



Fiction

Group 3

The Myth of Huangshan

British International School, Shanghai, Puxi Campus, Chen, Yu-chi Charlotte – 12

With her cheeks flushed, Elyse fluttered down to Earth. Her lonely eyes filled with sorrow, she was an iridescent angel from the realm of the Great Spirit. With a soft thud, Elyse landed, her white wings brushing softly against the dirt, her lips trembling softly. The soft-spoken angel landed on a mountain.

As the young angel laid down, she could feel the softness of the soil between her fingers, the vegetation providing a much-needed respite; her dark hair was splayed and her unblemished skin heaved in rhythm with her breath. Tears stained her face, and the soft blue of her eyes melted into tears. The drops of sadness flowed freely along her face, slipping towards the soil below. The redness of her tear-stained face enveloped her nose, an unending soreness slinking its way throughout her whole body. Elyse curled into a ball, her wings shielding her from the morning cold, acting as a warm feathered blanket. They delicately brushed across her face, softly, wiping away the remnants of tears, comforting the girl as her body racked with choked sobs.

Watching through her watery eyes, Elyse gazed at the blue-gray sky. The wind blew as the mist thickened, dampening her hair. The plants yearned for the wetness, and the insects too. Insects loved drinking in the sweet liquid; it was a feeling of paradise for them. I wonder, Elyse thought, was this paradise for Dina too?

The mountain, called Huangshan, was once the place where Elyse and Dina enjoyed life. This was their secret haven. They would talk with animals, giggling at their growls and snorts; they would drink in the sights of nature, with leaves and mud smeared across their delicate skin. She looked back towards the blue-gray sky.

“The sky matches your eyes.”

That’s what Dina would have said.

A lone tear escaped her eyes, which were clouded with sadness. But Dina is not here anymore.

She is somewhere better, prettier, and perhaps with better friends than Elyse.

Another tear rolled down her face, its surface reflecting the scarce rays passing through the mist, dripping into the soil. With heavy legs, Elyse stood up, the soil crumbling under her bare feet, and small twigs cracking under the pressure.

The angel could feel it all: the stones, the plants, and the trees. It was as if they were all watching her, waiting and anticipating her next move. As the soft mist started to disperse, the air was fresh with newfound humidity. She strolled through the familiar paths, climbed on rocks that she had climbed a million times before, her wings fluttering in determination. The mountain watched.

She held onto vines, newly sprouted with a fresh minty scent. She stepped onto rocks weathered into smooth stepping-stones. The breeze blew dark strands of hair out of the angel’s face. The leaves ruffled and whispered sweet nothings of encouragement. Her blue eyes were lit with life once more.

I’m going to see her one last time, she thought.

It had been going through her head, the possibility of seeing her again. The hope numbed the pain in her throbbing heart, and the excruciating pulls of her wings attempted to carry her back to where she belonged. She knew her time was slipping away. She knew she had a limited amount of time on Earth before she had to return to her sanctuary. However, Elyse wasn’t one to give up, especially not on Dina.

The sun began to climb overhead, the rays of god showering the girl, embracing her in warmth. Her wings ruffled again, pulling and yearning for heaven, knowing she had to leave soon. Elyse winced, planting her feet on the ground, toes curled to get a better grip on the smooth rocks.

She could feel it; she was near. She had almost reached the place that she had walked to a million, no, a trillion times with Dina before, hand in hand, giggling, while watching the sunset.

“The circle of life,” Dina once said to her, sighing, “It never ends. You never know what life has to offer you.”

Perhaps Dina never once thought about how Elyse would handle Dina’s death. The bubbly tan-skinned girl was gone. Her laughter no longer lighting up the skies; her wisdom no longer leading others. Such a friend was to die for, but Dina died instead. How she wished it were herself.

Her thoughts lingered as she twisted her neck to look at their little cavern, hidden between the rocks. A curtain of fresh ivy vines, now sickly-green and withered, without any tending, covered the entrance.

Looking at it now, the cavern suddenly brought back a flood of good memories: how they would escape the harsh reality of spiritual warfare, how they would sneak away from their overbearing parents to indulge in the cavern's cool waters, and how every time Dina would have just the right thing to say to comfort Elyse's fears.

As Elyse continued to climb the mountain, what was supposed to be a golden landscape covered by slips of sunlight, was now slowly turning into a milky white, like fluffy clouds. Some of them brushed across her face, some landed on her lilac robes.

Oh, she thought. Their texture is quite unique.

The angel held out her hand into the misty air, feeling the water drops envelope her fingers. The mist was cotton-like, almost tangible, with a chalky feeling. Slowly, the angel felt her hand being coated in the small white particles. She blinked.

Elyse remembered.

Dina was incredible. She was always the brighter one of the two, but neither minded. Elyse was born into a family of Lords and Dukes; their expectations for her powers high. But no, she didn't reach those standards, Dina did. Dina, the daughter of one of the lowest ranking officials in the realm, had incredible powers in controlling particles. The moisture, the dryness, the wind – she could control them all.

They used to play at the top of the mountain. They would watch the sunset.

People always wondered why Dina wasn't the one born into the higher ranked family because of her powers, but neither one cared.

Elyse remembered when they would sit on the peaks of Huangshan, smooth rocks against their hips and their fingertips fluttering over tops of ferns, they would watch the sun set. They would watch the ball of golden light die down, the moon and stars rising to their glory.

Dina would conjure a ball of milky white swirls, microscopic beads of water shimmering inside, all at her will. "Mist," was what Dina said it was. Elyse would peer into the circular masses, watching pearly particles dance and twirl.

"They're just like stars!" Elyse would exclaim with childish excitement. The mist would expand and slowly wrap her body in sweet dew.

Dina would blush, Elyse thought. Her eyes would be filled with pride, and the stars of passion in them would appear.

Dina used to say, Elyse remembered, that *whenever I'm powerful enough, I would create a majestic mist that covers the whole mountain, just for you.*

A long-lost emotion resurfaced, the muscles on the side of her mouth cracked, like liquid fire running across cold ice. Her lips upturned in a very long time.

The mist lingered on her cheeks, holding and stroking them, as the snowy-white mist pushed her into an embrace. Tears sprouted in her eyes, leaping down her nose. It was her, it was the lively tan-skinned that had improved, and moved on, even in death. Her last wish was finally fulfilled, and it was for her.

So you didn't desert me.

She knew at that moment, that it was time for her to move on too.

She laughed, dancing in the swirls of pearly white, as she reminisced the memories they made together, on the peaks of Huangshan, their tears, their laughs, and their wishes.

It was daybreak, when Elyse came, the mist welcoming her in. It was dawn, when Elyse returned, the mist spewing her out, with one last hug.

Armor of a Forgotten Hero

Canadian International School, Lee, Lauren – 13

“Thirty six strange peaks,

Immortals with black top knots.

Morning sun strikes the tree tops,

Here in this sky mountain world.

Chinese people, raise your faces!

For a thousand years cranes come and go.

Far off I spy a firewood gatherer,

Plucking sticks from stone crevices.”

—Li Bai “Dawn Vista On Huangshan”

The mountain is a bold statement of the slowness of time, of the reality of the ever-present moment, in a world of ticking human-clocks.

Stealing one last glance at the beautiful earthy peaks of the mountain range, and the orange-gold that stretched far and wide, Wang Shu then turned back to his makeshift workspace: composed of a surprisingly clean slate he found in the fields and globs of dirt held together by mud. Hearing wisps of laughter from out in the fields, he hastily shook his head and tried to block out the bright laughter, trying to calmly gather his belongings. Squeezing his eyes shut, plugging his ears, but to no avail. Like many times before, a soft smile crept upon him, and he dared to hope; making a mad dash to the field. He ran out, hoping to see his friends happily playing hopscotch.

But, like many times before, he was met with deafening silence.

Silence that gnawed at his insides. Silence that hung in the air like the suspended moment before a falling glass shatters on the ground. The silence was like a gaping void, needing to be filled with sounds, words, anything. The silence was poisonous in its nothingness, cruelly underscoring what the world had taken from him. He was trapped in a beautiful prison.

Oh, how he missed them; though they would now be twenty, or even thirty by now! He missed his brothers and sisters, the family that took him in, the family that tried to cope with the utter hopelessness of their situation. The family of the forgotten children. Wang Shu sighed softly, turning back to his makeshift shelter, not even thinking about glancing back. The thousands of times he thought they had returned, the thousands of times he turned back to find their left-behind belongings, and the thousands of times he sat paralyzed by fear in the dusk, had wiped clean any possibility of hope.

Later that evening, as Wang Shu laid in the “forgotten-hand” billet that was now his by default, he hoped that sleep would be kinder to him. *How foolish of him, to have dared to hope.* Wrinkles and dark circles did little to hide the naivens of a young boy. The sleep pooled on his eyelids, and the wooden buildings surrounding the mountain were filled with the soft sounds of the townspeople sleeping. The people he once knew. And the wind swooped up, over the heights, rushed and rustled through the tough mountain grasses, and gradually ebbed away through the crags to silence.

Sleep comes so that my dreams may live.

The laughter of the children echoed his open heart; with the frequencies only those who have loved and loved can hear. With his inner eyes, he saw their smiles and eyes that focus on the branches that sway in the gentle wind. For they are not the forgotten, not then, but brave heroes; the hearts elsewhere that yearn to be free, to return here.

Sleep comes so that my nightmares may live.

As Wang Shu scanned his mother's face for a reaction, the silence hung in the air like the suspended moment before a falling glass shatters on the ground. He expected her to crumple, wail, or dissolve into tears, but she did none of those things. Instead she put the letter down, got up and started to make a pot of rose tea. Her son was to be taken away and she was making tea like a robot. When she set out four cups he knew she hadn't taken it in. Sitting at the end of the row was his favorite, the blue ceramic one he'd made at his elementary school art fair.

A bolt of thunder jolted him out of his sleep, allowing an escape from his merciless captor. The thunderstorm that followed bequeathed a percussion of rain upon the rooftop, washing away his fear, as most storms in these parts did. Nonetheless, he refused to go back, refused to let his eyelids droop, and instead tried to remember.

The storm soon ebbed to nothingness, now the silence was as pure as the night air outside. It seemed as if every creature was sheltering, as if birds had either flown south or had better things to do than sing, and it sounded like there wasn't another human for miles. He had been here long enough to know that even in the night, there had to be more sound than that of his racing heartbeat.

Wang Shu hesitantly tucked himself into bed, trying to ignore the oddness of the situation.

Every hero eventually realizes that dreams come with price tags that have nothing to do with money. If heroic dreams were easy, if capes were free, everyone would have one and this world would be better already.

As he went back to sleep; he dreamt of a coin, old and covered in dirt, the engravings worn and the head of the king so tarnished as to be stolen from view. He held it in his left hand, watching the mud dirty his skin. So close to his face, the coin had the aroma of stale blood. Wang Shu turned to his right hand and in the palm was a new spring leaf, crowned by a perfect sphere of dew, reflecting an image of his face, softened and relaxed. When I turned back to the coin, the image of the king had freed himself and journeyed over to the leaf, igniting the growth of strong roots and new foliage that reached for the sunlight, robust, virescent.

On the back of the coin, it now wrote: "Join us, hero. It is your time."

"The birds have vanished down the sky.

Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,

until only the mountain remains."

—Li Bai "Zazen on Ching-t'ing Mountain"

A Lovely Place

Canadian International School, Neo, Katelyn – 13

Mist spilled out of valleys and gripped the peaks like claws. Snow slammed against rock, sliding down in despair. A black-clothed figure watched sourly as the snow around him turned to ash. Then he narrowed his eyes at the towering mountain ahead.

Huangshan is such a lovely place. GuiCheng's black robes flew wildly, barely held to his body by a thick sash around his torso. He grinned. *I can't wait to make it mine.*

And he launched himself into the air.

The cold seeped through his clothes. Rock and snow blurred at his sides. Shadows extended into distorted figures and stretched out their claws. Frost crept onto his skin, covering the gold markings on his face. GuiCheng narrowed on a peak bare of trees with a narrow top.

Then a face pale and bright as the moon appeared in front of him.

He sucked in a breath and stopped. Silence flooded the space where wind had screamed. Snow fell gently, catching on his eyelashes. The owner of the face was floating in front of him. "It has been a while since I've had visitors." Their eyes twinkled. Mist-white hair flowed around them, their face neither a man's nor a woman's.

GuiCheng snorted. "HuangYue, you look well as ever." He surveyed them, raising a brow. "Pity I'm not here for a visit."

HuangYue's lips tugged up. "I'm aware of that."

He bared his teeth into a slow smile. "Then get out of my way."

They laughed, their voice like tinkling bells. "I am afraid I cannot do that."

GuiCheng growled, edging towards them. "Move. I'm not wasting my energy on you."

HuangYue tilted their head, regarding him thoughtfully. They lifted a hand and trailed over the gold marks framing his eyes. "GuiCheng."

A chill ran down his back. "Enough!" he spat. GuiCheng grabbed the whip at his side and brandished it. Dodging, HuangYue landed on the nearest peak and frowned disapprovingly. Dark mist swirled and the whip turned into a blade. He snarled and swung at HuangYue.

They blocked the swing. He charged. HuangYue leapt away, pale yellow robes spread like petals. GuiCheng hissed and struck again.

"GuiCheng, why are you doing this? This is not what you truly want."

"Not what I want?" GuiCheng laughed darkly. "You have no say in that." He slashed his whip. "This mountain happens to fit my needs," he drawled. "So don't take it personally!" A sturdy bow appeared in his hands, an ebony arrow already notched against it. "Isn't it *delightful* how one arrow can turn this magnificent beast into ash?" He drew it back and turned to a small pine tree that looked like a lotus flower. He grinned. "I won't make it painful."

Then he released.

HuangYue's eyes widened and with a wave of their arm, the arrow halted. It trembled, trying to break their spell. HuangYue gritted their teeth and clasped their palms together, grinding the arrow into ash. "GuiCheng, stop this *now*," they commanded and dropped their hands. "You are not like this."

They stiffened immediately.

GuiCheng smirked. He leapt out from the mist, swinging his axe. HuangYue flinched back.

GuiCheng laughed maniacally. "Dodged my swing? I'm impressed, HuangYue. Not everyone can do that." They jumped from peak to peak, GuiCheng missing HuangYue over and over. Trees shook. Snow fell. Cliffs crumbled. Tremors rumbled through the mountains. GuiCheng watched for an attack, but they remained dormant. His axe morphed into a whip and he lassoed a piece of loose rock. Grunting, GuiCheng threw it at HuangYue.

They moved to the side. Falling rocks boomed. "GuiCheng," HuangYue said quietly. He ignored them and swung at them. A wave of their hand and the whip shuddered to a halt. "You won't gain anything from this."

GuiCheng scoffed. "Nothing?" A saber appeared in his hand. "I'll be feared and respected once I'm done here!" He stabbed at them, but they pushed away. He swung at their abdomen, but they jumped.

He snarled and struck faster, but HuangYue easily kept up.

An itch formed on his skin and a fire grew in his head. He lunged at HuangYue, hissing. Then something in HuangYue's gaze changed. They blocked his blow and pushed against GuiCheng's exposed chest.

His eyes widened in surprise. His breath rushed out of his lungs and he floated weightlessly, crashing through trees, knocking down rocks. Then his back collided with a stone wall.

Blood spurted from his mouth and he slid down to his knees, red smearing against the stone behind him. His chest was on fire and his heartbeat echoed in his ears. Blearily, he saw ivory hair spill down. A small shimmer swam in pools of sadness. "Rest," HuangYue whispered, and placed a soft hand over his eyes.

Gnarled trees filled the scenery. Smoke rose from cracks in the blood-stained ground and clogged the air. Rotten corpses, decaying trees, piles of bones littered the land. And yet in front of him, GuiCheng saw a pair of small hands tending clumsily to a plant. A boy spoke with a lilting voice as if he were telling a story. GuiCheng jolted. *The hands...the voice...no...why am I—?*

A shout interrupted his past self. He whirled around and saw a large, tattooed demon storming towards him. His legs went weak and he stumbled back, trying to run away. But he was still small, his legs uncoordinated. GuiCheng watched as his father clasped his neck and lifted his small body. *Save me...*

"Enjoying yourself, you filthy animal? Taking care of that *thing*?" He mocked, spittle spraying in GuiCheng's face.

He started shaking. "I...That's my..."

"Pathetic," he spat. "You're not worth *anything*." His father let out a burst of fire from their finger, setting the tiny plant up in flames.

"No!" GuiCheng shrieked, thrashing in his father's grip. "That's my best friend!" He spent weeks persuading the shoot to grow. "Please, father! Stop!"

His father growled and sunk his nails into his neck. "Quiet! My son wouldn't behave like this. You're a disgrace." Blood streamed down GuiCheng's neck. Wailing, GuiCheng kicked his father's arm. He hissed, and his grip loosened.

GuiCheng fell to the ground and scrambled away from his father. His father let out a blood-curdling roar and thundered after him. His chest tightened, his eyesight blurred. Hiccups came from his mouth as he sobbed, making it impossible for him to breathe. *I'm a demon. I am strong. I can keep going.* He didn't care as the ground burned the skin on his soles, he didn't care if gnarled bushes ripped his robes. He had to run away.

Soon, a figure as small as himself came into view. Yet he didn't stop and beg for help. Before he passed the figure, he saw a multicoloured gaze follow him. Then it shifted away.

He sniffed, tears dripping off his chin. *Why can't I fight back? Why am I not strong enough?* He bolted through the trees. *Why am I so worthless? I hate him!*

I hate me.

So he ran. And he ran and ran, his hate growing until its roaring was all he heard as he slew, leaving every battleground soaked with the blood of gods and demons and humans.

GuiCheng vaguely felt a warm hand rest on his face, and he opened his eyes. He was slumped on the cold stone. HuangYue leaned above him, their eyes searching his. Stone grey dotted with green. Warm brown speckled with purple.

Beautiful, beautiful eyes.

"Do you remember now?"

GuiCheng snapped out of his daze and scoffed. "How could I not?" He lay his head on the stone behind him. "My life flashed before my eyes." He stared at HuangYue.

"You smile, yet you are hurt. You laugh, yet you are crying."

He glared at them, but HuangYue merely watched him. "I killed so many beings," he muttered.

"Why did you do it?"

GuiCheng looked away and swallowed. "Because I was greedy," he finally said. His voice cracked. "I wanted closure. I wanted reassurance." Tears blurred his vision. "I wanted people to look at me with awe."

"And why did you want to harm Huangshan?"

He hesitated and glanced around. Tall, grand peaks broke out of the mist. Trees stood with quiet pride as snow settled on bare branches. It wasn't the mountain worth millions of fearful stares he thought it to be.

"I don't know," GuiCheng whispered. Tears fell onto his face. "I don't know." He thought of his foolish actions, his pitiful self. He was broken. He had strayed from who he was but...he was back now.

"Huangshan is such a lovely place," he whispered.

HuangYue smiled. "Yes." Then he glanced at GuiCheng. "*He* is."

Waiting for the Water to Go

Canadian International School, Yue, Venita Yue –13

Qing was grabbing her brother Kuso's sleeve as they ran through the forest. She stopped before a cave and pointed.

'In there.' She said. 'Someone is calling.'

She's right. Somewhere deep into that cave, something was creating this horrendous sound. It could be a person's desperate call for help, or a beast's growl.

Inside the cave, the air was wet and crisp. Darkness was thick, but they were able to borrow the sunlight from the outside world to light their way. It was noon, and the sun was still hanging brightly up in the cloudless sky. Qing constantly looked behind her while their only source of guidance shrinks as the sound became closer and closer.

At the end of the tunnel was a stone buddha. About three times the size of Kuso and was covering another entrance behind. Light was shining through the Buddha's body, and it was glowing. At the same time, the air coming from the other side was blocked by it, causing the growl.

The siblings leaned on one side of the buddha to push it out of the way. Moss was growing from the bottom due to old age. It was heavy but they were able to move it until the sound was completely gone. They walked through the opening and arrived at a small bay facing the open sea. The fog dispersed into the horizon, touching the water's surface and leaving no gap for the sky.

However, in the distance, a statue of a golden chicken could be spotted standing solely on the surface.



They came back the next morning, but it was not what they saw yesterday. Qing and Kuso were immediately absorbed by what was before them. Both stood silently for a while.

The water ebbed and a hidden town came to life.

'Wow!' Qing finally said. And before Kuso could stop her, she already walked down the stone staircases and onto the path that led into town.

'Qing—Wait!' He called.

On both sides, there were shops with billboards and signs, and three to four storied residences. Shops where supplied, but there was nobody.

'What is this place?' Kuso said to himself.

That was when they noticed the dancing smoke that curled up into the air with a delicious smell coming from a shop not far away. It was a shop with a wooden exterior and a sign that says Wonton Noodles. Kuso opened the door and triggered a bell that hung on the inside.

'Welcome!'

Before them was a young man that looked in his 20s. In the absence of silence, the young man took a good look at the both of them and finally said in a different tone.

'You guys are not from here, aren't you?'

Qing and Kuso shook their heads with innocence.

'What is this place? And where is everyone?' Kuso asked.

'Let me grab you each a bowl of noodles first.' He said.

Two steaming bowls of noodles. The wonton still glimmering with grace, and the pink of the shrimp could be seen through the glass wonton skin. They devoured it within minutes. Kuso felt a sudden sensation of coldness. He looked down at his feet and the water was at his ankle high. Qing also jumped with panic.

'I will be gone soon.' The young man said. 'You guys should get going too.'

He thanked him, then grabbed his sister's hand and ran all the way back into the cave.

They arrived back home. Looking over their fence, they could see their parents usually eating breakfast in the yard.

'Who are you children?' Their mother asked as they went through the front door.

As if time was just frozen.

'What?' Qing's pitch was higher in disbelief.

This can't be... Kuso thought.

'I knew something was wrong with that place.' He said, while trying to calm the storm that's thundering inside of him. 'We need to go back for answers.'

The sun rested in the middle of the sky, and dyed all things yellow with its ray of shine. The shadow of each tree ran over them as they walked through the forest, back to where they came from. They decided to wait until the next appearance of the town.

The sky was still dark, but the dim morning ray splits it in two. The world was quiet when Night exchanges for Day. They live in the same house, but they never meet. One leaves the back door as one comes through the front.

When the water was completely gone, they ran down the stone staircases, onto the streets of this town. In the distance, they could see that same young man walking out from his shop, holding a broom in his hands. He seems to notice them too, waving with his right.

'Didn't expect you guys to come back at all!' He said, as Qing and Kuso caught their breath.

'There's a problem.' They said.



'I don't have answers, but there is someone who might know.' The young man said after hearing their story. 'Keeper of the tower. Madam Mei Ying, a librarian that guards the books of fortunes. Everyone has their own book.'

In front of them was an intricate red Chinese wooden pagoda. A square tower with stories each separated by projecting roofs and bells dangling on every edge; always ringing in that crisp way that seems to echo on forever. Two guarding stone lions by each side of the door, and at the very the top, stood the golden chicken.

The traditional appearance of the tower seems to disguise what is on the inside. The ceiling stretched till the very top, with sunlight shining in. All four walls were filled by heaves and heaves of books, with stairs that seems to go on forever spiralling along. It was like an underground cave of a mad scientist.

'How can I help you?'

The sudden voice of a woman scared the both of them equally.

She was a slim woman with pearl skin and silky black hair. She wore a red Cheongsam with black plimsoll shoes and a pair of glasses.

‘My name is Kuso, and this is my sister Qing. We would like to see our books or fortunes.’

Together, they walked up the wooden stairs. Passing the walls, Qing realised there were only two types of books; red or white.

‘Why are the books different?’ She asked.

‘White is for the alive, and red is for the dead.’ Madam Mei Ying replied coldly.

Her expression changed as she looked at the two books that belonged to them. It was neither white or red, but both! The red seems to slowly collide with the white, or devouring it.

‘Is there something we could do?’ Qing was desperate, with tears emerging from her eyes.

Madam Mei Ying silenced for a while, then said. ‘Two days from now, it will be the next full moon. Go to the peak of Huang Shan and ask the fortune writer to grant you a wish.’

Qing and Kuso went on their journey right away.



The moon seemed to be so close to them that the ripples on the surface could be noticed. So quiet that a single sound could evoke thousands of birds.

There, an old man sat on the edge of the cliff, holding a book in his hands with a pot of fine wine beside him. They walked closer to him, and noticed the pages were blank.

‘Can you grant us our wish?’ Qing asked.

At first, he didn’t say a word. Then, still with his eyes closed, he said. ‘Oh! To have something that goes with my great wine!’

With hurry, Kuso searched his pockets to find their last remaining bun. He handed it to the old man. The old man smiled.

‘Under the cherry blossoms.’ He said. ‘Put your hands in the water and say your wish.’

In front of them, new land has risen from where it used to be a cliff. A red arc bridge led to a sacred place above the clouds, connecting the two lands. At the end of the bridge, a sakura tree in full bloom could be seen, with petals gliding along the wind and down its branch.

Looking down from the edge, fast streams of water ran below, clashing with the rocks and wind to create a roar. Under the sakura tree, the falling petals tickled their cheeks, and the branches hovered over them like a tent. The tree glowed with life. A rock fountain was next to it, with two gold fishes swimming its body of water. Qing and Kuso looked at each other and Qing placed her hand inside. The water felt like a mother’s hand, as if welcoming her. The moon rested in the fountain and the fishes swam peacefully; they’ve finally united with their old friend, the moon. Qing took a deep breath.

‘I wish everything went back to normal.’ She said.

Contest in Magical Mountain

Carmel Pak U Secondary School, Zeng, Si Rui Dora – 13

I'm wandering in the mountains, astounded by the beauty of the view and almost forget what I'm here for. The shadows of the trees are whirling and crossing over one another, the nameless flowers are blooming in a peaceful and unassuming way. The moisture in the air, the sound of the cascade and the dew in the sprouted plants make everything wondrous. When I walk to the cliff side, I realise that I'm in the middle of a lofty mountain whose peak looms through the fog. The mercurial clouds are changing ceaselessly, one moment before it looks like a unicorn, in the blink of an eye, it changes to a monkey. Right when I'm enjoying the pleasing view, the incandescent glow of the sunrise washes away the darkness before daybreak.

My name is Zhang Zi Yi, I was an orphan before my master adopted me and raised me as 13th heir of Pine genre Kung Fu. I'm here, at Mountain Lu, because there's a contest. Mountain Lu is a magical place where mythical creatures live in, every sixty years (one circle of Heavenly stems and earthly branches), there will be a contest held to choose the next leader of the mountain, who shall guard the mountain, be respected and obeyed by every creature in the mountain. My master tells me to come here and join the contest.

Finally, I arrive at the wooden cottage. I see an old man with long beard and white hair, sipping a cup of tea, he must be Master Zhou. Then I see a girl who looks like at the same age as me, wearing a plain Hanfu and playing the Guqin. She looks quite shy and introverted. "Oh, Zi Yi, there you are! This is Wen Yin. Let's wait for another contestant, then I'll begin to introduce the contest rules," says Master Zhou. I salute and bow then sit down, staring out the window wondering what the next couple of days will be like. A while later, there's a loud noise coming from the door. A thin and short boy comes in, "So sorry, Master Zhou...I overslept again," stammers the boy as he bows. "Never mind, Bo Yong," says Master Zhou with a smile, "So let me begin to introduce you the contest rules. First, there are two tasks for you to do, you'll get one mark for each task if you win, the person who has the highest mark in the end will be the next leader of Mountain Lu. Second, you can only be helped by creatures living in Mountain Lu, no help from the external is accepted. Lastly, you cannot cheat or otherwise you'll be disqualified. Any questions?" Both three of us shake our heads. "Good," says Master Zhou.

"The first task that you need to do is to reach the top of the mountain by riding a creature called dragon-horse that is half horse and half dragon, please note that it can only fly 1000 metres above sea level. The highest peak is 1474 metres above sea level. So you need to figure out what to do after flying 1000 metres by yourselves," says Master Zhou. I tremble as I have to face my fear of heights. Oh dear...What am I going to do? I'm so unmoored. I breathe in and out over and over again, try to calm myself down. Then I decide to get familiar with the magical creature first. I recognise the dragon-horse instantly, its soft teal fur, horse's tail and dragon's head. It has eyes full of cleverness and mischief. It just standing there elegantly, gives me a gaze with scorn. There's a moment of silence until it talks, which really scares me. "What do you plan to do after the 1000 metres?" asks the dragon-horse. "I have no idea..." I say. It arches its long eyebrows slightly, and says "Hmmm, you can climb up the rocks if you want, but it's dangerous to do so as the slope is steep and treacherous." I begin to ponder but I still have no thoughts. The anxiety and worry creep into my mind. "Do you have any friends that can help?" I ask. "I do have some friends that can help indeed. They are the heavenly birds, the combinations of phoenixes, birds and chickens. They can carry you throughout the remaining journey," says the dragon-horse. "Such delightful news! Great, then it's settled. Thank you so much! I really appreciate it," I say in a high-pitched voice and with excitements.

The next day is clear with no fog but gentle breeze instead, it's the perfect weather to do the flying task. The flicker of sunlight is dancing merrily on the plants. "Ready, set, go!" Says Master Zhou excitedly. Just then, his phoenix flies high to the sky, bursts into a fire glowing blindingly, tarnishes and becomes ashes. "Don't worry, it will become itself again once the task is done," says Master Zhou with a blink. Right when I ride on the dragon-horse, it swiftly flies to the sky. The wind blows through my hair and the refreshing air make me can't help smiling. Time flies when you're having fun, we reach 1000 metres very soon. "I'll spurt magical flames as signs for you to jump. Don't worry, those heavenly birds will catch you," says dragon-horse. "Alright, thanks again", I say as I nod. A few moments later, I see gleaming flames coming out. I gasp and close my eyes then jump out of the dragon-horse. The feeling of falling is unearthly and heart-stopping, I'm so glad that it doesn't last long. In my disbelief, I'm caught up by the heavenly birds safely. I settle down and take a break, watching these stunning birds with glimmering tails.

Suddenly, I heard a ferocious bellow and a girl's scream. I'm already very near to the peak, but I still tell the heavenly birds to fly to the lower side and see what's going on. I feel aghast about what I see: a beast with lion's head and scorpion's sting is attacking Wen Yin, whose clothes are torn. I decide immediately what to do, I start doing the martial arts that my master taught me. The beast soon fall in unconsciousness. I tell Wen Yin to stay with me and the heavenly birds, she agrees. "Thank you so much for saving my life!" she says with thankfulness and her face flushes. "My honour," I smile. When we arrive at the peak, Bo Yong is already there. "Why are you so slow?" Asks Bo Yong. Wen Yin explains everything to him and Master Zhou. "A good leader must be courageous and help the people when they are in need. To praise what Zi Yi did, I announce this task has two winners, Zi Yi and Bo Yong," says Master Zhou. "Congratulations!" says Wen Yin. "Thanks, and sorry for your encounter," I say. "It's fine, I'm alright," says Wen Yin cheerfully.

The next task is to walk through the forest with no candles, lamps or torches, just complete and evermore darkness. The person who finishes first wins. It's midnight so we can't see anything clearly, we can only depend on one another. I walk slowly and carefully, avoid making any noise that can wake those beasts up. We walk separately for a while, so far so good. Right when the butterflies in my stomach disappear, I hear a loud scream again, this time it's a boy's one. When I find Bo Yong, I'm too alarmed that I literally can't talk. His face is as pale as sheet, both of his eyes are bleeding uncontrollably. I clap my hand on my mouth and tears begin to drop. "Oh my god...Wh...what happen? Are you okay?" I keep shaking. "The tiger-snake. I can't see anything now, but I'm alright," he says with a weak smile. I cover his eyes with herbal eye patch and carry him on my back. After a long haul of fighting beasts, we finally arrive. When Wen Yin and Master Zhou see us, no more words are necessary, we all know what happen. Fortunately, Master Zhou says he has some medicine to save Bo Yong's eyes. What a relief!

"To compliment the kindness of Zi Yi, I announce that the winners of this task are Wen Yin and Zi Yi. So, the leader of Mountain Lu is—Zhang Zi Yi!" says Master Zhou. Wen Yin and Bo Yong start clapping. "Thank you, but I won't be here without your help. So I would like to invite you to guard Mountain Lu together." I say. They agree and we all hug together.

A Race Between Time and Hope

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Apelbaum, Abigail – 13

As Xi Wang sat beside her mother on the hospital bed gently stroking her mother's arm, makeup rolled from her soft, kind, light brown eyes, onto her rough yet vibrant skin. All she wanted was for her mother to no longer be restricted by the barriers of her illness. It was clear, both she and her mother were in pain. As her mother cried to the sirens from a distance, the mountains did too, and both her mother's tears and the loud rain, wouldn't come to an end. It felt as though the mountains were mimicking her mother, but for what reason?

Xi Wang and her mother had settled down in a small, welcoming village on the side of a mountain in the north of China when she was 8 months old, about fourteen years ago. This village had always been a blessing, until 2 years ago. 2 years ago, Xi Wang's father was their whole life, until he wasn't. Her father was a problematic man. He had been in contact with the wrong people and made deals he had regretted. And this was all Xi Wang had known about her father's death. Regardless of what he had done, he was her best friend. He was the light that guided her through the dark, and he taught her to understand that there is some bit of hope in every situation. After all, hope was what inspired him to name her Xi wang. His death took a toll on his family and after months of trying to heal the wounds Xi Wang's father had made, nothing could get rid of the disbelief they had felt. Regardless of the events which occurred with her father, the hope which fuelled Xi Wang was never extinguished.

Not long after her fathers' death, Xi Wang's mother had fallen ill. She had a rare terminal illness, which took a toll on her body. Slowly but surely, her silky, long, black hair had begun to fall off. Seeing her mother in this state wasn't pleasant, but Xi Wang got used to it, until it came to the point, where nights turned into days, and days turned into months, and her mother's pain was unbearable, which meant she needed immediate care.

As the rain danced across the mountains, Xi Wang's mother had tears dancing across her face. It was like these mountains could sense her mother's pain, but that was all in her head, or so she thought. The next couple of weeks were spent in the hospital. They were tough and exhausting. The day soon came when the last strand of hair on Xi Wang's mother's head had fallen out, and this wasn't a good sign. They knew they would face challenges but as always a deep hope filled Xi Wang's body and she knew like all the challenges they faced before they could overcome this. A while after processing the whole situation, she and her mother decided they needed a distraction. Any distraction. So they watched the only news channel, on the old, rustic tv. As the news was shown, they witnessed something terrible. A landslide had just occurred from the top of the mountain, putting many in danger. It was frightening and just seeing this made Xi Wang tense up. She felt as though anxiety had taken over her body, and after everything that had happened in the past, she had no idea what was yet to come.

That same night it was cold and windy, and as Xi Wang laid down on the bed near her mothers, she had various thoughts running through her mind. "My mothers' last piece of hair had fallen off today, as well as the 'hair' of the mountain. My mother cried, and so did the mountain. It's like the mountains are trying to tell me something about my mother, but that can't be, at least I don't think." Xi Wang was unsure whether she was overthinking, or this actually meant something, but soon enough, she drifted off to sleep.

As the nurses spoke to one another in a very serious tone, Xi Wang overheard unsettling information about her mother. "Her immune system is extremely weak right now, her temperature is too high" "There is not much we can do, we need to find a cure and we must do it fast" Xi Wang's stomach felt as unsettled as the information she had just heard. She decided to take a stroll, get some fresh air, and clear her head. As she stepped outside, she was beginning to heat up. It was hot. Like there was a fire within her. It was getting hard to breathe and as she turned her head, she heard someone yell "fire, fire, it's coming from the mountains, someone help, please!" the voice was heavy as if her

lungs were being suffocated. Xi Wang ran back to the hospital, where it was safer. What she had witnessed was frightening, but she couldn't share her fear with her mother, at least not right now.

She held onto hope but at the back of her mind, she knew that the mountains had something to do with her mother, and any opportunity to help her mother was one she could not resist. And so on that day, Xi Wang decided to figure out what the mountains were trying to tell her. She had the slightest idea of how long she would be gone for, or where she was going, but she had to do it quietly, and fast, or she wouldn't make it back to be with her mother while she still could. Memories and thoughts and ideas were racing through her mind, yet as she attempted to process all that was happening nothing made sense. She began walking with the slightest idea of where she was going, with nothing but a bottle of water, and hope.

These disastrous events occurred on the same mountain which the village sat on, so climbing it couldn't be too hard. She began her journey at 9:23 am, while her mother was getting endless tests done. The time was now uncertain, but the sun was setting, and Xi Wang knew that wasn't a good sign. She had nowhere to sleep, and nothing to eat, but she did have hope. So she decided to settle down near a rock, and as she laid down, on the rough, uneven ground, all she could do was hold onto hope. Then, morning came, and she had to continue her journey.

She walked, and walked, and walked, but it felt like the walking was endless. An hour of walking turned into a couple of days of walking, and soon enough, Xi Wang was sleep-deprived and starving, so she knew she had to head back soon, or her life would end before her mother's. As she sat down on the hard ground, she looked up in hope of clearing her head, but as she faced towards the sky, all the clouds were oddly shaped arrows pointing towards her left. They were pointing to the rock near her. There was a large chance Xi Wang was just imagining this. She was starving, dehydrated, and exhausted, but regardless of what was wrong with her, her mother came first. Everything around her was spinning, and the spinning wouldn't come to an end. She walked towards the rock as slowly and steadily as her body could. As Xi Wang looked on the rock, there was nothing. Nothing. She burst into tears and began to lose hope. She crouched down onto the ground, and whimpered softly, as she lay down on the floor holding her legs to her stomach, and as she twisted from one side to the other, she saw it. There it was. It was what she had needed all along. It was the plant, the medicine her mother needed to heal. Xi Wang was ecstatic on the inside, but as she looked at it, she noticed there was something engraved on the ground. 'Time will beat hope, hurry'. The only thing going through her head was that she had to get the medicine back to her mother, and fast. Xi Wang's senses were right, the mountain was there to help her mother, "but was there enough time to do so?" Xi Wang asked herself. It was difficult for Xi Wang to get up, it was practically impossible, and now that time was running out, so was hope.

As she grabbed the plant, and finally managed to stand upright, she just collapsed again. The next time she opened her eyes, she was lying on a hospital bed, wanting a sense of relief, and as Xi Wang stroked her mother's arm the little hope which Xi Wang had left flickered like the remnants of a candle. As her mother's eyes began to shut, she held onto her mother's arm, as tight as she held onto hope.

A Giant Friendship

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Artzi, Aviv – 11

Once upon a time there was a lovely girl named Betty. Betty was kind, polite and generous. She had blue eyes like the ocean and long and straight dark brown hair. Her skin was white and soft as a baby's skin. Every day Betty would run in uncle Jeremy's farm with his dog. Betty was eight years old and even at that age she was the fastest in the village and even uncle Jeremy's dog couldn't keep up with her.

The village was high in the magical mountains and rumors about giants have been going on since three hundred years ago. Betty's family wasn't really big or rich. Her family was only Betty, her mom and uncle Jeremy. They didn't have much money, They were quite poor.

One day, as usual, Betty went up the magical mountain of friendship to get some water from the water well. The villagers gave each mountain an element based on events that happened a long time ago. The mountain of friendship was also the place that rumors about giants have started from. On her way up, she saw two old men and one donkey. It seemed like the two men were fighting about who's the owner of the donkey. Betty went over there to help find a solution to the problem. She asked what she could do for help but each one of them said it was stolen from him. Betty didn't know which one is lying and which one is telling the truth so she had a very simple solution in mind. She looked at the cheap knife that her mother gave her to protect her against bad people and she said, "If you both really want this donkey then I can cut it into two halves and you will both have the donkey". She knew that the owner of the donkey, the one that really cares about it would give up the donkey so that the donkey won't get hurt, and in a blink of an eye, one of the old men shouted,

"please don't! It's fine, he can have the donkey" with his eyes rolling down with sadness. Betty went to this old man and told him:

"Sir, I believe that you are the real owner of this donkey because you care about it." The other old man was mad but he was shocked by this little girl and her trick, but he knew deep in his heart that he really isn't the owner of the donkey. Betty kept walking through the magical mountain trying to find the water well. On her way she saw broken branches and fallen trees, she also saw some small, wild animals. The birds were singing, the squirrels were jumping and running around, the deer were playing with the bunnies. It was unusual because this mountain was known for signs of giants and it was known that giants hated animals.

Betty felt good for herself about the good deed that she did before. When Betty arrived at the water well, the area was sort of empty. All she could see is the water well and with a couple of meters' distance, trees all around it. Betty saw some broken stones that were a part of the well. The broken stones were shaped as a huge finger, from Betty's perspective. As Betty went closer, she was instantly shocked. The birds made a weird noise and flew far far away from the area, the deer ran away as fast as they could without making any noise and the squirrels hid inside the trees. She also saw bunnies hiding inside of caves under stones and looking at her as they were expecting something scary to happen. Betty tried to get the water from the well using her old, wooden bucket but she couldn't. While she tried and tried she instantly heard BOOM BOOM BOOM. She wasn't taking much of that for a note. She thought that it might be just the wind knocking some trees out because here, high up in the mountains, the wind was very strong. Betty tried once more with her rope and bucket to get some water but suddenly. She fell down! Betty was very stressed. The well was very very deep. As she fell more and more, the ground looked closer and closer. She knew that it was the end. Right before her body was smashed into the ground she started to float. Her body was a couple of inches above the ground, but she felt a strong force pulling her up and up. Now she started to see the ground smaller and smaller until she was in the sky and she could barely see the well. She could see a beautiful view and clouds. She still couldn't understand how she could fly. Betty looked above her and was shocked! A thumb and a finger big as clouds holding her shirt up like she was a light doll. She was terrified! "A giant!" She thought to herself without even looking at the big picture. Betty turned around her head and she saw something, something that she could never forget. She saw two eyes, each big as a half of her body, two ears that each one is big as her whole entire body and a mouth big as a cloud. Betty thought that she would end up badly or even for lunch. She shouted: "Please don't hurt me! I didn't mean to interrupt you!"

The giant said in her strong and loud voice: " it's ok! I just hope that you are feeling better!" while putting Betty on the ground. Betty was shocked that she hasn't been eaten yet. Betty started running back to her home, shocked from what happened to her. When Betty was running, she looked back and saw the giant sitting down on the ground and saying silently to herself: " Well, I think I need to stay friendless for now" with her eyes rolling down with sadness. Betty felt bad for what she did and she started to run back to the giant. When Betty was just 10 meters away from the giant, she said "hey".

The giant was happy. She rolled her head to the side and saw Betty standing in front of her without being scared or terrified. The giant replayed,

"Hey". Betty asked her if they can be friends and the giant replayed, "Yes! I would love that!" Her voice was so loud that Betty had to cover her ears.

The giant apologized and Betty said: " you should never be ashamed of who you are".

what's your name?" asked the giant.

"It's Betty!" she replayed happily. "What's your name?" asked Betty,

"It's Mary", She replied. Betty created a password, which she used in order to meet with Mary. Only after saying this password, Mary would show herself. So it has been decided between the two. "Mary Mary show yourself, giant and small, friendship is the key to them all ". The two friends both went in their different paths, Betty back to her village and Mary stayed in this place. The next day, Betty snuck some turkey and some grapes from her house and was on her way to the same place that she met Mary in. When Betty reached the water well, she said: "Mary Mary show yourself, giant and small, friendship is the key to them all". Mary showed herself from behind the trees and she showed Betty a huge strawberry that she found in the woods, about three times as big as Betty and Betty showed her turkey and apologized for that the food wasn't much and Mary understood. They both laid on the ground looking at the stars at the sky. As for tomorrow, the same thing happened. Betty brought her food, Mary brought her food, the code was repeated and they both happily watched the stars at night falling. The same thing happened every day, until one day, uncle Jeremy noticed that something was wrong. He took his double barreled shotgun with him and followed Betty. When Betty said the code and Mary showed herself, uncle Jeremy jumped out of a bush aiming his heavy shotgun at Mary's head and was about to shoot without even thinking, but instantly someone was standing in front of his gun with her legs and hands wide open. It was Betty, the girl who wouldn't lose her friend so easily. Uncle Jeremy was shocked by Betty's act that he decided to retreat. Betty knew that now that uncle Jeremy knows she can't keep it as a secret anymore and she decided to bring Mary to the village. It was everybody's first time seeing a giant in real life. Some people thought of it as a myth or a dream. Most of the village loved the idea to have a giant living with them and it has been decided with the village leader. Mary will be a part of the village and Betty and Mary got to keep their friendship forever.

Bao and the City of Gold

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Banerjee, Aarush – 13

Once upon a time, there was a boy who lived with his mother on the crest of a cold, high mountain. His name was Bao. Bao was a simple boy, he never had much. His father abandoned him and his mother when he was younger, and so he had no memories of him. Bao's mother worked as a cook in many households to provide a good life for him. Bao was slightly underweight, he had intense black eyes, he had short spiky black hair, he was of medium height and he always had a smile on his face. Bao had a brave spirit; he always stood up for himself and others; he wasn't afraid of anything. For his entire life, Bao had never visited any other place in the world except for his province. He was always made fun of for his father not being around, but Bao made sure not to let this get into his head.

Everyday Bao would go to school and have a good time there. He was a good student who performed well in class and he was also good at making friends. Bao also had his fair share of bullies, but everyone in the school and the province shared one common enemy, the governor. The governor was easily the most selfish person that Bao had ever met, even the people who serve and work for the governor despised him. He was a short man, with a grey beard, he possessed a pair of horrible teeth and he had a sharp mind. He struck children for not doing well in school and used to punish random street goers for no good reason except for his pleasure. He was a monster. Bao always kept in mind that one day he would overthrow the governor one day and give the title to someone worthy of it.

One day Bao was heading back home after a wonderful day at school. He didn't think anything could make it better. As he was walking, he saw a scroll on the street. It had text on it, but it was indistinct and he could read it properly, he proceeded to put the scroll in his bag and continue walking home. Bao always heard stories about mystical treasures and gold hidden in the mountains for thousands of years, this could have been his way to help his mother out. When he got home he quickly washed up, ate his dinner, did his homework, and then opened the scroll. He could tell that scroll wasn't made recently. Some of the corners were ripped off and missing, there were holes in the middle of the scroll blocking out text. Bao was truly intrigued. After examining it closely he realized it was a map. He had no clue what this map lead him to, but he did know the destination was nearby since Bao recognized the landmarks shown on the map. Bao wanted to pursue this map but couldn't since he would miss out on school he waited till the weekend came to follow the map.

The time had finally come for Bao to follow the map. It was a cold morning, the clouds were coming down. After his breakfast, he wandered through the mountains following the map. Some places were challenging to get through; some were too steep to walk up. Bao perspired through it all. When he was nearing the end of the map, he was really tired. It was at this point where he started to regret his decisions. He thought to himself, "what if this was for nothing, what if this is all just a joke?" He decided to go through the end since there was no point in turning back after how far he trekked. As he approached the destination, his heart started to beat faster, his palms were sweaty, and he was feeling a little dizzy from all the walking. He saw a door and at first had difficulty opening it. After a few tries, he was fed up. He tried to kick the door open, but it did no prevail. After many tries, Bao was frustrated. He didn't know what to do. He later then realized that the door had a lock. This wasn't a regular lock. On the scroll, Bao noticed that there were some special words he had to say. After he uttered the words, the door magically opened.

He walked in and he couldn't believe what he was seeing was real. An entire city made out of gold and completely abandoned. Bao being a smart boy stuffed his pockets with gold, closed the door, and left. He was bursting with excitement to tell his mom about the news, he thought he could finally get his mom out of her job and live comfortably. As he got back, his mom was enraged. He had been away for such a long time his mother was worried sick. Disregarding his mother's anger he pulled out the gold and showed it to her. She was as shocked as Bao if not more when she saw the gold. She was happy at first but was then concerned. She wondered if he stole the gold, and asked him to return it to where he found it immediately. Bao was upset, he thought he had done a good thing. He told his mother that he would return the gold the next morning.

As he was heading out, he noticed the governor watching him. Afraid of conflict, Bao speedily walked away. He came to a stop to check his surroundings, and saw the governor standing with 4 of his men. The governor asked him, "How did you acquire this much gold?" Bao told him everything out of fright. They were on their way to the city of gold. When they got there, Bao said the magic words. The door opened, and it was empty. All the gold, all the treasure, the glimmering city had disappeared. Angered, the greedy governor struck Bao on his arm. Bao, enraged, stuck up for himself and demanded an apology, then was struck again.

Bao came back home crying, he told his mother everything that happened. While she was angered, she couldn't help her curiosity. She asked Bao, "Is there a city of gold in the mountains?" Bao had enough. He took his mother trekking through the mountains to prove that it was real. Once they had got there, Bao said the magic words again. The door opened and there it was. Bao was angered so his reaction was subtle. His mother on the other hand was shocked. She went and hugged Bao, this Uplifted Bao's spirit.

Bao went deep inside the city, and he found a script. The script read, "To those whose hearts are clear, the city of gold will appear. But those whose hearts are evil, the city of gold shall disappear." Bao understood why the city of gold was missing when the governor came with him, it's because his intentions were evil. The governor was evil. When they got down, they made sure to confront the governor about this. After the governor was told, he took a seat. Instead of flogging Bao, he just looked at him. The governor now understood that in fact, he is evil, he is the dilemma of the province. The governor was deeply saddened. But he knew what to do. After a few days, the governor stepped down from his position and left the province never to be seen again. Bao and his mother were living comfortably after they sold some of the gold from the city, and that was their secret. The city of gold remained a mystery to the province, but not Bao.

The Legend of Zhang Li Le

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Chang, David Heewon – 12

“Grandma, Grandma! Tell us a story!”, cried the young children of the Zhang household.

Grandma Zhang, tired as she was reluctantly wobbled into the living room and sat on the ornate blue chair. “Have you three ever heard the story about our ancestor Zhang Li Le? The one who slayed the Demon King and saved his village?”

The children looked at each other, shaking their heads. “No Grandma Zhang.”

Her wrinkly lips started moving and whispery music crept out “Hundreds of years ago...”, and the children were swept into another world.

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In a house in a village lived a boy. Not a large, beautiful mansion filled with food, money, and gold: it was a small earthen shack, falling apart at the seams.

It had a single room, and no door. It was only protected by a wooden fence. The boy slept on a pile of straw with his dog and worked hard every day, even weekends (at this the children gasped)!

This boy was a very humble and generous one, and his name was Li Le. This boy had strong, black hair. His eyes were hazel brown. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms. He came from a long line of farmers. One thing stood out about his family, they were all extremely generous people. Although he was poor, he was still quite respected and people in his quaint village all loved him.

One day, by some mysterious chance he stumbled upon a golden pig on a bright summer's day (“was it alive?”, the elder child asked). Now, this pig of course wasn't alive but it was beautiful nonetheless, it had dark, shining eyes and gleaming crystal hooves. The most peculiar thing about this discovery was that he found it on the day that he turned 16, on the third sun of the seventh moon. He had just finished reaping his small harvest and was ploughing his field when he hit a gleaming object. He fished it out and took it to the village elder.

The elder was quite excited about this discovery and brought out the local shaman. The shaman saw the pig and immediately took it as a sign. He rushed through a quirky ceremony that involved many powders and perfumes. He told the boy that the discovery was a sign that he had to go out and face the demon king who had been terrorizing the village and taking ransom every moon cycle. He gave our young protagonist three items, a pear, a peach, and a beautiful blue silken handkerchief saying, “Use these items when you are in a dire situation and use them in this order: peach, pear, handkerchief.”

With this advice and a new set of clothes, Li Le set out on his first adventure, stepping out of the village grounds for the very first time.

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Meanwhile, in the Demon King's lair a dark figure was eyeing Li Le through a bowl of water. “Send the mountain troll. Let us test this ‘hero’s’ strength,” his gravelly voice boomed and echoed across the cave.

On the other side of the mountain a large burly creature leapt out of a crater in a mountain. It landed swiftly, running towards Li Le (the youngest boy hid behind his brother upon hearing this). After only about an hour and a half, he stopped our hero right in his tracks.

Li Le ran, adrenaline rushed through his whole body and fear kept him from remembering a troll's weaknesses. But he did remember one thing, and this was the peach. He tore it from his pouch and quickly ate the glowing fruit. Li Le's eyes started to glow, and a comforting warmth filled his body. He looked up at the monster and it exploded into flames, screaming in wrath and agony.

Of course, the demon king was watching this scene for the whole time through his bowl of water. The scene instilled quite some fear in him. So as any demon would do, he caused more malice and evil.

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After 6 more days of walking Li Le reached the looming mouth of a giant cave. Dripping stalactites hung from the top and even a very small sound would echo and cause a huge noise. He knew instantly that this was the entrance to the demon lair. Before he went in, he decided to rest, so he set up a small camp just outside of the cave.

That night while Li Le was sleeping, a small army of goblins sauntered out of the cave. They were wielding clubs and crude shields and were making an enormous amount of noise. Despite this, Li Le was in a very deep sleep as he was quite exhausted by all his trekking. Seeing this, the goblins started ravaging his camp. They ate all his food and were going to start rifling through his belongings when one of them, drunk on fermented fig juice screamed at the top of his lungs and cackled about his shenanigans. This noise was able to wake Li Le up.

With a jolt Li Le leapt up and looked around his camp. He was of course shocked to see the sight around him. He grabbed a stick from the burning fire and tried to ward off these maniacal monsters.

Now, before we continue on with the story, one thing that you must know is that goblins are very cowardly and weak. This is why they are always in large groups. They are quite clever although they cannot be called smart. Other than being alone, they fear two things, horses and dogs.

Because the goblins were in quite a large number, Li Le didn't scare them at all. Knowing that his life was probably in danger, he grabbed the magic pear given to him and took a bite out of it. Suddenly, a large cream-colored horse appeared below him and a large hunting dog was growling beside him. This of course scared the goblins half to death and Li Le and his newly found 'pets' quickly disposed of them. As soon as every goblin was either dead or had retreated, the animals disappeared.

Li Le now realised that he had wasted enough time and finally ventured into the cave. For a few minutes, he walked through a decrepit, damp, and dark hallway. When he reached the end, it forked off into two different paths. He saw that the one on the right was more large and beaten. He took this as a sign that it was more used and after a bit more contemplation, went in.

Li Le soon came to a large stadium with goblins, trolls, demons, orcs, and small dragonets sitting on stone seats. A group of giant, armed demons that were mounted on wingless drakes surrounded a faint, looming figure on a throne. Li Le had no weapon and knew that he would be killed instantly.

"Why should we be afraid of him Biff? He's just a little boy," said a demon.

"Apparently he killed our strongest troll and killed a bunch of elite goblins," said 'Biff'.

"Well he doesn't seem to have any weapon now," said another demon.

"Yeah, he seems to be wetting his pants," said a big gruff one.

The demon king had had enough of this petty talk. "If you think you can kill him, go do it!" he shouted. Poisonous gas crept out of the drakes' mouths while spears drove toward Li Le. he dodged best he could but the gas was weakening him and he was getting tired. Soon enough, a spear met its target, driving through him (multiple horrified screams erupted from the children). The one who landed his shot (Biff) ran around the arena whooping. Without anything to do, Li Le took out the handkerchief. He wiped sweat from his brow and he was suddenly filled with a rush of adrenaline. We wiped the blood from his wound and it rapidly healed. Finally, he squeezed the handkerchief to dry it off and it turned into a giant, glinting halberd. Filled with courage, he rushed towards the now unprotected Demon King and ran him through. The weapon went through him like a warm knife through butter. Li Le had finished his quest.

As soon as the Demon King died, every monster and spawn of evil disappeared. Li Le ran back to his village. He was still energised from the handkerchief and made it in a few hours. He ran to the chief and gave him the demon king's jewel—encrusted crown and collapsed, entirely exhausted.

After this, the once poor village grew rich from the spoils of the crown and with the money tourists gave them to see the legendary cave.

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“And, even now if you try enough, you can still see the very cave that Li Le fought in, deep in the yellow mountains,” Grandma Zhang ended her story. There was no response. All of them had dozed off. Chuckling, she hobbled out of the room and turned the lights off behind her.

The Story of Will and Silinco

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Domnitz, Yair – 11

It was a normal day in Grenfield High. Everyone chatted and gossiped throughout classes, everyone except one boy. Will Sadento was tall with fair hair and tanned skin. He was 15 years old and was bullied a lot by the older kids. He lived on Third Street and had no friends, but he was the smartest kid in his grade, maybe even the whole school. All he wanted was to stop being bullied.

His days at school were always the same. He got to school, kept his head in his computer and tried to get his work done without being tormented by Cole and his little cronies. This story is how he earned their respect.

It was a normal day for Will. He got to school and went to his homeroom class in the morning. This was when his day started going sideways. Cole and his group of henchmen left homeroom early and set up a trap for Will.

“Oy chaps,” Cole said, “Here’s the plan”...

As Will left his homeroom for English, they struck. Cole and his sidekick Henry lashed out to try and grab Will, but Will sent a kick their way and ran. He was relieved, and was congratulating himself, when he bumped into the other half of the group, Matty and Patty, who were twins. They blocked his usual route, grabbed him by the shirt and took him to Cole.

“We got him, Boss.” Matty said while Patty nodded.

“Excellent,” Cole said, with a mischievous grin on his face. “Now let me have a nice little chat with Willy boy here.” He grabbed Will and slammed him onto the lockers. “Now listen here Will, I don’t want to hurt a young chap like you, but I will if you don’t cooperate,” Cole said. “You know I hate you and you hate me, but I want to cut you a deal.”

“Anything,” Will whispered, “Anything at all!”

“Ok then,” Cole pointed to the school bulletin board. “There is a field trip to China to see some mountains for a week and the big bozos over there are going on it.” He pointed to Matty and Patty laughing at one of Henry’s jokes. “Survive that entire week with them, making sure they come to no harm, and we won’t bully you anymore”.

“And if I don’t?” Will asked.

“Then I guess you might want to get some fighting lessons,” Cole said, slyly.

“Fine” Will said, “but I better not be in the same group as them”.

“Enjoy your trip!” Cole shouted, mischievously.

Will did anything but enjoy the trip. No electronics were permitted, no snacks allowed, and he was in the same group as Matty and Patty. They went on multiple plane rides and rarely stayed in one place for more than a few hours. It wasn’t as good as it looked in commercials, but was better than riding in a car dreading what Cole would do to him. He could imagine Henry and Cole kicking and punching his brains out, laughing. He put the image away as he tried to get sucked into a movie. It was the only entertainment the plane had and he couldn’t stand not doing anything for the next 13 hours. He started watching Harry Potter and attempted to relax...

“Ladies and Gentlemen, you may unfasten your seatbelts. Welcome to Beijing.” Will woke up to the sound of people shuffling and speaking. He rubbed his eyes, and realized he fell asleep at about the hour mark of the movie. He unfastened his seatbelt and joined the crowd leaving the plane. He thanked the flight attendants as he left, and joined the field trip group as they got on a bus.

“Next stop, Hua Chu Jia Hotel!” the teacher, Mr. Brander said. When they got there, Mr. Brander said to get changed and pack their mountaineering bags and meet outside the hotel to begin climbing. They got outside quick enough and set out in their own groups. The twins hadn’t bothered Will for the entire journey which made him think they were planning something awful, but Will tried to push that to the back of his mind and focus on navigating through the mountains.

As he followed the map, he kept shouting directions so Matty and Patty could follow, but didn't hear anything from them, so he continued. Left, right, right, straight, left, left, turn, straight, straight, right. Will began to lose track of directions and time. He hadn't heard any giggling or cracking from the twins for a long time and he was at a cliff, so he stopped and turned around, only to see no one behind him. He turned around again, heard a 'Boo' from the twins and screamed as he fell down the mountain.

In a big cave under the mountain, a scream was heard from above. From that scream, the bloodthirsty giants awoke.

In every story like this, there is always a bad guy that isn't really bad, and this story is no different. One of the giants named Silinco, wasn't evil. He enjoyed the fresh mountain water that trickled from a hole in the roof of his cave, and loved eating trees for food. He was caring and curious, which was why he took the unconscious Will from outside and treated his injuries.

Will woke up a day later to a roar from the other bloodthirsty giants. He took in the scene. He was in a cave that looked like some sort of home, and in front of him was a giant. He looked 20 feet tall and muscular. His clothes were baggy and ripped with stains that disturbingly looked like dried blood. His skin was pale and his veins and blood vessels were visible. There were nasty cuts and bruises on his face and a big wound on his chest. Will screamed and the giant shut his mouth with his finger.

