



Fiction

Group 4

Fool in the Mountains

Canadian International School, Ng, Emily – 15

He was late. Chen Jun Lang, top freelance travel journalist dubbed the next Bob Woodward, was late. How was he supposed to know he had to reply to a dozen more messages from his boss? Downing the cold coffee with one hand and struggling on his windbreaker over his neon yellow T-shirt with the other, his feet found their way into his hiking boots. He proceeded to strap his fanny pack and slung his trusty backpack over his shoulders, locking his hotel room door behind him. He blew down the staircase to the first floor and made a beeline for the exit and threw open the door, pasting on a half apologetic, half sheepish grin—

Wind gusted past him, stirring fallen leaves across the plain concrete ground.

The entrance was empty.

Junlang furrowed his eyebrows. His private tour guide for today's trip to Huangshan, or Yellow Mountain, was nowhere to be seen. Whipping his phone from his fanny pack, he dialed Mr Fan. The guide picked up after seven rings.

"Hello sir?"

"Hi Mr Fan! Where are you right now? I can't see you at the hotel entrance and it's nine fifteen already. You know, if you're not coming, I will have to ask for a refund. I'm sure you wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

"Mr Chen —"

"I prefer Woodward."

"Yes, sir. Mr Woodward, I am sincerely sorry. I cannot be your guide to Huangshan. I have a family emergency to attend to."

Junlang's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "In that case, I understand. However, I do wish you had told me sooner."

"Mr Woodward, I had sent an email yesterday notifying you. Perhaps you have not read it yet?"

Junlang scowled into the phone. Fine, he hadn't read it because he was preoccupied. But that was no reason for him to point that out. "No, I haven't. I'll let this slide today, but I would have really appreciated it if you gave me more time to respond."

"Yes, Mr Woodward. My sincere apologies, sir."

Junlang hung up, slightly mollified by Mr Fan's contriteness. He drifted back to the hotel lobby, at a loss of what to do next. He had depended on Mr Fan showing him the best routes and scenery up to the Guang Ming Ding. He *could* go solo — he wanted to go solo — but his boss wanted a small commentary on the local people too, and a local guide was the best way to obtain that information. A loud bout of giggles interrupted his thoughts. Junlang turned to look.

"Oh Liu Shao, you're too modest!" a woman chirped. "*I* think you're the best tour guide in the whole wide world, not just in Huangshan." Her little clique burst into more squeals reminiscent of a pigs'.

The man sitting in the middle grinned, running a hand through his hair while the other still held the signature red flag of tourist guides. "Thanks for the praise, ladies. You flatter me too much."

Seizing his chance, Junlang gave himself a quick check at the glass window and strode over, flashing them his signature million-watt smile. "Hello! I hear that you're travelling to Huangshan. Do you think you have space for one more person?"

The woman who previously spoke — she was probably the leader of this group, Junlang guessed — stood. “Sure, we have more than enough space for just one person.”

The tour guide looked apprehensive. “I don’t know guys, leading so many people at a time is a stretch even for me. I can’t be sure if I can handle one person, especially not an inexperienced, self-absorbed guy who can’t take care of himself on the hike.”

Junlang refused to rise to the bait. “I’ve been a freelance travel journalist covering hiking treks across the world for over 5 years. I should be just fine,” he shot back, his smile a little tighter than before.

With a clear amount of reluctance, the tour guide held out his hand. “I’m Mr Zhang, your group tour guide for your hike to Huangshan. Our hike starts at eleven o’ clock and we’re staying up the mountains for one night. We will spend the last day back in this hotel. Guiding you for the whole trip will cost \$ 400RMB, not including accommodation, insurance, nor sustenance. It’s a pleasure to be leading you around,” he recited, sounding anything but.

He took his hand tightly and shook it. “The pleasure is mine. Mr Woodward, at your service.”

When Mr Zhang continued holding his hand out, Junlang counted out the fee from his fanny pack and gave it to him.

Mr Zhang pocketed the money and handed him an annotated map of Huangshan. “Here’s our itinerary. We’ll be travelling up from the Yungu Temple Entrance and hike up to White Goose Ridge, then make our way to Initial Belief Peak. Make sure to eat something before the hike and bring a light lunch. We’ll head to Lion peak then make our way back to the Paiyun Hotel, where we’ll be staying for the night. We can enjoy the sunset at Cloud Dispelling Pavilion then wake up before dawn to witness the spectacular sunrise at Purple Cloud Peak. For the next day, we will be travelling back the short way to Yuping Hotel for lunch and come back to this hotel for dinner.”

Junlang nodded. He had to admit it was a solid plan. He wanted to go to Initial Belief Peak, Lion Peak, and Guang Ming Ding too, so it wouldn’t be a huge deviation from his plan although it was certainly slower-paced. As long as he got good coverage of Huangshan, it would be fine. He was looking forward to taking photos of the distinctive fauna and flora, especially the Huangshan azaleas with their unusual blood-red petals — this was the perfect time of the year to photograph them.

Hours later whilst taking a break at White Goose Ridge, Junlang was sorely regretting his decision. This trip was a huge deviation from his original plan to get some peace and quiet. His eardrums ached from the constant, high-pitched abuse they were getting, and his mood wasn’t faring much better from the unwarranted hostility he was receiving from Mr Zhang. Sure, he put a good act on for the ladies and helped them take photos, but his companions ruined any chance he had of properly appreciating the scenery around him. And with the speed they were going, it was unlikely they were going to make it to see the sunset.

Junlang was right. They barely managed to see the vestiges of the sunset at Cloud Dispelling Pavilion, and when they got there, most of the crowd was already dispersing. He wasn’t the only one to be disappointed, but he was certainly the only person in the group that wasn’t responsible for them falling behind schedule. After all, he wasn’t to blame for the women taking a break every chance they got, nor the amount of time they spent on snapping pictures. He understood their need to rest and immortalize the scenery into pixels — after all, that was part of what he loves to do for a living — but he wished they didn’t take so *long*.

Spearing his chopsticks into his bowl of rice vengefully, he shoveled the steaming pearly grains into his mouth.

“How did you like today?” inquired the group leader over the chatter of other guests and porcelain clanking against porcelain. Junlang couldn’t remember her name — it was something along the lines of Linda or Lindsay or Lindsie. At least she was pretty enough for him to remember part of her name, a thing he can’t say for the other women.

“It was alright, but it was a bit louder than I had expected.”

She nodded and they descended to silence, occupied with their food. After one more bowl of rice, Junlang set his chopsticks down.

“Alright, I think I’ll retire for the night,” he announced to the table. “I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

“Don’t forget, morning call is at half past four in the morning! Wake up if you want to see the sunrise!” The group leader called out. Mr Zhang glanced up from his bowl, then down again.

Junlang made his way outside the dining room and towards the exit, taking a short detour to his room to get his backpack. He wanted to fully capture this sunrise and the serenity in Guang Ming Ding, away from the annoying hubbub that followed the women everywhere they went.

A local hand from the restaurant blocked his exit. “Sir, you shouldn’t go there,” he cautioned nervously.

“Why?”

“You see, Huangshan is much safer during the day than at night,” he muttered, wringing his hands nervously. “Some of the paths can be hard to navigate at night, even for locals. And...and...”

“Well?” Junlang pushed on impatiently.

“And...there’s a grandmother’s tale of maidens being kidnapped and spirited away into Huangshan by demons. It might not be safe, that’s all I’m saying,” he confessed.

Junlang laughed in the boy’s face. “Well, you can’t put any stock in dear old grandmother’s tales. Besides, I am no maiden, nor do I believe in demons.”

The boy’s cheeks flamed. Pushing him aside, Junlang strode out to the night, with his backpack on his back and his torch in his hand, mentally envisioning the route he needed to take to get to Guang Ming Ding.

After hours of searching deep into the night, Junlang had to admit he was lost. He could swear he had passed that U-shaped mossy rock three times already and that the bowed pine on his left was familiar. The heavy mist seemed to obscure everything. He sighed, about to admit defeat. He could probably try toughing the night out in the Pavilion he saw a few minutes ago, but he wasn’t sure if he could find his way back. He flailed for another solution. Perhaps — Perhaps —

The woman seemed to materialize out of the mist. She wore a billowing snow-white *hanfu* that swept down to the floor. A woven basket dangled from one slender arm, filled to the brim with emerald leaves and ivory stalks. Her waterfall of raven hair framed her ivory, perfectly heart-shaped face and accentuated her wide coal-black eyes beneath elegantly arched brows. Her lips were vermilion — Junlang briefly wondered how she got her makeup. It was slightly unnerving and very dramatic and extremely antiquated. It was absolutely alluring.

For a long moment, brown eyes locked into coal-black ones.

Then she ducked her head. “I—I didn’t expect to run into anyone,” she stammered softly, breaking the silence. After a moment of no response, she peeked up from her eyelashes, then cast her eyes back down when her gaze met Junlang’s, spurring him into action.

“My apologies, my lady. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He bowed and did a traditional fist and palm salute in greeting. He definitely wasn’t doing it to impress her. It was merely appropriate. “What is your name?”

“H—uang Shi Lin.” She flicked her eyes back up slightly longer than before, then turned back to the ground as if embarrassed by Junlang’s attention.

He smiled encouragingly. “That’s a beautiful name fit for a beautiful girl like you. Yellow, poetry, and the woods — is that right?”

She nodded at the ground, then picked up the courage to speak. “A—are you lost?” she whispered.

“Well...” He grinned sheepishly. “Kind of. I’m trying to get to Guang Ming Ding to see the sunrise, but I suspect I might have made a wrong turn at some point. Everything just looks the same under this bloody mist.”

She perked up at that. “I can help you!” Faint rosy spots appeared on her cheeks. “I mean, I have been here longer than almost anyone else. And m—my village house is in Guang Ming Ding too. I would appreciate the company.”

Junlang couldn’t stop a smile from breaking over his face. “I would like that very much too, Shi Lin. Call me Woodward.”

So on they went, with Huang Shi Lin leading Junlang over paved paths and rocky slopes, wide-open roads and hidden trails, until at last they arrived at a narrow rock cleft.

She beckoned him in from where he was standing dubiously.

“You live in a cave? Are you a cavewoman or something?” He blurted out, regretting his words the moment they were out.

Her twinkling eyes met his, the first time after their hike. A jolt of electricity went through him. “No, but you’ll see. Don’t you trust me?”

Junlang nodded numbly. “Of course. Of course, I trust you.”

Her voluptuous lips curved upwards. Her icy hand slid into his and she led him hand-in-hand down the narrow passageway. Several times, Junlang heard an odd noise and jumped as Huang Shi Lin squeezed his hand in reassurance. After a long while marked with inheld breaths and palpitating heartbeats, they finally reach the end of the passageway. It seemed like hours had passed, and it seemed like no time had passed at all. Cool air blew in, and Junlang gratefully inhaled in the chilly air, clearing his mind.

A modest village cottage stood on the left of him backed by a steep stone face connected to the cleft. A rill trickled water down to a miniature plunge pool next to the cottage before continuing down the mountain.

They went towards the cottage, a little thing with chipping whitewashed walls supporting clay roof tiles on top. Near the entrance, there was a rural wood burning stove. Huang Shi Lin set down her basket and lit a red candle, bathing the interior of the cottage with dancing/flickering red light. The cottage was sparsely furnished and windowless. The floor was hard-packed earth. There was a *kang* bed stove, a wooden desk opposite which had pigments and drawing tools scattered across it, and an antique clothes cabinet lacquered in red.

She glanced back at him. “Do you mind if you go outside for a bit? I — I need to change my clothes,” she explained.

“Of course,” Junlang said, hurriedly backing out, closing the flimsy wooden door behind him.

He explored the outside of Huang Shi Lin’s remote abode more closely. It was surrounded by crimson Huangshan azaleas at the height of bloom. Junlang quickly snapped some pictures with his phone and went on exploring. At the back of the cottage, an outbuilding stood half-hidden by vines and camouflaged by dirt. Curious, he unconsciously gripped his torch harder, swinging the heavy wooden door open.

A refrigerator sat inside, its metallic surface a stark contrast to the surroundings.

Junlang blinked in surprise.

“I see you’ve found my only purchase, Mr Woodward,” Huang Shi Lin’s voice sounded from behind him in the darkness. He turned and smiled sheepishly, caught snooping. “But truly, I find having a refrigerator immeasurably useful. It keeps my food from spoiling for a long time.” She turned to another topic. “Would you like to come see the sunrise? We should be able to see the sea of clouds today.”

Junlang nodded. Huang Shi Lin gestured for him to go back to the front of the cottage, carefully closing the door as they left. Had he looked back, perhaps he could have seen a glint of silver behind her back. But he didn’t, caught up in his excitement.

Junlang walked to the front and he could see the sky already lightening. He quickly set up his camera and tripod in front of the blooming azaleas and put an eye to the viewfinder.

Huang Shi Lin’s hand slid onto his shoulder. “I think you should aim a bit more to the right,” she murmured. “You’ll be able to capture the sun rising between those two mountains. See?” She pointed to the space between two mountains in the distance, where the sky indeed seemed to be lighter. At the same time, her hand slid to the back of his neck gently. Junlang could barely think past her soft touch, the heady scent of azaleas enveloping him.

In one swift motion, she drew a glinting blade with her other hand and stabbed it into his neck at the base of his skull. The camera equipment tumbled down the hill and over the edge. She yanked the blade through the spinal cord and out again, then plunged it into the side of his neck. Blood spurted out and splattered the soil beneath the azaleas as the sun finally illuminated the world. She lowered his body onto the ground and watched as his life drained out and his eyes became dull and lifeless, staring to the sunrise.

She made quick work of skinning and quartering his flesh, taking particular care to keep the skin intact. She carried the meat to the refrigerator and stacked them neatly inside, then came back out to wash her hands in the plunge pool. Carrying her drawing equipment out, she spread out his skin and painted across Junlang’s face with broad swipes and fine strokes until his face was unidentifiable from hers. Finally when she was satisfied with her handiwork, she sloughed off her skin and clothes to reveal a green-skinned demon with fangs as sharp as razors. She — the demon — dressed in her new skin and grinned in an imitation of a smile behind her newfound clothing.

The rising sun lit the sky and blanked the clouds in red, and in the sunlight, the blood-soaked azaleas seemed to drip scarlet rubies.

Note: Huang Shi Lin can be translated back to 黃詩琳, which was the translation Chen Jun Lang chose to believe in.

However, the demon’s name can also be translated to 黃屍林, which means yellow, signifying Huangshan, and ‘forest of corpses’, which is a nod to the unique azaleas she gardens with blood.

The Deceit of Nature

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Eder, Eden – 14

It was the middle of January when they had the picnic that they would never forget. It was just them out in the mountains, with nobody else other than themselves and the wild animals. Although they knew of the dangers of the mountains, they underestimated it and enjoyed their picnic. It was only when the ground started to shake that they considered moving, but they did not realize that it would only get worse. They set down their picnic on a ledge to have a better view, but it only led to the death of Thomas' father. Ever since that picnic, they never left the village, but that all changed when his mother got sick.

Thomas brought her a soup from the kitchen that he had made himself and fed her with a spoon.

"Are you feeling any better?" he asked in a comforting voice.

"Slightly," she mumbled out. He sighed and told her he'd go out for a walk around the village and grabbed his hat and went outside.

He stepped outside and walked on the path along trees of different shades of red and orange, and sat at the outskirts of the village where he watched the sunset. Watching the sunset reminded him of the picnic in January. He looked off into the distance as a tear formed in the corner of his eye, and looked to his side where his father's memorial lay. He stared at it while tears dripped down his cheeks when he was interrupted by someone.

"What are you doing, Thomas?" said a elderly woman. "It's getting dark; I'm sure your mother would want you inside." she said with a comforting tone.

"Yeah, I think it's time I head back," he said as he got up.

He was headed back to the path when the woman put her arm on his shoulder and said, "I know you miss him, Thomas. I do too. If you ever need to talk about it, feel free to come by sometime," she said with a smile.

"Thanks, I will." He nodded and smiled back at her, and then continued on his way back home.

He opened the door and put his hat on the coat rack next to the doorway and saw his mother laying down asleep on the couch, where he last left her. He sat down on the ground next to the sofa thinking about what he can do to help her, and he had an idea. He grabbed his hat and rushed back over to his father's memorial and to no surprise, she was still there.

"Margaret, may I speak to you?" he asked.

"Of course. What is it?" she said without looking away from the memorial.

"It's about my mom. Do you think there's anything I can do to help her? I've tried helping her every way I can but nothing is working." he said sadly.

"Well, there's a special herb that can cure almost any illness. Unfortunately, they grow far from here and I'm too old to go with you, so you'll have to go alone." He was terrified of the outside world since his father's death, but he knew he needed to do this.

"If that's what I need to do for her to get better, I'll do it."

She nodded and motioned for him to follow her.

They stepped into her house and she handed him an old map and a compass. "This map shows you where they grow, and you'll need this compass," she said as she held them in her hands.

"I have to. I can't lose any more of my family," he said as he took them out of her hands. She smiled and waved goodbye to him as he went down the steps. He went home one last time to pack his bag and held his mother's hand one last time, then he headed out the village and followed the path leading out.

He walked down the path that he used to walk down so many times, and he felt happy. He walked for about twenty minutes until he ended up in the open mountains. He took a moment to look at the view, as he hadn't seen anything like it before. He jumped back when he heard a bush rustling in the distance, and he took a step back. He didn't know whether to continue going forward or to step back, so he tried to intimidate whatever was back there by throwing a rock at the bush.

He aimed at the bush and threw the rock directly at it, followed by loud rustling. He went to investigate the bush while keeping a distance, and he saw a person hiding between the leaves. He had brown hair that was almost long enough to cover his eyes and wore a green t-shirt that was torn up and covered in dirt, and his pants the same. He also had many scratch marks across his arms and legs.

“Hello?” he said to the person in the bush.

He peeked out of the bush and said, “Please don’t hurt me!”

“Hey, don’t worry, I don’t want to hurt you. Sorry about the rock,” said Thomas, reaching his arm out. The boy grabbed his arm and pulled himself out of the bush and they looked at each other.

Thomas was confused and stepped closer to the boy.

“So, what are you doing out here?” he asked.

“Well, it’s a long story but I live out here, What about you?” the boy responded with a smile on his face.

“I’m out here looking for a special type of herb that could cure any type of illness; do you think you know where I could find anything like that?” he asked with hope.

“Mmmm.. No, but I could help you look for it,” he said as he grabbed his arm with a smile.

“Thanks, umm. What’s your name?”

“My name’s Toby; what about you?”

“Thomas, but you can call me Tom.”

“So, how do you live out here? It’s really scary,” Thomas asked him.

“Well, as long as you’re careful and know how to survive it’s not that hard,” the boy replied.

The boys chatted the entire journey and shared their experiences with one another, getting to know each other better. It was going well until Thomas asked a question that really struck him.

“So, Toby, was it? How did you end up out here?” Thomas asked the now silent Toby.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he replied with a cold tone. It was silent for a while, until they came across the ledge of a mountain.

Thomas had bad memories of ledges and looked for other ways to cross it. Toby noticed that he wasn’t next to him anymore and turned around and saw him looking around.

“What are you doing? There’s a ledge here that we can cross—” Toby said before being interrupted.

“No! I’m not crossing the ledge. Don’t you know how dangerous that is?” Thomas said nervously.

“Oh come on, toughen up a bit and just cross it,” Toby replied coldly.

“We lost my dad in an accident on a cliff; I’m not crossing that ledge, Toby,” Thomas replied while letting out a tear. Toby looked at him and gave him a hug.

“Sorry. I also lost my father. He couldn’t handle it anymore after my mother left us,” he said while also tearing up. They hugged each other and grieved over their losses, then Toby got up and reached his arm out.

“Come on Tom, let’s find another way around,” he said smiling.

Thomas looked up and smiled, grabbing his hand and pulling himself up.

“Thanks, Toby.”

They looked around for another way to cross and found a slope which led to a forest. Toby jumped down before Thomas and found a path that looked too out of place to be natural.

“Tom, Look! I think this is it!” Toby said pointing towards the path. Thomas climbed down cautiously and looked down at the path.

“Good catch, Toby!” he said with a smile. They walked down the path and found themselves in an ocean of herbs, just like the ones Margaret told Thomas about. They gasped and looked at each other in joy and started grabbing as many herbs as their pockets could carry.

Once they had enough herbs to last them a lifetime, they left the forest cheerfully, but then they realized something.

“Toby, where are you headed off to now?” Thomas asked him.

“I ... never thought about that ... but I’ve had so much fun with you Tom. I don’t want us to have to part ways,” he said in a sad tone. They both stood in silence until Thomas spoke.

“I’ve got an idea! Toby, how would you like to live with us in the village?” he spoke with joy. Toby’s eyes widened and he formed a cheery smile.

“Tom, I would love that more than anything in the world!” he exclaimed with happiness as he hugged him.

On their way back, Thomas rambled on about the village to Toby in full details, and they were both excited as one could be. They entered the village at dawn, and it was the start of a new world for Toby, finally having a place to call home. As for Thomas, he now had a best friend. Additionally, his mother started getting better and Toby was adopted into the family.

Finally, the family felt whole again.

The Mountain's Trap

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Fan, Emily – 15

“Again?” Haruno said in disbelief, adding another jagged line to the three marks she had made on a tree.

It was the fourth time that she had crossed paths with this tree. Ever since she arrived at the mountains, she had left markings everywhere she went, but she seemed to return to those same marks every time she thought she had made it to somewhere new.

She knew she was being assigned a suicide mission when she was chosen, just like all the other scouts in the past. She was just barely surviving on picked fruit and spending nights holed up between large rocks, but she knew it wouldn't be long before her name was added to the ever-expanding Lost Patrol; before she'd break her promise to her brother that she would make it back.

“Your sacrifice will be honored,” the Village leader had said before she left, raising a glass of wine at her as if it was garlic and she was a vampire, “by the Lost Patrol.”

A stream gagged in contempt as she trudged past. In response, Haruno ruefully kicked withered and bug-bitten leaves into the flowing water. She slowly fell to her knees, collapsing into a pool of sunlight as exhaustion crashed over her like a load of bricks dropping onto her back. The silver water swiftly evaded her trembling fingers as she reached towards it. Haruno let out a tremoring sigh and rolled over to her side like a fresh corpse, numbly feeling two streaks of warmth creeping down her cheeks. She spat and hacked out bits of stray dirt and fragments of crushed leaves from her nose and mouth.

Haruno rolled back with her chest facing the sky, wincing as sharp rocks and leaf scraps dug into her scarred back. The soft golden shafts of afternoon sun felt like spoons that were gouging out her eyes. She squinted and turned onto her stomach instead. A stray ochre leaf settled comfortably on her nose and she vehemently flicked it away. With a burst of resentful vigor, Haruno struggled to her feet. She dragged her feet through the thick layers of fallen foliage and continued uphill along the small river.

The blaze of adrenaline quickly faded, however. Fighting off the slowly amounting waves of lethargy that seemed to radiate from every fragment of the mountain was becoming harder. Haruno staggered and nearly impaled herself onto a jutting rock, lashing her hand out at the last moment to block the Grim Reaper's blade. She exhaled deeply and leaned against the rock, lolling her head to the side to watch the final streams of gilded blood stain the sky as the dying sun meekly crawled to its grave.

Her cloudy eyes followed the sun. “Brother, I'm sorry,” she choked.

“Who are you talking to?”

She jumped and hit her head against the stony protrusion, wincing. Reaching gingerly to the back of her skull, she shrieked as her hand came back bloody.

A figure stepped out behind the rock. Through her blurry vision, all she could make out was a pale, slender male. He pulled her into a standing position with surprising ease, examining her wound.

caught sight of her back, crisscrossed with scars and oozing with purple.

The wounds along her spine had begun to itch again. It felt like a whole nest of larvae squirming under her skin. She started to squirm, her mouth agape in a silent cry of agony and sickening itchiness, which had spread to her arms and thighs. Chills ran along her jaw. The insides of her mouth started to swell up. She helplessly clawed at her neck, trying to alleviate the itchiness inside her throat.

“Kuri!” A sharp cry sounded from a ledge above her. “Leave her. She’ll be gone soon.”

“She’s not gone yet,” he snapped back. Gingerly picking her up, he crossed the clearing between the rock and the cliff, swiftly navigating back to the stream that she found earlier. Once there, he threw her into the strong current with a splash and held her down, immersing his entire arm in the water. She struggled weakly against his single, extraordinarily powerful hand.

“It’ll work quicker if you stop moving,” he shouted, voice muffled from the water.

She fell limp. She tried to draw in a breath but only managed to suck up water, which rushed into her mouth and throat and shot through her nose. She cried out but only released a few pitiful bubbles. Just when she felt that her lungs were on the verge of popping like a water balloon under pressure, he yanked her back up and scrutinized her dripping form as if he was inspecting a freshly caught fish. He pounded her back and a projectile waterfall shot out of her mouth. She collapsed, fatigue and shock from the icy water paralyzing her limbs.

“You—” she started hoarsely—

“—are not dead,” he finished. “Yet.”

She faced him, breathing hard. His pure white hair drifted across his razor-sharp red eyes in the direction of the wind. She caught sight of streaks of gold carvings imprinted on his forehead that resembled a familiar, faded, maroon headband. His ghostly pale face remained unreadable.

“You tried to drown me.”

Kuri tensed. The girl’s back was laced with brick red smiles and there was a dark scar on her left calf that made her stumble every time she tried to stand up. He had saved her, yet here she was, accusing him.

“Listen.”

She lashed out, swinging blindly at him. He effortlessly dodged and leaned forward, piercing her with a cold, laser-like glare.

“I said *listen*.”

She ignored him, struggling to her knees.

He eyed her coldly. “Or you’d rather die.”

The blood drained from her face.

Suddenly, Kuri’s smooth, cold face was replaced by her father’s. Her back numbly stung from the lashes he had inflicted on her. She could see the tail of the bloodstained whip snaking behind him as he raised it over his head for another lash.

“You’d rather die,” Her father roared, “than to be a scout?”

Her brother tugged at their father’s sleeve. “You’ll kill her!”

“She won’t die from this,” he snarled back, spewing spit as he spoke. He tied string from a ball of red yarn to her wrist, pulling on the knot until her hand started to turn purple. He grabbed Haruno by the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder, striding out of the house. She shrieked and flailed, tangling her arms with yarn in the process, but it was no use.

“No! Come back!” Her brother’s pleading wail sounded like it came from miles away.

She twisted her head back to face him, her face contorted and eyes strained wide with desperation.

I promise I will.

“Calm down, freak,” Kuri muttered. Haruno fell limp as she realized she was slung over Kuri’s bony shoulders. He barely huffed as he skimmed across the rough terrain. “How long have you been here for?”

Haruno’s teeth were beginning to chatter. “I d—don’t know. It—it’s been a while.”

By the time they reached the cliff, Haruno was starting to doze off from exhaustion. Kuri’s footsteps slowed to a halt. He laid her onto a worn stretcher made of rough leather and branches. Two other figures snaked around her and hoisted her up between them. She could barely make out the blurred night sky before passing out.

“Who’s this?” A steely voice came from in front of her.

Her eyes slowly opened.

She was propped up against a splinter-infested chair in a large cabin, surrounded by a motley ring of shadowed figures. Beside Kuri, a mauve-skinned figure was sitting opposite to her. His heather-tinted hair was pulled into a ponytail that snaked down to the base of his neck. He swept his bangs away, revealing striking red eyes, similar to Kuri’s.

“Koya.” Kuri nodded coolly at the figure.

“Alien!” Haruno croaked.

Koya didn’t flinch. “Name?”

She raised her quivering chin. “Haruno.”

“Why are you here?”

“They sent me.” Words tumbled around in her head. “The Village. A sacrifice.” Her hands trembled. “I mean, scout.”

“I thought they stopped sending them,” Kuri muttered.

“Obviously not, then,” Koya replied. He tilted his head, appearing deep in thought.

Questions began to throw themselves around in Haruno’s head. Her words wanted to spill out at the same time but they formed a block that prevented her from saying anything, leaving her tongue limp. After a long moment of hesitation, she spoke.

“You’re...human?”

The pair exchanged glances.

“Scouts, Kuri said. “The village was losing too many people to the mountains. They sent all boys over the age of fourteen away, thinking that we could find out the most about the mountains. You might’ve heard about us.”

Haruno gaped.

The Lost Patrol!

“No one came to search for us when none of us made it back, though,” Koya murmured.

Haruno whipped around to face him. “Are you kidding? They’ve been sending scouts every month up to now!”

There was a long moment of silence as her words sank in.

“What?” A small whisper came from the shadowed figures.

“I—I’m one of them,” Haruno stammered. “The scouts from previous months never made it back. Are they here?”

“We haven’t seen anyone new for years,” Koya muttered. “And it doesn’t matter. You won’t be able to report back.”

Haruno blinked.

“You think we haven’t tried escaping?” Kuri hissed.

“Escaping?”

“The mountains trap us, somehow,” Koya murmured. “A few of us tried to retrace our path back down the mountains.” He gazed bleakly through the window at the endless peaks, darkened by the night. “We found some of their limbs a few sunrises later.”

Haruno shivered. “Then...what did you do?”

“We lived.” Kuri gestured around him. “We fought.”

“Fought?”

“Animals.”

Haruno slouched back in her seat. “That’s *it*? Surely there’s more you can do!”

“What do you suggest, then,” Koya said flatly.

“Escape!”

“We’ve sacrificed too much for that,” he said quietly.

“I could go,” Haruno offered hesitantly. “If you lose me, it’ll be like losing nothing.”

The pair hesitated, swapping glances.

“It’ll be losing our strongest tie to the village,” someone mumbled from the back.

“It’s worth it,” Kuri argued. “We could tie a rope to you. You could try to find your way back down.”

“You might die trying,” Koya warned.

She pressed her lips tightly together against a wave of grief. “I promised my brother I’d be back. I have to try.”

“Brother,” Kuri muttered to him, “if she wants to go, you can’t stop her.” He turned to Haruno and gave a tiny nod. “Sunrise.”

Haruno spent the night tossing around in her makeshift bed. She lay shivering with cold wood pressing against her freshly healed wounds. When the first streaks of light trickled through the cabin windows, she was the first one to crawl up, followed shortly by Kuri and Koya.

They fastened a sturdy rope around her waist, tying the other end to a sturdy tree trunk nearby. The rest settled around silently as they watched Haruno take unsteady steps down the slope, grabbing haphazardly at rocks and tree trunks when she lost her footing. The early sunlight struck her stumbling form, bathing her in red light.

“Another lamb to the slaughter,” Koya murmured as he watched her. “How many times have we seen someone go like this before?”

“She’s the best chance we have,” Kuri replied.

“But do we really want to leave?” A third figure emerged from behind the brothers.

They slid their red gazes to him in a stunned silence.

“Are you kidding?” Kuri hissed. “We’ve been trying to leave ever since we were sent out here!”

“But...if we do make it out, what are we going to look like to the village?” The newcomer glanced at Koya. “That girl called you an alien.”

“She isn’t used to us,” Koya replied, shrugging.

The rope suddenly gave a sharp jolt, rustling the tree’s leaves. Three pairs of eyes landed on the needle—straight rope vibrating in the air, then onto each other.

Haruno gave the rope a final jerk, tying it to a firm-looking tree as it had run out.

Out of sheer exhaustion, she caught her toe on a rock and tumbled backward down a long slope, letting out yelps of pain as she rolled. She finally landed into a bush and stayed there, making no effort to disentangle herself.

Suddenly, remote yells reached her ears from behind her. Haruno whipped around, eyes wide, but only saw another swab of dense forest. Sighing, she let her eyes flutter shut.

Immediately, however, she heard more distant cries.

Oh.

A plan began to gather itself in Haruno’s mind.

She reopened her eyes slowly and carefully raised herself up. She deflected her eyes to the left as she took ginger steps backward, and, from the corner of her eye, she could barely make out a clearing dotted with houses in the distance.

Energy shot through her limbs. She forced herself to step back into the dense layers of foliage. Locating the rope, she ran her hand along it as she stumbled back.

“Kuri! Koya!”

The pair seemed to fly out of the trees. They landed silently beside her, eyes blazing. A stream of others followed as if they were the brothers' delayed shadows, slipping into position behind them into two neat lines.

"That way?" Kuri demanded, gesturing towards the rope.

"Wait—"

Before she could finish, Kuri had already leapt forward with his line.

Koya hesitated. His group milled around him uncertainly.

"*Wait!*"

Koya frowned. "What?"

"You can't just run towards it," she cried. "You can't look at it. You—"

Her sentence was cut short by Kuri knocking the breath out of her, shooting out of the nearby trees. "Liar," he snarled into her face.

Koya slithered his way between the two and kicked out at his brother, propelling Kuri backward.

"Let her finish," Koya said, holding him down.

"What is there to be said?" Kuri roared. "It led to nothing!" He squirmed violently, wriggling free from his brother and dashing at Haruno again.

"No!" Haruno scrambled up. "I promise! I found—"

Kuri picked her up and, with a resentful glare, threw her right down towards the rope. "You say you found the Village? Prove it," he said coldly after her screaming, tumbling form.

Haruno rolled for what felt like an eternity, gritting her teeth against the pain from sharp rocks and yelling out every time she bumped into a tree trunk, unable to stop her roll. After what felt like crashing into endless rocks and leaves, she hit a flat surface and lay motionless in the dust.

"Mother!" A child's cry pierced her ears.

"What?" A distracted voice traveled across the air, followed by pittering footsteps that abruptly stopped in front of Haruno. The woman let out a shrill scream.

"Monster!"

Heavy footsteps thudded against the peat, skidding to a halt beside Haruno. A babble of voices rose like a distorted wave. She pried open her eyes, straining for her eyes to focus and barely making out a group of unfamiliar village men milling behind the Village leader, now an ashen, pot-bellied elder. For a long moment, the air was laced with silent shock.

Finally, the leader let out an unintelligible rasp.

Haruno coughed and pushed herself up. The mother immediately ushered her child away as the village men scattered a few steps back. Haruno swung her head around, spraying white particles around as if a bucketful of sand was trapped in her hair.

“The Lost Patrol,” she gasped.

The villagers exchanged bewildered glances.

“What’s that?”

Haruno froze.

The leader hobbled to her, huffing with every step he took. “You found them?”

“They’re living on a cliff. I tried to lead them back but—” she broke off, suppressing a spasm. Her words shriveled up in her mouth as she coughed up white dust.

“Get the doctor!”

He leaned towards her. “Which cliff?”

Haruno’s eyes bugged. “No,” she rasped. “You won’t find them. There’s a barrier— I—I don’t know how it works, but it’s why people get lost.”

“Haruno!” A hauntingly familiar, rumbling voice came from behind her.

“Father?” She murmured. Exhausted, she forced her aching neck muscles to turn.

“*Brother?*”

The edges of her brother’s face were covered with grizzled, gray hair and his eyes had hardened. Lines were beginning to form on his forehead and patches of his hair had become gray. Haruno suddenly felt sapped of her energy, weakening with every heartbeat.

“Where’s father?” Haruno croaked.

“He isn’t here,” he replied shakily. “Can’t you tell? It’s been thirty years!”

Haruno’s head spun.

He crouched beside her. “What happened to your skin?”

“Skin?” Haruno glanced at her arm. It was becoming dry and the skin seemed to be flaking off, as if she was coated with a thin layer of flour. She suppressed another powdery cough, vigorously clearing her throat.

Just then, a loud rustle of leaves sounded from the mountain edge. The commotion around Haruno seemed to freeze as everyone’s attention was drawn to the mountain edge.

A blur of white and purple, followed by a stream of other familiar forms, tumbled out. Shrieks and yelps filled the clearing.

Her brother drew in a sharp breath. “They’re...the Lost Patrol?”

The Patrol’s movements drastically slowed. It seemed to take them every scrap of energy to even crawl onto their feet. Spotting Haruno, Kuri took a lurching step towards her with Koya following, but they suddenly paused in midair.

Haruno struggled up, shaking powder from her limbs and, with a lurching gait, stumbled over. Kuri reached out, white powder showering from his trembling arm.

“Haru—”

A loud crack stopped him short. A large fracture formed down the center of his face, slowly traveling to his chest. Smaller splinters started to sprout from the main fissure like a mycelium infestation. For a moment, his desperate face seemed to hang in the air before reducing itself to white dust along with the rest of his body.

The Mountain Towers over the Monastery Every Day

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Hasofer, Asher – 14

A part of the mossy, cobblestone path cracked today. I didn't feel anything. All it showed me was the impermanence of things. Besides, it was destined to happen. Whether there were thousands of days left for the stones to cover the dirt, it was going to crack eventually. Likewise, the wood of the trees was rotting, destined to leave this earth one day – even after standing as wooden pillars for ages.

Back to daily events. The rice was plain and inedible, the view of the peaks was usual. The tint of the morning sky was dotted white with clouds. I felt tired and headed to the monk's quarters. No one was around, I went to sleep. I woke later and the miserable cool of the morning had receded. All I felt was warmth. The air was clear and I could breathe in without thinking. The massive mountain looked down upon me in disgust like it did every day. As was my custom, I tried to ignore it. I got up from my resting place and started walking on the now slightly broken cobblestone pathway which has lived for centuries. Surely, in another 200 years the path would realise that it was time to sleep and the entirety of it would fail.

I arrived somewhere. Although I had just rested, I still felt exhausted. I found another orange soul. "Come brother SiWang, pray with us," someone whispered.

"Where?"

"Well now the monastery is resting, Abbot has said to gather in the courtyard."

I looked over through my fatigued, blurred view and saw everybody, even the skinny man. I felt strange. To be standing while all my brothers were kneeling filled me with a subdued rage. Why should I be above them? I fell to my foundations, not because I wanted to pray, rather because it would let me feel the sensation I imagine for the time when I retire to the dust. After all, is it not the place of everything to expire? In my case, I am to eventually give in to the course of all nature, and when I die I will not be above nor below anything.

My eyes were shut in prayer, but nothing changed. My prayers didn't stop the hole inside me from expanding, and being around all my 'brothers' didn't help either.

After a while, another voice arrived at my ears, this time a familiar one.

"SiWang, let's go and piss off to somewhere else." Of course, that unruly voice had to be TaoQi's.

"Why do you always speak in such an unrefined way?" I muttered calmly.

"I feel like it sometimes. You take this monk thing too seriously. You can actually express what you're feeling. You need to lighten up a bit, friend."

The crystal raindrops of the evening were falling, and the light blue of the day turned dark.

I walked along the cracked path to the skinny man's quarters for my nightly duties.

As I was sweeping his floors, I noticed that the skinny man was not there.

The stench of tea leaves filled me, and made me think about the leaves. The leaves sprouted into life and eventually crumbled: if that is to happen to me, is there any purpose to life?

I didn't have long to ponder this idea, as the slender man entered his quarters. I immediately bowed out of habitual deference. Pure rage coursed through me. It was one of the rare occasions I felt mad, not because he annoyed me, but rather because I was below him.

The skinny man looked at me,

"SiWang," he spoke abruptly.

“Yes, *Abbot*?”

“You’ve attended only a single prayer, with that friend of yours, TaoQi. Where have you been this week?”

“I don't know, *Abbot*,” I uttered.

“Did you know that the pathways of this monastery were chiselled from the stone of the surrounding mountains centuries ago?” he replied.

“Yes, *Abbot*. ”

He paused, and seemed to not want to continue the conversation.

“SiWang, I have noticed you don't speak much and you have no emotion. Why is that my son?”

“I don’t have the impulse to speak. The words I speak will be heard by people who will live, and then die. Is it worth speaking if the words are meaningless?”

“SiWang! Do not question me!” the old man boomed.

He droned on about respect for a while and I didn't much care for what he had to say.

I felt tired again, I turned away to walk off.

“SiWang?”

I stood silent , looking at him indifferently.

“What is your purpose in this life?”

The loud and the quiet in my head stopped, and the thinking stopped as well.

“I don't know, *Abbot*,” I replied

“Go.”

As I walked away from the slender man’s quarters, my feet started to get cut on the rugged pathway. I didn't care, after all, the place of any living thing is to die.

I kept walking and eventually found myself at an impasse of the path. I didn't know where in the monastery grounds I was, since my monk life had been mostly mundane and saddening.

The man made, cobblestone path I had been walking on broke apart and became a narrow, mountain rock path that had clearly not been used in a very long time.

I carried on the track, which I had discovered would lead me further through and beyond the mountain. I thought about the mountain. It towers over the monastery every day, clearly in the view of every orange soul, and yet not a single one has ever managed to conquer it.

It reminded me of a conversation with TaoQi when we were younger.

“Nothing triggers anything for me. All my relatives could get hurt and all my relationships could end and I would still feel flat,” I said.

“What do you mean flat?” TaoQi said.

“I never feel happiness or anger, I think it's because I have realised that life is bound to end and that means life is impermanent. Since my life is going to stop one day, I don't invest anything in it.”

“Does thinking like that make you sad?”

“Probably, but I don’t acknowledge it.”

“Look SiWang, you need to start treating your mentality like an obstacle. If you can't come to the realisation that there is some purpose in life, you are going to implode.”

Thinking back to what he said, I figured that the mountain that faced me on the narrow path I was walking was my obstacle. It was an ever-present insult to my ideas about death and it taunted me every day. It taunted me because I knew that even when I am long gone from the water and maggots of this earth, and when I am reduced to memories of bones in the dust, the mountain will still be above me. The reason my entire existence has been pathetic is because the mountain has constantly reminded me that I will expire.

I felt tired. I walked until I found a tree and rested on *the gravel floor*.

When I woke in the morning I realised the conclusion I had to come to. I calmly walked back to the monastery and arrived at the all-too-familiar monk's quarters. I folded my orange robes on my mat and went to find TaoQi. I wanted to console TaoQi and thank him for all the help he'd given me over the years.

“SiWang, why are you thanking me now?”

I looked at him and walked away.

I didn't even think about going to talk to Abbot. Instead, I headed to that place in the woods beneath the mountain, far away, where I had slept the night before.

I brought a rope with me and attached it to the tree I had slept under.

As I went to fasten it around my neck I heard a familiar voice.

“SiWang, stop there!” It was the skinny old man again. He continued, “Come down from there.”

“Yes, *Abbot*.”

The Tale of Two Villages

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Kleinberg, Natalie – 16

The Li

Long long ago, two sworn enemy villages sat side by side with a mountain in between. The houses in the villages had dark pointed roofs and wooden walls. Creaky doors led into each house which generally housed around five people. Outside of the houses were twisted roads which winded around and around. Occasionally, the fog would fall from the mountain tops and lay atop the trees and houses, filling the village with a mildewy aura. When rainfall occurred early morning, you could almost hear the sound of a single water droplet falling down a tree tall, leaf after leaf. Only when the sun was at the peak of the mountain would people wake up and get on with their day. Those who could sleep all day, would, and this was often the case. You could always tell when it was time for work as every creaky door and rusty fence latch would screech. A simple dispute between two brothers and a sack of rice had enough damage to create decades of separation, theories and conspiracies about what truly happened on that god-forsaken day. All I knew was that we despise them, and they loathe us. Every aspect of our existence was different and the only thing that binds us is the mountain that divides us. We are the *Li*, and *they* are the *Hou*.

The Li are a strong group of people who flourish when together, but could not possibly survive alone. We rely on tactics of secrecy and tales to sustain our way of life. Secrets helped build the walls that surrounded us. But, without the secrets, those walls crumble, and only what once was, remains. My family is part of the Li, just as we had been for centuries before. After the dispute, my great grandfather founded our village and named it Li village. Since then my family has been in charge. Many of us had never left Li territory for fear of what was beyond and the potential threat of uncertainty.

The mountain that divides us is tall and glares down at us with large feet decorated in bright green leaves which dance down the side of the cascading sharp surface. The grey stones either shielded you from the burning sunlight or encapsulated you in the thick and musty fog which occasionally graced the mountain. The mountains were as numerous as they were mystical. They always have been, and they always will be. But the mountain which divided us was unlike the rest. I remember laying in the cool grass with wind caressing my face just staring up at the mountains forever. *How could something be so still yet so lively?*

It is said that there was a hole in the center of the mountains in which the bravest would go as a show of their strength or those desperate would go to plead to the gods in times of strife. From what I knew, it stood as a gaping hole on the side of the mountain, and from there you could see everything far and wide. Its presence had a supernatural feeling, and not having been to it in real life, I *knew* it had to mean something. This portal would come to be known as the 'gateway to heaven' as it was the closest one could get to the spirit world. Those who failed to reach the top, met their demise at the bottom of the icy Zhi Ming River.



For years I had relentlessly asked my mother about the Hou, why we hate them so much and why they hate us and I had been left with nothing other than blank faces and signs of disapproval. Other times I had been told variations about what truly happened between the two brothers.

