

Fiction

Group 5



New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Chu, Yannis – 16

As far we know human beings have always been resilient and tough, striving to make the world a better place. Throughout the time of my voyage, we encountered various scenarios—hostile, nonchalant, hospitable and of course there were times of euphoria and exhilaration.

Time flies. We first set sail two years ago and now we are preparing for the second voyage. The sense of pride and achievement that comes with sailing is priceless. Not only do we want to experience a whole new world, but we also want to promote peace and mutual understanding amongst nations as we start our adventures. Thus, we brought along gold, silver and agricultural technology on our quest for the exchange of knowledge. Moreover, we endeavour to meet the locals so as to learn something new from them because they may be wiser than us. Their mentality and experiences will differ from us, city men, we are always fixed inside our own culture and traditions. After a long and careful deliberation, 100 or so sailors and I decided to sail around the world and the voyage would last for at least one year.

When it came to preparation, we spent about half a year, getting everything ready. We prepared the equipment – ropes, kerosene torches, oars...Of course we also needed maps, food, clothes, clean water, weapons and so on. We had a chain of strenuous and arduous trainings. Most important was the boat we used for sailing. We did not buy the ship, but instead we decided to build one. Without doubts, it was not an easy job. From purchasing the best materials to the final step, they were all done with our very own hands. We had hard times. Yet we surmounted all the difficulties like the time the ship could not float for the first time. And finally, we set off.

The first six months was nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing exciting happened. “This voyage is not as amazing as I expected. Was it a mistake to set sail?” These ideas appeared in all our minds. We wanted to pursue excitement but this half of the year disappointed us. What we hoped for was something amazing but got nothing in return. However, our hopes for excitement did not end well. A sudden stormy night took 30 sailors’ lives. The storm came from nowhere. We started to notice the power of nature and that we were at her mercy. It was a general truth that a single natural disaster could break millions of families into pieces. However, being human, we cannot evade these events as we are part of nature. It is patently clear that we cannot surmount nature but we can definitely accept our coexist peacefully.

Good signs appeared in the seventh month. We kept sailing, crossing the Pacific Ocean unwittingly. Eventually we met a boat on the Arabian Sea. They waved at us and were extremely friendly. We made commercial exchanges despite differences in culture and a lack of a common language. The encounter was gratifying, even though we did not speak the same language, we used our body language and facial expressions to express ourselves effectively. We also shared our food and clothes with them. Even though it was the first time for us to encounter such a foreign culture it was not as difficult as we thought to get along. Different nations should definitely seek common grounds while holding back their differences. Please don’t forget that we are an integral whole living on this earth.

The eighth month was of significant value to us as it was the time when we had our first battle with pirates. They had three vessels in total and each vessel was double ours in size! Nonetheless, all of us did not give up and spared no effort to fight them. At last, we won. It was a difficult war because we did not have enough weapons. However, our spirits were always alight and we were led by our primal need for survival. After the war, both sides suffered heavy losses. It was discovered that battles are detrimental in all aspects. As a result, peacefulness should always be pursued as no one wants a life of suffering. Please always bear in mind that there must be some ways that are better than war to settle disputes.

What’s next, we had brand new experiences of meeting aborigines in the ninth month. As we predicted, they were wiser than us but lived in primitive circumstances. Their planting skills were more efficient, I’ll give them that, but the island where they have lived for generations was not as advanced compared to our modern city. Though, they were content. They never grumbled and instead, they strived to better themselves. We may not find this environment acceptable, but why not give it a try one day? I don’t mean that we should live a primordial lifestyle, but we should be satisfied with what we have and not always ask for more. It is impossible for us to possess all the treasures in the world, instead we should learn to treasure what we already have.

The last few months was the time for us to return to port. Unfortunately, one night when we returned to a port near Japan, the heavens opened and the winds were whipping. The sky was pitch black. At the same moment, an enormous wave struck the hull of the ship. It was a stormy and very long night. The next morning, it was found that almost all our crewmen were killed. Finally, we returned home. The Emperor and swarms of citizens came to welcome us back. We were loudly and cheerfully applauded for but those who deserved it most were the ones who sacrificed themselves valiantly.

One year has passed and it is just about time to set sail again. In spite of countless uncertainties, we will continue our journey as mysteries of this world are beyond our imagination. Obstacles will never stop our boats.

Adventures always come along with storms and surges. Yet we never give up in upholding our hopes and beliefs. We endeavour to sail against the current to uncover new worlds.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Lau, Addison – 16

– I held the paper – just received – with my shaking hands. Witnessed the person who sat on *that* shiny silver and bloody red horse; then with a sudden neigh, vanished beyond the far-away darkness. When sand and dust settled around the edge of the glittering flare, there left alone, I held the wrinkled paper, looked between the lines filled with black characters, perplexed. –

New tales of the Ming Treasure Voyage

1

Exactly one month later, that very same paper became my toilet paper, and had been thrown into the endless, restless southern waters. It was the third day after the departure from the dockyard, and I've already been having severe stomach aches. The captains have reserved themselves all the juicy beef and pork, leaving us the exhausted catch of either smelly raw or already rotten dead fish. Worse still, our livelihood rested upon those inedible fish, throughout this immeasurable journey. It wasn't as if I had an ambitious plan of having a delightful vacation, but I never thought it would be this bad, getting food poisoning every second meal. To make things worse, I was having a hard time sleeping on the rolling wooden ship the first few days, while dealing with both the physical and mental tortures of being miles away from home. I counted the ongoing days with my fingers, lost count with my sweaty hands, and then shook them hard in frustration.

Out of my expectation, the fleet wasn't small either. On my ship, which was one of the 60, there were a few hundred crewmen, forming a full sized navy. Some of the men who were by my side were those I'd met back in the early days at war. I had good times chatting and playing chess with them back in the day. But when darkness fell along with the cold blowing winds, we couldn't do much, except lie somewhere on the ship, closing our eyes to pure nothingness, and we waited for the morrows to delight the sky. As my mind ran wild, I couldn't get myself into any dream. I climbed up the ladder, out of the wooden chamber, sat on the wet, salty wooden planks, then laid down in the open air. I felt calm winds whispering over my body, and listened to the charm of the pearl blue waves. I looked beyond the sky – the endless, glorious, mysterious canvas of stars – searched for the brightest one amongst the countless glimmers. There I saw Polaris twinkle, shining its hardest, exactly behind where our ships faced.

2

The rise of the sun shined and leaked into the golden waves, happening millions of times over the same old sea. The rays woke me from a really short sleep, *again*. The kitchen offered us our usual half-cooked-but-still-rotten cod for breakfast. I munched between the stale mixture of the stone hard skin and soggy wet flesh, picking a sharp bone from between my teeth. I looked at the nothingness on the horizon for a while, then turned my head towards the fleet, waving in white, sailing on blue, above the untouchable depth of the waters. Maybe there was land out there, maybe an undiscovered civilization, maybe a place we've never known, never stood on.

However, the sun didn't bless us for long, and soon the sky filled with thick, disappointing rain clouds. Bolts from the gods started to strike from the edge of the heights right down onto the unsettling waves. The high wooden poles started to shake and creak. Chaos drowned the wet wooden decks. People scurried, slipped over, then crouched down with fists protecting their heads. Crates rolled, tripped over the wooden bars, and were dumped hard into the waves. I climbed clumsily back into the cabin, and stumbled straight onto the wooden beds, CLONK, between those two somebodies in shock and fear.

The wooden masts cracked and tore apart. The ship started to bank on one side. It was not a good sign. Realising that one of the mates had already jumped onto the ladder out onto the deck, we swiftly followed.

The main mast cracked, fell tilted and drunk, uncovering the raw birch core under the heavy blowing rain. The dark grey sail was torn into pieces, helplessly attached to the end of the pole. We combatted our way through the gusts, supporting ourselves on the heavy beams. Very soon I my body was paralyzed... I could no longer feel anything. It got darker and darker. Voices became muffled...

3

I woke up from a deep sleep, but still felt exhausted. Some sailors laid on the filthy, wet wooden planks like dead fish. There was a sharp pain deep in the center of my skull, my soul felt as if it had been pulled out and thrown into the ocean.

I looked pointlessly among the never-ending waters... With delight, I saw the edge of the sea. Land, *o' land*, an existence I've waved goodbye to two full moons ago. I sat up despite the splitting headache, almost losing balance. But at least I saw green, the colour I've longingly missed.

Beached, the few of us that survived stepped onto the foreign soil, onto this unnamed piece of land. It was unfamiliar to step on solid ground.

4

Over the next few days puffed and purple bodies washed ashore. I sat on the black sand with the broken ship, the injured sailors and disheartened captain. Sun set in the far distance, painting the broken, left over crates on the side in orange. The wind blew, the waves tickled the shore, time passed through my helpless hands.

I took a deep sigh; sat down facing the open ocean; prayed to the setting sun – someone would come to find us.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Tse, Tim – 16

My name is He. My story of adventures all began back in 1404. It was a freezing cold Winter when I was appointed by the Emperor of Ming Dynasty to set sail for visiting some foreign countries for the first time. The purpose of this was pretty obvious: we have to ally with countries nearby to strengthen both our economy and military power. Therefore, in the seven ships were countless gold and silk which were considered the grandest materials in China. No one would ever guess that there were 6 more voyages sailing with me.

"Dear Emperor, please allow me to bring along enough soldiers and powerful weapons to ensure our safety?" The original plan was to have only me, some of my subordinates and a multitude of old women who were good at sowing. Yet, I knew that it was not going to work. Definitely not. How could we protect ourselves when we encountered enemies?

With the blessing of the Emperor he replied, "Yes, please have my elite soldiers and heavy weapons on all the ships."

It took a total of nine months for preparation. With all the "presents" and weapons like the fire cannons and guns packed, we (consisting of over 2000 people) set sail at Qing Long Harbor. Lying on the upper deck of the biggest junk enjoying the sea spray, I felt unprecedentedly relaxed without realizing how enormous the challenges would be.

Time flew by, it seemed like 3 months had passed in a split second. We had visited Vietnam where we were treated like premium guests. The reason was quite patent: China and Vietnam had been friendly to each other since the 13th century for the safety of both countries' armies. The local people gave us boxes of fresh fruits, making all the ships aromatic.

The three months were not easy. The crewmen often told me that they missed their homes and their families. I was a bit homesick too, not having been with my wives and sons for such a long time.

Fortunately, life on the ocean was not unacceptable as we were all well fed by those old women. They were just like our moms, sowing our clothes and taking perfect care of us.

However, peace did not last long.

Around two weeks after we left Vietnam, troubles ensued. It was a cloudy day. "Captain, there are ships with big fire cannons! What should we do now?!" the soldiers screamed. Honestly I had no idea what to do at that time since I had never encountered any form of military attack before. I panicked, sweating all over. "CAPTAINNN, those ships are getting closer. They have no intention to stop!" Having no choice, I ordered the soldiers to open fire and others to stay on the lower deck. The first shot missed, so did the second and the third.

"Stop your Chinese ship right now!" shouted the captain of the unknown fleet of ships. "We are the pirates who rule this region. No one shall pass without my permission. Stop or you will die!"

At the very moment, one of their ships was destroyed. All of us were shocked, with our mouths open.

"Pirates over there, drop all your weapons now or we will open fire!" completely frozen with horror, I could not even say a word, seeing another group of people wearing weird costumes with grass skirts trapping the malicious pirates.

I kept my mouth open until the leader of them came to me. "We are soldiers from Thailand. I am sorry that we did not come in time. You are safe now," he said softly, like he was whispering.

Gold and Its Symphony

Dulwich College Beijing, Lee, Bryan – 16

Early morning. There was a breeze in the air. I still remember the birds rushing away frantically, scattering leaves from a nearby tree noisily without rhythm as I stepped off the boat and onto the crusty, dirt ground that sprouted no trace of greenery.

I took a deep breath.

In the air was the subtle hint of the sea, and it felt cool against the innards of my neck and skin. This was air that was clean and pure, air that had been absent from the many hours I spent inside the damp and suffocating cabin of the boat.

I looked around, scanning my surroundings. In front of me was a desolate land, a village that held a strange assortment of buildings in alien colors. In its silence, it reeked with a certain kind of unsophistication, and a certain kind of menacing hostility.

Noisily, I turned around, my armor clanking ruthlessly, to find my fellow soldiers looking on at me, and I realized that it was my turn to lead the troops; Commander Zhou had drunk too much last night.

I turned back towards the village. In the breeze, its flags and banners seemed to wave in a way that beckoned me to stay away, to hop back onto my boat and to return to where I had come from.

For the briefest second I obliged.

But alas I took a step forward, and my men followed suit.

We marched into the village, marching like a machine that knew nothing but to keep moving forward, our metal boots crushing whatever shred of serenity was left in the somber, sleeping village. The few heads that were there turned curiously towards us, and my skin began to crawl with an uncomfortable nervousness as I marched step after step. In the back of my head I could feel the growing presence of eyes starting to stick on me, and a growing sea of murmurs rushing and sweeping the village all around us.

It wasn't long until we approached what seemed to be the first actual house in the village. Everything before then was commercialized, artificially colored with lyrical promises and sweet nothings to sell some silk or a slab of meat for a desperate amount of copper coins.

The house was small, wooden and pathetic. I knocked on the door, and it shook so violently on its hinges that I couldn't help but fear that the entire building was going to collapse.

Out of the window peered finally the head of an old man. His small beady eyes gazed at me cautiously and impatiently.

"Gold," I said, raising a small bag I was clutching onto. "Courtesy of the Emperor."

I tossed the heavy bag carelessly at the old man, and a pair of swift, sudden hands reached out to receive it firmly. The old man's eyes widened slowly, and his mouth stretched into a quivering smile so big it looked grotesque. He looked at me, his expression a little bit uncertain, but he ultimately opened the bag, and his laughing face shone with the shade of a brilliant yellow. I nodded to my men and gestured them to march on with me to the next house.

A crowd of people were staring at us now. Their eyes were intently fixed on the bags we were carrying in our hands. There was an unmistakable hunger in the air, and the unnatural silence that followed felt suffocating as we continued to walk on.

"Just do it now," Liu, my second in command finally said to me. "We might as well. There's too many of them."

I stared at him in careful thought, and then looked around to find ourselves surrounded by a colorful collage of silent faces.

Their eyes were still and focused.

I rubbed my chin, unsettled.

"Fine," I said, after breaking the silence with a hesitant breath.

Liu handed me the next bag of gold and I took it and raised it up high like a torch and the eyes all followed. "On behalf of the Emperor," I yelled. "We are giving away magnificent gifts of gold! Let this be a reminder of the Emperor's greatness and endless generosity!" And with that I tossed the bag of gold into the crowd at random, and that was when the chaos began.

There was something exotic in the way the peasants scrambled over each other, breaking teeth and toes in a growing, reddening puddle of wretched sweat, as they fought for what was theirs. Their cries were animalistic, with piercing shrieks and screams, and I watched their bodies undergo the most severe deformations in order for their hands to wrap around a single cold, solid, nugget of gold. It was an ocean of swarming bodies, a grand display of the purest forms of savagery known to man. Peculiar sounds rang into my ears, and I looked away, my face a little green, and my stomach churning threateningly.

I breathed deeply and found myself a little bit relieved, realizing that I was no longer holding the object that had led to this perversely colorful orchestra of the human anatomy.

On the side of the street of the chaos there was a young mother who sat lying on the ground. Her eyes were weeping readily as she clutched onto a small, limp body. It was apparent from her pained sobbing that it was the body of her child; her toddler son, as I was later told, who had been very tragically caught in the crowd, and trampled over by several middle-aged men.

I approached her, and her weak, reddened eyes stared up at me helplessly, whimpering. But behind her glossy wet eyes, I could see a growing curiosity that couldn't be contained.

I handed her a bag of gold, and all the heartache in her eyes disappeared with a disbelieving blink, fading into an empty nothingness. Her red eyes widened, and as if she was in a trance she ceased all sobbing and wailing. She placed down the limp, small body and in its place, she cradled my bag of gold.

For a moment, I couldn't hear the sounds of fighting in the background, and my head spun slightly in a dizzying blur.

She was looking down, but I could still see her face.

She couldn't help but smile.

"Gold is the answer to life," Commander Zhou said back on the boat. He had just woken up and learned about our visit to the village. "It's the answer to all life's problems." He took a sip of his alcoholic drink. "How many dead this time?" he asked as he wiped his lips.

"Reports said around twenty peasants," I replied. "From our side, we lost two. There were just too many. And we still couldn't bring ourselves to kill unarmed peasants."

"Hm," Zhou muttered. "Better than the last village, at least."

I nodded slowly in agreement. "Yes. It's better than the last village."

Zhou sighed, flourishing the damp air of the cabin with the smell of stale alcohol. He glanced at me. "We have to stop tossing the gold like that, and just hand it out like civilized men. Why don't we ever do that?"

He continued to look at me searchingly, looking for an answer.

I gave none.

After a while, he left the cabin, and I was left alone in the room.

Though I gave no answer to his question, I gave thought to it in the safe confines of my head. I supposed there were many different reasons why I always tossed the gold like that. I supposed there was a certain, forbidden fascination to it, a certain curiosity that I couldn't help but satisfy and explore, over and over again. There was something appealing in the raw honesty that the gold brought out from people, something I would never see, back in the kingdom, where people dressed nicely and spoked elegantly in wealth and jewelry.

And then, I supposed, there was a hopefulness in me that always made me toss that bag of gold into the crowd, a side of me that hopes that people would not lose themselves, would not commit themselves to savagery and damnation over something so ultimately... small.

On the table next to me lay the bags of gold we were given by the emperor. They were laid out in an orderly fashion, just sitting there, ready to be delivered and gifted to the world. I took one into my hands and examined it, feeling its cold hardness against my fingertips.

I stared out the window, gazing out into the wide, vast sea, and I found my hands holding out the bag of gold towards it, as if I was offering some kind of sacrifice to the waters.

I closed my eyes, and I saw myself ripping the bag apart, its contents scattering out, pouring like a golden waterfall that seemed to never end into the abyss of the deep blue sea, ridding it and its disease forever from humanity.

I smiled.

But I knew it was impossible.

So I stood up from my chair, and clutching an answer to life in my hands, I walked out of the room, ready to set sail to the next village.

