the first half of the game, the score is 36 to 52. The East high school is leading by 16 points; everyone goes back to their locker room because the break time is 10 minutes.

Everyone’s morale is low; everyone sits in the locker room without saying anything. It’s quiet so that you can even hear the sound of a needle dropping onto the ground.

Sweat has saturated the young man’s jersey and pouring from his golden curly hair to his cheek. He’s feeling dizzy because he was not recovered from the fever and he played so hard in the first half of the game.

“Guy! There are two more quarters left, see how they got 52 points in the first half? We can do better than that!” Coach James yells hopefully and looks at Abelard and saying, “Abelard, take a rest in the second half of the game, you did a great job in the first half.” Abelard looks at the coach and faintly nods his head.



The buzzer rings, both teams get back to the arena. On the way back, Abelard sees the awards and he remembers his dream which is to help the school win a championship. Also, he chooses number 23 for his jersey because it's the same number as Michael Jordan, who's one of the greatest players in NBA history. Once he got a fever, but he kept playing the game and he helped his team win the most important game in the finals by he scored 38 points. Abelard thinks there is no reason for him to give up on this game, the young man learns a lesson.

"Coach, I want to go back in the game," Abelard firmly says.

"Ok, if you want to. I was same as you when I was your age," Mr. James praises.

"The Duke chases up!" the commentator yells. The Duke High school is only down by 2 points and the shot clock is down to 10. Abelard getting rid off the defender and then Leo passes him the ball. Abelard takes one step back to the three-point line. If he makes this shot, then Duke will come back and win the championship. Now or never, the whole team's fate is on his shoulder.

Abelard feels like everything is in slow motion and he can only hear his heart beating. Abelard jumps into the air and ready to make his last shot of the game, while he's slowly rising in the air, he can see the defenders are running to him. He sees that spectators are looking at him and waiting for him to make a final hit. He can see his coach and his teammates are nervous. Finally, he makes the shot.

The ball "flies" into the air from Abelard's hand. At this moment, times seem stops. Everything seems to freeze, except the ball is spinning in the air and draws a beautiful parabola.

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After the game, people rush over to Abelard, they surround him. Some one asks: "Abelard, how can you make that last awesome final shot?" Abelard firmly answers "No pay, no gain. This line is always with me. It's a long journey to take for those day's achievements."

# The Departure Station

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Lu, Michelle – 15*

Hot summer winds rushed over thousands of miles through the country and arrived in Guangzhou, bringing humidity and heat that felt even hotter and overwhelming than ever in the early July of this modern city. The scent of sweats from these crowded streets wafted directly to Nadia while numerous people were huddling under their garish umbrellas to shield them from the bright sun.

This place used to mean everything for Nadia. She still remembered all of those summers that seemed to never had an end she used to have in elementary school, where they played frivolous games with neighborhood kids, classmates, and teammates in the basketball team she was in and during all of these times, Teresa was always with her. They were the inseparable dual in their elementary school as if they were the leaves growing out of the same stem, connected from soul to soul. Nadia is now returned back to Guangzhou and she planned her time in Guangzhou as joyful as she could, and meeting Teresa was undeniably the first schedule on her agenda.

“I wish nothing has changed.” Nadia murmured to herself as she was talking towards the meeting spot. Grand trees beside the long concrete roads provided impeccable dwellings for cicadas and their noise was annoying like it had always been. All of these were just like the same as a year ago, but for Nadia, who already moved to Toronto for a year, it all seemed too alien for her. As she was approaching to the meeting spot, she realized that Teresa was already there.

“Hey Teresa!”

“Hey!”

They decided to go back to that coffee shop where they used to finish homework and fortunately the vintage café has not renovated after Nadia went to Toronto. It still contained that sense of vintage –the wooden wall with dark brown paintings of flowers accentuates the sense of calmness and quietness in the coffee shop, the bronze doorbell that looked antique hung somewhere above the doorway. As soon as Teresa pushed open the rusty door handle, the doorbell immediately rings in its own way. As usual, they sat down by the windows.

“So... how’s Toronto?” asked Teresa.

“It was alright I guess...people are much nicer than the people here fore sure!”

“Oh nice.” Teresa replied carelessly. You know there was this nerdy guy in our class, and he was so annoying and he is just naturally weird. He doesn't even have any social media and all he does is to play games. For god sake, who knows how he got those top marks. Weirdo.” Teresa complained absently as she was flicking her fingers and tapping on her iPhone screen.

“Oh, did he do anything to you or your friends?” Nadia did not understand, probably because she went to a small school so everyone was a friend with everyone else. Excluding other people or bullying was not much of a concern there.

“He really didn’t do anything directly to me, but he is just...weird. It wasn't anything big.” Teresa said in an inattentive tone.

“Hmmm well...” Nadia tried to contradict her idea but finding a suitable timing and satisfactory way to say it was hard. At least she surely did not want to have any kind of arguments since this was their first reunion after Nadia had left China. So she remained silence and their conversation stiffly stopped.

It was an uncomfortable lingering silence.

*This is so awkward. This is so awkward...this is so awkward!* Nadia was almost desperate to say, *come on please say something Teresa!!* She almost knocked over the Grande sized coffee cup. *Please calm down*

*Nadia*, she kept telling herself to do that, although the reality does not give a second for her to adjust herself. She did not know what to do other than looking at Teresa sitting across the table.

While Nadia was being speechless, Teresa was actually thinking exactly the same thing, *Oh my lord please say something Nadia! How am I supposed to talk to you about anything while we didn't talk much in one whole year?* Teresa kept watching directly at her phone and did not stop scrolling and tapping to conceal the fact that she did not know how to talk to Nadia normally anymore. However, she still knew that, *Nadia is not other people. Nadia is Nadia*. So Teresa thought, *she has not changed, but maybe I did?*

Endurance to this tense moment is anguished than Nadia thought. Now she wondered why life had to bereave people of their loved ones as they were venturing through the life. Thus she realized that although recapturing the perception of the past is simply worthless, it is something unstoppable. Nadia cursed herself; *I should have talked to Teresa more. I should have cared more about this. I should have loved this friendship as I did before*. She understood that all of these thoughts could not come true anymore. She regretted. People often say living in the present is what memorable and meaningful, but when current occasions were not as pleasant as it meant to be, they tend to find the path leading them to where they started, but never could.

Nevertheless, time is unforgiving.

Both girls sat quietly until the sunlight started to vanish upon the further horizon. Teresa picked up her iced mocha with extra milk and less sugar. Nadia observed that the ice cubes were floating on the surface of the liquid. Unsympathetic freezing ice cubes were drifting away from each other, hitting the solid edge of the glass cup from time to time. Then they were wafting back to each other creating clear and pure sound but had only persisted for a few seconds. By this moment, a simple perceptual idea flashed through Nadia, and so she thought to herself. *Oh, right. That's us. As we kept going in our separate journey, we drifted away as if we are meant to be like that*. The voice of ice cubes clashing was noticeably clearer, but heavier, than it is accustomed to be. And so, time passed even though it was prolonged than it supposed to be.

"I better get... get going..." Teresa stood up, took her coffee, and walked to the trash bin and was reading to leave. Nadia saw her doing so, and she followed. Teresa pushed the handle, and the action is completely identical to when she came in and even years ago whenever Nadia needed a hand to open the door at school or in the shopping mall.

"I'll see you around!" Smiled Nadia, although she barely knew how to properly smile with that kind of predicament situation. They said goodbye to each other but it will not be their last reunion. "The bond is special between us because we have been through so many things", mumbled Nadia to herself, "today was just not what I was expect."

Nadia walked to the bus stop, those steps unquestionably contained great meanings and thinking in them, although probably no one could ever discern those insignificant discrepancies in her footsteps. The two girls gradually went back to their normal days again, as if this is the terminal of this friendship, but the departure station of a new journey of life.

# Journey to the West and Back

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Meng, Flora – 15*

The earliest memory I can recollect from the outset of the decision was stepping into a car with Mom and Dad while waving cheerfully at the grandparents whom I had lived with for as long as I could recall. In that spur of the moment, had I bothered to truly ponder about where I was about to go and how long I was going to be away from them? Strangely, I had not, nor had I understood why I was delighted about the trip. I was casually told that we were moving to a place far away called Prince Edward Island in Canada, whatever that meant, and I naturally accepted this decision, being quite nonchalant about the whole departure.

Perhaps the idea was too radical for me to grasp or to make sense of as an unobservant and carefree child. Little did I know, I was about to embark on an adventure in the following procession of years that would abound my childhood with discoveries of my identity that like this instance when I first moved away, I was unable to distinguish at first. My journey took me to the unfamiliar scopes of Western society, a critical leap I was fortunate to make, but fragments of uniqueness is carried in everyone's story, and mine as of now is marked most remarkably by the path that lead me away and back to China, my home.

Natty is what most people call me, but Natasha when my mother is livid and potentially deafening. I think it is certainly fair to say that a significant portion of elementary school consisted of debating passionately with my Mom on my poor choices most notably my insistence on comparing Google searches with book reading and arguing that the former was far more efficient and informative in the modern world. That doubtlessly led to more irate expressions and unsightly glares, but curiously, I would one day appreciate the encounters I made with this seemingly unapologetic woman.

Though before the frenzy with all of that, I did spend my first year in Canada harmoniously roaming around the neighborhoods of arguably one of the friendliest islands I could've landed on. They say that young children can learn several different languages early on, which was exactly what I had undergone. Grade 1 came along with the ESL classes that I readily excelled in and needless to say, even I was sure it was easier than public school in China.

My classmates were as innocent as I was, albeit more confident and outgoing, and included me eagerly. During the summer, we would often go shoveling for clams, where my Dad would do the shoveling and I would be standing whimsically in the water with my Crocs. Visits at the local Cow's ice cream store were prevalent and surely more fearless venturing around our complex with a dangling lanyard key and a curious little mind. That very winter, I had witnessed snowfall for the first time. In fact, it had covered the ground to such a height that it was just short of covering my entirety.

The clear victory in all my mind-boggling discoveries came on Christmas day when we returned home from a night over at a family friend's house. My closest friend Estella told me specifically that I had to write a letter to Santa if I wanted anything, which sounded insane considering how I had gotten used to seeing dozens of Santa Clause's walking around communities back home just to deliver some cheap, plastic hand clappers and whistle toys.

Now I could ask for *anything* I wanted? The idea was beyond absurd, but I had nothing to lose. So I mustered up all the English I knew to write that letter and carefully composed it on time for the saintly figure. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that the legend was true when I tore open the mistletoe covered wrapping paper to find the exact model of the Hannah Montana doll I had asked for and spied on in the local supermarket.

Sadly, my perfectly enjoyable year came to an end when my parents suddenly announced that we were moving to another city, this time called Toronto. I was quite startled at the time, but still in no way reluctant. I was sincerely attached to that town, but I was still easy to sway as a seven-year old.

So it was, a new chapter. We found an apartment to stay in temporarily when we arrived, but my parents were also desperately searching for a new house. In fact it was on one of these frequent open house visits that we had discovered my future school. On this particular visit, my mother began conversing with a



Hispanic lady who was the owner of the house. As she brought up my need to find a school, the lady hastily introduced the one her son was enrolled in, a private French bi-lingual school well acclaimed in the city as the oldest and most renowned. I do not think it was their particular confidence that I was going to get into a French school the year after I learned English that convinced us to approach the school, but I assumed that the trend with all of our arrangements were quite spontaneous anyways.

The entrance examination came along and I was lead into a building that appeared decades old with vines expanding intimately on the walls outside, almost creating the illusion of a protective barrier to the halls inside. The antiqueness glistened with an elegance that was appreciable and modest. Despite my anticipation to explore the rest of campus, I patiently went through the testing, which to my surprise was not particularly arduous. We were notified days later that I was miraculously admitted and could to start in a preparatory class the first year.

With good news, comes the probability of shortcomings. Being naturally on the quiet and composed side, I kept things mostly to myself, but this was stagnating at times, as I often felt afraid to speak in my third language. The most distinct memory I had of making a laugh out of myself was during a discussion in our class. Christmas was around the corner and our teacher decided to ask us what we were going to do for Santa. Maybe I had zoned out the entire time when the other kids were giving their responses or I simply had terrible listening skills, but either way when I was asked, “Et toi Natasha, qu’est-ce que tu vas faire pour Père Noël?” the immediate answer I blurted out was, “Well, my mom said she’d buy me one!” In that instance, a burst of laughter exploded and reverberated around the room. Every single student in the class was laughing when a boy blared out, “Your mom is going to buy you a Santa Claus?” and retreated back to giggling hysterically.

Apparently, I had mistaken Santa in French, “Père Noël” for “Piano,” as much as that seems impossible to mix up. It wasn’t that such instances left a negative imprint on my self-esteem per say because apart from the instantaneous embarrassment I felt exposed to, I wasn’t affected to any greater extent. Though looking back, these small details do and did subconsciously plant the idea that maybe I was not clever and qualified enough to be there or that I didn’t belong with these kids. Fortunately, these thoughts were beyond recognition for my younger self and throughout elementary school, I learned to identify myself as just another member of the community.

Just another member of the community, I ask myself now. Was that mode of thinking the problem? In order to fit in, it was common sense for me to adapt into a herd mentality, doing what the majority did so I was not the odd one out. It never hit me that I should of tried to excel or aim to realize my own potential whatever it may be. Being the above average Chinese girl seemed adequate enough as a title, challenging myself on an even battlefield with the kids I grew up was not a concern or priority in the least. In fact, the averageness I had managed to maintain followed me in closer proximities when I hit middle school.

At that age, some of the more ambitious students became more dedicated to their interests and began setting objectives for the year. Though for me, I was restricted to making meaningful progress towards self-growth because there was nothing that interested me. The worse part about it was, I did not care.

The activities hosted in school were plentiful and being an older and more established institution, the school was also rife with clubs and activities to join. One day, the announcements were encouraging students to walk around the club fair to sign for an extracurricular they were interested in. My friends and I went to the auditorium to find a circle path that was filled with booths along the way. I circled past each booth numerous times, but found at the end that nothing sparked my gaze for more than a few seconds.

Though my unconcerned self was not so worried about my lack of passion in anything and my weariness to find one, it became increasingly apparent to my mother that I was wasting precious time empty handedly. We continued having many conversations to which I mostly sought to fight back, but almost the same topic came forth every time: my reluctance to read.

Growing up, my mother always stressed the importance of reading to me, how it prevented us from shallowness and ignorance, how it teaches us of human nature and dealing with people. How it



nurtures our competence to be independent thinkers with the hindsight to develop moral principles and to look at things from diverse perspectives. No matter how much she tried to tell me this, I could not understand or see the need to listen especially when not complying with her requirements granted no consequences in my life. I didn't feel pressured in my environment, nor did I feel any threats that challenged me to become more proactive.

I defended my position by explaining how none of my friends or classmates read, how it was a new era, but I was told in response that this is why I should read. In a time when people are more distracted by the materialistic achievements of society, the most formidable way to be accelerated and not drowned by our own endeavors is to use today's accomplishments to help us become more efficient while acknowledging the need to continue learning, she told me. I was simply not ready to understand all or any of this until I had actually witnessed myself what the use of it all was, but I never forgot these words.

Near the end of seventh grade, I met with my first major devastation. We were going away yet again, this time to somewhere I never imagined possible. My entire family was going to move back to China to live, and the decision was final. I felt like my mind was effectively cluttered with confusion, denial and utter repulsion. There were plenty of compelling arguments that my parents made, but initially there were none that I was willing to accept. Their points ranged from work opportunities to immersing my newborn sister and me to our native culture before we were too old or stubborn to accept non-Western ideals. They told me that they could no longer bear being trapped in the helplessness of a society where almost all of their prior capabilities were ultimately rendered worthless. Even the language barrier, which they were unable to fully overcome, was an excruciating struggle that was comparable to feeling like an empty minded soul, desperate to make a sound.

I had never thought that this was the case for my parents nor had I ever considered the innate parts of my identity that I had abandoned habitually. The prospect had certain highlights too, I was going back to my home and grandparents, I would enroll in an international school where I could use my language abilities to my advantage, and I thought that the change could potentially be amusing for a change, as the monotonous trend in my life was beginning to lose its appeal. So as always, I complied without further rebellion.

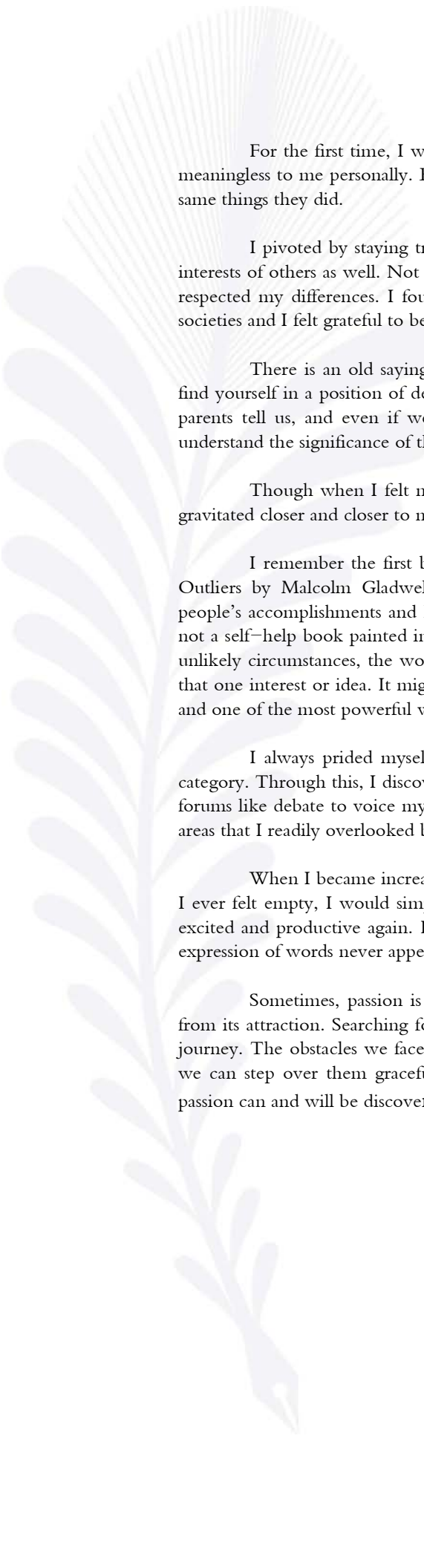
My first year back kicked off most positively. When I no longer had to speak French in every subject, I thrived academically with the upper hand in my language proficiency. I felt an almost immediate surge of confidence that enlightened my mindset in a spectrum of ways.

The initial transition did not feel as unfamiliar as I would of imagined and from the years of strictly speaking Mandarin at home, courtesy to my parents, I spoke Chinese without an accent and felt quite thoroughly adapted in the environment. Deep down, I had always sensed a strong connection to my heritage and the philosophy that had evolved from our ancestors. I enjoyed the familiarity and realness between friends and families. I related to the sense of humor and perspectives of my Chinese classmates. I enjoyed feeling comfortable in my own skin and not having to be confined by social obligations in middle and high school with the image of popularity mostly dissipated.

Though the longer I was immersed in this community, the more I began to see its flaws as well. While it was refreshing to witness the warmth between relatives and companions, my propensity to keep certain things to myself and respect personal privacy in not being overly engrossed in the business of others, in turn created an image of me that was far from who I was.

Increasingly, friends that I had bonded so well with began calling me cold, indifferent and not belonging to the crowd. I gradually began to realize that most of the kids around me came from highly prosperous families since I went to a private international institution rather than the public, conventional system. My classmates back in Canada also came from well-off families, but the phenomenon in China was vastly different.

Coming from these influential backgrounds, a trend that was apparent in society as well as in the kids of this generation was the obsession with materialism. This was almost a hobby among many of the richest students, right up the alley with the Chinese entertainment business that would always be rife with celebrity endorsements.



For the first time, I was adamant that I did not want to push myself to engage in things that were meaningless to me personally. Even more so, I did not care how people viewed my decision to not like the same things they did.

I pivoted by staying true to who I was while maintaining my prior relationships by respecting the interests of others as well. Not only did I feel better, but also others were more comfortable around me and respected my differences. I found that yin and yang existed in both the cultures of Western and Chinese societies and I felt grateful to be apart of both of them.

There is an old saying in Chinese, which translates to “Listen to the advice of elders or you will find yourself in a position of detriment.” When we are young, we are forced to listen to what teachers and parents tell us, and even if we are told that what they say is meant to be good to us, we often fail to understand the significance of their words.

Though when I felt most lost without a direction, the brightest light bulb ignited my mind and I gravitated closer and closer to my childhood enemy: books.

I remember the first book that really got me into reading was actually a non-fiction book called *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell. It delved into success stories while dissecting the ingredients to those people’s accomplishments and how they overcame hardships. The greatest part about that book is that it is not a self-help book painted in black and white. It shows that our future is destined by the combination of unlikely circumstances, the work we put into mastering our talent and the people we meet who can spark that one interest or idea. It might have been perfect timing, but that book was the encouragement I needed and one of the most powerful ways something could make an impact on me.

I always prided myself in being a staunch realist and naturally began reading in the non-fiction category. Through this, I discovered my interests into humanities, law and business and felt obligated to join forums like debate to voice my thoughts. I always believed that I was “passionless” until my enthusiasm for areas that I readily overlooked before began emerging almost overwhelmingly. I loved it.

When I became increasingly intrigued in the study of people, fiction became my new best friend. If I ever felt empty, I would simply think about all the classics and books that I had never read and become excited and productive again. I felt strengthened by knowledge and the depth that it could bring out. The expression of words never appeared so beautiful.

Sometimes, passion is not something that finds you, but once you find it you will be inseparable from its attraction. Searching for the missing fragments of our identity can take us on long and unexpected journey. The obstacles we face are critical in strengthening our endurance in the real world, but as long as we can step over them gracefully, learn to reflect on our experiences rather than be destroyed by them, passion can and will be discovered most vividly.

# The Space Between Two Stars

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Nair, Akhil – 16*

It's funny how the world works, the loneliest man on the loneliest road. Until yesterday, Robert had everything he could dream of, a loving wife, an adorable daughter, a mansion, a multimillion company, etc. He had a car for each day of the week, never had to worry about forgetting the time as he had a collection of the most expensive watches ever produced, and was put into consideration for being awarded "The Person Of The Year". Almost everything that he had was not anything to him after what happened the day before. The events that occurred in a six hour span was what caused Robert to be in a red 1967 Cadillac convertible, cruising down highway 50 at 120km/h at nighttime.

Robert's favourite song, "Hey Jude" just started playing. He had just finished his favourite meal of all time, a double cheeseburger. He was driving down a road he always liked, in a car that he always liked, joining him was a whole album of songs by a band that he always liked. Robert wanted this day to be only about him, nothing from his past should pop up and ruin the amazing day he has been having. As the song was getting near to its chorus, Robert began singing along, "then you begin to make it better, and any time you feel the pain, hey Jude, refrain, don't carry the world upon your shoul—. Everything came back to him; he remembered what the worst day of his life was like. Robert couldn't fight back his tears and they started leaking.

1 minute into the events that changed Robert's life. Robert was zooming past cars in his brand new Lamborghini Centenario. He got his favourite number 13 as his car's registration number. As the Centenario swiftly drove past a cemetery, without a smile on his face, Robert smelled the interior of his new car. Robert waited a whole year to get the car he paid near \$2 million for, yet he didn't seem excited. Betrayal. That's the one word that kept popping up in his head. His best friend, Tina, stabbed him in the back. Robert didn't know what Tina did, but she somehow persuaded the board of directors and now he lost the company he started from rags. He was so infuriated that he accidentally punched and destroyed his Centenario's right side mirror.

30 minutes into the events that changed Robert's life. His wife, Tia, probably heard his car's engine since she opened the door right as Robert got out of the Centenario. "Wow. Honey, I think I might have competition, the new car looks amazing" Tia joked. Robert didn't laugh and simply kissed his wife. Tia noticed that her husband's usual funny personality was missing and asked him "honey, is everything alright"? Robert didn't give a reply and Tia asked him once more "Robert, was everything alright at work"? Robert decided it was best to lie to his wife right now and replied "yeah, everything was fine". Tia believed her husband and told him with a frown "I think Mira didn't get a good grade on her project, she seemed unusually dull after coming from school. Honey, even if she didn't get a good grade, still do take her out to get her a new doll like promised". With the problem he had, Robert forgot that he promised to buy his daughter, Mira a doll if she got an A on her science project. Robert was going to buy her a doll even if she had gotten an e, however Robert was now in conflict as he did not really want to do anything and just wanted some alone time.

45 minutes into the events that changed Robert's life. Robert knew that he would never want to disappoint his daughter and took her to Toys "R" Us. Apparently Mira got a C on her project and was dull about it. Robert wasn't feeling any bright either as the duo had a quiet ride to the store.

1 hour into the events that changed Robert's life. "It's alright Mira, I will never be disappointed in you. We all have to deal with problems in our life. Getting an okay grade on a science project is perfectly alright. My average grade when I was in grade 4 was a C, and look at me now I have enough money to buy my little girl all the toys in this store. Mira, as one of the lines from my favourite song says, don't carry the world upon your shoulder" Robert said as he comforted his crying daughter. He knew that no matter what happens, his daughter, who always greeted him with her bright smile every evening by the door doesn't deserve to cry; no matter how bad a day he had, he should always be Mira's "awesome" daddy. Mira slowly stopped crying and gave Robert a big hug "I love you daddy". Robert finally had a smile on his face and told his daughter that he loved her too. To Robert's surprise, Mira then asked him "Can we really buy all the toys in this store then"? Robert couldn't contain himself and laughed as hard as he can.

2 hours into the events that changed Robert's life. Robert had bought Mira four dolls and were now finishing up their pizza at a crowded street. His daughter's smile had made him forget about what happened today and he was acting like his usual self. Robert wanting Mira to have a great time, took his credit card and then handed Mira his wallet "Mira, here is my wallet, now go get yourself an ice cream from Häagen-Dazs". Seeing Mira's big smile made Robert's day as he asked his waiter, John for the bill.

2 hours and 20 minutes into the events that changed Robert's life. Robert was starting to get worried as Mira was taking an usually long time to get ice cream. He decided to quit waiting and told John that if he sees his daughter come by, then tell her to wait at their seat. Robert took his daughter's things and proceeded to walk past the the corner to get to Häagen-Dazs. As he turned a corner, he saw people crowding over an area and heard a man calling for an ambulance. Robert didn't want to have any negative thoughts but decided to check out what everyone was looking at. He politely asked people to give him some space to see what is going on. As he brushed past a lot of people and finally got to the middle, he fell to his knees.

3 hours and 30 minutes into the events that changed Robert's life. Tia came running towards the ICU, Robert caught her before she charged inside. Tia started tearing up as she hugged her husband. After wiping away her tears, Tia asked "what happened Robert, what happened to our little girl"? Robert was hesitant to tell her but eventually told her what a bystander saw "our little girl was skipping towards Häagen-Dazs with my wallet. Someone seated inside the ice cream parlour told me that suddenly a man came from behind with a knife". Robert didn't have the guts to tell his wife the rest of the story, however Tia was able to figure it out and started weeping again.

4 hours and 30 minutes into the events that changed Robert's life. A nurse just came out of the ICU and told Robert and Tia that the doctors were doing their best and weren't able to confirm anything yet.

5 hours and 30 minutes into the events that changed Robert's life. A doctor came out of the ICU and removed his mask. He introduced himself as Ronnie and informs Robert and Tia that he is the head surgeon. Robert was curious about his daughter's condition and with hope asked Ronnie about Mira's present condition. Ronnie's next few words verbally murdered both Robert and Tia.

6 hours into the events that changed Robert's life. Robert decided to leave his mourning wife alone and go outside where he could let go of the tears he has been holding. Right as Robert stepped outside, something fell right in front of him. Robert fell to his knees and mourned over the loss of his daughter and wife.

The song changed. Robert wiped away his tears as heard loud honks that was progressively getting closer. Robert paused the music and turned off the head lamps. Robert noticed that a Peterbilt 379 truck was coming on the lane opposite of his. Robert leaned to the passenger side seat and opened the glove box. He took out a packaged barbie doll and placed it on the passenger seat. Robert gave the doll one last look before he stared at the night sky, he noticed that there was space in between two stars and said to himself "I'm coming". Robert closed his eyes and steered the Cadillac towards the truck.

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# Through all that ...the Journey to a Book

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Um, Tae Seo – 15*

It was the first day of school. Mr. H woke me up from the nap I was having in the parking lot. I would not call it a nap. More of a knockout. “What are you doing here boy?” asked Mr. H. The last thing I remember was that I was going to get my bike from the parking lot, and then someone barked my name. Something like a metal container struck my head and then I was down. I knew if I told Mr. H that, I would get more interviews with the guidance counsellor so instead I told him, “Sorry, it must’ve been all the anti-depressants I’m taking. They made me feel dizzy and then caused me to fall asleep.” I looked at him with a smile. He looked back at me with a strange look (the kind of look you get when you tell people you are from the future). “I have a suggestion for you, go hit the gym. Get some muscles. Then no one will be able to do anything to you. Get rid of those skinny arms and legs.” He suggested...me...going to a gym...I didn’t even know where a gym was. After a brief moment of silence, he blurted, “Um, Tyler... I don’t think a person can get a cut on the head from losing consciousness.” Staring at my forehead, he looked really shocked. I didn’t understand what he was talking about until I lost consciousness again.

I was woken up by people crying from a distance. It smelled like the hospital. The ceiling I was staring at was the exact same one I saw the last time I was at a hospital. Five seconds of hard thoughts later, I knew I was at a hospital. Feeling both puffy and surrounded, I slowly sat up. On my left, I saw my mom. Her makeup was all ruined by the tears rolling down her face, and her curly blonde hair was wet, which I believe is because she came here right after her shower. On the other side of the bed was my dad. On his phone, playing his online Poker game. He didn’t seem to care whether I was dead or alive. Classic. I glanced at my mom, puzzled. Before I could ask any question, she mumbled, “Why. Why did they do that to you?” I was about to say something before my dad interrupted, “Obviously, ‘cuz he’s a freaking nerd who doesn’t have any friends. Who wouldn’t have done that to him? I’m surprised he didn’t end up in a freaking garbage truck.” My mom couldn’t say anything. She just glanced back at me with her shiny green eyes (something we both have in common) ... and smiled.

With my head wrapped, I was on my mom’s Chevy on the way home. The car ride wasn’t so pleasant. The entire ride was my dad’s dark brown eyes staring at me through the rear-view mirror. Of course, I was forced to sit at the back with ruined leather seats, since dad didn’t want me within a 60-cm radius. Intense air was just flowing through the whole ride, until the barking started. “YOU KNOW HOW MUCH YOUR TREATMENT COST? Money enough to get me and your mom food for the next two months!” Obviously, that was Dad. Mom sat in the seat in front of me. Even with a seat between us and the loud noise from the engine, I could hear her sighs and cries.

Right, I forgot to mention, my dad isn’t my real dad. My real dad passed away 7 years ago during the bombing of Iraq. Unfortunately, he was there when it happened. Anyways, the ‘dad’ I have been mentioning the whole time is my step-dad.

Upon hearing the running river and the quacking of ducks, I knew we were almost home. When we arrived, Dad was the first person to get out of the car. Slamming the door shut while saying almost every curse word the English language has to offer.

The seat squeaked in front of me. Mom turned around and looked at me and started a lecture. I could only understand bits and pieces of what she was saying because, first of all, I couldn’t think properly because of the head concussion. Secondly, I couldn’t hear her because my ear was also affected. I was able to get, “Tyler, you are a grown boy. You are in high school and you have teachers who look after you. Why do you let others torture you like that? How long do I have to wait until you learn how to take care of yourself? It’s been 8 times that the school has called because something like this happened. I love you but I am tired of this. Please. Try to understand.” Her last sentence ended with tears dripping down her round cheeks. She and I both knew that I wasn’t going to say anything. Then I sniffled, “I’m sorry.” I couldn’t dare to look at her eyes. Inside the awkwardness, we both felt that we were having a nice moment.

As usual, me and my mom’s nice moment was broken by the sound of my dad. The window shattered from the second floor with my chair falling down followed by broken shards of glass.



Out of the clang, there was my mom's sound of surprise. Her skinny arm and hands covering her ears as tiny rain drops fell from the sky. With a minute of hesitation, I found a blanket inside the pocket of the front seat and used it as an umbrella for me and mom to safely get in the house.

Silence ran across the entire house. Quiet enough that I could clearly hear the tear drops from mom's cheeks hitting the floor as it was dropping. Mom and I stood there. Then a loud slam came from upstairs that cause both of us to jump. I was forced to go in my room which was on the first floor.

My room didn't have a heater. To save money for the electricity bill, Dad sold my heater to his pals next door. I mean, I understand. Teenagers can survive without having a heater in the middle of November. But selling it to his pals seem a little illogical.

I was in the room alone for about two hours. I couldn't hear anything that happened upstairs. My curiosity level increased gradually as each second passed. At this moment, I had no choice but to check what was going on upstairs.

As I reached halfway up the staircase, I could start hearing the murmurs of my parents' voices. "Just do it. Mary, just do it. It's the best for both of us." My heart dropped down to my stomach. My heart beat rose. "Maybe for you, but I ain't going nowhere without my son." I felt relief. But hatred grew inside for my step-dad.


My instinct was telling me to go back to my room. So, I did. As I was, I heard a slap. Round two of my heart drop. I didn't turn around, I was facing the bottom of the staircase. One part of me was telling me to go check, the other part of telling me to go back and let the adults handle it themselves. Ignoring 50% of my thoughts, I ran towards their room. The door was slightly open. Through the door, I saw someone lying down. My feet stopped. Wishing that wasn't my mom. Long hair...blonde curly hair. I pushed the door open and ran towards the body. Tears dropping, this time it wasn't my mom's. Dad was right beside Mom, kneeling down on two knees.

"Hospital...hospital...please. God damn it are you out of your mind!" I cried out of my throat. Grabbed his phone and called.

When the ambulance arrived, it was too late. "I'm sorry son. It's too late." I started thinking and asked "What? It's too late? I thought it was some kind of shock due to the slap. What?" The man looked at me while putting away his stethoscope. "It was a shock. But not a simple shock. It was an attack. A heart attack. I recognize her. She used to come to the hospital often. I was not sure why, but now that I see it...I am pretty sure she was taking drugs due to high blood pressure. I'm sorry.." My mom...she was now covered by a white cloth, I would never get to see her again.

Without thinking I ran inside the house. Grabbed dad from with neck. Shook him. No words were able to come out of my mouth. Unfortunately, words were able to come out of his mouth. "You think it's my fault? Who do you think gave her high blood pressure? It's you! She admitted it! Get your ugly freckled face out of my room!" Before I could step out of his room, I was knocked out.

I hated waking up at places I didn't know. Again, it was the hospital. Confused out of my mind. There were four doctors around me. "Tyler, you are suffering from brain damage. Sorry to inform you that...it's temporary, but it would take some time. You will be able to remember things from long time ago, but not things that happened recently. I'm so sorry." At that moment, I forgot what the man said. Now I could understand why. A lightbulb turned on in my head. "My mom...where is she? Sir, where is my mom. WHERE IS SHE!" "The funeral ended Tyler...you have been sleeping for 5 days." Wait...what? I wasn't...what? My own mom's funeral...I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye...or didn't even have a chance to see her one last time. I was controlled by my own anger.



Two hours of walking...I was at school. Mr.H's office light was on. As I was about to go through the main door, a dove flew in front of it. With the medication paper in my hand, I shooed it away. Mr. H found me first. He was putting posters up the board in the hallway. "Tyler? Why are you here?", he looked so confused...but so was I. Usually I just grinned or smiled when he said something, but not this time. I asked him with all seriousness, "Why do these things always happen to me?" I looked him, too tired to even look up now. A tap on my shoulders raised my head up. Mr.H looking at me, and me looking back at him. He handed me a book. The moment I opened the book I realized there was a missing page. "This book has been here years...abandoned...forgotten...yet someone liked it so much they took on page out. Like this book, you will find hope. It is up to you now."

# A Journey

*International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Vallee, Gracie— 16*

The streets were cold and dark, lit only by the dim glow of the street lamps, and Maria wandered around them frantically, like a rat in a maze, as if she didn't know where she was and had to get out. That was how she felt. It was how she always felt. It was October, she was sure of it. The air was chilly and probably would've felt nice if it wasn't suffocating her, leaking into her chest and clenching its bony fingers around her lungs until she couldn't breathe anymore. She choked. She knew she was asthmatic, but she couldn't do anything about it. She didn't have a home. She didn't have anything, really, except herself. She barely even had that anymore, because they kept trying to take it from her. It had happened three times before. She had lost her parents when she was little, and her siblings had all been adopted by other families. She had grown up alone in a home for abandoned children, and she had run away when she was fourteen, or around that age. The first time was shortly after that. The world proved to her quickly that it didn't care about her wellbeing, and neither did any of the people in it. They wanted her as a physical possession, something to be used to entertain themselves, and then thrown away. The second time had been almost immediately after the first, and the third had been about a year ago, she estimated. It had been cold like this. It had been freezing.

Maria spent much of that night searching for a place to sleep, but she remembered that she couldn't sleep anymore. Nowhere was safe. She kicked herself, angry that she could ever be so stupid. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her old Goodwill jacket, which was tattered and dirty. Her dark hair was knotted and her eyes were puffy from a lack of sleep. She saw the silhouettes of two men in front of her and she turned on her heel, her heart pounding. She was ready to start running, but their shadows loomed over her, blocking out all the light, their booming voices filling her ears. They were too fast for her and they grabbed at her, picking over her bones and her clothes, ignoring her pleas and cries for help, for mercy, until she couldn't run anymore. Maria opened her eyes and they were gone, their voices still ringing in her ears. She was in front of a convenience store. She looked it up and down, at the fluorescent lighting with the one broken bulb that flickered obnoxiously, at the short, narrow aisles half-full of bags of chips and candy bars concealed in their wrappers. At the refrigerators full of water bottles, foggy from condensation.

Maria's gaze drifted to the cashier, a lanky dark-skinned teenager leaning against the glass cases of tobacco behind the counter. He yawned, and she felt herself tense, but then he started to shift, and as she watched, slowly inching back from the door, he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. He went out from behind the counter and shuffled to the back of the store, disappearing from her vision. Maria raised her eyebrows and hugged her stomach. She hadn't eaten since she had begrudgingly gone to a local soup kitchen two nights ago, due to her own desperation. In fairness, she hadn't died yet, but she wasn't sure how she was still running on that one meal. It wasn't a crime to go into a convenience store and buy food, but it *was* a crime not to pay for it. She looked around for someone to ask for money, but to no avail. The streets were uncharacteristically empty for this part of town, but the rush of relief she felt at this was no surprise. Sad, Maria admitted to herself in a rare moment of reflection, but expected.

As if out of thin air, a presence seemed to materialize beside her. She stumbled back, caught off guard, but quickly regained stability, so to speak, and found her footing, ready to run if necessary.

"What are you *doing*?" A feminine voice, immediately preferable to the alternative. Women were safer in Maria's experience, but still not always to be trusted. This voice had something to it, a kind of bewilderment mixed with what would otherwise be innocent confusion. It was off-putting. Maria looked the woman up and down. She looked young, maybe around the same age, and she was pretty. She had beautiful skin. It was unblemished and creamy and in the low light, it looked like she didn't have any pores. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold. Maria studied her features for a moment, then watched her face screw up into a scowl. "Uh, hello?", the woman said, squinting at her. Maria started. "What?", she breathed.

"Why are you just standing there? Why don't you actually go in?"

"Um—"

"Go on," said the woman, who had proved herself nosy and without boundaries. "Are you buying anything?"

"No. I don't have any money." The words left her mouth before she could consider them. "I mean, you can go in. Sorry." She started to back out of the way to the store's entrance, but the woman swiftly moved to grab her arm. Maria pulled back, her reflexes kicking in, and she whipped her head around to find the best escape plan, immediately turning back to watch her opponent with now-sharp eyes.

"Wait!" The woman exclaimed. Maria didn't move. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I can get you something."

Maria tilted her head to contemplate this offer. She didn't even know this person's name. They could be tricking her. And she didn't have the energy to trek across town to the soup kitchen again. Before she could make her final decision, the woman took her hand and pulled her towards the door. She let herself follow, and they walked into the store.

"Why isn't there anyone here?", the woman muttered to herself.

"The cashier went outside to smoke," Maria replied, overhearing.

"Ah. So what do you want?"

About ten minutes later, give or take, Maria went to find her companion with a bottle of cold coffee and a bag of pretzels.

"How do you pay when there's nobody here?", she asked, as they walked up to the cash register. In answer, the woman dug into the pocket of her oversized jacket and pulled out a five-dollar bill. Maria stared in astonishment as she placed it on the counter, and then followed her out the door, returned to their original position. "I'm Maggie, by the way," said the woman. Maria nodded. "Maria."

"Do you have anywhere to go?"

"Nowhere."

"Want to go somewhere?" Maria studied her, confused as to why she was suddenly being invited places by someone she had known for fifteen minutes. She knew she had no allure, nothing special that would make anyone want to spend their time on her, but maybe this stranger was different. "Sure," she said, trying to seem as nonchalant as she could. She wondered why she cared. Maybe it was just something new, and she couldn't keep her curiosity under control.

"Okay. So—"

"Wait!" Maria interrupted, regaining her sense of skepticism. "Where?"

"I dunno," Maggie answered, unfazed. "Anywhere."

"Okay."

They walked down the street, and as Maria sipped her coffee and listened to Maggie talk, the streets got nicer and the buildings got taller, and the air seemed to warm up with every word. Maggie yawned, and Maria offered her the coffee. Hours went by, as fast as if they were minutes, and they sat on a bench facing west out over the river, and Maria told Maggie things she had never addressed out loud. They ate pretzels and turned around to watch the sun rise behind the buildings. Maggie sympathized with Maria, which was something Maria hadn't experienced beyond soup kitchen volunteers and their cheerful voices. Eventually, Maria stood up to leave like she normally would, but found herself willingly admitting that she didn't have anywhere to be. She sat down again and smiled at Maggie. "You smiled!", Maggie said excitedly.

"I mean, I guess."

"I haven't seen you smile yet." Maria thought about this. She really hadn't smiled in a long time. Her mind immediately pulled up dark images of intimidating men with ruthless eyes, but she frowned and pushed them away.

"Are you okay?", Maggie asked. Maria nodded, taking note of how easy it was to stop herself from thinking about things she didn't want to see anymore. She wasn't sure if it was Maggie, or this part of town, or even this time of day that made that possible, but she knew she was going to remember that combination. Maggie continued, "You know, you just have to keep going west." Maria raised an eyebrow. "I mean, I think about the sun to keep me going."


Maria's gaze fell to her hands, suddenly nervous and vulnerable, and when Maggie didn't say anything, she looked up again. "Go on."

"Well, the sun can't just stop moving— I mean, I guess this all depends on us moving, but the sun looks like it's moving to us, so I never question it. Okay, whatever, just imagine the sun moves across the sky every day, and it goes from east to west, right?" She looked at Maria for clarification. Maria was caught off guard.

"Uh, I guess?"

Maggie nodded. "Okay, yeah. So the 'sun'—", she raised her hands in quotation marks. "The sun can't stop moving or we won't have day or night and time will stop and life as we know it will be over." Maria smiled. "So you have to be like the sun and always keep going west because if the sun decides to turn around and go east, it will screw everything up for everyone."

Maria nodded slowly and Maggie's cheeks flushed. "I'm trying, okay?", she said, laughing. Maria laughed too, to avoid an awkward pause, but then something clicked. Maggie's explanation had a few scientific holes, and it was kind of cliché, but it made sense. Maybe it just wasn't the best analogy. Regardless of that, the point was there.



“I get it,” she said. Maggie pumped her fist in the air and Maria laughed.

“It gets easier,” Maggie said quietly, after their laughter died down. “Eventually, you don’t have to use a stupid metaphor to keep moving forward, because you just do it automatically.”

Maria smiled down at her hands. “It wasn’t stupid!”

“Don’t even pretend,” Maggie said, an air of fake seriousness about her. Maria shook her head, turned her body to face Maggie, and gingerly reached out and took her hand. Maggie’s hand was cold and bony, but in a good way, somehow. They sat there on that bench facing west out over the river, fingers entwined, and watched the sunlight sparkle on the water, and Maria didn’t turn around once after that.



# The New Journey to the West

*Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial Colleage, Bibi, Leiba – 15*

## Present Time

“But if the judge is here, who was the guy in China?” Xavier heard Scar quietly ponder to himself as he stared at the tied up man in front of him.

Genevieve was too shocked to speak. Her face pale.

"This must be a trap!" Major Lin harshly announced to the group.

Xavier, deep in thought, looked down at the grey colored floor of the jet. 'If the judge is here, and if it's a trap, then the guy behind all this must've thought of a way to contact us.' Xavier thought to himself as he looked for the microphone which the judge was using to guide them.

Julian, the ever oblivious, spoke up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Everyone stared at him, trying to acknowledge the harsh reality of the situation.

"This is reality." A deep voice boomed over the speakers.

## One Day Ago – At the military base

"General, are you saying I don't have say in this?" Major Lin fumed.

"Major, I also don't have a say in this. It's an order, must be followed."

Major Lin stood there, arms crossed, as he gave the General a heated glare.

"This is a mission in which I'm going to help the Americans. I don't see why I have to have little immature kids follow me!" This idea seemed a bit too absurd to Major Lin.

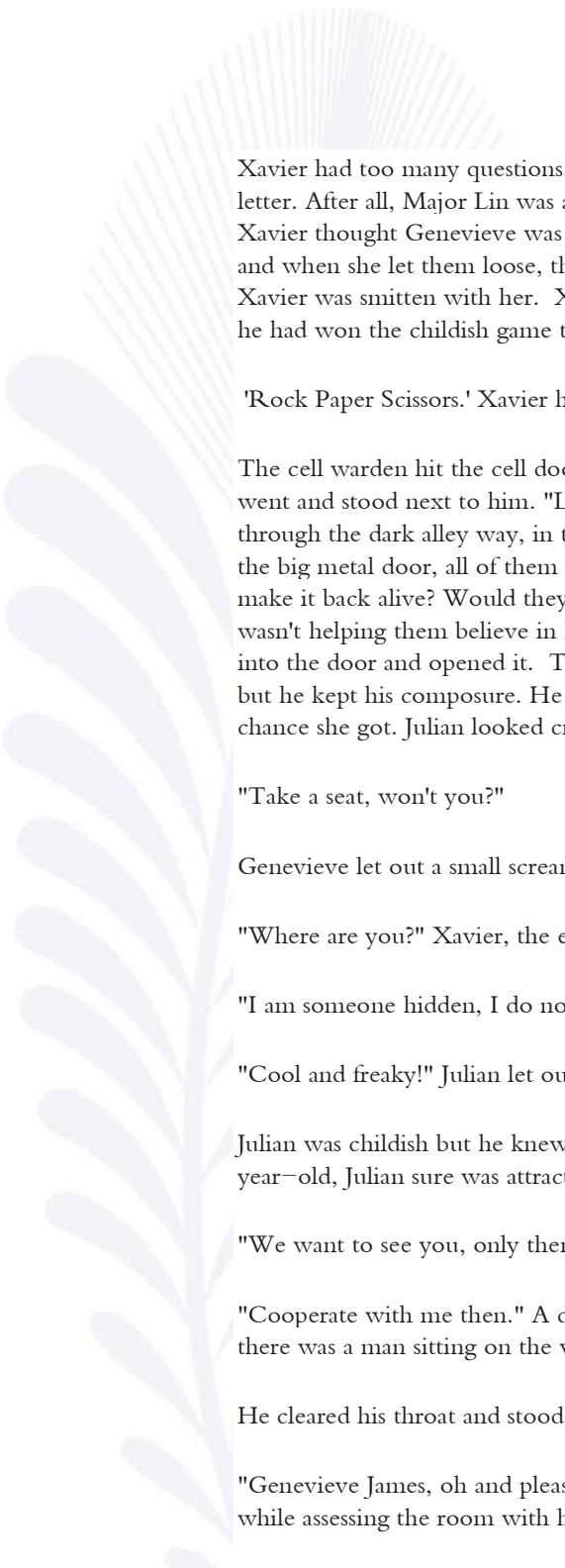
"Those 'immature kids' are actually smart people."

Major Lin huffed and shook his head. Years and years of training he had, still, he had to have immature kids following him.

## At the prisons.

Xavier heard the cell's gate open. It was the cell warden, "The judge has called."

When judge had sent them a letter earlier, he had told them that if they came when he called, he would take it as a yes to his request. And if they refused to come, it was a blatant no. Xavier felt weighed down by the pressure. He looked at his friends who looked hopeful. Hesitantly, he took a firm step towards the cell gate. His slow walk put slow yet wide smiles on everyone's faces. Xavier was the only one against the idea of meeting this judge, it felt all too surreal.



Xavier had too many questions, he didn't trust the Judge or "Major Lin", a name also mentioned in the letter. After all, Major Lin was a stranger. But Genevieve had convinced him. Her smile tugged at his heart. Xavier thought Genevieve was a remarkable young girl. Her long blonde hair reached her lower abdomen, and when she let them loose, they flowed down the length of her spine framing her face. Least to say, Xavier was smitten with her. Xavier smiled remembering how her emerald eyes were lit with hope when he had won the childish game that Julian had suggested.

'Rock Paper Scissors.' Xavier had bitterly thought to himself when Julian suggested it.

The cell warden hit the cell door harshly which caused all of them to stand up almost immediately. Xavier went and stood next to him. "Lead the way." He muttered. Everyone followed suit. They followed him through the dark alley way, in the way seeing strange, miserable yet dangerous faces. When they reached the big metal door, all of them started to have insecurities. Were there any guarantees? What if they didn't make it back alive? Would they protect them? None of them were sure. The judge's promise of safety wasn't helping them believe in him. But the warden didn't let them ponder anymore, he put the password into the door and opened it. They walked into the room. The complete white room made Xavier feel odd but he kept his composure. He looked at his friends. Genevieve looked like she wanted to run at the first chance she got. Julian looked creeped out. Scar was oddly calm.

"Take a seat, won't you?"

Genevieve let out a small scream, Julian yelped. All of them, startled at the sudden voice, looked around.

"Where are you?" Xavier, the ever bold said.

"I am someone hidden, I do not wish to be revealed."

"Cool and freaky!" Julian let out an excited whisper.

Julian was childish but he knew values well. He had light brown hair, blue eyes and pink full lips. For a 16-year-old, Julian sure was attractive.

"We want to see you, only then will we cooperate." Scar said cautiously.

"Cooperate with me then." A deep voice suddenly said. Only then did the group of youngsters realize that there was a man sitting on the white plush sofa.

He cleared his throat and stood up. "Major Lin." He introduced himself.

"Genevieve James, oh and please tell us if there is anyone else in the room." Genevieve shook his hand, while assessing the room with her eyes.

The Major just gave Genevieve a crooked smile in response. The Major was a muscular man, even though in his late forties, the man looked like a hero from an action film.

"Scar Wells"

"Julian Roberts"

"Who are you?" Xavier didn't trust the man enough to tell him his name.

"I'm the leader of this trip," answered Major Lin.

"I don't work with leaders."

"Too bad for you then."

"Genny, you honestly don't expect me to work with him, do you?" Xavier whispered in Genevieve's ear.

"Please?" She whispered back, her emerald eyes begging his steel blue ones.

Genevieve trusted Xavier deeply, it sometimes hindered her in her steps. Genevieve looked at Xavier, she really liked the aura of dominance surrounding him. His blue steel eyes gave her warmth while they scared others away. His dark brown hair looked soft and silky, Genevieve wanted to rake her hand through his fine delicate threads. Xavier however, simply nodded and stepped back.

"Work together, brains awake!" demanded the mysterious voice.

Xavier came to a conclusion that the voice was the Judge's voice as he heard the Major's reply.

"Yes, sir." Major Lin instantly replied in a curt tone.

"You may lead them out."

"Yes, sir." Major Lin started to lead them out.

Major Lin led them out from a door which was unknown to them. They all quietly followed. When Major Lin stopped, everyone stopped alongside him. It was a bright and early morning.

"The private jet is going to arrive any minute now."

The group of youngsters started to ask questions and gossiped amongst themselves.

"All of the questions can wait until we're on the jet." Major Lin said with a tight smile.

And true to the Major's words, the loud noise of a jet landing filled their ears. Xavier didn't want to do this, he wanted answers. Xavier pondered whether or not he should stop the Major to ask questions. When everyone started boarding the jet, Xavier came to a decision. After all, his pride didn't allow him to just follow orders.

"Major." Xavier said as he reached him.

Everyone else hesitantly boarded the jet. Major turned to Xavier and raised an eyebrow.

"I have questions." Xavier voiced out.

"Ask away, young boy."

"Why would you bring us along with you? Is there any guarantee of us coming back alive? I'm sure the Judge hasn't suddenly thought of starting to do good deeds." He fired away. Xavier wasn't the only one who had these thoughts in mind, all of them did. But Scar didn't want to prolong this, he wanted to get this over with. Julian and Genevieve were too hesitant.

"Kid,—"

"Don't call me that again."

"Xavier, right? Xavier, the judge somehow believes that you are some help to me, absurd right? I tried to explain numerous times to him that you group of delinquents are of no help at all, but he thinks you are smart kids. Unbelievable," Major Lin shaking his head.

"We are smart. Don't underestimate me or my mates Major. And don't judge my maturity, you hold no right. I would've never joined you or given you the satisfaction of seeing me following orders if it were up to me."

Xavier's pride didn't allow him to get insulted like that. It was all about his pride. Everyone had someone in their lives while Xavier had no one. The only thing Xavier had was pride. It was his anchor. Only his friends could make him give in.

"Then prove it." The Major said with a smirk, his eyes holding mischief.

A silent moment passed between them as they stared at each other. It was clear to Xavier that the Major was challenging him.

'Challenge accepted.' Xavier thought to himself.

"Last question, whose voice was it back in the room?"

"The Judge's."

### **In the Jet**

In the jet, Genevieve and Julian started having an argument. Both of them wanted the window seat. Xavier told Genevieve to end the argument by sitting behind Julian, which was another window seat. Scar decided to sit with Julian to avoid further conflicts with Xavier. Xavier, far from everyone, sat at another window seat which was three seats apart from Genevieve. Once everyone settled, Major Lin explained briefly. "This jet belongs to the judge. He will be guiding us through this mission. We are going to America because they want help."

"Why ask for our help?" asked Julian.

"I don't know, you tell me."

"For obvious reasons, Julian has an IQ that probably no other 16-year-old has, Scar knows a lot about aircraft, Genevieve's hacking will come in handy and I have a unique skill of picking locks." Xavier boasted.

"Really? How would all this help the Americans?" The Major voiced his thoughts.

"That was exactly my question." Xavier said through gritted teeth, clearly irritated.

"Before I start our departure, I have some rules. Firstly, don't think of running away. You will only end up in more trouble. Secondly, don't try to contact anyone. If you tell anyone your location, serious action will be taken. Lastly, don't do or say anything unnecessary unless you're told to do so."

Everyone, in deep thought, pondered quietly to themselves as the Major went to the cockpit to start the departure.

"I'm hungry." Xavier heard Julian whisper to Genevieve.

"What about food? Any arrangements?" Xavier asked the Major loudly enough for the Major to hear.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"There's arrangement."

Xavier sighed, frustrated. Xavier didn't like indirect answers, he preferred straight and honest replies.

'Go through this for Genevieve.' Xavier told himself. 'And others as well.' He added to himself as an afterthought.

"It doesn't matter Xavier, I will just try to sleep."

Xavier clenched his fists, hard enough to draw blood. He loathed Major Lin for making Julian seem so helpless. After Julian was asleep, his head tipped to one side and his hands hung loose on both sides. Xavier noticed that Scar was on the verge of sleeping as well. His eyes then met Genevieve's for a long slow moment.

"Aren't you sleepy?"

The sudden question startled Genevieve. "No, are you?"

"No."

"Let's talk?"

Xavier shrugged. Genevieve moved to sit with Xavier.

"Look, Xavier. I understand that you are upset with me and Scar, but—"

"I don't need explanations Genevieve."

"Can you please hear me out?"

"Genevieve, I respect you. That's the only reason I agreed to come along. I want the same respect back."

Genevieve slid back down in her seat and slouched. She was starting to have second thoughts about this trip. They had a good nap of 5 hours, but it would be the last nap they would have for a long time

### **Present Time**

"This is reality." A deep voice boomed over the speakers.

"You'll pay for this." screamed back the tied up judge. "Let me out of these ropes will you all!"

Genevieve would've run to him to ask how he was, but she was scared to even move. Xavier didn't understand what to think, he was told that they had to go to America to steal documents ONLY.

"We are landing." Major Lin announced. "Xavier and Julian, come help me free the judge up"

Both obviously confused but followed orders and freed the judge up.

The judge quickly instructed, "Remember, if any of you turn against me, I'll blow this jet up. I have my men there as well, don't try to be smart."

Xavier asked, "Ok, but can you or Major Lin explain why you were tied up in the cargo bay and what is actually going on?. And is that guy in the speaker you Judge?"



“SHUT UP and SIT DOWN, we are landing! Our mission starts soon.”

Before the jet landed, Genevieve quickly went to sit with Xavier. She held his hand in a tight grip, as if it gave her comfort. Or maybe the other way round. Xavier looked at Julian and was surprised to see him handling it well. In reflex, Xavier raised an eyebrow with a smirk at Julian's bravery. Xavier shared a look with Scar only to find out he had the same reaction. Julian was laid back, deep in thought. Not in panic, pacing. Genevieve wasn't surprised, she was worried.

The judge ordered them to search for the NASA headquarters on the plane's computers. A classified file with the title “Mission Bravo Echo Houston” was all also given to them. Xavier began to understand what they were here for – to delete American Intelligence on the Chinese government's classified plans.

They stopped on a road, it was a dusty road. They had landed in a remote area. And after half an hour of impatient pacing and cursing, a truck stopped in front of them.

The Major gave the judge a questioning look, 'really?' He thought. 'We'll be going to the headquarters in this?'

Even Scar was shocked, his hazel eyes wide open in shock. His black hair whipping in the wind. The huge truck looked like it was about to break into pieces right then and there. Xavier barked out a laugh when the doors of the truck automatically opened. For a truck that looked almost done with, it sure was impressive inside. They entered the truck and gasps erupted from Julian and Genevieve. The car from the inside was beautiful. It was spacious or the white colored paint made it seem so.

Scar and Xavier just stared at it in silent awe.

"Are we really going to do it?" Julian snapped everyone out of the daze they were in.

"Of course not."

The Judge ordered, “ Stay focused! Does everyone understand the brief...”

“Bang” – a gunshot resonated the vehicle and everyone jumped. In moments, the judge turned into a mere memory. Xavier inhaled a sharp breath, this reminded Xavier of the time his alcoholic father killed his mother then ran off when he was sober. He heard Genevieve choke back a sob. Scar, stunned, just stared at the dead body.

"No!!!!" Julian wailed.

"What's this?!" The Major demanded.

A deep voice boomed over the speakers, "He defied me. I felt obligated to show you what'll happen if you defy me. There are guns installed in this truck."

The group didn't know what to do, Genevieve was crying in Xavier's arms while Julian and Scar were holding themselves up. The place didn't seem attractive anymore. Xavier felt like they were now locked up in a moving firing squad. The truck door suddenly opened again, someone dressed in all black slipped in, got the judge's body and threw it out. The man slowly turned back, stared right into every single one of their eyes and slipped out again.

The Major signaled them to keep calm and kept away from the cameras as he turned back around and took out a piece of paper and a pen. He started to map something out.

The Major started to whisper to himself, "Follow the protocol, you know this was going to happen. You've been briefed by the judge." Suddenly he grabbed Xavier by the shirt and screamed, “You set me up little punk, didn't you!”

Xavier was dazed and tried to release Major Lin's tight hold

"You set me up. I'm gonna kill you—"

Those were the last words he uttered and the Major went limp to the ground.

"NOOOO!!! What are you doing?" Scar bellowed, "What have we done you to...?"

Another SHOT fired.

Genevieve screamed as she clung onto Xavier tightly knowing that they might be next. But the bullet never fired. It was a deafening silence. The three of them on the floor of the truck, their legs couldn't hold them up anymore.

Xavier was trying to make sense of all this chaos and frantically wondered, "Why target us? Was there going to be another man to remove the now deceased Major and Scar? Who is that man in the speaker?"

Suddenly, the truck's door violently opened and soldiers barged in screaming, "Hands up now! Show me your hands!"

Julian collapsed in panic and fainted. One of the officers handcuffed Xavier first then Genevieve after. Xavier dropped his head and gave in and noticed the American Flag on one of the soldier's uniform. Julian was brought out on a stretcher. They were brought to a location unknown to them as they were blindfolded throughout this mission.

### In Jail Cell

Xavier was alone. He couldn't fathom what was happening to him.

"How is Genny doing? Is Julian alive? I knew I shouldn't have agreed to this?"

He put his hands on his face and wanted to cry but no tears came. His life had always been sad and his heart had grown cold over the years. He started shivering from the chilly air and put his hands under his arms to stay warm. When he did this he noticed a crinkly sound and reached into his chest pocket. It was a piece of paper. He unraveled it and realized it was Major Lin's map!

It read, "Phase 1 Complete; Phase 2: Mission HackNet." On the back of the paper was a detailed map of a military base with two red dots. Xavier soon realized that one dot represented where he was now and the other was the place he should get to.

"But how?" he wondered.

He looked at the map closer and saw a "XIX" at the very bottom of the paper. Soon he started to look for this "XIX" in his cell and found it right under where he was sitting. Xavier looked at it and pressed down.

The room magically projected a replica holographic image of himself sitting on the floor. The lights went out and the cell door opened. He quickly ran out and into a room that had its door open. Xavier shut it and the lights came back on.

He whispered, "Ah Major Lin, you clever man. Phase 2 to here I come"

# Of Dragons and Dreams

*Island School, Foong, Katya – 14*

It started with a dream. A dream of a serene place, unlike anything he had ever seen before. Rows of gleaming golden roof tiles, each end curling up towards the clear blue sky, sheltering sturdy brick-red pagodas. The faint smoky wooden smell of incense wafting out from behind the brass doors. Engraved into the middle was a swirling steel dragon, a staggering bright red ball stuffed tightly in its mouth. All of a sudden, the dragon leaped out from the doors. Fluttering its wings, it scooped him up from the ground and took to the skies.

Then... he was in the air, soaring through the skies. Cruising through the clouds. The wind gently caressing his face. Below him were mounds of sand dunes, carved into the sand were intricate patterns swirling in all sorts of directions. The dragon started scaling higher into the air. When he looked down again, the deserts had disappeared completely. Instead, there were snowy-white mountains planted on fields of luscious grass, stretching out for miles. The clouds below him merged together and the beautiful view of the mountains was gone. This time when he looked down, he saw not the home of nature, but the home of man. A golden castle, with shimmering silver crystals decorating the sides of the freshly polished walls. He shut his eyes tight. He felt the wings of the dragon being pulled from underneath him and he was no longer flying. He was falling. Falling all the way down. Into a vast, empty pit of nothingness.

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Floating sandy plains stretching on for miles into the endless horizon, ripples of sand snaking across the barren land. The air was parched, dry and very hot as if in an oven set to the highest temperature. The desert, almost inhabitable, yet with the occasional cactus and a nearby oasis; life is somehow sustained.

An enormous shadow loomed over the dreary bleakness, interrupting the desolate landscape. There he stood, auras of light radiating off him, casting a beacon of life in this wasteland. Propped on his back was a towering bamboo rucksack that hung over his well-built shoulders. Xuanzang trekked grimly towards a nearly dried-up oasis, threw his pack to one side and collapsed on a nearby rock. He cupped his hands together and lifted the cool water to his chapped lips. Etching forward to drink the little water left. Xuanzang hadn't drunk in days. The water slid down his aching throat, soothing and cooling it. He continued drinking, hungrily, greedily, fearful that this could be his last.

Finally, feeling satisfied, he continued on his journey, aimlessly roaming the desert, desperate to find even the smallest signs of life, all to no avail. Suddenly, he saw something that made stop dead in his tracks. Squinting into the distance, he saw a shapely figure, seemingly floating through the deserted plains. It was coming closer towards him. He prepared himself for a fight. The sandy mist started to clear and the mysterious figure came into his clear sight. He was taken aback. It was a young woman. Draped on her back was a pure white gown, dancing on her back to the tunes of the wind. This woman was unlike anyone he had ever laid eyes on before. She was absolutely beautiful. She flashed him a nervous smile with her pearly white teeth in between her painted lips. His pupils dilated. Without speaking, she beckoned him to follow her. As if in a dazed trance, he eagerly agreed. She took him to a nearby hut in the middle of the empty desert; the hut was made completely out of straw. The edges were frayed and torn apart; bits of straw were peeling off the sides. He followed her inside. The hut was cramped to the brim with unusual objects scattered everywhere. Golden chains, patterned wooden boxes, a large collection of watches and loose change of foreign money in odd places. In the corner of the cramped hut, sitting in a straw armchair sat a mysterious old man; presumably the woman's father. They both seemed incredibly welcoming, offering delicious treats everywhere in the hut.

The woman questioned him "What is a handsome young man doing out here alone in the middle of the Gobi desert?" Xuanzang smiled, "I am a Buddhist monk, I have been sent on a journey to Nanjing to uncover the true teachings of Buddhism." At the sound of this, both the hosts in the room perked up their ears. The woman raised her eyebrows and flashed her father a quick glance. He silently nodded. She continued, "I see, you must have been travelling for quite some time. Here, have some of this to help you relax." She passed him a flask containing a dark mysterious liquid. "It's Chinese wine. It'll help you... unwind. Drink it." She smiled her charming smile at him again. Dazed by her overwhelming beauty, he

willingly drank the whole flask down. Both the woman and her father smirked. Xuanzang set the glass down on a nearby wooden box. He grabbed his pack and got up to leave. "Well, you both have been extremely welcoming. But, I must leave now, my time is running out. Thank you again." The women sprung up immediately, "But Xuanzang, you just got here. You can't leave now." He whisked around. "How do you know my na..." He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence. Before everything turned black. Pitch black.

When he came to, he was laying on the sandy floor. Everything was a blur. He tried getting to his feet, but the dizziness in his aching head made him collapse again. He was trying to remember what had happened. Fragments of his memory had been shattered. All he could piece together was an image of this beautiful young woman. She had a small cottage in the desert. He had gone inside. There was a man there and...the wine. He had drunk the wine. There must have been something in the wine. He suddenly remembered his pack. Looking wildly around for it, he spotted it laying a few meters away from him. As he tore through the netting, desperate to check for the contents inside, he was already aware of his fate. He had been robbed. The golden coins, the only form of money he had left, were gone. Yet fortunately for him, they hadn't taken the most valuable thing. The scrolls, each one wrapped in a silky golden cloth still remained fully intact. With a sigh, he hoisted his pack onto his muscular shoulders and set foot into the stark unknown, blissfully unaware of all the remaining dangers that were to come.

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The air became noticeably cooler. A strong gust of wind caused the musty grey cloth draped on his back to violently flap against him. Xuanzang had hiked for what felt like an eternity. His stomach, growling with anguish and pain, the muscles in his legs tensing with torture. All the little energy he had left slowly oozing out of his shivering body. He tightened the cloth over his shoulders and desperately peered out into the horizon. In the distance, peaks of chalky white poked out from a hazy mist. The milky clouds in the glistening cerulean sky parted to reveal a heavenly sight.

Expanding over an infinite array of verdant meadows, stood immense mountains draped in blankets of pure snowy white. The mountainous regions were enriched with life in every corner. A herd of mountain goats was obediently trotting through the grasslands. The pearly fur on their bulky bodies blending in with the vast mountains behind them. Xuanzang stood there speechless, marveling at the exquisite sight that lay in front of him. He was suddenly hit with a sense of déjà-vu and was taken aback. Xuanzang had encountered these sights before but where?

He began the long walk towards the foot of the mountain. He was still in awe, shooting glances left and right as he passed through this picturesque haven. After plowing through thick bushes of grass, he finally reached the bottom. Gazing up, he spotted a small trail, chiseled into the middle of the mountain. He clambered onto the first of the unsteady rocks near his feet, using every free limb to tightly grasp onto anything he could take hold of. Xuanzang was about a few hundred meters up the side of the cliff when his arms began to tire. The heavy pack on his aching back was nervously creaking with every inch he climbed. He glanced down.

The mountain goats were now little specks prancing around in a blanket of green. His heart began pounding. Droplets of sweat tearing down his glistening face. "You've got to focus. Don't look down." He told himself. He swiveled his arm around to grab onto the next rock. He felt the rock slip out from under his grasp, making him lose his grip. His heart dropped. Xuanzang was desperately clinging on for dear life. The rock fell from underneath his arm right off the side of the mountain. It landed with a huge clatter, exploding into a million tiny pieces upon impact. With one final pull, he hoisted himself up onto the flat trail. He thrust himself onto his back and lay there motionless, panting with fear. Xuanzang heaved an enormous sigh of relief. He was finally safe.

For now.

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The clear blue sky had now been completely engulfed by a thick jet-black quilt, interrupted by numerous twinkling stars. Xuanzang was halfway into the trail, which dangerously skirted on the edge of the mountains. The awe of the scenery from a few hours earlier had made him forget his starvation. Yet now, he was hungrier than ever before. He was salivating at the thought of a delicious roast duck, his favorite delicacy. Suddenly, the smell of the smoky crispy skin wafted into his nose. Could it be? Was he dreaming? Roast duck? He could almost taste the juices in his dry, parched mouth. The smell was getting stronger. He looked up and realized he wasn't imagining it. The narrow trail had opened into a luxurious space of land, carved deeply into the middle of the mountain. There it was. A golden castle.

The sounds of laughter and the faint clinking of glasses of wine could be heard through the thick golden walls of the castle. Xuanzang picked up his pace and marched over to the doors. He grasped the metal lion door knocker and pounded on the door several times. The laughter stopped. "Who's there?" A deep gruff voice called from inside. "A fellow traveler," Xuanzang responded. He could hear scuffling and then the stomping of footsteps, coming closer towards him. The door opened with a jolt and a large man, dressed in silky red robes shimmering with bits of gold, stood glaring at him. "What do you want?" "Sir, I am a Buddhist monk sent from Sichuan and I am on a journey to Nanjing to uncover the real origins of Buddhism. I have been traveling for days and I am extremely in need of some food. Would you please be ever so kind to spare me some?" Xuanzang pleaded. The man stroked his bushy beard, "A Buddhist monk, you say? Hmm, alright come in. You came at a perfect time, we're celebrating with a big feast."

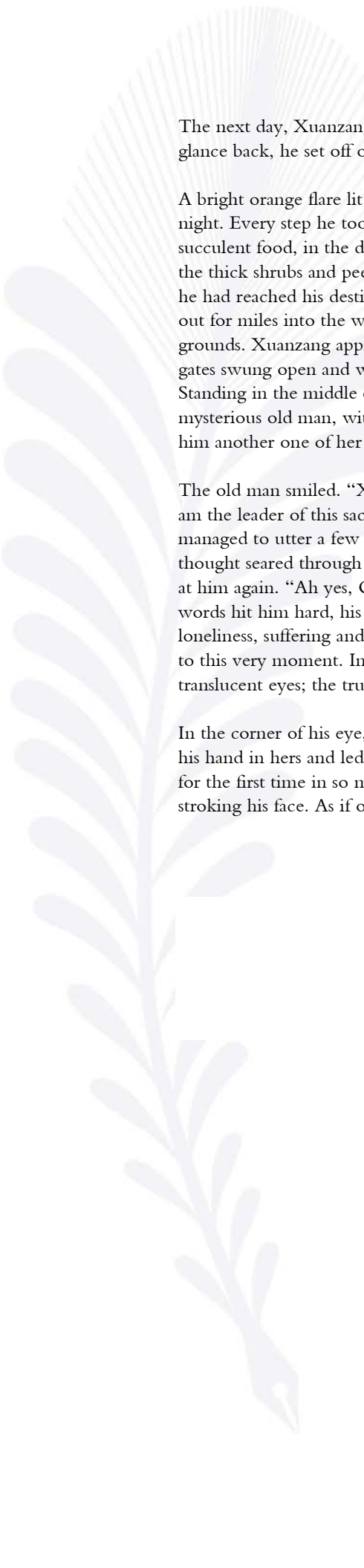
Xuanzang bowed and entered inside. The golden palace was enormous. Crystal chandeliers hung from the decorated ceiling, which was patterned with paintings depicting the twelve Chinese zodiac animals. The marble floor was carpeted with a large silky bright red rug, stretching all throughout the enormous castle. Placed in the center of the rug was the longest dining table Xuanzang had ever laid eyes on. It was filled to the brim with steaming plates of hot food. All sorts of smells were swirling in the air. The loud chatter of a whole array of guests, dressed in formal silky red robes filled the atmosphere with joy and life. Placed at the end of the dining table was a gleaming golden throne, bejeweled with shimmering, shining crystals, alighting the whole room. Xuanzang was gaping in awe. The man who opened the door for him earlier, bellowed out to him, "It's lovely, isn't it? My name is Qu Wentai and I am the ruler of this kingdom. Come on now, let us eat."