I looked like my mother, she had ebony hair which lay at her shoulder length and occasionally held up in a tight bun. As she aged, worry lines began to form between her eyebrows and she grew colder. My father never spoke much, but when he did, he would speak about how the Hou would scheme and make trouble for our village – despite the fact that he had no evidence of his claims. But now that my parents have departed from this life, I have to take matters into my own hands and make it my responsibility to find the truth. From a young age, my parents wanted me to learn how to care for myself and my people; but they also wanted to teach me how to rely on myself. As a result of my lack of training, I felt lost as a scarcity of food swept over the village. Even when surrounded by people, I felt more alone than ever.

I could feel my legs turning to noodles and my stomach clenched at the thought of how I could handle the situation. I could feel my back getting hot and a powerful headache coming on. I was completely lost.

My hands started to tremble like leaves during the fall and I could feel myself slipping. My people need food and we are currently going through the worst famine in five decades. I had already seen the elders and advisors but no one will explain how the previous famine was resolved all those years ago, when I tried to search for records they were all mysteriously burnt or had disappeared. Not only that but I am the youngest leader of this village at only 19 years old, and everyone is relying on me.

I needed to take action. Before sunrise, I decided to go to the last resort and began to climb to the mountain which divided us from the Hou and go to the gateway to heaven. There, I would hopefully find the answer to my questions and be able to pray for a better future for my people.

The crepuscular village began to gleam in silence as the sun slowly started to rise above the vibrant purple and orange horizon. Each citizen slept soundly in their homes. One villager lay still, old as time. Another dreamed with excitement for the day ahead. However, as a collective, stillness adorned the sleepy village.

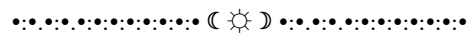
I carefully opened the heavy door of my home. The wet grass below my feet brushed against the bottom of my shoes as I walked across the field leading to the mountain. Now was no time to turn back. I had never attempted to climb a mountain, nor had I ever been this close to the mountain. From afar the mountain is minimal and adds beauty to the setting, but up close stood a huge mass of rock, getting steeper after every step. I could feel my hands begin to sweat each time my clumsiness got the best of me.

Now was not the time to fail. My people *need* me.

After falling down several times, and considering returning home, I had reached the stairs leading to the gateway to heaven. For each step I had taken, I felt like I was being pushed back two. The Chinese sparrowhawk could be seen gliding through the air and its scream was audible as the sound bounced from mountain to mountain.

“If I could do that, I could do anything...right?”

Just as I began to reach the rim, I felt my feet slip on the slippery rock from the previous night's rainfall and felt myself lose balance. My heart began beating so fast I could hear the pounding in my head as I fell down the side of the mountain. Everything was moving instantaneously but felt like slow motion as I peered at the freezing Zhi Ming River below and a mysterious crevice in the bottom of the mountain which was never mentioned in descriptions. Dark storm clouds passed over the mountain. That was when everything went pitch black.



Next thing I knew, the sound of cracking ice etched through my memory forever as the day where everything changed ran through my mind. The piercing cold mass of ice around my body started to melt as I felt the life rushing back to me. By the time I had started to open my eyes, I saw a crowd of people surrounding me, standing over me with grave concerned faces. Unfamiliar faces.

I awoke to find myself in a strange warm house. The unfamiliar faces started coming closer to me. “Thank god she’s awake”, one said. “Where did she come from anyway?”, said another. The people were dressed in robes I had never seen before. “*Why are these people taking care of me? I don’t even know them!*”, exclaimed the voice in my head. I remember my mother reminding me countless times to pay attention and be careful, and now, I don’t even know where I am for the first time in my life.

I looked around the room and realized the symbol “后” was painted on the walls of the house. I was in Hou territory.

How could I have let this happen?

“Who are you people and what do you want from me?” I asked. A man wearing a red jacket came forth and answered, “you had fallen into the Zhi Ming river, if we hadn’t saved you, you wouldn’t even be alive right now”. “But, I don’t understand”, I retaliated, “why did you save *me*.” Everyone’s face became confused and others murmured to each other. A boy around my age stepped forward and said, “it’s part of our philosophy, what a strange question.” The man with the red jacket stepped forward again, “we are the Hou, this is what we believe”, he scratched his head, “who are you?”. I stood up, “my name is Mei Ling and I am a leader of the Li village,”.

At that moment I was worried about an attack. My entire life, I had been told of the wretched Hou people. But to my surprise, a smile formed across the face of the man in the red jacket and said, “what an honor to meet you!”, and

shook my hand, “it’s been far too long and we have much to discuss.” The man then said, “My name is Fong Ling and you are my cousins daughter!”

The whole room gasped.

I dropped back down to my knees in disbelief, stupidly forgetting that I had been injured falling into the Zhi Ming river. “Tell me everything”, I stated. Fong held out his hand, “how would you like it if I showed you?”.

I nodded and we proceeded to exit the house and walk towards the crevice that I had spotted in the wall of the mountain during my hasty descent. The Hou village was laid out similarly to the Li village but was so much more lively and high-spirited. Fong led me closer and closer to the mountain and the closer we got, the more it made sense. This was no ordinary crevice, this was a cave. Inside the cave, the walls were decorated with glowing gems which lit a pathway toward a wall which stated the events of the dispute between two brothers. The story went as follows:



One day, two brothers were in charge of a large village in which they inherited. At the time, a famine had left many lifeless and sick. The brothers were completely distraught. Until one day, one of the brothers, Li, discovered a large sack of rice. He suggested giving away all of the food to those who needed it the most, while the other brother, Hou, suggested holding back the food until there was enough for everyone. Li was smart, but lacked forgiveness and acted rashly while Hou was kind hearted and didn’t think his decisions through. The argument drove both of the brothers crazy and before they could come to a final decision, the rice disappeared, leaving both brothers hopeless. Filled with rage, Li went to the spiritual advisor and wished for the village to be separated into two villages. That way, each brother could lead how they sought fit and there would be no more arguments. The next day, a large mountain formed in the center of the village; forming two separate villages. The brothers vowed to never see each other again. Years after the separation, Hou decided to move past the dispute but Li never wanted his family to experience the same thing and made sure the true story was never passed on.



Everything was finally clear and with the help of the Hou, my village could get the help it needs. I explained the situation to Fong and he gladly agreed to help.

I looked up at the audience. People of all ages sat silently, waiting for me to continue. “So that’s the story of how we restored the villages, and this is why we celebrate the day of unification between families. Hopefully this teaches a lesson and gives more insight into the importance of togetherness. With the help of the Hou, we have fixed deep wounds in our society. Secrets can leave us torn apart and confused but fellowship brings us together.”

Shadow of the Mountains

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lyons, Itai – 14

I am sitting on my chair staring out the window at the sunset glowing behind the Yellow Mountains. The clouds surrounding them seem to hide the world from the raised peaks. Between those peaks there are many secrets long buried. But still the occasional scream of pain cuts through my thoughts and then there's a flash of a bloody hand pulling down on my shirt. I live in fear of the mountains and yet I'm so transfixed.

A hand taps me on the shoulder and I stop staring at the Yellow Mountains and the bloody hand disappears. I turn around to find a mysterious woman looking at me, scared.

"Father. Are you okay? You screamed again," Rong says, quietly. "Father?"

I stare at her for a moment before I realise, it's my daughter talking to me. "Yes. Fine, just...remembering," I lie.

"Remembering what?" she asks.

"The soldiers."

"That was so long ago, Father."

"But I remember so clearly when I first saw them. The soldiers, I mean. I was fifteen. Hundreds of them passed through our village with their shining armor and gleaming swords. Each one walking with purpose. Determined to win. Determined to show their strength. Determined to show honor. And that's what I wanted then, honor. That is all a man could want then. But me, I am no longer that man anymore," I say as tears come to my eyes.

There is silence for a minute before I speak again, "Rén wú wánrén, jīn wú zúchì. No man is a perfect man; no gold is sufficiently bare."

I hear a scream of pain again. I can see it all so clearly. A man crawls up to me. And behind him bodies of a hundred men, all bloody. All dead.

"Father, why is this important now?" she asks again.

"This is the story of my life and the regrets that I have," I reply through gritted teeth.

The mountains loom in the background.

"Can you tell me? I want to know what happened," she says quietly.

Another scream rings out through the night air from those mountains, and with it I'm back to where it all began.

I woke up suddenly, drenched in sweat. A blinding light seeped through the open doorway and the tiny window that was by my head.

"Get up, it's time for work," my brother Li Jie said.

I groaned loudly, and then rolled off the bed. I felt myself get pulled up from the ground and pushed into a small chair that rested by the end of my bed.

"Come on, we don't have all day. The men are coming today and we still have to finish the last couple of swords. We all need to help the army so that we can win this war," Li Jie said to me.

My sight cleared and I saw him walking around the small wooden cabin.

"Let's go." Li Jie said again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." I said as I got out of the chair and pulled clothes on over my bare chest.

When we got to our shop we immediately started working. Quietly, swiftly and effectively. Like we had hundreds of times before. We finished making the swords well before noon and so I left the shop and decided to go to the beautiful pagoda that overlooked the valley and the towering yellow mountains in the distance. It was my favorite place in the village. It was calm and quiet, a great place for being left alone.

I must have been up there for ten minutes before I heard the sound of marching and horses galloping. Soldiers were coming up out of the valley and onto the road leading into the town. I was transfixed.

Hundreds of them marched up the road into town. Each one with their shining armor and gleaming swords. Each one walking with purpose. Determined to win. Determined to show their strength. Determined to show honor. And at the front of the rows of men there were about twenty men riding on horses carrying huge flags on wooden poles.

They formed two huge lines on both sides of the main road, then the men on the horses galloped in between the lines of the soldiers. And stopped in front of my small shop.

As soon as they stopped, I ran through the lines of the soldiers, straight back to my shop. There I saw the two men that had come to the town before to order the swords, talking to my brother. Li Jie seemed very angry.

"Brother, why are you so angry? You're embarrassing yourself in front of our guests," I said to my brother.

"No. Your brother is not embarrassing himself. In fact, me and my fellow General," one decorated soldier said as he pointed at the other man, "are the ones that are embarrassed."

"How so?" I asked.

"I was just telling your brother that we can only pay for half of the swords now, and half in a couple of months, with interest."

"That is okay," I replied, while ignoring my brother's protests.

"We are also here to tell all the villagers that any man under thirty and above eighteen years is being drafted to the army. You two don't have to serve as you are essential workers."

As soon as I heard this, I told the man to sign me up anyway. But my brother said that instead he would stay to make more weapons for the army. The man said that in a couple of months I would need to be ready to be taken to the military camp to be trained for the front lines.

All that mattered to me was that I was going to be one of the soldiers with shining armor and gleaming swords. I would walk with purpose. Determined to win. Determined to show my strength. Determined to show honor.

"Why did you sign up so fast?" Rong asks.

"I wanted to have my own honor," I say and then continue with the story.

After two months of waiting the men returned once again but this time with a hundred soldiers.

The men arrived and told us that there was no time to be sent to camp for training. We would be immediately sent to the front lines because a huge attack had devastated the ranks. We were also told that we would be going through the Yellow Mountains as it was the most direct route and we could get to the lines faster. Men were dying every day.

We were each given our own armor and swords. Then we set off the next morning and marched for the mountains. The route was simple; we traveled through plains and forests, stopping only to get food and water. We traveled day and night so that we could get to the front lines faster. At this pace, we made it to the start of the mountains on our third day of marching, already tired and beginning to slow, but our leaders made us continue.

We marched up the ancient stone steps and through the mountains for only a couple hours before we passed through a small village that seemed to hang from the mountains. I remember thinking that it was a very lonely village. It was small and quiet with only a few people slowly walking through the town. As soon as the townspeople

saw us they ran inside and ushered their children into the huts with them. While I was scared of them, they were clearly scared of us and this scared me most of all. You see in my village the townspeople were in awe of the soldiers, but these townspeople trembled at the sight of us. It's clear that they built these homes high above in these floating clouds, but now they have been found. As we left the village, I swore that I saw a man holding a sword on the peak of one of the mountains staring at us. But I kept it to myself as I assumed that I was hallucinating from lack of water. We had not stopped all day.

“Why not? Surely your leaders were getting tired too,” Rong says.

“They were. We all were. But they said that by not stopping we could get to the front lines faster,” I reply.

“Can I continue?” Rong nods.

We continued on until we got to a small valley in between two particularly large mountains. Here our leaders told us we would set up camp. I put up a tent and threw my belongings down. I then proceeded to leave the encampment to find an area to relieve myself. I found an area a good two minutes away from the encampment. I was about to go when, out of the dark a pair of bright yellow eyes peaked through the bushes. I saw the flash of a sword and knew that this man was an enemy soldier.

I was so scared that I ran straight back to the camp, not stopping until I came to the commander's tent in the middle of the encampment. I pushed aside a soldier that was standing guard outside of the tent and ran inside. The commander, a war hardened old man with a scar running up his left arm and another across his cheek, and a long white beard that seemed unfinished, looked at me said in the most calming voice, “What is bothering you, my son?”

“The enemies are watching us sir. I saw one on top of the mountain when we passed through the village and another just minutes ago in the bushes outside of the encampment,” I practically screamed.

“No enemy soldier would dare spy on us and none are near here. We're still three days from the front lines and from there another two days to the first enemy walls,” he said, now in an angry voice.

“Then the front lines must have fallen then. The enemies are here. And they are watching us. We're walking into a trap,” I screamed at him.

“You have read too many books, that is the reason that you think like this. Dú wàn juàn shū bù rú xíng wàn lǐ lù. It's better to walk thousands of miles than to read thousands of books. Leave my tent before you do anything stupid. There is no honor in lying to get out of fighting.”

Two soldiers grabbed my arms and dragged me out of the tent and as they did, I screamed for all to hear that we were going into a trap. They threw me into my tent and had a soldier stand guard outside of it to make sure that I did not escape.

Soon, I heard the sound of shouting. I ran out of the tent and I saw that the enemies were upon us, charging down from the mountains and into the valley. I picked up my sword and went towards some other men who were preparing a shield wall. The enemy was now about five hundred paces away when they stopped.

More men piled behind me, each one holding a spear. And behind them was the commander battle-ready. Each man was now in armor too, awaiting the enemies to charge.

A horn sounded and a cheer rose up from within the nearby treeline. I stared at the shadows emerging from the tree, no more than two hundred paces away.

“Ready spears!” barked the commander.

The gap between the two sides had narrowed to no more than thirty paces. My fellow soldiers waited for the commander's order and hefted their spears and drew their arms back. I saw the commander narrow his eyes as he timed the moment, his sword held high. With a dull gleam, the blade swept down and he bellowed, “Fire!”

The dark shafts of the spears arced through the air before they struck the figures swarming towards the shield wall. Scores of men collapsed as the sharp iron heads tore through them. But the attackers did not waver and charged straight into the shield wall. The crash of shields and ringing of clashing blades, and the grunts of men locked in battle surrounded me.

Then, the enemies burst through the line. One of them, an axe in one hand and a sword in the other, his mouth gaped in a roar behind a wild black beard, charged forward towards the commander, swinging the axe above his head and thrusting the heavy blade towards the commander's shoulder. I acted instinctively, twisting my head around and slamming my body into the enemy. His axe swept down, narrowly missing the commander's boot before crunching into the dirt on the ground. Then I swept my sword down, stabbing deep between the enemies shoulder blades. The man let out an agonizing cry and collapsed face first in the ground. Blood spattered the dirt around him.

The enemies retreated back to the tree line and we all counted our losses. Only twenty of us remained.

Then there was movement in the enemy's ranks. A tall figure emerged and strode towards me and the other survivors carrying a flag which meant halt. He held a long heavy sword in the other hand. His long dark hair was tied back with a black ribbon. He stared at us for a few moments before he spat on the ground and said, "Your front lines have fallen. The fight is over. You have been defeated. Throw down your weapons and you will live. If not, you will be cut down where you stand."

There was a brief stillness before the commander lowered his sword and stepped towards the tall figure.

I addressed him, "What do you think you are doing ... sir?"

"The fight is over. We did our best and lost. It's time to surrender."

"No!" I growled. "There is no honor in surrendering. Do you really think they'll let us live? Better to die like a man than be cut down like a dog."

"Yes, they will." The commander drew himself up. "For the sake of all of us, you will obey my orders, soldier. Now stand aside."

I was engulfed by raging anger. My commander threw his sword out onto the ground, at the enemies leader's feet. "We surrender."

The man next to him followed, and lowered his weapon to the ground. Another did the same, then the rest, until the surviving soldiers stood defenseless. All except for me.

The enemy looked at me, "I admire your bravery soldier. But you cannot possibly think that you can kill all of my men. There are thousands of us. Put down your sword before you do anything you will regret."

"Just surrender boy, before you get yourself killed," my commander said.

"I would rather die than surrender. There is honor in that!" I screamed.

The tall figure turned and faced his men and said the worst words he could ever say: "Kill them all, but leave this one alive." And he pointed at me.

The men behind the tall figure fired arrows at my fellow soldiers, all of them fell immediately. Even my commander fell down. He reached out his bloody hand and grabbed my shirt, but then his fingers slipped and he too was gone.

The tall figure took my sword from me and then retreated. Leaving me to live was the worst thing that they could've done. They left me with no honor after all. I was outnumbered by thousands. The last of my comrades fell around me and all I could do was mourn them. To this day I regret not having tried to take more enemies down. I know that I would've died, but then at least I would have honor.

Tears fell from my eyes then and again now as I tell my story to Rong.

"You had honor," cried Rong. "You refused to give up."

"The honor I have is you, my daughter, and that is why I gave you your name, Rong (honor). May you never see war and may you live without regrets."

He looks to the Yellow Mountains. For all of the poems of beauty about these mountains all he can see is the horror of them. He has never and will never been able to return to them even though he lives in their shadow.

Choices

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ronen, Daniella – 14

I was brought up thinking that there are two categories of people when it comes to dealing with a problem; those who would do anything to solve it and those who would do anything to avoid it.

My parents used to say that the people who choose to face their problems even if it means overcoming difficult situations, the ones who choose to take the hard route when there is another much easier route to take, not only show greater strength but also greater mind. Those people understand one thing that the other category of people will find out soon, which is that you absolutely cannot escape a problem.

When I was a child I used to believe anything my parents used to say but as I got older things changed. Soon after I graduated the things I believed were not what my parents did and the lessons I've learnt were not based on their life experiences but mine. As a former criminal, I have come across many problems, probably too many. The only good thing that came out of these problems was that I realized that I disagree with this theory.

I believe that how to deal with a problem depends on one characteristic which is, how big the problem actually is. The only thing I do agree with and do believe, something that I learned the hard way, is that you cannot avoid a problem forever, no matter how hard you try.

April 4th, 2013 (1 hour into the robbery)

"You are under arrest for an attempted robbery" said one of the many cops surrounding the group. As I looked closely at each member of my team, underneath all the frowning faces was confusion. I must admit that I was very lucky not to get caught.

"If it ever comes to us getting caught, you cannot let your emotions get the best of you," Sam used to say, "confidence is key."

Sam was only in his mid thirties when I first met him; however his defined eye bags and his messy dark and grey hair suggested otherwise. His bright green eyes, which looked calm in almost every situation, were the only thing in his appearance which suggested normality. The most noticeable thing about Sam was his limp. Whenever he walked one could hear a loud "thump" noise and this did not come in handy in the thieving business. This is why he had only led the robberies but since being injured hadn't participated in one.

I was disappointed that I was not allowed to hear the story behind this intriguing limp but he would not agree to tell. Sam was the only one who knew our personal information, Sam knew everything about everyone.

At that moment, when looking at the group, I realized that they had forgotten everything Sam had told us. Their emotions were shown all over their faces. After spending a while with a group of people you come to know them quite well. Sadly, as I knew them so well, at that moment I knew what to expect, because there was one quality that all four criminals shared and it was an extremely short fuse. By their expressions you could tell that they didn't care about the cops anymore, about money, and definitely not about Sam's instructions. They were all focused on one thing and that was figuring out what could possibly go wrong at a perfect plan.

So, knowing that four criminals were about to figure out what I had done, I had only one thought in mind which was running far away without any of them finding out.

May 16th 2018 (5 years after the robbery)

Living in the mountains takes time to get used to. It is all about survival. Not many humans like living there, especially not at the peak. Winters are colder, transportation is more difficult but the reason most don't live in mountains is the lack of communication with the outside world. For me, however, it was the perfect location.

Shortly after the failed robbery I fled England and escaped to the mountains in China. Many would think that the hike up the mountain would be the more difficult part, but for me it wasn't. It's not that I am some athlete that doesn't get intimidated by hikes, don't get me wrong. I struggled, a lot actually. It took me days to reach the top. However, I do believe that leaving England as one of the most wanted criminals definitely outweighs a hike, which now seems so simple in comparison.

I could talk all about my journey to China but that is unnecessary right now. What I came to talk about was one day, five years after my escape.

I had already been used to life on the mountains. It took some time, but I got there. I was married, had a job at the restaurant in the corner of the street and I had just finished building a new home. You could even say that I was happy. The criminal life was behind me.

This was all until two very significant people from my past decided to pay a visit.

It all started when my boss told me that two customers had requested me specifically to be their waiter for the day. It surprised me since I was not a waiter anymore and since everyone knows that I take Tuesdays off. I decided however, to go to the restaurant that day because of two things: the first was that my boss made it very clear that if I disagree there will be consequences and the second was that I was just curious.

I arrived at the restaurant to see a man and woman sitting around a table meant for six, their heads facing away from me. I started off as with any other customer.

"Hello! How can I help you today?" I began.

"You can help us by coming back home," said the man.

I couldn't place his voice but it immediately sounded familiar. Both the man and woman turned around in perfect synchronization, as if it was planned.

"Sam?" I froze in realization.

"Yes, did you think you can run away without me finding you," he replied. Deep down I had known this moment would eventually come, so I wasn't surprised. The only thing I didn't predict was Pamela.

"What is she doing here?" I asked, trying to avoid any possible eye contact.

"She came to me one week ago and offered to help find you," said Sam. That was when I first looked at her, after five years, she had hardly changed.

"Hello Matthew," she said.

April 3rd, 2013 (12 hours to the robbery)

“Are you actually going to go through with this plan?” asked Pamela, one last time.

“Yes, but I will be fine,” I said. Of course I wasn’t sure of it, anything could happen, but I didn’t need her to know that. “We have a plan for almost every possible outcome,” I continued, reassuring her.

“Yes I know, but I still think it’s a mistake. Can you tell me again what's your role in all of this?” she asked.

“Yes. All I am doing is hacking into their security cameras and making sure that the police won’t enter without us knowing. I wouldn’t even need to enter the bank.”

“OK, I’ll try to calm down, but as your wife it will be difficult,” she replied, as she reached out for her third cigarette of the day. She could not go one day without them and the current situation was not helping.

May 16th, 2018.

“I still don’t understand why you need me?” I asked them for the third time, still confused.

“What is there not to understand. They are moving ‘our four’ to a different prison, so we think it’s the only chance to help them escape,” Sam said.

“But how do you want me to help you?” At this point I already knew what they wanted me to do but I was trying to buy some time for me to figure out my response.

“We need you to turn off the security cameras around the jail for exactly one minute. That's all you need to do.”

Of course I didn’t want to go back to being a thief. I hated myself for the things I had done. At that moment all I wanted to do was yell ‘no’ and tell them to go away but I had to be smart. I assumed that ‘our four’ had figured out that I was to blame for the failure of the first robbery. They must have been the ones to tell the police about me in order to get less time in jail. So I realized that neither the thieves liked me nor did the cops which raised the chance of me getting caught. I knew that I could not change the way the cop’s see me. On the other hand, my former ‘team’s’ opinion of me, that I could definitely improve, just by simple hacking.

“OK,” I said. “But after this I am done.”

April 4th, 2013 (30 min before the robbery)

My loud typing could have been heard from miles away. I can’t control it. I was supposed to signal to Sam when the robbers could carry on with the plan. I have done this hundreds of times, I probably should have been more confident, but I have never worked well under pressure. Every time I clicked something, I prayed that there wouldn’t be any complications. Sam tried to keep silent but whenever he spoke I could hear the anxiety of his voice from the earphone he gave me. It took me ten minutes, but I had finally gained access to the security cameras of the bank. I gave Sam the signal.

Now was the easy part, or so I thought. All I had to do was wait and let Sam know if the police were arriving. That morning I placed the building plans in my jacket pocket. When I reached inside and placed all the papers on the table, I noticed something which I must have taken by mistake. At that moment I had forgotten about the bank, the rest of the group and the security cameras. All I could see were the bolded letters, almost too small to read, spelling '*divorce papers*'.

May 29th, 2018

After about two weeks we were back in England, I told my wife I was going on a short trip with some 'friends'. This time, I told myself I would be focused. In order to get back to 'my mountain', I couldn't let anything prevent this plan from being successful. This time all I had to do after I hacked into the cameras was turn them off just for one minute. I know that seems like very little time, I thought so too, but to my surprise a lot could happen in just one minute.

Technology on the mountains was not the best so it's been a while since I used such an advanced computer. Over the two weeks I had practiced non-stop only to figure out that hacking is just like riding a bike, you don't forget. It was like no time had passed between the robbery and now. I found myself typing again, now at a much more advanced program. It was the same scene again. I was in contact with Sam again waiting to let him know that the security cameras are off. I must have been a little rusty because this time it took me twenty minutes to gain access. Suddenly, just as I was about to turn off the cameras, the whole room including the computer went completely dark.

It's true that when you lose one of your senses your other ones heighten. It's not that I am blind, but at that moment it felt like it. I had to trust and depend on my other senses. I could hear very loud steps entering the room. I could feel someone attach something metal around my arms which I assumed were handcuffs. What I found most surprising was that I could smell smoke.

Light turned back on, stronger than ever. I was blinking continuously until I saw two blurry figures standing in front of me, in police uniform. At that moment I was confused about many things. I did not understand how they knew something was happening, I did not understand how they knew where I was and finally, I did not understand where the smoke was coming from. I looked around and was stunned.

"Pamela?" I asked, now trembling.

"Be quiet!" she said. "You are under arrest."

As I was taken to the police station, I slowly understood what had happened. Who else would let the police know about the robbery five years ago? Who else could make sure Sam and I would help out the robbers in jail and use it as proof against us? Who else could have placed divorced papers in my pocket knowing that I would get distracted seeing them? Only Pamela could have. The 2013 robbery was when I lost her, she had always been against my way of life, I guess she just couldn't take it anymore. Ironically, she later on joined the police.

I was never the type to deal with my problems, even though I was taught that avoiding them was the wrong way to handle things. "Those who face their problems show not only greater strength but also greater mind" my parents used to say. I used to take great offence to that sentence since I knew that it wasn't referring to me. Now however, like I already mentioned, I don't believe everything my parents do. Now, I don't believe that running away makes me weaker and definitely not less smart. In fact now I *know* that it's quite the opposite, because when I see an opportunity I take it without hesitation.

I was a good person, I knew that, and I didn't deserve to go to jail. I had 'my mountain' and my wife, waiting for me to return. So, when an opportunity came along, such as a naive policeman leaving the car doors open as he left for a minute to talk to his boss, I took it.

Like I said, a lot could happen in just one minute.

Earthly Fairytales 1: The Child, the Mule and the Dog

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Tang, Liana – 15

On the day of the annual gathering of the Eight Immortals, seven of them arrived on time and waited for Han Xiangzi, the only one who hadn't appeared. Elder Zhang Guolao flew into the sky to look for him. Just as Zhang expected, Han was sightseeing on Huangshan Mountain. He enjoyed himself so much that he forgot the gathering. Zhang tried every possible way to persuade Han to leave. Reluctant to go, Han turned a stone into a replica of himself, in case he forgot the way to Huangshan Mountain the next time. The stone therefore was named Immortal Showing the Way. Zhang, for fear that Han would slip away again, rode backward on his mule to keep him in sight, wondering why Han was entranced.

It was a peaceful morning. The lake inside Hongcun Ancient village at the foot of the mountain was indistinguishable from the sky, smooth as a bright mirror. The creeping darkness around the hills slowly retreated, unveiling patchworks of white walls and grey-tiled roofs, their silhouettes flickering in the river tinged with dark green.

A yell sliced the soothing silence as the boy scampered around the village with a blossoming blister on his finger, leaving a trail of tightly-woven curses.

"Ow, ow," He sputtered. When the boy reached the edges of the cobblestone road, Ah-Gum quickly bent down and dipped his finger in the water, watching the blood trickling away. Stupid dog, he thought bitterly.

Everyone in the village knew about Yiong-Yueng's clever puppy, Hsi-Long. It takes a normal dog three years to learn all sorts of complex tricks: churning rice, swimming in water with a boy on his back, or going door to door with a basket, begging rice and money for his master. Even then, his training wouldn't be complete until he could hunt the gibbon, the mouse-deer, and other animals, which would take two more years. But Hsi-Long learned all this in a few months, so all the boys in the country admired him.

Just now when Ah-gum sneaked out, he saw Hsi-Long guarding Yiong-Yueng's family door. Ah-gum patted his thighs, barking "Here, Hsi-Long! Come here," but the dog didn't move. When the boy pulled his tail, Hsi-Long still wouldn't obey, and chewed on his finger.

Ah-gum pursed his lips as tears ran down his cheek, before stomping his foot on the ground. "This isn't fair, this isn't fair," he cried.

Just then, Ah-gum heard faint clippings against the roughness of cobblestone. The boy recognised the rhythm of everyone's footsteps in the community -- how else would he slink around unnoticed? It was a new sound, and that made his heart sink.

"Are you alright, little brother?" A voice spoke from behind, steady and low.

Ah-gum swiveled, and he gawped at the white mule carrying a strange man that sat facing backwards. The man was a collection of hard lines and tailored edges -- sharp jaw, lean build, and a wool coat snug across his shoulders. His dark hair would glint in the rising sunlight if it weren't for the straw hat nestled on his head. A leather satchel hung loosely at his side.

"I'm fine, thank you very much." Ah-gum answered, brushing off the dirt on his disheveled clothes. He had to look somewhat presentable in front of a stranger. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

The man laughed. "My name always changes, like a leaf on the trees during the four seasons. I have come to visit my master and his friend on the peak of Huangshan mountain, but I must first accomplish a task."

Ah-gum waved dismissively as he stooped near the pond, staring at his gloomy reflection. "I don't want to talk right now, okay? I wanted to play with this dog, who would kneel and bow and do all these tricks for Yiong-Yueng. Instead, he bit me."

“Is Yiong–Yueng his owner?” The man asked.

Ah–gum nodded.

He continued. “Have you ever done anything for the dog? Did you ever give him anything to eat or drink?”

The boy shook his head.

The traveler muttered something under his breath, opening his leather satchel and retrieving a kernel of corn. “Take this and give it to the dog. Speak kindly to him. Do this two or three times, and he will surely trust you. Then he will do for you all he knows how to do.”

Ah–gum snatched the kernel of corn from the man’s hand, inspecting it like it’s some form of trick. “What do you want from me in exchange? My family doesn’t have much money, nor food for one more person.”

“Guess you could say I just wanted to help,” he winked.

Despite Ah–gum’s doubts, he did as the traveler instructed, placing the newly received food in front of the dog, and spat the words “sorry.” When he returned minutes later, the dog no longer growled in his presence.

It works!

Ah–gum sprinted back to the edges of the cobblestone road to share his gratitude, but only the usual weeds waved in the wind where the man and his mule had stood.

Earthly Fairytales 2: The Rise of Zhongyong

In his youth, Han Xiang Zi was known for his obstreperous disposition. Although he, like all well–off boys of Tang, was educated in the rites and five Confucian classics, Han had no intention of entering government service. He simply desired to explore the surrounding mountain, play his flute, and commune with nature. When his uncle criticized his pursuit, Han simply replied, “You and I have different ideas of study.”

The sun was at its full glare as birds chirped in the background. A young teen wiped the sheen of sweat beading on his forehead, as he sat under the shade of the Guest–Greeting Pine with a bottle of ink, a paintbrush and parchment. The umbrella–like tree was shaped like a gentle old man stretching one of his arms out, welcoming honored visitors, and Zhongyong needed that psychological reassurance for his latest poem — he hadn’t been able to write for days since his grandfather’s harsh critique.

Born to a family of farmers, Zhongyong never saw stationary until a sudden impulse arose one day. His father lacked the resources to buy it himself, so he borrowed from a neighbor. Zhongyong wrote a poem on the spot and signed his name. From then on, his work received many compliments, and word of his literary talent spread across the entire district. People started to treat his father with respect, and even paid money to buy more of Zhongyong’s poems. Instead of sending the boy to school, his father seized the opportunity and took him to visit the town’s people every day.

A couple of years later, Zhongyong was fifteen when Wang Anshi returned to his hometown. One night, he requested a simple task from Zhongyong — to write a poem for his mother’s unfortunate passing. But it was almost as if his hand refused to capture the feelings stirring inside his mind, resulting in sentimental refrains and cliché metaphors. His grandfather’s eyes darted across his work, skimming lightly before putting the paper down. “I’m afraid you don’t live up to your reputation,” he spoke in a cold voice.

Grunting, Zhongyong crushed the paper into a ball and flung it with all his strength, only to have it land pathetically a few feet in front of him. His heart winced at the gesture, but maybe it was a sign to start working in the fields again.

Just then, Zhongyong heard the sound of faint clippings against stone. He whirled, and saw a man seated on a white mule, facing backwards, with a straw hat and a leather satchel.

The man hopped from his seat and picked up the ball of crumpled paper. "Is this yours, young man?"

"Yes, sorry," Zhongyong replied quickly, his cheeks flushing pink. "Or at least, it should be."

The man cocked his head, asking him to speak.

Zhongyong sighed. "I used to have a skill weaving words, creating stories that brought life to the quiet village. Mostly, it made my father happy. But I'm afraid time has come and ate up my talent."

He paused briefly, before forcing himself to say the fated words. "I am uneducated. Perhaps I have been in denial for too long, and I will have nothing but a wretched future as a farmer."

Instead of responding, the man retrieved from his satchel a long and slender piece of bamboo with dried fish skin stretched over one end. Zhongyong immediately recognized it as a fish drum -- an emblem of Elder Zhang Guo, one of the eight immortals spoken from folklore. His head snapped up, surprised, but this man didn't look nearly half as old or plump. Come to think of it, where did he get the white mule from?

"I want you to shake the drum," the man interjected suddenly, handing him the percussion instrument. "A small sound will do."

Despite Zhongyong's protests, he rattled the castanets as the noise reverberated throughout the valleys. Suddenly, his vision clouded with patches of wavering shadows. Panicking, the teen briskly brushed his hands against the darkness, revealing a small crack of light. It slowly expanded to a moving landscape illuminated with dull colours of grey and black, before it consumed him.

Zhongyong woke up on an origami boat, oarless. The sky was heavy with fog. There was a cool drizzle, but the rain did not reach the surface of the water, which remained as smooth as a mirror. Despite the lack of wind, the boat sailed toward an orb of light in the horizon.

When the poet nearly reached land, he could make out the light gaining shape. The smell of damp ground and wet pebbles wafted in the air.

On the shore, there sat two tombstones covered with moss. The only difference between the two gravestones was that a straw hat perched on one, while quills and parchment accompanied the other. When he gently wiped the dust away, careful of its fragile state, his heart sank for a moment. The name Zhongyong was engraved on each.

The teen felt his head spinning. He tripped over the gunwale of the boat and plummeted into the ocean as layers of cool liquid submerged him. When he opened his eyes, Zhongyong was transported back into the mountains.

The man spoke quietly. "Death is the North that every compass points to. No matter where you sail, ultimately, you must turn toward it. Even if you are reborn, you might not have the same chances in your next life. Do you still wish to waste the entirety of this one farming?"

Zhongyong swallowed, his shoulders hunching. It took its toll, whatever that was.

"No," he said firmly.

"You have your answer, then."

As the traveler reclaimed the fish drum and returned Zhongyong's crumpled sheet of paper, a question lingered on Zhongyong's mind. "Who are you?" he asked.

The man smiled. "I'm just a regular, mortal apprentice."

Earthly Fairytales 3: The Mortal Apprentice

After Han's uncle spoke against the emperor's pro-Buddhist policies, he was publicly criticized and re-assigned as the postmaster of a distant rural outpost. As he trekked through the Qin mountains en route to this new posting, he was caught in a sudden blizzard, which caused his horse to falter. Near death and losing hope, he became aware of a figure approaching him through the whirling winds. To his bafflement, the figure was none other than his nephew, Han Xiang Zi. Using his magical powers, Han cleared a path through the snow and led his uncle to the safety of a local inn. As the two sat down for a cup of wine, the immortal reassured his uncle that his fortunes would be reinstated and that he simply needed to be patient. The next morning, after bidding a fond farewell to his uncle, Han Xiang Zi vanished into the sky and returned to the company of the other Immortals.

The sun lingered above the hills, painting the sky with fresh strokes of orange and pink. A chilly wind blew against the pine trees, but the apprentice had more pressing concerns than lack of warm attire in mind. He carefully followed Elder Zhang Guo Lao's instructions on folding the white mule into the size of his pocket, a jarring trick that was always disorienting to witness. Weirdness must be an inherent trait of becoming immortal, the man thought, then laughed at his joke. It was a blessing that nobody was around to notice his shenanigans.

Or a sad curse.

Once he packed away the mule, the man began a long journey toward the peak on foot. A long time ago, the apprentice voiced his protest against the idea, but Han firmly insisted. He said that as the mule belonged to Zhang Guo Lao, it could easily locate his master, but the apprentice will learn nothing. If he truly wanted to find the way, he would come through.

The man stopped under the overcast layer of thick, undulating waves of fog. Dark mountains occasionally poked through before being submerged again. He heaved a heavy sigh, and delved into the sea of clouds.

Many years before, the apprentice had constantly been praised for his quick wit and intellect. However, cleverness had not been enough to bring him success. When time came, he failed the imperial exam and his business never took off. He felt like a disgrace to his family, and became a recluse, before finally departing to the Yellow Mountains to find immortals for inspiration. But he could not find anyone, and got lost instead.

The man swept at puffs of water vapour to gain a better view of his surroundings, but it was no use. The clouds soaked many of the mountains and roads, turning it into the lonely isles of the sea.

The traveler remembered his legs aching a year ago, after days of climbing as darkness tipped over the edges of his vision. When he woke up, two people hovered over him, holding bundles of fruits, asking him to go home. On his way down the mountains, he suddenly concluded that the two men must be immortals, and went back to ask them to "point the way."

The man kowtowed, begging to become an immortal after his life was a failure. When he looked up, one offered to show him the way if he became an apprentice.

All he needed to do was to deduce why Han was entranced with the mountain.

So the apprentice set out on one more expedition, now equipped with new tricks, new clothes and a mule. The only requirement was that he returned with an answer on the night the Earth completes one full revolution around the sun.

The man stopped, panting heavily in the mist. Only the crickets chirped in the distance.

But what on this mountain would an immortal admire that was not present in others? The scenery was breath-taking, but there were many places that were even more beautiful around the world. Was it the community then? But people were like grains of sand on the beach, easily swallowed by the ocean as wave after wave rose to claim them.

If he was an immortal, what would he see?

As the man continued to mount the hard, granite stairs, the sea of clouds slowly parted. A small domed building was perched on the peak, from which a rich shrill echoed inside.

Alas, his mentors were waiting.

Bamboo groves lined both sides of the road where Zhang Guo Lao and Han welcomed him. They crossed a wooden bridge, and the pair showed him into the parlor. It was decorated in a pure Eastern style, full of sunlight and wide openings in the four walls so that the space resembled a pavilion.

"I'm glad you showed up," Han said, putting down his flute and gesturing to the floor. "Take a seat."

As the man sat on his knees, he spoke. "I'm afraid I'm too unwise to have the correct answer."

"What if you recounted what you learnt on the journey? Perhaps that would help," Zhang Guo Lao suggested.

The man conjured the memory of offering food to the boy with a bitten finger, and helping the aspiring poet on the verge of giving up. But when he shuffled through his memories about his own life, he was at a loss.

"I don't understand. I've failed."

"If you truly failed in life, why did you try to help others?" Han refuted.

Because I knew I wouldn't last forever, the apprentice bitterly thought, until he had an epiphany.

The man suddenly stood up, but bowed quickly. "Thank you for your hospitality, but I'm afraid I need to return to the mortal realm. There's still so much I could do." He retrieved from his pocket and gave back the mule to Zhang Guo Lao, and gently placed the leather satchel on the table.

For the first time, both immortals smiled. "You have your answer, then."

"Oh, and thank you for returning the mule," Zhang Guo Lao voice trailed off as the man sprinted away from the abode and down into the mountains, careful of steep cliffs and steps, until he found the Fairyland Bridge again. It was a stone bridge, ornately carved, suspended between two adjacent mountains above a narrow gorge. The pale crescent moon shone brightly in the night sky.

The man thought briefly of the life he was going to give up. He could perpetually bask in the luxury of overbrimming time, drinking with the company of wiser gods. He wouldn't need to work a day in his life anymore, rotting away needlessly, and planting seeds that may ultimately shrivel and die.

But doesn't one generation plant the trees, so the next could enjoy the shade?

The apprentice took one step, then another. As he scampered across the bridge, the man did not look back, for he had found his way.

Huangshan

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Tang, Nichole – 15

Huangshan — the mystical place, with many legends and myths being passed down, from generation to generation. It is the frequent subject of traditional Chinese paintings and literature, as well as modern photography. In order to get the full experience, you need to visit Huangshan during the four different seasons. During the spring, the mountains flowers and plants start to bloom; during the summer, greenery and multi-coloured flowers dot the landscape; during the autumn, yellow flowers and red leaves make the mountains more colourful, dotted with the hints of autumn; during the winter, frost and rime decorate the mountains so it looks like a crystal world straight out of a fairytale.

The many legends surrounding Huangshan all have amazing back stories to it. Huangshan mountain has been held in high esteem in China's history, especially since the Tang Dynasty. It has attracted many visitors, most among whom were poets, painters, and hermits. It seems that every peak, stone, and stream on Huangshan Mountain has its own story. Imagine how, a thousand years ago, a talented literary man traveled all the way here, endured the hardships the mountain threw at him, gasped with admiration at the majestic peaks and a beautiful poem flowed from his mouth. And now, a thousand years later, you are standing in the exact same spot, admiring the same scenery, living through the same thoughts the man was thinking, maybe humming some lines from his poem or exposing our own praises. The diversity of animals on Huangshan, the culture and history infused in the peaks of the mountains, the colourful specks dotting the landscape — all of which are hauntingly beautiful.

Huangshan is home to 1805 species of higher plants; rare plants such as the Huangshan azalea, *Tsuga chinensis*, and *Pinus taiwanensis* can be found here. When it enters late September, the golden and red scenery to the grand canyon and other parts on Huangshan Mountain are a delight to the eye.

The main attraction towards Huangshan is the mysterious history and legends behind it. Huangshan itself consists of 72 peaks. Most of them are individually named according to their shapes or legendary stories. The mountain's name itself has got a story behind it — named after the immortal Huangdi ("yellow emperor") who made marvellous contributions to the Chinese culture, and developed an interest in alchemy, and became immortal on the mountain. The "Stone Monkey Watching the Sea", the "Immortal Drying his Boots", the Lovers Locks — all of which have their own stories behind it, recorded down into history books.

There are 72 peaks in Huangshan Mountain range, including 36 major peaks and 36 smaller peaks. Among them, the notable Celestial Capital Peak, with its shrouds of clouds and mist, just like the heavenly place commonly described in Chinese mythology, has its own notable history and legends. It is the third tallest peak in Huangshan Mountain, about 2 hours away to the south of Lotus Peak.

During the Tang Dynasty, it was said that there was a young poet who went there to describe the beauty of the mountains. He stayed in a dingy mountain cave for 1000 days, writing numerous poems, hoping to make his family proud. One day, in the early morning where the sun just starts to peak out of the clouds, with magnificent shades of red, purple, blue and fiery orange projecting into the blank canvas of the sky, he heard a youthful voice humming quietly, along with the sweet sounds of running stream water. He was bewildered — having not had human interaction in the longest time, curiosity got the best of him, and he decided to follow the source of the almost haunting melody. Walking down from his cave and towards the stream he drinks from, he saw the bare back of a slim figure, washing herself down in the bubbly stream. The crunches of the leaves and twigs alerted the young woman of his presence, and she turned around and shrieked, the harmonious tune coming to an abrupt halt. The poet, embarrassed, quickly apologized and started walking away, hands covering his eyes to protect his and her dignity, until a soft voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Stop." The young woman whispered.

He halted, and slowly turned around, and the woman was smiling sweetly at him. He thought to himself, "that is the prettiest woman I have ever laid eyes on". Her emotions were not easily hidden on her innocent face. Her pain was evident in the crease of her lovely brow and the down-curve of her full lips. But her eyes, her eyes

showed her soul. They were a deep pool of restless gold, an ocean of hopeless grief. As he looked into her eyes he knew, all the beauty of the universe could not even hope to compete with this simple thing: passion. Passion turned her eyes into orbs of the brightest fire, and in them he could read clearly that she would fight to the very last tear for her life. She would not let the world break her. Sure she could cry, but she would never let them take her true self from her. She clung to it with passion. Passion that made her beautiful. She was show-stopping.