A Wound That Never Healed

Harrow International School Beijing, Yao, Caitlin – 16

“Be careful, Miss!”

Yuqing’s hands were gripping firmly on the branch when Peony, the young maid, shouted with a concerned voice from the distance.

She ignored the remark and steadied herself with her legs, her right hand reached for a chinaberry leaf while her left hand held onto the branch.

“Miss! Please get down!” Peony’s footsteps grew louder. Yuqing turned her head, but her fingers were still fumbling at the leaves.

“Just a moment!” She responded as she plucked the leaf from the branch, “Look! I’ve got it!”

Peony pursed her lips and shook her head nervously.

Yuqing knew Peony was secretly afraid of being scolded by her parents. She brought herself towards the ground reluctantly and stood beneath the tree, waiting for Peony to scuttle towards her.

“Madam doesn’t like it when you climb trees...”

“...or run in the courtyard, or play with a catapult...” Yuqing mumbled along begrudgingly, pausing before she took a deep breath and whispered, “...or obsess over medical herbs Doctor Li told me about.”

Peony sighed, “Madam is waiting for you.” She patted Yuqing on the shoulder, prepared to lead her way. Yuqing trudged behind Peony, her mind was elsewhere. She glanced round the courtyard and fixed her gaze on the silhouettes behind the window of a room – it was Jade bringing medicine from Doctor Li to her ailing sister. Yuqing stopped there, mouthing the names of the herbs in it; she stood still until Peony came over and hurried her along.

* * *

The scene from her childhood played itself in Yuqing’s head as she sat quietly in her room, staring dreamily past the pearls dangling from the phoenix coronet on her head.

“Tomorrow you’ll be married.” A familiar voice murmured from behind; a reflection of her mother appeared in the mirror in front of her, her hands resting on Yuqing’s shoulders, “Look at how beautiful you are.”

Her own reflection became clearer behind the pearls, “I don’t love him.” She blurted out, the emptiness in her eyes became more discernable than ever.

She could see how her mother’s face hardened, and feel how her hands gave her shoulders a firm squeeze as if to bruise them, “We have had this discussion already, can’t you make some sacrifice for our family? You’re marrying General Lin’s son, the most privileged general in the Ministry of War; your father might finally become something more than an insignificant official.”

“So my happiness is sacrificed as a result?” Yuqing bit her lips and glared at her mother, who didn’t reply. She lifted her hands from Yuqing’s shoulders and walked towards the doors, “A woman’s happiness lies in a good marriage and making her family proud.” She said sternly before leaving, muttering “disobedient child” under her breath as she left.

Her room fell silent; only her oriole chirped every now and then behind her.

“It’s such a shame, Miss.”

A man with a hunched back appeared at the doors just when Yuqing was about to close them. He was wearing a long, indigo-coloured robe that distinguished him from the servants, bowing with his hands clasped in front of Yuqing.

“Doctor Li.” Yuqing called his name with relief, “It’s good to see you, are you here to visit my sister?”

“Indeed.” He straightened up and said, “Her coughing seems to be worsening, I have prescribed her more loquat leaves in her herbal medicine to see if there will be any improvements.”

“I see. Any specific instructions?”

“No. Everything else is the same as always.” Doctor Li’s voice took on a serious tone, “There is something I need to tell you and your family – I’ll be leaving tomorrow. As you may have already heard, Admiral Zheng He’s fleet is leaving at sunrise; the Emperor has ordered for him to visit places like Java and Siam. I’m one of the doctors appointed to accompany them.”

“How wonderful.” Yuqing’s eyes lit up at the idea of practicing medicine on a mysterious voyage.

“I have been your family’s doctor since you were this tall.” Doctor Li’s hand hovered at his waist, a faint smile sketched on his face, “...and tomorrow you will be married. You’ll have a different title when I return.”

Yuqing nodded politely, the spark in her eyes a second ago was extinguished. She bid Doctor Li a goodbye and closed the doors, but as if recalling something, she reopened them and called out to him.

“Yes?”

“I just remembered, you said “it’s a shame” when you came. What exactly were you referring to?”

“Oh, that.” Doctor Li took a deep breath and responded hesitantly, “I was referring to you. You had always been keen on medicine when you were younger, memorizing the effects of herbs and collecting them. I could rely on you to sort out my prescriptions. It’s a shame now that you’re getting married; you are obliged to focus on domestic duties and probably will never touch herbs again.”

“I once climbed a tree just to collect them, risking being told off by my mother...” Yuqing chuckled, but then her voice trailed off as she said wearily, “What use does my interest have? My parents would rather have me painting and doing embroidery ‘like a proper lady’. Also, women are never allowed to be doctors.”

Doctor Li sighed remorsefully, “Too bad you aren’t my apprentice, going on the voyage with me.” He tried to sound lighthearted and playful, but somehow the remark didn’t come out like a joke as he had intended, for he saw how Yuqing beamed at him, although her smile was gone in an instant.

“What was I thinking?” Yuqing shook her head and muttered to herself, “Doctor, I really need to send you off now or else I will start to have crazy thoughts!”

There was something about Yuqing’s manner that made Doctor Li felt regret at disappointing her – perhaps it was the way her face glowed that reminded him of her ambitions that she was forced to conceal.

He called Yuqing back as something suddenly occurred to him and said something that would change her life forever, “Miss, I have always been impressed by your passion in medicine. If you really wish to go, there may be a way around this.”

Yuqing’s eyes widened in shock. Behind her, the oriole flew out of the window that was left ajar while the two of them were once again engaged in conversation.

* * *

The Sun emerged from the horizon, casting beams of sunlight in every direction, illuminating the massive crowd that has gathered at the port. Some were loading cargo onto the ships, others occupied themselves with military supplies. Normally, Yuqing would marvel at such a sight, but at this moment panic and anxiety overtook her.

Change your identity; beware to conceal your gender. Doctor Li’s words repeated themselves in her head. The sound of them drowned the million voices talking around her. *Try not to draw attention to yourself.*

Her clothes were identical to all the doctors, she was now “Doctor Li’s mute apprentice” to everyone; her real identity was kept only to herself.

“Look at the ship!” Doctor Li exclaimed and pointed.

Yuqing’s eyes followed the direction of his finger. *Huge* would be an understatement for the size of a treasure ship – it looked like it could fit an entire city in; the masts towered the crowd. It was accompanied by several treasure ships and countless smaller ships.

She gazed beyond them and wondered about the world that lay on the other side of the horizon.

Mother, father, please forgive my departure. She quietly went over some of the words she wrote hurriedly to her parents the night before. *I will make this up with the remainder of my life – or if I can’t, with my afterlife.*

* * *

“Take this one! He is wounded!”

Yuqing was brought in front of a soldier, his armour was lifted slightly to reveal a garment that was dyed red by blood, resulting from what seemed like a spear wound. He moaned in pain as she approached him.

Yuqing shot him a reassuring look although she could feel her own heart pounding against her chest with a mixture of nervousness and apprehension. This was the first time that she was allowed to treat a wound like this. Many of the soldiers were injured after helping to fight the uprising at Sumatra and all the doctors were summoned to treat them, before this, Yuqing had only been called upon when a sailor caught a cold or when doctors worked on cures for foreign diseases.

The soldier mumbled as she tried to clean the wound, “Would it...ever..heal?” He stared at her blankly.

Yuqing nodded and put on a sympathetic look; she made a couple of gestures telling him that she’s trying to bandage the wound and stop the bleeding.

“Would all wounds heal?” He asked after slowly regaining his consciousness, “I hope they do. All of us have got different wounds from the battles.”

Yuqing smiled and busied herself with tending his wound. This wouldn't be time for her to explain, with gestures, how she treats different wounds. She also wanted to tell him that the doctors try their best to ensure all physical wounds could heal but it's the mental ones that are more difficult; she doubted whether the soldiers could ever forget the deaths and injuries on the battlefields.

Her thoughts suddenly drifted back to her family – there was definitely a wound left somewhere by her battle with her mother. It had been exposed in the air for too long with no one tending to it.

It had been at least a year since they first set sail. Yuqing couldn't risk asking anyone on board so she tried to keep track of time by counting sunsets. Day after day she watched the red, glowing sphere vanish behind the horizon; watched the pale blue sky become the canvas painted with shades of marigold and crimson.

But she lost count after a year – some days merged into others. What she preserved in her mind was all the sights she had seen that portrayed a world she had once never even dared to dream about.

She remembered the shimmering golden roofs of those magnificent Buddhist temples in Siam; the devoted monks murmuring their prayers in unison.

She remembered the bustling markets in Ceylon; the curious glance of a lady sitting in a wagon, dressed in an exotic sari.

She remembered the mysterious islanders on Java, who spoke a strange language but were nevertheless kind to her; they offered her a piece of a fruit named “*cempedak*” that tasted very sweet.

...

Of course, she had been practicing medicine like she wanted. She recalled the names of countless herbs and their effects; learnt how to take the pulses of patients and figure out what different signs of pulses implied.

This was all she longed for – being a doctor who helps vulnerable patients; there was more – she saw the world beyond the horizon.

“Hey.” The soldier said feebly, “Why are you smiling? Does my injury please you?”

Yuqing shook her head and blushed.

“Anyway...do you want to hear the story of the uprising in Sumatra?” He said abruptly.

She gave him a quizzical look.

“I'm feeling much better now.” He explained, moving his arm a little to prove his point.

She nodded, allowing him to continue, but she only heard vaguely about a son of a fisherman who tried to rebel against the new king of Sumatra, and absorbed none of the details. Instead, she managed to deduce something crucial – they were now going to return, for she heard that Admiral Zheng had promised to help the king to suppress it on their way back. Yuqing felt something tugging at her heart as she thought about returning. It seemed like decades ago when she confronted her mother about the arranged marriage; seeing the stern and disappointed face of her mother as she stormed off; now she couldn't help wondering about how she had been.

* * *

“Yuqing.”

Doctor Li whispered her name as she was returning to her cabin, looking around cautiously, “This is important, Admiral Zheng is looking for you.”

“Pardon?” Yuqing raised her voice in surprise, “You mean...Admiral Zheng He?” She asked tentatively to make sure she had not misheard him.

Doctor Li placed his finger in front of his lips – a gesture for Yuqing to lower her voice, “Yes, the most important person here.”

“What for?”

“I have no idea. You'd have to find out yourself.”

“Do I have to go?”

“You better do.” Doctor Li pursed his lips, “He has the power here, the wise decision would be not to defy his orders. He arranged to meet you in his cabin at sunset. I need to go tend to the wounded soldiers now; let's just leave this conversation at that.”

Yuqing frowned as Doctor Li patted her shoulders and hurried off. Millions of questions swirled in her head – What is the Admiral like? What will he do to her? Was she failing to do her duty?

Most important of all – why is he meeting her?

She was left to wonder about these questions herself; she hadn't dared to make friends during all this time she was on board and pretended to be a mute in order to hide her real identity. She sat in her cabin and passed a few troubled hours before twilight arrived.

* * *

It was dusk when Yuqing approached the Admiral's cabin uneasily. It was located above the cabins where she and the other doctors lived; the surroundings seemed much quieter compared to the chaos beneath where small cabins were tightly packed.

Two servants saw her come nearer; they bowed and opened the wide wooden doors for her and followed her as she entered.

There was no one in there apart from a tall man standing with his back to them, "You can both leave now." He addressed the servants, his voice deep and resonant.

"There is no need to pretend in front of me." He said to Yuqing after they left, "Wu Yuqing, daughter of the minister of the *GuangLu* bureau."

Yuqing was startled when she heard her name, "How did you find out?"

"Your father brought you along to the Palace once. I recognized you the moment I saw you with Doctor Li."

"Why didn't you report me?"

"I wouldn't. Every one of us has our own struggles." He paused, "Plus, no other doctors could compete with your diligence."

"I've always dreamed to be a doctor." Yuqing swallowed hard and said, "My sister suffers from illnesses, I have always wanted to cure her and help as many people as I can; but women are not allowed to be doctors no matter how capable we are. I'd tried to escape from the fate of an arranged marriage."

"Have you thought about the consequences of your actions?" His voice was frighteningly calm, "This is why I called you in. Your sister made a desperate attempt to write a secret letter to me. She overheard some of the conversation the night before your escape in the adjacent room, but she never thought you were serious. General Lin was infuriated by it; he felt humiliated; this then led to a conflict between him and your father. Lin made vital contributions to many battles and is valued greatly by the Emperor. No one dared to say anything even if he backstabbed your father..."

"What happened to him?" Yuqing urged, sensing the seriousness of the situation.

The Admiral took a deep breath, "He is now expelled from the bureau and imprisoned. I don't know what would happen to him...and your mother..."

"What happened to my mother?"

"She committed suicide...she felt there was no one to rely on." It took a long while for him to answer, "I'm sorry."

"Would we...make it back before...anything...happens?" Yuqing's question was now punctuated by sobs. Tears raced down her face like a waterfall.

"I don't know." He sighed; now facing her, "I could assign you a vessel, some skilled sailors and soldiers; it'll be quicker than our gigantic fleet if you travel back that way, but the sea can be very dangerous, you wouldn't want to risk it."

Yuqing looked at him with her watery eyes, the Admiral had the most penetrating glare she had ever seen. For an instant she suddenly became more determined than ever, "I'll do it, Admiral."

"But..."

"I will do it." Yuqing gritted her teeth, "Admiral, maybe you don't know me well enough, but once I put my mind to something, no one can ever make me give up. It's my fault that things turned out like this, now I have to bear the consequences."

There was a subtle change to the gaze of the Admiral – it was no longer a glare but showed a hint of admiration, "I can't help thinking what would become of you if you were born a man." He said finally with a weary smile, "You were either born in the wrong gender or in the wrong era."

Yuqing lowered her eyes at his remark, "Could I depart tonight?"

"If that's the best for you."

She nodded and asked for approval, the Admiral granted her request and dismissed her. On her way out she tried hard to refrain herself from bursting into tears, but to no avail. Memories of her family came flooding back to her as she prayed for her father's safety, *If I don't ever see you, father*, she thought silently to herself, *I pray for us to be a family again in the afterlife; then I may be that daughter you and mother wished for – who could make her family proud.*

This will be the only remedy for the mistake I have made in this lifetime.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Heep Yunn School, Fung, Hiu Lam – 16

'Hey! We got to go, Miss!'

'Fine, I'm coming, wait for me!'

She waved to the crowd who gathered by the shore as she climbed onto Alice – the ship named after her mother. Their leader smiled and the kid in his arms blew a kiss at her. She giggled when she climbed on board and a strong arm tucked her.

'Well, Miss, you've done pretty well in giving away our gifts. Last time when Tim tried to do so, he ended up being mistaken as an invader and had been kept as captive until we went to rescue him. Fortunately, our gifts managed to get to their hands and everyone went safe and sound.'

'Of course I can do well. Father has been teaching me the rules of interaction since I was born. And also, when can you stop calling me "Miss", Dave? You are older than me.'

'Sorry, Miss, but you're the captain's daughter, all of us have to be this formal.' Dave was struggling to keep his face straight, but it was so obvious that he wants to laugh it made his face looked mashed up. She couldn't contain her laughter.

'Only YOU are being this formal, and is my father around?'

'No.'

'Then loosen up.'

'Fine, Alexa.'

'Uhh... still too formal.' She waved her finger.

Dave sighed, 'Lexi.'

'That's better.' Lexi gained. Dave shook his head while pointing at the direction of the captain's cabin.

'Father wants to see me?' Her eyes shone.

'Yes, Mis... Lexi.' Dave frowned when he saw Lexi smirking.

'Yea, you better keep practicing it until you got it right.' She winked at him, brushed her ink dark hair over her shoulder, and skipped merrily to her father's cabin, giving high-fives to the fellow shipmates along the way, failed to hear Dave's warning. 'Your father is worrying, Lexi...'

Entering the lion den, Lexi rushed right to her aged yet vigorous father, who opened his arms and swallowed her completely. He rocked her once, twice, before releasing her, just like when she was little. Lexi face dropped when she saw her father's ashen face.

'What's the matter?'

Her father's wrinkled hands cupped her face. They had a smell of metal that made Lexi thought when was the last time he held a sword. 'Do you know how worried I was when you're out?'

Lexi sighed. This again. 'Father, I keep telling you I'll be fine...'

'I know, I know, I'm just saying. I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt...'

'I'll be fine. And this may be inevitable since I got on Alice. But this is what is right, isn't it? We have to sacrifice when it comes down to it. These are the words that you told me when I came aboard.' Lexi raised her hand. 'Don't talk, father. This quest is for mother, the only wish of hers that we had to complete for her. She knew it won't be a straight way, that's why she told us to help her to complete this noble wish. Right, father?'

'I really have no chance in out-talking you, do I?' Her father gave her a gentle smile. 'Just make sure you don't go visit your mother before me.'

'I won't. I'll stay with the pack. They will protect me.'

Just then, the emergency bell rang and Dave rushed to the cabin.

'Captain, Mis... uh,' he looked at Lexi's smirk. 'Alexa.' She smiled. 'Sorry to interrupt you, but a group of pirates, whom I think targeting our gifts to nations, are attacking us.'

Lexi's father looked at Lexi, 'When you say "they", you mean David?'

Lexi glared at her father, 'Maybe.' Then she looked at Dave. 'I'm coming with you guys.'

Dave's brown eyes widen in horror. 'Alexa? You may get hurt. Why don't you stay here? Am I right, Captain?'

Lexi's father looked at Lexi. 'Well, Alexa seems determined. I've trained her to fight one or twice, and I believe she will be in safe hands, am I right, David?' He gave a pointed look at Dave.

'Yes, Captain. Alexa, come on.' Lexi rushed out with him, no longer she shutted the door, she heard Dave's exasperated sigh.

'Why do you have to come with us?'

She bounced in front of him. 'Why can't I?'

They began to walk fast to the first desk. Lexi could merely make out some voices made by swords. They began to walk faster. She could now hear people's yelling.

'I've to warn you. You will easily get hurt.'

'Uh, so you're actually caring about me?' She gave him a flirty smile, just in time to hide it when she saw Dave's serious look, with sweat pouring down his face.

'I'm just pointing out you'll be a liability in the battle.'

