



Fiction

Group 3

Huangshan Tales

ESF West Island School, Beed, Lara – 11

It was a cold and gloomy night. I sat on my hard mattress, shivering as the thin blanket did very little to help me feel warm. The only chance I could feel like a normal villager was when I snuggled with my fluffy siamese cat, called Blossom.

Unfortunately, Blossom was too busy trying to keep warm herself, unwilling to feel my cold hands in her paws. My dad wasn't making enough money to afford a heater. Ever since my mother died, we went from a wealthy family to a family that got excited over spare mints in trash cans. I tried to sleep, but failed miserably. It was just no use. "Come on, JUST FALL ASLEEP! You survived the worst part of winter. It's almost spring!" I said to myself. Soon, I fell asleep, but only after I wore all my ragged clothes on top of each other, wore my torn socks, and took my cat away from my dad, bearing with the wails of Blossom as she shivered violently in my arms.

After that horrible night, I ran to the village well to get water for me, my dad, and Blossom. I ran off, grabbing my bucket.

And so I continued, running to the well, ignoring all the rude remarks and comments that were thrown at me by the richest chinese kids in the village. I quickly reached the well in record time: 1 hour. I started to lower the bucket to get some water, but then I saw it. The rich kids, playing in the village park. One kid saw me, and said: "Oh! Look! It's the poor girl!"

I was so mad, that I completely forgot what I came to do in the first place.

"I am not poor! I have enough money, and i'm not spoiled like you!" I shouted in anger.

"What are you gonna do, baby?" he replied.

"This." I said.

"What? You aren't doing any— Ouch!" I cut him off. As he was talking, I kicked the bucket. He cried out in pain and agony and ran off with the other kids.

I collected my bucket and started to gather water.

A while later, I arrived at my home, well, home isn't the word to describe it. It's more like a roof with sticks and a tiny door! Anyway, I wished I hadn't. I wished it was a nightmare, but sadly, it was true. I opened the door only to see that my house was being invaded by ALIENS!!

Well, not the flying around type in UFO's with antennas, but the 2 most spoiled, posh people I have ever met: The new kid and his annoying father. My life isn't and wasn't THAT interesting.

"Hi! What's your name? I'm Jack. Nice to meet you!"

"Don't really care." I replied, rolling my eyes sarcastically. I didn't think he would take it too personally, but he ran out of the house and started bawling his eyes out so loudly that I could hear it from my room! I yelled at him telling him to keep it down, but I think I made things worse. Soon, he came back in, to my disappointment. I was forced to talk to him while my Dad and his were talking. Apparently, they were long friends back when my Dad lived in America. Since I was 3 years older than Jack, I was told by his Dad that I should babysit him while they went for a walk. I was about to say no, but then I saw the pleading look in my Dad's dull grey eyes.

"Sure!" I replied, trying to look and sound happy.

"Great! Let's go then!" my Dad exclaimed, obviously happy with my choice.

"Bye daddy," yelled Jack excitedly, "Hope, we're gonna have so much fun!"

As soon as they left the house, Jack suddenly became calmer. He acted differently, less exciting and more self absorbed.

"Why don't we go for a walk?" I suggested, hoping he would say no. To my surprise, he said no.

"How about YOU go for a walk and I'll just chill here." He said.

Suddenly, I got mad. How dare he act like that in someone else's home! My home! Such a spoiled brat. I yanked him and his thick jacket, and pulled him to the door.

"What are you doing? Let go of me!" he screamed. I held on and started to make my way out of the doorway.

"Ugh, would you stop being a baby for once?" I said as he whined and complained.

We were about halfway there to the village well, when Jack got a call from his Dad.

“Hi Dad!”

“Hi Jack, I have some bad news...”

“What?”

“We have to move.”

“Again? We just got here! Please, no!”

“I’m sorry, Jack. We aren’t welcome here. The emperor wants us to go. We can’t refuse.”

“Is there any way we can stay?”

“Unless the emperor changes his mind, I’m afraid not.”

“Well, then I’ll make him change his mind.”

“Jack, don’t get in—”

Jack hung up the phone, with a mixed expression on his face.

“What is it?”

“I have to move, AGAIN! I don’t want to, but I can only stay if I do something amazing to make the emperor change his mind!”

“You could throw an epic party?”

“Nah, my Dad would get mad.”

“You could, um, make the best chinese dress?”

“Ew! Gross!”

“Well, you could climb Huangshan. But no one ever has come back down!”

“Huang what?”

“Huangshan, you dummy!”

“Huangshem?”

“UGH!! Just call it... um... China’s Magical Mountains!”

“So, let’s go!”

“What? We can’t leave now! It’s freezing cold during the day, and burning at night! There are dangerous plants that could kill us if we get too close! We need to pack!”

“So I’ll go home and pack, and you do the same!”

“Ok, why not?” I said sarcastically. I hoped he didn’t think I actually wanted to come. Sadly, he did.

As soon as me and Jack were done packing, we snuck out at midnight. I was really nervous, so I brought Blossom. I was scared, but I knew I had to be the braver and more responsible one because, after all, he was younger than me. As we reached the base of the mountain, the sun started to rise, blooming a mix of orange, yellow, pink, and blue. Suddenly, I felt lighter. I felt as if the sunrise had given me enough hope, that I could finally believe we were going to make it down.

As we climbed, we faced lots of obstacles, such as wild animals trying to eat either us or our food, poisonous plants (which Jack kept collecting), and the seemingly endless hike up to the top. Unfortunately, Blossom didn’t make it up. Halfway through the climb, she started to act really sick, and she could not continue. She died the next day. I was so sad, I cried the rest of the way up. It was devastating. Jack acted normal, but in our camp one night, I heard him crying and saying the name ‘Blossom’ over and over in between sobs. I didn’t think he would get too attached to her. I didn’t bother to comfort him, because, well, I have a history of making him miserable. However, we made it. I don’t know how, but we did. And when we reached the top, we saw it. The village.

“Wow, a village? Where are all the people?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s find them!” I replied.

We walked all around, only to come across a mother and her son, a cat, and an old cable car leading back down to our village.

“This is how we used to get down the mountain to get water. Our village cable car was destroyed, leaving us no way to collect water. Most of us died off, and some of us moved, but me and my son stayed. We made our own source of water. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough.” The mother said.”

We managed to fix the well, and came down after saying goodbye to the mother and her son. We were so excited! Jack could stay! I was not going to be poor! We got out of the cable car at the base of our mountain, and ran to my home. Turns out, our parents were looking for us! We were only gone for a day, but we could understand why they were worried.

4 MONTHS LATER

Jack and I finally got noticed by the emperor. He got to stay in the village, and I was granted 1 wish of my choice. I chose for my family to be wealthy and healthy, throughout the rest of their lives. Me and Jack became good friends. A couple of days later, it was my birthday! I got one of my most favourite presents. A siamese, fluffy cat, just like Blossom! I decided to call it Flower, after blossom.

It was a happy ending, thankfully.

Max and the Magical Crystal

ESF West Island School, Beed, Neil – 13

My mother hid me in my bedroom. I was only six when The Sacred attacked my little Chinese village in the middle of a blizzard. She ran out onto the plaza, her sword clattering by her side. I sat there and looked out the small window, praying that this was all a dream.

It was from that window I watched, helplessly, as a soldier rammed a sword through my mother's chest. She turned around to look at me and fell to the floor. I ran outside and knelt over my dead mother, my wet tears falling onto the white snow.

The soldiers ran to our pious crystal and pulled it off the stand. They got onto their horses and ran off, leaving the entire village in the dust.

Angry and scared, I ran to the woods. I leaned against a dark oak tree, tears flooding the soil around me.

Then I saw him. A bright green lizard crawled down from the highest branch of the tree. He quickly scuttled over to my shoulder.

"Hello there, Max," he exclaimed with a smile.

"Ahhhhh! A talking lizard!" I screamed wide-eyed in shock.

"No, it's ok, I'm Spock," the lizard said in a gentle voice, "you don't have to be afraid."

"You see," he explained, "the crystal powered the entire mountain, not just your village. The forest is in great danger, all the water in the Enchanted Fountain has disappeared completely, and the animals have nothing to drink. I had a vision, Max, only you can bring the crystal back."

"Me? That's impossible! I can't do anything right! I couldn't even save my mother." I said dejectedly with tears in my eyes.

"Yes, you can," asserted Spock, "you just need to believe in yourself"

I took a deep breath in as Spock explained all the precautions I needed to take when getting to The Sacred's base.

The plan was simple, climb to the top of the mountain and retrieve the crystal.

"Be careful," the lizard warned, "dozens of beasts lurk around the path."

He handed me my mother's engraved sword.

"Truth, Honor, Justice," I read aloud, and off I went to retrieve the crystal.

The great mountain towered over me. Branches cracked below as I hiked up the old, ruptured steps. It was getting dark. I began to set up my tent. Suddenly, a low growling noise filled the twilight breeze. I looked around in shock.

"Hello?" I asked as I quivered in fear.

"Hello," it responded in a deep, raspy voice.

Behind a bush, a huge creature rose. Black scales crawled around his entire body, his sharp teeth gnawed, and his glowing yellow eyes squinted at the sight of me. I tried to draw out my sword, but when I reached down, nothing was there. I must have dropped it on the way up.

"Oh no." I whispered.

It charged into me as fast as an eagle that just found its prey. It knocked me back into the soil. I tried to get up, but my legs burned. I couldn't move a single muscle. The creature trudged closer, his sharp horn shining against the midnight sky. I breathed in slowly, eyeing the beast as it came closer.

"I can't go now," I told myself.

Slowly but surely, I picked myself up. I could feel the electricity run through my spine. The animal started to sprint. This was it. I closed my eyes, my heart beating faster than bolts of lightning crashing as it strikes land. I clenched my fists and tensed up all of the muscles in my body. It was getting closer. With a sudden burst of adrenaline, I used all the energy I had and punched the creature right in the nose.

Bright blue lightning ran through the beast's bones and dark smoke came out of his large nostrils as he collapsed on the floor in front of me. I looked around, then at my shaking, blue hands.

"Did I just do that?" I asked myself in confusion.

The colours suddenly faded out and my skin returned to normal. Shaking, I retired for the night in utter shock.

I woke up startled the next morning to the sound of a tall tree collapsing against the leaves below my torn tent. I got out slowly and gazed ahead in horror. All the colour had drained from the trees across the mountain.

Without the crystal, the entire mountain was destroyed. In disbelief, I started to climb up the rigid hard rocks. I was so close to the peak. Slowly walking up the spiral staircase, I circled the mountain as I ascended to the summit. Swiftly, something ruffled the bushes behind me. I turned around, but I couldn't see anything there.

"Must have been the wind." I told myself.

I turned around slowly, but only to come face to face with a gigantic white tiger. Its red eyes burned with anger, as he growled and walked toward me. I quickly turned around and started to run. The tiger sprinted, the distance between us closing rapidly. I tried to go faster, but I had reached my limit.

"Come on!" I screamed to myself, and that instant, I zoomed across the stairs, leaving behind streaks of bright blue lightning.

I could feel the wind in my face, my feet pushing me forward faster than a heartbeat. The lightning clapped and thundered behind me, its electricity travelling to every nerve in my body, crackling and running through my veins.

"Woah!" I shouted as I came to a stop.

I glanced at my burning blue shoes in awe then took a look around. The tiger had faded completely out of sight. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I leant against a jagged rocky wall, but suddenly heard the sound of moving machinery and mechanisms. I jumped away just as the wall parted to reveal a long, icy passageway.

"Incredible!" I exclaimed in surprise.

I shivered as I walked down the dark tunnel, I had forgotten to pack warm clothes the night I left. I continued down the frozen alley, but only to come to a stop. In front of me, I saw two paths, each leading to two different places.

I took a step closer. I could hear my mother's voice. I looked over at the first path, where the voice was coming from. But then I heard the Sacred on the other side, rejoicing with the crystal they had stolen. The ice slowly cracked below me as I took a step toward the sound of my mother. Without the crystal, China's Magical Mountains will fall. I needed to do the right thing. I needed to save my village.

The sweet sound of my mother's beautiful voice faded away as I walked along the second path, ready to face whatever was at the end. I stepped into the blinding lights at the end of the tunnel. I had made it to the top of the mountain.

"Intruder!" I heard a gang member shout.

Hundreds of soldiers surrounded me, their sharp swords banging on their impregnable shields.

"Give me the crystal!" I screamed.

The leader sneered at me.

"And what's a kid going to do about that?" he jeered.

The top of the mountain erupted in loud laughter.

"He's just a kid!" everyone snickered.

I ran toward the leader, but he just knocked me down onto the floor. The laughter grew even louder. I closed my eyes. I could hear my mother.

"Get up, Max" she whispered.

"Come on, Max" said Spock assertively.

"You can do this" I heard the villagers say in unison.

All my friends back home were counting on me. The whole of China was counting on me. I slowly rose into the frosty air. Every part of me ached. I had to do this. I took a deep breath. My eyes crackled with powerful electricity.

This was it. I reached my hand into the air, and straight out of the sky, my mother's sword flew into my hand.

"Truth, Honor, Justice!" I shouted and drove the sharp sword into the snowy ground.

The electricity from my hands reached the tip of the sword, and all the clouds in the sky circled the summit. The bright lightning thundered and roared as it struck the top of the mountain leaving streaks of bright blue electricity around the clear white snow, and as if by magic, the colour of the mountain was restored, and the sky turned a bright blue. Weak and tired, I knelt on the floor, next to all the disintegrated bodies around me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Just a little while longer. Suddenly, the sun rose from behind the village, and everyone woke up that morning to find clear water running down the long streams, and the crystal back on its stand.

I felt one last shock of electricity run through me, as I smiled and faded into the clear, morning air.

A Tale Of Phoenixes And Demons

ESF West Island School, Chan, Aniece – 11

Wake me up from this nightmare, someone, please.

“Miss, wake up. A proper princess must not be late. That would bring dishonour to the Emperor.” She yanked me aggressively out of my bed. This is Liori, the maid that has been serving me ever since I was born. She is a pain, I won’t lie.

“Look at me. I thought I taught you proper manners ever since you were young!”

My everyday life is like this.

I feel the magic in the wind coming to me, I felt a presence that made me feel warm and cosy but also gave me strength. A mysterious red bird was travelling towards me! It soon became clear to me that it was a phoenix. As it came closer to me, I felt even stronger. It startled me and explained,

“Janet, I am here to inform you that you are the next phoenix bloodline who can hold the feather and use its magical power. You must go and conquer the ‘Feather Of Faith And Wisdom’, which is located in Feng Huang Shan. Child, run free, to where your heart desires.” She was about to leave, then turned around.

“Oh right! You need to hunt down the four dragon protectors, they can assist you to the mountain safely. They live together in a small village, near Feng Huang Shan. I’m off, good luck.”

Then, it disappeared without a trace left behind. You can do this. I must do it for the sake of China. I leaped out from the window. I looked down, then noticed I was about to fall onto a guard! I crashed onto him, and it was not a safe landing.

“P–princess? Please be careful! Are you alright?” He was shaking whilst weirdly, begging me for mercy for some chaotic reason.

“Don’t worry, I am fine.”

“D–do tell me i–if there’s something I can d–do for you.”

“I know, come on this trip with me. I can explain it to you. I want you to accompany me there.”

“Yes, I will help you with all my abilities.”

I jerked him to a hidden place that only I know about, then whispered to him,

“You better obey me, guard. Assist me to Feng Huang Shan, and help me track down the four protectors.”

“What? Princess, escaping to find something will bring dishonour to the family!”

“But I want, no need to save China from the demon race. They’re going after the ‘Feather Of Faith And Wisdom’.”

We used the little energy left in our bodies to make a little hole through the magical barrier surrounding the palace. Then, we crawled through it and entered the forest. This forest is named, ‘The Forbidden Forest’. Well, it is not just called the Forbidden Forest without a reason, rumours state that many have gone missing after entering the forest, and there are hundreds and thousands of dangerous species lurking about and call the forest their home. Who knows what kind of trouble I will be in. But I don’t care right now, as long as I can do whatever I want.

“I didn’t catch your name yet though, just realized now.”

“My name is Arthur, and I am quite the loner in the palace.”

As we chatted, we became more close and understood each other more. Talking to him was relaxing and it makes me feel like all the weight on me has been lifted off my shoulders, unlike back at home.

“Alright now, I need to collect some food, it is getting rather darker and deeper now.” Arthur explained.

Scurrying to find some safe animals to hunt, he disappeared. I was trying to catch up to him but he soon faded and I couldn’t see him with my bare, weak eyesight. As I was trying to track him down, I encountered an unusual animal skulking in a nearby cave. I was curious to see it, so I snuck past the trees like a ninja and reached it. It had blue shimmery eyes, a pair of mini ears and was the size of a newborn cat. I instantly fell in love with it, and felt a bond between us. It beamed at me and blushed, then dashed from left to right, then finally onto my arms. I believe it was a Kitaron, which is an endangered animal and are an extremely rare creature that lives in caves alone, and likes to keep a low profile. With my genius and creative mind, well of course I named it Bubbly, how could I not name a fat and round Kitaron Bubbly?

“P–princess? Are you here? Hello?” Arthur yelped from a distance.

“I’m right here!”

I introduced him to Bubbly, in hopes that they would be friends and get along well. They both despite each other, which is undoubtedly not a great start.

We arrived at the village mentioned by the phoenix. Suddenly, I felt a strange presence. There were four different presences I can sense, all of them felt connected in a sort of way. The power was strange and it felt so powerful that my mind was going to explode. The four ‘unnatural four’, which are the four protectors of Earth. They knew I was the next phoenix bloodline. They were the strongest of them all, at least in my head. Skylar the protector of the land

and sky, Asher, the protector of nature, Kiaria, the protector of life and death, finally, Sulien, the protector of the moon and sun. They are all shining with pride while I'm in the darkness, craving for some praise.

"I am in fact the next phoenix bloodline, name's Janet. I have a request, please assist me and my friends to Feng Huang Shan before the demons come to take the ancient artifact, the Phoenix Feather Of Faith And Wisdom." I asked them.

"Well, since you are the next phoenix bloodline, we can assist you there." They replied with faith in their eyes. They packed their bags and followed us to Feng Huang Shan. Arriving there was not a piece of cake, with all the insects around, it was horrendous. The spawn of demons rapidly increased, it was even quicker than Einstein's quick mind calculations.

Rage filled the territory.

"Go away." King Almaro uttered in arrogance.

"You and Arthur go find the feather together." Sulien suggested with confidence.

We darted there as fast as we could, giving it all we've got. A demon with death in his eyes, looked down at us like we are ants, and laughed,

"Hey y'all, stop acting like barbarians!"

"Boring, random demon." I joked with sass.

I rolled in the air above him and landed at the entrance.

"Girl, I'm not done with you!"

I'm about to die. Death was chasing me like a runaway goose in a farm, it was so unsurprising. Though, I wonder why. Well, it is the end of my line for my life, so why wonder about such futile worries? Wait, got to make myself from thoughts right now, though.

I ignored him, then grabbed the glorious feather off the display board and hastened back out. I was tempted to look around for any unrevealed treasures, but I had to stop the demons and their vicious acts.

The feather was shaking and magic came out of it. In a flash of time, this sensational aura circled the demons, and a ray of blinding light targeted the mob of demons, there was no escape for them. Right before the ray hit them directly, something unexpected happened. It all happened so quick, I couldn't process it at all. I was struck by this bewildering force that I couldn't utter a word. My heart was pounding so quickly, gasping for breath. My injuries were too severe, I'm going to die.

"I won't forgive you if you don't come back alive!" Arthur cried with all the strength left in him.

Bubbly rubbed herself against me, it was fuzzy and comfy.

The pain in me was unbearable.

"Promise me you'll stay alive."

That was my last wish for them.

The four protectors tried to save me with their magic, but the dark spell that had hit me was so powerful that they couldn't do anything but stand and wait. I felt a drop of water dripping down on me, a glittery, glistening droplet of water. Then, all I knew was I blacked out for good.

I wanted to stay with them longer, but destiny was acting like a strict mum and wouldn't let me see them more.

Their warm smiles were the last thing I wish for. I knew it. My predictions were never wrong, about anything. Death was really playing tag with me, and caught me off guard. Like my mother used to say, all I was good for was foresee the future ahead of me, well, at last, I let it destroy my life and destroy it. I feel relieved now. My time came to an end, so be it then.

Aster

ESF West Island School, Doss, Ariyaana – 13

My breath short and sharp, winter was always the harshest month. It was getting dark, without hesitation, I knew where to go. I paced myself, trekking through these beautiful, exquisite mountains, the mountains I call home. The beauty and tranquillity packed in these natural formations are truly one of a kind. It is a place you will never forget. Sorry I haven't introduced myself! I go by Aster and this is my life story.

I have lived up in these mountains for most of my life, it was pretty hard getting used to living up here. From when I was born to my fifth birthday, I lived in Huangshan, a small city located close to the yellow mountains, the place I have learnt to call my home.

How had I landed here? A great story to tell. In the city of Huangshan, a war broke out. Soldiers storming in left and right, taking away innocent townsmen. My parents and I fled, only with a backpack each with essentials such as water, food and blankets, it was like our life depended on it, which in fact it did. We made it to the outskirts of Huangshan, with the soldiers on our feet. We thought we were safe until we came across a bad thing, an extremely bad thing. There was a diversion in the road, causing my family to split up. My parents were in panic, without any agreement, they forced me to go the other way, parting from them. The army of soldiers had followed them, leaving me in the middle of nowhere, stranded and alone.

I never knew what happened to them because they never came back.

I don't really remember what happened afterwards, all I remember is waking up in the middle of the mountains, shivering, fearing what's to come. At that moment, I had one objective: to get to safety. I needed to get to a shelter but... I did not know how to get one or even find one until I stumbled on the flower path. A flower trail, filled with dead lotus', my mom's favourite flowers. Without consulting the consequences, I followed the trail, leading me to a cave, which in present time, I call my home.

I had stayed in the cave for God knows how long, I was starving, frightened and most definitely unprepared. My hunger got the best of me and I knew I had to hunt, but how? A five-year-old, hunting. Quite a literal death sentence, but I did it anyway. I left my cave, the sun still up, memorising the exact location and set off. I had collected mushrooms and found a stream, I used some leaves to make a somewhat container for the food, refilled my water and left.

Trekking back, I took a wrong turn. I was in a dark area, a very intimidating area. There was not any warmth to it. A perfect place to die, I thought. I was making my way through, trying to go back to where I came from until I heard a growl. As expected, there had to be other life on these mountains. I scoured my brain for answers until I came to a realisation, *mountain lions*. Mountain lions also known as Puma Concolor, are the biggest of the cat family, mostly found in the western hemisphere and mountain areas, they are quite dangerous creatures. I knew I was in trouble from the moment I spotted them. One of them started circling me, followed by several others. I knew I could not run; it would be impossible to outrun these agile, fierce, big creatures. My body, hyperventilating, didn't help me think of ways to escape. As of now, I never knew these animals would become my friends. First impressions aren't everything, right?

Well, you are probably wondering how I escaped. Weirdly enough, I did not. I turned around and slowly approached them. They did not fight back but instead came closer. I laid my hand on what seemed like the leader of the pack. I steadied my breathing, crouched down and bowed, hoping to show my co-operation. It seemed as if my message got through, and they slowly started to back away. I gave one last bob and turned around in the way of the area I came through. My dad always said I had a magic touch when it came to animals, I guess I did.

After that wild encounter, I did find my way back to my cave. The howl of the wind, guiding me. The pathing had involved lots of twists and turns. It took me a considerable amount of time to get back to the cave. The sun had gone down quite a long time ago, making the moon and stars distinctive. Fortunately, I did make it back, bringing back several cuts and bruises with me. I was parched and famished; the hunt came in handy. I had eaten well, not believing how the day unfolded. It had completely changed and drained me. I had to rest.

I woke up the next morning, the sun shining on my eyes. I got up, drank some of my water and started thinking. How long will I be here? How long will I have to live like this? How will I survive? I went outside, looking for a sign – any sign at all – of my parents. Having that little hope that they may come back. I spent, what seemed like an eternity, to find footprints, a trail. I went back to try and find the lotus trail but in its place was an empty dirt road.

I could not find anything and headed down to the stream. I collected water and stayed there for a while. The eerie silence of the mountains was too loud. I was left with nothing but my thoughts, painful thoughts. I was alone – no one to count on, no one to speak to – all alone. I had to face the obvious. I had to lead this lifestyle; I did not have a choice. Huangshan had been falling apart the last time I had seen it. There would be no point trying to go back. Finding civilization would be too strenuous. Exploring would be dangerous. Then it had hit me. *I was stranded*. I had to live here, be here, with just myself. **I had to.**

I devised a plan. If I had to live here, I would have to know here. I spent the next 3 days walking around the mountains, getting used to them. Finding food points, water sources and shelter. I had spotted several mountain lions but kept them undisturbed.

The cave became my home. I had set up a bed, using foliage to mimic a mattress and pillow while using my blanket as a source of warmth and comfort. There was a food station where I had mushrooms, water, greens, vegetables and fish. I had a fire going on using twigs I found on the paths and rocks to ignite the flames. I would hunt every 3 days, making sure I go at the right time was key to having a successful hunt. I would explore practically every day. I had made clothes from leaves, vines, twigs and anything I could get my eyes on.

Life had changed, quite drastically, but I had adapted quite well, Making the mountains my home.

So here I am, several years later, in my cave, on a cold day, the wind still howling. The mountains now bring safety to me, the inhabitants such as lions and birds have gotten used to my presence, they help me in many ways. I had grown mentally. There were challenges every day, of course but that is the fun in it. There were days where I did not think that I could do it anymore, living here, making my own life, being my own person. Against all odds, I made it past those days, and now I am stronger than ever.

Every now and then, the thoughts of my parents would come rushing in. I really do miss them, but I don't think they ever left. They are somewhere, looking over me. The lotus path, the lions, the wind, they were here, spirituality. They were with me.

It is winter again; I am in my cave. A fire burning, bringing me comfort and warmth, I never thought that this would be the way I lived. I do not think it will be forever. For a long time, yes but forever, maybe not.

The Final Peak

ESF West Island School, Gibb, Bori – 13

A thick layer of fog lies motionless on the mire. Jester clasps his hands around his neck. Blood seeps through his fingers. He collapses into the mud.

My knees buckle, and I drop to his side. His life will not be forgotten, and his death will not have been for nothing. I put pressure into my ears, and block out the gun fire. The thumping of my heart is distinct in my head. Through the blood and broken skin, I see a vein. The final pulses of life coursing through. I see and hear our heartbeats synch for a moment. Then his body grows limp. I breathe out. A wail escapes and racks my body. Long dignified weeps.

The simulation ends.

I'm sitting in a metal chair in The Pit. I punch and kick, smacking my arms and legs against the side. I moan, in pain, and in relief. I feel like the weight of a mountain has been lifted off my shoulders. The experience in the simulation was stressful, I feel like a mountain has been lifted off my shoulders.

That was my seventh of the week. Ever since the Shadow Commander took over, and now that I am 16, daily simulations are a must. They are used to collect our terrors and turn them into data. Why? No one knows. And we have no choice.

I leave for home. I open my eyes and see my mother. The sun is reflecting off her dark green eyes, turning them a shade of gold. They are beautiful. Her long eyelashes mesmerise me as she blinks. She stares at me. I wonder if she sees what I see.

"I watched your simulation," she starts. "I know it was difficult." She pauses. "I'm sure you don't have too many more simulations to face." Her words are tender. It's almost impossible not to believe her.

"Don't worry, Prim, I'm sure you will face your final fear soon," she says.

"So, no more simulations?" I ask.

"After you face your final fear, no more."

I sit on the wooden stool in front of a mirror in my house. My mother twirls my hair with her deft fingers, and idles with the tips. She lifts it up into a bun, and tucks a curl of hair behind my ear. She pins it down, and steps away. She nods once at me in the mirror, and begins to walk away.

"Mum?" I murmur. She walks back, and kisses me on the forehead. I know this is my cue to leave.

I head for The Pit, as I do every day. Steam rises from the concrete slabs. I let the smell of the wet pavement fill me. Jester is there waiting, along with other participants Judie, and Judwin, Lace, Rue, and Pod. I can't tell whether Jester's surrounded, or excluded. I feel his eyes consuming the side of my face. I know that by acting like I don't notice, I will irritate him, so I do so. I feel arms embracing my shoulders. I turn around, meeting Judie. She looks so happy to see me. She's about to say something when we hear the clump of boots coming up from The Pit. Her arms drop to her sides, and her smile fades.

It's Deke, who has worked for the Shadow Commander since the Fall. It's always shocking to see him, but not because we aren't expecting him.

"Today we will be verifying your bravery in The Pit. Here's what will happen. You will be jumping off the end of a pier into a tank. You will have three large horseshoes strapped to your back, making you sink to the bottom of the bay. There will be a series of keys on the top layer of sand. You must find the right keys that fit in the right locks, and set yourself free. Then swim your way up. There will be an air pocket, if you even make it that far." He chuckles, and leads us into The Pit.

Deke injects me, and the simulation begins. I fall out of this reality, and into another.

It feels too dark for day, and too light for night. There is no sunset, nor sunrise. We stumble on the uneven gravel paving the pier. Waves swell and lap around our ankles. When we reach the end of the pier, Deke signals for one of us to jump in. No one volunteers at first.

“I will,” Jester finally says. I see his hands begin to shake. He grabs the hem of his shirt to steady them. He glances at me. “I’m taking my Swiss army knife. It’s my lucky charm.”

I can tell he wants to be brave. Before he jumps, he whispers, “Dad would be so proud.”

My throat tightens. I cough to relieve the pressure. I squeeze out “Bye.”

This could be the end. I need to say something more. “I lo-.” I pause. He waits. I can’t say it. His mouth forms something too sad to be a smile, and whispers “I love you”. He falls back, and sinks unnaturally fast. I yelp something like his name, but he’s gone. I watch him, until he disappears. Every second hurts more than the last. Bubbles rise to the surface, and I pray I’ll see him again.

Eventually, Deke signals for another person to jump. I don’t hesitate. “Me.” No one objects.

I lean back, and pludge in. I spin and roll around helplessly. I hear water rush past. My back drags me under at speed. My arms flail around, and my hair covers my face. It’s not getting any easier to hold my breath. My back thuds into the sand, the force of metal crunching my spine. Pain prickles down my thighs, into my feet. My head clouds as dark spots appear in front of me, obscuring my view. I blink rapidly, trying to see past them.

I need to find Jester. I lie on my back, and pat the sand around me for the keys, still blined. Suddenly, I feel something cut into my palm. I try to focus my eyes. Jester’s Swiss army knife.

Blood is a strange colour. It’s darker than you expect, like mountains and twilight. I watch it seep out and disperse into the water, giving it a tint of pink. I use the knife and cut myself free of the horseshoes. I can’t feel my legs. Without them, I can’t move. I twist and turn, looking for air. My fear peaks.

I prop myself onto my elbows, and shuffle around on the seabed until I find the pocket of air. I breathe deeply. As my mind clears, I begin to understand: the knife sticking out of the sand, what Jester said before he fell, that this air bubble untouched. He left the knife for me. Sacrificing his life along the way.

I lie in the sand and sob my last breaths. But then I sense something moving nearby. Jester! I grab for him, but I can’t reach. I realise, he’s sinking. He drifts quietly onto the sand beside me. His skin is yellow, and his eyes open.

I ignore the burning in my lungs. I lift him onto my lap, not to try and wake him, but so I can say, “I lo-.”

The simulation ends.

I don’t know how to feel. All I know is I’m not angry.

We all went through the same simulation, but our minds adapted in differently. I jog out of The Pit. I start sprinting, getting as far away as I can, and only when I feel my legs trembling, do I stop. I press my forehead against the nearest tree trunk, though it scrapes my skin. I let the tears come.

I need to think. I go through the same number of simulations, but with more terror. Does this mean I have been through more fears than most people already? I arrive home to my mother, watching Jester’s simulation. We adapted to the simulation similarly. We are both afraid of death. The only difference is, he’s afraid of his *own* death, I am not.

Neither dinner or breakfast make it into my memories, nor does my mother doing my hair, or the kiss goodbye. I arrive at the pit the next morning. I notice I don't feel Judie's embrace. I wonder if her view of me has changed somehow after the simulation yesterday, just as mine changed on Jester's.

I hear Deke approaching again, and brace myself.

The first thing I sense is grass. It's prickly. It's pleasant. I am surrounded by jagged rock, yet I don't feel trapped. I begin to feel moisture under my feet. Mist swirls around my toes, and grows up my legs. I feel lighter, and surge upwards.

I rise above the cliffs, to see radiant peaks. The mist thins, and I glide to the highest point of the tallest mountain.

Now I realise, here among the magical mountains. This will be my final simulation. My brother appears. I have faced all of my fears. Except for one.

"Jester, I love you too."

The Story of the Orange Lily

ESF West Island School, Iyer, Sahana – 13

Tang Xiao Hui is a bright and intelligent young girl. She loved history, which is why her project was on the poets of the Magic Mountains. The mountains were a source of wonder for many in her community. Almost no one knew the true height of the place, and it just seemed to radiate with an aura, unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. This community was one that had existed, at the foot of the mountain, for centuries. Soon, however, quite a few things would change.

We start our story at Huang Hua Elementary School. It was the last five minutes of class, and of Xiao Hui's presentation. She talked about the Poets Li Bai and Du Fu, who are well known for having spent time in the mountains. Everyone in the village knew of their famous works, but one that was lost to the pages of history interested Xiao Hui immensely. This poem is described as being so mysterious yet melodious, that it sparked curiosity in anyone who reads it in its entirety. The entire passage is quite long, but a recurring theme is the *Orange Lily*. The lily is said to belong to the Pearl Dragon, who was very proud of them, as only a few grow. Centuries ago, many were found all over the valley, but now, not one can be found anywhere.

After an hour-long meeting of the Huang Hua Elementary School's book club, Xiao Hui was going home from school. Just then, her younger sister, Xiao Mei, and their parents were walking towards the school. A village meeting was being announced in the courtyard. In a true coincidence, an Orange Flower was found at the foot of the mountain. However, its petals were scattered all around that section of the base of the mountain. This mystified all the Village Elder was telling the residents about the same story Xiao Hui had told her class just an hour earlier. Li Wang Lei, the village elder, told them that this flower has not been seen for since the 8th century, and that if the Lily exists, then so must the dragon. He told everyone to keep a look out for anything related to the dragon.

Early the next morning, there was a deafening noise. It was the Pearl Dragon. He had come down the mountain upon finding out that one of his prized lilies had gone missing. When the Dragon found his lily in the possession of the village elder, he became furious, and demanded to know who had stolen it. The climbers, which go up every summer to collect berries that grow on the mountain, had just come back. As such, it was impossible to tell who had stolen the flower. The dragon was not pleased with this answer and warned of big consequences.

The consequences soon became apparent. Massive Hailstorms combined with severe floods had caused the entire village's supply of food to go to waste. The harvest season had just finished, so none of the crops were stored properly yet. As such, the water carried all the barley and grains outside of the barns. By the second day, crops were floating around the village streets, all ruined. The hailstorm also caused the small road towards the village to get hidden, meaning that the village was isolated from the rest of the world. The villagers were soon starving and were unable to get any food. Many of them were getting sick from the hailstorms, which were not common in their village.

Before the situation got any worse, the villagers all met in the village circle. Many of them had sick family members, so everyone was desperate to come to a solution. In the middle of their meeting, the Pearl Dragon came back. He came with the same demand as last time and wanted the name of the person who had stolen his Lily. However, he was not alone, in his hands was a box full of plums. This got the Wang Lei thinking. He told the dragon that none of the climbers had stolen the flower, as it had been found at the base of the mountain, not at someone's house, and that it may have accidentally 'travelled' its way to the base of the mountain. The village elder then asked the Dragon to stop the atmospheric disturbances, and sudden temperature fluctuations for 24 hours, and that the villagers would do everything in their power to help him. The Dragon agreed but warned that if he did not get his lily back, in pristine condition, at the end of those 24 hours, he would come back, and the consequences would get worse.

The next morning, the entire town was on edge, and school was cancelled for the day. The streets were all pristine again, and the sun shone down upon the village. There was enough food to last everyone in the village three meals. Xiao Hui had finished her lunch and was going to return the books she had borrowed for her presentation, back to the library. Once there, she noticed that all the books on shelves about the ancient properties of the flora and fauna of the mountain were out of bounds. This intrigued Xiao Hui, who rushed home to tell her parents. She suspected that something big was going to be announced soon, and she was right.

About 13 hours after the Dragons Announcement, the villagers all meet with the dragon in the village circle. Wang Lei tells the dragon that they will make a special potion, and leads him to a back room, where they converse for 5 minutes. Upon their return, Xiao Hui noticed the dragon looked surprised. The Dragon stopped and said that he was not willing to trust the townsfolk. Wang Lei explained that the townsfolk are suffering through this sudden change in weather, and that they have nothing to win by harming the dragon but have a lot to win by helping. The village elder says the lily was brought down by accident, and that is why the villagers were all surprised by the Lily's existence and were quite confused when first asked about it. In addition, Wang Lei told the dragon that he would not tell anyone about the effect of the potion will not be told to anyone, unless it is a success. The Dragon seemed to be getting more and more content with the proposal, and finally agreed, giving them another 48 hours to get the potion ready.

Wang Lei tells all the townsfolk to pick plums from the trees, and that everyone must collect at least two. He, and a few other volunteers, collected firewood in order to make a fire that would cook the large quantity of plums needed for the concoction. Around 7 hours later, everything was prepared, and the Village Elder set the potion to brew. The next morning, the second batch of plums were picked and added to the concoction. It was then allowed to simmer for another 7 hours. By the time the dragon was given the potion, it was late at night. The potion was given to the Dragon, who drank it just outside the village gates, and went to sleep. A very tense night later, the villagers get up to find that the Pearl Dragon has turned into a man! Li Zhang Wei was his name, and he had gone missing centuries earlier. He told the villagers about how he had gotten lost, but he could not remember how exactly he had become a Dragon.

He also apologised for his earlier actions. Zhang Wei said that he had come to the village asking for help years earlier. He said that he had given the villagers a flower as a thank you gift, but that they had tricked him, and shooed him away. That is why the flower was a part of the libraries books but was never seen again. He desperately wanted to become a human again, so he snatched the opportunity when he saw the lily near the village. The villagers all forgave him after he explained his actions, and Zhang Wei promised to help in the village whenever possible.

"That is the story of the *Huang Hua Festival*!" said Xiao Hui. She was named after her great grandmother, the Xiao Hui in this story. "This is why, every year, a week after the harvest season, we all eat *bao zi* (dumplings) and drink plum juice. Thank you for coming to visit our village and we hope to see you soon." She was talking to the tourists who came to visit the mountain. After the events of this story, the abandoned road became a popular rest stop for people travelling along the mountainside. The village became famous, and this story is now told all over the world! The Orange Lily is now displayed in the village circle and is a source of wonder for many that see it.

Unexpected Visit

ESF West Island School, Lane, Eva – 11

Chapter 1

Intro

“Eek!” Natalie screamed, dropping the box. “Well that was rude.” the dragon said, placing his tiny wings on his hips. Natalie looked at the creature in horror as his yellowy light blinded her eyes. “I am a dragon thank you very much my name is Glow, and I came out of that box you have.” he started. She slowly picked up her water bottle to defend herself with and raised an eyebrow on her panicked face. “I think I know what your question is...” he boasted, “My name is Glow the Great and powerful dragon, and I come from the beautiful yellow mountains. There is a yellowstone in the middle of the mountains that gives the mountain it’s beauty and my power. But obviously there are people who envied me, even my own little brother, and one day a jealous villager, who was a powerful sorcerer trapped me in that magical box, who knows how long I’ve been in there, hundreds of years, thousands? And now you have rescued me, er thank you.” Natalie didn't know what to say, *usually you wouldn't trust a strange creature that comes out of a box*. She thought. “Since you have done me good I could give you something in return”. “What?” Natalie gullibly replied. “I could take you to the yellow mountain, the beautiful, beautiful mountain with trees thousands of years old and the occasional misty clouds allowing you to see the lovely mountain tops oh and you must see the sunsets because they are the nicest you will ever see.” She quickly but sleepily agreed without understanding what was happening first.

Chapter 2 To The Mountains

“You are completely sure this won’t take me to some alternate universe or –”, “Stop being such a baby and do it already!” he interrupted. So she followed the instructions he gave her. He flew in the box and shut it, she tapped three times and said the mandarin character “*shan*”. All of a sudden everything in her room was twisting round and round in one big swirly picture, faster and faster, until it all disappeared. There was nothing around her. And once again she was shocked as she found herself in the yellow mountains. *It’s prettier than I imagined*, It looked sunny and fresh but felt calming and free. The sun felt warm but every now and then she was greeted by a crispy summer breeze. Her eyes darted all over the mountains realizing how high she was. “Amazing isn’t it?” boomed a loud and scary sounding voice. “Agh” she cried when she saw the dragon had increased in size by at least 20 times and he was 8 foot tall and very fat. “Honestly all I’ve heard from you as agh or eek” the large thing bellowed. “I grow when I return to my original home. Now come on I want to show you around. The sleep deprived (from walking all over the mountains) but excited girl followed, picking up the magical box on her way.

Natalie’s legs grew tired from walking to one rickety unstable bridge to another, and she finally got sick and tired from hearing the dragon's loud annoying voice. “And this is the north west mountain in the middle of this is the magic sto–”, “Please be quiet!” he looked at her confused. “Sorry I just want to go home. I've been walking around for hours and I am fed up with you showing me around.” she explained. “No.” the dragon said with his face expressing nothing. “What do you mean no?! Don't you know how many unstable bridges I’ve crossed and how much of your annoying voice I've listened–”, and right in the middle of her sentence the dragon flew away without a single word.

Chapter 3 Dim The dragon

“Hey! Come back here” she shouted, jumping in an attempt to grab his tail, but he was too high up. After the dragon flew out of her vision she sat down her back against a huge prickly boulder the size of her, and started sobbing. And before she knew it she teared herself to sleep.

“Excuse me” spoke a quiet scared sounding voice. Natalie opened her eyes to what looked like glow but smaller around her height and skinnier. Without thinking she grabbed the animal and screamed “Take me home right now Glow!”. “Agh! I’m not glow I’m Dim!” with those words Natalie let go immediately and started crying again. “There there” the scrawny dragon said in a kind voice “You must be the one Glow tricked into bringing him back, he is boasting to all the other dragons about it. But don’t worry we’ll get you back home.”

Dim ushered her into the boulder she was lying against and from the back there was a hole just about big enough to let them into a beautiful but small place. It was decorated fantastically. There were 4 lanterns hung from the top and all over the walls were lovely glowing stones which shone of a fire in the middle. There was a huge leaf to the right of the fire and a big pot to the left. He sat her down on the leaf making what looked like tea as she explained the whole story. When she finished the dragon shook his head and said "That naughty dragon.", "You see, Glow is my older brother and has much more power. He was the first born son so my family expected greatness from him and after they saw how powerful he was they decided to name him Glow". "But I don't understand, why didn't they name him that when he was born?" she asked puzzled. "Dragons only get names that suit them, and the only way you know that the name will suit them is if you see what they are like beforehand". "Oh, ok carry on then" Natalie replied but she still found this whole dragon thing hard to understand. "After my outstanding but horrible brother I was a disappointment to my family when I couldn't fly or lift heavy boulders, so they decided to call me Dim." As he lowered his head into disappointment Natalie thought better of asking all those touchy questions. "Well that's um—" she tried to say something sympathetic but she wasn't the best person for that. "Well Dim it was great that I bumped into you because I need some help getting home..." she said unsure. "We can try but it will be very difficult". Natalie bit her lip as she thought, "I've got an idea!" and they discussed the plan for the next half hour.

Chapter 4 The Plan

"This is the second time I have walked around this whole mountain today, I mean tonight, I mean.. Whatever" she was tired again from walking around trying to find the dragon, didn't reply to any of her complaints. Just as they almost gave up they spotted him.

In a grassy patch he was boasting to a group of other dragons and you could tell by their scaly faces that they were bored and probably heard the story a million times. "Duck" whispered Dim as the pair dropped behind a small boulder. "Okay, now go up there and do the plan" Dim said pointing over to the group. Natalie hugged Dim tightly, and now her arms were wrapped around him she didn't want to let go, "Thankyou Dim, thankyou" she let go and walked over to the Glow as he eyed her suspiciously, "Oh and that's the one stupid enough to fall for my amazing plan" he said looking proud flying above all of the other gigantic dragons. "I come in peace and have brought a gift because I appreciate your godly powers" she said slyly while the other dragons looked confused. "Ooo let's see then, where is it?" he snapped. "Right here in this box", she opened the same box but it had wrapping paper all over as a disguise. He flew closer and eyed the box. "I can't see the present". "shrink down and go inside if you want it", so the dragon shrunk down and flew in. SNAP! Natalie shut the lid, she tapped three times and said "*shan*" once again everything was twisting round and round until there was nothing again. She closed her eyes and hoped it would all go back to her bedroom. And it did, to her surprise it was still the same time as she left. *Wow!* she thought, *did that really happen?* After locking the box inside her drawer. Hopped into bed and fell asleep, only to awake herself the next day thinking it was a dream.

A Tale Infused in Scarlet Mountains

ESF West Island School, Leung, Chung Hei Chester – 13

“No!” Yu-Long rasped.

“But—” a hoarse voice began to dispute.

“I said no. There is no time for rest. Not when we are this close.”

The hunting pack led by North Owl Tribe leader Yu-Long had spent the past three moons traversing Huangshan’s great canyons, chiselled mountains, and waterfalls of clouds that rolled over moss embedded hills. To stop now would be madness. When the overhead sun began to sink, they finally set foot in the forest clearing where they were to meet the person who hired them for the bounty. As the sun sank lower into the horizon, Yu-Long couldn’t help, but wonder if this request had been a bluff. His of thought was interrupted by a sudden rustle from the hanging branches above.

Yu-Long casted his gaze to the eerie shadow that had slipped into view. “Step into the light,” he called. The shadow moved and morphed into a tall, lean figure.

The figure chuckled back. “Here I am. I am Xing-Zhi, a member of the North Owl Tribe first legion.” She rolled up a sleeve to reveal an engraved mark of the first legion against her porcelain white skin. As soon as he saw the mark, Yu-Long bowed.

“We too are from the North Owl Tribe. I am their chieftain, Yu-Long.”

“Well, Yu-Long,” Xing-Zhi drawled. “Head towards the summit, and walk for three moon sets until you reach the cloud harvest mountains. There, find the pines that have been drenched in the lies of the wind. Then, hike up the Lotus Peak—the highest peak of Huangshan, and crawl into its mouth in which you will retrieve an artifact. *My* artifact.”

“And what does this artifact look like exactly?” Yu-Long asked, pondering the credibility of this mysterious shadow in his mind.

Xing-Zhi took a deep breath and began. “It is an orb covered in a thin plate of stone, and bathed in the pure essence of a Giving Tree.

“A rabid group of Nomads serve as guardians of the artifact. They wear the armour of our warriors slain from eons past. Make no mistake: they are your enemies!”

Her bony fingers stretched to Yu-Long’s faceplate, tracing the grooves. “Now go! Make me proud!”

The North Owl Tribe trekked on the path that the mysterious Xing-Zhi had set them on. As they escaped the wooded atmosphere below, the mountains afar seemed to shine like polished marble. The clouds weaved through the arms of the trees. The passing of three moon sets came when the group finally laid eyes on the Lotus Peak. Beneath the clear wisp of clouds, they spotted a forest like no other. The branches were withered away, and the soil was soaked in a plum hue.

“The forest of lies!” Yu-Long murmured. Suddenly, a warm flicker of fire came from the forest, then another... another... and another. “The Nomads!” he hissed. He turned to his pack. “We rest here upon this mountain, then ambush them at night from the high ground. Once all the Nomads are dead, we shall have free passage,” Yu-Long mused.

It was time. Slipping into the opaque black shadows of the surrounding shrubs, the pack crept to the very rear of the camp. His right-hand man Yu-Hua began the attack by setting the Nomads’ huts ablaze; stirring up a panic. With an ear-piercing whistle, the North Owl Tribe warriors on the cliffs fired their arrows downwards into the valley below like rain from a thunderstorm. The arrows ripped apart the clouds, and shrieks of fear echoed across the fruitless pines. Shrieks of fear that oddly emanated from...behind them? The Nomads had flanked them! Arrows flew across Yu-Long’s head as he and his fellow warriors were mercilessly shot down by the Nomads.

“Retreat!” Yu-Long yelled to his pack. As the North Owl Tribe scrambled for cover, he noticed something rather peculiar about a dead Nomad warrior—something familiar. *Impossible!* He thought. *There’s no way!*

“Cover me!” he barked to Yu-Hua.

Yu-Hua simply nodded. Yu-Long made a mad dash to the warrior, and flung off the slain warrior’s faceplate. What Yu-Long saw chilled him to the bone. For the warrior’s marking featured an owl clasping lightning bolts in its feet: the marking of the South Owl Tribe. They were butchering their own. Armed with the shocking truth, Yu-Long willed his feet to move; dashed out from cover.

“They are one of us! Take off your faceplates; show them your markings!” he screamed to his fellow warriors.

With a great leap, Yu-Long tackled one of the Nomads, and tore off his faceplate. He showed his face in a headlock to both tribes. The meaningless fighting slowly came to a stop. Yu-Long fell to his knees, and let out an agonising wail of despair.

The milky evening dew had been washed away, and in its place hung the sickly, acrid smell of blood. Yu-Long made his way to the injured Mu-Bai, chieftain of the South Owl Tribe. Mu-Bai was pinned to a stump by an arrow that had pierced through his stomach. Yu-Long dropped to one knee.

“Mu-Bai, brother! Who gave you the order to attack?” Yu-Long nervously asked.

“Xing-Zhi did. She told us that there were deranged Nomads that had killed the North Owl Tribe, stripping them of their armour; wearing them as trophies.” Mu-Bai stopped and punctured lungs heaving for air.

“So, we retaliated. We agreed that it would only be right if we were to strike back as an act of revenge...” The words stopped flowing from his lips.

Yu-Long sighed in grief. He put Mu-Bai’s faceplate back on his limp head, and began to rally what warriors remained.

Both Owl Tribes climbed the Lotus Peak united; fuelled by their rage. The horizon of the Huangshan valleys was blocked by the mouth of the head. A beam of light, which slithered through a fracture in the ceiling, lighted up a worn-out abandoned podium that had long since been reclaimed by nature.

“There!” a warrior exclaimed, pointing to the podium.

The orb was nested on the podium. Yu-Long cautiously made his way toward the artifact; gently lifted it from its nest. *How ironic!* Yu-Long thought. That such a simple object could cause so much death. The tribes headed back to Xing-Zhi with fury in their hearts that would only be quenched once they had their revenge.

They made their journey once more through the blood-soaked mountain. Xing-Zhi sat in the middle of the clearing. The tribes soundlessly paced around her. A flock of Laughing Birds thrust out of a patch nearby, and Xing-Zhi opened her eyes in a startle. Her heart skipped a beat. In the blink of an eye, warriors surrounded her from all angles. Xing-Zhi could do nothing but hold her hands above her head.

Yu-Long took three paces towards Xing-Zhi. “Before you die, witch, answer me this. Why would you do this? Turning your own tribe against each other?” he snarled.

“The Owl and Wolf Tribes—” Xing-Zhi croaked, “disregarded all life around them. Not a single life other than humans was spared.”

Yu-Long spat on the burnished ground. “So, you betrayed your ichor tribe for some trees?”

“The tribes were damning us to certain death! Nature gave us a renewed life: a life that the tribes did not cherish, did not value!” Xing-Zhi hissed.

A loud scoff came from Yu-Long.

“Hand me the orb, and I will show you its purpose!” Xing-Zhi shrieked.

Yu-Long hesitated, but temptation got the better of him, and he threw her the orb. Xing-Zhi began to peel flakes of stone from the orb like paper.

Xing-Zhi pointed a frail finger at Yu-Long. “Long before any feet brushed the grounds of Huangshan; mountains were the only inhabitants. These mountains were gifted with the essence of life. They would shine internally, emitting a strong light that would brighten up the forests around it.

“You see my child— the roots of the pines are connected to that very living essence within the mountains. But a war broke out amongst the Humans. It divided them into two tribes: Owl and Wolf. Their conflict ripped apart natural life all throughout Huangshan. They used such essences to further incite the havoc. The digging into the mountains to extract the living essence within became normalised, and not too soon after the number of essences fell.

“Your ancestors came to a pathetic truce. All seemed to have harmony, but the damage was already done. The forests that surrounded the mountains withered away; their essence taken. Only their carcasses remained.”

A small grin began to form on Xing-Zhi’s face. “A few of these essence orbs survived, and you happened to bring one to me,” laughing, she smashed open the orb.

An opaque mist engulfed the dazed and confused warriors who promptly blacked out. When the haze settled, it revealed a new mountain that had arisen dressed in a scarlet hue. Where the warriors had once stood remained nothing but pine trees, their armour the only remnant of the once-feared Owl Tribes.

The Spirit of the Mountains

ESF West Island School, Li, Andrea – 11

Long ago, in the country of China, there lived a beautiful goddess who protected the legendary magical mountain. She was known by many names, the graceful one, The beautiful one, some even called her the protector of the magical mountain. The goddess' real name was Huang nu, or yellow lady. There was a whole group of people devoted to her during a period they liked to call, the Yellow age. During that time, temples were dedicated in her honour, and the mountains were lush and beautiful, blossoming like a beautiful flower. But slowly, people stopped taking care of nature, and instead became more interested in cars and other electronics that polluted the earth, and the mountain. Slowly, mist started to cover the mountain. Nowadays, you can barely see the mountain through the mist. Some people have even forgotten that it existed. And the poor Yellow Lady could only sit and watch, as people forgot about her and the mountain, too busy with their VRs and TVs to come and see the real thing.

The Yellow Lady has been protecting the mountains since the magical mountains appeared. The magical mountain is linked to her, as if they were good friends. When one dies, the other immediately kills itself. That was exactly what was going to happen if people did not start remembering her. One day, a naturalist was in china for a vacation. His name was Tam. He liked to look for mountains in legends. Tam was excited. He could not wait to discover the mountains and prove to others that the legend was true. He could make the Yellow lady great again! Tam had been walking for many hours. When he arrived at the site for the mountains, Tam was confused. In the place of a supposed beautiful and blossoming mountain, was a ghostlike mountain covered in thick grey haze. Tam was taken aback. Had he found a new mountain? Or was this *the* Magical Mountain?

Tam looked at the mountain. There was almost no way that *that* was the Magical Mountain. He ran back to the urban city to report his discovery to everyone! Now a big group of people were heading towards the mountain to see Tam's discovery. Everyone was astonished that the ghostlike mountains were translucent, yet solid! From afar, it almost looked like they were walking in the air! That day, the spirit woke from her painful slumber, only to find people where she usually saw nothing! People were setting up camp there, families hiking through the mountain and gaping at the view below. The Yellow Lady threw her head in her hands. Did they really think this was scientifically possible? Hadn't they read the legends? In every legend, if something was like the state of her once beautiful mountains, they were fading. And so was she. She had to get those innocent people off this mountain before she and the mountains crumbled from existence.

As Tam looked at his discovery, he could not help but think that this all was a bit strange. Invisible mountains. Misty cliffs. How in the place of one mountain was another one that almost looked identical except for its colour and state? Tam gasped to himself as it hit him. As in a transparent rock literally hit him. He saw people everywhere facing the same problems. He had to help them! This was his fault that they were stuck here! Rocks were chasing people all over the place! Tam raced towards a family stuck between two rocks about to come down. He pushed them away as the rocks clashed with a thunderous BOOM. Most of the people were already rushing towards the exit of the mountains. Tam scanned the horizon and saw a little girl at the edge of a cliff trying to pick a flower as a rock rolled towards her. The girl, completely unaware, teetered towards the cliff to try to get the purple blossom. In a flash, Tam caught her and told her to run. Then Tam realised he had to run too! But the rocks were too close! All he could do was pray to the spirit, the goddess he always believed in, the saviour of him right now. The only person that could save him. He took a deep breath and jumped off the cliff. The spirit, high up in the mountain unleashed a sob. The only person who truly believed in her, had overestimated her power. There was only one way to save him. To make him, the spirit. The Yellow Lady smiled sadly. Her time was up. It was time for a new reign, a new spirit.

Tam opened his eyes. Instead of his normal clothes, he was wearing an old China robe, pared with his now pale skin. Also, he was now floating. People gaped at him. Tam's eyes widened as he realised, he had become the spirit. Everything came crashing back at him. The spirit. The mountains. Saving the girl. Believing in the spirit. The legends. Tam heaved a sigh. This was going to be a hard job to do. But from that day forward, Tam vowed to make the Yellow Lady proud.

Immortality

ESF West Island School, Ng, Megan – 13

All the myths pointed me here, to these craggy mountains. Alchemists making pills and emperors ascending. After all these years of waiting, I'm finally going to do it.

This is where I'm going to become immortal.

Everything I've wanted is here. The stone staircase I stand on will bring me there. All of it's just how I imagined, too— crooked pines rooted in the rock, the foggy peaks up in the distance.

My left leg begins to ache, and I ignore it. This is where I'm meant to be, and I'm not going to let some old injury stop me from gaining eternal life.

The atmosphere here is strange. Not quite silent. Twice I hear whispers behind me, and when I turn there's nothing there except the steps I've left behind. The trees and bushes on either side of me grow thicker, and I'm uncomfortably aware of the fact that, besides a vague grasp of some Huangshan myths, I've got no idea how to set about accomplishing my goal.

All that's left is to keep moving, because I've got this strange sense that whatever I want to find will be at the top. A herb, to make magical pills— it's been done before in myths. A spring that a legendary emperor bathed in before gaining eternal life. My plan hinges on me recognising whatever it is the moment I find it.

Mist curls between the pines. The pain in my leg has swelled, and my pace is slowed— I have to stop every few minutes to rest.

There's the sound of quiet laughter next to me and I swing around to empty mist.

I force myself to climb a few more stairs. There's a rough wooden railing here, and I cling to it like a lifeline. Climbing is better than thinking— if I stop too long, the past will catch up with me. Already I can feel the old panic, hot under my skin.

I've got to keep moving. The stairs have gotten wider, not steeper, and the trees are flimsy and stick—thin.

A voice to my right, and I look quickly. This one seems to have come from the rocks itself. I run up the next few steps and tell myself it's because I'm so eager to get to the top. Not because I'm scared.

I dash up the first few steps without incident and am just regaining my confidence when my left leg buckles under me and I fall.

The panic feels like it's about to burst through me. The last time I was trapped on the ground like this was when—

Don't stop to think. I've got to keep moving forward. I've got to keep searching for immortality, because I am not going to die here, alone on this mountain. I am not going to die at all. Stand up and swing your left leg in front of you, come on.

I lean back on my hands and try to move my left leg. Nothing happens.

The sky above me is covered in the reaching arms of the trees, and it's white as paper. I stare at this and try not to scream, because the terror is shooting through me and the mountain is still so high, and I'm not even halfway done. I'm not even halfway done.

I hold my backpack to my chest and sob. How could I be so stupid as to believe in immortality? This was always going to happen sooner or later. If not now, then when I got to the top and found nothing. Nobody can stop death.

Someone is speaking very faintly behind me. The voices, they're back again.

Are they real, or am I just going crazy? I wouldn't be surprised if I were— this entire trip was crazy. The one non-mythological emperor who tried to find immortality died *because* of his search, and I'm exactly the same. I'll die here, surrounded by fevered hallucinations. I'll die here, and it'll be because of my own reckless decisions.

Reckless decisions, I think, and suddenly we're walking to the car together under an umbrella, our footsteps splashing, and I'm asking her if we should maybe make the trip another day—

Something very close to me is whispering in a language I don't know, and I whirl around and tell the voices to go away.

I scream at them, at the moss-covered stone beneath me, at the mountains themselves, but they don't leave— I can feel them hovering around. Almost like they're waiting for me to start talking. So I do.

"I didn't want everything to turn out like this," I say, looking around at the rockface. "I never used to be scared of death."

Nobody answers, but I can feel something listening.

Something listening. Voices in the rock. I've heard about this before. Where?

The voices feel like they're leaving, so I keep talking. Anything to get them to come back.

"It began when she died, I guess."

All my memories of her are stained by that last one. Where I am crawling out of the wreckage on that terrible rain-slicked road and screaming at her to wake up, wake up.

The voices lean closer. Did something just move?

There was a legend about the rocks on Huangshan being living. They're in strange positions, upright pillars and sitting monkeys. Is this what's happening? Some of them were even said to have been real people who became stone.

I've always hated that myth. To be trapped on a mountain forever, unable to move or call for help, locked into place as you were slowly forgotten by everyone else— it sounded worse than dying.

"After that, I was constantly scared of death, of making some mistake that would end up getting me killed. I did my research and came here to prevent it."

I can feel the panic rushing back.

"And it's not going to work, is it? They're just myths. Nobody can actually become immortal."

She wouldn't have done this if she were the one who had lived. She wouldn't have gone crazy on this mountain worlds away from home.

The voices are more solid now, and I feel hands on my shoulders. Slowly, with their help, I stand.

We walk up together.

As they guide me up the mountain— flights of stairs that are almost vertical, paths beaten through thin forests, terrifying ridges that cling to the rock— I tell them about her. How she was never scared of anything. How she'd wake me up early and drag me to hiking trails. How a simple drive through the rain could change everything so suddenly.

She would have loved Huangshan, I realise. She would be happy if she knew I was here. And the hands squeeze my shoulders in agreement.

We continue the walk, higher and higher. The pain is gone— all that's there is the almost—white sky and the sound of my voice, telling our story.

I understand why Huangshan was loved by so many poets. It's beautiful, really. Immortality might not be up here, but peace certainly is.

The hands have stopped moving me. I'm sitting on a ledge, legs dangling down into a steep drop. How did I get here? The stairs are nowhere to be found. I hear the voices again, and they're almost singing.

It's as if I'm in a painting. Perfect clouds across the sky, the crooked trees streaking the mountains with green. She would have wanted this for me, I realise. Immortality wouldn't have brought her back, wouldn't have helped me. It's here, on this mountain, where I can feel her closest.

Here, the memory of the accident is so far away. Here, she's alive in every plant, every rock. I miss you, I say to her.

And I'm about to tell her I'm sorry, that I should have stepped in and stopped us the second it began to rain. But I know deep down that it wasn't my fault. She's driven in worse weather before. How could I have predicted it?

Instead, I tell her that I love her. I tell her about my travels, and my research, and how it all worked up to this moment. I've never felt so purposeful.

Huangshan's hands tighten around me, and I realise that I've found immortality after all, right at the moment when I had stopped looking. It's here where the people in the myths became part of the mountain. It's here where the emperor ascended and found peace.

As I sink into the ledge and join the spirits of Huangshan, I realise that turning to stone wasn't death, as I thought it would be. Instead, it's eternal life.

It's immortality.

The Mountain of Far Beyond

ESF West Island School, Tang, Xi Chor – 11

"Far, far away, deep in the lands of China, there was a mountain as high as the heavens. People called it the mountain of Far Beyond. The people who climbed the mountain said there was a magical haven far beyond their wildest dreams. Every one of them who returned all bore the same thing. For—"

Taoqi coughed. All the other children giggled and laughed at the coughing fit except for one.

"Go on! you haven't finished the story!" Danda said, her eyes wide as dinner plates.

"You still haven't said what they came back with!"

Taoqi glared at the laughing kids for a second and returned to his story.

"As I said, they all came back carrying one extra possession. Fortune"

All the other kids stopped laughing and stared at Taoqi in awe.

And like a dam bursting they all began to assault him with questions. Shouts were heard as the children tried to ask him more.

"Is it true?"

"He must be lying!"

"You all see that?"

Taoqi pointed to a mountain towering over the land.

"That's the mountain of Far Beyond. It's said that to reach the destination you must go out of the village and follow the path until you see an intersection. Take the path on the right and you will reach a village called the City of Markets. It's the only place you can climb the mountain of Far Beyond. From then on, all you have to do is follow the path up the mountain."

The children laughed again, but Danda simply stared towards the mountain.

The village that the children lived in was called the DaoTian. The land around DaoTian was very poor. To feed themselves, every adult in the village was a farmer and had to work in the muddy rice paddies day after day bending, stooping, and trampling. Working in the fields so much had turned the village into a dull brown. What once was a colorful village turned into a depressing state.

That night, when her family was having their meagre dinner of rice, she asked her mom a question.

"Ma?"

"Yes?" Ma turned to look at Danda

"Is the story of the mountain of Far Beyond true?"

Ma pursed her lips and asked:

"Taoqi told you that?"

Danda nodded.

"You know those stories are fake, right?"

Danda's eyes widened.

"They are!?" She exclaimed.

"Now now, we don't know if those stories are true or not," Ba said, looking at them.

"For all we know, it might be another planet. And besides, stories cost us nothing."

"And gain us nothing!" Ma shot back "We cannot buy fortune with stories!"

