

Fiction

Group 4



Brett's Diary

Open it to Unleash My Secret!

Bishop Hall Jubilee School, Wong, Wilson – 16

29 Oct 2101 Monday

I went to school at 7 am as usual. Something extraordinary happened! The government has proposed a fund for filming a documentary about the Ming Dynasty. The most attractive part is the \$100,000 award!! I want to use the money to buy the intriguing iPhone XXXXS, but I still haven't figured out how to make a top-notch video. Can Mr Diary give me some hints???

4 Nov 2101 Saturday

Oh my god!!! Eddy's dad is inventing the time machine. And Eddy is going to join the competition with me. Maybe I can use the time machine? Should I do that? Eddy said he will bring me to his father's lab tomorrow. Let see what I can do tomorrow :-> See ya!

P.S. Mom reminds me to take the tote bag if I want to go anywhere.

5 Nov 2101/10 July 1405 Sunday/Monday

Today was truly the highs and lows of my life!!

Eddy and I went to his father's lab as planned. We both entered the time machine and it was activated instantly, but it was going to nuts that we didn't have any control over it. As we were entering into a very dark mysterious void, the weightlessness was undeniably a luxury in one's life.

The machine was soon rebooted with the help of the robot called Keith. The designated time period, for us, was the 1400s. How coincidental!!! We wanted the theme of the documentary to be the Ming Treasure Voyages. The time machine accelerated beyond the speed of light and the time showed that we were travelling back to historical times!! I never thought I would be able to do this!! How exciting!

After the torture of turbulence and dizziness, we landed in Nanjing of the year 1405. The first thing that hit me while I was still fighting against the urge to vomit was the stench which reminded me of the bad conditions of my own neighbourhood... Straight to the point. Keith told us that we had two choices. Either we helped Admiral Zheng He to return to Nanjing safely, or we had to stay in the Ming Dynasty for the rest of our life. Of course, we chose the former, but I had not the faintest clue of what's going on. Keith disappeared like a spirit at a blistering speed. We only got our tote bags with us. We were in a crowd of strangers speaking unfamiliar languages, wearing weird clothing and looking eccentric. What should I do?????? Can Mr Diary give me some ideas?

11 July 1405 Tuesday

What's happening?? Why is everything out of my control? There are surprises every day!!

It was with great effort that we finally figured out what language these people are using. That's the old-fashioned Cantonese, our mother language. I have read books before that Cantonese was one of the official languages of the Ming Dynasty. But it's perfectly reasonable that we only understand some of the words they use as the language has become very different after 700 years.

We enlisted in the navy for the expeditionary voyage. Actually, we were one of the tallest among the applicants. It's surprising that nobody was suspicious of us. We take precaution though. We avoid speaking to strangers and when we can't understand what was said, we observe other people and follow the crowd. Of course we take recordings as well, and use the translation function on our phone to make sense of things that we cannot understand during the day.

Unbelievably, we were allocated to the commander's ship, which was the biggest ship in the whole fleet, nine-masted, 417 feet long and 171 feet wide. We hurried to the harbour to take a look at the fleet and especially the commander's ship before it went dark. It looked magnificent! Admiring the fleet in sunset filled us with awe and for a moment, eased us of the uneasiness and nervousness of spending time in an estranged era. We attended the banquet thrown by the Emperor. Everybody was in high spirit at the banquet, clamorous, boisterous, rumbustious. There were some really strange dishes but they were scrumptious and Eddy stuffed himself with a lot of Osmanthus jelly! I hope he won't have a stomachache later tonight! After the feast, we boarded the commander's ship and Eddy and I got to have a cabin to ourselves.

After checking our cabin, we headed out to the deck where the Admiral Zheng He was giving a speech to all crew members. He was really tall – even taller than us – robust, sun-tanned. His demeanour emanated confidence and authority. Surely he is a man who has been through tumultuous times. He feels invincible. Does he really need our help? Will we be able to accomplish what we are tasked with?

The ship was full of untrained men, so Admiral Zheng told every person on the ship to be ready for the hardship in the coming 6 months. In other words, it meant that we would have to undergo serious military training for 6 months. Urgh, the equipment was so out of fashion. In our generation, a pocket-size laser pointer is enough to send every soul on the ship to hell! What a waste of time! :<

It's late already, I have to be ready for the training tomorrow. Good Night!

15 July 1405 Saturday

We've been through a few days of training and my limbs feel like lead. I wanted to escape from the ship, but it was just a wild imagination hovering over the vast ocean. I wish I had brought them the Anywhere Door, which I purchased a few months ago. How unthoughtful!

I shan't dwell on fruitless thoughts and useless groans. I have encountered some urgent issues.

First of all, the intensity of the military training is too much for teens like us. We have to practise for 12 hours a day. 200 sit-ups and push-ups are the basics. And not to mention we have to lift a 20 lbs gun and learn to operate a cannon. Every day after the training, we are so exhausted as if we are going to die, only our soul survived in this torment. Thank god that today is a day off!! And we could walk around the ship. But we got to regenerate our physical strength before Monday, which is the start of another rigorous training week.

Secondly, the difference between old Cantonese and Cantonese nowadays is astounding. It's easy to spot you are not a native Ming Dynasty person cause the phonological differences are too noticeable. Also, there are many obsolete words and expressions which we have no idea what they mean. I am afraid of being spotted and picked on when our peculiarity catches attention, and worse, being seen as spies or as a potential threat. We try to speak as little as possible, and we mumble if we need to reply to anyone. But there's gonna be one time when we'll need to speak.

Hope these issues can be solved perfectly. At least find a solution for that?

29 October 1405 Sunday

After sailing for a few months, it seems that the phrase 'every cloud has a silver lining' is true. We finally figured out how to solve the problems.

We thought that the intensity of military training is outrageous. But after training for a few months, we are acclimatising to it so the daily training is becoming easier to cope with. It's obvious that our stamina has grown, so doing a few hundred sit-ups and push-ups is no longer a difficult task.

Regarding the problem with language, we finally figured out that the main difference between their Cantonese and Cantonese nowadays are the ambiguity of tones. As you know, Cantonese has 6 tones, but the tone no.1 and no.4 are reversed in the language. That's mean the word poem which is read as 'si1' in Cantonese nowadays should be read as 'si4' in the old Cantonese, which meant 'time', vice versa. That means we only have to interchange tone 1 and 4 to sound like them. And we have acquired a lot of vocabulary by listening to the people around us. So we need not be afraid of being discovered as strangers to the land.

Now that I have lived in this era for some time, I think a person living in the past is much happier than a person living in the 22nd century. Although technological advancement improves our life quality and we can get what we want with a tap of our fingertips. But there are just too many concerns in our lives. But people in the past can live freely, without the interference of a complex society. This is the simplicity which our modern society is in want of.

I hope everything will be alright. As I still have to stay on the ship for two years :< I missed my parents and friends

3 Dec 1406

Tuesday

One uneventful year passed. So I did not record anything, but today, we reached Quilon, India. After sailing across the oceans for a year, we finally saw a piece of land. I felt very grateful that I could walk on land again. Having anchored our ships, we headed to find the King of Quilon.

We were ordered to carry the treasures for the King of Quilon to show how powerful Chinese are. We really appreciated how glamorous Quilon was. It was like we were at Egypt at that moment. Back to the point, I finally figured out that we were crucial in this journey. As the language of Quilon and China are different, verbal communication is almost impossible between the delegates of the countries. And Admiral Zheng He was angry and demanded somebody to help. We went forward and took out my smartphone. We used the app 'Banana Translate' to help the King of Quilon and Zheng He. It turned out to be a fruitful meeting. So we headed back to the fleet, feeling useful and important.

The Admiral rewarded us a bar of gold and promoted us to lieutenants for what we contributed to the journey. And the whole ship cheered and clapped for us. This was certainly the proudest moment in my life!!!!!!

P.S. I heard that lieutenants don't need to participate in regular training! So am I exempted from the boring physical workout now?

P.S.S feels feverish

5 May 1407

Wednesday

This was the saddest moment in my whole life.

Remember last time? That Admiral Zheng He promoted me to lieutenant as I was able to be the translator of King of Quilon and Zheng He.

Today, we reached Calicut and members of the fleet all headed to visit the King of Calicut, and both sides shared their treasures with each other. A translator was required again. So the Admiral asked me to help him. But unluckily, the language of Calicut disappeared long before our time in the 22nd century so the language of Calicut doesn't exist on the list of languages in the 'Banana Translator' app.

So the meeting was cut short without successfully constructing mutual trust and appreciation between the two countries. We left Calicut, drained of any positive feeling and instead was filled with disappointment. When we boarded the ship, Admiral accused Eddy and I of treason and stripped us of our titles immediately. We were sent to the prison cell without given a trial and we're to be executed when the ship returned to Nanjing.

Why am I so unlucky? I shouldn't have helped them using the app last time! Can I still have see my family and friends? I don't want to die!!

7 Sept 1407

Sunday

It seems that we have walked out of extreme bad luck.

We are on the Malaccan Strait now. But we met pirate leader Chen Zuyi and his fleet at Palembang. Their fleet is also enormous, with more than 200 ships and 5,000 crew members.

Initially, one of the missions of this treasure voyage was to negotiate the pacification of Chen Zuyi. But apparently it failed and Chen's fleets attacked us and sank some of our ships. So Ming's forces were forced to engage in retaliation. But it seems that no party can defeat each other as they are a good match for each other.

In order to win the battle, Zheng He came to the prison to negotiate with us. He asked us to help him as Ming's morale was abating. He knew we have brought some high-tech equipment on board and he believed we would be able to defeat them effortlessly. We would do everything just to leave prison so we cut a deal. So, now, we're back in our own cabin.

9 Sept 1407

Tuesday

I finally got back my tote bag and was able to equip ourselves with weapons. We replicated some weapons and distributed them to the soldiers using the "magic mirrors". When Chen and his pirate fleet used handguns to knock out people one by one, we were using cannons, lasers and mortars to sink ships!!! The battle ended within an hour and we killed most of the pirates and captured Chen Zuyi and his followers. Most pirate ships were burnt and seven were captured.

Everybody was surprised by the power of modern machinery. They worshipped us like gods as we were able to defeat such a strong enemy with minimal casualties. Most crew members just threw away their old weapons and were eager to learn how to use the newest technologies in the 22nd century.

Admiral Zheng He was extremely satisfied with the effort of his crew members. He guaranteed that everybody would be rewarded for their contribution. But we got fervent appreciation from the whole fleet as our presence made the victory as easy as pie. We were exempted from punishment and got promoted to vice admiral, which was just one rank below Admiral Zheng He.

2 Oct 1407

Friday

The voyage on the sea finally came to an end.

We parked at the Nanjing port in the morning of 2 Oct, just one day after my birthday. The Yongle Emperor came to welcome Zheng He and his fleet's glorious return. An enormous celebration was held and it was an event even greater and merrier than the banquet we had before the voyage.

Do you remember that Chen Zuyi and his lieutenants were captured? They were brought to the execution chamber and were hanged. That marked the final end of this lengthy trip.

29 Oct 1407

Thursday

We were invited to the award ceremony, in which officers that contributed to the battle against Chen Zuyi's pirate fleet were rewarded.

We were praised after the emperor had given his compliments to Zheng He. The emperor thanked us for providing such advanced weapons for the crew members to fight against the pirates. He awarded us 100 kgs of gold and executive positions in the imperial court. We kindly thanked his generous gifts but we declined his offer.

We only demanded to take videos around the Nanjing for making the documentary to join the competition. The Emperor agreed and dispatched some helpers and troops to help us.

We definitely enjoyed the filming process and learned a lot of about the Ming Dynasty.

Keith appeared just right after we accomplished everything and we are going to the time machine and travel back to the Year 2101.

8 Dec 2101

Thursday

'And the winner goes to..... Brett and Eddy's adventure to the Ming Dynasty'

Oh my god, I am very excited now!! Our documentary won the championship in the competition and we now share a \$100,000 prize. Our effort is paid off! I can finally buy my iPhone XXXXS.

But the most glorious part was that our documentary was selected as one of the top 10 videos shot in the Year 2101 by BBC and they bought the copyright of our documentary. It is scheduled to be broadcast next Thursday. Also, they invited us to be the host of their new show, Travel To The Past With Our Time Machine. But we rejected immediately, since travelling back in time is simply a daunting task!!

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Kwok, Marco – 16

This is the third voyage of the *Ming Treasure Fleet*, led by General Zheng He. The fleet had just left Sumatra. One of the men on the fleet asked him where they were going.

“We will head to Gampola, an enormous island southwest of here,” he answered. Gampola, was later called Kotte, and now known as Sri Lanka. “We will donate some gold and silverware to the temples there.”

“When will we arrive?”

“In about two weeks.”

At the same time, Alakesvar, the king of Gampola, whose country lacked capital, had heard of the news that a fleet from China would arrive there with various marvelous treasures like gold and silverware in two weeks’ time. One of his courtiers suggested to rob them of all their treasures, to make their country rich. To rationalise his idea to the king, the courtier even suggested it’s the “Sinhalese Dream” and to “Make Gampola strong again”.

When Alakesvar heard the idea, he nodded, filled with greediness, thinking about all the treasures and how to rob the fleet. He had almost forgotten to prepare the welcome ceremony for them, and he just realised it was one day before their arrival. “Oh, should we hold a pseudo-welcome-ceremony for them? They are meant to be our guests,” he then ordered his courtier, “You, go and prepare the ceremony. We have no time now.”

As there wasn’t enough time for preparing a solemn ceremony, the fleet was not welcomed well. “The envoy from the great Ming Empire, I am sorry that we cannot hold a ceremony that is worthy of your honourableness, as we are so poor,” Alakesvar greeted the members of the fleet.

“Never mind,” smiled Zheng He, telling his mission to the king, “The Emperor has ordered us to donate some gold and silverware to the temples in Gampola, to show our sincerity to the Buddha.”

“I shall thank the Emperor’s greatness and kindness,” the king replied, with his weak mousy voice, bowing down mimicking what the Chinese nobles do in front of the Emperor. “You must be very tired for you have travelled for almost two weeks at sea,” the king consoled them, pretending to be ardent, “I have already prepared a hostel for you, and you may have a good rest there.”

“That’s great. Thank you, your majesty.”

After welcoming the fleet, Alakesvar returned to his palace. The fleet had been placed in the Raigama Royal Hostel, and he was discussing with his courtier about the robbery. The courtier suggested to make an appointment to a killer to slaughter the fleet. Finally, the treasures will be ours!”

“That’s a really great vision; that’s our Sinhalese Dream!” exclaimed the king.

At the same time, Zheng He and his men were taking rest in the hostel. They had found that the hostel was dilapidated, with mice and spiders, and the men had been clamoring about it.

Suddenly, a sound appeared. “It is totally impossible for Gampola to welcome us so unenthusiastically and host us in such a run-down hostel,” Wang Jinhong, Zheng He’s assistant suggested, “As I know, Gampola is an extremely rich country; and we have all just seen the magnificent palace. However, the country is in serious deficit recently. Also, the king is known for his extreme greediness, for both gold and land. I have a sneaking suspicion that the king is up to no good and if my instincts are correct, they want to murder us, in order to rob us of our treasures.”

“So, it means that we are in a very dangerous situation. Jinhong, what is your suggestion?” Zheng He asked, pretending to be calm.

“We must leave now, otherwise the killer will find us very quickly, and nobody will survive,” Wang Jinhong answered with furrowed brows.

Immediately, Zheng He ordered his men to pack all their things, and that they were going to tell the king that they were leaving, not leaving a single treasure for the greedy king Alakesvar.

Soon, they arrived at the palace, asking for the king.

Alakesvar and his courtier were shocked because of their sudden appearance outside the palace. “What should we do? Did they find out our plan?” asked the king. “It’s impossible for the assassin to arrive at the hostel in such a short time since we just sent him his orders. Our plan hasn’t failed. Maybe we should let them in,” answered the courtier.

“Let them in,” ordered the king. Soon, all the fleet members appeared in the main house.

“Your majesty, I am sorry to bother you here, but I must tell you a sad truth that we must leave now, as our schedule is extremely tight.”

“I see. Our dear envoy, you may leave if you want, as you are representing the great Ming Empire, and nobody will refuse the Emperor’s command. However, I hope that when you are back in China, don’t forget to pay us a visit again,” said the king, indifferently.

After they left, Alakesvar interrogated his courtier, and was beside himself with fury, “You see? Now they have left! No more treasures! So how will your ‘Sinhalese dream’ work?”

The courtier suddenly leant over to the king and whispered, consoling the king, “Your majesty, don’t forget that they are going west, and China is in the east. They must pass through here and replenish their supplies. We can still get our hands on their incredible treasures. Our ‘Sinhalese dream’ still has hope!”

“I will only trust you this last time, and if you fail to get the treasures for me, you are going to be executed!” the king roared.

Time flew by, after one year, Zheng He had finished all his missions in Eastern Africa, the Middle East and Western India, and the fleet arrived in Gampola again.

“My dearest envoy, you have arrived here once again?” Alakesvar welcomed Zheng He with a stiff smiling, “I am sorry that I had given you such rotten tea last time. I swear that it will never happen again.”

“Never mind,” replied Zheng He.

This time, the fleet was served well. The hostel was neither dilapidated nor dirty at all. All the men of the fleet were satisfied, filled with joy.

Suddenly, one of them remembered what Wang Jinhong had said. “Will our lives still be threatened this time? I don’t want to die...” he murmured.

Zheng He and Wang Jinhong also remembered what they had chatted about there a year ago. As Zheng He could not be sure if the Gampola royal house will still want to rob them or not, he commanded the men to stay alert of all abnormalities.

Abruptly, they heard some noise from outside. When Zheng He opened the window, an arrow shot into the room, and pierced the wall.

“Gampola has sent troops to attack us!” Zheng He shouted, “Pack all the treasures immediately! And run!” All of them tried to escape, hiding behind the wooden panels to evade the flying arrows.

At the same time, Alakesvar was smiling at his courtier, appreciating his successful plan, expecting nobody would escape from the troops. However, he was still worried that they would escape through the woods. The courtier read his mind and suddenly laughed, “Your majesty, I’ve already ordered some men to cut the woods down, so it is impossible for them to escape. They won’t abscond this time!”

The king smirked, “Our ‘Sinhalese dream’ is coming true! Gampola is going to be strong again!”

While the fleet was running for their lives, they heard some strange voice. “All men, assemble now!” ordered Zheng He, then he went to check with Wang Jinhong to see what was happening.

“Oh dear, Jinhong, they are cutting the trees! Then how can we escape?” Zheng He moaned.

“Don’t be so pessimistic, Sanbao (a nickname for Zheng He). The Gampola troops will not stay in the woods all-day-long. If we escape at night, they won’t find us,” Wang Jinhong suggested. Zheng He agreed, and he ordered the men to escape at night towards west immediately after he returned.

Luckily, their escape was successful, and they finally reached Colombo. Colombo, the largest city of Sri Lanka, had become an important city since the Kingdom of Gampola was established. So actually, there were already troops of Gampola there.

“I have something to report to the king!” a soldier requested outside the palace.

“Let him in, maybe he brings some news that I have longed for,” ordered Alakesvar.

“Your majesty, we have found Zheng He and his men in Colombo. What should we do?” asked the soldier. The king repeated the question to his courtier. The courtier suggested to gather the people, so that Zheng He and his men could be cut off. The king agreed, and asked the soldier to announce to go ahead with the plan.

As what Alakesvar and his courtier expected, one day later, Zheng He was in trouble.

“Jinhong! Don’t leave! I’m here!” cried Zheng He, “Why are you going that way?”

“Don’t you see there are Gampola troops, Sanbao?” shouted Wang Jinhong, “If the troops and I marched towards where you are, they will find us, and then we will all be killed!”

“Oh no! We are cut off by them!” wailed Zheng He.

He returned to the tree where he rested, and thought how he could contact Wang Jinhong and the men. “Maybe I should try to meet them at night,” thought Zheng He.

And he was successful indeed. “Jinhong!” shouted Zheng He, “I’m Sanbao! I’m here!”

Wang Jinhong ran out immediately. “Sanbao, how did you get here? There are Gampola troops everywhere!” Wang Jinhong was shocked.

“Don’t forget that people of Gampola think that ‘sleeping is more important than anything else’, so I escaped from them at night,” explained Zheng He.

Wang Jinhong was so moved that he hugged Zheng He. “My dear Sanbao, don’t leave me, I need you. I’ve missed you very much!” Wang Jinhong cried, and his tears were pouring.

Zheng He consoled him, “Don’t cry, Jinhong, I’m still here, don’t make it like I’ve died and you are attending my funeral. Jinhong, do you know how many troops the ignorant Alakesvar sent?” he asked.

“Emm...I think around twenty-thousand,” replied Wang Jinhong, releasing Zheng He from his hug.

“From what I know, Alakesvar has only twenty-thousand men,” calculated Zheng He, “and that means Alakesvar has sent all his troops to attack us, and there are no troops in their capital at all!”

He further suggested attacking Kotte, the capital of Gampola, directly, to have Alakesvar caught.

“But what if his troops arrive before us?” asked the worrying Wang Jinhong.

“Don’t be so pessimistic, and have confidence in our men! I am sure that even with only two thousand men, we can still win against the twenty-thousand Gampola troops.” Soon, the men of the fleet assembled. “All men of our great Ming Empire!” ordered Zheng He, “We are going to take action tonight! We are going to attack Kotte, the capital of Gampola! We must let the ignorant king know how strong our mother country is!”

“Long live our Emperor!” chanted the men.

At the same time, Alakesvar was discussing with his courtier the plan of a surprise attack. “Now, that we have cut off Zheng He and his men. What should we do next?” the king asked.

“The Chinese troops are now probably in a mess, as their admiral is cut off from his men. If we launch a surprise attack on them we will win, and then we will get the treasure, and the ‘Sinhalese dream’ is going to come true!” suggested the courtier, excitedly.

However, no sooner had they planned the sudden attack than they were suddenly attacked. Zheng He and his men reached Kotte before dawn. They had never thought that Zheng He would meet his men at night, and that he would choose to attack the capital when it lacked troops for defense.

After Zheng He had gathered his men, he gave a short briefing, telling them how to attack the palace and where to find King Alakesvar. When everyone was ready, Zheng He commanded, “Attack!” then everyone charged towards the palace with only a few soldiers guarding the gate.

“What’s that noise?” the king asked his courtier.

“I...I don’t k...know...” murmured the courtier, thinking of the chance of Zheng He’s men attacking the troops. The moment they were wondering what happened, the door of the palace was suddenly demolished, and all the Chinese troops entered the palace.

“Catch the fat one!” ordered Zheng He, “That is the king!” Alakesvar and his courtier were so shocked, that before they could think of how to escape, they were already captured by Zheng He’s men. Zheng He then walked to the tightly tied king, pointed at him and accused him of conspiracy, “You have planned to stop us from returning to our motherland, you have planned to rob the treasures of our great Ming Empire, and you have even planned to murder us! How dare you!”

The palace was in total silence, but it was quickly broken by the Gampola troops. “My men!” Alakesvar exclaimed, “Fight! Protect me!”

“Men fight for your lives!” ordered Zheng He, just after the king’s command.

Although the number of troops of Gampola was ten times that of Zheng He, Alakesvar had sent his best soldiers to Colombo, so soon they crumbled, and were defeated.

“So what should we do with the captured king?” Zheng He asked Wang Jinhong.

“We should bring them back to China, and let our Emperor decide.” Wang Jinhong suggested.

Half a year later, Zheng He and Wang Jinhong returned to China, reporting to their emperor with the captured Alakesvar, accusing him of his crimes. After hearing the report, the emperor praised Zheng He and Wang Jinhong for the great job, he rewarded them and their men very well. As for the ex-king of Gampola, he was harshly punished by the emperor for his ignorance and greed. He was exiled to the Mongolian Gobi Desert.

Another half year later, the edict by the emperor had reached Gampola, the island where the king had suddenly disappeared from. People of the island were all shocked when they heard the news. “Alakesvar, the king of Gampola, is now officially banished,” announced the edict, “You now have a chance to choose a new ruler who is virtuous to become your new king.”

At last, Parakramabahu was chosen by all the people of Gampola, and agreed to become the new king, who is now known as Parakramabahu VI. The name of the kingdom was also changed from “Gampola” to the name of the capital, “Kotte”. Parakramabahu was a very nice king who treated his people well. He also kept a good political and economic relationship with the Ming Empire. And the most important thing was, that Chinese treasure fleets had never experienced hostilities again, so Zheng He could finish his missions safely from then on.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Li, Ivan – 15

“There may be no returning...” A group of sailors prepared themselves for a great journey, a journey to explore the seven seas, and to search for other nations and resources...

“Off we go!” pulling up the anchor, captain Zheng He (also known as Joe) said. The ship sailed right off into the distance. The ship slowly faded into the far west seas.

Ian asked, “What do you guys think will happen next? Will we get a lot of treasure? Or will we die a horrible death?”

“Well, anything can happen, who knows? But one thing I DO know, is that we are going to blast through those hiccups and everything will be smooth-sailing,” Linkon stressed confidently.

Sailing for a whole month, they were absolutely bored by the deadly dull and plain-o sea. Frank complained that it seemed like a never-ending trip to absolutely nowhere. All of them were bored by the monotonous trip, except Nathan. He kept looking through the telescope for land. Miraculously, he found an orange patch of arid land “Land! Land!” he exclaimed in complete joy. Everybody woke up from their ocean of boredom. They turned the sail, and travelled full speed ahead towards the foreign lands.

When they got closer, they could see some details of the landscape. They saw some kind of artificial structures. “I think there is civilization there! There must be humans living there in order for these structures to be built!” said Linkon. The ship docked on the shore. “I knew there were humans living here!” Linkon exclaimed. All the people living there were all confused and surprised. However, there is still a problem: How would they communicate with each other? How would they know if the natives understood them or not?

“We can draw!” suggested Ian.

Joe replied, ‘Why not? Let’s try!’ ”

The natives seemed to know what the sailors were drawing. They took them to a structure in the shape of a pyramid and they got to see the ruler of the land. They gave the ruler some goods, like the finest teas, silks and even gold. They became great friends with the country – Egypt.

They set sail again and returned to China. The cartographer, Ian, drew a map of China and Egypt. A couple of years later, they were given their fifth mission – the mission to trade with the Egyptians. So yet again, they set on sail.

But the weather was not compliant at all. Suddenly the sky darkened and the view became gloomy. As the rain started to drop and the wind started to pick up. A thunderstorm approached! Hoo-Hoo..the wind was strengthening. The waves became bigger, shaking their ship from left to right. Lightning struck right on the post of the sail. Fortunately it didn’t catch fire as the rain and heavy waves distinguished it immediately. Everyone was frightened. They didn’t know what to do. But the ferocious wind didn’t show any mercy. It kept blowing and destroyed one of the pillars. “The bow is about to break! Nathan! Fix it!” Nathan was in utter horror. He was in a frenzy and put planks and wood everywhere trying to fix it. They were lucky as Nathan frantically repaired the limp and loose planks in time.

As people always say bad things come in multiples. It’s true and not so soon after, the second atrocity happened. They hadn’t even had time to calm down, when another ship came right towards them.

“Raiders!” Joe shouted, “Get the cannons ready! Quick!” They went back into “frenetic running mode” again. They shot every cannon and fired every weapon they could. But they all missed. “Time to retreat I guess...” Ian said. They turned the sail and even paddled to try to go back to the safe shores of China. They finally beached and the pirate chased them. They kept running until the soldiers of Ming Dynasty arrived... They were saved...

On the seventh voyage they successfully found Serbia and other countries. Although they had faced a multitude of obstacles and adversities, they managed to overcome and solve all the problems one by one. They helped other countries. They made the Ming Dynasty the emperor of the seas. They unlocked the major trade routes through the open oceans. They had done their jobs well as sailors. They created history...

“Where should we go next?”

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Ng, Elise – 15

Another intolerably scorching summer day. Standing outside the maroon gates of the vast Forbidden City, I felt beads of sweat were breaking out all over my body—tip of the nose, neck, back, chest... the dazzling sunshine would not let us servants go, not until our masters had come to our “rescue”. Sigh! How pleasantly cool it would be inside the majestic palace!

However, the courts were having a meeting of paramount importance with His Majesty, so they wouldn't show up any time soon. I started to get dizzy. The world was spinning quicker than ever. My eyesight seemed blurry, my eyelids kept drooping even when I tried my best to keep my eyes wide open. I could tell I was about to faint.

“Oh look!” exclaimed my peer, servant Mong. “Here comes our master! Hurry up, hurry up!” I immediately threw my dipping head up, seeing our master pacing out with an admirable noble bearing, wearing a noticeably rare smile. “Master Zheng, your humble servants are here at your service.”

In veneration and fear of getting caught, I stepped up without hesitation, beginning. “How could we help you?”

“Just carry me home,” as the deep voice bellowed just above us, we lowered our heads more.

“Yes.” The servants and I choired in unison.

No sooner had we arrived at the Mansion of Zheng's than servant Mong and I were summoned to Master's study. Upon being called, I elbowed Mong nervously and stuttered out my fear, “H...Hey, Mong, do you...do you think we'll receive heavy punishment because of our—no—my laziness? He probably saw that!”

“Take it easy Kok,” but he gave a bitter, dry laugh that hid nothing. “If that were the case, we wouldn't have been called over but directly punished instead. Am I right?” I was so anxious that my stomach clutched and twisted like my mind. Maybe Mong's did too.

Not giving any more time for us to pray, Master Zheng called, “Come in.”

Scared at the thought of getting severely punished, we were both as silent as a muted bulldog, expecting a harsh scolding. To our surprise, the Master grinned and announced, “Well, I have a good news for you.” Mong and I exchanged looks in disbelief. Am I hallucinating? Good news? However, we were instantly relieved to know we were not going to be disciplined. That could be considered as good news anyway! “His Highness has approved my proposal for the biggest large-scale fleet sail ever. What's more, you will be brought on board to help us with handling the cargoes.” The atmosphere grew tense as we were completely astounded and speechless, silence took over the room.

We finally realised what it meant, which got us thrilled to bits. “Thank you, Master!” Kneeling down before him, we expressed our sincerest gratitude towards the man who offered us this priceless opportunity that we had never dreamt of.

Time flew by while we were busy preparing to set sail, soon everyone only had a few remaining tasks—double checking cargoes, testing ship materials for the last time and so on. Not only were my hands trembling after handling boxes of supplies, but my whole body was quivering in sheer bliss!

Hark! The percussion of the drums indicated Zheng's fearless sail to the unknown; with every beat of the drum and unified echo of the soldiers' calls it uplifted us and gave us courage to tackle every obstacle on our long and arduous journey! The Emperor had come personally to show his unconditional support on this monumental journey. We never imagined people from poor families like us could be part of history, especially at this young age; actually, this was an extremely surreal experience for us. “Oi, Mong, I think it'll be a good idea if we give each other a real big pinch. After all, it's still hard to believe!” I poked him and whispered.

Everything was fine within the first few days of the voyages, except for the embarrassing seasickness I suffered. I protested to Mong, “How do you do it? I'm vomiting three to four times a day!”

He mocked slyly in reply, “That's because you haven't got the clue!” We were getting along better and better, until that one night that I'll never forget.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Buddhist Sin Tak College, Ng, Justin – 15

During the Ming Dynasty in 1413, China was one of the most powerful countries on planet Earth, even the most forceful in the whole universe. It was renowned for its indestructible and unassailable fleet of ships, known as “Grand-ships”, which was said to be unsinkable and unyielding, they were far more resplendent and stupendous than the Titanic.

Why were these fleets particularly notable? At that time, China had complete worldwide sovereignty over the seas, they stroked fearfulness and admiration from other countries because of China's well-established sailing facilities. What's more, the generous Ming Emperor decided to make use of the sumptuous fleet to carry cargoes of precious items, giving them away as marvellous prizes to make cordial relationships with other countries on every New Year's Eve.

As “Grand-ship” set sail on New Year's Eve in 1413, an important day that saw China giving out extravagant presents for the first time. Thousands of Chinese people gathered at a colossal wharf, witnessing piles of silk, stacks of diamonds, heaps of gold being transported onto the ships. The scene was inordinately mind-blowing. Afterwards, they cheered for their homeland and raised a formidable hurrah which was as loud as thunder.

There was a total of seven voyages sailing to seven continents and passing through five oceans. The first route was going to Asia, calling on countries like Japan and Singapore. “What a placid and tranquil place with an idyllic scenery and extensively unrivalled grasslands, it must be immensely restful here!” the captain exclaimed. The sailors marvelled at the splendour of this breathtaking scenery. The rulers of several Asian countries met the captain and received a great deal of precious items.

The second route was travelling to Antarctic. It was distinguished for the hostile environment with frosty temperatures, lands were filled with mounds of snow. The rivers and lakes froze over.

“BREAK CLEAR! QUICK! Storms are coming... all ghastly and crazy” the captain stammered and crammed his hands into pockets. “It's a desert here. Nobody can live under such dreadful weather!”

“Hang on! Heeling, Captain!” cried the sailor. It was a truly gruesome and nasty nightmare for all on board.

After leaving the threatening monstrous place, they decided to proceed with their journey, sailing to Africa. It was a populous continent yet most people suffered in poverty by virtue of a lack of resources. The sailors witnessed thousands of people living in dilapidated mud huts, lying on the filthy and shrivelled floor, praying for food and water. The sailors were flabbergasted to see those abnormally thin bodies.

“Why is this continent so doleful and flaccid? People living here must have suffered in lengthy agony! Poor souls!” a voice broke out.

As the fleet had plenty of advanced fishing resources, including lures, tackles and reels, they made use of the pleasant geographical location and mild climate to teach those inerudite African people the art of fishing. They even gave the revolutionary fishing equipment to them. From then on, Africans were known to be “king fishermen”. The generosity of China had triumphantly driven the economic growth of Africa.

After establishing a long-lasting and trustful diplomatic relationship with Africa, the fleet moved on to Europe, where many western countries with state-of-the-art weapons were located. Noisy markets were everywhere, trading all sorts of exotic goods. At that time, Spain and Turkey had a strenuous relationship, paving the way for the erupting Spanish-Turkish War. The sailors saw many homeless refugees. A majority of them were forced to leave their homelands to foreign lands by swimming or trekking to get away from the obnoxious chaos of wars. Nevertheless, the captain transported cargoes of gold to each of the two countries as a peace treaty, for the sake of ameliorating the relationship between Spain and Turkey. The war finally ended peacefully. The European refugees couldn't thank China enough by dint of hard work and persuasion to settle the war.

A quarter of the year had passed of 1413, many countries that laid on the equator had already entered typhoon season. Unfortunately, the fleet met a catastrophic tropical cyclone on the way to the Australian continent. The roaring waves rolled mountain high. Strong winds snarled like wild animals. The teeny-weeny junks couldn't prevail on the whistling animal, and got tossed about on the stormy sea.

“Captain! Water in the hull! The junk may sink.” the alarming voice warned mechanically. No sooner had the warning come than the captain pressed an emergency button promptly. Thousands of crude and steely pillars hoisted from the bottom, lifting the whole “Grand-ship” up in the midair.

“We have braved the elements! Hurray!” raved the captain. In spite of the distressing weather, the tremendous fleet had no damages at all. They rushed out of the fuzzy fog and victoriously arrived at the fabulously prepossessing Australian continent. Seeing the kangaroos jumping ecstatically, the sailors felt a sense of console and gave the illustrious Chinese tea-leaves to the Aboriginal people.

At length, the fleet travelled across many seas and oceans. Much to the captain's astonishment, they discovered a colossal continent that nobody knew, which is known as the American continent nowadays. The sailors were flabbergasted by the astonishing discovery. Primitive people were found everywhere and they drilled wood to get fire. They caught fish manually. They climbed mountains and wade through rivers to obtain water. Unknown and unexplored. There were prodigious abundance of fruit, crystal clear rivers and diverse wildlife. There were promising resources all over!

The primitive people were immensely amiable, they gave many treasurable items to the sailors. The captain also gave away many newfangled machines and precious silk products to them. A fabulous relationship between China and the people of this island was budding beautifully.

This tradition of making new discoveries and new friendships continued every New Year's Eve. The legacy of The Grand-ships will never be forgotten.

Eternal Love

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Apfelbaum, Mia – 14

People say time heals all wounds but people also lie. It was a warm evening in the year 1405. I was at home nursing my daughter, Hua Yin. I named her Hua because Hua means flower. She was my perfection, made by Gods angels. My husband Li Yin was at work. It was like any normal evening. I put Hua down to sleep and then would go try and fall asleep myself. I always believed she protected me, my guardian angel. That night I couldn't sleep. I did the only thing I could do when I was unable to sleep, I thought about life, I thought about Hua. Hua had porcelain white skin and big black eyes. She had big round cheeks that could melt your heart. She could look at you and you would just want to hug her. She was my perfection. She was what kept me going. After a bit of thinking, I drifted off into a warm sleep.

I was woken up at 4 am with excruciating pain to my cheek. My whole body jolted up and all I could think about was if Hua was hurt. Through the corner of my eye I saw my husband sitting on the bed his eyes filled with rage as they often are. He began to scream at me, raging over something small. I tried talking to him and calm him down, but instead, his hand just radiated off my cheek. With every word, the pain was getting excruciatingly worse. With every breath, my hatred for this man grew. The pain of knowing this man could hurt me and I was incapable of fighting back, but even worse he could hurt Hua. This knowledge broke me. My bed, a place I felt safe in, a place that I could escape to no longer felt like a haven. As the pain in my body grew worse and worse, I suddenly heard Hua crying and I remembered why I was still here with this man. It was for her. I wanted a life for her, a life she would love. A life filled with joy and wealth. Something I couldn't give her on my own. I ran to go and grab her. I could hear her cries ring through my ears. I always believed she could sense when Li and I were arguing.

Just as I grabbed her Li's hand pulsed through my arms, my world began to spin and I dropped her. Suddenly a room that was filled with Hua's light turned into a room of hatred, a room I needed to escape. I dropped the only thing I cared about. In that moment I knew I couldn't stay here with this man. This man made me hurt the only person I truly care about. I had no money, no job, and all I had was my own knowledge and my little flower. I knew that if we stuck together we would be okay, at least that's what I believed. So I ran, and I ran holding my precious flower. The only other thing I took with me was my one medical book. That book had been with me through everything and it was going to stay with me. Medicine had always been my passion. I left the so called comfort that was my home, to a world more viscous than I could ever imagine. A world that made my home seem so safe.

I didn't know where to run to. I slept in a little room I managed to rent for the night. It was a quaint pale blue room with simple wooden furniture that filled the room with a warm feel. Very simple, just enough for me and Hua to sleep the night. I was thinking about a place we could go to. My mind rushed back and forth from idea to idea but none were what we needed, then just as I was drifting to sleep I remembered hearing of a very famous captain called Zheng He and of his fleet of ships. The Ming Voyages they were called. I heard these ships could fit up to 30,000 people. I knew that if I could sneak onboard somehow I could sail on the boat until we reached a new land. Where I could start a new life. For me and for Hua. I could build her a life she deserved, a life I couldn't give her here. I knew it would be dangerous but this was our only hope.

As we entered the dock the next morning I began to search for a way to sneak onto the boat. I was able to find a broken maid's costume lying in the corner near the trash and I quickly changed and managed to hide Hua in a little basket I found near it. I didn't think this was a good idea but it was the best idea I had in mind. In the chaos of loading the ships we were able to sneak on. I found a little room at the very bottom of the ship. This room would be our home for now. It was small and made of wood, the smell of the sea breeze lingered in the ships evening air.

A week passed as we lived in utter secrecy. I cleaned the floors every day. I made sure no one noticed me, I managed to blend in very well. Every day I brought the leftover food I had for Hua and I. If she cried I made sure to quickly lull her to sleep. I made sure we hid well, for if we were caught we would both be dead. It was day nine of our adventure, I had woken up to the sound of Hua crying. The pain in her tears filling the room. I quickly grabbed her and began rocking her back to sleep. I sang a quiet melody that filled her ears with beautiful sounds. The moment I touched her I knew something was wrong. She was hot, very hot. She was ill. I tried to calm her down but I knew she needed medicine. She was not going to get better unless I gave her medicine. I quickly thought about what to do. I knew there must be medicine on this ship. As I was thinking I heard the loud chatter of men outside, I was immediately snapped out of my thought and back on alert. As I went out on a journey to find her medicine. I overheard Zheng He, the captain of the ship talking to one of his doctors about how one of his army generals was very sick and could die.

"He could die in a matter of hours if we don't find the right medicine," I heard Zheng He whisper.

At that moment I knew exactly what would help him and how I could save Hua. I remember what I read in my medical book. I knew everything about doctoring, although I could never be a doctor because I was a woman. I went up to Zheng He with a small new found confidence and began speaking. I explained to him the specific medicine he needed. He was on the verge of sending me out until his doctor gave the general my medicine and in an instant, he felt much better. He doubted me at first but once I begged him he had to try. Zheng He being embarrassed that a maid

helped the general quickly told me to leave. I didn't even receive a thank you. I knew that this medicine would help my Hua. I told myself I would sneak back here and get the medicine during the darkest hour of the night. This was Hua's only hope to make it through the next week.

It was almost the black of night. I went to go check on Hua, she was hot and pale. She looked sicker than ever. My heart was running through my chest, racing a million beats per second. I knew I needed the medicine to save her. I ran through the whole ship. The dark floorboards creaking with every step. Careful to not get caught but still fast as ever. As I approached the cupboard I realised it was locked. Anger rising to my cheeks, I was mad at myself. How could I have not thought of this? I looked everywhere, but no key was insight. I didn't know what to do, but I had to do this for my Hua. Suddenly I had a really bad feeling, I ran back to check on Hua. Every thought possible ran through my mind as I ran through the dark hallways. I entered our little hideaway and saw Hua lying. She had no color and didn't make a single movement. As I ran up to her I rattled her but she just lied there. She didn't even make a sound.

She was dead.

Dead.

Death seems so simple. We are surrounded by death. We acknowledge it and we accept it. We merely nod to death. But once death has stolen a loved one from us. These simple sayings and acknowledgments don't matter anymore. As I stood there with my precious angel lying in front of me dead because of me, because I couldn't give her the medicine she deserved. I knew I could have done more. The salty hot tears poured down my face, more and more. Burning my eyes. My screams getting louder and louder. My lungs gasping for air. I took another deep breath and as I breathed I realised she was gone and no matter how much I cried she would never come back to me. My god sent angel was gone. The reason I kept on pushing through everything was gone. A pain shot down through me, a pain like no other, I dropped to the floor and hugged her. My body collapsed over her dead lifeless body.

I had to do something with her. I couldn't keep my Hua dead in a little room. She deserved more. I thought of the only thing I could think of doing at that moment. In Chinese culture the ocean represents life. It represents a freedom beyond our morality. I knew I had to let her live on in the beautiful seas. I found a blanket lying in the corner of the room, I wrapped her all warm and beautiful. She lied there so peaceful not bothered, she looked calm. My hot tears soaking the blanket draped around her. I slowly walked out of my room and toward the deck of the ship. As I stood there the cold breeze hitting my face. I could only hope that she would have a better life, a life I couldn't give her. The life she truly deserves. I kissed her pale head and as we touched for the last time nothing mattered. My baby was gone, everything around me disappeared. Once I said my goodbye. I threw her in. I saw her little body fall into the cold vast ocean. The love I had for her would be an eternal love. In that moment I felt like I died inside. The tears began falling from my face, the painful screams coming out of my mouth. My chest tightening. I slowly began to walk away with tears in my eyes. She was gone. She belonged to death now. She was no longer mine.

As I turned away I saw the general who I saved earlier. He kindly looked at me and asked who I was, I told him: "My name is Mang and I was the maid who saved you," I said while holding back tears.

He thanked me and asked why I was crying?

"Nothing," I said.

I ran back to my room. I didn't want to talk, I could barely say a few words. That night I didn't sleep, I just lied there emotionless. Not a tear fell, not a thought passed through my mind. As I woke up the next morning I promised myself I would continue. For Hua's sake, I would live the life Hua never got to live.

I was cleaning a lot in the next couple weeks it always got my mind off things. Even back home after having big fights with Li, cleaning always seemed to get my mind off things. As the week went on I bumped into the general I saved around three more times. We managed to finally exchange names. He looked so different up close. Beautiful silky black hair draped over his eyes, perfectly balanced pink lips. His name was Wong Lu. We slowly, slowly began to talk and talk, more and more. We would bump into each other more often. We would give any excuse to talk to each other. Over the course of the next month, we began to talk in privacy and meet when we could. Our connection grew. It grew with every conversation we had. He would sneak into my little room and I would sneak into his. I was still grieving my daughter but for the first time in a long time, I was happy. It seemed that maybe time was doing its job right. I was healing. Whether he knew it or not he was helping me heal. He truly accepted me. Our connection grew deeper as we would meet every night and sneak and have dinner. I remember one memory especially, he was tired and we both had a long day. He took me to a private spot on top of the ship. We went through dark halls but eventually, we made it. It was beautiful, the stars shined bright and everything seemed perfect, as we both laid there cuddling, everything seemed okay. We both fell more and more in love. I loved this man. This was a love I never experienced. A love I would cherish for a lifetime. This love was an eternal love. This love was easy, there were no bumps. Things seemed calm but as I soon learned time always takes its course.

We were arriving along the coast of Indonesia and Wong was called to fight. Everyone was preparing for the huge battle to come. He told me he wanted to stay or we could run away, anything to be with me. He didn't want to fight. I told him 'no', I made him go to war.

I told him, "After all of this we can figure it out."

I wanted him to finish his journey as a hero. He listened, I knew he would do anything for me. I knew that once he made it through this, we could live a better life together. I wrote him a note before he left and I told him to read it on his way back from war. I had tears prickling in the back of my eyes letting him go. The note explained everything, who I truly was, my daughter, everything. He only ever knew half of me. Just as he was leaving I was hit with a bad feeling, something did not feel right.

I waited all day for him, the men slowly coming back from a heavy day of battle, Wong had still not come back. As I was just going to ask about him to one of the men overseeing the fight, two men dressed in big suits came and grabbed me. They showed me the letter I wrote to him covered in blood.

They screamed, "You traitor!" along with many other horrible words.

Yet all I could ask was "Where is Wong?"

So much was happening. I was caught, yet all I cared about was where Wong was.

They thrust towards me the two most painful words, "He's dead."

Two words that ruined me. I screamed. A pain hit my chest, a kind I hadn't yet experienced. I screamed and I cried as they took me away. Nothing else mattered. I didn't care that I was going to jail, all I cared about was Wong. I couldn't lose someone else. The little hope I had left was merely a flickering light, except now this light was about to flicker out.

It's been three years since I lost everything I loved. I thought time would heal my wounds but as I have learned people lie. My wounds are not healed but as I sit here in my little dusty cell, with a little bit of warm sunlight pouring in. I felt okay, I was still in pain, everything I loved was still gone, but I felt okay. As I heard the screams of people outside my cell I heard a new scream today I hadn't heard before but I instantly recognized it. It took me a minute to understand my mind foggy with pain but I knew what it was, it was Wong's scream. I didn't understand but I knew it was Wong's scream. In that moment life simply seemed like a game some people win and some people lose and for the first time I didn't feel like I was completely losing.

The Truth of the Ming Voyages

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Gangaramani, Diya – 15

My name is Zheng He, I am going to tell my story. My real story. The story begins in 1402. I was thirty-two years old and I was in a good place, socially, emotionally and physically. I was one of my emperor's favourite subjects, because of my loyalty to him and our empire, as well as my work ethic. He trusted me, which is something of great value because this trust is what acquired me the position to command the Seven Voyages of the Treasure Fleet. However, the chances are, you can read about these affairs in history books. I am writing to tell my story. My true story. One that you have not heard before.

I grew up with four younger sisters and my father. Regretfully, my mother had passed away when giving birth to my younger brother. However, he couldn't survive more than a few days without his mother's milk. At least, that is what my father had told us. I was too young to remember.

When I was thirty-two years old, my father passed away. He had a heart attack and was in the hospital when he passed away. He was in the disheartening hospital for a few hours before he finally died, but, minutes before his death, he muttered the last words he would ever say "Your brother is alive. Honour your mother and I. I don't know exactly where he is, but I do know that he is somewhere along the Indian ocean. Find him, and bring him home." I was beyond shocked when I heard those words, but I had to spend the last few seconds with my father, while I still could. He died two minutes later. I would miss my father like anything, but I would focus my grief on living up to the task he set me up with. I had to find my nameless brother, no matter what it took.

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At thirty-two years old, I was close to the Emperor. I was definitely very lucky to be in this position because it is the reason that these events took place. I had to come up with a reason to travel through the Indian ocean. I managed to come up with a good idea. I knew how much the emperor valued respect from other nations, so I thought of delivering gifts to other empires would be a good suggestion. Little did I know that the Emperor would love this idea so much, he would make it one of the biggest voyages of the era. Nor did I know that it would make me one of the most known mariners in the world. And it was all to bring my brother home.

You can read about the voyages in any other book, so I'm going to focus on telling my story. I didn't have very much information on my younger brother. In fact, I hardly had any. All I knew is where he came from and that he left in 1376. His birth certificate didn't have my father's name on it, so he wouldn't have known my brother's legal name. However, I did know that adoption wasn't that common during that time, so that was something that would help.

During the first six voyages, I always found a way to slip away from my troops. I would say that I wanted to go exploring the area, or that I had a meeting with a general or something of the sort. I would walk around, starting conversations with people, and asking casually if they knew anyone who was adopted, or if they had heard any rumours about this. Not a single person had anything of value to me over the course of the first six voyages.

The seventh voyage, however, was a different story. We travelled to a beautiful island, it was as if the breeze was hope itself. By this time, I was fifty-nine years old and my health was not in the best condition. Yet, I was determined to find my brother. I had to find him, even if it would be the last thing that I would do. The seventh and last voyage took three years, and we visited seventeen different ports. It was exhausting, but I still made sure to travel around each and every area we went to and asked around. I was beginning to lose hope. I desperately wanted to find my brother but my body was failing me.

One day, I was absolutely exhausted when walking. My vision began to blur, and knees started trembling, and I collapsed. The last thing I remember from that day is a small boy yelling frantically to his father to get help. The next day, I woke up in a hospital. I opened my eyes and saw my head troop speaking with a doctor at the foot of my bed.

"He's going to be fine, but he needs a lot of rest. I want him to stay here for a while. He's not quite fit enough to travel yet." The doctor was speaking quietly, so I knew he didn't think I was awake. I wondered how long I'd been there. I tried to sit up and the doctor and my troop walked over to me.

"How do you feel?" The doctor asked, concerned.

"I'm okay but a little bit sore."

"You're going to stay here for about a week, and then I think you should travel straight home and rest before you do anymore travelling."

"Alright, thank you so much, doctor."

"Thank you," my troop said. The doctor smiled and left the room.

"I couldn't get you a private room, but you're alone in here until another patient checks in. I'm going to go sort out some paperwork and write to the Emperor." He bowed and left the room.

I was alone in the room, and I realised what this meant. I couldn't search for my brother anymore. I had failed my father. I couldn't do the one thing that he had asked me to do before he died. I had failed. I slowly lay down and fell asleep.

The next morning, I heard people coming in and out of the room. I heard someone say that there was another patient coming to stay in the bed next to me. 'At least now I won't be alone,' I thought to myself.

After a while, the chatter quietened down and it was just me and the other patient. There was a curtain between us so I couldn't see him. I could hear him snoring quietly, and thought how nice and peaceful this man must feel right now. I longed for that peace of mind, but all I could think of was my father and how my mission to find my brother had completely collapsed. I tried to find something to do to distract myself, but nothing really helped. Eventually, after what felt like a lifetime, I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, a nurse entered our room to bring some food. The curtain remained shut, but I did hear my roommate thank her for the food so I knew he was awake. When the nurse left, I decided to introduce myself. "I'm Zheng He, what's your name?"

"My name is Wang Shu." His voice sounded familiar, but I was quite sure that I'd never met anyone from that area before, apart from the people I asked about my brother.

"What are you here for, Shu?" I asked, trying to start a conversation, mainly to distract myself from the self-hateful thoughts.

"I have tuberculosis. What about you?"

"Apparently, I've been over exhausting myself."

Wang Shu and I became quite close over the next couple of days, but, I hadn't seen him yet. The curtain was kept closed the entire time. He told me all about his life, how his parents sold books for a living and how he didn't have any siblings but would have loved some growing up. I was happy to have made a friend, and to have been distracted long enough to enjoy myself a little bit.

One morning, as I woke up, and I heard Wang Shu coughing quite a lot, and I got nervous, so I screamed for a nurse to come and help. The nurse came in and gave Wang Shu some water, and she checked him to see if he was okay. I assumed that he wasn't because the nurse called for the doctor to come to take a look. She opened the curtain between him and I. I looked at him, he looked at me. Our eyes locked and it was a magical moment. I looked at his face and he looked exactly like me, except that he looked a few years younger. This was my brother. I could feel it in my bones. Wang Shu was still coughing and the doctor was trying to give him medication, but, slowly, he stopped coughing. It took me a few minutes to realise that he hadn't just stopped coughing. He had stopped breathing. He was dead.

* * *

On the boat back home, I was very quiet. I would answer any questions the troops had and I would return to my corner of the deck and stare at my feet. I had lost my father. I spent my life trying to do what he wanted me to do, and I managed to find my brother, but I couldn't bring him home. I didn't have any close family left. All of my sisters had married and moved away and I didn't know where any of them were. My brother was the only person I had.

That night, I went to sleep, and in the morning, I didn't wake up. Like my father and my brother, I had stopped breathing. My troops cut off some of my hair, took my shoes and brought them back to China, and buried me at sea.

The Letters' Voyages

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Gershon, Lily – 15

16th September 1817 Night time,

My dearest Eliza,

How it grieves my heart to have left you and the family this morning as the sun broke dawn. I need not tell you that since I left, all my thoughts have been with you at Berkshire and your image along with Oliver, Adelaide, Owen, and baby Henrietta's fills my mind. Even in my dreams, I never imagined I should find so much love on Earth for you and the family. How those moments glisten for me when I was close to you and our darling children, with your hand in mine. Those days flew by the equivalent to the speed of light, but our separation will go by equally so. Lest I forget this morning as it commenced with the routine choir of birds, aiding us in our waking as you soon attended to Henrietta. I attended to the children and subsequently finalized my packing preliminary to the forthcoming journey. Emotions that could only be described as devastation and consternation were fluttering in endless rings in my mind when the children drew nearer to converse.

"Father, must you leave this instant?" Cried, Oliver.

"I must," I bravely pronounced whilst raising Oliver, "I'm off for an adventure!"

"An adventure?" An intrigued Adelaide inquired with a smirk on her face.

"Certainly my dear," I replied as I lowered Oliver, "I'm going on the Ming Treasure Voyage." I retrieved my briefcases and unveiled one which would present an object of interest to the children. I comprehended in order for the children to not fret for I am elsewhere, I must convey to them that I am indeed fine.

"Father, what is this?" Panted Owen as he ran into the room. I paused for a moment and then grinned.

"Gather around children!" I announced animatedly. The children formed a circle centering me. I retrieved a map that radiated brighter than the sun and twinkled infinite stars that panned across the walls. The children's eyes grew wider than the ocean and their minds travelled journeys only their imaginations could reach. Magic pronounced itself in our cottage and granted our children hope that I shall return home safe once more.

"This map once belonged to the remarkable Ming Dynasty in China as they embarked on seven treasure voyages initiated by the Yongle Emperor. The grand voyage travelled to coastal territory islands in and around the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and beyond one's imagination."

"Must you disturb your father whilst he is preparing to leave? Adelaide and Owen Wright, repeatedly I have requested the two of you to order your reading for the afternoon!" You vocalized marching into the room as simultaneously quieting down Henrietta's cries in your arms. I stood and placed the map back into the briefcase as you approached me.

"Augustus, I certainly do not feel comfortable with you embarking on such a dangerous journey, whatever money we may need, only a fool accepts this opportunity to captain a ship during these circumstances. I advise you not to go." I remind you, Eliza, although formidable and threatening, this is a voyage I am to complete for you and the family for I have vowed to cultivate for you and your offspring. In times that I feel apprehensive, I shall close my eyes and return home to our glorious moments with the children, for it shall be you to pull me through the danger. Time struck noon declaring the time to leave had arrived. I cherished those final embraces with the children. I look to you with Henrietta in your arms. I kiss you both farewell and look in the distance to save an image of my life prior to this change. I step outside our door and attempt to embrace the novelty of this new chapter.

Eliza, I love you. Three simple words, and yet never uttered or inscribed in ink by me or to another living soul, only to you. Off I go alone and it's with a very heavy heart I part from you. Brighten up, remain my one and only treasure, as I to you. I ask you to please continue to exchange letters with me throughout this journey.

With promises of unchanging love and faithfulness,

Augustus Wright

I read Augustus's letter with the essence of melancholy as I ruminate upon the last fortnight and life without him. I stand at the window and observe the children playing in the autumnal fields, crunching the leaves with every bounce. I cogitate upon my last memory of Augustus prior to his departure; he stood by the door with the sun illustrating a silhouette of him and watching time slow as Augustus closed the door following him. Reminiscing the sound of the door jolts my body and sets me back into reality.

"Mother?" Inquires Oliver with concern written across his face.

"Yes, dear. Sorry." I speedily replied.

"I, I, I've been here for a while and Henrietta is crying," quivered Oliver, "is there a concern with father?"

“My dear child, there is no matter of concern with your dear father. Promise to not be distressed.” I urged Oliver. Oliver nodded, embraced me tightly, and ran along. I positioned Augustus’s letter on the étagère and sat to commence my reply to Augustus.

30th September 1817 Morning,

My beloved Augustus,

Should I draw you the image of my heart at this instant it would be what I hope you still love, though it contained nothing new. The early possession you attained there, along with the power over it, it leaves not the smallest space unoccupied. I have witnessed a near score of years roll above our heads with an affection heightened and improved by time to create a beautiful family; however, the moments of dreary absences have not in the slightest degree effaced from my mind the image of my husband, my beloved Augustus, to whom I bestow my heart. I read and write with ease and understanding that you are safe, Augustus, and that you are captaining your fleet with bravery, strength, and dignity.

Opining that the last fortnight passed with simplicity is embroidery of our circumstances. We celebrated Henrietta’s half birthday as a family. Watching the children be joyful was a feeling like no other. The expressions of bliss mirrored the compass of the abode. Must I confess, I shed a tear when I consider the similarities between you and Henrietta. A child so small, yet so expressive and delightful; she is following in your traces.

Now it is morning, the crisp air welcomes us along with the autumnal leaves on the ground. The children are bounding on the fallen ruby and amber leaves, crunching away with every spring in their stride. Observing their delight fills our world with wonder.

Now I ask you to listen to me in turn. Your letter has touched me more profoundly than I thought even you could have touched me. To our family, you are not only the solar spectrum with the seven luminous colours but the sun himself that illuminates warmth for all to adore. I ask for you to remain enthusiastic through your travels, lest you forget from whence you came and remember to think about your safety and protection. Our family yearns for your presence further as the time ticks.

Eternally yours,
Eliza Wright

The tranquil silence of midnight permitted me to read Eliza’s letter without a forlorn feeling for returning home. How it is distressing to comprehend I will be absent from the principal maturing stages of my children’s lives.

Notwithstanding this, I will listen to Eliza and regard my well-being. The bow of the deck is coated with an airy mist, hissing frost at a constant. The night is painted dark by Erebus, yet, stars glisten ever so elegantly. I begin to leave the deck. Abruptly as I stride, the ship trembles with fear as the waters below attacks the ship. The sense of adrenaline that comes with fear rushes to my head.

“Captain,” a shipmate yells, “the ship has encountered serious difficulty. The harsh turbulent waters have ambushed the ship and all the vessels. We are to vanish, Captain!” I hasten to salvage Eliza’s letter, quill, ink, and small goods that are on the deck and expeditiously placed them in my coat. The ship commenced swaying as if the seas were in battle, proceeding the boat to tip at superlative angles. I turn, shipmates are plunging into the waters below. I endeavor to the optimal of my propensity to advance to the main mast of the ship and progress to haul the ship. Stormy winds actuated by Anemoi brawled against me as I scuffle to steer the menacing occasion. I maintain to discern shipmates soaring over the deck. Zeus’s conduction of lightning masked Aiolos’s transmission of the storm as the lightning wrecked the ship. Each fleeting pulse from my chest intensified to emulate each thunder strike. Prayers and howls roared as the ship was ushered astray by rogue tides. The mist blinded me as I acquired the capability to administer the ship. I glimpse a shore in the distance.

“Captain!” An officer cried as I conclude marshalling the ship to shore.

“Officer!” I shout in astonishment. I rapidly attended to the officer. It was Officer Taylor. He was wounded; blood flowed like a ruby river from his legs and his head was painted with scarlet splatters. He attempted to speak; however, he was too immensely sore to utter. I tended to Officer Taylor’s wellbeing and ensured he will recover expeditiously.

I decide to return to the main deck of the ship and observe the wreckage. I trudge each step as disinclined as the next until I position myself on the deck. The scene is non-comparable and not desirable to wish on my foe. There is a grief that cannot be spoken and a pain that forever will go on. Phantom shadows are on the ground as my consociates lay there side by side as they encountered their ill-timed demise. The destruction to the ship could only be elucidated as demolishing of fabrication of adventure and exhilaration. The witnessing of an exceedingly wrecked ship with damaged parts distributed over the deck of what once was a ship provokes immense despair and woe. I hear Eliza’s words in my mind, instructing me to protect myself. Instantaneously, I recall Eliza’s letter. I check my pocket for the letter, ink, and quill. I redeem the letter to find half of the ink had spilt in my pocket and the letter. I gaze off into the horizon contemplating the manner to write to Eliza and the manner in which I am to return home.

“Eliza, must you be so concerned about Augustus? The concern is reflecting on the children and unsettling them!” My Mother implored whilst knitting.

“Mother, it is highly wearing in these circumstances to not fret, particularly when Augustus has not written for a month when he is captaining the most menacing voyage of his lifetime! I have written numerous letters; to which he has not responded! I had my concerns and Augustus refused to listen!” I insisted whilst pacing.

“The ship is lost! The ship is lost!” A man screams. I panic and rush outside trembling like a leaf in wind. The man continually squalls whilst dashing along the road. I halted him and bid to speak through my tears.

“Pardon me, sir. This ship you speak of, is it captained by Mr Wright?” I questioned with dread in my stomach.

“Indeed. The vessel sunk into the waters once a severe storm hit. It is not known the events that followed subsequently. There is a lack of knowledge regarding whom has persevered through the bedlam.” I grasp my chest towards my heart and swoon. It is as if time ceased and purloined my life from me. I bellow a cry from my heart that yelped for assistance. My Mother dashes to my extricate.

“Augustus! Return, my love! I beg of you!” I repeatedly howl as Mother heaves me into the cottage.

I maintain sobbing until I spot Oliver out the corner of my eye.

“Mother? Is, it, is? Father? Mother?” Uttered Oliver as he turned as pale as a phantom. He gaped at me, instantaneously staggered, and had a convulsion. Oliver trembled like leaves in a storm and then shuddered. I am in a state of disbelief to comprehend the occurrences before me.

“Augustus!” I wail toward the heavens.

This setting was not desirable to naturalise to. I rested the night on the sands in the belief I was delusional. I stand and observe the shore. The withering heat paved way for the air scents of the sea. Pillow clouds hover over the golden peaks through the wandering skies. Solitude embraces me with every waking thought. I instantly picture Eliza with the family. I instantaneously retrieve my quill, ink, and the insufficient amount of cartridge—paper. I commence corresponding with Eliza.

November 1817, Morning

My dearest Eliza,

Should this letter reach you, let it be an intimation that I have passed. What will become of you and our offspring is a matter I am uninformed upon. However, soothe yourself, Eliza, as there is one above that will preserve your well-being and not let you starve.

Your love bestowed upon me the prosperity of kings since you have been paramount of wives. I loved you deeply, to the extent you shall never comprehend.

Beloved, do ponder of me when the grief has drifted. Converse with the children about me and lest they disregard who their father was. I beg of you to vow that the children shall comprehend that I shall never neglect them or you, Eliza. I should not have left you thus bringing such suffering and poverty on a loving wife and children for which in time I beg you will exculpate me. If the chance should come your way for a gentleman to bestow you an offer, know it would please me to think you would take it, and not grieve much for me.

So dear beloved, I bid you farewell in the desire to meet once more if there is a hereafter. Know that my final thoughts were of you, the only one I ever loved, the one who made a man of me.

With promises of unchanging love and faithfulness,

Augustus Wright

I conclude the letter with tears streaming down my face. I glance to my left and perceive Officer Taylor above me, solacing me.

“It is of the highest significance we endeavour our journey home.” Insisted Officer Taylor. I nod in agreement.

Abruptly, sounds of amusement and hilarity are heard by Officer Taylor and I. We exchange perplexed expressions then instantly bound towards the sounds. We gait each step as we writhe beneath the elevating shrubberies. We arrive at a base of civilisation attaining urbanity and cultivation. I advance towards one of the men and outstretch my hand. One of the men stretched their hand out in return.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir.” I timidly spoke.

“Sir,” he uttered, “you men are in India. You travelled through the Indian Ocean when confronting the storm. May I inquire if the Crown sent you?”

“No, sir. Our vessel was voyaging to trade goods with China when our ship encountered a lamentable storm.” Officer Taylor expressed.

“Thus you men are foraging manners to depart home,” the man vocalised, “I desire something in order for me to assist you.”

I endured an instance of helplessness until I recalled the small goods I salvaged and placed in my pocket. I passed the goods to the man who subsequently examined them, and tittered.

“Well, Sirs, I shall assemble a team to repair the boat.” Declared the man.

“Thank you, Sir. If I may beseech you, I beg of you to dispatch this letter to my wife.” I implored whilst passing the letter to the man.

“With pleasure.” Averred the man.

Within what was the sensation equivalent to the speed of light, Officer Taylor and I were prepared to embark on our voyage home.

Each passing day brought ineffable despair and dependency from mourning my husband. Mother has been administering the children’s mettle whilst I have been mellowing in my sorrow.

“Eliza, do eat, dear.” Mother urged. I peer blankly at Mother as stillness imbued the cottage. Instantaneously, roars of applause and exclamations are heard from the exterior of the cottage. I excuse myself to observe the havoc. I observe swarms of people embracing two men advancing near. I view the face of the man appearing towards me and to my incredulity, that man was Augustus!

“Augustus!” I shriek whilst I bound towards Augustus. We meet equidistant and embrace. I weep rivers of exaltation and consolation into Augustus’s arms.

“Father!” The children howl. The children charge towards Augustus and I and encircle him. Bliss penetrated the air, enfolding our family amiably. My bliss returned, and I am impotent to be rejoicing further.

“Grandmother,” enquired Alexandra as she reads the letters, “Why did Grandfather write these?”

“My dear, your dear late Grandfather used to write to me during his voyages. Once, his fleet encountered a storm and was deserted. He wrote a letter bidding his farewells and in his charming manner, sent the letter. Miraculously, Grandfather returned home.

“Must you maintain the letters and not the vessel’s treasure, Grandmother?” Questioned Albert.

“My dear, pure wealth was not those discovered during the voyages. Pure wealth is the merits of the relations of your beloveds. Your dear Grandfather enlightened me upon this.” I elucidated. The sun brightens the abode as I peer out the window. An image of Augustus is illustrated by the window and I commence to smile.

“Remembering those merits, grandchildren, are better remarkable than any merit of the magnificent treasure.” I gaze at Augustus by the window and I smile. I glimpse him smiling in return as he voyages away.

The Letters

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Meroz, Tal – 16

“Ding—dong—ding—dong—”

The ringing bell resounds throughout the whole school. It represents the ending of a week’s study.

“Well, I guess that’s the end of this lesson then. Your homework for this weekend will be...” Mr. Liu, a fifty years old history teacher, throws the chalk on the teacher’s desk. He thumbs through his old textbook which has pages almost coming off, continuously assigning homework for the students. Right before the students start to complain, he closed his book, finishes up his line, “that will be all, have a nice weekend.” Then left the classroom.

Right after Mr. Liu steps out of the room, students start packing their bags, shouting around the room, discussing which coffee house to go to for studying.

“Wake up, Chen Yiyang.”

“Hmm?” Chen Yiyang raised his head. His hair is a bit disheveled from the sleep, his eyes are only half opened. A red mark is left on his head, that’s what someone gets when he dozed off with his head on his arm. “What’s the matter, Guan Zheyu?”

“Come on. School’s already over, let’s go home.” Guan Zheyu said with his bag already packed and carried on his back.

Chen Yiyang nods and quickly packed his bag within a few seconds.

Looking at Chen Yiyang packing his bag, Guan Zheyu sighs away, “Honestly, what will you do for your exam? You’re never gonna learn anything if you sleep through every single history lessons.”

Chen Yiyang makes a little deprecating shrug, “So I’ll fail history this year, and won’t choose it for the next two years. It’s really not a big deal.”

It only takes less than 20 minutes to get to Chen Yiyang and Guan Zheyu apartment. Chen Yiyang lives at apartment number 401, and Guan Zheyu at apartment number 402. They’ve been living opposite each other since they were baby. Chen Yiyang’s parents always spend most of their daytime at work, hence they often ask for the Guan family to take care of Chen Yiyang when they’re not at home.

“Are your parents at home?” Guan Zheyu asked before entering his house.

“No.” Chen Yiyang answered while looking for the keys. Usually, when Chen Yiyang’s parents are not at home, he will go to Guan Zheyu’s house for dinner.

Guan Zheyu nods, then went in his apartment. Leaving Chen Yiyang still struggling to find his keys. After checking every pocket on him and was sure that he doesn’t have it, he remembered that his parents will sometimes leave a spare key under the entrance carpet just in case someone forgets his key. He lifts the carpet, but there aren’t any keys, instead, an envelope is placed gently.

Chen Yiyang picks up the envelope and turns around, he knocks the door of Guan Zheyu’s apartment.

Guan Zheyu opens the door, “What’s wrong?”

“I left my keys at school. But guess what? I saw this letter under the entrance carpet.”

“Well, do you wanna come in?”

Chen Yiyang nods, so they walk into the house, through the living room, into Guan Zheyu’s room.

Chen Yiyang hands the letter to Guan Zheyu, “It seems like a really weird letter, looks like those from the ancient times. Also, it says ‘to Liu Seyu’. I don’t know anyone with that name.”

The envelope is made of a brownish Xuan paper, folded and glued into a rectangular shape. A red box is drawn in the middle on it, the addressee’s name is written inside of it vertically with black ink. On the right, there’s the address, and on the left, is the sender’s name – Chu Yingxuan.

“It’s probably just a kid trying to prank you. The address is wrong, I’ve never heard of this place.”

“I know, but why will anyone put it under a carpet if they can just drop it into the box mail.”

Guan Zheyu shrugs, “Shell we open it first?”

They cut along the edge of the envelope, took the letter out and gently unfolded it. The letter is also written in traditional Chinese with black ink on xuan paper. They quickly scanned through the letter. It’s a letter sent by a mother. She wanted her son to learn to do business with her husband, however, her son left the house to join a voyage that fleets to the south west. She’s worried about what her son is going to face, and asks help from her friend, Liu Seyu. According to the letter, Liu Seyu’s husband is also going to be on the voyage. Therefore she’s asking to have Liu Seyu’s husband to take care of the son and even to try convince the son to come back home.

“It’s a prank.” Guan Zheyu says surely.

Chen Yiyang shakes his head, “But why would anyone make a prank like this. Why would anyone learn how to write in traditional Chinese, learn how to write with ink brush, just to prank us.”

“I don’t know. But the letter is way to weird, it can’t be an actual letter.”

"I know. But..." Chen Yiyang sighed deeply, "Yeah... Whatever, I'll place it back under the carpet."

So he did. He placed it back.

For the next few days, every time when Chen Yiyang is entering or leaving his house, he will lift his carpet to see whether the letter is still there. The envelope stayed at the same place all the time. Until the following Wednesday, He found the letter gone. Guan Zheyu didn't care much about it and said that it's probably just the kid took the letter back after realizing the prank didn't work. However on Friday, when Chen Yiyang is back from school with Guan Zheyu, he once again finds a new letter under the carpet.

He runs into Guan Zheyu's room, "Guan Zheyu! I received another letter."

Guan Zheyu raises his head from a thick textbook, "Is it the same one?"

"No. Here, have a look." He hands the opened envelope over, "It says that the letter from last time got sent back, so she, ummm... Chu Yingxuan, is confused. But other than that, It's more or less the same thing from last time."

"Okay." Guan Zheyu raised one of his eyebrows, "So what are you trying to say?"

"I wanna write back to her."

"...What?"

"See, the thing is that I know you think it's only a prank. But don't you think that there is a small chance that it's written by a mom who's actually worried about her child."

"From the ancient time?"

"Yes. From the ancient time. She wanted to send it to her friend, to Liu Seyu. But it somehow got under my carpet. You know, like in movies." After a pause, he adds like he's going to make a big decision, "So, I wanna write a letter back, just for fun."

Guan Zheyu lowers his head, sighs while scratching his head, "Whatever. Just do whatever you want."

"Great! Do you have any xuan paper and ink?"

"You're kidding me, right?" He stares straight at him, "Don't tell me you're gonna pretend to be Liu Seyu, and write with traditional Chinese."

Then immediately he realizes that Chen Yiyang wasn't jocking. Because he saw him nodding with a big smile on his face.

"Well, I'm not going to pretend to be her. But, yes I'm going to write in traditional Chinese."

"What? You barely even know how to write in simplified Chinese!"

"And that's why you're here."

They start laying a layer of newspaper on the desk, putting a piece of xuan paper on it. Chen Yiyang is holding a dictionary, looking for the words they don't know how to write, while telling Guan Zheyu what to write. Guan Zheyu is sitting straight on the chair, holding a ink brush on his right hand, thinking how to turn Chen Yiyang's words more formal. And so, one speaks and one writes, an one page long letter is finally done.

"Well done!"

Chen Yiyang picks up the letter, once again looks at it from the top to the end. They told Chu Yixuan that she sent the letter to a wrong person. However, they think that she should not be worried. Every child has a dream, and they should chase their dreams even if it's dangerous.

"Good enough." He nods and stuffed it in a xuan paper envelope they made by themselves, writing the name and address according to the letter they received.

Then they once again placed it under the carpet.

Like the week before, the letter stayed under the carpet till Wednesday, and a new letter is placed instead on Friday.

"There's another letter." Chen Yiyang turns to Guan Zheyu, opening the envelope in front of him, "Do you wanna have a look?"

Guan Zheyu unfolds the letter, reading it out loud and concludes at the end, "So, she still thinks that her son should listen to her rather than risking his life on doing whatever he wants."

"But he should have the right to chase his dream," Chen Yiyang looks down at the letter, "Besides, how dangerous can it be. Which voyage was that?"

"Umm, according to the date she states on here is..." Guan Zheyu quickly finds the date written at the end of the later, "Well, it's the old way of counting the years, but it you search on line..."

He takes out his phone, taping at the screen, "See, it should be about January, 1412."

"Was there any voyages going on at that time?"

"You didn't listen on history at all, didn't you?" Guan Zheyu rolled his eyes, "If the letter is real, Chu Yingxuan's son is probably going to take part of the Ming treasure voyages. The ones that were led by Zheng He."

"Umm, I'm pretty sure I've heard of it."

"Basically, there were seven voyages in total, during the Ming Dynasty, that were led by Zheng He, the eunuch. They left here, at Nanjing, and the farrest they could get was to East Africa and the Red Sea."

"Okay, so was it dangerous."

“Well, there were pirates and storms. Plus, there were also disease spread on the fleets.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.” Chen Yiyang says, “Shall we write her a letter back first?”

“Sure.” Guan Zheyu said.

Both of them are sitting next to a desk, thinking hard for what to write. They still think that they should convince the mother to let her child chase after his dreams. However, trying to convince someone through a letter, is not a easy task.

“Here, write this...”

Right when they decided to start writing, the phone on the desk rings.

Chen Yiyang picks up the phone, looking through the messages, “It’s my mom. She’s back. I should probably go home.”

Guan Zheyu nods, “Sure. I’ll see you on Monday, or even during the weekend.”

Since Chen Yiyang’s parents are often not at home, every time when they come back, they will have dinner together. His parents call it ‘a way of strengthening their relationship’. Though this didn’t help much, the gap they gained through months and years can impossibly be filled by a few dinner. No matter what, Chen Yiyang still has to admit that his parents are trying their best to fix it.

“I’m back.” He steps into the apartment. The light is turned on, which made him squint. After weeks of entering this house without the light turned on, Chen Yiyang isn’t fully used of this light. Even though he just came from a brighter place, he still feels like that he needs something to block the brightness of his apartment.

“Come,” Ms. Chen made him sit down next to the lunch table in the middle of the dining room, “Dinner is ready.”

“Thanks.” Chen Yiyang simled to this mother. Then looks at the opposite side of the table, straight at Mr. Chen, until Ms. Chen sits down.

“So, how was school?” Ms. Chen asked, having a spoon of soup.

Chen Yiyang shrugs, “Fine.”

“I talked to your teacher this other day,” Everytime when Mr. Chen starts with this sentence, Chen Yiyang knows that it’s not going to be a joyful dinner. Mr. Chen raises both of his eyebrows, “He said that your grades got worse.”

Chen Yiyang nods, “Okay.”

“No.” Mr. Chen took a bite from his bowl of rice, “ It’s not okay. You have to try harder in order to be a lawyer.”

“What?” Chen Yiyang dropped his chopsticks, “Since when did I say that I want to be a lawyer?”

“That’s what I thought.” He seems a bit astonished, “Anyway, you should still be one.”

“No, I not going to be a lawyer. It’s such a boring job.”

“Yiyang,” Mr. Chen looks deeply at him, shaking his head, “ I understand that you might still be concerned about your future. However, trust me, you’re gonna be a lawyer.”

Chen Yiyang rolls his eyes, decides not to answer him. Then picks up his chopsticks, continues to eat.

The living room is filled with dead silence. No one is speaking a word, trying to use eating to cover this awkwardness.

However, this didn't kept for long. Mr. Chen breaks the silence, “I’m going to get you a tutor.”

“For what?” Chen Yiyang frowns at his father.

“For all of your school subjects.”

“Fine.” He curls his mouth, “But just to make it clear, I’m not taking law for college.”

Mr. Chen laughs like he heard something funny, “Of cause you are. It’s the best for you.”

“Dad! I’m an independent person, and I can decide what to learn by myself.” Says Chen Yiyang, pronouncing word by word clearly, “You had your life. Now you should not control over mine.”

“How dare to talk to me like that!”

“Stop, stop, stop.” Ms. Chen immediately stands up, tries to stop this fight between the father and the son.

“I’m full.” Chen Yiyang is already gnashing his teeth. He leaves the table without a second word.

Chen Yiyang crossed the hall, knocked on Guan Zheyu’s apartment.

“One moment!”

Chen Yiyang can hear the footsteps from the other side of the door getting closer and closer. Then the door slowly opened from the inside. Guan Zheyu looking at Chen Yiyang suprisely, “Chen Yiyang? What’s wrong?”

Chen Yiyang looks at Guan Zheyu, forcing a smile, “Hey, can I stay at your place for now?”

“Sure, come in.” Guan Zheyu brings him into the room. He pours two cups of tea, handing one to Chen Yiyang, then holds the other one, sits on the bed comfortably.

Both of them kept silence. Chen Yiyang didn't mention a word from what happened. And Guan Zheyu believes that if Chen Yiyang wants to talk about it, he will mention it by himself. Therefore he didn't ask anything. Both just quietly sat there, drinking the tea Guan Zheyu poured.

"Do you wanna continue on writing the letter?"

After about ten or fifteen minutes, Chen Yiyang says awkwardly, to fill the silence.

"It's there." Guan Zheyu points at the table.

They once again look at the blank paper, thinking of what to write.

"Tell her this," Chen Yiyang pulls a chair, "I totally understand that you want the best for your child.

However, you should notice that your son is your son, and you are you. You and your son are two independent individuals. He has a different life, a different thought, a different dream from you. Even Though it might take a long and hard time to get to it, he will still want to chase after his dreams. I believe that rather than being regret at not doing something, it's better to do it then feel regret. And I'm sure it's the same for your child, too."

Guan Zheyu wrote down what he said, and they both added a couple more sentences to make it more convincing. They kept on crossing out and changing what they wrote. When they finish the final draft, it is already midnight.

Chen Yiyang quietly puts the letter under the carpet, where it's supposed to be. Then went back to Guan Zheyu house for the night.

After a night of sleeping, Chen Yiyang is much more calm, so he went back to his own apartment.

He went straight into his room, and shut the door.

After a while, someone knocked the door.

"Yiyang..." Ms. Chen came in.

"Mom? Why are you here?" Chen Yiyang didn't expect to see his mother here, "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"Not today."

She sits down next to him, and takes out a brownish envelope.

It's the one he and Guan Zheyu wrote.

"Where did you get that from?"

"I saw a paper at the entrance under the carpet this morning, so I took it." She paused, "I've read it already."

Chen Yiyang looks at her.

"I saw the name on the envelope. I wrote it right?"

"Yes, I did."

"Who's Chu Yingxuan. And why is it under our carpet?"

Chen Yiyang scratches his head, thinking of how to explain it, "It's... Umm... It's a long story."

Mrs. Chen sighs, "Anyway, I hope you know that your dad is just trying to make you a successful person. You just need to communicate with him more often."

Chen Yiyang nods.

"He's just a harsh person, but he'll never force you to take subjects you don't like."

Chen Yiyang nods again.

"Would you talk to him about it?"

"Fine, I will."

"Great!"

They look at each other and smiled.

"So, do you want to tell me what's the story of the envelope now?"

"Sure!"

Ge Ming

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Razon, Ori – 15

In the year of 1432, the Ming dynasty set out on its seventh and final voyage, and made their first international stop in Surabaya, Indonesia; residing there from the 7th of March until the 13th of July. The Yongle Emperor tasked Lu Changdong, a respected merchant and voyager, with leading the voyage. The following are excerpts from Lu Changdong's diary:

8/6/1432

Finally. Something positive is coming out of our dynasty. Although they stem from nonetheless nationalist motives, this set of voyages is hopefully the beginning of something very special. The Yongle Emperor has reignited by once exuberant faith in our dynasty and its values. Today, as we walked along the roads of Surabaya, I understood that there are some things that you can fulfil with money, but at the end of the day these are not the things that make you happy, and that it is the small things that make life worth living. As I walked from house to house, handing things that I took for granted as a child to families and people in need, the emotions of pure joy displayed on the faces of children and parents finally made me feel as though I was making a real difference, as if I was becoming part of something bigger than myself. The words of Buddha have guided me throughout my entire life, and once and for all, it seems as though we can finally put his lessons to practice, as a dynasty:

Just as treasures are uncovered from the earth, so virtue appears from good deeds, and wisdom appears from a pure and peaceful mind. To walk safely through the maze of human life, one needs the light of wisdom and the guidance of virtue.

May we all uncover the treasures of life, and discover the virtue and wisdom within us all.

Long Live the Ming Dynasty!

Throughout the following couple of years, the citizens of China had become witnesses to a chaotic civil conflict, and an eventual change in dynasty. Through means of violent revolution, Shunzhi revolted against the Yongle Emperor, and executed him publicly. Concerned over sustaining his new position as emperor, Shunzhi immediately canceled the treasure voyages, and implemented strategic massacre in order to eradicate all threats to the Qing dynasty. Considering that Indonesia was one of the main beneficiaries of the treasure voyages, Emperor Shunzhi's first course of action was to terminate all inhabitants of Indonesia – starting off with Surabaya, its capital at the time...

25/8/1437

I was the first to lay foot in Indonesia, and I couldn't help but notice that the neighbourhood seemed a bit over familiar for my liking. It seemed quiet. It seemed peaceful. I knew it was my duty to follow the emperor's orders, no matter how unjust, and yet, something inside me couldn't do it. Something inside couldn't destroy such peace. From the ships behind me came a peculiar, blood-chilling sound. It was like the low snarling of many voices, and it grew louder and louder until it became a sullen, muttering roar. Hundreds of Chinese soldiers, some of which I recognised, rained down on the neighbourhood. In the Qing dynasty, hesitation came with a price; and now convinced I had to execute such a task for my own wellbeing, I rushed into the nearest hut, armed and fearing for my life. But I recognized a familiar face. A young face. I couldn't do it, and I froze. Unable to summon the courage to take action, my commander exploded into the hut in a sprint, blinded by his one goal in mind: to slaughter all inhabitants of Surabaya. The father stood his ground, defending his family with his life, but he was no match for commander Lee. As he penetrated into his innocent, soft flesh, guttural chokes mixed with an agonized roar erupted outward. Unnerved, Lee moved on to the mother, and she was of similar fate. He walked slowly toward the son, grinning, but our eyes locked and I couldn't let it happen. Principles of loyalty to our dynasty had been constantly projected to me as a child; and yet, I betrayed all that I had been taught, and slashed at the neck of my commander.

Silence.