'Ouch, that hurt.' She glanced at him. 'You seem pretty tense.'

'The pirates I mentioned earlier were some kind of ocean rulers. The few miles from south to north are all their controlled area. We are basically a fish compared to them. I just hope our men are still holding them down.'

They almost reached their destination. Lexi could see the men fighting with all their power. The ship's floor was decorated with pebbles of roses, not that Lexi had seen much in her life. The air smelled of dead fish, only the cloying smell was sweet. Belatedly, she noticed that both their men and the pirates were dripping with blood. All the blood drained from her face. She grabbed Dave's arm before they came to view the pirates and hid behind the wall next to them. She put her hand on his mouth before he got a chance to speak.

'I know we can save them. We're going to beat the pirates hard before they take things that don't belong to them. But I don't want to hurt them as much as they hurt us. I really hate doing so.'

Dave took away her hand and put his hand on her head. 'You don't have to kill them if that's what you mean. Just wound them and stop them will be fine. Now, are you ready to go and save our men?'

She nodded, and the next thing she knew, she took out the blade by her side, shiny as the sea water and when moonlight cast an eerie look to the blade, as it was a gift from the nymph. Her ink dark hair weaved around her as she, using all the skills passed by her father and the training from Dave, attacked the pirates with such a force that shocked not only the pirates, but also the shipmates as a woman could fight so well in the midst of fog and dark. With the blade passed to her by her mother, she became the new version of her mother – the mighty warrior, who would do anything to protect her own men, to the point on laying down their life. And luckily, Lexi had someone currently by her side and looked out for her.

'Perfect hit, Lexi. Three o'clock direction. Good. Ten now. Use double hit. Good.' Though away from her, Dave still shouted out the things that Lexi had to look out to while using his two short yet merciless blades to fight off the pirates. Sooner rather than later, the pirates, black and blue, jumped back to their ship and crumbled to the floor, with a crowd of people surrounding, no wonder treating them, just like Lexi.

'Traver, can you help him? Thanks.' She went to Dave's side with a roll of cloth and some medicine to treat him. Dave sat on the floor and leaned his head onto the ship's wall. Lexi gasped at the condition of his shoulder.

'Oh God! It completely ripped open. Ok, Dave, just hold still. Now listen, I'm going to sew your shoulder back with my hair, ok? Next, I'll bandage your shoulder with the cloth along with the medicine I brought along from home and I swear it will be much better tomorrow that it could function well. You hear me?' He nodded weakly.

'Oh goodness, please stay with me just for a little while.' Her hands shook as she suppressed her tears. No time for tears, Lexi, she told herself. She took a deep breath and began her work. It didn't take long, her moves became mechanic and her eyes, in the eye of Dave, turned from violent in the fight to concentration, lack of grief and fear, just concrete and selfless. Or she had been selfless all along, thought Dave, as he gazed into Lexi's eyes for escapement from his pained body. After a few moments, her eyes turned relieved and she blew out a breath that she had been holding. She caught Dave's gaze and him, embarrassed, turned away quickly. Lexi smiled, though it seems forced. Dave turned back to her and held her pale hand. She held his between her hands.

'What is it Lexi? Talk to me.' Dave said softly.

'I'm just...' A tear dropped. 'I'm terrified. I saw the blood pouring out of your shoulder just now. And you were so pale, so white, I couldn't stop but think that you are going away, and I'm terribly haunted by this feeling now. Oh God,' she put her forehead to their linked hand, 'don't you dare to do this again.'

Dave gave out a little laugh, and pulled her to a hug. 'I swear I won't scare you like this again.'

She hit his arm playfully, 'Don't fool around now. I'm serious.' Her eyes darken a shade. 'I don't want to lose you.'

The eyes of Dave soften, 'I know. Sorry.' He smiled at Lexi, 'Luckily we drove the pirates away.'

'Yeh.' She held Dave up and they began to walk back to the cabins. She looked at Dave with a mischievous smile. 'Now you can't consider me as a liability anymore, right?'

'Fine, whatever you say.'

'Then am I the best fighter?'

'Oh, you must be.' He answered sarcastically.

A door slammed at the far end of the corridor and the Captain rushed to the side of his daughter with a frown upon his face.

'Oh dear, David. You should have told me that you lots are facing those nasty pirates. I should have come with you...'

'We're fine, father.' She glanced at Dave's shoulder. 'And we will be fine. Also, you see. Your daughter managed it well.'

'Yeah, Captain. She turned on her full veconom-mode that scared the pirates away effectivity. You should see the way her hair attacked the pirates like octopus. Flying all around like seagulls.' He shot a humorous look at Lexi.

'Oh shut up.'

Her father laughed and ushered them to the cabins. 'Go to rest now. When the sun rise, we are expected to be on the land of Lydia. According to your mother research, they're living a poor life and don't have anything decent to use. Hope that we can help them tomorrow.'

'Yes Captain.' said Dave, and Lexi, playfully.

The Captain patted Lexi head, nodded at Dave, and went back to his cabin.

Dave turned to Lexi to ask her a question, he turned his head yet stop short when he saw the face of Lexi. Concern and anxiousness covered her face. He hoped that she was still doing ok after the fight with the pirates just now. Though she had been practicing all through the years, it was still the first time her father actually let her to be on battle. Maybe her father finally saw that she grown up already.

Just looked away, Dave. He told himself.

Yet he couldn't. Instead, he noticed how worried she looked. The Captain had been far more lenient with her, and he had been telling to the others to take care of her, arranging Dave, the toughest of them all, to look after her. Anyone who had been with the Captain long enough would know something was up that the Captain didn't want to tell them, including Lexi. He didn't blame her for being anxious. He himself was. He just hoped she would be able to relax, at least for a while. Just after the daybreak, they had works to do. They couldn't manage to lose focus when they had a great mission tomorrow. The land of Lydia, according to the Captain, was a land of thirst, hunger, and tears. Only with their help would they be able to become a live city.

Lexi caught his staring and looked at him curiously, 'Have I got something on my face?'

Dave looked away immediately. What's with him this day? 'No, you're fine.'

'Oh.' She paused. 'You want to tell me something?'

He widen his eyes, 'How do you know?'

'I'm pretty good at reading you now you're always with me.' She shrugged. 'What is it?'

'It's actually nothing important... I'm just curious. How can your mother knew every places we had to go and that they're in need? Had she been there before? If so, why don't she help them back then?'

Lexi leaned against her cabin door. The corridor light casted upon her made her looked formidable yet gorgeous— goddess—like, Dave figured.

Stop letting your mind wandered, man. Dave pinched his hand to focus on the words of Lexi.

'My mum was once the greatest warrior in the whole country. Yet, as the emperor listened to the wicked that she would threaten his place, he forced her to enter the wild and never went back. Propitiously, her will to survive lead her travel through nations. She met different people, tribes, countries, which she figured out they need help in order to have a decent life that she once had. When she met my father, he had been distributing food to the homeless. Though he was a noble in his country, he still used his very own hand to do so. Before my mother grew sick and eventually returned to God, she worked on the map and the book on the people that she wished to help. My father, wanting to complete her wish, built Alice and brought all of us to serve the others.' She gave a small smile to Dave that he couldn't control himself to give her his. The purity of the hope her mother was magnificent. He had never heard something that noble. He had never believe it. But coming from the mouth of Lexi, it seems that even the least possible thing could happen.

Even miracles were possible.

'Done with the bedtime story, Dave?' Lexi raised an eyebrow. Dave was looking this relax was new to her, just like she was talking to another boy instead of the straight instructor of hers.

'Yes, Lexi. Thanks.' Dave cracked another smile, and it took all the breath out of Lexi. He was just so breathtaking, this normal side of him. 'Get ready for tomorrow now.'

'Dawn practice too?'

'Dawn practice then.'

They opened their cabins' doors, and stopped outside.

'Goodnight then, Dave.'

'You too, Lexi.'

'We're here.' breathed Lexi. After her training with Dave, she was alert, and being alert in the land of Lydia wasn't a good thing.

Just being here was an agony. There were kids sitting closely to each other as they didn't have the strength to stand up to run. The elderly were lying on the ground, too sick to move. Just a few steps away, people were mourning over their dead relatives, yet they didn't have the power to bury them.

'Oh God, here's disastrous. Let's find the one in charge.' Dave tucked Lexi, who were staring ahead blankly. She just nodded her head, too stunned to say anything.

The both of them went deeper and deeper into Lydia. Just after a while, they arrived to the lair of the leader, or the queen, Lydia. Lexi frowned where she looked at the place. It wasn't the same with the description of her mother. mentioned a treehouse. She wasn't expecting the grand palace just like the one back in China, her homeland.

'Wow, looks like we're back home.' Dave raised an eyebrow to Lexi, looking as confused as her.

'Oh, here's the mighty warriors of Alice.' A woman came out of the grand palace, with two tough-looking men beside her.

'How do you know who we're?' Dave asked, stepping forward and pushed Lexi behind him.

'Of course. You dress like her. Chinese.' She looked at Lexi. 'And you look like her.'

She descended down the stairs. 'I'm the leader of Lydia. I remembered your mother wanted to help us since the last time she was here. Come. Give me your gold and treasure.' She extended her hands to them.

'No way.' Lexi brushed away Dave and went face to face with Lydia. 'You're here, living peacefully in the palace of yours while your people suffer. I'll return to the coast and give the gift to the ones in need. They won't receive gold and treasure, only daily necessity will be given. Sorry your majesty, we've to go.' She grabbed Dave's hand and started to walk away, only to notice to be surrounded by Lydia's men.

'Not so fast. With Alice's daughter here, I believe I can get what I want. Fight if you want, you can't go far.' She said in an airy voice and went back into her den.

'You ready, Lexi?' Dave said under his breath.

'We don't necessarily have to fight, dear.' She looked at the confused Dave.

'Our men were already giving goods to the poor. I told them to do so after we went deep into the land so as to save time.' She looked at the sun, which raised high in the sky. 'They should've done their job.'

'You mean, we can just escape? How?'

Dave looked around. There're just trees.

Trees, he thought. The ruler here once lived in a treehouse. They should have a route up in the trees for the ruler to move around the land without difficulties. He looked at Lexi and saw she was smirking at him.

'Fine. I hope you remember today's lesson. Put the center of your focus on your shoulder.' He looked at the soldiers around them, relaxing as they thought they had them trapped.

They didn't.

'Three. Two. One. GO!' Both of them ran up the tree beside them, leaving the shocked soldiers behind them.

'Look. Over there.' Lexi pointed breathlessly. There's a road built out of woods. It led to the sea where Alice parked.

'Come on, Lexi.' Dave pulled her hand and together, they went back to Alice and wait for another adventure awaited.

Death Discovery

Hong Kong Academy, Raymond, Sierra – 18

KKRRRSSSHHH! A violent force makes my body jolt forward. My vision fades to black; it becomes clear again. I find myself looking down at an urn with my name on it. I only see the urn, everything around me is hazy.

In loving memory

Deidre Li

December 25, 2000 – December 1, 2019

Loving daughter

It seems that I'm dead. *Wait what?! I'm dead? I'm Dead! Why am I dead? This is just a bad dream, right?* The hazy environment turns into my living room and people appear in dark formal wear.

"...I'll miss her. She was taken from us too soon. She had her whole life in front of her. Wherever you are Deirdre, I hope you are in peace."

After Dad finishes speaking, everyone gets up and start heading for the potluck. "Dad! I'm not dead!" I yelled out. No one responds. I run over to my relatives, waving my arms frantically in their face. "Are you guys deaf or what?! I'm not dead, I'm right here!" Nothing happens. *Are they... not able to see me? This is a joke!*

I run out of my house and head over to visit Sidney: my best friend and the only person who can tell me what's going on. She lives down the street from our house, about 5 minutes away. It doesn't take me long to find her house. A decent-sized gray house for a family of three. I see Sidney practicing shooting hoops in the driveway.

Just as she was preparing to shoot I walk up and wave to her. "Hey Sidney!" She drops the basketball and looks like a deer in the headlights. *Why is she so surprised? Am I really dead?*

"You're not real, are you? You can't be alive, you're dead." Sidney talks to herself, as if to reassure herself that I don't exist.

"What do you mean I'm not real, Sidney? I don't understand what's going on! First I wake up and see my urn, my dad gives a sad speech about me being dead at a funeral party, and then you act as if I'm some ghost?!"

I'm getting really tired of this. Everyone that I know is acting as if they can't see me. If this is a prank, then someone has a terrible sense of humour since I'm not laughing.

Sidney looks at me then looks to the left and right to see if anyone else is around. It was just us. "Of course I'm just imagining things! You died two weeks ago! How is it possible that I can see you?"

"It's been two weeks? I thought it was December first? Why do you keep insisting I'm a ghost? If I'm a ghost, then prove it," I said.

Sidney picks up her basketball. "Hey what are you – " She throws it straight at my head.

I wasn't able to dodge. Just as I was expecting the basketball to hit my face, it didn't. Instead, the basketball flies through my head and goes across the street, onto the neighbor's door step.

Sidney's eyes widen and so do mine.

"I really am dead! No wonder everyone was acting strange!" I said.

Sidney looked troubled, as if she was pondering over something. *It's normal, I mean, how would you react if you found out your dead best friend was a ghost?*

“Sidney? Are you okay?” I said. I move closer to her.

She looks up at me. “You really are here. I thought I was just imagining things,” Sidney said.

“Guess I’m actually a ghost. If I’m a ghost, then I’ll assume that I have unfinished business here,” I said.

“What kind of unfinished business?” She asked.

“Well, from what I’ve see on TV, a ghost’s unfinished business is knowing how they died. Now that I think about it, how did I die?” *I remember everything else but my death! How is that possible?*

Sidney shifts her gaze away from me. “I don’t know.”

“Well, do you know where we could start?” I said.

“No,” she replied.

“What do you mean? You said I died two weeks ago, you had plenty of time to find out from my family. They would have told you since we’ve known each other for years,” I said in frustration.

“Well... We could go check at the police station? My dad might know something.” Sidney shrugged.

“That’s a start.”

Sidney and I take a drive to the police station in her parent’s old dented Volkswagen beetle. Well, technically only Sidney did because I’m a ghost. I just floated besides her in the passenger seat.

Before we arrived at the police station, we picked up a dozen donuts along the way. Our plan is to steal the medical examiner’s autopsy report because it is possible that the police found me when I died. We pull into the local police station and see a couple of officers inside.

Okay, so here’s a quick summary of the plan. Sidney enters the building and gives the police officers inside the donuts to make us seem inconspicuous. I’ll have to come up with a distraction somehow. Then, Sidney will go to her dad’s desk and get his ID for the file room and take the autopsy report.

Before we enter the building, Sidney and I look at each other.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Sidney questions. She raises one eyebrow.

“Of course! Officers love donuts!” I said.

“Right,” Sidney says with a deadpan expression. *This is unusual...Sidney would normally be excited about this. “Borrowing” from the police in order to help her dear old friend: Me!*

We go inside. “Hello, what can I do for you Sidney?” It’s Officer Hinkley. Sidney and I have known him for pretty much our whole lives. Since we live in a small town, everyone knows everyone.

“Hey Officer Hinkley, I got you and the others some donuts. I need something from my dad, do you know where he is?” Sidney replied.

“Oh, thanks! They look delicious! Your dad is eating lunch right now, you wanna wait until he comes back?”

“Yeah, I can wait.”

Now I need to play my role as the ghost... How can I make things paranormal? I only discovered that I was ghost until a couple of hours ago...

I look at all the offices and try to imagine everything flying around in the room. Nothing happened. Instead everyone starts to move in slow motion.

“You look like you need some help?” a voice behind me asks.

I turn around and see a man in his 20s with bed hair. Grinning mischievously.

“With what?” I ask.

“With causing a distraction of course!” he exclaims.

“Yeah but who are y—”

“I know this seem random and you have questions and all but I’ll be right back. Here’s your distraction!” The man disappears just like that. That was weird.

Suddenly, I see people’s desks floating in the air. The lights started to flicker fast. Printer paper started to chase the officers. Officer Hinkley was sitting in his chair eating a donut, watching all the chaos ensue.

Since everyone was distracted, I went over to the file room and saw Sidney with my file.

“I got the file, let’s go,” Sidney says. Just as she was leaving the file room, time stops completely. It’s the weird guy again, but this time with parted hair. *Is this guy a ghost too?*

“Nope. Not a ghost, but rather a psychopomp. I’m here because of your predicament. It’s rare that spirits stay tethered to this world. The only reason is because something is keeping you here. Once you find out what it is, you can no longer stay here,” says the weird man.

“I already know what I need to look for: how I died,” I said.

“I can see that.” he looks towards Sidney who has my file on hand. “However, your friend here knows more than she lets on.” The man looks down on a pile of papers and picks them up.

He shows me what’s on each sheet. It states ‘AUTOPSY REPORT... IDENTITY: Deidre Li.’ The papers list that an old dented Volkswagen Beetle was photographed driving away from the scene. The crime was detailed as a ‘hit & run.’ In the pile were some photos held together with several photos from a traffic camera. The car shown was Sidney’s. The report continued to describe that I was run over and found dead, sustaining fatal injuries.

NoNoNoNoNoNo... Why?! Did Sidney really do this?

“She did,” the psychopomp stated. He disappears, leaving me with the truth.

“No! She couldn’t have! If she did, she would’ve told me already!” I ran out of the police station and met up with Sidney, who was waiting at the parking lot.

“So the report here says you died because of car accident. So that’s it I guess. You should be moving on now.” Sidney read the file, avoiding eye contact.

I can’t believe it. She lied straight to my face, and she wasn’t even convincing!

“That’s a lie and you know it!” I stormed off and started walking away from her. I didn’t want to listen to her pathetic apology. Not after this.

“Deidre I can explai—” Sidney tries to reach out to me, but I cut her off.

“How could you lie to me?! Out of all the people that I know, you were the one I trusted the most. Yet, you lied to me.” I was devastated. The one person that I knew my whole life always told me the truth, but this time she lied.

“I didn’t want to tell you because I thought you would never forgive me. I lost control of the car when I was trying to pick you up from your job, and I ended up hitting you. I—I got scared, so I drove away. When I—I went b—back the police were there a—and the ambulance took y—you away.” Sidney started breaking down in tears.