"How can we gain fortune?" Danda asked.

"That, is a question no one truly knows" Ba Said

Every morning, Danda's father and mother went out to the fields to work, leaving Danda all alone with nothing to do. Sometimes she would daydream or play with the other children. But today, she didn't feel like it. Danda felt sad after she had upset Ma last night, so naturally, she did something that she would always do when she was feeling sad. Exploring.

Exploring made her feel free. She loved to look at the butterflies flutter around, and the ants crawling across the earth. She would look at every ant and make up a story for each of them, pretending they were a king to a merchant to a farmer.

As she was squatting down looking at the ants, a traveller passed by. Danda looked up to him and said: “Sir, have you been to the mountain of Far Beyond?”

“Oh yes,” he said with a proud look “It is a place where you could get wealth and— ”
Danda didn’t hear the rest of the sentence as she was running madly to prepare for her journey.

She quickly grabbed some supplies and wrote

Dear Ma and Ba

I am going to the mountain of Far Beyond to change our fortune. I may be gone for a few days but don’t worry. I will be back soon carrying fortune.

Love, Danda

Danda looked back at her rickety house and thought: that would do.

She set off to the unknown.

★ ★ ★

After several hours of walking, Danda was exhausted. She found a tree lean on and decided to take a rest. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Danda was woken up by the sound of rustling from her pack. She gently opened her eyes and the sight that greeted her was a surprise. There was a small cat, looking for food. As soon as Danda moved a muscle the cat instantly registered that she was awake and ran behind the tree. Not wanting to scare the cat, Danda quickly got some rice and dropped it on the floor. Wary of the gift, the cat refused to eat it. But soon, hunger quickly washed over him, and he pounced on the rice and gobbled it all up. Gaining Danda’s trust, the cat now followed her.

“I’m sorry, But I can’t take you to the mountain of Far Beyond.” She said sadly.

“I know a shortcut there!”

Danda stared at the cat who seemed to have spoken.

“Can you talk?” She asked the cat

“If most people listen”

Danda was stunned. And because most animals cannot talk, she decided to listen.

★ ★ ★

Danda walked forward with her new companion. The cat told her that he was a Maneki–Neko.
A symbol of fortune.

“What’s your name?”

“A name?” The cat responded, “I don’t think I have a name.”

“Well, everyone needs a name,” Danda said “How about, Fortune?”

“Fortune...” The cat opened his mouth as if tasting his title “I like it!”

When they got to Fortune’s shortcut Danda was surprised that it led straight up the mountain. But dusk was quickly approaching so they decided to stop their journey. They found a tree to rest beside and made a small bed using leaves. With her new fluffy companion, Danda’s mind was mixed. But exhaustion washed over her, and she went to sleep

The next morning, they wasted no time trekking up. The journey was cold and hard, and she almost froze to death. Sleeping in this wintry wonderland was not an option so they planned to trek up the mountain in a whole day. Otherwise, it’ll be suicide.

Just when they thought that it couldn’t be done, they saw a structure in front of them. It seemed to be... a monastery?

“I’ll wait outside for you,” Fortune said, “A talking cat would attract a lot of attention!”

“Ok” Agreed Danda

Danda went right in and sure enough. It was a monastery

“What is this place?” She wondered out loud.

“The Golden Monastery,” A monk beside her said

“Do you need anything?” He said with his kindly eyes

Danda hesitated

“I’m here to look for fortune” Danda answered

The monk laughed.

“What you seek, is what you have”

Danda tried to decipher the words.

“I— already have fortune?”

The monk nodded

“But that is impossible!”

“And also, tell your friend out there, that the Jade Emperor has permitted his return”

“What!?”

In addition to being confused, Danda was now shocked as ever, but as she looked back the monk had disappeared. Walking out she heard Fortune say:

“Well?” Fortune asked eagerly “Did you find what you need?”

Danda shook her head in disbelief. “A monk said I already have fortune, and he said to you that the Emperor has permitted your return?”

Fortune looked confused for a second then his eyes flashed with understanding.

“I—, I remember now”

In a flash, a golden cloud suddenly dropped out of nowhere. He stepped onto the cloud and the cloud began to go up.

“Wait! But what happened? You haven’t explained!”

“Another time, friend” Fortune promised

“In the meantime, take my claw as a reminder. I was the fortune you were carrying all along!”

★ ★ ★

When Danda finally got home, her father and mother were in the fields. She quietly sat her belongings down and went to her bed. She was exhausted, after all. Danda let herself be lulled to sleep at the prospect of imagining a house filled with gold. Smiling a secret smile, she slept peacefully that night.

When she woke up, the shouts of Danda filled the room. They only stopped hugging her when they heard the rumble of Danda’s stomach. Ba quickly went to make his special tea and Ma went to cook up a special breakfast. A choking sound erupted from the living room. Danda and Ma went running through when they heard the noise.

“What is that!?” Ba said pointing at a claw on the table.

“It’s just a gift from a friend” Danda said.

“That’s no gift! That’s a claw of a beckoning cat!” Ba exclaimed as he picked it up.

“This is worth the Emperor’s entire fortune!” Ba looked at Ma who smiled and whispered:

“Our fortune has been changed”

The Tiger That Saved My Life

ESF West Island School, Thakar, Maya – 12

Chapter 1: Akita:

The sun was slowly sinking into the clouds that circled the misty grey peaks. The bitter wind blew around, causing leaves to fall from the old pine trees. I shivered and winced from the cold, clearly my thick coat was unable to protect me from the howling gale. I did not struggle to keep my balance on the slippery, jagged limestone only because my claws provided me a firm grip. As I edged ever closer towards the moss covered steps, I looked back one last time at my village that now appeared the size of an ant.

I continued down the steps fighting back the tears that were threatening to overcome me at any second. The sun was slowly rising above the clouds announcing dawn to the surrounding villages. I tried to block the thoughts of home from my mind, the worried looks that were probably frozen on my parents faces. Suddenly my stomach released a low growl of complaint, only then did I realise.

Somewhere in the foggy distance I could make out a large patch of green. Surely there would be food there, so I expeditiously started my descent. As I came closer to my destination, I could make out the tall green trees with thick patterned barks and the scent of damp moss filling my nostrils. I continued on my path. Only a couple meters away from the forest I spotted a tiny figure. It had peachy, white skin with dark curly fur only on the top of its head. It appeared to be walking on two legs like a circus animal.

The growls from my belly had suddenly disappeared. All that filled my body now was pure curiosity. I followed the creatures crunching sounds until I saw it settle down on a hollow log. I searched for a way to introduce myself. “Hi my name is Akita” I murmured as I built up the courage to reveal myself.

I leaped in front of the ginormous tree that was concealing me and stuttered “Am I Akita, I mean I am Akita.” I was mixing up all the words that was how nervous I was. When I glanced back at the creature all I saw was it staring at me in utter astonishment.

Chapter 2: Ebony:

Was I dreaming, it couldn't have been what I thought it was, was I staring at a talking Chinese Tiger? As her soft voice slowly woke me from my stupor, I realised I was not delusional this was really happening! I groaned and rubbed my aching head. Standing in front of me was a ginormous tiger with black claws, beautifully striped fur going in a mesmerising pattern of orange, black, orange, black and murky green eyes like a polluted river.

After moments in silence I finally spoke up “Hi I am Ebony,” I stammered.
The soft voice belonging to Akita (The tiger) replied “What animal are you?”

Clearly, she had no knowledge about us humans so I decided it would be easiest to tell her my story and the reason why I was on the mountain.

Every day was exactly the same, no fun and certainly no adventure! You see I come from a tiny village. My life was simple, but I was not content. Every day we would wake up to the smell of fish which was revolting. Then I would head off to work which was in a little area we liked to call shi chang meaning market. I had the monotonous job of selling the fish. Every ten minutes or so a customer would walk up to the tiny hut and trade some bread or flour for some fish. Then I would return home and go to bed that was it! I needed to get away from humans and their repulsive behaviour so I left.

Akita listened to my story without a single interruption when I took a glance at her face, all I could see was her willingness to listen and learn. She was so fascinated by the world below the mountains the only thing I could do was take her down there myself. So we continued the descent.

“Eh, slow down!” I wheezed and coughed. Akita had no trouble on the slimy, mossy rock and was now miles ahead of me. She turned around at the sound of my voice and suddenly with urgency started bolting straight towards me. In a split second she was by my side offering to carry me for the rest of the journey. I tried to reject the offer, but my tongue was dry as a sandpaper and my legs were slowly collapsing underneath me. Unhappy with the weakness I had displayed I reluctantly sat down on the long, soft coat on the tigers back.

The rhythmic tapping of Akita's claws lulled me to sleep. I slept like a baby peacefully and sound, but only to be woken by the whipping pain of snow hitting me with full force. I struggled to fight the wind while clutching on the Akita's fur. I opened my eyes hoping to see some shelter but all I could see was the swirling white of the endless storm.

Chapter 3: Akita:

The wind attempted to tackle me and succeeded. I flew through the air and landed with a thump on a soft patch of glistening snow. Laid beside me was Ebony, covered head to toe in snow which was slightly tinted red, wait then I thought 'red that's not right'. I swiped off the snow which was enclosing a dark red wound nestled in between two ribs. What could I do, my paws were too heavy and clunky, not in a million years could I heal a wound that deep. I had no choice but to gently lift Ebony up onto my back and head down to his village.

Sharp colours of red, black and grey flooded my mind, I could not escape. What had I done? I just wanted to run back home safe and sound but even there I would not be safe from the tide of guilt that was violently crashing onto the shore, swallowing me up.

I scurried down the mountain, never stopping to satisfy my parched mouth or growling belly. Soon I could see and smell the little fishing village. It was kind of cute. Unlike our village it did not contain thousands of rows of huts but just a couple and was located beside a large river dotted with multicoloured fish.

I walked with caution watching the dancing shadows in each window and taking note of where the sweet scent of bread was coming from. I continued on the winding path until an old frail lady gasped "Ebony!".

Chapter 4: Xue:

That filthy creature was holding my boy like a trophy. The tiger was flaunting its success, it had killed my son. I could not speak, instead I quietly sobbed as I ran to call for help. I ran a couple of meters before my legs became jelly and I collapsed besides a wooden barrel outside a hut. I landed with a large thud waking up all the surrounding huts. They circled around me offering help and asking questions. Before anyone could say anymore I shrieked "Tiger, holding, son, dead." My sentence made no sense but somehow the villagers understood and disappeared into their huts.

One by one the villagers marched out their huts and down the cobblestone streets. They held flaming torches and their sharpest fish knives. I followed them silently and stood at the back hoping I wouldn't be noticed.

Chapter 4: Akita:

First gleaming torches of red, next a large crowd of tired faces, last the blades. I froze like a deer in headlights. Something was wrong. Within seconds I was surrounded. The blade belonging to a man with a thick bushy moustache pierced my skin. Pain flooding my body, blood flooding out of my skin. I was fighting for air until I finally took my last breath and my last thought 'I should have never left home, my family was right, humans are nothing but disasters'.

Chapter 5: Xue:

The creature and Ebony lied on the cold cobblestone floor. The blood that was now dry looked like a blanket protecting them from us and the outside world. Only now did I notice the beautiful fur of the creature. Both my son and the creature's stomachs curled inwards exposing their ribs, by the looks of them they hadn't eaten in days. The tiger had its paw protectively, over Ebony like a mother.

I set up a fire and cremated them both. I kept the ashes in tiny pots. I could not help but feel that both their blood is on my hand, the only thing I could do was keep the pots in their memory.

No one knows where the other tigers have gone but all I know is that they are gone, gone for good.

My Grandma told me a story when I was 4, about the healing mountain, a form of Guanyin; the God of mercy and compassion. She had healed her sidekick, a crippled boy. Being a reincarnation of her, it has the same powers. I wish to teleport there and get medicine for the butterflies in my stomach. Tomorrow's my first day of school and I'm too nervous to sleep.

"Emma!" shouted mom, "you're late!"

At the school assembly, the principal announced, "Today, we are welcoming a new student – Emma Wu. How about we hear a little bit about her?" I was ushered onto the stage to introduce myself. I cleared my throat, and began. "Hi my name is Emma, I'm from China but I was born in the US. A fun fact is that I get stage fright." Everyone started laughing. I escaped to the comfort of the restroom and sat there, crying. After a few minutes, there was a gentle knock on the door. "Hello?" a voice called out. "I just wanted to check if you're okay," the girl said. I opened the door and there was a short girl, waiting for me. "Hi! I'm Olive!" she said in a shrill voice. "Hi," I said back. We walked back to class together. That was the day I met my best friend.

At the dinner table, mom said that she met a nice lady at the supermarket, whose daughter went to the same school as me. They set up a playdate for us on Friday. Eager to know who the girl was, I asked mom. "I think her name is Holly!" she said. My stomach dropped to my feet and I ran to my room.

Friday came as quick as Usain Bolt. "Be nice, okay?" Dad said. We stopped outside a mansion. "Okay Dad," I said. I walked to the door and rang the doorbell. I presumed the lady at the door was Holly's mom. "Hi there! You must be Emma. Holly will be down in a minute." "Take a seat." Holly's mom said in a friendly voice. At least her mom seemed nice. Holly came trudging down the stairs and sat down opposite me. "Don't be rude! Offer her a drink or a snack!" Holly's mom whispered to Holly loud enough for me to hear. "Would you like a drink or a snack?" she asked in a bored tone. "No thanks!" I replied. The playdate pretty much went by without a word.

A week later, the doorbell rang. It was – The mean teens. (A.K.A. Michaela, Holly and Amelia) "What do you want?" I said cowardly. "We just thought we'd come to visit" Amelia said in a mocking tone. They started looking around, and saw the painting of Chang'e; The Moon Goddess. "She is so ugly!" Michaela remarks "In fact, I think the ugliness of your house has rubbed off on you!" They all laughed. "I am a bit busy," I whispered with tears in my eyes, I pushed them out the door. I turned back to the painting. "You are so ugly!" I screamed. "If you say so" said a dreamy voice. I looked around, confused. "Who's that?" I asked. "The ugly lady behind you" she said. "Chang'e?" I whispered. "You have been disrespectful. You deserve a punishment." She said in a strict tone. "Your family will be frozen forever unless you travel to the healing mountain and retrieve the Glowpea flower. To get there, answer three riddles. One; What belongs to you but is used by others?" Is it my name?" "Correct. Two; What goes up and down but never moves?" I recalled my science class, where the thermometer kept going up and down... "Is it temperature?" "Yes, well done. Three ; If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you don't have me. What am I?" After thinking about that one, I remembered when Michaela shared all her snacks with her friends in secret, since sharing food isn't allowed at our school due to allergies. I know what it is! "Is it a... secret?" "Good job Emma. Suddenly, a ray of light beamed from Chang'e's hand, sucking me in. Soon, my feet were on hard ground again and I could hear an echo saying "Just shout the answers to get back home."

I was in a valley filled with pine trees surrounded by forest sounds. After walking for 30 minutes towards the village, I decided to rest under a tree. I dozed off, but little did I know that a wolf was on the prowl. A growl woke me up. There he was, creeping towards me. Instinctively, I clambered up a pine tree. After an hour I peeked down the tree to see that the wolf was gone! I started scaling down the tree when I heard a twig snap. I looked down to see the wolf with a pack of friends. I quickly ascended again. The wolves started making a pyramid to reach me.

Suddenly, I heard a low growl. A weird looking creature emerged from the bushes staring me in the eyes, he pounced on the bottom two wolves until they all tumbled down. He executed a deafening roar scaring the wolves away. I cautiously climbed down. The strange creature looked like a Chinese stone guardian lion! "Xie xie nin!" I said with a deep bow, which meant thank you. "No problem!" he replied. "You speak english?!" "Yes, I am a linguist " But, how do you talk and move?" "A wise wizard cursed me to turn into a walking, talking statue for eating his goats. Why are you here?" The lion asked. "I need to get to the healing mountain to retrieve something, my name is Emma" " I'm Guang! I always wanted to go to the healing mountain to find the magical herb that can undo my curse. May I join you?" I was happy to have a companion.

“Hey Emma, should we settle down for the night?” Guang asked me after walking the whole afternoon. I was exhausted after the wolves and climbed into the nearest tree. Guang got into a comfy position below me. I woke up to Guang shaking the tree with all his might. “Emma, we have to get going!”. By lunchtime, we reached the quaint village. “This is Liao village,” Guang said like a tour guide”. “It’s nice, but where’s the mountain? Is there anywhere we can have lunch? I’m starving.” I asked. “The mountain only appears at 4 o’clock, until then we can go to a friend’s house for lunch” he told me. Guang led me to a small hut. He knocked on the door. A petite girl answered the door. “This is Emma, we are travelling together to the Healing Mountain!” Guang said introducing me “ Emma, this is Tian Tian. We were wondering if we could stop by for lunch.” Guang said. “Of course you can, if only I can go with you to the mountain to get a cure for my Nai Nai (Grandma) who is terribly sick.” Tian Tian told us “Sure!” I told her.

Walking towards the North, slowly the mountain was coming into view, rocky and steep, covered with colourful plants. Tian Tian asked “To go up, we just have to pay our respects” Tian Tian assured me. She walked up to the mountain and started praying. A golden carriage appeared, taking us to the top of the mountain.

Tian Tian and Guang immediately started looking around, but I was still taking in everything. “Hey Emma! I’m pretty sure Glowpea is up there!” Guang was pointing at the highest point. I cautiously climbed up, trying not to look down. But... nothing was there. Tian and Guang had already found their cure. I called down to them, “Hey guys! I can’t find it”. They helped me search in vain. Dejected, I just wanted to return home when it suddenly hit me. “The Healing mountain; THM. THM is a pharmacy on our street back in San Francisco! Maybe there is a medicine called Glowpea there!” I exclaimed. “Bye Guang, bye Tian Tian, I promise I will come back to visit!”

Back home, I ran to THM, browsing through the shop, I finally found Glowpea tablets in aisle 3. I opened the door, mom and dad were waiting for me. Chang’e seemed to wink at me.

One week later...

After school I met Olive in the hallway when the mean teens blocked our way. Michaela sneered, “Hi Emma! Are you and your friend going to your weird house?”. Amelia chuckled, yet Holly stepped forward, “Michaela, that was quite mean.” “ Well then Holly, never talk to me again!” Michaela snapped. This time I blocked Michaela’s way “I don’t think she would want to talk to someone in trouble” “I’m not in trouble!” “Now you are” it was Ms. Garcia, the principal.

That night I dreamt of Liao village, Tian Tian and Guang, wondering whether I would ever go back.

The Healing Mountain

ESF West Island School, Thakur, Deeva – 11

My Grandma told me a story when I was 4, about the healing mountain, a form of Guanyin; the God of mercy and compassion. She had healed her sidekick, a crippled boy. Being a reincarnation of her, it has the same powers. I wish to teleport there and get medicine for the butterflies in my stomach. Tomorrow's my first day of school and I'm too nervous to sleep.

"Emma!" shouted mom, "you're late!"

At the school assembly, the principal announced, "Today, we are welcoming a new student – Emma Wu. How about we hear a little bit about her?" I was ushered onto the stage to introduce myself. I cleared my throat, and began. "Hi my name is Emma, I'm from China but I was born in the US. A fun fact is that I get stage fright." Everyone started laughing. I escaped to the comfort of the restroom and sat there, crying. After a few minutes, there was a gentle knock on the door. "Hello?" a voice called out. "I just wanted to check if you're okay," the girl said. I opened the door and there was a short girl, waiting for me. "Hi! I'm Olive!" she said in a shrill voice. "Hi," I said back. We walked back to class together. That was the day I met my best friend.

At the dinner table, mom said that she met a nice lady at the supermarket, whose daughter went to the same school as me. They set up a playdate for us on Friday. Eager to know who the girl was, I asked mom. "I think her name is Holly!" she said. My stomach dropped to my feet and I ran to my room.

Friday came as quick as Usain Bolt. "Be nice, okay?" Dad said. We stopped outside a mansion. "Okay Dad," I said. I walked to the door and rang the doorbell. I presumed the lady at the door was Holly's mom. "Hi there! You must be Emma. Holly will be down in a minute." "Take a seat." Holly's mom said in a friendly voice. At least her mom seemed nice. Holly came trudging down the stairs and sat down opposite me. "Don't be rude! Offer her a drink or a snack!" Holly's mom whispered to Holly loud enough for me to hear. "Would you like a drink or a snack?" she asked in a bored tone. "No thanks!" I replied. The playdate pretty much went by without a word.

A week later, the doorbell rang. It was – The mean teens. (A.K.A. Michaela, Holly and Amelia) "What do you want?" I said cowardly. "We just thought we'd come to visit" Amelia said in a mocking tone. They started looking around, and saw the painting of Chang'e; The Moon Goddess. "She is so ugly!" Michaela remarks "In fact, I think the ugliness of your house has rubbed off on you!" They all laughed. "I am a bit busy," I whispered with tears in my eyes, I pushed them out the door. I turned back to the painting. "You are so ugly!" I screamed. "If you say so" said a dreamy voice. I looked around, confused. "Who's that?" I asked. "The ugly lady behind you" she said. "Chang'e?" I whispered. "You have been disrespectful. You deserve a punishment." She said in a strict tone. "Your family will be frozen forever unless you travel to the healing mountain and retrieve the Glowpea flower. To get there, answer three riddles. One; What belongs to you but is used by others?" Is it my name?" "Correct. Two; What goes up and down but never moves?" I recalled my science class, where the thermometer kept going up and down... "Is it temperature?" "Yes, well done. Three ; If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you don't have me. What am I?" After thinking about that one, I remembered when Michaela shared all her snacks with her friends in secret, since sharing food isn't allowed at our school due to allergies. I know what it is! "Is it a... secret?" "Good job Emma. Suddenly, a ray of light beamed from Chang'e's hand, sucking me in. Soon, my feet were on hard ground again and I could hear an echo saying "Just shout the answers to get back home."

I was in a valley filled with pine trees surrounded by forest sounds. After walking for 30 minutes towards the village, I decided to rest under a tree. I dozed off, but little did I know that a wolf was on the prowl. A growl woke me up. There he was, creeping towards me. Instinctively, I clambered up a pine tree. After an hour I peeked down the tree to see that the wolf was gone! I started scaling down the tree when I heard a twig snap. I looked down to see the wolf with a pack of friends. I quickly ascended again. The wolves started making a pyramid to reach me.

Suddenly, I heard a low growl. A weird looking creature emerged from the bushes staring me in the eyes, he pounced on the bottom two wolves until they all tumbled down. He executed a deafening roar scaring the wolves away. I cautiously climbed down. The strange creature looked like a Chinese stone guardian lion! "Xie xie nin!" I said with a deep bow, which meant thank you. "No problem!" he replied. "You speak english?!" "Yes, I am a linguist " But, how do you talk and move?" "A wise wizard cursed me to turn into a walking, talking statue for eating his goats. Why are you here?" The lion asked. "I need to get to the healing mountain to retrieve something, my name is Emma" " I'm Guang! I always wanted to go to the healing mountain to find the magical herb that can undo my curse. May I join you?" I was happy to have a companion.

“Hey Emma, should we settle down for the night?” Guang asked me after walking the whole afternoon. I was exhausted after the wolves and climbed into the nearest tree. Guang got into a comfy position below me. I woke up to Guang shaking the tree with all his might. “Emma, we have to get going!”. By lunchtime, we reached the quaint village. “This is Liao village,” Guang said like a tour guide”. “It’s nice, but where’s the mountain? Is there anywhere we can have lunch? I’m starving.” I asked. “The mountain only appears at 4 o’clock, until then we can go to a friend’s house for lunch” he told me. Guang led me to a small hut. He knocked on the door. A petite girl answered the door. “This is Emma, we are travelling together to the Healing Mountain!” Guang said introducing me “ Emma, this is Tian Tian. We were wondering if we could stop by for lunch.” Guang said. “Of course you can, if only I can go with you to the mountain to get a cure for my Nai Nai (Grandma) who is terribly sick.” Tian Tian told us “Sure!” I told her.

Walking towards the North, slowly the mountain was coming into view, rocky and steep, covered with colourful plants. Tian Tian asked “To go up, we just have to pay our respects” Tian Tian assured me. She walked up to the mountain and started praying. A golden carriage appeared, taking us to the top of the mountain.

Tian Tian and Guang immediately started looking around, but I was still taking in everything. “Hey Emma! I’m pretty sure Glowpea is up there!” Guang was pointing at the highest point. I cautiously climbed up, trying not to look down. But... nothing was there. Tian and Guang had already found their cure. I called down to them, “Hey guys! I can’t find it”. They helped me search in vain. Dejected, I just wanted to return home when it suddenly hit me. “The Healing mountain; THM. THM is a pharmacy on our street back in San Francisco! Maybe there is a medicine called Glowpea there!” I exclaimed. “Bye Guang, bye Tian Tian, I promise I will come back to visit!”

Back home, I ran to THM, browsing through the shop, I finally found Glowpea tablets in aisle 3. I opened the door, mom and dad were waiting for me. Chang’e seemed to wink at me.

One week later...

After school I met Olive in the hallway when the mean teens blocked our way. Michaela sneered, “Hi Emma! Are you and your friend going to your weird house?”. Amelia chuckled, yet Holly stepped forward, “Michaela, that was quite mean.” “ Well then Holly, never talk to me again!” Michaela snapped. This time I blocked Michaela’s way “I don’t think she would want to talk to someone in trouble” “I’m not in trouble!” “Now you are” it was Ms. Garcia, the principal.

That night I dreamt of Liao village, Tian Tian and Guang, wondering whether I would ever go back.

Worlds Collide

ESF West Island School, Tse, Chloe – 12

“I, a citizen of China’s Magical Mountains, pledge to treat my fellow citizens with respect and obey my guardians. I will stay on the premises and will never go beyond boundaries without permission or approach a Belowworlder of any kind. I will contribute to making the Mountains a safe environment.”

I lived in a tower, which meant I got better views than anyone. The Mountains were, in a way, a fairy tale. We could do magic, if magic meant levitating things and talking to animals. From my window, you could see everything: a songbird serenading; tops of trees that held our apples and towered over everyone and everything; golden foxes running around, chasing fluffy rabbits. I also got a clear view of the clouds and fantasized of jumping onto one of them and seeing if I could float up and away to someplace new – which, after living in a tower for all eternity, was exactly what I planned to do.

I had lodged a knife in the side of each boot and my sack consisted of an assortment of essentials from fruit to matchsticks. I tied the top of my makeshift suitcase in a double knot, so it looked more like a sack, levitated it onto the windowsill, and looked down. All clear.

With a final nudge, the sack flew gracefully down the side of the tower and landed on the soft grass below. I came after, tumbling onto the ground clumsily. Without hesitating, I grabbed it and hurried around the tower, going into the opposite direction of the fence, losing myself in the trees.

I didn’t really know where anything was, as we didn’t have maps this high up in the Mountains – but I didn’t mind taking a stroll around. That was what made it so fascinating – everything was so *bright* compared to the inside of my tower. I wandered around for a while, stopping when I heard a *snap*. It could’ve been anything, from a person stepping on a branch to an animal chewing. I yanked the knife out of my boot. Slowly, I tiptoed in the direction the sound came from. Animals? No, animals knew better than to make noise unless they wanted to become dinner. *Snap*. But no one ever came here – I specifically chose this trail because I knew it was practically deserted. The stories my Uncle had told me resurfaced. But they were just stories, right? Tigers with snakes for tails didn’t exist, did they? So, it had to be a person. *Snap–Snap*. I was getting closer. Just one more step and– I felt the knife slip out of my hand.

“Where am I?”

It wasn’t an animal. But it wasn’t someone I knew, not someone from the Mountains. It– *he* was a boy. A Belowworlder.

Minutes, hours, months could’ve passed while the boy and I stared at each other. The silence was broken with the sound of a tire running out of air, followed by an unpleasant odour. The boy’s cheeks went red. I felt a little sorry for him, so I spoke up.

“How’d you get here?”

His eyes widened. “I’m not so sure.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “I didn’t think this trail was open to the public.”

“It’s not– *wait, then how come you’re here?*”

I crossed my arms. “You first.”

His eyes casted skywards, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I was hiking with my family, but we dropped the map somewhere, so we stopped to figure out where we were, but then I got bored and wandered off.”

“Far off,” I concluded. “You’re practically in a different world.” I shut my mouth. Why couldn’t I keep quiet? A line from the pledge I had taken came back to me: *I will stay on the premises and will never go beyond boundaries without permission or approach a Belowworlder of any kind*. Maybe it was because this child was the first Belowworlder I had ever seen. I could tell from the look on his face: a mix of confusion and awe.

To my surprise, he took some sort of glowing, glistening slab out of his pocket and started tapping it furiously, probably looking for a map. I’d never seen a phone either, but I knew what it was.

“Phones don’t work,” I said. “We’re too high up.” Sighing, he pocketed the device and looked up, a scowl plain on his face.

“I figured,” he snapped. “So, care to tell me where I am, who you are, and *why this place doesn’t seem to have Wi-Fi?*”

“China’s Magical Mountains,” I told him. “I’m Yuigui – what?”

“Magical Mountains? Yuigui? That’s a name? And – you don’t know what Wi-Fi is?” he demanded. I watched as he sat himself down on a rock, pulling his hair. When I didn’t react, he waved his arms out in exasperation. “What is going *on*? This place is crazy!” At that, I snapped.

“For your information, Yuigui is Chinese, meaning Laurel.” When you lived in the Mountains, being named after a plant was common. We never socialized with Belowworlders, so we didn’t know any ordinary names. “And yes, China’s Magical Mountains! I’ll have you know that even though I’ve lived here since I was born, I spent a lot of my time indoors, also, I’m in an equally bothersome situation as you being out here for the first time, so pull yourself together and stop being a baby!”

Silence.

He slowly looked up. “Indoors? Why didn’t you come out?”

I snorted. “Well, it’s against the law to go against the fences, and to *talk to Belowworlders*. But since I was too curious, I got stuck in a tower.”

“Belowworlders?” he asked.

I pointed at him. “People like you.”

“Ah. Are we really that bad that it’s against the law?” he raised an eyebrow.

I pondered for an answer. “No, it’s just that most think that we have a higher status than your type since we have famous ancestors.”

“Who?”

I tugged at some grass, considering whether to answer this. “Li Bai. Du Fu”

“Wow,” he said, impressed. “We learn about them at school! That still doesn’t answer why it’s against the law to talk to, uh, *Belowworlders*.”

“That’s the thing – no one’s ever done it before. Mountaineers are just. . . scared. But you’re actually not that bad.” A smile appeared on his face.

“I’m Benji.” He said. “You’re not so bad either.”

I was about to say something else, when I heard another sound. The sound of wood scraping against wood – or something heavier.

I reached for the knife in my boot but stopped at Benji's sharp intake of breath. I looked up, and sure enough, a knife wasn't going to get me out of this one.

Dragon.

I had never seen one, only heard about them in the tales, but there it was. Standing in front of me. Sixty feet tall with eyes of the devil.

"Dragon....dragon...dragon!," Benji peeped.

I waved my hand, and a tall branch flew into it. I held it defensively in front of me.

"How'd you do that?"

"I really don't think now's the time to discuss magic." It was amazing how calm I sounded. No wonder this trail was empty – who would've wanted to cross a dragon?

"Magic? Could magic send this dragon flying into nowhere?" Benji whispered.

The dragon turned, facing Benji instead. "A Belowworlder?" it boomed. I jumped, and Benji did too.

"And I thought you Mountaineers were gung-ho about the law!" the dragon cackled. His tail flew towards us, and Benji and I ducked in unison.

"We don't want any trouble," I said.

"Of course," he said mockingly, "Lucky for you, I'm in a good mood today – and *hungry*. I'll let you go for the boy."

"What's he saying?" Benji asked. Right – he couldn't understand animals.

"No," I said sternly

"Why? He's a Belowworlder – no Mountaineer knows he exists. I doubt he'll be missed anyways. Look at the scrawny thing—" I'd had enough. I brought my hand up, and the dragon slammed to the ground. Then, I thrust my branch straight into his tail. He howled, and I grabbed Benji's wrist and sprinted through the trees. When we put enough distance between us and the dragon, I dropped his wrist and slid onto the floor.

"Whoo! Do you do that every weekend or something? You were like Black Widow! Awesome!" he said, panting.

"Guess you can't wait to go home after that, huh?" I grinned.

"I wouldn't mind learning a bit more about this place." He admitted. "Also, how do animals talk? And how you make things float?" he added.

I'd heard Mountaineers blather about how Belowworlders were, but they really weren't that much worse – or different – to us. We just needed our worlds to collide to realise.

We walked in the direction of the place where I found him when I realised, I had a question of my own.

"Who's this Black Widow?"

Discover

ESF West Island School, Wang, Sophia – 11

I held the only two things my mother left me – an extravagant painting of the Chinese mountains, and a beautifully written poem contained in a wooden scroll.

‘*Why did you leave me?*’ was the only question I wanted answered from the parent who had left me when I was one year old in the middle of nowhere – that is, until Mr Linem, the orphanage keeper of a small village found me and brought me back with him.

I was old enough, so it was definitely time for me to find out the truth.

“Mae!” Lilian, my childhood friend from the orphanage ran towards me. She was dressed up in a light grey outfit matching her white hair, and carrying an enormous stuffed up blue bag.

“You really look prepared.” I stared at the colossal bag.

“That’s a must, since we’re leaving this place for the first time in our lives.” She gestured, “But I guess I did bring quite a large amount of items...”

Well, she and I had been living in this village and never stepped out of it for ten whole years, and had no clue what it was like beyond our village’s boundaries. Lilian was definitely ranked number one as the person that wondered the most about the world that we had never seen with our own eyes, but only read about from books.

Lilian decided to go with me when I told her I was leaving to find my mother.

“Please always put your safety first.” Mr Linem was just like a worried parent. “Mae, don’t forget to hide your hair once you’re out.” He always mentioned how I had to hide my long red hair – it was probably for my own benefit and safety.

I nodded and put my hat onto my head to cover my hair. “Please take care.”

The orphanage which was covered in vines – the one place we called home. We were finally leaving it.

Lilian and I both crossed the village boundaries. And for a moment, I wondered if it was going to be worthwhile.

We were hiking straight to the Chinese mountains, which we always gazed at from the broken window in the orphanage. The main reason we were proceeding this way was because my mother left a painting and poem of the Chinese mountains with me – those objects might’ve been a clue leading to her whereabouts.

I gazed at our destination and stood speechless. To put it simply, it was beautiful. Both the painting of the Chinese mountains which my mother gave me and the real thing gave off an elegant vibe of life.

We started hiking up, I guessed we finally reached around the base of the mountains.

Lilian took a deep breath, “I’m exhausted. How far are we planning on climbing up?”

“Till the top.” I looked up at the neverending slope. Well since we never really exercised back home, I expected our stamina to give out eventually – and Lilian was also carrying a colossal bag with... unknown items.

“The top?” Lilian muttered, putting her bag down. “What are the chances of finding your mother here?”

“About a... five percent chance, maybe?” I hesitated, “I’m not even sure if she’s still alive...”

She changed the subject. “Mae~ It’s starting to get dark. Let’s set up camp!”

We found a perfect area for camping and managed to do a pretty good job setting everything up.

I sat down next to the campfire – it was impressively comfortable. “I wish I could live like this forever.”

Lilian sat down next to me, “The Chinese mountains.” She took a sip of water, “What a wonderful place. I wonder if the rest of the world is like this as well.”

For a moment, we both sat down and gazed at the stars and breathtaking scenery.

It was early in the morning, Lilian was determined to hike longer distances than before.

“Aren’t you pushing yourself too much?” I watched under my hat as she dashed up.

Before Lilian could say anything, we reached a rather flat pathway, and we both heard a loud noise – it sounded like an absolutely destructive machine. “What was that?”

The ground shook. It almost felt like an earthquake, which was written in books, said to be a natural disaster, and also the Earth’s natural means of releasing stress.

We started looking around at our surroundings. I noticed a group of men in the distance, but the biggest problem was that they seemed to have some kind of ultimate weapon against nature.

The machine started moving, it progressed towards the bulky trees. Then its arm suddenly appeared and sliced a tree in half. It carried on chopping one tree after another.

The men laughed, it was as if they were mocking mother nature.

Lilian watched in disbelief, “THAT’S ILLEGAL!”

I stood up. “They have no right to chop those trees which aren’t their own property.” I ran towards the men.

“STOP!” I screamed. Both the machine and the group of men froze. “What do you think you’re doing? You have no right to chop down these trees!”

Unfortunately, my hat fell off and my red hair was visible.

“A little girl?” A man said.

“Look at her red hair!” Another one screeched. “That hair could sell for a hefty price!”

“HEY! It’s illegal to chop down trees however you want!” Lilian sprinted through.

A man moaned. “We’re bandits. We don’t care if it’s against the laws or not.”

“Let’s capture them. Deal with them later, we have to finish what we started.” A different man said. The bandits agreed, and tied us both with ropes. They walked away and carried on chopping down trees.

Lilian nudged me, “The grass behind us, it’s called a Finiv. I’ve studied about it before. If you keep rubbing an object at it, the Finiv will cut through the object.”

I reacted quickly, and started rubbing the ropes tied around my hands at the grass. The ropes tore apart – my hands were free. I glanced at the tree logs placed about three meters away from me – I finally cleared my head and devised a plan. “Thank you so much.”

She beamed, “Break a leg.”

I crawled towards the stack of logs without being noticed, and hid behind the logs. I managed to overhear the group of men conversing.

“Hey, now that I think about it, doesn’t that red hair ring a bell?” The bandit questioned.

“You’re right! Didn’t we kill a pesky woman with red hair about ten years ago?”

‘What? Another woman with red hair like mine?’ I froze and tried to process what was going on. *‘My mother?’*

“They might be somewhat related, but what does it matter?”

I was dazed and confused, unsure of what to do next.

I suddenly noticed a cliff at the opposite end of the tree logs. Was God guiding me? I started focusing, waiting until the bandits walked to the area where the logs would roll to.

They were nearly there.

Three... two.. one...! I pushed the tree logs with all my might, and they went tumbling down towards the bandits.

One noticed the tree logs, he alarmed the others.

“AHHHHHHH!” All the bandits ran for their lives, however the logs hit them all and pushed them off the cliff. The large machine was the only trace of the bandits left.

“Mae, we did it! We survived.” Lilian ran to me.

“Yeah.” The conversation between the bandits – about how my mother was killed, it really hit me hard. “I overheard their conversation. They said they also killed a woman with red hair ten years ago.”

Lilian held my hand tightly. “Your mother...”

I nodded, “Most likely. I think my mother tried stopping them like we did, and made sure I was out of the situation when I was a child. That’s probably why she left me. But I still wanted to meet her though...”

“They say God sometimes leaves us to suffer, but God might have his own reasons for how it is the way it is. And Mae, you know there’s no way your mother went down without a fight.”

I laughed. “Lilian, you want to explore the world, right?” Lilian nodded. “Take this chance to do that then.”

“What about you?” She knew from my tone and speech that I wasn’t going with her.

“I’ll stay here.” I concluded. “This place was definitely something my mother treasured deeply. I want to spend some time here, and protect what she tried to protect.”

Lilian’s eyes were watery, “Then promise me the moment you decide to leave this place, contact me. Let’s carry on exploring parts of the world together.”

“Of course.” I hugged her. Separating with Lilian felt extremely painful, but I set myself my own goal which I was determined to achieve.

As we waved farewell to each other, I sat down and gazed at the sunset sky.

*From this day forward, I'll follow the path you did, mother.
Please watch over me.*

Between Two Worlds

German Swiss International School, Kwon Wong, Madeleine – 13

Huang was a lost cause. It wasn't something that had to be observed carefully -- one glare from him would make you want to hide and one word from him would put Horrid Henry to shame. On top of showing his temper, all he ever did outside of school was shut himself up to play computer games and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

One morning, after realising that she hadn't seen him for a whole day, his mother had an epiphany. If her son couldn't be fixed with human power, maybe Nature could.

Huang, a thin boy with menacing eyes, appeared at the breakfast table, dragging blue trousers that draped his thin legs like curtains. His mother coaxed. "Huang, I want you to go spend some time in the mountains. How does that sound?"

"Yeah right," he retorted.

At this, his mother's face changed immediately and so did her tone. "It wasn't a question. You will go to the mountains and don't come back until you've learned something," she said, briskly packing some dumplings, dozens of beef jerky and a bottle of water into a red backpack. Seeing this, Huang stood up and started howling like a hunted lion at last caught in a trap. She pushed him to the door and handed him the backpack. "Remember, if you are lost, always choose the better path, it'd be obvious," she sang mysteriously and disappeared inside. He heard the door lock click. Panic sank in.

"Of course I'll choose the better path, what else?" he spat back. His mouth never betrayed his fear.

He knew exactly where the mountains were. Everything in his village -- from the traditional food stands to the modern hotels with glass windows -- seemed to be encircled by the great mountain range, lush with green and decked with gleaming stone cliffs. Fine, he thought. He was going to get the whole thing over with quickly.

At the foot of the mountain, Huang stared up at the endless series of stone steps that seemed to soar up. He loathed feeling so helpless; it felt like losing a series of games against the computer. He glowered at some jovial passers-by, who immediately drew away their eyes and pursed their lips. He felt a little better.

He muttered, "How am I supposed to learn from things that don't even talk?" He blinked furiously, adjusting his eyes to the dizzying lines of steps ahead of him. He stomped up the first twenty steps, the way he liked to attack fast when he started a battle.

"Why did you build these steps? So that you become famous just sitting here while boys like me suffer?" He kicked the stones hard. "Yeah, I sit in my room all day too, but at least I do something. I save the world in Epic Battles!"

The stone steps were very narrow and very quiet.

"I heard about your 'amazing' sunsets and clouds," he started, wildly waving away the hazy mist, "but turns out it's just a lot of fog," he finished. To his horror, he nearly fell backwards and decided to climb quietly. His legs felt weak. Every few minutes, he paused and clung to the stone steps. "Got... anything else... to show me? Like some... magic tree... or treasures hidden away or something?" Huang rasped, between gasps of breath.

Met only with cool breezes, he smirked and shrugged.

As he clambered the last bit to the top, he observed the sharp boulders and fading silhouettes of different peaks in the distance. Even in his heart — normally only roused by digital images — something stirred. However, quickly finding himself bored, he said, "I mean, we share the same name, right? There are legends about how you got your name — an emperor came here to find the ingredients for immortality, and his name was Huang." Then, rather embarrassed at sounding so nerdy, he added,

"That was from one of my computer games; not that you'd know how amazing the computer world is."

He stretched his legs at the top and felt the heaviness of muscles all over. Then he blurted out. "You know I lost my whole world two nights ago? I spent all day yesterday trying to get it back. But they're all gone — my army, my weapons, my generals, my mountain fortress... all of them. What am I going to do now?" He wailed. He collapsed onto the ground and threw stones down the steps. Pitiful echoes reverberated through the air.

It was sunset when Huang came to a fork in front of a forest of pines. The path to the left was narrow and seemed almost untouched, as all the leaves on the ground had not been swept up by the versatile winds. The path to the right was quite different; it was flat, wide and smooth and he could tell it was the "better one" that his mother would approve of. Huang dashed to it, sure that it would lead him back home.

He sprinted past what seemed like a thousand trees. "There's a quote by a famous Chinese writer that says, *it is not worth seeing the Five Great Mountains if you have been to Huangshan*. Pft, I totally see what he means. One mountain, two mountains, they're all the same!"

Something started bothering him. It was the pines. None of them stood straight; each one stood in its unique posture like monsters that he used to spend hours quelling in his games. One lurked behind a towering boulder; another stood like a fierce guard on top of a cliff; another one literally stood sideways, like a witch trying to swoop one up. The more he looked, the more they came alive. He had to get out of here soon. But in fact, he had an eerie feeling that he'd been circling the mountain endlessly, only arriving at the same crosspoint every time.

"Something's wrong," he panicked but hunger struck harder. Finding his bag was empty, he banged his head on the ground for not rationing more carefully. He walked on until he heard the sound of water. It turned out to be a tiny brook and there, he happily lapped up the crystal clear water and felt refreshed. Then he spotted a huge bush studded with berries as big as marbles. He gobbled them up and saved some in his pockets.

"In Epic Battles, I never run out of food... I'd never thought of having to find food myself... And in the Epic world the mountains seemed so easy to conquer..." he murmured sleepily. A tremendous fatigue overcame him and before he knew it, he fell asleep on the soft grass.

When he woke up next, it was to the sound of monkeys. "Since when did we have monkeys here?" he grumbled but was actually happy to have some company. He remained prostrate watching them up in the trees. Monkeys were interesting creatures — they went around in threes or fives and scratched each other's back. One monkey shared his berries with a younger one.

A funny thought came to him — if he was conquering this mountain in Epic Battles, he would surely have killed those monkeys. He would have had to, to become the Hero. He stopped breathing for a moment, thinking how horrible it was. "That computer world sure is different from the real world. I can't kill anything in real life, no way," he stuttered. A wave of emotions — fear, regret, anger, sadness, hysteria — overwhelmed him and he screamed. Why was he here? Where was everyone? He missed home and his mother.

A thick fog started shrouding him. Almost dreamily, he found himself walking again among the strangely shaped pine trees. Whenever he felt tired, he just let himself fall into a deep sleep.

Awaking, he saw the same trees. Right -- he remembered that he had again ended up at the fork. Then he saw it -- a human like figure, pointing its long arms to his left. Straining his eyes, he recognised it as the famous Welcoming Pine Tree. He slowly got up to get a better look. The end of the branch looked as if it was pointing at the path that he had never taken!

So he entered the narrow path. The trail wasn't as arduous as he had imagined. "Why did I not even consider coming this way? How come I kept taking the other path, knowing I was wrong?" he shook his head.

He came to the edge of a cliff and crossed the Bridge of Immortals, the famed crossing that linked one impossibly steep cliff to another. He felt almost immortal as whiffs of cloud wafted around him. On the other side, he easily found those steps that he first came across at the beginning of his journey. It seemed like a long time ago, though he remembered it clearly as if it was just earlier that day. He sauntered down the steps, into more clouds. He wasn't afraid anymore; he wasn't thinking about his aching legs, for there were none. Most surprisingly, he wasn't thinking of his Epic Battles anymore. Though they could not see him properly, he had a pleasant smile on his face when he greeted a group of passers-by.

Out of the clouds emerged a boy with a faded red backpack and blue trousers that fell above his ankles. He strode back home, thinking what excuse he'd have to tell his mother for being away a whole year.

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus

(Never Tickle the Sleeping Dragon)

German Swiss International School, Lee, Ruby – 11

It had slept for a thousand years or more trapped here, the steady thrum of its heartbeat pulsing through the rock, ringing through the mountains in a phantom drumbeat. Coil upon coil of its serpentine body shifted with each breath it took, shaking the land above as it snorted in its sleep, the smoke that escaped from its nostrils drifting around the soaring mountain peaks; around the towering pines that adorned the mountain; around the raised villages that overlooked seas of cloud against vast skies streaked with brilliant red and orange. The creature's eyes were closed tightly, disguising the gleam of death and destruction within as it slumbered deeply, scaled chest rising and falling with each breath.

For the first time in centuries, the beast stirred lightly, one fiery, gold-flecked crimson eye cracking open. Its maw gaped open in a great yawn, revealing every single one of its wickedly sharp, jagged, yellowed teeth before it snapped shut with a sickening crunch, shaking the very earth, which trembled as if it was scared of the mighty being. As it stretched languidly, the curves of its sinuous body shifted, scraping against the narrow walls of its earth-bound prison, fragments of caked dirt and debris scraping away to reveal jewel-toned scales that glimmered in the pale shafts of sunlight, shining valiantly in the near darkness of the cave.

It — for the mighty being had no name nor gender; long lost in the mists of time — lifted its great head from the icy stone it had lain on, eyes lidded as it surveyed its surroundings. Barren, grey underground tunnels that stretched as far as the eye could see greeted its eye, rugged and strewn with debris as sunlight shone through minute cracks in the rock. Serrated, yellowed talons tapped against the ground as the creature let a frustrated whine escape, pacing like a lion before it curled into a tight circle, scales shifting against each other and resounding in the still, dank air.

The creature lay its bejewelled form down once more onto the cold, hard floor as pebbles crunched underfoot, skidding off the side of the magnificent being. It seemed for a second as if the regal beast would return once more to its peaceful slumber before it threw its magnificent head back and let loose a roar that felled the towering pines as if they were toothpicks and rattled the very foundations of the earth.

The wind bowed down in submission of death incarnate as the galloping *longma* of seafoam reared back and neighed, nostrils flaring as they heard the earth-shattering roar. The sun, frightened, peeked out from behind a thick barrier of storm clouds as the creature rose, its imposing frame blotting out what was left of the light as its serpentine form towered over the villages of the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor.

Slitted pupils stared at the village below — so ethereal and tranquil, with its patchwork paddy-fields and rows of little houses amongst drifting white clouds — and narrowed.

“How dare they build their houses, their villages on this mountain, this place of worship that had stood here since the start of time?” it growled as its eyes grew stormy, gold-speckled crimson darkening into blood-red. “How dare they?” it screeched as it climbed the height of the mountain, swooping down as it dove for the village with a scream of pure malice that shattered the still mountain air once more.

Cuttingly sharp talons dug into paddy-fields and wrenched soil from the rock in great clumps as the beast growled out a challenge. The people of the village watched with wide eyes as chaos ensued, running to hide whatever they could from the dragon's all-encompassing wrath. Flames licked hungrily at the harvest crops and at the proud, tall pines which stood guard over the once-tranquil village, demolishing great swaths of crops and anything in its way, engulfing what it could find as the people ran from the beast, lashing its tail as it snarled, letting loose streams of fire as it became one with the firestorm, cocooned in red-gold streams of wildfire.

A young boy stepped forward, lunging out at the beast in a valiant attempt to distract the creature, which merely impaled him on a single talon and watched the life drain out of his eyes, its frame shuddering as it let out a rough bark that could once have been a laugh, rough and unused, reverberating through the chasms of the mountains.

The boy had stared straight into the eyes of the beast — a slitted black pupil that narrowed in malice as dancing flames speckled with burnished gold and a myriad of colours that stared back into a pair of determined hazel eyes, steady even as the boy shuddered, his knees buckled and he crumpled, only mortal; only human in the end. The beast

gave not a passing glance to the boy as it rent human flesh from bones with razor-sharp teeth and thick, crimson liquid flowed sluggishly out of a broken corpse; lent not a passing thought to the howls and piercing cries of the villagers that filled the air.

Lashing its whip-like tail, it snorted once more before taking to the sky with a dreadful howl that rang through the mountains in a never-ending echo, a flickering wall as red as the blood that stained the creature's claws roaring in its wake as it raced through the mountains, devouring everything in its path.

And the villagers watched, faces pale and drawn as the fear seeped into their very beings and the terror held their hearts in an unrelenting grip. They watched as their home, their lives burned merrily in front of them, the sparks leaping up from the fire triumphantly. They watched as the beast from the legends told by their ancestors before them came to life before their very eyes, a thing of destruction, a dreaded omen, with the all deadly beauty of a gleaming steel blade...all of those things and more...a **dragon**.

The Tales Of Huangshan

German Swiss International School, Leung, Natalis – 12

“Isn’t this exciting?” My mom exclaimed as we headed to the airport. “A free trip to China, all because of you, Ben!”

“That’s right.” My dad agreed, looking at my reflection of the rear-view mirror. “All because of that essay you wrote about how China impacts the world.” I groaned. While I must admit that going to China to visit all the mountains would be exciting, I really didn’t like getting this much attention.

It was the year 2018, and just before the summer holidays, our school hosted a competition to write about how a country impacts the world. The prize for first place was a trip to the place you chose. I chose China because I used to live there before moving to London in 2017. Now, I didn’t expect to win it as I was only in 7th grade, and this competition was for the *whole* secondary school of Dignity London School. But, I must have gotten lucky, and I won the prize of going to China!

We were to go to the southern Anhui Province in eastern China. The flight there was mostly boring, except for the fact that my dad had to go to the toilet *seven* times, and he had to climb over me to get there. But twelve hours later, we arrived.

As soon as we got off the plane, we gasped. The scenery was beautiful! The sun shone brightly, and huge, green giants towered over us. Now I understand why people were so amazed by the Anhui Province. The mountains were stunning.

“Those mountains must be the famous Huangshan,” My mom said, eyes wide in wonder. “It looks so magical!”

“It’s rumoured that many famous authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien were inspired by these places to create their bestselling books.” My dad added.

“They were inspired by these mountains?” I asked. “But why? I know it looks very magical, but there has to be something else, right?”

“Oh yes, there are gnomes and all the other mythical creatures there.” My dad said seriously. Then he laughed. I rolled my eyes. Of course he had to joke. My dad chuckled, “Of course there’s no mystical things there. It’s just a mountain. Somehow the authors just managed to find inspiration.” I wasn’t convinced, but that was ages ago, so that was the only thing that was ‘true’.

As we took the taxi to our hotel, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. It looked like a tiny human, walking across the street. I turned around to look at it more closely, but it was no longer there. *What could it be?* I thought, “*Or was it just my mind?*” I turned back, and saw my parents looking at me. “Everything all right?” My dad asked.

“Yeah, just thought I saw someone I knew.” I lied. But inside, my head bombarded me with millions of questions. *Who was that? Why was he so short? Was he even human?* I couldn’t figure these things out.

We arrived at the hotel a few minutes later. It was the ‘Huamao International Hotel’. Just like the scenery, the interior was stunning. The walls were filled with paintings and the entire room was bright and gold. We checked in at the front desk, where a man kindly escorted us to our room.

It was massive.

The decorations were fancy and the room was clean and up to date.

“Let’s sleep now,” My dad suggested. It was already 9PM, and we had dinner on the airplane. “Tomorrow we are visiting Huangshan!” So I slept, still wondering what the strange human was.

“Ben,” I heard my mom whisper. “Wake up. It’s time to go.”

I immediately sat up from my queen-sized bed. Even though it was comfy, I didn't sleep a wink last night. I kept on thinking about the tiny man. Now, I would have just thought to myself, *Oh, that's just my imagination*. But, My dad said that authors took inspiration from the mountains here. What if... there were magical creatures in Huangshan?

Before I knew it though, we were on the bus to Huangshan, and we soon made it there.

When we got off, the guide greeted us warmly. "Ni Hao! I'm Advik Poon, and I am your tour guide for Huangshan!" We introduced ourselves and we started hiking up the mountain.

Advik was *very* talkative. He talked pretty much every second we were walking. And he didn't just talk about Huangshan; He also talked about his personal life! That's why I started zoning out. I thought about the tiny man and realized that there was a story about them: The Lord of The Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien.

I snapped back from my thoughts to reality. I was in an unfamiliar place in the mountain that Advik hadn't shown my family yet. As I looked around, I realized that there was a problem: *I was alone*. Without a tour guide, I was lost as well.

I called out for my family desperately. "Mom? Dad? Anyone?" No response. I realized I had to get out of here myself. I had no phone, so I started walking up, to the peak of the mountain. That way I could get back down.

But there was another problem: there was a fork in the path. One went higher into the mountain while the other went back down. I trusted my gut and walked up.

I got back to my thoughts again. Was it possible that the tiny man was... a Hobbit? Did J.R.R. Tolkien take inspiration from it? I snapped back to reality, and this time I was surrounded by fog. But there was hope. Just above me was a tiny village with tiny houses. They were made of wood, but it must be safe there. I could go there, take a break and continue my journey. Maybe they would even have phones there, and I could call my family. So I hiked to the mysterious tiny village.

When I got there, I couldn't hear anything. Was this village abandoned? Nope. Because a second later, I was tackled to the ground. I looked up and gasped. It was a tiny man! He was an old one, but I had a sense that he was very powerful. He stared at me with anger in his eyes.

"你是谁?" He hissed. I looked at him with confusion. He groaned. "Oh my god, what language do humans speak these days? Do you understand me, *boy*?" I nodded, frightened.

"Great, so you understand english. Then, why are you here?"

I tried to speak, but no words came out. Finally, I managed to squeak out, "I got lost."

"Well, how sad. But, you're not allowed here!"

"Why?"

"Ages ago, we let humans in once. We were a stupid and curious species back then, but we aren't now. The humans betrayed us. They sent an entire army to take this place! We had to use our secret weapon: dragons. Most humans died, but some of them managed to survive, which is how you have books about us."

I tried to pay attention, but the only thing I asked was, "dragons are real?"

He laughed, "Of course! Where do you think all the mythical creatures come from in your books?" And as if on cue, a powerful roar rang in my ears, and a *dragon* flew in the blue sky.

He smiled at my surprised face, but he grew serious again. "You must not tell anyone about this place. We cannot risk another attempted invasion. Otherwise, we will have to kill you and everyone you told. Understand?" I nodded, speechless. Luckily, he gave me a map to the end of the mountain, so I could find my family again.

I started to go back to the trail, but I had one more question. "May I have your name?" I asked the little man.

He responded with a smile. "My name is Gandalf." And a powerful wind suddenly pushed me to the trail, leaving me with lots of questions.

However, I had sworn to not tell anyone about the tiny village, and getting back to my family was very important as well. So, I sensibly hiked down the mountain with a lot of help from Gandalf's map.

Advik had told me and my parents that if we got seperated, we just had to wait at the main entrance. So I arrived there, and sure enough, my parents were there, waiting. As soon as they saw me, they gasped, and rushed to me.

They pulled me into a huge hug, knocking the air out of me, and said, "I'm so glad you're safe!" I was about to show my parents the map, but it had *disappeared*.

Then, as we were heading home, I saw a tiny, old man on top of Huangshan. And even though he was far away, I could have sworn that he smiled and winked.

Beyond The Clear Skies

Harrow Beijing International School, Alderson, Natalia – 13

Dawn slowly draws itself to the crust of the oceans of green, lapping over each other, on a series of mountains. A series as if carved by a witch's spell, a shade of yellow, sublime, pours itself on the dim shadows of the forests. In the distance spirals of clouds dabbed with a band of color, surround the tips of these mystical mountains. Maybe if you could reach the waves of condensed powder, they would lift you to the beyond; beyond the willowing trees in the north; Beyond the low valley;

Beyond the covered ditch, the rusting shovel he held in his trembling hands,

Beyond the flattened essence of despair that lay covered over her, the essence was almost as thick as her already dried blood-filled tears. Her scream still echoes through the hollow depths of the mountains.

The faint whispers of dry wind will forever haunt him.

"It becomes overwhelming, we were so close, I could feel it."

"I don't belong here, I loved her, how dare you!"

"I can still feel her hanging on to my arm"

"the crying never stops"

It's hard to see through the blank canvases of sky, the fog that plays as paint, but I know she's out there, I can hear her. Almost touch her.

Why can't I? Why did she leave me?

Days passing like the flashes of zooming car lights. Days were spent in one of those cars, the small, rental ones. A red one. F202IE.

It was so warm.

She wasn't planning on returning it. Days awaiting to arrive here. Rumors of this place always amused Martha. The playful thought that nobody hearing your scream. The thought that your essence would forever echo through the mountain walls.

The thought escape.

"HE TOLD ME TO GO, I HAD TO LEAVE, I HAD TO GO AWAY. I HAD TO LEAVE HIM."

As if falling in an endless void, she didn't know when she started falling, or when she should call for help. Or when she'd hit.

Break.

Shatter.

But staying in a deep hole awaiting the day the bang would come, how loud it would be! She couldn't bare it.

He wasn't home that night. She left food; it would spare her time.

She arrived in the midst of a night breeze. The silhouettes of the mountains looked like big-nosed people shouting at the moon. She named them to calm down.

Ted...

Michael...

Johnny...

Dad.

She could hear the graceful flapping of an owl's wings, the shimmers and sparks as the after-thought of a fish's jump. She was still filled with adrenalin.

She couldn't,

wouldn't

should've

stayed still.

She decided the mountains covered in sheets of green would harm her, although the sheets crisp. For she's heard several tales of mystical animals living there as a child. Those stories tormented her dreams. There's no way she's hiding in the mists of green.

Her eyes twinkled as a reflection of the array of ruptured stars beyond her.

She saw a valley. A valley with a small river. It would do.

Only as she sat down did she realize how cold she had been. She felt a streak of paralysis. Numbness filled her finger tips.

Numbness she had become immune to. A painful clod of agony clutched her stomach. She didn't know if it was hunger or the sense of being detached.

She was always detached. Perhaps she just hadn't come to terms with it until it presented itself to her as a cold river she had to face.

The surface as pale as her lips. As still as her heart beat.

Her shirt stuck to her ribs as if clinging on to save itself from *him*. The blood still seeped out of her, though the wound not new, but it never healed once.

As if she's a broken, empty vase. The flowers already withered, but the water still pouring through the cracks.

*"she didn't come home that night, or the night after, or for the next week. So, I went looking for her. I knew the way there, I went there often with my mother when I was just a child, Martha's age, but I didn't know it well enough. I was going around in circles. I found myself in a valley."

"what if he finds me here. He knows these mountains."

Deep down, it amused her, that she thinks she has a choice; as if she has enough strength to stand; to walk away; to leave him completely

She knew he would find her; he went to that valley as a child.

She wanted to be found.

She never denied that.

Her father harsh and unsensitive.

Although gave her the mark on her face. From the iron.

“you deserved it, you were ironing my trousers as if a piece of cloth” tears twisting and combining with the steam of the iron.

The mark that dares not turn pale under the hushed tones of the forests.

However, the amount of steam escapes from her screams,

she pleads to feel the burning hot warmth it forever gives her.

The warmth that is the surface of a flare of emotions and hurt.

But only as the rusting shovel hit her stomach.

Her skin absorbing it's falling flakes.

Did she realize, she wants warmth.

The warmth of the little red car.

The warmth as the first beams of sunlight make way to her fragile face. Those few seconds it felt like away from *him*.

The warmth on her face as the tears came streaking down, lines of camouflaged hurt, seeming as if love.

The skies are clear.

But beyond the valley that lay beneath his feet.

Beyond the patterned greens that plastered smiles on her face as dawn pulled its way above.

Beyond the spirals of gold and pink that hung in the air as ornaments.

Beyond, Martha could never reach.

A Touch of Legend

Harrow Beijing International School, Chai, Martina

The people of China loved to speak of the mythical Feather Island, a village located high on the clouds above Mount Fanjing, the home of the Faes. They spoke of the two connecting temples atop the mountain, crafted by the ancient Faes as a magical border to hide their homeland from the human's eye. They spoke of the Legend of the Dragon Tamers, the Dark Ages, and of the King of the Dark Dragons, Pitch.

The legend went like this: Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there were a tribe of Dark Dragons. They were once the high and mighty, ruling over Feather Island in a time known as the Dark Ages. The fearsome King of the Dark Dragons, known as Pitch, was a dragon with dark purple—and-black scales, glowing purple eyes and a green sclera. He had a sharp black spike on the center of his forehead, webbed ears, sharp fang-like teeth and horns that ran down his back.

No Fae had ever been able to try and battle the Dark Dragons and get back alive, but they would not yield. The villagers of Feather Island gathered together some of their strongest warriors to form the Dragon Tamers. Together, the Tamers managed to defeat the Dark Dragons. The most famous of them all was their legendary leader, a fae called Cree. He had sacrificed his own life battling Pitch on the cliff. The battle ended with both of them tumbling off the ridge, ending their lives and, subsequently, the battle.

The Dark Ages had ended then and there, returning to the normal life villagers residing Feather Island were used to. Well, as normal as anything involving Faes could ever be, at least...

"Stop it, Everest." A girl moaned from her soft white bed as her pushed away thin air. She had dark blue hair, azure blue eyes and a blue tint to her skin that made her look more like a smurf than the Fae that she was. This girl's name was Delphi. She opened her eyes groggily and realized that it wasn't Everest, her pet dragon, who was breathing down her cheek. It was a feather.

Yes, you heard right. Delphi had a pet dragon. Every Fae had a pet of their own, ranging from phoenixes to nine-tailed foxes to winged horses. Delphi had a dragon called Everest.

"Everest?" She asked, her irritation quickly turning into worry as she glanced around the room. There was no sign of the purple dragon that always waited beside her bed for her to wake up in the mornings. "Everest? Stop playing hide and seek with me! Come out before I send you to obedience class!"

She waited. There was no reply. That line always worked, *always*. And if Everest wasn't coming out...

Feeling a surge of energy, Delphi jumped out of bed and changed into her daily silk dress, running out and across the bridge that separated her house from the rest of the village. She saw smoke in the distance and headed towards that, to find her very own purple dragon in the middle of destroying the perfectly innocent local library.

"What in the name of Cree are you doing?" She exclaimed at Everest.

The dragon looked at her and blew a burst of flames in her direction. Delphi barely had time to stumble out of the way, and the bit of brick she'd been standing on a second ago was now a steaming pile of black rubble.

She stared in disbelief at Everest. "Are you feeling okay?"

The dragon didn't reply, instead choosing to go back to destroying the library. Delphi went forward and tried to stroke him, causing Everest to thrash his tail and take off into the air.