The screaming had stopped so very suddenly. One slash of a blade and the commander, my commander, lay there, like a ghoulish mannequin. As I recollected my breath, the adrenaline faded from my system. I began feeling nauseous, and retched. My mind wanted me to think of a plan, I wanted to flee, to hide. But I stood there, frozen. the passage of the light slowed. Sounds muted, as if I were underwater. Aside from the beat of my heart, no muscle would move. And before I could digest all I was going through, the kid had fled without a trace. I didn't even get to know his name. In these late hours, I begin to humanize the mangled face of my commander, and when I realize I've completely and utterly obliterated a human being from existence, it becomes absolute mental torture. But it was justified right? I saved the boy's life. ~~Her~~

It doesn't matter. I can't let myself ponder upon the sentimental, although it is all that is on my mind. There's is no space for it here, at such a time. It is too late for me to go back now. I'm a traitor. With or without that kid at my side.

26/8/1437

I hid out in the mountains that night, until the tension died down. I fortunately woke up on the morning of the 26th – overwhelmed, but hopeful. Surabaya had a cold and hostile air to it. As I observed the paths of the neighbourhood, the barbarity of the events of the 25th revealed itself. Indonesian corpses were piled on one another, in abhorrent fashion. Innocent men, women, and children. The fog had faded, and the only remains of civilisation were the ashes at the tips of our toes. Or so I thought.

After examining the paths of the neighbourhood, I recognised fellow soldiers from the Ming Dynasty. I wasn't alone. Thank God. I wasn't alone. I wasn't the only one who understood that something had to be done – that we couldn't be bystanders to massacre. They understood it too. With almost all hope lost for the Qing Dynasty, it seemed as though Emperor Shunzhi was going to annihilate all the virtue that we had spread overseas as a result of the voyages, together with everything that would come in his path. At this point, it was no longer about surviving ourselves. The only chance we would have as a nation to end this dynasty and rebuild one with values of righteousness and virtue was to cut off the root of the problem: Emperor Shunzhi himself. Once he would be killed, the entire dynasty would crumble down, together with him. Tonight, I embark on a voyage overseas, together with my fellow soldiers, with the hope that we can revive what the Chinese Dynasties were once known to be. The remains of the Ming Dynasty will not go down quietly.

Together, I have no doubt that we can do it.

26/9/1437

It's been a tedious journey over the course of the past thirty days. Every moment has been a struggle, a struggle for survival. Its needless to say that this journey has been taking its toll on all of us – both physically and mentally. But we have each other, and I guess that is all that matters.

One day, we have to fight for our lives in the depths of the ocean. On others, we have to stealthily prowl past masses of soldiers, with the risks increasing at every stop – whether it be water or land beneath our feet.

It is almost impossible to describe what goes through one's head in the constant fight for survival. These events leave an ingrained mark on a soldier, a stain which stays with that soldier throughout the rest of his life – if he will even have one:

All senses are tightened to their utmost awareness. There are no longer any arrows raining down on us or fading screams in the distance. Silence. But it is precisely when it is silent, when one must prepare for the storm which will follow. The rustling approach of the unknown sparks an inexpressible fear within each and every one of us. The combination of blood, sweat and tears below me results in a soft and muddy surface, making it even harder to go unnoticed. Every elbow I put forward feels as though it's being pushed against me by a thousand men. Every leg that follows ruptures into my wounded left hip, sending an agonizing pain which pulses through my entire body. But we must not grunt, pant or gasp – we cannot be detected. Our breaths come in short and faint spasms, like a broken machine. We spot a large group of soldiers from the Qing dynasty coming in our direction. We have to act quickly. I grasp on my bloody dagger with my trembling and sweaty hand. The opposing soldier closest to me, aware that he is not alone, takes the sheath off his sword, triggering a metal scrape which cuts straight through me. We approach opposing soldiers from behind, all at once, and all our pain begins to disappear as the adrenaline pounds through our bodies, reaching our every limb. They spot us and turn around, each at different times, but before they can do anything, they are silenced by the edge of our blades. We escape the restricted area and sprint up the tall and dark fields of the mountain. Drained, I collapse onto the

ground. As I wipe my face, the blood which had once flowed in the veins of my enemies is now clasped in the deep calluses below my fingers. I uncontrollably gasp for air, desperately crawling for cover.

Luckily, we all managed to retreat to cover and survive that day. However, it was yesterday when I finally understood how easy it was to kill, to be killed, and how fast I could die. All it could take was a knife at the hands of a single soldier— one wiser, stronger, or more skillful than me, to put an end to my life and everything that I ever loved. But I can't let this fear take control of me. It is at this dark hour, where such courage must reside with me stronger than ever before. Only then, can we bring an end to Emperor Shunzhi and his corrupt dynasty.

13/11/1437

The palace. It was right before our eyes today. Everything that we had built up to over the years, came down to that very moment:

We approached the palace, silently. The dust was coming down on us, and without vision we were rendered powerless. We were all thrown into oblivion, but we knew we weren't alone. As the dense mist came down, we began to see shadowy figures charging at us with menace. The mere view of their horrific forms incited a dreadful fear that pulsed through our veins. In panic we retreated, but it was too late. Arrows rained down on us from all sides, breaking through the heavy silence and dark fog. As my friends and fellow soldiers fell dead before my eyes, a sense of helplessness struck me. I slashed hastily with the hope that I could somehow escape this living hell. I leapt over my dead comrades, filled with a sudden yet irrational courage. Fire, crouch, run, kill, dodge, stab, kick, repeat – those were the eight pillars of survival in such dark hours.

The smell of blood was so strong I could taste it. The gunfire so deafening it shattered my ears. And the screams of my fellow soldiers, that was the most painful of all. It was utter chaos. The soldiers of the Qing Dynasty continued running at me in waves through the thick mist; but somehow, somehow, I managed to survive. Second by second, I continued clawing for that last burst of courage and power within me. And suddenly, almost miraculously, I spotted a clear opening to the left of the dark fog. It seemed as though that path had been put there especially for me. I personally never really thought much about God, but it was at times like this that his presence was hard to deny. Clear of all threats and hazards, I sprinted through without thinking twice. To my relief, two of my most trusted and skillful comrades followed. I was not alone. Hope was not lost.

19/11/1437

Today, the deed has been done, and with the support of the majority of the oppressed and tyrannized people of the Qing Dynasty, a new emperor will come to power, in light of a new hope. A hope for a righteous and just dynasty, once and for all. As I write these final words before the new emperor's accession, I cannot help but think of all th

التلاعب والخيانة هي أكثر الطرق فعالية للحصول على السلطة. عندما ذبح والدي أمام عيني، فهمت القوة التي يحملها المرء على حافة نصله، ولم أستطع أن أتحملها. لقد عذب الصينيون العالم لمدة طويلة، واليوم سيصل كل شيء إلى نهايته. أنت في مكان جيد الآن. لا تقلق ستكون فخورا بما ستصبحه الصين.

Translated: Manipulation and betrayal are some of the most effective ways to gain power. When my father was slaughtered in front of my eyes, I understood the strength that one carried on the edge of his blade, and I could bear it no longer. The Chinese and their malevolent emperors have tortured the world for too long, and today it will all come to an end, once and for all. You are in a good place now. Do not worry, you will be proud of what China will become.

Off the Cliff of the Boat

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Shem Tov, Eden – 14

Ying

I was standing on the edge of the boat, dangerously close. I knew I couldn't survive pain anymore, so I wanted to end it. But as I jumped off the cliff of the boat, I felt a grasp on my arm, pulling me back. I was enraged by anger and annoyance, why can't I get my happy ending? The stranger took me away from the boat's cliff and sat me down on a chair. Then the stranger started questioning me. So I told my story...

~

"I-I th-thought it wasssss the right thing to do-o. For-r my sun-un-shine." I couldn't even get my words straight. I was shaking and crying so badly. My tears felt heavier than the rain that was pouring down. And for once, the salt and the iron smell of the ocean wasn't the only thing I hated the most.

"Please, I beg of you. What happened?" "No!"

~

Stranger

"It was 1406, on the Ming Treasure Voyage." The young and beautiful girl let out a loud sigh and she buried her hands in her long black hair, covering her face.

"A year ago, Father arranged a marriage for his best friend's son and I. Though I didn't have the courage to tell him that I was thinking of another boy, one from the streets that sold fish for a living. One that father would never approve of, even if he tried to fit into our gold glazed life. His name was Na'Lan. There was only one solution to this, and that was to run away. At night, I made my escape through my gold framed window into the dirty streets. Na'Lan waited for me and we ran to wherever we could and found ourselves on a ship. But, there was a secret that Na'Lan hid from me. A big secret, that changed the way I was with him."

She hesitated, "He-He was part of a gang, a drug gang. He loved the gang so much he called them 'family'. The gang did many dangerous things that put all of their lives in danger. They traded drugs like opium and marijuana, teamed up with pirates, and stole gold and silver from the emperor. They pretended to be poor so that no one would suspect them, and it worked. I only found out about this other life of his when we were already on the ship. And even worse, that they were on the ship as well. But I was too quick to judge, they were lovely people and took me under their wing. I grew close to them and it was a mistake, I should have known they were dangerous."

Ying

"The last memory I had was when we went on a dinner date, I remember it like it was just yesterday." I took my head out of my hands and looked at the stranger with my pitch black eyes, agonized.

"His curly brown hair waved so elegantly to the ocean breeze, and he was wearing a white button-up shirt with navy blue shorts. I even remember the exact words we said in our conversation," I laughed.

"We were so madly in love that when we talked to each other, it felt like everything around us was blurred out and we could only focus on each other. We were talking about the future, what will we do after the voyage was over, where we would live, but when we started talking about my relationship with my parents, we argued. I wanted to avoid them, to avoid my father's shame and my mother's tears. But he wanted to meet my parents, which was brave of him because my father would kill him. Though for some reason it seemed very important for him, and he insisted. So I shifted the subject." I closed my eyelids tightly for a few seconds

"It was the last thing I remembered before it became a blur."

Stranger

"I woke up on my bed, not remembering how I got there in the first place. I looked around and saw Na'Lan sitting anxiously beside me, waiting for me to wake up."

She stopped for a moment to recall the memory.

“I was in my pajamas and I never saw the clothes I wore the other day ever again. I asked him how did I get here? He said I fainted. But I didn’t believe him. He had that look on him that usually appears when he is guilty. So I asked again and again. He gave up, took my hand in his, and explained: ‘We were kidnapped, it was Bo Ling, he wanted the opium even though we didn’t have any.’”

She shivered.

“But I knew he was hiding more; it wasn’t an excuse to why I couldn’t remember anything. For the third time, I had to ask ‘How did I get here?’

He hesitated, “I carried you.”

I was getting angry: “Yeah, because I couldn’t walk on my own,” I said sarcastically.

He went down on his knees, “I am so sorry, this will never happen again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I will stop I swear. I won’t deal drugs or steal or put your life ever in danger again!”

He was stuttering, spitting the words out. I was so confused. He was so apologetic, and... regretful. He saw the confusion on my face and explained further: “They drugged you, but— I — I — I stopped him”

He was hesitating, choosing his words carefully.

“What do you do?”

“I stopped him.”

“No. You are hiding something.”

He paused for a moment, thought about something, then said. “The only way to escape was to—”, he hesitated, ‘kill him.’”

Stranger

She looked at me, trying to read my thoughts. I looked back at her. She was beautiful. She had big black eyes, surrounded by long and thick lashes, thin eyebrows, and straight black hair that extended to her back endlessly and clumped together in chunks as the rain poured over it. It was cold and windy, and the boat was swinging side to side vigorously. But the story was too mind capturing to care.

“On that night, I saw the first vision: I was on the floor curled into a ball. I hugged my knees tightly and squeezed my eyes on my thighs. Then I opened my eyes, it was blurry, and it was dark, and I was in a strange room. I closed my eyes again and when I opened them I realized that I was standing up holding an object, but my eyes were too blurry to see. I never told Na’Lan about the vision, I don’t know why.”

She stared at the ocean blankly, “After the incident, we pretended not to care; we moved on.”

She rubbed her temples, “But in here,” she pointed at her brain, “it never did.”

She looked at me straight in the eyes again, and she looked so tortured.

“We continued with our normal routines and ignored what happened. He kept his promise as well, he quit his illegal trading and I never saw his family again.” I wondered if she regretted it, but then she said “it was the right thing to do, because —”, she looked down at her stomach and rubbed it. “I was pregnant.”

“We were so happy; my Ah Yu was our own little sunshine. He gave us brightness and hope.”

She looked down at her stomach, smiling at him. Her smile wasn't like anything I have ever seen before. Her smile was big, showing all of her teeth, it was like a smile you would have while laughing. It made her look even more beautiful.

“He was more than just my sunshine, he was my planet, my universe, I couldn’t live without him.” Suddenly, the smile went from lovely to crazy. She was obsessed with her baby.

Stranger

“Na’Lan got a job so that we could afford a living for our family. Na’Lan worked as a sailor at first on one of the small ships, then he was upgraded to a pilot’s assistant, then to ship manager, and finally to a pilot. The pilot gets a big cabin for his family on the ship. There were two rooms in the cabin; one for us, and one for the baby. I already knew what I wanted for the baby’s room,” she said smiling, still glaring at the ocean.

“A crib in the front door, so that I could watch my sunshine through the other room. There would be a bed there too so that when I want to play with him he wouldn’t fall and hurt his head on the hard floor. And there would be a big cabinet, for all of the clothing we will buy for him.”

She was smiling through all of her words. She was so happy to talk about her baby. She was still glaring at the ocean though.

“How did you know it was a boy?”

“I felt it.”

Now she looked into my eyes with hopefulness. She held her belly with both arms and was smiling that same creepy smile that she wore before. I started to be concerned. I never saw a mother this passion for her child. It was like an obsession.

Ying

“One night, while we were eating dinner at the restaurant, he seemed nervous.”

I smiled and looked at the ocean again.

“He kept on babbling about something, but I wasn’t focused, the recurring memory came to me. The same as the others.”

My expression suddenly became terrified.

“It was in that dark strange room. I was standing up, and the small room was spinning, then I looked around and saw two figures. They were big and bulky, it looked like two men. I squinted my eyes to take a better look, but it was too blurry, then I passed out.” I closed my eyes, trying to remember.

“Then I noticed that Na’Lan was sitting in front of me again. He was still babbling and fiddling with something under the table. I asked him what was wrong,” I let out a small giggle. “Then he pulled out the most beautiful ring I have ever seen and asked me to marry him.”

I looked down at my hand, where the ring was. It had one small red stone on it and it seemed a little bit too big for my thin fingers.

Stranger

“That was the best night of my life. But after a few weeks ...”

She closed her eyes lightly, “... the worst night happened.”

Her face fell and she squinted her eyes aggressively, pushing back tears forcefully.

“He just came back home,” her voice cracked. “It happened too quickly. The ship authorities knocked our door down, grabbed my fiancé and dragged him out. There wasn’t enough time to fight back, or to even realize what had happened.” She finally opened her eyes, which were red “I had to run after them, and once I reached them, I had to beg. I was crying and begging them to explain, but they kept their mouth shut, and so did Na’Lan. He seemed to understand what was happening and kept his face serious the whole time. It hurt me to see him so calm when I was going crazy. I followed them until they reached the third floor, where they put all of their prisoners. Then I finally understood what was going on.” She finally broke into a sob, putting her face on her hands again, hiding her tears.

“They found out about the murder of Bo Ling,” she managed to spit out while sobbing. “Then I got another flash of memory: I was hitting something very hard, then I tried to stand up, but slipped because of something slippery. I looked at what I slipped at, and I gasped. Afterward, it was just black again,” she stuttered, struggling to get the words out as she was crying.

“Then he finally spoke, Na’Lan. He asked if I could keep a promise for him. I said I would do anything. He asked to always watch out for myself and the baby because...”

She took her face out of her hands and looked at me, with pain painted on her face, “but then they took me away from him.” She glared at the ocean again. “But I didn’t need any promise for that. I love my baby, so I will always watch out for him.” Then she whispered silently, “Maybe even more than my fiancé.”

Her tone was dark.

Ying

When I stopped sobbing I started to speak again, confidently.

“The punishment for murder was to be thrown out of the ship, into the ocean.” That is why I always glare at the ocean, I added mentally. “I was preparing for it mentally, so that I wouldn’t get hurt. I told myself that he was guilty, that he deserved it, that he killed a man. But I just can’t.”

My voice cracked. “He was allowed to talk to me one more time before they ...” I looked down and lowered my voice “threw him out”.

“I was crying too much to listen to his words, but one sentence stood out: ‘keep your promise, and try not to think of that night too much.’ It took me by surprise. He never talked about what happened when we were kidnapped. Suddenly another vision flashed: a person was shouting at me to stop, the voice was familiar. I was still hitting something, and I think I was sobbing too. I was also shouting ‘No! No! I will get out!’ The familiar voice was suddenly close to me, and it was troubled. I heard cleaning and scrubbing. Then I was lifted into the air. I couldn’t make much sense of it, I could just see a blur.” I glared at the ocean coldly.

“When the vision finished, he was already at the edge of the boat, ready to jump.” I switched my glare to my belly and smiled, “then I felt the first kick.”

Stranger

“I was immediately rushed into a room and I gave birth to my baby,” the same smile crept up her face, the creepy one. It was scary to see how she could phase so quickly from sad to happy.

“It was ironic, one life is gone, another is born.”

Ying

“I closed my eyes, trying to push back the tears. The three minutes of holding my baby were the best three minutes of my life. I remember the feel of his soft skin and his big wide eyes. The way he looked at me made me feel so happy. He smiled and reached his tiny arm at me, trying to reach my face. I put my head down to let him touch me. Right then, he let out a small giggle, which was the most beautiful sound I have ever heard. And at that moment, I truly felt complete. The nine months of waiting was truly worth it. I let my eyes close softly to fully absorb the moment, and I let some tears of joy escape. But then I felt my sunshine being pulled away.”

Stranger

She stood up, flying her hands around in anger and pulling her hair out so hard it scared me.

“I only got to hold him for three minutes before they took him away. They said it was a punishment for marrying a murderer!” she screamed.

Stranger

When she finally calmed down, she sat back on the floor, where I eagerly waited for her to continue. “Then everything really started falling down, when I saw the full vision,” she suddenly jerked, unwilling to remember the vision again. She curled up into a ball again, her eyes becoming blurry. This time she didn’t hide or glared at the ocean. It was like she was talking to thin air, “I don’t deserve Na’Lan, I don’t deserve my baby, my sunshine, I don’t even deserve you, or a soul, or a life at all!” She screamed at the air, “I will never forgive myself! Ever!”

I didn’t know what was happening I didn’t know what to do. I tried to find my voice. “What did you see in your vision?” She started to sob again.

Stranger

She wouldn’t talk. She just kept on shaking. “Please, I beg of you. What happened?”

“Nooooooooooooo!”

I grabbed her hands tightly, looked at her straight into her eyes and asked again forcefully. “What happened?” She finally calmed down, and spoke in a hushed and shaky voice “It was all my fault. In the vision, I saw – I saw – I saw m– NO! I CAN’T!”

“I promise I won’t tell!” I said.

She gulped and said unsteadily, “I saw myself, in the storage room, with Bo Ling and my fiance. Bo Ling grabbed me furiously, putting something in my mouth. It had an effect on me, and everything just went chaotic. It gave me energy, whatever he gave me. He was choking Na’Lan when he thought I passed out, but I faked it. I found a broken paddle that was split to half and left a pointy edge on it. I stabbed him in the back continuously... until I was sure there was no return.”

I gasped,

“I wasn’t myself!” she said defensively. “But Na’Lan took the fall for me anyways...” She drifted off and I thought that she will start crying again, “But you know what’s the worst part?”

I waited.

Her voice shrank as she talked “I love my baby, more than my fiance. This makes me guilty and selfish. So deep inside.” Her voice shrank even more that I could barely hear, “I knew it the whole time.” And I swear I heard her whisper silently, “So I let him take the blame.”

New Tales of the Ming Voyage

Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Yu, Clarissa – 15

Standing at the grave of his stillborn child, Nopadon bent down and gingerly placed a bouquet of lilies onto the mossy rock the size of a newborn kitten. He stood back up and gazed at the rock as if his child was going to magically appear.

She was his 'second' child and today was her anniversary. The first was a miscarriage, they were 5 months into the pregnancy when it occurred. Both his wife, Khajee and him were ecstatic to have a product of their love, as most new parents do. Thus, when they discovered they had a miscarriage, they were determined to try again.

It was not long before the second child was conceived. With more experience, the pair were more careful and after 9 months, she was ready to give birth. Nopadon was not allowed to participate and observe the process of the birth so he waited outside of the hospital for a lengthy 14 hours. Nopadon could only hear Khajee struggling and the doctor attempting to help his wife.

It was dusk when their child was born. Nopadon remembered everything on that fatal day. The sky was a mix between pink and orange, with hues of blue and purple mixed into the sunset. He fondly recalls how he thought nothing, not even a rainy day can dampen his mood when the doctor broke the news to him.

Two weeks, a total of 14 days after that fateful day, Khajee was still in a melancholy mood. She blamed herself for Duangkamol, her stillborn. It was all her fault. It has happened again and again. Twice. She gave false hope to Nopadon twice. That was twice too many, in her opinion. She loved him dearly and knew what a child meant to him. She could only hope that someday she could bear a child that could repair the damage.

Consumed by his thoughts of what the stillborn could have been, it was not apparent to him that nighttime had appeared. Suddenly, he realized that the sun had gone into hiding and the moon replaced the sun in its position.

Nopadon slowly walked back to his home, passing by various sizes of rocks, which indicated the age of the deceased. The larger the rocks are, the older the person was. The oldest person to ever live was a man by the name of Punyaa, he lived all the way up to 31 years old.

It was raining all night long and turned to a slight drizzle in the morning. Nopadon was visiting his cousin, Chakrii by the docks when it happened. Hundreds of boats slowly docked on their already crowded deck. There were more people on the ships than the civilian population in this village of Siam.

On this very day, the calm and quiet village was disturbed. On the ship, there were captains commanding their sailors, navigators communicating with each other animatedly, doctors treating crew members that are injured and many more. The busy and sophisticated ships strongly juxtapose the village.

The boat was greater than any infrastructure the villagers have ever seen. Words spread fast in the minuscule village and by noon, almost all of the villagers were crowded around the vessel. The chief of the village attempted to display a nonchalant expression upon discovering the arrival of these explorers.

Any sane person would marvel at these enormous ships. Their sails were a deep blood red, which contrasted with the emerald green exterior. There were at least nine sails in each of the boats, with one at the front and one at the back. Their sails reflected the very essence of Chinese culture, with bamboo connecting every few inches of the sail, making it easier to control and manipulate in order to use the wind to their full advantage.

Every crew member on the boat seemed to know exactly what had to be done, like clockwork, they operated smoothly and without any delays. Every person on the hundreds of vessels had their own role which they performed meticulously.

A man named Zheng He was in charge of the ships. They have traveled to numerous villages before this specific one. In each one of them, they offered treasures from China and stayed for a week while they loaded more supplies onto their boats. This one was no different.

Zheng He got off his ship and greeted the chief. The moment they shook hands, everything stopped. The crew members stood up straight and observed the interaction. The chatter suddenly ceased. It seemed like Zheng He and the chief communicated forever. The only sound other than the two communicating with each other was the children in the village quietly whispering to each other and the waves crashing onto the ships and docks.

With a flick of a wrist, tens and hundreds of crew members marched off the ships. It was all a blur, within a few minutes, the crew all boarded off the boats and settled into the village.

Nopadon, uninterested with this encounter, bid farewell to Chakrii and ventured back home.

Back at their humble abode, Khajee paced back and forth, waiting for Nopadon to come back home. She was due any day and Khajee hoped Nopadon would be there. She had heard of the commotion from the other villagers and wished Nopadon would not have to work due to the foreigners being there.

Back at the seashore, the villagers were ecstatic to meet some of the crew members, it had been forever since foreigners visited. The foreigners from China brought numerous goods from their own country, sharing their wealth and their culture.

The village had never seen goods of that quality. Zheng He and his crew presented gold that gleamed in the hot sun. The children curiously picked the gold up, unaware of the heavy mass. Then the crew displayed their shiny silver, which was two times as much as gold. The villagers were astonished, they could not comprehend how the foreigners would willingly give up these treasures that some could only dream of.

Just as the villagers thought the crew gave up all they offered, they shocked the villagers with porcelain and silk. The wives were marveling at the ceramic porcelain and the luxurious silk, thanking the crew members while discussing amongst each other what they would utilize them for. Everyone in the village was content that Zheng He had visited.

Some of the foreigners spent the day telling stories to the village children who have never stepped foot outside of Siam. Other helped the current villagers with their daily tasks. The village had never been so crowded.

Days passed. It was nighttime, two days after Zheng He's fleet had settled. Everyone in the village was asleep. Suddenly, a loud scream woke half of the village up. It was a scream from Khajee. Her contractions were too much for her to bear. Nopadon brought Khajee to the doctor to conceive their infant. Much to their surprise, the two midwives from Zheng He's ship helped them as well.

The midwives helped the local doctor in the birth of Nopadon and Khajee's son. The Chinese knew how to properly remove the umbilical cord, which the local doctor had used a sharp rock to cut. They knew the sanitary procedures needed to ensure an infection would not occur.

The skills the midwives taught the local doctor would help the birth rate increase in this village in Siam, similar to the other places Zheng He and his crew visited.

The skills that the local doctor had were primitive. Using a rock as a means of cutting the umbilical cord was pathetic. The midwives kindly helped calm Khajee. Khajee was sweating like pig, her breaths were not unified and she kept on blinking. Khajee was desperate. She did not want to disappoint Nopadon again.

Khajee thought back to the first miscarriage and how much damage it had done to her, and her husband. They were ready for their baby. Everyone in the village knew that she was pregnant, and trusted that she would birth a lovely infant for the whole village to fawn over. It has been a while since they had an infant in the village and Khajee was proud to become a mother.

The miscarriage traumatized them both deeply, but it was nothing compared to the destruction the stillborn child had done. Weeks after the death of their child, Khajee was consumed by her thoughts. She kept on thinking about what she had done wrong. Her luck was just the worst. Nopadon and Khajee never connected as they did previously. Khajee blamed herself for Duangkamol's death, as did Nopadon. They both did not want to trouble one another.

Nopadon began thinking of ways he could have helped Duangkamol and how he could not be with his wife, he could only wait outside while his wife suffered through the birth of their child. Similarly, Khajee was determined that she was unfit to become a mother, and those were signs telling her so. No one in the village knew how much damage the death of their children brought to the couple. After all, the smallest coffins are the heaviest.

The midwives knew something was wrong, Khajee was panicking. They soothed Khajee inside while Nopadon was alone with his own thoughts.

Nopadon paced around the hospital for the duration of the labor. For 11 hours, he either sat on the grassy ground next to the door of the hospital or paced around the fence. He was sweating, much like Khajee. Nopadon tried to sleep on the grass but his mind would not allow him to do so. He did not trust strangers easily, what if the midwives were causing trouble instead of helping. Nopadon knew the birth rates were low, every few years there would be a child, and if there was an infant, the likelihood of a child dying due to infections was high.

Nopadon was not a naive human. He knew what the chances of the infant surviving were. The local doctor and the midwives barely know each other. They had no chemistry. If a division of power happens during the course of the labor, there was no doubt that there would be consequences.

Nopadon dived into rabbit holes upon rabbit holes, thousands of scenarios are pictured in his mind, yet not a single one of them was positive. He lurked outside of the hospital until the roosters began to crow. Then the sound of people was heard, shuffling, yawning, laughing...

Nopadon observed how his neighborhood operated like clockwork, much like the crew members on the ship. The milkman going to every household on a bike similar to his age, providing the villagers' fresh milk before the sun even greeted him. It seemed natural to swerve his bike right as the shepherd walked straight to him. Without looking, they both waved to each other and greeted each other, then continued on their road.

He observed through the windows, how every family had their own systems of operation. The one on his left was the farmer's house. They were the richest in the village and they had 5 kids. He saw how the wife would cook while the daughters helped with the cleaning while the father and sons got ready for a hard day of work.

Nopadon turned and looked at the home on the right. There lives a lonely man whose wife died at childbirth. The whole village went to her funeral. It was one of the most devastating thing the village has encountered. He marked the contrast between the fast-paced family to the slow, gloomy man who lost the reason for him to live. Deep down, Nopadon was afraid he would turn out like that widower. Old and alone.

Before he could brainstorm any further, one of the three midwives barged out the door to give Nopadon the great news.

After sanitary procedures, Nopadon entered and greeted his teary wife. Looking at their newborn son, Nopadon thought of a perfect name for him – Prasert.

A Eulogy to Heroes

Chongqing Nankai Secondary School, Li, Weike – 16

“Zhu! Come back home now and pack your stuff! You only get a tiny space for your pack so don’t bring your silly books and loose pages of poetry! Quickly!” A yell from a grouchy woman pierced the street, so shrieking that it penetrated tier upon tier of onlookers.

“I’m COMING!” a boy retorted, disappointed and perhaps irritated.

The shriek began again, “Quickly now! Time’s ticking!”

“I AM COMMMING!” the boy roared. His disgruntled sound nearly froze the street, making the idle owner of the fruit stand jump out of his skin — the owner cast a cursory glance in the direction of the sound, then leisurely resumed laying out his fresh pears and oranges. Among the crowds a handsome-looking boy, though a bit chubby, dashed through stores and stalls, dodging in and out of the flow of human legs. A stack of yellowish pages were in his left hand — the old urchin Li, the only other weirdo in the little town of Yuan, gave them to him — one of which, Li had claimed exuberantly, had been passed down for centuries from the Tang Dynasty. “What a gorgeous era.” The old man constantly reminisced about centuries before, eyes gleaming, voice shaking, and words asserting so unswervingly that he was the true heir of the emperor Li Yuan. Yet the only proof he possessed was a roughly-made imperial decree, and, his very last name. The boy, on the other hand, was haunted by his name. Mocked by all his neighborhood, Zhu had the very same last name as the Ming’s emperors, but held nothing yet a very deep hatred towards the dynasty. “The most distant relatives of our emperors,” he remembered a girl had jeered at him. So he identified with Li. He visited Li now and then. He would read through Li’s piles of old books from those dusty shelves and drink unrefined oolong tea with him down by the old birch tree.

★★

I would never do this again, never, he thought, *the Sixth Voyage down the South Seas*, as he scowled and slammed the door behind him. How ignorant they were, those silly grown-ups, that they even bragged about it as “the Great Voyages!” And all his neighbors, giving up so relentlessly the company of their children and wives or husbands, rushed to the ships in exchange for gold and silver coins. Ostentatious fleets, gaudy treasures, and mighty smug captains in shining armor standing tall on the bows — nothing could be more humdrum than a scene like this. It was quite glorious, indeed, but even so, how could they possibly compare the scene to what those books had described of the Tang Dynasty, the infantry and cavalry marching down the prairies of Mongolia, flying spears and roaring horses along the Yangtze River, and dust and smoke that could darken the skies for weeks. And a knight would always charge in at the forefront, drawing his sword from its sheath and brandishing it proudly. He especially wanted to be that knight, as poets of the Tang Dynasty constantly portrayed, who guarded the western border of China against the raids and invasions of the Huns — but he couldn’t quite imagine himself properly. So heavy, he’d always be standing comically with sword and shield and armor. And poetry! The moonlight in the capital city of Changan would always shine on an artistic poet, chanting his gorgeous verses in time. What now? A pile of golden cargo or boxes stuffed with silver coins? Zhu had stayed in his chamber and refused to come out for nearly all the journey the fifth time he had embarked on “the Great Voyage” two years before. He brought hundreds of pages in his pack — the full collection of the poetry of Li Bai — and dove into it at the very beginning, devouring every single character. So thrilled by these scenes, rivers surging ahead from where the skies originated and moonlight pouring down so expansively, he would nearly jump with glee. The sea, yet, was an entirely different story. The amazement that grown-ups had described in detail, he had seen none of on his way. All he ever saw was monotonously stretching water and unvaryingly spreading skies. And the flux of shining gold and the wicked grins from the shrewd merchants. The waves always raided the ship at night, and his chamber would be just one step from shattering.

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“You have to find him, the former emperor, Zhu Yunwen. Rumors have been spreading around the streets.”

“Wait... What do you mean? I remember... a funeral for him. It was the grandest funeral. He died in that huge fire he himself lit, right?”

“No...” the official leaned forward and whispered, “that was only a coverup job. It wasn’t his body but his wife’s. He was... lost...the day the new emperor’s army occupied the capital”.

Zhu was passing by the vestibule, and accidentally caught a glimpse of his father sitting across to a golden-cloaked official whom he had never seen before. *Another grown-up conspiracy*. He stopped behind the door and began pondering.

“...So, uh, the voyages were not only about silver coins and expensive spices and all that stuff, they were also about...” Before Zhu’s father finished, the astute official interrupted him.

“Shhh! You got the idea. The lost emperor is a threat. He has to be eliminated.” He stood up and walked towards the front gate. “Just don’t forget. I’ve got businesses...”

Zhu suddenly recalled some ramblings from the old urchin Li: the young emperor who succeeded because of the early death of his father, the tough usurper who arose from the borderlands, and the mysterious underground channel which Zhu Yunwen utilized to flee to nowhere — yet no stories could be more tedious than one like this, one with nothing but cruel politics and inexorable backstabbing. Where have those faithful love stories been? Where have those electrifying legends gone? What were left after all those centuries, he concluded, were only boring spirits and shrewd souls. Vicious ones too, of course.

The date was near. The fleet was scheduled to embark on the first day of October. The whole town of Yuan, relying fully on the shipping industry, began to regain some of its vitality. People from foreign lands gathered around the town, saturating all the motels and accommodations. The prices of local handicrafts surged, yet the intricacy and craftsmanship of the products were still barely satisfactory. It was the best season for the town, but the worst time for Zhu. With a thousand romantic hearts inside him, he still possessed the remaining rationality to remind him that he had to obey his family’s will and go on the voyage. “Who would look after you during the voyage if you don’t come?” his father claimed. “By the way, it will be fun. You don’t want to spend another of your winters in the shabby house of that weirdo Li, right?” Even if he did, there would be no way to convince his headstrong father.

So he locked himself up in his room, burying his head in the pages and counting the remaining days. He didn’t want a moment away from his beloved books, not to mention a horrendous farewell. *What a stinking century*, he thought. *The times are bad*. Businesses, wealth, and blind lust for power — no times could be more unmemorable than the one he was in. Year after year he longed to be a warrior, yearned for becoming a hero, and dreamt of a knight. *A stinking century, without legends or heroes*. He had made his mind up on the century and, as also a spark of light came across his mind, also for himself.

The sky still hadn’t turned bright in the east. A dull white gleam was gradually spreading across the heaven. But the town had been awake for a long time, as had the boy Zhu. It was a big morning for him, and for the whole town. The harbor was in a hullabaloo. A seething mass of folks wandered about the dock. People shouted as the drums and cymbals crashed incessantly. Everyone could hear the banging of gongs and the blare of trumpets from the shore. All the residents from the town, except for old urchin Li, flooded to the harbor — either they had been lucky enough to secure a lucrative job onboard, or they had laborious work in the harbor. The ships were within striking distance. For their sheer scale and grandeur, everyone would be mesmerized. Nine erect masts shot into the clouds; twelve white sails billowed with the breeze they caught. An anchor weighing tonnes shone in dazzling bronze, requiring more than two hundred strong men to set sail. As for the ships, they waited, thousands of folks to hold and four floors to fill, the vastness of the South Sea to explore and the strength of the Kingdom to demonstrate. Dragon as the prow, lion as the stern, with the hull covered in auspicious patterns, gleaming and shimmering. And along came the emperor in stunningly golden finery, with four people lifting the palanquin and eight brave men by his side.

“Where is he?” Zhu’s father asked.

“Maybe... he went back home to grab some more books. You know, books from the weirdo. He’s fallen for them.”

His mother was quite confident. “Just wait for a few more minutes. He should be here.”

He was there already, standing at the bow of one of the ships and looking over the vast expanse of the harbor. A sudden burst of pride had swept through his body, like an electric current flowing through him, when he thought of his gorgeous plan. He had been so tired of reading legends from centuries before, always accompanying the heroes, but never becoming one — *Now I’m the hero! I’m about to write the*

legends! I will be the first in the century to add a touch of romance to this lifeless era!

As the emperor went aboard, Zhu suddenly emerged from the crowd. He raised his hand over heart, and shouted out with all his might: “The former emperor, Zhu Yunwen, escaped from the grand fire in the capital! And he, is the rightful ruler!”

The emperor stood in shock, eyes glaring at him.

The masses were engulfed in an uproar. Chaos spread.

Troops of men surged towards the boy whose hands gripped tightly the pages from old urchin Li and whose face held a hearty smile, bringing him furiously to the ground.

Reconstructed

Dulwich College Beijing, Zhu, Kaleo – 14

Voyage 1: 序

Zheng He stirred swiftly, dredged from the void of a dreamless sleep and shunted into reality, and stridently walked to the window, unable to remove the thought of the assigned edict he had received the previous day from his thought. The construction of over 200 transport ships? And for what purpose? However, before he could ponder over the events that occurred over the previous night and their purpose, he was then alerted by a quick knock on his door. Opening the door, Zheng He found a courier (he surmised by the stranger's clothing and the scroll clutched in his hand), promptly taking the scroll and closing the door on the courier with a quick intonation of "Thank you very much". As he scanned the text, he ruled out the possibility of war, and was immediately further perplexed. Could it be for trade? And if so, why not use existing routes like the Silk Road? Then, he decided to push aside skeptics after blindly inferring for a week and decided to pay the Emperor a visit.

Just then, another courier scurried in front of him, declaring "The Emperor requires your presence".

Months later, the later events passed in a blur; the sendoff-esque banquet on that fateful night having no alleviative effect on the orders that rung in Zheng He's ears hours earlier. No matter what doubts he had, the order was given, the ships constructed. The voyage began the next day, with thousands assembled in Nanjing before Zheng He. As the endless slews of vessels were unmoored and seen off, Zheng He looked ahead off the prow of the lead vessel with pride and uncertainty to such an endeavor.

The surfacing kinetosis seemed to subside slowly, as the fleet sailed out of the coast towards its destinations, bearing lavish gifts and letters set to forge the chains of trade between the motherland and the locations lying on pristine horizons.

Following days of minimal report and views of infinite sea, the crew were alerted to the long-awaited sight of land. Looking closer, Zheng He found a proto-metropolis of brick and ornate architecture past the shrouds of greenery on the coast, eagerly anticipating the new sights and knowledge yet to entail this discovery. Making land on a worn dock of partly-decayed wood, warped with the weight of crews upon crews of explorers and traders before now, the crew debarked the lead vessel, bringing forth a scroll on the Emperor's behalf and proceeded to head to the city that lay beyond the verdant curtain in front of their eyes. After making it through the brief path (which cut through the forest), Zheng he strode up to the decorated palace, where a guard-lined hallway waited, their goal just at the end of the hallway, on the intricate (and quite noticeable) throne. Exchanging words, seals, and scrolls with the King, Zheng He assured the King on the arrival of Chinese gifts to enlighten him on their native culture, which he jovially accepted.

Days later, the fleet, having given and received their share of items, bade farewell to the King, thanking him for his hospitality, and continued the voyage. This process repeated, fascinating and exhausting Zheng He with the sheer number of locations traveled to. Java, Malacca, Aru, Semadera, Lambri, Quilon, and Calicut passed in a wondrous blur, imprinting the sights and experiences in Zheng He's mind. However, on one occasion, they were forced to leave the mountainous kingdom of Ceylon following the hostility by its rulers. That instance aside, the ships set a course to return after reaching the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula, stocked with an abundance of never-before seen items from the fruits of the crew's dealings and labor.

One day, the homebound fleet encountered a motley fleet decorated with flags that seemed to send only one message into the hearts of whoever approached: Pirates. Grabbing an eyepiece, Zheng He scanned the lines of ships for the lead vessel, and instantly recognized the face of Chen Zuyi, ruler of the city of Palembang and pirate leader, infamous for dominating the Malaccan Strait. After an exchange of message-bearing arrows in a final attempt to negotiate the pirates' pacification, Zheng He unfolded the final note, deeming negotiation to be futile and preparing to attack.

Ordering his men to unleash a volley of flame-tipped arrows, Zheng He set his lead ship on a direct course towards the enemy. The resulting crash shook the ship to its foundations, but the frame held firm. Zheng he, brandishing a sword, valiantly led his troops onto the deck as his archers continued to pick off the minor vessels. Despite suffering injuries and some casualties, Zheng He's forces sunk 10 enemy ships and captured 7, along with Chen Ziyi for execution, restoring peace to the Strait.

Following further negotiations with the men at Palembang, Zheng He plotted the homebound course once again, returning to Nanjing as a hero with envoys, goods, and the great sense that he had led something greater than himself. “Let the forces of adversity come”, he thought. “After such an endeavor, I have branded my name into history as a future legend!”

And eight months later, when the imperial edict decreeing a second voyage was issued, Zheng He gladly accepted, knowing that there was still much more to come.

Voyage 2: 破

Ma Wen Ming slowly stood up from the grave of his brother, placing down a well-wishing note at the headstone that read *Zheng He*. It was a full year since his brother’s death, causing him to reflect on his brother’s astounding discoveries on his six voyages, like the legendary *qilin* that his ships plucked from thousands of units across the world. But before he could be fully immersed in the pain of contemplating the legacy of a dead man, he was alerted by a yellow-robed stranger who promptly greeted him and told him “Head to the palace. The Emperor desires to tell you something.”

Dashing up the gold-polished steps of the palace’s entrance, Ma Wen Ming arrived and knelt at the Emperor seated on the throne. “Do you remember your brother’s six voyages?”, the Emperor asked. “How could I forget?”, was the confused response. Proceeding to exposit, albeit simply, the Emperor leant forward, training his eyes on Ma Wen Ming, and voiced his intention. “I want you to captain the treasure fleet that was formerly led by your brother for a seventh and final voyage.”

Ma Wen Ming remained in awe of everything that happened for the coming weeks, as everything that revolved around him shifted into overdrive: the appointment of a crew, additional ships being recommissioned, the preparation of envoys...

As the ships punted off from the docks of Longwan, Ma Wen Ming glanced towards the horizon, excited and unsure of continuing his brother’s legacy.

As the days went by, the fleet sailed with their first destination: Surabaya. Exchanging seals and words, the fleet continued on through the archipelago of Indonesia, moving and negotiating at a pace that seemed that all was by design. Until the fleet moved on, that is.

Sailing to Ayutthaya to resume the voyage and their endeavor, Ma Wen Ming led the crew to this land, ironic given his lack of familiarity to such a land. Perhaps it was that his brother did not document it in time? No matter, he thought, for he could have the privilege of life to see it himself.

For the weeks that ensued, Ma Wen Ming watched the passing sights of each destination with an unmistakable look of part determination, which only betrayed a sliver of childlike wonder on the navigator’s face, as the fleet ventured ever further than Zheng He had documented, sailing beyond well-known ports like Champa to shores stranger than anything before seen, likely places that his brother would have documented before his untimely death. The towering Great Mosque of Mecca, a so-called “holy city”, the fortresses and necropolises that the Ajuran constructed at the architecturally wondrous Mogadishu, the never-before-seen port city of Ormus, and other sights that were lost in documentation were now imprinted into Ma Wen Ming’s vision for as long as he could remember, as the days went by until the time to return to his homeland.

As the sun began to set towards the horizon, Ma Wen Ming looked up at the dimming sky above, and relished the feeling that he would be home soon.

The sepulchral skies they encountered on the fleet’s homebound course led into a storm, with torrents of rain pouring down onto the crew in a matter of minutes. Scrambling to the front, Ma Wen Ming immediately pulled out his compass and knowing that it was their only action, shouted “Crew, set a course for la-” He was cut short by a bolt of indescribable pain that left a lasting tingling sensation through his body. Regaining consciousness minutes later, he checked his compass and persisted with staying on a homebound course.

However, despite heading for a northward coast, there was no land in sight, and a crewman’s call of “Maelstrom!” made Ma Wen Ming deduce that something was terribly wrong. Issuing an order to evacuate the lead ship and for the others to pull back, he was left at the helm of the ship to somehow survive the whirlpool.

The winds beat harsher than ever, shaking the very planks of his vessel and splintering the cabin. Ma Wen Ming, oblivious to the collapsing world about him, pressed on, desperately steering the ship away from their fate. No choice but to fight for his life and press on...

Until the very mast was struck by another thunderbolt, embers from the ignited wood falling around the ship's lone navigator before being swiftly extinguished, to which Ma Wen Ming noticed as almost symbolic, like every moment in time being swept away by the forward movement of life, or tears in rain: all inevitably overwhelmed by an unstoppable force. As this contemplation prompted Ma Wen Ming to stop and accept the inevitable, he shook off the thought. No! He could not go so gently when he was still alive! He had to press on!

However, wheeling around after another thunderclap, Ma Wen Ming only saw the great mast toppling towards him, finally felled by one gust of wind or one bolt of lightning too many, and then came the sharp blow of the mast against his head.

There was a single split-second of incomprehensible pain, and then everything was gone.

Leaving, resisting, fading and finally falling into a dark and dreamless slumber, as the vessel fell apart into splinters, drawn into the whirlpool with one doomed soul aboard, bound to the fate of the ship as the wreck disappeared to places unknown...

Voyage 3: 急

Ma Wen Ming blearily opened his eyes, mustering the strength to roll over and resist the throbbing pain that incapacitated him. Standing up, he was shocked by the sight of a sky and sea of a more azure hue than any sea that he saw on his voyage, and astonishingly foreign trees that seemed like the ones he had seen in coastal areas... Where could he be? And then his eyes fell on a red-hued stranger who looked unlike anything he had seen prior, much like everything in this strange new land. But upon moving his sand-caked arm, the stranger fled, leaving him to notice the splintered wood strewn around him, as the memory of that horrifying maelstrom resurfaced.

As to assess the situation, he set off inland, tracing the footprints of that stranger. Pushing overhanging ferns aside, he found an odd collection of tents, heading to the largest one to find answers. Finding more of the red-hued strangers, he greeted them, albeit futilely, as they did not seem to comprehend him. Drawing a boat on a plank he found, the strangers glanced at it, discussing in what seemed to be their language. The exchange of drawings continued, until Ma Wen Ming pulled out a makeshift compass, cobbled together in the minutes before following the stranger, and deduced that he could not return to China from this coastline. Spending several days with the natives to fashion equipment, he then set off from the beach to the "other coastline" to return home, unaware of a series of three ships behind him, miniscule along the horizon, but visibly intending to make land...

And so he trekked for days on end, with the azure coast receding into boundless plains, roamed by many animals and more natives who, fortunately, noticed Ma Wen Ming with curiosity, but not with a trace of hostility. Days passed, and eventually Ma Wen Ming slowly learned about this new world around him: how to hunt, make a settlement, and more. Acclimating to this new world would undoubtedly make this place harder to bid farewell to, Ma Wen Ming thought.

Going further into this uncharted land, Ma Wen Ming encountered strange new sights, like dark columns that destroyed everything in their path at an unparalleled speed, curious new creatures that ranged from elusive to downright hostile in disposition, and a series of drastic shifts in climate, from cliff-lined mountains that turned Ma Wen Ming's progress into a complete halt at times with the unclimbable terrain and frigid weather, an expansive desert that could almost make him drop dead from the heat and dryness, which promptly led to another fascinating mountain range filled with pitfall-esque vales and gargantuan streaks of ice cutting through the landscape, and a verdant forest with some colossi among trees that seemed to block out the very sky. And for everything the climate and topography threw at him, Ma Wen Ming pushed on, motivated by the thought of returning home.

For the remaining hours of the journey, he trudged through the landscape past the canyon, seemingly autonomous, until he managed to smell the sea breeze from the coast, his spirits high from the anticipation of returning.

And then, pushing a clump of sepia undergrowth aside, he saw the sea, preceded by the golden sand of the coast, staring in awe of it, thinking that he was so close to finally going home, until the fact that he didn't have a ship to cross the unknown sea dawned on him.

Determined to change this, he went to work. Fashioning an axe from a conveniently shaped stone and branch, he hacked away at the trees in the vicinity, in an attempt to create a raft. Within a day, he had completed his initial design, setting sail as the sun set, only to be swept overboard. Making a mental note to fasten himself to the raft, he was about to try again, but decided to rest for the night and gather everything before his ocean-wide traverse.

Looking up at the constellations that night, he could picture an ethereal ship sailing across the starlit sky, reflecting the impending final stretch of his own journey as he slowly succumbed to the sea of dreams and distant memories, which he fervently clung to in his mind as he slept through his final night on this fascinating place.

The next morning, he bade the land farewell as a single tear managed to escape his eye over the fact that all things moved on, and set off across the waves, vowing to come back someday.

As his time at sea passed by, Ma Wen Ming drifted at sea, guided by the wind and his compass, waiting for the first sight of land.

Until one fateful day, where he spotted a distant coastline, and knew that he was close to China. Making land at the port, he instantly recognized the architecture of the pier, staggering onto the planked walkway and knowing that he had finally returned home.

Months later, Ma Wen Ming walked along the shore, his mind utterly cluttered by the constant constraints of the Imperial Court, until he passed a rickety dock, remembering the year-old promise that he made to the newly christened continent. Impulsively walking down, he unmoored a boat, punting out of the dock into the open arms of the Pacific, ready to go back to the place he once knew: Adventure.

Voyage 4:

He opened his eyes and shook off the fatigue of the previous night from his mind, but that dream... it remained, rooted in the soil of his mind. However, he later set off as life went on like every other day.

Until that alley surfaced in his eyes...

Looking down the alley that he went by on every other day, his eyes were immediately filled with an invasion of light and color, with the alley radiating a golden glow that seemed to restore the run-down alley to a state only seen in centuries past. An impulse surfaced in his mind, exacerbating the doubts brought into his train of thought by the dream, prompting him to walk down the alley, to which his conscious numbly complied.

Going down the alley, with nothing but the steady stream of light to guide him, he turned to see of a dilapidated hangar near the coastline. Decimating the lock with a wrench, he peered inside, closing the door after him, only to find a torch. He moved to its spot on the wall with a match in hand, intending to light it.

Just then, the interior lit up, revealing an ornately decorated ship, built from fine, gold-painted wood and revealing spectral suits of armor on it. A grating voice issued from seemingly empty space. "AS A TRUE ANCESTOR OF THE GREAT VOYAGER, DO YOU ACCEPT THE HONOR OF CARRYING FORTH THE LEGACY OF YOUR FAMILY?"

The words dawned on him. Every childhood story told to him, his adeptness in cartography and sailing, it all fit with the message, and there was only one answer.

He stepped forwards, realizing the unraveling of this story and the fateful circumstances that led to this, and spoke.

"I, Ulysses Ma, will continue what my ancestor started."

Then everything began.

A Dragonfly Sets Sail

French International School, Lui, Jessica – 15

Beneath the rosy clouds across a dull morning sky, in a stirring town nestled in the crook of a bay, where the ocean paced back and forth on smooth beaches, where the spring breeze was beginning to gain the rough, sandy edge of summer — somewhere in the seedier part of town, between the wooden buildings, under the corners of curling ornate rooftops — there was a young girl.

She darted noiselessly through the streets, slipping through alleyways and crevices, her feet as quiet as the paws of a fox. Her green *hanfu* fluttered behind her in the wind. In her hands was a messily wrapped bundle about the size of a vase, which she held so tightly to her chest that passersby might have believed there to be vast sums of money in it.

But there were no passersby to make this remark, because it was very early, and the girl had been careful to wake up long before the restaurants and shops and brothels began their day of business. She continued nimbly on her way, passing dark windows and closed doors. There was no other noise on the street save the light rustling of her clothes and the distant crashing of the sea.

The bundle, although it did not contain money, was indeed of extremely high value. It contained *wuxiang*, a highly-sought substance imported straight from the Silk Road and passed from the wagons of tired merchants to the cargo of the Emperor. A mere pinch of the revered drug was said to be capable of stabilizing the *qi* and restoring energy to even the most hopeless of medical cases. Its value was equal to that of gold.

Which was precisely why she had stolen it. *It really wasn't that much*, she assured herself as she neared the temple where she had been ordered to deliver the bundle to. *The merchants would never notice*. She had crept into their wagon as soon as it arrived in town and had miraculously managed to sneak away with a handful of the powder. How she had done it, she herself didn't know; but the agility that she was so known for in these areas had not failed her, and she had scampered off scot-free.

The girl obtained and resold substances like these in the secrecy of back alleys and basements, passing packages and sealed parcels from one hand to the next. She was only one of the thousands of peasants who did this for a living, but she had built herself a reputation of being fast, reliable, and — most importantly — never getting caught. The regulars called her “*xiao qing ting*”, “Little Dragonfly”.

But, she thought triumphantly, *this time will be my last trip. I've been offered loads of money for this little pouch. With all that money I'll never go hungry again. I'll always have a roof over my head at night*. She scurried down the last path to the temple, unable to hide the gleeful grin breaking across her face. *I'll never have to run like a slave again!*

In her midst of her fantasizing she had run straight into the clearing where the temple stood. It was, although beautiful, slightly dusty from disuse. Stone steps led through peeling red columns into the heart of the small structure. The fly eaves of its mahogany roof stretched outwards like long arms. A lifesize statue of a woman had been placed next to its doorless entrance. At her feet, in a separate stone plaque, the goddess' name was engraved: *Mazu*, the goddess of the sea.

A twig cracked behind her. The girl whipped around.

Before her stood a young man. He wore a deep red *hanfu*, made of the rich, silky material the aristocrats so often used. A mischievous, easy smile was spread across his face. What surprised her the most, however, were his eyes. His eyes glimmered brightly — as if he was looking ahead into the distance at something far away that nobody else could see. “A nice temple, isn't it?” he said, grinning at her. “Shame it went out of use after the treasure voyages stopped.”

She blinked. *Is he talking to me?* She shifted uneasily. None of her clients had ever spoken to her.

Oblivious to her discomfort, he continued. “My pa was a voyager. I grew up listening to his stories about the open sea, about faraway lands, exotic fruits, and defeating pirates.”

The girl was growing irritated. *I really don't care, man!* She was tempted to throw the bundle at him. *Take your stuff and give me the money, then go!*

“But then they stopped the treasure voyages,” the man grumbled, and she was startled by his whiny tone. “Why did they have to stop them?! I wanted to go too!”

He suddenly moved toward her, and she threw up her hands (and the forgotten bundle) in a feeble attempt at protection. He didn't seem to notice. Grabbing her shoulders and looking earnestly into her eyes, he said, “So that's why I'm starting my own. With my pa's money and my buddies back in town, I'm going to sail out to sea! All I need now is money to hire a doctor on the ship, and then we're good to go—”

“Let go!” she hissed. She pushed the bundle into his face. “There's your order. Now give me my money!”

The man froze. “Wait, you're the drug dealer?! *Xiao qing ting?*!” he exclaimed.

She raised an eyebrow. “Huh?!”

They stared at each other for a moment. Before she could open her mouth again, a cord was slipped onto her wrist. She gaped at it. Then at him. And back at the cord again. “You—”

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, sounding genuinely apologetic. “You'd caused a bit of trouble by stealing this,” he waved the bundle, “so the Emperor said that if I managed to catch you, he would pay me.” As the panic settled in and she writhed, trying to get away, he kept an iron grip on the cord. “I promise you won't get executed.”

“No!” she wailed. “You liar! Scoundrel! Cheat!” Oh, she *knew* she should have done a background check before taking up the offer. She had been blinded by her greed, and look what it had cost her. *I don't want to go to jail! No! No!*

He began to drag her up the path back to town. “I'm none of those things! I'm an awesome person!” came the miffed response, which only served to infuriate her further. She swung a kick at him, but he managed to dodge. “Hey!”

“Don't 'hey' me! You're the one who tricked me into this mess!”

“Well, Little Cricket, if only you hadn't been naughty and—”

“It's Dragonfly, you scrawny twat!”

As they struggled back into the outskirts of town, they received a few stares from the earlier townsfolk. She straightened grudgingly. *If I'm going to make my escape, it'll have to be when there are less people around*, she reminded herself. *Many of the people around here probably wouldn't hesitate to help capture me if they could; there is a bounty on my head, after all.*

“My name's Xiwang, by the way,” said the man cheerfully.

“I really don't care,” she muttered. What was with this guy? If he really was affiliated with the Emperor, why was he so... dense?

“My friends are waiting on the ship already,” he continued, and she wondered if he had heard her at all. “I'm just going to deliver you to the local justice dudes—”

“—*dudes?*—”

“—then I'll take the money, pluck the nearest doctor and away we'll sail,” he announced proudly.

The girl noticed they were now walking into a quieter area. *Great*, she mused. *All I have to do now is keep him talking, and then bam! The blockhead will never know what hit him.* “What's so good about those voyages?”

He spun round, eyes shining. “Oh, have I been *waiting* for that question,” he hummed. “Not only were they a sign of our country’s wealth and pride, but they were also a method of colonisation...”

As he rambled on, they entered the quietest part of town. Here, the afternoon sun only glowed faintly through a layer of heavy-set clouds, and the buildings formed a crooked line along the paved path. Only his voice broke the silence here; the dark shops they passed showed no sign of life, and the crashing of the waves did not reach their ears.

They turned a corner. “...and that’s why, Little Cricket, I’m not looking for some pompous apothecary to join me on my journey — just someone who cares about—“

Her eyes narrowed. *Now!*

Swinging her leg back, she brought it between his legs from behind. Hard.

He swore loudly. “Ow!” Whipping round, ready to snap a few strained retorts, he realized too late that in his pain he had loosened his grip on the cord.

The girl was gone.

Gone indeed she was. Pumping her legs as fast as she could, she was zipping through the empty streets, trying to keep her footsteps quiet and work her hands out of the cord at the same time. “Freedom!” she crowed silently. The wind in the ribbons trailing from her hair buns and the sensation of stone slabs flying under her toes stirred the adrenaline in her veins. The cord fell away. She was free! The dragonfly was free!

Suddenly, she noticed how dejectedly empty her arms were. The bundle! That dunce of an explorer was still holding it!

She gritted her teeth, slowing to a reluctant halt. There was no point in escaping if she had let him get the better of her. She would have to turn back. If only she could—

“Oi!”

Her breath caught. Half turning, she saw him running at her.

Really fast.

“Whoa!” she yelped. The memory of the bundle slipped into the depths of her mind and panic took over. Her feet flew into action. “You’ve got your stuff already! Leave me alone!” She skidded around a corner, blood roaring. Behind her his footsteps grew closer. *Damn, he’s fast!*

They had turned onto a long street. The shopkeepers here were unfortunately awake and setting up shop. The girl whizzed past their wide-eyed gazes in a flutter of green cloth, vaulting over a crate of tea leaves and ducking through street stalls. Somersaulting lightly over an alarmed ox and its owner, she shot a glance over her shoulder. He was nowhere to be seen.

Yes, I’ve lost him! Feeling triumphant, she nicked a dumpling from a tray, ignoring the outraged cry of the chef. She popped it in her mouth. Hot, savoury soup burst across her tongue. This chase was mildly fun, she thought. Now if only she could retrieve that bundle...

An old woman appeared on the street in front of her.

Before she could even react her body collided painfully with the old woman’s. A resounding smack, and then she found herself on the hard stone ground, head spinning. The elbow that had been under her was throbbing mechanically. Something that felt like blood trickled down her leg. Her lungs felt deflated.

The old woman was lying on her side a few feet away. She wasn’t moving.

The girl scrambled to her feet. “*Po po?* Granny? Are you okay?” Kneeling, she patted the old woman's shoulder. “I'm sorry...” There was no response. “Granny?”

Xiwang slowed, panting, in front of a large crowd. He squinted. “Has that stupid little Mosquito gone through here?” he wondered out loud. He nudged a nearby stall keeper. “Hey, man, what's going on?”

The stall keeper, a grumpy looking old fart with a wispy goatee, muttered something about a girl “knocking over the old Yang widow” and something else about “medicine” before turning moodily back into his stall.

Xiwang's blood ran cold. *What's she done?*

He wrestled through, stepping on a few feet and pulling someone's hair along the way. She was a girl; if she ended up doing anything, well, *bad*, he... knew how the punishments worked around here. They were not pleasant.

She's probably crying her eyes out, he grimaces. *Either that, or she's been scared into submission. Or maybe she's—*

As he emerged into the centre of the crowd, her voice reached his ears. “Ah, you! Come over here!”

He gaped at the scene in front of him. The girl was not crying. Nor was she in submission. She was kneeling on the stone slabs over an unconscious old woman. Her *hanfu* had been torn away at the knees; the cloth had been used to prop the *po po*'s head up like a pillow.

She turned around, hair ribbons flying. “You! I told you to come over!”

Slack-jawed, he stared at her. “Uh, wait, me?!”

“Yes!” she snapped, tone authoritative. “Get me some ginseng!”

He scurried over. “Ginseng, ma'am?”

“*Yes!*” she growled. “And hurry, idiot! We need to revive her breathing as soon as possible!”

Xiwang ran faster in that moment than he had ever done in his life. They had passed a herbs shop in their chase, and it was from one of the baskets there that he grabbed a few stalks of the ginger root. “Hey, man, sorry, I'll pay later,” he explained breathlessly to the flabbergasted shopkeeper, and with that he sprinted back. Obediently, the people parted for him.

She took the ginseng from him wordlessly and with one straight, experienced motion cracked it in half. Stunned into silence, Xiwang and the crowd watched on helplessly as she tore off a thin piece with her teeth. “Hold her mouth open,” she ordered, and he hastily pulled the old woman's jaw back. The girl slipped the ginseng piece below the old woman's tongue with deft fingers, not hesitating in the slightest.

As he sat back on his heels, he looked at the young girl beside him with fresh eyes. At first he had dismissed her as simply one of the many homeless struggling to make a living off the black market. But now, she emitted an aura of intense concentration. Her message was clear: *This woman will wake up. I'll make sure of it.*

All of a sudden, the jigsaw pieces in his mind seemed to come together. This stealing, cheating, fast-footed little dragonfly had a mind of her own, a will of her own, a heart of her own. She had made a mistake and had injured someone. Now here she was, owning up, willing to do whatever it took to make the situation better. Here she was, doing her best to heal others.

He realized he could probably trust this girl.

A hacking cough rattled its way out of the old woman's throat. The crowd gave a hushed shout, and everyone leaned forward, craning to get a look. The Little Dragonfly swatted them away. “Oh, give her some space, will you? Let her

breathe.” She and Xiwang crouched over the granny’s body. “*Po po?* How are you feeling?” she said softly. “I’m sorry I crashed into you. It was my mistake.”

The old woman sat up feebly, one hand on Xiwang’s arm for support. “Oh, I’m fine, dearie,” she warbled good-naturedly. She chewed mildly on the ginseng as she stood up. Patting the girl’s hand kindly, she turned and hobbled away. “Thank you all!”

With their main source of interest gone, the people murmured and scattered back to their shops like ants going on their way. Xiwang and the Little Dragonfly stood alone in the street.

She cleared her throat nervously. “Well, I’ll be off now,” she mumbled.

She would have whipped off then if he had not caught hold of her green hair ribbons. “Oi, oi, wait, Little Mantis!”

“Dragonfly!”

“Whatever!” He spun her around and took hold of her shoulders.

She leaned away from him, mortified. *Am I still getting arrested?!*

But his eyes were shining with admiration. “That was awesome!” He shook her for emphasis and she groaned. “You didn’t tell me you knew doctor stuff!”

“I don’t *know* doctor stuff,” she retorted. “I’ve just... been running around long enough to pick up a few tricks.” Her stomach convulsed with dread as she noticed a devious grin stretching across his face. “...What?”

He beamed at her. “Join my crew!”

A short silence. Then: “...No.”

“Why?!”

“I don’t wanna! You’re annoying!”

“But you can be my doctor dude!”

“Get someone else! Use the money from that bundle to hire someone—” she hesitated. “—wait, where is it?!”

“What?”

“The bundle, you nitwit!”

“Oh, I lost it.”

“You *what?*!” she spluttered, on the verge of choking. “Do you know how much money that was worth—” He grabbed hold of her hand. “Oi!”

“We’re leaving! To the docks it is, uh—” He turned. “Wait, what’s your real name?”

She opened her mouth to object, but relented. “...Shuhua.”

His gaze was serious. “That’s a pretty name,” he said, and she felt the tips of her ears turn red.

“W—whatever!” She fell silent. Something in her had changed today. The hopeful glimmer that had been in Xiwang’s eyes was not so far off anymore. For the first time, she saw what he was seeing — the shimmering ocean, the warm, wet gusts of wind in her hair, the boat heaving beneath her feet, the thrill of the unknown.

Maybe I can leave behind this street life, she thought. Maybe there's hope for me, too.

She scuffed the ground with her shoes. His hand was warm and secure. "What if they come after me?"

He took a long look at her. "I promise you I won't let them take you away," he said finally, and despite her best efforts to ignore it, her heart warmed.

More silence. She scuffed the ground again. "Well?" she demanded, embarrassed. "Are we getting on your stupid ship or what?"

Xiwang gave her a goofy grin. "Heck, yeah!"

And when he led her by the hand, she let him. They ran towards the pier, towards the ship, towards the open sea of adventure...

Salt Water

Good Hope School, Cheung, Jocelyn Rachel – 16

“I’m saying you should’ve at least acted a bit more grateful—”

“Don’t worry, I am.”

Without a second word, he slammed the door to his cabin shut. To be fair, it was not *his* cabin, as it was shared between quite a few groups of crew members, but most of them were outside right now, and he had relatively more privacy. That being said, it wasn’t a lot. As he exhaled into his hands, he felt the odd stares of the others on his back. In all honesty, he didn’t think the situation was all that bad, it was just the circumstances that were. He had just wanted to go fishing, that was all, and go back to his little rundown shed of a home with his mother, and live good and well. However, this one grand voyage that the Yongle Emperor himself had commissioned had apparently required another crew member, and he had been tricked by that utter bastard Zhouli into helping out. With his luck, he probably wouldn’t be home for half a decade. He should’ve known something was off way earlier on, but by the time he had realized, Zhouli was waving an official order for his recruitment aboard the treasure ship in his face, giddy delight in his too-blue eyes.

What a fool.

He sighed, glancing up just to meet bright sunlight filtering through the crack in the door. Time passed quicker whenever you were dreading it. He blinked harshly as he straightened himself, smoothing out his clothes and offering a death glare to the people behind him. Before he could sweep out of the cabin to his post however, a hand caught on his shoulder, forcing him to stop. He turned to see a young man looking back at him, a faint grin on his face. He’s probably younger than me, he thought with an internal groan, letting his dark eyes fall shut for a moment before meeting the stranger’s amber gaze, which was – could you believe – twinkling with amusement. How dare he? He had just opened his mouth to speak when said stranger started first, interrupting his train of thought.

“Lize, right? I’ve heard things about you.”

He bristled, feeling a spark of defiance before he shut it down. He liked being known, but how this man worded it made the attention sound negative. He painted his face a picture of calmness – or rather, emotionlessness – before inclining his head as nonchalantly as possible, though the motion still seemed rather stiff.

“That’s me. I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

The stranger’s smile did not vanish, but instead widened.

“I’m Xuqiyue. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

How it was even a pleasure at all, Lize could not imagine. Even in his hometown, Lize was generally regarded as the stoic one: a nicer way of saying he was too blunt, too straightforward, but that was the way he was. He didn’t mind and his mother also didn’t mind too much, his books didn’t either, so who cares? He simply just nodded again at Xuqiyue, wondering what he was expected to say. The pleasure is all mine? That would be a lie. He didn’t enjoy lying. As the sunlight blossomed into speckles across the wooden floorboards underfoot, he wondered offhandedly how late he was. Maybe he could make it up later to whoever would be overseeing his job. He had many more days and months to do so, after all – with all the time in the world, it seemed to him. It took a few more moments before he had the compulsion to pull his mind back into his current situation with this... rather curious man, who was now squinting at him rather obviously: observing him, of all things.

“Can I help you?” Lize asked, crossing his arms at Xuqiyue, who was just a few centimetres shorter than him, but not enough that he could leer over him.

“Not today,” Xuqiyue shook his head. “Just wanted to say hi. Let’s be friends, yeah?”

Lize did not reply, instead seeming to freeze at the proposition. Friends... The closest thing he had to a friend on this stupid ship was Zhouli, and they were on a hiatus right now. Frankly, Lize wouldn’t mind having friends too much, especially since he was keenly aware that this journey was going to be incredibly long, excruciatingly long, if he didn’t have any distractions. So he bit his lip, nodded at Xuqiyue, and left.

“Ehh, so it’s like that?” Xuqiyue mused, glancing ahead past the ship’s mast instead of at Lize next to him. Standing by each other they created almost a perfect contrast: Lize stood straight out of habit, his dark eyes vigilant as he took in their surroundings, the breaking waves casting a reflection in his pupils. One of his hands held onto the railing while the other pushed his hair out of his eyes, intent on navigating. Xuqiyue on the other hand lounged carelessly by Lize, playing with his own fingers and sniffing at the salty tang of ocean air. Like a dog, Lize thought in the back of his head, though the accusation was fond, almost. He resisted the urge to ruffle the man’s hair: he was only three years younger than him, for God’s sake, even though sometimes he acted like a child. They were just so different. But being friends with Xuqiyue had led Lize to many other people: Zhongtian, Guanjiarong, Baiyun and more, all of whom had their own quirks, but found it easy to bond over talk of how the weather would be like and how the ship would fare, what pirates they’d have to fight off today, the best techniques to catch fish, and such seemingly simple-minded topics related

to their voyage. Xuqiyue was much more sociable than Lize was, but with his presence, Lize found it possible to engage. People even said “you’re the guy who Xuqiyue always sticks to, aren’t you?” to him. It had admittedly been easy becoming closer to the man, after all.

“Yes,” Lize replied with a resigned toss of his head as he rolled out the map they had been given. Or rather, the blank scroll. They were entering uncharted waters now. “Now you know why I was so...prickly back then, for lack of a better word.” They were discussing how exactly Lize had ended up on board the treasure ship. It had been a full four months since the voyage had begun, and Lize still wasn’t sure he was enjoying the whole ordeal, notwithstanding the decent acquaintances – or friends – that he had made. The daily work was harsh, and he couldn’t help but think about how his mother was doing. He hadn’t even gotten to properly say goodbye, not with the intention of leaving for years. To look on the bright side, he wasn’t getting seasick every other day, which was an improvement if he said so himself. In hindsight, he was infinitely glad that Xuqiyue hadn’t approached him earlier, when his pale skin had appeared constantly sallow and green from the ship’s inconsistent swaying.

“Don’t get me wrong, I forgave that incompetent Zhouli a long time ago,” Lize exhaled, running his fingers up the bridge of his sharp nose. “But I can’t help it, you know. Can’t help but be frustrated.”

When Xuqiyue didn’t respond, he looked up to find the younger man smiling at him with a tilted head, completely disregarding their task at hand. Lize rolled his eyes before he continued, painstakingly etching down the shape of a nearby island. When he finished, Xuqiyue caught his hand before he could start on the shoreline of a peninsula that was approaching on the horizon.

“What is it?” Lize’s voice was as cool as always, but his undertone was more exasperated than aggravated.

“Tell me about your mother, Lize.”

“Now why would I ever?”

“I’m curious!”

“...Right.”

“Please? I’ll give you some of my dinner, alright?”

“Fine,” Lize relented, moving his attention back onto the teal and the blue of the ocean roaring around them. “I’ll tell you about her when our shift ends here, alright? This requires my focus, and yours, if you want to hear about my mother.” Lize cracked the tiniest bit, the side of his mouth quirking up when Xuqiyue let out a loud and accusing yowl, complaining about his unfairness and sportsmanship. Yeah, right... What an idiot. Lize was just being smart, which Xuqiyue seemed incapable of doing at times. Lize laughed mentally at the thought, subconsciously reaching over to fix Xuqiyue’s sleeve. Oh well. He didn’t really mind sharing about his mother. She wasn’t dead or anything, nor gone, and she was a wonderful woman. She was quick-witted, grounded, big on manners and strict, but she loved nothing more than her own children and her late husband. She always wanted the best for them, he thought, suddenly feeling a wave of guilt before he squashed it down. Haa... he missed her. Much more than he’d like to admit to anyone, even himself. He was a grown man now.

“Now, Lize, your mother wouldn’t want you to sulk, would she?”

“S-sulk? When have I ever?” Lize retorted, glaring at Xuqiyue. Even though the man had never shied away from Lize’s stink eyes, he had the horrifying feeling that they were doing the opposite of their intended effect.

“All the time! Whenever I leave you for a while, you have such a lonely—” Xuqiyue broke off into an undignified squawk as Lize swatted at him, impatient. “Seriously,” he muttered under his breath as he stepped back, turning to begin to work on cleaning the starboard, only for Xuqiyue to accidentally knock over a set of brooms in his hurry to get to Lize. “I’m serious this time,” Xuqiyue coaxed soothingly as he was determined to break into Lize’s personal space, headfast. “Get on with it,” Lize responded, cocking his head as if daring Xuqiyue to speak.

“You look like you don’t want to be here sometimes,” Xuqiyue started, his voice steady without any hint of a taunt. For once, he seemed to be a little nervous: he wrung his hands together, though his eyes were still. “You always tell us it’s nothing at all, but you really want to go home, don’t you?” he paused for a moment, trying to find the words to put together of what he wanted to say. “But you know, your mom, she seems much more adaptable than you are,” he joked, ducking when Lize swung at him. “Just kidding, Lize. I just meant... I think your mother would want you to enjoy this.” Xuqiyue spread his arm, as if to indicate at everything around them: the sea foam swallowing up the hull of their ship, the masses of crew members in throngs, the strong mast flipping in the wind, and more than anything, the open sea. “It’s really not an opportunity you get every day, getting to go on such an important voyage for the emperor himself,” he laughed, a high, clear sound, his hands coming to clutch at the jade pendant around his chest which Lize knew belonged to the man’s late grandmother.

Lize couldn’t help but blink, surprised that Xuqiyue had become so incredibly perceptive...but maybe he always had been. Maybe that’s why he even approached Lize in the first place, even though it entailed the most awkward greeting in history. And now that Lize thought about it...he was right, too: upon hearing Xuqiyue’s words, his mother’s face drifted out of the haze of his thoughts and jabbed a stick at him. “Get yourself together, young man,” she chastised him in the recesses of his head, and he stifled a self-deprecating laugh in favor of looking up at the

cloudless evening sky. How pointless it had been for him to give away all of the precious moments and joy just to worry about something he couldn't control at all. Looking at Xuqiyue now, he wondered if that was why he seemed so carefree: that he knew how to push away things that were weighing him down and to live entirely in the moment. Lize regarded himself: they were such different people, so different that he forgot he could learn so much from the other.

"Don't say anything," Xuqiyue broke out, shaking his head. "Your blunt approach will definitely ruin the atmosphere." Lize opened his mouth to snap back an indignant remark, but right at that moment Xuqiyue's sharp eyes caught on the spire of a distant building. Lize whipped around as soon as Xuqiyue pointed, his earnestness almost – almost infectious. "No way...a coastal town? We're approaching civilization?!" Before Lize could protest, Xuqiyue was pulling him along to the front of the ship, tripping and stumbling over ropes and ledges. As they watched the land growing closer, Xuqiyue whispered in bated breath.

"Imagine...maybe that's our promised land where we'll find our own treasure."

Lize only smiled, nodding. Perhaps he had found *his* treasure of knowledge already.

The Missing Emperor

Good Hope School, Fu, Karina – 15

‘Are these all?’

The old man shook his head and pointed the burnt end of the stick to the side, where a stack of documents were waiting to be burnt.

‘Augh! It isn’t enough that the whole ridiculous journey emptied the country’s vaults, it’s causing me burdens now!’

‘The boy mumbled while the other quietly threw a few more books into the flame.’

‘Hey, you! Were you on that fleet as well?’ The boy asked. The man did not answer, but the silence spoke for itself.

Nowadays, those voyages are no longer a national pride, but instead a sheer waste of energy that exploited the people.

‘Aha! So you were! Then tell me, what could those barbaric lands possibly have that bewitched the former Emperor to ruin his own country?’ The boy sneered, but again, there was no answer. The silent air was filled by the soft, drowsing crackling of the fire, which sometimes flared up when new books were tossed into it. It was only when the boy finally started to doze off, did the old man speak for the first time to him.

‘None of us had thought it would last this long. No, not at the beginning....Our goal was simple – to find *the* missing Emperor and bring him back.....’

‘Your majesty, I express my deepest gratitude for your hospitality during the past two months. As much as we would hate to leave your wonderful country, I am afraid the time of our departure is drawing near.’ Zheng He said in his most sincere tone, he sounded almost apologetic; a tone the translator by his side failed to copy, but the king seemed too worried to care.

‘Sir Zheng...’ before the king could finish his sentence, he was interrupted by one of Zheng He’s men, who rushed into the chamber with two of the king’s own guards at his heels. The King frowned at the intruders.

‘My deepest apologies, your majesty. But I have brought urgent news for Sir Zheng.’ The man said, still panting as he kneeled on one knee.

The king waited for a translation before looking towards Zheng He for a reasonable excuse of his man breaking into the palace.

‘Your majesty, this is my most trusted subordinate —Wong Jing–hong. He does not mean to offend you, but important news must have come to us.’

Despite his annoyance, the king still smoothened his expression and waved an approving hand at them.

Then Wong Jing–hong immediately ran to Zheng He, who has already stood up at this point, and whispered in his ear. By the time the messenger had finished, Zheng He’s expression was dead serious. He stood up and bowed to the King again, ‘Your majesty, I do not mean to be rude but we must set off immediately.’

‘May I ask why?’

‘On our way here, we sent a team to persuade the pirate Chen Zu–yi to surrender. That team had just returned and brought back the news that he accepted our offer.’ Zheng He paused for a moment before continuing, ‘They said that he knows where our missing Emperor is.’

The Sumatran King sighed. ‘I have no intention to rain on your parade, but that news is most likely to be false. He is a cunning and ruthless pirate who has attacked and tricked our neighboring countries many times before. We have tried to pay our tribute to your Emperor before,’ Here he gave a nod to Zheng He as a gesture of respect, ‘but our ships were all robbed by him. This is the worry I was about to tell you before your messenger arrived.’

‘I am aware of your concerns. But your majesty needn’t worry, as we will capture him and bring him back to our capital for trial and execution.’ Zheng He answered.

‘I will await for your good news then.’ Despite saying so, the worry and doubt was still apparent in the king’s eyes.

Zheng He understood that, because Chen Zuyi had been rampant for years without being defeated. Somethings need to be proven by actions, not words.

‘How do you know so many details?’ The boy interrupted.

‘I was the Captain’s right–hand man.’

‘Oh! I remember your name now; it is Wong–something–Hong, right?’

The man ignored him (much to the boy’s dismay), but instead continued, ‘It didn’t take us long to arrive at Jiougang, where he was waiting for us. The moment our fleet approached him, he lashed out at us.....’

'Attack!' Chen Zuyi yelled at the top of his lungs as the Ming dynasty's fleet approached his. His sonorous voice travelled far and fast on the sea, and was soon echoed by his troops who seemed to appear out of nowhere. The nineteen larger pirate ships encircled the Ming fleet and are gradually closed in, blocking all their escapes to the open seas. The smaller battleships sailed straight for the outermost ring of ships in the Ming fleet, each loaded with pirates. 'Sir! At this rate, they will force us into the shallow waters! Permission to...' Wong Jing-hong started but was broken off.

'Not yet.' Despite being just as anxious and worried as everyone else, Zheng He' looked as calm as he could ever be. This is their first real fight, and the responsibility of defending the Ming dynasty' honor lied heavily on their shoulders. It was a fight they can't afford to lose.

Zheng He's stern look seemed to have a calming effect on everyone else, the sailors exchanged glances and quickly scattered back to their places.

Most of the pirate battleships had already reached the outermost Ming ships. The pirates had their eyes on the ships that seemed to have a deeper draft, as they are more likely to carry more resources like food or treasures. No loss for the pirates either way. On each battleship, several pirates threw their grappling hooks to the side of the Ming ships and pulled them close, while the others leaped onto the other's deck.

To their surprise, the deck was empty.

The pirates howled in laughter, reckoning that the cowardly Ming soldiers were hiding from them. As soon as they found the locked door leading down to the cabin, they started slashing and banging at it, already looking forward to their first blood.

At the sight of this, Zheng He finally nodded to the soldier at his side, who immediately lifted a horn to his mouth and blew it with all his might.

The blare of the horn changed the battle instantly.

The deck of the smaller Ming ships suddenly split from the middle and opened up, throwing the unguarded pirates down to the bottom of the ship, where sharp blades and nails awaited. They hardly made any sound before they died.

'Bang!' The first cannons were fired from the Ming ships as iron balls flew across the air towards the pirate ships, destroying everything in their way, Chen Zuyi's eyes widened. The pirate, in his long years of raging on the ocean being unchecked on, seemed to have forgotten that there was always someone better than him out there, and that his ships were no longer the strongest nor had the farthest attack range.

As the ships from both sides sailed closer to one another, the battle intensified. The sea was filled with the sounds of cannons firing; the whipping of the grappling hooks flew across the air; the small thuds of arrows rained onto the decks; the cries of men were heard as they charged onto their enemies' ships.

Zheng He leaped onto Chen Zuyi's ship and challenged the pirate himself. Their swords clashed together and for a while, they were neck-to-neck. Both men seemed equally strong in technique and strength. But as time passed, Chen Zuyi's attacks slowed down and could only just defend himself as his strength failed to keep up with his technique. Obviously the man had grown too proud of himself and left out his trainings, so it didn't take long before Zheng He knocked the pirate to his knees and had a sword on his neck.

'Where is he?'

'wh-who?'

'*The missing emperor! Where is he?*'

'I lied! I lied! It was a trick!'

The sword dug into his neck, a line of blood trickled down from the shallow wound.

'I don't know! I really don't know! Please don't kill me!'

Zheng He would have done more if Wong Jing-hong had not ran to his side and held him back.

'Captain! Didn't you say we need to bring him back to our Emperor? We need him *alive!*'

Much to the pirate's relief, Zheng He backed down. He wiped the blade on the pirate's clothes and put it back to its sheath.

'Thankfully he speaks Chinese, otherwise I suspect you will drag a translator off the boat.' Wong Jing-hong joked as he tied up the pirate in ropes. The joke may be a bad one, but it appeared to calm Zheng He down by a little.

'Watch over him.' Zheng He said as he charged into battle.

With the leader captured, it wouldn't take long to clear out the remaining pirates.

'Ever since that battle, the Captain became close friends with —'

'That's all? I thought the man who troubled our dynasty for years would be better than that!' The boy complained.

'Power and wealth can corrupt a person.'

The boy didn't seem satisfied but didn't disagree either. 'What about that time in Java? I heard almost two hundred of you died there. And the Emperor didn't even—'

The pained expression on the older man's face stopped him, he realized he shouldn't rub his nose in others sore point.

'I'm—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...' He mumbled an apology. 'So what happened to the missing Emperor then? Did you find him?' Although he knew the answer as the missing Emperor never returned, he was too desperate to change the subject.

But to his great surprise, the man nodded slowly.

'It was on our third voyage. He was hiding in Kollam in India. No one knows how he got there.....'

As soon as Zheng He marched off the ship with his troops behind him, they were greeted by the warm, welcoming cheers of the locals. But something felt odd to him. He dismissed that feeling and kept a straight face as he walked towards the ambassador sent by the King of Kollam at the end of the dock.

'Greetings, Sir Zheng. It is an honor to meet you. His majesty is waiting for your arrival in the palace.' The man said in fluent Chinese, which surprised Zheng He as Kollam is incredibly far from China. But there was no time to wonder where he had learnt it as he ordered most of his troops to collect resources to refill the fleet, leaving only a handful of the best soldiers and translator by his side. Just in case.

As they walked into the stone-built city, the ambassador began introducing the local history and specialties. There was no denying that he was a good tour guide and a diplomat, showing the glorious side of their country while inconspicuously praising China, but Zheng He wasn't listening to him. Instead, he was focused on the familiar chanting that became louder as they walked on. This was what struck him as odd at the dock: the enthusiastic cheer from the locals mixed with the calm chanting of monks.

'May I ask what are the monks doing?' Zheng He finally asked as they were walking by a line of those who were chanting in unison. Although Zheng He had the same religion as them, Buddhism, he could not understand the language.

'A wealthy family in this neighborhood had recently lost a son, and they were hiring to chant a spell called *Amitabha Pure Land Rebirth Mantra* in Buddhism. It is said to help the dead clear their karma and move on to where they belong. They need to walk around this neighborhood for forty-nine times to complete the ritual.'

Zheng He nodded in acknowledgement, when suddenly; he spotted a familiar face in the line, a face that belonged to Emperor Jianwen.

'Excuse me.' Zheng He hastily said before running towards the monks, leaving the ambassador and his own troops behind. The suspicious monk seemed to realize Zheng He was on to him, as he ran out of the line and dashed into a small alley.

'Hey, you! Stop right there!' Zheng He yelled as he chased the monk down the twisty alleys and streets, but the monk didn't even look back once, he just kept running.

The monk was obviously not up to such a strong exercise, so there were many times when he was almost within arm's reach of Zheng He, but he was all too familiar with the city that he could easily gain distance between them again with a simple turn. There were times when Zheng He feared he would lose sight of the monk in this maze-like city.