I was heartbroken. Not by the fact that I was run over by my best friend. Even though that is shocking in itself. But by the fact that she lied instead of telling me the truth. As much as I wanted to forgive her, I couldn’t bear to be around her. Not after this.

Immediately I start fading. My hands are gone and I starts losing my arm. Sidney comes over. “Please! I’m sorry! Don’t go!” she screams. She tries to grab my hand, but I phase right through her. She desperately tries again, but without success.

I got what I needed. Closure on my death. It didn’t make sense for me to stay around. I was ready to go to the afterlife.

My vision started to go black, it was getting harder and harder to see. Soon, I see nothing.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Kellett School, Lo, Jacob – 16

Through his locked brows, Emperor Zhu Di¹ gazed at the distancing fleet against the violet rays of the setting sun. He hid his anxiety and excitement as the ambitious maiden voyage of Ming Treasure Fleet set sail. A total of eight ships formed the fleet that was chartered to stretch the dynasty's reach and to deliver the king's dominating grace to the common people far away. The ships were spread out in an orderly fashion, resembling a war-time naval fleet. Chained from stern to stern, it organized itself into a triangular shape, like a piercing arrowhead. As the fleet disappeared into the shimmering sea, a new chapter was being penned.

"I've finally made it." Li Sheng, a young man in tattered clothes heaved a sigh of relief, thinking back to the hardship he had experienced just to be on the ship.

"All the humiliation and pain would be worth it if I succeed. Mother, I will seek justice for you, and Zhu Di will pay for what he did!" Li's eyes glimmered with surge wrath, filled with determination. His glaring stare fixed onto Emperor Zhu Di who sat proudly ashore in his crimson robe, waving his farewell to the fleet. Suddenly, interrupted, a demanding voice pierced through the warm breeze of the sea.

"Oi! Li Sheng! Can you not see that my boots are dirty? Hurry up and clean it, or is it that you want another "tattoo" on your face?" The sailor mercilessly shouted in a condescending tone while he gave Li a menacing glance. Li Sheng nodded as he rushed to retrieve a towel, preparing to wipe off the dirt.

"Good boy, good!! Now, get out of here and clean our squadron's room! If I see a single speck of dust in the room, you will... Hahaha! You know what's gonna happen, right? Shoo!" The bulky sailor waved him away, continuing to drink out of his tankard with his friends.

"Success is within reach... just a little more!" Li Sheng encouraged himself as he walked towards the squadron room. His hatred grew even stronger as it became harder and harder to hide from the naked eye. On the other hand, most of the other sailors around him were all relaxed, celebrating for the start of their operation. Even the Ten Great Guards, who wear an expressionless face, were drinking and chatting. They were truly carefree; being chosen for this mission was a gift from Heaven! This mission chartered by the Emperor is safe and pays extremely well. Not only that these sailors could live a luxurious life on the journey, but they could also go straight into retirement after the operation finished! How could they not be ecstatic?

Emperor Zhu Di has gone all out in his quest for eternal life. The quest for was cloaked with by the voyage's public image is to spread the glory of the Ming Dynasty, the grace of the king and to chart new frontiers. According to the country's Royal Diviner, this voyage would grant the Emperor just enough karma to break the shackles of mortality. Any error in the operation would ruin his transcendence opportunity, so every sailor was meticulously picked.

Abroad the magnificent fleet were happy crews en route to riches, of course, with the exception of Li Sheng. As the abandoned child of the Emperor, Li Sheng would rather die than see his father succeed in transcending to immortality. His hatred towards his father was unfathomably deep, and he was willing to pay for Zhu Di's death with his own. Plotting to kill the king was practically impossible, so ruining this operation was the best he could do. Even if karma didn't truly exist and would have no effect on his Majesty's mortality, it would still deal a heavy blow to the Emperor's reputation. For Li Sheng, either outcome was better alternatives to swallowing his pride in silence and in perpetuity.

Now that Li Sheng was finally on the ship, he could finally execute the final step of his revenge plan. However, it was the hardest step to achieve as it tolerated no mistakes. His goal was to set fire to all eight ships, thoroughly destroying the operation. Achieving this was extremely difficult, but fortunately, Li Sheng

¹ Zhu Di, the Ming Emperor, also known as Yongle Emperor, was the third Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, who reigned from 1402 to 1424. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yongle_Emperor

had something to draw reference from – the Battle of Red Cliffs during the Three Kingdoms period. Although the two situations weren't identical, there were still many similarities. In fact, it could be slightly simpler for Li Sheng given he is already on the ship he wants to set aflame, risking his own demise.²

This historical phenomenon could possibly, again, be shown to the world, and Li Sheng's idea was hugely feasible. Since the voyage fleets were chained together, it was very possible that his plan would work flawlessly. There was no shortage of flammable goods aboard as well from kindlings to whisky. Everything was ready, and all he lacked was an opportunity for him to act.

"I should probably get this over with as soon as possible. I can't tolerate the humiliation anymore! Tonight, tonight! I would burn all of you into ashes! Chen Dalong, let's see if you can still pick on me after tonight!" Li Sheng thought to himself, chuckling lightly.

Temporarily parking his thoughts, he unlocked the archaic wooden door and entered the squadron's room. He coughed as the smells of musty wood seeped into his nose. As dust in the room danced in the air, a sudden fleeting sense of calm set in as the memory of his childhood flashed before him.

By the riverside, there stood a mother and a child. The gushing sounds from the flowing river paired with the picturesque view were breathtaking. A boy was running around, picking flowers from the beautiful grassland, trying to impress his mother. His mother's vision, however, was drawn onto the bridge afar, and the scent of disappointment is fast approaching.

Suddenly, a man dashed across the bridge wearing a weary face as he waved at the duo. The mother's spirit brightened and her smile blossomed like a flower. The boy bubbled with joy, running towards the man in the robe, giving him a welcoming hug.

Time mercilessly passed as the trio chatted, bursting in laughter.

"Jing—er, I've really got to go. Until next time then!" The man stood up as he adjusted his attire. He gave them a warm smile with guilt.

"Have you not told them yet?"

"Next time, next time. I'm still waiting for a good opportunity. You know, the Royal court has been really unstable recently. There seems to be a divide amongst the officials. I promise, for the last time, I'll get it done as soon as possible! I don't know when we'll be able to meet again, so take the money, alright? Take care!" Zhu Di answered with hesitation. As he spoke, he quickly left the scene, unwilling to turn his head to see the women's disappointed face. He was ashamed, yet he was powerless.

And that was the last memory of Li Sheng with his father. The bag of money from Zhu Di was quickly used up, and her mother's laborious life began. One Month. One year. Ten years. They continued to wait as Li Sheng's mother health conditions slowly deteriorated, constantly working overtime to support their survival. Li Sheng could only watch as her rosy cheeks losing their vibrant colour; her once-beautiful face filling up with wrinkles; her silky dark hair turning white.

"Don't blame your father, alright? I couldn't raise properly, and I've failed to fulfil my duty as a mother! Your father is the Emperor, so how would he have the time to take care of us? If fate allows, we'll meet again in the Underworld..."

Snapping out of his thoughts, a bitter smile crept onto his face. Clasp his hands together, he took a deep breath and held his tears in. He retrieved a towel from his bag as he dejectedly mopped each furniture.

² [Historic context: The Battle of Red Cliffs is one of the most significant battles in Chinese history. The Sun-Liu side achieved victory with an enormous number disadvantage (fifty thousand troops against eight hundred thousand). They sent unmanned fire ships towards the Cao navy army, which set the whole navy ablaze. By manipulating the wind direction, the fire caused a "chain effect" as the fire passed on from one ship to another.]

Swells of tears would occasionally form near his eyelids, which then Li Sheng would sniff quietly as he wiped them off with his trembling hands. His lips trembled, muttering incoherent words, eyes twitching with pain and anger.

"It's all because of you! Why... why couldn't you just be a man for once, and keep your promises? You are the King! Who could act against your words? You liar... Ten years! We waited for ten years! We didn't ask for much, yet you couldn't fulfil it with your almighty power? I rather not have a father like you!" Tears uncontrollably streamed down his face, and his face flushed red. What caused his rant and rave? Was it anger? No, that wasn't accurate. Was it sorrow? That wasn't it. It was disappointment and hopelessness. He had adored his Father, even though they didn't meet much. His father had an unfathomably high position in his heart, comparable to an image of an omnipotent Deity. But now? Everything had crumbled, and only hatred remained.

"Zhu Di... Zhu Di! You're a liar! Mum truly loved you, but what did she get in return? The Great Emperor of the Ming Dynasty? What a joke! You don't deserve her love; you don't even deserve to live!"

Soon it was already dusk. The room now was impeccably clean and tidy, and Li Sheng could finally plan his revenge. Sneaking into the storage room with dazzling treasures, he recorded the layout of the room. By igniting the ridiculous amount of alcohol here, it could definitely cause a unceasing fire. As long as he could time the explosion perfectly, this voyage ship was bound to be reduced to ashes. However, Li Sheng was more ambitious. Destroying one ship was not enough for him to vent his anger; he wanted to thoroughly ruin this operation which will require the cooperation of the heavens' wind as he waited patiently for everyone to let their guard down.

"Midnight, it is then. No one would expect an accident to occur on the very first day of the operation. The wind seems to be quite strong as well, and it's blowing towards the east side. It probably wouldn't burn all seven voyage ships, but burning four of them shouldn't be a problem. Father, you can finally experience powerlessness and disappointment that Mother and I felt..."

The silvery moon crawled out from the endless horizon as Li Sheng made some final preparations. Surprisingly, it went smoother than expected as the sailors didn't give Li Sheng any trouble. The guards at the Treasury were also fairly lax, probably due to the influence of alcohol. Everything was ready, and everything seemed to be in Li Sheng's favour.

Li Sheng was sweating as his hands trembled, holding the flint and steel. His resolution from before disappeared as he continued to hesitate. After all, this fire would kill hundreds of sailors, and his heart wavered. He was stuck in a dilemma. He didn't want to put all his effort to waste, but he didn't want to harm the innocents either.

"That bastard must not live eternally... how would I face my mother in the Underworld if that actually happened!? As long as I'm alive, I would not allow that to happen! But the majority of these sailors have done nothing wrong, and they do not deserve their deaths either. Just what should I do!?" Li Sheng growled as he continued to ponder. Towards his father and those bullies, he wouldn't mind being merciless; towards the innocents, he didn't want to drag them into his personal grudge. Li Sheng's morals wouldn't be easily swayed, despite his deep abomination towards his father.

"I'll just burn one ship... and I'll notify the innocent sailors before the fire spreads too much. If I burn the treasures and sink this ship, he wouldn't be able to accumulate enough karma for his transcendence. This wouldn't kill anyone either. Hm, I guess I will make do with this plan. If Zhu Di still manages to transcend, then at least I've done all I can. Mum, I'm sure you'll agree with my method, right?"

He knelt in front of a tinder bundle that he had prepared beforehand as he struck the steel rock onto the edge of the flint, followed by a quick downward motion. The small spark landed on the bundle as it glowed silently. Wisps of smokes started to appear, and he patiently watched the fire swallowing the fibrous materials. Then, he started pouring litres of alcohol onto the floor nearby, and Li Sheng left the treasury stealthily.

"Twenty minutes and the smoke should start to become noticeable. By then, the fire would already be unstoppable. When they find out the accident, I'll probably be executed. Death – bring it on! At least, I've avenged my mother! I've died a glorious death!"

The next twenty minutes were abnormally quiet. Li Sheng, with a carefree attitude, stared at the starry sky, appreciating the world's beauty. His mind was more tranquil than ever, and he began to wonder what would happen if he decided to not seek his revenge. Would he be able to live a carefree life like other sailors on the ship? He imagined the confrontations of the voyage ships with foreigners, establishing trades, the discovery of new islands, and even the brutal sea battles against pirates. A smile crept across his face, and his heart wavered again. Was his decision a right one?

He didn't regret his decision. If he had stayed, he would still be bullied by others, and he would never attain true happiness as a part of him would constantly strive for revenge.

Smoke began to flood the sky as the treasury door was ignited. The silence was destroyed as the ship fell into chaos. Sailors rushed out of their resting rooms, anxiously waiting for the Captain's instructions. Some immediately tried to put out the fire, but the flame was unaffected. Some ran around, forcefully waking people up from their intoxicated state. Li Sheng watched on the side, observing the situation and merely smirked.

"Here goes the treasury, and the boat. At least all of you get to stay alive, so I've no regrets either. Farewell! Mother, I'll accompany you in a few minutes' time!" Li Sheng thought to himself as he walked to the stern of the ship despite the chaos. He filled his jacket with heavy rocks, and he dove into the boundless sea without hesitation.

The wave struck him as Li Sheng sank and drifted. He didn't struggle, and his face even carried a smile. He allowed himself to sink, being suffocated by the water. His body yearned for air, but his strong will refused. He sank until he lost all consciousness.

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Years later, the voyage was complete as the sailors returned home after the long journey. The original eight voyage ships whittled down into seven, and the Emperor was furious. Although transcending became impossible, this glorious adventure was still recorded onto the books of history, passed down for generations. On the historical records, there only had been seven voyage ship, and its sole mission was to distribute to the glory of the Ming Dynasty. He hid his intentions to transcend to an immortal, and he mercilessly issued a ban on anything regarding it. The Royal Diviner was killed, and even some normal civilians. "Shut it, or die with it." This attitude established by the court scared many people, and this truth slowly disappeared from the world.

On the book of history, it noted:

There were seven voyages by the Ming Treasure Fleet, and the people on board had many adventures. It carried cargoes of gold and silk and other precious items for the captain and the sailors to give away as gifts. Sometimes they met peaceful people and did give away the wonderful presents they had brought from the Emperor, making new relationships with a variety of countries. The mission was a success, and this mission shall be remembered forever.

Tale of a Thousand Suns

King George V School, Cheung, Geraldine – 16

Calicut, 1433

“I’m not dying.”

At first his question goes unanswered. With the sleeve of his robes pushed back past his elbow, Zheng He watches as the physician’s fingertips prod at his exposed forearm, pressing at his raised vein. Outside, the sun is going down, and shadows play and shift over the physician’s fingers as he frowns in concentration.

“I am unsure, Admiral.” Li Wei says at last, straightening up and shaking his head. Zheng He lowers his sleeve. “You understand, of course— that when one is ill at sea—”

In that moment Zheng He wants to reply that he does understand, but he doesn’t. For years his rule with ill sailors has been to abandon them on the shore to await death, so that the rest of the crew might not fall ill with the same sickness. It is a cruel rule, but necessary for the survival of the fleet. But now, when it is his turn to face such a fate, he is not so sure, and the hesitation scares him.

“Is this illness a certainty, doctor?” he asks Li Wei.

“Pardons, admiral, but if you were not ill I would not be here.”

“Perhaps you misunderstood me. Must I be put ashore?”

Li Wei rubs at the back of his neck. “May I speak freely, admiral?”

“If you must.”

“Well pardons, admiral, but you are not young.” Li Wei looks apologetic. “This illness may take you, or it may not. The best course of action—”

“I know.”

“It is for the good of the fleet, admiral. For six voyages the fleet has remained strong. It cannot be allowed to wane.”

“I know that too. But I want to wait until we are sure that this is true illness rather than something minor. But until then, do not put me ashore. That will be all, doctor. Dismissed.”

Li Wei nods and bows before exiting, and Zheng He sinks back onto the wicker mat bed. Outside, framed against the cold light, he can faintly see Li Wei’s dark silhouette, speaking with one of his colleagues— one of the 180 physicians aboard his several *baochuan*.

He does not want to meet his fate. For a week now the sickness and the coughing has persisted, and Li Wei seems to want to leave him behind on the shores of Calicut. In fourteen days the fleet will leave Calicut for Hormuz, and by then Zheng He will have to have made up his mind about staying and leaving.

“You are an admiral.” He mutters to himself. “You’ve sailed to over a hundred shores. You are not afraid. You’ll do your duty, and no less.”

But some part of him still refuses to. He chooses to push it from his mind.

Sleep is a long time coming that night.

Dian Lake, 1377

Ma He does not remember when they first began to play in the lake by the house. Perhaps it was his father who had led him there first, or perhaps his brother, Ma Wenming. Wenming is a year Ma He’s senior, and wherever Wenming goes, Ma He always follows.

Only today, he is not so sure. There is a limestone cliff near the house that overlooks the deep waters of the Dian Lake, easily some twenty *chi* in height from base to summit. When he was a boy he had witnessed Wenming ascend the cliff until he was a distant figure easily hidden by Ma He’s thumb, and had watched him leap from the summit into the lake below. As he fell he had become a blurred silhouette, bird-like and framed by sunlight, a brief laugh escaping his mouth before he’d plunged into the icy water with a spray of white foam.

And now Wenming has led Ma He to the cliff, and it is his turn to take the leap. The clear water below now looks like the mouth of a yawning chasm, mysterious and impossibly wide and a deep, pensive blue. And Wenming wants Ma He to hurl himself into it.

“Will I die?” He asks.

He is leaning against the wind, which is rippling the water of the lake and nudging Ma He towards the cliff’s edge.

Wenming folds his arms. "You saw me do it, Ma He. You should know."

"Will it hurt?"

"Oh, come on, Ma He. Be brave."

He inches forward. A quote from one of his books comes to mind— *Wisdom, compassion, and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men.*

He decides to leap.

The wind whistles in his ears. A blur of white sunlight glances off the deep blue water below. Then there is a splash, a sudden shock of cold, and a wall of icy water erupts around him as he plunges downwards. The world around him is sapphire blue and still, and silver streams of sunlight light the depths.

Be brave, Wenming's voice, saying it into his ear, but that is impossible. Ma Wenming died years ago.

And then Zheng He wakes up.

The next day, before sunrise, he summons Li Wei again.

"Have you rested, Admiral?"

"Rested? May I remind you, Li, that I have over a hundred ships to command?"

"Pardons, Admiral, but all night as well as all day?"

Zheng He presses his fingers to his eyelids. When he was younger, perhaps, the work the Emperor has given him was tiring at the most. But grey has begun to thread his hair, and everything he does seems to take a toll on him.

"Put me ashore." He says, suddenly.