Choosing the safe path, Delphi stayed on the ground and watched as her beloved pet dragon soared off, leaving a smoking black ruin that was what was left of her village's public library.

Later, Delphi found herself flipping through the pages of *Book of Ancient Forces*, trying to find what happened to Everest. She came across the page of the biology of Dark Dragons, and...

Dark scales. Purple eyes. Black flames. And a black spike at the top of their foreheads. That sounded awfully familiar.

Was Everest a Dark Dragon?

Delphi thought back to when she first adopted him. She'd found his egg on the mountaintop of Mount Fanjing, all alone and deserted. She didn't know *where* he'd come from, and she was starting to suspect something that...wasn't pretty.

Suddenly, she heard a roar from outside her cottage. Running out the front door, she saw Everest flying around and blowing fire everywhere as if he'd been fed some hallucination medicine.

Delphi deeply regretted what she did next. Sprinting over to her dragon, she jumped up and latched herself onto his back as he swooped down to the human mountains below.

Everest thrashed around, hoping to throw her off as she held on for dear life. The wind whipped her face and she soon felt like throwing up, but Delphi had a feeling they were still in the air and was not about to let go of her dragon's tail.

Faes, no matter what the legends say, *couldn't fly*.

Everest jerked his tail again, with such force that Delphi felt her grip on his tail loosen.

I am so not dying like this, she thought to herself as she fell.

Thankfully, wherever Everest had decided to drop her, it wasn't too far from the ground because she only felt a strong bump when she hit the forest floor—hard enough to give her a small concussion, but definitely not hard enough to kill her.

Standing up shakily, Delphi saw Everest land in front of her and start to advance towards her with a crazed look in his eyes. Taking a few steps back, she bumped into something soft. Giving a small yelp, Delphi whirled around, to find...

She rubbed her eyes, making sure she wasn't seeing things.

Standing in front of her was a fat old man in a battered shirt, Hawaiian shorts, with a mane of white hair on his head and a rat's-nest styled mustache. Okay, first off—that mustache really needed trimming.

"Uh...Who are you?" Delphi asked, hoping she didn't sound too impolite.

"My name is Cree."

It took Delphi a moment to process this, and when she did, she stared. "Wait, your name is what now? I—how are you still alive? And how did you end up looking like some homeless guy?"

"It's a long story." Was her reply.

“Well,” She said slowly. “Can you, maybe, tame Everest? My dragon?”

“Um...” Cree started. He suddenly pointed at the sky. “Oh, look, a bird! How beautiful!”

Delphi raised her eyebrow. “Okay, it’s cute, but can we get back to the point? Why do I feel like you’re avoiding the question?”

Cree hesitated. “Fine.”

He went forward slowly, holding his hands in front of him in a not-so-heroic way.

Everest swished his tail once and knocked Cree right into a bush. He raised one finger and said weakly, “I...have a confession.”

Delphi glared at him. “Yes?”

“It’s a fraud. All of it. About me being some legendary Dragon Tamer. None of it is true. It’s just a big huge scam designed to make mortals worship me.”

“Wait, what now?” She stared at the old man in disbelief.

“All the Dark Dragons, Pitch, the Golden Bridle—they did exist a few millennia ago. Those were true. But the part about me defeating them and whatnot? Yeah, that’s just a made-up lie. The Dark Dragons and the Dragon Tamers went extinct ages ago, there was no point for them.” Cree explained. “I was never a Dragon Tamer.”

Alright. That had just proved Delphi’s entire life was a lie. Perfectly normal.

“I still have the Golden Bridle with me. It’s just an ordinary leather bridle, and believe me, I’ve tested it before.” Cree told her, taking out a long brown bridle and holding it out. “You can have it if you want to, but it’s useless.”

She took the bridle—it felt light and cheap, not at all like the magical one she’d pictured in her dreams.

“I’ll just go now!” Cree declared, and sprinted away at a speed not fit for an old man.

Delphi raised an eyebrow and, holding the bridle carefully in her hands, tackled Everest.

The process was very tiring and included quite a lot of thrashing, yelling, roaring, fire-blowing, kicking, and grabbing. Just as she thought her dragon was calming down and wrapped the bridle around his head, Everest gave a strong jerk and Delphi tumbled right into the sharp black horn at the center of his forehead.

The force of Everest’s thrashing had resulted in him falling off the cliff of the mountain, and Delphi was only able to watch as the Golden Bridle snapped, slicing off Everest’s head. She could only lay there silently on the ground while watching her dear dragon’s head seep blood and the rest of his body toppled down the cliff face.

She looked at her abdomen. It had a hole. And the hole was incredibly bloody.

Oh, dear.

As Delphi felt her eyelids starting to droop, she saw the bloody bridle in her hand slowly turn a blinding shade of gold...

Fated

Harrow Beijing International School, Chen, Caitlyn – 13

Inside a cottage on the edge of the world, a boy's eyes opened to the morning light. His sea green eyes shimmering under the warm morning sunlight, only at one glance his eyes show the hue of the new spring growth embellished by flecks of ambition. The kind of charming, passionate green that the ocean turns during a storm.

"Good morning Emery!" an older male call at the top of his voice, "You better get down, breakfast is ready."

Emery leaped out of his snug bed, quickly brushed his frizzly brown hair aside and descend down the stairs. His world is well-hidden, it's beyond any mortal's reach. The Skyborn village is a dome shielding all of the Skyborns from the chaotic and dangerous outside world. No one knows the exact location of the mythological Skyborn civilisation, legend said that it's in Huangshan, where mountain peaks can pierce the realms of the stars and eerie mists encircle the mountain year-round. The only entrance in Skyborn is through the Portal of Secret which is guarded by two ancient sculptures, if you are a worthy Skyborn you can find the entrance easily as for the ordinary its beyond impossible.

Individual houses are chiselled out from the stone cliff, streets are inundated with festivals and small outlets. The village thrived, citizens are joyous and satisfied with their current lifestyle, especially Emery's family. His father, Alvar the Wise, is the most important and senior priest of Skyborn; however, Alvar's early life was a lot different compared to Emery's.

Alvar lived in the era of Dragons...

A long time ago, dragons and Skyborns were bonded together. Skyborns relied on dragons for Skydust, which was a magical sprinkle produced when dragons flied in the skies. Skydust powers the Skyborn village from water pumping to electricity. Dragons, unsurprisingly, relied on the Skyborns for essential food and the protection of their dragonets. Special or rather chosen Skyborns have the ability to connect and speak with their chosen dragons and essentially become a Dragon Whisperer. There were laughers up in the skies every time the dragons and Skyborns went for a ride or hunt. Alvar would often stare blankly at the skies, he's birth defects hampered him from soaring the skies, thus Alvar was preparing to be the next Senior Priest of Skyborn --the highest rank official in Skyborns government. With an undecipherable smile on his face, he entered the sacred temple on the Holy Festival. No one know when the tradition of the annual Holy Festival first started, but the Festival ensured the very survival of Skyborns. The festival was consecrated, Skyborns celebrated the King of Dragons; Skyborns put on their most lavish cloths, the Temple was adorned with ornaments, flags, and shimmering gold specks. All for a single festival. Except that this year's festival went horribly wrong...A deathly blanket covered Skyborn, Alvar could sense it. It's the smell of withering flora, the fragrance of rotten flesh, the ominous signs of the constellation.

At the beginning of the festival stand the burly black figure of a Vulcan dragon, Draco, gusting blazes out of his nostrils. His ebony eyes reflecting the flames on his talons as he paced around the temple searching for the Elder Priest. Oh, there he is, the Elder! Attired in gold and silver yearn, he strolled out of the temple and glared at Draco for disrupting his lunch. Draco glared back...The next thing the Skyborns knew, Elder dropped dead with smouldering flesh flaming on his body. It was Draco who did this, and from this very turning point, history was altered forever, as did the Age of Dragons.

Alvar has told this story to his son countless of times; Emery understood and knows every detail of his history. The past, as Emery sees it, is a tragic event and a misunderstanding. And as every boy dream, Emery wants to save Skyborn from the Evil Dragon. But, Emery is different.

Maybe he's destined to be the hero...

A black silhouette strolled aimlessly under the beautiful twilight, the dark violet sky and the rose-red clouds are vividly painted on the sky, Emery had just finished his duty on the Watch Tower. Tracing back to his steps, he made several swift turns before entering the forbidden alley. The alley is feared by the Skyborns, the Skyborns avoid walking adjacent to the alley for a reason: Darkest secrets lives in it.

Emery walked straight into a shabby, dilapidated mansion, the pipeline was gushing out pollute water and the acrid smell inundated his nostril, but he chose to ignore it. Immediately, an ear-piercing roar reverberated the mansion, it was as loud as thousands of thunders strikes together. A broad figure appeared under the doorway, his eyes matched Emery, except that he is in a totally different species.

He is a dragon.

Emery greeted the blue-white scales dragon with a nodded followed with a question, "Good evening Echo. I stopped by to confirm the day of Mission Fortress, it's tomorrow isn't it?"

“The attack will be tomorrow as planned.” Echo thundered.

“What about your companions?”

“I assure you they will be here. And in the meantime, say goodbye to your dear father, we may not return once we’re there.”

Emery stared at Echo with disbelief but also understands why he had said that. The mission is dangerous, breaking into the most well-guarded place and guarded by large fire-breathing dragons is quite an impossible task, Alvar would have thought his son going bonkers if Emery told him about his ‘great’ plan. Emery carefully traced back his steps out of the forbidden alley, he returned back in his warm, comfy home mustering how to tell his father about this situation.

The truth is, he didn’t. He left without a goodbye...

The sky was painted with rose pink with a shade of royal blue, Emery tiptoed out of his house and rushed towards the courtyard beside the forbidden alley. As he came closely, three tall figures including Echo emerged. Among the dragons, Echo stands out as a wind element dragon with soft sea-green eyes, there are also a dragon with red scales which are blazing with fire and a dragon with pure-white scales, icicles dangling on his scales.

“Morning Emery, meet Cinder (fire dragon) and Polar (ice dragon), and my confidants meet Emery a Skyborn” After Echo finished the introduction, the other two dragons hissed under their breath, can’t blame them dragons and Skyborns aren’t supposed to love each other. Without any delay, Emery climbed on Echo’s streamlined body as Echo, Cinder and Polar ascend into the azure sky.

“Will they be able to save Skyborns?” Emery pondered, the fate isn’t definite yet... or is it?

The squad soared under the pale-white clouds, their skins craving for more of the gentle breezes. Everything is where it should be, except... Cinder suddenly halted, his eyes fuming with unanticipated hatred, Echo watched in horror as Cinder lashed out flames towards she-dragon, Polar, who’s unprepared of this attack. The ice dragon’s fragile body burst into flames, Polar screeched as Cinder launched himself towards her and with a swift stroke, Cinder slit Polar’s throat. Blood like a coagulated wine began to gush out as she falls to her death. Watching his best friend fell into the bottomless pit, Echo’s sea-green eyes turned stormy, tempestuous, pain filled his heart as he lunges himself carrying Emery to Cinder.

“Revenge it shall be” Hissed Echo, a bloodshed began.

A Split second pasted, Emery finds himself plummeting to the abyss below with the unconscious body of his dear friend, Echo; a stream of tears tickled down Emery’s cheeks.

He murmured, “I’m so sorry Dad.” Then he shut his eyes tight waiting for the end.

The ground is getting closer by each second.

100 meters.

50 meters.

30 meters.

15 meters.

5.

4.

3.

2.

1...

Several days later, Alvar confronted the senior council, he yelled straight into their faces, “We, no, you. You Lazy cake-eaters must end all connections with the Dragon tribe and punish them severely for what they did. My son is six feet under because of them!” His voice tremored when he squeezed out the words—my son; afterwards he stormed out of the building watching the Skyborns preparing for the war between them and the Dragon, it would be destructive and a bloody carnage.

He smiled.

The Abyss of Wishes

Harrow Beijing International School, Chen, Nemo – 12

She was running from something, horses, men, their shouts of fury shattering the sky at dawn, but the mountain was unfamiliar, the footholds that her feet found so easily being entirely new. Something in her mind rang, a memory.

“The abyss of wishes, if you believe and you dive into the mist...” Her grandmama, the storyteller’s voice.

She knew where she was heading now, and a sense of deep foreboding filled her. A cliff. She imagined it, a gaping mouth in the mountains. No, she had to go back to her home, to the Village above the Clouds, but she was like someone possessed, and she couldn’t turn back, not now.

The shouts behind her grew louder.

It was all suddenly so misty, but she could make out the edge of a cliff – the abyss of wishes! She walked towards it, knowing that her pursuers couldn’t catch up to her now. She squatted down, hand reaching into the mist, letting it curl around her, inviting her.

What was she doing?

Another line of the story came back to her: “Whatever you want first on your list of wishes will come to you...”

“Whatever I want, grandmama? Truly?”

“Yes, child, but only if you believe...”

She tipped her weight forwards and tumbled off the edge into the mist. It was a strange sensation, it didn’t seem at all as though she was falling fast. In fact, it rather felt like she was falling through water, or some other sort of soft cushion.

“And on your birthday in the year of your zodiac¹, a shooting star will appear...”

She was accelerating now, falling faster and faster, and she saw the ground beneath –

Mei awoke with cold sweat all over her, clutching the embroidered quilt that once belonged to her late mother. It was barely dawn, but the sunrise could not be seen for the mist that plagued the sky of the Village Above the Clouds, as her grandmama often still told her, as though she was still a small child. As with all dreams, the memory of this one was altered and she suddenly remembered holding the hand of someone while running, and assumed it was Peng, her lover.

At dawn, Peng² woke to somewhat clear skies – compared with the usual skies in the Village Above the Clouds, almost anything could be considered clear. He looked out of his cottage’s window and saw the farmers already out and working in the fields, and the rest of the town just waking up. He was a worker himself, but not a farmer or a normal labourer – he was an inventor. Just last winter, when the Village above the clouds was suffering a food shortage due to a lack of irrigation in the previous summer, he had designed a complex aqueduct system which could be easily controlled, bringing the water from a mountain stream to the fields.

The villagers often said that he and Mei were both geniuses, him as an inventor, Mei as a doctor. Everyone approved of the pair, so similar in being almost perfect, except that it wasn’t sure if Mei would be chosen to be the emperor’s concubine.

He looked upwards again. When he was young, the villager boys teased him for this habit and his name: “Peng”, they would say, “Looking up into the skies but unable to fly.” His parents seemed to share this belief, bemoaning the fact that he was too practical: If he put his genius into activities that “showier”, he would have gone much further, but both he and Mei were satisfied with where he was now.

Thinking of Mei, he realised: today was the day that the emperor’s guards would announce which girls had been chosen. There was a commotion in the village centre, accompanied by the snorting of horses. The announcer cleared his throat, then announced the name in his thin voice. Only one person had been chosen, and the girl was... Mei.

¹ In Chinese tradition, every person’s zodiac sign refers to the year that they are born in. There are twelve zodiacs, and one’s zodiac year happens every twelve years.

² Peng means large bird
or roc

He had to tell her, but in his churning mind there was a glimpse of hope, perhaps they could elope as they did in the stories, but he would have to find her fast, the emperor's men were on horseback, and they would only have a chance if they had a head start. Their best chance was to escape by mountains. He needn't think more.

A delicate hand grasped his, and already, he knew it was Mei. She ran, letting her feet lead her in the most familiar path as she pondered what they should do after they eloped, to somewhere they could become an inventor and a doctor, but there was no time to think now, the guards had just blocked their way up the mountain.

She changed course, faintly aware of her hand grasping Peng's, and his panting behind her. It was only when she arrived that she knew her destination – the abyss of wishes.

The guards were catching up, when Mei remembered her grandmother's story: "*Whoever jumped into the chasm, believing in its magic, would have their truly most desperate wish fulfilled*"

"On the count of three, jump." They both knew it was their only chance left now.

"Three." They could hear the thundering footsteps. "Two." The shouts. "One" The clouds of dust. She grasped his hand and jumped, with her heart strangely calm.

When Peng came to, he was in a chair of a room with no windows, with a desk with multiple gadgets. It did not interest him very much, although his eyes lingered on a button which said 'fly'. Where was Mei?

He frantically searched – within minutes, he had explored the whole of the machine he was in, finding the directions to the outside and a few notebooks full of drawings of invention ideas he had toyed with before himself, the 'spaceship' where he was (as the author called it) among them, but not Mei. Perhaps she was outside of this spaceship?

He went back to the original room and pressed the button on the notebook which was supposed to open the trapdoor. It turned out to be the very spot he was standing on. It was a small platform, and it was lowered by a rope woven with iron threads to the ground about a meter below. To his surprise, there was a small crowd gathered there already, and as he came down, they all cheered, with some bowing.

"Hello...?" He mustered, with a wave. "Have you seen a young woman pass by? All dressed in white, she might have looked like she was in a hurry."

"A woman? No, good sir, but your appearance is a miracle!"

Six years later, Mei was surprised to see a child run to her, announcing a visitor arriving in an extravagant machine, asking to see her. She sighed, looking out the window. It was surprising how much the village had changed since her arrival. And today was her birthday in her year – an important occasion to celebrate. When she had arrived, the town was infested with plague. She had saved many, passing on her medicines to many students and eventually become a hero, somewhat. But Peng had not come with her.

The visitor walked in the open door. She turned her head, and gave a little gasp of surprise. She would have fallen into a chair if she weren't already sitting down.

"Peng?"

"It's me, Mei. I know all this is quite extravagant, bringing the spaceship and all, but I thought that this is the day. It's your birthday, and mine, and it's our year, and I finally figured out how the abyss of wishes works, so I came – forgive me for intruding if" –

But he had said enough, and she knew that his rambling was only caused by nervousness. She stood up, and interrupted: "Not at all, come, take a seat." He seemed to be relieved that she was still friendly.

"If you still" –

"Yes, I do."

"I was thinking since both our wishes have been fulfilled, it would have been nice to settle down, start a family" –

"We can keep working for our wishes."

"Yes, but Mei, will you... will you marry me?"

She smiled, knowing that he hadn't changed a bit for the worse in the past six years. "Yes. Yes, with all my heart."

Far away, in the Village above the clouds, grandmama saw two stars shoot across the sky, finally clear for once in years. They reminded her the two threads she had been using to embroider a new quilt, one with two pearly white silhouettes on a dark cloth, a man and a woman. In her heart, she knew they were an inventor and a doctor. She sighed contentedly, watching the shining trails the stars left behind, knowing that Mei now lived in the land of dreams.

Li Bai and the Dragon

Harrow Beijing International School, Gao, Kelly – 12

Long ago, a magical dragon lived on Mount Huangshan. As people say, the dragon protected our emperors of China and their Alchemy. There is also a saying which says this dragon defeated our enemy during the new year's, Monster Nian. Some says Nian is defeated by colour red, some says Nian is scared of red as this dragon is covered with red scales, glittering with gold. Even though there's so many stories about this dragon, people had never seen a shadow of him.

A Poet of the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai, heard this story. He was wondering about the scenery and this magical dragon. If he could be the one who sees this dragon first, this could make him famous! Also, people say the Alchemy of all emperors are done there. If he finds some kind of elixir, he could live forever! With these dream-like thoughts, he started his journey to the magical and mysterious mountain —— Huang Shan.

First of all, he prepared some food for his journey. Some pancakes, with his favourite white wine, accompanied with braised meat. Li bai thought of the route he's going on to get up to the top tips and then started. However, with the steep and magnificent peaks of Huangshan, it is quite different. The mountains and rocks had different shapes and gestures; some are like immortal creatures, some are like monkeys watching the sea, some are like animals eating watermelon, and some are like warriors fighting. Li bai thought about it, and his heart hanging up again, because he realised how dangerous the peak of Huangshan could be. An overpass was built between the two peaks, with a length of 18 meters. It was suspended on both sides and the abyss was at the bottom. When he thought of it, he was frightened.

Slowly, Li Bai's heart that was beating strongly began to feel less pressured. The sea of clouds on the mountain was very beautiful. Looking at it closely with a stare, it looks like a layer of thick fog covering the strange peaks and scenes. As soon as the wind blows, the white clouds became like a pair of white butterflies dancing, flying around the mountains. Li Bai looked up again. Ten miles away, it's like the ocean where he can't see the edge of it. It submerges and only shows the peaks. It's like an island on the sea which looms in the mist. Li Bai thought he was walking into a fairyland from a fantasy!

Looking and enjoying the scenery, Li Bai seemed more excited to what the dragon and this landscape would look like. The scurries and leisurely pace abruptly changed to the vigorous strides, strengthened with excitement.

Unfortunately, rain poured onto this curious poet, which made him stay in a stone cave, lighting up some fire to avoid the coldness and the damp outside. After a while, the rain was still pouring. Not only did it not stop, it smashed and pounded onto the stone floor of Huangshan.

In this way, Li Bai was trapped day by day in that cave. Finally, in his desperation, the torrential, uncontrolled rain finally stopped. All of a sudden, it became so quiet. When Li Bai came out of the cave, the cool air came, with a fishy smell. The sun shines on the road washed by the heavy rain, and the mountain road seems to be paved with a layer of bright glass; the sun shines onto the trees on the mountain, and the trees seem to be covered with pearls and agates. Suddenly, Li Bai saw something vague, flying over the sky. Slowly, it became closer and closer. It's the magic dragon! It's not like what everyone said at home, this dragon is sapphire blue and glittering, sparkling with gold. Gently, it landed in front of Li Bai. Li bai was shocked, unable to believe that he saw it, he saw the dragon of legends, the dragon that was famous. When he recuperated from the excitement, the dragon grabbed at him, taking him up the blue sky and flew. Li bai was shaking through his way, where he never saw the world from this special angle of sight, and being held by an animal. His feelings changed like the route of a rollercoaster, up and down, excited and frightened.

The dragon took him to a temple, where it is cold, and wet. Thousands of stoves were together, where the dragon finally spoke up: "I'm the one you're looking for. I am a normal dragon with no power, not like what people said. They say I'm red, where I am blue. They said I scared monsters away, but it wasn't anything to do with me." The dragon opened one of the stoves and continued: "Millions climbed the mountain to find me, but they were all the same. You are different, every time someone comes, I make the rain pour, and none of them waited till it stopped, but you did." The dragon handed Li Bai an elixir, where words on it said: "ever young". As the claws of the dragon slowly let go the hands of Li Bai, it flew up, and said: "The only reason I stayed was for this elixir, this is from the emperor that saved my life, and now I'm giving it to you." So quickly, the dragon disappeared.

After that, Li Bai stayed, and lived at Huangshan in seclusion. He ate the elixir, wrote a lot of poems for this mountain, but never saw that dragon again. No one ever knew this story, only Li Bai and the blue dragon, who went to find his savior.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Harrow Beijing International School, Guo, Daniel – 13

A thing I commonly find cliché and banal in regards to works about mountains is how they are generally portrayed by writers. Nebulous clouds surrounding a supernaturally tall mountain that seems to reach the heavens, and Sages with unparalleled wisdom giving out abstruse advice to all that seek it before ascending to heaven halfway through the story in an unrelated interlude, and the protagonist being a clueless young man who seeks nothing but catharsis or closure from a traumatic event. It might seem interesting when you read one example of that trope but it would soon turn insipid to you. And so, I find myself in the exact spot in which I had just so described a typical mountain story to be, a clueless young man attempting to find oneself amidst a sea of tourists and denizens of the mountain.

“Move on! Come on, what in blazes are you waiting for!” came the voice of an irritated tourist. Muttering a quick apology, I slid my card on top of the scanner and waited for the automatic fence to open. After quickly rushing past the unhurried crowd at the temple’s entrance and entering the temple what greeted me was exactly as I had thought would look like, the sagacious monk who gives cryptic pieces of advice to all that seeks it. I see that he is still not done with his banter, it seems that I will have to initiate a conversation then. “Sorry, traffic was a nightmare” the cacophony of noises came to an abrupt end, a veritable sea of heads turned in my direction, looking at me in either amazement or just simple condescension. I guess that some religious people did develop a superiority complex of sorts to those who seem secular like me, but anyway, I have my things to attend to.

“So, this is the case, is it not?”, the ‘wise’ monk inquired, I found myself struggling to give an appropriate answer. “I—Uhm—yeah plan on taking up a position of——um——yeah! A tourist guide to know more about myself.” Mr. Monk raised his eyebrow at my answer, probably because people like me who are still attempting to find themselves at the age of 30 generally tend to come off as a hopeless man just days away from a suicide attempt. Though to my surprise, he sighed and shooed me away to whatever post I signed up for.

“Ok, the gist of this job is to just loiter around the entrance of this mountain until a tourist comes up to you and asks for your assistance. You put on your Mr. Polite and Cordial façade right when they come up to you can take them on a long tour around the mountains! Wahoo.” The man in charge had an imperturbable attitude befitting of a man of his stature. Bob Wugert, an American who immigrated to China in the 1980s, first undertook the responsibility of starting the tourism business in this particular area. So, he’s essentially the boss around here, the perfect example of the jaded professional trope, having worked in the tourism business for more than 40 years, he knows every inch of this area, the best places to buy souvenirs and even the finest bistros around here, which is about everything you need to know as a mountain guide. He continued to talk about how the whole process of taking a tour around the mountain went and eventually came upon the point in which I was most curious about, regarding how to deal with cantankerous clients.

“And so, I gave that guy the good old slugger! You should have seen his face, swollen in all of its glory! That’s what he gets for attempting to humble the great me! Bob had started ranting about how he treated intractable clients, with a fist to the face. Anyone else would have gotten fired on the spot for the mishandling of clients. And the possibility of the company losing money and reputation due to assault, but Bob Wugert is the Jeff Bezos of the Tourism Industry. Just having him here earned us enough prestige and renown for our rating on multiple internet platforms went up from 3.7 to 4.8! Getting rid of him would be like selling McDonald's African Burgers during the African famine. vacuous, simply vacuous.

“Young man! I ask of you, what in the heavens is this?”. An irritated tourist raises a complaint. Shrugging I move on to the next part of our tourist trap. A statue of the Buddha pointing towards a shop. According to Bob, it was de rigueur for Buddhists to obey their god, so buying what their god wanted was considered obligatory. While this may seem heretical or offensive to certain people, do note that All is fair in love and business.

It has been about three weeks since I have arrived at this mountain and took up a position as one of the mountain's innumerable tour guides. My first paycheck is due soon. I have a decent rating on AdviserTrip(OC app) and everything else has been progressing well enough. Still, I have not acquired the one thing I came here for, Enlightenment, not in the spiritual sense but rather just to know why I came into being. The chances of me coming into existence are around one in several billion, yet I have not accomplished anything noteworthy yet. For an agnostic like me, I still do believe in divine forces beyond the comprehension and reach of mankind, so the question of why I got chosen plagues me to no end.

Splat, splat. It has been raining nonstop since morning and there are no signs of it stopping soon. God, this seems like one of those cliched scenes where Mr. Wise sage will soon approach me and give his judicious advice, Mr. Sage, I am waiting! And soon enough, he arrives. "Hello, young one, what brings you to sit here in desolation?" I turn my head around to get a glimpse of who spoke to me. And the same person who conversed with me three weeks earlier in that temple was standing right behind me. And so, making full use of this opportunity, I ask him the question that has been bedeviling me for so long. "Why was it me who came into being?"

Leading me into his temple, the sage starts to speak. "I see that you have an existential crisis, am I wrong?", shaking my head, he continues. "I've said this to many young men and women before, and you shall be one of many to hear it, what defines you is not what you accomplished in life but rather how you look at life. A philanthropist who has saved many lives considers himself normal because he did 'What he was supposed to do'. The very definition of good is so twisted that a murderer who tortures other murderers could be considered as 'good' in a sense and be sent to heaven instead of hell. A judge who has followed all the rules of the judicial system might be considered essentially a sinner because of the punishments he brought forth, know that there is no true definition of good nor bad, you not accomplishing does not mean that you are a bad person, or a good person, you decide who you are and why you are, it all boils down to whether you think you are content with your being or not."

It was on that day that I realized cliched scenes do bring forth enlightenment and closure.

Time for Action

Harrow Beijing International School, Helian, Mars – 12

It was a misty morning when we finally arrived at Huangshan in Anhui Province in eastern China. I was part of a research team that would look at the wildlife in Huangshan. I had heard that there was a mining company has found valuable resources such as coal and bronze in these mountains and are damaging the environment with their excavations.

There was a chilly mountain breeze, and the trees towered above us like immense behemoths. Some of them were as old as one thousand years. As we exited the main road, and proceeded onto a dirt track, I heard an inexplicable crash in the distance. I took out my binoculars, and there it was, the loathsome mining company, clearing away at the trees so that they could start another mine. Oh, how I hated those people, caring about nothing by themselves and money.

Five thousand feet above, a free eagle was soaring majestically through the air when it heard a tremendous crash from behind. It turned round and saw the most hideous sight. The rumor had been true about the yellow monsters, ten times the size of a tiger. They ripped trees right off the ground and flew dirt into the air, as high as 10 meters! In a flash, it cleared a huge area of 50 meters square. Then came the worst of it all. They started to drill through the ground, shaking it like mad. The eagle was dazed by all this unacceptable behavior. What were they doing? It flew away to alert its other fellow eagles.

Back on the ground, I looked around us, there were animals and trees all around, but something wasn't right. There was a hint of aggression that all the animals, from the smallest ant to the distance roar of a tiger. Even the smallest plants seemed to be leaning away from us.

Interminable days went by without much progress. We had come here a week later than the mining company, and we can barely find any animals to study. The only ones that we were able to capture pictures from were the ones from far away or the ones that we could only glimpse. Whenever we saw the animals, up close, they always ran off. Then, on a crisp clear night with a bright full moon, I fell into a heavy sleep after another day of hard work. But this night was different. I dreamed of a goddess in robes the color of the pure white moon, approach me. "Who are you?" I asked her.

"I am Yaoji, the goddess of the mountains, and I am here to give you an important task, and if you succeed, then the animals of this mountain range will be free." She paused for a second and looked in the direction of the excavation sight. "As a reward, I will show you something that no other human has ever seen, species that were only assumed to be myths." Looking at me solemnly, she asked "Do you agree?"

"Yes, I will not disappoint you." I replied. Questions swirled in my head. What was I going to do? How am I going to stop such a big project and immense mining behemoth?

"But ho..." I was about to ask one last, and most important question, when the goddess, started to fade.

"Seek you own answers," And she dissolved into the distance. Then, I was all alone. That was when I realized that someone was calling my name.

"ROBERT, ROBERT, WAKE UP!" a cold shower of water crashed into my face as I sat up immediately, and there was my friend Peter the camera man, with an empty blue bucket.

"What's the time right now?" I asked.

"It's well past 9 now, and breakfast was supposed to start at 8!" He shouted. "At this rate, we're never going to finish this goddam book of yours!"

“All right, all right, calm down a second,” I said, “There is a change of plans, can you call everyone to come and have a meeting at the courtyard outside my room.”

Deep in the forests, a different meeting was being held. Animals of each species. The tigers gathered on a huge flat rock, while eagles congregated on the mountain tops, and rabbits crowded in dirt holes. The subject that they were talking about was the yellow monsters and what to do.

“We should attack the humans; they are no stronger than us,” said a young tiger to his fellow tigers.

“But there are huge monsters that they control!” Said an older and wiser tiger.

In the eagles’ nest, the suggestion was different. “Maybe we should go further west, there is no humans.”

“But we don’t know what is out there, and this is our home!” Replied another eagle.

In the rabbit hole, the suggestion was even sillier. “They aren’t effecting us that much, right? So, we should just put up with it for now,” said a young rabbit.

“Small problems always turn into big ones.” Said a wise old rabbit helplessly, “We don’t have a concrete plan, but we can’t just do nothing.”

Back in the temple courtyard, the same gloomy atmosphere was there. Not a single person could think up a good idea how to stop the contemptible company from destroying the environment.

“Let’s all end it here. Maybe we will think up something tomorrow.”

That night, as I lay awake in my bed, I kept on thinking about all the things I’ve done to the environment, and all the different ways I’ve done it. Then, I got it. I would make the Chinese public start to become aware of this happening in the Huangshan mountains. Now it was time for action.

Hope

Harrow Beijing International School, Jiang, Hannah – 11

I had always admired the great, bulky barrier in front of my hometown— Mount Huangshan. When I was an innocent young child, free of worries, free from the burning flame of rules, free from the invisible chains of responsibility, I used to admire the mountain. It used to be a blissful atmosphere filled with joy and jubilation. It used to be the cherry blossom toys I made from the cherry trees perched on top of the granite peaks, which reminded me forcibly of a miniscule werewolf perched on top of a cliff at full moon; lonely, yet proud. It used to be the rustling of bushes of the young pups, engrossed in their own adventure, and the howls of their mothers. Now, it's just a piece of moldy rock in my eyes. I had never wanted it to wither and rot, but life changes, and you have to get on with it— like what I did when my mother could not and would not anymore— and moved to a new home: heaven.

“Hope. Never give up, whatever you do. Keep hoping for new opportunities in life. Come on hither—” she would sigh and hug me tight, breathing more words of encouragement into my ear. Those were my mother's last words. I keep them pressed hard to my chest every day before setting out to another day full of hurdles to jump on the path of life. But sometimes, I just couldn't bear thinking of my mother's soft face, repeating those words, staring deep into my eyes, reaching far below the sorrowful pupils.

The memory of my mother always pained me, for the ceaseless words she used to say did not pass unheard and forgotten. I can still remember the sensation when I would come back from a week's camping trip with my friends, my mother would embrace me and cry. *“Is this my darling Hope? Why, she is all grown up now! Is this my little angel?”*

I would roll my eyes and respond. *“Come on mum, I've only been gone for a week!”*

“But you've grown so much, and you're awfully pale! Was it too cold at the campsite? Did you catch a cold? What did you do?”

I remember I had found my mother irritating, bothersome. Sometimes, I even hated my mother for her lack of incisiveness. But later on in life, I soon realised that all of those unnecessary actions, fussing about and those embarrassing hugs in front of my friends were actions of love. They were never futile.

I also thought of the mountain my mother used to adore and worship. As she had a rather garrulous temperament, I had hardly believed the myth she told me years and years ago on the very same rock. She said that the rock changes in your vision based on emotion. Obviously, it was some fraudulent folklore that her family had foolishly believed in. I refused to believe it— until her death. Her death that changed everything.

So, I paid a visit to the Yellow Mountain.

The navy-blue sky looked peaceful for once in what seemed to be a long time. There was only the muffled sound of thunder that was happening far away as I watched the breathtaking horizon. The sun had almost set, painting the dazzling sky into apricot and red. I was looking up with glee and hope when the first thunderbolt struck— a sign that I had been wrong, that the storm was still going to continue, that my fears are going to keep haunting me until my dying day. It blazed brilliantly against the sky and sea, which made it more obvious than ever. More followed. There were openings in the cloud now, as if the sky were torn into pieces. Then came the rain. It came down in a sheet, soaking the sand, filling the agitated sea. Everything was raging around me; I felt the sky's anger and I shuddered.

In an instant it stopped.

The storm broke. The clouds closed like curtains as if signaling for the end of the show. The rain still fell down, but the arrows which had been hard and piercing a moment ago turned to soft and rubbery ones. It was as if no storm had happened, except for the single fact that a line of seven different colors in a curve was coated onto the landscape— a rainbow. The first symbol of hope was violently bright, and with it came another gift. I could see the radiant horizon again.

“Rainbows were often the signs of hope, Hope.” Rang my mother’s voice in my head. *“They speak directly into our troublesome heart and soul, filling us with awe and energy of love pouring around us. Remember, that anything which strikes a blazing light into your life always require the bloodiest of battles. So in a way, the light was never a great beacon of hope, it is just so because it was the only thing that shone during the dismal ages. No one ever sees the same rainbow, and when you see one, recall the fact that this rainbow is from your own horizon. Rainbows are also the sign of Magical Blessing, Hope. They’ll bless and bring fresh beginnings and new prosperity.”* And so, my mother was right again. Coming here was never a mistake. The mountain had blessed me. I could feel the tingling sensation of the warm rain hopping playfully in my hair, then rolling down my back, then jumping into my shoes. I sank down to my knees, crazy with joy. Looked up, and it was gone. The symbol of hope vanished. Yet, it couldn’t have just left me— could it? Half doubting myself, I rubbed my eyes wearily and looked up again. The band of colors was slowly fading away, melting into the vivid scenery. Nevertheless, it was shining effulgently as it trotted away tranquilly.

So keep this in mind— dear reader— the darkest days come with the most incandescent times. Never hope for just the light, hope for a change in life— whether abdominal or eminent, it should always be acceptable. But when the aphotic approaches, be ready for the rainbow, the rainbow that will bring the meaning of life, the rainbow that will pour a bucket of realization over the bleary eye of misconception, the rainbow that will set the bonfire of hope ablaze. Hear my mother’s voice like I did, and bear in mind the priceless words and the bodacious quotes she used to repeat on the towering rock— the Yellow Mountain. When the path ahead of you is blurred by the fog of secrecy, jog your memory for these two words: *keep hoping*.

The Magical Huangshan in China

Harrow Beijing International School, Lai, Toby – 11

Clutching my stitch, I gasped for fresh air. There was still half way to go. I took out my flask and gulped down the rest of the water and redeemed myself. I looked at my hands, they were covered in slimy moss and cuts were plastered all over it. I winced as the water in the moss went into my cuts and made them sting madly. The sky was growing dark and clouds glided across and gave me the signal that I had to take my flashlight out. I shone it towards the floor and eerie looking bugs scattered across the floor, running in every direction. I looked in front of me, staring at the top of mountain, that was my destination.

Soon after, it was like I was never going to make it. The sky was pitch black but the smell of the fresh air kept me awake and alive. My bag was heaving down and my flashlight was running out. But the scene was beautiful, stars spreader across the sky light a massive blanket and the crisp sound of leaves rustling in the air made my body feel relaxed. As I carried on, the sound of animals joined in with their friends, they scattered along the trees and ran from bush to bush. Night became dusk and dusk became dawn, the sky brightened and the sun came up. Finally, I made it. The sky looked magical, gold, yellow, red, orange, all mixed together to make a beautiful ombre. Below me, a pool of clouds floated dreamily there. I wanted to jump down! As I looked further out, I felt like all my worries were gone. The wind brushed past me as though it was keeping me away from danger. I sat down and enjoyed the view. Then I saw..... A village?

I stood up immediately. Was there a village floating just outside this mountain? No wonder people couldn't see it, it was hidden amongst the clouds and it seemed very small. I wanted to get there, but how? Without thinking, I jumped onto the clouds and they surprisingly stayed! I didn't know what to do, but I apparently the clouds did, as soon as I got on, the slowly glided me towards the little village. When we got there, I cautiously got off and started wondering around. It seemed like no one was there, the village was empty but seemed quite new. It was like a dwarf's village. There were tiny trees, tiny benches, tiny houses, tiny kitchens, tiny everything. I could easily squash them if I wasn't careful. It was just a normal village, but everything was tiny. Suddenly, I heard a tiny little sound behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw tiny people coming towards me slowly. They all looked scared as though I was going to eat or kill them all. I was amazed of how many there were, families and families were living in this tiny village! Deciding I shouldn't be rude, I merely said, "Hello." But it seemed as though my voice was coming out through a mega phone for them because they all covered their ears and glared at me with disgust and hate. I awkwardly bit my lip back and started around.

"BACK, ALL OF YOU!" Boomed a voice from behind me. This voice sounded normal, a voice like mine. At once, all the tiny dwarfs scattered back into where they came from. I spun around and saw an old man, around the age of 70. He had a long, white beard and half moon spectacles that hung on his nose. He looked fierce and I didn't want to mess with him. I gulped, "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to come here. I was just looking from the mountain across and saw this village." To my surprise, he smiled warmly, "Oh no, my dear I think you have mistaken me. Those people, even if you would say they were people (he chuckled), are not my servants, nor are they and family or friends of mine." Looking at my puzzled face, he carried on, "On one long, snowy day ago, I was walking up this mountain myself to find a hidden statue that contained my ancestors' secrets. I came across a tiny, tiny snow-covered house near a bush. First, I thought that it was a block of wood, but when I saw windows, I knew this was something. I bent down, and peeked into the hole, finding not but one, but a whole family of dwarfs. They were stuttering about in the house, each doing their own thing. Knitting, washing, cooking, some warming themselves near the fire, anything that humans would do. I started looking for more and sure enough, I found 8 more of these minute houses. Then, one of the dwarfs from a house came out and saw me, he quickly alerted the other dwarfs and houses and then everyone came out. They all looked terrified, it was quite funny actually, all whispering frantically to each other and glancing at me every once in a while. Soon, I told them if they knew where this statue was. At first, they didn't really get what I mean so I told them what it was called. Immediately, they told me if I went further down the mountain, I would find a pool of clouds, I had to jump on and they would already know where I was going. Sure enough, when I found the clouds, they took me to a place where the trees and plants were blooming, even though it was winter. Nature was beautiful. The dwarfs even came.

I found the statue and finally unlocked the truth about my ancestors. Ever since then, I made the dwarfs better homes but told them I had rules and restricted areas they couldn't go to. So, the reason why I shouted at them when I saw them was because this is where my granddad was planted, yes, this tree was my granddad. He was one of my last relatives that existed." He ended, as he looked at me, it felt like he was giving me the feeling of being x-rayed. I simply nodded, feeling quite tired.

Although it was morning, I was keen to get back home, I said goodbye to everyone and before I jumped onto the clouds, the man gave me what looked like a fragment of a mirror. "This is a two-way mirror, if you need me, just speak my name into the mirror and I will see you from my end of the mirror (he held up a piece of mirror just like mine). I might tell you this now, but I am your great-great grandfather. Yes, I did go missing a few years ago because I went looking for the statue. By the way, I'm DaoFu." I looked at him in horror, a memory clicked in my brain, exactly 7 years ago, I remembered my grandma sobbing in her bedroom because DaoFu went missing. She thought that he was dead, somewhere unknown. I didn't really know much back then, but I did know that everyone in my family was stressed. As I came back to the real world, I started into my great-great grandfathers eyes at didn't know what to do or say, so I just walked back to the cloud pit and made them take me back to the mountain.

When I was walking down the mountain, something clicked in my brain, I quickly took out my mirror my great-great grandfather gave me and spoke loud and clearly, "DaoFu!" At once, he appeared on my mirror and I hastily asked, "DaoFu, why were you looking for the hidden secret of your ancestors?" He looked half surprised and half calm when I asked him, "I was trying to find the fifth spirit they left me." He said simply. My mouth dangled open, was there really a thing as a fifth spirit? My thoughts bombarded me as I went back home but that didn't stop me from being too distracted. What was the fish spirit? I knew there was water, fire, earth, and wind, but what was the fifth one?

Suddenly, I woke up with a start, I gulped the fresh air and sat still, not sure what had happened. I got up drank a cup of water and I don't know what made me do it, but I started finding for the mirror in my dream. I had a feeling this mountain and village existed, but I wasn't sure. Some part of me was happy that this was a dream but the other part of me seemed down, I didn't really have any close relatives, my parents died when I was four and my step parents aren't the same. Yes, they are nice to me and all, but just having someone that will know me so well and loves me forever just isn't the same.....

The Magical Mountain Story

Harrow Beijing International School, Liu, Sophia – 13

The comet's tail spread across the dawn, a red slash bleeding above the golden land that shimmered with tremulous light like a wound in the pink and purple sky. The pallid winter sunray penetrated my vision. There was something different today, an edge in the vibrant morning sunlight that made my hackles rise, its the third year here, I remember clearly. It was a memory engraved into my mind and never to be flattened again.

My skin was drenched as the cotton sheet tangled around my legs, damped with sweat. The cotton stung onto the bruises, clinging onto my bloodstained legs as I squirmed at the horrendous pain as it tore me apart. My stomach churned, threatening to spill, clenching firmly, I blinked my eyes to make it adjust to the dazzling sunlight.

Then everything went black, and I find myself plummeting down the sky as it embraces me, the tender wind coating me. Suddenly, there was an unbearable pain igniting inside me as I forced my eyes shut, helpless in the sea of invincible wind overwhelmed my mind. Then the immense laughter of the hollow wind quietened in the distance, the pain began to dissipate, but I could still feel the power pulsating inside me.

I tried to scream, but a knot was strangling tighter and tighter on my throat.

Gods save me. I am going to die.

'Die. Die. Die.' A raven shrieked beside me incessantly as I continue to fall. Tears meandered down my face, slipping through between the thin lines of my moistened eyes as my childhood backfired me.

Then everything went blank.

Then there was a man looming above me. I winced as it entered my mind. This is not my memory, no. I remember clearly, everything.

Do you?

He grasped onto my arms and held them tight, digging into my skin like a serrated saw. His touch was scalding hot, currents of excruciating pain drowning my body inch by inch, devouring me into pieces. His story-book smile sharpening into fangs, dripping with dark crimson blood as his eyes thinned into two ferocious lines. Her skin burned hot against mine as my body was set with a blazing fire. I screamed, but nothing came out. My body disintegrated as the fire spreads across my body until there was nothing but a pile of steaming, charcoal black ashes. The last thing I saw is him with his fake saccharine smile.

'That's what you always wanted, am I correct?'

The icy courtesy in his voice was shattering me more.

'A curse. Your family and the bird was an obstacle to my success. And you child. Do you think they will believe in your frivolous words than mine? '

I screamed until my voice was hoarse and my throat throbbed, a chimney of smoke traveling and streaming up my windpipe, deteriorating and enhancing the pain in every inch of my throat until I feel my consciousness drift out of me. I can still feel my arms smoldered with flames where the claws were engraved.

The night captured every soul, hushed every noise until the world is a tedious, dull blankness, the whirlpool of nothingness. I stayed there, cringed on the callous mattress as torrents of time brushed against my cheeks. Who am I?

Who?

And everything turned white again,

I am dead. I must be.

Visions. Thousands. Millions. It illuminated the whiteness. It appeared simultaneously as it all scrolled down like watching millions of movies at a time.

I saw my owner, his silhouette towering over me. His hands spread like a spider on the sophisticated stone sculpture. His ebony face as white as dead men's bones as his prolonged fingers clenching onto the lion sculpture.

I saw it then. The golden mountain, a transcendent it was untouchable. It stretched across the horizon like the red and pink color coruscated like pink tourmalines under the shower of sunray of the winter sun. Master swiftly turned around and scrutinized me as his cold expression morphed into a cold stare, his face distorted. And my whole scene changed.

I was laying on my back as a wooden stick pummeled down. The log was like a frozen stalactite. Blood oozed down my spine as I grimaced, tightening my jaws as the consecutive pain strike me again and again. Then my opaque vision cleared, I saw my owner. Standing there, his hat casting a dreadful shadow over his long sullen face, it tilted to one side as a glimmer of dwindling sunlight slanted down, a boundary line that separated the dark silhouette and the vibrant color in the vivid sky.

Then my master spoke, his voice like thunder oscillating in the air.

"Now tell me. What is your connection with the golden mountain?"

Screams, millions in complete anguish were appearing in my mind.

I sobbed.

"I... don't know."

The next moment his hand was tightened onto my throat.

"Deception will only jeopardize your chances of survival." He snarled. "Answer again."

But I can't. He knew it.

I can sense hordes of people gathering around, and whispers arouse like grass susurrating under my feet.

He was choking me, blatant under everyone's eyes.

I can see the master talking again.

But his voice was dissipating into thin air.

Or.

Is it me who is fading away?

Living and dying, the latter was a better option. Wind fizzled like bees beside my ears. My eyelids fluttered open, and I discover myself in the middle of nowhere. Everything was white. The pellucid water beneath me a canopy for my scar, the surface glinting like iridescent scales. Hastily, I looked around myself and froze. Cotten still clung onto my entangled hair, my tattered thin layer of fabric clothing is still here.

I am not dreaming.

I examined around the place, trodding forwards as I felt the water current pressing against my knees. It is an unprecedented freedom—a kind of joy I have never experienced before. But at that moment. I heard a voice.

"Jo?"

I frowned, unmoving on my track. I did not ever been given a name, but this name was, however, familiar. To my instincts, I answered.

"Hello?"

"Does it hurt?"

I was startled by that question. I peeked around, trying to find the voice source until that girl spoke again.

"I'm not visible. It's useless trying to find me. I'm...only a voice in your mind...an imaginary friend."

My body tensed, a chill gradually crept up my shoulders like serpents crawling towards the nape of my neck. I always thought it was a delusion haunting me after the three years of torment—a delusion of somebody watching behind my back. But it came out to be true.

Then the whole world plunged into immense silence. The sound of the tranquil water underneath suddenly seem so reverberating in the air.

She began her story.

'Once, we lived in complete serenity. Being one of the most entrusted family to the dictator, therapist to the reverent beast—the Pheonix. The Pheonix was wide—spread to be a good omen, a symbol for peace. They reiterate our ancestor's words: 'The phoenix's fire that ignites the night' They said it averted wars and saved our kingdom from the verge of destruction. They say centuries ago, at a war we are doomed to lose, it soared into a night and dyed the sky blood red like splatters of paint tracing into the distance against the darkness. It returned to the old king's shoulders then, its claws like arthritic fingers of silver strings entwining securely around the king's armor. The enemy was dumbfounded, and so they succumbed and relented, and a peace treaty for twenty years was signed.

But Alas. What we feared has come.

The tyrant—our king, was a prudent man but an avaricious man, his thirst for power blinding his eyes. He told us he lived in a corporeal world, not a world with mythical creatures that surpass his power. He killed the Phoenix.'

Her voice was trembling.

'The...citizens...were outraged, their indignation arose like what the dictator expected. He made his response; he eliminated my family for failing our duty. Setting a hideous curse on me.' She winced. 'He cursed me to reincarnate right here and to be starved alive. To the citizen's satisfaction—sacrificed to the gods.'

Her whole voice was shaking with vexation.

I don't even know who I am. I woke up to the world endowed with the ability to speak, but a vacant memory awaiting to be restored. Live a life as a low servant for my master. I was interrogated with coercion every day. Being asked if I have any connection with the golden mountain. Beaten up if I tell them I don't know. At last, I raised my eyes.

But I was here.

In my damp and tiny cottage.

By my own.

Drifting away into the night as the translucent purple and blue clouds fell into twilight.

"I haven't told you. I am you. You are my next reincarnation. I am dead now. I have watched you for years they found you. The last few surviving explorers that belong here brought you with them. You were lying on the ground—blood trickling onto the grass like the blooming red blossom of April. Our home before was on the golden mountains, people called it the godlike mountain, just because people that do not belong there was not allowed inside. And nevertheless, slaughtered."

She leaned forwards, her voice muffled by her tears.

"Good night."

Abruptly she stopped.

"And let this sleep be eternal."

Home

Harrow Beijing International School, Wang, Eddie – 13

Warmth permeated the darkness of slumber. Slowly, slowly, yet surely, the world shimmered into existence, flooding into my consciousness. The curtains scintillated with soft rays of light, while the fresh echo of birdsong hung in the fresh morning. It was the dawn of a new day, the dawn of a renewed hope.

I arose from my bed, stretching my limbs to rid them of weariness, and slipped on my shoes. Yearning for the embrace of illumination, I sauntered across the wooden floorboards to the faintly glowing window frame and yanked the beige curtains apart. Brilliant radiance surged into the small area – the sun in full glory – like a phoenix bursting through the confines of its prison, unleashing the true extent of its might. The light coruscated onto the ornamental dragons upon the cerise carpet, igniting the mythological creatures' eyes with a passionate flame, almost as if they had passed into the realm of the living – the legend of 画龙点睛 became reality.

No longer capable of containing my enthusiasm, I strolled past unadorned bookshelves accommodating a few children's books, past multitudinously coloured oil paintings of the mountains, bursting out with exclamation onto the mountainside. Emerald blades of grass shone silver with fresh morning dew, an earthly reincarnation of the celestial tapestry of stars that dominated the night sky. A gentle breeze stirred the sweet mountain air, caressing my cheek lovingly. Mountain ranges and jagged peaks unfolded into the distance to the edges of my sight. The fiery sun was rising from the far off horizon, alighting the mists in a blaze of crimson. Bathing in its golden light, I welcomed the daybreak as I had done every day of my life. This was my true home.

But today, something was different – a slight, almost unperceivable disturbance in the calm ocean of time.

Today was the end.

In a single moment, everything came cascading down upon me. Realization of the truth unfolded. And the truth threatened to devastate, to suffocate, to choke. Today, yes, today, I was to leave the mountain, the beloved place I had spent all my life, forever. The imminent future cast a shadow into the depths of my heart.

“Li Jie!”

I swivelled around. A few metres away stood my grandmother. She was an elderly woman, quite petite in stature, with flowing white hair. Her face was round, and though etched with wrinkles, still bore the liveliness of youth, characterized by the warm smile forever imprinted upon it.

“Grandma!” I ran up to her.

“My dear,” she said. “Are you ready to leave this afternoon? Have you packed?”

“Yes, grandma.”

“Good boy,” she responded. “I’ll miss you.”

There was a tone of distinguishable sadness in her voice.

“Aren’t you coming?” I eagerly inquired.

She decided not to say anything, but instead stared at me with those deep dark eyes of hers. Through them, she conveyed a message, unable to be expressed by mere vocality. Through the lifelong bond we shared, I looked earnestly back into her gaze, striving to understand it. But when I gasped her meaning, I was at an immediate loss for words.

“But...but...” my voice trailed away.

“No, I’m afraid not. But I am sure that you’ll be fine in the city – just imagine going to school! Your parents will take good care of you. And you can come back every summer too.” She wrapped her arms around me, stroking my hair gently with her hands, weathered from years of hard labour.

Grandma was born of the mountain itself. Her passion, her determination, her vigour, and all the other constituents of her ephemeral body seemed to be bound the eternal spirit of the rising and falling massif. She was just as loving, just as unwavering.

I anticipated, dreaded, the moment when the car would come. To pass my time, I sat down on a stone outcrop, staring aimlessly at the ever-rising sun bestowing its light upon the world. I was at peace to think, to ponder meticulously, yet I could not think of what was to come. Or maybe I dared not. Sorrow clawed at my soul. Of all that I would lose, there was the hard farewell to my grandmother. She had brought me up on the mountain, and generously looked after me for 7 years, while my parents earned a living in the city. Now I was going to join them in that mysterious place. That left grandma alone by herself. How could she possibly cope? Sick with the idea, I forced it into the most obscure corner of my mind, and instead focused again on the sun. It was the only everlasting, unchanging object, after all.

But, alas, some time later – I knew not how long had passed – the sound of tires on soil reached my ears. Slowly rolling up the mountain path was an old, battered, grey automobile. It came to a halt before me, throwing dust into the air. A door opened and a thin figure clambered out. It was a man, wearing a dusty jacket and bleached jeans. My dad had come to take me.

“How’s the past month been son?” he called as he walked over.

“Um... great, I suppose.”

“So, are you ready to go to school?”

I remained silent. Grandma emerged from the hut carrying my travelling bag.

“Of course he is!” she exclaimed to my dad. Then, noticing my speechlessness, she turned to me and asked, “Aren’t you, Li Jie?”

Something snapped in my mind. I turned away, sprinting up the hill as if my life was at risk, screaming my resolution of staying on the mountain. At that moment I didn’t care about what I was doing, where I was going, I only thought of escaping the miserable evil that wanted to take me from my home.

Behind me, the rough voice of my dad yelled, “Where do you think you are going Li Jie? Get in the car you disobedient boy!”

However, grandma stopped him, “Son, we cannot force him to do anything. It is his choice.”

My choice.

That halted me.

Yes, it is my choice.

I carefully weighed the options. *Was I willing to do this? Could I really leave all of this behind? My childhood? My home?*

I ardently sought an answer from deep within.

But there is so much to life. So many wonders I have yet to experience. Then, something my grandmother told me years ago resurfaced in my memory. *Li Jie, change is a fundamental part of life. We need to learn to accept it.*

So, was it okay for me to leave?

I already knew the answer.

Yes.

I compelled myself to move my feet. Gradually, step by step, I made my way back to the car. As I neared, and my choice became evident, both my dad's and grandma's faces lit up in joy. My dad extended a hand. *The gesture of acceptance.* The final decision. I took it.

The soft monotone rumble of the car engine droned on. Sitting in the backseat, I gazed out of the window at the now-distant peak. From afar, it took an imposing stature, like an ancient supernatural pillar created countless aeons ago to hold up the sky itself, but its magnificence remained unmatched. The sadness that plagued my heart was now washed away. Home is where the heart is, and, though I have left, my heart would remain in this beautiful place, always. The sun was now setting, its inferno dimming as it approached the horizon. The moon would then rise, and then the sun would be reborn once more. Yes, just as the cycle of the sun and moon would never cease, the challenges I would face are endless. But I was ready for whatever came my way. Taking one last glance at the mountain before it faded away, I turned to focus on the journey ahead.

The Magical Mountains of China

Harrow Beijing International School, Wang, Letian – 13

He fell. And fell.

ZhangWei's eyes fluttered open as he realized that he was drenched in his sweat. Great. Another night, same nightmare. The familiar scene played through his mind. He tried to block out the dream, to control it from forming, but of no avail. It was still dark outside, and ZhangWei wanted to get some sleep but was afraid to fall back into unconsciousness, should the dream choose to attack him again. Hanging just above the waterline of sleep, ZhangWei lay on his bed dreadingly, as if his soul has escaped him and evaporated into the dull air around.

The weather outside was calm, with a mild, brisk wind breezing through the trees. The sky was as clear as ever, and stars were twinkling brightly in the night. The moon hung there, like a white balloon inflated to full size enlightened, but only lost in the vastness of space.

Morning arrived way too quickly. The day was, as usual, dull and boring. Going to work, having lunch, daily exercises, back to work, and back home at 10:00 p.m. straight. At first glance, ZhangWei looked about the most normal person you could see.

He had no clue how special he was, or how he would change the world...forever.

As ZhangWei rested upon the latex mattress, he rethought his day: he thought about the holiday he planned to go to Huangshan—he was looking forward to that, as it meant that he was finally allowed to take a break from work after persuading his superiors. Everything on that holiday was planned out perfectly. What could go wrong? What could go haywire in such a place as Huangshan?

What ZhangWei did not know at the moment was that everything was about to go very, very wrong.

On the first day of the holiday, ZhangWei rose early. He could not contain his excitement anymore. Every bit of the waiting and craving all added up to this day. It was time to go.

The adrenaline pumped through his body as if he had just received an electric shock. Even the 4 hours of mundane driving didn't seem so bad. The brilliant sun shone over the car's window, pouring into his sight. It was a cloudless day, and a flock of pigeons were flying past, forming a triangular shape in the sky as they soared through the air. ZhangWei dreamed that he was as free as a bird, without the shackles chained by his work. He just kept driving and enjoying the sceneries that mother nature gifted him. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he noticed a little road to his right. It was barely visible, hidden by clusters of bushes, and it seemed to lead up into the mountains.

ZhangWei didn't pay much notice at first—after all, it was just a road—but eventually, curiosity overtook him. He knew that he shouldn't drive off course, that he should stick to the plan, that he was only several miles away from his destination, but the temptation was too hard to resist—it was simply the power of human nature. It was like that phrase, 'curiosity killed the cat'. All ZhangWei cared about was that 'satisfaction brought it back'. He pressed on his brakes, looked through the rear-view mirror, and hesitated for a second. He let out a little sigh and reversed his

car back to the spot where he saw the tiny road. As he got closer, he saw that there was a trail of footprints—only a single set of them—stretching into the abyss of the mysterious mountains. ZhangWei finally gave in to the temptations, turning right and driving in the direction of the trail, leaving the main, safe road behind and entering the path into the mystical mountains.

ZhangWei turned on the headlights of his 2018 grey Range Rover, the prized possession that he'd bought with his three-year savings. After some time driving into the unknown, ZhangWei had lost track of time. He didn't even have much of a clue whether it was day or night, seeing as the tall, wide trees obscured his vision of the sky. Making matters worse, he'd forgotten to wear his watch and his phone was out of battery, which was peculiar because he seemed to remember it being full when he'd left, and he hasn't used it that much. Exhaustion soon took hold of him, and his eyes began to get heavier and heavier as his stomach started to rumble. He decided that he'd take a rest and sank into his plush leather seat. ZhangWei closed his eyes and fell instantly into the sweet, oblivious balm of sleep.

Hours ticked by unnoticed by ZhangWei, and as he opened his eyes, he felt utterly astonished—darkness had disappeared all around him, and he was lying in a snug and comfy bed, with god's warmth coming in from the window. ZhangWei took a moment to take it all in. He appeared to be in a thoughtfully furnished room, with windows on the left and a door directly opposite the bed. All the things in it were made from natural resources, mainly carved poplar. The room itself was quite large, containing a bathroom with a large tub. Most interesting of all, there was a little piece of paper on his bedside table, and on it, scratched in a sort of messy handwriting, was a message: "Do not leave this room."

Once again, ZhangWei was at a crossroad. The voices inside his head started debating with each other, something that happened a lot when he was in a dilemma.

"You should be bold! Walk out the front door and see what you might find," the confident him declared.

"No! Of course not. You've already risked it once and that was how you ended up here, of all places," the more nervous he argued.

This little debate continued for a few minutes (maybe even a few hours, who knows) before ZhangWei made the final decision. Once again, his curiosity got the better of him, and once again, he walked towards the unknown, barely conscious of the possible aftermaths of this particular action. The door looked relatively safe, even somehow inviting, and ZhangWei walked over and pushed them open, subsequently stepping into his destiny.

The door slowly creaked open. Little by little, ZhangWei started to see what was behind it, and little by little, he regretted opening the door at all. Behind it was a balcony—a very large one, with no fences on the side. It was high up the mountains, located on a cliff. What was worse was that a young Yinglong was guarding the door. ZhangWei studied mythology at work, so he recognised the dragon instantly. He had never believed in the myths in his entire life, and he certainly did not expect to see a living, breathing proof. The Yinglong, now awoken and aroused from his deep sleep, did not look friendly. The fiery gaze in its eyes gave ZhangWei the impression that it was not pleased to be woken from its slumber. Suddenly, he felt small, weak,

and puny compared to that dragon. Getting eaten alive by a fifteen-foot-long beast was not on his to-do list for the holidays.

ZhangWei froze. He wanted to move, to run for his life, to avoid the dragon's tail from cutting through his spine, but his legs were frozen.

A million questions swam through ZhangWei's mind: Will I die? What can I do? How do dragons even exist?

Alas, he couldn't answer any of those. The dragon charged forwards, and at the last second, ZhangWei unfroze. He knew that he was no match for the creature, which left him with only two options: either stay, get swallowed by the dragon and die, or jump off the balcony and die. Neither were too inviting at the moment. Then, he saw a wide silk sheet spread on the couch. Using all his courage and determination to stay alive, ZhangWei snatched the sheet, and, closing his eyes and using it as a make-shift parachute, jumped.

Of course, the dragon didn't follow (apparently even dragons were smarter than him) but ZhangWei also had absolutely no experience on how to stay afloat in the air.

It soon became clear to him that a silk sheet could not be used as a parachute. Cold air rushed past his body, and Zhangwei could already see the ground approaching fast.

Nope, he thought to himself, I am not going to die like this.

However, there wasn't much he could do about the situation, so he closed his eyes, bracing for the impact...

...Nothing happened.

Zhang Wei opened his eyes and realized that he was still falling. He looked up. There was nothing there. He had long fallen far from the comfort of solid ground. The Huangshan was above him, suspended in mid-air. Zhang Wei looked back down. He could not see a landing.

And so he fell. And fell.

And fell.

And maybe, just maybe, that was his destiny.

The Magical Mountains of China

Harrow Beijing International School, Xue, Haotong – 13

Once upon a bygone time there was a boy who lived in the magical mountains of China.

The graceful lithe shadows of the tall willow trees caressed my face. I gently bled into consciousness, then wakefulness. I sat up, a jolt of tranquil arcing through me, guiding me to the present. The day had begun. I looked around, each breath another invigorating presence. I was on an elevated stone slab, perfectly rounded by the gradual wear of waterdrops, glistening timidly. To my right, an unassuming but vibrant abode was perched in the dark brown soil, its unpigmented walls and ornamented ceilings encircling the courtyard I was in. Overhead, a vast swathe of cool, iridescent leaves wavered in the morning breeze, casting a greenish hue onto the courtyard. I supposed sleeping on a stone slab would have been uncomfortable, but in the years since my mother's passing, I'd come to be content with anything the mountain offered.

He led a peaceful life.

Directly ahead, I spotted a faded brown pitcher, carved roughly in a rounded shape with a large spherical body just small enough for me to carry ending in a light brown opening at the top. Next to it were several musty scrolls I used to record my travels. Time to get to work.

One of nothing but survival.

I slowly stood from my makeshift bed, stumbling a bit from the vertigo and slipping into a pair of adobe-colored pants, and walked over to the pitcher. With a heave, I picked it up, cradling it so that it doesn't fall and strolled out of the courtyard, mentally going over my trek for the day to a nearby creek, where I could resupply on water and stay the night before planning out the next day. I gingerly bent down and with a flick of my arm, collected my scrolls and walked out of the courtyard.

He carried the oppressive burden of loneliness and the numbing finality of always knowing where to go.