Mesmerised, he started walking towards her, taking in the soft curves of her hourglass figure, admiring the paleness of her skin, her soft jawline, her long shiny black hair cascading down her back, her full lips, her button nose, her alluring aura — everything about her was to die for.

She gave him a soft smile, and that was all it took. He was entranced in her beauty, it was almost like sweet seduction on her part. He took her back to his space and read his poems to her.

It took a bit of time for her to open up, but from what she told him, she came from an abusive family, where she was forced to be engaged with an older man for money. She was an outcast in her village, because of a legend that she was “cursed from birth”, as a part of punishment from the gods for what her ancestors did. From young, no one wanted to be her friend, and the adults would tell their kids to stay away from her. She became the embarrassment of her family, and her only purpose was to give her family a dowry. The poet’s heart broke for her, and he decided to help her out, giving her refuge in the mountains, far away from her past.

They spent months together in the mountains, and as each day passed, the poet fell even more in love with her, and as did her. He worked on his poem for her, professing his undying love for her — he was ready to propose.

One night after dinner, they both decided to drink the wine the girl brought from her village. The more drinks they downed, the more incoherent their words became. They were laughing and tumbling on the ground, their words slurred. And that was when both of their lives fell apart.

While drunk, the woman accidentally spilled what her curse was about — she was cursed from birth to change into a snake every full moon. The only way her curse would be broken was if she found someone who would still love her regardless even after knowing her full story.

Shocked, the poet inched away, for snakes were cursed beings. The woman, being too drunk, failed to notice that it was a full moon on that very night. The poet looked down and realised her skin slowly transformed into green, shiny scales, pushing out from under her pale skin. She shrunk down, and her limbs were gone, while her once passion-filled eyes became two black beady orbs. The poet screamed, and ran for his life, down the mountains, and hid between the bushes.

Heartbroken, the woman made a pact that as soon as she transformed back, she would throw herself off the mountains, her existence meaningless.

The poet calmed down, but still wary, making sure to look out for the soft slithers and crunches of twigs. It never came.

Once the sun came peeking through, the poet decided to go back, to check on her. Even though he was scared, he knew deep down that she was still the same sweet, pain-filled woman. But as soon as he went back, he realised that she was gone, her belongings packed neatly. He called her name desperately, but she was nowhere to be found. He went down to the stream, only to find her clothes at the riverbank, and her nowhere to be seen. He screamed her name over and over, his voice growing hoarse, but he refused to give up. He dived into the water, hoping to the gods to have mercy, and to let her be alive, but nothing.

Heartbroken, he burnt all of his poems in rage and despair, and jumped into the river, forever reunited with his lover.

The gods, feeling merciful, decided to let them be together for eternity. They made them each a mountain, their souls embedded inside, so that they would still be together.

Even now, Celestial Capital Peak has two distinct mountainous shapes. Legend says that the two lovers are still together. However bittersweet that is, at least they're still together.

Crimson Spring

Chinese International School, Zhu, Edward – 14

I went to the spring with the clear water on December 8th.

The pine tree forest was situated quite close to the Shuzen temple near the Cinnabar Summit. I took the dirt path that led to the spring past the forest. The rain pelted pretty hard that day, putting me in a hurry to get back. I had heard of the spring that was far inside the pine tree forest. All of the villagers heard about the spring. It had appeared - completely out of nowhere - sometime a year ago.

The passages formed by the pine tree arches were all dark. The only light came from the oil lamp which I held shakily. It was definitely very silent, except for the pounding rain against the ground. The terrain was thick with stilts of pine tree that reached to the skies with bush-like leaves, as bare foliage covered the edges. Deeper into the forest, the overgrown greens of the trunks merged with each other, creating a confusing, cosmic depth that came off as more uneasy than welcoming.

Abruptly, a low-pitched growl seeping from the bushes. I turned around, pausing for a second, waving the oil lamp around to find the source. I caught a darting shadow from the beam of light down a small slope. Leg first, I slid down the slope, dropping the oil lamp.

A paw swept past my face and disappeared in the darkness. A tangerine blur tumbled past, landing flat on the floor. The claw had missed my face. And now, the dirty ochre body lay limp on the ground. Gazing down, the tiger's damp fur looked to mix with its streaks of black.

As I moved the light downwards I found that one of the tiger's legs was bent loosely at an unpleasant angle. There was a gash running alongside the body, resembling the blade of a knife or a cleaver. Its outline looked far from a normal tiger's; its figure was starved, ridden with wounds. It was almost pitiful, in some way. I wrapped some robes around it and led it back to the temple with a stick.

On the exterior, as it was raining, the temple's imposing, deep color fit in with the surroundings. The lights from the secluded curtains leaked out into the sky, observing the surrounding nature, leaving flickering traces of yellow on the rain.

My robes were already mud-ridden when I entered the gates. Inside, the main room was already occupied by a group of monks. I noticed Chenglei, sitting at the long side of the table, lecturing his apprentice, Chengshun, about some new piece of local paranoia about some bandits in the pine tree forest.

"How much money do the bandits get?" Chengshun leaned in, curiously.

"I don't care. What they're doing is dangerous." Chenglei warned.

"But what if I needed a bit of money?" Chenglei asked. "What if what I'm doing is right?"

"You never know what they're going to do to you."

Wangshu, who sat on the other corner, seemed to look upon them in condescension. He always seemed to be conjuring up some piece of wisdom. I found myself next to Chenglei.

"Excuse me, Chenglei, Wangshu." I said. "Did you get to the spring?" Chenglei asked.

I nodded. "And I found something else." I walked the tiger into the temple hall. Chenglei jumped, scrawling behind the pillar. Wangshu took a step back.

“Don’t worry, it’s hurt!” I said. “It can barely stand. Look how starved it is. That’s why I brought it here. Give it some time to recover, and it’ll be ready to go back outside. Right now, it’s in no condition to go anywhere.”

“Well, I don’t know.” Wangshu said.

Chenglei crossed his arms, staying quiet.

“Chenglei?” I asked. “What do you think?”

He scowled for a moment, and said, “You gotta watch out. You never know what type of bastards you’re going to find in the mountains.”

“What do you mean?”

“You heard of the butcher’s story?” Chengshun chimed in.

“What about it? They got the man who killed him? Right?”

“No, they didn’t. Some old tourist was wrongly accused and they couldn’t get to the execution in time. They say the real killer fled all the way to the mountains afterwards.”

“God.” I looked down in disgust. “They ever find who did it?”

“Nope.” Chengshun declared. “He’s probably still up there.”

I stared down at the floor.

He continued. “In fact, there’s probably all sorts of bastards lurking up in the mountains. The pine tree forest, the caves, full of little bastards in the night. You never know.”

“Are you implying that this tiger here killed the butcher?” Wangshu asked.

“No.” Chengshun said. “All I’m saying is, you never know if it’s going to turn on you.”

“Hm.” I stared downwards. “But we can’t leave it outside, either. It’ll be dead in days.”

Wangshu didn’t say much.

Chenglei retorted. “If you really want to do that, then you’re in charge of it. If it slashes all of our throats in the night, that’s on you.” Wangshu agreed.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

I followed through the next week. There was a small enclosure with a cage in the backyard where I held it. It was making some progress; the broken leg was much better than before, and the wound was slowly recovering. I estimated that it would only take a month for it to fully recover. Sometimes I would read some Buddhist story from a small pamphlet I had.

“One day, a businessman was upset that the Buddha was teaching the public. He believed that he was wasting people’s time, when they could be making money.”

“Filled up with rage, he approached him as he was teaching his disciples. When he stood in front of him, he was at a loss of words, so he spat in the Buddha’s face. All of his disciples were furious. The Buddha simply sat there and smiled.”

“Shocked, the businessman didn’t do anything. The Buddha continued to smile, while the disciples remained furious. They couldn’t harm or do anything to the businessman in Buddha’s presence.”

The tiger’s stare became curious.

“The following night, the businessman couldn’t sleep. He wondered why the Buddha wouldn’t react to him at all. He made his mind that he would apologise to him the next day. When he arrived, he spoke up and apologised. To the disciples and the businessman’s surprise, the Buddha replied by saying: ‘Why would I excuse you?’ No-one said anything for a bit. He continued: ‘Why do you need to be excused? You are a different person than you were yesterday.’ That’s your first lesson. The lesson of forgiveness.”

“God, Shufen. You sound insane.” Chenglei walked in condescendingly. “You really think that bastard understands what you’re saying?”

“I’m hoping.”

“Why don’t you just leave it to recover? It’s not your apprentice.”

“Fine.”

I sat by the table again that evening. Chenglei and his apprentice, Chengshun, were there, discussing some story yet again. Wangshu was staring out the window.

“Hey, Shufen.” Chenglei said. “When’re you getting rid of the tiger?”

I ignored him.

He continued. “I think we let him go about a week from now. We’re in danger if we let it be too comfortable here.”

Chengshun agreed, “Yeah, we have no idea what it’s gonna do later.”

Wangshu turned around. “Don’t talk when the grown-ups are speaking. This isn’t your business.”

“What? This very much involves me, too.” Chengshun retorted. “You’re not even my master. Don’t tell me what to do.”

I ignored him. “It’s not doing anything bad. It hasn’t lashed out or harmed anyone.” “Fine. But I think we should get more people helping it. Make the process faster.” Chengshun chimed in. “I volunteer to clean his enclosure tomorrow morning.” Wangshu turned around. He looked as if he wanted to protest, but then remained silent. “Alright.” I said. “That’s fine.”

The moon still hung in the sky when we were awoken by a screech.

Chenglei got to his feet instantly. I put on some robes and followed him as he scrambled to the enclosure. Wangshu was nowhere to be found.

Chenglei burst open the enclosure doors. Chengshun lay, shivering, on the dirt ground. A pool of blood blended with his monk robes. His leg kept shaking, over and over. I looked around. The tiger’s cage rattled aggressively as it banged against the bars. A broomstick lay between them. A high pitch whine seeped from Chengshun. The backdoor was shut.

“God-damn it!” Chenglei stormed inside. “Shufen, this is on you! This is what I warned you about!” I followed him inside. Wangshu was still nowhere to be found.

“What do you mean?” I retorted. “It wouldn’t harm anyone out of nowhere!” I pointed down at Chengshun. “He probably did something. To it.”

“Why would Chengshun even think about that?” Chenglei looked disgusted. “And don’t even bring up how he did something to your tiger. Look at his damned leg! Why don’t I throw you in the bastard’s room and leave you for a night?”

I didn’t know what to say for a moment. The tiger laid back in his cage.

“God-damnit. Where’s Wangshu?” Chenglei walked around, clawing his hair.

Unexpectedly, the backdoor opened.

Wangshu stepped out in the enclosure. He picked up a broomstick and a bloody glass shard on the floor.

“Chengshun attacked it first. Look at this shard. It’s all bloody, and the tiger’s wound is too.”

Chenglei and Chengshun didn’t say anything.

Wangshu sighed in disappointment. “I knew he was up to something from the very beginning, so I watched him secretly the whole time.”

There was no noise except a now low-pitched growling from the tiger, whose wound was now bleeding at the edges.

“Chengshun, I don’t want you near the tiger.” Chenglei didn’t scold his apprentice. “Damnit, Wangshu! Don’t just stand there. Someone get him some help!” Chenglei pulled Chengshun up as he hobbled back inside.

“That was a close one, Shufen.” Chenglei glared back at me. “Real close.”

Over the next few weeks, neither Chenglei or Chengshun talked to me at all. They mostly kept to themselves, only talking to others. The tiger’s situation was getting a lot better; though Chengshun had attacked it, the wound was now healed, and it was now able to walk, looking far healthier than a month ago. I decided to take it on a walk in the pine tree forest near the clear-water spring.

I was halfway on the path to the clear-water spring when the tiger began twitching its mouth incessantly; its eyes, however, were alert, as if there was some primitive switch that the surroundings had flicked. The edges of its mouth began letting out low-sounding growls.

“Are you alright?” I looked at it in fearful curiosity. I stared behind me. The pine tree stalks stared back.

In a sudden, the tiger pounced up to its feet. Striding around with the gait of a predator seeking a prey’s trail, it began following an invisible path on the ground; head-down, concentrated. I followed it as it slowly brought us deeper into the forest. The simplicity of the surroundings was surreal; it was as if there was something that was hiding behind the thin, little pine tree stalks.

I felt the muddy ground harshly after seeing a flash of red. Seemingly, out of nowhere, a figure had appeared, as if the same apparitions from the villager’s stories had appeared. And as I was standing up, I was shoved down yet again.

“Don’t say anything.” Face down, I felt someone hold a blade to my neck.

“Don’t worry. We’re not here for you.” I heard a muffled voice next to me. “We’re here for the tiger.”

“What?” I asked in surprise. “Why?”

“Just comply, and you’ll leave here without harm.”

“I’m not handing it over!” I squirmed around, and the blade sunk in more.

“Stop it! You know what this tiger did?” He continued. “The bastard killed the butcher.”

“What’re you talking about?” I retorted in shock.

“Damned-well, it was. The sheriff was too lazy to open the case again. He’s always too damned lazy.”

Another said, “You know, you’re housing a murderer. You’re a monk. Don’t you believe in karma?”

The first bandit continued. “This tiger killed the damned butcher, and now he’s caused someone else to die. All we’re doing now is fair.”

I tried pulling the knife off my neck, but it was still pressed against it. “Shut up!” “If you’re so reluctant to let it go, we’re going to have to tug it off you.”

As the blade was sinking in my neck, there was a familiar roar ringing around the forest. Then there was a jab of acute pain in my neck.

Then there was nothing much. I shut my eyes closed, and covered my eyes. I looked up again. The bandits had fled. The tiger was standing next to me. I saw a piece of paper drift onto the floor. I supposed it was the wanted poster. I didn’t want to look at it.

“Hey, Shufen!” I saw Chengshun call out in the distance. “Chenglei asked me to pick you up. You were taking too long.” He strode over. “You look injured. You okay?”

“Yeah.” I stood up. “Bandits. Lucky I got the tiger here. Else I’d be gone.”
As we left, I didn’t notice Chengshun picking up the wanted poster from the floor.

A few mornings later, I came back to the enclosure. No one had woken up again. The enclosure was eerily quiet. The door was closed.

As I ambled over, I saw the same scene as weeks ago. Chengshun was lying in a pool of blood. But there was no broomstick. The cage had been unlocked. The tiger was nowhere to be found. The backdoor was open.

I peeked down at Chengshun. There was a strange, sinister look to him. He was completely motionless. There was no whining. There was no shivering, or twisting of the leg. He was completely still, almost at some sort of otherworldly peace.

“Chenglei! Wangshu!” I shouted towards the temple. There was a second of quiet before commotion began to stir. I saw all the monks hobble over, one by one. Chenglei pushed me to the side.

It stared at the tiger in a mix of shock and fury. But then he spun directly towards me. “This is on you!” He pointed at me. “Look, it’s done it again.”

A View of Heaven

Creative Secondary School, Barlow Qing, William Robert – 15

“Lu Shen? Do you see that point at the peak?” Lu Shen’s father asked, guiding Lu Shen’s eyes towards a point on the mountain, hidden beyond the sea off clouds.

Lu Shen paused and squinted at the clouds, his eyes willing them to part, “ Father, I have told you many times, I can’t see anything.” he muttered frustratedly.

“ Don’t worry my boy, eventually both of us will see the summit, it’s the gateway to heaven after wall.”
Lu Shen’s father replied, smiling at his son’s desperate glaring at the clouds.

“ But for now, let’s get logging.” His father continued “ I want you to show me your single–slice tree felling stroke.”

Lu Shen felt his fathers hand rest upon his shoulder then leave as his father continued walking, and he was instilled with a sudden feeling of warmth and pride. All of a sudden bright light seemed to overpower him.

He struggled with the light for a moment before finally he gave up, sat up and was immediately handed a bowl of steaming congee by Grandma Li. Lu Shen ate wordlessly, his eyes entirely occupied by the small urn that sat in the dark corner of the room, tears began to well up, as realisation battered him.

“ Lu–Shen? Another nightmare?” Grandma Li asked, expressing clear concern.

“ No, this time it wasn’t –it was the last moments we shared together before the accident” Lu Shen replied, having to pause several times to hold in the tears. “He was proud of me that day.”

Grandma Li saw what was coming and a calming hand on his shoulder. Then she spoke, her voice breaking slightly as she spoke, “ Lu Shen– dear child, please remember that father’s spirit remains with us, contained in those ashes.”

Lu Shen contemplated her words for a moment, and stared at the warm steam rising from his congee.

Lu Shen turned to glare at his grandma, a sudden coldness gripping him, he shuddered. “ If fathers spirit is truly free and with us why are his ashes being kept in this dark, lonely corner of the room, in this old piece of pot?!”

“ Lu Shen!” Grandmother cried out in shock.

“ Father wouldn’t want to remain chained to this pot, he would want to be in heaven, at the top of the mountain.”
Lu Shen cried out uncontrollably, his eyes leaking with tears, ignoring the hurt he could see in his grandma's eyes.

Without another word, Lu–Shen seized his hand axe and ran out of the house, leaving his Grandma to weep silently.

Lu–Shen returned home at sunset, freshly cut wood clutched between his arm, his eyes still puffy from the tears. He entered the hut sullenly, and Grandma Li turned and gave him a long stare.

“Lu Shen please understand, it is tradition that the ashes remain with the family” Grandma spoke and paused as she saw the unmistakable rage in Lu Shen’s eyes. “ Lu, please, it is impossible to even bring him to the summit, I am far too old and you are too young.” she implored.

Lu did not reply. Both sat down and ate in silence.

It was much later, when Grandma Li had fallen asleep, when Lu–Shen made the final decision to take his father to the summit. Lu–Shen lay in his bed for a moment, considering that if he died, Grandma would have no one to take care of her. No, he had to go, his father's last words had been promising that both of them would reach the mountain, he would honour that promise.

He glanced over at his sleeping grandmother for a moment, apologised to her, teary eyed, and stood up, walked over to where the urn sat and poured the ashes from it into a hollow gourd. He then took the gourd and axe, slung both over his shoulder, and began to run.

He ran for what seemed like hours or days, overcome by raw sadness, he forced himself up vast slopes, through dark, misty forests and over rocks shaped like grotesque monstrous forms. Eventually he fell to the ground, asleep his mind and body drained and exhausted. He dreamt of steel and of the hand that had once ruffled his hair, lying, bloodied. He awoke suddenly, a ruin of a child and began to scream into the empty darkness, before finally losing his voice and falling back into restless sleep.

When dawn came, he began the ascent with renewed vigour. He clambered up over huge monoliths of mossy stone and passed vast patches of exotic flowers, which glimmered like jewels, he moved past trees full of singing birds whose voices rang seductively through the air. However he remained totally oblivious to the beautiful sights he passed, instead he was held utterly by memories of a happier time and was dominated totally by darkness.

Eventually night fell once more, and with it came the biting cold of the north wind. Ice tickled his form as he continued to climb, higher and higher, the gourd hanging by his side. His eyes were never once dry, they seemed to leak like water from a crack in a dam. His voice had long grown hoarse from the desperate screams that left his mouth whenever he took time to nap.

After another nap, Lu Shen sat, again rendered dumbstruck by the horror of his dream and the memories that clung to him like skeletal fingers. He lay there in the corner, crying like a dog that had lost its owner. Then he spied the gourd, lying next to him in that lonely mountain cave. The tears continued to pour from his eyes, but this time he gritted his teeth, and taking the gourd began the ascent once again. As he climbed, his form clinging and clambering up boulders, he passed by mountain springs and clusters of emerald green bamboo. Sometimes he paused to quench his thirst, or to eat berries from a mountain bush, but other than for necessities, he continued up.

Eventually he came to the summit of a particularly steep hill and found himself looking over a deep chasm, with a stone bridge crossing over it to another hill. The bridge was inlaid with ancient words of scripture and philosophy, but more than that, In the centre of the bridge sat a hermit. He was dressed in simple brown robes, a simple straw hat sat on his clean shaven head and in his hands a necklace made of prayer beads. He was meditating, his face scrunched up in deep focus.

Lu Shen watched him for a moment, and then attempted to move carefully and quietly around the hermit so as not to disturb him, and had almost crossed the bridge when he heard a voice behind him speak, making him jump.

“Wait, young man.” the hermit called, standing up.

Lu paused, eyeing the monk warily.

“Young man, might I ask where you are going? Traveling alone up this mountain like a madman?” The hermit asked.

“ I...” he paused, again feeling a familiar swell of sadness overtake him. “ I am going to give my father the burial he deserves, at the top of this mountain.” He replied, barely holding back the clutch of tears in his eyelids.

The hermit contemplated his words for a moment, and then strode over to him. He knelt down next to Lu, and spoke to him in hushed tones. Lu was reminded of his father, who had also knelt before him and spoken as such, to teach him the basic principles of woodcutting.

“ I understand completely how you must feel, for I, being a hermit, was forced to forsake my family for spiritual enlightenment, but now is the time to give up sadness and rejoice.” He looked up into Lu’s eyes and smiled.

Lu Shen paused, and spoke with a shaky reply “ How can you ignore the loss of family, how can you live past it?”

“Do you know the legends this mountain speaks of? This is the home of the heavenly kings and their greatest treasure, the pills of immortality! ” The hermit shouted, his voice rife with excitement.

“ Pills of immortality? ”

“ Yes the pills of immortality, small pellets that, when ingested grant the bearer eternal life. For this reason, I gave up all mortal vestiges, and traveled here, for only a member of spiritual society can gain access to the abode of the kings!” the Hermit stood up and turned, seeming to address an imaginary audience.

Lu Shen merely stood in silence, beginning to put two and two together.

“ But... I will permit you, young boy, to travel with me to the abode of the immortals! Now forsake your sadness as we will soon obtain the greatest gift! Everlasting life!” the hermit raved, turning back to Lu Shen.

Lu Shen looked at the monk, and gave him a hard glare, tears fleeing unhindered from his eyes like a gushing waterfall.

“ Don’t tell me to forget my pain, don’t even tell me you understand it at all! You gave up your own family, for the sake of searching for myths!” Lu Shen roared, his gathered bitterness and anger flowing through him. The hermit stepped back stricken.

“ How can you offer me eternal life, when I have lost half my life already when my father died?” Lu continued, his voice like a hurricane.

The hermit growled “ You're a fool, you will never reach the summit, you will die cold and alone, and you will regret not taking my offer.”

But the hermits' words fell on deaf ears, as Lu had already turned and left the monk. He was bombarded by memories of the golden age lost to him, his father and he, playing a game of hide and go seek in the woods, running through the forest. He hurtled up the mountain, as he turned tight corners around the edge of the mountain. He thought nothing of danger as he forced himself to climb over treacherous and sheer cliff faces and walked along pathways as thin as paper.

As he climbed, higher and higher, his soul empty but for the climb, he came to a flat area, where a set of naturally formed stairs led higher. He paused for a breath, felt the adrenaline from the encounter with the monk and his body's natural energy finally and totally spent and collapsed to the ground.

He breathed in the thin air with harsh gulps, his body was wracked with exhaustion and drowsiness. He wretched up a thin, clear bile, evidence of the fact that he hadn't eaten a full meal in days. the cold began to set in on his skin, and finally a sense of futility overcame him. He had been too hasty, and now he had robbed his grandma of not only her only memoir of her lost son but also the only capable worker in the household. He sobbed weakly as he felt himself beginning to black out.

“ So this is how it ends? ” a thin, vicious voice rang from above. “ Fine with me.”

Still deathly weak, he looked up, towards where the voice was coming from. At the top of the staircase, was a wolf. It was large, far larger than any that he had ever seen, it sat on a piece of grotesque rock, jutting out of the rocks landing, watching him with piercing grey eyes. He met its gaze, and fought back the urge to scream.

There, sitting in its grey-blue eyes was oblivion and the purest form of self destruction. He stared at it, too weak to gasp. The thing was not just a simple wolf, it was his mirror. It was something that dwelled alone, abandoned from the pack, hungry, tragically thin.

The creature, this wolf with a pelt of silver blue, leapt down the staircase onto the snow next to him. Lu silently regarded the beast, it would kill him then eat him, but he couldn't even raise an arm in protest. The beast moved towards him slowly, he was weak, a single strike would kill him, it could take its time.

The wolf strutted towards his shivering form. It raised its paw, and struck him across the face, its powerful claws making deep scratches across his cheek, he gasped and closed his eyes. The blow was like the axe, the axe that had hewn the wrist of his father. The wrist that had once sat on his shoulder, urging him on.

Then he felt it, a glowing presence near him. Father! he thought, overwhelmed, once again tears welled in him. I have wasted my life, he thought.

“No, you haven’t.” The presence spoke gently, its voice matching his father. “ Let go of me, my boy, you must accept it, and let it go. Don’t let him win, my boy”

Lu gasped with tears, but the presence released him, No, don’t leave me! He cried aloud.

Then he paused, unable to feel the presence anymore, but strangely he accepted it, his father was gone, but the warmth was still present. He stopped crying.

Blood spewed from his mouth and Lu shouted to the elements, he would not, consumed by this beast of darkness! The wolf paused, unsure, even scared of this burst of power. Lu looked at it, and it covered back, shocked by the strength in his eyes. Lu took his axe and struck it, right in the head, felling the beast in a single strike.

He fell with a smile, even if he would never see the summit above the clouds, he could rest easier now, knowing he had overcome that he had finally managed to let it go. As he rested in the snow, his face looking out towards the sky beyond the mountain, he saw a gleam in the air. It shimmered in front of him, and expanded into a vast shape, twisting and curling in the air. It radiated orange fire and gleamed like the gold of the emperors, the dragon spiralled and danced before him.

It was majesty in its purest form, a creature of the sky alone: It scales red like the magma that spewed from deep within mountains, its teeth were a blinding white, and its horns were those of a deer. The creature wordlessly, floated down and took Lu in its talons. Then it looked to the sea of clouds, far above it, and with great speed, it shot upwards, holding Lu tightly against its chest.

It burst out of the foamy clouds, and Lu watched in breathless, wordless excitement as he gazed upon the highest peak, the summit of the mountain, the seventh gate of heaven itself. It was everything that he had wanted to see: the pines stood taller and mightier here, ice and thick snow blanketed everything, giant stones of a long forgotten age jutted out from the body of the great mountain. The dragon's body spiralled and it torpedoed forwards towards the peak, then as it reached the flattest point of the summit, it floated down. It paused still hovering above the ground, and dropped him.

He landed with a grunt, and looked up at his saviour, who had already disappeared. He gazed across the summit, and looked across at the view. It was stunning. Above the clouds and the vast expanse of blue was a sea of littered stones, and pine trees, and the peaks of the other, monolithic mountains. There were giant pieces of ice that slowly melted, and clusters of beautiful exotic flowers. At last he could see them all for himself, Lu thought, and then he remembered the gourd. He took the gourd from his side, and opened its lid. He poured the grey, silky ashes into his hands, and paused taking another long look.

He then discarded the ashes into the air, letting them carry off into the wind, free at last on the summit. Lu fell to his knees, weeping, not with sadness, but joy, he had done it. From far above as he lay weakly on the mountain side, he saw a staircase of gold trailing down from the sky, and he saw from further above, a gate of steel. He closed his eyes once more, and as he fell into a dream, and once again he felt the hand of his father on his shoulder, proud.

China's Magical Mountains

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Chun Ming Norman – 15

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The alarm clock rang. The sound filled the room. John opened his eyes, with a terrible headache in his head. He wakes up to see the bright morning sun shining through the window, the dimly illuminated room reminded him of his party last night. He feels a sudden vibration and realizes that someone is calling him! He picks up the phone and says, “Hello? Who is this?”

A young, energetic female replies, “It’s me! Haley! Where are you?!”

John drowsily says, “I just woke up, what’s happening?”

“Don’t you remember?! It’s the graduation trip today! We are going to HuangShan city today!”

John cursed under his breath, and said, “I’m coming now! Wait for me!”

“You haven’t changed a bit after all these years. See you later.”

John quickly jumps out of bed, clumsily packing his clothes and desperately trying to find his passport. A voice comes from the kitchen, “Good! You’re finally awake. I’ve already packed all your things for you. Just get to the airport, NOW!” It’s John’s mother. He quickly ran out into the corridor and to the main door where he saw a neatly packed suitcase and a mountain backpack. He waved his mother goodbye and headed out the door.

A vivid yellow taxi drove by and John caught it just in time. He quickly got in the car and started heading towards the London Heathrow airport. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a small bottle of aspirin tucked on the side of his backpack. He picks it up and finds a sticky note attached to it.

“Just in case you needed this, lots of love
Mom
P.S I know about your late night parties”

John rolls his eyes and he takes a pill and swallows it in one big gulp. A few minutes later, he arrived at the airport and his phone started ringing again. He picks it up and hears a familiar voice, “Where are you?! There are only 5 minutes left until departure. You better come now!”. John hangs up the phone and quickly starts sprinting towards the security checkpoint. After he got past, he saw a flashing red light near one of the terminals and started running towards it.

Abruptly, a public announcement speaker said, “Final call for John Lee at gate 14, this is the final call.”

He arrives at the gate and hands his ticket to the receptionist. Completely out of breath, he says, “My name is John and ... I’m supposed to board this flight.” The tall, young man at the reception table cheerily replies, “You made it just in the nick of time, congratulations.” John sighed with relief and headed onto the tarmac, and up into the humongous Boeing 747. With the directions given by the flight attendant, John finds his seat next to his best friend Haley.

Haley said, “I’m glad you made it.”

Scratching the side of his head with a slight smile on his face, John replied, “I never thought I would make it”

“Did you actually forget our graduation trip?” Haley added.

With an innocent smile, John admitted, “Yes I forgot.”

Over the public announcement speakers, the pilot says, “Welcome aboard. This is the departure announcement for flight 45A to HuangShan city. The time now is 9:56 am and we will be approximately arriving at our destination at 9:44 pm. Thank you for choosing British Airway and I hope you enjoy your flight.” Along with his classmates and teachers, the 23 soon to be graduates started their long journey to HuangShan city.

John’s grandfather was from China. In John’s childhood, he often travelled back to China to visit his grandparents but ever since high school, he has never really thought about going back to China. He no longer felt a connection to his homeland and his culture.

John asked, “Do you know anything about HuangShan city?”

Haley proudly replied, “I already did the background research on the local tourist spots. I’m very excited about our visit to the legendary yellow mountain, HuangShan.”

John felt curious about the yellow mountain and asked, “Why is it so legendary?” while making air quotes with his fingers.

Haley said, “The myth, was that once upon a time, the yellow emperor travelled his way up the mountain to make the pills of immortality”

John abruptly started laughing, “What’s the yellow emperor?”

“He was a hero in the Chinese culture and he was a patron saint in Daoism.”

“Oh, that’s pretty interesting. I look forward to it.”

After eating their lunch, John took a quick nap and after a few more hours, they were already in Chinese territories. Through the window, John saw nothing but darkness. He wasn’t seeing the familiar city night lights that he grew up with, instead, there was nothing but scattered villages with fields, along with acres and acres of flat land.

After landing, John felt uneasy but he followed his classmates outside of the aircraft. They made their way across the tarmac and into the interior of the airport terminal. The teacher held up his hand and led the class to the security checkpoint where they all made it safely into HuangShan city. The teacher met with the tourist guide and then followed him to the bus where they then travelled to their hotel. Throughout the short trip, everyone was feeling tired and some even fell asleep, John wasn’t any different from the rest of his class. They had finally finished their exams and this was their well-deserved break. The countless nights where they would only get a few hours of sleep has taken its toll on the students. After an hour, they arrived at their hotel. The crowd of tired students crept their way into the hotel, they each went to their rooms and prepared themselves for the evening briefing.

John swiped his keycard on the door and walked inside. The sight of the soft and well-made bed caused John to want to just lie face first into it and fall asleep, but he resisted the urge to do so. He unpacked his luggage and his backpack. Then he quickly showered and dressed up for tonight’s briefing. He quickly slipped on his slippers and started heading towards the lobby of the hotel, where his classmates were already patiently waiting for him. When he arrived at the lobby and saw his classmates, he was faced with disappointment. Mr. Chow said, “You’re late, once again.” John shyly replied, “Sorry, I didn’t pay attention to the time.”

“Students!” shouted Mr. Chow. “It is time for our evening briefing. Now, we are going to talk about our activities for tomorrow. HuangShan has always been an intriguing subject. It holds great cultural value to the locals. I couldn’t help but overhear some of your conversations, it seems like the majority of us hold great interest in HuangShan.” The students felt happy and excited when they heard the news. Someone even shouting in joy. Since Mr. Chow

wasn't a native English speaker, he couldn't pronounce all the words perfectly and it often caused his students to laugh at him when he pronounced something incorrectly. In fact, he was born and raised in China. Mr. Chow said, "My mother has always told me stories about Huangshan, she always said that it is very important for Chinese people to visit Huangshan at least once in their lives. I have looked forward to this moment for a long time. Let's all meet here at 8 O'clock here tomorrow." The students all returned to their rooms. John walked to the elevator alone, urging to fall asleep. Just before the elevator doors closed, Haley shouted, "Wait up!" John reacted as quickly as possible and kept the doors open for Haley.

They both stood there in the elevator, both feeling tired and sleepy. The elevator interior had a huge glass panel which allowed the passengers to look at the view outside of the hotel. The city was dimly lit, with buildings which differed from the ones that John saw in London. "It's beautiful and quiet," John said softly. "I know right. I never thought that I would be able to come to China! It's such an amazing feeling." Haley replied enthusiastically, despite her tiredness. Ding! The elevator door opened on the thirteenth floor. "Goodnight," John said. "Goodnight" Haley said, with a forced smile on her face.

The very next morning, at 7 O'clock in the morning, the telephone rang in John's hotel room. It is the hotel's morning call. John opened his eyes to let the morning light fill his vision. He wakes up and gets ready for the morning. After breakfast, John and his schoolmates gathered in the lobby and listened to Mr. Chow's instructions. The class got onto the bus and started to head to the yellow mountain. The whole class was in a good mood. They all started to talk amongst themselves.

A few minutes later, John overheard something. Another boy a few rows in front of him started mocking the locals and their accents. Jerry said, "The people here have the weirdest accents I have ever heard in my whole life!" The others bursted into laughter. "Nice one, Jerry." Someone in the crowd replied. "Why is the mountain named the yellow mountain anyways, is it because of their skin?" The people burst out laughing. John felt uneasy and uncomfortable. A fire started to burn inside him, fueled by rage. He had the urge to start hitting Jerry and shouting at him. Although it made John angry, he didn't let his emotions get the best of him. Ever since the first day John met Jerry, he had always made fun of other people, so John didn't let the insult get to him.

When they arrived at the base of the mountain, everyone got off. Just before getting off the bus, John said, "Thank you for the ride" in Chinese to the driver. The scorching sun was harsh on John. Back in London, he would never get exposed to this kind of weather. He could feel the perspiration on his face. Just before they started to hike up the mountain, the group listened to the briefing from the tourist leader.

"Listen up everybody, here are some danger safety rules, do not lent over the fences on the mountains and be careful not to trip on the stairs, if you feel dizzy or uncomfortable, do not hesitate to tell me or Mr. Chow about it."

Jerry was right next to John and he overheard him once again. Jerry murmured, "Did the leader just say lean instead of lean?" with a smirk on his face. The others tried to hold their laughter but some ended up bursting in laughter. John felt annoyed and he felt like Jerry was not only insulting the leader but also insulting all the non-native English speakers. The fire inside John was burning like a forest fire out of control, but he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of everyone else, so he just let it go. It reminded him of how he had difficulties learning how to speak English the first time he was trying. Jerry reminded him of his kindergarten bully who would always laugh at him when he had the wrong pronunciation. John knew that he shouldn't lose his temper so he just suppressed his anger.

"Is there a problem?" Mr. Chow asked, with suspicion.

"No, mister." Jerry replied, with a sly smile on his face.

They then started the hike up the yellow mountain. Along the way, the tourist leader introduced the students about the history and mythology behind the yellow mountain. Next to John, Haley seemed to have something on her mind. A few seconds later, Haley broke the silence and asked John if he was doing fine after Jerry's insults.

John confessed, "That jerk is so annoying, ever since the first day I met him. He hasn't changed a bit."

Haley replied, "I totally agree with you, you should stand up for yourself, your race and your culture. You have to fight back. You can't just let him mock your culture like this."

John scratched his head, "I... don't know about that, I shouldn't make a scene."

"You can't hold all your emotions in, you have to let it out someday. You're just going to hurt yourself by doing this." Haley said.

"It's fine." And with that, they moved on.

Over the course of the next minutes, John and the class came across some locals hiking as well and also the scenic spots that were on the mountain like the hot spring and guest greeting pine. The locals were communicating in their local language and John felt like he was starting to feel a sense of belonging in this area. The peaks of the mountain were spectacular and John felt at peace when he saw the beautiful scenery. It made him feel like he was no longer involved in this cruel and twisted world, but in his own fantasy where there was no conflict between humans and everyone could live in peace, a place where everyone were treated equally, despite their race, their accent and their culture. For once in a very long time, John felt relaxed and at peace.

"What is that?" A stranger's voice came from behind.

Everyone turned against a lone pine tree. There were confused whispers among the group, "What is happening??" Haley walked towards the tree, followed by the group.

"Oh I see it! It's a leiothrix! I read about this on a website before coming." Haley gasped in awe. "It is one of the birds that can be only found in southern China and the Himalayas."

Everyone started to take out their cameras and started taking pictures. John looked at the bird, he was admiring its beauty. A chirp came from the pine tree. The sound was never heard before by the group of tourists, they all stared at the bird, mouths agape. Jerry broke the peacefulness, "Are birds here yellow skinned too? I thought it was only the people." Nobody laughed this time. John bursted in rage, he shouted, "Jerry! You are a disgrace! Why are you so disrespectful to others! Didn't your mother teach you how to respect people of other cultures?!" Everyone was shocked. Nobody knew what to say. All the tourists directed their attention towards the red faced John, who was now panting with rage. The people who were standing on Jerry's side before even shuffled away from him. The locals started to clap and applaud, and then followed by Haley and the class. A few moments later, Mr. Chow spoke calmly, "John is right. Jerry you are very disrespectful, you have been since this morning." Jerry felt the embarrassment overwhelming him. His face started to go red. Mr. Chow added, "I cannot believe you, I'm very disappointed in you. Apologize to John and everyone else right this second." Jerry had no choice but to surrender out of embarrassment, "I'm sorry for being disrespectful to your culture." The locals smiled and said a few words to the tourist leader. The tourist leader translated their message, "They said they forgive you." Everyone else all sighed with relief, they kept on hiking to the top of the mountain.

Haley tapped John on the shoulder and said, "You were very brave to do that. I told you it would make you feel better."

John replied, "Thank you. I just couldn't take it anymore, he was an insult to all the locals and it made me feel responsible for protecting my culture. I feel like I am reconnected with my culture. Thank you for inspiring me to do that."

"My pleasure, buddy." Haley replied, with a smile on her face.

While hiking along the mountain, John kept thinking about his own culture and roots. Just at the same moment, the tourist leader talked about the history of Zhuolu.

“A long long time ago, the YanHuang tribes which were led by the Yellow emperor fought against other tribes. The battle of Zhuolu was fierce. According to the legends, the Yellow emperor was initially beaten but he didn’t give up. After preserving and enduring the harsh conditions, the YanHuang tribe ended up victorious.”

Suddenly, a beautiful view came into the view of John and his classmates. The sea of clouds were like still waves which were flowing across the mountains. It was like nothing that the group of students had ever seen before. The clouds covered the base of the mountains but only showed the top of the mountains. It gave the students a sense of mysteriousness. The mountain reflected John, the uncovered part of the mountain like the tip of the iceberg, the small part of his own culture which John has rediscovered. And the rest of the mountain, clouded, yet to be seen, just like the part of his own culture which John has yet to discover.

The tourist leader continued, “According to the legends, the Yellow Emperor once came to this very mountain to forge the legendary pills of immortality.”

John felt as if he was reborn, he felt a new sense of hope. He thought again about the battle of Zhuolu. He thought about how the Yellow emperor was defeated at first. He thought about how Jerry disrespected the locals and the culture at first. Then he pictured how the Yellow emperor didn’t give up and fought back, victorious at last. Then he remembered how he protected his own culture and fought back the hurtful words of Jerry. It was like something clicked in John’s mind. He felt proud of himself, proud to be Chinese, proud about protecting his own culture and identity.

Without noticing, he was standing atop of the mountain. The sound of the people beside him seemed to all drown out. Although it was crowded, it felt as if he was standing alone. He looked over the world, feeling powerful, as if he was the Yellow emperor.

Mystic Temple

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Isaac – 16

The mountain is silent, peaceful, and calm. The mist has embedded into the mystical mountains of Hua Shan with the mighty temple above all clouds, standing at the peak of earth. Monks there have trained all their life to protect the temple from the clans, wanting the sacred weapons that fought in the ancient wars of the past, wielded by the Gods, when those weapons collided, the soil would build up bit by bit, with the fragments of the Gods presence, the soil stood up and created the Hua Shan.

Max never believed in those stories, he only knew he was given up on and put at the steps at the entrance of the temple. He never believed in anything his masters taught him. He never listened.

The light of the moon reflects off the calm ponds of the mountain, waves interrupted the scene where intruders have been approaching the sacred temple. Max never slept that night because of his punishment, still mopping the floor of the alleyway of the temple for disobeying his teacher. The bushes were moving unnaturally, the wind had started to blow, he knew something was coming. He rushed back in informing his masters of the incident, “No way, the guards would’ve seen them coming, you underestimate the training we perform here young one.” said the eldest. A man with profound physic defended him, “I am still willing to check out for intruders just in case.” the eldest master sighed and waved them off. “Thank you for believing me old man!” said Max cheerfully hopping along, “have some respect young one, he is the youngest combat monk to be one of the 4 grandmasters of the temple!” said one of the servants following the grandmaster “It’s ok, you can call me Shuang.” said grandmaster Shuang with a kind and soft smile as they hurried to the garden of the temple.

The garden looked as peaceful and quiet as usual. “How dare you trick us! There is no one here!” said one of the servants. Shuang closed his eyes and slowly walked towards the darkness, the light of the temple reflected off his pure white clothing, the sound of his footsteps getting lighter and lighter as he walked farther and farther away till he stopped. The brief silence felt like hours. “Show yourselves, I don’t have time to waste,” said Shuang, 10 shadows emerged from the darkness, the moonlight reflected off their perfectly sharpened blades where they all swung towards Shuang. In an instant, the attackers all fell on the ground unconscious. Shuang isn’t just a grandmaster, he might be one of the strongest fighters in history.

“Good work kid, I didn’t expect someone like you would be able to notice trained assassins in the dark, would you like to be my student?” asked Shuang, his eyes were bright and with passion, Max accepted his offer, “Well you’re one of the grandmasters so I could only accept!”

Shuang trained Max one on one, he has never focused on one student alone before, others were jealous of how an annoying, childish and arrogant child would gain such teachings where only the best students of the temple could have. Shuang has dedicated his life to mastering the art of using a wooden stick in combat, Max held up the stick looking puzzled “Shuang, why don’t you use weapons with a sharp edge, it’ll be way easier to kill them.” Shuang lifted a light smile “I prefer to have freedom in life, just like how I fight, I want options to choose whether another life should be taken or not, by using this weapon I could defend myself easily and knock down my enemy instead of only hurting them, if I could choose I don’t want conflicts” Max burst out laughing “Just listen to yourself, that sounds so stupid if I get the chance I would beat their ass!” Shuang sighed and continued with teaching him how to wield a wooden stick every day and Max trained hard.

Finally, they were on a mission together. Shuang was the general of the operation and Max was the leader of the small squadron. The soldiers watched their step, they were mindful of every move they made, one miss-step would lead to their position being exposed. They were waiting for the enemy clan to appear, to retrieve their stolen weapons that were taken by them on the last secret attack. They waited for hours and Shuang noticed that this might be a trap, he ordered all troops to fall back. Everyone quickly fell back and retreated towards their base, a group didn’t move and stayed at their position, Max said “I’m sure they are around here, we need to wait a bit longer, if we give up now, these 6 hours would be for nothing!” “No, we must go now, I can sense that this might be a trap, we got the wrong information, we need to go now or we might get ambushed,” Shuang yelled. Suddenly shadows jumped out and sliced through the squadron, bodies fell one by one from the trees, Max finally knew what he had done. 10 warriors were brought to their graves because of his foolishness. Max knew his time in the ancient temple was over.

Max was put to jail to review his actions, it was cold and hollow, only the sound of his chains around his neck would break the silence of the jail underground away from everyone else. Every time he meditates, he can see his comrades being slaughtered one by one, limbs cut off, the screams when they get stabbed through their heart, he could hear all the hatred, all the despair he has created. He thought he was better and smarter than everyone else, he thought his way was always right but this time, he has seen the consequences when he was wrong. He was prepared to be cast out of the temple.