"Shhh," the giant said, "They won't find you in here"

"What are you!" Will shouted.

"I'm a giant who isn't really evil, my name is Silinco and I'm here to help you save those two other humans from the other giants."

"Matty and Patty have been captured by your kind?!" Will whispered.

"Pretty much." Silinco calmly said. Will screamed again.

"I have 3 days to get them back, unharmed to the Hua Chu Jia Hotel and get back home to America, ok?," Will said. "I need to know where they are so please help me!"

"Fine, I'll help." Silinco said. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Name's Will. Will Sadento."

Silinco told Will that the twins were being held hostage in the middle of the mountain and he agreed to hide Will in his cloak in the next meeting, which was The Feast of Flesh. Will spent time learning more about Silinco and the other giants to understand their flaws. Those flaws were the things that would help them save the twins. When the next meeting was called, Will and Silinco were ready.

"Brother Silinco, there you are, please come join us in The Feast of Flesh!" The chief giant called out.

"Good luck." Will whispered, then hid in his cloak pocket. Silinco sat down, closed his eyes, held hands with the giants next to him and started to pray in a foreign, ancient language.

While this was happening, Will climbed out of the cloak and climbed onto the table. He took a knife from his pocket, and started to cut the ropes that bound Matty and Patty.

"What are you doing here?" Matty whispered to Will.

"Brother Silinco isn't bloodthirsty. He's a good guy and he helped me get here to save you, so shut up and stay still so I can cut you out of these ropes."

As the giants opened their eyes, the ropes had been cut. The giants could see Will Matty and Patty running away.

"Stop them!" the chief giant screamed. All the bloodthirsty giants got up and tried to run, but didn't realise that Will had attached metal clamps to their feet. They were that gullible.

“Dammit!” the chief shouted.

“Can’t we just eat the other flesh?” a giant suggested.

“I wanted human flesh!” The chief said. He started to scream...

When they got back to school, Will was a hero. Matty and Patty couldn’t deny his bravery when they told Cole what had happened. Cole had no choice but to respect Will for the rest of high school. Will was finally happy, and the story of Will and Silinco is still told to this day at Grenfield High.

Magic on the Mountain

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Goldbery, Ella – 13

“Dad, I’m home!”

The raging storm outside had resulted in wet library books and a soaked sweater, which I put down on the table as I glance around the living room looking for my Dad. He usually sits on the couch reading his newspaper waiting for me to come home. It’s dark and quiet, too quiet, something’s up. Turning the lights on I head upstairs looking to find it as empty and dark as it was downstairs.

“Dad, Dad!”

I cry out, he isn’t replying. Maybe he’s on a walk, I think but by the time the sun sets, my stomach is already twisting itself in several knots. Where is he? My head buzzes with infinite worse-case scenarios, anxious thoughts, and worries and then I see it, a note. I open the note to find scrawled words on crumpled paper, all in my Dad’s handwriting.

Dear Felix,

You are probably wondering where I am. In the basement, there is something I have left for you. I am inside it and on top, there is another note.

*Love,
Dad*

Nervous, palms already sweaty, head aching with questions, everything is too confusing. I head downstairs to the basement, my hand on the doorknob not knowing what I was getting myself into. I look around the basement finding a book on the table that instantly catches my eye. The title reads, ‘Tales from China’s Magical Mountains’. On top, I find another note dusty and covered in dirt. The room is cold, my hands shaking. I read the note to myself and my brows furrow in confusion.

My blood bubbles in anger. I look back at the book. Grabbing it roughly, I throw it at the wall. It makes a loud bang as it hits the wall before falling and lying face open on the ground. The room starts to shake like an earthquake. A bright light comes from the book’s direction and before I knew it, I start to feel dizzy and the room starts to spin. I fall on my knees battling the sudden heaviness on my eyelids to stay awake, but they ultimately close and when I open them again I am in a whole different place.

I look around and it looks just like the cover of the book I found in the basement. Is this what my Dad meant by the book helping me find him? I dust myself off and started walking. I haven’t walked more than 100 meters when I get tackled and pinned to the floor.

I look up and see a beautiful girl looking at me. She gets off me but keeps a grip on my forearm. I start to ask her a question when she says, “We don’t have much time if you want to get to your father, we need to rush”.

I’m busy looking at her long chestnut brown hair, her bright green eyes, and mission-ready gear on when her question pulls me back to reality.

“Wait, what? What danger is he in? Who are you?”

The girl throws some of her gear at me and secures her own from the fall. “Put that on you, I’ll answer your questions on the way we must be haste in our journey.”

I do as she says, I try again to speak with her this time in a nicer tone than earlier, “My name is Felix and I was looking for my father when this magical book transported me to whatever this place is. You mentioned that he’s in trouble, what do you mean by that?”

The girl keeps walking at a brisk pace, looking behind her back every few minutes.

“My name is Kora. Your father, he’s in danger. I have been assigned to find him and secure him from his kidnapper. All I know for now is that the kidnapper is a woman and she wants to get the gem that is the source of this mountain’s magic. Your Dad and I are the only people who know where this gem is located.”

She pauses before continuing, “I live in a village at the top of the mountain. If that woman succeeds in taking the gem, the mountain’s natural beauty and animals will disappear. It breaks my heart to think of this place being ruined, I and so many other people love it here... That’s why I need your help with this. ”

We hike on for a couple of hours, talking and getting to know one another. Before we know it, the sun starts setting. We set camp and go to sleep to gather our strength for the day.

We keep going like this for another day before finding signs that lead us to the top of the mountain. On our way up, I ask Kora about how she had come to live in these mountains.

“My only solid memory of my Mom was of her reading me stories of this mountain, I came here after she passed to feel close to her,” she says.

“My mom also passed but I was young so I don’t really remember her. It’s just my Dad and I and he never really speaks about her,” I reply.

She abruptly stops walking and tells me to stand still and be quiet. It seems we aren’t alone, and the scratching noises seem to come from within a cave to my left. We go closer so that we’re standing in front of the cave. Two big wide purple eyes open and chills go down my spine. A humongous mouth opens and Kora and I hide. “This dragon is the only thing coming between us and the final path to the top of the mountain, we must face it,” she says in a confident whisper.

I nod my head, too scared to say anything.

“Ok so on my count, use your bow and arrow to stall the creature, I’ll try to attack him from the other way.”

Kora gives me the signal and I shift quickly in front of her so that the creature sees me.

Kora creeps through the bushes while I distract the creature.

“Come on you creature!” I bellow. That does it and the dragon is looking me in the eyes now. At first, my shots are a bit wobbly from the nervousness but after a few, I get the hang of it. When she’s close enough to the dragon, she takes out a sword and starts fighting the beast. Although I know that this is the worst time to think this, she looks really good when she fights.

“FELIX! Quick, shoot more arrows, we need to get him injured enough to leave without it running after us,” screams Kora.

The creature comes closer and closer to me, while I become more and more terrified.

And then I hear a BOOM! Kora falls off the creature, her screams echo as she falls. I wince as I hear the thud of her body smacking the ground. I hurry over, firing my bow to the creature before sliding up next to Kora.

“Kora! KORA!” she’s battling to stay awake. “Wake up, please WAKE UP!” my heart stops beating as I see her fade away in my arms.

“Please, stay with me,” I say with a panic.

The dragon starts coming close so with every bit of courage I can muster, I take Kora’s sword and before I put it through its chest I say, “This is for Kora!”. The dragon falls to the ground.

I rush back over to Kora. I start frantically trying to resuscitate her by giving her chest compressions and mouth to mouth. Tears start streaming down my face as I ask her to wake up as if that would help. All this time that I spent with her, she had started to become someone that meant something to me, I couldn’t just give that up.

“Kora, please wake up” I scream my lungs out.

Her eyes flutter open enough to say, “Felix, leave me here, I’m too weak and I don’t think much can be done to help my situation. Continue, save your father before it might be too late” Kora said while slowly fading away.

The tears come faster now and I find it hard to breathe.

I refuse to leave her so I carry her up with me, maybe my Dad can use his medicinal knowledge to help save her.

I go up the mountain, following the path. I stop as least as possible but I’m starting to feel tired and need to put her down a couple of times.

I start climbing the final set of stairs and a bright blinding light comes from the top. I see the shadows of three people.

“Hello, Hello?” I call out hoping it to be my father.

“Hello, Felix,” a familiar voice of a woman says to me.

I put Kora’s body on the floor and walk closer so that I finally see two figures.

“Dad? Mom?”

The Guardian Dove

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lau, Miley – 11

A cherry tree stood full of pink flowers, vibrant and beautiful. Its trunk although full of lines was towering over the small hut beneath it. Birds made their homes upon its branches, singing their unique songs, and with them sat Li swinging her legs, her raven black hair tumbling down her shoulders, wild and free. Eyes reflecting the petals surrounding her, the grass below danced to Li's singing, her voice was magical. Oh, how she lived a happy life.

Li's grandmother sat humming a small tune as she sipped a cup of tea. Birds sang their songs and the Four Sacred Chinese mountains loomed along the horizon. Of the four summits, Earth, Water, Wind, and Fire, the Wind mountain was her favorite because of its legendary tales. She lived with her two grandchildren Li and Wang in a small hut overlooking a cherry tree near the woods where her grandchildren would go. She had lived in this place as far as she could remember, it may be small she thought, but it was home. She got up to fill her cup but suddenly felt her legs give away from under her and she slumped down onto the ground.

Gleaming in the sunlight were rainbow fruits, each delicious and sweet. Wang crept closer to pluck the precious fruits. He held one red apple up to the bright sunlight. Closing his eyes he brought the treasure closer and took a bite to savor its delicious taste, but instead of pure sweetness a bitter sting soured his tongue. He quickly opened his eyes only to see his apple completely black. Unsettled, he ran back home.

Wang burst through the door and hurried to the living room. He looked at Grandmother's rocking chair, realizing she was not there! He frantically searched around the small house and finally found Grandmother sprawled across the floor. He dashed across shaking her shoulders.

"Wang? Are you home?" Li asked as she came through the door.

She looked around and saw Wang holding Grandmother. Grandmother opened her wrinkled eyes to see two worried faces staring back at her.

Grandmother smiled then said, "I'm ok children, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Li and Wang smiled uneasily back at her, deep down they felt something was amiss.

As night fell, the fire roared while orange and red sparks danced in the firewood. Li and Wang sat chatting to Grandmother, smiling and laughing, but something was strange about the atmosphere. "Grandmother, is the chicken ready?" Wang asked, Grandmother looked down at the chicken brown like soil. She shared the chicken around the table. The children ate heartily and when their stomachs were full, Grandmother knew it was time to tell her story.

Stars twinkled above the night sky as Grandmother searched her mind with so many meaningful stories. She looked beyond the children where the Sacred Wind Mountain stood and started to tell her tale.

"Once upon a time, a beautiful bird ruled over the woods, its wings were green like emeralds, its body more radiant than gold, its voice was so beautiful that when the sun rose all the animals would come and sit around the bird to hear her song. Nature would dance to the sound of her voice, it was heavenly.

One day, while she was flying and dodging all the tall trees, the bird looked up at the pure sky. Suddenly she crashed into a tree and fell to the ground. Unable to cry for help, she could only wait for someone to come to her rescue. Darkness came looming over the trees and the poor bird couldn't see anything, as the frogs stopped croaking she heard a sound. It was someone creeping closer and closer until finally, she found herself being lifted off the ground. She struggled against her kidnapper's hands but soon couldn't stop herself from falling into a slumber.

The bird woke up and tried to move her wings only to cry in pain. The stranger turned his head around realizing she was awake and told her not to be frightened because he would nurse her back to health. Day-by-day, she got stronger until finally, the bird was free. Before she flew away she granted the stranger a wish to show her gratitude.

After thinking for a minute, the stranger replied, "I wish that anyone who comes your way can get one wish as I did, but the wish must be used for a good deed."

So because of this, anyone who encounters the bird atop Wind Mountain will be granted a wish but only for good", said Grandmother as she finished the tale.

The next day, the sun awoke while a white dove sat on top of the small hut, it stretched its wings showing its beautiful feathers, white and pure. The sun shone overhead then as the dove took flight flying into the clear blue sky.

Li trudged up the mountain, "What are we doing?", she thought to herself as she considered turning back.

She suddenly remembered the empty bed and quiet hut back home. She looked ahead and finally made her decision while dragging Wang with her, embarking on their quest to find Grandmother.

The night crept forward and Li's legs grew tired. Finally, Wang fell onto the grassy ground.

"Li, we've been walking for hours yet I still know nothing about what your plan is!" complained Wang,

Li looked back at her brother and replied, "Remember the myth Grandmother told us about the magical bird on Wind Mountain?"

Slowly it dawned on Wang, "You mean her myth about the wish?"

"Yes," Li said.

"But that's crazy, Grandmother told us the myth just to entertain us and it's not true Li!", reasoned Wang.

"Wang, she told us the story the night she vanished. Is that a coincidence? I don't think so." replied Li.

"Fine! You can go but I won't!" as he started to back down the mountain.

Li sat beside a pond as the sun set over the horizon. She looked across the water and a beautiful phoenix flew down for a drink. Li was shocked but then remembered she was on a magical mountain without Wang.

Wang ran calling his sister's name louder and louder he shouted until finally,

"Wang! Where are you?" Li's voice rang.

"I'm here Li!" He replied. Finally, Wang saw Li run towards him.

"Where did you go?" Li asked.

Wang replied, "You won't believe what just happened! I found the mythical bird and made a wish!"

Suddenly they both heard a song soaring through the winds, dancing with the trees and making flowers blossom. It was so magical they decided to find the source. Tracing back to each flower blooming they followed the song to the river. The siblings stepped into a clearing and saw a dove on top of a woman's shoulder. Her hair flowed down to her waist. Noticing someone behind her, the woman turned and to their surprise, it was Grandmother!

Grandmother smiled, " My dear Grandchildren, how did you find me?"

"We found the bird of Wind Mountain!" Wang exclaimed.

"Will you come home with us now?", pleaded Li

Grandmother shook her head "My dears, my love for you two is as big as the sky and as deep as the sea, no words can describe my love for you but I must return".

Grandmother pointed a finger up towards the heavens, They gasped as Grandmother's finger was transparent. Suddenly the dove, resting on Grandmother's shoulder, flew up and began to glow.

"Children remember this. Every accomplishment you make I shall witness, Whenever danger finds you, I will be there to protect you. I will always be in your heart." With those words, Grandmother faded and the dove flew away.

A month passed after Grandmother's departure. Li was picking flowers nearby humming a tune. She carefully plucked up a daisy and put it in her basket. Suddenly, the ground turned black Li looked up and saw a huge tiger staring straight at her. It roared, baring its ginormous teeth but before it could take a bite a white dove suddenly flew down. A great white flash appeared, blinding the tiger but strangely it didn't blind Li. The tiger scurried away as the dove landed on her shoulder. It pecked Li's cheek.

"Always keeping her promise", Li thought to herself as Grandmother flew away.

The Merciless Mountain

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ngo, Nili – 12

Ke-Ai looked up at the beautiful remote Chinese mountains in awe as the dark, camouflage green Jeep slowly came to a halt. Her parents, BaiYing and QiangDa, were prominent historians searching for a Chinese Empress's tomb.

"Ke-Ai, honey, why don't you rest at the hotel while we leave for a bit? It's been a long journey. We'll be back soon, I promise." The young girl's mother sighed, kissed her on the forehead, and left, wearing the same light brown trench coat she wore the day before and holding the fourth cup of coffee she had this morning.

Ke-Ai waited until she heard the lock click before she hurried over to the closet. "It's been too long since I've had an adventure, and even longer since I've had a friend. If I'm going to get one now, I better look presentable."

She paused for a minute. Her big, curious brown eyes lit up like matches, and a big, pearly white smile started to grow on her small round face. She picked up her favorite t-shirt and jacket and her unicorn backpack. She stuffed some food, a flashlight, and a large water bottle in the bag. Tying her long charcoal-black hair into a bun, Ke-Ai picked up the bag and set off to the abandoned castle where her parents were already studying the century-old artifacts. She knew it was a long way up and couldn't wait to face the challenge.

Her classmates always thought of her as a teacher's pet, but her teachers appreciated that she was patient and kind. Her mother put school before everything and would leave her little to no time to make friends. Her mother's disregard for a childhood with peers was what truly started this adventure.

Grunting and struggling her whole way hiking up the mountain without falling over from the harsh winds, Ke-Ai sat down on a nearby rock and closed her eyes. She was drifting off, but there was one problem. Apart from knowing she had to head up, she had no clear idea of where the abandoned palace was, and the hotel was already too far away to turn back. The fear of being lost made her shiver, and reality began to sink in. Though she was young, her dad insisted on teaching her how to survive in the wild alone. "Never panic, sweetheart. Always ration out your food," Her father would say. "Be sure to have a nearby water source." Tears running, the girl took out the five energy bars and the small box of raisins she had packed. After calming down and having taken a deep breath, she sorted out the food and was already on her way to finding a water source.

"Hello," whispered a soft voice. Ke-Ai screamed and turned around. No one was there.

A colossal wave of twinkling stars fell from the sky and diluted, only to reveal an elegant woman wearing a royal silk gown with her hair pushed up into a tight bun exposing the small, shiny golden tiara sitting on her head. She looked as if she was sculpted to perfection and put onto Earth right after. She opened her eyes, and they sparkled as she watched Ke-Ai. Still in shock, Ke-Ai was left speechless.

"Wh—who are you?" She stuttered.

"I'm here to help you; I've memorized this mountain pretty well. I've been watching you, and you look like you need some water. There is a stream just over there," The woman pointed to the young girl's left. "follow me."

Ke-Ai squealed in happiness and went up to hug the helpful dame.

"NO!" She shrieked, holding up her bony hands to block the child from coming closer. Ke-Ai had a puzzled look on her face and wondered why she couldn't express her thankfulness. She was a curious little girl, and she felt like something fishy was going on. So, when the mystery lady wasn't looking, she pulled her long, flowing dress. Ke-Ai screamed as something abnormal happened. Her hand had gone through the woman, and everything in a five-centimeter radius disintegrated. Instead of regular flesh, her skin was misty, like a cloud. As you can probably tell, this is not an everyday occurrence.

"Sit down!" The woman's 'skin' grew back, but she was still enraged that Ke-Ai didn't follow her simple order. The young girl sat on a nearby stone, scared of what the furious ghost-like figure would do to her. The woman took a deep breath. "I am here to help you. I'm not like you; I've been here for thousands of years, stuck on this cursed Earth, this doomed mountain. It's been a century since someone came to visit. In return for getting you back home, you need to help me with a quite challenging task. I know you're up to the job; I've watched you since you've arrived in this crazy place. You're a survivor."

Ke-Ai's face lit up in joy. It was always nice having a stranger complimenting you. "All I know is that I miss my parents, and they are probably back home already. I have been climbing this mountain, so I'm guessing that this is the direction where the hotel is." She pointed downwards to her right. "Before we go, I want to know where you come from. You aren't normal, obviously, but I'm a curious girl." The child paused for a minute and looked her up and down. "What kind of creature are you?"

The bizarre figure laughed. "I'm the soul of someone six feet underground."

The girl's jaw practically fell to the ground as she stuttered. "Y-You-You're a ghost? How will you help me if you're a ghost?!"

Ke-Ai started to get frustrated, and she didn't know what to do. She felt trapped.

"Ease, child, you don't even know my name. I'm Mi Tang, Empress of the now-forgotten empire of JinXin. Let's get you back down from here. It's getting dark; I want you to get back home as soon as possible. Things here get strange at night." Ke-Ai agreed. She and the Empress started heading back to where they assumed the hotel was. "Stop making so much noise! I can hear the dry leaves crackling under your shoes!" Easy for you to say, The young girl thought. You're floating over the dirty mud! She kept her thoughts to herself.

"Who goes there!"

A voice shouted in the dark. The Empress and the girl weren't able to get down the mountain before night fell in time, so they brought out the flashlight. It must have brought attention to unwanted visitors.

"Quick, run!" The ghost whisper-shouted. "The trolls come out at night!" Ke-Ai ran for her life without looking back. She felt the cool breeze from the magical being's floating, and she knew she was safe, at least for now. Several fast footsteps approached them, and the girl ran faster. And faster. And faster until she just couldn't anymore, and she collapsed.

"C'mon, Ke-Ai, you can do it! We've got to get out of here!"

Then, as she was about to get back up, something slashed her arm. She screamed in agony as she started to bleed out. But a small cut on her arm is no match for brave Ke-Ai and her survival instincts. She quickly tied her hot pink jacket around her arm and winced. She got up and held the injured arm, still unaware of all the events happening around her — a large green 'man' with sharp front teeth and pitch-black eyes was waving around a long machete, trying to cut MiTang just as he had wounded her. The Empress, smart and resourceful, picked up a sharp rock that she found on the ground and threw it at one of the troll's eyes with a flawless aim. Blood spat in every direction, and the young girl, her arm still aching, put her intact arm over her head to block the troll's blood landing onto her head as she screamed in horror.

Once her arm was disinfected (with the help of MiTang), it was already morning, and she knew that her parents must have been worried. Sure enough, a helicopter flew over her and slowly came down as they found the missing child. She looked around, a big smile on her face, the police swarming her and asking about the large gash on her arm. "I helped you. Time for you to help me." A malicious grin on the ghost's face appeared. Ke-Ai's parents came to hug her.

"I'm so glad you're safe, honey." The grin disappeared.

"Them! Their ancestors killed me! Ke-Ai, I need you to kill them for me."

"No! I can't!" Her parents looked around, confused. No one was there. Who was their sweet child talking to? The young girl picked up a similar rock that MiTang used to kill the troll and threw it at the Empress. The Empress growled as her real disturbing monster form was revealed, and she disappeared.

Ke-Ai got the adventure she wanted.

Dead Grains

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wigisser, Alex – 13

Cutting through every grain I could detect. For my family to feed. My arms felt heavier after all the cutting, it felt as if I had two stones placed in each of my hands, weighing me down until I could no longer bear it. And though my body had been drained I only managed to acquire half a bucket of grain. I faintly didn't collapse on the ground. Bringing the grain home, I interrupted my way home with a short break. Much needed I sat down and remembered the tales that had been told of my village, the overflow of grain, the tall green endless grass, but now we inhabit a lack of grain and the dead grass, a ghost town it is, little to no one lived here. And those who did live here couldn't afford to leave the village, it's rock bottom here.

As I had arrived home I saw my greeting mother and my loveable grandmother. Showing my mother the grain I had collected for the winter, I saw her face drop not knowing if my grandmother would survive this winter. My mother's mind had been triggered as she didn't want or deserved the same death as my father. "YonGang was that all there was?" she asked in a panicked manner, I nodded in disappointment. Overthinking, my mother was beginning to get anxious.

Every Night and day I observed my mother grow more anxious. Her anxiety was entering me, sleepless nights hearing my mother's cries. I couldn't endure this for the winter. I tried every method I could to make anything soluble that would keep my family alive for the brutal winter. Nothing worked. The depressed state of my household was beginning to affect me. I had become hopeless. Will I be responsible for those who perish and be left to roughen under the soil of these lands? The thought of death, brought me to the corrupt trader of help, Zi Li.

Mr. Li was well recognised for securing a strong trustable word, but with a twisted trade. Though many used to come to Mr. Li for his words of wisdom, after the perishing of his wholehearted wife occurred Mr. Li had altered his ways of helping. I was still willing to get his word for aiding, even if it meant to sacrifice it all. As I approached his small home I saw him eyeing me down. As we exchanged words he told me the historic tale of the mystical city above mount Hua and the clouds. He mentioned the great crops and grain this land contained, but warned me of the dangers, along the way. And in exchange he demanded the grain of our entire household that we had acquired. This left me indecisive of what was the correct decision. Feeling every beat out of my heart, I was in pain, in pain of what could happen in both outcomes. But as I recollected the words of my deceased father who once told me "Who you are defines what you are willing to struggle for." I am YonGang Wong and I am willing to struggle for those who provided love and hospitality for me. I nodded. And so I gave him the grain, now my journey to the mystical city began.

The preparation began, not much to take. But one thing was crucial: the blessed Jian sword of my father. The Jian's value was priceless. The fierce edge almost too sharp seeing the Jian pierced your skin. The sheer shine of the Jian was enough to blind your eyes. It's beautiful. This was my honour for my village, it was my protection. As a young boy Father would teach me the ways of the Jian and the honour of it.

The time to leave was when the darkness of the earth kept everything quiet. The journey began, I followed the path to the top of the snowy capped mountain, and above the clouds. The highest peak was where I was headed. Thoughts flooding my mind on my own mother panic. As I pressed on I was experiencing brutal fatigue my hands could no longer close because it was too cold. Scraping all my force in my body I had arrived to the foggy clouds which had made me faint to sleep.

I woke up alerted I was warm and dry though I ended in snow wet and cold. To my surprise I woke up home comfortable in bed, but something was off, it was summer. Feeling the warmth penetrating my skin again, I ran out and to my surprise the fields were full of crops and grain. My village was beautiful. Checking all, I saw my mother happy as ever. And my... Father? It was him, tall, strong and handsome. That's my father, he was here alive and happy. I shed a few tears and ran to him in disbelief. As I arrived he comforted me with his words. The day passed I was still in awe. I felt safe at home. But still something was off. My father didn't teach me the ways of the Jian, which

he often did once a day. Which left me uncertain of my surroundings. That night I wondered if this place wasn't right; it was too good to be true. Days I spent here, I was growing fond of my improved home. As the days flew my parents sat me down. They exposed the secret of this place, it was the mystical city. My mind overflowed with illogical thoughts, I was blissfully comfortable. My parents then asked me to stay with them. My heart was beating quicker, the thump of it was getting louder and louder. I told them I would consider it and leave them with an answer. That intimidating night I was left with the decision to continue my life with my complete family or to go back to the deadbeat village.

As realisation struck me, I had realised that though it was the mystical city they weren't my true family, my father was still dead. These people are imposters to me. I had fooled myself, this was no beautiful village, it was my desire, this had all been a trickery and illusion. As I crept out the village I had been caught. I shouted at my 'father' telling him the truth I know behind this place. He had accepted the defeat, so he returned to his raw form as a demon. He abnormally grew taller and his bones started to pierce through his chest. He was long and skinny, his eyes and skin had turned pale, his hair became ashy and thin. All had turned into dust, the only light I had seen was my escape, and those poor trapped souls in this demonic city, which this creature fed off. With honour and pride in me I had my father's warrior mentality, and with no mind, I Graciously moved like a butterfly, but stung like a bee. The blessed Jian had trapped the soul of the demonic entity.

As I left the demonic city, I had freed the trapped souls. All souls were put to rest. Emotions flooded, I was relieved by the endless blue sky which hadn't been seen in time in my province. I reflected on what had occurred and concluded that a curse on my village had been lifted. As I approached my village, Mr Li stood with a sack of overflowing grain, which he collected for the winter. He gave it to me as he knew I had restored peace and beauty into our village. Mother was pleased to see the grain. But Grandmother and mother seemed to be brittle and skinnier, as I left them. But as my mother saw great change she saw a beautiful blossom ahead of us, she was at peace. Though I had restored beauty and peace, I hadn't been in peace, anxiety flooded into me, all memories of the demonic city replayed constantly. I talked a little less and drank a little more. The curse of the village vanished and had entered me. I am now deformed and fuelled by sadness and anxiety. But it was for the better good of the people I love and the honour of all.

The Eight Pillars Mountain

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Peter Gian – 12

It was a frigid morning in the suburbs of China. Now we focus on Joe, a quiet man with horrible hygiene and is so lazy he became part of his bed. He has spent his time in China sitting on his bed and watching TV. He himself has never wanted more but also never wanted less, and he has a lot. This morning Joe said to himself “Why haven’t I done anything, why have I never been famous or praised, I want that.” Joe decided that he would climb a mountain, but not any mountain. The Eight Pillars Mountain. Joe’s family and friends pleaded with him not to go but he had made up his mind. Joe unaware of the danger it held and set off on a journey to certain death.

Joe hiked as far as he could go. The journey was l bsuowong and treacherous, a man with a strong stature would have difficulty crossing the path and with Joe, sitting on a bed all day didn’t help. It took months upon months to finish the journey to the mountains. The mountains were a mythical place and were hidden from the world as they were a connection between humans and the heavens. Luckily Joe had GPS and a phone and was able to cross through a secret portal to arrive there. When he arrived Joe nearly fainted at the sight of it. It was monstrous with eight towering peaks that flew high above the clouds, its terrain steep and slippery and the incline nearly impossible. Joe optimistically said “How hard could this be?”

Once Joe started the ascent he began to reconsider his choice, but when he looked down he decided not to. As he climbed more he became even more scared of falling to his doom. Joe had finally reached the top, his mountain climbing gear was brutally damaged and he felt like he could go no longer, Joe rested for a while and set off to climb the second peak, unknowingly walking right into a trap. As Joe walked a huge bird jumped out of nowhere. Its feathers gold and fiery with talons as sharp as knives and a beak of pure metal. Its eyes were filled with anger. Joe stood frozen by the fright of this beast.

Joe stared at this beast and ran. Joe didn’t know where he was going but he ran into a forest nearby. He hid under a large boulder and waited for the bird to go. Suddenly the bird’s head squeezed under the boulder to feast on Joe. Frightened Joe ran out of another opening and saw the large bird's head stuck. Joe ran for it and made it to the second peak, who knew what danger lurked there.

Joe scraped the floor as he cautiously approached the second peak. Joe wondered if the second peak had an even more frightening beast! Joe wanted to turn back but maybe it was too late. As Joe ascended the second peak nothing seemed to be there. Joe had his hopes as high as the mountain itself, no monsters had appeared for quite a long time and Joe was near the Fourth mountain. Joe’s hopes died instantly as the earth shook as if a giant was coming towards him. Soon a giant tortoise the size of a hill with its feet as large as a truck and a dazed expression on its face. It wandered the ground until it caught sight of Joe, after catching Joe at the corner of its eye it dove straight at him. It lunged at Joe and he ran for it. The fourth peak trembled at the size of the beast, suddenly the ground gave way and half of the peak fell to its earthy demise, the massive beast with it. Joe unluckily fell too but as every story goes he caught a branch and he continued his everlasting journey.

Joe approached the fifth mountain without any peril and crossed it safely, the same was with the sixth peak which was where he rested from his near death escapades. As he rested he wondered if he should turn back, his scrapes and bruises, his cuts and wounds prevented him from thinking that thought any longer. He so longed the comfort of his bed and the delicious crunch of his nachos and the sweet sip of a chocolate milkshake. Behind him was a great bird beast and rocky terrain that you would surely fall off. Joe decided he had to keep moving forward, he slept in bushes on the sixth peak glad that his journey was almost over.

Joe approached the seventh peak, it was towering over the sixth peak the incline was so steep he had to use his climbing gear Joe heaved his gelatinous body up the mountain it took hours but he made it to the top. Joe arrived at the top and breathed heavy sighs of relief. As Joe continued forward out came a giant monster, a dragon. Its long elegant body was as large as the mountain itself. It flew high into the sky, the dragon had the face of a lion and its claws were as large as trees and sharper than anything you could ever imagine. This beast was larger than any other before, the dragon swooped down at Joe and Joe ran for his life. He hid in the mountain side forest but the dragon

tore open half of the mountain. Joe jumped towards the remaining half of the mountain but was caught in the mighty beasts hands and was taken to the very top of the mountain, to the heavenly realm.

As the dragon flew higher into the realm Joe started to open his eyes. The realms golden glimmer and the white puffy clouds. As Joe started to become amazed the dragon started to speak "You are held guilty for crossing these paths punishable by death." Then the dragon dropped him in a suspended cage. As Joe tried to get out the dragon came to him, he said "Your fate has been decided." The dragon smashed a chain and Joe fell to his doom. Then a second later the Dragon appeared and laughed, he caught Joe and brought him to the ground safely below the mountain. Then for whatever reason he did that Joe never got his answer.

Joe returned home and got cheers from his neighbors and family. Joe finally felt as if he belonged here. Satisfied Joe lay in his bed wondering why he ever did that. He wanted to be the best and to have lots of friends and be a celebrity. But why didn't he get up from his bed and try to make friends. That climb taught him a lesson. He didn't need to accomplish heroic acts to enjoy life with friends and family.

Nature's Sacrifice

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yong, Casey – 12

There was a small oasis of untarnished nature and a mighty mountain was in the middle of it, it loomed over the world, the highest peak of the earth. It was ruled over by a cold unnamed guardian deity, the ruler of all nature and the mountain was its prized possession. The deity was very protective of it and had a small circle of paradise surrounding it. Any human who dared to trespass onto the mountain would die instantly.

The deity, Nature, sighed as another fearless human attempted to climb her precious mountain and as soon as it touched the lush green base, it vanished into thin air, its existence permanently erased. Humans are so puny, so tiny and idiotic; they already knew that climbing the mountain or even coming close would result in immediate death, and their curiosity still took over.

One day, Nature was wandering around the mountain in their human form when she heard quiet sobbing. Her ears perked up and fury stirred within them. There shouldn't be any humans around here, she thought. Her eyes darted frantically, her calm stroll breaking into a sprint as she ran around the mountain, searching for any humans.

She eventually spotted three shivering children, soot and ash covered the kids from head to toe. The oldest, a boy was hugging the two twin girls close to him, his hands covered in raw burn marks. One of the girls had a big gash across his forearm and on the border of unconsciousness. The other girl was mumbling nonsense to herself and her mouth was tinged with an unhealthy color. All three pairs of eyes widened in fear as they saw Nature standing there, brimming with anger.

"Leave." Her voice boomed across the meadows, hair flowing intimidatingly and eyes red.

The boy managed to mutter "W-we c-c-ca-n't," and looked at his twisted ankle. "T-there's a war outside, d-don't send us back outside. Please."

Something about those tearful orbs looking back at them pleadingly made Nature calm down. They knew human greed could put innocent and pure children into terrible situations the children did not deserve.

Disgusting, she thought but she left the children alone, the thought of killing or sending them back outside leaving their mind. If they're so weak, they'll die here anyway.

A week later, she was watching over their personal oasis once more but three irritating pests kept distracting her. The three kids she had unknowingly taken in.

She had learned the boy was named Ray, the girl with a gash Ophelia and the other Ari. They made a little life here with the natural plants and any resource they could find. They were kind hearted and polite so naturally, the spirits of the land could not help but assist them. It should have angered Nature yet she only found it...nice?

Huh? She thought to herself. I took in those brats out of pity, what am I thinking?

A month passed and Nature watched over the kids secretly, wanting to know what they were up to.

She approached them and when they saw her, they froze in terror and dropped the apples they were holding while picking them off trees.

"I come in peace," Nature spoke unconvincingly.

Ray was the first to recover and went on his hands and knees, begging forgiveness for trampling on Nature's turf and his sister followed suit. Something about the purity in the kids and their wholehearted apologies changed the deity's mind about killing them, they would be interesting at the very least

"It's alright. Pray tell, what were you doing?"

Months passed and Nature grew more and more fond of the children, they treated the world around them nicely and helped her with taking care of the paradise. They always left nice gifts like flower wreaths and picked fruit behind as sort of an offering.

One day, Nature felt her barrier being attacked, she peeked out and saw a bunch of weird weapons aiming at her oasis, firing what seemed to be man-made missiles. Usually men could never destroy her barrier but this. This was different.

Her barrier was chipping away as each bullet landed on the thing that was keeping intruders out and if her mountain was destroyed...

One thing about the myth no one knew was that the mountain was the source of Nature's life source, the reason she kept it so close to her heart.

If she dies, nature itself would die as with her. Mankind would lose all the trees, flowers or grass but they could not know that because there would definitely be a lot of humans that would easily kill Nature.

She desperately tried to salvage the situation by putting her powers onto the barrier but it kept falling apart.

When did humans become so powerful?

Ophelia was dowsing water from the clear stream onto the roses before she heard a bang sound. Flashbacks from guns and war from home flooded her mind and she fell to her knees.

Not again...they found us, she thought as she covered her ears in shock, her head spinning.

No doubt her siblings would have heard it as well, and they would be panicking as well.

"Don't tell me they're coming to take us back, please, please..."

Nature felt nauseous, she had been holding the barrier for the past three days nonstop and if she took a break, it would be eradicated immediately and she would die.

Then, she heard a call from outside, "We will surrender if you give us the royal highnesses."

Nature suddenly remembered the children and realized they were the royal highnesses. Her eyes darted around the crumbling paradise and saw the kids holding their heads, covering their ears in pure, unadulterated fear. Whoever was outside definitely did not treat the children well, despite them seemingly being royalty.

"And what if I refuse?" her voice echoed.

"Then we will wreck this land," came the response.

Oh no.

She would never admit it but she adored the kids with her whole heart. They were the most lovely humans she had ever met and she would not let them get hurt.

Ophelia yelled, "Let her go! We'll come with you!"

When did she show up?

"I forbid you, you will not go with these people."

"Nature! If you die, nature itself will wither away too!" Ray retorted back.

She was stuck in a conundrum, she would never think of harming the kids but if she died, even while she was protecting the kids, the payoff would not be worth it.

What should she do?

"You don't have to decide for us, we'll decide for you," Ari said softly with a joyless smile as she walked stiffly towards the army.

"What are you doing?" Nature asked frantically, her composure falling apart, not unlike the barrier.

"You've been great to us, thank you," Ray nodded and walked calmly in the other direction.

"THESE PEOPLE WILL HURT YOU—"

"But we don't mind getting hurt at the expense of saving you," Ophelia was the most traumatized by the men but she, with a shaky bottom lip, surrendered.

Nature was furious, not at the kids, but at herself for letting them go.

As soon as the men took control over the kids, Nature saw the despair in the kids' eyes but they kept a straight face in an attempt to not alarm the deity. No, she could not let this happen so she resorted to her final plan.

A plan that would certainly kill her but it may save the children.

She lowered the barrier, letting the army into her land and used up her final energy, releasing a giant beam of light towards the army, massacring them, her body deteriorating by the second and the mountain crumbling to the ground.

At the end, the beam of light killed all the soldiers except for the children. They saw nothing around them except a tiny ball of light. It was the last, half dead spirit of the deity.

"Take my last remaining life source and become the new rulers of nature, you have taught me love and for that, I thank you. Goodbye," Nature whispered before she whisked away with the wind.

The children started bawling uncontrollably, their surrogate mother gone because she gave her life away to save them. As they wept, their flows of tears landed on the barren ground, it sprung grass. The life of the oasis returned, flowers blooming and streams gushing, the paradise came together and sang a requiem of sorrow, thanking Nature for her services and a hymn of hope, now these children would guide the world as the new deities of nature.

From then on, the now deities traveled around the world, wildlife and compassion seeping through their every step. They helped countries and cities find its love for the environment once again, and the paradise Nature guarded over had spread to the whole world.

The Mysterious Skeleton

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Zagury, Annabelle – 12

“...and in conclusion, that is one of the many reasons we should always be careful when handling dinosaur bones and other fossils. Now, class, the moment you have all been waiting for, the five lucky students that will be coming with me to China are... Elya Hope, Rhiana Watt, Aron Patterson, Tomas Clark and Jasmin Marshall. Congratulations! Please see me after class and I will fill you in with the details. For the rest of you, class dismissed.” declared Dr. Marissa Raven among all the cheering and gasping. Dr. Marissa is a middle-aged good looking woman with long brown hair and often wears either a lab coat, formal clothing or tan, and khaki clothing.

“They are so lucky!” whispered a girl at the back.

“I wish I could be in their place!” someone muttered.

The five students walked up to the front of the class. As usual Rhiana Watt was walking in front of everyone while chewing on a piece of pink gum and blowing bubbles. Behind her was Tomas Clark, her so-called “boyfriend” according to Rhiana and her friends. Tomas had short brown hair and a pair of charming hazelnut eyes. Up next was Elya Hope with her big pigtails and thick glasses.

“Y’all pumped up for this trip?” asked Aron Patterson walking up with his shiny blue eyes covered by his blonde curls.

“Yeah, but I have no idea how I got to go,” answered Jasmin Marshall, a clueless girl who somehow got lucky on the last test.

“All right, you five students were chosen because of the good grades you received and the effort given in the previous test. Now, while in China if you take just one step over the line, you will be in isolation for the rest of the trip and you will not be enjoying what awaits you when we come back to the campus,” Dr. Marissa looked up staring at each of them in their eyes, “you will be representing this university in China, so I expect you all to be in your best behavior and display your professionalism as true palaeontologists throughout the expedition.”

“Understood,” they murmured.

“Okay, I will email you the rest of the information, we leave next Wednesday. Now, go home, prepare and pack.” she continued while walking out of the room.

Early in the morning, the students all met at the airport with their baggage and equipment. The team grew bigger as the national palaeontologists’ team joined the expedition which was a surprise to the students. They had a long journey on a plane to Huangshan Tunxi Airport and then traveled on an endless bumpy and rough jeep ride to a cave that was located right in the middle of the mountains. A radar scan had revealed that this cave contained a large number of fossilized skeletons.

When they arrived at the cave Dr. Marissa gave instructions on how to proceed. “Team! Welcome to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor! Let’s get to work and set up all the materials and equipment!” ordered Dr. Marissa.

“What is this place? Where is the hotel? Where is my private suite?” Rhiana complained while Elya rolled her eyes.

“Are you kidding me, this place is like paradise!” answered Aron, “Look at the view! It’s like we’re floating on clouds!”

“So, where will we be searching for bones?” asked Jasmin.

“In there,” replied Dr. Marissa while pointing at the mouth of an underground cave. “We are about to load the equipment into the cave, and then we will get to work digging,” announced Dr. Marissa, “so this is what we need to do, tie the ropes around that big piece of rock, make sure it’s secure and then we will use the ropes to transport our equipment down into the cave. Do this slowly and carefully.”

“Yes, doctor,” everyone responded and got busy with their respective tasks.

Once they had just finished loading everything into the cave Aron suddenly shouted “Hey, guys! Why is the rope falling?!”

Crumble and crash! Everyone turned their head immediately towards the mouth of the cave and in a split second, the only entrance and exit to the cave was gone and it was now pitch dark.

“Ahhhhh! Daddy! Somebody help me! I am extremely claustrophobic! Where is everyone! Oh no, where is my phone?” Rhiana panicked. Click and clank, beams of torchlights shone all around the cave.

“Stay calm everyone, minimize your movement and stay where you are!” Dr. Marissa ordered.

“Listen up everyone! This is the current situation. We have been trapped inside this cave for fifteen minutes now because there was a malfunction with the rope that was used to bring down the equipment,” announced Dr. Marissa “we have called for backup but they claimed that it will take them at least five days to remove the rock, hence we are stuck here for five days. Luckily, the university prepared us for any situation, therefore, we should have enough water, food, and sleeping bags to survive. So there is no need to panic. Let’s not waste our time here. I have contacted the campus to permitted us to start searching for fossils. Any questions? No? We start in one hour. For now, relax, eat, gather some strength before we begin.”

They all plunged into the project, ignoring the fact they were trapped. Towards the end of the third day, to everyone’s surprise, the students and the team of palaeontologists found an immense skeleton. They were all bewildered by their discovery as after running all the analysis they could with the equipment down in the cave, they were unable to identify the dinosaur species of the skeleton. The DNA found in the bones had a strange sequence and the few cells they found within the bones had intense radiation that no one had ever seen on a skeleton. There was also an extra bone near the head, that according to the results, had contained and created a very hot substance that was likely to have been fire. Within the cave, they also found burnt rocks near the skeleton.

Elya, Jasmin and Tomas came up with a theory that fitted with all the evidence and decided to approach Dr. Marissa about it.

“Dr. Marissa, Tomas, Jasmin and I looked through the data of the skeleton that was found and we came up with a strong hypothesis that fits in with all the data we have, though you might not enjoy it,” started Elya. “We believe that this skeleton belonged to a dragon. Please, hear us out, we have evidence to back up this idea. For example, the extra bone near the head, we believe it was where the dragon turned air into fire, and we even have strong proof for that, all around the cave there are burnt rocks and the same types of cells as the fossils were found on top of the rocks.”

“No, NO!” exclaimed Dr. Marissa, “it is not a dragon, this skeleton probably belongs to an undiscovered species of pterosaurs! There is no such thing as dra—” though before she could finish her sentence, Dr. Marissa suddenly fainted.

She remained unconscious for five hours due to the shock and denial of the theory on dragons had brought to her. (She later claimed that the reason she would not accept this theory was because her parents had always placed pressure on her to be perfect and receive top grades.) They taught her there was no such thing as a miracle or magic or even luck, only logic and ideas that were proven is the truth.

Dr. Marissa finally woke up five hours later with a clear mind. “While I was asleep...” she began saying seconds after she regained consciousness “...I dreamed that I was in a world where there was magic, where we all had magical powers. There were dragons, magical creatures, and miracles. It was like a sign from the universe to tell me that I have to believe Elya, Jasmin and Tomas, that they are right. Even though I don’t want to accept it, I believe they are right. They came with a hypothesis and found strong evidence to support it.”

“Elya, Tomas, Jasmin, may I see your evidence again,” ordered Dr. Marissa with a smile.

Five years later, Dr. Marissa Raven has published a study about a skeleton that belonged to a dragon and continues carrying out numerous expeditions discovering more fossils of dragons and mythical creatures. She has established a laboratory and institute that specializes in dragons and other magical creatures that were discovered and proven. She also educates students as well as world-renowned scientists about dragons and the unpredictable side of science. Dr. Marissa Raven has opened up a new era of scientific discoveries. In the lab, she has also invited Elya Hope, Rhiana Watt, Aron Patterson, Tomas Clark and Jasmin Marshall to work alongside her. She is now known as the Dragon Queen.

Coming Down, Bound By Silence

CCC Kei Yuen College, Kwok, Wing Chi – 11

It was on the third night, that the unusual incident occurred. It happened when Mike, Alice, and I wanted to take a break from the activities at the various temples in town and explore the perimeter of Mount T'ai. Actually, what we did was quite dangerous, as it was an eerie twilight, and we couldn't see our footing at all.

Heading around the I was following Mike, and like most boys our age, he wears scuffed Vans. In the low evening light, his shoes seemed to flicker into a bright silver— silver or gold patent— they looked like a king's slippers from so long ago. That was when I first realised that there was something really wrong, and that we were in some kind of trouble.

Mike turned around, but I couldn't see his face anymore. Instead, he had the appearance of a terrified, bearded middle-aged man, face glowing pale white. Black, sticky fluid oozed from his mouth. His silver hair was long and loose, flowing freely around his shoulders....and he was hovering.

I suddenly felt a fear, stronger than anything I have ever known, and I let out a prolonged scream. The ghost then shape-shifted into a glowing figure, cast adrift, emitting the essence of pure loneliness. The transparent figure floated up toward Tai Shan's peak, then disappeared behind a rocky crag. I felt the warmth of my body seep down to the forest floor.

It wasn't the visual effect of seeing a ghost that was so scary, it was more the empty, frozen, horrible feeling of solitude, abandonment: there was the sense that someone was lost in time and space.

Alice and I started shaking, took one look at each other, and then burst into a sprint. We were going straight back to The Grand Hotel! We stumbled a bit on the path, but kept going at top speed. While we ran, we were dead silent, and we could only hear the urgency of our breathing and the rustling and snapping of twigs..

When we finally got back to our shabby rooms (over 200 RMB!), we were simply terrified, and we were in a total panic. Of course, our top priority was to lock the doors, make sure that we were alone, and catch our breath. Calm down a bit. After that, we needed to find Mike. Had the ghost inhabited his body? Did he decided to climb to back up the steps or was he simply lost on his way to Dai Temple? It was so hard to recall exactly what we remembered about the last time we saw Mike.

But Mike came out of his room when we knocked on his door....'Hey, I couldn't find you guys, so I came back to the hotel. Was it fun? Huh...?! What's wrong with you guys?'

We were so thankful that Mike was safe and intact, waiting in his room. We definitely weren't about to ask how he got there.

We told Mike to grab what he needed and we would explain everything later!

Urgently, we packed up the bare essentials, like our wallets and passports, and called the front desk instead of going through the patient process of downloading a local app. We told the front desk that it was a real 'emergency' and we needed to get to Jinan City. We didn't bother to pick up our rooms. We abandoned some of our things and ran out the front door of the shabby, little 'Grand Hotel'.

Waiting in the Grand Hotel's parking lot for our driver to arrive, were not able to relax at all, our hearts beating through our chests, and we paced in a tight circle.

Waiting those six minutes for the taxi to arrive, I remember that we were even too scared to draw attention to ourselves, and when the taxi driver's headlights became visible at the bottom of the parking lot, we all breathed a sigh of relief and crammed into his silver, seven-seater van. The driver could tell by our appearance that something was very wrong, and he us if we were in serious trouble; I think he was wondering if he should take us all to the police station.

We didn't dare to look back at T'ai Shan— the mountain itself. Descending, winding down the hills of Tai'an, we finally started to talk after ten minutes of silence. We realised that Alice and I had all heard similar noises as we ran down the path: a faint crying or weeping, punctuated by grunts and screams. Mike, on the other hand, had no recollection of ever leaving his hotel bunk! His memory had been wiped clean.

Alice and I told our stories in whispers, with hesitation, because we knew that no one would believe us. We didn't want to get labelled. We made a pact not to tell others or disclose our experience to the media, because of the social isolation we were sure to experience. We didn't want people to say that we were liars....and we didn't want to get called 'crazy'.

Of course, while we were preparing for our pilgrimage to Tai Shan, Alice had mentioned the legends of several ghosts. T'ai Shan had been a place of sacrifices for centuries, as the unofficial centre of an ancient cult. Those sacrifices usually took place at the top or at the base, near the little hill that we had been navigating in the darkness. Alice told those stories as if it were a reason to try camping out in the forest instead of renting a room in a ramshackle guest house near the base of the mountain.

Yes, in retrospect, it was as if Alice thought that we should try our luck at running into a ghost, especially when we started walking off the beaten track by the end of the second day. Alice even told a few different biographies of kings, rulers, and emperors who were known to have made sacrifices there.

The gruesome depictions of who or what got sacrificed.... I thought they were all just dumb old stories at the time. I even remembering chuckling a little bit when Alice got to the part about an unhappy ghost trying to pull hikers into one of the streams.

Finally, it was eight long days before we found the courage to Tai'an town and pick up the rest of our things. We took the train back, and we insisted that Alice's dad (a businessman from Jinan) come with us, because we were just too scared to go back there by ourselves.

When we got the run-down Grand Hotel, I would have to say that it was nothing special and nothing appeared out of the ordinary; the hotel was continuing business as normal.

Then, just as we were about to pull out of the parking lot, we heard a grumble. A single, solitary man appeared from the brush. He seemed to be elderly or homeless. However, he was very different from our 'noble ghost' and his appearance pulled at my heartstrings. I felt sorry for him. He stared at us, silently.

'Should we give him a few of our Hong Kong snacks? I really don't want to eat the ones that were left in the hotel room.'

'No, just leave him be...' Alice's father suggested.

We all felt uneasy (instead of relieved) descending the hills of Tai'an for the final time. We knew that we would never go back in our lifetimes. I didn't bother asking the others if they thought they'd return or plan a family vacation at T'ai Shan....we were NEVER EVER going back.

At that time, I didn't worry about the occasional, shivering feeling of isolation that all of us would experience in the coming years. I simply remembered my pact, made with Alice, coming down the mountain. I said nothing at all.

The Cloud Gate Of Past Souls

CCC Kei Yuen College, Saim, Muhammad Wasim – 13

This is the story of a young apprentice named Wen, a gifted soldier-in-training, a boy who had unknown powers, and a humble soul. It was the time of the state of Qi, and his father had been a legendary crossbow specialist— a great warrior— in General Jiang’s army. His father had been defeated in battle but once!

In fact, both of the boys’ parents came from humble upbringings, but he was not of royal blood.

The hexagonal fortress town where he lived was non-descript and far away from any of the larger Qi settlements or river ports. Nonetheless, the boy had extreme confidence and a very strong spirit. The boy’s willingness to fight and innate sense of heroism soon become well known in the district, and he inspired many young men just like himself to defend the fortress town and small moat surrounding the craggy, small, ancient mountain. He had an unyielding, fearless quality.

Some of the wise men who lived in small caves and crags on the east side of the mountain said that the mountain was truly sacred, and had to be defended against evil at all costs. The reason was because of a gate, an ancient invisible gate that was situated on the south face near the peak. The oldest of the sages was said to have moved to all the way from WuDong over 80 years ago in order to aid and protect the invisible gate!

The men on the mountain called this gate ‘The Gate of Past Souls’. Even as a young boy, Wen had become fascinated with the idea of a floating, cloud gate. He swore to protect all of the entranceways and approaches to the mountain, keeping evil away from a mythical gate that he had never even seen. Naturally, he wanted to protect his home and family inside the fortress walls, but he also wanted to protect the purity of the mountain’s magic.

What were the two main rumors surrounding the Gate of Past Souls? The first mystery was that it could help anyone forget their past. Sometimes, young lovers with broken hearts would search for the gate, hoping to be able to forget their lost loves and move on. This was the most popular reason why young people sought out the mountain, coming from as far away as Linyi to seek healing and clean slate.

However, the apprentice had also heard a second story that was even more enticing, and this was the one he that drew him in. It was the story of a white witch— a beautiful sorceress— commanding a wayward army of lost ghouls, lost souls. The boy knew that he would meet her one day, even though any person who walks through the cloud gate has to be truly desperate; it would have to be someone willing to fall off the mountain ledge, someone willing to have their soul splintered. In other words, that person would have to be willing to die to meet the white witch, and going to the white witch could only be a last resort where all other efforts have failed.

Finally, just a few weeks after the boy had turned eighteen, his fortress town came under a vicious, surprise attack. It was an effective band of fighters, and they were solely interested in possession of the potential magic of the mountain. They wanted to glean it for themselves, and they knew they had to eradicate the town at the foot of the mountain. They called themselves The Rogues.

It only took one brief instant in the early morning light for the mountain fortress to be surrounded by the ruthless, evil, infantry of The Rogues, numbering nearly 400 men.

With the town temporarily fortified, Wen knew he had to act quickly. He seemed to discover unbounded courage, like the compounded courage of his ancestors before him. He grabbed his tools and began to wriggle through an old tunnel that criss-crossed beneath the fortress walls, even though he knew he would emerge in an opposing thicket where several of the attacking army’s horses were grazing. If he startled the horses, he would be found out!

One hour later, Wen emerged from a rabbit hutch *ever so slowly* just in time to see the opposing army prepare 2 massive cannons, built on a mountain of sand and mud. They were getting ready to bombard the fortress and all of the families inside. Wen prayed for their safety.

Then, Wen became to crawl up the vertical slate wall of the south wall of the mountain, even though he would be totally exposed. Anyone who looked at the mountain now could see him there, stuck to the side. Just one hit from a well-aimed arrow would knock him off the rock face. However, he was fearless. He was dehydrated, cold, disoriented.... and he continued his climb.

Wen was unable to call out for the Gate of Past Souls in a clear voice, especially considering the mountain echo. But he thought about the white witch, whispering for her. He urged his heart to feel love for her. Sure enough, after 3 hours of slow climbing, a cloud gate appeared and a white witch spoke to him:

‘Over 400 men are attacking the town, but I am holding them back. Yes, I can deliver the final blow if you are willing to take the risk...’ she murmured, shimmering in the crisp moonlight.

Wen nodded and held out his hand, as if beckoning toward a bride or companion.

Her icy nails wrapped around his smooth fist, and she squeezed tightly.

She pulled him off the side of the mountain and onto a blue-green cloud that hovered there, impossibly.

At that moment, one of the Rogues noticed the immortal couple and shouted for reinforcements. Arrow began to zing through the air, most hitting the south face. But it was already too late. The white witch beckoned Wen inside, and he seemed to step through a window in the sky. As soon as the cloud gate closed shut behind him, a howling ghoul army came rushing out of the mountain caves, screaming. It sounded like a freight train going off the rails. It was an unholy army that was impossible to defeat.

Within five minutes of fighting, the leader of the Rogues was sliced in half, and so the Rogues’ morale was completely erased. They tried their best to escape, grabbing what remained of their leader’s body, heading back down the mountain valley to the coast. They left so quickly that they abandoned 200 fallen gang members behind them, lacking any courage or dignity in the end.

For this fortuitous victory against a massive private army, Wen’s father was made Gatekeeper and Captain of the fortress defences.

Although the people of the fortress town claimed that they could, occasionally, see Wen’s face in the pale morning light or in the wisps of small clouds that flickered near sunset, Wen’s father was never able to speak to his son again, and wondered if the gift of immortality or even the protection of their homes from The Rogues....or even his victories in the General Jiang’s army....was really worth it all in the end.

Wolf's Journey

CCC Kei Yuen College, Shreesh, Abhinav – 11

In the closing years of Chu Kingdom, their peaceful mountains were consumed by constant conflict. The fires of war raged on. The war spread deep— deep into the most remote areas and far away from the coast, the rivers, and towns. Local people called this interior mountain land ‘Daiguzhen.’ They didn’t understand why anyone would want to invade such a remote, impoverished place.

In a lost corner of Daiguzhen (no one knows how to find it, exactly), there is a hidden valley. In the middle of that valley, there is a sunken well. The story I am about to tell you starts in that well, in the centre of the mountain valley. I think it’s all gone now, as it has been made into a reservoir.

A timber wolf had thrown himself into the well, depressed. His master had left the town over 2 years ago; gone off to war and never returned. Wolf knew that his master was surely dead, and he lost his own will to live. He did not know that an important battle was encroaching upon the mountain valley, because even reaching the next town took three days of hard travel.

So Wolf was sitting at the bottom of the well, showing no will to live and feeling sorry for himself. He would let out a weak ‘howl’ every few minutes, a sorrowful echo that bounced off the mountain walls.

A young girl heard his cries. Looking into the well, she said: “I think there is going to be trouble here in the coming weeks. Are you able to stay with us, help us? I think I can even hear cannons if I listen.”

She then dropped a letter to the bottom of the well. She dared not tell anyone about the letter, because it was a forgery and she herself had written it! Looking at the pitiful wolf, she said:

‘Um...it’s a letter from Minister Changping. It says that your destiny awaits you and that you are supposed to ‘search for the peak that is bathed in light’.

(The young girl, searching for ideas when she forged the letter...just ended up quoting one of her favourite poets.)

The wolf woke up and slowly climbed out of the well. He then started on his way over the first two peaks, moving in a steady, northerly direction. He felt such a deep despair that he didn’t want to stop and rest.

However, after Wolf crested the second peak (both peaks had been cloudy, overcast), the wolf noticed a man running up the mountain, running in fear. It was an injured soldier, un-armed. Therefore, the wolf continued down the mountain in a quiet way and very soon came upon a Qin invasion, locked in a series of vicious sword clashes.

Wolf saw a group of tall men fighting with long spears, kicking up dust. Wolf instinctively knew that the soldiers moving in defensive moves, using swordwork, were his own countrymen. The larger men using spears were the Qin invaders. With this new fighting technology, they took the Chu by surprise. You could see lots of cuts and injuries, and sense the desperation. It was a long, drawn-out, pathetic battle.

Wolf was so exhausted by his journey, but managed to launch into action. He attacked the largest man. There was no time for the leader to turn round, and the wolf soon had a death-grip on the man’s arm.

“What’s the matter, you dirty stray? Nothing to do today?” groaned the Captain. He couldn’t get Wolf to let go, but he also didn’t flinch. Didn’t the Qin soldiers feel pain?

With Wolf’s help, the defending Chu soldier was able to strike a death-blow while the Qin leader was distracted. Then, together, they moved on to the next Qin soldier. They narrowly dodged a spear as they closed in. Having a wolf at their side, a wolf raised in these mountains, was an unfair advantage. The Chu soldiers soon triumphed over the invaders.

The oldest Chu soldier invited the wolf back to their camp, commenting on his battle skills: “Fighting side-by-side with you, Old Wolf, we can begin to defend these mountains. How did you ever find us? Has word of this battle already reached Daiguzhen?”

Wolf was very honest when he told the Chu soldiers that he was on a personal journey, 'looking for a bright peak' and had been in depression since his master went off to battle, over two years ago. Wolf hesitated to tell the soldiers the man's name, because he really didn't to hear any confirmation that his Master as dead. He wouldn't be able to bear the news.

"Listen Wolf, we would never lie to you. We have really never heard of this man. But why don't you stick with us if you have nothing else to do? It felt good to finally be able to fight back today! We have been in retreat until now. Stay...and help us."

Wolf agreed and stayed with the Chu Division. In the morning, the group walked back over the peak they had just lost the day before, and just as they started down into the next valley, the mid-day sun came out, shining brightly. This was surely the 'peak bathed in light'.