Thankfully, the monk seemed to have tripped on an uneven stone step and fell on the ground. This gave Zheng He enough time to catch up with him to pin him to the ground.

At this point, Wong Jing-hong, who had been at their heels the entire time, finally caught up with him? Still panting, he asked, 'What's wrong?'

'This is him, Emperor Jianwen.'

'What? Could you have been mistaken?'

'No! I have spent enough time around Ming Chengzu and his family to know how each and every one of them look like! There is no mistake!'

'Alright, alright. But at least give me something to prove so I can believe you.'

'Take off his left shoe! There should be a black birthmark shaped like an orchid at the bottom of his left foot.'

Wong Jing-hong hesitated before saying, 'I am sorry.' He took off the monk's left shoe and sock, and there it was, an orchid-like black spot the size of a coin. He was too stunned to talk.

'Then I guess we should, em, bring him back onto the ship? And maybe inform the King?' Wong Jing-hong muttered, trying not to look at the found Emperor's face that was filled with despair.

'So what happened to him then?' The boy asked.
'We brought him back here, to his uncle, the Emperor at the time.'
'But we never heard the news.'
'Remember the time when the last Emperor suddenly called a lot of monks into the palace?'
'Yes, but what about it?'
'What better place to hide a leaf than in a forest?'
The boy raised an eyebrow.
'But if you have found him, why did the voyages continue?'
'.....the former Emperor thought it could stabilize the imperial court and promote trade,'
The boy smirked at this as even the man himself seemed to have difficulty in believing that, but the man continued,
'...and there is a chance for those who know will die on the seas, so he wouldn't have to get his hands dirty and raise suspicion.'
'But if you knew he wanted to get rid of you, why did you agree to go on the voyages?'
'Part of it was due to my own selfishness. Once you got used to the adventures at sea, it is hard to settle down on solid ground again'
'Oh, whatever! It all sound too story-like, you must be faking me.' The boy yawned. 'I've had enough of story time, I just really need some sleep. Would you please finish the rest for me?'
The man nodded.
'Thank you, eh...seriously, what is your real name?'
Silence filled the air again. It was only when the boy was already half asleep, did he seemed to hear the man's reply.
'My family used to call me Ma He.'

Zheng He was wandering around Java with his friend, Wong Jing-hong, trying to carve every single view into his memory as this may very well be the last time they visit this place.
'Zheng He, I need to tell you something.' Wong Jing-hong suddenly called his name.
'What's wrong?'
'I won't be leaving with you this time, I am staying here.'
Zheng He was dumbfounded.
'I am getting old, Zheng He, we both are.' His friend carried on, 'We don't have much time left to live for ourselves instead of the Emperor.'
Zheng He turned towards his old friend, he wanted to deny but the glistening white streaks in his friend's hair made him speechless.
'You of all should know that they will *silence* us at all cost if we go back. Starting a real family is all I ever wanted, but I will never get to if I return.' Wong Jing-hong continued 'Being free is all *you* ever wanted, but you will never get to be if you return, especially as Zheng He.'
'Hold up, are you saying that.....'
'The old Emperor is gone, and the new one never looks you in the face.'
And there, Zheng He could see a sparkle of mischief in his friend's eyes; it was a rare sight even in their younger days. And Zheng He couldn't think of a reason to refuse.
Perhaps this will be a brand new adventure.

His Legacy

Good Hope School, Hon, Rayna – 14

As I watched the last boxes of silk and gold load up the boat, I let out a sigh of relief knowing that I'll be sailing again. The sea was my true home, one I never had since my family left me to fend for myself at the age of 12.

"Jake you coming?" I twisted my head to see Youngjia beckoning me to hurry on board before the ship departs. I stuffed the last of my food into my mouth and scrambled on board, hearing the sounds of family bid their loved ones goodbye. I wished I had that.

I watched the mainland shrink smaller and smaller as we journeyed forward, bits and fragments of our last trip came to me. We sailed all the way to Arabia. Can you believe that? It was a great trip the Arabians accepted our offerings of peace and our homeland made a new relationship. The emperor even crowned us the great explorers of the sea and sent us on a new mission. Leading us to another long journey of sailing and I loved every single part of it, well maybe not every part of it. Not when the captain asked me to sweep the deck or assign me to toilet duty. I swear the captain has it in for me sometimes, always asking me to do things or calling me aside to tell me some new information about sailing.

Captain Wu, one of the most formidable captains known. He's that kind of man that's really strict but you know he only has your best interests in mind. Everyone on the ship respects him and in my own weird way I do too. He taught me everything I knew about being a sailor now, I owe everything to him, literally

Captain, he has this odd treasure chest that he keeps with him all the time. No one really knows what's in it which was part of the reason why no one has dared touch it but I have never seen that chest 5 inches away from the captain.

"Captain called a meeting!"

"Captain called a meeting!"

"Captain called a meeting!"

Being torn away from my thoughts in bed, I shrugged on my coat and headed down to the common room for the meeting.

"The voyage this time held a special meaning," the captain was not one to beat around the bush, "I'm sure you've all heard about the legend of Harizonna," murmurs of agreement ran around the room.

The folklore of Harizonna was a well-known one. Legend has it that during the Warring States period a group of people escaped from the mainland and found Harizonna. Described as heaven on earth, Harizonna soon disappeared off the surface of the earth. Many have went on journeys attempting to find this "paradise" but almost none returned and those who do come back empty handed and a crazed mind. Despite this, it's every sailor's dream to succeed in finding it, mine too.

"The emperor sent us to find the city of Harizonna and we are not to disappoint."

"Dismissed"

Hushed chatters broke out in the room as everyone filed out to resume their duties, mine was to rest.

"Jake, you're on mapping duty", no worse words could have come out of the captain's mouth, I hated mapping, I would have taken toilet duty any day instead. Of course the captain knew this and called me out in front of everyone. I trudged to the map room, giving everyone who was laughing at my expense a somewhat murderous glare.

Days, weeks, months pass by like this, the usual duties on board or the sudden ones assigned by the captain to humour him, I suppose. There were the usual weird rumours spreading on the ship. One claimed that the captain was looking sick. Can you believe that? The captain? Sick?

And there were the occasional attacks from pirates or whatnot trying to steal from us. Nothing huge.

On the 68th day on the ship, I was fixing up some tweaks in the maintenance room, another tedious task that was assigned to yours truly by the captain when Zhunia and Binfang, two of my cabin mates, rushed in to the room and dragged me out, literally. What I could pick up from their gibberish like murmuring was "Captain's calling you...last words...quick" and all I thought about what other surprise the captain could throw at me again.

As we arrived the captain's quarters I immediately sensed something was wrong, there's this unruly feeling lodged into my gut as I twisted the doorknob open and I was greeted with a sight I imagined possible.

Captain Wu, the almighty all-powerful Captain Wu, laying down looking green and pale on the bed and I knew this was way more than whatever illness that have befallen him before. My feet seemed to be glued to the floor until I finally realized he was bidding me forward. Jiangsu, the first mate, shook my shoulders and I dragged my feet forward, kneeling in front of the man who I considered to be my mentor and somewhat of a fatherly figure of mine since I never had one.

"Jake," he stretched out a hand to reach for my shoulder, "I didn't know how to tell you." He was grasping my hand at this point. "Listen you are my son, my *erzi*. I'm sorry I never told you, I only thought of training you to

lead his ship...I give you my ship, my chest and my love. Be strong.” He choked out, giving my hand one last squeeze as he breathed his last breath and journeyed far, far away from us.

All those tedious jobs, random session of learning, those were his ways of fathering me. All those times I thought he was making fun at me, no he was building me up to be a captain. And now that I understand that, I had no chance to appreciate it, after all he is gone.

Father? How is that possible, the abandoned orphan had someone who cared about him? Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't he come back for me? Why did he abandon me? Why did he take me under his wing, on his ship after all these years?

Captain? How is that possible, the wannabe crewmember having his dreams become a reality? Leading his own very crew?

And from that moment I swore I will lead it well.

But for countless nights and days, I have failed this crew by leading them to infinite traps and dead ends.

Moreover, months passed upon this incident and yet— *You are my son, you are my son.*

Why can't I get these words out of my head? Why can't I be the bloody captain that leads everyone to success like I should?

I can feel everyone's disappointment in me. Wasn't the captain's son supposed to be some great hero?

Worse of all, I could feel his blow of defeat on me. My father, I can sense his disappointment in me. Letting a deep sigh overcome me, I laid down in the captain's quarters, *his quarters*, trying to get my head over the looming issue of where Harrizona is. Waving my hands in front of me, a poor attempt to clear my thoughts, I dropped them to my side.

Ow. I felt something hard hit my left hand. Darn treasure chest...

I picked up the object and held it up close to my face for further inspection. It was a simple wooden box, surrounding the keyhole was two golden dragons, guarding it.

Feeling something engraved on the bottom of the chest, I flipped it upside down for more probing.

The answers you seek are nearer than you think, the skeleton you pursue is closer than you expect.

What. It would kill him to give me specifics, wouldn't it?

At this moment my mate, Youngjia, decided to come bursting in. It would kill him to knock for once.

“The weather just doesn't seem to get better these days been dark for ages...What you got there?”

I wordlessly passed the chest to him still indulging in thought.

He read the engraving aloud, “Blimey, what do you think that means?”

Shrug.

“The skeleton that could mean the key to this” he gestured to the box, completely disregarding my reluctance to talk, “closer than you expect, you'd think the captain might have given you something before and hid the key there?”

I jolted up at that. *The compass!* I immediately opened the drawer, rummaging through it finding the captain's gift to me, feeling pleased with myself that I didn't chuck the thing out to the sea years ago. When my hand came in contact with it, holding it up for Youngjia to look.

“He gave me this when I first took up mapping duty, said to treasure it and would find it to be the key to all my problems one day.” I informed him of its origin.

His eyes lit up that, “He's totally hinting at you, open it up!”

Retrieving a screwdriver from my bedside table, I flipped the compass and unscrewed it. I always thought it as odd that the compass had screws behind.

As the last screw came unturned, I chucked the cover away, unable to contain my excitement.

Empty. There was nothing inside. I felt the disappointment taking over again.

“The cover!” Youngjia exclaimed.

My eyes lit up again, both of us racing to where I had chucked the cover to and stuck to the back of the cover was a skeleton key. Youngjia snatched the key out of my hand and raced back to the chest, the anticipation nearly killing him.

Just as he was about to turn the key, I hollered out, “Wait! We should bring it up to the deck to open it in front of everyone” He paused, “Okay.”

“Go! GO! GO! Meeting time!”

“Captain called an emergency meeting!”

“Urgent! Get down to the meeting room”

“MEETING TIME! GO!”

In an unbelievable amount of time, Youngjia had rallied the crew onto the deck. They were all looking at me eagerly, eyes full of expectation of a breakthrough.

Holding up the chest I began, "Everyone remember this?" realisation ran through everyone's head "Well I just found the key to it prior moments ago and wanted to open it I front of everyone."

Twisting the key, I heard the lock pop open and the cover flip agape. Inside contained a rolled-up scroll which I held up for everyone to look at. Slowly but surely, I unrolled the scroll praying to all the gods that this will be my answer.

Blank.

It was blank.

Why would captain put a blank scroll in such a chest?

Letting out a cry frustration, I let the scroll slip out of my hands, letting it roll to one of the crew members' feet.

Xiaoen, I think his name was, picked up the scroll at his feet and help it up to the sky. And at that moment, at that very moment it was as if the ancestors were looking down at us, smiling fondly. The gloom in the sky split and a sudden lightning bolt was unleashed from the sky and hit the scroll.

As if magic had happened words started to appear on the scroll, lines and segments started to make an appearance. Soon, a whole map completed with instructions had materialized out of nothing.

It was that exact moment I finally believed in fengshui. I completely and sincerely apologize that I ever called fengshui rubbish, I take that back.

Picking up the scroll, I read what was written on it out for everyone to hear.

To find the place where you seek,

Sail around the island that reeks.

Weave through the pillars of death

Then you shall find what you want-eth

Discussion among crew members immediately erupted.

"Island that reeks, that's clearly, Lianyu"

"What in the world is want-eth?"

"Pillars of death that wouldn't be..."

"Krouhfunbeinrg" I finished off for him.

Collective gasps were heard.

Krouhfunbeinrg was the place that was notorious for sinking all the ships that passed. All sailors knew that if you treasured your life, never go to Krouhfunbeinrg. You might as well write your will and put it in a bottle if you're heading there.

Immediate protests were heard as I mulled over what we should do. Choice one, head back to the motherland and face the emperor's wrath. Or choice two sail all the crew towards death's door. As much as I didn't want to die, I didn't want to my first voyage to be a failure. A voice in my head added, *and as much as I'm mad at captain, I don't want to disappoint him either.*

Among the chaos heard on the deck, a voice broke out that quieted the others, "I don't believe Captain Wu would send us on a death mission."

Everyone immediately looked down as if disappointed in themselves for thinking such thoughts.

"Captain what do you think?"

All eyes laid on me, "It's going to be a dangerous task. Bu if you all would support me, we would go." I said tentatively.

Relief flooded my face as I heard shouts of agreement echo in my ear. I raised my hand and hollered, "Onwards to Lianyu!"

Lianyu took 1 month to arrive at, we were greeted by the stench of the island before the actual island. Everyone was rudely awakened by the foul essent of the isle in the break of dawn, Zhunia and Binfang, thankfully, took it upon themselves to hand out lemongrass-scented cotton buds to everyone in attempt to block out the smell.

For three-day and three-nights, everyone was tortured by the filled-with-rot island. Frankly our appearances would earned jeers and laughs from others now. Cotton filled nostrils and dark rings brimmed eyes.

It was safe to say that everyone was feeling much livelier when we left as to when we came.

The estimated time of arrival at Krouhfunbeinrg was in 1.5 months. During that time I tasked the crew with filling our ship with as much supplies as possible, not forgetting the sacrifices to the gods who were protecting us and checking, refining and repairing the ships defenses, sails and every other technicality. I even went as far as making everyone clean their own bunks up as preparation for the coming challenge.

As I crossed out another day till our arrival at Krouhfunbeinrg, I felt the atmosphere among the crew getting tense, even I myself found that my footsteps have quickened these days. Everyone was nervous.

Reading and re-reading the scroll over and over again as I awaited our arrival, arrangements have been made to ensure our safety in this Krouhfunbeinrg. I myself will be taking the wheel along with two assistants, a fair amount on

watching the sails and the condition on the sea, around a handful assisting wherever needed and everyone else on either immediate repair or whatever else that needed to be tended to.

My thoughts were interrupted by the news of arrival, I swallowed down the lump in my throat, squared my shoulders as I took on the burden of the captain and got ready to lead my ship through this mess.

The waves were huge and unforgiving, after each obstacle came another bigger and harder than ever. Krouhfunbeing was armed with sharp rocks and creatures of the wild. As I steered through the pillars of rocks, narrowly avoiding another, the crew was busied with other challenges.

There were flying fish, the sea was densely populated with flying fish. All of them as if carrying out a suicide mission, flying on the boat like there was no tomorrow. Some the deck flapping around, but some of them had flew through our sails, leaving gaping holes in their wake.

It was an odd sight to see, sailors known to be bold and fearless, screaming their voices out as they ducked out of the fish's way and slashed them alive or frantically mending the holes in the sail.

"Look out!" I snapped my head towards the direction they were pointing at, that wasn't there a while ago. A barrier of rocks, looking as lengthy as the great wall itself was stretched across the road ahead.

It was approaching rapidly and there was no time to go around it—the sails were on the verge of breaking. We either get to the other side or we go down.

As if all the praying had suddenly worked, I spotted a miniscule opening on the near left of the ship. It was narrow, really narrow. I wasn't even sure if our boat could fit through it but it was our only chance. I spun the wheel to a hard left, aiming for that channel.

I forgot to give a warning.

As the boat tilted to the left, almost all the crew lost their balance. But unnoticed by everyone, Jianguo who was slashing away at the fish lost his balance completely and went overboard.

As we enter the pathway, there was a screaming sound coming from the water, the whole crew looked at where the sound came from.

Jianguo was being eaten alive by those flying fish. Tearing him apart flesh by flesh. Like an offering to the gods, asking for a passageway.

A large screeching sound was emitted from the side of the ship scratching the rocks. We barely squeezed through.

I quickly grabbed the ropes, willing to risk anything to save Jianguo. But the pathway was closing up as we travel passed it, stopping all hopes anyone had about saving him.

The screeching lasted for around a minute until we finally exited to tunnel and it was there. I caught a glimpse of Harrizona.

Everyone was silent, thinking of him.

But remembering what he told me about being a captain, I squared my chest up for the crew.

"Prepare the peace offerings" I shouted and cheers were returned.

I Saw the Light

Good Hope School, Ng, Karis – 14

The sun beat down heavily; the calm water sparkled in the reflection. Seagulls flew freely above the ship and disappeared into specks as the Ming Treasure Fleet carried treasures and stories untold travelling to infinity and beyond, which in reality, was actually to India.

'Splish-Splash-Splosh', I quietly made my way across the deck, leaving a trail of soapy water behind. I stopped as I heard the roaring laughter grow louder. I twisted my head and saw seamen trotting along the deck, stepping on the boards that I've just cleaned. Just as I was about to pick up my pail and clean the deck again, a huge shadow casted on me, shading me from the blinding sun.

"Stand-by! All hands on deck!" that piercing voice rang in my ears. I looked up to see a silhouette standing above everyone on the observatory deck. Confidence radiated off her as she spoke with such authority, "Captain Lee speaking!" I sucked in a breath and stood still, knowing that father would be present, but still stood comfortably under the shade from the person on the observatory deck.

"Me hearties, look alive and stay alive..." Father's booming voice echoed across the sea as he delivered the same speech he did yesterday and every day since we've boarded.

"My baobei", father's arm held snugly across the silhouette's shoulders, "you are my pride, wear your family name proudly, and always know that my blessing is with you." Father turned towards me and I immediately averted my gaze and snapped my eyes shut. "Look at me!" I forced my eyes open and peered at him, "Er-zi, why are you of such? Can't you see how bright your sister shines? Fighting against pirates and leading sea-men with such power, why can't you do that? How is it that two siblings, both born at the same time, sees the girl manlier than the boy? I tried giving you chances, mopping the deck, cleaning the galley and tidying my papers, but your strength has never shone through. Son, your candle is flickering, your time is ticking..." I swallowed back my tears and caught the smug look on my sister's face as she sashayed away.

I ran back to my room, flinging myself across the deck and curled up like a ball on the hard plank of what they call bed. I scanned across my room – stacks of books piled to the ceiling, pen and paper scattered across the desk. It was so different to my sister's, filled with weapons and armor, with the rusty smell of metal flowing through the air. I never liked my sister's presence, or greatness, if that's what it's called; I never liked how she always looked down on me, just because she possessed greater strength than I did, relentlessly teasing my intellect. The belief that every man should be a fighter to be worthy is ridiculous. I scoffed, thinking, "My wisdom is my power." No matter men or women, one without knowledge only blinded by strength is the biggest fool, and my sister was the fool I always took her for.

My father's chamber was awfully messy, I was called upon to tidy my father's room. I scowled at the request, such a degrading task for the son of the captain of the ship to take on, but thankful it wasn't time to clear the lavatory. Why couldn't my sister share my scout work? Why am I to bear all the dirty tasks? I stacked the papers on father's desk aggressively with one hand, and flipped the page of my book on the table with my other hand. I felt my anger simmer down as I stared off to the distance, "Why's everything so unfair..." a teardrop gently rolled down my cheek, soothing the burning sensation on my face. I closed my eyes and let out a shudder. 'I'm not going to continue on like this.' My mind was tugged in all directions, I had to be strong yet was I as weak as my father put me out to be? I didn't need others' validation, I knew myself well enough yet I still had doubts. My mind fogged up, I had to make up my mind.

I left the chambers, unbothered.

I've spent not days but years imagining how things would have played out if I were to be my father's shining pearl, then my thirst for knowledge wouldn't be the laughing stock of the ship. I picked up a stack of stained paper, a worn-out pen and started to map out all my thoughts, I thought I knew how everything would lay out to be. My mind was doing its magic, the pen glided across the paper, leaving trails of wonders behind. I was intoxicated in the glamor of erudition as the sun shone through the gap of the window.

I held a tight grip on my paper, walking out to the deck with my thoughts still running through my head. "Listen up," my sister screeched, "we are going to stop by the nearest port and stock up, I want all hands on deck and those pesky scums from the other ship may also be at the port. I need everyone to be on their A-game, I know we certainly do not want a repeat of last year's incident." Murmurs flooded through the crowd, all voices agreed to my sister's words, including mine.

The incident from last year was that the ship Zun[Respect] attempted to raid the treasures of our ship whilst we were stocking up on supplies. Luckily, my sister and I spotted them before they could enter the ship and steal our treasure. But that was not important because there was no such thing as luck. By observing the previous run-ins with the troublesome ship as named by my father's stories about them when I was little, the 'raid' from Zun was predicted by me, though no one was concerned when I put out the thought, but then they certainly were when they saw Zun

attempting to raid the ship. The algorithm to predict the run-ins were simple, and I was the only one to know. I gripped the worn-out paper tighter.

“Land ahead,” I focused my gaze onto the port, “Holy mackerel, Zun is here!” My sister said bitterly. A smirk crept up my face, my calculations were right.

“You, get everything we need. You! Help him with that, wait, you too!” My sister barked out orders and waved her finger. I rolled my eyes at her, craning my neck only to see the brightest smile on my father’s face, fixated at my sister, beaming with pride. I huffed and turned back, “And you, my dear brother,” my sister started, her words were dripping in sarcasm, “just stay away from trouble.”

I held my remarks and headed out to do what I sought to do with the paper wrinkled under my tight grip.

I cautiously walked up to the ship of Zun, glancing back and forth to ensure that the coast was clear.

“Hey,” I called out nervously, my voice was trembling.

“What do we have here,” the Captain of Zun sneered, smoking his cigar. “The son of the Cap Lee, what brings you to our parts of the water?”

“I... came to... chat.” I stuttered, my heart pounded a million miles per hour, urging my mind to come up with something.

The captain’s expression softened, “Come on in. What you got son? Spill!”

“Why did you raid our ship last time?” I said while walked into Zun’s deck.

“What? That’s never what we did!” the Captain’s eyes flew wide open and shook his head, “There must be something wrong, last time we encountered, your ship’s rope to the dock wasn’t secured tightly, my mates were trying to tie the rope tighter for ya’ll. But I’m sorry if you originally wanted to lose your ship.” The Captain shrugged, leaning against the rail.

“Oh...” was all that came out from my mouth, my heart sank like a stone, I was wrong. There had been false accusations and I was guilty as charged.

There was an eerie silence where clashing of waves was the only thing you could hear. I cleared my throat as I locked my eyes upon a certain something on the mapping table.

“Wait, I’ll go get us some water.” the Captain exclaimed while leaving me.

It was right there, my blood was pumping, I grabbed it and shoved it in my jacket.

The Captain came back with glasses of water and kindly smiled. My heart sank even deeper. I then heard the piercing siren ringing through the air, “Ba! He’s here, with the traitors!” my sister ratted with a vicious sneer on her face.

Heavy stomps entered the ship and father yanked my arms, pulling me away. I struggled as I screamed, “It was all a lie, a misunderstanding!” My voice faded away as I was dragged on board back on our ship, capturing a final glimpse at the Captain of Zun, with serenity marked on his aged face.

“What were you thinking?” Father growled, my sister crossed her hands, stood back and watched the scene unfold. “Making friends with the enemies? Did you spill all the secrets of our ship, allying with the rotten scum? Have I taught you nothing, Er-zi?” I stood still, my expression never flickered, my mind was filled with thoughts, my eyes focused on the clouds. “You are the greatest failure I’ve ever had, the only red on my ledger!” My father spat out spitefully. I stood aside and snickered, unaltered, “All of that, all for you, yet for nothing.”

My father spat angrily, “Basic respect, young man, am I as a dog if you don’t respect me? RESPECT! Have you not read the Confucian books, and I thought you were smart!”

My blood was boiling, “Treat others as you wish others to treat you, how can I show respect, when you treat me like crap!” I hollered, “I did everything, even your degrading tasks – I do them accordingly! I have never complained when you obviously favored my sister, putting her on a pedestal while I stood 8-feet under,” I gasped for air, “WHY DO YOU HATE ME SO MUCH!” not a single drop of tear was worth shedding on this man and not one fell.

I swayed as I walked towards my sister, who backed away with every step I took, I knew I was intimidating. A cold smile was planted on my face, “And to you, my dear sister, never thought you’d see this side of me, did you? You are wrong, like a lot of things. I have the brains, you have the brawns, we could have worked so well together, yet you’ve decided to cast me away in the shadows, abandoning me.” I glared at her, “That’s not what siblings are for, right? I’ve never asked for anything, I only ever wanted to be your equal!”

The sky rumbled, darkening drastically. I turned away from my family, facing the by-passing crew. It was going down.

The ship swayed on the choppy waves, throwing people from one side of the ship to another. Rain was pouring down like a waterfall, flooding everything on board. Orders were frantically being shouted out, “Raise the sails... Sam, take the wheel...Dump out the water idiot!” It’s not that I could control weather, I’m no God, though some may think my plan was foiled when father caught me mingling. I assure you, all was well.

I reached into my jacket and took out the logbook of the ship of Zun. Every ship has their own logbook – the most important item in the eyes of any captain. In it is future plans of the ship, details to everything that happened on that day. If only father had listened, he would have known all the secrets to the ship of his sworn nemesis. I held the worn-out book in my hands, the image of the kind smile on the Captain of Zun blurred my vision, the book weighed like steel.

I shook off everything and steadily walked into the chaotic scene, crew members were holding onto the rails for dear life, my sister grabbed my father tightly and father attempted to steer the boat through the aggressive waves. “Need help?” I asked.

“Get away, you traitor!” “You brought this curse upon us by being with Zun!”

I said exasperatedly, “Well, good luck because the ship won’t last another storm, and currently, it has been through 2. You know what they say, third time’s the charm, and you’d better find a way to get out of this storm fast.” I tapped my wrist and walked across the ship without a hitch whilst possessions flung around the vessel.

My father and sister exchanged worrying glances as I sauntered to the mapping room. “You know it’s never too late to ask for help.”

My sister snapped, “I don’t need no help, I have the power to do anything! Scoot, you monster!”

‘Monster, monster...’ the word echoed louder and louder in my head by the minute. I shakily let out a breath and sat on a chair in the mapping room. The yelling could still be heard from the outside, the rain beat heavily onto the windows and the sky let out another frustrating grumble.

I squinted at a device – a pointer was swinging wildly, malfunctioning. I stared and toyed with the ancient mechanisms, visualizing how it was supposed to come together. I looked at it once again and the pointer steadied, the storm was clearing up in the south, yet we were heading east.

I took out the clumped up paper that I’ve written at the start of the day, going through my plans. Then I took out the logbook from Zun and skimmed through it. It read ‘fallout with Lee: he kicked me off Ming Treasure Fleet, he was threatened, he didn’t like that I was intellectually better. I’m going to get my own fleet and sail the great sea to fulfill my thirst for knowledge. I don’t want to be delivering treasures from one destination to another bided by the orders from the emperor, I want to be free’

I recited a familiar line, “I’ve got no strings to hold me down, to make me fret or to make me frown. I will not tolerate anymore of anyone’s doubt on my abilities, I must venture out.” I bit down on my lips and continued reading, ‘day 210, Lee despised me, he told everyone I was a monster, and I was betrayed.’

The captain of Zun was never a monster – monsters were only what we perceived them to be. I’m the monster, I’ve framed, I’ve stole, I’m unwanted, I’m no more than the monsters parents tell their children about at night. My head spun at the realisation.

Every wobbly step I took to the deck seemed to mock me. “HOLD IT!” I screamed.

“I said I don’t need your help brother!” my sister sneered while gritting her teeth.

I sighed, utterly defeated. “This will not end well for us. Though I hate to give you the satisfaction of me once again solving all your problems, I don’t wish to die in the storm because of your stubbornness.” I reasoned as salty tears mixed with rain washed down my face.

“I can do this!” my sister panted with determination.

The sky let out another defying growl, the ship shook cowardly, and the sails of the ship were either badly torn or lost at sea.

“Please listen,” I cried, my vision was fogging up from the tears and the roaring storm, “Clearly someone needs to be the bigger person here,” guilt was eating me up, “I am sorry if you feel like you need to prove yourself to the society, to battle against social norms. You are a strong woman like no other I’ve seen in the—”

“Stop—” my sister stuttered, her hair flying in all directions and soaked through, “you’re right,” she sobbed, clutching on the steering wheel hysterically, “help us.”

I gave my sister a weak smile, finally seeing her caring eyes that were lost to the crave for power.

“Head south, stat!” I yelled, rain dripping down my face.

The moon rose, I was again hidden in the dark, away from the soft glow of the moon. Everything was calm and silent. The last 24 hours were certainly like no other day I’ve experienced on board. Despite all turmoil, I had made my decision.

Father suddenly proclaimed, “Me hearties, look alive and stay alive! We’ve survived another night, and it couldn’t be done without my baobei’s bravery!” The crew mumbled praises, exhausted from the entire ordeal.

It was time.

I stood up, feeling the warm glow of the moon on me, “I’m done! I’m sick and tired. I’m not some treasure that you lock up and deliver until you might have use for. I mustn’t stay, it’s not right.”

My sister stood, shading me from the moonlight, “You can’t go, what about everything that we’ve been through?”

“Yes, those were memories and Reza, you are my flesh and bone. All these times, I only remember a shadow, living in the shade of your grandeur. I yearn for more Reza.” I gave her a sad smile.

Reza let down her tough demeanor and said softly, “Thank you and sorry Ezra.”

Tears welled up, why did it have to be this way. When things were starting to turn out for the better, I had to sail down another path.

At the crack of dawn, I left at the nearest port, stating bittersweetly to myself, “Look alive and stay alive Ezra.”

I gripped the mushy paper from yesterday and tucked it in the logbook.

I left and headed to the Ship of Zun and went onboard, to seek out knowledge untold.

The first ray of light hit me. I saw the light.

Epic Memories – The Story of Ming Treasure Voyages

Good Hope School, Yan, Natalie – 14

My name is Zhangxian, and I was raised by my aunt in a small village in Eastern China when I was young in the Ming Dynasty. I was 14 years old at the time when I remembered just a few days after my birthday, there were posters around the alleys recruiting new sailors to go on voyages to give Ming treasures to other countries. I've always had the desire to go to sea and I like adventures so much, more than anything. I couldn't let the chance slipped away. Yes, I was only 14 at the time when I signed up.

On that day, the new and old sailors gathered at the small port. We put our bags in the ship. My heart already fluttered, squealing with indescribable feelings of joy. It was an intense feeling, but on the other hand, I felt a sense of sorrow in that I couldn't see my village, friends and my aunt anymore.

"Zhangxian! We will miss you!"

"Good luck"

"Don't drown!" screamed my friends.

"Zhang...Xian..." my old aunt who had been sick for a long time quietly uttered. We hugged and I could hear her sniffing and sobbing on my shoulders. There was silence. I felt bad for her for raising me for 14 years. How heartbreaking it was to say goodbye. We finally let go after a while.

"Aunt. I will come back. I promise."

My aunt nodded while wiping her tears.

"All aboard!" Shouted a man, probably the Captain. I took a deep breath, ready to venture out to the sea. Ready for my adventure, I looked back and saw everyone waving goodbye. I sighed – it's time to look to the future.

The ships were quite pretty I admit. They had many dragon carvings on the walls; the decks were coloured in hazelnut brown; they had large basements inside and a small yet exquisite kitchens. I smelled the scent of the sea, a salty smell. I wish I lived next to the sea.

The engines roared. The fleet of ships moved. While I was looking at the beautiful sun of dawn, the same man shouted again, calling us to gather in a circle.

I finally had a clear look at the man. He had a curly black beard, a bit disgusting as I spotted some breadcrumbs and liquid mixed within. He had a bad sunburn on his face especially on his nose. His eyes looked fierce. I couldn't figure whether he was bald or not as a part of his head was covered by his black laced-up hat. He looked muscular and bulky, with strong arms and strong legs. He let off a creepy smile with crooked, yellow teeth. He really looked like a pirate, but at least a good one at that.

"GOOD MORNING EVERYONE!" shouted the man.

"Good morning..." we said.

"You should all know what manners are right? You should always respond after what I say. I dislike people who are impolite. Anyways, I am Captain Wang and I will be the one leading you all. We've got seven voyages in total. We will first arrive in India, where we will give them our silk and some gold."

"Meanwhile on this ship, you will have to clean the deck during late afternoons. You will have three sessions for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There are also sessions in the afternoon which you can practice archery and using swords and canons. You will have to master at least one of these weapons so you can be equipped well to fight battles if there are pirates..."he shrugged.

"You can now go down to the basement and choose a bed. And come to the area next to kitchen to have breakfast."

We all swarmed into the basement. The environment wasn't as bad as I expected. The walls were still in hazelnut brown with carvings, but the window was in an oily stained colour with some black mold on the surface. The bed sheets were modest in an ivory white colour but with some stains too. Overall, the basement was quite nice. The stairs that connected to the upper deck was marvelous too. It was grand and truly impressive.

I chose a bed, next to a teenaged boy. I stared at him when he secretly put a small dagger into his sock.

"What are you looking at?" said the teen boy.

"Ehh"I couldn't get the word out. And I couldn't even stare through his eyes either.

"Are you wondering why I put away that thing?"

I nodded nervously.

"It's for urgent needs" he said coldly.

"Oh"

"What's your name?"

"Zhangxian, 14"

"Zhengming, 17"

I forgot to tell you how he looked – he was quite handsome, with coal black hair but who knows why he got some strands of blonde hair in between. He had ginger brown eyes and his skin colour was a bit tan, which seemed to have been exposed in the sun for many times; he had a solemn look; he was fit yet muscular. I had a feeling that if he wanted to be the Captain, then he would be a great rival of Captain Wang.

"Hey!" Zhengming interrupted the silence. "Let's go to get breakfast"

"Sure!"

There were already a few men serving breakfast. They gave me a bowl of congee with herbs on top, together with a pack of peanuts and a glass of water.

Zhengming and I went to the upper deck and ate. We sat at the barrels and looked at the sea while eating.

The food was not good. The congee was watery. After I finished eating, my tummy still grumbled a little.

"You hungry still?" Asked Zhengming.

"Ya", I expected him to give me some of his food. No kidding, I really expected him to give me food, though it was a selfish thought.

"You will get used to it" he said, "by the way, you cannot ask for more food."

I regurgitated the water in my mouth hard. I thought: you nasty Zhengmin.

I thought of going to the kitchen to steal some food to eat, but I gave in. I was afraid that I had to walk on the plank and get fed by the sharks or had my head chopped by the Captain.

And so for the whole morning, it was a free period where we washed ourselves, changed clothes, and did leisure stuff. It was a pretty dull morning and so I sat on the deck alone watching the seabirds fly. I spotted some dolphins too, glimmering and sparkling under the sun. Wait, sparkling? Oh, right. Those weren't dolphins, those were some other creatures — mermaids. I really did see some mermaids. They got a silvery and turquoise fin tail, with silvery hair too. Swimming and diving elegantly and serenely at the sea. The ocean was so beautiful I believed I fell in love with it. I desperately wanted to jump the deck now into the ocean.

"What are you looking at?" Asked Zhengming

I almost panicked as he suddenly popped out next to me.

"Mermaids." I replied in a sulky voice.

"You still angry with me? Then you really behave like a kid, throwing tantrums for this teeny-tiny issue. What I am saying is the truth you know. You must get used to these harsh conditions. If you cannot get used to them, then why do you still want to be a sailor? A sailor is supposed to endure harsh conditions."

I nodded in understanding.

"You said you just saw mermaids? But don't mermaids not exist?" He asked.

"I really saw them. See!"

He gasped, admiring the beauty of the mermaids.

"You don't believe in mythical creatures, right?" I asked.

"I tend not to believe in mythical creatures because that's my family beliefs."

"You have to believe that they really exist." I said. "Maybe you will see sirens, the kraken, merpeople later." I smirked.

"Why did you sign up to this voyage?" he asked again.

"I love the ocean." I replied in an enthusiastic tone. "And I love adventures."

"I love the ocean too. But another purpose was to earn money for my family, so I signed up to get money. My family is poor and my father needs medical treatment but we don't have..."

Lunch came. Nothing changed except that the nuts were replaced by an apple and two pieces of margarine. We then started the weapons practice.

The Captain taught us how to hold swords and bows and how to use the cannon. Everyone tried the weapons a few times and chose the weapons that they were good at.

Fun fact: I shot arrows to the ocean rather than the center of the wall. I couldn't even lift a cannon ball. I even dropped the sword while I was holding it. Great...

Meanwhile, Zhengming seemed to be good at every weapon. But with his size and strength, his best choice to show his potential was the sword.

"Zhengming. Help me." I couldn't choose.

He told me to do it again, but those flaws kept repeating when I was doing it.

"Mmm...swords are better for you. I mean if you chose a sword then you could practice with me, right?"

Therefore, I tugged along with Zhengming and signed up for sword practice.

Since then, I have been swinging swords, fighting duels, poking and attacking. Of course, I was still not as good as others. Anyway, I was the youngest among all sailors. Thankfully it made some sense that I wasn't as good as others.

After the practices, we had to rest for a while and did the cleaning chores. We had to wipe the floor, polish the weapons, and wash the clothes and kitchen tools. Chores, chores, chores...I think my fingers were callused.

At last we had dinner again, but with some dry noodles and water together with potatoes and beans. After all these we could get to sleep and wake up at 5 – an exhausting first day already.

The routines continued like it was continuing in a ceaseless way. With pain and moans, these made me feel stronger every day.

I think I lost count of the days but anyways we finally stepped on land. My legs wobbled a bit like soggy spaghetti when I got on land.

“Eh young lad? You are supposed to stay on the ship.” Said a sailor. “Only representatives and the Captains could leave the ship and give the treasure. We sailors have to stay in the boat and keep a good watch of the ship”

I was disappointed.

“TAKE THE SILK AND THE BAG OF GOLD NOW!” yelled the Captain.

Men rushed to the basements to carry the silk and gold. The silk were so delicate yet exquisite in dazzling colours.

All the sailors gathered at the side of the boats, tilting our heads. I spotted that the Indian king also gave Captain some drawings and saris with goods too.

“Twitch~” some sound we’re made behind me. It’s like there was someone creeping behind. I stood back, trying to convince myself it won’t be some scary animal. Wait it won’t be tiger right? I took my sword out for self-defense.

Murmuring could be heard behind the bushes at the port. Murmuring? Animals couldn’t do that. Only humans could.

The Captain and the representative took the goods back with a pleasing smile on their faces. Meanwhile I was still aware of the sound. I tugged Zhengming’s sleeves. I told him what had happened. Zhengming then also took his sword and told everyone to prepare.

Suddenly out in a burst, a swarm of bandits came on our boat with sharp swords. Ok, this was a robbery. Everyone took their swords and fought back the bandits. I was numb – this was too sudden and scary.

A bandit saw me and rushed at me. My hands were still nervously holding the sword and I couldn’t move. When he rushed to me, I closed my eyes real tight, biting my lips. Hopefully this was a nightmare, but no, a gust of wind swept through me and clinking of sounds of sword fighting were in my ears.

I opened my eyes. The Captain was having a sword fight with the bandits. Suddenly, I woke. Stupid Zhangxian. Just because of a bandit you were praying that it was a dream?!

Courage was inhaled. I plucked my sword and swung it and ran the whole sword through the same bandit’s stomach. Blood burst vigorously from his stomach and then he stomped down as a very dead corpse. I killed a bandit.

The captain just looked at me in shock. He didn’t say anything but pat me on my back and continued to go in the battlefield. Meanwhile I ran to the area to safeguard the people who were carrying the gold.

All of a sudden, a rope was tied on my neck and I almost choked to death. A bearded man used a rope to tie my neck and tugged me with the rope to tie me on a pillar of the ship. I tried to struggle and used my hands to untie the rope. However, his strong hands made my hands almost twist when he pulled the rope and tied my hands behind.

It was so painful that I kept screaming as if I literally was being punished in hell. I managed to scream the last time which Zhengming could hear me scream for help and the next thing I knew, my mouth was tied again.

The bearded bandit then lit a fire and put it next to me, and chased after the men who were taking the goods to the basements. I tried to struggle hard but my neck would break. I tried screaming but I couldn’t. My sword was laying somewhere beside me but I couldn’t get it. Tears swarmed in my eyes as I was feeling that my life was ending. Then hope appeared – Zhengming took his dagger from his sock and threw it to me and it landed on my feet. I tried to use my legs to push the dagger up my knees so I could put my neck

with the rope, moving forward and backward so the dagger in my knees could cut the rope. It seemed endless but at last I managed to cut all the ropes.

I took my bloody sword and the dagger and rushed down the cellars where I predicted the bandit was, searching for the gold. One of the men was stabbed to death and the others were hit to the point of unconsciousness. Anger rushed in me. I tried to form a quick plan. I decided to stab his back and push him out of the window. I jumped on his back and used my sword to stab his back. He wailed and wanted to catch me on his back. However, I was too fast and jumped around on his body, making it hard to catch me. As I moved, I kept stabbing my sword in his body and legs. I deduced that he couldn’t move anymore but unfortunately, he was still that strong. I couldn’t even push him. I then stood at the window, and when he moved to me, I quickly bounce-jumped to a side and made him crash the window. He really bumped through the window and finally, he drowned.

I checked the gold and goods in the cellars. Good, none of them were stolen I assumed.

I came back to the deck. Everyone was standing aside; the battle was finished.

That was the first battle that I fought in and it was one of the most vivid memories of my life. I realized I was grown up. Not fearful anymore but a brave teenage boy.

“Hey, here’s your dagger,” I approached Zhengming.

“Take it. It’s an award for your bravery and strength. I don’t need it”

Days and months passed, we arrived in Arabia and places around coastal Africa. We gave our goods to others, but who knew, other countries also gave their goods to us, like jewels and clothes. Our country China had made new relationships with many countries through these kind acts.

Of course, adventures are always part of voyages. I remember one day we headed into a rainstorm, where waves and currents kept bumping against the ship. My body jolted violently and I almost threw up. Everyone’s face was pale, white and green. Yet even though we were in desperate times, maybe everything tried to elude us, but thanks to our determination and team spirit, we all survived these hazardous scenes. I also remember we were attacked by some African pirates, where cannon balls were flying around and swords clinging, but still it was an epic battle where people became stronger and braver. Thank God I didn’t see any mythical deadly creatures.

Heartwarming laughter always filled up the ships, where we made new friends, drank rum, ate, goofed around before bedtime, and together watched and admired the ocean where we saw the sun rising, birds flying, or a rainbow forming on the horizon with puffy clouds in the sky. You won’t even have a chance to see that in the village. Here, it was so free. I really loved these voyages and we weaved many memories.

Time passed quickly, and now I am back on the land, 50 years of age already. I often sit and remember these memorable adventures, giving goods, build relationships, fighting battles...I touch the dagger every once in a while. Memories will fade one day many say, but I am sure this memory of adventures will forever stay in my mind, I guarantee it won’t fade away.

The Miles in Between

Good Hope School, Yim, Sunniva – 16

His regret took root on the fourth week.

His arm muscles were sore from the endless scrubbing that even he was not to be bothered with as a farmer's son, and he developed a newfound appreciation for his mother who had a knack for keeping the interior of their hut immaculate. Ploughing and harvesting he could do, but he was unaccustomed to the foreign sensation of his knees constantly against the hard floorboards. His knees were sore from the burden of his body, and his calves ached from disuse – that was another downside to being confined to a ship. There were only so many places you could go, especially when you weren't summoned for.

The first day, still overfilled with the anticipation for the journey ahead and eager for any recognition from these mysterious men that had visited his humble shores, he had gladly taken on any task they had thrown him. He was handed a bucket with wet rags draped on the sides and asking what he was to do with them had only earned him a pointed look from the deck master. He quickly learned the simple rule – to know your place and not speak up unless being asked a question.

Though now he couldn't fathom how, that day, and in the few that had followed, he had truly enjoyed the process of staying low and busy, for it enabled him to explore every little nook and crook of the ship, and allowed him to eavesdrop on casual conversations of passers-by without feeling uninvited.

For days he remained invisible and unimportant, the eagerness in him dimming with every repeated swipe of his arm. He was tired of this endless cycle of cleaning and craved some semblance of excitement, though one could argue that this life was not so different from the one of early risings and gruesome farming he had left behind.

He had a purpose back then, though. He knew that his effort would pay in the form of food for his family, and it was he, the eldest son of a widowed family, who must work as diligently as he could. Each day he had worked, and there were always the little things he could look forward to. Like getting glimpses of Wong's girl who would pass by with a basket of food from the market every noon, consistent as clockwork. Or, bragging to his baby sister in hushed tones about how he had fended off starved beasts targeting their fields. Sometimes, if it was a long day, he could ask his little brother what he had learned at school, and would reassure himself that it was only made possible through him giving up his own chance at studying to take up their father's mantle, when he was called away to defend the honour of His Imperial Majesty. Back then, it was a sense of purpose that drove him on to tolerate the regularities and stomach the constantly nagging feeling that he was deprived of choices, trapped in this life by obligations and expectations like a bird in the mouth of a canary.

He saw his mother's pleading eyes when she handed him a bag of rice cakes. Refreshments for the trip, she had called them, as if he would only be gone for a few days. The night before, she had tried to reason against his leaving, but a quick sharpening of his tone had silenced her. *Don't keep me from a better life*, he had refrained himself from saying. He was considered a young man now, it often startled him to realise. It empowered him, if not just to give him the autonomy to choose to leave.

Leave. It was a spited word, reserved for cowards who abandon their families in hardship. No, he had to remind himself. He left an honourable man, for the captain had paid his full wages for a decade in advancement, before they departed. They paid in intricately carved gold adornments and finely woven silk, and who could say no to such a lucrative offer, except for the weak-minded and oversentimental bunch? He loved his family, but he needed to feed them more, with most able-bodied men conscripted and gone.

A rare chance, they had called this, when they called for young men to join them. They did not recruit often, for the last time was well over a decade, but now they needed to fill the decks of a few new vessels. Ships gifted by His Imperial Majesty, due to their success in shaping foreign relations. It was *mingyün*, he had recognised, a chance perhaps crafted by *Guanyün*, who had heard his faithful, albeit silent, prayers to be rid of his confinements and took pity on him. What little men left of his dingy village who had not yet been of age two years ago during the conscription had all left to join this magnificent army on their adventures.

Adventures, they were promised. These visitors had stayed for two weeks at the most lavish taverns there was within ten miles, visiting the market each day and paying for any purchase in gold or silver. They had claimed they were restocking on refreshments, and it was a blessing to their village who mostly traded in items of need. Each night they would attract a crowd at the respective taverns, and the usually frugal

innkeepers would bring out ale after ale for everyone, for the bill was cleared and paid for every morning. The most eloquent of these guests would be at the centre of all attention, telling the tales of all the extraordinary things they have seen, with the occasional exaggerated or inappropriate comment by a drunken sailor or captain.

Tales of faraway lands with strange people and peculiar beasts, and of strategically laid out battles and unexpected fights. There were people that particularly adored putting spices into their food, so much that they themselves reek of their spices, who rode on steady beasts that drank from their noses instead of their mouths. *Xiàng*, as they were called, had elongated canines that were always shown bare to ward them and their riders from troubles. Then there were the battles that small nations would have lost if not for the assistance of the fleet, and the spectacular festivals the royalties would hold in thanks.

Night after night he drunk on these tales, thankful for the reprieve they provided for they distracted him from the soreness of his muscle from the day of work, and occupied his mind lest he start dreading the day ahead. They spun out tales as smoothly as a spider would with her silk, and he'd spend hours merely listening, entranced by the images that filled his head. Then, when he would trudge down the small trek back home, his feet always felt lighter than they had been the night before.

When they had announced they were to leave, a mixture of unwillingness and yearning bloomed through his heart so unexpectedly that he jumped at its fierceness. Between one heartbeat and the next, he was ready to leave this place he had called home for all the years he had been.

But now, he could not help but wonder if it were all alcohol-induced fantasies, for in the past weeks he has seen nothing but the endless stretch of sky and sea, and all he would hear were the gentle splashing of waves and idle chatter of mundanities among the clatter of deck boys and serving girls he dared mingle with.

That was another thing he discovered, aside from the utter unimportance of his presence. Those who had basked in the admiration and luxuries provided by the villagers were only a handful among the throng of men and women this fleet was armed with. The decks and hallways were more often crowded with servants and to-be sailors such as he, than any of the faces he has come to recognise from nights of intent gazing from across the room that had seared their features to his memories.

The day he had left, a ship carried them to the fleet that merely appeared as a speck from the harbour, and he had gawked at the sheer size of the armada from up close. When he looked back, the clatter of shacks from his village had blurred into a patch of brown amidst the green of their hunting grounds. He saw his hometown from a view he hadn't before, for his family did not deal with waterstuff, and it was his first time at sea. From the distance, its miniature form seemed inconsequential, forgettable. It was only then had he realised why no more than a dozen of these ships had come to their village, for their shallow bay could fit no more.

Afterwards, he and a few others from his village were assigned to respective ships, and gone was the last of any linkage he had to home, his mother's cakes already devoured during short trip there. He was transferred to a moderate-sized ship in the middle of the fleet, its beat-up hull telling enough of its age.

He had wondered then why the men had come. They certainly didn't lack supplies, not any that could be provided by his village, nor by the many even smaller ones they later stopped by. It was first among the many other questions he would have of the inner-workings of this fleet, which remained unresolved as he saw a few ships deviate from the fleet now and then with trunks of treasures and return with heaps of mediocre garments that they certainly didn't bother using. (It wasn't until much later that he finally learned that the fleet was tasked with handing out portions of the riches they carried to famine-stricken villages, on behest of His Imperial Highness. Then, he'd finally discovered that the war had ended a year after the conscription, and why no men ever returned to his village.)

Sometimes, when left to his own devices, he would wonder if the easiness of giving and unwavering charm back at his distant village were all a ploy, to amass spiritually and literally hungry youths to join their fleet. But the moment the thought appears he'd scoff at its silliness – what use were he and a few others of, to a fully self-sufficient fleet filled to the brim with royal treasures?

What was he here for?

Days, weeks, and perhaps months dragged on, though it would be probable that it was just his impatient mind warping his perception of time. He had no idea where the fleet was travelling to, for he had never heard of places that required the long months of travelling they were going through to reach. Chattering with his usual crowd yielded nothing, for nobody ever told deck boys and servants anything beyond their duty.

He ceased to care if he were not delivered the exciting exploits he thought was promised and resolved that this was a pretty good life. He had provided for his family, who would be better off with the money than starving with him, he told his traitorous heart that missed the gentle caresses of his mother and the chime-like laugh of his sister. How fares his brother, who has now taken his place as the man of the house and must shoulder the burden that comes with? The very responsibilities he had loathed for years, thinking he would be glad to be rid of, but has now left a gnawing pit

in his heart that craves expectations. They were lacking in this life, for all he was expected to do were to keep the decks shiny.

Occasionally, he would be tempted to stop bothering with the decks. Mere moments after he has cleaned it the deck would be trampled on and his efforts gone instantly. But what were he to do, if not finish the one thing he was tasked with?

~

One morning, before the crack of dawn, restlessness overtook him and he ventured up from his quarters to the decks, tiptoeing so he won't wake his fellow deck boys. He did this often now, enjoying the rare silence and stillness of his surroundings, listening to the wind brush against the flaps of the ship. The quietness contrasted against the business that overtook the ship during the day, and served as a reminder for him that getting to be part of the hustle should not be taken for granted.

This time though, he found a lone figure already by the railings as he climbed up, the silhouette of a plump man stretched out by the faint illumination of the lanterns.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Zhang."

The man didn't bother introducing himself, for what fool on a ship would not know his captain?

His was a familiar figure on the decks, though finding him not amid his usual crowd of shipmates was rather unsettling.

"Deck boy, hm? I like my decks shiny."

He hadn't thought he was noticed by anyone, and the revelation elated him more than he would admit in the face of another man.

He wasn't sure what he was to say, if anything at all, so he let silence befall between them. His captain was a flushed man who always seemed to be under the influence of one wine or another, and he hadn't had much dealings with such men for his father were a pious and reserved man who despised drinking.

He averted his gaze downwards, unknowingly. He was about to return to his quarters, when his captain boomed a loud laugh. Gazing up, he discovered a piece of land on the very edge of the horizon.

"This never gets old," he announced, somewhat mischievously, as he signalled the nightwatch who scuttled to ring the bell that called everyone to the decks. Slowly but steadily, people flocked around and behind him, but his focus remained on the land that grew larger and larger.

What a strange piece of land it was! He has never seen trees quite like that, with a trunk so huge it looked as if the trees grew so closely that they had no choice but to merge. The leaves branched outwards horizontally, as if they were crawling away from the centre. As their fleet neared shore, he caught sight of people with skin as dark as the midnight sky.

The sight of all these things that existed beyond his imagination had sent his heart racing and howling, and he knew for a fact that he wouldn't mind the repeating days ever again, and would gladly trade in years of tedious work without bargain, if it meant he could experience the rush of adrenaline brought upon by unprecedented discovery.

Letters to Xin

Harrow International School Hong Kong, de Blank, Anjeli – 14

26 February 1406

Dear Xin,

It is coming for me. Death. I can feel it.

It's strange to think I once was a handsome boy, innocent and content. Looking at me now, that seems an incredibly long time ago. I was young and foolish and made the biggest mistake of my life. I was wide-eyed, curious and alive until I stepped foot on this dreadful ship, the ship boasting with opportunity and a lifetime of pride and fame. They told us all about the adventures we would go on, the priceless treasures we would find and how we would come home heroes.

They lied.

We should be back in Nanjing in three months but I don't think I've ever felt so far away home. I try to think of you, my love. I remember the first time I laid eyes on you and the beautiful smile you had on your face. Leaving you behind for this life was a horrible decision and I regret it with all my heart.

My vision is blurred but I can sense the empty space where my pale arm used to lie. I attempt to wiggle the fingers. Nothing. I can hear the water splashing against the side of the boat, rocking me slowly side to side, placing me in a trance, helping me to forget all that I lost. The clink of the glasses and loud cheering are signaling that my friends are celebrating our glorious victory without me. Why don't they come down to see me grasping onto my last bit of life? The rhythmic tapping of their clunky feet on the ceiling above is gently putting me to sleep. My vision is starting to fade out. I will soon rest, facing the closed door that won't open anytime soon, on the hard makeshift hospital bed that many fallen soldiers before me died in, wistfully watching the world around me fall apart. I know you will never receive these letters I have written. You'll never know how sorry I am Xin. Or how much I love you. Goodbye...

11 July 1405

Dear Xin,

Today is the day. I've tried so hard to prepare myself for this new chapter of my life but I don't think I'll ever be ready. Standing on the docks, looking out at the vast, blue sea, I can see the colossal ships heading towards us. I cannot wait to board and set sail. The sun is rising above the distant mountains, painting a beautiful picture in the sky. Its warmth spreading across my body as the scattered clouds slowly part ways to let the sun's golden rays through. I sit, my feet dangling off the side of the dock with the cold water splashing over my shins. The endless body of water before me is turning light blue as a mixture of orange and yellow dance on the surface, illuminating the colorful fish and coral, shimmering on the small ripples caused by the slight movements of my feet. I can see the ships' black silhouette as they sail past, slowly coming to a stop before me. My adventure begins.

25 August 1405

Dear Xin,

Before embarking on this journey to the unknown I was nervous, but being here has made me feel more alive than I have felt in a long time. Although the work is very challenging, the routine keeps me focused and strong. I finally feel like I have a purpose. All I worry is that when I come back you will have forgotten how it feels to be together and that our love will be lost far out at sea. Every part of me wishes to be reunited with you but I must continue to work hard to earn money for a happier future for us.

The day starts early at the crack of dawn as we set sail on a new and different adventure. I cannot wait to tell you all about my experiences. I have never seen so much beauty before Xin, I just wish you could be here to witness these sights with me. We've come across many new lands and discovered different cultures and people, all with their own unique traditions, some of which I find very strange, whilst others bring me immense joy and comfort. We've encountered an extraordinary settlement on the coast of India where they indulged us with delectable foods and small trinkets in exchange for gold we gifted to their leader. I remember the rich smells of spices and the mouth watering aromas of curry drifting around the air. The night was filled with drinking and dancing along to the loud music and cheerful faces and laughing carried along by the evening breeze. I almost forgot about all my concerns about you Xin. Almost.

18 September 1405

Dear Xin,

I am missing you more than ever. I almost lost my life last night and I was scared I would never make it back to you. We are alive, but barely. Something terrible happened.

A storm.

I awoke to the violent rocking of the boat. The rain battered down on the windows of the sleeping quarters as the men around me were slowly stirring. Each raindrop hit with such force it felt as if the windows would shatter. I could feel the ship trembling. I could smell the pungent zing in my nostrils. I could hear the wind howling. It was coming for us.

I looked out the window above my bed to witness the mountain of water towering over us. My heart was pounding rapidly as I ran upstairs to find many men scrambling to secure the ship as much as possible. The wind was no longer howling up here. It was shrieking. The rain was no longer just falling. It had a purpose. Hail was cascading down and clattering onto the floor like knives. I glanced at the few stars, isolated from each other by the deadly clouds bringing forth this remarkable monster of a storm until they disappeared completely from sight.

We tried our best to do the impossible job of protecting ourselves but it was hopeless. The sky was darkening and ominous dark clouds gathered overhead, moving swiftly, covering the moon, leaving us alone in the dark. The waves grew larger, angrier. They battered us from all sides and nothing could be done. I could see the smaller ships in our fleet sinking in the distance and I prayed we wouldn't have the same fate. Smashed glass pieces that were once beautiful trinkets and treasures were lying on the floor like a thousand tiny daggers, the lightning violently reflecting off them.

There was no escaping the storm.

The fleet has certainly depleted in size, many of the smaller boats struggled to stay upright. They were no match to the monstrous waves devouring them. Even after all our efforts, we were powerless against the wrath of the storm. We are unable to find countless treasures but luckily, our ship isn't ruined. I just feel so blessed that I am alive. However, as we continue on our journey, fear is starting to set in amongst the crew. We are entering pirate territory.

15 December 1405

Dear Xin,

I miss you so much. The last few months have taken a lot out of me. My body feels weak, rebuilding the ships has made my hands rough and covered in blisters. The days are shorter and colder, the dark sets upon us earlier. Working in the pitch black and using only small candles to get work done is challenging. I wish I was back home with you, in the warmth of your loving arms, on steady ground, away from all this ghastly work. There has been no sign of pirates yet but I fear they will attack soon.

14 February 1406

Dear Xin,

My worst fear came true, we were attacked by the pirates. We should've prepared ourselves, we knew they were coming. Last week, I was looking out the telescope when I saw them sailing past in the distance, their bloodthirsty eyes watching us in our disastrous state, just waiting for the right moment to attack when we were at our weakest. Word had been spread that we were carrying several treasures and many were out to get it, including the pirates, and now was their chance.

It was twelve minutes past midnight when the first cannonball struck our ship. One young boy screamed, his painful cry echoing through the whole ship. I was surrounded by panic and chaos as everyone rushed to see what was happening outside. The pirates were here, and they weren't leaving till they got every single piece of treasure on the ships.

The sounds of swords being unsheathed sent shivers down my spine as I clambered up to the deck. We were circled by a swarm of gruesome pirates with filthy beards and stained teeth. Their feet thundered on the hard deck as they closed in on us, and then the battle began.

The fight was long and excruciating. The clanking of swords was like a drum beating in my head. I picked my fight against an unpleasant pirate. Swerving, I managed to escape his deadly strikes and attacked. My small pocket knife, however, was no match to his polished sword. Back and forth, we charged at one another, each blow harder to recover from. My skin was cut, my arms were tired. I had given up. He was older, more experienced, but I was more agile and tactical. I managed to gather some strength to be able to get one last hit at him. But he saw me coming and pinned me down on the floor. He held the sword up to my throat as I uselessly tried to push it away, I could feel it pressing up against my skin. I thought that was it, that I was going to die. Yet, I thought of you and how I could never leave you behind in this world. The moon glistened on the silver sword as I quickly freed my arm, grabbed my knife from my pocket and pushed it into his torso, stabbing him. The pirate collapsed, his heavy body on top of mine. I pushed him off of me. He was dead. The fights around me slowly came to an end as the pirates were being defeated. The shouting and wailing were hushed, and silence fell upon us. We'd won.

We had defeated the pirates! I turned my back to the dead body of the pirate I had just killed and cheered. My crew mates joined in as we shouted and laughed, enjoying our brilliant victory. And then suddenly, I felt it. The blade, biting into my flesh. Blood spurted as my limb dropped to the floor.

I'd lost my arm, Xin.

It was sliced off by the pirate's sharp sword. The pirate I had "killed" came up behind me and ripped it away from the rest of my body. I let it be swept away from me. It was so absurd and naive of me to think I had actually killed him. Blood poured out of the stub all over the deck, it was leaking out of me, no-one could help. I felt a sharp pain spreading all through my body. It burned Xin, so much, I couldn't breathe. Losing all my senses, I collapsed onto the hard floor and everything around me looked distorted. I could hear the strange voices of my crew, they were screaming. I tried to reach out to them but they were so far away. The pain was coming from everywhere, I couldn't take it anymore. I closed my eyes with the image of the pirate in my mind. His dirty face up close to mine, his nauseating, hot breath forcefully blown onto my face, his laughter echoing through my head, the bloody sword spinning around in front of me. Then everything went black.

I awoke in a strange bed, my chest rising and falling quickly as I gasped for air. For a moment I had forgotten all about what had happened until I looked out of the corner of my left eye to see an empty space where my arm should've been. I didn't care that we had won, I didn't care how much treasure we saved. All I could think about was how I let you down. Now, I lie here in this bed, writing this letter. I'm so sorry. I never meant for anything to happen to me. The plan was always to make it back to you. For you to run into my arms while I stand on the dock, smelling the sweet smell of daisies from your favorite soap. For my pale and coarse hands to interlock with yours, pink and smooth, and for my fingers to run through your charcoal black hair as you rest your head on my shoulder. I'm frightened that this will no longer be possible. I won't be able to hold you tight or support you anymore. I don't know what else to say. What can I say?

I'm sorry.

Tears are cascading down my cheeks and falling onto these precious papers, smudging the heartfelt words I have written. My hand is unsteady, my fingers are cold and numb, writing is proving to be a challenge. I dream of the long walks in the park we used to take, watching the little kids playing with their kites, wondering if we would ever have kids of our own. I dream of the picnics we had underneath the star-filled sky, eating delicious foods you prepared for us. I dream of the strolls we took by the river and the wide smile you had on your face when I told you "I love you". I dream of our wedding in a couple of years. I was going to propose when I got back. I would watch you walk down the aisle and admire your beauty in a silk dress as you take my breath away. I love you, Xin. I always will, and I will keep fighting to come back to you. Always.

Anna

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Sophie – 15

It was in Grandmama's little attic where she first found them hidden beneath all their glory: a pot of decent gold, some letters, and a roll of soft silk the colour of vintage pearls.

The girl didn't want to clean up the attic in the first place. It was dark, dirty, and infested with spiders and termites and mice and the nastiest creatures ever known to man. Why would Mom force her to clear the attic instead of anyone else? Though, she had to admit that a part of her wasn't even surprised. Mom had been acting ten times freakier than she usually was after Grandmama died from some kind of cancer some time ago. Honestly, what was the point? She died already. The girl knew there was no use worrying and mourning someone who would never walk on the face of the earth again. That was the cold, hard truth, and Mom needed to know it whether she liked it or not.

Plus, she didn't want to mourn for another hundred days. For God's sake, the funeral was done and over with. She didn't want to wear a piece of dull cloth that was basically like screaming in people's face, "Oh, look, my family member died, give me pity!" It was so embarrassing, especially at school where all her American friends would ask her what it was for. Of course, she wouldn't tell them it was a weird Chinese tradition that signified mourning. So, she did what any other sane being would do: she hid the cloth in her bag before school started, and put it on again before she went home.

It was *such* a smart idea. It was just too bad that Mom had to spoil it once again by catching her on the street without wearing a so-called "important" piece of cloth. Not only did she have to wear a white rag that didn't match her expensive, photo-worthy outfit, she now had to clean – to clean! – an attic that was a million years old. It made her absolutely furious.

Thankfully, those items that she found were a bit more interesting than the dust around her, so she decided to stick her nose around. Naturally, the girl grabbed the pot of gold first. She got over her initial disappointment at its lack of glamorous grandeur. After all, it would come in useful when she needed some cash. She then unrolled the roll of silk, but found it incredibly boring. She kicked it away, too lazy to roll it back. And all there was left, unfortunately, was the dull stack of letters.

It was trivial, she knew. Who would want to read some ancient scraps of garbage? But bear with her – there was literally nothing else to do up there. She had to find something to do. Thus, after screaming at a pile of cobwebs above her head, she settled in a corner and began to read.

Dear Kaiser (kai ze 凯泽),

I cannot bear it any longer! I am meant to be sewing a dress for a customer, but the sun is peeking out behind the cloud, persuading me to write to you instead. It's only been ten days since you've left for the palace to fulfil your dreams of being promoted as an official, but to me it's been an eternity.

I'm afraid my curiosity has got the better of me, as I have never been out of the village before. What does the palace look like? How are the people treating you? Is it true that for the emperor gets a hundred dishes each meal just for himself?

And to be honest, you've made me quite jealous. You get to travel all around China and experience things I've never even heard of before – just because you're male. I'm sorry, but don't you think that's just terribly unfair? It may be my culture, but that's not the kind of culture I want to believe in.

Please reply. The whole village has quietened down from the buzz and chatter to a drone of serenity. I'm rather lonely. Lonely, that's all. Oh well, I'll see you soon. Goodbye!

From Anna (an na 安娜)
July 1, 1405

From: The Grand Secretaries
To: Admiral Zheng He, Deputy Wang Jinghong

1. *In accordance to the reference, you will proceed and report to the Ministry of War to receive further assignment.*
2. *Your assignment consists of taking command of 27,000 troops to the Western Ocean on an expedition.*
3. *Your duties include preparing for the voyage and leading the fleet. Refer to the documents in the next package.*

July 11, 1405

From: Admiral Zheng He
To: Official Kaiser

Kaiser, hurry up. Hurry up and finish the documents for the voyage preparation and the crew recruit.

August 15, 1405

Dearest Anna,

Please do accept my apologies for not writing back. It has been absolute chaos at the palace – not that I've been spending much time there. I have been assigned by Admiral Zheng He to accompany him on an expedition. But Anna, it's no ordinary expedition! It's at sea, and we're sailing on the most magnificent treasure fleet I've ever laid my eyes on. Luckily for me, I get to test out the ship before we truly set sail.

Breathtaking. It's breathtaking. It's a hundred thousand tonnes of ancient oak, fashioned into a body of warm wood and might, with masts that reach the heavens, lifting maroon sails in the air, holding everything together. I get to sit by the bow each day, watching the sun wake up and fall asleep to a soundless lullaby. I get to count the stars as my bedtime story and watch the bow stroke the waves with a regal dignity unlike anything I've seen before.

Anna, I know you're fuming right now. I'm sorry you cannot be here and experience everything with me, but as you know, society is one strange thing. Why women are perceived as pretty, polite girls whose sole purpose in life is to get married is beyond my understanding. That's why I love you. You keep me on my toes and remind me every day to go against what is wrong, even though everyone thinks it's right.

Also, you will not believe what I managed to do! There is a space in the fleet crew that requires a good cook, and I know someone (I mean you, Anna.) who would be perfect for the job. I do hope it will make you quite happy. See you in a while.

Sincerely,
Kaiser

From: On Behalf of the Yongle Emperor
To: Crew, Officers, and Admirals of the Fleet

You have been invited to a ceremonial banquet to celebrate the fleet's maiden voyage tomorrow at the Grand Hall. On behalf of our country, China wishes you the best and we pray for a journey full of successes and a safe passage.

Autumn of 1405

From: Official Kaiser
To: Admiral Zheng He

Sir, the ship is ready for departure.

To: Fleet Registration

Anna Zhang and Kaiser Li:
Registered on Ship 1 – 7:17 am, October 26th, 1405.

Dear Kaiser,

Thank you, thank you, thank you! I cannot thank you enough for recruiting me as a cook on the ship. The ship is so incredibly exciting, from the bustle of the sailors up on deck to the cheeky gossip down in the common crew. I spend my rest times just sitting by the railing, staring out into the horizon, wondering and dreaming and thinking about everything and nothing. I listen. I listen to the whispers of the wind, telling me that this is what I'm meant to do, who I'm meant to be.

Can you believe how many places we've been to in the past seven months? According to one of the maps, we've sailed to Champa, Java, Malacca, Aru, Semudera, Lambri, Ceylon, Quilon and now Calicut. I feel like I'm invincible, that I can conquer every problem that stands before me. I feel free. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before.

I'm afraid, though. What happens after this voyage? Do I need to return home just to sew and sew until my fingers are sewn together in frustration? Do I need to give my freedom back and be controlled by society again?

I don't want to go back. I want to stay here, Kaiser, with you, with the sea, and with the freedom that comes with it. Even if the storms strike us down and the dark clouds cover our view, I want this anyway.

Okay. That's enough. Let's meet by the boiler room at 8 o'clock.

Anna

From: Admiral Zheng He
To: Officials and Officers

At Cape Comorin, we will change direction and begin the return journey to China. Alert the captain and crew immediately.

May 1405

From: Admiral Zheng He
To: Kaiser

Kaiser, I've been sent to Palembang to negotiate the pacification of Chen Zuyi. As you know, he happens to be the most vicious Chinese pirate dominating the Malaccan Strait. I have heard that he has plotted for attack. Prepare for battle.

September 1405

Dear Kaiser,

I think I am truly in love with you. Please tell me we can get married after we return –

EMERGENCY... EMERGENCY... EMERGENCY ...

*PIRATES SPOTTED NORTHEAST OF SHIP. PREPARE WEAPONS AND SECURE THE DECK.
CALLING ALL SAILORS, SOLDIERS AND OFFICERS.*

Dearest Anna,

There is going to be a war. By the time you receive this letter, I will be fighting with the other soldiers, and you will be safe and sound, as the rescue ship will come for the crew. I know this is very sudden, but bear with me – you need to understand. And I need to tell you now, just in case I don't make it.

This voyage had a purpose. To all you young, naive souls out there, it was not just to explore what was beyond our home. It was to display power to the kingdoms and trade ports nestled in the Indian Ocean. It was to show Chinese might to their world. And for me, and all the other officials, it was to take pride in our country.

I know you find our cultural identity is confusing. It has faults that anger you and force you to reject it, just like every other culture. Who wants to be proud of a culture that shuts down women yet raise up men? But Anna, I'm telling you, to just accept your identity. You are who you are, and no one can change that. You are born Chinese, and you will always be one, a child of the powerful nation that sailed the Indian Ocean.

I have snuck two items from the gift room for you to keep as a reminder of your first travels outside of the village. Use the gold as a light in the darkness, and to never dull your flame. Use the silk as a shield of protection and strength, and to never be afraid even when times are rough. And use the notes and letters I've collected just so you can share your story with our child, their children, and the next generation.

Remember, my dear. Remember that you have the power to inspire and to change not just yourself but the unjust things you see in your life. Use your heart, soul and mind to do what you love and love what you do. And I pray, I pray so hard, that you will find a heart that will open up to yours and adore you for who you are, and arms that hold you with love so deep it reaches infinity. I pray that you will find a mind that will help you dodge the obstacles in life, and eyes full of warmth and the feeling that you belong. But most of all, I pray for you, that you will be happy forever and ever, for you are your own person, and the most incredible person at that.

I love you, Anna.

With all the love that possibly exists in our universe,
Kaiser
September 17, 1405

The girl closed the letter as a tear rolled down her cheek. She couldn't help but wonder what happened afterward. Did Kaiser survive the war? Did he reunite with Anna to raise the child that would begin their generation? Did they live the happy ending that they yearned so much for?

She took a deep breath.

Kaiser's wish had come true. The story was shared indeed, and it was shared with her. But could she really call herself the next generation of great-great-great-something-grandmother and grandfather when she didn't even accept her ethnicity, her identity?

She couldn't.

The girl reached into the pocket of her pants and tightened her fingers around the cloth inside. Gently, she pulled the white fabric out. It was just a cloth, after all. But its meaning was an entire different story. A story that she had to tell, starting with herself. And with a small smile, Anna tied it to her arm.

The Ming Treasure Voyages

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Matharu, Ambi – 14

She used to tell me stories, ones about ghosts and ancient legends and pirates that sailed the world, but that was all before she left. People said she was delusional because she was chasing something she would never catch, but being a gullible child, I believed every word she said, and I don't regret it. Her name was Cece, Cece Ming, and she would walk around the campus, with her books in her hands, scrappy paper falling out of each end and pencil marks everywhere, looking like an utter mess. We went to university together, she majored in Ancient history, and I, Philosophy. She used to constantly 'remind' me to write down everything I'm thinking, that 'letting it out onto paper, is how a philosopher would handle everything,' but I've never been bothered with it. Unlike Cece, I have a Chinese name and an English one. Xi Shi is my Chinese one, but no one here in Manchester can pronounce it, so I go by Iris.

I tell myself every day that I have to hold on to every single memory I have of her, and not let a single one of them slip away. If I do, they she will actually be gone. She went missing in the middle of October last year, and coincidentally, today it's been exactly a year since then. She left a box of her stuff here in my room, and advised me to keep it out of reach of mom. I've never had the courage to open it though, so it sits here, beside me until the day it can finally be opened. I don't know when that will be. I have a letter from her from the day she left, which I have been saving for today...I think?

*Iris,
By the time you read this, I will have left.
I need your help.
Open the box next to you, but don't tell mom anything.
Cece x*

I flip the paper over and skim the back of it. To my surprise, that's all she wrote. A small post-it, in a white envelope with my name on it. That's all she had to say to me. That was it! Although I'm exasperated at how that's what I've been waiting to open for the past year, I can't help but be curious as to where she is and why she's there. She wrote it as if it was a text message, as if last year, she predicted that I was going to be reading this, whilst sitting next to her box in the corner of my room. I reach over to the box, as if to open it, but as I get closer and closer, I feel a shiver run down my spine, forcing my hand back and away from Cece's box. Mom is still not home, so if I were to open it and she walked through the front door, would I be able to put it all back the way it was, before she came up and saw it all? I would give anything to see Cece. A rush of adrenaline runs through me, and I grab the box, whole heartedly ripping it open.

Papers, scrolls, sketches, broken compasses. It's just a box of her old junk.

Unenthused, I pick up a piece of paper in the box that catches the corner of my eye. It was burnt around the edges, and crumpled up as if it had been squashed into someone's pocket. It starts off with a name, then a date – 1403? It looks like a piece of someone's diary, but looking at the date, it must be a prank or something. As I read through the ancient looking text, I come to realise that due to how its written, it might actually be from 1403. I remember my professor mentioning something about 1403, and how it was a great historical and philosophical time, but its hidden somewhere at the back of my head, and I don't have the willpower to try and search for it now.

I've just labelled a little file, which I will hopefully put some important papers in, Cece's ones, ones that can lead me to her. So, as I rummage through this scrappy little box, labelled 'home,' all I find is more junk, or what looks like junk from my perspective. I just got a text from mom, too, and she said she won't be home till early tomorrow, so I decide to go back to campus with Cece's box. It's all starting to hit me, right in the face. Everything that has happened today is so overwhelming (in a sad way), making my head swirl and feel like there is a build-up of clouds waiting to burst and shower an abundance of tears. I should probably sleep on it, and hopefully tomorrow morning I'll have a clear enough head to understand everything inside it.

It's the next day now. I have purposely woken up earlier than usual, so I can do some more research into some of the papers in Cece's box. I find a sheet with a title "The Ming Voyages," and I search it up but only one result shows up. As anyone would, I click on it, but everything goes blank, so without thinking about it, I delete the page, in case it's some sort of virus. Instead, I decide to use Cece's research. I scan everything into my computer, and sort through it all

thoroughly. This way I can look closely at all the details on my screen. I figure that finding my sister is more important than going to my lecture this afternoon, so I go on reading throughout the whole day. Dates, numbers, locations, names. Zheng He's 7 Voyages across the so called 'Western Ocean.' After reading a considerable number of papers, I concluded that Cece was looking for something the pirates on the Ming Voyages left somewhere. The first of Zheng He's voyages set out on July 11th, 1405. They travelled around the Indian ocean and were comprised of 317 ships with 27 870 men aboard. They were Chinese pirates, but good pirates. Instead of stealing gold and jewels, they delivered them from the emperor to other countries to form new friendships. She specified that 7 voyages were planned, but only 6 succeeded, as the last fleet of ships couldn't get to their last location, which resulted in the emperor ordering the sailor-pirates to leave the gift somewhere hidden, for a future descendent to find.

It was all confusing to me at this point. Why would Cece care about this and leave to try and find a gift that was left by an old Chinese emperor in the 1400s? I think that's what she's doing. Something pops up on my screen, it looks like a conversation on Gmail, but I don't know who it's from. It just says 'unknown.' It's an address, or part of one:

SO14AD
(*Southampton*)

As unsettling as it is, getting an email from an unknown source with an address on it, something is drawing me to it. I have the strongest gut feeling that Cece is there. From Manchester to Southampton should only take about 4 or 5 hours if I catch the quick train. Thinking about it, I would need to miss about a week of classes and lectures, so there's going to be a load of work to catch up on, but it'll be worth it. If I find her.

I get the first train from Manchester station to Southampton. Luckily, my train is going all the way there, so I have about 5 hours to kill. I'm having a look at places around the postcode that was emailed to me, but it seems that it's in the middle of nowhere. The closest thing I've found to the postcode is a little cafeteria, three miles away. I'm almost in Southampton now, and am feeling a chill rush down my spine as I get closer and closer. The moment I hop off the train, I jump in a cab and show the driver the postcode. I have absolutely no clue where I'm going, I only hope that I'll find Cece there. Part of me is eager to get out of the cab, and run towards the sketchy little shop I see outside the car window, however, the other part of me wants to tell the taxi driver to take me right back to the station, so I can hop on a train back home. Mum has messaged me far too many times, so I've told her I'm in my lecture and muted the conversation for now.

After paying the driver, I reluctantly step out of the car and walk towards the mysterious shop in front of me. I get closer and closer, and stand by the front door of the shop, half asleep and half awake. Something startles me. It's an old lady staring at me on the other side of the door. I jolt backwards, and she opens the door, initially with a confused face. But that confused face soon turns into a warm smile. As she leads me into the small shop, she points out all the ancient collectables she has. I can tell she's describing them and how she came to get them, but the words are blurred in my head. All I can think about is finding Cece. In the middle of her sentence, I abruptly say 'Cece.' She stops. 'Sorry ma'am, but you haven't by any chance seen a young girl, about my age, around this area, have you?' She stares at me for a second or two, and starts to shake her head calmly, but it gradually turns to a nervous nod. She points me towards a door on my right, and I feel anxious to open it. Then, without realising, I've already opened it.

There she is. I see her, sitting in front of me, surrounded by a ring of papers.

I shout 'Cece!'

She jumps up and runs towards me. I can't believe I've found her after all this time. As great as the moment is, seeing my big sister again, I suddenly pull away and slap her.

'How could you just leave me?' I shout.

But she doesn't answer, instead, tears start running down her face, and I go back in for a hug, apologising for snapping at her. She sits me down and talks to me about everything she's found, all the articles about the 7 voyages that were never published, all the treasures Zheng He offered. As Cece goes on, I look over at the old lady and roll my eyes, she

smiles and points back at Cece, but I can't figure out what she's getting at. After phasing out for a few moments, Cece tells me that we need to be leaving now, so as she gathers her papers, I walk over to the old shop lady, and ask her why she pointed back at Cece.

'You two are very special kids, you know?'

'Why?'

'Everything your sister is trying to tell you, it's true.'

I look at Cece, and by the time I turn back around to face the old lady, she's gone. As Cece and I walk to the front door, we find a note on it saying:

*What you seek to find is a treasure that was meant to be found by a descendent of the Ming family.
Is that you?*

It's not as if the old lady is able to magically reply, but just for jokes, I write 'yes' on the paper left on the door. We step through the rustic looking door in its ill-fitting frame and we expect it to slam behind us. But there she is again, the old lady, holding the note, and this time, she looks suspiciously happy. She stares at us, wishes us good luck, and walks down towards us, handing us a little slip of paper, again with an address on it. A thought pops into my head – what if she was the unknown person that sent me the email? As if **she** wanted me to find my sister?

It's been a long day, so I'm planning to head to the nearest and cheapest motel I can find.

As a child, before he passed away, my father always used to tell me that all great philosophers and adventurers write down everything. All their adventures, all their thoughts, are logged in a diary so that maybe one day, when that philosopher is long gone, someone can learn from what they did, what they thought, and make new discoveries and write it all down. Unlike Mother, he also used to tell me that usually, the things that Cece would think, were right and if it ever came to it, to believe what she says, even if it contradicts what I think of the matter. And that's what I've done, my whole life, until there was a gap for a year where I didn't have a 'Cece' to rely on. I think about that as I walk, and realise I want to follow Cece because I believe in her, just like my father did. After hours of walking, we find an old scrappy box, hidden under some leaves, in the middle of nowhere.

You're not going to believe what we've found.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Harrow International School Shanghai, Shen, Brightly – 14

The silent waves pushed towards golden bay, flipping and twisting the white shells and corals like a bored child fiddling its toy, the beach was empty with no one lying on the beach—chairs nor under the brightly colored umbrellas. Suddenly a shimmer of red and gold was revealed under the sand, glimmering in the afternoon sun. It was a bookmark. The waves pushed and pulled the golden bookmark, hiding and showing the red pea stone welded in it, making it turn and spin until it was finely out of the sea's wretch, lying still on the smooth sand.

Thud, thud, the damp sea wind blew away the distant calls of seagulls and cars driving by, but couldn't cover the sounds of footsteps stepping closer and closer. A clean delicate hand reached down to the bookmark...

As the waves and boats retract back to the sea and the days and nights rewind, we would peak where the red beans grow to unfold a story untold.

A rustle of footsteps past out from a mansion shattering the silence of the gloomy rain, a man in his 40s pasted up and down the room, his hands cluttered to a scroll behind his back, his face pale with distress "What to do! The emperor has given the order, every family has to give a young man to join the Ming treasure voyages and our only son is not an officer!" he muttered "Who will carry our family name if he's dead on half way? Even a fool knows going on this voyage is suiciding."

"How about the exam? There's one coming soon, as long as he passes and becomes an officer the emperor can't do anything." A woman, already covered in tears suddenly quivered, her eyes told that this was the last hope.

Their worried voices past out the window, into a girl's ear, her eyes like a pair of black pearls, hair smooth as silk, her little nose and smooth outline make her seem as if she always gave a soft warm smile, but now with her thin brows crossed with concern, her clean delicate hands had crunched in a fist, ignoring the crumpling book. She raised her hand ready to knock. However, moments later not a single knock ended on the door as her hands was hold down by her matchmaker "don't you worry May my dear, when I find you a rich man to marry, your brother won't need to go on that suicide mission, all you have to do is buy him a place as an officer, and have a chubby baby boy."

The round matchmaker smiled in pride revealing her golden teeth, yet soon her smile vanished, instead her foxlike eyes round with fear "What on earth, are you holding!" She snatched the crumpled book away from May and stared at it in disgust "A girl looking at papers and ink? Next I'd be expecting a dog spitting ivory! Only man spend their time on useless symbols on paper, we woman do much more important things, learning how to make fabric and needle work and taking after the family. Only these girls could get married."

May snatched the book back, her face red in fury "This is not only ink and paper! Can't you read the title 'Three hundred poems of Tang'?" Not waiting for the matchmakers response she thundered into the bookroom and slammed the door. Leaving the matchmaker in the soggy rainy air and steam puffing out of her ears.

"The weathers better then yesterday aren't it?" May smiled as she walked on the sunny street.

"Ya." The Matchmaker murmured in response, her eyes flashing around in alert, as though expecting the passersby to do a sudden charge at them "I still wonder what kind of a father would let his daughter touch books and pens then allow her to go in public at the age of marriage."

May giggled, her voice like the clear tingles of a stream, but stopped in a sudden, her eyes glowed as she stared at the small dusty pave. The matchmaker looked over her shoulder, the pave was small and dusty but was covered in a bright glimmer as the jewels it sold reflected the sunlight, yet what formed a huge contract to the splendor of jewels, was the shopkeeper. The old hag stared at them with dull bored eyes and gave a warp sneer, the matchmaker narrowed her thin eyes but May smiled back and asked "How much would that be?"

Her hands ignored the clear emerald bracelets and glittering golden rings, instead it ended on a pair of metal bookmarks each with a red pea stone welded in it. The old hag's sneer stiffed, she raised her brows and looked at May with query, but soon she smiled and finished exchange in speed, as though afraid that she regrets.