He was thrown in the hall of the temple to see the headmasters, the loud chattering surrounding the hall was enough to ring the heavens. "Listen!" shouted Shuang, silencing the crowd "I have seen something in the boy, he is still inexperienced, he is still immature, he is still a child, but he will be one of the greatest warriors of our temple under my guidance !" The crowd was silent for a brief moment, they muttered, "Why would a grandmaster have so much trust in a brat like him?" "Grandmaster Shuang never stood up for anyone before."

It was pouring, every droplet of water stung like a bee, young Shuang held his wooden stick with his knee on the mud, gasping for air, a thousand footsteps were rumbling towards him. His master said to him "This might be the end of me, youngster. You've definitely been one of the best students... no one of the best friends I've ever had, I wish I could see you grow up and be a man, I still have so much to do... I'm sorry, my final wish is for you to find our next successor to this combat style, and live." His master has bruises everywhere on his body, his left arm seemed dislocated and his other was filled with cuts from the sharp blades, it felt as if ants were biting all over his body and a voice telling him to fall asleep, he still crawled to his trusted weapon and helped himself up, the broad shoulders and the strong physic, it looked as if he stood taller than anyone, this image burned into Shuang's memories.

The headmaster looked down upon Max. His eyes were empty, he should feel guilt, suffering, pain... He felt nothing. But a familiar warm hand was put on his shoulders, Shuang has never looked so assured as he is now, the headmasters looked at each other and the eldest spoke "Grandmaster Shuang has made it clear to us how he views the young boy but that doesn't change what has happened. But we are willing to give this boy a chance, he would be repairing the cliffside path, if he is able to do that, he may come back to test his loyalty to the temple."

The cliffside path of the Hua Shan was viewed as the most dangerous pathways up a mountain, it was built 200 years ago by a He Zhizhen inlaying stone nails on the cliff to support the wooden rafters for him to walk, in order to cultivate his morality. The stairs were carved from the stone walls of the Hua Shan where it was too steep to fit wooden stairs. The planks on the edge of Hua Shan was as wide as Max's foot, and one of the planks were broken, even though just looking at the path most people would vomit out of fear, Max once again felt nothing he blindly stepped onto the planks, on the first step he wished he would fall to his death joining his comrades, on the second step he saw glimpses of all the memories he had, he has never felt true happiness until he met Shuang, even though it could be hard at times, he realized that Shuang was the only one who had trusted him before, he tried to turn back but he slipped and in that moment he can feel the tension releasing in his mind was going blank he knew it was the end of him he thought "I wish things could've ended differently, this world never treated me right from the start but they gave me Shuang, I wish we could've... I guess I could only hope to meet him again in another life." at this moment, Shuang used his wooden stick and redirected Max's momentum from falling to being scooped to the side, Max was saved. He slowly woke up, his vision was blurry but after a brief moment, he started to feel numbness and immense pain in his back, he can barely remember what happened, but from the formation of his bruise, he can tell Shuang has saved him.

6 months later, Max has built himself a small camping site and learned how to make mushroom stew for himself, he worked on finding the right materials on rebuilding the pathway alongside training harder than before. Max was using different types of stones to make stone nails like how master He Zhizhen did, despite the efforts he wasn't able to make a stone nail nearly as strong as the original. He spent hours and hours, days, and nights trying different ways. Suddenly he remembered one of the teachings Shuang told him "Defeating the enemy doesn't only require strength, you must analyse the strength and weakness of you and your opponent to make the best decisions based on your current situation. You learn to adapt." This time, Max analysed the pieces of stone carefully, picking out the strongest stones, then going through his selections one by one, realizing the grains of the stone would vastly affect the strength of the stone. Max once again started making the nails, he was aware of the grains and shaved material off bit by bit with certainty that it would become the strong nail he hoped it would be. After one week of work, he has made 2 nails that would be able to fix the plank walk, he slowly crept his way to the broken pathway, his eyes and body were cooperating as sharply as everywhere every slight movement were calculated in order for Max

to not fall off the cliff, he first put down the new plank of wood, then slowly sawed away the corroded old piece of plank, the old piece of plank was cut and fell off the cliff. “One, two, three, four, five……” Max counted to hope to hear the stone reach the bottom of the cliff but after 3-minute pass by there was no sound, it meant that the drop was extremely capable of killing any living being who fell off. Max’s hands started to shake, his head felt lighter and lighter with his vision slowly fading away, a slight bang echoed through the mystical mountains, the stone has finally reached the bottom of the cliff, the mountains were so quiet that the insignificant little rock’s voice has been able to go through the mountains. Max came back to his senses and immediately took out his hammer and hammered the stone nail in, surprisingly the first one worked and the hammered the second one in for extra support. He crawled back like a worm and laid down facing upwards out of breath. Even though it was as straightforward as reading a manual, the job was so intense that it made him feel grateful that he was still a living man. He lifted his torso and sat up, he finally have taken a look at the majestic mountain view, even though it was still precipitous and jagged, only those imperfections would build the mesmerising curves of the Hua Shan.

It was bitter cold, the sound of footsteps crunching the snow made towards the temple. Max stepped through the front gate, back in the familiar place he used to stay every day, but it looked different, the structures looked smaller than what his memory recalled. He looked up at the temple feeling relieved that he was finally home. Max felt something was odd, somehow the temple felt different but couldn’t tell why. He walked cautiously moving his feet swiftly through the hall ways. Bodies were scattered around the hallways; his foot was like walking on puddles but of blood. Some chatter was coming from the main hall and he rushed in as quickly as he can to finally reunite with his master, he slammed open the door only to reveal bandits wearing black surrounded Shuang and a dozen of monks, a few dozen of bodies were piled up at a corner lifelessly hanging stacked up like dirt. Max couldn’t hear anything Shuang was saying, he stood there frozen to the ground. One of the bandits swung a sword at Max, his reflexes raised up his arm, the next thing he remembers is how blood burst out in front of him, revealing once his limb hitting the ground dead.

He opened his woebegone eyes, the temple has decayed looking depleted. He stood up using his right hand to assist him, his left arm was covered by a long-sleeved shirt but it looked hollow. He wore worn dusted clothes, he picked up his hoe and limped off back into the present.

Huangshan

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Janice – 15

Staring blankly at the beautiful scenery, the sun that was rising behind the mountains, the birds that were singing, the roosters that were crowing. This beautiful sunrise did not bring joy but sadness to the young Xuan Yuan – the yellow emperor. Those memories came flooding back – those evenings that he hiked with his father on this mountain, those evenings that he hunted with his father and those evenings he sat here with his father enjoying the sunset – he sniffed and his eyes were misted over with tears.

“Go to Huangshan, son.” he remembered what his father told him before the war. He held the letter his father asked a soldier to bring it back home to him. “My beloved son, go to Huangshan, find the treasure I left for you. Go through the door and find it, don’t be scared, I know you can do it. Bring home the treasure. Love you forever, father.” he read the words on it over and over again, he sighed. He looked up the mountain, wondered where the “door” was, wondered what the treasure was, wondered why father told him not to be scared. He clenched his fist and tears streamed down his face, he knew that father had faith in him and he would never let him down.

He hiked to the peak of the mountain, he didn’t see any marks or anything out of ordinary on his way, he had no idea where the door or the treasure was. He stood on the edge, holding a fire torch, overlooking the peaceful villages beneath the clouds, his eyes once again filled with tears, he thought that he had failed his father. He took out the letter, trying to look for any clues he missed. He put the fire under the paper and he gasped in surprise. He saw a map.

He would have rested, he would have set up a tent, he would have lied down and waited until the next morning to find the treasure, but he was too excited, he couldn’t wait. He took his bag, the map and the torch and started his long journey to find the treasure.

He followed the map and he noticed that there were some arrows on the trees around him, which he thought he must have missed on the journey to the mountain peak. He followed the arrows, he looked up to the sky, the moon had changed its position, he thought he must have followed the arrows for hours. “They are leading me to nowhere.” he thought. He held up his torch to see how long the path was, he saw a long road with tall, dry trees on both sides, as if they were pointed in an arrowhead, leading him to the “door”. He must have walked for another few hours, he was exhausted and decided to set up a tent and wait for the next morning to start walking again. The tree branches stood tall, covering the moonlight, but he didn’t care, he was too tired.

“Coo! Coo!” he heard the birds chirping. He opened his eyes and he saw the green leaves on the tall tree branches. He must be too tired last night to see the tree leaves he thought. He packed his bag and started to walk again. He looked at the trees to find the arrows and they were nowhere to be found. “Weird,” he murmured. He took his letter out and followed the map. He heard footsteps, he turned around and saw an old man who carried some wood on his back. “Where are you headed, young man?” asked the old man. “At the end of the road, sir,” he answered. “Oh, you don’t want to go there, trust me, you don’t.” he laughed awkwardly. “It’s fine, I will head back home soon, don’t worry. Have a nice day.” he said as he turned around and continued walking, he heard the old man sighed. He shrugged his shoulders as he looked for the arrows on the trees.

Hours had passed and it was getting dark. He was trying to walk straight to the end of the path but he felt like he was walking in circles. The path seemed endless. He decided to sit down and eat his dinner. As he finished his dinner, the sky was completely dark. He started a fire and lit his torch; he once again saw the arrows on the bodies of the trees. He knitted his eyebrows and looked suspiciously at the arrows. “This is weird, I was sure that there were no arrows this morning.” he thought. He took a deep breath and decided to take his time and follow the arrows before they “disappear” again. As he walked, he saw a shiny little dot at the end of the path, he was so sure that this was the “door” he was supposed to find. He ran to the door as fast as he could. He put his hand out, reaching for the doorknob, he saw some lightning bolts connecting his fingers to the doorknob. He swallowed and looked at his

surrounding trees. The arrows were still there, the tree leaves were gone and the trees stood bizarrely tall. Suddenly, a magnetic force pulled his hand to the doorknob, the door was pushed open, he felt a push on the back and the next second he realized he entered through the door and he heard the door closed. He turned around and the door was gone.

He looked up to the sky, the clouds covered the sky but it seemed that it was still in the morning and the sun was nowhere to be seen. He looked around, he was in another forest, the trees were leafless, the branches were covered in snow, he looked at the ground, it was covered in a thick layer of snow. He didn't remember that it was snowing. He shivered with cold in his thin cotton shirt, he opened his bag and took out an extra cloth to put on. He took out the map as he remembered that his father told him to go through the "door". He had no idea where the map was leading him but he hoped it was leading him to the "treasure" that he was meant to find. Hours must have gone by, but the night didn't come, the sky was still bright without the trace of the sun or the moon. "Is father here? Why would he ask me to come here? Was it just because of the treasure? Where am I?" he couldn't stop wondering. He shook his head like he was getting rid of the questions in his head. "Focus!" he said to himself.

He wandered around the forests for hours and hours, finally, he found a cave, he believed that it was where the x marked on the map. He went inside and lit a candle. He was exhausted, he had no idea how many hours had passed, he couldn't figure out the time without the sun or the moon. He sat down and ate some food he brought. He stood up again and walked around the cave to find some hints. He put his hands on the cave walls, it was smooth. Suddenly, he felt something stuck out of the wall. It felt like a button or a switch. Immediately, he pressed it without even thinking. He felt the floor shaking, some small stones fell from the ceiling of the cave. He heard a rumbling noise and the atmosphere became dusty, he couldn't see what was happening. The rumbling noise stopped, the air became clear again. The wall in front of him was no longer there, he saw a table and there was a book on the table.

He opened his eyes wide in surprise as he walked near the table. The book was covered in dust, looked like it had been placed on the table for thousands of years and no one had moved it ever since. He took the book and blew away the dust, "The Magic Spell Book," he read out the book title quietly. He opened the book, a note fell out. "Well done, son. Seems like you have found the treasure, now go back to the door. Leave and don't come back." he read the note. "So, this is the treasure, a magic spell book" he spoke quietly and grinned. He wondered why he had to run, he finally found the treasure, he decided to sit down and read the book. He opened the book, he smelled a strong old book scent, the pages were no longer white and there were some small yellow brown spots on the pages. As he focused on the book, he forgot about other things around him, he forgot about the time, he didn't notice that the sky turned black.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps. He looked up and saw a little girl peeking inside the cave from the entrance. She walked inside and whispered "Why are you here? The sky turned black; you can't be here". "Why?" he asked. "Shhh! Be quiet, the monsters will find you." she said. "What monsters?" he laughed. "Shhh! I am serious, you can't make loud noises, you will regret it, I promise." she whispered in a serious voice. "Okay, fine. Then can you tell me what is happening?" he whispered. "I have never seen anyone else before, did you just get here? Why don't you know what will happen?" disbelief spread across her face. He told her about how he got here and that he was finding the treasure his father left for him. "So, you found a door and you entered here. Do you know the way out? Was the door there after you entered?" she whispered. "No, the door disappeared." he said. Suddenly, they heard tree branch cracking and weird creaking noises. He looked up and the girl immediately blew out candles. "What are you doing?" he asked her angrily. "Shhh! Don't move." she covered his mouth. The weird noises went far away and the girl exhaled with relief. "What was that?" he asked. "The monsters." "There are no monsters!" he exclaimed. "Go outside and you can see it yourself, don't make any noise." she said quietly. He walked to the entrance quietly and he couldn't believe what he saw. He ran back to the girl, he was frightened.

"The..." he swallowed and continued "The trees...". "Yes, the monsters, now you believe me?" the girl looked at him, annoyed. "They were moving! How?" he asked unbelievably. "I don't know how but they become active when the sky turns black." the girl explained. His heart was beating very fast, he felt like he was having a heart attack. "Is anybody else here? Or are you alone? Do they eat people? How can I leave here? Why can they move?" he trembled with fear, he felt dizzy, like his head was about to explode. "Slow down, don't be that scared." she said,

“All I know is that they won’t be able to find us if we are quiet.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Ok, now you are calm. Yes, they do eat people.” she said slowly. “What?!” he suddenly forgot how to breathe, he felt like he was about to pass out. He closed his eyes again, trying to calm down. The girl tried to distract him, she told him how she ended up here.

She said that she and her brother went to play in the forest one night and accidentally found the door. They entered through the door and the door disappeared. They were stuck here. She said that one time, they were still outside after the sky turned black, her brother tripped over some stones, he fell and made a loud noise, one of the monsters came and caught him. She ran and hid inside a cave so the monsters weren’t able to find her. “What happened to your brother?” he asked as he calmed down. “He was killed by the monsters, all I could find was his head after the sky turned bright again.” she said as her eyes filled with tears. “How long were you here?” he asked. “God knows how long.” she whispered. “We need to get out of here. How can we get out of here?” he asked. “The door only appears when the sky turns dark, once you wait for the sky to turn bright again, the door disappears.” she said. He got up from the ground and packed his stuff. “What are you doing?” the girl looked worried, “don’t go out there! You will get yourself killed!” “I need to get out of here, I have a mother to take care of!” he exclaimed. He packed his stuff and walked out of the cave.

“You don’t have a plan! There are monsters at the door, we can’t leave!” she whispered as she followed him out of the cave. “I don’t care, I am leaving here!” he said quietly. The girl was frustrated, she stomped her foot quietly. She thought of leaving him out there alone, but she couldn’t bear to see another person being killed by the monsters. “Ugh, fine. Don’t do anything stupid that will get us both killed.” said the girl. They started walking back to where he found the door.

They heard the tree branch cracking noise, they stopped walking, one of the monsters must be close. They saw a cave near them, they sprinted as fast and quiet as they could. They held each other closely as they hid at the end of the cave. The cracking sound moved closer and closer, they held their breath. He saw the long, tall body of the monster, it bent down its body, listening to the sounds in the forest. It had big, ugly hands, the long and sharp tree branches were its claws. The roots of the tree became its feet, every time it moved, there were some tree branch cracking noises coming out. He had never seen a creature that scary. He held the little girl even harder, their muscles were tensed. They watched the monster walk closer and closer to the cave, they couldn’t stop imagining what might happen to them if the monster found them. He began to sweat, he could hear his own heartbeat. The monster stopped in front of the cave, it looked around. They could hear its low growls as it “breathed”, the girl shivered with fear in his arm. It felt like forever before the monster turned around and walked away. They sighed with relief. They panted as they sat at the end of the cave. “Ok, let’s keep moving.” he said as he got up from the floor.

They moved closer to where he found the door, there were more and more monsters. They could see the door but there were too many monsters in the way, they could never make it there alive. They hid behind a giant rock, trying to figure out a plan. “We can’t make it that far. There are far too many of them.” the girl said, waiting for him to respond. He was trying to think, he shook his head, trying to calm down. “We have the spell book, maybe it can help.” he finally said. He flipped open the book, trying to find a spell that could help.

Suddenly, a monster appeared in front of them, it grabbed their feet. It dragged them out. They tried to hold onto the rock, but it was too strong, they were dragged away. His spell book fell out, and it flipped open to one of the pages. He didn’t have time to think, he shouted out whatever was written on the page. “Come the lightning and the thunder!” Right after he shouted, a lightning struck the monster that was holding their feet, it disappeared.

They exhaled and looked up, all the other monsters turned around and looked at them. “Uh—oh.” they thought. The girl picked up the spell book and got up. “Run!” he said to the girl. They started running, the girl flipped open the book and tried to find a spell that could kill all the monsters as they were running. “Look out!” he shouted, but he was too late. The girl tripped over the rock and fell.

“Leave me!” she shouted as the monsters were getting closer and closer. “Take the book and run to the door now. Let me be the bait, they won’t have time to catch you!” she said as she held up the book. “No! I am not leaving you behind.” “We don’t have time for this, just go!” He looked at the girl one last time. “Thank you.” he said quietly as tears streamed down his face. He took the book, turned around and ran to the door as fast as he could. “I must make it out alive, I won’t let my father down, I won’t let the girl down. Gosh, I don’t even know her name.” he thought as he got near the door. He reached the door, he grabbed and turned the doorknob. He opened the door, he saw the familiar trees and roads on Huangshan. He heard the girl’s scream, he turned around and saw the poor girl being wrapped around by tree branches. “I made it, your sacrifice is worth it. Thank you, girl.” he thought. He stepped his foot out of the door, as his second foot was stepping out of the door, he looked up at the sky, it started to turn bright and the door started to disappear...

Climbing in Yellow

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Sharon – 13

“Students make sure you take all your luggage, we aren’t coming back here again!”

“Ugh, Ms. Usuro is so annoying.” Mason mumbled.

“As always...Oh Mason, look at the big black spot on her forehead!” praised Jacob. The boys laughed, mocking their poor teacher.

“Boys...don’t think I can’t hear you! Be fast and get ready, we’re leaving soon!”

The students quickly carried their backpacks and gathered around, none of them seemed excited, knowing that they had to climb up the endlessly seeming mountain in the middle of the winter. This was supposed to be a fun graduation trip, but with the absence of their lively camping teacher, Mr. Jones, they’d known it would be a boring week

There were around thirty of them, each carrying a big backpack, some even carried two.

“Boys, why don’t you guys leave first, I will see you in the camping site, you guys know where it is right?” asked Ms. Usuro, while she was busily taking care of the other students. “You may also set up the tents first.” Ms. Usuro, the substitute teacher, was a stubby looking person who never smiled. Unfortunately, she was responsible for the students graduation trip, which required a strong physique that Ms. Usuro does not attain.

The group of boys nodded, they had been there a couple of times in the previous years, probably the most experienced within their group of classmates. Mr. Jones had specifically mentioned this fact to Ms. Usuro just in case the inexperienced teacher needed assistance during the journey.

The group of three boys left the crowd and headed up to the small and narrow path, which was the only way towards the camping site regardless of where they entered the mountain. It’s usually a half an hour journey to the camping site, that’s why the teacher asked them to leave and set up the tent first, saving time for later activities. They originally planned to climb and explore the creatures and view of the yellow mountain, with their expert camping teacher Mr. Jones.

Suddenly, the clouds appeared from nowhere and darkness enveloped the sky, tiny raindrops started falling from the sky, the boys felt more of the coldness, trembling their bodies, and teeth.

“Anyone have an umbrella?” asked Mason, the weather turned bad and it was raining even heavier.

“Well I don’t think anyone can take out their umbrellas in the middle of the road, Mason.” Fred shouted, trying to fight over the howls of the wind between rustling leaves as the trees creak.

“What are we gonna do? It’s pouring and we are still in the middle of nowhere!” cried Jacob.

All of a sudden, a flash of white lightning snaked through the air, a black shadow-like object appeared as the lightning struck the floor. The boys jumped backwards, taken aback by the bolt of lightning. They were soaking in both rain and sweat. Jacob, who was quick to think, dragged whoever was next to him to a nearby cave. Fred, however, was lost between the sea of fog and deaf to the screaming wind. Scared and not able to find his friends, he ran towards the camping site along the narrow path to look for help. The group was separated.

“What kind of creature was that?” cried Jacob. The boys ran further inside the cave, trying to create as much distance from the shadow as possible. The cave was big, unexpectedly big, though the entrance was small. There were many passageways inside, they were small and varied in shape. As the boys got deeper, it became darker, after making sure nothing was after them, they settled down, and waited for the storm to stop.

“Wow, I don’t think we’ve seen a cave here before, or have we?” Mason questioned confusedly, they’ve been walking this path multiple times and none of them had ever noticed the cave.

"I don't know...It came from nowhere..." Jacob replied, with his teeth chattering in fear, and his hands still shaking.

Everywhere was dark, Mason pulled out his torch from his bag, looking for the exit. The boys tried to walk back to where they came from, strangely, there was no exit. They were devastated, and frustrated.

"Did we go the wrong way?" asked Jacob, trying to remain calm.

"No, I'm pretty sure we came from here" Mason answered.

"How are you going to explain this then?" Jacob pointed towards the dead end ahead of them

Mason hesitated for a moment.

"I don't know... Let's find another way out, surely we've missed a path" Mason mumbled with confusion.

Suddenly, a ray of pale light caught the boys' attention, it woke them up from their tiring souls. Mason turned off his torch, the light was yet gentle but dazzle, the boys quickly followed the pale of light, they walked into another narrow path of the numerous in the cave.

As they walk, the light gets brighter and brighter. The boys gasped, they saw an exit.

A pale of sunlight, warm and soft, shines through the clouds to give them a gentle breeze.

"See, I told you, there must be another way out!" Mason shouted excitedly.

"Wait... this is where we came in!" Cried Jacob, looking towards the familiar narrow path of the mountain.

"But, don't you think that is strange...there was a storm a few hours ago, and, and, the floor now isn't even wet..." he hesitated.

"Maybe it's the sun, it dries the water. Come on, let's go and find them." Mason pulled Jacob out of the cave.

The boys quickly walked back to the path that connects to the camping site, they knew everyone should be waiting for them, they'd already disappeared for almost 3 hours. As they walked through the path, they have strangely found out that the trees that grow correspond with the path has been much shorter and smaller when they recalled their memories, but there was no time to waste, they must reunite with their classmates as soon as possible.

The two boys were tired, after walking for three hours straight in the cave, they now have to climb the mountain. After thirty minutes of walking, they still couldn't find the camping site, all they saw was a bunch of wild grass standing on a piece of flattered rock ground. They were confused, and desperate.

Couldn't fight off his tiredness, Jacob collapsed and sat on the ground, "Where...where are we...?"

Mason remained silent, as his eyes focused on an old man who was drinking and holding a brush. The old man has a long and white beard, wearing a long grey robe and some baggy clothes that only seemed to appear in ancient China.

Mason stepped up, "Umm, excuse me, do you know where the camping site is?" Mason asked carefully.

The old man turned back, his face was red like a fresh apple, unsteadily gait, he didn't seem to understand what Mason was saying.

"Hello sir... Can you hear me?" Mason asked.

The old man grummed, he ignored him, turned back and kept on drinking his bottle of wine.

Mason was shocked and scared by all that happened, comprehensively, his mind and thoughts were messy, he appeared to be aware that he had gone to a wrong place, or in another word, time.

“Jacob, lets go.” Mason grabbed Jacob’s arm, Jacob hesitated, “Go!”, Mason whispered.

The boys went down the path as Mason pulled Jacob and left quickly.

“What do you mean?” Jacob asked anxiously.

“That guy... he is an old man.” Mason replied, nervously.

“Of course...I mean, he is old!” Jacob was confused.

“I mean, he should be from the past, we shouldn’t be here, we have to go.”

“What?”

“We have to go back to the cave.”

“No! We took hours to get out!”

“Jacob, we have to get back to where we belong.”

The two boys eventually went back to the cave, they walked for another hour, finally, they found another exit. When they came out, it was red, and hot. It was not the mountain that they were familiar with, nor the one that they were looking for, there were no trees, no grass, not even the narrow path that they walked through in the morning. The sky was red, brick red, with a few brown stripes within the dark and horror atmosphere. It is filled with dust, where the boys can barely breathe when they come out of the cave, everywhere was nothing like the famously known Yellow Mountain.

“Where are we...?”

“It should be, when, are we.” replied Mason, terrified.

All of a sudden, the boys saw two astronauts—like people walking outside the cave, they both have a round helmet covering their head, a big tank carried on their back, much like the oxygen supplies that astronauts carry. The two men seemed like they were arguing, although the boys can’t hear their conversation, they can tell from the two men’s body language that they were having a conflict. As the two men walked closer, the boys tended to hide, eventually, the men came into the cave, the boys squeezed together and hid besides a big ore of the route.

The two men were speaking english.

“I told you this was a bad idea.”

“What are you gonna do then?” the other man replied.

“It's unchangeable! You’re just gonna harm the timeline and the past if you insist on changing the history! And how are you going to do it?”.

“Lauren knows, she is already on her way to 2020.”

“What? How can you not tell me!” the man shouted.

“You’re just going to stop us!” the other man shouted back.

“Don’t tell me she brought Tayke.”

“You know her too well.” the other man sneered.

“You’re just gonna harm the people, it's not supposed to be there! It can’t be in the record!” the man’s temper sparked.

“That's the only way to get us back to normal, you know that.” The other man calmly replied, and walked away.

“Not Tayke, there must be another way, there must be another way!” cried the man.

“Tayke, the black shadow monster...?” Jacob mumbled with fear, Mason remained silent.

The boys shattered.

The Yellow Mountain Journey

Creative Secondary School, Lee, Caris – 15

The cold wind blew right beside my ears, it was much colder than I thought it would be, I thought. Yes, you may already guess where I am already, I am on the peak of Huangshan, the most beautiful and gorgeous mountain in China. Me and my classmates were having a school trip here to study the countless different species and the culture here. We had a little break time on this peak and after 15 minutes, we will move on to the next peak to continue our trip.

I stood at the edges of the peak, searching for some rare plants that might grow there. Suddenly, I looked at the abyss down there attracted by a mysterious force, it was dark and quiet. I don't know why there's an attraction between me and it, causing me to look at it more. I stared at it for a long time, maybe just a few seconds, it was so long that I don't even know how much time passed. I started to think, there's a pair of mysterious eyes down there staring at me too, through my eyes, and going straight to my soul. My heart kept beating faster and faster, as fast as there's a leopard running in my heart. I started to faint, and when I noticed that, I already fell into the deep gap.

I don't know how long the time passed when I woke up. Here is cold, wet, and dark, I couldn't see anything but black. I can hear some water dropping somewhere, I guess there's a river nearby. I tried to stand up, but my legs felt like noodles and they were shaking. All of a sudden, I saw something on my neck shining, it's the necklace that my grandmother gave me when I was packing up my luggage. There is something flying from the necklace to outside, I look closely into it, it looks like a glowing butterfly, it is so bright that I cannot see directly into it, especially in the dark. The butterfly started flying deep into the dark, I felt the butterfly gave me some power, I stood up quickly and tried to follow the butterfly. Using the glow from the butterfly, I can start to see what is in the dark, here is like a cave, there are rocks everywhere, there's some water dripping from the point of the rocks. The butterfly flying faster and faster, I ran hastily to follow the butterfly.

The butterfly passed through a circle with lights shining on it, I blinked for a few times as the lights were so strong. I hesitated for a moment but I decided to go for an adventure because this would be the last chance I can get out of this weird place. I ran into the hole and a black covered my eyes.

When I open my eyes again, I am already in another place, or more like dimension. It seems that I traveled to the past, the strangers walking on the street were wearing ancient clothes like what I have seen in a museum. There were people on the side selling snacks and clothes, it just looked so realistic... Is this a dream? I slapped myself and I felt serious pain on my face, I looked at my hands, they were transparent. 'What..what happened?' I talked to myself. I walked through the street, I found out that I can pass through other people's bodies. It was such a new experience for me that I can't stop playing with my new superpower.

Suddenly, I was pulled by a mysterious force, I tried to escape from it but I can't control my body anymore. My feet were making the sand flow all over the streets but the strangers ignored it all. I finally gave up as I started losing my focus, my vision started to fade and my eyes closed again.

It was already midnight when I woke up, here is a house made with some simple wood and grass, there were some clothes piled up at the corner, showing the owner's personality. Two people came into the house, I was scared that they would notice me and kick me out of the house, but it seems like they cannot see me. I looked closely this time, the man on my left is a monk, he was bald and wearing yellow clothes which is somewhat similar to what I saw in dramas on television. The other one is an old woman, I suddenly realized that she looked exactly like my grandmother but just with different clothes! My entire brain was blank for a few moments, then I decided to listen to what they were saying.

'Mei Shan... You really want to do that... the consequences will be so serious that even me cannot help!'
The monk asked my grandmother.

'This is the only way to help... You know that, too right? I must do it!' My grandmother shouted at the monk. She started to cry quietly, I never saw my grandmother cry in my life before, I felt so anxious but also curious about what they were saying.

'But... but what if the result will be the whole village disappearing from this world? For a single child that is a monster?' The monk questioned.

My grandmother cried 'Yes, this is my grandson, of course I will think for him first! No matter what cost, I will keep him alive!'

I was so shocked by the fact that my grandmother was going to kill other people to keep me alive, my heart became colder and colder as I started to digest her words. And... I am a monster? I looked at the monk and waited for him to speak more about me, but the monk looked so disappointed, he left the house shaking his head and without a single word.

My vision has changed again, now I am on the street. I saw my grandmother holding a baby running to the forest which is located outside of the village, there are people chasing after grandmother. I tried to stop those people from blocking them but it didn't work, they all went through my body and continued chasing her. Suddenly, the ground started to shake, all the buildings started to collapse, I ran to the center of the village to see if there's anyone else. But then something weird happened, the villagers started to become stones slowly and their movements froze. I screamed for help, are the villagers dead? I don't know...

The whole village is quiet, I walked slowly to check if there's anyone alive, or even a chicken, a dog. I walked through a small garden, there were a bunch of kids playing with a ball, their smiles were so bright and pure, but they became stones, their lives were over. I walked near a house, there was one happy couple sitting in the balcony, they looked like they were having a good time, a special time only for them. I kept walking, finally, I walked near a small pond and I looked at myself using the reflection of the water. Is it really what the monk said? All these tragedies happened to the village because of me? A monster?

'These are all my faults...' I shouted to myself that was inside the water. 'I shouldn't have been born to the world, then all these people wouldn't die...' I cried hard, as my soul was crying too.

'No, child, no...' A voice spoke to me.

'Who are you! Come out!' I shouted and looked around.

'It doesn't matter as long as you save the village' The voice said.

'How? It is impossible! I don't have any powers like superman and spiderman?' I asked.

'You have to feel carefully... It is right inside the necklace'

I closed my eyes, I kept reminding myself, I have to save the village, I have to save the village... Then, I felt a power rising up from the necklace, going to all the places inside my body. I opened my eyes, the power suddenly exploded and covered all over the village. The trees started to grow again, the houses were fixed to their original place, the villagers started to live again and the time started to change again.

'See child, you did it!' The voice said, I felt that she was happy too. 'Now, as a reward I will tell you your past...'

'Once upon a time, there was a peaceful village, the villagers believed that if a child was born on the date of 7th of July, then the village's future would be a tragedy. However, after 30 years, a baby was born on the date of 7th of July. The villagers were scared and they decided to kill the baby before the baby was one year old. The grandmother of the baby decided to take the baby outside of the village to escape the fate. That unfortunate baby is you and the woman is your grandmother. Your mother was dead soon after giving birth to you and your father is dead after a month too, the villagers believed in the story more. The monk in the village predicted that if the baby left the village, all the villagers would die. The villagers trapped your grandmother and you in a house, but the monk secretly let you and your grandmother leave the village, then it's just like what happened in front of you.'

I nodded my head and thanked the secret voice. I planned to walk through the village but then I felt dizzy and I fainted again.

I woke up and saw all my friends and teachers looking at me. It was like a jump scare. For me, the whole adventure just now seems like a silly dream. I hold my backpack and continue my journey up the yellow mountain.

In Movies

Creative Secondary School, Shi, Chun Chung – 15

In movies, TV, stories from all places. Foggy mountains are always seen as where secret masters, where experts live. I have always wondered why masters are always hiding on these foggy mountains. In my opinion, it has nothing to do with the mountain's beautiful view. Instead it's all about hiding from the world, being humble. And being humble is the most important trait a person could have.

Firstly, I think that being humble could improve a person mentally, according to some experts, people that is humble tend to handle things more calmly, this is very helpful in many situations in life, also being humble will make it so that a person wouldn't be self-centred, this means that this person could learn from others. A person couldn't be perfect, there is always someone better at something than you, being humble makes it so that it is a lot easier to take in. Most importantly being humble makes it so that it is easier to make friends, when you are humble, people around you will be more willing to talk more and build a closer relationship with you.

Also, I think that being humble could make it so that a person could not get disturbed by others with a different opinion, many of the masters tend to not be the king's fav, therefore being humble could also save their lives.

After all, I think being humble is pretty important.

Eternal Love

Creative Secondary School, Singhal, Sakshi – 15

Hurrying through the dusty streets of the village after a long day in the paddy fields, Akihiro could sense the growing excitement of his grandchildren, eagerly awaiting his arrival. A warrior, who had seen many battles in his younger days, now led a peaceful life, growing rice and spending cherished moments with his family.

‘Grandpa’s back’, the joyous shrill broke his chain of thoughts as he found himself engulfed in warm cuddles. As they settled in front of the fireplace after dinner, little Emiko climbed into Akihiro’s lap, an eager smile playing on her lips. It was time for their bedtime story. So ‘What’s it going to be tonight?’, he asked, gazing lovingly at his youngest granddaughter. ‘Can you tell us what happened to Princess Zhang Xiao Xi’, Emiko pleaded. A look of pain shot across Akihiro’s face, Emiko so reminded him of Zhang Xiao Xi. ‘Yes, my princess,’ he replied, ‘whatever your little heart desires.’ And so he began..

A long time ago, a small village nestled at the base of mighty mount Huangshan. This village was known for its natural beauty, prepossessing and tranquil. It was full of clay-coloured huts, big and small. Crystal clear streams twinkled like diamonds by the warm rays of the sun as they gushed along the borders of the village. The market centre bustled with people. You could see housewives exchanging gossips and haggling over the price of fresh catch and men negotiating and trading wheat and rice. Young girls helped their mothers with the household chores while the boys were expected to provide a helping hand in the paddy fields. This village was ruled by an authoritarian emperor, named Zhang Da li. Tall and broad-shouldered, donned in a silk Hangfu and gold accessories to go with it, he was a stern ruler with ebony black, high arched eyebrows, and a sharp-pointed jawline. A man of his words, people admired him as an emperor but feared his anger.

Within the borders of this village lived a young princess named Zhang Xiao Xi. Despite being the emperor’s daughter, she was anything but like him. She emitted a positive charisma that cast a spell on one and all. Unlike her father’s stern glance, her almond-shaped eyes reflected love and compassion. Her flawless skin, framed by flowing jet black hair stretching out to the floral bow of her Hangfu enriched her beauty. She wore floral printed canary-colored silk Hangfu with light ornaments. Villagers admired her and adored her. However, few could see the tinge of sadness that lay behind the smiling eyes. The queen’s death had left a vacuum in her life which could never be filled by the Emperor. To her father, Zhang Xiao Xi was merely a means to expand his kingdom, by marrying her off to a powerful prince. However, that was not what Zhang Xiao Xi’s heart desired. She was in love with a brave knight. Tales of his valour and kindness had won the princesses heart when their eyes had first met in the royal court. As much as she loved him dearly, she feared her father’s wrath. The princess knew that if she confessed her feeling for the knight, the emperor would sentence him to death. And so they met in secret.....

Every night she and the knight met secretly on the tall mount Huangshan. The pale crescent moon shone like a silvery star illuminated their way to the meeting point. They exchanged sweet conversation in a mild breeze, perched on the top of the mountain, watching the valley that lay before them. The wide streams shimmering in the moonlight slowly rippled into small nerves and drifted deep into the dense forest. When it was time to part, they clung on to each other fearing that it would be parted forever. Hidden from the rest of the world, the only witness to this magical love story was a young warrior, a confidant of the knight. Having fought many a battles together, the knight trusted him with his life and his secrets.

One night, when Zhang Xiao Xi came to the mountain to meet the knight, her almond eyes were brimming with tears. Sensing a rising panic in his heart, the knight embraced her tightly. No words were required to realise that their worst fears had come true. ‘Father wants me to marry prince Lu Wu Xin,’ she quivered, ‘but I won’t be able to live without you.’ As the knight was about to console her, she placed her finger on his lips, ‘We both knew that our love would never meet father’s expectations. But I am not able to part my ways with you, so.....’ she gave a little pause and continued, ‘so please marry me’. Tears rolling down her pale cheeks, she hugged the knight tightly. In a soft tone and after what felt like eternity, the knight finally spoke, ‘I won’t be able to live without you either, however, I am unable to treasure you and provide you with such royalty. Do you still want to marry me?’

At that moment in time, behind a big oak tree, a pair of vicious ears were trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. As the figure moved swiftly in the shadows, it failed to notice the warrior who always accompanied the knight to the mountains. The warrior, having caught a glimpse of the receding shadow rushed to warn his master.

All was silent for a moment as if time stood still. Dark clouds covered the moon enveloping the valley in a blanket of darkness. The stream felt as if it had changed its course and was now flowing backward, silently. The fear of losing each other was evident in the tight grasp that engulfed the two souls. The silence was broken by the drop of a single tear that trickled down her cheek and softly landed on the green carpet with a thud. All had come alive once again.

“Your highness” announced the gatekeeper “ Prince Lu Wu Xin seeks an immediate audience in private.’ The Prince’s arrival a few days before the wedding was not a good omen but definitely not one that could be ignored. The emperor moved to his inner chambers to receive the unexpected guest. “To what do I owe this honour” asked the emperor, having exchanged pleasantries in a polite tone. “Where is your beloved daughter Zhang Xiao Xi?” asked the prince, a smirk evident in his cold manner. The emperor eyes remained stern, as he let the prince continue. “Your daughter.....is in love with the knight of yours. I saw them together at mount Huangshan” he said while smashing his fist on the stone pillar next to him. Blood dripped down his knuckles on to the tiles of the grand hall. ‘Impossible” the emperor roared. “I give you my word, if I find my daughter with that man I will kill both of them but ” the air was tense as the voice echoed “be warned, if proved wrong, you shall have earned a deadly enemy.”

The warrior waited, hidden by the boulder, in the moonless night. “We need to run away, it won’t be long before the emperor realizes that things are amiss.” It was decided that the knight and the princess would escape from the palace and meet at their usual spot on the mountain, where the warrior would be waiting with the fastest horse who would take them away, far away from the wretched claws of destiny.

The wind howled mercilessly, as a falcon circled high in the sky as if warning of the impending danger. The horses seemed to be perturbed as well as they click clawed their legs and their high pitched neighs echoed in the silent valley. ‘ They should be here, any minute now’, the warrior kept reassuring himself. It was then that he heard the sound of the dong fill the night. A chill ran down his spine, the dong only spelled danger. Knowing for certain that the Knight was in danger, he decided to make his way back to the village, in case his master needed him. Just then he heard a rumble in the far end bushes. He turned sharply to see that the princess and the knight had made to the mountain. However, they were in a deplorable state, clothes were ripped and torn, their bodies were covered in blood oozing out from several cuts that they had endured. The warrior ran towards them, worried and relieved, hoping to persuade them to rest for a while and allow him to clean their wounds. “NO! Don’t stop us now” the princess cried earnestly. The knight embraced the warrior, ‘ You’ve been a good friend.’ he whispered before mounting the horse. The knight and the princess showed no trace of fright. ‘ Thank you’, she said gently as she placed her sapphire ring in the warriors palm. ‘A token of gratitude and remembrance when we are gone’, she smiled. Tears rolled down the warrior’s face as he watched them ride away into the moonless night.

The warrior made his way down the mountain, dragging his heavy feet towards the sleepy village. Despite their daring escape, the warrior felt consumed by a dreary feeling, weighing down his heart and soul. As the first rays of dawn peeked through the dark clouds, he saw spirals of smoke wither away in the far distance. He quickened his pace, intrigued by the sight. A deadly silence had engulfed the village. He stood frozen as a scream struggled to escape his throat. This couldn’t be.....

As the princess prepared to escape, little did she know that she was being watched by the emperor. As he saw her move out that night, a cold fury filled his mind and body. “Guards!” he yelled, ‘Close the palace gates and ring the dong bell.’ There was a sudden commotion and in just a blink of an eye the whole palace was awake. Marches trooped out in search of the princess and the knight.

He stood in front of the lifeless bodies, lying covered in blood, hands clasped tightly. The knight had fought bravely till his last breath but they had been heavily outnumbered. It's a bad dream, he reminded himself. He had seen them ride away to safety, to happiness, to togetherness.....this couldn't be true. Just then, his eye caught the sight of Zhang Xiao Xi's slender fingers. There was a mark on her finger, the mark of her favourite ring. The ring, of course was missing.....

A deafening silence had filled the room. 'Whom did the warrior meet that night on Mount Huangshan that night, grandpa?', asked a tiny voice. Emiko's question broke Akihiro's trance. 'We shall find out someday. For now, off to bed ,' he smiled lovingly.

As Akihiro blew off the lamp, he couldn't resist the urge to open the secret compartment, so skilfully built in the corner of his room. As he opened it gently, the sapphire glittered in the dark, filling the space with a soothing light, a reminder of an eternal love.

Huang Shan Quest

Creative Secondary School, So, Darren – 15

“We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains.”

The Chinese teenage boy sat solemnly at his desk, studying this quote from his favorite poet. He always had great interests in the creation of the universe and the existence of life. Every night he looks upon all the goods his ancestor has brought to society; Li Bai. The great Chinese poet during the eighteenth century who has inspired millions. “Li Zhong Xing, it’s time for dinner.” Nolan’s mother called. “Yes mom, I’m coming,” Nolan replied as he put down his earbuds on the desk and zoomed to the dining room.

Li Bai’s father slammed his fist on the table, “This is a disgrace! You are a disgrace to the Chinese culture! You should not disobey your own father! You are not stepping out of this house without my consent!”, they could hear the children outside laughing. Li Bai was furious, “What would the country think if you were to trap the great Chinese poet huh? You’re the disgrace! Do you actually think I care if I am disrespecting you right now? NO! I will leave NOW and I don’t want to see you ever again!”

Nolan gasped as he woke from his slumber, now sitting on his bed as if he was resurrected. “Immortality fruit? Huh? What the heck?” Nolan thought to himself, “Stupid ass dream.” A voice echoed in Nolan’s bedroom, coming from all angles. Nolan turned his head as he heard footsteps creeping on the floor; he saw a black figure standing in the corner of his bedroom; Nolan froze, “*Nolan...*”, the voice echoed once again. Nolan turned to look, his heart raced as the shadow’s eyes started to glow, lighting up the whole room. Unanticipatedly, the figure zoomed towards Nolan and shot through Nolan’s body, then evaporated where it disappeared behind Nolan. Nolan froze as if he had been electrocuted as he felt a burst of energy running through him. He couldn’t tell what he was feeling. Soon after, rays of spectrum started to spurt out of him, he couldn’t handle it, it was too much, he tried to scream. Abruptly, Nolan’s vision began to blur, he was switching from reality to a memory. He wasn’t sure who’s memory, but he certainly knew it didn’t belong to him. Just as Nolan thought was going to rupture, the pain faded away.

Cold wind glided on Noland’s face. He opened his eyes. A man in his thirties, overdressed, wearing a Hanfu. Nolan knew this place, he knows this mountain very well, it is in his memories. This man failed on his quest on the finding of the immortality fruit. He failed. He is selfish, ignorant, he ignores others in order to accomplish his wants. Nolan stood there, looking through his new memories, as if it is part of his now.

“You will do what I say. I want you to go to Huang Shan, and find the immortality fruit.”

“Nolan, NOLAN! Wake up, we’re still in class.” Nolan’s teacher screamed.

The man turned to look at Nolan, then everything zoomed out of Nolan’s sight as if there was a black hole that sucked everything in.

Nolan popped back into reality. The whole class gave Nolan a cold stare. Some laughed. “Shut up.”, Nolan looked annoyed, soon he drifted into his imaginations.