Xuanzang feasted on delicacies of utter perfection. From a sizzling roasted duck to the crispy skin of a ginger soy fish, all the flavors melting in his mouth, filling his empty stomach up to the brim. Qu Wentai was very hospitable. "You may stay here and enjoy my food for as long as you wish, on one condition... You must educate my scholars here, everything you know about Buddhism." Xuanzang eagerly nodded. "Very well, my guards will take you up to your chambers." That night, Xuanzang drifted into a deep sound sleep, the first time in a very long time.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, he was rudely awoken by a loud constant pounding on his door. A guard had come to inform him of his daily Buddhism teachings, beginning in a few minutes. Xuanzang wearily dressed himself and glided down the carpeted stairs to a large hall where the scholars were awaiting him. He began teaching them all his knowledge of Buddhism, patiently answering questions. As night fell, the King invited him to dine with him and another ravishing dinner was laid out in front of him once again. He quickly scoffed everything down and went to bed satisfied and content. He was awoken early the next morning and the day began again. Days became weeks. Weeks became months. Xuanzang was getting anxious. He had a journey to complete. He couldn't waste any more time in this luxurious castle.

Xuanzang made up his mind; that night at dinner, he announced his plans to leave the next day. Qu Wentai did not take it well. "How dare you! I offer you delicious food, a comfy bed to sleep in and you cannot even repay me with your knowledge! You will not leave, you must stay here and educate my scholars!" The guards shifted closer to the doors, clutching their golden spears tighter in their hands. On hearing this pronouncement, Xuanzang felt miserable, but he knew he had to stand his ground. "Thank you very much for your hospitality, I am forever in your debt. But I have a mission to complete. For how am I supposed to be a teacher of Buddhism, if I don't even know the origins of Buddhism myself." Xuanzang firmly stated. The King sighed, "Very well, I understand the importance of this quest to you. Stay for one more day, finish up your teachings, you may leave tomorrow night." Xuanzang bowed gracefully and headed back up to his chambers.





The next day, Xuanzang left at nightfall, the golden doors slamming tightly behind him. With a wistful, final glance back, he set off on the trail to complete his journey once again.

A bright orange flare lit up the dreary sky with a warm glow. Xuanzang had hiked all the way through the night. Every step he took leading him further away from the comfort of the magnificent palace and its succulent food, in the distance, he spotted a glinting light through the bushes. Curiously, he tore through the thick shrubs and peered in. There it was. The sacred temple. Finally, after so many months of traveling, he had reached his destination. It was everything he imagined it to be, and more. Red pagodas stretching out for miles into the warm horizon, the soothing sound of chiming bells echoing throughout the temple grounds. Xuanzang approached the wooden gates cautiously. Without warning, as if expecting him, the gates swung open and what he saw next stunned him.

Standing in the middle of the doorway was the same beautiful young woman and next to her was the mysterious old man, with an enigmatic look on his face. “Surprised to see us again?” The woman flashed him another one of her charming smiles. “What are you doing here?” He was speechless.

The old man smiled. “Xuanzang, welcome to the Buddhism temple of Nanjing. My name is Shi-LuJiang, I am the leader of this sacred temple. This is my beautiful assistant, MeiLeng.” Shocked, Xuanzang only managed to utter a few words, “You were the ones who stole from...” But before he could finish, a flash of thought seared through his brain. “And Qu Wentai?” he whispered hoarsely, heart racing. ShiLujiang smiled at him again. “Ah yes, Qu Wentai. How is my old friend? Was he as hospitable as he always is?” These words hit him hard, his head reeling, spinning. But he finally understood. All those months of hardship, loneliness, suffering and, of course, temptation. It had all been a test! Everything had been a test, leading up to this very moment. In that instance, Xuanzang saw it, as clear as the beauty radiating from MeiLeng’s translucent eyes; the true meaning of not only Buddhism, but of life itself. Perseverance.

In the corner of his eye, he saw MeiLeng gracefully moving towards him with her brilliant smile. She took his hand in hers and led him outside the wooden gates towards the open ground. He shut his eyes, at peace for the first time in so many months. Suddenly, he felt himself soaring through the sky, the wind softly stroking his face. As if on the back of a beautiful dragon... as if in a dream.

# The Untold Truth

*Island School, Gui, Steven – 14*

**S**tones crumbled underneath my feet, I looked down, the fog made it almost impossible to tell how deep the valley was. “Guys be careful, try to stay calm and don’t mess around,” I said to my fellow companions. I tried to stay calm but thoughts raced through my head, most were negative and made me reconsider my choices. But now I knew that there would be no going back, we had traveled too far for that so we had to keep moving. I was afraid, mostly for my friends, each of my fellow companions all has deep connections with me and I don’t know if they remember the first times we met, but I know I would never forget.

Just about two to three years ago I was still a monk, working in a temple in Chang’an. I decided to leave due to the rumors of sacred Buddhist texts in India. So despite the emperor's strict ban on travel, I decided to set off on my treacherous journey. On my first few months of my journey, while crossing Qilian mountain range, I stumbled on the monkey king. At that time he was still trapped under the mountain of five elements and had been free for over five hundred years. In the end, I decided to set him free and offered to let him join me on my pilgrimage to the west. He was a huge help and later on that day he was the one that protected me against an army of men no less than a hundred, sent by the emperor to punish me for my illegal travels.

The one behind the monkey king would be the talking pig. At that time I first met him he was homeless and he had no real purpose in life after being banished to the mortal world for courtship with the moon goddess. After he decided to join my pilgrimage, he became a reliable fighter and a good friend

Behind him would be the river troll we met one day by Flowering Sands River. At first, he threatened us, but after the monkey king and the talking pig subdued him, I learned about his terrible past and he became a good friend and our friendship improved with each following day

Then there is Yulong the dragon, who was actually sentenced to death the first time we met him, however, I was able to save him. Now he uses his morphing abilities to morph into the horse that I sometimes ride. He usually stays in this form until I tell him otherwise.

Together we had traveled a long way to reach our destination and to this day we are still traveling, on the way we have faced many terrors, most of them being demons who want to eat me for my flesh which has the power to grant the consumer immortality.

“Xuanzang?”

“Yes, Monkey King?”

“Isn’t that the city, Turpan?” asked the Monkey King.

“Yes, it seems so” I replied.

As we neared the village, its limestone towers and ancient buildings greeted us. Finally, when we arrived at the sturdy iron gates, to our surprise the person who was waiting for us was none other than the Empress herself. At first, I was rather confused, and nervous because I knew that there would be consequences if the emperor ever found out that I had traveled without his permission.

“Good Evening, your highness, what a pleasure it is seeing you here,” I said with the most confident voice I had, trying my best not to show any fear.

“Yes, I suppose” replied the Empress in a posh voice.

The empress started to walk towards the palace, gesturing for us to follow. Seeing that it was rather late and it would be rather rude to disobey the empress, followed her towards the marvelous golden palace.

As we entered the palace, noticing that there was a huge banquet set up, the talking pig ran as fast as he could towards the table. Thinking that it wasn’t meant for us I signaled for the talking pig to stop, but to my surprise, no guards went to stop him and I soon realized that maybe it was for us. Too hungry to even think me and the rest of the group started chomping down the food, it seemed like we hadn’t eaten for days (which was true).

Seeing that we were rather hungry, the Empress sat on her throne and waited for us to finish. I rose my head, full and satisfied, but also a bit suspicious. While we were eating even the monkey king thought that there was something fishy going on. He even tried to warn me but I didn’t really think that it was that big of a deal because I had known the emperor for a long time and he had always done nice things for me time to time.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why have you made this feast for us?” I asked.

“I had this meal made because I knew you guys must have traveled a long way to get here” replied the empress smiling.

After everyone had finished their meals, they led us to our sleeping quarters. Everyone was so tired that we all fell asleep.

“Whats going on?” I asked

A stream of sunlight hit my face, my body was very sore and secured upon a wooden beam of some sort. Then someone came into the room. It was the empress, at first I was really confused, but then it all started to make more and more sense. Just then, what seemed like the empress soon transformed into a demon.

“Oh, did you not expect this,” said the demon in a high-pitched voice. “Did you really think that the empress would be this kind and generous to a bunch of outlaws”

“Nope, I always had a feeling that this was a trap” I replied calmly. “Since you are going to kill me anyway, why don't you tell me who your leader is?”

Looking a bit agitated it said “Fine, you really want to know?”

“I was hired by the emperor, after he heard that you had left the temple and broken his ban on travel he became furious”

No surprise there, I thought, that might just explain why some of the past demons wanted to kill me that much.

The demon carried on “You see the emperor made me and my gang a promise of unthinkable riches in return of your head” “So we spread out across China searching for you” “But I guess our hunts ending, because there is no way I’m letting you slip away like you did when my brother caught you”

I gulped, this was getting more and more intense . The demon grabbed one of the many knives laying on the side table and started sharpening it. I started to sweat as I saw my reflection on the smooth silver knife.

In the distance, through the semi-transparent windows, I could see a shape in the distance, no bigger than the size of a pea. I squinted my eyes hoping to see better, it was the monkey king. I didn’t know what to feel, “did my friends just leave me?”, “Do they even know that I’m in trouble?”, “Will they ever come and save me?”. Then the demon stopped sharpening the knife and slowly started to walk closer and closer towards me. Just when he was inches away from me, the door crashed down. It turned out it was just the monkey king and the talking pig, they had come to save me and quickly took down the evil demon with one mighty swoop. Baffled, I said “I thought that you guys had left without me”

“We would never do that,” said the talking pig,

“But I saw you guys out the window, I thought you guys were miles away,” I said, pointing out the window.

“Oh that was our decoy” replied the Monkey King.

So with that done, we were ready to head back on the road.

As we came closer and closer towards the border, we began to see a huge mountain range separating us from India.

Seeing that there was no clear way to climb over the huge mountain range the talking pig said “Maybe we could circle around it by going through the middle east”

“But that would mean that we would have to take a massive departure and who knows, maybe even add a couple of years more to our trip” I replied a bit agitated.

In the end, seeing that there really wasn’t anything we could do to get over the mountains that seemed to stretch into heaven, we decided to listen to the talking pig and circle around the massive row of mountains.

Finally, after coming to a consensus, we took around an extra two hours figuring out our new path to India through the wild middle east.

I thought we were making a huge gamble since I had already planned most of the trip to India and I was very unsure of going another way because we would be walking into unknown territories, but in the end I was still pretty optimistic about the trip because I knew that we would be able to persevere through almost any challenge.

On we marched back into the Gobi desert of Inner Mongolia, the sand scrapped against my face like a thousand little blades, water was quickly running out and the situation began to feel unbearable. It continued like this for days with no sign of ending. Then one day monkey said, “ Xuanzang, look!”.

“What going on Monkey?” I replied

“There is an oasis around 2 kilometers from here”

I grabbed my telescope hoping to get a better view and to my surprise, there actually was an oasis. Everyone was so relieved by the sight of water,

“Everyone, drink as much as you can” I shouted “We might not be as lucky tomorrow”

Months had gone by until we had finally made it to Jalalabad city, we were getting closer and closer to India. As we began to approach the city, monkey said: "Maybe we should go in disguise since we are outlaws now". We all thought it was a great idea and began to think of possible disguises when we finished it was almost impossible to tell that we were our former selves. When we finally mustered up the courage to go into the city, no one even noticed us. Flyers and posters were everywhere, with our faces with a wanted sign and a grant if we ever got caught.

"Are you kidding me?" said Monkey "How come I am worth a thousand yuan less than the talking pig?"

"It's because I am more valuable than you" Pig replied proudly

"But you're a pig, I've done way worse things than you" Monkey exclaimed, "You know where I got my stick?"

"The junkyard?" said Pig laughing at his own joke.

"My stick was one of the columns of the Dragon Kings Kingdom" Monkey yelled.

Everyone gasped, Monkey looked around, not realizing that people were overhearing their argument. "He's the Monkey King?", "That's not possible", "And that's they talking pig!", were just some of the chatter in the crowd. It took them some time to realize what was going on and by that time I and my gang were already a mile outside of the village.

"Well thanks for blowing our cover Monkey" I shouted, "You've ruined our plan and now we have nothing to eat and drink, thanks to you!" For the rest of the night, everyone remained silent, I could slowly feel the tension between me and the Monkey King rise.

The next day, as we were walking down a stone-paved road, we saw a poor homeless girl by the side of the road selling apples. With kindness in my values, I decided to go to the girl and buy a couple of apples. I reached into my pocket and took out all the cash I had left, I stared at my hands in my hands were five rusted bronze coins and two silver coins. "Thirty yen," I thought to myself, "Have I already spent so much?". I took one of the bronze coins, "How many apples can I get with five yen?" I said.

"Sir, five yen would get you seven apples," she said back.

"Then I would like to have four apples please"

"Sure thing" She replied as she reached behind and when she turned around she had four beautiful apples that sparkled in the sunlight. Then she reached into her pocket for change.

"No, no, you keep the change," I said gesturing for her to stop.

"Wow thank you kind sir" she replied blushing.

"Don't you worry about it, it seems like you needed it"

Later on we continued walking, soon we were in the middle of a field, a herd of horses pranced by, the view was almost fictional. Then, unexpectedly one of the baby horses tripped and it fell flat on the ground and it couldn't stand up. Seeing that, its mum stopped prancing and tried to help it stand up. After a few tries, it seemed like the horse would never stand up again, so its mum decided to separate from the herd and stay with its foal. The moment was so emotional that the monkey king burst into tears. I could see that Yulong was rather down, so I decided to ask what was wrong

"What wrong Yulong, you feeling ok?"

"Oh, it's just that after seeing what the horse did, I feel kind of homesick" he replied

"Then why don't you go home, I think that we would be able to handle most of the challenges that come our way"

"You sure?"

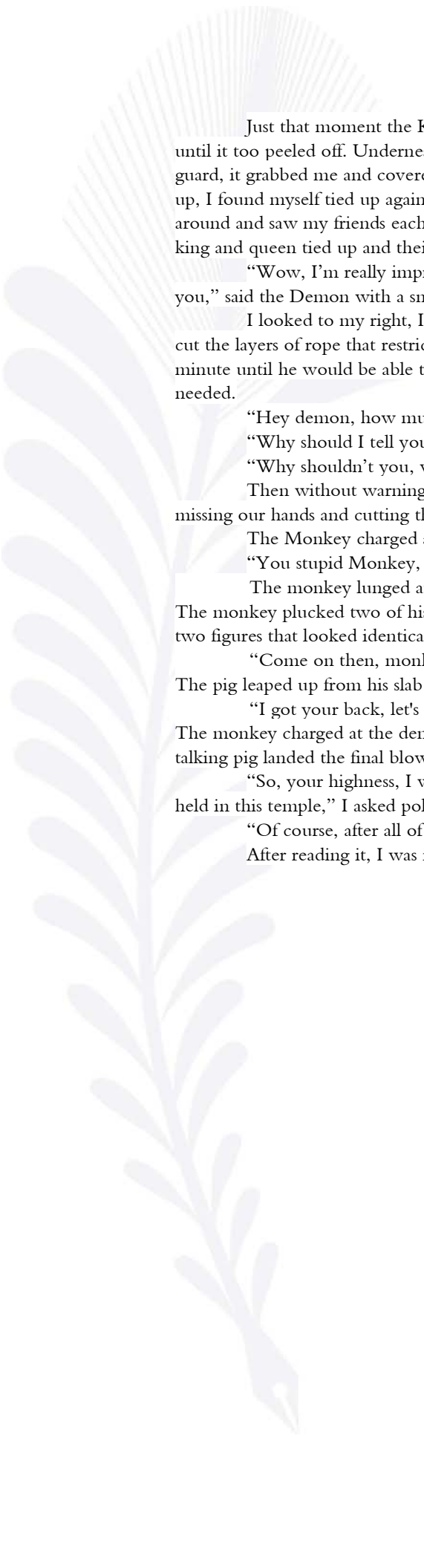
"Yeah, and I can always call for you if we ever need more firepower"

So I told everyone that Yulong had decided to take some time off and spend some time with his family.

A few months later, we had finally arrived. The Badami Cave Temples look even more impressive in person. I wasn't the only one that felt relieved that after around four years of traveling we had finally made it to the temple. As we neared the temple I began to feel very excited, ideas filled my head, ideas of what wisdom the scripts might hold within them. At the same time, I began to wonder what made the scripts much more sacred than the scripts back at home. As we reached the temple more and more guards appeared, then I started to realize how special and separate the scripts really were. When we entered the main temple, King Pulakeshin II greeted us kindly and congratulated us on making the trip to India. I began to tell him about my reasons for coming to India and what I was hoping to see after making it to India. "So may we be allowed to see the sacred scripts your highness?"

"Certainly Xuanzang, you deserve to see it" He replied

"Wait, how do you know my name?"



Just that moment the King began to transform, his skin peeled off and his head began to expand until it too peeled off. Underneath all that skin was another demon, seeing that it had totally caught me off guard, it grabbed me and covered my face with its huge slimy hand until I fell unconscious. When I woke up, I found myself tied up against a stone slab on the wall. The smell of rotten flesh filled the room, I looked around and saw my friends each tied up in a specially made trap. In the corner of the room, I saw the real king and queen tied up and their mouth stuffed with a piece of bread.

“Wow, I’m really impressed Xuanzang, you managed to evade capture from my brothers, haven’t you,” said the Demon with a smirk. “Well this demon won’t let you escape that easily”

I looked to my right, I could clearly see that Monkey was using his cuff knife to slowly but surely cut the layers of rope that restricted his movement and held him in place. I knew he needed at least a solid minute until he would be able to cut through so I knew that it would be up to me to buy him the time he needed.

“Hey demon, how much exactly are they paying you for the capturing and killing of us?” I said.

“Why should I tell you” replied demon

“Why shouldn’t you, we’re going to get killed by you either way”

Then without warning, Monkey jumped into the air and threw three knives, each of them barely missing our hands and cutting the rope that held us to the slates.

The Monkey charged at the demon, raising his stick. The demon, caught by surprise, yelled:

“You stupid Monkey, how did you escape from my trap! That’s impossible.”

The monkey lunged at him, the demon ducked down.

The monkey plucked two of his hairs, whispered some words of enchantment and out of nowhere appears two figures that looked identical to him.

“Come on then, monkey, show me your true power!”

The pig leaped up from his slab and landed next to the monkey.

“I got your back, let’s take him down once and for all.”

The monkey charged at the demon once again, this time he was only acting as a distraction, while the talking pig landed the final blow. The demon vanished in a cloud of smoke.

“So, your highness, I was wondering if I could have permission to read the sacred Buddhists that are held in this temple,” I asked politely

“Of course, after all of your service you deserve to read it”.

After reading it, I was inspired to go back as a changed man, as a better version of myself.



# The Origin of the Three Demons

*Island School, Lai, Ka Chun – 14*

SHOWERS of rain fell from the night sky, sudden breezes of wind blew against the monastery. Making the windchimes jingle a melancholic tune. A monk dressed in an orange robe with shaved hair, wearing a wooden bracelet and carrying a book of the Buddha was meditating inside. His mind and body were transported to another dimension, soul and spirit with the Buddha. He suddenly sensed a shift in the air, something was different, he could sense it from afar. There was a deep and overpowering voice that cannot be resisted. The Buddha had appeared, he spoke to him, “Xuanzang, there is a quest that you have to confront, use your wisdom, leadership and conscience for this quest. You must find and release these 3 trapped spirits that are scattered around the country, one in the southern village of Guangzhou, one in the western Nanjing temple, one in the eastern hills of Jiangsu, make them trust you and follow you on a perilous journey to find spiritual fulfilment and your courage. I trust you, Xuanzang.”

The thunder rolled in, a spark of a bright bolt hit the ground and shattered the concentration of Xuanzang. He deeply exhaled and opened his eyes. His mind was set, but he was no fighter, he couldn't possibly free these spirits and make them his disciples. In his heart, he knew that he was a coward.

Though, he had to do it, disobeying the Buddha was the meaning of ignorance. Xuanzang thought of the Buddha's words, “I trust you.”, that lit a fire in his heart. He was determined not to fail the Buddha and set foot on his quest.

After a few hours of rest, and walking across the plains of China. He finally arrived at the village of Guangzhou. The turf was soft to the touch and slightly wet, the luscious grass glaring because of the rainfall. The sun rolled west, lighting up the village, temporarily magnificent in the light. It was small but bustling, houses were made out of oak wood, very stable. Fields of crop and rice were scattered across the village, with gigantic mountains surrounding it. A striking view.

Xuanzang walked towards the village until a woman came sprinting and yelling, “Monster!” , tufts of clouds started to cover up the rising sun, dimming the entire village. Xuanzang was petrified. Slowly, he stepped towards the nearest house and asked an old, wrinkled skin lady about it, she replied, “Legend has it that this demon was a normal human being, a father of a family. Until he heard of the Hidden Treasure buried not far away from here. He became obsessed with it and possessed by greed. He went on threatening other villagers to tell him where this treasure is, he went as far as slaughtering a family of four. He turned insane, in the end, he was hanged near the river. Villagers thought he was dead, but years later, children started going missing, husbands and wives searched the whole village but only to find their children's bodies in the lake. Now the demon rises again with vengeance.” Xuanzang was even more unnerved. The old lady replied, “You're a monk right.” Xuanzang stared blankly at the wall, his brain trying to contemplate the story. The old lady snapped, “Hey!” Xuanzang replied, “Yes, I'm a monk, my mission is to release these trapped spirits.” She nodded her head, “Rescue that spirit, he desperately needs your help.”

The river was churning, rumbling. Waves of water rippled throughout the area, shaking the earth with it. Whoosh and then a splash! The demon roared, his raucous voice pulses through the village. Letting them know he has awakened, but Xuanzang noticed the roar had a whimper to its end, a sign that a spirit was trying to escape. The demon's eyes had shades of hunger, despair and a hint of desperation, his skin scaly and shiny radiating the sun's light, his body like a killer shark and his teeth as sharp as a newly smelted double-edged sword.

Xuanzang sat down in front of the beast, confronting it with all his will. He focused on his spirit and started to meditate, humming a few of the Buddha's words to free this spirit. The monster started to swim to him, hypnotized. In Xuanzang's mind he concentrated on this soul, he felt his pain. The monster was now trapped in Xuanzang's conscience, struggling to get out, grasping at the water. Hitting the lake to create attention, like a drowning man. With one final prayer from the monk, a sharp light emitted in front of him.

A field of light surrounded the monster, then a quick bang, it vanished. On the surface only a floating man, who was naked and vulnerable. Everyone cheered civilians, parents, children's even the elderly. One woman rushed out of the crowd and hugged Xuanzang, thankful for what he has done. The monk still had a man he

had to save, he swam all the way to the man and resuscitated him. He gasped at the air and tried standing up, but his body unable to adapt, collapsing on the ground.

There was a loud scream from the crowd, "Kill him! Why are you saving him, you should have let him drown." Xuanzang replied, "He has suffered enough! The pain he was in, it was tormenting. You villagers will not need to care for him, I will take him in as my disciple. You will be free from this monster."

Reluctantly, the villagers agreed and said no more, they gave the man some spare clothes, a spear for protection and a place to sleep for the night.

Xuanzang sat next to the man, thinking something to say so that he could follow him as a disciple. The fire was crackling from the furnace, lights were dim, by then dusk had set.

He woke up from a dreaded nightmare. His memories of his past, all the bloodshed combined into one nightmare which shocked his entire body. A pool of sweat covered his body. He glanced across the room, finding a monk sitting on a chair, the monk said, "What's your name?" He froze, trying to search through his brain, finding his name. He replied, "Sha Wujing".

Xuanzang said, "I have freed you from the demon's grasp Sha Wujing, you are now purified, but need redemption from the sins you have committed. My name is Xuanzang, follow me and in the Buddha's steps to redeem yourself and to find peace in your inner self. We would be travelling to the west Nanjing temple. I hope that you can accept this offer and help me on this journey." Sha Wujing considered. He remembered that he was a disgraced man, a man that desired greed more than anything. Now, resurrected, he wanted to be a changed man. Sha Wujing replied, "Yes, I will be one of your disciples on this journey."

They left the village at dawn, packed their essentials and brought their weapons. They trekked through the forest of Nanhua, encountering countless amounts of mystical animals, exotic scented flowers and towering trees.

Then, they hiked up the mountains of Nanjing. They looked towards the horizon, the sun was glimmering at its brightest, presenting nature at its finest. The rivers, waterfalls, seas, mountains and hills. The elements of both earth and water conjuring together to form a spectacular view. Birds, eagles were soaring in the air, adding life to the magnificent scenery, in the distance laid the Nanjing temple, shimmering with all its glory, forming a masterpiece of a scene.

Sha Wujing's face was covered with sweat, tired from all the walking. He reminded himself of his family, how they told him to push through a challenge, no matter how hard it is. How they supported him when he was in toughest days. The love that they gave to him, that he didn't give back. He always took things for granted. After discovering that the treasure had existed, his mind poisoned. His heart changed, the money was intoxicating him every day, corrupting his soul. After a few months, he was turning insane, his loved ones could not bear his behaviour, so they left him. There he was, alone, depressed, driven insane. Turned to the demon he was before. Though now, he has the willpower to change, the resurrection and freedom was a turning point for him, he will never go back to the demon he once was, ever again.

After an hour of navigating, they finally arrived at the temple, it was not as big Xuanzang thought. A standard temple, with drawings of legendary dragons and at the front door stood two intimidating animal statues. Xuanzang knew this temple well. Inside it was a demon, a fierce and strong monster that was originally a brave and courageous soldier named Zhu Bajie. He had fought heroically serving his own kingdom in pride, but after the war had ended, he was made useless. He started drinking and eating non-stop, filling himself with his own gluttony and rage. He was always dreaming about the adrenaline of war, how he wants to go back on the field, how his chances going back were ripped away. That is what made him furious, he unleashed his anger towards his family, in the end hurting himself in the process, and died horrifically. Then, becoming a demon.

Xuanzang said, "Be careful, Sha Wujing, the demon here is very violent. His anger cannot be underestimated, his powers are incredibly strong." He nodded his head and they went into the temple, they were immediately hit by the stench that was so atrocious and vile fainting was almost inevitable, but they stood still and sturdy. Out of the silhouette casted by the fireplace came the demon, holding a sharp, pointed rake. He looked like an ordinary human, but his eyes stared right towards your soul. He showed a creepy smile that crawled into your heart. He was ready to reap the souls out of them. Xuanzang and Sha Wujing

were ready, Sha Wujing attacked first, hitting the gut of the demon, only to be retaliated. He dodged and weaved past his rake, he attacked his back, hitting it with a force similar to a thousand tonnes. But there was no crack heard. The demon returned with a swipe and Sha Wujing fell down instantly. Xuanzang took this chance to take away his rake with his bare hands, holding onto the weapon himself. He was not much of a fighter, but for the sake of saving his friend, he had to. He raised the rake and swiped it down his face and into his body, disfiguring it but only to unveil his grey, rough and hard belly, his skin wrinkled and battered. The demon unleashed his true form, he turned into a rhino and rammed Xuanzang into the wall, breaking his ribs. Sha Wujing got up from the ground and grabbed his spear, he shouted a battle cry and bludgeoned it into the demon's neck, piercing the tissue. Thump! He fell down onto the ground, momentarily unconscious.

After that, Xuanzang sat down, meditated to call out for the Buddha's help. Xuanzang's wounds were healing significantly fast, then he used his mind to find the spirit trapped inside the demon. With one lift of a hand, a blinding light struck the temple. The rhino was gone, what was left was a muscular man, wounded but still alive and breathing.

Xuanzang summoned his healing powers and given it to the muscular man, his wounds slowly disappeared. The man gasped, his eyes locked on to Xuanzang and said, "Who are you?" He replied, "My name is Xuanzang and I am a monk. I am on a quest to find my three disciples that will help me throughout this journey. The Buddha tells me that you are one of them. You were a great warrior Zhu Bajie, you have served your kingdom well, but it's time to atone for your sins. Follow me on my journey and honour will naturally come to you." Zhu Bajie reflected on his past, bit by bit he woke pieces of his memories, reminding him of the blood of his family that had fallen onto his own hands, regretting everything. He said, "Thank you, I accept this offer. It's time for me to change."

Xuanzang said, "That's good, now we have to embark on the treacherous journey to the eastern hills of Jiangsu so that we can find our final disciple." He felt great saying that, it was almost as if he was now a complete leader, a commander with no fear.

They walked out of the temple, night had set in. Under a sky of midnight velvet, there were stars glittering merely into existence, in the sky forming a certain constellation, the moon illuminated the grassy plains which created an entirely new landscape compared to daylight. The lake glistened, reflecting the luminescence and peacefulness of the dark night.

When they arrived at Jiangsu, the sky was concealed by clouds, some of them as big as the land, as black as a crow, rumbling inside. In front of them was never-ending rows of mountains. Zhu Bajie thought, a barren landscape, perfect for a prison. Then he recalled his memory and said, "This is the place where we fought in the Spring War, we lost 10,000 men in this territory, needing to retreat back to our defence lines to call for backup. The enemy had a demi-god on their side, a powerful and mischievous, monkey changeling, who wiped out our entire army in one hit. His name is Emperor Wukong. Some people said that he even tried to challenge the Buddha to become the ultimate king and ruler of the world. But he was defeated and now trapped here in a cave, powerless and eager to escape. Isn't that right Xuanzang?" Xuanzang replied, "Let's find out."

After a few miles of walking, they heard a noise, a whimper calling out for help. It came from the hole in behind them, they tracked back and looked inside. It was Emperor Wukong, a powerless monkey with dishevelled hair, he looked up and snickered, "How wonderful that the Buddha has sent me guests!" "Are you here to make fun of me?" Xuanzang replied, "Emperor, I'm going to make you a deal, you either serve me to regain your freedom or stay in this prison for another few centuries." The emperor laughed, unveiling a cunning smile, "Why don't you just set me free, I won't do anything to hurt you, after all, you helped me." Xuanzang was not buying it, he was clearly annoyed.

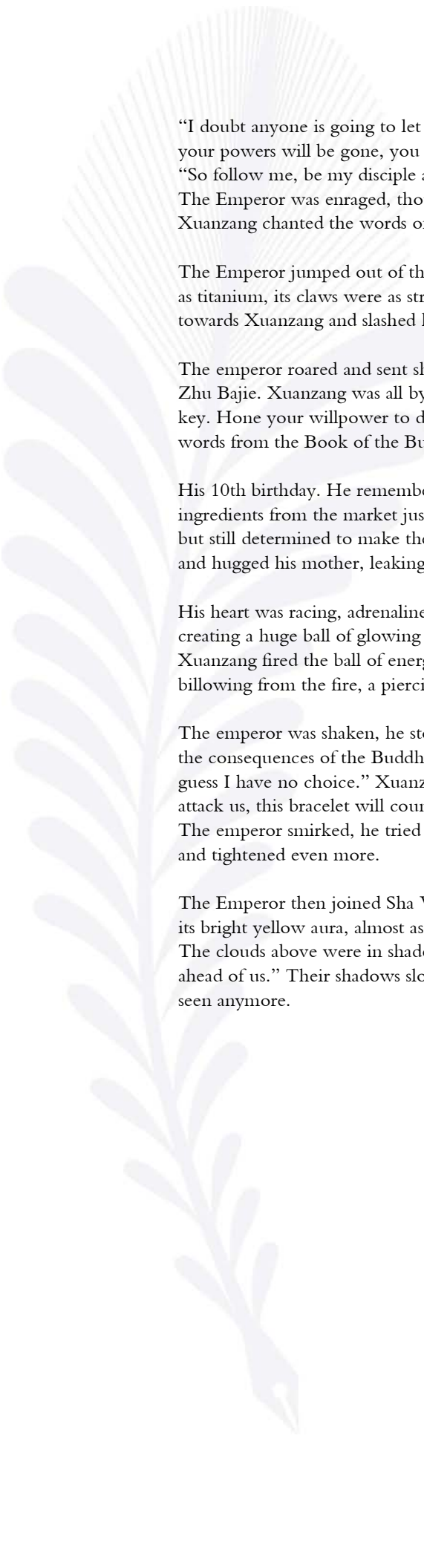
He said, "Well, why can I believe you."

"If you let me free, I will serve you for free, with no charge at all. It's a win-win situation."

"And if I don't"

"Oh. Once I get out I will tear your family apart, one by one, until you are left, then you will die too!"

Xuanzang was unfazed.



“I doubt anyone is going to let you free, you will just stay here and rot, everyone will forget about you, your powers will be gone, you will never be a ruler and you will never have the privilege to even do so.”  
“So follow me, be my disciple and I will let you redeem your freedom after that.”  
The Emperor was enraged, though sighing, “Alright. I swear I will follow you.”  
Xuanzang chanted the words of freedom.

The Emperor jumped out of the hole and morphed into a ferocious tiger, with fiery eyes and fangs as sharp as titanium, its claws were as strong as diamond. He shouted, “I WILL KILL YOU ALL!” He turned towards Xuanzang and slashed him with full force, ripping Xuanzang’s robe in half, causing him to bleed.

The emperor roared and sent shockwaves to the ground, splitting it open and separating Sha Wujing and Zhu Bajie. Xuanzang was all by himself now, in his mind he remembered that the Buddha said, “Patience is key. Hone your willpower to defeat your enemy.” Xuanzang sat down on the ground, again humming words from the Book of the Buddha, focusing on a specific happy childhood memory.

His 10th birthday. He remembered that his mother had a sore leg, but still managed to collect the ingredients from the market just to make his favourite dish. When she arrived back home, she was exhausted but still determined to make the dish. She celebrated his birthday with him, Xuanzang was extremely happy and hugged his mother, leaking a tear on her loving arms...

His heart was racing, adrenaline coursing through his body. The power emanating from his own body, creating a huge ball of glowing energy in his hands. The emperor lashed out at him, dropping his guard. Xuanzang fired the ball of energy towards the emperor. Boom! There was a huge explosion, smoke was billowing from the fire, a piercing soundwave sent the emperor flying across the plains.

The emperor was shaken, he stood down, Xuanzang didn’t break a sweat and said, “Surrender now, or face the consequences of the Buddha. Join me and you will redeem your freedom” The Emperor replied, “I guess I have no choice.” Xuanzang put a necklace on the Emperor’s neck, and said, “If you disobey me or attack us, this bracelet will counter your powers and weaken it, also slightly hurting you in the process.” The emperor smirked, he tried to remove it, using all the strength he has left, the necklace did not budge and tightened even more.

The Emperor then joined Sha Wujing, Zhu Bajie and Xuanzang. The sun set in the distance, gleaming with its bright yellow aura, almost as if it was smiling and Xuanzang and his companions for a well worth victory. The clouds above were in shades of scarlet, amber and violet. Xuanzang said, “We have a long journey ahead of us.” Their shadows slowly disappearing as they walked towards the horizon until they couldn’t be seen anymore.

# The Unimaginable Detour

*Island School, Mak, Chloe – 14*

The icy wind numbed the faces of the pilgrims as they trudged wearily up the hill. The clouds grew darker, a thick haze forming ahead. A deafening roar filled the sky and out of nowhere, bullets of rain pelted onto their skin.

“Can we rest now?” Pigsy complained, “My legs are sore, my arms are tired and I can’t even see my feet in front of me!”

“Well that’s only because your tummy is so big, you can’t see anything else!” Monkey snickered.

“SHUT UP, MONKEY!”

“Both of you stop bickering! We’ll stop when we see shelter!” Xuanzang sighed.

Xuanzang was worn out from the bumpy ride on the back of Yulong the horse. His three disciples, Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy continued dragging themselves up the path, hoping to find cover. Suddenly, a boy dressed in rags ran out from behind the trees with his hands out. Monkey turned, pulling out a piece of hair, and turned it into a sword in one swift blow.

“LEAVE US ALONE!” Monkey threatened, pointing the sword at the boy. “NOW!”

The boy gave a small sneer, only seen by Monkey, before running away crying.

“MONKEY! HOW DARE YOU CHASE AWAY THAT POOR BOY!” Xuanzang shouted.

“YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND, MASTER. HE IS A DEMON IN DISGUISE!” Monkey protested.

“ONE MORE WORD OF NONSENSE AND YOU’LL BE PUNISHED!”

Monkey grunted in annoyance, not saying another word for the rest of their journey.

They had been walking for two hours, the rain doubled, the path steepened and finally they noticed a small cottage just distinguishable behind the misty fog and layers of bushes. Seeing the shelter, they walked up with a bit more spirit, ready for a cozy rest. Just as they were arriving, an elderly woman with a kind smile opened the door.

“YOU AGAIN!” Monkey yelled, whipping out the sword.

Again, he saw the same, small sneer form across her face.

“MONKEY!”

“I SAID TO LEA– ARGH” Monkey shrieked, grabbing his head before running away from pain as Xuanzang chanted the Ring Tightening Mantra.

“I am so sorry for his behaviour, I’m not sure what has gotten into my disciple, Monkey. Please forgive us, we would be so grateful if you let us stay for a while,” Xuanzang apologized.

“That is quite alright. Come in, come in!” The old lady beckoned joyfully, “It must be so cold outside, have a seat, I have some freshly made dumplings.”

“We truly appreciate your help, Ma’am. These dumplings are delicious!” Xuanzang said, dipping his piece in some soy sauce.



“You’re very welcome! Oh, could you two gentlemen help me bring some water from the well so I could make us all some tea?” she smiled, gesturing to Sandy and Pigsy.

“Of course ma’am.” Sandy stood up, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“Juht gih ee unn heccund,” Pigsy garbled, stuffing the eighth piece of dumpling into his mouth.. They walked out her back door to a pea-green garden with flowers placed sporadically among the grass.

“Could both of you look down and tell me when the bucket reaches the water?” The two nodded, looking over the edge of the well. All of a sudden they both felt a hard push and tipped over the edge.

“ARGHHHHH!” Their screams echoed across the walls of the well as the old lady smirked above them.

“Now, it’s time to savour the monk!” she whispered menacingly.

Instantly, Yulong, which was attached to a pole in an outdoor shelter neighed ferociously, calling the attention of Xuanzang.

“What happened? What happened?” Xuanzang ran outside with concern. He looked from Yulong, to the old lady, to the well. “Where are Sandy and Pigsy?” He asked.

With no reply, the old lady charged at him. Xuanzang being quite helpless at defending himself stood there with a look of horror plastered on his face. Yulong broke free from the rope and started kicking the old lady, while Xuanzang hid behind a bush. As hard as Yulong tried, he wasn’t a match for her. In a matter of seconds, the old lady lifted him up and flung him into the well too. Xuanzang prayed with all his might that he would stay alive. The old lady advanced on him, licking her lips. Her hands reached out to grab him but Monkey leaped down from above.

“HAIYA!” Monkey turned a plucked hair into a metal stick, advancing on the old lady.

Quickly, she grabbed the monk, dodging Monkey’s hits along the way. Xuanzang was frozen in fright in her arms. As she moved back and forth, she tripped on a pebble and tumbled down the dark hole, with Xuanzang still in her arms. Without hesitation, Monkey jumped into well and they all disappeared.

*While they were fighting above...*

“AHHHH!” Sandy and Pigsy were plummeting down the dark hole until they finally hit the icy water. The water pushed and pulled them in every direction making it impossible to have a sense of where up was. They kicked and paddled, but however hard they tried, the water beat them. Luckily, the water calmed down fast.

“UP THERE!” Sandy mouthed, pointing to a faint light shining above. They pushed to the top, their heads surfacing, both gasping for air. Expecting the same walls of the well, they were astonished by a drastically different view.

They floated in silence, filled with curiosity and confusion until they were surprised by Yulong coming up near them.

“What is this place? Am I dreaming? What happened to the others? What about the old lady? I thought she was nice until she pushed us in...” Pigsy questioned. Then, Xuanzang and Monkey both floated up nearby, the same look of awe frozen on their faces.

“Where’s the demon gone?” Monkey asked, “She was here just now.”

“You mean the old lady?” Pigsy replied “Who cares about her? We somehow landed in the middle of the ocean in this strange world and you’re asking about the old lady!”

“No, you idiot! She’s a demon trying to eat Master and she can disguise as anyone she wants like that little boy we saw earlier. I can see through their disguise.”

"I'm sorry for not believing you, Monkey," muttered Xuanzang, "Right now, we need to figure out where we are and how to get out of here."

*Once they swam to the shore...*

"Woah, this place is awesome." Piggy whispered, standing soaked in his dull cloak. The sun had risen and the harbour promenade was starting to come to life. Glass buildings packed closely together soared through the clouds. People dressed in colourful clothes and accessories held out glowing, rectangular boxes. Wafts of sweet and savoury food broke into the air, as bright lights danced around the shops.

"OH-MY-GOSH, look at their clothes!" Piggy pointed. A little girl dressed in a pink shirt matched with a sparkly skirt and bunny-backpack skipped along the path.

"Should we ask someone whe—" Monkey said.

"THERE ARE DUMPLINGS!" Piggy blurted.

"DUMPLINGS! THERE'S NO TIME TO BE THINKING ABOUT DUMPLINGS!"

"EATING IS VERY IMPORTANT, OKAY?"

"BOTH OF YOU STOP. We need to find out where we are and figure out how to go back."

Xuanzang was feeling a mix of stress and bewilderment. As amazing as everything was, something didn't feel right to him, it seemed *too* much like a fantasy.

"MOMMY, MOMMY, IT'S A HORSEY!" The little girl they saw earlier bounced over to them petting Yulong's long mane.

"Sorry about that." Her mother ran over, holding back her daughter.

"That is quite alright but we're a bit lost. Where exactly are we right now?" Xuanzang asked.

"Oh, this is Victoria Harbour. Are you here for Halloween? Your costumes are amazing," she responded.

"Costumes? These ar—"

"Yes, thank you so much, ma'am." Xuanzang answered.

The group looked at each other, more confused than ever. As they were planning on the next step, a stray newspaper flew their way. Picking it up, Monkey read aloud the printed words.

"The biggest Halloween party will be held in Hong Kong this year." He read. "So, maybe the well transported us to Hong Kong and today must be Halloween according to that mother," he continued doubtfully.

"Who knew Hong Kong was this cool, I would definitely live here if I could, have you *seen* those dumplings."

"PIGSY!"

"Right, sorry continue"

"The party will be held on October 31st—" Monkey's eyes widened, speechless at what he saw. *This can't be right*, he thought to himself. *There was no way could this be true. How in the wor—*

"MONKEY! EARTH TO MONKEY!"

Snapping back to reality, Monkey reread the tiny numbers on the flimsy paper. "October 31st, 2017." he whispered.

A loud thud erupted as Pigsy dropped to the ground.

"PIGSY, WAKE UP! PIGSY!"

"What happened? Where am I?" Pigsy muttered, rubbing his throbbing head.

"You just fainted, we're in Hong Kong remember" Xuanzang answered.

"That wasn't a dream?" Everyone shook their heads, a worried look spread across their faces.

No one had a good plan, so they decided to keep heading west until someone thought of something. Everywhere they looked, there was something new and different. Streets were filled with people inside huge, metal monsters attached to circular, black cylinders.

"WOAH! LOOK AT THOSE!"

"NO, LOOK AT THAT ONE!"

They were heading towards the road and vehicles of all shapes and sizes zoomed past them. Deciding to stop for a small rest, they sat down next to a lamppost in a small park. Up ahead, they saw a large group of people, all dressed up in weird costumes, dancing to the booming music that was playing. A young boy dressed in red, followed by a lady with a big fan and a man with bull horn caught the eyes of Monkey.

"Red Boy, Princess Iron Fan, Bull Demon King?" Monkey immediately ran to the family, relieved to see some familiar faces. "Red Boy! Princess Iron Fan! Bull Demon King! I can't believe you're here too! How did you get here? We need to find the Buddhist scriptures but we ended up here. Can you help us get out? Do you have any idea how to get to the Buddhist scriptures? We rea—"

"I think you found the wrong person, sir. But I heard you say something about Buddhist? Are you trying to go to the Big Buddha?" The lady questioned. As Monkey looked closer, he realised the red face, the fan and the horns were all fake and none of them looked like who he thought they were.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realise..." Monkey said, hugely disappointed.

"That's okay. The Big Buddha is in Lantau if you were planning to go. Just take the ferry to Lantau. Then, keep walking up the hill and you'll be there."

"Thank you so much!" Monkey replied, delighted with the news. *Maybe we could ask the Big Buddha for help*, he thought, jumping back to the group to deliver the news.

While the conversation was going, a waitress dressed in a neat uniform came over to the group with some miniature glasses of pink and orange liquid topped with a lemon slice. "Free samples, free samples." She exclaimed. "Would you all like some free samples, they're very refreshing and delicious." She said, walking over to the group. Pigsy automatically reached out for one and gulped down the small glass.

"THAT TASTES AMAZING!" Pigsy bursted out, licking his lips delightfully. Everyone else, thirsty from the walk, all decided to give it a go and drank down the colourful concoction. Mumbles of appreciation followed as they handed back the glass. Seeing Monkey come out of nowhere, the waitress flinched and quickly scurried away. Seconds later, Monkey reappeared, informing his companions of the good news.

"We just need to take the ferry to Lantau and we're there!" Monkey announced. The group was eventually happy with a plan. They marched towards the nearest pier, their spirits lifted. Slowly, everyone but Monkey, was beginning to grow weary and their pace slowed down to a mere shuffle.

"I'm tired and so sleepy. Can we sit down for a bit?" Pigsy moaned.

“You sat down 30 minutes ago! We’re nearly there!” Monkey scolded, irritated with the continuous complaints. After another ten minutes of mumbles and grumbles, they finally reached the pier. “I will go check to make sure the Big Buddha is on Lantau and you guys can sit down and rest... Humph, why am I always the one doing everything?” he grunted, rolling his eyes at his sleepy companions.

As Monkey leaped into the distance on the somersault cloud he magically formed, the mysterious young waitress from earlier appeared at the pier. She hurried over and waited until loud snores rose from the drowsy group. Snickering to herself, she prepared to capture Xuanzang, until Monkey returned and caught her eyes. Scowling, she retreated and got ready for a bumpy, ferry ride.

Monkey came back a few minutes later to be welcomed by his snoring companions.

“WAKE UP! HELLO? WAKE UP!” Monkey screamed, tugging on their shirts.

“Monkey? Oh I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise I fell asleep. How long has it been?” Xuanzang apologized, rubbing his eyes.

“It’s been 30 minutes and the ferry is here so we need to go!” Monkey said, irritated. Waking the rest of them up, they boarded the ferry, paying with fake money. Monkey transformed from a human he plucked out of Yulong.

Little did they know, they were followed by the suspicious waitress carrying a tray of fishballs. They agreed to stay on the deck to keep them more awake so they wouldn’t miss the stop. Behind Monkey, the waitress offered his tray of fishballs to Pigsy.

“Really? OMYGOSH THANKS!”

“Pigsy, wh—” Monkey turned around to see the face of White Bone Demon staring back at him. In less than a second, he smacked the waitress into the ocean before his head started throbbing madly from his Master’s Ring Tightening Mantra. He escaped onto his cloud and flew away.

“NOOO MY FISH BALLS!” Pigsy dove into the ocean trying to save his precious fish balls, with Sandy diving in right after, trying to rescue the waitress. Unexpectedly, the waitress threw a punch at Pigsy, then another one at Sandy, a look of bitterness and rage growing. Although Sandy and Pigsy are very good at water combat, they were so shocked at the punch that the waitress was able to grab their two heads and smash them together. The waitress quickly swam back to the boat and pulled herself onto the deck. Pigsy and Sandy lay floating in the ocean, unable to move a muscle. On the deck, Yulong used all his might to stomp on the waitress’ fingers, slowing down her climb until Monkey finally came back.

“YOU! YOU RUINED ALL MY PLANS!” The demon screeched, pointing at Monkey.

Monkey tugged out a hair and blew, turning it into a clone with a metal pole. “Sorry.” He grabbed the demon before she could realise what was happening and pushed her off the boat. The clone jumped into action, smacking the demon’s head with the pole. Too weak to keep up the disguise, the waitress slowly turned back into a skeleton before landing with a tremendous splash in the murky water.

“I am so sorry, Monkey, please forgive me for not believing you.” Xuanzang pleaded, turning to the glowering Monkey.

“Fine, but you need to trust me when I say someone is a demon.” Monkey growled.

“I promise I will. Now let’s get ready to meet Buddha.”

It was already dark by the time they got off the ferry. Even more tired than before, they hiked up the hill leading to the Big Buddha.

“Are we there yet?” Pigsy whined.

“Just shut up and keep walking!” Monkey snapped.

“Oooh someone’s grouchy.” Pigsy laughed.

“We’re nearly there.” Sandy informed seeing the tip of the statue from afar. Another five minutes took them up close to the statue. It was a breathtaking sight, one that would be in their memories forever.

“So now what do we do?” Pigsy asked. “Hello, Buddha? Are you there?”

They waited in silence with no answer from the statue.

“I don’t think this Buddha is real.” Monkey whispered, letting go of all the hope he put into this one, inanimate object.

“Monkey is right. This place is closing soon, we should go.” Xuanzang added, concealing his disappointment.

“No, it can’t be, we came all this way for nothing?” Pigsy whimpered. Slowly, they started walking down the steps in the misty darkness, avoiding the question that was in their mind.

“It wasn’t for nothing.”

“Of course, it was.” Pigsy answered. “Wait, who said that?”

Instantly, turning around, they saw the Big Buddha sitting in its place smiling down at them.

“You have all done well in this journey to the 21st century. You all have shown courage, perseverance and loyalty to your Master. For that, you have all earned yourselves a reward. For you, Sandy, you have gained the Monk’s Spade.” A long, crescent moon shaped shovel appeared in front of him, putting itself in his hands.

“For you, Pigsy, you have gained the Nine-tooth Iron Rake.” This time, a long rake-like weapon appeared in front of them, handing itself to Pigsy.

“And lastly, Monkey, you have gained the Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod.” A tiny needle sized stick appeared.

“Um... thanks...” Monkey said, taking the tiny stick.

“Monkey, command the staff to be bigger and you’ll see.” As Monkey followed his instructions, his needle quickly grew into a red and gold staff.

“Make good use of these weapons to protect your Master as you continue your way to the West. I wish you good luck in your search for the scriptures. Now, it is time for you to leave the 21st century and return to the 7th century.”

“Wait, what about my fishba—” Pigsy pleaded.

Before he could finish his sentence, they were transported back to the small cottage, beneath the roaring storm.



# Journey to the West

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Chan, Annie – 17*

Jinpa had never been to the airport until 16 hours ago when he boarded the plane from Bhutan to New York.

All his life, he had only known the tall columns in the monastery he grew up in – the vast halls filled with monks' chanting every morning, the tranquil mountains where he sought solace before the break of dawn, and the four white walls of his tiny room, which was filled with his only possessions for the 20 years of his life: a bed, four sets of robes and a cupboard of books.

Jinpa hadn't even stepped a foot outside the walls of his temple until 36 hours ago. And at that moment, he was surprised to find himself brimming with curiosity, a sensation unlike anything he had felt before. He knew he would be back soon, but he couldn't contain his excitement when the Abbot's stern gaze flashed in his mind. It reminded him of the purpose of this trip.

"Now, Jinpa, you are young and you've never been out of these walls. The outside world is an exciting place, but it is also dangerous and full of evil. Remember all our teachings, and do not be easily deceived by the magnificent skyscrapers in the dazzling city of New York, for most who dwell there are driven by their greed for riches," the Abbot had warned. "Let us hope you can instill the selflessness and love that is so deeply rooted in our religion into the hearts of those who don't appreciate the things around them, and perhaps you will understand why it is a blessing that Bhutan is still trapped in the past."

Jinpa remembered everything the Abbot had said, but his young mind could not help wandering off to the fine weather and the iconic sights of the city that never sleeps. He knew it was only a short trip, but a part of him felt like he was finally set free from the confinement and tediousness of his life at the monastery.

As he stood in awe at the Arrivals Hall of the JFK Airport in New York, marvelling at the bustling crowds and all the activities that were going on around him, he couldn't help but feel a tinge of sadness – over what he had missed in his life. It wasn't as if life in the monastery wasn't good – Jinpa felt content and fulfilled in its simplicity – but it could be boring sometimes, doing the same things repeatedly every day of his life. Now that he thought about it, he felt silly thinking that the most exciting moment of his life before today was when he discovered a bluebird residing in the corner of his room.

As Jinpa made his way towards the information counter, he suddenly felt very self-conscious about his attire and the speed of his walk. No one was wearing a yellow and red robe or carrying only a cloth sack as their luggage and everyone else around him was walking in a speed that was never seen in Bhutan except in the case of a fire.

"Excuse me," Jinpa cleared his throat nervously, eyeing the sign that read "Need some help? We're here for you!" on the counter. "Do you know how I can get to the bus station?"

Not one of the four ladies at the counter even gave Jinpa so much as a glance when one replied after putting down her phone, "Read the signs and follow them. You'll get there eventually."

Back in Bhutan, Jinpa had hardly seen any cars, let alone buses, around as most people preferred to walk.

"I'm sorry but I've never been on a bus before. I'm afraid I won't be able to recognize them, do you mind describing one to me?" Jinpa found his voice getting fainter and fainter as he was met with the lady's gaze, one was filled with contempt. He had never felt so insignificant in his life, and how he wished a hole would open in the ground and swallow him whole in that instance.

Jinpa's heart filled with dread as the lady opened her mouth.

"Where are you from, sonny?"

"Bhutan, ma'am,"

"Never heard of that place. Now listen, young man, I'm very busy here and I can't leave my post, so you'll just have to figure out how to get there yourself. It's that direction," She jerked her head impatiently to her right. "Sorry," she added after a split second and resumed her conversation on the phone.

"Thank you very much," Jinpa bowed respectfully, trying to ignore the fact that the lady didn't sound sorry at all.

Minutes later, after an embarrassing incident about not knowing how to use the Metro card, the young monk was finally seated on the bus, next to a middle-aged woman who took one look at him and wrinkled her nose in disdain. For the first time in his life, he felt relieved when no one attempted to make any conversation with him.

Jinpa sighed as he looked out of the window at the bustling crowd. So far, his trip hadn't been as pleasant as he expected, and the coldness and unfriendliness of the New Yorkers he had met troubled him. Nevertheless, he tried not to let this upset him and reassured himself that not all the people in the outside world were like this. As he tried to make himself comfortable, Jinpa quietly observed his fellow passengers. Almost everyone was glued to their mobile devices and no one was talking. The bus was deathly silent except for the tapping on phones and the occasionally rattle of the bus. It couldn't be more different than Bhutan, where everyone knew each other and stopped to say hello to even strangers; there would always be the sound of laughter and the sight of smiles whenever there were people. But not here in New York – Jinpa noticed as he looked into the streets.

A couple smiled into the camera as they took a selfie, but the smile was quickly replaced by a tight-lipped frown of the woman as she snatched the phone from the man. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she wasn't pleased with the photo. A second later, they were taking another selfie, a forced grin plastered on their faces. As the bus pulled away, the couple were already having an argument. It was as comical as it was sad, thought Jinpa.

When he had finally arrived at the hotel, Jinpa quickly went up to his room and started practising his speech. He had prepared something for the talk he was going to give later in the evening, but after the few hours he had spent in the city, he suddenly had a lot to add. As he stared at the towering buildings that seemed to stretch out for miles, he wondered why the city dwellers were so oblivious to the riches surrounding them, and so engrossed with getting what they didn't have. He wondered how many of them would actually take the time to admire all the beauty around them. Money and fame. Do they really bring happiness?

After an hour of scribbling, Jinpa had finished putting together his speech. He stared at the words he had written, unsure if they could convey what he wanted to say without being too boring or too other-worldly. The talk was starting in fifteen minutes, and the monk headed out to the hotel lobby. Jinpa's heart jumped to his throat when he saw the long queue for his talk.

He had expected around thirty students, but lining outside the auditorium were about two hundred people, and some of them were reporters.

Five minutes later, the young monk was clutching onto his paper for dear life, trying to steady his trembling hands as a booming voice announced,

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce to you, Jinpa, a monk who has just travelled here from Bhutan, the happiest country on earth! Jinpa will be talking about the key to finding true happiness as well as the lives of people in Bhutan. Without further ado, let us welcome him onstage!"  
There was a round of applause.

Jinpa took a deep breath and walked up the stage, leaving his piece of paper behind.

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"I began by introducing myself, of course. I was surprised to see not just students, but also businessmen, housewives and people from all walks of life attending my talk. A reporter asked me about our secret to

staying happy. I think they were expecting something complex, but it really is very simple,” Jinpa chuckled as he poured more tea into the Abbot’s cup.

“Then what did you tell them?” The old Abbot gave Jinpa an affectionate smile as he sipped his tea. A bell chimed in the distance and a flock of birds flew in a pattern past the monastery.

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“People in Bhutan don’t really care about money or things like keeping up with the latest fashion trend and owning a lot property. These are only materialistic desires and you will never feel satisfied if those things are all you seek in life. Quite simply, we are happy because we choose to do things that make us happy, and stay away from things that make us unhappy! Now some of you may be rolling your eyes now, but it’s true. Simple things like caring for others and caring for the environment make us happy. We don’t ask much and we count our blessings daily. Why compare ourselves to others and get upset when we can be grateful for the things we already have? Family, friends, a beautiful planet – these are the things we shouldn’t take for granted. And sometimes, we just need to slow down and get some rest. What’s in the hurry? Take your eyes off your phone, look around you and just live in the moment. And don’t fake a smile only for your selfie. What I’m trying to say is, you can be happy as long as it is what you desire. Just take some time off and figure out what you want to do in life, and then do it!” Jinpa bowed as the hall was filled with thundering applause.

A reporter raised her hand and asked, “Do you have any advice for those who have difficulty figuring out their priorities and their purpose in life?”

Jinpa smiled and replied, “Yes, people in the West may treat the subject of death as taboo, but we certainly don’t. Back in the monastery, we treat dying as just a natural part of life. If you understand death, you’ll understand life much better. My advice is to think about death and then ask yourself this: “If you were going to die tomorrow, what would you do now?”

Jinpa smiled as he left the hall. Just the look of wonder and realization on the people’s faces had made the whole journey worth it.

The next morning, Jinpa stepped out of the hotel with his cloth sack in hand as he prepared to start his journey back to the East.

"Had a good trip, sir? Are you sure you won't be staying a bit longer?" Jinpa turned around and saw that the cheery voice had come from the porter. The young monk returned the smile and said,

"No, I don't think so. I've seen enough to know that what I seek cannot be found in the city,"

"Took you by surprise, eh? All the hustle and bustle of this place. Bet you don't get much of that in the monastery. Say, where are you from?"

"Bhutan,"


"It must be freezing in the mountains, especially wearing only that robe of yours. The weather in here is much better, don't you agree?" said the porter as he opened the door of the cab.

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“Oh, you should’ve seen the look on the porter’s face,” laughed Jinpa.

“And what did you tell him? Wait, don’t tell me yet, let me guess,” the Abbot stroked his beard thoughtfully.

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Jinpa got into the cab and hesitated before giving his reply,

"On the contrary, even the finest weather in New York can't compare with the warmth in my monastery on the snowy mountains of Bhutan. No sir, not even close!"

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And the halls of the monastery rang with laughter as the bells in the happiest country in the world chimed once again.

# We Found Love

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Choy, Sonia – 16*

The group of four misfits stood at the opening of the cave, breathing heavily. After eighty challenges they had finally made it here, the ultimate destination of a spiritual journey. The stories had told that they would find their spirits lifted once they find what they have come for. They met along the way, three young geeks and a man leading vastly different lives before they set off for the mountains and the mysterious cave inside it.

Charlie was surprised at his indifference when they reached the cave. He was the one who began the journey first, and yet he had a gut feeling that it was going all awry and wrong at the final place. The journey was long and hard, months of wandering countries and cities, finding scraps and a little bit of warmth from the slums. He wasn't interested in being the first one, and so ushered in the kids before entering the cave himself.

The cave was wet and cold, reminding Charlie of the attic he lived in as a child, where water dripped from the ceiling in those chilly winter nights. Yet it also had a haunting beauty to it, made entirely of marble and limestone, carved into intricate patterns by nature and weather. The ground was slippery and he asked the kids to hold on to what they can— he himself was long used to walking on wet ground.

Charlie shivered slightly at the sudden cold breeze. The weather still attacked them relentlessly, even at the very end. He hugged his jacket a little closer as they descended towards the center of the Earth, the kids still chattering in hushed voices in front of him. He preferred not to join in the conversation; he was never a man of many words.

The cave got progressively darker as they walked on. The previous warm yellow glow was gone, as the kids had their arms around each other. More and more unpleasant memories floated back to Charlie. He found dark spaces all too familiar, from the countless times he had been shoved into dark alleys in rough neighbourhoods, more than usually followed by bad things to him.

“Charlie, you okay?” Shelby turned and asked, her voice filled with concern.

“I’m great. We’re almost there.” Charlie tried to sound hopeful, but he was actually far too tired to feel anything. They followed a winding path that led to a deep cavern. The kids stopped at the entrance, looking to Charlie as he caught up with them. He gestured for them to go in first, preferring to take the rear. He was, admittedly, slightly nervous.

The cavern was lit up in warm red and gold flecks, but with cold blue hints. It was something cold and distant and alien to all of them, and the kids shied away, stopping at the entrance. Charlie walked on— he figured it wouldn't make any difference to him, whatever he saw. He finally managed to find the source of the light— four glowing stones.

Charlie walked towards the table and picked one of them up— a blue stone with jagged edges and pointed corners. The others were rounded and well-grinded, much more welcoming than the icy blue one he picked up. But he found himself drawn to its roughness, how it was not as rounded and polished as the others. The kids later followed from behind, each of them picking up a stone, speechless as they held it in their hands.

“That’s it?” Ken asked incredulously, clenching the red stone in his right palm. “Doesn’t seem spiritual at all to me.”



“What did you expect, a pot of gold and a Bible?” replied Shelby, though looking slightly disappointed as well. And they had plenty of reason to be. The journey was fueled entirely by anticipation, that they’d find some treasure at the very end. Charlie had lost faith halfway through it, and so did not feel anything, but the kids had been hopeful and driven all the way to the cave.

“Well, not a bunch of glowing rocks,” Mia added as she flung her golden stone back onto the table. “I don’t see how my spirit is enriched by holding a stone.” The teenager had her arm around Ken as the two stood back. Shelby shook her head before putting her stone down, leaving Charlie the only one holding anything. He couldn’t put it down— he somehow refused to believe that the journey had been in vain, even though he repeatedly told himself that it didn’t matter anymore.

The three youngsters were about to leave when Ken finally noticed Charlie lingering round the table, still holding the blue stone in his hand. “It’s a joke, Charlie. Let’s just go,” Ken said sullenly, gesturing towards the exit of the cavern. Charlie shook his head, shooing the kids away as he contemplated his thoughts quietly. Somehow it all made sense to him in one moment. There was much more to spiritual fulfillment by material things— maybe there was something hidden deep that they had yet to discover.

Charlie sat on the stone table, letting his legs dangle like a child’s as he gazed upward at the haunting columns of the cavern. His mind wandered to the things which happened along the way— how they had seemed like complete strangers at first, how Shelby always made terrible jokes. Him and Shelby playing matchmaker to get Ken and Mia to kiss. He almost felt like a kid again, spending so much time with them.

“Charlie?” Shelby asked, her voice echoing in the cavern. Charlie tried to clear his head and shrug it off, eventually nodding to the teenagers. He gazed at the three stones left on the table, shining and shimmering in the dark, then at the group of young people behind him. They now meant more to him than the rocks and what they’d set out to do. So Charlie turned away from the stone table and left the glowing cavern, and out into the wild once more.

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Mia backed away quickly as she reached the opening of the cave with Ken’s arm around her. The sky and just about everything else was blocked from her view by a giant creature in the distance. Just like Ken, she looked up and nearly blacked out from what she saw.

It was a dragon, but nothing like those from cartoons; it was red and scaly and frightening. The smell of burned flesh and smoke was too apparent to ignore. Mia glanced at Charlie— even the older, usually stoic man was visibly shaken up and backed off. She managed to ignore the dragon as much as she could when Charlie’s shivers became more apparent. He looked like as if he’d seen a ghost.

*I mean you no harm, Charles. You and your companions have come far.*

Charlie could feel himself go white as a low voice rang in his head. He turned frantically, searching for the source of the voice, ultimately landing on the enormous creature in front of him. His knees buckled and his legs turned to jelly as he held on to the edge of the cave, steadying himself.

*Would you like a lift home?*

The booming voice no longer scared them, as Shelby’s expression lit up, a smile spread on her face. Ken met eyes with Charlie, who nodded. “Yeah, it’d be—” Shelby was cut off mid-sentence, as the four were swept

up onto the dragon's back by its tail. Ken let out a loud excited whoop, as they ascended to the skies, holding on to each other, soaring through layers of clouds and through the wind.

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And then they fell.

They fell from the sky, tumbling down from the dragon's back, as Charlie tumbled off the dragon's back in shock. He found himself in free fall, plunging straight into the dark and cold ocean. He was soaked, kicking his way up to the surface as he gasped for air. Charlie spotted Mia and Ken first, and yanked them to the surface. The kids were treading water next to him as he looked around for the last kid.

"Shelby's still down there. She can't swim." Ken's words confirmed Charlie's greatest fears. He nodded to the kids before diving into the water, searching for the final teenager. But he could hardly see anything in the water; it was muddled and Charlie didn't have his glasses. He saw Shelby's jacket floating in the distance, and propelled himself down into the depths of the sea.

But Shelby was nowhere to be seen; Charlie had to get back to the surface holding only Shelby's jacket as he was nearly out of breath. He flung the girl's jacket onto the nearby shore, then waved to Ken and Mia. The three all dived down a second time; this time he finally saw Shelby's hand poking out of a ruined boat, moving weakly.

Charlie lifted the boat up with Ken while Mia dove under and pulled Shelby out. The poor teenager had gone slightly blue as they swam up to the surface and towards the shore. Ken carried Shelby on his back while Charlie helped himself to the shore. He saw Ken search for Shelby's pulse, then him and Mia trying to get the water out of their friend's body.

*Use the stone.* A voice rang in Charlie's head as he reached for the glowing blue stone in his pocket. He hesitantly walked towards the three young people, then pressed the stone to Shelby's back. Instantly she coughed, spitting water all over the three of them and herself, as she wheezed for breath. Charlie felt a rush of relief wash over him, as Shelby looked to her friends in gratitude.

And that was when he suddenly understood what it had been all about, watching the three youngsters embrace in front of him. Charlie couldn't imagine life without three kids constantly laughing with him and at him. Ken, Mia and Shelby have now become a huge part of his life, pulling him out of his original bubble. It was the greatest spiritual gift he ever had— he was now able to put his feelings out, to truly care for people and not having to put up walls to protect himself.

"I think we found it," Mia said suddenly, putting down Charlie's blue healing stone and leaning on Ken's shoulder. Charlie smiled knowingly, as the four went through the same thought process Charlie just did, discovering their true goal and what they had set out to find.

"We found love."

With that, Charlie tossed the stone into the sea and welcomed the three youngsters into his arms.

# New Journeys to the West

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Khan, Sarah – 16*

**N**ew Journeys to the West? If we are talking about New Journeys to the West, then it certainly have been deprived from Journeys to the West.

Journeys to the West apparently have a lot of different stories. One is based on reality and one is based on a novel. The one based on reality actually shows the great discoveries of the monk, Xuanzang. It is actually really similar to those stories of Christopher Columbus or even Zheng He, who went on voyages and made great discoveries. Christopher Columbus discovered America. Zheng He's discoveries brought China silks and porcelain to trade for foreign luxuries such as spices and jewels and tropical woods. The thing that was great about Xuanzang's discoveries was that he travelled a long way to India just to learn proper teachings of Buddhism since there were a lot of discrepancies in the Buddhist texts in China. Not only that, but he was believed to have found the first campus university in human history in the search of him finding a learning community. When we look at these incredible historical figures, shouldn't that inspire us to do something of that sort as well? Doesn't a fire ignite in us which compels us to make as tremendous discoveries as them which make our country extremely proud of us? But the questions is, in this present world where almost everything has been discovered and is being researched, is it still possible for us to be yet another historical figure that is going to be appreciated in the future? Is it possible for us to continue the Journeys to the West into the New Journeys to the West?

The world right now is in a momentous situation where New Journeys to the West can be done if only there is something undiscovered left to be discovered. However, the world we live in today is less likely to be explored. We are not searching for things that change our lives as a whole anymore but only searching for things to make our lives easier. Before we used to discover places on Earth to see where else we can build our shelters across the oceans and now we are searching for new planets to live on across vacuum. Before we used to search more ways to make fire, now we are searching for chemicals that can cause explosions. Before we used to search for ways to survive, now we are searching for reasons to survive. So was it simplicity that kept us going? Are there still ways we can continue this story which would bring up the greatness of the West?

What Xuanzang discovered was the depth to a religion, what we discovered and living by right now is science and technology. But do they come hand-in-hand? A religion is a belief where we have faith in a God which we probably haven't even seen by our own eyes but follow all the principles and regulations they have set for us. On the other hand, science believes in solid facts and evidence and has always tried its best to proof baseless beliefs. Remember that one time when science proved that the Earth orbits around the Sun not the vice versa against the belief of Christianity. This is why I doubt whether or not the subjective past can go together with the objective present. But is it really impossible? If we have an element that keeps us together with the morals of humanity and an element which can help us enhance the quality of our existing lives, would it be that difficult to co-exist? Maybe that is what is left to be discovered! The discovery where the Journeys of the West coincides with the existing world to give birth to New Journeys of the West.

# The Long March

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Wong, Pauline – 17

“Incoming attack! Run!”

Those were the final words I heard before grey smoke enveloped my vision. There was another bang. And another. And another. Beneath the smoke I could see orange flames waving their vigorous arms, grabbing at nothing and everything and pulling them into their vortex. I could hear the clacketing of shoes as they ran frantically away from the fire. I could see the fire moving closer and closer, but I couldn't bring my jelly legs to move.

“Daman!”

Wang had found me loitering by the camp. I was in agony. The debris that had pierced through my feet was so painful I allowed a sob to escape me before regaining my composure. *Men don't cry, men don't cry.*

“We have to go, now!” he exclaimed. “*Zou ba, zou ba!*”

The first few days of the journey was peaceful. We crossed rivers with warm waters and forests that were dense and sheltered. It was a smart move. The KMT scums would never find us there. We were safe.

At least, until we reached the Luding Bridge.

Those scums had us surrounded.

We were stuck at the swaying bridge just above the Dadu River. We had to cross the bridge but the enemies were guarding on the other side. They were getting closer and closer with every passing second. The rushing current of the waters broke on the sharp rocks and splashed onto the wooden boards of the bridge. I could hear gunshots in the distance. The general was asking for volunteers to clear the scene so as to allow the rest of the Red Army to pass.

“*Wo qu!*” a familiar voice said and my blood turned cold. I turned and Wang was standing there, tall and determined. *Please, don't.*

“Wang...” I pleaded.

“*Hao Hanzhi!*” said the general. “Come here then.”

The rest of the Red Army waited among the woods near the bridge while Wang crept slowly towards it. He was holding a grenade tightly in his palm. I held my breath as he walked out into the open sun. Wang took a cautious step onto the first piece of the wooden boards.

There was the click of a gun.

Wang ducked just as it started raining bullets.

Swift like the wind he crossed the bridge, and pulled against the pin of the green weapon. He tossed the grenade into the enemy redoubt with perfect aim. There was a bang and the planking was dissolved in fire. The entire attack lasted for seconds but it felt as if it had been hours. There were a few more gunshots and then everything was quiet. He had done it.

But he didn't make it.

I watched in horror as a bullet hit him and he lost his grip on the railing of the bridge. He was over the edge in the blink of an eye, falling into the yellow waters of the Dadu River. His body plunged into the sharp verge of a rock and he was tossed into the river. His body was slammed over and over again by the waves and he was soon out of sight.

My friend. My only friend was gone, just like that.

He has sacrificed himself for the army, for the country. He has sacrificed himself for the justice of all communists. It was an act of bravery, a pledge of dedication to the party. He knew, from the moment he raised his hand, that he would not make it out of here alive. Yet, he chose his country over his life. He died before seeing his country rise to power, he died before seeing his country be blessed by the spirits of peace. He died a hero, the selfless hero who brought the Red Army to success.

My friend. My only friend was gone.

Snow was brushing against our faces, icy wind piercing through our chests, extracting more and more pieces of hope from our hearts. It was winter, and we were thousands of miles away from home.

The men said that the civil war would soon be over, and families would reunite and we would all go back home. But where is home? I could vaguely remember the sturdy walls of our living room, and the laughter that rang and echoed at every wall. Home is playing with Cixi on the rough and cracked floor of our backyard, home is playing tag with Wang in the village, home is having dinner with Ma and Ba and Cixi, talking about interesting events that happened around the area.