Li Wei's eyebrows rise. "Admiral?"

"You heard what I said."

"You have made up your mind?"

"Put me ashore. The fleet will sail to Hormuz without me." He removes from his sleeve a sheet of paper. In the pre-dawn light it is thin and translucent as a moth's wing. He has spent the early hours of the morning setting his brush to it, covering it with row upon row of carefully inked characters. "For when the fleet leaves for Hormuz."

Li Wei takes it.

By the time Zheng He is settled on one of the white sand beaches that dot the shore the first rays of the sun have already coloured the sky a hesitant, faint blue, bathing his distant fleet in a myriad of shadow and light. As per Zheng He's own rule, Li Wei leaves him with a crackling fire, and enough food and fresh water to last him three days, but no more than that. *Without water I have seven days.* Zheng He thinks. He swallows and nods Li Wei a farewell, choosing to watch the distant ships across the water as the rowboat the landing party has brought with them rows back without him.

Having nothing to do for once, the sun rises and sets over Calicut with astonishing speed. He does not touch the food, instead watching the stars begin to show overhead. He knows the names of every which one he can use to find his way, but either the dull thirst beginning to set in or his gnawing hunger has caused that knowledge to seep from his mind.

He does not know how long he remains awake. A fit of coughs racks him in the night, and in the morning he coughs and sees droplets of blood spattered on the white sand. For a long time he thinks that sleep will never overtake him, but eventually he does.

Calicut, 1407

The first voyage had been the worst.

The first night in his cabin, Zheng He had been unable to sleep. Eventually it had gotten so bad that he had had to rise and make his way above decks, the better to lean against the gunwale and feel the cold sea wind buffeting his face. Outside the distant stars, which had always calmed him down in past years, only seemed to agitate him more.

He places his hands a shoulder width apart on the gunwale and watches the dark sea in silence, lost in thought of storms and shipwrecks and impossibly high waves. It is a while before he realizes he is being spoken to.

"Ma He."

He turns.

The man who has suddenly appeared beside him bears him an astonishing resemblance, although he has died long ago. Both men's eyes are almond shaped and obsidian black, although Zheng He's hair is still dark and his father's has become streaked with grey. The latter approaches and leans beside him against the gunwale, dark eyes scanning the sea.

"You're scared." Says Ma Haji.

"Yes, Father."

"You fear death."

"Yes, Father."

"Why?"

Zheng He swallows. "Perhaps because of what lies there."

"Why fear it?"

"Father, this is the fear of the unknown."

Ma Haji strokes the wooden railing beneath his arms with one finger. "Look around you, Ma He. Where are you going?"

"The ship is on course to Champa."

"And after that?"

"Java. Malacca. Aru."

"Afterwards?"

"After that I cannot say for sure."

"And do you know what Champa is like?"

"No, Father."

"Do you fear it?"

He thinks before answering. "No. I have been there. I have seen the sun rise there, and at Java, and Malacca, and above the mountains of Ceylon besides. Every journey brings another sunrise, and I have seen a thousand. I don't think I fear it."

Ma Haji smiles. "Precisely. Be brave, Ma He."

At dawn, two days after the fleet has left for Hormuz, the crew scatters Zheng He's ashes over the sea. Li Wei stands at the stern of a *baochuan*, the revolving sail of one of the ship's nine masts casting him in shade. The sheet of paper Zheng He has left him is clutched tightly in one hand. He has not read it yet, but now he opens it, his eyes roving over the lines of clear writing, mouthing the words to himself as he reads.

In the course of a thousand sunrises and seven voyages we have traversed more than one hundred thousand li of immense water spaces, and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high. We have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in a blue transparency of light vapours, while our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds, day and night continued their course with starry speed, breasting the savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare.

The fleet now sails on to Hormuz without me— I am on my own voyage now. I know not where that may lead, and I know not how I will get there, but it is another voyage all the same. For what is another sunrise, except for a new day, and a new adventure?

— Calicut, written in the reign of the Xuande Emperor

Li Wei finishes reading and folds the paper closed, looking upwards as he does so.

The sun has risen above the horizon before him, lighting the sky with swashes of orange and gold. Another morning has come— it is a new day once more.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Korean International School, Shrestha, Prasan – 16

They were sailing through the smooth surface of a calm yet unpredictable body of water. Ming commanded the rest of the crew to prepare themselves as he could see a distant threat to their vessel. They even named their craft as 'Lady Mary'. They cared and treated this ship as if they were caring for their own women. However, Ming was disparate from the rest of his crew. The closest mortal he could relate to was his little brother, Wong.

When they both first joined the crew, Ming was an entirely different person from what he has become now. He was a very frank person and if anyone in the crew needed mental stability to prepare themselves for the raging seas, they would turn to him. Unfortunately, on one of their various excursions on the waters, many crew members were unprepared as it was their very first encounter with a whirlpool. This whirlpool was not an ordinary one as it somehow seemed like it was sucking in tornados.

The inexperienced crew were struggling to maintain the raging tides of the sea and it could be seen how their lack of qualification was affecting their vessel. Crew members were swinging monkeys on the masts of the ship. Crew members on the ground were rolling like bowling balls from one side of the deck to another. However, there was one member who looked remained still as water. Ming had the mindset of a true captain and was already thinking of methods to get out of this situation. He knew how to get out of this obstacle and was quick to command the crew. He ordered them to first drop the anchor and then rotate the sail away from the whirlpool. The crew were confused from this but soon understood his idea as the ship had turned completely away from the whirlpool. The crew then lifted the anchor back up from the ocean and immediately set sail away from the whirlpool. There were also other ships nearby from them and Ming helped them with his wit. As a reward for aiding them away from danger, they rewarded them with enough supplies to buy a whole new ship. The supplies included silks, gold and other rare materials.

People started applauding the captain after they were a safe distance away from danger. Ming received their applause well as he was thanking and complimenting the crowd. He noticed a distinctive voice that was not heard by him. He usually would be embarrassed by Wong after he had done something of this sort. He would jump on him with joy and would start the 'hooray chant'. However, this time there was no 'hooray chant' or someone jumping on him unexpectedly. Ming immediately started a search for his little brother and as soon as he wasn't found on the ship, Ming went out on sail on one of their emergency boats back to the whirlpool.

The rest of the crew was against this idea, but they couldn't stop the captain from making his own decision, especially after he single-handedly saved all the crew. Ming paddled and paddled to no end with the crew soon picking him up from a nearby shore where he had passed out from exhaustion. As he was making his way back to 'Lady Mary', he thought of what he had just lost. He lost his yang to his yin, his sun to his moon and his light to his shadow.

Existing crew members then started rumors that the captain had turned to a person who felt no empathy towards anyone, almost like a sociopath. For this reason, the captain experienced unspeakable amounts of prejudice from new crew members that he was isolated from almost all the crew members. The only people that he could still communicate without any glares were his two close friends, Tao and Cheng, who were also close friends with his little brother. It had almost been two years since his brother went missing and now Ming was feeling a sense of déjà vu. He could see a distant whirlpool stirring up but in the corner of his eye, he could also see a battle of two ships. He used his spyglass to further examine the ships when he suddenly discovered something unthinkable. He could see his little brother, Wong, defending himself against his enemies. Immediately after he saw this, Ming set sail towards them to further aid his brother. The crew were soon close enough to board the ships and they could quickly dissemble the enemies. After the aftermath, Ming could finally have a chance to catch up with Wong.

Ming was in so much joy that he didn't even realised how long they were having a conversation for. Ming wanted to know how much he had changed since the incident, specifically how he had escaped an impossible disaster. Ming realised both of them were starting to feel dehydrated and went to fetch water. Although Wong insisted that he would go, Ming stressed that it was the least he could do after losing him. As he made his way back to his chamber, he started to hear small decibels of mumbling and grumbling. As soon as he opened the door to his chamber, he could spot that all his crew were tied in ropes and Wong's crew gathering the supplies Ming once received for the price of his brother. Wong's crew were grumbling over how their supplies were inadequate. He tried to set his crew free with his blade but was quickly dismantled by Wong's crew.

Ming then woke up to a grinning face of his brother Wong. Ming was really confused in why his brother would do this. Wong emphasised that he could no longer stay behind his shadow while he was only recognised as a 'second-hand' version of his brother. As they were going back and forth, Ming's crew members were slowly decreasing in numbers. Ming glanced to the edge of the ship and could see his crew members walking the plank blindfolded. He could also see his bare crew members being sliced by the pirates if they refused to walk. In a fit of rage, Ming untied his ropes with what seemed like brute strength. It is true that Ming was an entirely different person after his brother had gone missing, but it also taught him a lesson. He used his favors from the loyal relationships he had established with multiple countries and learnt many things from them. He grew much stronger from all the training he had received from these countries and it was for preventing an incident like his brother's.

He stood up to the crowd of pirates standing out because not only was he the only member of his crew who was still unscathed, he also had a look in his eyes that screamed out vengeance. As the pirates were preparing to attack, Ming was suddenly obscured. He had deployed multiple smoke bombs that contained quick burning tar and rags. This caused the pirates to panic and started swinging their sharp swords around them. Although this did protect them from attacks, they could also swing at their allies which led to them having double-edged swords. Wong was not found anywhere in the battle because he did not care for his allies like Ming does.

Although Ming had disguised himself in the thick smokescreen, he was not delusional to think that he could take out all the pirates. He was stalling for time hoping that the rest of his fleet could see the signal produced by the smoke. After some time had passed, the smoke had dissipated but also the tied crew members. Hanging from the top of the mast was Ling and as soon as the pirates spotted him, they were swarmed with reinforcements of the Ming Treasure Fleet. Although some crew members were lost in battle, Ling did not want the pirates to face death and left them on a deserted island. Even though Ming's eyes were glowing with vengeance earlier, he wanted nothing but to reconcile with his brother.

With now a new goal of finding and reconciling with his brother, Ming had now set sail again. This was the seventh time that Ming had gone on a voyage and he also had a feeling that it would be the most important. After months on the unpredictable ocean, there was still no sight of Wong. Most of his crew members had already concluded that he had dropped to the ocean bed from getting caught in the crossfire when the reinforcements arrived. Despite all odds were against Ming, he still had only one thought in mind. He told everyone every day of the journey that, 'If my brother could survive a whirlpool, he can survive this.' Although Ming hoped that this would motivate the crew to pull through this journey, almost half of the crew had quit or joined another ship.

After days of rationing food, they could only last one more night. That same night, Ming was scouring the sea with his spyglass to hopefully find his brother. He could not find his brother, but he did see a battle between two ships occurring near them and it was odd for Ming. The Ming Treasure Fleet had gained such a reputation that once pirates saw their flag, they would avert away from them. Yet this ship was attacking right in front of them, almost as if they were trying to mock them. Ming decided that after stopping this attack, they would sail back to their home.

Once they arrived at the battlefield, they tactically devised a plan to help the victims but also not suffer many casualties. Soon after, they boarded the ship only to find that the assailants were Wong's crew. Ming saw the victims and could see they were bludgeoned repeatedly without any sense of remorse. Ming was filled with anger that he yelled out, 'An eye for an eye!' Ming immediately lunged towards Wong and tackled him towards the ground.

Wong felt that one of his ribs had been fractured from the tackled. This was another lesson he learned from Ming's teachers which was to aim for vital points. A normal would be in agony but Wong only grinned. Wong's crew were also in combat with Ming's crew and were evenly matched. Clashing of swords and screaming from pain could be heard. Wong could only laugh amidst of the chaos that was happening around him. He then started to explain how he turned out this way to Ming. As they clashed their swords, they were also in a meaningful conversation.

Wong explained that the whirlpool he entered released his 'true self' and realised that he could control his own crew. However, Ming was still confused at why he would attack other ships and not want peace. Wong emphasised that he didn't want recognition from how giving they were, but from how terrifying they were. Amidst all the chaos, there was a loud blowing noise that could be heard. Ming and Wong spotted a cyclone approaching them and decided to retreat. Both ships tried to move towards the land, but the cyclone had such a powerful vacuum that they could not get out of this danger.

Ming secretly knew how to get out of this situation, but it would cost a life. Ming also realised that the only way everyone could be saved was from sacrificing himself. Without a second thought, Ming immediately boarded Wong's ship and threatened the pirates to board their ship or he would start firing cannons at their ship. Once the ship had been cleared, Ming used the front of the ship to ram his ship. After multiple attempts, 'Lady Mary' finally set sail.

Wong was confused why Ming would still sacrifice himself to save him. Ming explained that he couldn't lose his brother again. Before Wong was out of reach, Ming threw his spyglass to him and told him to accept it. This spyglass was a family heirloom only given to the ones who were the most deserving. Ming begged Wong to continue his legacy, but Wong didn't respond. As Wong turned back to respond, Ming could no longer be seen as the thick clouds produced from the cyclone covered the ship completely.

After they had reached safety, everyone cheered, and it seemed like there was no tension between anyone. Wong looked up and saw sunlight piercing through the thick clouds and he felt that this was a sign from his brother to break into his 'true inner self'. Wong promised himself that he would carry on the legacy his brother created through the way of helping each other.

A Welcome Change of Sights

Korean International School, Srivastava, Aryan – 16

The sun's warm rays were dancing past the light clouds onto the welcoming Ming Court on that fateful morning. The Yongle Emperor was receiving foreign emissaries whom Admiral Zheng had brought along with him from his most recent voyage. His globetrotting ventures had made Zheng He a local legend, and people across the country sang praises of his courage and zealous nature. As boys will always be boys, my friends and I would make toy boats out of reeds, then fight over which one of us was going to be Zheng He on our imaginary voyages. We would fight terrifying ogres and slay sea monsters as we waded past their guts into the awaiting sunset. Zheng He was no mere man in anyone's eyes. He was made from the fabric of legend, and everybody aspired to be spoken of in the same breath as Zheng He.

My mind drifted off as the emperor announced that Zheng He was about to set off on a new adventure. This was to be Zheng's fifth voyage and I could not wait to hear about his escapades. There was no way my name was to be left out of the stories this voyage would bring with it. The destination the crew was headed to flew past my wandering thoughts, and it could have been the moon for all who cared to listen. All I could think of, were the clever ways through which I could sneak into Zheng's ship undetected.

After the ship's lawful boarders had received their instructions from the emperor, they set about the city to take care of any unfinished business they had. I was now in the business of getting onboard the ship undetected, and that was easier than I expected because all the attention was on the revered explorers. One by one, they came on board as the sun was setting, and I was eagerly waiting for the ship to set sail as I hid in the cargo bay. "This is it." I told myself, "This time, I won't have to hear the story from anyone else." I wondered what my friends would think of me once I returned. What if I did not return? A cold shiver accompanied the thought, and the bright moon told the cold night winds which parts of my body awaited its sharp kisses. I drifted off and had a wonderful dream of cheers from everybody awaiting us as Zheng and I got carried in the air by the excited crowd.

The crowd suddenly got violent, and their grips tightened as their cheers turned into scolding. "What do we have here?" they shouted. I was suddenly brought out of dreamland into the chilly night by a thunderous voice. "Answer me boy. Who are you?" I was dangling in the air as the strong man shook my body like a damp cloth in the wind. "My-my-my name is..." I was so scared, I had forgotten my name. "Are you a thief? A spy?" the huge man demanded, as the rest of the crew quickly circled us. I could feel dozens of eyes scanning my body as the man's hot breath made the air warmer.

"This is it." I thought. "They will throw me overboard and forget me as soon as I hit the waters." "Let the boy go." A strong calm voice hit my ears as my feet touched the wooden floor. There was a silence I could now perceive, as the steady and well thought out footsteps approached me. His silhouette was all I could see when I looked up, but even that was unmistakable. Admiral Zheng He was now standing next to me. Looking at me. Seeing me. It then hit me that what would happen when I got discovered had never crossed my mind before now. What did I expect? A warm welcome? Certainly, standing next to Zheng He was not a possibility I had in mind when I set off.

"Get back to work, all of you." Zhen softly commanded, as the huge men scrambled off. It was now just me and him. His eyes examined me from head to toe, and a distant look came across his gaze. It was as if only his body was there with me, his mind far off into a time only he knew. Zheng He had a kind and steady face. His beard waved in the wind as he seemed to come back to the present. "I do not approve how you got into my ship, but I admire your courage. You remind me of a younger me, and you have a lot to learn." An air of relief hit my lungs as he said that, and I knew that I was not going to be thrown off the ship. "You are probably looking for adventure, but I cannot guarantee you will find it, or whether you will ever see you home again." I swallowed hard. "You are now part of my crew, and my crew has a job to do. Head to the kitchen and make sure you find something to do there."

"Thank you admiral." I said, as I waddled around the ship looking for the kitchen. The cook scoffed at my presence in his personal space, but burst out into a thunderous laughter as I flinched at his rebuke. "It's okay little boy." He said. "By the time we're back home, you will have grown into a man." I was relieved at his optimism. He seemed to have the notion of going back home affixed in his plans. "Can you cook?" he asked. "Y-y-yes." I replied uneasily. "We shall soon find out." He boomed, as he burst into another air of hysterical laughter.

As the days raced past, the cook and I became accustomed to each other, and my duties were now mainly doing the dishes and serving the food since he found my cooking wanting. I had many lucky breaks, as the cook would tell me to leave the kitchen and claim that he did not need my help. I took advantage of this time by going above and taking in the salty sea breeze. I got to know most of the crew this way, and my zeal for adventure was now in full thrust. I got to hear familiar stories again, but with an original take as they

were told by the men who had been there. I once walked into the cook doing the dishes, and realized that he would tell me to leave even when there was work, because he wanted me to see what the sea and the other adventurers had to offer.

It was during one of these breaks one day, that one of the crew members excitedly announced that he could see land ahead. The ship shook as everyone rushed to the top to see for themselves. It was a magical scene to behold. There were people on the endless beach going about their daily activities, and as we approached, I realized they were unlike anyone I had ever met before. They had dark and strong looking skin, and their teeth were brilliant white, in contrast to their bodies. As we docked on this mysterious place, the exotic looking people came to greet us with a warmth I thought I'd never feel again. The ladies sang beautifully as children came and inspected these strangers who came from the sea. We were led away from the beach into a beautifully green country, with wonders in every direction I looked. My eyes ached for more, the more I saw. I had never thought my eyes would ever want to be that wide open.