A mountain meadow in full bloom was their next stop. It didn't surprise anyone to come upon the remains of battle, a battle graveyard from years ago. Wolf was disgusted by the skeletal remains (as much as a wolf can be disgusted), broken swords, lost shoes, and dented helmets strewn about. It was a sad scene of defeat. The Chu Kingdom had really taken a hit at this place. Their soldiers had been killed without mercy.

An eerie scene for such a beautiful meadow. However, Wolf noticed an owl perched near the edge of the meadow, watching the men intently. (Animals often notice other animals that escape the eyes of humans). Wolf wondered why Owl was so high up the mountain today? But just as he approached Owl to say hello, she opened her expansive wings and descended to the mountain valley below.

'Listen, I think she was spying on us. There must be another Qin Division in the valley. Are we able to fight them?'

'Thank you, Wolf. We wouldn't have noticed her at all....and, no, we had better take a few weeks rest. Some of us are seriously injured, Instead of continuing into the valley, let's look for a temple up here. Some of us have lost a lot of blood.'

The Chu Division of sixty men was able to find a monastery behind the adjacent peak, a peak even brighter than the one they had just crossed. Wolf got his spirits back and was even able to laugh. Over the next few weeks, Wolf found that he loved playing with the soldiers as they convalesced at the monastery, and he learnt a few new tricks about battle, as well. By the time the division started down the mountain, they were in fighting form and had a new-found confidence. Wolf was their terrifying, secret weapon.

The men told Wolf that Minister Changping had raised over 50 000 men in total, but even that would not be sufficient to defend the Chu Kingdom against the Qin Empire. In fact, the only reason the Qin had not bothered with these mountainous districts before was that they were quite meaningless; they were not strategic, and they were poor. Fighting for them was not even worth the loss of men. However, the world was changing. Now all of the Chu towns and villages were under threat. That threat would never subside, especially since the Qin Empire had superior weaponry.

They tried not to think about the impossibility of their task, now. It was time strengthen their skills and their spirits. Wolf remember the young girl's words as he sat at the bottom of a well, only weeks beforehand, lost in sadness in Daiguzheng: she had said to 'search for the peak that is bathed in light.'

To wolf, that peak turned out to be the company of men, working side-by-side in a fighting division. It wasn't an actual mountain, for he had been surrounded by beautiful mountains for all of his life.

People always say that wolves can only be tamed by one master. However, there were likely many wild timber wolves who fought alongside the Chu, some of them with enhanced magical powers. There is simply no other explanation for how the tiny Chu Kingdom was able to stave off invasion from the Qin Empire for so many decades.

And, yes, there are many eye-witness reports of battles involving magical beasts just like Wolf. Will there ever be another kingdom as mythical and magical as the remote mountain Kingdom of the Chu?

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Cheung, Charlotte – 12

Reports to finish, graphs to make, emails to reply. John exhaled heavily, as he flopped his head into his pile of printed materials. A third empty cup of coffee rested next to him, his drowsiness hinting at the necessity of a fourth or a fifth. His breath reeked of a disconcertingly stinky mix of coffee beans, the extremely faint flavor of mint mouthwash and saliva in general. In search of a break from the totality of pressure and frustration in life, the next morning, he headed up to Huangshan.

He looked up to the sky – the sun was yawning but he was up anyway. The Chinese characters announced solemnly, his arrival at the “Front Gate”. He began his stride up to the cable car station, but he froze in his tracks – his brows furrowed, eyes widening.

Something was amiss.

Gone was the iconic magic and beauty of Huangshan – instead, the uninvited noise from tourists loudly squabbling to each other banished the sacred serenity. A vocal bargaining between stall owners and the tourists about the price of an ice drink pricked his ears, like the unrelenting buzzing bees.

Completely exasperated, here he was to experience the search of a gone silence, yearning even more for the peace that was always absent from his daily life. Where was the mesmerising beauty of Huangshan that enticed generations of poets and artists? He wondered. While the walk up to the zenith seemed to be infinite, the remix of multiple languages and dialects of tourists became the background tone, setting the mood of his journey. The Baizhang Spring and the A-shaped Waterfall were simply close by, but John could not see anything more than what met the eyes. The Baizhang Spring failed to dazzle him, the cascading silky waterfall was no more than a source of biting cold splashes.

As he popped into a cable car, he was only hoping that the peace would come upon him. Now, the unclosable windows made him feel more claustrophobic than ever, the noise poured in through the gap, smashing his eardrums like a pie was being thrown at his face – and he could not jump out of the cable car. The closer he was to the blue sky, the muddier and unappealing the brown trails became.

He buried his face in his hands, gritting his teeth. Why was this happening? He came here to escape from chaos, and all he found was more chaos! “Oh, this is enough chaos for one lifetime,” he thought. Huangshan used to be that paradise where crowds were nowhere to be found, the peace and beauty prevailing above all else – however, he now found the crowd utterly unavoidable. Had he known all this would be harassing his eardrums, wreaking havoc with his psyches, he would have stayed at his office desk to continue with reports, graphs and emails. Even the suffocating working life his boss psychopathically put him through would be better, better than seeing his dreamy portrait of Huangshan smudged before him. They, the ruthless tourists, contributing dabs and strokes that nobody asked for.

“You have arrived at the Greeting Pine,” a pre-recorded voice commanded. John followed like a robot, walking towards the Greeting Pine with no expectations. Here they were, freely dancing in the wind. The pines were waving with enthusiasm, eagerness and energy, standing in their old age as trees.

John boarded another cable car, and the Stone Flown From Afar caught his eyes. The stone reached the sky, gently penetrating and dipping into the clouds with its tip, like a Chinese pen dipping lightly into a bottle of ink. He dazed at the ethereal structure.

After another little ride in the car, he had arrived at the Cooling Platform. Walking to the center of the platform, he felt the wind blowing towards his face, ruffling his hair, and brushing his legs, a cooling sensation sweeping across his whole body. He didn’t even mind his shirt flapping against his chest.

Another cable car trip later, the Begin-to-Believe Peak almost made his eyes pop out. He couldn’t believe it! How did these – how did these rocks hold together, in a straight fashion, when they were almost floating, hovering over each other? It was almost as if levitation had allowed the rocks to defy gravity!

He went higher and higher and higher, and the cable car doors opened at last. As he stepped out of the car, the biggest, tallest, most grand of them all was revealed – the Lotus Peak.

He had been missing out. The wind greeted him and brushed his cheeks lightly as he watched the waves of clouds soar smoothly through the air – looking next to him at the “Greeting Pine” and below him to the little staircases, the imposing peaks and those trees that nobody cared for but managed to flourish with their own inner strength, witnessing the changing of times in its ancient history. He felt like he was atop the entire world, a godly feeling empowering his mind, like he could do anything –

The fog was engulfed by a gentle but sudden whoosh of cold wind, just as he had wished for the fog to disappear from his sight, leaving a collection of peaks in its wake. John felt awash by a void, the sense of nothingness and emptiness – as he stood speechless and with a serene feeling.

He peered down at the scenery below his feet, the green of the lush grass, the brown of the peaks, the white of the clouds and the black of the granite staircases. Another light gust of wind breezed past his face, and he felt...reborn, like a wave had just washed his soul, and the pressure of the documents and reports on his shoulders just wafted away like a cloud of smoke. Looking out of the cable car he was in, John opened up the window and let the birds settle on the edge while chirping. Brown birds, black birds, and white birds all flew away from their cables, and came to join John on his cable car, while they sang their joyful songs. He thought of it – he used to hate birds chirping. He thought they were nuisances, creations of nature that had voices to bring disruption and unhappiness to people. But now, it was a kind of naturally created music, that he had learnt to listen more closely to, and he slowly appreciated it.

On the way to the airport, he reflected upon the power that being atop the Lotus Peak had given him. The imposing peaks, the persistent trees, the steamy springs – they had survived the harsh wind and rain, the freezing snow and hail, and the ferocious sun. After tens of thousands of years, they still stood confidently, not withered by the tests of time or the tests of whatever disaster nature threw their way. They all toughed it out, despite what was going on around them, and learnt to find the peace in their inner selves.

Drifting into a deep slumber, a poem about another mountain his mother read to him when he was little spoke to him, quietly and gently:

*“Since I cannot be born again,
on days when my heart grows grim, I leave my quiet house,*

*and go away to the mountains.
On the day I return from a nameless hill,*

in house and the village,

I am reborn.”

The next morning, John awoke with a spring in his step. A first cup of coffee rested next to him – its emptiness didn’t hint at the necessity of a second, instead it hinted at his energy. His breath smelled of fresh apples, refreshing mint mouthwash and a good granola bar. “All clouds float, don’t they?” John smiled to himself in his office, looking at a picture of him in Huangshan on his desk. Thinking of going back to Huangshan again, he felt that serenity wasn’t far, but it was close to his heart despite all those daily nuisances

Does the rainbow actually exist?

Chinese International School, Fung, Annalise – 13

“Now students, Huangshan was originally named “Yishan” because of a legend...” The teacher droned on about Huangshan, which was their Chinese History topic for the month. “Lily Chen.” Lily heard someone calling her name, but couldn’t quite place who the voice was. “Lily, you should really pay more attention in class! I’ve been calling you for the last 2 minutes, yet you just noticed me,” the mysterious voice said.

Lily glanced at the speaker and spotted a man who carried himself with an arrogant air, wearing a jade belt and a cloth scarf on his head. Lily, who had just learned about this man in her previous Chinese History lesson, widened her eyes in shock as she stammered in disbelief, “W—wait...are you Li Bai?”

Li Bai laughed heartily and nodded his head. “Yes Lily, I am indeed Li Bai.” “Wait, but why are you here? Shouldn’t you be writing poems?”

“Yes, I am supposed to be writing poems, but I need inspiration! I need your help to go find a beautiful rainbow that is set in one of the most dangerous parts of Huangshan, but I don’t know how to get there. The last time I saw the rainbow was when I was a baby, and I don’t remember anything other than that spectacular sight I saw.” Li Bai smiled as he thought of that gorgeous rainbow.

“B—but, how am I supposed to know how to get to the rainbow? And why did you even pick me to help you?” Lily asked.

Li Bai, providing no answer to any of the questions, only smiled mysteriously and stood there. Suddenly, there came a faraway call of the phoenix. Li Bai smiled, satisfied, and summoned Lily onto the wind carriage.

Lily stepped gingerly onto the wind carriage, and WOOSH, in the blink of an eye, the view from the carriage had changed from Lily’s classroom to the beautiful mountains of Huangshan!

“Lily! Look over the edge of the carriage! We’re currently passing by the magical pine trees. Here is the Greeting Pine!” Li Bai shouted excitedly, eagerly showing off his childhood ‘home town’.

Lily glanced over the side of the carriage, and saw the pine tree beckoning to her!

“Welcome home Li Bai. And welcome newcomer! According to this form that Li Bai submitted, your name is...Lily Chen,” the Greeting Pine exclaimed excitedly, beckoning them over with its long branches, “and you have been summoned by Li Bai to help him find a rainbow in Huangshan. Now, let me give you a hearty welcome to Huangshan!”

Li Bai whispered, “Lily, you have to be careful around the Greeting Pine. It is so talkative and could keep us here for hours telling us about the scenery and history of Huangshan! We have to rush if we want to get to the rainbow before sunset.”

“Oh please,” Lily pleaded, “can we just stay for a little while? Although I would normally find the scenery and history of Huangshan boring, the Greeting Pine speaks so animatedly I can’t help but listen!”

Li Bai shook his head wearily, “fine,” he said, “we can stay for 5 minutes.” Lily squealed with excitement and rushed to hug Li Bai, “thank you!”

The Greeting Pine smiled and said, “Well, did you know that Huangshan was originally called—”

Lily cut the Greeting Pine off mid-word, and said, rolling her eyes, “Ugh, I’ve already learned about this at school!”

The Greeting Pine just smiled and said, “Yi Shan. in 747, the name was changed to Huangshan by an emperor’s order, as the legendary Huangdi, literally translating to Yellow Emperor, wanted to emphasize an association between Huangshan and himself.”

Lily stood there, her eyes open wide with curiosity, and said, “wow, I did not know that!” “5 minutes is up!” Li Bai said, “time to continue our journey!”

Lily nodded, and climbed back into the Wind Carriage.

“Bye!” She shouted.

The two companions sat in silence, when Lily suddenly shouted, “Li Bai! I see a monkey!”

Li Bai looked around, confused, but laughed out loud when he spotted something. “My dear Lily,” he said, “that is the famous Weird Rock of Huangshan! People say that it looks like a monkey watching the sunset, don’t you think so?”

Lily focused intently on the rock for a while, and nodded her head, “Hm, that’s true! Wait, that reminds me, it’s almost sunset! We have to rush in order to see the beauty of the rainbow clearly before dusk falls!”

Whilst both parties were nervously watching the sun’s slow descent into the mountains, Lily spotted a person soaking in the hot spring. Li Bai, noticing that Lily was looking at something, looked over to see what was attracting Lily’s attention.

Li Bai, after a few moments of confusion, realised that it was Xuanyuan Huangdi. “Lily,” he said, “that is Xuanyuan Huangdi. He is currently rejuvenating for 21 days, so we better not disturb him!”

Lily nodded her head and sighed, slumping down in her seat, “I really wanted to go try that hot spring! That way, I could brag to my friends that I went to the Hot Spring in Huangshan when I get back home!”

Li Bai, knowing that Lily was extremely disappointed by not being able to rejuvenate herself in the hot spring, reassured her by saying, “Lily, don’t worry! I think we’re near the rainbow now, so get ready to see the most breath-taking view of your life!”

Lily nodded half-heartedly as she thought of the warmth that she could have surrounded her if only Xuanyuan Huangdi wasn’t rejuvenating right when she got summoned by Li Bai to find this so-called ‘gorgeous rainbow’.

Lily looked around. She was defeated! She didn’t know where the rainbow was, and the sun was only a few minutes away from setting. If she didn’t spot the rainbow soon, Li Bai would never get to see the rainbow again! As she looked around, trying to spot the rainbow, she saw a stream of white water falling from the sky. It was a waterfall!

“Dear friends, I assume you must be looking for the rainbow. It is nearby, all you need to do is fly your wind carriage over to where I am, and you will see it. I have been watching this rainbow for such a long time, it is nice to finally have some company,” the waterfall said.

Lily was so excited to finally see the rainbow that she didn’t even comprehend that a waterfall was talking to her! “Wait, Li Bai,” she said, furrowing her eyebrows, “this waterfall that is leading us to the rainbow is trustworthy, right? I’ve read many stories about how the spirits in Huangshan lure visitors somewhere and then the visitors are never to be seen again. Supposedly, they tell the visitors to prove that they are adventurous and force them to walk across the Bridge of Immortals. However, many people fall off and die. What if...we’re about to become one of those visitors?”

Li Bai laughed, “Don’t worry Lily,” he said, “this is the White Dragon, and long ago, it released a torrent of water, flooding villages all over Huangshan. So the emperor punished the White Dragon, and turned it into a waterfall! However, after the White Dragon’s punishment was over, it wanted to stay a waterfall, as it felt bad for what it did to the village. Now, the White Dragon provides fresh water for all the villagers in Huangshan.”

Lily thought, “The White Dragon seems like a trustworthy person! Or dragon, to be precise.”

When the wind carriage flew to where the waterfall was, Lily and Li Bai were astounded by the beauty that stood before them. They stood there, speechless, as they took in the rainbow. Tears started streaming down Li Bai’s face, “thank you so much,” he cried, “thank you for helping me find the rainbow again!”

As Li Bai stood in front of the rainbow, entranced by the beauty of it, Lily realised a sea of clouds was underneath the rainbow. She thought, “wow, that looks so fluffy, I’m going to jump on it!”

She crept to the edge of the wind carriage, careful not to disturb Li Bai from his trance, and... “3, 2, 1”, Lily shouted, “yayyyyyyyyyy!!!”

As she jumped from the carriage onto the clouds, she heard the White Dragon shout, “No, Lily, don’t! You’ll be brought back to the mortal world if you....” The White Dragon’s voice faded as she fell through the clouds.

Lily landed on hard plastic. “Where am I?”, she muttered. The joyous screams of her classmates brought her back to reality. “Lily! You finally woke up! You passed out for 1 hour, we were so worried!”

“Now now, don’t surround Lily, I’m sure she needs some fresh oxygen and personal space if she wants to recover quickly,” the teacher warned the class.

Lily swiveled her head to look at her teacher, only to see her wink and mouth the words “you’re welcome.”

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Jan, Sydney R – 13

Chinese legend has it that there was once a kind, noble Yellow Emperor, otherwise known as Huangdi, who was admired by all that met him. For a long time, he ruled a village in China's Southern Anhui province, not far from an ancient forest in Mount Yi, literally meaning black mountain. The forest was no ordinary forest however, it was well believed to be the land of the gods where mythical creatures and autonomous spirits lived together as one. The area was covered entirely with a beautiful, silver mist that glistened in the golden glow of the rising sun, and veiled the secrets hidden within the forest.

Years passed and the emperor had heard a rumor about a spring of immortality that lay just atop of Lotus Peak – the tallest peak of Mount Yi – which rose high above the thick sea of clouds. Gradually, he was consumed by an undying desire for eternal life. Ignoring his advisors' warnings, he dressed in his finest clothing, abandoned his people, then set off alone into the forest to hunt for the magical spring.

Feeling weary after his daunting, but successful journey, he heaved himself into the spring of immortality and fell asleep in it for forty-nine days. Everyone believed he had ascended to Heaven, and the mountain was later renamed to Huangshan in his honor. But what they didn't know was when the emperor woke up from his long nap, he had yet to pay the price of immortality.

2000 years later...

"Ow," I grumbled, "that hurt."

Already covered in mud, I rolled onto my back and spread my arms across the forest floor.

"You did it, Mei Ling," I said to myself, then let out a sigh of relief, "you ran away from home for the first time."

The argent, full moon rose high above the endless darkness, shining through the silver mist and casting shadows in where its luminescent light couldn't reach. My eyes were puffy and my short, brown hair curled inwards, framing the sides of my face. Eventually, my breathing returned to normal, but my skinny legs still ached from the long run. Despite being in the forest countless times before, still, the shadows of twisted pine trees and strangely shaped rocks sent a shiver up my spine. When I was finally confident that every creature had fallen asleep, I rested my eyes and let my mind drift to a memory from earlier tonight.

I was back in my room, dirty laundry scattered all over the place, *exactly* how I liked it. It had been three hours since the sun disappeared behind the mountains, and most fireflies were awakening from their long slumbers. Suddenly, I heard a frightening gasp coming from my mom, who stood angrily outside my bedroom door.

After just five minutes of lecturing, I had had enough.

"Look," I hollered back at her, clenching my fists, I channeled all my rage and screamed my lungs out, "I know I'm not the perfect little girl you wanted me to be! I take my books with me into the forest and I read alone for days on end. Unlike those other kids in the village, I don't need friends, I don't need dad, and most importantly, I don't need *you!*" I pushed past her, snatched my coat, then slammed the door behind me and dashed into the ancient forest.

I was quickly brought back to reality by a man's voice hovering above my head as I lay on my back.

"Are you lost, my child?" the stranger said, in a calm voice that also expressed his concern. When I didn't respond, he added, "Where are your parents?"

With my eyes still shut tight, I told myself over and over that everything would be fine, until it felt true. My heart pounded faster against my chest as I slowly opened my eyes.

My jaw instantly dropped at the sight of him, not from fear, nor from his unusual attire, but because his body was completely translucent. I could just make out his amiable, brown eyes, crooked nose, long-flowing moustache and beard, and warm smile. He wore a traditional black, ankle-length robe made of silk embellished with beautiful golden swirls in the shape of dragons, and a brown, silk belt wrapped around his waist. His hair was tied back in a small bun topped with a garment only worn by the...

To my surprise, I was no longer afraid of the spirit itself, but more shocked with who he was.

“You, your the... Ye—yellow Emperor!” I exclaimed. As he nodded his head, I continued, “According to legends, you should have ascended to Heaven long ago. So why are you still here?!” My eyebrows had scrunched together as they always did when I was deep in thought.

“Come with me,” he said with a kind smile, “since I can’t bear to leave a girl your age alone drenched in mud, I’ll tell you my story while we head to the best place to watch the sunrise.”

After I had taken all the time in the world to just stand up, the emperor then muttered something under his breath. Suddenly, the mist around us began to gather beneath our feet, lifting us off the ground inch by inch, until we floated high above the forest. The moon began to fade as the horizon became a delicate, golden thread. I bent over and was greeted by gigantic koi, formed from the silver mist below. They were the size of airplanes and swam like a pack of lively dolphins, occasionally jumping up to brush the sky, then diving back into the endless sea of clouds. It was like living a fairytale, silently riding on our little cloud across the sky towards a single peak that stood taller than all the others.

“Are you going to tell me the reason why I found a thirteen year old girl alone in the forest at night?” the emperor abruptly asked. Feeling embarrassed, I reintroduced myself and explained the heated argument I had last night.

As I told him that I’d rather be alone for the rest of my life, we arrived at our destination. I hopped off the fluffy cloud and watched each breath turn into a puff of smoke as soon as it entered the freezing atmosphere. To my left, there was a natural hot spring which I had to resist cannon-balling into. On my right however, I was left wide eyed and staring in awe. The sun rose above the horizon, spreading warmth throughout the forest. Glowing rays of sunlight pierced through the mist below, changing it from a dull silver to a warm, glistening pink.

“What a sight to behold,” I thought, but for some reason, I had an empty feeling lingering in my soul.

It was like the emperor saw right through me when he asked, “You wish you could share this moment with your mother, don’t you?”

Thankfully, the emperor didn’t wait for my response before carrying on, “When I woke up that morning in the spring, my skin had become pale and transparent. The forest god was already waiting on the other side of the bubbly water, and informed me that by transforming into a forest spirit, I had indeed become immortal, but that also meant I could never set foot outside the forest ever again. At first, I was overjoyed, spending most of my days exploring the forest. However as time passed, I began to miss my family. Day after day, I sat on the edge of the forest watching my children grow into gracious adults. Though as life went on, and I saw the last of my children’s souls ascend to Heaven, towers of regret began to build within my heart. Desperate, I repeatedly implored the forest god to release me from this dreadful curse, and yet he refused to every time. I’ve been alone in this forest ever since.”

I didn’t realize I had been crying until the emperor reached over and used a gentle hand to wipe a tear from my cheek.

“I want to go home,” I said in between sobs, “please, take me back.”

On the way home, I didn't pay much attention to the tall, stone pillars, nor the thunderous waterfalls that I usually would have been delighted to see. The sky was a brilliant blue by the time we made it to the edge of the forest that overlooked my little house.

"Come back to see me anytime, Mei Ling," the emperor said, lightly patting my head once before disappearing into thin air.

When I turned to face the porch of my house, there stood a lonely woman staring blankly right at me. She wasn't wearing her usual blue dress and her dark hair had become a bird's nest. Hot tears streaked across my face as I sprinted full-speed ahead, making my way through the golden rice field, towards my mother, who waited for me on the other side with wide, open arms.

The Sound of Home

Chinese International School, Liu, Kaitlyn – 11

4 years ago...

“What have you done?!” Mother’s cries woke me up in the middle of the night. I hurriedly ran downstairs, but there was no sign of mother. Wrapping my hands around my body, I made my way out the front door. A blast of cold wind rushed into the house, sending shivers down my spine. I peered across the river, squinting against the strong wind. In the dark, I could make out the grey figures of mother, and...father? I could hear mother crying in the distance. I rushed across the wooden bridge and approached them. There, lying on the ground was father, with a nasty gash across the entire left side of his body...kneeling next to him was mother, squeezing his shoulders, so tight that she was trembling. I could hear mother’s voice clearer now, cowering in fear, “Please. Oh God, please. Why’d you go? The mountains are dangerous. Don’t leave, please...”

The next morning, he was gone. And mother’s soul, though still alive...left with him.

★ ★ ★

Ever since father died, mother was never the same anymore. Mother would stay in her room the entire day, not doing anything, just lying in her bed. I wish I could be mad, leaving me alone to fend for myself, but seeing the few black strands of hair left in the midst of white, and the wrinkles on her face, deepening, day by day, I forced myself to hold back. Instead, I made things. Shell necklaces, flower crowns, strings of pebbles that would jingle in the wind... I brought them to the market everyday, but often came home, my pockets as empty as ever. Everyone was poor. No one can eat seashells and stones. So, I hung all the leftover wind-chimes on my window frame. Everytime the wind blew, our entire house was filled with the sound of the pleasant clinking and clanking of the pebbles.

★ ★ ★

Mother was lying unconscious on the floor when I walked into her room. I called Uncle Chen from next door and he carried mother to Doc. Zhang, who lived next to the market. We waited outside of the Doctor’s house, exchanging nervous glances to one another. I didn’t have the money to pay for the expensive doctor.... What if Mother died? I would have no parents, no home, no anything. How would I live?

I trembled in fear, feeling tears forming in my eyes, raging with sadness, and fury but mostly fear. All the feelings bubbled up inside me, like a volcano, about to erupt. Droplets of tears slid down my face and fell onto the floor, *plink, plink*. I was sad, angry, hungry... so I ran. As fast as my legs could take me. I ran past the market, past all the grey and white houses. All the way till I was far from the village, not daring to look back. Finally, coming back to my senses, I realized that I was at the foot of a mountain. The mysterious Yellow mountains – Huangshan.

I looked up and the bright morning sun forced my eyes into a squint. The tall mountains towered over me, making me seem smaller, and weaker than ever. The sharp peak poked a hole through the sky, barely visible under all the clouds. Without thinking, I grabbed the nearest rock with my right hand, and started to climb.

By the time I got to a small cave on the side of the mountain, the sun had already set, and my hands were covered in scratches. I found a small cave, and leaned my back against the cold, hard stone wall. Before I could think anything more... I had already fallen fast asleep.

★ ★ ★

I woke up with the sound of a buzzing bee surrounding me. I swatted it away, and I carefully lifted myself to my sore feet, and slowly stepped out of the small cave...straight into a ginormous rock.

I stumbled back a few steps and rubbed my sore head. The rock was shaped oddly, almost like a human...with wings. I reached out a hand and felt my coarse fingertips brushing against the surprisingly smooth stone. Before I could observe the statue closer, the entire rock simply disappeared into thin air, to be replaced by a muscular young man, wearing yellow and blue robes. But, he looked strangely familiar... he had the same broad shoulders, and tough jaw that father had. *Could it be?*

“Hey, Zhang Hao.” The man spoke, with a voice, exactly like father’s. Coarse, but warm.

“Hey, Father.” I acted like it was completely normal to see Father suddenly appear from a stone statue, but I had no space in my head to think. All I could do was stand there – dumbstruck.

“Come. I will explain everything.” Father gestured for me to follow him, towards a rocky hanger on the side of the mountain. I sat down next to him and gasped in awe at the sight. Tall jagged mountains shot out from the endless oceans of fluffy white clouds. Each mountain had a unique shape, telling a different story.

“Do you know the tale of the *Immortal Showing the way?*”

“No.”

“It’s a old legend of Huangshan...”

★ ★ ★

Immortal showing the way

The beautiful Huangshan attracted many people to come visit. Among them were said to be immortals, like the Yellow Emperor, the Dragon King and even the Eight Immortals.

Once, on the day of the annual gathering of the Eight Immortals, one of the Immortals – Han Xiangzi was late. Another Immortal, Zhang Guolao flew into the sky to look for Han Xiangzi, but to find Han sightseeing on the Mountain – He was enjoying himself so much that he forgot the gathering! Zhang told Han that they had to get back to the gathering, Han, not having any other choice, turned a stone into a statue of himself, so he would know how to come back next time. The stone, therefore, was named – Immortal Showing the Way. And according to legend, the statue is still there, in the depths of the mountain, and one touch of the stone, would grant immortality...

★ ★ ★

“Every year, men from all over the village would go up the mountain, wanting to prove themselves a hero, and achieve this immortality. But, no man ever succeeded to find it. There were too many beasts and creatures that lived in the mountains, and most men came back injured, whilst many never came home...” Father took a deep breath and sighed, “I wanted to try. So that night, I secretly left and tried to find the rock. But unfortunately, I bumped into a ferocious tiger along the way. I managed to kill it in the end, but the tiger had left a deep gash on my leg. I wobbled home as fast as I could. By the time I got home, I barely had any energy to take a single step. I’m sorry I couldn’t say goodbye...”

“It’s fine. I saw you...That night, I mean.” I let out a heavy breath, and lowered my head.

“Oh yeah, I did too...why did you come here, climb the mountain?”

I clenched my fists and bit my lip, I started explaining. About mother, and how I had to sell things at the market. Then about how mother suddenly fainted, and I didn't know what to do... "I...I was just so scared. I would be alone if she left, and I..." I broke into tears and father placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, it's gonna be fine. Life is hard. There will be obstacles that block your way. But how will you know what the result will be, if you don't even try? Come on, kid. Don't let your fears bring yourself down. Think on the positive side. Hmm?"

"Well, maybe I—" Before I could finish my sentence, father had already disappeared, along with the stone statue. Maybe I had imagined it all... But, what father, real or not, had said was true. I couldn't just give up like this. A lot of people still needed me. I couldn't leave them.

I started to climb home. Maybe it was me, but climbing down the mountain seemed almost *easier* than climbing up. The statue. I don't think it granted immortality. It was *showing the way*, towards hope, and life. In the blink of an eye, I had already gotten to the village entrance. In the distance, I saw a small body, carrying a basket, crossing the bridge across the river. It was her. She was fine. And there, I heard it. The *clink clang*, echoing across the entire village — It was the sound of home. Brushing off the dirt on my clothes, I ran. But this time, I wasn't running away from my fears, I was running towards my fears, and I knew, I was going to conquer them. Bravely, swiftly — like a warrior.

Escape from Jiuhua Shan

Chinese International School, Liu, Sarah – 14

A thick mist swirled around Jiuhua Shan. The mountain was the highest among all the Yellow Mountains and the most sacred to the Buddhist faith. The pine-covered peaks seemed to stretch upwards to the sky, sheltering the ancient monastery nestled against the side of the mountain, seemingly abandoned by its former inhabitants. Dense clumps of pine trees clung precariously to the rocky slopes, almost obliterating the narrow pathway that man had built several centuries ago leading up to the monastery. Parts of the path were almost impassible to human beings.

Huang Rongxi lay slumped against an old tree trunk, exhausted from his steep climb. His right arm hung limply by his side, blood seeping through the bandages covering the faded grey of his imperial uniform. Huang had walked for days without food, the pain from his wound growing ever worse as the days passed. The slaughter during the battle against the Tang army had been so intense that Huang saw no chance of surviving the onslaught against his own depleted unit. One moonless night, he slipped out of the camp and crawled into the dense undergrowth at the base of the mountain. For two days, Huang slowly climbed higher and higher into the Yellow Mountains, evading any paths which might be used by any imperial troops. He was convinced that by now, any search party would have given up the hunt for a deserted soldier and began to gradually slow his pace.

On the third day of his escape, Huang decided to take shelter in a low cave, almost hidden in the midst of the silent forest. As night fell, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the numbing pain in his arm. The next day, Huang woke up early, disturbed by the sound of rustling leaves outside of the cave. He immediately moved to draw his knife from its sheath, but instead of an imperial soldier, he saw the face of a young boy, standing at the entrance of the cave. "My name is Hao Jingcheng," said the boy in a gentle voice.. I live on the mountain and I know somebody who can help you." "Go away boy, I don't need any help. Just leave me alone." Huang grunted. But the boy persisted. "But you are bleeding through your bandage, and you won't last more than a couple of days on the mountain." "I already told you to leave me alone." Hao continued to badger the man. "I'm going to take you to the monastery at the top of the mountain. There is an old monk that lives there who can tend your wounds." Ignoring Huang's protests, Hao began to lift the soldier by his good arm. Eventually, Huang gave up the fight and limped out of the cave, supported by his young rescuer.

Towards evening, Huang and his new companion reached the top of Mount Jiuhua. As the sun began to set, tiny snowflakes fell from the sky, gradually forming a white blanket across the mountain. The rays of the sun had painted the sky deep shades of red and pink, forming a backdrop to the ancient Shaolin Monastery which clung precariously to the edge of the mountainside. By the time the pair reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the main gate of the monastery, Huang was on the brink of collapsing. Suddenly, a tall figure of an elderly man emerged from the gate. "Who is this soldier, Hao?" asked the figure. "And why have you brought him here?" "I found him hiding in a cave alone. His arm is badly injured, we need to help him." Hao pleaded with the monk. Shi Liangxin looked warily at the injured soldier. His saffron robes billowed in the cool evening breeze. "Do you realize that imperial troops are roaming around the mountains searching for deserters? We must hide him in the monastery, so I can fix up his wound.." ordered the monk.

The next morning, Huang opened his eyes and gazed at the sight of an enormous golden buddha which seemed to stare down at him with pitying eyes. All around him were piles of fruit and other offerings. The scent of incense penetrated his nostrils when suddenly the old monk entered the room with a bowl of steaming hot chicken soup. Huang tried to sit up, but the throbbing pain in his arm forced him back down again. Shi said in a gentle voice, "Try not to move your arm, it needs time to heal. But we can't stop long in the monastery since the imperial soldiers are climbing up the mountain. If they find you, they will kill you, and kill me for helping you."

Two days later, Shi quietly slipped into the room where Huang was fast asleep. Gently shaking the soldier's arm, Shi said, "Wake up! We have to leave now! The soldiers are close, and there is no time to spare! Follow me to the temple. Hao is waiting for us there." Huang reluctantly got out of the bed and shuffled towards the door of the tiny room. Hao beckoned the soldier from the temple steps, urging him to hurry. Shi followed closely behind, carrying a few small bags of food over the shoulder of his wiry frame. Within moments, all three figures had passed through the broken down rear gate of the monastery. They had barely walked a kilometer when they suddenly heard the yelling of soldiers from the monastery. As the monk stole a glance behind him, Hao clenched Huang's hand tightly signaling

his wounded friend to move faster. Huang smiled at the boy and picked up his pace as the sun began to sink behind the Jiuhua Shan. The dying rays of the sun seemed to illuminate the whole mountain, casting the three lonely figures in deep shadow. As darkness fell, Shi motioned his companions to stop and rest, "It's getting dark now, we should take cover somewhere and eat some food, but we can't light a fire. Let's rest under that rocky ledge and later try to get some sleep." The three desperate figures ate quickly and tried to snatch a few hours of sleep under the watching stars of the night sky.

When Huang opened his eyes the next morning, his vision focused on the figure of Shi praying to Buddha in the cold morning air. It was early and the mist gently swirled among the peaks of the opposite mountain. Hao was already awake, packing the few little belongings ready for the journey ahead. Shi's prayers were suddenly interrupted by the sound of pebbles falling down onto the ledge. Hao signalled to Shi, his finger pointing upwards. Before any of the three companions could make a move, a tall figure dressed in imperial uniform emerged, carrying a long sword of the officer rank. Huang immediately recognized the officer from his own regiment. Captain Lu was infamous for his brutality towards the common soldier. Lu looked at Shi with menacing eyes, "Monk, your status will not protect you for helping a deserter to escape from the army. The penalty is the same for both of you – death." Lu moved towards Huang, the sword raised above his head. As Huang pressed his body against the rockface of the ledge, Hao suddenly launched a sharp rock towards the Captain, and just as Lu turned to face his young assailant, Shi grabbed Lu's wrist and wrenched the sword from his hand. A furious Lu struck the monk heavily on his head, pushing the old monk towards the edge of the precipice. "Let your precious Buddha save you now, monk!" yelled Lu. But, the Captain was ignorant of Shi's training as a Shaolin monk, and in a moment, Lu was hanging over the ledge. Lu grabbed Shi's long sleeve, but it was too late, his grip loosened and his body slipped over the ledge.

"We must leave now!" Shi quietly exclaimed. Hao peered over the precipice and suddenly turned to his companions. "My uncle's village is beyond the next mountain. We can reach it in two days if we hurry and take a shortcut through the forest path." Shi nodded and motioned his companions to set off along the forest path. By nightfall, they had reached WaiTong Shan and spent a few hours resting before continuing their journey to the top of the mountain. The next morning, the sun rose early, casting a long shadow across the valley below. By late afternoon, just as the sun began to sink over the horizon, they finally reached the top of the mountain. With a gesture of his hand, Hao pointed to a collection of small, ramshackle farmhouses in the distance. "My uncle's village!" said Hao in an excited voice. Shi smiled, "It looks like a place where we might be safe from the war and people like Lu." Huang let out a sigh of relief, "Maybe at last all of us found a home in the Yellow Mountains."

Lost in Huangshan

Chinese International School, Luo, Hoi Yi Rachel – 12

“Mum, I don't want to go! I hate hiking!” Elizabeth whined. “No, you’ve got to go! Doing exercise is good for you! You always stay indoors, going hiking in the Huangshan Mountains will be just what you need,” she said firmly.

An hour later, they were hiking up the mountains. Elizabeth's mother was ahead gazing at all the sights she saw. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was struggling to keep up with her; she looked as if she would collapse any minute. Just as she was about to take a break, a thick mist engulfed them. “Mum! Mum! Where are you?” Elizabeth cried. She expected her mother to jump out and scare her. However, her mother was nowhere to be found.

Elizabeth took a deep breath to stop herself from having a panic attack. *Don't panic*, she thought to herself, *you won't survive a minute on this mountain if you get all panicky*. She slowly retraced her steps and found her way back to the village. When she got there, she tried to ask for assistance, but she didn't speak Chinese so nobody could understand her.

Then, a girl in pigtails about her age went up to Elizabeth and asked, “Are you alright? You look like you're lost.” Elizabeth stared at her in shock “You can speak English?” she asked. The girl smiled and said, “I learned to speak English at school. I'm Lin. How can I help you?” Elizabeth replied sounding embarrassed, “I'm Elizabeth. My mother and I got separated while hiking up the Huangshan Mountains. Can you help me find her?” Upon hearing this, Lin's eyes widened in surprise. “My parents are lost in the Huangshan Mountains too! I tried to find help, but it seems that no one here could help me. Maybe we could go find our parents together!” she exclaimed. “Sure! But we will have to gather supplies and provisions first,” Elizabeth answered. After an hour, they gathered all the supplies they needed, but it was already dark, so they decided to head out on their quest at the brink of dawn.

The next morning they set out on their quest to find their missing parents. Despite being concerned about her mother's wellbeing, Elizabeth couldn't help but notice the grotesque-shaped rocks, granitic boulders and ancient pine trees that surrounded them. Nonetheless, she had no time to stop to admire the magnificent scenery. As they were hiking they encountered a crossroad, and Elizabeth asked, “Which path should we take?” “I'm not sure which path is the correct one,” Lin muttered thinking hard. Suddenly, she cried in shock, “Elizabeth, look! That pine tree just turned its head! I think that it's showing us the direction!” “That's not possible! Trees can't communicate!” Elizabeth exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief. However, her jaw dropped as the pine trees slowly turned their heads towards her as if they had heard everything. “Oh....oh you're right, they're moving!” she stuttered. Lin shot her an I-told-you-so look. “Let's follow the path that they showed us! Come on!” Elizabeth said. While they were hiking up the path, they came to a dead-end, “We can't go this way! I think that we need to climb up the oddly-shaped rock mountain to get to the top,” Elizabeth commented, “Could you give me a head start?” Lin hoisted her up on the rocks, and they started climbing up together. Just as Elizabeth reached for the rock ledge, she heard Lin cry, “Help! I'm about to fall!” Elizabeth turned around, Lin was dangling on the edge of another rock, with hundreds of feet below her. Elizabeth stretched her hand out and Lin immediately grasped onto it like her lifeline. Using all her strength, she tried to pull Lin up. They struggled for a while, but at last, Lin was finally safe. After hours of sweat, they finally made it up to the top of the mountain. For a while they sat there in silence, enjoying the glorious view of the red and orange majestic sunset.

Lin suddenly broke the silence and said, “We should set up camp here. Let's light a fire.” After they had the fire up, they began to warm themselves by it. “Tomorrow we'll continue to search for our parents, but we must be careful not to get lost in the seas of cloud,” said Elizabeth. However, her thoughts buzzed like angry wasps in her head, as she was beginning to have doubts about this mission. *Two 12-year-old girls out in the wild who had no clue where their parents were. What if they couldn't find them? Did they know what they were doing?* Lin saw the worried look on her face and comforted her, “Don't worry, we'll find our parents, I promise.” They smiled at each other simultaneously. Lin passed Elizabeth a white bun. She looked at it confused and asked, “What is this?” Lin laughed and replied, “Your dinner. It's mantou, Chinese steamed bun.” As night fell, the black sky was illuminated with bright shimmering stars. They snuggled in their warm sleeping bags and soon fell sound asleep.

Early next morning, Elizabeth was awoken by the savouring smell of food. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and found out that Lin was grilling something by the fire. She stared at the sausage looking food with a perplexed look. Lin said, "Don't worry, it's just lap cheong, Chinese sausage." They devoured the chewy but delicious breakfast as they watched the golden sun peeking out from the seas of clouds in the horizon. It was a marvellous sight. In fact, this was the first time Elizabeth had ever seen the sunrise. She could have stayed there all day, but they had to get going.

After walking for a while, they realized that they had inevitably gotten swallowed by the seas of clouds. Fortunately, they managed to spot each other's rays of light from their torch. All of a sudden, they heard a gurgling sound. "Elizabeth, what's....what's that noise?" Lin asked, trembling. "I don't know, but I'm sure it's nothing," she stammered. Elizabeth tried to stay calm, but she was quaking in fear. They walked forward hand-in-hand nervously looking out for danger.

"Lin, I..." Elizabeth began, but she stopped mid-sentence. She felt a black shadow looming over them.

Elizabeth slowly turned around thinking that they were in trouble. To her surprise, she saw a small hot spring bubbling. The chain of steam mixed up in the mist made it look as if it was a monstrous creature. "Elizabeth!" "Lin!" voices rang out from the hot spring. They would have known that voice anywhere. It was their parents! Elizabeth rushed into her mother's arms, "Mum! I'm so glad I finally found you!" she said in joyful tears. "Lin helped me find you..." she trailed off.

After they'd all calmed down, Elizabeth's mother began to tell the tale of how she ended up in a hot spring. "Well, I got lost in the mist, and I wandered to this resort. Here I met Mr. and Mrs. Chan, who also encountered the same problem. Since I didn't have a way down, my only choice was to stay here," she concluded.

"But why didn't you come down to the village and look for us?" Lin asked. Her mother sighed heavily, "We're sorry, we wanted to, we really did, but the mist was too thick and the wind was too strong. We were afraid that we would get lost again, so we decided to wait until the mist passed. We didn't realize that it would take such a long time," She said. "Let's go back down to the village tomorrow morning," Mrs. Chan said.

When they arrived the next morning, Mrs. Chan took a deep breath and sighed contentedly, "It's so good to be back home! Even though I've only been away for a few days, it felt like ages," she commented.

The next few days went by in a flash. Lin showed Elizabeth all the parts of her village, took her to try traditional Chinese food, explored the markets, and she even taught Elizabeth how to speak Chinese!

When it was time to leave, Lin gave Elizabeth a friendship bracelet made out of colourful pebbles that she collected from the mountains. She had made one for herself to wear too. "I made these friendship bracelets for us! Wear this and you'll remember our memorable adventure," Lin said.

On the airplane, Elizabeth looked at her bracelet with a wide grin on her face. It was truly an unforgettable experience. She would remember Lin and the magic of Huangshan forever.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Yuan, Zachary – 11

Thunder clouds loomed across the sky, plunging everything into imminent darkness. Lightning speared down from the clouds, crackling and shuddering. A huge shadow loomed over the jagged mountain tops, moving swiftly. The rain poured down, churning the mud. Three children trod along the rain-soaked trail quietly, peering from left to right, as if looking for something. At last, the little girl spoke, “Where are we?”

“I have no idea! Why come to this muddy filthy place?” asked a boy.

The other boy, the oldest of all, walked onwards with a determined look on his face, ignoring the questions behind him. The wind and rain battered them, furiously, to stop them from continuing. But he knew something important was waiting for them.

The storm seemed to get stronger as they climbed higher. At last, they reached a cave.

They clambered into it and peered around. An eerie silence met them and darkness swallowed them. Through the dim light, they saw some straw and a few pebbles.

Suddenly, a rustling noise told them something was wrong. The older boy whispered, “There’s something in this cave.”

A creature let out a loud growl. Before the older boy could move, something barreled into him, knocking his breath out. He lay there, unable to move as he was pinned down by a graceful and sleek clouded leopard, which seemed to be mumbling to him...

Tom woke up with a start. His mother peered at him with a fuming face that looked like a tomato. She cried, “Why did you oversleep again? We are visiting Huangshan today, don’t be late!” Then, she stomped off.

He was in a hotel room in Huangshan City, Anhui, China, with his younger brother John, younger sister Sophia and parents for the summer holiday.

“Hey, Tom! Do you know that Sophia and I had the same dream last night? We were at a mountain and there was a creature,” said John loudly.

Tom jumped, and said cautiously, “I had a similar dream!”

“Wow! This place looks amazing from the bottom!” exclaimed John when they arrived at Huangshan.

People were crowding around a gigantic pine tree. Tom heard a tour guide saying, “This is the Greeting Pine. It is over a thousand years old.”

Tom, John and Sophia followed the path towards the cable car station and hopped into a cabin. The view was breathtaking as they flew towards the lush green mountain peaks.

Half an hour later, they were approaching a small dusty door of an ancient hanging temple, having left the cable car for an old village.

The door creaked open.

They walked forward cautiously and peered around.

A gigantic tripod cauldron was sitting in the middle of the room. A rack of candles glittered faintly in the dark. The red poles reached from the bottom to the top, with golden dragons circling it. Drawings of people in traditional Chinese robes hung around the room. A Buddha sitting in front of them. And...

All of them froze, their faces pale with terror. John shivering, took a step backwards. Sophia clutched Tom's hand tightly, but no one made any sound. Next to the Buddha, lay a clouded leopard, the fur lying smoothly on its pelt, glistening and shining. Its eyes bore into theirs, but it didn't seem threatening, nor astonished at all.

The clouded leopard tossed its head back, lifted its chin, and said quietly, "A new threat arises, the Dragon King wakes, you have to beat him, for everyone's sake. You will meet him at the sea of clouds. If he prevails, the killing starts, and he will haunt everyone to the heart. So do well youngsters and win this fight, with all your wisdom and all your might." With that, it lifted its lean body and padded into the darkness.

Finally, Tom broke the silence, "That was the same clouded leopard in my dream last night. But what does it mean?"

They stepped out of the temple, still shaking and felt the cold breeze brushing past them. Then, they continued walking up the mountain, climbing a path of crumbling stone steps.

Towards the end of the stone steps, there was a huge Black Tiger pine tree. It lay motionless but when they walked closer, the tree suddenly moved and started to talk, "I am wet, yet I am dry. I am feared, yet I am enjoyed. I am scorching, yet I am freezing. What am I?"

Tom replied calmly, "This is an easy riddle. It is sand. Beach sand is wet and enjoyed, while desert sand is dry and feared. Desert sand can be scorching at day while freezing at night."

The tree said, "Smart boy! Here are a bow and two arrows made from my bark. Use them wisely!"

They continued hiking upwards, none of them said much. They started to distance themselves from the human world below. Finally, John broke the silence, "Look at the world beneath us. It is covered by the clouds."

Tom looked at them with wide eyes, "How could we forget? We are supposed to meet the Dragon King at the sea of clouds!" He hauled himself over a rock and found himself standing on a flat piece of ground. Clouds whisked around his feet and under him.

"You are here at last!" said a voice echoing through the mountains, generating a thunderous noise.

A massive shadow loomed over them and an enormous dragon with a necklace on it swept out from the clouds.

"You have got wild imaginations, youngsters," said the dragon, "but death awaits you here," without waiting, it struck with its tail.

John ducked, but his shirt was torn. He sat up and wiped his sweat with his sleeve. The dragon gave no time for hesitation. It tried to attack Sophia, whose instincts guided her to shoot at the dragon with the bow and arrow.

The arrow struck the small box on the dragon's necklace. Three souls fluttered from the broken box and one flew into the bushes. A phoenix appeared and blinded the dragon with its glow. The dragon let out a roar of pain and stumbled around blindly. Then, another soul fluttered towards the stone monkey on the peak. The monkey came to life and bounded off to break the dragon's claws. The dragon, blinded and claws broken, thrashed around wildly. Tom grabbed the bow and the last arrow, aimed, and hit one of the dragon's wings, bringing the dragon down onto the cloud bed and making a thunderous crash, generating lightning and thunder. The last soul sped towards a tree and transformed into the clouded leopard they met before.

"Well done youngsters. You have saved the world," whispered the clouded leopard. It suddenly turned into an old man dressed in yellow. "I am the Huangdi, the oldest ruler of China," he said. "When rulers are alive, they go to Huangshan and drink the elixir of life from a mysterious hot spring. After they die, their soul will return to Huangshan, the gateway to heaven. The elixir will help it stay in the current world as an animal. However, I fear the power of the Dragon King and his ambition to retake the world for himself one day. I feel that we should all leave this world to prevent any fatal accidents from happening again," said Huangdi.

As the three children turned, they saw the monkey turning into a strong man in a dragon robe. Then, the Phoenix turned into a female in a golden robe and replied, "Emperor Wu Zetian from the Tang dynasty agrees with you, Huangdi." She looked at the children and said, "You have stopped the destruction of mankind. Keep your good job and try to make the world a better place."

The person in dragon robe nodded, and said, "I am emperor Kangxi from the Qing dynasty. You have braved all the challenges. We believe in you. Please use your knowledge and skills wisely and you can change this world in a positive way."

All three of them nodded. Finally, the fallen dragon turned into a bold and muscular man. He roared, "You have ruined my plans to conquer the world. But deep down, Emperor Qin Shi Huang admires your courage. I will be watching you, so make wise decisions." He gave Tom, John, and Sophia a hard stare and stepped into one of the clouds, dissolving.

Huangdi said at last, "Great job saving the world and remember our words." He winked, stepped back, and disappeared into the clouds forever.

The three felt clouds covering them, swirling and twirling, and they heard the talking of a few people.

The three of them sat up with a start. They were all sitting in a cable car at Huangshan and a man dressed in uniform was patting them awake. Tom, John, and Sophia stumbled out dreamily and neither spoke until John broke the silence. "You were in my dream," he said to Sophia and Tom.

"Same!" said Tom. "Perhaps it's not my dream, but our dream..."

The Tale of the Faceless Creature

Diocesan Boys' School, Leung, Ching Hang Wesley – 13

There once lived an old and wise hermit. He fed on wild berries and bugs and drank water from creeks and waterfalls. He was also very mysterious, because he had been living in the forest for more than 10 centuries and had seemed to stop aging at the age of 90. He lived in the heart of the Amazon forest. Though there were a lot of local tribes nearby, he never interacted with them. Maybe it was because for every 10 years, a child from each tribe would disappear and yet return 5 weeks later to their homeland as a juvenile. When questioned where they had gone, the juvenile would say that a tall and queer creature with no face had snatched them while they were playing in the heart of the forest. The creature would take them to a pocket dimension and made them live on human remains as he would. However for some strange reasons, the creature would not eat or even touch them. It would just leave everyday and come back with people of different races. To them it had been 15 years, but to the people in the tribes, it was just 5 weeks.

The tribes had started to suspect the hermit for the queer disappearance of the children as he lived in the heart of the forest and had been very aloof with them.

'Bizarre stories!' a famous host of an American show had heard the stories about the unnatural disappearance of children and decided to interview and shoot a documentary about the legend.

Upon arriving at the Amazon forest, the tribe members of respective tribes refused to disclose about the details as they were afraid that the creature with no face would come after them. After failing to get a story about the strange mystery, the host of the show and his crew planned to leave, until they stumbled upon the old hermit. The host asked the hermit if he knew anything about the rumors. The hermit replied 'I know many things, even some that are not supposed to be known by a lowly hermit like me. But yes, I do know the story, I even know about the origin of the faceless creature that has been kidnapping children of local tribes.' Full of joy, the television host begged the old hermit sincerely with the shooting. Seeing how eager the host was the old hermit agreed to tell the story provided that the host had to do him a favour.

'The faceless creature wasn't always faceless, nor was he always a monster. He, like you and I, was once human, with the name John Mills. He had a handsome face and was like any other ordinary man except for the fact that he loved cursed objects, antiques. Yes, he liked things like Annable The Ghost Doll. I as his best friend, thought it was silly. Nonetheless it was a harmless passion of him, until one day... he was cursed himself. I wouldn't forget that night, the night he got cursed.'

'It was a splendid Autumn night, John and I were on a study trip in the Amazon forest with our classmates. One day, we accidentally bumped into a young boy from a local tribe. The boy was friendly and kind. He offered to bring us to his tribe because a powerful storm was coming our way. We kindly declined him and went on our merry way. But we should have followed him because the storm did hit us hard that day. Only John and I in our study group survived. We did not have any food, so we started eating the berries that we could find and drink from the creeks. However, after 5 months, John could not bear not having no meat. Right then at that time a wild boar appeared and John planned to hunt it down. So he took a stone and attempted to kill it, but because it was too dark, we could not see properly. John killed what seemed to be a boar, so we immediately made a fire and tried to roast it. After some time when we gazed upon what we were cooking, I was struck with fear! John had killed a woman from a local tribe! Instead! I of course, refused to eat. John, on the other hand, was so hungry that he devoured the woman as if she was some roasted turkey. Right at that moment, an old man came and saw John eating that woman. He was struck with horror and took some dirt and threw it at us, chanting some weird dialect. We thought it was nothing as the old man hurried off right away after that. Not long after, John told me he felt sick and his facial features started to disappear. His mouth started to grow wider and wider uncontrollably. He also started to grow taller and taller, until he became the creature that he is today— a faceless monster with the endless desire for human flesh. I was not being turned into a beast like him, but gained immortality for some strange and explicable reasons. However I felt very guilty so I decided to seclude myself away from society and avoided any contact with the tribes nearby.'

'Though I don't know why he kidnapped children from the local tribes and set them free 15 years later. Maybe it was because he wanted younger siblings as he had told me he always wanted some. He freed them when they turn into juveniles because they were too old, I guess. So this is the story of John Mills— the story of the faceless creature.'

The old hermit had finished his story and the host of the show was satisfied. The host thanked the old hermit and went on his way for the helicopter. The old hermit smiled a friendly smile as the host and his crew left. However soon his kind smile would turn into a sinister grin as he began to transform. He grew taller and taller and his facial features melted away, until he was the faceless creature.

You see John Mills was never the faceless creature, the old hermit was. John Mills was just one of his many dishes on his dining table. The pilot, the host and his crew who were supposed to fly home became sights unseen and his news unheard since then— as if they just vanished into the unknown.

Stone of Souls

Diocesan Girls' School, Au, Cheuk Yi Cherry – 13

...T'was her, who swept the Mountains. T'was her, who reaped everyone's soul. T'was her, spreading fear across the mountains... Beware... beware...

Mei clutched the snake with a razor-sharp claw, as her prey writhed, trying to escape from the menacing sharpness. She was a fowl, with long, black feathers and a colourful crown. She pressed the prey onto the floor of twigs and leaves.

"You should taste hmm... sweet..."

She closed her eyes, and placed her beak on the snake's small head, as if she was kissing it.

Except she wasn't kissing it.

She was sucking its soul, inhaling the inner powers of the fresh corpse with her hard, crooked beak.

The snake flung itself vigorously, clinging onto its last ties of life, gaping for his last breath... then he stopped moving.

Mei smiled in satisfaction upon her feast. The colours of her crown became more vibrant than ever.

Cackling, she strutted away, and went on to hunt for her next victim...

Trees shivered; winds hissed.

Beware, for Mei is on her next target... beware...

Plop.

ZiShan plucked a plump peach from the lush, viridescent tree as he precariously tip-toed on a dry branch. The young man nimbly jumped off, and slipped the fruit into his sleeve.

This was no ordinary tree, for it was remarkably tall; the fruits were surrounded by a soft aura; its bold trunk, its evergreen leaves and gigantic, fleshy fruit were distinct amidst the Mountains.

Under this tree lived ZiShan and his companion, Zhong, a monkey. He was resting on his master's shoulder, composed.

"Come on, Zhong. We promised my aunt at the Peonium at noon today." ZiShan smiled.

The duo, man and monkey, roamed the Mountains everyday, and paid occasional visits to the Peonium. The Peonium was a pleasant clearing, free from the densely-packed trees and rocks of the Mountains where they lived.

Zhong blinked with his soulful eyes, as they walked into the woods.

It was a place of ancient souls, where the creatures dwell with the sweet sounds of flowing water and birdsong in the pine trees. Rodents and beasts wandered, winds breezed gaily. A new smile paints itself upon the duo's faces, their skin semi-illuminated by the dappled light. The lamb-white clouds wrapped her arms around her enchanted and enigmatic children.

They arrived at a cool, flowing stream by a boulder of rocks, where the waters seemed to shimmer and the current was at a slow pace.

"...Help...me..." a trembling voice whimpered.

ZiShan turned to see a fowl, feathers drenched in blood, lying beside the rocks, unable to move.

"Dear! What happened to you?"

He caressed the vulnerable creature, and moved closer to examine. She had been cut open in the chest, her baby-pink flesh caked with blood. Upon this sight, his eyes clouded with sombre — as if he himself, had been pricked in the heart.

"A... bear and I got into a fight... and he... did this to me..."

"Oh no... maybe I can help. Here. Take this peach."

The young man took out the peach from his sleeve and placed it beside the fowl's crooked beak, as he ripped off a corner of his beige tunic and wrapped it around the wound.

"Rest well, lady fowl. It is unfortunate that we have to leave now, for we have to arrive at the Peonium before midday. Take care."

Then, ZiShan called upon Zhong, and left.

Little did he know, that this fowl was the fowl whose name was feared.
He just helped Mei. *The Mei*, who brought nothing but grief and death to the forest.

Mei pecked the glowing peach and nibbled. She drank the sweet, luscious juice...
And the wound started to heal.

In a few moments, no flesh was seen, the blood on her feathers magically drained away; she felt her powers stir... she felt stronger than ever before.

She twitched her brows in suspicion. This was no ordinary peach.

Then she returned to her usual behaviour, ready to hunt. Not for animals, but the peach.

Trees shivered; winds howled.

Beware... beware...

Zhong frowned in utter disgust when his master helped that fowl. He saw through the wounds and blood; he knew instantly who the fowl was.

That bloody chicken. Shan — STOP. DON'T HELP HER. NO. WHY ARE YOU GIVING HER THE PEACH — WOW. YOU GAVE IT TO HER. THANKS!

The more Zhong thought about it, the more enraged he was; he got so mad that he ran away.

Why didn't I stop ZiShan from helping her? I came here to kill her, now he saved her life.

He sat under a tree, and buried his head in his furry palms.

Think, Zhong. Think.

He recalled what had happened before he came to the Mountains...

The Jade Emperor looked down at the Mountains from his Cloud Palace, and shook his head. Death. Soulless creatures. Fear. All over the once-peaceful region. He saw the creature suck countless animals' souls; he saw her insatiable greed for power.

He called upon General Zhong,

"This fowl is at large. I need you to go down there, and restore peace to the Mountains."

"Zhong shall try my best." He was a bold, strong General of the Cloud Palace of Gods, and he kneeled down with his sinewy limbs.

"Do not disappoint us." The Emperor added.

He transfigured himself into a monkey, and met ZiShan, who eventually became his companion...

... "Zhong! Where are you?"

Before he walked away with ZiShan, he glared at Mei — he wouldn't disappoint anyone.

He knew he wouldn't.

Plop.

Zhong sneaked up the tree near their cottage and plucked a peach.

Sorry. I had to do this.

Zhong scuttled away with the fruit in his arms, still softly-glowing, and disappeared into the depths of the Mountains.

Mei lurked, in hopes of finding the peaches which awakened her power, making her stronger than ever.

It's been days. Still nothing close to that fruit that guy gave me. Where. Is. It.

"MEI, HEARD YOU WANTED THIS PEACH, HM?"

Her eyes sparkled. She turned her head, only to find the familiar pine trees around her.

"You... know where it is?"

"I HAVE IT WITH ME NOW. MEET ME AT THE Peonium."

Mei rushed to the Peonium, expecting to see a bold creature of some sort —

Except it was a monkey. ZiShan's monkey.