Save the seldom utterance of alarm when I trip over the occasional log, I remained silent for most of the next segment of the journey, content with the mellifluous flow of creek water and the chirping of birds overhead as company. Though the winding mountain path I took was supposed to snake around the edges of Huangshan, the thick canopies of sycamores obscured most of the view down the side of the mountain. To the other side, a wall of caramel rock stretched endlessly upwards, dotted with the occasional mass of greenery.

But he'd grown to be content with nothing but loneliness as a finality.

A holler rang out from directly ahead. I paused, listening, noiseless amusement crept through me. Another holler. A velvety rustle of leaves. A flash of maroon. I smiled. I gently set down my jar and ran ahead. I bent down and picked up the little critter. It stared up at me, its blue green eyes a sun of joy to my otherwise mundane day. It cocked its little head. My heart melted. I wanted to keep it – make my home his. But alas, no. I haven't the time nor the room for a companion. My smile turned wistful. It's always been like this – me on my own with nothing but the clothes on my bag, trekking across these mountains, not to be bothered with or bothering anything else.

Or had he?

I kept going.

The journey was long – one I had to make alone – but it never got old. For the next few minutes, I cleared my mind of all but the wonderful feeling of peace as the quietly alluring rushing of clear water grew louder as I neared the spring. A few minutes later, my journey was finally rewarded with my emergence from the forest into a large granite clearing. To my right, was a Chinese painting brought to vibrant animation. Clouds. Tremendous, rolling clouds, draped over jagged mountains of all sizes, like a translucent veil, gently caressing looming giants of rock,

crinkled with wear but standing defiantly against the wind. Illuminating the entire scene was an angelic glow emanating from the east, it's yellow hue a laipsing presence of warmth and serenity. Greenery dotted the mountains. I grinned at the magnificent scenery. I admit that I was fairly oblivious to the outside world, but I doubted such beauty existed elsewhere of these mountains.

He tried to convince himself that he had, pretending to enjoy every view he came across. Quite difficult when he knew his stay in these mountains may as well be imprisonment.

Nevertheless, the view wasn't what I was here for. I turned around to yet another majestic sight. This time, a waterfall – what seemed like a million tons of water crashed down from the top of a rocky hillside a dozen meters above me, the droplets it sprayed a formless cloud of moisture randomly settling on greenery and the occasional passing creature, eventually joining the iridescent pool the waterfall created. I regarded the waterfall with excitement, taking mental note of its proximity to my home. I walked forward, bending down to wash my face and drink before filling my pitcher.

Even more so when he had never known anything but these mountains – which he'd come to recognize as beautiful – and the fringes of survival.

As the clear cool water meandered down my face, a thought struck me. I was never one to believe in epiphany – the notion that great revelation could be made in single instants of brilliance had always bored me. After all, there was no point in great philosophical realization when I have never and will not ever be anything greater than a tiny part of these mountains. But as I washed myself in the creek, the water cleansing my body of grime and dust, I could've sworn that I'd come to one.

Perhaps he'd accept it.

Everything is meaningless. That was the hard, stone-cold truth.

Perhaps I could fool myself enough that the illusion of meaning could come to be. But no. In the end, even if I am forever, even if these mountains and their memory of me will stand the wear of time, it will be meaningless. Fate, even true, final fate, is meaningless in the face of the simple fact that all – even the flow of time itself – will come to an end. Even true immortality will eventually become nothing but consciousness in an endless see of meaninglessness where no amount of consciousness could make any difference. The only true meaning – meaning to stand the final sand of time comes from surpassing meaning itself.

Even on a smaller scale, I will never amount to anything more than a lonely boy living his lonely life in these lonely mountains. Everything was laid out in front on me – the winding mountain path, the tranquil flow of creek water, the exhilarating whistle of wind. Then death. Nothing I will ever do will be known by any other than myself. No matter how brilliant I was, no matter how much merit I deserved, I will die without meaning. The worst part was, I knew this. I *knew* that I will die meaningless. I *knew* that there was no hope for anything greater. Perhaps that was the most terrifying part – the mirthless understanding of the finality of my road in life granted to me long before it's realization. How cruel!

And yet, there was no escaping it – existence is but the paradoxical trap of meaninglessness finality for mortals and meaningless infinity for immortals, locked in a vicious cycle. I thought of my scrolls, a record of my everyday life. Perhaps one day someone would find them. But even then they will be nothing but proof of the fact that my existence is nothing but an endless dredge.

What he did not realize, however, was that sometimes, meaning is created not by accomplishment, merit, but by true appreciation of one's own beauty, for the universe and all that shapes it is but the endless tyranny of trying to make something comparable to itself but never succeeding if not for the willingness of certain people to not surpass but to truly understand the endlessness that is their own existence.

Perhaps there was another way. A method to circumvent meaning and life's apparent gaping void of it. No, there wasn't. But one thing's clear – since meaning is only an illusion anyway– I might as well end it. I stood up, my face still a mask of serenity and fulfillment. My pitcher and all my scrolls lay at my feet apathetically. No rush of euphoria overcame me as I walked to the edge of the cliff. No longing of a better life – for there was none. Nothing but the intimacy of my sudden realization to accompany me as I stepped to the edge of the cliff.

But alas, acceptance was not an option, for the only way one controls true meaning is to deprive the world of the meaning it once held.

In other words, the only control one has over their own fate is to end their own life.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Harrow Beijing International School, Zhang, Annie – 11

Even the dust mites floating about in the air were luckier than her, Eliza thought as she slumped against her car seat. They were nice seats too, very new. The whole car was new, bought by her father for this annoying trip to the mountains. Eliza hated the mountains, they were the reason why her parents had gotten divorced. She remembered the look of disgust on her mother's face, when Eliza's father had chosen the mountains over her. Eliza didn't blame her mother, who would want to live with a man who chose nature over her. Eliza thought about how beautiful her mother was, how compassionate she was, how warm her smile was compared to her cold father. Who never seemed to smile, except when he was in the open air. That was why she chose to live in the city, the capital, just to spite her father. Eliza loved to see the contempt on her father's face when he had to drive into the city, a place where nature was constricted to small splotches. Eliza must have dozed off, for when she opened her eyes again, all she saw was a vast forest. Thick and green, beautiful too, but not as pretty as her mother. Eliza adored her mother, who was an accomplished and independent woman. CEO of an international company, and nobody deserved her. She sighed, and looked once again out of the window. There was a sign, advertising a cabin in the woods. In the advertisement, there was a happy family, the parents leaning into each other, and the kids, with fake smiles plastered onto their faces. Eliza snorted, she wished that life was as amazing as the advertisement said it was. She breathed in that new car smell, a sort of leathery smell, the kind that her mother hated, because it made her carsick. Eliza believed that she too got carsick on this kind of smell, insisting that just inhaling it made her head spin. Unfortunately, her dad thought that this was poppycock, and bought the idiotic car anyway. She groaned, it wasn't the first time that she had groaned on this trip, and it certainly wouldn't be her last. "What?" Eliza was startled by her father's reply. His voice was deep, and gravely, always with a hint of danger. During the last 53 times she had groaned throughout this trip, her father had generally ignored her. As usual. There was a reason Eliza's father had noticed her groan, and she knew perfectly well why. She had made the groan super loud and super annoying, so that it was impossible to ignore. Still, her father rarely cared about her presence, acting as if the bundle of atoms that made up her had never been created before, much less with help from him. "What?" Eliza's father repeated again, this time with agitation and impatience. *Oh, and he's the one who's impatient*, grumped Eliza. Still, she knew better than to argue with her father, she simply replied in a sweet voice, "how much longer?" She watched her father's face change from white, to red, to purple, and then back to its tan color again. "Ten minutes" was the short, curt reply. Yup, this was her father, the complete opposite to her fun, cheerful, lovable mother. How they came to marry and create her, Eliza had no idea. "By the way Tan—" her father started, "it's Eliza" she cut in with a curt smile. Her father gave a cold smile, the kind of smile that wasn't quite fake, there was some warmth in it, and yet it never seemed to reach his eyes. It was very charming, and highly disarming. "Yes, the English name that you gave yourself" Eliza glared at her father. "Do you know anything about the mountain, which is called Huashan, we are going to?" And without waiting, launched into a lecture.

It was only an hour into the hike, and already Eliza was sick of her father. He had scoffed at her when she tripped over a bush, and then there was the rock incident, which left Eliza in a sour mood. After another hour, they arrived at a clearing. It was dusty, crawling with insects, and had no decoration. "Is this where we're staying?" Eliza asked, curious. She had never gone camping before, her mother insisting that it was full of germs, and unhealthy. But here she was, in the middle of a germ ridden clearing, getting ready to sleep. "Do you know how to gather wood?" Her father didn't even look at her. As usual, but she wasn't really bothered by this. She shook her head no. Her father turned away disgusted, but Eliza didn't care. She glared at her father's long shaggy hair, which always covered his features. Revealing nothing but two coal black eyes, which were always filled with contempt. She swore that she heard her father mutter the words "useless". What? Her father was calling *her* useless? The man, who had broken her mother's heart, who had never even cared about was calling *HER* useless? Eliza was furious, normally, she wouldn't bother about her father. But this was different. Normally, she wasn't out camping with her father. Normally, her father had ignored her, and just taken her for ice cream. Normally, her father didn't call her an idiot. Eliza was seething now. Even though she was bleary eyed, she was determined to show her father that she was not a useless doll. Stumbling and grabbing for purchase, she made her way into the woods. Eliza was confident that finding a few

twigs couldn't be that hard. But, she was wrong. She had strolled for a few minutes, groping around in the dark, when it came to her that she should probably turn the flashlight on so that she could see. And then it hit her. She had forgotten to bring her flashlight. "Eliza, how could you forget a flashlight?" She muttered to herself, as she turned around looking for the camp. Except there was no camp. She had wandered so far into the woods that she couldn't find the clearing. "Alright" Eliza murmured, "I'm alone, in a dark scary wood, with no food, shelter or light. Well, there's bound to be light in the morning." She stood, slowly, and thought *well, I haven't been eaten yet, so that's good*. Then she remembered that she was alone. Speaking to herself was the same as thinking to herself. That was kind of creepy but, *what was that?* Eliza whipped her head around. There, in the bushes! A lantern was glaring at her, *glaring?* She must be losing her marbles, Eliza shook her head. Was it her imagination or did the lantern come closer? "Oh look, it has teeth!" She muttered deliriously. Wait a minute, teeth? Eliza leapt to her feet, *nothing like a toothy animal to wake you up*. She thought, as she raced away into the woods. It was not a cloudy night, and yet no stars in sight. Or they were out but the trees were blocking them. No worries, she couldn't read them anyway. Then, Eliza saw something straight ahead, it was moving, and she was moving towards it! With a screech she stopped, whipping her head around. Her eyes, looking, searching, for the monster that she knew was there. Then she saw, it, a pair of eyes, licking its pointy death tools. Eliza curled up, and closed her eyes, waiting for the monster to come near her. It crept closer and closer, Eliza could feel its breath on her neck, like a gust of summer wind. And then, a warm tongue licked her face. Eliza looked up, a puppy, was licking her face very enthusiastically. "What have you got there Nella?" Said a grainy voice, Eliza looked up, there was a man, who was more like a grizzly bear than a human. "A little girl eh?" Eliza nodded slowly. "Well, you'd better come with us then."

Eliza looked out into the ocean blue, standing on the cliff on which the bear man, named Gerald, had found her. She had learnt a lot with him, over the years which she had spent in the forest. Turns out that the forest wasn't as bad as it seemed. There were cures in the forest that could save lives. But this time, she wasn't going anywhere into the forest. "Bye girl, take Nella with you." Eliza turned, tears in her eyes. "Go home, where you belong." At that, the man left. Eliza sighed, and turned towards the direction, of the city. Leaving, one of the amazing mountains of china behind. And heading towards "home". She remembered what Gerald said, "it may be hard, but nothing is easy girlie. The mountains may be amazing, but it is not your home." Eliza smiled, and patted her dog, "what do you think girl?" Her dog simply licked her happily and trotted forward. Eliza let out a laugh and followed.

The World Below

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Cheng, Jessica – 12

Father always said Mother's words were rubbish. There was something below us? Impossible. Our kind were so educated and talented in every aspect that it was utterly preposterous that we wouldn't have noticed people living below us. Impossible!

Mother died a year ago. She killed herself. Father said she never cared for our perfect family, which is why she did such a thing. He suspected something like that would happen as soon as she started sprouting words of madness, about places in the 'World Below'. She prattled on about how breathtakingly beautiful it was: where birds sang elegantly, where mountains reached for the heavens, where meadows and fields stretched as far as the clouds in the sky.

But obviously not, he would scoff, all mountains were short and stubby, our home – our Clouds – was glorious, not to be compared to those ugly mountains; how disrespectful of her to compare those *things* to our Clouds – to our Sky?

Father would sometimes peer out the windows and wonder what Mother saw in the dull sight before us. Plain mountains and plain fields, plain grass and plain rocks. What was so special about that?

I used to be very close to Mother. She would tell me stories about everything, about the supposed 'World Below' and our Clouds. I would often ponder why Mother would throw away what our world considered a 'perfect' life. What could have been so bad here that she would have wanted to leave – forever?

All of a sudden, I felt an overwhelming urge to jump off the nearest cloud and plunge head-first into the unknown. Mother would have approved, she said that: 'Life is a journey, do what scares you most, and you will finally start the journey of life.'

Jumping off the Clouds. It was a ridiculous idea, but no one would notice I was gone anyway; Father was too busy obeying every command of the King that he didn't have time to bother with me, his youngest son. As for my siblings, they didn't live with me and Father anymore, each and every one of them was married to rich royals or something of that sort.

No one cared about me anymore as soon as Mother left. If no one would notice, there was nothing to worry about, nothing stopping me from free-falling into the 'World Below'.

The more I thought about the absurd idea, the more I was convinced that I could do this. Nothing was planned, nothing was arranged; for once, I had no idea what to expect there. The anticipation, the thrill, the excitement were all so mind-boggling. The prospect of leaving my perfect world forever was delightful. I would never have to listen to Father and his idiotic ideas again.

Swiftly, my mind was made. Mother was right; maybe this 'World Below' would be interesting. It would be an adventure, an experience of a lifetime! My confidence grew and grew like a flourishing flower; I could do this.

One step at a time, one foot in front of another, slow and steady. I glanced back one last time at my home – my prison for the last 16 years. Looking down into the unknown... I plummeted into the dark void beneath me.

The air around me dropped by a hundred degrees; everything was a blur as I fell rapidly. My breathing staggered as I saw that I was headed nearer and nearer to the ground.

BAM! It was as if a tornado had hit the realm of the 'World Below'. I dropped aggressively onto the ground. Hurriedly, I stumbled around – blinded by the light – and tried to look for something – anything – to place my bruised hand on. I touched... something wooden? Cautiously, I opened my eyes to see a sign: "Mountains of Huangshan".

I looked around, and it hit me that I was free at last! Joy fluttered in my stomach. Here I was, in the World Below – the Mountains of Huangshan. This was more exquisite than anything I ever imagined.

I gaped at the stunning scene before my eyes. Birds of all kinds soared above me, as if they were enjoying their freedom, just like I was. Dandelion fluffs danced around, causing my nose to tickle with glee. Soft green fern surrounded the earth, the feeling of nature and creation was flying everywhere. The scent of wild flowers overwhelmed my senses, everything here was just so amazing.

At that moment, the thought of home and the ‘perfect’ world I lived in disgusted me. A world in the Sky where we had no freedom, no liberty, no decisions of our own. I stood there paralyzed, how did I live in that world, where the *real* perfect world existed, right below me?

All my life, I had been hidden in shadows by people around me, not knowing the truth. I had been lied to; I had been told that there was nothing below us. The World Below was just stories to scare youngsters with. But there was nothing scary here in the Mountains of Huangshan, it was just rainbows and sunshine – literally.

At that very moment it dawned on me: this was when I *really* started living; the life before me was just a series of orders and expectations. Here I was, living *my* life, the way that *I* want to live it. No one could twist me again into someone as shallow as the person I once was – living an empty life without meaning. The people of the Clouds were special, there was no doubt about that, but others were too. It was just that we boasted and bragged our way to the top, about how advanced we were, how we got to live in the Sky, how we left all the puny people below to death and war.

Nevertheless, the World Below was just as beautiful and fair as the Clouds, just as it was different. Here, I was absolutely *free*, while up in the Sky, it was like an empty cage that I was trapped in.

Mother had been right all along, there was no *real* life in the Clouds, it was just a prison – however splendid it may be – just a beautiful prison. But here in the World Below, I could lead a better life, without anyone ruling me. I could start *living*.

A feeling of contentment washed over me, this was a place of real beauty; the World Below, the Mountains of Huangshan.

Somewhere Out There

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Cheng, Katelyn – 12

Hundreds of deep, boot-prints traced the fresh white newly fallen snow as a group of middle aged discoverers trekked the proud mountains of Huangshan that reached up to the clouds. They searched and searched looking for treasure from the tip of the mountains to the deep green grass that filled the land until the glowing orange sun started to fall. They went from mountain to mountain digging for hundred year old fossils and hidden treasure that was said to have been found in the mountains of Huangshan before. They dug in unison checking through every piece of snow. Every bit of snow they dug aside, a piece of hope left their bodies. They found nothing, leaving their hearts devastated.

The leader of the group shouted, “Head back! We ain’t going to find anything here!” All the tired out discoverers’ worn in leather boots traced the snow yet once again as they mumbled tiredly to each other returning home for the day.

All of them except for one. One younger man’s dream was to find something. Something extraordinary. And he *knew* that this was the place. His name was Lewis. Lewis pulled his scratched, grey fogged up goggles off and his entire sight turned to colour. His cold purple lips could feel the slight wind as the cold breeze touched his face. The smell of fresh snow and nature filled his nose in one breath as he gazed star-struck, into the beautiful blue clouds and the orange-yellow sunset as it warmed his body. Lewis was too busy admiring his sights that were as pretty as a picture that he didn’t notice the rest of his team had already left him behind.

He screamed, he shouted, he looked, but no one was there. He was alone. The sky turned darker and darker. The wind grew stronger and stronger. And Lewis started to panic. The sky eventually turned as dark as a black hole, and the wind howled as it blew Lewis’ hair side to side passing his frightened face. Afraid, Lewis quickly checked his electric watch that was nearly out of battery, desperately looking for help. Lewis stared in disbelief as he watched the darkening screen of his watch display a sign “no battery left”. A small red light which quickly turned black flashed in his face. He had lost connection.

Lewis rubbed his freezing face onto his deep army green coloured down jacket as his eyes started to become weary and his vision started to blur. But he knew he couldn’t rest just yet, he needed to find a safe place to rest for the night. Barely opening his eyes, Lewis walked slowly like a zombie one step at a time looking for a place to stay. He suddenly got too tired to walk and a quick gust of wind wrapped around his body as he collapsed onto the soft snow.

During the night, glowing stars sat amongst the jet-black sky, looking over Lewis as he laid on the mountain. The long snowy night had Lewis’ body freezing as cold as an ice cube. His fingers were shaking, and his nails and lips were turning as purple as grapes. The mischievous wind quickly woke Lewis, pushing him from side to side. Lewis quickly sat up, rapidly checking his surroundings. As he sat up, the purple and orange coloured sunrise had Lewis in shock, rubbing his eyes checking if this was all a dream. Silence filled the mountains as Lewis took a deep breath, trying to stand up. His body was still numb from the coldness, but Lewis once again had forgotten, he was all alone and he didn’t have any food and he had lost ALL connection with the city.

Alert, Lewis knew he *needed* to find food. With his stomach rumbling, Lewis scanned the deep mountains for food. He went from mountain to mountain, tree to tree, but nothing was found. He then remembered his childhood favourite book of the Huangshan Mountains. He suddenly started to dig like a beaver through his overfilled backpack, and right at the bottom was the book. He opened his book, remembering all his memories of the past, flipping through the crinkled up pages that were almost falling apart. He found one page and read the following lines: “Gracie knew she was lost, and needed to find some food, so she hiked and hiked past all the mountains and discovered a secret village! The secret village’s name was Huangshan Village, and when Gracie entered, she saw an unbearable amount of food, from dumplings to noodles, they had everything.....” This book had Lewis even more hungry than he’d ever been before, his stomach was roaring. Even though that book that Lewis had was a children’s book, and probably wasn’t real, that was his only hope. Lewis was determined.

Hoping for luck, Lewis followed the cartooned map of the book, carefully trying to figure out what was saying, as over all these years, the writing and print on the book started to fade. This was Lewis' only hope, so he kept on walking, keeping his head high like a lion. One step more he took, one step closer he was to food. After hours and hours of walking, Lewis finally reached his "destination" his tired and sweaty body was still numb from the cold. His fingers were now blistered and snow stuck to his clothes from the snowstorms he conquered on the way. "Finally!" Lewis shouted with all the energy he had left. Now all that was left for him to do was find the hidden village. But it wasn't going to be that simple, Lewis walked around checking through every centimetre of the land, but nothing was found. In complete disbelief, Lewis was in shock as he looked around and nothing. Nothing! He was in the middle of nowhere.

Lewis quickly dropped to the floor, still disappointed. Lewis shut his tired eyes, as a small drop of water left his eyes and quickly turned to ice as it slid down his face. Lewis turned around, and rubbed his teary eyes to find a frozen sign that exclaimed " Huangshan Village". Lewis shot up like a rocket and quickly ran to his destiny. He couldn't believe that his book was actually real! This was a miracle! Running like a crazy woman, Lewis entered the Huangshan village, and colourful festival lights brightened his eyes, and the smell of fresh food entered his nose. The people in the Huangshan village were wonderful, they were extremely helpful and fed Lewis like a baby. Noodles, dumplings, and soup entered his angry stomach and Lewis was saved. He was even offered a place to stay by the caring village people. As he entered his room, he saw colourful handmade bedsheets and wall hangings, beautiful flowers and plants, and his eyes were teary once again, but this time, it was happy tears. The day quickly passed and Lewis was the happiest he'd ever been, he had good food, a nice place to stay, and even friendly neighbours.

But that wasn't the end. It was exactly nine minutes past 12, as a loud screeching noise grew louder. Lewis awoke off his handmade sewn bedsheets. He stared at a rising glowing green light outside his window, and quickly ran outside in his blue and white striped pyjamas. Lewis burst through the village door like a soldier, quickly scanning his surroundings for danger.

He looked at the rough ground. Huge green scaly feet with claws as sharp as knives. He looked in the sky. A gargantuan reptile face with glowing bright green eyes that were as bright as glow sticks. He looked up as far as he could. Dark thunder clouds circled around the monster. "Please, help" – Lewis.

The Shifting of Duplicity

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hildebrand, Isabella – 14

“They are harmless, I swear to you. They have nothing but good intentions. This dragon, it saved my life!” I doubted they’d understand a single strangled word that stumbled out of my quivering lips. I tried to control the weeping, yet to no avail. King Bohai gazed at me with pity, “Xing’s lost his mind. Go.” With the wave of his hand, 3 broad-shouldered men heaved me from the floor— through resplendent doors, over the gold path, into my village. I said goodbye to her: Biyu. Tears spilled over her silken skin yet she smiled and cupped my cheeks as if it were another ordinary day; as if I’d see her the next morning. I would not. Soon I was being dragged out of the region entirely and her familiar grip was torn from me. I was thrust out the settlement's gates and down a hill.

I truly only had a fraction of understanding as to why any of this was happening— why I was accused of being a spy, why so many people were telling me I’d gone mad.

You see, I snuck out of our village with Biyu and slipped over the side of a rocky mountain; I hit my head and forgot everything apart from her. I woke between the claws of a brilliant red dragon that flew me over mountains and placed me in the center of my settlement after curfew had settled over my village. It left after introducing itself, Tiamat. People questioned my disappearance the next day, as if they knew me. They might have— I just couldn’t recall ever knowing them.

This is what I tried to explain to the King when he blamed me of being a spy, having disappeared for a day. Biyu couldn’t have said anything about my vanishing without implicating herself for leaving with me.

I reached the bottom of the mound, the soreness and sharpness of the pain pulsing through my body. A chilly, grating whiff of air blew over and combed through my tousled hair. I debated between sitting and weeping or trying to find Tiamat. Maybe I could multitask?

I walked a path clear of mountains and pillars of rock, wary of mountain lions and snakes. Sounds as little as a rustle startled me.

Tiamat had pointed at his cave while we were in flight, I thought seeking refuge there and then being flown to another province would be my best chance of safety.

Occasionally, I’d go off trail to glance at my province— a combination of deep maroon and blazing gold palaces, markets, roads and neighborhoods cluttered at the crest of a colossal mountain. It was impossible to miss.

A flaring pit of anxiety raked at the bottom of my stomach. Tiamat told me that my province’s rivals were readying to attack our own, with the intention of slaughtering the citizens inside the ruby walls. I prayed it was simple gossip he’d picked up on— nothing more.

Whimpering and travelling on foot was not a compatible blend. Little distance was travelled the first day. A bundle of leaves made do for a raspy pillow for the evening.

A relieving curtain of heat from the sun crept over me with leaden steps, like a benevolent solace from the numbing night. I continued the path to Tiamat’s cave, stopping to check if the red and gold buildings were still intact.

Tips of the palace were tinted a crisp black. I tensed at the sight. I scanned the markets and villages; I tried to convince myself that I was hallucinating.

I couldn’t see much from where I was, but it seemed as if everything had been set up in flames at some point last night. I stared blankly; I was deciding how to feel, what to do. Yes, there was a gnawing flame of despair, resentment and regret— *that* I couldn’t deny. But I could push it aside. I could let the only memories I have with Biyu slip away over time and deal with the furious swarm of emotions meanwhile.

I refused to resort to that.

My recollections of events with her had become the source of my identity. I wanted nothing more than to find her alive in the accumulation of cinder that was once a winsome state. My breath became precarious and fell out of rhythm quickly; I bent over as if someone had thrown a fist to my stomach. A mangled sob pricked the air, then a startling shriek. It took me a moment too long to realise these perturbing sounds were coming from me.

“Oh, be quiet. Not all of them are dead.”

I whirled round, searching for the origin of the raspy, blaring voice. No one was within sight. “What?” My voice trembled violently from fear and misery, “Who— Where are you? *Who* are you?”

“In front of you.”

I glared, puzzled, at the landscape in front of me. Green scales began to form less than 10 metres away, moulding into a large animal with wings. Bigger than large, I started to realise. Immensely, monstrously, *gigantically* enormous. The size of a dragon.

Which was funny, because it actually turned out to be one.

“It’s Malinda, might I add.”

Malinda was three times as massive as Tiamat— three times as stunning, too. Blonde horns stuck out her head, curled to a sublime degree, and glinted in the sunlight, a ravishing contrast to her lime scales. I gawked at her like a fool.

The creature bent down, her beak two times the size of my body. Her pupils met mine. I choked, “Dragons can— dragons— they can— what you just did?”

“Yes,” She breathed, her scalding breath steaming against my glacial skin, “Most of us can camouflage as much as to become invisible. Your *friend* Tiamat cannot.” She turned away.

“I’m supposed to take you to Tiamat. He’s been waiting for you.”

I simply stood as a response. She took it as an agreement even though I wasn’t sure to trust her enough. She squeezed me between her claws and soon I was above the clouds, gliding over hills and the narrow spaces between poles of stacked rock.

We reached a mountain solely composed of stone, it may have been the most extensive mountain we had come across after 5 minutes of flying (we’d travelled a long way despite the little time it took.) Malinda didn’t swerve to the left or right, she was flying in a beeline to the rock wall. We’d hit it if we were to keep flying at this pace, this direction.

“Malinda.”

“...Malinda?”

“We’re going to hit the wall.”

“*Malinda!* What are you *doing?*”

I clawed at her nails.

I braced myself as we neared the crag, tucking my head under my arms. I didn’t expect it to do much for the pain.

Almost a minute passed by. I didn't feel anything slam into me; the breeze of flight was still present. When I opened my eyes, dragons neighboured us, staring at me curiously. Their gazes skittishly flicked to Malinda every few seconds.

I don't know how we got in here, but we were inside a cave that seemed to stretch over an infinite space. Constant ripples of heat radiated off the baths of lava shifting at the bottom of the cave, the main source of light. Otherwise, little lemon crystals, pinched inside the creases of the walls, gleamed and mirrored off the plates of dragons. Walls curled into platforms at several levels, some bigger than others. Dragons tended to perch on the smaller ones, sometimes lying with two or three others.

Malinda continued soaring through the cave as if every eye inside wasn't turned towards us. Were they looking at me or her or *us*?

"Xing?"

A vermilion dragon pushed through the audience trailing behind. "Tiamat?" I grinned. Malinda considerably placed me on a platform, as tenderly as if I were a fragile snowflake, and left mutely. Tiamat joined me, flapping his wings as he alighted on the rugged floor. "You're alive, Xing."

"Clearly." I replied, extending my arms.

"Xing, you surely don't want to live in despair for the rest of your life, do you?"

"No."

"And your lover has died?"

"Yes."

"I'll do you a favour." His voice abruptly threw me into a trance, his vowels curling with inducement.

"Yes?"

"Death."

I choked on my breath. He smiled cunningly, his claws soon slashing through the air; through me.

Nature Preserved

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jones, Kaelan – 12

I woke up at the crack of dawn and triple-checked that everything was packed for the perplexing adventure I had laid before me. My whole life led up to this moment and I was more ready than ever. My dream as a child was to go and explore the Huangshan mountains and bring back something breathtaking to my small village. The reason I was so keen on this adventure was because my father went exploring and his father went before him and his father went and so on. Now it was my turn.

I left at around 8 o'clock and was headed for the journey of a life-time. I hiked up the winding trail and by the time it hit 3pm, I finally reached the peak but I was exhausted. I had sweat dripping off my forehead and had already drained 3 litres of water. I decided to rest under some tropical trees that looked cozy and welcoming given my circumstances. I lay down and dozed off with my head resting on the trunk of an ancient tree. I dreamt of running through the woods and getting chased into an abyss of darkness—

I woke with a start when I heard a rustle in the bushes behind me. I jumped up and took out an ancient family heirloom, a combat bamboo stick. I started poking around the bushes trying to find the owner of the rustle but nothing revealed itself. I decided that I must have just imagined it due to my tiredness so I propped myself against the trunk of the tree and noticed the dazzling sunset that was occurring. I let myself get lost in the immersing colours of this astounding view that I felt lucky to get to see. Whilst I was appreciating the sunset, I noticed that I was far above the clouds and saw that it was like seeing a warm blanket made of cotton candy stretched out all the way to the end of the world. I decided it was time to settle down for the night and lay down on the roots of the tree and allowed myself to be taken into the land of dreams and felt all the exhaustion leave my body.

Darkness, and then light. Leaves getting swatted out of the way with a long bamboo stick, heavy breathing, sweat dripping. I'm running through the woods. I'm getting chased. I didn't have time to realise that this isn't the first time I've had this dream today because I knew that if I stopped, even for a second, I would get trapped. I hear footsteps behind me, '*or are they footsteps*' I heard myself think. There seemed to be a lot of noise but they sounded muffled and happened much faster than regular human footsteps.

I woke, sweat soaking my shirt, to the rustle in the bushes behind me. I poked the bushes again and still couldn't find anything. I pushed the thought out of my head and started packing my things up. '*What better place to start at than at the famous 1500 year old pine trees?*' I thought to myself and started venturing into the woods behind me. Darkness enclosed me like a cage as soon as I stepped into the looming woods. I could feel eyes watching me but when I looked around, all I could see were trees and bushes.

Another rustle. I couldn't be imagining the sound this time so I followed the noise of where the rustle was, my bamboo stick at the ready. I heard a squeak and then a blast and a flash of light that nearly blinded me. After regaining my vision, I went towards the sound of the blast and tried to find the source of the disturbance. I stumbled across a tree root that was burning at the edges and pried open. I kept moving forward to find the mysterious owner of the blast. I soon came to an opening in the woods and I regained good vision thanks to the natural light from the burning sun. I could now see that there was a tree swaying and branches creaking. Suddenly, I saw a golden blur drop from the tree and rushed over to a golden lump on the ground.

I could see it moving up and down slightly, it was breathing. I didn't want to get too close to this creature in case it attacked me and I just waited and watched this thing. After a few minutes, this animal slowly helped itself to its feet. It turned around and when I saw the face of it I gasped. 'The Mythical Golden Monkey' I whispered to myself in shock. I instantly got down to one knee in a respectful bow. You see, when Marco Polo got back from China and told all the Europeans about this Mythical Golden Monkey but everyone thought he was crazy and mistook this 'legendary' beast with a normal monkey. However, Marco Polo was right. There really was a legendary creature that was respected all throughout China and I have been the first to find it.

‘The Mythical Golden Monkey’ I whispered again. I couldn’t believe my eyes and was still on one knee whilst this legend watched me calmly. ‘Hello Mortal’ he said, in barely more than a whisper but still loud enough for me to hear him. Here’s the thing about this particular beast; this was the real reason my whole family went exploring for something in the Mountains but we were too embarrassed to tell everyone the real reason in case they thought we were crazy so we just kept it as a family secret.

I couldn’t believe that *I* was the one to find him. Generations and generations have come to find him but no one was successful until now. The Monkey said ‘Come towards me Mortal,’ and I obeyed with anticipation. He sat on top of a stumped tree and was elevated whilst I was still looking up at him, on one knee. ‘Congratulations, you are the first to find me.’ he whispered again. I was still speechless but managed to mumble a simple thank you. I didn’t know what was supposed to happen now but greed suddenly washed over me like a wave of water and I knew what I wanted to do. I slowly shuffled over to my trusty bamboo stick and in a blink of an eye, I had knocked out this magnificent creature.

I scooped him up in my arms and carried him to the ancient tree this journey began at. I started going down the winding trail that I came up on what seemed to be years ago. I was still controlled by greed and never thought about anything other than finally proving myself to my village and most importantly, my family. About halfway down the path, I noticed that the flowers were wilting and that tree trunks started darkening and shrivelling. Clouds seemed to be covering the sun and the air became humid and polluted. I didn’t think much of it considering what I had just accomplished but when I was about to reach the bottom of the steep climb, a thunderstorm erupted out of the blue. I quickly realised that nature was angry at humans right after I brutally kidnapped a sacred legend from nature. I made the connection that due to me being violent towards the magnificent Monkey, nature punished us humans. I knew that the only way to stop this Earth from going into total chaos was to wake up this creature. I tried everything I could think of but nothing seemed to work.

An idea suddenly popped into my head and I gently placed the Monkey into a nearby creek. Nothing happened for a minute but then the Monkey’s eyes flew open and he sat bolt upright. Nature seemed to stop all at once and the atmosphere changed back to how it was before I attacked this precious creature. The Monkey looked confused but quickly got a sense of what happened and looked at me with a raised eyebrow. I quickly told him the story with about a million apologies in the middle of the tale and when I finally finished and caught my breath the Monkey simply said ‘OK, I forgive you.’ Relief rushed over me and I was soothed by those simple words. The Monkey then asked me a question that took me by surprise, ‘How do you feel about a monkey as a pet?’ he calmly inquired. ‘Uh—’ is all I could muster before he quickly said ‘I’ll take that as a yes then’ and before I knew it, I was going home with a mythical creature in my arms and nature blooming all around me with love and affection. All I could think about was how beautiful nature was with it’s blossoming flowers and the now orange sun shining over us like an orange balloon. Nature was preserved.

The Mission for Medicine

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lau, Lyra – 12

Whoosh! The sounds of the strong winds grew stronger as the long wintery nights in Zhangjiajie city grew colder, and more unbearable. It was impossible to tell what time of the day it was without a clock, because the gloomy clouds never revealed the blue sky hidden above. The bleak sky has not seen a peak of sunlight in weeks, and the people of Zhangjiajie felt dispirited, especially Po Anne.

‘Kassandra! Kassandra darling!’ Po Anne tried to shout as loud as she can with her weakened, powerless voice.

Kassandra, Po Anne’s granddaughter, was busy feeding the chickens, and failed to hear her grandma tirelessly trying to get her attention. Minutes later, which felt like hours for the impatient Po Anne, Kassandra returned inside ; her shoes covered in dirt, and her hair all scruffy.

‘Oh look at you! You’re a mess! Hurry, get clean and fix me a cup of tea. I’m not feeling too well, you know how easily your Po gets sick these days.’

‘Yes Po, I’m on it!’ replied Kassandra enthusiastically, as she ran to get cleaned up.

‘You know, you remind me of your mother. Always so eager and passionate. ’ Po Anne said with as a warm smile grew across her face. Words like these always lit up Kassandra’s heart.

As Po Anne carefully lifted the cup of tea to her lips, splash! Her weak hands got so shaky the tea had spilt all over the place. Kassandra’s head swiftly turned at once, as she ran to go help her. Po reassured her she was fine. Kassandra knew that Po was unwell, but they couldn’t do anything about it because there was no doctor in Zhangjiajie, as it was such a small, remote city.

‘Po, I really think I should go. Mother said that the next time something like this happened, we need to start seriously considering when the time is right.’

‘No, no. I’m fine.’

‘But Po! You are sick! I am still young, I can help you! You have to let me, just trust me Po.’

‘The mountains are not a safe place for a vulnerable girl like you!’

‘Who else is going to go!? Brother Ming is only 7, you want him to go?’

Po Anne sighed, this was a frustrating topic, and she hated every time it got brought up.

There was a well-known myth in the city of Zhangjiajie, that in the mountains of Tianmen, there was a hidden medicine, that could only be accessed by a soul that was willing to go through what the mountain had to offer. Of course, this was no ordinary medicine ; this medicine was said to be able to cure any sickness in both young and old, and it was located deep into the mountains of Tianmen. Many have tried to obtain this mysterious medicine in the past, but none have ever returned. The reason Po Anne was so against the idea of letting Kassandra go, was because years back, her own daughter, who was Kassandra’s mother, had went missing trying to look for this medicine

‘No means no!’ Po exasperated. ‘Now listen to your Po. I should be respected in this household, and you shall do as I say!’

Kassandra was taken aback. She had never seen her Po react this way ; but little did her grandmother know, Kassandra had a secretive plan up her sleeve.

The next morning arrived, Kassandra got up ; she made sure she didn’t fall asleep the whole night because there was no sun to wake her up in the morning, and she only had herself. Frantically, she stuffed whatever she could into a rucksack that was the size of her, and left without a trace. Kassandra had planned on returning with the medicine before Po Anne went searching for her, or noticed she was missing. In her mind, it was going to be a hike up the mountains. She knew it wouldn’t be easy and she had her all the stories, but she was not prepared for what was awaiting her.

She had reached the mountains, and started climbing what looked like a few flights of stairs. Easy, she thought. She quickly regretted thinking that, and each step felt a mile long. There was no telling when the steps were going to end, if they even had an ending. They turned in a spiral way, wrapping around the mountains like a snake wrapped around a mice.

After hours and hours of gruelling torture, the fatigued Cassandra's legs grew tired, and she was about to collapse any second. Even though there was no sunlight, she could tell that night was coming soon, and she started to panic. Cassandra didn't know her mother had gone missing whilst in those mountains. Po Anne had told her when she disappeared that her mother grew sick, and there was no doctor to cure her. Po Anne was too afraid to tell her the truth because she was afraid Cassandra wouldn't take care of her in the future, and she would have nobody left.

Time was running out, the wind was so strong that the dry skin on her lips were peeling off. Her eyes could barely stay open and Cassandra eventually stopped to sit herself down on the stone cold steps, huffing and puffing. This was not some mountain you could just hike up. Back at home, Po Anne had been immensely worried about her. Cassandra was a humble child who never rebelled. She had already alerted the whole city, as it was so small; everyone was now on a hunt to find the missing Cassandra.

Something sparked in Cassandra, this was a strange and unfamiliar feeling. She thought she heard a voice, one that sounded familiar. After some time, she managed to figure out what this faint voice was trying to say 'Go! Keep going and don't stop!' And then she realised why the voice sounded so familiar, it was her mother! Although it was only the voice of her mother she could hear, this was enough to fill her with determination. She ignored the sores, she ignored the pains, she kept pushing. Only a soul, that is willing enough, would reach the medicine.

Finally, she reached the top of the mountain. The steps had ended, and it seemed like all her hard work was about to be paid off. Well, there was one more test. This was no physical test, this was one that tested the mind. At the top of the mountain, Cassandra searched high and low for this medicine, but there was no sign of it. This was the mountain's test. It was waiting to see what she would do next.

After a lot of searching, thinking, and considering, Cassandra decided to wait. She was going to wait as long as it took, even if it meant staying the night. She couldn't have went through all those steps, just for nothing. She knew there was going to be a sign, but she had to be patient. As Cassandra shivered in the chilly, bitter cold night, bing! It was like a lightbulb had lit above her head. She rustled through her rucksack, frantically searching for something. 'Aha!' she shrieked. She pulled out a charm that was given to her by her mother, and she was told to never use it unless met with a situation so severe she had no other option. The charm had the words '犧牲' on it, which means sacrifice in English. In order for this charm to work its magic, you had to make a sacrifice. Cassandra knew in the back of her mind exactly what she had to do, but it wasn't going to be easy.

This charm was the only gift she had from her mother, and she always kept it around her because it made it feel like her mother was present. A sacrifice would mean she'd had to sacrifice something dear to heart. The charm. She held it tight, gave it a farewell kiss, took one last look at it, then threw it off the mountain.

Bang! A thunder bolt struck the moment it left her hands. A glowing light appeared above her, and it was descending from the sky towards her. Cassandra held her arms out and caught something. Anxiously, she opened her hands to find the medicine! It was a small bottle with the words 'magic' engraved on it. She had done it!

The excitement didn't last long as the storm grew stronger. Cassandra had to get back quick. Her Po was sick from worry and from illness. She ran like there was no tomorrow, she didn't stop once to look back. At last, she reached Zhangjiajie City. She went straight to their hut, where Po Anne laid, sick and motionless.

'Po Anne! It's me, I'm back! And I have the medicine.'

'Ka..Kassandra?'

'Yes Po, hurry! Drink this, It will cure you!'

Po Anne took one sip from the bottle, and slowly started to feel better.

Success! She had saved Po Anne, and completed a mission of a lifetime.

Baited

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lee, An – 13

Bao Zhang, with his black hair plastered to his face, stumbled dejectedly behind Wang, his father; shivering as he went. Having been trekking for almost a day, he was exhausted and half asleep.

The craggy cliff side was completely capped with a silvery coat of snow and he could just make out the burly outline of his father, clambering up the mountain like a circus monkey. Trees sagged down like dejected lions after a missed kill and their branches were enclosed beneath a chunky sheet of bleak Chinese winter. Bao's fingernails scraped against the rough rock and his blood flowed thickly over his frigid fingers. Cold. But this was merely nothing now, he licked the bright red blood dripping down his finger and shivered as he climbed up the last precipice to catch up with his father.

Bao was used to being quiet, that was one of his hobbies. Normally it was his father who spoke; Bao followed his orders. But this time, in this place, in this country, things were different. Bao was erupting with questions and he struggled to keep them to himself.

"Baba"

Silence

"Baba" he shouted loudly, the snow biting into Bao's throat.

"What, son?" hollered Wang

"Where are we going, please tell me"

His father didn't meet Bao's eye, but Bao already knew the answer, and he regretted asking the question.

"You asked me this question before, you'll soon find out"

Bao dropped his gaze to the floor, avoiding his dad's angry stare. He merely focused on the sound his boots made every time it had contact with the diamonds of winter.

Crunch, Crunch, Crunch

Bao could see more clearly as the sun rose up, kissing the sky. The mountain lay in the distance like a colossal camel's hump; red streaks of light dashed across the sky like oily wet paint on a canvas.

But Bao stopped. He sensed something that wasn't right. Something out of place; very out of place. However he couldn't fit the pieces together. Looking up towards the mountain ahead, he could see the twinkling lights of a village, illuminating the fog. Bao smiled. There was fire. He would have some warmth.

Bao was used to not feeling welcome, but this was different. A ghostly mist encircled the village, but Bao and his father hurried on down the street, looking for any signs of life.

"A ghost village, right Ba?"

Silence.

They continued to walk in silence.

"Wang Zhang, my old friend, good to see you"

"Hello Jing Wei, why were you hiding?"

"Oh, that, well we needed to make sure it was you."

"Who else would it be?" Wang replied, laughing

"Many bandits these days, Wang, it's been a long time since you left"

Wang's smiled dropped into a frown

"I guess so"

"Well, come in, come in" Jing said, beckoning towards the door

"Dad, do you know them?" Bao just couldn't hide his surprise.

"Now now, who's this Wang? I asked for you, not your scrawny little servant here." Jing smiled, but not the happy kind of smile, the smile that showed all his golden teeth, and a few pieces of rice left over from his previous meal.

"Now Jing, this is my son Bao. Bao, this is Jing, an old friend."

“Son?” Jing looked surprised, almost shocked.

“Yes Jing.”

Avoiding any more conversation, they entered the bare room. One old, but solid chair, stood in the corner. Some pictures, with the colour fading in them, hung from the rundown wall,

“Stay here Bao, I am going to talk to Jing for a minute. Alone.”

If Bao had been a young boy, he would have shouted “No father, Don’t leave me alone.”

But he was not a young boy, and his throat was too sore for him to shout, so instead he mumbled a quiet ‘Yes, father’ and shuffled his feet. Uncomfortably.

He would have stayed like this until his father came back, but his inquisitive side took over. Pressing his year against the door, he leant in, straining hard to listen to every word his father said.

“Why did you call me here, Jing”

“It’s the dragon, Wang, it’s attacking us again”

“What have I got to do with it”

“I have to admit, that isn’t a bad way to listen to what my father is telling your father, he’s a village elder now, after all.”

Bao jumped back, surprised.

His instincts told him to call his father, but he slowly turned around, facing a teenage girl in a red flowery dress. Her murky grey eyes stared at him, waiting for an answer.

“Now, who are you?”

“Fang, daughter of Jing Wei, the third elder to the right of Emperor Wu. You?”

“Um, I’m Bao”

Fang smirked.

“Oh, so you’ve met my daughter now, how fantastic”

And Bao spun around once more just to find Jing and his father grinning at him.

“I know what’s bothering you, so just listen to me” Wang said later that evening

“Dad, I’m sorry I should never have...”

“It’s fine, I know that you want to go home, just don’t escape...”

“What? That was not what I was going to say. I was going to ask you what it is with you and dragons. I heard you talking about dragons with Jing. I’m not deaf.”

Wang cursed under his breath.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you Bao. I need to kill this dragon, it is my duty”

“A dragon, are you mad?”

“I think so.”

Eavesdropping, Jing crept away from the door, laughing under his breath.

“Dumb idiots” he muttered, cheerfully; then faded away into the darkness of the night.

It was a blustery afternoon—Bao and his father marched on down a street. The tall yellow flag of the imperial building waved at them, inviting them to come in. It was the only two-storey building in the village, so stood out from the rest. But his mind was elsewhere. Completely elsewhere.

“How did you come to meet Jing, Father?” asked Bao.

He felt like lately his father and him weren’t talking much and he wanted to say something.

Wang knew this, and stayed quiet with his gaze planted firmly on the building.

They walked through a large gate, guarded by two men in brown armour, who greeted them with a polite “Hello, Sir”. Approaching the building fast, Bao could just see a figure waiting for them; as they got closer, he realised that that was the person he was thinking of. That was who he wanted to see most.

He tried not to show this to Fang, and followed her through the muddy path which led to the building. He could see animal tracks imprinted on the ground but wondered if an animal could be that big.

“Ba, is that” Bao could not let the words out of his mouth

“Yes son, now be quiet”

Knock Knock Knock

They could feel a quiet hush coming from the inside of the building.

“Come in” a raspy voice shouted

The golden door opened, and Bao gasped.

He looked around the room, mesmerized. It was the first time he had heard so many voices of so many people talking at once.

“He’s our saviour”

“He is a star”

“He is the sacrifice”

At the centre of the stage though, was Jing. He motioned to the trio standing at the door to come join him and immediately they walked towards him. But Bao was confused, where was the dragon?

A thud rang, echoing across the vast theatre. Turning back, he noticed Fang closing the double doors. Then locking them. Twice.

“Wang, you know what to do,” Jing said, with an unusually high voice.

The crowd roared with delight and Wang absorbed all the attention.

“Where is the dragon Jing?” Wang asked. Scared. All kinds of questions ran through his mind.

“Let me tell you a story” Jing began

“Every 25 years, a dragon comes to our village and asks for two sacrifices to be made. The dragon provides us protection from neighbouring lands and this is the least we can do for him”

“Where’s the dragon?” Wang repeated

“We need two sacrifices to be made.” Jing replied, grinning.

Bao now understood the meaning of what Jing was saying

“Ba we need to go, Ba, now”

“We need two sacrifices to be made, which is why, Wang, I am sorry to say, I have to say my goodbyes”

And with a push, Wang and Bao were thrown into the open mouth of the hungry dragon.

The Dragon Master

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ling, Amber – 13

It is said that if one kills a full grown dragon, they will have good luck for the rest of their lives...

The village of the Golden Dragon Hunters was the luckiest on the Mountain of the Yellow Emperor. The Golden Dragon Hunters had a reputation for killing dragons on the mountain but not getting killed themselves. In the old days, they killed them for protection, but now they killed them to keep the tradition. It was a rule for every man who turned seventeen to find, hunt and kill a dragon to be allowed to return back to the village. However, there was a legend about a lost scroll containing the secrets of the Dragon Masters that was passed down through each generation. Dragon Masters refused to kill dragons and instead learned how to earn a dragon's trust and receive their special abilities, writing the instructions on the scroll of Masters. However, Dragon Masters were banned from the village of the Golden Dragon Hunters since the last Dragon Master turned on the Dragon Hunters...

It was 253 BC, the 11th day of November, when a new child, Li, was born to Ming and Tong. He was a loyal, ambitious young child from the start. As time passed, his parents would tell him bedtime stories about the legendary Dragon Master. Li sometimes asked his parents if the Dragon Master might be alive today and could teach him to also be one. His mother and father would always say it was forbidden for any Dragon Master to set foot on the mountain.

The day before Li's seventeenth birthday, Li's Mother and Father had prepared a small cow-skin bundle with a spear and a hunting knife for survival. On his birthday, Li waved goodbye to his parents. The mountain was so steep that he had to grab onto the big rocks to haul himself up. As he climbed, he soon was above the fluffy clouds admiring the view. His shirt turned damp and stuck to his skin like glue. All around Li were cliffs and trees and a dark cave was spotted. A silhouette quickly flitted across the entrance from where he was standing. He excitedly ran towards the cave, thinking it was a dragon and he could quickly go home. However, when he got there, Li found an old person wearing ancient Chinese male clothing sitting inside, stirring a small pot full of broth. The delicious aroma wafted up his nose and made his mouth water. He politely asked if he could stay and rest for a while, then helped himself to a small animal skin mat. As his eyes wandered around the surprisingly bright mountain cavern, they settled on the scarred gash along his right arm made by a Dragon Hunter's Shamkiv, a sacred sword given to men who passed the test of killing a dragon. The mark of the banished. His eyes widened at the sight of the scar. There was only one kind of hunter that would be banished with the Shamkiv mark: a Dragon Master.

Li couldn't believe it. The last Dragon Master was killed. How could he be alive? Is this why he was hiding in this cave? Li scrambled back in fear while the color drained from his face. His father had briefly explained that the last Dragon Master had turned on the Village Chief's father and killed him. The Dragon Master suddenly stopped his stone hard eyes from studying Li and asked if he was all right. He was surprised to hear that the man spoke in a woman's voice. Li slowly nodded his head, gazing downwards, not wanting to look him in the eyes. 'Don't be afraid. You are my grandson.' At first, his eyes widened slowly to look at his ancestor while his jaw dropped in surprise but then his gaze dropped in respect. Li gathered his courage and asked if he could be a Dragon Master. His grandparent closed his eyes to consider this, then nodded. However, in order for him to share the secret, Li must follow the tradition of the Dragon Masters: he must befriend a dragon on his own.

As he was searching for a dragon in the clearing a few minutes away from the cave, Li wondered about the beauty of the mountain that he had never seen before, since he had only known his village area. Lush green trees towered above him upon a carpet of vivid colored flowers with bees and butterflies fluttering around him. However, on the other side of the layer of flowers, there was a colossal dragon eating a sheep carcass in a grass clearing. It had silver scales as smooth as marble. Li carefully stepped into the clearing to admire the animal.

'Snap!' As he made his way over, he accidentally stepped on a stick. The dragon's head shot up in alertness, scanning its surroundings. When its gaze fell upon Li, panic dropped into its eyes as it opened its wings and started to stalk towards him. It blew fire and beat its wings so fast it created a swirling hurricane. Li screamed but he couldn't hear

himself. The dragon roared unforgivingly. Li came back to his senses. He started to race away, but he was no match for the dragon. His right leg was covered in blood and soot, so he had to stumble away. A typhoon of panicked thoughts ran through his head. He knew this was the end of his life, getting burnt to death by a dragon. Sadness began to settle in his heart as he realized how much his parents would miss him. The dragon started to suck in a breath as Li buried his face in his hands, covering his eyes, refusing to watch his last moment of life. Suddenly, a high pitched scream echoed around his head as Li opened his eyes to see what was happening and why he was still alive. All he could see was fire surrounding the Dragon Master while he spread his arms like a starfish in an attempt to protect Li. The Dragon Master had saved his life by sacrificing his own.

'No!' he screamed as the Dragon Master lay dying. 'Grandson. The reason I decided to become a Dragon Master was because I was the first female Dragon Hunter. I was fascinated by dragons even though it meant I had to kill them. My father didn't want me to become a Dragon Master so that's why I pretended to be a man. When I killed my first dragon, I was terrified, but finding out that I could be a Dragon Master meant that I could be next to dragons but not kill them. This made me feel reassured that I could chase my dream of being a friend to dragons. The instructions of the Dragon Masters are under my bed. Follow them and be the best that you can.' She spoke softly as life slowly faded from her eyes. Li cried over the lifeless body of his grandmother. The Dragon bowed his head in sorrow and motioned to offer a ride on its back. After Li had retrieved the scroll of the Masters, the dragon flew Li and the body back to the village. His parents, village Chief and all the villagers' jaws dropped to see him descend from the sky riding on a dragon. Many villagers shouted at him. They even threatened to throw rotten fruit at him if he didn't get off the dragon. As soon as they touched down onto the ground, Li was grabbed by his parents who hugged all his air out.. Li explained that he wanted to become a Dragon Master. His village was so silent, they could even hear a feather drop. To his surprise, the village chief suddenly spoke up and told everyone to go back to their daily business. He then spoke to Li's parents about an official scroll detailing what would happen to Li since he brought bad luck to the village because he didn't kill a dragon.

When the sun rose the next day, Li rushed downstairs but was beaten to the scroll by his parents. Ming and Tong were huddled around the scroll with their hands clenched so hard that their knuckles turned white. Blood drained from their faces with each word that they read. Li's eyes widened. His heartbeat increased rapidly. An elephant was crushing his lungs. After a few glances at each other, the scroll and Li, they motioned him towards a chair. Li desperately tapped his fingers on the table. They sat down beside him in silence. Tong buried his head in his hands in frustration while his wife seemed to have a sudden interest in her shoes. Finally, after the tapping of his fingers slowed down, Ming cleared her throat and slowly read what was written. Li's face gradually turned pale...

The Village Chief had sentenced Li to death.

Lost in an Emerald Abyss

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Logue, Ishbel – 12

Hacking and coughing, I push blindly through the smoky debris. Startled flocks of birds screech in alarm, flapping desperately to get away from the danger. My sight is soon blocked by the relentless smokescreen. I feel claustrophobic, like the smoke is trapping me in its wisp-like clutches. I push, and push, and push, until – without warning – the ground beneath me gives way and I plunge out of the red-hot metal. I am finally free, but with freedom comes clarity. As I gaze upon the wreckage, I can at last recall what had happened. The plane had broken down.

“Hello?!” I rasp, “Is anyone out there?” My desperate calls are answered by the greedy crackle of fire and nothing more. Despair threatens to overwhelm me, but I force my mind to clear and turn away from the growing flames. No one in there can help me now. Trembling, I squint upwards, towards a distinctive nearby cliff, and search every detail for a clue to my whereabouts. Icy sweat trickles down my spine and face, giving the air a salty tint among the ash. Eyeing the serrated cliff sides, I realise where I am. Desperate for another clue, something to tell me that I am wrong, I scan the cliff sides once again, but to no avail. I’m in China’s yellow mountains. Remote. Humid. And known for its stories about mythical creatures and monsters.

Against my will, I turn once more to the burning plane, eyeing the skeletal fingers of smoke reaching out to grab the light. I take a moment of silence to honour those who died before me. I know I should go, but I can’t will my body to move, can’t will my mind to think. In the corner of my eye, I see a winged flash of gold, soaring in circles like a bird of prey. Whipping around in shock, I search for the flash of gold, but the sky remains still, blue and lifeless. Ancient rumours of the yellow mountain’s magic flash through my mind, but I force them away. It must’ve been a trick of the light. Suppressing a shiver, I clench my jaw and hustle away from the fiery graveyard.

I pass a trickling waterfall, the droplets sparkling like diamonds in the beaming sun, before falling into a mossy pool. I pass a colossal spike of rock, like a sword wedged into the ground, left for hundreds of thousands of years. I pass a vast, dense forest, probably concealing thousands of hidden treasures. Flocks of colourful birds dip and dive throughout the ultramarine blue sky, taunting me with their freedom. The forest floor almost seems to move beneath me, between the soft movements of the grass and the hurried scampering of the insects. Leaves dance in mid-air as they fall from the trees, creating a mystical ballroom in the sky. I feel hypnotised by the intricate movements of the leaves, until I remember with a start where I am and what I’m doing. Reluctantly, I continue my endless march, dragging my legs step after step, kilometre after kilometre. After an eternity of walking, my bloodshot eyes finally spot a desolate village balancing precariously on the edge of a sloping cliff. This will be my aim.

Panting hard, I haul myself up the cliffside, the jagged surface shredding my palms. The seconds drag into minutes, minutes into hours. The humid air presses in from all sides, soaking me to the bone, and coating my eyes and lips. A single bird sings a melancholy song, echoing throughout the mountains, sending cold needles tumbling down my spine. My panting seems too loud, my heart too fast, my climbing too slow. The salty odour of my sweat mixes with the delicate fragrance of the vegetation below me, creating a complex scent, one I have never had to smell before. Arriving at a ledge, I pause, exhausted, to rest my weary muscles. In the distance, I can still see the smoke curling greedily through the open sky. The tips of the chinese fir trees sway in a distant breeze, which eventually reaches my spot in the cliff and plays with my auburn hair. With the breeze carries the scent of ash, taking me back to my final moments in the plane – which could’ve been my final breaths as well. No one had known what was going on as we fell and fell and fell through the sky; panic had clouded our minds. I swiftly stop myself from thinking about the faces of the other people, the despair-ridden faces of their loved ones once they find out what happened. Strangely, I wish there were still people in my life, people that would feel despair from my death. Banishing these selfish thoughts, I tilt my head away from the breeze. My algae-green eyes follow the clouds – wisps of fluffy cotton – as they journey across the sea of blue. They seem to avoid the blinding sun, not daring to block its blazing beams.

Once again I see the flash of gold in the sky, this time more clearly. It looks like a vast, golden bird, shining in the sun. I strain my neck, desperate to give a name to this mysterious creature. A puff of red streams from its mouth, and then it's gone, as quick as it had come. My mind spins from this sight – am I imagining things again? Or was this beautiful, golden creature something of myth, of legend...

All of a sudden, joyous and inviting voices travel down from the top of the cliff. Hearing these voices, I carry on climbing with new-found desperation and hope. The village is inhabited. I can barely feel the jagged sides of the cliff, can barely remember the deathly drop below me. I can barely smell the rusty scent of blood as it slips from my ruined hands. I can barely hear that single bird as it continues singing, alone. I can barely think until, at last, I pull myself over the ridge and collapse onto, blissfully, even ground.

For a moment I merely lie there, collecting my scattered thoughts, and cradling my bloody hands. But then I hear the whispers. They crawl through the bristling grass and echo through the wind. They seem to come from everywhere, yet, when I scramble to my feet, I can't see their source. In alarm, I stumble backwards, away from the deathly edge, and towards what appears to be a strangely familiar, golden, life-sized statue of a dragon. Every last detail, down to the creases on its face, seem thought-through, and realistic. Each knife-sharp, gleaming scale is scratched, as if the dragon had once moved and fought. Its whip-shaped tail is held in the air, as if waiting to strike. Its claws are each several inches long, yet uneven – some slightly longer, and sharper, than others. All of these features are petrifying, but what really chills me to the bone is the hunger and greed, somehow etched, into its large, amber eyes.

I stand still, in shock, startled by the realism of this statue, and the similarity to the flying figure I had seen before. However, I quickly recover, as the whispers seem to draw me towards it, begging me to come closer, begging me to not be afraid. At first, I succumb to the yearning voices, taking a dreamy stride forwards, but then something seems off. The tail of the statue twitches. The eyelids flicker. The tongue traces the outline of its lips. Finally, the mouth opens wide into a gape – showing off thousands of large, needle-sharp, golden teeth – and the dragon, claws outstretched, dives towards me.

The Beasts of Huangshan

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui, Michelle – 11

Many people would wonder, ‘what in the world is going on up there?’ as they gaze at the ancient hills and mountains of rock. Huangshan never appears to have its mysteries solved or discovered, there are many places that the villagers haven’t stepped foot on. That’s why nobody would go up there. Stories are told and shared across the villages and they fear the gigantic fire-breathing dragon, living on the highest cliff of Huangshan. It is actually better if they just stay put.

High up, on one of the mountain peaks, a spacious hole sat hanging above a rocky balcony. The air up there was fresh and it constantly smelled of blooming lilies. If you were to ‘gulp’ the air, you’d be able to taste the flavour of tulips. All you would really be able to spot here are the decrepit ocean of stones and trees scattered around this humongous board-game like land. It was so still up there, every minute the only sound you would hear was the occasional chirp of a hungry bird. It was also usually damp and hot up there in the valleys.

In the hole, there lived a human. He was your textbook person; messy hair and some simple cloaks to wear. One thing, and one thing only, had defined him from everyone else. He spoke to dragons, the beautiful yet terrifying mythical creatures that would dwell in the caves of every mountain. You might be wondering, ‘Don’t be silly. Dragons do not exist.’ That’s where you’re wrong. The human was raised by a colony of them, and he never viewed them as a threat like you and I do. From then on, he discovered many others who were intrigued by his existence.

There was Blue, the small dragon who spat teal flames whenever he sneezed. Another was Inferno, who could create rings of fire to protect everyone. One more was Opal, who could daze her enemies by flashing her gemstone-like scales. There are many others, but the list would go on forever.

He would whistle, and they would come, he would growl, and they would fiercely see what intruder had come to attack their master. His name was Xin.

The boy wasn’t very old, yet not very young. However, even though he had existed on this planet for 20 years, not a single year had he ventured down to the villages that thrived below the kingdom of rubble. In short, Xin lived on the cliffs for his entire life.

On a terribly stormy day, Xin was woken up by the sound of the wind. It was humming a tune. It came and went, then came and went, just as if it wanted to annoy the boy with its screechy singing. The clouds were grumpy, and the fog clouded the area. Xin noticed something quite peculiar about his home. He saw the rubbish scattered everywhere. Surely he didn’t leave the house in chaos when he went to sleep. The pawprints of a wolf and the clawed footprint of an eagle were found shortly after. Xin grumbled, confused. Whatever got into his humble abode overnight was definitely not one of his dragons.

Xin got outside and gave three sharp whistles. In less than a minute, the distinctive shape of Inferno came soaring over. He was looking particularly moody, and the fire that usually burned warmly above his head had gone out.

‘What do you need, master? It’s such a bad day. Maybe you could call me another time,’ Inferno said gloomily.

‘This is crucial,’ Xin said. This is all translated from Tongue of Dragon to English.

The dragon trainer showed Inferno the footprints and his pantry in shambles. There was even a stinky present left by his ungracious guest. Only then did the fiery dragon decide to track down the beast.

‘Hey, I see some footprints leading that way,’ Xin exclaimed.

The two friends flew through the pouring rain. The tracks ended by the bottom of a castle-sized stone. There were cracks all over the bottom, and Xin knew it was probably a secret way inside. He tried pushing. Nothing happened. He muttered a few random words to it. Nothing happened. He tried a few more times, but you can probably guess what happened. Exhausted and angry, he returned to his home.

However the next day, Xin didn’t wake up anywhere near his home. He was on the ground, stalactites looming over him. Scrambling up, the dragon trainer observed his surroundings. It was like a mountain, but hollow. There was a geyser situated in the middle. The only source of light came from the tiny hole in the ‘ceiling’.

‘There’s a good boy,’ came a purring female voice.

There were corridors around the edge of the mountain, and strange sounds echoed from there. A woman came, petting the eagle–wolf hybrid. Xin was furious, but also terrified. He never knew another person would be up here in Huangshan, living their life like he lived his.