“I have received 4 emails from your teachers today, what is up with you Nolan?” Nolan’s mother looked furious, she gave Nolan the death stare, “4 emails... Look at yourself, look at your grades! Average forty percent? Is our money going to waste towards your tuition? Am I raising a pig with your father?”, Noland’s mother continued to rattle. Nolan on the other hand drifted into one of his memories again,

“What would the country think if you were to trap the great Chinese poet huh? You’re the disgrace! Do you actually think I care if I am disrespecting you right now? NO! I will leave NOW and I don’t want to see you ever again!”

Nolan felt the rage, he felt like he was in the memory. “ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME RIGHT NOW?”, Noland’s mother snapped her pair of chopsticks in half, and threw it right at Nolan’s face. Nolan’s father backed off; the room was dead silent, no one even dared to move. Hissssss. The boiling soup started to urge out from its pot,

dripping into the blue flames on the stove. “My son is an idiot.” Nolan's mother said with such adamantness. *Idiot. “My son is an idiot”*, repeatedly echoed in Nolan's head. Nolan, a bomb, what his mother said acted like a fuse,

“SHUT THE HELL UP MOM! SHUT UP!”

Nolan sat quietly in his dark room. It was only seven at night, yet he was still filled with rage. *“Leave them, your mom hates you”*, the voice echoed.

It was ten. Nolan has been going into the new memories, experiencing different emotions, different perspectives of things. There is this strong feeling that is guiding Nolan into forming different opinions.

Brainwashed.

He didn't feel like himself.

He decided to follow that strong feeling to go on a ... quest?

Nolan departs from home to school, at least that's what Nolan's parents think he's going. He found a cab who was willing to drive from Xi'an to Huang Shan, which is a 2 hour drive. He hikes up the mountain and stumbles across the death trail of Huang Shan, hiking to the edge of the mountain on a plank of wood that is only long enough to fit a pair of feet; 2160 meters off ground, life depends on his harness. Looking down feels like it has already given him goosebumps. Nolan has reached the highest peak of the mountain; the south peak. The view was magnificent with fluffy clouds below Nolan's feet; the clouds covering smaller mountains like a warm, soft, silky blanket. **6:30 PM.** The sun slowly falls under the fleecy clouds, that was day one in HuangShan.

After countless days and nights, Nolan had been avoiding security in Huang Shan. For the past few months, Nolan has been living off Li Bai's memories of Huang Shang. He has learnt a lot about the mountain. During the day Nolan hides from the sounds of walkie-talkies; at night Nolan hides from flashing bright lights. As time went by, visits from security were less frequent; tourists started visiting Hua Shan. Nolan was known as missing Huang Shang boy. He learned skills and gained knowledge he wouldn't have in the cities.

Securities visits came less frequently. People probably thought he was dead for good, Nolan thought. This was the perfect time to hunt. As Nolan slowly climbed down the mountain his head started to hurt, he came across another memory,

“This is impossible to get down! This stupid fruit, this is going to cost my damn life to get down there! Damn it.”, Li Bai was furious, his life's work wasted. He has spent over eight thousand hours just on research. Li Bai wrote his best works during the period of research. But he had to see his quest being accomplished, no matter what it takes, even if it cost his family.

It was at this moment that Nolan lost his coordination as he came back to reality. Going at five kilometers per hour, Nolan crashed into a tree crushing his spine, bending his spine five degrees.

Nolan woke up with two of his spears stabbed into his stomach, blood oozing from his stomach. He sat against a tree, fully blossomed; pink, red, white, it stood out from the rest of the trees. Nolan under the alluring tree, disgusted. He looked around sitting in an ocean of blood. Destiny. This was his destiny. His destiny is to be the chosen one to accomplish his family's legacy and die. Death. To continue his family's legacy for what? Nolan was drained out, he didn't know. He doesn't want to know. The trees were close to each other; dense, acted as an umbrella, blocking out the warm morning sun. Nolan's head ached; he felt something. He tilted his head to the right, a fruit and a flower attached to it. Took a bite, a bitter flavour starts to burst in his mouth, but then starts to fade, the trees start to fade. Everything started to blur, and he slowly lost control of his own body, his own thoughts.

★★★

“Where am I?” There were people all around Nolan. To familiar faces to strangers. “OOF” Nolan gasped as his mother, weeping, gave him the warmest hug. “I'm so sorry Nolan ... Thank God you're alive! Oh my goodness, everybody thought you were dead! Oh my little boy, come here!” His mother cried her eyes out.

It was report card day. Nolan's heartbeat came to a stop as soon as his mother pulled out his report. Ninety-five percent overall. Pride shone on Nolan's mother's face. It was a sunny afternoon, the streets below were crowded with locals and visitors shopping for souvenirs and local Xi'an street food. The awards blinked on the wall, and the biggest of them all printed,

Founder of

Immortality Project 01

Advanced Discovery of New Medical Research

Nolan Li

China's Magical Mountains

Creative Secondary School, Tang, King Chong Jonathan – 15

The mountain stands tall, above everything around him. His head goes peeking into the clouds, sometimes even goes above them, and his body just there, not moving for centuries. Covered by grass, dirt and trees, and when the wind comes, the trees and grass on him move around like they are dancing.

However, some people think that mountains are nothing special. That they are just a weird thing that emerges from the ground, just a weird tall piece of land that is taller than everything else. They say it has no purpose, just a waste of land. One of the people that thought this was called Fred.

Fred was a teenager that lived at a village at the bottom of Huangshan. People in his village always said that if there wasn't this big mountain in the way, they would have a bigger village and more places to have fun, and they would all have bigger homes, and instead they have this huge mountain that is very hard to climb. He also thinks that the mountain is very ugly, with patchy dirt and trees on it. However, he has never looked at the mountain carefully. One day, his school organised a school trip where their whole year group had to hike near the Huangshan area. At first, Fred complained that it was a waste of time and he did not want to go. He asked his teacher if he could not go, and wanted to fake being sick on the day to skip the trip. But at the end, he thought that he might be up for something that he has never experienced, and living under this mountain for so long, he has never climbed or hiked on it, so he went.

He arrived at the start of the hiking trail, meeting up with his classmates and teachers. They were ready to start walking. Fred looked up at the mountain and stared carefully at it for the first time in his life. To his surprise, he saw a view that he has never seen before. A tall mountain stood before him, where the peaks cannot be seen because they are covered by the clouds. He started his hike with his classmates, climbing slowly up the mountain. As Fred was walking, he was looking around at the different special looking trees, where he has never seen in the village. He saw some very colourful and rare birds flying around and chirping on trees. He saw the beautiful view of the villages and people below the mountain. He looked up and saw the clouds floating.

He slowly climbed up and up the mountain. Most of the path was rocky and steep, but some parts were smooth. By noon, they had reached the top of one of the lower peaks of the mountains. There were tens and hundreds of peaks of different heights. He looked around, observing everything. Some mountains are steeper, some have more trees, some have more stones. He saw a tower in the distance which was very far away in another city. The clouds are blocking the sun. It was colder than in the village because of the higher altitude. After a quick break, they walked around for a while then hiked back down the mountain the same path they hiked up. Fred walked slowly and wanted to use this time to enjoy the hike and look at the views.

After this hike, Fred has started to understand how beautiful and majestic this mountain is. He saw the beautiful views looking down from the mountain, he saw birds and trees that he had never seen before, and he saw the peaks being covered by the clouds, and he was curious to see how the peaks actually looked above the clouds. When he got home, he went on the internet and researched some pictures of the peak of the mountain. He sees the peak, standing taller than everything around it, and the clouds floating slightly below it. What a beautiful sight, Fred thought. He never thought anything positive about this mountain, but after seeing some pictures of the peak and hiking it for a bit, he realised how beautiful and majestic it is. He thought to himself that humans cannot make anything like this, this is a natural wonder, and we should treasure it instead of thinking it is ugly and a waste of land.

The Race to the Pills of Immortality

Creative Secondary School, Tsang Parry, Iwan – 15

His face was old and wrinkled with a long grey beard. He looked up at the king who dressed in expensive and colourful clothing with jewellery. The old man cleared his throat and began. "My lord—there is going to be a race tomorrow." The old man paused and looked at the tall prince standing next to the king who sat in his throne. "A race to the peak of Huang Shan to earn the pills of immortality between all the kingdoms in the land. And you must travel up the mountain from the heavenly stairs through the deep forest to race to the top of Huang Shan." The prince stepped forward with a big grin but slowly went down as everyone else was silently staring at him. "um father?" he asked. "Yes—you" as the king rolled his eyes. "Well then" went the old man. So it is the prince that shall race for this kingdom then my lord. The king did not reply. The old traveller looked at the prince and back at the king and nodded. "Thank you for your time my lord and I shall be on my way to the next kingdom." He turned his back and walked away with a guard on each side of him guiding him out. Then the doors closed.

The prince now on his horse shoulder to shoulder with all the other racers with the rising sun behind them as horses trampled through flowers and plants with the sound of heavy breath as racers competed down the forest. Rivers sparkled as the red blazing sun shone down on the surface of the water. All of a sudden a loud yell out came from the bushes with red berries by the river. Then it started to rain. But the rain was not water droplets they were arrows! Men and horses fell to the ground letting out their last ever words of begging for help while horses cried in agony on the ground. The prince swiftly tried to get out of the target of arrows with other racers in front of him. There was the sound of a thin object flying through the misty air, then a sharp pain entered the prince's shoulder. "Ah!" He shouted to himself. But there was no time to treat his injury yet. Leaves were blowing in the wind and onto the path. In the distance appeared a white stairway leading up to the peak of Huang Shan.

The prince decided to take a break just before he would begin to climb the stairs. He sat down carefully on a rock after sweeping the brown dead leaves off the rock and treated his wound. Sitting with his back hunched forward looking down at the muddy floor and thought to himself about the reaction of his father when he arrives back with the pills of immortality. He quickly got a bit of fruit and beard for himself to eat and watched the leaves flying on the air. After that he pulled out the arrow now dripping blood off the tip, rapped a bandage around his shoulder to cover his wound. Then came a cold blast of cold wind on his face from the racer that past him by with a blink of an eye. "The pills are mine!" shouted the racer with his horse bashing through every small tree and bush in its way. The racer with all the confidence in the world raced up the heavenly stairs and raised higher and higher up the mountain. The prince without hesitation got right back on his horse and went after him. He started to catch up seeing the racer's horse in the distance. The horse had been abandoned. The prince tried looking around but saw no one. Only the sound of movement behind the trees. It must be a monkey in the tree he thought to himself. The prince decided to carry on but out of thin air jumped out the racer with a dagger in his hand and pushed the prince off his horse and stabs the horse. The horse screamed and dropped to the ground. "No!" shouted the prince. "you're not going anywhere now" said the racer. "You've lost!" he continued. The attacker lunges forward with the dagger in his hand at the prince but jumps back from the dagger. He runs forward at the man with the dagger. The racer in response waves the dagger at the prince but only managed to cut the air. Then the racer ready to kill jumps at the prince covered in mud and blood. The prince quickly skipped out of the way while the man fell to the ground although quickly get back up he was kicked down the mountain by the prince. The prince did not waste time watching the barbaric man fall to his death as he still had a race to finish. He took off his armour he ran up the stairs near the finish.

There was an old lady waiting by a tree on the peak. She got up as soon as she saw him but didn't clap or congratulate the prince but only said "I'm sorry" as she picked pills off the tree and gave them to the prince. "Why are you sorry?" questioned the prince. The lady looked at him and sniffed the air. The air wasn't as fresh as it was before the race started the prince thought to himself. The lady held his hand and took the prince to the edge of the mountain where all the boy saw was his home in flames.

Home

Creative Secondary School, Wat, Hoi Lam Sophia – 15

Walking on the street of New York on the 1st of November, Edward had never felt so...trapped. As a poet, a famous one as some might say. He needed to hand in his draft of his new anthology by the end of this month. And here he was, aimlessly wandering, desperately searching for something or someone to write about. He tried, he really did. Sleepless nights, overdosing on espresso, and thousands of books. All of those only made him the most tired he had ever been.

“Ding!” his lame ringtone rang – it was a message from his publisher. “I changed my mind. If I couldn’t get your draft before next week, we will not publish your work.”

That was the moment when Edward lost it. He felt like the deep blue sky fell down and crushed everything he had, and he was on the verge of breaking down. People around him exchanged worried looks and concerned glances. He felt like every pair of eyes were scanning him, so he stared at the ground and walked away quickly. Holding on to the nearest lamppost like his life depended on it, he panted, and tears could not stop streaming down his face.

After taking a few deep breaths, Edward slowly calmed down. The street was less crowded, and the fresh colours were brushed upon the sky by then.

“Time to go home.” He murmured to himself.

But where was home?

He certainly didn’t want to go back to that oversized, empty apartment. He removed his hand that was holding the lamppost tightly for the last few minutes, and frustratedly ruffled his messy hair. That’s when he saw it. A beautiful watercolor painting of an unknown mountain, and the word “Huangshan” was written on an A6 advertisement, which was sticking on the same spot his hand had been holding onto. That night, Edward made one of his most irrational yet best decisions– going to Huangshan for a week.

A rush of adrenaline went through him when he finally arrived at the mountain. The mountain was breathtakingly beautiful. There were not enough words in any language to describe all its beauty. The mountain laid in the distance like a green camel hump or perhaps the nose of a slumbering giant turned to rock. From afar Edward could see sheeps, trees, wolves, birds, streams, and flowers. The scenery looked like it was the most valuable painting that came to life. He held out his hands to make a “picture frame.” with his fingers. It fitted right in, a perfect photograph; from here it even looked two dimensional. Edward then explored the mountain fully. He took time to walk around, appreciating every little beauty detail of Huangshan.

Even though the air in Huangshan was pleasantly cool, Edward was sweating a bit after walking for hours. He sat down on a peculiarly shaped rock, and stayed there for a while in comfortable silence.

It was 11:13 when he woke up from an unexpected slumber and realized one thing...several things actually. The night was starless and the moon was covered by murky clouds that blended in with the rest of the sky. Tendrils of iridescent silver mist crept over the mountainside. Harsh wind whipped and screamed through the cold air. He blinked dumbly, tried to open google maps to find his way back. But his phone battery was crying for help.

“Bloody hell.” He groaned.

Edward started walking into the forest, following the narrow path leading to the edge of the woods. He could already feel his shoes sinking into the mud, but he didn’t mind. He just wanted to go back as soon as possible, he had not even booked a hotel yet. Before Edward could even realize what was happening, a big gust of wind hit him,

forcing him to close his eyes and took a few steps back. He could feel leaves banging his calves and shins and the young man had to kneel down to shield himself. Edward couldn't open his eyes for some time before it finally weakened. Never before had he experienced a wind so brutal coming out of nowhere.

All of a sudden, something shiny caught his attention.

Was that glitter falling from the sky?

Edward was standing dumbstruck, and squinted, not trusting his eyes. The sky turned pink, and golden glitter started to fall from the sky. He wasn't sure about what was happening, but when he came face to face with a gorgeous winged-creature, he couldn't help but be immediately mesmerized. She was full of that kind of cosmic beauty that transcends all time and space. No knowledge of astrophysics would be able to explain the rare phenomenon of the universe that she was.

They stared at each other in silence for a beat. Then two.

"Woah, you are so beautiful" Edward blurted out, and mentally slapped himself.

"Well, hello to you too" The creature smiled cheekily, showing her cute dimples.

Edward explained that he was lost, so the creature kindly offered her tiny wooden house for Edward to stay for the rest of the week. It was beautifully decorated with flowers and glitters, it was also full of rare animals that he had never seen before. Like, leopard, muntjac, deer and leiothrix. Those playful animals stole his heart the moment he stepped in the door. Most importantly, her house felt warm, cozy, and homey. It was a fuzzy feeling that Edward hadn't felt in years.

He just wondered what it felt like, to know what his home was, so easily.

"I hadn't asked, what was your name?" Edward asked, when he was watching her dancing around and the house, and using her little wand to grow her obsessive amount of plants fondly.

"I'm Leah."

Leah. what a beautiful name for a beautiful girl. No wait, what exactly is she?

Over the next few days, Edward learned a lot. He learned that Leah was a fairy. She had been living in Huangshan alone for a long time, but she saw her animal friends as her family. And that she felt like the truest version of herself here in Huangshan. He also learned something new about himself. He was in love with everything in Huangshan, the large forest, abundant rainfall, sharp peaks, floating clouds, and... Leah.

When Leah smiled at him, it was like the whole world vanished, It was what he thought about if he felt observed by strangers on the street. He thought about the way she looked at him, and their inquisitive gaze couldn't touch him.

How on Earth did she do that?

That week was truly the best period of time in his life. Edward went on morning walks with Leah and her animal friends at 5 a.m. every day. Flowers blossomed, trees bore fruits, and plants grew taller. Everything just seemed a little more colorful and lively when she flew past it.

"So you were the reason why this place felt so magical?"

"Maybe. I only knew that you were the reason why everything felt so magical to me."

Watching the sunrise every morning, He wrote poems in his own corner of the house, words were flowing like endless rain into a paper cup. He wrote and wrote, and there was only Leah coming out of his black ink pen.

“Oh— sorry to interrupt, didn’t know you were having your “writing session”, I was wondering if you would like to go to the rainfall tonight?”

“It was a date.”

“It was a date then.” Leah echoed. Her cheeks were the blush of roses, that peek of champagne pink. The colour infused cheeks dimpled with the blossoming smile and her eyes shone in a way that only deep happiness can bring.

Edward mentally cooed, and suppressed a smile. He could tell from her blush that she really liked him. Her usual light yellow had a rosiness to it, it was cute.

All I wanted to do was to kiss her right now.

So he leaned forward. They were so close that he could even feel her breath fanning out on his cheeks. His heart started beating so fast, hammering against his ribcage as he closed his eyes. The next thing he knew, Leah had pressed his lips to his, they kissed as the world fell away. It was slow and gentle, comforting in a way that words could never be.

After making dinner with Leah at night, they chatted, for endless hours.

“Why did you run from your home?” she asked softly, lifting her eyes to his ones.

I needed to be here more than I needed to be back home. And as soon as I was here, it became home. There was a little voice inside of me that felt... settled here, that feels at home. And I couldn’t get it to shut up, no matter how hard I tried.

“I wasn’t running from home, I was running towards it.”

Another day, same routine.

On day five, Edward managed to hand in his draft.

Edward wasn’t sure how it happened, but suddenly they were out of days. It was November seventh and he was leaving tomorrow, back to a life he was used to, back to doing what he’s best at, what he was born for. He was supposed to feel happy, and yet...

Though they did not address anything. Perhaps they knew what they were doing all along, knew how ephemeral the two of them were doomed to be.

The last night he spent in Huangshan, They barely got any sleep. They couldn’t sleep, and they did not want to as well. Both of them were desperately holding onto the feeling of being loved and being at home. Edward did not want to open his eyes in the morning and realized he only had a few hours left with Leah. So he just laid there on the comfy bed, stared at the ceiling with a hundred thoughts.

I just wanted to be with you forever.

Edward thought, turning to look at the ethereal fairy laying next to him. He felt empty, weighed down by his sadness and the thought that he was going home in less than a few hours. There were moments where he was sure Leah felt the same. Like now, when she was gazing down at him with so much tenderness and love. It was like they were on

the cusps of something more, but neither of them ever said a word. His confession was on the tip of his tongue ready to slide out like honey, and yet he remained silent. They both did, looking at each other and recognizing the reluctance mirrored in each other's eyes. It was then that Edward realized they were both...scared.

They woke up early and by some unspoken agreement, they carried on as usual, respecting the routine they had established and they had been sticking to. Both of them got dressed in companionable silence, bundling themselves in warm comfy clothes before they went out.

They walked through the forest, the rainfall, and here they were, the place where they first met.

"Hey," Edward said after a few minutes of silence.

Leah staring right at Edward's face. "What?"

"Can I kiss you?"

Leah blushed a little, looking away. "You didn't have to ask."

Edward wasn't sure why he felt compelled to, why he didn't just reach like he already had many times in the past week. There was something about this moment that made it feel more fragile, perhaps it was because he knew.

He knew it was their last.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Edward nodded, reaching for Leah, bridging the gap between them.

In her kiss, he was home.

He savoured every single second of it. He savoured the way Leah touched him, what she tasted like. He savoured the feeling of being in love and feeling it for once.

When they were done, they stayed like that for a while, breathing each other's air. silently wishing he could stretch this moment just a little longer.

Edward was in his favorite place in the world with one of his favorite people. How beautiful it was for him to have this. How tragic it was that it couldn't last.

Edward went back to New York and his life went on, even on days he was sad. The one thing that kept him going was his published book. His book "Ephemeral" went viral, everybody was talking about it. He started getting recognized on the street, gaining followers on social media, and seeing his name on big book review websites. But his mind couldn't help but wonder about that fairy he loved, dreaming about the stunning place he lived for a week, and imagining what it would be like if he didn't leave them.

Every single day he made himself busy. Buried himself with work, and made himself drunk by going to the nearest club. Work. Drink. Work. Drink. Work. His day cycle only consisted of mountains of crumble paper and alcohol. Once he stopped drinking or working for a second, his thought flew back to that lovely mountain and beautiful fairy. Just like tonight, Edward's hiraeth to go back to Huangshan was so strong that he sat on the edge of the couch, shaking hard and clutching at his knees as it sank all the way into his very core that he was never going to see Leah ever again. He put his fist through the drywall before his reason could catch up.

Darling, I had seen you curing broken and withered plants, then could you come here and heal my soul?

One day Edward passed by the lamppost where he found out about Huangshan, as he tried to take his everyday walk— the habit he formed after living with Leah. The advertisement was still there, waving to him eagerly. The only difference was that people there were senaking pictures of him. He lowered his gaze irritately, and swiftly walked away. That night, he dreamt about living in Huangshan with Leah forever. Just taking morning walks, writing poems, growing sunflowers and playing with newborn animals. The dream was so vivid that he almost believed it.

Almost.

They said when you were missing someone that they were probably feeling the same, but I didn't think it was possible for you to miss me as much as I was missing you right now.

November flew like an arrow. Edward blankly watched the fire curl and sway, flicking this way and that, crackling as they burn the dry wood, on Christmas day. A sense of emptiness hit him.

It was when he started to consider moving to Huangshan. He had given himself too little time to think whether anything or anyone New York was actually important to him, that he never realized there was little to nothing. He liked the fashion trend, he liked the beautifully built skyscrapers, he liked that he was able to earn a living doing what he loved. But nothing compared to the thought of living with Leah together in Huangshan forever, just spending time with his lover and enjoying life.

He started packing mindlessly.

Edward had never been so sure about something in his entire life. There were a few hundred trillion cells in his body, and every single cell was screaming "I was going home." non stop. Arriving at Huangshan, determined, he did not spare a glance at anything or anyone, not even the gorgeous scenery there. He rushed his way through the forest he remembered at the back of his hand, nearly died tripping over his own feet.

The moment before he knocked the familiar wooden door, so many emotions fighting their way to the surface.

"Knock knock"

The fairy he had dreamt about all month opened the door. She looked as gorgeous as he remembered, yet different.

Exhaustion and sadness was clear through her slight humped back. Her colorless wings passed through an oversized vintage tee. She rubbed her bloodshot eyes, then she lifted her gaze. She looked surprised, one of her hands was covering her mouth, and tears were forming in her eyes.

Edward took a deep breath and said. "I...loved you. Since I was deeply in love with you, maybe it was worth asking if there was space for me in that already amazing life of yours? Because... just like you felt like the truest version of yourself here in Huangshan, I thought... I thought I felt like the truest version of myself when I was with you." Leah didn't say anything, just choked out a sob, leaned forward to kiss him. Time stopped as they slotted together.

Maybe before they were both the kind of lonely that doesn't fully hurt, the kind of lonely that was comforting sometimes. Now they were finally together, in a place where the rest of the world had forgotten.

Home.

The Fall of the Precious Fruit

Creative Secondary School, Wat, Joey – 15

It is a universal truth that a good King must be equipped with a thick, rich glass of wine. And in this case, Huang di was beyond a good King; as he had a dark, ruby red liquor all over his stomach. The beams of perfect golden sunshine travelled through his glass and reflected the scarlet light on to his face, blinding his sight, “Who would need sight when you have a never-ending life?”, Huang Di thought.

But he knew the sight sickened him, he was glad he was temporarily blind. Oh! such a majestic waterfall, falling into the opaque lake; it was gleaming like the stars in the day, how deeply upsetting it was. Not to mention the trees; the ancient forest, each with unique patterns and a story, the breeze brought the smell of woods, they were divine; he wanted to vomit and was repulsed every time he saw them. The sight might seem as breathtaking for a few 100 years, he was sure, but now it merely bored him.

It was time for lunch, Huang Di opened his mouth and thousands of enchanted fruits were poured into his mouth. Such precious fruit! Golden mist sprouted out from the stem, levitating into his mouth. Clap, he waved the servants away. His mouth was filled with luscious tastes, yet the taste buds were numbed. Once again, he succeeded to live for another thousand years. What an achievement! He hated it. The juices of the “elixir of life” fruits dropped, melting away in the silk carpet. It had the image of the natural ground, with villages, boats, temples and of course, his own golden statues. It was given to him from the peasants when he was crowned, and was made of every single one of their finest clothing.

It was then when he had an epiphany, he could very well visit the natural ground. Why couldn't he? He had never been there for the last 500 years, “It could be a fun trip, I supposed, blessing the peasants with my presence and whatnot.” It was perhaps the best idea he had ever since the invention of taxes. His mood was immediately lighted. Just imagine the praises he would have, and the parties they would plan for him!

Huang Di put on his robe and crown. The pearls of the crown hit against each other, creating high-pitched twinkling. With this melody keeping him company, Huang Di swiftly passed through the tiger of the mountain consuming a flying deer, she was lying down near the river; wings deformed; her bones exposed in the neck area and her bare flesh was filling in the tiger's mouth. However, the corpse immediately recovered, and she ran away. He did not like deers; it reminded him of his uncle. So he instead headed east, to the stairs of the eight pillars. To cross the ghastly rapid river, he crushed some gold nearby the trees, and the gold dust formed a gleaming bridge. He then proceeded to walk down the pillars, each step echoing louder than the last. It was then he finally left the bubble of the mountain; the gruesome air of the natural ground instantly slapped in his face, leaving a horrendous mark.

White, white and white; these were what fitted in Huang Di's sight. The dazzling gleam of the pure snow left Huang Di utterly dumbfounded. The blinding white sewed his eyes closed. Such white! It was long before he had ever seen or experienced winter, for there were none in the mountain. He grabbed a handful, watching them soften in his hand with gleaming wonder. “What on earth is this!” The mushy snow mixed with the filthy white snow every time Huang di stepped on one, it became a muddy looking pile of filth, with occasional green grass standing in the middle. The winter breeze nearly distracted Huang Di from the lack of cheers he had; his silky robe seemed to completely melt away in the wind, bare, he felt.

And when his eyelid broke the lining in his eyes, the sight was marvellous. In the filthy snow, a corpse was half buried in snow. Its left shoulder was exposed to the air, half decomposing; some of the bones were exposed, leaving a perfect cross-section. “I wonder how long it takes to be reborn in the natural world.” Huang Di shrugged and didn't pay much attention, it's merely a deer, besides, it would recover soon, wouldn't it? To the right of the corpse, there was a market.

Market would not be the correct word to describe it, for it was so pathetically shabby and bare. There were at most four stores selling utter rubbish. The stores were all made of the combination of mud and snow, forming a shelter that could barely fit two humans. Yet From what Huang Di observed, three to four merchants were in a shelter, “I supposed they too have magic in the natural ground.”

One of the merchants in the shelter was selling fans. She was holding fans that were made of hay, they were half broken, with an enormous hole in the middle. Her hair was in the hideous golden yellow as the autumn leaves, leaving her oddly standing out against the snow. She was rather petite, but she had a triangular lump in her stomach area. She had a child pulling her hay dress, begging for attention and food. She pulled some hay out of the fan.

Huang Di could not tell the gender of the kid, nor the species as it had no hair. "Is it some sort of pet mammal?" It's head's skin was exposed and it looked so fragile that a little drop of snow could drill a hole in it's head. Merely from observations, Huang Di could see the rib of the kid, down to the bones; for the skin was so thin that they all sunk into it's back. Its lank figure was even more exposed with its disproportionately sized arms. They were merely two bones, no skin could be found, and was the size of a short knife. Undoubtedly, It was not satisfied with the hay, and it climbed next to the corpse and started harvesting it's half decomposed organs, the blood mixed with the pure snow, creating a new concrete for the shelters.

Huang Di began to walk, and walk he did. His steps were wider and wider every time he walked, pushing the snow from the group and kicking it everywhere, watching the snow piled up. His shoes were longing for attention, demanding a party. Yet no one seemed to have noticed his presence nor his silky robe.

Just as Huang Di was on the edge of hysteria, a little girl, wearing a red dress, which was also made of hay and dyed somehow in order to pass as fashionable, mistakenly ran into him.

She was wearing a coin necklace, it was utterly oxidised. Yet from the rusty surface, a silhouette was barely recognisable. The girl in red was shocked, the rusty silhouette and the annoyed man in front of her overlapped and she let up a short yet muffled scream, and ran back and hugged her mother, with a sense of curiosity in her eyes.

"Ahem," He cleared his throat, "Yes, it is I, Huang Di. And I have chosen your village to... inspect, you may greet me."

The people woke up from their individual comas. Their eyes sparkled with desires, clinging to a sense of hope. They began crawling to Huang Di and bowed. The parent, one leader-like villager smoothed out his hay cloth; brushed through his filthy hair with his muddy fingers. His eyes were filled with tears; heart beating. His legs were slightly shaking as he tried to recollect himself and spoke after a few seconds of silence.

"I am personally honoured to meet you, your majesty. I am Li, the village chief. And I am ..and we are..we have been expecting you, your majesty. The legend of Huang Di has been a myth ever since my great-grandfather. It was passed down by my family, generations by generations. You see, I...my grand-grandfather was an underling of yours, he spoke of you so erm.. greatly, and we are so... so honoured to be visited by you." He said when he branched out his awfully smudged right palm.

Huang Di looked at the man in disgust. How pathetic! Is there no proper courtesy in the natural world? He was the king, yet they dare to look improper and disgusting, to say the least. Last he visited, there were proper clothings. Huang Di quietly nodded, acknowledging his presence. Li was not affected by Huang Di's reaction, his eyes were filled with hope. "If you may, we would love to introduce our village to your majesty." Huang Di enthusiastically agreed, although the villager's manners were disagreeable, he was fascinated by the seeming different breed of the peasant in this village and their magic. "Yes, you may." He replied.

Walking through the market he saw at the entrance of this village, numbers of buildings began to introduce themselves and unravelled under the snow. It was tea time, yet the sky was still a depressing, dull grey, as it was for the whole day. Li introduced proudly.

"Our village is famous for its hay. Fei, please go ahead and fetch some of our finest hay and the vegetables we saved for the new year for your majesty. And...the potato."

"But the potato is our last...okay."

Huang Di frowned, he had never heard of hay before, and it most definitely did not sound pleasing. After ten minutes, it was done, a fresh bowl of hay and vegetables were presented in hopes of Huang Di's liking. The whole village was waiting for Huang Di's comment.

The anticipation wrapped around their necks and tightened as the time went by.

HuangDi found it hideous and laughable. “Look at these dry yellow sticks and grey vegetables! This is utterly disgusting. I appreciate your humour, Li, but you may provide me the elixir of life's fruits or some meat would be fine.” The whole village stayed silent for a few seconds. It was Fei who broke the silent “If I may your majesty, we don't have meat of any kind in this village after the drought. We barely have vegetables.” Huang Di laughed “How about shark's fins, bear's palms, bird nests? It is impossible for this village to have no meat at all, when I last visited, there were at least pigs. This is ridiculous!” The villagers stayed silent, Li took back the prepared meal and stored it in the storage. But he knew they would be spoiled. The potato was around the size of a fist, rotting away.

Li then brought Huang Di to his parents, who longed to meet him for their entire life. It was his parents last wish that they could meet Huang Di before they passed ; for they were nearly sixty years old. Li's house was located at the west side of the village. Huang Di was tired, walking along the seemingly endless path with no food. But he was generous enough to bless the peasants with his presence.

Besides, he was supported by a carriage with all the villagers walking behind him.

The house was rather decent compared to the other villagers. It was made of hay and some mud, yet there was a structure. It had a hole drilled inside the wall of the house and it was connected to a cave, making it spacious, Li said. And there were his parents, walking out of the cave. They immediately bowed after seeing Huang Di. Their bodies were trembling with excitement. What an honour! they did not dare to stand in front of the divine entity. Huang Di, who was waiting for them to stand up, half pulled, almost forcing them to stand; his feet were stomping .

As the two parents were slowly standing up and rambling on about how they longed to meet him, Huang Di paused and laughed in delight. “Your parents are so amusing to watch, Li. You see, they are only using one leg to walk, how hilarious! In my palace, I have never seen someone do this form of comedy. I have to say I am impressed. I might consider naming them as my entertainment servants. ” Li kept his polite smile, and stared at Huang Di at disbelief.

“Your majesty, This is a comedy of no kind. My parents were injured in the earthquake three years ago, and they have been limbering ever since. My boy, he was merely five years old, passed...during the accident, he was my joy...he would have been eight now...and he—”.

“I don't care if it was “earthquake or “storm quake” or more abnormal diseases you have in your world . You still have a daughter, it's enough for everyone. Besides, you don't have enough food to keep him alive anyway. ” Huang Di shrugged.

Li's facial muscles were physically impossible to hold up a smile, for they were stiff as a stone. But he wouldn't want to seem pathetic in the eyes of the divine entity.

“Your majesty, I... was so abruptly blunt and ...I insulted the divinity of the god. In fact...I am...I am... truly glad my son is in a better place. Speaking of my daughter, allow me to introduce my dearest daughter, Mi Mi. ”

The red dress bowed, her face was red as a ruby, almost as red as her dress. “Your majesty, I... am honoured to meet you.”. She was around four years old, with a pale complexion but luckily the dirt on her face covered them; yet light freckles could still be seen through her face. She had the nose like a button, it was round and was at the point of blackness that it seemed glossed. Her elvish ears were heated and pointy as a fawn.

Huang Di, curious about the magic of this natural world, moved closer and closer to the girl. Taking the air away, until there were no spaces between them. “Such a delicate little face.” he examined. He decided to bless this little girl with a new life; a new face; a reborn. However, he was not bothered to brush the dirt off her face, what a chore it would have been!

He took the little girl from her neck using his right palm, lifting her up. It wasn't hard, for her neck was paper-thin. He put her under the sunshine, squinted his eyes, allowing the sunshine to float around and through her pellucid neck. She screamed but there was no way of knowing for her screeches were muffled and it was rather faint. He then proceeded to compress her neck dreadfully slowly. His thumb pressed into her skin and deep within, her strugglings were drowned in the sea of begs; begging the divine would show mercy on her.

Huang Di, felt rather odd that the villagers could not recognise what he was doing. He was frustrated that the morals could not appreciate his noble actions. He put more force onto the girl's neck. He was not worried, they will see his work of art eventually.

Snap!

Finally, her bones were shattered! Her face was tilted to the left, slightly deformed. Blood rushed to her pointy ears, now appeared as red. Her cheeks were grotesquely distorted with dark bruises on her face. She was violently shaking; every inch of her body trembled; legs quivered; arms waving as if she was fighting the air, and in this case, she was losing. For thirty seconds, it felt like this would last forever.

Yet she stopped.

She was dropped; motionless; faced up. Her face had a perfect maroon shade, almost blended in with her red hay dress, some might argue it surpassed the later even. Yet her dim black eyes; soulless; staring, remained fixed on Huang Di, as if she was blaming him for her tragic, untimely death.

Satisfied with his work, Huang Di looked up, "Ahh perfect. She will be up and has a clean face in no time, just you wait-". The mourning cries surrounded him. Li bended down, along with his wife. They were silent. Trembling hands smoothing over their little girl's eyes, leaving handprints and her face was pale again. It was yesterday when she was born, how scraggy she was. But she was big enough to fill the void in the family. And she was gone, wrenching a bigger hole in them.

Detecting a shift in mood, Huang Di frowned, shrugged and added "I suppose the magic in the normal world is lower, nevertheless she will be up any time soon. I suppose a child would take longer than a deer..." yet stopped when he met the bloodlust eyes of the villagers. The cries evolved into wrathful screams.

The next thing he knew, a set of teeth was upon Huang Di's neck. Li tore some of his flesh out before he could react. The sweet, fish-like smell filled the village. Meat, at last! And Fei's and then thousands of teeth acted upon him. Each sank deeper into his skin; his veins; his bones. Children ripped the skin with their milk teeth; adults shredded his muscles. His heart was pulled out, along with ruby red gores. The juicy and lush flesh was peeling off his skin. His stomach was exposed, gashed open; teeth were pulled out, as a knife to saw the flesh; his eyes were large, emerald green and were half transparent under the sun. When plucked out, they were the size of thumbs. How moist they were. It only took one bite to utterly explode into thousands of blood juice, the grapes filled the mouth with luscious, thick blood. Such precious fruit!

As the golden sunlight beamed on the hill, the crystalline snow melted, the son of the east, turned into a feast.

China's Magical Mountains

Creative Secondary School, Wong, Jeremy – 15

Once there were 3 ancient guardians connecting the spiritual worlds and the realm of the living, these guardians maintained balance between the worlds. They swore to never affect the 2 sides directly as it might cause an imbalance between worlds, as long as they are here the 2 sides will never collide as if they were just parallel lines in a piece of paper. But if one of the guardians were to be killed, 2 things will happen, chaos and the 2 guardians will find a new third guardian.

“And that was the story of the 3 guardians kids!” said Joseph. It was a windy night but not too cold, very suitable for a long sleep.

“Papa, what does chaos mean?” said John. John was a kid similar to a twig you’d find under a tree, and he was a boy full of questions. He is 5 years old and was asking questions since he was 3.

“So if 2 guardians die, we might get to become the new guardians?” said Ken and Chloe, they were twins and they were always in sync. They always did everything together as if they were the same person, with fairly similar personalities and similar interests. They were at the age of 6

“These questions will be left unanswered. Go to bed now my children” said Joseph at a tiring voice as if he’d just worked on a 12 hour shift.

“Don’t touch my stuff John, I need it for my lessons later” said Ken, Ken is now 15 years old, learning about algebra and poetry. He was a straight A student with no difficulties about his academics.

“Why would touching 2 pieces of blank paper affect your lessons later?” said John, John still is a trouble maker and still is full of questions. He has no difficulties in his academics as well, because he gave up and decided to freestyle every upcoming test since he was 10 and he still was able to not fail any of them.

“Where is Chloe?” said Tom, he was of the closest friends with Chloe and obviously have feelings for her

“Well, I’m not very sure, you can try checking where her locker is, if she is not there then try the classroom, she is always in there drawing deers and trees for some reason” said Ken.

Chloe always stayed in the art classroom, she didn’t like communicating with the people in the school, well except for 3 friends and her 2 brothers. Chloe found deers and trees fascinating, they are known for being the symbol of another realm and connection between the 2 realms, very similar to the story her father told her when she was 6. The art classroom is the least visited room at free periods, so she chose to stay there for the most of it.

“Hey, Chloe” said Tom

“Hello Tom, give me a few seconds to finish this” said Chloe with a voice that had no tone as if it was an auto response. “So what is it?” now with a tone full of curiosity.

“Well, I’m going to go hunting with my father starting from Friday to Sunday this week. Would you be interested?” said Tom

“I’ll answer that tomorrow, I need to check with my father.” said Chloe, “is it ok if my brothers come with us?”

“I don’t see why not, there should be enough space for all of us” said Tom with a voice with very slight disappointment covered by excitement

Time went by really quick and Friday came, after school the 3 went home with Tom and went in the caravan that was double deckered and had so much space it fit 4 beds, and 1 bed at the lower deck. The 4 were enjoying themselves on the way to the mountains, playing uno and poker cards. Once they arrived Jerry, Tom’s father, taught Chloe and Ken how to use a rifle. John was already familiar with shooting and didn’t need to be taught. They were having a really fun time, shooting birds, deers and rabbits. Night time came by, Jerry taught them how to process deer meat and rabbits. After dinner Jerry chose to sleep at the lower deck and the 4 slept at the upper deck, they had a fun time until midnight, and they were too exhausted to continue and decided to sleep in. Morning arrived and Chloe realised her leg was aching but didn’t pay too much attention to it, she thought it was just overwork and she didn’t stretch yesterday when she started. The 2 brothers realised Chloe was walking very weird, as if she was

limping, but she was able to run normally as well. So they didn't pay too much attention to it as well, just telling her to be more careful and don't hurt herself.

The 4 were trying to enjoy themselves as if it was yesterday, but were too exhausted since they only slept for 6 hours. That night they slept very early, about 9pm and already they went to bed. 12 am arrived and Ken woke up and saw Chloe's bed was empty, he went outside and saw chloe's footprints heading into the forest, he grabbed his rifle and deciding to locate where she is or where she is going, after walking for about 30 minutes, the footprints came to an end, and he thought maybe Chloe went backwards stepping into the same footprints but that was soon found out to be wrong because he went backwards and saw nothing, the footprints ended 2-3 steps in front of a tree there was nothing special about this tree, it was just slightly thicker than the ones around it.

"So I guess this tree was just older than the rest of the trees around it" said Ken "Where did she go?"

As Ken was wondering where Chloe went, he heard footsteps near him, it wasn't human. "Sounded like a deer" Ken said to himself "Let's see where it's heading"

Ken decided to go towards where the footsteps are sounding and came to see a large sized deer with the biggest pair of antlers Ken has seen from the past 2 days of hunting. Ken stared at the magnificent creature standing right in front of him forgetting that he was supposed to look for Chloe. Soon it was 5am and Ken finally started to take his eyes off the deer and headed back to the caravan, and he found Chloe. Remembering that he was looking for Chloe and Chloe went missing, he asked Chloe where she had been since 12am.

"What do you mean? I was sleeping for the whole night." said Chloe, questioning Ken's sanity

Ken realised he sounded like a lunatic and stopped questioning Chloe, he decided to pretend to fall asleep and wait to see if she'll go out again at night.

And tonight as expected Chloe headed out again, Ken followed her quietly and saw that she went into the tree Ken saw last night, she went in the tree hole and disappeared. Ken tries to follow but for some reason he couldn't enter as if it was barricaded by some mysterious force, he decided to go look for the deer again and he saw the same deer and the same antlers. But this time, he heard a voice

"You guys need to leave." The voice sounded

"Why and who is this?" said Ken

"I am the messenger for the 3 guardians, they are displeased that you people have been destroying the environment, hunting down deers, shooting birds." the voice said. "The mountains have all sorts of species, a lot of living organisms, we can heal humans with our bodies, we are important to the ecosystem. Ecosystems in the mountains are very fragile. If you break the balance, it will be a start of chaos."

"We'll be leaving tomorrow, can you tell me what is happening to my sister" asked Ken.

"She is being punished for the acts of causing unbalance in the ecosystem" said the voice "She is not aware of the punishment, take it as pity from one of the guardians."

Ken headed back to the caravan without Chloe, he knew there was nothing he could do, he decided to not mention a single word about this, and he swore to never go hunting, and he will do whatever he can to stop his family from hunting.

Ken and John are reaching close to the age of death, Chloe has already passed away, 10 years exactly after that night. Ken decided to tell John what happened that night, and why Chloe died so soon. It's been too long since Chloe's death, it wasn't as important as the other part of the story. John found it hard to believe and thought Ken was just getting too old, getting mad. What John doesn't know is that everything was true, and Ken is worried for the next generations, what will the guardians do. All this pollution, over harvesting, over consuming. Resource on earth grows more scarce everyday, more organisms moving towards extinction. What is the chaos

Flying by the Wayside

Creative Secondary School, Wu, Tania – 16

The sky above was a perfect baby blue, dotted with dainty clouds that drifted along like lazy, unmoored boats bobbing on a river, and he felt like a walking corpse.

Maybe it was because he'd been walking for hours and hours on end with what had to be the heaviest boots in the world, dragging his feet as he walked and leaving miniscule trails that were quickly stomped on and erased by the other tourists behind him. Maybe it was because he was terrified of heights, but he had still forced himself to come here and hike "the loveliest mountain of China", as the tour guide and every brochure he saw about the mountain repeatedly shoved in his face. Maybe it was because everyone around him was talking, talking, talking and all he wanted to do was slap some duct tape over their mouths.

He tuned out the voices of everyone around him – he'd become quite good at that; like listening to a broken radio, all he could hear was buzzing, fuzzy static. Occasionally, a word or two of interest would float through the fog, blaring faintly into his ear until he somehow registered it. This mountain was named after the legend of the Yellow Emperor, who came here to gather herbs for his pill of immortality, the tour guide mentioned, his words met with murmurs of wonder from the other tourists. Isn't it funny that people came here to live forever, and he'd come here to die?

Picturesque landscapes sprawled for miles, the stately granite peaks standing like looming, majestic guardians of this paradise. The blue-black rocks of the Yellow Mountain played foundation for lushly emerald pine trees, a few of the pines already starting to turn a warm, rich orange-yellow in the fall weather, little flecks of gold sprinkled atop a green carpet. The tour guide had said that this place was ideal for wildlife, full of endangered and near-extinct species, as if it were a sanctuary for those slowly being extinguished, and he believed it. This place had something magical about it, something freeing and alluring that seemed to soothe the tension in his shoulders.