"You have the peach?" Mei pressed, glowering.
"Very well. I do." Zhong waved the peach at her.
"Hand it to me. Now."
"No."
"Do it."
"No."

Mei, enraged, pounced at Zhong, who swiftly dodged. He ran, picked up a sharp stone and stabbed it on her wing.

She let out a screech and stumbled backwards for a split-second. Regaining balance, she charged at Zhong, who sprinted across the clearing. She dug her claws into his flesh in a fury. Zhong seized Mei, and bit her in the neck as hard as he could, pushing her a thousand miles away. A sharp pain struck him in the chest; his head was heavy. He felt the world collapse onto him, yet he clinged onto the remaining strength he possessed.

"Don't disappoint us."

He stood, picked up another stone, and sharpened it with another rock quickly. Mei, squawking in agony and frustration, limped towards him, tightening her blood-dipped claws.

"GIVE IT TO ME NOW, YOU SCANDAL!"

Zhong rushed forward and took a sudden leap. He screamed, jumped into the air and sent the stone down the flesh —

'NO—'

ZiShan dashed over from the other side of the Peonium, and vigorously thrashed Mei onto the hard ground. But it was too late.

The stone pierced through ZiShan's chest; the cut clean, the blood fresh.
He just killed his master.

"Everyone... deserves a chance... including her... Promise me... Don't... kill... her..." he breathed.
Zhong's eyes watered, as he caressed his master's cheek — he had been so kind... yet his hands were now red with his master's flowing love... But he couldn't let his emotions override. Not now.
"I promise."

Zhong stood up and transfigured to his General form.
Eyes alight with hatred, wet with tears, fiery with determination, he pointed a finger at the writhing fowl, and shot a cold blast upon her, turning her into stone, sealing her evil deeds from this world once and for all.

The work is finally done.

In great sorrow, Zhong buried ZiShan in the Peonium, and stood a grave with fresh flowers.
He transfigured himself into a monkey again, and rested by his grave.
Dear ZiShan, this is for you.

*Day by day, year by year, he watched over the evil fowl and his kind master. He made sure the Mountains were peaceful: free from blood, free from fear, free from soulless creatures —
Until his blood, his sweat, his tears — all turned into stone.*

Till this very day, the statue of Zhong is still watching over Mei. Their spirits and souls, sealed safe in their statues, still remain, forever, and ever.

Author's note:

The names of the characters and places in this story symbolises something in the Chinese culture:

Young man: ZiShan, 子善 (Son of kindness)

The monkey: Zhong, 忠 (Loyalty)

The fowl: Mei, 美 (Beautiful)

Peonium:

Inspired by the flower "Peony" and the word "Pandemonium"

Peonies, 牡丹, is a popular flower in Chinese culture, and is often associated with beauty, even though it is often interpreted as a gaudy or superficial flower.

- Here, it represents how beautiful Mei is on the outside, yet her heart is evil and greedy, and how it will be a permanent mark/ reminder for the people who go there.*

Pandemonium represents the battle that happened there.

Peach tree:

In Chinese culture, it often represents immortality and is considered the tree of life. It symbolizes Mei's obsession with power and her 'immortal' will to seize the fruit.

Two Lines Away

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsz Kiu Rella – 13

This can't be happening again, I thought as I glanced outside the window. Why does writer's block keep happening to me?

I sighed and tilted my head upwards, staring at the drifting clouds that would pass through my head if I wasn't inside a cable car. The closely-packed mountains came into view, sharp edges protruding on all sides as trees lined up on a perfectly vertical axis. I glanced down; the foot of the mountain was nowhere in sight as thin mist did its purpose like a blusher. Staring at the scenery before me, I felt alarming tranquility for a brief moment; everything was so surreal, so ethereal. My pessimistic self almost seemed despicable compared to the serenity of the surroundings.

My friend told me to take a day off and 'stay away from urban areas at all costs', saying that it would inspire me and help me get unstuck. That was how I ended up alone inside a cable car, travelling up the seemingly endless mountains in the city of Huangshan.

The cable car rose and travelled alongside the clouds. I fished my phone out of my back pocket, about to demand an explanation from my friend for wasting my time when I should be at my desk working on my laptop. When I looked up from my text of complaint, the sky was dark and —

Wait. The sky was dark? It was midday just a minute ago.

Turning on the flashlight on my phone, I realised that I was stranded on the peak of a mountain, all alone save for occasional chirps in the dark. My claustrophobic nature took over and I yanked the door open, scanning the surroundings as much as my eyes would let me. My heart involuntarily beat faster as I recalled news about women walking alone in the streets after midnight and they were never seen or heard from again.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I whirled around, startled, thinking that I really was going to get kidnapped when that person let out a yelp.

"Sir, would you please turn off the light? It's even brighter than the moon,"

Realising that I just shone my 'flashlight' straight into his eyes, I muttered an apology before stuffing it back into my pocket. I still kept a fair distance from him though, but his polite and somehow innocent tone made me lower my guard just a bit.

"Who are you?" I asked, squinting my eyes. He had long hair, and from what I could observe in the pale moonlight, it was silver — almost white.

He puffed his chest out and held his head up high as he answered, "My name's Li Bai, a Chinese poet."

Right. And I am a time traveller coming from the year 3050.

"No really, who are you?" I asked, expecting him to burst out laughing and say that it was all a joke.

He looked at me like I just lost all my brain cells. Maybe I did.

"I just told you," he raised an eyebrow.

Stubborn, I thought, but decided to play along.

"Do you want to stay at my place for now? Dawn won't come for a while,"

As much as I was unwilling to follow a stranger, I had nowhere to go and a shelter was better than nothing. After what seemed like an hour, we arrived at his household and I stumbled in, craving the feeling of sitting. I glanced around while he was busy lighting up the candles: it was a one-room wooden house with a table, a chair, and a bed, but that was it. Rows of sheets lined the walls and I inspected them, eyes travelling from piece to piece until it landed on one on the table.

‘Thoughts In The Silent Night,’ it read.

My eyes widened in realisation and I glanced at the man pacing in front of me, my thoughts all over the place. How could he be alive? I thought he was dead.

“It’s unfinished,” he remarked, looking at his work. “I lost inspiration,”

I chuckled. “Looks like we both are in the same situation then,”

“You write as well?” he asked, his mouth stretching into a grin. “Can you help me with it? I really want to finish it but I have no idea how to continue,”

I pursed my lips, remembering the exact words that followed, but held myself back from spitting them all out. “What was it that made you want to write this poem?” I asked instead.

“Family,” he replied, almost immediately. “And friends. I was exiled back then because I was an advisor for the enemy of the Emperor. I haven’t seen them for so long...” he stared out the window.

Seeing him like this, guilt blossomed in my chest. I recounted the days when I locked myself in my room, cancelling plans I made with my family at the last minute just so I could focus on work. It soon turned into heartache as I remembered how they were always the ones who stuck with me whenever my friends turned out to be not what they seemed.

Sure, no family was perfect. We argued, we fought. We even stopped talking to each other at times, but in the end...family was family, and the love would always be there.

Speechless, I fiddled with the hem of my shirt, a fresh wave of realisation knocking me over.

“That’s why I came here,” he continued, looking at me. “I guess I wanted some peace and quiet. It’s beautiful, don’t you think? And if you look close enough, you can see the stars at night, which just brings out the moon even more. In a way, it’s like a sea — except it’s shiny.” He said, pointing out a window.

A full moon was present that night; a symbol of family reunion in Chinese traditions.

I nodded, shifting my gaze back at the half-written scroll. “You can express your feelings,” I suggested, motioning to his work. “You said you miss your family, right? Write it. Tell them what you think. How you feel.”

He scrunched up his face. “It won’t be popular if it’s the same writing style every time,”

Oh, you’re going to be popular all right. “It’s not about popularity,” I crossed my arms. “Every writer wants to be successful — who doesn’t? But why do we write? Because we love writing. And why do we love writing? Because words express our feelings that we can’t normally express during a normal conversation.”

“But — ”

“Nope. No ‘but’s.” I interjected, dragging him to his chair. “Don’t write for anyone else. Write for yourself and yourself only,” I handed him a brush. “Amaze me.”

He sighed overdramatically, but still took the brush from my hand. I stepped back, not wanting to pressurize him too much. He pondered for a moment, then finally lifted his brush to write.

I glanced at the paper over his shoulder and sure enough, there were the two sentences that I remembered so vividly from the textbook. I smiled, and so did he.

“Well!” I clapped his shoulder. “There you have it, big boy.”

“I guess,” he agreed.

I looked outside the window and my face fell. The moon wasn't the only source of light anymore and I still had no idea how I had gotten here in the first place. As encouraging as it was to be able to help a famous poet on his way to fame, I couldn't help but worry that I would never be able to apologise for my negligence towards my family.

"Listen," I started, my voice low. "This might sound crazy, but I'm not supposed to be here. I don't know if I'm hallucinating or something, but — "

I was about to say 'but you are supposed to be dead', but that would surely dampen his spirits and whirl us into a state of panic and confusion.

So instead I said, " — I have to go."

He nodded, and if he found me suspicious, he didn't say anything. "I will see you again, right?" He asked, standing up and opening the door for me.

A light smile tugged at my lips. "If you're lucky,"

Of course, we never saw each other again. But when I stepped back into the cable car and it started moving downwards until it touched the ground — my world's ground, I thanked every holy thing I could think of that one, I wasn't trapped in whatever that place was above the clouds; two, seeing him finishing his work with such enthusiasm and passion reminded me of why I started my book in the first place; three, he reminded me of what mattered most.

So as I exited the city of Huangshan, I took my phone out and sent a quick text, saying that I would be home for dinner tonight.

No more cancelled plans. No more missed calls.

Legends of Miracles

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Bethany – 13

“Once upon a time there lived an old woman in the mountains of China, near the village of Wang, who no one had seen for the last six hundred years. She had an herb that could cure any illness, from the worst fevers to the most subtle of tremors. Up, up, up on the highest peak, near the clear mountain stream, legend says you’ll see her picking this very herb, which has leaves of shimmering amber and veins of the brightest sapphire.”

The rain fell as she climbed.

Pale hands against slippery gray rock. Hauling herself up, up, up. Grabbing, searching for a handhold, a way to pull herself up to the next ledge— and as she found one her foot slipped again, and she pulled herself up by the root of an old, gnarled tree that spanned the desolate slope, hands slick with sweat and rainwater. Her tiny hummingbird (she named it Yin) hovered beside her, trilling its sweet song into her ear.

All this way for something that might not exist. All this way to chase a faint wisp, a cobweb, a story passed on from mouth to mouth until the details were blurred and embellished, over and over until two things remained: there was an old woman on this mountain (who hadn’t been seen for the last six hundred years and was almost certainly dead); and she had an herb that could cure any illness.

It was only for her brother that she kept on climbing, that she kept chasing that insubstantial wisp of hope, that she still clutched at the thin straw that there *might be a hope for him*. For baby Kang (who used to giggle so when she made him small toys of twigs and branches) that she hauled herself up rocks and roots, leaving bleeding cuts and scratches and blisters and bruises on her hands (once delicate and soft like petals on a flower). For her brother in the makeshift crib in the tiny hut, wheezing and sputtering, choking and coughing up blood as her mother wept beside the crib (rivulets of tears like rainwater down the slope) that she dared climb through the damp mist, up the mountain where the old woman lived.

Up and up she climbed.

Tiny rocks dislodged, sending avalanches of pebbles and gravel down the mountain. Yin squawked (more of a squeak, for a hummingbird). She clambered up boulders and trekked up winding, snake-like paths and mossy steps where she didn’t have to depend on all four limbs (blessing of blessings). Picked berries for food and sipped rainwater from conveniently shaped rocks. Sometimes she’d pass grinning skulls leering at her with their empty eyes and shudder. That could be her if she didn’t succeed.

She’d always wanted to come to the mountains, though. They’d been portrayed by an infinite number of poets through the ages, sketched by ever so many acclaimed artists, stood near her village like mighty giants protecting them from war (though if they did, why had her father have to leave for war, leaving her with mere memories of his voice?) There’d been long, epic tales of people going on quests in the mountains. Some succeeded. Some failed. Some no one knew of but had likely joined one of the skulls on the ground. (No one had succeeded in finding the old woman in six hundred years; of that she was certain.)

She’d never dreamt that her first— and most important— visit of the mountains would be for this. For going on the exact quest so many thought impossible.

As she climbed, Yin sang its song. Chirping and humming, a simple tune, really. Five notes, maybe less. Chirp, chirp. On and on. The one thing that never changed about her journey. Yin was always there. Singing its song. Telling her it would be alright.

Higher and higher. As she climbed, rain blurred her vision. The rain, pelting down on her. Like tears, like sorrow, beating down on her. The sadness from home, weighing her down. Grief.

“The hope that he’ll survive... It’s a very small chance. All we can hope for is a miracle.”

“I’m sorry, but at this rate...”

She blinked the raindrops away. No use feeling hopeless now. Prove them wrong. Stay strong, don’t cry.

Out of nowhere, rocks started falling. Pelting, roaring, crashing. Down, down, down. Knocking her over, sending her tumbling down. Sending her crashing onto rocks. She lifted her head up to continue her climb; a rock crashed down again. Plummeting.

She climbed and fell and climbed and fell and when the rocks seemed to stop falling she couldn’t keep her eyes open and she was about to fall asleep—

In her dreams she fell too, but it was endlessly this time, down a dark, dark pit.

Falling down, falling down. Hopeless. There was no herb, no hope. She couldn’t get back up, could she? Couldn’t stand, couldn’t move; was she even alive? Could she ever climb back up? Did she even want to get up? Could she find the strength to even move an inch anymore?

Somewhere inside her head she heard screaming. A baby, yelling their head off, shrieks punctuated by long retches and chokes. A baby— her brother. Kang. Death’s grim shadow loomed over him, and she knew she had to move. She had to wake up. Wake up. Keep on climbing. Don’t stop. Stay strong.

Suddenly she heard Yin singing its cheery tune above her head, pecking at her hair (“Would you stop that!”) and she decided.

She would climb the rest of the mountain. Even if she had to battle an army of demons and tigers to get there. She would get a cure for her brother. She had to. As a sister— if it wasn’t an obligation, it was something she’d do of her own free will. No one wanted their sibling to die.

When she finally— finally!— got onto that last ledge, got to the top and saw no old woman, no hut, no telltale golden glint of the herb (an herb no one alive had ever seen, probably)— she started feeling actually helpless.

She stood next to the clear, crystalline stream, Yin’s abysmally optimistic tune in her ears. Looked up at the billowing clouds. It looked like success. But there was no old woman, was there? No herb, no miracle cure, no help.

There had been an infinitesimal chance of success anyways. It had always been a cobweb, a wisp, a feather just out of her grasp. A straw she could grab at, a chance that she took that he could live. And there she was, watching the feather float away. Waiting for the miracle. Waiting for the feather, the feather floating away into the gray, solemn sky, to drop into her hands.

She let the tears fall. Let it all out. What good was staying strong, anyways, when there was no hope left? What good was it? What good was bravery, strength, hope if it was all for nothing? Feathers, ha. They were all gone now.

Somewhere Yin let out a chirp, sharper than anything she’d heard from it.

“Shush.”

Yin let out another cry, crystal clear and bright.

“Shush. Don’t you know? None of this was worth it after all.”

Then she saw it.

Sparkling amber, almost gold, with a glossy sheen that seemed almost artificial, with veins of the brightest blue she could imagine. There it was, lying below the undergrowth.

The leaf.

The miracle.

When she grew up, she’d tell her children an old legend, of the leaf of amber and sapphire. Every time she told them the tale of the mountains; details got blurred and embellished.

But it always ended like this.

“The old woman had died, but the leaf sprouted from a seed; a seed planted by the old woman – the guardian of the mountain – six hundred years ago. A seed that would only grow at the tears of someone who came with bravery and strength and hope.

And most of all, love.

Forever

Diocesan Girls' School, Hui, Hiu Yan Sarina – 13

He was an Emperor.

No. He had *invented* Emperors.

A magnificent, almost omniscient, mind, leaps ahead of his time; his glory shone beyond his people and his land. He had no enemies; there were only followers, basking in his protection and prospering under his rule.

Was there anything this godlike Emperor could not solve?

He sat upon his grand throne. His subjects gazed adoringly as ever; yet, they whispered bewilderedly amongst themselves, keeping their voices nearly inaudible so he would not catch their words.

Was this really their Emperor?

His robes were intricate, but the golden fabric failed to conceal the frail, weak frame that jutted painfully through wrinkled, spotted skin. His expression was as regal as ever, but his features were twisted, even distorted, from years and years of wear. His gaze surveyed the grand hall, but it displayed only hollowness.

Time was a savage predator.

He denied the pain; he languished in his lacklustre livelihood that was obvious to himself as well as those around him. He was determined to maintain his divine image for his subjects, if not for himself.

Greatness could not die.

An elixir of eternal life.

The wanderer's words whirled in his head as the Emperor stared in incredulous shock.

'It is a heavenly paradise that lies hidden above a sea of clouds; it possesses an unearthly beauty, a blessing to the eye that is not meant for the mere mortal. It is the very pinnacle of immortality; the birthplace of the one and only elixir that is the becoming of all deities.'

Yishan. 'The Black Mountains'.

His very core seemed to flare with a sudden restoration of youth as he pondered this sudden blossom of Hope's bud. Rationality urged him to brush this shallowness off his thoughts, but his aching bones drove him further.

'Only you, my lord, are deserving of this elixir. Only you of all mortals are qualified for this quest.'

'You will become a god.'

Thunderous cries echoed throughout the kingdom.

It was the day of destiny. The skies paled before the Emperor's eminence as his people screamed out celebratory cheers, for their beloved Emperor would soon wrestle himself from the very hands of Death.

Long live the Emperor.

As he waved goodbye to his loyal people an old woman stumbled onto the ground before his feet, spat out by the unwelcoming horde.

'My lord,' her voice was choked by violent sobs. 'Don't go. Please. It will be the end of you.'

'And why is that?' His smile was that of pity.

*'The law of the gods must not be forsaken,' she pointed at the skies. 'Mortals must not cross the path of immortality. There is a price. There is *always* a price.'*

But the aggrieved crowd had swallowed her once more.

Far, far away, on the concealed peaks of Yishan, the first drop of rain fell.

Are you afraid of the dark?

Fade into nothingness, stark

Naked with none but unknown.

And so you linger. But now

The world will not know of how

You reap the seeds that you've sown.

At long last, his ascent was at an end. He was at the peak of Yishan.

The Black Mountains were more beautiful than anything he had ever set his sight on. Deeply grooved gray peaks jutted from waves and waves of fiery clouds, which flamed with all the colours of newborn dawn. The rocks were barely shadows in the haze of receding mist, half-buried by lush green life. Rolling combers of white swept leisurely over the gorge, dissipating as they lapped gently against rocky slopes. Mild sunbeams threaded through the treacherous boulders, bathing his fatigued body in mellow comfort.

He inhaled the thin, fresh mountain air. The traveller's words had indeed been truthful: Yishan was fit for even the gods.

Within the heart of heaven's crag

Where clouds form sea and boulders jag

Borne from sheer will and craft divine

The power to break Death's design.

Cleanse your mind, lord, and show your worth

Nine years upon the journey's birth;

With greatest joy the gods' call sounds

And you will welcome sweet life's bounds.

With the traveller's parting words echoing in his mind, the Emperor melted into the shadows of rock.

Like a part of the mountainous terrain, he sat at the edge of the plateau. The sea of white disguised the yawning gorge below; it kept rolling, rolling, rolling across the skies, until his mind was dulled, his senses blurred. It was unbearably mundane at first; his sense of time was disorientated, and his days were both horribly dragged-out yet surprisingly fleet.

He tried to 'cleanse his mind': for hours he hung on the brink of consciousness, gazing at the breathtaking scenery and emptying his emotions. But the thirst for immortality burnt unceasingly in his chest, flaming and flickering and all-consuming. He felt no hunger, he needed no sleep; the only hunger was of heart.

Furtively, the summer heat absconded from the Black Mountains; green faded into hay-yellow, dusted by specks of scarlet. In the morning chill, thin sheets of frost slyly crept over the oddly shaped boulders. His movements were sluggish, presumably from the chill; but strangely, he never felt the effect of temperature on his body.

A wavering cry drifted mournfully into his mind.

His eyes were open in a flash and he scrutinized the gorge. Nothing. Just an empty expanse of white, white, white.

A fierce shudder scrambled up his spine as he closed his eyes again.

And yet the cries went on. Hollow, dreadful cries, screaming perpetual misery. Screaming searing, vehement regret. Screaming to be set free.

White thawed into lush green; wisps of blue seeped into heavy gray skies. But spring did not thaw his stone-hard body, nor did it thaw his stone-hard will.

The melting snow revealed the strangely-shaped boulders, gleaming in the light after winter's polish. Occasionally, the helpless cries would be carried to him in the thin mountain air; but he had learned to shut out what he didn't want to hear, learned to shut out the surge of hopelessness that would've consumed him otherwise. Whenever the cries sounded, however, the bizarre rocks would seem oddly...*human*.

Time passed.

Get out. He was going mad, mad, mad. He would tell the voices to *get out, get out he said!* But they never listened; they just kept drilling, mourning, lamenting, begging. *Get out. Get out. Get out.*

He kept raising his arms to cover his ears; but he *couldn't*. He couldn't move his limbs, nor any part of his body. He never questioned it, never tried to struggle against his invisible restraints. The immobility had become natural to him, for he didn't remember the last time he had actually *moved*.

Over the years, unusual things had happened to his vision. He could not see clear outlines, he could not see any form of colour; he saw only the strange boulders that had remained his company for the past nine years. And there were moments when he saw not dead rocks, but *spirits*: translucent *spirits*, in human form, looming behind the rocks, looming above the peaks. Just *staring* at him. *Why were they staring at him?* He felt no surprise at these apparitions; instead, they were as natural as his people had once seemed to him. It was almost as if he was...*part* of them.

Nine years upon the journey's birth;

With greatest joy the gods' call sounds.

The last lament echoed. Echoed.

Echoed.

With an almost audible *slam* the senses flooded back into the great Emperor, washing away the dullness, the mundanity, the indifference that had hypnotized him for too long. Colours washed over his clouded eyes: the sea of clouds, the jutting rocks, the fresh green leaves...

It was *gorgeous*.

He inhaled the thin, fresh mountain air. The traveller's words had indeed been truthful: Yishan was fit for even the gods.

Except...who *were* the gods?

He looked down at his torso. His body was gone.

Instead, there was rock.

Violently he started to twist and turn, arching his back like a windblown weed; but the boulder that had swallowed his body would not budge.

He cried out for help; but all he could see were boulders, boulders, boulders. Exactly like his own.

He struggled harder. *'I mustn't die. I must become immortal...'*

The spirits of the rocks...

It all dawned on him like the harsh winter frost.

Hopelessly he looked down the lethal ravine. Surely he could still struggle forward an inch—but no. He would not let himself forward.

Because greatness could not die...

And you will welcome sweet life's bounds.

He was an Emperor.

His descendants went on to crown him *Huangdi. The Yellow Emperor*. And Yishan was renamed *Huangshan* in his honour, for they knew he had risen to godly immortality at the peaks.

Does it matter if no one notices a solitary rock gazing out into the sea of clouds? Does he know that he lives on in myth?

Long live the Emperor.

Yin and Yang

Diocesan Girls' School, Kwok, Gianna – 13

The winter is a cold one. Li Bai feels it in his bones from the plummeting hail that coats every stretch of soil, from the cold that bites at his heels, the scathing, restricting arms of the North wind only choking him further and further. A thick sheen of fog lingers above the undulating ranges, faint splatters of dim red, yellow and blue tainting the white canvas, barely visible in the blinding sunlight. The flickering shards of iridescent light tattletale on the caves' inhabitants, dancing on the tip of a peeping tiger's muzzle or the dissipating wisps of tobacco smoke at times. But, despite the clamor and cheer that goes on above him, Li Bai's eyes remain stubbornly fixated on the scroll before him, unbudging and glaring.

An intent gaze continues to burn into the shreds of paper. He longs to weave braids into his wife's grayed hairs, longs to come home to two steaming bowls of dumplings, filled to the brim with scalding winter melon soup. But the ever-present cacophony of metal clanging against metal and the thunderous onslaught of galloping hooves, reminds him painfully of why he was forced to leave. He has heard rumors, all carrying the same dismal message, be it a slip of the mouth from a benign villager or the embellished flags streaking across the valley, the tails boasting the vibrant colours of "An Lushan", the metallic tang of spilt blood suffocating at this point. And so, he waits. Waits for this brittle winter to come to its end and for the melee, to abate. He clings onto the inkling of hope that he'll be able to feel the creases of his wife's face under his fingers, a map so intricate yet familiar to him, like the back of his hand.

But these days, it's been harder to wait. Despondent for any source of warmth, he fumbles for the mottled flask tucked neatly between the rags, and takes a bold swig. The tepid liquid trickles easily down his throat, leaving trails of artificial warmth gauged in his stomach. The kick surges within him, the taste long-lasting enough to ward off the tendrils of worry for now. The words unfurl from his mouth with ease, soon black streaks on the white scroll.

To drown the old sorrows,

We drank a hundred jugs of wine,

There in the beautiful night.

The reedy tune of the dizi resonates within the valley, a hollow and rare sound. With supplies so scarce around these parts, the raw bamboo, carved by skillful hands into a slim flute, catches Li Bai's attention. A swift hand skims across the small of his back, laden with gold trinkets, the gesture so light he could have mistaken it for the brush of a dove's wing. He doesn't falter to turn, and greets the newcomer with a mustered smile, his grip on the flask loosening.

"I haven't seen someone greet me so informally in ages."

The melodious tune skids to a halt, a low voice in its place. Li Bai only smiles back weakly in response, eyes unfocused yet wistful.

"Certainly, this is the wine's doing. Or perhaps not. Who's to say? It's not like you meet Han Xiangzi everyday."

"You are an interesting man, Li Bai. I have heard far-fetched tales, saying that you've become a lunatic of sorts, with the growing heaps of wine flasks. But all I see here is a man driven by grief."

Li Bai lifts his head slightly, to look into Xiangzi's glittering eyes. The man's eyes are shadowed, though swaddled in robes spun from pure gold, they are of no help in concealing the wizened, dark truths that lurk beneath.

"Your mentality is imbalanced. Or, as some might say, you have lost the balance of Yin and Yang."

"Perhaps," he cocks his head. "But I have my reasons. I hail from the North, and my wife waits for my arrival with a heavy heart every passing day."

“That is still no excuse for your loss of control,” Xiangzi replies, with his back a tad bit too rigid.

His lip twitches with annoyance, as one hand reaches into his robe pocket.

In Xiangzi’s grip lies a ripened pink fruit, as round as a baby’s bum. An aureate hue emanates from it, buzzing and humming.

“I am sure you realize what this is,” Xiangzi asserts.

A peach of immortality.

Throat suddenly dry, Li Bai only nods. The sheer possibilities that skim through his mind leave him breathless; living long enough to see the war cease, buying enough time to cross the province’s borders, and most importantly, making up for the lost time with his wife.

“Take my place at Her Highness Xiwangmu’s banquet, and you will be able to indulge to your heart’s content.”

He doesn’t even hesitate, gulping as he gropes for the fruit..

“Meet me by the stone steps when the moon is high, I will be here awaiting your return,” Xiangzi says with a smug smirk. And with that, he stares upwards into the seemingly hooded peaks, still and stoic like a statue.

“When will his eyes be opened? Not only to his fortunate surroundings, but also to his wrongdoings?” he mutters under his breath. But the words are not heard by Li Bai, and only hang in the wintry silence.

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Before Li Bai knows it, the soil beneath his bare feet is no longer muddy, engulfing darkness in its place; his thin shawls now replaced by grandiose robes. He feels the dizi digging into his backside, a tell-tale sign of what happened.

“Han Xiangzi, you are rather late.”

A haughty voice cleaves through the deafening silence. Piercing ebony orbs amidst the suffocating darkness meet Li Bai’s, and unspoken schemes graze his ear.

Suppressing a shiver, he shuffles forward unsteadily, eyes downcast, while the figure emerges from the darkness. As he reaches to gather his robes, about to sweep into an apologetic bow, a slender hand grips his chiseled chin.

Xi Wangmu jerks his face upwards roughly and leans close. The honey-sweet aroma of peaches from her hot breath fanning him.

Her stone-cold eyes bore into his, lingering for a mere moment. Though it is fleeting, the familiar flame of mischief flickers behind those long eyelashes.

“You look....different.”

“It is no wonder, after all I haven’t had the chance to taste Her Highness’ fresh peaches in quite a while,” Li Bai shoots back defiantly.

Wangmu’s tight-lipped smirk stretches into a toothy smile, but the saccharine facade crumbles a bit, her glance lanced with daggers.

“Of course, it is my pleasure to serve and have you. Come, accept my offering to you,” she hisses, grip loosening and hands beckoning.

Li Bai hears the cold seething, sees the narrowing of her eyes. But above all that, he tastes the aroma of cloying peaches on the tip of his tongue, and the promises they hold. The sickeningly sweet songs that speak of peace and prosperity, wealth and fortune that are all-encompassing. And so, he stumbles towards her outstretched hand. Stumbles a bit further into the fantasies of perfected possibilities, and into the chasm of greed.

He staggers with an eager desire, but just as he grasps a hold of the sweet fruit, just as his fingers curl around the fresh flesh, it disappears before his sight.

Alike the peach, the gold trinkets too disappear from his knobbly fingers, his robes reduced once again to a barely adequate scarf.

Only the imprint of Wangmu's last words to him, hurriedly snarled in his ear, remain engraved in his mind reverberating back and forth in his eardrums.

"Did you really think I wouldn't notice, puny mortal? Deceit, greed, it doesn't matter. You have fallen for the temptation of ephemeral bliss one too many times, regardless of it being in the form of peaches or wine. You have lost the balance of Yin and Yang— that is the biggest sin of all."

Li Bai's bare feet dig into the cold stretches of land, but his hand is cocooned by a warm grasp.

"See there?"

The very same gold-laden hand points upwards, towards the mountain ranges. Li Bai's eyes follow Han Xiangzi's trail, and they settle upon a dazzling myriad of colors.

Framed against the obsidian-black night sky, a thick layer of white mist unfurls with vibrant hues, a startling range from crimson red, daffodil yellow to azure blue.

"It's been there all along— the Buddha's Light. You didn't notice it earlier, when it was in blinding daylight; yet when placed against the night sky, it shines with clarity and resplendence."

Just like Yin and Yang.

For the first time in many winters, Han Xiangzi's words bring a smile to his face.

For the first time in many years, Li Bai discards his mottled flask of rice wine, his dog-eared scrolls, and inhales the crisp winter air.

For the first time in many decades, Li Bai truly savours the beauty in the balance of Yin and Yang.

"I understand now."

The Heart of the Mystic Mountains

Diocesan Girls' School, Wong, Hingis – 13

My life has always been about travelling, loving the rush of joy I felt at exploring places I have never been before and revisiting old favourites. Having heard a lot of tales about China's magical mountains, about those wispy translucent clouds and those sharp peaks cloaked with mist, I wanted to witness the unearthly mythical sight for myself. And now, I'd finally made it there.

Clouds with a faint spectrum of colours that looked like shimmering wisps of fluffy cotton candy against the night sky floated about as the smell of fresh pine wafted through the air, lilting notes of sweet music filtering through a forest of varying greens. Everything felt so peaceful compared to the confusing mayhem of the world I left behind.

The mountaintop I stood on overlooked the rest, dozens and dozens of others connected by intersecting rope bridges. Creeping tentatively towards the edge, I shuddered as the world seemed to fade out of focus, stumbling back to safety as my vision swam before me.

The whole universe looked as if made up of dots and lines up here, I thought disbelievingly. It was truly a sight I would never forget, dotted with splashes of black and white and all the shades in between and decorated with silvery moonlight.

The myths always said that there would be dragons. Tons of them flying and swooping about, their scales reflecting the silvery moon shining against the inky backdrop of the night. I wonder...

I was still lost in thought whilst looking at the glistening diamonds that glittered brightly in the sky, when the path in front of me that led to the next mountaintop suddenly flared up in a glow of warm orange. Short beige poles I hadn't noticed before now had flames crowning them, the fiery orange-yellow light becoming white hot, licking at the poles as they danced and swayed with the wind.

Desperately wanting to explore the other mountaintops, I forced down the aching pit of worry threatening to overwhelm me that came at being this high up, making my way to the bridge and braved a wavering step to test my weight.

It seemed to hold.

Carefully, slowly, I started making my way across, cautioning not to proceed with haste. Almost halfway across the bridge, a faint breeze embraced me with a gentle hug, bringing with it the comforting scent of fragrant flowers.

It's okay, it seemed to reassure me. You'll be fine.

Despite this, ominous storm clouds were gathering in my mind, veering it off course. *What if something happened to me? What if I fell? What if I never made it to the Heart of the Mystic Mountains?* Shoving these thoughts into a pitch black pit that would never see the light of day, I continued to inch my way forward with painstaking focus. The other side was finally within reach—

CRACK!

“W—what was t—that?” I said shakily, as the bridge began swinging from side to side as the wind picked up its pace. I looked back, catching sight of the wooden boards being ripped from their places as the gale howled relentlessly, the bridge rapidly falling apart right before my eyes.

*I **have** to get out of here—*

The sound of wood connecting with rock echoed in my mind, the “crack” playing over and over again. Abandoning the need to be careful, I ran, fear spiking in my chest as my boots hit the wooden boards. Rain had started to fall down, the gentle droplets of water that felt cool to the touch landing on my face and soaking my clothes becoming freezing cold within seconds of contact. Although fueled with adrenaline, my body still became numb within minutes. Blood pumping furiously in my veins, I could hear my own labored breathing as I fought to escape the raging tempest's attack, my breath coming out in rapid pants and forming clouds of mist in front of me.

The wind was stronger now, more insistent, tugging at my hair, my shoes, my clothes, not seeming to care that I could plummet to my death with one small misstep. A brief flash of lightning struck through the ominous sky with a loud crack, and then everything went dark.

Too dark. I can't see—

And then I was falling through open air, slipping through a gap in the bridge that hissed at contact. The mountain's unforgiving currents swirled around me, whipping about faster and faster, increasing speeds as I gained momentum following my descent. Gravity pulled me down, down and down, until it felt like I could fall no further. And yet, I continued to plunge towards certain death.

But all of a sudden, I wasn't plummeting anymore.

I'd been caught by some sort of moving...creature? I writhed and kicked and clawed helplessly, but it trapped me in its claws tightly, the sharp points digging into my clothing uncomfortably. My eyes tried desperately to focus on my surroundings as we flew through the wind and the rain, but I was unable to see anything through the darkness except...*bits and pieces and slivers of light. Like looking through a piece of fractured glass. The lights had an orange tint to them. That must be the fire from the pole*—Something sharp dug into my arm, something that urged my eyes to close and my body to relax in spite of how *wrong* it felt. “There was a hole,” I giggled, “Fluffy cotton candy...dancing fire crowns...and...a pointy thing that poked at m..e.” I murmured dreamily, before I fell into the haze of sleep.

A prickling light shone into my eyes, causing me to grimace at its intensity. Blearily, I sat up. *Where am I?* Radiant rays of sunshine hovered over the land, dark shadows swooping across the pale aquamarine canvas. *I couldn't place my finger on it, but it all seemed oddly familiar.*

“What am I doing here...”

A voice interrupted me, sounding most impatient. “Long story short, you, a puny little being, managed to make it more than halfway across the bridge—that's where the traps start automatically activating themselves. You made it further than most, so I had to save you from certain death blah blah and all that. Guardian's rules and all that stuff y'know? Now, explain yourself.”

Turning around slowly to prevent the insistent pounding in my head from getting worse, I gaped at the speaker. “You...you're a *dragon*?”

“I'm *aware*. What did you expect?! Just get on with it.” The golden dragon replied, looking pointedly at me and gesturing with a claw airily.

“I just wanted to see the sights for myself since there are so many myths. Please please please let me stay. I'll do *anything*.” I forced out, not stopping to draw a breath.

The dragon sighed as I looked hopefully at him, beseeching him with my eyes. “Fine, I'll take you to the Guardians for their verdict. *It's not like we get many visitors anyway...they all pass away to the Spirit Realm before they even come close to entering...*”

He motioned for me to climb on his back and then we were off, soaring through the clouds that parted seamlessly as we passed. Even the sunshine seemed to bend to his will, glowing brighter and warmer than ever before. The dragon slowed down after passing by thousands of forests, landing at the edge of a jagged cliff. As he saw me looking at a cave tucked away from the steep edge, he sighed resignedly and beckoned me forward. Luminous orbs floated about, and its walls were engraved with writing.

“The Guardians of the Mystic Mountains have sworn to always protect other beings and use their powers for the greater good, never ever revealing the mountains' secrets to the World Below The Clouds for fear they would be destroyed. Those who pass th—”

“Well come on now, we don't have all day, do we?”

The dragon pressed its claw to the wall. It parted with an unwilling groan, revealing luxurious gardens with blooming flowers, plants weaving along the walls of the houses, gushing waterfalls ending in crystal clear ponds. It was all I had ever imagined and more. Looking up, I could see dragons all the hues of the rainbow twirling and gliding, and feeling the tingling feeling of something magical at my fingertips, I knew I had made it. *“The Heart of the Mystic Mountains...” I breathed.*

The Unexpected Elements of the

Discovery Bay International School, Chipner, Laura –14

“Chuna Hua, come on we need to get up before dawn!”

Jin Li exaggerated to Chuna Hua. Jin Li always was putting herself in the leader position of the group, making sure her friends were aware of the current situation.

“ Okay listen. Jin Li. We will get up this mountain, well eventually.”

Chuna Hua exclaimed with a deep sigh.

“What. Do. You. mean? We need to get up this mountain before the strike of dawn!”

Jin Li raised her voice as passionately as she could.

“ The sky right now is as gloomy as you right now. We can't possibly head up!”

“Well just because you insulted me doesn't mean you are right but... I am going no matter what.”

“Please just wait a little longer.. Jin Li please!”

Jin Li walks down the muddy path of the mountain bottom and looks back to Chuna Hua. Her look is of regret and sadness but she knows this is what she must do.

“They don't know this yet but...grandfather, I will make it, even if my friends are left behind. I will get there.”

Jin Li looks down at her locket as a shape tear rolls down her face.

“ Okay... up I go”

Jin Li takes in a deep sigh and disappears into the thickness of the lush mountains.

“ Jin Li!”

Chun Hua calls out in despair.

“Guys we have a problem!”

Chun Hua rushes into the mahjong parlor at the mountain bottom where the boys are.

“ Why, what's wrong?”

Wang Lei, looks up from his intense game. He looks at Yi Bo up and down and gives him the death stare.

“Guys! Please Jin Li just went up into the death defying clouds of the mountain and disappeared, she said she had to go up and wouldn't wait for the clouds to clear!”

“So you are saying you have to go up into the most unpredictable mountains in this country to go look for Jin Li?!”

Yi Bo says with confusion and attitude.

“Yi! What is wrong with you. Our best friend is gone, god knows where and you are asking me if we have to go up! It's a no brainer!”

Setting Yi in his place they look at each other with certainty and rush up the slippery slope of the mountain.

“ It's been only 30 mins and my calves are already hurting!”

Yi Bo says with annoyance.

“ Well suck it up Jin Li is missing and we would do anything for each other, so just shush!”

The clouds, mountains and everything around the group was getting thicker as they headed up the deadly mountain.

The wind howled and flipped around every living thing. The animals crawled back into their holes of hibernation and the grass got crushed and crunched underneath the 6 and only footsteps on the yellow mountains.

“ Jin Li!, Jin Li!!”

“Ugh where could she be”

Chun Hua and Wang Lei scream at the top of their lungs as Yi Bo casually relaxes in the back.

“ What are you doing?”

“Me?”

“Yes you, are you called Yi Bo?”

Wang Lei whispers to Yi.

“Okay, what? I am looking, just in my own space while you two scream and lose your little voices over it!”

“Very funny.”

The first flat of the dry land mountains came. The group looked left and right scrambling to get to the prayer temple for the new year.

“She was right. Even if we don’t get down tonight, we had to go up now we would have never made it. I just wish she told us what was going on.”

As Chun Hua is trying to come up with a reason for Jin Li’s disappearance, the explorer finds a remarkable clue to Jin Li’s location.

“ Uh guys, look!”

Chun and Yi abruptly stop in their tracks.

“ Oh my god! Its Jins necklace..”

A moment of silence crosses over the group of the leaves brush across the mountain top.

“We have to find her”

“She must be at the temple”

“Well we have to get there before dawn”

The group scramble into the night all across every mountain face they can find but no luck. The small figure of Jin could be anywhere engulfed in the tall rocks of the yellow stones.

“The stars alone in parallel to the star of the...”

“I got it”

Wang lei looks at his work of the sky again and looks out to the tyretorous fields among him.

“ I know how to find Jin”

Wang smiles with confidence and walks toward the East.

The three left of the group reach the mysterious new year temple. The gold shinned as the mood hit the plating, the red trimming of the building lit up the eyes of the group. The only thing missing in this beauty was Jin.

“She was here. I know she was, I just wish we knew where she was.”

“Um I think we might find her sooner than you think.”

In the corner of Chun and Wang's eyes a fireball lit up with a dark silhouette inside of it.
“Is that.. Jin?”

The fireball was glowing yellow and targaene orange. The ball got larger and larger, consuming the life-like figure inside.

“We..we have to help him...now!”

Chun desperately pleaded with the boys, to agree with her to help Jin.

“No Chun, we need to let this happen.”

Yi stepped Chun away from the increasingly dangerous flames surrounding most of the temple now. They looked around to see the deep night of dusk dispaing ad dawn emerging. The outlines of the deep yellow stones and the greenery of vines sharing off of them shown in their rear views. The most important thing was Jin.

A larger map surrounded the ball of scorching fire it expanded engulfing the entire mountain and snapped back as quickly as light into the size of an atom. Jin, Chun, Wang and Yi all coupled to the ground with the fire.

The breath of the sun awakened Yi.

“What happened? The last thing I remember was just, this huge scorching fire.”

Yi looked around at his friends who were shackled to the cold hard concrete floor of the temple. He rushed down to each and everyone of them as they took breath after breath in awakening to dawn.

“Yi ar..are you okay?”

Wang looked at his friend in disablfe and worry.

“Im fine, how are the girls”

They slowly looked over in unison. They gasped slowly and tried helping them up.

“Ahh!”

“What happened, my hand was pricked”

Wincing Yi explains what type of thorn pricked him. It was carefully wrapped around Chun, a long dusty green vine was coming out of her hand and wrapping around her trembling and weak body.

“What in the world is this, why is this coming out of her hand.”

It had great thrones of protection and looked as if it was about to strangle her. The boys carefully made a knife out of a shape stone laying next to Chun. The dusty green turned venta black. The roots curled up around Chin and her already pale face turned a dark violet.

The fireball around Jin was gone and she had ash in her already dark hair. The boys looked down and saw her burn marks disappear with a yellow sparkle.

“I don't understand, first the vine and now her burns are disappearing?”

Yi looked around in disablfe.

“I know it's like they got a granted power.”

The silence drew again. The leaves rolling in the air above their heads were heard louder as the group who were meant to pray on new years have turned into the powers of the planet.

“Woah! What did you just do.”

“What do you mean”

“You hand there was a thin milk white cloud just in it.”

Wang and Yi look at each other and temp into the temple as chun wakes up in agony.

“ I have a cloud or air in my hand, she has a vine coming out of her hand and she had a fire ball around her last night.”

“You guys have powers.”

“We are missing one!”

The boys step into the middle of the temple where there is a grand, elegant wishing fountain.

“I think you should give something a try.”

Wang looked at You with hope and slowly walked away to the groggy girls.

Yi looked at his trembling hands and raised them over the water. The water elegantly moved across the below zero air. The paused his hands as the water hardened and turned to stiff ice. He was amazed by what could do.

Jin and Chun stood up and embraced each other in a hug.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes I am, are you, fire fairy?”

“Hahaha you saw huh?”

“Yes we did but we didn’t know what to do.”

“You did fine.”

“Do the boys know?”

“I think so..”

“It was my grandfather I had to come and pay my respects to his ashes.”

“I get it.”

“When I got up here I saw four people with earth powers and I said that's us. I guess the mountains heard me.”

Jin and Chun walked to the yellow mountain edge looking down on the tiny villages below that looked like ants. They knew this is where they belonged.

The four all entered the temple together and stood around the statue of the yellow mountain. They realised it was their time to embrace this mystical place and now they were a part of the mountain family.

“Common guys lets show these mountains what we got on them”

The Light from Grandma

Discovery Bay International School, De Sampaio, Manoela – 13

I was alone, in this world of fear of what would happen in the next chapter of my life. Fearing and seeking a 'why' of my being, 'why' was I there? As I walked home my feet dragged with each step. I entered my house, as soon as I went in I saw my two sisters joyfully playing with their dolls. I asked if they had checked on grandma and gave her daily dose of medicines, oh which their surprised faces said: "oh sorry Jay we forgot". I didn't think twice, I rushed to her room with my heart skipping a beat every second, I could just imagine that if she got even worse then she was now because of me I would never forgive myself never. I intrusively opened the door to end up seeing something that my eyes just couldn't catch on. Something I wasn't prepared myself to see. She was there. But not there. She was laying on the ground with an exhausted face praying for help.

A week had finally passed around after grandma's incident, I just thanked God that nothing happened to her. I worry about her too much, I don't know what I would do without her here. Watching her face turn paler and paler everyday, watching the enchanted look in her face fade away I knew I should prepare myself for what was coming, but in the very deep inside of me it was too tough, it was too much suffering. To clear my head up a bit I decided to go for a walk, as I reached the pathway that brought me the most joyful feeling I looked around and I saw the view. That splendid view that caught me speechless. It always reminded me of mum and dad, they died when I was young and told grandma to raise me and my sisters in this so beloved place. A light breath of wind tickled my face, a small gasp came out of my mouth that got me distracted from my thoughts just to look back and encounter the blue horizon lines from that hazy day. The sun finally started to settle it seemed to be basking in its own rays. It hovered over the horizon, and bright fuchsia and apricot collided with the deep blue sky. After a few minutes there or so I walk home, finally with feeling more calm from looking at that special view.

Days came and went quickly, watching grandma get sicker and sicker everyday. It was tough but I never left her side. Grandma didn't talk much she used to, but not anymore. Which came to me as a surprise when I was in the kitchen preparing dinner for my sisters and I that Lily came running into the room saying grandma wanted to have a chat with me. Excitedly but worried at the same time I went to her room and sat down in the chair next to her. As a few seconds ticked by with none of us saying anything I finally made up courage to say:

"did you need to talk to me grandma?"

"uh yes my dear yes" she said

"So is everything alright are you feeling anything different?" my hands trembled as I spoke trying to hide myself from the truth.

"You know Jay you have always been my favourite grandchild"

"Oh hum thanks grandma but what about Lily and Bella?"

"They will always have a space in my heart, but you Jay, you are special. You are the one who holds this family up together, and as you may seem to notice I'm going very soon Jay, and when I go I need you to be strong and keep taking care of the girls for me will you?"

"Grandma don't say that" I cried

"Jay darling don't hide yourself from the truth" she said slowly

"I promise I'll take care of them."

"You know why your parents wanted you to live in these mountains so much?"

"Why?" I curiously asked her

"Because that's where they grew up, and they wanted you Lily and Bella to have the same experiences that they did when they were young."

I dragged the chair closer to her bed where she was peacefully lying down.

"Jay darling that monumental and incredible view of the slim rocky mountains will always be there for you to see, everytime you miss me you look up to the sky and think of this me knowing I'll be safe in God's arms always looking down and protecting you three."

"I'll miss you grandma" I cried

"I'll miss you more than you can imagine, but I'll always be here" as saying that she pointed to my heart. At last we gave each other a long hug that seemed to last forever.

She was gone. I would never see her again. Her body was laying in the bed, the warmth of life stolen away by death's cold embrace. Bella promptly sprinted to her body, Bella was desperate to find any flickers of life or hope left for her dear grandma, but was met with cold silence broken only by the breeze gently blowing from the window that upheld her. Grandma was gone, stolen from all of us. I just stood there watching Bella cry over her body in disbelief. I said I was prepared to face it, I was certain I was prepared to face one of my biggest fears but I wasn't. At that moment I couldn't do nothing but stand there in disbelief. 'Was it my fault?' 'Did I get the medicines wrong?' A split cold second until Lily came in the room and shocked herself to what her eyes were met with. I hugged both of my sisters as if it was the last time I would ever be able to do so.

A month later had passed and it still felt like it was yesterday. I kept my promise to grandma up going. Taking care of Lily and Bella because they simply just meant the world to me. But there was this one thing inside me that was being bothered by my own thoughts. I still hadn't gone to the view of the mountains where grandma told me to go whenever I missed her. I think I was ready to go. I told Lily and Bella to come with me, and so they did. We walked in silence still heartbroken thinking of everything that had happened to us. When we finally got there I told them to sit down in the grass with me. They looked over and said to me:

"It's beautiful"

"The trees hanging off the edgy cliffs"

"Everything about this place makes me feel good"

I finally had built up courage to say:

"Girls I didn't bring you here over nothing, grandma once told me that everytime we were falling down we could come to this very place to feel her presence among us"

With that being said me and my three sisters stood there, feeling the slight breath of the wind hit us feeling like grandma was just there with us, like she forever will.

A Climb

Discovery Bay International School, Ngok, Chung Ching – 14

There it was.

My goal.

My escape.

My freedom.

It was the only place I could go.

The crest of the mountain sat ominously as I gazed at it from the bottomless valley.

I marveled at the mountain for a moment before returning to the task at hand, I sat under a rock shivering as I braced for the avalanche.

As the snow flooded the verdant landscape, I began to trudge through the snow, I looked back for the last time on the life I once had. If I had regrets it was too late, I had to look to new horizons to escape the boredom and mundane routine of life.

Reaching the peak of the mountain range would solve everything. Right?

I continued my journey to the peak of the mountain along a narrow path that spiralled around the entirety of the mountain, and the difference in terrain as I progressed through the path was enchanting.

As I ascended, more and more mist obscured the rugged base of the mountain.

The sun slowly peered through the thin leaves of the canopy as it slowly descended into the West.

I wish I had the time to fully appreciate the setting as I went from one majestic view to another, but it would all be made up at the end, the peak was the only thing that mattered, the lush bushes were only a nuisance that slowed me from reaching the peak.

Over time, the path gradually became narrower, and eventually was obfuscated by the snow of the snow-capped mountain.

As I neared the peak of the endless mountain, my body felt as if it could melt into the snow below, as the altitude increased, it felt like I had just run a marathon despite only having plod a few meters in the snow, but the thought that I could finally have everything I needed nudged me forward.

After what felt like a century, I could see it.

I was done.

I had floated away from everything, I had reached the top.

I had spent so long trying and was finally finished.

But all that was there was a thin vapid patch of grass that could only fit a picnic.

I flew to the sky but my bubble had burst.

What now?

The Journey to my Happiness

Discovery Bay International School, Nilsson, Naiya – 13

It had been nearly a year since mother died, I hadn't been out of the house since the day of the funeral. I had no one except for my aunt, and after a while she had finally gotten so fed up with me that she kicked me out. That brings me to today, a 14 year old girl being forced to go and live with her estranged grandfather in some strange faraway place. Here I am, driving to where I'm supposed to meet him, leaving everything I've ever known behind; maybe it could be my new start!

After what felt like days in a cramped car, I reached the meeting place. As I stepped out of the car, I was taken aback, the place we had arrived at seemed like a fairytale; exotic birds singing their songs, ancient looking trees blocking out the sunlight, leaving me in what felt like a piece of paradise. Who knows how long I was standing there, but the next thing I noticed after my stint of daydreaming were four horses standing in front of me, one with a young weathered man sitting on him. The man got off his horse and started talking to me, not that I was listening, I was too busy petting all of the horses. "Um hello, excuse me, are you Zhang Wai's granddaughter?" The man asked me. The word "granddaughter" caught my attention, who was this strange man?

"Your grandfather sent me to pick you up, so grab your bags and mount the horse." This man kept telling me to do stuff, who was he? Eventually, I got around to asking him "who are you and how do you know my grandfather?" He replied "oh right, sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Li Wei, I work and live with your grandfather in the Yellow Mountains." Well that made things a bit clearer for me and while he was loading all my belongings on two of the horses he was describing what sounded like a magical place. Finally we were ready to start the long journey back to my grandfather's house. After he was done he asked if I needed a leg up, I then replied with "whats a leg up?", he then burst out laughing, he asked "do you not know how to ride?" I shook my head and he looked extremely shocked. After a minute he said "ok well come here, I will help you up, all you need to do is sit in the saddle and hold onto the leather straps, the horse will follow me so you won't have to do anything." "Okay, got it" I replied. Li helped me up on to the most gorgeous horse that I had ever seen, he was huge and well built with the smoothest, glossy black coat. This was going to be amazing.

Everything was ready and this time there really was no turning back, I was on a horse with a man I just met, claiming to take me on an extremely long journey to my grandfather's house, where I was supposed to live with a person that I had never met before. I guess this would be my life now, and before I even had time to finish processing everything, we were off.

It was nearly night now and the sky was a stunning array of reds, oranges, yellows, pinks, purples and more. I am certain that this was the most breathtaking sunset that I have ever seen, unfortunately I was interrupted by the sound of Li Wei calling my name. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, he told me that we had to sleep out here tonight and that it would take us around four days to get to my grandfather's. Yes, I said that correctly, FOUR MORE DAYS of traveling! The night was starting to fall, we had to work quickly to build a fire and set up camp. I did try to help, but it did not amount to much as I had never been camping before, slept outside or for that matter acquired any survival skills. So after some attempts, Li finally told me to just sit aside and wait till he was finished.

Around an hour later our camp looked habitable, now it was time to cook ourselves dinner which consisted of a cup of instant noodles and green tea. It wasn't much but at least it filled the hole in my stomach. I had no idea what time it was after we finished eating, but the sky was a pitch black charcoal shade and I couldn't see anything beyond the fire. I was very tired and sore in every muscle from our long day of traveling so I headed off to bed not knowing how I was going to sleep my first night out in the untamed yellow mountain ranges. As soon as my head hit the ground I could feel my eyelids start to close and just before I fell asleep I said a quiet goodnight to Li, but before he could even reply, I was fast asleep.

After a surprisingly sound sleep, I was awoken by the sound of rustling outside of my tent. I pulled myself up to go find out where the sound was coming from. When I opened the tent I was surprised to see Li by the fire cooking some fish and rice, breakfast definitely sounded good right now but still what was that noise? I turned around and saw the four horses; it must have been them. After a quick and hearty breakfast and when everything was packed up, Li and I started the next leg of our journey. We were peacefully riding along a pleasant trail when out of nowhere we heard gunshots which changed our serene paradise into a full blown tornado. Birds were flying everywhere, monkeys were tumbling through the trees trying to escape and every other animal was panic stricken. It wasn't just the animals that were alarmed, I was terrified. Why did someone have a gun out here? What were they shooting at? Why were they shooting? Who was this person? I had a million more questions running through my head but I was jolted back to reality by the sudden movement of my horse and before I knew it I was clenching on the reins so tight as I galloped deeper into the mysterious yellow mountains.

After what seemed like an eternity, both horses and I caught our breath and found some calmness. It was only then that I remembered that Li Wei was also with me. When I looked over at him, his face was a bright fiery red and looked as if he was about to erupt. He quickly shouted "come on, we have to keep moving, it is not safe for us to be here". His response shocked me, I had no time to think or respond, just trust that Li Wei and the horses would lead me out of danger and back into the peaceful, picturesque world of the Yellow Mountains.

The following two days were magical and as we travelled deeper and deeper into the yellow mountains, it almost felt as if no one had ever travelled here before. I saw new flora and fauna that seemed to be of unknown species. With every new step, we were getting closer and closer to my new home. My Home, in the mysterious Yellow Mountains, I really liked the sound of that. Maybe this was going to turn out alright. I was looking forward to meeting my grandfather and living in a place where I might finally feel like I belonged!

It was the final day of our journey, excitement was bubbling inside of me and I couldn't wait to discover what lay ahead. Nothing could stop me now, even when Li told me we were about to embark on the hardest part I didn't hesitate or worry. We had to climb the steep, rocky edge to the peak of the mountain so we could reach the other side. I was ready for it, I couldn't wait.

After a few treacherous hours, we were nearly there. I urged my horse forward and we raced ahead. What was at the top of the yellow mountain on the otherside caught me by surprise, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. Standing there was a man that had to be my grandfather, he was looking out into the most beautiful view of all times, it was pure heaven. I ran up to him and without hesitation, I gave him the biggest hug of my life. I definitely caught him by surprise but he just hugged me back and we stood there in the sunset looking out over my new home with someone I already loved.

My Great Escape

Discovery Bay International School, Thmopson, Sophie – 13

I start walking home, knowing I'm only arriving to a scolding. My feet drag with every step. I turn the corner onto what should be called 'Trash Can Road'. I gag and hold my nose. Broken bottles of beer roll onto the road, with rodents crawling around them, ready to feast. When I enter my home, I see my younger sisters on the couch. They're giggling and playing with their dolls. But no matter how many neon colors stand in front of me, there's nothing bolder in the room than my father's face. His death stare still gives me shivers down my spine. He's still running his fingers over the same photo of my mother as he does every day. She's wearing a lace white wedding dress and is grinning wildly. He always said me and her had the same eyes. His face is pale and his eyes are red. He stands up slowly and offers to take my check. I try my best to smile at him, but it's more like I'm presenting to him my teeth before pulling out my check. He scans the check and dismisses me.

My father was always strong-willed and independent, but this only made him worse. He's the reason I used to cry myself to sleep every night until the 4th grade. He constantly reminds me of how much easier it would be if he had no children, how he can only fake a smile for 3 people, and how he could only see a future for my sisters. He called me the runt of the family and blamed me for his problems. That's when something came over me, like all of a sudden I couldn't control my body. At the door, I give myself one last glance at the mirror. My tangled hair, my tear-stained eyes, the bags under my eyes. I open the door and start running.

I look back and I see how caged I was. How caught up I was on his words, how he made me feel worthless... I start to run faster. I remember how after a long, traumatic day of work, he would be there, a look of disgust on his face. My calves are burning now. I run faster... I remember how he would tutor me, or how he would teach me new things, but no matter how many papers, how many meals I made, it wasn't enough to please him. I feel my whole body trembling at the thought of him. I try to forget. Forget the feeling of being at my father's house, being home, but everything reminds me of him. I had been stretched so far, I had to learn everything, do everything, and it had to be perfect. I had finally torn... I halt abruptly to take in the view. I knew where I was, but I felt transported, free. I looked forward to seeing an unimaginable view before me. How could such a beautiful place like this go unrecognized? It was magical, as if gravity didn't exist, as if the laws of physics had suddenly disappeared. Nothing made sense, nevertheless, it was beautiful. It's foggy, mysterious horizon tempted me to explore onwards, but my legs could hold me and I dropped to my knees.

Its mountains were randomly perfect, towering over everything below. Slim, yet muscular, muscular, yet peaceful. It was the whole package. It was monumental and incredible. I rose to my feet, still not stable, and placed one foot in front of the other. The trees, creeping over the edge of the skyscraper, as the ground seemed to stretch further, and further away. At this point, it looked bottomless, and I took into the light that one misstep could lead to a large series of unfortunate events. I slowly came back into consciousness to realize my heart was beating a thousand beats a minute. A gust of wind tickled my skin as I let my expectations go and sunk into myself. I felt... like my own person, free. Free to make mistakes, free to have my voice, free to be myself. I felt a grin creep onto my face, followed by a giggle. And that giggle, it evolved into a laugh, and that laugh evolved into a full of laughing breakdown. I was no longer my family's caretaker, I was no longer my family's backbone. I was no longer part of a family. What 3 sisters? What father? Dead mother? What a poor girl. Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump...

Thump-thump. My heart skipped a beat. He's not always like that, every once in a while, the storms clear out and the turbulent sea calms. And in the brief tranquility, I allow myself to hope. My family. I took out my broken watch and sighed. My family didn't know where I was, or what I was doing. I think to myself about the good times. The last Christmas we had with mother, with father putting me on his big shoulders and me fumbling with the star. We all laughed as one big family, and no matter how much I hated them, they were my family. It was then reality dawned on me as if the mountain gods had spoken to me. You're stuck with your family, and mine loved me, no matter how many fights or arguments we had.