‘Well, well, well. Look what we have here,’ she said, unsheathing her dagger.

She owned silky red hair and blue eyes that looked like they were made of clouds from a summer sky. Calmly, she pressed the dagger up against Xin’s neck.

‘Who are you?’ he spluttered.

‘That will be none of your business until you answer *my* questions,’ she replied. ‘What is your name and why do you live with those dragons?’

‘I... I’m Xin,’ he answered. ‘I don’t understand why my existence is so interesting for you. If you could just let me be...’

‘No,’ she said plainly. ‘I always needed the dragons. They were for my hybrid–making experiment. My only successful result was Pumpkin.’

The eagle–wolf stopped preening itself when it heard its name. Xin was sweating profusely, as it was boiling in the mountain and the dagger was so cold against his skin.

‘I live with the dragons because they raised me,’ he said nervously. ‘I never meant to harm you or anything, but your Pumpkin had invaded my privacy.’

‘I wanted you to tell me where your beloved dragons are,’ she said. ‘I need one. Just one. And then I will fuse it with one of my ravens. Then your work here is done, forever you shall not be bothered again.’

‘I can’t,’ Xin exclaimed. ‘The dragons are my family. I cannot give even the most unknown dragon to you, because the rest of them will abandon me and take me as a traitor.’

The woman hesitated, then took the dagger off his neck. She looked disappointed but she understood. ‘I guess months of my planning were wasted.’

Xin apologised, and accepted the woman’s hospitality. She gave him a few slices of bread and butter, and a glass of milk, seeing as he was extremely groggy after an uncomfortable night’s sleep.

Once he was up and ready, the woman introduced herself as Nicole and asked if he wanted to train Pumpkin, or perhaps even stay in the mountains for life.

‘Pumpkin never really liked me, he only follows my orders because of food,’ Nicole scoffed. ‘I need a trainer who’s had experience.’

‘I don’t have *that* much experience, I don’t even train, I just stand there and give food to dragons who do what I tell them to,’ Xin said, his face hot.

‘Pumpkin loves food,’ Nicole said, laughing.

From then on, Xin stayed as the woman’s personal trainer. Of course nothing’s changed – he stayed living in his cosy den on the peak of a small, rocky dome. However apart from having a simple week of sticking to his schedule every week, he now knows another person, just like him, staying in a hollow volcano, with mythical creatures of some sort.

It was better knowing that Pumpkin wasn’t as harmful and evil as Xin expected, and so all of his worries were washed away into the ocean of relief, where the nervousness was tucked away in the corals. He decided not to go anywhere further than the villages, as the grains of seeds beneath the hills’ cracks longed to burst through, and Xin didn’t want to leave and miss the evolution of this very mountain.

The weeks, the days, the years passed by. The villages below the mysterious mountains remained unchanged. Many legends still lay up in Huangshan at the time, and still nobody wanted to venture deep. Stories were told and shared across the villages and they fear the gigantic fire–breathing dragon, living on the highest cliff of Huangshan. And it was and is, in fact, true.

Some people would venture to the mountains, once they have plucked enough courage. They would wander and wander until they found a specific spot. The view was astonishingly marvellous from where they stood. However, another beautiful shock, apart from a view, would be waiting for them on these towering boulders.

It was rumoured that a woman, riding a flying wolf with an eagle head, rode alongside a man on the legendary fire–breathing dragon, at a certain place and time.

Alone

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Luo, Venisha – 13

For the first time, she was alone. For the first time, nobody was there to tell her that it was ok. For the first time, Victoria realised that she was in danger. She had to think of a way to get back to the campsite quickly, because who knew what the night would bring?

.....

Finally. Finally. Finally. They had finally arrived at the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor in eastern China – Huangshan. Victoria had been looking forward to this holiday for weeks and weeks. Her jaw dropped as they gradually descended into the misty mountains. They undulated in every direction as far as she could see. A thin, swirling layer of mist wrapped around the peaks like a huge opaque blanket. The mountains were covered from top to bottom with lush green vegetation, which were emitting a variety of different sounds – the hooting of monkeys, the chirping of birds and insects and the growls of the predators that lurked in the shadows of the forest floor. The air was extremely humid but pleasantly cool as evening settled in.

They slowly approached a bare patch of land near the peak of one of the steep mountains – this was going to be their campsite. After setting up the tents and unpacking all the equipment, Victoria and her parents decided to explore the jungles. They slowly trudged towards the perimeter of the forest and entered its depths. The brown earth was wet and spongy underfoot and the trees stretched up into the distance, their leaves spreading out to form a canopy high above their heads. Thick vines intertwined overhead, blocking out the sunlight. The floor was littered with moss covered rocks and crawling with dozens of types of insects. The greenery all around them was so thick that they had to use a knife to slash through all of it to get around. Animals peered down curiously from above the trees as they passed by, surprised to see unexpected visitors. Their yellow eyes fixed unblinkingly on the three tourists. In the distance, a small waterfall roared. Water cascaded downwards like a transparent curtain. Once or twice, Victoria even saw blurs of colour traveling in between the trees. However, when she looked again to see what it belonged to, it was gone.

Victoria and her parents walked on and on, but the little sunlight they had was already starting to fade quickly, so they decided to head back to the campsite before it got too dark. The three would continue exploring the next day.

And they got back just in time.

The beast slunk back into the forest, disappointed that it couldn't catch its prey. But it was determined to try again the next day.

The following morning, Victoria and her parents got up at the crack of dawn to continue exploring the place as much as they can. So they entered the forest for the second time, but it was ready. The silence was suddenly pierced by an angry growl. Victoria and her parents were instantly alert, their eyes darting left and right, searching for the cause of the noise.

“ What was that?? ” Victoria whispered, scared. Before anyone could suggest that they go back to their campsite, where most of their resources were, they found the leopard blocking their path.

“ Run! ” her mom shouted.

Victoria didn't need to be told twice; she was already bolting in the opposite direction. Her parents raced after her, but the leopard was closing in. Fast. Trying to divert the attention to themselves, Victoria's parents ran in one direction whilst she ran in another. It worked. The leopard quickly turned around and started chasing after her parents. However, Victoria didn't stop running. Every muscle in her body was screaming in agony for her to stop, and she could barely breathe, but nevertheless, she ran on, weaving in between the trees, trying to avoid trampling the plants and getting her feet stuck in the mud.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, Victoria halted where the ground had finally stopped sloping upwards. She bent over, catching her breath, trying to take in her surroundings. But this was no longer the forest that she was familiar with, the forest that was close to their campsite. She had lost the leopard all right, but that wasn't the most worrying thing right now. She was lost. With no one to help her. In desperation, Victoria quickly scaled a tree, but

all she could see was the unfamiliar canopy of trees spread out beneath her, going downhill, and the silhouettes of the steep mountains in the distance. She had no idea which direction the campsite was; she had not been paying attention, having been focusing on escaping.

Without any other plan in mind, she decided to retrace her steps and started walking back the way she came. She continued walking. And walking. And walking. Despite her best efforts, Victoria could not spot anything that she recognised. Just as she was about to give up, a creature suddenly appeared in front of her. From the waist down, it was a stallion, as white as snow, its tail swishing back and forth, but from the waist up, it was a human. A centaur. It quickly signalled Victoria to get onto its back, and still staring open mouthed at the creature, Victoria hesitantly climbed on. The centaur immediately took off, gathering speed. The forest around her instantly became a green blur, as if she was looking out of a window of a high speed train. Occasionally, she could spot the bright plumage of birds high in the trees and brown tree trunks, but they were going so fast that none of the details could be seen. After only a few minutes, the centaur slowed to a stop. Victoria got off shakily and turned around to thank it, but it had already disappeared into the shadows. Up. Up. Up.

The blue cable car rose up the side of the mountain, gliding up the wire. Li stared out of the plexiglass windows. Beside him, the peaks jutted up, penetrating the ever present blanket of mist. There was nostalgia in his heart. The tranquil forest was spread out like a carpet under him.

The other passengers were busy snapping photos and shouting about how beautiful it was. Li paid no attention, and continued staring at a single peak. His eyes followed a thin path barely visible, into the mists. This was a path that his young self had trotted on a thousand times.

The cable car stopped, startling a brooding Li. He stepped off, breathed the fresh mountain air, and sighed. This was the air of his childhood. It was revitalising, refreshing. It washed away all the fatigue and grime of the city. Li's lungs welcomed the air, inhaling large quantities of it, rinsing every last tired particle itself in the elixir.

But he didn't want it. The repetitive, machine-like routines of urban life forced his revitalising mountain air out of his mind. Li's mind switched back to his work. He was here for a purpose. He was not here to emulate the intoxicating mountain air, he thought. He cleansed his mind, and set off.

The winding steps of Huangshan were made out of old, cracked stone. Small insects and ants crawled in the cracks, scurrying among the fallen leaves. It was autumn, a season traditionally represented by the Chinese element of metal. Li smiled as he stroked the shining accessory on his suitcase, forged in the shape of a rampant tiger. How fitting.

Every step was a pain to him. Li had spent two decades in an office chair, his wavering confidence bolstered by coffee and tea. In his office chair, Li had developed back pain, despite his young age. His knees cracked at every other step. The burden of his suitcase weighed heavily on his right arm, threatening to dislocate his shoulder.

Li deliberated painfully in his mind over his next step. He had come to crush the last resistance of holdout peasants on the mountaintops, their will weakened by money and technology. He was meant to strike the final blow. But he had seen all the simple and elegant beauty of Huangshan. It drew him in, a refreshing respite to the artificial neon jungles of the city. It wasn't glamorous, but it felt... real. It wasn't crafted in any way. It was pure. It had existed since the dawn of time, created by a power that no one knew. It was unlike the plastic displays that were so embellished, they felt alien and fake.

Then he thought of the technology, the access to convenience, and all the luxuries of city life. *Yes*, he thought, waving away all the mists of the mountains. He didn't want the mountains, even though it was his birthplace. It was never wrong to reject something bad for something better.

But which was truly better? Li pondered as he walked up the steps. He had lots of time, and he could spend the day thinking. The two notions fought in him like wolves, with unwavering ferocity. For a moment, he stood there, trying to make up his mind, before a shouting tourist broke his stupor. He frowned, and continued walking.

Before long, he had reached his hotel. Li knew he was unwelcome. His picture was all over the village community by now, and the reception glared at him as they handed him his room card. The bellhop pushed his luggage with surprising force. Li knew that he was exerting his anger on the luggage.

#

Li had a terrible first day on Huangshan. It wasn't strictly his first day, of course, since his mother lived here. It was where he was born. No, it was his first day as a visitor. And the hospitality of the hotel staff had been cold, to say the least. Somehow his actions merited such a response. Or perhaps it was his intentions?

The waiters had spilled a bit of chicken soup over his pants, before proceeding to make an even bigger mess of it by rubbing on the puddle. Then, when he picked up his spoon and tasted the soup, he realised that the cook had accidentally put too much salt on purpose. It was far from his childhood meal of choice. This wasn't something his mother would make. His mother...

Li nearly struck out at his servers for violating such a sacred childhood memory, but his manners prevailed and he coldly downed the rest of his soup, as not to offend his hosts.

When he returned to his room, he checked everything. He found some traps. At least his bed wasn't dirty, he thought. Then he opened his laptop to check his emails.

The desk was somewhat greasy. Whether it was an ill-executed trick or not, he did not know. He sighed, and opened QQ. Nice.

"The transaction has been backed up. Fear not. Do your thing and the money will flow in."

Great. Now all he had to do to get 10 million dollars was to persuade twenty-something stubborn villagers. Well, at least he wouldn't have to worry about the exact financial matters anymore.

#

As Li shouldered his bag and prepared to leave, a man stopped him. He wore simple clothes, and appeared to be a villager. He spoke sternly.

"We have lived on this land for centuries. Do not dislodge us. Only the foolish do so. Sir, I ask that you turn back. We do not intend to utilise other means to stop you. Please, leave."

"No. It is time for you to go to the city, and to learn about technology. Your roots are outdated, your ancient traditions inferior. Please, let me go about my business."

The man's eyes flared up. "Man, do not insult my culture! Inferior or not, it is mine. I will uphold it, like my ancestors before me. I hope that you will feel remorse. Whatever you say, I want you to know that we do not yield."

Li pushed him out of the way, and set off at a hasty trot.

#

Li was fully exhausted when he arrived. He was plagued by the words of the man, and by his childhood.

The villagers were arrayed before him, each of them bearing an expression of contempt. Then, someone spoke.

"You city-dweller, can you please respect us? We don't want our peaceful land to be replaced by a concrete box. Whatever you offer us, we do not accept. We are the true guardians of our land, not—"

Li interrupted her. “No. The concrete box will bring you tons of money, more than anything you could ever dream of. You could have actual WiFi. Your children will go to school—”

Another villager waved his hand angrily. “NO! This is our land, not your land. We are happy here. Go!”

A third villager stepped up. “Li, you were born here. You are a traitor. You want to destroy the place where you were conceived. I’m old. I knew you. When you left, you were an innocent child of the mountains. Now, you reek of greed and treachery. If they truly want to evict us, then send a less offensive man. ”

His expression softened. “But perhaps you were never a city man. Perhaps you can redeem yourself...?”

Li’s mind flashed back to his distant childhood memories, the man who had stopped him, the pleas of the villagers. His mind flashed back to his gentle mother, his father, and their breakup after his mother couldn’t adapt to the city. Li’s mother had cried when his father took him to the city. Before that, his kindly grandmother and his mother had cared for him. He had mountain blood. He thought of the mystical stories of the mountains, those bedside stories that had accompanied throughout his childhood. The Flowering Pen. The long ridge that resembled the back of a fish. Legends of seductive foxes and wise sages.

And more. He remembered the mists that surrounded him, when he had run up and down the mountain slopes. His grandmother often yelled at him for that, saying that he could slip and fall. He remembered the berries, the many flowers, gorgeous wonders that he could never see in the city. He remembered the dragons and *qilin* who dwelled in the mists and clouds, in the legends at least. He remembered the ancient pines, so large and so tall that it took ten villagers to hug it.

Such were the mystical mountains of China.

Li looked at every villager, examining their expressions. Some were defiant, some hopeful. Then, the true Li took over.

“I support you,” Li said, to the applause of the villagers.

“Just a little further,” she thought to herself. She knew it had to be somewhere around here; the forest was getting more and more familiar. Just as she had predicted, their campsite was right around a cluster of tall trees. Everything was the same as they left it in the morning.

Except her parents were nowhere to be seen.

The Huangshan Village

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Sun, Zhaoping – 12

Up. Up. Up.

The blue cable car rose up the side of the mountain, gliding up the wire. Li stared out of the plexiglass windows. Beside him, the peaks juttied up, penetrating the ever present blanket of mist. There was nostalgia in his heart. The tranquil forest was spread out like a carpet under him.

The other passengers were busy snapping photos and shouting about how beautiful it was. Li paid no attention, and continued staring at a single peak. His eyes followed a thin path barely visible, into the mists. This was a path that his young self had trotted on a thousand times.

The cable car stopped, startling a brooding Li. He stepped off, breathed the fresh mountain air, and sighed. This was the air of his childhood. It was revitalising, refreshing. It washed away all the fatigue and grime of the city. Li's lungs welcomed the air, inhaling large quantities of it, rinsing every last tired particle itself in the elixir.

But he didn't want it. The repetitive, machine-like routines of urban life forced his revitalising mountain air out of his mind. Li's mind switched back to his work. He was here for a purpose. He was not here to emulate the intoxicating mountain air, he thought. He cleansed his mind, and set off.

The winding steps of Huangshan were made out of old, cracked stone. Small insects and ants crawled in the cracks, scurrying among the fallen leaves. It was autumn, a season traditionally represented by the Chinese element of metal. Li smiled as he stroked the shining accessory on his suitcase, forged in the shape of a rampant tiger. How fitting.

Every step was a pain to him. Li had spent two decades in an office chair, his wavering confidence bolstered by coffee and tea. In his office chair, Li had developed back pain, despite his young age. His knees cracked at every other step. The burden of his suitcase weighed heavily on his right arm, threatening to dislocate his shoulder.

Li deliberated painfully in his mind over his next step. He had come to crush the last resistance of holdout peasants on the mountaintops, their will weakened by money and technology. He was meant to strike the final blow. But he had seen all the simple and elegant beauty of Huangshan. It drew him in, a refreshing respite to the artificial neon jungles of the city. It wasn't glamorous, but it felt... real. It wasn't crafted in any way. It was pure. It had existed since the dawn of time, created by a power that no one knew. It was unlike the plastic displays that were so embellished, they felt alien and fake.

Then he thought of the technology, the access to convenience, and all the luxuries of city life. Yes, he thought, waving away all the mists of the mountains. He didn't want the mountains, even though it was his birthplace. It was never wrong to reject something bad for something better.

But which was truly better? Li pondered as he walked up the steps. He had lots of time, and he could spend the day thinking. The two notions fought in him like wolves, with unwavering ferocity. For a moment, he stood there, trying to make up his mind, before a shouting tourist broke his stupor. He frowned, and continued walking.

Before long, he had reached his hotel. Li knew he was unwelcome. His picture was all over the village community by now, and the reception glared at him as they handed him his room card. The bellhop pushed his luggage with surprising force. Li knew that he was exerting his anger on the luggage.

#

Li had a terrible first day on Huangshan. It wasn't strictly his first day, of course, since his mother lived here. It was where he was born. No, it was his first day as a visitor. And the hospitality of the hotel staff had been cold, to say the least. Somehow his actions merited such a response. Or perhaps it was his intentions?

The waiters had spilled a bit of chicken soup over his pants, before proceeding to make an even bigger mess of it by rubbing on the puddle. Then, when he picked up his spoon and tasted the soup, he realised that the cook had accidentally put too much salt on purpose. It was far from his childhood meal of choice. This wasn't something his mother would make. His mother...

Li nearly struck out at his servers for violating such a sacred childhood memory, but his manners prevailed and he coldly downed the rest of his soup, as not to offend his hosts.

When he returned to his room, he checked everything. He found some traps. At least his bed wasn't dirty, he thought. Then he opened his laptop to check his emails.

The desk was somewhat greasy. Whether it was an ill-executed trick or not, he did not know. He sighed, and opened QQ. Nice.

"The transaction has been backed up. Fear not. Do your thing and the money will flow in."

Great. Now all he had to do to get 10 million dollars was to persuade twenty-something stubborn villagers. Well, at least he wouldn't have to worry about the exact financial matters anymore.

#

As Li shouldered his bag and prepared to leave, a man stopped him. He wore simple clothes, and appeared to be a villager. He spoke sternly.

"We have lived on this land for centuries. Do not dislodge us. Only the foolish do so. Sir, I ask that you turn back. We do not intend to utilise other means to stop you. Please, leave."

"No. It is time for you to go to the city, and to learn about technology. Your roots are outdated, your ancient traditions inferior. Please, let me go about my business."

The man's eyes flared up. "Man, do not insult my culture! Inferior or not, it is mine. I will uphold it, like my ancestors before me. I hope that you will feel remorse. Whatever you say, I want you to know that we do not yield."

Li pushed him out of the way, and set off at a hasty trot.

#

Li was fully exhausted when he arrived. He was plagued by the words of the man, and by his childhood.

The villagers were arrayed before him, each of them bearing an expression of contempt. Then, someone spoke.

"You city-dweller, can you please respect us? We don't want our peaceful land to be replaced by a concrete box. Whatever you offer us, we do not accept. We are the true guardians of our land, not—"

Li interrupted her. "No. The concrete box will bring you tons of money, more than anything you could ever dream of. You could have actual WiFi. Your children will go to school—"

Another villager waved his hand angrily. "NO! This is our land, not your land. We are happy here. Go!"

A third villager stepped up. “Li, you were born here. You are a traitor. You want to destroy the place where you were conceived. I’m old. I knew you. When you left, you were an innocent child of the mountains. Now, you reek of greed and treachery. If they truly want to evict us, then send a less offensive man. ”

His expression softened. “But perhaps you were never a city man. Perhaps you can redeem yourself...?”

Li’s mind flashed back to his distant childhood memories, the man who had stopped him, the pleas of the villagers. His mind flashed back to his gentle mother, his father, and their breakup after his mother couldn’t adapt to the city. Li’s mother had cried when his father took him to the city. Before that, his kindly grandmother and his mother had cared for him. He had mountain blood. He thought of the mystical stories of the mountains, those bedside stories that had accompanied throughout his childhood. The Flowering Pen. The long ridge that resembled the back of a fish. Legends of seductive foxes and wise sages.

And more. He remembered the mists that surrounded him, when he had run up and down the mountain slopes. His grandmother often yelled at him for that, saying that he could slip and fall. He remembered the berries, the many flowers, gorgeous wonders that he could never see in the city. He remembered the dragons and *qilin* who dwelled in the mists and clouds, in the legends at least. He remembered the ancient pines, so large and so tall that it took ten villagers to hug it.

Such were the mystical mountains of China.

Li looked at every villager, examining their expressions. Some were defiant, some hopeful. Then, the true Li took over.

“I support you,” Li said, to the applause of the villagers.

The Mountain of the Yellow Emperor

Heep Yunn School, Chan, Hiu Yau – 14

“Huangshan, the misty mountain, is the origin of many myths. Hidden by mist, no one truly knows its real appearance, no one truly knows what terror is within, and no one truly knows what magic dwells beneath the misty cover.

“This moun...” she burst into fits of coughs, cutting off her sentence. Despite her attempt to hide it, I saw traces of blood.

“Gran, you don’t have to continue,” I cared about her health more than her stories, no matter how much I loved them.

“I’m fine, let’s see,” she paused in thought, fidgeting with the piece of jade strung around her neck. She said it was magical. “I shall tell you the story of Emperor Huang, who became an immortal dragon in HuangShan. He..... ”

Gran finished her story and blew out my candles.

That night, I dreamt about dragons living on a misty mountain.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A week later, the doctor came, he said Gran only had a week left.

Our only hope was the tale of a man who miraculously healed after visiting Huang Shan. It was rumoured that the mountain has exotic herbs, some even say that the Yellow Emperor healed him.

I remembered Gran’s folktales. She always believed in them. Could those about Huangshan be true?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

That night, I couldn’t sleep.

I couldn’t give up without at least trying.

But Gran caught me sneaking out.

“Are you going to Huangshan?”

“... Yes.”

“I know you want to help but... It’s dangerous.”

“Gran, please!”

She sighed, “It seems that I can’t convince you not to go... It will be dangerous. But how can I doubt your ability like they once did to me? Go to the tallest peak, the Lotus peak, which is where the Yellow Dragon’s lair stands.” She reached for her jade, “Take my jade with you. This way, part of me will be with you, even if you don’t make it back in time.”

It was still dark when I arrived at the mountain.

Mist surrounded me as I went forward, shrouding my vision. I couldn’t help but think that something was in the shadows, using the mist as their cover. Creaking sounds came from my left. A pair of glowing red eyes stared at me from a cave, I ran.

A shadow caught up to me. I was too slow. But it backed away as soon as it faced me, staring at my jade with horror. The jade emitted a warm glow that encased me, a protective aura that kept monsters at bay.

I was running from a relentless monster when I stumbled into a tunnel lined with peach blossoms, entering a clearing. A man shot the monster. “You okay? Why are you here? It’s dangerous.”

I told him about my quest to save Gran.

He offered to host me for the night and I accepted. “You will face Xingtian on your journey to the Emperor’s lair,” He handed me a sword as I prepared to leave the next morning. “I hope this can help,” he smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

As I left, I turned back to look at the blossoms. The flowers were gone, the clearing too. A thick mist covered the entrance and I couldn’t see the tunnel anymore.

Was it all a figment of my imagination?

I shook the strange feeling and continued hiking. I thought about the story of Xingtian, the giant. Gran said he was beheaded by the Yellow Emperor. He then used his nipples as eyes and belly button as mouth, hitting his shield with his battle axe as an act of defiance. Why was he here? Was it a challenge for visitors?

Two days passed. I looked out for the giant, but he was nowhere to be seen. As I climbed another hill, the mist thickened, shrouding my vision.

Then I heard it. Sounds of metal clanging against each other, and grunts of fury as loud as thunder. *Xingtian*. He was clad in nothing but a pair of ripped pants, exposing his bare torso that was now his face. I unsheathed my sword. A red jewel gleamed brightly at the end of its hilt as the mist served as great cover for me.

“Hey!” I called for his attention, then quickly ducked behind a rock.

“All intruders shall face death!” He bellowed.

He stepped closer to me. I struck, slashing off one of his toes. Hollering in pain, he thrashed and hit around blindly. I rolled out of his strike zone.

To my luck, the mist seemed to have cleared a little. And I saw my solution.

I dove for the vines, yanked one off, and tied the end to a sturdy rock. I ran around the giant in circles, using the mist as my cover.

As I almost finished encircling him, he saw me. My blood ran cold.

He lifted me off the ground towards his mouth, as in, belly button. I tightened the vine before he could notice them. Since the giant lifted me up, the vines were able to wrap around not only his feet, but his torso. He tripped and fell, dropping me to the ground.

Xingtian was tied up.

“Bravo,” somebody clapped from behind me, “I knew I could count on you to defeat Xingtian.”

I turned. It was the man who saved me.

He smirked, “You trust so easily, all it takes is a bit of illusion from a Fangshi like me. People are so easy to fool as long as they believe, everything will become real for them.”

Anger seeped through me, so that was why the peach blossoms disappeared when I left. “I put a tracking jewel on the sword and followed you. You did me a huge favour, young man, I could never have gotten past Xingtian without you. Now, I can rule for eternity!” His laugh echoed through the mountain, sending chills down my spine.

“Do me another favour and stay here.” He flicked his hand, a cage materialised around me. And he disappeared into the thickening mist.

I trusted the wrong person. I must stop him! I yanked at the bars of the cage. It wouldn't budge. "Ugh!" The mist thickened even more. For a split second, the cage seemed to blend into the mist, appearing to be see-through, unreal.

Of course this was an illusion! The Fangshi's voice ringed in my head, "People are so easy to fool as long as they believe, everything becomes real for them." I couldn't break free because I thought of the cage as real!

Not real, I told myself.

My hands passed through the metal. I broke free and ran up to the Lotus Peak, hoping I wasn't too late.

Two lions guarded the entrance at the temple. "State your intentions, boy, or you shall face the wrath of the lions."

"I am here to stop the Fangshi..."

"No worries, child, we took care of him." Traces of blood dripped from the lion's lips. I shuddered.

"What are your other intentions?"

"I'm looking for a panacea for my ill grandmother. The Emperor is my last hope."

"What a brave hero with a kind heart, go in."

I stepped inside and was faced with a majestic dragon.

"My brave young hero," the dragon boomed, "Very few were able to arrive here."

"I'm here for my grandma."

"Your grandmother was a brave heroine. She once protected this temple with her life, preserving my essence." A bag of herbs, wrapped in paper, appeared on the floor in front of me, "Feed her this medicine. My companion Qilun here would give you a ride back, I wish you all the best."

Gran told me about Qilun before. Perhaps this was why she believed in myths, she experienced them. The Qilun took off and soon we were back home. But I was too late.

My mother was weeping next to Gran's bed.

"This shouldn't..." I dropped to the floor, tears spilling out of my eyes.

I clutched the jade on my neck, the only thing Gran left for me. The jade glowed hot, illuminating our cottage, blinding us. When the light died down, it magically went back to Gran.

She opened her eyes.

"How...?"

"I told you a piece of me was in the jade. It was enchanted to store part of my soul, and perhaps, scaring off some monsters too."

After Gran downed the medicine, the lively brightness returned to her eyes.

As I went to clear the used herbs, I noticed mist had clouded over the pot. When it cleared, I peered inside. All the herbs have disappeared, not a trace of medicine remained.

The paper that was used to wrap the herb fluttered from the table to the ground in front of me. There I saw:

*She was saved because you believed and held hope in your heart.
The panacea, my child, is your faith.*

The Path of Pain to the Peak

Heep Yunn School, Chan, Xin Kei – 13

1837, Mudu (a village at the foot of Huangshan)

One month old

A baby born inked. Lim was inked. An angry red birthmark spread across half of his face, like an entire continent on a map. “Look how gross he is! I bet his mother did something bad during her pregnancy!” Callous cackle echoed in the tiny room where the new mother lay exhausted. She glanced at the tiny baby next to her, the birthmark, rancorous and raging, escaped her vision. In his face, she saw only her entire world.

“Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond,” she whispered to the sleeping babe.

1842, Mudu

Five years old

A boy. He was only five, but he might as well be fifty. He knew of prejudice, knew its bitter taste. He knew of pain, felt its sting from the heat of a palm. He knew of hatred and its burning touch that set fire to his soul, but not his skin.

He was a boy who could not ambulate through the village without being laughed or stared at. Like how water could flow and evaporate in thin air, he would disappear whenever he encountered any of the village children. It was as if his shoes instinctively knew where to run when bullies came. Like an iguana, his clothes changed colours whenever he needed to hide from snickers and smirks. This was Lim, a master at disappearing.

Lim looked up where the cloud mists hugged the mountain like a comforting blanket, a tender shelter for the peak from the wind. *“Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond,”* the clouds seemed to write a message with their tendrils curled across the sky. And by noon, the mists would have disappeared, just like Lim.

1849, Mudu

Twelve years old

A man. A man who could outfarm, outplough, outharvest any villager twice his age, twice his size. But all he wanted was his mother to outlive him.

He looked down at his mother’s grave. The salty tears flowed into his mouth, bringing the bitter taste of sorrow. Sadness was like a river, cold and unending, chilling his heart, deadening his mind.

He was in the field that fateful afternoon. Hard at work in the heat of the summer, he was too far and too tired to hear the screams of “Fire! Fire!” The villagers heard his mother’s cries. *They* smelled the smoke. *They* felt the heat of the flames. But *they* did nothing! All out of fear that their children would be cursed just as her son was if they touched her.

Bitter. Unforgiving. Pain.

Was it his fault?

Flames of resentment burned within, brimming in his chest, as hot as lava. Near her grave, a broad belt of silver brocade wound its way in front of Lim, mirroring the person that he was disgusted of. Himself. In the gurgling of the stream, he heard the laughs and guffaws of the villagers.

“Lim, look at you, I bet you did something horrible in your past life”

“Lim, get away from me, I don’t want to get infected by you!”

In the ripples of the water, glass shards reflected off its surface in tiny but sharp and painful memories. The evil curl of a lip after an insult. The narrowed eyes before a well-aimed shove. The wicked sniff before a snicker.

He jumped into the water, wishing to drown the hot, angry feeling, wishing that his tears, his birthmark, his guilt would be washed away.

Under the surface of the water, he heard his mother's voice, garbled but unmistakably hers. "Lim, it is time to head home! *Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond.*"

He saw her face, waiting for him at the surface and swam eagerly up. When he broke through, her face was gone. All that's above him was the mountain that touched the sky, and the clouds that played around its peaks.

1852, Mudu

Fifteen years old

An outcast. An outcast who had no other features. Not his hands that could turn a plough faster than a full grown man. Not his legs that could outrun the swiftest rabbit in Mudu. It was always the birthmark, a curling and lambent flame burnt on his face. This was Lim.

He had desperately wanted to join in the festivities of the Summer Solstice Festival. The villagers of Mudu were praying for prosperity, racing dragon boats and enjoying the roasted pig to celebrate the Summer Solstice Festival. For once, he wanted to be included. For once, he wanted to be a part of the villagers. For once, he wanted to join the festivities.

"Get away from me!" a villager jeered. "I don't want to get infected!"

"I am not infected, why can't I join?" Lim protested.

"Look at the birthmark on your face, don't spread it! Don't bring a plague to our village!"

The familiar words slammed into him. It was always the same. The hatred, the fear, the anger that burned against him. When would he ever be seen, truly seen, as a person and not a birthmark?

Suddenly, he wants to get out of this place. The words he grew up with came again like a siren song. "*Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond.*" Determined, he set out one foot in front of the other, eyes fixed on the cloudy mists of Huangshan. He didn't know why. Didn't know how. But he felt lured to conquer its peak.

Moss and lichen covered the boulders sprawled in rockery of mother nature. The worn path snaked through the blanket of grass with thick dark green boughs arching over it from each side. The sky vanished almost completely, only a few fragments of blue remained, like scattered pieces of a puzzle. The air was filled with the fragrance of leaves and loam, damp too. The silence caressed his skin like a cool summer breeze, soothing his soul. Lim climbed the mountains of Huangshan. Fear crippled him but he was keen to conquer the mountain. He cared little about the wet mud that stuck into his shoes or the branches that dug into his shoulders. He was eager to leave. Eager to finally arrive.

"Rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond."

Two months later.

Over many moons and over many suns, he finally reached the peak of Huangshan. There was nothing higher, above, or beyond than this. The quiet curl of the mists was comforting yet unnerving at the same time. Lim felt that something momentous was about to happen. He just did not know what it was.

The sound of quiet footsteps broke the silence. The footsteps were coming from the mist, towards him. Closer. Closer. *Closer.*

"Hellooooo?" Lim asked, timid, hopeful and scared all at once.

And then. And then the silhouette became clearer. Clearer. *Clearer.*

It was a man. An old man with a mottled scalp ambled out with a shuffling gait. It was not his gnarled hands that surprised Lim. Nor his grey scraggly beard. But his red birthmark on his left part of his face, its outline exactly like the missing part of a map on Lim's face. Lim stood up with a jolt. He was both flabbergasted and bewildered.

Every muscle of his body had just frozen before a grin crept into his face.

"There is no need to *rise higher. Rise above. Rise beyond.* You are safe here now. Welcome to the *Village of the Inked.*"

High up on this mountain, Lim was finally home.

The Soul Trader

Heep Yunn School, Chow, Lok Lam – 15

‘Noel! Could you just put down your phone for a while!’ Amanda demanded.

I groaned and completely ignored my mother.

My dad, Nick calmly whispered, ‘Do you really think she works? She’s like an old witch living in those “Chinese Magical Mountains”!’ Amanda gave a weak smile back. I frowned and asked, ‘Nick, who’s...?’ Amanda interrupted, ‘Noel! How many times do I need to tell you not to call your parents by first names? That’s very rude!’ I rolled my eyes and spared no response.

The car travelled for a long distance, with all the sharp turns and mischievous intersections. Looking out the window, I saw clouds running fast across the sky with the carry of the wind, as if they were children on a piece of grassland. There were villages sitting quietly above them, like calm and wise grandparents taking after their grandchildren. There were those pine trees which stood at every top of the mountains, watching over this planet. They made up the view that took my breath away. I rolled down the car window, the air seemed to get colder as we travelled along the mountain roads. The car seemed to be more and more distant from the world, it gave off a mysterious vibe as if we were going somewhere secret.

We finally stopped at a village. Getting out of the car, I noticed the stone beside the village entrance. I walked closer towards it and brushed my hands over the words.

‘Surrender your body in exchange
Once traded then never change
Underneath the surface of strange
Lies a new beginning which was rearranged’

‘Surrender?’ I wondered. Nick dragged me away into the entrance of the village before I could understand the meaning of the poem, but it was still on my mind.

We walked into the temple of the village. This temple was different. Looking around the temple hall, I also realized the most peculiar thing was that there wasn’t a single person around. Replacing the statues was an ancient book in the middle and a stage behind it, the stage was like those stages for consecration. I walked closer towards the book, the aged pages lied open and were covered in dust.

An old woman walked in. She introduced herself to my parents, with a very polite tone, ‘These two must be Mr. and Mrs. Pang. I am the person in charge of the temple, you can call me Nadia. The manners education class is ready...’ ‘Again? Amanda, is this your tricks...’ I burst in instantly but was then interrupted by Nick, ‘Noel! Do not call your mother by her first name!’ Nadia urged, ‘His manners will be corrected, now shall we begin?’

‘Now may Noel step onto the stage please.’

I walked unwillingly onto the stage, thinking this was just another silly act of Amanda trying to change her son’s ‘misbehaviors’. Nadia flipped her ancient book onto the correct page and read, ‘Upon the stars...’ I could only recognize the first sentence, then there was some foreign language that I couldn’t understand. I stood there plainly listening to her reading. When she finally finished, I gave out a long sigh. I walked towards Amanda and Nick and interrogated, ‘What act are you playing again this time?’ Strangely, they ignored me, plainly glancing at the stage.

I turned around and I saw ... ‘myself’!

I saw ‘myself’ up on the stage, as if there was a mirror in between. I was shocked, my heartbeat was racing fast. I saw ‘myself’ tidying up his clothes which I never do. I rubbed my eyes and stared at him. He walked downstage towards my parents and said with a polite tone, ‘Mom and Dad, thank you so much for doing all of these for me.’ Amanda and Nick were so pleased with what they saw. But I was so confused that I shouted, ‘Nick! I’m right here! Amanda! He’s fake!’ Nick gave a written cheque to Nadia then they walked out of the temple, without a single glimpse back at me.

I was so terrified like a deer falling into a hunter’s paws that I screamed, ‘Mom! Dad! Don’t leave me!’ I tried to run towards them but I fell onto the floor. I could do nothing but stared at them taking a fake ‘me’ away. Their car travelled away, getting smaller in sight. The sense of hollow inside me grew larger in contrast.

‘It is of no use.’ She scoffed, ‘You stupid humans, always regretting when you finally lost the things you care.’ I spoke slowly, ‘What...’ She began, ‘It is called soul trading.’

‘This act of soul trading is my mission and what I was born to do. This career of mine began when I found out that some rich people wanted to live forever. I had this idea of soul trading to satisfy their desires. They pay me, I get them another life.’

I yelled, ‘What does it have to do with me!’

‘You see, I cannot plainly create a human being. Therefore, I thought of a plan— education. Stupid parents want their kids to be better, they even believe coming to these places would ‘heal their children’s evil souls’. Therefore, I exchanged their children’s souls with the rich folks.’ She smiled as if she thought there was nothing wrong. I paused for a while then said, ‘What? My body was exchanged?’ I looked down at my hands, they were slightly transparent, but I could already see the wrinkles on them. I blinked for a few times to ensure I wasn’t seeing things.

Nadia walked over to me and took my hand. She dragged me to the ancient book and flipped it open. She continued, ‘Long before, I was sent to this beautiful and mysterious mountain.’ She pointed at the first picture of the book, it was a picture of a younger her holding the ancient book while standing at the top of Huangshan.

Nadia glanced at the picture with a sorrowful eyesight. She spat, ‘It was lonely living here. Those villagers went far away after they heard my plan. Sure, there were poets and storytellers who were inspired by my story but most people thought it was cruel. News was spread among nations and a rumour of evil souls on Huangshan was developed. Huangshan was said to be mysterious and I was left here all alone.’

I stared at the picture, ‘It is cruel.’

‘Your parents got a well-mannered kid, the rich guys got to live longer, I got the money and you got to stay in this beautiful village. Ain’t that good?’

I glared at her and whimpered, ‘You can’t just break families like that...’

I recalled the moments when I was actually happy with my parents and I continued, ‘You are no one to replace families!’ She scoffed again, ‘I’ve been here since forever, and I have only seen those parents babbling about how their children should improve. If your parents really love you that much, why would they be changing you against your will?’

I was dumbfounded.

Months had passed after the day I arrived here, that horrible memory of me exchanging souls still haunted me every night. Mom and Dad were never back, probably they didn't realize the kid wasn't me or they were satisfied with a well-mannered kid. The only thing that could calm me was the magnificent view of Huangshan, the clouds still floated past every day. The world was changing and this view was probably the only constant in changes.

I was left in charge of this temple after months of training. I signed myself up because I wanted to prove that the world didn't work like what Miss Nadia said. I still believed that families cannot be torn apart, I just needed some proof. I walked towards the entrance of the village and stopped at the stone. I brushed my hand over the words which lie upon it.

Would things be any different if I had looked more carefully at the poem that day?

A family walked in, the parents greeted me but the kid rolled his eyes. I smiled as if I saw the shadow of my youth.

'Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Wong. I am the person in charge of this temple, Leon. The education class is ready.' The kid walked onto the stage with his body shivering.

I turned the ancient book and flipped to the correct page. 'Upon the stars...'

Suddenly, the kid screamed, 'Mom! Dad! It's so scary!' He ran down the stage towards his parents and hugged them tight. He sobbed, 'I promised not to be rude!' His parents hugged him back tight. His mom patted on his head and said softly, 'Sweetie, we won't make you do it if you don't want to.' His dad nodded apologetically at me.

'It's fine, I wish you a happy family life.'

Watching them walk away in perfect harmony.
I thought I found my proof.

The Answer

Heep Yunn School, Li, Nicole – 15

I didn't know why I was there. People said that the 'secrets of fame and success lie in the mists of the Yellow Mountains', so let me see if the 'generous' mountains could spare me from my heavy debt back home.

It was dusk when I hiked on the Cloud Valley Scenic Area alone. The howls from panthers and squawks from eagles seemed to be communicating with each other. On the way up from Yungu Temple, my tiredness and annoyance rose. With the ponderous travel backpack on my arched and sore back, I was forced to rest beside a stone statue. It was a man in a long cloak, holding up his hand as if to show the way. 'I don't like this.' I muttered recurrently, although I did feel a bit of reassurance knowing that at least the statue cared.

When I was struggling to stand back up, I lost my balance. As I tumbled down the hill, every part of my body was being cut by the unforgiving rocks, but I could not cry in pain. Alas, in the midst of the excruciating pain and despair, I felt a forceful punch on my skull, and everything went dark.

I woke up to the mellifluous sound of a traditional Chinese instrument, alongside the rippling sound of waterfalls. Feeling drowsy and alert at the same time, I frantically tried to prop myself up. 'Fear not. Haste will not get you anywhere.' A deep masculine voice chuckled. Following the source of the voice, I saw, with blurry vision, a basic outline of an old Chinese man who was wearing a cloak.

'Wh...who are you? Where... where....' I felt unsafe with this 'kidnapper'. However, with my soreness and pain in my body, I was in no form of defending myself. 'I am not a kidnapper, and this is my cave. If you feel at least a bit better, have some fruits, and go home.' With the melody of Erhu soothing my tense mind, I began to put down my guard. After a bit of rest, I tried to leave.

'Stay. I sense that you came here to search for the secrets of the mountains, so I will now point out the way.' I chuckled. I never cared about the so-called 'secrets' of the Yellow Mountains, so I was quick to refuse his offer. However, as odd as it might sound, I was allured with the temptation to know what was in the 'Pandora's box'. I decided to follow him.

He led me along the hiking trails of the mountain. As we walked in silence, it was then that I first started to appreciate nature. We were very high from sea level, and looking out, the waves of mist spread out in the air, masking sources of life on the mountains. Of course, this cheeky act of the mist could not deceive me as the wildlife shouted and competed for attention. Yet, they competed with laughter and peace. I then saw the mountains as full of life and vivacity, and I started to smile. The grass crackled softly beneath our feet as I continued exploring the depths of the Yellow Mountains.

'There you go.' The man said. I realized that I was not alone. 'To discover the secrets of the mountains, you first need to let go of your ego and befriend the mountains. Nature always seeks for reconciliation, but it is man who denies its good intention. Anger brings much sorrow.'

As we walked further into the mountains, he looked at me and said in a serious tone, 'You are a good man. You are just lost.' I was shocked. He had said exactly what I feel. I felt numb and lost. He glanced at my defeated expression and said, 'No man is a perfect man; no gold is sufficiently bare. If you want a change in your life, you will have to learn.'

We sat down next to a spring. Strands of thin light came from the sky and showered onto the emerald waters. I took a whiff. The fresh smell of nature never fails to calm and amaze me. Just when I was immersed in the beauty of nature, the man told me something that would forever change my life.

'Your desire for fame and wealth destroyed you. Life is not about materialism. It is about spiritual cultivation. It is about not being jealous when you see others getting better than you, but to applaud them. It is about not feeling defeated when facing obstacles, but to overcome them with courage. It is about love, it is about wisdom, and acknowledging the fact that we know nothing. This is the meaning of life.'

I froze. I could not believe that after all these years of thirst for money and power, I only came to a wrong approach to life. Despite seeing my stunned expression, the man grinned with satisfaction and continued.

‘You see, the mist and the odd-shaped pines are the spirits of the ancestors who chose to cultivate their minds in the mountains. They became the source of all lives in the mountains, which explains why our King, Huangdi chose to make the elixir of immortality in this place and why many new species are found here.’

‘A long time ago, it was evident to the scholars and the wildlife that wherever civilization was present, devils of rage, distrust, jealousy, and greed could be found. These devils were distractions from the true meaning of life, which was the cultivation of the spiritual mind. This was the reason why scholars retreated to this very mountain. They fed their minds and spirits on the beauty of nature and the tranquillity of the mountains. They let go of all the desires and greed and dedicated their lives to find the meaning of life. When they died, their spirits stayed in the mountains, guarding and leading the people who went to the mountains in search of spiritual success. This is why the mountains remain solemn and mysterious. This is the story of the mountains.’

After listening to the wise man, I gasped in awe. He woke me up from my ignorance. Before, I was a penniless man who had deep hatred and jealousy. I was obsessed with money and jealous of others’ achievements. Now I knew. Being consumed by materialistic possessions and jealousy kept us from love and life.

I walked the man back to his cave. However, he gestured me to the steps following the old cableway. He stood with me beside a pine tree. ‘Look at the beauty of nature. Contemplate what I have just said. You will know what to choose; spiritual or materialistic wealth.’ Then, unexpectedly, he chuckled, ‘Centuries ago, I gave advice to a young man like you. You remind me of him.’ Abruptly, the man turned into the exact stone statue that I had seen before I tumbled down the hill. I now knew who he was. He was the rock statue, ‘Immortal Pointing the Way’. Legend has it that he once pointed a man on the way to a happy life and success, and now it was he who led me from darkness to light, to truth. In that very moment, I have decided to develop spiritual cultivation in this mountain, where I was reborn.

After moments of solitude, the sense of responsibility slowly but surely marched into my heart, reminding me of my long but meaningful journey ahead. After sending the statue my last smile, I grabbed the fruits he had given me in the cave, my worn-out photo with my family which I had brought for this trip, and started walking towards the peak of the mountain. Throughout my hike, the mystic rock inscriptions and the ancient pine trees pointed me the way, and I felt more and more connected with life. As time passed, I was more immersed in my thoughts with the meaning of spiritual cultivation. What am I afraid of? What is wisdom? How does one obtain true peace?

I arrived at the acclaimed Nine-Dragon Waterfall. The nine levels were equally almighty, but they coexist in harmony. Each level of waterfall originated in different places but they all ended in the same pool. Isn’t life the same? We humans are born with different backgrounds, we take on unique journeys throughout life. Regardless, as the Bible has said, ‘Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection unto eternal life’. Just like how the different levels of waterfall all ended in the same pool, life will one day come to an end. So what’s more important than embracing the present?

Slowly, I found more and more inspiration from the Nine-Dragon Waterfall. Determined, I set down the fruits that the man had given me on the floor, and with the sound of never-ending waterfall accompanying me, I closed my eyes and started my journey to enrich my spiritual wealth.

The Immortality Elixir

Heep Yunn School, Ng, Hei Yan – 14

What is death? It is something unavoidable, a natural process that happens to everyone in which all of your normal biological functions stop and you would close your eyes for the last time to abide in darkness and silence. It is something that I, Emperor Xuanyuan was terrified of.

Before I used the immortality elixir, I was a successful ruler who led countless men to victory in wars and my country was showered by riches. I appeared fearless among my people, as a powerful emperor, but it was nothing but a mask I put on for show, for I am haunted by the inevitable, death. One day, the glory that I brought to this country would end. My rule upon it would be over as I breathe my last breath in this palace.

I searched far and wide to find a way to avoid death, but to no avail, until I stumbled across the findings of a dead alchemist in the royal library. Fu Qiugong was an infamous alchemist who dedicated his whole life to achieve immortality, until his own research doomed him, as he fell to his death when trying to gather the ingredients for the immortality elixir.

I was not expecting much when I first read this book but what I discovered left me in awe. The findings concluded that an immortality elixir could be made with the life of others. Once you have sucked out a person's life, you could live another year without the fear of death. In other words, if you take enough people's lives, you can live for as long as you want, or immortality, as I would call it.

With this newfound information, I wasted no time to begin constructing a contraption that would create people's most desired dream and suck out their lives, while generating mist that covered up the piles of bodies. I would place the contraption somewhere that it was inescapable, and I knew the perfect place for it—Yishan, or Huangshan as people now call it.

On the 100th day, the contraption was finished. I began heading to Huangshan, leaving my trusted chancellor in charge. I set foot on Lotus Peak, the tallest mountain of Huangshan, so tall that no one would even dare to come up. As I gazed upon the breathtaking view that Huangshan had to offer, I started the contraption. Mist surrounded the mountain within seconds, and I was no longer able to see the foot of the mountain.

Word soon spread about the emperor who never returned after his visit to Huangshan. Grief filled the country as people mourned their missing emperor. To commemorate me, they named Yishan to Huangshan. Centuries after centuries, an endless number of people had come to Huangshan, each having different objectives and desires. My contraption created thousands after thousands of illusions for the people who stepped foot on Huangshan, each falling victim to my machine without fail. The peace and silence of this little village of mine seemed to be the only form of civilization that was seen on this mountain. Animals were my only source of company and what was keeping me sane from the silence of this mountain.

It was just like any other day when everything went south. I was walking out of my door when I saw something that I didn't think I would ever see again in this lifetime. Another living human was standing in front of my door. Cold sweat dripped down my head as a hint of panic rushed through my body. How did he get through the mountain without falling for the illusions that the contraption created? The contraption showed no signs of malfunctioning when I checked on it last night, so how did this human get past the machine?

“Greetings, Emperor Xuanyuan. Pardon me for such a sudden visit. I am the person who created the immortality elixir, Fu Qiugong, or should I say, the ghost of Fu Qiugong. May I ask if you used the immortality elixir from my findings?” the ghost of Fu Qiugong said.

“What are you doing here? Yes, I have used your findings to make an immortality elixir, but I do not see how this may affect you. You are a ghost, no longer a living being of this world, I do not see how me making it would cause you any trouble,” I replied.

Fu Qiugong chuckled, and said, “Oh no, it does not affect me at all. I am just here to stop you from using the elixir. You could have done so much more if you had not used this elixir of mine, just like my friend Rong Chengzi. He was quite the talented young man.” As he continued, his expression slowly morphed into a sad, gloomy look. It looked as though he was lost in his own memories of his friend.

“But why? I don’t understand. Why should I not use your elixir? I have gained so much more than I could ever have when I was a human. I have gained immortality, I saw the world changing in front of my very eyes. I saw the changes of this mountain. I saw history happening. I could not have gained these if I were a human,” I smiled to myself. With the immortality elixir, I had experience so much more than I could ever have. There was no way I am giving up on using it.

Fu Qiugong simply smiled, with a hint of sadness on his face.

“Let me tell you a story, a story of two alchemists who wanted to be immortals. They, like many others, were afraid to die more than anything else on this earth. They decided to put their talent in alchemy to use to create an immortality elixir to prevent the inevitable. In the end, they succeeded in creating the elixir, and one of the alchemists wrote down his research into a finding. However, by being an immortal, they had lost so much more than they ever wanted to. Sure, they gained immortality, but at what cost? They could not see their families ever again, as they never aged. They lurked so far into the woods that no one could ever reach them. One of the alchemists was driven into insanity from all the things he had lost and vanished into the woods. The other alchemist faked his own death, and he lived in regret for the rest of his life, realizing the mistakes that he had made by creating the immortality elixir. After his death, he searched every corner of this earth as a ghost to see if anyone had used his findings to be an immortal, and attempted to stop those who did.”

Before I could utter a single word, the monk stopped me and continued speaking. “How much have you lost because you used the elixir? You could not see your family because you had to stay in Huangshan. You have not seen other humans simply because you had to stay in this mountain to use the elixir. How many times have you wanted to give up because you feel so bored in this mountain doing the same thing over and over again? You can't rule your country anymore. You have been so close to insanity so many times, yet you go on, simply because you have gone too far to stop using the elixir. How many lives have you taken away to make the immortality elixir? Death is unavoidable, you cannot escape it. The more you try to run away from it, the scarier it will be. Death is just another part of the circle of life, a part of nature. Xuanyuan, accept death.”

The words of Fu Qiugong hit me in the heart. I wanted to argue that he was wrong, that I had not lost anything by using the elixir, that I was not a coward who was afraid of death. But deep down, I knew he was correct. I couldn’t lead my country to further glory and prosperity. I could have experienced so much more if I had carried on being the emperor of my country, instead of this dull and mundane life that I have right now. How many families have I destroyed by taking away the lives of their loved ones? The feeling of regret rushed through me as tears streamed down my face.

I walked towards the contraption that I had built thousands of years ago and stopped the contraption. It stopped working after mere seconds. The mist that I created with the machine still surrounded Huangshan. It would probably take another thousand years before it could disappear completely. I looked back at Fu Qiugong, who reached out a hand at me. As I took his hand, I felt my body slowly vanishing away. Fu Qiugong and I became nothing but two glowing orbs, and we flew to Tian as we both finally accepted death.

Kismet

HKUGA College, Chan, Wing Tsun Valerie – 12

To be honest, I had never expected my first month in China to end up like this.

But here I was, perched precariously on a flat marble slab, with nothing to defend myself against the harsh winter winds except for a flimsy windbreaker. This... wasn't exactly a typical Christmas Eve.

Really, this wasn't even close to what Christmas Eve should be like, but well, I couldn't really stay at home. It wasn't even a home to me, when I couldn't understand what everyone was talking about most of the time.

And besides, I still didn't understand why we had to come to China. Father's apothecary was doing wonderfully in London and life was better than ever when he announced two months ago that we would be going back to his hometown in Huangshan City to have more 'business opportunities', apparently. The whole family had to emigrate to this rural town where the only appeal was the picturesque landmarks— which, for your information, weren't what they looked like on the web.

So the only logical solution was to run away, and since for some reason, I had been drawn to Huangshan Mountain since day one, I had naturally resolved to spend a week on Lotus Peak. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? The fresh air— and my disappearance— would probably make my family change their minds and bring me home.

I sat there for what seemed like forever, wallowing in self-pity and mindlessly kicking my legs against the circular marble slab I was sitting on. I had been walking for hours and on several occasions climbing over small landslides until I reached a rather flat area, strangely devoid of trees and barren except for the slab that she was sitting on, inscribed with Chinese characters that I had never even seen before.

The stone was cool against my touch, and I figured that it was as good a place as any other to rest tonight, and as I idly doodled on my diary, I swept my fingers across the carved characters, covered in a thin layer of dust and slightly warm to the touch.

As I tried to speak the characters out loud, stumbling over many unknown words, the carvings grew hotter under my palms until a glow started emanating from inside the marble. My eyes widened in alarm and I warily backed away, but it was too late.

A silhouette had materialized and started to take the shape of a person with long limbs and a lean body. I couldn't bear to look, in fear of it being one of the shapeshifters that the superstitious elders had kept going on about. But still, curiosity overtook my common sense and I opened my eyes slightly to see... a boy.

He had dark floppy hair that covered almond shaped brown eyes and looked around in confusion. His movements were easy and elegant and reminded me of ancient nobility in the novels that I read, and as he registered my presence, the boy bowed slightly and spoke in a dialect that I didn't comprehend.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak fluent Chinese," I apologized, hoping that he would understand what I was trying to say. "I'm Harper, and you are...?"

A look of comprehension dawned on his face and he started speaking in English. "Oh, good day, Miss Harper," He greeted me with smooth English. "My name is—" He paused, then said, "Edward."

I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't border along the lines of 'how did you suddenly appear', but the boy didn't say anything either, so we sat there on the rock in quiet, albeit slightly awkward silence.

I stared morosely into the darkness in front of me, tall, willowy trees wailing the vehement force of the glacial winds, small specks of snow brightening the dark, dense clouds that obscured almost everything from view, calling to mind the tale I had read of the two lovers who had jumped off the cliffside of Huangshan together instead of being sentenced to severe punishment for their forbidden love, much like the story of Romeo and Juliet.

The boy suddenly spoke, jolting my mind back to the present. “Are you a... tourist?” He asked hesitantly, as if he was unsure of the term.

“I’m not a tourist,” I snapped frostily before I realized the huge mistake that I had just made. “I mean... I live here in Huangshan City, yes, but it’s not permanent—” I cut off abruptly. What if this boy was some... ancient, vengeful spirit trying to punish me for wanting to go home? “What about you?” I tried to sound pleasant and failed miserably.

He arched a brow at me. “Do you want to know?” He replied cryptically, and for some reason I couldn’t understand, I nodded, and Edward placed a pale, cold hand on my wrist. Before I could jerk away, everything in front of me seemed to be wiped away in a blur of white.

I found myself alone and on the same slab that I had been sitting on, only with a small rock outcrop sheltering me from the merciless storm that was drenching everything within visibility. The dim hubbub of voices made me turn, and I could then see three middle-aged men crouched over a crudely fashioned bowl that they held over a small flame, chanting some kind of poem together.

In the corner, a slim young boy was leaning against the walls, with shadowed eyes and a downcast expression. He was... Edward?

The plumpest of the men looked up in his direction. “Edward,” he beckoned to the boy, who hesitantly walked over with reluctance. “But Father— Emperor—” The man, who was apparently a king— which meant that Edward was royalty— didn’t even look in his direction, forcefully grabbed him by the arm and cruelly dunked his head into the murky, bubbling concoction he was brewing, a twisted smile appearing on his face. “This is for my own good, son,” he said, and as the scene faded away, Edward limp and lifeless in the king’s grip, I was left staring in horror at the boy sitting next to me.

“Who even says ‘this is for my own good’?” I quipped, trying to lighten the mood. Edward didn’t speak for a long while, and when he did, his tone was grave.

“My father was Huangdi,” he started. “The great ‘Father of China’. He came to the mountain in search of immortality, but in order to live forever he had to sacrifice me.” A bitter expression flitted over his face. “He did it. No hesitations. But what he didn’t know was that he had unwittingly condemned me to an eternity of being trapped in this marble, never to be freed unless someone read out the inscription.”

I was speechless, but even if I had said something, it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. I bit my lip and quietly touched his arm. “Harper.” Edward said carefully, “I think you should go home.” I didn’t answer him, but I knew he was right. The first colors of dawn were starting to appear on the horizon, splashes of golden yellow and orange brightening up the sky. Edward didn’t say anything else and I hugged him.

No words were needed, but he understood and smiled sadly at my earnest face.

I had to go home. To be completely truthful, I had no idea what even possessed me to run away. I mean... true, London would always be my home, but well, those were my parents, and deep down I knew that this place wasn’t that bad.

“Thank you,” I told him quietly and started sprinting down the cobbled stone steps, slick with snow. Edward stood there motionless, his expression not betraying anything and devoid of emotion. “Would you... want to come with me? Leave the mountain?”

Edward finally spoke, “No, Harper, I can’t... this is the last piece of me left,” He said, his knuckles grazing the marble slab. “I cannot leave.”

“Please,” I begged. Yes, he was a total stranger. Yes, he was probably from eons ago. But he was still a child deep down, and I did owe him for making me realize that I belonged with my family. Edward disappeared and materialized in front of me, his gaze softening as he kissed the back of my hand.

And then, he faded.

“Edward?” I screamed. But he was gone. All that remained was a small whisper, over and over again in the back of my head. And as a thick mist started to surround me, a single tear dropped from my eyes.

Now here I was, alone on the bus, my notebook spread on my lap. The driver smiled at me, his eyes crinkling. “Up so early, lassie? Merry Christmas.”

I replied politely. “Merry Christmas.” My mind raced with unspoken thoughts, but as I picked up the pen, I could only write one sentence.

‘I found out the true meaning of kismet on Christmas Eve. Or should I say, kismet found me.’

Tales of Kayla and the Mystical Creatures

HKUGA College, Leung, Yat Laam Ashley – 12

Hi, I'm Kayla, an eleven year old explorer. I can't wait to tell you everything! First of all, I'm adopted. Yes, you can stare in disgust and then ignore me like everyone else. I'm told that my parents died in a murderous fire ten years ago but I always feel like the truth wasn't as simple.

My adoptive parents brought me on a vacation to China. I explored the mysterious mountains and made a huge discovery that totally blew my mind!

After an overnight flight trip, we arrived there. We followed a tourist group to visit Huangshan which is famous for its unknown mysteries! When we arrived at the bottom of the mountain, I gazed upon it and gasped in amazement! It's humongous in a phenomenal way. That's when I accidentally left the tourist group and wandered off into the unknown...

"Whoa!" I tripped over a spiky rock and fell into a bottomless hole with my right leg injured!

All of a sudden, I ended up in a peculiar cave...at least that's what I thought.

But unlike other successful explorers, I was agitated. I was limping with my right leg bleeding, frantically searching for a way out. I trod the muddy ground and pushed myself towards the highest point where I might be able to climb out, but it was no use.

I hopelessly flopped against the cave wall but then the sound of an elephant call caught my attention.

Turns out, it was a fascinating creature! It was as small as my palm and had the trunk and ears of an elephant. However, its body was really furry and it had a curly tail like a pig. Its fur was light brown with the scent of a brownie.

"I can't believe it! I'm the first person to discover you! I'll call you...Elepie!" I remarked as I doodled it onto my book. I would disclose this to the human society!

Not only had I discovered Elepie, but he also led me to other kinds of seductive creatures, such as extraordinary turtles that move unbelievably fast, enchanting antelopes that could run on air and mind blowing owls that literally blow bubbles as big as your head! I had such a wondrous time that I didn't realise it was getting late.

I promised I'd visit them again. My leg is better after resting for a while, so I climbed up the hole.

I had an urge to announce this stunning place to the world but through Elepie's gesturing, he told me the cruel things that human society would do to them. It felt like being kicked in the gut, not able to let others know what I've done, but deep down, I knew keeping a secret would be worth it. I wished to let others know, but keeping secrets is part of an adventure.

This month, I've been visiting the creatures each day and playing with them, until one fateful day...

"Breaking new! Police found dead bodies buried with bones of weird creatures. The police led to a conclusion that people were killed by the creatures ten years ago, including Benson Wong, Ray and Iriana Anderson and Cathy Lee."

"Wait, did she say Ray and Iriana Anderson? As if, Ray and Iriana? My biological parents?"

Tears poured down my face. How foolish was I, to become friends with those murderous creatures! I must avenge my parents.

That night, the guilt of betrayal was bugging me. I handed the creatures to scientists.

In the middle of the night, I snuck out to search for the truth. So I met up with Elepie who was hiding in the cave, frightened. The poor thing was shaking nonstop.

I tried to recall my memory about my parents. However, I sulked profusely every time I thought of them. I steadied my trembling cheeks, dried my tears and held myself together.

My adoptive parents once told me that my parents were studying zoology in China when an earthquake knocked down some flammable chemicals in the lab and lit up the building! That was ten years ago, and unluckily, my parents passed away because of it. Fortunately, I asked my adoptive parents to write down the address on my headband. Right then, I stood up firmly, feeling the courage to start the investigation!

Elepie and I snuck aboard a train. My heart beat got faster by the second, like it was a drum, hit by fear and doubts. If my parents really were killed by these creatures, why was I told that they died in a fire?

Right then, I could tell the train was moving fast, the view from the windows were all blurry. But for once, my head and heart were both telling me what to do.

I searched from block to block for the right address, until I found it! The building was untouched after the incident so whatever I found in the room belonged to my parents. I couldn't believe my own parents had walked on the very same floor before! There was a bag with their names on it. Next to it, there was a shallow antiquated cupboard.

I reached inside but there was an odd brick sticking out! Elepie jumped inside and pushed it.

"A hidden drawer!" I whispered out loud. There was a diary inside!

I blew the dust away and quickly flipped through it...

My parents weren't killed by the creatures! This is my mum's diary...

Dear Diary,

Richard found fossils of mythical creatures a year ago. But right then, others didn't believe him. However, today, Richard, Ray and I finally found those living creatures! I was exhilarated. But we realised we should protect them from the humans. Richard told Ray and I to fetch him a magical bone that could save them! I'm heading to the museum to get it. Those creatures are lovely and I would do whatever it takes to protect them. I'm sure baby Kayla agrees. I left her at the dormitory but I'll be back soon.

Iriana

I immediately collapsed onto a chair and was about to faint! I figured out what really happened!

Mum and Dad went to get the bone but there was an earthquake that made the building on fire! After many years, the archeologists thought that the creatures killed them! My parents were animal lovers and explorers too!

I finally knew the real truth! Before we knew it, Elepie and I reached the research centre.

An idea popped up! I threw a rock through the window and activated the sprinkling system. While the scientists were busy shutting off the system, we freed the creatures! I felt like an action hero!

I knew adventuring was in my blood! We ran as fast as we could to escape. Elepie led the creatures back to the cave while I went to find that magical bone mentioned in the diary.

I asked the museum guard to let me use the bathroom but instead, I headed to the animal fossil section. There, I swapped the magical bone with a plastic toy bone. The magical bone had words scribbled on it. I promptly stuck it into my backpack.

I squealed with delight! I finished my parents' mission!

When I rushed back to the cave to announce the good news, I saw how happy the creatures were. Elepie blew his trunk when he spotted me with the bone. We sat down and checked out the writing on it.