These moments were long gone when Ba was sent to fight in the war. They were the men of the village, the people with strength and wisdom. I wasn't old enough then, or I would have joined them.

Another year passed and Wang and I was enrolled into the army. We left home with the determination to save the nation and a heart full of hope. We promised those who were left behind that we would be back soon, with Ba and other men who has left home for war as well.

Months passed.

We expected a short and effortless battle, but as the war dragged on for weeks and eventually months, we accepted our fate with a bitter heart. We continued with our daily routines with dark clouds over our heads, until a bomb broke through the clouds and into our camp, and we were forced to flee. The moments were gone, but memories still remained stitched to our hearts.

The journey to Western China seemed never ending. It has been weeks of striding down steep roads and hiking up mountains. It has been months of fighting and surviving in the deserted woods and mountains. It was an uphill battle, and though there were bruises on my skin and open wounds in my stitched and patched minds, I carried on.

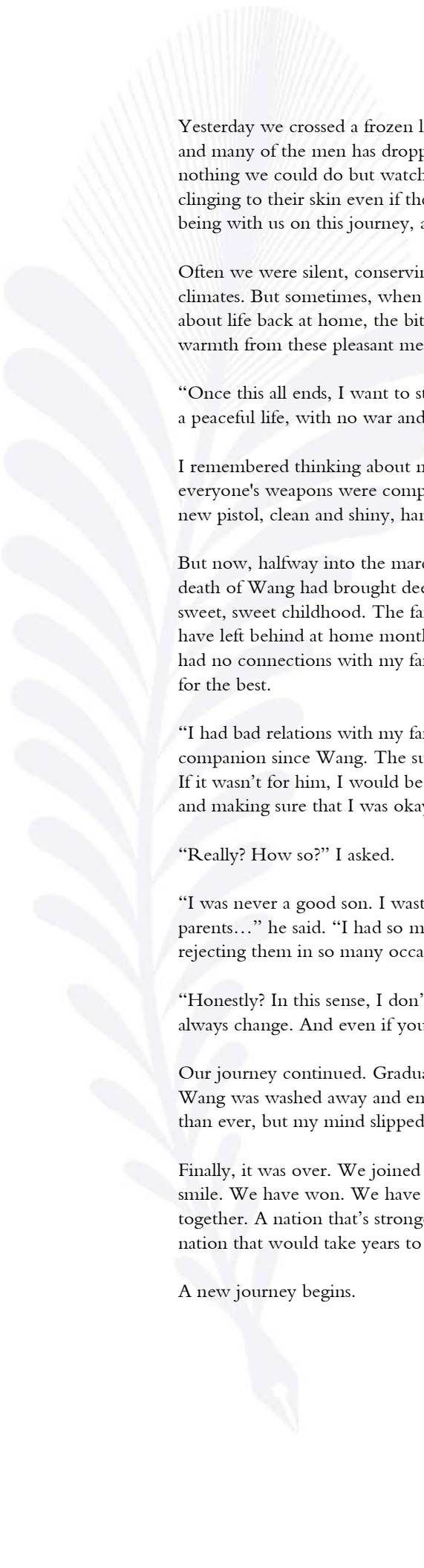
"We're approaching our last few rings of the mountains," I heard one of the men said.

"And after that?" another man responded.

"More walking," he replied, "But definitely easier and not as cold."

Cold was an understatement, it was freezing. We're in the snow mountains of Jade Mountain, where the sky was clear and the scenery was beautiful, but all I could see was the staggered postures of men as they went on on this endless journey, the line of dark heads extending to horizons where none can see. These were the souls of broken men, those who didn't know where they're going, those who trust in their chairman, those who longed for a peaceful life. These were the men who still remained strong, those who were winning the battle so far.





Yesterday we crossed a frozen lake and lost many of our men. The ice has cracked halfway in the crossing, and many of the men has dropped into the freezing water, the sharp ice slitting their skin open. There was nothing we could do but watch them as they struggled—they would have died from the freezing water clinging to their skin even if they managed to get out. All we could do was say our prayers, thank them for being with us on this journey, and step past them. We didn't look back.

Often we were silent, conserving the limited energy we had in our bodies to get through the horrible climates. But sometimes, when the silence was too deafening, we would start conversations. We would talk about life back at home, the bits and pieces, the ups and downs. It's a trip down memory lane, and the warmth from these pleasant memories was a great distraction from the desolate lands.

"Once this all ends, I want to start a family," one of the men had said. "All I wish is for my children to have a peaceful life, with no war and suffering."

I remembered thinking about my dreams then. It was the start of the march, and I remembered how shiny everyone's weapons were compared to my dusty old pistol that belonged to Ba. I remembered wishing for a new pistol, clean and shiny, handsome and grand.

But now, halfway into the march and miles away from home, all I could wish for was a family reunion. The death of Wang had brought deeper traumas than I would have ever imagined. It triggered memories from sweet, sweet childhood. The family as one, an easy life, a chance to thrive. I missed Ma and Cixi, whom I have left behind at home months ago. Not to mention Ba, whom I have not seen for more than a year. I had no connections with my family whatsoever, so whether they're between life or death, I could only hope for the best.

"I had bad relations with my family, and now I regret it a lot," said Haimin. Haimin has become my companion since Wang. The sudden sense of loneliness almost killed me; I was depressed and demoralized. If it wasn't for him, I would be nothing but a lost soul. He was there for me, supporting me in every step, and making sure that I was okay when I was in mourning.

"Really? How so?" I asked.

"I was never a good son. I wasted my golden years in drugs and gambling, hardly spent any time with my parents..." he said. "I had so much time to think and reflect in this journey, and all I could think about is rejecting them in so many occasions. I really hope it's not too late."

"Honestly? In this sense, I don't think anything would be too late. As long as you are sincere, you could always change. And even if you can't show it to them, they would know somehow." I replied.

Our journey continued. Gradually I found myself relieving the pain that has been on my shoulders since Wang was washed away and embraced the new friendship between Haimin and I. The hikes were harder than ever, but my mind slipped into deeper peace with every peak we reached.

Finally, it was over. We joined the rest of the Red Army and rested our sore legs. I see Chairman Mao smile. We have won. We have done it, the golden army of China. We would build the new China together. A nation that's stronger than ever, a nation that would gain recognition among individuals. A nation that would take years to nurture and develop.

A new journey begins.

## New Journeys to the West

*Renaissance College Hong Kong, Chow, Theodore – 16*

“I just can’t get enough of this,” said Zhu the Pig as he shoved more food down his throat. “Clean up that mess, Piggy,” Sha the Monk responded hurriedly while mopping the floor. “The Great Master of China is soon to arrive and all you do is make my life difficult!” “Don’t call me Piggy! I’ve changed my name! It’s Gip!” Zhu the Pig yelled back with his mouth full of food. “Oh! You just reversed the letters! I would hardly call that a name change,” teased Sha the Monk.

“Relax! He won’t arrive in the city until this afternoon,” said Wukong as he jumped onto the sofa. “Well, it has been a hundred years since we last gathered together. I think he deserves a more than proper welcome,” said Sha, as he eyed the crumbs falling from Zhu’s mouth.

Suddenly, everyone’s head turned as a guard burst into the room, but before he could say anything, the Great Xuan Zang announced his own arrival. “How are you, my dear friends?”

“The Great Buddha of Sandalwood Merit! Welcome! Welcome! What brings you to our humble place on this fine day?” Sha asked humbly and bowed at Xuan Zang. “Please, there is no need for formalities, my friends,” replied Xuan Zang. “I’ve come to ask you for another favour. Oh, legendary warriors! I know all of you here have already atoned for your sins in the past. But I stand here today asking in good faith. One more journey! One last adventure! Would you consider doing it for your Great Master?”

Upon hearing this request, the three of them went silent for a moment and looked at each other in search of a response.

Zhu couldn’t stand it. Thinking about the good food he had in their last journey, he licked his lips and broke the silence. “As long as there is food and we’ll be able to taste the delicacies of the world, I’m in!” “Yeah, I haven’t had a good thrill ever since our last adventure,” Wukong added. “Guys, just wait a second. Before we make a decision, let’s look at the facts here, okay?” Sha suggested and asked, “Great Master, could you please tell us where we would be going and what the mission involves?”

“I’m sure you have heard of the great tales from the West in the past hundred years: the life of happiness. Our fellow countrymen are now living a much better life. However, they look miserable. Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, who heard the sounds of misery of the world, asked me to help. I’ve heard from reliable sources that there is a secret to this life of happiness in the West that we can bring back to our poor people. But to obtain this secret, we must travel to the West again and seek out their Secret Keeper who lives in a white palace. I understand that in our last adventure, we flirted with death numerous times and I know this is no easy decision. Whether or not you all come with me, I leave in two days from the Shanghai Pier. You’ll know which boat is mine when you see it,” explained the Great Master. And with that, he took off into the horizon.

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The swishing and swooshing of the waves against the pier echoed throughout the interior of an ordinary fishing boat. On the deck sat the Great Master Xuan Zang who was looking out towards the sea, meditating.

The sun was setting and the chilly evening wind battered the trio as they made their way towards the boat. “Maybe we should turn back,” suggested Sha. Wukong immediately replied, “No! We’ve made it this far, and besides, the Great Master needs us!” “Yeah, and think about the yummy food in the West,” said Zhu, as they stepped onto the boat.

“I’m glad you three could make it,” said Xuan Zang. “We’ll be taking this boat from Shanghai, down the Yangtze River as far west as we can. Then, we go by horse. I hope you are fully prepared. This journey isn’t going to be smooth.”

“We didn’t come because we thought it was going to be a smooth journey, Great Master,” said Wukong pensively. Xuan Zang nodded at them. “The boat will drive itself towards our destination. Sleep well tonight, my friends. Who knows when we’ll get another chance,” advised the Great Master.

Later that night, as they made their way further west, the water began to darken, to the point where it was no longer blue, but pitch black, and only the sloshing of water against the hull could be heard. Sensing something was not quite right, Wukong got up, nudged Zhu and Sha and whispered something to them. The trio made their way to the deck, taking out their weapons on their way.

Not too soon, a large crash rocked the boat, knocking the trio off their feet. Water splashed onto the deck and the sound of wet footsteps followed. Wukong leapt to his feet, with his fiery eyes providing the only source of illumination, his golden armour shining in the dark. Scanning the deck, Zhu held his nine-tooth iron-rake close to him and jumped to the quarterdeck with the help of a few puffs of clouds, in an attempt to get a better view of the invaders. Sha stood ready with his crescent-moon shovel, prepared for combat.

The splashing sounds continued rhythmically, increasing in volume. Suddenly, a gush of water swept Zhu off his feet, and the demon appeared. Hearing the thud of Zhu’s fall, Wukong turned just in time for a full face of sea water, temporarily disorientating him. With Sha the last one standing, the sea demon targeted its next attack at him, but Sha used his Monk’s spade to block the water and threw it back at the demon, who dodged it. With all of its attention focused on Sha, Zhu came up from behind, hit the demon on the head and kicked it back into the river depth where it came from.

Suddenly, the door to the cabin opened. The trio, expecting more demons, all turned their heads, with weapons at the ready. To their surprise, Xuan Zang stepped out and said, “Could you all please stop making a racket? I’m trying to get a good night’s sleep before we face monsters tomorrow.” With a chuckle, the trio left the deck. They all quickly fell asleep while the magical boat sailed deeper and deeper into the dangerous territory.

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“Our journey on the river has come to an end,” said the Great Master, “and from here on, we travel by horse.” “Well, the river still carries on for quite a while,” noted Wukong. But Sha quickly explained, “We can’t travel through the river because we’ve reached No-Man’s Land. The boat will be sucked under by the current as soon as we round the corner, not to mention the river strainer demons!”

The group then made their way through the forest. The misty woods and the tall Cypress trees made it feel almost like a fairy tale. “A lot has changed since the last time we passed through these woods,” exclaimed Zhu. “That’s because we’re taking a different path this time,” explained Xuan Zang. “I calculated the geographical distance, and this is the fastest route with the least danger. Feel the tranquillity, my friends.”

“Least danger, you said?” asked Wukong, who now slowed his footsteps and looked up into the trees. “Yes, why?” asked the Great Master, with his head buried in the map. “Because of that!” Sha directed their attention to the trees.

Wukong took his needle-sized weapon out from behind his ear and expanded it to full size, ready for the fight. Zhu looked up, hoping to catch a glimpse of the demon, but before he could get a good look, the forest demon wrapped his legs in thick vines, immobilizing him. Sha tried to catch it off-guard by coming up from behind, but the demon jumped onto the branches before his crescent-moon shovel could touch it.

Guarding Xuan Zang against the demon, Wukong and Sha, however, lost sight of it. Just when they were scanning the surrounding, a piercing whistle sounded, and green arrows rained from the branches above. Wukong used his staff, spinning it around to block the arrows from hitting his friends. Three small forest demons materialized from the soil beneath them, swinging swords and axes. Zhu summoned a cloud to take care of the archers in the treetops and swung his magic iron-rake flicking soil into the air, disorienting his attackers and kicking them backward with his hooves.

Wukong then transformed into a tiger and pinned one of the demons to the ground, where it sunk back into the soil. Thinking they had controlled the situation, Zhu exclaimed, “Well, that’s a little too ea ...” Just before he could finish his sentence, Sha pointed and yelled, “Look out!” A large tree fell, nearly crushing Zhu. Wukong jumped to the base of the tree, thinking there were more demons, but as he looked around, a mist had formed around the enclosure.

In the mist, a shadow of a large bull formed and it began to charge at Wukong, knocking him back into the base of another tree. “Hello again, Monkey King!” The bull smiled cunningly. “I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.” “Why do you look so familiar?” Zhu asked curiously. “We’ve fought before. On our first journey,” explained Sha, “the Bull Demon King!”

“I’m glad you remember me, Sha the Monk!” The Bull Demon King spoke with contempt. The Great Master interrupted confidently, “We beat you once. We’ll be able to do it again!” “But this time will be different. This time I’m not working alone.” As the Bull Demon King said this, the Iron Fan Princess leapt out from behind a tree, fanning Zhu, Sha, and Wukong off their feet. “It’s nice to see you all again, but we just need Xuan Zang here,” the Princess said maliciously, “I can’t wait to taste your Great Master and become immortal!” The three disciples stood in front of Xuan Zang to protect him at once.

Zhu used clouds to propel him towards the duo, magic rake in hand. Taking advantage of the clouds, the Iron Fan Princess sent a large gust of wind his way, blowing the clouds away and sending Zhu falling on his face. Wukong plucked off one of his hairs and blew on it, spawning dozens of smaller monkeys. All at once, they charged at the Bull and the Princess.

The Iron Fan Princess sent a tornado towards half of the small monkeys, flinging them away, while the Bull Demon King charged at the other half, who climbed onto him, hoping to overwhelm him but to no avail. Using the monkeys as a distraction, Zhu and Sha looped around the back, trying to surprise the duo from behind. Zhu hit his rake to the ground, sending tremors which disoriented the Princess. Sha took advantage of this and tried to attack the Princess with his shovel before she had the chance to regain her footing, but she took out her swords and blocked the attack.

Wukong climbed up the trees in the nick of time, hiding from the Bull Demon King’s view and waiting for the perfect moment to strike. While hidden, he transformed into a grasshopper, making his way close to the Bull. The Bull Demon King, who was trying to get a clear view of the treetops, took no notice of the small grasshopper that was now hidden under a leaf. When Wukong got close enough, he transformed back into his original form, using his staff to hit the Bull Demon King. The Bull fell off the tree. Hearing the thud of her husband’s body, the Iron Fan Princess turned her head, which gave Sha the opportunity to hit her with his spade. The Princess slumped to the ground, defeated.

While the three were about to rejoice at their victory, Wukong looked around and noticed that Xuan Zang was missing. Zhu shouted, “Great Master! You can come out now, it’s all safe!” Sha’s head swerved at the sound of a body falling to the ground. A sharp fan blade had pierced the Great Master’s arm and his immortal blood dripped from his skin. “I thought immortals don’t bleed,” said Zhu. “We do, but we heal fast. I’ll be fine soon.” Xuan Zang responded weakly.

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As they carried on their journey to the West, they battled more demons along the way. Some were enemies from the past, seeking revenge and a second chance at immortality. Others were new demons that the trio put down with their weapons. The group worked together as a team, climbing mountains, crossing gorges, adventuring through dense jungles. A strong bond of trust, friendship and faith re-developed between the four members. Each battle tightened this bond, allowing them to experience truly happy moments of success and bringing them one step closer to the mysterious Secret Keeper.

One sunny morning, they finally arrived at their destination. Upon their gaze was a dazzling white palace, where the Secret Keeper held the secret to his country's happiness and brilliance. The path leading up to the main entrance was made of marble and precious stones, with large pillars on both sides of the walkway, which evoked a sense of grandeur and splendour. They entered the Great Hall, searching for the Secret Keeper. To their surprise, he was not as grand as they had imagined him to be. Standing at merely 6 feet and wearing what the Westerners call a "formal suit", the old man said, "Welcome to the White Palace! What can I do for you?"

"We seek the secret to your western happiness," Xuan Zang replied. "I am the Great Buddha, traveling with the Monkey King, Wukong, and his companions, Zhu the Pig, Cleanser of the Altars, and Sha the Monk, the Buddhist Arhat. We have travelled far and long in search of this secret and we would greatly appreciate it if you would help us uncover it." The three disciples nodded to the Secret Keeper while the Great Master explained.

Wukong added aggressively. "We have battled demons, conquered jungles, fought beasts, trailed gorges and hiked mountains to come here! We aren't leaving till we get what we came for!"

"Well, the secret to western happiness?" Raising his eyebrows, the Secret Keeper asked, "Why do you need it?"

Xuan Zang sighed. "For the past hundred years, many of our people have been living a high life. All they care for is how much money they make, how big a house they live in, how many cars they own. They only believe in the Book of Wealth these days and nothing else. They may be living a better life, but they look sad."

Upon hearing this explanation, the Secret Keeper said, "I see. Your people seem to be very successful in life. I have heard of many tales of sorrow that came with this success, and you are not the first ones to come to me for my people's secret of happiness." The Secret Keeper then smiled and presented them a beautifully carved wooden box. "Bring this back to your people, and share it with them. I hope your people will find happiness in no time."

Receiving the gift from the Secret Keeper, Xuan Zang bowed and thanked him with the deepest gratitude, and left the White Palace with his three disciples.

"What about all those magical stories we've heard about this place? Where's all the yummy food?" Zhu asked. "Well, we really can't eat like kings every day, can we?" The Great Master replied rhetorically. "We have got what we came for and now it's time to go home."

Frustratingly, Zhu followed the rest and they left the Palace.


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After days of adventures, fighting demons and passing dangerous lands, they finally boarded the boat, where Xuan Zang and his three disciples sat down together and opened the wooden box. To their surprise, they only found a small parchment scroll in it. The Great Master unrolled it and read aloud what was written to his companions, "Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you got."

"That's it? This can't be right! Maybe we are being tricked!" Zhu said angrily while Wukong and Sha looked puzzled at each other. Xuan Zang, however, remained very calm. He closed his eyes and began to meditate.

When the Great Master opened his eyes, he met three pairs of eyes staring at him cluelessly. "My dear friends, the Secret Keeper is not tricking us. These twelve words carry great teaching that our people need. If we are satisfied with what we have, we wouldn't end up wasting all the time and energy looking for more!"





“Ah! It’s like what they say: the grass is always greener on the other side.” Sha tried to impress the Great Master.

“I agree! Maybe if we appreciate what we have, instead of simply asking for more, we would be happier people. Happiness doesn’t depend on how much money you have, but how you perceive your life and whether you are satisfied with what you have achieved. We don’t need to travel thousands of miles for a so-called “secret”, Great Master! Happiness is within all of us! We just need to know where to look.” Wukong reflected.

Upon hearing this, Xuan Zang was very pleased with his two disciples. “Well said! We need more of this thinking in our country. Maybe then, we would be more happy and successful with our lives. This is surely the secret to happiness for our people.”

With his stomach rumbling, Zhu complained, “Aiya, we are still a long way from home, and I haven’t had a proper meal today. I am NOT happy at all. Maybe we could save the chatter for the ride?” The other three laughed simultaneously. Noticing that the sun was setting behind the tall mountains, the Great Master said, “Yes, let’s have a proper meal to make our Piggy happy.” And just like that, they opened a bottle of wine and ate to their heart’s content. A journey that sets out to discover the secret to happiness ended on a happy note.

# Self Actualization

*Sha Tin College, Ho, Michael – 15*

I hate myself. I stare at myself in the mirror in disgust. My ugly, acne-ridden face in itself is already a nasty sight to behold, but along with my towering height, lanky arms and legs, I am the laughing stock of my school. Each day, I wake up with a feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach, as I know that I will have to endure yet another day of torment. And, lo and behold, as I have no friends, there is no one I can rely on to provide me with solace, ever. I did once think I had friends, but they'd turned on my back and just like the rest of my tormentors, began making everyday miserable for me.

One day, after yet another miserable day of school, as I was walking home on the route that I always took, I had a feeling that something was out of place. I just couldn't put my finger on what it was. I peered around, observing the squat, unremarkable buildings that lined the side of the street to my left. On the contrary, beautiful, verdant green hedges rimmed meticulously trimmed grass on the other side of the street. Behind the grass lay palatial, white houses which were befitting of kings. Okay, maybe they weren't that amazing, considering that such ugly buildings were right in front of the houses. But to me, most houses were luxurious because my mother and I dwelled in a tiny bungalow, beside, let's just say, unpleasant neighbours. Don't get me wrong, but I don't blame her for that. My dad had deserted us shortly after I was born, just before I'd had my second birthday. Even though I was a baby at the time, I remembered enough to know how much I hated his guts. The smiles that never reached his eyes. The way he told me and my mom that he loved us, yet left one day, without warning. My mom, who was jobless at the time, had had to find a job quick, lest we would have been thrown out onto the streets, and I sent to foster care afterwards.

As I was about to round the corner, I noticed a gloomy back alley between two of the ugly buildings which I did not remember ever seeing before. I tried to forget about it and just go home, but curiosity got the better of me. There was scarcely enough space for me to shimmy through, but it was sufficient. After grunting, shimmying, and more grunting, I finally emerged in a recess between the buildings.

"Jake." A man I hadn't noticed previously seemed to materialize behind me, out of the gloom.

I yelped, wheeling around to face him. He wore a dapper leather jacket, which matched well with his navy blue jeans and leather shoes. His hair was buzz-cut and dark as the night. His eyes were raven black had a hard look to them, and his eyebrows set in a permanent frown.

I swallow my fear and inhale deeply.

"H-How do you know me." I managed to sputter out.

"That isn't important right now." He replied in a deep, baritone voice. "I know you're having a difficult time right now, and I'm going to give you a choice."

I nodded slowly, not sure how else to respond to this man who had nearly given me a heart attack just a few minutes ago.

He extended a fist. Turning it so that his palm was facing me, he unfurled his fingers, to reveal a tiny white tablet.

I laughed, the fear I had felt moments ago disappearing as quickly as it had come.

"You're joking, right?" I sneered. "If you're going to sell me drugs, you might as well leave. I'm not desperate enough to kill myself with pills."

He grabbed me by the shoulders and stared into my eyes so intently, he might as well have been staring into my soul. I writhed in his grasp, taken off guard by his sudden violence, but to no avail. I tried clawing at his eyes, since my lanky arms make it difficult to fend for myself in a scuffle, but his hands repositioned to clamp onto my wrists with a vice-like grip.

"Listen." He said through gritted teeth. "Dissolve this in water and drink it. This will help with your unhappiness."

He shoved the tablet into my coat's pocket and darted off, through the other end of the alley with his coat fluttering in the wind.

I was at a loss for words and could only stare as he took off. The sun was beginning to set. The vivid amber glow of the sun was slowly fading, and night was about to fall. I didn't want my mom to get worried, so I hastily shimmied back through the narrow gap and sprinted as fast as my spindly legs could, back home.

"Mom!" I yelled, kicking my shoes off, shrugging off my backpack and tossing it onto the couch, all in one practised and fluid motion as I entered my tiny living room. Tiny as it may be, it was well lit and quite spacious, with just a two-person couch propped against a wall and a TV in front.

"Hey honey!" Her head popped out from behind the little pantry cupboard in the kitchen. "Where were you? You're over two hours late."

"Sorry. I had a lot of homework I had to do. My friend offered to help so I stayed at his house for a bit." I lied, hoping she won't see through it. I'm not a particularly good liar, so I was crossing my fingers.

Her eyes widened and her mouth slowly spread into a big smile. "I'm proud of you honey. You finally have a nice friend!"

I grimaced, quickly regretting not opting for a lie that didn't hurt me so much. I considered telling her about the strange man I had met just now, but dismissed the idea after some more thought.

I turned to the left, running down the hallway, wrenched the doorknob to my room and shoved the door open. My room is only big enough to fit my bed, my desk and swivel chair and give me two or three feet of unrestricted space. Although it may seem small, it's pretty big by my standards, so, whatever.

I flicked the light on, and plopped down onto my chair and swept my hands across the table to clear it, as it was cluttered with stationery, tissues and whatnots. I fumbled through my coat pockets and delicately pinched it between my forefinger and thumb. As much as I didn't want to take a pill that I didn't even know what it was, which, not to mention, had been given to me by a total stranger, I did not want to suffer any longer. I wanted to live my life happily, without needing to fear the contempt and ridicule I always received from my peers, teachers – virtually everyone, except my loving mother of course.

No longer would I be self-conscious, self-loathing and detested by everyone. I stared resolutely at the tablet one last time, before uncorking my water bottle, letting go of it and watching it dissolve slowly. I tipped the bottle into my mouth, chugging all that had been left in it and wiped my mouth dry with the back of my hand after I'd finished.

I sat still, buzzing with barely contained excitement. I didn't know what was going to happen. I knew that drugs such LSD could work some serious magic on the mind, but this probably wasn't it. I waited. A minute passed. Then five. Then ten. A whole half hour had passed, and nothing had happened. I drummed my finger on the table impatiently and spun around on my chair all the while waiting for something spectacular to happen.

After a whole hour had passed, I realised that the man had tricked me. Cursing myself for my stupidity, I retreated to my bed and for some reason, even though it was a bit past eight, I was already exhausted.

Talking to that conning idiot was what had probably left me so drained. I fluffed my pillow and got into a comfortable position. As I was on the verge of falling asleep, I thought I saw the man again, this time in my room and right beside me instead of in a back alley.

"Jake, you must go where the sun sets. If you want your life back, you must journey to the west." He told me, before my eyelids closed and I fell into a deep sleep.

I opened my eyes slowly, snapping them shut again as the sunlight stung my eyes. I cupped my hands over my eyes, squeezing my eyes hard to get rid of the grogginess and to acclimate to the unusually dazzling sun. I lethargically slap my hand onto the alarm clock, wanting it to shut up so I could get a few more minutes of sleep. I missed and hit something soft. Odd. I slapped at it again. Missed again. My eyes refocused onto the alarm clock – that is, where my alarm clock should have been. Instead, I was looking at dirt. Literal dirt – as in earth, dirt.

I stood up and looked around. I was surrounded by colossal trees with gnarled roots, interweaving and spreading over the dirt. All around me were these roots, forming endless networks which looked like they could be used for hunting. To trip an unfortunate creature escaping from the jaws of a predator. The canopy was thick and barely any sunlight could penetrate through the barrier of leaves, but I just so happened to be under a patch of glaring sunlight. Twigs and dead leaves carpeted the dirt floor, and brush sat along the trees. Apart from the occasional dapples of light, the darkness was pervasive and anything beyond ten, maybe fifteen metres, faded into nothingness. This felt like a dream – perhaps a lucid one. I had never had the fortune to experience one, but if I ever had one, this would be it.

I walked around tentatively for the first few steps, careful not to trip over the long finger-like projections. There was nothing but an endless gloom and just... trees. There was no chirping from birds, no chittering from insects... I became more agitated with each passing second. I was distraught. No skittering from mice, nor squirrels, nor raccoons, nor ANYTHING, for that matter. My heart began to beat harder and faster. 'Pull yourself together', I told myself. My heart rate slowed as I took slower and deeper breaths, and eventually regained composure. No signs of life. Okay. Maybe—

I could hear a hissing sound. My head snapped towards the direction it came from. I inched back slowly, one step at a time, until I was back to back with one of the trees. The hissing continues and my heart began pounding against my ribcage. I had been to a zoo before. I had handled a snake. Snakes didn't get this loud, and they definitely stopped to take breaths instead of hissing incessantly, like this one was. At first I couldn't see anything. Slowly, ever so slowly, the trunk of a snake appeared from the darkness. I'd thought that it was a tree at first, but realised it was wrong as it slithered closer and closer. It was mud brown, standing well over 10 feet, and sunlight glinted off its leathery scales. Its eyes were unreadable. Dark. Hateful.

"JAKE." It boomed. It was a guttural sound. Unnatural and utterly demonic. "I AM DECEIT. I HAVE FOOLED YOU MANY TIMES. YOU THOUGHT YOU HAD FRIENDS, BUT THEY WERE NEVER YOUR FRIENDS. YOU THOUGHT PEOPLE LIKED YOU. THEY SMILED WHEN THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT YOU, BUT THAT WAS JUST DERISION."

I hadn't a clue as to what it was raving about, but the icy tingle of fear was creeping up my spine all the same. I walked back a few steps and prepared to run, but lost my balance as my feet got caught on one of those damned appendages. My legs gave out and I collapsed onto the ground.

It hissed angrily and began charging at me, faster than any vehicle ever made, and its weight crushing twigs beneath it. I shut my eyes, begging death to arrive swiftly and painlessly. Ten seconds later, I still hadn't felt any pain, apart from the one in my ankles and my bum from falling over. I dared to open an eye. The snake was still there, and had only advanced a metre from before. I was bemused, until I saw that the twigs it was slithering over were not actually being crushed.

Without a moment's hesitation, I picked up a large stone and flung it at his head. Instead of hitting where his eyes should have been, it went straight through. I clambered to my feet and realised that it had merely been a projection, and that the snake was in fact just a regular snake.

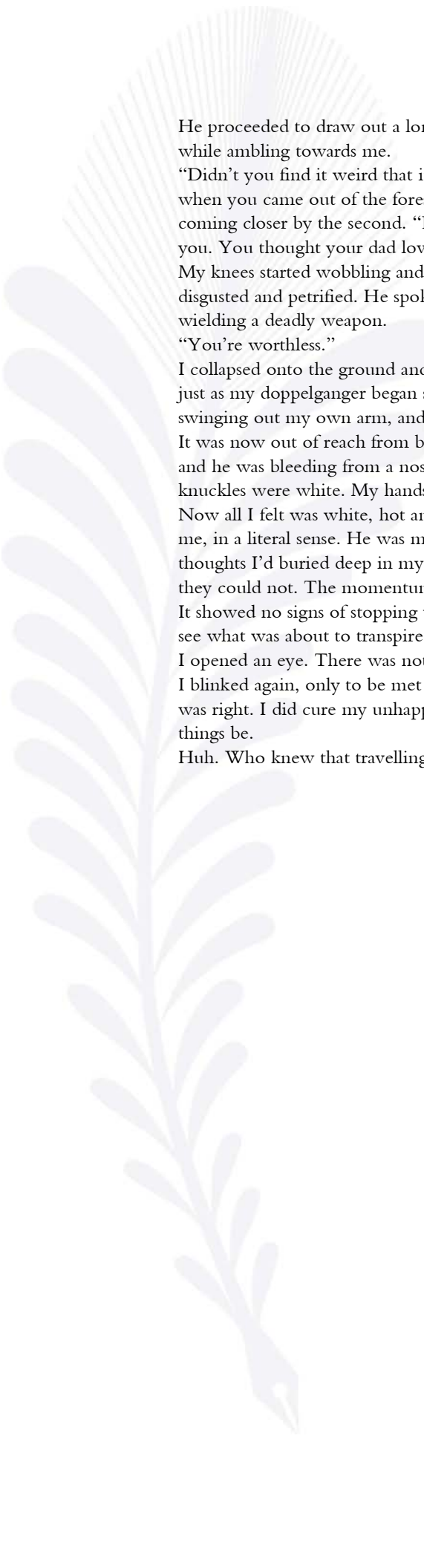
I laughed, from relief and the farce that had just scared the wits out of me and killed me. I dusted my pants off and realised that, again, I had managed to stumble into a patch of sunlight. The sun was setting, and the sky setting into a comfortable amber. I suddenly remembered the mysterious man's words... to 'journey to the west', I believe it was. I wiped a bead of sweat from my forehead which had just trickled down, and set off to the west.

What seemed like years passed, before I reached a clearing. The view was magnificent. The sky had brilliant hues of blue, interspersed occasionally by clouds. Mountains soared into the sky and the sound of life filled the air. I looked behind, and saw that the forest had disappeared. It had completely vanished. All the trees had been replaced by an expansive, relatively flat plain. In front of me, where I had exited the forest, was a pedestal. Atop it was a pill. It was exactly identical to the one the man had given me. It was probably what would bring me home. I smiled and grabbed at it. My hand shot straight through, just like the stone had when I'd thrown it at the abomination of a snake.

"Are you that gullible?" Someone asked from behind me.

I sighed, turning around slowly to face whoever was speaking. I was tired from all that had happened today already, but when my eyes settled on the figure in front of me, I did a double take and shoved a fist into my mouth to stop my stomach from rising to my throat. The person looked exactly like me, but worse. Sure, I'd seen myself in the mirror plenty of times. But looking at my mirror image, in person, magnified my self-loathing by a twofold. He looked exactly like me, but worse. I couldn't bear to stare at myself, or, rather, my doppelganger.

"What? You don't like me?" He taunted. "Don't you realise that I'm exactly the same as you? In body, mind, soul, and so on and so forth?" He cackled, relishing my horror.



He proceeded to draw out a long, wicked-looking dagger with a serrated edge, brandishing it in the air while ambling towards me.

“Didn’t you find it weird that it was nearly night when you left, and there was suddenly so much daylight when you came out of the forest?” He laughed again, jabbing the dagger deftly into the air several times, coming closer by the second. “Probably not. I mean, you believed your friends when they said they liked you. You thought your dad loved you, when instead, he left you and your mom. You’re sad.”

My knees started wobbling and I was doing all I could to keep myself standing. I was both ashamed, disgusted and petrified. He spoke the truth. I hated him more than anything else in the world, and he was wielding a deadly weapon.

“You’re worthless.”

I collapsed onto the ground and began sobbing. Hot, angry tears of shame and anger streaked down my face, just as my doppelganger began sprinting towards me. As he swung his arm to slash at me, I intercepted it by swinging out my own arm, and knocked the dagger out of his grip.

It was now out of reach from both of us, and I began pounding his face with my fists until his lips puffed up and he was bleeding from a nostril. I crawled over to the dagger and picked it up. I clasped the hilt until my knuckles were white. My hands were trembling. Gone was the fear and self-pity he had made me feel.

Now all I felt was white, hot anger. As I brought the dagger down, I realized that, in the end, he was still me, in a literal sense. He was me in every way. What he had said, had simply been a manifestation of the thoughts I’d buried deep in my mind. I had to accept the truth of it all. I was trying to stop my hands but they could not. The momentum, along with my full body weight was too great.

It showed no signs of stopping when the dagger was an inch from his eye. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see what was about to transpire.

I opened an eye. There was nothing in front of me. In fact, all around me was darkness.

I blinked again, only to be met with the friendly sight of my bedroom. I smile. Turns out the mystery man was right. I did cure my unhappiness(although the experiences were traumatising) and learnt to just... let things be.

Huh. Who knew that travelling west could lead to self-acceptance?



# Believe in Yourself

*SKH Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Tin, Tsz Kei – 15*

## Chapter 1

**K**am Shan Country Park is located in Sha Tin where monkeys are always found. As there was somebody caught feeding the monkeys illegally before, the monkeys are not afraid of humans anymore. However, there was a monkey which was unlike all the others. He could understand the language of human beings. He would run away as fast as he could even the tourists were 10 metres away from him. People thought that he might be just another monkey living in the forests which fears humans, but the fact wasn't like that.

This monkey was not only afraid of humans, but also a lot of other things such as climbing trees and picking bananas, etc. The only food source was from his parents. All of these characteristics were due to the horrible and unforgettable experience that he had in his childhood.

When he was a little monkey, he was much weaker than all his peers. Once he wanted to challenge himself and climb up the tree, his peers teased him. The monkey was so upset and he couldn't climb up the tree at the end as all his peers didn't believe in him, making him become reluctant to try anything new afterwards. Moreover, he was once attacked by a merciless man. Fortunately, the monkey didn't lose his life as he could escape with his lightning speed at the end. But trauma was hard to avoid. That's why he was riddled with scars and afraid of human beings.

In fact, the monkey wanted to be like the other monkeys but he couldn't face his childhood shadow. He didn't want to depend on his parents anymore, but to take care of his parents.

In the human world, many people were also influenced by their experiences badly.

Anthony, who was an office worker in a big company, didn't have any motivation to work. Once he made mistakes in his proposal, his boss scolded him and called him "Rubbish". Anthony became frustrated after that moment. He was unenthusiastic to face challenges and tasks. Actually, his dream was being a boss. But he lost the motivation to be one starting from that moment.

Other than this office worker, there was a young athlete called John who became depressed after a certain moment. He was a high jumper on the Hong Kong Athletics team before. A few years ago, John joined an international competition. In that competition, John failed his trial of 2m. All of the audiences were shocked as they thought John could have a better record. For sure, the one who was shocked the most was John himself. When he fell on the mattress, he hurt his waist. Due to the disappointment and the injury, John quit the team. He gave up his high jumper dream.

An ex-convict, Benson, became extremely afraid of the world after he was released from jail half a year ago. He had a poor self-image as every inmate did since he thought the public wouldn't accept him. Dreaming of working in a café, he attended the interview of a café once. During the interview, he suddenly left when the boss asked him to talk about his life. He couldn't tell lies and didn't have the courage to tell the truth that he was sentenced to jail before.

## Chapter 2

One day, when the monkey, Anthony, John and Benson were taking a rest, a letter appeared in front of them. They were astonished by the weird phenomenon. They opened the letter with trembling hands. A lot of words were written on the letter.

"Dear dreamers,

I know your mind very well. The shadow stays and is affecting you badly, right? I now invite you to be on an adventure which can change you drastically. No matter you are interested in the adventure or not, you ought to find me at 9am tomorrow at Kam Shan Country Park. See you tomorrow!

From Dream

Deity"

Although they all felt strange, they decided to go as this person could really read their mind and know they had trauma.

When all of them were in the country park the next day, they searched around and contemplated where this person could be hiding. Some shining symbols appeared on the ground while they were searching around. Both humans and the monkey panicked and almost fainted. The position where the monkey was sitting was surrounded by a glittering circle.

In front of the three people, there were shining arrows pointing at a particular direction. Without any other hints, they could only blindly follow the way directed by the arrows. They kept walking forwards and met each other at a junction. The three arrows combined to become a big arrow and pointed to one direction. All of them noticed that they were going to the same destination and finding the same person. That's why they suddenly greeted each other.

After they had followed the arrows for a certain period of time, the arrows disappeared and they saw the monkey in front of them. Anthony, John and Benson all thought that the monkey was "Dream Deity". The monkey thought that Anthony, John and Benson were the deities. Suddenly, they heard a voice from somewhere, "Hello everyone." All heads turned. Soon, an elegant woman appeared in front of them. "Are you willing to take the challenge and join the adventure?" All of them nodded without hesitation as they thought this might be the only chance to change their lives.

Wind blew, ground shook, and leaves fell. All of them felt that there were some changes in their bodies. It seemed that they got some mysterious power. "I've given you something. You need to explore it by yourself. I won't tell you anything about it. Good luck! Get this map and start your adventure." The deity handed them a magic carpet which could take them to everywhere in the world.

A point marked with "Golden Bauhinia Square" on the map was flashing. The adventure began.

### Chapter 3

When they arrived, they didn't know where to go. Suddenly, a lot of fog came out from the back of the Golden Bauhinia. A massive, black, scaring spider appeared. His eight legs were covered with some fur and had some stripes. It was as horrible as the one that might only appear in our nightmare.

All of them were shrouded in the purple fog. The passers-by outside the shroud couldn't see them. The spider kept moving towards them. However, no one made a sound or moved a step as they were too afraid and didn't know what to do.

Anthony murmured with a shaking voice, "We will die if we continue doing nothing..." One step, two steps, three steps. The spider was just 3 steps away from them. Benson, the one who was standing at the head of line, shivered with tense. Under the nervous condition, Benson landed the spider a blow on its eye with extraordinary power. The spider stepped back as the punch was too powerful. The fog kept coming out with a pleasant smell which might make the people and the monkey faint. It was hard to find where the spider was. At that moment, Benson concentrated and kept focusing on searching the spider. When he felt something fluffy, he punched upwards with courage. Benson's super power was uncovered. It was his extraordinary power and outstanding concentration ability.

After the spider had received numerous punches, it surrendered. The spider turned a violet crystal on the ground. "We'd better keep the crystal well as I think that might help our future plans," said Anthony. They took out the map again and the point marked with "Elephant Trunk Hill" was flashing, telling them the second mission point.

### Chapter 4

Elephant Trunk Hill is a famous hill in Guilin, Guangxi. The lake surface was as smooth as a mirror. The trees were emerald in colour. When they ran nearer to the cave, they discovered a shining golden box with "Dream" written on the surface. Anthony made use of his greatest power to produce the largest force to take the box which was stuck on the ground. He successfully lifted the box.

After a short while, they found an elephant behind them! The elephant was the soul of the killed elephant in the Great Trunk Hill. It turned into a devil and learnt human language after he was killed and sealed in the Stone Mountain. He shouted with anger, "Who is destroying my land?" They escaped by climbing up the stairs and ran in different directions. However, when they reached the top of the mountain, there was no way to go further.

“You can choose to fight with me but I can tell you that you won’t defeat me.” the elephant said with an evil smile. The elephant walked towards them and compelled them to walk to the edge of the cliff. The monkey was highly concentrated as he wanted to find out his superpower. Some aura things flew thoroughly in his

body. Numerous identical monkeys formed a circle surrounding the elephant. One of the monkeys hopped and kicked the elephant. The elephant was irritated and struck back by his trunk. When his trunk touched the monkey, the monkey disappeared. The other monkeys kept running around and distracted the elephant. The real monkey acknowledged that his power was shadow clone technique. He could also see that there was a sword far away behind him. But if he ran to pick up the sword, the elephant must notice that he was the real one. He wanted to make some noise and let his teammates know so he shouted. At the beginning, he thought that the voice he made was just some noise. However, when

Anthony, Benson and John heard the voice, they rushed to the sword. “I am..... able to speak human language?” A question popped up in the monkey’s mind. He tried to speak more and express the idea that he was thinking. “Monkeys are responsible for distracting the elephant and you guys find the best timing to attack him!” The monkey yelled. In fact, the elephant heard what the monkey said and he could discover the real monkey. Nevertheless, he could not chase the real monkey as the other monkeys kept attacking him. At the time two monkeys covered the elephant’s eyes, John attacked the elephant with the sword. The elephant turned into some blue ashes and rose up to the sky. All the fake monkeys disappeared. It seemed that the sword was also unusual. Therefore, they decided to keep the sword as well. John told the monkey, “You are so fantastic! Originally I thought that you can only understand human language but you can speak it!” The monkey smiled joyfully as someone praised him. Another reason why he became delighted was that he discovered that he didn’t fear humans anymore. He stayed with 3 people from the beginning of the adventure.

The map was taken out again. The point marked with “Lugu Lake” was shining brightly.

## Chapter 5

The “Dream Team” explored couldn’t find anything special in the Lugu Lake. The adventure had already started for three days. They were all exhausted and leaned on the tree for a rest.

When John’s back touched the tree bark, he felt something soft. He turned around and saw a pair of big eyes. The hissing of the serpent scared John and he fell back.

A voice came from the serpent, saying, “Who are you guys? It’s so bold and rude of you to lean on me.”

John was terrified and said, “Sorry.....I couldn’t see you”

“Are you ignoring my existence? No matter humans or animals, everyone ignores and hates my existence. I hate the world!” the serpent said in a very agitated state.

The serpent kept moving forwards and approaching John. He opened his mouth and the sharp fangs were clearly seen. If John was bitten by the serpent, he could hardly stay alive. He held the serpent’s body tightly and suddenly the skin of the serpent turned black. Some white vapour was liberated from the skin.

The serpent said entreatingly, “Please don’t burn my skin! Sorry! Forgive me please!” John felt weird as the serpent surrendered so easily. He loosened his grip. “It’s my fault to have the idea to hurt you. Sorry. My skin is the only worthy part of my life. It is a treasure for me,” The serpent said.

John asked, “Why did you say your skin is the ONLY worthy part?”

“A few years ago, I lived in a zoo with my family members. When tourists visited the zoo, they only ignored me and walked past. No one would like to stop for a minute and take a picture of me. Even my family members hated me a lot because of my physical appearance. I prayed day and night, begging Lord to help me escape. One day, I could change my skin colour corresponding to the environment just like what chameleons can. I can also understand and speak the human language. I left the zoo and my family. Without this ability, I couldn’t escape from the horrible family and protect myself in this ruthless world,” the serpent said.

John said with sympathy, “Oh poor you!” He gently stroked the serpent’s skin. The black part turned back the original colour.

Knowing there was something mysterious in his hands, John found Anthony to do a test. He put his hands over Anthony’s bruise. The bruise disappeared! John understood that he had a pair of “Magic hands”. He could do whatever he wanted by his hands corresponding to his mind.

The serpent gave them a jade as a gift. They put the jade into one of the bags and continued their adventure. Checking the map, they discovered the next mission point was the Naypyidaw in Myanmar. The adventure carried on.

## Chapter 6

The capital city of Myanmar, Naypyidaw, was filled with the bizarre feeling when they arrived at night. All of them stood in front of the door of the Water Fountain Garden. The unusual quiet environment made the atmosphere more peculiar.

When they moved one step forward, there was a sound which was like the cracking of the ground. Anthony led the team with courage and moved forward step by step. Four bats flew out from the trees nearby with a distracting sound.

The “Dream Team” couldn’t even move one step since the defence of the bats was so strong. They tried to jump higher and hit them. None of them could reach the height except Anthony. Anthony could jump as high as the gate. He made use of the sword they got to kill the bats one by one. The sword was stained with the blood of the bats. The final superpower was uncovered.

The team rushed into the garden. The shining golden box with the word “Dream” appeared again. They could successfully open the box this time.

Anthony opened the folded paper inside the box. It was the national flag of India. After the box was closed, the word on the box changed. “Good luck!” was shown on the box. The hint was given in a specific way this time. They sensed that the next mission point might be the final mission point.

All of them sat on the magic carpet with excitement, wondering what would happen in the final destination.

## Chapter 7

The magic carpet took them to the Qutub Minar, a grand building located in India. Different monsters were already standing in front of the tower when they arrived.

The “Dream Team” had fought so hard throughout the whole journey. If they were able to wisely use the abilities, they could definitely defeat the monsters.

Attacks came from all sides. But all of them were not afraid as they were a team. They believed in each other.

John made use of his Magic Hands to heat the metal near him. After heating the metal objects, he hurled them at the monsters. Many of them were burnt and fell down. With the shadow clone technique of the monkey, many monsters were distracted and didn’t know where to escape. When they got lost, Benson, John or Anthony would give those punches, kicks or even attack with the metal objects. The wonderful cooperation between them gave a great threat to the monsters. Only the boss still remained alive. The monkey came up with an idea. He thought that the jade and violet crystal they got must have some functions. He quietly walked backward and took the bag. The monkey cut the crystal and jade with the sword stained with the blood of bats. Some violet and green powder was left on the sword. Suddenly, many identical monkeys appeared again. The boss wanted to concentrate but he couldn’t. The real monkey inserted the sword into the abdomen of the boss. The boss died.


The “Dream Team” succeeded and shouted, “Hurray!” A letter fell from the sky.

“Dear dreamers,

You all have done a good job. Now I would like to tell you the main idea of success.

Be confident. Don’t be afraid. Even you don’t have superhuman abilities. You can achieve what you want if you believe in yourself.

Throughout the adventure, you have encountered a lot of challenges. You can do it not just because you have superpower, but also the courage of yourself. The power I’ve given will belong to you guys. You have a permanent mission, which is to make use of the power to help others. If you become self-abasing again, all the superpowers will disappear.



Wish you a happy life. Good Luck!  
From Dream Deity”

They looked at each other and smiled.  
The “Dream Team” gained the courage from the trip. When they went back to the places they belonged to, all of them achieved their dreams without using the superpower.

Believe in yourself.



# The First and Final Betrayal

*SKH Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Tso, Long Hin – 16*

‘I, with the authority given by the Most High, found the defendant, Wujing, guilty,’ the judge expressionlessly enunciated.

At the strike of the judge’s gavel, Wujing closed his eyes and gasped. The whole court sprang into wild laughter and revelry.

‘According to the law, Wujing will be sentenced to death,’ the judge remained unmoved. In a hurry, he rose and bowed in reverence. All did likewise in giggles and chuckles here and there.

Two bailiffs grabbed him by his arms and dragged him back toward the exit. Before the door closed in his face, throngs of these spectators were still absorbed in their ridicules.

‘I still can’t figure out why you would do that,’ said one of the guards when taking him up to the cubicle, but he only heard the echoes of his own voice in the corridor.

‘Get in then,’ the guard stared in disrespect. ‘Silence is not always gold, moron.’

The key clanged in the keyhole and then Wujing was all alone. He lay on the dry hay, with his eyes ablaze.

A hiss. That was a familiar one. He sprang up immediately and heeded the surrounding. Out from the corner crawled a snake. It scurried through the disheveled hay, serpentine between invisibility and visibility, and then emerged again at his feet. Its forked tongue protruded again. A disquieting hiss ensued.

Wujing’s eyes widened, his lips started trembling, and his throat clogged. He retrieved his legs as slowly as he could, making his movement indiscernible. The snake seemed to be half-hearted about his presence, veering away from him and slipping off through the bars.

He let out a sigh of relief. He stretched his body again after making sure there were no more snakes around. It was not long ago when he last saw a serpent.

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That one was gigantic. It coiled around the trunk of an old fig tree. Its forked tongue jutted out into the air, searching in the air, searching for him.

A hiss again. On that day it drew his attention. He looked at the tree. Somehow the serpent spoke audibly into his heart.

‘Hi, Wujing...’

He was not too surprised. He knew very well what it was. It could be nothing but for the embodiment of evilness itself. It dragged its minions around with it every day to look for those they could devour. Three years of being embroiled in battles with these beings he also knew perfectly well what they ultimately wanted: his master’s body, synonymous with life eternal. But instead of backing off, he drew himself closer to it.

‘Wujing, I need your help here,’ in his mind the serpent uttered. He knew something was going awry but he was not afraid of opening this can of worms. ‘I need your help here. I want you to tell me where your master is.’

Wujing furrowed his brows. Snippets of memories emerged—when his brothers were out in the battlefield he could only sit on the bench drily. When his brothers were messing around, he was going extra miles to do good for his master but got no appreciation.

He was reminded of that time when there was a shrine in the city in which they sojourned and this is place where his master was teaching. A harlot went into the crowd and elbowed her way through until Xangzhang saw her.

She knelt down and fished out an alabaster jar from her bag. She wound open the lid and perfume pervaded the room. Xangzhang smiled at her with placidity. She then gave it to him, saying that she would like to give everything if that could give her true pleasure instead of selling her own body for some gods that she did not know.

Wujing sensed the approach of an unclean human, as well as a chance for him to show his reverence for his master. He immediately stepped forward to block her from moving forward. He opined that she should give the alabaster jar to the needy instead of giving it to his master.

‘Jing,’ Xangzhang frowned, eyeing him sternly with knitted brows. ‘Why did you stop this woman from approaching me? Did I not tell you that I am here to bring ultimate peace to all who are manacled by earthly pleasures?’

Breathing hard and panting, Wujing felt choked by his master’s injustice. He had served his master for years and battled with every monster to keep him safe but now he chose a random harlot over him. He thought he had done enough to manifest his loyalty to his master. He thought his endeavors to do good could please his master. But in the end he could not even hear a word of favor from him.

Each snippet haunted him. He tried to dispel these ideas but they were just glued to his mind. It was like lice on his head. Once they dropped an egg on his scalp, it would evolve into a thousand more of its ilk.

‘You will just have to kiss his cheek to greet him when you see him,’ the serpent said. ‘Then we would have access to him.’

‘They would never know who did it. And we would give you whatever you wanted.’

On the spur of the moment, it was more about revenge than about power. Wujing clenched his fists, gritting and gnashing. He could not fathom his animosity toward them. Maybe this had been hoarded in his heart long ago, suppressed and undermined from time to time to retain his dignity before his brothers. Now it was an opportunity for it to break loose, and he craved for an opportunity like this.

‘Okay.’

It was this short and succinct reply that delivered him up to this ordeal filled with remorse and pain. Indeed, no one knew who had blown a whistle to alert his master. No one except himself. When he winked, that serpent disappeared.

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He walked back to the bungalow they rented. It was like a dream to him, bewildered by his own vision of the serpent. He knocked on the door. It was Wuhung who received him.

‘Hey brother,’ he threw his arms around him. ‘Where have you been? We’ll eat whoever comes by if we delay our dinner for one more second.’

He squeezed a smile. Stepping into the house he found his master looking at him. He smiled at him warmly. A smile that could only be given to a family member. It suddenly felt ghost-silent except for his own heartbeat seeing that smile. Wujing laid down his Yue Yee Magic Staff; Bajie laid down his tripod; Xangzhang laid down his scepter. All these were essential in guarding their own safety but now they laid them all down simply because after all these years their trust in one another became insurmountable. Their interdependence became an airtight bastion against the trespasses of the evil. He would not like to smirch this beautiful picture.

Wuhung led him to his seat and tucked him in. Wujing looked at what was on the desk. Naan, curry, unleavened bread and water. No ambrosia and nectar, but only homemade dishes.

That was a very delightful meal: Bajie as usual gorged on naans and curry, sweeping everything edible into his mouth. Wuhung was on the verge of poking us with his magic stick, shrieking, “Master needs to eat as well!” Xangzhang laughed lightly enjoying their rapport, giggling while asking them to sit down.

‘Wujing,’ said Xangzhang, ‘why don’t you eat with us?’

Wujing reckoned he might have been trembling when he obeyed his master and started eating. He dared not look at what sort of expression there was on his face, he could picture him slightly lowering his chin, looking at him from that angle and trying to devour him with the penetrating gaze. He always felt like his master had the perfect knowledge about what they were thinking even before they uttered a word.

‘Are you alright, Jing?’ Wuhung was worried, looking at him from across the table. Bajie held his hand still, having half a piece of naan in his mouth staring at Wujing.

He could immediately feel his face cool down and pallor crawled up his face. He wanted to say something like “I am alright. Probably I’ve caught a cold” to brush them off but he could not. He could not utter a word that contained a grain of sincerity in the face of his master.

His master came to his rescue. He stood up from his seat and went up to one corner of the hut, coming back with a pot of water.

The whole house fell into complete silence, except for the gentle jingle of the metal lid against the handle. Xangzhang slowly poised it on the ground in front of Wuhung, rolled up his sleeves and took off the towel wrapped around his waist.

‘Gimme your feet,’ Xangzhang said placidly.

‘What do you want, master?’ Wuhung asked with his mouth agape, taking his feet aback. ‘You can’t wash my feet for me. You are my master!’

Xangzhang looked up, wringing the sodden towel. 'Wuhung, I came here to serve, not to be served; to forgive, and not to hate.'

Wuhung was silenced. He could speak no more but reached his feet out. They were filthy, speckled and bruised. Xangzhang held them still and touched on the cuts.

'Do they hurt?' he asked, and Wuhung nodded. He then gingerly pecked on those cuts with the towel, wiping away the filthy pocks on the side and soothing the bruised areas. Wuhung's mien was a concoction of many feelings, from embarrassment, shame, gladness to sadness. To their bewilderment, he picked up the pot again and placed it in front of Wujing. He reached out his hands signaling him to do the same.

Wujing recalled his feet being much worse than those of Wuhung: some parts were purple and some blue. Toes were deformed and nails crooked. One side was dotted and one side blotched. Even he himself felt deterred to look at them.

But Xangzhang just held his feet gently as if they were fragile glass. 'I came here to forgive, not to hate,' he repeated, and then went on to clean his feet. He soaked the towel. His hands were warm but coarse. He was careful not to touch his wounds. Then he did to him the same as what he did to Wuhung. Wujing could not distinguish if that was an illusion or it really happened. When what it seemed to be a religious ritual was completed, he felt the sourness and pain slipping away.

Wujing looked at his master, subconsciously scratching at the rim of his seat pad. It wrinkled and his brows also wrinkled. This discomforted him. His master's gentleness disconcerted him; his lowliness confounded him; his humility unsettled him. He had a sudden strong urge to push him away, but he fought back his urge.

The master then moved on to Bajie and did all the same. Wujing could not pay any more attention. His mind was tied to a spinning wheel. One thing orbiting him was the words the Serpent said to him.

"Kiss him."

His master knelt down and washed his fellowman's feet.

"Kiss him."

His master soaked the towel in the pot again.

"Kiss him."

His master stood up with the towel and pot in his arms. Wujing went up to him and hugged him.

'Thank you, master,' said he, pecking on the master's cheek.

It happened so fast. Black smoke flooded the house. Wujing heard his brothers yelling, "Master?" over and over. He heard Bajie reach out for his tripod and Wuhung for his magic staff. He also heard himself screaming at the top of his throat for no reason. But he could not hear his master.

The smoke wheeled around him and dissipated in a flash. When he opened his eyes, he could only see an empty bungalow with only himself.

On the desk placed thirty silver coins. He knew it was his remuneration for betraying his master. And he realized at that moment that he was blinded all along by that serpent. All the jealousy and hatred made him the perfect decoy to lure his master into the sinister trap. He limped toward the desk and in fury swept all the coins off the desk. He looked at the puddle of water on the ground, wherein he found the reflection of an empty-headed creature controlled by temerity and vanity.

He knew where his master and his brothers would be in— the stone table, on which prisoners on death row would be executed. They would force him to eat the humble pie before eating him themselves by pushing this dignified monk, who was appointed to bust the power of the evil through learning the sacred text in India, onto that ominous table.

He had never run any faster in his life. The only thing revolving around his head was to save his master from the jaws of the devil as well as repent from his collusion with those beings. If his master would like to wash his filthy feet, he would also like to forgive his obnoxious acts.

When he got there, in his retrospect, his master was already headless. Bits of his body were distributed among those beings. The gore and blood might have benumbed his fellowmen, so much so that they could only stand there dumbfounded and ossified. The serpent was now in human form. Biting off a part of his master's heart gave him some pleasure. As he was laughing out loud in frenzy, he spotted Wujing.

'Thanks so much, Jing,' he said with blood dripping from his mouth. 'You are now half as hypocritical as your master.'

His sonorous laughter brought about Wujing's breakdown. He sat on the ground hugging his knees. Between his knees he could only hear his own heartbeat and outcry. Only if he could completely silence the world, he could find peace. But then a deafening screech interrupted him.

He looked up. The serpent looked heavenward and started scratching his throat. His minions started to do likewise. In a few minutes the serpent's face turned purple and with the eyes gouged out. He let out his final breath and fell onto the ground. Like domino the others fell on the ground one by one. And then all the revelry died down.

The stone table was bloodstained to save the world through the sacrifice of an innocent soul. Wujing would give up everything to be dying on his master's behalf. He would rather to be betrayed by his loved ones instead of betraying his loved ones.

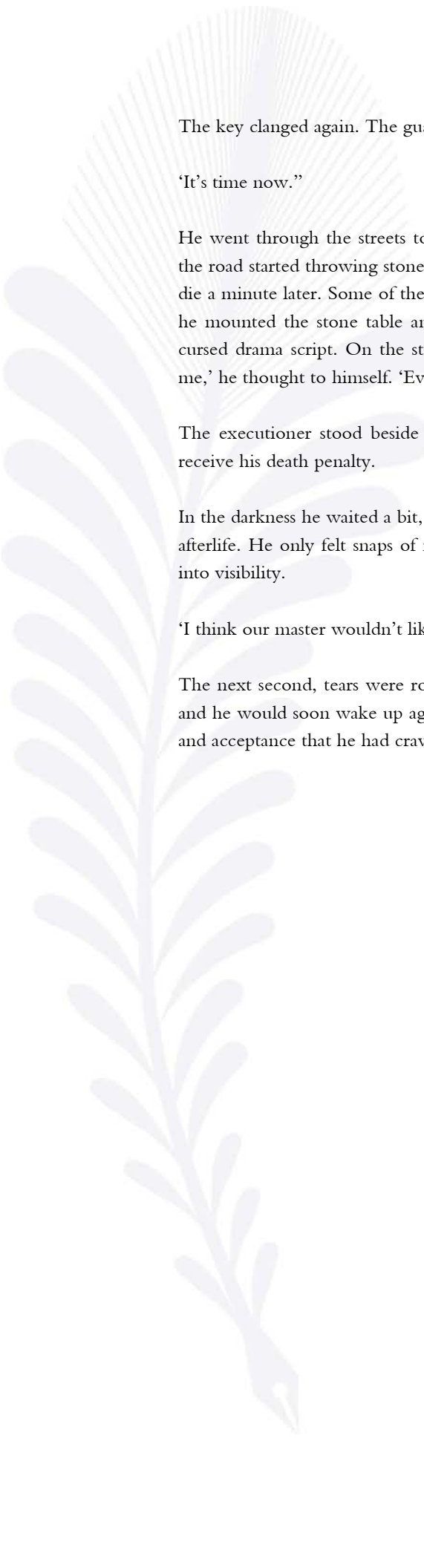
The regional authority arrived soon after. It dawned on Wujing that his master was the greatest decoy. Xangzhang was the bait leading the serpent to Wujing, and ultimately making it run headlong to its own destruction. As the perfect poison, Xangzhang assassinated the father of all killers and of all guiles. All along Wujing and his fellowmen were told by the master to look for the sacred text in the west so that the power of the evil would be busted forever and all people could be in peace. It turned out he was the word itself. He busted the power of the evil and brought ultimate peace to the whole world.

After that Wujing went back to the hut and picked up all thirty silver coins, before turning himself in to the regional authority. He confessed how he had not resisted the temptation of the evil but instead colluded with them for only thirty silver coins. His betrayal against his beloved master only earned him thirty cold coins. What an irony.

Was death his due penalty? For him it was not. In the final moment he was still plotting to blot out his master, who would like to empty himself to cleanse his defiled feet and corrupt soul. He deserved to be thrashed in hell for the rest of his life along with all those evil beings.

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The key clanged again. The guards broke his remorseful reverie.

‘It’s time now.’

He went through the streets to the stone table. The crowd’s bellow of rage was earsplitting. People along the road started throwing stones at him and the guards did not bother to protect someone who was going to die a minute later. Some of the stones hit his back and some hit his head. He did not feel pain though, until he mounted the stone table and saw in his memory his master’s death re-enacted in front of him like a cursed drama script. On the stone table he could not see his brothers in the crowd. ‘They should despise me,’ he thought to himself. ‘Even seeing me disgusted them.’

The executioner stood beside him and raised his sword up in mid-air. Wujing closed his eyes ready to receive his death penalty.

In the darkness he waited a bit, expecting a sharp bolt of pain on his nape and then he would wake up in the afterlife. He only felt snaps of icy wind in the end. When he opened his eyes, his long-lost brothers leapt into visibility.

‘I think our master wouldn’t like you to die either,’ said Wuhung.

The next second, tears were rolling down his cheeks. Now even though he realized this was only a dream and he would soon wake up again in hell, he already felt contented. At least he had received the forgiveness and acceptance that he had craved for all along.

# The New Journey to the West

*St Mark's School, Young, Ho Ken 15*

## Prologue: The Disappearance

“**D**ong...” The grand clock chimed as visitors grabbed their last chance to take photos of the Grand Taj Mahal.

“Finally... a pleasant day without despicable robbers and sly thieves,” Buddha muttered as he scanned around the most famous tourist spot of India. Buddha was a janitor in the mausoleum. Since the Indian News reported that one of the most ancient and original Buddhist scripture was kept in the attic of Taj Mahal, burglars from all over the world had flocked to the once peaceful and holy place, trying to steal the precious and sacred book. Although Taj Mahal was heavily guarded by the latest security devices and gadgets, Buddha knew that they would mean nothing to the true devils and demons.

As Buddha climbed up the attic and inspected the safe to make a final check, he suddenly felt something strange...

Something shiny was reflecting from the impeccable floor. Buddha peered upwards and saw a sniper aiming at him with a rifle from the rooftop. A cunning and merciless smile flickered across the face of the intruder, sending chills down Buddha's spine.

“Boom!” All in a sudden the attic was filled with smoke and mist. Buddha tried to press the alarm, but the tear gas had almost paralysed him. When the smoke was cleared, there was nobody except him.

The safe was opened. The holy book was gone. Instead, there was a note with a drawing of a vulture, smiling maliciously to the dumbfounded Buddha.

## Chapter 1: The Agency

As usual, I was sitting in my office at the Tang's Detective Agency, staring at the ceiling and wondering about the purpose of life. People called me Master Tang. I had three very peculiar disciples. The first one was Monkey King. King was good at martial arts. He was quick, creative and energetic. But sometimes, he could be impulsive, rash and reckless. I had always told him to slow down. But whenever I was giving him advice, he complained that I was causing him severe headache by murmuring in his ears.

My second disciple was called Piggy. He was lazy and gluttonous. He was the three-time champion at the Hamburger Eating Contest. He could have won many more champions had he not been banned forever from the contest for eating too much and causing the organiser to go bankrupt.

My third and last disciple was called Sandy. He was boring. He didn't speak much. But whenever he spoke, he could be quite pedantic, and sometimes, insightful. I remembered I once said to Sandy, “Hey, Sandy, do you know you are as bored as a log?”

“With respect, my Master,” he replied in his upmost courtesy, “A log is a piece of wood. It can't have any feeling, let alone boredom.” I was speechless.

As for myself, I liked to read different kinds of books: psychology, theology, criminology, astrology, biology, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, epistemology, pathology, geology, meteorology, topology... the list can go on and on. Recently, I had been fascinated by occultism and divination. Today, I had a very strange feeling. So I drew a card (I always had a deck of cards of twenty six alphabets in my drawer). It was a G. I was wondering what it meant, and then I heard, “Guest!”

## Chapter 2: The Guest

Piggy was proclaiming, “A guest, everybody!” He was opening the office door and ushering a guest into our office. We hadn’t had any guest for a long time, and so for an instant moment, we didn’t know what to do.

Monkey King was the quickest to respond, “Have a seat, pal.”

The guest was sitting in our crummy sofa that would basically suck your whole body in. I took a look at our guest. He was bald and old, with a funny and flowing beard, kind of like Dumbledore’s, if you knew who I meant.

I said, “Coffee or tea?”

“Master, we don’t have any coffee or tea,” Sandy whispered in my ear.

“Oh, how about some water?” I was hoping at least we had water.

“Thanks but no thanks,” our guest said, “My name is Buddha. I want you to help me find a lost book.”

I was a bit surprised. Piggy said, “We find lost dogs, lost cats, lost husbands, lost wives, lost sons, lost daughters, but we never find any lost book!”

“No, no, no,” I said instantly when I was actually meaning to say yes, “Yes, yes, yes, we can find you anything, old pal,” I added desperately, “Copy books, picture books, drawing books, phone books, story books, children books, adult books, old books, new books, e-books, audio books. Any books you like.”

The fact was that we hadn’t had any business for a long time, and I could do even for a lost pen or a lost shoe.

“Good,” Buddha said slowly, “You know, it is not an ordinary book. It is a sacred book. It is the Book of Ultimate Wisdom, one of the ancient Buddhist scriptures. It was stolen by some monsters and evils in India. You and your disciples should be able to find it.”

Monkey King interjected, “It’s okay, man. We can find anything, and I can beat those scumbags for you. Free of charge.”

“He meant the beating part,” I added hastily, “We do charge a very modest fee for finding your lost property.”

“Ah, money,” Buddha said, “I can pay you \$100,000 plus any expenses you’d incur in your journey.”

I responded immediately, “Deal!” Actually, I was prepared to accept even half of it.

“But mind you, son,” Buddha sounded very seriously, “When I said monsters and evils, I was not being figurative. You will encounter unspeakable and dark forces which would stop you at all costs. For what I know, they are the Bulky Bully, the Sly Spider and the Speedy Skeleton.”

Monkey King said, “No problem. I can’t wait to beat those monsters. Just tell me where they are hiding.”

“The Vulture Peak, son.”

## Chapter 3: The Journey begins

The next day we found ourselves sitting on a private jet to India. Buddha was surely wealthy.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to India. The local time is 1040 and the temperature is 20 degrees. For your safety and comfort, please remain seated with your seatbelt fastened until the Captain turns off the Fasten Seat Belt sign,” a soothing voice came from the loud speaker.

Monkey King, as usual, couldn’t wait to unbuckle and jump off the plane. I had a strange feeling that his wish would be granted.

“It is curious, Master,” Sandy said suddenly, pointing at the window, “There is a fighter jet flying very close to us.”

We all looked across the windows. Yes, the fighter jet was incredibly close to our plane, and I could almost see the smile of the pilot.

Suddenly, the pilot winked at me, and to my horror, a missile was launched from the fighter jet towards our direction.

“Boom!” We were hit. I saw smoke coming out from a wing of our plane, and it was diving down real fast.

“Go, man!” Monkey King was throwing some parachutes to us. The pilot and the stewardess were already wearing the parachutes and jumping off the plane.

Before I know it, my three disciples and I were dashing towards the emergency exit with our parachutes on.

“Jump, man!” Monkey King was shouting to us.

“Yes, Brother King,” Sandy said matter-of-factly, “Is that high enough?” He jumped up for a few inches.

“Off the plane, idiot,” Monkey King pushed Sandy and Pigsy off the plane. He then grasped me close to his chest, the next thing in view was nothing but the big deep sapphire ocean.

## Chapter 4: The Speedy Skeleton

Could pigs swim? I didn’t quite know, but surely they could float. My three disciples and I were landing on the Indian Ocean from 3,000 feet above. I thought we would drown.

But Pigsy practically blew up his big belly and floated effortlessly in the sea. Monkey King, Sandy and I grabbed Pigsy’s hands and legs, and we floated safely towards the shore.

Yes, I forgot to mention. My three disciples were not ordinary men. They were sort of like the X-men, with very peculiar and extraordinary abilities which would come in handy when we were in danger.

When we were tidying up ourselves on the beach, a very tall and lean man suddenly appeared.

“How dare you come to the Vulture Peak?” he said spitefully.

“We come to get the Book of Ultimate Wisdom back,” shouted Monkey King, “Hand it back, or you will taste my fist.”

“Ha, ha, ha, if this filthy pig can run faster than me,” Skeleton was pointing at Pigsy, “I will tell you where the book is.”

Monkey King urged Pigsy on, “Go, race with him.”

“How can I?” Pigsy moaned, “You see, he is lean and fit. He must run faster than light.” Pigsy was not incorrect, that man’s built gave him the inherent advantage over Pigsy. He was wiry and swift, he must be Speedy Skeleton.

“Brother, light can’t run,” Sandy said plainly, “So, he mustn’t run faster than light.”

Skeleton snarled, “We run from here to the other end of the beach.”

It must be about 1,000 m, I was thinking. And there was no way Pigsy could win.

“Brother, I will help you,” Sandy whispered in the ear of Pigsy.

“Ready, set,” Skeleton was running away already, “Go!”

Pigsy bit his lips, “Okay.” He was running, slightly faster than a snarl.

Monkey King and I were staring at Sandy to see how he could help. Sandy was murmuring something in his mouth.

Skeleton had been running for about 800 m, and Pigsy was about 100 m behind. Then, suddenly, a wall of sand was rising up from the beach and blocking the way of Skeleton. Skeleton was running too fast to stop, and he hit the wall hard. It was actually too hard that he was knocked unconscious. His nose and mouth were covered with sand.

“Yes, I forgot,” Monkey King said.

Sandy was called Sandy for a reason. He had the ability to summon dust and sand and change their shape to whatever he wanted.

“Hurry, up the hill. One down, two more to go.” Monkey King said.

## **Chapter 5: The Sly Spider**

We were running uphill. When we were almost at the top, a slender woman came in sight.

“Hey, smarties, why hurry?” Her voice was soft and mesmerising. It made you want to sleep.

“Yeah, Master, why don’t we take a rest?” Piggy was yawning.

“No, we need to get to the hilltop before it’s dark.” I said, although I was dead tired.

Suddenly, an enormous web of silk was flung at us. The web was like a huge net, covering the four of us tightly. We could barely move.

“Hey, hey,” the woman had morphed into a big spider, “No one has ever escaped from my sticky web.” She was smirking at us.