The Journey Up

Discovery Bay International School, Whittle, Chloe – 13

Story...

That's it. I was lost. I was in the woods and lost. I peered down at my dog, fufu. Thinking he would know the way. His eye peered up at me as if I was crazy. I sat next to him, wondering if we would ever find the mountains. A gush of wind suddenly came out of now where. I don't know where it was coming from. Part of me thought it was trying to tell me something. As if it was pointing me in a direction. I stood up and if followed the wind. Before I knew it, I was out of the forest. I look up to be amazed by the mountains that were right in front of me. The evergreen mountains were so lush and picturesque, I had to blink twice to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I glanced at fun with the biggest smile, we were smiling back at me. I looked up at the dove-white, hilly mountain that soared up into the sky. The tip of the mountains was covered by the foggy clouds until it became a blur. I fantasied about what would be up there. Was I ready to climb this mountain? I was about to find out. My long-awaited journey started here. It was time to start the journey. This is my journey up.

As I started to climb up the huge hill, my thoughts started to spill into my head. The grass was a vibrant green. It swayed back in forth in the wind as if it was dancing. The weather was nice. The clouds filled the soft blue sky and the sunlight beamed down onto my head, making it hot. At some moment there would be a gush of wind coming out of nowhere. I was in an amazing mood. Everything around the world seemed perfect. I kept walking up. I then decided to take a break and eat some of the food I had decided to bring. I took out my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and took a bite of it. I gave fufu a bit of some leftover bread as she munched on it next to me. I sat on a tall rock as I ate my food, the view I had was amazing. I took a deep breath in and somehow the air smelt fresher. I didn't want to take too long since I still had a long way, so I grabbed all my things and continued on. From a distance, I could see colorful flowers pouncing out of the ground. I ran over and dropped my basket. I layed down in flowers and looked up at the sky. I looked over to see fufu rolling in the flower meadow. I picked some flowers to bring home for my grandma later and continued on.

Moments later a huge gush of wind came, almost sweeping me off my feet. I was able to catch my balance. The sky had gone from a baby blue to a dark blue. The white fluffy cloudy turned grey and the sun had vanished. Fufu had this look of distress on her face and just then I knew what was about to happen. Rain. I picked up fufu and started running in the hope to find some sort of shelter to keep me from getting drenched. Finally, I had found a gave just big enough to shelter me from the pouring rain. I reached into my soaking wet basket and pulled out a blanket that my grandma had knitted for me. Fufu and I curled up in the blanket and watched the rain as it poured down. We counted the thunder and watched the lighting as it lights up the sky. After a while, the thunderstorm had calmed down a bit but it was already dark, so I decided to call it a night and get some sleep.

I woke up to the bright blue sky back again and a rainbow. It was going to be a good day. I packed up my things and I was off again. I was already halfway along the mountain so I knew I was hopefully able to make it to the top before dawn. I came across a small river. I decided to jump and wash. I heard my stomach rumble in desperate need of food. I found some fish in the river so I tried to catch them. Fufu was able to catch one and we feasted on it. I dried off and went on.

Ten? Fifteen? I didn't know anymore, I had lost count. I can't recall where I turned a wrong turn and I have lost count of the day. I was tired, the bags under my eyes were big and dark. I could no longer feel my legs anymore. They either felt like jelly on some times or hard rock on others. My hair had become dry and stiff and I lost my sense of taste. My back ached with each step I took. I look down at fufu who look just as bad as me. I could barely keep my eyes open. "Keep your eyes open....keep your eyes open..." I told myself. Suddenly everything became pit black and I felt my head hit a rock. I was out like a light.

I awoke to the breeze of air hitting my face. I..I..wasn't on the ground. I was on a dragon. I big red flames dragon, we were soaring through the air as all my worries have vanished. Fufu has her tongue sticking out. It really was a magical mountain. We rode off into the sunset and lived once again.

The Ghost of the Yellow Mountain

Discovery College, Kim, Jungwoo – 12

“Looking for me?” a voice echoed behind the trees.

“Max?” I jerk my head to the direction of the voice.

Squinting between the disappearing mist, I spotted him leaning against a tree grinning from ear to ear. “That's not funny,” I yelled, “I was lost!” I faced the ground half embarrassed and half angry.

“You looked so scared.” Max added. He was trying so hard not to burst out laughing that he looked like he was suffocating.

“What took you so long anyways?” I said, trying to steer the conversation away.

Max didn't answer. Instead he reached out his hand and said, “it's getting late. We should head back.” I looked up at his warm friendly smile and without hesitation I grab his welcoming hand. As he pulls me up, I can't help but notice how cold his hand felt, it's unusual for someone to be that cold on a hot summer night.

Max saw the puzzled expression I had on my face and chuckled, “Come on. I'm not a monster or anything, I don't bite.” I stared at him sternly, *Why is he acting so strange?* I thought to myself. Whatever it was I decided to play along, I'm not in the mood for fighting.

“Yeah never mind, I, uh... was wondering, where are the others?” It's a stupid lie but it's all I could think of right now, to be honest I couldn't care any less about them. The group that we came with were all distant friends and cousins of Max. I'm pretty sure they didn't even remember my name.

Max looked at me and grinned, “Don't worry about them, they're all waiting for you below.”

“Yeah right,” I mumbled. Soon I found myself on my feet following Max through the dark mountain. He seemed to know his way and was walking with speed. I was surprised at how fast Max moved, it's a struggle to even keep him in my view at this point. Unexpectedly, Max suddenly stopped, I stumbled and fell to a halt.

“Why'd you stop?” I ask as I picked myself up.

Max looked at me seriously, “hey, this might sound weird but I have a question for you.”

I looked at him oddly, “uh, sure.”

He put his head to my ear and lowered his voice, “are you ok with me asking? Because it might sound really awkward.”

I shot him a concerned look. “You can tell me, what is it?”

Max stared at me dead in the eye, “do you believe in ghosts?”

I smirked but then I saw the seriousness in Max's face. “Uh... no,” I respond quietly.

It got silent for a second, and then Max burst out laughing. “Haha, you should've seen the look on your face. It was hilarious.”

Trying my best not to punch him, I managed to walk past. Behind me, I could hear Max shouting, "You go first. I just remember I forgot my bag where we left."

I turned around and looked at Max, "but I don't know the way."

"Don't worry, just go straight down and soon you'll be back at the beginning of the trail." Max waved at me and quickly ran back up, soon disappeared from my sight.

I turned around and did as he said. After a few minutes I arrived at the beginning of the trail. Everyone was huddled together waiting below, I scanned the group and found Max, I was surprised to see he's already here. "Max!" I shouted, "you're already here? Wow, that was fast."

Max gave me a puzzled look, "what do you mean? I've been here all along, where were you?"

I looked at him and laughed, "your tricks are getting old, haven't you picked on me enough today?"

Everyone including Max was staring at me oddly, I started to feel uncomfortable. "Uh... guys come on, are you all a part of this prank too?" I heard murmuring between the crowds and a few people shaking their heads.

After a few seconds, Max spoke up, "we don't know what you're talking about, we all met here a few hours ago."

I looked at him angrily, "then why were you up there in the mountain with me a few minutes ago?" I protested.

Max paused for a second and replied, "I wasn't with you, like I said earlier I arrived here a few hours ago with the others, we were worried about you when you didn't show up."

"If that's the case, who was I talking to up in the mountain?" I asked, starting to tremble.

"I... I don't know," Max replied looking at me like I was crazy. "Are you ok?"

I ignored him. My body was starting to feel numb.

Max was looking at me rather curiously, "are you ok?" he asked. He put his hand to my forehead, with a shriek he quickly jerked it away, "you're cold."

I don't have the strength to speak. My eyes closed and I dropped to the ground. A huge crowd gathered around me, some of them were furiously calling the hospital while others were screaming and yelling for help.

Later that day, I exited the Yellow Mountain of Huangshan in an ambulance.

Life is a Mystery

Discovery College, Ng, Tiffany – 12

A long time ago in the mysterious mountains of China, Huangshan, there lived a little girl called Tsing, she lived in a village with a group of people, happy people, they have always lived a comfortable and easy life. There Tsing met her best friend May, they have spent most of their lives together, when they were together they were the happiest girls in the village, even though they fight sometimes, they get over it after a small amount of time. But one day something unfortunate happened, a huge earthquake struck and destroyed the whole village. Tsing lost her whole family, the only person left was May, they decided to take a journey to the unknown land below them, they have never been anywhere down on the land we live on today. So they packed their bags and started walking, they walked for 2 days 2 nights they drank up all their water, May was starting to get very weak so Tsing tried to take care of her even though she was also very tired but she kept on going.

One week later, Tsing and May were still walking. They walked over mountains, rivers, oceans and forests but they haven't reached a single big city or village, all the places they went to were either deserted or very dangerous. By now they have already ran out of both food and water, they were drinking from water wells as small as a plastic cups, May was getting very weak by now sometimes she can't even move her fingers, she is very weak just like a new-born dolphin needing its mom to bring her to the surface of the water to breath, skinny as a stick, Tsing knew that she needed to help her friend.

As they continued walking, May suddenly collapsed on to the ground, Tsing was sweating, panting and crying, Tsing fell to the grounds on her knees, fanning her, giving her air and poured water on her, but nothing worked, Tsing had lost all hope, she had small soft water droplets running down her eyes, her brown and ruff knees were on the soft sandy grounds, her whole body was shivering from the cold strong winds, she thought: " my life was as bright as a sunshine, lovely as beautiful spring flowers blooming day by day, but now my life is the strongest thunder storm, as dark as the night sky, will my life ever be the same as before again?" Tsing knew she had to keep going to a safe place so she continued to walk.

The next day, Tsing woke up on the floor, she looked around and saw a snake as long as school stairs, its teeth was as sharp as a knife, the snake looked like it was going to bite her any second. Suddenly, an arm quickly appeared in front of her face and strangled the snake's head, Tsing looked up and saw a tall old man, he was wearing a farmer hat and looked like he hadn't showered in days. Tsing quickly said, "Thank you for saving me just now, My name is Tsing I come from the Huangshan mountains."

The old man replied, "No need to thank me, you said you came from Huangshan" The old man sighed and said, "Those beautiful mysterious mountains, those mountains are like our lives, sometimes live will go up and down again, life is mysterious just like those beautiful mountains, no matter how you are feeling right now always look on the bright side you can always overcome any problems." The old man looked at Tsing.

Tsing said through tears, "Thank you, Thank you, you didn't only save me, but gave me inspiration to keep on going, thank you, thank you so much!"

The old man took her back to his house and gave her some food and water, Tsing thanked him and continued going to a faraway city, as you might have guessed, Hong Kong.

Tsing continued to walk to the far away city, yes, she was alone but she believed that the spirits of her family and best friend May will always be there, the old man there gave her lots of positive energy, she walked over sea, mountains, scary forests and more but she never gave up, she walked, she ran, she swam and finally she has arrived to the new city or to be exact our home Hong Kong.

After all those weeks and months, Tsing finally arrived to the big city she wanted to come to, she didn't know the language there, she didn't know what places there were, she walked to a small hut on the bottom of the mountain, there she saw a woman, about 40 years old.

She went in and said, “Um, Excuse me?” She stopped to take a breath, “Do you know where I can find a home to live in?”

The 40 year old woman stopped knitting and said politely, “May I ask who you are?”

Tsing was surprised as that woman spoke the same language as her. “My name is Tsing, I come from the far away mountains of Huangshan, I don’t have a home. May I ask where I can find a house to live in?”

The Women answered, “ Oh, you came from the same place I come, I used to live in Huangshan, but I wanted to go somewhere else so now I’m here, here in Hong Kong you can’t find a place to live for free how about you come and live with me here?”

Tsing didn’t know what to say. She held her mouth open the only words that came out was “ tank yo.” Tsing was so shocked that she couldn’t even speak, she dropped all her things and hugged the woman. Afterwards she asked the woman what her name was and she said, “Mandy, I changed my name to Mandy from Man Yee.”

So then Tsing lived with her new stepmom.

3 years has passed, Tsing is still living with her beloved stepmom, Mandy, Tsing is going to turn 18 next week, she is very excited because Mandy said she prepared a very special gift for her and Tsing can’t wait to see what present she will be getting. In these past 3 year they have moved houses twice, from their first house a wooden hut at the bottom of a mountain to an apartment with 3 rooms, Tsing guessed that she will finally get her own computer because she has been begging her stepmom for it in the past year.

Tsing and Mandy were supposed to go out for mother–daughter night which is the second Saturday night of each month, but Mandy needed to do something for work so she told Tsing to come with her to work and then eat dinner near her office. The moment they left their house, Tsing thought they shouldn’t go out tonight because she felt that something bad will happen, but Mandy was in a hurry and just pulled her out of the house, they took the bus and walked to Mandy’s office. Tsing cleared her mind because nothing happened just now so they don’t need to worry about anything.

As soon as Mandy finished work they walked outside and started crossing the road, but suddenly a speeding truck came from a far, rushing towards Tsing’s side. Mandy was behind her and saw she quickly pushed her away, then the truck came, Tsing fell on the floor and heard a loud scream from behind her, she turned around and saw Mandy lying on the floor with a pile of blood under her.

Tsing knelt on the floor next to Mandy and said, “Mom! Mom! Wake up please.” Tsing was crying, it was the most painful moment of her life.

Mandy quietly whispered in her ear, “Tsing, I don’t think I can make it, no matter what please continue living, life is hard but you must go on, please do me a favour, continue being the cheerful girl you have always been, I love you, I always will.” There Mandy died on that very day at that very spot.

Tsing said to her mom through tears, “Mom! I love you too, please don’t leave me ,please!” Tsing knew that her mom was already dead, there was no hope.

As she arrived back home she found her present it was a computer and there was a note and it said: To the world’s best daughter, I know I’m not your real mom but I love you like my own, enjoy your birthday!

After reading the letter Tsing burst into tear, her mom wanted her to live a happy life so she kept on going, so you should too, no matter what happens in your life remember that you will be able to overcome it live the best life you can because “life is a mystery”.

The Magical Mountains

Discovery College, Nie, Ethan – 11

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

“Mama, I’m home!” shouted Mei Ling as she walked through the front door to her apartment.

Her mother was sitting on the sofa reading a book. Her long black hair whipped across her shoulder as she turned her head toward Mei Ling’s direction.

“Hi, Darling! Welcome home. Go hang your backpack on the hanger and then wash your hands.” she said to Mei Ling. Mei Ling did as she was told and went into the kitchen to wash her hands. When she finished, she came out of the kitchen and she began to tidy her backpack.

Her mother walked toward her and helped Mei Ling get all the books out. “So how was school today?” her mother asked.

“Oh, it was awesome,” said Mei Ling. “We learned about a lot of very interesting stuff and in Chinese class today, we learned about the Yellow Mountain!”

“Oh, so what did you learn about the Yellow Mountain?” Mama asked, putting the books down so she can listen to Mei Ling.

“I learned that the Yellow Mountain is in Anhui Province, is famous for its beautiful landscapes and has a long history dating back to Ancient China.” Mei Ling said with enthusiasm.

“Did you learn about anything else?” Mama said.

“No, we just learned the stuff that I said,” said Mei Ling, “we were learning about the mountains in China.”

“Ok,” said Mom.

Mei Ling finished tidying her backpack and went into the kitchen to get some water.

“Don’t forget to do your homework today!” her mother called from the living room.

“Of course, Mama, I won’t forget,” she yelled back. She gulped down her water and went quickly to her bedroom.

She sat down on her chair and looked at her Chinese homework. The instructions were on the paper. It said to copy the characters on the paper 10 times, then read the text and answer the questions. ‘This is going to be easy!’ she thought. Then, moved her Chinese homework to the side and looked at her math homework. The instructions were to finish the adding and subtracting fractions questions. ‘That is easy!’ she thought to herself. “It’s only 30 questions.”

She then looked at her English homework. She had to read a book for 30 mins. ‘So easy,’ she said. “I’m going to finish homework in a whizz!” she said to herself. She began to write.

CHAPTER 2 – The Video

And indeed, she finished it very quickly. By the time her mother called to tell her that dinner was ready, she had already finished her Chinese homework and math homework.

“Steamed fish and rice, your favourite!” Mama said as Mei Ling sat on the dining table. Her mother took the dishes from the kitchen and brought them to the dining table. She sat down and, using her chopstick, began eating.

“So what do you want to watch today for dinner?” Mama asked Mei Ling. They always watch a video at dinner when they are eating.

“Can we watch a video about the Yellow Mountain?” she asked.

“Sure can,” her mother replied. She grabbed her Ipad from the sofa and clicked on the app Youtube. She typed Yellow Mountain. “There is a video about the beautiful landscapes of the Yellow Mountain,” her mother told Mei Ling, “Do you want to watch it?”

“Ok,” said Mei Ling.

Her mother pressed the video and it began to play. Pictures of the Yellow Mountain were all over the screen. Some were very beautiful, showing pictures of trees, the mountains and a very special kind of cloud which Mei Ling later learned, was a very unique feature of the Yellow Mountain called the Sea of Clouds. Mei Ling thought it looked beautiful.

As she ate the fish, she couldn't help, but wanting to go and visit the Yellow Mountain herself. “Is it really this beautiful?” Mei Ling asked her mother.

“The Yellow Mountain? Yes, it is really beautiful,” she replied. “The Yellow Mountain is famous throughout China and the world for its beauty.”

“Mother, can we go to the Yellow Mountain someday?”

“Yes, we can go to the Yellow Mountain,” she replied. “In fact, we can go this summer.”

“Oh, can we?” Mei Ling asked.

“Sure can,” her mother replied. “Actually, it's nearly the summer holiday.”

“Oh good, that means we can go in summer!” Mei Ling said excitedly.

“Yeah,” her mother replied.

They kept on watching the video and when it ended, they had already finished their meal. Mama began to tidy up the table. Mei Ling sat up from her chair and went over to the sofa. She grabbed a book, sat down and started reading it. Her mother noticed.

“What book are you reading, Mei Ling?” Mei Ling looked up. “I'm reading a book about mountains, Mama!” she exclaimed.

Her mother stopped what she was doing and looked at Mei Ling, smiling. “You're still thinking about the Yellow Mountain?”

“Yeah, it's just so interesting,” Mei Ling said.

Her mother paused. It looked like she was thinking about something. “Well, you can always ask your dad,” her mother said, “He's bound to know something about the Yellow Mountain.”

Mei Ling looked excited. “Oh, can I call Daddy tonight?” Mei Ling's dad is on a business trip in Shanghai.

“Yeah, you can call Dad tonight,” her mother told Mei Ling.

“Ok, thanks Mama!” Mei Ling happily replied.

Mei Ling went back to her book and Mama went back to cleaning.

CHAPTER 3 (The Story)

The evening went by quite quickly. Mei Ling called her dad at about 7:45pm. She told him all about what she learned about the Yellow Mountain.

“I heard from Mom that you know a lot about the Yellow Mountain,” she told her father.

“Yes, your mother’s quite right,” he said, his loud voice blasted through the speaker of Mama’s iPad. “Would you like me to tell you the history of the Yellow Mountain?”

“Oh yes, please?” cried Mei Ling. “I really want to know!”

“Very well, I will tell you.” Mei Ling’s dad cleared his throat. “The history of the Yellow Mountain begins millions of years ago when it was first formed in what is now called Anhui Province during the Quaternary glaciation.”

“What is the Quaternary glaciation, father?” asked Mei Ling.

“The Quaternary glaciation was a series of glacial changes and it formed the Yellow Mountain,” Mei Ling’s dad replied.

“Ok,” Mei Ling said. “So that is how the Yellow Mountain was formed.”

“A few hundred to thousands years later during the Qin Dynasty, when the First Emperor of China, Qin Shihuang was the ruler, the mountain was called Yishan which means Black Mountain, but the mountains weren’t black so Yishan is not such a good name.” He continued. “So that is why in Ancient China, the name was changed to the Yellow Mountain in honour of Qin Shihuang. In the past, Huangshan was already famous throughout China but in the present, Huangshan became famous worldwide for its beauty, pine trees, caves and the most famous feature of all.”

“Tell me father, what is it?” Mei Ling curiosity asked.

“Is the Sea of Clouds!” Mei Ling’s father said.

“What is that, Father?”

“It is a phenomenon which makes the cloud look like an ocean of clouds.”

“Wow!” Mei Ling said dreamily. “Could you tell me about some of the myths of the Yellow Mountain?”

“Of course!” he said. “One myth of Huangshan was in the Tang Dynasty from the year 618 to the year 907 when the last emperor of that dynasty was visited by a man who claims that there are immortality pills on the Yellow Mountain which was called Yishan back then. He said that the way to get the pills was to come to the mountain and practice some techniques, then he can get the pills.” Mei Ling’s dad paused for a moment, stroking his beard. “But he never got the pills because he died and the Tang dynasty was over.”

Mei Ling started daydreaming at the screen.

“Hey are you still there?” Mei Ling’s father said, waving his hand at the screen.

“Yes I am!” Mei Ling said, startled. She quickly put her mind off daydreaming and gave her full attention to her dad. “Are we finished?” she asked.

“Well, it’s nearly time for you to go to bed, it’s nearly 10:30pm!”

Mei Ling looked disappointed. “Oh please, Daddy, just one more!” she begged.

“Oh, all right, I’ll tell you just one more!” “He cleared his throat and began to speak. Mei Ling changed into a more comfortable position.

But suddenly, Mei Ling’s fathers voice and the call ended. It took Mei Ling a few seconds to realise what had just happened.

“Oh, it ran out of battery! But, it’s ok, I guess I learned a lot today.” She quickly took a shower and then was tucked in her bed by her mother.

Magical Panda

Discovery College, Viiret, Inka – 11

Li Jing trekked down the grassy slope. Well, it wasn't very grassy anymore. It was just brown and brittle. The trail was rocky and dry, and there was so much gravel. The 11-year-old girl was sliding down the rocks, carrying her sturdy brown bucket, the gravel slipping under her feet. Her once long, straight, shiny black hair was now ruffled and very sandy. Ever since the drought, no one in the village was clean. Li Jing could now see the Wishing Well. It was the only source of water, and it was becoming scarce. When Li Jing arrived, the well was only knee deep. She hooked the bucket onto the rope and lowered it down. The bucket filled with water and she pulled it back up.

When Li Jing arrived back at the village, there was hardly anyone there. Then she realised that everyone was crowded around Lao Ye Zhang Wei.

"The drought has left us all thirsty," he rasped. "We will need our strongest men to go up to the Magical Mountains. They must cross many obstacles to get to Xiong Yuan, the Magical Panda. I shall now select who will go. Guo Zhi, Hui Qing, Ding Xiang, Nian Zu and –"

"Me! Me! I want to go!" Li Jing shouted. Everyone turned and looked at her. "I've been longing to go to the Magical Mountains for months!"

"You may not go, Li Jing! You are too small," the master croaked.

"But that can be a good thing! I can duck under things, and I'm nimble and quick! Please, Lao Ye, I really want to go!"

"I've already said no. That's the decision."

"Let her go! It will be a great experience for her. And I'll look after her," Guo Zhi, Li Jing's father called.

"Very well," said Lao Ye Zhang Wei. "But don't blame me if she gets hurt."

"Yay! Thank you, Lao Ye!" Li Jing squealed.

Li Jing, her father, and her mother went into their house.

"Look how much water I got! It's enough for the whole tomorrow!" Li Jing showed her bucket to her parents.

"Wow, that's a lot! I didn't even know the well had that much water in it!" Da Xia, Li Jing's mother exclaimed. "And you will need a lot of water if you're going to travel to the Magical Mountains and see Xiong Yuan." Da Xia passed Li Jing and Guo Zhi a canteen each. "Fill these up in Li Jing's bucket, and then once you've finished them, find any chance you can to fill them back up. I don't want you to die of thirst."

"Thank you, Da Xia. We hope our ancestors will bring us luck," Guo Zhi said. "We'll have to travel a long way. We can't even see the mountains from here!"

Then the bell sounded. Li Jing hurried outside. Lao Ye Zhang Wei was standing by the bell.

"Everyone who is travelling to the Magical Mountains gather round!" he yelled, but then broke into an outburst of coughing.

"Lao Ye!" Nian Zu ran up to help the master. "Water! We need water!"

Li Jing ran to get her bucket. “Got some!”

“Thanks!” Nian Zu grabbed a canteen from his house and ran back to the master. He pressed it to his lips. “Here, drink.”

The master soon stopped coughing. “Thank you, Nian Zu and Li Jing. As I was saying, the people who are going to the magical mountains better get ready; you leave at dawn. Go to the training area and prepare.”

Everyone headed toward the training area to watch the practice. Li Jing got on the monkey bars and did them as many times as she could, faster each time. Then she heard a loud crack. “Did you hear that? It was so loud!” she exclaimed. Everyone stared at her.

“Hear what?” Hui Qing asked.

“That crack. It sounded like a tree falling,” Li Jing replied. Why hadn’t anyone else heard it?

“Nope. Didn’t hear anything. Did anyone else?” Hui Qing asked. Everyone said no. *Must’ve been my imagination.* Li Jing thought. *But I’m sure I heard something!*

“Yay! Today is the day!” Li Jing jumped up and down.

“Please be careful, guys. I don’t want you to get hurt. And please,” Da Xia turned to Guo Zhi. “Look after Li Jing.”

“I promise I will be careful!” Li Jing squeaked.

“And I promise...”

Luna And The Infinity Of Stars

ESF Island School, Anders, Zhejun – 11

My name is Luna. I live in a small farming village hidden far away in the mountains of China. When the sun is clear, on the horizon you can see the snowy top of the Magical Mountain.

When I go to sleep, my Grandmother tells me stories of the Magical Mountain where a unicorn lives. Legend has it that the unicorn has magic to help people, but only those who seek to help another. No one has seen the unicorn, because the mountain is haunted with shrieking winds and mists of loneliness. Some people who went to the Magical Mountain never came back. Those who were lucky enough to return never spoke again.

I live alone with my Grandmother. We do not have much land to farm, so my parents left to go to the cities to find work. They send me letters, but since it takes so long to travel, the letters only come twice a year.

Grandma does the best she can to farm and homeschools me. Lately, something has been wrong. She wakes up later, sleeps earlier and eats less. The doctor has tried several times to find a cure. Grandma has tried every medicine but nothing is working. Grandma is getting worse. Without Grandma, where is my home?

My only hope to save Grandma now is to find the unicorn of the Magical Mountain. I have a map of the mountain, but I will have to do it on my own. I will be on the mountain for a few days, so I pack extra supplies, just in case. It is heavy to carry, but I have to try.

As I left, I said confidently, “Grandma, I am going to the Magical Mountain to find the unicorn. The unicorn could help cure you! Wish me luck!” Grandma coughed and tried to smile. I walked through the village and saw the children playing. I did the same with Grandma when I was younger. My memories started rushing back like a wild river flows.

At the base of the mountain, I said to myself, “You’ve got this, this is for Grandma.” I took a deep breath and took my first step up the mountain.

While I was walking, I could hear my stomach growling. I sat down and ate a cheese sandwich for lunch, it reminded me of sandwiches Grandma made me. I was about halfway up the peak with a long way to go. Behind me, I saw the village and the people looked like snails.

As I got up, I tripped over a pile of rocks. My right knee was cut from the rocky ground and started to bleed. I hurried to get some bandages. My knee was hurt and I could only walk slowly.

I reached a clearing as the sun started to set. I set up the tent I packed and settled in to eat dinner. As the night got darker, I heard sounds outside. I thought some scary animals might want me for dinner. My heart was racing! This is the end, this is the end!

That was when I remembered what Grandma said every time I was scared of the dark at home, “There are no scary things in the dark. The scary sounds are your imagination. Don’t be scared!”

I calmed down and took a step out of the tent. I realised Grandma was always right, there’s nothing scary in the dark. It is just your imagination. So I went inside the tent, lay down and fell asleep.....

As the sun rose the next day, I searched for the unicorn. As I got deeper into the forest of the mountain, I got lost. I took out the map to see how to get to the next peak. It started to rain heavily. The map got soaked and so did I. I quickly setup the tent and waited until the rain stopped. An hour passed and finally the rain stopped. But the map was ruined by the rain. Without the map, I was lost in the mountains.

I started losing hope. There was no way I could find the unicorn! I didn’t have a map and I didn’t know where I was. I am so sorry, Grandma, I failed. I shouldn’t have come up here. There is nothing up here to find, there is no cure. Maybe it’s just a legend. What was I thinking!! I came all this way just to fail.

Suddenly, I heard something move in the bushes behind me. I turned around and a tall creature jumped out. I got scared and stepped backwards, but I didn't realise how close I was to the edge. I fell off the mountain! I grabbed for the edge, but it fell too.

I screamed as loud as I could and closed my eyes. I thought I was going to die. But then, I was lifted up by magic. I was in shock and my heart was pounding.

I landed by my tent and the magic healed my knee. When I looked up to see who saved me, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was the unicorn of the Magical Mountain!

I stood up and said, "Thank you for saving my life. Can you help cure my Grandma? She's at home and and she's very sick. The doctor in my village couldn't ... couldn't....." I started to cry.

"Yes, come with me." the unicorn replied calmly.

The unicorn led me to a hidden garden filled with flowers. The unicorn picked up one of the flowers, enchanted it and told me, "To cure your grandma, you need to make a soup. Grind the flower and mix it with dew from a cloud. To collect the dew go to the highest peak of the mountain and use this small jar. Make sure to collect moonlight before your head down. You can use this magical pouch for the moonlight."

"How do I get to the highest peak?"

"Here is a magical map with wings to show you the way. You don't have much time left!"

The unicorn gave me the flower and I used the new map to fly up the mountain. After a couple hours, I was nearly at the top. I realised some of the clouds were close enough to touch. Now, I understood how to collect the dew. I took the jar and scooped dew from the surface of the clouds.

As I closed the jar, the sun set and the moon rose. The sky filled with an infinity of stars surrounding a bright, full moon. When I looked down, I couldn't see anything. Suddenly, the shrieking winds rushed over the mountain and it got very cold. I started to freeze and put my hands over my ears to cover the noise. I tried to scream, but no sound escaped. The shrieking winds stole my voice!

I had to get home and help Grandma. I will not be afraid! I put the jar in my bag and took out the pouch to collect the moonlight. I faced the opening of the pouch towards the moon. A line of wavy moonlight came towards me and spilled into the pouch.

I accidentally dripped a little moonlight on a cloud. The cloud went under me and lifted me up. I could see the lights in the village far below and used the rest of the moonlight to make a cloud path guiding me back to the village. The closer I got to home, the clouds descended like a mist and then I was in front of my door.

I went into the kitchen and ground the flower, as the unicorn said. I mixed the cloud dew and flower over the fire. I took a sip of the soup and my voice returned.

I went to Grandma's bedroom where she was laying down and told her, "Grandma, drink this. It will cure you. The unicorn said so." I helped Grandma sit up. She drank it slowly, laid back down and closed her eyes. I stayed with Grandma for the whole night to make sure she was doing well. Soon, I fell asleep on the floor.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of food. I stood up, looked at Grandma's bed. She wasn't there! I ran to the kitchen where Grandma was cooking up eggs for breakfast.

"Grandma, I missed you so much!" I was so happy to see Grandma doing well, I started crying happy tears. Grandma hugged me and said softly, "Thank you, sweetie, for everything. You found the unicorn of the Magical Mountains! I am so proud of you! You must be starving. Let's have some breakfast."

As we ate breakfast, I told Grandma all about the journey to find the unicorn. We lived happily ever after!!

The Mist That Lifted

ESF Island School, Au, Perla — 11

Alessia trekked up the Celestial Capital Peak.

Alessia kept an eye on the supposed tour guide, his footsteps swiftly stamping up the hill. Alessia stopped, panting and resting her hands on her knees. Her eyes gazed up from looking at the jagged rock ground and she looked around. No one was there. She shrugged, taking sizable strides up the rugged stone steps. The crisp, damp air brushed against Alessia's nose and it smelled faintly of rain.

HuangShan made her think back to times she didn't like to talk about. Strangely, this place was therapeutic, coaxing her to say and think whatever she wanted to. Somewhat like a hairdresser that always got the introvert to open up.

Alessia was weighed down with her insecurities and her thoughts. Things she wouldn't have wanted to say. She hated how her father pushed her into vacations she didn't even want. She didn't like the reason behind it, it wasn't even like she had been asking for any breaks. She let a sigh escape from her lips and she gazed into the scenery before her. It was almost sunset and the sun was hiding behind a gargantuan mountain. The lighting was slightly dim so she couldn't clearly make out the mountain; it looked like a silhouette of a fairly large iceberg.

When Alessia squinted she could see small trees littered across the mountain. The trees were obviously not as small as what was in front of her. It was just so far away that it seemed like one of those miniscule models people used for building miniatures. In the distance she could see another smaller mountain. An upturned tooth of a dragon. Something jagged and slightly pointier at the summit. Neighboring brothers and sisters of the dragon tooth mountain were accompanying the dragon tooth mountain. They were positioned behind him so he was pushed to the front. The distance between them was filled in with mist, otherwise known as the fancy shrouds that were draped across and around the mountains. The shrouds of mist gave the family of mountains a mystical and shy appearance, it was almost like they were trying to hide behind these shrouds. One could say that the mist was canopies of water cascading down from the tops of waterfalls. Delicately, gracefully running away.

Alessia thought again. The mist was like her mother, recurring, mysterious and something you can never grab hold of. Sure her mother was loving...at times. But you could never know with her. She never stayed no matter what she promised. You never know when she was going to come back for sure and she had this strong scent. Alessia happened to be sensitive to smells. Her mother smelt of not truly caring. Her mother, in short, was an alleycat, a cat that comes for the fish bones and scampers off into the woods less than ten minutes later. Maybe the mist was her father. Bitter and cold. You could tell that he was trying to be strong but he was weak. You could smash through with just mentioning mother. Like how you could easily stick a hand through the mist and it would almost dissolve it. Most of all, she knew that the mist was like her own insecurities of her dysfunctional family.

Alessia knew that the tour guide wasn't there anyway. She didn't need protection or babysitting. She somehow felt like the mountain was enough company she needed. A black velvet tarp was flung over the sky.

HuangShan at night was a marvellous sight. The sky was a deep mulberry, raisin, midnight blue and navy mixed quite unevenly. The colors were distinguishable from each other but they were blended quite well. The sky was scattered with an assortment of different stars. Each brighter than the last. The mountains in Alessia's eyesight were completely black now. Nothing was to be seen on the mountain, not even the oldest rugged, flat-crowned evergreen. The mountains were scraggly, unevenly shaven beards of sleeping giants that lay down, causing their beards to stick up slightly due to how stiff the hairs were. She kept walking and walking forward until she didn't know where she was.

Alessia whipped out a heavy duty flashlight out of her North Face backpack. She let it shine at the rocks that she was close to walking on, illuminating the night sky. She climbed across some rocks and she noticed that there was an enormous rock with some chinese calligraphy characters carved on it. She could identify that the very rock before

her could be known as the “Drunk Rock”. She tried to find a spot to set down a sleeping bag. The tent was with the tour guide, but she could manage on her own.

The next morning, Alessia woke to find the area around her eyes stinging and puffy. She just rubbed at them and grabbed an energy bar to eat. Alessia sat cross legged on her sleeping bag and her teeth chomped down slowly onto her energy bar, tears were streaming down her face and her breath was trembling like there was an earthquake. She looked at the sky; the sun sat on its throne with the two clouds watching over everything with him, the mist scared away by the sun. The clouds filtered off a tiny bit of him. Alessia put on her puffer jacket. She felt chilly. She checked her phone. It was nine degrees.

“Welp,” she thought, “another treat for me.” Spitefully packing her sleeping bag up, she started her journey again.

Not too long later, she found herself staring at the Huangshan Cliffwalk. She didn’t know if the bridge was very stable, it was stuck against the cliffside and the path was quite narrow. Almost as narrow minded as mother about the separation. Alessia inched towards the other side a few steps and the bridge felt solid. She didn’t know what she was expecting. Jelly? Anyways, Alessia ignored her sardonic thoughts and she continued walking.

Hours and hours passed as she kept walking on and on and on. This was a 130 meter walk. It was bound to last long. She had only walked for 4 hours and she had just walked 12 miles. The woman on the walking app was chiming in the miles to her so she could keep track. The breeze was soft, light and fresh. Alessia felt all her worries rush away. The breeze carried her worries into the heavens. Alessia gazed into the distance, walking slowly at a consistent pace. All she could think about was her calm, deep breathing. It was the loudest thing she could hear. The wind blew at her side, and the sun shone, making her the tiniest bit warmer.

Maybe a walk was what she needed.

Maybe the vacations were nice once in a while.

All she knew for sure was that the mist had lifted.

The mist that had once covered her eyes, the mist that had once bothered her.

The Body on the Mountain

ESF Island School, Chan, Eugenia – 13

She kept running, faster than she ever did in her life, on top of the squishy grass that felt like thorns and through the cool fresh air that felt like pins and needles drawing in and out of her, trying to get rid of the horror of what she just experienced. Yet, the appalling scene just played and replayed in her head over and over nonstop.

The terrifying scene was light this: She gasped and snapped open her eyes. She was lying in a bathtub-like box with a strange smelling blue-green watery liquid. She screamed and ran away.

After running a length of some thousand meters, she looked back. The strange box with the liquid was nowhere to be seen. Instead, it is replaced with a mass of green pasture and green plants, shooting out from everywhere, and a billowing carpet of fog stretched into the far distance. She peered through the narrow gaps of the layered fog, and found out she was on a mountain. Somehow this piece of information made her relax a bit. She sat back down, grinning. The back of her head hurt a bit, but she didn't care. Somehow the grass didn't feel as thorny and the air felt softer, even though it still felt like her lungs were severely scratched.

She kept sitting, taking in the beauty of the surroundings. Suddenly, with a pang, she remembered what happened before she found herself in the strange liquid and box. All she remembered was that she snuck out of her home to play. "Home!" she said aloud, "I must have been gone for a few days! My parents would be worried!" She scrambled to her feet and navigated her way home.

Along the path, she found herself near the strange box with the liquid again, but this time surrounded by people in strange clothing talking to each other. They are all wearing dark and tight cotton clothes whereas she is wearing loose white robes.

When she approached, the people looked at her. Some started to scream, some fainted, some shuffled nervously and talked. Yet, she was too bewildered to do anything except to stand rooted on the soft grass and oversee this commotion. She stared at the strange box, and suddenly realised it was a coffin and started to scream.

Right then, some armed people advanced towards her, yelling things in an unknown language and thrusting her into the coffin box. She howled and kicked, but everyone ignored her. The cover flew on the coffin, smothering her. She was then never seen to move or make any sound anymore.

Epilogue:

She, together with the coffin box is taken to a bright lab where it is captured and examined, while the people there, who had seen her move, tried to explain to the world and prove what had happened. Yet, no matter what they did, she still stayed as still as a statue.

The Hope

ESF Island School, Gupta, Arnav – 13

Green tea plants move side to side violently, as rotors move at a more concentrated pace, ropes are dropped and many of us whisper while we climb down from the Chinook about the magnificent breath-taking mountains with illusory sharp peaks, raised village houses, strange sea of floating clouds, odd-shaped pines and grotesque rock formations. I, along with tens of other paratroopers are ordered to execute enemies in their bunkers. We rushingly march to the allocated positions. As it is 5:47 pm and we have just about an hour left. I feel torn down by feelings as if each change in my mood is a bullet shot in my head. I desire raw revenge at times, though I wish I wanted a nobler justice, I feel pride and patriotism tinged with shame, complicity, betrayal and guilt.

The helicopter hovers back to the ongoing, desperate war near Shanghai. We hurriedly move towards the bases which are located near the hundreds of beautiful Anhui mountains as my mate, Robert exclaimed in the Chinook. I wish to be there one day, enjoying the view of the shrouds of mist clouded over the jagged mountains, sturdy rocks, leafy pines hanging over the cliffs and jagged crevices as many ancient poems say. At a steady pace, we move near the iconic mountains, few take out their binoculars to scan for the allocated fortifications.

I along with a dozen other soldiers are just feet away from the enemy bunker. Holding my 8-pound rifle in my hands, we realise that we are encircled.

I regain consciousness. I feel a stiff wooden platform beneath me. I stumble between moments as the vehicle moves through asphalted roads and unpaved dirt roads. I can't see anything, my hands caught up in strands of fibre twisted up together. I can barely move.

Screeeech! I feel the truck stop, the doors open by a couple of soldiers as they arrive and force us out of the carriers by holding our necks. We walk on the uneven, jaggy ground barefoot. The servicemen take off our blindfolds and let us take a glimpse of the outside world, far from the firing and the rage of the war. There are fantastic rocks, cloud seas, ancient rock-clinging pines, U-shaped valleys and moraine deposits. There is nothing like it, nothing like it in the whole world. They push us through a gate with rusty iron bars. Just on the right, there is a 100-meter-tall pole with a flag having a large red field with five golden stars, a large one followed by four smaller ones.

We have been brought into a patch of dusty, hard, concrete ground, and ordered to stand in tens of rows. After being aligned, a few soldiers get distracted by a waterfall which is Atlantis-blue, it is gushing over the rocks. At its widest point, it is surging and plunging down the fog-covered mountain. It has a beautiful serenity-pool at the bottom, it is veneer clear. The waterfall flows as smoothly as maple syrup. It is swishing over the rocks joyfully. It is thundering down into the pool like a gigantic water spout. But a Chinese major prevents them from looking there by speaking up in a strong and bitter Chinese accent,

“You are in the Xidi POW-Camp, and you are the enemies of China, therefore you will be treated accordingly.”

Onwards, we have been ordered to work in factories in a nearby city. Secured prison buses would transport us to factories. The Chinese clarify that we have to work for wages such as food and water, those incapable of doing so would end up starving themselves. No one dares to stand up for themselves. Lots of people are fatigued due to severe working conditions and lack of rest. Some start to lose consciousness while working, in those instances, soldiers brutally punish them. Many die due to malnutrition.

Rob, Mark, Henry and I start to make plans for our escape, as we are, fortunately, good foes since the start of the call for infantrymen in Honolulu, we know each other as if we are all brothers. We had decided that it was better to attempt to escape rather than rot in the factories by labour.

Mark, who is a head shorter than me, sneaks up to the numbing doors of the camp scanning for any troops on the lookout in the dead of winter. He proclaims to have found none in the blizzard and gestures for mission a-go,

the 3 of us unsuspectingly come out of our bunks into the bitter snowy night. No far than 35 feet away is high barb-wire fencing which reminds me of the ongoing, desperate war. In the deep and gloomy silence, we rush to the fencing while keeping our backs low. Henry pulls out his cutting pliers which he had brought from the factory, after twisting the wires and yanking them apart, we all get out of the POW-Camp and have a long way ahead of us. Robert proclaims that he knows how to get to the highway as he had his Geography degree in China before he joined the US army. Confirming that it is at least a 4-hour hike from Xidi, having no alternative, we all follow him East in the harsh and forbidding weather, for miles and miles. This is to be the longest night of my life, a nightmare of agony, terror and loneliness.

We all arrive at a frozen frosted brook. Rob tells us that this would indicate the half-way point to the highway. We decide to take a break and huddle up to stay mildly warm, enough to keep us going. I have lost track of the date and time now, but surely it is midnight. The temperature is below freezing. Mark exclaims that he has gotten frostbite. It clearly can be seen as he has got bluish skin on his hands. Having no medical equipment, with a big heart, we are forced to trail for the highway.

It is now close to impossible to keep on going, Mark lays down in the white-bleached ground after losing the whole of his hope,
“Carry on, don’t wait here for me....”

With having barely anything to keep a person warm, we had to shamelessly, we leave him alone and plod ahead in the snow.

As we reach the highway, the cold white and grey flakes disappear and the morning sunrises. Just then we see a Chinook accompanied by several American Black Hawks, knowing that waving will have no good, we search for transport to follow the helicopter.

“Ute! A Ute, pickup truck on the highway,” exclaims Henry.

The pickup truck slows down. The transparent glass window inches down,

The driver questions, “Ni xiǎng qù nǎ lǐ?”

Robert replies undoubtingly, “Huang shān, Huang shān, Yellow Mountain!”

“Zuò zài chē hòu!”

We hop on behind the vehicle. The pickup zooms on the narrow, flat and endless highway up to the steep, fog-covered mountains. The Yellow Mountains of China stand tall and towering, the ancient emperor who once lived there brooded, he had transcended to immortality, of course, the years of refining had resulted in a fathomless lake of power.

Without noticing the time, we arrive at Huangshan. The pathways carved through the mountain and along its cliff sides there are gravity-defying walkways. It criss-crosses with the broken shards of the mountain like a ballerina gliding from toe to toe. We take the thousands of ancient stone steps up to the sky-piercing mountains, never knowing what could be in the next corner. In this lofty land, fantasies and dreams are materialised. There are only white-grey flying clouds hovering above us and rocky spires and twisted tree trunks surrounding us. This is heaven, this is genuinely heaven! We finally see the take-off area for the helicopters we saw earlier. We sprint to the sufficient flat area in hopes of going back to the battlefield

An Adventure Up Yellow Mountain

ESF Island School, Hagio, Ryo – 12

Once upon a time in the middle of nowhere in China, a group of 8 people were attempting to climb the yellow mountain. The yellow mountain was nicknamed the peak of death and all the people who attempted to climb it had died. Even the rescue team had once disappeared into the depth of the mountains. However, legends told that there is a secret vault at the top of the mountain which is filled to the brim with gold. Furthermore, there are 4 special potions. The first one is the elixir of decoy which would make 50 of yourself, the second one is the elixir of strength that can boost your power, the third was the elixir of health that can save you from diseases, scratches and pain. The fourth elixir, the elixir of life was the most powerful, it could bring back the dead. They were all in the vault at the top of the mountain.

There were 8 people climbing Andy, Ryan, Jeff, Bob, Justin, Tom, Steve and Tate. Andy was the strongest, but was mean. Tom was the bravest, who would stand up against anything. Jeff was the smartest, and Bob was a Geologist. Justin was the coolest, and Matthew was the fastest. Steve was the kindest and Tate was the youngest, the weakest. He always got bullied by Andy. Tate had no courage and was not good at anything however, he was kind and caring. Andy didn't want him in his group, but he had no choice as they needed 8 people to get up the peak of death.

Day 1

The 8 started climbing the lower stages of the mountain. In the first few minutes, the weather started to become cloudy, and started raining. The 8 went inside a cave and decided to wait for the rain to end. One hour passed, the rain gradually became gentle and a few minutes later, the rain stopped. The 8 came out of the cave, and started to climb the first challenging climb, the NEVERENDING slope. Legends told that it took a week to climb, and once every few days, an object would come tumbling down the hill and could kill everyone. The 8 slowly started climbing. A few hours later however, Justin slipped due to the wet surface and tumbled down the slope. He fell off a side of the cliff and went plummeting down into the depths of the mountain. They had all expected to lose someone but they hadn't thought it would be this early. Furthermore, they were surprised that it wasn't Tate. Everyone except Andy seemed shocked, and some started sobbing. "Oi, you weaklings, hurry up and follow me!" shouted Andy. "But we just lost a friend!" Tate cried back, "Why are you so cold?" "Friend?" Andy shot back, "He's not a friend. In fact none of you are. We don't need friends, and I just brought you guys because legends said that I need 8 people to start the climb!" And with that Andy marched on forward not looking back at the shocked faces of everyone else.

Day 7

When the remaining 6 finished climbing the slope, they were all exhausted. However, Andy shouted to keep moving so they kept walking up the mountain. After they lost Justin, they had also lost Tom. Tom was hit by a large tree log that came rolling down the slope and he was knocked off the mountain. The remaining 6 had to climb the rocks of death. Legends told that rocks came falling off the cliff and you would be instantly killed if any of the rocks hit you. When the 6 started climbing, Bob instantly knew that the rocks above were magma rocks, as he was a geologist. He suggested that 6 should take another path, but there were no other paths so they had no choice but to climb.

Day 10

When the group finished climbing the rocks, they were all covered with scratches and cuts, and were all really tired. They had lost Steve and Bob, and they were starting to become stressed. Tate's legs were trembling a lot and he was so tired he lost consciousness when he made it up the cliff. So the 4 decided to rest and start their journey tomorrow.

Day 11

The 4 started walking to the next challenge, the maze of caves. Legends told that the maze changes its shape and there were many gaps and walls blocking the way. When the 4 reached the mouth of the cave they saw that the entrance looked like a monster's face. It had 2 holes at the top and there were sharp rocks around the entrance that looked like teeth. The 4 heard weird sounds as well and Tate was shivering. Then, Ryan realised something. "There's weird smoke coming out of the 2 holes", he said, "It looks like the cave's angry." Then, Jeff went near the two holes, and examined the inside of the hole. Suddenly, more smoke came out and covered Jeff's face. He started screaming "Hot, Hot" and came back to Andy, Ryan and Tate. "Are you ok Jeff?" Tate asked. "Yeah, and luckily now I know what the smoke is! This place is a volcanic area, and the smoke is the steam. The steam travels through the hole and makes the scary sound. It works the same way as a flute does. So no need to be scared Tate!". "Ok, let's go in, and try to reach the end of this maze!" Ryan said. So the four went inside the cave. A few hours later, the four realised something. A hole, about 3 metres long, was in the middle of the path. Suddenly, the maze changed its shape and blocked off the path that they came from. They had no choice but to leap over the hole. When Jeff looked down, he realised that the hole was very deep, and he guessed that it was over 50 metres deep. If they fell, they would die. Even if they survived, they would be stuck down there for ever. Andy went first, and he was able to jump over the hole quite easily. However, when Ryan jumped he slipped and he went straight down the hole, and his screams soon disappeared. Jeff fell as well, leaving Tate and Andy the only ones who remained. Tate jumped but he didn't make it. He thought it was all over. Then, something grabbed his arm. To his surprise, Andy had grabbed him at the last second. Even Andy was surprised that he saved Tate. He didn't mean to do it, it just happened instinctively. This was the moment that Tate realised that Andy was actually a nice person after all.

Day 15

Andy scrambled out of the cave. So did Tate. They had made it out of the cave by some miracle and they were surprised by that. They went up the last stages of the mountain and soon they reached the peak. They had made it. They found the vault, and they realised that it was unlocked. They went inside and they instantly had to close their eyes. There was something shiny and when they opened their eyes, they realised that it was gold. Tons of gold and at the end of the vault they saw 4 potions. The 4 elixirs everybody wanted. Andy carefully took the 4 elixirs and wrapped cloth around it, and then placed it inside his bag.

When the two returned to their village, cheers welcomed them and people started shouting at them "Well done" and "You survived" and more. However, when they realised that 6 people were missing, they all became quiet. "Where's the others?" a villager asked. "They survived too, right?" But to the people's horror, Andy and Tate shook their heads. "Wait a minute?" a villager said, "The elixir of life would bring back the dead right? If you use it, it could bring them back!" Andy immediately opened his bag, and looked for the potion. Then, his hands froze. He couldn't find it. Tate realised that was well, and looked inside his bag too. It wasn't there. It had been stolen. When could it have been stolen? The two thought back at the events that happened when they came back. They only let go of their bags once. That was at the security checkpoint at the entrance to the village. The officer told them to give the bag to him for a security check. The two immediately rushed back to the security office. When they reached the security office they realised that they were too late. Now they had to go look for the officer. But this time they weren't afraid. The villagers were on their side. With their help they would be able to capture the guard. They were about to face their next mission.

Journey of the Yellow Mountain

ESF Island School, Hui, Nathan – 11

During the time of 730AD, Li Bai, a Chinese poet, was starting to get the hang of life. Whereas Du Fu, another famous poet and his best friend, was going to try an impossible task—something that would change the course of history.

Li Bai's determination slowly made him trudge to the towering heights of Yellow mountain in Anhui province. He knew that this would be one of his hardest goals in his life and that he would climb above the clouds, where nobody had ever gone to. He wanted a friend to keep him company, so he asked his friend, Du Fu, whether they could climb the yellow mountain together. As Du Fu agreed, the two of them packed their belongings. Knowing that they would be climbing for days, they took with them a stack of bamboo, some meat, paper, ink, and a compass.

The duo started walking up the mountain on a rocky path. Li Bai was using a bamboo stick as a hiking staff, and they trudged up the hill. Once the trail was gone, the roads were getting steeper, and then there was only rock.

Nonetheless, the two didn't stop. Together they conquered countless steep paths and decided to set camp on a small plateau halfway up the mountain, where it had just enough space to set up their bamboo and campfire. The two decided to get some rest, and so they did.

The next day, Li Bai woke up early to see the magnificent scenery. Li Bai wrote a poem on what he observed:

*Thirty six strange peaks,
Immortals with black to knots.
Morning sun strikes the tree tops,
Here in this sky mountain world .
Chinese people, raise your faces!
For a thousand years cranes come and go.
Far off I spy a firewood gatherer,
Plucking sticks from stone crevices.*

As he wrote, Li Bai remembered the legends of the Yellow Mountains, and how enchanting the towering peaks were. There were mentions of an ancient monastery on the summit, and there was also a monster that has been guarding the mountain for centuries. He sat down near the charred campfire and watched the sun continue to rise. Not long afterwards, Du Fu also woke up.

The two packed their camp and continued to rise onto the mountain's summit. They decided to eat their cooked meat from last night, which made them feel stronger than ever.

But as they walked along, a huge silhouette sprang suddenly from a grove of bamboo and blocked Li Bai's way from Du Fu. It looked like some kind of huge, powerfully—built ape, similar to a gorilla or an orangutan, standing about 2 meters tall and covered in long, thick, dark brown hair. Its massive head was tapered at the top to a sharp point, and its face was smooth and hairless. Worryingly, it had enormous, powerful jaws and a pair of small but fiercely shining eyes; it was the legendary 'Yeren' or the wild man of Yellow Mountain area! It opened its mouth to reveal huge, curving yellowed teeth, and let out a powerful, rumbling roar that echoed through the mountains. Both men shook with shock and terror, and Li Bai told Du Fu to go without him and continue the journey to the highest point.

As Li Bai would do anything to protect his dear friend, he grabbed a bamboo stick and started to fight back using the "Yin Shu Gun" form of Shaolin stick fighting. With a long, strong piece of bamboo in his right hand, his left waved a slow, graceful flourish.

Concentrate, he told himself.

His elegant gesture ought to have given the Yeren fair warning, but the ugly, stupid creature noticed nothing.

Next, Li Bai spun the bamboo with quick, flowing gestures and hit the stick onto the Yeren's head, but it seemed useless.

He then warned the Yeren using a hand signal. Using the monkey climb, he landed a powerful punch, but the Yeren had tricks of its own.

It slashed a rock with its claws, then landed another punch which Li Bai blocked.

The poet then swirled the bamboo stick as fast as he could, but the Yeren deflected and landed a blow, knocking Li Bai behind.

But then, just when the Yeren wanted the finishing blow, it tripped on a stone and fell, stumbling onto a large rock.

The Yeren yelped in pain, like an injured dog, and with its eyes, he begged Li Bai for mercy.

The poet looked at the creature sternly and said, "In the name of the Dao, be off with you, and don't come back! And don't you ever *dare* to hurt innocent travellers, ever again!"

The cowering creature nodded and rubbed its battered head, and then bowed deeply, before skulking back off into the mountains, where it was swallowed up by bamboo and clouds.

The surprising conclusion to this amazing story came over two thousand years later, when a fearless and resourceful Chinese Indiana Jones-style archaeologist named Professor Nathaniel Hui of Hong Kong University, discovered Li Bai's long-lost epic poem in China's National Archives.

Entitled "The Battle of the Yeren" Li Bai describes this incredible event, which had been lost since the eighth century B.C.E., and that is how we know about this amazing poet's incredible true adventure.

Mysterious of the Yellow Emperor Mountain...

ESF Island School, John, Tiara – 11

It was mysterious how a mountain could look so beautiful. How it glimpsed under the sun and looked over us above the clouds. Its green leaves wrapped around the rocks preventing landslides. The rumour is If you listened closely you could hear a dragon roaring. I never believed that though until..

It was dark and gloomy, I was supposed to be sleeping but instead was listening to the sound of pattering rain hoping that suddenly it would stop. A few lightning strikes came once in a while which startled me. Suddenly several booms of thunder echoed one after another, a thundering clash came from the mountains. Alarmed I looked out the window to see the rain slowly stopping along a beast with a fierce red colour with the sharpest triangles poked on its tail. It had a pattern of golden spirals and a bold white mane. It gave a huge breath of fire as it quickly flew escaping my sight. I rubbed my eyes, pinching myself "Was it all a dream?" I questioned myself.

Practically the whole night I rolled sides on my bed, my hands were clutching a thin layer of blanket. No matter how cozy I was, I still couldn't sleep. I felt stupid staying there when there was absolutely no point doing something that it wouldn't be successful. I got out of bed, my eyes sore, my hands cold. I took a deep breath, was I ready to do this? Should I get back in my bed? I decided not to stop, I left my house I shivered every step I took the more I trembled. The road was icy patches of snow here and there but in the middle of the road was a trail of fire spirals. I followed it nervously...

Following it nothing happened; it was a completely useless trail. About to give up I heard a roar, it wasn't just a roar it was a roar louder than thunder a roar like a dragon. That's when I realised a dragon was nearby I looked both ways and saw the same tail as when I looked out the window this time there was a flowing yellow green chain marking everywhere it went. Intrigued, I followed. I ran up the stairs. I panted running up the stairs, my hair flowing in the wind. I shivered. Almost to the top, I sighed as suddenly a huge blow of air was aimed at me. Feeling hopeless I held onto the stairs. My hands were slippery and soon enough I was going to be blown away.

Time ticked as my hands were losing their grasp. Suddenly the wind stopped, thankfully I continued the walk up the stairs. In front of me was a beautiful village made out of the most interesting wood. The wood had Chinese characters embroidered on in the silkiest gold fabric. Guarding the village was a warrior, a tall strong man, he had a long beard and a sword which was taken out. He was a muscular man that had the most dangerous weapons. The thing that surprised me most was how he rode a dragon. The same dragon I saw earlier, the one with the beautiful colours and designs. It looked better now that I could see it clearly. The dragon seemed gentle but had a fierce side. They flew up in the air patrolling the sky.

It was my chance, I ran quickly trying to dodge from being spotted from the fearsome duo. In the corner of my eye I saw the duo swiftly land. Steadily the warrior came up to me. Seeing this I swiftly hid in a bush outside a house in the village. The warrior stood in front of the bush and looked around, seeing nothing as he retreated back to the dragon. I wanted to continue exploring but I knew the warrior was suspicious so I went into the house behind the bush. The door was creaked open so I entered. Inside the house there were different books and cauldrons plus a big dinosaur fossil on the wall! "Who owns this house" I accidentally said the words a bit too loud that suddenly the warrior entered the house with a sword. He pointed the sword in my face. I felt like this was the end..

"Hello Warrior!, I am.." I said nervously I quickly looked around the room for a name. I scanned an open page in a book on the owner's desk. I said "Sorry for that pause, I am Li Bai's Daughter.." The warrior grunted and dropped the sword. "Sorry for that mam. Follow me." The warrior said in a stiff voice and seemed sorry. He dragged me into a room above some more stairs. We entered a big throne room. There were many people standing around the

throne. There were candles and lanterns floating around. A marble floor with a red carpet. There was a grand poster of the dragon striking a fierce pose breathing fire. On the throne the dragon stared at me and swiftly a fireball swarmed around it to show the emperor. "Hello Li Bai's daughter" He said as the warrior nudged me towards the emperor. I walked slowly, my head looking down. "You are my daughter?" A man said. He had a long white robe, and had a journal and pencil in his hands. He had a long moustache and mysteriously glared at me. I declined "no I am not." I said trying to save myself from the warrior as he ran towards me with a sword. "SILENCE" The emperor said as he threw a golden book with lots of pages. I caught it hopelessly falling into a wormhole of clouds. "HELP" I screamed as I landed in my bed just in time to see a streak of sunlight entering my house.

The Mountain Adventure

ESF Island School, Ko, Lok Yi – 11

“Liam, I think... I just saw something!” Amelia shouted with fright. Liam ran towards her but there was nothing. Liam frowned, and said, “Stop wasting my time!” He veered around and continued to do his homework. Amelia was so obscure about it, all she could think of was what she just saw. perhaps it's just an illusion?