"You know that the bookmark is made of metal, do you?" The matchmaker asked in disbelief. May nodded with a big grin as she slid the pair into her 'Three hundred poems of Tang' then clipped the book under her arm "the red bean stones remind me of a poem I've read, it's worth it." She said and turned ready to head back, not noticing a piece of golden glimmer fell out of her book.

"Hello? Is this yours?" an uncertain sound came from behind.

A hand was holding one of the red bean bookmarks. It was a young man. May recognized the uniform he was wearing. 'A scholar.' she thought, her sight moving to the patch on his shoulder and sleeve. 'a poor scholar.'

"Yes, its mine." May smiled, the young man's face flushed.

'an honest poor scholar.' Amused and interested, May thought. 'And a little handsome.'

"Wait, is that 'Three hundred poems of Tang'?" The young man stopped flushing and stared at May's book as if it was a gold brick.

"You've read this?" surprised, May asked in excitement.

"I've read through three times in a row!" He said in pride.

"Well, I'm on my fifth!" May grinned, passion shone in both of their eyes. "We should have a cup of tea some time, oh, and my name is..." the rest of her sentence was faded in the shouts of scholars, school was over, leaving May only the name and teahouse

"...June...South land tea..."

After that haste first meet, they met often. Discussing all kinds of literatures, from poems to jambic verses. As time dripped and dropped, friendship sprouted from their hearts, but not only did the friendship show its peek in their hearts, so did something else – love. Even so nothing changed, they still talked about the same tales and books, but a goal was stealthily, silently planted: June would go to the exam to become an officer in order to become rich and marry May.

Rain poured, concealing the crashes of the distance sea, thunder and lightning stroked making the wind weep in fear. The door of June and Mays rented bookroom banged open as June bumped in, his face white and pale, mixed with rain and tears. May, reading one of the pages in 'the collection of poems from Tang', the jewel red bean book mark placed in it, looked up, her heart fell ice cold when she met his eyes.

"Well?" she whispered in a shaky voice. Wishing that her guess was wrong.

"I failed the officer exam." June croaked back, "still, I could run a bookstore and get rich..."

Bang! May threw back her chair, her tears busted out her empty terrified eyes. Stunned by Mays overreaction, June tried to comfort her, but May just threw the book on to him and ran out of the door. June still frozen, stunned and miserable stood their placing the book in his pocket.

The next day May still came, she told him to make his own book store. But all she did now was burring herself with work.

A year past, the bookstore opened in success, and May seemed to have walked out the shadows of the failed exam.

Everything sang spring was coming, if you ignore the furious looks on May's father and matchmaker. After knowing the news about the store, the matchmaker left in reproach, and May's father came to bungle June and Mays bookstore. Yet when got there all he saw was a few shelves of books, sitting near was May, June and a few other scholars and children. So he stood there for a whole day, looking them talk and smile about different books. May's father left with a smile on his face too.

Not after long he acquiesce June and May to get married.

June, May and their family all lived in joy, and the news that May's brother had become an officer made things only better. Things should have last this way, until all of their hair turns white, until their shop became famous to all of the land of south, but when the news of the Ming voyages came back to their mind, all was too late. Before the last goodbyes, June got pulled away into the huge stomach of the boat, into the claws and jaws of the deep unknown sea. Leaving only the broken hearts of two young lovers, and the dripping tears sliding of the red bean stone bookmark.

A few days past, facing the deep blue sea, June sat on the deck of one of the ships, holding 'three hundred poems of tang' he gave a small grin, he founded this book in his pocket, and flipped to the page where the red bean bookmark lay. It was Wang Wei's 《相思》

红豆生南国，春来发几枝？

愿君多采撷，此物最相思。

Red beans grow in the land of south, how many new branches do they grow every spring?

I hope you can enjoy the collection of them, as they show the most sustenance love.

'So she knew all this time.' June smiled at the red bean bookmark. Slowly he moved his sight towards the sea it was blue and unfathomable yet calm, the same in his eyes when he saw a huge black hole of the canon spitting its fire tongue to their boat.

The wings of seagulls once young and bright that flew over the south sea sky had turned grey and dull, the clouds that once cried in sorrow had thinned and faded through time.

The south land teahouse bookstore, known by every scholar and child, had a special background, it was famous for not only the endless shelves of books and tea but the owner who knew every tale in every book she sold, she was an old

lady with a red bean bookmark in her hair. There was also a tale about the bookmark, that there once was a pair and that the lovers who had one each would be together forever.

“Is that true? The story of the bookmark.” Asked a group of children, eyes opened wide to see the bookmark on June’s white hair.

“Who knows.” June said, she looked the sky, it was blue and unfathomable yet calm, the same in her eyes.

After her death her bone ash was poured into the sea, so was the bookmark.

The bookmarks had separated so did their heart.

The waves brushed through the centuries, repeating its endless course, the branches of red bean fell and grew covering the scars time left. Where we go back to the present where the bookmark was brought back to land.

It was a girl who picked up the red bean stone bookmark, her eyes like a pair of black pearls was fixed on the bookmark with curiosity, her hair smooth as silk, her little nose and smooth outline make her seem as if she always gave a soft warm smile. Her thin brows raised in surprise, as her clean delicate hands clinched gently to the bookmark, she looked around but didn’t see the owner, so she shrugged and rubbed of the sand. Raising the bookmark under the sun she smiled as it shined then slipped it in her book and clipped it under her arms.

Following the girl’s steps, the café’s doorbell tingled, a glimmer of gold fell out of her book when she walked past a table with a young man reading his book, the same bookmark slipped in his book, but this time the sound of the bookmark was clear on the stone floor. The girl looked back in a hurry, just in time to see the young man handing her the bookmark

“Hello? I believe this is yours.” He said, this time without questioning.

Reincarnation

Harrow International School Shanghai, Xu, Annie – 13

In the beginning, Pan Gu split the chaotic world in prehistoric times into Heaven and Earth. He sacrificed his body to create mountains, rivers, the moon and the Sun.

From that point on, the order of Heaven and Earth was created, all humans owned a soul where merits could be recorded, and this soul would reincarnate in the Underground City after each death. It was from nature that each soul had its own destiny recorded on the Sansheng rock by the Underground City. One should not and cannot change their destiny. If one did, then it would symbolize the contrary of natural law and the manifestation of heaven's will.

Everything was in order, systematically, until Yong Le 14 years, December, Ming.

It's 2.30am, the sea waves shimmered under the silvery moonlight. The scene looked aesthetic, but... Si encountered the most tragic seasickness.

Si is a kind-hearted twenty year old young man. Although he is plain-looking, but he is hard-working, honest, and reliable. He loved his career and he does everything steadily and produces high-quality work. He is a sailor. He had a dream since he was young, and that is to have an adventurous job in relation with the sea. He loved everything about the sea, as if it was his destiny to do so...

All of his family told him that he is different since he was born. On one occasion, his mother brought him out to the markets and met a fortune-teller. The fortune-teller said: "The soul of this child contains a profound merit. He is the after life of a central figure in the past. However beware, he might have an inexorable doom at the age of twenty. I can say no more about the rest, the secret of God's design shall not be revealed."

Although he was already twenty, he never sensed any danger or felt that he had the soul of a central figure. He felt as ordinary as everyone else.

He couldn't stand the seasickness anymore, so he went outside to feel the sea breeze, which might give him a sense of relief.

Just then, enormous waves rose violently without any precautions. Dark clouds shrouded rapidly over the bright moonlight and a gale began to blow. This made the whole ship rock severely, which wakened the sailors. Lots of them began to panic in a hopeless tangle... including Si.

Suddenly, an immensely dark shadow appeared in the large gale with the size about twelve metres tall. It looked like a ferocious tiger with a pair of pointy wings.

Si knew immediately that this was one of the Four Ominous Beasts since the remote ages— Qiong Qi.

Qiong Qi did not give him the chance to consider more, it bit into his head, right into the skull, in an instant blood erupted out from the top of his neck.

He had no head.

Qiong Qi chewed his head in his mouth, it did not care about the rest of Si's scarlet body and flew away.

It came and went in a hurry, the sea turned back to its serene scene, the mild moonlight shone on the waves which gently lashed against the ship, sending up pearly sprays.

Si woke up in the darkest place he could ever imagine as he heard two very different voices calling for him.

"Your Majesty..." a trembling voice filled with emptiness and void called torpidly.

"Your Majesty!" a ferocious voice filled with violence and brutality called relentlessly.

Although the two voices differentiates distinctly, they all sounded exceptionally polite, but spooky.

As Si opened his eyes, he could see two blurry humanlike figures, one white, one black. As his vision became clearer he could now apparently see two ghosts kneeling beside him.

The white one was smiling eerily, he was tall, thin and pale white, as if he was made out of paper. He had a protracted, lurid tongue dangling wildly down from his smiling mouth.

The black one looked fierce and tough, he was rotund and elephantine with a dark black face.

Si, being a man who loved reading bizarre and curious legends, understood that the two 'figures' in front of him were the Black and White Wu Chang. They were the ghosts responsible for guiding the souls of the newly dead to the Gate of Hell.

"Your Majesty...!" The ghosts bowed respectfully, "we have sent you to the Gate of Hell already. Ox Head Horse Face should be here any minute now!"

It was only then did Si realize that his body was transparent. He was at the entrance of a gate saying 'Gate of Hell' on it. It was caliginous all around, and from time to time there were ghostly cries echoing.

"Thank you..." said Si, frightened with his lips trembling, but still kept his manners, "however, what did you just

call...?”

“Your Majesty! We arrived late, please forgive us,” two voices interrupted as two manlike figures trotted towards him from the gate... except, one had the head of an ox, and one had the face of a horse. They were Ox head Horse face, who were responsible for guiding the souls to pass through the Underground City, to the Palace of Hell.

Without the chance of asking his queries, Ox head Horse face led Si into the Gate of Hell. They walked on a bluestone slab road, the road surface was very uneven. This was the legendary Huangquan Road, which is a lead road to the Palace of Hell. Ghosts on the Huangquan Road were either crying thrillingly or screeching eerily for human lives.

The Harbour

Harrow International School Shanghai, Zhu, Lisa – 14

Under the mild, warm air, the sky has born black clouds since autumn came, the harbour became as grey as a newspaper picture until the morning sun decides to shine its blinding light over everything...

It was the very first thing to pierce the utter darkness which covered the harbour. The morning sun had just woken up, it rose like a flower opening in the spring time, gifting its warm petals to the world whilst slowly painting the pale, grey sky with a layer of burning red. The peeking sun illuminated a quivering path across the surface of the never-ending ocean. It bathed the ocean's meek waves as well as the delicate clouds in a flaming red. The blinding light rays of the sun reflected, it shone across the ocean. The blinding light made all the water droplets glisten, allowing them to shine, like diamonds hidden with beauty. The waves of the harbour play a melodic music day and night, they create a unique music that cannot be heard anywhere else. The ocean never gets tired, never misses a beat and through both brilliant days yet also the darkest nights, the percussion of the shore keeps on a lullaby for everyone to hear but also for everyone to admire.

Dozens of trees lined on either side of the harbour, their branches quiver, their leaves were brought down to earth by an invisible spiral of breeze. I watched as a single golden leaf pirouetted down, spinning through the air as it let itself be carried down. There was a slight shoo, as if it could've been whisked away any second but it kept floating down. It floated past me and landed lightly on the ground, the flamboyant, vibrant colour standing out against the ambers and bronzes laying beneath it. The leaf seemed so delicate, as if any slight movement could cause a tear, or a wrinkle. However, this was a corpse of what was once summer on the docks, where the harbour was filled with bright green. Each leaf danced from branch to ground, they were each a colourful flag with the freedom to roam the skies. Crisp golden leaves lay like a blanket on the floor, birds shot from branch to branch as twigs snapped and the leaves crunched under the feet of sailors who made their way to their ships.

There was a calmness to the surrounding, as if the usual heat which hovered over every day was gone, fanned away by the light breeze which was filled with the aroma of the saltiness of the ocean. In my opinion, the wind has always been a fascinating topic. In coldness, it rouses me to wakefulness, alertness. In soft breezes, it is finer than silk, it caresses my skin with a gentle touch. Today, I find myself feeling the cooling breeze bringing warmth to me softly. I took another look around, the world surrounding me was painted with both a bright red and orange, the sun had risen further up into the sky, reaching all life, waking all up. Every single second is rich, whilst the sky became a new painting from moment to moment, it would be miniscule changes being made to the sky, a splash of red in a different region, another cloud being covered with a shade of orange.

Each passer-by is a person, all capable of laughter and joy. Yet, somehow, everyone that I saw was distracted, hurrying, eyes cast down onto the floor, all hurrying to their boats to start their days off, as if they had been beamed to this stunning paradise but didn't have the time to notice. I stared, at the people scattering by, racing to their ships, charging to get onto the ocean, hastening to start their day. This, this was what I saw every morning, how would today be any different? On days, I would wonder who would be the first to notice the beauty in which surrounds them, who would be the first to raise their heads and take in the surroundings, who would be the first to break the loop in which we all exist in...

Above the white tipped blue, the gulls own the sky, their wings beat, hugging the mild wind. These gulls would spread their wings and make their way across the ocean in search of a prey, they would glide against the wind, hover above the ocean surface. They would often approach the fishing fleets, who have just left the port, who have barely begun their haul, hoping to feast on a few fishes which the fishermen have caught, yet, to no avail. The gulls cry and make their inverted arcs, hungry, tenacious. The fisherman would try his best to wave them away without making them agitated. However, what is the ocean without the squawking of the gulls? The air would be an empty void, at the same time, everyone's ears would be grieving for the sound from these animals which roam the sky freely, these animals which own the sky above us.

Admiring far into the horizon, where the sun has left a trail of flaming red high up across the beautiful, blue canvas, which was the beautiful sky, I couldn't tell where the ocean ended nor where the sky began. The ocean seemed to integrate with the clear sky, they both seemed, endless. The water was clean and soft. Gentle. It could have fooled those who haven't been a victim of a sea storm with its façade. However, in my many, many years abroad, I can see past the disguise of the vast ocean, I understand the true colours of this majestic beauty, the true dangers that it holds. Every time we take to the seas, it was a gamble on our lives. We are all well aware of this, but no one has the ability to quit this addiction where we enter the unknown.

After a while of gazing into the horizon, I noticed in the corner of my eye, the rest of the crew slowly beginning to pile onto the enormous ship, hauling their cargo, stacking their merchandise into heaps. Yet, no one made any effort to take in the scenery, to experience the beauty before we set sail to the ends of the earth. I was the only one to stand at the head of the ship and observe the surroundings, no matter how long I've been part of the crew, this was something I would be doing every day, watching, as the sun made its way up the sky, as the ocean began to glimmer, as the gulls began to cry.

What would be brought to us on this journey? No one knows. I savour this moment that I am in, wondering what's to come whilst we explore what's beyond the horizon...

The Admiral's Last Voyage

Heep Yunn School, Cho, Shu Nga Keziah – 14

He was going to die.

That was all he knew as he lay limply on the bed, his eyes glazed over, gazing at nothing in particular. Scarcely minutes ago every inch of his body had been ablaze with pain, and panic had consumed him as he fought frantically against the illness burning him alive.

Now he felt nothing but a sort of serene resignation. He was going to die, and he might as well die at peace.

The Xuande Emperor's voice rang in his ears. *One last voyage, San Bao. This will be an expedition no one in the world has ever seen the like of.*

The corners of San Bao's—or Zheng He's—pale lips turned up slightly in a faint smile. An expedition no one had ever seen the like of. The past few years had been just that, had they not?

For some people the world consisted of a worn-out village, a dusty hut, and a wife who could cook and sew. For some it consisted of sparkling mansions, glamorous young women in flowing robes, endless music and dancing. His was a boundless world of blue, of sun-dappled waves dancing beneath him, of myriads of stars that guided him and his crew through the palpable darkness of the night. His was a world of trunks overflowing with fragrant tea and lustrous silk, translucent porcelain and rich brocades woven with the finest gold thread in all of the Empire; things he and his crew would give to the rest of the world. It was a world of exotic, far-off lands, populated by dark-skinned men who gifted them in return with smooth ivory, vibrant feathers in every hue imaginable, gemstones that sparkled and shone in the sunlight, and a *qilin*.

Amidst excruciating spasms of pain, Zheng He laughed inwardly. What a queer animal they had been given by the envoys of Malindi once; a *qilin*. How he and his crew had stared in awe when that giant, towering beast had come into sight! He could almost see it now, the gracefully slender creature with a neck that stretched higher than the treetops, its elegant frame covered in a silky, spotted coat of fur the colour of golden hay.

His sailors and the court officials had marvelled over the quaint horns on the creature's head, as well. "They have brought us the legendary *qilin*, San Bao," one of the court officials in the palace had told him, excitement in his voice. "Its horns, its body—they are exactly as the early scholars described it. A good omen, sir; a good omen."

That was before the Yongle Emperor passed away. The Yongle Emperor, who had treated him as a friend, who had held him in high esteem as if he was a prized jewel.

He had always wondered where the Emperor had gone after death, the man who had trusted him so. Now he was about to find out.

As the Emperor passed away, so had this grand world of Zheng He's. He had watched, helpless, as the new Hongxi Emperor closed the empire's doors to the world. He had not seen the burning of the fleet, but he could see it in his mind's eye—the ships which had roamed a thousand miles on water, now utterly submerged in a sea of fire, the orange flames licking higher, higher.

Had he been devastated, then, since such glorious voyages had been brought to a halt? No, not exactly devastated; he was becoming too old for those trips anyway. It was only that during those five years in which he did not once set sail, in his dreams, he sometimes found himself and his crew roaming the seas again, striking awe into the hearts of nations. In his dreams, he sometimes heard the name *The Great Ming Empire* whispered in admiration throughout remote places, and he would glow inwardly knowing that it was because of him.

As it was the Hongxi Emperor had died, and he had been given one last mission to complete. One last chance to rule the waves.

One last voyage, the new Xuande Emperor had said to him, his resonant voice echoing through every corner of the hall. And although Zheng He's once-bright eyes had dimmed and his hair had turned a silvery grey and his great towering frame was not nearly as strong as it used to be, he soon found himself aboard the ship once more, the wind tousling his hair, the sailors at his command, the constellations his guide to the great unknown.

And, oh, what a journey it had been—three more years of sailing, of extending the glowing name of the Empire to faraway countries and barbarian regions, in much the same way as the sun extends its rays to even the murkiest of places. His fleet of one hundred ships had taken them further and further away from the Empire, sailing to the edge of the world, trunks of golden baubles and glittering jewels glinting in the warm sunlight all the way. They had visited flurries of distant lands, city after city swirling about them like seawater—Qui Nohn, Surabaya, Hormuz, Mogadishu. And now they were returning home.

Perhaps he had known death was approaching all along, during this particular trip. He had felt it in the mellow breeze that had suddenly become cold and biting, and in the way the soft sunlight seared his skin. He had felt it in every faltering step he took, in the strain of his failing limbs, in every frantic pulse of his heart, in the voice inside him imploring him to slow down, slow down. He had never heeded the voice, had never slowed down. He had moved like lightning, day and night. Perhaps that was his mistake, he thought, a trifle ruefully.

Could he possibly leave this world behind? To slip away quietly, to abandon the sea and the ship and his friends—all that he knew? The more imminent it became, the more inconceivable it was. He could feel the footsteps of his fate approaching, closer and closer. Zheng He's bloodshot eyes searched for the sky to no avail, meeting the blank ceiling instead. What was this queer ache deep inside of him?

He felt them all beginning to fade from his memory, the countless escapades he and his crew had shared. What persisted in reverberating through the vast hall of his mind were fragments; a wisp of a salty breeze across his cheeks, a brief blinding flash of gold as a piece of jewelry caught the light, the fleeting satisfaction glinting in the Emperor's eyes as he caught sight of the sparkling trinkets given to him as tribute.

“*San Bao?*”

Hundreds and thousands of days, all hazy through a misty veil of sea spray. Perhaps that was enough, after all, for him to hold on to as he embarked on his last journey—hopefully—into *Jannah*. Into paradise, where greater adventures awaited.

“*San Bao*. We have arrived at the port of Kozhikide.” The sailor's voice rang out, clear and crisp. Through his blurred vision he saw the silhouette of a young man standing against the rosy sunset glow spilling in from the doorway. “We shall soon be home again.”

Zheng He closed his eyes. To the young sailor, perhaps, they were on a return trip. But not for him. He felt as if he was floating on water, drifting, further and further away. For the first time in his life he did not know where he was headed towards, but he knew, somehow, that all was well.

He chuckled at the ceiling, too feeble to turn his head in the sailor's direction. “Home?” he murmured. “I have miles yet to travel on my own.”

The admiral was making his last voyage on smooth waters.

The Sea's Song

Heep Yunn School, Tsui, Yu Hei Iris – 14

I believe that the sea can sing.

Sitting on the shore, I put my hand out into the water. The water tugs at my fingers, as if trying to pull me into the ocean's welcoming arms. The waves ripple, breaking the smooth surface of the ocean, crested with white foam that sparkles in the setting sun. The golden rays of light dance on them, caressing my cheeks gently.

I close my eyes, and everything recedes. The sea whispers, speaks in its haunting tongue; the ripples of the waves playing out its tune on its own silken strings. The notes rise and crash at my feet, and I am home.

~

"What do you think it is saying?" my father asked me once, when I was eight.

"I don't speak Ocean," I protested.

"One day you'll understand what it's saying."

"How do you know?" I asked without opening my eyes.

My father's hand ruffled my hair. "You were named after the great Mohamed, son," he said, "and you will discover Allah's greatest gift."

I can taste the salty sea spray on my tongue as the gulls swoop around me. "Tell me again about your last voyage," I said.

"Again?"

"It's my favorite story."

I could feel him heave a laugh, though there is something deeper, a reluctance to it.

"The day I went to Mecca was a fine summer day," he said. "The stars were my only guide, but they were enough – enough to guarantee a map in the skies, veiled by the clouds, wreathed by moonlight. Such beauty!"

"What did you do with that map?"

My father's smile waned. "With sheer power of memory I committed the map of the stars to paper. It will guide any seafarer who is of my blood. It tells of the routes of conquest – and even more. It guarantees victory in battle to whoever can read it. If that map is in your hand, if you are worthy enough to decipher its wisdom – there is no war you cannot win. You have no idea – the map of the stars has power none can withstand; all men would flee before the wielder's face, for his wrath would then become terrible to behold."

"Where is it?" I asked, entranced.

"Gone," said my father. "The new emperor of the Ming dynasty tried to take away my creation. He wanted conquest – he wanted to use it to conquer the lands beyond China. I told him that a wise warrior always avoids the battle but he didn't listen. So, to keep it out of their reach – I placed it in the protection of Tianfei."

"Where?" I said.

My father smiled. "The map tells of a treasure, a secret even deeper than the road to conquest written in the stars. A secret very few have ever come to possess," he said. He paused. "I destroyed the map."

"What?"

"Yes, son – I tore it into pieces – seven pieces. In that way, only a great seafarer of my blood will be able to find it, for it is protected by the power of the oceans. Scattered all over the seas, it awaits the day be put together again."

~

TWO YEARS LATER

He is gone.

I try to smell the salty sea air that is miles away, try to feel the tremor of the ocean waters that is world away, try to see the rays of golden sunshine dancing on the waves. I am Ma He. I am the son of Ma Hajji. I am ten years old.

I am a son with no father.

Hands bound, eyes darkened, I keep reliving those last, terrible moments of my father.

I remember the clash of the Mongol and Ming armies. The shouts, the cold rings of steel in the air, the blood flowing – the rising of the red sun.

I remember glimpsing my father as he shouted aloud, his face glowing in the light of the rising sun, the fading stars wheeling above him, crowning his brow.

I remember the cold Ming blade that went into him, the blood that spilled from his stomach to the floor.

I remember my cry of anguish to the heavens.

And I know, in that instant, that the moment will always be branded into my mind. I can't see the ocean waters. But I can hear them, whispering in my mind, a lament of torturing, a grief of no ends.

~

His name is Zhu Di. And I am his slave, named anew, by the name of Zheng He.

They told me what I was, why I was brought here. I remember the cold eyes of the Hongwu Emperor as he gazed down at me with hungry eyes – eyes that had no interest in me, only in the key I hold to obtaining my father’s treasure.

They told me what my father was: a traitor and a fool. He refused to serve the Ming dynasty, hid from them his creation when it could have served so many great purposes. For that he must die. And there is a reason they left me alive – because I alone have the greatest potential to uncover my father’s map.

I am a slave who gained my enemy’s trust, became Zhu Di’s confidant through a honeyed tongue. I repeated the respectful words, letting them flow like bitter cud from my mechanical lips, while underneath my heart seethed in fury.

I am a long way from the sea. Yet the waters still lash at my heart, the salty water against the wounds left behind my father’s death. I can still hear the furious waves, sending blood throbbing through my veins, roaring in my ears, filling my mind with only one word discernible.

Revenge.

~

“Well, what do you think, my friend?” says Zhu Di, gesturing proudly to the magnificent structures that line the harbor.

My eyes rove over the great ships that bob gently on the seas, and they take my breath away. The oars are golden and the timber gleaming white, the sails as pale as the argent moon. They are larger than any ship I have ever seen; nine masts, what I would judge to be about a hundred and thirty meters long.

“You have done well, my liege,” I say.

“What you see before you is only the tip of the iceberg,” he says. “There’re also troop transports, fuchuan warships, even more. This treasure ship, of course, is the best of them all – upon this boat you will be commander.” He glances at me and a manic gleam seems to come to his eyes. “You will set foot upon the lands and the deeps untrodden, discover the towering mountains, green shores and the never-ending deserts wreathed in mists and shadows. You will be my hand, stretching out from China, to bring my rule to the world.”

He steps closer to me, and I flinch as that hated breath caresses my face.

“You will find your father’s greatest creation. Do you consent?” he whispers.

Unbidden, into my mind comes my father’s last words to me, and I am transported back in time.

I am holding my father’s limp body in my arms, and from my father’s lips comes his last desire.

“I will avenge you,” I vowed. “Tell me how.”

“Revenge,” he sighed, “is that what you want?”

“More than anything,” I said.

“To take your revenge you must go...” he said.

“Go where?” I hear my ten-year-old voice from far away, a wandering phantom inside my soul, as the ocean waves rage inside me.

“The seven pieces of the map,” he gasped. “The greatest treasure in history that lies in the depths of the sea.”

He seized my hand with a force too strong for a dying man. “Find it,” he whispered.

His grip slackened. His eyes softened. And I saw a trace of the father who told me the tale of the seas, told me that I would one day understand its strange tongue.

“Ma He,” he whispered. “You are my greatest creation.”

“Zheng He,” says Zhu Di, drawing me back to the present. “Do you consent?”

Seven pieces of the map, scattered over the seas...

My father’s dying wish.

I look into the eyes I loathe and answer, “I do.”

~

They call me Zheng He. I am admiral, conqueror, and explorer. I am the hand of the emperor, roaming far to the corners of the world no one has seen. Yet the water of the seas does not satisfy my thirst – I thirst for blood.

I stand on the prow of my ship, journeying back to China. I refuse to call it *home*; home lies only on the seas.

Within the eyes of my crew I see the awe as they behold me, a seafarer with power in my hand and wisdom upon my brow, a lord of dignity and glory, eyes bright and keen as a dagger blade. I put my hand back in the water, feeling the tides turn.

Six pieces of the map are complete.

I can feel the ragged parchment beneath my armor. The first I found in Ceylon, the second in Java when we defeated the Majapahit king. The third was guarded by the Sinhalese until our troops defeated them. The fourth I extracted from Sekandar at Sumatra before his execution, the fifth from East Africa, the sixth from Malacca.

Six voyages, six pieces.

The waves have raged on my every voyage, rearing and leaping like a wild stallion: the white foam its streaming mane; the thunderous echoes of the waves are its pounding hooves striking the seabed, beating out a nightly rhythm that never ceases; the sea is my tireless steed that carries me, caught in the frenzy of my revenge –

One more to go.

“Sir?” calls a voice.

We’ve already arrived at the harbor. Looking down, I see a messenger.

“Sir, the emperor demands that you return to Nanjing immediately,” he says.

I am seized with a sudden fear. Has he found out?

“Why?” I ask.

“Haven’t you heard, sir?” The messenger’s face is drawn with sadness. “The Yongle Emperor is dead.”

~

They call me Zheng He.

I am no longer a seafarer. I fell before the prime of my glory. Why did my father tell me to wait, to seek the secret, before I killed Zhu Di? Why had I hesitated, why had I stayed my hand? I could have delivered the killing blow.

There’s a new emperor. I’m appointed defender of Nanjing, forbidden to return to the seas. I hear the sea’s song, mournful and frustrated, hammering against a locked door, unable to break the chain –

Of course. The chain of a slave. I was one when I came to the household of the son of the man who killed my father. I thought that when I was upon the seas, I was free. How ridiculous. Here I am, after the deaths of two emperors, serving a new one, but still – no matter how much I fight – I remained as a slave.

The Hongxi Emperor has made further treasure voyages forbidden. And here I stand, looking helplessly at the ocean I cannot reach, thirsting for revenge that is now impossible, now that Zhu Di is dead. I try to summon the ocean’s song in my heart, but it has gone silent.

~

“Zheng He?”

I turn at the approach of the new emperor. “Yes, my liege?”

“I would like you to return to the seas,” says the Xuande Emperor. “I wish to resurrect what my grandfather has done.”

The old hatred instantly returns.

“This is an order, Zheng He,” he says, perhaps seeing the momentary anger flash in my face. “Do you accept?”

I think of the six pieces of the map. My father’s last words to me. *Find it*. Dare I go beyond the horizon to seek for the seventh and last piece of the legendary map, although the one I swore to take revenge on is gone?

“I do,” I say, and am instantly reminded of the same words I said to Zhu Di, what seems like a lifetime ago.

~

This will be my last voyage. I can feel it as I set sail.

The legendary map will tell me how my revenge shall be taken.

I can feel it as I discover the last piece, at last, upon the great plains of Kenya. I trekked through the endless grasslands for over three days to find it at last, wedged in the hollow of a weather-beaten tree.

Panting with exhaustion, I slide down against the tree trunk. For a moment, I suppress the overwhelming triumph that fills my heart and threatens to make it explode. The joy, the ecstasy, the pure jubilation of it all! Allah, Tianfei, they have granted it all to me. I feel the urge to laugh, to run barefoot on the plains, suddenly dizzy with giddiness of victory.

From underneath my tunic, I draw out the other six pieces of the map and arrange them, like a puzzle. My heart throbs, pounding furiously, and I wait with bated breath as I put them all together.

When the final piece is in place, silvery lines begin to snake across the yellowed parchment. They crisscross and interweave, and I recognize my father’s handwriting. Stars, silvery stars, mapped out in great detail, fanning out to every corner of the map, and in the center of the parchment characters begin to ripple and float before my eyes.

Forgiveness is Allah’s greatest gift.

I’m dumbfounded. Five words... five words! All my life I’ve sought the completion of this map, and all it contains is five words! Five words, with completely no meaning! I sought revenge. I thought this map would tell me what to do, how to avenge my father upon the death of the ones I meant to take revenge on.

All is truly lost.

I dive for the pieces of the map, wring them into even smaller pieces, tearing them apart with a ferociousness I have never felt in all my life. The rage, the undying thirst, I curse my father's soft-heartedness –

My father. He seems like a lifetime away, and at that moment I yearn for him, to hear his gentle voice, to hear his laughter like music in my ears.

Suddenly I am eight years old again, sitting beside the sea, listening to its song.

"One day you'll understand what it's saying," my father said.

All my life I had been misguided. Staring at a goal far upon the horizon that had only ever been a mirage. Looking at death full in the face and trying to bring it upon the one person who had trusted me in my captivity, even though it was his people who had murdered my father.

Zhu Di.

He thought me a brother to him, true in heart. All my life I have detested him for spilling my father's blood. Now I have lost all those times I could have stood shoulder to shoulder with him, free from my thirst for vengeance.

I should have forgiven him long ago.

I throw myself on the ground and weep for all that I have lost, and my tears fall like rain upon stones.

~

The seas are smooth today. My ship glides peacefully on the waters. We are sailing home. Back to China.

I lie, delirious, in bed, and I know that I am on my deathbed. As the ship bobs up and down on smooth waters, I think I hear an old lullaby. Soothing me to sleep.

The sea is singing its song.

"Sir?" comes a voice.

A sailor comes into my cabin, he looks frightened. I know what a state I must look, a dying man of sixty-two, weakened by the seven voyages of my life.

I reach beneath my tunic and draw out a small bag. I hold it out to the sailor.

"There is little chance that I will survive the journey back," I say.

"Don't say that, sir," whispers the sailor. I look at the young face, and I know it well. This boy has served me well on my voyages, been most faithful. As he comes towards me I see in his gaze the haunted look that I experienced when I was ten years old.

"Do one thing for me," I say. "when I die, I wish for my body to return to the ocean. My blood shall become the waters of the sea. The sea has been my life – and my body shall be my last tribute."

The sailor is trembling, but I continue, holding out the bag which contains the last remnants of the map.

"When I die," I say, "throw this into the sea with my body."

The sailor takes it with shaking hands.

"What is it, sir?" he whispers.

I look at the sailor, smiling.

"A great treasure," I answer, "with a magnificent tale behind it. My father forged it with knowledge that came from his time on the seas. It could serve great purposes – but it must return to the sea, where it belongs."

The song of the sea fills my ears, lonely and haunting, but to me it is no longer that eerie, mysterious tongue. I can hear it, transporting me to the world beyond, one that even the greatest emperor cannot conquer.

"One day you will understand what it's saying," my father whispers.

I can hear it clearly now, it's the only thing my age-weakened mind can comprehend.

Forgiveness is Allah's greatest gift.

Before my eyes I can see the faces of my father, my brother and sisters, Zhu Di, growing ever closer.

I am named after Mohamed. I am my father's greatest creation.

They call me Zheng He.

Myth and Legend

Holy Family Canossian College, Cheung, Carrie – 15

It is a great honour to be chosen for this voyage, they say. It is unprecedented, revolutionary. Anyone who goes will be making history.

Captain Zheng stands at the prow of the flagship, back ramrod-straight with pride, with a fleet of ships and the wind at his back as they set off, the sweet incense they burned in front of a statue of Tian Fei for safe travels clinging faintly to his robes. The crew buzzes with excitement as they set off, the younger men with grand fantasies of honour and glory, the more experienced sailors grateful for the chance to join a voyage of such magnitude. The sea is a fickle mistress, and every day they offer up worship to gods they don't completely believe in that the sky will be unclouded and the wind will be in their sails, that pirates will not attack.

At first, fortune seems to favour them, and the sacrifices they make to the gods seem to hold. The ships go steadily on their course. past Champa, Java, Ceylon and Calicut. Trading, navigating, sailing on calm waters. There is a brief skirmish with a pirate lord, but they still make it through, weary but still alive.

Then they reach the Indian Peninsula, and their luck runs out.

“Harder to starboard!” Captain Zheng roars, trying to make his voice heard over the ear-splitting shriek coming from the monstrous creature towering over the ship.

“There’s a monster,” the fishermen had warned him, “It’s been there for as long as anyone can remember, takes anyone who is fool enough to go near. You’d best to avoid that cursed place, captain.”

But he’d ignored them, and now he is staring into pitch black eyes that seem old as time itself.

She had surfaced in front of the ships after they entered the peninsula, water rolling off her in curtains as she roared in challenge. The sailors quake with fear at the sight of her, and the ships creak and groan in protest, having seen battle against pirates just weeks before.

Waves of seawater cascade from her ivory limbs as she lashes out at the ships, each arm as tall and thick as the masts, and the crew are fighting to keep her tail from coiling around the ship and crushing them into matchsticks, jabbing at her coral red scales with long metal spears. Some of them pierce too deep, fountains of blood spurting out, and spear handles stick out of the writhing mass of scales. The mermaid shrieks even louder in a tongue they do not know, but it paralyses them all the same, some of the crew freezing just long enough that the waves she stirs up wash them overboard. The air is thick with desperate cries, and the copper tang of blood mixes with the salt of seaspray.

“Tell the cannons to open fire!” the captain shouts above the din. Someone gives the signal, and the other ships pelt her with cannonfire, the bowmen peppering arrows into her flesh. She struggles as weighted nets are thrown on her tail, trying to shake them off and further opening up the cuts bleeding out all over her body. Her movements grow slower, and finally she lets out an unbearably sad cry and falls beneath the waves, the seafoam stained red and the water churning black with blood.

The ships breathe a quiet sigh of relief. They tend to their wounded, count their dead. There is grief for lost friends, and tears are shed, but they move on, operating like clockwork, assessing the damage and salvaging whatever they can from the waves.

The ship's cabin boy sees a shimmering, pearlescent chest bobbing merrily among the debris and chunks of wood. The captain gives the order to haul it on board, and despite the draining battle, the crew buzzes faintly with excitement. A mermaid's treasure is a thing of legend, and they are eager to see what riches lie in the chest.

One of the sailors pushes the great lid open, and a pair of golden eyes blink up at the men surrounding it.

"Mama," she burbles. Her voice rings like bells. Her tail flicks back and forth, the same ruby red as her mother's.

"We didn't know any better," the sailor says helplessly, clutching the chest. "What do we do with it?"

"Kill it," the captain says, but there is no conviction behind his words.

Murmurs spread amongst the crowd of sailors, and the little mermaid pokes her head out and stares at Captain Zheng, curious at the arrival of a new voice.

"We – we can't! She is a child, and we just killed her –" The first mate says helplessly.

"I know," the captain's voice catches.

He has his own memories of being taken to somewhere strange and foreign, forced to adapt to a new life. He looks down at big melting eyes filled with confusion. "Mama?" the mermaid asks, her odd voice coming out muffled as she chews on her fist, drool running down her chin.

"She's not here," the captain says briskly, unflappable composure falling back into place. "Someone find a tub and fill it with seawater. See that it is brought to my quarters – someone needs to keep an eye on the creature."

And protect it, he adds silently as he stalks away. Many of the crew had lost a friend in this fight, and there was always a chance they would take it out on the little creature currently lying innocently in a tub in his cabin.

On paper, this never happens.

In a dry report, the fleet's losses are attributed entirely to the previous battle with the pirate lord's crew, most of his forces taken down and losing many to a valiant battle. Better the families of the dead believe their loved ones avenged by the execution of a bloodthirsty pirate than come for revenge on a blameless mermaid child. Her mother's actions were no fault of hers, and she should not have to suffer the consequences. None of the crew protest his decision, and a locked chest is among the wagonload of possessions Zheng He brings to his residence.

"Why am I here?" the mermaid asks. It is their third journey now, and the crew's second journey with her. In a mere four years, she has grown from a toddler to a teenager at a dizzying pace.

"Your mother abandoned you," the captain says after a long pause. "We found you in the waves, alone."

She picks at the salt-soaked boards of the deck, hair falling into her eyes. "Alright," she says in a small voice, and turns back to whittling a wooden spear point the way the cabin boy taught her. The captain gives a disapproving glance. She does not need to learn about weapons and violence yet, and he reminds himself to chide the cabin boy for teaching her.

She is still too young for that, he thinks.

He gives her little trinkets from the pile of treasure the emperor grants him after each voyage. He has no wife to offer them to, and like human girls her age, the mermaid has a certain fondness for pretty things. It makes the captain laugh to see her act so coquettishly, admiring the shine of golden bangles and jewelled hairpins in the sun.

She should act her age, he thinks.

Because sometimes, it is hard for him to see the little creature he and the rest of the crew helped raise. Her skin is nut-brown from the sun, not her mother's sickly pale hue from decades underwater without surfacing, and it is traced with scars the mermaid has earned from tussles with crew members. She is still human sized, nowhere as large as her mother had been, but their tails are the same deep crimson, her teeth the same sharp gleam of ivory, and in his nightmares, all the captain sees is the blood of his men in the water, their screams echoing in his ears.

He feels that she has been growing up entirely too fast for him to catch up, and soon she will no longer be the innocent little child he knew, slurping up clams and babbling nonsense in her little wooden tub.

Her eyes still shine gold though, and the captain prays that it will be an age before they grow dark with cruelty.

When they almost reach Calicut on their fourth voyage, it is to flee.

There is a fleet of pirate ships that has been gaining on them for days. The captain had hoped that they could outrun them, but their ships are no match for the swift pirates. Their own ships, though armed, are big and slow, and while they make for a very impressive sight when they reach foreign capitals, they are no match for these pirates' speed.

"We have to keep going," Zheng He says grimly.

"Why?" the mermaid asks.

"Because if we try to stand up to them, it will be a massacre." And it will be carnage, he thinks, another day of the stink of gunpowder and the iron tang of blood, of screams and more of his crew sinking into the cold, merciless embrace of the ocean. They will win, but at what cost?

The mermaid tilts her head, eyes flashing. "Are you sure?" she asks.

The pirates surrender after the flagship is sunk, the anchor ripped off and planks torn off the hull. The surviving crew, wild-eyed and delirious, whimper and say a great sea creature came from the depths and descended it's fury upon them.

"Demon!" they shriek. "Monster, sea witch!"

Zheng He looks at the mermaid floating alongside the ship, her expression twisted with frustration as she tries to crack open a particularly stubborn clam. He tries to put together the pirates' words with the young mermaid currently growing cross-eyed as she stares down the clam and has to hide his laughter. He frets over a particularly nasty splinter in her arm and makes her bandage it.

"Don't worry," she says with a bright grin, "it was fun. Besides, family is supposed to protect each other."

That night, the captain joins her by the railing and watches her tail swish lazily back and forth in the water. The moonlight is dimmed by wispy clouds drifting across the sky.

“I was taken away from my family too,” he ventures softly.

The mermaid nods and continues looking out to sea. He knows that if he doesn’t wish to talk further about it, she will not pry.

But she deserves to know. The captain takes a deep breath and quietly, he tells her about being ten years old, young and foolish, thinking that he was being clever, lying to a general about the location of a Mongol prince, about being taken prisoner and made a eunuch as punishment.

He doesn’t tell her about screaming for his older brother to save him as he is pressed down on an operating table. He doesn’t tell her he didn’t understand what was happening, why it hurts so *much*, until someone tells him that he would never be able to have children. He doesn’t tell her about countless nights waking up, begging for his mother and sisters. For all her strength, she is still young to the world, and she does not need to learn of such pain

“I took you in because it reminded me a little of myself,” he admits, “you were so young, and you had no one. It was only right.” After he finishes, there is a heavy pause.

“What was she like?” the mermaid asks, her voice tinged with longing. “My mother.”

The captain stares pointedly out to sea as he tells the mermaid about the mother she never knew. He doesn’t describe the monster he sees in his nightmares, but tries to tell her what he remembers of that day with sugar coated words, pointedly avoids her mother’s fangs, her desperate fury. He refuses to meet his daughter’s eyes, even when his voice trembles a little.

“It took us almost a full day to defeat her.” He finally looks at her, his gaze filled with remorse. “I heard her cry, when she fell. She must have loved you very much to protect you so fiercely.” His voice hitches. “I had to protect my crew. I’d only heard the rumours and I never knew she was protecting you – I never thought of trying to reason with her –”

His voice breaks and he braces himself for his daughter to hate him.

“I’m sorry.”

Dawn breaks over the horizon, and the sun breaks over the horizon in streaks of liquid metal, pooling in the troughs of the waves and glittering on the seafoam, and the mermaid silently places a hand on her father’s knee as guilty sobs wrack through his body.

“It’s okay,” she murmurs. “It’s okay.”

On their fifth voyage, the mermaid stops aging, her young face smooth and unlined, but she grows bigger and bigger, until she has to be hauled onboard the ship. The crew starts calling her their guardian, and then their patron goddess, then one day they start calling her Tian Fei in place of the wooden idol they once prayed to.

She follows them from port to port, and the captain orders her to stay out of sight. “Better you stay hidden and safe,” he says wryly, and while she is a bit put out at having to stay away from her family for so long, the crew throw down exotic treats from every place they visit. Although the flaky pastries never taste quite as delicious when soggy with seawater, she appreciates the thought.

But for all the crew’s efforts, word spreads, as it often does among sailors, and soon every port whispers.

“She is a monster,” the people whisper, “a monster a shining tail for her legs, dyed red with the blood of every monster she ever slain. She is a goddess of the deepest oceans, with golden eyes that can see into your soul and the seafoam in her wake is a bloody scarlet. I heard Zheng He made a deal with her, and that she would sink any ship in his way in exchange for any loot on board. They say she eats anyone from those ships as well.”

The crew all scoff at the rumours, but are grateful for the dwindling amount of pirates they face. Zheng He’s fleet has gained a reputation, and on their sixth voyage, there is no one who dares oppose them. The mermaid spends her time splashing alongside dolphins, admiring the tattoos and piercings of the newer sailors and learning rude ditties from the older crew members that she tries to shock her father with by singing them at the top of her lungs, bawdy lyrics booming out across the waves.

Zheng He looks to the heavens and prays for the gods to grant him patience, a wry smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. The mermaid sees it and grins, diving back into the waves to help corral a school of fish into the crew’s waiting nets.

“I’ll be dying soon,” the captain says, looking over the railing at the mermaid. It is his seventh voyage, and he can feel it in his bones. He has already adopted an heir to settle his affairs, and while his physicians have advised him against this voyage, he wants to die with his daughter by his side.

“If I go before this trip is finished, guard the ship.” he continues. “I know you always have, but they’re lost without you there.”

“Of course I will,” she scoffs, rolling her eyes. “I’ll always protect my family.”

They share an amused look, the old man and his daughter, almost bigger than the ship and forever frozen at the age of twenty-four.

“I love you,” she says quietly. I’ll miss you, she can’t quite bring herself to say, but her father reaches out a wrinkled hand and she takes it gently with two of her fingers.

I love you too, he thinks, the unspoken reply hanging between them as they look out across the sunset, the waves turning a molten gold.

Some legends say the day Captain Zheng died, the goddess of the sea, Tian Fei herself mourned his passing, her cries of anguish heard echoing across the water for miles. The crews on board the ships mourned for the good captain, the good friend. They comforted his grieving daughter, who finally allowed herself to break after putting on a brave smile for her dying father day after day until one morning, he didn’t wake up.

She cries great heaving sobs night after night, her musical voice warped into something unrecognizable by sadness.

“Baba,” she cries, “My baba.”

But she is not a child anymore, and her father is not there to comfort her with quiet lullabies.

We have forgotten her now. She is a creature of myth and legends of ages past, and our world is no place for a mermaid.

But the fishermen still whisper her tales. We call her by many names: Tian Fei, Mazu, Tian Hou. She is benevolent, she is cruel; she is the harsh, unfeeling storm, she is the gentle wind in the sails. She whispers warnings of typhoons, calms the winds long enough for them to sail a little further out for more fish.

And sometimes, the occasional mortal whispers back.

“They tell stories about you, you know,” a young girl remarks, leaning over the railing of the dock. It is the early hours of the morning, and hardly anyone notices the girl looking over a seemingly featureless expanse of water.

The mermaid circles the dock. “Is that so?” she hums, smirking with a maw full of teeth sharper than any sword.

“You are bigger than they said you were,” the girl says hesitantly. The mermaid laughs. She does not surface, for fear that the resulting waves will crash onto the docks, so her bell-like voice comes out muffled, and the girl cannot help but laugh with her.

“But I wonder,” the girl asks suddenly, “Why were you not angry with them? You lost your mother to them. You could have destroyed them all in a second, and no one could have blamed you.”

“I suppose I could have,” the mermaid shrugs, sending ripples fanning out across the water.

“Well, why didn’t you?”

The mermaid thinks of her family, her father, all of them young and terrified, but willing to try and amend for their mistakes by taking in a little mermaid child, and smiles to herself.

“Don’t trust every story you hear,” she says, her golden eyes gleaming with mirth.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Holy Family Canossian College, Soon, Sonja – 16

“Chang! Chang!” I jolted awake. As I roused from my heavy slumber, the familiar scent of briny sea air filled my lungs. My body was sore from resting on a bed made out of planks. I’ve been on this very pirate fleet for around five years and counting, you would think I’m used to these harsh living conditions. Except that I’m not. “Chang, get up! We’re tasked to raid the nearby fishing village once night falls, remember? You’d better get ready before we reach land, unless you want to face Chen Zuyi himself,” hollered my friend Xiang. Chen controls the seas of Southeast Asia with his notorious pirate fleets, and is one of the most feared pirates ever to exist. Shrugging nonchalantly, I fought off my sleepiness and started to ready myself for the upcoming raid. Although I’m definitely not one to hesitate when ending an enemy’s life, I doubt I can ever massacre innocent villagers and destroy families without feeling an ounce of guilt. In fact, I myself am a victim of these pirates’ relentless attacks years ago. Both my parents were murdered in cold blood and I was held hostage by pirates, forced to join them in order to survive. Escaping is never an option. Every single pirate who has betrayed Chen faced brutal consequences if caught.

Standing on the crow’s nest, I stared unwaveringly as the sun fell behind the horizon. Above me, shades of orange and pink spread through the sky, only broken apart by long trails of tranquil clouds. At the far west, a spectacular shade of scarlet illuminated the reflection of every wave. Instead of being fascinated by the swirls of colours surrounding me, I only felt intense fear. In my eyes, the scarlet glow reminded me of the bloodshed of the innocent. As if on cue, a flock of black crows soared through the sky, as though foreshadowing inevitable deaths.

“Chang! It’s time.” Clutching tightly to our spears, Xiang and I crept silently down the pirate vessel and headed straight for the fishing village. As the soft glow of the brightly-lit huts faded in the distance, we made way to the town hall, where the village’s gold is kept. I was planning to knock the guard out cold by dealing a blow to the back of his head when a couple of unfamiliar faces emerged from the dark. Immediately blending into the shadows, I watched intently as the well-dressed men handed the guard bags full of gold coins and rolls of silk. This fishing village is relatively poverty-stricken. Who would be giving away gold to aid them? The Chinese officials? “Who’s there?” A voice unexpectedly called out. The soft crunch of footsteps slowly made way to our hiding spot. A fire torch was shined to our faces. “Filthy pirates,” the solemnly dressed man muttered under his breath. “Call our captain, he’ll decide how to deal with these incurable, good-for-nothing thieves.” Not long after, we found ourselves facing a man dressed like a Chinese military. “The name’s Zheng He, captain of Ming treasure voyages. What do you all have to say for yourselves?” Zheng fixed me with a piercing stare and I began stuttering uncontrollably how I was forced to become a pirate, along with the other young people. Once I was finished, Zheng let out an exasperated sigh and motioned us to follow. He led us to his massive vessel, where I saw the most glamorous ship before my eyes. Its’ hull was delicately carved with magnificent dragons and its’ sails painted wine red, unlike the bloodstained ones I usually encounter. I was still staring in awe when Zheng’s voice snapped me back to reality. “I’m taking you lot under my wing. You two are part of my treasure fleet now. You’ll be in charge of cleaning the decks. This is your chance to prove you’re better than that barbarian you call captain. Don’t blow it.” Xiang eyed our supposedly “new captain” suspiciously. Once we were out of earshot, he whispered “What if he’s planning to turn us in? We’d probably be executed!” “Do you prefer making a living out of killing? At least we’ll be put out of our misery. Besides, Zheng’s tone seemed sincere,” I replied reassuringly.

We were kept busy over the course of the next few weeks. Every day, we got up at dawn and scrubbed the decks. For the rest of the day, we helped preparing meals and mended sails. If we were lucky, we could even assist in the navigations. Life was definitely hectic, but I had never been happier. However, happiness never lasts.

I have always feared that the pirate fleet led by Chen Zuyi would be after us, no matter how many days, months, or even years has passed. After all, we left the entire crew behind and disappeared without a trace. Eventually, my worst nightmare came true. It was a midsummer’s day, and the air was heavy with the dampness of a coming storm. Nearly everyone were hiding out from the rain in the cabin, except Xiang, who was on duty to check out for incoming obstacles or enemies. All of the sudden, she rushed into the cabin and stammered in a panicked tone. “P...Pirates!! It’s Chen. I could recognize that ghastly flag from a mile away!” Before her sentence was even finished, Zheng started barking out orders. Soon, all 68 ships under his control had their cannons ready and were in formation. Through the mist, we could barely make out the enormous pirate fleet, all hanging black flags which were fluttering in the wind. Gradually advancing towards us. Although I strived to keep calm while retrieving barrels of gunpowder from the cargo hold, I could still feel my heart thumping against my chest. The trepidation of fighting against my former crewmates was too great. I had gone into battles with them too many times to underestimate them. And what if Xiang and I get

captured? It was my fault that we were caught by Zheng in the first place. I couldn't bear the thought of Xiang being killed by Chen because of my carelessness. These feelings of horror overwhelm me as I subconsciously curl my fingers into a fist and dig my nails into my palm. My thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the first booms of a cannon. I scurried to the main deck just in time to witness the shells fly well behind our ship, erupting into white columns of water kilometres away. In spite of the fact that they missed their target, it unmistakably marked the start of a gruelling battle.

The fighting lasted for two days and two nights. For forty eight hours straight, the firing of gunshots, fearless battle cries and screams of agony echoed in the wind. The rain splattered against our raw faces like solid matter, but the battle went on. The water seeped on deck was pale pink, a result of waves of seawater and the blood of my comrades. I hid inside an empty barrel, fearing I'd be seen. Towards the dawn, as I was close to drifting off due to extreme fatigue, I was awoken by a wave of cheering. I poked my head out of the barrel, and was instantly met by a terrorizing sight. Headless corpses were scattered across ships and limbs can be seen floating on the surface. Despite the horrendous scene before me, something caught my eye. It was Zheng, lifting up the head of Chen Zuyi. He was covered with bruises and wounds, but he managed to speak in a steady tone. "Chen Zuyi is beheaded by my very own cutlass. More than 5000 pirates have been killed. The rest have surrendered. The seas of Southeast Asia will be peaceful once more." Thousands of survivors erupted into cheers, as we celebrate the end of Chen's petrifying era.

The battle didn't merely signify the end of Chen's pirate fleet. It also marked the end of my past. Living in the shadows of fear and having countless sleepless nights, wondering if I would be recaptured. The day after Chen's death, the sun came out once more, casting slanted beams of sunlight through the dispersing clouds. Every new day comes with new hope. "Land! It's an island which is unmarked on our world map!" As everyone rushed to the side of the boat to get a closer look, I lingered back and smiled to myself. After all, when one door closes, another opens.

Beyond the Mist

Holy Family Canossian College, Yew, Elizabeth – 15

“Dad, what’s this?” young Emlyn asked, holding up an old leather covered book she found in the basement. The young girl stared at her dad curiously, she had never seen a book like that before.

The spine of the book was barely hanging onto the pages themselves. The pages were yellow but there weren’t any creases, as if the owner handled it with extreme care. This book was nothing like her own books. A faint musky smell of the ocean lingered around it.

“Is this a storybook?” Emlyn asked impatiently. Her dad chuckled, “Something like that, my child. Do you want to listen to it?” The little girl cheered as she squeezed herself into her dad’s armchair, getting ready to listen to the stories written in that old, leather covered book.

‘January 14th. It’s been 4 weeks since the Yongle Emperor threatened to tear us down. We’re nearly out of food and water. The crew is getting weaker and weaker by the second. I –’

“Commander Zhang! The Yongle Emperor –”

Silencing the rest of his sentence, I rushed toward the ajar door while hastily draping a damp coat across my shoulders to shield myself from the harsh weather.

The walk to the deck was dreadful. Glancing at the pained emotions visible on the faces of the crew lining up beside the edge of the ship, my shoulders hunched since that was never a good sign.

Standing in the center of the deck, I suddenly found my boots extremely interesting.

“Commander ZhangJun of The Ming Elite, since you and The Ming Elite crew are guilty for not being able to fulfill the Emperor’s task of discovering the treasure, you are all charged with treason.” The officer announced, voice void of emotion.

My face shot up, furious eyes burning holes through the fragile piece of parchment. My heart dropped immediately. No, no no! All these people have wives and children to go back to, they cannot die!

Sharp wails and booming complaints pierced the freezing winter night.

“No! You can’t do this! Take me only but do not lay a finger on these innocent people!” my voice trembled with fear and anger.

I stared at the officer with all the courage I could muster at the moment and clenched my fist, waiting for my ultimate doom.

The officer chuckled darkly when an executor strided around me for a few seconds before slashing my back with the tip of his sword, the pain made me plummet down onto the wooden floor.

There were faint gasps when the executor lifted the sword, tiny droplets of fresh blood dripped silently onto the wet wood beside me.

My heart raced and my life flashed before my eyes.

How did I end up here? Only a few months ago, we were all happily celebrating the defeat of some stray, vicious pirates.

Halfway across the Indian Ocean, The Ming Elite encountered another group of pirates and before I could react, the other ship’s captain jumped onto The Ming Elite with a sword in his hand once he realized The Ming Elite carried cargoes of gold and silk.

“How ‘bout this? We take most of your gold and silk and we’ll let you go.” I let out a soft chuckle, “In your dreams, pirate!” Before drawing out my sword and pointing it straight at the pirate’s chest.

As soon as the sound of metal swords colliding pierced through the air, ruthless pirates dashed onto the ship, sailors scrambled onto the deck with weapons to defend themselves.

As more clashing of metal filled the air, the fight became even more deadly. Pirates were aimlessly stabbing the sailors. Whenever they successfully knocked out a sailor, they would cackle as if they had already won the fight. Sailors, on the other hand, were much more attentive to their surroundings as they were mostly skilled sword fighters. One sailor jumped onto a rope before swinging himself onto several pirates, knocking them overboard all at once.

In the middle of the ship, I was challenging the captain to yet another duel. So far, I have blocked most of the captain’s hits. Except for the one hit on my left shoulder, which was gushing blood at the moment. However, my attention did not waver.

My sole focus was on the motion of the blade. Clank! I blocked another one of the pirate’s hits. He was getting restless and started slashing his blade over and over against my frame, cutting open a few wounds.

Suddenly, I lost my balance and fell down, sword sliding out of my hand and out of sight.

I tried to roll to the side to avoid the hits of the enemy’s blade but my shoulder was pressed down with one of the pirate’s boot, immobilizing me.

The pirate cackled menacingly and lifted his sword as he prepared to end my life.

“Wait!”

Staring up at the sailors I’ve grown so fond of with sorrowful, curious eyes, I realized all of them had drawn their swords and were aiming at both the officer and the executor.

“G— give us 1 more week. A— and if we haven’t found the treasures the Yongle Emperor requested, we’ll all come to you without a fight.” One sailor proposed.

After a long and menacing pause, the executor retreated his sword under the officer’s command.

“1 week.” He repeated abruptly before travelling away.

I rose up with grateful tears in my eyes, ignoring the screeching pain and the blood slowly staining my loose shirt, and started bowing to all my crew, mumbling thankful words under my breath.

Several sailors rushed over towards me when suddenly, my world started spinning violently and I fell face first onto the pile of drying blood, the moldy planks knocking me unconscious.

We drifted west aimlessly for four days with barely enough supplies for the crew.

Hunching behind the helm, I was so determined to find the rumored mystical island to repay my crew that I had completely lost track of sleeping and eating.

“Commander Zhang! You have to rest.” One of my sailors begged.

I glared at him as if he had suddenly grown an extra head before turning back towards the direction the ship was sailing.

My eyes were red and twitching with all the sleepless nights trying to figure out where the blasted island lies.

“I must find the island. I must find the island...” I began murmuring to myself

All of a sudden, The Ming Elite travelled into a thick cloud of mist that appeared out of nowhere. We became alarmed since we couldn’t even see past our noses.

The Ming Elite glided blindly for some more time before the mist gradually cleared up.

Before The Ming Elite, an island surrounded by crystal clear water appeared. There were clouds hanging everywhere. They hung so low, the mountain peak seemed to be higher up in the sky than them. The clouds were like giant, shimmering pink and blue marshmallows, floating elegantly over the whole island.

As The Ming Elite drew closer, we began departing the vessel and step foot onto the mysterious island. Weapons in our hands, we stayed alert to their surroundings, not knowing if there were any natives occupying the land.

After a brief search along the edge of the forest, several sailors found out only tropical wildlife lived there. The trees and plants grew exotic fruits we had never seen before.

I have never seen water so clear or a sky so fresh and blue as I strolled along the seaside.

Looking around the island, I noticed something.

I realized I have been staring at the treasure we were searching for the entire time.

Unlimited natural resources were found here.

If the Yongle Emperor claimed that island as his own, he would become extremely rich.

But what would happen to the island?

Would the resources really be endless? Would the ocean and sky remain so clear if people started inhabiting island? Would the wildlife be safe from excessive hunting?

I realized if I report my findings to the emperor, this once breathtaking island would turn into another one of China's waste-filled islands.

But think of all the glory we would receive once we travel back to China! We would go down in history as warriors who served the Ming Dynasty well. And most importantly, we would not face any treason once we get back to China.

With saving the natural resources for the future generations to come in mind, my crew and I made the bold decision to protect that island by agreeing not to disclose the location of the island to the Yongle Emperor.

"What happened next?" Emlyn asked. Her dad shrugged slightly, "No one knows, but all we know is that he risked his entire life protecting something he knew would be important to future generations."

Turning to the last page of the book, a picture slipped out. It was a portrait of ZhangJun. He looked strikingly similar to Emlyn.

"Why does he look like me, dad?" Emlyn's eyes shone with curiosity.

"My child, ZhangJun was our ancestor. This," Her dad held up the book, "Was his journal, it has been passed down as a family heirloom for centuries. I want you to learn from him. Be brave and selfless. After all, that's why I named you Emlyn."

The Inner Voyage

International College Hong Kong, Ko, Marcus – 16

“Smoking *this* again?!” The next punch connected with my jaw, enough force to send me soaring meters into a railing on the deck. The crew mockingly laughed at the events that transpired. With adrenaline numbing the injury, I slowly looked up from my uncomfortable position from the floor, to remind myself of my status and how pathetic I am.

The captain ordered, but also to show off his dominance to satisfy his ego. “Kid! I dare you to try that again! You should be grateful we kept *you* on this ship for this long! Since you’re so useless, you can be our stress reliever instead!” The sailors disperse, entertained by the show, some spat on me as contribution.

I rolled on my back to face upwards on the wooden floorboard of the ship’s deck. Appreciating the clear sky sprinkled with a few wandering clouds, acting as small blankets that covers the rays of the sun. I extended my right hand towards it subconsciously, as if reaching for a distant dream obstructed by many obstacles that I could not get pass, it infuriates me. Then again, I ain’t anything special. I am just a feeble and pitiful man bullied by his peers, chasing after some fantastical dream that I regret ever chasing.

I brought myself up, using my skeletal limbs as support. Only a very thin layer of skin separated the bone from the air around, barely any muscle left to thicken the layer. Which is the result from a lack of a full meal in the last week on the voyage, if you can even call half a bowl of rice a “meal”. Too weak to stand, I stumbled and fell back onto the railing. My sensitivity to pain increases every day, and the small fall, which would not even make a child react, already makes me tear up in excruciating pain.

“Hey, you alright?” Ah, the same voice every time. “Again? Damn it, those damn brutes need to learn we are all part of the same crew, am I right?” He picked me up and carried me off like a disabled old man. We were both silent as he lead me to the destination which I always arrive at. I can already feel his usual ulterior motive lingering in his face. “We are around two days away to Nanjing, so...” and with those words, the crutches that held me crumbled, as I fell through the cargo hold trap door on the deck. “... stay put like a good pet, wouldn’t you?” The trap door shuts as I curse him to damnation.

As I made impact with the floor below, a beast from the stockpile of cages felt my presence and roared deeply in response, a signal of intimidation. The creature was a gift from Mogadishu from what I heard, given by one of the many wealthy merchants scattered across the city. Its aggression gave me no fear, in fact I felt a relatability with the creature. Even a creature which speech and thoughts I can not comprehend, I felt the same desire I have within it, the desire to escape.

Unlike me however, it was tenacious, unable to accept the situation it found itself in. I no longer retaliate, finding it futile. My desire has been driven towards the deepest recesses of my consciousness. I reluctantly limped away from the beast, couldn't bare seeing myself in it any longer. Its yellow fur soon blending and fading into the creeping abyss as I headed towards the front of the cargo hold, to what I seek.

Within one of the countless boxes that littered the hold, only one I seek. A wooden crate containing a black substance I do not know the name of. A pack of matches and a small contraption contained within it. The contraption is a long hollow tube, and a small protrusion on the tube allows the substance to be inserted in, which I proceeded to do so. At the end of the tube, I placed a lit match in front. I place the tube in my mouth and inhaled, with a short pause to feel the smoke bouncing off my cheeks, I gave a great exhale followed by a trail of smoke that could reach the heavens.

The all too familiar euphoric sensation gradually overwhelmed me. I closed my eyes to allow the sensation to settle in faster, to fully escape the harsh reality all around me in every sense possible. All my mangled thoughts became singular, no longer confused or disorganised. All my physicals senses became null, everything focused on the colourful experience. The physical pain I suffered beforehand dissipated, along with my fears. I no longer fear my crewmates, the captain, no longer fear pain. Actually, I became indifferent towards fear itself, it was as if only a singular emotion exist in my subconscious, happiness.

When I allowed my senses to return, there I was again. The gigantic treasure ship, similar yet different to the one me and the crew were on. Decrepit and rotting, with its hull barely holding, surrounded by an unnaturally dark sea. As if the starless night sky was below in the water, an all-encompassing abyss that could swallow me in a blink of an eye. Yet, the ship illuminates my surroundings, like the moon in the sky. An untraceable, comforting sound emanating

from the ship, silencing the sea's roaring waves. On the deck, laid a field of grass, which felt indisputably more comfortable than the sturdy, rugged wooden floor of the ship's deck. Feathery and soft, I could lie on it forever if I wanted. Strange, I remembered this ship having seen better days the first time I was on board.

“Do you really have that much time wasting away in this wretched place?”

The voice... too familiar... Sitting straight up confirms my assumption of his identity. There he was sitting in front of me. His voice contained in a putrid exterior you could call a body. With my thoughts, I answered.

You again, you keep coming back and for what?

“Pathetic, I can't even pity you anymore... sitting in a cargo hold of some ship, rotting away like a corpse. Intaking some herbs... how much more pathetic can you get?”

You are right on one thing. I am pathetic. But I accept that I am pathetic, just leave me be. I can accept it if I can live in this paradise. You are not even obligated to pity me.

“Live in this paradise...? You ain't even living anymore. You're just a dead man walking. You call this paradise? This is just some mental space you conjured up, your brain tricking your senses into perceiving this space physically.”

Shut it with your explanations, just get out of here and let me rest. In here, no one can touch or bother me.

“A temporary measure, once you get back out there, you will be insulted and berated, assaulted and thrown around like a little toy.”

I came on board the voyage to travel the harsh seas, discover new destinations, meet unique people and exotic wildlives, not to acquaint myself with a bunch of muscle-heads and some egotistical, arrogant brute who directs them all.

“Keep telling yourself that. Ever since you got on, you haven’t ever left the ship. Everytime we arrive on port, you were thrown into the hold. Once we left, then you could exit. Is that what you desire, to be a slave on board the voyage that you so willingly enter?”

What can I do? If I ever speak up, I will get beaten down again. It has always been like this, my family, my ‘friends’, everyone I know always try to obstruct me from anything. My dreams, my goals, desires....

Before I could finish my answer, the world became a blurred, and soon following that blur, faded into obscurity. *Reality* returned with its horrid and putridness overwhelming my vulnerable senses.

No.. stop, I’ve got to get out of here.

I stumbled towards the box, empty of any herbs. No, it can’t end like this. I analyze the piles of other boxes and found my target. Within the mountain of containers, its small label barely visible from a small opening within the mountain, the only indication I need. In a swift motion, I claimed the box and its contents, but not without toppling a stack of them, each of them tumbling downwards resonated so clearly, that the entire ship could hear it. No matter, I got what I wanted. With the same procedure and sensation stated previously, I re-entered the space where no one else could.

“Ah you returned, as I dreaded.”

For the love of the heavens, leave forever!

“Do you know why I am still here? It’s because part of you rejects the *you* that you’ve become. I’m your last thread of hope to bring you back from the never-ending abyss.”

I have told you, the world is against me. Everyone thinks I am just an annoyance, and my lifelong dream have been crushed eternally. There is nothing left for me, other than this space. Your efforts are futile, it is far too late for me to go back.

“You need to stop pitying yourself and playing victim. Look, you keep running away from your problems, they will eventually get worse. You ran away for too long, all this happened because you never took the initiative. You’re pathetic because you foregone the chance to be strong, and chose to remain and consider *yourself pathetic*. You kept clinging to some childhood fantasy, never looking at the bigger picture. The people and events that occur around you. You’re still an immature brat, the world isn’t made for you!”

I have no words to retort. He was right, everyone called me pathetic and I took that to heart and accepted it. I distanced myself from every person, they form assumptions of me as a scrawny, childish kid. Since I considered myself pathetic, everyone else agreed with what I wanted them to perceive, resulting in all the misfortunes I experienced. What kept me going was the dream to become part of the Ming Voyage my father was a part of, but that was never enough to begin with. The crew despised me, since the reason I am a part of this is cause of some childish dream. Everyone else probably joined due to more realistic, more dire circumstances. Impoverished families, lack of education and more. I was too stubborn and naive, and the crew despised that.

For the first time since coming here, I answered him not with thought, but with speech. But my voice felt so alien, I could not perceive nor comprehend what I said. But, what I could sense was a faint smile from him, as if having a melancholic understanding with my answer.

“So, you finally realised? Take the initiative, have humility, and maybe you would finally be understood. This is goodbye now... old friend.”

He turned his back on me. I unconsciously extended my hand as my last ditch effort to call him back but with a blink, he left no traces for me to scour. The ship I so dearly adored as “paradise” finally sailed its last journey. The ship’s hull crumbled, the foundations collapsing, and in mere seconds I was barely kept onboard by a few wooden struts, until those crumbled away. Then, I suddenly fell into the abyssal sea as the last remains of the ship vanished into it. As I landed into the waters, something was off. The impact gave me a shock of insurmountable pain, the sensation of the water, the immeasurable salty taste on my tongue, and how my mouth, eyes and ears felt clogged by pressure. They all felt too... real.

The Extraordinary Adventure

International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Liu, Yisi Nicole – 16

Part I – Storm “Abandon ship! The storm is killing us! Go to the other ship of the fleet!” Zheng said.

Sailors stood in the edge of the deck with one hand holding rigging and were ready to swing to the other ship. They turned around.

“Captain, come! There is nothing we can do! We should go! The ship is sinking! Go!” The sailors shouted.

“No” was the answer from Captain Zheng.

“But, captain” The other sailors said.

“There is one more thing left me to do. Find First Mate Yang, and he will be your new Captain! Now, you guys go!” Captain shouted and cut the bottom of rigging so that the sailors can reach the other ship as this abandoned ship tilted sideways.

“Captain! Don’t!” The sailors cried.

The abandoned ship was swallowed up by the ocean soon after the sailors reach the other ship. They looked at the direction where the ship disappeared and wish Captain can in a boat head toward them. But there was nothing. The ocean back to normal, and dark clouds left.

“Where is Captain!” First Mate Yang shouted loud and walked toward these sailors.

“Captain... Captain... Captain is dead! !” one sailor cried.

“What! No! That cannot be true! Then who will be the captain?” First Mate Yang said.

“You are our captain of Ming Treasure Fleet, Captain Yang. You must take it since it is Captain’ last word” One sailor answered.

“Ok, then I take it.” First Mate Yang said.

Under every crew ‘s gaze, Captain Yang walked proudly up to Quarterdeck and then he cleared his throat.

“As you may have heard that Captain Zheng is dead-----

“What? What? What?” people whispered.

“Silence!” Captain Yang ordered, “I will be your new captain and guide your way to home. However, I am the captain which was directly appointed by former captain, and so there are a few rules required all of you to follow. First, do not mention the old Captain Zheng because the dead are gone. Second, do not suggest me to find him because it wastes food and water supplies. Third, be obedience because you guys are not as knowledgeable as I am. That is all, and thanks

for your patient.” He said and arrogantly stood here to wait for a round of applause. He suddenly realizes that he forget to say something and he spook again.

“In addition, for all these rules, if you follow them perfectly, you will be safe and if you are not.... Sorry, I can hardly guarantee your lives since the natural mother is too merciless.” He added.

“Seriously? First Mate Yang? You are definitely out of mind. Looking for Captain Zheng should not be in the highest priority? He is dead for us! One young voyager said.

“Oh, come on, Zheng is the bottom of the ocean now! Mat— No Captain Yang is right here, and he is so brave and wise. We should certainly obey his order!” A one-eyed sailor augured.

Captain Yang walked downstairs slowly and went toward that young voyager. The young voyager stepped one afterward, but it is too late because Captain yang had already thrust his sword into his body right in the heart place. Captain Yang withdraw the sword, the blood gushed out from the young voyagers. Then he failed down.

“Pity, pity!” cried Captain yang and walked up to the quarterdeck , “My dear one-eyed sailor, please throw this little voyager into the sea. He so wanted to be with Zheng, then I gave you some help! Mercy!”

He turned around, and said: “ Any question besides that?”

“I guess that silence is your answer! Ok! Have a nice day to all of you. Right! The one-eyed sailor is now the first mate of the Fleet as the reward for his loyalty.

Part II – An Island Was Captain Zheng really dead? The answer was no. Then where he was? The reply is hard to tell.

After he let the sailors go, the water flooded reached the deck and so the ship had half in the water. In the last minute, he drove the ship away so that the whirlpool caused by this sinking ship wouldn’t drug the other ship to the bottom of the ocean. Right after that he quickly grabbed a block wood and then sunk into the ocean. A few minutes later when Treasure Fleet had already been very away, he was rose to the surface by the strong buoyancy of that block wood. Then he float on the ocean. Luckily, the ocean current took him to a small island.

When Captain Zheng woke up, he was in a hut and a little boy was playing with a parrot. “Aye, aye, aye.” The parrot said.

“You are awake! Captain Zheng!” he screamed and then he ran out the hut, “Captain Zheng is awake! Captain Zheng is awake! Guys!”

“Wait! Hey?!” Captain Zheng said. “Aye, Avast!” The parrot said.

Not a while, an old man with a peg leg came in and the little boy followed beside. In the boy’s hand, there is a grass – made a plate with food and bottle.

“Have some food first, Captain Zheng.” The old man said I must tell you that you have already one step in the hell when we first found you! Your face was just as white as a coconut juice! Unbelievable!”

Captain Zheng took the food as the boy gave to him. He was confused.

“I really appreciate for saving me, healing me and offering food. But I get to ask... who are you, where I am and how did you know my name?” Captain Zheng said with confusion.

“Ha – Ha – Ha!” laughed by the old man, “Oh, you don’t remember us, don’t you? Not a surprise at all, it is completely in my expectation. After all, we are just a bunch of villains live on an island!”

“By your meaning -----

“Aye! We used to be the pirates! Still miss the old day, ha!” The old man cried, “But the bloody storm in Java destroyed our ship, and only a few of us survive. We float in the ocean for several days, and we all thought that we would have died if we didn’t meet you and your Treasure Fleet! The moment when we met you and your ships, we believed that you were going to put us in prison for all the wickedness we did. But you did not! You gave us food, a boat, and some tools, and we are thankful for that. The natural mother didn’t have mercy on us, whereas you did!”

“I see... I remember that!” Captain Zheng said.

“Aye! We are hoping someday, the ocean current will bring you here so that we can return your favor. All of them are dead except for me and finally, you are here.” The old man cried, “Oh! Why you are not on your ships? Want to have a trip?”

“It is a long story.” Captain Zheng said.

“Tell me, we have plenty of time! I may help you.” The old man said.

“We met the terrible storm too, and one ship that I was on got into the whirlpool.” Captain Zheng said, “I endeavored to get the ship away from, but it just went closer and more importantly the other ships of the fleet were also dragged by the whirlpool. I had no choice but to let the other sailors go and drove the ship into the whirlpool so that the others can escape, Then you should know the rest of the story.”

“What about the Treasure Fleet? It cannot set sail without you!” The old said.

“No, first mate Yang will take my place and he is good a captain as well, I believe.”

“Ha – ha, I doubt it!” the old man said, “He is a skillful sailor just like you, but he is not a good captain! His evilness, wickedness and rudeness are like a pirate! Aye, a bloody pirate! His ambition of being captain is written on his face, and how can you be clever enough to let him be the captain ?”

“No, you are wrong because his ambition and ability are the reason why I chose him to replace my position”

“What a fool!” the old man cried, “You can be considered as an experienced sailor, but you don’t know this small fact!

Ridiculous! Sailing in the ocean, what is the most important thing ?

“A good ship, I suppose?”

“Oh! Of course, no! It is about building a friendship! For god sake!” cried the old man, “Coldhearted ocean, but warm-hearted human. Be friends, and don’t wend! Only this can survive, only this the ocean is alive!”

“You would never know how much a pirate learn!” Captain Zheng said, “I need to catch up them before it is too late! If first mate Yang is the person that you describe, I would better set sail now! I am going to make a raft, can I borrow a block of wood?”

“Ha – ha – ha, no! As you need a ship! My boy!” the old man said.

Part III – The Captain The story backs to the Ming Treasure Fleet

“Captain Yang, we are soon arriving at Kuri, and from the sailor reported that it is worth to pull over and pay a visit!

“ First mate one-eyed sailor said.

“What a good word you use to describe the plunder! Very impressive.” Captain Yang said, “Now, setting topsails, conquering the land and preparing for robbing!”

“Yes! Captain Yang” was the answer.

With this wind, the Fleet moved more quickly and they are very close to Kuri.

“Make ready the guns!” Captain Yang ordered, “Count to three and fire!”

Not in a minute, Kuri was on fire and people ran to the port from all places. They are screaming, crying and wondering what is going on?

“Shoot these people, please, gentlemen.” Captain Yang said.

“But....they are civil-----”

“Shoot! Or I shoot you!” Captain Yang shouted.

The people who reached the port got killed and fell into the water. The people who nearly arrived at the port got killed too, and they lied on the port. The people who were going to run to the port stopped and the fire caught them. Their blood color the ocean into the red.

“Ok, finally, let’s start the Treasure voyage.” Captain Yang said, “Drop anchor and land!”

While the sailors that follow Captain Yang landed the Krui, there were a few of them who refuse to go robbery staying in the ships of Fleet. At the same time, another ship with Pirate Flag was near to the main ship of the Fleet.

“Did Captain Zheng stand in a pirate ship? One sailor of the main ship asked. “I believe so.” The other one answered.

“Captain Zheng!” The former sailor shouted. “Give a rope! Let me go on board, sailors!” Captain Zheng answered.

The sailors threw the rope over as the pirate ship got closer, and in the pirate ship, Captain Zheng was saying “bye” to the old man and his crew.

“I guess it is time to say goodbye.” The old man said in the pirate ship. “Yes, but we will see you again.” Captain Zheng replied. Captain Zheng hugged the old man, caught the rope and swung over to the main ship. “Captain!” the sailors said together. “Now, everything needs to be back on track.” Captain Zheng said.

Compass of the Soul – The Diaries of Lv Shuntao

International School of Nanshan Shenzhen, Qiu, Xuefei Sophia – 15

Preface

Upon visiting my grandmother who is now old and frail, whilst putting her affairs in order, I searched an old barn of her property. It was there where I made the most remarkable discovery, an old dusty book which turned out to be a diary and the true accounts of a sailor and his journey to India. It was written in traditional Chinese from the early 1400s. I tried to slowly translate this story and put effort in keeping the original feel of the language used at the time. However, I needed to put some parts in modern English for a better understanding.

First entry — Spring, Early April 1408 “At the Docks”

At the Qingdao port, the vessel awaited me. My mind, full of adventure on the high seas I felt wary of the hard graft ahead. But I must, my sick mother relies upon my purse, should I return in one piece. We prepared for the best part of a week, ropes, chains, masts, spars, braces, sheets, and vang as I am a rigging man. Yesterday the rumors were aplenty, saying a few mates were sick though I have seen nothing. I may one day curse seeing the post inviting crewman to sail to India. We had to clear the rats onboard as they were more in numbers than us. I awoke yesterday morn to see green eyes upon me at the end of my bunk. This tubs hull was not only musty but putrid from layers of sweat. We have not set sail and it seem like this accommodation was not up to the standard expressed in the post by a long chalk. My two fellow bunk mates were also down as they have always been landlubbers. Their first experience onboard has left them homesick, although we won't set sail until tomorrow. Although I am younger in years, they constantly hound me for information to make their passage easier. I have somehow grown fond of them both. I support them as much as I dare as if they were seen slacking by the first mate the punishment would not be a pleasant one.

Second entry — Spring, Mid April, 1408 “Setting Sail”

My daily tasks are so monotonous and caused me frequent blisters which hurt like the devil himself. The creaking bones and aching back made me so uncomfortable I would have done anything to be on land. The physical appearance of most men was that of weight loss. Heavy eyes, a daily routine of sweat and exhaustion, putting ten years on a man in just a week. The few rats which were not evacuated when we left port, seemed to be the only ones gaining weight. But at least I am better off than most. As I climbed the rigging, my views were unobscured and spectacular. The birdlife was of great interest to me. As we passed islands with white sandy beaches, coconut palms and an array of birdlife. I am tempted to jump overboard, swim there, and retire.

The rumors have it that this ship is full of treasures that are mainly gold, and we are on an expedition to give gifts in return for support during conflicts. They called it the ‘Ming Treasure Voyages’, and our captain Captain Zheng is a very famous explorer. Others say we are to return with not yet seen before treasures from India. I did not care which was true except to say I hope the pirate rumors were invalid.

The food onboard begins to tell on my tired body, everything smells rancid and has an overbearing amount of salt for preservation. My grumbling stomach, as the food is so meagre, made me sometimes wonder if I would return as a skeleton. The rice is undercooked, and everything

seemed to be in some form of a soup of which the liquid part was cold and exceptionally salty. How I hanker for some of my moms home cooked food. For many keeping food down has become an occupational hazard as the rough seas of—late are enough to give anyone indigestion and the feeling of nausea. Changing conditions from baking hot days to freezing nights are also playing havoc with my body. It is like having sunburn on the long days, and frostbites during the equally long nights. Getting used to doing our private business over the side of the ship was embarrassing but at least not as bad as the stench from the unwashed garments and body odors which I have never smelt the like of before.

From my perspective, I am relatively unaffected by the poor conditions we were faced with on board. I believe I am tolerant to most sicknesses and pursue my daily tasks with energy that I wouldn't make a good patient, unlike my bunkmates who visit the sick room every few days. I guess truth be told I am more of a realist than a dreamer. I forge ahead hoping to better my prospects. One day my life will be changed.

Today was not a pleasant one, we lost a valuable crew member who fell from the topsail as the captain tried to navigate the rough seas. He was straight overboard, a rather large man who would make a tasty dinner for the sharks. Our efforts to save him were in vain as Captain Zheng seemed not to care for the life of one able seaman. At one point, I really thought mutiny was inevitable. Although it seemed to be averted but my feeling was that the crew could turn any day as the atmosphere was tense. Apart from anything else, seeing Captain Zheng and his trusted officers living the high life whilst we suffer below deck was too much for any man to bear.

Third Entry — Summer, Mid June, 1408

“A storm within the ship”

My diary entries are getting scarce, this is mainly due to the monotony of life on board this ship. Apart from hitting some rough weather, I have one important aspect of this trip to tell which will never leave my soul. With the cargo being so valuable, at least if rumors are to be believed, two days ago my life changed and changed somewhat for the better. I had overheard a dozen or more rebellious crewmen plotting to steal the weapons stored above, taking over the ship and plundering the gold. Upon hearing this plot, I deliberated for some time as to whether to inform the captain and his officers or follow the crews. Pride and annoyance came about inside me before thinking and logic took over. I decided for the former, formulating the plan to join the upper deck and officers. Not so much by betraying my crewmates, but more for my desire to better myself and to fulfill my future ambitions. My education would not go to waste.

Upon receiving my news, the captain sent officers around the armory finding two men hiding behind the wooden barrels. They were immediately arrested and spat out the whole plot fairly rapidly. All the ringleaders were named and rounded up. Undoubtedly with the proof of malice and intent, Captain Zheng would make an example of these ringleaders which would ensure no more rebellions would take place for the rest of this trip. After being soaked in dead men's blood, blindfolded and forced to walk the plank, a flurry of sharks appeared from nowhere to enjoy their dinner.

I was summoned to the captain's quarters. The captain was fearful for my safety should the crew members find out I had spilled the beans. I was immediately made a junior officer and had the protection of the other officers and the Captain himself. The Captain was surprised that I was a fully literate young man, so an opportunity to be in charge of navigation was given to me. It is a task and challenge I was looking forward to. My personal effects were immediately moved to the upper deck, a comfort I would enjoy for the rest of my life as my new cabin was only shared by one other officer who smelt quite sweet comparatively to my last bunkmates.

My new occupation afforded me time for my beloved bird life and geography, however, the snarls from my old crewmates could be heard a distance away like a pack of hungry dogs waiting to kill.

My navigational skills were testing me. As we passed a small group of islands, I had informed the captain we were making good time and would arrive in India in the next two months. However, from the look on the Captain's face and the shape and size of the islands we have passed should have alerted me to the fact of my foolishness. I was swiftly informed by the captain that we were still 7 months from the destination. My face has not glowed so red. I understand that I still have a lot to learn, and thankfully, I have not sunk us yet.