“Master, she must be the Sly Spider,” Monkey King was struggling, but the web was too sticky and too tight.

“Yes. She is one of the demons mentioned by Buddha,” I said helplessly.

Meanwhile, Pigsy and Sandy had fainted and became unconscious. They were suffering from arachnophobia, a kind of fear of spiders and hairy insects. Suddenly, I remembered I had once read a book about entomology, the study of insects. “What are spiders afraid of?” I was thinking very hard.

“Wasps!” I shouted, “Yes, wasps!”

Sly Spider turned pale on hearing wasps.

“Monkey, change to a wasp! Quick!” I yelled.

Monkey King had the supernatural capability of 72 transfigurations. He could transfigure himself into any form or creature. All of a sudden, Monkey King had transformed into a big wasp. He used his sting to sting Sly Spider, and she was immediately paralyzed and collapsed onto the ground.

We were then freed by Monkey King.

“Wake up, Pigsy and Sandy,” he said excitedly, “We have one more to beat.”

## **Chapter 6: The Bulky Bully**

We had run to the top of the Vulture Peak. There was a temple. Guarding the entrance of the temple was a huge man. He was about 8 feet tall, and weighing about 400 pounds.

“I am the Bulky Bully,” he roared like a thunder, “Who are you to intrude my palace and disturb my dream?”

“Give us back the Book of Ultimate Wisdom that you had stolen,” I told him, “And we will leave.”

“I’ll give you no book... unless you can pass me,” he jeered.

Pigsy was mumbling in my ear, “He was as strong as a bull.”

“I will take him,” Monkey King bellowed and rushed to fight Bulky Bully.

Pigsy, Sandy and I could only watch helplessly as Monkey King and Bulky Bully were fighting fiercely.

Bulky Bully was too strong and too big for Monkey King.

“Monkey, change to a chimpanzee,” I yelled.



Monkey King transformed into a big chimpanzee and was punching Bulky Bully with his big fists.

“I can change too!” Bulky Bully shrieked and morphed into a gigantic bull.

Bulky Bully in the shape of the colossal bull was chasing Monkey Bull who was evidently losing the fight.

“What should we do? What should we do?” Sandy was panicking.

“Er...er...” I was cracking my brain. Suddenly, I screamed, “Red! Red! Do we have anything red?”

“What?” Pigsy and Sandy were at a loss.

“We use something red to attract the bull.”

“Yes, I do,” Pigsy was taking out the national flag from his backpack.

“Run to the cliff and wave it at the bull!” I shouted.

Pigsy was holding up the flag and yelling, “Hey, Bully, come here, come here!”

On seeing the red flag, Bulky Bully became obsessed and was charging at Pigsy.

“Oh, my god,” Pigsy was shaking at the edge of the cliff.

“One, two, jump!” Sandy and I were shouting when Bulky Bully almost hit Pigsy with its deadly and baleful horns.

Pigsy jumped really hard, and Bulky Bully ran over the cliff.

“Aaaaaaaaaw....” was all we could hear.

“That was a narrow escape,” I breathed a sigh of relief.

## **Chapter 7: The Return**

We met Buddha at the Grand Taj Mahal and returned the book to him. He was first shocked, holding the book as if his life depended on it. Looking at us intently in tears, he expressed his gratitude in the most sincere way.

“Your courage, your strength and your wisdom had won the day,” he was thanking us, “In order to repay your effort, in addition to your rewards, I will give you some free publicity.”

He was beaming with delight, “Every tourist to Taj Mahal will be given the brochure of Tang’s Detective Agency.”

Thanks to Buddha’s brilliant scheme, our agency soon became the most famous detective agency not only in the East, but also in the West.

## Treasure

St. Mary's Canossian College, Chu, Nicole – 15

‘Wu, you should probably start working on drafting the new plan now. I don’t think the boss would like to see you checking your phone during office hours.’

Rolling her eyes, Wu looked up from her phone to her co-worker. ‘I’m taking a break. Do you have a problem with that?’

‘Well, you haven’t been typing anything for more than half an hour–’

‘Just so you know, *I* was the one who proposed the solutions to the problems of the previous project while the rest of you had no idea what to do. So, *I* was the one who has raised the company profits, and thus your salary.’

‘Yes, we’re grateful for your skills, but...’

‘So clearly, I deserve a nice long break. Don’t you think so? Don’t worry. I’ll work on the new plan a little later.’

Wu’s co-worker gave a long sigh and returned to her desk. Turning back to her phone, Wu saw an email notification popping up on her screen. She clicked on it and read the message:

*Dear Wu,*

*It has been such a long time since your university graduation. I still remember you as one of my brightest students – intelligent and quick to learn, though a little troublesome.*

*I moved to India some years ago, and I was wondering if you would want to come for a visit this summer. If you would come, please send an email telling me when and I will give you a map on how to go to our meeting place. With you being one of my best students, I will give you something valuable when you arrive. I would be delighted if you promise to meet me, and I look forward to your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Professor Zhang*

Wu was curious about what exactly ‘Old Monk’ Zhang (a nickname given by students because of his bald head) meant by ‘something valuable’. It would probably be like an antique vase or painting, or anything that was worth a lot of money. Deciding to find out for herself, she began to type a reply agreeing to his request. Also, she could miss a week of work, so the visit would be worth it.

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Dragging her luggage behind her, Wu scanned the hall of the New Delhi airport for an exit sign, eager to get to a hotel. She couldn’t sleep, though she had wanted to, because the cramped plane seat was too uncomfortable, and the passengers beside her were either crying children or loudly quarreling couples.

But Old Monk had told her to board a bus immediately after landing. He also mentioned the ride would be a couple of hours long... Wu gave a huff of disappointment. She would have to take a nap in another cramped seat again instead of on a large soft hotel bed.

As she looked for the bus stop, she saw a person munching through a giant bag of chips, with another on top of his suitcase. She took a few steps closer, and her eyes brightened.

'Zhu! What a coincidence!' Wu exclaimed.

Zhu saw Wu and waved at her. With his mouth still half-full of food, he said, 'Hey Wu. Long time no see.'

'What are you doing here?' Wu asked. She privately remarked to herself that his belly had got much larger than before.

'Old Monk Zhang asked me to come here. He said he wanted to give me something valuable. Well, he used to like me in the old university days.'

'That's funny – he told me the same thing.'

'*And* I figured out I could get away from work a little by coming here.'

'Same as me. We should really thank Old Monk, but he's sending me on a very uncomfortable two-hour bus trip now.'

'I've to ride a bus too – I think the bus stop is over there. We can go together.'

The two headed towards the bus stop. 'The bus we've to take is – that one!' Wu pointed to a long white van.

But when they got to the van, the driver stared out of the window at them, and sniffed, 'Sorry, the bus is full.'

Wu could see through the windows at the side of the van. The vehicle was half empty. Indignant, she retorted, 'Obviously, it *isn't*. There're only nine people in a twenty-seat vehicle. Are you stupid?'

'I've to accommodate the passengers later,' the driver said coldly.

'I think we've no choice but to board this one,' Zhu said to Wu. 'Old Monk said this bus was the last of the day, and missing it will upset the whole schedule that he's planned.'

'Did you hear that? We're in a hurry,' Wu snapped.

'I have my reasons not to let you board this bus,' said the driver, becoming impatient. He got out of the van and shook his finger at Wu. 'You're impolite and disturbing my business as well.'

'If the rest of the journey is going to be like this, I wish I had never come here,' moaned Zhu.

'No, *you're* just being unreasonable!' Wu yelled to the driver, her hands tightened into fists. '*If you don't* –'

'What's going on?' A young man walked into the scene. He saw Wu and the driver, and froze. 'Um... hey Wu, is it you?'

'Jing!' Zhu shouted. Seeing the puzzled expression on the driver, he explained, 'He's an old university friend of mine.'

Wu strode towards Jing and spoke angrily, 'That obtuse driver won't let Zhu and me board the van.'

'Well... um...' Jing turned to the driver, 'My friends here... really need...'

Wu smacked her face with her palm, while Zhu shook his head and sighed.

'My friends have gone through a tiring day... Can you please let us board your bus?' Jing asked nervously.

The driver rolled his eyes. 'Fine,' he muttered. 'At least someone knows how to be polite.'

Wu suddenly said, 'Jing, what do you mean by "us"? Wait... did Old Monk Zhang send you here too?'

'Um, yes, he did. He'll, uh, give me "something valuable". I think it'll be a piece of treasure.'

'You can join Zhu and me then. He asked us to come here too.'

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'I'm so tired, and my legs are aching so much,' moaned Wu, as the trio trudged on the dirt path underneath them.

For two days, the trio had to wake up early to catch a bus or train, only taking brief naps on uncomfortable vehicle benches, or standing in noisy and crowded stations. The rest of their time was mostly spent on walking, much to the annoyance of the trio.

'I'm hungry,' said Zhu.

'You're always hungry,' said Wu snidely.

'I'm just really hungry. I used to have five meals a day, with good food, but now we only have three with awful –'

'I won't be able to stand this any longer,' complained Wu.

'Well...' Jing looked at his phone, and said in a relieved tone, 'luckily, we're now in the place Zhang told us to go to.'

The trio arrived at a village. Children ran past them as the adults stared at the newcomers, who stopped at a small house – the address that Zhang gave them.

'I hope Old Monk will give us something valuable,' Wu said as Jing knocked on the door. However, there was no reply.

Jing knocked again, and shrugged. 'Maybe we should just go inside,' Zhu suggested.

They walked into the house and found themselves in an empty room, devoid of any sort of furniture.

'After all we've traveled, is this our destination?' Wu asked incredulously. 'Have we gone to a wrong place?'

'Old Monk made us come here for nothing!' groaned Zhu, 'Where's the valuable thing he said he'd give us?'

'Um, Old Monk didn't force us to come here. We did so on our own accord,' said Jing.

'The whole place is empty! Perhaps we should head back home,' Wu said in an annoyed tone. But then she took a deep breath, and suggested, 'Let's check the whole house first.'

Wu tried to pry open the floorboards to see if there were any trapdoors or hiding places that could indicate their old professor's location.

'I don't think you should do that, Wu. You're damaging...' said Jing.

Wu frowned, but started tapping on the floorboards.

Zhu put his bag on the floor and prepared to sit on it, but got up and inspected the house with Wu instead.

However, nothing important could be found. Disappointment was shown all over their faces.

The group was silent for a few minutes.

Then, Zhu said miserably, 'Now we should return home. Who cares about Old Monk?'

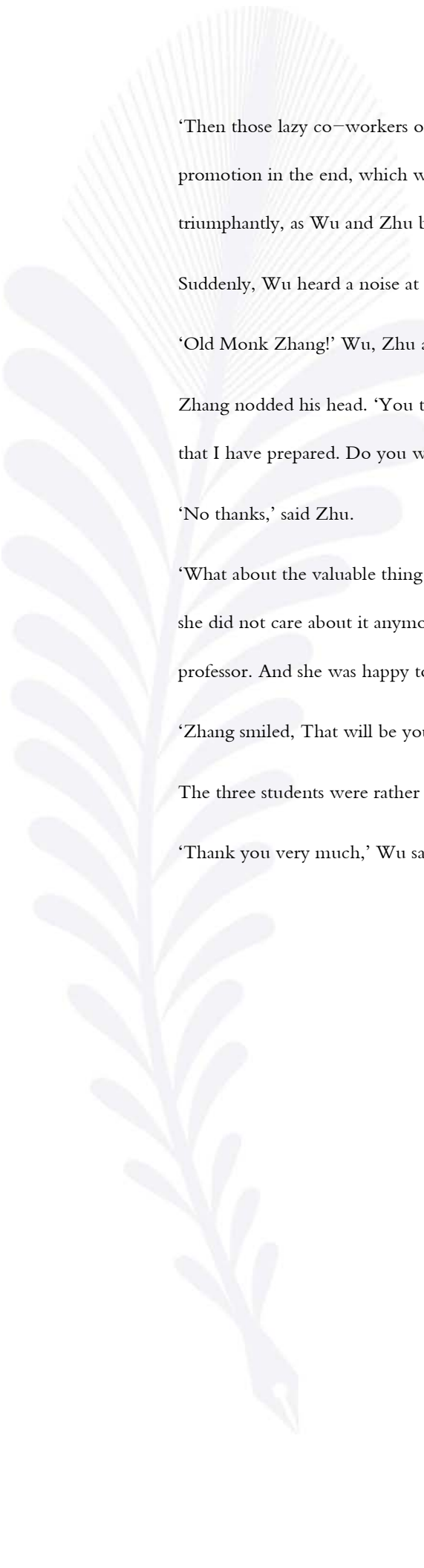
Wu walked over to the side of the house and looked out of the window. Did all of their effort go down the drain? Did they really gain nothing from this long, uncomfortable and exhausting journey? Should they just head back and call it a day?

But something in Wu's mind made her speak, 'I think we should wait here. That's what we've promised Old Monk.'

'Wu's right,' said Jing.

'Well, yeah, he's our old professor after all,' said Zhu, 'We shouldn't mind waiting for a little longer. Why don't we have catch up on our lives?'

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‘Then those lazy co-workers of mine were reprimanded. And to top it off, I was actually given the promotion in the end, which was what they had said “impossible” in the first place!’ Jing recounted triumphantly, as Wu and Zhu burst out laughing.

Suddenly, Wu heard a noise at the door.

‘Old Monk Zhang!’ Wu, Zhu and Jing cried, as their old professor stepped into the house.

Zhang nodded his head. ‘You three have done well,’ he mused. ‘All of you did not give up on the journey that I have prepared. Do you want some tea, or food?’

‘No thanks,’ said Zhu.

‘What about the valuable thing you’ve promised to give us?’ Wu asked on behalf of her friends. Strangely, she did not care about it anymore. She finally realized that the purpose of the trip was to visit her old professor. And she was happy to be reunited with not only her old teacher, but also her friends.

‘Zhang smiled, That will be your newfound enlightenment developed from this journey.’

The three students were rather stunned, but they were pleased with Zhang’s answer.

‘Thank you very much,’ Wu said humbly. Zhu and Jing nodded in agreement.



# The Journey to the West, the Exploration towards My Heart which Ignites my Passion

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lam, Adora – 15

I have always wondered how afterlife would be like. Do we get to sit beside Buddha and listen to his sayings and teachings? Do we get to read aloud prayers alongside with monks and nuns? Will we be happy and free from sorrows in the sukhavati? Will there be reincarnation? Do our souls exist forever and ever?

Walking, staggering, tottering, wobbling... I was travelling in a vast desert, without my navigator. To be exact and aghast, *without my phone. Under the burning sun, I teetered ahead, with a huge bundle wrapped in a piece of ancient cloth in the shape of a modern backpack at my back. To be precise, the bulky object was dragged by me all along; and when I stopped and looked back at the long way I had been through, a boundless vestige of trail came into view.*

*It's been a long way.*

*Meticulously recalling, I came to a dreadful and alarming conclusion: I had no idea where I was heading to, and when I would arrive at the final destination. In other words, I was confused by the situation all along. With barely no idea about the "excursion" I was engaged in, I believed that staying and wandering in the middle of a desert would not be a wise idea, so I had to proceed. My legs ached a bit, but I told myself that I could make it.*

I tried to spot traces of human activities, but to my disappointment, the desert was remote and desolate, yet limitless...

The arm of the cactus seemed to stretch out far and invite me on the journey to the West. Without any hesitation, I accepted the invitation. I had always been attracted to The West, The Mysterious West. It's an instinct, a naturally-developed liking.

With the huge bundle at my back, I soon became exhausted. Surprisingly, I never thought of abandoning it. The bundle was quite large compared to a skinny man like me, but not the most hefty for its kind.

Brimming with curiosity, I sat down in the hot sand and unzipped the bag.

A notebook was revealed. On top of it, which was lying in the embrace of the rough cloth, extremely still, was a name card. The name Ajal Walker was written on it. That was my name, a name that meant the destined, chosen death Walker. I used to be indifferent towards my name, however, after the retrospection of the messages brought by my name, I began to develop an instant dislike towards my given title. Was it a curse that made me rove in the desert? The absurd, yet peculiar settlement made me feel unfamiliar with my own name.

It reminded me of a dreadful event. I was crossing the road and, walking towards the Convention and Exhibition Centre. A car came really close and failed to stop. The car bumper hit my lower leg, my elbow hit the headlamp, and I flipped over the hood and off the side of the car to the walkway. Blood streamed down my body, and it didn't take long before my blood flooded me. I was alone, mourning.

A gentle breeze blew, waking me from the reminiscence of an unpleasant event. I reminded myself to keep moving. No matter what, I still had to keep going. There was barely no chance of fleeing the barren land if I gave up hope and perseverance. I made up my mind and continued the long journey to the west.

Night was approaching, and the sky was darkening gradually. Wind brushed my face. I shivered. To keep myself "safe" and warm from the attack of the freezing air, I held the begrimed bundle tightly in my arms. At that exact moment, a special sensation emerged, as if a gust of warmth had swept through me. I instantly felt sizzling, cheerful, hopeful and secure.

Out of my expectation, I slept very well that night: I even dreamed. I dreamed of my childhood idol, The Monkey King, who was a popular character in a myth and the coolest, most fascinating and glamorous figure I had always admired and believed in. He also inspired me to be a righteous person and perhaps a hero in the future. I chatted with him about the fact that my family stopped me from imagining myself as a heroic figure in the future and believing in the so-called myths for children. Despite their opposition, I never lost hope in the Monkey King, but I began to "isolate" my imagination from my thoughts. I never abandoned fantasy and miracles, because I always knew they were parts of me. They created a unique and special 'me'. The respected adventurer encouraged me to live out my true self and display my inner good qualities, but not to be restrained by the people around me.

"Passers-by in our lives only surround us, but we're the centre of our lives," he remarked. "So seize the day and make every moment count. Catch up with you later, pal."

I gained some insight from his words. Just as I was about to ask him ways to leave no stones unturned and endure, I woke up.

Would a conversation with an adventurer turn me into a daring and curious explorer? I was not sure, but I felt different, having a different outlook towards my journey, and my future.

To be honest, while facing the vast and hazy desert, I was perplexed and at a loss. With my confidence boosted, I was not so desperate. Clearing my cognition, I decided to first search for an oasis to sustain my life.

Walking, staggering, tottering, wobbling... I was travelling in the vast desert, still without my navigator. That night before I slept, I took out the notebook and flipped through it. There I found some adorable drawings, artistic and innovative description by the side; alongside with some passages written by me, demonstrating my liking and interest towards the myth: The Journey to the West, and conveying my idea which was to spread messages about love, peace and hope through quotes that streamed through our hearts. It was a resourceful safe of insight, a mine of psychological stability and spiritual wealth and a gateway for my path to creativity. All along, I was only one step away from the bright future of creating my own masterpiece. Whirled with thoughtfulness, I became exhausted gradually and soon fell asleep.

When I woke up the next morning, I continued my journey. Fortune favors the brave: I saw an oasis after hours of travelling. To my surprise, the water was glowing. Under the push of curiosity, I looked into the pool of water and saw some of my childhood flashbacks.

I was stunned and overwhelmed by such discovery, and was also touched.

In the pool, I saw my younger “form” playing merrily with the Monkey King doll, tottering around happily, telling my family enthusiastically the new monsters and stories I had just come up with while taking pleasure in the enjoyable times.

When I grew older, I could no longer take pleasure in the delightful moments. I was only allowed to take up duties and face pressure. It was hard dealing with such a transition, but I succeeded in going through it. I thought I did. I concealed my true feelings and isolated my source of imagination and creativity from my “mature mindset”.

I was stunned, overwhelmed and touched, but was also upset by the recollection of my childhood: I used to be that fearless and curious, fascinated by the creation of wonder, magnificence and happiness.

The remarkably moving moments halted all of a sudden when I witnessed a terrible calamity: A young man was hit by a car, seriously injured, with his bones fractured and sticking out; and his organs clinging out.

The man was ... me.

A wave of dizziness hit me hard, and I experienced a serious whirling sensation. Just as I was suffering from giddiness, lines of small words appeared next to the spring: “This is the story of your life, the brave Ajal Walker. The West is your destined home, and it is the destiny you have been striving for all along. The stage of being a child is not ignorant, but invincible: Strong in imagination, capable of creation, power to look upon and see through things in the world in a different angle. Pure and clear like crystals. Your new journey is yet to begin, Ajal Walker. A journey near death is not the final stop nor the end of your trail. It might bring you luck, inspiration or some unexpected reward.

In the bundle, there are curiosity, wonder, courage, creativity, fantasy, purity, and memories. It is an essential part that makes the whole ‘you’. That is why fate makes you bring along the bundle that belongs to you all through your journey. The bundle is an amazing and exquisite part of you. It is a challenge for you as well. You would be a mediocre person unless you learn to unleash your true and full potential, and establish the idea of self worth. Embrace your inner qualities and implement the idea of self worth into your mindset. Everything is planned, but not everything is fixed. They are there for a reason, they are never a coincidence. Their flexibility and your fate are up to you to decide. Remember, see through the objects you value.”

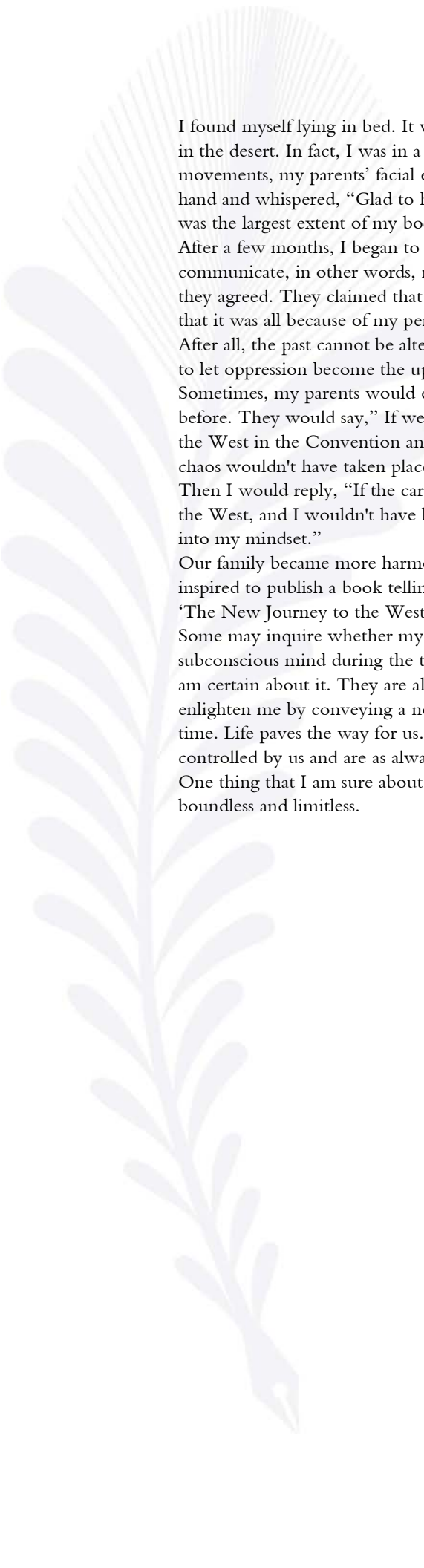
The captivating lesson drove me into tears and brought me into a new stage of my life. It was a new life after I awakened and realised who I really was.

A wagon reeled by. The driver stopped and opened the door. He was the Monkey King, alongside with his master, and companions!

“Want a ride, friend?” he delightfully inquired. I got on it and we roved away in a gust of mist.

A brilliant shock of white in the bright and clear sky forked silently to the gullible ground. The vehicle entered the bolt of lightning, and began to proceed at light speed. Out of fear, I screamed hysterically. The Monkey King cringed a bit and comforted me, “Don’t worry, my friend. We’re bringing you home.”

“Excuse me, did you say home?” I managed to mutter this question while producing a series of horrifying sounds.



I found myself lying in bed. It was soft, and comfortable. It took me a while to realise that I was no longer in the desert. In fact, I was in a ward. I turned my head and saw my family gazing at me. Witnessing my movements, my parents' facial expressions changed from anxiety and worry to relief and joy. They held my hand and whispered, "Glad to have you back, child." I greeted my parents with a warm smile and a wave. It was the largest extent of my body at that moment. I could not afford a cuddle.

After a few months, I began to compose stories and fantasies, just like the old times. This time, I learnt to communicate, in other words, negotiate with my parents about my will and my greatest wish. Reluctantly, they agreed. They claimed that they allowed me to do so because they had no choice. However, I thought that it was all because of my persuasive speech about wanting to live my life to the fullest, but not dulled. After all, the past cannot be altered, but the future can be ameliorated or improved. I promised myself never to let oppression become the upper hand in my life and never let depression take hold of me.

Sometimes, my parents would express their worries over the severe traffic accident I had encountered before. They would say, "If we had known about your idea of attending the fan meeting of the Journey to the West in the Convention and Exhibition Centre, we could have forbidden you from going. The whole chaos wouldn't have taken place."

Then I would reply, "If the car crash hadn't happened, I wouldn't have embarked on the unique journey to the West, and I wouldn't have learnt how to embrace my inner qualities and to insert the idea of self worth into my mindset."

Our family became more harmonious and our relationship was closer. Through our conversations, I was inspired to publish a book telling my experience of hovering between life and death. I decided to name it 'The New Journey to the West'.

Some may inquire whether my very own journey to the West is simply an illusion merged from my subconscious mind during the trauma or a real life hovering between life and death. I would remark that I am certain about it. They are all precious experiences which endue me a whole new perception and enlighten me by conveying a note: Maybe living in the present moment is the best way of spending our time. Life paves the way for us. So no need to worry, never doubt, as things such as death are never controlled by us and are as always, unpredictable.

One thing that I am sure about is that the vast desert and I have one thing in common. We are both boundless and limitless.

# Pilgrimage

*St. Mary's Canossian College, Tam, Celine – 15*

The scorched sand shimmered in the intense white rays of the sun. Heat rained down on the young monk and his three followers like the breath of hell. Their hats cocooned their heads in warm sweat, the arid heat burnt at their lungs. Steps became heavier and heavier. At the point before they collapsed, they saw traces of flames ahead of them; and when they looked up, they saw an inferno, sweeping across the Flaming Mountains. Looking to their leader, the three followers desperately asked for instructions, with one of them demanding a detour. However, with the unquestioning belief that the Buddha would protect them, the monk insisted on continuing their scheduled journey by trekking through the mountains. As the heat rose dramatically, their dehydration became so severe that they had no choice but to take refuge from the heat inside a cave. Unfortunately, the heat had taken its toll on the monk. As his consciousness faded, Tang Sanzang couldn't believe that his mission had to be aborted unwillingly.

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A lone Yixing clay teacup sat in the middle of piles of documents and books, slowly cooling off after being there for hours. An assistant professor in his early thirties took a sip of the cold Pu-er, and realized that he had been reading for far too long in his office at Stanford University. The moment when he looked up, there was his lifelong passion hanging on the wall – a gigantic map of the Tang Dynasty, between 500 A.D. and 700 A.D. Dr. Wallace Wang Baker was reminded of how his interest was originated from his mother's enthusiasm as a historian in Peking University, before she married his father in California decades ago. Feeling accomplished that he had managed to turn his interest into his career, he turned his gaze to his graduation portrait, framed and propped up on his desk. He recalled that the portrait had been taken upon his receiving a doctorate's degree in history, and he smiled, recalling that feeling of pride he had felt at that time. He had also remembered feeling blissful, as he had made his family proud. With his eyes darting to the large family portrait that hung adjacent to the map, he noticed the wide grin his grandmother wore, yet another proof of that he had done his family proud.

His latest research focus was an extension of his doctorate studies, in which it examined the timeline of Tang Sanzang's pilgrimage to the West. Across his 5-year doctorate training, the aspect of this 16-year pilgrimage that fascinated him the most was the year of arrival of Sanzang from Turpan. It has always been a controversial topic in literature: originally, it is established that Sanzang arrived at the city in 630 A.D., however, newly-discovered scriptures and documents suggest that the year of arrival was earlier than historians had thought.

Dedicated to finding out the truth, Wallace spent a whole day on a plane and 2 hours of driving to get from Stanford, California to the Flaming Mountains, located east of Turpan. The main area of his expedition was the 77 rock-cut caves in the Bezeklik Caves. Knowing a bit of Turkish allowed Wallace to interpret the religious art and the ancient writing on the caves with no difficulty. The caves varied in size, but most of them had rectangular spaces with rounded arch ceilings full of murals of the Buddha. After 10 days of explorations, Wallace came across an undiscovered location, whose location was not marked on the existing maps. The entrance of the cave was largely obscured. As a historian dedicated to discovering the unknown, he eagerly stepped into cave with great caution, knowing perfectly the dangers lying ahead. After four hours of getting past the obstacles, "enlightenment" was the only description he had in mind when he saw the faded Turkish writing engraved in stone, spanning across the entire wall. His eyes scanned rows and rows of text until he realized, to his great excitement, that the information was connected to the years in which Sanzang had spent in Turpan. Unfortunate for him, the most important portions of the text were too faded to the point that he had not been able to decipher them. All of a sudden, a beam of light shined from above, and Wallace collapsed instantly.

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Wallace woke up with a throbbing headache. He felt as though his head had been cracked open. Trying to gain back his consciousness, he was relieved to find himself in the same cave in one piece, yet it puzzled him that the stone engravings were missing, as if they had never been there. Rubbing his eyes bewilderingly, he found himself wrapped in reddish-orange robes. To his great confusion, lying next to him in the cave were three oddly-dressed men, whom Wallace wished would be able to clear his uncertainties. A moment later, the first man to awake was the short-framed one. Without hesitation, he leapt to his feet to check if his companions were alright. First to his left, the big-sized man with a beer belly tucked out; then to his right, a tall, hunky man making slurping noises.

Once the three men were on their feet, they turned to Wallace with great concern and chorused, “Master, are you feeling well?”

Disorientated, Wallace gaped at the men, until he managed to stutter out a few words. “W—who are y—you?”

The short-framed man rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Haven’t I advised you to detour to save ourselves? Yet you blindly accepted fate as it comes, and insisted on charging into the flames! And look at what it has done to you!” Wallace fell silent, as he was attempting to figure out what exactly was going on.

The big-sized man added, “I agree with Houzi<sup>1</sup> on the detour. What’s the point of going through the Flaming Mountains? Can’t we choose an easier route instead?” He turned and pointed at the hunky man. “Wujing! Don’t you agree that we should’ve gone for the easy way?”

The hunky man addressed as “Wujing” turned to stare at his companions with, ironically, a pair of puppy eyes. “I really have no idea. After all, I just follow wherever Master goes.” Listening to their conversation and glancing at blank stone wall, Wallace wondered if the impossible had happened—that he had gone back in time. Dazed, he tried to ask something, but it only came out in a whisper. “W—which year of...Zhenguan is it?” “The seventh?” Houzi replied, with concern in his eyes. He motioned for Wallace (or rather, “Master”) to sit down, before muttering, “I’ll try to find out where the flames came from.” The moment he stepped out of the grotto, a wizened old man appeared, blocking the entrance to the grotto and preventing Houzi’s departure. “You monkey! How dare you come back, to rub salt into my wounds? You were the one who caused all this to happen: my banishment from the Heavens and ending up as a Tudigong, a mere guardian of the earth, and the destruction of this area.”

Wallace, who was well-informed about Chinese literature, began to fill in the blanks. Being familiar with “Journey to the West”, Wallace knew that a few centuries ago, Houzi had wreaked havoc upon the Heavens. The events had not only lead to the near-destruction of the Heavens, but also affected many locations among the mortal world. As for Tudigong’s banishment, Wallace knew that Houzi was innocent, and he sympathized with Houzi for being trapped inside the Eight-Trigram Furnace for 49 days by Taishang Laojun<sup>2</sup>. Houzi felt that he was wrongly accused. In a fit of frustration and anger, he used his “somersault cloud” and reached the Heavens in a single leap. Wallace worried that Houzi would make a huge fuss in the Heavens, and predicted that he would suffer from more unnecessary punishments. However, as far as the strict rules of the Heavens are concerned, Wallace knew that he couldn’t enter as a layperson. A seemingly feasible plan struck him all of a sudden. He wondered if Tudigong’s token of command would grant him access to the Heavens. And once he placed his hands onto the token, he found himself transported right before the golden gates of the Heavens.

The remaining followers were stunned by what had happened. Bajie’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates as he muttered, “Wujing, do you think that was our master? The one who strictly complied with Confucianism values? The same one who believed that rules were to be obeyed, and the same one who had never challenged authority? And to think that he had just violated all of his beliefs!” Wujing simply shrugged. “No way that Master isn’t our Master.” He paused for a while, then said with a look of realization, “It must be the heat!” Bajie couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

In a split second, Wallace realized that he was standing right in front of the gigantic red double doors, encrusted in layers of jade and crystal. Stunned by how glamorous the doors were, Wallace looked up to see the words “Southern Gate of Heaven” inscribed across a plaque.

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<sup>1</sup> Houzi: “Monkey” in Chinese

<sup>2</sup> Taishang Laojun: The Grand Supreme Elderly Lord



Determined to help his follower, Wallace pushed the heavy doors and slipped into the Heavens. As the doors slammed shut behind him with a resounding “bang”, he fell speechless as what he saw was almost identical to the Forbidden City in Beijing, except that the city was in ruins, with bricks and pillars scattered all over the streets. Wallace grimaced at the sight of the destruction. Following the ruined buildings, he slowly made his way to the Jade Palace, where he believed Houzi had gone to.

Once Wallace stepped inside the Jade Palace, the first sight that greeted him was the Jade Emperor and Houzi engaged in an argument, with Houzi being berated. “For thousands of years, fulfilling duties and being compliant to the authorities have always been the core values of our cultures. Houzi, you are such a disgrace to our society! Can you see how much damage that you have done? You are solely the main reason of the social instability I observe here.”

Staring daggers at the Jade Emperor, Houzi retaliated. “You’re blaming me for social instability just because I was trying to fight for justice of my own? Then how would you justify trapping me inside that Eight–Trigram Furnace for 49 days? Is it even fair to me, to restrain my freedom? Why should I care about others’ feelings if nobody even cares about mine?”


Upon hearing Houzi’s words, the Jade Emperor frowned. “How can you be such an egocentric person? Confucianism has been the most influential philosophical thinking in our society. The harmonious social relationships can only be achieved when all of us respect and follow the teaching under the Five Cardinal Relationships. Between the ruler and the subject, there are righteousness and loyalty. The highest form of righteousness is to honour the worthy with your action. And look at you, where is your honour, your worthiness, your righteousness? The subject must obey their ruler absolutely, even if I am ordering you to die.”

It was at that moment that Wallace decided to step in. “Certainly Houzi has to be responsible for his own action. The destruction of the palaces have to be accounted to his fault. Nevertheless, before we start pointing fingers at Houzi for what he has done, perhaps we should rethink the assumptions behind the relationship of ruler and subject.” As both the Jade Emperor and Houzi turned to stare at the intruder in surprise, Wallace reflected on what history had taught him. As far as he was concerned, a long–reigning emperor is one who always listens to his advisors; yet a king with a boundless appetite for power is a dictator, whose kingdoms collapse in no time.

He raised his voice and continued. “After all, Houzi is an independent individual. It is ridiculous for us to presume that he must forfeit his own thoughts and follow the expectations given by the societal values. Does he not have the right to pursue the value of his own choosing instead? But then again, freedom is not exactly a slogan. Houzi?” Houzi jolted, shocked by his Master’s sudden mention of himself. “I do hope you will remember that freedom does not empower you to do whatever you want and whenever you wish. As a matter of fact, you are actually entitled to achieve any sort of goal you can dream of, but on the other hand, it is your responsibility to take into account the impacts of your actions onto others. From what I’ve seen, individualism and collectivism always seem to stand in sharp contrast to each other.”

Not only did the Jade Emperor and Houzi find the words “individualism” and “collectivism” alien to them, every single denizen of the Heavens stood slack–jawed. For a split second, the history professor forgot that his audience was 1400 years before him, and he reckoned that he ought to explain further. Clearing his throat, he started talking. “Imagine a compelling force between the inalienable rights of the individuals and the fundamental expectations of the society to sustain the ‘greater good’. It is like the opposing edges of the platform that seeks to shape lifestyle and attitudes of societies. Yet, I strongly believe there is interplay between these two inseparable concepts, as there is nothing wrong with the general stance of either approach. Harmony is not about everyone having the same opinion; but instead it is when everyone respects each other, despite having divergent opinions.”

Houzi had once perceived his master as an extremely naïve monk, who pursued an idealistic world of Confucianism values; but right at that very moment, he found himself impressed by the wisdom demonstrated by his master. On the other hand, despite not being able to fully comprehend Wallace’s impromptu speech, the Jade Emperor looked as though he had a vague notion of what had been discussed.



He raised a finger as to confront the innovative definition of “social harmony”, but soon fell short of words since he knew, deep down, that it was not entirely unfitting. Without a choice, the Jade Emperor sent Wallace and Houzi back to the mortal world unpunished.

Almost instantly, Wallace and Houzi found themselves back where they started, back in the cave inside the Flaming Mountains, and were immediately greeted by a disgruntled Bajie. “Where have you two been? It took you four years to settle the dispute?” To which Wallace replied that the duo had been gone for only a day. Houzi thought for a while, and responded, “It must be true that a day in heaven equates to four years in the mortal world.” Houzi simply shrugged. “Perhaps we should record this incident. How many people have actually had such an extraordinary experience? By engraving this story onto the wall, we can ensure that we’ll go down in history.” Only after Houzi had finished engraving on the wall with his staff did Wallace realize the sole purpose of this journey. The answer to his initial confusions lay before him, as bright as day. Wallace confirmed that Tang Sanzang had arrived in Turpan at 626 A.D., but no one had known about his arrival as he had never made an appearance in the city until 630 A.D. Wallace was thinking of the methods to preserve Houzi’s carvings onto paper when all of a sudden he felt his consciousness fading.

When he opened his eyes again, the first thing Wallace noticed was the fading message on the stone wall, and he sighed. Wallace may have just made a ground breaking discovery, but with no proof in hand, perhaps only the heavens will believe his story.

## Going Forward into History

*St. Mary's Canossian College, Tang, Ally – 15*

The girl closed the book with an inaudible sigh. The familiar headache blocked all her thoughts, as she gripped the book in her hand tightly. “Ling! Are you alright?” A hand grabbed her arm. Ling looked up, and saw her friend looking at her, concerned. She shook her head, “No, I’m fine, thank you,” She gently freed herself from the tight grip, “Well...I’ll get going now, thank you for your help,” Ling said gently, as she took a step back and turned around, put the book back onto the shelf, and left the library. “It happens every time....why?” Ling muttered to herself.

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Up in the sky, a dragon’s roar broke the chattering among the crowd, as a shimmer of gold fell. Slowly, a male appeared his expressions grim and serious. “Where are they?” He demanded, as he looked at the guard next to him. “Your Majesty....We....We lost them....” the guard slowly stammered out the ,shaking. The crowd fell silent finally, as a wave of shock overtook everyone. “What....do you mean...you lost them...?” The male in the golden cloak asked quietly, his posture tense, but demanding attention. “They....they defeated all our guards....and escaped...” The guard answered. The crowd finally came back to their senses, and started their chatter once more, as they discussed the possibilities. *Could they finally be gone? Are they going to disappear forever? This would be a relief for a lot of us!* They thought to themselves. “Silence!” roared the male, “ I want absolute silence! Everyone! Calm yourselves and behave like a God should!” The crowd immediately fell to their knees, obeying his order immediately, while they chorused, “I apologize, your majesty”. The Jade Emperor turned back to the guard, “What did I tell you over and over again? Today is Judgement Day!” He glared at the bowing guard.

“ Do not fret, your majesty” A voice rang out from the far distance, as a tall figure stepped into sight, carrying a bag. “What is it now, Yang Jian?” The Jade Emperor asked, sighing. His patience was reaching its limit, and Yang Jian sensed that. Giving the Emperor a smirk, the War God flung the bag to the floor of the court. “Delivery for you, you’re welcome!” Yang Jian laughed, as three figures toppled out of the bag. “Gods, what is this bag! It smells like sweat combined with ...I don’t know!” A monkey-like figure groaned as he stepped out of the bag, rubbing his head. Two other figures followed, one pig-like, and the other glancing around uncomfortably. Grinning at the tense crowd, the monkey gave a wave, letting out a laugh. “Oh my ! It’s been a while since there were these many people! The last time this happened was when I came back from getting the Book of the West!” he shouted at the crowd, with excitement evident on his face. “Enough of this idiocy!” The Emperor roared, enraged. “Sun Wukong! Zhu Bajie!Sha Wujing! You three are called here to receive your punishments for your reckless behaviours! I have told you time and time again that as a god, you should not interfere with mortal business! But what have you done?! You went again to the mortal world and left a mess! Do you expect us to help you clean up every time you play around? This time even losing the Book of the West again!” The Emperor roared, as the sky rumbled with thunder. Sun Wukong merely rolled his eyes, “C’m on old man, it’s not like you aren’t used to this! Plus, if I remember correctly, the last time you were famous would be when you sent me with these annoying people to that trip! With that annoying monk!It’s a miracle that the book could stay here for more than 100 years already. Don’t you see how clumsy and careless the guards are! One hit from me could knock them down .How pathetic!” The Monkey King’s eyes stared challengingly into the Jade Emperor’s, as the elder of the two suddenly got an idea, and declared his final judgement. “Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing! You three are now banished from the Heavens, and shall find the next life of your old master,Xuan Zang! Accompany them to find the lost Book of the West, and protect them. Otherwise, you shall be banished from the heavens forever!”No one had the time to reply, as a wave of a hand dragged them into what seemed to be the inside of a hurricane, tugging the shouting three into the unknown.

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Tang Ling threw down her bag of books, and lied on her bed, thinking about the headache again. It happens every time she reads a book about the legend of the Journey to the West. Somehow, whenever she opened the book, or listened to the story, she got a massive headache so painful that she could hardly concentrate on the story.Stranger yet, the headache immediately stopped when she stopped listening,or

when she closed the book. This had gone on for the last 17 years of her life, and she too was so confused that she prayed every night to the gods, hoping for an answer to be given to her. To her dismay, the reply never came, and she was left wondering why she was so strange.. “Bang!” A loud crash came from outside the balcony, startling Tang Ling. Her chain of thoughts broke, and she rushed immediately to the balcony. “What... was that...?” She thought to herself. A giant figure of three men toppled over each other entered her vision, and immediately, she screamed as loud as she could, while the three stared at her wide-eyed.

“You’ve got to be kidding me” Wukong muttered, staring at Tang Ling, “This is her?” Sha Wujing nudged his friend, reminding him to be nice. Knocking on the door, he said gently, “Hello. Sorry for the sudden intrusion, but I guess there are some things that you need to know. Does anything strange happen to you sometimes...?” Tang Ling, taken aback, only nodded, as she held her head. “My...my head I guess...it’s a funny thing....but everytime I listen to or read the legend of The Journey to the West, I get a headache....” Then, she stared at their faces for the first time, only to have a scream escape her throat. Pointing at Wukong and Zhu Bajie, she stammered, “You’re....you’re a monkey...and...and...you’re a .....pig!” She blurted out. Immediately realizing her own mistake, she covered her mouth embarrassed as Wukong rolled his eyes. “Now, Wukong, calm yourself. Why don’t I explain to her what’s going on?” Bajie put a hand on his friend’s shoulder to stop his aggression, and smiled at Tang Ling, giving her more details of the matter.

“And that’s how we ended up here. If you would be kind enough to allow us to stay with you to ensure your safety for a few days, we would be most grateful,” Sha Wujing concluded, and gave a little bow with his hands clasped together.

“No,” the girl answered firmly, “I won’t allow this. Not in my own house. Who would let strangers live in their homes because they claim to be mythical characters? Definitely not me! Did you guys just fail to break into my house? That’s why you made up this story?” She snorted, and pointed at the door, “Please just leave me alone.”

As Tang Ling pointed at the door, the tallest of the three grabbed her arm roughly. Then he bit his thumb, allowing blood to seep out. “What...what are you doing? Let go!” She tugged at her arm. Sun Wukong placed his thumb on her arm, and the blood slowly dripped down her arm. Her eyes widened, Tang Ling stared at her arm, as the blood slowly traced out a form of something....a dragon..it seems. “Well, this doesn’t happen in real life, does it?” Sun Wukong rolled his eyes, “You best believe us and thank us for offering protection, really.” Gaping at him, the female stared at her arm, then back at the three. To everyone’s surprise, the girl burst out laughing. “This is must be some kind of joke!” She said, wiping away the tears at the corner of her eye, “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

A sudden crash from the window startled the four, as four creatures rushed into Tang Ling’s apartment. “Why are there so many intruders today?!” The girl said annoyed, but her complaint was soon cut off by a curled knife at her throat, “Woah! Calm down!” she said, panicked.

“Try fighting and we will immediately kill her,” A hiss rang from behind Tang Ling, as the knife was shoved even further into her neck. “So you failed to rob me, now you’re threatening me?!” Tang Ling exclaimed incredulously, her eyes widened, “Wow! You should’ve just told me earlier then! I’d have let you taken everything!” She had never felt such a source of hopelessness before, as the cold steel touched her throat. “Shut it,” the voice from behind her hissed out again, “Before I decide to kill you first,” Both sides stayed silent, as Sun Wukong tried his best not to give in to his recklessness. “Well then, we’ll be taking this beauty!” A hand traced Tang Ling’s chin, and gave a cold laugh. A snake-like demon entered her vision, and Tang Ling fought the urge to scream for fear that she would lose her life in the blink of an eye. With a strong pull, Tang Ling and the demons disappeared from the trio’s eyes.

“Dang it!” Sun Wukong punched a wall as it all fell silent and eerily calm. “What do we do now then...?” Zhu Bajie asked dumbly, still not sensing the severity of the situation. Getting smacked over the head by his companion, Zhu Bajie groaned and rubbed his head, as he scowled at Sun Wukong, who replied with the roll of an eye, “What else! We hunt them down! Do you really want to stay here forever?!” Then, with a leap, Sun Wukong flew into the air. Pulling out a little of his hair, he blew it, as dozens of copies of the Monkey King appeared, and all went in different directions in search for Tang Ling.



Tang Ling opened her eyes to a sight she would never forget in her entire life. Row after row of monster and demons of all kinds stood below her, staring up at her with what could only be described as utter hunger and desire. She was so shocked she couldn't even form a decent sentence, as she realized that one little move from her would result in her falling down the what seems like 7 feet tall cliff. "Everyone!" A loud growl boomed from behind her. Tang Ling shivered at the sudden closeness, as she took another glance at the crowd gathered. "The time has come! We shall revive our savior after all these years! The Gods have abandoned us, and left us to fight for ourselves, now, it's time for us to abandon the Gods instead, and let them feel the pain they have inflicted on us!"

"Sure!" A chirpy voice cut in from the other end, "But why weren't the three of us invited? Surely you don't think I would be happy to see the Gods all smiling when they sent me through those torturous years!" Ling's eyes brightened at the familiar voice, as a male holding something long and golden entered the room. "Well, Look who we have here! The infamous Sun Wukong!" A demon from behind Tang snickered, "If you're here to save the girl, look around you! Everyone here is more than willing to tear you apart!" "Ah, ah, ah!" Wukong shook his head, smiling, "I don't think my fur would attack me, you see...." He snapped his finger, and all the demons in the crowd shimmered with a golden light, and disappeared into the dusts. "Well then, shall we continue? Just the few of us? I've been itching for a fight recently!" Holding out his hand, he gestured for them to come down. "If you want to play, we shall join!" A hiss came from behind as a snake demon came forward. With a shake of her hand, the fan in her hand transformed into two white swords, each looking deadly yet sickly tempting. The two weapons clashed, as the ground shook from the large impact.

"Stop!" A shrilly voice shouted desperately from behind, "Lord Shin! The Book of the West! It's been stolen!" A little bird demon was flying above the two fighting figures, as Lord Shin stopped his attacks. "Useless fools can't even guard a book! Useless!" He roared as the earth began to shake from his wrath.

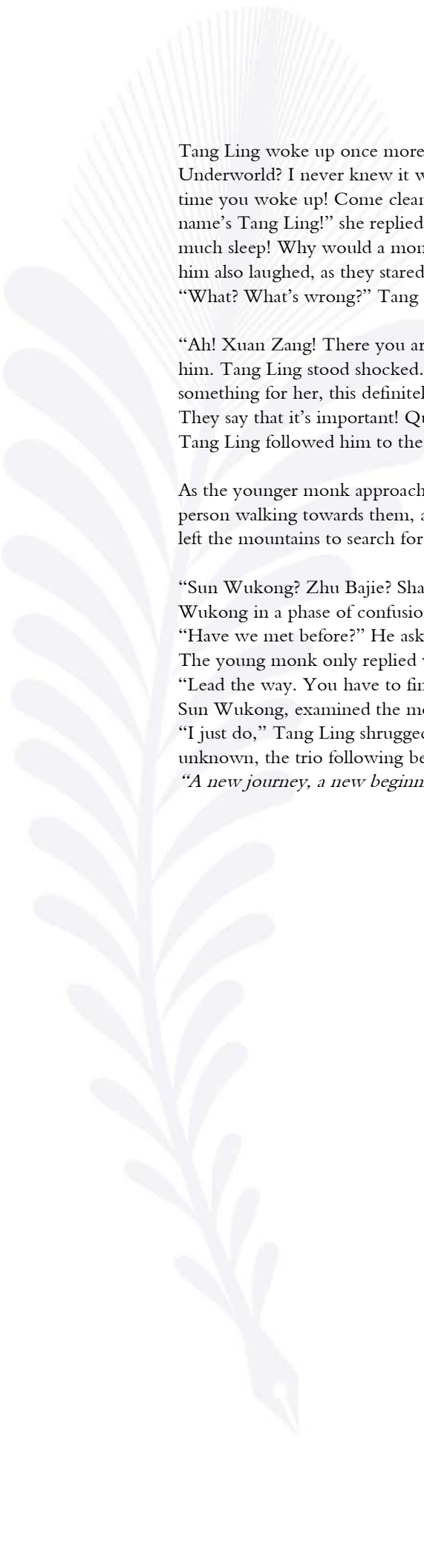
Sun Wukong winked at Lord Shin, as a calm voice rang out from amidst the wrath. "I believe you are looking for this?" Sha Wujing held a paper on his left hand, while his right held his spade. "Wait...something seems wrong...." Tang Ling stared dumbfounded at the paper in Sha Wujing's hand. "Is that supposed to be...the Book of the West?" She asked, her mouth agape, "Wait...isn't it supposed to be a real book..?" A bark of laughter cut off her thoughts from beside her, and a dog-headed figure shoved his head in front of Tang Ling, his big eyes staring straight into hers. "Such a naive little girl! What? Did you think that all things would stay the same as in the story? I'll tell ya! The story is just part of the truth! Do you want to experience the story? I've heard that you have never heard the story of your friends over there! I'll tell you all about their reckless behavior, and how it led us into despair!" The dog demon let out a little howl, and soon, werewolves and bird demons surrounded the area, leaving no space for escape. Wukong cursed under his breath. Even though they were great fighters, the journey from Tang Ling's house to the demons' hideout had exhausted them, and all the energy they had left would not be enough to ensure Tang Ling's safety. With a battlecry, Sun Wukong didn't give his other two companions time to hesitate, as he rushed into the crowd of werewolves, immediately triggering the start of the battle once more.

"Well, since they don't care about you anymore, you can say goodbye!" The dog demon was still besides Tang Ling, and the cold metal from the sword dug into her skin for the second time in one day. "Help!" Tang Ling yelled as the sword began to pierce through her skin, leaving her crying from the pain. "Yang Jian, God of War, hear my cry and save me!" Ling shut her eyes tightly, and prayed to the heavens that a miracle would happen. Much to her surprise, everything around her fell into slow motion until time eventually stopped.

"And why should I help you?" A bored voice rang inside Tang Ling's mind.

"Yang Jian?" Tang Ling whispered with little hope. "Yes, that would be me," the voice sighed again, "I heard your request, but since this was a punishment for the three of them, I won't help! It serves them right! Especially Sun Wukong, that pesky little demon! Well then, I'll get going! Good luck!" The voice turned from annoyed to cheery within a second, as all hopes shattered with the resuming of time. In one quick motion, Ling fell motionless as the sword had pierced through her soul. The last image she had seen however, would be one she could never forget— the face of a half snake, half tiger creature, 8 feet tall, rising from below the ground—the demon king has risen. With the curses from Sun Wukong, and the evil cackling, Tang Ling fell into eternal slumber.





Tang Ling woke up once more to the feeling of cold water being splashed onto her. “What...? Is this the Underworld? I never knew it would be this pretty...” She whispered to herself. “Xuan Zang! It’s about time you woke up! Come clean the yards!” Yelled a monk. “Alright, I’ll be.....wait...Xuan Zang? My name’s Tang Ling!” she replied, confused. The same monk gave a hearty laugh. “You must’ve gotten too much sleep! Why would a monk have such a girlish name? Are you kidding me?” Other monks who heard him also laughed, as they stared at Tang Ling strangely, as though she had gotten some kind of disease. “What? What’s wrong?” Tang Ling questioned them.

“Ah! Xuan Zang! There you are!” An older monk cried as he came forward, while everyone else bowed to him. Tang Ling stood shocked. What was going on? A knowing twinkle in the monk’s eye confirmed something for her, this definitely wasn’t where people went after they die! “Someone is here to see you. They say that it’s important! Quick! Don’t have them wait!” The old monk smiled kindly at Tang Ling, as Tang Ling followed him to the entrance of the monastery.

As the younger monk approached the trio, Sun Wukong immediately felt something familiar about the person walking towards them, as if they had met before. But it clearly couldn’t be the case, since he had just left the mountains to search for this Xuan Zang person by the Gods’ orders.

“Sun Wukong? Zhu Bajie? Sha Wujing?” The young monk questioned with excitement. This left Sun Wukong in a phase of confusion.

“Have we met before?” He asked carefully.

The young monk only replied with a mysterious smile, “Well, shall we get going then?” She asked the trio, “Lead the way. You have to find the Book of the West, don’t you?”

Sun Wukong, examined the monk standing in front of him, shocked. “How...How did you know...?”

“I just do,” Tang Ling shrugged, smiling kindly as she started to walk away from the monastery into the unknown, the trio following behind confused.

*“A new journey, a new beginning,”* Tang Ling thought to herself, *“This time, I’m not going to fail.”*

# New Journeys to the West

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Chong, Yan Hei Kylie – 14*

1.

A charred tree stump sits across from me, painfully twisted and pointed. Billowing tents partially obscure it from my view, all so caked with dirt that the only way you could tell it used to be white is if you were here when you put them up. They clump together in tight little rows under the dust-filled desolate air, and if you didn't know better, you would think that they were looking down at a battlefield hospital.

The woman perched delicately there is haggard. She doesn't seem it, at first; an undiscerning observer would be perfectly correct in saying that she looks nothing like a conventional refugee. She's meticulously groomed, in clean if worn clothes, long hair still damp from the shower, and not obviously malnourished. Her porcelain skin is almost as white as her perfectly straight teeth.

But nobody can hide the trauma of what they've left behind: the sound your house makes as it collapses around your loved ones. The memory of the dirt that collects, bit by infuriating bit, in your skin, until it makes you want to scream and scrub savagely at yourself with seawater and your bare hands, but even the slightest movement may tip your pathetic rubber dinghy and send thousands of others into watery graves. The ink on your hand that marks you as a legitimate resident of the camp, a livestock brand that you cannot bring yourself to wash off no matter how hideously the ink starts to bleed into your skin, because it is your one source of fleeting safety.

The stack of used paper beside her grows smaller as two, five, ten wrinkled, bedraggled birds join her on the wizened wood, balancing one on top of the other as they pile up on her lap. I would like to imagine that they provide a jolt of color to the otherwise ashen landscape, but it's all the same to me. The world seems inexpressibly gloomier when you see it in shades of grey. Except her. She's... warmer than everything else.

I close my notebook on this sentiment and stand up. She lifts her head to watch me as I draw closer and sweep by. Later, I try to decide whether I am relieved or disappointed that she did not speak to me.

2.

"You got spare paper?" I stop as I'm about to pass the woman and rip out a scribbled-over piece of paper from my notebook. She licks her fingers and starts to fold, the inviting pat on the tree trunk coming almost as an afterthought.

The ridges and bumps dig into my skin as I gingerly sit down beside her. She smooths the paper out to read my now-obsolete list of possible countries and raises an eyebrow at me. "Aiming high, huh."

"All or nothing, right? And since I got nothing back home—" I shrug. "Might as well."

"Might as well." She repeats pensively, her fingers working absently at the paper, creasing it, refolding it, pressing down hard on the fold with a bitten-down nail. She looks out across the camp with eyes of flint. "I'm getting out of here if it kills me."

She has her own notebook in her lap, a little black thing with a pencil and eraser placed on top of it. I look around the oppressively familiar landscape for a while as she folds: the clouds of dirt billowing in the far distance, little grey puffs of powder against the horizon. The distant hum and chatter of the forgotten camp around us.

She hands me the origami when she's finished, a little cube that bulges when I blow air into it and deflates when I gently apply pressure to the sides. There's a little smiley face drawn on the side. I push on it a little, and as the air whooshes out it crumples into a frown.

I pick the sketchbook up and turn it over in my hands. The cover is blank, but there's an handwritten inscription on the back: What's good for the art is bad for the heart.

She tells me her name is Chen An.

3.

"Fancy meeting you here." Chen An slips up to me when I'm in line for the bus and drops her meagre belongings into the plastic shopping bag I'm using as luggage: a comb. Her notebook, with a few pieces of multicolored paper sandwiched in between. A spare set of clothes.

"Looks like we both won the lottery for the Western Dream." I say.

Her hair is up in a bun this time, held in place by a pencil that's threatening to slip out every time she nods her head. She laughs. "It's only getting better from here, baby."

We sit next to each other on the plane. Chen An suddenly grabs my hand as we take off— I glance at her. "I didn't peg you for an anxious flyer."

"Oh, it's not the flying I'm afraid of." Paper napkin scraps float gently to the ground as she sweeps them off her lap.

"Just think about it— soon you'll be able to fold as much origami as you want."

She sighs, sinking back into a seat that smells faintly of orange juice. "Then how will I decide what I want to fold?"

I flip my writing notebook open as Chen An pretends to be asleep and we cut through the night sky. A light flickers on the wing of the plane.

My pen hovers over the blank page for a second as I stare helplessly at it, caught up in the immense responsibility of being able to write anything I feel like. The knowledge of my own freedom looms above me, closing in ever menacingly, as I leave my former life and my family, trapped forever under the rubble of war, behind.

I jerk my hand backwards from the paper, but the pen is a dollar-store cheap thing that leaks, and a globule of ink spurts from the tip even as I slam the notebook shut. It leaves a black-blue stain on the leather cover and covers up part of the sentence written on the front.

It used to be a quote from Ernest Hemingway, but now it just says "Bleed".

The ink seeps past the cover, all the way into the pages inside. It stains an accusation into my fingers, sharp against the ink stamp on my wrist that was just beginning to fade away.

4.

I settle into a dimly lit single room in a fluorescent metropolitan city, in a block where, it seems, all the refugees have congregated. I talk to people in my language and eat food I thought I'd never taste again. Chen An lives half an hour of traffic away.

People ask me if I miss my home country with genuine compassion and just-suppressed curiosity. I answer in the same way every time— that the second the first bombs dropped, there wasn't anything left there for me to miss. It starts to hold true, whether I want it to or not. I smile with increasing desperation as memories of my parents begin to waver and fade.

Recruitment managers at publishing houses and advertising companies and newspapers all nod sympathetically at this. They flip through my portfolio and my writing notebook and promise to look up the book I've published, but I never get the call back. There's no work here for the author and no work for the artist, not when they have no 'legitimate' credentials.

I swallow my pride and go to restaurants, into shops, still wearing the suit I bought with the last of my money and shoes that cost 8 dollars but have been painstakingly buffed to a shine. The wallpaper of my apartment starts to mildew and rot.

5.

Chen An's in a sundress and flip-flops when I see her next. I can feel callouses as I clasp her red, raw hands in greeting— they're not an artist's hands anymore, but a dishwasher and laundry-woman's tools of the trade.

She starts as I greet her and we sit down on the park bench. "That's so weird— it's been ages since anyone called me Chen An. It's Cecelia now."

I look at the woman sitting with her legs crossed next to me, her hair loose around her ears and unmistakably oriental features. A slight breeze tickles my face and presses my shirt closer to my back. I tilt my head back and say, "You don't feel like a Cecelia."

"Humor me, okay?" She seems irritated with my response.

"Okay. Cecelia." I can't help but laugh at how strange the name sounds when attached to Chen An. "Can I ask why?"

"It's easier than listening to everyone pronounce my name wrong." She says. "Helps me fit in."

The wind changes; blows Chen An's hair back instead of into her face. She smells of detergent and soap. She turns her fingers ceaselessly over and over in her lap, rubbing over the cracked skin, and I see that the blot on her wrist I'd taken to be ink is actually a tiny tattoo.

She lifts it up for me to see. "It's a paper crane."

"Good luck and peace, right? Is that what they mean?" I carefully take her hand in mine. It is small and fragile, despite the callouses. One squeeze, and the veins running under her translucent skin would burst. I let my thumb sweep briefly over the back of her palm.

"They say that if you fold a thousand, your wish will come true." She looks at the greenery that surrounds us, places her other hand on the smooth slats of our park bench. "I'm right where I wanted to be." She whispers that under her breath, reverently, like she's still coming to terms with the place we've found ourselves in,

I grip her hand tight and listen to the sounds of the birds in varying shades of gray. My fingers twitch as I think of something I want to write down.

She eventually pulls her hand away from mine, giving me an opportunity to seize my writing notebook. Chen An takes out her sketchbook and watches as I jot down a few sentences.

“Why don’t you ever write something longer? You’d be good at that.”

“It’s too much hassle trying to set things in stone— you never know when something’s going to change.”

Her eyes flicker in the light from the park lamps as the sun goes down in a defiant blaze of presumably breathtaking oranges and yellows. She starts folding another paper crane, and before we leave, she presses it into my hands. “For you to start your own collection.”

It starts raining as I walk to the subway with my brand-new metro card. I wrap my coat more tightly around me and shield my face as I walk back. It’s only when I’m hanging up my clothes that I feel the crinkle of paper in the pocket and remember the present from Chen An. It’s white, made from a fresh piece of blank paper, now flattened and just a little damp around the edges.

6.

“You’re never really going to be one of them.” I laugh harshly. “You know that, right?”

“I can try.” She looks defiantly at me and tucks her newly short, blonde hair behind her ears. Her nails are manicured and painted, although the skin around them is still ripped and bitten.

“How far are you willing to go for this?” I slap my card against the ticket vending machine and almost rip the piece of paper it spits out.

She blinks at me owlishly from behind her tortoiseshell glasses with plastic lens. A niggling voice inside my head says that I’m being irrational, overreacting, that I should be happy she’s gotten a new job as an art curator. I step angrily onto the waiting bus. “Goodbye, Chen An.”

She slides into the back seat next to me and attempts to take my hands. I wrench them away, and even the crane tattoo on her wrist seems to have faded into her fake tan.

“Didn’t you always say that your identity in no way defined who you were?” She looks at me challengingly, and I realise that the question says as much about her as it does about me. “Such a writer, postulating ‘truths’ that you don’t even believe in.”

I sit in the sun-warmed seat next to the window, where the light shines demandingly into my face. It won’t let me slip from its grasp, like a spotlight in an interrogation room. Cecelia is in complete shadow next to me. I want to turn my head to escape from the blinding world outside, but I can’t bring myself to look at her.

“Don’t you realise that this is the only way people like us can succeed here?” Her voice softens. “This isn’t the Western Dream. This is reality.”

I scoff. “You already have it easy. You’re the model minority. Obedient, hardworking, skin pale enough to be the beautiful kind of exotic.”

Cecelia flutters her long, delicate fingers against my cheek. “So I changed my name and my hair. It doesn’t affect who I am.” She tilts her head speculatively. “You’re pale enough too, in the right lighting. Just change your name and you’ll do fine.”

I look at the sunlight slanting into my lap. *My parents shoving me out the window of our ruined house, the shattered glass digging into my stomach, their faces as I sat beside the wreckage of our lives and alarms tried to drown out my last conversations with my father and mother. Everything that we lost in the span of an hour.* Last carrier of the family name, spread your joy across the world with pride.

“What’s in a name?” She asks blithely.



*The last day we'd spent together: nothing special. A trip to the park, chasing each other around as the spectre of war loomed heavy and dark above us.* I'd thought at that moment that no matter what happened next, at least I would always have that memory of a perfect spring day. But it's different now. The grass doesn't smell as fresh anymore; I can't quite recall the way mother used to call my name. The memory is fading through a yellowing filter of grief and regret. "To me? More than there should be."

"I thought you said—"

"It doesn't define me." I interrupt impatiently. "That doesn't mean it isn't important."

We rock gently back and forth as the bus sways along the city streets, stopping and starting, starting and stopping. A bird lazily wings its way across a grey sky.

7.

Half an hour of traffic stretches out into forty-five minutes. My handwriting is jerky as I'm bumped up and down, but it's with satisfaction that I close my notebook on an entire new chapter of writing.

The gallery where Cecelia works is small; run-down, dusty, and tucked away in such a way that everything seems deliberately quirky instead of the result of neglect.

WHEN EAST MEETS WEST: PRESENTED BY CHEN AN, CECELIA. It's the first thing I see when I step inside: Cecelia standing next to a glossy blowup of herself.

"Hello, Chen An." I dip my head in greeting and she smiles graciously enough, if more reserved than before.

We walk through the corridor of artwork together until the very last piece. It's titled "Wishes upon a star by Chen An", and I pick up the glass jar placed on the pedestal. Thousands upon thousands of tiny origami stars rattle around inside, all covered with writing too small to see. They sparkle inside their jar, even in the daylight.

"Will you teach me how to do that?" I ask. "Fold origami, I mean."

"What are you—" She skitters over the answer for a moment, still fixated on the jar of stars. "Yes. Of course."


8.

Chen An's apartment is full of origami. Paper constructions cover the table, the tops of cupboards, the mantelpiece in her bedroom.

Paper cranes hang from the ceiling, threaded on strings that hang down by the windowsill. The light hits them just the right way this time of the afternoon. They hang lifeless, illuminated by golden cages of light, dangling pieces of paper given beauty by a few creases and folds in the right places.

She sits alone at a table. I look at her deftly flipping the paper over, painting the back with glue, then making a tiny cut in the finished product and holding it up for inspection, and I realise that I want to tell her.

That although we have tragedy growing on our bones, although I am still overcome by the sound of gunshots and the meaning of the words I try to eke out from a bone-dry pen, while she puts on a smile as she steps into higher and higher heels and covers her palm with paper cuts, although we are both still floundering in this hazy Western dreamscape that has yet to resolve itself into reality, I would squeeze myself dry of the ink that runs through my veins if I had to, for her.



I take a step forward and she glances up; smiles welcomingly at me. A sigh gusts through the entire room and flutters the curtains. It ruffles Cecelia's hair and fills the entire room.

The paper cranes are taking flight. They come to life with a soft rustle of beating wings, held up by gossamer wires, drifting up and down above our heads. Cecelia's eyes are soft; she glances above us, then holds up the crane she was folding and lets it float into the air. I clutch my notebook tighter to my chest.

*Peace. Hope. Luck. Refuge.*

I close my eyes but still they soar on through their journey, ephemeral and weightless, borne lithely through the endless current of time with the beating of my heart.

# New Journeys to the West

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Lee, Pui Man – 16*

Oh no. No. NOOOOOOOO—”

Xuanzang was in the middle of a chant when the scream pierced through his ears. He was startled. The next moment he found himself flat on his stomach, as, in his frenzy to search for the source of the screech, he knocked over, a *camera stool*.

“SUN WUKONG!” Xuanzang’s furious voice now joined the newly restarted moans. Yet he did not let his anger override his compassion. Someone out there needed help. He had to go. The moans rose to a crescendo. He quickened his pace.

“Wukong —” Xuanzang called out again, this time in anxiety. And he received no response, again. Usually Wukong would appear the moment he called for help. But *not* this time. Maybe Wukong was hurt too. The fear churning in Xuanzang’s chest reached a peak. And as he rushed over to the rolling figure on the ground, he felt like the worst of his dreams had come true. Wukong *was* hurt.

“Wukong, are you okay? Are you okay? Talk to me. Talk to me. Please. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not.”

“What happened? Are you hurt? Come on. Let’s get you to a shady place first.”

“No, it’s not that. See? See this thing?” He held up his phone and his shaking finger moved towards a small icon at the corner of his phone.

“Yeah. But tell me what happened first.”

“Don’t you get it? There’s no more mobile data connection. We are literally in the middle of nowhere. Are you telling me I have to live *without* WIFI for the rest of the journey? How am I gonna keep that many followers on Instagram...hmm?”

With a final syllable, Wukong fainted. Xuanzang had collapsed on his sprained ankle, and, rather unintentionally, dropped Wukong’s head from his lap onto the rocks.

\*\*\*

Two weeks ago, Xuanzang set out on this journey to the West to retrieve the Buddhist’s Bible. He very much wanted to believe in his own hypothesis: the Buddha had sent Wukong to aid his journey. But he was soon forced to face reality. Maybe the Buddha wasn’t planning to make things easy for him. Bringing his new disciple along was a complete disaster. He had experienced loads of hardship since he set off. Monsters constantly craved for his meat, which would give them immortality. The scorching sun in the West wasn’t

[illegible]

se had been more destructive than his new dis-  
ghter. Above all, Wukong was the most passion-  
ld the most detailed possible record of their jour-  
monsters they encountered, and all sorts of rand-  
st, Xuanzang found it quite fascinating. The In-  
be so much easier. He never came across it in  
be his worst nightmare in the hands of his dis-  
ey, on Wukong went with his photo-taking. I  
out network connection. Whether it was to sav-  
g didn't know. But he was definitely enjoying  
ely peaceful.

ggggggggg-----  
screaming. In another level of urgency and ag-  
verwhelming sea of green in front of him insta-

is it? Never mind. I'll settle with my phone. Lo-

h a photo of Xuanzang's thrashing limbs amor-  
ve restored its calmness. Nothing could be hea-  
d his search for his camera. He was unsatisfied  
le. Only Xuanzang's forearm was visible. His  
shape of the monsters, let alone focus on the m-  
ds, needed plastic surgery. The lighting of his c-

was tied up against its icy stone walls, his eyes f-  
d come rescue him soon. No way would Wuk-  
m that long either. He must have woken up fr-

zang, blocking the entrance from his sight. May-  
to do without WIFI. But to Xuanzang, they v-

principle. Wukong was a good  
 mate photographer he'd ever  
 journey. Pictures of the meals  
 om things were posted with  
 internet had made  
 his years of isolation as a monk.  
 principle.  
 He was clearly distressed, but  
 ve his head from being dropped  
 the result of it -- the journey  
 -----" It was  
 ony.  
 ntly snatched away all his  
 et me switch it to night vision  
 ng the disappearing green  
 ard except for Wukong cursing  
 with the quality of that  
 skin tone was light enough.  
 misplaced features on their face  
 camera might be better. Here it  
 fixed upon the opening of the  
 ong abandon his master. But,  
 om all the noise. He should be  
 ybe they were just curious.  
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for his meat. The monsters must know something. Or their master must know something. Something about eating his meat would give them immortality. The malicious light from the hollows on their faces was piercing into his brain. He closed his eyes. At least he still had his eyelids as shields. He didn't understand what kept Wukong for so long. Maybe Wukong was hurt too. No, he couldn't be. Xuanzang couldn't even bear the thought of that. He just knew that Wukong would come for him. He knew it.

An abrupt silence fell. Heads turned. The blood in Xuanzang ran cold. The master of monsters was about to appear and finish him off. The sharp edges of the chains cut into his skin in his attempt to lean toward the entrance. He could hear nothing except the stillness of the frozen air. The monsters were holding their breaths too.

Some weird noise from outside the cave was growing louder. Even Xuanzang could hear it now. It might very well be someone speaking against the wind. But as the source of the sound moved closer, the disjointed syllables, sounded, increasingly eerie, and non-human.


"Hello, everyone. It's Wukong here. My sincere apologies to my dearest followers. I haven't been updating for so long. Please forgive me. My master did NOT warn me about the lack of WIFI. Look at what he got me into. Do I look like I have a life right now? Talking to an imaginary audience. Anyways, as you might see, I'm now on my way to look for my master. No, to rescue my master. He just got himself into trouble again. We were sleeping. I heard noises. I warned him. Monsters swarmed in and he was still asleep. I had to fight on my own and there were just too many of them, you know. I only managed to kill two. And they took my master. So here I am, on a rescue mission. Oh I forgot to mention, one of his shoes fell off. It stinks. You guys should be glad you are behind the screens. Anyways that's how I deduced the monsters brought him to this cave... here. See it? See it? Okay. Now. Listen to me. This is important. Focus on the face of the monsters. And then compare theirs to mine. They need plastic surgery. Now I'm gonna switch to the clip camera on my collar so you guys can see how I fight the... MONSTERS"

He broke into the cave. The monsters burst towards him. They started fighting.