Amelia walked into her bedroom, something shiny was there. Amelia was so curious, she mustered up her courage and tiptoed to that gleaming mysterious creature. “Hello?” she said, “why are you in my bedroom?” The mysterious creature didn’t give her a reply. After a few minutes, the creature finally turned around, he looked adorable! “Can you tell me what are you doing here?” Amelia asked. The creature didn’t say anything, he walked away with his tiny feet and was heading towards Liam, Amelia followed him. Liam was in the living room doing chores. Suddenly, he saw this weird glowing creature standing next to him, staring at him. Liam was so terrified and didn’t know what to do. Liam did nothing but left his mouth wide open, he was speechless, he just couldn’t believe he saw this weird creature. Amelia held Liam’s hands, when Liam was just about to ask why, Amelia picked up the creature and... BOOM

Abruptly, a voice came out of nowhere, “Hello,” The voice echoed, Liam and Amelia had no idea where that voice came from. But soon they saw who it is, it’s the creature! That creature spoke, “Hello, I’m Charlie, thank you for saving me. If someone is brave enough to touch me, I can go back to my home. Now, let me bring you back home—.” Charlie didn’t get to finish talking, but something strange suddenly happened, there was a big strong light coming from nowhere.

The sharp white light shot into their eyes, they couldn’t see anything! Luckily, gradually their eyes started to recover. Amelia and Liam started to see sharp peaks and floating clouds, this is so beautiful, it’s like they were in paradise. They stood there, feeling indulged in this wonderful, lovely place. But soon, Liam and Amelia were starting to get hungry and thirsty, so they decided to find some food. Liam and Amelia walked and walked, shortly, they saw a village, they were so happy because they felt like they might get some help from there. They climbed up the peak and they finally arrived. Liam and Amelia entered the dusty old gate in front of them, expectedly, it led them into the village. The village was very quiet, there weren’t a lot of people there though.

“Huángshān sìqiān chū, sānshí’èr lián fēng. (Chinese poem written in Chinese Pinyin)” Liam and Amelia heard a man’s voice. They ran to the house where they heard the voice come from. Liam bravely walked in front of the door and knocked, “Hi? Is anyone in there?” Liam asked. “Hello,” A deep voice responded. The door slowly opened, the person behind the door looked a bit different... he had a long beard, he’s wearing a fotou (a kind of hat from the Chinese Ancient). “This man looks like someone that I saw from my Chinese book. He looks like... Li Bai...” Amelia thought. Liam thought that too, “There is no way we traveled to ancient times,” Liam thought, he wasn’t 100 percent sure though...

“I’m Li Bai.” The man said. “LI BAI!?” Amelia yelled, “What? There is no way you are Li Bai... unless...” Liam mumbled, he couldn’t believe this... Liam looked around, “this place kind of also looks like the ancient times, but— how is this possible. Did Charlie do this?” Liam pondered. Li Bai looked at these kids, “Very unique clothing.” He thought. Li Bai also felt like they were very hungry, and indeed, that’s true. Li Bai believes there was not much danger since they were kids, so he invited Liam and Amelia into his house, they saw another man, Li Bai introduced that man to them after they’ve all sat down. “This is Du Fu.”

They were both surprised. But, why were they shuttled back to ancient times? Amelia and Liam sat down with Li Bai and Du Fu, Du Fu looked at them, and asked, "Wow, umm you're clothing looks special? Where did you buy those from?" "Of course!" Amelia thought we are from the future! "We brought these clothes from a place that is very far away," Liam replied, Du Fu, smiled. Soon Li Bai told Amelia and Liam that he was going to get them some tea, he brought Du Fu with him too.

When Li Bai and Du Fu were away, Amelia and Liam walked around the house, Liam saw a very grimy old book, he saw a message saying: "Welcome, if you can read this, then that probably means that you're very special. There is a way to go back to your home, but it's your mission to find it." Liam was surprised, he immediately called Amelia to see, but after nearly 5 minutes, the text vanished. "There is a way to go home!" Amelia whispered to Liam. Liam nodded his head, but didn't seem to be that excited, "The text said we need to find the way back ourselves, what if we would never be able to go back home?"

It was night time already, both Liam and Amelia were very tired. Li Bai gave them a room and let them sleep in there. That night Amelia was very homesick and was very stressed out and worrying about not going to be able to go back home, Amelia even started crying. Liam realized and said "Don't worry! Everything's going to be alright."

The next day, they got up and packed their backpacks, Liam had also brought the old book along. They walked outside and began to explore, soon they saw a sign with unreadable characters, it was like a secret code or something. Liam suddenly took out that book he brought, he flipped the pages and Amelia came to look too. Liam started to read, "If you find the magic feather, you can go through the door. If you can't find the magic feather, you will stay here forever more..." They both looked at each other, "How are we going to be able to find it?" said Amelia. Liam opened the book again, hoping for answers, but the book didn't state anything about the feather. So not, their only hope is to find it by themselves. Amelia and Liam wandered around the forest, after a long walk, they decided to have some rest. Amelia saw a small restaurant right in front of them. "Hello there, is there a seat for two?" just when the waiter was about to say no, a familiar voice said, "They can sit here."

It was Li Bai and Du Fu. Amelia and Liam sat down and asked, "How are you? Liam and I were just wondering, have you ever heard of the magic feather?" Li Bai grinned "Of course!" Du Fu also added, "Speaking of the magic feather, do you know why we live here?" "No." "It's because I've heard that there's a cave in the forest, and if you can find it, you can shuttle through time! When Li Bai and I heard of this, both of us wanted to move here. Also, one of the trolls that lives high above the clouds told us that this place looks so magical and pretty and it is all because of the cage and the magic feather!" Woah, this conversation might be the coolest conversation Amelia and Liam had ever had! The cave, magic feathers and trolls!

Amelia and Liam finished lunch and continued the journey of finding the magic feather. Amelia hopped and ran around, and OUCH! Amelia fell down a little gap, she scraped her hand! "Ouch, it hurts!" Liam quickly carried her under a tree and let her rest. While Amelia was sitting there, something glowing was next to her. She carefully turned around, "It's—" She couldn't even talk, she was so happy! "It's the magic feather! Liam, it's the magic feather! Liam was so happy too! Liam picked up the feather and suddenly, a sign appeared right in front of them, "It's the sign we saw, but we can read the words on it!" The sign showed them the way to the cave, not even 30 minutes later and they had arrived. "IT'S THE CAVE". They both shouted, they ran into the cave and a sharp white light shot into their eyes, just like before. Charlie started to appear, "Phew, I thought I'll never see you again, sorry, when I was about to go, I accidentally pressed the "shuttle to ancient times" button, hehe, luckily I got to see you again." "We don't want to see you again." They made a funny face and walked away together. They arrived home safely and lived happily ever after.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF Island School, Lam, Chamon -11

“Hahaha!” laughed the Yellow Emperor joyfully. He was spinning around the yellow mountain on Luna’s back, his dragon. The yellow mountain is steep and misty. Everyone knows the legend of the Yellow mountain: A dragon lives there and sleeps all day. At night, he would come out and kidnap people. But everyone was wrong about her, Luna. She is the pet, or should I say friend of the powerful Yellow emperor who lives in the mountain. The Yellow Emperor has the power to control things like lifting something. Luna is very considerate, she always cares about the Yellow Emperor. Very surprisingly, Luna can even talk.

One late afternoon, Luna was just hanging around the mountain. Suddenly, she heard a shriek. She rushed to see what was going on. A little girl was falling from the cliff, “Whoosh!” Luna quickly carried her to prevent her from hurting. The little girl opened her eyes and saw that she was sitting on a dragon! “What’s your name?” asked Luna calmly. “Carly,” replied the girl shyly. Carly was shocked that the dragon could talk. Luna knew Carly was shocked so she gently put her on the ground and gave her some time to think. Carly smiled, “So the legend was true.” “Mm.” Nodded the dragon. “Hop on!” Carly cheerfully climbed on Luna. They flew across the sky. “Carly! Where are you?” cried Carly’s parents. Luna heard their crying, then she flew back to the tourist spot and gently put the girl down without anyone seeing. Carly beamed. She cheerfully ran back to her parents before softly patting the dragon. That night, Luna flew back to her cave and shared what happened to the Yellow Emperor. He was delighted that Luna made a new friend. “As I am getting older, I think I should be ready to crown my son too. Hmm, but my son is in Australia.” He sighed, “I need to find a person who I can trust soon”

The next day, Carly was swimming in the hotel's villa which is just beside the misty, yellow mountain. She just surprisingly thought of Luna. She whispered, “Luna? Are you there?” Looking at the sky, hoping that Luna would hear her. As usual, Luna would go out and hang out in the back of the yellow mountain. And, of course the dragon could hear her voice because of her big ears. She looked around to see if anybody was near. She flew down and shouted, “Hop on! Are you ready to go for a spin? It wouldn’t take you long. Hold tight!” They both laughed brightly as they flew across the sky.

This goes on for a week. Unfortunately, Carly needed to go back home the next day. On the other hand, the Yellow Emperor started to get worried because he thought that if he died early and hadn't crowned a person, Luna’s friend Carly might take over. She and his dragon are really good friends. On the last day that Carly was staying, when Luna was getting out from her cave to go fly with the girl again. The Yellow Emperor finally opened up to her, “I hope that I can find a suitable person who would take over my space before I die. But I am afraid that Carly might take over” said the emperor, embarrassed. “Carly, would of course not take over. But anyways, she would go back to her own country home tomorrow, so you have nothing to worry about,” smiled the dragon warmly. The Yellow Emperor was comforted and thought for a second, “Why don’t you take over for me?” Said the Emperor wishfully. “I am certainly in!” Then she flew out to spend the last day with Carly, pleased to hear that she could take over, also excited.

The following night, Carly woke up cheerfully. She was thrilled. She definitely couldn't wait for the ceremony. That morning, inside the hall of the Yellow Mountain, the ceremony began. The Yellow Emperor gave all his lifting powers to Luna and also his crown.

Can't Wait To See You.

ESF Island School, Lam, Hannah – 13

I took two steps feeling calm, wanting to see the world again. I want to remember, the water rushing down the river, the leaves rustling from a distance and the howling of the wind of Huangshan. Yes, I'm happy where I am now but I miss those whom I loved years ago. It seemed like yesterday when I was going,

Down

Down

Down

The vision of mama, my mama got smaller and smaller. I could still hear her crying as I floated through the air, like I'm flying and soaring through the world, I looked down. And I found out I wasn't flying. It took me years to realise that macaques aren't flying creatures, it took me years to find out that I wasn't able to survive that fall, and that's why I'm here.

Mama told me when you die you go up in heaven and that's what I believed. I couldn't imagine going to another place in the afterlife now. However, I do miss my mama. I approached to a tall door knocked it,

Knock

Knock

Knock

The door slowly creaked open, hundreds of different creatures (mostly human) were patiently waiting inside. I looked up to see what looked like angel, she stared at me and then smiled softly.

"How may I help you?"

I handed in forms that were required to be filled.

"I would like to visit my mother, it's my birthday today and I miss her very much."

She got her glasses on as she started reading my application. She occasionally looked back at me, after she was done reading, she got her bell out and rang it once, it was one of the most soothing I've ever heard.

"Looks like you've gotten everything that was needed, hope you'll be able to see your mother. Happy birthday and enjoy your trip little one."

I smiled. The first time since four years, I visited home. The mountains still stand as tall as ever, the river was still flowing, the wind was blowing softly and all the trees of Huangshan seemed to welcome me with open arms. I went over the oldest tree in the mountains, where I used to live with my mama. Then I saw her, she was crying like when I was falling, but she wasn't alone. A little macaque that I don't know of went over to mama.

"That's your brother you know, he would have loved you."

"Where did he go?" asked the macaque whom I presume to be my sister.

“He’s probably watching as high up there, did you know when you die you go up in heaven? He’s probably waiting for us.”

Yes I am mama.

I can’t wait to see you again.

The Yunshen of Nowhere

ESF Island School, Lau, Yee Ka – 13

“Stomp..... Stomp.....” everyone in the tavern turned their heads simultaneously at the person who was tramping on the staircases. He went into one of the rooms and slammed the door behind.

“Knock it off, young man!” someone said with irksome.

“I’m sorry!”

“My dear master, even though I asked every single pharmacy, I couldn’t find the extraordinary medicine you have told me about. I’m very sorry about that.”

Unfortunately, Master Hung was bitten by a poisonous snake in a forest with dark magic. He originally wanted to taste all the delicious dishes in the world, but he mistakenly entered the magical jungle, offended the phantom inside.

Guo Jing’s tears tangled in his eye socket, ashamed and worried. Albeit his knees were in great pain of running, he did not complain once.

“Bang!” the door flew open and an old lady appears in front of him, a taste of unique medicine smell touched his senses. She lent out her scrawny hand, went straightly towards Master Hung. Jing was vigilant to protect his master, pulled the sword out of the sheath, and held the sword in both hands. Jing swept the blade through the air and strived for her arms. At first, Jing thought that defeating a weak and skinny woman was effortless. Unexpectedly, the old lady slapped Jing’s sword effortlessly, it broke and fell on the floor. Jing felt that his hands were shaking violently, convulsing. Immediately, he realised that she was far better than Mast Hung.

“Prepare your luggage, you should be ready to go in an instant,” the old lady said.

Fog covered the viridity of nature. Feeling that the appealing view was ruined by the heavy dampness floating on the air. The weather was as cold as ice, some parts of Jing’s clothes turned into frosts, but the plants were still in full bloom. “Guo Jing, here is the Yunshen of Nowhere, be careful of your steps, I won’t save you if you trip over!” Her voice echoes through the mountains of Yunshen of Nowhere. Jing had heard of this well-known name before, thought that it was just a legend story, didn’t expect himself be in this magical place. They were getting higher and higher, a lot of magical animals Jing had never seen before came over their heads. Jing sighed with exclamation, “Maybe this is so-called fantasy land in the picture books?” Shortly after, they arrived at a paradise without coldness and dampness, but only sweet and fresh air.

From the outside of this house looked like a paradise but cosy. It had been built with brown bricks and has animal fear and skin decorations. The roof was low and rounded and was covered with grey ceramic tiles. Two small chimneys sat at the side of the house. The house itself was surrounded by grass, a huge pine tree in the centre and bushes on the borders of the plot. There was a huge room adjacent to the kitchen, which is the medicine room.

“Lie him on the bed and take warm water. I’ll take the elixirs that will cure your master.”

After nights and nights of treatments, Master Hung finally woke up from his long-drawn-out sleep. The old lady also reinforced Jing’s swordplay. At last, just right before Jing stepped out of her wooden house, he asked, “My most respectful doctor, who are you? And how do you know magic?” The old lady replied with a mysterious smile, said, “Not bad. I am the queen of Snakes. My fellows accidentally bit you because your Master dashed into their home. They bite you and I saved you, from now on, we will not owe each other. Goodbye!”

Roasted Snails

ESF Island School, Law, Vynici – 13

“Crank Creek Cronk” The sounds of my screwdriver rush through my house. I am currently making a time machine, hoping to be able to go back to the olden days to learn more about poetry and my cultural history. I am aiming to go to Huangshan to meet some well-respected poets, as I heard that quite a few live there.

“What are you doing?” asked my father.

“I’m going to ancient Huangshan, I won’t be back in a bit though. If you’re wondering what Huangshan is, it is a mountain located in the city of Huangshan, in Anhui province. It’s over 1,000 meters tall, and was formed 100 million years ago from rock formations.” I replied.

After a few days, the machine is finally done and dusted. I hop into it, with a sense of excitement rushing through my body. I am excited to learn more about poetry and the history of where I’m from.

In the blink of an eye, I am in ancient Huangshan. It is so quiet that you could hear the drop of a pin. I marvelled around the area, hoping to meet someone. While wandering, I see two men, I ask myself “are these two poets too?”. When their eyes catch me, they immediately start whispering to each other, as if I was some wild animal. I considered walking to them, but then I thought that it might make them a little uncomfortable. “Boldness” the quote by William Shakespeare just rushed through my mind, the quote that I have been remembering since I was a little child.

I take a deep breath and walk towards the two individuals.

“Hi, I am from the future. Nice to meet you, may I know your names and if you are a poet?” I asked, in mandarin, in a polite manner.

“Yes.” They hurriedly replied., looking confused. “Who are you and why do you look like this?”

“I am from the future. I live in Hong Kong and it is 2020 in my time. Have you heard of Hong Kong before?” I say as I attempt to communicate with them.

Then I watch as they both mutter something into each other’s ears and start acting as if they are considering something.

“No.” The one on the right with a beard and almond brown eyes say. “I can help you with poetry, do you want to be one of my apprentices? You can only stay for a year though, as there are quite a lot of people wanting to sign up. We will allow you to cut the wait list since you’re already here. ”

I consider for a minute and say yes to this rare opportunity.

They then lead me into a house. A grand house. When we arrived at the entrance of the house, I met a girl, tall and skinny with wavy auburn hair. Upon our arrival, she handed each of us a cup of tea.

“Gong Fu Cha. Drink” Li Bai said in a serious voice, as another lady led us into the house.

We arrived at an open area, surrounded by marble half-walls, and in the middle of the area, was a traditional chinese table. The lady then helped me into my seat, while Du Fu was ordering his maids to cook some traditional dishes.

“Yes! The traditional Chinese dishes here must be authentic!” I said to myself. The thought of boiling hot soup and marinated duck made my heart go warm.

When the dishes arrived, I stared in shock. It was a... plate of roasted snails.

It looks horrible in my opinion, but to them, it's gold. Eating the snails, they stared at it with joyous eyes, as if they had just found a puddle of water on a deserted island.

"Why aren't you eating?" They asked in curious tones.

I immediately picked up the shiny pair of chopsticks, took a deep breath and swallowed it.

After, I picked up the miniature sized teacup and drank the delicious Kung-Fu Cha, just to wash away the horrible taste of snails.

"Done." Li Bai announced in harsh tones, as his servants immediately came to pick up our dishes.

"Come with us" Du Fu told me and he followed Li Bai, who was holding the hand of the lady that we met earlier on.

Du Fu told me that she was his "Human walking stick", because he has a bad hip.

"Cucucu... KOOOO!!!"

I opened my eyes, to find that I was sweating all over. Why? It was officially two weeks since I have arrived in ancient China and I have started to get used to it. I even like snails now!

Half awake, I slowly walked into the toilet and rubbed my eyes, to see scratches all over my face. At the start, I thought that it might have just been a prank, so I threw some water onto my face.

Ow.

Ow.

When the first drip of water reached my face, it immediately brought this stinging sensation, that I have never felt before. I felt like an ant on a boiling pot!

I slipped on my coat and ran to one of Li Bai's servant's shed, and pounded on the door. When she opened the door, she greeted me with a wide friendly smile, until she saw the scratches on my face.

"Oh no! You must've gotten scratched by Sir Tai Bai's (Li Bai's courtesy name) kittens! It's okay, just put some tiger balm on and your face will be as good as new!"

She went into her shed and opened her drawer, full of mysterious Chinese medicine. After searching high and low, left and right, she presented me with a bottle of Tiger Balm. I remember seeing this in Hong Kong, but the packaging just looks a tad different. I poked my finger into the bottle and got some tiger balm, and slowly rubbed it onto my vulnerable face.

"Thank you!" I said gratefully to the old septuagenarian lady.

"Go back into your room now! Take a rest until it is breakfast time, breakfast time starts when Sir Tai Bai wakes up. I will come around and knock on the doors when it is time!" She screamed, when I was already a few meters away from her shed.

It was breakfast time, and an assortment of Chinese foods were served. Today, it was Chicken Congee, Choy Sum with soy sauce made from a secret recipe, steamed fish, Chinese fried noodles, crispy spring rolls and a pot of steaming oolong tea. I chose a spot on the marble table, and greeted Li Bai, Du Fu and his "Human Walking Stick" called Xiu Ying. bp

"EAT!" Li Bai exclaimed.

We immediately picked up our chopsticks and started eating. Mmm, the taste the fried noodles is scrumptious, nothing like the ones in modern Hong Kong. Don't get me started about the crispy spring rolls, they are legendary.

While eating, I felt guilty that I wasn't giving anything back for their kind help towards me. From the gorgeous chinese cottage to the delicious food to the precious knowledge that they have taught me. I decided that at the end of this year, I will go back to Hong Kong and buy some presents and deliver them over.

After eating, I returned to my cottage and lay in the soft bed, thinking of what to do before my poetry session at 2:00pm. According to LiBai's helpers, I am going to have another poetry session with Li Bai and Du Fu! How exciting.

Life here has been beyond perfect, it feels like I have ran away from all my responsibilities in modern Hong Kong! I mean, being the forgotten child and being placed in a Village school while your brothers all go to a prestigious school is quite sad isn't it?

It is 1:45, and I wake up to a stinging pain in my foot! When I look down at my foot, I see one of Li Bai's assistants binding my foot together with threads and needles. I was so wrong about what I said before! Life isn't great right now!

"STOP" I screamed on the top of my voice, hoping that they would release me from all this pain.

"Sorry girl, its too late. Sir Tai Bai ordered us to do it, and its too late to let the stitches out. You're going to have to deal with the pain." She said, without any empathy at all.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I stare at the drips of blood slowly leaving my vulnerable body. I can't bear with this anymore.

Suddenly, I feel my entire body go cold and my vision gets blurry.

"Wh-wh-aa-t"

The Mountains Mist

ESF Island School, Lepine, Alfredo – 11

PART ONE: THE DARK

Yellow clouds beside the walls; crows near the tower.
Flying back, they caw, caw; calling in the boughs.
In the loom she weaves brocade, the Qin river girl.
Made of emerald yarn like mist, the window hides her words.
She stops the shuttle, sorrowful, and thinks of the distant man.
She stays alone in the lonely room, her tears just like the rain.
– Li Bai

Alone in a room, a woman crying, my mum. Father had left a week ago and it hit us hard. Obviously my mum is upset, but I say good riddance; he was a mean, old, abusive man. We are struggling, he paid the bills so now we're heating our noodles in a 7/11 microwave. I have to do my homework in the dark.

Oh! Where are my manners! I am Chun, Chun Long! I live in Huangshan City! It's not the most amazing of cities but it's my home. I know every nook and cranny. I know the best Bubble Tea spots here, and everyone knows me; mostly just to pick on me. See, I'm a short, nerdy kid with divorced parents; there isn't a living being in the universe who wouldn't get bullied with those stats.

When I'm older I want to work for the Chinese National Space Agency. I'm not that keen on flying through the cosmos, drifting in that eternity of darkness; that sounds scary and awful. I want to be a scientist so when the crew returns from Mars I can examine the rocks and alien fossils they bring back. According to my calculations, something is moving those Martian molecules, and I want to know what it is – even if it's aliens. My classmates make fun of my interests there as well – little do they know I explore the vast emptiness of space as a hobby to get away from the vast emptiness of space in their heads.

Today I'm sitting in the back of my bus, my class is going to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor. Of course the jerks in my school found a way to corrupt the name so now everyone is calling this historic site “the mountain of the wee emperor” I think that “joke” shows you what I'm working with here (although secretly I smiled at that, not just the colour reference but also the mountain is pretty small and I wondered if the Emperor himself was short as well – the joke, unknown to them, actually works well on many levels!).

The bus stops and since the clowns at the front didn't wear their seatbelts, most of them slammed into the chair in front of them. Look, I consider myself a good kid, but they have put me through hell and I think it's fair that I can get a good laugh in when their idiocy comes back to bite. They must have heard me because under their bruised foreheads they are giving me the death glare. I think I'm safe since there's a teacher here so they can't make me dunk my head in a toilet, at least until we get back to school.

Before we started our mountain hike our teacher Ms Ting shouted
“We will have lunch first, if you forgot your lunch I have rice and tea!”

Ms Ting is the nicest. and the reason I don't have to bring weapons to school for protection. I sit down on a bench and unpack my lunch. My mum used to make my lunches but with my dad leaving she barely has the energy to stand, so I made me and my mum's lunch. I don't have the internet anymore to teach me since we can't afford it, but I have some old cook books from my mum's collection. I made me and my mum some ‘gaifan’. That translates to “covered rice”. It's rice with a little meat and vegetables and what we have every day – sometimes with only veggies.

I sit down and eat my lunch, quietly dreaming about being a scientist when I see some shadows and judging by the sounds of stupidity, I'm guessing it's the bullies. Remember when I said they would just hurt me when we got back? I was wrong. Ms Ting was helping other kids sort out their lunch so they were free to attack. They chased me into the mountains, didn't look back, I didn't want to get socked in the face, I ran and ran. I came to a stop and looked around, I didn't know where I was. And then I slipped and I banged my head on a rock. All I saw after that... All there was... was The Dark.

PART TWO: THE LIGHT

Before my bed, the moon is shining bright,
I think that it is frost upon the ground.
I raise my head and look at the bright moon,
I lower my head and think of home.
— Li Bai

I was the boy lowering his head. All I see is dark. My eyes are too heavy to open. Until I hear a voice, Soft and gentle but commanding enough for me to wake up.

“Young one, the sun has blossomed in the sky. Awake with it”

I get up and look around and see little specks of light floating in the air in what seems to be a limestone cave. I look to my right where I see an old man sitting by a large iron pot over a fire.

“Would you like some soup?” he asks me as he hands me a bowl.

I didn't finish my lunch so I was starving and took the bowl.

“Who are you?”

“I am Li Bai” the old man said.

I thought to myself “that's impossible! He died centuries ago!”. He must have sensed my confusion, he explained that we were in the spiritual realm. When he saw my disbelief he got up and gestured me outside. When I saw what was out there I couldn't deny it, even though I knew it had to be a dream. It was like the sun had been smeared across the sky. The mountains were more green than ever and there were men with long beards who looked like old time philosophers or poets as far as the eye could see, as well as a few strange looking animals. The water below was clear and like glass. I looked back at Li Bai and he was smiling.

“Thank you Li Bai but I would like to go home,” I said. Li Bai spoke in a more serious tone.

“You can't go home until you have beaten your demons. Young one, your head is limitless but your heart is holding you back. Family, school, money, everything. If you want to go home, you must conquer the things that chain you down.”

He handed me a sword and walked me up the highest peak. This place, he says, is where I will conquer my demons. A few seconds later I spotted something rushing towards me, flying gracefully through the air. It was crimson red and had scales like a lizard and two yellow horns. When I realised what was rushing towards me it had already knocked me off my feet. It was a dragon!

“Try again young Chun, your demons can only hurt you if you allow them to, you must beat them.”

Every time I got back up, it hit me again and again and again. While it was rushing towards me for the 100th time I thought about life, my parents, school, how I was feeling. I threw my sword to the water down below and raised my hand. The dragon stopped just centimeters from my face.

“You are ready, young Chun, like your name, You're pure” spoke Li Bai. The dragon breathed fire on me and I woke up in my bed.

No flying lights or dragons to be seen! I was home.

“Chun, you're awake!” it was my mum,

she told me that I slipped on a rock so Ms Ting took me home.

“Mum... if you need any help I'm here for you.”

She smiled and hugged me. After she left my room I felt something in my pocket, I pulled it out and all I saw was lint but something shiny caught my eye. It was a token with a dragon on it, and a note “be pure Chun, you're a bright sun –Li Bai”.

I can do this, I am Chun Long, I can do anything!

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF Island School, Leung, Chloe – 11

Frost filled my lungs as I gasped for air, my feet were numb and my legs heavy. The cold was starting to bite at my fingers and toes, making every step painful. I wrapped my mother's scarf around my neck, again and again, hoping my mother's smell would overcome the cold. I fell to the snowy ground as my knees gave in on me, the snow was slowly seeping into the thin trousers that I wore and sent shivers down my spine, but all I could think about was the scarf. I needed to savour this moment, the sweet woody smell my mother had, the mesmerising pattern of the scarf she always wrapped around my neck, the fluffy ends of it brushing against my face, I had to savour it all. When I finally gathered the strength to stand, I stuffed the scarf into my pocket and plodded to our little wood cabin deep within the mountains.

I carefully creaked the door open and tiptoed inside, when my dad came out of my room, file in hand, my body froze as my tired eyes recognized that file. "WHAT DID I TELL YOU? I TOLD YOU THAT YOU WERE NOT ALLOWED TO KEEP THAT **FILTHY ANIMAL'S** THINGS! CANT YOU JUST FOLLOW BASIC INSTRUCTIONS?" His hand slashed across my face, narrowly missing my eyes. His blunt nails dug into my wrist as he dragged me to the closet. My vision became blurry as my back hit the mouldy closet. He slammed the doors and fastened lock after lock after lock. I moved closer to the crack in the closet door and saw him throw the brown paper file on the ground, he took something out of his pocket and chirp.

I dropped to the ground, my hand squeezing my mouth shut, tears started rolling down my face. I tried not to make a sound as I sobbed, the ashes started to fill my lungs as I panted for air. I heard my father walk out of the room, then the voices started coming in again.

You knew he was going to find it one day

As many nights passed, the sorrow I once held slowly turned into pure anger. I never tried to get out of the closet, but this time, I felt the emotions take charge of me. I desperately searched my pockets for anything I could use when I found a stone, a rather large one in fact. I hesitantly put the stone against the closet side, I shut my eyes to drown out the thoughts. I took a deep breath and smashed the stone into the closet side. The weak bug-ridden wood broke free, the frosty air filled my lungs again, this time, it felt relieving. I put the scarf around my neck before catching an image of my mother from the corner of my eye, I turned around to see a torn picture of my mother sitting on top of the pile of ashes. My eyes welled up with tears and my mouth formed a smile for the first time in a while. I looked up to the clock, "3:30 pm" it read, Father would normally be downtown, getting drunk with his friends or hooking up with women of various ages. With that in mind, I crept into the kitchen, stuffing a couple jars of food, a flask of water, a blanket, a fishing rod and a change of clothes into my basket. I heaved the basket onto my back and put a box of matches, a knife and a couple of copper coins into my pocket. I stepped out of the back door with a sigh and looked back at the only home I ever had, knowing I would never see it again.

I ran to the foot of the mountain and saw the lake my father and I used to fish at. *No, you don't need to think about him.* I nodded in agreement and set foot on the mountain. At first, my pace quickened but soon, my legs and lungs reminded me of how difficult the Huang Shan was to climb. Or how weak you are. I regained my breath and continued to climb up the mountain at a steady pace, I needed to get as far away as I could. I climbed up and up that mountain until nightfall, my body was screaming for rest but my mind was paranoid. I sat down beside a tree and rummaged through my pockets, I fished the scarf out of it and wrapped it around my neck. The warmth slowly made its way to every inch of my body, relaxing my muscles that I didn't even know were tense. I felt my paranoia dissipate and soon I found myself unravelling my beige blanket and taking shelter underneath a cave. I looked up into the cracks of the cave and allowed myself to be mesmerised by the stars as I drifted off to sleep.

"Mama? " I yawned, "Where are you and Kang Kang going?"

"Shhh Xi Feng, you can't wake Papa up, right?" my mum whispered. "Me and Kang Kang are going on a little trip okay?"

"Take me with you!" I begged

"I can't"

"Why not?"

My mum hesitated. She said nothing and hoisted Kang Kang onto her back, his jet black hair rubbing on my mum's shirt.

"I'll be back soon," she said as she closed her bag.

"I'll come back and get you, okay? I promise. Hold on to my scarf while I'm gone, okay?"

She handed me her scarf and walked out of the house. She stopped and gave me a sad smile, her emerald eyes twinkled in the moonlight as she whispered,

"I love you"

My eyes shot open at the sound of my mother's voice, "Mama?!" My face relaxed as I recognised the rocky walls. My eyes teared up at the thought of her, I wiped away my tears and tried to get up but I was interrupted my tummy growling. In defeat, I started making some rice. I gobbled down the rice quicker than I ever had before and ventured out of the cave. I lugged my legs through the knee-deep snow, wincing every time the snow bit at my toes. The edges of my vision blurred and I could hear my heart desperately forcing out blood. The floor swayed beneath my feet until a blood-curdling scream shook me awake. I ran towards the scream, to see a boy's leg being ripped into shreds.

My face paled as a pair of emerald eyes locked with mine.

The Fog Guide

ESF Island School, Leung, Kelly – 13

'Fogs, the ancestors of the forest and our map, they are the spirits that shall guide you home.' As elder Yu finished off his daily tales of legends. As Leah slowly stood up and took a big stretch, she looked out from the wooden barred windows, a glimpse of light shone through the gaps of pine trees and the high pointed mountains, birds chirping away, welcoming the new day in Gu Mu village. Gu Mu village, a village only well known to a few and a small populated village hidden high up in the mountains. The bright beam emerged over the hills, waking up the villagers in Gu Mu village to prepare for the day ahead of them.

While adults and teenagers held baskets and hooks ready to farm and harvest the wheat, the children went to the elder's hut to start school. Following the lead of adults at the far back was 13 years old Leah who was clenching the metal hook given to her. This was her first day on the field and she was rather nervous. She had never worked on the fields before worrying that she wasn't physically capable of finishing the job. But then, two familiar voices echoed through her head saying 'It's not about how much you do, it's about how much passion and effort you put in!'. Remembering these sincere words, she lifted her head and took a deep breath and caught up with the others.

As she looked back, she saw the village's children running outside to play after having a class, reminding Leah herself of the times where she played hide and seek with her friends as well. Whilst cutting the wheat, she looked around her and realized that the fog was starting to slowly surround the village. Looking at the fog, it reminded Leah of her childhood since when she was young she would always hide in the fog as well. Reminding herself of the times in the past just gave her a sense of joy motivating herself to continue working.

As time passed quickly, Leah and the others working on the field were told to return to help prepare dinner. Slicing up a radish in a circle, Leah looked far out, the sun was slowly fading away into the horizon and into the woods. No one seemed to realize that the sounds of screams and laughter were missing. Fearing for the worst, Leah sliced up the final pieces of radish and went into the hut to fetch her silk string bag, putting in water for herself and some emergency snacks. Pulling on the two strings to close the bag, she tied on the eternal knot ornament with bells on her bag for good luck. She went into the storage room planning to steal a torch, but at the entrance of the storage room was elder Yu, holding a lit torch. He passed it to Leah and nodded at her, showing his confidence in her. She nodded her head to Elder Yu and promised to bring the children back. Leah slowly and carefully sneaked out of the village and into the fog.

Leah was confident that she could bring the children back since she knew the different hidden spots of the children – right at the top of Huang Shan since there were more pine trees and it takes longer for the seeker to walk up to find the hiders. It was easy at first since the path was flat, the fog was still faint and Leah still had a lot of stamina, but as she got closer and closer to the peak, the road became steep, the fog got more packed. Leah was starting to lose her sense of direction. She had drunk all the water and ate all the food she brought already and didn't have much to fuel herself up.

The flame on the torch was slowly turning dimmer and dimmer and her feet started to get heavier and heavier. She couldn't take another step anymore as she slowly collapsed. Before she could fall face flat on the ground, a mysterious force held up Leah, it was a cloud of fog, it was under Leah and preventing her from falling. Leah was in shock and was amazed by how the legends were real. She dazed in awe as the fog got bigger and bigger into a tiny couch and slowly moved up the hill as if the fog already knew where she was planning to go. The ride was slow but enjoyable. Whilst going up, Leah was able to see the sunrise up and see all of the yellow mountains, oh how tall they stood as they separated the clouds that hit against them. The mountains were like columns of rocks stuck together to make one big masterpiece. Leah was above the clouds, unable to see the foot of the mountains nor the village. It was a breathtaking view not one could see in their lives. Not long, the fog stopped at the peak at a tiny house. Leah was confused about why the fog would bring there but thinking it should have brought her there for a reason, she went into the house to investigate.

The door to the house was left ajar, thinking that it was abandoned she slowly walked it. To Leah's horror, she saw the children all stuck in a big spider web, she quickly ran to the children, and using the hook that she found beside the door, she cut through the web and freed the children. She got all the children and was about to set off to run back to the village, but something was in their way, the big spider demon. 'You aren't going anywhere, you are put there to starve and be food for me and my babies.' The children got scared and hid behind Leah, Leah holding on to her hook and devising a plan to slice off all the spider's legs then running away, she went on a full charge and was about to attack the spider. But at the same time, the ornament on Leah's bag started to glow and bright white golden lights started to spread like soundwaves and the spider demon was trying to resist the force but it was too strong for her that she vanished into thin dust. But even after the demon was slayed, the ornament continued to glow. The waves from the ornament were so bright that Leah couldn't resist and blacked out from the bright light.

'...6...7...9...10 Ready or not here I come!' It was a younger version Leah and she was running around in the field playing hide and seek with the other children. Leah was hiding behind a pine tree and she was trying not to get caught but when she stepped back, her foot slipped and made a loud 'THUD!'. The seeker who was named Jack found her and they both giggled.

Hearing the different sounds of children giggling, Leah woke up to see the house vanished and the children surrounding her. She was relieved and hugged all the children. Leah looked back to the fog and bowed in respect in a show of thanks and asked, 'How did you know I was looking for them?' The fog went though Leah and the children's leg and bells started ringing. It was the ornament that I brought with me and the same bells as what one of the children had sewed to their vest. Leah sighed in relief, glad that she brought the bells with her as well.

Now all Leah had to do was to bring them back to the village, but she feared was going to lose them. She had an idea, Leah rang the bell that was on her ornament, and a gush of fog swept towards Leah and the children. Leah hesitantly asked the fog 'Do you mind...bringing us back to our village?' For a moment, the fog didn't move, but then suddenly both Leah and children were quickly scooped up by the fog and took the slow journey back.

When we arrived at the forest, the pine trees stood tall blocking the sunlight from entering. The fog separated and Leah and all children landed safely. Leah and the children bowed down to the fog in thanks and the fog swiftly flowed back into the woods. Looking at each other, they ran back to the village. All the villagers were glad that they could see the children and hugged them in their embrace. Leah ran to her parents and hugged them as well apologizing for sneaking out without telling them. After hugging her parents she hurriedly ran to elder Yu and said 'IT'S ALL TRUE, the fog spirits are real!' Elder Yu said 'Calm down my child. Come to my hut and let me hear your story'. Leah was slowly led into the hut for a cup of tea and her bewildering tale.

The Most Important Thing in the World

ESF Island School, Liu, Ho Yan – 12

“Don’t you just ever feel curious? Are there any secrets lurking in these mountains? What IS our destiny?”

“Oh, Mei, why do you worry so much? These mountains are just very old and ancient, people don’t know much about it. I think it’s just pure luck we live here, it’s nothing really.”

Mei and Jade lived on the cliff tops in a mysterious village in the HuangShan mountains above the rolling clouds, the ones filled with magic were a brush from the grass could send magic scattering all over the floor, and each stone step was more than a thousand years old. This place was magical, this place was home.

“It is time, Jade, the truth and destiny of our family will not wait. Your great great great grandfather, the great poet came here to seek more than refuge,” Mother gripped Jade tight, her expression begging for acknowledgement, “he sought the most important thing in the world, and now it is passed down to you. It is your destiny to find the answer, as the generations before have failed.” Jade’s heart filled with flickering hope and *trouvaile*, “I won’t fail you mother, this is my destiny.”

The morning wind blew through the windows, welcoming the day for adventure. Mother had packed the things required, the pack strapped to Jade’s back was unproportionate to her body, like the boulder on a tortoise. Jade sets off down the rocky path of the mountain, the murky road lay ahead of her, so she set off the obvious path, she didn’t even look back.

Walking down the clear path of the mountains, the fresh air awakening her to her senses, Jade hearing the soft chatter and the jingle of bells.

“We’re down here!” A voice calls, angelic like and pure, like no voice Jade had heard before. Peering down at an awkward angle, Jade realized that the sounds were produced by the grass at the ground, sprouting out from the rock and filling the gaps and creases of the mountains. Filled once again with the hope spreading from her chest she speaks, bewildered to what the grass would say,

“I am on a mission to find the most important thing in the world, do you know what it is?” The girl still half determined this was just a daydream. The jingle proved her wrong, harmonious in an answer, as if they knew she would ask this in the first place,

“We believe the most important thing in the world is strength in numbers. Just like us, we look, sound and think the same, and like this we are stronger!” The grass patch erupted in giggles, like music to Jade’s ear, almost hypnotizing, but she shook her head,

“You all strive to be the same, decreasing your own value,” Jade took a step, the soft crunch from her foot wilting the green pasture, “It is important to be yourself, be unique, be yourself.”

The earth rumbled beneath Jade, slow vibrations could be felt each step she took on the rocky path. The road ahead became less of trees and soil, the weather parched and dry, as if she was now in the Sahara Desert. A flat rocky surface lay behind the terrain, a dark cave looming by the mountainside. Rumbles and snores echoed from the mouth of the cave, and Jade knew she was close to something big.

Peering from the opening of the cave, the girl spoke to the darkness,

“Hello? Is anyone there?” The only answer coming from the cave seemed to be the constant dripping of water, but before she could say anything else, a rumble shook, deep and powerful, the image of a monster flickered across Jade’s mind, but the beast that emerged seemed a hundred times more vivid and momentous than anything she’s seen before, feeling as if she was a grain of dust compared to the dragon that now stood next to her, letting out a great yawn that shook down the leaves like droplets of rain.

“Who has summoned me from my million year slumber?” Its voice was lazy and low like a grumble, its eyelids barely open as the moss covering its scales and talons seem to look green as ever. Trying her best to accustom to the dragon’s colossal size, it seemed impossible as every shift or movement it had, the dragon seemed to grow larger.

“Hello, dragon, I apologize for waking you. I just have to ask, what is the most important thing in the world?” Her question was simple and quick, not wanting to bother, knowing she would be gone in a million years, and to the dragon, it would all be just a quick nap. The dragon’s voice was scaly and dry, opposite to its unbothered mood a few seconds ago.

"I believe the most important thing in the world is secrecy, when you keep to yourself, the treasure you possess belongs to you and only you." It's thick tree-like talons waddled over to it's cave, it scooped a handful of rubies and pearls, cascading down on Jade. The young girl laughed, shaking her head,
"You know the value of your possessions, but how much is it actually worth if you do not show it to the world?"
The beast shrugged it's heavy shoulders, as Jade tried to hide her disappointment from the enormous creature. The beast crawled into the cave, consuming the dark hole with its mass. Patting its snout painstakingly as she stepped closer to its ears,
"See you in a million years..."

After days of walking in circles, Jade's hope began draining slowly, the days began to accommodate her, slowly beginning to get colder and more dreadful.
A green moore stretched at the front of her sight, trees waving in the wind. She decided she would stay under a big willow for refuge, where the long leaves cascading down would block the tantruming cold. Laying underneath the great big willow, her eyes grew heavy, as she let the sleep consume her, not knowing the reason why.
As her eyes fluttered open, the moores lay in front of her, and she knew something was different. Looking behind her, the great big willow vanished into thin air,
"Hello, Jade." A voice slipped into her ear, as she turned around to face it. A woman wearing a blood red dress stood, her dress adorned with roses. Her presence seemed welcoming, she was the spirit of the great willow tree.
"What is the most important thing in the world?" Jade asked, her voice coming out in a whisper, as if her voice itself seemed intimidated by this holy being. The spirit seemed satisfied with her question, and in a blink of an eye, a few more spirits appeared, their features having the same calm expression, but each one different.
The spirit walked up to the girl, her high pitched voice surreal like a melody by a nightingale.
"The answer is simple, one you already know." The spirit pointed to her heart,,
"I do?" The spirit nodded, anticipation surging through the girl's small body.
"Although we do not possess the common treasures others want we do have one thing..."
"What is it?" eagerness and desire overwhelmed Jade, this was the moment she found out.
"It's love and family." The spirits concluded together in harmony, "Our love as sisters dig deep into our roots, our family may not be big or strong, but we help each other up, and that's what helped us exist through these millions of years." Jade's expression sunk, the answer wasn't what she expected nor wanted, and the spirits could see this.
"Jade, why did you go on this mission in the first place? Who was it for?" The red spirit questioned, her eyes sparkled, like she knew the answer already, and she did.
"My family,"

Her eyes flickered open, the field lay in front of her, the willow tree on her back, the wind whistling in and out of her ear. It was all a dream? A single red rose, the blood red reflecting off the drab trunk of the tree, the petals delicate, yet the thorns present and piercing, one that wasn't there mere moments ago, she was sure of it.
"Love and family..." Jade mumbled.

The small hut above the clouds stood at the peak of the mountain, one that seemed distant, yet familiar, she finished her task.
Mother and Mei bound forward and smothering Jade in a tight embrace.
"So, did you find out the answer?" obvious excitement hinting in her voice as Jade stepped into the all too familiar room. Looking out her window, a flicker of red barely escaped her sight, as soft giggles and lazy snores seemed to play in her ear. Instantly knowing who, she answered, her adventure playing in her mind all over again, her mind telling her it was all fake, but her heart knew otherwise,
"I did."

Diary of a Poet

ESF Island School, Narayanan, Vijay Sathappan – 12

January 4th, 1947

The sun shines its golden rays on the mountains ahead. Around me, air is so fragile, like a baby, yet it is heavy with my dreams and aspirations. Huge waterfalls dribble down, the crashing sounds on the stone echoes across the huge land, breaking the silence of the morning. As the sun looms from the mountains, so the people of the land. They embark from their village houses, their views looking like tiny ants from my humble abode. With their small vessels, they wade through the seas, their ever-sharp eyes looking out for salmon and trout.

After my daily dose of herbal tea, I jump down, the wind whistling in my ears. I dive down in the crystal water, it is time to take my routine daily bath. After swimming for a few meters, I spot my friend, Loi-Wei.

He calls me up into his tiny fishing boat and I readily jump on, seeking some warmth. He passes me one of fishing rods, asking me to fish. I take it wearily. The Government has started cutting down land, and the rivers are getting smaller. All the fishermen in the village rely on one another to fish and feed the village. That is what I like about Huangshan. It is a community, not divided, not survival of the fittest. I bade goodbye to Loi-Wei and race across the branches and vines, back to my humble abode.

I strolled through the market today, my daily poem completed. Li-Jien, the butcher pulled me aside and told me that he saw a few white men.

“I think that they will soon invade our land, Li-Bai!” he says, with an air of frenzy, *“You must be careful!”* But then smiling he says *“But, maybe they do not want to harm us.”* Stopping to take a breath, he further continues in his preamble. *“I have seen one of them is a poet” “Who knows, perhaps you may like them.”*

This reminded me of my quest in finding an apprentice. With a spring in my step, I climb up the mountains. As I climb, I see a fire burning nearby. The Burnings of the New Year has started. A festival to burn the old things and start a new year. We have to burn the old things in our house, to create space for new things. The festival is largely celebrated here, especially on top of the DuZhu Mountain, a mountain known for its religious symbolism. Legend has it that the God of Light, Ma Zhi, defeated the God of Death, Tu Ren, from destroying the world on the same mountain. Till date, DuZhu is used for the Burnings of the New year, to mark the coming of light over darkness, or new over old. I must hurry up to my hut and change for the festival. I hope I notice the white men there as well.

January 31st, 1947

I have waited a long time for my fabled ‘white poet’. I must find him. I need one person to pass down my knowledge. In a changing world, where poetry is a dying art, somebody needs my knowledge. It is fine for Du Fu, he has his son. But me? The villagers, although they respect my art, do not want to learn it. They think that their day-to-day jobs are much more profitable. Poetry takes a lot of time to learn, like any other art, practice makes perfect. They enjoy reading the poem, but do not want to learn it. I asked around, but people either shut their doors when they see me, or make an excuse. It is hard, being a poet.

My father used to say that soldiers in the army had to learn poetry. It was important that a soldier knew how to stay calm during times of war. For that, poetry was needed. I used to be fascinated by my father’s teaching. By day, he taught the soldiers, and by night, he taught me. He was an excellent poet, that is, until he was killed by the Japanese.

I have heard that the white man is a poet. He will be the perfect apprentice for me.

Each day passes in the same, dull manner, a repetitive routine. I draw men in the wet mud, my inspiration for poetry having completely gone. Li-Jien says he has not seen the monsters for days. I even tried asking my rival, Du Fu for help. But the vile idiot refused, shutting his door on me.

I hope that he will come soon. Only if he comes, can I pass my vast knowledge on to someone. Poetry is a dying art, a treasure that only few possess. I have heard that the Government is planning to cut down villages in China and transform them into pesticide factories.

Imagine that! The beautiful village of Huangshan into a pesticide factory! It breaks my heart to imagine that the beautiful rivers of Huangshan will soon be a black death, floating with the corpses of innocent animals.

I look out the horizon, seeing the beautiful rays of the sun, keeping the tiny flicker of hope safely inside my heart.

March 4th, 1947

I have lost all hope in the comings of the white poet. It has been two months since I last heard of him. I have restarted my poetry. Du Fu has taken advantage of my lethargy, and started writing more and more, making more money, yes, but more importantly, winning the trust of the villagers.

I, once considered the god of poetry, am now reduced to a poor man. I begin writing, but I am devoid of inspiration and each poem ends up being worse than the last. My friends have ignored me and the village has disregarded me. I try to earn back their trust, but in vain. I know it is wrong to be like this. But my brain is failing me, and I need an heir to my knowledge.

That is all for today. My failures today have made me lethargic to even write a proper diary entry.

March 5th, 1947

The white poet has arrived today. My dreams have come true. I regretted not learning English years back, my laziness now showing its consequences. I could only barely keep up with the white's speed of language. But my writing proficiency is exemplary, and I showed him my poems. He then started speaking in Chinese, a huge relief for me. As we chatted, I realized I did not know my guest's name.

He introduced himself as Jack Keroauc. His poems mainly consisted of surreal events, full of crazy dreams and sightings. His poems are amazing, heavily contrasting with my poems, which tell of the usual happenings in life.

We continued chatting for a long time, until he shared one of his poems, which he translated into Chinese. It was breathtakingly beautiful, so amazing, that I cannot find the proper words to describe it. I begged him to remain here for a few days. He readily accepted, leaving me for a short time to get his supplies. When he came back, I cooked a meal of boiled rice and chicken meat. Under the moonlight, we shared stories and ideas. I hope, diary, that we, together, can help each other out. Me with my inspiration and him with his consistency. His poems are good, but it does not have the same style throughout. His collection is a mess, with everything all over the place. I look forward to teaching him.

March 5th, 2000

It has been a long, long time since Jack left. The once peaceful village of Huangshan has now turned into a war zone, the screeching sound of cars and motorbikes becoming common on streets. Nobody here has respect for poetry anymore. Children tease me on streets, even dogs turn away when I have come. I have turned old, the effects of living for over a hundred years can do something to a man. My end is near, I can feel it in my bones. I cannot even write properly, even the smallest sentences can wear me out.

I can only write one more sentence, I feel as if I will soon meet Death....

March 7th, 2013 (Jack Kerouac's Diary)

I have come back to visit my dear friend in China. I cross streets and climb steep branches to reach my friend's humble hut.

I come in, a scene of grotesque horror meets me. My friend is sprawled on the bamboo mat, a piece of scrap paper, eaten by dust lying near him.

I cross my friend's body, holding back tears. Has nobody bothered to take his body out. But strangely, there is no scent from him. No flies are present above him, the hut smelling of the usual violet flowers. A serene look is over his face, his forgotten body lying in a changed world. I pick up the paper near him. On the paper is written one word

'Bloom'

The Mysteries of Yellow Mountain

ESF Island School, Ngan, James – 11

Yellow Mountain is a mysterious place. It is a ginormous mountain with a lot of fog covering it. Many fossils of dinosaurs have been discovered there and scientists find many new species on Yellow Mountain. Yellow Mountain is also very steep and dangerous.

Oliver is a skilled and experienced mountain climber. He wants to climb Yellow Mountain and discover its secrets. Rumors are that a pack of fierce wolves live up the mountain. Oliver is a young mountain climber who climbs mountains all around the world. His mother and father also loved to mountain climb and brought Oliver around the world with them on their travels.

Oliver loves adventures and will attempt the challenge of climbing Yellow Mountain. Yellow Mountain is a dangerous place. Oliver heads off to China. During the 14 hour flight, Oliver checked his equipment such as the clothing, first aid kit, food..... Oliver is prepared. He will climb with his friend, Tom, who also loves hiking. Tom was already in China waiting for him. His friend has climbed countless mountains with him. After arriving in China, Oliver and Tom drove a car to Yellow Mountain where their journey will begin.

Oliver and Tom slowly walked up the mountain, it was very steep and took a long time to walk a short distance. An hour passes by and Oliver and Tom have only walked a bit. They had their lunch break and continued walking up the steep mountain. Oliver and Tom are exhausted and using a lot of energy. Oliver and Tom are very tired. They continue going up the mountain seeing fewer and fewer people the higher they went. Finally, after 5 hours, they reached the top of the mountain and were presented with a spectacular view. Not many people are up on the top of the mountain, because it is 4 pm and most people have returned home. After staying up at the top of Yellow Mountain for 30 minutes, Oliver and Tom decided to leave and rest in their hotel. They walked down the mountain while it was turning dark.

They slowly went down the mountain, it was getting darker and darker. Oliver and Tom walked quickly because it was getting dark and they wanted to go to the hotel. Suddenly, a wolf burst out of nowhere. They were shocked and scared. The wolf was very fierce and growled angrily. Oliver used his hiking stick to defend himself. The wolf used its teeth to grab hold of the stick. Oliver was forced to let go of the hiking stick. Tom opened his backpack and found a map of Yellow Mountain. He started to try and find other routes to get back down the mountain. After finding another way down, Oliver and Tom ran for their lives taking the new route down. After running down the new route, they met more fierce wolves, this time so many more than just one. Oliver was terrified and Tom started to panic. Tom used his hiking stick to distract them, he threw it and all the wolves started looking at the hiking stick. Oliver and Tom slowly backed off. They were trapped on the mountain. They still had some food to last a while, so they went back up to the top of the mountain. Tom took out some things that might help them to fight off the wolves. He had rope, they found some tree branches and some stones. Oliver and Tom quickly found some long branches and used them as swords. They each picked up a lot of small stones which they could throw at the wolves. They rested for a small while to get themselves ready. They slowly walked down the mountain, keeping their guard up. A wolf jumped out and growled in front of them. Tom threw some stone pebbles at the wolf, which made it angry. The wolf charged towards Oliver, he dodged the attack and used his tree branch to stop the wolf from fighting him. Tom escaped and Oliver followed him. The wolf was chasing them but couldn't catch up since wolves can't run very long distances for a long time. They lost the wolf in a short time. They had to climb across a cliff to reach the other side of the mountain. While they were climbing, wolves appeared on the other side of Yellow Mountain. They decided to go back but there were wolves on both sides of them now. Oliver used his stone pebbles to throw at the wolves. Oliver had excellent aim and hit some wolves in the eyes so they could no longer see. Oliver and Tom seized this opportunity and ran down the mountain. The wolves chased them and suddenly, they found themselves at a dead end. The wolves were slowly reaching them. Oliver, thinking quickly, decided to attack the biggest wolf, so the other wolves would be scared of them. Oliver attacked by using his stick to hit the wolf. Tom distracted the wolves by throwing more stones. Oliver then tied up the largest wolf. The other wolves ran towards the wolf that was tied up and bit on the rope to try to save it. Oliver and Tom ran, following the map towards another route down the mountain.

It was 2am in the morning and Oliver and Tom were still on the mountain. The wolves chased them a few times and they escaped them. They were now inside a cave and had covered up the entrance with some larger rocks so the wolves wouldn't be able to get in. They decided to wait until morning to begin fighting off the wolves again.

The wolves were biting and smashing the large rocks at the entrance in vain. Oliver and Tom were preparing for the fight. They planned out the whole fight. They found an exit to the cave, but it was very deep and Oliver and Tom couldn't fit through the back exit. At 6am, Oliver threw three rocks out of the cave. The rocks did not hit any of the wolves but the wolves turned their heads to see what happened. The second the wolves turned away, Oliver ran out of the cave. The wolves thought he was still in the cave. Oliver ran to the other side of the mountain which the wolves can see. The wolves saw him and ran towards Oliver. Tom seized this chance to run out. Since the wolves didn't rest that night, they ran slowly because they were tired. Oliver ran down the mountain, to the nearest route that lead down the mountain. Tom followed Oliver, The wolves chased them. They couldn't catch up. As soon as Oliver and Tom reached the bottom of the mountain, They called the police to catch the wolves. The police arrived shortly and all the wolves were captured. Yellow Mountain is finally a safe place to hike thanks to Oliver and Tom.

Oliver and Tom go back to America where they live and continue their normal lives. They decided to hike Yellow Mountain again two months after their first dangerous adventure. They arrived in China after another 14 hours of travel. This time, Oliver brought a real metal stick, just in case the police hadn't caught all of the wolves. When they arrived, There were a lot of people. Much more than the last time they visited Yellow Mountain. The tourists have heard what happened on Yellow Mountain and believe that Yellow Mountain is safe to hike without wolves. A lot of people recognized Oliver and Tom because they were interviewed on a TV Show talking about their experience. Some thanked them, some asked for their autographs. Oliver and Tom had a fun day at Yellow Mountain and went back to the hotel when it was 2pm. The mountain is finally a safe place. Many scientists still visit Yellow Mountain to dig for fossils and study the mountain.

The Torn Paper's Prophecy

ESF Island School, Palshetkar, Vaibhavi – 13

As I sat there, I contemplated the actual reason for everything. The wind whistled an intriguing tune in my ear, and the same tune went out the other. I didn't notice until the last second.

From the low benches that bordered the perimeter of the park, I looked up to see the buildings that made up the grand skyline of our city. I felt so small, so insignificant compared to the impact that so many had as they built the (overall) utopia that we today called home. Many people say I have a very negative attitude towards life. I say they're wrong. I'm not pessimistic; I'm realistic. I'm not lying about the ever increasing climate change, or the large spikes in life, or even death. What's the point of being fakely hopeful even though you know how everything's going to turn out?

My attention wavered from the buildings to the clock. Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. Every second that passed felt like another eternity. But I wasn't in the mood for thinking. This was just a break from the busy reality that was our world.

While I walked, I still thought about that clock... I walked into the mediocre-looking building—the one with the slightly tattered sign that said Gorsan Inc.

Just for a little context, today, I was to give a presentation there for the interns. I left the job a long time ago, but I wanted to relive that feeling of the musty smell of my desk, and the ancient feel of my office.

As I walked up the stairs, I went over the main points I wanted to make today. Quite a long presentation, if I do say so myself.

As the end of the staircase started to appear, my stomach started to turn. Was it supposed to? Well, it doesn't matter. Every presentation starts with some kind of nervous reaction.

As I opened the door, I walked upon the most calm room I'd ever been in. Actually, I hadn't walked into too many rooms, at least not as the authority figure.

"Hello everyone! You may know me as the presenter for today.", I said, as I tried to put on my best enthusiastic face.

And with that, I was done introducing myself. I'd hoped for at least one "Hello" or "Hi", but all I heard was the sound of someone's cough.

"Let's start for today, shall we?"

"Go ahead, mister.", said a voice from the back of the room.

"... So, as you all know, ever since the company was established, Gorsan Inc.'s been highly successful in producing successful business campai—"

"Really, mister? My mom said this place didn't have many expectations from it's employees. So automatically, that isn't great, right?" said the same voice from the back of the room. This time, I looked up from my notes, and stared at the kid. She had black and purple hair, and wore a blue cap backwards. I don't know what drove me to do it, but I looked straight back and said:

... Nothing. I didn't have the energy to deal with it.

"Campaigns. Not to mention, the improvements that we had done last year really helped work speed. The company is honestly quite a pleasure to work with. Following o—"

"Didn't you leave a few years ago, mister? Didn't you say they're 'a pleasure to work with'? What happened? The pressure got to you? The routine got tiring? What was it?"

“Listen, okay? I’m just here to tell you about my experiences at this company. Okay?” I was close to breaking my usually calm demeanor because I didn’t like people asking me about things I didn’t like to talk about.

“But mister, I did ask a question about your workplace experience. Aren’t you going to answer it?”

“OKAY, THAT’S IT. I’M SORRY I CAN’T ANSWER YOUR QUESTION, YOUNG LADY! I DON’T WANT TO ANSWER IT, AND I WON’T!”

I didn’t know what made me do it, and I can’t say I’ve done it before. But I slammed my hand on the table. I wish I hadn’t... because it was the most painful, and the most grotesque occurrence I’ve seen. The tip of a pencil, but much bigger, and much more malicious

A steel spire. At least that’s what it reminded me of. A spire as wide as the area of my palm had impaled it. A pin drop silence was heard.

Blood gushed out, gasps and screams were heard, and something... happened to my hand. I—it started to disappear, crumble. Like a demolished building whose bricks started to fall like rain.

An arch... An arch, I could see, far ahead of me. A stone arch, tall and proud, stood in front of me. It was like it was calling me... Begging me to come to it. Something about it stood out quite a lot, and I understood what it was. I could see a golden medallion. Looking down upon the Earth, but only as high as the arch itself. Its glory could be felt miles away, and it shimmered as the real Sun shone upon it.