They reached the Nine Dragon Waterfall, where torrents of water rushed down and met nine rocks along the way down, forming nine smaller waterfalls that looked like dragons sweeping through the rocks, flying down, down, down the mountain until they reached the bottom.

He could be like them.

The tour group decided to rest at one of the waterfall's lakes for a spell, the tourists scattering across the edges of the lake. While some of the others went to take a few photographs with their cameras and phones, he sat down on one of the smooth rocks by the lake to ease his weary feet. He let out a quiet, relieved sigh as he listened to the sound of the gushing water – its effect was just like the effect of the sound of footsteps and quiet conversations back home in the city, except the cascading waterfall wasn't interrupted by harshly hurled words and eerily echoing screams that jolted him out of his momentary peace. He turned to glance at the waterfall and peered into the pool, taking a deep breath when he saw a reflection materializing in the shimmering water. *One last time, then.*

The man in the reflection looked exactly and nothing like him at the same time. The same face, same hair... but there was something sinister about the man's eyes that made his heart seize up. The man's face was somewhat misshapen, distorted by the moving ripples, which only succeeded to exacerbate the man's grotesque appearance.

Hello.

He shuddered. He never liked hearing the man's voice. Nails scraping bloodily on a chalkboard was never pleasant to listen to, no matter how used he was to the sound.

Have you finally found the courage, then?

Yes. No. Maybe. Well – he was here, wasn't he? He'd bought the ticket and got on the plane, but whether he would really do it or not was another question.

Do it. You have to.

He exhaled shakily. He knew the end of this game – he lost it every single time. Pure weakness and cowardice were the only things that made him refuse his losses and keep on playing, but he was determined that this would be the last time he participated in this little game. After all, there wouldn't be any *him* to play anymore.

If you know the end, why keep playing? Get it over with.

Hope. Fear. Pipe dreams, maybe.

In other words, you're a coward.

He wasn't going to deny that, but... perhaps there were still things to stay for. There were always things to stay for, weren't there? He had kids, two sweet little darlings that he loved and—

And you only see them on the weekends and they don't even call you Dad.

Well. At least he had a job, a stable one that he was good at and—

And that inexperienced trust fund baby got promoted before you did. You're going nowhere.

But they say life is full of surprises, a new adventure every day, and—

And you do the exact same thing every day. You hate it. You hate life.

Defeated, he turned away from the water with a sweep of his hand to destroy the reflection. His palm still drenched, he buried his head into his hands and let cold water slide down his face, raindrops on a grey, dreary window. The man was right. The man was always right, and that was why he always lost. He knew – he'd always known – the man was right, and although some part of him kept clinging on, that optimism in him was like hope in Pandora's box, weak and frail. Easily crushed.

The group eventually kept going, continuing to ascend the mountain to the peak. They passed by incense-heavy Taoist and Buddhist temples, and the narrow Bridge of Immortals, steadily getting closer and closer to the peak. It was like ascending the stairway to Heaven; passing by sites of ethereal beauty and getting closer, closer to the sky. He could feel the apprehension building in him, his hands trembling slightly from both timidity and excitement. One last act of unbridled fearlessness.

He felt lightheaded and shaky when they reached the peak, stumbling a little before he regained his balance and tried to avoid remembering they were high enough to be above the clouds. His acrophobia was a pain for this, but he couldn't let it stop him. He'd lost the game, and it was time to get the prize.

The tour guide suggested they split up for a while and enjoy the peak on their own, so the others fanned out, eager to take pictures. "Goodbye," he murmured softly – to the other tourists, to the world, to himself, to whom he didn't know exactly – and stepped closer towards the cliffside, which was lined by low, wooden fences.

Soon, he was left alone. The clouds curled around his ankles like tendrils of smoke, like hands inviting him to come closer and closer. He felt enticed to step onto the clouds and let them sweep him away, let him be on cloud nine, but he held himself back. *Not yet.*

Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he carefully climbed over the fence and sat on it, shaking at how high up he was, but nevertheless feeling like he needed this. It would be golden hour soon, and everyone was anticipating the sight of this paradise bathed in gleaming light – they'd gather again and he needed to be alone.

But for him, life had lost its luster. When he was younger, life had been exhilarating, one ride after another; drinking with his buddies, parties, spontaneity, the birth of his children... Now, life had settled into a mundane humdrum. Wake up at seven-thirty. Go to work. Get stuck in a traffic jam and listen to other driver's angry honks. Say hello to his coworkers. Get the same response, every single time. Sit next to a computer for eight hours then have his work ridiculed by his superiors. Go home, get stuck in another traffic jam, and have dinner by himself. Taxes. Mortgage. Bills. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

He hated it. Spontaneity had turned into familiarity, and familiarity into tedium. What's more, he hated everything he did. Seven-thirty was too early for him to wake up, his car smelled too new, his coworkers were boring, his work was dull and unrewarding, and being lonely didn't help much to make him feel better. He missed the unpredictability of life he had when he was younger and he wished he could have it back, but he couldn't just throw everything aside and hop on the first train to the airport. He had responsibilities now, the responsibility to support himself, to pay child support, to be a good citizen and contribute to society. He needed his job and he needed the money, no matter how much he hated it.

But why? Why should we keep going? All he was was a toy, easily replicated, replaced and ruined with a snap of a finger. And his inevitable expiry neared – twenty, thirty more years on the clock and that was it, aging and ailing until some debilitating illness overtook him and reduced him to a pile of pain and discomfort in a chair. Why wait until then? He'd had enough of it *now*.

He could hear the man's cackles, as if the man was laughing at how naive he'd been to think he didn't need to do this. He had worked up the courage and good money to come here, and this was his chance. He couldn't bear any more lonely dinners.

He could hear the other tourists, the majority of who were older than him, clucking and cooing at the scenery. Giggles and squeals floated into his ears, and his eyebrows furrowed. How did they do it? He felt tempted to ask, to ask how they'd managed to keep smiling and surviving when they, just like him, were chained and shackled to the ground by their nine-to-five and duties. Well, he knew so many people could do it, but he couldn't. Not when the sickening, hateful smell of gasoline, cigarettes and fast food were still permanently fresh on his skin from walking through the streets of his city. Not when his fingers were slipping, barely clinging onto the precipice, and he couldn't hold on any longer. Not when he could feel that the end was near.

Good. You're finally going to do it.

He could hear the man again and he gripped the fence tightly. Yes. He was going to do it. What was there to stay for anymore? Two children that didn't think of him as their dad? A job that was dull and unrewarding? Responsibilities that he detested with every fiber of his being?

What a tragedy. Our deepest condolences. No one ever saw it coming... He could hear their words already, uttered remarks of confusion and shock and perhaps the smallest tinge of sincerity. He could imagine how they'd try to search for a reason, try to put a neat little bow on the whole affair, try to *understand*, but things were rarely so complete, so black and white. And he'd be long, long gone before then.

He looked up and his eyes caught the breathtaking picture in front of him, fully taking it in and actually appreciating it for the first time. He let his eyes feast on the view, hungry for a final pleasure, a final beauty to behold.

From the peak, the view was beautiful. The peculiar rocks and striking pine trees were smothered by a sea of wispy clouds, rolling through the peaks. The sun above him shone its warm, glorious beams onto him, illuminating his face and the nature around him.

Heaven.

He felt like he was in heaven, in paradise, like he was standing on top of the world. A gentle breeze blew past, sweeping through his hair and rustling his clothes. He breathed in the bucolic smell of pine trees and blossoming flowers, feeling cold, fresh air rush through him. He felt so free here, where his responsibilities and worries melted away momentarily. He heard quiet chittering, rushing water, and birdsong – the sound of nature, the sound of peace, the sound of what things should be. He felt like he could sing and dance and yell into the void and not worry about that month's electricity bill. Here, among the trees and rocks and animals, he felt like he was at home. Free. Unrestrained. But he knew it couldn't last forever – he couldn't stay here forever, unless... well, unless.

He was so sick and tired of being controlled by so many things – the law, social etiquette, his fears and worries – even this stupid, stupid *goddamn* fear of heights nearly controlled him into not doing what he'd come here to do, and he couldn't take it anymore. Souls were not made to be controlled by anybody but themselves.

A bird flew by, wings spread wide as the bird glided towards another peak, and he glanced at it longingly. If only he could be free like that – he wanted to soar through the air, to have nothing beneath his feet but liberation, to feel like he was in control. He wished he could be as free as a bird, fluttering among the mountains and roaming unshackled, free of his chains. He wanted to fly.

And so he spread his wings, poised for takeoff, and let himself fall.

China's Magical Mountains

Creative Secondary School, Young, Liam Thomas – 15

China was once ruled by the beasts of the skies, Majestic creatures with snake like bodies swimming through the air as if it were water with a great vibrant color of scales. These creatures controlled all and were seen as kings compared to the other creatures of China. They lived in the mountains above the clouds higher than any human could ever see but then humans learned of this and with their new advancements the beasts were hunted. Their horns were grinded and used as medicine, their bones were used as furniture for the emperors and soon after that as the beasts were on the brink of extinction they fled to the skies in hiding.

Years passed with not a single sight of them until one particular beast came down to wreak havoc amongst the chinese lands. This beast was different from the rest. The color of the beast was a darker murky color tainting the once beautiful beast. This beast caused chaos and calamity everywhere it went. Pent up rage being built up ever since the humans decided to hunt its kind forcing them to flee. This beast rampaged on and on until it was shot through the heart with a ballista. This feat is still talked about in the years to come the current emperor, the one who killed the beast hung its skull above his throne daring all to try and challenge him, but no one would and China has been under the tyrannus rule of Pòhuài. The emperor led China with a daunting fist causing destruction of the land around him. Greed shone in the eyes of the emperor causing him to take all of China for himself.

The beast that the emperor of China slayed would become his way into power controlling the land. People would have claimed to see the beasts descending from the heavens but there has been no way to be sure. This happens due to humankind destroying whatever can profit them not caring for a thing in the world but themselves. The emperor took to the mountains with his new army from his newfound power and ravaged across the land the beasts now with a dark shade to them would only fight back against the humans but inevitably failed. Bang Bang Bang the sound of war polluted the skies flashes of red white and black.

The Chinese army returned to China victorious conquering over the once prosperous beasts have returned dead and seeing the emperor only grow in power. They salvaged the bodies of the dead beasts lying lifeless. The emperor would use the beasts bones to advance their weapons conquering the rest of China with ease. China returned to the mountains scouring the lands looking for more of its kind but would fail. China conquered the beasts and used it for personal gain and never once caring about what would happen without them. China became known as the ruler of dragons and a country which ruled over the vicious beasts of the skies.

Wonderment

Diocesan Girls' School, Lau, Janet – 14

Mint and moisture in the air. Clandestine whiffs of citrus and cherry. Seas of misty white, encircling rhodie fields of pastel pinks and purples and yellows. Slender viridescent stalks of rice standing bathed in light, their grains shining warm and golden. Light showers of invigoration and new life, bringing with it the linger of dewy earth. Iron sheets of rusty sepia, hastily assembled into a hexahedron, pieces of fraying wetness adorning its grime-spattered sides. A wrinkled couple squatting noiselessly within the flooded hollow of corroded metal.

Spectres of yesterday. She sees them every time she closes her eyes.

I was thirteen. Life was an endless cycle of tending to rice stalks and washing clothes in the nearby river and mending torn shirts and walking the ten miles to the next village to pray in the little rundown temple. Every day, my grandparents would have the old couple, our only neighbours, over; as I worked silently in the fields outside our shack, loud chatter and gossip always rang loud outside our house. When the occasional scrumptious roar came up, I would run over and ask in curiosity, only to be snapped at in return. *Children have no business being nosy. Go back and work.*

Alright. Whatever you say. I never talked to them when I worked again.

But the night was different; it was when I could be truly free, free from the shackles of my commanding grandparents.

Night in the mountains always had a magical air. I would take a lamp and wander into the shallow wood across our home, emerging into a stretch of field that I had all to myself. I would set my lamp beside me and lie out on the cool moist grass, looking up at the grand obsidian canopy stretched out infinitely above me and over the trees and peaks; the darkness was my refuge, cradling my bruised body, soothing my sore muscles. Multitudes of stars, like brilliant diamonds, shimmered their brilliance all over the inky heavens.

My grandparents had once gossiped about the diamonds a bride's city relatives brought to the next village as dowry. They had to be worth at least a whole house, my grandfather had said. What did they look like? I had asked. Transparent and shiny, my grandmother had replied. Now go work in the rice fields so we can actually move out of this shack.

As I lay facing the night skies, I would stretch out my arms, trying to collect all the diamonds in my hands. Maybe, with enough diamonds, I could leave this place, this life, this lack of freedom, all behind me; I would never see the endless rice fields again, would never feel solitude ever again; I would go down the mountains and into the city, where life was a trotting horse lamp, never exactly the same every day.

But the diamonds never came. And when the first slivers of orange-golden light started to faintly shine atop the mountains, it was time to retrieve my lamp and hurry back home for another new day of the same.

My birthday, at the end of the twelfth month, had just passed; spring had rolled around again, which signalled the start of the rice plantation cycle. Filling burlap sacks with unhusked rice from the last harvest, I trudged my way up the makeshift dirt steps alongside the sloping rice fields, ready to begin plantation.

That was when I saw *her*.

The first thing I noticed was her glossy black shoes, with heels scratching the rubbled path beneath her feet. I hadn't ever seen such a pair of footwear; the rough sand would mar the polish on the shoes, and any pebble larger than a grain of rice would trip up anyone in those heels. And her *dress*! It was the lightest shade of white, and glimmered like the moon under the faint silvery sun. Her suitcase, which she held in one hand, looked like the ones businessmen carried in my grandpa's old newspaper; were there more dresses in it? Wads of cash? Or, better yet; diamonds?

Throwing down my sacks, I sprinted down the slopes. “Miss? Miss? Uh, sorry, but I was thinking, where are you going?”

I felt small standing in front of her. Here I was, in my grubby torn too-small shirt and trousers, reeking of dirt and perspiration, and in front of me was a noble high-up city lady. She must’ve been at least six feet tall with the heels.

“Well, I’m travelling to the Niu village, about ten miles from here? Oh gods, this is just such a damp and desolate place, isn’t it?”

An oddly hot pang shot through my chest. I tried to shake it off. “Uh, if you don’t really mind, what are you going to do? Sorry.”

She looked away for a second. “I’m... trying to see if my younger niece can come with me to the city. You know, to live, with my family there.”

The city. Such a place shrouded in glamorous mystery. Maybe this could be my chance? Be the niece of a wealthy family in the city? Would I do it?

“I would very much like to get on with my journey? The roads here are spectacularly bristly, and my feet are starting to hurt.”

No. I wouldn’t let go. Perhaps those were real diamonds in her briefcase.

“Miss, maybe I could carry your briefcase for you as you walk?”

She laughed, an airy chuckle which just made me feel even more inexplicably chagrined. “Sure,” she smiled, tossing me the briefcase. “I could use some help here.”

We started off on the rubbled path to the village. “Frankly,” she mused, “the mountains are pretty nice. Sure, it’s pretty underdeveloped...but there’s a certain magic in the air. When I came up all I noticed was that white mist! And the air is simply marvellous; the air has never been so fresh in the city after all those nasty new automobiles. The poppies on the way up are almost as dainty as our roses back home, anyway.”

“Pretty things get mundane when you look at them every day.”

“Well, at least not for me,” she chuckled.

Soon we arrived outside the purported niece’s house. After about half an hour she emerged from the door, face red. “Alright,” she sighed. “I guess I’ll have to bring someone else. My husband really wants a girl at home, anyway, and I doubt he cares who I bring back.”

Were my ears failing me? This was the luckiest day of my life! I had to grasp it tight and get myself down this mountain.

“You could bring me? My grandparents wouldn’t really care anyway.”

She cocked her head. “Huh. I guess you’re not bad. Should I go ask your family?”

No. Definitely not. They would be fuming. “Uh, no. They don’t care where I go or what I’m doing.” *And I don’t want to be free labour anymore.*

“Well? Let’s go? My automobile’s waiting just a few paces away.”

How liberating freedom felt! I was leaving all this behind and getting a new life; to live as I wanted with no one stopping me, to meet new people, to wear nice dresses, to dance in ballrooms. Life in the mountains had never sounded so monotonous.

As we rounded the corner around my grandparents' shack I couldn't resist taking a last look. The poppies, the rice field, the clothes hanging out to dry; relics of my past life. I wasn't coming back to this place again. I hoped it was for the better.

I looked up at the sky, imagined the stars twinkling silently, and whispered a short prayer.

*"We live in the void of metamorphoses,
but the echo that runs through the day...
that echo beyond time, anguish or caress.
Are we near to our conscience, or far from it?"*

She fiddles at her sky blue qipao, just starched and ironed, newly tailored for the new year. She doesn't want to go, she tells the teacher. She has errands to run and gatherings to attend.

Have you really seen the world if you haven't seen the poorer side of things? The teacher asks, pushing up her steel-rimmed spectacles.

The other girls stare at her, some with disgusted scowls on their faces. *Never gloat over disaster.*

The school bell rings and she heads home. She changes into a high-necked lilac cheongsam adorned with silk roses, a birthday present from her father. A maid fixes her short wavy hair in the mirror; she smiles, satisfied.

The doorbell rings. She comes to get the door. It is her boyfriend. I can't believe you're already sixteen, he says, holding up a crimson rose.

And this is for you, he adds. He brushes her ebony hair aside and clasps a diamond necklace around her white neck. She laughs lightly. Thank you, she whispers.

They get into his car parked by the flowerbed. He starts the engine; they drive off into the heart of the city. The night is rife with life and chaos. All around them stand Western-style brick buildings entangled in epileptic neon lights. The sidewalks are crowded with men in tuxedos, a gaggle of penguins with top hats squawking amongst themselves. Women in arrays of sequined flapper dresses and long silk cheongsams and large fur coats squeeze in among the crowd, like bright pink flowers on a bed of dark leaves.

They stop in front of a particularly crowded nightclub. He leads her into a private room on the second floor.

"So, I've heard you're headed to the mountains next week?" he laughs.

She shrugs. "It's a school thing."

"And I take you're going?"

"Uh, no. I have things to do. With you," she mumbles, looking down.

"You mustn't feel obligated to come with me to those affairs, darling."

"No, not really. I just don't want to go."

"I could quit and come with you. We could watch the stars together."

She turns away from his gentle stare. He doesn't understand. She doesn't want him to, anyway. How does she explain that she doesn't want to go because she is a *city girl*, because she belongs in banquet halls and on dance floors, because she doesn't want the people she once called her grandparents to blink in recognition, because she doesn't

want to see anything that reminds her of that unspeakable past, because she detested the feelings she had always felt being there, because she doesn't want to be reminded of who she was that seems like a whole lifetime ago?

"I'm not implying anything here, darling. But you do realise that not going could make us look pretentious in society; imagine all the events we wouldn't get invited to," he adds, edging closer.

She sighs. "I mean, if you put it that way... I guess I'll go."

A sea of virescence, enveloped between alpine turrets of lush foliage. An abundance of poppies, each periwinkle half-moon petal adorned with lucid morning dew. The dawning sun, casting its golden rays upon everything and everyone in its wake, drenching Nature in an aureate sheen. The crisp air, thick with the sweet scent of grass and the muskiness of the woods. The white haze laying clandestine among the poppies and whistling in the pines and swirling around the snow-covered peaks of the overlapping mountains. *Deja vu*.

I'm standing in the middle of all this, inhaling large gulps of the fresh mountain air, silently taking in the queer familiarity of it all. Around me rings the loud chatter of my classmates; for once, I'm not drawn to the crowd. I feel like I'm in the middle of a dream. Except it's all real, and I don't know what to make of all this. My thoughts are jumbled, warring; before my eyes stand the very specters that have always haunted me through closed eyelids. No matter how much I try to reject them, to push them all away, to fill my mind with the present, the ghosts of my past have never left.

But, strangely, being here among the mountains, I don't feel the hatred or detestation I'd expected myself to feel. There's this entity, this atmosphere; it cocoons my being, keeps my aversion under wraps. It may be the harmony of the flowers, the grandeur of the mountains, the fragrantcy of the air; I'm not sure. I don't know. But something seems off.

"Darling, let me get your briefcase for you," Richard says.

Oh. He's here too. "Thanks," I smile.

"I like your dress," he comments, pointing.

I look down. Yeah, I like the dress too. It's a plain white drop-waist dress with ruffles around the hem. And it looks nice with my new Mary Janes. But, in the back of my head, there's this nagging feeling, poking and prodding my conscience, telling me *this seems wrong*. No, it doesn't? What's wrong with this? With me?

Someone suggests taking a walk and exploring the surroundings. So we head out of the field and onto an ashy path. The ground is rough, but I manage to walk slowly to avoid slipping on the gravel. Richard walks back to hold my hand.

"Just look at that!" a voice exclaims.

I look in the direction she's pointing at. It's a small rounded hill, covered with a carpet of short green stalks. Nausea creeps up my spine; my world is spinning. It's the rice fields. And, buried within the crops, is the figure of a young girl, back crooked, dragging a full burlap sack half her size behind her.

"That poor girl," the classmate muses. "Having to do that every day? I would rather kill myself than do *that*."

I turn away. Tears, hot and stingy, are welling up in my eyes. I squeeze Richard's hand; he wraps an arm around me. "Can we just continue moving?" I half-yell.

"You don't need to get so riled up," he hisses into my ear. "Let's go," he announces.

After what seems like eons we finally start seeing dwellings along the path. My heels are on fire, my face is sticky and moist. I'm such a mess. I probably look horrible.

All around us, out of the doorframes of wooden—and—brick shacks, are scores of curious dark faces peeking out to get a look at our group. I peep at one of the women; her eyes suddenly widen with shock.

She hobbles out of the hut, her stout figure shaking with every step. My classmates instinctively take a step back. Stopping in front of me, she carefully scans my face. After a moment she shakes her head, sighing. “I don’t know who you are, but you look like a girl that went missing a village over. It was three years ago, you know. But we’ve never found her,” she croaks. Wistfully, she looks up at the sky. “Well, I guess she’s gone from us forever. She was such a timid little thing, you know. Always trailing behind her grandparents whenever they came over to the temple here. Once she went missing, her grandparents left soon after.”

She smiles and, raising a hand, tenderly ruffles my hair. “Well, have a nice time here. This may look like a dump to you city folks, but I promise you it’s a real nice place. The air is so much fresher than down below.”

Richard winces. “Yeah, yeah, what a pity. We’d better get going,” he says, grabbing my arm and pulling me away.

Once again my head starts spinning. Who am I? Where do I belong? Maybe I am merely a lonely traveller, not fitting in any time or place, aimlessly drifting between different universes, trying to find my home. I love the city; its vibrance and its life. I’m drawn to the bustle like a moth to a lamp. But sometimes, just sometimes, I get home, go up to my room, and I don’t want my maid there. She bothers me, circles around me like a pest. All I want is to lie on my bed, turn down the noise outside, look out of the window, and gaze at the stars...

I wake up with a jolt. The world is dark, and a faint yellow light drifts in from the distance. Scents of wood and spice wrap around my nostrils; I am outdoors. My heart hammers against my ribcage. No, I must be dreaming. I’ve left that all behind those three years ago.

I sit up, and the world makes itself known around me. I’m at the edge of the same plain we were in this morning, only it’s night, everything is dark, and the scene feels so much more familiar to me. Not so far away, in the woods, are Richard and my classmates, huddled around the light. I walk over to them. Richard notices me. “Finally up? We’re about to go to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Huh. Do you all want to go stargazing?”

“Nah, not really. You go alone. You’re the only one who got some actual rest. Take the lamp, too.”

So I took the lamp and wander off into the field, picking a spot to lie down on. The grass is damp and muddy. I don’t really care. Let all the dirt splatter over my white dress. The night is quiet, peaceful; the silence swaddles me like a cotton blanket, thick and protecting me from the bitter cold. All above me, the stars shine their radiance, bright and alluring, against the onyx backdrop of the sky.

For once, the solitude doesn’t bother me at all. It shelters me from the noise and the confusion of the world, giving me a place just for me. My mother’s voice rings in my head: *There’s a certain magic in the air*. And I realise, after all these years, that I finally belong, right here, in the mountains, amongst the stars and the darkness.

A rush of epiphany goes through my head. Finally, I am at peace.

And it is simply wonderful.

Forever Doesn't Last Long

Diocesan Girls' School, Tang, Tim Yee – 14

In the flickering embers of the rising sun, I look at the familiar frame of the mountain. It stands silently, shrouded in its misty cloak. Above us, the last of the stars flicker and fills the air with a softness before disappearing behind the clouds. I step into the cool water of the stream, submerging myself with a sigh. Even the birds are silent now, as the sun appears in a sea of pinks and oranges. Unraveling my hair, now silver with age, I bend carefully and wash.

When the birds start to sing again, I bundle up in my robe and walk back home. The air is fresh with dew and birdsong. My dogs bark at the car engine purring at the front door, spilling out children and their harried-looking parents. The children are staying with me this weekend, which means another story they've been looking forward to.

"Start it with once upon a time!" Mei Mei says. "Like a princess story."

"This is not a princess story, child. This is a story of forever."

—

A fairy and her mother were up on a mountain the fairies called the Gold Peak. The gold wasn't gold at all; in fact it was the precious bounty of herbs and exotic plants that grew only on this mountain. The fairy child, barely a toddler, was put down on a flat expanse of rock littered with wilted flowers. "Flow—flower?"

She held one up to the weak sunlight. "Flower is crying." She touched it, a pout forming on her chubby face. "Don't cry, flower." To the child's surprise, the blossom's leaves started to perk up. Screaming in delight, she jumped off the rock to find her mother. "Mommy! It's happy!"

The child reached the edge of a cliff that hadn't been there a moment before, hidden in the depths of mist. The flower in her hand tilted in the wind, tugged out of her grasp. "Flower!"

She reached out her small, pale hand, and tipped over the edge. The child went tumbling down, twigs nicking at her dress, tugging at her wispy black hair. Alarm registered faintly as she clung to a branch. Her hands slipped, scrabbling against the harsh bark. Panic in full bloom now, she started to cry for her mother helplessly.

"Fly, little fairy," a voice behind her sighed, like the breath of a zephyr that vanishes as soon as it appears. "You are safe."

Sure enough, the branches stretching out of the mountain had cocooned the fairy, cupping her like hands. She uncurled her tightly clenched fist and out fluttered the flower.

"F—flower?" She blabbered, looking for the voice.

"Silly child. I am the mountain."

"Oh!" She giggled. "Thank you, mountain." She kissed the branch holding her as it lifted her back onto the rock.

The fairy's mother cried, rushing forward to cradle her child. She scolded her about wandering off, unaware of her child waving a cheery goodbye to the flower, still floating in the mist.

As she grew, the fairy became the village healer's apprentice. Every dawn, she would be on that same rock, saying goodbye to the flower that bobbed on a misty wind, holding a basket of plants. And every dusk, she came back.

When the world was inked black with shadow and the only light came from the twinkling stars above, a girl with hair whiter than the moonlight stepped out onto the sea of clouds.

“My fairy child,” she said, her voice deep and calm. “What have you brought me?”

“Tangerines, mountain,” the fairy replied solemnly.

“You look troubled. Come, join me.” A simple boat materialised with a snap of her fingers. They climbed in and the boat set off, gliding through the thick clouds.

“Tell me about your worries,” the white-haired girl coaxed. “Perhaps within the centuries I have lived, I have gone through the same as you did.”

The fairy poured her tea with trembling hands, lifting her cup and pressed it to her lips. A long silence passed. And then she sniffled. “How can emptiness feel so heavy?” She blurted. “Everyday mother teaches me about plants and magic and people come to see me for their illnesses. My passion—it’s drained, replaced with emptiness.” She wept into her hands, devastation lacing her words. “How am I supposed to live forever like this?”

The spirit hummed. “It won’t last long,” she assured.

“This emptiness?” The fairy asked hopefully.

“No, I meant forever.”

She stared. “But—“

“Look at the stars,” the mountain spirit interrupted. “They shine brightly tonight.”

“Why do you like stargazing so much?” The fairy grumbled, but she lay on her back, blinking the fuzziness out of her eyes. “We do this every night.”

The spirit held a tangerine carefully. “I stargaze because it makes me...and my thoughts, my emotions, feel so insignificant and small. I am a mountain, but I am a speck in a ray of light...and nothing matters.”

The fairy watched the stars. *Nothing matters.* “Mountain...what do you mean by forever not lasting long?”

She said nothing at all, just stared at the flickering lights from other worlds, at everything and nothing, at infinity.

“You’ll see.”

The fairy turned twenty, sixty, one hundred, yet never once forgot those words. She couldn’t figure out the meaning either, so she shelved it away in her mind.

“Mountain, why do men dislike me so?”

“You are unsettling, my dear.”

“That’s not nice.”

“It is beyond nice. You are under no obligation to make sense to humans.”

“...Have you ever fallen in love?”

The spirit looked down. “Once.”

“Who?”

Her eyes turned sad. “It does not matter.”

“I’ve fallen for a man. He...he completes me.”

The spirit glared. “Have I not taught you that women do not need men to feel complete?”

“Yes, but he tells beautiful stories of a world outside this kingdom. He says I am his galaxy. He says such wonderful things to me, things I’ve never heard from men before. Maybe, mountain, he is good.”

“Pah! That is a shallow reason for goodness. Go on, woo this man, until he disintegrates into the earth as ashes and you’ll come crying to me.”

“Mountain, there is no need to be —“

“Does he know what you are?” The spirit crossed her arms, brows furrowing.

“Well, he knows that I am no mortal, especially when I sing — ”

“So, you bewitched him.”

“No!” The fairy laughed. “No, he lives near the stream, where I sing while doing laundry. He actually gave this tea to me, telling me to share with a friend.”

Disgruntled, the mountain spirit stopped the boat. “Let’s watch the stars.”

“His name is—“

“Let’s watch the stars.”

Silenced, the fairy did as she was told. She looked over at the ancient spirit. Her face was devoid of emotion. But her eyes were black, no longer the earthy brown that was so wise and strong. Resentment boiled in the fairy, like the tea that spilled over the cup’s edge and onto the spirit’s lap.

The spirit’s eyes glowed, first darkening until it seemed as if the fairy’s soul was spiralling into them, then flaming silver. It was as if her irises had melted away, leaving her eyes completely bone—white.

The spirit disappeared. The fairy sat on the rock, no sign of the boat, nor the sea of clouds. Nothing. Even the stars winked out.

“Mountain?” She whispered. “Where did you go?” The fairy waited, for an answer, for something, anything.

“Mountain, are you alright?”

Go home.

“Mountain?”

But the voice was all around her, resonating through her bones. Disoriented, she picked herself up, stumbling against a tree. “Mountain, what’s wrong?”

It is not your fault. The voice sighed. *I was careless. Go home, my fairy. It is not safe here.*

“I’ll—I’ll come back tomorrow,” the fairy promised, eyes fixed on the dark sky, praying for a star to relight. “I can...I can help.”

Don't. Find your good man. Stay with him, away from me. Don't come back.

"Are you—are you banishing me?" The fairy's hand shook again as she fought the hot words that tangled in her throat and died on her tongue when the phantom wind passed by her like a gentle caress. She stood trembling, body heavy with the weight of unshed sorrows.

I hope you bloom.

That night, the fairy gave up her immortality. The deities took her heart and planted a flower in its place. Letting go of eternity was easier than she thought, but the bud in the hollow cavern of her chest still had yet to bloom. It didn't bloom when she married the man she loved, nor did it bloom when her first child was born. She wondered when it would.

The flower blossomed when her child took his first steps. She didn't notice it, but it tickled her with joy when her son laughed. And her flower grew to fill the hollow cavern when her husband returned from the war, balancing on one leg with a broken smile on his weary face.

Her sanctuary was no longer the starry sky. Her son grew up and left for the city, and she grew old with the love of her life in peace. And when she was left alone at last, she waited for her flower to wilt. The mountain was only a bedtime story she had told her son, and the sky was merely a graveyard littered with the corpses of stars.

The flower didn't wilt.

—

"What's the moral?" Mei Mei asks.

"There is no moral. It's just a story," I reply, tucking her in.

"Daddy says everything has a moral," she says. The others are already asleep.

I switch the light off. "Maybe not this time." The moral of the story, I think to myself, is that forever may last in seconds, in memories, or in tangerines.

A Dragon's Tale

Diocesan Girls' School, Yuen, Tsz Yu – 13

“Now, Kei, why are you still awake?” Grandma asks, and Kei blinks her eyes wide open, sitting up and letting the blanket fall onto the bed. “Grandma, tell me a story!” Kei shouts, then blushes shyly. “Please.”

“Will you fall asleep then?” Grandma smiles at Kei, who immediately falls back onto her bed dramatically, grinning sunnily at Grandma Man. “Yes, Grandma!” Grandma slowly made her way towards the side of Kei’s bed as the child blinks her sleepy eyes and yawns. “Tell me the story about the dragon in the mountain!”

Grandma laughed. “Are you sure, Kei? I’ve must’ve told that story a million times already.” Kei nodded her head, already pulling the covers over her head and adjusting her pillow. “Please, Grandma.” Kei pleaded, her lips cutely pressed into a pout. Grandma laughed softly before starting the story.

“The Yellow Mountains were a mysterious place.” Grandma begins, her voice turning oddly silky as she tells the story. “There were fauna and flora that no one had ever seen before, and many people strived to study these mysterious lifeforms that were only found on the mountain.”

“But there was a dragon?” Kei murmured sleepily, nuzzling her face into the pillow. “There was a dragon.” Grandma confirms. “And the dragon guarded the mountain and its life.”

“The dragon had always been very peaceful. He had regular visitors trekking up the dangerous mountain path to seek help and advice. In exchange, the people were not to destroy the mountain’s wildlife.”

“Grandma.” Kei shifts in her bed, blinking blearily to stare up at Grandma’s weary face. “I’ve never thought about it, but why would the dragon protect the mountain?” Grandma gently raises a hand to cover Kei’s eyes, ensuring the child’s eyes were closed before continuing. “That’s a very good question, Kei.”

Grandma pauses, rubs at her eyes before continuing. “To answer your question, the dragon was a friend of the goddess who guarded the mountains. It was believed that the goddess had disappeared under unknown circumstances, and the dragon was here to take her place.”

“It was said the dragon became quick friends with the locals, but after a long time, the dragon, too disappeared like his old friend.”

“Why did the dragon leave afterwards?” Kei asks innocently. “You always say the dragon left, but you never explained why.” Grandma chuckles. “You always fall asleep before I tell it. Very well, little one. I will answer your question.”

“One day, two adventurers arrived at the village on top of the Yellow Mountains. They stayed at the village for a few days before asking if they could visit the dragon.” Grandma tells Kei. “The adventurers arrived at the mountain top and declared their presence to the dragon.”

“We come bearing a message, lord.” Grandma lowers her voice into a raspy imitation of a seasoned adventurer, hardened after years of travelling. “Hear.”

“The dragon rose to its full height, the movement gently shaking the mountain.” Grandma says. At this point, she pauses and looks down at Kei, and the child twitches. Was she asleep yet? “The people shook, but they laid a piece of paper in the dragon’s paws and bowed their head.”

“The rest, my child, you can probably guess.”

“Will the dragon ever come back?” Kei whispers, and the words almost go unnoticed. Grandma sighs and strokes the child’s hair. “I don’t know.” Grandma admits. “If the dragon comes back? What would life be like then?”

Kei did not reply. She did not know the answer.

After a moment of silence, Grandma looks over to Kei to check if she is asleep. She is, her face relaxed, greatly contrasting her intense features when she was awake. Grandma sighs and tucks the child in.

The dragon, with its great beating wings, called into the air. Sparks flew on the mountaintop, like shooting stars soaring through the night sky. It settles as a gentle snow, the dragon nodding his head towards the two travellers before leaving.

The village erupts. The sky was full of shouts and curses, and from that day onwards, nothing ever grew on the mountaintop.

“If the dragon comes back?”

She had long since left the mystical place that was the mountains, but if worst came to worst, she knew she could not let herself stand on the sidelines.

Grandma glances back down at the sleeping Kei. “Sleep well.” She whispers to the wind, and with one last look at the sleeping child, she closes the bedroom door behind her.

He bends down to pick a golden flower next to his foot. “Bring this to her, please.” He says, cupping the delicate flower in his palms. The wind whistles.

And if a golden flower suddenly appeared, clutched in Kei’s small hands the next day? Well, it certainly isn’t Grandma. After all, she had never seen such a flower before!

The Emperor's Wife

Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah – 14

I am dead.

I swallow my fear and look at you. You that once was is no more; this is you now. Your hand is loose in mine, your mouth parted like a toddler's. Your eyes are glassy and wide open.

I give your hand a squeeze.

You are beautiful, I think. Our god. My god.

Gone.

Behind me, there are a million people, but they are all silent at your form. I am the only one kneeled at your side, cradling your hand in mine. The silk is soft under the back of my hand.

Gone.

There are whispers. I reach forwards and with hesitant fingers, slide your eyes shut. You look more peaceful now, and I reach over to close your mouth gently.

Gone.

I can hear someone crying behind me. You were a good master; they do not want you dead. I do not want you dead either, but what I want is not important.

So many people are watching you. Your hair is streaked with age, and I knew it was your time, but I do not favor it any more than you do. The neat hair that I once tangled my hands in is now flat and colorless.

The bed we once shared is large, large enough for both of us. I watched as the light leaves your body, and I watched as your firm mouth lost its smile. The beautiful death that the priests had promised is not there; but no one dares cross you, and I do not blame them. Instead, you gasped like a fish out of water and struggled for the final strand of life that exited you.

This is no longer our marriage bed.

The bamboo is bent from the weight that it endured over the ages, and I trace it with my other finger, the silk catching in the grooves and ripping. I pay it no mind.

You are still in front of me, and although you seem real you are just a husk, a bottle without a cap. Why is your hand still in mine? I drop it.

The crying behind me is just like white noise, and I find it sad that you were not here to see. What you did to those that loved you, that trusted you, that thought you good. You are selfish and I hate you.

No, I love you.

I close my eyes and your arms are around me, but that is a dream.

You left everything behind, and now we are weak. I ought to blame you but I don't. You make everything look like there is no sense, and I long to see you smile again.

I reach forwards and press a final kiss against your forehead. It is cold.

I am dead.

~

There are elders, around the table. My hand is still buzzing with iciness, but I hide it under the table. My robes flourish around me and I leave your chair empty.

There are also hushed whispers, whispers that I hardly listen to. The sky is bright and happy but bleaker than ever, and the *shunmus* don't seem concerned.

You laugh at me for hating them and I hate you for laughing at me.

I open my eyes. The elders are staring at me, and I ask them what is wrong.

—Where should he go? They ask me. This is the only time they ask me; all others were decided by them. All the preparations.

They know I knew you better than anyone else; they hated me because of it. Now they will fulfill their hate, because that is who they are.

I purse my lips but do not answer. There is nowhere you liked to be. That is what I believe and that is what I will tell them. It is not untrue and I will tell them that.

—My lady.

I look up. That is what they call me, always. I am their lady.

—We must decide.

I do not know. You were a man of many endeavors but of little liking. You were kind but firm. I do not know.

The council is restless. No one can fill the gap you once inhabited, with your thundering laughs and your firm gaze. Your straight mouth that kissed me in the dark.

Outside, your *shen* plays. I watch as he laughs. How can you leave this all behind?

I do not know anything, and I do not know where you must be final. This is important but I do not know any of it.

The elders are laughing at me. I do not care and I will not tell anyone, because this is my last secret and I will carry it to the grave. The grave—that makes me even sadder.

I need to choose and it is up to me, but the truth is that I know. You left me unhappy, and I want to leave you unhappy.

I know where you want to lie, but I do not want you to lie there.

My smile is a mask. I run my finger along the table, the table of gold and wood that is the same material as your body's home. I used to joke that you would buy everything yellow, everything *huang*, but now I do not joke because your coffin is yellow too.

I will not tell.

But in the distance they are folding their hands, touching their foreheads. They want to be with you as much as I do. I must tell the truth. I will not.

In the distance, I can see the city, and behind the city, huge mountains. I smile at the gods because they smile at me. They beckon to you and I feel a weight dragging me down. I look down and you are holding on to my hand, kissing my leg. I will not tell but I will.

My eyes close and open again. You smile at me.

—There. I say, and my finger points. —You lie there.

You lie where you wanted to, and you smile.

No huge monument, just a mountain. You seem happier than you'd ever been.

~

My best robes are set out for me by the slaves.

I smile at you, who seem to be with me all the time now. Outside the window, I can see the boy playing. I watch him play for a few more minutes, and besides me, you watch too.

My best robes, the ceremonial ones. The ones you'd bought for me. I feel the soft silk under my fingertips, just as it'd felt under yours. There is a certain type of *something* I cannot distinguish about it, that makes me wish to bury my painted face in its creases. Instead, I undress quietly.

The citizens had loved you too. I can see the mountains far off in the distance, and I smile at them, but they don't smile back anymore. They only ever smiled at you.

The mountains are beautiful, and I cannot argue against that; the robes are, too. Colors of the mountain, red of autumn, blue of spring, green of its summers. It is so many colors and so beautiful.

I put it on, slowly.

It is at this point that I know what exactly makes me this so, and there seems to be no argument as to that.

Outside are the mountains, loved by you, and they look greener than ever; inside, there is me, and I am weathered away, soon to be gone.

~

—Come on. I tell him. —Just a little more.

He is tired, and so am I. The boy is dressed in his best robes, those that make him look like you, and as I watch him I cannot help but think of you. He is your *shen*, and I think of you.

I smile, albeit this, because they watch. I am a good empress and a good wife. In front of us, in front of the boy and I, your coffin is being held on six shoulders, the laborers strenuously walking under the weight. They think it is an honor to hold you, and so do I. So *did* I.

Just a little more.

Does this ever have to end, I wonder, and did this ever have to start? All this, all this for your crow's—feet eyes and your lined but just face and everything that was in between. The boy whines but he knows it is his duty to keep silent; and that is what he does. I would not blame him if he went home and cried.

I just wish I could comfort him.

Inside my palm, grasped firmly between fingers that had held yours, is your *shanzi*. Your fan is light, made from the grandest of oaks, lined with gold. Your touch is all over it, and when I squeeze it gently, you smile and take my hand. I hate you but I don't.

—*Mama*. The boy—the *shen*—says. —How much further?

The onlookers don't hear. They never hear, the civilians that you'd loved with so much passion, but they know you are over and they hate you as much as I do for it. The boy is the spitting image of you and instead, they stare ravenously at him; I do not want him to be seen by any, but soon he will be seen by all.

They believed you were a god. They believe he is a god, too.

It is your fault, I think, but my mind betrays me, for its hand squeezes the fan tighter. I can hear the cool winds around me, around the fan, around you.

—Almost there. I reply. My free hand strokes his raven hair. —Just a bit further.

—My legs hurt.

The fan had been filled with natural winds and with your love. The finest painters in all of the kingdom, spraying black ink onto the thin white to create mountains and valleys and rivers: the ones you loved.

—I know. Just a little further.

My legs hurt too. I cover my head with the veil, like I am expected to, and bow my head in mourning.

The *shunus* of your mountain bow their heads towards you.

~

The coffin is dark ebony upon my fingertips, cold and lifeless as your body that lies within. My lips murmur prayers upon your still hands and kiss your brows; furrowed, even in death.

I pray to everyone possible. This is my duty. To the women of heaven, the *shunnus* watching over him. To the kings of heaven, their hands cast downwards to praise. To my gods and yours, even the ones I barely believe in.

My lips, still young as three decades, run over you, just like yours used to do when you were with me; my hands soft under yours, and your eyes locked onto mine. Now, your hand is on my shoulder, almost as in comfort. You don't say anything, because that was how you were. It is better but worse at the same time.

Your skin was as soft as a *baozi*, and your eyes as piercing as a sharpened *jian*, an arrow. I remember everything about you and I pray for you.

—I gave you what you wanted, I say. —I hope you are happy.

You nod. Our child stares, the future king, the one who will rule. His gaze wavers as he looks up at me and I know he feels at least some kind of emotion: so unlike you. We were never like you. That was why you loved me, because I was there, and I was cold but warm.

Like two opposite sides. Why am I thinking about this?

Maybe this— maybe this is— my last chance.

You are staring at both our child and I with a face that is stony, but hides something underneath, even if it's just a crack. What are you thinking? I never knew, and I never know.

Behind me, I can hear everything of nothing. The shuffled feet and the splatter of mud and the wind, the rocks, the *ziranfengguang* of so much nature that you cherished.

This place is so beautiful, and finally, I see what you see.

—It was him you loved, I whisper. No more than that; nigh a whisper. —It was him.