"High above the clouds, on the mountain of myths,

lies a magical roam, full of creatures with gifts.

But the humans are cruel, they don't belong together.

By the power of the bone, the creatures can stay away forever." I read aloud.

The bone opens a gateway to a magical roam, where the creatures can finally stay safe. This is all great news! But when my eyes and Elepie's met, he was filled with tears.

“I guess we’ll have to say goodbye.” I hugged the fur ball, squeezing him so tight that he couldn’t breathe! He blew his trunk softly and hugged back.

I was about to wave the bone in the air to close the portal to the magic roam, but then, I spied an army of scientists marching up the mountain!

“Please close the portal, please please please!” I exclaimed as I waved the bone. The portal shut right on time.

I fell on my knees, crying my heart out. When the scientists interrogated me, I just shook my head and told them I didn’t remember anything.

So there you have it, here’s my story. I made the discovery of a lifetime:

Special people show up in our lives, they inspire us to do great things, they make each day better, but sometimes these special people go away for a good reason. Who knows, I might get to see them again...

Was This My Destiny?

Hong Kong Adventist Academy, Narayan, Siddharth – 12

Long ago there was a mountain with mist around it, my ancestors always thought that place was only for gods. They believed if you are a human and entered that place you will be sent to the death realm. Centuries passed and no one ever went to that mountain until my ancestors' village got attacked. They had to evacuate, it turns out that we lost the misty mountain. Thousands of years later I was born, but when I was born our village got attacked by the same people who made us leave. My parents put me in a basket and threw me in the water.

After a few hours of floating in water a group of monks took me. They raised me like their own child. They trained me like a warrior, strong, fast and wise. All the time when I was tired or gave up this one old wise man came to me and said "you are destined for this don't give up.". That night I had a nightmare and woke up, turned out it was real. All the monks gathered around me and gave me all their powers, and the old man was finally saying what I was destined to be. "You were always destined to be" Boom, everyone got blasted and I was the only survivor.

Then I had no one. I was just walking for days, and I finally reached a place. When I asked people what that place was they'd just ignore me, but I had received power from monks. They knew how to speak in Chinese but I didn't know whether it was China or not. I asked in Chinese what this place is and someone shouted out that this place is China. I went looking for shelter, until I found a rich weak man being robbed by a gang of robbers. I thought I could steal the money with them but I could only use my power for good.

I went and I tried talking to the robbers but they pushed me away. I got mad and punched one of them. That guy went like 1km away and the robbers ran away. I took the rich person to the pharmacy. Then he came to me and said "I am such a corrupt rich person why would you want to save me?" I said I don't know, all I wanted was food and shelter. You were the only one I thought could provide me these. He said you are innocent. I will keep you in my palace because you saved my life.

Years passed and I grew stronger. One day the rich guy was wounded. I asked him how this happened and he said there is this army trying to kill me and you. I went out to fight the army but there were the greatest warriors of all time. Lord Chkish Lord Memeky Lord Pppopo and Lord Bob. They were too powerful but I didn't give up, until I got beaten till half death. Then I thought that they were more powerful but I am more evasive, I ran as fast as I could and reached near a misty mountain. Was it the mountain of the death realm? I checked the piece of scrap that I always carried around and it was exactly like that.

I thought to go up there because even if I didn't I would be killed. So I went up and after days of climbing I reached there. It was a temple, when I stepped in the temple I saw a person there and he was trying to lift a shiny gem. I went there and I tried to lift it and I did, the old person said "kagetoshi?" I asked him how do you even know my name? Then he slapped me and said, how could you forget your own brother? We both were crying with joyce. Then he asked me, how did you escape? From who I questioned. Then he said this army that was trying to kill you before and since you were born.

Then he said one of the predictors of the army told their leader that you will destroy them. They were looking for you and trying to kill you. The gem you have will give you lots of power I don't know what kind of but I know this. This is our chance for revenge. So I picked the stone up and then something strange happened, two realms opened up. The holy realm and the death realm my brother yotokoshi said go in the holy realm I will go in the death realm.

I went in. I saw gods over there, and when I was walking they bowed to me. I asked them why are you guys bowing to me, I am a normal person. They said you have to be worthy and have great power to come here, and so we admire you. I walked until I found a big wand and a robe. The gods told me to put it on and hold the wand and I will get great power. I wore it, and I felt way better and so I exited the holy realm.

When I came out it closed, and my brother went into the death realm. He went in, but no one was over there. There was a big sword and heavy armor. Then the god of death came and told him, what you have worn is the armor that is indestructible and a sword that is used by gods. He came out and then we were ready to battle.

We returned down to that empire in China. We challenged the leader for war. He agreed and started to laugh like a crazy man. We started the war and my brother destroyed the army with a few swings of the swords. And I killed all the warriors with my huge magic wand. We had defeated everyone except the leader. Me and my brother didn't solo on the leader because he can only be killed by a god or anyone who is as strong as the gods.

We didn't believe we were so strong so we fought him together, and as we thought he was horribly strong. He pushed my brother away, took his sword up and.... I don't know what is going to happen. I close my eyes and hear a sound, a metal sound, my brother has an indestructible armor. We are fighting him but we cannot do anything because he also has the same armor as my brother. I use my wand to make his armor disappear and my brother's sword slashes through him.

We finally have gotten our revenge, said my brother. We found out that the emperor died so they chose me to be the emperor. I said this could not have happened without my brother. So they started to say that we can divide the empire. I agreed. Was this the destiny the old man was talking about or is my story going to be longer?

Tales of China's Magical Mountains

Hong Kong International School, Tin, Cheryl – 13

My family and I live at the base of a great, magical mountain. Few go to the mountain, and none come back from it. The boundary of the village is the closest we ever go. There is a story about that particular mountain, that if somebody leaves a gift for the gods at the top, they will be granted a wish. Only one of the oldest men in the village claims to have tried this, but most don't believe him and even thought he was insane!

When my little brother fell sick, the village doctor said the disease had no cure and that my brother was going to die. I decided to beg the gods for help.

When I told my parents that I have needed to go on this journey, they said it was not real and that they didn't want to lose both their children. Not caring about what they said, I decided to ask the old man. The old man told me that he had been to the mountain when he was young, and that his wish was granted. He asked me if I realized how dangerous it was, I said in return that if I could save my brother I was going to go anyway. He offered to show me the entrance to the mountains and told me I would need my warmest clothes. I agreed to meet him the following day to begin my journey.

I needed to find a gift for the gods, something that they can't have up there but something that we have down here. My father is an amazing baker, so I know how to bake bread. I ground the grain and mixed in the water. I carefully kneaded it until it was smooth then set it by the stove to rise. After it had risen, I baked 3 golden loafs that split on top and were soft and fluffy inside. I chose the best one as my gift and brought another one to eat.

Early in the morning I hugged my brother farewell and worried that he was so pale and green-looking. I promised to hurry. I walked to the boundary of the village and met the old man who turned and started walking. I followed. By midday we reached a river. The old man told me that I should follow it upstream and then when I reach the end of it, look down and find the start of the river. That means that I must almost be there, at the top of the mountain. After that he said look to the peak and climb! He told me he was worried that he would never see me again and gave me a wooden staff and fur coat that he said he had brought with him on his own journey to the mountain. He told me that the mountain was sacred and that if I was to undertake this journey, I should not harm a single creature on my journey.

I walked and walked, and when it became steep, I climbed and climbed. The weather grew colder and soon night was approaching. I shivered, pulled the fur coat around me, and pushed on to continue looking for somewhere to shelter for the night. It got chillier and darker and soon I could no longer see. I listened to the sound of the water and carefully climbed the rocks knowing that if I fell, I would be washed away to my death.

When my hands were frozen and I was too numb to continue I found a place where the wind was no so fierce, curled up and quivered myself to sleep.

When I awoke it was freezing and looking to the summit, I realised I had a terribly long way to go. I drank some water, ate some of my bread and continued climbing.

As I climbed and shook from the weather, the frosty air grew thin and only the fur coat kept me from the piercing cold weather. I tucked my nose and chin down under the collar and pushed on. I ate more bread when I needed and drank water from the stream.

Soon the trees began to disappear and there was only rock and snow. The stream was also getting smaller the further I climbed on. I looked for somewhere to sleep but as night approached, I could find no shelter. Further up the mountain I saw some smoke and hurried toward it as dusk fell. The smoke came from a hold in the cliff and below it was a small wooden door. I knocked and it was opened by a tiny man. I asked could I please spend the night and he said his house was too small and anyway he didn't have any food. I told him I had half a loaf of bread that I could share with him. He told me for a whole loaf I could stay inside. I told him I needed the other loaf as a gift for the gods. He told me that was only a story. I should give him the bread, spend the night and then return home and that only death awaited me on the mountain. I had no choice and gave him the loaf, only having half a loaf left.

The following day the gruff old man mumbled and grumbled and called me crazy but told me it had been a long time since he had bread and anyway my bread was the best he'd ever had. He told me a little girl had no business going up the mountain but if I must I should get going right now so I'll reach the top sooner rather than later.

The wind was strong, frigid, and flakes of snow blew in the air.

A storm came up, then all of a sudden I couldn't see anything, and I couldn't hear the stream either.

I climbed along the river as it got smaller and smaller, going higher and higher. After I found the start of the river where it poured from the mountain, I looked up like the old man said and could see the peak. Finally, I arrived at the peak of the mountain after hours of climbing and scrambling. The top of the mountain was flat. I could see to the horizon in every direction and far below I could see my tiny village. I wished my brother was here to see it. The peak of the mountain was covered in tiny silver flowers. As I had no gift I gathered up as many as I could and lay it at the edge of the mountain overlooking the village any my brother.

I made my wish that my brother would live a long and happy life and waited for a sign. I had very little energy left, and the cold was too bitter and strong. Eventually I curled up beside the flowers and collapsed, not moving a muscle.

When I awoke, I was warm and in a soft bed. A woman was sitting beside me. She told me that she lived on the mountain and grew the silver flowers that only grew at the very highest part of the mountain. She asked me what on earth such a young girl was doing, so I told her about my brother and my journey and my wish. She then said that perhaps my wish had come true because the flowers she grew could be made into a very potent medicine and that she could help me make it.

I happily thanked her and gasped as I realize she was one of the goddesses. She smiled softly at me and generously gave me the cure for the disease. I thanked her once again, inclining my head forward slightly. Looking at the far way down ahead of me, I sighed and had said to myself, "Do I really have to do this all over again?" The beautiful goddess had responded, "No, my dear. If you don't wish to go all the way back, just close your eyes and I'll guide your way." Even if I hadn't understood what she said, I did as I was told and shut my eyes, cradling the medicine in my hands.

Seconds later I was back in the village. I ran to my brother as quickly as I could, panting as I went, and handed him the bottle. Drink it, I had said. Giving me a funny look, he did, gulping down the pungent liquid. I watched him get better right before my eyes. Rosy cheeks, back straightening, a glowing smile on his face. He had screamed and shouted in joy, and as my parents rushed out, I took the third piece of bread I had baked and headed out to find the old man. When I did, I gave him my much appreciated gratitude and the bread, telling him the amazing story of reality that I had been through.

Reverie in the Clouds

Hong Kong International School, Zhao, Jasmine – 12

After climbing the Yellow Mountain for a few hours, I saw my first destination; the Monkey Watching the Sea rock. I remember my mom telling me how it got its name, “the stone is shaped kind of like a monkey. It’s perched on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the sea of clouds. No one knows how it got there or how it stays balanced—all a part of nature’s wonders.”

I walked over to the large rock and the first thing that I noticed was the spectacular view. The sea of clouds was gracefully and swiftly flowing. *Wow, it looks just like the sea.* The clouds were ever-changing; one moment its waves were crashing onto the shore, the next, it looked as calm as a river flowing peacefully, just like my thoughts. The next thing I saw was that the rock actually looked like a monkey. *Could this be the rock of the famous Monkey King, Sun Wukong? I heard that he lived comfortably in the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits before leaving and seeking a life full of danger.* He had a lot of fun with his monkey friends when he was young; they played games and ate the peaches and other fruits on the mountain all day long. *Why would he leave his comfortable home? If I were him, I wouldn’t. Actually, I still miss the good old days when I was younger. I could spend hours playing on the playground or staring into space doing nothing. I wanted to freeze time and stay a 5-year-old forever. Now, I have so many more responsibilities and schoolwork to complete. I have to practice the flute every day and practice soccer every day also. Even though I spent most of my time outside of school doing homework, I always have at least 1 sheet of homework that I don’t have time to finish until the morning that it’s due. Life is always so stressful. I don’t understand why the Monkey King would choose to leave the comfort and fun of his own home and embark on a dangerous journey.*

All of a sudden, a voice asked, “Young one, do you need me to answer a question?”

“Who are you?” I asked cautiously. I didn’t know if the voice was real or if it was a mere figment of my imagination.

“I’m the ghost of the Monkey King. I heard your question in your mind. Now to answer that question, I had a good life playing with my friends all day as I’m sure you already know. But, when there is nothing else to do, it can get pretty boring because I had no goals, no purpose, and thus no meaning in life at that point in time. Then, one day one of the senior monkeys on the mountain had died. I was devastated, I thought, ‘my job as king is to make my monkey’s lives better. If my monkeys could become immortal, that would make their lives a lot better.’ Even though I had the responsibility in my life to help my monkeys since the day I became monkey king, I had just realized it. My purpose in life was to make my monkeys’ lives better. And that’s the reason why I left the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits; because I was pursuing the purpose of my life.”

If he didn’t leave his comfortable home and leave his comfort zone in search of purpose, there wouldn’t be the adventure of Monkey King stories, and we wouldn’t even know that he existed.

It’s true that I had fun when I was younger, but, just like Sun Wukong, I realized that I couldn’t stay like that for my whole life. When I was five, if I could play all day I would be thrilled, but I wouldn’t be happy in the same situation when I’m 15. Everybody has to take up responsibilities and find out what they’re passionate about; that’s how people grow up.

But I’m still not sure that I want to grow up.

“But what if I still want to be a child forever?” I asked the ghost.

My voice echoed in the vast sea of clouds, and I didn’t get a response.

It looks like the ghost of the Monkey King has already left.

I took a deep breath in, looking around at my surroundings. The sea of clouds kept changing and shifting, almost blocking my view of the path—time to head to my next destination for the day.

I finally reached my next destination, the illustrious Lotus Peak.

The first thing I noticed when I got there were all the lush green pine trees. They looked healthy, brave, and bold, contrasting against the dullness of the gray granite. I watched the sea of clouds flowing by. The clouds flowed like a sea, moving at a rapid pace, just like my thoughts.

“Wow, all of these pine trees must’ve been here for a long time,” I said out loud.

“Yes, we have,” a voice said.

I turned around abruptly to see who was talking, only to see no one, just trees.

“Who said that?”

“Oh, just me,” the same voice responded.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a pine tree,” the voice said, “people always come to me for advice with their problems, and I assume that you’ve come here for advice as well?”

“Yes, sometimes, I wish that I were still a 7-year-old, without any troubles. I still remember when I used to get dulce de leche ice cream after riding my bike in the evening, with fireflies lighting the path. Now, it’s so different. I feel like sometimes I don’t want to grow up and want to be a kid forever.”

“Why yes, of course. I have been standing here for 1,500 years. In those 1,500 years, I have seen a lot of things. I have seen countless emperors come to this mountain trying to get an immortality potion. Sadly, none exist.”

“I know that there’s no such thing as an immortality potion or something that will stop you from growing up. But, when I read Peter Pan, I still can’t help the feeling of wanting to be a Lost Boy and never growing up.”

“Everything happens for a reason. Adults can still play on the playground, even though they’re not children. They can still ride bikes and eat ice cream.”

“Oh, that’s true. I guess it’s just the spirit when you’re a kid that makes it feel different. You don’t have to ride your bike while lifting the burden and guilt of not completing your homework. You don’t have a care in the world, other than the task that you’re doing at the moment.”

“Everyone is growing, even I, who’s 1500 years old already, am still growing every day. As long as you have the heart and spirit of being young, you can still feel young. Since human life is so short, you need to make the most of your time here on Earth. You can’t live in the past or in the future; you need to live in the present. That means you have to stop reminiscing about the past or worrying about what the future will bring. You have to focus on the present. Enjoy every moment while it lasts.”

“Thank you, pine tree, for your advice.”

I looked at the sky once again. This time, to my surprise it was completely clear of clouds. I could see the Light of Buddha shining through. The Light of Buddha shone defiantly against the sun, reflecting the rainbow of colors; the journey that I had been through to get here. The sea of clouds had cleared, just like my thoughts.

I gazed out at the beautiful scenery of the Yellow Mountain; jagged peaks of the mountains, the mystical sea of clouds, the enchanting and majestic light of Buddha; thinking about what the pine tree and Monkey King ghost had told me; ready to accept the past, live in the present and change the future.

A Tale From China's Magical Yellow Mountains

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Chan Man-Li, Cecili – 16

Today my friend Alex and I went hiking on Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's tallest peak and something magical and unbelievable happened to me.

First, we took a bus to the car park near the top and from there we went up to the peak where you can get the best view.

"Hey, Dennis," I said. "Look over there. How wonderful the view is!"
I walked toward the cliff to get a better look but suddenly, I fell down a hole.

"Oh! Help me!" I screamed. "I can't see anything." Everything was dark. It was frightening, terrible and horrifying.

Luckily, I didn't die. I had slipped through a time gate and passed back through time into the period of the Tang dynasty and had found that I had become a government officer. I had a lot of money, elegant clothes and priceless treasure...However, I was not happy at all. I saw many corrupt officials paying bribes to a corrupt warlord called An Lushan to buy themselves higher ranking positions. Corruption prevailed in the imperial court. I heard that An Lushan's wealth was even greater than the government's, and his ambition was getting bigger and bigger. He hoped to become Emperor.

One day, when I went out of town to the market, I saw many people starving, and dying on the ground. This sight made me realize the meaning of the poem written by Du Fu:

"Behind the red lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside the gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved."

I felt ashamed. Because even as an official, I couldn't help them with anything.

I walked on sadly until finally I came across a temple. I opened the door and there I saw the pathway to The Yellow Mountains and nearby were Du Fu and Li Bai were playing chess.

I said to them, "Why do you just sit here playing games and don't think about how to help the hungry people? Are you just careless idlers?"

They said "We have been practicing our magic in The Yellow Mountains for many years trying to call a future man to help us change the fate of our country. Finally, you have come. Welcome. All this hunger has been caused by An Lushan, who is destroying The Yellow Mountains to collect the magical stones of power that lie buried underneath."

In a great panic I said "What! You made me come back to the Tang Dynasty? Send me back quickly."

They said "No, you have a power that we don't have. The power that can change the world. If you can't solve this problem, the world will become chaotic and it will end. There is no future for you without us. You can't go back to your world. You must stay here with us."

"Let me tell you about an old legend," continued Li Bai. "A long long time ago, Bai Di created The Yellow Mountains, which is as wonderful as a fairyland. Many different immortals are living up there on top in a small village among the clouds. They were responsible for creating the clouds, the animals and even the dinosaurs. Three great stones of power are hidden underneath the mountains and they are the source of life for this whole land. If someone collects these three magical stones, he will have the power to rule the world and become a god. Without its magical stones, The Yellow Mountains will lose the gods' protection, the land will become barren, humans will starve and all living things will become extinct. I hope you can help us to prevent An Lushan from getting to the magical stones."

I said "OK! I will help you."

We secretly recruited warriors to fight against An Lushan and communicated by hiding our messages in egg yolk pastries. In less than two months, 100,000 people had participated in our secret organization. An Lushan knew I wanted to stop him from getting the magical stones so he summoned me to see him in his palace.

I saw there were different collections around An Lushan's great house, such as roses presented by ambassadors, large pearls on the bookshelf and a thousand year old ginseng.

I thought, "An Lushan is a wealthy man. He even has some things that the Emperor hasn't got..."

An Lushan said to me "You are very capable, but you have chosen the wrong enemy. I think you would have won long ago if you hadn't. I have one of the magical stones. If you cooperate with me to get the other two magical stones and help me create my empire then I will make you my prime minister. Help me to find the magical stones and we can enjoy inexhaustible wealth and top social status. Hahaha..."

"Is it really good to rule an empty city?" I asked him. "Being a monarch will be just a hollow and meaningless honor without any responsibility" I said with disappointment in my voice.

At this, An Lushan suddenly became angry. "You'd better follow my orders while I am still being nice," he shouted. "Seize him, guards!"

I was grabbed by his soldiers. I was completely overpowered and I could not resist. I was locked in a secret room in his garden and surrounded by darkness.

When Li Bai and Du Fu realized that something was wrong, they pretended to be An Lushan's guards and sneaked into An Lushan's palace that night. They overheard the Captain of the guards say to the soldiers, "Remember to guard the southern room strictly. Go there now to take him some food."

Li Bai and Du Fu walked slowly as they followed the other soldiers. After the soldiers put down the meal and left, Li Bai and Du Fu broke down the door. They whispered, "Brother, come quickly."

In silence, we made our escape but suddenly, Li Bai rushed into one of An Lushan's rooms. He said, "Aaaahh. nice wine! I want to drink a cup of it before we go."

Du Fu and I stopped him but before we could, from the window of An Lushan's bedroom, we saw a person who had turned into a small figure. It was a tiny creature with two horns on its head and a tail on its body.

Then we heard a sound, "squeak, squeak..." We were surprised. Du Fu said, "Is this some kind of rat devil?" We knew that it was dangerous and we couldn't defeat this beast, so as not to be discovered by it, we crouched down and backed quietly away.

After returning to The Yellow Mountains, we discussed how to fight with An Lushan. We became more and more depressed because we all knew that humans are unable to confront humans who have been selfish and turned into such rat devils as the one we saw. This has been true since ancient times. Realizing that we were unable to confront An Lushan on our own, I climbed to the highest peak of The Yellow Mountains to ask Bai Di for help.

I called out to him from morning until evening for three days, "Bai Di, please help me to confront An Lushan." However, no one answered me.

As I finally turned away, a kind voice said to me "This is the destiny of humans. I can't help you. Unity is the only way you can change your destiny."

After that, I went back to Li Bai's and Du Fu's home. Du Fu said, "I found a magical book about how to deal with a rat devil. According to the book, we must capture the rat devil and take it to The Yellow Mountains. Then we need to draw a magical circle to open the entrance of the underworld. After that, we must lead the rat devil into the magic circle to purify his soul and send it back to where it belongs."

To make this happen, I went to see An Lushan pretending that I'd changed my mind and because of his greedy desire, he believed me when I promised him I would go to The Yellow Mountains to help him search for the two remaining magical stones.

In the meantime, Du Fu and Li Bai summoned all the warriors to hide in The Yellow Mountains. After An Lushan arrived in the mountains, all the warriors immediately captured him and led him to the magic circle.

An Lushan said "Do you think I can be defeated so easily? Soldiers, go!" he commanded.

Suddenly, another blue army, a supernatural force, emerged from the forest. Our warriors were surprised and scared.

I implored them, "Don't you want to be reunited with your families and children?" At this, the warriors' spirits seemed to lift.

"Go ahead!" I urged them. "You cannot fail. You can only succeed."

I said it with all the power, my voice could command and with that, our warriors took heart, engaged in the battle and defeated the blue army. I pushed An Lushan into the magic circle and Du Fu and Li Bai began to cast their spells. However, to stop An Lushan from escaping from the magical circle, I had to go to the underworld with him.

Du Fu and Li Bai said anxiously, "Leave the magic circle quickly or you will die."

I said to them "I'm glad I met you both. It was my honor to help save the world. Goodbye, my brothers." And tears of great sadness were falling from my eyes as I spoke these final words to them.

After this fight we were victorious. Du Fu and Li Bai took the magical stones back to The Yellow Mountains and China regained its vitality. People had clean water again and enough food and no one would die from hunger. Li Bai and Du Fu set up schools in the capital to promote Confucianism, all was well and society was restored once again.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on a hospital bed. My friends and family were there by my side and someone said to me, "Thank God! You've finally woken up."

Soon after I was discharged from the hospital, I wrote a book about my experience in the Tang Dynasty called "A Tale from China's Magical Mountains." On the cover of the book it says, "Thanks to the unity of the people, we can all now live in a prosperous and peaceful society."

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

International College Hong Kong, Ottaviani, Kayla – 11

The wind whistled above the mountains. Green and bright as ever, the birds squawked and squeaked above the Yellow Mountains. A shimmer of light whispers over the old pine trees settled upon the craggy rocks of the mountains.

Two young boys were running down the mountain steps squealing. The youngest tripped over a misplaced step and smashed onto the ground.

“Ouch.” He mumbled. He got to his feet and continued running after his brother, who was already ahead. Down the mountain they went, laughing and screaming like nothing had happened. A glitter of light, bright and as yellow as the sun, followed the two boys as they sprinted down.

The oldest stopped. He stood at the bottom of the mountain next to a shiny pool of water, little colorful fish were swimming among the waters. He giggled, and tossed a leaf into the water. The fish jumped up, and ate a leaf chunk. Laughing, he tossed another leaf.

By now, his younger brother had caught up with him and tossed a leaf in it too. They laughed together for a while, and then stopped. They stared at the fish that had just jumped up to grab the nearest leaf, but, after it jumped, it remained in the air. It had wings! Shiny, little red wings that kept the fish floating above the water. The brothers stared at it in awe. The little fish blinked and turned toward them. *Blinked?* Fish don't blink. The younger boy hid behind his brother as the fish rose higher into the air. The fish disappeared, in a blink of flying—fish eye. The younger brother cautiously stared down at the pool. All the other flying fish were gone too. They just disappeared into thin air. It was impossible, it didn't make sense, but it happened.

The two young brothers told their parents of this odd happening, but they didn't believe them. They laughed and said it was all their imagination. They pleaded and pleaded, but all they would do was laugh and chuckle. The two boys locked themselves in their room.

“It flew right? I could be wrong, but it flew!” The younger boy said. The older brother nodded his head. He sat down on his bed.

“I'm sure. It certainly was flying, unless it was a hallucination.” said the older boy. They sat there in silence for a while.

“What is a hallee—coronation?” The younger boy asked.

“It's basically something you see, but others do not see.” The older boy replied. He patted his younger brother on the head as he stared up at him.

“But you saw it too right? So it can't be a hallee—coronation.” The younger brother said truthfully. The older boy nodded.

“That's right. So it's NOT a hallucination. It was real. It was... magic.”

Magic indeed. It was stirring among the mountains. Wisps of light such as the one that had followed young Vincent Chang as he chased his older brother Tamen Chang were flowing through the trees like sunlight. The sun set at the edge of the mountain, glowing brightly shades of orange, pink and blue. Meanwhile, bright yellow fish flitted about, flapping their shiny ruby red wings.

Long, long ago lived an emperor. He had a castle, a beautiful one among these mountains. That was a time when fish still flew through the sky, and when birds roamed the sea. Bright and beautiful, it was the most magical human place. But the emperor secretly hated the magic. He wanted things to make sense, and in his perspective, it didn't make sense for magic to exist. So he banned all Magical Animals from the mountains. The fish fled into the sea to remain camouflaged among other fish, and the bird flapped into the sky to remain hidden among the clouds. The wisps of light ran to the sun, where they stayed for years and years. Now that the emperor was gone, they could

return, but it had been many decades, and humans now believed their kind as a legend, a myth. They could not return to the human world because they would get hunted, killed, interviewed (humans were so dumb at times, they expected an answer?). So they remained in their unnatural habitats.

But the emperor was dead. Nobody could free them from his ban, except for the emperor's descendants. But the emperor's descendants were unknown. Nobody knew who they were. They existed, but maybe on the other side of the world, not here in Eastern China. But the Chang brothers had a magical aura. The creatures hoped that they were the ones that they were looking for.

The next day, Tamen woke, startled. He had a nightmare about evil flying fish and finned birds pecking him to pieces. He then ran back to his parents, pecked and bruised, and told his parents what had happened, but they didn't believe him. They lectured him about "lying" and then he woke up for real.

His younger brother was having a similar nightmare. He had been chased down the steps of The Huangshan mountains by red wisps of light, black empty eyes glowing from them. He ran and ran, and suddenly, he tripped and fell down the craggy rocks of the mountain. He woke up sobbing. He ran to his brother's room, who seemed to understand immediately.

"Come here." And they both stayed there, on the bed, for a while after that.

The brothers were not thrilled to hear that they would be going to Huangshan Mountain for a hike yet again, a few days later. But they had to go. They had no choice.

Up the mountain they went. Vincent huddled next to his brother, who was equally scared. They both jumped at small noises. Soon, they were at the top, and their parents sat down on the ground to eat lunch. Vincent and Tamen walked to the cliff of the mountain. They fearfully stared up and saw finned birds in the sky. At that point, it wasn't even surprising anymore.

The birds noticed them and flew toward them. They squawked and pecked lightly at their arms, gently, ticklish but not painful. They both laughed. Suddenly, a piece of paper dropped from the bird's beak. Tamen picked it up and read it.

Dear Yellow Emperor great-grandchildren,

Please allow us come here. We need home.

Sky uncomfy. Fish say sea itchy.

Please say : Animals stay here.

Then we are invisible to other persons.

Sincerely, Fish and Birds.

The letter was odd. The bird nodded and left. Weird. Vincent looked at his older brother. "We aren't yellow, are we Tamen?" He asked. Tamen laughs.

"No, certainly not. But I think we need to do this. Hold this with me." Vincent touched the paper.

"Animals. Stay. Here."

Many years later, these magical animals remain among these mountains, invisible to most, but to the descendants of The Chang brothers, not so much. They have been told to keep these creatures a secret, from generation to generation the sight of the animals was passed on. The animals never forgot the brothers, as we have not forgotten them.

The Abyss of War: The Dawn of the Locket

International School of Beijing, Niu, Qiming – 11

Huangshan, Anhui, Yuan Dynasty, 1280 A.D.

The night was cool and very foggy.

“Thud, thud, thud!”

There was the sound of heavy footsteps outside of the central ger.

“Password?” came a loud voice from inside.

“Victory.”

“Come in.”

The flaps opened and the guard treaded over the threshold, pulled on a short chain, and dragged a ragged man in through after him. The guard stood to attention. “Horsethief, sir. Permission to execute him, sir?” he barked.

“Not yet, corporal,” said a dwarf who sat cross-legged on a mat.

King Leo turned his attention to the prisoner. The man’s clothes were dusty, but quite rich. “Your name?”

“Verraden,” came the reply. He was a stiff old man, with dark, swollen eyes, a long, pointed nose, and large ears, which seemed to flap around and hear everything.

“I want you to tell me everything you know about the Locket of Reckonings.”

Verraden shuddered. “Sorry, sir, the what?”

“The Locket of Reckonings.”

“The L-Locket?”

“Yes, the Locket, tell me everything you know about it. Now.”

Verraden pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket. “Alright, sir,” he said, still shivering, “here it goes…”

The story of the Locket of Reckonings

The Locket was made by the evil, but great sorcerer Jayden Hurareous, pure gold and adorned with a ruby. Very dark and powerful magic were its specialties, but its legendary creation wasn’t finished yet. After the historical defeat of Hurareous in 282 B.C., the Locket landed in the hands of yet another powerful wizard, the light wizard Justin Pillsbury. Pillsbury gave it abilities to summon light and dark magic, making it the most powerful and dangerous object ever made. Pillsbury realized what a fool he was right after the charm was completed. Since he could not destroy it, Pillsbury went to the mysterious mountains of Huangshan and hid the Locket somewhere within its magical dominions.

Hundreds have tried to find it, but none have succeeded… nor returned.”

Verraden neatly folded the parchment and put it back into his pocket.

“So, you mean the Locket was not destroyed?” Leo concluded.

“Correct. But Pillsbury also left this prophecy – 1500 years later, a young man will find the locket… and destroy it.” Verraden paused for a second. “The date was October 22nd, 220 B.C.”

“Today is the eighteenth of October, so there are… four days until the date?”

“Yes, sir, and I have a reason to believe that the man is standing right next to us.” Verraden pointed at the young corporal.

The young corporal gave a gasp of surprise and fainted.

“Get up!” came a gruff voice from behind.

The creature wore an ancient gray uniform, which must have been exquisite at some point, but was now in a tattered and almost unbearable form. It carried a huge axe, which was tarnished and chipped, and looked as if it had experienced hundreds of battles. But what truly drew his attention was the creature’s skin. It was sallow and had a muddy, greenish color to it, covered here and there with dirt, small sticks, and even patches of moss. The creature wore an ancient metal helmet on its head, so that only the eyes were visible. The eyes were yellow, with thin vertical pupils like a cat. The creature smelled like something buried in a swamp for centuries and then dug up.

“Eat ‘im? Maiby roast ‘im in troll blood?”

“He’s NOT for eat—”

Something made the creature turn.

There was the sound of fast, heavy footsteps, of something swinging through the vines. The creature saw it coming and tried to avoid it, but the thing came too fast. There was a soft *crunch* of shattered skull and the creature collapsed.

With fierce growls, its partner advanced on the object.

The object, which was a china ring, exploded, blasting the thing into smithereens.

"I think it's time, dear."

The young corporal, whose name was Allan, turned around. A white-haired man in an emerald cloak was standing next to him. He was clearly very old, but his movements were easy, with none of the usual creakiness of his age. He had piercing brown eyes that seemed to glow in the sunlight and his round-rimmed glasses were bent and sat slightly askew on his face, as if he had recently been in an accident.

"Saviely Augustus Ignatov at your service, but you can just call me Savvy," the old man said.

"T—those creatures..." Allan stuttered, pointing at a dark smear that was once his captor, "what are they?"

"Immortuis. Undead warriors of Malum—"

"Malum?"

"The lord of evil and master of the Turrin Mortem."

"And?"

"And let's have a talk." Savvy took his hand; the floor disappeared beneath their feet.

They reappeared in a dusty room. The ceiling was curved, giving it a cave-like feel. On his left was a fireplace and two extremely worn hide chairs. Savvy was sitting on one of them.

"Sit down, sit down," he gestured at the other chair.

Allan hesitated, and then rested his bum on the seat.

"And now," Savvy announced proudly, "we summon the others."

The first to arrive were the warriors from the Order of Guardians, five dozen stern-faced, dark-haired men wearing full armor, who were sworn to protect the kingdoms with their lives. Their very presence filled the entire room with pride and confidence.

Then there were dwarves from Antarctica, whose beards were covered by a thin layer of ice, which now melted all over the floor; elves from Madagascar, who dressed in colorful armor; giants from Mawsynram, India, who wore rain ponchos instead of armor; human fighters from Atlantis...

At first, Allan was stunned by how there was just a flash of light, and then they simply appeared out of nowhere, but soon, he had gotten over the shock.

"Hey, who are these guys?"

"Our army."

Allan stood on the deck of the ship. There was no moon, which was a good thing, since being spotted wouldn't have been very nice.

The army had been split into two sectors. The brigade of dwarves and men were to attack the front gate and try to attract all of the enemy's attention while the elvish navy led by Savvy and, believe it or not, Allan would try to ambush the fortress's rear.

Then, Allan heard a sound as quiet as the footfall of a cat.

King Frederick of the elves had leapt down to the deck.

He said, "Something is coming."

"Retreat!"

More than a dozen soldiers were lying dead in the moat or before the feared walls.

"Coward!" King Leo skreighed at the battlement. He was met by another rain of poisoned arrows.

The attackers pulled out.

"Prepare the cannons!" Leo ordered. "We're gonna bomb them out."

Then they heard the blast.

Up there, on the battlement, were two very large medieval cannons, and even worse, they were pointed directly at them. There was a distinct *boom*.

Verraden pressed his palm on a slab of large gray granite. There was rumbling and scraping, and the stone began to shake. He lifted his hand. The granite disappeared, revealing a single staircase that corkscrewed down into the darkness.

He sauntered past dozens of traps and defenses. Soon, Verraden arrived at the vault. He murmured something under his breath, and the doors swung open.

The chamber inside was high-ceilinged and lit by crystals in the walls. It was almost empty, except for a small grubby package wrapped up in yellowed paper. He picked it up. Then, the room exploded.

It was a tornado. That was what Frederick had seen, a gray spiral in the distance, moving towards them at a completely unnatural speed. The stars along the horizon began to disappear, and it struck the front of the fleet. Allan watched, horrified, as all around, elves were being struck into the sea and bits of wood were blasted out of the ships.

“Any help,” Frederick growled at the wizard, dodging a sharp piece of wood, “I’d appreciate it.”

Savvy pulled out a wooden rod and pounded it once—twice—

There was a rude *honk*, and, next moment, the tornado was gone. Silence.

The peninsula of Turrin Mortem was not two thousand yards distant, the port lit by hundreds of fires. But between themselves and the fortress was a solid mass of ships, at least ten times as many as the attackers. Each one was bristling with immortis and trolls and who-knows-what. Their enemy had been waiting for them.

Then there was a blast that almost flipped the whole ship inside—out.

King Leo closed his eyes. He heard something whiz overhead.

Here comes the cannonball, he thought, goodbye, cruel world!

Something banged him on the head and his eyes snapped open. The Turrin Mortem was still there, but a huge chunk of wall was missing.

All around him, soldiers were pouring through the hole into the fortress.

Then, he followed their lead and charged towards victory.

At the Foot of the Yellow Mountain Lies a Village.

International School of Beijing, Pan, Anya – 13

It is perhaps similar to numerous other rural Chinese settlements; away from the pandemonium of cities lay old, disheveled buildings, with faded, dusty plastic litter and untamed thickets blooming between the cracks of the architecture. But most distinguishably for the girl, the village is a place she spent a significant amount of time her childhood at, her hometown. Summers were ankles deep in the clear water of the nearby river, wet hands batting away mosquitos on the muddy shore, and sneakers pattering against the smooth, moss-ridden stone tiles on the ground.

According to stories her parents would tell her, the ancestor of their family was once a valuable member of the imperial court, serving as a teacher to the emperor at the time. However majestic stories her parents would tell, a nagging sense of disbelief was always present in her mind. If the village was as impressive as the stories seemed to imply, how did the village degrade to the rural state it was in now? The only full-time inhabitants were old grandparents; almost all of the young adults had left to the allure of the bright cities, channeling their ambition and talent into the journey of being a part of something more important than being a farmer in an irrelevant part of the country.

In addition, the village was old. Dirty. Out of touch from the outside world. For her, it existed as an outside world, a time capsule of nature and culture, long lost from the bustle and lights she loved. There wasn't WIFI or high-tech devices that she had gotten accustomed to as a child, and the integration of the infrastructure with nature also led to the ever-present layer mud and grime that clung onto everything from the buildings, the soles of her shoes, and the sleeves of her cotton sweater, unappealing towards her city-girl sense of hygiene.

Hence, the dim feeling of disappointment would always settle into her stomach whenever her parents would inform her of a trip to visit her relatives in the village. As a city girl who had grown up in the bustle of an urban megalopolis, quaint villages did not appeal to her lifestyle, and with every return trip would the sensation of relief would accompany her home.

To her, the village was similar to a large tree; old and deep-rooted within the grounds of history, with long, sinewy branches extending over cities and countries, generations blossoming like a swathe of colour across its thick branches. However, for her, even the most beautiful tree could not compare with the glamour of a skyscraper. She preferred the clean, pristine, and orderly architecture of cities more, and so, with the feeling of disdain towards the village, would she only reluctantly agree to visit her relatives, longingly looking towards her friend's exotic vacations.

Over time, the trips to the village became more and more spaced out. Schoolwork became more intense, and her parents progressively became busier. The distance between the city and the village became a bigger and more obstructive variable.

A few summers ago, she visited the village again. With the same ill-bated breath, she peered out the glass windows as we tumbled past the same yellow fields and lakes, this time with a more cracks in the buildings and more murkiness in the water. However, as she settled back into the village over the course of the next few weeks, she also rediscovered the parts of the village. Even if she still found caked mud on her clothes and skin, the fresh scent of dewed grass and earthy dust lingering in the air, the vivid swathes of yellow fields rippling with the wind and the thickets of green adorning the sides of the houses – not pristinely, like the houses in the city were – but messily and organically, was refreshing and a fascinatingly different. She felt the fragile yet clear sense of tranquility that surrounded the village and its inhabitants.

One by one, the pieces of the puzzle would slowly reveal themselves, giving more complexity to a place she once easily dismissed. Even though the sound of the bird's chirping could not compare to the clamor of the city, she began to love it still. And even though the tree is different from the skyscraper, it still holds its own sense of beauty and meaning.

This time, when they departed from the village back towards the city, it was with reluctance, not relief.

At the foot of the Yellow Mountain lies a village. But for the girl, it is her hometown.

Tales from Huangshan's Magical Dimensions

International School of Beijing, Poh, Miranda – 11

.....BLACK.....

The jade peaks jutted into the frail fabric of the azure sky, shot through with so many undertones you could not tell its original color—it was a smoothie blend, very much undecided. Clouds weaved in and out the seams of the sky like majestic dragons frolicking.

Judith panted heavily, too fatigued to glimpse the array of peculiarities along the trail. There were boulders and peaks that hoisted the sky up; there were pine trees with their outstretched clawed branches; the curling steam of hot springs. But she didn't see them...she wanted to get away from everything. The venue—Huangshan—was not important apart from it being isolated, and she could float above in the clouds. Yet it seemed like such a mistake now that she was facing it all—the reason behind it was so vague.

Yes, she is a countryside girl that just joined the bustling city—middle—school. She is a misfit. She knows. Flashbacks ran through her head—feelings more than happenings. The dreadful feeling when it came to presentations because everyone would be snickering at her accent; the inferior feeling when she doesn't have designer—clothes like her classmates; the yearning feeling to be part of the crowd. She is just like a square peg in a round hole desperately trying to cut its outstanding corners. Memories are painful. She couldn't forget the smirk on everyone's face when they found her eating home—lunch perched on the toilet bowl, trying to avoid the crowd. She wished she was dead at that moment.

Until she saw it, it was such a conundrum that nothing could make you tear your eyes away. The thing was PULSING...neither animal nor plant. Judith stared at it, wondering how things were still so wild.

She laughed bitterly. Everyone would be muttering about her by now. Wild tales of what happened would be circulating now.

Oblivious to her lamenting, the goo swelled rapidly, inflating and deflating. It jostled itself excitedly. Its excitement reached a climax and BOOM! The whole thing exploded. She cringed as goo pelted on her.

Darkness.

.....WHITE.....

Judith pried her eyes open, the sun filling her vision.

Figures draped in robes swarmed around her emotionlessly. Skin ashen, their garments seemed to be woven from dull stones. Who are these people? Her head spun. Where was she? The last thing she remembered was...goo? This was not the mountain ...I'm in a hallucination, she thought, nothing could produce something like this. A tsunami of various speculations ran through her head.

Could she have entered into a different dimension?— the scene around her seemed like a sci-fi movie. Butterflies tingled in her stomach. Her curiosity awoke, demanding that she followed this trail before her eyes. As she neared a junction, something caught her eye — a centerpiece, labeled “Modern beauty—commissioned sculpture.” Birthed from a stone, the edges smooth and almost shiny; its fullness was such a presence. The outline of the statue—a lady—seemed as if it were born to be there—not carefully chipped out.

Judith eyed the silhouette of the lady, its presence unsettling. “That is a mistake!?” The display of the lady's large body was shocking. WHO would commission such a thing—modern beauties are meant to be slim and curvy. She couldn't fathom why ANYONE thought this was a beauty—it was basically the opposite of everyone's definition back in the real world. Some dimension thing?

The sky grew dark—as if a massive pine tree was looming over her. Like her thoughts had grown a mind, shadows swept in everywhere, clamped over her. ‘Uhm...can’t-breathe’—they engulfed her.

.....VOID.....

Black. White. Black and white swirling together. Judith was within a void, darkness reigning. Cold sweat beaded around her forehead. She was in a cavernous, isolated space, —Judith could see some ovular contraption a few meters away. She bounded up to it, feeling like she was walking on clouds. Another dimension?

Her eyes squinted at the odd thing through the darkness—and a spark of recognition. It was— The glop of goo? Residing very comfortably on its stump was the goo. It couldn’t have just been some slimy membrane, could it?

This is the thing that tossed me into that town dimension and this one—not as simple as it seems! Judith was sure this time, it is some artifact.

Thousands of possibilities relayed through her. She lobbed the goo onto the ground.

“BAM!” the space reverberated with the impact as the goo hit the floor like a pane of glass. It’s shards—formed a silhouette—the fat-lady?

Shocked laced her once again, as she met the fat-lady—or its twin because its inscription read:” Lotus Lady, Lady of the Lotus Peak.” Thoughts ran through her head. What was the goo playing at? She didn’t need to know about this—she needed to know how to get home!

Judith threw the goo again. She could see peaks furling around a central peak like petals, which turned into a massive block of stone which is the Lotus peak. Her way out.

One foot in front of the other, she began a mindless climb. Constantly having to remind herself of her goal, she felt like it was not just her energy depleting by the second, but also her spirit. Physical activities have never been her strength. She was panting heavily by the time she’d climbed quarter-way. Her desperation mounted as her altitude increased—why was she here again?

Why do you want to continue? Her inner voice asked drowsily. No one will miss you ... “Stay”! Judith’s vision blurred. Voices circled around. “Stay”! “Join Us”! “Be yourself”!...

Judith liked the monotonous thrum of the words. Her eyelids felt heavy. So heavy. She wanted to stay and be one of them. The darkness was closing in, cloaking her like a shadow. No more facing my classmates.Splat, the goo teleported onto her face, shaking her from her trance. She squinted through the goo...the fat-lady—again. This time, inscribed on its plaque was a sentence “The view is not just breathtaking, it is the struggle you have put in that makes it all the more worth it.”

She sliced a rock across her palm. Blood welled on her palm, overcoming the thrumming. She thought about those figure’s blank faces. She didn’t want that. Reality was hard, but she’d rather face that than be blank. Escaping wasn’t a choice. Deep breath. She carried on.

99991... She had climbed 100000 steps—she was famished, utterly exhausted, and ready to go back home. Success felt so good, and all her troubles were so distant.

“I don't know who I am” her voice cracked “Yet.” Everything tumbled out, how she was so absorbed in her stories that she forgot about the story in front of her—her story. How maybe she wasn’t writing it how she should, she could change—into a better her.

Judith felt revived. Determined. For the first time in a very long time, she didn't want to hide anymore. She wanted to be who she was. "Bring me back", she intoned, "I can do this, bring me back. I am going to change, I am going to be who I am. I will stand tall and strong like Huangshan".

As she uttered those words, her world fractured into pieces, as if the truth was too much. Judith was tossed round and round until she landed on a glop of goo, back in the mountain named Huangshan.

It was great to be back.

.....GREY.....

Judith would've seen the goo; she would've seen the voice's dwelling; she would've seen that rock midway on the hill that looked like a fat lady. Yet she didn't see anything as she was descending, she was too eager to get back to her old—yet new life.

A quiescent trickle flowed through her body, fragile yet strong—She felt her life—and the mountain's life, this scrawny but brave and powerful mountain, ebbing and flowing. The fact that she was connected to this mountain—this powerful mountain and the fat-lady that didn't care what others thought gave her the strength to go on. She had a fragment of the Mountain's birdsong in her heart—and it was up to her to choose how to sing it. She had the mountain inside her, and its unfathomable power was in her. She was special, in a normal way, and she could make this work.

And the fat-lady—perhaps she was still a little odd to Judith, but the perception of beauty was different for everyone, and she should accept that some people thought that way instead of thinking that those people were wrong.

Wonder filled Judith, she found that she had realized this all in one day, in a mountain called Huangshan, with a glop of goo. /this nature had taught her so many things.

This wasn't goodbye though, Judith was sure she'd be back here again someday; but for now, she was ready for her life to truly begin again.

Luna of Huangshan

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Imama, Dawood – 13

“Ying Yue”, “Ying Yue”, a familiar screaming voice of my dear father woke me up from my intriguing yet breath-taking dream. I have been having this strange dream every night ever since I turned eighteen two months ago. Just as I was about to go back to my sleep, I heard heavy knocking sounds along with my name being called a thousand times. “Ying Yue”, “Ying Yue”, wake up and open the door” came my dear father’s roaring voice. “Okay, okay, I’m awake now.” I answered back. “Please stop with the knocking first.” I pleaded with him as I rushed to get out of my bed, I heard the chuckling voice of my father as he replied, “okay, okay, sweet munchkin, I’ll be waiting downstairs for you, hurry up!” Hearing my father call me by my nickname warmed my heart and brought a smile to my face. I just love my father so much, after all, he’s the only family I have. As I touched the pendant on my neck, I looked at the beautiful picture of my mother, whose eyes are filled with so much warmth and love. My mother died when I was six years old, she was the best mother a child could ever have, and I’m thankful for the amount of time I get to spend with her. I know she will always be here for me and my father. Now, my father is my whole world, and I’m his.

“Ying Yue,” called my father, breaking my train of thought. “Oh sugar, I’m late, I thought to myself while rushing to freshen up. “Coming out of my closet, I checked myself in the mirror before going to meet my father for breakfast. Staring back at me was a girl with long black hair, cascading like waterfall and skin as pale as snow, tainted with rosy cheeks. I got my eyes from my dad, big pools of hazel orbs and my heart shaped crimson lips from my mom. Rushing down the stairs, I saw my dad setting up the breakfast table, lost in his thoughts and humming a sweet tune. I surprised him by back hugging and screaming “Good Morning” in his ears. He almost dropped the plate of steamed buns before recovering from his shocked state, and scolding me light-heartedly. “Since you are late today, you will have to go to the market to buy groceries as your punishment” said my father, smiling like a Cheshire Cat. “Ba Ba, I groaned.” “You know how much I hate grocery shopping”, I said. “And that is why it is a punishment my sweet munchkin” replied my dear father. “Fine”, I sighed feeling defeated. I love my father too much to argue back.

After stuffing my body with all the delicious food cooked by my dad, I helped him to clean the dishes and water his precious plants. My father then went to his study to get some of his pending work done while I embark on a painful journey to the market. It’s always agonizing to be the subject of a million hushed whispers. My father is a herbalist and a homeopath, he is always researching one thing or another. My father is a very respected and loved man among the people of our small village, Xīn yuè. The name of our village means The Crescent Moon, and it represents feminine energy and spiritual connection between the moon and the earth. There is a legend that the ruler of this village was a powerful female, the first ever female to lead a village and she was known to possess powers and beauty beyond this world. Arriving at the market, I looked at the grocery list that my father gave me and sighed. “well it seems like I am going to carry a lot of bags.” Without wasting a second, I started buying the things that were listed on the grocery list.

“Finally I am done, ” I said happily . The sun was setting quickly, flashing magnificent colours, signifying the death of another day. Entering the house, the air is filled with a heavenly mix aroma of smoke and five-spice powder, signifying that my dad already cooked dinner. “Ba Ba, I’m back”, I called my father to let him know of my arrival. Walking to our dining room, I see Szechuan eggplant, Stir-fry beef and photon soup along with freshly cooked rice laid beautifully on our dinner table. “Go freshen up, munchkin. We will be eating dinner soon,” my father instructed which I merrily agreed.

We ate dinner near the small window, looking out the beautiful Huangshan mountain. I don’t know why, but whenever I look at the crescent shaped Huangshan mountain, I feel like its calling on to me, especially when I vision it in my dreams every night. “How was your trip to the market?” Ba Ba suddenly asked me mischievously. “It was like a trip to heaven, Ba Ba” I replied sarcastically as I heard the hysterical chuckling of my precious father. After dinner, I helped my father clean up before calling it a night. On my way, I went to my dad, wrapping my arms around him and whispering “I love you, Ba Ba.” “I love you too,” he whispered softly and kissed the top of my head.

Gasping for air, my eyes flew open in panic. "The dream again" I thought to myself, though it was more of a nightmare this time. I felt like I was being transported to another realm in a never ending dark and hollow abyss. I shivered thinking how real it felt. Wanting to get rid of this spine-chilling dream, I spun to my left to turn on the bed lamp, but what I saw was terrorizing. I was no longer in my old bedroom, but rather in bedroom fit for a royal. My pink colored walls were replaced by golden walls. Everything in this room was red and gold colored. Frantically looking around, I saw a huge red coloured double door with two huge wolfs with crowns intricately designed on it. Assuming that it will lead me to freedom, I hastily got out of bed. My bare feet touched a warm, plush, red rug momentarily paralyzing me but once I gained my consciousness I rushed for the door. "The door will not open" came a deep voice from somewhere in the room. Swallowing the uncertain lump in my throat and suppressing the rapid beating of my heart, I looked back and saw the most beautiful man. "Is he even real" I thought to myself. His beauty was so delicate that one would be afraid to touch it so as to not damage it but at the same time his eyes are so feral that one would succumb in his presence. "Wh-o are you?" I fearfully asked him. He replied calmly, "I am Wang Long Yee, the king of my world". "What do you mean your world, where am I?" I asked with an equal calm voice. "Ying Yue, I am the same man and this is the same world which you have been seeing in your dreams, this realm is Huangshan ," he answered with tenderness. "How do you know my name, how do you know about my dreams, who are you?" I cried back to him. I can no longer think straight and I am terrified of the person in front of me. "Ba Ba , where are you?" I tearfully whispered to myself. The tears flowing like a river. "Ying Yue" came a whisper but I dare not look at the source of the voice. Suddenly, a large rough hand touched my shoulders and I stopped breathing at the warmth of his hand. "please calm down, and I will answer all of your questions but for that you will have to believe me," he said softly. I timidly looked up, and got lost in his gloomy black eyes that have storms brewing within them. "I am listening" I sighed defeatedly. Without warning, everything went pitch black and once again I felt like I was being transported to through the same dark and hollow passage.

My eyes flew open in horror, but my heart was soon relieved to be back in my pink colored bedroom. "Gosh, this dream felt too real, I can still feel the warmth of that mysterious man" I murmured to myself. But, that sense of relief was short lived when I felt a strange weight on my right wrist. I lifted my dull white covers, and saw that a thick gold bracelet laid on my wrist with the same design of two wolfs that I saw on the door. There was something more, as I opened my fist, I saw a letter in red luxurious paper. Opening the letter it read:

Your mother is a moon goddess,
She lives in depths of blue sky,
Your father is a sun healer,
He lives in the depths of golden soil.

My father is a king of creatures,
He lives in the depths of green wilderness,
My mother is queen of spirits,
She lives in the depths of silver heaven

You are the lock to all the eternity,
I am the key to all the infinity,

We shall meet again very soon,
We shall infinitely be one heart.

Your other half,
Wang Long Yee

The Huangshan Mystery

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Kasim Mohamed, Suhail – 13

Lee was screaming in agony. Fan Jing was worried whether his wife would survive this. At dawn, a healthy baby boy was born. His parents were relieved. The baby started squealing softly. “We’ll name him Fu. He’ll bring richness and abundance to our village”, said Lee. Fan Jing put a pendant tied in a rope around his baby’s neck. The pendant had a symbol of a blue phoenix in it. It was a family tradition which was passed on from the child’s great grandfather. The pendant is given to the first-born child of the family.

Tai Fook village is located beneath the Huang Shan Mountains, also known as the Yellow Mountains. For more than a century, the village had witnessed a scarcity of food. Farmers tried their best to increase the harvest, but in vain. The villagers had to depend on seafood most of the time. Lee’s brother Wang Lei was the village leader and was a strong and powerful man. People had faith in him, that he would find a solution to the food shortage.

“Why don’t we leave this village? Why can’t we migrate to some other place? How long should we endure this?” questioned the villagers. “You can’t run away from your home. This village has provided our ancestors with everything. There were wars fought in the past to conquer this place. You do not know the value of your motherland. I agree there is a scarcity of food. We must find ways to overcome this problem. And we will” said Wang Lei. He tried his best to encourage his people. But deep down, he knew that the problem was getting worse. The most often raised question among the villagers was “Why don’t we go up the mountains and find food?” What lies there was a mystery to each one of them. Some curious and rebellious ones went out to unravel the mystery of the mountains. But never came back. One such person was Fu’s father Fan Jing.

Some believe that there are strange creatures up there. No one goes there now. Why do people disappear there? What if there is enough food up there? Maybe the mountains could end the food crisis or maybe not. These were the questions running through young Fu’s mind. After her husband’s loss, Lee became an overprotective mother. She would not let Fu go anywhere near the mountains. “You are my only reason to live” she told her son.

Fu grew up to be a curious and a kindhearted boy. He had problem solving skills and he would not accept any denial without knowing the reason. He heard strange noises from the mountains. He would often beg his mother to let him go because he wanted to see the place so badly. But she did not let him.

It was a night of thunderstorms and it rained throughout the night. Fu couldn’t sleep well as he had a strange vision. He saw a blue phoenix turning into a fire. He was petrified. He woke up and he couldn’t figure out whether it was a dream. He had so many confused thoughts. “I have to solve this puzzle,” he said to himself.

Fu decided to venture into the mountains without his mother’s permission. He packed up some essentials and started his journey. He climbed through the trees and vines. After climbing for some time, he got tired and hungry. Then he came face to face with a strange creature. It was a huge cat with emerald eyes, and it was completely furry. It was twice the size of Fu. It wasn’t as wild as he thought it was. It seemed as if the cat was trying to communicate with him. It pointed at a mountain with stairs which led above the clouds. Fu found a cave to rest for the night and wondered about what could be up the stairs.

The next morning, he reached the stairs and started climbing them. It took him hours until he found a tree full of fruits. He quickly grabbed some to eat. They tasted unbelievable. Suddenly, a huge lion popped out of nowhere, blocking the path. He needed to distract the lion somewhere else, but how? Lions are cats and cats like chasing lights. He quickly made a fire out of wood and waved it around. As he was moving the fire, the lion was mimicking and moved its head around. Then Fu threw the fire at a distance and the lion followed it and vanished in the bushes. Fu continued his journey. He stopped to look at a shining thing. It was a broken piece of armor with a symbol resembling that of the pendant he was wearing. That meant his great great grandfather had come there. He was a great warrior and his family admired him for his courage and endurance.

When Fu reached the top of the stairs, his pendant started glowing. He heard a loud growl, but he didn’t know where it came from. He saw an old castle in ruins. As he went inside, he discovered that the entrance of the castle was the shape of his pendant. He walked through the ruins and what he saw made him flabbergasted. His heart pounded at the sight of a huge fire breathing dragon. He froze in astonishment. The dragon came closer to him and Fu saw a hollow on its forehead. Fu took out his pendant and placed it on the dragon’s forehead. A gust of wind swept through and the dragon turned into a shimmering blue phoenix.

Things became clear to Fu. The great great grandfather whom he admired, had taken the pendant from the phoenix to show his bravery. Little did he know that it would turn the phoenix into a fire breathing dragon. The phoenix showed the vision that the warrior had become arrogant and he wanted to show his audacity to the world by taming a huge phoenix. As the warrior returned to his village, he took with him the curse of the phoenix which had turned into a hideous beast. The curse that did not allow the land to prosper. The curse which made his entire generation suffer the consequence of a deed which they weren't even aware of.

The dragon waited in the mountains for someone to return its power. It was filled with rage and it burnt the men who came to the mountains without the pendant. Fu fulfilled its destiny and saved his village. The phoenix blessed the young boy with a long life and richness. Its shimmering wings flapped, and it flew in liberty.

Fu returned home with contentment and relief. He did something that his father couldn't. If only his father had the pendant with him, he would have been alive. Fu's mother was furious to see him as she was searching for him everywhere. "Where have you been for the past two days? I thought I lost you too" she wept hugging him.

"Our sorrows are over. Our land is not cursed any more. We can grow as much food as we want here. Uncle Wang Lei was right. Tai Fook village is our precious motherland, and we will not leave our home. We can cultivate and harvest in this land and hail the glory of our village".Fu exclaimed with tears of joy.

Under the Hood

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Khadeeja – 13

Alisson stopped to take a deep breath, “Where the shadows float like the ocean and where the azalea blooms, you will find me.” She whispered underneath her breath. “Oh mom, where have you gone?”

“We are hopefully on the right track. We'll find her. Come on, keep climbing” Lucas comforted.

“What if this is all wrong, what if the old lady was wrong, it's been months climbing up and down mountains of China, what makes you think this is any different?” Alisson complained.

After a few rocky and steep paths, they looked up to see an old hut. They paused walking and turned around to look at each other, a huge smile passed through their faces. “I guess the old woman from before was right after all.” Alisson said cheerfully, pointing at the hut.

They started to catch a slow chase towards the hut, but stopped when they realized they had been climbing for so long that all their energy had been drained.

Before heading towards the hut, they turned around to gaze at the sunset, the golden ball went down with the birds singing, warmth and relief running over them. Alisson smiled, “That was beautiful” Lucas looked up to the pink sky, “no wonder your mother wanted to come here.”

They started walking towards the hut, by the time they got there it was almost nightfall. Their stomachs were now rumbling.

Without thinking twice they knocked on the door. At first no one answered, so they banged on the door with a no reply again.

”Is anybody in there?” Lucas wondered out loud and that's when the door suddenly creaked and someone peeked through the small gap.

Earthlings come in, come in. I haven't seen your kind in a long time” the door opened wide, he was rather a young man, looking in his 40's. “Take a seat, may I offer you something?”

“Yes, please, we are really hungry. We have been climbing for a long time” Alisson said, Lucas followed with a nod.

“You better eat something before you go to the temple.” Then the man went to the back of the hut which looked like a kitchen, questions started popping up in their heads, he came back with two plates of sandwiches and placed it next to them and took a seat.

They both grabbed a sandwich each and took a huge bite without hesitation. It was probably the best food they had in a long time.

Alisson suddenly remembered what the man said and felt very confused now, what temple was this man talking about and why does he sound like he has been living here for way longer than he looks?

“Would you kids like something to carry for your journey?” the man asked. There was a brief silence, except for the sound of Lucas munching loudly.

“Yeah, sure we would like something for the journey to the temple,” Alisson blurted, hoping to get back on that subject. Lucas looked at her confused.

The man just stood up and walked back to his kitchen once again.

”What is this temple he mentioned and why do we not know about it?” Alisson asked Lucas, extremely confused.

“I thought YOU knew!” Lucas replied.

“I'm just going with what he is saying.”

The man came back with two bags and handed it over to them, "I don't think your kids came here for the power. I'm sorry but I just happened to hear your conversation."

"Who are you?" Alisson stood up. "What is this power you're talking about and where is this temple?" Lucas added. "And where do you get food up here?"

The man reached out to the rocking chair, looked at them and said "Let me explain it to you all from the beginning.

"He sat down and sighed. "This mountain, where you are now, is the yellow mountain. There are sacred guardians, who protect it. The mountain grants you wishes and curses at the same time." He paused to look at them. "Are you following?"

They nodded, still very confused.

"High up in the mountain there is a temple, where a ritual takes place on every blue moon night and that's how people gain powers."

He paused to exhale.

"And once your wish is granted, the mountain locks you up here. Many people out there don't know about this mountain except the old lady who told me about this place. I came here searching for a certain power, and I'm locked up here now, totally regretting it." And he looked down, sadness took over his face.

"Well at least the old lady sounds familiar," Lucas said to Alisson breaking the silence.

"I'm really sorry sir. It must be hard, staying alone," Alisson said to the man.

"Oh there is nothing to be sorry about. I'm the one to blame." He eyed them. "Anyways, why are you kids here?"

It was Alisson's turn to tell her story now. "My mom went missing around 3 months ago and left us a note." She took out the note from her wallet and handed it to the man.

Where the shadow floats like the ocean and where the azalea blooms you'll find me. And ever since, we have been searching for her. We came across the old lady, and she told us that my mom might be here and that's why we got here" Alisson finished with a tear trickling down her face, she quickly wiped it off with her hand.

"Your mother was very specific about this place. She described it really well" the man spoke.

"Please, tell me we are in the right place," Lucas said, anticipating a good answer.

"You are, don't worry." The man looked towards Alisson "Your mother has described the peak of this mountain, close to the temple. I think you should start climbing towards it, there is a possibility your mother could still be there!" the man spoke, trying to show some positivity in his voice.

A smile spread over Lucas' face, "Thank you sir, for helping us and feeding us." Lucas bowed.

"Don't worry about it. But tonight, you kids need to take some rest, I'll get you some sleeping bags." The man stood up, walked back and disappeared.

Lucas turned to look at Alisson, who was now in tears of joy. "We are going to find her!" Alisson smiled.

The next morning they woke up, stretched and got ready to leave. They thanked the man for his hospitality and started climbing up again.

"While you're climbing, you will come across many strange things, try keeping yourself away from them." The man warned them.

They came across many mysterious-looking flowers. "Could those be azaleas by any chance?" Lucas asked hopefully.

"Maybe they are!" Alisson reached out to them.

"Ally, no!" Lucas grabbed her away.

"Sorry, I totally forgot what the man said."

They walked for many hours until their stomach started gurgling. They stopped and took shade under a tree and opened up their bags, took out the food the man gave them earlier that night.

When they got back on their feet, a shadow crossed above their heads. They looked up, but to their confusion, there was nothing there but a clear blue sky.

"What was that?" Alisson asked with a little uneasiness in her tone.

"We don't have time to investigate, look over there!" Lucas pointed his hand behind the tree they were resting on.