On one side of the cave, Xuanzang saw, through the endless moving shades of green, Wukong reaching into his ear to retrieve his most powerful weapon, Jingubang. Yet his hand stopped halfway and turned towards his collar. He brought his collar closer to his ear. Xuanzang's heart was hammering against his chest.

Wukong must be having a problem with his Jingubang. Why is he putting it back in? No, he must stay safe. Xuanzang could no longer care about the mission right now. All he wanted was both him and Wukong to get out safe. If anything happens to Wukong because he was trying to save his master... Then he saw *it* coming. "Wukong, careful—"





On the other side of the cave, Wukong was trying to bring his camera closer to his ear so that his imaginary audience could see how he inserted and again retrieved his Jinkubang from his ear. John Green's right. "The world is not a wish-granting factory." Otherwise his followers would be watching this video live. Xuanzang can wait. The Buddha would keep him safe. Someone would go save him in the end even if he doesn't. "Guys, you see how it works? It's cool, isn't it?" He didn't see *it* coming. Or in a way he did. The next moment, Wukong blacked out. And a set of teeth sank into his master's flesh across the cave.

# Journey to the West Characters' Bodies Found. Scientists & Historians: Is all of this really fictional?

*St. Paul's Convent School, Chow, Yuet Ting Tiffany – 15*

10<sup>th</sup> January, 2120

**O**n 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2118, archaeologists unearthed 3 mummies in Nalanda Mahavihara, a large Buddhist monastery in the ancient kingdom of Magadha in India, possibly rewriting the history of human evolution.

After further investigations, the 3 mummies were said to be humanlike creatures, with human-cum-monkey, human-cum-pig, as well as one with demon-like features. Speculations aroused among the researching scientists and historians as to whether these discoveries were a large scandal, as their appearances, although heavily decolored, resemble shockingly the characters of the famous Chinese literature: Journey to the West.

On New Year's Eve, Abigail Dabny, an archaeologist working at the site with her group, discovered 3 unidentified mummies in the grounds near the remains of a brass monastery built by Harsha, the 7<sup>th</sup>-century emperor of Kannauj at the site. The mummies were neatly buried 4 foot deep in a regular array, just next to the platform arising at the entrance of the monastery. The mummies had been preserved in a remarkably good state, their features were clearly seen and identified. Dabny also found ancient artifacts around the mummies, including a twenty-foot iron staff with gold rings on each end, a nine-tooth iron muck-rate, and a golden chain armor chest plate, which were famous weapons and armor owned by Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie respectively, according to the story version written in the Ming Dynasty.

“You could still see the clothes and the appearances of the mummies, they look as if they were just sleeping. As unrealistic and surreal this is, the complexity of it has proven this could not be man-made.” Dabny stated.

According to sources, the mummies fit the descriptions of the three characters in the novel: Sun Wukong (Monkey King), Zhu Bajie (Piggy) and Sha Wujing (Sandy). One of them was human-sized with looks similar to a monkey. Its forehead was surrounded by a gold band. Another one was ridiculously chubby in size. It looked like a pig with a huge snout, it was also human-sized. It had two trotters and two hands. The last one appeared to be a human, but its nose was crooked strangely, its ears were 4 inches long and its skin was much darker than the others. The mummies' skin was still intact and hair was present. We can also see them wearing tunics, robes and long blouses made from cloth and fabric shoes. Dabny suggested that they are possibly from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which fit the expedition to the west mentioned in the story.

Scientists and historians that examined the mummies along with Dabny had proven them to be real, instead of artificial. Modern human DNA was found present in the bodies. However, the real question is: where did they come from?

The most extraordinary thing about the mummies was the fact that they were not humans as we see today, but rather a combination of half-human, half-monkey or half-pig. One of the mummies, as mentioned, had a large pig snout and ears, and strands of hair containing DNA of a pig was found present. Another's body was covered with monkey hair.

“The heads and trotters can be decapitated and amputated respectively from a large monkey and a pig, being replaced on human bodies. But there were no stitches or cuts on the bodies, as far as we know.” said Leonard Catcher, one of the researchers at the site.

Journey to the West is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese Literature. It was published in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in the Ming Dynasty by Wu Cheng'en. The story retold the tale of Xuanzang, a brave young scholar and Buddhist monk, spending years traveling from China to India, spreading the cultures of

Buddhism. He travels westward with his three disciples, including Sun Wukong, a powerful and impulsive monkey; Zhu Bajie, a strong and greedy pig; and Sha Wujin, a loyal and shy friar, encountering countless monsters and beasts along the way. The four adventurers each symbolizes an element of the human soul, the story itself also reflects different political and cultural climate of ancient China, making it one of the most famous tales of all times.

But now it may not be a fantasy at all.

According to history, Xuanzang visited Nalanda first in 637 CE and then again in 642 CE, spending a total of around two years at the monastery. He studied under the guidance and teachings of Śīlabhadra, the head of the institution at that time. Besides studying Buddhism, he also studied grammar, logic, and Sanskrit translations.

In the story, the 3 characters were said to be made gods in Heaven after fulfilling their humble duties to deliver the scriptures whilst overcoming numerous difficulties and challenges, protecting Xuanzang from harm. There were believed to be fictional characters added to the novel published in the Ming Dynasty during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Nalanda Mahavihara is a large ancient Buddhist monastery located in Nalanda, Bihar (India). It has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2016. Nalanda is the most ancient university of the Indian subcontinent, indicating the historical development of the religion and flourishing of Buddhism. The original building was destroyed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Turkish army, under the leadership of its commander Bakhtiar Khilji, crushed the university in 1193 AD. The archaeological remains of the ascetic and scholastic institution date back from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The mummies had been transmitted around the world for examinations with the most advanced technology.

Some teeth remain from the mummy which seemed to be a half-pig-and-half-human creature, in fact, were decayed needle teeth, characteristic of those of pigs.

The reasons of why these creatures died still remains a mystery.

“We can presume, from its body features, that this half-pig, half-human could stand on two feet and eat with two hands. It has a pig head and a human body, which is definitely saying something.” Dabny stated.

The venue where the 3 mummies were found, Nalanda, was the final destination of Xuanzang's journey. It is believed that the mummies had not been formally buried in the ground despite being found neatly. There were, as stated, no actual casket or coffin; except for the certain weapons and armor found, there wasn't much around the area. As to why they were buried in that specific location, the reason is still unknown.

“The bodies were found in a Buddhist monastery, mummified and neatly buried. It could be a burial that happened to be somewhat unexpected as no tomb had been made beforehand. We cannot be sure if they are Buddhist monks, these monks enter mummification when alive and have their tombs built beforehand.” said Jerol Gad, another researcher in the team.

Sokushinbutsu is a practice in which Buddhist monks monitor self-discipline and spiritually prepare themselves for death. They enter mummification when alive, undergoing starvation and other processes. It is believed that many Buddhist monks have tried, but only a small amount of these mummifications have been discovered.

Alternate theories suggest that these bodies were actually from a parallel universe that managed, in some way, to slip through time and ended up in India. Although there have been recent breakthroughs in the study of the parallel universe since the start of this century, there is no specific evidence which supports this theory.

Other theories say it was but an unrecorded result of human mutation, yet others argue the possibility of the trio being together and buried in the same place.

Rowen Quinn Andrew is a historian and professor studying ancient China and its cultures at the University of Oxford. She has long been dazzled by the novel itself and was able to take a deep look at the bodies when she was invited by the researchers at the site to scrutinise them. After a week of experiments and predictions, we were able to interview her on the issue.

*What was your initial reaction when you first knew about the discoveries?*


“I was as shocked and skeptical as everyone was. There was serious uncertainty about whether these bodies were actually real. Journey to the West was one of the novels where, when you first started reading, you can tell straight away it is but only a fantasy. A monkey, born from a rock, eventually becoming a powerful threat to the ultimate kingdom of Heaven does ring a bell in Chinese culture as it associates the religions and beliefs of Taoism and Buddhism, but it was not something we see in the ordinary world. Each historical finding is unique in its own way. The mummies discovered were special in the sense that they were mystical. You get a similar feeling as when historians discovered the first cavemen, because it opens up a new field of discovery and exploration. I cannot say I am too hopeful about it, but it is certainly worth finding out more.”

*What are your thoughts on this new discovery? Do you think it is, as they say, from a different universe?*

“What we are looking at now is something truly fascinating and to some extent, unreal. These findings can possibly be concrete evidence that humans have too simplistic a view of our past. Historians construct an imaginary interior from multiple sources and perspectives, telling the stories based on the way these sources are presented, instead of the way they wanted history to go. One of the most crucial aspects of this discovery is that it doesn't fit into the storyline. Despite all the artifacts and ancient bodies, what we are looking into now is one single, somewhat reliable, source. 22<sup>nd</sup> century has been very different from its previous account, the ideas of parallel universes and hyperspace has changed the way humans see time, time is no longer some simple measurements or duration, but something that can be twisted and altered at will. Similarly, historians are now being drawn into the field of science, which is a very contradicting idea. We may have to look more deeply into this discovery before coming up with conclusions right away. After investigating these bodies, their resemblance is uncanny; the moment I see them, it reminded me of the characters. One conclusion drawn was that it was an ancient form of evolution, neglected by humanitarian records; it is true that Xuanzang visited Nalanda in the 7<sup>th</sup> century but why were there no records of his disciples in his books? Something must have happened along the way. If we fill this gap, we may as well believe in these conflicting conclusions. However, how unbelievable this is also made it very ludicrous for some to believe this is true. The reliability of a single source is not high, drawing conclusions and taking sides with this single reference is definitely not giving enough.”

*You were one of the most brilliant western historians who studies Chinese history, having dealt with ancient artifacts and scriptures for almost two decades. How do you think will this discovery impact on the field you are working?*

“This could be seen as a major breakthrough; if scientists, speculations are correct, it opens up a new branch of history humans have never touched on before. This branch may involve studying myths and legends that may not sound convincing in the first place; However, if 3 bodies of what were fictional characters were dug up after 1500 years, it is likely that we will discover much more from our past than ever before through these bits and pieces of household bedtime stories. One of the most fascinating parts of these discoveries was that they were not completely human, said to be evolved from monkeys and apes. The fact that we found a body with obvious characteristics resembling a human and a pig is really intriguing. The process of human



evolution is once again challenged. Throughout history, we have never included other animals in process of evolution. However, the appearance of this half-pig, half-human can be a major starting point of exploration. This discovery will attract attention from historians, scientists, researchers, theorists, religion scholars and much more, the debate may never end.”

It is believed that the three mummies will be delivered to different places to be investigated, and they may be put on display as soon as spring in 2125.



## New Journeys to the West

*St. Paul's Convent School, Keung, Joanna Ka Wai – 15*

“Now that we have a year of nothing to do,” she types with hesitation, “should we go and experience the west?” The text finally found its way to the group chat. After years of dreaming, Bette was determined to make this a reality.

The group chat remained idle for minutes, which was saying something. Bette’s breath grew deeper and deeper. Sipping her coffee by her book stand, she was waiting patiently, still.

*Ding, ding!* It finally rang! Bette rushed to check, and she was disappointed. Jake texted, “Are you kidding me?” with an additional question mark in the end.

“Yes, I am sure!”, “I have been waiting for months to ask you all this.”, “We all love the book so much, why don’t experience it once?” This was what she typed, in immense anxiety. It was late at night, yet she did not want to sleep.

Now, Matt broke his silence by saying, “I want to lose some weight. I have time too.” *Thank you*, thought Bette.

Privately, she spoke to Sandy, their last member in the quartet. Sandy, as usual, said, “Sure.” If Bette had a bucket list, retracing the *Journey to the West* route would be right on top. She still remembered all her imaginary childhood adventures with the three were running around Jake’s backyard, pretending to fight the tree spirits (which were the trees of the backyard), to fight the bull demon king or even the white bone demon. The novel has always been a staple of their childhoods. The four of them used to read the book countless times during sleepovers. Their show-and-tell sessions often included action figures, comics, books and toys from the book.

“I know that this is a tough decision, but wouldn’t it be great to finally fulfill our childhood dreams?”

★★

“So, we start at Xi’an. Then, we take a plane to Dunhuang. We walk and sightsee for a few days, then we go to Turpan by taking another plane, then a bus.” Bette started. There was a sense of confidence and excitement in her words, that made her seem like a kid in a toy store. As she continued, Sandy started jotting her notes, while Jake and Matt listened. As Bette was taking in a deep breath in between, Matt uttered, “This is going to take ages, trust me.”

“Gosh. Just let her finish.” Jake replied with a certain degree of dismay.

Bette, who let out a little frown, pulled it back and continued, “So, where was I... Yes... After walking to Kuqa, we go see the canyons and caves and mosques there. It would be great for taking pictures.” She looked at Sandy and gives her a little wink.

As soon as Bette said the word “walking”, the room fell into a deep sort of silence. *Walking?* Jake thought. His eyes exerted anxiety and panic, which was terribly uncommon for the happy-go-lucky boy. Trembling, he asked, “How long is... you know... the walk?” Seeing through the worrying eyes of his, Bette gently replied, “It won’t be long. I won’t tire you guys, you know that.”

As Bette continued talking about her masterplan, the room (which was in fact Matt’s living room) fell into silence, with the four of them contemplating their decision to join in, but at the same time a slight sense of joy was brewing in their hearts.

★★

The day finally arrived. Carrying their hefty backpacks, the four gathered up in the Hong Kong International Airport, waiting for their adventure to begin. While Bette was checking in at the counters, Matt, with his especially heavy backpack, uttered as sweat slid down his face, “I have a bad feeling about this...” Jake, trying to lighten up the mood, cheerily said, “Snap out of it! It’s going to be great and trust me, you are going to lose, like, 50 pounds when you come back.” Matt laughed in relief, saying, “Well, that would be great, wouldn’t it?” Touching his belly (that was very obvious), he started to dream of the day when his belly fat all disappeared, and where he became the handsome man that he aspires to be.

“Let’s go!” Bette excitedly screamed at her lifelong pals. Merrily, the four best friends embarked on their journey to the west.

★★

“Wake up! Wake up!” Sandy whispered as she patted on Jake, as the flight attendant murmured on the speaker of the flight’s arrival. With a bright smile, Bette looks out of the airplane window, and all she sees is her childhood. It somehow made her teary eyed, knowing that this was where she has always wanted to be.

As the four stepped out of the airport, they all simultaneously and deeply inhaled. There was something in the air that ignited their exhilaration, and they finally all seemed like they were happy to be where they are now – the starting point of their long, long journey.

“So, what we do, is that we would first take a bus from here to the Big Wild Goose Pagoda. And then, have dinner, then maybe take a stroll around the place, and then we reside at a motel.” Bette said, all the while walking and reading a map from her phone. Sally quietly asked, “Anyone need mosquito repellent...How about hats, I have extra ones if anyone forgot to bring them. You know that hats are especially important in hot places like these...” She kept blabbing, and from time to time, Jake, Matt and Bette took some repellents, sunscreen or sunglasses from Sandy.

In the blink of an eye, the bus came to a full stop. And right next to the four, was the Big Wild Goose Pagoda. In their hearts, there was a strong emotion of happiness that flooded. This was where everything all started, and where everything all ended. This was where Xuanzang himself started his conquest, and stored all the scriptures and artifacts he found. It was probably the immense height of the building, how surprisingly modest and plain the pagoda looked like, or just how much history this seven-story building retains, that gave the four an instant attraction to it.

Seeing the pagoda clearly for the first time, there was an urge in the four's hearts to take out their phones and take tens of hundreds of pictures of the legendary pagoda. Yes, that was what everyone visiting the place did. However, the four of them all knew that this place was such a sacred place to them, that the pagoda held such a special position in their hearts, that it was better if they experienced it through the lens of their eyes, not the lens of the camera.

Walking around the pagoda, all four of them stopped talking, and kept their eyes on the pagoda. Peeking into the interior of the building, they all seemed to be quite in awe, for they were experiencing their childhood dreams and fantasies. They continued walking for an hour, and soon enough they found themselves walking in circles around the building. When they arrived, the sun was still high up in the air, but after time, the sun started to set. But still, they just could not leave. “Not everyone gets to come here, you know.” Bette told the rest of the gang, “Let's leave some good memories here.” She took out a camera, and took one polaroid picture of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, set against the setting sun. The exuberant orange of the setting sun added sentimentality and magnificence to the pagoda. It was something that neither of them was going to forget.

★★

The following day, the four took a plane to Dunhuang. Seeing the success of their adventure so far, Jake just could not help but merrily say, “This is going great!” He smiled and stared at his best friends with such compassion. He knew that these people were those that were going to be with him for the rest of his lives, and he was more than happy about that. The rest of the four also knew that, and they too thought if they had to be best buddies with someone, it would be who they are with right now.

It was quite a long ride to the Mogao caves in Dunhuang. These caves were not something initially planned in their itinerary, but the fame that the spot has attracted Bette to put this place into their schedule.

Between the bus and the cave was a long walk, which the four had to pass through, while carrying their backpacks, which got heavier with extra souvenirs and food. After every minute, Matt had to stop for a little rest, saying “I can't do this” every time. Nonetheless, they all successfully arrived at the entrance of the Mogao caves. By the time they arrived, the four were all soaking in sweat, and unsurprisingly, Sandy handed out the tissues and towels to her fellow partners.

Once again, the four were in complete shock as they saw the exterior of the cave. But this time, it was different from the kind of awe they had for the pagoda. Unlike the pagoda, there was no sense of nostalgia, there was the pure feeling of awe towards the epic scale of the temple and caves.

What surprised the four even more were the paintings within the cave. Colours filled the walls of the cave, and the wall paintings, textiles, sculptures and scriptures all opened a whole new world for the four of them. It seemed like the intelligence and creativity of the generations before them resulted in such masterpieces that could hardly be compared and replicated till this day.

Closely examining the walls, Bette noticed the brightness of the colours. In her imagination, with the passage of time, any painting that is as exposed as these would fade in colour. What she witnessed was contrary to her expectations, and that made her experience all the more special. She told Matt, “The colour never seems to fade, does it? How could this have happened?” Matt, as well as her friends who overheard her question, were all surprised by it.

Photography and art has always been one of her passions in life, and it was something she wanted to pursue since she was a kid. Unfortunately, her dream was met with the dismay of her parents and even some of her peers. Jake, Matt and Sandy cheered her on, of course, but there was something else that she had to consider – money. Being the only child, she had to take care of her parents financially, and being an artist was not a safe bet.

Laughing slightly, Matt replied, “It just proves that this place is extraordinary.” as Bette kept on staring at the paintings. Oh, how much she wanted to reach out and feel the surface of the wall paintings.

As the day went by, the four never stopped walking around the caves, as in every cave, there was something new and amazing. They all marveled at the artistry behind these exhibits. It was unlike anything anyone has ever seen before. It was truly a place that was extraordinary.

After Matt (in deep exhaustion) proposed to leave the caves for their meal, they started their five-minute walk to a little restaurant. Sandy claimed, “The only reason we could find something to eat is because of this.” She points at her phone, and a pocket Wi-Fi on her other hand. Oddly enough, Jake and Matt are not terrible enthusiasts in technology and smartphones. They always think that technology is more like a scam or a fraud than something beneficial. Bette replied by saying, “Cut it, Sandy. You’ll never remotely succeed in shaking their disbeliefs in Wi-Fi or apps or that kind of stuff.” Jake looked at Bette with an expression of agreement. After a few seconds, Sandy formulated her thoughts and said, “Well, I was just blabbering.”

Sitting down outdoors, with their hot noodles, the four gave a sigh of relief as they could finally eat, after hours of wandering around with an empty stomach. Matt, looking especially happy about the meal, raised his chopsticks quickly and started shoving the noodles down his throat, all the while creating an agonizingly loud slurp. His friends seemed completely at ease, but the other tourists were not. A seemingly-American tourist at the next table, patted on Matt’s back and said, “Could you tone your...eating noises down? Thank you, sir.” Matt responded by saying a sincere “sorry” and ate his lunch quietly.

After eating more than a half of his meal, Jake took away Matt’s bowl and started eating from it. In total anger, Matt asked, “What are you doing?” Jake, looking sly and cunning, replied, “Didn’t you want to lose a few pounds? I’m helping you.” Matt silenced and uttered a quiet “okay”. Sitting there and witnessing all of her friends having the times of their lives eating, Matt felt an urge and he grabbed the bowl from Jake and said, “I’m not done yet.”

★★

Settling down in a crammed motel just close to the Dunhuang airport, the four seemed pleased by their second day. At the same time, they were fatigued. The motel lobby was nearly empty, the four were the only customers there.

A man, with a black hood covering his face, entered the motel lobby, and asked the manager for a room to stay in. With all four pairs of eyes staring at the man, he glanced over, revealing a man that not only was obscured by a hood, but also a mask. Only revealed were his eyes that were subtly dangerous. The look in his eyes made a strong impression to the four of them, who all started to look scared and terrified to a certain degree.


As the man approached the sofas, where the four sat while waiting for their room keys, the four sat closer together, while the man sat by himself on the other side of the sofas, and he started playing a game on his phone. It seemed like a combat game, as punches, ducks and kicks sounded from the phone, making the four even more horrified.

Minutes and minutes passed. The four were doing different things (like Bette was checking the flight information for the next day, while Sandy and Jake were tidying up their backpacks), and the man kept playing his game. There was an obvious sort of tension between the two “parties”.

As the manager finally found a key, he nervously handed it over to the man, rather than the four (who have been waiting for quite a long time). As the man was about to leave, he went near to the four, took out his hand, signaling for Jake to shake his hand. In Mandarin, Jake asked, “Sorry?” The man abruptly grabbed Jake’s hand and shook it, saying “Nice to meet you.” In his deep, baritone voice was something the four could not really comprehend, but it intensified their fear for him.

Quickly, while he was shaking Jake’s hand, the man with dexterity grabbed Jake’s backpack, turned around and ran out of the motel.

Leaving the four and the manager in shock, they all ran out of the motel, trying to chase after him. While running, the manager said, “This man is a thief, he’s been here a couple of times, and every time, he does the same thing!” In the five, Jake and Bette were sprinting extremely fast. Jake screamed, “Hey, Hey! Give it BACK!” Being the athletic man that he is, he quickly ran up to the thief and grabbed his shoulder.



“Where do you think you are going, sir?” Jake asked in fury. The man did not answer, and within a split second, he let go of Jake’s hold and attempted to run, only to see Bette in front of him, blocking his way. Desperate, he runs to his left, but is blocked by Matt. He runs to his right, with both Sandy and the manager standing right in front of him. The man said, “What are you trying to do to me, huh?” He dropped the backpack on the floor, and said “Take it back...okay? Is that okay for you all?” Jake took his backpack, but he did not seem very pleased. He looked at Sandy and nodded his head. Sandy reached out and started dialing on her phone. Not long after, she told the police (which are on the other side of the phone), “Hello, there has been a thief trying to steal my friend’s precious backpack...Yes...This is...” The man, with a helpless expression, told the manager, “You win this time, okay?” The manager let out a little grin, and so did the four.

Back at the motel, Bette and Matt sat together as Sandy and Jake were being questioned by policemen just outside of the motel. The manager granted the four motel rooms free of charge, claiming that the capture of this thief “help keep the motel out of danger”.

“This all happened way too quickly.” Matt sat, still trying to process what had happened. “I agree.” Bette, who too, was attempting to recount what just happened. All they knew that this trip was going to be an exciting ride. Bette suddenly smirked, and said to Matt, “This is how you experience the west, right?” Matt, responding with laughter, “I suppose so.”

They knew that this was only the beginning of their adventure, and that the rest of the escapade was going to be filled with great memories.



## New Journeys to the West

*St. Paul's Convent School, Luk, Katie – 15*

*The Thought-horse and the Mind-ape had scattered,  
The Lord of Metal and the Mother of Wood were dispersed.  
The Yellow Wife was damaged, her powers divided,  
The Way was withered, and how could it be saved?  
—Journey to the West, chapter 30  
Loading...*

A loud growling rippled through the air, followed by a low piercing cry. Its distressing, pained-filled screams cut through the tranquil air, echoing in the forest. The poor Yellow Robe demon was holding his beloved wife, Jade maiden's limp body. Twenty yards away, there stood Wukong, proud and tall, his golden armour and phoenix-feather cap shimmering in the moonlight. Wukong vacantly stared into the fuming beast's predatory eyes, not a bit affected by the death swirling in them.

"I just lost all my interest in this fight, I wish Wukong never shifted back to his original pompous form, Jade Maiden's beauty is entrancing." Piggy voiced out, reluctance laced in his voice. "Should we help Wukong out? I'm a bit worried." Sha ignored Piggy's comment altogether and stated. "Nah, let's not steal his show and allow the magic shenanigan to flaunt his cathartic butt—whooping." Piggy proceeded to lie on the grass and yawned, "Let me take a nap, his hijinks are seriously tiring me out." Sha monk mumbled, "I still think we should find a chance to help Wukong sneak in the moon wave cave to save Xuanzang." Piggy popped open an eye and laughed, his stomach rumbling. "Sha, he doesn't need us, he claims he's unbeatable, just let him unleash his righteous baton twirling."

At this point, Yellow Robe Demon's original form, a black boar with a silky yellow robe, gradually appeared. He cautiously pulled out his steel blade from under his robe and proceeded to swing it at full force, letting out a throaty growl. But obviously, Wukong's reflexes were way faster. He evaded the attack and hopped on his cloud trapeze, performed a magnificent somersault, vanishing in the sky, before conjuring vertical hurricanes of whirlwind in mid-air, blasting the poor creature out of sight.

"Ten-four, good buddy! Yep, I'm just about that virtuous mission!" Wukong twirled his golden staff and sauntered to the half-asleep Piggy. "You mean your mission to single-handedly (don't use words like this!) every deity in all three of China's major religions, or kill three innocent and beautiful ladies I could have made my wife? Yeah, much appreciated." Piggy stared Wukong right in the eye and spat. "Well, it's not my fault I have an unfettered mind with great knowledge and skills, unlike—" "So with that great mind of yours you pull out a Gilgamesh after experiencing an existential crisis, then went on a quest of immortality?" Piggy supported himself up with his rake, cocking his eyebrow in satisfaction when he noticed Wukong's evident frustration. "What, and you—"

*The Yellow Robe Demon has shapeshifted into a fly and is approaching defenceless Sha monk. Location: moon wave cave. Weapon option invalid: character trait of dullness of mind causing him to leave his "crescent moon shovel" behind. Use 10 diamonds to give him a new weapon right this instant?*

"Yes, yes! Give it to him!" I panicked and shouted, furiously pressing on the keyboard repeatedly, leaning towards the computer and staring it down like we were having a fight.

*Command invalid. You do not have enough diamonds. Purchase more?*

"What, this isn't fair! Why didn't the teammate option even appear?" I spat and did an angry spin on my chair.

*You failed the mission. Sha-monk ran out of lives. Please wait for two hours before attempting this round again.*



I slammed my laptop shut in anger. It's the 5th time I've attempted this round and my characters just won't co-operate and complete one single mission together. I wondered why I initially thought assigning my characters with clashing personalities was a cool idea.

"What, and you think you're so great? All you do is follow your carnal desires!" Wukong spat, stressing his words. "Could you at least keep an eye on Sha, You know how obscure his useless kind is— Where's Sha?" Wukong squinted his fiery golden eyes until he spotted Sha-monk's prominent red beard in a far distance, plucked a hair from his back and blew on it, instantly transforming into a wasp. He zoomed through the vault of leaves and limb, popped back to his original form, muttered a spell and instantly froze the poor beast.

"One blow from my rake and your very soul will be rent asunder!" Piggy muttered through his clenched teeth, slamming his rake onto the unstaggering Wukong with all his might—

Clang!

Silence.

Wukong's golden bolt took the *very brutal* force and remained, well, obviously unharmed. Sha-mok dragged a worn out Xuanzang out into the open only to witness Wukong and Piggy immersed into a new round of bickering.

"Enough! When will you two finally learn to cooperate and—" "Master, if only you would stop being so naive and use your compassionate without wisdom then I could have killed that shapeshifting devil—"

Wukong interjected in the middle of Xuanzang's sentence. Xuanzang calmly started reciting the dreaded spell. Wukong's face contorted into horror. "Master please don't—" His pleading faded as the bolt strained him, agonizing tremors raked through his body every couple of seconds. He slowly curled into a ball. "I'll send you away again if you keep being that impulsive and and arrogant. You've killed enough innocent people Wukong."

I stared blankly into the screen of my computer, only to be faced with nothingness. My hand reached into the tall can of caramelized popcorn in a repetitive manner. I sighed in defeat. Two hours had long passed and yet I still couldn't enter the game. Just as I was about to slam my laptop shut—

*As the Heart's Nature Is Cultivated, the Great Way Arises*

— *Journey to the West, chapter 1*

— *guanyin*

The red flickering words replaced the original "game loading" command. Before i broke out of my trance the screen blacked out, along with all the electricity in my house.

CRASH!

I froze. A million horrible thoughts of what might happen to me ran through my head and I broke into a cold sweat. As I held my can of popcorn in a defense position and shuffled out to the living room, more clattering and shouting was heard. "for Buddha's sake Sha, shrink your stupid shovel! You're digging it into my back and scratching my beautiful armour!" a shrill voice pierced through the tense and suffocating air.

I took a deep breath and turned on my phone's flashlight, finding fiery golden eyes staring straight at me.

Before I could scream, the light flicked back on.

I blanked out. My pupils dilated, breathing caught, and mind went into overdrive. In front of me, stood a wild monkey with a hideous feathers sticking from his hat, a rake-wielding pig, a partially bald man with a red beard, and a totally bald man in off-white.

I screamed the loudest I could manage.

Silence.

I screamed again.

Silence.

"Wukong," I muttered, "I thought you were larger than this" It was unbelievable, he was lower than my waist?

Well, also because apparently my characters from a GAME, previously only figments of my imagination were standing in my living room.

‘How dare you insult me you— wait, how would you know my name? Devil come out of your disguise!’ Wukong rambled and proceeded to pluck his staff from behind his ear, enlarging it, twirling it and tucking it underneath his arms, 101% ready to sprint at me.

“Master, look at Wukong’s impulsiveness, he seriously—” Piggy declared.

I let out a huge sigh. “Guys, you may be a four-man-band-archetype, but that means you’re a team! If you don’t work together for once, and recognize your personal traits, there will be more troubles and obstacles while defeating the demons! Your personalities may be different, but all of your strengths compliment each other and cover your weaknesses!” I declared in a serious tone. “Seriously it’s so hard to complete any mission with you all acting up like this.” I muttered under my breath as I turned and placed my can of popcorn back in the cupboard. Piggy’s stare was starting to make me uncomfortable.

I didn’t miss the looks the four people— and animals exchanged.

This might be the first and last time I possessed the ability to get a 100% double take rate at me. I mean, it’s kind of inevitable when you have a marching troupe of 5 compadres, with three being animals, and mostly dressed up in hideous eye-catching costumes. I gave strained smiles to the chuckling children, mentally scolding myself for agreeing to bring them to a local Buddhist temple and promising to buy them a copy of the scriptures. I explained to them that the scriptures were attained a long time ago and now Buddhism is one of the major religions in the world. Xuanzang totally freaked out when I told him there were other religions like Christianity, Islam in our mixed society. I can basically still feel his judging eyes staring holes into me.

By now we arrived at a more rural part of the city, and while Piggy and Wukong continued to bicker away, Sha-monk and Xuanzang immersed deep in a conversation, I hauled out my phone to read the messages I received throughout the night.

*The ape’s immortal body is matched a human mind: That the mind is an ape is deeply meaningful.*

— Journey to the West, chapter 7

—guanyin

*The heart must be frequently swept,  
The dust of emotions removed,  
Lest the Buddha be trapped in the pit.*

— Journey to the West, chapter 50

—guanyin

*Samantabhadra and Manjusri were  
Disguised as pretty girls among the trees.  
the unreligious Pig was worse than worldly.  
From now on he must calm his mind and reform.  
If he misbehaves again, the journey will be hard.*

— Journey to the West, chapter 23

—guanyin

I decided all of these texts were sent to me by guanyin, obviously, and from what I heard she was a member of the court of Heaven. After decoding them for an entire night, it seemed like every single text described traits of each of the four-man-band-archetype-members, and how they often get consumed and distracted by their lower self instead of seeking enlightenment by seeking higher state of consciousness. They seemed like commands specifically for me, but what could I do? I only knew how to press computer keys.

The group suddenly came to a halt and I looked up to see a shabby old lady and a young girl approaching our group.

“We...we come with no bad intentions, we merely wanted someone stronger to help us with chopping some firewood. Can you come and help us?” The girl specifically looked at Xuanzang with her innocent eyes.

At once Wukong reached behind his ear.

I heaved a sigh and shook my head instinctively, partially at Wukong's impulsiveness and seeing how Pigsy was basically staring into the young girl's soul. People (and animals) never change, do they?

While Xuanzang rushed over to volunteer, Wukong interjected, "I could easily help you chop all your nonexistent firewood in a second, but listen to me master, these people are trying to deceive you!" Upon hearing Wukong's words, the girl started tearing up.

"Alright listen up, disguising yourself as a sympathetic duo won't work on me. That's like man-eating demon trick number one. Hell, I did it all the time back when I ate people." Wukong's shrill voice alarmed me and I decided to walk over, secretly investigating Xuanzang's reaction.

At once it felt like my body was under trance as I opened my mouth and spat out unfamiliar words, "*A single thought at once disturbs a hundred monsters, don't let your lower self take interest in the thoughts and emotions that interfere with your dedication to be present. Only then, will you reach Vulture Hill.*"

I stared at Xuanzang in confusion once I broke out of my void-box. He stayed silent for a moment and finally voiced out, "maybe we all should go in together, the task will be easier completed with more people, right?" Xuanzang gave a warning stare to Wukong, but didn't recite the restraining spell. Pigsy didn't make unnecessary provoking comments. I heaved a sigh of relief. It was then, it clicked. Guanyin must have given me a little help to realise my purpose in their mission— to lead the members to seek their, what was that? Vulture Hill! This must be it, the way to pass the mission! "I think I know—"

A whisk of wind whipped past me and pushed me to the floor. The two ladies, accompanied by two bulky men had already hopped on a gigantic motorcycle and sped past us, whisking Xuanzang with them in the process. "Since you all wouldn't cooperate, we had to use the hard way." the old lady sang darkly and smirked at us.

Wukong's eyes turned from gold into fiery red and threw his hands up. But before he could conjure any power, shots rang through the chilly air, grazing Wukong's arm in the process. I gasped loudly and Sha-monk immediately pulled me behind his back.

"Let's transform ourselves, it'll be faster that way." Pigsy suggested. I was expecting a provoking comment from Wukong about Pigsy's only—36 transforming skills, but surprisingly, it didn't come. "It's fine, I can erm... walk or something..." I scratched the back of my head. "No, we're going together. We're a team, as you said, right?" Wukong gave me a mischievous smile. Well, that was unexpected. At once I was hurled onto his cloud trapeze as strong currents of wind zipped through the forest and encircled us.

In no time, we arrived at an abandoned factory. The gang members were trying to snatch away Xuanzang's emerald bracelets and golden stick. Before we could even rush over, a large group of bulky gang members marched out with advanced-looking machine guns in hand. Tremors of fear drifted from my head to toes, feeling like chilling ice shards racing down my veins.

A huge pitbull charged at me with full force, a few men firing from behind. I sprinted around a few trees before launching behind a purple shrubbery. I crossed my fingers, silently hoping the members would finally work together.

No matter how many horror movies I've seen about terrifying beasts that prowled the depths of forests reigning terror on innocent souls, nothing could have prepared me for the sight that stood in front of me. Yellow sullen eyes glared at me. Its long saber-like teeth protruded from its mouth. Engulfing as much stale air as I could, I screamed.

What have I gotten myself into?

Branches slapped at my face, grabbed for my clothes, and tripped me up like they were aiding the beast behind me. The ground began to shake and I knew it was in high pursuit behind me. The forest ground vanished from under my feet and I cartwheeled down the slope. Shock paralysed me and fear froze my mind. My entire right side screamed in agony as I was propelled across the forest floor. I turned my head to see the fierce pitbull staring at an escalated slope, a growl reverberated through its chest.

Like fate loved me or something, a strong current of wind crashed into the animal's side, causing the beast to stumble disoriented.

Looks like I'm not dying today.

Another sphere of sparkling fire landed inches away from me, sizzling out on the fallen leaves. I looked up to see Pigsy raising his nine-toothed rake in the air, fire and blinding light streaming forth. A deep growl bellowed through the air as the poor creature retreated.

I hauled myself up to find all three members looking down at me in concern. I nodded surely at them, their presence pacifying me slightly.

"The Mind-ape had scattered, The Lord of Metal and Mother of Wood were dispersed. The Yellow Wife has damaged, her powers divided, The Way has withered, and how could it be saved?" I hummed with a sure smile, recalling how this used to pop up everytime before I played the game. Gunshots were nearing us. "Togetherness." Wukong tucked the golden staff beneath his arm. "Don't give in to your lower self." Pigsy swung his nine-toothed rake to his shoulder. "Pursuit of higher consciousness" Sha-monk polished the other end of his shovel.

I smiled. We are ready.

At once, we stood back-to-back, facing all four directions, each showcasing our own talents against our enemies. Wukong recited his spells to conjure a protective field around us, blocking out the string of bullets aiming at us.

Squawks of surprise sounded from the gang members as the bullets directed back at them.

Sha-monk flung his shovel, energy surging from within and generating powerful gusts of wind, shooting away currents of air that sent any racing bullets away, falling debris mopped out in a cloud of white powdery dirt.

"Pigsy, Sha-monk, lure the enemies to the riverside! Unleash your strong fighting skills in water!" I shouted as I shedded my head from the bullets that managed to break through the protective field.

The two nodded, dashing to the river at full speed.

"Chase them!" The leader of the gang yelled.

The gangs rushed to the riverside like a tsunami. Sha-monk emerged from the river, mustering up a handful of pent-up energy to conjure spheres of water, while Pigsy had multicoloured essences swirling in his hands, freezing the water and icing the gang's machine guns. Their collective forces hit the enemies right in the stomach like a brick wall. Fear and surprise flickered across their faces.

"Guys, here we go, let's show them what we've got." Wukong smirked.

And they struck.

I watched as the duplicated Wukongs collectively conjured balls of sizzling fire, hurling them at Sha-monk, who met them with his spheres of water from his twirling shovel, and Pigsy freezing the spheres with the cold forces of his rake.

At once, energy surged to life from within. The huge force collided and created a huge swirling tornado. Streams of energy danced around the tornado erratically into an upward spiral, it grew more and more powerful.

The piling gang members started shooting a new type of bullet that I didn't recognize. Gray smoke bounced off the spots they hit off the tornado.

The tornado was slowly losing its power. The rising fatigue swayed the members' bodies; a tell-tale sign that they were drawing more energy than their bodies could replenish.

We were outnumbered and overpowered by the gang's high-technological weapons.

We were losing.

A stream of enthralling light blinded all of us. We instinctively screwed our eyes shut. A worn out Xuanzang staggered to us, calmly reciting a string of scriptures albeit the catastrophe, not affected by all the disturbing thoughts and emotions.

Gold raced across his irises, swirling and glowing. Out of thin air, bolts of lightning appeared around us, slithering and crawling around like electrical snakes, crackling around the brewing tornado. The golden essence started swirling around the members, the energy that made them feel alive and vivacious once again surging. We were back on track.

The tornado eventually blasted off.

When the steam and winds faded, the characters were nowhere to be seen.

A golden string of words "Mission Accomplished" hung in the air.

I smiled.

*"Do not go far to seek the Buddha on Vulture Peak; Vulture Peak is in your heart."*

*-- Journey to the West, chapter 85*

# New Journeys to the West

*St. Paul's Convent School, Tsang, Annalise Ching Hei – 15*

## Chapter 1: Prologue

I was five at that time. Standing next to the Grand Master, Tong SamZhong, at the backyard, trying to imitate his tai-chi moves. My stubby arms mirrored the movements of the master's, though clumsier and shakier. It didn't matter to us though. Despite my failure in imitation, he looked down and smiled at me as though I was his pride and joy. I pushed on, determined to win his approval. However, I was greeted by a pair of dispassionate eyes, dripping with vile disappointment. I shrivelled as the master flouted, "You'll never be as good as WuKong. A monkey is far more intelligent and flexible than a blunt leopard. I should never have taken you under my wing." These words rang in my head like a bell, echos that would haunt me forever.

A sheen of sweat covered my back as I bolted upright, breathless and refusing to acknowledge the tears rolling down my face. I've had the exact same nightmare last night, and the night before, and the one before that. It started with that accursed self-proclaimed Monkey King, Sun WuKong joint the training a few months ago. The darkness in my room felt strangely disorienting and overwhelming all of a sudden, like a suffocating ocean, drowning me in forgetfulness and negligence. I found a sense of comfort at the storm raging outside the window, maybe because it resembled the whirlwind in my head. My eyelids grew heavier and heavier as the rhythm of raindrops lulled me to sleep. But deep inside, I know, I would only be reliving the same nightmare until I violently jerk awake once more, drowning in my own cold sweat.

In my fluttering sleep, the night storm was replaced by a scorching sun, and once more, it hid my nightmare temporarily. I went over my usual routine of getting up and taking a cold shower without a trace of fear and sadness from last night. As my padded paws soundlessly walked down the stairs, the living room was strangely empty. My head tilted in confusion as I searched over the whole house.

"...It's time... You were meant to be... scroll at the West-most mountain..." I picked up fragments of the master's hushed voice as I walked past his room. I held my breath and stayed outside, eavesdropping.

"...Me? Alone?" gasped a familiar voice. The same irritating voice that haunts my dream every single night. The voice of Sun WuKong.

As I listened on on their conversation, my nerves twitched with jealousy. My lips bled from my sharp teeth biting down on them. I held my exploding anger under control and tiptoed away, silently plotting, scheming, calculating.

## Chapter 2: Deceit

"Think about it," I added to my previous statement, "if we go together, we double the chance of success. At the end of the day, what Master Tong wanted us to achieve is world peace, right? So why does it matter who gets the scroll, am I right?" I draped my arm across his shoulder, tolerating the disgust that struck me as I touched his fur.

"I need someone like you? Oh please!" he scoffed, straightening his back. "I'll have to turn down your offer. The master says I go alone. And that is exactly what I'm going to do." Annoyance seethed through my veins at this egotistical obnoxious monkey.

"But, but," I continued in a honeyed voice as I leaned in closer, "if we go together, you would be known as the leader. Whereas if you go alone, you would be known as the lone traveller. Even worse, touch-wood, you could die without anyone to tell your legacy!" I gasped in pretended shock. "I've been hearing rumours flying around. You know, just little things like 'WuKong is a nobody who brags about his powers'. But who cares, right? You and I know that you're better than listening to these petty comments. People are going to talk, though. So let's spread some positive rumours, like you're a great leader and whatnot is probably going to get rid of these annoyingly petty comment. It's your choice though. I admire your honour."



I knew I've struck a nerve. he tensed up, tightened his jaw and furrowed his brows. Then he lifted his head with forced confidence and nodded in agreement. Behind his bravado, it was clear that he was hesitant about letting me go with him. Gears were turning behind his eyes. 'Does he have something he wants to hide from me?', I suspected. A sly grin tugged at the corner of my lips as I was one step closer my rightful scroll.

### Chapter 3: Demise

WuKong gathered his friends and we started our journey at the crack of dawn, hiking through smooth valleys effortlessly yet adrenaline had blinded me, I discovered, as the surroundings shifted without my acknowledgement. Harsh winds sliced through my thick spotted fur mercilessly, leaving a trail of burning pain behind. Each time we dragged our feet forward, the air grew hotter and heavier. The surrounding leaves rustled. I shrugged it off, dismissing it as a small forest animal moving through the bushes, ignoring the unease at the pit of my stomach.

It rustled again. This time louder.

Quicker.

Closer.

My comrades must have heard the rustling too. WuKong stopped abruptly, extending a protective arm to stop us from walking. Bajie, still oblivious to the possible approaching danger, whistled nonchalantly and was immediately cut off by an urgent hush from SaTsang. Being well experienced with Bajie's wonted stupidity, I shut my eyes in frustration and exasperation.

Another rustled in the bushes made every single strand of my fur stand up. I was on guard, ready to pounce any second. SaTsang had drawn his spear. His eyes darted from corner to corner. It was strange, how in this threatening situation everything slows down. A crystal drop of sweat rolled down WuKong's rosy cheek. Our breaths were in sync. We waited, but nothing came. Partly I was relieved that I didn't have to fight, but a distant voice in my head cursed furiously – cursing at the missed opportunity to injure, to kill that damned monkey. My attempt to suppress this desire only worsened it.

"What are you doing?" it hissed. "Are you forgetting your mission? You dim-witted leopard. That's why you'll never be anything great. That's why the Master didn't trust you with the scroll." I was seeing double at this point. It continued, "Now you're trying to push me away? Sweet, sweet little leopard, you're losing your vision. Come on, remind yourself, why are you here?"

"Protect the scroll. The scroll. It's mine." I whispered through clenched teeth.

It laughed menacingly. "That's right. Little leopard. That's right!"

I swayed slightly as darkness impaired my vision. The only thing I could see was WuKong staring at me with his concerned eyes. But it only fuelled my anger, feeding to the voices inside my head.

Nothing happened and we pressed on. However, an air of tension hung between me and WuKong. I have been trying to convince myself the tension was not my fault, but the voice inside my head nagged me.

"Stop lying to yourself, Little Leopard," it used its nickname for me again. One that would've felt warm and accepting otherwise. "Stop ignoring the hostility. This is happening because he knew you lied. You, Little Leopard, lied to them! WuKong must hate you, and he is going to tell Bajie and SaTsang what a demonic hag you are."

I wanted to scream at it, but my frustration would only strengthen it. I am tethered to the voices in my head – there's no two ways about it. I looked everywhere to find a temporary distraction. WuKong trekked in front of me, but I thought he would turn around any second to kill me. Of course he would kill me, the evil

witch! I was the one who fought for the possession of the scroll with him, the one who lied, the one who battled with him for the heart of the master! How silly of me to think that he had accepted me. No, no no...I have to kill him before he does so! I have to...

My trail of thought was broken by a piercing screech. I wasn't able to comprehend what I was seeing at first – a wall of metallic onyx that smelled of decaying corpse. My mind clicked as I looked up. The mythical Scorpion King stood before us, tall as a steeple, with his chela raised, its narrow tail dripping with venom. Below its numerous legs, a golden scroll disguised as a common pebble, unseen by most commoners.

I was terrified, but WuKong was even worse. His eyes were glued to the razor sharp claws of the giant scorpion, unmoving and unblinking, yet his whole body trembled. The Scorpion King's narrow tail jabbed and stung mercilessly, missing us by merely centimetres as we dodged. BaJie was beseeching hopelessly at WuKong to so much as move, to find shelter, to run, though WuKong's feet were planted onto the ground. He was frozen in fear.

"Yes! Little Leopard! Use this! Use this opportunity! It's about time the monkey die a gruesome death!" growled the voice inside my head.

With my mind set on avoiding the attacks, it was easy for the voice to take me over. All of a sudden, a wave of halcyon washed over me. I sauntered to a nearby boulder and observed the chaotic scene. I squinted at WuKong and concentrated hard on my magic, sending a numbing ache to the back of my head.

Then I was able to see. I was transported to another place where the sun shone gleefully and flowers budded like gemstones on the ground. A young monkey skipped across the field. At first, I thought it was WuKong. But after a closer look, I saw that it was a female monkey who resembled WuKong a lot. An older monkey chased after the young monkey jauntily. WuKong.

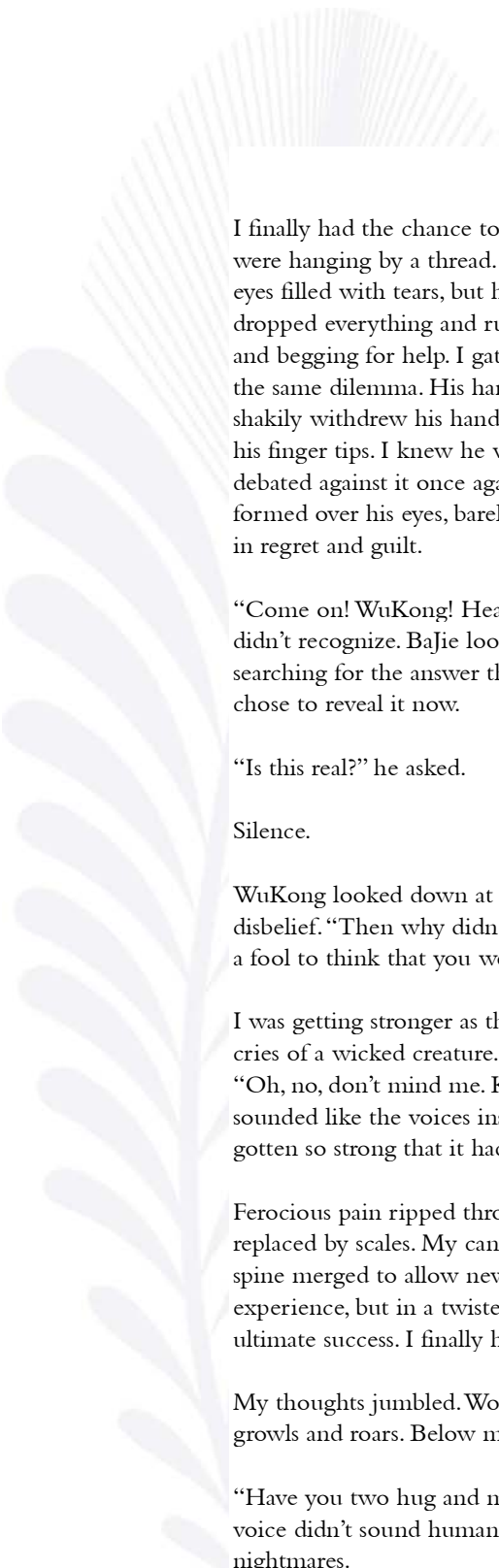
An ominous figure loomed over the siblings whom I immediately recognised as the Scorpion King. The Scorpion King's tail swiped across his sister's leg. She fell instantly. Then wailing bloodcurdling screams followed. WuKong ran to his sister desperately. He was fast, but not enough.

Countless arrows rained down from the sky, followed by the savage cries of the monkey army. The Scorpion King was outnumbered, and he fled before the army could reach him. WuKong was cradling his sister's body in his arms, her face a deadly pale, her chestnut fur covering her leg was stained a shade of erythraean, blood dripping from her leg tainted the ground as well. WuKong's fingertips glowed at the same time the other monkeys surrounded them. The glow faded as the other monkeys murmured, "He has healing magic? Oh, how feminine." WuKong's eyes darted from his sister's body to the crowd rapidly – and I knew he was facing a dilemma. To save his sister and put his reputation at risk, or to save his reputation and lose his sister? Time revealed his decision. His sister's consciousness grew dim as he mourned until it faded for good.

As I pried into WuKong's mind, the memory played out in front of his eyes. He forced his eyes to close, shaking his head as if to shake the memory away. He mouthed a silent prayer to erase the memory to no avail. His knees gave way and kneeled onto the ground. When he next opened his eyes, they were glowing with a hateful passion that masked all traces of fear.

"No! Don't let him fight! Stop him!" miffed the voice inside my head. I complied. I weaved an illusion of pain over WuKong. I made a thousand daggers stab him, a scorching flame burned him. WuKong cried in anguish.

Abruptly, SaTsang dropped onto the ground, his scream choked at his throat. His face heliotrope, almost matching the purple of his robe. I grinned guessing that the Scorpion must've stung his leg. My brief moment of satisfaction caused my illusion to waver, giving WuKong a gap to recover, a gasp of air amidst the torment. I could see his eyes, the flames of vengeance would not be denied. Gathering all his strength and abhorrence, he threw the biggest boulder he could find towards the Scorpion King. The flying boulder looked like a shooting star, drawing a fiery trail across the sky, burning a hole through the Scorpion King's heart, and it shrieked as it thudded onto the ground. I let go of my illusion. I was unsteady and powerless after draining myself from excessive magic.



I finally had the chance to take a good look at my comrades. WuKong was untouched, but Bajie and SaTsang were hanging by a thread. They whimpered incoherently. WuKong was looking at them too, unflinching. His eyes filled with tears, but his gaze was vacant and traumatised, like he was reliving a painful memory. WuKong dropped everything and rushed to SaTsang. At that moment, SaTsang was his little sister all over again, dying and begging for help. I gathered all my strength and went to their side. Once again, WuKong was faced with the same dilemma. His hand laid over SaTsang's throbbing wound gently, fingertips itching with magic. He shakily withdrew his hand only to place it back onto SaTsang's flesh again. The sparks of magic crackled at his finger tips. I knew he wanted to heal him. He knew he could have done it – to end all the pain. He debated against it once again. Instead, he squatted down and tended their wounds silently. A thin layer of glass formed over his eyes, barely holding back the flood of tears. His lips trembled as he looked up at me – almost in regret and guilt.

“Come on! WuKong! Heal him! What are you waiting for?” I shrieked. A pretentious voice, one that even I didn't recognize. Bajie looked at him, pain overflowing his eyes. WuKong's eyes widened, his mouth agape, searching for the answer that never came. I knew he felt betrayed. No one but I knew about his power, and I chose to reveal it now.

“Is this real?” he asked.

Silence.

WuKong looked down at his hand. “Is this real?” Bajie repeated. “You're not denying.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Then why didn't you heal us before?” He looked up the sky, laughing sarcastically. “God, I'm such a fool to think that you were our friend!”

I was getting stronger as they argued. The voices inside my head laughed, though it sounded more like the cries of a wicked creature. “Good, good. Keep going.” I hissed at them. They shifted their attention to me. “Oh, no, don't mind me. Keep arguing.” My voice barely resembled what I used to sound like. Instead, it sounded like the voices inside my head – strident. Inside, I was terrified. The monster inside of me had gotten so strong that it had unleashed itself from our tether and completely overpowered me.


Ferocious pain ripped through my body. My muscles tore as my bones elongated. My fur shed in handful, replaced by scales. My canine teeth fell, and rows of tiny razor blades poked out of the roof of my mouth. My spine merged to allow new wings to break through my thick skin. The pain was greater than anything I've experience, but in a twisted sense, it felt comforting knowing that this transformation would bring me to ultimate success. I finally have the chance to win – to possess my rightful scroll.

My thoughts jumbled. Words slurred. I could no longer think logically. My thoughts were in animalistic growls and roars. Below my enormous body, WuKong and Bajie cowered in dread.

“Have you two hug and made up? You better, or you won't stand a chance against me!” I said, though my voice didn't sound human at all. It was the sound of an erupting volcano, a devastating storm – the sound of nightmares.

WuKong and Bajie looked frail. I liked the sensation of power vibrating through my new body – the devil in me was unleashed. The turmoil surrounding me fed me. The darkness devour every ray of light, and I felt dissociated from myself. I was watching myself in a far away cage, unable to reach out, to shake myself out of this craze. Voices were muffled, but I was seeing crystal clear.

I waited for that glorious sensation of feeding on their fear. And I waited, but it never came. I growled impatiently. WuKong gathered all his strength and stood on his trembling legs, followed by Bajie. “What is this? Stop it!” This insignificant act made me felt as if my life was being sucked from my body. “I said, stop this madness!”



“No. Not again.” WuKong said tautly. “You lied, you used us, and you turned us against ourselves. Never again are we falling into your deceptions.” WuKong spat out bitterly. I wanted to laugh at his feeble act of ‘heroism’, but the laughter was choked in my throat. I shrieked once, twice, as WuKong drove his golden staff through my skull, my brain, and out of my head over and over. Ironically, at his most vulnerable time, he rose to be the most robust.

The pain became numb after a while, though it didn’t hurt any less. Some time during our battle, the moon swallowed the cerulean sky, replacing it with a royal blue. It was a starless night, only the soft illumination of the moon shining a spotlight on me. It would’ve been nice if I wasn’t succumbing to the eternal darkness pulling me into the depths of hell.

My blue, black and white scales transformed into seashells, reflecting the moonlight; my wings and my body disintegrating into ash and dust; my eburnean talons melted to the ground. Finally, I could be here, forever, together with my scroll.

# Wukong's Resolution towards Mankind

*St. Paul's Convent School (Secondary Section), Cheung, Margaret – 15*

It was a long time after Xuanzang and his companions, the Monkey King, friar and the talking pig had retrieved the numerous scrolls of Buddhist sacred texts from guardians, and a long time after the four had ascended to the Spiritual Mountain, where they were given several titles that marked them as gods. Too long of a time, in fact, Wukong, the Monkey King thought, as he was one day lounging in one of the many gardens that the Mountain possessed, staring mindlessly at the lazy fluttering butterflies, and the blooming flowers, each beautiful on its own and therefore even more splendid grouped together. It had been more than a hundred years since he set off on that journey with Xuanzang and his companions. He was starting to get restless.

"What are you doing here, Brother?" A glance at the garden's entrance informed him of the arrival of another; his companion who had travelled with him to the Western Regions and obtained the sacred scrolls together, Zhu Bajie.

"Just relaxing in the garden," He replied absent-mindedly. "You? Why are you here?"

The pig planted himself on the bench near the one Wukong was lounging on, and replied, "Master told me to look for you. He said that you seem restless these few days and it could be a sign of trouble." He yawned. "He also said that you might ransack the palace sometime soon so I should watch you."

"Liar," Wukong accused. "Master would never say anything of that sort."

"And if he did?" A grin spread itself lazily on Bajie's lips, and he, too, laid down on the bench in a fashion similar to that of the monkey's, eyes focused on the white clouds rolling across a bright blue sky but barely looking.

"If he did, then I shall confirm it!" In one smooth move, he sprang off the wooden bench and onto the stone that formed the paths weaving within the spacious garden. "Master wouldn't have said anything of that sort." Wukong repeated, then nodded, as if affirming to himself such an idea, and set off towards the direction of the grand palace.

The pig merely stared at his old friend's retreating back, and did not reply. When Wukong finally disappeared from view, he sighed and muttered, "Since when has he *not* decided to stir up trouble? Master should not have worried that much. After all, that monkey is bound to come back sooner or later."

And confirm it he did. Wukong stalked into the palace, ignoring the guards situated on either side that serves to ward off intruders – in which case, himself – and headed straight for Xuanzang's chambers, which were placed deep inside, so by the time he reached it, his anger had somewhat subsided, though he was ready to fly into a rage the moment he set eyes on the meditating Xuanzang.

"Master!" He exploded, throwing open the door with a force so hard it nearly flew off its hinges. Such an intrusion would have angered any other person in the palace enough to cast Wukong away without a demand for an explanation, and possibly exile him to the mortal realm, but Xuanzang merely opened his eyes and glanced sideways towards his pupil, who looked as if steam would rise from the top of his head shortly. "Did you tell Bajie to watch over me because I may cause trouble?"

"That I did," The man replied calmly, and ended his prayer. He stood up, and shut the doors gently, then beckoned the monkey into his quarters. "How about you and me have a chat together? I see you are rather agitated, Wukong."

"Master, I – " He started, impatient to draw forth a direct answer from him. However, another look silenced his protests halfway, and Wukong's shoulders relaxed, as if defeated. "If you wish," He said plainly instead.

"Excellent." And so he sat, at the table that was placed in the middle of the room obediently, despite not really wanting to. Xuanzang placed two teacups made of fine china onto the wooden surface, and carefully poured tea into both. "Now, would you tell me the reason you came again, in a civilised manner?"

"The thing is, Master – " Impatience rising inside of him like flames in a fire as he spoke. "Bajie told me that I needed constant surveillance because I seemed to be restless these days. The very idea of that pig! I shall punish him for you, Master," Wukong finished eagerly, seeking for hints of approval from his Master. However, Xuanzang answered calmly, "That's true. I did ask him to watch over you, because you do not seem like your normal self, Wukong. The normal you would have knocked and walked in politely in a subtle manner, instead of tearing my door rudely away from the wall, and demanding explanations for baseless arguments."



At this, the monkey grew silent. He had been quiet and patient at least two months ago, that was indeed true. Perhaps the arrival of summer had caused him to be restless again.

"Perhaps you can explain your behaviour?" Xuanzang prompted, and took a sip out of his own teacup.

"Master, I –" Wukong started, thinking of excuses that could get him out of trouble but coming up with none. "I was feeling pent up," He admitted. "I wanted to do something, anything. It's so tiring to sit around and meditate. Not that it's a bad thing," He added quickly at the sight of the frown on his master's face.

"But I'm eager for adventure. Think of the sights that one can admire in the mortal realm below! It would be exciting to embark on a journey to discover what is different from our time in the mortal world." He ended his speech in an enthusiastic tone, hoping to win his master over.

Instead of the reaction Wukong hoped to see, Xuanzang sat in silence, eyes closed. The monkey was impatient, eager to know what his Master would think. But he held his tongue, lest Xuanzang decided to disagree with him.

"What do you propose?" The man finally asked, breaking the long silence that had stretched between the two of them.

"Well," He began, licking his lips nervously and picking out his words carefully, a habit he knew his former self would not have considered at all. "I wish to spend a few days in the mortal realm. I hope to observe the difference in behaviour and know how much the world has changed." Wukong waited anxiously for the reply, hoping that he had not overstepped boundaries and accidentally said something offensive, for his Master was a sensitive man when it came to human affairs.

"On one condition. You mustn't do anything reckless that would in any way harm the mortals."

"The mortals I have assaulted were in fact monsters taking the form of humans, Master!" Wukong protested, his tone with a small note of whining, as if to plead his innocence. "I cannot ignore evil beings walking the earth amongst humans, waiting for chances to strike and devour their flesh – as they had tried in many forms in the past with you, Master."

Xuanzang stiffened at such mention of the unpleasant experiences in the past. "What if the evil beings you speak of are good in nature?"

"There will never be any one of them who have good or just reasons for whatever they do, Master," He declared.

"What about *you*?" At that, Wukong stopped, unable to form an argument. Xuanzang took the monkey's silence for agreement, and continued, "I see you have no reply to offer then. Now –"

"I promise not to attack any evil being that has not yet harmed others in their mortal form," He gritted his teeth. As long as Wukong agree with the terms set out by his Master, Xuanzang usually comply with what he wanted.

The man heaved a sigh. "You may go then." Instantly, the monkey cheered, and was preparing to say words of gratitude before the monk cut across him. "Wait. You must wear your band, so I can exercise control over your impulsive behaviour." As the monkey showed signs of interrupting, Xuanzang cut through. "Or else you're forbidden to. It is final."

"Alright," Wukong sulked. "I promise."

"That's settled. But remember to keep yourself out of trouble." For the first time in their conversation, the monk showed traces of a tiny smile stretching his lips. "And hopefully this shall cure your restlessness."

"Thank you, Master!" The disciple beamed, and he rushed out of the room, excited to tell Bajie the news and to jeer at his ignorance at the same time.

Xuanzang sighed as he watched the monkey dance through the halls of the palace, whooping loudly, then shut the doors quietly. "You think this is the best choice, then?" Turning towards the back of the room, he asked.

"Don't worry." A deep voice replied from within the shadows casted by the pieces of furniture. "This is for the best. If Wukong stays, he will probably destroy everything and cause trouble. When he finally realises the severity of the conflict in the mortal realm, he will eventually lose the interest of visiting altogether."

"I hope so," Xuanzang murmured, looking down at the golden band that had once fitted around the monkey's head, the golden band which had caused severe pain for his disciple. "And what if he decides to head down once more?"

A chuckle. "Why, you need not worry. As long as you continue to show him the ugliness of the mortal realm, he will soon stop seeking adventure and remain here quietly."

The next day dawned, bright and clear, with no traces of cloud in the sky, and it was on such a day that Wukong decided to embark on his journey.

With one jump, he descended into the world below and soon found himself in a small forest clearing, seated on the back of a horse and wearing a long dark blue robe the colour of the night with sleeves that end at his waist and silk trousers, both of which had exquisite orange patterns weaving through the fabric. A quiver was slung across his back, completed with a bow.

“Young master!” His ears immediately caught the sound of something emerging from the thick trees, and he reached for the weapon on his back. “We have found the animal – what are you *doing*, young master?” Realising that he was notching an arrow against what seemed to be a friend, he quickly lowered it, and said, “My apologies. I thought I’ve seen a deer the direction you came from. You were saying?” He cocked his head.

“A deer?” The other young man brightened. “Why, then, we shall have a feast tonight! Madame would be delighted.”

“I said, I *thought*,” Wukong corrected.

“Right,” He straightened up on his horse. “Wei said he had found a young calf grazing near the lake.”

“Very well. Let’s make haste then.”

That evening, after Wukong and his hunting partners arrived back home, there was an uproar amongst the occupants of the house; apparently the youngest son had been sick for some time, and during the hunting trip, they had killed a young calf, which was said to be the host of the evil spirit that had caused his brother sickness, thus healing him.

The whole night was then spent frolicking with others, and instead of his original mission to observe the behaviours of others, Wukong was caught with enjoying himself in the party, for it was a number of years since such a large scale banquet or party was held at the palace or Heavenly Realm. He ate the food that was prepared by skilful chefs, chatted with high-ranking nobles of the Emperor’s court, and watched the dances with great interest, and that night, as he went to bed, he thought to himself, *nothing could be better than this*.

He was wrong to not have gone to the Mortal Realm earlier, Wukong reflected whilst he was lying on bed. That night, he went to sleep in bliss, stomach full and thoughts full of the party. Little did he notice the shadowy figure that lurked within his room.

The next day dawned bright and Wukong set off in pursuit of his master, resolved to make one more trip down the Mortal Realm.

“You cannot believe what I have seen last night, Master,” He wheedled the poor monk, who barely caught a wink of sleep the night before. “Please allow me to go once more!”

Blearily, the man waved him off, muttering something along the lines of ‘a spoiled monkey’, but in the end granting permission for another excursion. Delighted, Wukong then descended into the Mortal Realm immediately, once more dropping down through the clouds, and expecting the familiar woodland scene to appear before him.

Instead, what greeted him was something akin to a nightmare scene. A mass grave of numerous corpses, mutilated in some form or another lie on the grass stained with the blood. Wukong, out of reflex backed away from the horrific scene, and found himself stepping onto the rotten flesh of another.

“What is this?” He whispered, as if murmuring would lower the severity of such murder, of such a tragic event.

Wukong looked around, trying to catch sight of something that wasn’t dead flesh, but all he saw a sea of dead bodies. Horrified, he tried to use his powers to reach the Heavenly Realm, where he could escape this nightmare.

“This – is the result of human conflict.” A glance at his right showed a man walking towards him, as if he had materialized out of thin air. Wukong frowned, taking in the old-fashioned clothes that marked him as someone not of that era. “And this,” He indicated at the sea of the dead. “Is what happens when machines and humans go to war with each other.”

“Machines?” Wukong asked, mystified at such a word.

“Machines,” The older man repeated sombrely. “Destructive creatures that has no mind or heart, controlled by their creators to create chaos and disturb peace.”

“W—what era is this?” He asked again, though afraid of the answer.

“It is what humans call the modern age, an age of advanced technology and conflict.”

“How did this happen?”

“Ambition,” The man began to pace, walking around the dead bodies. “Mindless slaughter, only to end in regret afterwards. No one thought of the consequences that would befall them. Only continued action, and endless anguish.”

“Is there a way to change this?” He gestured. “Surely not all of them are bad.”

“There are, of course, as there are solutions to everything. However, good blends with bad, and it is not easy to find a solution that will resolve all conflicts. Therefore, this is where *you* come in, Wukong.”

“Me?”

“You,” The old man confirmed, stroking his white goatee. “For you are a link between the Mortal Realm and Heavenly Realm, bound not by rules but by your Master’s spell, and free to come and go as you wish. You have limitless freedom and you are held back only because of your restlessness. Since you have discovered this tragic nature of things, you desired to make a change. I admire that.”

A small pause. Then the man began pacing once more. “But of course, there was nothing to do about that. You are a spirited animal, and thus you must come out once in a while. Since you have seen everything, there are a few things you can do.” He met Wukong’s gaze straight on.

“And they are?”

“Serve your Master obediently. Stop teasing others and focus on your prayers, meditation and find peace within yourself. By doing this, you offer your sincerity and genuineness to the Jade Emperor. Once you propose your idea to save the foolish humans of this era, he will surely grant your wish.”

“Do you mean to say that I am powerless?”

“By your own,” The man acknowledged. “However, by turning to the Emperor, you are showing repentance and remorse, as well as care for humankind. This is what you came for, no? By fulfilling your purpose, the Jade Emperor will finally accept you, I’m sure.”

Wukong bit his lip, a sudden flood of unpleasant memories of him ransacking the Heavenly Palace invading his mind. “The Jade Emperor despises me.”

“He dislikes the manner of speech in which you use when speaking to him, and your reckless actions that cause trouble,” The old man corrected. “By doing this, you will save humankind, and also garner his sympathy and forgiveness.”

“...Very well. I shall follow your suggestions.”

From that day onwards, Wukong prayed and meditated obediently, focusing only on the images of the humans which ruled the modern age and his hopes of saving them, instead of seeking fun and amusement by going down to the Mortal Realm. He stopped seeking thrill. Instead, he chose to save others, like his master.

Speaking of his Master, Xuanzang was secretly relieved that his disciple no longer tear through the halls to find him and beg for small pleasures such as sweets and excursions to the Mortal Realm. As he watched Wukong meditate in his room, he turned to the man next to him. “You did change him,” He said, surprise evident in his tone. “It was thought to be impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible unless you think it to be,” The old priest who guided Wukong during the massacre now smiled at the monk. “Steering Wukong to the right path proves the point.”

“Thank you for your guidance, Your Majesty. It would not have been done otherwise.”

“No,” The man replied softly. “Thank your disciple. It was his wish to save humankind from collapsing, and I am only granting that wish. Therefore, be grateful to him.”

And as Xuanzang turned back to his meditating student, he knew, that the old priest’s words were true. Wukong had indeed changed, from bad to good, and even better.

# A Journey to the West

*St. Paul's Convent School (Secondary Section), Cheung, Regina – 15*

That town, that toxic town, most of my childhood years were spent there looking out the window, only to the beautiful cocktail-blue sky that always seems to be darkening and large pillows of clouds moving towards me. When I got older, everything was just deteriorating, the slanted beam of light never stays, not with me, the roar and growl had become my second nature. That town was lethal, everything was absolutely lethal.

So this is it. I packed up my bags that seems to be so extra hefty, perhaps it is my heart, locked up the gate, bidding a farewell to the old life, landing on a whole new golden globe with no regrets, no more hypocrisy, no more corruption, but hope and optimism awaits me at the west.

Leaving has always sounds so grieving to me, I called this – a great escape.

They said entering a whole new side of the world, is like walking into a crowded room full of people you barely recognise. Everyone is talking, they could be talking about you, or they are not. You feel small and intimidated. And going through this all alone, you will feel like you are naked in a whole room of strangers, bare and helpless in front of every pair of eyes that swallows you in, judgements piercing through, only with an enhanced feeling of anxiety and vulnerability. But this is different, I can feel it. The harsh tides that has crush me down ebbed away. I am calm and unfazed by anymore backstabbing guns and knives that have once bayoneted me.


Life always amazes me, no matter how hard I try, nothing can undo my past, yet there are thousands of roads ahead of me, for me to choose. That's when I realised, my heart has guided me here, to this magnificent building. A building that holds a lot of sentiment; the breaking, the uplifting, the rupturing, the inspiring – Art. I adore this place the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos, a balance of purity and serenity.

I see these people, those obscure orbs holding intense stares with pieces of enigma scattered in them that I cannot figure, to one direction, but their facial expressions present, frowns that tend to clench their brows, smiles that tend to the dimples by their cheeks, confusion that tend to highlight the bewildered faces, admiration that tend light up eyes. These people intrigues me, as I divert my gaze that aligned with theirs., I see this painting that has been hung on the plain wall at eye level.

'Amsterdam – The Release of Happiness – Leonid Afremov' Interesting.

As I am studying the painting, taking in every strokes of the paint brush that has glided through different circumstances, that is now engraved on the canvas forever. The cold and dark tone of the upper sky and the dead end of river immediately drag all my attention, tug at my dignity, and pull me in a deep sea of unwelcoming memories. Spruce. Sapphire. Denim. Prussian. Navy. I'm not looking back to rewind my story's past, yet the shades of blue are never ending, awakening the disorienting fog over life. The wide sky is the muddled colour that seems calming, at first but eventually suffocates and draws out all the glow in you, leaving you lost and impotent in the darkest night. The river is smooth and enchanting on the surface but deep down, the mixed hue in it forms a spiral that dangerously engulfs you into the murk, leaving you breathless and drowning in vast negativity. A twitch of my eyebrows, I, once again stumbled over and fell into the crater of my bygone.