Fourth Entry—Early Winter, Late October 1408

“Near Misses”

This has been the longest time since I have written a word, as I have just returned from 3 months in the sick bay. As I was checking our course and the relative position of the stars, I was set upon by at least 3 or 4 burly crew members. Their identities, although unknown, was revealed by their language and odours. I even have my suspicions that one of them was my former bunk mate. However, I dare not to believe it after all the guidance I have given him. It would be a bitter pill to swallow. I was soon found left alone laying on the ground. I was carried away by one of the officers and sent to the sick bay immediately. When the captain inquired about my attackers after I awoke, I decided to stay mute about my former bunk mate. I still had some bond with him even if only slight now.

During the sick days, I continued to study navigational techniques. Although others treated me well, looking after me during their leisure time, only Xiao He and I became close friends. He worked in the sick bay, therefore we spent many humorous nights chatting and sharing ambitions and past times. I was told that Xiao He was highly-educated but forced to go on this journey by his father for him to endure hardship, take responsibility, and become a real man. Xiao He and I shared a love of nature, so we discussed mountain walks, the wildlife, and the beauty of summer days near running water.

Being shy, Xiao He suffered with his emotions somewhat, a man with little confidence who would always ask or look towards others for help. Panicked easily as though that of an abused child, and a face of a beaten dog. Confidence shot to pieces, with sick expressions his mind like noodles of no logical path. I want to console him, nurture him, and yet slap him into life. Yet with me he was open to some extent. Plain and simple, forgetting his shyness to the point of him laughing and joking about very trivial matters.

Fifth Entry — Winter, Mid November, 1408 “New Friends”

The early mornings and late nights test us from the freezing conditions at sea. I regret not bringing enough provisions to keep me warm, but Xiao He had helped me with an extra blanket. With the wind rising we at least were making better time to our destination, it was now commonly thought we would arrive by January. As we crossed the choppy water, a vessel which was a mere pinprick appeared in the distance. As we came closer, it was evident three people were aboard. Upon more closer inspection one appeared to be a female, I thought at that time this spells trouble. After hauling them aboard they explained their plight, being former members of a pirate gang they had dared to escape and look for new found freedom. There were some who showed distrust of them, yet the Captain believed and offered them shelter. After consulting with all three of our new

crew, my mind was turned from believing all pirates were no good to giving them some credibility at least. As the navigational officer, they enlightened me with some really useful information about the whereabouts of several pirate ships. We changed course after informing the captain, hopefully giving us safe passage for the rest of our voyage.

The ex-pirate Yu Xi had been spending more time with me recently. She amuses me with her tales which although seemed exaggerated, I am sure the cores are true. She is neither beautiful or ugly, but has a child-like appearance for one who is so experienced in life. I am drawn to her purely on a platonic basis, although I must admit time passes easily in her company.

Sixth Entry — Winter, January 1st, 1409

“Anticipating Arrival”

As the new year just turned six days travel to our destination, the talk onboard was how we will be greeted, when could we accomplish our goals, and would India become a friend rather than an enemy. I now knew the Captain’s plan was to offer gold in return for support in times of war. My own thinking was more about what we would find on this strange land. Although I had some knowledge, I was sure the full picture would be different. There was lots to prepare, wooden crates to be lifted and organized, the white flag raised as a sign of peace, and a full clean down of the ship and everything in its place as Captain Zheng was a stickler for neatness and order.

The captain organized for twelve of us to go ashore, firstly for fear of antagonizing the natives, and also to leave the ship crewed well enough to protect its cargo. I was keen to go ashore, and knowing that my friends would also accompany me, this adventure would be special. For the next six days, I am sure I will have sleepless nights.

Seventh Entry—Winter, January 7th, 1409 “The first leg”

I heard rumors and stories about this land we were going to. They called it “the Muslim Kingdom”, ruled by the Sultan and with Persian being the spoken language. We were met by local chiefs who undoubtedly knew our arrival, as we came in peace flying the white flag. The captain explained that he brought gifts to seek for alliances and wishing to meet the Sultan. A meeting was quickly arranged. So far so good. We were transported for seventeen hours before arriving to the Sultan’s palace. We felt vulnerable being far away from our ship, but at least we had no valuable cargo with us.

Introductions were made, the Captain set out his desire to make allegiances. Disaster struck us. The atmosphere turned very frosty. The Sultan demanded three times the amount which had been offered, and the captain appeared not to take it well. We couldn't give into this demand without jeopardizing future plans. He contemplated deeply before asking our opinions. Xiao He, being afraid to open his mouth, stuttered and fumbled to speak. The captain was looking irritated and about to explode. To take the attention away from Xiao He, I quickly asked the captain if I may be given the chance to communicate with the Sultan as I formulated a plan to resolve this situation. It was granted. I knew I would need my best negotiation skills. My plan was to offer the original amount of gold today, and pay four times the amount should we call upon their services in times of conflict. This would allow us to complete our journey and better negotiate with other countries. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the captain looking distinctively nervous, although I knew I had his support or he would have stopped me a long time ago. Tension was mounting, both sides locked in a staring contest like two cockerels about to engage in battle. The Sultan asked for two hours to consider this matter with his council. We would undoubtedly sweat for a little longer.

After a long three hours, we got the result we were looking for. I felt elation and wanted to climb the mast and bellow out "Winner!". But I composed myself and accepted a few congratulatory pats on the back. Yu Xi also confided in me, she has praised my quick thinking and negotiation skills making me even fonder of her. I am surprised that she even bothered to mention it. To sweeten the deal, we were given fresh food, crates of fruit, fresh drinking water, and enough supplies to support us until our next destination. The gold was left, the captain and the Sultan embraced, completing a satisfactory first leg of our journey. As we set sail from India on course for Arabia, the atmosphere for the first time since leaving port seemed somewhat jovial yet my heart was rather heavy. Yu Xi decided to adopt India as her new home, her seafaring days were over. I am saddened by this, as her company enriched me and her tales were enchanting. Now I think I said goodbye in such a cold manner, it is something I may one day regret.

Epilogue

The diary eventually ends here. The story of this man remained unknown, and the reasons why the diary didn't continue is still a mystery today. However, it is proven by history that this ship of sailors led by Zheng He became one of the greatest explorers of the world who successfully made allegiances with India, Africa, Arabia, and a variety of other countries. An official name "Ming Treasure Voyages" was given to this special journey. Eventually, they won themselves a place in history, and were considered as rulers of the sea historically.

The Time Traveller

Island School, Bindal, Preksha – 14

A flash of bright light cut off a perfect night's sleep as the scenery around me changed and I tore through the fabrics of time and space. I'm Daniel Wu, and I'm a time traveller.

I can't control it, it happens whenever it wants to. Multiple times I have been mid-conversation or in the middle of a meal when pure white bursts out of me and cuts me off, sending me to the French Revolution, where I had to help take down the King, or the Stone Age, in which I needed to defeat the beast that destroyed villagers' crops and took their children. It takes a while to figure out why I'm there, but once I figure out my task and fulfil it, I'm able to come home.

I got up and I felt my bed swaying as I listened to the sound of waves crashing nearby. I spied a window, so I rolled out of the bed and walked up to it, trying to keep my balance. All I saw was a sea for miles and miles. I looked down at the floor that was still swaying too much beneath my feet and struggled to keep down my dinner. I don't like the sea. The sun was setting right at that moment, and although I felt awfully sick, I had to marvel in the beauty of the sky. It was absolutely beautiful, like in a dream. Although I hated it, the ocean's waves completed the serene picture. The only thing ruining the moment was my stomach lurching again that sent me running to find a bathroom.

Once I felt better, I straightened myself up and started to take a look at my surroundings. I guessed I was in the past because there wasn't any technology lying around. The room was large, but a bunk bed took up most of the space so there wasn't much room left for anything else. A big cupboard, although in the corner, was the most eye-catching thing because it was the only thing that had any colour besides brown and white. I guessed that whoever owned this room wasn't the most interesting person in the world.

I decided to look through the cupboard. Everything inside was far too big for me, but I guessed that as long as I wore clothes that were the norm, maybe people wouldn't notice me much.

I pulled on my clothes the way I thought was correct and looked at my reflection in the window. I was wearing a shapeless and flowy robe that covered most of my throat and then tied at the back. It was airy and comfortable, and I wouldn't have minded taking it home. I began to walk away before I came back to empty my pockets. I stared at the small white cube in my hand a long time before shoving it into a pocket along with a very sharp knife and started walking up the stairs to explore the ship I was in.

As I turned a corner in an attempt to find a staircase to the deck, a hand reached out and grabbed me from my wrist and pulled me into a room. It was the kitchen, which was well-lit and smelled like wine and poultry. A boy looked up at me and handed me a sponge and a bucket, and then pointed at the floor. I sighed and got down on my knees and began to scrub before a pair of thick boots entered my vision. I look up in surprise.

"Is this your first time on board?" "Yeah,

how did you know?"

"Your robe is on backward." He deadpanned. "What?

No, it's not. The tie goes in the back, right?"

He gestured around the kitchen. "Do you see anyone wearing their robes the same way as you?" Oh.

“Well, I can’t change it now, can I? I’m already here.”

He grinned at me and crouched down. I noticed that he had his own sponge and bucket with him. “I’m Brendan. Who’re you?”

“My name’s Daniel.”

As we cleaned the kitchen floor, we remained mostly in silence, sometimes requesting to pass a sponge or more water to each other.

“So, this ship’s pretty big, huh?” I cringed.

“Yeah, it’s supposed to be used for trading. When’d you get on here? I thought they told everyone as soon as they got on.”

“Oh, I got on last time we docked. No one came to tell me anything.”

Brendan looked at me strangely. “You don’t know very much about this ship.”

I started sweating. Would he ask me who I am? Would he call the captain on me? Would he beat me up? “Ah. Well, you see, I didn’t exactly pay to be here.” *It’s the truth.*

“That’s not allowed. You could get executed in front of everyone.” Then Brendan leaned closer. “But don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

After we were finally finished making the floor squeaky clean Brendan led me to the deck. The sea salt stung my nose and the crashing of the waves made me feel queasy again. “Did I ever tell you I don’t like the sea?” He ignored me, instead, he led me to a table where a map was held down by four stones. He pushed a finger onto what I was guessing was where we had come from.

“This is where we first came from. Great Ming.” He pointed to part of China. “That’s China.” I corrected.

“What’s China? This is Great Ming. What are you talking about?” He didn’t seem to question a lot of things I said or did that were wrong.

He then moved his finger through the empty areas between land. “We stopped in different areas of China to pick up more people and then went to Malacca.” He pointed at where Malaysia would be. “We passed through the Straits of Malacca. Now we are on our way to Ceylon.” He pointed near India before continuing.

“You know, most people got off the ship at Malacca. You know why there are so few people on this ship now?” I looked around. Although the second in command had said there were around a hundred people, Brendan was right. It looked like there was almost no one around.

“Seas around Ceylon are pretty rough. The docks there used to be constantly full of ships. But then strange things started happening. First, small boats disappeared. It was understandable. Many people blamed it on bad luck and rough water. Then, slowly, more and more boats disappeared. Then bigger boats, until entire ships were disappearing with people on board. No one wanted to stop there.”

“Oh, my goodness. Why are we going there?” *I bet that’s why I’m here.*

“There was a rumour going around that there was an evil snake that lurked under the surface, waiting for its next victim. Multiple swore they had seen it, a thick rope of dark green swaying in the water.” Then he shrugged. “But obviously, that was just a rumour. A ship like this can’t get taken down simply by some big waves.”

“Heh. Yeah. Of course not.”

“Anyways, tell me about you. Why are you here? Why do you know nothing about anything?” He asked bluntly.

“Well, I, um, got on the ship here.” I pointed to the Philippines.

“We didn’t dock in the Philippines.” He sighed. “Fine. If you don’t want to tell me, don’t.” He began to walk away before I called him back.

“Okay. If you really want to know, I need to tell you in a quiet place. Somewhere no one will listen.” He smiled brightly at me before grabbing me by the wrist and dragging me back downstairs.

Once we were safely in what I guessed was a room for weapons because it was full of gunpowder and what I guessed were cannons, we both sat down. “Okay. I’m just going to say this quickly and get this over with. You’re not going to believe this. I’m taking a huge risk telling you this.” I took a deep breath. “I’m a time traveller. I’m only going to get back home after I fulfil my task. I think I know what it is, but I’m not completely sure yet.”

I watched in worry as Brendan remained silent, preferring to react through his eyebrows which were currently sky-high. “I think your eyebrows are trying to escape your head, Brendan.” I joked. He tried to look up at his eyebrows before relaxing them.

“You’re... a time traveller?”

“Uh-huh.”

Brendan stared at me a little longer and I stood there, waiting for him to do something. “I don’t understand.”

“Okay, I’m a person who can go through whatever time I want. I can go into the future or I can go into the past, but every time I do, there’s a task I have to fulfil. I sometimes have to save a group of people or defeat a monster. Things like that.”

Finally, after what felt like centuries, he spoke. “I think – I think I believe you.” He spoke slowly like he was still trying to come to terms with the fact that there was someone who could tell him all about the future in front of him.

Understandable.

“Oh, good.” I was relieved. “Most people would send me to an asylum.”

“So... a time traveller, huh? What time are you from? How'd you become one?” “I'm from the 21st century. It's really different to what it is now.”

“Wow. That far off? Seven hundred years in the future!” He perked up in excitement. “Tell me everything about the future and I'll tell you everything about now. You won't stick out as much.” He got on his knees and started begging. “Please?” He dragged out his 'please' to a full five-second stretch.

“Well, it's not very interesting.” “Says the one who lives in the future.”

I decided that I could trust Brendan because even if I couldn't trust him it wouldn't matter because I would be gone soon. So, we paused for me to change my clothes so that they were worn correctly, and we began walking around. After mostly me talking with Brendan cutting in from time to time to ask questions or point something out, I couldn't think of anything else to talk about and we'd been around the entire ship already.

The ship was built like junk boats back in the future, with loads of masts and ropes all around, but to my surprise, most of the rooms contained weaponry rather than people, although there were still far more people on the ship than I'd expect ships from old times to be able to carry.

Finally, we flopped down on an empty barrel each and watched each other. A faint voice called out something that sounded like, “Land! There's land!” and we both watched as crowds of people came up to the deck to look.

Instead of looking with them, Brendan and I remained sitting down, we were so tired. “You know, the future sounds really interesting.”

I began to respond. “Well—”

But I never got to answer, because at that moment the sky darkened, the sea got choppy, and people started screaming. From the depths of the ocean rose a fearsome monster, so huge it made the ship look like a toy, the people tiny figurines.

The monster was a humongous snake made of the same stuff as nightmares. Water poured off its probably bulletproof scales the same shade as a dull seafoam. Massive fangs dripping with deadly venom hid in its mouth, its angry white eyes glaring at everyone. Its body swung from side to side, its flat head moving around the ship like it was picking its first victim. Beneath the water I saw a huge body sitting on the ocean bed, chains forcing the body to stay down. I saw bones and skulls afloat in the water nearby, telling me what this snake-man does to people.

The snake-man screamed in anger seeing all of us encroaching upon his territory. The horrendous creature's voice echoed around the ship and slammed into my ears at full speed, forcing me to the floor and cover my ears trying to stop the volume. I curled into a foetal position in pain. My head was light and about to explode when finally, finally, sweet relief came. His voice stopped and for a second all I felt was sweet bliss as the pain subsided.

Then the snake—man screamed again, but this time even louder when I thought it wasn't possible. All I could see was black spots. My ears rang, trying to block out as much sound as possible but it couldn't block the snake man's screaming. The snake—man was so loud it made my entire body hurt. I looked up and saw Brendan shaking on the floor in a puddle of tears.

I looked at the monster and I wondered, is it really worth it? And then I looked at Brendan on the floor. I thought about my life back home.

I looked back at Brendan. I sighed.

With much effort, I stood up on legs that felt like jelly. I slowly removed my hands from my ears, only to immediately get hit with the sound again.

I fell backwards and immediately covered my ears again.

The snake's white eyes turned and narrowed at me. It flicked its tongue out like it knew that it could just eat me right now. This was a bad idea. But I had to do it.

I turned to a person dressed differently to everyone else, whom I guessed was the captain. "Bring out the cannons!" Instantly, a massive group of people followed my instructions.

I felt my pockets for the small white cube and flipped it open. I stared at the green light and the switch next to it. I had gotten this as a thank you for saving the future human race. They gave it to me for future adventures. The people told me that it was a cube that could let out enough poison to destroy entire forests. I kept it with me at all times.

I looked up at the monster. I probably could put this on its back, and it would have no effect. No, I had to somehow get this inside the monster and then have enough time to get it back before I returned to my time. The snake threw back its huge head, preparing to unleash another feral scream and I noticed a scar on its throat. Someone must have fought this monster before us. If I could cut the scar open, I could put the cube inside.

I stared at the dark and choppy water. This is happening. My greatest fear. I was about to jump into deep water. I pulled out my knife, held my breath, and I jumped.

While I was underwater, I faintly heard the sound of a loud gun going off. Must be the cannons. I swam through the dark and murky water, trying to see where the snake was.

I finally found the snake, only to see it moving scarily fast in a way that made me feel uneasy. It must be fighting above the surface, the cannons bouncing off its scales like they were absolutely harmless. How could I get it to come down here so I could cut it open? I felt my lungs bursting, trying to get some air so I swam upwards as fast as I could and took a huge gulp of air and the snake's terrifying white eyes turned towards me.

I guess that's how I do it.

I immediately swam back down under water. I could cut it open now. The snake lashed wildly, trying to hit me underwater, but the water was too dark for it to see clearly either. The monster had the advantage

here, and we both knew it. It was stronger, bigger, and faster than me, and all I had on my side right now was a knife and a bomb I couldn't use yet.

But somehow, out of pure luck, I found a change in texture from slimy and smooth to dry and hard.

I lifted up my knife and stabbed as hard as I could until I felt like my wrist was about to break, but I kept going. My lungs were about to burst, I couldn't see anything, and the snake was screaming so loud I thought my ears were bleeding, but I didn't care.

After what felt like ages, I felt the cut split open. I fumbled with the switch on the cube and threw it in, leaving the knife and swimming away instead. I swam up to the surface as fast as I could and got as far away as I could to watch the cube kill the monster.

The snake gave one last feral scream before slamming into the water and turning over. The knife I had stuck in its throat glinted in the sunset and blinded those who stood in the wrong position. The snake shook violently and split open. We all watched as blood and guts all pure black seeped out and poured out into the ocean below. The snake's body slowly vaporized and all that was left in the water was my knife and the small white cube, which looked completely untouched. I swam towards the now black water cautiously, in case the snake was still alive.

I managed to make it to the cube and knife and people started cheering so loud it was almost deafening. I grabbed the cube and knife and turned to see everyone jumping around with huge smiles on their faces. I caught Brendan's eye, who quickly realised that I needed to go.

He smiled at me sadly and waved goodbye. I waved back at him, just in time for the white light to flash.

I opened my eyes, and I was in my apartment. I was still wearing the robe I stole, and I was still dripping wet.

I smiled to myself. I had saved another group of people, and I'd survived a giant sea mon

Pirates

Kellett School, Hammond, Molly – 15

Shimmering silk lay around the deck in opulent mounds awash with color, in between them a smattering of crates were also arranged. They were bountiful chests, brimming with luxurious goods: gold, pearls, silver, and jewelry, that we were to give as gifts to the coastal civilisations that we encountered as we sailed around Asia. Our vessel was veteran; brine had warped the boards of the hull and the wood's coloring had transitioned to the foul green known by all seamen. Vibrant red sails fluttered above our main deck in the energetic breeze that swooped up from the seafront, bringing with it that salty essence which characterizes Zhuhai. Excited, it rushed and rustled between the masts and over the pools of silk. Hanging onto the main boom, I gazed back out towards our village and managed to catch a glimpse of the roof of my home. It would be a long time before I could lay eyes on it again.

Scattered across the hold and boardwalk below were a swarm of men, working together at a seemingly inhuman pace, shifting crates and other paraphernalia. Seven days had already passed loading the ship and now it was finally almost complete. Having already achieved my quota, I indulged myself in a lounge atop the bowsprit. Gazing down at emerald sea, immersing myself in its gentle motion, I drifted in and out of consciousness before surrendering to the blissful embrace of sleep. In my dreams I was already exploring the distance lands our adventure would take us. The whimsical figments of my imagination displayed delicious melodies and exotic tastes. Flying sea spray caressing my cheeks, as I stood against the foremast, basking in the friendly sun. I would be like a panther, strong and triumphant – no longer restricted by poverty. This was the adventure of a lifetime.

I was abruptly pulled from my tender slumber by the jarring yells and exclamations from the boardwalk. Still befuddled by the luscious cloud that is sleep but sensing something was wrong, not knowing quite what, I slithered down the bow spirit back towards the main deck. Cautiously, I wiggled my feet about before touching the flaky board beneath me and finally reverting back to a standing position. Curiously wondering what could have happened, I dashed to the edge of our boat before peering down at the chaos unfolding below. I was shocked to lay my eyes upon a group of imperial guards confronting the crew down below. Before I could fully comprehend the situation that was unfolding in front of me, I was jostled by the rush of the crew on board and the cacophony of shouting abusing my eardrums. The creaking of the boat loudly reverberated over the commotion of the sailors below and I tried to get my bearings. Suddenly, our boat lurched forward and the rush of the water beneath us roared mightily. The yells from the boardwalk escalated, becoming increasingly desperate and demanding. Briefly, I scanned the faces of my fellow crew members, it seemed only a few were as puzzled as I was. The rest, however, were working outstandingly hard, moving the remaining items from the deck to the hold and participating in the intricate dance of organising the ropes of our sails. Now we were picking up speed, our pursuers were falling behind, their yells blending into the background. The quieter they became, the more I realized that my voyage had just begun.

Shooting passionate rays of red and orange, the sun hung considerably lower in the sky than before I had gone to sleep. The sapphire blue sky at the peripheries of the horizon was creeping closer, slowly plunging us into a world of night. No more than an hour later were the lanterns set alight. Their flickering orange flames were like miniature suns, dappling our boat with a delicate light. By this point, the tension had subsided and the crew was finally beginning to settle down, some sitting on the deck, some heading to the hold, and others climbing up to the Captain's quarters. I myself settled into a small nook, stretching out then nestling in further as I watched the lanterns perform. Where their light could not extend, eerie shadows were drawn out over the aged wood. Their dance mirrored that of the lanterns, ebbing and flowing like the ocean below. In this image, I drifted off for the second time on my first adventure. My dreams were as merry as ever, brimming with tales of great explorers and my own voyage. However, dark clouds permeated these jubilant frames, my conscience was plagued by a question. Why were those men confronting us? Doggedly, I ran the question through my mind over and over and over again, there shouldn't have been a problem, our journey was commissioned by the empire! I tossed and turned the rest of the night, unable to rest easy.

The following morning I groggily awoke to the sun quietly peering over the horizon, shifting the sky's pigment to a tender blue, before heading down below the deck to grab some food. New to my taste buds, the dried meat and pickled vegetables tasted somewhat familiar but rather acidic – a world away from my mother's steamed crab and lotus roots. Yet, it was food and a small sacrifice for my chance on this exciting quest. I shovelled the food down as quickly as I could, to try and avoid tasting the bitterness for much longer, earning some sidelong glances from a few of the other crew members. After wiping my hands on my already discolored trousers I returned to the deck for want of

fresh air.

Atop the deck once again, I spotted a boy leaning against the side of the boat who looked about my age. His hair was stashed up in a top knot, more disheveled than everyone else, and he seemed to be entranced by the waves in the distance. Tentatively, I walked up and stood next to him. "I'm Hui" I stated, rather awkwardly. "Disung" he quietly replied, his gaze remaining fixed on the horizon. "Where are you from?" "Xi'an" he responded, still softly "I travelled for four months to get to Zhuhai with my uncle." "Woah. I'm just from Zhuhai. My whole family lives there." Later that day, Disung and I had to begin reorganising the goods in the hold, our hasty exit from the port meant that valuables were strewn across the hold. It was laborious work, the huge crates were especially heavy, after a few hours of sorting and shifting we were drenched in sweat and finally able to head back up for some fresh air.

Our relaxing break was interrupted by shouts from the Captain, "Everyone over here! Now!" Disung and I quickly sat up and hurried over to where the rest of the crew were gathering. The Captain was a plump little man, who was shorter than most of the crew but weigh more than half of us combined. His stature should not deceive you, however, his bellow was resonating, like the roar of a lion and could be heard for miles. He had summoned us for what seemed to be a sort of meeting. Although I was never the most attentive of people, I did try to stay focused on what he was saying. "We should be landing in Quang Ngai within the next day or so, this means that you lot are going to have to get the hold together and prepare for anything else you need before we get there. As we arrive I am going to need everyone on deck so listen out" he instructed, "That's it, get back to work!" Well, there goes our short break, I thought.

I spent the rest of the day completing menial tasks around the boat. First, I had to scrub the deck with another boy called Daquan, it was back-breaking work and the fierce sunlight scorched my neck, transforming it into a painful red streak. Afterwards, I was sent to move several crates, which I had only hours before neatly organised with Disung. The quartermaster forced us to continue our arduous work past sundown but I could at least sense the buzz of excitement from the crew, all impatient for seeing the shore tomorrow.

I was the last person to be released from work so when by the time I made it up to the deck it seemed as though the rest of the crew had already fallen into a deep sleep. It was the middle of the night, yet there was a murmur of voices from the Captain's quarters and the lanterns in that area were still alight. Curious, I quietly rose to my feet and snuck across the length of the deck, leading myself to a position just below the Captain's quarters, beside the stairs that led up to them. I tilted my head to the side trying to hear what they were saying, wondering what could have led to a mysterious midnight meeting. At first, I could only catch snippets of the conversation "...send them down", "...give us time", "...the treasure", but as I continued to listen in, my ears adjusted to their tone and I was able to hear much, much more. "Make sure you're armed", "Don't let the crew take down the goods", "Send the others down first". Something was definitely amiss, this was not the conversation of some kind-hearted men hoping to spread prosperity throughout the region. This was the conversation of a pirate.

Not sure what to do, I shook Disung awake. I couldn't say that we were the closest of friends but he was my best bet. Short of breath, I quickly told him everything that I had heard and seen. Surprisingly, he believed me. "I knew something was up" he whispered, "No one is that good a person." Although depressing, that seemed to summarise what I was thinking as well. Now in agreement that our ship was actually a pirate ship, we clambered down to the hold where no inquisitive ears could hear us.

"What should we do?" I asked, desperately hoping for an answer. "I really don't know" Disung replied. When I set off just a few days ago, this was not the battle that I imagined I would be fighting. Together we sat there for several hours, struggling to find a solution to our predicament. The creaking of

the boards above us didn't help our focus and the constant fear of being discovered remained. Every particularly loud thump or voice was like a tendril of ice, causing us both to freeze and taking several minutes to thaw. This staccato pace of discussion was painfully slow and awfully ineffective.

Then I had an idea.

The rest of the night flew by in a blur of excitement and activity. Disung and I worked together like a well-oiled machine, rearranging storage and collecting supplies. Tirelessly, we continued plotting all night long, determined in our pursuit. We knew that we could not let these men get away with this. While we were sorting out the logistics of

our plan, I imagined my mother's face as I returned back to Zhuhai with the treasure we had protected, the emperor would shower us with gifts and pleasantries, we would be the most famous sailors in the empire. At daybreak, we finally collapsed in our sleeping quarters, on edge for the day ahead.

After what seemed to me like five minutes, Daquan shook us both awake, "Guys, get up" he instructed, "We should be arriving in Quang Ngai in fifteen minutes!" Apprehensive, Disung and I sprung to our feet – it was almost time. Unaware of our plan, Daquan shot us confused, suspicious glances. I glanced at Disung on my right, using my eyes to request to include Daquan. He nodded then we whisked Daquan to the sequestered back of the boat. In hushed voices we explained our plan, hoping that he would believe us and that he wouldn't alert the Captain or his ring. After we had finished explaining, he remained silent for a few moments, seeming to contemplate what he had just heard. Disung and I stood motionless, awaiting a response, internally praying that he would join us. Finally, Daquan said "Okay."

The thud of our ship signified our landing at Quang Ngai. Our little trio joined with the rest of the crew on the main deck, setting our eyes on the crystal clear sea lapping at the golden sand below. In the distance, some small huts were visible. About half of us headed down to the beach, each person carrying a heavy crate. Glancing behind me, I saw that the Captain and his men were remaining on the ship. Perfect. The group of us that were sent off the ship trudged slowly up the beach, as soon as we were out of earshot from the Captain, I told everyone what was going on. "All of us are being used by the Captain to support his criminal exploits, we aren't giving gifts, the Captain is keeping the treasure for himself and his ring of men" I explained, "Don't look backwards now or he will get suspicious. You can check your crates, they're packed with sand." The others seemed to exchange wary glances, but after subtly checking their goods, there seemed to be quiet solidarity among us. "Now for my plan" I instructed, "As soon as we make it over this hill we can dump our crates. Then we can take back our ship."

Our band gathered together just over the hilltop, murmurs cascading around the circle. "I know you are all armed, and there are more of us than there are of them. We need to force them off the boat as quickly as we can, then we can deliver our goods to the village and continue our journey." Disung stated, his voice was captivating and every single man was paying their utmost attention. After some more explanations and a solidified plan, we began an apprehensive wait before our return to the boat, in order to convince the Captain that we had already visited the community of Quang Ngai.

I was the first up the boardwalk, "We delivered our crates to the village, Captain, in return they offered us some local delicacies including *cua ớt* which we thoroughly enjoyed." I felt the white hot pain in my cheek before I smashed down to the deck. "You didn't think to bring some for us" the Captain bellowed down to me. Although my vision was blurry, I could sense the tension of our crew growing behind me. "I'm sorry Captain, there just wasn't –" a kick to my stomach silenced my faux plea. That was it. Fiercely, I unsheathed my knife and took a swing at the Captain's leg, triggering the charge of our men behind us. Suddenly, commotion enveloped me, men were fighting across the whole deck whilst Disung and Daquan helped me to my feet. "Nice job" they joked as we went to join the fight.

My knife collided with the Captain's, our gleaming blades almost throwing sparks into the air. His swings were strong but he didn't possess my agility. With trained steps, I evaded his attacks, slowly forcing him to the edge of the boat. Every step backwards that he took, the more flustered he got and I could sense a fear slowly building up inside of him. Eventually, I forced him to the very edge of the boat, his face purple with frustration. Using my small blade, I twisted his knife out of his hand and put mine to his throat. At that

moment, I could feel the gazes of almost all the men on the board shift to the Captain and I. The clamour of the fight died down and suddenly everyone was frozen, it was surreal.

What happened next was a blur of events. I led the Captain down to the hold where some small cells were already erected, soon after his allies surrendered and they found themselves in the same place. Afterwards, the remaining crew split up, a few stayed on board to stand guard over our new prisoners and prepare to set sail again. The rest of us located the real treasure and headed off over to the village.

The walk only lasted ten minutes, even with our small party carrying over the crates. Although we were excited to meet the villagers, we were still highly agitated – Đại Việt had only recently been re-established after Ming occupation – some grudges were most likely held. Despite our worries, we were pleasantly surprised to find that these

villagers were very welcoming and kind. They accepted our gifts of gold and silk, whilst showering us with local delicacies and gifting us with meticulously crafted ceramics. Our exchange seemed to have peaked interest from villagers because they gathered around us, some small children staring in awe at the mounds of silk and gold in front of them. It was a heartwarming moment that remains ever clear in my memory.

However, we soon decided to leave. This was a struggling village full of hardworking people, they had to return to the markets or the forests or the river to provide for each other. So, our hearts still beating fast with excitement, we headed back to the ship, more ready than ever to continue on our journey. As the boat began to pull away from the shore I was proud to see the ecstatic faces of my crew full of determination to complete the voyage ahead and to do some good in the world. The coast slowly faded away as our crew settled in, our ship now three crates of precious metals and ten rolls of silk lighter. Confidently, I stood at the foremast, looking out into the distance, feeling the flying sea spray caressing my cheeks, basking in the friendly sun.

I am the Captain here and I *will* complete my adventure.

Confucius at Sea

Kellett School, Samtani, Divina – 16

1. Part one: 仁 Jen – kindness, the fundamental of humanity

Every great story that takes place upon the high seas usually involves swashbuckling adventure and utter skulduggery, perhaps even a treasure chest or two. However, this story may prove, peculiar, as the story of Admiral Zheng He and his fleet is but a simple exploration into the concept of humanity.

Our whirlwind of a story sets out at the turn of the century, 1403.

The crew have eagerly boarded the docks, with farewells shining on their eyes, and heartfelt admirations from loved ones blazing on their cheeks. Or perhaps, it could be the unabating touch of the blessed sun on their skin. Nonetheless, the ropes are untied, the sails shiver in anticipation, and the anchor is hauled, a final companion welcomed aboard. Pensive, the newly instated, though greatly admired Captain Zheng He stands at the bridge of the ship as his fingers drum against the smoothened oak of the steering wheel. Quieter and quieter the demanding and deafening voices behind him crash against each other, waves writhing upon waves, crest crashing upon crest.

A few hours later, the captain opened his eyes to reveal an expanse of ethereal light glide across the mountains and hills of the ocean. Tendrils of incandescent lustre illuminated the contours of his face just as the first scream shattered the serene silence.

Deteriorating bodies bloat under the watchful eye of the rest of the crew; rubbed raw rashes growl angrily in the dark; and seafoam white froth bubbles at the gums. Disease had come for them, and on the first night too. A couple hundred sailors crowded the lower deck of the ship and excessively poured out the doors, morbidly peering in to see the afflicted. Musty wood and sea salt wafted through the ship, until it reached the area of sickness where the air turned putrid.

Whispering turned to bickering as the future was contemplated by the surviving crew. Shrewd eyes and a flippant tongued man asked his colleagues two questions amidst the chaos as they awaited their captain.

“我们为什么不在它们感染我们之前把它们扔到船上？我们为什么要冒着痛苦，因为上帝注定了他们/Why don't we just throw them over board before they infect us? Why should we risk suffering because God has doomed them?”

A perturbed quiet fell upon the men as they endured the moans of the sick. Minutes trudgingly wore on while the thought of merciful murder settled in the stomachs of the men.

Leather boot clacked against flimsy wood boards, beckoning the Captain's imminent arrival.

Cleaving in two, the humble crew parted anxiously; bated breaths begging for guidance. Once Captain Zheng He examined the scene, his calm expression cracked by the lines that appeared on his forehead.

Determinedly rolling up his silk woven sleeves, his fingers nimbly pull apart the coarse fabric of the shipmates shirt, revealing swollen joints and coalescing bruises, forming a map of anguish.

He had already heard his crew's thoughts on the matter upon arrival.

Zheng He's fingers carefully clutched the sick man's hand as he formed a decision and murmured a quick prayer to Tianfei, the Chinese goddess of the sea.

Heaving the man's body into his arms, Captain Zheng He turns to his comrades.

“他们需要营养丰富的食物。把它们放在我的宿舍等待订单/They need nutrient rich food. Lay them in my quarters and await orders.”

Stumbling at the words, the young cook asked, “但先生，船长的宿舍是禁区/But sir, the captain's quarters are off limits.”

As he regarded the rest of the uncertain crew, the captain replied, “为什么我的宿舍不受限制？与男人的生活相比，昂贵的布料无济于事。让这些病人在最黑暗的时候体验到舒适/Why should my quarters be off limit? Expensive cloth is nothing compared to a man's life. Let these sick men experience comfort during their darkest time.”

Enraged, the man who had spoken up earlier, demanding death of the sick, questioned, “它们可能会冒险感染你和我们其他人/They could risk infecting you, and the rest of us too.”

Zheng He turned back to the sick men in his care and said, “保持朋友，而不是在危机期间成为敌人·是对我们人性的最终考验/To stay a friend, rather than turn into an enemy during a crisis is the ultimate test of our humanity.”

With his orders, the crew worked as one to move their sick friends from the howling underground of the ship's lower deck, to the lavish rooms of their captain.

Over the course of the few days while they sailed to a land we now know as Vietnam every one of the disease struck crew fully recovered. This would prove important in the days to come for the future of the Ming Treasure Voyages.

2. Part two : 禮 Li – order to life, actions create consequences

Two months later, Captain Zheng He has travelled to Brunei, Java, and Thailand. Laden with gifts from kind governments after presenting them with China's greatest gold, silver, porcelain, and silk, Zheng He had accoutered the Chen Zuyi pirates. After a strained peace agreement somewhere near Indonesia the ships had parted ways.

A while later, maps, compasses, and other navigational tools were strewn about the captain's desk as he furiously scribbled down recordings of past ports into an eroded leather bound book. Brush in hand, ink delicately wrapped in it's strands, he reached to write as the first mate stormed into the room.

The captain looked up as a droplet of ebony ink bloomed on the paper underneath. Flustered, the first mate, Wang Jinghong, scurried backwards, over his own feet, and back out the door, closing it during his retreat. A second later, two rapt knocks reverberated through the wood.

Zheng He allowed his entry, raising his eyebrows curiously at the blustering man.

After accepting and dismissing Jinghong's fervent apologies, Zheng He was finally able to ask the problem

“先生，投降的海盗刚刚袭击了宝藏舰队！Sir, the pirates that surrendered just attacked the Treasure Fleet!”

His eyebrows furrowed, the objects on his table precariously rattling as he strode over to the window. Spying the creeping sun on the horizon, he replied Jianhong.

“将这个词传播到兵船和福船。我们必须准备好洒血。帝国不会遭受这种叛国罪/Spread the word to the Troop transports and Fuchuan warships. We must prepare for blood to be spilt. The Empire will not stand such treason.”

Light languidly spilled across the sea and ships that prowled closer and closer. It were almost as if TianFei herself was blessing the day to come.

Masts raised, winds buffeting, palms locked on sword grips, men systematically working the ropes, the tension in the air was palpable. Out of nowhere, a rope was slung onto the main hull of the ship, imbedding itself into the wood. With the raise of his sword, the blade reverently glowing in the morning sun, the soldiers charged.

Surging like a tsunami, pirates flooded the deck. Hissing through gnashed teeth, they were vagrant rats, scattering into the chaos. Heads were cut off if they boarded. Fingers were hacked off if they went for the ropes. Hearts were shot through by arrows if they survived the previous. For a fragile second, the violence was satiated, their bodies going limp on the sharp end of a sword. But the pirates were nothing if not bloody determined. Hyena like, their movements erratic, drunken almost, for they abhorrently tripped up soldiers before plunging a steel dagger into their backs. They heinously spat globs of spittle into faces before knocking teeth out into a puddle of crimson waste on the deck. They carelessly used fallen bodies as shields before throwing said body onto their foes, who gasped for a breath that rankled with the taste of their crewmate's coppery blood. The ocean was washed as red as a setting sun while the battle wore on.

On the starboard side, the Captain was fighting off two malicious looking pirates who circled the captain with contempt. Adjusting his stance, Zheng He attacked. Glinting metal scraped his opponent's abdomen, drawing scarlet, just as the second pirate went down for a stab at his calf which he quickly parried, throwing the man off. Snarling, his first opponent kicked him from behind, to which he rolled over, catching a salty breath that stung his parched lips.

Bringing his sword up in defense, he twisted his blade behind the other man's, the tip reaching vital organs. Blood blossomed, death incriminating its victim. However, he still had one more to go. Leg wobbling, he defiantly pushed himself off the ground and into his last opponent's vision. He raised his sword to the left, then feigned a jab as he pressed his blade against the other man's, his blade honourably almost reaching its target. White light encompassed him in the space of eternity, but also a second, as his aggressor punctured his stomach with a smaller dagger. Clutching at his wound desperately, he could see the smaller details on the dagger's owner, who scornfully looked down upon him. Closing his eyes, for only a millisecond he promised himself. Zheng He's mind when blank.

Rushing sensations blasted straight to his stomach as the force behind the dagger went still. He blinked, vision clearing to see one of his crew standing over the pirate's body, grinning. It happened to be that his rescuer was also one of the previously sick. Holding out his hand, the sailor helped him stand while glaring at the captain's wound, distraught. Observing his rescuer's expression, Zheng He put a scarlet soaked hand on his shoulder.

“别担心这个。上帝明确地打算让我活着，因为他把你带回来拯救我。为此我感激不尽。”

/Don't worry about this. God clearly intends for me to live seeing as he brought you back to life to save me. And for that i am grateful.”

Shaking his head with a sad smile, the sailor disagreed, saying, “**我的生命对上帝无关紧要。不，你是那个拯救我和许多其他人免于死亡的人。我很高兴我有机会偿还债务。但是你拯救了自己，因为正是你的行为让我得以拯救你** /My life is inconsequential to God. No, you are the one who saved me and so many others from certain death. I am glad i had the opportunity to pay back the debt. But you saved yourself, for it was your actions that allowed the consequences for me to save you.”

Nodding gratefully, all the captain said was, “**也许你是对的** /perhaps you are right”.

Tearing off a piece of fabric and giving it to the captain to staunch the rivulets of blood streaming from his abdomen, he earnestly answered, “**我当然是对的。如果你第一天晚上没有照顾我们，我们谁也不会恢复得那么好，我们也不会赢得这场战斗** /Of course i am right. If you had not cared for us that first night, none of us would have recovered so well, and we would not be winning the battle.”

Looking back at the fight still raging on around them, Zheng He realised the sailor was right. Though blades were still piercing and bodies still fell like flies, the pirate numbers were drastically thinning. A smile growing on his lips, the Captain had never been more at peace.

Having dropped of the rest of the pirates, who had suffered a casualty of 5,000, at the nearest port for their executions, Captain Zheng He and his crew scrubbed the decks of remaining gore, and headed back out to sea.

3. Part three : 君子Chun-tzu – at home with the world

It was a decade later and the esteemed Captain Zheng He and his crew had travelled to many new places, expressing diplomatic felicitations, including India, Sri Lanka, Arabia, and now Africa. Most times they were met with welcomes and presents, though occasionally they would encounter hostile soldiers upon docking. Fortunately, for them, Mombasa was not one of those places.

Birds danced, birthing abstract shapes in the sky, as Zheng He's crew and him explored the terrain of Mombasa, in what is now Kenya. 9,146 km is how far they were from his home in Nanjing. Although, far away from their homeland, the crew explored the foreign continent eagerly. The magnificent architecture was inspired by the swahili culture that seemed to entwine itself with the port city. Towering alabaster mosques grandly rose from the tops of buildings; its sight incandescent for ornate gold intricacies detailed the surface.

Meanwhile, colourful streets glowed with the soft luminescence of lanterns, while the tastes of the new country flirted with their senses. This exotic place was so different to anything they had ever known back home in contemporary China.

A few days before they had visited the radiant palace that reigned from the centre of the city. The palace being the city's nourishing heart, the streets were its veins, teeming with rivers of people. Nonetheless, when they had visited, carts brimming with cloth, beads, metal goods, silks, and porcelain, and their words dribbled diplomatic greetings and compliments. They walked back down the palace steps soon after, guiding their carts filled with gold and ivory.

Strolling through the streets that smelt of all sorts of spices, Zheng He had to pause, for his joints were inflaming to the point where he sucked in a stinging breath. Resting by a stall, he distracted himself with the draped with exhilarating coloured cloths, and curiously created jewellery, Captain Zheng He fancied the precise weaving of four bracelets, that were throned on a velvet cushion, for his sisters who long awaited his arrival. After buying them, and safely storing them in his breast pocket he set out to gather his men. It was time to return home.

Once his crew were all accounted for, they got to untying the aged ropes and dragging in the barnacle smothered anchor for what felt like the last time. Hearts heavy they climbed aboard, watching the ships that were new, unmarred, and anticipating adventure, pull up to port. With one last lingering look back, hoping to imprint the majestic though peculiar city into his mind for the rest of life, Captain Zheng He steered the ship into open waters.

They were just passing the coast of Indonesia when Captain Zheng He's lips tasted blood. A week later he succumbed to more shortness of breath, and his skin grew feverishly pale; the doctor on board sorrowfully agreed that death was on the horizon.

Surprisingly untroubled for a dying man, the Captain announced his arriving departure. The crew crowded on deck, bustling with uneasy energy, and he stood alone on the bridge. Agitated shouts broke out across the ship.

One sailor called out furiously, “你不能死。我们差不多回家了/you can't be dying. we're almost home”

“我不认为你死的时候会选择· 否则没人会/i don't think you get to choose when you die, otherwise no one would”, said Captain Zheng, chuckling merrily,

Another voice cried out, “但是谁会指导我们? /but who will guide us?”

Zheng He prominently directed their gaze towards Wang Jianhong, his second in command, who had matured finely over the past few years. Upon noticing the Captain's meaning, Jianhong turned as red as 红包, the chinese packets they would get during Chinese New Year.

One last sullen voice begged, “没有我们不能结束我们的旅程/We can't end our journey without you.”

Eyes wrinkling, he responded softly, “对抗不可避免的事情是没有智慧的, 所以我不害怕, 你也不应该/there is no wisdom in fighting the inevitable, so i do not fear, and neither should you”

Voice steady as the ocean below their feet, Zheng He raised his chin and regaled them with past anecdotes of hardships, testimonies of their bravery, and lastly with his thankfulness of having been their captain.

Teary eyed and despairing, the crowd dispersed, leaving Captain Zheng He once again alone with his thoughts. Shifting his thoughts to the gentle buoyancy of the waves as they hit the hull, he let himself be lulled into a state of peace. Exploring the depths of his spirituality, he heard Tianfei, the sea goddess, beckon him closer. Transcendent, he forgoed anything and everything that tethered him to the physical world, and simply, let go.

Attentively, they cut off a braid of his hair, and took off his pair of shoes, for they were to be taken back to Nanjing for his burial. Otherwise, they lovingly wrapped their Captain in white silks that clung to his hollow frame. A splattering of stars attended the burial from above, as the red whispers of a new morning seeped into the night sky. Even the ocean paid it's respects, its waves allayed, as it held its breath in memory of the Captain Zheng He.

They ceremoniously lowered him into the shimmering ocean that had embraced him in life and now death.

The Ming Treasure Voyages

Kiangsu Chekiang College Internation section, Ng, Jinghong Dylan – 14

Lightning strikes. Thunder rumbles. Gales blow. Waves like mountains crash upon our tiny vessel, but somehow it manages to withstand. Some sailors pray to whatever god they worship, while others try to survive. Cowards run to the lifeboats only to be swallowed by a giant wave, The brave attempt to repair the bent mast, but none succeed in trying. During this struggle, what was I doing? I remembered exactly what I was doing as clear as day. I certainly didn't run to help repair the mast or escape through the lifeboats. I was trying not to drown as this huge tide attempted to pull me into the ocean. In these situations, nobody is here to help you. Other people have no time to rescue. They are also trying to survive, remember? Of course, it is an exception if you are a person of importance, such as our captain. If you are the saviour of this person of importance, you will be showered with praise and reward even if you died in the attempt. This chain of thought happened just as a huge wave crashed onto our ship, pulling me into the ocean. I had barely enough time to scream before I fell into the ocean, never to be seen again.

How did all this happen in the first place? I guess it happened long ago before I was even an adult or even a teenager. Let me tell you a bit about myself. My name is Wang and I was born in Lijiang. Wonderful place, really. Beautiful canals, wonderful scenery and air as fresh as you can get. My mother and father were both captains on a ship, sailing then and now to go on an expedition. They were away a lot, so when they drowned while attempting to save some valuable item, I was not sad. Don't expect me to be remorse. I was four when they died and I barely remember anything about them. Anyways I grew up as a curious boy with a constant dream of being a mariner. My grandma was really nice to me and always played as the pirate in our fantasies. I was happy in Lijiang. There was a catch, though. Lijiang was in the middle of nowhere, about 500 miles away from the nearest port. So this basically meant my dream of being a sailor was finished. Until the day I met this boy named Zheng He.

Zheng He was one of my neighbours. He was around the same age as me, maybe older. His hair was dark black and he was quite tall for his age. You couldn't call him ugly or handsome. He lived with his parents who were retired farmers. I rarely saw him outside, so I assume his parents don't let him go out much. Anyways, let me tell you how I met him. Or was it how he met me? On that day, when I was about eight, I decided I would construct a boat out of the wood planks and other supplies in our garage. We had a lot of sailing items since my parents were captains. Our garage is filled with parts from their ship, a gallon. Spare planks, broken lanterns and even a cannonball(though how it

got in there, I have no clue). But why did I want to build a boat? No, it wasn't because I wanted to play pirates. It was because I could sail to the port. In Lijiang, there are lots of canals. One of them leads to a river, which leads to the port. I was determined to follow this route to my dreams. So on that day, I took a few wooden planks and went to my secret hideout, right next to a canal, hidden from prying eyes. Unknown to me, my neighbour saw me creeping out and decided to follow me. So while I unrolled my parents' blueprints for a sailing boat, a voice behind me said, "Are you trying to build a boat?" I was really tempted to say "no sh** Sherlock", but my grandma has forced me to get out of this habit of saying it to anyone who asks a question. Instead, I tried being polite by saying, "What was your first clue?" He ignored me and sat down next to me. We sat in silence for a long time. Then he said the words that changed our lives forever. "Let's build it together." Not very dramatic for words that change your fate, but nonetheless, it changed my life. Come to think of it, these words were the thing that put my future self into a lot of hassle. After he said these words, he told me his dream, which was extremely similar to mine, except he wanted to be a nice pirate. Don't know what a nice pirate is? Apparently, Zheng He's definition of a nice pirate is that instead of plundering enemy ships, they give gifts to enemy ships, creating bonds with more countries. Typical Zheng He. Instead of stealing gold, he gives gold. What a nice guy. After we talked about our dreams, we made an oath to make them come true. So from that day onwards, we would come here and build our ship.

For years and years, we constructed our ship. After 5 long years, our vessel was completed. It wasn't small. It had three small rooms, a sloop mast rig, a storage room and even a small lifeboat. It wasn't much, but it was a boat. The day had come for us to set sail. We had to put supplies on the boat, such as a water filter, salted cookies and a few other supplies. For me, the hardest part of the journey wasn't constructing the boat or loading the supplies. It was how I had to explain this to my grandmother. On the day we planned to leave, I tried not to cry. My grandmother, knowing something was wrong, gave me one of her lian gao, which she refers to as "only to be made on special events". Once she gave me this, I burst into tears. My grandma only hugged me and sent me to bed. The entire night, I did not sleep a wink. I thought about a lot of things, mostly my regrets. What would happen to my grandma? Thinking about this made me guilty, so I wrote a note to my grandma saying what I had done. After writing my note, I grabbed my bag, which seemed to feel slightly heavier than before and dashed stealthy to our rendezvous point. When I arrived, Zheng He was already there. "You ready?", he asked, sounding untroubled as if we were only going on a short vacation. Lucky him. He didn't really love his parents much. For me, this took a lot of guts. Let me just say that this process was a walk in a park for Zheng, while it was a climb out of hell for me. As we got on the ship, I saw the shadow of a person. This

made me scared as I thought it was soldiers sent to arrest us. That's absurd, I thought, What soldiers are up in this hour? As I slowly calmed myself down, the boat shuddered. It had started moving. "Well, this is it. This is where our dreams come closer into becoming reality." I thought aloud. "Yes, this is where all our adventures will start." And so, our adventure came to a start.

The journey out of Lijiang was smooth. No living soul saw us unless you called the shadow which I just saw a living soul. I kept seeing a shadow of a person tailing us. I told myself I was seeing things, but seeing the exact same shadow at the rendezvous point made me scared. Coincidence? I think not. When we reached the borders of Lijiang, it was already dawn. I think I looked unassured of my decision because Zheng He said, "My friend, this is the path we must take, figuratively and literally. We are not only doing this for our needs but also for our country's needs." Being honest, this was the most inspirational speech I have ever heard. After we crossed the border of Lijiang, we proceeded down to the port. This took two years and by the time we arrived in the port of Suzhou, I had already matured. I no longer wanted to be a sailor. Since the travel across China had already satisfied my dreams, I wanted to settle down, maybe even have kids. When I told this to Zheng he, he got angry. We argued for a long time. "After coming all this way, you give up now?" he asked. "Yes", I replied firmly, "The trip across China was fun, but now I want to settle down." With that, I left him.

In the next ten years, life was peaceful for me. I got a job as a fisherman, bought a house and settled down in it nicely. I had almost forgotten about Zheng He. Sometimes, I heard other fishermen talk about this great captain. When they told me his name, it sounded familiar. Apparently, he wants to be a good pirate. Again, that sounded extremely familiar. When I asked them to tell me more, they said they had told me all they knew. Apparently, he would be coming to our town in a few days, Everyone was talking about him, When I asked other people who he was, they told me the exact same things the fishermen told me. In the following days, people began to set up decorations to honour the coming of this man. The people treated the coming of this man like the coming of the emperor. Even though they barely knew who this person was, they still honoured him because he was a person of high rank. It just occurred to me that even though I had asked a lot of questions about this man, I still didn't know his name. I ran to ask one of the volunteers helping to decorate. "What's the guy's name?" The man, being extremely busy, just pointed to a big banner hung across the town hall. In bold colourful words, it read '歡迎鄭和'. Now, I guess the name of this man was quite obvious to you, but in fact, it was subtle to me. In my defence, I had not seen him for about ten years. Anyways, the

Chinese words translate to “Welcome Zheng he”. That name sounded really familiar now. But facial recognition occurs faster than name recognition.

The day has come where Zheng He would come to our port. On that day, slightly more information had been found about him, though none of them was personal. He was coming to the port to run some errands. It had also been also found out what the job of this captain was. Most people, including me, sounded familiar. He was apparently going to be a “nice” pirate. I was thoroughly confused by the concept of a “nice” captain. I was about to ask what it meant when it occurred to me that I knew the meaning of this word. I was starting to think of where I heard it from when there came a loud cheer from the harbour. I rushed to the sound when I saw the most startling and intimidating thing a person could see. It was a fleet of ships. I had seen fleets of ships lots of times in the ten years I lived here, but those were ants compared to this one. Ships as far as the eye could see, reaching towards the horizon. Ships bigger and sturdier than the surrounding ships. Ships with the brightest red and metallic gold only added to the effect. All of us locals looked at the ships in awe. I guess this guy was used to people being too astonished to cheer for him because captains of a high rank expect the locals to honour their coming. Out of all the ships, five of the most majestic vessels berthed. I was just told that this was a fleet consisting of 99 ships. I was obviously stunned by the numbers but the most astounding fact was that only a quarter of the entire fleet had come here. It was said that the total number of ships added up to 317, I was sure this information was wrong, but I would soon come to see. Just then I saw the captain disembark the ship. I saw the silhouette of his body against the sun so I could not make out his face. I ran to get a closer look at this man, but every other person in the harbour beat me to it. Everyone was trying to get a glimpse of this man, and it soon turned into a free for all. I gave up after a while and walked back home.

I took a short nap on my balcony hammock, which overlooked the harbour. A great view of the sea, I admit, After a while, I was woken up by a loud knocking. “Go away”, I groaned at the door drowsily. “Sir, sorry to disturb you”, the voice said officially, “But I am to pass this letter to you in order of Captain Zheng.” When he uttered the word ‘Zheng’, I was so shocked I flipped out of my hammock. I rushed to the door to collect my letter. I was thoroughly shocked by this. Why would such an important person seek me? I wanted to ask the man but he had already left. The answer, I hoped, would be in the letter. I tore the envelope open carefully. The letter consisted of a small paragraph, though it contained a lot of meaning. The letter read,

Dear Wang,

It had been a long time since I last saw you. I have been trying very hard to make my dreams into reality. As you can see, I have done exactly that, though I am not satisfied. I wanted to sail the world with you, not alone. So it is my greatest wish that you come along this journey with me and explore the seas. If you accept my offer, meet me at the pier at midnight.

Yours,

Zheng He

Ok, this took me surprised. I remembered who this guy was. How could I forget? But the thing was, he wanted me to go on another journey with him. I thought long and hard for about a few seconds, then gave up because thinking was not one of my good points. I imagined the things that might happen on the journey, such as our boat sinking or who knows what else. But instead of making me doubt, it had the opposite effect on me. I wanted adventure. My hands were itching to hold a ship's steering wheel, my bare feet on the floorboard, my nose smelling the scent of sea, my eyes seeing the beauty of the ocean. It was decided. I would go.

I went out at midnight, carrying a bag with the necessary items. When I arrived, I saw my friend not on the pier, but below it. Zheng He was on a small rowboat. He gave me a friendly wave, whilst I nearly burst into tears over this emotional reunion. I remembered that he was a person of high rank, and I quickly did a curtsy. He just laughed and said, "Ai, Long time no see, my friend. No need to bow, get up. But less talk now. We must return to the ships. Our journey begins tomorrow at dawn." Zheng signalled to the two men on the pier, who I did not notice until now. Once we got on the ship, I tried to process the beauty of the ship. Everything was brand new, all the metal polished and huge white mast raised. Once we boarded, Zheng He ordered for all ships to set sail for Brunei, which was his first target. He told me to get some sleep. "I have a lot to talk with you about. Come to my quarters at luncheon and we will discuss matters." With that, he bid me goodnight.

The following day, I reported to Zheng He's cabin, where we dined over the amazing view of the ocean. Zheng told me of his goals. He was going to try making countries ally with China by giving them gifts, such as gold and silk. He hoped in return that the countries would do the same. I guess he was trying to protect future generations, as if China had a lot of allies, it would have fewer enemies. Zheng left me after lunch, telling me to explore the ship. Every part of the ship was as grand as the exterior of it, but one thing puzzled me. There were military items every battleship usually had. But if the mission of Zheng was to make peace, what was the point in the weapons? I would find out very soon.

As we passed through a small coastal town, Zheng He ordered for the ship to be slowed down. He shouted something else which I did not hear over the commotion on the ship. The crew hurried around the ship, preparing... weapons? The ships masts were hoisted, cannons loaded and the crew on the starboard with an assortment of weapons. What were they trying to do? The ship sailed near to the harbour of the town, where I saw a crowd of people, cowering in fear. It seems like my friend was showing off the military power of China. Making places fear you are also a good way of getting rid of your enemies.

I will stop writing here as it feels not fit to write all my adventures in a single journal. I shall hopefully finish writing my adventures and publish it for future generations to use.

Written by

Wang Jinghong

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

King George V School, Bhat, Shraavasti – 15

In this story, the perspective of 3 characters come together to detail the incidents that occur and explore the relationship between various characters.

Syaoran

Being the son of the captain of the *Zhang* fleet meant I was born into a life of uncertainty; each day was a surprise as we painstakingly traversed vast bodies of water for months upon end without a clue, who was on the other side of the water. An encounter with rabid villagers or the occasional rogue soldiers was common, taking the lives of several of our crew including my mother, who remains missing to this day. Nevertheless, my father, *General Chang-ho* continues to voyage aimlessly under the orders of the emperor like a pawn. Having travelled from India to Arabia, there was nothing we hadn't seen. Recently, we were given orders to form an alliance with a local village chief and to recruit more men for our next voyage.

The day before, the crew had faced a malevolent storm that raged into the night. All the members were occupied in keeping the boat from falling apart. While one issue was fixed, another emerged. The wooden planks that lined the deck were damp, sagging with water; the sides of the ship were punctured by the debris of a junk boat along with the help of a fervent whale. While several of the masts were splintered and collapsed to make a gaping hole that peeked into the storage room. Hours had trickled by as the crew and soldiers laboriously pieced the ship together until dawn before they succumbed to the slumber of exhaustion.

I was jolted awake as *Wang Lei*, one of the soldiers, yanked my arm in desperation. As my eyelids craned open, I could see his eyes rounded in alarm, coloured with uncertainty. His face contorted in horror as he gazed towards the door. I could hear the fierce clanging of steel, grunts of exhaustion and muffled cries of our nurses, followed by the abrupt flare of gunpowder. The *Wokou* (Japanese pirates) had perfect timing! We scurried towards one of the storage room and crouched behind barrels of liquor our swords poised, ready to attack. Unfortunately, a gruesome scene had already unfolded beneath our eyes; a steel sword streaked with blood laid menacingly beside an unidentifiable limp body. Who laid motionless on a wooden crate, while grubby men with dented brass helmets and tattered robes streamed into the storage room lifting away crates of our gold and rolls of royal silk. I counted 10 pirates, if we were to show ourselves we would be begging for our deaths...

Cheng Ho

Mrs Lin hadn't been paying her loan for about 3 weeks now, I thumped my fist along the cluttered desk, which trembled innocently beneath my fist. A veiled woman stood out as she hurried across the street, bumping into passer-by's who eyed her suspiciously. Upon closer inspection, I recognized her hole-ridden slippers and brass band that was adorned around her index finger. She was attempting to run away again.

My feet crashed against the pavement, my breath uneven as I chased her along the cobblestone road. She had abandoned the obnoxious scarlet red veil, causing her hair to pirouette behind her like a cape. As I swerved frantically my shoulders brushed irritant bystanders, evoking several murmurs and grumbles of protest. She glanced back wary, her eyes wide, pupil dilated filled with desperation. But I wasn't going to be swayed again. I had mouths to feed, family to support, children to send to school, I couldn't let this pass.

The lady disappeared into the crowd, blending unsuspectingly. I shoved mercilessly through the mass of bodies, receiving glances of indignation. I scanned the crowd and crept towards her clasping my hands on her shoulder firmly. She turned instantly ... But. It wasn't her. I had lost her, again.

Sighing in despair, I turned my attention to the crowd that had formed along the coast, spreading about a mile or so. Villagers buzzed with anticipation as they spurted slivers of gossip amongst themselves. Behind the crowd lined the villages best, equipped with steel swords slung on their back, and sickles or kitchen knives clasped in their hands, waiting. Looking to see what this commotion was all about I slid through to catch a glimpse: in the distance was the vague silhouette of a ship. There was no sign of attack, but it was too soon to say. The clear echo of the gong permeated along the coast, eerily, as if in warning.

I faintly caught a discussion between a middle-aged woman and a young girl who naively questioned with wide eyes, "Could it be the supposedly friendly treasure fleet? I heard the last town they visited was Yashiri which is a few hours away at most!" The woman beside her rightfully laughed, incredulous, "Little girl. Are you asleep! Have you seen a ship on these waters leave without prowling our village? Most of the ships that have anchored on this dock were filled with ruthless *Wokou*, some of whom even set fire to our homes. You foolish girl!"

Foolish she was, it was hard to meet such people these days; in a world where everyone had begun to think about themselves.

As the royal ship came into view I was mesmerized by its, captivating presence: the delicate arch of the prow where a fair maiden posed elegantly, reaching out to the foamy sea, as the waves lazily slapped against the deck. The boat possessed a beauty that was rough around the edges but was nevertheless majestic. Despite the peeling paint, the crooked mast and the weather-worn sails she remained poised, unbothered.

The sun formed a vague glow around the ship and caused the tittering waves to twinkle incessantly beneath the boat as if it were on ice. Upon closer inspection, the sun revealed a gleaming sword and steel armour. I heard a muffled gasp from the scholar besides me and seized the telescope from his trembling fingers. The elder men behind me growled precariously and began raising their sickles and swords gently into the air, with their face contorted in anger. My chest tensed beneath my shirt in anticipation while my primate instincts threatened to be loose. A white flag was shot into the air and swung in the air violently. The soldiers, at least what I had thought were soldiers waved nonchalantly. Amidst the commotion, the scholar's pupils lost focus, quivering erratically, while a shadow of confusion flickered across the visage of the men beside me.

Even If the young lady were to correct, should we accept their gifts? Who knows their true intentions. Even if they were to form an alliance who knows what they would do with us after.

Mrs Lin

Exactly three days ago, 30 or so men suspiciously arrived at the southern dock, waving a white flag and bearing gifts for the village chief, claiming to be part of the Ming treasure fleet. The situation sounded eerily similar to my experience as part of a fleet before I was separated from my family. But, more than a decade had passed, and from the villagers' description, the ship was nowhere close to the one I resided before. The chief was currently offering 100 yuan for servants in their accommodation. Upon hearing the offer, I immediately closed my box sized clothing stall in the market— I was run with debts to pay and a son to find. I couldn't pass up this opportunity. My regular chase with the *Mr Ho* was getting strenuous. My luck would soon run out.

For the first day, several villagers swarmed around the crew in curiosity and suspicion, after all this was a rare case. All the visitors we encountered before were only interest in raiding the village and causing distress. However, the night these men arrived, I heard the crew even entertained the villagers with traditional melodies and trot songs. Most of the villagers had warmed up to them but few remained wary due to the guard the captain kept up. The captain and a couple of soldiers regularly met up with the chief, privately. Not once during my time at their accommodation had I been able to catch a glimpse of them or overhear their conversation.

Syaoran

I leaned towards the carpenter's counter, asking for the towns insider, pressing few jewels I'd pocketed from the ship's storage into his palm. Although the shopkeeper's curiosity waned after I handed him the jewels, other locals stole glimpses at me, even glaring. Then turned their heads as I lifted mine, pretending I didn't see them. This unfavourable attention probably had to do with the thick plates of steel armour on my chest, the blood-speckled brass helmet I grasped in my hand and the pretentious jet black-maroon robe that danced behind me as I walked.

Glancing at the address he'd given me, I trudged towards a stilt house, buried into a corner. As I tugged at the uneven, bamboo door it squealed open as its ruttid hinges brushed against steel. Rolls of parchment paper and record books lined the sides of the room, while a makeshift desk was placed to the left. *Mr Zhang*, who was also a moneylender faced the wall, scanning the shelf behind his desk when he asked, 'Young man, what brings you here?'

I discreetly slid a piece of paper with my mother's name across the desk. And dropped the bag of gold coins and jewels I had bagged from the ship on to the table. Initially, the moneylender eyed me warily, glancing at my attire.

But, once the moneylender glimpsed at the contents of the sack his eyes lit up and sparkled, the corners of his mouths twitched. I must have looked desperate and pitiful with my dishevelled hair and grubby appearance— he said he would fulfil my request so long as I helped collect money from a 'troublesome' customer.

Using the portrait *Mr Zhang* had given me as reference, I conducted my search: Not long after I was alerted of her location by a silk shopkeeper. The following afternoon, when the straw huts bamboo door was locked shut I stormed into the quaint house, slashing the brittle door open. Upon entering, I noticed 4 mattresses scattered around the one-room shelter. I tugged all the drawers in sight and fumbled with the stale mattress'. Towers of clothing that peppered the room tumbled as I rummaged through their room, finding loops of money hidden behind nooks and crannies in the wall and in the hollows legs of the bamboo furniture.

I gazed at the now war-zone like shelter that appeared ransacked with upturned mattresses, ripped bedding and collapsed cupboards that were encircled by shattered glass and ceramic cutlery. Though I was soon to be ridden with guilt. It was too late to change my mind.

On my way out, I came face to face with a startled middle age woman; Her jaw dropped open as if to ask why I was here. Her serene eyebrows were furrowed, creating wrinkles in her face, while her pupils flickered in confusion erratically. Taking advantage of the element of surprise I twisted my body and ran haphazardly; tripping on my cape; blocking my ears, silently waiting for her to scream and chase me.

Mr. Zhang

Who was this boy? And how did he get his hands on such items? These were the questions that tormented me. More importantly, how could I get my hand on this?

I arrived at their accommodation and headed towards one of the burly, mammoth sized guards that stood at the entrance. Tapping his back, I learned to the side and whispered, “You wouldn’t want your wife and children to know how you got that money, would you?” – He was an old customer who owed me a favour in exchange for my confidentiality. Luckily as I predicted, the man vigorously opened the door, unquestioningly.

The chief had decorated the place like a museum; ornate tapestries hung across the walls with occasional large scenic paintings. Handwoven curtains, embroidered with cherry blossoms hung from the ceiling, blocking even the slightest ray of light. Wooden cushioned chairs with intricate carvings from dragons to flowers were scattered across the room along with 2 large Luohan beds that were placed facing each other. Centre stage was a staircase, which led to the crew’s dorms.

The only room on the ground floor was at the corner, blocked with ostentatious deep, emerald green doors. At the muffled sound of voices, I froze still. I leaned towards the wall with my ear against the ridges of bamboo, attempting to grasp what seemed like a conversation between the captain and a messenger. The wall had already been swaying, before I knew it I fell into the room on my stomach and positioned my legs, prepared to run.

Mrs Lin

Who was that boy? And why had he ransacked our home? Upon reaching home, exhausted after working at the lodge I opened the door to a flustered *Ms Yang*, whose eyes brimmed with tears, escaping into droplets, streaking her cheeks. Her lower lips trembled as she explained what happened, reducing her voice to a faint mumble. While *Mrs Song* wailed distraughtly.

We were done for; all our money was stolen and our home close to ashes.

I was walking solemnly under the candlelit lamps, along the Shinzo market, attempting to collect my thoughts, deciding my next steps. Before I saw a soldier, beside the community notice board. Which was already surrounded by a fairly large crowd. As I peered closer, I noticed it was a recruitment offer:

Do you want to work directly for the Emperor? Be a real-life pirate? Well, this job is for you. Not only will be compensated greatly, but you will also be provided with free stay and food. And become a part of the emperors very own treasure fleet where you can explore the world and help your emperor form alliances with other nations. We also have a position for cooks, medical staff & maintenance.

I had previously worked aboard a ship as a nurse and had experience dealing with all sorts of wounds. I was delighted at the thought of joining the crew. I would be able to kill two birds with one stone; find my son and restore my livelihood. Given my current state I didn’t have much of an option so before I decided otherwise, I hurriedly approached the soldiers as his boots began to turn away and slipped my name into the box.

Syaoran

Mr Zhang was running as he pushed crates of fruit along the street behind him, while roars of indignation spur behind him. His head was craned backwards as he was running, recklessly. His eyes widened in relief as he met my gaze. As he staggered towards me, he placed his hand on my shoulder, tugging me into a bookstore until the grunts and heavy thud of boots fell into a whisper.

Gripping my forearms, he shook me, his fingers tips digging desperately into my skin. He was heaving, his breath staggered and uneven when spouted, ‘Your mother is here in the village’

The disbelief must have shown on my face, as he began describing what happened:

“I heard the chief and a messenger talking privately;

The chief asked, “Did you locate Syaoran’s mother?”

The messenger replied quietly saying, they had narrowed it down to a few villages neighbouring villages including this one. But, would need a few days at pinpoint her exact location.

In response, the chief grumbled, “I’d hoped we would find her this time around. But I guess I will have to wait. The emperor has already assigned our next destination”

The chief had requested the messenger to refrain from telling anyone else, including you. That was all I heard before I fell into the room and was chased by their guards.”

Why didn't he tell me? Did he think it would distract me? That I would use it as an excuse to stay? I had no intention of following his footsteps as captain. I was going to stay.

Mrs Li

At dawn, clutching a rice sack stuffed with my belongings I stood at the dock, below the monstrous ship. A line of new employees stood at the dock, reporting to a crew member. Soldiers stormed the deck, roping in the anchor and loading crates of supplies in preparation.

My stay at the village didn't last for long, as I'd anticipated. After my escape from the *Wokou* two years ago, I have constantly been leaping from one village to another, away from their men. But this time I was leaving out of my own will.

Was my husband still part of the fleet? Or my son even alive? Was I behaving too rashly? Nevertheless, at that moment, I took a leap of faith and hoped for the best, knowing I would regret otherwise.

Syaoran

Knowing my long-lost mother was close by I had to stay. Additionally, I had other pursuits, which wouldn't be possible as part of the crew.

I rushed towards the lodge, past the oblivious guards, into my room that I shared with two other members of the crew. The room was now spotless after the others had packed in preparation to leave. I changed into the clothes I'd grabbed at the local market. Then, clutching my pack and my spare stash of money, in the break of daylight, I fled to the streets. The coarse fabric bristled against my skin creating rashes. While rocks splintered through my thin, yarn sandals, creating blisters on the soles of my feet. As I ventured farther away from the city, past the village boundary, the screams of vendors and murmurs of daily chatter faded to the sound of my feet shuffling against gravel. Amidst the towering hills in the valley, my voice echoed as I vowed to return with my mother, with only the shrieking birds and animals as witness.

A Voyage

Korean International School, Bertrand, Max Albert Pierre – 14

A little while ago, we were travelling. Travelling to give gifts of gold or silk among the people who wander the seas. So we started small. Small as in the China Sea. We went around in an average size boat, could fit about twenty crew members, but with all the riches within this boat, the maximum was six.

I, Captain Ray Park recruited our crew just over a year ago, who came from families of riches. First, we enlisted Zhu Ming, in our army of adventurers, she came from the Family of rulers in China, more commonly known as the Ming Dynasty. Then we had Wei Tao, from a governor to adventurer. Then we had Liang Son, a poor farmer, who made his life a fantasy when he created his restaurant. Huang Yao who had been born into a wealthy family, who worked for the government and managed their army. And lastly, we had Mo Fa, he wasn't rich in any way, he didn't have everything he wanted out of life but he would help us, as over a month ago, we discovered his powers. This sorcery was unseen before. Mo Fa could move things with his mind, could protect us in desperate times. He was our most needed asset. Always reliable.

On the first day of our travels, the 3 of March 1643 we left from the Zhan Jiang Port to be kind and helpful to adventurers, pirates, and army alike. Our goal was to charitably donate gold, silks and riches to these people. And we were going to succeed. As a crew, we were determined. And we were guaranteed to find someone who wants all these treasures.

After a few days, we found or the first ship was a Vietnamese army ship. A colossal achievement in the world of engineering. Of course, they stopped us. Their leader's name, Dave. He was a kind soul, possessed a gigantic beard, he was quite short, as his squeaky resembled that. Nevertheless, there was an immense contrast between his dark sombre clothing and his positive attitude. His enormous crew welcomed us aboard with frowns, depression and guns. Indeed, silence speaks on many levels.

"What brings you upon these seas?" Dave yelled after a few minutes of quiet.

I replied as quickly as i could, "We are bearing gifts, the Ming dynasty sent us the friendly with neighbouring life on the water and the wanderers of the sea!"

"What are your names, sailors? I'm Dave!" Screeched Dave.

We bowed down individually saying our names and showing the gold we possessed.

"Enough," the captain acknowledged "prepare the banquet, as tonight we feast!"

And so Dave left, back to his study.

During that day after we helped with all the chores, but, we had something to look forward to, food. After a long day Hung Yao, Liang Son, Mo Fa, Wei Tao, Zhu Ming and I were exhausted. The Feast was wonderful, it had all sorts of food from Vietnam including pho, Banh Xeo, Goi Cuon and other specialities, plus, they made Peking duck just for us.

We gave away gold, silver and many beautiful pearls. As we departed, the sun was burning, our crew was feeling overfed and under the weather. We were, however very grateful to have started their mission as helpers or the sailing community and neighbouring countries.

A few days passed, the crew was feeling a lot better, but we still couldn't find any ships. So we kept our heads up high as we search for a few more days until.

A Ship.

A Pirate Ship.

It looked devastating like it would ruin anything in its path, the sails were black, their masts tainted. Could run through armies. We covered away, left as fast as we could. No trace that we had been there could have been found, or everything we were trying to do could have been over. Our lives. The silver, gold, pearls. The riches in General.

The pirates had seen us, we had been spotted. The chase was on, but they were fast, too fast, there was no possible way we could have out-spined them. But we didn't give up, that wasn't what we came here to do. If we were caught we

would have failed. Everyone was now awake, except Mo Fa. They were now finally on us, they fired their cannons and lept onto our ship, destroying everything they could find. The first pirate on ship fired a deadly arrow from point-blank range into our fallen sleeping angel's head never to be woken again. But right when we had lost all glimmer of hope, Dave arrived. With an army, there was no way they could let us down. But as they brutally ended each and every one of our crew member's lives. I watched, I was left alive to see he had betrayed us. Told them where we were, what to do. I'm now hiding in this time of urgency all the pain I'm feeling was incomprehensible. And then.

Darkness.

My new life being a Pirate

Korean International School, Chae, Rachel – 15

It is a quiet, restful night. The children gathered to listen to the story of captain Goldbeard. They settled down in a small tent, ready to listen to the story they loved the most. “So, I think everyone is here now. I’ll start my Ming voyage story.”

I was a normal boy in the Island Plando. It was an extremely poor island with lack of needs. One day, a huge boat arrived on our island. The captain Hornigold and the sailors of the pirate came off the boat. They asked our islander if we needed any supplement. And if yes, they would want to stay for a night. By getting the supplement from them, our leader agreed to pay them back by letting them stay for a night. At night, I went to the ship of the pirates to steal their food and gold. I heard that they keep their treasure in the captain’s room, and I planned to steal them when he was asleep. But when I went into the room, there was nothing but some food for the sailors. I thought the captain Hornigold hid his treasure somewhere else, but there was nothing left. I realized that they gave us all they got, only except what they needed. I woke up the captain Hornigold and said “I’m very sorry captain. I was jealous of what you’ve got. I tried to steal all your money and treasure. Can you please receive my apology and appoint me as your sailor?” However the captain responded was unexpected. He asked me what is the advantage for him if he hires me. I was very messed up. I replied to him “I don’t know what am I good at or what I can help you, but I promise that I will only obey you.” After the conversation, he decided to take me on the next journey.

The next day, our ship made a voyage towards the Sparrow Ocean. It was the most known ocean among the pirates. They fought every minute, and the wave never stopped. I was tremendously terrified, but I believed in my captain, so I went to the Sparrow Ocean with him. On the way there, I learnt some daily life of the pirates. I mopped the floor, handle the wood, spread the sail and worked as an assistant. As I was the newbie pirate, the senior sailors nagged at me. But I never gave up and tried my best to overcome with the tasks they gave me. After these tough work, I could see the dolphins swimming over the sea in the sunset. It was like a numberless rainbow on the sea, heading towards the ocean with us.

After few months, we finally arrived at the Sparrow Ocean. The Sparrow Ocean I heard from others were bloody, with smell of ammunition, and can hear the never ending screams of the pirates. However, the Sparrow Ocean that I saw was superior. The ocean was blue and clear that I could even see under the ocean. There were lots of sea creatures living there and it was very peaceful. The scenery was amazing, that I could never forget it. Captain Hornigold told me that this is the biggest treasure he earned. As Captain Hornigold was old, he wanted me to be the owner of the ocean. I fought with the pirates who tried to harm the ocean and gave some treasure to the people in need as I learnt from respectful Captain Hornigold.

“This is the story how I became captain Goldbeard. I can never forget about my only captain Captain Hornigold and the present he gave me. I believe someday I could let you to own this Ocean Sparrow.”

Ming Treasures

Korean International School, Chan, Ryan – 15

The sunlight shines upon me. The captain is calling my name. I woke up. This is how my everyday crew life starts. I started off eating fish for breakfast. Fish is the main source of food for our crew because the sea is just right next to us. I am only a young boy, so my work on this ship is not as hard. My main job on the ship is mainly cooking and cleaning. In some days, I also need to fish. Our ship is now sailing to Africa. I have never gone to Africa before so this is my first time going. Our aim to Africa is to give away the gold and silk we have. We are the opposite of pirates. We give away goods and money instead of stealing or fighting for it. Me and the ship crews then start to sail to Africa. The captain said it will take around one month to arrive in Africa.

For the first week, I was doing the same stuff over and over again. I cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner for all of the ship crews. I clean the floor every day twice. In the evening, I get to relax and play games with some of my friends that are also on my ship. Suddenly, my captain shouted "John, come over here!", my name is John. I was so scared. I thought I did something wrong. My heart beat like the thunder as I was walking towards my captain. He said, "You are not in trouble, I just want you to try to be the watcher for this ship." A watcher is a person that needs to be on duty on the highest point of the ship, watching out for any enemies or dangers. I was so delighted. I have never been the watcher for this ship, so that was a whole new experience for me.

The second day, I started my new job full of excitement. I was informed to be in this duty until we get to Africa. Everything went smoothly for the first few days until my captain said I need to pay attention for upcoming rocks. We arrived at the place which has a lot of rocks in the sea. I am the one who is in charge to look out for the upcoming rocks and need to inform the captain to spin the wheel. I was very stressed. The ship will crash if I didn't tell the captain in time. It was really hard and sad for me to see my friends playing down on the ship while I'm up on the tower on duty, but this is my duty. While I was watching my friends playing, I suddenly saw a big rock in front of our ship. I immediately rung the bell. My captain turned the ship just right in time. I was very lucky and I would pay all my attention when I'm on duty.

It was a peaceful day. I was on duty. I was paying all my attention to the sea. Suddenly, I saw a pirate ship coming straight towards us. I froze as it was my first time see a pirate ship in my life. It was enormous and have a lot of weapons. Although we are not pirates, we still have weapons to defend ourselves. I ran the bell to informed the captain. The captain shouted "Incoming!". Some crews set up the cannons, some crews ready their guns and bows, some ready to take over the pirate ship. I was given a sniper as I'm on the highest spot on the ship. It was my first time handling a gun so I was very scared to shoot. Our ship and the pirate ship met and we started firing guns and cannons. Some crews jumped over to the pirate's ship and attack with swords.

I saw a crew got trapped by the pirates. I was scared to shoot but my crew was in trouble. I aimed at the pirate's head and shoot. Boom! The pirate went down and the crew is free. I got more confidence in shooting. I went to help my crews. Boom! Boom! Boom! The Pirates went down. We went from losing to winning. Our confident pumped and we all jumped to the pirate ship and fight all the pirates. We won! There was plenty of gold and silk on the ship. We took it and decided to give it away to the countries that we will be visiting in the future. It was a great victory for us and also the first victory for me. At night, we all gathered around and celebrate. The captain says I did a great job, I was delighted and proud. That day will definitely be an unforgettable day for me.

Weeks after the victory, I was on duty as usual. I saw some land in front and I assumed its Africa. I checked the map and confirmed that the land was Africa. I rang the bell and yelled "We are here! We are in Africa!" We all hurried and cheered. We arrived in Africa, it has been more than a month from the last time I stand on a land. We met the leader of Africa and we gave gold and silk to the locals. They invited us to the feast at

night and of course, we accepted it. They prepared a lot of food and wine for us. We tried some of the traditional food. Our captain told us that we are going to stay one week in Africa.

One week past as fast as lighting. It's time for us to say goodbye to Africa and start our journey to a new country. Before we leave, the leader in Africa gave some local goods and food for us to bring it on our ship. We thanked all the people in Africa and say goodbye to them. It was a truly interesting and unforgettable journey for us, I would definitely not forget the journey in the sea. I learned a lot of new skills and had a good time in Africa.

We sailed out to the calm sea in the gorgeous sunset, wondering what new adventure we are going to face in the future.

Adventure Voyages

Korean International School, Ho Ha, Tae – 15

Chapter 1.

Wang, a boy who is interested in Chinese History. He is currently studying about ‘Zheng He down the Western ocean’. Wang wanted to experience Admiral Zheng He’s great voyages. This was one of the Great Ming Empire’s biggest seven maritime expedition project. Wang always talk about Zheng He and it became his hero. Wang wanted to become a historian to investigate and study more about ancient China. However, Wang’s parents wanted him to become an ambitious pilot. They were concerning that being a historian will earn less money that might affect Wang’s livelihood.

One day, Wang was watching television in a warm cozy room. He heard footsteps coming toward him. When he turns around, he sees his father with Wang’s suitcase.

“Son, we are going to your grandparents’ house to celebrate Christmas!” said his father.

“Wait, today is Christmas? But, it’s 23th of December! And I thought we don’t celebrate Christmas!” He gasp while his eyes open wide as Tarsier.

“Calm Down boy, it’s just a joke!” Father laughed.

“But this year, we are going celebrate Christmas. Now, start pack your clothes and ready to sleep. It’s very late right now.” Father said. He drops Wang’s suitcase.

“Also, don’t forget to eat your vitamin pills!” As his father finishes talking, he walks out and slammed the door.

Wang realise that his father looks very odd today. It’s his family first time celebrating Christmas. Wang got distracted by packing his suitcase. After that, he ate the pill, turn off the light and ran to his comfy bed. As he lies on the bed, he immediately falls asleep. Wang got woken up by a man screaming. When he open his eyes, he saw several men were wearing traditional clothes with a leather helmets, and holding a sword toward him. They are soldiers. Wang was confused. Later, he realised that he was lying inside the barrier full of golds.

Chapter 2.

One of the soldier shouted, “How did you get up to here you filthy boy? Do you even know stealing golds is a strict crime?”

“Yes... I know sir! But, first can you tell me where am I right now?” Wang said. As his body shivers he was clearly got scared.

Suddenly, a man wearing fashionable and heroic clothes walks up to him. Wang was confused.

He stands in front of him.

“Greetings, young man.” As he saids with his deep tone.

“I am the leader of this treasure voyages, admiral Zheng He.”

Chapter 3.

After Wang heard the man’s name, he was shock. He couldn’t able to close his mouth. Wang thinks he is dreaming right now. He start to slaps his face several times and tried pinching his arm to wake up. Then he quickly concluded: this is not a dream.

Zheng He was confused too as Wang was self-harming.

“Give this young man our sailor uniform.” said Zheng He.

As he walks toward Wang and said, “You will be part of my advisors of this journey to bring glory for our Great Ming Empire!”

Wang quickly agreed and promoted becoming his youngest advisor.

The soldier guided Wang to his room. The room was small with a bed, small table and a box for personal belongings. It was better than other normal sailors’. While Wang was changing his clothes, he thought this is all a set up. He opens the window and only seeing pale blue ocean. He comes out from his room and went up to the ship deck. Suddenly, he heard a crew shouting out loud.