There were animals I had never seen or heard of before in my life. Some had stripes and others had spots. Some had manes, and others had beautiful horns. There were some tall animals, which I later came to know were called twiga, the local name for giraffe. We got into the king's compound with the crowd escorting us, as some zebra and gazelles scattered out of our way. Everything seemed like a magical dream.

The generous king had ordered a feast for us, and there was the familiar smell of roasting meat, accompanied by strange, sweet smelling spices that made my stomach ache to be fed. The food tasted even sweeter than it smelled, and the soft meat could not get into my mouth fast enough. We went to sleep that night with our minds going haywire over the sights of all we had seen that day. As I lay on the ground looking up at the beautiful stars, Zheng He walked over to me and asked, 'How do you find this place?' 'It is amazing.' I replied. Where are we?' I asked, 'Malindi.' Zheng replied. 'Welcome to Africa.'

A Tale of Two Cities

Munsang College, Cheung, Chin Wai – 16

Have you heard of the Ming Treasure Voyages? No? They were a fleet that undertook a special mission from the Ming Dynasty of China. Instead of stealing gold from the places, they gave away treasures. I am honoured to tell you the story of the voyages as a young man on the fleet! Hold on and buckle up, and here we start!

At first, I was just a farmer in the Canton Province, with all but my field and the hoe. All of a sudden, someone announced the recruitment of some workers for the “New Journey”. No one knew what exactly it was, and the law was a draconian one. To be honest, no one dared to give it a shot. I got nothing left; my family members were all killed in an epidemic and I was the only one who survived. I took the plunge then.

I still remember the day: It was the summer solstice when we gathered in a port. The ship was enormous! Only later was I told that I would be one of the people who would be on the ship! I was filled with excitement: What could I see? What would I experience? Flooded by excitement, we then entered the ship. Only after I stepped onto it did I find out that the inside was such a grand place, with well-decorated oil lamps and smooth floor tiles. How silly were my fellow villagers who did not dare to give it a shot and go onboard!

I was allocated as the one in charge for tidying up the place of meeting, like in the palace of the Indian palace. Don't think that this position is simple! It involved a lot of things, like to prepare all the bits and pieces. Here, I am going to tell you some fun (or not-so-fun) things that I came across with this position.

The Ming Dynasty was unimaginably luxurious! As I was given the permission to enter all the petite storage rooms, I found out that we the Ming Dynasty people lived in a lavish fashion. All the plates we brought were of the highest quality, made of the best ceramics and painted by the best artists in the Ming. Holding one in hand could make me the most glamorous man of my country. When they were under the sunlight, the sunlight simply cast the rays back to the sky, leaving not a single bit of residue. But this is always reasonable; we don't show others our worst face, do we?

One of the grandest palaces is the Mogadishu palace. The wall was painted in an array of colour, which was also shiny in the daytime. The king met us with great excitement, and offered to give us audience in a grand room. When we arrived at Mogadishu, we were to talk with the peasants there too. From the grapevine, I somehow found out that the king was a cruel man, who collected excessive taxes from the people. This was what made the Mogadishu palace shiny and glamorous; built on a puddle of blood, sweat and tears of the fellow people. We left with great excitement, but my heart went out to the people there.

We visited a poor state too, Ceylon (they said). Ceylon is actually an island, just next to India. It is Sri Lanka today. Ceylon was such a poor place that there were not even a bit of weed on the port we arrived. They had no palace or grand castle, but we were only offered to stay in a hut built by some fellow people. Through gesturing with the people there, I could see that people have great relationship under the leadership of the so-called “head of the village”. In fact, the head worked as hard as every other Ceylon people did, and worried as much as every other Ceylon people worried. This was truly a scene for every one of us to learn from.

On this fleet I have learnt a lot. What amazed me most was not the grand and luxurious palaces, but the strong bonding that tied all citizens of the place together to face the best or the worst. ***Leadership is less about commanding others than empathizing with fellows on their difficulties for a common good.***

This is truly a voyage that I will never forget.

The Root of the Vine

Munsang College, Siu, Yiu – 16

It was 3:00 a.m. The sky was pitch dark. All sounds had been smothered and smudged before being nulled to nothingness. Not even the howls of the wind, the hoots of the owls or the rustles of the lonely trees in the freezing cold were heard. It was a long night.

'Agh!' A frustrated gentleman broke the silence. Weak rays of light from the lamp on his working table made him the protagonist in the dark. He placed his hand on the cheek and walked back and forth, just as an anxious child waiting for the release of his term test results. Then, he stopped walking and stared at the piles of documents on the table for a long while. He sat down on the fluffy upholstery and opened the file on top of the others. He tore the very first page of the thick pile into shattered pieces and threw them into the bin with anger. He kicked over the bin and stood at the exact point with his eyes closed. Everything seemed to have been frozen. It was like a freeze-frame in a mime. Then, he turned away from the mountains of files and went to bed.

The name tag on the table marked 'Mr Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China'. It was 4:30 a.m.

'Hey, wake up! We gotta go now. I mean now and we shan't be late. For no good reason shall we be late and you know we will be in trouble if you stay in your bed. So now, for the one last time that I'm telling you, get up. Shake a leg!' A man in his mid-40s with a long, black cloak commanded, trying to wake the young gentleman who had been weaned on his warm and cosy bed. 'Who are you? How dare you speak so rudely to me?' He stared at the man with a puzzled and annoyed look. 'I am General Zheng He. I don't know who you are and I don't really care but since you are on my fleet, I am quite sure that you are one of my Junior Generals. So now, please get up because we are arriving at our destination, Bangladesh, one of our most aggressive "friends" indeed.'

'Wait, wait a minute. Slow down. You said you are Zheng He, you mean the Zheng He from the Ming dynasty, the famous explorer who made his way to India, Africa and Arabia!' 'Yes, so what? How can you not know who I am! You are on my fleet, gentleman.' 'Oh Sir, I...I am...' He stammered. 'Okay gentleman, again I don't care who you are. Just start working now. We will soon debark.' Zheng He left. He still couldn't believe in himself, 'Did I travel back in time? I travelled back in time! Oh my god, when I go back, I am going to publish essays about this. I am sure I will. I definitely will.'

Now, he knew that he travelled from the 21st century to the Ming dynasty.

Another General came by. 'Hey newbie, what's your name? I haven't seen you around before.' 'Erm... erm. My name is Chun. That's right, you can call me Chun.' The General left with an 'okay' gesture. 'Phew. I am really good at camouflage.'

'But wait, did General Zheng just say we were going to debark on the soil of Bangladesh? From what I knew, Bangladesh was a poor and crowded country. Also, many conflicts and wars arose in that region these years. Was there anything worth exploring? Oh, I really doubt that.' He murmured these while he was paying his visit to different chambers and parts of the fleet. Soon, they saw the land of Bangladesh.

The first thing that came into their sight was neither the welcoming indigenous tribes wearing cowrie bracelets and beaded corsets nor the breathtaking scenery of Mother Nature — it was the 'sea' of tribes holding the poor-looking handgonnes that stood along the front. They gave a 'warm' welcome to all the members of the fleet. None of them dared to move. No one was talking or walking. It was like a freeze-frame in a mime.

The tribes first broke the silence. A smart-looking woman with a golden crown shouted and howled but no one on the fleet could understand a single word. They seemed to be annoyed. They yelled with a louder voice and everyone could feel the tension growing in the filthy air.

‘Indeed. They are nothing more than a crowd of the uncivilised.’ Chun murmured with despise. He thought no one could hear what he was saying but, unfortunately, the head of the tribes spotted Chun. He shouted louder and this time, the tribes were loading their gunpowder into the barrels.’

‘Wait! You must have misunderstood us. We are not here to harm. I guarantee,’ Zheng said. He opened his arms with his palm opened, facing upward, trying to show signs of openness and honesty. She stared at Zheng with a suspicious look. He shouted again but this time they put down their weapons. Tension stopped thriving. Finally, all members of the fleet, for the very first time, felt at ease, especially Chun as he was the culprit of the conflict which almost triggered an interracial war.

Just when everyone thought that things were settled, the sky grew darker and darker. It was just as if the sky turned from a clear blue amber into a groaning monster in a blink of an eye. The sky had darkened into a faint violet. A flash of forked lightning and a great clap of thunder came close upon each other. The tribes shouted in their dialect again and they all ran into their huts. This time, Chun and the others wouldn’t need to understand what the tribes were saying to make their situation clear because it was self-explanatory: A storm was coming.

Workers on the fleet started to tremble with fear, not knowing what to do. They said, ‘Let’s leave the fleet and run into their huts. Only through this way will we be safe.’ ‘But the tribes are aggressive. Can’t you remember they were trying to kill us a minute ago? It is dangerous to go out and seek for help from enemies. Also, we can’t leave the fleet. All our assets, gold, food and silk are on the fleet. Without our fleet we are nothing but a crowd of refugee.’ Chun said. Controversies sparked and this marked the beginning of the fierce debate: To leave or not to leave. This is the question. The fleet was on its own now.

Just when General Zheng was caught between a rock and a hard place, a black figure was getting closer and closer to the fleet. It was the head of the tribes who was trying to kill them a moment ago. Zheng was shocked for a second, not knowing the intention of him running towards them.

‘Be prepared, He is coming to attack us.’ Chun shouted. ‘Wait. Is he waving at us? I guess he is asking us to go to their huts. Let’s run and leave.’ All members of the fleet, including Chun sped to the huts. Chun ran with Zheng and they went to the hut of the head of the tribes. They sat on the floor. The head and her family stared at them with a strange look as if they had discovered something brand new. Then, she sat next to them, and she filled the cups on the end table with hot tea and spoke in her dialect again. She seemed to have realised that Chun and Zheng did not understand her. She placed the two cups of tea in front of them and invited them to give it a try with simple gestures. Chun and Zheng were a bit nervous but they still had a try on the cup of tea. It was a traditional fermented tea planted in the region. Chun and Zheng showed a huge smile on their faces and so as she herself and her family.

‘Well, I may have to admit that I was wrong about them. They may really just have misunderstood us and there’s nothing more. I mean they are not as rude and uncivilised as I said.’ Chun said. Zheng remained silent but gave him a warm smile.

The storm lasted for two days. Afterwards the tribes helped the members of the fleet to rebuild another fleet so that they could sail back to China. During the time they spent together, members of the fleet learnt more about the tribal life in Bangladesh. They visited the garment manufacturing workplace, tea garden and wet markets of various tribes. They saw children having lessons and the way the locals interacted with one another. Everyone appreciated the harmonious and loving relationship among the tribes. They were helpful and welcoming. They were much more passionate towards life though their materialistic enjoyment was not as fulfilling as that in China.

Life was simple but beautiful here. Also, there were a lot of local and traditional gadgets, especially in terms of their costumes and accessories such as the Dung-dkar, which is a musical instrument made of sea snail's shell. Zheng decided to trade with the tribes and gave the tribes some Chinese green tea in exchange for these little funny gadgets. 'I can't believe visiting Bangladesh is such an eye-opening journey.' Chun exclaimed. Suddenly, the ground started spinning fiercely and Chun felt faint.

Bang! Chun fell right on the floor. Wait, the floor? He checked out the calendar and the clock on the concrete wall which he was so familiar with. It was 4:30 a.m. He sat on the fluffy upholstery, just as what he usually did, picking up his pen and then he turned over the very first page of the file on of the others.

He then wrote: *The Silk Road Economic Belt* and *The 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (The Belt and Road Initiative)*.

The Sea and the Treasure

St. Mary's Canossian College, Kot, Erica – 17

The dangers in the seas lie aplenty,
The foremost the demons in the deep.
If you get a stone to your forehead,
Your soul goes along with them!

'Let the ships sail!'

The people on the shore gave us some fanfare with their large drums, and off we went, to the deep blue.

Even the mere sight of our fleet was impressive. More than a dozen of ships, the largest anyone has seen in living memory, started to move as their colorful sails caught the wind. For me, it was even more impressive. Glowing spirits floated everywhere as they patrolled the ship, to protect it from any malevolent force attacking the ships. Yes, spirits. How else do you think that the ship can survive through all these voyages? Blind luck? No, of course not. There are important people on board. SO Instead, the government bribed the spirits; not with money, though, but with burnt offerings on their altars. What use are gold taels for the dead?

How did I know? Good question. And there's a simple answer to that good question: I can see the spirits. It's a special gift of mine. Some people can walk on hot sand without getting a single burn; some can summon tigers with fancy paintings; I can see spirits, whether I want to or not. I had nightmares as a child because of this. But this ability was the thing that helped me earn my ticket on board. When I told the guy that I could see spirits, he immediately pulled me aside, made me swear an oath that I wasn't lying, and I was on board.

My real title is the Marshal of Spirits. Cool, right? Except that reality can be harsh. So my official title is something more like General Horse Caretaker. I know. Laugh if you want to. But at least, I would have a few men to help me out, I thought, as our ships pulled away from the harbor.

Things couldn't be worse. With that happy thought, I set off for my duties a horse-keeper with the rest of my crew.

There stood Chan, a serious person with a temper as easily flared up as a dried pile of firewood. Really, he was serious about everything. He even keeps his clothes as tidy as possible when sowing hay, which is simply impressive. Then there's Leung, who is a slow riser, but in general, he's a nice fellow. And there's Ming, a wad of muscle. He eats a lot, and has a fiery temper, but he's the only one who can lift 3 bags of feed at the same time, which is pretty amazing as I can barely lift one. And of course, there's also Liang, the chef. He's on this trip mainly because he wanted enough money to start a nice little business. He would spend hours talking about how he wanted a small restaurant, and then he could marry the girl he liked. Man, at this point, I can probably draw a full picture of his girl, with him giving me so much detail.

SO here's the daily routine: We (except for Leung) would wake at sunrise, and then we'd wake Leung up with a large pair of cymbals. Then after we wash, we give offerings to the spirit protecting our ship. His name was Wong, who apparently died in the Battle of the the Red Cliffs, and had a wound on his stomach to prove it. After that, a hasty breakfast, then chores. The work includes feeding horses, brushing them, and avoid being kicked. The part of avoid-being-kicked is important. The horses are cooped up – they're skittish, and they pack a good heavy kick. And then lunch, then more horse-caring and maybe swabbing the deck, then we get supplies from one of those supply ships. Usually this means Hui's supply ship. He'd toss us rice and other commodities, and maybe a pint of alcohol if he was feeling particularly good. Most of the time, though, he's in a filthy mood and gods help the person who was foolish enough to ask for more supplies. For he was quite the drunkard, and because he was the captain of the supply ship, he had plenty to drink.

About ten days into sailing, something happened. Ming really wanted to drink.

'I really miss the liquor, y'know? Just a little sip of some liquor, and yeah... I'd be in heaven in no time.'

'You really miss *jiǔ* that much?'

'Yeah, well, you know. What's life all about? I'm no smartie. Life is wine and women. I'm gonna get Hui to toss us the wine.'

And soon came the evening, and boy, Hui was a storm cloud ready to discharge. Like, his face was all red — a sign of him drinking since lunch. After we got our supply sacks, Ming asked, "Yo, Hui, toss us some booze!"

Then Hui exploded. Long story short, Hui vowed we would not be getting supplies tomorrow as he pulled away from us. I wasn't too sure of the details myself, but I was pretty sure I swore. Hui might be a horrible person, but he wasn't the type to bluff. Sure enough, the next day, the supplies didn't come. So for dinner that day, it was just congee from some leftover grain Liang saved up. All in all, no one was happy.

'Okay, it's your fault, right? Ming? C'mon! You ever heard of not provoking someone?' yelled Chan, pacing around the dinner table. Granted, everyone only had half a bowl of congee with a small fish that Leung had the luck to pull up, and that fish had to be shared, so everyone only had a few flakes of fish and half a bowl of congee to be exact. Usually, everyone hollered for seconds, so... yes. It was kind of lacking.

But while I was thinking about food, Ming had decided to let his fists do the honors. He punched Chan in the gut and yelled.

'It's not my fault, dammit! Hui was drunk as a hound, ya ...' He said something I probably shouldn't write down. Then his fists decided to do the rest of the talking and smashed into Chan's stomach and pretty soon, it turned into a fight. I wasn't going to let it turn into a full out brawl, so I pulled Chan away from Ling.

'I'm not gonna end this here!' said Ling, seeing that most of the crew had formed a meat shield around Chan. He spat, then left.

After that, the atmosphere around the Big Horse (as we have started calling it) was pretty tense, although we didn't miss any more meals. Still...

And on the fifteenth day of sailing, we finally spotted land. Everyone was excited that the tension broke. And when the gangplank was lowered, everyone cheered like children getting free candies. Our little crew had nothing to do, so instead of sitting around, we decided to go and walk around, because when you'd been cooped up on a ship for so long, you started missing walking on solid ground.

We started exploring around. During the three days that the fleet got supplies off the island and made diplomatic relations and whatnot, our crew struck treasure. Not the type you think, like a full box of gold, but a full box of spices. Fragrant, exotic spices could sell as well as hot cakes on the Lantern Festival. And from what Liang's seen, the spices were top-grade. 'I say!' he'd exclaim, looking at a dried leaf. 'Look at this brilliant color! And the heavenly smell! This is truly fine!'

Me? I don't really know. I'm no food expert. Nor do I devote my time to studying dried leaves. But I guess everyone has their own interests. As for me, I'm content with studying words, so as to flip over my prospects, but also, because 'he' was full to bursting with interesting stories, since 'he' had been haunting there for quite a while.

Well, with a crew this diverse and having so little space for this diverse crew, disaster was bound to strike.

And strike it did.

One morning, as we all ate our morning meal, Leung noticed something. 'Where's Ming?' I looked around, and didn't see Ming, nor hear him, which was weird, because usually one can hear him from a mile away, and he *is* enormous.

'He's not awake yet?' said Chan, with his mouth full of grub.

'It's possible. But usually, doesn't he wake up the earliest?'

'Right...'

'Let's fetch him,' I decided, swallowing my bite and getting up from my chair. 'I'm not lifting those bags without him.'

The others muttered in agreement.

Still half asleep, we shuffled towards Ming's room, which was the closest to the living area.

'Ming!' Chan hollered. 'Get up already!'