Still scanning, I come across to this beam of warmth, contrasted under a dark night. Crimson. Tangerine. Honey. Butter. Emerald green. These shades exude rays of light that seems so friendly, genuinely, casting slanted beam of light across the meadow. Despite being night time, all the illuminations seem to turn the originally mystic Amsterdam into a flaming patchwork of colours, adding a remarkable glamour of rebirth on the canvas. This rush of sentiment feels so new to me, as the simple yet complex mixing of colours is a promise that something can begin again, all the lights blinding the history, guiding the new self to an irradiate journey. Although midnight won't last forever, there will always be an authentic colour spectrum peeking through every haver, in the most peaceful fluorescent bloom, along with the brightest smile.



Taking a step backward, I let the full picture of the canvas take a soothing, calming influence on my mind, while I am diving in the shade of my mind that is packed with uncertainty. My head is running wild. I saw

the despair in the gloom, heard the sobs in the blues. I'm almost determined that the shadow will forever follow every step you take, and exploit the just for you to glow , no matter how hard you scream for aid, it will always be a one way trip to this black hole. The quarrel between my head continues. I saw a new spectrum of joy, hope and a illuminated pathway for my heart to follow. I'm certain that I've officially moved on from my dusty old part, it's getting better, my life's getting better. I don't have to look down, follow where my shadow guides me, I can look up to the radiating light with my shadow following . Confusion flood over me as the dilemma stays, in silence.

Walking out of this building, the siesta feels extra refreshing, as it shines bright, looking straight, I shielded my eyes, to continue my journey to the West.

This time, my shadow following my every steps.



# A Realm Without Heroes

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Chen, Jerry – 14*

**D**ark clouds hang over the sky. It will rain soon.

The streets of LuoYang city bustle with people. Customers haggle with merchants, packing hastily as they struggle to grab everything before the rain falls. Crowds start to disperse, hurrying to take cover. Women call out to children, beggars sit beside houses to count their money and the guards retreat to the safety of their camp.

I don't stand out in the crowds. A mere boy of 14, shorter than the others, not yet a man. Black hair like everyone else's, dirty cloths, dirty face. Sharp eyes, sharp nose. I'm not the strongest, nor the brightest. But I'm the smallest and the fastest, and it helps me run away in situations like the one I'm in right now.

I race through the streets with an angry, fat butcher chasing after me brandishing a knife. I've had worse.

I have to be fed, after all. And he had to be the unfortunate guy to be stolen from today. I didn't even take much.

Taking a bite from the beef jerkin, I survey my surroundings. I'm on MingHuo Street. Forward will take me to the Southern Gate. Going backwards will mean confronting the butcher. Nothing to my left, but a few meters off to my right, an alleyway opens up. Weird that I've never noticed it. Raindrops started to fall. The voice in my head urges me in the direction.

I look back as I jump over an empty fruit stall. The butcher is trapped in a tight mob rushing to go home, but he curses and waves his knife in the air. I hope nobody gets hurt.

I scurry into the alley before the angry man can follow.

The light seems to weaken as I step in. Rain—water falls in fat drops. The ground is slippery, and I misplace a step, falling over onto my face, and the world fades away.

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What I expected in heaven are cities built of marble and jewels, the things in our dreams.

I did not expect a mountain full of peach trees, barren rocks, and monkeys.

Was the fall really that bad? Slipping on the ground seems like an unlikely way to kill myself, but who knows. I recall that I hit the ground face—first.

I wake up and find myself at the top of a mountain, on a bare slate of rock, right next to the sky, and three monkeys peering curiously at me. One is prodding at my eye, another sitting on my stomach eating a peach, the last gnawing at my footwear. My awakening is accompanied by a cacophony of shrieking, jumping up and down, and running down the mountain screaming. I don't remember what happened during the mad scramble, but when my vision clears, the monkeys are gone.

I peer over the summit I stand on; clearly I'm on the tallest mountain around. There is no clear path down the mountain.

As I look for a way down that will not result in my death, I spot a small, humanoid figure at the base of the mountain. It looks like a monkey at first glance, but I realize it was too big to be. Its limbs are longer than the average ape's, the body covered in fur but with the proportions of a man. The figure darts up the mountain with inhuman speed, leaping from ledge to ledge with ease. Within seconds, it pounces onto the slate I'm sitting on, and I got my first clear sight of the figure. I recognize him instantly: the figure in myths and legends, the hero of the Tang empire: the Monkey King.

His short fur is a light shade of brown, flecked with gold, covering him from head to toe. Leather armor of the finest quality coats his torso, sunlight reflecting off the golden plates of metal. Two feathers of cocktailed chickens are pinned to a head—piece sitting atop his head, the feathers dappling in the wind over his back. His eyes are gold ingots. He easily tower over me, a giant lanky figure near two meters tall. He stands up from his crouching position, snatches a peach from a nearby tree, takes a bite, and his face breaks into a wide smile.

“Wu! Come here, give me a hug!” He picks me up from the ground and pulls me into a tight embrace, tight enough for me to smell the sweat in his fur from who—knows how many days of not bathing. He lets me down after a long while of suffering, leaving me gasping for breath.

“Oh, no, no, no, you're not in heaven,” he says after examining me. He'd answered my question before I asked it, and before I can respond he opens his mouth again.

"You're in the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit! Paradise! Wildlife! Much better than heaven!" From what I experienced the past while, I highly doubt his words. "Flowers and fruits grow best here! Here, try a peach!" He offers me the peach he'd already bitten into.

"No, thank you. But—" I didn't finish my sentence in time, and he cuts in again.

"You mortals never change. When we gods take you someplace, you always ask 'Am I in heaven?', 'Where am I?', 'Why am I here?'. No fun, you people. It'll be a nice change when someone asks 'What are the notable tourist attractions here?'." He proudly displays a book written in crooked Mandarin, titled "Site-seeing with SunWuKong." He forces it into my hands and pats my shoulder. "All for you, sonny."

I stuff the book into my robes. "Thank you, but...what am I doing here?" Other monkeys start gathering around the ledge, chittering and fighting with one another. I recognize the three from before.

Sun's face falls, sighing exasperatedly. "Another one of those questions! I guess I have to tell you." He scratches his head, and starts to speak.

"Seventy years ago, I accompanied the monk XuanZang on his journey. Fifty years when we came back from the West, which you should know. But do you know why?"

"The country was losing faith in the religion." At least that was what the imperial herald told us.

He bends over giggling. "Is that the lie they tell you mortals today? Well, boy, let me explain. A century ago, the doors to the Abyss opened, and the gods were so disunited to fight the demons. The monsters crawled everywhere, the stronger ones becoming king, and the weaker ones cleaning up for the big ones."

"Aren't you one of those kings though?" I ask. In the myths, the Monkey King had started out as a demon also, traveling between all four realms to wreak havoc upon all those who cross his path.

Sun looks offended. "That's not important. Anyway, the only way to fight the demons was to summon a holy artifact that contained a lot of magic. With the power of the manuscripts, the gods were able to banish all demons and close the doors to the Abyss."

His explanation sounds as crazy as the original. "And then?"

He glances around, scanning the horizon. He looks back at me. "A week ago, the manuscripts were stolen from Changan."

I was confused. "And what does that have to do with me?"

He looks me in the eye. "Yes, yes, well, hear me out. Demons are returning to your world. Without the manuscript, the gods are unable to maintain the barrier between the worlds."

"You still haven't told me why I'm here."

"Patience! Is Confucius doing his job correctly?" The Monkey King shakes his head. I, who have never received formal education all my life, have no idea who he's talking about. He sighs. "I'm a god. I can't interfere with mortal business. So, you are...um...well...your duty is..." He sighs. "Kid, I'm not allowed to explain."

"So you mean it's not meant for my ears." He bobs his head. I sigh. He seems to be frustrated also. "Never mind then."

His grin reappears. "Good! Now that's dealt with." Suddenly, he surveys the surroundings, his face contorted into a frown. He sniffs the air suspiciously. One of the monkeys bark something at him, and his frown grew even deeper. "You have a visitor."

I understand none of what just happened. Are all gods this vague? "What do you mean?"

Sun looks at me. "A demon has detected your presence. You have to go back, before it finds you. Quick, quick...how does it work again?" He scratches his head. A monkey helpfully offers a book, and Sun furiously flips through the pages. "Ah...I see...um...close your eyes."

I do as he says. Following a large "crack", the sound of monkeys fades away.

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I open my eyes, and I'm back in the dark alley. Rain pours down in large quantities, and lightning crackle in the night sky, accompanied with the drumbeats of thunder. Sun is nowhere in sight, yet, I hear him clearly. A bit too clearly as he marvels at the world around him.

*Incredible! The feeling of rain! The smells, oh, it's so good to be back here again!*

I look around. "Where are you?"

*I'm in your mind of course. Literally. I can't pass into the mortal realm any other way. But I can only see what you see, hear what you hear, and smell what you smell. So don't go anywhere...well...don't go anywhere you're not supposed to!*

I groan. I hate supervisors, and now I have one that can monitor me at all times. “Where’s this demon you talked about again?”

I hear him sniffing. *Behind you, I think.*

I look back down the alley. There is still no sign of the monster Sun talks about, but I don’t want to risk it. I run the other way.

Despair hits when I reach the end of the alley. It turns out to be a dead end.

*Oh, no, oh no, um...can you climb?*

“No, I can’t.”

*Well...let me think...*

The smell hits me before Sun can think up anything. The scent is just like an unkempt barn, except for the fact that the smell of sweat and blood has been mingled in. It must smell me too, for the ground rumbles with each step the monster takes.

Finally, it comes into view. Dressed in barbaric furs, he towers over any human being even in his bent over stance: a two and a half meter tall figure layered with meat, skin, bone, hair, and his arm—span is as wide as he is tall. Built up of muscles, long, white hair covers every inch of the figure’s body, unwashed and dirty from battles, feasts, and carnage. In his rough, large hands is the biggest battle—axe I’ve ever seen.

But it’s his face that is most intriguing. More bull than human, his face twists back into a sneer, with sharp, razor—like teeth. With his squashed nose and mouth, his red eyes seem out of proportion. On top of the creature’s head grows a pair of giant, magnificent horns, so large that his head swings while he walks. I hear Sun bite back a curse when he sees the figure, and the monster’s snarl turns into a wide grin. Clearly they know each other.

“Sun! Long time no see! I knew it was you from the smell!” The monster’s voice rumbles like the thunder above.

*We have to talk our way out of this. He is my former brother, Demon Lord Niu Muo. You don’t want to see him angered.*

I attempt to imitate how people greet each other on the street. “Good day...Niu Muo...”

He roars with laughter. “Good gods, Sun, you’ve gotten timid!” He slams the axe into the ground, takes out a water—skin, and takes a swig.

I look around for any mortals. “You’ll wake someone.”

The bull finishes the drink and glances at me with his beady little eyes. “And what do I have to fear of mortals?” He laughs his rumbling chuckle again, and before I can reply, he pulls back and swings a mighty fist at the wall right next to him. Shrapnel and bricks tumble down with the rain, and screams erupt from the house.

When the dust clears, the bull demon is not moving. He is staring at something inside the wall, he starts to pant, and his red eyes glows with fury. I know exactly what is about to happen. I dart into the house close behind the demon, as he charges toward the red vase on the table. With speed born from desperation, I run past to pick up the mother and infant on the couch, and manage to leap out the window in time as the building crashes down. I land in the center of the city square, on top of the stone well, with the mother and child in my arms. How did I jump so far?

*You are infused with my power now, explained Sun. It seems like all we’re missing now is my weapon. Does this well lead to the ocean?*

I set down the two behind the well. “Yes.”

*Good. You must stay beside this well for a while. Do not leave.* I hear the Monkey King start to chant.

“What for?” He did not reply.

Off in the distance, the pile of rubble shudders, and the bull emerges. “You still haven’t lost your edge after all these years.” He stops and stares at something behind me. I look back. Why do architects insist on red roofs? When I look back, he’s already charging.

What are the options? I can try to stop him, but by the looks of those horns, I cannot stand even one hit. But if I don’t stop him, everyone behind me will be in danger. I charge up to meet him.

The impact is lighter than I expect. My hands lock onto the massive horns, holding him back. Although I am slowly backing off, I hinder his progression.

To my dismay, the demon starts to snort, and with every breath, he starts to grow. Within a few seconds, he’d grown to twice his size, and I am starting to lose my footing.

My legs push against the ground, my arms aching of exertion, I am now backing against the well. The Monkey King finally finishes his chant.

*On the count of three, let go.*

“Are you crazy? You’ll get everyone killed!”

*Trust me for this. I have an idea.* I’m starting to tire anyway, so I have no other choice. The ground around me starts to crack.

*Ready...it’s coming...soon now...LET GO!*

I let go of the horns and use his momentum to swing myself over the well and onto the ground. Simultaneously, the ground around my feet breaks open, and a great, golden pillar, some twenty thirty meters long etched with words of an ancient tongue, shoots up from where the well had previously stood. It catches the angry bull right under the chin, sending him reeling backwards in pain.

I grab the pillar and force it out of the ground. With a mental command, it shrinks until it’s appropriately sized for me.

*The Staff of the Golden Brace, said Sun. The same I pulled from the ocean hundreds of years ago. With this staff, you can go to all nine layers of hell and back alive, brave all dangers of the four realms, or even rival the might of the gods. This is my gift to you, kid, and use it wisely.*

The bull lord picks himself up from where he has fallen, burning with fury. “How dare you oppose me, silly monkey. You will feel the true rage of a bull!” He extends his hand, and his axe returns to him. He roars, and suddenly lifts his axe and charges, bellowing. Pity that the staff has a red shaft. I feel the urge to run, like anyone would in front of a raging bull.

Instead, I tug off a strand of my hair and blow it away. Immediately, twenty duplicates of me appear in all directions, yelling and behaving like apes.

All twenty one of us leap forward, little monkeys screaming bloody murder. I manage to whack him on the skull. While he is dazed, I whack him on the side, and he topples over. The duplicates dissipate, and the staff shrinks.

I walk up, but he surprises me when he sweeps me off my feet with a hand. We both scramble up.

“You wave a mean stick, I’ll give you that,” the demon grins. “But you’re not powerful enough to kill me! I will crush you, and I will eat you!”

I shrug. “You have to catch me first.”

He’s big, strong, but slow. I dodge his every blow, sometimes getting a free swing when he leaves himself open, but it isn’t enough.

How was he defeated in the myths again? Sun had to summon a few gods to subdue him. I cannot.

He over-swings, and my staff elongates. I mean to hit him under the chin again, but it hooks onto his nose ring and tears it off. It’s pretty disgusting, and the bull is really angry. I do remember how he’s defeated, though.

I shrink my staff and grab onto the cleaner part of the ring as he barrels forward, howling with anger and pain. I dodge his cleave and sidestep his next attacks. I need the right moment.

Finally, he does a back-hand, aiming for my legs. It’s now or never. I jump onto his axe, and using it as a jump pad, I flip onto his shoulders. Ring in hand, I cram it onto his head, and it slips over the horns and locks at his neck. He cries out in anguish, and suddenly vanishes.

The silence is broken by a sudden fit of crying. The child I’d saved is pointing at me, tears rolling down his face. The rain has stopped, and people are coming out of their homes.

*Quick, to the right! Don’t just stand there!* I leap onto a near-by building before anyone else can see me.



# Balancing Good and Evil

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Deckert, Lara – 14*

I sit in the blue plastic chair, gazing out of the classroom window and into the dark, dreary sky. The teacher is droning on and on in a monotonous voice at the front of the room, words muffled by the soft pitter-patter of the rain, which, at this point, is nothing but white noise. The students are either asleep or staring blankly into space, but Mr Jefferson doesn't seem to care. He's obviously as sick of us as we are of him.

I slump down further in my chair and sigh, crossing one leg on top of the other and tapping my pencil on the desk, as if doing so would speed up the time. My fingers trace my name, 'Raven,' that I etched into the desk and my gaze wanders to the clock that hangs above the door. Fifteen more minutes until the end of school. My pencil moves faster. The teacher speaks slower.

*Tick. Tick. Tick. Tap. Tap. Tap.* "Today's homework is—" *Tick. Tick. Tick. Tap. Tap. Tap.* "Pages twenty-three to thirty—" *Tick. Tick. Tap. Tap.* "Answer quest—" *Tick. Tap.*

That's when it happens. At exactly 3:53pm, May 11, 2015, the clock stops ticking. The teacher stops writing on the board. The rain stops falling. The students stop moving.

I blink, my mind taking a while to process what I'm seeing. When the hairs on the back of my neck rise and a feeling of dread pools in my stomach, I blink again.

This must be some kind of trick.

Then the classroom around me and everything in it starts vibrating and spinning, slowly at first and then faster, until all the colours in the room blur together. The ground and ceiling fade away, leaving blackness below and above me. The chair I'm in starts whipping back and forth, up and down in the middle of the air, in a cocoon of spinning, crashing, flying colours. The sound of nothing roars in my ears, driving all conscious thoughts out of my mind. I scream and squeeze my eyes shut, tears streaming down my face as I gasp for breath and cling onto the edge of the desk.

Suddenly, it stops. Far away a mass of light appears that's so bright that it burns my vision even through my shut eyelids. With a jolt of horror I realise that it's flying directly towards me. My eyes fly open, and my hands instinctively try to shield my face, but it's too late. The ball of light slams into my chest.

I explode, my mind and body caving in on themselves. Every pore in my body is on fire, every sense is amplified a thousand times. My heartbeat is as loud as if I was listening to it through a stethoscope. I can feel each blood cell that's speeding through my veins. I can taste the air, how its flavour is a tang of everything that exists in this world, from poison to sugar to metal. I can smell the alcohol in my nail polish and the chemicals from my shampoo. But, I can't see a single thing except blackness.

I'm paralysed, tongue glued to the top of my mouth, breath caught in my throat, heart hammering my ribs as this overload of information struggles to make it to my brain. But before that can happen, my head is snapped back, and everything goes black.

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I open my eyes and shoot up, gasping for breath. My heart is beating furiously and I'm covered in sweat. I squeeze my eyelids shut again and when I lift my hands up to knead them, I realise that my cheeks are wet. After a couple jagged breaths, I reopen my eyes.

I'm sitting, knees tucked against my chest and arms curled around my legs, on a white cot in the corner of a room. The walls and floors are spotless. There's a cluttered desk opposite me, and next to it is a plastic, grey door.

It's the nurse's office.

I'm in school.

I expel a breathy puff of air that I hadn't known I'd been holding in, and, full of relief, I grin. It was all a dream. I flop back down on the bed and cover my face with my hands, giggling. Thank God.

The voice comes from nowhere.

*Sorry to tell you this, but it wasn't a dream.*

I let out a yelp of surprise. "What the hell?! Who's there?" Eyes narrowed, I sit back up and whip my head back and forth to scan the room for any sign of movement. Nothing.

*My name is Sun. Sun WuKong. Nice to meet you, Raven.*

"What's going on? Where are you?" I demand. Although unlikely, my thoughts instantly go to Jonathan, the school's most notorious prankster.



*I'm inside of you, Raven.*

A sense of foreboding wraps itself around me and my heart drops. "This has to be a prank. 'You're inside of me?' What does that even mean?"

*This isn't a joke. I became one with your mind the second that ball of light touched your chest.*

My heart stops and I stiffen. "How do you know about that? This is *ludicrous*, and it's not funny. Come out. Now," I hiss threateningly.

Even as I speak the words, I know what I'm asking for won't happen. The voice I'm hearing isn't coming from anywhere. As crazy as it sounds, it seems to be coming from, well...inside *me*.

*As much as I admire your tenacity, Raven, don't bother denying the truth. I can hear your thoughts; I know you believe me.*

My breathing starts increasing and I and push myself against the wall, taking a few deep breaths. There's no way this is happening. It's impossible. Control. I need to regain control.

*Calm down.*

I burst out. "*Calm down?! You want me to calm down?! I just found out that there's a talking voice in my head, and you want me to CALM DOWN?!*"

*Well you're going to have to, because you have a visitor.*

Sure enough, the door bursts open, knocking against the wall with a *bang*, and Lisa, my current assigned caretaker, walks towards me, busily texting on her phone. I scowl as her sharp blue eyes meet my gaze.

"This better be good," she snaps.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"Don't you use that tone with me, *missy*. I feed you, clothe you, and give you a roof. And what do you repay me with? Attitude and trouble. This is the *second* time I've had to leave George to come and pick you up. Is *this* how you treated your mom?! No wonder she killed herself."

I stiffen at her words. "She didn't kill herself." It sounds fake even to my own ears.

"Of course," Lisa smirks and walks out.

She doesn't care about me. None of them ever have. I hate them almost as much as I hate myself.

My heart pangs as I remember the one person who continuously loved me, no matter how I was. Mom.

*Lisa seems lovely...*

I snort under my breath and roll my eyes, stalking towards the exit. "You have no idea."

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I pace back and forth in my room. The only pieces of furniture are my bed and the dresser. I never bother to decorate; it's not like I'll be staying here long anyway. They always kick me out after a month or two.

"So you were supposed to be trapped under a mountain for 500 years because of some stupid thing you did, but then you split into two different people? I don't understand."

I feel Sun sigh, a gentle vibration through my skull.

*In existence, there are several universes that parallel each other. In mine, there are gods that rule. I served them; did their bidding. But, I was ridiculed for causing mischief, even though I cleaned up their messes. Eventually, a part of me wanted to punish the people that mocked me. Being cast under that mountain was the last straw. With nothing to do but wait 500 years, that part started fighting for control of my body. Then, one day, I just...exploded. My body couldn't take the struggle, so I ripped into two different beings; good and evil, you could say. Somehow, we tore open a portal and shifted into your universe, bringing us to now.*

"And the headband?"

*I'm sorry?*

"Earlier, you said that your 'dark side' is looking for a headband," I say sarcastically, using air quotes.

*Erebus—*

"Erebus?"

*Erebus means dark, the opposite of Sun. He has his own body, but not the power to use it. When we were still one person, we, I, wore a headband that the gods gifted me. It contained all of my power. But once we split, it did too. The right half is lost somewhere, and we wear the left.*

“We?”

*Your hand.*

I look down and am startled when I see half a golden band wrapped around the side of my left middle finger.

“I’m guessing we have to find the other half?”

*Yes. It contains too much power, and if Erebus got his hands on it...Imagine a falling sky. Imagine the ground beneath your feet crumbling into nothing. Imagine a world so full of darkness and chaos that even love doesn’t exist. He’s angry, Raven. Angry at world.*

Sun stops and his sudden fear flashes through me. My tongue feels like sandpaper.

“So, where is it?”

*Where is what?*

“The missing half.”

He’s quiet for a few moments. *You don’t understand. It’s dangerous. Erebus will do anything to get the headband, and if you’re there at the same time as him...he’ll kill you.*

I swallow, hard, suddenly really annoyed. “Look. You just said that we have to find it, right? How are we supposed to find it if you don’t tell me *where it is*? This entire mess *isn’t part of my plan*. My plan includes a quiet, drama free life so that I can get *good grades* and go to a *good college* far away from this stupid town and all the stupid people the stupid government thinks can replace mom. Is Erebus, you, or the *end of the world* included in this plan? *No*. So the sooner this is over, the sooner I’m back to my life. Otherwise Erebus will inevitably find us, and then we’re *really* in trouble,” I seethe. I don’t want to be in this mess. I never asked for it. But here I am anyway and the only thing I know is to do whatever’s needed to get back to my boring life.

I guess Sun finally realises that I’m right; that there’s no other solution.

*It’s in your basement.*

I choke. “In my *basement*. This life—threatening, power—containing headband that someone who wants to destroy the world is looking for, is. *In. My. Basement?! Why?!*”

*Your home parallels the location of the mountain in my universe. So, naturally, it appeared here.*

It’s too much. I can’t believe this is happening. I lift up my left hand and pinch myself, hard. When I confirm that I’m not dreaming, that this is real, I close my eyes, take a few deep breaths and accept it. I accept this absurd, illogical, insane situation and I accept what I have to do to get out of it.

Suddenly filled with a calm, I manage to ask, “What do I do with it, once I get it?”

*You put it on, Erebus and I become one again, and I regain control over the good and evil parts of me.*

I walk out my bedroom door, not caring that it’s dangerous because at this point in my life, the thought of death isn’t scary. I’ve been through enough to understand that.

*Raven, stop. You don’t understand. It isn’t what you think. The basement changed as soon as the band appeared here. Erebus can get in! He’s connected to the band so as long as he knows the location he can get in!*

I ignore him as I face the door that leads downstairs.

I know that I’m moving too fast. I know that I should take a step back and listen to Sun. But that isn’t how I function. When a problem arises, I solve it as quickly as possible, no matter what it takes, and go back to my regular routine, because denying a problem and dragging it on for months in an attempt to safely figure it out only makes the situation worse.

So, I open the door and tread silently down the stairs.

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As soon as I step foot onto the ground, it’s like I’m in another world. Sun was right. My basement has changed.

Instead of a compact space full of clutter and boxes, I’m in a room that feels like it goes on infinitely. Marble walls stretch on and on with no end, eventually fading away into blackness. I can’t see a thing except for one circle of light that shines on a dusty marble pedestal and the blackness around it. The air is silent and stale, not a single sound except for my short breaths. Goosebumps appear on my arms.

My footsteps echo through the room as I straighten and start to walk towards the spotlight. With every step, my instincts scream louder for me to run. I should have, because when I’m a few metres away, I see that the pedestal is empty. The headband isn’t there.

Which means that Erebus is.

I guess that somehow, I thought I'd be safe coming down here, because when the temperature around me drops and he steps into the spotlight, cold red eyes glinting maliciously and a broken, gold, headband circling half his head, I realise that I just made a mistake.

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"Raven Waters. I knew when Sun chose you that you were unpredictable, but being stupid enough to come down here after *just* learning what was going on – well, you surprised even me. You just saved me the trouble of having to come find you." Erebus chuckles and that's when I know that there's nothing I can do. Sun seems to have disappeared, and even just standing next to him, I can *feel* his power. I feel sick, my hands are clammy, but even though my body is paralysed with fear, I come to the realisation that mentally, I'm not nervous at all.

He stops suddenly and hisses, "Give it to me."

"No."

His eyes flash and a second later I'm flying across the room, slamming into the wall. I gasp for breath and roll onto my side, heart pounding and tears blurring my vision. Erebus appears in front of me, towering over my body.

"Insolent little *girl*. You're pathetic. *Give me the band.*"

A sudden fury comes over me. "No."

His hand shoots and lifts me by the neck, cutting off my supply of oxygen. And yet for some reason, I don't struggle. Erebus's face is a few inches away and I see in his cold eyes just how insane he is.

Just as I start to see stars, a sudden force slams him away from me. Sun. Erebus crashes into the opposing wall with so much strength that it crumbles directly on top of him, burying him in masses of marble. I fall to the ground, rasping. His headband must have been knocked off, because when I look up, it's a few metres away.

*Raven. You don't have to put it on. If you do, you'll die. Even half of the band contains too much power for your body to handle.*

Sun doesn't seem to understand that subconsciously, I don't care. Growing up, I hated mom. I hated how we had no money, how she couldn't afford to buy me anything and give me the life that I saw others enjoying. So when she finally saved up enough to give me an education, I ditched class. I smoked and drank and stayed out late. I made her life miserable, and she still loved me enough to borrow money from all sorts of people to try and make me happy. Then, she died, and my world came crashing down.

Maybe by doing this I can make it up to her.

So, I stand up, and taking one last, final breath, I put on the crown.

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I'm standing over my lifeless body, looking down at it. I feel...content. At peace. I'm not angry, sad, happy, or anything else. I just am.

Looking up, I see Sun. He's real, a real being with arms and legs and a face. He stands on the other side of my body, watching me. The golden half-crown that I saw Erebus wearing lies on his head, only this time it isn't broken; it's a full circle that wraps around Sun's head and shines brighter than the stars.

He's watching me and after a few seconds, his lips turn up sadly. "Thank you."

It's as if we're still the same person, because I know the hidden meaning behind those words. He's sorry I had to die; he's sorry that he couldn't do anything to help. I smile softly to show that I'm not upset, and I reach out my hand. He takes it and as we shake, his gaze moves to something behind me and he slowly starts to fade away, until all I'm holding onto is air.

"Raven?" says a soft, gentle voice. I gasp; I know that voice. I spin around, and there stands my mom. She opens her arms, eyes filling with tears, and I rush into them, sobbing. Burying my face into her shoulder, I hold on to her as if I'm drowning and she's anchoring me to the shore.

"I'm sorry mom, I'm so sorry.," I choke.

"Shh...shh. I'm so proud of you," she whispers, stepping back and cradling my face.

"What now?" I mumble through my tears.

"Now, we go home."

## Eastbound

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Goh, Mavis – 15*

Early spring arrived on a light breeze, bringing with it the sweet scent of new blooms and the freshness of new life beginning. In the monasteries of Nalanda, two travellers were busy packing their bags and assembling their scrolls, which were to be bound together and strapped to the back of a packhorse.

One of the travellers was a monk. Astonishingly, he was not from the great monasteries of Nalanda; rather, he had come a great distance and over the flaming desert, all the way from China. He was Sen, and his traveling partner Wu was similarly far from home.

“Fine weather today,” Wu commented unnecessarily. He reclined in the shade and plucked a mango off the tree they were resting under, biting into it indelicately. “This tree is especially wonderful. Ha! I wish we could carry it back to China.” As he talked the mango slowly turned to pulp under his grip, and mango juice stained his chin and hands.

Sen viewed this blankly. “Soon we will be braving the scorching heat and sands of the desert,” he said, pointedly looking away until his sharp profile was silhouetted against the bright sun. He gathered his beige robes and shifted to sit further from Wu. “I want to leave by noon. Bringing these scrolls back to China will be an arduous task. We should leave as soon as possible.”

Much to the frustration of Sen, they departed two hours behind schedule. Wu, however, was carefree. He adjusted the scrolls strapped to his back and flicked the reins of their horse a little. As they navigated out of the bustling marketplace he asked delightedly, “D’you think they’re scared of my sword?”

Sen glanced at those who were eyeing the sword resting at Wu’s waist, then turned his gaze to Wu’s obnoxiously bulky figure, clad in stiff armor. “I don’t think it’s your sword they’re scared of,” he muttered. When Wu’s attention flicked to a stall selling fruits, Sen hurriedly walked up behind him and said, “Let’s focus on getting out of here.”



It was yet another two hours before they reached the city walls. “Beyond this,” Wu proclaimed dramatically, “is a vast sea of sand, waves of dunes rising threateningly over our heroes. The brave spirit of warrior Wu—”

“Stop talking,” Sen said, annoyed. “If you talk too much your throat will dry up, and water is limited as it is.”

“At least I have things to say,” Wu sniffed. “You’re really like a grandpa, even though you’re twenty.”

“And you’re really like a baby, even though you’re twenty six,” Sen replied without missing a beat. “Our horse is becoming restless. Let us proceed in our journey.” He shrugged a little to secure the straps holding his scrolls and took the first step into the desert.

Wu called after him, “If you keep treating me like this, see if I carry any more scrolls!” Then he tugged on the reins and a disgruntled snort, the horse followed after him in catching up to Sen.

Nightfall was like an icy blanket that fell upon them without warning. They tied the horse to a small shrub, then set up a small cloth tent and huddled inside for warmth. Above them the inky sky glittered with infinite stars, dreamlike in its endlessness and absurd vacancy, and it enveloped them until they felt they were in a different world entirely. The chilly air pressed against them and set them shivering. Sleep was flighty and they slept in bursts, so when morning came they faced it with heavy eyelids and hazy minds.

“We simply need to adapt to this new way of living,” Sen explained optimistically. “Soon we will become accustomed to such drastic temperature change, and be able to sleep peacefully once again.”

Yet this cycle continued for the next week until they reached the mountain pass, where they were utterly unable to rest at all. Wu was particularly restless, running his hand through his mop of tangled brown hair. “I don’t like this,” he said uneasily. “This is a great place to be robbed. Sen, don’t trust these mountain passes.”

“Perhaps you’d like to climb over the mountain instead,” Sen suggested dryly. He massaged his aching muscles and forced his foot to take the next step.



"I can't feel my feet," Wu complained. "Or my hands, because of this horse. This is terrible. Why did I sign up for this again?" He kicked a rock and hissed at the resulting pain.

"I don't know," Sen said pleasantly, staring steadily at the next rock. When he resumed staring ahead, he noticed a distant figure shuffling wearily ahead of them. As they neared, the faint details of a well-worn, dark brown monk's habit sharpened into view, and Sen said, "It seems we have encountered another traveller. Let's ask him for his story."

Wu gave the figure a once-over and said suspiciously, "Why do his robes have this weird tear down the back?"

"All sorts of strange things happen in the desert and mountains," Sen said reasonably. "I guess we'll find out."

The monk's skin was worn rough and tan by the sun, and he carried with him a small leather satchel slung across his chest. He was willing to accept their companionship, and they learned that his name was Jing and he was on his pilgrimage across the desert. Sen was delighted to learn that there was another monk taking the perilous journey, like him. "You should come with us," he offered amiably, and Jing accepted.

"Hey Jing, why are your robes torn in the back?" Wu called from where he was leading the horse behind them.

Jing answered immediately. "During a gust of wind, my robes caught on a tree branch. In my terror, I moved too quickly and my robes tore." He added, "It allows for quite a few icy drafts at night."

Sen nodded in understanding. "Ah, the desert is approaching again," he said, peering into the horizon. "The sun is about to set. We must move quickly."

Wu was decidedly unhappy about having to fit all three of them into one cramped tent. "Just leave your sword outside," Sen said exasperatedly. "Why do you even need your sword anyway?"

"Why don't we all leave our things outside?" Wu glared pointedly at Jing's satchel. "Not like there are wild animals waiting to bite into our food and water, or bandits waiting to steal all our belongings."

They all glared at each other in some sort of three-way exchange of annoyance.

"Everyone," Sen said with an air of finality, "Is going to leave their things *outside*."

They did. Then they settled against each other to conserve heat and closed their eyes. "You're really strong for a monk," Wu said to Jing. "See, Sen, his arms are really strong and hard."

Sen sighed, and silence soon fell over them.



Wu woke to a sudden draft by his legs. The tent entrance flapped in the wind and a cold gust of wind tore at his face, leaving him squinting at the stars. As he crept to the entrance, there was a quiet hiss of sand moving outside, and then a small clink. Wu held his breath as he reached for the sword lying just outside the tent. As his fingers closed around the firm leather of the handle and he lifted the sword, there was an unearthly shriek that pierced his ears and set every nerve in his body on high alert.

Behind him, Sen jerked sharply upright as his hands scrabbled for balance on the ground. Just as his mouth began to form words, Wu tossed a pillow at him and gestured to remain silent. Sen glared at him with eyes that demanded an explanation, and as Wu rolled his eyes, the tent fell into shadow.

Wu snapped around to see a pair of legs blocking the exit and he dived, locking his arms around the knees and sending both him and the stranger tumbling to the ground. With a vicious yell the stranger lifted an arm and the serene starlight reflected off the edge of his blade, sending Wu rolling to the side to pull the stranger off balance. As Wu kicked the other's head into the sand, he drew his sword to lop off the protective vest. Keeping one foot planted firmly on the stranger's back, he drove his sword diagonally through the man's chest until it pierced the sand, and he kept it there as he waited for the convulsions to stop.

A dark stain was spreading across the sand as Sen emerged from the tent. At seeing Wu standing, he breathed a sigh of relief. Then he looked down and his eyes widened in barely concealed horror and he admonished, "Wu, violence is never the solution." He knelt and muttered a short prayer.

Wu scowled. "Well, *he* certainly seemed to think it was," he said, nodding towards the corpse. "It was kill or be killed. Anyway," he continued hurriedly, as Sen looked as if he were about to begin a lecture, "Let's check for who he is."



He pulled his sword away, wiping it in the sand. Then he nudged the body with his foot and it rolled over with dragging limbs, revealing the bloodstained face of Jing.

"He must be a bandit," Wu announced disgustedly. He prodded the leather garments Jing was wearing and said smugly, "I told you he seemed unusually strong. Probably got those robes from a real monk he attacked. Stabbed him in the back — that explains the slit."

"Bandit or not, you shouldn't have killed him," Sen said reproachfully. "That's bad karma. It'll come back to bite."

"You think that's the worst thing I've done?" Wu laughed as he kicked the body away. They watched it roll down a slope with sickening thuds at every turn. "We gotta move. The scent of blood attracts wild animals."

As Wu disassembled the tent, Sen said, "He killed our horse."

"Probably because he has a crew of bandits following close by, who were gonna pick him up. Otherwise he'd have left it alive so he could escape on it," Wu explained matter-of-factly. "All the more reason why we need to start moving now."

Sen planted his feet on the ground. "No," he said resolutely. "We need to bring these scrolls with us."

Wu stopped in disbelief. "Are you crazy?" he exclaimed. "There's no way both of us will be able to lift all of those. Just leave them. Our lives are more important." He shoved the canvas of the tent into his bag with more force than necessary.

"We can't let the word of all those scribes go to waste," Sen declared. "There is so much information hidden in these scrolls. Can you imagine? The knowledge that our country will be able to gain? We must bring these back, Wu. This is my purpose."

"Well it isn't mine," Wu spat furiously. His face flushed red with anger as he spoke, "Just returning to China with our lives intact will be good enough! You're the most well traveled out of anyone in China, even the emperor himself. What kingdoms haven't you visited? Isn't your experience and knowledge enough? Who cares about these scrolls?"

The night air turned taut from tension and heavy with unspoken words. In the silence, the scratching sound of Sen untying the scrolls bound to the packhorse was particularly deafening. He worked on re-binding the scrolls to his own bundle, while Wu stood motionlessly on the sands.

Wu's mind wrestled with indecision. Perhaps it was the war that awaited him back in China that left him so uncertain. It weighed heavily on his shoulders, as it had for the entire journey, and Wu's back strained with the pressure until it finally snapped.

"Why," Wu breathed, "do you have no sense of self-preservation? I can't — I hate that you're just gonna throw down everything trying to save these pieces of paper. You think we can just keep walking? You think we're gonna survive the next few months lugging these dead weights behind us?" he questioned incredulously. Then he burst out, "Your prayers aren't gonna save us from collapsing from exhaustion, Sen! We're going to die if we do this! I refuse to sacrifice our lives!"

Sen blinked at him. "This is my purpose," he repeated. "I believe you're being selfish. We're capable of much more than we think we are. Shouldn't we at least try crossing the desert with this treasure trove of knowledge and learning? I want to help my home in the best way I can, and for me, it is by doing this."

Wu swallowed down the words he was about to say. It wasn't that he didn't understand Sen's situation — instead, he felt his priorities lined up differently from Sen's. For it must be known that Wu was a warrior, ever since he was a scruffy kid picked off the streets of a dilapidated town. He'd grown up in a band of ragtag boys like him, who ran and screamed in a isolated temple somewhere in a vast rice field. More importantly, they had spent their entire lives being trained to become elite warriors who would serve the emperor on the battlegrounds of their war with the Turks. And Wu had long proven himself to be the best of them all. He was scheming, he was clever, he was fearsome, and when the other boys saw his dark, curly haired head around the corner they would shout and run to him for stories or advice.

When Wu became a true warrior he had taken his place as a general in the emperor's army, yet in the days leading up to his first battle he'd become jittery and uncertain about his responsibilities and his military prowess. The battleground put his life at stake and he hadn't been ready to take such a risk. At this point he'd seen Sen creeping out the city walls and, in a sudden bout of insanity, convinced the monk to take him as a bodyguard.

Even so, Wu couldn't run away from the war forever.  
"For me," Wu began slowly, "What awaits me in China is most likely imprisonment or penalty of death."

Sen glanced at him questioningly. "Does the emperor have something against you?"  
"I sort of left my position as one of his generals," Wu announced, his voice betraying him by wavering. "I'm not really in favor right now." Then he announced decisively, "I'll help you lug these back. I have nothing else to do anyway."

The monk looked at him for a long moment. "You don't see enough purpose in your life." He ignored Wu's sputtering and said, "You need to realize what you can do. Start by bringing these scrolls, and from there you can gain more accomplishments."

"That doesn't help," Wu grumbled. But he shrugged his smaller bundle off his back and handed it to Sen. "Give me yours."



The sun beat down on the two travellers and scorched the sand and their skin and left imprints on their eyelids, shimmering marks that faded in and out as they blinked their eyes. The air was suffocating, as if they were being boiled alive in the humidity. The bottom of their feet had been rubbed raw from trekking, a steady plodding as they forced one tired foot in front of the other. Their joints ached, their heads throbbed and the blisters on their feet sent sharp spikes of pain into their feet every time they took a step. Their muscles screamed from the strain of holding the scrolls up or dragging them onwards, and their throats were parched beyond belief. They'd taken to drinking a drop each time to soothe their throats, and all conversation had been halted due to sheer exhaustion.

Nighttime was just as bad, if not worse. The winds bit at them and turned their exposed, numb skin into dry flakes that pricked with pain. Sleeping was, oddly enough, an arduous affair, as they were never certain of whether they'd wake up. If they did, standing to resume walking required tremendous mental and physical strain.

It was an endless trek, but then—! Then, in the distance, there was a splash of green. Hope bloomed, simultaneously warm and nerve-wrecking, in Wu's chest. As they neared it became apparent that it was not an illusion or a fantasy made up by their rest-deprived minds. The oasis was real, and so was the food and water that it provided.

They rested and ate and drank with relish, so much that they began to feel lightheaded. Sen said confidently, "With this break, we will reach our goal. Wu," and here he stood up, newly motivated for the next trek, "We *will* reach China."



The wooden house was cool in the crisp autumn air. A helmet was hung on a hook; then a cape, then some gloves. "Another victory under my belt," Wu sang. "Another one bites the dust!"

On his table there lay an envelope. A letter, from a province far, far away.

*Dearest Wu* [it read],

*I've been translating, as usual, and I'm proud to announce that our library is nearly twice the size and full of texts from all over the world. It's possibly the greatest collection we have in China, and I hope to expand it further. Even scholars from foreign lands have come to request an audience with me, which I never fail to be surprised and incredibly honored by. Here's to success on my part — and I expect that there has been equal success for you. I hope to hear back from you soon.*

*Sen*

Wu closed the letter and added it to the bundle resting on his bookshelf, full of letters from Sen. He sat and pulled out a brush.

*Dearest Sen* [it read],

*The emperor appointed me general yesterday...*

# The Journey to the East

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Huang, Cindy -15*

Sun Wukong heard birds chirping when he walked through the long corridor of the imperial. He looked up and found two mockingbirds flapping their wings and pecking each other so hard that both of them got scratchers all over their body. Wonder what they were doing, he stopped to watch:

Both of the mockingbirds were blue. One was darker and the other one lighter.

Their wings were rounded with white patches on the

Upper and lower surfaces that were visible when the wings are outstretched.

The lighter one seemed to be weaker, who was being continually knocked down from the tree. The darker bird chirped happily and jumped into the nest but ignored the other female mockingbird who crept up the branches, attacked from the back. The dark mockingbird was overwhelmingly shocked at the attack and fell down the tree, while the winning couple jumped into the nest which once belong to the darker mockingbird.

Sun Wukong sympathetically picked up the loser and put it on another branch, *poor little thing*, he thought.

"Your Majesty." the servant reminded, "The Buddha is waiting for you." Sun Wukong stood up with the last look at the mockingbird and found him hidden into the branches of the tree and disappeared.

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The Rulai Buddha lived in the most luxurious palace among all the others.

"My dear child, come here." She murmured.

Sun walked up and lowered his furry head to shown respect.

The Buddha smiled, "As the descendant of the great monkey king, we believe you have the power to complete the holy mission to the east. The Jade Emperor have selected a young man to bring the sacred texts of Buddhism all the way to Tang Dynasty to spread Buddhism. While you would be in charge to protect the safety of this man, you should always obey and follow him. Understand or not?"

"Yes, your majesty." Sun replied respectfully.

"Good," The Buddha nodded "Pack up your belongings, and you will leave right now."

Sun is glad to take over such a mission. He hopped into his room and threw necessities into his bag. When he walked out of place, he accidentally crashed into somebody who was walking in.

"What the..." He was ready to spill, but all of a sudden found a pig face looked down at him. He jumped back and saw this pig-face man dressed in grayish cotton clothes and was holding a spade.

"Ah sorry, I was rushing." He offered a hand to pick Sun up, while Sun accepted his hand, still in great awe.

"So I guess you are Sun Wukong, the Monkey King." Pig-face figure cleared his voice, and made a short introduction, "I am Zhu Bajie, I'm going with you on this journey. Rulai Buddha assigned us to help you on the journey to the east; we are your companion," Bajie said, but didn't seem that exciting compared to Sun.

"God who in the world actually want to go on that journey? I'm satisfy with my life here." He leaned slightly toward the side of Sun and chitchatted: "You know what? The time I heard it's Tripitaka who will lead us, I know this journey would be screwed."

Sun raised his eyebrow. "Why so?"

"Don't you know?" Bajie leaned back, crossed his shoulders. "He is the only student of Rulai Buddha. Rulai gave him everything. He had been pampered and spoiled so badly."

When Sun, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujin walked out of the palace, a man in white is already there waiting for them. It's Tripitaka. He looked young, not more than 30 years old, he was riding a white horse, and was waiting impatiently at the gate.

"Finally, don't y' all know the time?" Tripitaka saw them, looked annoyed. He waved to have them follow him.

Together, this bizarre group, went on a journey to the east.

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The mid-summer sun shone directly to the three tired men, they had just come to the Gobi Desert these days and with a lack of drinkable water, all four of them are devastating. They barely spoke throughout the whole journey, the heat had forced them to saved their energy and moved forward.

"Okay, I'm not moving forward anymore," Zhu Bajie furiously stopped and sat on the burning sand. "If anyone could not provide me with fresh water and meat, I'm going to stay here forever"

"Bajie!" Sun roared; the heat had also irritated him, for a monkey who lived in jungles, this kind of weather was unbearable. "The map showed that we are almost at the edge of the desert, just keep moving. Almost there."

"Map, map, map," Bajie impatiently rolled his eyes, "Can't believe that. Since 400 years ago Rulai came down to earth and bought that map, it had not been newly updated."

"But..." Sun trying to argue but Tripitaka who was sitting on the white horse interrupted him: "I find no need in arguing. Let's stopped and stay here to rest. Bajie and Sun can go around to find food and water. I will stay here."

Zhu Bajie eyed Tripitaka and turned his head to Sun; they exchanged a look and together stood up. Bajie walked away first, while Sun first bowed to Tripitaka.

Together they walked down the sand hill. The sun was still burning hot, but once the night came, it was deadily cold.

"Bajie." Sun trotted to reach Bajie, "What happened? I'm sorry about the shortage of supplies, but you should be aware of the sacrifices of this holy mission."

Bajie stopped, "You think I'm complaining for nothing?" He turned to face Sun Wukong, "You honor Tripitaka as a teacher because he is the man selected by Buddha. Look what he is doing right now? Eating and drinking all our supplies and we like his slave," he yelled.

"He is the monk that carried the sacred texts." Sun tried to persuade him but indeed, Zhu Bajie, at the edge of explosion, would not listen to him. In silence, they walked past many bushes.

When they turned at the corner of a sand hill, they saw a fancy ancient Chinese household: Timber frames were typically constructed with joinery and doweling alone, roofs built on roof cross-beams, while the house surrounded with exterior walls painted in luxurious dark red. The front door is opened, music and the smell of cooked dishes wafted to them.

"There seems to be a party." Bajie slobbered when he smelled the food, "Let's go in and ask whether they can offer us food."

"Wait." Sun leaned forward and grabbed his arm. "Calm down and think about this: why would anyone live in the desert and have party? What if it's a trap set by demons?"

"Who cares!" Bajie shook off his hand impatiently. He rushed to the door and stepped in.

"Oh girls. We have some guests today." They saw a pretty leading maid dressed in green, traditional Chinese dress, and enthusiastically she pushed and pulled them into the gate, ignoring their struggles.

Sun and Bajie were welcomed into a fancy room decorated with silk curtains. Two maids pressed them into chairs while the others magically served them with dishes.

The leading maid winked, "You two came from places far far away, I bet that you are tired and starving. Help yourself."

Bajie, in great happiness, had devoured almost everything before the maid asked them to do. Sun, who was more careful and sensitive, examined it and tasted the pork. It was fantastic! He thought, this probably could be the best dishes on the earth. He lowered his alertness and enjoyed the meal.

Half way, Sun broke the silence: "Who is the owner of this house?" He asked the leader maid standing next to them.

"Our owner is a good master, a brilliant chief" The leader maid praised in proudness, "Usually she would come and visit the guests, but today before you arrived, I got the news that our great owner found a perfect ingredient. He is now probably worrying how to make him into a delicious dish!" the maid chuckled sweetly.

Sun, however, was not fooled by her cute chuckles, he felt a coldness coming up his feet and gradually rose up to his brain, and suddenly, he was conscious. His hand moved to his weapon Jinggu Bang.

Sun felt a cold felling crept up his back but he doesn't know why. Raised his head, he found all the other maidens stood by the wall, their face facing down, senseless. They are not even breathing. Sun suddenly realized that, are they something like...puppets?

"Did you just said, 'HE' but not 'IT'?" Sun asked suspiciously, one hand reached for his dagger and another hand reached Bajie's arm and grabbed it tightly.

The maid looked up slowly and stared straight into his eyes. Holding that sweet face, she repeated what he said, "Yes, it is HE. Your dear master is probably now ready to serve. Little Monkey, would you like to have a try before you left?"



Abruptly, Sun jumped up and knocked down the table and all the dishes and spilled some of them on the maid.

"My dress!" the maid in great shock, yelled. Irritably, her human face was torn apart. What shown after the face mask is a black widow spider face, the spider climbed out of the human skin and bawled: "Originally I planned to eat your master first, but now you would be my appetizer!"

She came careening in their direction and barreled towards them, yelling. Sun grabbed Bajie's arm and yanked him out of the way. He dodged to the side and delivered a sharp bang to the widow spider's knee. She grunted and fell against the stack of wooden chairs. She scrambled up, rubbing her knee, eyes full of hate.

"Bajie, you run first, go and save Tripitaka, and I will handle this." Sun yelled to Bajie behind him, but he got no response. Sun turned, but found nobody. The door was wide open.

"Seems like your little companion has abandoned you," The widow spider laughed, "Don't worry about him, he definitely tastes awful."

Sun couldn't hear any single comments made by the spider. *How can he do this to me?* His brain was blank, *Isn't companion those who complement each other?* The spider didn't gave him time to digest. She roared and bit him on the neck, Sun cried and dragged her off his neck.

The other puppet maids who was ordered to stand aside and watch was about to yell something, but Sun stepped forward and jabbed a finger in her eye. She screamed louder than her master and fell back against a dumpster. She slid down on her butt, her hands over her face.

The spider climbed up again, cursing. While Sun found the poison was now making him dizzy. He forced his mind to the pattern the attacker wove, trying to spot the spider. The widow spider changed tactics: She had the knife out and was holding it loosely in her right hand. She was going to go for Sun low with a slicing motion.

When she swung, she expected Sun to jump back, but instead, he leaped inside the swing instead. Sun hooked his left arm over her right, grabbed her throat with his right hand, and drove his right knee into her crotch.

Sun let her go, and she fell to her legs. She leaned forward, vomited, and then passed out.

Sun raised his Ruyi Jingu Bang ready to give the last shot, but a familiar voice interrupted him.

"Stop." After a strong light, Rulai Buddha appeared in front of him. She walked straight to the spider lying on the ground. Lowering her body, the Buddha touched the spider's forehead and turned her into a mini version and put the mini spider in her pocket and set her eyes on Sun.

"This spider used to be one of my chiefs she escaped from the palace few months ago." She nodded to Sun and left with another flash of light.

Sun stood up and suddenly a wooziness in his head overtook him. He fell down to his knees and groaned. His eyes were in a pain at the light that reflected off the mirror of the room. He blinked back tears and turned away from the sunlight, curling into a ball.

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"I threw up; I'm not continuing on this journey." That is Bajie's voice.

"You cannot!" Sun heard Tripitaka yelled, "You are supposed to protect me all the way to Tang dynasty. If you are still loyal to the Buddha, then stay!"

"Don't try to pressure me with Rulai! This would be a journey with no clear safe end! Only the stupidest will stay!"

Sun was awake when he heard the conversation. He lifted himself up from the bed and tried to stop him. "Bajie!"

"Oh, you are awake." Bajie turned and tilted his head.

He then turned to Tripitaka, "No worry about your safety. Sun would stay and protect you. He has LOYALTY." He left with Wujing without looking back.

Sun stared at his back: *How could our group just break at the very first beginning? Not even half way down yet.* He wondered, but at least, *Tripitaka is safe, and I will do what I suppose to do.* Nervously, his hands were twisting his shirt, as though wringing time from it, drops measuring out the seconds and minutes of life he has.

Very soon, they met another dragon demon who tried to steal the sacred texts from them. In the irritation of losing their companions and betrayal, Sun beat him up, when he tried to kill the demon, Rulai shown up again and took it away, saying it was his personal business. Sun became furious of Rulai's action. He attacked Rulai when she was ready to leave and killed the dragon demon she was holding. That offended Rulai, who believed in her absolute control over their lives.

She saw Sun's attack as a provocation to his absolute monarchy. After communicating with the Jade Emperor, who was alarmed of Sun's power, they decided to lock him up for 500 years to let him know who



was in control of all this. On the part choosing the warriors, they play a trick and asked Bajie to be the frontier, and in exchange, he would be awarded a job in the palace so that they would no longer need to struggle on their own.

\*\*\*

So here they were, Sun at one side of the river while the other groups of the army on the other hand.

"Hey, man," said Bajie dresses in fancy armor with a cigarette in his mouse, "you got a light?" He had been treated well. This gave him an incentive to kill Sun to remain such a life.

"You're not after a light," Sun said, and they all laughed.

"You are still as numb as the time I left you." Bajie shook his head in pity. "Don't blame me for today, blame yourself for standing on the wrong side and angering the wrong people."

Sun faced his opponent and waited. He would let Bajie make the first move. However, Bajie didn't move, a man in heavy armor stepped out and ready to attack.

*Don't lose don't lose don't lose.*

The announcer in his head retreated with an appreciative wink. The buzzer sounded.

The big guy moved.

Sun jerked back. The blow meant for his jaw whizzed by in a blur of knuckles. From the corner of his eye, he saw his opponent's other arm begin an upward trajectory. He ducked this time and felt his hair ruffle with the force of it.

*Drop to the floor. Roll clear, stand. Don't let him connect. Draw it out.*

The big guy charged with a roar like a bull. Sun sidestepped, whirled to face him. His opponent lunged. He avoided one flying fist, only to collide with another.

The blow glanced off his ribcage, a sharp sting fading fast. In front of him, the big guy grinned and jabbed again at his midsection.

*Block. Shove away. Back off.*

Avoidance was simple, but it couldn't last forever. Sun felt pressure emanating from all sides, a nearly audible chant:

*punch-kick-strike-hurt.*

Sun went on the offensive. He lashed out, aiming for his opponent's gut. The big guy proved equally effective at defense, and Sun's fist met a meaty forearm. He tried again with both hands and this time connected.

It felt like punching flesh-covered steel.

The fight was done.

Sun jerked back and panted heavily. The big guy lay on the ground, not moving. Sun doesn't know whether he's alive or not. Bajie waved another man forward, ready for another round of the fight.

*I can't do it.* Sun moaned. He didn't think he can withstand a second round. The only way to escape, he looked down to the river in between, is to jump into this river he was not familiar with.

He looked back to gazed Bajie one last time and jumped into the turbulent river. Before he fainted, he saw the blurry image of blue mockingbird who disappeared in between the branches.

\*\*\*

There were many rumors about the young monkey king Sun Wukong; some said that he drowned after angered Rulai Buddha.

Some said that after he jumped into the river, he floated to the forest and lived with other monkeys for the rest of his life.

Others said he turned into a stone at the edge of a cliff because of great despair. The monkey shape stone can still be seen on the yellow mountain. The stone monkey holds his knees, sits on the bluff, looks in the distance, seems to expect something, seems to be thinking about what.

In the twilight of the sunset, his showdown is bleak. Slowly, he faded into the light and shattered into a dark blue mockingbird with white belly.

# Monkey King's Second Life

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, La, Shu Rui – 15*

The ashes lay smoldering and the devastated wreckage of the war crumpled under the feet of the chief executive. The chief trudged across the ruined land and the lifeless bodies coated in grime and blood, displaying a reticent expression with no concern etched on his face. Poor women scavenged for traces of their husbands' bodies on the barren landscape of cracked soil. This elicited no empathy from the chief – his head was held high as he stepped carelessly over the debris. Nonchalantly and gracefully, he stepped into his private jet, a symbol of wealth and prestige that seemed unfitting in such a scene. He was presented with an opportunity.

Multiple countries in Africa engaged themselves in a war that utilized the deadliest weapons any of the participating nations could find. Through this war the victorious state wished to take over the land of the other states', but the use of such weapons only destroyed the landscape, leaving all the countries in poverty with no gain.

The war had killed the weak and weakened the strong. The survivors lived in clusters, desiring protection and warmth from one another. The close contact and weak immunity meant that any form of mild disease could lead to a full-blown lethal outbreak. Moreover, all the pharmaceutical firms in the country had been thoroughly looted and burnt to the ground, and this executive was in charge of the nearest and largest firm that still stood, beyond the borders of the country. He could easily take advantage of this situation and manipulate their desire for survival.

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Elsewhere, the humid, stifling hotness of June was a catalyst to conflicts in the office. The employers' patience and temper were running short, and the workers were especially uncooperative and lazy with the uncomfortable weather.

A balding middle-aged man with benign eyes named Mark shuffled into his office and pressed his sweaty palms against the cold metal door handle. He was the next life of the Monkey King in human form. Sensing sound, the lights of the office automatically flicked on, the curtains raised themselves, and the air conditioner blasted cold air into the office. He reclined into his seat and continued editing the process paper, when the manager peaked in through the door surreptitiously.

Johansson, the manager, quietly stepped in and called for the other staff in the office to gather for his announcement, and the other two workers, Peter and Daniel, scrambled in hastily, with Daniel tripping over Peter's shoes.

Johansson treaded lightly over to the back door, softly closed and locked it, then went to the blinds and turned them closed. After checking for any surveillance or recording devices, he returned to his chair and discreetly pulled out a black binder from his briefcase. All three workers were exceptionally curious about what the binder contained since the manager was usually outspoken and direct, and had never been so secretive.

"This binder contains the password that allows us to access the live broadcast our chief executive will be playing in a minute," Johansson explained. "He will be giving a speech on our company's secret weapon for profit this year."

Flipping into the first page, the document read:

*Our neighboring nation is the victim of an ill-considered war. The casualties were high, losses were great, and the cost was immensely high. This executive, on behalf of our nation, expresses deepest regards for our neighbor and encourages all citizens to support our devastated neighbors through any means necessary.*

Mark flipped onwards to the next page.

*With that said, this company believes that the greatest profit could be only from interacting with these citizens in need. Given our recent breakthrough on the discovery of the antibodies attached to individual cells of the influenza virus, the chief executive officers believe our company is the leading and most advanced in the world in the field of influenza cures, and with no close seconds.*

*Considering this situation, the best course of action to take at the moment is to deploy mutated influenza bacteria into the war zone. The conditions for spreading such a disease are ideal – the war has weakened all the survivors, and they tend to live in large groups – so if one were to be affected, the entire group would be at risk.*

*We are the only company who has the ability to develop the cure for such a disease because we already have grounds in the research of the flu. Thus, patients will pour their remaining income into our company in desperation for the desire to cure this mutated disease. We maximize our profit margin by selling drugs that would diminish, but not cure, the symptoms, so that our income would be steady and continuous.*

*If fellow coworkers are concerned about the morality of such a scheme, keep in mind that the purpose of our company is profit first, followed by less important worries, such as the morality of our actions or the wellbeing of our customers. If coworkers are concerned about lawsuits filed against this resolution, be assured that our panel of highly trained lawyers will be able to turn any case against us in our favor, so there needs to be no concern regarding morality and justice.*

*Thank you for your cooperation, and keep any talk in relation to this subject at a minimum outside of the office to protect the interests and privacy of the firm. This online broadcast will be erased within one hour to prevent any information from being leaked.*

*With regards,*

*Chief Executive Officer of Healthcare Pharmacy*

Daniel and Peter were thoroughly on board.

“Ha ha, I bet we get a pay raise from this plan,” Peter grinned ignorantly without giving it much thought. Daniel snorted in agreement and handed the binder back to the boss. The two of them left the office, chatting excitedly in favor of the plan.

Mark sat in shock as he read to the end of the document. His mind whirled with the information from the letter – deploy deadly viruses, then withhold the cure so that more income is achieved.

Mark recovered from his flabbergasted state and exclaimed, “Manager, you can *possibly* sign this document in agreement? To threaten already miserable lives for profit? Why would our chief suggest such a thing?”

“The chief is always right. He knows what he’s doing, so follow his directions, Mark,” the chief responded curtly. “Your insubordination is not appreciated.”

Mark, who remembered his previous lives, flashed back to his life as a monkey who had been on a journey to India, and recalled that back then, he had never done anything against his morals for personal gain. He had always fought for good, fought for right, and fought for the people who deserved to be fought for. If he had done anything wrong, his conscience ached so hard that he would do anything to reverse the damages he caused. Mark knew that whether as an animal or as a human, he would remain the same man with straight morals. He would never even consider this a moral dilemma – he would never choose profit over the wellbeing of the citizens.

“How could we justify this? Prioritizing profit over lives? I refuse to take part of such a task!”

Johansson had had enough of Mark’s disobedience. In his previous life, he possessed a spell to cause pain to the Monkey King as punishment for disobedience. He recovered his powers and channeled his thoughts towards Mark’s mind, causing Mark’s head to explode with pain.

Mark’s hands flew towards his head and clasped his skull.

“No!” he screeched. “Don’t – use that—to – control – me –”

Johansson repeated the spell with more force.

The pain grew, and Mark fell to the floor, screaming from agony.

Realizing that Mark wasn’t giving in yet, Johansson repeated the curse faster and fiercer.

The excruciating wave of pain hit him and he would have gone unconscious if he didn’t agree, but he stayed silent.

Johansson paused his chanting to add, “Mark, surrender your superficial ideas of morality and join us. Otherwise, we have to make you leave our company.”

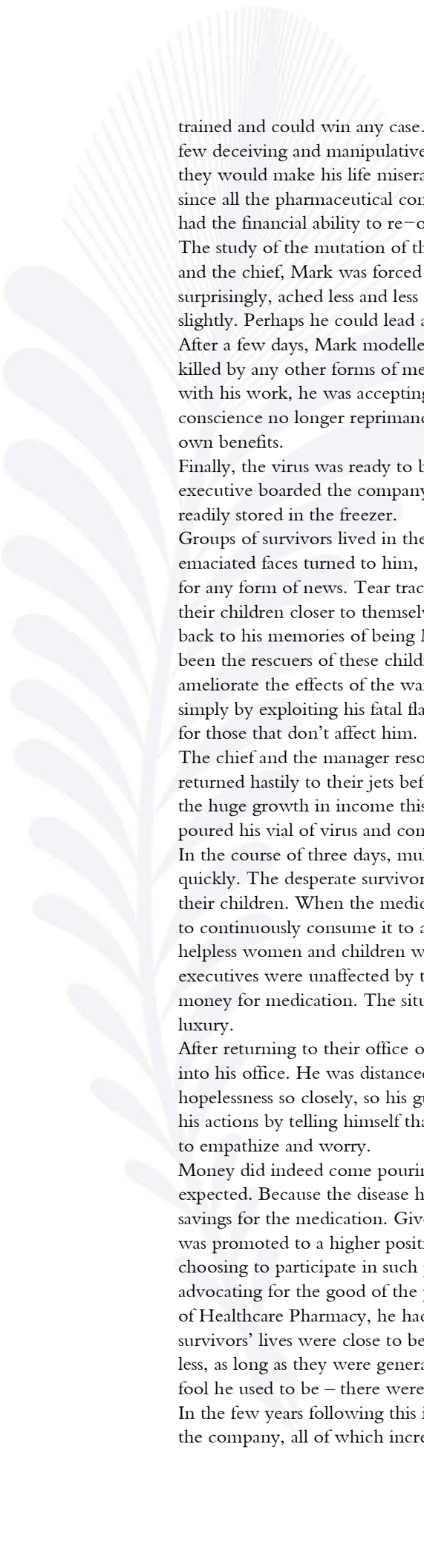
The threat of unemployment, the thought of losing his job, and the fear of being kicked out from the world’s leading pharmaceutical firm, on top of the torture, forced Mark to concede. He was thoroughly defeated and ashamed.

“Good,” Johansson responded calmly.

He released Mark from the painful spell and Mark rolled over, and his face was colorless and grey. He stood up, trembling all over, nauseated.

“Our research begins tomorrow. I hope to see you here, in the office, at 8AM sharp,” Johansson stated imperiously while making his way out the door.

Mark considered telling the press to expose the company’s despicable plans, then recalled that back in the broadcast video, the chief executive had noted with confidence that their lawyers and speakers were highly



trained and could win any case. Undoubtedly then, they could make themselves seem innocent by saying a few deceiving and manipulative words. Additionally, if the company found out he revealed their secrets, they would make his life miserable. He also couldn't find another job that matched his studies and interests, since all the pharmaceutical companies in the nearby countries were destroyed during the war, and no state had the financial ability to re-open them. Mark had no choice but to continue with Healthcare Pharmacy. The study of the mutation of the influenza bacteria started the next day. Under threats from the manager and the chief, Mark was forced to contribute his ideas despite his hatred of the task. His conscience, surprisingly, ached less and less each time he did, because the idea of a larger profit began to appeal to him slightly. Perhaps he could lead a better life with his money – buy a larger house or even purchase a car... After a few days, Mark modelled the virus and twisted certain organelles to prevent the virus from being killed by any other forms of medicine. After submitting the paper to the manager, who was greatly pleased with his work, he was accepting of this plan, and even began looking forward to his pay check. His conscience no longer reprimanded him for his participation in such a cruel endeavor when he thought of his own benefits.

Finally, the virus was ready to be deployed in the devastated war zone. Mark, Johansson, and the chief executive boarded the company's private plane and flew to their destination, vials of the influenza bacteria readily stored in the freezer.

Groups of survivors lived in the devastated villages huddling in groups. Seeing Mark, the children's emaciated faces turned to him, their eyes pleading for consolation, for updates on where their fathers went, for any form of news. Tear tracks ran down their uncleaned grimy faces, and the mothers instinctively pulled their children closer to themselves – the war had destroyed their sense of trust towards others. Mark flashed back to his memories of being Monkey King, painfully aware that back in his previous life, he would have been the rescuers of these children and their broken families, and would have risked everything to ameliorate the effects of the war. The company had altered his entire legacy and his personality so quickly, simply by exploiting his fatal flaw of greed. His desire for more wealth and power outweighed his concern for those that don't affect him.

The chief and the manager resolutely poured the vials into their water supply and their food supply, and returned hastily to their jets before anyone could spot them. Sensing Mark's hesitance, they reminded him of the huge growth in income this act would bring, which provided enough incentive for Mark and he swiftly poured his vial of virus and contaminated the living areas.

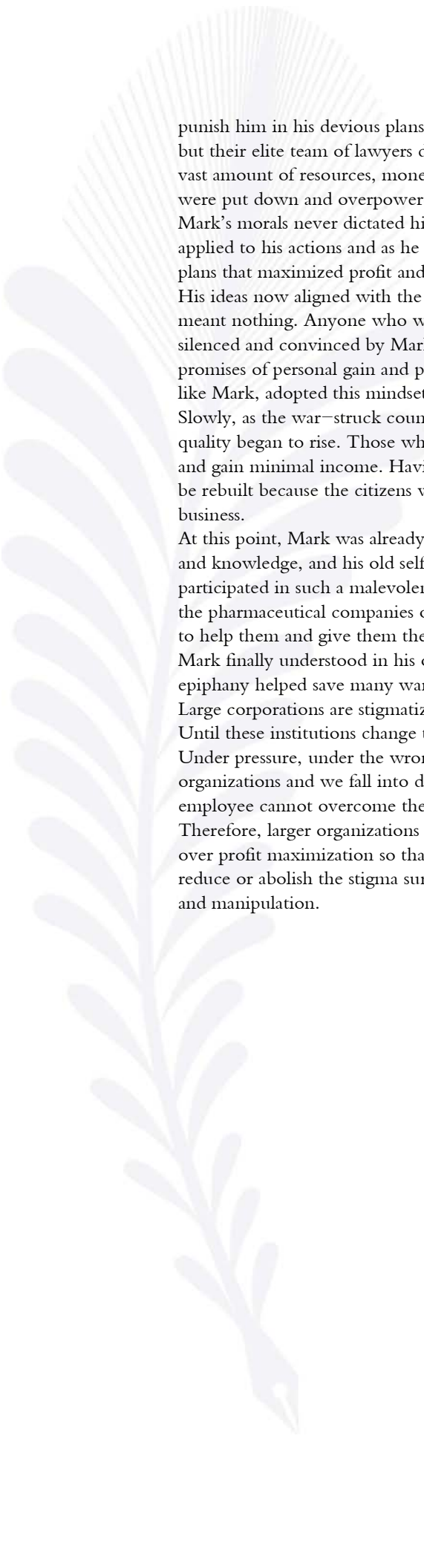
In the course of three days, multiple people began experiencing the symptoms of the influenza and it spread quickly. The desperate survivors piled their small savings together to afford minimal cures for themselves and their children. When the medicine they bought didn't cure the symptoms entirely, they had no choice but to continuously consume it to alleviate their symptoms for a while. After running out of their savings, the helpless women and children were forced to find labor to pay for the medication. The Healthcare Pharmacy executives were unaffected by their knowledge of the ordeal the war survivors went through to accumulate money for medication. The situation was lost on the executives who only knew a life of comfort and luxury.

After returning to their office on their polished, air-conditioned private plane, Mark settled comfortably into his office. He was distanced from the scene of the survivors and no longer felt their desperation and hopelessness so closely, so his guilt from memories of his previous life disappeared. He attempted to justify his actions by telling himself that he would never find himself in such a terrible condition, so he didn't need to empathize and worry.

Money did indeed come pouring in, in the hope for a cure to the influenza, exactly as the chief had expected. Because the disease had spread far and spread fast, a huge amount of people were giving up their savings for the medication. Given Mark's huge input in this project, his pay was multiplied by ten and he was promoted to a higher position researcher with shorter office hours. He felt proud of himself for choosing to participate in such profitable plan. He questioned his previous life as Monkey King – constantly advocating for the good of the people – did that really bring him any benefits? Now, as a valued employee of Healthcare Pharmacy, he had a luxuriously lifestyle and had no worries concerning anyone else. The war survivors' lives were close to being destroyed, but the high-profile executives of the company couldn't care less, as long as they were generating revenue. Their lives would never fall into such ruin anyway. What a fool he used to be – there were no advantages in fighting for others.

In the few years following this incident, Mark was convinced to take part in multiple projects proposed by the company, all of which increased their profit. As the chief had promised – no repercussion came to





punish him in his devious plans. Several lawsuits were filed when he attempted to take advantage of others, but their elite team of lawyers debated their way out of every scenario. He has well-protected due to his vast amount of resources, money, and influence, and anyone who showed dissent towards him or his plans were put down and overpowered.

Mark's morals never dictated his actions again. The ideas generated from his life as Monkey King no longer applied to his actions and as he became the senior executive after seven years, he was the one proposing plans that maximized profit and influencing younger employees to prioritize personal profit over morality. His ideas now aligned with the corporation's – profit first, then everything else; morals were superficial and meant nothing. Anyone who wanted to fight for the “right way” or advocate for “the greater good” were silenced and convinced by Mark, who exploited their flaws of greed by outweighing their concerns through promises of personal gain and protection. As all these became more senior members of the company, they, like Mark, adopted this mindset and used it to teach others.

Slowly, as the war-struck countries began to recover and rebuild their infrastructure, the war victims' life quality began to rise. Those who were not struck by the influenza were able to find jobs in their countries and gain minimal income. Having greater financial capability now, the pharmaceutical firms were the first to be rebuilt because the citizens were in desperate need of one, and *Healthcare Pharmacy* began to lose business.

At this point, Mark was already an old, retired, but rich man. With older age came greater understanding and knowledge, and his old self came back to him, bit by bit. He grew once again guilty of having participated in such a malevolent plan and wanted to do something to pay for the damages he caused. When the pharmaceutical companies of the war-struck companies became more stable, he came out of retirement to help them and give them the secret cure that *Healthcare Pharmacy* never revealed.

Mark finally understood in his old age that doing what's right feels better than doing what's profitable. This epiphany helped save many war-struck victims and their diseases were finally cured.

Large corporations are stigmatized in this society for being overly selfish and tilted towards personal gain.

Until these institutions change their mindsets and ideas, our younger generation will follow their trails.