I did. And I wasn’t disappointed. As I passed through the arch, I was greeted by numerous peaks that loomed over me. The bliss blue sky was full of birds that I didn’t even know existed, and the fog made it look like a wintery paradise instead of a cold, dark place.

But something else caught my attention. A peculiar silhouette. It sat at the top of an ordinary peak. It didn’t move, didn’t blink, didn’t do anything. It just stood there aloof, while I stared at it. No monkey business whatsoever. It looked oddly familiar, with that long tail that curled at the end in the shape of a coil. It was just... stone.

I decided to move on, and as I walked, underneath my feet, I heard a heavy rumble. It was odd because it wasn’t heard again, at least not by me. I ignored it, and turning to my right, I could see a village. And I snapped back into my situation.

What was I here? Where am I? How did I disappear? Where is everyone that was with me during my presentation?

I was in a tight spot as I thought about what I could do, my knee banged against a rock. It was a wide rock, a sort of a mixture between a square-like and circle shape. But that’s not the point. There was a paper, with writing on it. It just laid there. Doing nothing; nothing at all. It didn’t fit in with the extraordinary scenery everywhere else. It was a yellowish coarse paper, with a few dirt stains and tears on its corners, and one large one that ran right through the center, like it was stabbed.

It said:

“Early End in Huangshan

*Year’s end, these leaves now rest,
The season of crimson now comes to an end.
On the pier, the shallow water becomes thin ice,
And winter’s snowy clouds cross over Xin An.
Broken dreams circle these walls,
As the light, which is their Sun, crashes upon us all,
These negative thoughts, they vanish from my corpse
I look up, and away they wash, those negative thoughts”*

What could this mean? Is it a poem about destruction... or something worse?

Could it be? It must be.

I sprinted as fast as my legs could to the arch I saw earlier. I never thought it would carry so much symbolism. I get it.

Look up, not down, as you can't see the Sun, and the opportunities it holds for you. At least that's what I thought it wanted to say.

But, I never noticed that under the Sun, the arch turned into some sort of portal. Without thinking at all, and as if the Sun was emanating an intense aura that compelled me to do it, I stepped inside of the ocean blue coloured hole through one side, and came out the other.

As I walked up the stairs, I went over the main points I wanted to make today. Quite a long presentation, if I do say so myself.

This felt a little nostalgic... or is it the phrase, "deja vu"? If anything, that makes me feel better, because it is a second opportunity to rectify mistakes.

As I reached the top of the stairs, and my hand mindlessly gripped the rectangular doorknob. I opened it.

I walked upon the most calm room I'd ever been in. Actually, I hadn't walked into too many rooms, at least not as the authority figure. There's a first time for everything, they say. No way it doesn't apply to this!

"Hello! I'm a former employee of the company. Today I'll be giving some key points to enlighten you about the company, from a sort of "alumni's perspective". Feel free to ask any questions."

Thanks, mystical mountains. You've changed me. By a great deal, actually.

The Dragon Princess

ESF Island School, Raje, Nishita – 13

People say dinosaurs and animals lived on this planet before humans. What they don't know is – so did Dragons. My name is Kaylin Prince and this is the story of how one of the greatest dragon empires burned to the ground. This is also known as my story.

I lived my entire life in a village near the yellow mountains. It was a quiet village, where it was said: people live quiet lives. What they didn't know was that the whole village could turn into Dragons at will. My family had ruled over all the dragons for decades and finally it was my turn to ascend the throne. I remember it as though it was yesterday.

★ ★ ★

“Kaylin,” says Caden, snapping me out of my thoughts. I am in the throne room with my mom, the dragon queen, and my older brother. The castle is hidden in the yellow mountains by the mist. Dragons used to roam freely until humans came along. Now we live in the yellow mountains, hidden by the mist. Living peacefully, guarding our secret. I realize my mom has just asked me a question.

“Are you ready for tonight?” she asks again. I guess my confusion can be seen on my face. “Yes” I answer.

All around us people are planning and getting ready for tonight. Red and gold is being hung all over the place. Caden and I give shallow courtesies before leaving the throne room. She might be our mom, but she is also the Queen of Dragons.

Tonight is the ceremony. I transformed into a full fledged dragon last month and as the tradition goes, I will now be crowned the dragon princess. Caden was crowned when he was 16 as well and so was my mom and her mom before her. Everybody in my family has been crowned when they were 16 and I was scared that I wouldn't. Becoming a dragon is harder than it looks. But now I don't have to be worried about that.

The main party is going to be held in the throne room but the whole castle is getting decorated. Red and golden, I never got why those are the colors. I mean when we turn into dragons usually our colors are black and violet or black and dark green. Basically black and a dark color, never golden and red.

I am near my room when Caden catches at my hand.

“What's up?” I ask. We might be royals but that does not mean that we don't use normal language. Or at least Caden and I do when speaking to each other

“Are you ok? You seemed distracted in the throne room,” he asks

“I was wondering what would happen if someone was seen in their dragon form by a human.” I say honestly. I am always thinking about that. Well not always, since the first time I turned into a dragon.

“Sometimes there have been quick glimpses. The humans think they imagined it.” Caden says

“I already know that. That's how dragons came into their stories in the first place. I mean what would happen if we tell them we are real. We can live without hiding.”

“They will hunt us down. Humans are afraid of what they don't understand and when they don't understand something, they have to take it down,” he says. “Look, I know how you feel. But it is not worth thinking about. You should get ready.” Caden checks his watch before continuing, “The party will start in an hour. And you can't be late.” He starts walking backwards, “It is in your honor, after all.”

I turn around rolling my eyes and walk back to my room.

★ ★ ★

I look at myself in the mirror. I am wearing a black dress which turns into a gown at the back, black leather boots

and a violet ruby necklace. My hair is falling on my shoulders with violet streaks. The thing I love most about these events is that dark colors and leather are part of our regular and formal clothes. I smile at myself in the mirror before turning and picking up my phone from the table near my bed.

I walk towards the throne room. When I get there, most people of my mom's small kingdom are already here. I take a deep breath

"Nervous?" I look to my side to see who said that. A smile comes to my face when I see who it is. "Mira" I say and hug my best friend. My nerves seem to disappear when I see her.

Mira and I have been best friends since we were five. We have done literally everything together since then and I guess it is fitting we do this together as well. Mira links her hand with mine and we make our way into the throne room. My mom is sitting on her throne at the end of the room, Caden is standing beside her talking. I catch her eye and she smiles at me before turning her attention back to my brother. Everyone in the room is talking to each other while sipping their drinks. I look around before following Mira to get a drink. We both pick up glasses and stand there for a while. I look around and take a sip of my drink. I can't believe this party is for.... I spit the sip I took back into the glass. "This is horrible" I splutter. "What is it in this thing?!" Mira shrugs at me then puts her glass away as well, deciding it is best to not try the drink.

At that moment the ground shakes and everyone looks around. What was that, earthquakes don't affect this mountain. A voice comes from outside the castle "They are here". Humans.

My mom stands up from her throne as the castle moves again. The minute it stops Mira and I run through the crowd making our way to where my mom and brother are. I run up the podium steps and hug my brother before asking "Mom, what's going on?" "The humans are here." The door to the throne room flies open and a crowd of humans with pitchforks and torches come in. One man steps forwards and demands what is going on here and asks what we are.

Before my mom can answer some of the humans from the group step ahead and wave their torches at the crowd. Honestly, humans don't know the difference between vampires and dragons. We breathe fire. We are not afraid of it. Nevertheless the whole room breaks into chaos.

My mom turns towards us. "Kaylen Prince I crown you the princess of all dragons." She puts her first tiara on my head. The tiara has a silver frame with black and violet gems. "Now go. I will send someone to find you both when this is all over." she commands. "But mom---". "Go" she says again before descending into the crowd.

I look at Caden for a moment, then back to the crowd. After a deep breath, Caden and I hold hands and run into the crowd as well making our way to one of the balconies around the room.

On the balcony we can still hear people screaming and people turning into dragons. We stand on the railing of the balcony. I look back one last time before we jump. I turn into a dragon right when I am about to hit the mountain rocks. We fly away from the mountain staying close to the water surface.

A minute later the castle bursts into flames.

★ ★ ★

And that was the last time I ever became a dragon. After that Caden and I went into the human world and I started living my life as a human. I still have the tiara my mom gave me and that is the last thing that remains of the dragons.

I finish typing my story and look up from my laptop. The short story writing competition I am taking part in doesn't know that this is the story of my life. They think this is a fictional story, which is one of the reasons I signed up. Fictional stories are great but my story is real and that makes it interesting, but of course the judges don't know that.

A knock sounds from the door. Finally, Caden took his sweet time to visit me. I open the door and to my surprise no one is there. At my feet, there is a brown paper envelope. I pick it up and walk back into my dorm room shutting the door behind me. The envelope only contains a scrunched up piece of paper. I open the paper to find two words written on it: "Found you". I look back in the envelope to find a ring.

My family crest is on the ring. I fear my past is catching up with me.

The Saviour's Quest in the Land of Red Dragons

ESF Island School, Soni, Aarav – 11

Once upon a time, lived three lively and loyal friends named Max, Jess and Frank in China. It was a normal day for them, playing soccer, painting and watching TV. Their summer vacation had just begun and now they just wanted to relax.

Max was an intelligent boy, achieving straight As, Jess was very good at sport and ran like a cheetah and Frank loved working with nuts and bolts making robots and washing machines.

One day, a man with a hermit cap came up to them while they were talking, frowned at them unreasonably and with a loud and robotic voice said;

**“3 close ones and a beast must answer the call,
to save China from a great fall,
Three-headed monsters they will face,
To help someone not their race.
They will search high and deep,
and make the monsters finally sleep”.**

His eyes then glowed green for a moment, then he pointed behind them and disappeared. They looked behind themselves and saw a dagger made of imperial gold, a sword made of celestial bronze and a suitcase full of mechanical equipment. And then they saw a golden lion, with a mane shining as bright as the sun, and he stared at them with its piercing eyes.

The burden of saving China was on their shoulders.

Jess picked up the imperial gold dagger, Max picked up the celestial bronze sword and Frank made a wind-up toy using the tools. With the lion, they went to the mountains. Many tourists were surprised that 3 kids and a lion were galloping together with weapons. Frank noticed buttons under Max and Jess's weapons and told them to press it, then Max's sword turned into a pen. Jess's dagger turned into a hair clip.

They needed to think of how they would get up the Yellow Mountain, if they hiked up, it would be too slow, they would have to find a vehicle. Max and Jess looked at Frank and said in unison, “You can put together something that can make us fly”. Frank started working and as his hands elegantly worked, in no time they had four jetpacks powered by fire. They helped the lion put on the jetpack and put on theirs too. And then they flew up.

It was the best thing ever!

They saw mist wrapped around the breathtaking mountain and there was a magical rainbow-coloured aura that it was releasing.

Then they saw a cave and trotted into it and there it was : **Their first challenge**

They saw a horrifyingly mighty creature. It was hairy, with a lion's head, two elephant legs and a gorilla's chest. The monster roared and charged at them with lightning speed and all of them dodged. Then two more of the creatures appeared. Jess was a natural since she did kendo. She had great reflexes and she kept slicing at the monster's legs. Their lion; who they named Shiny, began biting its enemy and then something really cool happened; it dug its silver claws in the creature's chest and the monster instantly exploded. Frank was playing with the creature; he took out a

laser light and had a theory that since lions are cats and the monster is part lion, he might be able to distract it with it. And it worked!

He then took out a hammer and chucked it at the abomination's head. It disintegrated.

Max looked like he needed an assist so he and Shiny smashed the monster into pieces. Jess was now a bit wounded on the legs since the one she was fighting was the biggest one of them all; precisely 8 feet tall. Even with Frank helping, the monster was a bit too much. The monster kept healing when Jess stabbed it at the chest or the legs, maybe she just had to get the head. She then used the jetpack to fly up and then slashed and achieved victory.

Then hordes of monsters came in. They were surrounded. They all tried to run but only Jess and Max got through. "Frank!" cried Jess. "Shiny!" shouted Max.

Frank thought of flying away but the creatures were too tall and fast. Frank pulled Shiny back, took his own jetpack and threw it in the air and the lion slashed, bit and made a way for both of them to escape. While they were leaving, the jetpack exploded with a big blast and ended every monster over there.

Max's instinct told him that they should go at the top of the mountain; so they were headed there. They killed many odd-looking monsters on the way and used up most of their jetpacks' energy.

Now they faced the three headed monsters

Max kept swinging his sword without looking. Frank was throwing all sorts of tools at the monster but it did not budge. Even Shiny was having trouble fighting them. It kept slashing its claws at the head but the head came back. Jess had hurt her shoulder and they were really falling apart.

Was this it?

All of them thought about their lives; their family.

Then all of them felt a sudden power surge.

Electricity sparked from Max's fingers and he gave the monster a big shock. Frank threw massive fireballs at the monster. Jess now turned into a Bengal tiger and bit the monster; and it disintegrated. Shiny's mane sent a bright light that blinded the monster and the rest became easy.

With their new powers, they fought any creature that came to them easily.

THE FINAL BATTLE

They were now at the top of the Yellow Mountain. The clouds sent a pleasant scent that made them want to lie down and relax but they had no time to rest. There was a whole structure built all around it. The trio opened the door and saw that there were at least 2000 monsters in it; every kind they had faced. As soon as they looked in, they closed the door and thought about their situation. Then they made a grand entrance.

Jess turned into a dragon (which couldn't breathe fire) with Franks throwing fireballs in the sky; Max electrifying them and Jess the dragon smashing them at the ground. Shiny was helping by blinding a lot of them; since they had long range weapons. They were like a giant wave of destruction— until Jess passed out and the shape-shifter fell to the ground with them. Max assumed that being a dragon took a lot of strength. Jess transformed into human form while she fainted. Max took out some first-aid and tried to get her back. Frank started throwing fire everywhere. Shiny blinded anything that got close to Max and Jess. Frank now threw bombs around which bought him two

minutes to build something. His hands worked furiously and he made an onager. He kept lighting it with fire and the weapon was unstoppable. It was so strong! He had killed at least 500 monsters— and then his superpower slowed down leaving a hammer to attack which was not helpful.

Then Jess woke up, turned into a rhino and charged. Max now used all his power and a big lightning strike came from the clouds and hit the onager which blew up and it was the biggest explosion which radiated so much power; luckily they were all in a safe distance. Now came the big one. It was at least 15 feet tall, it was hairy, held a club in its hands and remained unnoticed so far. Next to it were trapped in a cage Li Bai and Du Fu. And next to the poets was a monster spawner with new monsters coming out of it. Frank easily smashed the monster spawner and whispered something to Li Bai and Du Fu, they replied and Frank started making something. Max tried to break the cage and Jess went to fight with the big one. She turned into a maximum sized African elephant but the monster kept hitting its club at it which almost killed Jess but she kept the fight on.

The giant now took a sword and swung it mightily and Jess fell to the ground and now her life ended. Li Bai and Du Fu, who were now freed, used their instruments and got into artistic poetry.

Jess and Frank ran over to Jess with tears in their eyes and sat there crying, but as soon as tears fell on to Jess, she woke up. Max and Frank were relieved and hugged her. Behind them they saw the monster who was very drowsy but was still standing. Jess climbed up the monster and said “Bye” as she sliced off its head. The monster found it hard to say bye, since it didn’t have a head anymore.

Now the three climbed down the gigantic mountain and went home, keeping their superpowers a secret for the rest of their lives.

The Heart of Huangshan

ESF Island School, Suen, Ching Laam – 12

“Have mercy! Have mercy...” There was a terrible war in Huangshan between the Thalassians and Ignisians. The two tribes were fighting over the rich land between them, they sent spies and used destructive weapons to attack each other, no one can be trusted in this situation. This war not only destroyed many lives, but also the mountains. Trees were damaged by bombs and animals were burnt alive, it was a horrific sight. The once peaceful mountains were destroyed bit by bit. Both tribes had equal strengths so the war lasted for a long time, until one day, the Ignisians released their ultimate weapon, an unknown virus. The virus spread quickly among the Thalassians, the people and soldiers suffered and some died in agony because of this fatal disease. The Ignisians invented special masks to keep them safe from the virus, they dominated the Thalassians and ruled over them. When all hope seems lost for the Thalassians, the prophet of Thalassius told Prince Artem, the Prince of Thalassius, according to the myths, the heart of Huangshan can cure any disease. The heart of Huangshan is a crystal that gives off blue light, it's located in Lotus Peak, the tallest peak of Huangshan. Prince Artem set off to find the heart while the people invent masks to block the disease. On the night the prince was leaving the village, the prophet made a new prophecy. “When people beg nature for forgiveness, a saviour covered with blood will walk between the clouds and the blue moon, at that time peace will come.” Marking the prophecy, the prince started his journey to find the heart.

Prince Artem brought along some weapons, food and a first aid kit and walked through the breathtaking mountains. The mountains are so beautiful, the unique landscapes, peculiarly-shaped granite peaks, the colourful flowers, the vast sky, the pine trees, the golden monkeys, the sea of clouds.... Everything is so perfect and lively in Huangshan. The prince was enjoying himself in the mountains, nature provided him with food, shelter, water and company. The animals in Huangshan walked with the prince making sure the prince didn't feel lonely. Prince Artem thought “There is no other place in the world that is as magnificent as Huangshan, I must protect this place at all costs.” After a few days of climbing, Prince Artem finally reached Lotus Peak. He walked through the trees and plants and found vines twisted into the shape of a staff, crowning the heart of Huangshan in the middle. The heart is translucent and gives off a soft blue radiant, the beauty of it is hypnotising. Prince Artem circled around the heart, gasping at its beauty, he touched it, it is cool but tender in a way. “How mysterious this is,” he thought. Prince Artem yanked the heart out of its container and walked away with it. Without the heart, Huangshan was losing its liveliness, the branches of the trees fell out, the flowers withered. The prince noticed the change and placed back the heart, once the heart was in its container, the plants regrew and everything became vivid. Prince Artem tried chipping a small piece off the heart using his sword but the heart is too tough. “What should I do?” thought Prince Artem, “I need the heart to cure my people but without the heart, Huangshan will die.”

Prince Artem made an important decision, he decided to leave the heart to where it belongs. He thought “There must be another way to combat the virus, I can't bear to see Huangshan die. The war is only between humans, we shouldn't drag nature into this, alas, humans have already done enough harm to nature.” When he was about to leave, a loud strong voice ordered “Stop right here! Lower your weapons and raise your hands!” The prince turned around and found himself surrounded by Ignis soldiers. He lowered his sword calmly and raised his hands. The female general looked at the prince and smirked, “Looks like someone failed his mission, we forced your silly old prophet to tell us where you are, how pathetic,” she said with a laugh, “Tie him up!” she then ordered. When the soldiers tied Prince Artem up, he took out his dagger and stabbed the soldiers, the soldiers lost hold of him and he ran away. “Stop the prince you fools! Fire!” yelled General Zelda. The soldiers threw grenades, shot with their guns and ran after the prince. The trees around the area were burnt and animals were shot, Prince Artem couldn't bear to see this and walked out from his hiding place. “Stop firing please, you are destroying the mountains! Here I am, take me instead,” said the prince. “With pleasure,” said Zelda, “Fire!” she ordered. Prince Artem dodged down but the bullet hit the heart of Huangshan. The blue mysterious crystal shattered and dropped to the floor.

All the plants died immediately, the sky darkened, there were animal cries in the distance. Huangshan is no longer lively and beautiful when the colours and lives fade away. “Look what you've done! You ruined the mountains! It's over!” yelled the prince in a rage. Prince Artem stormed away into the forest. He found wounded animals and took care of them using his first aid kit. He tried everything to bring the forest back to life but nothing worked. Prince Artem then said to the Ignisians “Don't stand here and do nothing! Try and fix the mess that you created!” The Ignisians recovered from shock and tried to help. There are spots of blood everywhere, the prince followed a blood

trail, leading him to a wounded leopard. “Don’t move, it will only worsen the wound,” whispered the prince, “I am here to help.” The leopard calmed down and let the prince touch it. “That’s a terrible bullet wound, this will hurt a bit,” said the prince. He then pulled the bullet out of the leopard, the animal let out a terrible scream. Blood rushed out from the wound, drenching the prince with leopard blood. Prince Artem wrapped the wound and gave the leopard some food. There was a scream in the distance, the prince ran towards the direction and found Zelda lying on the ground, she was bitten by a snake. “Calm down, stay still,” said the prince. He then sucked out the venom and covered the bite with a bandage. Zelda felt better. “How dare you hurt our general!” shouted an Ignis soldier. Before the prince could react, an arrow hit the prince square in the chest. Prince Artem fainted and fell on the ground. Zelda ordered “The prince didn’t hurt me, he saved me. Take him to the military doctor right now!”

The Ignis military doctor took care of Prince Artem and he soon woke up. Zelda gathered the soldiers near the broken pieces of Huangshan’s heart. She said “Look at the damage we’ve done! How can we fix the heart? Let’s hope nature can forgive us,” Zelda regretfully sobbed and her tears fell on the shattered pieces of Huangshan’s heart. The pieces reformed magically and the heart slowly pieced together. “Hand out the prince I order you,” said Callan, general of Thalassius. The prophet of Thalassius sensed the prince was in danger so he and the soldiers went to save him, that is why the Thalassius soldiers were here. Prince Artem walked towards his people and said “Calm down, I am fine. Put away your weapons” Callan saw him and yelled at the Ignisians, “You wounded our Prince! How dare you! Fire, Thalassians!” “Stop right now!” ordered Prince Artem. He walked up on a stone and said “Let’s end this war! We humans have done enough harm to each other and to nature. Let’s not claim the land between our nations, let’s make it nature’s. Our two countries can come together and build a new eco-system on those lands. I offer peace.” At that moment, the heart of Huangshan fully recovered and let out a bright blue light, the light was so bright that it turned the moon blue. Standing on the rock, the prince looks like he is walking between the clouds and the blue moon. “Why can’t humans coexist with nature?” said Prince Artem. “The prophecy! It’s fulfilled!” screamed the prophet. Prince Artem walked down the stone and placed the heart back to its rightful place. The plants slowly regrew, covering Huangshan with their green leaves again, with the heart in place, the colours and liveliness came back. Prince Artem stepped in front of Zelda and asked “Do you accept my offer?” Zelda replied “Yes, our countries should collaborate.” Some blue, heart shaped leaves grew around the heart of Huangshan. Ignis’s military doctor told the Thalassians according to their study, this kind of plant can cure the unknown disease. Prince Artem said “I guess nature did forgive us afterall, it is giving us a second chance. We should use it wisely.”

The Mountain

ESF Island School, Tse, May – 12

I started to run, and the branches sliced through my flesh with every step I took. “Don’t be scared, help me.” The voices were increasing in volume incrementally.

I stepped on the camp bus as I let out a shaky breath I didn’t realise I was holding. Apparently, my mom registered me for Camp HuangShan. I glanced around and noticed kids around my age. I tried my best to avoid all their stares by sitting at the back. “Hi, I’m Isabel and this is Jess, nice to meet you.” I just nodded and looked down, as I wasn’t used to others chatting with me. That was one of the reasons why my mom sent me to camp, to socialize with others. The bus halted and I glimpsed outside. We had reached Camp HuangShan.

After I signed up, the camp instructors took me to a shared cabin. There were three more girls in my cabin and we quickly got along. But there was this one girl who had dark raven hair. She was very different and refused to talk to any of us. I let it slide and walked out for lunch. I quickly learned that this mysterious girl’s name was Jade. Everyone told me to stay away from her. I was curious about why but I ignored all the questions I held in my head.

After a few days, everything was fabulous. But I still knew zilch about Jade. She never participated in any of our activities. So, I decided to do the unthinkable. I snuck back to the cabin and crawled over to Jade’s bed. She had books stored below her bed and documents of each camp member, even me! I freaked out and left the cabin immediately. But something distracting caught my eye. I looked over immediately and saw Jade sitting on the edge of a cliff, holding a knife. She spun around and smirked wickedly at me. She muttered something but I couldn’t hear it clearly since she was barely making any sound. I wonder what she’s saying. “Well, well. You.” She pointed the blade at me and started to get up gradually and walked towards me, getting faster and faster with her every step. I screamed as she chased me. I managed to escape her. “You can’t run from me.” I turned and saw Jade. She wasn’t doing anything at all. But I could have sworn I saw her chasing me. I ran past her, to my cabin.

I jumped up to my bed and covered myself with the thin blankets. It wasn’t cold but I was soaked. I was rocking back and forth, trembling and thinking about what I just saw. My insane scattered thoughts were cut short when I heard the door open. A sinking feeling crept its way into my stomach. ‘Who was in here?’ “Amelia, are you in here?” A familiar voice asked. Isabel. I immediately untangled myself from the blankets as I peered up and tried to fix my face. “Amelia, were you crying?” Isabel came over and asked me. Concern laced in her tone. “I’m fine, just tripped.” I cracked a smile. “I hope you are fine, I came over to inform you that our camp instructor planned a campfire for us tonight,” Isabel told me with a smile plastered on her face. “Sure, I will be there,” I responded and gave her a reassuring smile.

Isabel nodded and left the cabin. I decided to go out for a walk to clear my mind. ‘I probably just dreamed about everything’, I thought to myself. I put on a clean T-shirt and walked out the cabin. I observed my surroundings, there was no one. I wandered into the forest, making sure I didn’t get too far. I sat down on the soft grass and looked around with my dull eyes. I couldn’t see anyone and hoped everything I saw was just my pure imagination.

I no sooner laid down than I started hearing whispers, which got louder and stronger as if they were trying to deliver a message. I covered my ears to try to get them to stop but they were too loud. I started to run, and the branches cut through my flesh with every step I took. “Don’t be scared, help me.” Some of the voices whispered. I cried out as bolts of searing hot pain jolted through every inch of my body. Tears filled my eyes instantly and spilled over as the pain took over. I groaned and lay there in the darkness. The voices were still in my head, whispering non-stop. There was a horrible throbbing pain in the back of my head and I felt like someone was trying to rip me apart. Suddenly, everything stopped. All the whispers, murmurs stopped. I froze, and the pain was gone. I glanced around, and I could feel myself shaking. This was definitely not my imagination.

I limped back to the campsite and saw everyone getting ready for the campfire, except for a certain person. Jade. She stared at me with certain hatred with her cold dark eyes that sent chills down my spine. I ran back to my cabin and shut the door behind me. I felt a cough rising up in my chest but when I tried to release it, a painful sting came as I covered my mouth with my hand. I coughed painfully and dark red liquid came out. Blood. My breathing that was once slow got rapidly fast, only causing it to hurt even more. I slumped down on the chair and gulped, and a leftover taste of blood still laced in my mouth.

I ran to the bathroom and brushed my teeth, making sure there was no more blood. I took a clean bath and slipped on a long dress that reached down to my knees. I opened my door and stepped out of my cabin.

My breath was still unsteady as I approached the campfire where everyone was gathered at. I knew there was something twisted and wrong about this camp, although I just couldn't seem to point it out. Jade, however, could be the answer to all my questions. My eyes roamed around as I caught Jade creeping into the forest. 'Why would she go to the woods while a campfire was going on?' I followed her, creeping behind her silently. I needed answers to all of my questions. My eyes widened as I saw her approach the cliff. The same cliff where everything weird began occurring. I touched my forehead, where the sheen of sweat covering it caused a few strands of my hair sticking together. I was nervous and curious and needed to figure out what was going on.

After a few minutes, Jade turned around, and for some reason, she seemed to be able to sense me as she looked right at my direction. She looked at me and tilted her head with a twisted smile crept across her face. "Look, we have a guest. Amelia Delgado." She said as she stepped towards me. "How did you know my last name?" I questioned her in a voice that I did not recognize was mine. It was hoarse and raspy. Like someone was sucking the life out of me. "Do you feel that?" Jade chuckled darkly. "W—what are you doing to me?" I asked, engulfing a great amount of air. "I'm taking your life away from you, you Delgados. Have you ever heard that curiosity kills the cat?" Jade taunted coldly. "W—what have I ever d—done to you?" I stuttered as I felt myself get weak. "No darling, you haven't done anything to me. Your descendants have. I was just an innocent little girl here, at this camp, 70 years ago. I wanted to live life. I wanted to live, grow and die as any human being would. But your descendants were pure evil. They fed me a type of herb that made me immortal. I never got a life. I will make sure your entire family line doesn't get a life as well. I have attempted to kill your family members for years now. Only you are stupid enough to fall in my trap!" Jade shouted furiously. I almost felt bad for her.

All of a sudden, I felt air enter my lungs again. I got up and started running for my life. My legs were aching, my lungs were burning, and my head was spinning. It wasn't long before I felt myself getting woozy, and my vision started to get blurry. I knew at that moment, that it was the end of me. I let myself in as the darkness consumed me and I sank into oblivion.

Eyes of Ember

ESF Island School, Wong, Sophie – 13

“I’m cold,” Elias complains, dragging his feet on the narrow stone staircase.

“What did you expect? We are walking up a mountain, in winter, at 2 am.” I snort, hitching my bag higher up my shoulders. The wind cuts against my face, wildly flying my hair and making my cheeks flush. The moonlight illuminates the jagged edges of the side of the mountain, turning the dull grey stone silver under its light.

He ignores me. “We shouldn’t be doing this. I was joking when I said that I would go. I didn’t know you would actually take me seriously and drag me ten thousand miles away from home!”

“I needed to see something and besides, it’s good for you; you’ve become lazy and stopped going camping with me, Kia and Liam.”

“Kia, Liam and I,” He corrected.

“Shut up.”

“No.”

“You wouldn’t want to wake the dragons with your shouting and you stomping around like a giant.”

“Hey! I only weigh 70 kg!” He defends.

“Whatever you say.”

“I can feel the sisterly love,” Elias huffs. “I wish I brought my phone.”

“Knowing you, you would drop it.” My steps slow as a large opening of a cave comes into view, inside pitch black.

“Tell me again why couldn’t we have gone when our eyesight still worked?”

“I had to come at night.” I chew on my lip and sling my bag over my shoulder, taking my phone out.

Elias’ jaw dropped. “You brought *your* phone?!”

“Because I’m the more responsible twin.”

“Hypocrisy at its finest.”

I turn on the flashlight and point my phone to the cave, waving it around. “In my defence, the last time you brought your phone camping you lost it twice.”

“Your memory is clearly not functioning properly. I lost it three times.” Elias replies, his voice deadpan, as we slowly walk through the cave, the darkness swallowing us quickly. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I almost scream as I see the number of ashes and bones littering the floor, burnt leaves and stripped branches strewn messily and dead tree branches hanging from the ceiling.

“I don’t remember it looking like this,” I mumble, grabbing Elias’ arm tightly and running as fast as I could out through the maze of stone I knew like the back of my hand.

“Oh my gosh woman, did you just get a sugar rush and how in the hell did you know—” His voice cuts off as I reach the end of the cave, stopping suddenly, yanking him back in the process. I can hear my heartbeat as I squint, the moonlight shining directly into my eyes, and I start to make out my surroundings.

Light mist covers the large plot of land, tall pine trees with burnt tips stand near another cave entrance on the far side and cherry blossom trees fill most of the space, giving off a fragrant smell. There is some sort of a campsite built in the middle of the cherry blossoms; a tent with a sleeping bag is tucked under one of the trees and the benches around a fire pit have clumsily placed small potted plants and vegetables.

I suck in a breath as flashbacks from my dreams flicker in front of my eyes. Elias is silent as well and I turn my head towards him, his mouth open and eyebrows furrowed.

“Are you okay?” I start to get worried as he continues to gape at the landscape.

“How—” He struggles to find words. “Ash, how do you know this place?”

“*That*, right. Well, uh, I’ve been having the same dream about Huangshan every day for about a month and—”

“Hold on a minute. *This* is Huangshan?!”

“—Yes?” I say timidly.

He glares at me and I brace myself for the impact. “This mountain is dangerous for a reason! Do you know how many people have been here and never came back? Hell, even our brother disappeared here and we haven’t seen him for two years—”

I cut him off. “Which is exactly why I need to explain everything to you before we might die.”

Elias looks up and starts mumbling incoherent words under his breath. I stare at him weirdly, “What are you doing?”

“I’m praying to God.”

I roll my eyes, slapping him across the head as he yelps in pain, rubbing the sore spot. “I’ve been having dreams that—” I pause, uncertain. “That Exton is still alive.”

Elias is staring at me, a dumbfounded on his face. I rush to continue before he runs away. “I—I know it sounds stupid, I mean it’s impossible our brother is alive but every night I dreamt about this mountain and— and I sound stupid.”

“A bit,” Elias admits. “Although it sounds too coincidental that all of this is happening around the day he went missing. And an entire campsite is on a secluded mountain. And out of everything, the plants are still alive—”

Elias suddenly stops and I look at him questioningly. I see realisation wash over his eyes. “The plants are still alive, the fire is suddenly lit—”

I jerk my head to look at the fire pit.

“Ash—”

“Shush!” My heart starts pounding rapidly as I drag Elias by the arm behind a cherry blossom tree, and we stay quiet for a few seconds.

A low growl comes from behind me, and I slowly turn around to lock eyes with a large reddish-brown dragon. I let out a large scream as Elias grabs my hand and we run into the cave next to the pine trees, just as something explodes behind us. I’m still in a state of shock as we find a small space to squeeze into the cave, our breathing the only thing audible besides the loud growls of the dragon from outside the cave.

Elias says, “I should explain something to you.” at the same time as I say, “I think I insulted the dragon with the comment from earlier.”

Silence settles between us. “Eli, I think I’ve gone crazy.”

He begins to say something but I cut him off. “I’ve gone crazy!” I burst into laughter. “Or I’m hallucinating—”

Something flickers in his eyes. “You’re not dreaming or hallucinating, Ash.”

I snicker. “And you want to tell me that dragons exist?”

The ceiling above us suddenly crumbles down and I scream. Elias grabs my hand once again and drags me out, pulling me behind one of the pine trees.

“Oh my gosh! This is real, oh my gosh. It can’t be real, can it Eli? Why are dragons real? How are—” Elias slaps his hand over my mouth as I continue to panic.

Overwhelmed, I yank Elias’ hand off of my mouth and start to run towards the cave to go back, but I am met with two glowing orange eyes.

The dragon’s eyes bore into mine and everything happens in a blur. A large purple forcefield-looking shield is around me as a fireball made out of lava crashes down against it. I shriek as the lava melts through the forcefield and drips onto my skin.

Unimaginable heat and pain shoot through my arm and it feels as if I’ve dipped my arm into hot coal. I let out an ear-shattering scream as I see Elias run towards me in my peripheral vision, waving his hand in a circular motion, muttering something under his breath. Another shield is placed around us as the dragon continues to pelt it with lava.

Tears rapidly fall onto my cheeks as my entire arm suddenly goes numb and now feels like I’ve dipped my arm into dry ice. I can see Elias saying something to me but I can’t hear anything as I continue to scream even louder than I thought was possible, my arm throbbing, scalding and freezing all at once.

“Eli! Make it stop!” I plead, covering my ears with my hands. “Please!”

Panic and fear are evident on his face as his eyes turn a deep purple, his eyes fixed onto my arm.

“Eli?” I cry, scared to death as the colour of his eyes stay purple. “What are you doing? Come back!” Tears gather in my eyes again. “Eli!”

His eyes continue to glow and the pain in my arm starts to slowly fade away. After a few seconds, his eyes slowly return to their normal brown, the forcefield disappearing with it. I screech as he starts to reach for me.

“Ash, ASH! Calm down, everything is alright! I’m here, it’s me!”

“No!” I run away from him back towards the cave when the dragon suddenly appears out of nowhere and lands right in front of me. I scream, my heart dropping to my stomach as the dragon narrows his eyes at me.

In a blink of the eye, the dragon shifts and shrinks into a tall, tanned boy with the same black hair as mine, the same smile I used to remember, everything I used to know but with eyes of ember.

The Village Lost to the Mist

ESF Island School, Woo, Isabelle – 13

Kasumi was an orphan. Like all orphans, she had no mom or dad. She had her orphan friends and her strict master. That was the world she knew. She has never left the orphanage. Being a disciplined child, she was smart and spent the majority of her time studying. Yet she always had a sad, nostalgic feeling. Something she couldn't remember. Something she wanted to remember. She didn't know where she was from. Her master told her that her parents left her at the end of the river and never came back. She learned to accept that over the years. She wasn't wanted or needed. That was her life.

Her bedroom overlooked these ominous looking mountains. They were alluring, always covered by a hazy and delicate fog, she always wanted to go see them, but she knew she can't just leave the orphanage. Actually, come to think of it, she never sees anything beyond the mountains. The fog always covered everything. She never questioned it though. Well, until now.

On her 16th birthday, her mischievous, reckless friend Kiriko ran up to her and said "Hey Kasumi, you wanna come camping with me?! You better come! It would be fun, and before you object to all the stuff we do like normal, please note, it's your 16th birthday and I don't want you to die an old lady with regrets of how you spent your life filing useless pieces of paperwork."

Kasumi was somewhat, taken aback you could say. Usually, Kiriko gave up arguing after a minute or two, she was short-tempered like that, she doesn't put up a fight or give the reasoning for her ridiculous requests. So clearly there was a catch.

Kasumi questioned, "Did you get permission from master?"

"No."

"Course you didn't, your going to sneak out again, aren't you. I really don't understand why I never tell on you, honestly."

"Because I'm one of the few people you talk to at this orphanage obviously. I'm like your one piece of emotional support you have, come on your 16, you never go anywhere and you have like minimal friends."

"I have Akana and I don't go anywhere because there's nowhere to go!"

"Akana is a freaking cat! You're such a killjoy. Guess you won't be coming to the mountains with me then." said Kiriko with a smug look on her face.

Well, this isn't fair, she didn't tell me we were going to see the mountains. If there was one thing Kasumi wanted to see in her life, that was mountains outside her window. She only ever seen them from a distance, the fog and the towering looking cliffs patched with green. It sounded like they came from dreams, so close in your head yet so far. As Kasumi was deep in thought, Kiriko was rambling something about how she was going to keep it a surprise but got too excited. By the time her rant was over, Kasumi made up her mind.

"Fine, I'll come."

"HAH, YES I KNEW IT!"

Kasumi gave her friend a large eye-roll packed with a small smile.

And so now it's midnight, two days later and Kasumi is about to go on her first adventure for the first time in her life. She and Kiriko daintily tiptoed out, with huge backpacks slung over their shoulders, in the dead of the night, being sure not to wake the master.

They journeyed up the misty mountains, slowly making their way up. Passing by marigold glowing fireflies under a blanket of twinkling stars. They didn't even need flashlights, the enchanting atmosphere lit everything up for them. It was quite magical like a pretty painting came to life. The mist freely parted and let them through, like it was welcoming them into the mountain. By morning, they made it up to the peak. It was sunrise, and it was breathtaking, Kasumi had never really seen anything like it. Red, orange, yellow, washed over the sky like a spilled paint bucket.

They stopped at an abandoned village to rest. It felt so good, the fresh, minty-frost, morning wind blowing through her messy raven black hair. It was so peaceful, as morning songbirds sang mellifluous melodies...

Wooshhh....

A sudden chilling whistling cold washed over her, and it made Kasumi shiver right down to her bones. The hair at the back of her neck raised up, indicating that something wasn't right. Kiriko looked at her in blatant confusion, clearly unaware and unaffected by the sudden change of feeling. The songbirds started singing a melancholy melody. And Kasumi's eyes widened with realization. She knew this song. She knows it right from the deep core of her heart. But why doesn't she remember? Why? The song, this song, she doesn't remember hearing it yet she knows it.

Hmmmm...hmmmm..hmmmm..

Kasumi whipped her head around. Kiriko too.

"Did you hear that?" Kasumi whispered in a quivering voice.

"Uh-huh yeah, there humming to the melody of the birds."

"I didn't know people lived here."

"They don't."

A petrifying silence followed after that. The wind fell to a standstill and the thick fog started to cloud in surrounding them like they overstayed their welcome.

"We should get out of here." Kiriko whimpered

"Agreed."

They got up as fast as possible and started to exit the village, and started walking at a fast pace. The fog was picking up on the mountain, and it was getting more difficult to see. Clouding their view they could barely see 5 feet in front of them. They walked for a long while through the village and Kasumi began to wonder why it was taking so long for them to leave.

"Hey didn't we pass by this archway before? I could have sworn I- Kiriko, were going in circles."

"What?! We're walking in a straight line."

“It doesn’t matter we’re going in circles...”

It was at this point Kasumi started to get scared, *this isn't good*. She thought. She began to scan the area for another exit other than the one they came through. It was ever so hard to look through the fog but she soon saw an old-looking temple in the distance with an exit on the other side.

“Kiriko let’s go there. It looks like an exit, come on.”

They started running out of panic, and desperation to leave the abandoned village. When they reached the temple, an odd, ominous, strong wind blew against them, howling through the empty temple, pushing them in. Inside the temple, it was dark and cold. Overgrown vines were everywhere and there was rubble and dust littered here and there.

“There look, it’s an exit!”

A solid milky fog blocked the exit, not thinking Kasumi ran through and tripped on the stairs...

Owwwww She thought.

She took in her surroundings.

There was a crowd, full of bustling people.

She was in the market.

Wait wait wait, a market?! WAIT. WHERE'S KIRIKO?!

She frantically turned her head left and right, the worried expression ever slowly growing on her face.

Where am I?

The Secrets of Huang Shan

ESF King George V School, Kim, Yerin – 12

The mysterious mountains had finally appeared. It was known to be one of the most beautiful and magical places in the world. The peaks of the sharply shaped mountains were able to be seen through what looked like lightly floating white cotton candy and were still striking up into the sky. Alysha wished that she had six more eyes to take in the breathtaking view at once. She couldn't believe what she was staring at. A spot of yellow was glowing above her dancing, shining on the villages which had scratches on the gates of every entrance. It was so beautiful. Right at the start, stood an oak-wood sign that was partially peeling off, barely visibly written: 'Huang Shan', in bright yellow strokes. Her name was Alysha. She had to figure out for herself.

Rumors of 'Rahn the Eternity' had spread. Legend has it, if you were able to make it to the top of the mountain, you will be able to live for eternity. But no one has ever made it through the hard challenges... ever.

Alysha quickly took a step. Except from the fact that as she tried to take another step, her foot wouldn't budge as if her feet had grown root. In fact, she was sinking down.

It was quicksand. More movement would only cause her to sink more, but she couldn't let that happen, it was only her first move.

"So this is how it works." At first, she felt confident. She had prepared as much as she could carry, and she expected it to be empty when she reached the top; she hurriedly got a pole from inside and extended it. She placed it under her hips and leaned backwards calmly waiting until her legs flung to the surface. She grabbed the dirt beside and pulled herself to it. Then Alysha quickly extended her elbows and got up before anything worse happened.

She had passed the first level. Although not in the cleanest way; but she didn't mind, even if she did, there wasn't any time to consider.

As she went on, the path was leading to a vent through the middle of nowhere. The vent didn't look dangerous at all, but Alysha was assuming it was (to call it as a challenge at least).

Alysha jumped straight into the vent, and as she did so and crawled cautiously forward, the opening of the vent slammed closed and she began to feel fear. As she went, there were two paths to her left and right, and still one continuing forwards. *Which path do I take?* She was physically well-trained for months before she came here but she didn't know there would be mind games, too – because no one actually came back from Huang Shan. But one more thing... something she was forgetting about. There was the smell of smoke.

As soon as she realised, two big blasts of fire came from her left and right and quickly she slid through the metal vent. One arm blocking her nose, opening her eyes as much as she could, she used all her strength to open the opening of the vent. Quickly, she escaped and slammed the vent closed like it did to her in the beginning. When she did, it was a completely different place. The path was no different. However, the ground was much softer. It was a desert.

Flustered, she continued to walk, whilst covering her eyes making sure for the sand not to go into her eyes.

"Wait.." she paused.

"Why *is* it windy, there mustn't be," she looked in all directions making sure nothing was wrong. Unsurprisingly, there *was* something wrong. Something *very* wrong.

From behind her was a wide, tall bush of fog coming closer and closer towards her. Why wouldn't there be a sandstorm among these challenges? Alysha tightened her backpack and got ready to run. Sprinting, she rapidly went as far as she could go until she reached two large boulders that looked as if they were placed there for her to use. She went to the end of one rock and pushed it with all she could until the two rocks hit. Anxious behind these big rocks, not being able to see what was happening behind her, she waited.

Soon, all was silent. She had only finished the third adventure, but it felt like almost a day had past. From her bag she pulled out her bottle that was filled before she had come. She gulped the soothing liquid inside and soon she had drank roughly half of what she had brought. And food... She desired to eat it so much, but she left it as it was and stood up.

But something caught her eye. Bones of people! And as she dug up, revealed dinosaur fossils! Could it really be? In case, she ran towards it and put all she could find in her bag. Now, it had really been time to move before night. As she went on now, she only looked at what was ahead of her, and how much left she had to go. A lesson she had learnt on this journey.

A door that seemed to be old was in front. To the right of the opening, had a keypad that seemed like a passcode to open the door; on top, it had a green sign reading, 'EXIT'. *'How do I open it?'* she thought.

Until she observed a few black lines. Just a few... 'Is that a 1?' she mumbled, there was a straight black line on the left of the 'E'.

"Another one!" There was the exact identical line on the side of the 'I'. And...

"A 7!" she exclaimed. A '7' was illuminated under the left sector of the 'T'. Next to the rusty keypad was a spray painted star. She breathed out. With her delicate hands Alysha tapped the numeric pad in order:

"1.. 1.. 7.. star." as she muttered, the door opened to either side and it seemed to be an elevator! When she entered, the lift shook and like before the door slammed right after her. As it did, scared to move at all, she stood motionless. The lift slowly went up, the light flickering.

After a few seconds in the dim light, the lift had stopped. When Alysha cautiously stepped out, she was shocked by what stood in front of her.

By now, she had forgotten why she had come here in the first place: to meet eternity.

A large throne was waiting for her, painted golden and covered with velvet. On the throne, a tall woman with a white dress was sitting with her legs crossed on the colossal chair. As she spoke, her voice echoed around the horizons of HuangShan.

"Would you like to live eternity?" The woman that was most likely 'Rahn the Eternity' asked her.

"Emm.. Yes."

"Welcome, I am Rahn. I may teach you 'eternity' as I cannot show you. Until now, you have climbed HuangShan with courage, I have seen; sometimes you sank down, sometimes you felt empty and scared. But you have overcome it which is what leads you here. Another word that is known for what some call 'eternity' is, 'happiness'. Since you are the first one to arrive here, I expect you to share this information with those you love and not be selfish with this. Now, are you ready?"

"Yes," Alysha replied, excited to hear a secret no one else has before.

"Be happy and grateful. You will then live eternity!" Rahn said this as if it was a joke.

“Actually, I came all the way here to— I already am grateful—”

“Bup.” she raised a finger to her lips.

“You came here to find eternity, I know. Now trust me. You may now exit with the elevator there. You know the passcode.” she then returned to the position she was before Alysha had come. *‘Will she be here forever?’*

This time, the door was much bigger and it seemed more rusty, besides that it looked the same. Alysha took the long ride back. Thinking: *‘Is this really the way to happiness... eternity?’* She had never expected this sort of answer. Through the lift, she heard the faint voice of Rahn.

“This path will take you to your beginning. And don’t worry you will not forget anything. Use the secret. I wish I knew this when I was young.” This wasn’t just an elevator this time. It was a time machine.

When the door opened, she stepped out. In front, nothing was visible but a bright light that almost blinded her eyes. She squinted and before her last step, she stopped and thought. Tomorrow she will have a complete new start. Achieving new goals.

Still not sure if this was the truth, Alysha couldn’t help but smile. So wide that it looked as if her lips would tear apart. And as she did so, she stepped into the bright light...

Mountains Calling

ESF King George V School, Mishra, Athy – 12

My life was pretty average until I got the dream. I was standing on the edge of a narrow cliff gazing at the misty clouds that stretched as far as the eye can see, as they wrapped themselves around the emerald peaks that dotted the landscape, that's when a deep voice came from behind me and said 2 words: "Bodhi Dharma". I woke up with a start. Ivory rays fell upon my white bedsheet as the birds chirped their songs. I glanced at my MUJI MX50 alarm clock, 5:00 AM Monday. I wandered out the door and got ready for school thinking about only one thing, what was that dream about? I strolled out the door and onto the grassy lawn where the bus stopped. Soon enough the dented and rusty amber school bus came to stop. As I sat down on my blue leather seat, I could only think of one thing, The Dream. Where was it? Who is Bodhi Dharma? What did he do? Why me?

As we reached school, we ran out of the putrid rectangle on wheels and breathed in a gulp of fresh air. Our school was a small building that was made of glass, bricks and concrete. It was surrounded by a forest full of oak trees that occasionally grew acorns for us to pick and feed to the squirrels. In the class, I sat down on my black chair and waited for Ms. Hammond, our teacher to arrive. After a while of anticipation, Ms. Hammond, our maths teacher walked into the classroom. She had black hair, was wearing glasses and had a black sweater with a pink scarf that Clarrise gifted her on her birthday. "In our first lesson we will learn about the wonders of Algebra" She started the lesson but I just couldn't focus. The letters and words on the blackboard started to dance and jiggle until they formed pictures of mountains, the world was coming to a blur, I was feeling dizzy yet my mind just focused on one thing: "Bodhi Dharma". Before I knew it, I heard the loud shriek of the school bell. Class dismissed.

I boarded the rust bucket and sat quietly on the way home. I flung myself onto my soft mattress hoping to sleep like a baby but guess what? I had the same dream that night. I could not take it anymore so after school that next day, I told everything to my mum. Strangely she told me that I could use her library card and research as much as I wanted about it. My mom was a scientist so her telling me to research was normal, but something as absurd as this? I strolled down to the glass and wood building with bold letters on it saying: Irvine Public Library. I strolled down to aisle 12 section BD22 and pulled out a book named "Bodhi Dharman – The Mystic Sage" From that day onwards I would go to the library everyday and research more and more.

On Thursday 11 February, one day before Chinese New Year, I was going through my favourite travel vloggers post when my eye got caught on one image. It was an image of misty clouds wrapping themselves around the emerald paks and abalone cliffs that dotted the landscape. It looked exactly like my dream. Suddenly I heard the whooshing, the light drumming and the deep voice from behind me: "Bodhi Dharma". I knew that I had to get there immediately , to answer all my questions.

After taking permission from my mother, who surprisingly was happy on my decision, I hopped onto a grey Toyota Camry headed towards LA Airport. I rushed to check in at Terminal 3 aisle D6 for my China Air flight. The flight was going to be 19 hours long. I sat down on my seat in Economy class aisle 42 seat B. I was tired and slept, eagerly waiting for the flight to land at ZhengZhou Airport ,China.

I quickly received my luggage, passed the glass and concrete immigration stalls and exited the airport where there was a chinese driver holding a placard that read Peter Dharman, my name. We boarded the white Toyota Innova Crysta and headed on our way to the Shaolin temple in DengFeng HeNan. Soon we arrived and I was standing in a black and red pagoda with intricate patterns of gold dragons, monks and warriors on the roof. I had arrived at the most famous temple on Planet Earth: The Shaolin Temple. I walked over to a ledge and as I gazed at the scene that lay before me, I saw those very same misty clouds wrapping themselves around the emerald peaks and abalone cliffs. It was exactly like the dream. I felt so good. I felt happy and satisfied and felt like I had actually achieved something. Suddenly I heard that very same deep voice. "Bodhi Dharma" This time, rather than annoyed, I felt happy. I looked behind me and saw a huge ivory statue of some sage. I walked over to it and read a golden plaque on it that said in big letters: **Bodhi Dharma.**

As I stood mesmerized, the saint from the Shaolin temple came and greeted me “ Nai Hao Dharman ”. I know you have many unanswered questions and we were waiting for you for a long time. We knew you would come to the land of your great grandfather, Bodhi Dharma. I was shocked and had no clue what he was talking about. He kept on telling the story of Bodhi Dharma.

1504 Years ago in 517 AD, a plague had struck China. Thousands of people were dying per day. The skies filled with murky grey sadness and red clouds of death. Life had come to a halt. This virus neither had a cure nor was preventable for it had been spread by black flies hence its name: Black Fly Virus. Inside the jade halls on a gold throne embedded with dragons, The chinese emperor issued an order to send messengers to all the stretches of the world to find a cure. One such messenger was Huang Shu Di. He travelled and travelled for ages and ages and asked many people in order to find a cure but he came to no prevail He was about to give up and return to China when one day he emerged from a forest of mystical Banyan Trees and entered the kingdom of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, India.

He wandered into the palace ornate with carrera marble, black onyx, Ivory and gold. He passed the diamond encrusted halls and entered the outdoor gathering area. There was the queen who was a beautiful woman covered in majestic white silk robes, The prince, Bodhi Dharma who was a bearded man sitting on a red and gold throne and opposite of him sat a sage with a weird hairstyle and a long white beard. As Huang Shu stood amazed, the Queen said “What is the reason for your arrival”. Huang Shu Di said “I bring a message from the emperor of China, a great plague has taken China, thousands of people are dying everyday. Please save our country from the Black Fly Virus” . The Queen replied,,”We too had this virus years ago but we have cured it, and as a gesture of friendship and support to China we will send our Prince Bodhi Dharma to China”. He will teach everyone how to fight this virus and make your body so strong that in future you don't have to face such situations anymore.

Bodhidharma showed Huang around the kingdom and explained that they fought the virus by eating the right foods and by practicing martial arts. While visiting the school, Huang saw some people were fighting each other. He asked why people in India fight each other ? Bodhidharma explained that they were not fighting but they were practicing martial arts. It would make their bodies strong and immune. It's the best way to make our body strong not only from outside but also from inside.

The next day, Bodhidharma and Huang Shu Di boarded a Huge wooden sailboat and set sail to china. They travelled on vast seas and oceans and eventually reached the mountains surrounding the great Shaolin Temple. Bodhi Dharman understood the lifestyle of Chinese people and taught them to eat more vegetables and fruits, do Karupatti which was martial arts from India and later became Kung Fu. Bodhi Dharman also brought art and science of Ayurveda which helped to develop into Chinese medicine based on plants and herbs. Together they fought the deadly virus and made China free of this disease. The king declared Bodhi Dharman as one of the great Masters of China and people still follow his teachings.

Today when a new deadly virus COVID spread again in China, Master Bodhi Dharman, sent his messenger – his great grandson Peter Dharman to save this world once again. Welcome home Mr Dharman!

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF King George V School, Sun, Rosie – 12

There's a reason Huangshan is barren, a reason that goes back way before anyone can remember, a reason that has nearly been lost with time's erosion.

The legends say that it used to be green. It used to be absolutely bursting with life and color from each nook and cranny. It used to be a beautiful place, full of trees and colorful birds dashing by, their song echoing through the woods.

That's how it used to be.

Now it's a misty, lonely place, where trees grow through solid rock at the edges of mountains, with nothing to help them but the instinct to live.

And yes, there is a reason why it's like this.

It all began back when villages flourished there. The records say that they were so in touch with nature that they could communicate with the birds and squirrels. Whether that was true is uncertain, but it is for sure that they were content and happy with their lives.

The clouds listened to them and provided them rain when they needed it, and hid away when they needed sunshine. The trees grew tall and provided the sweetest fruit in all the land. And above in the skies resided the dragon that controlled them all.

The dragon was huge—so huge that he could easily block the sun if he wished. But he trusted and cared for the villagers, and in return, the villagers cared for the forest—kept it alive, cherished it, protected it.

For everyone knew that the forest was exactly what the dragon's heart was like. If the dragon was happy, the forest flourished. If the dragon for any reason was discontent, then the trees would begin to shrivel, the birds would begin to lose their voices, and the villagers would soon find themselves without a home.

So the villagers sang praises of the great dragon, which helped them in times of need and made sure they lived happily.

But the dragon had a weakness.

The dragon kept his greatest secret in a wooden box down in the well. He ordered the villagers never to go looking for the box, or if they were to find it, never to open it. The villagers agreed to this. For thousands of years, people kept asking their friends and family the same question: "What is in that box?" But they did not wish to anger the dragon, for their lives depended on it, so generations died without getting closer to finding the truth.

Until a young boy was born.

The boy had always been a troublesome child, always doing the opposite of what he was told. The villagers quietly whispered amongst themselves that he would never do anything good. But secretly he had a plan.

He was going to find the box.

The boy had never been told of the box with the secret inside. His parents had never told him about it, since they knew that he would almost certainly go looking for it. But he'd heard about it, nevertheless, from his friends. So he set out into the woods one day.

As he kept walking, the trees began to get thinner and thinner, until they looked like dead, gnarled fingers sticking out of the ground. The birdsong went from a symphony to a dull muted whisper to silence. Soon, he could hear nothing except his footsteps crunching on mud.

He smiled. This was good. He was getting close.

"Don't go there," a small voice whispered.

He turned around and noticed a small squirrel perched in the trees.

"Don't go there," the squirrel whispered again. "It's dangerous. You don't know what the dragon will do."

The boy laughed. It echoed through the empty wood. "Don't be ridiculous. Everyone knows the dragon will love us no matter what."

The squirrel sighed. "I'm telling you, don't! It's lucky you're going the opposite direction any—" The squirrel quickly clapped its hand to its mouth. "I shouldn't have said that!"

The boy laughed. "Thanks for your help." He smirked and set off in the opposite direction.

It wasn't long before he came across a clearing. In the middle was a stone well with a wooden frame that was falling apart and creaking due to old age. It hadn't been used in a while. The boy immediately knew that the secret was hidden here.

He turned the rust-coated handle. It creaked and croaked, but he could see the rusted bucket was coming up.

A small wooden box was nested inside.

The boy smiled and drew it out, before flipping the lid open.

A small piece of paper was curled up in the middle.
He pulled it out. Something was written on it.
A single word.
This was the word that would send their lives into danger.
He could turn back now.
Would he?

The boy opened the paper.
Two characters were written.
“不满,” he read out loud. “Discontentment.”

The words were foreign on his lips. He’d never said them before. He’d never experienced them before. He didn’t know what it meant.

He looked up towards the sky.

“You see this, dragon?” he shouted, waving the paper at the sky. “I’ve discovered your little secret with this nonsensical word. I win!”

The boy ran back home.

The village had gone looking for him. They were all running through the forest with lanterns, calling his name. The boy scrunched up the paper in his fist and thrust it in his pocket.

“Thank goodness you’re here!” the man shouted. “We were so scared that you were gone!”

The rest of the village clustered around him and let him sleep.

“We were worried about you,” his mother called. “Don’t run away again. Are you feeling hungry?”

He ate his food reluctantly. However, he could see his mother had changed. Her forehead showed worry lines now.

“It’s a pity we don’t have much food today,” his mother said. “I wonder how we lived like this before! Look at our shabby little house. We need to improve it. And look at your shirt— slightly torn— oh, how poor our fortune is!”

The boy looked outside the window.

All the villagers outside were discontent. Unhappy with this. Unhappy with that.

“I don’t think the weather is good enough today. It’s just two degrees too hot for my liking.”

“Look at this dreadful jacket? Can you imagine how poorly it’s made? Purple, too! Who ever heard of a purple jacket?”

“The trees are too tall. Whoever made the trees so tall? Too hard to get fruit.”

“What do you mean? The trees are too short! No good for climbing.”

The boy realized, for the first time, that this was discontentment— the greatest curse of all.

The dragon woke up to check on his village friends.

What he saw appalled him.

Weather not good? Jackets not perfect? Trees too tall or short?

His greatest secret had been uncovered!

The people the dragon trusted had betrayed him. They were grumbling about everything now, unhappy about this, unhappy about that, in a world that was otherwise perfect!

“Mankind is never content,” he thought to himself.

So his heart turned grey and malicious.

The forest did, as well. The trees perished. The grass that once grew on the side of the mountains perished. A heavy mist grew over the land.

The villagers, one by one, left the wretched mountains. The dragon was all alone now, looking over what had once been a beautiful place.

Discontentment had ruined it all.

The Tale of Nine Dragons Waterfall

ESF King George V School, Wong, Adelaide – 12

“Dad, don’t you think that waterfall kinda looks like a dragon?” exclaimed a small boy, clutching the hand of his father in the crowd of tourists.

“I suppose it does, because this is called Nine Dragon Waterfall after all...there’s a story about it though,” replied the father.

“Tell me! Tell me! Please?”

“Alright then. Let me tell you.....”