“Land! Land! 5000 li (chinese measurement) !”

Admiral Zheng He came out from his room with his bright face and shouted, “Prepare to trade! Take the barrels of silks and gold off the ships!”

Wang wanted to know the nation that they are trading with. He sneakily as a mouse, sneaked into the Admiral's office and steal one of map. Wang found out that they are in Palembang. In modern day, it is a province in Indonesia.

Chapter 4.

Wang heard Zheng He's voice coming towards him. He quickly hid the map and escaped the office. The crewmen were loading the barrels down to the land. Wang walk down the ship. He saw hundred of civilians were waving and giving a warm welcome. In the crowded people, he saw a conspicuous person walking toward the ships. He was wearing luxurious and fashionable dresses with the bodyguards surrounding him. Wang looked closely at the man;he start to feel ominous premonition; he feels some negative power from that man. Also, he saw thousands of troops marching towards the ships. Wang's face turn pale white and ran back to the ship.

Wang rush to the office. When he arrived, Zheng He was having a meeting with his advisors.

"Admiral Zheng He!" He cried as his breathe keep coming out.

Advisors and Zheng He were confused.

"What's the matter young man?" Said Zheng He. With his totally confused expression.

"It's... It's..." Wang couldn't able stop breathing when he tries to speak. Other advisors were upset due to Wang's disrespectfully interrupting their meeting.

After few minutes later, Wang finally stopped breathing and shout: " Sir, it's CHEN ZUYI !"

Chapter 5.

When Admiral Zheng He heard the name, he immediately order all crewmen retreat back to the ships.

"ALL MEN BACK TO THE SHIP ! PREPARE FOR BATTLE!" He shouted.

Everyone were grabbing weapons and standing for battle position. The cannonballs were taken out form the storage. The ships sails back into the water and prepare to fight against Chen Zuyi pirate gangs .

Chapter 6.

Chen's pirate ships were gathered around Zheng's ships. The pirates began to firing their cannon toward the ship. One of Zheng He's ship were completely sunk. The bodies were floating and some golds were stolen by Chen's Pirates. Zheng's troops began to pull their bows to aim at the pirates. As they release, the rain of arrows flew toward the pirates.

Meanwhile, Wang was hiding Zheng He's office avoiding arrows and cannon balls. He was shivering and kept talking to himself.

"Death is approaching! This is a real life hell!" He cried.

Zheng He was busying commanding the battle. His aim was to capture Chen Zuyi and take him back to the court to take punishments. The hundreds of arrows and cannon ball rains from the sky and one of the pirate ship got close to the commander ship. They threw the hooks attempting to climb to the ship. The crewmen and the pirates had a brutal sword fights. Wang saw bloods splattering the deck; he saw one of the man's head was chopped off. Zheng He's commanding office got invaded by the pirates. Therefore they had to run up to the deck to fight. Wang followed Zheng He's lead, because he didn't want to die.

Zheng He prepared a small boat for Wang and told him to call for an reinforcement from another Zheng's ship. And told Wang to stay there and never come back to him. Wang ws rolling his boat to another ship. This was caught by Chen Zuyi's pirate.

"Sir! There is a small boat heading toward Zheng He's reinforcement ship!" A pirate said with his raspy voice.

"Let him taste my bloody cannon, KILL IT!" Chen shouted.

As soon as Chen's order was given, the cannonball fire toward Wang. The moment when the cannonball was in front of Wang's face, he woke up...

Chapter 7.

Wang was sweating all over his body and his eyes turned red. He realise it's his room. He checked his clock, it's Five minute past seven. When he went downstairs, he saw his father drinking a warm cup of coffee.

"Hello there son! How was your Christmas present that I gave you?" He said while smirking at Wang.

"What present?" Said Wang with his annoyed tone.

His father ignored him and continued to drink his coffee. Meanwhile, Wang was trying to think – was that a dream? But everything looks perfectly realistic... He went back to his room and saw something on his bed. There was a map that Wang have stolen from Zheng He. He wanted to know the result of the battle. He open his book and starting to flipping over them like crazy! Wang found the page where the answer will solve his curiosity – Zheng He won the battle.

This is the new tales of the Ming treasure voyages.

Chapter 8.

“Wow! Grandpa, did you made up this story? Said the little girl.

Grandpa smiles at his granddaughter due to her cuteness.

“This is a true story my dear...” grandpa said.

“How do you know that?” said the little girl with her questioning expression.

“My dear, because Wang is your father! I gave him that present!” Grandpa laughed.

Detur Pons Mundo

Korean International School, Je, Ming Sung Andy – 15

Chapter 1: To Africa

The ship is sailing towards the west; its ambition is to find lands, unexplored countries where the mighty Ming does not show its presence. The man up on the deck is Zhenghe, a politician, explorer and a diplomat who holds the authority of an army of 1500 tonne ships. From a Semu (caste in Ming dynasty who came from Central or West Asia), he became one of the most trustworthy servants of the Yongle Emperor. From trust of the emperor, He is missioned to conduct expeditions to establish political relationships.

This is the 7th expedition for Zhenghe; he is now a veteran on voyages. Looking at the endless sea, he turns around and views an army of boats following him, a total of 62 ships with 27,800 soldiers are behind him waiting for his command. He endeavours to hit Africa; a land that is known to be further away from the Arabian Peninsula which was never explored before. Unlike other expeditions, Zhenghe knew that the way to Africa would be harsh and unexpected. He calls Xiao Ming, his private assistant to the deck.

“Xiao Ming, how much time does it take to arrive? It has already been 15 days since we left Calicut.”

“I am not sure captain, the Indians told us that it would take few weeks to get to the coast of Africa.” Said Xiao Ming.

“Follow up with any new updates, get ready for supper; the sun is dropping”

“Yes Captain”

The chefs made the kitchen boisterous, soldiers rolled barrels of Kechiap to the kitchen, crew members tidied the deck and floors. Smoke arose from the kitchen; dinner was made, the scent of cooking rice gave an exceptionally pleasant aroma. It was time to serve those foods to the drooling sailors. The order of serving the food on this ship is pretty much like other ships; the captain gets his food first, soldiers the next, crew members after, and leftover goes to the slaves and cut workers. Zhenghe’s meal is always completed in his room, served with lavish, fresh food that cannot be imagined to be served on the sea. Today, like any other days he was served with unspoiled delicacies, however, he did not finish it.

“Why are you not finishing your dinner captain? Is it not to your appetite? I will tell the chefs if so.” Xiao Ming asked in curiosity.

“It is not the food Xiao Ming,” replied the man in anxiousness, “I checked the stars last night, the Arabians told me I have to see four stars facing North at this point, but I saw it on the South. We have to alter our direction now.”

“I will tell the sailors to change the direction right now; it is all from my mistake, I have no words to confess.”

“I am very sure you will. How is everyone doing on this voyage, report any casualties or lacks we have.”

“2 slaves and one soldier died from tiredness this week sir, crew members and soldiers are also reported with scurvies and rashes, we also lack fresh food, there are only processed food from mainland now.”

“What happened to all the food? It has only been two weeks from India! We still have a few days to get to Africa, also, how did you deal with the bodies?”

“The slaves were thrown to the ocean, and the soldier was wrapped and placed in the coffin.”

“Pay full respect to the soldier, and spare some of my fresh consumables to soldiers with scurvies and rashes, give them some rest too.”

“As you wish.” Xiao Ming concluded.

Oil lamps are running out, lights are getting dimmer, and ships are now getting ready to spend its night. Soldiers are preparing to get their rest on double deckers, crew members on the bed, and rest on anywhere they can get space. Lights slowly fade out and when the others are relaxing, night duty gets on work.

“I oughta tell you this,” whispered one of the night shift workers to another. “I’ve heard that people are dying because they cannot eat on the other ships.”

“That cannot be true, I thought we had plenty of food in all ships.” replied the other.

“Well, they say it is taking longer than what we have expected, I’ve also seen fellas with scurvies and all those rashes, ugh!”

“Yeah, I’ve seen those people too, hope they get better. Have you also seen the body of the slaves, I mean the scut workers, 2 of them died just from our ship, I guess the rumour is correct!”

“Yeah yeah, but you see, no one cares about them, I guess they are plenty of those lower classes dying.”

“I see, I don't even know how they got to this ship.”

“Wait, I hear footsteps, let's get back on duty.” ends the worker.

Like any other days, the sun rose, and the blazing sunlight woke up the ship, everyone is working hard to get to the destination, food is running out and everyone knew that the only way to counter this crisis is arriving at any port in Africa. Sailors invested the whole afternoon altering the past mainsail afternoon and it is now manoeuvring without any blemishes. Zhenghe is at the forecast deck with his telescope, then he catches a flat green line in his sight, a land that possibly is Africa that they have craved for. Zhenghe in excitement shouts out

“Day 16, we are in Africa crew members, command the fleet to approach to the land in front of us at full velocity.”

Chapter 2: Brief Moments in Mogadishu and Malindi

When Zhenghe's ship was about to approach, diminutive vessels surrounded. Then after a minute or so, four packs of African soldiers appeared. Zhenghe, covered with bodyguards, then arrived. The African soldiers performed actions, moving hands around their body, then soon made gestures that seemed as greetings. The captain of the Chinese vessel then bowed to the soldiers and moved to the port.

“Get the gold and all the valuables ready, time to impress the king of this country,” ordered Zhenghe. “Time to show what Ming has got.”

As soon as Zhenghe commanded, colossal amounts of precious stones, marbles, and elegant silk and respectable specialities filled the harbour. Wagons to deliver all these bribes arrived, Zhenghe was escorted forthwith, both his soldiers and African guards circling for a brief walk to the King's accommodation.

The palace that Zhenghe and the soldiers arrived was fascinating, adorned with gold and precious material, the place seemed sacred and stunning. The waiting man soon was allowed to go into the palace. The King was covered with all kinds of refined jewellery and accessories. When the visitor was still astonished by the outstanding beauty, the King stood up. A gentle smile upon the King's face relieved Zhenghe's anxiousness from the fear of rejection. The African man looked around the captain of the ship, circled him for a few laps in curiosity, then sat back on his throne.

“I, as the servant of the great Yingzong emperor of everlasting Ming Dynasty would like to present you our treasures specially ordered by our majesty,” said Zhenghe breaking the silence.

In a short time after Zhenghe finishing his last word, a whole mountain of stunning presents invaded the King's room. A slight smile spread on the receiver's face; he seemed to be impressed by what the Chinese explorer has added to his collection. The King then spoke

“Welcome to Mogadishu”

“Thank you” replied Zhenghe in fascination due to the ability of the King to speak Chinese.

“I hope you to visit Malindi too, I have a present to your emperor there.”

“I would also appreciate your consideration if you spare some of this country's food. We lack food to maintain our journey.

“As you wish traveller,” answered the greeter.

After the discussion, Zhenghe's vessel travelled to Malindi, gifted a giraffe and a zebra for the Yingzong emperor, and safely came back to Fuzhou, the territory of Ming dynasty at the year 1433.

Emperor's Plan

Korean International School, Jin, Tina – 16

One day, the Emperor gathered us in his palace and said :’I need 30000 people right now, to go on an adventure.’ so the adventure begins. 1000 crew died on the way. Not enough food, drinks. There were rats, flies – very dirty and bad environment. Someone died because of diseases. 2 captains, 10 vice captains. People were divided into different teams – cooking team, cleaning team, soldiers, service team???. I am one of the members in the cooking team: there is a rule that we will steal the captain’s food. Don’t question, don’t tell because if the captain knows they will kill us and throw us into the sea!!!! My friend is in the cleaning team – he told me that they don’t actually clean, they just pretend that they have cleaned the rooms, all teammates are super super lazy but the cooking team was even lazier.

We had a lot of adventures during the trip. The most unforgettable one should be the fight between us and the happy island people. It was a scary night with strong winds and heavy rain. We landed on the happy island..... At first, we thought the people were very nice, you know what? They gave us food and drinks, and even held a party to welcome us. I remember a little girl told me: ‘Hey! My name is Claire. Welcome to happy island! We are so happy to have you as our guests.’ I smiled at her, and she hugged me, so we became friends. Everything seems pretty normal and peaceful until the night comes.....I heard a weird screaming from the captain’s room – ‘AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!’ he screamed loudly. ‘YOU GET OUT OF MY ROOM!!’ with voice cracks. There was another voice laughing and said ‘NO!! GIVE ME ALL YOUR GOLD! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!’’. And I woke my friend up – ‘Hey!! Stop sleeping! The captain screamed and he seems to be in danger!’. Unfortunately, my friend ignored me and keep sleeping. I am extremely angry and I slapped him, punched him, yelled at him – ‘WAKE UP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!’. He finally woke up and yelled at me ‘What’s wrong with you? The captain.....WHAT?’. He and I rushed to the captain’s room and we saw the door was opened but captain was not in the room! We are super frustrated so we woke all the members up and search for the captain. My friend and I entered the Happy forest, which is the biggest forest in the island, someone told me the forest have a scary creature that will eat human.....We went there and my friend said ‘Don’t go in!’. Originally, I wanna leave but I heard a voice screaming : ‘HELP! HELP! HELP!’. My friend looked at me, with his body shaking and face turning pale ‘Oh no!! That sounds like captain, should we go and see?’, I nodded and we went in the forest. We followed that voice and we saw OUR CAPTAIN yelling at us!! The sheik of the island stared at us angrily ‘What on earth are you two doing? IT IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!’. We are frightened and don’t know what can we do. And suddenly – ‘BANG!’ the sheik was shooted, falled down and died!! We are shocked and have no idea what’s going on – ‘He is dead! My friend! Don’t stay there! It is dangerous! Come and follow me – I will show you the way to escape!! COME! NOW!’ It’s Claire! She comes and rescue us!!!! We followed her quickly and she showed us the way to get on the boat ‘Don’t come back again or else you guys would be in danger again! Leave the island now!!’ She told me. ‘But what about you?’ I asked. She smiled and said ‘You need not to worry me. I will be fine! Go! Have a safe trip!’ She waved at us and gave us a big smile. I will remember this moment forever – a young beautiful girl who save our life, she is a HERO. When we started our journey, the emperor gave us a loads of gold and told us ‘If you meet some nice people, give them some!’. So we took all his gold and started the adventure. Sometimes when we meet some really good people, we will send them our gold. And don’t you know who received the biggest amount of gold? It is the PEOPLE OF SAD ISLAND.....They are the nicest people I have ever seen in the world. We landed on the island. They danced to welcome us. They gave us BBQ fish and it’s very tasty. We stayed on the island for 1 month because we lack of food and drinks. The emperor on the island know our bad condition and then he said :”no worry guys! I will take care of you until you guys have enough resources. If you don’t mind, just take some food from here! You guys must have travelled a long way to come to the sad island! Take some good rest.”

And then, we stayed there for 1 month. The emperor organized different activities for us to better understand the island’s culture and history. For example, the funniest game on the island is playing a ball called sadball. The emperor told us :”we invented this game 100 years ago, just make a blind guess, do you know why there’s such a game? What is it for?” and captain said:”For..... entertainment?” the emperor answered:”what a good guess! But it’s wrong.” one of the teammates in cooking team raised up his hand

and shouted :”I KNOW! ITS FOR celebration!” the emperor laughed:”HAHA, this young little boy is so energetic, but again, it’s wrong.” The emperor continued :”i think its time for me to tell you the truth. It is for medical use! When people get sick, they will feel painful so when they play the sadball, they can release their negative energy and the

sadball will absorb all those negative energy and the patient will recover! Don't you feel its magical? perhaps , some of you may not believe me but dop give it a try and you can find its magic.” We are amused and actually believed his crap. And then, all of us are eager to give it a try. So we form groups and play the sadball. It is great to know that the island have such a special culture. At first, we all think that the people in sad island are sad therefore they are named sad island. But it seems it's situation is the opposite! They named sad island because they have the magic to absorb all the negative energy from people and give them happiness! What a wonderful island!

We had wonderful and lovely memories on the sad island. I am sure will remember it forever. Our captain said we had a great memories there and the emperor treated us really well so when we left, he told the emperor ‘Thank you your majesty for your warm welcome and care for us in these days, we will certainly remember how well you treated us. All of us have a good rest here and we won't forget it. This is the present from our emperor to your island. We wish you and your people good health and all the best to you guys.’ Our captain then sent them a large amount of gold to thank you for their care to us.

I learnt that adventure is never easy but as long as we have the determination to overcome the difficulties and walk out from our comfort zone , we can do it. And miracle happens everyday.

Tales of Buju on the Ming Treasure Voyages

Korean International School, Leung, Jade – 16

“Hey, you! Come over here and clean up this mess.” Jack, the captain shouted. I took my broom and swept the floor swiftly as I didn’t want to get scolded again. I always wanted to part of the pirates because I admire their bravery and it seems adventurous. Even though I am not a pirate, but being on the same ship, traveling and working for them is my dream.

It was the afternoon when the fight started. I was sweeping the floor as usual and all of a sudden, there was an explosion sound on the other ships which were on the left side. It was a bomb attack. I rushed to the end of the ship to see what was happening. There were people on small boats trying to intrude our ship. In the meantime, they grabbed their weapons and loaded up the guns and all I have was my broom and a small knife. I didn’t know what to do but to stand with them. “ Don’t worry, kid. We’re going to get through this.” One of the pirates said.

Awhile later, the intruders finally came up and began fighting with the pirates. I stood behind the door because I was afraid to go out. Suddenly, there was a man in a black mask rushed in with a knife in his hand. I took my broom and smacked his head from behind. He fell down and his head was bleeding. I felt like I am one of them now so I took the knife from his hand and ran out. At last, some of the intruders were killed and some escaped into the water. None of our properties were stolen but there was some damage to the ship.

While I was cleaning up the mess, one of the pirates called me in. The pirates were having a meeting and they wanted me to join them. When I heard the news, I was shocked. I am officially part of them now. I am the youngest pirate on the ship.

A few days later, we arrived at our final destination. The place we were heading is called Buju. We decided to stay on this island for a week to enjoy the paradise. We got off the ship as soon as we arrived and gave some of our wonderful presents to their Emperor. Meeting the emperor of Buju was one of the greatest things I’ve ever done on this trip. We had a lot of fun and learned so much of their culture and made some new friends there. One of the best things in Buju was the stars at night. When it was getting dark, the sky would become like a galaxy. I have never seen so many stars at night in my life. It was stunning and I will never forget that.

As time passed, it was finally the time for us to say goodbye. We left and sailed back to China. When we were on our way back, we were all celebrating and dancing around. As soon as we arrived in China, I said goodbye to all of them and went ack home. I had the best time of my life and I wish to go on this adventurous trip again.

A Tale of the Ming Treasure Voyage

Korean International School, Soong, Hiu Lam Chloe – 15

Arjun Acharya pressed his ear to the door and listened quietly to the anxious voices of his parents. He clenched his jaw as the sound of his parents' voices dimmed down to the sound of a whisper. Pushing himself off the door, he quickly slipped into his room and pressed his ear to the wall. He smirked, thanking God that the walls of the small house in Calicut were thin enough to hear everything.

“We cannot just send him away!”

He heard his father sigh, “It’s too late. I have already volunteered him to go. He’s too comfortable here. We have to push him out of the comfort of home; I refuse to let him laze around the way he does.”

Arjun furrowed his eyebrows at the conversation. Were they talking about him? He shuffled forward quickly in an attempt to hear the conversation more clearly. However, the lack of sound from the other side of the wall confused him. Have they stopped talking or have they moved elsewhere?

“What are you doing, boy?”

He cursed under his breath and turned to the doorway to see his father standing there with a frown on his face. Arjun leaned his back on the wall, looking at his father in the eye and said, “Nothing, dad.” The frown on his father’s face deepened as he strode forward elegantly until his feet were right in front of him.

His father, Jai Acharya, was an intelligent and hugely successful man. He was a tall man with good luck built into him like the jewels drilled into the king’s crown. He was the jack-of-all-trades, hugely successful in anything he does and never fails in taking what he can’t do, in stride. The most vital part of it all was that Jai knew it.

However, the look on his father’s face didn’t match the face of a man who prides himself in pushing past every obstacle. Instead, it was the face of a man who had given up all hope. Jai fell onto his knees, gripping Arjun by his shoulders. “You will do great things, my son. I have taught you everything I could. I have taught you to keep a levelheaded mind. I have taught you to have a protective heart. I have taught you to have an honest soul. Remember these words, Arjun. They shall be the only thing that may keep you from harm’s way once you leave the safety I’ve provided for you.” Jai whispered into his son’s ears as if he didn’t want anyone else to hear.

Arjun furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, “What are you talking about, dad? I’m fourteen. What harm am I going to be getting into?”

Jai sighed in defeat, “You will understand soon. Have patience”.

Patience. That word rang through Arjun’s head as he was pushed onto the massive ship. His mind hadn’t been able to process the events that had led him to be a part of the Chinese voyage. Nonetheless, here he was. He turned around, searching the crowd for his parents that had sent him away as a gift to the Chinese. His anger had now turned into fear as he was pushed further into the ship.

“Level-headed mind. Protective heart. Honest soul.” Arjun whispered to himself as he felt the ship push itself away from the docks. He felt a hand on his shoulder as a deep voice gave out what he supposed was Chinese.

“Li Min.” The soldier said monotonously. Arjun turned around to see a man with armour made of what seemed to be copper, staring at him with impatience. The soldier turned around and started to walk away. Arjun didn’t understand what had just been said, but he quickly followed the man.

Soon, they made it to a broad set of red doors with tints of gold on the detailed lotus design. The soldier stopped right in front of the door and turned around to face him, at least that was what Arjun thought he was trying to do.

“Zheng He.” The soldier said with pride hinted in his voice.

Arjun stared at him with wide eyes. “What?”

The soldier repeated himself although this time; there was a slight hint of annoyance laced in his voice. “Zheng He.”

Arjun stared at the soldier for a split second before he spluttered out, “Jeng Huh?”

The soldier finally looked down at Arjun before nodding his head. The soldier turned around and knocked on the door with what seemed to be some sort of password. As soon, as the soldier’s fist lifted itself from the door, the massive piece of wood slowly slid open to a small room with a desk in the middle. The soldier moved aside and beckoned Arjun to step forward.

He cautiously stepped into what seemed to be the strategy room. From the letters that scattered all over the desk to a huge map of the world that covered the entire left wall. The place gave an aura of importance or perhaps, it was the person standing behind the desk that gave off that impressive aura.

The man was wearing armour. Unlike the soldier that had led him here, the armour had gold laced all over the armour. Arjun who had no idea who the soldier in front of him was, decided to be safe and say, “Jeng Huh.”

Arjun then realized, he had no idea what the two words meant and he silently prayed he hadn’t said anything terrible. The man in front of him stared apprehensively as if he didn’t know what to do with him. Arjun quickly got down on his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground in front of him. The fear of being trapped in a place that he didn’t know had started to kick in and was taking over his control.

Levelheaded mind. Arjun scolded himself quickly for forgetting the rule so rapidly. Suddenly, he was pulled up onto his feet and dragged off. As the doors closed in front of his face, he managed to catch a glimpse of the man in gold smirking. What was going on?

That was then the phrase that was repeated in his head for the next few months. They hadn’t thrown him in a cell, but instead a tiny room with a small bed and a desk that was less than a meter apart. In the next few days, he had also come to realise he was now Zheng He’s personal assistant of sorts. Even though there were days where Zheng would get frustrated with Arjun’s lack of understanding of the Chinese language, most of it was smooth sailing. At least, that was what Arjun had told himself.

The short voyage from India was nearly coming to an end as they finally arrived at Sumatra. As Zheng led his men off the boat onto land, Arjun decided between himself that he was going to stick to Zheng and Li like the glue sticking the smaller boats together. As they rushed forward in quick strides towards the city.

The first thing Arjun noticed were the villagers, working hard in the fields. The plantations were long and narrow, stretching over miles and miles of land until it faded off into the distance. The clear, blue water of the never-ending river flowed into the sea, as children played near the riverbanks. The tall trees that hovered over them were giving people shade as they walked along the path towards the centre of the city. The blue sky that was reflections of the sea made Arjun feel warm inside, feeling that today, the trade was going to be a good one.

When they arrived at what appeared to be the king’s home, the soldiers had stopped right as Zheng took his first steps onto the king’s stairs. Arjun realized this and started to pull back, but Li grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him up the stairs behind Zheng. Li swiftly took a spear and forced it into Arjun’s hand and said, “Na.”

Arjun, who had started to learn the meanings behind certain sounds that the Chinese made, realized that Li was trying to force him to take the weapon. Arjun immediately started to protest but a glare from Li stopped all sounds coming out from his mouth. They walked through the door to face the intense glare of the Sumatran King.

Discussions began between the Sumatran King and Zheng, with some inputs from other people in the room. During this time, Arjun had kept his head down. He had been trying to press down the anxiety of being in the room by gripping onto the spear as tightly as he could.

Unexpectedly, shouting and yelling started and the once tidy room turned into a pigsty. Spears were being tossed around and Arjun quickly rushed to the nearest wall as panic started to settle in yet again. He observed the room, finding Zheng and the king going at each other while Li was fighting another soldier. Looking with more detail, he found that Li was losing. The way Li was stepping and the way the other soldier was ferociously pushing Li back, Arjun knew that he had to help in some way.

Rushing towards them, he used the butt of his spear and hit the soldier in the back of his head. The soldier stumbled forward, tripping over Li, before turning around and growling at them. Protective heart. Arjun steadied himself as the other soldier took a step forward. Arjun watched as the other soldier throw Li's spear to the other side of the room, before taking a jab at him. He dodged the attempt and jabbed back at the soldier.

Dodge. Move back. Jab. Repeat. Dodge. Move back. Jab. Again.

Arjun didn't know how much longer he could repeat the same steps without the other soldier realizing it. Arjun also realized that Li had left him alone to fight the soldier in front of him. Arjun instantaneously decided to jab as many times as he could before butting his enemy with the blunt side of the spear.

A loud yell of "TING!" gave Arjun a fright. Expeditiously pointing his spear at his enemy, he came to realize that it was Zheng in front of him. Arjun heaved in a sigh, and lowered the weapon hastily. Zheng said a few final words before turning on his heel with a wave towards Arjun, telling him to follow.

Keeping his head low, Arjun stepped in time as the admiral pushed open the doors. Quickly boarding the ship, he watched as soldiers began to take off their armour while servants rushed to pick them up. Whilst this was happening, food and water was being brought up as soldiers dropped to the ground in fatigue and weariness.

Orders were sent out as they left the docks, the huge fleet following behind them as they elegantly floated away from the island. Sumatra wasn't a very nice place to visit, Arjun decided. He carefully stepped over the soldiers who decided to lie down on top of the deck as a swift moment of tranquil was brought upon them.

Stepping into his room, he grabbed a piece of paper and dipped the brush into the ink.

Dear Father,

I have no clue how I'm going to get this to you, but today was probably the scariest day of my life. A fight had broken out while we were in the king's throne room in Sumatra. I had to fight someone today. I knocked him unconscious but I feel extremely guilty over it.

I want to go home dad. I'm not meant to be a sailor or a soldier. I don't want to be Zheng's personal assistant or Li's training buddy. I want to go home and hang out with my friends.

Dad, I don't even know when I get to leave. No one knows how long this voyage is going to take. I haven't seen you in months now, and I don't know how much longer until this voyage ends.

Sincerely,
Your son,
Arjun.

P.S Tell mom I miss her to.

Arjun folded up the piece of paper before throwing it onto the pile of other folded letters that will probably never be sent. He sighed, resting his head on the palm of his hand. Perhaps, today wasn't the best of days.

Another few months had passed and no other confrontations had happened like the ones in Sumatra. The people of Arabia and Thailand were welcoming and happy, which slowly started to reflect on Arjun. He had started to realize the joys of travelling the world and giving to other countries. He had started to build relationships with Li and Zheng, who had surprisingly given him a bit of their precious time.

He started to feel comfortable at sea. The new environment though, was always threatening as he never knew who to put his trust in completely. Nevertheless, the amenity of the sun setting over the horizon every day had given Arjun the feeling of the warmth at home. The smell of the ocean breeze now felt like taking in a new breath of fresh air that could never be found in the busyness of Calicut.

Honest soul. "I don't know what to feel Li. I feel safe, but I feel safer in Calicut. I feel less fear than I did a few months ago though." Arjun turned his head back to face Li who was standing behind him. Together, they watched the mountains move further into the distance.

Li answered back quietly, "Ni kai xin ma?"

Arjun smiled contentedly, "Yeah Li, I'm happy."

The New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Korean International School, Wong, Aimee – 15

The grey walls of the Meridian Gate loomed before Yong Zhi, him feeling as distant from the definition of his name as possible. Named by his father, Yong meant bravery, and Zhi meant smart or wit, which was definitely not what Yong Zhi felt at that moment.

In a crowd of many other people hoping to be chosen to join Emperor Yongle's Treasure Fleet led by Admiral Zheng He, he had never felt smaller in his life. There were men young and old, coming from far and wide, of various shapes and sizes, but they all had one thing in common— they were enrobed in exquisitely made robes only to be afforded by the most elite. Except for Yong Zhi, who was wearing the most presentable robe he had, which was a light gray with no colour or pattern, and unlike the others, he also didn't have the hat, only a simple ribbon holding his hair in place in a bun, easily showing his young and inexperienced age at 18.

It was the day where the admiral himself would individually interview and pick people to join his fleet for the voyages, and Yong Zhi had decided to try his luck. He wasn't confident at all, as a commoner, with his best asset being his sharp tongue that did not hesitate to throw a sharp comment or retaliate to any thrown his way. Other than that, he really didn't have anything. Yong Zhi was only of average height, had mediocre fighting skills, and had very low cardiovascular endurance that would probably last his five minutes on the battlefield until he was either killed or was able to rest. The people interested had been told to meet at the 7th hour of the day, right before noon in front of the entrance to the palace, the Meridian Gate. Suddenly, a loud bell rang, the initial sound crisp and clear to all the people gathered. It was now the 7th hour, and soon they would be led in.

The metal gates swung open, revealing 2 soldiers dressed in full attire on each side, and in the middle of the gates stood a tall figure, face obscured, clothed in indigo robes, a bear embroidered on his chest, a silver belt loosely hanging around his waist, and a black hat sitting on his head.

"I am Zhou Yi Xiang, second commander of the Treasure Fleet. I am here in place of Admiral Zheng to lead you into the palace grounds, where the interview will take place. Please follow behind me so you won't get left behind."

The crowd followed behind him, marvelling at the colourful structures adorning the outer gardens, the animals carved into the tall beams of pavilions and halls, the vibrant colours of the flowers in the gardens. It was exactly what you would think as being royalty's residence. Yong Zhi started feeling the butterflies building up in his stomach, feeling more and more uneasy every step closer to their destination. They came to a stop in front of one of the many luxuriously decorated halls, Commander Zhou leading the interviewees into the hall. 'Ooh's and 'Aah's could be heard from all around, people gaping at the sheer size of the hall.

"Can all of you please form rows of 10, 1 row behind another, and any odd ones out at the back please." Yong Zhi felt the bodies around him move in a flurry, trying to form neat rows of ten as fast as they could. Just by a simple estimate after scanning over the crowd, there had to be at least 16 rows of people, barely filling even a quarter of the room. Two simply dressed guards quickly scanned over the group, and began leading the first two rows into something that seemed like a smaller room, off the side of the main hall. Yong Zhi began to mentally prepare himself, as his row was now at the front. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears, yet his mind went blank from fearful anticipation. The guards were now heading his way, and they motioned for his row and the row behind to follow behind them, but to the opposite direction of where the other people had gone.

After briefly looking around, Yong Zhi noticed that something was missing, but he couldn't pinpoint what exactly it was. They entered a smaller that was almost identical to the previous one, just smaller and adorned with less bright hues of red and blue, specks of green and gold scattered in between. It was then that Yong Zhi noticed that

Commander Zhou was standing in all his glory (so that's what was missing), face now fully visible. Yong Zhi gasped quietly as he took in the situation he had at hand. He was actually trying out to possibly join the army, well not exactly the army but close enough.

His train of thought was abruptly cut off by Commander Zhou, "I will be evaluating you for the first round of interviews, one-on-one, in the order you are currently lined up in. Please wait patiently for your turn." After the final word, he turned on his heel and opened the door to yet another room, this time much smaller and simplistic than the other rooms. The guard ushered for the first in Yong Zhi's row to go inside the room, and swiftly closed the door behind him.

After zoning out for a few minutes, Yong Zhi was ushered into the room. He quickly bowed towards Commander Zhou and stood in front of him, hoping for the best. He could now take a clear look at the commander's face, and saw a much younger and youthful face looking at him. There were visible signs of faded scars, most likely from strenuous training over long periods of time. There were dark bags under his eyes, sullen and evidently tired from a clear lack of rest.

"What is your name?"

Yong Zhi was pulled out of his reverie by the question. "My name is Yong Zhi, Commander Zhou."

"Age?"

"18 years old, commander."

"Do you have any prior experience with physical combat?"

"No, Commander Zhou."

"Then why do you want to join the Treasure Fleet?"

"With all due respect, I want to prove my worth to both my family, and my peers who have shunned me for being weak and scrawny, by representing our country in this plan to give, rather than receive as is custom on the seas. I find this to be a good and rewarding cause, as we may also encounter dangerous people that we either defeat or die trying to."

"Very well, please go wait back in the main hall, while we finish screening the rest of the potential members of the fleet and announce the results afterwards. It was nice meeting you, Yong Zhi."

"You too, Commander Zhou."

Yong Zhi walks out of the room, feeling a heavy weight lifted off his shoulders. He returned to the main hall, picking a place to sit and rest against. 'A little nap wouldn't hurt,' thought Yong Zhi as he closed his eyes.

He woke up to a hand shaking him awake. He looked up to see who it was, and to his shock, it was Commander Zhou. "Wake up Yong Zhi. You're the only one that has made it through and into the fleet out of this group."

"Wait, what? I'm the only one that got in the fleet, but why?"

"I'll explain to you in my personal quarters. I also hope you don't have any important things at your residence, as starting from today you will be staying with me in my quarters as my personal assistant, until the end of the entire Fleet is over and done with. Clothes shall not be of any concern, as you will be measured by the royal tailor once we get there, and they will be made as soon as possible."

Yong Zhi was at a loss for words, and nodded his head. The rest of his day after getting the brief explanation from Commander Zhou, experiencing the detailed measuring the tailor used, settling in to his new quarters, was just spent on getting used to his new life. His daily schedule for the next 3 months before the fleet set sail, was to accompany Commander Zhou and monitor his day-to-day tasks to assist him in the future, then have combat training every other day, personally mentored by the commander, and to clearly log all of the members of the crew on the various ships of the complete fleet. Even after just one day of the strict orders, Yong Zhi could feel himself quickly adjusting to what would now be his life.

Yong Zhi could only sigh in content. This was better than anything he could have achieved in his hometown. He was now a relatively high ranking member of the court, and in charge of drafting diplomatic messages in place of the commander, meaning he had various opportunities to expand his horizons, both before, and during the voyages of the Ming Treasure Fleet. He really couldn't ask for anything more, could he?

The Journey

Korean International School, Yum, Lok Yin – 16

Zhang never had a past. At a young age he ran away from his plagued and trouble-stricken village. Much of his life was drifting from place to place, running errands and carrying out odd jobs. It was a tough life, food was scarce, and the winters were cold. No friends, family, past or future. It wasn't until, by sheer coincidence, that he reached the port town of Wongzhou. The local marina was an obscure scene. Usually it would smell of fishes from morning catches. But today there were no aggressive fishmongers selling fishes. In place of those were an armada of a fifty or so vessels. Crates and barrels of supplies were loaded. *We are at war*, he thought, *God bless those poor bastards*.

All of a sudden, he spotted something intriguing. One of the crates that was being hoisted onboard a grand warship slipped free of its pulley. A thunderous bang followed, as the box exploded. Wood splinters flew everywhere. In the heap of debris, there was something out of place. Although shattered, Zhang could make out what was the cargo. The crate used to house a large, decorated porcelain vase. *Huh*, he thought, *why would a warship go to war carrying such fragile and precious item?*

Zhang approached a uniformed ensign taking a break. 'What's with the navy and treasure? Captured some contrabands?' He asked.

The ensign looked puzzled, but then replied. 'Why, you never heard of the treasure voyages? Have you been in a coma until just now?'

'Wha.....' In a flash, he remembered. Wherever he went, there were talks, rumors about the so-called treasure voyages. Sending priceless gifts to other kingdoms, greeting locals, and other inconceivable events. *Propagandas, myths*, he thought. It was simply impossible. 'Oh, they are real?'

'Of course! In fact, we are short on men. We could use a good man like you. I promise that there will fame, fortune and plenty of stories to tell your kids.'

Fame, fortune. The words echoed inside Zhang's brain. It was perhaps a start to a new life. Without hesitation, he agreed.

Fast forward six months, Zhang was working as a lookout in the open sea. He was the eyes of the fleet, which now consists of nearly 200 ships, and commanded by the venerable Admiral Zheng He. His name was renowned in the whole Ming Empire. A legend, respected by the Emperor himself and worshipped by his own men. However, Zhang's task was arguably more important than his. He had to eye the surroundings for any traces of civilization. But all he saw was a canvas of different shades of blue, and most of the time he was sick as a parrot.

However, it wasn't all gloom. For the past few months the fleet had contacted civilizations, from isolated tribes to massive kingdoms. Wherever it went, Zhang saw sights that he never thought was possible. Wild beasts, majestic creatures, animals with brilliant colors. It was simply incredible. One time, he had the opportunity to set foot on land. He visited the local bazaar, a site of spectacular sight and sound. Exotic spices, fruits, and textiles. Everything was otherworldly.

Zhang continued to eye the sea. Trouble was brewing on the horizon. A flotilla of 200 boats emerged and was sailing towards the fleet. It wasn't a hallucination. There was pandemonium on the deck. The crew were preparing the cannons and taking aim. *Uh oh. Pirates*.

BOOM! BOOM! Cannons fired and recoiled rocked the ship. But the shots were futile. The guns were wildly inaccurate and the canoes the pirates are on were tiny in size. Moments later, the frigate was boarded by the barbarians. Zhang abandoned his mast position and brandished a sabre. On the deck was a dark colored man armed with a spear. Zhang was face to face with that thuggish scum. *SLASH!* After a brief skirmish, one down. Along with the help from other sailors, the boarding party was massacred. Though the party was wiped out, everyone knew they were the red herring. The ship was not carrying anything valuable, hence worthless.

The frigate was on fire.

Flame spread quickly on the wooden warship, turning it into a fiery monstrosity. The weakened structure collapsed, and several seamen disappeared beneath it. As the inferno toppled over, Zhang jumped and held onto a piece of floating debris. There he clung for dear life.

Don Joey, Winnie the Giraffe and Me

Munsang College, Lau, Yui – 15

I was on the deck of the ship staring at the blue, crystal clear sea when I heard Commander Hatong call me. “Come here, that guy on the deck.” he said. I didn’t blame him for not knowing my name. Literally no one on board knew who I am—I was nothing short of a servant. While I was wondering why he was calling me after I finished cleaning all those tables, chairs, floors, windows and toilets, Hatong answered the question in my heart by saying, “You seem free, don’t you? Take this crown band to Official Zheng. He is on the second floor.” He pointed at a box on the floor. “You mean...Official Zheng He?” I was so nervous that my volume went straight down. “Yes, are you nervous? Never talked with him before? He is kind, and he is definitely not going to kill you. I am busy right now, so go find him, immediately.” Hatong ordered. I thought he wasn’t telling the truth, but I also knew I could get killed if I disobeyed any orders, especially orders from someone with such a high position like Hatong.

I picked up the box and went down to the second floor, trying to search for Official Zheng. “If I am recalling my memories correctly, Official Zheng is usually inside that room...” and that was when I bumped into a fierce-looking, beardy man. “Oh sorry...” I apologized as he turned to me. “What are you doing here, you servant?” he said. “Commander Hatong told me to deliver this...crown...band...” I muttered. “Okay, you do that, I don’t have time for these insignificant stuffs anyway.” He turned, and stormed off. I knocked on the door, and heard a voice saying, “Come in.” I pushed the door softly and entered the room.

I saw Official Zheng sitting on a chair, with Ma Huan, the translator on his left, and a strong man, which should be his bodyguard, on his right. I bowed down immediately as I entered. “At your ease, young man.” Official Zheng said. I stood up, head facing the ground, “Commander Hatong told me to deliver this...crown band...to you.” I held the box up high. “Oh, does Hatong not even know how to do this himself?” Official Zheng said, looking at me, “Young man, that’s your chance. I don’t usually bother doing these things, so if you can help me and do well, you may be the next Hatong.” I was so tempted and was about to reply, but the bodyguard spoke first, “Official Zheng, that’s against the rules!” Official Zheng stared at him, “My words ARE the rules, Hu Jun. Hatong can’t even fulfill his responsibility, why can’t I find someone to replace him?” Hu Jun winked at Ma Huan, but he was never supportive, “Oh, hell yes, Official Zheng. We all see how irresponsible Hatong is, there’s nothing wrong with finding a replacement...at least temporarily.” Official Zheng nodded as I heard the door banged behind me. It was the beardy man. He seemed surprised that I was still there, but soon ignored me and said, “Official Zheng, we have arrived Chiem Thanh!” “Okay, Wang Heng, we are coming. Next time, don’t bang the door unless it is emergency.” Official Zheng stood up, then said to me, “Young man, follow me.” Wang Heng seemed doubtful, “Official Zheng, he...” “He will present the crown band.” Official Zheng said, “He replaced Hatong.” “Oh.” Wang Heng glared at me for a moment, but soon turned and left me behind following.

I followed Official Zheng, Ma Huan and the Commanders to the bow of the ship. “Are we leaving the ship?” I asked quietly. “Yes, you’ll be responsible to deliver the crown band to the Chiem Thanh emperor, so follow us down the ship and meet with him.” Wang Heng replied. My heart started beating harder and harder, although he was not as great as the Ming Emperor, but he’s still an emperor—enough for me to get nervous. We left the ship and reached the land in Chiem Thanh, then after some walking, we reached the palace. “Emperor, the representative of the Ming Kingdom has arrived.” the palace guard reported. “Oh really? Let them in.” The guard opened the door, and the five of us went in. I was planning to curtsy to the king, but as I saw none of the others bow down, I remained standing with the head slightly facing downwards to show respect. “We are coming to present a treasure of the Ming Kingdom, the crown band...” Official Zheng said as he looked at me. I held the box up and stepped a few steps forward, not too close but near enough for the king’s retinue to get the box. “Oh, what a beautiful crown band. Where is it from?” the king stared at me. No one seemed to be answering, so nervous, I started to talk, “It was...a royal treasure...the Ming emperor thinks it’ll suit you...” I saw the emperor smiling and some heads nodding, I thought I shouldn’t have said anything wrong, so I was finally relieved. “Are you planning to stay for a night or two?” the emperor asked. “Official Zheng, we still have to fight Sugan the fake king in Sumatera!” Hu Jun shouted. “A night won’t hurt much, Hu Jun. It’s getting late soon.” Official Zheng said. “That’s settled then! I will prepare the rooms for you!” the emperor sounded happy. We slept in Chiem Thanh for a night, then returned to the ship and left for Sumatera.

“Well done, young man.” Official Zheng said to me on the ship, “You had manners; you knew how to deal with pressure...which made you enough to replace Hatong. What’s your name?” Just as I was going to reply, Hatong banged

the door and came in. He bowed down and said, "It's my fault, Official Zheng, It's my fault! Please don't replace me...with a servant!" He looked at me and said. "Even a servant can do better than you. Who should be the one reflecting?" Wang Heng murmured. Hatong stared at him, then turned to Hu Jun, trying to ask for help. "Sorry bruh, but that's the truth. No disagreement for me." Hu Jun said. Hatong turned to Ma Huan, but he shouldn't have expected something better than this from the translator, "Official Zheng, Hatong was doing terribly. It's reasonable to get him be replaced." "Can you hear what they said, Hatong? YOU ARE NO LONGER A COMMANDER. I'll find a position for you...no freeriders allowed here. Now get out!" Official Zheng shouted. Feeling hopeless without support, Hatong left the room, staring fiercely at me on his way out. "Now, about you, young man." Official Zheng said, "Now you are the commander, so how should we call you?" "You may call me Hetong." I said, "My family name is Zhang—Zhang Hetong is the full name." "Hetong replaced Hatong," Commander Zheng laughed, "What a joke." Just as Official Zheng finished his sentence, Wang Heng realized something, "Official Zheng, do we need some weapons to fight Sugan? I may take them from the storage room." "Okay, tell the servants to help." Official Zheng said, "and bring Hetong with you. He need to get used to being a commander." "Okay. Come with me, Hetong." I followed Wang Heng and left for the storage room.

"A commander is different from a servant. You can make orders to anyone with a lower position—everyone except Official Zheng, the commanders and the translator. But you still need to be loyal to Official Zheng and keep your manners. Also, don't be too harsh to servants. Make them willing to work for you." Wang Heng explained. "Understood." I said. "Good, you are a quick learner, aren't you? I'm sure you will do this well." Wang Heng showed me how to gather servants for helping, and how to ensure they work well appropriately. After we finished preparing for the weapons, Wang Heng went to the Captain's room to confirm our position. "The captain said we are arriving, so we better get prepared. You know how to fight, don't you?" Wang asked. "I know how to use a sword, and I learnt some basics of fighting from a monk. But I'm not used to shoot with a gun." I replied. "I may teach you. It's not hard at all." Wang Heng gave me a brief lesson of gun shooting and I learnt the knack of having high accuracy, before we were told that Sumatera was right in front of us.

The Commanders left the boat last, so the troops were already facing each other when I arrived the frontline. "That's Don Joey. He's the best military general of Sugan the fake king." Wang Heng explained, "If we can catch him alive, it'll be a big bonus to our military power, given that he's willing to work for the Ming Kingdom." I nodded as the war started with some drum noises and shouts. I used my gun to kill many enemies—Wang Heng's tips worked—but I soon find my gun out of bullets, so I used a sword instead. The soldiers of Sugan were very vulnerable, so our army made a great success. Soon, there were only a few soldiers of Sugan—and their commander, Don Joey—left. Our soldiers attempted to beat Don Joey, but in vain—all were killed by the strong but cruel man. Wang Heng and Hu Jun rushed to fight with Don Joey, but couldn't take an advantage of him though we were greater in number and entered a stalemate. Suddenly, Don Joey grabbed a sword on the ground and quickly pointed it towards Wang Heng. I knew if I did nothing, Don Joey would kill Wang Heng, then Hu Jun, me, and other soldiers might die also—we might eventually lose. To save him, I pick up an unused gun on the ground and targeted at his belly. At the crucial moment, I remembered Wang Heng said that it was best to catch him alive, so I shot his arm instead. The shot worked and Don Joey dropped his sword which nearly sliced Wang Heng. Hu Jun immediately picked up the sword and pointed it towards Don Joey's neck. "Don't kill him, Hu Jun." Wang Heng stood up and said, "He could work for us—he is a great military general, and a great fighter." "Fine," Hu Jun said, "Let's bring him back to our camp."

In the camp, I met Hu Jun, Wang Heng and Don Joey. "Great shot," Hu Jun said, "Don't think I didn't realize that was you." "That's not my own effort. Wang Heng taught me to shoot." I said. "You are humble, too humble maybe. You deserve some compliment, and a higher position." I smiled and replied, "You too. You fought bravely." We both laughed. "Sugan the fake king surrendered after the big loss. We won!" Wang Heng said. All of us celebrated, except Don Joey. "So, what about him?" Hu Jun pointed at Don Joey. "He fainted for quite awhile, but he seems okay. He knows some Chinese, and I think I can convince him to work for Ming." Wang Heng said, "If I can't, Ma Huan can." "Oh, that obsequious bastard." Hu Jun said. "Don't say that, he knew how to get us killed by Official Zheng." Wang Heng whispered, "and certainly we don't know as much as him, especially in language. He may be a bastard, but we need to respect him." "I am already respecting him by not saying that out loud in front of him." Hu Jun said, "We need to leave soon, carry that guy on board." Wang Heng called a few servants to get Don Joey on board, and the three of us returned to the boat.

"The next stop is Malindi." Hu Jun said, "According to Official Zheng, we need to find the god beast 'Qi-Lin' there..." "Oh God, are god beasts even real? The King believed that?" Wang Heng complained. "Yes by the information I've got..." Hu Jun sighed. "At least we beat the fake king Sugan, or else this is a meaningless trip again."

Wang Heng said, “A Qi-Lin in Malindi? Do you believe it?” “It’s no use complaining.” I said, “Hu Jun, did Official Zheng said there’s anything we need to prepare?” “Nothing! And that’s the point! Why am I supposed to be here seeing a god beast that may not even exist without doing something more meaningful?” “Stop complaining, calm down.” Ma Huan entered, “We are arriving Malindi.” “Ma Huan, don’t tell me you believe in god beasts.” “No, but we have to believe, don’t we?” Ma Huan said, “At least in front of Official Zheng, we have to act as if we believe that there will be Qi-Lins.” For a moment, all of us sighed and the room went silent.

Soon we arrived at Malindi and landed to search for Qi-Lins. I searched dedicatedly at first, but Wang Heng found me and said, “Hetong, there won’t be Qi-Lins. Don’t waste your energy—you are no longer a servant.” I turned and saw Hatong searching for Qi-Lins with hard effort. I felt pity for it, but I guess that’s life. One second it gives you sweets, another second you get sour. The only way to combat sour is to get prepared, and have faith. I decided to keep searching. I might not succeed, but with hope, we would have a high chance to get things done. I suddenly found that Don Joey was going somewhere furtively and kept looking at his surroundings, as if he didn’t want others to discover him. I said to Hu Jun, “Don Joey seems strange. He is going somewhere secretly. What should we do?” “You follow him. He has always been strange,” Hu Jun said.

I quietly followed him and we arrived at a plain with many deer-like creatures, with a long neck and spots all over its body, eating grass. “It really looks like a Qi-Lin!” I thought. When I looked down again, I saw Don Joey taking out his sword, sprinting towards the creatures trying to kill them! “Stop! Don Joey, what are you doing!” “I need to kill the Qi-Lins!” “Why?” “Because...You conquered my country, destroyed my home, killed my friends...I won’t let you get the god beasts and gain good luck!” He ran towards the Qi-Lins. Without further warning, I shot two bullets at his legs and he fell down. However, he was too strong and stood back up. Suddenly, a few black-skinned people ran out and pointed at Don Joey. They were the indigenous people who protected the Qi-Lins (they called them ‘giraffes’ in their language). After a round of fighting, Don Joey fell on the ground again.

Just as I was going to leave and find my friends, Ma Huan, Hu Jun and Wang Heng arrived and saw the Qi-Lins as well as the indigenous people. Ma Huan spoke with the indigenous people and knew about the giraffes as well as what happened to Don Joey. The indigenous people knew about Ming and promised to give us a giraffe as a present. Also, the indigenous people said they were going to kill Don Joey as he tried to attack the giraffes. “How should we call the gi...giraffe?” asked Wang Heng. I heard the giraffes emitting a ‘wi-ni’ sound and suggested, “Let’s call it ‘Winnie the Giraffe’.” They all said it was a good idea and decided to call it ‘Winnie the Giraffe’. We carried the giraffe on board. Official Zheng was delighted to see ‘Winnie the Giraffe’ as he thought it was a Qi-Lin as described in tales, while me and my friends believed it wasn’t on our own. We accomplished all our missions and decided to call the trip an end.

I was on the deck of the ship staring at the blue, crystal clear sea when I heard Hatong call me. “Commander Zheng, we are arriving at Ming.” he said. “Okay, I’ll be coming.” I replied. The journey to the west came to an end, but my life as an official has just started.

I Come. I See. I Do Not Conquer but Connect

Munsang College, Ng, Jerry – 15

11th July 1408

Cloudy

This morning, the Emperor summoned me to the Grand Palace for a briefing. I was quite sure that he would order me to navigate uncharted waters and explore the unknowns. I was ready to be at his beck and call. No countries are allies of China and even some Northern tribes are hostile to us. We must break the impasse by securing resources in a mass of Virgin Land.

When I saw him, he looked joyful, though with a streak of pensiveness.

“Guess what! I have thought of a brilliant way to gain the support from neighbouring countries. We could make an enormous fleet and you could lead your people to set sail,” he exclaimed.

“What?! Your Majesty, what have you said? In the past, no one was allowed to set sail. Are you sure to break the rules set by the ancestors?” I asked. Breaking any rules set by past emperors could set a dangerous precedent, upset the equilibrium and throw us into a flat spin.

“Never mind. Everything has to change.” I could hear a subtle sign of discontent.

In order to please him and free myself from trouble, I decided to accept the challenge. Now I am still feeling worried as the world is an unknown and anything can be hazardous and take my life. What can I do? I cannot pay lip service to the Emperor. I have to bring myself to the unenviable task, a mammoth one actually.

13th October 1408

Sunny

That day has finally come. A few months ago, enormous boats of with trappings of regality were pieced together. They were moored to the harbour and we are now going to set off. At that moment, instead of feeling afraid, I was nervous and sweated a lot. When I walked on the kerbside, some waved to me and shouted, “It is an honour to be appointed by the Emperor to explore the whole world. Break a leg!” I didn't respond to it, but I mumbled to myself, “You would not say that if you see the dangers that loom on the horizons.”

The Emperor was not there since the harbour is far from the capital, so instead the chief executive of the province came. He brought a letter and boxes containing heavy stuff from the Emperor to me.

He read it raucously, “*Message from the Emperor*: Please bring these boxes of goods and silks to the Emperors of other countries that are willing to cooperate with us. Wish all of you a resounding success

After that, all the sailors got onto the deck and those precious boxes were carefully carried onto the ships. When I was walking to the fleet, the chief executive waved to me. I then walked to him.

“*From the Emperor*: You should only open this bag only when you are in emergency.” The chief executive whispered to me and put a small leather bag into my palm which had already been wetted in sweat.

“Wish you all the best!” He added.

Now, when I look closely at the bag, it is an embellished one. On the bag there is a Chinese character ‘*Ming*’ sewn on it and the bag is sealed with a golden thread. Out of curiosity, I had the urge to open it immediately to see what was inside the bag. However, I should listen to what the Emperor said. I have to toe every line he has dictated to me.

Bon Voyage! I have to give myself a pat on the back.

28th October 1408

Sunny

Urgh... The voyage is sickening. I have thrown up several times a day. Now I am knackered. I have been sucked out of all the nutrients that could have otherwise propped me up.

Anyway, today, our ship has sailed to the land after 15 days in the ocean, with everyone reeling from seasickness. When a sailor observed what was ahead of us with a telescope, he was suddenly on cloud nine. “Yes! At long last, we are saved from non-stop puke! I have seen land!”

At around noon, we set foot on the soil. All of us were excited about that. The place where we landed was a barren rock with sand covering everywhere. Vegetation was few and far between. We were all b e m u s e d by the new environment. Some of them were hopping like a grasshopper until they carelessly tripped by pebbles while some of them were touching the fine sand on the land surface.

After we had explored the coastal areas, we headed for some inner areas, when we started to walk deep inwards, we saw many striking creatures, such as a crawling thing like a crayfish but with a curved, pointed tail. We were all enjoying nature there for the whole afternoon.

At night time, we decided to make a tent at places with shrubs where there will be fodder for the campfire. When we started to eat the food we brought from China, we saw red, glittering eyes from the bushes. They were some kind of dogs, but with sharp fangs. They were likely to attack us as they looked as if we were enemies. They first growled at us and then they started to approach us so we quickly grabbed our knives. The horde of ‘large dogs’ then dashed to us and some of the sailor were being bitten and injured at their ankles. As some of the sailors were athletic, they were able to protect us while keeping the ‘dogs’ away. At last, no serious injuries were reported.

I then had come to terms with the grave risks in this voyage: It was very likely for your fingers to be burned, literally.

1st November 1408

Shower

After days of tiring walks across the land of sand, we arrived at a densely populated place, where locals called this city “Kuzubai”. The locals were not very kind at the start, but after they knew that we were from China, they became friendly to us. They probably knew about the great power of China since the Tang Dynasty. I am proud to know that our country is known by people far away!

Welcomed by the locals, we further asked about where the Emperor of this place lived. They pointed to the building which is conical in shape to us. Before we set off, they brought home to the cardinal importance to choose our words carefully with the presence of the Emperor. It was the last thing one wanted to see when the Emperor’s feather was ruffled.

When we arrived at the palace, the Emperor was inside a room. When he saw us, he instructed some guards to check whether we were hostile to the king. Knowing that we were representing China, he quickly walked out and said, “All of you must be very tired after such a long journey, please come in and take a rest.”

The beach we landed on and the palace were polar apart: There were green patches with pink and yellow flowers with bees and butterflies flitting everywhere. All of us were absorbed in this scene of ethereality.

At dawn, I decided to have a meeting with the Emperor.

“Why are you coming to us?” asked the Emperor inquisitively.

“We China would do to invite you and your people to fight the tribes that are hostile to us,” I stated.

“Undoubtedly, China is a strong country throughout the world history. What is the purpose of this cooperation?” asked the Emperor sceptically.

I knew why he took what our offer with a pinch of salt. He was afraid that China would use this opportunity to invade his country

“No worries! To show our sincerity, we prepared some little gifts that you may find useful,” I said while asking my colleagues to move several boxes in.

When the boxes of goods and silks were opened, the Emperor was beaming with delight.

“There should be an opportunity for us to cooperate,” he added immediately.

17th November 1408

Rainy and freezing

Today, after being in “Kuzubai” for about half a month, we decided to head back to China as the food storage started to become unable for us to sustain for a month. (Originally we planned to go further inland...) We followed the same route and got to our fleet as soon as possible.

As soon as we sailed away from the land, someone bellowed, “Stop or you will be shot.” All of us were in panic. One of us shouted, “I don't want to die here, I must go back to meet my wife!” Then, we saw a hook holding on the wooden plank of our ship. Some people who looked cruel got onto our ship. When we thought how to deal with this situation, a gargantuan man stood was looming right there.

“I know that you have gold bars. Where are they?” “No... I won't tell you...” one of the sailors trembled.

“You will be learning the lesson of refusal!”

People then rushed onto the deck. The fight started. Although we resisted hard and we had more advanced weapons than theirs, we couldn't steal a march on them. Our size of manpower paled in comparison with theirs! With more and more people injured, being the leader of the whole team, I had to think of a way to save our lives....

Suddenly, a flash of memory came up to my mind: The chief executive had given me the leather bag and reminded me to open it only in emergency. I then quickly tore the bag open and inside the bag there was a pack of grey powder. That is a pack of lime powder! It was useful in dealing with enemies as lime powder itself, when mixed with water, generates heat and causes skin burn. I immediately spilt the powder onto the pirates' faces and told the sailors to use a wooden bowl to spill water on their faces. They thought that the powder we spilled was magic powder that hurt them as they didn't know about this use of lime powder. They were afraid and ran away immediately.

This day is an exhausting day and I didn't expect the journey to be this dangerous. Today, I was so afraid that I was going to jump to the sea to escape, but luckily it turned out to be safe.

8th December 1409

Thunderstorm

The weather was inclement yesterday. The sky were covered in thick layers of clouds and it was bucketing down from dawn to dusk. We faced the gravest danger since the start.

The weather worsened in the afternoon. There were claps of thunders sending tremors on the sea and waves were raging, tossing our boats vigorously. The glass wine bottles that we brought aboard fell and broke into fragments and the wine spilled everywhere.

“Wait, have all of you just heard of some unusual sound? It seems like that something is going to happen...”

“FLUSH, SWOOSH!” the sound now is so obvious that all of us can hear now. As soon as we had heard the sound, our face turned white. We knew that we were really in deep trouble.

Some sailor quickly ran down the deck to see what had happened.

“Hey! Help! Fetch me things to plug the holes!” he was swept aside by the incoming waves.

Not wanting our journey to end up tragically here, all of us were determined to plug those holes. However, all of our boxes of goods had been used. How could we get things to repair the ship?

The waves continued to batter us and our boat finally could not withstand the force of the nature. Finally, it tilted and all of us fell into the stormy sea.

That's what all I remembered yesterday. When I was conscious again, I found myself in a wooden hut along the coast. When I asked the locals there, they told me that in the morning I lay in a swoon on the beach, so they decided to bring me home.

Thanks God that I am still alive now. The most amazing thing is: When I asked where the place is, they told me that this place is Haikou, the southern part of China. It was a close shave, but I lost all my properties. Worrying about my colleagues, I decided to travel back to the capital and look for them along my path.

5th
Sunny

February

1410

Yeah! I have made it. I was back to the capital this morning. The most important thing was that most of the colleagues survived in that disaster. Still, it is sad to say that some could not make it.

After the Emperor heard that I was back, he immediately asked me to have a meeting with him. I first reported to him about how we invited the Emperor of Kuzubai to be the ally. He nodded with a grin.

Next, the most difficult things came: I had to report on the disaster.

“Your... Your Majesty, I am very sorry to tell you that a little... Yes, a little accident happened when we were back...” I hesitated.

The Emperor
frowned.

“Our ships sank when we were back and some of us are missing.” I rattled off the words with fear.

“How dare you! You should and you must be responsible for the losses!” He shouted. “You, as the leader of the whole journey, misbehaved and caused loss of money and even lives...” I shut my eyes and was ready to accept the punishment.

“See how I scare you? You shouldn't be as timid as a mouse if you want to succeed!”

Phew! it was a dramatic day. The Emperor actually wanted to praise me as I helped the country to make allies. After I was home, I sat down quietly and thought deeply about this voyage. Next time, the ship should be immune to the inclemency of the weather so the tragic catastrophe wouldn't have happened again.

I am finally brought round to the tenets of truth: Our country needs pillars of strengths that accrue from modern weapons, but what is topping the list is soft power that best manifests itself in camaraderie with other countries. Comradeship, with all parties on an equal footing, is always preferable to a mindset to twist others around the little fingers.

A New Tale for Ming Treasure Voyages

Munsang College, Yeung, Fai Yan – 15

“Hey look! Java is getting closer and closer to us!” shouted Chen.

Eyes galore were immediately riveted on the large piece of land in front of them filled with trees, wooden houses and volcanoes.

All sailors were thrown on the edge of their seat before rousing themselves to the uplifting discovery.

When they arrived at the port, the King of Madjapahit stepped forward and welcomed the fleet warmly with a handshake. Zheng He said, “We are the representatives from Ming China. We are here because Emperor Youngle would like to establish a friendly diplomatic relationship with Madjapahit.” The King of Madjapahit replied, “It is our honour to be given a great opportunity to build a relationship with Emperor Youngle.”

The King of Madjapahit then ordered some of his servants to lead one of the Chinese crews to the palace of Madjapahit.

On the way to the palace, exotic scent and scenery were transfixing the crew. They were so electrified that they had never experienced foreign things like this in their whole life. These were totally new and different to them. On the street there were dancers putting on the traditional Madjapahit dance, singing local songs and storytellers telling the old myths to the children who gathered and squatted on the ground.

After passing through the main street, they started to enter a forest before gaining access to the palace. The large team with huge luggage had drawn so much villagers’ rapt attention. Inside the wooden boxes that the team carried, there were precious stones, some rare animal species and also iron. The team was so worried that the treasures inside the wooden boxes would be stolen. That, if it did happen, would let Emperor Youngle down. The most worrisome thing was: They might be given death penalty by the Emperor if they failed to complete their ‘mission’.

After a whole-day journey, the fleet were extremely exhausted. They stopped in front of a hostel and someone in the crowd suggested, “Let’s take a rest here tonight”. There were a total of fifty people in the fleet and twenty rooms were occupied by the fleet that night.

On the next day when they departed from the hostel and were ready to resume the journey to the palace, some saw three men whose bodies were thoroughly covered in a black cloth behind the fleet. At first they didn’t pay much attention to those men, reckoning they were just some foreign tourists. However, after approximately half an hour, the fleet discovered that those men were still behind them, and they immediately noticed that those strange men were stalking them!

The atmosphere suddenly became tense and silence descended on the pathway.

Though they had not spoken to each other, they all knew that they had to concentrate and cooperate, or else the treasures would be looted.

A few minutes later, the fleet realized that more and more men were joining the three men and some of them were even holding knives and hammers.

As the fleet expected, the gang of total ten men suddenly rushed to the fleet, stabbing some crew members with knives, hammers and shooting them with arrows. Chen immediately lay down on the ground

playing dead and, at the same time, he peeked to see whether the gang of robbers had already approached the wooden boxes and taken all the treasures inside away.

He then saw a robber walking towards one of the wooden boxes, and his eyes were gleaming with avarice. "How greedy this man is..." thought Chen.

When the robber took out a piece of iron from one of the wooden boxes, Chen grabbed a knife dropped by the robber around him and threw the knife towards the back of the robber.

The robber fell into the wooden box immediately. Blood kept running out from the back of his body.

The rest of the gang was horrified and quickly rushed back to where they hid themselves.

Only twenty members survived from the robbery and massacre.

The twenty members survived joined the other crew, and they took the wooden boxes along. The whole team headed towards the palace.

They finally got to see the King of Madjapahit. The crew paid tribute to the King with the treasures inside wooden boxes. When the King was ready to open the last box, Chen suddenly remembered he had not taken the corpse of the robber out.

However, the King of Madjapahit already unlocked the cover and lifted the cover up...

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lam, Haidee – 14

“You don’t look like a Scholar.” Someone quietly interrupted my train of thought as my head whipped around to face a boy of my own age. His hair was cleanly cut, but his mouth was downturned in disapproval and his eyes were accusing. I rearranged my expression so I didn’t appear surprised, even though I was.

“I work for the crew,” I replied briskly, wrapping the cloak around me tightly. “What about you?”

The boy snickered, finding the idea outrageous. “Work for the crew? Any crew member would at least require some muscle, but you don’t have any. Besides, you’re a girl, and girls don’t do manly jobs.”

My temper flared up as I recalled the miles that I had sprinted to be on this ship. To escape from my arranged marriage and my filthy husband. “Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I can’t do such jobs. Besides, you don’t look so muscular yourself.”

The boy sighed, giving in to my retort. “You’d better get off before they catch you. The crew will be arriving.”

I couldn’t go back, back to my family who had traditional beliefs and forced arranged marriages upon their daughters. Instantly, my irritation for the boy vanished, leaving me trembling and exhausted. “I need to stay here. I can’t go back.” The thought of my relatives’ fake smiles as I stood in my blood red gown left me quaking in fear for what would happen if I chose to return home.

The boy pursed his lips slightly before crossing his arms. “What’s your name?”

“Jia,” I sighed. “What’s yours?”

“Kit,” He snapped. “Now follow me, and don’t attract any attention.”

I followed him with unsteady footsteps until we reached his room. He rotated his head twice before closing the door with an audible thud.

“Where are we right now?” I questioned, taking in my surroundings. Rickety oak lined the walls and floors, dimming the room to a comforting gloom. A scratchy handwoven mat was hastily placed against the bed frame while a roll out mat leaned against the closet on my right. A tabletop on my left was scattered with papers and diagrams, the reed yellow colour contrasting against the dark chocolate colour of the tabletop.

“You’re currently on Zheng He’s treasure fleet of his 3rd voyage.” He paused before flitting his eyes to the black cloak shrouding my figure. “People can’t know that you’re here. You have to remain hidden.”

“What about you?” I asked, fidgeting with my cloak. “Are you supposed to be here?”

“I work for the crew,” he snapped. “I need to be here.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, suddenly feeling meek.

“The crew is headed to Champa. However, we will be making stops at Siam, Malacca, Semudera, and Ceylon.” His eyes flickered towards the door, his expression cautious and guarded. “If someone comes in, hide in the closet. If they ask you of your whereabouts, tell them that you’re Kit’s maiden.”

“I refuse to be anyone’s maiden.” I shuddered at the thought of serving my future husband. “I belong to myself and no one else.”

“Fine,” Kit snapped, his tone icy. “If you are so adamant about being independent, then stay cooped up in this little room so no one will see you.” He then stormed out of the room as the door slammed shut.

Tentatively, my fingers reached for the handle. I hated staying indoors, much less in Kit's tiny and damp room. Tightening the cloak around me, I stepped out into the light, continuing my descent down the hallway.

"Excuse me, but who are you?" A man questioned, his tone inquisitive rather than threatening. I was a runaway, a girl who had secretly slipped onto this ship. Turning on my heel, I sprinted back to Kit's room, cushioning my footsteps with my leather shoes to not alert any other crew members.

"Wait! Stop!" His laboured breath followed behind me as his clumsy footsteps lumbered across the wooden planks. Then, his scrabbling fingers caught the hem of my cloak as he yanked it away, revealing my true identity.

"You don't belong here," He stroked his peppered beard, the lines of his mouth twisted downwards to form a sneer. "Who are you?"

"Give me back my cloak," I pleaded. "I won't disturb you any more."

"I asked you for your name," The man demanded, his black eyes scrutinizing.

"Jia," I whispered, my eyes still wide. "Can I have my cloak back, please?"

"Why are you here?" He continued, his grimy nails digging into the soft black fabric of my cloak.

"I'm—" I stuttered, my mind reeling.

"She's my maiden," Kit interrupted, grasping my wrist tightly. "She was just wandering around, Wei."

"Pwah!" Wei spat. "Who wears a black cloak unless she doesn't want to be seen? I thought you learned from your past mistakes, Kit."

Kit instantly stiffened, his lips thinning. "She is my maid. Drop it, Wei."

Wei shrugged, but not before leaving a backhanded comment. "Well, don't blame me if she gets stranded on an island or gets locked along with the others. Here's your cloak, Jia." My tentative fingers reached for the cloak before fastening it around my neck. "Thanks," I muttered, my eyes trained to the ground.

As Wei departed, Kit instantly hauled me to his room, his eyes black and burning with undeniable anger. "Can I not leave you for a few minutes without stirring up trouble?"

"Staying cooped up in your room isn't fun either," I retorted. "Since I'm now your 'maid', I should be able to walk around freely."

"That also means taking care of my basic needs," Kit smirked. "Help me wash those clothes over there. I need to wear them by tomorrow."

"I still get to stay here, right?" I questioned, wrapping my arms around myself, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"As long as you don't get into that much trouble again, you should be fine." Kit finished. "I wouldn't mind having someone to help me out."

The days flew by, and I learnt new skills. How to tie knots, how to use the constellations in replacement of a compass, but most of all, how to slip by unnoticed. Still, a question remained unanswered in my mind.

“What did Wei mean by learning from your past mistakes, Kit?” I questioned out of the blue, using a needle to stitch back the frayed edges of my cloak together.

“On my last expedition, a young boy with huge aspirations to be a general followed me into my room. He managed to stay hidden for a month but got caught by one of the sailors,” Kit replied, his voice as bitter as the curd. “I never saw him again.”

“Oh,” I mumbled. “So are we headed towards Ceylon?”

“Yes, General Zheng will be making amends with King Alekshvera there.” He stated. “Then, we will be heading towards Champa if everything goes smoothly.”

In the middle of the night, I jolted awake to cannon shots and clanging metal. Instinctively, I wrapped the black cloak around myself and scurried out of the room, hearing the dissonant clash of metal amplify as I scampered out of the hallways.

I had no idea what had happened, but whatever amendments Zheng He attempted had resulted in conflict and war between the Sinhalese. Hundreds of Sinhalese soldiers surrounded the fleets, their swords, spears and shields gleaming menacingly under the full moon.

I wasn't a fighter, but my eyes darted around with acute alert and attention as I searched for Kit. I did find him, cornered at the ballast, his sword gleaming under the full moon. He brought it down against his opponent's spear, resulting in another dissonant clang. His opponent drew back his spear and sent his shield crashing right towards Kit's face. The sudden momentum knocked Kit off his feet, leaving him in a fetal position.

With mustering grace, I leapt onto the ballast, my shoes cushioning a majority of the impact. As Kit stood up, one of his eyes were swollen shut and blood dribbled out of his nose. He managed to parry another of his opponent's attacks, but his movements were becoming slower and less coordinated.

With a slash, his opponent had left a gash and pouring wound on his right shoulder blade. Kit cried out in pain, his sword clattering to the ground. Spear raised, his opponent prepared to deliver the blow towards his heart.

I contemplated my options quickly, before settling for one. Kit was my friend, and he had saved me on two occasions. This time, I would help him, even if I would get injured along the way.

I bunched up my cloak and smothered his opponent, briefly distracting him. As he yanked off the cloak, I dragged Kit out of the way, just in time to dodge his glinting spear. Fortunately, the spear grazed my skin but didn't do much damage otherwise. As Kit leaned against the edge of the ship, breathing heavily, I knew that we couldn't defeat him by force. Perhaps luring him overboard would work.

Wait. That was it. “I'll lure him over here. You shove him off the ship once I dodge his attack.” This wasn't the best idea, but Kit nodded, trusting my strategy. Multiple menacing slashes interrupted my strategic thinking and caused me to whip my head towards the noise. The opponent had shredded my cloak into strips of black fabric, making it no longer wearable. Ignoring the sudden clench in my heart, I perched myself on the edge of the ship, hoping that my reflexes would be able to dodge his impending blow.

My eyes momentarily widened as he brought the spear down on me. Then, the two of us were tumbling downwards, scrambling to get a hold of the ship.

Kit caught my flailing arm just in time, grunting in exhaustion as he hauled me up. A splash followed soon as my feet touched the ballast. Then, the Sinhalese generals yelled a few commands, and the army began to retreat. We were safe, at least for now.

“Jia? Kit?” Wei shouted, his lumbering footsteps getting closer as he waved a torch in the air. Behind him, a few more members of the crew followed, their torches raised as they stared us inquisitively.

“You two sure are lucky,” He grinned, revealing his yellowed teeth. “General Zheng managed to hold the King and other important members of Ceylon captive, forcing their armies to retreat.”

Behind him, suspicious whispers and accusations filled the air, all directed to the one girl on this ship: Me. Still, I held my head high, gathering the remnants of my cloak in my palms as I steadied my gaze on the members of the crew.

“Where are we headed now?” Kit asked, sheathing his sword back to the side of his waist. He was still bleeding, but with proper bandaging, he would be alright.

“Nanjing,” Wei grinned, slapping Kit on the back. “Your hometown, Kit.”

“Who are you?” One of the crew members questioned, his eyes narrowing at my ashen state. I knew I looked hideous, with a bloody gash, tattered clothes and greasy hair. Still, I felt proud and brave, for what I had just done.

“I’m Jia,” I replied, my voice steady and confident.

A Captain's Guide to Survival

Sha Tin College, Chan, Karina – 14

The captain stood at the bow of his ship. The deep blue sea surrounded him, the vessel a mere pinprick of brown wood against the vastness of the ocean. Looking around him, he saw naught but the sky and the sea, not even a hint of land revealed itself. For most, it would be a mighty sight to behold. He and his small crew had been sailing for weeks. Led by their master, the mighty Zheng He— admiral of the Ming treasure fleets— the captain's ship was one of many sent on a mission to find peace and friendship in the world around China.

They were returning from a place called Africa, a land of grassy plains and little rain. It was already an honor to serve the Emperor Yongle, but what the captain thought was even better was the ability to explore, to feel the awe of being impressed by something new. The captain loved the adventure— the glory of doing so was just a side bonus. The fleets before his had brought back fantastical treasures nobody had ever seen before: a strange plant root which was hairy and looked almost human—like, rumored to bring longevity; colorful silks that were soft and smooth to the touch; a variety of herbs and spices that the captain was certain would work well in certain Chinese dishes.

Joining the collection was something the captain had brought back from Africa— an absurdly long-necked creature from far away that could only be a descendant of the mythical *qilin*. There had been so much to see in Africa— there were lions, black and white striped horses called 'zebras', large and awkward looking birds with feathery bodies and naked necks. Even the chief of the tribe he had stumbled upon wore the pelt of something furry and had a scary looking painted mask to match. The captain had given himself a bit of a fright upon meeting the chief— he had mistaken the foreign man for an animal. Thankfully, the chief had only been amused and not offended.

A particularly harsh rock of the ship brought the captain back to his senses, swaying on his feet. The boat was shrouded in mist and he couldn't see much farther beyond his hands. Was it his eyesight? He rubbed his eyes, but nothing happened, and his sight remained blurry. Dark clouds formed in the sky, and rain began to fall. There was a dark shape looming in the distance. What was it? His eyes widened at the sight before him. No, it wasn't a new land they had discovered, or friendly strangers hoping to make contact. What drifted before him was worse, far worse than he'd ever imagined. It was a *pirate ship*.

The pirate ship was much larger than their small junk boat. Ragged sails fluttered menacingly in the wind, cannons meant for mass destruction peeking out from numerous gunports hidden in the pitch black hull. A terrifying monster as scary as the the pirates themselves glared at the captain, sitting in the position of the figurehead. An ugly snarl was painted on its face, seemingly ripping the *thing's* face in half. It was quite fitting, really. The pirates were known for terrorising the oceans, stealing from helpless merchants and fishermen, murdering and pillaging wherever they went. Truth be told, the only reason the captain had been promoted was because all the former captains of the ship had been killed by pirates, and he was the only one with the skill set— or the foolhardiness— to take on the role of captain.

"Captain! What should we do?"

The captain froze, mind whirring, thinking of possible solutions. He'd only been promoted for a month, he wasn't used to having his crew, his former equals, asking him for advice. He wasn't used to having the responsibility of so many people putting their lives in his hands. He had to grin and bear it, all the same. "Listen up!" He bellowed, making himself heard over the din of the panic. His idea was crazy, but there was a small possibility that it could be crazy enough to be unexpected to the pirates. "Cannons out, men! Once we get close, we can knock all their weapons out, and they'll be defenceless!"

"Are you sure it's going to work, Captain?" A voice yelled towards him, rising over the chaos. It was his first mate, who looked rather dubious about the whole idea. The first mate was old but wise, as the saying went, 'with age comes wisdom'. However, his ideas were a bit more on the traditional side, like speeding up the ship, and only shooting if necessary.

The captain shrugged. “You’ll just have to trust me!”

The first mate nodded. “You heard the captain! Prepare the cannons!” The captain was thankful for the first mate— not just for trusting him, but also being there for him when he was just a young boy wary of the world out there. Everybody instantly got to work, heaving and shouting, untying knots here and tying more there. The pirates were getting closer and closer, almost close enough to touch.

“NOW!”

At the captain’s command, cannonballs shot out of their side of the ship, blasting into the pirate’s. The force of the hit sent the pirate ship careening, sections of their ship set ablaze. The pirates scrambled around the deck, trying to put out the multiple fires and keep their ship afloat. The captain cheered to himself. His plan had worked!

“Alright, men, full speed ahead!” The captain roared.

“Aye, Captain!” Mere seconds later, their massive sails were up, billowing in the sudden strong wind. The men began to paddle, oars pushing through the water. The ship glided through the water, easily evading the pirates. The crew cheered as they sailed away from the criminal ship. However, the captain had bad news— he had given away his compass to one of the tribal leaders of Africa, who had been so amazed by the device that he had offered them the *qilin* creature in return for the gift. The captain had never seen the area they were in; to sail back into the fog and familiar waters would be suicide. They were lost. Quickly, the captain prayed to Mazu, goddess of the sea. Time and time again, she had protected the fleets, surely she would be with him and his crew too?

“Captain, what’s happening?” A frightened voice cried.

The captain yelped as the water below them started to bubble and boil, frothing and coughing up mist. He squinted at the strange sight. Was a deep sea monster here to gobble them up for tea? Something pearly white exploded out of the mists, and the captain let out a shout as liquid splashed onto his face.

“Be at peace, men.”

The captain blinked in shock, then blinked again. Similarly, the men on his ship stood staring at the sight.

There was a dragon in front of them, rising out of the water. The captain took a double take. A dragon? He stepped and looked again, and almost fell over. The creature before him was no dragon— it may have had the head of one, but it had the body and rear of a horse. It was truly magnificent, covered with glistening white scales that shone in the midday sun, almost blinding the captain and his crew. Its pearly black eyes gleamed with wisdom and intelligence, with a hint of curiosity, as if it were trying to read his mind. Its scaly tail swished from side to side impatiently as it pawed at the water with large hooves. The captain gasped. Before him stood no ordinary dragon horse— it was the famous immortal *bailongma*, that only appeared in the company of gods and goddesses such as Nuwa, who saved the world from destruction. The captain only had one question. What would the immortal creature want to do with him?

Perhaps the answer lay in the creature’s companion. If the captain thought the *bailongma* standing in front of him was the most magnificent, beautiful thing he had ever seen, he was wrong. A woman stood beside the dragon horse, a woman who looked both young and old at the same time. She was huge, almost twice the size of the ship, and the captain had to tilt his head up to look at her. Water swirled around her legs, mist drifting around her long sea blue robes. She wore a necklace of beads that looped around her pale neck like a snake, glowing faintly blue. They glowed faintly, like a lamplight in the night. Her glossy black hair was streaked with grey, tied back in a neat bun behind a crown and veil.

The captain knew who she was— how could he not? She was Mazu, goddess of the seas, protector of seafarers, after all. He remembered the stories the first mate had told him as a child— “Mazu is the goddess

of the sea, she will protect you no matter what.” He remembered doubting the old man, wondering how a mere fisherman’s tale could help him with his fears. “When you are scared, remember her bravery.”

According to legend, the goddess had began life in the Song Dynasty as a civilian, a young woman named Lin Moniang. She had the ability to predict storms, and she often used that power for good. One day, her father and brother were out at sea, when a storm struck. Knowing that they were in danger, Moniang set out during the storm to rescue her family members, but had been killed in the process. According to myth, she had risen to heaven and become a goddess, because of her courageous deed. To make up for how she’d been unable to protect her father and brother, she became the protector of all seafarers, ensuring that they made it home safely.

The captain bowed at the woman’s feet, his crew following suit. “Lady Mazu,” he mumbled hopefully, “have you come to our aid?” He heard the crew whispering amongst themselves, in awe in the presence of the goddess before them. The dragon horse snorted at them, and the captain jumped. It wasn’t every day that one was faced with a *longma* with a bad temper.

“Be at peace, my children. I will lead you home.” The goddess’s voice was warm, soothing. It sounded like help, like rescue, like *home*.

The captain lifted his head off the floor. “You can?”

Mazu laughed, a glorious sound. “Of course! What do you think *bailongma* is here for?” The dragon horse let out a loud cry that was more roar than whinny. “He has the strength to pull your ship back to Fujian.” The creature gnashed its pearly white teeth, and the captain quaked in his boots.

The captain nodded, bowing again. “My men and I thank you for your help, Lady Mazu.”

She smiled, a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. “There is no need to thank me, young sailor. I do this for the father and the brother I lost.” She disappeared in a swirl of mist, leaving nothing but the smell of sea salt. To the amazement of the men, the fog in the distance had cleared, the light rain stopping completely. The sun shone down on them once more.

Bailongma knickered, a harsh and loud sound. The creature sounded annoyed, as if it were used to shuttling lost sailors back home from the sea.

The captain laughed. “Thank you, *bailongma*.” The dragon horse lifted its head and roared to the heavens, so loudly the ship trembled on the sea. The creature dived into the water, and the sailors began their long journey home.

A young boy trotted after his father, a look of childish annoyance on his face. “Papa, why must we pray to Mazu every time we leave?” He asked. His father was a sailor, a man who loved the sea. The boy, on the other hand, preferred the land.

His father stepped into the temple, placing a small statuette of a white horse in front of the statue of the goddess, who stared down at them with a small smile on her face. “She is the goddess of the sea, protector of seafarers such as ourselves. When we are lost, she will bring us home.”

The boy looked at his father suspiciously. “How can you be sure?”

His father laughed. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Searching for the Unknown

St Margaret's Co-Educational English Primary & Secondary School, Ho, Sam – 15

When the palace officials came to our little village in the middle of nowhere, I initially gave it no thought. Officials come and go like the wind; taxes are collected, and wrongdoers are hauled away. It's the way it is and the way it has been for as long as I care to remember.

“Come now and sign up! This will be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to serve your emperor and country!”

Many were skeptical. “I'm not interested, sorry. I refuse to risk my neck on the battlefield for a pittance of a wage. I refuse to be an expendable pawn for the honour and glory of some general who's in over his own head. Why should I go fight another man's war?”

“Rest assured, we are not conscripting recruits for the war. We promise to pay you very high wages, 70 pieces a month.”

70 whole gold pieces? That's more than what my family's farm makes in one year! I don't care what I'll be doing, as long my life is not at risk. I immediately went up to the officials to sign up. Upon receiving me, they announced, “Brilliant, we have another loyal subject for the glory of the emperor. Those who are still interested, you can still sign up now!”

“Actually, what kind of job are we signing up for, if it's not for a war? We don't want to be signing up to be a slave, especially without knowing about it, do we?” A voice piped up from somewhere in the crowd. A few snickered. With a glare from the officials, they quieted down.

“This will be an expedition to other places beyond our country. That means you will be serving as a crewman on a ship.”

What! I had expected this to be a short leave, maybe for a few months and that's it. It could have been a simple construction project for the emperor's palace. However a boat trip! A huge voyage? There's no hope for me to be back within any conceivably short amount of time. I just wanted an opportunity to support my family, is that so much to ask for?