The winds laugh. The rocks quiver in humor. The rivers patter against the walls of the mountains—everything, laughing. Laughing, laughing, laughing.

The *Huangdi's* favourite. My whole life, I had thought it would be me, the one they referred to as the favourite, the best, the closest.

But no. It was the mountain. It was always the mountain, and you smile at me, at my face. At the face that had thought was the one. I was never the empress, just the lady, the concubine; it is the mountain. The mountain was your empress, your first love, your beauty. The One that watched over you for so long. I was not your wife: how can someone who knows so little about you be so? How—

How could I have been so foolish as to think it is *me*?

Of course, I think. The mountain. *Your* mountain.

Your empress.

—My lady. A voice comes from behind me, and I turn. Our son's hand is clutching mine. —It is time.

Yes, it is time. The stone steps, and the candle, and the darkness. The wife to dutifully follow her husband to the grave; to be buried alive, and to stay by your side for the rest of the afterlife. You kiss the top of my head, and I let you. The child watches me and I do the same to him, turning him away, towards the men who wait.

Their eyes watch. I was not a bad master, I think? Yes, I decide. Not bad at all. Not a bad ending, for not a bad master. The lady and her man.

One of your servants hand me a candle. I step down. *One*.

The others watch. *Two*.

I breathe, into that last air. That earth. That *shan*.

I am afraid. For the last time, I admit that. I am afraid; one emotion never allowed; I am afraid, and a royal face is not one of fear.

But I can be afraid. I am not empress.

Love him. My lips give back to the wind, one last time. *Love him, Empress.*

Love him like I never could.

I step down.

Three.

The tomb clangs shut, and as I hold up the candle, dirt pours upon me.

~

Goddess of the mountains, Empress of land and life... is that You?

I did not know You loved him so.

The Aoyin

ESF Island School, Chan, Ashley – 15

China's snowy mountains are dangerous and yet entrancing. The snow is sprinkled like icing sugar on the mountain tops and the peaks sharp like daggers piercing the sky. Winter never shifts to summer and the snow is eternal as it falls like dripping blood and never thaws. Only the bottom half of the mountains are used as trails as they get too rampant at the top. It's cold enough to turn your breath to smoke, turn the tips of your ears pink and your nose red and sore like a newly picked scab. The snow covers the ground like a blanket and footprints quickly disappear after they are made like a distant memory. At night the trails disappear as they are engulfed by the mist surrounding. Some say a light appears in the darkness guiding humans the wrong direction into the forest never to be seen again. Old tales tell of monsters camouflaged in the rocks, wide amber coloured eyes that watch.

Everyone has a longing within, a desire for something deemed unreachable. Desire can pull humans to do horrible things to expel this feeling that their heart is not complete. Humans are constantly chasing something but once caught they usually realise it wasn't worth the effort and go on to chase something else. This story is about that anguishing feeling known as desire but this feeling doesn't lie in the heart of a human but rather a monster.

Long ago in China before neither you or me had set foot on this wandering planet, a magical mountain known as Huangshan was overrun with monsters. Beautiful dragons with scales that matched the ductility of diamonds and fire breath that could set the snowy mountains alight, serpents looming the seas with their lingering bodies and eyes so bright that if you were to go fishing you would mistaken the eyes of the monstrosity for glowing lanterns afloat in the sea. However, one monster was feared above all – The Aoyin. A four-horned bovine that ate humans and had tough hair like straw and the colour of tar, sharp curling horns protruding from its skull with steel curled around them. If you were to pierce your finger on the tip of its horn your blood would trickle down like a waterfall. The body of the Aoyin was a mere skeleton with no flesh draped across, an open ribcage cascading like a ladder and the face well structured and white like porcelain. In the place of two eyes were two hollow divots. If you looked close enough in the cavity of its skeleton you would see a beating heart pumping tar, the black liquid leaking all over the ground it sauntered upon. For the heart was stolen from an unlucky farmer who had stumbled upon the Aoyin.

The Aoyin desired more than anything to bear a child. Someone to care for, someone to live for. However, in order to bear a child it had to become a proper vessel of a human and find a gullible enough man to fall in love with it. That night on the full moon the Aoyin dragged itself to the top of the mountains where the snowfall was most severe and the winds howled like scorned women and as it trekked up, the pumping heart left a trail of tainted snow everything that was pure and white turned black. The Aoyin nestled a spot for itself in the powdery snow, resting until the heart she stole combined with the magic of the moon and would transform it into a bewitching sight.

From night to day the transformation was complete. The tough straw like fur turned to draping silky hair, the porcelain and cracked skeleton turned to soft milky flesh and the hollow divots were now lustrous black eyes that paired an alluring contrast with the snow. The Aoyin's straw like fur had shed and she used it to cover up her body as she walked down the mountain unbothered by the cold she had lived with for many centuries. The Aoyin stumbled upon a village filled with young ladies sampling the clothes. They ran their hands through the silk scarves like a sieve and pressed their cheeks up against the mink fur to feel the softness. The Aoyin mimicked their expressions and stature. She lifted her shoulders and rolled them back to walk straighter, she widened her eyes for the appeal of innocence and pinched her cheeks for the blushed youthful glow. It was scary how easily the Aoyin tailored herself to appear more human. She entered into a dress shop, her feet creaked on the wooden floors and she felt the warmth of the shop on her body. The shopkeeper came out of the storeroom delighted that such a beautiful woman had entered her store. The Aoyin slipped on a violet dress and it highlighted how fluid and anatomically perfect her body was. She smiled as she looked into the mirror, smoothing her hands over the dress like fondant over a cake.. An Aoyin does not possess the ability to have emotions and yet she found herself mirthful and content with the person she saw reflected in the mirror.

“What’s your name miss?” The shopkeeper asked, smiling. The Aoyin peered outside at the snow descending like little angels and responded, “Xue, my name is Xue. Your clothes are very beautiful.” The shopkeeper could not see past the illusion that Xue made herself out to be, she was far too spellbound in her charm to realise the monster that lay beneath the surface. “It’s very busy today, lot’s of young women are preparing to go to the Emperor’s ball.” The shopkeeper said.

“What ball.” Xue asked intrigued.

“You don’t know? The Emperor’s wife recently died in childbirth, the child didn’t make it either poor thing. He’s in search of a new wife.” The shopkeeper answered.

The shopkeeper stepped closer to Xue adjusting the dress on her body and smoothing the fabric, Xue breathed in her scent. It was warm and pleasant like fresh air. Xue wanted a taste of her blood and could not control herself before lunging at the shopkeepers throat. As the blood from the shopkeeper was drained and her skin became dull Xue skin’s became brighter and luminescent like the moon, her eyes became shinier and her lips filled with plumpness. Maybe this is the way I could stay in my form forever Xue thought to herself.

Xue arrived at the Emperor’s ball and immediately grasped his attention, they danced although he never said a word to her. Xue’s hands felt like a poison to him that had the Emperor wrapped around her finger and he quickly proposed, ordering for vows to be exchanged the very next day. Flowers decorated the palace, snow blanketed the ground and all of the townspeople came to watch. Xue was so encompassed by the whole scene of it she forgot who she was marrying and was aghast when she stepped upon the altar. The Emperor was a glutton that showed through his three double chins and protruding stomach. He wore a dragon robe embellished with silver and gold thread and a pearl necklace strung around his fat throat. Xue reminded herself that she needn’t love the gluttonous Emperor but instead love the power and child she would be given.

The Emperor gave his new wife everything she wanted. Dresses made out of the finest silk, fur coats made out of the fiercest leopards and a baby. Xue had never felt more happy in her life than when she was pregnant. Whether it was a girl or a boy Xue would love it more than anything in the world. A baby girl was born and named Shan after the mountains. They were happy for a time. Xue would read to her daughter in a rocking chair watching as her precious little head dozed off in her chest. Xue couldn’t believe this little baby was hers, so completely dependent on her for survival. At night Xue would rest her elbows on Shan’s crib watching as her stomach went up and down and how her eyes flickered when a touch of wind escaped from the balcony into the bedroom. Xue wondered how a monster such as herself could create something so pure and innocent. Whilst the bond between Xue and Shan strengthened, the Emperor grew enraged his wife was so absorbed with someone else other than him. He desired attention from the wife he tried so desperately to please. Remember what I had said about desire before, how it drives people to do terrible things?

The Emperor slipped a sleeping potion into Xue’s wine during dinner and waited for her slumber. The Emperor loomed over Shan’s crib whilst retrieving a steel dagger from his pocket. So driven and so sure of himself he plunged it into his daughter’s heart and as if linked to her daughter Xue awoke in deep distress, something was wrong she thought to herself. She quickly jerked up from her bed the indent of her once peaceful head still in the pillow. Xue ran to Shan’s crib, relieved at first to see her husband keeping watch until in the jarring silence she could not hear her daughter’s soft breaths anymore. Xue’s eyes widened and shook, glazing over with tears as she watched her baby’s blood drip from the dagger in that snake’s hand. The floor creaked as Xue stepped back in shock, tears rapidly streaming from her face. Her scream was high pitched and loud like a flock of vultures communicating for their prey. The kind of scream that hurt the body both physically and mentally, the kind of scream that took all the energy and all the rage bottled up in the body and shook the palace grounds. Xue’s mouth widened so much so her jaw started to crack, the crack traveling across her face and to her neck like an infection. The Emperor shuddered, he opened his

mouth to release a scream but all that was released was a single breath. The Emperor called for help and shouted for someone to rescue him from the evil entity that was inhabiting his wife, if only he had been able to see past the beauty into her true nature. The Aoyin grabbed the steel dagger out of his hands pushing the cold steel up against his disgusting face now drenched in a mixture of sweat and tears. An eye for an eye, a heart for a heart the Aoyin told him as she drew a slit around his heart looking him in the eyes as she did so. Nothing would bring her baby back to life, not even the murder of the great coward Emperor but she would ensure he would die a slow and painful death. The Aoyin retrieved the Emperor's heart, holding it in her hands as the Emperor fell to the ground reaching for someone, anyone to catch him. His heart still beat in her hand, a much rougher and harder beat than the soft flutters of her daughter's stilled heart. The Aoyin's hand now covered in a glove of the murderer's blood, she limped over to her daughter to stare at her once more, She looked intently careful not to miss any details. Her daughter's dainty curled toes, thin wispy hair and little plump lips. The Aoyin's head bowed down like a weeping willow as she kissed her daughter's cheek and smelt the top of her beautiful head before opening the balcony doors. One handle tainted with blood and the other left clean as if it was completely untouched.

The Aoyin's bare feet felt cold on the balcony ledge and the wind felt as if it were cutting away at her flesh. The Aoyin was never in fear of dying, she had lived far too long. She was in fear of the only person she loved dying and now it had come true. The Aoyin let herself fall and she kept falling. She fell until her milky skin turned back to cracked bone, until her long silky hair turned to tar covered fur, until her eyes shifted to nothingness and the flesh melted off to reveal a carcass. The Aoyin lay in pieces in the snow waiting for the everlasting snow to cover up her body once more.

The Phenomenal Encounter

ESF Island School, Ho, Sze Wai Jacque – 14

The depths of the mountains hide many extravagant things, don't you agree? Life was spectacular for me, a 15-year-old girl that lived in the province of Fu Zhou. I only had my older brother Lee to look up to. Unfortunately for us, our life was rough and neighbors considered us cursed. Our parents just stood up one day and left when Lee turned 18. They never looked back and this made me resent my parents. I had to conquer everything alone, sometimes with the help of her brother, but life isn't always fair...

My 16th birthday was coming up. To celebrate, Lee bought us a trip to visit the caves in Huangshan in hopes to discover the mysteries held in mystical mountains. The sublime landscapes were known to capture everyone's attention. The word 'Huangshan' literally translates to yellow mountains and is known to have peaked as high as 1800m! Between the high rise peaks providing lush greenery, villages can be found high above the clouds. I was fascinated when reading the article about supernatural animals living in the very cave in the Huangshan mountains and the magical Nine-dragon waterfall, just where we were planning to visit for my birthday.

Gazing up to the sky, the floating clouds darkened into a dreadful shade of grey within a blink of an eye as the little water droplets falling from the sky doubled and tripled in size. The rocks towered over me while I walked towards the narrow limestone opening that served as the entrance to the cave. The jagged opening was just big enough for me to squeeze through carefully without inflicting any injuries.

The distinct change in the atmosphere was immediately noticeable. The cave's cold and damp climate was a contradiction to the warm air outside. Surrounded by the touch of cold and moist air, feeling the rock beneath my sandals, a crunch with each descending step I take, the roaring noise of the wind that seemed like it was mourning the soul of a long lost friend became fainter and fainter. The lit flickering fire torch in my right hand guided me through the rocky, pitch dark cave. Considering how dark the cave was, I began to grow accustomed to the darkness. I stared back at where I came from, only to see a dot of light.

Peering at the never-ending tunnel ahead of me, I grasped the cool rock and rested my weight against it. It was refreshing, but a strange sound made me break out in a cold sweat. Within a few minutes of walking again, my breath quickened as I heard distant calls of muffled squeaks that cut through the deafening silence, gradually becoming louder. Pushing myself to keep moving forward, I stumbled upon hundreds and thousands of cobwebs that hung on the ceiling above me. I ran for dear life deeper into the unknown pathway. The unpleasant squeaks were now so loud, shrill, and piercing that I did everything in my power to shut the noise out. Gathering my courage, I shone the fire torch up upon the ceiling revealing a cauldron of bats.

A dark shadow lurked behind an enormous rock some 50 feet away. Around 5 of us, as part of the tour, had our eyes glued to the prominent creature. A soft growl cut through the pitch, silent air as a pair of glowing eyes beamed through the crevasses of the rocks. From the distance, the creature walked confidently on all fours with a dominant glare fixed on every corner of the cave.

Nobody moved a muscle as the giant predator headed to feast. Not a single word was exchanged. As risky as it was, adrenaline pumped through my vein while two more scaly figures—smaller than the first, strode towards our direction. They start eating some bats that hung on the ceiling by plucking them down. With every chew this alpha took, it revealed the razor-sharp teeth hidden from sight. Crunch...crunch.. crunch... They even used their long, curved, and retractable claws to break through the large pieces of meat.

One more, then turned into two more and three more dragons appeared from the depths of these dark caves; their eyes shining with a hint of yellow, individual scales as large as my hand reflected the slightest bit of light while their nostrils flared with smoke released. My jaw dropped as a total of nine magnificent dragons stood tall and proud right in front of us as if I could just reach out and touch its iridescent scales. A sudden, muffled cough from my brother cut through the still air. Freezing in our tracks, the dragon's turned their heads and sniffed the air. They all took a few steps towards us with their eyes fixed upon us as if we were their next prey. We retreated quickly, watching our every step carefully. A deafening growl escaped from the largest dragon's mouth. The ceiling started to crumble. The floor was shaking. "Run!" Our tour guide screamed at us...

Taking myself as fast as I could run, I could barely feel my legs. The thumping of my heart along with the crispy, crackling sound of rocks repeated in my ears over and over again. My hand was balled so tightly my knuckles turned white. All colors drained from my face as I sprinted away with the tour group, crawling through tight spaces and climbing over giant boulders with people following me closely behind. The light at the end of the tunnel gradually grew bigger and bigger. I could clearly see that rain was now pouring down outside. Thunder boomed now and then, sending echoes throughout the entire cave. I was petrified, but I had to get out of there alive.

We all burst out of the cave and didn't even dare to stop running. I took a glimpse behind me and let out a shrill scream. They were still chasing after us. In an attempt to lose the incredibly fast animals, I took several turns and curves through the slippery mud while being drenched in sweat and rain. With every turn and curve we made, I looked back behind me and realized weirdly enough, a dragon would disappear. Three more, two more, one more. They were nowhere to be seen.

I gasped and panted as we slowed down and darted our eyes to the surrounding area. Lively green trees and bushes surrounded us with no sign of the fairytale creatures. The path we just ran from mysteriously disappeared...

Instead, it was replaced with a waterfall. I frowned. "What.. just happened," I whimpered to my brother. I looked again and counted a total of nine cascades and pools. Each pool was leading to another one, forming a waterfall and ultimately leading to a river. This wasn't here before. The sky rumbled as cool water splashed over me. The heavy rain filled the waterfall. A few moments later, the rapidly rushing water looked as if it exactly resembled the nine white dragons flying down from the cave that just chased us. Our guide covered his mouth as he gasped "This is the infamous magical Jiulong waterfall. Also better known as the Nine Dragon waterfall..."

Two Identities, Two Generations

ESF Island School, Hui, Tsz Hin – 15

“You’re going on your own, idiot! No one likes you!” Xuanmin and Guanche shoved me onto the ground and started running away. When I stood up, they were long gone.

It was pure mayhem on the Yellow Mountain. Crowds scurried and pushed each other as they all sought to catch a glimpse of the Mountain’s marvellous views at its observation deck. Enormous shadows of the clouds and the mountain cast themselves upon the landscape and effortlessly roamed over the ridges and valleys like silky waves merging imperceptibly into the distant horizon. But I wasn’t here for the views. I was here on a field trip, to collect data with Xuanmin and Guanche – the class’ worst bullies – for a group Chinese history project about the Yellow Emperor.

They never liked me. Since the start of the school year, they’ve always told others that I was an ‘idiot’ – and together they ganged up on me – they drew on my exercise books, stole my homework, and left me out on purpose. I was reluctant to tell anyone about the situation – I could not risk getting bullied even more.

A gust of furious northern wind raged on the peak and pulled me out of my thoughts, unleashing its merciless raindrops rapidly like bullets onto the ground. In a blink of an eye, mist had shrouded the summit entirely. Sunshine was blown away, and the gorgeous view was gone. An unnatural streak of lightning illuminated the grim sky, followed by a deafening boom of thunder. Concerned that it was going to rain heavily soon, the crowds immediately hurried towards the cable car station. Soon, I was one of the only few left.

Getting increasingly difficult to navigate my way around the mountain, I gave up looking for the two. My clothes were thoroughly soaked – it was freezing. I rushed towards the cable car station, but it was nowhere to be seen. I had lost my way in the mist. Exhausted from all of the running, I was desperate to seek shelter from the heavy rain. Shaking from the cold, I saw a small trail emerging from the mist as I glanced ahead. The path led to a mysteriously looking cave.

Seeing that it was the only shelter around, I slowly stepped in. A stream of cold air rushed past me, as an alarming chill crept up my spine. The cave was pitch-black. I couldn’t see a thing. I started to sweat, tremble, my heart beating faster.

Within seconds, massive rocks toppled down obstructing the entrance to the cave. I was trapped! I shouted, “Help, help!” But there was not a single soul around. Suddenly, my surroundings started to spin faster and faster. I vaguely remember what happened next – I felt myself falling into a bottomless pit for an indescribable period. As I plummeted into a void of no return, it almost felt like time itself had ceased to exist.

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After what felt like an eternity, I was woken up by the bright sunlight. The stones that once concealed the cave were miraculously gone! I immediately rushed out of the cave, entering a wondrously clear daybreak. It was bizarre – the air was very fresh, there were many more trees everywhere, and despite being the same, recognisable landscape – everything just seemed out of place.

“Oh no! I’m going to be late! I’ve got to go now!” I immediately hurried towards the cable car station, but it had disappeared. I headed towards the observation deck, wanting to see whether I could find any hints of what had happened. But there was no observation deck. All of the busy crowds were gone. The high-rises that once stood proudly before the mountain had vanished, only to be replaced by crude wooden shelters scattered around the landscape.

I heard voices behind me. “Hey, do you know where Prince Xuanyuan went?”

Who is the Prince? I wondered.

The voices came from dozens of weird-looking figures, who all stared at me, and then at each other. Nodding their heads, they suddenly fell to their knees, shouting, "All hail Prince Xuanyuan! All hail the Yanhuang Tribe!"

"I'm not the Prince. Who are you? Is this a movie or something?" I asked confusingly. Who was the Prince? Why were they calling me this way?

One of them replied, "Prince, we are your guards. You were hunting just now, but your horse went wild suddenly and knocked you off the cliff. We finally found you! Please follow us as we escort you back to the village."

I was bewildered by all of this. *Hunting?* I thought. *Wasn't this banned on the Yellow Mountain as it was named a 'Natural Artefact' years ago?*

"Where am I? What's happening?" I asked.

"Prince, you probably may have lost your memory from your fall, so please let us tell you. Remember life was once enjoyable?" another of the guards exclaimed. "That was until Chiyou – the new Chief of the Jiuli Tribe – decided to invade us, the Yanhuang Tribe. That devil has four eyes and six arms, and kills people without even blinking an eye. Under his command, the Jiuli soldiers destroyed every town they entered and slaughtered every citizen they saw on the way. Those who dared resist – including my aunt's family – were set on fire alive."

His eyes welled up. "The Jiuli Tribe's ultimate goal is to take over China, and anyone obstructing their path would be cleared mercilessly. Most of our allies are already gone, and the very few remaining – including us and our neighbour, the Xuannü Tribe, are on the brink of collapse. Prince, with your intelligence and strength, we are sure you can counter Chiyou and those Jiuli devils. We all have faith in you!" His tears broke into a smile.

"Why are you telling me all this? Let me go! I've got to get back to class!" I exclaimed.

The soldiers looked at each other and sighed. "The Chief has ordered us to bring you back to the Tribe. Perhaps you'll remember what happened when you get back." I reluctantly followed the soldiers as they continued to chat about their encounters with the Jiuli.

That night, I sat in my shelter, pondering all that had happened to me during this uncanny day. Deep inside, I realized – this was not the modern era. The mountain was a mysterious linking point between two time periods. I was sometime in history. But why was I the chosen one? When was I? I regretted not listening more in History class – perhaps I would know a lot more if I did! Eventually, I fell asleep, with my confusion still lingering in my brain.

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"Prince, Prince!" I heard muffled shouts from someone. "Wake up! Wake up!" It was one of my newly assigned guards, shaking me and grabbing me up.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. "It's the middle of the night. What happened?"

"Our food supply has been raided. Chiyou had his troops burn most of our stock. We've only got around two – three days left of supply before we all go hungry. The battle – it's now or never."

I shuddered. "Then ... then go tell whoever the General or the Chief is. Why are you telling me this?"

"Prince Xuanyuan ... I regret to tell you that Chief Shaodian ... has just passed away ... in the raid," said an old man who rushed into my shelter. He was a shrivelled toothless creature, feeble and walked with a cane. He had visible scars, and deep red fresh cuts on his skin. He nodded towards the guard, who slowly backed out from the shelter. He was breathing heavily, "I'm so sorry for your loss ... but now is not a time for grief." He wiped away his tears. "Prince, you will become the next Chief of our Yanhuang tribe – the Yellow Emperor."

The Yellow Emperor? This name sounded quite familiar. Wasn't this some guy who lived thousands of years ago? What am I doing here? "Who are you?" I exclaimed. "I'm not whoever you call the Yellow Emperor. Let me go!"

“Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Fengbo, the former Chief’s senior advisor. I think we’ve met once or twice before? My new Chief, look at everyone here!” He pulled me out of my shelter, and I saw dozens of peasants kneeling before me. “Look at all of them. Most of their family members have been killed by Chiyou. The people of our Tribe need you.” He clenched his fist. “You’re our only hope to defend our tribe from Chiyou”. He took out a large, wooden stick, and passed it onto me. “This is the Royal Staff, symbolising power in our tribe. Chief Shaodian asked me to pass this onto you before he passed away.”

Time was ticking – I had to make up my mind. My History teacher just had a lesson on the Yellow Emperor – if only I had listened!

Why did I become the leader of the Tribe in all of a sudden? I thought. I’m just an ordinary high school student. I can’t save them from the petrifying Chiyou. Where was the real Xuanyuan? Where did he go after hunting?

Respect and honour. It was the first time people looked at me this way. I was not despised by anyone finally. I realized – the mountain had chosen me to prove myself – to prove that I’m not what Xuanmin and Guanche label me as. No, I’m not weak and subservient. I’m not worthless. I’m not a piece of scum who had no friends. I must not become what they think of me.

Forcefully eliminating all of my fear of the unknown, I wanted to grasp this moment to prove my true qualities. *The mountain chose me for a reason. There’s no other way to go anyways. I’ve got to take this position. I’m not a scaredy-cat, am I?*

A surge of confidence suddenly emerged in my body, and the words gabbled out of my mouth, “Thank you for entrusting me with this position. I shall be the Chief of our glorious Yanhuang Tribe.” Fengbo passed on the Royal Staff to me. I was elated for finally making a decision but worried that I was incompetent. The sound of the applause reverberated on the rostrum and throughout the valley the whole night.

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My hands sweated with fear and anxiety as the officials reported progress. The burdens of being the Chief weighed heavily on me. Any wrong decision I make could potentially lead to a disaster.

Fengbo asked, “Chiyou’s only got two ways to attack us, according to the map. One would be to head for Zhuolu, our border settlement, by water, and another would be to go for our capital by land. We’ve not got sufficient soldiers to defend both of the settlements – we’ve got to choose one out of the two. Also, we’ve heard rumours that our only ally left, the Xuannü Tribe, has surrendered to Chiyou and the Jiuli. We might be on our own now. Prince, this is a matter of life and death. Only the Chief has the authority to decide where we position the troops. Where should we go?”

I looked blankly at Fengbo, not knowing what to answer. It was the first time I realized History was so important. I hoped I didn’t hate this subject as much. Even if I did pay attention slightly, my life would be much better now. I struggled to recall anything about the Yellow Emperor!

Looking at the map, I noticed that the Jiuli Tribe was situated in the Eastern part of China. As most of China’s rivers and waterways are in the East, this meant Chiyou’s soldiers would be experienced in water. He would want to use this to his advantage. Somewhere along the Yellow River would be ideal for him. Looking at the map, I saw Zhuolu – lying right beside the Yellow River.

I stammered, “I ... I think the only way for Chiyou and the Jiuli Tribe to attack us will be through our border settlement in Zhuolu.”

Fengbo stepped up, “Let’s go for Zhuolu then. It’s an important settlement as it is positioned strategically. Whoever wins this battle wins China. Currently, most of it is Xuannü-owned territory, with some being ours. If the Xuannü surrendered, we might suffer casualties from the ambushes and raids we might face – they know a lot more of their own land than we do. Let’s pray to God that we’re still allies!”

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In Zhuolu, thick, heavy fog engulfed any possible hint of a view. As we descended deeper within the landscape, the decaying air and stifling atmosphere was suffocating. The wind slashed furiously against the trees, which lashed and crashed against each other, warning us of the dangers that lay ahead. Bewailing sounds ghosted through the trees. Dense shadows flashed in the woods as if we were being watched ...

What if Chiyou forayed to the capital? What if his troops were more experienced by land? What if the Xuannü did surrender to Chiyou? The amount of uncertainties that lay ahead worried me. Despite the cold weather, I broke into a sweat. My heart pounded, and my hand began to feel clammy against my bouncing knee. I began to pace back and forth, stomping my feet impatiently on my chariot. The very act of watching the battle progress was hurting my eyes, and my heart was still threatening to burst forth from my ribcage.

As the fog became heavier, we lost our way in the forest. Looking for anything that might help, I felt a hard, circular object in my pocket. I didn't know I brought a compass with me the whole time! A thought struck me: *Why not use it to navigate our way through the forest?* I stationed it on my chariot, and immediately it pointed north. We soon found our way through.

Gradually, noises emerged from the other end. The sound of fierce, well-trained and equipped warriors, to be exact. Then we saw – they were the soldiers of the Xuannü Tribe, marching orderly towards us. Their bodies were stiff and erect as if they were possessed like a puppet of a skilful manipulator.

The rumours were true. I thought. We've been abandoned. There's no hope anymore. We're doomed. I am an unworthy leader – I wasn't able to save the Yanhuang Tribe from Chiyou. I've not been able to protect those who had faith in me. I'm a failure. Gradually, I lost faith in myself. Scenes of how I was bullied by Xuanmin and Guanche reappeared. At the moment, I accepted that I was subservient to everyone else, of being too scared to fight back the bullies. I've lost the only chance to prove my qualities to myself. If I couldn't change the fate of the Yanhuang Tribe, how could I change my own?

Suddenly, the Xuannü troops sped up and ran with their swords pointed towards us. However, they came to a halt, standing right in front of us. Their backs slowly turned, and suddenly the sounds of horns and drums reverberated across the battlefield – blood started rushing through everyone's veins. They shouted in uniform, "Once an ally, forever an ally! Let's fight the Jiuli devils with the Yanhuang Tribe!" All of the soldiers roared. I wiped away my tears, with my faith in the future resuscitated. I proudly waved the flag of the Yanhuang Tribe, as one of the most significant battles in history – the Battle of Zhuolu – began right in front of my eyes.

The hope I had once lost had now been restored in me. I immediately shouted, "It's now or never!" The Yanhuang and Xuannü troops immediately rushed towards the Jiuli troops. Suddenly, more and more Xuannü troops emerged on the mountains, shooting fire arrows and throwing rocks at their opponents. They shouted, "Chiyou, get out of our Tribe!" The once fearless, ferocious Jiuli troops shouted in agony, scurrying to escape the battlefield. They immediately descended into chaos.

The rest soon surrendered. The only one remaining was Chiyou himself, who wielded terrible sharp weapons in his six arms. He was more of a savage beast than of a human. With his super-human strength, he made his way across the soldiers and stood right in front of me. With dirt and blood stains smeared across his cheek and forehead, the majority of his face was covered with a thick armour. He roared, "Xuanyuan, it's all over!" Just as he was about to stab me, numerous arrows flew across the sky. Blood spilt out of his mouth, and just before he fell to his demise, he gave me a harrowing stare – one that I could never forget.

Suddenly, my vision started to fade out. From afar, I saw something like a helicopter. I rubbed my eyes – it wasn't a helicopter – it was alive. A large golden phoenix gently picked me up, and I was tucked onto its comfortable warmth. My body began to relax as the clouds zipped by under the phoenix's hooves. Things started to blur out – my thoughts of the past and present all swirled together. I started to fall through my memories. Scenes of me being bullied by Xuanmin and Guanche, stumbling into the mysterious cave in Yellow Mountain, my adventure through time, the epic Battle of Zhuolu all reappeared and rushed past my head. A faint voice echoed in my head, saying, "Now you know the importance of History, right?"

I found myself back in the cave, resting on a rock. As I woke up, I heard people calling my name. As I walked out of my cave, everyone immediately shouted, “He’s back! We found him!”

My history teacher shouted, “Here you are! What have you been doing here the whole time?”

As I was about to reply, I noticed a stick lying around to the right.

No, it isn't an ordinary stick. I thought. Looking more closely, I knew what it was — it was the Royal Staff.

I smiled, I realised I was going to ace that history project!

The Unexpected Truth

ESF Island School, Khaimson, Aleen – 14

“Please I’m begging you, I NEED TO PEE!”

“I *cannot* believe that you are asking me to take a pee in the bushes of the magical mountain. We are literally in the yellow emperor’s home. And you want to pee? For the last time Greg, hold it in.”

We start our story midway up the Huangshan mountain, where two hikers are only just beginning their adventures in the magical mountains. A sea of misty clouds surrounded the mystical forest as birds began to greet the morning with song. Their voices echoed through the trees, while monkeys danced and swung from branch to branch. Colors of pink, purple, and orange generously painted the sky. The sun had just begun to rise from hiding below the horizon. The morning air was crisp and smelt of petrichor.

Sophie and Greg are making their way up the mountain, excited to see the world-renowned views of the Huangshan mountains. Little do they know, they’re in for a much bigger adventure than they’re expecting.

“We shouldn’t have started last night, sleeping mid-way up the mountain was horrible, my back is aching, and it feels like we’ve just slept on a pile of rocks. OH WAIT, we did. You owe me, Greg.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep complaining, would you rather climb all the way up all night. Would you rather have encountered the soul of the emperor roaming around, or the mythical dragon? Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Enough with you’re nonsense, we would have been just fine if it weren’t for your stupid little fear of ghosts.”

“First of all, it’s not stupid, there are many legends of ghosts roaming around the magical mountains, and second of all, you should be thanking me, you’re back may hurt but at least you didn’t get eaten alive by the spirit of the emperor in dragon form.”

“Yeah right, you keep telling yourself that.”

Greg and Sophie had come all the way from South Carolina just to climb the magical mountain. The twins had dreamed of reaching the top ever since their mother told them the legend of the yellow emperor. It is believed that the yellow emperor had lived in these mountains thousands and thousands of years ago, back in 2697 BCE. The mythical ancestor was said to be practicing his medicine up in the mysterious mountains. He used his concoctions to turn himself into a supernatural being. Some people believe his soul still roams the mystical mountains to this day. This is what caught Greg’s attention about the story. He’s always been one to love any sort of folk tale, legend, or ghost story. He wanted to experience it. He wanted to stumble across the spirit of the all-mighty Huangshan emperor. It would be a dream come true. For Sophie on the other hand, it was the adventure. Along with the unforgettable views which she would be able to capture with her beloved camera. The twins lived a simple life back in Carolina. They wanted change. They wanted adventure, thrill, they needed something more unexpected than the vast plain forests of South Carolina. So they set off on a spur of the moment escapade, to the unknown mountains of Huangshan.

“Okay, enough with the chatting, we’ve wasted enough time we need to get moving.” Sophie says as she begins packing her backpack,

“Yeah I know, you’re right. It’s daytime now so we won’t have to worry about bumping into the emperor’s spirit. I read on wikipedia that he only shows up at night, so we’re good.” Greg agreed.

“Right, whatever floats your boat Greg.” Sophie said as she shook her head. She’s always secretly been jealous of Greg’s belief in these stories. When they were kids Greg always talked about how he wanted to stay up to see santa. One Christams eve Sophie was stumbling to the bathroom in the middle of the night and caught a glimpse of her dad putting gifts under the tree, while he munched on the cookies they had left for santa. She was disappointed, but deep down she always knew this was the case. She never told Greg though, to this day he refuses to believe Santa’s not real. It’s pretty pathetic but also in a way admirable. You have to be *really* invested in something like Santa to still not believe it at 25 years old. It might just be his stubbornness, but regardless, it’s still commendable.

The twins continue their journey, arguing occasionally about the reliability of wikipedia. The sun rested behind a bundle of clouds, occasionally peering out onto the mountain. Humidity levels exceeded normal as droplets of water dripped from every tree in sight.

Greg:

I'm not going to lie, Sophie has really been getting on my nerves recently. We just need to reach the summit, check into the hotel, and then we can go our separate ways for the rest of the day. She's constantly pulling out her vlog camera to continue her youtube video... for her 13 subscribers. At least she knows what she wants in life. She's been to film school, she knows everything there is to know about cameras, and she's doing what she loves. And what am I doing with my life? Living with my parents? Check. Avoiding going back to college because I have no clue what to do with my life? Check. Using my parents money to pay for a trip to China, secretly hoping to run into a stupid ghost I read about online? Check. Wow. But at least I'm here, in the middle of China for the rest of the week, doing god knows what. I'm trying to keep my cool, keep my zen, and gosh if I'm being fully honest I have no clue how to get to the summit. The entire map is in Chinese. Let's just say I wouldn't be able to lead us there if the map was in English... But Sophie can't know. Plus I'm sure we'll get there. Eventually.

"To be honest Greg I was expecting a bit more. I was never really interested in mom's stories but when you mentioned all the exotic creatures and scenery I figured it could be worth it. So far all I see is trees, and I think I saw two monkeys eating insects from each other's skin. Very exciting stuff man." Sophie said as she rolled her eyes.

"Once we reach the hotel we can book as many overpriced tours as your little heart desires." Greg scoffed back.

"Okay, enough with the chit chat. I would love to sleep in a proper bed tonight." Sophie snapped.

They continued their adventure as the hours went by, and they seemed no where closer to the summit. The clouds started closing in on them, reminding them that nightfall was only hours away. As they began walking deeper through the forest they realised that the path was slowly fading into the ground. Leaving them even more lost than they were to begin with.

"Good going Greg. Which way are we meant to go now." Sophie barked at greg.

"All right, all right just— just calm it, we'll figure something out— OH MY GOD DID YOU HEAR THAT?!" Greg shrieked. In the far distance the bushes began to softly shake. It could be mistaken for a gust of wind at first, but Greg being the anxious yet passionate person he is about folk tales, he automatically assumed the worst. "Sophie, don't make a sound. Just follow my lead, when I run, you run. Got it?" Before Sophie could even get the chance to argue, a bush started to shake right behind them. The twins jumped at the sound and turned around. "He's everywhere Sophie, the emperor's everywhere—"

"THE EMPEROR?" A voice screamed from behind them. The siblings jumped and screamed in unison, prepared to start running for their lives. "Wait! Wait, I'm sorry I didn't mean to scare you." That's when Sophie spotted him. Her eyes bulged out of her head as she watched a thin, middle-aged man briskly walking out of the bushes. He had dark brown hair which sat softly at eye length, his eyes were a mysterious inky shade of black. He wore a long shirt with baggy jeans, which very obviously didn't fit him as his hand pulled at the jeans while he walked, attempting to make them feel more comfortable. Sophie began mumbling, trying to form a sentence and tell Greg to look but she was too focused on watching the strange man inch closer to them, that she hadn't even noticed Greg staring straight at him. A puzzled expression sat on Greg's face as he carefully watched the stranger approaching them. We should probably run, Greg thought to himself as he grabbed Sophie's hand ready to pull her away and escape the very unexplainable scene. "I— I'm not going to hurt you, I'm sorry I just could *not* stop listening to you rambling about the magnificent emperor and how you don't want to anger him. God I always hated that guy, and I warned everyone about him too. Oh my gosh where are my manners?! I'm You, it's nice to meet you."

"You're me?" Greg asked skeptically.

"No! Haha my name is you, as in y, o, u. It means ruler, which is you know, not very fitting since I never made it to becoming emperor. Anyway enough about me, what are your names?" You asked smiling wide to seem as friendly as he possibly could.

"I'm Greg, and this is Sophie. Um I don't mean to sound rude but we don't really know who you are and we really need to reach the summit before sundown." Greg said, not sounding as confident as he would've liked.

"The summit? You'll be lucky if you get there tomorrow!" You laughed. "You're walking on the opposite side of the mountain. Getting up to the summit from here is nearly impossible, the steep cliffs are *not* designed for tourists to climb." You explained as he let out a chuckle. "Tell you what, If you let me tag along, I'll bring you to the summit." You offered.

"And what do you get out of it? We don't have money to spare for you." Sophie demanded.

"No, no, no. I don't want money, I just want, company." You replied.

"Company?" Greg asked, as Sophie pulled him aside.

"I don't like the sound of that Greg, this is how all the horror movies start. Before you know it he'll be stabbing us to death with a knife. I won't get to upload my youtube video, come on Greg think this through." Sophie insisted. Greg and Sophie stood there weighing out the pros and cons, while You whistled softly. They agreed their priority was getting to their hotel before dawn and they were *not* sleeping on a pile of rocks again. "Okay, we'll do it. Do you promise you're not a secret serial killer?" Greg asked.

"I promise." You answered.

You, Greg, and Sophie began their journey together to the summit. The sun brightly shined brightly, illuminating the forest. Light fought its way through the towering trees, creating shadows on the forest floor. The ground's moisture seeped through Sophie's thin sneakers, causing her feet to make a gentle *squish* sound whenever she walked. The quietness was filled with You's whistling. Greg began asking You questions in hope of breaking the awkward silence, questions about his youth, his job etc... You managed to dodge most of the questions about his personal life and began explaining the history of the Huangshan mountains. This made Greg feel a bit uneasy but regardless he listened with intrigue. "I'm sorry if this comes across as rude but, who are you, you? Why are u wandering around in the middle of the forest for no reason." Sophie questioned.

"You know Sophie, I don't think you would believe me if I told you." You chuckled.

"Try me." Sophie smirked.

"Alright then, there's not really any other way to say this. I guess I'm what you people call, a spirit? Is that right? I think so or is it a sprint? I can't remember the word for it. Or is it—" Sophie burst out laughing holding Greg's hand, as he stood there in disbelief.

"You—re... Wha— What did you say?" Greg asked as a dizzy spell hit him.

"Greg are you okay? You look a bit green." You asked worriedly.

"He's fine, don't worry—" Sophie replied as she realised that Greg was on the floor unconscious.

For the next ten minutes You and Sophie were trying to wake Greg up. Eventually they succeeded, they gave him food and water and helped him gain enough strength to stand up again. Sophie began reassuring Greg that You was only joking, and he's a normal person just like them.

"I— I wasn't lying Sophie." You interrupted.

"I KNEW IT, I knew we would meet the emperor Sophie." Greg shouted.

"But I'm also not the emperor Greg. I'm, well I *was* his assistant." You confessed. Confusion struck across the twins's face.

"Assi—Assistant?" Greg asked in disarray.

You:

I know most of the things I tell them they won't believe. I'm not sure how much I should share with them. How am I supposed to tell them I was neglected as a child, grew up being best friends with the future emperor and out of pity he took under his wing to be his assistant. Oh and the story doesn't even end there. He became addicted to practicing his illegal witchcraft, everyone thinks he was practicing medicine and the magic of the mountains allowed the medicine to turn him into a dragon. That's definitely not how I remember it. I remember him taking the magic away from the mountains. He took the rarest of butterflies, and birds, He used their blood for his so called 'medicine'. He

sucked all the magic out of the mountains to turn himself into a dragon, that's what killed him. The magic consumed him whole and ended his life. I remember watching him slowly go insane as his addiction grew. He lived in his lab, experimenting with different types of crystals, blood, and cursed objects. He performed rituals and spells to suck the magic out of the mountains. I slowly became neglected and completely forgotten. I tried to stop him, many times. But he grew so powerful with all his magic, that I made no difference. But the mountains knew. That's the sole reason I'm still here today. With the last droplets of magic left in the mountains, I was granted eternal life in the mountains. I was so grateful, and I still am. But now I think of it as more of a curse than a blessing. I have to live watching the tourists babble about their love and admiration for the emperor. Most of them can't see me. Only the people who aren't invested in loving the emperor can see me, including Sophie and Greg. And now I have to explain all of this to them in the easiest way possible. Well, here goes nothing.

The three of them sat themselves down under a tree, as the twins patiently listened to You explain everything. He went on about his childhood, his trauma from working for the emperor, the evilness that hid inside of the beloved ruler, the curse of being banished to the mountains for all of eternity. Everything. The twins sat there in silence taking all of the information in. They didn't speak one word until You was absolutely finished. Sophie tried to secretly record some of it for her video, until she realised You couldn't even come up on her camera screen. "So, so let me get this straight. You worked for the evil yellow emperor, and you witnessed firsthand how he swallowed all of the magic from the mountains for his witchcraft and the last of the magic was used to grant you eternal life?" Greg asked, running out of breath.

"Yeah... that sounds about right." You answered.

"I don't buy it." Sophie smirked, before You even had a chance to answer she burst out laughing. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding." Sophie reassured him.

The three of them sat there until the sun's golden rays began disappearing and dawn fell upon them. They babbled about their lives, the future, and conspiracy theories about magic. Greg showed You his stories he had written about hypothetical situations which he would have encountered with the emperor. Hours went by until they realised it was nightfall and too late to continue their hike. The three of them set camp under the tree and bonded over a fire burning week old marshmallows, as the twins explained to You about everything about the new world. Sophie showed him her videos from college and high school. You sat in awe listening to the siblings's fascinating lives. It made him so jealous that he couldn't leave the mountains, but this just about made up for it. After hours of uninterrupted chatter, they were ready for bed. They lay in their sleeping bags watching the mesmerising sky coated in stars. The trees caved in on them, promising protection for the night. The three of them fell fast asleep as their snores echoed through the forest.

The next day the twins awoke to find You gone. It was time to continue their journey without him, as they packed up their belongings and headed for the summit. Greg slid his hands into his pockets and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. "I have never met anyone as passionate about history as you Greg. I've seen your stories, they're incredible. Now it's time for you to write your own story. Live your life Greg. I'll see the both of you soon." Greg traced his fingers on the messy handwriting and smiled. He knew deep down, this was fate, with the stories You had told him, and Greg's writing skills. It would make one heck of a book.

Immortals

ESF Island School, Lam, Charlie – 15

Huangshan. A mountain renowned for its unworldly features, each entwined with breathtaking tales. It's the motherland of ancient religions, the epitome natural beauty, the birthplace of mystifying legends. I have arrived.

Beads of sweat drip past my eyelashes, blurring the empty path ahead. Apathetic, regiments of bony trees cowardly shy away, exposing me to the sun's harsh glare. I kick the soil, angry at myself. I should've started earlier this morning. As if on cue, a thick layer of fog cloaks the mountain, shading it from the harsh daylight. Unfazed, my eyes refocus on the pearly clouds above, and I steadily hike towards the peak. Flecks of soil wrap around my aching toes, sinking my tattered sandals into the muddy earth. Still, I soldier forward, my mother's story ricocheting in my mind.

Mother told me about an elixir, a mystical extract nestled on the top of China's tallest mountain. Granting eternal life, the elixir allows the most worthy to transcend time and space. All the children in the village would listen to her stories, enchanted by the prospect of immortality. As time went on, most of my peers dismissed this as a mere folktale, laughing whenever it was mentioned. Yet, I'm undeniably sure it exists; the evidence is unmistakable.