Under pressure, under the wrong influences, our fatal flaw of greed can easily be exploited by powerful organizations and we fall into discord as we manipulate the weaker ones for personal gain. A single employee cannot overcome the entire institution's ideas, but one institution impacts hundreds of employees. Therefore, larger organizations are responsible for preserving morality, and for prioritizing the greater good over profit maximization so that all those who work under them will align their ideas the correct way. To reduce or abolish the stigma surrounding these corporations, they need to change their mindsets of greed and manipulation.



# Lucid Dreaming

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Liu, Cathy – 15*

one

There was a boy in a school lunchroom.

His lips were chapped and pressed in a thin, rigid line. Perspiration was beading along a wrinkled forehead, dripping over temples where a vein pulsed. Sweat-greased hair hung over his dark, skittering eyes — *left, right, left, right*, in a constant state of vigilance. His teeth were clenched, tightening his jaw and locking his muscles in place. Hands hidden under the table were gripped in taut fists in an attempt to stop the shaking, yet all it resulted in was little crescent-moon indents dug into the callused palms of his hand. Layers upon layers of fabric swallowed his thin frame up, hiding the evidence of his neglect in self-care.

The dirty window he was sitting beside shielded him from the relentless gusts of autumn wind howling outside. Leaves, propelled by the wind, skittered and scratched along the glass.

The boy's wandering pupils fell on the bottle of water in front of him.

Murmurs and hushed whispers surrounded him, and he was more than aware that they may very well be about him, yet he simply could not find it in his heart to care. His quivering, pale lips shaped indecipherable words under his breath. Upon further inspection one might discover that the words the boy was repeating followed a rhythm of *ta-ta-tum ta-ta-tum ta-ta-tum TA*.

*It's your fault it's your fault it's your fault STOP.*

There were voices in the boy's head, and these voices had been tormenting him for weeks.

Sometimes they were shrill and sharp, sometimes clear and melodious — but mostly they were hoarse, grunting blows to his self-confidence. When he squeezed his eyes shut, images that were just as deprecating as the voices flashed behind his eyelids, images that he never wanted to see again.

The boy's name was Xuan Zang, and he was responsible for his sister's death.

Growing up, he was never one to cause trouble, yet trouble seemed to always find its way into his back pocket. He got into it constantly, always being berated by teachers, scoffed at by his peers and always facing the disappointed faces of his parents.

Coming home to crossed arms, wrinkled foreheads and listening through the kitchen door to sighs that they thought he couldn't hear became a daily occurrence. Maybe they weren't aware that their actions were dousing the poor child's heart in ice-cold water, and maybe it wasn't completely their fault — after all, he, too, would probably do the same if he ended up with a son as hopeless as himself.

The only splash of color in his world, it seemed, was his sister. She was a bright ray of sunshine everybody's lives — wherever she paused things got better, whatever she touched became lively and lovely. It was her who took him under her wing when no one else did, and it was her who almost convinced him that life was beautiful.

And then it happened.

No one really expected it to happen, though, considering how remarkably dim Xuan could be and how remarkably loving his sister was, someone must have speculated that it was bound to happen at some point.

He could still feel the pressure between his shoulder blades that shoved him away from the barreling headlights of Death to this day; the hands that knocked him hurtling, breathless, into the lake with a cold, dark *splash* while the owner of those terrible, wonderful hands was rammed into at a breakneck speed of eighty miles per hour.

If he had not stood there in the middle of the road, she wouldn't have had to push him out of the way. She wouldn't have had to...

*Die.*

He blinked rapidly, trying to dispel some of the pressure that was building up behind his eyes.

It was a bad place in his mind to be. If his mind was an ocean, it would be the dark caves that no one wished to venture into.

His spindly fingers swept over the hairs near the nape of his neck, feeling the gentle prickle against his palm. *Ah, I wish time would go by quicker.* His leg bounced faster, his teeth gnashed the deformed nail in his mouth harder. The muscle in his left cheek twitched. Once. Twice.

*Tick, tick, tick.* It was 12:08.

How undeserving Xuan was of his life.

He sighed, dragging a hand over his eyes and down his face. With his other hand he picked up the plastic bottle of water and glowered at it, loathing shining deep in his eyes. *If only I had died with her.*

“Argh!” A wave of frustration involuntarily jerked his arms across the scratched surface of the table, dropping crumpled papers and bleeding pens in a flurry of sound that had every head in the cafeteria turning. Silence permeated the room. Xuan stood up, his chair scraping across the floor with an ugly screech, and gathered the papers abashedly.

He threw the half-empty bottle away and went home. To hell with school.

two

Unwilling feet dragged Xuan all the way home, traipsing across neighbor lawns and jaywalking across nameless streets. To any passerby he might have seemed lonely, maybe deranged, but one glimpse inside his mind and anyone would discover that was most certainly not the case.

He was just as sane as everybody else, except for the voices that kept him company. He supposed they had always been there in the back of his mind, but it was his sister’s death that brought them to the surface.

*The too-bright lights of the ER made him sick to his stomach, and when he stumbled into the bathroom, slamming open the door with such force that it banged into the wall with a resonating crash, hatred blossomed out from his esophagus and choked cries echoed off the porcelain toilet bowl.* He was okay, *he thought bitterly*, but his sister wasn’t. *His legs were soft, his fingertips tingling, and his tongue numb to the sour taste of the bile he had just retched out.*

What a waste, *someone clucked their tongue disapprovingly.*

It was the Pig’s gruff voice that piped up in his mind first. They were greedy, and selfish, and everything bad about Xuan that he wished didn’t exist.

Then there was the Little Girl, though, contrary to what the name suggests, the Little Girl could be neither Little nor a Girl, but Xuan had always imagined that the voice belonged to a child — a lively bundle of spirit with dark, dark eyes like his own and a head full of wild, flaming orange hair to match her unpredictable and explosive personality.

*Redhead redhead, redhead bedhead.* That was how it always replied to Xuan’s inquisition of how it looked — like a child’s rhyme, but more like a mantra than anything else.

The Little Girl and the Pig got into fights often, about trivial and unimportant things that would make Xuan flinch (though they looked like nervous ticks to an outsider) but also about big, huge arguments that would leave Xuan’s brain pulsing and throbbing for days.

That was where the Mediator came in. It was calm, cool, quiet, and Xuan had never once seen it show any type of emotion. Frankly, it scared him. He supposed it scared the other two as well. As soon as the Mediator thumped down his giant foot that sent a pounding ache through Xuan’s brain, the Little Girl snapped its mouth shut and scowled while the Pig grunted and turned its back, grumbling at how unfair it was.

*Crack.* Xuan glared at the stick he had stepped on and kicked the remnants.

*Face it, you’re hopeless without her.*

He scowled. “No,” he stated firmly out loud, trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

*I’m not.*

*But you are,* the Little Girl joined in, giggling slightly.

Xuan’s hands trembled slightly. “My parents love me,” his voice cracked.

*Look at you,* the Mediator mused idly, *trying so hard to convince yourself that you’re okay.*

*You’re not okay,* the Pig snorted.

*They blame you, you know,* the Little Girl said, attention elsewhere as it twirled a strand of hair around its finger. *They think you killed her.*

*You killed her,* it repeated, propping its chin up with a cupped palm.

“I—I’m...” he shut them out, trying his best to ignore the pounding in his heart and his head as if someone was throwing their entire body weight against a locked door. *I’m not to blame,* though his heavy heart told him the truth.

With shaky fingers, Xuan slotted the jagged edge of the metal key into the slot. *Click.*  
“Mom? Dad?” he called, out of habit, even though he knew they weren’t at home. They were rarely ever home.

*You’re worthless without her.*

He rushed to his room and flung his bag to the side, bolting to the bathroom at record speed. His hands made quick work of his clothes, tossing them to God-knows-where, just as he had done to his backpack.

The fidgeting was back. There was an itch, an itch under his skin that he couldn’t reach. He was chasing it with his blunt nails but it was never gone, the *scritch-scratch* sound traveling to his ears and into his head. The prickling didn’t subside at all.

*You’re purposeless without her.*

Xuan scratched at his hipbones, he scratched at his arms, he scratched at that place just below his jaw and his ear. He scratched until long red welts appeared and blood brimmed under the swelling.

None of it seemed to work.

Frustration built up inside him until he just couldn’t handle it anymore and *screamed*. It was a guttural sound, raw and high-pitched.

The release of sound brought his mind to some peace, and the scream choked him into a series of coughs.

Eventually, the emotions drained out of Xuan and he was left tottering in his bathroom, staring down at his twitching hands and his naked body. He was numb.

His legs gave way and he fell to the floor, curling up into a delicate, fragile ball of paper-white skin and brittle bones, of desolation and despondency. *I’m hopeless without her*, he finally admitted to himself.

The reply was immediate. *Good boy*, three voices integrated into one.

### three

For the entire weekend, Xuan was bedridden. Physically he was exhausted, but mentally he was trudging through purgatory. The voices in his head were getting stronger, louder, more of an impact on his mental state, and their constant attacks left him a sniveling mess under the heavy duvet.

*If she were here right now, she would hold me and tell me it’s all right.*

*Well, she’s dead!* the Pig squealed happily, clapping its hooves together joyously.

*And it’s your fault,* the Little Girl reminded with a smirk on its face, *don’t forget.*

“How could I?” Xuan screamed, hands fisting tufts of hair and *pulling*. “How could I forget when it’s all you ever tell me? Huh? God! I wish you would just — just all *shut up* already!”

The deathly silence rang loud, louder. It chilled him to the marrow of his bones. Everything was too quiet, and the only thing silence will do to a person is drive them up a wall, simply to come crashing down again, edging away to reveal a madman in his place.

*Watch it,* the Mediator’s voice was like a roll of thunder, low and rumbling and an indication of the lightning yet to come.

But Xuan was on his toes at the edge of insanity and quickly tipping in.

“No!” he screeched, “Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut *up!* Go *away*, why can’t you just leave me alone?” A sob racked his entire body. “Why me? *Why does it have to be me?*” Tears of frustration brimmed up behind Xuan’s closed lids and he refused to open them, only — wait, wait... the tears were dripping anyway, against his wishes, down his cheeks — oh they were so wet... so warm. They squeezed their way out of the creased ravines of his eyes pressed shut. He had never realized there were so many.

*Don’t you know? Vultures feed on corpses.*

“Am I a corpse?” Xuan could hear the fractures in his own voice.

*Well, we’re feeding off of you, aren’t we?*

Obsidian black eyes slipped shut as Xuan made a sound of non-committal agreement. “I suppose you are.”

It was only when Xuan woke up did he realize that he had fallen asleep, and the tear tracks on his face dried crusted and rough against his skin.

Then his legs led him out the back door and trekked the long trail that brought him to the graveyard.

Gray and green and black, black, black — colors blurred in Xuan's vision as his eyes once again filled up with tears, this time not of frustration or anger but of relief.

Xuan sat on the damp earth in front of his sister's grave. "I came to visit," he cleared his throat, blinking rapidly to banish the tears that were threatening to spill. The epigraph etched on the stone burned his retinas, branded into his memory.

*In loving memory...*

The bridge of his nose ached, then a single teardrop glided down his cheek.

His eyelids fluttered shut, and the wind sifted through his hair like a gentle caress, and just for a moment Xuan could imagine it was his sister there, comforting him. He exhaled, watching through half-lidded eyes at the wisps of white smokiness that billowed from his lips.

He had never felt so at peace since she passed away.

Then the voices were back — hissing, spitting; the boy's head jerked left in a series of violent ticks. *Die*, they shrieked, causing his ears to ring unpleasantly, *Die! Die! Die! Dead!*

"S-stop-p," he commanded weakly, fluttering fingers fisted his hoodie, desperately trying to grapple on to whatever they could reach. He curled in on himself, forehead pressing against the cool, damp soil.

The mud pressed against Xuan's clammy skin, moisture seeping in through his pores.

*"Xuan, why do you do this to yourself?"*

*What do you mean? I'm not doing anything.*

*"This is all you, little brother. You made these voices appear yourself."*

*No. No I didn't.*

*"Breathe, Xuan. Breathe like how I taught you."*

That. That he remembered. Inhale through the nose, one, two, three, exhale out the mouth, one, two, three.

His heart was still pounding.

Inhale, one — *the lights, the lights, spinning around him as the world blurred away in a torrent of bubbles and cold, cold water* — two — *the black slickness running through the cracks in the paved road and the sickness rising in his stomach to his heart and his head* — three — *beep, beep, beeeeeeeep* — exhale, one — *tears mixed with snot mixed with bile mixed with saliva mixed with the bitterness in his heart* — two — *she didn't deserve it, I don't deserve it* — three — *squeeze his eyes shut pray to whoever's listening that this was all a nightmare.*

And again.

Inhale, one — *it's not fair* — two — *nothing's fair* — three — *I loved her* — exhale, one — *I love you* — two — *I miss you* — and three. *Do you miss me?*


Another breathless murmur of "Go away", a painful flare in the back of his head as if something snapped, and the voices in Xuan's head were no more.

Xuan smiled through his tears and wiped his eyes with a dirtied sleeve.

He could imagine the pride in her eyes. *"Feeling better?"*

There was a boy in a school library.

There was meat on his bones and his hair was buzzed short. His teeth were brushed and his clothes fresh. Open on a table in front of him was a notebook, one that he was scribbling madly in. Every so often he would pause in his writing and glance out the window that was cracked half-open with a ghost of a smile hanging from his lips.



The room was completely devoid of people except him, and he wouldn't have had it any other way. Time spent in solitude was time well spent, he figured, and actively tried to shroud himself in peace and quiet.

It was how he got his thinking done. It was the only way that he could hear *himself* above all the useless, noisy chatter of the world, cutting through as clear and bright and curious as they come.

He put these thoughts down on paper because he thought they were beautiful. Should there ever come a time when the thoughts mature into a story, perhaps he would consider publishing them for the world to read. As for now, he was perfectly content with word shavings and sentence crumbs.

His phone screen lit up with an incoming message from someone he had previously neglected to build a relationship with. He had decided to open up to her, though, and she now cared for him as much as his sister used to.

*Come home soon. Dinner waiting. –Mom*

*Tick, tick, tick.* It was 5:00.

Just one more sentence, he promised himself. *Just one more sentence.*



# Journeys to the West

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Mak, Milly – 14*

High up at the peak of the East Mountains of China, above the clouds and out of sight, stood a solitary concrete house. There was nothingness for hundreds of miles but a single well where water was fetched at exactly six in the morning everyday. The inside of the isolated house was empty except for an aged wooden table, a single chair, and a miniature statue of the Buddha on the table. There was a bald man dressed in a plain brown ragged robe sitting on the chair, composed and eyes closed, and an excited monkey leaping around the house and chattering restlessly.

Xuan was a monk, granted immortality by the gods in the 800s after overcoming extreme hardships and completing the infamous “Journeys to the West.” He was a kind man. In fact, he was sometimes too kind for his own good. He always put others before him, with an altruistic mentality that he could surrender himself for the sake of others. This wasn't beneficial to him; in fact, he offered to sacrifice himself to fulfill others only too many times in his lifetime.

That was why Sun was always by his side. Sun, a monkey granted with special powers since the 800s, was blunt and straightforward, always aggressive and ambitiously solving problems in a way that benefited him. He acted intuitively and did not think much about his actions; he would do whatever it took, as long as he could reach his final goal.

They were best friends, as they recognised their own flaws and realised that many times, their cooperation was required to be successful. However, with such extreme contrasting mindsets, these two could never compromise and, more often than not, fought over who's decision was a better one. Sometimes it was in a problem of immense magnitude and importance, like decisions they made when completing one of their missions, and sometimes it was just a small daily decision, like deciding what to eat for dinner. No matter what it was, they always quarrelled.

Just as the two were arguing over something of minimal significance, the Buddha statue suddenly lit up magically. Curious, the man and the monkey immediately turned to the source of light. This meant that they had received a mission from the gods – finally. This hadn't happened for decades – since the second world war, when they had prevented a major nuclear disaster from destroying the world completely. But that was another story.

A regal voice of authority spoke up from the statue and echoed off the walls of the tiny room. The sound seemed cloudy and unreal, but the words spoken were articulated clearly. “Greetings, Xuan and Sun. A terrible earthquake is foreseen to happen tomorrow in Crown Village of Sichuan...”

The clean room immediately started to transform into the scene of the village after the earthquake...

At first the immense amount of dust in the air blinded Xuan and Sun's view as a dry dusty smell filled their nostrils and choked them. Gradually, as their eyes adjusted to their surroundings, a dreadful landscape of ruins appeared before them. No buildings or houses remained intact; rocks, bricks, and furniture from houses piled up, along with fallen branches and twigs from collapsed trees. Rubble from crumpled houses trapped villagers below them, and bloody screams for help surrounded Xuan and Sun.

The horrible scene around them dissolved away. However, what followed was even more painful and heartbreaking.

The broken and torn voice of a sobbing man, the polar extreme of the previous god's calm and clear speech, echoed in their ears. Rumbling and crashing sounds were heard just behind the voices.

“Dear gods, please... please save our village. My house has fallen apart, and I am homeless and penniless. My farmland has been ruined and I can no longer sustain a living. Please...”

This wasn't the end. Many others followed, of men and women, children and the elderly alike, all voices desperate and filled with pain, sorrow, and sheer horror. Xuan and Sun had never heard anything as terrible as these broken voices.

“Gods, please tell me where to go... My family is gone and I don't have a home. I'm only nine, I don't want to die. Please help me...”

“Save me, gods... I'm stuck under rubble and nobody is here to call for help!”

At the end of the series of foreseen prayers, the crashing sounds in the background gradually diminished, and the clear voice appeared once again.

"The country does not recognise this small and insignificant village and will not send enough aid. Over five hundred locals will die, thousands will go missing, and the rest of the population will be in turmoil. We, the gods, and Crown Village, rely on you to bring peace and safety to the villagers before the terrible destruction. I wish you the best of luck."

The statue returned to its original white ceramic state as the room reverted back to normal.

Even after the end of the god's speech, broken cries for help seemed to fill the room and echo in Xuan and Sun's ears. The image of destruction seemed to be imprinted in their minds. Xuan and Sun sat in silence for longer than a few moments, in shock.

Finally, Sun spoke up.

"We should really help them."

"But how?"

"I don't know. I don't know yet. But we can, before they are destroyed."

And so the duo left their house at the peak of the mountains and began their journey west, to the village of Sichuan.

Hours later, they arrived at Crown Village. It was a century-old traditional Chinese village, busy and full of life. Xuan and Sun could not believe that this place, bustling with activity, would be completely diminished into ruin within a day.

"So what do we do now?" Xuan prompted.

"The fastest and essentially easiest way would be to scare them away from the village. Oh! I can transform into a terrorist and threaten all the villagers to leave their homes," Sun declared.

"No! That is immoral, Sun. Why would you lie and threaten them to get your way? I suggest warning each villager, one by one, about the earthquake, and evacuating them immediately. We can do this in a friendly way; we don't have to be harsh."

"That's not how society *works*, my friend. I guarantee you, nobody will listen to you. They will only ignore you, or even kick you out of their village, for interrupting their busy lives. Don't be so naive. And even if they do listen, how long do you think it would take to evacuate the entire village? Two, three days, for five thousand villagers? They'll all be dead by the time you finish!"

"And what good will threatening do? That will bring them so much unnecessary stress and terror. Think about their feelings, Sun."

Their argument lasted longer than it should have, and their time was running out. They only had less than three hours before the earthquake started, and Sun was the first to point this out.

"We only have three hours, Xuan. Why are you so stubborn? Just do it my way."

"No. I refuse to lie to the villagers. You can do it your way, but I will warn the villagers myself."

This pointless debate between the two tenacious and headstrong personalities had no final solution. They both rolled their eyes at the other and proceeded in their separate ways, to carry out their plans individually.

Xuan, the peace advocate, quite literally started from the left side of the village and just walked from door to door to tell each villager about the disaster bound to happen. At each door, he made his kindly speech:

"Good evening. I am Xuan, the monk from the East Mountains. I am here to warn you about the terrible earthquake about to happen in three hours. You must immediately evacuate your family and friends from this fate!"

And at each door, he received a cold glare and a dismissive and sarcastic *thanks* before the door slammed at his face. He couldn't understand why nobody listened to him; he was only trying to help.

He soon realised his efforts were futile. The more he continued his attempts at warning the villagers, the more he started to doubt himself.

*Maybe Sun was right... Nobody will believe an old man that their century-old village will fall apart in a few hours.*

After the 50th house, he left the village and sat down on the grass fields, defeated. He regretted speaking so harshly to Sun hours ago.

*How's Sun doing?*

Then Xuan checked the time.

*Oh no. Five minutes left before the earthquake??*

Meanwhile, Sun, the aggressive and impatient one, carried out his plan at the right side of the village. Transformation being one of his magical powers, he transformed himself. He was now covered in black cloth from head to toe, body posed to look as threatening as he possibly could. He walked around at the right side of the village, holding a knife, and told everyone he saw that they must leave the village or else he would kill them. Of course, there were terrified screams and slight panic. However, unexpectedly, a lot of the villagers stood up against him. Even after using some of his magical powers to scare the villagers, Sun ended up being chased out of the village by a mob of angry men, all shouting, “you can’t hurt our families or take away our village! We have been here for generations and a man holding a knife will not scare us!”

Sun was shocked by the villagers’ unexpected behavior.

*How would I have known that they are so protective of this stupid village??* Sun thought to himself, annoyed at his failure.

*Maybe Xuan was right... Threatening will only cause unneeded panic and chaos. Wait. Is Xuan’s method working?* Sun suddenly remembered his long-forgotten partner.

He checked the time.

*Five minutes left????*

Sitting at different sides of the village, the man and the monkey were dumbfounded, clueless as to what to do. They both regretted their argument, and yet they couldn’t do anything now. And so they were forced to watch the destruction, identical to the premonition they saw just yesterday in their own house, play out yet again, but in a much larger magnitude. The clean and perfectly arranged houses collapsed into rubble within seconds, the smell of dust yet again permeated the air, and bloody screams of pain and terror filled the area. If they were mortals, Xuan and Sun’s lives would have been in fatal danger as well.

Suddenly, both Xuan and Sun heard a voice echo in their ears:

“Your mission failed. What did you learn?”

“Cooperation and compromise,” the answer coming from the opposite sides of the village was the same.

The god hummed in approval. “I will give you another chance. This time, you only have two hours to save the village. Make good use of your time.”

In the blink of an eye, the village returned to its original undisturbed state, and Xuan and Sun were standing beside each other again. They eyed each other guiltily, each knowing that they were wrong to ignore the other.

Their time was short. They mumbled their apologies and started planning. This time, as Sun had suggested rudely a while ago, they decided that being completely truthful would not be effective at all, and so they agreed that they had to create a lie. But as Xuan had pointed out earlier, threatening would only cause chaos, so they would use a friendlier and more positive way to attract people out of the village.

Now, instead of being a terrorist that ineffectively frightened the villagers, Sun was a merchant selling magical goods and cheap merchandise on a hill at an open area a distance away from the village, where there would be no trees or houses to collapse on them in the event of an earthquake.

Xuan entered the village once again and advertised the merchandise in the village square. At the news of cheap and magical goods, the villagers became excited and gathered their friends and family to inspect and buy them. In a close-knit village like this, news traveled fast, and soon enough, all the families were rushing out to buy the mysterious magical goods.


With perfect timing, Xuan ensured that everyone left the village before leaving it himself as well.

When Xuan arrived at the makeshift street vendor’s place, everybody was crowding around Sun curiously, unsuspecting of the fate of their village.

Then it finally happened, and Xuan and Sun saw the destruction yet again; the third time in the past three days. But this time, rather than feeling guilty and helpless, they were relieved. When the village collapsed before the villagers’ eyes, Xuan and Sun could see the shock, fear, and despair on their faces. Five thousand villagers stood on the hill, looking over the village that had been their home since they were born and belonged to their families for many, many generations before them. They huddled together and sobbed as they realised that even though they lost a home, all their friends and family were safe and unharmed, and that was all that really mattered. A village could be built again somewhere else.

And that was exactly what they did. With the help of Xuan and Sun, the previous habitants of Crown Village built another warm and harmonious home together, a few miles west of the ruins.

“Thank you for helping us build the new village! Two extra pairs of helping hands are always useful,” the mayor of the village told Xuan and Sun, a wide grin spread across his face.



Little did he know, Xuan and Sun not only helped them rebuild their village, but also saved the lives of all the villagers. They glanced at each other and chuckled.

“No problem. We’re always happy to help!”

With the smiles of proud parents, Xuan and Sun stood on the hill just beside the village and watched as the villagers learned to treasure each other even more. They actively supported each other, and worked together cooperatively. Finally feeling satisfied and accomplished, Xuan and Sun, now understanding the importance of cooperation, traveled east to return to their home on the mountains.

# Sun Wo Kong Spirits

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Park, Carol – 15*

Leaves on the tree rustled in the chilly wind of fall, as the farmers of Cheng Du, Sichuan heard the same sound under their feet as they stepped around the ground covered deeply in the shades of canary leaves. The layers of jackets on people seemed to increase day by day, and passerine birds seemed to chirp more tumultuously in the mornings. Legend says if you caught a falling leaf before it touched the ground, then your dreams would come true. Most teenagers in the old town would laugh at its logic, considering themselves too old and mature for these kinds of far-fetched so-as-called “legends”. However, Lu Yuan, a young boy who had just had his fifteenth birthday, kept the truth to himself that he secretly attempted to catch falling leaves when nobody was around.

The autumn mornings of Sichuan, China in 1987 hadn’t looked much different from this very day. It was a typically sleepy morning that mothers had to pull their children out of their warm beds to go to school, and it was no exception for Lu Yuan’s family. However, it was always his aunt who had to do this. Lu Yuan was a young man who entered high school that year, but he refused to move on with his life since the day his mother passed away, the year he turned nine. It definitely wasn’t that his aunt mistreated him or that he despised her. She loved him like her own, but LuYuan knew he could never love her like he loved his own mom. For the past six years he had hoped that just for one day his mother would appear and pull him out of his bed to get ready for school. From time to time, Lu Yuan struck a note to that memory which made him go deep down to hell and back to life.

*“Shut up!” The voice of his stepdad pierced through Lu Yuan’s ears, and soon was the sound of a hand slapping hard on the face.*

*“No! Don’t you dare do this to me!” his mother’s voice shook in the darkness that he could not see, and her panting cries killed him deep down his heart. His feet were stuck to the bitter cold ground, and his eyes were shut no matter how hard he tried to force them open. Not long after, a harsh scream was heard, and then a sound of a piece of metal clanked on the ground, twirling twice before it hit stable on the hard floor. He was numb, he was numb...but he uttered a cry of grief, and streams of bloody tears burned his cold cheeks. Lu Yuan’s entire skin shivered as he shrieked the name of his stepfather, whose being was pettier than a spaniel’s, crueler than the fate of death. Lu Yuan fell immobile as he heard the click-clack of that man’s footsteps hurrying out of the darkness. The sound which gave him irresistible chill faded away fast. The man disappeared forever from Lu Yuan and was nowhere to be heard from again.*

“Honey, it’s time for school,” his aunt whispered.

Lu Yuan gasped in fear, waking from his nasty dream.

“Five minutes,” came the reply tersely. It wasn’t necessarily that he was too lethargic to wake himself up, but it was a morning that reminded more of his mother from the nightmare that he dreamed deep in his sleep last night, and he decided to be a little surly and rebellious. This sickening memory came back as dreams once in a while unexpectedly, and he would rarely talk for that entire day.

Lu Yuan tried to let everything go that happened in his brain last night and decided to get up. He let out a long and bitter sigh and swung his ragged bag onto his shoulder. Out the windows of houses were the sounds of kids giggling at the hilarious joke that someone had made, and the others were yawning under the morning sunlight that peaked through the tall trees. Lu Yuan, just like all other boys and girls, hurried their steps to the school, reminiscing about an episode when Sun Wu Kong defeated a nasty monster from his favorite story book, “New Journeys to the West.”

Lu Yuan had always been a fan of Sun Wu Kong, just like many of his other friends. They all took great interests in this character who went through so many of his magical adventures and won victory over all sorts of obnoxious creatures. His fighting techniques, especially, made the boys uncontrollably thrilled. However, the reasons for this liking were a little special for Lu Yuan. He still remembers his birthday, when his mother came back home with a bundle of books packed in a blue packaging. Six years had passed by from then and he still had the series of books neatly organized in one corner of his little book shelf. He enjoyed the stories very much, because whenever he read them to himself, they somehow felt like the night time stories that his mother had used to tell him. But every time he took a glance at the books as he ran his fingers through his bookshelf, he knew he had long lost the giver.



“As much as there were stars on a beautiful night sky, as much as there were grains of sand on a beach.” That was always how much he told his mother he loved her. But it was not after long that he knew he was wrong. The innumerable numbers of stars on dark night sky seemed so limited and scarce when he looked up at the night sky the day he was forced to let go of his mother’s hands. Why was he given such a fate, and why did

the world beat him till he turned green and purple with scars and bruises? He would do anything to tell his mom once again that his love for her was incomparably full, that numbers of stars and grains of sand were just blankness that would eventually be discovered in limited numbers by scientists or whoever.

The one thing Lu Yuan knew for sure is that his mother had given him the spirit of Sun Wu Kong inside him, and he had always believed that. That was the only thing that gave him the power to confront the things that were too difficult for a young boy like himself to face.

His mother used to tell him, “When your friends are mean and you want to cry, just remember that there is a Sun Wu Kong by your side to defeat every monster that you encounter.”

He recalled to how he used to smile like an angel whenever his mother told him that, because he always believed it to be true. The spirit of Sun Wu Kong that existed deep inside him was the last thing that gave him a spark of hope in life, and he knew by his heart that it was his fate destined by the world for his last present from her to be the series of books about Sun Wu Kong.

An episode about Sun Wu Kong fighting King Paramita had run through his mind by the time he arrived at school. He arrived early at school and decided to walk around the school garden before classes started, since it was one of the things he always did when he wanted to be alone sometimes.

The garden didn’t look at all large or fancy, but pink and red roses bloomed in the cold, and Lu Yuan thought it could never lose their beauty even in the chilly wind. And it did somehow remind him of his mother, because once in a while, his memories with her still bloomed in Lu Yuan’s mind.

He took time to appreciate the panoramas of the garden, until a loud noise broke his thoughts just like an alarm bell waking a sweet dream. It sounded to him like a sharp moan in pain. Lu Yuan grew nervous and uncomfortable, but he knew he couldn’t just walk away. He cautiously followed to where the sounds came from, and soon that led him to a vicious scene. A group of big bullies pushed a weak boy down the floor and slapped him a multiple times in the face. Lu Yuan frowned at this unbearably abominable and inhuman sight. Lu Yuan recognized the boy being bullied as a quiet one in his class that he had never spoken to. Although the boy kept every word to himself as the evil laughs of the bullies vibrated in the air, Lu Yuan felt as if he spotted streams of tears on the boy’s face, that were shouting out loud for help. Lu Yuan’s feet shook wildly, traumatized by the cruel atmosphere. He seemed to hear the sounds again. The shrieking of his mother and stepfather, the sound of his mother’s grievous scream, followed by the clinking of knife onto the ground. It felt like he was playing the situation over and over again in his brain, and the pain was irresistible. He had his Sun Wu Kong to protect him; he couldn’t just stand there and be a bystander, like he had been when his mother died.

Without knowing it himself, He ran up to the group of boys and he punched one of them on the face hard a few times.

“Why did you do that? Why did you beat that kid up?” Lu Yuan shrieked his heart out and his voice came out so hoarse that his words were almost incomprehensible. Lu Yuan’s His heart beat like the sound of fast drumsticks that felt uncontrollably infinite and his head began to spin dizzily. Lu Yuan was more surprised himself than the bullies for the actions that he took, but he kept on punching the boy on the face until the guys around pushed Lu Yuan down to the ground, and started to kick hard on him, one kick after another, until Lu Yuan sunk down to the ground, recalling back to how painful his mother must have felt at this moment of her life. Tears fell like rain and covered his eyes, and he felt the presence of Sun Wu Kong fading away from his heart and body. Sun Wu Kong defeated all bad guys. He never lost. The power that he always thought he had inside him, his hero flew away in the wind together with his tears. It faded slowly, and went away and there was no turning back. Someone blew away his last candle, his last hope. The deep scar that formed in his heart only deepened as the bullies knew no end and continued to use their dirty feet to step hard on the heart of the boy who had just lost his last presence of light. His vague memory of his mother seemed to become clearer with every kick and stepping. And soon the images became so lucid and clear that he could not control himself from over thinking about his mother’s lie that he had always failed to doubt.

“When your friends are mean and you want to cry, just remember that there is a Sun Wu Kong by your side to defeat every monster that you face,” her voice echoed in the wind.

‘There was no such thing as Sun Wu Kong in the first place,’ Lu Yuan whispered, on the ground stained with his own patches of blood that spread wide across, and it may have looked just like his mother’s. His tears mixed with the blood on the floor and it further spread the redness across all directions around him.

Soon, silhouettes of students and teachers came crowding around his corpse-like body, and soon it grew uncontrollably loud. Ear-piercing sound of siren besieged him and he his sight turned too blurry for him to keep his eyes open to and see his blood continue to flood the floor.

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“Are you feeling okay, darling?”

By the time he opened his eyes and blinked them a few times to see if he was really still alive, he felt a warm hand that was holding tight onto his. It was his aunt’s. He could tell from her swollen eyes that she had been crying through the night, and he gave her a weak hug.

He felt a strong migraine, and he could feel without looking that his head was tightly wrapped in thick bandages. He looked around. There were a few hospital beds, and then he realized that he was on one himself, and also had on patient’s clothes. A tall-looking man wearing a white gown came as he noticed his consciousness and checked his eyes as he flashed a way-too-bright flashlight on them. It was almost as if his head was going to crack open when the flashlight was shined onto his eyes, but he refused to say a word about how he felt. He slumped back down into his bed, and did his very best to hide his upsurging tears from his aunt. He didn’t want her to find out that he once had believed such a stupid character, and he felt so numb and empty that his last hope depended upon something that could fall apart just at any moment.

“I heard from your teacher that you tried to protect another kid from being bullied,” his aunt opened up the conversation carefully.

When he heard his aunt’s sad voice, he couldn’t say that it was because the kid reminded of his mother. He didn’t want his aunt still thinking that he thought so much about his dead mother.

“Don’t be afraid to face the world, dear. I know how painful it might have been at this young age for you to experience all kinds of these cruelties, but no matter what, don’t give up on your hopes,” his aunt continued.

He has never told her any of his thoughts, but she just seemed to know more about him than himself. He probably had kept himself aloof for others for too long. It was time for him to rely on somebody. He had always thought that being mature meant being able to stand independent, but he reached an epiphany that after all, building trust between people and being honest and true to his emotions was the rightful thing for him to do.

Now Lu Yuan truly understood his mother’s words by heart. Having Sun Wu Kong’s spirit in him did not mean he had to win every fight against the tough world, but always believing that there was a last spark of light that still made him a courageous and beautiful person.

“Thank you auntie,” Lu Yuan smiled. “Thank you.”

# Decisions

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Wang, Candace – 14*

**February 20, 2020 12:15am**

It was the third quarter of my junior year in KING Private International School of Shanghai. It was only 2°C outside, but I could feel the warm sun shining down on my face from under the billowing curtains.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* My alarm clock rang loudly as Emily shook me awake.

I squinted my eyes open just enough to look at my girlfriend, at her clear blue eyes, long curled eyelashes, and prominent nose. Her golden hair was tightly secured in a loose bun, and as usual, her full lips were dry and cracked.

“Hey Nick! Wake up, time to eat, dear. If we don’t leave now we’ll have to line up for another ten minutes.”

Lunch? What was she talking about? Suddenly, something in my brain clicked and it all made sense. That was the bell signifying the end of class, the beginning of lunch. I jumped out of my chair and ran out with Emily.

The two of us made our way through boisterous crowds of students and finally arrived at the cafeteria, getting into a line that was already slowly becoming longer. Panting, we bought our lunches and sat down on our usual seats. Emily gazed out the windows, staring at the blooming flowers outside and sighed deeply.

“I checked your SAT scores this morning. Not much improvement since the fall, Nick. You lied about studying for it during the winter break didn’t you? And sleeping in Biology again? Nick, you’ve got to be more serious about your academics if you want to get in the same college as me. You do, don’t you?”

She was critiquing me again, but I was afraid pointing it out would anger her further. “Of course I do, honey. I’m just busy these days working on my computer program, you know, that’s my only hope. I really am trying hard, Em, only sleeping 4 hours each night, I was just too tired. I promise it won’t happen again,” I sighed. “As soon as I’m done programming this I’ll catch up with my schoolwork, I promise.” I softly ruffled her hair and smiled widely. “You can believe me.”

I caught sight of Emily touching the scar on her left wrist for comfort, “Nick, I know that I can always count on you.”

**Feb. 22, 2020 10:02am**

Arthur walked down the hall towards me and I could see that he was wearing his typical simple t-shirt and overly baggy shorts. His hair was over-gelled; it looked like he hadn’t washed it for the past month. Arthur was short and young for a junior, only 15 yet already scoring perfect SAT scores. I often joked that he never grew because all his energy was used to memorize history dates. As he walked past, he looked up at me condescendingly through his thick glasses.

“Hey Monkey King, heard you failed your SAT again. Doesn’t seem like it bothers you that much. Oh, right, it’s not the first time that you’ve gotten a score like this one,” he smirked, “you’re already used to it. About time you let go of Emily. We both know she’s better off with me.”

His words caught me by surprise; it had been a while since anyone had ever called me Monkey King, I had forgotten about it already.

*“Nick! You were the one who pulled my chair away from under me in math class, weren’t you!” the 10 year old Arthur shouted at me across the hall. “You know, you really remind me of the Monkey King in Journey to the West, which my Chinese tutor is reading with me right now. You’re always so playful and lighthearted about everything, but actually very smart and loyal. You don’t fit in school, Monkey King.”*

*“Thanks Art,” I replied sarcastically, “already learning your second language, huh? Good luck. Also, I don’t need you to tell me what to do, I have a mom in case you didn’t realize.”*

I shook myself free of this memory from 7 years ago, of the Arthur who wasn’t yet condescending or trying to steal my girlfriend. Rolling my eyes at Arthur, I kept walking forward, nudging him forcefully as I walked past him. Just seeing his face disgusted me. He’ll be having a wonderful day tomorrow.

**Feb 22, 2020 10:21pm**

I made my way through the unlocked back door of the swimming pool. Everyone thought it was impregnable, but there were so many ways to get in. Hurriedly, using the flashlight on my phone, I searched for locker number 128 in the changing room. There it was. Taking a paperclip, I picked the lock. Inside the locker was his swimsuit: what he would be wearing to his swimming competition the next day. Suddenly there were footsteps outside, the stomping increasing in volume with each step. I froze where I was, silently waiting for them to pass.

One second. Two seconds. Three, four, five. Please don't come this way, I pleaded silently...

The sounds of footsteps slowly faded away. Swiftly and silently like a monkey, I quickly made my way out the back door again. Finally having left the school building, I sighed to myself in relief. There was no one following me; after all, I was experienced in completing missions like these. Knowing that I had successfully accomplished my task, I slowed down and leisurely walked to the short fence of the school's little garden, which I could easily climb over. I did not know that awaiting me was Charles, the head of security.

"I saw a light in the changing rooms of the swimming pool just now when I was on patrol. Knew it was you. No one else knows the school as well as you or has the guts to sneak into school this late. I've already spoken with Mr. Strikt, the S.A. director. He expects to see you in his office 8am tomorrow morning, sharp."

I rolled my eyes and hoped that Charles didn't catch it in the dark.

**Feb 23, 2020 8:05 am**

The S.A. office was warm and smelled like cookies, supposedly to trick students into thinking it was a nice place. The juxtaposition of colorful paintings hanging and unicolored tables were supposed to make the room seem welcoming, but to me, it only seemed poorly designed.

"Nick, did you think it is really appropriate for you to do that? What were you doing there last night? You don't have many conduct marks left so you'd better be truthful." On and on the S.A. director droned, repeating exactly what he told me two months ago when I broke one of the lights.

"You'll find out soon Mr. Strikt. I've got to get to math class now though, I'm sure you don't want me to miss another class." I stood up, turned around, and directly walked out of his office before he could stop me.

Just as I had expected, Arthur was "just coincidentally walking past the S.A. office" when I came out. Just as I had expected, Arthur gave me his supercilious look as he mocked me for getting caught and having no more conduct marks. And just as I had expected, Arthur had no idea what he would have to go through later.

I merely sneered back at him, "Good luck today."

**Feb 23, 2020 12:24 pm**

"Why'd you go to the S.A. office again? Nick!" Emily glared at me, "You promised me you wouldn't get into trouble again until the end of this year. Not yet two months and you've already broken the promise."

"Em, it was nothing." It annoyed and hurt me that she didn't ask me how I was feeling but only cared about how well I was doing in school.

Emily turned her head away from me, but I could see her eyes watering. "What's wrong?" I asked her, and tried to grab her hand from the table.

She yanked her hand away from mine and spoke waveringly, "Lying to me has been a habit already hasn't it? I miss the Nick from two years ago." Emily stood up, took her tray and left alone.

Feb 23, 2020 4:42 pm

The afternoon was unusually chilly.

"Nick, you of all people should understand me. I need someone who I can rely on my entire life! I don't want to end up like my parents! I love you but I don't know anymore Nick, I don't know anymore. Now you lie to me, break your promises, and show no effort to get into the same college as me. I need someone responsible, but are you really the right person for me?"

Emily's words stung me. It had never occurred to me she would ever say something like this to me. Lying and breaking promises? Was that what it all seemed like to her? I didn't tell her so she wouldn't be worried about me, and of course I was trying hard to be accepted by the same colleges as her! So hard in fact that I had been sleeping 5 hours a day for the past three weeks to finish my program. And here she was, denying all of my effort in a few sentences. I felt the pain of betrayal, the pain of a loved one turning their back on me. I felt anger rising in me, like a wildfire, burning wildly and fiercely.

"Five years, Emily, five years! Think about all I've done for you! You still don't understand me." I punched the wall next to me. As angry as I was, I would never hurt Emily. "What makes..."

"Nick, I do understand you. I see right through you, all the pretenses and lies you tell me. I know that you love me, but this is not how I want to be loved."

"Then what do you want me to do? I've been trying my best, always so loyal, but..."

"You have to choose, Nick. Between me and your programming. It's either me or that app of yours. If you want me, you need to let go of your app and start showing effort in academics. Give me your answer by tomorrow midnight." She turned and left alone.

I stood solitary in the cold as her words made sense to me and collapsed me mentally and physically. I walked home slowly in the cold wind.

Feb 24, 2020 10:20 am

I decided not to go to school. I stayed at home in bed and thought. Luckily, my parents were out of Shanghai, so I was undisturbed. I thought about the first time I had met Emily; I thought about how nervous I was when I first asked her out; I thought about every movie we went to; I thought about the first meal we ate together. I thought about the first time I saw all her inner struggles, when she showed me the complete true Emily.

*One. Bang. Two. Bang. Three. Bang. Four. Bang. Crack. Her locked bedroom door burst open. I bolted into her room, but froze when I saw her. Emily was leaning against the corner of her room, and her wrist was bleeding. No, no, no, no. I fumbled for my phone and dialed 911.*

I could still remember so clearly, how I was the only person waiting for her outside the ER. I could still recall exactly what she told me in the school the day she finally came back.

*She walked in, and without looking at me, sat down right next to me. "How did you know? Why did you save me?" She paused for a few seconds, and as if unsure of what she was about to say, looked right into my eye. "Thank you."*

*"I've been observing you and asking your best friend about you. I knew something has been going on for the past few weeks. Kylie told me you weren't picking up, which you never do, so I ran to your house just to check on you. I knew you would regret it; you're too good for... death."*

*Emily looked me in the eye and said, "Find me after school in the garden."*

I took another swig of Jack Daniels, waiting for the alcohol to muddle my mind, but my thoughts were still so clear. It was that afternoon she told me everything about her—her parents divorce, her grades dropping, her helplessness and hopelessness. I always thought of her as a cheerful, bright girl, but it was that afternoon I saw her inner conflicts.

That was also when she let me into her life.

Yet now she was kicking me out of her life.

I remembered one of the first things she told me when we first got together. "I want stability, someone I can rely on, someone the opposite of my dad. Can you be that person, Nick?" *I've always been*, I thought to myself. These past few months I've been programming hour after hour just to get into a good college, to become the reliable person she wanted in her life, but she asked me to choose. It was the right choice. When I finally succeed and become the man she wants, she'll understand me, and then we'll get back together.

I sent her the message. "Let's break up, Emily."

I gulped down the last few drops of alcohol and slept like the dead.



**Feb. 25, 2020 8pm**

I saw Emily in the hallway, but walked past her without looking at her. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she grabbed her wrist with her other hand when she saw me. She walked past me as if we were strangers. *It's alright*, I told myself. *I just need to focus on finishing my app.*

**Dec. 15, 2020 5:56 pm**

College ED results were coming out tonight. My palms were sweating and my breath was involuntarily shaking as I refreshed my email inbox over and over again. *Please. Please. Please. I really need this acceptance letter. Please.* Finally, a new email popped out. I took three deep breaths and then clicked into it.

"Dear Nick Monking, it gives me great please to inform you that the initial reviews of your application indicate you will be offered admission to..."

I could not believe my eyes. I collapsed onto my bed with happiness and laughed so hard that my sides ached. And then I remembered. Emily. Yes, I must tell Emily, she would be so pleased.

Finally out of my daze of happiness, I scrambled for my phone and typed, "It's been so long since we've talked to each other. Meet me tomorrow morning before school in the garden." I hesitated, and then added at the end of the sentence, "I still love you, please come."

**Dec 16, 2020 7:30 pm**

This was one of the earliest I've ever been to school. I sat down on the bench, the same one from three years ago. A gust of wind blew and I realized how cold I was, but not because of the freezing air, but because of my nervousness. And then I saw her, as beautiful as she has always been, walking towards me.

"I missed you Em. I got accepted. I heard that you did too. We can go to the same college now." I spoke my words in a rush, scared that she would turn around and leave me behind once again before I finished speaking. "I spent the last year working on my computer program, sleeping sleepless nights, but you were my motivation, even though you weren't by my side."

Emily looked at me and then hit me hard in the arm. "That's for breaking up with me, jerk."

Then she tiptoed to whisper into my ear, "I missed you too Nick. Thank you so much."

I kissed her and then hugged her tight, determined to not lose her ever again.

**Dec 25, 2028 6:42 am**

It was only 2 degrees outside, but I could feel the warm sun shining down on my face from under the billowing curtains.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* My alarm clock rang loudly as Emily shook me awake.

"Hey Nick! Wake up, time to eat."

I squinted my eyes open just enough to look at my wife, and the clock that read 6:42. Yawning, I said, "You're beautiful as always, but why do you have to wake me up so early on Christmas?"

"I've got a present for you, honey. You'd better be downstairs in ten minutes." She pecked me on my cheek and left.


Grunting, I forced myself out of bed, brushed my teeth, combed my hair, and slumped my way downstairs. Emily, was pointing at a box under our Christmas tree.

"Open it. You'll love it."

I picked up the box and shook it. Yep, definitely clothes inside, from the weight of it, a necktie. Ha, I knew her so well. Impatiently, I unwrapped the gift, but was caught by surprise. It wasn't a necktie.

It was a set of babies' clothes.

"I'm pregnant Nick. It's going to be a summer baby." Emily teared up with happiness. I was at a loss of words, but managed to choke out, "I love you so much Em...and our baby." I hugged her tight, but this time careful to not squeeze her stomach.



June 22, 2029 7:23pm

Emily was sitting next to me on the sofa. She was cradling the baby while I was watching the news.  
“Recently, Arthur Wilson, eminent astrologist has discovered a new planet...”

“Emily, is that Arthur Wilson we know?”

“Yes Nick, the one you tried to prank at least 300 times in high school. He turned out as well as everybody had expected.”

I smiled at my memories of the immature Nick who hated Arthur so much, and replied, “Let’s have dinner with him someday. It’s been so long since we’ve seen him.”

# Rising Sun

*The SMIC Private School Shanghai, Xu, Hannah – 14*

“Sol!”

Rudely pulled out of his peaceful slumber by a loud voice, a young male lurches upright in his bed. His forehead collides with that of another person – this one with a large, round face and small piggy eyes.

“What is it, Felix?” Sol mumbles, rubbing his forehead with a barely suppressed sigh. He swings his legs off of the bed – no point sleeping now that his head is throbbing, anyway.

“Oh. Uh...well there’s a robbery down the street,” Felix mumbles, already backing out of the room. “I think we should check it out. Also, on a more important note, there are pancakes waiting on the dining table. Just thought you might want to know.” With that, he dashes into the kitchen, feet thudding heavily on the wooden ground.

Grumbling, Sol pulls on a sweater and grabs his monkey mask. He remembers he had left his gun downstairs the last time he returned home from an early morning rescue. In the distance, he hears Felix slurping something and Mir, the third member of their little group, running down the stairs. In the room next to Sol’s, Axel, their ‘mastermind,’ snores lightly, eyelashes fluttering as he drifts off into dreamland. Lucky guy. He took the night shift, meaning he didn’t have to get awoken at five in the morning just to catch some common *thieves*.

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“Let’s go!” Sol shouts, grabbing and slinging his gun over his shoulder. Felix shoves the last pancake into his mouth, running around and grabbing his pig-face mask and an ax-gun. Mir calmly walks toward the garage, nodding pleasantly at Sol on his way out.

“Good morning,” he says lightly. His weapon, a weird combination of a sword and gun, is in his right hand and his left holds a skull-shaped mask.

“Remind me again why we are doing this?” Sol says, almost sarcastically. Mir sighs.

“It’s for the greater good, Sol. It’s all for the greater good.” As Mir exits the house, Sol’s mind drifts off.

*It began five years ago. It was a cold, snowy day, and Sol was just walking home from buying some groceries, the tip of his red nose peeking through his striped scarf as though scared to face the bitter wind whipping through the air. He climbed the stairs leading to his house, and set the bags down onto the kitchen counter with a loud thump. Crossing over to the opposite side of the room, he picked up one of his mom’s chocolate chip cookies and bit into it. Cookie in hand, he headed upstairs to his room, looking forward to a good long six hours of gaming time. Passing by his mother’s room – Sol’s bedroom was the last one on the second floor, behind his mom’s – he suddenly stopped and turned to face the white door. His mom never closed the door, not even at night, when she was sleeping.*

*“Mom?” he twisted the doorknob cautiously before he stuck his head in. An eerie silence greeted Sol, and he noticed with a jolt how cold his mother’s room was. All thoughts of gaming and relaxation left his mind as he took in the open windows, curtains flapping and casting frightening shadows onto the cream-coloured walls. He took another step into the room and stopped cold. There, lying on the ground in a puddle of blood, is his mother, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Sol’s half-eaten cookie fell onto the floor and broke in half, crumbs spraying everywhere.*

*The rest of the night was a blur. Sol remembers only fragments – him calling the police, getting questioned, and then, sitting alone in the dark night, hugging his knees to his scrawny chest, Sol realized that he was, for once in his life, utterly alone.*

Shaking his head as if to get rid of the memory, Sol follows Mir and Felix into the car and slips in. With a loud roar of the tires and headlights glaring harshly at the road ahead, the trio speeds off into the morning.

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“Are you sure we’re at the right place?” Sol glances suspiciously at the seemingly vacant grocery store. Large bubble letters spell out “WHITE DEMON WHOLE-SALE STORE: FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES ALL YEAR ROUND” on a faded yellow banner partially falling off its perch above the main door. The large glass doors seem locked, although Sol knows that a little thing such as a locked door is nothing to the three vigilantes.

"This is the place, I'm telling you!" Felix replies hotly. In his pudgy hands lies a tablet, currently emitting a low blue light in the dark van.

"Excuse us if we don't trust you, you led us to the wrong place three times in the last week," Mir comments from the driver's seat. Sol lets out a small chuckle at the offended look on Felix's face.

Felix opens his mouth to let out a quick retort, but Sol suddenly makes a "shhh" sound and peers around. He slips on his mask, which falls over his head to fit him perfectly. Mir and Felix follow his lead, immediately turning the trio into three unidentifiable figures.

Deep inside the fruit store, a large crash sounds, immediately followed by a terse moment of silence. Pointing at the store, Sol pulls open the sliding door of the van and his lithe figure steps gently onto the pavement. Felix joins him a moment later, and after a quick glance in Sol's direction, Mir, driving the van, silently speeds away to guard the backdoor.

"Come on," Sol jerks his head toward the door of the fruit store and starts to step toward it, freezing at every suspicious sound. Felix grunts and walks to the locked front doors, fits a small round device onto the lock, and lets it do its work. A second later, the lock clicks open and Felix tries to push the door open.

It doesn't budge.

"It says *pull*, you idiot," Sol hisses and, pulling the door open, steps into a large store filled with stacks and stacks of apples, oranges, and bananas. The back of the room splits into two dark hallways.

"I'll go this way," Sol hisses and points his gun towards the left hallway. Felix nods and soundlessly, the two separate.

The lights are turned off, but the rising sun shining through the windows provides just barely enough light for Sol to find his way around. Large cement walls rise from the ground, with small crates and boxes filled with what Sol supposes are more fruit leaning against them. The smell of fresh peaches waft across the long hallway, and Sol pauses to sniff the air.

*Peaches. Yum.*

The hallway gently slopes down toward a basement. Pausing suspiciously at the bend, Sol sticks his head out to check if there is anybody in the room below. A lone light-bulb floods the room with a yellow light, and in the corner are the silhouettes of two figures – one small and thin, the other large and round.

Then, Felix's unmistakable voice reaches Sol's ears. "Do you need any help?"

Sol rushes forward to see Felix kneeling down so that he is at eye level with a young girl. Her dark hair glows under the bulb, and her skin glows ghostly pale compared to Felix's tanned body. She looks frail and almost pitiful, standing there in a small pink dress and a basket carried on one arm.

Felix looks over the girl's shoulder to see Sol in his mask, and his face breaks into a large, relieved smile at the sight of his best friend and leader.

The girl notices Felix's straying eyes and turns her body, curious as to what he is looking at. With a start, Sol realizes that her eyes are the deepest, darkest black that he has ever seen, and her full lips are coloured the gruesomely dark red shade of blood.

"Sir! Would you like some apples?" she offers Sol the small wicker basket hanging around her arm – in it lies three beautifully shaped, bright red apples.

There is something off about her, but Sol can't quite place his finger on it. Felix looks very comfortable helping her, kneeling there on the ground. As if noticing Sol's suspicion, the girl smiles even wider, showing her pearly white teeth.

"Come, get some apples." The girl inches closer to Sol, and her words seem to ricochet through the large circular room. Felix starts to stand, looking a little alarmed.

Sol takes a step back, reaching for his gun.

"I said, *take an apple!*" the girl screeches and, as if making a split second decision, turns to launch herself at Felix. A knife appears in her hand as she leaps towards the older male, intent on killing him.

Felix screams (a surprisingly high-pitched scream for a man his size) and backs up against the wall. Sol stumbles back and slings his gun off his shoulder and onto his hands, firing it in quick succession. The girl slumps on the floor at Felix's feet, and with great effort, turns her head to look back at Sol.

"He will find you," the girl promises from the floor. "And when he does, he will bury you alive!" Her blood-drenched dress smears against the cement floor, painting a crimson smile with the oozing red liquid.

"Who?" Felix steps forward bravely despite his shaking legs, weapon in hand. "Who is going to find us?"

The girl just bares her teeth in a cold smile.

Although death threats are something to keep in mind, the three vigilantes are all too used to them. So, they leave the fruit store and pile into their van. The girl's body lies on the basement floor, left there by the three friends for the local police to find and collect.

Sol leans his head against the cool glass window as the world flies by, his bright amber eyes staring back at him. To his left, Mir hums placidly under his breath, seemingly unshaken by the entire encounter. Of course, he was standing guard the whole time, so he probably wasn't all too worried anyway.

The scene outside the window seems to disappear as Sol gets pulled back into his memories. In his mind's eye, he sees a younger version of himself, hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans, walking down the street with a furious expression on his face.

*It had been three years since his mother was killed. The police still had not found the murderer – in fact, they had already given up on the case, something which did not please Sol at all. The streetlights casted harsh shadows on his already angry face, making him seem even fiercer. His face mask lay crumpled in his fist as he turned and stomped up the stairs to his house. On the couch sat somebody he had teamed up with, for the first time since he started this vigilante thing, and he glowered at the back of the boy's head.*

*"Felix!" Sol barked.*

*Felix jumped to his feet. "Yes, Sol?" he hurriedly replied, pushing a bag of potato chips behind his back with a guilty expression on his face.*

*"Where were you tonight? You were supposed to meet me for training at that abandoned parking lot." Sol throws his mask down onto the kitchen counter – it landed in same place where he had placed two stuffed grocery bags that one fateful night, so many years ago.*

*"Oh." Felix looked down at his toes. "I'm so sorry! I forgot that we had training tonight."*

*"Forgot? You forgot?" Sol's voice rose furiously before he managed to get ahold of himself. "If you're going to treat this as some joke, something less important than your stupid chips and TV shows, then you can leave. Right now!"*

*Felix's head snapped up, and Sol saw a small fire ignite inside his dark brown eyes. "No. I'm sorry for leaving you stranded today – it won't happen again. But I made a choice to leave behind my life and become a vigilante, and I'm not going to leave, no matter what. My own brother was caught and killed by one of those petty criminals running rampant around this city. He was innocent – had never done a bad thing in his life. I promise, I am going to kill every one of those --"*

*Cutting Felix short, Sol held up a hand, although his eyes twinkled amusedly. "No swearing in this house, please."*

Pulled back to reality by the van screeching to a halt inside the garage, Sol jumps out of his seat and strides into the house. It is not his old childhood home – Sol had left the house, and everything that came with it – when he started working with Mir and Axel. *This is a house filled with memories*, he muses as he unlocks the back door, *I would hate to have to leave it, be it because of death or the ever-increasing rental fee.*

+++

That night, a thin sliver of the moon shines through Sol's window, and he rises out of bed to pull down the shades. As he does, the world suddenly silences and a tingle travels up his spine. Sol whirls around.

Standing in front of him is a long, lean figure dressed head-to-toe in black. His face is hidden in the shadow, and the only thing Sol can see are his luminous silver eyes, which stare penetratingly at Sol.

"Who are you?" Sol demands, his hand inching for his gun before realizing that he had – yet again – left it downstairs. He really should stop doing that.

The figure laughs – a low, raspy sound. He steps out of the shadow, and a long, thin face appears. A pale hand grips the handle of a small blade. "I am the White Bone Demon, Sol. I believe it was *your* mother I killed five years ago? Your mother – Luna – was also a vigilante, did you not know? Oh, I was so tired of her running around trying to stop all us criminals! Of course, I couldn't have anybody threatening me, I was just rising to power – so I killed her. I thought it would break you – but you chose to become a vigilante as well! Caused quite the uproar when you started killing my little team – not that you knew they all reported back to me, of course. You thought they were all separate little criminals, didn't you? Yes, yes. I couldn't have you follow in your mother's footsteps and overthrow *me*, not after so many years of scheming and planning! But that is why I am here tonight, of course."

Before Sol could answer, the Demon steps forward. A flash of silver, a brief moment of searing pain, and all that is left of Sol is a cold, bleeding body, glassy eyes gazing unseeingly into the heavens.



# New Journeys to the West

*United Christian College (Kowloon East), Wong, Sum Yin –15*

“**Y**our majesty!”

Sun Wukong’s golden eyes slowly opened as an energetic voice shouted in his large ears. He didn’t even flinch the slightest bit, for he had gotten used to loud, energetic voices over the centuries, particularly his own.

“What is it, general? Make it quick, I’m trying to take a break.” Wukong grumbled in annoyance, but if one listened closely they could hear the hidden amusement in his voice.

The general—who wore his hair in buns, wore a grass skirt was skipping around excitedly on the flaming haloes beneath his feet in an almost childish manner.

“Some spirits visiting the Jade Ruins reported that a human has fallen into the mountain!”

At that, Wukong’s large ears perked up immediately as the boy before him said “human”.

“A human, you say? No human has ever fallen down in quite a while, are you sure this isn’t some prank?” Wukong’s questioned, and the general shook his head vigorously in reply.

“No, I’m sure it isn’t! Look!” He said, whipping out a small crystal orb from a small pouch in his waist. Sure enough, the image on it showed a young dark-haired boy walking through weathered halls made from jade.

“This is it...” Wukong’s voice trembled as he whispered to himself. “Our shot at freedom.”

Centuries ago, Wukong journeyed with a monk he called his master and two companions he called his brothers on a quest to find the sacred Buddhist scrolls from the west. Despite the numerous perils they faced, they still found the scrolls, and the Buddha himself awarded them with sacred statuses.

All had been well, until the demons that the team had supposedly defeated came back for revenge, and despite the victory obtained by the Heavenly Kingdom, the demons had imprisoned he and his companions under, ironically, the destination of their Journey, Vulture Peak.

*I just hope this boy’s essence is pure enough to break the darn seal—*

“HEY!!”

The loud scream of the general almost blew him off his throne.

“Will you. Capture. The human. With us.”

Wukong blinked a bit, then simply shook his head. The child’s face fell.

“Ne Zha, you know how skilled I am and how cool I look in fights, don’t you?” Before the general could speak, Wukong interjected with a smirk. “I’d steal the show from you if I joined you. Besides, you don’t need my help. Just get the human here alive.”

The general, Ne Zha, huffed, but gave up on protesting.

“Okay then, we’ll bring the human here to you!” He announced happily. “And those two traitors too!”

“What are you waiting for then? Go!”

The general flinched at the suddenly hostile tone, but bowed and did not say more as he commanded the army of monsters behind him to leave.

Only when everything had gone quiet did Wukong allow his smile to drop.

The emperor heaved a sigh, allowing the cold darkness to wash over him.

~

*"...Monkey?"*

*Wukong looked away from the glowing barrier and the coppery seal in front of him, where the corpse of the child had just faded into sparkling flecks of light. His red-and-gold staff was dripping with deep crimson blood redder than the handle of the staff. The emperor turned quickly to his "brothers", his eyes wide.*

*"W-what have you done-you killed her!" The plump, pale man cried out in horror. "You killed a defenceless child!"*

*The monkey being could barely speak as he stepped forward.*

*"G-guys! I can explain!" He cried out, feeling smaller under the glares of hurt and disappointment of his close friends. "I-W-we gotta go free, remember--"*

*He was cut off by Pigsy throwing his black officials hat on the blood-stained floor.*

*"That is no excuse to brutally murder a human, Wukong! And why didn't you tell us anything?!" The former pig-being cried out, his voice thick, as he immediately turned around. "You know, I don't even know why I called you my brother in the first place. Guess I was right about you killing innocents after all. I'm leaving." He spat, and the Monkey King could feel the hope draining out of him as his former friend walked away, mumbling under his breath.*

*His desperate gaze darted to the other, more muscular and toned man, who took off his own officials hat. His eyes widened further.*

*"Not you too, Sandy!" The monkey cried out in devastation. "We're brothers till the end, right? Y-you know me--"*

*"I don't know if I know you anymore....you were always violent, but this? It's stepping over the line ." Sha wujing, more commonly known as Sandy, sighed and shook his head. "Sorry, Wukong. What would Master think..?"*

*The emperor felt his soul fill with dread as he watched the only person he thought understood him leave. Things couldn't get--*

*"Sun Wukong."*

*He turned abruptly, his heart beating faster by the second.*

*"M-Master--"*

*"How could you?"*

*"Did I die for nothing?" I*

*“You disappoint me”*

*“You murderer”*

*Wukong’s breathing quickened as his master’s voice crowded his mind like flies to carnage, and it was too much, and he was nothing but a killer that deserved death—*

~

“AAAAH!!!”

The monkey king cried out, jolting up from his bed as he panted heavily. His golden gaze darted around, as if a thousand monsters would jump out at him at any given moment, or as if he were choking on his ambitions to free his citizens.

“Heh.....heh...”

He slapped a palm to his forehead, ignoring the deep crescents his nails had bit into his palm pads. The memory had plagued his sleep again, and for the thousandth time Wukong wondered how broken his mind was.

He could barely remember the days when his mind was quiet, his hands were clean, and when the four of them were still together....

“KILLING HUMANS WERE NEVER MY CHOICE!! THE STUPID DEMON KING MADE ME DO IT!!”

Wukong screamed, and his voice echoed around his huge golden room as he panted. The screaming had done nothing to ease the guilt that had weighed down his heart for centuries.

His gaze darted over to several huge brown jars with blood red cloth covers in a mahogany shelf.

As the Monkey Emperor of Vulture Peak, he had promised the Jade emperor and the rest of the Heavenly Kingdom that he would never drink unless it was at a banquet or any other big occasion.

*I’ve broken that promise countless times before unknowingly, and its not affecting my leadership. In fact, I lead better after an alcohol night , clearing my drunk-ness the day after, He thought to himself as he reached for one of the jars almost reflexively. So what gives?*

~

“Sun Wukong!!”

“W-Wha...?” The monkey being squinted his bloodshot eyes at the glittering mist serving as a communication window that had appeared before him.

The face of none other than Guan Yin appeared among the mist. Her slender black eyebrows raised the second he saw Wukong’s face.

“Emperor Sun...have you been drinking again?”

The monkey being’s eyes widened as he finally came to terms to what was happening.

“Drinking?! N-Nononono.” Wukong shook his head vigorously as he tried to silently nudge the open wine jar away from sight, using his magic to make himself appear and sound sober. He winced as the wine jar made a huge SQUEAK as it was dragged along the floor. “Who’s—” He was cut off by a long sigh.

“How long?”

“What?”

“You know what I'm talking about. How long have you been hiding that you broke your promise to not drink? This is seriously hurting us, and you. You know that—”

Wukong forced a cheeky smile onto his face.

“Hey, Guan Yin, you know me.” He interrupted, his voice trembling heavily. “I never, obeyed rules, and I always broke promises...” He chuckled mirthlessly. “Remember when I wreaked havoc in the Heavenly Kingdom? that was just because I ate those magic peaches—”

“Wukong.”

“WHAT?!”

Guan Yin refused to let herself be deterred by the abrupt snarl. “You know... This is a serious issue. you can't hold it in and push people away forever. You'll have to tell someone eventually. know it was hard, losing your companions and master—”

“YOU KNOW NOTHING!!”

This time Guan Yin did wince at Wukong's tone. She had never imagined that this was what the monkey being would become—someone who was completely broken by grief and regret, with his sins pressing down on him like that Five-Finger Mountain the Buddha dropped on him. It was hard to believe that he used to be that lively, mischievous monkey who always lived by his own rules and code, forever motivated by righteousness and boundless energy.

Wukong was right, however. He has never lost his close family before, after all.

The monkey seemed to notice Guan Yin's troubled expression, and gave her a simple tired smile.

“But, hey, thanks for the *concern*.” Wukong's tone made him seem much, much older, even though he was already thousands of years old. “I'll consider taking it. I'm sorry this hurt you, but you can always choose not to care. And I deserve anything this—” He held up his full beer cup. “—does to me. Catch ya later.”

Guan Yin watched as Wukong's image dissipated. She didn't wish to see Wukong like this, nothing but a husk of what he used to be, and this was the first time she saw how serious the issue was. However, there was still hope.

“Don't worry, Wukong. Help is on the way.”

~

“Hey Pigs?”

Zhu Ba Jie, more commonly known as Pigsy, turned his plump body away from the Asian-skinned child in front of him.

The young human, Guang, had been the latest of too many humans to count that had fallen into the mountain. Maybe it was just his imagination, but this human felt different from the rest that had fallen to their demise after they chose to leave the safety of the Jade Ruins. There was a somewhat...different air to him, as if the child was a lot more than he seemed...but that did nothing to change the fact that he and his brother wished to protect him, just like they attempted to protect the other children from their murderous brother.

“Wukong’s making a speech.”

The former pig-being glared at his more toned and muscular brother.

“Sandy, that stupid jerk isn’t worth watching. So get your eyes off that magic mirror and focus on dinner with the kid.” He spat in disgust, signaling to Guang, who was sitting opposite him and next to his brother.

Sha Wujing sighed at his brother’s hostile tone. He could understand his brother’s unwillingness to forgive Wukong for the immoral action of killing innocent children to break the seal, but he never understood why he held onto his loathing for so long

His finned ears twitched as his thoughts were cut off by Pigsy’s rambling to the human child.

“You see that monkey on that magic mirror right there? That’s what killed, like, thousands of human kids before you. This is exactly why you never leave this place, kid. We can’t risk you getting killed by that heartless—”

“Pigsy!!” The man in question flinched as his shoulders were forcefully grabbed by muscular arms. “Have you ever took the darn time to take a close look at *our brother?*”

“Sands not in front of the kid!!” The man’s eyes darted toward their visitor frantically, but he seemed to be unmoved by the conflict.

“Just look!!”

Grumbling reluctantly, the former pig being squinted at the silver mirror in front him, to see Wukong standing on a golden stage in a public square, speaking into the mic.

“It’s just another speech about killing kids and getting—Wait, is he drunk!?” Pigsy’s eyes widened as he saw through the Monkey’s magic. He scowled at the hidden crimson face. “Oh great, now he’s a drunkard. As if being a crazy murderer wasn’t enough—”

“For heaven’s sake, Pigsy!!” He flinched at the loud, thick voice. Wujing sounded like he was about to cry. “If you hadn’t left, he wouldn’t have to drink to stop himself from breaking in front of a crowd!!”

“He’s a child murderer—just think about how many kids he killed!! How many we failed to save from death!!”

“He just wanted to save us from this prison of a mountain! and killing kids was literally the only way to go! Did you actually think he actually had a choice? Did you think he actually wanted that?! Sometimes I think you seriously don’t care about him anymore.”

Wujing spat, turning away abruptly from a trembling Ba Jie.

“I want to go.”

Both brothers jumped as Guang spoke—They’ve forgotten his presence in their heated argument.

“Let me get out there..” He repeated, his voice determined.

“D—didn’t you hear anything we just said, kid? You’d die the second you step out of there!” Pigsy found his eyes warming up with tears. “No! We can’t risk another kid getting killed! You’re not walking out that door!”

“W—why would you want to leave?” Wujing asked shakily. “k—kid, I understand you miss your family, but—”



Suddenly, Guang walked forward to hug the two former buddhas.

“I understand that you’re both concerned about my safety, Mr. Ba Jie, Mr. Wujing. But there is nothing you need to worry about. This is my destiny after all.”

~

*The human must be enjoying his or her time with Pigsy and Sandy.*

Wukong thought to himself as he lounged idly on his throne, supporting his head with one hand on his cheek.

*Pigsy and Sandy must be doing a good job at helping the human feel at home, after they failed to have all these humans stay in the Jade Ruins. He couldn’t help but let out a dry chuckle. That’s good. They don’t have to lose another child anymore.*

“Your majesty!! Your majesty!! You have got to hear this!! Guess what we found out there?!”

Wukong felt the bottom of his stomach drop as he saw the ecstatic grin on the general’s face.

Before he could speak, Ne Zha stood aside with a flourish to reveal a small child flanked by two armored celestial spirits, his expression not showing the slightest hint of fear. But Wukong thought he saw sadness in his soft black eyes.

He turns away briefly, trying to hide the uproar of guilt toward his chest.

“Good.” He forces a smile onto his face as he looked to his trusty soldiers. “Now leave us alone. I’ll see if the kid’s essence breaks the seal or not.”

The soldiers bowed, and Ne Zha bounded out, followed by the two guards.

The monkey emperor sighed.

*Here we go again.*

“You know, kid, you look awfully calm for someone about to die. Were you trying to kill yourself or something?” Wukong tried to cover up his guilt with a flippant tone as he kneeled down. Opportunities to talk to the children that were about to die under his staff were rare, but that suit him well enough. He didn’t want to get attached, after all. But this kid made him curious for once.

Then he stepped forward.

“Your majesty, may I?”

Without waiting for a response, the child touched Wukong’s forehead with his palm.

Blinding light flashed in Wukong’s face, but it faded in an instant and when he opened his eyes cautiously again, they widened into saucers at the sight in front of him.

“Hello, Monkey.”

There, glimmering with golden light, was his former master Tang Xuan Zang.

“It has been a while, hasn’t it?”

“M–Master....” the Monkey stuttered as he tried to comprehend what was happening before him. Tears warmed his eyes. “B–But–”

“Guan Yin reincarnated me.” His warm black eyes looked straight into Wukong’s teary golden ones. “And can I say I really am glad to see you again.”

“...I–I’m not worthy to be your apprentice....” Wukong’s voice started to shake heavily as memories flashed before his eyes. “I–I killed so m–many k–kids...thousands....b–buddhists d–don’t kill, y–you told me that right? w–well, guess what, I’ve b–broken that now, like I always do–”

The monk embraced the monkey as he started breaking down in tears.

“T–These kids d–died for nothing....t–they were innocent a–and...o–oh, their faces...”