Once upon a time,

There was a mountain that soared higher than the steeples. Clouds clothed the peaks with a blanket of thick mist, ancient stone steps twisted and turned like snakes across the nooks and crannies of the mountain. During the winter, the snow embraced the cliffs in a sweater of white, and during the spring, between the ancient pine trees were signs of life everywhere: pawprints of a Mongolian wolf, the hoofprints of an ox, the feathers of a pheasant, the occasional shrieking of a macaque, and the budding blossoms of sprouts ready to reach their green hands towards the warm sunlight.

The great mountain was known as the Yellow Emperor’s mountains, or more simply, Huangshan.

In the great mountains, there was a small trickling waterfall.

Behind the waterfall was a paradise of nature where cranes flocked in vast numbers to drink in the glistening waters and where silver-furred wolves, graceful tawny deer and swinging, hooting monkeys roamed the land.

The King of Heavens wanted the secret paradise to be a sanctuary for animals only. So, he appointed one of the most truthful creatures, the dragons, to be the secret passage between the lands.

Behind this waterfall, was the secret home of these magnificent creatures.

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Amongst the nine dragons who lived in this secret wonderland was a young dragon named Xue. Xue had pearly white scales that reflected shades of lavender, peach, and mint, flowing whiskers and luscious horns, and soft, forest green eyes.

Xue enjoyed slipping through the passageways to the mountains and ventured on adventures, despite her companions relentlessly warning her not to leave Huangshan, as them, the mysterious creatures could only survive in this secret land.

One day, when Xue meandered through the snowy riverbanks in the tall reeds, she heard a loud wailing sound, unlike anything she had heard before, and followed the sound to a frosted rock as the first snows began to fall.

Swaddled in a thin cotton blanket, was a small baby boy.

Xue had never seen a human before and had no reason to help any human being, but Xue had reason to help a small, abandoned, defenseless child in the middle of a freezing winter.

She took the child back to the world behind the falls and named the child Huang. When wrapping the child in warm furs, she discovered a golden charm of an intricate dragon buried inside.

Xue raised the child as if he were her own. She taught Huang how to climb trees and swim across lakes, how to find food and how to find his way through the mountains. She even taught how to communicate with the inhabitants of Huangshan, but most importantly, lessons of kindness, patience, and bravery.

The two of them splashed in the frothing brooks in spring, ran through the meadows in summer amongst the herds of deer, leaped in the scarlet piles of leaves in autumn as flocks of cranes migrated, and brushed through the snows with the wolves.

Later, when Huang reached a more mature age, he even learnt to start fires with stones and was taught to speak Human.

Despite his recent maturities, Huang never shunned Xue and enjoyed his life thoroughly in the mountains. He raced the wolves in the meadows, climbed the giant ginkgo trees with the monkeys, and fished with the cranes at the twisting rivers.

Their life was peaceful, and happy. Or it was, for a while.

One day, Xue and Huang decided to go on an adventure. They slipped through the waterfall gateway into the mountains. The two of them scurried through the grass, but were stopped in their tracks by a large, thumping noise.

“What’s that?”

Xue flicked her tail and ducked lower into the grass. Not long after, dozens of shadows approached, blocking out the light of the sun. Xue’s heart pounded rapidly. Humans? What were humans doing in the mountains? She yanked Huang under a bush quickly.

“We should stop and rest soon,” growled a deep voice.

“Shouldn’t we keep going?” replied another anxious, low voice.

“No, this is pointless,” groaned the first.

“Look, the emperor is sick! And we need to find his heir fast, otherwise the kingdom might fall to pieces. So, what do you think is more important, carrying out the mission or resting your feet?” snapped a reedy voice.

“But the army’s been searching for over fifteen years. How are we supposed to find him? There are so many places in China the heir could be,” moaned the first voice.

“Remember, the heir should have an intricate, golden charm of a dragon! Now hurry up, we’ll be moving out of the mountains before sunset,” barked the reedy voice.

Xue yanked Huang away and dragged him all the way back to the secret entrance at the falls. Not looking back, she hauled him through the water and all the way back into the cave.

“What was that, Xue?” asked Huang.

With her jaw clenched, Xue snorted in exasperation and tromped away to a shadowed part of the cave. A heavy silence filled the hollow.

“Hey Xue, please don’t tell me I was that missing child...” mumbled Huang.

Xue stared in shock at him.

He shrugged sheepishly. “I found the charm in the blanket a couple years ago. I didn’t know what it meant until now...You don’t want me to go, right? Please don’t make me go...I know you would be sad if I go...”

Xue rolled over and glared at him. “I will miss you terribly...but your people need you...your country needs you. I would be selfish if I try to keep you here”.

Huang’s eyes filled with tears. His mouth went dry as he attempted to answer her.

Xue’s eyes softened. Sadness and dread rushed through her head like a river. “Come, let me take you back home.” She swallowed down an ember of sorrow down her throat.

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Xue and Huang soared over the clouds, cutting through the sky as they tracked the movements of the marching men. Just as they were about to cross over the final stretch and ridges of the mountains, down towards the camp in which the army had made, Xue hesitated and hovered in the air before taking a nervous gulp. Xue knew, if she left the mountains and touched the ground, she would be vanished in the air.

She soared down towards the men, the air rushing past her face, and as soon as her feet gently touched upon the grass, her legs began to crust over in a layer of gray stone. Slowly by slowly, the gray stone stretched across her body and cracked across her face. Huang gaped in horror.

“Goodbye, dear...” rasped Xue as the gray crept across her chin and began its ascent to Xue’s horns. As reached out towards the dragon, the stone finished its job and all was left was a statue of a dragon, frozen in mid-flight, with an expression of fear and sadness.

“Xue...” he whispered.

The statue crumbled into dust and disappeared.

“I’ll never forget you.”

Years later, in the great palaces, there lived an emperor who was patient, compassionate and brave. He treated all his subjects with kindness and was beloved by all his people.

However, every day at dawn, he stands by his windows and watches the sun rise over an enormous range of mountains that he once called home, where he lived with a wonderful, kind white dragon who had taught him through life’s greatest lessons and had made him the person he was that day.

One day, he returned by himself to his former home and stood in silence in front of the waterfall which was the entrance to where he had once called home. He could never return to it, ever again.

However, when he turned to leave, he spotted something strange. The waterfall was now made up of several rock ridges, that glistened peach, mint and lavender in the warm sunlight. One rock looked as if it was an eye, filled with kindness and sadness at the same time.

He smiled to himself. At least Xue was at peace now.

Many years later, after the emperor was long gone, people told stories of his generosity and patience, and the way he had ruled his people. Like Xue, he was never truly gone, for people remembered him, day after day.

Not only that, but the mountains where he once lived are named after him, and the unlikely guardian who had come to love him and help him no matter what.

Do you know that place?

We call it Huangshan.

The Fountain of Huangshan

ESF Sha Tin College, Fung, Marcus – 13

It was a dark night. The primeval trees stood against the howling wind. A faint light reflected the rough rocks. A thick blanket of snow covered the stairs. From afar, you could see a faint curtain of slithering smoke crawling away to the sky. A tattered tent sat on a loose cliff. A fire burnt outside the tent, twirling in a fiery dance. A man climbed out of the canvas. He sighed and put out the fire with his feet.

Suddenly, cracks formed on the tall cliff. The man, shocked, leaped for the mountainside. He barely held on before the cliffside, along with his tent, fell down to the unknown abyss. The man was limping heavily as he moved. He held a torch. His face was half-lit by its feeble fire. His body was full of wounds, bloodstains on his ragged clothes. A haze of smoke blinded the man's eyes. He carried a bag, heavy as a boulder. Dazed from his injuries, he had no idea where to go, he was just faltering, on and on.

There was a snow storm, turning the sky into a swirling white storm of screaming darkness. The biting cold numbed the man's face and fingers. The cold seeped into his toes and stalked him through the mountain steps. A twist of fate for the man, a large cave was around the corner. It was a gaping hole in the mountainside. Although the man found shelter, a cold chill ran down his spine. Inky black water covered the floor. Light didn't reach the ceiling, walls nor the floor, there was only a pitch dark void. The man took an unlit torch out of his bag and lit it with his flint and steel. The bright light shone like the sun in an uncanny darkness and blinded the man's eyes for a brief moment. There were countless tunnel openings on the cave wall. The tunnels were like the arteries of the earth. They went on and on without an end of sight or possibility of sunlight.

This man who was resting in the mountain cave was in the Huangshan Mountains. Searching for a sacred power. He was looking for a sanctuary. A temple hand built by the ancient civilizations. Rumors were that inside the temple was a thing so unimaginable that it wiped out the very same people within months. Almost no trace as to where they went. The man needed to know. He had searched for it for almost thirteen years. Tracking the message from Italy to Mexico, from Russia to Egypt. After these twelve years of dead-ends and collecting hints or clues, all sources pointed to the Huangshan Mountains in China.

Still suffering from the cold, which was slowly invading his internal heat. The man was clinging on to his life. The man was tired. Unable to walk. He tried to sleep, to escape this frozen hell. He closed his eyes for a brief second only to open them and find himself in a hallway. A perfect arch made of sandstone and brick walls hemmed the man. A soft welcoming voice echoed "Look for the fire..."

The man closed his eyes again. He woke up back in the freezing cave extremely confused. The man grunted in pain as he stood up. "I. Need. To. Find it."

The man picked up his bag and continued his journey.

The man took out a piece of yellowed paper. It was from his search in Norway. It read "WITHIT THM MTTMR+FI ÞIRM, THM MMH+FXM HHI+MM F+MP. BNR+T TX BM RMßIRTHMM N+M F CHM&H+Y." An ancient runic writing that no one understood. The man considered it a dead end but he brought it along just to be safe.

He took out a faded map from his bag, seconds from tearing. "Almost there" said the man with a rough voice. He pointed at the side of one of the sky-high mountains with a dim orange light coming off of it. He went around the uneven corner to find a temple. Crafted out of limestone, there were tall rocky chimneys that looked like jagged stalagmites. Small windows looked out to the fogged darkness. A pebbled path made basalt and marble paved the way to the archaic temple. Lingering vines entwined with the mouldy walls.

Shivering from the winter cold, the man trudged on the winding path towards the great wooden door which towered over the man. Small cracks could be seen on the door. A rusted gold door knob guarded the door.

"Finally." The man said.

"In these ancient walls, a secret that took twelve years to find."

He opened the huge door. An instant warmth filled the air. The air smelt like no one has been here for years. A weak fire burnt eternally in a stone fireplace. The only movement being the dust shuffled by the man's boots and the whispering of fire. Multiple flickering torches were held by grey metal sconces on the rock walls. A worn down bed

sat at the corner. A thick sheet of dust covered the old oak shelves. The shelves held centuries of knowledge yet it wasn't what the man was looking for. At first it seemed like the temple was a living quarter for someone, but no one has touched anything inside for a long time.

"Where is it?" the man questioned himself. He scrambled around the dimly lit room for the message.

The man knelt down to examine the fireplace, the warm wave of radiation melted a thin layer of snow on his hands. The fire crackled as the yellowed piece of paper fell out of the man's pocket. Suddenly, the fire exploded and grew ten times as strong. The man was shocked and stumbled backwards. The fire jumped to life as it rearranged itself, leaving a hole in the middle with the scorched piece of paper.

"What type of wizardry is this?" The astounded man questioned. The fire calmed and the man reached for the paper. Still numb from the cold, the man couldn't feel the burning paper.

When the man looked at the charred paper, the ancient runes were nowhere to be seen. All these years, mounting up to a blank piece of paper. The man sat on the bed, storms of dust were pushed out of the way. He readied to go back to a mountain village miles away.

"Another dead end." The man frustratedly said.

The tall wooden door once again opened to the pitch black night. The ongoing blizzard blew against the man's face.

Suddenly, the floor began to shake. The man fell on his knees from the rumbling. The echoes from the quake ricocheted off of the monstrous mountainsides. The man looked back at the sanctuary. Many books fell out of their places and were cushioned by dust. The fire trembled in an effort to avoid being put out. There was a hole in the walls of the temple, leading to a room with echoes of an unknown origin.

The man thought "Perhaps the shaking caused it?"

He got on his feet and walked towards the new room. Around the corner, there was a fountain. The room was silent and still, water endlessly poured out of the top, the whole structure was coated with gold.

"Finally! I am here! The Wishing Fountain!" The man was overwhelmed with excitement.

The fountain was filled with warm water, beneath it there were many coins from a long time ago.

The man knew what the future had held for him as a rejoicing smile appeared on his face.

50 Years Into The Future

The sky was silent. Dark clouds reigned over the burning city that was once the pinnacle of the world. A city where glass towers were spread across the metropolis, giving shelter to thousands of people. A city of wide avenues stretching around like the web of a spider. A city where the air was fresh as day, unlike the poisonous gas that was here. There was no indication whether it was day or night, only a grey foggy sky that curtained the world. The Wishing Fountain, once a beautiful thing full of opportunities, Now a permanent scar on the face of Earth.

The Fountain stood in the center of the burning chaos. The golden coating had worn out, revealing an extraterrestrial stone structure on the inside. Vines entangled with broken cracks in the fountain. Still, dirtied water dripped from the fountain top. The curse that was the fountain still stood while everything around it fell. Many golden coins were left unattended in the fountain.

The man appeared. Scars all over his body. Faint frantic screaming could be heard all around the block. Standing before the fountain. Looking over the madness that the fountain brought on everyone. The man realized he shouldn't have went on his journey. Never should he have went to Huangshan. He never should've went in that room. He never should've used the fountain. The doom that was brought by the Fountain of Huangshan.

For Every Tragedy, there is Always a Happy Ending

ESF Sha Tin College, Lo, Kaiden – 13

My grandfather died. The note in his chest pocket, it read only a place: Mountains of the Yellow Emperor (Huangshan).

Confused, I searched on the internet and only found the location: East China. It must've been important since his expression as he came through the door, was cautious and anxious. He was 79 at the time and only did frequent visits to our house. With that note sticking out in his chest pocket, he used our spare key that we gave him, slammed open the door, and barged right in. A few seconds after he stepped in, he covered his heart with both hands and collapsed on the spot. We rushed to the hospital as fast as we could but still, he couldn't make it.

Ever since then, I have been investigating what the 'Mountains of the Yellow Emperor' is or meant. It took around more than half a year to snap back into reality and give up on this pointless exploration, realizing only my (dead) grandfather has the answers to this unsolvable investigation. It finally popped into my head, 'I could go to China for my summer vacation!' I begged my parents to go. Reluctantly, they went along with the idea.

Right before we got onto the plane to China, my dad received a call from work. Due to an emergency, he couldn't come. When we arrived at Tunxi airport (which was conveniently the closest airport to Huangshan), we went straight to a motel since both my legs started to drag behind. By the time we had already settled down, it was finally time to sleep. All I could think about was what awaits me tomorrow at Huangshan and all the secrets I was going to unlock.

Tomorrow finally came! Luckily, I read the pamphlet whilst we were checking in, I bet my mom would gladly take a 2-hour spa, followed by another 2 hours of yoga. While she suspects I'm enjoying crafts... That would give me just about enough time to explore around Huangshan. I brought my watch and water, not much, but good enough. Using the money my mom gave me to buy food and drinks, I was able to get onto a taxi and drive straight to Huangshan, I looked at my watch, 10:13 am. No roads were leading straight to the actual mountain itself, so I had to jog. There I was, standing right in front of a tall, majestic mountain, with peaks piercing through clouds. it was the most fascinating view I have ever seen! I could barely contain my anticipation to see what awaits me up there, when suddenly, I remembered, there wasn't much time left, I looked at my watch: 10:56 am. I shot past the beautiful scenery that I so eagerly wanted to stop and explore, cherry blossoms, ponds, small creatures, pine trees, and fresh grass. I looked past them right and left, then skidded to a stop as a glimpse of a moving shadow caught the corner of my eye. My eyes were squinting into narrow slits so I could take a closer look, my mouth was already open without me realizing. Who is that?...

I saw a rather large man with a beard in yellow robes wearing dangly hat ornaments, by the looks of it, he was old. He was about 20 meters in front of the road up the hill, I think he was crossing it. He appeared out of nowhere from multiple monstrous wide trees and tall bushes, completely covering where he came from. He was midway crossing the streets when I rubbed my eyes, the fog was too thick. I needed a closer look, but once my hands were off my eyes, the old man had disappeared. I'm pretty sure it was just some sort of hallucination; Time flies.

After a while, as I continued my journey, I looked up at the sky and saw the sun was at the centre of the sky, I couldn't stay any longer, mom would be worried. Although I did not discover much today, I'm certain tomorrow will be better.

The very next day my mom received a call from the hospital saying dad got into a minor car accident. But all the aeroplanes that are going back home are full, so we had to wait for one more day. I cut through the wall of silence and said, "I met friends yesterday, can I go hang out with them today?" She approved. Same way as before, I arrived at Huangshan, 3:48, sprinted up the mountain. It felt stranger today, I felt the presence of a shadow, I was being watched. Ignoring the situation, I dismissed the thoughts and ran up the road, further than I ever went before. Finally, I arrived at the top, 4:05. In front of me was a beautifully architected temple. Curious, I went towards the temple and as soon I stepped up the small set of stairs, I heard someone clearing their throat with a cough. My eyes took a while to adjust to the brightness of the overwhelming colour of gold surrounding the room. In the centre,

there was a throne and on that throne was an old man, I could tell he was an emperor with the crown, fancy clothes and the penetrating demeanour, he was sitting up straight and had a long and grey beard. With a jolt, I realised he was the man that I saw, the man that I thought was a hallucination. I stepped back whilst staring at him, realizing he might be a dangerous man, casting a worried and frightening glance towards the man, I thought to myself 'will this be it? I wasn't able to say goodbye to my grandpa, and no one I love will be able to say goodbye to me...'

At first, he had one of his eyebrows up and then he laughed, laughed, and laughed. He was laughing at me! He finally spoke, "You think that I'm some kind of threat?" He literally read my mind. I recognised you, you're David's grandson, we kept in contact for a long time, but these few months he hasn't returned my mail."

After a moment of silence, I replied: "He died."

"Oh."

After a long pause, I switched topics by saying "Why were you following me?"

"To protect you from the demons."

"Demons?" I exclaimed in disbelief

"Yes, demons. Millennials ago demons and monsters existed, that was a forgotten timeline. I and your grandfather were the best demon hunters. Eventually, we found this mountain, then we created jail cells in the centre of the mountain, and we stored demons in it. Once, when we were fighting a demon, it nearly brought us to the verge of death. With the realisation that every minute we go into the field, we put our lives at risk, so we decided to retire and live in the mountains. Because of the countless numbers of demons in the mountain, the magic from the demons was able to keep them, us and the mountain alive. We were too unwilling to kill the demons because of what it granted us, we built and explored the mountain for years until decades ago things became boring for your grandfather, he wanted to go out into the world and live a life, but I wanted to stay with the mountain because I have grown attached to it, I didn't want to leave everything that I created. A few weeks ago, I found out the demons have found a way to escape the cells but still don't know the way out of the mountain, many are wandering around. I broke the news to David but he probably overreacted knowing that they will hunt him down and also knowing he is too weak to defend you. Now that your grandfather is gone, I should be too, bringing the demons along with it."

"Do you need help?"

"I can take care of it, I might look old, but I'm still very young."

I looked at my watch, 4:34, I needed to return. As I turned towards the exit, I connected some thoughts myself. On my way back, I was fulfilled and satisfied that I have found the answers. It wasn't going to be battles and war in this adventure. It was going to be returning to my normal life. I arrived back at the motel, but as soon as I opened the door, my mom was on the phone with a worried look. When she turned around and saw me, she immediately ran to me and quite literally crushed me.

"Solving a mystery."

Eventually, we arrived back in Los Angeles by plane and found our way to the hospital. As soon as he was in front of us, my mom instantly dropped our belongings and rushed right past me to envelop him with a fierce hug.

A Dragon's Legacy

ESF Sha Tin College, Szeto, Millie – 11

I knew I shouldn't have wandered off from Dad to walk up another hiking trail, no matter how dull the hike up Huangshan felt or how crowded it was. I tugged at my mask, furious at myself.

To add to my frustrations, it was now raining.

That's right. Dad and I went to Huangshan for a little hike during the pandemic. There weren't many people around and the scenery was stunning, but it was a tiring experience.

I looked out across the canyon. Thick swirls of mist surrounded the mountains and billowed up from below, concealing and protecting Huangshan. Leafy trees grew all over every single mountain, as if to soften the spiky peaks. I stretched out my hand to touch the ghost-white curls of fog and rain. The eerie beauty of Huangshan was accentuated by the calm whooshes of the breeze.

Enough soaking in the scenery. Dad is probably at the top of the mountain and freaking out because you're lost. Keep going. I kept walking.

The rain poured down on me as I threw my coat over my head for protection. A gust of wind roared in my ears. "I can't keep walking like this, I'll catch a cold," I pressed my back to the rocks and shifted around the mountain, trying my best to avoid the rain.

I touched a cluster of dry rocks and turned around to see a pitch-black opening in the boulders. *A tunnel?*

"I'm definitely not going in there, it isn't safe," I muttered, forging on through the curtains of rain.

A bolt of blinding white slammed into the ground below, shaking the entire mountain. The lightning was followed by a series of rumbles, a drumroll sent from Heaven. I sank to the ground and covered my ears with my hands. "On second thought—," I scrambled for the safety of the tunnel.

Backing into the safety of the cave, I bumped into something rough and somewhat furry, tumbling over on the floor.

"Did I reach the end of the tunnel already?" I turned around and gasped.

A bloodred Chinese dragon, with scales embellished with the brightest golden and silver patterns was curled up on the cold stone floor, softly snoring. Its scales radiated a lustrous glow that put shame to even the sun and its skin was laced with tongues of ruby fire, the only light in the cave. Grey tendrils of smoke rose out of its nostrils. Spiky, curled antlers adorned its massive head. Its eyebrows were furrowed, as if it were dreaming about something truly disturbing. Its lips were curled, razor sharp teeth showing menacingly. I fell to the ground in shock with a thump.

The dragon stirred as I held my breath, carefully edging away from its lair, eyes widened in terror.

An ominous rumbling began in its throat.

Very slowly, its eyelids rose, unveiling a pair of ancient, deadly, jade eyes.

"Who dares approach the Mighty Tianlong?" It hissed, voice raspy from years of slumber. It raised its massive head from the floor and opened his mighty maw, revealing lethal fangs as sharp as stalactites.

"My name is ChunYing," I shivered, terrified.

"You are a human child, aren't you?" It leaned closer, sniffing carefully.

"Y—yes."

"I do not harm innocent humans. I am a Protector of humans, sent from the Sky Emperor himself to protect the world. It is thanks to my guidance and advice that this country has become so advanced. I possess infinite wisdom and centuries of experience," the Dragon informed me proudly, scratching his chin with a single claw.

"What? If you're so powerful, why aren't you teaching us how to solve our problems? Why are you dozing away lazily in this little cave?" I was curious.

"You see, O disrespectful little human, during the Tang dynasty, my guidance was no longer needed. Humans are clever and they managed to keep the country running without my assistance. I hid away from the people I was supposed to protect and fell into an eternal slumber..." He looked down to me. "Well, almost."

"You have to be kidding me. Have you not heard of the pandemic, the Californian forest fires or the floods in China?"

"Pandemic? Fires? I must have missed out on a lot of things," the Dragon leaned down to me again. "Get on my back, silly child. I need to see what has happened to my people."

Hesitating a little, I climbed onto the reptile's scaly back. He rose into the wind, rippling like a giant ribbon, higher and higher into the sky, until we were above the clouds.

"There's a city ahead," I announced, pointing to a skyscraper below. "We should keep hovering over the city in case the people see us."

"What's that?" The Dragon pointed to a small building.

"It's a building. People live in those," I explained.

"What's that?" He leaned down and carelessly picked up a nearby truck, tossing it up into the air and catching it. Thankfully, it was empty.

"That's a car. They're like chariots, but we use mechanics to run them. Please put the car down before you break it."

"Child, what is wrong with the air here? I can hardly breathe!" He let out a series of deafening coughs and hacks, smoke curling out of his mouth. His jade, glowing eyes narrowed, trying to see through the thick smog.

I squinted at the surroundings. "You took us to Beijing. The air here is polluted."

"What is wrong with all this smoke? The water running through the streets is grey and look at those heaps of trash everywhere! Besides that, what are those humans doing? The streets are empty and they're all inside their homes! The ones that are outside are wearing a strange strip of cloth over their nose and mouth. Child, what is happening?"

"It's because of the pandemic, Dragon. It's killed over a million of people and everyone's staying in their homes so that we don't get sick. The world has turned upside down by all the misfortunes that have happened this year. See what I meant when I said that you were needed?" I patted the Dragon's antlers. "I don't know how we can help with or stop the pandemic or the problems around the world, but we have to try."

The Dragon grimaced, baring knife-sharp rows of teeth. "I don't have any healing powers, naïve little human. You creatures are on your own. I have not seen the world in many years. I am inexperienced." He hissed. "I can only watch my people suffer."

"That's not all you can do!" I tried to persuade him. "You can help with the natural disasters around the world!"

He shook his massive head. "You humans. Always so hopeful. I loved that about you little creatures. No matter what darkness you were trapped in, you would always remain hopeful and fight your way out of your problems. That is a quality that must be cherished. Alas, I cannot help."

"We need your help!" I pleaded, clenching my fists.

“I told you, I cannot assist you with these disasters.”

“Why? You’re a mighty dragon and you are a friend to all humans!”

“Solving these problems happening around the world is the responsibility of you humans. You creatures caused a lot of these disasters as well. You abuse the environment, pollute the water and air, and cause global warming. These are your problems, and thus they are yours to solve.” The Dragon tipped me off his head and held me in his claw.

“That does not mean I will not do something about your suffering. Here, you and I must part ways.” He set me down on a rooftop. “I will command my winds to escort you back to Huangshan, my child. I have work to do and peace to maintain. Thank you for waking me and making me see sense after so many years.”

With a strong gust of wind, the Dragon was stripped from my vision, along with the city of Beijing, and I was sitting in the Dragon’s lair in Huangshan. The rain had halted.

I stood up, stumbling towards the mouth of the cave.

And there he was, in the sky.

My Dragon.

He was burning with all his strength, a look of furious love yet gentle kindness for humanity in his jade eyes, spiralling through the sky, a rainbow that shone with glory trailing in his wake. He broke the grey clouds open with his tail and moved through the wind like the swiftest thunderbolt. At one point, he crashed into a layer of clouds and vanished, scattered to the winds...

Whenever I see a rainbow, I think of the Dragon I met in the middle of Huangshan. I think of his sacrifice and his message of hope to us humans.

The Mystical Mountains of China

ESF Sha Tin College, Tang, Jason – 11

In the year of 1611, Emperor Chongzhen ruled the lands of the Ming Dynasty. The Monarchy at that time was struggling to hold up as its people were suffering from war and natural disasters. But in the east of China at that time, it was a different story.

Locked deep in the lands of China was a small village in Huangshan located in the province of Huizhou, the modern-day Anhui. Colossal mountains shaped like fingers staggered above the clouds. Caverns and secret caves scattered around the landscape. Hidden in the mist and fog was a tiny village on top of the highest mountain in Huangshan. No one from the south ever discovered Huangshan or the secret village hidden in the mist. They never knew the secrets that lay between the Mountains.

Long stone stairs circulating the mountains in Huangshan led up to the Village. Two pine trees, thousands of years old, formed the large gate into the village. There were dozens of homes sized differently with a sense of their own diversity. A long road separated the two districts, each district was home to about 6 different families.

In the village lived a young boy named Chen. Him and his family of three lived together in a small limestone house. The walls were covered with light turquoise and the roofs were painted with tomato red. Vibrant lanterns tangled around the doors and roofs.

Chen's father, Han worked in a pet shop in the village breeding and selling Dragons, flying Turtles, mystical Lions and other magical creatures that were only found in Huangshan. Chen's mother Crystal made medicine with herbs and insects found from around the mountains. The village was scattered all around the humongous mountains with hundreds of unique homes all with their touch of diversity. Chen would always play around the colossal mountains that ranged across the fields.

While Chen's mother Crystal was cooking dinner, Chen read books that his grandfather gave him before he died. "Interesting, the gem of Huangshan. Li bai and Daofu mentioned this in their poems as well." Chen whispered to himself quietly. The thick book smelt earthy and had an extremely hard cover like concrete. Just as Chen was about to turn another page the fossilized book the door sprung right open. "Everyone guess what I brought back from the pet store!" Han, Chen's father excitedly cheered. "Is it a necklace for me? I wanted a pearl one!" Crystal shouted with her eyes wide open. "Well.uhh," Han nervously laughed.

Something suddenly screeched an ear breaking tone out of Han's bag. The delightful smile in Crystal's face suddenly dropped. "No way! Is it a dragon?" Chen screamed.

The little creature jumped out of the bag enthusiastically. It had magnificent scales sprinkled with magenta and gorgeous blue eyes that looked like the ocean. Its wings were a mix of light red and a darker tone of purple that dazzled everyone's eyes. Its two parallel horns stuck out of its small head. "What is this disgusting creature doing in my house!" Crystal exclaimed loudly. "What do you mean this lovely dragon is so cute, I had to adopt him. He's a Purple Sapphire Horned Dragon, a very rare species and one of the last of its kind." "Just don't let it cause any trouble, and don't let it destroy all my vases!" said Crystal.

Chen spent hours and hours playing and taking care of the young dragon. They formed an unbreakable bond in a matter of hours. The Dragon slept by Chen's side, ate by his side and even went out together side by side. In a matter of weeks, the Dragon grew to the size of a bicycle. "Let's call him Lucky, it's good fortune and brings luck!" Chen said. "Why not. Take good care of Lucky son." Han told Chen.

Without his parents knowing Chen took the magnificent Dragon beyond the village, into the jungles in the mist.

Lucky flapped his wings around with a little grin.

“Do you think it's time for you to fly buddy?” Chen asked.

With a little nod from Lucky, Chen jumped on its scaly back and held onto its mane and with a final breath of air the elegant creature took off into the winds.

“Ahhh, slower buddy.” Chen laughed.

They lifted slowly reaching the sea of fluffy clouds.

“Wow, the views are just spectacular.” Shouted Chen as he glided around in the clouds.

In the far distance near the low rivers there were miniscule figures. Chen and Lucky could not tell what they were. Flying closer they found out it was Emperor Chongzhen's Army. Their bright red flags staggered around the air as thousands of soldiers slowly stormed up the mountains.

“We have to go back and warn the village,” Chen exclaimed.

They swiftly flew back to the village gates and into their limestone house.

Chen and the Lucky broke open the doors quickly and towered in their home.

“Dear son! Where have you been? Emperor Chongzhen Army is coming to our village!” Crystal shouted.

“I saw them mother, why are they here?” Chen sighed.

“They are here the Gem of Huangshan. It has been told the Gem has powers of the extraordinary and can control life. If someone ate it, they would be immortal.” Crystal replied.

“The gem also brings life to these magical mountains in Huangshan. Without its life would slowly fade, and the earth would crumble.” Han said.

“How come I didn't know any of this until now?” Chen asked loudly.

Crystal and Han held a green box. They opened the hard cover, and in it was a shining Gem. The magnificent gem glowed like a beating heart. It was the Gem of Huangshan.

“The great poet Li Bai pasted it down in generations and here it is today. We mustn't let the Emperor lay hands on the Gem.” Crystal cried.

“Everyone, hide under the bed and I'll keep the gem in one of the vases.” Han shouted.

“No, I can help. Me and Lucky can deal with this.” Chen said bravely.

“No Chen!” both parents screamed.

But it was too late Chen and Lucky leaped out of the doors and flew above the sky.

“Is that our son up in the sky, this is too dangerous!” Crystal sobbed.

The army of Chongzhen was storming up the mountains and was only a couple hundred of metres from the village gates. The soldiers shot spears at Lucky as they saw him hover above. They both dashed to the mountain creak. Suddenly Lucky screamed so loudly the echo of ear breaking volume went for kilometres around the mountains of Huangshan.

“What are you doing Lucky?” Chen shouted.

After a couple minutes distant sounds vibrated, it was the ancient dragons. Dozens of enormous Dragons all with different colours and scales raced to the village. In the trees below Tigers, Jaguars, all kinds of birds and animals came together as one. They all flew and leaped around so ferociously the soldiers were starting to panic.

“Oh my lord, Lucky how did you do it?” Chen gasped.

The Army headed backwards very quickly, and the village was saved by a young kid and his pet dragon. This news spread everywhere from province to province. Chen and Lucky saved Huangshan and the village and were deemed legends. When they returned home all the villagers came out to praise them.

“How did you both fight ten thousand soldiers?” one asked.

“With Luck and Lucky, my best friend,” Chen said.

Crystal and Han raced to give a soothing hug to Chen.

An enormous magenta and red covered dragon hovered over Chen's house. When it landed the whole village was shaking.

“Could that be Lucky's mother?” Han spoke.

Lucky flew to the massive dragon and they both licked each other with their slimy saliva. The transparent liquid was everywhere on the streets.

“It’s time to let Lucky go home with his real family Chen,” Crystal sighed.

“Well, thanks for saving the village and I will miss you a lot buddy,” Chen cried.

Chen teared and cried as both dragons flew away into the distant mist. With one last look, Lucky gave a grin and flew away.

Huangshan was saved by two best friends and now 400 years later Huangshan is a protected paradise for dazzling species of all kinds. And who knows, maybe the dragons are still here.

Tales of China's Magical Mountains

ESF South Island School, Grunberger, Mathias

It all started in 1820, there was a group of friends traveling when all of a sudden they come across China's Magical Mountains. They decided that since so many people wondered what was in the end why not find out for themselves.

Matt said, "why not sounds fun and it's beautiful today, how hard could it be?"

John, Rose, and Olivia later agreed. They hiked for nearly 2 hours now, everybody regretting their decision. Rose said, "can we please just head back?" Matt said "no, how could we? We don't even know how far we are" So they continued.

They were all exhausted and decided as a group to take a break, so they all sat down and rested for the next 20 minutes.

20 minutes later, they start to hike again. They hike for another period of 1 hour until they come across a tour guide who was left here by his group of previous travelers who had all died. He explained to John and the group how they died, and how it was all from one dragon which he saw for his own eyes and ran away as fast as he could, and once he found a good spot he could stay there. He also explained how hard it was to survive claiming he was living off of plants and bugs that he found throughout the Magical Mountains. They asked him if he knew the way to the end of the Mountains and he said "well nobody has seen the end, to be honest, nobody has ever managed to come this far without giving up or dying along the way" All of a sudden the group's mindset changes and all of their faces turn into a surprised look. Olivia then said "guys, look we are the farthest almost anybody has ever come, we cannot give up and make sure to save up supplies because we don't know how long there is left" So they kept going but had to deal with several setbacks along the way.

Setback 1 came along pretty fast. It was the fact the now came the first main uphill to get to the top of the first. They had successfully pulled through.

Then they came along with setback 2. Setback 2 was to decide if they wanted to eat or hike more. They voted, Olivia and John voted that they should stop and eat a little, however, Matt and Rose said they should keep going until they are truly exhausted. It was a tie, then then the tour guide said he didn't want to be on any side so he didn't vote. Matt and Olivia looked at the bright side and said "why not I guess it wouldn't hurt that bad if we took a short break to eat a little snack" Matt later agreed and they took a 30-minute break.

30-minutes later, they have begun again Hiking again they Hiked through any different obstacles, they had to cross a small river creek but they were quite a big drop so they looked for some wood. It was a very risky decision but they decided to put some wood planks that they found and made a bridge. They all went one at a time so that they didn't put too much weight on the bridge and all successfully made it across. There was a little first area that they came across on one of the mountains but the only problem was that they had to think about all the different animals that could potentially harm them. They all pitched ideas. Matt mentioned "there might be a few bush vipers or spiders that we have to be careful of"

Olivia mentioned "there could be other snakes or venomous animals that we dont know about" Rose agreed with Olivia and john said "if we all stay aware we will all be just fine" The tour guide then mentioned, "what about so many other animals that are way bigger than us like the ox or the forest tigers and bears, what if the dragon is here!" The group thought about it and knew he had made a good point.

So they were extremely careful and quite not to attract any attention. They ended up making it through successfully. It had started to turn dark and they didn't know the area very well so they didn't know if they should sleep or not. The tour guide then said "I think you guys should sleep you have had a rough day" This had creeped the group out a

bit and they didn't know if it was a good decision to trust him, mainly because they only met him a few hours ago. But they decided as a group to sleep in the end, they found a cave, and almost instantly all of them were out. Then as they are sleeping the tour guide takes action, he gets into his natural body, as the dragon which he originally was himself. He killed his last tour group for food. He picked them up and curled them together with his tail they woke afraid screaming not knowing what's happening.

He brought them to the end where there were only magical creatures like dragons, minotaurs, griffins you name it. They were later eaten by the animals there along with other humans that were saved up and that was all. Since that day nobody has ever heard of it, nobody ever knew it was all gone, done

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF South Island School, Chung, Otilie

15 years ago today, accompanied by my older brother, I journeyed to the mountains of the yellow emperor in Eastern China, a place now established as Huangshan. The mountains were an item of mystery – only the bravest poets dared to journey there. Many of them never returned. Whilst villagers fabricated gruesome stories of how they'd been assassinated on the way, my brother and I found this fact to be quite intriguing – we thought “what could possibly be so enchanting that they didn't bother returning?”.

One night, my brother said to me “Legend has it that if you reach the very top of the first mountain, your greatest dream will come true.”. It was an old folks tale – I'd heard it before. Yet whether it was the dark of the night, or the serious tone in which my brother recited this line, I was captivated.

“I want to go there,” I pronounced.

“I'll get everything ready. Just be awake early tomorrow,” my brother told me, and then he turned around and left my room. I never understood how he managed to convince our mother to let us go on our spontaneous trip.

The very next morning, we set off on our journey. We were required to travel for two days, catching only a few hours of sleep when the sun made the ground too blistering to walk on with only our thin bamboo boots. On the third day, we finally reached the bottom of the mountain path. We knew this because the soil became softer, and the path would switch from wide to narrow quickly.

“Only half a day to go,” my brother claimed, his voice less confident than it had previously been. We kept up a steady rhythm, trekking up the slope of the mountain for approximately 3 hours before I finally called a break.

“Sit down on these rocks,” my brother instructed, pointing to an uneven arch of boulders, arranged in a mass to the left side of the mountain path.

The ground was covered with moss and algae, so I took off my boots to prevent them from becoming slippery, as I sat on one of the studier boulders. There was a continuous crunch of grains behind me – the kind you get from rolling a car along rubble. My ears were drawn to the noise – it was impossible to ignore, almost as if I was destined to hear and have to do something about it.

As the sound grew closer, I realised there was a wet squelch amongst the louder sound of material against rock – someone was coming up the path. I turned around to say something to my brother, but almost jumped out of my skin upon hearing a high-pitched voice speak “What are you doing here?”. I angled myself back towards the young lady – one moment the path had been completely empty, and the next, she was right behind me. I blamed the supernatural speed of her arrival on my own lack of observation, as I replied “We are journeying to the top of the mountain. What about you?”.

I couldn't help noticing that the girl was beautiful – her brown hair was thick and ran smoothly past her shoulders, and down to her waist. What stood out to me the most were her eyes though – she had these deep hazel eyes – I had never known brown eyes to be so full of life, sheltered with long eyelashes, that seemed to gleam when the light caught them.

“I was just returning to my village,” she answered, smiling. There was a deep indentation on her right cheek, and I was delighted to notice that she had dimples.

“How far away is your village?” I inquired politely. I was pleased to realise that my brother had wandered off somewhere by now, allowing me privacy to speak to the girl.

“Only an hour's walk away. Would you like to join me for lunch?” She laughed. Her laugh was like sunshine.

Just as I was about to accept her gracious invitation, my brother reappeared from behind a large oak tree, his voice stern as he warned me of the importance of getting on with our journey.

“Mother expects us home in five days. We must keep moving – don’t forget what we’re heading for,” he advises.

“Well?” The sunshine girl pushes. I think of my brother’s words. Ultimately, it was still my decision to make. I was keen on spending more time with this girl, however, the thought of the magic waiting for me at the top of the mountain twisted my line of thought.

“I’m afraid we have to continue on our journey. Maybe on the way back we might cross paths again?” I decide.

She nods at me, smiles a half-crooked smile, and then disappears just as quickly as she had arrived.

“Come on. Let’s move on,” my brother said.

For the rest of the journey, the sunshine girl was all I could think about.

After two more hours of trudging up the steep path, we finally reached the top of the mountain. Clouds swirled overhead, and when we looked down, our eyes could wander along the thin lines and creeks of the mountain.

Almost expectedly, my brother and I both looked at the small puddle of water that was collected on the ground, waiting for our greatest wishes to be granted.

“Perchance we have to take a sip,” my brother guesses – so, both of us collected some of the murky water in our hands, and gulped it down. It was cold, and dirty tasting. No doubt the remnants of rain from earlier on in the week. Nothing happened.

“Perhaps we should say something,” my brother tried again. I watched as he bowed down, and spoke some words of gibberish – I figured he must be speaking quietly on purpose, so that I couldn’t make fun of what he was saying.

However, nothing happened.

My brother and I stayed on the top of that mountain for two days, before finally returning home to our village.

“What wish had you been hoping to get granted?” I questioned my brother.

He mumbled something under his breath – the only words I had heard were “knowledge” and “poets”.

“What about you?” He asked me.

“To find a girl to fall in love with,” I replied.

My brother was quiet for a long time after that, until he eventually said “We’ve tested mother’s patience enough as it is. Let’s head back home.”

I did not see the sunshine girl again on our hike down. In fact, I never saw her again. I saw people that resembled her – but the resemblance was all I was able to take notice of – never again did I find someone as beautiful as her.

Up until today, I still consider what would have happened if I had indeed accepted her offer for lunch – did journeying to the tip of the first Huangshan mountain truly make your greatest wish come true, or had it all just been a myth?

To be sure, you’ll have to go there and decide for yourself.

Tales from the Misty Mountains

ESF South Island School, Fu, Aidan

Everybody is sitting in the room staring at the board, not me though. I'm concentrating on my pencil. Did you know that it is hard to actually twirl the pencil without it looking like that was your first time you are doing it. I'm the oddball, the weird one, the one who feels all alone after all that. I raise an after-school-celebration drink as I wait for the sun to set. I feel as if I am being sucked into a black hole. This is a weird feeling even if I am drunk. As I wipe the nice cold feeling of the condensation of the beer cup onto my freezing trousers, I see someone I used to see a whole lot standing there, giving me those constant looks.

I don't drink.

I am aware of this figure as I would be if somebody farted loudly. She comes and sits there as if she doesn't know me and as if she has gotten over "it", but she needs to polish her acting skills, and so do I. As I took a sip of the beer I have been drinking, she said under her breath, "You're the only one....." I smirk and chuckle, I might have spit a bit of the beer out. I don't drink.

To be honest, I know what she was talking about but I can't give up, after all she had done. I have seen her as much as I have seen my pillow, I could draw her with a blindfold, and especially the lips which I used to kiss so often. I take a sip of beer as I look away from her desperate ocean-blue eyes screaming for my return. I don't drink.

I say to her, "Is that so?" in a cocky and dumb voice.

She says, "I'm not joking." in the thickest accent I have ever heard from her mouth.

I know what she wants but I wasn't going to give her it. She is now looking at me with the same gaze that I have happily received until now. I'm cracking my knuckles as I down my beer and ask the bartender for yet another. I don't drink.

Honestly, I thought of her as one of many mistakes, I usually get things right but this time I didn't. She just doesn't stop. I used to have a fan club— one that had one member in it. I would still rather kick her out and end the fan club. She was like poison in my beer to me. I just knew it. I think with all my brain cells as I sip my beer. I don't drink.

Then it hit me one day, as I truly understand the meaning of betrayal and being used. I thought it was all over but here we are again. Why do I feel like I still owe her an answer? My brain is again trying to have a decent conversation to convince my heart to stay strong and luckily my heart gives in.

"No." I say in my weakest possible voice.

"What did you say?" she snaps in an annoyed voice.

"I said no." I say again, in a louder and firmer voice.

She responds by saying, 'But why? I did nothing wrong I—'

I cut her off.

"I said no! Don't you think you've done enough damage!" I roar in a voice that would remind you of a lion. She is shocked. She has always thought of me as a quiet guy but I am definitely not being very quiet now. Attention is now being drawn to us. I take another foamy sip of a beer as I watch everyone gather around for the "show." I don't drink.

She then starts rebelling and screaming 'You're meant to love me!' "I need you!"

I murmur back, "The only thing you need is money and a real heart. You know what? take this."

I give her \$100 and she asks, "What's this for?"

"For you to buy a shovel to get all the gold. You gold digger."

I take a sip of beer as all the people watching are getting hyped for what seems like the ex-girlfriend and ex-boyfriend battle of the century. I don't drink.

She just screams as I try to calm down. It doesn't work so instead of roasting her I am burning her. I just can't get over the fact that innocent eyes could actually be evil. I take my last sip of beer. and I walk out of the club with nothing except for sweet happy revenge and probably a new re-opened packed fan club full of drunks. I don't drink.

The Lonely Mountain

ESF South Island School, Kattikatt, George

I was here finally. After a long plane ride from the Beijing airport to Tunxi airport located in the Huangshan province of China. I was here for a bigger reason than the attraction of the Huangshan mountains. The city was like a normal one, cars and people going to their jobs. But a few kilometres away was one of the most scenic places in the world. But more importantly to me, my father's old village which he lived in when he was a child was up in these mountains. My father used to tell me about the golden monkeys and the copperhead.

We lived in the bustling city of Hong Kong but after my father's death I always wanted to come here. I immediately found the taxi driver. I only had my shoulder bag so I wouldn't have to drag my luggage everywhere. It was an hour drive and it felt really long so I dozed almost the second after we got on. We drove and drove through the city and slowly the atmosphere started to change and then we finally reached there. It felt a lot more different, it was misty and colder. It felt magical and almost like if I was on one giant rock.

I got up and I searched around for my dad's friend Kai Wang. He was one of dad's best friends. He was a tall and thin man wearing a straw hat. He looked and asked me who I was. 我叫张菲 (my name is Zhang Fei). No need to say in Chinese, I know English said Kai. Well let's move on, he said. The trees were filled with a strange fruit he had never seen but the trees seemed so much more beautiful than a normal tree. The mountain was kind of steep but we went at a slow pace. I started to get tired when we reached around the halfway mark. But then I looked around. We were above the clouds. In a green environment I saw a small house on the way. Although it was man-made it looked so much like it was a natural thing.

Then, we saw a small yellow thing in a cluster of bamboo. It was a golden monkey and they were babies. The small creatures were so cute swinging from the bamboo softly with ease. Then we finally reached the village. It was really small with just 10–12 houses. The people came outside and sighed thinking that we were tourists. They didn't exactly like tourists because of their noise and the way they almost ruined the place. But the people felt a little like the animals we watch in the zoo. And they take pictures and all which just makes a really bad impression. The people were kinder when he told them who I was. The people greeted me and I came inside. The floors were wooden and there was a small fire burning inside. After some refreshment, I went outside to continue exploring as we were near the peak. But when I looked down there was fear and also shock from the beauty of the place. I visited my dad's old home which was now owned by my uncle.

I was happy because the place really reminded me of dad. The places he described were just as good as I thought. Me and Kai trekked higher and after 3 hours we reached the peak. It was an amazing view and there weren't many tourists up this high so we had a great view of the stairs and old statues. We went into an old temple which was on the peak. It was surrounded by ancient trees that could have been 100's of years old. The temple had smoke in it. I breathed it in. The place was truly magnificent. It was sad that I had to leave but I did spend one more day at the village. We went down but then we saw the copperhead snake cross the steps. My uncle wasn't worried at all. He waited for it to pass. The people had a great respect for animals and worshipped them. I reached the airport and I was ready to go back to HK. It was a great experience especially since I could meet my dad once again.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF South Island School, Leung, Aidan

As you stare into the distance of the beautiful peaks, you see the magical and mysterious mountains of China, you sense the warm feeling in the air and you smell the fresh, green grass of Mother Earth. The beautiful, azure sky, along with the sound of droplets of rain, as they fall from the clouds, splash on the ground. The proud history and culture that you and others here celebrate is special to each and every one of you and always has a place in your heart.

Imagine, however, that this could cease to exist. You could live in a dystopian future. You'd grow up seeing trees crawling back into the soil, whilst houses turn into giants, covering the night sky.

The smell of gasoline permeates the air. Ashes fill the sky, and there is not a spot of sunlight. The sound of industrial machines and metal scrapes against each other. The constant aggravating noise of vehicles soars around the blocks of gigantic metal superstructures. What was once a land of fantasies and magical hope has turned into a dark and gloomy dystopia.

This is what your children will have to tell their children about their domicile of origin, how dazzling it once was and how it has altered. This is what would happen, unless you help.

A dystopian future is physically damaging to society. Currently, (other than Covid), we can go out to play football, basketball or take a walk in the park. However, in a dystopian future, none of that is possible. From a utopia to a dystopia, paradise to desolation, is a horrible outcome. That is what the mountains of Huangshan will become if we don't act.

"Get back to work, you lazy slugs," the Section Chief exclaimed. "And y'all better hurry up or I'm gonna start sackin' heads."

Jake sighed, worrying he wouldn't make enough yoyos today. But looking at his friends working hard, with determined faces, forced his doubts away. The smell of molten plastic filled the air, as Jake continued to press down on the mold. The sound of machines clanking against each other permeated his ears whilst reflecting on how he got here. Jake still couldn't believe how he was working at the age of thirteen. But after all, many kids these days start working around this age, especially if they were working class.

"JAKE, JAKE!", the Section Chief yelled. "You gonna' take your rations or are ya gonna' sit there daydreamin'". Jake shook his head suddenly, widened his eyes and stood straight. "Y-Yes, I will, sir."

Jake walked over to the line that was waiting for the rations. It was long and full of sweaty men.

"Looks like they're serving gum again."

Jake sighed in disappointment. Last week the rations were candy and the week before was canned ham which was slightly better. As he walked to the front of the line, another worker, who looked like he was in a rush, budded in. Jake didn't know him but knew he was called Hao. Annoyed and mad, Jake looked around to see if anyone was going to call the person out. But nobody cared enough to notice, so he decided to speak up.

"Hey mister, you know there's a line, right?" Jake tapped the man's shoulder.

"Yuh I do, got a problem with that, fella?" Hao shook the hand off of his shoulder. Jake shriveled, afraid to speak up again. But then he remembered how his father had told him to always stand up for himself and how if you don't, nobody will. Jake felt the pain, anger, rage and all the emotions flow through him. He curled his fist up and tapped on the man's shoulder again. Hao turned around slowly chuckling, but Jake, with his other hand, struck the bloke right in the face. The workers started to crowd around and stare. Hao wiped the blood off his nose. His expression changed into a menacing one. He pulled out a hammer from his belt and rushed towards Jake, lifting it in a striking position. Just then, a shot fired out and both of them paused in shock. The Station Chief approached with a squadron of armed guardsmen.

“Take these fools and chuck em’ in the basement,” exclaimed The Station Chief with a disgusted face. Jake and Hao were cuffed and taken to the holding facility at the Administration Department of the building.

A few hours later, Jake was released with a strict warning, and told that his rations would be cut for five days if this happened again. Just as Jake was about to leave the building, he saw a bunch of Station Chiefs enter. One of them was carrying a folder which read “HUANGSHAN NEW FACILITY”.

Jake thought about that all night. He couldn’t stop thinking about what was going on in Huangshan. He’d often heard tales about how beautiful and majestic it was. But Jake couldn’t get over the fact that the factory had something to do with the Huangshan Mountains. So he decided to look up the Huangshan Factory on the internet, but found nothing. He went to bed and tried to forget about it, but he just couldn’t get it out of his mind.

So the next morning, Jake decided to ask around about the facility, but nobody knew anything. When he asked his Station Chief about it, he was ignored. Jake decided to investigate. One night at midnight, he searched the Records Room. It was risky and dangerous but it was worth it as he found some folders about plans on Huangshan.

As Jake skimmed through the folders, he found blueprints, numbers and analytics, but what intrigued and shocked him the most were pictures of the mountain and what looked like simulations of what it would look like if a factory was built.

The next morning, Jake and the other workers were gathered together for a meeting. All of the Station Chiefs and the Director were there, which was quite unusual as only the Section Chief would typically attend. The Director stepped up, explaining how he needed a workforce to construct new buildings. Of course, he mentioned the risk and dangers, but also how they would receive high pay. The Director detailed that the work would be on steep mountains, and that they would also be given housing. Jake thought about it for a while. He considered the fact that, if this was indeed on Huangshan, there would be more of a possibility of how he could investigate, as he couldn’t just sit there and do nothing, whilst a piece of history would be turned into another industrial location.

Life for Jake continued on as a worker in the yoyo factory. He laboured hard, fast and produced quality material. His Station Chief took notice and gave him a promotion to Station Leader, where he was responsible for the yoyos in a small department in the production station. As time moved on, Jake received more and more promotions. Eventually, he made Section Chief himself and was invited to his first meeting. The main topic the Director brought up was Huangshan. He mentioned how he needed someone to survey the area and to evaluate if it was suitable to build a factory there. Jake had a jolting feeling and his worst fears came to him when he thought about a factory in Huangshan. But then his worries were cast aside after remembering that someone was needed to evaluate the land to see if it was suitable for building the facility. Jake raised his hand and held it up high. The Director took notice and exclaimed, “Ah wonderful Jake, pack your bags, you leave tonight

“T–Tonight?!” Jake asked in a questionable manner.

“Aye, tonight.” The Director spoke in a calm tone. “Unless you have something more important than the company, Mr. Jefferson?”, the Director asked in a sarcastic tone.

“None at all, I’ll be back with results in a day.”

“Excellent,” the Director responded with a pleased face. “With that you all are dismissed.”

As the plane descended into the misty atmosphere of Huangshan, the majestic rocky mountains and beautiful green trees grew on top of them. Jake gazed in awe at the beautiful surroundings, and was impressed. He observed the area as he got off the plane. Not only was it not suitable for a factory, it was also a priceless piece of history.

With that, he created a summary and report of the mountains, pointing out that it was dangerous and not appropriate for a factory. The Director acknowledged this, telling Jake that Huangshan would no longer be an option for the factory. Jake sighed, relieved and happy.

Although Jake had only saved one mountain, salvaging one peak would be a worthwhile contribution, in the long run. We may not be able to save mountains or achieve extraordinary feats in our life, but if we do good deeds, even if they are small, it will always benefit those around us.

Legendary Story of China's Magical Mountain

ESF South Island School, Li, Kristie

Down in the misty, foggy, ominous-looking mountain, where only immortals can belong, was the Heaven Realm Emperor practicing his powers. At the apex of the mountain, there was a pond, it looked very normal, so normal that the ducks would splash in it. The pond was cleaner than the sea, bluer than the ocean, it was aqua blue and inside was an old, gold, rusty cauldron full of everyone's fate. If someone were to put the cauldron upside down and sink into the pond, the six realms, Heaven, Demon, Flower, Mortal, lower immortals and lower demon realms would all disappear.

Thousands of years ago, an extremely powerful demon was stabbed and turned into a war general by the prince, he was called 'Luodu' and sooner his name turned into *her* name which is Xuanji. She helped the heaven realm kill one of the demon tribes, everytime she killed them she would feel her heart hurting. One day, she realised that she was a demon, and had killed her own tribe. She had been used by the prince, who was the emperor's son Yixuan to kill people who weren't supposed to be killed.

The emperor found out and said "What about this, you can go down to the mortal world for ten lives forgetting about everything, by that time I can make you an immortal again. Since the heaven realm was wrong at first."..... He looked at his son, "You can also go down for ten lives."

The nine lives had all failed, but the last one she finally passed. All thanks to Yixuan and her friends, Linglong, Ruoyu, and Minyan. Their memories were back, although it didn't turn out so well. Yixuan was hurt and only the extremely powerful demon's soul could save him. The soul was sealed inside a bottle, she didn't have a single bit of ambivalence in her decision. Soon the very powerful demon returned and overtook her. The demon was awake!

He was very determined to go up the mountain where the cauldron belonged. When he arrived at the mountain, the demon rose the cauldron, but then, Yixuan the prince and his friends were begging him not to destroy it. The demon said "I once believed and trusted the prince, and I never cared if I was an immortal, demon, or mortal. I thought everyone was the same, but what I got in return was betrayal, and getting tortured in the bottle. Should I hate him, should this kind of hate disappear like it never happened? Should I not get vengeance?" He also showed how he was cut. Around his neck, arms, and legs there were scars. It was like he had been attached together.

The emperor soon arrived, he saw the prince and told him that if he had waited for one more day then the immortal and demon war wouldn't have happened because the demon already told his king to not have war, but he had been too anxious. The prince was shocked and murmured "Everything happened because of me? I ruined everything?" He felt like fainting. The emperor removed his powers and wished that the demon could stop.

The emperor said: "I can't stop you if you want to destroy the cauldron, but you only have one chance, if you destroy it then everything will be gone. Make your decision wisely". His friends told him he had them, a family, and people who love him. Although, his response was that "everyone lives for only one life, after that life no one remembers anything. These friends, families and beloved people will die sooner or later, so why don't we just disappear together?"

He looked at the emperor and shouted, "I am so sure that I will destroy the cauldron. No one can stop me!" Surprisingly, the emperor replied "then please yourself". Just then, all of a sudden Yixuan shouted "think about it, our tenth life! Think about what we've been through together! You have friends and families and I love you. I will always be with you no matter what! Don't.....please."

The demon's head started to ache. His whole entire head was full of memories. In fact, very valuable memories, also very important ones. Not only that but the future. If he destroys the cauldron, all his friends and families and also his loved ones will disappear. In a flash, a tear came down his cheek. He touched it and couldn't believe he was crying. Yixuan chuckled "You said you didn't have a heart, but how can a person with no heart cry?"

The demon's, rather *'loyal'* servant said sinisterly "My lord, don't be blinded by these people's nice words. Remember Yixuan betrayed you! Don't let them ruin our great plan!" "Hmph, I'm not sure you are doing this for me," he glared. The demon removed the protection spell from the servant. "You removed the protection spell my lord? You want to kill me?! I did everything for you, even though my life was lost three times, just for you," he gasped. "You're only doing this for yourself, I am not entirely stupid, those ten lives I can remember every minute, every second, you say he betrayed me, I think you're talking to yourself," The demon replied.

His servant cackled, "The powerful demon is actually the powerful demon. I SHOULD BE THE LORD OF 6 REALMS. Muahahaha." The cauldron fell, just then Yixuan lept and held the cauldron. It was very heavy. The servant flew and stabbed Yixuan. Some kind of power hit the servant and he dropped back to the floor. Suddenly, the demon turned back into Xuanji and held Yixuan whispering "Yixuan, Xuanji is back, look at me. Look it's Xuanji, she's finally back." "Yixuan!" everyone yelled except the demon servant.

"I AM THE LORD OF 6 REALMS!!" the servant yelled again unexpectedly. He again flew towards the cauldron, but this time Ruoyu stabbed him with two knives and shouted at him "IT ALL HAPPENED BECAUSE OF YOU, YOU CAPTURED MY LITTLE SISTER, KILLED THE PERSON I LOVE, FORCED ME TO KILL MY GOOD FRIEND!!" He pushed the servant down into the pond and they both disappeared.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHH" the demon yelled and he let Xuanji out, they were two different people once more. "I wish I could live all over again," he sighed, and put his heart in Yixuan's heart. The demon drank some wine, and then 'poof' he vanished!

The emperor walked towards Xuanji and warned, "the demon has given Yixuan his heart, but I am not sure if the heart will pump again. It will depend on your fortune." Xuanji asked tearfully "Don't you want to save him?" "Yixuan is my son. I obviously want to save him, but I can't do anything either. I am powerless. You are made unexpectedly and every step you choose is not destined by Heaven, no matter what you become, immortal, demon or mortal it is your choice," he answered.

Xuanji brought Yixuan and her friends back to the mortal world. It had been two years but although there was still no sign of him waking up, she didn't give up. She waited ---- waited---- waited. One day, she went into Yixuan's room and found that he was missing. She ran all around the house, but she couldn't find him! All of the sudden, Yixuan stood behind Xuanji. They hugged each other and then, as fast as lightning, they went to Xuanji's dad to talk about their marriage. At last, her dad agreed and they got married. Yixuan and Xuanji had their children, and they were the happiest family. They both didn't want to become immortal or demon, so became mortal and happily finished their lives.