No answer.

'Ming!' Chan yelled louder. 'I'm knocking your door down!'

Yet no answer.

'Let's just break it down! Get something, quick!'

In a jiffy, with a metal pole, the handiest we could grab, the door was burst open and in we stormed. But just after we charged in, we saw something that stopped us. Ming was lying face-first to the floor, very still and quite dead.

'Who did it?'

I asked for the tenth time as I paced around the deck, trying to calm myself down and failing so.

'I don't know, boss. But, why ain't he wounded or anything? And there's no blood anywhere too...,' said Leung, apparently just as distressed.

'And the rock beside him. What could that mean?' asked Liang, who was a bit more weak-willed and so, was sitting on a stool shaking. 'It reminds me of that one poem... no it can't be...'

'What poem?' Chan flared up. 'Spill if you know anything.'

'You know, the poem on vengeful water spirits mothers tell their kids so they don't go swimming in seas?'

'Oh... that poem,' said Leung. 'Wait, what? So now...'

'I think supernatural forces claimed him,' said Liang, still slightly trembling.

'Well... It would make sense,' said Chan. 'Not that we know who did it.'

Really, who was I to argue? But then, I saw Tang's head shake, and I knew the thing was much more complicated than just 'a spirit killed him'. Back in my room (because a little killing can really hold anyone off their jobs, and it's not like the bigwigs can ride in the middle of the ocean), 'he' floated in and started to talk.

'No way it could've been a supernatural kill,' said Wong.

'Why are you so sure?' I mean, this is far-fetched. Someone just floats in and tells you something important, real casual. You'd think it's a practical joke.

'You guys have a guardian spirit, me, right? ... w ho's been on patrol, saying no invaders.'

'Oh yeah...' I've almost forgotten about Wong, even though I give him oranges every day. I guess I should give him more. 'So, who did it? Judging from it ...'

'I tell you, its strangling'

'Why?'

'I've seen that before.'

'Oh.'

So that's 'death by a spirit'. The question of WHO remained. Just then, there was a knock, and Leung came in.

'Who were you talking to, man?

'Er, no one in particular. What?'

'Well... I just wanted to talk.'

'Erm, sure,' I pulled him a chair and poured him some tea. I could understand why he wanted to chat. Sea voyages were long, and entertainment was all but common.

'The murder was unsettling, right?'

'Yeah...'

'Listen, do you know why I am here?'

'No' The sudden change of topic surprised me, as well as the eagerness in his tone. Speaking of which, I'd always wondered why Leung was here. I was here because I wanted adventures, Chan was probably here to fuss on everything like a mother hen, and Liang had those big dreams. So why did Leung come on board?

'So why did you come on board?'

'So... well, when I was younger, see... I wasn't well liked,'

'Okay?' This was getting kind of boring. "Um... so? Does that have anything to do with you being here?'

'No, just listen. Ming was one of the biggest bullies. Like... I came here because I kind of wanted to tell him that. But see...'

'Hey, you gotta tell me what. Preferably faster. Stop hesitating your words!' I said, starting to get annoyed.

'Okay. I'm good. See, Ming's family had financial problems since he was five. Apparently his father died, and his mother was weak. So he turned to robbery. Then this year, he somehow suddenly decided to pick up being a trader.'

'A trader? Him?'

'Yeah. But he never had great business because he couldn't get high-quality stuff. So—'

'The spices!' I exclaimed, jumping up and nearly knocking over the stool I was sitting on. 'Those things can make anyone rich.'

'Yeah, but listen, Chan is suspicious too. He is one of the more affluent traders in Ming's area, and I heard before he came here, Ming was getting his customers.'

'Huh.' I was never into trading, but I guess that was bad for a trader.

'So, yes anything else?'

'No, not really...'

So everyone has a motive.

I'm not sure who did it, but it makes me uneasy to sleep.

Everyone. Has. A. Motive.

Seriously, what is with Ming? He's dead, and apparently, everyone on this ship (except me), kinda hates him. And the spices are trouble too. I'm not sure what charm you can find in a bunch of nice-smelling dead plants, but three people want it, and one of them is dead. Could Chan or Liang have killed him? I mean, neither of them liked him very much anyways. Come to think of it, if we have a popularity poll, Ming would probably be last. All that thinking made me hungry. I went out to the kitchen to look for any spare food, although it seemed chance was slim. Hungry sailors simply don't leave much food behind.

Apparently, someone had the same idea as I did, because Liang was in the kitchen, and on the table in front of him, there was a small fish. 'Um, hello?' I said quietly. It would do the neither of us any good if we woke anyone. Food for two is more food per share than food for five. Simple calculation.

'Why are'nt you asleep?'

'That's my line. What are *you* doing here?'

'Preparing for tomorrow, duh,' he said this as he rubbed more salt into the fish.

'So... y'ou're not here to get food, or you can't sleep?'

'... how did you know that?'

'Well, a murder did take place just this morning...'
'I mean, it's unsettling all right. Unsettling enough to get me out of bed and start salting fish.'
'Who do you think killed him?'
'Wasn't he killed by spirits or something?'
'What if he wasn't?'
'Well, I'm not going to point fingers here, but Chan looks suspicious. I mean, they fought once, right?'
'Yeah...'
'Anyways. I didn't do it. I have a bright future, and a beautiful girl, all right in front of me. Not going to ruin it by killing that jerk.'
'You sound like you don't like him.'
'Well, it's not like he has a winning personality, so... yes. Plus, he, well... I don't think it'll hurt if I tell you this. My parents also had a restaurant, see. Ever heard of Osthams Tower?'
'The restaurant burned down five years ago?'
'Yeeah, that. Anyways. The main reason why, was because Ming and his buddies went there once, and they pounded most of the furniture and the stock liqueur into mush,' He sighed. 'Anyways, back to bed you go. You need sleep, man.'
'I... guess. Good night.'

The conversation just made the thing more confusing. The next morning, everyone else seemed shaken. Liang had these huge eyebags under... you guessed it, his eyes. But Chan was really faring bad. He had eyebags, his hand was shaky, and even his usual slightly cocky tone was replaced by something much shakier, like everything was built on top of a chopstick.

'H...hey, you all. Why the sullen looks?' he said, looking very sullen himself and nearly knocking the pitcher of water over as he reached for the salt.
'That...that business yesterday. Bad, right? I mean...'
Then he trailed off. If he thought that talking would steady him, it clearly did not work.
This put my little side investigation a bit back. Nobody looked like they killed anyone.
Could it be?
Could it be?

I went into Ming's room, which was now very easy to enter because no one locked the door. Inside, there was the body, which remained untouched. Dead bodies were kinda taboo for most people, and unless they were kith and kin, not many even dare to touch a corpse.

I looked through the drawers, every drawer, until I found it.
A suicide letter.

So, was a bunch of dead leaves worth the trouble? I thought as I stared at the dark horizons...

The stars were brighter than any jewel. I thought back on the letter, written by Ming, stating his fear and regrets and his decision to die, to let the others take the herbs and as repentance.

Was it?

I tipped the box to the roaring waves below and watched it drift away.

Seawards

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lam, Adora – 16

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I approached a seemingly nice man with squeaky whiskers, asking for his consent for going abroad the vehicle. He paused for a while, and suddenly projected his voice, “Ahoy!”

That was a sound which was excellent in reminding others for alarming and dangerous situations, but I prefer not to have such strong interruption during my sleep and my fantastic sweet dreams..

His voice pierced through my eardrum and I could hardly hear a thing for a short while until a short and stout man appeared behind the cabin door, holding the left ear of a well-built rough man tightly. The tall man who towered into the clouds moaned in pain, begging for the release of his tomato-like ear.

“Avast ye. This is exactly how you will be treated if you dare challenge my authority. If you turn your back on me, folks, dance the hempen!” The short man roared like thunderstorm.

None made a single sound. As he was a grumpy man with voice like a foghorn... He was the man in charge.

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“The compass is with me.”

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I was furious about such disrespectful act. But soon I realized in hope of settling my adventurous mind, I must first follow, or say, obey the absurd rules and observe the hierarchy on board. Otherwise, I might be kicked out or even killed and thrown into the ocean, unnoticed.

The cargo ship steadily sailed to the mid-sea ridge.

I decided to stay cool and collected through resting in the cabin. Just as the moment I stepped down the staircase, I heard a deafening and blaring sign of victory.

The cabin crew members were indeed rambunctious and loud, but the excitement they showcased was unusual. I hopped on the deck, and found most of them tap dancing in joy. An inconspicuous grin seemed to show up on the captain's face, his eyes flickering with joy and excitement. His hands trembled, well prepared for the revelation of the precious mystery.

His happy expression abruptly faded away, murmuring, “ Shiver me timbers, this can't be. This can't be. This could not have been true.”

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“We can enjoy incomparable wealth once we sell them.”

The sailors were discussing happily about what to do with the amazing and legendary chest. But I begged to differ, “gentlemen, these might be remains from the voyages. They are of high historical value, we should bring them home to glorify the contribution of the team rather than focusing on materialistic well being.”

The captain displayed his discontent towards my view by dragging me violently and locking me in my room, keeping me away from the precious jewels. He warned me, “Lad, you better not interfere our lives and work, this is real business, and we're keeping the flow going. Don't you let nonsense come out from your mouth ever again. You shall not hornswoggle us.”

“*All hands hoay!* We have to keep moving.” The captain clearly ordered.

After a short while, a gentle bump followed several seconds later by stronger rolling shaking started, I felt like a sudden large jolt followed quickly. I knew clearly we were on a ship, not on land, so we we're clearly not experiencing earthquake.

Once again, I decided to sneak out of the room. However, the door is tightly locked and shut. All I could hear and “comprehend” from the chaotic movement is that our ship might be under attack.

Unable to escape from the enclosed area, I used all my might to move the simple wooden furnitures to the walls as blockade.

When I attempted to move the desk, I realized it stuck to the ground perseveringly, as if it is rooted from the thin wooden floor. Panicked and discouraged , I stumbled on the stubborn layer.

I kicked something. Something round, something that bounced back.. it felt just like a button!

Surprised,I crouched down and discovered a little stud rising from the floor. Its colour matched that of the floor perfectly, merging into it in perfect disguise. In other words, it was camouflaged totally.

In doubt, but with no other choices or alternatives , I deliberately pressed it. A trap door opened gradually, until a passageway appeared in front of me. Without hesitation, I hopped into the seemingly dark and endless tunnel.

The passageway was unexpectedly smooth. Not rugged at all, the experience of crawling in it reminded me of the happy times which I held vague memories towards, the time when I got to crawl and fall into the arms of my loving family as a toddler.

Not long, I sensed an elevation of the path, as well as seeing a tiny spot of light. From this, I was motivated and energised, figuring out that there was a way for me to escape, and perhaps, to help the fellow workers on the deck.

Out of my expectations, the pathway led to the deck directly. I saw rows of cannons placed at both sides of the cargo ship.

“Launch the cannon, and...shoot!” The powerful voice of the captain rang again, penetrating my ears and mind.

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So everything was fine, and everyone was safe. Thanks to the protection from the cannons!

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Greater stories are readied to be unfolded.

Perhaps

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Perhaps if time was rewinded, it would have happened differently.

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Perhaps.

Days of drifting on the sea, navigating through strong winds and creating the waves led us to the Pier of ZhànChéng, where we docked. Our grand entrance sparked the attention of many, some of whom were familiar with us. After all, it was our sixth visit here.

We eventually arrived at Rastoke, a municipality renowned for its phenomenal scenery. The marvel of the Korana River was reminiscent of the past.

It was mid autumn.

He sat by the water, staring into his still, moonlit reflection. I held with both my fidgeting hands a lantern in the shape of a carambola, apprehension surging my mind. After moments of pacing and hyperventilating, I finally decided to tap on his shoulder – very lightly, at that.

“Good day – I meant good evening, Your Majesty. I had learnt how to make a lantern yesterday from my master’s wife, and she taught me how to do so. But my hands are the least of delicate, and so this is what I made. Despite its poor condition, I hope my incompetent self had made something to your liking. It is understandable that you would want it thrown away. I’m utterly sorry that I speak too much. I–”

Just then, amidst the plethora of deriding sniggers, an eruption of the crescendoing light, hearty chuckles jolted me from my train of thought, cutting my unnecessary rambling.

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Watching him scrutinise my ordinary – no, it was not even good enough to be called “ordinary” – creation, curiosity glimmering through dazzling irises, gaiety and merriment warmed my heart.

“My Lord, the ministers are here to see you,”

“Right. Let’s go.”

Having been invited to one of the palaces, my crewmen and I inspected our goods once more before presenting them to the ruler of ZhànChéng. He donned a simple, cordial smile, and even told us to disregard the formalities to have a casual banter with him. So we did.

As the sky was enshrouded by a veil of night, we realised it was time to set sail again. It was only one of our myriad of destinations, after all. Prior to leaving ZhànChéng, I spoke to the ruler in private.

I exhibited to him a jade pendant, adorned by shrieks of mineral black and white along the sides, and accentuated with red tassels underneath it.

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Santa Maria

St. Mary's Canossian College, Tam, Celine – 16

Midnight.

A lone figure sat in the middle of the barely-illuminated library, as a single candle burned its life away in front of him. The sound of dripping wax was almost in sync with the sound of tears rolling off of the man's cheeks, as the flickering flame illuminated his face, tear-streaks gleaming.

Even after years of pursuing financial support, the Court had eventually overruled his numerous requests, leaving his reputation at stake. Clinging onto the last sliver of hope he had, he had desperately scoured the shelves of the library for any sort of supporting document that could aid him in his voyages. Despite his eagerness, he knew deep down that any related papers, documenting the famous Oriental maritime voyages 60 years ago, had already been destroyed. At least, those were the accounts of the events that had happened officially; however, he dared not consider any other alternative. After all, giving himself hope was one thing, allowing himself false hope was another.

Until he came across the slim, leather-bound booklet.

A memoir. He had commissioned those who were fluent in the language to translate the contents for him—that was how desperate he had been, for anything that could possibly lend him a helping hand. As he sat down at the library, he started to flip through the pages, scouring for any stray piece of information that would be useful.

FIRST VOYAGE

11th July, 1405

One year ago, 16-year-old me was standing in front of the docks, staring at a notice that read "BOATMEN NEEDED", while clutching onto the scraps of a stale mantou someone had thrown out the night before.

Having turning 17 just a few nights ago, I was standing in front of the exact same docks, watching as workers loaded crates and sacks of supplies onto the fleet of ships, lined up neatly across the docks. From my vantage point, I noticed that a horde of men were loading red, heavy-looking chests onto the more extravagant ships, along with countless rolls of what seemed to be silk, and bucket loads of something that shone and twinkled under the sunlight. It took me a while to realize that they were loading pure gold onto the ships.

I had been instructed to report to the supervisor for my assigned ship, standing by one of the docks. He happened to be reading off from a list, while a crowd of men, mostly teenagers, surrounded him. After silently thanking my rather short stature, I slipped into the crowd, careful not to knock anyone over.

"...As I was saying, do note that..." By the time I had gotten close enough to hear what the supervisor was saying, the briefing had ended. That was when the pale-looking young boy next to me stuck his hand in the air, and waved it about. All he did was ask for food.

At that instant, the calm-looking supervisor's face flushed red with fury, and he flew into a rage, spittle flying from his mouth as he yelled at the boy. "Who do you think you are, boy? There are more than 27 thousand men on this voyage. Do you reckon that we have time to serve every single one of you, what with everyone busy preparing the 255 ships for the upcoming voyage?" He frantically put his hand down. I dug out a mantou from my pocket, split it in half, and quickly shoved it into the boy's hand. He flashed me a brief smile of gratitude, fingers closing around the scrap of mantou, before dodging the supervisor's glare and slipping into another part of the crowd.

Truth be told, I did not anticipate life on deck, not to mention my horrible sea-legs. But still, there was no point in turning back now. From the promotion materials at the recruitment docks, the government had

paid any boatmen 2 years' worth of salary in advance. With this lump sum, I could ensure that I would not be left with hunger for quite a while. Yet, for people as poor I am, choices were way too luxurious. We are nothing but disposable pawns on the giant chessboard of life, always replaceable. The best chance for us is to keep our head low, and fight for survival whenever we could.

20th July, 1407

Writing supplies on the boat were scarce, and considering how life on the boat was usually mind-numbingly dull, I hadn't considered keeping an entry. Day in, day out, we followed the same routine. Tending to the ship's sails, loading supplies each time we neared a port, and when the day was over I went to my bunk. Every now and then we passed by some cities, where the treasure ships would unload some of the Ming Dynasty's treasured goods. We might've passed by Ceylon, Calicut, or maybe Malacca, but I insisted on keeping my head low, as a lowly boatman.

But today—two years after the boat had set sail—everything took a turn for the worse. On our voyage back to Nanjing, in the seas of Southeast Asia, something the whole fleet had always dreaded happened.

A pirate raid.

Despite having only been a boatman for 2 years, the pirate's name was enough to send shivers down my spine when I realized who the leader was.

Chen Zuyi. Together with his 5000 men and having 10 ships under his command, he was the most feared pirate in history. From overhearing snippets of conversation, I learnt the fleet had a reason to be afraid of Chen—he had full command of a nearby city, Palembang, and was able to supply himself and his fleet, should resources be depleted.

But the same snippets of conversation had supplied me with the fact that the Grand Director of this fleet, his name being either Zheng He or Ma He, had already demanded the surrender of Chen Zuyi by the end of the day. If not, the fleet would open fire instead, which had me worrying in no time. It was very likely that, instead of choosing to surrender, the pirate would fight back with all he had, armed to the teeth, resulting in a bloody mess. Would I be part of the casualties? Would I not return home in one piece?

I knew that no matter what, I have to survive—I needed the salary, the lump sum to keep on living. Death has never been an option.

16th November, 1407

Glad I can make this entry. I could've lost my life back then, 4 months ago, rather than returning to Nanjing in one piece.

My intuition had been wrong that day. In fact, nobody had expected Chen to signal agreement towards the surrender. Fully believing that the pirate was handing his head over on a platter, a lot of boatmen decided to relax for the day. The tension during the day, which had been so thick you could cut through it with a knife, had mostly diminished by the time night rolled around. Some of my fellow boatmen were even drinking and singing sea shanties.