I was about to open my mouth, to ask if it was too late to pull away. But before I could make a noise, the official looked up towards the sky. “Heavens above! The Sun is about to set, so we must be on our way soon to the base camp!” They shoved me away, seemingly forgetting my loyalty. I ran back home amidst the clamouring crowd, heading for my home and my family who were expecting my safe return.

I quickly packed what few pieces of clothing I had. As I was about to step through the doorway, my family was there waiting for me. They gave me their blessings and spoke of their wishes for my safe return, their wishes for me to come back in one piece. I wanted to tell them that I didn't even want to join a voyage such as this. Yet my pride was forcing me to go— I could not bear to tell them the truth. I could just smile and give each of them a hug. I walked with the fading dusk behind my back, towards that horse and cart that would surely be my doom.

The ride in the cart was quite uneventful, aside the occasional bump. Sitting alongside me were unfamiliar faces, surely all recruits from the other villages. We gave each other an understanding nod, before returning to our solitude, pondering exactly what we had signed up for.

We rode until the cart came to a sudden stop, and we jolted forward. The smell of salt was in the air. We threw back the tattered flap of cloth covering the cart. In the distance, we saw flames, like will-o'-wisp floating mysteriously in the air. As we drew closer, we saw the flames were lighting up something huge and wooden. There were flames moving, floating in the air, casting an eerie light on the scene. The official told us to disembark and we hauled ourselves out of the cart.

There was another official waiting for us. He marshalled us towards what appeared to be a gangplank, leading up to seemingly nowhere. We looked up in awe.

It was a massive titan of a ship. There were workers grunting, pushing barrels up the ship. Another threw bundles of wood on board. Yet more workers stood in a line, passing up metallic balls, the size of my head, one by one. It reminded me of the villagers back at my home when a fire broke out, passing buckets filled with water to quell the flames.

I sighed at my thoughts. What was I doing, thinking back to my village? My new home for now, at least for the next few years, would be this floating fortress of a vessel.

I was quickly registered before being herded on board with my new comrades. I was assigned to move the cargo into the holds that filled the hull of the ship. All the constant physical exertion quickly tired me out. I was shown the crew bed quarters afterwards when the job was finished, and I passed out soon on my bed.

I was awoken the next morning by the smell of burning joss sticks. I climbed above deck to see an important-looking man clad in armor. He was holding lit joss sticks in his hands, bowing to an ornate statue of a goddess. A sailor walked up to me, "What's with that expression on your face? Don't you recognize who that is?" I replied nonchalantly, "Yeah, Mazu, the goddess of sailors. What about it?" He replied with a raucous laughter. "Are you kidding me? You don't know the man? Are you from some backwater village?" I ignored his last comment, and simply shook my head. He pointed to the man, "That's Admiral Zheng He. He is one of the nation's most decorated admirals, and he has been on a number of voyages to foreign countries. If you don't know his name, it's best for you to keep your head down to avoid trouble." With that, he waved his hand and walked away.

Believe me, I would most definitely keep my head down. I'll try to ride this through, and go back home a few hundred pieces richer. I'll just return to my fields, my farming, my life, and live out the rest of my days a wealthy man.

The deck shook beneath my feet, as the Admiral yelled for the anchor to be pulled away. People on the small harbour that the ship was docked to just a moment ago waved us goodbye. Well, goodbye to you, my home. My land.

The next few months were nothing special. Gossip had it that this was a treasure voyage to otherworldly locations. Beneath our deck, apparently, were treasures from the royal palace. But, more importantly, there were handwritten letters by the emperor addressed to foreign kings as well. What could our emperor ever want with these distant lords?

Personally, I couldn't care less. That kind of diplomacy is only suited for the court. We peasants are only suitable for grunt work. If I have to, I'll just move the treasure. Whether I move sheaves of wheat or chests of treasure, it's all the same. The only difference is that this cargo is probably worth more than everything in my village combined.

Each day was pretty much identical. I was woken up in the early morning to help manage the amount of rations that would be given to each crewmember every day. After meals, I was trained in some basic combat skills. I was told there are pirates that prowl the area, so we had to learn how to engage in ship-to-ship combat. The metallic spheres I saw from earlier were apparently "cannonballs" to be put in metallic tube, named "cannons". We would put gunpowder in the barrel, and the cannonballs would fly out to destroy our enemies. I hoped it wouldn't come to this, what does a peasant like me have with such contraptions and such magic.

I did become acquainted with my fellow crewmembers. We would all be assigned below decks to row the mighty boat if weather conditions were not favourable. So we have plenty of time to chat and become familiar with each other.

Aside from discussing about what happened that day on the ship, or complain about the harsh higher-ups, the thing they would talk about the most was about their villages.

They would talk about their daily life in the fields, their family, or their agricultural lives. As the ship sailed away from the safe port we knew and loved, the waves only served as a painful reminder for me of how I'm sailing away from home, into a dark sea filled with unknowns.

Day after day, it was the same. Zheng He, that great admiral, would pop up his head now and then, to make some announcement before retiring to his cabin. Yet one day, underneath a spotless azure sky and burning orange orb, everything changed.

"Men, we've reached land. About 2 hours from now, we will arrive on the island of Ceylon. Please, prepare yourselves, and be ready to move our cargo offshore.

I don't know if I was happier about a break from the monotony or just to touch dry land again. I can't say I walked with a bounce in my step, but I did feel somewhat relieved.

The next two hours came and went in a blur. All I can definitely remember was moving the ornate Mazu statue on to the deck. Weaving in and out of people rushing about, each with their own load to be offloaded onshore. Frankly speaking, it was a mess. Each crew member flittered about. Heavy cargo slammed into each other, and their couriers would exchange curses as they strained under the loads.

The ship slowly decelerated to a halt. The anchor was successfully dropped to the seabed. Some burly-looking sailors threw thick coils of rope onshore. Planks were lowered, eventually crashing with a thud. We had officially reached dry land.

We crewmen slowly slid the cargo we had onshore. Piles upon piles of treasure slowly stacked up on the pier that seemed woefully underprepared for the sheer mountain of gold and jewellery.

An interpreter, who could speak the local language, disembarked with us. He exchanged a few words of what seemed like gibberish to my ears. The local villager pointed off to somewhere inland. The interpreter nodded, and came up to Zheng He. "Sir," he bowed, "The locals have informed us the palace of the Ceylon King is in this direction."

We moved towards the royal residence through the city centre, almost like a makeshift parade. The villagers moved aside to make space for us. They stared at us with wide eyes, wondering what this mass of foreigners were doing in their homes.

Soon enough, the envoy arrived at a white granite building which dwarfed the surrounding houses. It loomed above the rows upon rows of small wooden huts, like a bird of prey perched high above, surveying its territory.

The palace stood in the middle, a white lion presiding over its court. Equally as majestic were the red wooden doors opening up into the courtyard. A guardsman standing next to the entrance signalled for us to enter. Zheng He gave him a smile, and walked through the door. The parade moved slowly through the door after him.

Inside the courtyard were exotic-looking plants. Trees shaped like umbrellas had furry round brown fruits hanging from them. Flowers bloomed in rows which were surrounded by trees. These plants were in shades I did not know were real. Spotted cats, which looked like lions without manes, prowled the garden. One of the felines walked up to an entourage member and bared its fangs. He instinctively jumped away.

The doors to the palace opened up. The interior of the palace was filled with a sweet scent that was the epitome of exoticness. Spices unknown to me burned in the air, releasing a visible trail of smoke the air. The smell of burning incense wafted from the windows, filling our nostrils. The interior gleamed, with gold leaves covering the coving and pillars. Statues lined the walkway leading up to the throne.

Zheng He gestured for us to stay put. He walked up to the king and bowed.

“Esteemed emperor, we are delegates from the Ming emperor. We bring to you wishes for great prosperity and wealth for your nation. We here have a letter addressed to you by the Ming emperor.”

An official ran up to Zheng He, bearing the said letter. The interpreter gave him the letter before whispering a few words in his ear.

“We accept your invitation,” announced the emperor. Zheng He had a hint of a smile under his professional façade.

Zheng He clapped his hands, and we pushed loads of treasure into his palace, including of course the marble Mazu statue.

“This here is a statue of Mazu, who grants a safe journey on the seas. We hope all sailors, your nation’s and mine, will experience peace so our nation can prosper together.”

The rest of our time in Ceylon showed us wonders of the type I never knew possible. Zheng He didn’t seem fazed by these marvels of colour, scent, and luxury. He moved effortlessly from dignitary to meeting to palace, a slight smile painted on his face. Upon seeing a shrine of the most ornate design, one of Zheng He’s most trusted advisors turned to the Admiral and asked, “What can possibly beat this beauty and splendor. What are your plans sir? Is our voyage complete

Zheng He smiled wryly, “We will be continuing our voyage westwards on to another continent. It is named Africa in our books and holds wonders and beasts that dwarf even those of Ceylon.”

Sigh. How long will it be before I can return home?

Adventure to Southeast Asia

St. Joseph's College, Au, Yi Lok Elliott – 16

Seeing the sunset on the ship in the middle of the sea, the seawater reflects the sunshine, changing from dark blue to golden yellow. The view is magnificent and I have a different feeling when I am watching it. It is totally different from the sunset I have seen on land.

I am Shing Chan, a sailor of the Chenggong ship, the largest ship in the Treasure Fleet, led by Captain Zheng He. I have been living in a small village in the Fujian Province. My home is near the sea. My brothers and I always went to the seashore to play when we were young. We love sea very much, and want to know the end of the sea. However, due to the order of the Emperor, we cannot sail in order to prevent traitor from bringing pirates to mug the city. Until the Ming government allows our Captain Zheng He to organise a fleet to explore the world outside our familiar homeland, I have got a chance to become one of the sailors of the Treasure Fleet.

I don't know how long the journey will be, but I am so euphoric as I can travel to other countries and I am sure that I can come up with different interesting stuff and people. However, before exploring the world, it is a hard time to be a sailor on board. It is the first time for me to leave the land and live in the sea for so long. I have vomited for several times since I have boarded the ship. There is no fresh food to eat. We have to wait until we have arrived our first destination and trade with the local merchants there. A lot of my colleagues passed away due to a lack of nutrition. Every day, we have to wake up early in the morning before sunrise and start to work. We adjust the flag to ensure the ship can move forward with the help of the wind. We have to measure how far we have travelled. We have to sail with the help of the existing map in the correct direction. We have to draw a new map with the location of new places we have found. I am so exhausted after working from til to night on the ship. In the first week on board, I find that being a crew of the ship is fun and is a honour, exploring the unknown world with courage and determination. But soon, we cannot see any islands in the sea, and we haven't seen anything in the sea but only some marine animals and birds on the sky. Every day is the same day to me, doing the same work at the same time. I start to find that my job is quite monotonous and I regret. I start to miss home. I miss my parents and my brothers. However, it is too late for me to give up and it is impossible to leave the ship in the sea right now. I only hope we can arrive our destination as soon as possible.

By the end of the night, we have come up with a big disaster. A typhoon is coming straight to our fleet. The sea is not calm as before. The water changes into a dragon and keeps attacking our fleet, to destroy us and eat us into the deepest of the sea. Rain and wind is all hitting our ships. Everyone, include Captain, was in a panic. But soon Captain Zheng has calmed down and gives order to us in order to get out from this dilemma. We are trying to lower the lost as possible. Most of the crew vomit as they feel headache in this roaring sea. Some are not managed to get their balance when they are working and fall into the sea. Luckily, Captain sends me to check whether there is water getting inside the ship so I stay inside the ship in most of the time.

In the next morning, the sea is calm again. However, one ship was sunk in last night. There are only six remaining ships. Everyone on the ship was sad as we have lost a lot of our crew members. After 3 days later, we have arrived our destination, the Indonesia. It is a sunny day. I have not seen any land for a couple of months. It is better to stay on land than in the sea. After we have got off the ship, the first thing we do is to meet the King of this country. I follow Captain Zheng and his guards to an enormous, magnificent palace. "Wow, this place is so big." I say. "Haha, the area of this palace is only one-tenth compared to the forbidden city in Beijing." Captain answers. Soon, with the guide of the servants, we have met the King. With the help of translator, Captain can talk with the King without barrier. Captain has given the King some gold, in exchange, we have got stuff which can be only found in Indonesia. Later, we have traded with local merchants for food and clean water for the remaining journey. After staying on land for a week, we have to sail towards the next destination again .

After a few hours, we have found out another fleet following us, about four ships. I use the microscope to observe the fleet. The fleet is hanging with a black flag with skull on it. It's the pirates! I inform Captain

Zheng immediately and Captain orders everyone to prepare for battle. The crew are moving the cannon and carry black powder on the desk. We get our swords, bring our shields. It is impossible for us to escape from pirates as their ships are small and are sailing at a fast speed. To get closer to us is only a matter of time. The pirates are getting near to us. Everyone is waiting for the order of Captain. Captain Zheng keeps telling us to wait and keep calm. When the pirate fleet is next to us, “ Fire!”, Captain ordered. We lit the cannon to shoot shells out. Our equipment is far more advance than the pirates’, and we have more number of ships than them. They cannot our opponents. Most of the pirate ships have been destroyed. However, some pirates survive in the shell attack and are managed to jump into our ships and have a fight with our crew. Within ten minutes, all the pirates on our ships are killed and we have caught the pirate leader.

We continue our journey and keep exploring the world.

Where the Desert Meets the Sea

St. Joseph's College, Wong, Sean – 16

*“The moon illuminates the seas,
To reveal your future;
The dark clouds shall leave.
No evil will come.”*

The Oracle of Mat–Su, Fortune 16 of 60.

The monsoon descended.

Silver bolts hurtled downwards from the blackened sky to strike the sea. Electrified waves roared in fury, gales whipping claw-like peaks that reached skywards.

Between the sky and sea lay a majestic vessel, a junk far from home. However grand it must have seemed to the mortals inhabiting it, it was puny before nature – as the forces of the sea crushed the ship, hundreds tried to claw their way to safety, but most soon sank beneath the waves, their souls consumed by the emotionless void.

The mortals dragged to the depths with them their failed Goddess. Centuries after her last worshippers were consumed by time, the Goddess lay dormant and still.

2018, Kenya

“Ngendo! Ngendo!”

Grandma was calling. Ngendo pretended not to hear. She didn’t quite remember why she was running away: was it some quarrel? Was it some sort of playful breakout? It didn’t matter. Ngendo’s bare soles danced across the soft, warm sand of the beach to leave imprints the shape of palm leaves. She felt the grains of sand between her toes and the oceanic breeze’s saline scent against her face. All across the beach, the turquoise sea dissolved against the golden sand with clockwork regularity.

“Ngendo!”

The voice was growing closer. The girl sped up and sprinted ever quicker, adrenaline coursing through her body. Her neatly braided dreadlocks, which were tangled up in an immodest mess of knots, kept falling over her eyes, but Ngendo did not mind, nor did she care; she only wanted to burrow her way into the small, isolated cove at the end of the beach and disappear from sight.

The cove was her private corner. When Mother was still around, she regaled her with stories about the past, all with one recurring motif: how adventurers came to Kenya in search of liberty. These adventurers brought with them stories and traditions—one of them being the tale of Aladdin, a Chinese prince who found a cave of treasures in Arabia. Ngendo didn’t have a cave, but she did have a cove. Therein lay her treasures: shards of emerald green coke bottles, bracelets without jewels, yolkish seashells. Each of the treasures had washed up on the cove’s wet sand to meet their new owner.

Something new had arrived in the cove. Moving closer, Ngendo saw a chunk of grey, dull rock covered in a sad mess of seaweed and salt. Ngendo submerged the rock in seawater to rub off the grime and dirt, revealing a distinct humanoid outline. More scrubbing unveiled a pair of cherry lips. As Ngendo caressed the lips, a soft glow emanated from the statuette. A gust of wind thundered through the cove, and a fork of white flame crashed into the sea. Ngendo’s reflexes kicked in—she raised her hands to protect her face, her skin turned chalky white and her nails dug into her palms, turning a wounded blood red.

A soft ray of warm light shone upon the cowering child. Soft hands touched Ngendo’s thin arms to calm the blood racing through her veins. In the chaos of the moment, Ngendo hadn’t realized that she was crying, but that didn’t matter – drops of tears were delicately brushed off her eyes like raindrops sliding off umbrellas. Ngendo opened her eyes and focused on the face before her. Anxiously, she coughed out three timid words, “Wh...who are you?”

“Fear not my child,” said the tall figure standing before Ngendo. A motherly smile, a flowing jade-hued robe and a torch in her hand. “Child, I am the silent one, I am the Heavenly mother, I am Mat–Su. I have been summoned to the mortal world.”

“Who?”

A few awkward seconds passed. The figure bit her lip and frowned. "Mat-Su." she motioned towards the sea, "Protector of sailors, fishermen, and merchants across the world's oceans. The guardian of your people – the subject of your childhood stories."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

Mat-Su was in disbelief, though why that was Ngendo could not tell. Her frown faded like a receding tide, replaced by a tsunami of emotions. Doubt, anger, fear and finally dread.

Mat-Su contemplated her words. "Where's the fleet?", she demanded, a stern demeanor clouding her visage. She stared the child dead in the eye. "What year is this? What do you call this barbarian realm of yours?" Thunder rumbled in the distance, the clouds circling the cove like crows and the tumultuous waves braying eagerly, like warriors sharpening their axes in anticipation of conflict.

"I...I swear I don't know!" Ngendo cried, dried tears bursting out like a flood from a dam as Mat-Su grew ever more livid. Suddenly, Mat-su's vision began to fade...

1430, the Swahili Coast

The monsoon descended.

The crew of the treasure junk Qinghe had journeyed long and far. For decades, the crew had been part of Admiral Zheng He's armada, hopping port to port from China to Arabia, where kings and sultans would gift them with a multitude of treasures and murals for the Celestial Emperor's purview which were all stored within the Qinghe's vaults. However, the further west they sailed, the more alien the localities got and the less their maps could help them. Eventually, the Qinghe lost sight of Admiral Zheng's fleet and drifted away in one of the Indian Ocean's nasty fits.

The tributes to the Emperor still glowed like earthborn stars, but the ship's crew had grown dull and gray. The hairpins that tied together the sailor's buns grew loose as another strand of hair fell off. So much time had passed that home was now a distant memory. When another friend passed, the surviving crew grew acutely aware of their own mortality. Now the myriad forces of nature had finally gathered for a knock-out blow.

The Qinghe's interior had been a prideful show of China's wealth. Now, the junk's lavishness mocked her crew, who had been so obnoxious as to think they could traverse the seas with impertinence. A gale tore through the sails as if they were paper, the ripping of cloth painfully audible. Brackish, pungent seawater poured in, straining the floorboards, which creaked with pain. The might of the sea proved to be too much a match for the ornate colossus as the Qinghe began to fall apart.

The captain of this ancient vessel was just as aged as his ship. His eyes sank into his sockets, the skin upon his fingers hung loose like a candy wrapper while arthritis plagued his joints. But the captain had a will of iron. Unsheathing his sword, he lodged his blade in the planks and knelt in reverence to a statuette—a stone-crafted lady with a flowing gown of a jade and a flame that danced upon her palm.

"Save us, Mat-Su," croaked the captain. He pressed his head to the floor in a pious kow-tow, "save us from heaven's wra—"

The Qinghe let out a great moan. The wind sliced away at the decks and plucked sailors into the grey sky as if ragdolls. Even as the junk was disassembled plank by plank, the captain quietly whispered to the Heavenly Mother.

Another wave came, knocking down the statuette. With haunting clarity, the captain realized the Goddess had abandoned him. He spared a thought for his wife and his children, whom he had abandoned for an exciting life at sea. He spared a thought for his crew and his ship – the nation's pride. He spared a thought for home. Then he left the final seconds of his life for Mat-Su, cursing her: the uncaring, incompetent Goddess Mat-Su, indifferent to his plight and predicament.

With that, the Qinghe gave a final roar of defiance as it dived into the roaring currents, the hull finally cracking under the force of the impact. The broken body of the vessel sank beneath the waves, and with it, the failed Goddess plunged into the seabed, the centerpiece of the graveyard housing her devout followers.

Mat-Su snapped out of her trance. She stumbled to the edge of the cove, steadying herself with a hand to the wall. Her chest hurt, and her hair was drenched in seawater. A putrid scent emanated from her body. Her throat valiantly held back the surge of warm fluids from her abdomen, which left her mouth anyway in the form of slimy green bile. A coughing fit later, she reoriented herself and staggered forwards.

Surprisingly enough, the young girl – "Ngendo"? – was still too petrified to move a muscle. Perhaps she should force some information from the girl? *No*, she reminded herself: *I am a benevolent Goddess.*

Another cough wracked Mat-Su exhausted body. “My apologies for the outburst, child.” It took some convincing to show that Mat-Su wasn’t a threat, and quite a bit more to get Ngendo talking. The girl didn’t know of any “Ming Empire” or her grand “Treasure Junks”, but that could be chalked down to her ignorance. Mat-Su was far away from home in the realm of Kenya, a distant land that the treasure junk Admiral Zheng He had ordered to be surveyed and charted. The Admiral had said that it was a tribal land populated by savages, but the truth was rather different: the natives dwelt in small mud huts, tending to their fields much like the Chinese peasantry. The only thing that alerted her to her displacement from home was the dark-skinned, large-eyed features of the natives.

“Do I scare you?” Mat-Su asked.

Ngendo nodded hesitantly. Wordlessly, Mat-Su smiled warmly and caressed the young girl’s hair. A sense of fumbling awkwardness pervaded between the two, but Ngendo composed herself and looked up at the kind stranger.

“Tell me,” continued Mat-Su, “have you ever seen people like me? Foreigners, Chinese?”

“Some. They look like you but dress differently. I saw them gathered around a huge ship, as if... fixing it. When Mother was still alive, we sold them fruits. They called the ship a 'treasure junk'...”

Mat-Su’s eyes lit up at once. “Ngendo, I need to meet these people—they are my countrymen and they need me. They prayed for me to save them in their darkest hour.”

Cajoling and urging paid dividends for Mat-Su. “They’re to the North, a two hours’ trek from here. We follow the vultures along the seashore. The ship is where the desert meets the sea.”

The duo made their way across the Kenyan coast. When the vultures circled above, they followed. When the vultures left, they stumbled forward through simple intuition. After an endless march, they finally arrived where desert met the sea, where the sun’s harsh rays bounced off the glittering sand for miles. The desolate coastline had but one feature: a treasure junk lodged in the Kenyan shore.

Surrounding the ship was a crowd of archaeologists and guards, who circled the vessel like bees to honey. Mat-Su gasped – *home*. She saw the majestic sails of the Qinghe. The faded carvings. The pagoda-like captain’s quarters. Home, where her pious countrymen lay waiting for her, industrious sailors tending to their treasures. The stroll downhill became a jog, and the jog became a sprint. Ngendo struggled to catch up as Mat-Su jumped from rock to rock until she landed before the junk. Her eyes became increasingly blurred by emotions with each step she took.

A pair of baton-wielding blue berets stepped in to stop the intrusion as a crowd of dirt-stained workers began to gather around her. The pious had come to worship, Mat-Su figured. Ngendo was right – they were dressed oddly. She didn’t expect dockworkers to be clad with any sophistication, but the sartorial gaucherie on display was alien and visually irritating. As Ngendo reached Mat-Su’s side, the Goddess noticed that the guards had abandoned ornate armor for simple pieces of cloth, and that there was neither a robe nor a sword in sight.

“This is an archeological site under the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China. What are you doing here?” Mat-Su turned to see a red-faced worker in rugged overalls. Did this mortal not recognize his Goddess? His protector from the storms? She who brought them to this far-off land?

“My countrymen – do you not recognize me?” she cried, “I am the silent one, I am the Heavenly mother, I am Mat-su, patron of sailors. You have summoned me to the mortal realm, and I shall hear your prayers!”

The dumbfounded crowd fell silent. Panic dawned on the Goddess. *These are not my followers! They are slave traders! My followers must be in the junk!* Enraged, Mat-Su’s motherly appearance was no more. The sky darkened; she roared as she let loose winds and storms to strike the blasphemers. Bright streaks of lightning struck the ground, flinging workers and guards around the beach like ragdolls. Mat-Su hoisted Ngendo, paralysed with fear, into her arms and raced towards the junk’s interior to rescue her people.

The junk was eerily quiet. In bygone days, there would’ve been incessant, raucous chattering. Now, the only lights were specks of sunlight that peered in through holes in the wooden deck.

Ngendo, recovering from the shock, broke the silence. “The... cabin looks... empty...”

That much was clear to Mat-su.

A grand vault lay just below the deck. In the heyday of the treasure voyages, Mat-Su would see hundreds of coolies in the cramped spaces, gardeners tending to flora and fauna, artisans cleaning sculptures with great care. She would have breathed in a thousand mixing spices from the ports of India and Arabia, heard a hundred dialects and tongues from across the great seas and seen books of history and science.

Mat-Su summoned a flame to dance upon her palm and illuminate the room. Ngendo heard a sharp intake of breath from Mat-Su. This was no treasure junk—it was a graveyard. Skeletons of animals and men lay scattered across the confines of the junk, their flesh long since rotten away, consumed by the corroding strengths of nature. Death clung to these walls. These sailors who venerated Mat-su, who once prayed to her daily for their safety, were now bones, collateral of the much more archaeologically-valued ship. Mat-Su felt Ngendo tug her robe. The girl had buried her head in Mat-Su's robes to avoid looking at the centuries-old corpses. Mat-Su covered the young girl's eyes as they made their way through the junk. Mat-Su picked up a bone: a sailor's finger, dry and coarse. Grains of granite-like powder flaked off upon contact, until the bone disintegrated into a pile of simple dust, slipping through her fingers like sand through an hourglass.

It made sense now. Her worshippers were no more, as they had been for centuries. The Ming Empire was no more—it had perished as all empires do. The Ming treasure voyages were ages past. Left behind, the lonely Goddess no longer had anyone to protect.

Mat-Su fell to her knees. Her already shaky willpower finally went out for good. She let the flame in her palm fall to the wooden surface. It came into contact and combusted the powder-like remains of the skeletal finger, imbuing it with life. The finger began to reassemble.

"What—" Ngendo, who noticed the flame first, was wholly unprepared for this morbid spectacle. Mat-Su turned to look. She summoned her powers, to use all her arcane knowledge –

Time stopped and began to reverse.

The treasure junk's broken floorboards were restored to fine oaken planks. Torches lined the walls again, illuminating delicate ornaments, their amber hue passing through stained glass to create a rainbow of hues throughout the junk.

"This was how the Qinghe looked like when Admiral Zheng first gave her to me."

Mat-Su turned to see an aged man stroking his snow-white beard. He was clad in silken robes and a mandarin's cap, while a bejeweled sword hung to his waist. Clenching that sword was a skeletal hand.

"Are you..." the goddess began.

"'Were you' would certainly be more accurate. But yes. I was."

Mat-Su hung her head. She let out a shaky sigh – the tears were returning. "I failed you, captain, and the entire crew of the Qinghe. The faith you had in me to bring you home was misplaced..."

"Be that as it may –", the captain placed his skeletal hand upon Mat-Su's shoulder, "–I've long since made my way home myself: heaven, to meet my ancestors. Admiral Zheng asked me to greet you when you make your way back someday. I don't blame you anymore, Mat-Su – it was but a small mistake. The Admiral invites you to join the rest of the fleet in the other world. The crew, their families, the Emperor himself – they're all there on the other side." The captain, smiling, motioned to a small statuette, "and you can be too."

The statuette was elegantly constructed. It was a young lady in flowing robes, her lips illuminated by red coral, her robes a soothing jade, her fair hair braided with a string of black pearls. Mat-Su drew close to touch the statuette. She knew what this was – forgiveness.

"No", Mat-Su whispered.

"What?"

"No. I don't want forgiveness. I want redemption. I have failed in my duty to bring my people home. I will join you only when I've done my part."

"I – we understand," The captain withdrew his skeletal hand. "I'll see you in due course."

The torches faded, and with them the splendor and the captain, his skeletal hand crumbling into grains of fine, ground bone.

"Mat-Su, I want to go home."

Mat-Su turned to find Ngendo by her side. She knelt down to embrace the child. With a snap of her fingers, Mat-Su's flowing hair was knit into dreadlocks, her jade robe became a dazzling Kenyan dress and a beaded necklace wrapped around her neck. *She looks like Mother*, Ngendo mused.

"I'll get you home. I promise. I'll get you all home."

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

St. Joseph's College, Yip, Hei – 13

"I lift my drink and sing a song, for who knows if life is short or long? Man's life is but the morning dew, past days many, future ones few."

It was 1422 when I was 18 years old. I studied under the Gong'an School of letters where I majored in music theory and poetry. "Books are full of a dull text, only when you hear the melody, your heart resonates." I thought.

In my study period, I met a Japanese student named Saito Asuka, who travelled from a far country to search for the same vision. He said, "There must be emotional power between people, and music is the medium for conveying good things." We studied music together, wrote lyrics and created music. As there's no banquet without an end, we spent eight years in college until Asuka returned to Japan.

At the beginning, we wrote letter to each another. But gradually, the amount reduced. In his last letter in early 1430, he wrote: "I have been recruited into the army and have been training all day. All we once knew is beaten by a broken dream. This is not the world I had in mind!" The same fate was added to me one year later.

Japan conquerors had always had the dream of conquering China. As the fierce Japanese army first encountered the Ming's forces, they defeated 5,000 Chinese soldiers. Soon, with Ming's greater military participation of 45,000, our army succeeded in driving the Japanese to the south.

Soon, a treaty would be signed, and I was included in the Zhenghe's treasure fleet as a poet and musician. With a broken smile and tired eyes, I could almost go through my friend's same longing heart as before.

On the afternoon of September 12th, 1432, the treaty was all set to go. Zhenghe and his fellow government officials, whom I had never had the privilege to meet, had left the fleet and set feet on the designated island with cargos of gold and silk to give away as gifts. Some people seemed to get all sunshine, and some all shadow. For me, I was preparing to hit the sack when a distant explosion appeared out of nowhere.

Soon, outbursts came nearer and nearer, and those staying on board were left in a state of shock. One by one, sound waves rocked the vulnerable cabin. Shortly, a platoon leader rushed back to the ship and announced, "The ...the treaty... treaty has been broken by the Japanese. We are now in war status on the frontline. All remaining battalions prepare yourselves and fight for our country!"

Just when I was losing my bearings, the leader turned his face to me and said, "Make yourself useful on the field. Music and poems are not going to save your puny life right now!"

Belt buckled, breastplate installed, helmet put on, I sped to the war zone with my companions, a suicide squad.

Once arrived, I jumped into the pit. Above my head, the bullets from matchlock firearms were smashing into pieces of dirt. Huge stones collapsed, and the dead corpses were flying in air. Ahead, gunpowder from the enemy was roaring; Behind, explosions from the Allies made up the hustle and bustle.

I had already scared out of my wits. My blood ran cold, my feet were sore. My mouth was dry and bitter as well, which was a mixture of sweat and blood on the face. The air was full of gunpowder and rancid smell. "Where am I? Why am I here?"

"Japanese dogs go to hell!" A Ming soldier threw away his matchlock, climbed up the pit, and ignited a Huolongjing cannon. "Bang!" My ears were ringing, head spinning. In a blink, the bronze metal parts of a cannon bursted open, disintegrating the soldier. A Japanese soldier had fired a rocket into the cannon just before the cannon could shoot its own. The single Japanese rocket artillery trooper killed fifty soldiers that day.

The bloody sunset had faded. On the vast expanse of muddy zone, both sides stared at each other like tigers, and neither would retreat from the battlefield first. In the pit, there were bodies and letters of wives and children. I had no retreat, no reinforcements, only the moon hung up lonely in the rainy night.

I couldn't move, or I would be blasted into pieces by the Japanese rocket trooper at any time. Drops of red liquid flowed down my face. Everything around seemed to have swallowed me up.

"We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness." Sighing for my fiancée and parents back in Shuntian, I had to live and fight for another day.

I spit a mouthful of bubbly blood on the floor, and stretched my paralyzed right hand into the pocket. I took out a green bamboo flute, put the mouthpiece on my lips, took a deep breath, and finally I twitched and blew the tune "Short Song Style".

The soft prelude lingered dreamily among the full-toned chords and scampered over the high bits. The notes drifted through the dark pit, across the shadow-covered jungle, into the ears of the distant Japanese rocket trooper. As the harmonica came to a stop, my heart was immediately tightened.

Suddenly, a melodious Shamisen stringed music, mixed with the gentle breeze, gently dawdled into my ears. Lending an ear, the same "Short Song Style" seemed to be far away, intangible, yet close. I shed the most sincere tears, letting the string of notes slid gently across my heart.

"Bright is the moon's sparkle; Will there be a time it can be grasped? Thoughts of you from deep inside, never settle never cease."

A figure came to me from the darkness of the distance. He was wearing a silver cuirass, and kabuto helm showed his symbol. He carried a Shamisen with his left hand and held a Shamisen with his right. Gradually, the face portrayed a clear outline. Without the faceplate, I saw the man turned out to be Asuka.

Under the dazzling stars, on the ferocious battlefield, the hands of the two enemies were tightly held together. Asuka's eyes were full of torture from memories, yet he still believed in the power of music. We talked about our family, mourned the homeland, and faces of the loved ones that we might never be able to see again.

He wiped the tears with his sleeves. "My friend, I am going to help you get back to your fleet, stay strong!" Then I threw my arms around his neck and limped the way back.

Back in base camp, all soldiers showed their unsettling emotions at me, and horrifying unpleasant looks at Asuka. I tried to get back on my fee, stood firmly and delivered a speech,

"The flowers seem close when you see from the high pavilion, but they will wound a traveler's heart. Why? There are much suffering in hundreds and thousands places. The colours of spring will not stop coming between heaven and earth. The floating clouds are also ever changing from ancient times to today.

However, are borders which our leaders have drawn on the map powerful enough to build the borders of prejudice into our minds, alienating us from each other?

The answer is a yes, as long as we make the change ourselves, stop the fight, care about the power we have towards others, and teach our next generation without bias.

Why don't we start at this very moment, making this world a better place by creating peace and compassion? My friend Asuka here has dispelled the dust of evil and hate from his heart, making his choice to show his compassion.

By this way can you only be able to look at our children's eyes with the feeling of pride for the world we have built for them."

After simple medical treatment, I accompanied Asuka to the Japanese tent on the opposite side. While the reactions and expressions inside the tent were more or less the same, I delivered the same speech and urged a truce for both sides. "I have done all I can to help." I thought. The remaining will be left for the fate to decide.

On the next day, a peace treaty was signed by both sides. It lasted for a peace for four years.

"You have won for yourself a place in history as some of the first great explorers." said Asuka.

It was not the fleet, the battlefield, or the exhaustion that I had explored, but as I believed, the true value of mankind.

"The moon outshines the sparse stars; the crows fly to the south. Circling the tree three times; on what branch can they find rest?"

Home at Sea

St. Mary's Canossian College, Leung, Staphanie – 14

Chapter 1

In the middle of the sea, there was a ship which some people were happy to see it but some were afraid. It was the legendary, enormous and destructive 'Conqueror' and the captain of the Conqueror is me. I was honored by the emperor as one of the seven voyages by the Ming Treasure Fleet. The mission entrusted on me is simple, to give a way cargoes of gold and silk and other precious items to peaceful people and kill all the nasty pirates and hostile armies. Every day is just like any other day but ever since today, unusual things happened...

This morning, I woke up as usual but I felt like something is wrong. I quickly got changed and rushed to the front of the ship finding the thing that is annoying me, the thing that made me feel wrong. Suddenly, I noticed a black dot coming closer and closer, becoming larger and larger.

"Is that a ship?" I asked.

"No...Wait! It is, and it is no ordinary ship, but a pirate ship!" my vice-captain Lee Tong Cheng replied quickly.

"Everyone back to your position! This is no training but a real battle!" I yelled.

"Follow me," I whispered to Lee.

Lee followed me to the conference room. I quickly scan through the maps and took out the right one. I stared at the map, thinking for a perfect solution.

"Can you think of anything?" Lee asked

I shook my head. I realised that there was a rock bay nearby which we could defeat the pirates as they wouldn't realise the hidden rock under the water. However, we did not have enough time and the speed to go there...

"Neither do I...the weather isn't too bad today." Lee said, looking out of the window.

"Hmm...the weather...the weather? This is it! This is the solution, thanks Lee!" I exclaimed happily and hugged him.

I rushed to check the wind direction. This is it, the moment of truth. The wind direction meter turned and turned and it stopped right at Southwest, just perfectly the direction we are heading which can work as a booster.

"Next stop, we are heading to the Skull Bay at Southwest direction." I yelled

My crews started to feel confused and not sure what to do.

One of them yelled, "Captain, the Skull Bay is also called as Deadly Bay. I heard that some rumors said no one ever came out of the bay alive."

"We are all in the same battle right now if we win, we survive. But if we lost, we die. You say that no one ever came out alive? So why don't we be the first ones? Now who's with me?" I yelled

"I am!" everyone of them yelled dauntlessly

"Now everyone, let's get already. Cause we have some pirates to defect," I said confidently.

Chapter 2

When we arrived at the Skull Bay and it is way much scary than I imagined. The rocks look so creepy as some of them look like human skeleton and when the wind hollows, there are sounds of people crying and the wind hitting you as painful as knives. All of my crew members were scared by the spooky atmosphere. I immediately check if the pirates followed us and they did! My plan is half away from victory.

"When you hear my commands, shoot them. But don't let them go too near since they are good at near fighting and they will take the advantage. Understand?" I asked

"Understood, captain!" my crews replied, full of confidence and fearless. That's why I really love my crew and I don't want them to get into danger. I took out my binoculars and monitor every single movement of the pirate ship. Just a little bit closer, a little bit closer...

"Now shoot!" I yelled

My crews start shooting with guns and cannons at the pirate ship. It worked perfectly as a worm on the fishing hook and pirates started to chase us blindly.

"Move towards the Bay now and beware of the rocks under the water!" I yelled

Our conqueror moves quickly towards the Skull Bay and the pirate's ship is also blindly followed us.

Suddenly they changed direction.

"Captain, they are planning to use the short cut!" Lee said anxiously,

“Don’t worry Lee, that’s exactly what I want.” I whispered with an evil looking grin on my face. Lee seemed to understand and smiled back.

Boom! The pirate ship crashed on to the rocks under the water. Unexpected waves caused by the crash hit our conqueror and it shook hard.

“Hang on tight!” I yelled

Our ship shook so hard that the ship bumped onto one of the rocks. I held on the rudder and tried my best to make the ship balance again. As the ship bumped on the rock, the some of the crews can’t maintain their balance and bumped onto the left side of the hull. The ship tilted too much to the left side.

“Don’t stay at the left side! Run to the right side!” I yelled and we landed at the Skull Bay.

Luckily no big and deadly problems were caused by the crash and successfully survived. Looking back at the sinking pirate ship, we all cheered and hugged one another, celebrating our victory...

Chapter 3

Some suspicious fog appeared while we are letting our precautions down. I felt very dizzy and a voice approached me

“Brother! I missed you a lot!” the voice said and I was hugged by someone. I took a closer look of the person and I realized that the owner of the voice is my sister!

“What...What are you doing here? Aren’t you home taking care of father and mother?” my sister giggled and pointed backwards.

“It has been a long time since we last met, my son.” a voice said

The voice is so familiar that it seems like I just heard it before...

“Father?” I asked

“I am also here my dear,” another voice says.

My father and mother appeared from the shadow. I am so surprised and happy that I burst into tears. We hugged each other and I showed them around, introducing them to my crews. I showed them my very own room and also the deck. My mother and my sister cooked the most delicious dinner and it is exactly the same taste as before. For once, after I have been sailing on the sea for so long, I finally had a warm feeling of home. The happiest thing was that they finally understood why I had left home and sailed on the sea as they were also astonished by the beauty and the power of the sea. The sea...the sea? But aren’t I at the Skull Bay? I realized that something fishy was going on...

“Can you help me to massage a bit, my dear sister? I asked, trying to figure out what is wrong.

“Of course my brother! I will be delighted to help you to the best of my ability!” my sister answered cheerfully.

She is not my true sister, I am sure about that. I know her like the back of my hand. She would never say something like that, never! She would usually just ask me to do it myself. The ‘sister’ standing in front of me, talking to me is just the sister I wanted her to be, my expectation but never the reality. My family never understood me! They just couldn’t ever understand the beauty and power of the sea! They even scolded me for promising to complete this mission! I finally understand what is happening. All of the things I am seeing right now are just illusions, my expectation but not the reality. Somehow, the suspicious fog can create illusion basing on the world you wish it to be, the world base on your expectations.

But then came another question... How do I suppose to get rid of the illusions? I tried several ways like kept on telling myself that this is fake in a brain-washing way, using a pin to pin myself and trying to sleep.

However, none of them work! I started to panic and my I can’t brainstorm anymore solutions. I stared at the sea trying to keep calm to brainstorm ideas. The fog makes me feel sick, the fog! If I did not breathe then I wouldn’t have anymore illusion! I held my breath as hard as I can. I started to feel lack of oxygen supply but I keep on telling myself that I am almost there, I am almost there...

Chapter 4

I am finally back to reality, I breathed hardly as I have never breath before. I saw my crew all unconscious or I should say day-dreaming. I spotted Lee immediately and woke him up from his illusions.

“What’s happening? Where am I?” Lee asked and squeezed my cheeks

“Are you crazy? Don’t you dare to do it one more time.” I said angrily

“It is you, the true captain Leung!” he said and hugged me.

“You have no idea what you did in my dreams.” He laughed and said

“Let’s wake the crews up, leave this creepy place and we can leave the chatting later, cool?” I asked

Lee nodded his head and we started to wake the others up.

After being exhausted of waking the crews up and sailing away from the bay, Lee and I finally got time to talk.

“Do you actually know what is happening?” Lee asked curiously,

“Yes, the fog can create illusion based on the world you wish it to be, the world based on your expectations.” I replied

“I don’t think that I want to experience something like that again.” Lee said with a smile on his face.

“Like what?” I asked

“Do you know how terrifying you are when you are being too nice to me?” Lee asked

I shook my head.

“For example, hugging me for no reason, cooking a meal for me and tying shoe laces for me?” Lee said with a confused look.

“If I am ever going to do that.” I said with a laugh. We both chat and laughed about the special things we encountered in the illusion.

Chapter 5

The next day, I received a letter by the pigeon post. Once I read through the letter, I immediately called Lee to the conference room and showed him the letter.

“How could something like this be true?” Lee asked disappointingly,

“I knew that someday they would do this but I just didn’t expect it to arrive so quickly.” I replied

“Even if he is the emperor, he can’t just start this mission and stop it all of a sudden so irresponsibly!” Lee said

“I understand that you are feeling really bad at the moment and can’t accept this undeniable truth, so take your time and we can find the solution together,” I said unusually calm perhaps it is because I know that I am the biggest one in charge here and I need to care and take up the responsibility if the emperor doesn’t.

“Let’s tell the crews. They deserve to know this.” I said, holding up the letter.

Lee nodded and went out.

“My crews of the conqueror,” I yelled “the emperor somehow wants to remove the mission and asked us to return to Ming. If we do not obey this order, the navy will be sent to capture us, dead or alive.”

“That’s very irresponsible to do so. How could he?” one of my crew said,

“Yeah, he thought that he is the emperor so he can rule over everything. It is time to show him that he is not everything and the fact that we will also be pissed off” another crew said,

Lee looked at me, his eyes are no longer lost but full confidence. I smiled back.

“So how about this time we show them who we are and how powerful we can be, but not some puppets that he can play with and throw it away whenever he wanted to. But first let me warn you all that we may be killed and will not have an easy life even if we survive. I give you all one night time to think about your decision and you will all tell me the answer tomorrow morning.” That night, I couldn’t sleep much since I have a lot to think, the consequences, the solution, my crews and the letter. I have never been so nervous before. I always act like I don’t really care but deep down in my heart, I don’t want this journey to end so fast. If only, if only... That was the longest night I had ever had.

Chapter 6

The next morning, the time has come to make our decision. I looked at my crews and I was astonished by them. They are nothing like what I expected, they all look so smart and with trust and hope in their eyes but not dull and with lost eyes.

“We choose to go wherever the captain wanted to go, we aren’t afraid of death but we are afraid of losing our home, the conqueror.” The representative of the crews said.

This is the true warm feeling of home. I was never, ever so glad and relieved. I looked at Lee and said.

“This is the moment for them to realize how powerful and destructive as we are the conquerors. Now who is with me?”

“Me, captain!” all of the crews yelled.

Tears ran off my face. They are not tears of sorrows but tears filled with happiness and warmth.

The following few days, we have been busily preparing ourselves for the battle with the navy. Lee and I had been discussing in the conference room and the crews were checking military weapons. The days passed in a blink of an eye and the day has arrived...

Chapter 7

The navy arrived. There were way much more ships and military forces than we could imagine. In my heart I know that it is a must for us to lose but I don't why that I still think that this is a battle worth fighting for. We started shooting guns and cannons at them. At first, our plan worked perfectly. We destroyed two-third of their military forces by using arrows lighted with fire. I was pretty amazed by the strategies Lee and I came up with. The captain of the navy seemed to be a bit afraid of us and started to take this more seriously but that was also when we started running out of weapons.

"Move to the Southwest direction, hold on tight!" I yelled.

The navy were so fast that they surrounded us. That was it. Time to end the journey. I kneeled down and helped Lee to tie his shoe laces.

"I guess sometimes dreams do come true, right?" I asked and hugged him.

I didn't expect his answers since we both knew it in our hearts. I walked down to my crews. I tidied every single one of their uniform and give them a hug.

"It has been an honor to be your captain, I would never have solve all the difficulties if you aren't here to help and being my motivation. You are all wonderful crews and I don't know what good deeds I did to have a chance to meet you all. Remember that the conqueror will always be your home, always..." My tear are rolling in my eyes. "Now, let take plan D. Conqueror forever!" I yelled.

"Conqueror forever!" all of us yelled,

All of us took out a burning log and we dropped it onto the ship. We all knew that we are dying but we were not afraid, because we have love, faith and hope. We had no regrets since we had done everything we wanted, we did our best and we found another place which we could call 'home'...

New tales of Ming treasure voyages

St. Mary's Canossian College, Leung, Yana – 14

It was as if the death god was hovering over us, suffocating us.

There were four in our room, including me.

There was fragile-looking Hua, there was petite XingYun, and there was Mei who sitting on the floor of the small toilet, face pale and gaunt.

I kept my eyes trained on a spot on the brown wooden walls as I contemplated the sad fate we were heading to, wasn't there anything we could do to save ourselves?

"How long till we reach Champa?" Mei croaked, her voice scratchy and unpleasant.

"Two more days, but that's if the sea stays calm." I replied, eliciting a tired groan from Mei.

"I absolutely despise seasickness. I think I'm going to die. Surely it is abnormal to be puking so much!" Mei cried helplessly.

"Perhaps death will be better. I'd do anything to go home. I miss Fei, being apart from him makes the colours in this world dim." XingYun sighed, not feeling an ounce of sympathy for Mei. I supposed she couldn't when she herself was drowning in the misery of being separated from her lover.

"How cruel, we must not speak of life and death so lightly. Besides, this is our duty to Ming China, we should be proud to be chosen." Hua piped in, her head still bowed as she stitched. I caught a glimpse of her embroidery design – a bird soaring in the blue sky and the spark of hope rekindled.

"Duty this, duty that, that's all noble people know. Hua, don't you want to be free from such restraints? Don't you have your own desires? Our fate isn't set in stone yet!" I said.

"Our fate has been set the moment we stepped onto this ship, it's too late for anything. We are the representatives of Chinese women and we will bring glory to them. Dreams and desires do not matter anymore, we are only the gifts that will be presented to other countries and places." Hua's voice trembled as she spoke, "We are nothing without our pretty faces, so be honoured to be given such a role."

The toilet door slammed as nausea hit Mei again.

I was shook awake by the loud roar of rain and the stampeding just outside our room. I turned on the lights and nearly fell down as the floor tilted to one side.

"YueXin, what's going on?" Apparently, XingYun had fallen off her bed as the ship shook and tilted from left to right.

I opened the door and observed the situation. Then, I closed it hurriedly as I made eye contact with one of the panicking sailors.

"A storm. The waves are getting very violent." I couldn't help but think that something was going to happen. Something bad.

XingYun was shaking as she sat down on her bed. "We'll be fine, I'm not called XingYun without a reason. The storm will pass."

The storm did not pass like she thought it would. Instead, the roaring of wind and rain became louder and louder and water had started to seep into our room.

Suddenly, the door to our room slammed open and in ran two bulky sailors.

“What is the meaning of this?” Hua, who had also been awoken, demanded in a tight voice.

“The storm ain’t gonna stop unless we give Tianfei something.” The two sailors grabbed the Xing Yun who was standing the closest to them and shoved her out of the door, ignoring the weak protests from the other two.

They were going to kill her.

I was about to protest but I realised that I would only make the situation worse. I did not want to become a sacrifice. Hua wisely kept her mouth shut but I could see the tears pooling in her eyes.

Xing Yun’s screams of help were blood-curling and yet, it blended perfectly with the low mumbles of prayers to the patron goddess from the sailors. I covered my ears and tried to shut out the horrid noises.

Soon, the howling wind and rain soon stopped and we could hear the sailors cheering in relief.

There was no mention of XingYun again.

A few days later, the ship was nearing Java. Hua and I, both dressed in an ridiculously extravagant dress, Hua had insisted, decided to leave our tiny room and take in some fresh air on the deck.

“You should go ahead first, I need to retrieve my coat from the room.” Hua smiled at me, though her eyes were on a pile of sailor wear that had been piled up in a corner.

“I can go with you, I don’t mind.” I offered.

“No, no, I know how long you have been waiting for this. Go ahead and enjoy the view on the deck first. It’s almost sunrise and you wouldn’t want to miss it.” Hua ignored my protests and pushed me onto the deck.

Once again, the sight of the upper deck of the ship had made me stop in my tracks.

The ship was enormous, the biggest ship I’ve ever seen, and it was magnificent! Its three sails stood proud and billowed in the gentle wind. The rising sun turned the sails into a golden yellow and the shadows of the towering masts coloured the wooden deck in different shades.

“Come on, we’d better not stand in the middle of everything.” Hua appeared, giggling at my awestruck face.

“Look, YueXin, isn’t this beautiful?” Hua sighed quietly. I leaned on the ship’s railing with Hua and looked at the sky that was painted red and orange. Cylinders of light moved across the turquoise sea and the seawater seemed to glitter under the light.

The silence was broken by the booming voice of the navigator. “We will be arriving Java in 15 minutes, please get ready to disembark and unload the gifts.”

At the word ‘gift’, both Hua and I stiffened and glanced at each other, fearing the worst. Quietly, we shuffled back into our room and shut the door.

“Do you think one of us will be the tribute to Java?” I asked, nerves tangled all together.

Hua said nothing but picked up her embroidery work and started stitching again, though I could see her hands trembling slightly.

“Where is Mei?” Hua asked nonchalantly.

“Isn’t she still sleeping? Let me check...” I ran over to Mei’s bed and threw her sheets on the floor, but, Mei wasn’t there.

I rushed to the toilet and pushed its door open, but in Mei’s place was only the pungent smell of vomit.

Mei had disappeared.

A few days passed and soon, the ship was starting its sail again. However, Mei was still missing.

“Hua, I’m suffocating in here. I’m going out to have some fresh air.” I opened the door and immediately, slammed into something hard and bulky.

“Going somewhere?” A voiced asked. I looked up and blanched at the sight of the man’s scarred and hairy face.

“I... I...” I was frozen with fear.

“We were just going to take in some fresh air from the deck. Would you mind moving out of our way?” Luckily, Hua came to my rescue.

The man sneered at us and said, “And why would I do that? I ain’t stupid. Nobody’s escaping on my watch. Mei just got lucky.” Then, I was pushed roughly back into my room and the door slammed shut.

Realisation struck like lightning.

“She escaped. Mei escaped! I can’t believe she abandoned us like that!”

I looked at Hua for her reaction but I could see nothing but a tiny hint of guilt and relief. “Hua, what’s going on?” I asked, my suspicions confirmed as she lowered her eyes to the floor.

“Hua, you knew? And you didn’t tell me?” I demanded, making Hua flinch at my harsh voice.

“She was going to die of seasickness, I had to help her escape!” Hua replied, gesturing for me to lower my voice.

I stomped towards her and grabbed both her shoulders tightly. “We could have all escaped, now we won’t have the chance to do that!”

Hua argued, “No, we wouldn’t have. Mei only escaped because we provided the distraction. I told you to wear that ridiculous dress with me so everyone would be too busy looking at us to realise that Mei had slipped into the ranks of the sailors.”

“I want to escape too, but I have my family to think of as well. This position as a gift to foreigners is not given to anybody and if we don’t behave or please the foreign kings, we will be punished for disobedience to our king. Our families could also be dragged into this mess, and I have five sisters and seven brothers... I cannot afford to fail this mission.” Hua was dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief and I felt awful for yelling at her.

“I’m sorry for yelling at you.” I said.

After a short while, Hua responded.

“I apologise for not informing you as well.”

We both knew arguing wouldn’t get us anywhere.

The days passed peacefully as the treasure fleet sailed to Malacca, Aru, Semudera, Lambri and finally reached Ceylon.

“Hua, I have this bad feeling ...” Before I could finish my sentence, the door was slammed open and a rough voice sounded, “Hua, YueXin, get ready to present yourselves to the local king Vira Alakesvara. You have five minutes to dress and pack things up, get on with it.”

Then, the door slammed shut again. We glanced at each other, our hearts filled with dread. Silently, we moved about the room and packed up our belongings.

“The King of Gampola will see you now.”

“Your Majesty, it is an honour to be allowed into your homeland. We are the ambassadors of China and we are hoping to establish a friendship between our two countries. To show our sincerity, we have prepared some gifts for you!” Admiral Zheng He straightened from his bow and waved his men who were carrying cargoes of gold and silk over.

“Your Majesty, we also offer you one of the most beautiful creatures in our land. Hua has the fairest skin in our land, with hair as black as midnight and a voice as sweet as a nightingale. YueXin has the most alluring eyes you’ll ever find and can dance to any music provided. Please pick whom you wish to acquire.” Then, the men behind us pushed us upfront and all eyes were on us.

I stifled my anger with a deep breath. What were we, animals? Creature this and creature that, and who gave him the permission to ‘acquire’ us? We aren’t objects for sale!

The king’s face seemed to light up as he looked at us from head to toe. I couldn’t help but fidget under his unnerving gaze.

“That one is very pleasing to the eye. Come here. Yes, you. Stand in front of me.” The king ordered. Hua looked at me, confused, before walking towards the King and curtsied.

“Hua, was it? Come closer, good.”

Hua stood just two feet away from the king and suddenly, with frightening speed and force, the king closed the gap between them, grabbed Hua’s neck and dangled her in the air.

“You think that you can trick me into believing with all these gifts and whatnot? I’ll show you what I think of you...” The king threw Hua at the wall and a loud crack followed by a scream was heard.

“Let me go! I have to get to Hua!” I struggled to leave the men’s grasp but it was futile. Didn’t they care that Hua was bleeding out right in front of them?

“Your majesty, what is the meaning of this?” Admiral Zheng He stepped up angrily.

“I know how things work. You’re going to trick me into receiving all these gifts so I will have to repay you later on. I’m not going to pay any tribute to your King so you can leave now or I’ll kill you all. Gampola doesn’t need allies, we are strong and independent! You are insulting our strength.” The king snarled and ordered his guards to ‘escort’ us back to our ship.

“You two, take her back to the ship. Go quickly!” Admiral Zheng He commanded.

“And the rest of you, let us show what a wrong choice it was to disrespect our king.” The men cheered and readied their weapons to face the Gampola. Soon, the room was filled with the stench of blood and screams of murder.

“Hey, we are trying to protect you. Your friend is likely already dead. If you rush into the battlefield now, you’ll be dead in less than a second.” One of the men of Admiral Zheng He tugged at my wrist harshly and tears rolled down my face as the gruesome scene replayed in my head over and over again.

Defeated, I stopped struggling, the men picked me up and rushed back to the ship. I lost consciousness soon after.

I woke to the sound of soft humming. Then, I sat up abruptly as I realised my bed was not swaying from side to side.

“Dearie, you’re finally awake. They thought you wouldn’t wake up.” A voice said. I turned and saw an unfamiliar face staring back at me.

“Who are you? Where am I?” I asked.

“Why, you don’t know who I am? I am Xiwangmu, the highest goddess of immortality. As for where you are, you are in the Kunlun Mountains, simply put, in heaven.” She replied.

“What? I don’t remember dying? I was escaping...” I trailed off, my memory was blurry.

“My child, after you lost consciousness, you were hit by an arrow that was shot by the Gampola guards. The men guarding you fled and you bled to death. I’m very sorry.” Xiwangmu said, taking my hands in her wrinkled ones.

“I...died? But why are you here, and where is Hua?” I asked, if I had died, then Hua should be around too.

“Hmm... so many questions, but the real question is, why are you here?” She smiled knowingly.

“Because... I am dead?” I stared blankly at her, I was confused to no end.

“Let me put it this way, what do you want most in life?” She asked.

I thought hard at that. As a woman, we had little choice in life. Our destiny was always to find a husband, preferably a rich one, and have children, preferably a male. I’ve never really thought of what I wanted...

“Well, if I were still alive, I’d wish for freedom and that women aren’t treated as lowly creatures by the men...” I blushed after saying such a ridiculous wish.

“Hmm... Perhaps I shall transfer your spirit over to Kuan Yin, she is the Bodhisattva of compassion and mercy. Maybe you will find your purpose as her aid...” With a sweep of her arm, I blacked out for a second and when I opened my eyes, I was standing in front of a huge palace.

I sighed wearily, what was going on? Why did I meet Xiwangmu? I had so many questions swirling in my head that I didn’t hear the soft pitter-patter of footsteps.

“YueXin? I can’t believe it’s you!” At that familiar voice, I looked up and saw Hua in a white robe.

“Hua? Do you know what’s going on?” I asked as I gave her a hug.

“Kuan Yin will explain everything. Come, I’ll take you to her.” Hua said.

Hua led me through a maze of hallways and we soon arrived inside a large room that was decorated with a lot of statues.

“Hello, YueXin. I am Kuan Yin. I’m guessing you have a lot of questions for me.” A figure sitting on a cloud in the middle the room said.

I was about to open my mouth to speak but Kuan Yin raised her hand with her palm facing me.

“You are here because I have a shortage of spirits to help me protect people who ask me for help. I believe after your voyage on the Ming treasure fleet, you have seen how helpless the women are and will be willing

to assist me in protecting and guiding them. From now on, you, along with Hua, will be the spirits of protection for women and can go down to the mortal realm in the form of a bird.”

Kuan Yin smiled sagely and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“We have a lot of work to do. Let’s go!” Hua said. I snapped out of my daze and followed her quickly. It seemed that this would be the new chapter of my life.

Mei slid down a tree trunk tiredly and her empty stomach growled in protest. She had been scavenging for food in the forest of Java and living in a small cave hole since she escaped from the treasure fleet one month ago. She was terribly lost.

"Chirp." Mei looked up at a tree branch and saw the prettiest bird she had ever seen. Another bird landed on her shoulder and dropped a small branch of berries in her hands.

"Thank you... " Mei said. The two birds seemed to smile, but that could be her imagination. She was starving! Then, the bird on her shoulder started pulling on her sleeve with its beak.

"Alright, alright, I'm getting up. Where are you taking me?" She asked as the bird pulled her towards her right. She didn't protest much as she didn't have any idea where she was anyway.

Mei followed the birds through the forest and soon she was standing at an open field with small houses perched on slopes a mile away.

"Chirp, chirp." Both birds called out and left with the gentle breeze of wind.

"Wait, I haven't thanked you guys yet! Huh? What's this?" Mei caught the tiny piece of paper that was floating down from the sky and it read:

"Good luck, Mei!"

The Final Voyage

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Lam, Justin - 15

The Xuande Emperor reclined in his gilded throne. He scanned the report in his hand before signing it. He paused, putting down his writing brush and taking a sip of tea.

The calm was broken by the the palace doors swinging open. A tall, broad-shouldered man stormed in, his black robes whipping around his imposing form. Admiral Zheng He. He was something of a legend in the palace, renowned for the six voyages he'd embarked upon many years ago. That, and the formidable military prowess he'd displayed during the Siege of Nanjing.

Right now, though, the Emperor was not inclined to appreciate those achievements.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked angrily. "I *specifically* gave instructions not to let anyone in."

The guard bowed frantically. "Your Majesty, we tried to stop Admiral Zheng from entering, but he insisted on seeing you."

Admiral Zheng bowed as well. "Your Majesty, I would like to discuss a matter of great importance with you."

The Emperor sighed, rubbing his temples. He took a moment to compose himself. "Very well. You may stand. What do you want?"

The admiral drew himself to his full height, fixing the Emperor with steely eyes. "I heard you were going to cancel all further expeditions to the Western Seas?"

The Emperor didn't say anything, merely nodded. He'd expected the admiral to argue with him over his decision. He would be more surprised if Zheng He *hadn't* spoken to him about it. The man was as much a creature of the sea as one of land.

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, this is the wrong course of action!" Zheng He said. "The voyages have opened our eyes to wonders beyond our imagination. Each time, we have discovered radical new things about the world. If we lock ourselves away, our progress will stagnate."

"The voyages violate the principles laid down by our dynasty's founding emperor," Xuande explained, knowing that it wouldn't placate him. "Every day, I receive complaints that the expeditions violate Confucian principles. What would you have me do?"

Admiral Zheng looked up at him, his mouth set in a determined line. "Allow me to go on a seventh voyage. If I succeed, continue these explorations. If I fail, end them. This is all I beg of you."

The Emperor exhaled. He'd been expecting heavier demands. He considered the options he had. He could refuse Zheng He's request, of course, but that would make the ongoing conflict between the scholars and the eunuchs even worse. No. Better to allow him to go on his journey and decide what to do later.

The Emperor finally spoke. "I will grant you permission. Do not fail."

~

The ship's prow cut through the waters, its flag flying proudly on its mast. A stinging spray of sea-foam splattered the deck. Zheng He breathed in the smell of brine, gazing at the miles and miles of open sea. He'd finally returned to the ocean.

"Sir," His third-in-command Lieutenant Tang Guan said, trying to catch his attention.

Zheng He turned towards him, eyebrows raised in a question.

“A dozen more sailors have fallen ill,” Tang Guan said, his forehead creased in concern.

“Again?” Zheng He asked in surprise. “That’s the second time in three days!”

He suspected there was something going on behind the scenes. His sailors were handpicked from the Royal Navy. They were the elite of the elite. They didn’t just fall ill without warning. Tang Guan evidently agreed.

“Sir, I suspect foul play here,” he whispered, lowering his voice so no one nearby could hear, “I think someone poisoned them.”

Zheng He nodded meditatively, hiding a surge of panic that rose up in him. If someone was sabotaging the expedition, it would be nigh-impossible to stop. Out at sea, there was no way to escape if anything happened. But why? Why would anyone try to sabotage the voyage?

The answer came to him in a flash. If the scholar-bureaucrat faction really wanted to stop further voyages from happening, the best way to go about it was to make sure this one ended in disaster. He gritted his teeth.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

“I want you to take a dozen of your most trusted soldiers,” he said to Tang Guan. “Tell them to guard our food and water supply on a strict rota and let no one in. If you capture anyone, bring them to me.”

Tang Guan nodded and retreated. Zheng He turned back towards the sea, trying to calm himself down. It didn’t quite work. His emotions were still in turmoil. It was very clear how much was at stake here. If everyone on board was poisoned, it wouldn’t just spell the end of further maritime expeditions. It would also mean their death.

~

Zheng He rushed into Tang Guan’s room. The lieutenant was currently lying in bed, his face pasty-white.

“How is he?” Zheng He asked.

The doctor frowned. “He’s not doing very well. The illness has symptoms I’ve never seen before. I can only lessen his pain with medicine and let him recover on his own.”

Zheng He gestured for the doctor to leave, watching him walk out of the door. He waited for a few more moments before leaning in close to Tang Guan.

“Do you know how you got poisoned?” he asked with his voice lowered.

When the lieutenant spoke, his voice was weak. “I think it must have been in the food or water. Whoever did this was targeting me specifically.”

Zheng He nodded, but inwardly he was going over the possibilities. The food storage room was under heavy guard. No one should have been able to enter. Whoever was responsible for the poisonings must have been a high-ranking official, to be capable of entering the room without being stopped. It couldn’t have been Tang Guan or himself. And that left...

“The executive officer entered the food supply room yesterday. He said he wanted to check how many days of food and water we still had left,” Tang said, confirming his suspicions.

Wang Jinghong. One of his most trusted officers and the second-in-command of the ship. Could he really have been the one behind the incidents? Zheng He couldn't imagine why he'd want to do that.

He turned to Tang Guan. "I want you to keep this quiet," Zheng He murmured. "We need to tread carefully if we are to stop this. I can't confront him without direct evidence."

The lieutenant nodded feebly. "I will."

With that said, Zheng He turned and strode out of the room. He had things to plan ahead for. He went up the stairs and up to the deck. The wooden boards creaked beneath his feet as he went over to the helmsman, who was at the ship's wheel, guiding its progress through the seas.

"Set course for the nearest land," he said, "If anyone asks, tell them we're stopping to get additional food and water supplies."

The helmsman nodded and turned back to the wheel. Zheng He returned to his cabin, deep in thought. What would Wang Jinghong do next? How could he be caught in the act?

~

A figure slipped through the door, head craning around, as if searching for something. Spotting an urn filled with water, he headed for it, and –

Zheng He caught his wrist, stepping out from behind the door. "Looking for something?" he asked, menacingly. Soldiers walked out from their hiding places, their spears pointed at the man.

Wang Jinghong looked around in confusion. "How... Why..."

"It's simple, really," the admiral said, glaring at his second-in-command. "I knew you'd try to sneak in and try to poison someone else again, so I set a trap for you, and you fell right for it. What do you have to say for yourself?"

A mix of emotions flashed across Wang Jinghong's face, before they were replaced by calm. "Who told you that I was going to poison someone?" he asked.

Zheng He shook his head, exasperated. "Does it really matter? If you want to know, it was Tang Guan who told me you'd entered the storage room yesterday. Other soldiers confirmed this."

The executive officer didn't seem to be perturbed. "Yes, I went here yesterday. But that was to investigate the cause of the sailors falling sick! I was trying to find out if our supplies were contaminated by disease!"

"Stop trying to talk your way out of this," Zheng He sighed. "You aren't convincing anyone."

"But it's true!" Wang Jinghong exclaimed. A shadow passed over his face as he looked down at the floor. There was a long moment of silence, after which he abruptly lifted his head. "... I received an anonymous tip-off today."

Zheng He's eyebrows drew together. Wang Jinghong didn't seem to be lying. He knew the man well, and he wasn't a very good actor. If so, what was this all about?

"Someone wrote me a note, telling me to come to the storage room. They said they had overheard a few soldiers conspiring to poison our water. That's why I came here." The executive officer's eyes were wide with shock and anger. "Someone set me up."

Zheng He growled in frustration, pacing around the room. He desperately wanted to believe his second-in-command, wanted to believe that his friend hadn't betrayed him. But he couldn't be certain of anything.

There is a way to ascertain Wang Jinghong's story, he realized. He turned back to the man.

"Where is the note?" he asked. "Can you show me?"

Wang Jinghong pulled out a scrap of paper. Zheng He took it and read it quickly.

"Have overheard soldiers plotting to poison water. I cannot stop them. Please hurry."

It appeared to be authentic, at least as far as Zheng He could tell. The handwriting wasn't Wang Jinghong's, and even if he were to try to disguise his penmanship, Zheng He would have seen through it. He knew him too well to not know.

Who wrote this letter? It must have been someone high-ranking as well. He doubted normal soldiers would have access to ink and paper, let alone this kind of high-quality mulberry paper.

He recalled something. His fists clenched, almost imperceptibly. "Executive Officer Wang," he said, forcing himself to remain calm, "What did you tell the guards when you entered the storage room yesterday?"

Wang Jinghong looked perplexed, but he answered readily. "I told them the truth, that I was there to see if the food and water was contaminated. Why?"

Zheng He's nails dug into his skin, causing blood to well up around his nails. He'd been played for a fool. He still remembered what Lieutenant Tang had said, that Wang Jinghong had wanted to check how many days of food and water were left.

He knew why the lieutenant had said that, of course. The act of checking was patently unnecessary, as the ship had clear records of its food consumption. The excuse was obviously a lie, and Tang Guan *knew* that it would be obvious to him. All the better to make Zheng He believe that Wang Jinghong was trying to hide something from the rest of the crew.

He headed up the stairs to the cabins, gesturing for the soldiers to follow him as he rushed frantically to Tang Guan's room. The man had no reason to suspect that Zheng He had found out. He would still be there in bed.

Zheng He barged into the room with a bang, standing aside and allowing the soldiers to file into the room. The lamps were already lit. Tang Guan had evidently been waiting for him. A trace of a smile hung on the lieutenant's face as he stood in the center of the room. He didn't seem to be bothered by the spears pointed at him.

"It seems you've discovered my ploy," Tang Guan said, his tone mocking. "A pity. I was hoping you'd execute Wang Jinghong before you found out. Perhaps I underestimated you."

He isn't even denying what he's done, Zheng He noted with fury as he stood before the despicable scumbag.

"It's over, Tang Guan," Zheng He said. "My soldiers have surrounded the room. There will be no escape."

"Who said anything about escaping?" Tang Guan asked, a crafty glint in his eyes.

He's trying to pull something, Zheng He realized.

But what was it? There was no way the lieutenant could fight his way out of the situation, especially against a squadron of well-trained warriors. Unless...

Zheng He whirled around, bolting for the door. He was stopped by a spear levelled directly at his face. All around him, the other soldiers did likewise. Zheng He had been outmaneuvered.

Tang Guan made a tsking noise in the back of his throat. “You’re too overconfident, Admiral. That always has been your greatest flaw, you know. Did you *really* think it’d be that easy?”

Zheng He gritted his teeth and said nothing. He simply fixed the traitorous lieutenant with a furious glower. If glares could burn people, Tang Guan would have been dust drifting on the wind by now.

“How did you secure their loyalty?” Zheng He asked. “Threats? Blackmail?”

“Nothing so crass,” Tang Guan replied, amusement showing in his voice. “I simply offered to make them rich beyond their dreams if they cooperated.”

“So you bribed them,” Zheng He summed up.

“Let’s not be so uncivilized, shall we?” Tang Guan smiled. “I dislike the word *bribe*. It’s so... lacking in nuance.”

“He won’t pay you!” Zheng He said, desperately. “Once he doesn’t need your services, he’ll dispose of you! Don’t help him!”

The soldiers didn’t move or say anything.

“You’re no great judge of character, Admiral,” Tang Guan said, shaking his head. “I’ll follow through on my promises, if only because it’ll be inconvenient for any soldiers to slip through the net and report me to the Emperor. Besides, they’ll be helpful in the future.”

“Whatever he paid you, I’ll pay double!” Zheng He said. He was grasping at straws here. “The Emperor will pardon you if you help me!”

“You *can’t* pay double,” Tang Guan said. “You see, you don’t have the money.”

“You’re a monster,” Zheng He spat.

Tang Guan ignored him. “Take him to the deck,” he ordered. “Let’s arrange for a little accident.”

Zheng He was shoved roughly up to the deck. A few moments later, other soldiers arrived, carrying a beaten and bloody Wang Jinghong with them. A wave crashed over the deck, drenching the two prisoners and a few soldiers. Zheng He shook the water out of his face.

“Why did you betray us?” Zheng He asked. “Why bend to the will of the scholar–bureaucrat faction?”

“Did you forget?” Tang Guan hissed, his features uncharacteristically contorted by rage. “My father was executed by the Yongle Emperor because he opposed the maritime voyages. All because of people like *you*.”

Zheng He sighed and bowed his head. Once upon a time he’d been a rash fool, eager to fight against his political enemies by all means. He’d leveraged the Yongle Emperor’s favor to persecute them.

How the times have changed. The sins of the past always catch up with us.

“I’m sorry for what I’ve done,” he said. “But your quarrel is with me. Let Wang Jinghong go.”

“And what? Let him blab to the Emperor about what happened today?” Tang Guan asked. “I can’t let that happen.”

Without warning, Wang Jinghong began laughing. Zheng He was suddenly aware that he’d been silent the whole time. Both men looked at him, bewildered.

Zheng He realized that while the two of them had been speaking, reinforcements had arrived. Soldiers were marching onto the deck, surrounding the group of traitors.

“You didn’t bribe all the men on board,” Wang Jinghong said, still laughing. “Some were too loyal to be turned like this. I managed to contact them before I got caught.” The officer grinned, showing bloodstained teeth. “Your move.”

The two sides began clashing, the reinforcements pushing in and trying to reach Zheng He and Wang Jinghong. Screams punctuated the night as men from both sides fell in pools of blood.

Tang Guan wheeled around, staring at the scene, his right hand clenched around his sword. He seemed to be considering his course of action. Then he turned back to the two prisoners.

“There is another way to stop further voyages from happening,” he said, “And another way to exact my revenge.”

The lieutenant drew his sword, the metal reflecting the faint, flickering lights from the lamps.

“If the great Admiral Zheng He dies on the voyage, no matter the circumstances, the Emperor will cancel all further trips to the Western seas, for a very good reason,” Tang Guan said, a cruel gleam in his eyes. “No one else is actually up to the task.”

Wang Jinghong’s eyes widened in shock as he understood Tang Guan’s meaning.

“So, you see, I think my previous plan was too overcomplicated,” Tang Guan said, a smile growing on his face. “I think Zheng He’s death will suffice.”

He charged. Zheng He tried to dodge, but his movement was hampered by the soldier that held him by his shoulders. He moved too late, allowing Tang Guan to strike a glancing blow on his left shoulder. A spatter of blood smeared the deck.

Zheng He stumbled backwards, clutching his injured shoulder. Tang Guan lunged again, and this time, he was too slow to get out of the way. The blade impaled him through his chest, and he collapsed.

When Tang Guan withdrew his sword, Zheng He clamped his arms around the man’s legs. Tang Guan struggled to free himself from the iron grip, but Zheng He could feel his strength waning. With a final leap, he launched himself off the deck, carrying Tang Guan with him.

As the two men hit the frigid water, a crimson cloud billowing around them, Zheng He’s thoughts were on his failed promise to the Emperor.

The Tale of Two Stones

St. Paul's Convent School, Cheung, Margaret – 16

The sound of the sea roused him.

He was alone, the only survivor to have escape death and lived to tell the tale.

Or at least, he was supposed to. Now a wasted man, he could only wander around in the island, spending his days staring out at sea, once the territory he ruled over, now his captor, lamenting his fate, and telling his story to the waves as they brush against the fine, golden sand.

Today was another of those days. He sat on the beach, facing the sea, and began once more recounting his tale.

The tale of a treasure and a voyage.

It all began with a memory...

“Zheng He, wait a moment.”

As he was leaving the imperial court, the eunuch turned back to the emperor, who had called his name, and saw, astonished, a young girl being led towards him.

“Bring her with you.” Yongle Emperor commanded.

Zheng He blinked, jolting himself out of the recollection. At the same time, an official had been hurrying towards him, holding a scroll of parchment. “Sir, we’ve a problem.” The man reported, whilst unravelling it slowly.

“What is it?” Zheng asked, seeing the clearly troubled expression. The other hesitated, before saying in a low voice, “The Mongols are catching up to us.” He revealed the map and pointed. “We have news of troops arriving there. If we stay any longer...” The unspoken threat hung in the air, and Zheng immediately caught the underlying meaning. “Understood. Thank you, Li.”

“I recommend you not to set sail immediately, Zheng He.” A voice came from behind them. Both men turned, and found a young girl standing on the bowsprit, perched dangerously on the flimsy bit of wood above the waters lapping at the ship. Despite being at port, falling and hitting the rocks below would mean instant death, even in shallow waters. The eunuch frowned instantly, and she continued, “Mistress Mazu is angry. We must wait until the sun rises again.” Having delivered her message, she walked down the bowsprit casually as if on the street, and disappeared down the crew’s quarters.

“W—who was that?” Li asked, almost murmuring, as if he was frightened of the thirteen year-old sent to them by the emperor.

“A guardian.” Zheng replied shortly. He stared at the crew’s quarters, then turned back to Li. “Inform no one of this new development. Tell the crew we will set sail at first light tomorrow. In the meantime, we rest.”

“Yes, sir!”

That night, Zheng He had a dream. Within it, he was standing in front of an altar, where two stones lay on the marble; a jade and an unknown black stone.

“You must choose one,” A voice told him, which came seemingly from nowhere. “However, choosing either would bring doom and death. Choose both, and you will meet an unexpected end, which would bring either riches or nothing to you.”

“Which should I pick?” Zheng asked, stunned by the sudden decision forced upon him.

“That is entirely up to you.”

The man frowned at that, but didn’t question any further. Instead, he looked at both of them, and marvelled silently at their beauty; the jade surpassed that of any stone he had seen in the palace, and the ebony possessed an ethereal and mysterious air.

“I – I choose – ”

Gong. Gong.

The sound of the morning gong ripped through the air, shattering the silence and rousing the sailors for another day of their expedition. Zheng He usually wake early, being the captain of the ships. However, today, troubled by his dreams, he had remained in bed longer, pondering about its meaning, before getting up to start his duties for the day.

As he commanded his men to set sail, one question kept him half-distracted. *What did he choose in the end?* Being a knowledgeable man, he knew that the jade represented the Confucian virtues of courage, wisdom, and also wealth to come.

"Zheng He." The mention of his name made him turn automatically towards the men busy at their stations, as if he was being chided for neglecting his duties. Then, realising he was no longer at the palace, the captain turned, and found the young girl once again standing there.

"What are you doing here?" Annoyed at her constant materializations and her sudden warnings that would throw him off guard, he was prepared to tell her off when she spoke again.

"I've come to find you. Have you had a dream yesterday night?"

Her sudden words took him by surprise. He stared at her, whose large and mysterious eyes reflected the stunned expression on his face, and was tongue-tied. As if reading his thoughts, she continued, "The Goddess is omniscient. She knows everything and told me of your dream. Would you tell me the details?"

And so Zheng recounted his vivid dream, albeit reluctant to reveal too much. However, she only listened attentively, and was silent until he was finished. At last, she spoke slowly, as if picking her words carefully. "The stones each represent something dear to you, yet both are at war with each other, so you must make a choice. However, dangers seem to lie in your path." Pausing, the girl hesitated, then murmured, "An encounter with the brown men will set the events in motion."

"I'm sorry?" The captain was confused at the sudden prophecy, but as he was about to enquire further, the ship's mate called, "Land ahead!"

"We'll talk later." Zheng turned and headed back towards the front of ship, preparing to give orders to dock and send ambassadors ahead. As the man gave commands, she watched on silently, before murmuring to herself, "May the goddess guide you always."

"Welcome, travellers from afar. Please, make yourselves at home." The Zamorin, monarch of the kingdom of Kozhikode, greeted in a friendly tone as Zheng He, along with his officers, walked into his palace to pay their respects.

"Thank you kindly, Your Majesty." The ambassadors bowed, showing their respect. The captain approached, holding a pile of expensive fabric. He offered this to the king, who clapped in delight at the sight of such exotic goods. "Please accept this as a token of gratitude for allowing us to stay."

"But naturally." The king rubbed his hands together, eyes gleaming at the riches laid before him. As a brown hand stretched out to touch the gold, almost in a trance, an advisor appeared at the Zamorin's side suddenly, whispering something into his ear. Immediately, the greed in his eyes disappeared, and he straightened, addressing the audience of men in his court.

"I heard that you people possess peculiar healing abilities. Is that true?"

As the interpreter relayed the message back, Zheng was extremely puzzled, but before he could say anything, the little girl who was supposedly left on ship suddenly materialized, and answered, in perfect Malayalam, no less, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Whirling around, Zheng was startled at her sudden appearance. Indeed, he wasn't the only one; the men brought along whispered amongst themselves as well, and members of the Zamorin's court also had uneasy glances. However, the king himself remained unfazed; rather, a grin had spread on his mouth.

“Who is this?”

“A priestess for the goddess of the sea.”

“Will she be able to heal my sick daughter?”

“That depends on the will of my goddess.”

For a moment, the two said nothing, merely looking at each other; the Zamorin sizing her up, and the girl returning it with an almost blank stare. Then, the king threw his head back and laughed.

“Such bravery! Very well, bring her to the back. Along with the captain,” He pointed at the admiral, who looked confused as the whole conversation was but a myriad of sounds and strange words being exchanged. Nevertheless, he understood the simple gesture, and followed a guard to the back of the palace, where stairs led to higher floors.

“This is my daughter, who is suffering from some unknown disease.” The pair was led into a chamber which smelled heavily of incense. There was a bed within, veiled with thick red curtains. The Zamorin continued sombrely, “Medicine—men had come far and wide, but none could help her. If you could spare your powers...”

Without waiting for him to finish, the young girl had already approached the bed and pulled away the curtains, revealing a young woman in deep sleep. She had long, flowing dark hair laid out on the pillow, and eyelashes that brushed against her dark skin as her chest rose and fell with each breath. The priestess examined her for some moments, before withdrawing and turning to Zheng He.

“Do you have any medicine with you now?” She asked in Chinese, as the king and his advisor looked on keenly.

“Some grinded herbs, but why – ”

“Give them to me, please.”

Unwillingly, the admiral reached into his bag and took out a silk pouch, which he gave her. Taking it, the priestess asked for some water, into which she poured the herbs and told the servants to heat. “After she drinks this, she will be healed.”

The Zamorin was sceptical, but nonetheless handed the concoction to the doctor standing next to the patient’s bed, who reassured him that it would be checked for poison and any other dangerous substances. And so, with the royal physician’s reassurance, the king left with his visitors and advisors back into court.

Before long, it was night again. The king had welcomed his men joyously into the palace and proposed for them to stay a night as a token of thanks, for which the crew was grateful. Zheng He, being the admiral, was of course equally grateful, and thanked the king for providing accommodation for his men as well as for himself.

As he was about to go to bed, there was a knock at his door. He walked to the door hesitantly, before throwing it open and gaped.

To his astonishment, there stood the young princess of Kozhikode at his doorway, holding something. As soon as she saw him, the girl thrust the package in her arms towards the man, then mumbled something along the lines of thanks and bowed, expressing her gratitude. Afterwards, as he was about to tell her there was no such need, a warning flashed in her large brown eyes, and she uttered something sounding similar to “Yud-ham”.

At that, he was greatly confused. What did she meant? Sensing his puzzlement, the princess repeated the word again and again, until finally she gave a sound of frustration and pointed at his sword lying by his bedside, and mimicked the action of fighting.

Suddenly, he understood. “Is it...war?” He tried to imitate her actions, which she nodded at. Zheng tried again, shaping a crown in his hands to symbolise the king her father, which she reaffirmed.

The king is going to kill us. He realised the important message behind her actions, and just as he was about to ask for advice, there came another knock on the door again, which swung open to reveal the little priestess.

“Little girl,” Zheng sighed in exasperation and annoyance. “Do refrain from going into others’ businesses too much. It’s very rude.”

“There is no need to ‘go into others’ businesses’,” She replied. “The goddess had told me about everything.” Ignoring him, she turned immediately to the young princess, with whom she exchanged a few rapid words.

“The Zamorin plans to attack us during our sleep,” She interpreted. “The princess says to flee immediately, and to take our ships and escape. We must head back to China this instant, for when dawn comes, the Indian ships will easily overtake us.” The princess spoke again, and she continued, “Her sickness was a plot to lure us into our deaths. She came here to warn you because you had saved her life. The gift is a precious stone to protect you.” She pointed at the wrapped bundle in his hands.

His blood ran cold at the mention of a precious stone, and Zheng slowly unwrapped it, revealing a stone black as midnight.

As if reading his thoughts, the priestess muttered, “I feared as much. This is obsidian, which is supposed to protect the wearer according to Indian tradition. It is the exact same stone as that in your dream, am I correct?”

“Yes. But – ”

“There is no time.” Suddenly, the girl’s tone changed, and her expression hardened to that of new determination. “We must set sail tonight and pray for the goddess’ guidance. Wake Li, who will bring the ships to port while you keep the situation and your men under control. We need only three ships.”

“But the treasure fleet – ”

“There’s no time.” She repeated firmly. “Hurry, now.” After that, she walked out and disappeared into the dark corridors. Uncertainty gripped his mind, but a quick glance at the princess, who shot him a reassuring smile, calmed him, and Zheng moved quickly, but not before thanking her.

The woman’s smile, if possible, widened, though was twinged with a note of bitter-sweetness, which caused a familiar stir in his chest. Forcing it down, the admiral spared her one last glance, before hurrying to wake his men.

The next few days were a blur. As Zheng commanded the ships, his mind went back to the princess, then to his prophetic dream, then to the obsidian in his cabin, and finally to the disappearance of the priestess.

Where on earth was she? That night, he had gotten his entire crew on board, and waited until the first streaks of light started to appear before realizing the girl wasn't coming along, and with a pained heart, ordered his crew to set sail. While he didn't want to, Li, his faithful advisor, had urged him on, persuading him that the life of a girl wasn't worth the thousands aboard his ships. Thus, he had left Kozhikode with a heavy heart.