"That must be the temple!" Alisson said, staring.

"Are you sure? It wasn't there before.."

"We might have just missed it. Let's check it out! It's a sign!"

"In that case, it can't be that far, we could reach it before nightfall." Lucas said and started walking up the trail.

They kept climbing when they saw another shadow cross over their head again.

"This is freaking me out, but I'm going to ignore it." Alisson shut her eyes.

"Yes. We are almost there." Lucas gritted his teeth and kept pushing towards the old place.

Before they knew it, the sun had been sinking and they stood to see another beautiful view of the sun. Perhaps their last.

They saw the building get closer and closer. They stopped to take a few breaks, but couldn't stop for the day, knowing that they were almost there. It was starting to get really late, but they couldn't stop.

As they got closer, it not only got colder and colder but there were more shadows circling their heads.

Alas, they reached the place.

And they were right, it really was the temple.

They walked slowly towards it, they could only see a silhouette of the temple. Something moved as they got even closer, but this time it was not on the sky, but on the ground.

"Who is there?" Lucas said, faking bravery.

"Go away." A female voice said.

Alisson fell to the floor. "MOM? IS THAT YOU?" Alisson screamed.

"You won't find her. You will never find her she is gone" the female said.

"Where, where did she go?" Alisson said with mixed emotions, anger, frustration and sadness.

Lucas walked closer to the woman to see her face, Alisson got up and followed him. It was too dark that they still couldn't see her, but they noticed that she was wearing a long robe and hood covering half of her face.

“Are you a guardian?” Lucas couldn’t hide the shakiness in his voice now.

”You don't need to know who I am. Just leave.”

“We came here all the way, searching for one thing. I am not leaving without my mother.” Alisson stood firm.

“You cannot find anything here, your mother is gone.” The woman spoke, fiercely.

Anger filled Alisson. “Show me your face! SHOW ME WHO YOU ARE. NOW!” She yelled.

A lump was forming in the woman’s throat. Guilt started rising in her as she slowly lowered her hood. A tear trickled down her cheek.

“You don’t deserve a selfish mother like me, sweetheart. ”

.....

The Huang Shan Village

Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College, Qayyum, Fatima – 13

I am Yue, a female citizen of Huangshan Village. My job is to learn about the past and assist the men in war but *never* participate in it. I am lucky to know how to read, for it is forbidden for girls to leave home to study. My father disagrees with the rules forbidding girls to study, so he always gives me books he buys from the market and teaches my mother and me to read. My friend Yang isn't able to read, I met her at the day-carnival once. We do everything together.

Today, my father was teaching me about the traditions of our village.

'Your ancestors believed that the Sumerian-traditions are... *Yue, are you paying attention?*' asked my dad.

'Yes, dad.' I answered.

'So, what was I telling you about?'

'The origin of *our* traditions?'

'No. I am talking about the *Sumerian's traditions*'

'Okay...'

'Yes...I see you *haven't* been paying attention after all. Here is a book on their traditions, goodnight, and remember to read it first thing next morning!'

'Okay...so can I *sleep* now?'

'Yes...if you want to.'

'Yay! Bye Daddy!'

'Okay. Sleep tight.'

I went to my room, it was glowing silver. This was the fourth time this week my room's been glowing. I sighed, as I could not sleep well in a room that was shining like it's the day. I opened my book.

'We believe that killing kids is good and it brings prosperity.'

I shuddered and threw the blanket over myself and slept. The next morning, I went out to see the day-carnival. To my surprise, there was only one stall with a long line of boys. I rushed over, thinking it was some kind of a game. I stood for 10 minutes and was already near the booth. I heard a boy about my age moan. 'This is so hard.' Then, I was pushed from the back, the receptionist stared at me. 'Trying out for the moon warrior?' she asked.

'Y...yes.' I muttered, not knowing what that is.

'Oh my, that, What *is* that?' she asked pointing at my glowing arm, I whimpered.

'*That's* none of your business!' I staggered and ran away.

I didn't run home, I went straight to our girl's pagoda, Luna, Yang, and Jing were all sitting there, looking at a poster.

'Oh, there you are! Look at this, it bans all "squads that only consist of girls". Really? How do they make *laws* nowadays?' Jing snapped, pointing at the poster.

'*Really.*' snorted Luna.

Yang was tearing a pile of the same posters, grunting, she said, '*Oops, there's no law banning girls to tear, is there? Bet they'll pass that law soon.*' They all laughed. I sat down and they saw my glowing arm.

'Oh!' said Jing gently.

Yang, however, snorted. She twisted my arm and revealed a tiny gadget tied to the back of my elbow.

'Who did this?' I asked.

'Your parents.' She answered bluntly.

'What? *No way.* Yang...your parents are horrible, but not mine, they're *nice*, well, my dad is, my mom, is...*cold*'

'So then, it's your mom, Don't trust her, Yue, she's...mad.'

I looked at Jing and Luna for answers, Jing shrugged, while Luna said, 'Uhm...Yang saw her parents doing it last night, putting glow gel and the glow arm device, everything. Someone...is doing this! The "sun and moon warrior" is fiction! *All fake.*' I looked at them, surprised.

A grown-up man came over and said,

'Oh, hello dears, I thought that law was passed...mm? The law about banning girls' squads?' Jing shuddered, looking vivid.

'Um, we, were doing our dishes' I said pointing to a few plates near Luna.

'*Oh*, I see.' the guy peered at the dishes, his eyes narrowed, and frowned. I quickly stood up and walked over to him, he said,

'These dishes are clean, I thought you were *washing* them?' I touched the dish, It was dry and clean, I panicked. Luna walked over to me and said.

'Oh, *finally*, the dishes are *dry*! Now we can go home. What do I have to cook today?' She said dramatically. I stared at her and after a few seconds, I finally understood what she was doing.

'Okay, whose dish is this...? This one is mine, Hey, Luna, where are your dishes?' I said, pretending that we are discussing *dishes*.

'It's right there.' Luna answered pointing vaguely at the fields. We all ran towards them, trying to escape the man, who seemed like he wanted to stop us.

The fields were filled with posters of the new law, I saw a poster on the ground which was slightly different from the others, I picked it up and saw something which would change my life forever.

There was a tunnel underneath the paper. I jumped in without hesitation, Luna, and Yang followed suit. The end was a hard stone floor, there was a glowing fire torch on my right, I picked it up and waved it in front of me. I saw a plate made of gold and filled with blood, there was a knife hanging with it. A deep and low voice suddenly said, 'Welcome, Moon Warrior!'

'The M...moon warrior?' I gasped. 'Jing? Jing! Where are you? Luna? Y...Yang?'

'Moon Warrior! Listen to me, sit in the bowl of blood in front of you, *Sit*, so I may sacrifice you.'

I rejected it immediately. 'No! No, I won't. Get me outta here.' I turned and tried to find the door.

'Huh.' Someone said. I waved the light in front of me and saw the guy who criticized our dishes.

'The sun and moon warrior tale is fake. *All* I want is *your blood*, *all* of your blood. *If* you and your little friend give me *all* of your blood, these two' the man pointed at Luna and Jing, who were tied up, 'Will be able to go free. *How's* my deal?'

'It's *not* a deal! It's a *threat*! You are threatening us!' screamed Yang. Yang kept on talking and criticizing him, while I looked around, I saw something that will help me: a door was on my right! I ran towards it and went outside, the guy saw me, Tap, tap tap...he was coming! I ran in the opposite direction for a long time. I stopped when I saw two doors, one was white while the other was black. I ran into one of them, I didn't know which one, all I know was to not look back and keep going. I ran and ran until my legs went numb, my eyes were sore, and all my bones ached. I was about to give up.

I fell! I had no more energy to run or even *walk*. Everything was stirring, I was about to blackout! A second before blacking out, I saw a beam of light, 'An exit?' I thought. I tried my best to stand up, crouching, I located the source of light, and crawled towards it.

The light was coming from the festival! 'Am I in a gutter?' I asked. I stuck my head out of the hole and saw Jing staring at me.

'Wha...! Jing! How did you get away?'

'Oh.' laughed Jing. 'I never jumped in the hole. So, it was only Dummy-Jing and Luna down there, I put a camera on Dummy-Jing so I saw everything, and so did the elders, they are gonna throw him outta the village. Cool, isn't it?.....'

Jing was still talking about rescuing Luna and Yang, I fell, and was already unconscious.

Three weeks later

I was laying in a hospital wrapped in bandages. Mum came in. 'I'm sorry.' she said. 'Victor told me to prank you, the prank was that I make your arm and room glow, he's been doing pranks and killing children for years... *oh*, I'm so glad you're *okay*!'

'Wh..who's Victor? What do you mean prank...and kill?' I asked.

'Victor is a *Sumerian-believer*, and believes killing 2 children every 5 years will bring prosperity to our village and he's been doing the "Sun & Moon Warrior stalls" every 5 years for almost 5 decades! Every 5 years, a child whose mother or father is told to prank their children goes missing, *thank* goodness you're safe!' Mum was dramatic, something was wrong.

'What's wrong, mum?' I asked.

Mum looked surprised, her eyes widened a bit. 'No..nothing. M'dear.' she said. I raised my eyebrows and she burst into tears. 'I...well, it...Jing's been murdered, you *know*, um...victor *killed* her...'

I stared. 'What? *Why*?

'It was Jing who told everyone about him...and so, that was his revenge...*really*'

I groaned, but at the same time, they (*the laws forbidding girls to do anything*) were removed and we were allowed to do *most* of the things others do. Huangshan is magical!

The Vermillion Bird

Kellett Senior School, Walters, Daniel – 12

Razor sharp, the stark white peaks pierce the lazy rolling clouds floating across the azure blue above.

Dappled rays of wintry light reflect the sparkling river as it runs through the lush landscape. Earth brown pebbles and smooth grey stones hide in the deep watery crevices as verdant, cultivated rice paddies are scattered like loose change around the fertile earth at the foot of the snow-capped summit.

An ancient town nestles in the shadow of the imposing peaks, as the rippling river continues its leisurely meander. Rickety, wooden bridges connect the two distinct halves of the town, sun and snow, fire and ice, shadow and light.

Snow and sun, ice and fire, light and shadow.
'He' watches, a silent silhouette keenly surveying the plains below. Heat and warmth are natural to his mythical presence but the glistening ice seductively draws him in, as this winged creature of the air attentively listens to the whispering secrets of the living mountain.

Night falls deep and black, apart from scattered pinpricks of light in the frigid sky. The town sleeps as the mountain wakes from its slumber. A brisk wind rises, sending flurries of light snow into a wild fiery tango. The wind erupts, tempestuous and untamed, driving sheets of jagged ice clattering down the rough terrain.

The bird rises, flaming scarlet against the background of a pearl moon. Deep, compelling eyes penetrate the unending night, the sunken orbs blazing into the alabaster tidal wave of imminent disaster before him. A majestic rustle of scarlet plumes, an expanse of flaming feathers and the immense power of the vermillion bird, explodes into flight.

A churning white froth rampages forward, flanked by the blazing bird. His aquiline head dips as he picks up speed and lands before the towering wall of ice. Echoing whispers, then silence as the tsunami of snow and ice reduces to a ripple and disappears before the winged mountain creature who stands fearlessly in its path.

Dawn breaks, casting a light of soft pink and ocean blue across the slanted angles of the mountain, until it envelops the cyan bird in its warmth. Its feathered robes become a sea of flames as it rises higher and higher, before disappearing into the embrace of the magical mountain, its home.

China's Magical Mountains

Kiangsu Chekiang College International Section, Jadhvani, Heer – 12

China is a country with many magical mountains and misty mountains. Amongst those mountains, there is a mountain called Huangshan in Eastern China. In that mountain there is a yellow emperor whose name is Huangshan. These mountains are breathtakingly beautiful, with their sharp edge. These mountains are huge and rich in thick mountain forests with cool climates. Amongst the Yellow Emperors, there are several pairs of poets named Ki bai and Du Fu. They lived there in the 8th century. People inside and outside the Yellow Emperor lead a happy life and are healthy. There are pine trees, which are very famous for pine and these pine trees lived around 1500 years. And there are tens of thousands of stone steps.

During the 8th century, the emperors became by riding the dragons. In those days, the dragon lived. The person who rode the dragon would become the emperor to the country. People also worship them as their Demi god's. People used to cultivate crops, grow fruits and vegetables. Those lands are very rich in minerals and metals. The dragons lived in secret mountain caves under a king's protection. The dragon is very famous in China. Poets used to love there only because the place is very pleasant and beautiful. The poets get poems easily by looking at the mountains and the climate. Owing to the huge height, it looks magical and wonderful. The people on that huge mountain feel otherworldly. They thought that they were living in clouds .

There are many villages around. People are called yellow citizens, and they live on the yellow mountain. They lived in tiny houses with very few people. But they do all types of work and grow plants . The emperor also satisfied people and solved all problems in a short time. They all lived very happily. The dragons also never harm them, and they used to play with dragons. They feed the dragon and everyone. They love their king because he is taking care of them and has no tax paying systems. Many years later, the dragon became extinct, and people in China still worship it. Later, all the king's emperors were down and governments were formed and many developments took place in China . Now, China is the world's largest populated country and most developed country with huge resources. Anyhow, there are still Huangshan Mountains, huge forests and stone steps. In those mountains and many mountains, scientists still found dragon bones and species. Many researches were undergoing. They think there are still dragons living in secret caves. In those mountains, many movies have been made and are still being made. These mountains are famous for his, her, their, etc. filmmaking and stunt performances. During the 8th century, the emperor protected all those areas and forests and now the people are using those resources and living happily.

The Search for the Elixir of life

Korean International School, Shum, Colin Jack Noah – 13

The Yellow Dynasty has become the largest and most successful kingdom in China thanks to the guidance and leadership of Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor. However, the years have reflected onto Huangdi's body and has made him weary. Huangdi looked at his many sons, all eagerly waiting for when he collapsed and they could take the throne. He realised that that day would be coming sooner than he once thought, his life flashed before his eyes, all the battles, women and glory that he had won. He decided to go on one last adventure, one that would make him immortal. Huangdi rose from his golden throne and the court when silent, he raised his arms and announced to the court, "I have heard that in the Yishan mountain, there is an elixir that grants the drinker immortality, I have decided that I will find the elixir. Tomorrow, I will embark on this journey with my two most trusted advisors, Li Bai and Du Fu"

Li Bai and Du Fu immediately snapped to attention, "Yes Emperor" they said with a salute. Huangdi stepped down from the dais and walked through the huge doors. As he walked, he heard people muttering that he had gone senile in his old age and that soon his sons would take over.

The next morning, the people bid farewell to Huangdi and his advisors. The sons wept in front of Huangdi but behind their tear soaked mask, they wore devious and scheming smiles. As soon as Huangdi's horse wasn't visible, the sons immediately started discussing who would take the throne. He shook his head in disappointment and marched on towards the looming Yishan mountain.

The group walked up the mountain for hours, as the sun began to fall, the sunlight shone all over the mountain and town, making the whole area glow a radiant gold. Li Bai and Du Fu stared at the breathtaking sight and immediately started writing poems. "Oi! Let's keep moving" barked Huangdi.

"Sorry, sorry" they muttered. They continued to trudge up the mountain until they found a cave and Huangdi ordered them to make camp there. As Li Bai and Du Fu led their horses into the cave, Huangdi stayed outside and looked at the path that they would continue on. He studied it more closely and realised it was too steep for the horses.

"We will have to travel on foot tomorrow" Huangdi said to Li Bai and Du Fu, "The path is too steep for the horses"

Du Fu started to groan but Li Bai quickly punched him in the stomach "Understood Emperor" he said. The Emperor sat with his advisors and watched them cook a rabbit over the fire. Eventually, the rabbit finished cooking and the three ate in an awkward silence. Li Bai and Du Fu glanced at each other, "So, Emperor, do you really believe this elixir will grant you immortality?" asked Du Fu.

"I do," replied Huangdi and they left it at that.

The next morning, Li Bai and Du Fu woke to Huangdi waiting for them. They quickly scrambled out of their sleeping bag and packed up the campsite. Once they were ready, they stood at attention and Huangdi started walking up the path. The trio walked on and on and on until they reached a plateau that they could rest on. Li Bai and Du Fu sank gratefully onto the soft grass and Huangdi calmly sat down. While Du Fu was giving everyone food and water, Li Bai took out a scroll and started examining it. "What does that scroll say?" asked Du Fu.

"It talks about the elixir, apparently the elixir must be made with four things that are found on the mountain, the whisker of a dragon, a story from a monkey and the scale of qilin, in that order" Li Bai said.

"And where do I find a dragon, monkey and qilin?" Huangdi inquired.

"Says here you can find the dragon on a plateau" Li Bai said while squinting at the scroll and his eyes widened, "Uh oh"

"Wha- AHHHHH!" Du Fu started to ask but was cut off by the dragon erupting from below their feet and came out roaring. They flew into the air and came crashing back down onto the path.

"I think I just peed my pants," Du Fu wept.

“Quick! Give me my sword” Huangdi ordered. Li Bi fumbled out the sword from his bag and handed it to Huangdi. Huangdi calmly drew it and raised it, the sunlight caught on the jade sword and Huangdi stood there, looking godlike. He screamed and charged the dragon, he swung his blade with everything he had, it hit the dragon’s body and Huangdi heard a shattering sound, The blade was in splinters and there wasn’t even a visible dent on the dragon. Nothing had ever broken the sword before, he had killed so much and now it was broken. Rage consumed Huangdi, he leapt at the dragon and pulled at its whiskers. The dragon roared and spewed fire from its mouth, it started beating its wings and swinging its tail wildly. Li Bi and Du Fu had recovered and were going over to save Huangdi but Li Bi was struck by the dragon’s tail and Du Fu was blown away by the wings. The dragon soared into the sky and Huangdi held on for his life.

As they flew through the clouds, Huangdi looked at the horizon and the retreating sun, for some reason, he felt calm and peaceful. He let go of the dragon and apologised for hurting it. The dragon looked into his eyes and grunted. It turned and started flying back to the broken plateau. As the dragon landed, Li Bi and Du Fu were once again knocked back by the wind of the dragon. Huangdi jumped off the dragon and stroked its chin, the dragon closed its eyes and a single whisker fell into Huangdi’s hand. Huangdi nodded his thanks and the dragon flew off into the sun.

Huangdi turned to Li Bi and Du Fu who were massaging their backs.

“I have acquired the whisker, let’s go find that monkey now” Huangdi told them and he strode past them.

It took two more days for them to find the monkey. They emerged from behind a rock and saw what looked like a stone figure looking off into the distance. “That must be the monkey,” Li Bi whispered.

“But that’s just a stone sculpture” Du Fu hissed.

Huangdi ignored them and walked over to the stone figure. He sat down and waited. After a few minutes, the stone started cracking and a monkey sat there.

“I have come to hear your story, Great Monkey,” Huangdi said.

“Very well,” the monkey said, “Long ago, I fell in love with a girl named Zhangzu. She was like the moon, shining and beautiful but I knew she and her parents would not want her to marry a monkey so I transformed into a human and proposed, she said yes and there was a big party, however, I became careless and became drunk, my disguise fell and Zhangzu was so horrified she ran away. She never came back and I now sit here, watching her home, filled with regret”

“I’m sorry,” Huangdi said.

“Don’t live life filled with regret, let go of your past” the monkey instructed. Huangdi closed his eyes and looked at all of his enemies, the women and children he had killed and he let go of them. He acknowledged what he had done in his past was terrible and he let go of them.

“Well done” the monkey croaked, “Now leave, I would like to be left in peace from now on”

Huangdi rose and walked back to Li Bi and Du Fu who were gaping at him. They shouldered their bags and followed Huangdi as they continued walking up the mountain.

It took them another five days to reach the top of the Lotus Peak which was where the qilin waited according to Li Bi and his scroll. The trio climbed to the peak and saw a qilin waiting for them. Li Bi and Du Fu shuddered at its terrifying appearance.

“Come,” boomed the qilin. Huangdi started walking over, Li Bi and Du Fu gulped and followed. They sat down in front of the qilin and waited.

“I assume you have come for my scale for the elixir?” asked the qilin.

“That is correct,” answered Huangdi.

“And do you know what the elixir does?”

“It grants immortality”

The qilin laughed, “The legends are wrong, the elixir does not grant eternal life, it grants a painless death”

Huangdi, Li Bi and Du Fu were all shocked but Huangdi’s eyes suddenly became weary.

“My time has come,” he said.

The qilin gave him the scale and Huangdi drank the elixir while Li Bi and Du Fu wept. The Yellow Emperor who fathered 25 sons and the creator of the first dynasty, died.

A Legend Lost to Time

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Cheung, Tung Ching Athena – 13

Rough stone, sculpted by the hands of nature, stand tall and unmoving as they tower over mankind. At times shrouded in wispy clouds and silver threads of mist, at others gleaming golden and shining in the dawn, these peaks are a spectacular sight for the ages. These sights belong to none other than the ancient beauty that is the Yellow Mountains of China, better known as Huangshan to the locals.

Many gaze in awe at the wondrous sights of the monumental peaks, saying that they now understand why these mountains are so praised in artistic endeavours of old and new. However, few know the true story of Huangshan, and why it is so appealing to create beautiful renditions of it in stories, poems, and paintings.

“Mother, tell me another story, another one!” the child begged. “Tell me the one with the magic and the dragon—please!”

“Again?” the mother laughed, stroking her daughter’s hair softly. “Alright, but it’s bedtime for you after this one.”

“Long before we were here, there once lived a dragon, soaring amongst the clouds...”

A mighty roar sounded from the heavens, marking the arrival of a mythical beast cloaked in scales that shone like the most luxurious gold and eyes that gleamed like the finest jade.

This dragon was a descendant of the Yellow Dragons, famed for their wisdom. He wished for nothing but peace to fall upon these lands, to watch the people prosper and usher in a new era of knowledge. And so, the dragon decided to bless the mountains they resided in with the gift of creativity.

He hoped it would serve them well, and wished to see the people produce stunning works of art and literature. For a while, the dragon was content. He watched in delight as they penned poems that would be passed down for generations to come, painted masterpieces that convey emotion in every brushstroke...

However, time quells far too much. As the years passed, the dragon faded from the people’s memories, thought to be a mere myth, a part of the great works of fiction that had been produced by previous generations.

And what was an immortal being, if his people no longer knew of his existence? Day by day, the dragon felt his strength seep away, yet still he refused to show himself and force the people to bow in reverence or fear, for it was never his wish to impede on their freedom.

Slowly, the trickling of his power left him as a hollow shell of his former self, old, ancient, and far less impressive than before. His strength came from living on through the memories of man, twirling and gliding free in their imagination. Without them, he was weak and battered. Likewise, the gift of creativity he had given to them also started to fade, until slowly, its spirit was held only by a few who tried their best to keep it alive. Those became the best thinkers and poets of an era, famed and renowned. But even they had not imagined that a mythical beast lay in slumber underneath their feet in the very mountain they lived on, fading, fading, fading...

(Thirteen years later, in a village on Huangshan...)

“Mother, I’m going to the forest to pick some berries. Be back soon!”

A young girl, basket in hand, she skipped down the beaten path to the woods enthusiastically. It was no lie— she really *was* going to grab some sweet fruit from amongst the foliage, but the real reason she was so excited was that she finally had a chance to set her thoughts free.

Settling down, she whipped out her hidden treasures from inside the small basket: a worn notebook and a simple twig dipped in charcoal, both small and easily concealable.

Here in China and especially in this little village she lived in, a girl who knew how to read and write was practically unheard of, never mind one who aspired to become a poet. She had learned all she knew from eavesdropping on the teachings her brothers received. *Studying was better for the boys*, her parents had put it kindly when she asked. *All you need to do is take care of your looks, and learn how to do chores. You'll have a nice husband to take care of you one day, so there's no reason to fret.*

She tried to forget the matter, but her passion won out in the end. Every week, she'd find an excuse to sneak out to her secluded spot, and let her mind wander.

Looking around, she drew inspiration from her surroundings and put pen to paper.

Before she knew it, the page had been filled up with her scribbles. Half-formed thoughts, descriptions of forest creatures, her emotions at not being able to let her words see the light of day... all of them, and more, she kept tucked away in her scraggly notebook.

Soon, it came time for her to return home. This time though, she found herself straying from the beaten path she always took, her feet taking her deeper into the thicket instead.

There was a moment of hesitation, but her curiosity won out in the end. Following her heart's lead, eventually she stumbled across the yawning stone mouth of a cave, shrouded in thick vines that made it near impossible to spot.

As she stepped inside, a small spark lit up the darkness in front of her, beckoning with its warm glow. It hovered in the air, brightening the way ahead.

Venturing deeper in, she found rows upon rows of carvings and splotches of paint on the tunnel's walls, telling of civilisations long lost to the sands of time.

"What... is this place?" Her voice echoed out into the stillness, but there was only the deafening silence to answer her.

The flickering light ushered her deeper, until she finally saw it.

In a central cavern, a massive hunk of sculpted amber, carved into the shape of a mighty dragon, lay sparkling in the light of her guide.

Carefully, she walked along the thin strip of smooth stone hovering above the still water below, crystal-clear and unfathomably deep. It reflected the sharp, deadly stalactites dripping down from above, and if one were to fall in, she imagined that they would never make it to the surface again.

Reaching the middle, she gazed at the statue in all its magnificence. However, she couldn't help but notice that it looked rather worse for wear, with its chipped scales and dull eyes. Though it was but a work of unmoving art, it was as if she could sense the weariness and despair of the dragon through the lifelike, empty gaze.

All she could do was place a gentle hand on its forehead. It was an action that felt inherently right and somehow sorrowful, as if the hollowness of the heavenly creature's rendition had passed it on.

All of a sudden, she found herself surrounded by vivid memories of her childhood, her mind pinpointing the time her mother told her a story both beautiful and saddening.

...scales that shone like gold, eyes that gleamed like jade...

...blessed with creativity...

...faded from memory...

...powerless.

With a rumble that shook the very earth itself, the statue started to crack open in front of her very eyes. Scrambling backwards, she looked for a way out in case the cave collapsed— but then, she realised that she need not fear.

Around her body, a slender dome formed, thin as silk yet resilient as diamonds. Stunned, all she could do was shield her eyes from the blinding glare.

When the dust settled, she cracked an eye open, only to find the dragon's sculpture, faded but glorious still, had come alive.

"You know my story," came its rumbling voice. "You've saved me, at least for a second."

Gaping like a fish out of water, the girl was rendered speechless, falling to her knees.

"Alas, I cannot remain in the mortal world for long. I sense the desire to create hidden in you."

Tethered to the Earth only by the girl's consciousness, he continued.

"Please, tell my story for me, won't you? Keep my spirit alive, so that one day I may return to see the people flourish once again..."

The dragon could bear the strain no longer, and soon became a smattering of yellow dust, carried away by a sudden breeze from nowhere.

Still in shock, what could she do except honor the dragon's dying wish?

She returned to the village, and time flew by. Eventually, she became the storyteller of the village, enchanting adults and children alike with her tales of heroes and monsters— but most of all...

"Miss! Tell us the story of the dragon again!"

The young woman grinned.

"Listen closely now. Long before we were here, there once lived a dragon..."

Somewhere far off in the clouds, a shimmer of gold snaked through the sky, twirling in delight.

To Paint the Sky

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Kwok, Sze Yat Vanessa – 14

Up top amongst the highest peaks, lives the artists who paint the skies.

Fairy tales sound stupid as soon as you grow out of your childhood. Or, well, when you're dumped out of your household and have nowhere to go. Han lets out a sigh, aware of his current situation. All he had was a rusty, dim oil lamp, and his ragged bag that carried a couple of his art supplies. Nothing else.

Slowly, the youth dragged himself up the uneven cobblestone steps carefully. He peers over his shoulders, and down onto the small village he has lived all his life. The lighting of the houses, which once gave him warmth, seemed as if making fun of his loneliness. Perhaps he could run back, and beg for his family to keep him. Perhaps he could give up his artistic dreams, and become a doctor, just as his father intended him to. Perhaps he would've done that if life was a fairytale, living happily ever after.

But as soon as his father shoved him out of the courtyard, he knew he could never turn back. Freedom, but at what cost?

Stop thinking of it, he tells himself. It's over now, you no longer belong.

The higher he goes, the darker the sky is. The darker the sky is, the brighter the stars are. How much he wished he could capture such a scene with his paint! Yet he had to move on. For one thing that he knew, he'd freeze to death if he had not found shelter before midnight arrives.

To where? He stops in his tracks, realizing. To his grandmother's favourite tales? Quite idiotic to believe, but he could only pursue himself to move on this way. He had always believed in her tales, no matter how fantasy-like they sounded, and sworn to never forget them even after her passing.

But the night was catching up. Darkness taunts the fragile flame, which now flickers weakly, about to go off. Han grips the lamp tighter. Please don't go off.

Ironically, it does.

The boy swears under his breath. He has to keep moving. Perhaps there may be an abandoned house near the top. Or even a cave would do good. The glacial winds kissed his cheeks continuously, and he felt his legs tremble like twigs. Squinting his eyes, he peers over his shoulders again. Right below him is the void. One slip, and it's the end of him. His heart beats louder than thunder, faster than a hummingbird's wings.

I can make it, he tells himself, but his legs say otherwise. They've been shaking non-stop, and now, they've lost all their energy. Han makes one last prayer.

He slips.

Something smashes against the back of his skull.

Pitch darkness clouded his vision before he knew it.

The first thing Han wakes up to is white. Must be the afterlife. Without much doubt, he pulled himself up, leaning against a wall behind him. Slowly coming to his senses, he realized. He seemed to be in a bed-room — all the room had was just a bed, a couple of lights, and a door to his left. Confused, he trailed his fingers from his neck to the back of his head, to where it hurt the most when he fell. Strange enough, it felt of... nothing. As if there were no injuries at all. Brushed down to his calves. The lanceolate leaves on the hill should've at least scratched him slightly, but there were no injuries at all.

Maybe this is what heaven — or hell, looks like.

“So, you’re up.” A soft but masculine voice interrupts. Shocked to hear a human voice, Han’s panicked to see who was there. His mind still hazy, Han was only able to register a bit of the other individual’s features — pale, lengthy hair, just like an elder’s. Yet his voice sounded as if they had a similar age to his.

His startled face most likely gave him away, as it earned him a chuckle from the stranger.

“Rest. And don’t worry, no one else is here to disturb you.”

Even more worrying. But Han’s dizziness forces him to shut his eyes and return to unconsciousness.

The following days were as troublesome. The boy kept waking up and passing out continuously, and nevertheless, was quite embarrassed for the burden he had brought for Ling, whose name he had learnt through their small conversations when he was awake. Ling was rather ‘simple’ and disliked complexity. However, his drawings were something else.

Ever since Han told the older, he assumed the blonde was older, he had wanted to pursue his dreams of art, Ling was more than delighted to paint in front of him. “Perhaps you could tell me how to improve,” he often said. Nevertheless, it wasn’t necessary. Ling drew the sky. It seemed as if it was the only thing he painted. Every day, every moment, he seemed to be working on a piece. And each piece was spectacular. His usage of colours often amazed Han — how he used so many variations of colours, but managed to make them look realistic, rather than excessive. Those slender fingers worked like magic on the paint board every single time. However, it was a pity that Han’s vision was still blurry, most likely due to the often passing outs.

“It’s alright, you’ll get used to living at such a height soon.” Ling’s kind words soothed the boy’s worry, as their relationship developed from their first conversation. Despite feeling as if the ice between them had melted, Han never dared to ask Ling specific questions. Where were they? Where are the others? Reason? Rather simple. He didn’t want to trigger Ling, and desired to leave as soon as he recovered, unwilling to be the elder’s burden.

That seemed impossible. Although Han had recovered from fainting, he hated to admit it, but he became reliant on Ling. Or rather, obsessed. His artworks often amused him, and his words of empathy, encouragement, sank deep into Han’s heart.

He seemed to be almost perfect.

But for Ling, he knew he wasn’t. He had lost his chance of leaving centuries ago, as soon as a sorcerer gave him what he wished for. To live on as a spirit. To paint the skies. And to be able to make the spirits that have come to him stay. Companions came, just the way Han did, and left as soon as Ling wasn’t able to hide the truth from them. It wasn’t his artwork, it wasn’t his personality, it was his greed that forced them to stay. And he knew he had to tell his ‘companion’ such. And Han, just like the others, would enrage from the truth. Dash to the balcony, dive into the scarlets and the tangerines, and fall into the sunset, into the underworld, gone. Forever. He trembles upon knowing Han’s reaction.

It’s a curse. Immortality only made it worse. Not to mention the pact he had signed with the sorcerer, was unbreakable.

Yet it was useless to say all this, as no one ever accepted his reasoning. And the never would.

Ling’s fists clenched till they were pale, as he looked down onto his crossed legs, knowing that he would not be able to catch the other from falling in time.

Han doesn’t move.

He soon will, Ling tells himself.

In spite of such, no one moves. Nothing moves. The entire world slows down just for them. A white, infinity space, painted with different shades of white.

And suddenly, thousands of neon shades seep into the space. Surprised, Ling attempts to take back his hand, but Han grabs it firmly.

“If you’ve ever thought of me as such a person, then you’re terribly incorrect.” Terrible in the best way.

Night falls. Han gazes down from the balcony, and onto where was once his home. People scurried around, carrying lights, and it was obvious it wasn’t a usual village night. They seem to be carrying a box, as crowds dressed in alabaster gather around it, followed closely by people carrying pearly white objects. He has never seen such a festival before. But it doesn’t matter to him anymore. Here he is, where he should be staying.

“Thinking of returning to them?” Ling’s dulcet voice comes from behind, joining his partner.

“Why would I ever?” the reply comes almost immediately, as the two lock eyes.

They can’t help but laugh in sync, as the paint of the night sky covers the universe.

Legend of A Flower

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Sung, Abigale – 12

Once upon a time, there was a flower. And this flower was one of a kind and said to be the most beautiful flower in the world. It was not like a normal flower, for it created a special kind of nectar that purified every stream and pond in the Yellow Mountains and ran through the ground, making all kinds of plants bloom and grow. It made the mountains the perfect habitat for animals. It was the very heart of the mountains and if any harm ever came to it, the mountains would wilt and wither. Many looked for this flower, but they never found it, until one little girl who discovered the secret of the flower.

In one of the numerous forests that are still to this day rooted upon the earth, there was a small girl, her face covered by so much soot and dirt that it could hardly be told that she was a girl. She was dressed in thin rags that did not do very well against the cold. Her feet were bare and turning blue. Her eyes warily searched her surroundings. Her name was Lin, and she was searching for the legendary flower that was the only cure for her youngest brother's illness, if it was real. Lin had no doubt that it was and clung on to that tiny bit of hope as she wandered around, lost, and afraid, on the verge of freezing.

As Lin walked, she shivered and wrapped her threadbare coat around herself, half to protect her from the frosty cold of winter, half from the terrors she was sure would pop up any moment. The trees loomed ominously over her head, reminding her all the stories the children from her village loved to tell. Lin was sure some horrible creature would pop up and lunge at her, and she would be the meal of a hungry beast.

After trudging for a long time, Lin was forced to sit down and rest. Her feet were scraped and bleeding from the frozen ground, and she was so cold she could barely even turn around to look apprehensively at the rustling leaves behind her. Sitting down and laying her head against the tree, she let fatigue take over her and closed her sleepy eyes.

She dreamed fretfully. She dreamed of her dear grandfather, who had died a few years ago and was the one who told her legends and stories. Everyone else in the village thought him crazy, with the twinkle in his eye and his stories. Lin thought him wonderful. She was, after all, a strange person like her grandfather.

She had no friends, but she was fine with that. The stories were her source of comfort. Lin smiled in her sleep. Then she dreamed of more troubling things. Her stepmother and her siblings, who cared for her as much as they did the dirt that they made her clean every single day. They hated her and blamed her for her father's death. The final straw was when Lin's youngest brother got terribly sick. Lin had made the mistake of bringing up the legend of the flower.

"BE QUIET, YOU FOOL!" Lin's stepmother screamed. "YOUR BROTHER IS DYING AND ALL YOU CARE ABOUT IS YOUR SILLY LEGENDS? IF THIS FLOWER IS THE ONLY CURE, THEN WHY DON'T YOU GO FIND IT?"

Her voice boomed and her siblings gave her baleful glares. Then Lin was thrown out of the house, quite literally, while the sick child wailed and cried.

Lin woke to a wet, and freezing sensation on her body. With a start, she realized it was

snow. It was lying thickly upon her, covering almost half of her body. Everything was white and frosty and would have looked beautiful if Lin weren't on the verge of freezing to death. Then she realized why she was not dead yet. Near her fingers, which were only slightly tinged blue, when they should have been swollen, purple and black from frostbite, was a warmth that Lin remembered, sitting by the fire when she was young, listening to her grandfather tell another one of his stories.

Lin frowned. It was in the middle of winter. How could she still be alive? With great difficulty, she got up. She throbbed and ached, and her joints creaked like old, rusty hinges.

Looking to her left, where she felt the warmth, she gasped.

There was a path of tiny white flowers, untouched by the snow, almost glowing.

It was not much, but Lin felt certain that it would lead her to the flower she was looking for.

Getting up and wincing in pain, she walked along the path of flowers. She was so captivated by the beautiful flowers that she didn't realize that she was in a large, empty meadow. Well. Not empty. There was a... thing in the middle. But Lin didn't see it until it was too late— a blur whipped into her chest and Lin collapsed, gasping for air. All she could see was fur and teeth. Large, extremely sharp teeth bared itself at her and Lin nearly fainted from fear.

She looked up to see red eyes glaring at her, full of anger and hunger.

“W—what are you?” Lin chattered, shivering.

The beast simply growled, putting its paws on her chest.

Why wasn't it attacking yet?

Lin could feel how bony it was. A sudden rush of sympathy burst through the fear that was clouding her thoughts.

Putting one hand on the beast's chest, which caused it to growl louder, Lin breathed deeply.

“I know you need to eat, but I need to save my brother.” Lin pleaded, closing her eyes.

Lin didn't put up a fight. Either way someone would die, the beast or her brother. There was no difference in which she gave a chance to live longer.

The beast curved its jaw, almost smiling, before it dissipated into the wind, turning into only memories.

Lin opened her eyes hesitantly. There was nothing that ever showed that the beast was ever there. Only the faint scent of something indescribable. Sitting up, Lin saw a small flower. The color of the petals were a deep, blood red.

Lin thought it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen— it would save her brother's life. She would have thought it beautiful even if it were ugly to all the other people.

Reaching out her hand for the flower, she hesitated.

In that moment, hundreds of doubts and selfish thoughts rushed into her head.

Then, she breathed deeply, and at once her head cleared. She reached out and plucked it, a terrible feeling in her stomach as she did.

Such a simple act that all the other village kids did all the time. Lin had never picked a flower before that day. She thought the flowers deserved a chance to live longer too.

Now she had killed everything on the mountain. For what?

Shudders ran through the ground, and instantly the grass around where the flower was turned duller.

“I'm sorry,” she sobbed. “I'm so sorry.” A tear dropped to the ground and crystallized, turning into ice. Lin didn't notice, but the tear sank into the ground and the shudders stopped.

She turned around and ran for what seemed like hours, running on adrenaline and sheer determination, and came to her village.

Still trembling, she walked back into her former house.

All was silent. Lin knew that she could not make herself known. All she had to do was feed the flower to her brother. Lin hoped that the flower was small enough that her brother would not choke on it.

She walked into the room that her brother slept in, finding her brother with a wet cloth on his forehead and a thick blanket lying on his tiny, thin frame. Lin's stepmother must have been out doing errands.

Lin woke her brother up, shaking him gently.

"Eat this," she whispered urgently. "You'll feel better."

The poor boy was so feverish he couldn't complain and simply opened his mouth.

Lin dropped the flower in and told her brother to chew before swallowing.

It felt like a long, long time before she saw his throat gulp.

Then his eyes opened wider, and he coughed a few times.

"Lin." he said dreamily.

Lin put my hand to his forehead and felt that the worst was over. His temperature was rapidly cooling and she sighed, looking at the little boy who had slipped back into unconsciousness.

"Sleep tight, little brother." she whispered.

Then Lin crept away.

She stepped out of the house and saw a trail of white flowers, untouched by the snow, almost glowing with warmth, and a tiny seed of hope bloomed in her chest, just like the tear that she had shed when she plucked the flower, shining, waiting for her at the end of the path, with petals the color of gold— the shade of Lin's eyes.

The Ever-Living Potion

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Yu, Hin Wan Ava – 12

“I am getting old,” remarked the Mayor of a small village in China “Life is so good! I wish I can live forever.” The Mayor was wealthy and had always been enjoying his prestigious life. He was worried that he would die one day and lose all that he had. He sat on his splendid armchair for a long while contemplating his own final future. Suddenly, he came up with an excellent idea and possibly the brightest idea he had ever thought of.

“Ah!” the Mayor exclaimed. “I know there is ever-living potion high up in the mountains, but I am not sure which mountain to be exact. I must get it! I must get it by all means!” The Mayor wanted to find the mysterious ever-living potion very badly. He wanted it right away, but he knew it would be unbelievably hard to attain it, there was no way he could do it by himself. So, he decided to make use of the people of the village. He would reward the person who first attained the potion with a huge block of GOLD. He demanded his servants to spread the news to everyone in the village immediately.

When the villagers heard about this news, they were very excited even though they all knew it was tough and dangerous to get the potion. Motivated by the appeal of gold and the uncontrollable greed, many villagers got on their feet. They started the long, challenging journey without thinking much of the consequences. They believed this life-risking adventure would bring the winner a life-changing fortune.

Among these boisterous villagers was a young man named Hou. Hou came from a family that had been living in extreme poverty. Hou was hungry for the reward. He needed the money to feed his family’s empty stomachs and build his family a house. Unlike the other ignorant villagers, he knew where the potion was hidden. Hou had once heard of the story of the ever-living potion from his great grandfather, although this poor starving family had never thought of any man would be brave enough to stay alive endlessly.

Hou headed to the magical mountains, where the potion was hidden. These mountains were covered by thick forests. Some said these mountains were sacred, some said they were cursed. People admired, and avoided, these magical mountains in fear. These magnificent mountains had been standing proudly at where they were in the far rural China for thousands of years. In the midst of these thick forests, there was an amazing place. The grass there was as green as the pharaoh’s emerald, as soft as Chinese silk. The air was filled with the freshness of the nature. Flowers were glowing and blossoming. Birds were singing beautifully. It looked like a tranquil haven. But there was abruptly a very mysterious cave which did not belong to the peace and serenity surrounding. The cave was ugly and was pitch black inside.

Hou knew the potion was inside the cave. Even though his body was shaking involuntarily, he took a deep breath. He told himself that he was the most courageous man in the world. He entered the cave like a fearless warrior. Along the way in the dark and damp cave, he saw a lot of jewelry and treasures spreading all over the ground. He stared at them with his thirsty eyes and grasped many different precious stones and other valuables and squeezed them all in his shabby small bag. Appearing in his mind was the picture of him and his family wearing glamorous clothes, appreciating their glittering jewels happily together. It made his heart smile. .

The fearless warrior kept on walking until the end of the long passage when he heard a loud, horrible voice saying “You shall not pass this gate!”

“You think you can stop me now?” Hou replied bluntly to the voice. He laughed, and climbed above the gate agilely. All in a sudden, there came a loud big ‘B... ANG!’, then it all went pitch black again. Hou’s vision was blurred. He panted and fainted finally.

Hou slowly regained consciousness and found himself locked in an old iron cage. The iron cage was rusty and dirty. Outside of the iron cage, Hou saw many dead human bodies hanging on the tainted stone walls. “Where am I? Am I dead?” Hou was very puzzled and could not recall any of his memory. He looked around nervously and found a weak old man being locked up in another iron cage opposite to his. Hou tried to whisper to the old man and asked “Where am I, sir? What is this?” The old man whispered back “This castle belongs to a wicked grinch. The grinch is the king of this castle. He has a very bad temper and I am afraid we are all going to die.” Hou then asked

“How did you get here?” The old man replied “I have been here for several months. I got locked up in here because I wanted to steal the ever-living potion like you. The potion belongs to the grinch. You and I are now at the grinch’s mercy.” Hearing this, Hou started shivering as if he was standing naked on a frozen lake in Siberia. His throbbing heart was going to explode. He banged and shook very hard the gate of the cage, hoping he could escape from the cage and get out of this dreadful place. But before he managed to escape, he woke up the grinch from his deep sleep.

Heavy footsteps echoed along the walls and the evil, furious grinch came. “What are you poor little fool doing?!” The grinch shouted at Hou in his deep, coarse voice. Hou quickly returned to his original position. The grinch stared at Hou opening his big stinky mouth showing his sharp yellow teeth, as if he was ready to eat Hou. Suddenly, Hou heard some noises coming from the other end of the chambers. Hou listened carefully, IT WAS HIS FAMILY! Hou tried to squeeze out of the cage to go to his parents. His body hurt a bit but it was worth a try. He really missed his parents.

“Mother, Father!” cried Hou. “How did you get here?”

“Hou!” Hou’s mother and father both screamed hard, “The grinch demanded two of his subordinates to kidnapped us from the village, and he brought us here. Why are you here Hou...”, before they could even finish their sentence, the angry grinch came and forcefully pulled Hou away.

“Mother, Father! Help me please!” Hou screamed. The grinch looked at Hou scornfully and spoke to him in a very low and creepy voice, “Let’s have a deal. If you want to get out of this cage and this castle, your family will have to die. If you want your family to be safe and leave here, you will have to die. You can think about this before I change my mind.”

Hou did not want to die, but at the same time he wanted his family to be safe. Hou sat alone and sobbed helplessly. He regretted. He regretted very much! He looked at the dead bodies outside of his cage. He did not want to be one of them. Neither did he want his father nor mother to be one of them. Hou was fighting with himself. He murmured to himself, “My parents would not be here if I did not come.” Hou popped his head out through the gap of the gate to check on his parents. Sadly, he failed. He did not see his parents.

An hour passed, the grinch was stomping through the hallway back to Hou. Hou stood up bravely and said “Let my parents go and I will stay here. You can kill me, but remember your promise. You have promised me to let my parents out of here if I give you my life. I will never let you hurt them.” Hou then shouted one last time to his beloved parents whom he believed were at the other far end, “Mother, Father. Quick! Please go home right now! Please stay safe. You won’t be caught by the grinch if I was with you at home. It’s all my fault. Goodbye Mother! Goodbye Father! I love you!” Hou’s parents were shocked and deeply saddened. They tried to run towards Hou but they were tied by heavy chains. Tears came running down their cheeks and their beloved son’s cheeks.

The grinch was waiting for Hou by his long dining table. The wicked grinch opened his mouth greedily and made a big bite with his sharp teeth on Hou’s trunk. Hou screamed miserably and hopelessly. He was in great pain. He screamed until his last breath. Before he closed his eyes eternally, the ever-living potion eventually appeared in front of him, on the grinch’s dining table.

It was life risking... It was life changing...

Wonderland

Marymount Secondary School, Ng, Cherie – 12

I hadn't done enough homework to understand how hazardous the Celestial Capital Peak was. As a seasoned backpacker from the City that Never Sleeps, I didn't need a tour guide whose accented English I wouldn't understand anyway. But thanks to my severe lack of coordination, my blonde hair and blue eyes weren't the only thing separating me from the crowd – I felt like a fish out of water, and I hated standing out.

I stared enviously at the local tourists boarding the gondola lifts, wincing at my aching muscles. Soon I was holding an internal debate, with the motion being whether I should head back to the mountain base and rethink my route. I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists, determined to reach my final destination without help from aerial transportation. I believed firmly in the quote “dreams don't work unless you do”, and my dream was only...1313 metres away.

I was a college student majoring in classical languages, and I'd spent hours in Literary Chinese class daydreaming about Huangshan. It was common knowledge that not even the most skilled photographer could encapsulate the mysticality of nature, but images taken of the Yellow Mountains at sunset were the definition of breathtaking. The sky would become a palette of rich and varied colours at 5 o'clock, blending together to create a serenely beautiful skyline.

Banishing all my fantasies of the resplendent horizon, I drew myself back to reality. The fog had turned Huangshan into a brilliant white page, obscuring my sight until I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Suddenly, my foot was unable to locate solid ground and my surroundings blurred like a poorly shot action photograph. I braced myself for my head colliding hard rock, but no such impact occurred.

I was falling into eternal blackness, and the infinite depth of the hole made me feel small and insignificant. A strange sense of calamity dulled my senses, my “fight-or-flight” instinct abandoning me completely. I was going to die as a cliché – Alice falling down the rabbit hole. I blamed my mother for my sudden death, which could've been evitable if she'd enrolled me in ballet classes when I was a child.

One moment I was falling through a dark abyss, and then I was lying on a soft bed of autumn leaves as speckles of red, orange and yellow were delicately blown off tree branches, fluttering down to the ground like colourful rain.

My knuckles scraped the earthen floor as I cast my eyes forward. The silence was so deep I became conscious of every breath I took, and soon my own steady rhythm coming from within could be heard. The silence caressed my skin like a fall breeze, smoothening my soul, taking away my jagged edges. Huangshan was beautiful, but it lacked the quietude and repose I so desperately needed. The perspiring delivery men dressed in torn undershirts hauling food up the mountain ruined the “haven of tranquility” vibes.

I quietly surveyed my surroundings—the sunlight was cascading down a gap of clouds into a lake that could've been mistaken for a mirror. In reflective blues and greens, it brought its own artistic watercolour effect to the daytime. I wondered if all bodies of water were this pure before human pollution contaminated wildlife. I'd always wanted to bathe in cliffside pools, to feel the saline water rush over my skin and lashes.

I impulsively decided to make my way down to the lake, navigating past the boulders covered with moss and lichen. I expected my gracelessness to resurface any second, but there wasn't a single minor disturbance on the mountain path. No jagged rocks stood out and threatened to send me stumbling, no pinecones spontaneously detached themselves from the conifer trees to grant me a minor concussion. This alternate reality was as perfect as a fairytale.

Maybe I had more in common with Alice than I'd thought—we'd both discovered Wonderland.

I passed cave mouths leading into impenetrable tenebrosity I normally would have investigated, but the only one obsessive thought in my mind was diving into the tiny glass pieces that formed the crystal-clear lake. I barely noticed when nightfall came with a whisper of black accompanied by a comforting chorus of stars. I found the darkness strange—in New York City, light pollution ensured that there my bedroom was always illuminated by a billboard advertisement.

I approached the lake with the same mannerisms a child would have when approaching a candy store—completely blind and oblivious to the dangers and risks the uncommonly clear water brought. The stars that glistened and shone in the heavens were dull in comparison to the mother of the sky—because the moon in its deep silver was a phenomenon.

The lethally dark water had lost its turquoise to the night, but in the moonlight the ripples twisted. I stared at my own reflection; the edges of my face slightly ruffled where the wind blew on the water. Startled by the clarity of the image, I made a mistake gazing into the water for a second too long.

All of a sudden, my reflection dissolved into broken and irregular memories that began to materialize in the water. It was as if the lake had switched to the “home movie channel”, and flashbacks rippled across the surface of nature’s only projection screen. Echoes of those I’d loved, broken promises which used to haunt my sleepless nights...nostalgia came down on me like an avalanche as my most intimate feelings surfaced.

Words like ambition, longing, reminisce would be defined differently by every individual, but the lake seemed to know my demons inside out. I dipped my fingers into the water as I watched it caress my hand coolly, eddying in its wake. My fingertips dripped with the transparent and opaque water as the images intensified into high-resolution, 4D pictures.

Fate was the last page of everyone’s story, and knowing your own was enough to make you a lunatic. With each fragment of my destiny disclosed to me, my subconscious craved for more information. The burning sensation the water produced numbed my hand, as if flames were licking my skin and scorching my flesh. But shards of my future only uncovered themselves to me when I made physical contact with the water, and I was so tempted...

I let myself drown.

Drowning, in movies, was a dramatic act and a vociferous dogfight where the main character fought tooth and nail to evade death. But my arms flailed against the icy water that stole heat from every inch of my skin, bringing me dangerously close to hypothermia. My body was begging for air, and I could feel my consciousness faltering as my vision began to blur. Clawing through the liquid that threatened to invade my lungs, my lack of oxygen sent jets of pain through my body.

Drowning was a silent battle, but I wasn’t going to suffocate in my hopes and dreams before I had the chance to make them come true. But I could barely form a coherent thought when the crescent moon became visible to me one last time—mere seconds before I was enveloped by the indigo water once more.

A sense of weightlessness numbed all my senses instead, followed by the darkness that lures you into the depths of unconsciousness inevitable landing becomes. I was no neurosurgeon, but I did know that the brain could block traumatising memories in a process called dissociation. While I would be able to recite my encounter with the lake to my grandchildren decades later, I was spared the agony of staying conscious during the fall that drew me back to reality.

I was sitting on a boulder, and the fanny-pack wielding Russian tourists next to me confirmed that I was standing on the summit of present-day Huangshan. He strode forward with a brisk pace. Others stared at the strange man in his tattered brown cloak and straw hat as he strode down the stone path to the tram station. A wild unkempt mop of hair that vaguely resembles vines stretched down the length of his neck. His boots looked as if they were made of leather at first glance, but the sound that it gave as the material collided with the uneven stone slabs led most to believe otherwise, several objects of odd shapes and sizes have peeked out of the shaggy piece of clothing, among them what looks like parts of medieval weaponry.

An oddity.

The braver member of a group of rowdy teens pipes up “Sir, I’ll give you 5 jiao if you do Kung Fu!” The group roared with laughter. “That is, if you know what a jiao is!” He added.

“Fools.”

No one could locate the origin of the sound. It emerged, as quick as an arrow from a Mongol’s bow, and was blown away by the chilling mountain breeze. Did they hear him speak? Or did he not speak at all?

When they turned their eyes back upon him, he had already disappeared, like the word he might not have muttered.

Rain beat down in the small Pavilion, mother and son rushed up the steps on the final ascend to the sanctuary.

The mother's rapid breathing slows down, similar to how an eagle slows when he descends to it's perch.

“Ohh, my socks are drenched. I told daddy that this was a bad idea. How easy for him to say that we can just climb the mountain on such a day!”

“But mother” The younger of the two piped up. “The forecast said that it would be a sunny day.”

“Well, the gods must be against us. Curse the weather. At least we have the pavilion to ourselves.”

“Don’t be so sure of that.” A deep voice muttered.

Both mother and son jumped at the apparition of a third being.

“Oh, sorry, uh, sir. Didn’t, eh, didn’t spot you there.”

A man in his dirty umber garment nodded slightly at the remark. “You wouldn’t spot me if I didn’t want you to.”

“Uh, um. Yeah.” There was an awkward pause. “So what are you doing in these parts?” The mother added cheerfully.

“Which part do you mean?” The man asked.

“Pardon?”

“Which part do you mean? Saying “these parts” makes your question vague and confusing.”

The mother was taken aback by this response to her friendly question.

“Uh, I was just trying to, you know? Strike up conversation?”

The man reached under his hat, pulling down a blood red bandanna. With his other hand he retrieved a canteen.

“To answer your question, I’m resting from my travels. Has it occurred to you that one might not want to engage in conversation?”

The mother's face flushed with a shade of pink, reminding the man of the blossoming flowers in the world of Katharia.

“I’m sorry sir, but as a mother I would expect more respect coming from the members of society, and that was incredibly rude, I do not know how you expect anyone to tolerate you if you exercise such usage of tone. Which school did you go to, may I ask?”

“Click”, a small flick of a finger sent the cap on a graceful arc that ended in the other hand. He paused to ponder.

“What if I told you I attended Zhan Ver Kanzirium?”

The mother was at a loss.

“I’m sorry, but I have never heard of such a place. And where might that be?”

The man took a swig from the bottle.

The man pointed to the east. "Look yonder, but I suggest you care about your child over the education of others."

The mother turned toward the east, only to notice that his son was no longer behind him.

"Wha— How— Why—" She turned back in fright.

Another swig, and the cap was reunited with the bottle.

The man smirked. "Beware of the Shen."

The mother turned back again. The next time she set eyes on the man, she only saw the caw of an eagle taking flight.

The word "Xeno" is of a Greek origin often combined with other words, often meaning "Foreign".

Also "Alien"

And that is precisely the word to describe such a creature.

Its scales dark as the night sky, it's many eyes glowing with a ghostly white light, its Mandible clicking as it crawled towards the man with it's eight squat legs.

The battle was fierce, the blade of the man not being able to pierce the thick hide of the alien creature, twice the man almost met his demise at the snapping pincers of the creature. At the end, a well shot arrow through the throat ended the miserable thing.

The creature turned over to face the sky, perhaps knowing that is where it will go. Embedded in the underside of the creature is the prize.

A glowing crystal the size of a sword hilt. Radiant yellow light flooded the room as soon as the man retrieved the crystal from the beast. So beautiful, yet as he turned it around in his hands, he felt the chipped sides cut into his hand.

Well, not everything is perfect.

With his prize, he made his way into the light.

The figure in the red robe lifted his hood as soon as the first sign of light emerged from the gaping maw. The breeze ruffled his well-set dark beard. The edges of his eyelids creased as he squinted to take a glimpse at the figure he had long awaited.

He sipped from his bowl.

"You did not expect me."

The man in the soiled cloak glanced up, the small yellow crystal flipped multiple times between his fingers.

"Ophiwayln"

Ophiwalyn nodded.

"Tamin."

The 2 men stared at each other as if it would force the other to make themselves scarce.

"How long have you been here?" Tamin demanded.

"For as long as I have waited."

"How did you know I was going to be here?"

Ophiwalyn smiled, he started pacing slowly towards Tamin.

"The fisherman I passed on the way claimed he saw a Eagle of enormous size, I knew that if one had to reach the temple he would have to fly."

Tamin smirked. He moved his hand slowly towards his trusty weapon.

“I ask, dear friend. Do you know what you hold in your hands?”

“I don’t, and I do not intend to find out. No questions asked.”

“You have become quite the mercenary, haven't you?”

Ophiwalyn fixed his gaze on Tamin with the frightening ice blue eyes of his.

“You hold a shard of Etrum, when the ancient hero Hou Yi shot down the 9 rouge solar celestials who threatened to burn the world into ash, their hearts landed in various places on the planet.”

Tamin turned his back on Ophiwalyn.

“And why would I care?”

Ophiwalyn glanced into the distance.

“Though these crystals have reproduced and there are more than 9 of these in the mortal realm, they are still rare. These sentient minerals grant a place of their choosing eternal beauty, as long as it still lies in the area. If you take it away...”

“It will lose it’s magic.”

“Precisely. The one that drew all the ancients to this place.”

Tamin turned to look at Ophiwalyn

“And why would I care?”

“For beauty? For the world? For old times sake? I see that you no longer cast spells.”

His hands were scorched from the times his firebolts failed to launch. At this moment he glanced at his hands.

“I have seen... Horrors. Magic is a plague. If it was not developed by Franklin we would have spared millions of lives.”

“But it has been developed, and now we have to live with it. Do not regret.”

“That I cannot do. But I know I won’t regret this.”

Tamin thrust his hand towards Ophiwalyn, hoping to pierce him, ending the encounter.

But Ophiwalyn was not there.

“You have grown in power, and so have I. You cannot hope to defeat the hero who rescued Snakeskin valley.”

With a yell, Tamin threw himself onto Ophiwalyn, swinging with his word in backhand grasp, each blow Ophiwalyn dodged.

Tamin grunted. “You might be right, I used to be able to beat you in hand to hand combat all the time. Maybe I have gone out of shape.”

Ophiwalyn smiled thinly at the comment

“But” Tamin added. “Rocks can still kill you.”

He shot an arrow at the boulders above Ophiwalyn, sending them hurtling down upon him.

Ophiwalyn threw his hands towards the sky, a green shield of interlocking lines sprung from them. The weight, however, was overwhelming, Ophiwalyn squinted at Tamin

“What is the purpose of the crystal, Tamin? Why kill your brother for it?”

Tamin looked back. “Magic is a plague, and I am the cure.”

With every step he took, the mountains started greying.

The one thing I'd been dreaming of had slipped through my fingers... My thoughts became a hurricane and adrenaline coursed through my veins, generating more panic than energy. My head was pounding and my heart was hammering in my chest. The panic attack was stealing every morsel of control I'd previously had over my own body, and I wasn't able to regulate my breathing until a single thought entered my mind.

Sometimes we are taken into troubled waters not to drown, but to be cleansed.

The familiar thirst for adventure and beauty made my skin tingle and the constellations, each secretly holding its own legend, drew my eyes to the heavens. Nobody on Facebook had mentioned how mesmerizing the Celestial Capital Peak was at night, but I soon became obsessed with its consistency—it would fade in dawn's first light with the promise to return twelve hours later.

And I could swear the moon was a slender crescent.

China's Magical Mountains

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Tin Yan Ian – 14

He strode forward with a brisk pace. Others stared at the strange man in his tattered brown cloak and straw hat as he strode down the stone path to the tram station. A wild unkempt mop of hair that vaguely resembles vines stretched down the length of his neck. His boots looked as if they were made of leather at first glance, but the sound that it gave as the material collided with the uneven stone slabs led most to believe otherwise, several objects of odd shapes and sizes have peeked out of the shaggy piece of clothing, among them what looks like parts of medieval weaponry.

An oddity.

The braver member of a group of rowdy teens pipes up “Sir, I’ll give you 5 jiao if you do Kung Fu!” The group roared with laughter. “That is, if you know what a jiao is!” He added.

“Fools.”

No one could locate the origin of the sound. It emerged, as quick as an arrow from a Mongol’s bow, and was blown away by the chilling mountain breeze. Did they hear him speak? Or did he not speak at all?

When they turned their eyes back upon him, he had already disappeared, like the word he might not have muttered.

Rain beat down in the small Pavilion, mother and son rushed up the steps on the final ascend to the sanctuary.

The mother's rapid breathing slows down, similar to how an eagle slows when he descends to its perch.

“Ohh, my socks are drenched. I told daddy that this was a bad idea. How easy for him to say that we can just climb the mountain on such a day!”

“But mother” The younger of the two piped up. “The forecast said that it would be a sunny day.”

“Well, the gods must be against us. Curse the weather. At least we have the pavilion to ourselves.”

“Don’t be so sure of that.” A deep voice muttered.

Both mother and son jumped at the apparition of a third being.

“Oh, sorry, uh, sir. Didn’t, eh, didn’t spot you there.”

A man in his dirty umber garment nodded slightly at the remark. “You wouldn’t spot me if I didn’t want you to.”

“Uh, um. Yeah.” There was an awkward pause. “So what are you doing in these parts?” The mother added cheerfully.

“Which part do you mean?” The man asked.

“Pardon?”

“Which part do you mean? Saying “these parts” makes your question vague and confusing.”

The mother was taken aback by this response to her friendly question.

“Uh, I was just trying to, you know? Strike up conversation?”

The man reached under his hat, pulling down a blood red bandanna. With his other hand he retrieved a canteen.

“To answer your question, I’m resting from my travels. Has it occurred to you that one might not want to engage in conversation?”

The mother's face flushed with a shade of pink, reminding the man of the blossoming flowers in the world of Katharia.

"I'm sorry sir, but as a mother I would expect more respect coming from the members of society, and that was incredibly rude, I do not know how you expect anyone to tolerate you if you exercise such usage of tone. Which school did you go to, may I ask?"

"Click", a small flick of a finger sent the cap on a graceful arc that ended in the other hand. He paused to ponder.

"What if I told you I attended Zhan Ver Kanzirium?"

The mother was at a loss.

"I'm sorry, but I have never heard of such a place. And where might that be?"

The man took a swig from the bottle.

The man pointed to the east. "Look yonder, but I suggest you care about your child over the education of others."

The mother turned toward the east, only to notice that his son was no longer behind him.

"Wha- How- Why-" She turned back in fright.

Another swig, and the cap was reunited with the bottle.

The man smirked. "Beware of the Shen."

The mother turned back again. The next time she set eyes on the man, she only saw the caw of an eagle taking flight.

The word "Xeno" is of a Greek origin often combined with other words, often meaning "Foreign".

Also "Alien"

And that is precisely the word to describe such a creature.

Its scales dark as the night sky, its many eyes glowing with a ghostly white light, its Mandible clicking as it crawled towards the man with its eight squat legs.

The battle was fierce, the blade of the man not being able to pierce the thick hide of the alien creature, twice the man almost met his demise at the snapping pincers of the creature. At the end, a well shot arrow through the throat ended the miserable thing.

The creature turned over to face the sky, perhaps knowing that is where it will go. Embedded in the underside of the creature is the prize.

A glowing crystal the size of a sword hilt. Radiant yellow light flooded the room as soon as the man retrieved the crystal from the beast. So beautiful, yet as he turned it around in his hands, he felt the chipped sides cut into his hand.

Well, not everything is perfect.

With his prize, he made his way into the light.

The figure in the red robe lifted his hood as soon as the first sign of light emerged from the gaping maw. The breeze ruffled his well-set dark beard. The edges of his eyelids creased as he squinted to take a glimpse at the figure he had long awaited.

He sipped from his bowl.

"You did not expect me."