And just when they were singing the chorus for goodness-knows-how-many-times in a row, the blade of a cutlass shone under the moonlight and cleanly lopped off the arm of the boatman standing right in front of me.

Frozen stiff with fear, I felt my legs lock themselves into place. I cursed my luck, as the pirate turned to me, grinning from ear to ear. Behind me, I heard the characteristic sound of a sword being taken out of its scabbard, as footsteps resounded around me, as two pirates sought to take me down. Cold sweat erupted across my forehead and I began to tremble, watching that gleaming cutlass swing down at me—I closed my eyes and prepared to face my end—

And then I heard a bloodcurdling scream, right when a sharp pain blossomed down my leg, and I felt myself sink towards the deck, my weight crumbling beneath me.

I gingerly pried my eyes open, before noticing that there was something warm and sticky on my face. Lifting a finger to my face, I hesitantly wiped off some of the liquid, when a metallic smell hit my nostrils and my split-second thinking concluded that it had been blood. My first instinct was to run for my life and so I tried to move my legs, before the sharp pain came back, soon blossoming across my whole leg. Incapacitated, I stared at the body in front of me, the source of the screaming, only to be greeted with the sight of the pale boy from two years ago, who I had never imagined could look even paler. Yet now he did, with a cutlass sticking out of his lower abdomen, his eyes tightly shut, as blood pooled on his shirt; and I realized that if it weren't for his timely appearance, the person lying on the floor could've been me instead. But what had struck me as odd was this decision of his: the fleet was a pirate attack, after all. The most logical thing one would do was to preserve their own life, and run for safety. Then why would this pale boy risk his life for me? Was there anything else he viewed as important, besides from his very safety?

The pirate raised his cutlass again, the victorious grin on his face growing wider by the second. As he prepared to strike one more time, the sound of deafening cannons cut his actions short. We all stayed there, frozen, as the sound repeated itself again and again. Eventually, I lost count—but at the end of the day, it were the Ming soldiers who emerged victorious, after destroying the pirate fleet, killing 5,000 of its men, and most important of them all, capturing Chen Zuyi. Only later on did I find out that the Grand Director, Zheng He, had secretly sent out an informant on the day they demanded surrender. That was why he knew about the pirates' plan, and devised a counterattack on them.

On July 19, the whole treasure fleet reached Nanjing, where the Emperor himself had appeared to welcome the fleet. After all, this maritime project had been a great success.

Just last month, Chen was publicly executed in the town center. My broken leg prevented me from attending, and so did Ah Jun, the pale boy who had saved me, and has been living under my roof upon our arrival in Nanjing. He had only gotten out of the coma a few days ago, but was still bedridden. "Why save me?" was the first thing I had asked him when he woke. Indeed, I still hadn't figured out his actions that day, even if I had plenty of time to look back on the incident. He simply smiled and asked me in return, "Remember the mantou you gave me on the first day?" The unspoken words were as clear as day; Ah Jun believed that risking his life that day was the only way he could repay me. I was in no way related to this boy in blood, yet he was willing to die for someone completely unrelated to him?

Ah Jun might have noticed my confusion, as he soon reminded me, "Is there not an old saying that goes 'A drop of water given in need shall be returned with a burst of spring'? It is only natural that I repay you with more than a mantou." Who would have thought he had joined the voyage other than the same reason I had in mind initially: to survive? Ah Jun taught me that there were more things to life than mindlessly struggling for one's own existence, that there were people out there who cared for my own wellbeing, that even in a world like this, there was eventually somewhere out there where I could truly belong. It was mind-blowing, for an orphan like me.

Yesterday was a crucial day for boatmen like me, as we had to attend a ceremony, which congratulated those who had played a part in fighting against Chen Zuyi and his fleet. While standing on the stage and

receiving the small lump sum of money, a feeling in my gut told me I had earned this through rightful means, through doing what was right. This new achievement indicated that I am valued, and through that, I have gained respect from the state. Perhaps, this odd sense of accomplishment is what they call “self-esteem”: even if I am simply an uneducated orphan, I still have my own part to play on this world, and that I still have my own worth as a person.

23 February, 1427

Twenty years have passed, but not until yesterday had I decided to pick up this journal and start writing again—life in these twenty years had simply been ordinary, except for what had happened very recently. Ah Jun passed away last week, after being bed-bound for 20 years, as I kept watch over his bedside, caring for his needs. If anyone were to ask me if I regret taking care of someone whom I’m not related to by blood, I would reply that it is one of my greatest achievements in life, to have a brother like Ah Jun. Despite having wanted to join the voyages again right after the ceremony, I felt that taking care of Ah Jun was my obligation and a priority. And so I opened a mantou shop for twenty years, to maintain a stable income, while stashing my sailing urges into the back of my mind.

And here I eagerly await the day the treasure fleet leaves the docks of Nanjing, with me onboard.

SEVENTH VOYAGE

3 July, 1433

Finally the day had come! The new king, Xuande Emperor, had issued the orders for the seventh voyage three years ago on June 29. Soon enough, the fleet departed from Nanjing once again in the winter of 1431, while I found myself on the main ship this time round. It was not a coincidence: the emperor himself had assigned me onto the main treasure ship due to my past experiences with the treasure fleet. It was an honour that I finally had a chance to serve next to the man who was in charge of it all. Zheng He himself.

Sadly, times like these wouldn’t last long. Just 4 months ago, Captain Zheng contracted an incurable illness from India, and soon developed severe symptoms. Bedridden for the rest of the voyage, he was clearly too weak to take charge of the fleets, and so he asked me to act as his deputy. I couldn’t help but question his judgement initially, for there were people on the ship who were far more qualified than I was. But still, I had a more meaning-searching query that demanded to be resolved.

And so, I found myself standing next to Captain Zheng’s sickbed.
“Why is it that you had launched this voyage, despite your age?”

The reply I received was very much detailed. “At 62, I should very much be enjoying my retirement. But despite my old age, I have chosen to serve my country; as you recall, the new king has just ascended the throne, making stable foreign relationships extremely important at this very moment. After all, he wished to reinvigorate the tributary relations promoted a great many years ago.”

The captain paused to cough, and I realized that he was far too sick to even make it back to the port at Nanjing. “Through the past six voyages, you have demonstrated to the country your capacity and your worthiness. You don’t need one more on your belt to prove it. Then why are you still risking your life for this voyage?” He was visibly straining himself, and I hoped that he would keep his answers brief. And brief they were, as Captain Zheng stated, “As a matter of fact, I know deep down that this may be my very last voyage. But sometimes, the good of mankind is greater than your own good—one small step for me, yet a giant leap for the entirety of our nation.”

This is a lesson that I would never forget for the rest of my life; that, to fully actualize oneself, one should serve the greater good.

Hours and hours flew past, as the lone figure sat at the desk drinking in every single word the journal had to offer, learning about the voyages documented in the journal, the adventures experienced, until the first rays of sunlight began to trickle into the room, at the edges of the windows. Soon, the library was awash with the light of dawn. He blinked at the light, for his eyes had started to water a little, and he stood up and stretched, a small but confident smile adorning his face.

From this memoir, he noticed that the anonymous sailor had started off with searching for basic needs like food and survival, then to building up a brotherhood, to cultivating self-worth, and eventually reckoning the importance of achieving the greater good. He understood that forfeiting his narrow-mindedness is a must by overlooking his current difficulties, and most of all, actualize the dream of mankind. Gone was the weary and hopeless man from midnight; in his place was a man clearly inspired by the unnamed man's journal clutched tightly in his hands, eyes gleaming with enlightenment and brain abuzz with ideas. With a spring in his step, the man swept out of the library of the University of Madrid, determined to seek for funding from the Spanish Court, and to make his dreams of navigation a reality.

He had only expected to reach East Asia; yet, he had discovered a world entirely new—one could almost say that without the Ming Treasure Voyages, the one to discover America would not be Christopher Columbus himself.

Reliving a Legend

St. Mary's Canossian College, Tang, Ally – 16

A crowd gathered in the middle of the mall, with occasional screams from excited females. Passers-by stared at the crowd, wondering what was going on. A famous movie star? No one was sure.

“Girls, there’s no need to push...” A raven haired male smirked slightly, towering over everyone else. Helping another girl who ‘accidentally’ fell down, he winked slightly at her. “You shouldn’t ‘fall’ for my love,” he chuckled. The girl blushed slightly, then roughly slapped her friend next to her, clearly ecstatic to have received the attention she had craved for.

Still trying to push through the crowd, the male hoped that the headache the screaming girls had given him and the gathering crowd would disappear as quickly as possible.

“Just let me out,” He mumbled angrily. He knew clearly that he couldn’t solve this with violence as this would result in a lot of trouble and an earful from his manager. Never losing his smile and still bending down to take pictures, he yelled, “Alright girls, one last picture and I’ll have to leave!” Awws and Nooos immediately spread like wildfire among the group. None wanted their idol to leave them this soon.

He was more than relieved when he saw his manager’s car running towards him. He jumped into the vehicle, never taking a glance behind his back. “Hit the brake!” He yelled at the driver as he fastened his seatbelt.

“Five minutes late!” a monotone voice said to him on his left. “Yeah, yeah. You think I don’t know that?” He rolled his eyes. “You should’ve known better, He. You know Director Zhao hates people being late, even though you’re an Oscar nominee.” His manager looked at him disapprovingly. Ma He shrugged.

When they arrived at the studio, all members were there waiting for the fashionably late actor. Director Zhao rushed out of his office, grabbed He, and yelled at him for a while before he was pushed into the dressing room to prepare for filming. The team was now making a series of historical movies on Chinese history. Coincidentally, he had the same name as the famous hero in the Ming Dynasty, Zhang He. The team reached him immediately to see if he would be interested in this character, and of course told him that the pay would be satisfactory. He immediately accepted the job, since he had always been interested in the marine history of China, and today was the first day of work. Ma He put on his armor and headed out to the scene.

“1...2...3...Action!” Director Zhao called out immediately after everything was settled, and Ma He started reciting his lines. “What a good day out at sea! My fellow crew members, today we’ll reach Korea! There, we’ll sell our goods to earn money and exchange gifts with officials for the sake of our great country!” Ma He yelled as he took out his sword and raised it above his head as encouragement to his crew. “Soon, we’ll be able to go home and reunite with our family! Gentlemen, stay focused and work efficiently. The day of return is near!” Ma He yelled once more.

He suddenly felt a slight shake beneath his feet, and then a swing. He did not pay attention to it at first, thinking that it was only his imagination. Then the swinging feeling became worse. Ma He began to panic. He felt the ground swinging back and forth, and it was not long before he could hear the roaring of the wind and feel the water splashing around him. He couldn’t hear anything else, not even the shouting of other crew members.

He was surprised when he felt the cold water dampen his clothes. Shivering, he found himself tied up too. “This is not funny” He groaned as he tried to get up. “Director Zhao? Manager Chen?” He shouted.

“Shut it before I feed you to the fish!” a rough voice yelled as he was kicked in the stomach. Ma He curled his feet in pain, but tried not to yell. He was still confused.

“What...what is this? Are we in Act 2 now?” Ma He looked around, furrowing his eyebrows. “Woah, this ship looks too real. Way too real,” He laughed nervously.

Something wasn't right. He turned to look at the huffy male who kicked him. “Hey, I've never seen you around in the studio before. Who are you?” He stared at the male.

Unfortunately, the male didn't understand him. “What do you mean by who are you? I'm your master now! Your king!” The male grinned. Ma He tried to contain his laughter.

“Yeah, yeah, and I'm the President,” He replied.

The male didn't share his humor, only kicking him again. “I'm not joking around with you! Call me Master! Now!” the male barked.

Ma He couldn't stand people ordering him. “Yeah? And who do you think you are? Do you pay my bills? Take care of me? Or did you give birth to me? Why do I have to listen to you? Do you know who I am?” He yelled back, only to find other ships facing them already. They were ready with canons and all sorts of weapons. He reckoned they were enemies. “Hey! Over here! We're over here!” He yelled at the other ships.

“Captain Zhang! Is that you?” an exciting voice yelled as the cabin crew suddenly grew even more excited.

“Uh, hmm...yeah! Yeah it's me!” Ma He shouted back, only to receive another punch from the sailor. “Shout one more time, and I'll kill you before they reach!” the sailor barked.

Ma He suddenly realized he wasn't in the studio anymore. Had he travelled back in time? The sound of cannons confirmed his thoughts.

One second, he was still tied up on the ship. Then, he was grabbed, and thrown into another ship.

“Captain Zhang!” A servant rushed out. “Are you feeling alright? Did they hurt you? I'll get you a doctor immediately!” Ma He grabbed the servant. “Who am I?” He asked. The servant widened his eyes in horror. “How badly did they treat you? Have you forgotten your identity, captain? You are the great traveler Zhang He!”

Ma He nearly fell to the ground due to horror. He was...the character he was playing. He laughed at the coincidence and let the servant take him to his room.

When he woke up, he found that the ship was already at a dock. He went out, only to find people hustling and bustling around him. A sailor with a scar on his face gave Ma He a hard pat on the back when he came out.

“A good sleep, cap'n? We'll have to go onshore and trade today,” the sailor looked excited. “I wonder what we'll see here in India!”

Ma He's first thought was curry, but of course he couldn't say that. He wasn't sure if they knew what 'curry' was at that time.

Ma He stepped off the ship after reassuring the sailor he would be making fair deals and earning great amounts of money. He looked around and smiled. Fortunately, no one would be better at selling things than him, gaining more than enough experience by taking advertisements while he was still an actor. To everyone's surprise, Ma He sat at the booth, and began to yell.

“The best perfume you’ll ever find on the planet! Come take a look! The first 100 buyers will get discounts! Buy three get one free...” And so he began to yell, attracting nearly everyone around him. His fellow crew members were so shocked that they forgot to do their work once there were customers.

“Is there anything wrong?” Ma He stared back at them.

“I would like three!” the seller opposite him yelled, clearly attracted to his products. Ma He took a look at the products his competitor was selling. Ivory products! He nearly wanted to call the police. “Oh right,” he muttered, “it’s not illegal here.” He examined the delicate sculptures which were the best he had ever seen. Sculptures like castles, people or animals could be seen. Ma He was amazed by the fact that all the sculptures were well crafted. “They should have given me one with my face on it instead of the Oscar’s award,” Ma He said when eyeing the products.

His attention was then caught by something shimmering in the sunlight to his right. A sword ...and... “Wow, so many weapons!” Ma He looked at the weapons greedily.

“Would you like an exchange of products?” the owner used his own special accent and spoke to Ma He. “You have very nice perfume. My wife would love it.” Ma He nodded immediately. The owner took the dagger hanging on the wall, and gave it to Ma He while Ma He handed him a bottle of perfume. “Have a nice day!” The owner grinned in satisfaction.

The crew found that Captain Zhang had turned quite strange after being kidnapped by the pirates. Perhaps he suffered from memory loss after the incident. With that thought, the crew looked at him in a pitiful way and shook their heads, leaving Ma He alone to yell and exchange products that they did not need. “Should anyone tell captain that we have all those on the ship already?” A crew member nudged the one next to him. “Just...just let him be...” the other sighed.

The products sold out very soon, and everyone was even more shocked. “See? I told you it would work!” Ma He grinned proudly. “Should we go back to the ship?” Ma He walked back towards the ship, only to be stopped by some guards.

“Captain Zhang? Our Emperor would like to meet you,” the guard captain bowed slightly and said. Ma He had heard about Zhang He meeting emperors and exchanging gifts before, so he wasn’t too surprised. Taking a little box of perfume with him, he nodded to the guard and said, “Lead the way.”

Although Ma He had seen Indian palaces before when he went travelling, nothing he had seen could describe the magnificence of the palace before his eyes. It shimmered with gold everywhere, making him squint as if he was standing in the sunlight. Marble floors, extraordinary paintings...everything was noble and majestic.

“Welcome, my dear friends from China!” a voice boomed out from the room they entered.

Ma He and his servants bowed to the king sitting in the middle of the room. The king smiled to them and asked them to rise.

“My friends, you are well-mannered. I am in need of your help, but first, make yourselves at home. Do you need anything? Tea? Cakes?” The king looked nice, but of course his acting skill couldn’t be compared to the Oscar nominee’s.

Ma He controlled himself so that he wouldn’t roll his eyes at the king, and with the most polite voice, he replied, “We are honored, your Majesty, to be of your help. Please tell us what we can do for you.”

The king’s eyes twitched a little. “Well, there have been quite the number of criminals in India lately, and I wonder if you would have anything for me so that I could...lower the crime rate by warning the citizens of the punishment for committing a crime.”

Ma He understood the king's meaning. He shivered slightly due to horror. He was silent for a second so that he could find the right way to reject the king.

"Well your Majesty, I'm afraid we don't...."

"You don't?" the king frowned.

"We are only a trade ship, you see...we don't have items that help people to...punish others," Ma He bit his lip.

"Then you're of no use to me! Guards! Arrest them!" The king roared suddenly, even shattering the glass he was holding.

"And then what happened?" a little girl looked excitedly at her father.

"And then... the king put the captain to sleep..." The father tucked the girl inside her blanket. "Just like what I'm doing now... and so you should go to sleep, just like the captain!" The father kissed the giggling girl's forehead and turned off the lights.

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Night, daddy!" The girl closed her eyes.

The father closed the door to the room. His eyes glinted with mischief.

"Ma He! How many times have I told you *not* to tell Audrey stories like this? She'll have nightmares!" a female voice whispered angrily to him.

"And just how many times have I told *YOU*, my name is Zhang He, the great traveler of the sea?" Zhang He stared angrily at his 'wife'.

"I know you love your job, but can't you stop acting at home?" his wife said annoyingly, turned around and turned off the lights.

It had been going on ever since her husband fainted in the studio. He claimed that he was Zhang He from the Ming Dynasty, but she just thought he was joking. No one, except for Zhang, knew that the real Ma He had already been 'put to sleep' by the Indian king, just like what Zhang He told the little girl.

And not just to sleep, but to eternal sleep.

Zhang He whispered a prayer to Ma He to apologize for making him the scapegoat.

"Don't worry," he whispered, "I'll take *good* care of your family for you."