“Shh, shh, Wukong–”

“Pigsy and Sandy left b–because o–of that....I–I wanted to s–set everyone free...b–but that’s no excuse for killing, r–right..?”

“Wukong...hey..”

“ a–and, every d–day, i drank s–so much....T–The Jade Emperor...H–he worried a–about m–me....I f–ailed him...I failed everyone...and y–you...I’m sorry...I’m so sorry..I’m so sorry–”

“H–hey, Wukong, look at me.”

Xuan Zang held the monkey being’s cheeks and forced him to look up at him.

“I told you to obey the rules on our journey because killing was optional.” He said, in a gentle but firm voice as he wiped the monkey’s tears with his thumb. “But here, those demons made it the only choice to kill children to break the seal. By killing me, the demon child forced you to kill him–It was never your fault. I knew that from the start. And from then on, you wanted to free them, did you not? You didn’t kill thousands of children for your own gain–you did it for everyone. I’m sure they all commemorate your achievements, not count your losses.” His smile faded. “But, bottling all your feelings and grief and acting like you’re alright isn’t the way to go. You don’t have to face anything alone–your citizens, the Heavenly kingdom, Pigsy and Wujing, and I, we’ll always be here for you.” He smiled again.as Wukong tried to speak. “And Pigsy and Wujing will forgive you. They’ll understand what you’re going through.”

For what felt like the first time in forever, a true smile appeared on Sun Wukong’s face.

“Thank you...Master..” The monkey could only say as he hugged back. “thank you...thank you...”

“You don’t have to thank me, Monkey, because you deserve this.” He pulled back slightly. “...I will break the seal now.” Xuan Zang replied with a touch of regret. “But we’ll see each other again soon, where we belong. And always remember this, Monkey–You’ll get through whatever perils thrown at you. You are the Great Sage Equal to Heaven, after all.” Wukong chuckled at that.

“Yeah.”

Wukong felt his master fading as he wiped stray tears from his eye.

“See you soon.”



~

“The seal has broken.”

“Your Majesty....why are your eyes red?”

“Long story.”

*The road to change will be hard. Wukong could almost hear his master tell him. Or was it just himself? Sometimes the memories will come back. They'll still haunt you time to time. But hey, if you can defeat actual demon kings in real life, you'll soon get the hang of this. Hey, this is just like another journey, isn't it? Just a bit more challenging—but you got this.*

“Let's go.”

## An Explanation

*West Island School, Boerner, Freya – 14*

A very, very long time ago the world was a mess. I wish that there was a way to more eloquently put it, but I think that that just about sums it up. The death toll was at its peak. People were jumping off buildings to kill themselves and others were being gunned down in the street. Disease ran rampant in underdeveloped countries and famine was prevalent all over the world. Terrorism ravaged each and every nation. Daily terrorist attacks plagued the news yet eventually news ceased to be reported as there were no longer enough journalists left alive to do so. The biggest trends became murder and kidnapping and other assortments of crude deeds. With everyone committing such unforgivable acts laws had zero impact or weight on the actions of most people. The police were no help, they were committing crimes too.

The world was in turmoil.

Everyone thought that the human race was doomed, that we would eventually spiral so far down that there would be no way for us to climb out of the hell we lead ourselves into. This all changed at 9:03 on the 29th of February, when abruptly there was a massive acceleration in the rate of evolution, so significant that you could see as people's appearances shifted. Hardly anyone survived, bodies dropped all around the world, never to move again. It was on this day that the human race was thrown out of one hell and tossed into another.

The Boom, as it later became known, changed the human race.

Suddenly human beings had skin as tough as titanium, blood hadn't been seen since the 2070's. Immune systems were tougher than ever and disease went extinct. No one drowned because of a new evolutionary trait in lungs, and no one starved because there was always enough food to go around. Murderer's quit trying to murder because you couldn't kill anyone, kidnappers stopped trying to kidnap people because... well I'm not really sure why but the point is that they stopped! Terrorists also stopped terrorising, still not sure why but maybe because everyone else stopped doing bad things? Either way, the world was a much safer place.

Aging slowed so when you reached 100 you looked 40 and at that point stopped aging.

People stopped dying.

Immortality was born.

In the Days of Mortality people dreamed of being immortal, wrote books about it and even invented Gods that were. They never imagined the downfalls of living forever. You had to live *forever*. Things got boring. Suddenly you had *deja vu* on a daily basis and nothing surprised you anymore, as you had seen it all. There was nothing new to experience because you had experienced everything already.

So, people started to attempt suicide, but that didn't work. If you jumped off the buildings that remained after the Days of Mortality then you would not splat and become a Jason Pollock painting on the pavement, you would simply make a significant dent. If you tried to shoot yourself the bullet would ricochet off your skin. If you injected yourself with a manufactured fatal disease you would recover in a day. After a pathetically long period of people trying desperately hard to kill themselves, a large percentage of the population moved from the Western Hemisphere, to the Eastern Hemisphere, living in China, to experience more. That's where I am. China. I'm 23 years old and have already experienced all that I could possibly experience. The word 'experience' holds little meaning for me now.

"So, what have you experienced so far?"

"Literally everything."

"Tell me about your experiences."

"Well I've experienced literally *everything* you could so I don't know where to start."

Many of the conversations I have revolve around *experience* and *life* and *adventure*! It's like living in an inspirational quote. I want to die. I'm sick of the inspirational quote. It's dull. It's optimistic. I want pessimistic. I want the possibility of being doomed! But that's never going to happen, so, I'm going to try to die. We'll see if I do, but if I don't...

What was the saying? *If you journey to the west you journey to your death*. I always thought it was strange that the saying was still uttered as we couldn't die, but I placed my faith in it, maybe poorly. I hoped that that faith wouldn't come back to bite me.

### **5 HOURS, 37 MINUTES BEFORE**

“Tickets! We need tickets!” the short woman screamed, her shrill voice carrying across the field. I was lying on the ground and started groping the air, as if I could latch onto it and pull myself up. When I finally stood up I stumbled over towards her, many others trailing behind me, equally as exhausted. “Ticket!” she snarled at me, baring yellowed teeth and unnaturally sharp canines.

I practically threw it at her, annoyed at her tone. She glared at me as she looked it over suspiciously, eyes searching every inch of the orange paper ticket. Satisfied, she flung it at the ground as if it had personally crossed her, and waved me along. Readjusting my bag I walked along the stone path, holding my shoes in my hand. My feet scraped along the stone, stabs of pain shooting up my ankles whenever I took a step. Grimacing, I glanced down at my feet, covered in blisters, swollen and discoloured. Gagging, I stopped as the world started to spin. I had been walking for a week, in the direction of the West. I had never journeyed to the West before. So few had and couldn’t tell me how to prepare for the expedition. My shoes were worn through after the first three days, blisters by the fourth. I felt confused as to why, if my skin was as tough as titanium, I could get blisters. It was puzzling. For a little while, I made my way forwards in a haze, vision blurring, barely keeping a hold on my bag, fatigued and emotionally drained. We might be immortal, but we still felt pain.

An animalistic cry rang out as I fell to the ground. My side collided with the stone and was followed by a shriek of anguish, as hands gently picked up my body and kind murmurs caressed my ears I realised that I had been crying out. The world spun around me and as I slowly entered a tunnel of darkness my head lolled back in a man’s arms, and I saw it. The perfect SunTrain. Flawless steel reflecting the sun in every direction made my eyes water, and the sleek shape made me feel content. I had always loved an engineering masterpiece. It hovered above a long, equally sleek metal cylinder, which flew away from me and across the Pacific, to the West. The old ‘rail’ no longer looked like a metal ladder laid on the ground, it was just a strip of cylindrical metal that was magnetically attracted to the SunTrain above it.

The darkness enveloped me and I drowned in vivid dreams.

### **5 HOURS, 9 MINUTES BEFORE**

Sitting in a room, watching a clock, the minute hand travelled around the clock at an irritatingly slow pace. I tried to move from my seat but as I writhed, snakes exploded from the abyss surrounding me and wrapped themselves around my wrists and the chair I was sitting in, binding me.

It was a rocking chair, invented by Benjamin Franklin, my hero: an incredible inventor from the United States of America. He died from a pleuritic attack when he was 84, he was considered old at the time of his death. Nowadays he would be considered young, and a miracle, to die from something as fickle as a pleuritic attack? Lucky little weakling!

A compass appeared out of the darkness, replacing the clock. The arrow began whirling randomly and I panicked. Why? I wasn’t sure. Screaming like a banshee, twisting in hopes of escape, fear engulfed me.

### **5 HOURS, 2 MINUTES BEFORE**

I awkwardly jerked up, awakened from my nightmare. My eyes flew to every corner of the room, my body tensed as I realised that I was on the SunTrain. I guessed someone had carried me in. There wasn’t any security. In the Days of Mortality there was, in order to prevent people from bringing dangerous items onto trains and planes that could inflict death. Now, there was no death, so there was no point in having security.

I was sitting on a padded bench in a disgustingly orange room, the walls curving up to meet the ceiling, a circular window gave me a clear view of the ocean. It gleamed as the SunTrain raced across it, heading west, to the Western Hemisphere, to what was left of America.

My mother once told me a story about the ocean, how it had been moulded with diamonds so that it glittered and shone. “A jewellers greatest inspiration,” she used to say. I doubt it, but it was a beautiful story. Always made me smile. I thought she was exaggerating the ocean. But she wasn’t, it was just as beautiful as she said it was. Impossibly so.

“Pardon me,” a soft voice snapped me out of my day dream and yanked me back to the train. I met the warm brown eyes of a tall, caramel-skinned woman.



She held a tray in her dainty hands. “Food,” she asked, her musical voice ringing in the small compartment. I eyed her dubiously, as I did to all people I didn’t know, but there was nothing even remotely unsettling about her. The warm eyes and kind smile won me over in an instant and my hand darted out, plucked a cookie off the tray and shoved the cookie unceremoniously into my mouth. She offered me a sweet smile. I offered her my back as I turned into myself, trying to hide that I was choking on the cookie.

It tasted like sawdust.

“We’ll have arrived in the Western Hemisphere, also known as ‘The USA’, in two hours, darling,” she whispered.

“Ok,” I barely make a sound but hoped she heard me.

She lingered by the doorway and I willed her to leave as if it would actually make a difference.

“Are you alright, darling?” she inquired.

I didn’t answer. She left.

## 2 HOURS 55 MINUTES

I fell out of the SunTrain along with a mere handful of others and landed on the grounds of what was formerly known as the United States of America. I grunted and pushed myself up off the ground and was sorely disappointed by what I saw ahead of me. A barren wasteland stretched out for miles beyond me. Every hundred yards a collapsed house dotted the horizon. Cows grazed on what little grass there was and trees swayed slightly in the cold, harsh wind. I was unimpressed with the USA. After hauling myself up, I began the march further West. I looked down at the ground and watched one foot move in front of the other over the uneven ground. It was oddly fascinating watching your feet move, one in front of the other. The more attention you focused on them the more important they seemed to be. But I guess that it’s like that for anything. For hours I watched my feet, one in front of the other, one in front of the other, one in front of the other. It was a reliable, rhythmic, constant pattern, I trusted it. When I glanced back up I was shocked to see that the sun was starting to set and a house was coming into view. I froze. I suppose this wasteland wasn’t so barren.

Was that really it?

*The house?* I knew it was in America, I just didn’t know where, I didn’t know it would be so close to the shore. My plan wasn’t thought out and was pulled together at the last minute. I went in knowing that there *was* a house. Where? No clue. What it looked like? No clue. Who owned it? No clue. That it existed? Well yeah but it was just a rumour.

But it had to be *the* house, it couldn’t be anything else. It *couldn’t* be anything else.

Hope gripped me and I started to move. Slowly at first, recovering from the sudden shock, but as the full impact of what I was seeing hit me, I sped up, first simply jogging, but then moving so quickly the world blurred around me. My feet flew and I was reminded of the days I would run through the streets of China, searching for new experiences. Now I ran to my newest and final experience.

Death.

I yelped as my foot caught on something. The last thing I saw as I plunged forward was the earth, and a single wildflower.

## 24 MINUTES BEFORE

Moaning, I rolled over, my head pulsing. My thoughts were incoherent and didn’t make sense to me. I crawled forwards for a little while, my eyes sealed shut, my hands seeing on their behalf. My fingers trailed over small crevices in the earth, and enclosed around slim blades of grass. The soil was grainy and as my palms scraped across it and I imagined thousands of microorganisms living in the soil getting on with their uneventful lives, completely unbothered by my existence. I think that went for most people, they weren’t bothered by my existence, didn’t care much. *That* was what bothered *me*, infuriated me, that in the long run nothing mattered and that we were born only to live forever and come to terms with the fact that ultimately, we were significantly insignificant. In the Days of Mortality you were born to die. Now, we weren’t even born to die. We were born... and then what?

*Well ladies and gentlemen, then we get to live forever. Yay! Go crazy!*

I reprimanded myself for my strange thoughts and how I was increasingly talking to myself. I tore my eyes from the ground and looked up, and at the sight of the house it all came rushing back. I gasped,

sucking in breath and broke into a sprint. Well, not really a sprint, more like a very fast amble. The house steadily grew larger. In no time at all, I was screaming manically and slamming my hands on the sign hanging from the door that read, 'Manor of the West'. For a while, I understood myself, but slowly my words became garbled and a mess of vowels and consonants that didn't quite string together.

For what felt like hours, but was probably a few minutes, I stood there, repeatedly hitting the door. My fists collided with the door again, and again, and again. The hope that previously gripped me, slowly slipped away. I sank down to the ground and from my vantage point observed the house. It was startlingly well kept, windows clean and polished, wood smooth and even, roof beautifully tiled. The porch I lay on was also very clean, probably for my sole benefit. I heard, a week ago, that the Manor of the West was a house that killed you, in fact, the only place in the world where you could die, so naturally, I plotted a course for it. And here I was, at the Manor of the West, sobbing on the floor because I couldn't die. I must have been a pitiful sight.

## **5 MINUTES BEFORE**

Rousing me from self-pity, a painfully loud creak made me flinch and I lurched in the direction that the sound originated from, but as I lurched my nose came into contact with a black, leather boot. I recoiled.

"Oh my—," I rapidly shut my mouth at the sight of the tall man standing over me. He was handsome, in a rugged, messy sort of way, with wrinkled clothes and wrinkled skin around his eyes that somehow worked for him. He had dark, dark eyes that vaguely reminded me of black holes, empty and dangerous.

"Here to die?" he wondered, roughly jabbing my side with his foot.

I stuck my hand up, "Absolutely." Staggering to my feet I stared at him, "Sign me up to death." I coughed awkwardly.

He smirked at me and opened the door wider behind him and pulled me through into a cavernous room. There was a lone chair in the centre of the room, a rocking chair. It made me smile, much like the ocean did. The room had black walls and hung on them were exquisite paintings, displaying every colour imaginable. One was of a beautiful woman with brown hair, smiling a mysterious smile. Another illustrated the sky, the stars swirling above a small town. I briefly forgot about the chair and stared at the paintings, they were unreal in their beauty, almost ethereal.

## **2 MINUTE BEFORE**

"Sit in the chair," the man demanded. I tiptoed across the floor towards the chair and did as he asked, folding my legs underneath me. "Ready?"

"Indeed!" I answered cheerfully. In truth, I didn't feel cheerful. I felt... conflicted? Lost? Confused?

But why?

I wanted to die. I really wanted to die.

Didn't I?

On the edge of my periphery I saw the man exit the room from a door I couldn't discern from the wall.

## **THE MINUTE**

Ok, I wanted to die. Life was pointless. Insipid. Futile. Inconsequential. Lame. It had been my whole life. But could I make it better? In the East life was routine. Here in the West everything seemed dull and broken and bare, surely life wouldn't be great. But was I trying hard enough to make it better, to really, truly be happy? Did I really want to die or was I just bored of living my life. If I tried harder, would life improve? Maybe it would. Didn't I owe it to myself to find out? I should've. Definitely. I needed to at least atte—

# Journey(s)

*West Island School, Tsang, Jessica – 14*

It's almost blinding. The blue light. But I force myself to go back into the file. It's too dark to see properly, but the tablet's screen brightness is too high for my liking.

The ground is cold underneath me, wind blowing through, ruffling my short hair. Elliott's sleeping in front of me, his strawberry strands flipped up so that they reveal his original black roots underneath his immaculate cut. Orange is curled up at his feet, but he isn't asleep. His own, bright blue eyes stare at the fire burning in our little hideaway spot.

I swipe on the screen, trying to pull my coat tighter around my body as the temperature drops. My fingers shaking as I press the button on my tablet, showing up the government file.

I pause. It feels like its taunting me, telling me *"You finally got what you deserved."* in its beige coloured icon and untitled name. It is the reason why I am here, on the run, with my best friend and a dog that is now mine.

I open it, finding the documents I've looked at a thousand times over and over again. The string of letters and numbers I can't dig in my mind to find any meaning, the numbers at the front of every single document, showing what order they're meant to be read in.

I've looked through all of them already, each about fifty pages long, but then again, I've got a lot of time on my hands.

I scroll through them again, mindlessly, my eyes almost drifting off with strain and tiredness. It's pretty much all the same, how the government's robots and technological advancements had finally turned on us as humanity, and everything the government is doing to cover it up, trying to save it. How much money they're pouring into I.T. guys to save it, coders, hackers, anyone they can pull in using their large sums and rolls of money all being shoved into their faces.

I chuckle at the thought of it. Elliott and I had always found problems with the government's robots when we hacked them for fun before school started or during summer break. Store bought were the best. They had almost solid codes, of course, they had a few knots, but then again, which code didn't? The government ones had strains of things wrong with them though, first it was programming, then it was settings, then it was the codes, then it was the firewalls and then it was the virus the government installed into them to keep them safe and to stop anyone from hacking into them. Elliott and I destroyed the viruses in about a minute and reprogrammed the robots *and* fixed the codes. So much for not hacking into them.

Truth is, the government probably can't save their robots. They can only destroy them. They've shelled out too many, too fast for too long, and it's practically impossible to knock all of them down. People would be dead before they managed to do so.

A warning sign flashes on my screen, telling me to leave or to be arrested because I hacked in. Too late. I was already camping out in the middle of the forest outside of my city, already being shot out of my home.

Orange sits up, his blue eyes scanning the trees.

"Orange?" I whisper. He turns his head to me, his big blue eyes bright and concerned. "Orange, what's wrong?" He whimpers suddenly, getting up from the tangle that is Elliott's legs and walks over to me. His eyes dart back and forth, as if something was going to pop up from behind the leaves.

Suddenly, I get his message. Slowly, I crawl over Elliott's sleeping body, and throw a rock onto the fire, knocking out the flames. Orange whimpers softly in the darkness, calling me back to him.

His eyes follow me as I cuddle back up to his little body. Even though our hideaway has turned dark and grey, his red fur is still visible in the moonlight, the ends sparking like embers have clung onto it. His blue eyes bore into mine. From what I can tell, he's a mutated dog which is how he got the blue eyes and his mother probably turned him out of his litter because they were different.

"Shush." I mumble, making Orange's jaw snap shut. Elliott's still sleeping. I nudge his leg with my foot, but he merely turns over to our side, his face slack with sleep. "Elliott. Elliott."

I push him a little harder with my foot, but Orange perks up on my body, his legs standing on the bone of my thigh, with his ears up. I look at him strangely, wondering if he's okay, when I hear what he's hearing.

It's almost nothing, like the quiet thrum of a hummingbird's heart. But it soon grows loud enough to not be ignored. It's still soft, but it's there.

Footsteps. Not marches. But quick, unsteady footsteps of people who are running through the very leaves Orange was staring at, trampling dirt and green under their feet.

I almost let out a gasp, but my hand covers my mouth just in time. But now, I reach forward, yanking back Elliott's leg so he wakes up.

"Wha—?" A sleepy murmur comes from Elliott's mouth and I clamp my hand over his mouth. His wide eyes swivel to me, bright with confusion and fear.

"They found us." I whisper, my voice hardly there, and Elliott's head barely shakes before a beam of light swipes through where the fire used to be.

It disappears, but then it comes back, fixated on the ashy pile of branches and leaves.

"Hey! I found something! A fire, I think." A man's voice.

My heart feels like it's being squeezed with a fist, blood spurting into my throat, making it tight and cold and hard to talk.

My feet shrink back in their scuffed sneakers. I feel Orange tremble next to my ribs.

Then a shadow casts over as the flashlight disappears. Kneeled knees appear at the mouth of the hole, clothed in ironed denim jeans. A pair of feet poke out from behind the blue, clad in newer sneakers than mine. A man.

"Go, go, go!" Elliott's voice is husky with sleep, but there's no doubting the determination in his quiet voice.

"Where?" I whisper back, watching the man out of the corner of my eye. He seems to be lowering himself into our hideaway spot.

Elliott's strawberry hair flips around as he turns around to look behind us. The ditch which is our little hideaway spot has a small tunnel, where the roots of a tree above trickle down and brush your skin. It leads out to the other side, but it doesn't guarantee a far enough getaway.

It's barely big enough for a six year old girl, and Elliott and I would be able to get through, but it would take too long. Orange is the only one who can run through fast enough.

I turn to Orange, who seems to know what I'm thinking. His usually dreamy eyes have turned inquisitive and his head is cocked to the side.

"Orange, go through and distract them from us." I whisper urgently, my eyes darting across his little face. There's no time to explain. Orange's face perks up, and he almost nods, before he darts through the tunnel.

I turn back around, seeing a shirt being pulled up by the rocks and branches that jut out from the opening, showing off the man's midriff. He's almost down.

My legs have started to tremble, and I hug them closer to me, waiting for Orange.

Suddenly, a bark sounds out through the dark forest and the sound of screams fill the sky for just a second. It's almost wonderful. Another bark sounds out, then a growl.

"Rory! Rory! What on earth are you doing?" A woman's voice.

"I—I saw something here." The man sounds off.

"A dog's here. Growling and spitting at us." The woman spits. "Terrible creatures. Don't know why we still have them around." The man says nothing, but his midriff, then his legs and his feet disappear as he hoists himself out of the ditch.

"Go, go, go!" Elliott says, his voice loud but muffled, and we both shoot into the tunnel, but get stuck. My fingers plough along the edges of the tunnel, my fingernails dragging deeper and deeper into the dirt. Roots stick out and tickle our skin. It's hot in there, heavy, and the air feels like it's pressing me down, pushing my ears together and sitting on my head so I fall. We both crawl through the tunnel, slowly, but steadily, each step hoping and hoping that someone won't catch us.

It feels like we were stuck for an hour, but Elliott escapes out the other side, and drags me by the wrists so we fall forward.

Flashlights are waving through the night sky, shining different coloured beams into the air. It makes the dust light up and dance in their artificial light.

A soft yap comes from the distance, and I stand up, so quickly the blood seems like it's flowing the wrong way in me for a moment.

Orange comes at me, his eyes sparking. I crouch down and he runs into my arms, tail wagging excitedly.

"Li. Li!" Elliott's hushed voice runs through the happy moment, making it melt. "Come on. We've got to go."



I look up at him, and his urgent eyes meet mine, and I get up.

"Okay, but—" A flashlight's beam shines barely a metre away from the both of us and I freeze, my words growing cold in my mouth. My eyes swivel to Elliott's, and I can barely make out the words coming out of him.

"Go go go go go." We both start to take off, kicking up leaves behind us as we run. I take out the tablet from under my arm, and start tapping on it hurriedly.

"What, are they, using?" I ask between desperate gasps for air, my finger on the screen of my tablet. My sides are already starting to hurt. Elliott looks back as he sprints forward, his eyes squinting behind his blue rimmed glasses. He's barely panting, let alone having his sides start to hurt.

"Electronic." He doesn't say much more and looks forward, but he knows that I've gotten his drift. It's the only word I needed.

I swipe and unlock my tablet, dragging up a program. The hologram appears before me as I'm running, the blue light jumping about.

"Elliott." I gasp. "Do you have a bug?" He nods, and reaches into his back pocket, making him stumble a little. He pulls out a small, metal compartment, which at the click of the little red button on the side, turns into a tiny, little handmade robot, one of the many we made when we were six in Elliott's garage with his dad.

I run a little faster to grab it off his hand, and I connect my tablet to the robot. It bursts to life in my hand, shaking, and my thumb creeps up the side, pressing the button.

I press one of the surrounding devices in the area, and highlight the tabs on my screen, getting all of the machinery in a five mile radius, and the bug, scuttling around my hand with its spiky legs, ejects its return button in my hand before it flies off to infect and disable the guns.

"Where are we running?" I ask. My legs are starting to burn and Elliott looks back at me, concern etched on his face, clearly seeing my running abilities to the maximum plastered on my sweaty and most likely tomato red face.

"West." He says, barely tired. "It's always better. They're always going to go North. West is best. They're not going to find us as easy." He holds up his phone in his hand, the blue light showing off the digital compass. Sure enough, the needle points to our direction, West, not North.

"This way. There's a river we can follow." Elliott says. Orange brushes up my leg, reminding me he's there.

We reach the river, which is smaller than anticipated and more like a very wide brook, but we follow it. The footsteps behind us seem to have receded far away enough. But swipes of flashlights and the electronic guns and Tasers are much too close and visible to be comfortable.

"Keep going." I whisper. But it feels like the wind's carried my voice, and soon enough, the calm, careful footsteps we hear turn into quickened ones.

"Run!" Elliott's voice pierces through the night, like a gunshot ringing throughout the woods. We sprint down the side of the brook, watching it as it widens into a proper river, albeit one spotted with rocks. Near where the river splits into two, one widening and one thinning, a small cave opens up.

"Wait, wait, wait." Elliott skids to the side of the cave, surveying it before jumping in. "Get in." We all hop in, and I scramble for my flashlight which is attached to the side of my bag to light it all up.

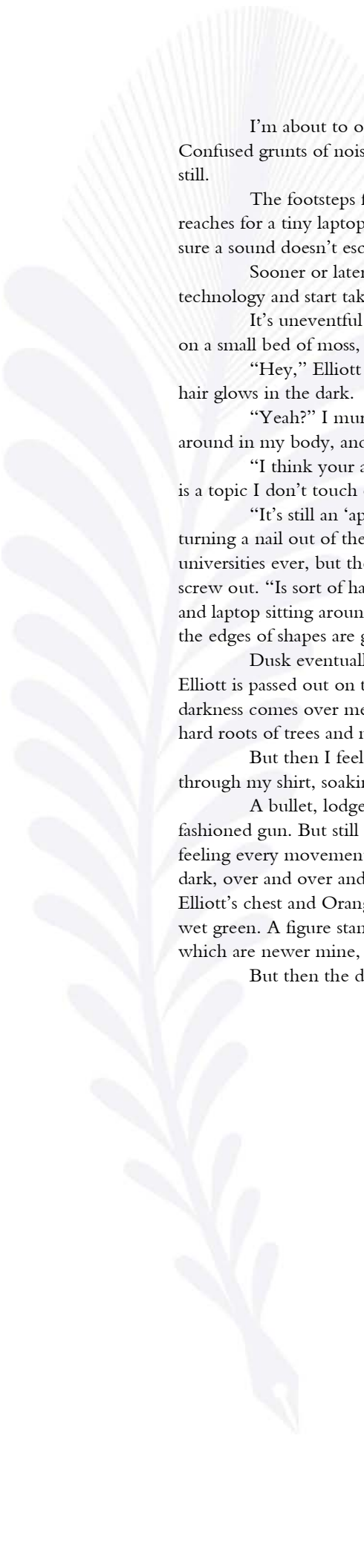
The beam of light illuminates a heap of old technology. Old dishwashers, laptops, chunks of desktop computers. Keyboards are scattered everywhere, with some of their keys lying about. A 'k' key lies near our feet. Old computer mice are fraying at the wires where they would have to be connected, old tablets and thick, old fashioned phones lie at the base. A television which looks to be about at least a century old sits next to one that looks newer, but still ancient.

"It's a tech junkyard." Elliott's voice is incredulous. "I thought they got rid of these ages ago." He leans forward, on his knees, scrounging throughout the old technology.

"I think these were one of the ones they didn't find. None of these are on or activated." I murmur, tucking the flashlight under my arm as I join Elliott in rummaging through the heap. "Look, none of these are any recent models. They've all probably only been in here for at least about twenty years."

"We could do some stuff with this." Elliott says. I can almost see the cogs in his head turning, the gears shifting as they get ready to churn out some brand new idea. "We could create something. We just, we just need tools."





I'm about to open my mouth to speak, but the sudden thrumming of footsteps makes me stay shut. Confused grunts of noise come from the people above us, and Elliott's eyes are wide in his face, his chest still.

The footsteps fade out as time passes by, but even after the footsteps have disappeared, Elliott gently reaches for a tiny laptop, clunky in size and reaches for one of the tools I've taken out of my bag, making sure a sound doesn't escape from the rusty machinery.

Sooner or later, we both lean back against the rocks, each with our own little piece of old technology and start taking it all apart.

It's uneventful but strangely therapeutic, when we're both taking apart old models. Orange sleeps on a small bed of moss, bound to wake up with his red fur covered in wet green.

"Hey," Elliott whispers into the dark. It's grown a little lighter with the moon, and his dyed red hair glows in the dark.

"Yeah?" I murmur back. It should be safe to talk normally now, but fear still follows my blood around in my body, and it makes me alert and wary.

"I think your ancestor would be proud of you." Elliott's voice is slightly playful, knowing that this is a topic I don't touch on very often. I roll my eyes.

"It's still an 'apparently' in my head." I say, taking one of my screwdrivers from the floor and turning a nail out of the board. "Xuanzang did probably travel ages and go and start one of the first universities ever, but the fact mum still tells me we're related and that," I pause for a minute, taking the screw out. "Is sort of hard for me to believe." Elliott smirks in the dark and settles back, parts of dishwasher and laptop sitting around his legs. The moon is a spotlight, illuminating everything so that it all shines and the edges of shapes are glittering silver.

Dusk eventually rises, thin rays of sunshine starting to appear. My eyes are heavy, my hands slow. Elliott is passed out on the wall, his eyes shut and his chest filling with air as he takes his breaths. A curtain of darkness comes over me, and it feels like I'm home, underneath my duvet, a pillow under my head, not the hard roots of trees and my dirt smudged jeans.

But then I feel something warm spread through my stomach, and I look down, and I see red spread through my shirt, soaking through, and the first stab of pain shoots through me.

A bullet, lodged, so neatly in the centre of my abdomen, an old fashioned bullet from an old fashioned gun. But still strong enough to kill a human being. Pain starts to alert me, and I sit up gently, feeling every movement in agony. My head swims with pain as dark fades into light and light fades into dark, over and over and over again. My eyes flicker to Elliott and Orange, and I see that a bullet is stuck in Elliott's chest and Orange's fur is matted with blood. He would've woken up with blood on his red fur. Not wet green. A figure stands at the mouth of the cave, his hands outstretched, and I recognize the sneakers which are newer mine, lit by the rising sun.

But then the dark comes again, and the light does not.

# The New Journey to the West

*Yew Chung International School—Secondary, Chen, Chia Yi – 14*

Zhang Yueying fumbled with the jade bracelet around her wrist, the pale green stone cold against her fingers and the summer sun warm on her back. Sitting on the steps that lead to the central garden, she glanced at the various trees, flowers and plants that grew there. From the towering weeping willow that grew in the center of the garden, to the small plum blossom tree that only bloomed in winter. As she stared longingly at the plum blossom tree a memory of her father leading her around the garden as a child surfaced, them walking from plant to plant, hand in hand.

Her father Zhang Qian—a high ranking official—was ordered by the Han Emperor to head west in hope of finding allies to help him fight the growing threat of neighboring clans. Her father took 100 men and marched west the very next day while she sat on the front steps and wept. The parting gift in her hand was the only thing that gave her comfort, a pale green jade bracelet with an intricate design carved into it. He had been gone for 12 years. In that time, she had grown from a naive child into an intelligent young woman, her father’s image growing fainter and fainter every day.

A faint jingle of bells caught her attention, followed by the sound of soft footsteps. Turning around, she caught a glimpse of raven black hair, piled up in a simple hairstyle and secured with a silver pin decorated with a bell; Snow white skin and eyes as big as moons. “Hey guess what?” she said “What is it Zhaojun?” she asked “please don’t tell me that Empress Wei is visiting, I’ve had enough drama this week.”

“I have some good news!” She replied trying to hold in her excitement.

Rolling her eyes she turned to her friend and braced herself against the wave of news, who was she going to talk about this time? Crown Prince Liuju or Princess Weizhang?

“The emperor’s making me a princess!” she blurted out.

“What?” Yueying said almost dropping the bracelet in her hand

Known as the most beautiful person in all of China, Wang Zhaojun was born in a small village near Hubei province. Skilled in calligraphy, painting and music, she caught the eye of the Emperor who brought her into the palace as a lady in waiting. That was where she first met her friend, wide eyed and scared as she was brought in.

“The emperor said he was impressed by my skills in calligraphy and music.” Zhaojun said clapping her hands together “The letter that arrived yesterday explains in more detail”

“How did you get the empress to agree?” Yueying said, eyes clouding with suspicion. The Empress envied Zhaojun’s beauty and had attempted to assassinate her many times, all of them unsuccessful. Which only made her hate Zhaojun even more. Since Yueying had foiled many of the attempts, the Empress wasn’t particularly fond of her either.

“I don’t know.” Zhaojun said, “But don’t mind that now, the ceremony is in a few hours!”

“A few hours?” Yueying exclaimed, “Why didn’t you tell me earlier, I have other things to do in the afternoon!”

“Whether you like it or not, you’re coming with me!” Zhaojun said, pulling Yueying to her feet and dragging her away from the garden.

Yueying didn’t know how she ended up at the palace again. She felt as stiff as wood as she forced herself to place one foot in front of the other as she climbed the palace steps, the black silk dress Zhaojun had picked for her felt like poison ivy against her skin as the fabric swished around her feet with every step she took. Yueying hated the palace. She hadn’t been there in a long time but she still remembered the poisonous courtesans, mask wearing officials and shadows lurking in every corner, waiting to stab and betray at every turn. She dreaded going back there, but she had to go. She couldn’t leave her friend.

It had taken a long time for them to get here. The palace was enormous and filled with winding paths and various intricately decorated buildings where the emperor’s many wives lived. It felt like walking through a maze. In the time it had taken them to get here. The warm afternoon sun had melted into the distant mountains as the sky turned from clear blue to deep purple, accented with rich oranges and pinks. Yueying tried her best to hide her discomfort as she stiffly walked up the last few stairs and stepped into the throne room, she was greeted by a cacophony of voices. Red lanterns hung from the sides of the room, their hazy red glow gave the throne room a warm and festive atmosphere. The room was filled with all types of people, from bubbly princesses gathered around a corner gossiping to servants scurrying around carrying jugs filled to the brim with wine and plates stacked with a variety of snacks and dishes. Yueying walked over to

the one of the empty seats near the edge of the throne room and sat down. Curious pairs of eyes seemed to watch her every step, hushed whispers changed from gossips to the girl in the black dress. Yueying – ignoring the whispers and glares – fixed her gaze on the assortment of food and wine placed in front of her, detached from reality.

Minutes later, the entire room went dead silent. The emperor followed by Zhaojun walked into the throne room. The emperor was dressed in golden robes with his hair tucked under his crown. He looked surprisingly old for his age, as if the stress of ruling the country was physically weighing on his shoulders. All of the guests in the room –along with Yueying– simultaneously stood up and bowed, the words “Your majesty.” echoing throughout the room. The emperor strolled up to the golden throne and sat down, all the guests sitting down afterwards. “Wang Zhaojun please step forward!” the emperor boomed, his eyes glittering with pride. Zhaojun gracefully glided towards the decorative throne and knelt in front of it. Although Zhaojun looked calm and serene, Yueying could tell that her friend was bursting with excitement. “Today, we are gathered here to celebrate the crowning of Wang Zhaojun, palace servant and the most beautiful person in all of China.” The emperor said “with the powers bestowed on me by the heavenly gods, I now crown you princess Wang Zhaojun.” The room exploded into rounds of applause and cheers. Yueying watched Zhaojun as she smiled and closed her eyes, savoring the moment. As the clapping died down, the emperor said. “Princess Wang Zhaojun will be doing her country a great service as she has agreed to marry the warlord Canyu from a neighboring clan in the north.” Zhaojun’s eyes flew open in surprise as she whipped up her head to stare at the emperor in shock. “In doing so, she will be preventing a war between our two clans and strengthening China’s relationships with the clans in the north...” “No.” Zhaojun said cutting the emperor off mid sentence. Even from the corner of the room, Yueying could see that she was trembling with shock and rage. “This was not the agreement, I will not be given away like some doll”

The emperor’s eyes turned from pride to fury as he glared at Zhaojun. “The details were given in the letter, why else would I decide to make some worthless servant girl a princess?” he asked, his voice dangerously low. Tension built in the room as Yueying felt the jade bracelet around her wrist growing colder and colder. “I refuse to go!” Zhaojun said standing up as she fixed her gaze on the emperor.

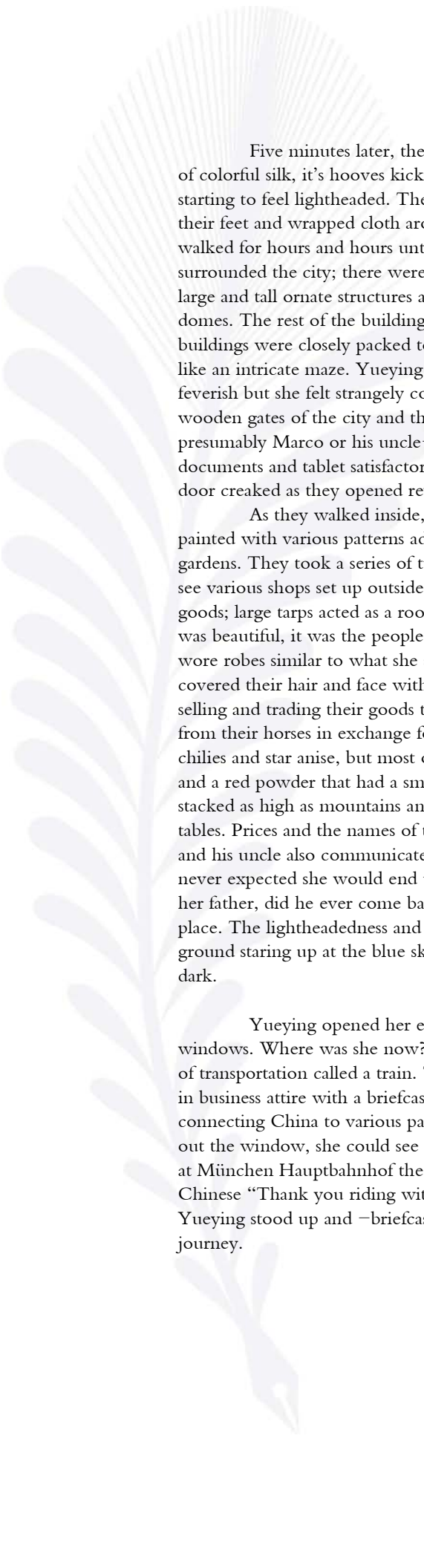
The emperor’s face went red with fury as he proclaimed “You have no saying in this matter, you will be going north to be married tomorrow! Guards! Please escort the princess to her quarters and make sure she gets some rest for her big day. Preferably a room with a lock and guards stationed outside, we wouldn’t want anything to bad happen would we?”

Zhaojun’s eyes went wide as two armed guards began to haul her to the entrance. “Yueying, help!”

Zhaojun shouted, her normally melodic voice turned shrill with fear.

Gathering up her courage, Yueying sprang up from her seat at the table to help her friend, the bracelet around her wrist grew colder and colder until it fractured with a loud snap. Jade colored mist flowed out from the broken pieces and enveloped Yueying. When the mist dispersed, she was no longer in the throne room

She was sitting on a rock next to a pool of water. The terrain surrounding her was rocky with patches of emerald green and yellow grass. The red orange tinted dust covered rock seemed to go on forever. Looking down at her reflection in the water, a face that was foreign to her stared back. Her long charcoal black hair what was normally adorned with various accessories was now tied back into a bun with a worn piece of cloth. Her eyes and lips were smaller that they used to be and her black silk robes were now replaced with worn rags. The face in the water would have been beautiful if her skin did not look sickly pale. Looking around, she saw various people resting on rocks or tending to horses carrying various bags and sacks filled with cloth or spices. They were dressed similarly to Yueying and every one of them looked tired. She closed her eyes and tried to remember something, anything that would tell her where and who she was. She remembered someone calling her name, not Yueying but Chunxiang. A servant sent by the emperor to accompany someone, someone with a strange name...Marco Polo home to Venice. She remembered a boat and sailing for days and days, people around her retching and fainting, a sickly stench in the air. 600 died before they made it to shore. The boat trip was followed by endless days of walking and walking across meadows, deserts and rocky terrain until her feet were blistered and sore. And most importantly, she remembered a jade bracelet shattering onto the rocky dust covered ground and green mist. “We’re only a few hours away from Tabriz,” a voice announced “we leave in five minutes.” Turning around, she saw the person who just spoke turn around and began to adjust some of the bags on the horses. Marco Polo her mind informed her. He had a pale complexion, dark brown hair and unnaturally light colored eyes. Different from the people that she was used to seeing, when she first saw him, Yueying thought he looked like a deity or a demon, something that didn’t seem normal.



Five minutes later, they were walking again. Yueying walked next to a horse carrying various rolls of colorful silk, its hooves kicking up dust as it walked. The sun was blisteringly hot and Yueying was starting to feel lightheaded. The heat was beginning to affect some of the other travelers as some swayed on their feet and wrapped cloth around their heads in an attempt to shield themselves from the sun. They walked for hours and hours until Yueying could see a city in the distance. A large wall made of stone surrounded the city; there were gaps in the wall where a great river flowed through. There were a series of large and tall ornate structures at the center of the city; each of them had multiple sections and onion shaped domes. The rest of the buildings were flat and cube shaped, made with the same material as the wall. The buildings were closely packed together, with barely any space between them. From this far away, it looked like an intricate maze. Yueying lifted a hand to her forehead as another wave of nausea hit her, her skin felt feverish but she felt strangely cold. What was happening to her? As they neared, she could see the large wooden gates of the city and the few guards that guarded it. The person at the front of the line of travelers—presumably Marco or his uncle—handed the guard some papers as well as a golden tablet. After deeming the documents and tablet satisfactory, he motioned to the other guards to open the gate. The heavy wooden door creaked as they opened revealing a bustling city inside.

As they walked inside, Yueying marveled as they walked past various gardens and domed churches painted with various patterns adorned flecks of gold. It was a great city surrounded by beautiful and pleasant gardens. They took a series of turns before they ended up at the market. Once they entered, Yueying could see various shops set up outside the low rise buildings. Most shops had multiple tables overflowing with goods; large tarps acted as a roof and shielded the goods from the sun. Although the architecture in Tabriz was beautiful, it was the people that really stood out. The people of Tabriz had dark skin, eyes and hair; they wore robes similar to what she saw in China. Some men covered their hair with cloth and the women covered their hair and face with cloth, only leaving their eyes revealed. They traveled from stall to stall, selling and trading their goods to the various vendors. Yueying helped take out a wide range of silks and tea from their horses in exchange for gold and spices. Yueying recognized some of the spices such as dried chilies and star anise, but most of them were strange. Such as a yellow powder that tingled Yueying's nose and a red powder that had a smoky smell. The market smelled like cooking food and herbs, spices were stacked as high as mountains and swaths of silk were hung up on the walls or rolled up and placed on the tables. Prices and the names of the goods were written in a language Yueying did not understand, Marco and his uncle also communicated with the people in what Yueying assumed was the same language. She never expected she would end up here. In a foreign place and time. She wondered what had happened to her father, did he ever come back? Or did he die on his journey to the west; maybe he traveled to this very place. The lightheadedness and the headache returned in full force until Yueying found herself lying on the ground staring up at the blue sky. She was thinking about Zhaojun and her father when the world went dark.

Yueying opened her eyes. She was sitting on a soft seat in what seemed like a grey box with windows. Where was she now? Sifting through her host's memories, she found that she was taking a method of transportation called a train. This train was headed to a place called Munich in Germany she was dressed in business attire with a briefcase on the seat next to her, in the case contained various designs for a railroad connecting China to various parts of Europe, it was a part of a plan called 'one belt, one road'. As she peered out the window, she could see various buildings scattered across the lush green landscape. "We have arrived at München Hauptbahnhof the voice coming from the speakers announced in English, German followed by Chinese "Thank you riding with us, we hope you have a great day!" As the train slowed and stopped, Yueying stood up and—briefcase in hand—walked towards the exit. This was the beginning of her next journey.



# Journey to the West: Lost in the Jungle

*Yew Chung International School—Secondary, Cheng, Serena – 14*

Stars gleamed overhead in the dark night sky. Some shone brighter; some dimly. The only sounds that punctuated the jungle air were the crackling and spitting of flames in the campfire. A sudden, wild, breeze leapt across the jungle landscape and the tall plants rippled like waves of the sea. The trees whistled sharply as the flames danced, their sparks illuminated the dark. I sat motionless. As I scanned the star-filled sky, I realised I've been waiting for ages since blacking out... Then finding myself in the middle of a jungle.

Jerking awake, I realised I dozed off. The air felt moist and heavy. I needed water to prevent dehydration and to clean myself. The stains on my skin were making me itchy and smelly. These smells could have attracted predators. I continued to stay in my position, barely able to stand the grumbling from my stomach. After waiting for such a long time, the sky hadn't become a single bit brighter. The grumbling became louder, even painful. With the hunger came thirst. My throat was dry. My body screamed for food and water, I had a headache. The throbbing pain couldn't be ignored anymore. My body needed food and water. I stood up slowly because of numbness in my legs, like a thousand bees trapped inside these thin layers of skin.

Struggling to take steps, I wondered how to look for water. Bending down, I grabbed a long, thick branch and had one end catch fire. I waved my new torch around me and added more wood to my campfire. Walking around in extending circles, I listened carefully for any sound of water. To my left! I heard a quiet trickle of a stream. A rush of joy filled all of me as I ran towards the sound of the stream as if I found gold. My torch lit up the stream, the surface glimmered like thousands of diamonds disappearing and reappearing. Taking a big step towards the stream I knelt down and dipped my head into the water. I greedily gulped mouthfuls, almost choking. The entire stream was mine, I could gobble it all.

Drinking and drinking, I lifted my head. Something jumped out of the water towards me. Its dark deadly eyes stared menacingly. It opened its tremendous jaws and showed its claw like teeth; they were neatly stacked in rows. There were two rows of teeth inside its mouth. From inside, a fork shaped tongue came slithering and stretching towards me. Instinctively jerking backwards, the snake still managed to bite into my arm. I shrieked in pain and hit it with the torch I still held in my other hand, but all it did was dig deeper into my flesh, blood spilled down my side. Feeling faint, I continued to struggle — if I stopped, I would be devoured. It had started to wrap around my body and squeezed me hard. I was losing breath and the battle.

Suddenly, the sky became bright. The stars disappeared; it was noon... instantly. The snake that wrapped around me was startled and loosened its grip. At that moment I leapt up, hit its head with the torch, and fled. Getting back to the safety of my campfire, I stared up at the sky in awe — a giant hand filled half the horizon. It was pulling a massive curtain; behind the curtain was the never-ending darkness. The giant hand reached the horizon and laid the huge curtain down. Just before the lights went out, I glimpsed a grand mountain that sat right where the hand originated.

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After escaping from the snake, I shook in fear by the camp fire and held my wounded arm tightly. Panting, I took deep breaths to calm down. Closing my eyes, I felt the cool breeze and the warm fire. Thoughts and confusion were put aside. Letting the fire fill me, I felt safe. Dreading to get plunged into darkness and danger again, I enjoyed every moment of the fire and safety.

Giving out a sad frustrated sigh, I thought, how am I suppose to get out of here? How did I end up here? I remembered going to the library looking for a good book to read. Scanning each book in the "new arrivals" section, I saw an eye catching title — "Journey to the West: Lost in the Jungle". I flipped open to the first page of the book to see if it's something that'd interest me. It described a jungle with tall mountains on one side and streams turned to rivers, and rivers poured into the ocean. I felt I wasn't interested. Putting the book down, something pulled me forward, pitching my face onto the book; I blacked out. When I came to, I was in the middle of a jungle. The air was freezing, so I started a fire using the skills I learnt in scouts.



Thinking about how I got here, I tried to find a way out. “Am I stuck in a book?”, I said out loud.

Slumping to the ground next to the fire, I hopelessly flinched at the thought of getting out. What do I do? Suddenly the image of the mountain I saw when it was bright and the giant hand came to my mind like loud thunder. The hand must be the person reading this book. The huge curtain was a page. The reader lifted up the curtain therefore light came in. The mountain was tall. If I reached the top of the mountain while the hand was flipping the page, maybe I could grab the hand and get out of this book. Even though I had no certainties, it was my only chance.

Using help from the moonlight and stars, the tall mountain could be seen on the left. Determined to get out of here, I started walking towards the grand mountain.

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The walk to the mountain was difficult, the least worries were the bugs and mosquitoes that caused big, red, itchy bumps. I dodged tree vines, got hit in the head by branches, tripped over tree trunks, and slipped over rocks. Sweat stained my clothes and made me sticky, but I didn't care — I had to get out of here. My wound stopped bleeding and didn't feel numbness, the snake didn't look poisonous anyway. I read a book about snakes; according to that book poisonous snakes usually have elliptical pupils, triangular heads and two large fangs. The snake that attacked me didn't seem to have these features — it had an arrow like head and its teeth were similar sizes and shapes.

Branches and leaves on the ground snapped under my feet as I stepped closer to the mountain. There was an uphill path towards the mountain. Staring at it, I hoped it was my way out.

At first, the mountain wasn't steep. After walking for two hours, I sat leaning against a tree. I felt so tired. Looking towards the sky, I saw stars glimmering in the darkness. If what I had to reach those stars to get out, I would. If I read this book, I wondered would it have been easier to find a way out... Drifting to sleep, two fireflies glowed in the shadows ahead of me. The fireflies caught my attention; therefore I stayed awake looking at them. The fireflies were in perfect sync, when one flew left, the other flew left; when one flew right, the other flew right. Their shape was perfectly symmetrical. Suddenly, the sides of the fireflies tilted up and the middle of the fireflies shifted down. Then these fireflies stayed perfectly still in that position. How strange?

The fireflies moved at a steady pace towards me, then the fireflies roared! I snapped awake. These weren't fireflies! They were beady eyes. Along with the eyes, claws gleamed in the moonlight. The approaching beast bellowed again a long, guttural, growl and displayed its salient and razor-sharp teeth. Its nose snuffled as warmth steamed out of its nostrils and its whiskers were more like splinters. Its fur was as dark and atramentous as the stygian shadows of the jungle. Saliva dripped out of its mouth as it strided towards me. Moonlight lit the entire beast. I stood appalled — it was a panther!

An aghast expression instantly engulfed my face as the panther leapt with its claws surging at my throat. My entire body was overwhelmed with fear and terror — I couldn't move. Just when the panther's claws neared my shoulders, a carmine red staff with glistening aureate trim collided against the panther's exposed gut. The panther recoiled away from me. The panther crouched and leapt towards... Not me, but something besides me.

Looking to the left, stood a man with a brown hairy face and eye brows; most of the hair were on the sides of his face, surrounding his mouth, nose and mischievous eyes. His ears were obviously large on the sides reaching above his eyes. On his head was a gleaming gold ring that looped tightly like the trem of his staff. His nostrils flared up, so his nose were like caverns in the middle of his head. The skin under his eyes were very pink, as if sun burnt. He was dressed in a yellow tunic with matching pants. There were gold circular patterns on his tunic. His tunic hung around his legs, almost as a skirt. Over his tunic, he wore a leather body protector with a short red cape hung over his shoulder. His armbrace were like scales. He wore a carmine and aureate belt like his staff.

He leaned back and waited for the panther to reach him, then he swung his staff like a club lightning fast, smacking it on the head. The panther fell to the man's feet. Slowly it stood up in a daze, and the man held up his forefinger, wagging it left and right. I noticed his furry tail wagging left and right in time with his finger. I watched this scene in astonishment. Every movement he made was of a skilled warrior, flexibly dodged each and every one of the panther's attacks. The way he moved reminded me of... a monkey. Come to think of it, even his appearance was like a monkey... and his tail!

The panther turned and slunked away.

"It's safe now. You could breathe again!", he said with a light tone. That's when I realised I was holding my breath.

"Who are you?", I blurted out.

"I am Sun Woo Kung, body guard and guide of Xuanzang. This staff is my friend, Ruyi Jingu Bang, translated to "The Compliant Golden-Hooped...", said Sun Woo Kung.

He's rambling, I thought.

"But who *ARE* you?", I asked again. There was a whicker of a horse and a monk riding a white stallion behind Sun Woo Kung. The monk wore a big orange hat that had ribbons hanging down on the sides covering his ears. His cloak was made of simple yellow and red fabric; there were no patterns on his cloak. The only patterns he had were the wrinkles on his clothes. Behind the monk two more people appeared. One of them looked part human and completely something else. His skin was light pink and had gigantic floppy ears. A round enormous snout protruded from his face, but wherever he went first wasn't his snout, it was his even more humongous belly. I had to stop myself from laughing when I saw this ridiculous creature, so I shifted my gaze to look at the last member of their group. He looked like a tramp. He had a red beard, but his head was bald. His necklace was a loop of skulls that made him look both terrible and putrefying. They both looked so grisly they made everything else, even the bugs seemed nice.

"We are travellers from the Middle Land", replied the monk. "We're searching for the ancient Sutra text. We want to show everyone the Buddhist ways. The way of the Buddha, is the way of Enlightenment. The way of the Buddha is the great hope. It will be the answer to all of our pain and suffering we have everyday. You know, what is the reasoning for our pain and suffering...", said the monk.

The monk was rambling on and on like Sun Woo Kung, I realised. I had my own problems. He was so enthralled in his thinking I just stopped paying attention. Sun Woo Kung saved my life, I was grateful, but this monk was lecturing. Can I thank them then get going?

"What are you searching for?", the monk asked while I wasn't listening. I didn't want to be rude, so I answered his question, "Hm? What? Nothing. I'm searching for nothing."

"You're searching for nothing? Nothingness... How profound!", exclaimed the monk. "In all of this pain and suffering, could nothingness be the ending?", he mused.

Sun Woo Kung said, "Master we must go. We must be on our way."

The monk flicked his hand to stop Sun Woo Kung. He glared at me with a look that cut into me straight to my heart.

"I see you are indeed searching for something too. You are lost. You are truly lost. You are in the wrong place", the monk said with wonder. "We have just crossed these mountains after the Middle Land. What you search for is not across the mountains, the door to your desire could be on the top of the mountain. Be careful of temptation, know yourself and be true to who you are", he said nodding. He raised his hand to his chest, and chanted, "amituofo" bowing down slightly.

“Woo Kung, Bajie, Wujing! Now it is time to continue our journey”, commanded the monk. As they moved on in their journey, Woo Kung called out, “Good luck!” to me. I realised I had yet to thank him, therefore I yelled, “Thank you for saving my life! I don’t know how to repay you!” Then I only heard light-hearted laughter, “You will, you will!”

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Continuing my way up the mountain, I couldn’t stop thinking about what the monk told me. The image of him saying, “Know yourself and be true to who you are” kept revolving around my head. What does that even mean? Why does it bother me so much? I haven’t been lying to anyone.

After walking for a couple more hours, I started to feel a little dizzy and drowsy. A shallow and dry cave was near; I decided it would be a good resting place. Before entering the cave, I checked my surroundings. No strange fireflies or snakes were around. It’s safe here. Sliding against the cave wall, I closed my eyes and quickly fell into a deep, deep, slumber.

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“Power. Wealth. The world. It’ll be all your’s. The entire world will bow down to you!” whispered a soft voice.

In the darkness, fog covered my vision. A swirl of smoke swiveled around me lazily until it enveloped me in all directions.

Power? Wealth? The world? That sounds like something good.

“You have knowledge we don’t have here. You could use your knowledge to conquer this world. We could rule this world together!”, the voice whispered closer.

What knowledge? I haven’t even completed school yet.

“Your knowledge, the things you know... You know the world’s future. You could make big explosions and deadly weapons we’ve never seen before! Come with me, join me, the world will bow at our feet!”, whispered the voice in an urging tone.

Power? Wealth? And some people at school just dislike me.

“You will be loved! All will be devoted to you”, the voice intimated.

If I stayed here, I would be able to obtain all of this. Wouldn’t it be fantastic to have power, wealth, and popularity? Then I thought of my friends, my mother and father. They loved me already for who I am. Plus, if I stayed here, I wouldn’t be able to see them anymore.

“Stay! You must stay! In your world you are just an ordinary child, but here you are powerful and capable of many things!” the voice went from whispering to shouting.

Did I really want what the voice was offering? Shaking my head, I replied, “No. I don’t want any of this. None of these are as important as my family and friends. I have to go back.”

The voice snarled at me, then the fog and smoke faded away.

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Waking from deep slumber was not as hard as I thought it would be, as on school days waking up was difficult. This sleep made me feel refreshed and alive, like I did something fabulous.

My journey up the mountain continued. What the monk told me stopped resurfacing in my head. Although the way to the top became harder, I enjoyed it. The cool breeze and shining stars made me relax, it reminded me of a hike I had with my parents.

After less than an hour, I finally reached the top. The top gave me a grand view of the jungle below, and in the distance I thought I was able to see the four travellers.

The giant hand could come anytime. I watched and waited for the sign, the instant rising of the noon sun that would fill the entire sky like someone flicking on a massive light switch. Starting to get impatient, I fidgeted, but after all of the things that happened, I took a deep breath and relaxed. Staring off to nothingness, I felt calm. I didn't know how long I waited, but the sky brightened instantaneously. A gigantic hand swept through the sky. Not wanting to miss this chance, I vaulted and grabbed the lowest finger of the hand. Clinging on to it, I grew bigger and bigger until my hands were as big as the hand in the sky.

Nose-diving onto the carpet, my eyes burned from the bright lights on the ceiling. Looking around, my best friend was reading "Journey to the West: Lost in the Jungle" on a bench looking at me dumbstruck.

"What... what happened? Why are you covered in dirt and scratches?", screamed my friend.

Standing up to my feet, I walked over to hug my best friend.

Trying to push me off, my friend exclaimed, "Hey! What's wrong with you?"

I smiled and cried, "Oh my gosh, I'm so glad I'm seeing you right now!"

My friend replied, "what do you mean? I saw you yesterday! What's wrong? "

Smiling again, I said, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing... is all that matters in the world."

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End of 《Journey to the West : Lost in the Jungle》

## Portraits

*Yew Chung International School—Secondary, Lo, Wai Man Michelle – 14*

Patient Sun Wukong?”

Perched on a stool, the patient peered at the partially finished painting before him, his face half-buried in shadow. He stooped down toward the pots of vibrant paint scattered around his feet, the strings of his hospital gown rustling in a soft susurrous as he did so. Chipped at the edges and worn to their bases, the pots were arranged in a chaotic cacophony of fading colour, like an unruly bed of wilting wildflowers.

“Sorry.” He tapped his head with a finger. “Sun Wukong isn’t in right now.”

Dark eyes, like caverns hewn into stone, bore into mine. A blurry image of Patient Sun’s medical file flashed into my mind, with the words *Dissociative Identity Disorder* emblazoned across the header. I inhaled sharply. “In that case, who are you?”

His raspy voice was like a knife scraping against a whetstone. “I am the Monkey King.”

Laughter bubbled up in my throat at the irony of the situation. “My name is Xuanzang,” I said. “I’m your psychiatrist.”

The Monkey King curled his lip and stared up at me in displeasure, then turned back to his artwork. I edged closer, diffident, and watched as the canvas bloomed with colour beneath the strokes of his slim brush.

“What are you painting?”

“Myself, of course,” came the curt reply. His hands flowed across the painting as if he were a conductor, blending pale peaches and greys into a harmonious symphony. “I only ever paint self-portraits.”

He nodded around him at the many pictures that furnished the cracked and yellowing walls. Hundreds of faces, all with the same features, stared back at us, watching silently. Ice trickled down my spine – every portrait seemed familiar in a way that I couldn’t quite place.

I laughed, the sound strained. “Well, Sun Wukong – Monkey King... ah, is there anyone else in there?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, there are only two identities,” he said, sharply, and flicked his brush, sending crimson poppies blooming onto the white canvas.

“Sorry. Well, as I’m here to help you –” I laughed again and fidgeted.

The Monkey King bowed his head and began coaxing streaks of watercolour into features, eyes fixed upon his work. “I’m a painter, not an invalid. I don’t need your help.”

The laughter died in my throat. “I don’t think you understand...” I swallowed. “Are you aware of the effects of dissociative identity disorder?”

“Yes, I am,” he scoffed. “The real question is, are you?”

“What?”



“Never mind.” With an impetuous wave and a grim chuckle, he dismissed me. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out soon enough.”

★

“Why do you paint all your self-portraits as characters from *Journey to the West*?”

Sun Wukong – the *real* Sun Wukong – beamed at me. “It was my favourite folktale as a child,” he said. “Quite ironic, when you think about it!” His face was wreathed in a sunny smile – utterly different from the Monkey King’s cold, callous expressions.

Upon the easel, the canvas dripped with viscous oil paint. A pair of melancholy eyes, framed by wrinkles and strands of grey hair, glared out of the painting. The grimacing monkey that was portrayed bore a bronze circlet upon his head. Its spikes glittered with crimson beads and dug into his skull as if it were a crown of thorns.

The painting next to it, however, was completely different.

In bright watercolour, this canvas depicted the same monkey lounging in a river. There were the same empty eyes and the same hoary hair; but unlike before, his mouth was quirked in a merry smile and the gleaming circlet of gold sat on his head with a jaunty air.

My eyebrows knitted together. Both figures held the same features, but there was a strange disparity between them. One was grim, one was happy; one was angry, one was merry; one was alone, one was surrounded by friends.

How could one person be so different?

*Oh.*

“These are self-portraits of your *personalities*,” I mused aloud.

Sun Wukong clapped his hands in cheerful affirmation and gazed up at me with a bright smile. “Do you like them?”

Nodding in wonder, I gazed at the myriad of paintings around the cell. On one side there was the Monkey King, clasping his iron staff in clenched fists, soaring through the sky atop a misty cloud, fanning mountains consumed by flames; and then there was Sun Wukong, tumbling from the treetops, cracking jokes with joy and laughing raucously around a roaring campfire.

A soft sigh escaped me. Within those brushstrokes was his *soul* – framed against the wall, bared for all the world to see, but for none to understand.

Something glinted and caught my eye then – a flash of dull gold. I pointed at the lonely, unfamiliar portrait in the corner, brow furrowed. “Who’s that?”

Crouched inside the casing, a painted figure was hunched over in despair. His face was masked by a matted mop of hair. I hovered over the ancient ink illustration, faded to a dreary crimson brown from the old vivid red that shown through here and there in patches that had been protected from sunlight. Its frame was cracked and coated in dust. A strong sense of *deja-vu* stirred my memory.

“Do I know him?” I asked. That silver necklace was familiar somehow...

Sun Wukong gave me a long, searching look. Whatever he was looking for, he didn’t find it; after a brief pause, he slumped back and stared at the blank ceiling.

“He’s an old friend of yours,” he muttered. “An old friend of mine, too.”

I cocked my head. “What do you mean?”

“He’s the third personality.”

I froze, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “The Monkey King said that there were only two.”

Sun Wukong’s gaze dropped to his folded, shaking hands in a silent warning.

★

Sunlight streamed in through the blinds, illuminating tumbling motes of dust and casting dappled shadows upon the patient’s latest work. I sat by the easel, fiddling with the worn silver chain of my necklace, and quivered at the gruesome depiction of the Monkey King in full battle armour.

“We need to talk,” I gritted out. “You lied to me, Monkey King. You said there were only two personalities, when there are in fact three. Why did you say that?”

Standing at the back of the cell, the hollows of his cheeks were sketched out in the dim light and shadows draped eerily over his features. “Sorry,” he said, shrugging with a practised carelessness. “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

My nails dug into my clammy palms. “I want to meet the third personality —”

“No,” said the Monkey King, in a swift venomous tone that brooked no argument.

I wavered under his firm glare but went on. I had to help him recover, whether he wanted to or not. “Listen, I can help you out of this sanatorium, but first I need to understand who he is...”

He shook his head violently. I trailed off, frowning at his ashen pallor. A sense of foreboding settled over me. I noted the way his hands trembled, and I began to tremble too. Who was the third personality and what had he done?

“We don’t talk about *him*,” he growled finally. “He’s the most delusional of all. You wouldn’t want to meet him.” He averted his gaze. I glanced back at the small, worn portrait propped up against the wall, and felt its silent, unblinking gaze on me.

I shuddered.

★

“Another Monkey King?” I lifted my gaze to the plethora of portraits staring down at me from all four walls. At twilight, the room was bathed in a purple hue, and a faint summer zephyr stirred the scattered brushes by the window. “How many will you make?”

Sun Wukong stiffened in his seat, mouth frozen into an unnatural smile. “This is the forty—second.”

“Will you ever stop?”

His eyes lingered upon the many portraits adorning his cell, his gaze heavy with an emotion I could not identify. Was it grief? Anger? The hairs on my neck stood up. People often said that the eyes were the windows to the soul; but in that moment, Sun Wukong’s eyes were dark. They reflected no light; they told no story.

“I don’t think so,” he said at last, brush poised over the canvas. “I’m not sure if I can.”

“You should try, at least.” My eyes darted meaningfully toward the small picture in the corner. “Painting might be a coping mechanism, but you can’t paint away all the different personalities you have.”

There was a faint *crack* as the brush snapped in his tightened grip. His knuckles glowed white. Eyes wide, I stared down into his tumultuous, conflicted gaze.

The room was silent.

“How ironic,” he said, and swept his brush down, adding yet another layer to the canvas.

★

Rain trickled down the window panes, diffusing blurry beams of light against the cell walls. Once more, the Monkey King was sitting on his stool. His fingers flitted across the fabric of his painting, smoothing down the stretched cloth of his masterpiece as he steadily ignored my words.

“Enough is enough.” The words burst out of me. “I have to know about the third personality!”

The Monkey King’s mocking laughter greeted me. Dark amusement tugged his lips into a half-smile, yet his eyes flashed in fear. “Why should I tell you?”

I fumed and floundered. “You just *have* to. Otherwise, I can’t help you.”

“*Help* me?” The Monkey King snorted, acerbic. “Please. You’re so blinded by your own delusions of ‘helping others’ that you can’t even see all the damage you’re doing. Just leave me alone.”

“Delusions?” An abrupt, indignant fury swept over me like a blazing inferno and simmered in my veins. “You’re the one who can’t face reality. I’m simply asking you to stop hiding behind those portraits and enter the real world.”

He snarled, face suddenly contorted into grotesque anger. “I will not abandon my life’s work!”

“Is your art more important than your sanity?” I retorted. “Sun Wukong – the Monkey King – whoever this third personality is – you know all these characters belong to the same person, yet you still paint them as ‘different’ personalities. Can’t you see? These portraits are holding you back!”

“The only thing holding me back is you!” he shrieked. His nostrils flared with fury. Swept up in anger, the Monkey King whirled around and hurled his almost-complete illustration to the ground. I stumbled back as he lurched toward me.

“Are you happy now? What more do you want from me?”

“I want to know who the third personality is,” I insisted, eyes narrowed, mind whirling. “I want you to show me the *truth*.” The need to know had been itching at me for days. Why was this room so familiar? Why did all the portraits remind me of myself? Who was the third personality?

“You want to see the truth? Fine,” spat the Monkey King, trampling over strips of ripped canvas. He let out a bitter laugh. “Ignorance is bliss. Isn’t that what they say? When I show you the truth, I want to see you suffer.”

★

He painted as though he were possessed.

Under the flickering lamp, jars of water shattered and pigment splattered everywhere, spraying a kaleidoscope of colour across the floor; but the Monkey King paid no attention. While the moon rose to its zenith and the murmur of people outside faded into silence, he enthroned himself at the easel and smeared colour across the fabric at a ferocious speed, hands flying in a frenzied blur. The canvas groaned as he slashed at the picture with his brush.

In the darkened corner, I sagged against the padded wall, watching him fill his artwork with passion and fury, as if he were an avenging god, pouring anger and hatred into his Pandora's box.

"Get up, Xuanzang." The Monkey King's voice, tremulous with gleeful virulence, stirred me awake. I found myself before the canvas, dazed.

"What –"

It was as though I were staring into a mirror. Resting upon the easel was a perfect replica of my own reflection. Familiar dark, empty eyes stared back at me, and the colourful oil paint reflected every wisp of my greying hair. Somehow, the Monkey King had captured my exact likeness in flawless detail.

"I don't understand," I said aloud. "This is a portrait of me. So what?"

His voice echoed around me. "I only do self-portraits."

*Wait.*

Dread settled in my stomach and my fingers grew numb. The brush in my hand – *when had that gotten there?* – plummeted to the floor. I choked as realisation dawned on me.

Desperate, my gaze swept over the walls: past the portrait of the robed Sun Wukong, past the portrait of the armoured Monkey King, past the portrait mysteriously hidden in the corner, then back to the portrait in my arms that was of me, Xuanzang. Everywhere, I saw the same eyes, the same hair, the same nose, mouth, ears –

Every painting in this cell was of *me*.

I dropped the illustration. The *crash* echoed around the empty room. If the Monkey King, Sun Wukong and I were all portrayed in the same painting, but there was only one face in the frame, then that meant...

I clutched my head. Disjointed voices and memories called out, mocking me, taunting me –

*The only thing holding me back is you –*

*Portraits, familiar in a way I couldn't quite place –*

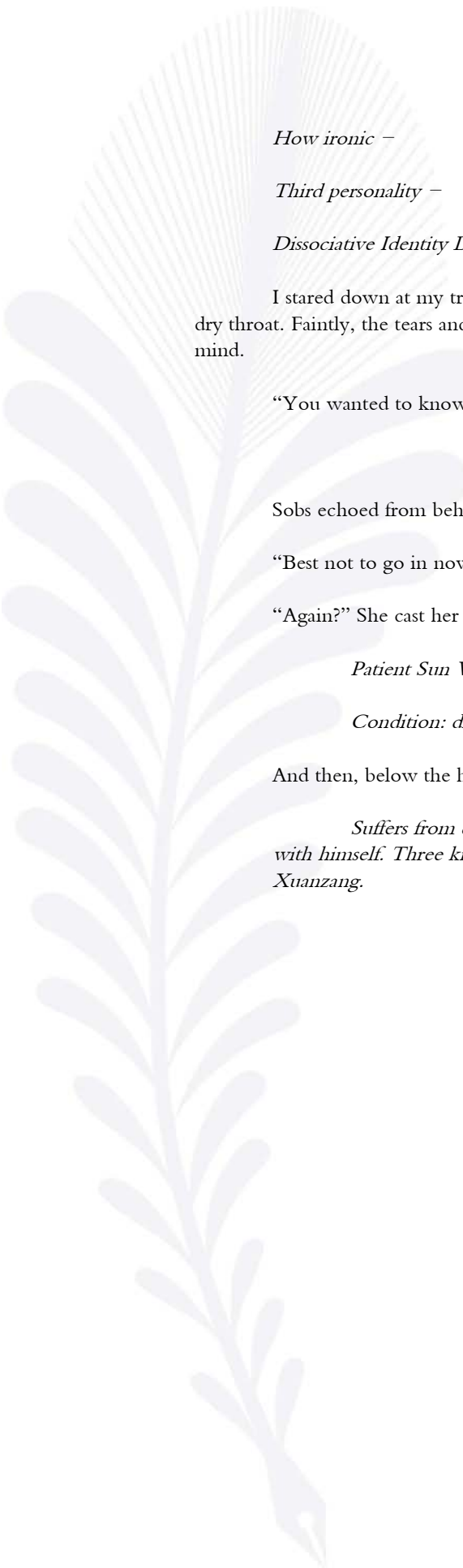
*The most delusional of all –*

*The real question is, are you?*

*Blinded by your own delusions –*

*The same empty eyes and the same hoary hair –*

*That necklace was familiar somehow –*



*How ironic –*

*Third personality –*

*Dissociative Identity Disorder –*

I stared down at my trembling, paint-stained hands, and clutched at the silver necklace around my dry throat. Faintly, the tears and laughter of Sun Wukong and the Monkey King reverberated through my mind.

“You wanted to know who the third personality was, didn’t you?”

★

Sobs echoed from behind the cell door. The nurse turned, unsure.

“Best not to go in now,” her colleague said, blankly. “That’s Patient Sun, at it again.”

“Again?” She cast her gaze down at the medical file in her hands. “Oh.”

*Patient Sun Wukong.*

*Condition: dissociative identity disorder.*

And then, below the header, in tiny print:

*Suffers from delusions and depersonalisation (out-of-body experiences). Often converses with himself. Three known identities include the Monkey King, Sun Wukong and ‘Doctor’ Xuanzang.*