The man in the soiled cloak glanced up, the small yellow crystal flipped multiple times between his fingers.

"Ophiwayln"

Ophiwalyn nodded.

“Tamin.”

The 2 men stared at each other as if it would force the other to make themselves scarce.

“How long have you been here?” Tamin demanded.

“For as long as I have waited.”

“How did you know I was going to be here?”

Ophiwalyn smiled, he started pacing slowly towards Tamin.

“The fisherman I passed on the way claimed he saw a Eagle of enormous size, I knew that if one had to reach the temple he would have to fly.”

Tamin smirked. He moved his hand slowly towards his trusty weapon.

“I ask, dear friend. Do you know what you hold in your hands?”

“I don’t, and I do not intend to find out. No questions asked.”

“You have become quite the mercenary, haven't you?”

Ophiwalyn fixed his gaze on Tamin with the frightening ice blue eyes of his.

“You hold a shard of Etrum, when the ancient hero Hou Yi shot down the 9 rouge solar celestials who threatened to burn the world into ash, their hearts landed in various places on the planet.”

Tamin turned his back on Ophiwalyn.

“And why would I care?”

Ophiwalyn glanced into the distance.

“Though these crystals have reproduced and there are more than 9 of these in the mortal realm, they are still rare. These sentient minerals grant a place of their choosing eternal beauty, as long as it still lies in the area. If you take it away...”

“It will lose it’s magic.”

“Precisely. The one that drew all the ancients to this place.”

Tamin turned to look at Ophiwalyn

“And why would I care?”

“For beauty? For the world? For old times sake? I see that you no longer cast spells.”

His hands were scorched from the times his firebolts failed to launch. At this moment he glanced at his hands.

“I have seen... Horrors. Magic is a plague. If it was not developed by Franklin we would have spared millions of lives.”

“But it has been developed, and now we have to live with it. Do not regret.”

“That I cannot do. But I know I won’t regret this.”

Tamin thrust his hand towards Ophiwalyn, hoping to pierce him, ending the encounter.

But Ophiwalyn was not there.

“You have grown in power, and so have I. You cannot hope to defeat the hero who rescued Snakeskin valley.”

With a yell, Tamin threw himself onto Ophiwalyn, swinging with his word in backhand grasp, each blow Ophiwalny dodged.

Tamin grunted. "You might be right, I used to be able to beat you in hand to hand combat all the time. Maybe I have gone out of shape."

Ophiwalyn smiled thinly at the comment

"But" Tamin added. "Rocks can still kill you."

He shot an arrow at the boulders above Ophiwalyn, sending them hurtling down upon him.

Ophiwalyn threw his hands towards the sky, a green shield of interlocking lines sprung from them. The weight, however, was overwhelming, Ophiwalyn squinted at Tamin

"What is the purpose of the crystal, Tamin? Why kill your brother for it?"

Tamin looked back. "Magic is a plague, and I am the cure."

With every step he took, the mountains started greying.

The Tale of the Yellow Mountains

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Fong, Tsz Yan Anson – 12

The Yellow Mountains weren't always as spellbinding as they are now. Before, these mountains were merely hills covered in flourishing flowers in spring, lush leaves in summer, and a fine sheen of snow in the chilly winter. Beautiful scenery that made the Yellow Mountains a rare jewel to see, and the subject of almost every Chinese poet.

The Yellow Mountains' beauty back then didn't reach half of the magnificence that they radiate now.

Something changed the Yellow mountains forever – enhanced their beauty until the luxurious green landscape was covered with evergreen pines that stood strong, guarding the mountains; and mysterious and magical fog that twisted and twined around everything, shrouding the peak of the mountain in a cloak of mystery. Even now, every blade of grass, every colourful flower, and every creature that grows on the mountains have an otherworldly sheen to them, glowing with life and longing and love.

How did this happen?

It was said to have begun when the famous poet Li Bai had a daughter. She was born crying and kicking; with wide, soulful eyes that glowed with innocent curiosity. Her mother, Li Bai's wife, held her daughter with complete and utter adoration, the corners of her mouth tilting up in beautiful symmetry.

She didn't notice the small fox creeping beside where she lay, expression shaped in a surprisingly human – like smile as it closed its eyes and concentrated.

The child in her mother's arms slowly stopped crying. The innocent glow of her doe-like eyes was replaced with a hawk-like gaze of intelligence, her mouth curving in a smile that was eerily similar to the one of the fox's. Below her, the fox collapsed to the ground, dead.

The mother realized with horror what had happened immediately – her child was now a *huli jing*, an uncannily gorgeous female that carried the soul of a fox. *Huli jing* were known for seducing men and stirring up trouble, an absolute bad omen. Horrified and disgusted, Li Bai's wife raised her daughter – named Eris – as if she was a stranger to her and nothing else.

Eris's bewitching beauty grew by every passing year. She had turned out to be devastatingly gorgeous even by the standards of *huli jing*, with raven hair soft as silk, eyes sparkling and framed with long, thick lashes, lips delicate and red as rosebuds, with a smooth and musical voice that would bring any man to his knees. As soon as Eris was of marriageable age, her mother matched her hastily with a random suitor, who agreed to the marriage as soon as he set eyes on Eris. Eris' mother sent her away hurriedly, liking nothing more than to not see her daughter ever again.

Young Eris thought this was it for her – being married to a common man and living an uneventful and normal life. However, her beauty was so dazzling she managed to catch the eye of the Imperial Emperor of China as he paraded through the city. *What a beautiful woman*, the Emperor thought, and he ordered for Eris to be brought to his palace immediately. Eris' husband-to-be was left standing alone by himself, disappointed and dejected.

The Emperor grew smitten with the elegant and gorgeous Eris right away; and made her his queen within a day of meeting her. Eris gradually came to love the playful and charming Emperor. She was different from other *huli jing* – she had no intention of seducing the Emperor, and she loved the Emperor with all her heart.

However, as the Emperor proudly paraded Eris around China, his general An Lushan took notice of Eris' ethereal beauty. Eris noticed this and took advantage of this fact to charm An Lushan further, attempting to secure his loyalty to the Emperor. *If An Lushan supports me, he will support my husband the Emperor*, she thought.

As the days went by, Eris wore her *huli jing* charm like a crown, increasing the fluidity and elegance of her movements and transforming her voice to a regal and imposing tone. She wanted An Lushan to see her as a strong and proper queen, and support the Imperial family's rule. But her plan backfired. Eris' charm was so intense that An Lushan fell in love with Eris, sparking jealousy towards the Emperor.

The Emperor, of course, noticed this and attempted to lower An Lushan's position. An Lushan was a great general and the Emperor didn't want to lose him. He thought his decree would keep An Lushan away from Eris and let the general calm down. But An Lushan's hatred towards the Emperor had been festering for a long time. He was jealous of the Emperor's power and jealous that Eris belonged to the Emperor. He resented the Emperor for trying to lower his position. He would not sit there and let the Emperor take his power! Infuriated, he raised an army and started a rebellion. The Emperor, raging from betrayal, gathered the soldiers loyal to him and met An Lushan on the battlefield.

Bloody battles took place as the rebels clashed with the Emperor's soldiers. Men died, and their decapitated and broken bodies lay limp on the battlefield, their wide eyes unseeing, blood drenching the ground as rapidly as rain pouring down from the sky. It was utter and absolute chaos.

Meanwhile, the Jade Emperor – the supreme ruler of heaven – was watching the bloody battles on Earth unfold. He was furious that the people had let mayhem reign, all for something as inconsequential as a woman! Burning with rage, he blazed down to Earth like a comet from the sky.

As the Jade Emperor reached Earth, he demanded that Eris lose her human form and her spirit be banished forever to her birthplace – the Yellow Mountains. Eris' spirit would live there forever in isolation, unable to interact or affect anyone ever again. But the Emperor pleaded for his lover's life desperately, and finally, the Jade Emperor took pity on him. The Emperor's spirit was turned into a dragon – the symbol of an Emperor – upon his death, his spirit destined to roam the mountains forever together with his lover.

As the days passed on, the Yellow Mountains grew more spellbinding than ever, as *huli jing* Eris' essence soaked into the land and enhanced it with beauty as gorgeous as Eris herself. Poets wrote of the lush grass on the Yellow Mountains that is as silky as Eris' hair; the spring wind that is as soft and gentle as a lover's caress, the elegant pine trees standing tall and proud; the stone steps that lead up the mountain, holding lingering memories of people who once set foot on them. Storytellers wrote of the translucent spirit of the Dragon passing through undiscovered mountain caves breathing mist and clouds of smoke, shrouding the mountain in a veil of magical mystery, forever staying close to his one true love.

Since then generations and generations have passed, and the people who once witnessed the great Anshi battle and the exact events of what happened are no longer on the face of this earth, the story long since faded and forgotten. We gaze curiously at the Yellow Mountains shrouded in fog and mystery, and wonder how the ethereal beauty of the Yellow Mountains came to be. We wonder why so many Chinese stories and poems feature dragons living in secret mountain caves, and search for hints of the ancient secrets the Yellow Mountains hold. *Why do these mountains feel so magical and unearthly? We wonder.*

Now, in a place far, far away from the setting of this mysterious tale, a 6-year old boy clutched a wrinkled, yellowed piece of paper at his grandpa's funeral.

The Yellow Mountains weren't always as spellbinding as they are now...

He read, again and again, the words on the paper written in his grandpa's curving handwriting, and smiled softly every time he got to the end.

No one knows what really happened to this pair of lovers after their banishment... But after all, stories don't really need an exact ending, do they? Some things are better off left to flourish in our own imagination.

"You're right, Grandpa." Tipping his head up, the little boy gazed up at the setting sun, and proceeded to imagine the wonderful life his Grandpa was now living, in another, better, world.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Ng, Chi Ching Isabella – 11

In the morning, the sun winked in the sky. It was a beautiful day, with a light breeze that caressed your cheeks. In the skies above the Yellow Mountains, a place of tranquility, the Jade Emperor sat on his golden throne, his beloved dragon, Yi Hua, close by. Ne Zha was reciting strategies, trying to concentrate on his scrolls as the breeze wafted around him, bringing pictures of skies—as a sound like thunder blasted him out of his reverie—the horns of war. The skies rumbled and the clouds morphed into black. The skies turned dark, filling with thunder and blinding flashes. The wind whipped fiercely, howling and no longer blowing leisurely. Then the dragon came.

The dragon was called Hei Ye. He was black, like coal, yet somehow much darker. It was the colour of a black, dreary night, the ones that brought a sense of hopelessness. Hei Ye roared. It was a real one, the type of roar that struck despair in warriors, the ones that made the flowers wither, the birds drop down dead, and the grass shiver. His breath was the smell of rotten fruit, sickly sweet with the aura of death. On his spiked back, a similar black-clad warrior sat in a dark saddle. His face was covered by a black helmet and he carried a gleaming sword. Their entire look emitted power and signs of evil at its work.

Ne Zha sensed a feeling of uneasiness welling up inside him, his instincts confirmed as the black dragon slithered like a great, horrible serpent towards the Jade Emperor. Although Yi Hua was a formidable enemy, Ne Zha grabbed his sword and prepared himself to face whatever danger came—just in case. When he entered—and hid himself—the black-clad warrior took off his helmet, saying in a shivery voice, “I am Ye Hui, the rider of Hei Ye. Remember me, Emperor?” He slid down the dragon with ease, a stiff, chilling smile on his face, yet his eyes seemed blank. At his words, Yi Hua sniffed and growled uneasily. He continued without any emotion, “I am here, as you may know, to issue a proposal. What I want is just a small little favour—your power. Give it to me, and you shall live in peace, avoiding your destruction and downfall. As of tradition, it is a shame that I can only receive your throne if you allow it, and I really can’t take it by force—unless I win you in battle—so I’ll bring an army to your palace tomorrow, if there are any disagreements. After all, your enchantments are unbeatable.” His grin now seemed like a predator waiting to pounce on its prey, knowing it couldn’t escape. The Jade Emperor’s face grew ashen, though he stood up and managed to speak in a powerful voice. “Never! You should have known better.” He said. His refusal seemed to vibrate in the room. “Your choice, Emperor, your choice.” replied Ye Hui, as he mounted his dragon somewhat awkwardly and flew away, becoming a tiny black speck in the distance.

As soon as Ye Hui and Hei Ye left, the Jade Emperor immediately sagged against his throne. Ne Zha, who had been watching the whole scene, slipped in front of the Emperor and helped him to his seat. “Thank you,” he said. “Ye Hui is not a person to be reckoned with. Once the kindest scholar in my palace, he became power-hungry when Hei Ye came into his service. We have to make arrangements for battle today.” The Jade Emperor’s voice was grim. “I’ll make the plans.” Ne Zha replied.

He set to work, quickly ordering the commanders to prepare for war. Soon, their men were geared up and ready for battle. Ne Zha stood on a platform, gazing down at the millions of soldiers below. He shouted in a ringing voice, “My brothers, let us go to war! We shall not fail our lord. We will win this battle, so take heart and let us be ready!” The warriors yelled in response.

Night fell, and the sky turned a wistful black. The soldiers were awaiting their orders on the peak of the Yellow Mountain when a tremendous gong blasted out loud. Ye Hui had come.

“Quick! Go to the battlements!”

“Prepare for war!”

A wave of panicked voices washed over Ne Zha.. Just then, the Emperor’s booming voice rang out. “My friends, the time has come for battle. Show your strength and courage, and when you fall in this bloody war I promise that the skies will remember you forever. To me!” The soldiers—some rushed down the mountain to fight, others protected

the Emperor— fought valiantly, although Ne Zha noticed that they were outnumbered. The five million soldiers they had brought were nearly no match for Ye Hei's soldiers, for he had twice the manpower. They were quickly losing heart as they were swamped by a seemingly infinite amount of enemies, and some surrendered. Blood mixed into the soil, running down in rivulets as swords clashed against each other. Men lay with their last breath on the reddened ground with horses trampling past their mangled bodies. Deadly wounds were inflicted, brothers and friends were lost, and lives were taken each passing minute. Ne Zha was growing more desperate as his comrades were lost, his side losing far more soldiers than the other. When he thought it couldn't get any more worse— this was by far his bloodiest battle— Ye Hei appeared right in front of him, bringing in Hei Ye with all his malevolent force.

Without warning, Hei Ye blew a flame of bright fire at him. He dodged right in time, letting the flame burn his spear into a pool of molten steel instead—he quickly let go. The black dragon looked satisfied at this. A white, pearly shape swooped down from the sky— it was Yi Hua! Ne Zha leaped onto her back as Ye Hei muttered a string of colourful words, clambering on Hei Ye as well. They took off into the sky. From above, the light-posts were gleaming like thousands of scattered stars. Just then, a blaze, blasted from behind, nearly missed him again. He commanded Yi Hua to turn around in circles, dazzling Hei Ye and blowing a burst of fire at him. Ne Zha was rewarded with a yelp of surprise as he singed the tail of the black dragon. Yi Hua flew underneath Hei Ye, scorching his underbelly as he ducked away and swiped at Yi Hua's hind leg. A trail of blood appeared. Enraged, Ne Zha took his shortsword hidden in his belt as Yi Hua swooped against Hei Ye, and slashed a gash across his side. Hei Ye howled and turned away. He scorched the hair on Ne Zha's head, but when Yi Hua flew under the black dragon again, Ye Hei swung his arm over the side and raked his sword on her belly just as Ne Zha drove his sword deep into Hei Ye's chest. A fountain of blood sprayed onto them, they spiraled lower and lower, and followed the now unconscious dragon that fell out of the sky.

They landed with an enormous crash, upsetting plants and flowers and creating a trench in the mud. Ye Hei dismounted with a befuddled expression. Ne Zha caught the dark warrior as he fell and asked, "Where am I?" Confused, Ne Zha lay him down on the grass. He yelled, "Look! Your mighty warrior has fallen, and he is dead along with his dragon. This is your sealed fate if you are still standing! My men, fight!" The other army took one look at Ye Hei's unmoving form and fled, leaving scattered swords and armour behind. The soldiers quickly cleared the battlefield with newfound courage, and Ne Zha found himself face-to-face with the Emperor. "Good work, my young warrior— but we must first take care of our problem—Ye Hei." They carried him and climbed onto Yi Hua, arriving at the place. The Emperor gave Ye Hei some healing herbs, and he soon woke up. Ye Hei's face was full of anguish—his face not devoid of emotion any longer. "What happened? I only remember a dream, where blood flooded the ground and there were many wounded. I feel like I just lost control..." He trailed off. "I think you may have been under a spell... possibly from Hei Ye, I'd wager." Ye Hei looked up. "My lord... I wish to take leave as I feel... unsettled, prickly for some reason. It's as if waking from a very long dream..." The Emperor smiled knowingly. "You may go down to the Yellow Mountains below." Ye Hei bowed and left, never to return.

It is said that when Ye Hei came down, he became good again, and his kindness and genius affected this place. He liked to visit people in their dreams, counseling them and giving peace. Thus, this place was said to have a magical sheen. For now, all was well.

Dream of a Warrior

Pui Kiu College, Ho, Wing Ga – 12

Shouts reverberated throughout the hallways of Spirit International Training Academy.

Two boys ran up to see what had caused the commotion. George heard a sharp intake of breath from Nick. “What is it?”

Nick grimaced. “I think I’d never forget what that...*thing* was.”

It was lying on the floor. George slowly walked towards it, ignoring the warnings from others.

Upon closer inspection, George saw that the otherworldly creature had strands of blonde *hair*. Nick rushed over, snatching his hand as he was about to touch it. “What were you thinking?! You could’ve been attacked!”

The next thing they saw sent a chill down their spines. A circular iron mask with a smiley face. This could only mean one thing.

It was their friend Clayton.

George’s eyes widened. He quickly told Nick, then the two hauled Clayton to the Hospital Wing. Upon arriving, Recoverers dashed forward, preparing diagnosis tools.

Minutes passed before they turned Clayton back to normal. A Recoverer approached them. “We have to talk to the Headmaster, so you three head back to class.”

The boys nodded, walking back to their classroom.

Clayton groaned. “Man, what *was* that? I feel like I’ve been to hell.”

Nick chuckled. “To put it simply, you turned into a semi-god.” Clayton’s head snapped towards him.

“Wait, seriously? Now *that’s* concerning.” George giggled as Clayton burst into laughter, making a noise like a boiling kettle. That is, until the Headmaster ran towards them, glaring daggers at a certain boy. “Anderson, tell me *everything* that happened. Explain why you’ve gone and became a demon?!”

Clayton stuttered. “S-sir, may I ask what you’re talking about?”

He fumed. “Well, what else? You turned into an *anomaly*! You’re a threat to us, and you’ll spend the rest of your days...**somewhere else.**”

Sometimes Clayton wishes their Headmaster wasn’t so *powerful*. As he was dragged outside, his eyes drifted in and out of focus as he was injected with Wither, a potion of decaying. It **burned**.

He collapsed to the ground. George covered his mouth, shocked. Nick was silently crying. Guards took Clayton’s limp body and threw him onto a Cloud. It floated away.

The Headmaster grinned malevolently, expression unhinged.

“*This world isn’t for errors.*”

Nick gasped as he heard that line.

A Hylios Insurgency sign off.

He immediately whispered to George. “I think I know what’s going on. The Headmaster’s from Hylios Insurgency, it’s an evil organization which captures people and uses them for experiments, mutating them into Hybrids. They’re sending Clayton to Huang Shan. It’s a mountain in China, near their base in Anhui, and I heard there are *monsters* lurking there.”

George's lip quivered as he saw Clayton, *hurt or even possibly dead*, in his mind's eye. He looked up at the sky as rain started to pour, grateful that no one could see his tears.

Clayton woke up shivering. His smiley mask was gone.

He stood up, adjusting to the unfamiliar surroundings. Then it occurred to him that he was on a *mountain*. Clayton panicked once he realized he was trapped until he could find a way out. Then he remembered that he could change forms. He concentrated.

Nothing happened.

He tried until he had to sit down and *breathe*. It was midday when he started to navigate his surroundings, gathering wood to craft a sword.

Time flew and soon, it was nighttime. Clayton was gathering coal when he heard rattling. *Skeletons*. He swiftly dodged behind a tree and waited for them to approach, then swinging his sword in a wide arc. But he noticed something: *the skeletons had bows and arrows*. An arrow shot into his leg, making Clayton scream. Despite the pain, he finished off the skeletons one by one. Clayton lowered his sword as his breathing evened out. It was then he knew he'd have to learn to *survive*.

This was going to be one hell of an adventure.

Clayton stumbled back to where he woke up, sitting down and placing some torches so monsters wouldn't approach. He fell asleep.

During daytime, he spent endless hours training and gathering resources. He had enough iron to make another mask, weapons and even a shield. Clayton used coal and made markings on trees, recording each day. Every night, he'd fight through hordes of monsters, putting torches to make a path. By the time he found a way out of Huang Shan, months had passed.

Clayton saw the trees, rock formations and clouds over his head, and he never realized the place that caused so much pain was so *beautiful*.

Then he heard *voices*. They grew nearer until—

"Clay!" Arms wrapped around his torso, and he realized that it was *George*. Another familiar face appeared, and once it came closer, he *saw*.

"George? Nick? Is it really you guys?" The boys nodded, tears streaming down their cheeks. Clayton broke, sobbing, but he had a smile on his face. Nick took a familiar object from his bag: Clayton's old mask. It had faded to a light grey, but the smile was still there.

"Clay, we know you love your mask, so we kept it safe." Clayton smiled, ripping the one he made in Huang Shan off. It'll never replace the one he made back home.

Suddenly, an unnerving laugh sounded. The boys turned around, only to find the Headmaster standing there, showing a maniacal grin.

"And you really thought I wasn't going to find you. Pity. You were a bright student, Anderson. Well, you know who I am now."

"Why'd you hide your true identity? Was it to gain our trust so you could take over the world? **TELL US!**" George screamed, face contorted with rage. Nick stood beside him, fists and palm slammed together in the universal sign of "*fight me*". The Headmaster smiled sinisterly, morphing into a void-like creature with blood red slits as eyes.

“You may know me as Nemesis.”

Clayton had enough. His eyes turned white, wings protruding from his back, golden light seeping through the cracks of his mask, and instead of a hoodie, billowing black and gold robes now fluttered at his feet. George and Nick pulled out their swords, ready for a fight. The trio looked at each other, nodding, a fierce fire burning in their eyes. All was silent, as Clayton spoke.

“Justice, or death. If we get no revolution, then we want nothing. We would rather die than give in and be another subject of Hyllos Insurgency.”

Clayton let out a war cry, charging at Nemesis, a spear of light forming in his hands. Nemesis defended himself with a shield of darkness, then quickly realized Nick and George were charging at him. He immediately threw them off balance, then encased them in a sphere of energy, trapping them, leaving the two helpless. Clayton screamed, using all of his force to summon a giant wave of feathers as sharp as knives.

“THIS IS FOR MY FRIENDS!” And with all of his energy, he reared back and threw his hands forward, the feathers crashing down.

Then silence.

Clayton fell. The last thing he remembered were the wails of an ambulance.

He woke up in a hospital, remembering his fight with Nemesis. The television was on, quietly playing the news. Clayton could only catch a few phrases.

“...Students from...found injured...Insurgency spy captured...”

Clayton was too tired to care. On his right was George, peacefully sleeping on the bed. He’d never seen the smaller boy so calm. On his left was Nick, a nurse changing the bandages on his leg. He saw that Clayton was awake, giving him a tired grin. Clayton smiled.

George woke up, and Clayton spoke, voice strained. “Hey.”

George smiled softly. “H-hey.” The two boys chatted away, and Nick joined in soon after. They’d give anything to let this moment last forever.

Two months later, Clayton was invited to give a speech to the city about his fight. He fixed his mask, stepping onstage.

“Everyone here might have heard about my fight with Nemesis earlier. I have no idea how I made this far; guess I’ve been deemed an anomaly by our Headmaster, who was secretly the villain. I’ve felt desperation during my banishment to Huang Shan. Now that I’ve defeated him, I know that I had fought for a righteous cause: to take down the Hyllos Insurgency.”

“Look. Everything the light touches, is our home. A warrior’s time as guardian rises and falls, like the sun. One day, when chaos reigns, he’ll protect everyone, and now I’ve seen the dangers of the real world, I’d like to be that warrior.”

“My teachers and friends may know me as Clayton Anderson. But from this day on, you’ll know that this mask belongs...to *Dream*.”

He smiled at George and Nick among the crowd, cheering and hollering. With that, Dream transformed. As he soared away into the sky, he looked upon the city that he’d sworn to defend, and he knew he’d never be happier with life than he did now.

The Tale of the Magical Fruit

Pui Kiu College, Lau, Tsun Sing – 12

Huang shan was one of a well-known mountain in China with lots of tales and legends. It attracted tons of tourists from around the world to visit. Some people might not know that there was a tourist guide who was as famous as the mountain. The guide was an old man with wrinkles on his face resembling a typical wise man. He wore traditional Chinese gown, a bit old fashioned, but suited him perfectly. He could tell endless interesting tales about Huang shan. Look! He is telling a story right now.....

Approximately five thousand years ago, there was a great leader called Huang Di, he was smart and kind to his people. But same as other ordinary people, he would pass away one day. People liked him so much and wanted him to be immortal. A wise man said that there was a magical fruit hidden in the most sacred part of Huang shan and anyone who ate the fruit could live forever. However, nobody knew the exact location of the fruit tree. Thus, he proposed to form an elite team which consists of people with different talents in searching for the tree. As soon as the team was formed, they set-off to Huang shan with great vigor.

They climbed higher and higher into the mountain, crossed meandering rivers and went through dark caves. Then after countless days and nights, they eventually arrived the back of Huang shan and found a strange, unique tree that they had never seen before. The tree shaped like an upside-down pyramid and the leaves were translucent blue. Then they spotted a tiny fruit with a red dim glow hanging on the tree. They decided to camp and wait besides the tree for the fruit to ripe because they strongly believed that the fruit must be the magical fruit they were looking for so far.

During midnight, a little boy who was the grandson of the wise man and part of the team was too thirsty to fall asleep. While he was searching for water, he saw a glowing red fruit with good smell and it looked very juicy, too. The boy quickly ate the fruit in one bite. He felt different in an instance, he felt like he was a genius. In a flash, he realized that he made a huge mistake as the fruit he just ate was probably the mythical fruit for Huang Di. The boy thought that he might get into a big trouble but he didn't have time to worry. He must figure out something as the sun was rising. An idea flashed in his mind and he suddenly transformed into a dragon, a fierce enormous dragon. The people in the team were so frightened that they ran away and never dared to return. Thankfully, the secret about the legendary fruit was preserved. People were apparently very scared of dragons as the place was in peace for thousands of years.

However, good fortune didn't last long. When time goes by, people started to get curious and tried to search for the dragon despite it was fierce. So he decided to turn himself into a tiger as it was common but powerful as well. He successfully scared away people and other animals, but there was a problem now ----- he felt so lonely. Although there were other tigers in Huang shan, they lived so scattered in the big mountain, also they were too aggressive to hang out. Therefore, he thought he should change into tamed animals like rabbit or deer so that he could have companions to play with, even though sometimes, he might be chased by ferocious predators like tigers and wolves.

As the tigers and other dangerous animals went extinct, more and more tourists came to Huang shan for sight-seeing. He should find some ways to protect the secret tree or it would be found some day. He decided to transform back into a human, but not a little boy, it was a tourist guide so that he could safeguard the berry tree. Actually, it was extreme difficult to find the magical tree without a guide, the boy thought. As far as he kept on telling the story of the mysterious fruit, on the contrary, people would think that it was not real but just a story made up for attracting tourists.

After the tourist guide finished his story, a little girl asked him curiously, "Are you the boy who transformed into a tourist guide?" The tourist guide denied while laughing awkwardly and shaking his head, "Of course not."

While the tourists were leaving the mountain, the little girl felt a gust of wind behind her head. She turned her head around and was attracted by a strange translucent blue leaf on the floor. When she looked up, she vaguely saw a boy aged similar to her, dashing back towards the back side of Huang shan.

The Dragon of the Mountains

Pui Kiu College, Leung, Lok Hei Yui – 13

I woke up groggily, what was that noise? It better not be those noisy “Homo Sapiens” again. Oh brother, it was them. Oh, how I missed those days where no one was on these mountains...

I am a dragon. A dragon who has lived in these mountains for thousands or millions of years. I have been in these mountains for a prolonged period of time. These mountains always have a blanket of fog, and mysterious as Mona Lisa's smile. The Huang mountains have always been brumous, as it were millions of years ago.

Years ago, these mountains were silent. Not a single noise, absolute silence. Only me, and the mighty mountains. I used to fly through the air and frolic through the clouds in the sky. Only I was there, living in my own life.

One day, I looked down, through the fog, I saw shadows, tiny shadows. “What are those?” I thought to myself. So, I decided to see for myself. They had two little legs, two small arms and a toylike head. Later, I knew what they were called, they were humans. I thought they wouldn't last long, they were very small, predators could easily eat them.

Then I realized I was wrong. One day, I saw one of them holding a sharp piece of stone. A wild tiger cat suddenly appeared. Then, the human holding the sharp stone piece thrustured through the fierce cat. Through the mist, I saw red liquid flowing out of the tiger. From the terrible incident I saw, I learnt that the humans living beneath me were to be feared.

I once had an encounter with the humans on the mountain, to say, it was an awful experience. I was having a usual day, minding my own business, sitting on a rock. When all of a sudden, a scrawny human boy locked eyes with me. I froze, he froze, we both were staring at each other.

The boy screamed with a shrill voice, “AHHHH!”

I yelled in response, “AHHHH!”

“What the heck are you?!”

“I'm a dragon, a mountain dragon.”

“You can talk?” He asked before yelling downwards, “Hey fellow villagers! A dragon! That talks!”

“What?! A dragon? I'll hunt it down!”

“I'm coming with you!”

“What will dragon meat taste like?”

Oh no... They were coming for me. I immediately flew straight up, above the clouds. I was horror-struck. These humans, hunting and killing everything they cross paths to, they are so gruesome. This was the first time I encountered human beings.

Years passed and the humans were still on Earth, and I was still on the same old mountain. I had learnt that they were tough beings. However, They do queer things. It seemed that they really liked to fight themselves. Up on the misty mountain, underneath the fog, I always saw them fighting against each other. Throwing spears, shooting arrows, sometimes beheading their own kind. It was a thing that I had never understood. Why would I kill my own kind? Why would I want to slay my own kind? Their murder of each other bothered me a lot.

Humans were always annoying me, they're still doing it now.

“Wow! Look at that view!”

“Mummy! Mummy! Look at the thick fog beneath me!”

“Look at that fig tree! Honey, let's take a picture!”

“Cheese!”

Look at them, their big mouths blabbering all the time, saliva droplets splashing out of their mouths, yelling with the long throats. Their noise bothered me a lot. They are constantly screaming, “look! Look!” I know they don't see the amazing misty view down there at where they live, but can they not focus on themselves? Squirrels, birds, monkeys, me! We get annoyed too!

Bonk!

Ow! What fell on my head? A cylinder? That hurted a lot.

Humans throwing rubbish and trash all over the place? I thought they had bins, to put stuff they don't need there. Metal cans, paper, plastic bags, they were all over the place. Through the fog, sometimes only rubbish was seen. Humans ruin the scenery with disgusting rubbish, they smell, they look displeasing. The mountains were no longer clean and tidy.

Crack!

What's that noise? I looked over to my left.

“Wahhhhhhhhhh!”

A small child was sitting on the floor, crying his eyes out. I looked above him. A broken branch, the pine tree had a branch missing. The child must have been dangling on the poor pine trees branch. Serves him right.

Pine trees were fragile, a lot of things could cause harm to them. My old friend, he is a 1,000 year old Greeting pine, he had been hurt a lot. From unwholesome children, to unruly adults. He had people scraping his skin, ripping of his limbs, and even tried to murder him by chopping against his waist. Poor, poor tree, distasteful humans.

Something went into my eye, it itched a lot. There's so much dust in the air, sand, pollen, “ack,” it's really annoying. Cough, cough, sorry. See those cars down there? These cars made the air muggy and vile. I tried to take a deep breath, “huff,” a gulp of dust flew in my mouth, I felt the cloud of pollutants hovering inside my dragon mouth. “Ewww,” I spat the breath of dust out. I coughed my guts out. I couldn't even have a breath of fresh, clean air.

Thousands of broken trees, ruined nature were all “created” by humans. The cave I was born in and lived in for millions of years was destroyed by humans too. I lost a home because of them revolting people wanting to own land.

Beautiful mountains, misty air, the fresh smell of the fogs, and my dearest homeland mountains. All were destroyed by humans. I missed the Huang mountains millions years ago.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Pui Kiu College, Ng, Wing Lam Venus – 13

An old man named Augustus was laying on his bed in a small city apartment. His immediate family members at his bedside, as though he would drop dead at any moment. Gus was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, and his survival rates were low.

Soon, Gus's family left him alone with his grandson Jerry, saying they had work to do. "Son, I don't have long, but I have somewhere that I wanted to visit just one more time." Gus said. Jerry, who was a mature boy and knew his grandpa was being serious, knew better than to reject. "Where?" He asked. "Home." Gus replied simply. Even though Jerry thought the answer was rather peculiar, he helped his grandpa pack their luggage and embark on a journey that they both didn't know would become a famous tale among residents there.

The next day, Augustus and Jerry were at the foot of Huang Shan, China's Magical Mountains. "Son, welcome home." Gus said. The old and the young walked along a narrow but sunlit path, they followed the sound of water, the rippling sound was flowing downstream while they were slowing going upstream. "Where are we going?" Jerry asked. "Past this mountain and at the bottom of the basin." Gus replied, panting.

So up they climbed and down they went. Augustus and Jerry followed the crystal-clear river as they went up, fish were trying their best to follow them upstream. They saw birds of different sizes and colours circling around them and the gnarled trees. Gus was so tired by the time they reached the top of the mountain that he had to take a few deep breaths. "Come on grandpa! We are so high up! Look!" Jerry exclaimed. The scenery was undoubtedly gorgeous, they were submerged in clouds of cotton candy, they were so high up that they can't even see the ground. With a few deep breaths of the freshest air on Earth, all of Gus's tiredness has disappeared, so Gus and Jerry set off again.

Augustus and Jerry now followed a rocky path downhill and entered a thick forest. "Grandpa, I am scared!" Jerry squeaked. The trees were so dense and thick that no sunlight went through to the ground. A distant rustle of leaves left them both shaken, expecting some sort of monster, they slowly looked up, but they only saw a flock of birds taking off.

It was almost evening when they finally arrived at the bottom of the basin, where a tiny village was sitting. Gus was not feeling well, his whole body hurt from all the walking. "Gus! Is that you?" A cry from an old lady brought Gus out of his pain. Gus half-ran towards the old woman, bursting with excitement. "Hazel! It's been so long!" Gus half-laughed, half-cried. "Hey everyone! Come meet my cousin, Augustus and..." Hazel cried to the whole village. "Jerry, my grandson." Gus supplied. All the villagers rushed to meet the men. They all had a lengthy conversation and went on a tour around the village.

The village consisted of cute little huts. "Grandpa, did u live in these huts when u were young?" Jerry asked curiously. "Yes son, in fact I lived in this very one." Gus pointed at the smallest one which seemed like it had been abandoned for a long time. "We used to build them ourselves, we had to collect the wood from the forest back there." Gus pointed to the direction they came from.

They walked around the tiny village for a bit, Gus submerged in his own thoughts, as though seeing the good old memories of his home replaying before his eyes. "We had to move to the city you know, because my dad had been given a job there, but I have always missed the mountains." Gus told Hazel. "What brought you here then?" Hazel asked, expecting good news. "Oh...Well I am diagnosed with cancer...I thought I would like to visit one last time..." Gus replied rather unceremoniously. Hazel dissolved in tears but tried hard to hide it. The village spent the night laughing, talking and eating.

The next day, Augustus and Jerry had to leave. They said their goodbyes with a heavy heart. They went the way they came, passed the thick forest and down the mountain. It was half-way there that Gus felt terrible, he was very sick. "Ah!" He let out a blood curdling scream which pierced through the air. Gus felt pain as though he has never felt it before, he felt his stomach burning. Jerry watched helplessly as his grandfather collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain. "Is there something I can get for you?" Jerry asked panickedly as he started stroking his grandpa's hair in the hopes that it would help. "Water." Gus croaked almost inaudibly.

Jerry opened his bag and found that there was no water left in his water bottle. He stared around hopelessly as his grandpa was shrieking in agony. Jerry tried to empty his head and think clearly, that's when he heard the stream flowing nearby. He ran like crazy towards the stream, plunge the water bottle in and quickly headed back.

"Here, drink up." Jerry handed Gus the water bottle. Augustus gulped down the water feverishly. Instantly, Augustus felt the most magical yet wonderful feeling. He felt warmth spread from his head to toes, he felt a glowing ring of light around him, like he was immune to everything. He felt better, in fact, he thought that he was completely cured.

Suddenly, there was a loud rumbling noise like an earthquake, a dozen people including Hazel rushed towards them. "What happened? We heard someone screaming" Hazel asked anxiously. "Oh that..." Augustus told all the villagers what had happened, everyone was amazed and laughed in relief. After that, the villagers walked Gus and Jerry back down the mountain, where they had to part again. "If I'm cured, I promise I will visit the village soon, remember to prepare a feast for us when we come back!" Gus joked. "Haha, sure!" Hazel promised.

Augustus and Jerry went back to the city where Gus was required to do a PET scan, he was miraculously declared NEC (No evidence of cancer). Meanwhile, the villagers in Huang Shan were recording the tales of the two and China's magical mountains.

The Quest of Nature

Pui Kiu College, Wang, Yan – 13

Deep in the famous mountains of Huangshan, there was a fifteen-year-old girl named Lanshi who lived with her father. They were friends with a little speaking dragon with fiery red scales named Fireball.

One afternoon, Lanshi and her father walked between the cracks of the mystical mountain and entered a dim cave to visit Fireball. The dragon was sleeping in the corner of the cave with its tail glowing mesmerizingly. Lanshi walked over and sat down beside it. Her father took out a dagger and some food from his bag. He sat down and tried to cut the food but his hand slipped and the dagger shot towards Fireball.

Before Lanshi could shout, a flash of blinding light shot out of Fireball's tail seconds before the dagger hit him. When Lanshi opened her eyes again, her father was locked in a box made of glass with holes, just like the ones used to hold animals nowadays. Just then, Fireball opened his eyes slowly and stared.

"Oh my... that's my potential magic reacting during life-dangering moments."

"Fireball- help me out please." Lanshi's father looked desperately at Fireball.

"I can't, Lan... I'm sorry. I'm too young to control my powers and the box is locked with magic."

"What are we gonna do? I can't let him sit in there and starve!"

Just then a gust of wind bursted through the cave entrance and an emerald dragon appeared. Lanshi thought the dragon looked almost identical with Fireball. The emerald dragon went over and hugged Fireball tightly.

"Mother! Where did you go! It's been so long!" Fireball shouted in joy.

"Honey I'm sorry... just got caught up with things. How's your magic doing? I felt it appearing in you which is why I came back. To train you."

The dragon turned towards Lanshi.

"These must be your human friends."

"Hi. I'm Lanshi and that's my father, Lan."

Lanshi stared at the green dragon in awe before starting again, "I'm sorry to have caused you any trouble, but my father is stuck in that cell and I was wondering if you could help him out with your magic."

The dragon hesitated a while before slowly nodding her head, "Call me Esmiranda. This cell can only be opened with one specific rock and I don't have it. However, you can collect them. It's a special hidden rock that glows at one's touch. It should be in the hot springs. You'll have to go alone."

"I'll go with her, mom." Fireball piped up.

"Alright then. Be safe." Esmiranda looked worried, almost scared while hugging Fireball again and letting him go unwillingly.

...

After about thirty minutes of Lanshi walking and Fireball flying behind her, they arrived at the hot springs. This was Lanshi's favourite place as a child. She used to chat with her dad there. The thought kept her walking faster.

"According to Esmiranda, the rock should be inside the springs so I'll try searching for it underwater."

Lanshi jumped into the spring, feeling around and praying to find an opening to something. After paddling around the spring for about 20 minutes, she felt something that seemed a lot like a handle about a foot underwater but she didn't have the strength to open it.

"Fireball! I found something!"

Lanshi ducked underwater again to check the handle while Fireball flew towards her. She saw a line of words beneath the handle that said “I shall only open for a worthy warrior”. There was also a fire symbol carved at the end of the sentence. She told the dragon about it.

“I can open it with my fire... if only there isn’t any water.”

“You have to use your magic, Fire. I know you haven’t learnt to control it yet but please try.”

“Alright. I’ve seen my family do a similar spell before when I was younger. Give me your hand.”

Lanshi smiled and held Fireball’s hand.

“Put your hand in the water. Keep still. Release your hand immediately after I blow the fire.”

Lanshi did as she was told. She heard Fireball mumbling something and her hands started to burn. She closed her eyes as the pain took over her and tried to hold on to the thought of her dad in hopes of staying strong. She heard Fireball yell something incoherent and she immediately released her hands. Then she ducked down just in time as the rock came flying towards them. She picked it up and held it in her hands, admiring its soft glow under the dimming sunlight.

She turned around and looked at the edge of one of the spiky mountains opposite her. The sun was slowly going down and the sunset was the most picturesque thing she’d ever seen. The view from the hot spring was so fabulous that Lanshi couldn’t help but sit down and enjoy it. The soft orange and yellow merged together was heavenly. The hot sun she once hated became insanely mesmerizing. It looked just like the painting her mom drew when she was younger. She wished she could be here forever, just admiring the view with nothing else on her mind.

...

Stars were twinkling in the night sky when Lanshi and Fireball finally set back the cave. Once they slipped through the cracks, Lanshi had this terrible feeling about the eerie silence in the cave. Then, she heard a huge crash. Someone started screaming barely 2 seconds after. Lanshi recognized the scream immediately.

“Dad!” She shouted as she ran as fast as she could into the cave.

What she saw made her stop right in her tracks. Esmiranda was hovering over her father’s limp body. She heard Fireball gasp and before she even had time to think, she rushed forward in an attempt to shove Esmiranda out of the way. However, Esmiranda was faster. She used her magic on Lanshi and threw her on the wall. Lanshi was left crawling and panting desperately for air.

“Mom? What are you doing!”

“Oh you foolish dragon, I’m not your mother! I’m aunt Betti. Your mother died years ago.”

“Why are you doing this?” Lanshi asked while Fireball fell back on the floor, shocked.

“You humans have been invading our breed for over thousands of years. How else did you expect to be treated like? None of you respected us. We were forced to move after your ancestors chased us away so they could have a quiet place for writing poems and drawing pictures.”

“I’m so sorry y’all have to go through this,” Lanshi said, “I truly am. I never knew about this. I promise I would make it up to you though, in whatever way possible.”

“Yeah? Well plainly saying sorry isn’t going to solve anything. They hunted us then and are still hunting us now. All our family and friends are gone, sacrificed for some useless fashion trends. Some of them were also locked up in a zoo or whatever you call it, and it feels like prison. None of them did anything wrong. Now your father deserves to be punished. What goes around comes around.”

Lanshi felt absolutely miserable. She had no idea that humans were doing this to other animals, harming and endangering them. However, she knew she needed her dad back. She knew he didn’t do anything wrong and didn’t deserve to be stuck in a glass box. She looked over at her unconscious father and then at her pale friend who still seemed to be in shock.

“Betti, I apologize for my ancestor’s and all the other humans destroying your habitat and killing everyone you’re close to. I truly am. I’ll try to make this better. I promise you. I’ll help raise awareness and teach everyone else in the village downhill about this. I’ll educate them about protecting the wildlife. And I’m not just saying this because my father’s imprisoned. I mean it. I really do.”

Betti’s eyes seemed to soften a bit before turning hard again.

“Aunt Betti... I believe Lanshi,” Fireball muttered quietly, “I know you didn’t see this but they took care of me after mom left me ten years ago and has always been there for me. Always. Please help Lan...”

Betti looked at Fireball for a few seconds, as if trying to find a hint of doubt. When she couldn’t, she turned to Lanshi and nodded slowly.

“My magic is the only way out of this cage and the only thing that can heal your father. Promise me that you will take care of both the environment and my little nephew. And if the promise breaks, both my magic and nature will come for you and your breed. After all, mistakes are costly and there will be consequences to pay for.”

Lanshi nodded gratefully as Betti waved her tail, and a flash of soft, golden light slipped out, breaking the box open and waking Lanshi’s father up.

The Magical Yellow Mountain

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Hei Tung Carridee – 12

‘Come on Greg! We are late!’ ‘Okay, I’m coming!’ The 2 young historians, Gregory Wright and Anthony Phoenix from The London History Association (LHA) were ready to set all the way from London Heliport to the Magical Yellow Mountain, also known as Huangshan, in Anhui. Their mission, this time, was to conquer all the steep mountains, and rescue an old immortal lady who had been trapped up on the Yellow Mountain for millennia, she knew and had seen everything, from the Old Stone Ages to modern times. She would have been the best source of all time for historians to study. Unfortunately, she was being controlled by her possessed father, and trapped on top of the Yellow Mountain. Until today, LHA was the first, and the only ever History Association that could ever find the exact location where the old lady was trapped. Therefore, LHA found it was an excellent opportunity to understand the past, from this wise old ‘Primary Source’.

‘How dare Dr. Big Belly give this challenging task to us? How dare him? We are only 17! What if we die? Huh?’ Shouted Gregory angrily. ‘Man, chill! Don’t be pessimistic! Maybe it’s a life-long unforgettable experience! The reason why Dr. Big Belly, well in fact, Dr. Benny gave us this nearly impossible mission to us is because he trusts us!’ ‘Well Ant, maybe you’re right...’ The helicopter landed, after a 10-hour long flight.

‘Wow, never thought Anhui is a crowded city!’ said Gregory surprisingly. ‘Well, no one knows, bloke! Maybe the yellow mountain is way more mysterious.’ They had a bowl of Chinese noodles with dumplings, then set off towards the yellow mountain.

The sky was red and yellow, looking exactly the same as the Yellow Mountain. ‘Wow, this place is beautiful!’ Anthony looked surprised by this amusing place. ‘Yeah, it is super stunning...Ant, selfie time!’ ‘Wait, no! It’s time to start our journey up onto the mountain, not selfie!’ ‘I know, I know, but stop being that serious! We’re here to have fun!’ ‘Who have ever told you we’re here for fun? Come along, we are supposed to go!’

The 7 days was unexpectedly cruel for Gregory and Anthony. They figured out the mountain was fully made out of mud and covered by sand, which made them extremely hard to climb up the mountain. ‘Ugh, how on earth a mountain is made out of mud!’ ‘Yeah, that’s an unprecedented mountain, really unprecedented. Anyways, we’re almost there, high five.’ Anthony said calmly, as usual.

‘Greg, we’re here, up on the peak of the yellow mountain! We’re the first ever human to step foot on!’ Anthony was smiling and giggling for the first time since the boys started their journey. ‘Yes! We are up here! Thanks mommy, thanks daddy, thanks mate!’ ‘Thanks too, mate! Okay, it’s time to go find the wise old immortal lady...according to the map, she’s 100 meters in front of us only!’ ‘Great! Let’s go!’

‘Umm... sorry, are you the immortal lady that has been living here for millenniums?’ Anthony confirmed softly. ‘Ah, human, HUMAN! I CAN FINALLY HAVE SOM ONE TO TALK WITH! Yes, I am, lads. I believe I’m the lady that you guys are finding. He is Gregory, and you are Anthony, right?’ ‘Yes! But... how do you know our name?’ Anthony was confused, why would she know their name?’ ‘Haha, I have a pair of special eyes and a special brain, so that I can see everything happening all around the world at the same time. I found out LHA was working on a project to save and interview me, so I took a look at the brave lads who are coming to save me.’ Anthony and Gregory were totally amused, they murmured, ‘How amazing!’

The lady continued, ‘You guys are the bravest and the most courageous human that I’ve ever seen, I really appreciate it... and by the way, aren’t you two interviewing me? Feel free!’

Anthony took a deep breath, in a shaky voice, ‘Okay, the first question, are there any other periods before the Old Stone Ages?’ The lady giggled, ‘Kids, really kids, hahahaha... I’m going to tell you a fact: The human history period called the Old Stone Age never existed, never!’ Anthony and Gregory were completely stunned, ‘What? Do you mean the studies of the Old Stone Ages are only lies or wrong predictions?’ ‘Exactly, and as well as all the other periods of human history. Sit down, let me tell you young boys the story... okay, here we go. In fact, we should be

living in the year in 6780 AD, not 2020 AD. At that time, a gigantic Meteorite crashed and almost destroyed the Earth...’

‘Woah, then why are we living in the year 2020 AD?’ the boys’ eyes widened, full of bewilderment and confusion.

‘Yeah, that’s a great question,” sighed the lady,’ At that time, my father was really concerned about human’s survival, although human beings made quite a lot of damage to the environment, he still believe human beings are helpful and they, well in fact, you guys are the only hope to change the world, so he decided to try on his newly made product, the time machine.’

‘Time machine? I thought it only appears in fairy tales!’ Gregory said.

‘Well, in 2020, of course it only appears in fairy tales! But who knows in 6780!’

‘And wasn’t your father possessed?’

‘Not at all. There are stories spreading all around the world that my “possessed” father locked me up on the Yellow Mountain. In fact, he locked me here just to protect me and prevent me from messing around in the human’s world. Well, I hated being trapped, therefore I tried super hard to escape from this Yellow Mountain, however, I failed walking a single step on this mountain, even though I have healthy wings and legs...maybe that’s my father’s trick and this Yellow Mountain’s unpredictable power.’

‘Oh I see, your father is smart! Then what happened to the human beings after your dad had decided to try on his brand new product?’ Anthony asked.

‘After that, my father figured out there were too many people to bring back to the 21st century, so he expanded the time machine. The expanded time machine’s capacity was about 1 billion people...’ The lady continued

‘Wow, that’s a lot!’ Gregory yelled.

‘Yes! There really was a lot! As my father was immortal too, his plan was to keep all the human’s size, age, family and literally all the backgrounds the same after time travelling, but clear all their memories that they had in the 68th century. He also made up a whole new set of human history to cover up the truth, he didn’t want people to be worried about things that would happen after 4000 years.’

‘Your father is actually very caring! He is not possessed at all!’

‘Thanks, ah, I suddenly remember a thing. My father said before that there would be some brave boys and girls that would come and save me. He told me to tell you guys something, something very important...’

‘What is that?’ The boys asked together.

The lady picked 2 jars of potion from her little bag, said in a formal way,” These potions are yours, after you drink these potions, you won’t ever die, like me. My father said the first braveries who came up on the Yellow Mountain to save me would be one of the members of our Savior Team.’

‘Savior Team? What is that?’

‘Savior Team is a team made by immortals on Earth, like you guys, after you drink the potions, and me. Our goal, is to protect the world and change the world, and most importantly, to prevent the Meteorite from destroying our world and human beings without them know our plan and mission. So, do you guys want to join the Savior Team?’

‘Of course we do!’ The boys nodded.

‘Great! And by the way can you 2 young lads help me down the mountain? I really want to try standing on the human’s world and the human’s point of view.’

‘Sure!’

The lady and the lads, no, the Savior Team, walked down the mountain, laughing and giggling, holding their hands tightly. Anthony and Gregory, the 2 young boys that won’t ever die, were ready to save and change the world, into a nice one, an undestroyable one. They are ready.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Pui Kiu College, Ye, Man Wa – 12

4000 years ago, the yellow emperor left a legendary sword, the Xuan Yuan sword in Huangshan. He forged it while participating in a sacrificial ceremony. The sword was extremely powerful because it was made of the scales of the dragon. Only a sage can use the sword. If not used properly, the person who used it would die immediately. His body would be cursed and his soul would suffer from the acid forever. Since ancient times, many curious adventurers have come to Huangshan. But when they came back, they all lost a finger. Some said there was no such sword, some said they saw Huangdi's ghost, some even said there were ghosts guarding the sword. No one knows why they lost their finger. After that, no one dared to go there anymore and the Xuan Yuan sword still remains a mystery.

The story was told by a mother to her son ten years ago, her son is still fascinated by the story now. His name is Kane. he is 21 years old now and he became an archaeologist.

One day, the media reported a shocking news. Mysterious power was found in Huangshan, and many scientists went there to investigate. But unfortunately, nothing was found. Some rumors said that it was because of the mythical sword. Once again, brave adventurers, travellers, even doctors went there and wanted to witness it. Kane was one of them.

He finally arrived there after ten hours of flight. With some tiredness, he was at the foot of the mountain. The story said the sword was hidden in the Bridge of Immortals, and therefore, his destination was the bridge. He started climbing the mountain, he walked on a bumpy road. After a few hours, Kane arrived at the Bridge of Immortals. But he was surprised that the bridge was as normal as usual, nothing special.

But suddenly, something attracted his attention. A dragon was carved on a pillar. He was confused that only one of the pillars had this mark. He walked towards it, and then he found that the pillar was loose. He rotated it.

"Boom!" A chamber under the bridge opened. On the wall of the chamber, a sentence said: "Only a wise person can control the sword." Kane was on the right track, it was related to the legend. He kept walking till he reached the end of the tunnel. A door opened and closed immediately after Kane walked into the door. He was in a room. A machine raised slowly from the centre of the room. There was a sentence on it, saying "Cut your finger and you will be awarded the sword."

There were two buttons and one said "cut the finger", another "keep your finger". Kane hesitated. Even though he was eager to get the sword, he didn't want to become a disabled person. At last, he pressed the button with "keep your finger".

The machine went down, another door opened.

Amazingly, he saw the XuanYuan sword behind the door, some words were written on the wall, saying "You kept your finger even under great temptation. You are the chosen wise man."

Kane took the sword with excitement, and went back to the Bridge of Immortals. Finally, he donated the sword to a museum. Now everyone knows about the famous sword. Huangshan has become more mysterious than ever.

The Clash of Time

Pui Kiu College, Yim, Long – 12

“Wake up Ben! Rise and shine!” Benjamin opened his eyes to a bucket of cold water and ice. Coldness washed over him like a tidal wave. His eyes shooting open, Benjamin fell out of his bed onto the hardwood floor beneath him. Laughter was heard and Benjamin saw his friend Timothy with a gray, rusty bucket in his hands. “Ben, today is the king's proclamation day! Did you forget?” said Timothy. “Yeah, it's the king's proclamation. Which means more taxes.” Benjamin said to himself.

“Welcome, fellow citizens of Central City! Today is the thirty-fifth national proclamation day!” said a booming voice. It was heard all across the stadium which held the citizens. A person was standing on top of a balcony facing the citizens, holding a microphone in his hand. He wore red robes lined with fur, a sparkling crown upon his head, which was tilted high. “I am your beloved king Titus, and after a discussion with the council, we have decided that the taxes will be added...” said the king. There were murmurs of dissent, but everyone was used to this.

Timothy could feel that something wasn't right. He could feel that Benjamin was emitting waves of anger. His face was steaming red like lava, and his fists were clenched together in anger, like a bomb that was going to explode in any second. “...the taxes will be raised by 70% because—” Suddenly, an arrow flew straight by Titus' head, missing him by millimeters. Titus was knocked back onto the floor of the balcony, shocked by the attempted assassination on his precious life.

Timothy looked in shock at his friend, who had just been pushed over the breaking point. Benjamin's face was filled with contorted rage, and he had just shot an arrow that was meant to kill. The citizens next to the duo stepped apart, letting the king identify them quickly. “Get them!” shouted Titus in rage.

From all directions, guards started running towards them, weapons raised. Benjamin knew they had to make a run for it. He and Timothy sprinted forward, and ran full speed to the gate of the stadium. “Close the gates! Don't let them get away!” Just as they were about to reach the gates, Timothy was hit by an arrow in the leg. He screamed in agony, but continued to limp forward. As they ran out of the stadium gates, the king bellowed in rage. “I have checked the gate records, my king. The names of those two rebels are Benjamin and Timothy. What do we do now, my lord? We have a rebellion among us.” asked the king's advisor Karloff. “Tell General Minotaurus to search every single bit of the city for them and tell Drake to come to my room.” said the king. “Yes, my lord.” Karloff replied, and stepped out of the room to carry out his jobs. The king gleamed with evilness, an evil plan boiling up inside him.

Benjamin was taken aback by the things that had happened over the past hours. Just mere hours ago, he was only a normal citizen. Now, he was a fugitive of the city. As they trudged forward, Timothy suddenly jolted forward and fell backwards onto the leaf covered ground. Benjamin was shocked by this sudden action, and quickly pulled his friend up to his feet. “Are you okay? What's happening?” Benjamin asked. “I—it seems that I have been afflicted by an arrow coated with the deadly wither poison. The wounded area will shrivel, and over time, the entire body will blacken. And by then, the person would fade away into ashes...” Timothy coughed. “So is there a cure for this?” asked Benjamin frantically. “It has been rumored that a mysterious doctor named the Apothecary has the cure, and he was last seen in the Huangshan regions.” said Timothy. “Alright,” said Benjamin, “The next stop is Huangshan!” Benjamin cheered. And thus, they set off.

A week had passed since the two had begun their journey, and they had arrived at the mighty Huangshan. It was a region of majestic mountains, shrouded in fog. Benjamin started walking up a long set of stairs that extended up to the fog in the mountains, with Timothy following suit. As they continued up the mountains, Timothy grew more tired and his limbs felt more detached, but he bit his lip and continued to act like he was fine. Soon they had to sit down and rest. Just as they were about to settle down, a massive blade shot out of the fog, forcing them to jump to safety.

The man took out a potion, and cured Timothy's wither poison immediately. And then, he introduced himself. “I am the Apothecary. I have heard that you two have been leading a rebellion against Titus. He banished me to this place a long time ago, and I'm willing to help anyone who is going to stop my old enemy,” said the Apothecary. “We have gotten a letter from someone named Steve, and he has been gathering up citizens that were willing to add

into the rebel army. We will go back and rendezvous with them, then head to the king's castle," said Benjamin. After packing up the Apothecary's potions, they started the long trek back home.

In an underground base in Central city, Steve sat on a chair thinking. "When were they going to come back?" he asked himself. Suddenly, there was a loud commotion on the lower level of the bunker. Steve looked down, and his face changed from boredom to excitement. Benjamin and Timothy were back! From all around them, the citizens were cheering for their leader, who had just returned from a long journey. Steve went downstairs to approach the leader he had been looking forward to meeting. " Benjamin, Timothy and...the Apothecary? I thought you were a legend!" Steve said in awe. "He banished me to Huangshan a decade ago. Are we going to head to the king's castle tomorrow?" he asked. "Yes." Steve replied. "I am now going to tell you who you will be in charge with. Benjamin, you will be in charge of taking out the king. Timothy, you will be tasked with taking out Karloff. Apothecary, you will act as the field medic. And I will be in charge of taking out their general, Minotaurus. All clear?" "CLEAR!" the citizens chanted in unison.

A day had passed, and the army was heading towards the king's castle. From his balcony, Titus could see the approaching army, but he was confident that his traps would crush the rebel army. As the army stepped into the stadium, Benjamin was surprised by how easy this was. Steve had told him last night that all the traps in the stadium had been disarmed, and that meant a lot less effort.

The king could feel that something was wrong...the traps were not working! He screamed frantically into his microphone. "DEFENSES HAVE BEEN BREACHED! Minotarus down! Karloff down! Guards down! I said down! Now go!" screamed the king in panic. As the army charged forward to fight the king's forces, Benjamin sprinted towards the stairs that led to the king's balcony. As he arrived at the top of the stairs, the king was waiting for him. Both of the king's swords were at his hips, ready to be used. "So you finally arrived," said the king, amused. Benjamin ran towards the king, sword drawn. But instead of attacking, he threw the sword at the king like a frisbee. The king quickly pulled his left sword and knocked the sword away, but was knocked back by an unexpected blow from Benjamin. The king blocked another of Benjamin's attacks, then engaged in a dangerous dance with Benjamin.

The king seemed to be toying with him, and not using his true power. A lucky blow from the king sent Benjamin's sword spiraling onto the ground. The king tripped him onto the ground, and pressed hard into him, trying to choke him. "You know what, Benjamin?" the king said "I don't really hate you. I just don't like people who rebel against me. People... that I don't want in my kingdom." the king said in disgust. Then, he kicked Benjamin across the balcony and sent him slamming into the wall. Just as he prepared to finish Benjamin off, he was knocked back by a potion bottle. The Apothecary appeared, and started throwing potion bottles at the king. He helped Benjamin get up and they engaged the king. The king managed to hold up at first, but was eventually worn out after the endless potion bottles and sword strikes. As he slumped on the castle walls, the war on the ground had ended too. Minotarus and Karloff were bested, and the king's forces were either dead or arrested.

As the king was brought away, Benjamin was elected as the first president of the city. Finally, peace was restored to the city, and he would lead the city to a bright future.

Chinese Magical Mountain [Huang Shan]

Pui Kiu College, Yuen, Ling Fung – 12

Back when humans still lived in caves and haven't quite developed culture yet, the Huangshan mountains were already as old as the earth itself. The mountains watched as centuries of Chinese emperors ruled at its base, for eons the mountain did not interfere with mortal matters but every once in a while it would punish the humans for polluting the earth by releasing ancient creatures that no longer roam the earth into the capitol of the cities. The monsters that were released were unstoppable and struck fear into the heart of the country, but despite the threats and dangers that humanity faced, the people were still taking no actions against the frequent attacks. A few chosen individuals were elected to venture into the heart of the mountain but none were ever heard from again. When all actions were proven ineffective against stopping the strikes, all the government could do was seal off the mountains and evacuate the locals inside. And as our young hero Cyrus Carter stared at his home as he was being carried away from the mountain, he had no idea that he was destined to save humanity and end the chaos caused.

As the sun slowly rose from the East, Cyrus squinted his eyes at the shining attraction and resumed to his usual daily schedule of cooking breakfast for himself and his crippled mother. Cyrus scowled at the fact that he was the one who was cooking and detested the fact that he was now as poor as the locals who inhabited the once-beautiful capitol of China which the monsters from the mountains had destroyed. Cyrus's fate wasn't always set to be poor though, once he was destined to rule over a stocks empire, but all that changed when the savages from the mountains came and destroyed the entire industry, sadly when the government had declared the mountain areas to be restricted his family had just invested most of their assets into the travel industry and had been left virtually penniless after that disaster. Cyrus's father had joined the military to continue providing for his family, but even then life was tough and when an military commander came to Cyrus's house with his head bowed solemnly Cyrus already knew what had happened. The news had devastated Cyrus's mother and almost drove her to the point of suicide. As Cyrus continued to struggle with cutting up cabbage that was soon fated to be stew, he swore that one day he would resume the Carter family to its full glory and bring honour back to his family, and every meal he ate would be so luxurious that people would drool and beg just to dine with him, but for now he had to settle with stew first.

While Cyrus wandered the long-abandoned streets of the forgotten capitol, his mind raced at the speed of light as he tried to think of possibilities to restore the once thriving economy that the city had possessed before the monsters laid waste to it. And as he pondered over issue that he faced, he stumbled on a broken section of the fence that had separated the rest of civilization from the Huangshan mountains, as he stood there paralyzed thinking about the possibilities that going inside the fence would lead to him, he also thought about his darling mother, who had taken care of him since birth and now relied on him for survival. But in the end Cyrus's hopes for success triumphed over his sympathy to his mother. While he tromped through the wildlife in the forest which had now reclaimed the buildings, Cyrus couldn't help but wonder what he was trying to accomplish by exploring the Huangshan mountains, and he also couldn't stop wondering what had happened to were chosen to venture into the mountains and where did the monsters come from. When he finally reached the summit of the mountain, he took a gaze inside the crater that was once a flowing stream and he gasped as he noticed what was inside, inside the crater was a massive hole that reached as far as to the earth's core.

Climbing down the mountain, Cyrus could feel hate and pain radiating of the walls of the abyss, the walls reflected every single sinful feeling he had ever wished or even thought of. When he reached the bottom of the abyss, he felt around the darkness blindly, groping the walls and trying to find a way that would lead him to the realm where the monsters emerged from. He ran in circles for what felt like eons, silently cursing himself for not bring down a flashlight, as he felt a difference in the texture of the walls his heart raced excitedly as he knew that he was getting closer to his final destination. He ran into the opening and saw a blinding flash of light. Looking around the

enormous hole , he could understand why god was punishing the humans for ruining the beauty of the earth , the hole was filled with dying monsters , cries from the dying beasts filled the air as they choked on the black fog that humanity had caused . At that moment , cyrus realized that he could either expose the beasts and have them butchered when he ran back up to the surfaces of the earth or he could leave humanity to suffer and take sides with the beasts , and as quick as an instance Cyrus already made up his decision .

In about ten years , humanity was gone , all that remains of the civilization was ruins of their gleaming cities . looking down at the ruined citadel that once housed over millions of innocent civilians . He smiled and threw a flower down to honour the passing of the only person he truly cared for , before walking slowly back onto the the abyss , where he now lives in harmony with the beasts that were just like most people – simply misunderstood.