An encounter with the brown men will set the events in motion.

Her words after hearing of his dream echoed through his mind as he was glancing out to the horizon, and suddenly he understood. The encounter with the Zamorin and his daughter had brought the obsidian to him, which represented one of the choices in his dream.

But what of the jade?

Zheng suddenly had an ominous feeling about what was about to happen.

And it turned out to be correct. The minute he docked his ships at Nanjing, there came an order to arrest him immediately. Zheng had demanded an explanation, which was given to him only after an unfair trial was forced upon him.

Apparently, 'evidence' of an affair between him and his mistress, the Princess Dachang, had leaked out. She had accused him of forcing himself upon her, despite the immense trust placed upon him by the emperor, and an apparent 'letter' was read out in court as well, largely humiliating the eunuch, who was sentenced to death.

Zheng could only laugh hollowly at the entire situation, for what could he do? While it was true that he did *not* have an affair with Princess Dachang, a search of his belongings could possibly reveal his relationship with *her*, whom he could not put at risk. Thus, he could only keep his silence, and await his fate without struggle.

Fate apparently had other plans; however, when that night, a key turning at the door of his cell roused him. He opened his eyes groggily, prepared to look at the stern faces of the guards, when instead he saw *her* trying to let him out.

"Feiyan – ! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Shh!" She hushed him and glanced around, fearful of any incoming guards. As soon as the coast was clear, she opened the door in one swift motion, and started working on the shackles around his feet.

"But... why?"

"I cannot let you die on behalf of another woman," She replied fiercely, and tossed the heavy manacles back into the dreary cell. "The emperor wanted you gone, and therefore made up this nonsense about an affair with the princess. But I won't let you die, so I had come to rescue you. This way!"

As soon as his limbs were free of their confines, Feiyan pocketed the key and grabbed his hand, running out of the prison and out to the port of the palace. The moment they arrive, she started untying a small sailboat tied to a post, hands flying over the knots while Zheng stood paralyzed in shock, until he caught sight of something dangling from her sleeve.

“Feiyan...is that...?”

“Oh, this?” She looked up temporarily to answer his question, and fingered the piece of jade hanging from her sleeve. “It was a token to protect me. I have enough protection as it is, however, so I decided to give it to you. You’ll need it for your journey.”

The once-admiral received it silently, remembering the choice he was forced to make between the two stones and hesitated, but still pocketed it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Quick! Get into the boat. I have ordered maidservants to stock it with supplies, so you should be safe for a while until you reach land.” Feiyan paused, before adding, “Contact me at once after you are safe. When the time is right, we will meet again.” At that, she clasped his hand desperately. “Hurry, before it’s too late!”

That was the last Zheng saw of her, or anyone, for that matter. Despite him being an excellent sailor, the flimsy fishing boat couldn’t hold against the fury of nature, and a storm rocked the boat, before a wave that night swallowed it whole and the man could see no more.

And thus was his tale of voyage and treasure. Zheng He stared out to sea, wondering about the fate of the two women he had met on his travels, which he had already forgotten.

Alas, everything began with a memory...

Forward, Take On

St. Paul's Convent School, Cheung, Ka Yu – 16

The world beyond the safe zone has always intrigued me. I can imagine numerous lands which I cannot count even with all my fingers and toes combined; even more people to meet and friends to make.

“Curiosity kills the cat,” they say.

One will easily fall into the trap of a seemingly brighter, livelier unknown, and end up losing what one already has in possession. Family, wealth, name all you can. Because grass is always greener on the other side. Because you should be grateful for what you have; asking for any more would be considered discourteous.

I knew the adults were only talking big like this so nobody will die trying again, but what else was I supposed to think if all I had left was nothing but to be seen as a burden? Would anyone in this village come for me if I tried leaving? Or would they celebrate because they no longer had to deal with me?

“Brat! Dinner is ready are you coming or not?” Mrs. Chiu slammed open the door and barged in my room with a scowl. Dust bunnies flew, several worn-out books threatened to fall off the near-empty shelf. I did not remember when the last time I had seen her act was, in any way, pleasant to me; or rather, anyone at all. I remained sitting in the moldy corner of the room in hopes that she would be fed up and leave. I was only going to get bashed for being a “curse” and wasting their food anyway so there was no point for me to be there.

“God, are you even listening? You’re just like your parents. If only they listened maybe they would still be here and I don’t have to feed a useless good-for-nothing like you! Do you know how much of a burden you are? Our family’s money used to buy food for your filthy mouth could’ve been used to send all of my sons to school. I would’ve gotten rid of you a long time ago if not for the rubbish laws.”

She strode in front of me, looking down on me with a face full of disgust. “No one wants you here. I am going to leave you out to die on the street once you turn sixteen so I don’t have to see your sorry face again in my life,” she jabbed me on my forehead and left huffing.

She was right.

No one wanted me here.

No one in their right mind would ever want something that belonged in hell.

I did not eat dinner that night. The cold December wind howled and looked for prey to satiate its uncontrollable hunger while I laid beneath the thin, roughly knitted piece of cloth I called a blanket which hardly protected me from the cold. Darkness enveloped me as I descended into a dreamless slumber.

You can say it was my escape, a place more welcoming, a place where I can just unreservedly exist. Sometimes, I wondered if I could one day sleep and never have to wake up again.

The waves seemed especially energetic today. It must feel so delightful to be able to flow boundlessly. There were only lone fishermen on their long wooden sampans in shallow waters, casting nets and occasionally singing familiar tunes I could barely hear on the shore. They always brought back warm memories.

Father used to sing it when he went fishing as I stared in awe. Fish came into his net more often like that somehow, he told me it was the gods rewarding him for his singing. It sounded silly but of course, I

believed him.

Faint noise of the crowd came from the busier part of town, interrupting the tranquil atmosphere by the sea. I heard that a small fleet of boats docked, people rumoured that they were a small fraction of the emperor's magnificent treasure fleet. Ha, as if the heavenly emperor would even bat an eyelid at this insignificant little fishing village.

"Hello, the person over there? Hello!" Startled, I turned towards the unknown voice. A boy wearing beige hemp clothing which covered his knees was running towards me. Who was he? And why was he talking to me? What? I stepped back from the strange boy.

"Oh, please tell me you are a person, not a ghost!" He stopped metres in front of me and covered his eyes. I could tell he was peeking at me through the gaps between his fingers, it was quite a comical scene.

"Of course I am a person! Who are you? People usually don't stroll so far from town..."

"Really?" He hesitantly uncovered his eyes, "Um, my name is Yu and I am lost." A nervous laugh. "I came from the large group of boats that came today, they're like really really cool and— oh, I didn't mean to stray from the topic. Can you tell me how to get back to the pier and what's your name?"

"You want to know...who I am?" Was I hearing him correctly?

Yu nodded with enthusiasm.

"I am Zi Yuen, I live here." I attempted to give a smile, albeit a crooked one; I could only hope it did not come off as unfriendly.

Yu eagerly rambled away as I led him back to the pier. He came from a family of boat makers, his father was one of the many workers who helped make the massive fleet. His mother surprisingly was also knowledgeable in the area. While his family was not crucial members of the crew, the success of the voyage no doubt depended on the durability of the ships. "As long as there are people to repair the ship, it can be used forever," Yu quoted from his father with a rather smug grin. He must be proud of his father.

The market was packed. Besides the usual customers who analysed prices of goods non-stop and shopkeepers yelling about how their fish was the "freshest and liveliest, caught just this morning", a large crowd gathered around the coast, eyeing and pointing at the impressive fleet. They were only causing a ruckus in my opinion. Burly workers were loading cargo onto one of the medium-sized ships; I scoffed, how come "treasure fleets" were not fully prepared before they left the capital?

"Aiyah, how come you can forget cargo that the emperor specifically ordered to be brought on the ships?" A middle-aged official in silky red clothing with a black wushamao scolded a younger man as the two hurried along. "How do I explain to Master Zheng if we left these here, huh? Consider yourself lucky we haven't sailed off the continent yet!"

A sharp voice caught my attention, shivers went down my spine. "Hey! What are you doing here?" Mrs. Chiu was here. I froze. "Why are you going near the sea again? After all I've done for you, provided for you, you choose to curse me and my family?" I could feel people's gazes burn holes through my body. Of all places, she chose to make a scene here? "This is why your parents died. Because you are a curse. Go home with me, now." She spat and reached for my arm.

I recoiled from the wrathful contact.

No, I would not surrender any longer.

Yu pulled me away and started running for the docks. I did not know where I had gained the sudden confidence from, or if I followed Yu out of sheer spite with wild abandonment. Faces in the crowd were

blurry but at the same time, my vision seemed to become sharp like a hawk's. Colours mixed and burst in an iridescent kaleidoscope. It was as if life itself accelerated before my eyes.

Mrs. Chiu's menacing voice blended into the background as Yu and I hid, panting behind stacks of cargo.

"I think we managed to lose that crazy woman," Yu peeped at the crowd, "What are you gonna do now?"

The realisation struck me, "She is so going to kill me if I go back." This has been a double-edged sword since the start, I was doomed no matter what I chose to do. I trembled. "Can you possibly..." What was I thinking? "Take me with you?" Was I crazy when I thought of this?

"You what?" Yu's father was beyond bewildered upon hearing my plea.

"I swear I won't get into any trouble, I will do anything you ask of! Oh please, please bring me with you!" I was on the verge of breaking down as I spoke.

What if they think I would be a burden to them?

Yu's mother went up to her husband and whispered something indecipherable to Yu and I. Sounds of waves splashing on the side of the boat filled the cabin. Every second seemed to pass at a snail's pace while my heart raced. I could not bear to look at the couple further in fear of getting rejected.

No, please don't leave me alone.

Please don't leave me alone.

"Now that's more like it! Ah, I almost forgot, my dad told me to teach you so of the stuff that we do and show you around so you won't get lost. But I don't really want to today because it's getting near night anyway."

"Good. Let's just call it a day then!" I was tired anyway, both mentally and physically.

It totally was not because we were trying to slack off or anything.

I could not sleep despite the relaxing rocking from the waves. Night had fallen upon the fleet when we reunited with the rest. The majority of the crew seemed to be sound asleep, retreating into a private little world that solely belonged to themselves. Some were put on night duty, making sure nothing was in the wrong place or if we were ambushed by pirates or enemies alike.

The smell of salt that was brought to my face was even stronger as I went out of the cabin, I could have sworn I felt it crystallise on my skin. The view in front of me was nothing less of a revelation.

Hundreds of ships of all sizes lined up in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight. Lit oil paper lanterns adorned the sides of the ships which outlined them in the dark. I was greeted by the same flickering light no matter which direction I turned as if I was in a never-ending garden of fireflies. Their glow faintly reflected on the saltwater, glimmering along the movement of the waves. The lights were also like stars that fell from the heavens. Being surrounded by them made me feel like I was in a magical tale parents tell their young children who threw a tantrum when the subject of sleep was brought up.

It was beyond fascinating, I had never seen so many set sail together ever in my entire life. In addition, these were huge boats. I had to make sure this was not just another wild dream of mine.

It felt like there was a new sense of direction. Lights were guiding me towards it, even though I had no idea where or what was I even heading to.

I knew faintly but didn't at the same time, as if navigating through a maze with nothing but pure instinct.

The square sails were up, steady and unwavering. Would it be too much for me to ask for the same?

I let out a sigh of relief as I watched all sorts of treasures from our travels getting unloaded, my favourite had to be that humongous deer with a long neck the locals called a giraffe; I briefly wondered what the emperor would call it. All there was left to do was to transport these back to Beijing, it was not part of my job, so I decided to give myself some time to feel the solid ground under my feet again instead of a tilting deck.

"Zi Yuen, Zi yuen! Something's not good!" Yu came running and panting before I could give myself the luxury of loosening up.

"What happened this time?"

"I heard that the crowned prince wants to shut down the voyages, and you know the current emperor doesn't have much time left. To make things worse, he also plans to destroy all long-distance sailing boats," Yu dreaded.

"Let's be outlaws then," for whatever reason, determination filled my whole being. "We still have much to see and much to do, the world's so big after all. We'll need our own ship then, huh."

Yu laughed in disbelief, "Sure, let's start with the planks."

There was never a set rule to count how much you valued or what you deserved, but rather if you deserved what you have whether it was honour, wealth or fame. Maybe being true to yourself was enough.

Maybe the cat was not killed by its curiosity and landed on a soft cushion.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyage

St. Paul's Convent School, Leung, King Sze Casey – 15

Ever since the *haijin* imposed on the ports a few decades ago, nobody could travel to foreign countries, and those dreaming of a life of glorious maritime explorations were forced to quell their wanderlust, contenting themselves with the monotonous cycle of farming and fishing. The elders, upon one too many drinks, would speak in hushed voices the fascinating and curious lives of the outsiders, who lived in the foreign states and had darker skin than us and led very different lives, who were kind and hospitable and traded funny spices for our silk.

“That’s how your great-uncle disappeared, I presume,” my grandfather once revealed during New Year’s Eve, as we were staying up for the *shousui* gathering. “Got smitten by one of the outsiders’ ladies, didn’t come back. Stayed there, raised his family, with zero regard of his parents back in Ming who raised him painstakingly. You’d think he would at least write back, but no, he never sent us a letter. Your great-grandmother was worried sick. I’m ashamed to have such an unfilial man as my brother.” He sipped his cup of wine and glanced at me. “You look like your great-uncle,” he rumbled. “You resemble him greatly. Your personalities were similar as well.”

Having grown up listening to stories of maritime adventures, I had always craved the freedom of the seas. When I started working at the docks, I was thrilled to discover that one of the ships made secret biennial trips to the foreign states in the South Sea. I immediately joined their crew, hoping I would embark on my own little adventure on the sea. But I was soon disappointed: the ship had a ‘restraining order’ put on by the provincial government, after too many times of getting caught by the patrolling marines. In the words of the captain: “The officials told us that had we been better at hiding our trading goods, they would’ve turned a blind eye provided that we shared the profits with them; but since we were found out by the marines, they had to carry out the orders of the government ministers.”

So we were completely over the moon when we found out that Admiral Zhang was searching for ships that would accompany his fleet and traverse the seas to where he had to conduct court business. We were to travel to where the foreign Muslims dwelled; the nature of the trip was not disclosed to us, yet we rejoiced at the opportunity to exchange the uninteresting fishing port for an adrenaline-pumping expedition.

~*~

I was patrolling the deck when Zhang Xie yelled at me to get downstairs. “The admiral wants to see you.”

“Alright. Why though?”

“I dunno.” He patted me on the back. “The naval officers just told me to get you, they didn’t tell me why.”

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach as I approached the admiral’s room. What was it? Was the food bad? Were we sailing too slowly? Did he – heaven forbid – find a rat and wish to complain?

The fantasies of gaining riches and glory was quickly ripped apart: the hired fishing vessels were forbidden to mention their travels to anyone. From the gossip among the other hired sailors, we learned that the imperial fleet was attacked by *Wokou* near Quanzhou, and although Admiral Zheng was safe, and their goods unharmed, their fleet was badly battered, the sailors severely wounded. Had the admiral returned to the capital, he would be immediately labelled a weakling and the mission a failure by ministers, and all naval exchanges by the central government would be halted. He was reluctant to give up all he had accomplished, for he knew that going back would mean being stripped of his title as Admiral, and he would have to return to being a lowly eunuch; and after a heated argument with Vice Admiral Wang Jinghong, his second-in-command, he visited the fishing ports in Guangdong, recruiting seamen who would not be averse to a years-long trip to the southern foreign states. He was determined to continue his court-ordained exploration and preserve his status.

The admiral was rather decent. He was quite apologetic about the secrecy ordeal, and paid us an extremely profitable amount for joining his crew. He had also gone on each hired ship, insisting on getting to know each sailor personally so that he could properly thank us. When he was making a speech on our ship, he had caught a glimpse of the large box labelled ‘SILK FOR TRADE’ that we had neglected to hide; he simply raised an eyebrow, turned the other way and resumed his speech.

Yet the other ships had not informed us that as part of the ‘get to know my crew better’ plan, the admiral would sleep over at each individual ship; and when he had announced that he would be taking his

repose on our ship, we had been whipped into a frenzy, for our humble vessel was indistinguishable from a rubbish dump – not exactly ideal sleeping conditions for the highly-ranked admiral. The captain's room was hurriedly vacated, and the men were ordered not to drink to appear more of a proper crew and less of a drunkards' commune. We had performed our assigned tasks with an unprecedented enthusiasm, as if to reassure the admiral that we were completely unfazed by the unexpected turn of events.

It was concerning how disorganized we were. Within the two *shichen* the admiral and his company boarded our ship, we had managed to burn the feast prepared for them, made crude and unseemingly references without realizing the admiral's company was standing nearby, and had addressed Admiral Zheng without the correct titles, more than once. The admiral had been lenient with us and tolerated our misconduct, but I had witnessed, on more than one occasion, Vice Admiral Wang giving us the stink eye.

As I descended the dek towards the captain's – now Admiral Zheng's – room, I pondered over the reason why I had been called. I was not an important figure in the running of this ship, and I was not in charge of anything in particular. The only contact I had had with the admiral's company was when I was pouring them a measure of wine; I had caught the admiral's gaze as I offered a wine cup to him. His brows had furrowed slightly before quickly smoothing out. Perhaps he had deemed the wine I served to be too cheap and was now summoning me to reprimand me about it.

I reached the room and knocked on the door. A soft "Come in" floated up from behind the door.

I shut the door and surveyed the room. The admiral, seated at the wooden desk, was the model of grace and elegance of the court, a stark contrast to the roughly hewn cabin. He was accompanied by Vice Admiral Wang, who stood behind him.

"Chen Xiaojia." the admiral's voice had a curious lilt, perhaps influenced by his native *Dian* dialect. "Aged nineteen, has been working on this ship for 5 years. Tell me, child, where do you hail from?"

"A small village in Guangdong, Admiral. About 200 *li* from the Guangzhou ports."

"How very... interesting." He gestured towards the Vice Admiral, who presented him with a scroll. Admiral Zheng unrolled the scroll and inclined his head slightly. "Come closer, child. Do you recognize this person?"

I bent over to inspect the scroll. It was a portrait of an elderly man. His visage showed Chinese features, yet his skin was darker. His unkempt hair framed his lined face. His eyes, however, stood out the most: coldness and cruelty shone out of them. His gaze struck an unrecognizable fear in my chest, even though I had no idea who he was. This was definitely an old man I would not want to cross.

"He looks Chinese, but his skin is darker than the average Chinese man. Is he a *huayi* living in the southern states? They receive more sunlight there; his skin would turn darker as a result."

The admiral nodded in approval. "A reasonable guess, but you have still not identified this individual. Perhaps you would be more familiar with his name; would the name Chen Zuyi ring a bell?"

My blood ran cold. Chen Zuyi was a bit of a legend among the men at the docks, his name only to be spoken in hushed whispers, as if they feared he would someone hear them and unleash his wrath on them. A pirate of the southern states, he was originally a sailor from Guangzhou – from our dock, even – who went rogue during a trading journey to the south. He had mutinied, along with a few of his crewmates, and murdered the captain., throwing the first mate overboard. After claiming the ship for himself, the pirate had raided ports and cities, killing its residents and robbing their wealth. On more than one occasion he had set fire to entire cities; a rumour spoke of the pirate setting fire to a palace while staring directly in the eyes of the monarch, watching him completely break down before ordering his men to throw the sobbing king into the fire. The *huayi* had written to the central government, begging them to stop the pirate from wreaking havoc onto their cities and ports. There was quite the commotion in the Ming capital; ministers were furious that Chen Zuyi would inflict such terrors on his fellow Chinese, and ordered the navy to bring the pirate back, preferably alive, so justice could be executed on Chinese soil, "bringing an end to this degenerate who had stained the noble reputation of the great Ming".

That was four decades ago. Since the navy had returned empty-handed, most people had assumed that Chen Zuyi had received his retribution at the hands of the navy. His name was not as widely spread among the public as it was previously; I had only learned of this person when I started working at the docks. We had believed that the infamous pirate had died, yet somehow the person in the portrait was Chen Zuyi.

"How... what? But I thought he'd died; wasn't he killed by the navy?"

The vice admiral's face was grim. "Quite the contrary. He had defeated our navy, and slaughtered the majority of our fighters. The ships that returned to Quanzhou barely escaped the jaws of death. The death toll of the mission was unprecedented, and the risks were considered too high for us to send another

fleet after Chen. Have you noticed how few ships had returned? The rest had perished in the battle with Chen; they were forced to cover it up by ‘promoting’ the deceased officers to ambassadors to the southern states, insisting that was the reason they had not returned. Had the public realized the actual fate of those officers, there would have been an uproar.”

“Chen had been mostly keeping to himself in the past four decades,” Admiral Zheng continued, “but we have received reports that he is resuming his raids on cities. We have been ordered to bring back the pirate, to put an end to his despotic rule of the southern ports. However, there are other issues we need to address. Here is a portrait of Chen Zuyi in his youth; it was painted when the navy captured him, before he escaped their ship and launched an attack on the fleet.”

I took the portrait gingerly and examined it carefully. Chen Zuyi looked younger and paler, although his gaze kept the same intensity. There was something familiar about his face, as if I had seen it somewhere before.

“Now, Chen Xiaojia, turn around. What do you see?”

I followed the admiral’s instructions and faced a mirror.

“There’s a mirror, Admiral. And, well, my face’s in it, and—”

Wait.

I glanced at my reflection. Then at the portrait in my hand. Then at my reflection. Then at the portrait again.

“Chen Xiaojia, don’t you think you resemble Chen Zuyi greatly? How peculiar... and when the navy had inquired of his hometown, did you know he gave the same answer as you did? A small village in Guangdong, about 200 *li* from the Guangzhou ports. And you share the same last name as well... how very peculiar...”

Terrified, I turned around to defend myself, and met the blade of the vice admiral. “I don’t know him, Admiral! I don’t know who Chen Zuyi is... I know his name but I don’t know him—”

“Silence!” the vice admiral barked, his eyes flaming. “Keep your excuses to yourself; I don’t want to hear them.”

“Answer me truthfully, Chen Xiaojia.” the admiral stood up and walked towards us. “Are you affiliated with Chen Zuyi in any way?”

“No! I’m not! I’ve never heard of this person until I started working at the docks! Nobody in my family had mentioned a Chen Zuyi before! I—”

A memory flashed through my brain. The *shousui* gathering. Grandfather grumbling about his brother who never returned home. Him looking at me and saying “You look like your great-uncle.”

“It’s my great-uncle! My grandfather said he had left home to live in the southern states four decades ago and had not written back ever since. It’s him! I know it’s him!”

“You’re doing a great job of convincing us that you’re innocent, kid,” the vice admiral snarled.

“Jinghong,” the admiral said softly. I could not glean an inkling of his thoughts through his guarded face.

Admiral Zheng and Vice Admiral Wang had a silent conversation with their eyes before Admiral Zheng turned to me. “Chen Xiaojia, I do not think you are innocent. However, we currently have too little evidence to convict you of anything. You shall remain on this ship until we reach our destination, then you will leave our crew. Have a nice day.” Then, he exited the room, followed by the vice admiral, leaving me to my jumbled thoughts.

New Tales of Ming Treasure Voyage

St. Paul's Convent School, Tan, Kai Shuang – 16

“Load up! They leave soon!”

Cries echoed, as men carried chests of treasure onto the ship. The proud sails were red, for good luck. The weather was bright, yet windy enough for a good course.

The wind tugged on Yi Ping's hair, as he stared at the horizon. He will grow sick of it in the next few years. Hua Ping cooed, fluffing her feathers.

“Take care, old friend.”

Yi Ping plastered on his best grin. “You won't even know I'm gone.”

“That is a lie.”

“You'll hear from me swiftly, and will be annoyed at me as if I were with you.”

“I trust you to write the most annoying letters.”

“Don't worry, really. That friend I told you about, he'll be with me. I met him during my first few voyages. He is a good friend. We've been together ever since then, and never separated. It will be great, with him.”

“Yi Ping! Everyone is almost ready now. Hurry!” Someone bellowed.

Yi Ping laughed. “That's my cue.”

Zi Yan didn't hide a smile. “You better get going. Time and tide wait for no man.” Zi Yan clasped Yi Ping's shoulder.

Yi Ping gripped Yan's arm. “I'll be back soon.”

“Please don't, this course will last for a few years.”

“Then please contain your longing for my brilliant personality.”

Zi Yan flashed him a sad smile.

With one more wave, Yi Ping hailed two crewmen to carry his chests up, then took Hua Ping's cage himself.

“See you soon, *Sire!*” Yi Ping yelled again.

Zi Yan gave one last wave before turning around. Yi Ping finally boarded the *Ming Yan*.

No one noticed a figure that darted onto the ship, quickly and swiftly.

★

Rui Qing was nobody.

Her aunt was keen on reminding her.

“Eat that up quickly, Jia Qing! I'll feed that to the dogs if you don't hurry, you brat!” Her aunt shouted.

“That's not my name.” Rui Qing replied gloomily, eyeing the bowl of stale leftovers.

“Well you're lucky to have me, you cursed child. I'll call you whatever I want,” Her aunt replied, snarky. “Your parents couldn't even name you properly.”

Something sharp pierced her; and in her, something bled. She gritted her teeth, slammed the bowl against the table and stormed out.

“So rude! Ungrateful even!” Her aunt admonished. “You are no lady!”

“That doesn't bother me!” Rui Qing screamed back, slamming the out door.

“Don't go out in your rags!”

Rui Qing was already gone. She was on the streets, ignoring the whisperings and stares of the passer-by. The sound of a commotion reached her ears, she followed the noise. She inched closer to the crowd, trying to work out the cacophony. She looked around, and saw it.

The magnificent beast of a ship floated proudly near port. Shouting men ran around, carrying goods and loading them on. Mesmerized, she joined the crowd, admiring the ship.

What would it feel like..

To leave?

To be... free?

The thought seized her. She thought of her aunt who never liked her; the room that never felt like her room, the home that never felt like home; her parents, whose faces are blurry in her mind, who never came back, who loved her enough to leave her...

She forced and wove her way through the crowd, undoing her hair and making it manlier. She looked at herself: ratty, enough to pass off as a male. She got to the first line of the crowd and mimicked the men at work –hurried footsteps, busy.

“All aboard! She is going to leave!”

Rui Qing ignored the thumping in her chest and darted up the board, quickly and swiftly. The board was retracted; the rope was flung back, the sails were adjusted and the ship came to life.

The crowd cheered as the boat left port. Rui Qing, in her hiding place, stared at the disappearing port as the wind pushed them away from shore. Picked up by the wind, she was freed.

★

“As I was saying—”

“What lovely weather we have! Those weathermen weren’t helpful.” Yi Ping leaned on Tian Jie, smiling.

Tian Jie tutted him immediately, “Don’t say things like that, you’ll jinx us.”

“You’re no fun, Jie, where is your bravery?” frowning, Yi Ping shoved him playfully.

Tian Jie yelped as he almost got pushed off the railing. “Watch it, stop trying to kill me!”

“Oi, Ping! Stop fooling around, come help us!” A voice called out, impatient.

“Watch it, Lei Ning, that’s Captain Yi Ping to you!”

“Go, puppy,” Tian Jie shoved him. Yi Ping stuck his tongue out in retaliation.

The sound of retching then caught Tian Jie’s attention. He turned and found himself staring at the scrawniest boy with a sickly colouring, wiping his mouth.

“You alright?”

The boy’s head whipped up lightning-quick, expression fearful. “No— Yes! Yes! I’m fine!”

“Doubt so, you better see Guo Yang; he has remedies for motion sickness.” Tian Jie herded him, putting his arm around the boy’s shoulder. The boy flinched.

“Oh! Sorry, are you—”

“No! Uh, It’s nothing! I’m alright!” the boy’s voice went high before going back to normal.

“My apologies, this must be your first voyage. You’re quite tense,” Tian Jie couldn’t help smiling. “You remind me of—Oh, mind the steps—the time I met Ping...I have no manners, your name?”

The boy, hesitantly, replied, “Rui...He.”

“Welcome to— Guo Yang! This is Rui He and he’s quite poorly; whip something up for him, if you’d please.”

“How unfortunate, wait,” Guo Yang was a pleasant young man who worked in the infirmary with two beds, filled with jars of unidentified dried herbs.

“Sit and rest, Rui He,” Tian Jie grinned. “I have to tend to our Captain.”

“As you always do,” Guo Yang returned, wearing a mischievous grin.

Tian Jie rolled his eyes and went back up.

★

“We sail for the West,” Tian Jie pointed at the map with his chopsticks. “We are currently here,” pointing to another point. “We’ll move like this—” moving up, “—To Western shore. There, we make friends with foreign dignitaries, exchange goods and be nice. That means no stabbing anyone.”

Lei Ning harrumphed.

“And that also means no making fun of anyone. I’m looking at you two,” Tian Jie continued.

The twins only grinned and shrugged.

“And please, don’t make us look bad.”

“I do no such thing. And that’s Captain Yi Ping to you,” Yi Ping crossed his arms, pouting.

“That’s right, *Captain Yi Ping*, our highest ranking officer, don’t mess this up,” Tian Jie shot him a look.

Yi Ping blushed. “I’ll do my best.”

“Can I visit the local marketplaces to study the medicine and remedies? To further my collection,” Guo Yang immediately asked.

“I’ll jot that—”

“We should also get some books. Might be useful in the future,” Yu Fen chimed in.

“Got it—”

“Let’s explore the marketplace together, for trinkets for Zi Yan!” Yi Ping shot up.

“That’s Sire to you, and fine, we can go,” Tian Jie narrowed his eyes.

“He doesn’t mind, we’re great friends.”

“We will be properly ashore?” Rui He piped up, curious.

“We will, is there anything you want to do?” Tian Jie smiled encouragingly.

★

Rui Qing’s heart thumped furiously. She was free. Free to roam, to anywhere she fancied. Free.

"I..." She started. "I...uh...want to go where you go," she finished lamely.

"That's fair; this is, after all, a foreign land. Stay in groups, everyone!" Tian Jie nodded. "Heng Qi, you want anything?"

The muscular man next to Guo Yang shook his head.

"Good! For now, meeting ends here. Good night!"

Everyone then evacuated the dining room, in favour of conversing, smoking, and gambling up on the deck. Ruo Qing followed, but felt hands on her shoulders. The twins grinned at her.

"Hello, I never introduced myself, I'm Ye Nan," the taller boy started.

"I'm You Peng, you're new?" the other boy inquired.

"Uh, yes, this is my first. I'm not too sure how this works." Her voice grew smaller the minute. "I forgot! I'm—"

"We know that," Ye Nan patted her, leading her deeper into the corridor.

"And we are going to show you all the fun things, all the hiding places here," You Peng grinned.

★

Weeks passed in bliss never experienced. You Peng and Ye Nan were great friends and together they explored everywhere. They lay underneath the stars, singing songs, learning knots and foreign languages. In the faint illumination of the stars, she swam in a state of unprecedented warmth.

She also got to know the crew. The banter between Yi Ping and Tian Jie; the intense herbal smell Guo Yang has; Yu Fen's animated tales and stories; Heng Qi's strong silent presence; Lei Ning's wickedly sharp wit. These details grew on her; she clung onto the familiarity and the newfound belonging.

Thinking of her parents, something wistful grew in her. Her omnipresent frustration gave way to a watery sadness that sloshed around in her. Thinking of her aunt who despised her and her parents, her heart hardened at once.

Nothing stopped the liquid melancholy from spilling out her eyes, sliding down, cold against her skin, colder in the wind.

"Homesick?"

She turned around, wiping her tears. Boys don't cry.

It was Yu Fen, looking concerned. "It's normal, for your first voyage. There's no shame in that."

He joined her against the sides of the ship, in the biting wind. "When I first sailed, I cried every night, thinking of my family. It took me too long to realize, while carried away by loss, I didn't notice my gain. I left my family; I have also gained another..."

"I don't come from a happy family," Rui Qing admitted.

Yu Fen put an arm around her, "Sorry you didn't have a childhood you deserved, but forget about that life. You have a new life, a new family, us!"

Rui Qing wiped the last of her tears and nodded.

"The past can no longer hurt you; we are men of the present time."

Rui Qing glanced at Yu Fen gratefully, "Let's go back in, the wind is rising."

True enough, the sea rumbled; waves crashed into each other, growing restless. They fought, and bled, dotting the black night with white.

★

Morning, an uneasy air penetrated the atmosphere.

"Fix those sails," Tian Jie barked at the crew.

"Quit the paranoia, Jie, let them breathe," Yi Ping yawned.

"No," Tian Jie hissed, "It's getting cold; don't you see those clouds? Get to work, *Captain*, secure the office and man the wheel."

Finally realizing the severity of the current state, Yi Ping complied immediately. Soon, the crew members were running around the deck, trying to be in several places at once.

Time moved slowly, everyone was cotton-limbed, in slow motion; but time moved quickly, the angry clouds sped towards them, full force, top acceleration. It was surreal, horrendous; their reality.

★

Bullet-like raindrops came with the storm. It fell from the grey, darkening skies, onto the ship, the floorboards, making loud resounding echoes. The wind pushed them around; toying lazily. The waves were hungry for destruction, shoving the *Ming Yan* back, forth; silver blood spilling.

Soaked inside out, Rui Qing couldn't see properly in this storm. She could only hear the shrieking wind, and distorted barking from Tian Jie. Fear and anxiety gnawed on her.

The ship was shaking and quaking, rocking roughly. Everyone clung onto the ship, as Tian Jie and Yi Ping tried to steer the ship, maintain their course, but the winds were working against them.

The storm was gaining strength; the crew of *Ming Yan* were growing weaker as they persisted. Rui Qing wondered if this is the end.

“Adjust your sails!” Tian Jie cried. “We’re getting off course! She will hold, faith!”

You Peng yanked the rope, knocking into Rui Qing, sending her sideways, over the railings.

The rope slipped out of her grip, like an eel.

With a shout, she plummeted, straight down.

She only registered a cold splash and loud silence.

The winds laughed, howling.

★

“Oh no! What have you—”

“Jump in! What are you waiting for!”

★

“Get him to Guo Yang, hurry!”

“Run!”

★

“What happened?”

“Fell into water!”

“Get the blankets, Peng, quickly! We need to— Oh heavens!”

“What are you— oh God.”

“Stop ogling—Don’t ogle hi— her, get clothes too! Now!”

★

Rui Qing first registered the cocooning warmth; then slowly, she opened her eyes. She couldn’t remember. Memories were hazy glitches of sensations and feelings.

“How are you?”

She jumped in her bed and turned to the voice.

Guo Yang, her brain supplied.

“You fell... the sea...in bed since...fished out...Hypothermia, nasty...alright?”

She fell...

In the sea...

The cycle of events struck her and all the missing gaps were filled.

...Does that mean...?

“Rui He?”

She opened her mouth to speak.

“Do you know...?” Her voice cracked.

He looked away, blushing, nodded.

“The captain... would like to see you.”

“So we shall,” Rui Qing ignored the dread in her stomach that threatened to consume her. She slipped out of bed, trying to steady herself. Guo Yang immediately held her up.

“Sit, I’ll find you some slippers.”

The dread only grew as she sat back onto the bed, wishing she hadn’t woken at all.

★

It didn’t take Guo Yang too long to find slippers; it didn’t take them too much time to reach the dining room.

When she entered with Guo Yang, the merriment ceased; all excitement died.

She was seated on one side of the circular table, while everyone was clustered on the other side, with Captain Yi Ping in the middle: eyes slanted, his gaze piercing.

She felt small. Fear ate her alive. Clutching her hands underneath the table, she refused to let her face betray her.

“You lied to us,” Yi Ping started, voice hard like steel. “Tell the truth, who are you?”

All eyes were on her. The twins’ gazes were questioning, unbelieving; Heng Qi was visibly shaken; Guo Yang refused to meet her eyes; Yu Fen looked pained; Lei Ning had a stormy, unreadable look; Tian Jie’s mouth was pressed in a troubled line.

She looked at her hands, breathed deeply.

“First...I’m called Rui Qing...and I’m no spy, if that’s what you are asking. I was fed up with my life, and I wanted to change it. I ran away, on a whim, and ended up here. I wanted to be free, and so I found you lot...a place to belong, a home. But at the end of the day, I am just a girl, I’m nobody... Do what you will, I am already satisfied.”

The table was silent.

Yi Ping started, “I sympathize, but I will have to—”

“I’ll personally fight you if you report her,” Lei Ning stood up with a clatter.

Yi Ping made a hysterical noise. “Then what am I going to do?! We all might get executed for condoning this—”

“This is not the matter of a stowaway, but whether you would hand out a crew member to the court, for the sake of rules. She is one of us, you cannot deny that. I remember being just like her: running from my past, and I found you, while roaming the seas. How glad I felt then, when I realized there was indeed a place for me...Are we going to betray her... like this?” Anger seeped into his tone.

“But she deceived us, betrayed us first,” Yi Ping replied, bitter.

There was silence again.

“I sold your coat that time,” Ye Nan started. “You didn’t report me.”

“Minor issue.”

“You took the blame when I lost that trunk from South-East,” Yu Fen added.

“You are my responsibility.”

“And she is yours too,” Lei Ning continued. “She is a part of us.”

Yi Ping slumped in his chair. “Tian Jie, I now can only depend on you to be sensible and—”

“No, you can’t.”

“What?”

Tian Jie looked firmly into Yi Ping’s eyes, “Because I was too, a stowaway before. Remember? You vouched for me...”

Yi Ping looked away. “Thought you forgot about it.”

“How can I forget? I would not forget such a thing: you changed my life. You saved me... I was foolish for not speaking up first, but don’t do it, Ping. She will definitely die if you report her. As Lei Ning said,” Tian Jie turned to look at her, eyes reminiscing.

“She is our responsibility. We cannot turn her away. You’ve broken the rules before, does it matter if you break it again?”

Yi Ping looked devastated. Silence descended upon them again.

Rui Qing’s dread was now replaced by a small flickering hope.

Considering, Yi Ping started again, “I’ll report the storm and injuries; I’ll leave out the stowaway part. But how...?”

“Say you picked ‘him’ up, thinking ‘he’ would be good help,” Yu Fen suggested.

“Or you miscalculated the numbers,” Yu Peng grinned. “Twins.”

“You have the power to do it, you know?” Tian Jie squeezed Yi Ping’s hand. “You are captain, after all. You could also pull favours from your good friend.”

Yi Ping scrunched his face up.

“I’ll do what I can.” He finally said, “I’ll write to Zi Yan about it. He’ll get over it; he has a few years to stomach that. We’ll all be fine.” He announced firmly. “Rui Qing, you’ll be fine too.”

Tian Jie grinned. The twins whooped. Lei Ning joined them, jumping around the room. Yu Fen smiled at her. Heng Qi pat her shoulder. Guo Yang apologized about his disrespect; blushing, Rui Qing waved it off with an awkward smile. Yi Ping groaned about the extra paperwork, only to be shoved by various crew members.

Mirth returned to the dining room, filling the room once more. Amidst the loud joy, surrounded by a family to call hers, her heart was warmed. Joy was not in the freedom she sought.

Outside, the gentle wind hummed a happy note.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

West Island School, Mak, Clovis – 14

Li Zhong woke up to the sound of crashing waves smashing into his warship. He was the commander of one of the many warships in Admiral Zheng He's armada. The massive fleet had left the city of Nanjing 2 months ago, carrying gold, silk, and other treasures to be gifted to foreign countries as a show of wealth and power. Li Zhong joined his second-in-command Yang Han on the starboard side of the deck, watching as the mighty waves continued to pummel the wooden sides of the ship. Their mission was to protect the huge treasure boats at all costs; Those ships were gigantic – each one over one hundred metres long and fifty metres wide; However their precious cargo was to be defended by smaller but more maneuverable warships like the one Li Zhong commanded. The journey so far was peaceful and nothing was out of the ordinary, except for one sighting of a pirate fleet, but the treasure fleet continued on past the pirates, as if they were invisible. Everyone was prepared for a long and exciting journey, hungry for adventure.

Ahead of them, the fleet started turning left towards the coastline, signaling a visit to the local region. The fleet had already stopped at 3 destinations before this, each time with servants and soldiers bringing some of the goods ashore to gift and trade. All 3 times the servants came back with valuable objects and materials, with one country even sending a diplomatic envoy to sail with the Chinese. Yang Han yawned, and said: "This may turn out to be more boring than I expected. I'm starting to wish for somebody to attack our ships so we can actually do something". Li Zhong laughed and replied: "It's better to be bored and safe than to be lying at the bottom of the ocean with your body split open by a cannonball!" Yang Han groaned in reply. A sailor walked up to Li Zhong and bowed deeply, before standing up straight and reporting: "The admiral wishes for Commander Li to join him on his ship." Li Zhong acknowledged him, and called for a smaller vessel to bring him to the treasure ship which Zheng He commanded.

As Li Zhong strode into one of the large rooms used for meetings between the admiral and other officers, he was surprised to see that there was only one other officer in the room apart from Zheng He. Usually when the admiral called a meeting most officers would be summoned; This would be a special case. Commander Huang Yitian sat at the back of the room, with an empty seat next to him, and Zheng He sat with his back facing the door, looking down at a map. Li Zhong walked a couple steps past the admiral, bowed, and sat down next to Huang Yitian. Zheng He looked up from his map, and announced: "In 3 days we will be arriving on the western coast of Ceylon. You two will accompany me to bring our gifts to the Alagakkonara family there." Li and Huang both bowed and agreed. Li Zhong went back to his ship, and notified Yang that he would be in charge of his ship in his absence. Yang Han asked: "Why do you think the admiral would personally go to bring gifts and also bring two high ranking officers with him? Does he expect a large opposition or someone very important like the royal family?" Li replied: "We will be meeting this Aqa-Aka-Ala something family, which is a powerful feudal family there. They have several family members and relatives in important positions in the country. Maybe the admiral just wishes to be more careful dealing with such powerful people." Yang muttered "Hmm...", and then both men stood silently, watching the tall mountains ahead slowly approach for a couple of minutes, before returning to their rooms.

Soon the announcement was made for the fleet to arrive at the nearest port; Li and Huang were busy making preparations for their trip, as Zheng He organised a select amount of goods to be brought as gifts. By the time all the servants and guards had brought everything ashore, the three officers were already waiting in a nearby pavilion, discussing the details of their trip. After half an hour Zheng He announced: "Let us go now.", and with that, the caravan of soldiers, servants, and carts of gifts started moving forward slowly towards the Alagakkonara residence. As they marched closer and closer towards the centre of the port city, their surroundings slowly became more and more luxurious. Near the coast, most houses were only small huts, with little decoration, but as they advanced inland, houses soon became large, carefully designed and decorated buildings, some even having spectacular gardens and water fountains. Not long after they saw their destination; a massive grand residence with several courtyards around 3 main buildings. In front of them was a line of polished stone steps, that led up to the courtyard of the largest and grandest building. The gates above the stairs opened, and two servants appeared, beckoning them into the courtyard.

The courtyard was a beautiful area with hundreds of different types of grass, trees, and flowers, and in the center was a tall metal statue of a general on a horse. The servants led them into the guest room of the main building, and told them to sit and wait. Huang Yi Tian muttered underneath his breath: "What a nice way to greet important guests...". Li Zhong looked at him meaningfully and shook his head. The admiral, however, merely sat there patiently, without any sign of emotion on his face. After half an hour of waiting, the door opened once again and a man walked into the room, flanked by 6 servants. He had a dark bushy beard, intense brown eyes and wore a large colourful piece of fabric around his waist, with a large bulky looking jacket on his upper body. He looked at the Chinese officers distastefully, and asked: "What do you want? We are very busy and have important businesses to attend to." Now even the admiral looked surprised at this show of disrespect. He replied: "We are here to send gifts from our emperor, to show the might and power of China.". The man's eyebrows shot up, and he angrily proclaimed: "I am a government minister, part of the Alagakkonara family, and you suggest that we need your gifts from your country? How dare you! Guards, please send our guests out!". Two doors opened from each side of the room and armed guards flooded in. They pointed their spears and crossbows at the Chinese envoy and slowly pushed them back towards the door. Li Zhong and Huang Yi Tian jumped out of their seats in fury and demanded the guards treat their admiral politely, but the guards ignored them and kept pushing everyone out. The Chinese soldiers outside the room heard the commotion, drew their weapons and charged in, forming a protective circle around Zheng He and the two officers. Now they were at a stalemate, soldiers and guards facing off, with their commanders watching behind them. Zheng He looked around the room one more time, with his gaze finally settling on the minister's face. He maintained that stare until the man looked uncomfortable, before ordering his men to leave and return to the fleet, saying: "It seems like we are unwelcome here."

On the way back, Li Zhong and Huang Yi Tian were noisily cursing the minister and his family until Admiral Zheng turned around and ordered them to stop talking. The gifts of precious goods remained untouched, and from then on everyone remained silent until they returned to their own ships. Yang Han rushed up to Li, and asked, "How did it go?" Li replied: "That little rat rejected our gifts, and threw us out. His guards even followed us out until we could no longer see that stupid mansion of theirs." Yang Han looked shocked, and asked: "Is the admiral furious now? He must be, right?" Li answered: "You know the admiral, he always seems to be calm. On the way back he seemed to be deep in thought, so I think he's probably thinking of a way to get back at that family for treating our nation with such disrespect. He needs to let those people know the strength of our empire! One day the admiral will get back at that minister!"

After several more months of travelling, Admiral Zheng announced that the armada would turn around and return to China. As the massive fleet slowly backtracked their route, what were once stranger lands and sights became familiar stops, with crew, officers, and servants each having their own special memories and experiences as they passed. As they no longer stopped at each of the destinations, their journey back was much quicker than the first part of the treasure voyage. However as they got close to their homeland, the fleet came across an unwelcome sight. A small line of cargo ships were ablaze, with sailors frantically jumping into the chilly ocean to escape the columns of fire. Commander Li's Brave Dragon, Commander Huang's Bright Phoenix and several other warships were sent to investigate. The rest of the treasure armada was ordered to stay out of sight and hidden. As they got closer to the scene of disaster they could see dozens of smaller ships surrounding the burning cargo ships. Through the smoke, dark figures climbed on and off the cargo ships, bringing loads of expensive goods, weapons, and stockpiled food with them. Further in the distance, much larger ships could be seen, all of them bristling with cannons. At once, the officers knew this was the doing of a pirate fleet. Huang Yi Tian returned to the treasure fleet and reported to the Admiral that it was the same pirate fleet they had spotted not long after leaving Nanjing. The admiral ordered the fleet to make a stop, and brought several officers with him to the nearest islands to search for information about the pirate fleet; Meanwhile, Commander Li was ordered to watch the pirates for any sign of attack, and not to let them escape.

After two hours Zheng He returned to the fleet and called a meeting between his military officers. He announced: "Local fisherman have provided me information: These are pirates led by Chen Zu Yi, and they have controlled this area for several years. We are to destroy this pirate fleet, and bring their commanders back to China to answer for their crimes." He then began to explain their battle strategy, and ordered all the warship crews to battle stations. Then they became to patiently wait until dusk. Chen's pirate fleet had been anxiously moving in a loose line within sight of Li Zhong's warships. Yet as time passed, and the Chinese ships showed no sign of allowing them to leave, they became increasingly aggressive. The pirate fleet started moving closer and closer to Li Zhong's line of ships, and looked ready to attack at any time.

Admiral Zheng made careful note of their movement and as the pirate ships started pushing the Commander's warships closer and closer to the coastline, ordered Li Zhong to engage.

Back on the Brave Dragon, the Admiral's battle plan and order had been received by Li Zhong. Li shouted out to his crew: "Gunners, open fire on the pirate fleet. Deputy Yang, signal the other warships in our line to attack the pirates as well. Helmsman, line us up parallel to the coast to allow more cannons to be effectively fired." As the sudden volley of cannonballs were flung across the sea towards Chen Zu Yi's pirate fleet, the pirates fired back, sending wave upon wave of deadly projectiles back at the Chinese fleet. The marksmanship of Chinese gunners were superior to the pirate gunners, and the result showed; Within minutes two pirate ships were shattered apart by the brutal force of the Chinese cannons, pirates from both ships frantically swimming towards the remainder of their fleet. However, only a small portion of the warships escorting the Chinese treasure ships were sent out as an initial scouting; The majority remained with the treasure ships, directly under Admiral Zheng's command. Unfortunately for the Chinese, this meant that Li Zhong's ships were outnumbered greatly by the pirate fleet; Their marksmanship, weapons and armour were superior, but the pirate fleet still had the advantage. Several Chinese warships were now on fire, and had to retreat closer and closer to the coast. However, the pirate ships did not know about the remainder of the warships; Zheng He had made sure of that, keeping the rest of his armada out of sight. But on the other hand, Zheng He had sent out a small patrol boat, barely in sight of the pirates, to monitor the battle. Therefore the admiral knew exactly what was happening, and had devised a plan to defeat and capture the pirates. After half an hour of close observation, Zheng ordered most of the remaining warships to take down the Chinese flag, most of the cannons to be temporarily stowed away, and for all of the soldiers to remain below deck, unseen. He left a small amount of warships to guard the treasure ships, and led his line of disguised warships out towards the raging battle.

The pirate fleet and the initial Chinese warships were still furiously fighting against each other with all their might. The appearance of Zheng He's large, unknown fleet surprised the pirates, who debated if the new arrivals were friend or foe. Suddenly the ships under Zheng He's command started firing at the ships under Li Zhong's command. Yang Han ran up to Li Zhong and frantically asked: "Aren't those our ships? Why are they firing on us? We need to signal them!" Li Zhong calmly answered: "Yes, this is all within our plan. Order our line of ships to start firing at the Admiral's ships. Make sure they shoot between the ships though, and don't actually hit them. Make it look real." Yang nodded with understanding, and sped off to inform the gunners. Meanwhile, the pirates were delighted at the sudden arrival of an ally, and continued the battle with a great cheer. Something they didn't notice, was the fact that both the enemy ships and their new allies ships were spaced quite far apart. Unusually far apart, if they had thought about it for a minute or two. This, of course was to ensure that the Chinese gunners on both sides did not actually damage their own ships; However the pirates, caught up in the excitement and desperation of the battle, were clueless. Soon Zheng He's line of ships were spread out in a loose semicircle around the pirate ships; The Chinese ships had succeeded in surrounding the pirates between them. That was when Admiral Zheng ordered his fleet to raise the Chinese flag, deploy all cannons, and for his soldiers to prepare to board the pirate ships. The pirates, realising they had been tricked, quickly targeted Zheng He's line of ships while continuing to battle Li Zhong's ships on the other side. After a short while though, it was obvious the Chinese pincer movement would crush them, and white flags were raised on all the pirate ships.

In the aftermath, Chinese soldiers boarded the pirate flagship, captured Chen Zu Yi and his lieutenants, before the entire treasure fleet set off on the last part of their journey back to China. 2 years after they departed, the fleet returned to Nanjing. The Emperor rewarded the Chinese officers and crew that fought against the pirates, and also ordered gifts to be sent to friendly foreign countries that had sent envoys back with the treasure fleet. Eventually, Admiral Zheng would be sent out six more times, with each voyage solidifying China's rule of the seas, making Ming Dynasty China the dominant naval power of its time.

The Hunt for Food

Yew Chung International School, Cheng, Serena – 15

Dust and dirt were all over. It was on the ground. It floated in the air. The walls were covered by smudges of dirt and grease. Even the ceiling had spots of stains of I don't know what. Some think it's disgusting, but to survive, getting a little bit of dirt on ourselves wasn't a big deal. The sound of heavy pounding, moving materials and lumber ricocheted throughout the cavernous room, as more dust poured into the entryway of the wooden building.

"Hey! Over here! I smell something." Standing behind a huge linen bag, I told Brother and Sister on the far left. They quietly tiptoed over, moving their heads side to side; cautiously making sure no one else was around.

"Smells a bit... Sweet, yet a bit sour. Let's see what it is." I said as I tried cutting a slit in the side of the linen bag. Brother and Sister crowded besides me sniffing the bag. As I sliced downwards, light green, wrinkly oval shapes started spilling out of the linen bag.

"Dates!" Sister exclaimed.

Brother snatched a handful of dates and gobbled mouthfuls within a matter of seconds. Even Sister, who was usually polite and gentle grabbed handfuls and swallowed them immediately. I did the same, forcing in more fruits than my mouth can handle and devoured them without chewing. Survival for lowly beings like us had always been difficult. We haven't eaten in days, and no one knew when we will find food next, therefore we must eat as much as we can when we find it.

Suddenly, the door slid even wider open with a high-pitched screech.

More bright light entered the room; both Brother and Sister leapt from the bag and scurried to a dark corner; I scurried after them, but I turned around and saw two men sauntering in. They were each carrying linen bags that swayed as they walked. Carrying more food? I thought, then I hesitated, stopped and hid behind the bag of dates.

"Do we have enough food for our long journey?" asked a man wearing loose knee-high pants and long sleeved shirt over the waist. His shirt and pants were made of cotton which looked worn out from years of use. The collar of the shirt was tight on his neck, the edge of his shirt had two strings on the side which tied a knot at the bottom, holding the shirt together. His sandals made of fibre skillfully knitted together, each closely hung onto each other.

"Well, yes, we must have! We have saved so much food, these storehouses aren't even enough. In fact, all twenty quays are full. The Lord Admiral, Zheng He, has been buying food from all over the country!" Another man with similar cotton clothes and sandals besides him replied, but this time instead of long sleeves, his were rolled up. "This is his third journey, after all. We have learned from the previous two journeys to the Southern Seas."

Journey? What journey? Is it a journey for treasures? Journey for... *food*? Perhaps that's why there's nothing to eat where we lived! Although the fields were harvested, food was not stored in the village storehouses. If we followed these two men, we might be able to find things to eat! Waving my head towards Brother and Sister, I urged them to come over. We hid behind the sackcloth, quickly but quietly still eating the dates we found. The man with long sleeves took steps further into the storehouse. The other took a broom by the door and walked in after. He started sweeping.

"Hurry! Grab as much as you can!" I nervously whispered to Brother and Sister.

As the man with a broom walked closer to where we were, continuing sweeping, we felt dust fly up our noses. We stuffed our mouths full, filling our tiny hands grip—fulls of dates.

The man was near, he'd almost see us.

“Let's go now!” Brother and Sister nodded their heads and we crawled on the ground, not to be seen. We passed by a few bags, each with a different smell. One had a sweet aroma accompanied with slight bitterness. It's smell made by nose twitch. The next bag had a salty but fermenting smell. My stomach growled, I must come back! We held onto our food tightly, not willing to lose any. While we were crawling, one of the bags fell open. Unfortunately, it was not properly sealed; dried plums tumbled out of the bag like rocks falling off a hill during a mudslide. Plums pummeled Brother and covered him.

“Hey! Get out of here you filthy thieves!” Yelled the man angrily as he swung his broom at us. Brother clawed his way out of the mountain of plums and rushed straight towards the door. Sister and I dodged the broom and dashed towards the dark corner, turned and ran towards the door, and joined Brother. The other man tried to catch us while we were heading out of the storehouse, but failed to as we were too fast.

“Dirty creatures!” screamed one of the men. We kept running, held tight to our dates and didn't look back.

“That... That was very close. Let's never do that again! I was so scared!” cried Sister. She held the dates extremely tight. The dates were squished, some of their skin flaked off.

“Why?” I asked, “We got away with lots of food, and now we know that entire building is full with more food! We must go back, again and again!” I declared as the three of us hid in the gutter of the next building.

“We cannot go back to the village. There is no food there! How do we survive? There's no one to provide for us, and there's no method we can create food on our own. To survive, we need to search for food and take them when we have the chance. We'd be lucky if we did find any at all.” Brother agreed.

“We're stealing! Doing bad things! We will be punished in our next life! I don't want to do this anymore!” Sobbed Sister as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Look, Sister, if we don't keep on doing this, how do we live?” Brother stared at Sister as her face became sour.

I watched as the two of them kept bickering with each other. Bitter sadness filled my heart. Only months ago our lives were full of solitude and bliss. We lived in a village near the countryside. There was always food to be had, whether from ripe fruit that fell to the ground, or in the village storeroom where the harvest was collected. Our village was small, and everyone knew each other. A small river ran between our home and the storeroom. Everytime we became hungry, we would cross the river, jumping on rocks to get to the other side. But a few months ago, the men started to leave in groups of twos and threes. They walked and laughed up the road, saying they had a great opportunity. We paid no attention as there was still plenty of food. However, after the last harvest was collected, much of the storeroom were loaded into carts, and the rest of the men pushed it up the same road. We became hungry, our parents left looking for food, and did not come back. As the eldest, I felt no choice, but to guide Brother and Sister up the road where I last saw the carts of food. We scavenged for days, sometimes almost getting squished by hooves of horses and wheels of carts. Although Brother and Sister were afraid, I kept them moving up the road. Finally we came to the end, and found ourselves facing a massive building we had just snuck into. Hungry, yet excited, we found food! Mountains of food! This was where our village harvest were taken. We're saved!

The tension between them became more and more intense, until I felt I had to say something.

“We are not stealing. We are just trying to live; it’s not like they are short of the little things we’re taking.” I told Sister, “Plus, that man is just ridiculous! He called us filthy! Can you believe that? Us filthy? We wash everyday!” A slight smile appeared on Sister’s face.

Brother sat down, staring at the ground intently. Suddenly he shot up and a candle seemed to light up in him. “Hey, remember our cousins at the next village Xiao Mei, Ya Ya and the others? I know they were starving like us. There’s so much food in that one building, there would be enough for us and our cousins! Xiao Mei and Ya Ya can bring their families here. How can these men take all the food from the countryside and hide it in this one building?” He spoke fervently.

Looking at Sister, “Sister, with more of us, we would not need to be afraid.” At that, she nodded her head.

“Brother, you know the way back. Straight on the road we came. Get our cousins, Sister and I will explore this area to make sure there are no dangers. Be careful, see you soon.” I said to Brother as he nodded his head, turned around, walked to the end of the gutter and sprung up.

Feeling brave, I bounded onto the top of the gutter and ventured to the edge of the dock.

There was water as far as I can see. Straining my neck forward, I looked further up into the cloudy mist; there were mountains on the other side. The side of the mountain had some trees, although most of it was already cut bare. Docks, and even more docks were on the left. I turned my entire body around to face the right. Even more docks continued on the right. How many docks were there? As many as I had fingers and toes! There were massive structures being built upon each dock, with curved bows and a flat deck, nine majestic beams extraordinarily tall that soared straight towards the sky, I cannot see the ends. The beams were more than 40 men high! Ah, those must be formed from the tall trees cut down on the mountain side! Some had fabric attached to them that fluttered in the wind. Leaning against the curved bows were wooden logs at an acute angle, holding up the structures, so they would not tip over. At the front of them were four menacing dragon eyes. Two at the front and two on the lower sides. I was astonished by the enormity. Some of them had three or four stories built upon the flat decks, the body was two hundred men long, each were even longer than the buildings combined behind me! Holding my breath, I sighed in disbelief.

Sister joined me and gazed at the constructions dumbfounded. “What are those things?”, asked Sister while she peered at the massive structures. My eyes followed the horizon line behind the wooden bows and saw the expanse of water. Many such structures that were on the docks, were already on the water! They floated, and I can see thousands of men on the decks running to and fro.

“I think they’re called... ships!”

Many men surrounded one of the ships on a dock. They were excited. Slanted platforms were slid under the wooden bow on one side. With loud yells, men hammered away the logs supporting the vessel, and with a loud splash it dropped into water; one side even submerged a bit before resurfacing. Men cheered and the ship was secured, then a plank was laid from the dock to it, creating a bridge.

On the dock next to us, lines of men, burdened with sacks upon their backs struggled onto the large curved ships. Some of the men stumbled under the weight of their sacks.

“Look, aren’t those men from our village?” Proclaimed Sister. Watching the direction she looked at, I saw familiar men dragging sacks. They were the ones who used to work at the fields – this is where the village men went to!

Another line of men pushed carts. There were more sacks in their carts, as well as wooden boxes. They had ornamental carvings covered with pearl. The carvings were of lotus flowers and scenes of country life by a river. Bronze surrounded the edges of the box, with a lock in the middle. Some of the wooden boxes were placed on two parallel bamboo poles as they swayed in time, carried by several men. One of the men tripped, a wooden box fell with a thud and the lid flew open. A guard stormed over to the men, yelling and kicking them. The men kept apologizing, kneeled down and picked up the.....

“Gold! Silver! Jade! And even silk!” I cried in wonderment. The wooden boxes contained all sorts of treasures and precious goods. Quickly the box was sealed, the men continued towards the large curved ships. Such treasures in one box, yet the vessel was filled with one box after another. Indeed, a treasure ship.

My stomach growled. After all, our meal was interrupted by the two men. We’ve both finished the dates when we were at the gutter. Sneaking back to the storeroom, the two men had moved to the other side, sweeping. Sister and I found a sack with ham. We enjoyed as much ham as we liked, until we were full. Yet, the smell of something fermented lured me towards it. Slitting open the sack, eyeballs glared at me with fins and scales sticking out of the bag. Fish! That was the source of the salty and fermented smell! We took the dried fish out and ate their flesh, leaving bones on the ground.

As we ate, a line of men opened the door with a loud bang and marched in. They confronted the two men sweeping on the other side of the storeroom. Luckily we were already eating at the dark corner, therefore no one spotted us.

“Wei! Stop sweeping and help us! We will be leaving soon and we need to bring these cargo to the ship!” said the leader of the group.

“When will we be leaving?” Asked the sweeping men.

“Soon! As soon as one week! So hurry!”

“Why are we leaving so soon?”

“The Ming princess is coming, accompanied by five hundred retainers As soon as she arrives we will depart.”

“Why are we even going on this trip? Is it really worth all this effort just to escort some gifts and the princess to the barbarian king beyond the South Seas?”

“The Emperor likes to show off, he wants to establish his dominance and power over the world. We are the Middle Kingdom, after all. We Mings are to bring brightness to the world, don’t you know? Besides, the barbarian king sent a delegation, asking for a princess to be his wife.”

“Bah!” one of the men standing at the back said, “This is all a charade! The emperor wants to find his nephew who fled beyond the seas!”

“Hush! Do not speak of that! You will get yourself executed for speaking treason! I was at the final battle of Nanjing. The charred corpse of the young emperor was presented to Emperor Zhu Di.” Whispered the leader.

“Not right! Not right! The second emperor dressed up as a Buddhist monk and escaped! Haven’t you heard?” Said another man in the middle.

“We will stop speaking of this. Our Lord Admiral led Emperor Zhu Di’s forces at Zheng Cun Ba outside Beijing and defeated the young emperor’s forces. That is why he was given the name Zheng He by the emperor himself! The Lord Admiral is a righteous man who does not eat pork and prays five times a day. I will not tolerate anyone speaking poorly of our Lord Admiral or emperor.” Said the leader firmly. Quiet filled the room.

Finally the sweeping man asked, "Will we fall off the edge of the world?"

The leader laughed, "Don't be two hundred and fifty! Don't be stupid! Now shut up and get to work! Load the vessel!"

The men started to take away our food and loaded them onto the vessel. Sister and I hung back at the dark corner with great sadness and heavy hearts. Again, our food was taken away. A few days later, the storeroom was empty.

After two days, Brother had finally arrived with our cousins.

"Where's the food? I'm hungry!" Wailed our cousin Xiao Mei.

"We travelled all the way here for food, yet there is nothing here?" Whined our cousin Ya Ya.

"Food was here! I swear! They've just been taken. We followed where the food went, I know where they are!" I said.

We went onto the docks. Our cousins gaped at the ships in awe, like we did.

Before I could even move, Sister, the most timid one leapt onto the rope leading to the ship.

"Everyone, follow me! We shall hunt after our food and voyage through the seas!" She said gleefully.

I looked at her and stuttered, "What— What are you doing?"

Sister turned her head around, her beady eyes gleamed with joy and she spoke with a high-pitched squeak, "Weren't you the one who said to follow the food?"

I smiled delightfully and felt proud of her as she continued walking steadily, using her tail to help balance, her claws gripping the rope. Her dark black fur on her back stood upright in her enthusiasm. From the back I can see her whiskers quiver with excitement. Brother, with the rest of our family, vaulted onto the rope, following her lead.

Feeling an irritating itch on my back, I used a back claw and scratched behind my neck as hard as I could. "Darn fleas!", I cursed. Then I pounced onto the rope and crossed into the ship.

Fairy Tales and False Truths

Yew Chung International School, Lo, Michelle – 15

A treasure ship in a fairy tale is the basis for a good story, but a fairy tale on a treasure ship is a disaster waiting to happen.

Even so, Li's days onboard the Ming Treasure Fleet are filled with stories. While the other sailors are away on land, his anticipation of their return and the tales that will follow lingers in his mind.

It is an unbearable itch that not even his favorite book of fairy tales can scratch – for the young, plain boy lives for fables of richly patterned Arabian carpets, of tropical fruity wine and endless oceans of amber sand. He thrives under legends of lush verdant rainforests, of exotic spotted animals, and hypnotic dancers in lively linen livery. He drinks up the crew's stories of daring escapes and heroic adventures with an unquenchable thirst and endless admiration.

“Tell me more,” he often begs, and while the crew fondly obliges every time, it is never enough. It can never be enough.

As he hears other mariners chatter about elaborate court music in Champa and massive golden shrines in Malacca, a fierce hunger burns within him, insatiable in its fierceness and animalistic in its jealousy. As he scales the rigging, he imagines himself climbing towering trees in the jungle, like the lieutenant in Siam. While he scrubs the wooden deck, he pictures himself slashing through an armada of pirates, like the Admiral in Ceylon. The mere ship's boy begins to nurse a dangerous dream – a desire to join the others on land, on an adventure of his own.

Then, it appears as though Li's wishes have been granted.

One sultry, humid morning, as the fleet drifts past the coast of Dai Viet, the venerable Admiral approaches him. With his imposing presence and tiger-like stride, Zheng He is both respected and feared throughout every port. Li trembles under his discerning gaze.

“You're coming with us when we reach Samudera,” states the Admiral.

Those simple, powerful words, spoken with such surety and composure, send Li into a state of euphoria. For weeks, he stumbles through the wooden galleys with a dazed grin; at night, he tosses and turns feverishly, whispering those words to himself like a prayer. “I'm finally going on land,” he murmurs, exulted. “I'm going on an adventure. I'm going to be a hero.”

“Have fun, boy, but be careful,” warns the lieutenant gruffly, his weathered hands hoisting the sails deftly. The seasoned second-in-command is Li's closest confidante and his main source of stories. “It isn't going to be all sunshine and rainbows out there.”

Li simply nods and smiles, already dreaming of his future exploits.

★

The ship's rudder scrapes against the reef, just as the stars silently fall away to rosy-flushed skies. Pressed against the timber railing, Li observes keenly as the rocky shore of Samudera, dappled with trees and rugged cliffs, draws nearer.

This is it, Li thinks. This is my adventure.

The band marches on shore with their sabers and crossbows, and Li can barely contain his excitement as he recalls their mission.

“Samudera’s current ruler is an imposter, and has refused to act as a tributary to our Emperor,” the Admiral had said. “Under his Highness’ command, we shall fight with the true Sultan and depose of this false king. Once we have ensured the throne’s legitimacy, we will establish a new trade port.”

Li can picture it vividly now – the locals cheering for their triumphant heroes, throwing celebrations for him and his friends, as the true Sultan thanks him personally for his help...

“Welcome!” A figure scurries over from a distant ramshackle hut. This man is very broad and very stout, with the beginnings of a paunch. His greying hair is slicked back from his flushed face, revealing beady brown eyes. “You must be the army from the Emperor!”

The Admiral gives a curt nod in reply. “And you are the soon-to-be Sultan of Samudera.”

The portly man smiles broadly. Li shifts uneasily at the display of sharp, yellow teeth. “Yes. I’m glad we understand each other. Please, call me Ratu!” The true ruler gestures at the small crowd of grim, brawny men waiting behind him, all carrying sickle-shaped daggers curved like snakes.

“We’re ready when you are.”

★

For hours, the congregation of armed seafarers, revolutionaries, and eunuchs troop through the jungle kingdom, their boots thumping out a steady staccato like the pounding of a war drum.

They march past wooden houses erected on rickety slats, past verdurous foliage buzzing with strange noises, and past dozens of curious sun-kissed faces. Li stares eagerly at their unusual huts, with lacquered roofs that arch towards the sky and striped walls that slope inwards, like oversized palanquins.

As they journey deeper into the thriving kingdom, the stifling foliage reluctantly gives way to a bustling marketplace. Local tradespeople wearing long sashes, flowing robes, and embroidered headdresses hustle around, dragging wicker baskets of dried beef and jars of aromatic spices. Li longs to stop and explore the market, to taste the curried meats, to rub the smooth silk gauze between his fingers, but –

“Keep your hand on your weapon,” the Admiral mutters. Zheng He’s narrowed eyes are fixated on the massive palace gates looming before them. Enormous eaves jut out over the structure’s gables and overshadow the entrance, which is guarded by sentries in elaborate uniform. The tips of their spears gleam in warning as the crew slows to a stop.

“We are envoys of the Great Ming from China. Under the command of our Imperial Emperor, let us enter.” The Admiral’s tone brooks no argument.

The impassive guards, however, refuse them entry. “The Sultan does not recognize your Emperor as his ruler.”

A troubling gleam enters the Admiral’s eye. “It isn’t a matter of *if* you recognize the Emperor or not – it’s a matter of *when*.” He draws his blade. “Perhaps the Sultan simply needs some persuasion.”

The saber slices through the two guards with the ease of a needle piercing paper.

Li stares in shock, a silent witness to the sudden slaughter before him, although no one else appears surprised. He sees the bodies crumple, like marionettes with severed strings, while time itself seems to slow down. As if in a dream, he sees the blood bloom across their uniforms, dyeing the linen a deep wine red. Vaguely, he senses his friends and crewmates raise their swords in warning.

The passersby sense it too. Slowly, whispers travel through the crowd, rippling through the marketplace, gaining momentum. People begin to shift restlessly, uncertainly. Then, as more guards burst

out of the open doors past their fallen comrades, the market shatters into a hive of hysteria. Murmurs turn into shouts. The locals utter strangled cries. The masses stumble and scramble away in a sudden surge of panic. Covered carts are knocked over. Splintered crates lay belly-up, precious merchandise spilling out like entrails in the sun as the frenzied crowd races by.

Ratu and his followers storm through the gates, charging like bulls seeing red. The lieutenant's face is a mask of equanimity as he lunges into the fray. His crewmates swoop down with fierce cries, their familiar faces contorted into grotesque expressions of bloodlust.

Around him, the deafening clang of metal on metal nearly drowns out Li's cries as he shoves his way to the front.

"Admiral! Why are we doing this? Why are we killing people?"

Zheng He pauses for a moment. He looks down at the boy with an indecipherable expression. Perhaps it is pity in his eyes, or perhaps it is disdain; either way, the stolid man stalks ahead without answering. "For the Emperor!" shouts the Admiral, in a voice like booming thunder. The ferocious troops howl like hounds hunting in the night.

"For the Emperor!"

Li does not think the Admiral has answered his question, but he repeats Zheng He's words over and over again, like a mantra, like a lifeline, until he can almost believe it himself.

He follows reluctantly into the imperial courtyard.

★

The once-peaceful garden has become a bloody battlefield. Arched wooden bridges are blackened with dirt, and the pruned bushes are ablaze with fire. The screams of palace courtiers echo through the smoky air.

He hears a quiet, unsettling laugh. Li stares at Ratu, who is staring at the chaos with a faint, satisfied smile. The man's eyes glow with exhilaration and bloodlust.

"Why are you smiling?" Li asks, uneasily. "How can you enjoy this? Why on earth would you *want* to kill?"

Ratu pauses for a moment, surprised. "For the good of the citizens, of course."

"I don't understand. What good is death and destruction for the citizens?"

"Death is necessary for a revolution," the true ruler replies. "Only through revolution, I can rule the people in the best way, in *my* way – with the support of your Emperor, naturally."

Li wonders if Ratu has simply misheard his question, but swallows down his protests and nods, committing the man's words of wisdom to memory. *At the very least*, he concludes, *Ratu will make a sage ruler, if not a confusing one.*

Ratu strolls into the palace as if he already owns it, grinning. The young sailor follows, but he cannot bring himself to smile too. Even as he stumbles through magnificent antechambers with high ceilings and sculpted pillars, through halls lined with intricate tapestries and flickering lanterns, Li can focus on nothing but the grisly image of the dead littering the way.

For the first time in his life, Li feels a pang of regret about coming on land. He had longed for adventure, for heroism, for tales to tell – not for genocide.

★

Despite all that has happened so far, Li is unprepared for what happens next. Someone comes upon him – a young warrior, around his age, with freckled cheeks and determined, terrified eyes – and a dagger appears, aiming for his throat.

Adrenaline courses through his veins, yet Li's sabre remains uselessly limp at his side.

However, from the corner of his eye, Li sees the lieutenant rush over, sword raised. He hears the blade crush the boy's bones, and sees the blood stain the pristine steel. In an instant, the youthful soldier slumps to the ground, face alarmingly pale. His hands flutter uselessly, like a trapped butterfly's wings – once, twice, before stilling forever.

“Why?” Li stutters in shock. “Why did you do that?”

The second-in-command remains curt as he leads Li forward, alert. “We are in the middle of a battle zone. Death happens.”

“But why are we doing this?” Li needs an answer – a proper answer. “Are we not heroes? Why do we need to kill?”

The lieutenant pauses for a moment. “For progress,” he says slowly, gripping the hilt of his sword. “For development and trade. For after this, we will have a new trading partner and expand our country's territory.”

“Progress,” Li thinks aloud. “For the Emperor. For the citizens. For progress.” *So this is what a hero fights for. This is what people die for.*

Somehow, though, these reasons aren't reassuring at all – especially not when Li glances at the young soldier's rapidly cooling corpse.

“Do you want to be here, boy?” His friend's question catches Li off-guard. The tough lieutenant looks uncharacteristically tender. “You could go back to the ship if this is all too much.”

Li wavers, but he thinks of all those days spent onboard clutching to his dreams, and clenches his fist. “No. I'll stay.”

The veteran nods. He keeps a wary eye on Li as they fight their way through the devastated palace, through the maelstrom of battle, towards the throne room.

★

The old man sitting on the throne stares back at them grimly, almost expectantly. His gnarled hands grip the sides of his wooden throne, but the Sultan resolutely does not move. His wizened face, however, flickers with alarm when he glimpses the remnants of the slaughter beyond the doors.

Li feels a flash of pity, but he pushes the thoughts from his head. *Imposter*, he reminds himself. *Imposter*. He keeps this word in his head as he watches intently from the side.

“You,” the Sultan says tiredly, pointing at the one who has come to take his throne.

Ratu bows mockingly. “Hello again, old man.”

With bated breath, Li prepares for the false Sultan to plead and beg, while justice prevails and Ratu reclaims his crown to lead Samudera into a new golden age. *This is the moment, the climax of the story; this is where fairy tales come true.*

Instead, the Sultan bows his head in what seems frighteningly like despair, and asks Ratu a question that shakes Li to the bone:

“Why have you come, imposter?”

Imposter.

There is a second of utter silence, a moment of quiet in the eye of the storm, in which Li gawks in incomprehension.

“What are you talking about?” The words burst out of him, loud and sharp and shocked. The Admiral gives him a warning look, but Li cannot bring himself to care. “You are the false king!”

The old Sultan shakes his head. “Royal blood runs through my veins, and my veins only. This renegade, on the other hand, has mercilessly attacked my subjects and caused devastation for his own greed.”

“The means don’t matter, old man. Only power.” Ratu sniffs and brandishes his sword. “I *will* be the Sultan, and I will rule the people. I will do a better job than you ever could.”

Li trembles, and raises a shaking finger at the imposter, his voice reaching a fever pitch. “You mean,” he begins, faltering, “that we killed all those people, that we broke into this palace, that we murdered that boy –”

They said it was for the Emperor, for the citizens, for progress. Now, though, Li realizes that it was all for show, that it was all for nothing. He recalls the Admiral’s stiffness, Ratu’s laughter, and the lieutenant’s hesitance, and is terrified to realize that he feels somewhat unsurprised.

Nonetheless, he still holds a spark of hope.

Li whirls around to Zheng He and the lieutenant, expecting righteous anger and betrayal at Ratu’s revelation. He waits for the lieutenant to condemn the imposter, for the Admiral to support the actual Sultan, and for the villain to be struck down.

Nobody moves.

Rather, the lieutenant sends a chilling glance at him, leaving Li stupefied at his friend’s sudden frostiness. The Admiral ignores them both and nods at the triumphant usurper.

Ratu smirks at the crumbling, ousted sovereign, and says, “Kill the imposter.”

Zheng He grips his sabre, jaw clenched. “Of course, Your Highness.”

The boy feels the breath leave his lungs. Betrayal and hurt swell into a tsunami, and the sight of the Admiral and the lieutenant beside Ratu strikes Li like a physical blow.

“You knew all along? Both of you?” Li’s idealistic world begins crumbling. He chokes, “Admiral, why are you helping this madman? He is not the true king!”

The Admiral shoots him a stare devoid of emotion. “The only true king,” he says, “is the one who recognizes our Emperor as his ruler.”

And with a slash of his sabre, he rips Li’s fairy tale dreams to shreds.

★

Oil lamps line the ship's galley, casting flickering shadows across the crowded hall as the crew celebrates. Crates of hand-dyed cotton and gold cast statuettes are stacked along the back of the room. The dining tables are piled high with roasted savory meats stuffed with spices and curried rice wrapped in pandan leaves – gifts from Samudera's new Sultan. The chatter of rowdy sailors is often punctuated by a shout or a whoop, and the conversation flows as freely as the wine.

At the back, far from the merrymaking, a young ship's boy watches the celebrations with an oddly vacant expression. The lieutenant sits stiffly beside him.

"We wanted to protect you," his most trusted friend, his favorite storyteller, says. "I tried to warn you, boy. Real life isn't a fairy tale. I know. It is harsh. But sometimes, leaders must be harsh – and to be a victorious adventurer, you must be harsh now too."

"All those fairy tales you told were lies, then?"

"Don't be silly." The veteran lets out a weary sigh. "Fairy tales are just that – fairy tales. They do not exist in real life, and they certainly do not exist on treasure ships like ours."

The lieutenant leaves. Li stays at the back of the hall, tired of asking questions that go unanswered. Deep within him, a silenced young boy mourns.

"Fairy tales do not exist on treasure ships," the boy – now a man – repeats to himself, and then adds bitterly, "not anymore."

★

In the following years, Li goes on many other adventures. He sees countless wondrous sights, encounters innumerable interesting folk, and voyages across the world with the Ming Treasure Fleet. He hears the enchanting music of Champa and gazes at the golden shrines of Malacca, just like the sailors before him. He tells no one of how these sights have failed to fill the void within him.

Although the lieutenant and the Admiral remain onboard as well, the three mariners never exchange more than stiff pleasantries.

Through his travels, Li also hears many folk tales – stories of jade dragons and pining mermaids, of vain queens and wandering ghosts. Local bards retell the same legends often, but with a new twist each time, and the younger sailors adore listening to their tall tales whenever the crew stops at an inn on shore. The ship's boys huddle around dining tables and listen, rapt with attention, as they long to fill the hunger within them with scraps of rich stories.

Sometimes, Li stays at the edge of the crowd to catch snippets of these fairy tales.

But he never stays to listen for long.

New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Yew Chung International School, Xi'an, Shenghuan – 16

Zheng He and the other ship's crews were ready to go on the sea navigation. They used new technologies to build the ship that made the ship much bigger, which had 186 meters long and 60 meters wide. This ship could carry thousands of sailors and a lot of gold, silks and other precious items to give away as a gift. Zheng He was the leader of the sea navigation, before the navigation, he asked crews to load on the gifts and the foods needed for the trip. Zheng He told the ship crews about how to operate the ship. He also told them when the crews saw the pirates, they should firstly think about escaping the pirates, if the pirate went closer, they needed to keep the pirates away from boarding the ship. When these were ready, the ship's crews were boarded on the ship and the ship went away from the port.

The crews checked the compass on the boat, they found that the wind was blowing to the direction of Manchu. They put the sail and the ship started to go to the direction on Manchu. Soon they were far from the shore, and they couldn't see the land anymore. At the start of the trip, the waves on the sea wasn't very big, the crews felt safe. Zheng He summoned all the crews on the trip to talk about what to do next. Zheng He had a meeting to talk about what to do when experiencing big waves.

One of the ship crew asked Zheng He: "Did you have any solutions when there are big waves? If we don't come up with some ideas to solve this problem, the ship might overturn and sink, there is no much possibility to survive if that happens."

Zheng He replied: "Our ship is very big, so it can deal with waves on the sea. If the wave is not extremely big, but there is still a risk that the ship might overturn when experiencing extreme waves."

Then, Zheng He announced to all the ship crews: "Our ship was big enough that we don't need to be afraid of big waves in the sea, but still in mind, it will be still a problem if we are experiencing extreme waves."

On the next day, Zheng He and the other ship crews woke up, it was the second day of their trip. After their breakfast, they planned what to do next. Later, one of the ship crew found out that the wind was blowing in wrong direction. He told other ship crews: "The wind is blowing in wrong direction, put the sail down." "Ok", the ship crews obeyed and put off the sails from the ship. Later, when they found out the wind was blowing in right direction again, they then put on the sails.

Then, the crews saw there was another ship in front of them. The other ship was far from them, but they were getting closer and closer. Zheng He saw this. "Hurry up, put down the sails as we will collide with them!" Zheng He told the ship crews. "We put down all the sails, the ship will slow down soon." The ship went nearer and nearer to the front ship, as the ship will soon collide with the front ship, their ship slowed down and the front ship went further and further. They missed a collide.

The next day, at the morning, one of the ship crew woke up and went to the deck of the ship. He looked around at the deck, he found out there was another ship far from them. He looked more carefully, he then found out there were many cannons placed on each side. The ship crew soon realized that this ship may be a pirate ship. He hurried went down and found Zheng He, he said hurriedly: "I saw a ship full of cannons, aren't they are pirate?"

"Let's go up and see, which direction?"

They went up to the deck of the ship.

"This direction, that ship, and it is getting closer to us, they may want to get treasures from us." The ship crew said.

Zheng He went to the dormitory where ship crews were sleeping.

"Get up, we may meet pirates, get the weapons and go to the deck!" Zheng He shouted to the ship crews, "for sailors, put the sail on to see whether we can escape from them."

The ship crews get on the deck, they got all the weapons and looked at that ship. The sailors put on the sail, the ship speeded up. The crews looked at the ship full of cannons, he saw that ship was getting closer and closer to them.

"The ship is getting closer!" He told Zheng He.

"Crews, ready for the battle!" Zheng He shouted out to every crews.

As the pirate ship got closer towards them, the pirate shouted at them: "You are dead now, when I order fire the cannon, your ship will sink. If you don't want to die, you better give us all the treasures or precious things to us so you don't get killed."

“Ok, we will go down the ship to find you some treasures we are carrying, but please don’t fire the cannon, we are surrendering now.” Zheng He told the pirates.

“Crews, we can’t give them our treasures just like this, we need to give these treasures away to the other country.” Zheng He told crews quietly. Zheng He and the crews were all very afraid and sad, as they didn’t want to give away the treasure and other precious things right away that they wanted to give them away to the other country as a gift, they were thinking some ideas to escape from the pirates without giving the gifts.

“What about this, we are pretended to give them treasures, but, when I said ready, we use a bottle of water and spill to the cannons, the cannon will be misfired when ignite line get wet. we can get the water from the sea, and pour at the cannon ignite lines at instant, so they won’t be realize that their cannons were misfired. When they realized and dried the ignite line of the cannon, we will already escaped from them. To do this, we can pretend that we are going to get the treasures, they won’t wonder that the truth is we get a bottle of water.” The crew said to Zheng He.

“Ok, you need to do things quickly as long as I told you, we are danger even if they fired one cannon, so you need to spill water on every ignite lines of the cannon in the short time, and quickly speed up the ship.” Zheng He told the crews.

“Are you ready? I will say three two one, and you all spill together.” Zheng He told the other crews.

“Give us the treasure in three seconds, otherwise, I will fire the cannon now!” The pirate ordered them.

“Spill the water now, ready?” Zheng He told the crews.

“Three...two...one, fire!” The pirate ordered them to ignite the lead of cannon.

As they ignited the lead of the cannon, Zheng he ordered the crews to spill water on the lead. When the pirate almost fired the cannon, the lead got wet and the fire extinguished after the crews spilled water on the lead.

The ship then speeded up and went further and further from the pirates. The pirates didn’t hear “bang”, and soon realized that the leads of the cannon got wet so the cannons misfired. The pirates looked at Zheng He’s ship, they glared as their ship went further and further. They just missed a target where they could just get the treasures. The leader of the pirates was very angry, “Why do you miss that target, I will give you punishments!”

Zheng He’s ship escaped from the pirates, Zheng He told, “Well done, with our smart ideas, we escaped from them! We will have a party together!”

After a few days, they arrived at the Island of Java. Zheng He asked the crews to unpacked the treasure that they wanted to give to the foreign country. Their adventure was nearly ended.