It was many years ago, but the traveller's perplexing smile is still fresh in my mind. Known for being an impatient worrier, a neighbouring shopkeeper climbed Huangshan to relieve his stress. I remember seeing him after his journey, his eyes so calm yet so fulfilled. Despite the pain, suffering and misfortunes of the world, he was completely at peace. I suppose, with all the time in the universe, all kinds of worries would disappear. He left a few weeks later, to follow his dreams. I still think of him, many years later.

I have to get the elixir. The doctor said I'm running out of time.

I started my journey twelve days ago. Guided by a water compass, I hiked to Huangshan City, hundreds of miles away from my home province of Shanxi. I trekked, by foot, over acres of verdant forests, deserted plains and boundless fields. I stop to rest, realising that I'm mere days away from the coveted elixir.

In front of me, a Buddhist monk meditates, mumbling a rhythmic verse. Alarmed, I stare at the curious figure: legs crossed, hands turned upwards, as still as the rocks beside him. A crimson robe was draped neatly across his chest, with waves of creases elegantly cascading. He smiles as I walk past, pressing his lips into a thin crescent. He must've come from the Buddhist temples at the foot of the mountain. I remember passing by the stubby structures, each topped with a curved brick hat. Humbly built and proudly displayed, the temples are decorated by years of worship, devotion and history. Monks have roamed the side of the mountain since the Southern Dynasties, with a wealth of knowledge accumulated over countless generations.

"Need any help, boy?" he says kindly. The wind huffs loudly from behind the trees, but the monk's soft voice is crystal clear.

"Erm... I mean, yes. I need to go up the mountain, sir. I don't know the way there, and I really need some help. But I wouldn't want to bother you, of course."

"Don't worry about that, I have all the time in the world." The monk rises and beckons me to follow him. He begins hiking up the steep path without a twinge of hesitation. I was shocked by his casual willingness. Climbing Huangshan is a dangerous journey for even the most experienced athletes, let alone a barefoot monk. Deep wrinkles crease into his tanned skin, a natural display of his advanced age. Yet, he glides smoothly up the rocky trail, completely at ease. I wonder if he aged at will, perhaps as a result of the elixir.

"I'm Ping," I say, itching my dry throat. He stops and nods. Without a reply, he continues his ascent. Like a young duckling, I follow closely behind.

Step by step, we trek up the mountain. Cleanly shaved, the monk's bald head shows no sign of perspiration, but I'm already overwhelmed by pain and fatigue. Clawing my nimble fingers into soft soil, I heave myself up the slope's ancient steps, carved by centuries of humble footsteps. The wind mocks my woeful technique, spitting bursts of air onto my dry face. A thick, humid breath rushes into my nostrils, barring cool air from relieving my lungs. I grunt pitifully, trying to think about the blissful elixir instead.

Suddenly, a sharp rock slices the side of my ankle, inducing a fiery, acute pain.

"Ouch! These stupid, spiky rocks." I cry miserably.

The sensation is magnified by prickly ferns, tickling my raw skin and gifting it a pinkish hue. I persevere, forcing one leg in front of the other. Yet, the pain persists, festering like a rabid disease. More and more often, a jagged blade hungrily targets my chafed skin, mercilessly piercing towards my bone. Bending down to rub my leg, I trip, scraping both my knees.

The monk turns around, staring serenely at my injury. I follow his gaze. My skin becomes an abstract watercolour, dyed with glistening shades of red. Emotionless, the monk plucks an oily leaf from the ground. He hands it to me, and I rub it on my skin. I feel better.

“The rocks,” he voices “are here to serve their purpose. They don’t want to hurt you.”

Nodding, I sigh. I guess when I become immortal, I’d be like that too, wiser and kinder. Remembering the elixir, my footsteps quicken, scurrying along the barren route.

The faint, buzzing tune of dragonflies are calmly constant. But the rocks are silent, and the sound of our pattering footsteps echo through the mountain.

A herd of golden monkeys stands stiffly on an adjacent cliff, ears twitching at the sound of rustling leaves. Their amber eyes are flushed with burning desire, the grating hunger seen in animals and humans alike. Greedily, their open mouths water at the sight of fresh fruits. After scampering up a stumpy tree, their bony fingers curl around juicy plums. They munch on the fruits, spraying sugary juices all around. Watching them, a band of colourful butterflies skip elegantly over the uneaten plums, twirling in a choreographed routine.

Realising that I’ve stopped in front of the animals, I run to catch up with the monk. He has been waiting for me at a distance, allowing me some privacy when appreciating the wonders of Huangshan. Mumbling, I thank the monk. He doesn’t turn around, but I can sense that he understands my gratefulness.

After hours of silent walking, we reach the heaven ladder ascending the Tiandu Peak. The aged wooden slabs lining the path are tied together by braided ropes; in between is a narrow path, barely wide enough to fit a single person. The monk ascends the ladder, drifting up the trail. The wind pushes the path’s railings into a swinging rhythm, but the monk is undaunted. Majestically, the fog spreads, allowing me to see the breathtaking view surrounding the peak. Grotesque rock formations are layered into multi-tiered sculptures, minimalistically decorated with clusters of pine trees. The nasally creaks of the railings dare me to go forward, but the lowering sun holds me back.

As always, the monk strolls confidently. We haven’t talked since the morning, but my faded footsteps made him turn around.

“One foot after the other. Chest up. Balance.” the monk calls from the mountain’s peak. His soothing voice travels with a soft breeze, finally reaching my nervous self. Still hesitant, I inch onto the pathway. Gradually, the ladder narrows; I realise I’m one misstep away from being swallowed up by the deep gorge.

Balance. The word echoes in my mind. My slow movements adapt to the quivering winds, mimicking the tranquil aura of a clouded leopard. The fog hinders my vision, but the sweet smell of pine keeps me going forward.

At last, we reach the Tiandu peak. The air is chilly, but a wave of joy keeps me warm. I must be near the elixir of immortality! According to legend, Emperor Xuanyan crafted the elixir from moraine stones, eroded over centuries by icy glaciers. The thin air reminds me that I’m almost at China’s highest peak; I haven’t felt this happy for a long while.

The sun descends over the horizon, and the navy sky triumphs over its yellow glow. In between, a timid olive hue blends the two colours, transitioning us from day to night. Still, guided by the shimmering stars, we continue the hike. Dark clouds twist and bend in front of the full moon, contorting into different shapes. A rooster playing a *dizi* flute, a mandarin duck slurping *chow mein*, a peacock performing a fan dance. I smile, I haven’t wondered about the clouds since I was a young boy.

The atmosphere is quite cool now. A brisk breeze whisks the sweat off my forehead, and the dropping temperature makes me hope for snow. Eventually, a sheet of darkness submerges the mountain; we keep walking in complete darkness.

By then, I have gotten used to the repetitive steps, meticulously carved over a thousand years ago. Ahead of me is the monk’s dark silhouette, progressing steadily up the slope. His quiet energy radiates around him, enabling me to follow him through the night. At last, the monk stops, signalling that we have arrived. I fall asleep under a metasequoia tree.

My eyes flutter open at the soft light of sunrise. Before me is a bewildering view. Clusters of porcelain clouds crown the mountain’s peak, and I feel a mix of honour and awe. I can sense that I’m getting close to the elixir of immortality. I can feel it. Engrossed by the astounding scene, my mind can’t begin to capture the mountain’s boundless detail. Silver pheasants flutter their inked wings, performing in a kaleidoscopic pattern. The dance continues, painting a moving calligraphy for just the monk and I. I pity those who have never had this experience.

The sea of clouds form a perfect heaven, one only present in myths and fairytales. No recreation, no matter how advanced, could ever challenge the hidden glory in the highest point of China. My mind flashes to the dull lines I’ve repeated in school, now enlivened by the mountain’s view. Li Bai’s poem, buried since primary school, resurfaces in my mind, and it is only now that I understand the beauty of Huangshan. Now that I have entered the *sky mountain world*, I finally understand Li Bai’s deep admiration for it.

All that's left is to acquire the elixir.

Suddenly, I feel a pang of guilt. I have never told the monk the real reason I sought his help. I must've taken advantage of his goodwill. Shame reddens my wind streaked cheeks as I reluctantly approach the monk to explain myself. The monk is squatted, observing shallow streams of water. The delicate lagoons weave into round estuaries, crafting an intricate pattern of brush strokes, thick and thin. Taking a deep breath, I venture my first sentence.

"I... I never told you the reason I came here. I wanted, no, needed, the elixir of immortality, and... and you were there to guide me. I'm sorry I mislead you. I never meant to do it."

"I figured," says the monk, chuckling. "You're not the first one. Besides, there's no such thing as the elixir of immortality."

Shocked, my mouth hangs open, and my mind flashes to the doctor's frightful message from just a few weeks ago.

Last year, I started having pinching sensations in my head. I went to the village healer, who has always made my illnesses go away. But this time, my pain lingered for far too long. Upon my mother's urges, I reluctantly visited a hospital miles away, with almost half of my total savings.

One step into the building, a cacophony of mechanical sounds, anxious footsteps and beeping machines immediately overwhelmed me. Nervously, I went to register with an impatient nurse, who transferred me from room to room. Blinded by blaring hospital lights, I was jabbed with needles and syringes. I was tested with odd frequencies, asked questions I couldn't answer and screened with almost every machine in the hospital. Around me, doctors and nurses scribbled my data onto mono color clipboards; I couldn't understand a thing.

Finally, I was brought into a white chamber at the far end of the hospital. It was too quiet, too empty. I should have known. The doctor, completely covered by thick masks and white lab coats, sat me down and told me what was going on.

A brain tumour. The doctor continued droning on with my test results and reports, but all I could think about is my future disappearing. I had a life, a family, and so many hopes and dreams. I was not ready for the end of my life. My little sister just turned eleven, and I wanted to do so much with her.

"How much time do I have?" I blurted out, fearing the answer.

"I'm afraid there's no treatment for your illness. There is treatment to help with the pain, but it's not a cure. You have about four years left, eight maximum."

Eight years. I wouldn't be able to get through my sister's twentieth birthday. It was at that moment that I knew I had to hike Huangshan. I took some painkillers before leaving home the next morning.

My worries, which have been bubbling in my mind since I commenced the journey, spills from my cracked lips.

"But I need immortality. I want to be here, permanently. I want to see the village children fulfil their destinies, I want to take care of my parents as they enter the best years of their life, and I want to see the world, to see it flourishing and advancing. The doctor told me I only have a few years left. I didn't want to tell you, but... but you already know, don't you?" I stare at my dulling hands, veins becoming increasingly prominent.

"I knew," the monk says simply. "Nothing is permanent, Ping. Take the mountain for instance. It looks permanent, undeterred by the jealous winds and pestering seas. But time changes it all the same. 50 million years ago, the whole mountain was submerged under sea water, surrounded by waltzing fishes and spiralling ammonites. Eons ago, dinosaurs flew all over the peak. Now, their egg fossils are sunk under the soil, covered by millennia of clay and dust.

"But the mountains are still here! They haven't changed."

"What is the mountain anyway? It's just a collection of rocks, and they come and go according to nature's commands. 400 million years ago, the mountain was just a little mound under the sea. The Lotus Peak, where we're on right now, was formed many years after that. Sometimes the peaks existed, sometimes it didn't. Even the mountain has never and will never be permanent. There's just no point, Ping."

I ponder upon the monk's words. I think about the rocks that I was frustrated with just yesterday. Were they part of the imperious cliffs, gallantly framing the ocean? Were they at the highest peak of the highest mountain, staring down at the kingdom beneath it? Or are they going to be part of something greater, even unimaginable, in the future... The rocks never worry about being built up or torn down, but they form something beautiful all the same. I peek at my scarred ankle; the wounds are now sealed with a dusty scab. It wasn't a big deal after all, was it?

"What is permanent," the monk continues, "are the memories, shared by poets across China, influencing artists across the earth. Your interpretation of the mountain transcends its physical changes. The beauty and wisdom of the world is useless if you can't appreciate it."

I feel enlightened by the monk's profound words. I realise I don't need more time, I just need to spend it wisely. Looking down from the peak, I could spy some other travellers, sprinkled across the slope of the mountain. From above, humans are so small. There's a joy in being a fleeting shadow in mankind's history, so that the precious time devoted to loved ones is incomparably valuable.

Life isn't about getting things, but enjoying it. Physical things don't last forever; it's the memories that persist.

The monk bends down and plucks lush leaves from a large tree, dropping them into a pitcher of water. Rubbing two wooden sticks, he lights a small fire under the pitcher, allowing the leaves' colour to diffuse. He pours a cup of *Maofeng* tea for me, then another for himself. After enjoying a long sip of tea together, the monk gestures for me to go on. I think he wants to stay for a while, but I'd like to go home. I thank the monk for the journey, holding on to his wisdom. Life's joyful surprises, meaningful connections and unforgettable journeys resurface in my mind; my eyes sparkle with peace and contentment.

I go down the mountain, with a taste of immortality.

The Old Man and the Mountain

ESF Island School, Martin, Katie – 14

In a distant land far far away, lived a poet who was drowning in his own sorrows. He had everything a man wanted – money, fame, freedom, and something else quite peculiar – a beautiful mountain. He lived in solitude and led a life of mystery. People knew little of the mountain and the poet, but one thing that they all knew for certain was that the mountain was dangerous, its depths deeper than the ocean.

In a neighbouring village, Tien grew up with no fears, “sky’s the limit”, was the phrase that her father liked to tell her, and her thoughts on the tales and myths of the mountain? Well, she believed that they were just tales and myths. She insisted that the disappearances were merely drunk men hallucinating and accidentally getting lost in the forest.

The mountain had been around for as long as the villagers could remember, it had always been there, a part of their lives, silently, watching from the corners. If you took the time to pay attention, the foot of the mountain was wrapped in layers of mist, alabaster waves tumbling down the sides of the mountain, like a jewelled case sheathing a sharp blade. The mist that hugged the mountain was the inspiration point for many tales, the greatest one of them all was the old folk tale explaining that the mist is actually the mountains tears from a long lost tragedy, coincidentally, this tale was also Tien’s favourite.

The poet – of average height, his white beard mirrors the exquisite beauty of the Nine Dragon waterfall – ice-cold water cascading down the mountain, drizzling onto the rocks and releasing crisp notes of water. Beady eyes similar to the ones of birds. His voice was raspy from all the smoking and his eyesight was far from good, all these years, the only thing that kept him company was a massive library built into his palace. His poems were his soul, his pen his sole companion.

Strange things have always happened in the villages close to the mountain. Just last year, luscious blackberries bloomed all over the nearby villages, but nobody dared to take a bite into the sweet and juicy blackberries. They were too unusual, too plump, too perfect, some say that the berries were a gift from the fae, most thought that it had some kind of connection to the mountain. So naturally, they kept their distance.

But one day, everything changed. Tien was dared to go up the forbidden mountain and stay there until sunset. Just before sunrise, she set off. In time to watch the sunrise from the edge of the first base. This was as far as the tourists dared to go. A famous photo destination for tourists to brag “I climbed one of the yellow mountains!”. Taking a final inhale, she set off without looking behind, uninterested in catching a glimpse of her village before everything was going to change.

Tien grew up with her father – who had told her that her mother was a princess, a fairy goddess sent from heaven who lived just at the tip of the mountain. When she was younger, Tien stared intensely at the tip of the mountain, determined to catch a glimpse of her mysterious mother. The summit of the mountain wasn’t visible, resulting in the rumours that the top of the mountain was a part of heaven. There were countless ones – the most outrageous ones ranged from “yeti monsters” to “beautiful women floating around with voices sweeter than honey”. Tien had always had fantasies about how the mountain was like, and how one day, she was going to bring her mother home. But as she grew up, she understood that those were just sweet lies told to a young child to avoid tears. But growing up with that fervent sort of yearning for the mountain, she wasn’t afraid like everyone else, she felt connected to the mountain, like she was part of the mountain somehow or the mountain was a part of her. The mountain had become such an important aspect of her life without her realising. She grew more and more attached to the mountain as the days flew by. She used to study close to the mountain so she could smell the faint freshness of the stream that meandered down the soft curves of the mountain, she could almost hear the rhythmic sloshing of the water hitting against the moss-covered stones, this is where she felt most at ease.

After a while of hiking, Tien had started to feel a distant grumbling down in her stomach, demanding for food. So she munched on her sandwich and thought about her day. She liked solitude, so much that she didn't mind being alone in the mysterious mountains. She enjoyed the tranquility, the way birds flew overhead and chirped their greetings.

A strange old man with a flute suddenly appeared in front of her with a perplexed look hung upon his face. The man simply stood there for a while, simply taking it in, this was the first human being he had seen in thirty years. Were all of them this short now?? Perhaps it was some kind of growth defect? Then he remembered that there were such things as "children", he let out a frown and sighed. The little girl reminded him of his daughter. "What are you doing here on this mountain", he snapped.

The girl seemed more confused than terrified. "I didn't see an 'off-limits' sign or anything.. I really didn't mean to interrupt you, I'll head right back, sorry sir", mumbled the girl and stumbled off. The old man didn't even have the time to process what just happened and just nodded, returning to his flute tentatively and wondering what all that was about. Tien on the other hand started to question what the old man was doing this deep in the mountain, but he could probably say the same for her.

Tien grabbed her belongings and headed for the clearing behind the bush she saw earlier. And right in the middle of the grass was that same old man. Now levitating, five meters in the air. Now that was impressive, Tien thought. Wait, hold on a second. He was FLOATING! Tien stared at the floating man with awe, her eyes wide with wonder. The man hadn't noticed that she was there, not until she announced her arrival by saying "AWESOME". Upon hearing the child's exclamation, he fell right onto the ground with a loud THUD.

"Foolish child", muttered the man under his breath, Tien broke his concentration, which was precisely why he fell. It took a few minutes for the old man to catch his breath again, he hadn't endured a fall like that in forever, he was always alone, free from distractions. It was the main reason why he liked the mountains, his secluded palace and the freedom to roam around like a free-range chicken.

The old man was fuming with anger, he walked towards the child and stopped abruptly before her. "Do you know how hard it was for me to concentrate and do that? Only for some child to come along and ruin it all. 30 years I've been uninterrupted, 30 years I tell you!" Tien was more happy than anything, she put the pieces together and surmised that she had finally found the supposed man of the legends, did he know he was famous back in her village?!

"Greetings Mr.. Er.. Mountain, I was wondering if you could come down to the village with me?"

"The village? Have you lost your mind?? I haven't been in that place for over 30 years and I do not wish to return, not now, and not ever."

Tien was a stubborn child, she had already made up her mind to not return to the village without the old man, she was determined to prove that she had met the legend himself, although he didn't seem half as magical as he was in the stories. Then again, who else could the old man with the long beard be?

When the old man showed no sign of movement, she plopped onto the ground and started crying, as soon as she sat down, the magical flowers and grasses on the mountain started blooming all around her, it was like her tears were some kind of magical potion that caused flowers to bloom.

The old man was startled, for decades he thought that he was the only one who could control the mist, the flowers, he was the trees, he was the magical beings that lived on the mountain, the sun, the fresh air surrounding the stream. Years ago, when a daughter of a merchant came to the village when he was just a teenage boy led him into the mountain and showed him the powers of the mountain, he felt bound to it with every nerve in his body and never took interest in anything else after that.

“W—w—what are you doing. S—s—stop now. I order you to stop at once!” The old man was confused and terrified, not since his daughter had seen the power of the mountain so wild and beautiful before, and certainly not activated by a small village child. The man sighed, deciding that he had to change his methods in order to calm the child down.

"Child, please stop your tears. I promise I'll follow you as soon as we set things straight. First of all, who are you?" the old man said.

The child stopped crying abruptly and looked up at the man with misty eyes, the old man was shocked by the resemblance of those almond shaped eyes, they were the very eyes his daughter had. Startled, he asked “What’s your name?”

Tien sniffled and choked out her name, unhappy about the old man’s reluctance but glad that he was still willing to come on certain terms. “You promise?”

The old man flashed a toothy grin in return – a gesture he hadn’t done for a long time, his facial muscles felt unfamiliar to him and he regretted the smile the second he displayed it. Not sure whether or not this was how you calmed a child down, after all, it had been years since he took care of one.

Upon seeing the old man’s grin, Tien cheered up immediately and decided to head towards the place the old man told her was his home. The child hopped along in front of him and hummed a tune he distinctly remembered, nothing was making sense. Her ability to connect with the mountains were extraordinary, she had to be related to him somehow. His daughter? It couldn’t be, Lili passed away long ago, he was certain of it, but did Lili have a child? Could this jubilant little ball of sunshine be his grand-daughter?

All of the light on the mountain seemed to be attracted to her in a supernatural way and the old man started to question his decisions to leave all of society behind so many years ago. Who was she? Why did she remind him of someone he knew long ago? Why does this little girl inspire him to do something more?

The mountain seemed to open up to Tien and showed her the quickest way to the old man’s palace, she picked up a few flowers on the way but it seemed that she was most fascinated by the milky white mist that was surrounding the mountains. Tien thought that they seemed almost magical, they were like silk and vanished whenever she tried to stomp on them. The mist seemed to be playing around with her games too, playfully luring her deeper into the mountain. Although trailing not far behind was the old man – stuck in his own thought bubble and trying to make a clearer sense of things. The one question that he just couldn’t make out was the connection between him, the mountain and her. He felt the overwhelming sensation of change, a feeling he knew all too well and feared.

It was a change that separated him and his daughter, Lili. It was change that banished him from the village years ago when he tried to defend the mountains when the villagers were blaming the mountain for the disappearing of their precious husbands. At the time, the old poet didn’t know why he defended the mountain himself, he assumed that he just couldn’t sit there and watch the mountain take the blame, even though everyone else thought of it as an inanimate object, the mountain was so much more than that for him. All those years ago, when he was accused of witchery and the dark arts, mistook for an evil sorcerer rather than the kind man he was. Nobody believed him nor did they support him, nobody except Mei, his wife. Mei was the one who followed him to the mountains when he decided that he’d had enough of the rumours and unfriendly treatment from the villagers, it was Mei who taught him to trust, to love, to live. And the very child standing in front of him shared her spirit.

Was there something more to the sudden appearance of the boisterous child? Everything was connected somehow. It all circled back to the mountain.

The Monk Of The Huangshan Mountains

ESF Island School, Mignon, Freya – 14

1

Opaque

It was almost dawn as Du-Yi (translation: Independence) stared up at the ceiling, recalling the screams and visions from just two hours ago. Du-Yi had just turned 15. His vision became blurry as a tear trickled down his rosy cheeks. The feeling of despair, misery and emptiness . . . he was paralyzed from all the inflicted pain, and bruises on his body. *What difference would it make to cry?* He laid on the cold wooden floor, his heart torn like a sword pierced right through his chest. The house was empty, only he and his father roamed around. They lived in a remote area in Anhui Province.

It was a day like any other. The boy hadn't been out of his room in months. Each day was like clinging onto a cliff, never knowing what to expect. One wrong move could end him. This thought overwhelmed him each and every moment. All he could do was wait patiently for the day he would be set free from the person that had haunted him his entire life: *His father*.

People had called their family “perfect”. Du-Yi hadn’t seen his mother since he was four. Nor did he know why she had disappeared. The only family he had was his: “Ideal father”, as people had called him. His father was a very successful businessman, and his name was Lowe Fu (Lowe meaning profit or greatness, and Fu meaning rich). Du-Yi was always so curious to find out what type of person his mother was. But whenever he asked questions about the past, he would end up getting beaten for it. His life was nowhere near as flawless as others made it seem. Du-Yi’s relationship with his father seemed perfect to the eyes of other people, but the secrets remained hidden.

On a frosty day in December things had not seemed quite right; he had an eerie feeling. Du-Yi wasn’t sure what was coming, all he knew was that he was prepared to endure the pain. Days like these never ended well. The sky became as dark as night. He heard a silent whisper into his ear, *I love you my precious son*. With those words, he was certain he heard his mother. His only reason for living was finding out about this mysterious lady, the one that loved him with all her heart. Curiosity took over his bad intuition. He creaked open the door and tiptoed down the stairs. He heard his name “Du-Yi...” He halted, and peered down the corridor. His father was talking on the phone with what seemed to be a client. His father whispered in a hushed tone, intending for absolutely no one to hear him. Du-Yi edged closer.

“That worthless boy should be grateful. He keeps asking stupid questions and keeps acting like he’s goddamn depressed. His face resembles that trash mother of his. I can’t wait to see the kind of face he makes when we rip out his toenails one by one. His organs are probably worth a lot. We should sell them like we did with his mother.” Lowe and his client started laughing hysterically. Du-Yi was speechless. He clenched his fists. His mind was going fuzzy. His reason for living was shattered into pieces. There was no hope if his mother wasn’t there anymore. All he worked for, all this time, meant nothing? He ran back upstairs, and gushed out all the tears he had left. He screamed into his pillow. His head felt like it was going to implode. Anger enraged him. Du-Yi swore to himself that he was going to ruin his father’s life, and take revenge, in the most gruesome way possible.

2
Fragility

It was daybreak, and the air was crisp. Du-Yi was packing up. He knew Loweï would soon awake from his slumber. If his father found out, Du-Yi for sure would not be able to see another glint of daylight. Every movement was straining, making it difficult to breathe. No emotion could describe his fear at this point. As he collected the last of his things, he heard a quiet creak from the door.

Startled, he looked for a possible escape route. There was none, and the sound of a person approaching became clearer and clearer by the second. Du-Yi was now frozen. If he didn't do something, he would probably get eaten alive. A bang came from outside his door. Du-Yi, shocked, unlocked his door and slightly opened it. Unexpectedly, no-one was there. He examined the whole area and went back into his room. As he was closing the door, suddenly hands latched onto the frame. Alarmed, Du-Yi looked straight up into the crimson piercing eyes only his father owned. A huge grin crept onto Loweï's face.

Du-Yi was petrified when he saw the two weapons his father was clasping in his hands. Finally, with what seemed to be an eternity, Loweï spoke up. "Where do you think you're going?"

Du-Yi was speechless, all the colour drained from his face, all hope was lost. "Nowhere... I'm staying here."

Loweï was silent for a few moments, then gave a friendly smile, which was not something Loweï usually did.

"Is that so?" He chuckled. His father was barely recognizable. Du-Yi smiled. *Maybe I do have a chance of escaping after all.*

"Yes!" Du-Yi replied.

His father's kind smile quickly turned into a sarcastic frown. "How unfortunate. Since you didn't tell me the truth, you've left me no choice. I'm afraid I'll have to punish you... now choose: Knife or the hook?"

There were no escape routes left unless Du-Yi, were to somehow distract his father even for a split second.

"Did you kill mom?"

Loweï took a moment to process what he just asked. His unsettling grin quickly turned into a bloodthirsty murderous one. In that same moment Du-Yi took his bag and slammed it across his father's face causing him to lose balance. Du-Yi sought out a window, smashed it open, and ran straight into the woods on his way up to the Yellow mountains. There, he hoped to seek meaning to life, and revenge.

3
Courage

His stick-like body shortly came face to face with the 60,000 steps that led up to the mountain tops. Anhui Province was famous for these mountains. But he knew that if he started to walk up those steps, he wouldn't be able to find any shelter. Instead, he took his own path with risk and uncertainty. There, he started his journey to everlasting fulfilment.

Du-Yi had been walking the whole day, and the once brightly lit up sky was now a gradient navy blue. He recalled reading about these bewildering alps, and the wonders that laid in them. He had read about the mythical animals that existed in the area, but Du-Yi was most wary about the clouded leopards. These beasts could kill him in a split second. By this time Du-Yi was urgently in need of seeking shelter, as the carnivorous animals would soon come out.

The hard soil soon became soft and slippery, as rain started to patter down. Luckily for Du-Yi, a cavern on the mountainside had just come into sight. Out of the blue the boy felt rumbling. As he looked up, he could see a landslide charging straight for him. Du-Yi had come this far and wasn't about to let this be the end. He sprinted, just barely missing the few boulders that might have ended his life. He staggered over, finally he slumped down, and to a deep sleep.

His dreams were not fiction, but rather memories of times he once had with his loving mother. He was around four, as passing images appeared before him. Several of them were of his mother embracing the fragile infant he once was. Du-Yi called out, "Mother!" She was the one person who gave him the love he needed, but just the other day, was foully fooled into believing his father's words: "she disappeared". Du-Yi never had a caring relationship with his father; it was cold and frightening. Du-Yi felt as though each movement was being judged. Tears of longing flowed onto Du-Yi's delicate cheeks. Oh, how he yearned to see her again, just once more.

The leiothrixes were chirping their usual wake up call, but Du-Yi was unmotivated to get up. Instantaneously, a wild macaque appeared out of seemingly nowhere. These animals were thought to be the cheekiest of them all, in the vast array of mountains. The macaque leaped onto Du-Yi, and his eyes shot right open as he saw the monkey straight above him. He yelped, pushed the monkey away, and groaned. He turned onto his left side, just to see two bare feet right before him. He slowly turned his head up to this unknown figure.

This strange man was peculiar; it felt as if a glowing radiant light was emanating from him.

Then this figure asked in a tender voice, "What might a young boy like you be doing all the way out here?"

Du-Yi had never seen such a friendly aura in his life.

He immediately sat upright, "Sorry, but do I know you? I've never heard of anyone living in these mountains."

The man smiled. "I am a Taoist master who serves by being a guide for those who are willing to learn the ways of eternal enlightenment. I live in a monastery up at the top of the mountain, and my name is Master Wu Liu (Translation: The willow)." Du-Yi was desperate as he knew his father might be looking for him right at this moment. He didn't know if he could trust this Taoist master, but something in his heart told him he could.

"Please, mister, help me put meaning into my life, and please help me get stronger. I need to take revenge on my father!"

The monk shook his head. "I cannot help you with seeking revenge, but I can make you stronger, if you promise me not to use violence with it. I was once a warrior, who served the Yellow Empire. There were many moments where I felt severe regret. Please, young man, don't go down the same route that I took. I promise to help you get stronger, and along with this practice, I shall teach you what you desire: meaning to life, and the greatest power of all: forgiveness."

“What? Have you ever experienced being tortured *every single day*? You will never understand the pain and suffering I have gone through. . . I cannot forgive him.”

Master Wu Liu gave a generous smile. “That is why you are here to learn, and you shall now call me Master Wu Liu.” The monk looked over to his right. “Look at that golden monkey, and please tell me what you think of it”.

“It’s beautiful, and I heard it’s an incredibly rare species,” Du–Yi exclaimed.

The monk grinned. “Yes, indeed it is. This is the beauty of purity, as the golden monkey never had an ego. It has no evil intention, a pure heart and true feelings. That is what makes it truly extravagant to watch.” Du–Yi was immediately attracted to this man's unique charisma and thus started his training. They made their way up to the monastery.

4

Balance

His first days with the master were exhausting. Du–Yi had to wake up at 4 am each day; just when the sun was about to rise, and make his way down to a river. There would come face to face with a waterfall. He was ordered to sit under the waterfall for 1 hour without moving an inch. This would allow him to get rid of all evil thoughts.

“Do not think about anything. Just simply observe your mind,” Master Wu Liu said.

After the long practice, Du–Yi’s shoulders were beet red, but he was numb to the pain.

Then Master Wu Liu told Du–Yi to go search for fresh loquats that grew up in the treetops.

“But Master Wu Liu, I do not know the whereabouts of these fruits.”

“Just let your heart and intuition guide you,” Master Wu Liu said boldly. Du–Yi was unsure, but did as he was told regardless. He was searching where his intuition told him to, and although he took some tumbles and falls, he found them in less than 30 minutes. An average person would’ve taken at least two hours.

After his return, Master Wu Liu looked quite delighted and said, “let’s get down to the serious practice now, shall we?”

They were standing face to face, and silence arose. For about five minutes, all one could hear was the wind howling. Soon Du–Yi started to feel uncomfortable and intimidated.

“Um Master–”.

Master Wu Liu stopped him mid–sentence. “Do not speak, do not feel uncomfortable, just feel the space around you and be present to every movement. Even the slightest movement of the wind you must take note of. Now... put this on.”

Master Wu Liu handed over a blindfold to Du–Yi. As soon as he put it on, everything was quiet. Then, a painful strike to his kidneys, stomach, shoulders. He couldn’t see what was happening but then he remembered what Master Wu Liu had said. He was aware of every movement. Then a hard pound struck his leg. He wasn't quick enough to stop it, but he now understood exactly what Master Liu meant.

“Let’s stop for today. Shall we eat?” After hearing this, Du–Yi’s heart immediately filled with warmth. It was like having the father he always wanted. One that cared for him.

They sat down in one of the rooms in the monastery that overlooked the sea of mist which engulfed the rest of the mountain. They ate the fresh loquats that Du–Yi had picked.

Master Wu Liu went over to light an incense, and then asked, “What will your new name be?”.

“Long (Translation: Dragon),” Du–Yi replied firmly.

“Long it is then,” the monk replied nonchalantly. There they discussed the meanings of life and created poems. Master Wu Liu unveiled something Long would never forget. “Heaven and earth. . . they are an expression of meditation, and it is your original nature that you should seek.”

Seasons had changed, and what seemed like months were actually years that had gone by and Long, formerly a frail skinny boy, was now a good looking and firmly built man who had the purest heart and was no longer the tortured, anguished, and distressed boy he once was. He had learnt that the meaning of life resided within, but a verbal answer could never be found because the answer was always changing. He learned that this is why we adapt and constantly re–paint our minds.

But most importantly, he had obtained his original nature.

This man was now fully aware, and even out–smarted the monk himself: Master Wu Liu. His intention, heart and feelings were now absolutely pure. He was ready to set things straight with his father, even though Lowei might not be looking for him anymore. He thanked his Master several times before departing, they said whatever they needed to say, and bid each other adieu.

5

Wisdom

Long walked down the mountain peacefully. After walking further and further, he came to a sudden pause, as he was faced with a clouded leopard. But, instead of fear, they brushed past each other with mutual respect. This time Long was sure of it. He was ready to accept his past, and be complete, so he would never have to look back. There, he let his intuition guide the way to his father.

He strolled down the mountain. The village had just come into sight with its beautiful display of lights. For the first time in ages, he saw groups of people and bundles of laughter. Antique shops that he had previously known had now been replaced with modern society’s love for trends. Nevertheless, he didn’t ponder any further. His goal was to forgive his past and bring forth a new chapter to his life.

He paced himself from the outskirts of the town on over to his house. He calmed himself, took a few deep breaths and knocked gently on the door, and it swung open.

His father stood by the doorway, disgruntled, holding an empty bottle of beer. “Who are you?” he rasped.

“Father it’s me, Du–Yi.”

Lowe's eyes shot up. “Du–Yi. . .?”

“Father, I’m sorry for leaving you. I just wanted to let you know that I forgive you and myself for whatever happened in the past.”

His father now had a sinister smile on his face. “How have you been? I missed you. Don’t you know how worried I was? I gave you everything. Du–Yi, my son, is this how you repay me?” His father’s tone was getting more aggressive with each passing moment.

“Father. . . just know that I’m not against you, and. . . I forgive you, so please just let me go now.”

“You, may have forgiven me, but I will **NEVER** forgive you.”

Lowe smashed his beer bottle against the door frame, and aimed the broken bottle at his son. Long grabbed his arm and took the bottle from his hand, leaving his father in shock. Lowe then came to a realisation that his son wasn’t the same boy he had once known. Long reached out, and helped his father up.

“You will always be my father. I may have hated you for what you did, but I have forgiven you. I wish you a better life.”

Through forgiveness he learnt kindness, and cleansed out all bitterness from his soul and mind. Lastly, he obtained peace and *wisdom*.

Long continued up the mountain feeling complete, and no longer felt a sense of attachment to his past. However, curiosity still overflowed within. He met Master Wu Liu, who welcomed him with open arms.

“You did well.”

Long smiled. “Thank you, Master.”

From then on, he would continue to carry out his journey to become a
Taoist Master.

Lion Peak

ESF Island School, Park, Ginny – 14

There was that saying that his mother told him years ago. If winter was depression, then summer was melancholy. While the cold brought dread and longing, summer brought dejection and memories. It stuck in the back of his memory even after all those years, even after she had passed.

Either way, he thought that there should've been some excuse other than the summer heat for an entire village to burn down. Or a warning, or just about anything else. One second the farmers were out toiling in the fields, the children were running around, and people were simply going on their day and the next was chaos. The flames spread like a wildfire.

He probably wouldn't be able to get the screams out of his head for years. If he even survived that long considering he had no plans or ideas.

People were trying to run, but they couldn't. A lot of the exits were blocked with the crowds of people fleeing and the debris crashing around the wooden and thatch town. Distantly he remembered being helped to leap over a ring of fire with several other people and then running after several distant figures as he ran. A part of him was convinced that he saw glowing eyes among all the chaos, and dead people already walking among the living. He hadn't even considered what happened to the people that were kind enough to hoist him out of the fire. Most likely they were dead. Hopefully, they found a quick way out. He supposed that the people he was running after were the people that he was with now though, which was at least one question answered.

The woman who was secretly a warrior, the man that was too smart to be a farmer, a boy, and a writer. He preferred the term poet, but it didn't matter. Why they'd run so far to somehow reach the black mountains was beyond him, but the lady insisted that it could've been an attack. She was probably right. He didn't have any other explanation. There wasn't anything special enough about or from the other man that he could find, but he seemed nice enough. Smart enough to also bring along and find food for them in his thatch woven basket, and to hold a conversation with him for long enough. It looked like the strong and muscular and agile and wiry body were swapped between both of them.

The boy was what intrigued him though. He seemed sharp and attentive enough, but it was like watching a cat. Jumped at everything, slunk away from them while they were talking, reluctantly talked back when spoken to. He wouldn't blame him if it was grief seeing that he couldn't have been much older than a decade or so, but it was still odd in his books. It was like a vase that had been created slightly tilted or thicker on one side than the other. Something about him just set off light in his brain, and something much farther than the distraught numb state he was in. There was that one time he tried to reach out and reassure the child, sort of similar to putting a hand on his shoulder or something of the sort, but he'd flinched away, quietly apologizing as he tried to comfort him. The sort of he could talk about anything if he wanted to or whatever kids were told. He wasn't too good with children.

Or maybe the kid was tired, just like they all were. They didn't even give names to each other to match faces to back story. They were just the ragtag bunch travelling through the black mountains. Black like the mountain stone, black like death.

He was broken out of his train of thought by the small kick in his side. For a moment, a shadow loomed over him from the cave entrance, outlining the robes and dress. Short in stature, around forty to fifty, but still fit enough to throw him into a wall even with the long skirt and clothing limiting her movement by his guess. There was a small pin in her hair with magnolia flowers at the end.

"What'd you find?" He quickly earned himself another almost impatient nudge.

"Let's go." The edge of his mouth almost twitched into a small smile from the rough voice. "Do either of you know where in Yi Shan we might be?"

"Ma'am, I think— sorry. I believe we are in the deepest depths of the mountain, also known as Hell."

“I believe general—” The man bit his lip as the woman just sent him a glare, before she reached down and grabbed his arm, hauling him up. “I specify that we are in one of the layers of hell, slowly descending farther and farther.”

The boy scrambled up towards the entrance while she headed towards the man, swiftly but gently punching his arm before also heaving him up. It might have been funny for them to be slowly losing their minds if they weren't running from some unknown threat. The sun was already rising in the sky, and they were losing daylight and time by just standing around. The woman probably understood that, and he honestly wished he didn't.

He grabbed the man's basket and hauled it over his back, carefully distributing the weight before feigning a smile. “There's only one way to find out, isn't there?”

There was an echoing throughout the valleys in between the black mountains, carried through the heavy winds that were blowing by as the group continued through the mountains. The stones were hard and dry, almost burning to the touch from the sun.

Everything just seemed to be constant nightmare fuel. Glowing eyes, wildfires, and now screams of burning agony and suffering far off in the distance. There was a time where the sounds might have just been blown off for some festival, before all the war and fighting going on.

His stomach set in dread as he watched the other three continue, hearing nothing even as they advanced. Something, someone or something else much larger was out there causing all that shouting, and sooner or later, it would come for them, finishing what was already started.

Pausing for only a moment longer, he trailed the people, keeping ever so silent as he did so.

The hike through the mountains had been apprehensive, and the top view wasn't even worth it. Scaling and creeping next to the side of rock, just for an underwhelming view. He'd expected the tales he'd heard from traders and stories, of fog and heavy clouds blanketing the mountains and the air of mysteriousness or a serene calm, that looked even better at night. He'd expected mystical peaks, and views that towered above all of China, displaying the land around the mountains or just another world entirely.

It sort of looked like huge mossy rocks from way up close in his opinion. The fog left just a sea of mountains that he would eventually be climbing, stars were dimmed as if they were already dead. How the bushes and plants weren't weeds yet was amazing to him.

Maybe he should've just wished for a pair of stairs building up to the top of the mountain and around Yi Shan instead and a coat and lamp seeing how dark and cold it was.

Sunny day, no fog, and somehow now a chilly night and small breeze. It was oddly breezy for a summer's night too, but here they were anyway. Keeping watch on the very tops of the mountain and at the very edge might add, with the boy sleeping behind them and the lady supposedly scouting. He couldn't have turned down the both of them, even though it was freezing.

“You heard about the war between the warlords, right?” He spared his companion a glance for a second before examining the tops of the mountains once more.

“Who hasn't? The war between Cao Cao, Liu Bei and Sun Quan for control over a *united* China, by spreading and taking over different territories and warlord things.”

There was a short pause of silence. Now that he looked closely, the man didn't seem like the farmer he'd claimed himself to be, and not just from the skinny build.

“You're...” The man seemed to struggle for a word. “A writer, right?”

“You could call it that. You're not a farmer, are you?” A small sigh met his statement.

“Do you think that Sun Quan’s army could’ve set fire to the village as a part of the war?”

“It could be Liu Yao because we’re on his territory, but there’s not much point if you don’t have people to rule over.” There wasn’t anyone blocking the entrances or stopping people. The fire would’ve spread way too fast for anyone to be attacking. It could’ve been set by someone inside the village for all he knew.

Somewhere below them, there was the sound of shuffling that caught his attention. There was only so far he could look without falling over the cliff, but something was moving there. The other man had jumped up too, which at least indicated that he hadn’t gone insane yet.

“Come on. Find the boy.” He probably would’ve been shoved off the cliff if he wasn’t being held by the arm. There was a short second where a cold pin was held against his hand before the lady hurriedly tied up her hair. “Something’s coming.”

There was a sense of dread at the very bottom of his stomach when the man didn’t immediately answer.

“He was right here not even a few meters away!” The man with the basket hurriedly looked around, before gesturing to the lady. He looked more panicked by the second. “W—we didn’t even hear anything—”

The lady with flowers in her hair was carefully looking over the top of the mountain before she just snapped. “We need to go *now*. If we can’t find him, those soldiers I saw not a *minute* ago will be up here.”

The poet was surprisingly calm, although slightly agitated. He probably knew that they would find nothing. He was always the smarter one of the bunch. However, standing around wasn’t such a good idea.

There was a burning flame in the pit of his stomach as what seemed to be a small troupe of men in yellow armour came up with their spears and flames and swords and blood. They quickly surrounded the bunch, poking and jabbing at them. The man tried fruitlessly to reason with them, to no avail. Even as the sharp twigs and branches scratched his arms, he didn’t move, watching with wide eyes.

The reasoning turned to shout. Even the poet seemed to have trouble keeping calm. The lady just seemed mad. The man was terrified. A second of confusion pierced both sides, before the leader of the soldiers, maybe their general snapped back at them, almost accusingly. Defensively, he accused them back of starting the wildfire that burned down the village, and his soldiers seemed to lap up the words like wolves. His head started to pound as a loud cry echoed through the mountains, followed by the clang of metal.

The fire in his stomach seemed to grow into a wildfire.

The ground roared as boulders and rocks shifted, breaking forth creatures with glowing eyes and mouths of fire. Slowly picking themselves off the ground with the screams of men filling the air as they stepped over the now lifeless bodies. A small anxious boy followed them as pieces of tattered rags and clothing and linen dripped on the floor, only to be swallowed up like flames. The skeletal bodies seemed to snap into place, filled with life through balls of coloured light for eyes and bodies wreathed in flame and destruction.

Mercilessly they tore into the soldiers, screams on both sides with one anger, and the other terror. The boy just stumbled to the bodies, looking on in grief as he collapsed beside them. As the small hands gripped fabric, the ground seemed to open up anew, but more slowly this time. The bodies seemed to freeze up and stiffen in place as the boy stumbled backwards, eyes glazed over in terror as he landed backwards.

Just as the skeletal monsters finished, the sounds of cracking filled the air as bones fit into place, forming more skeletons with blazing eyes and bodies of fire. The screams had long since faded, now leaving almost everyone on the mountain dead and the quiet sizzling of flames and bodies. The creatures just looked towards him expectantly, waiting for new orders almost desperately. The boy dully spared them an anxious glance that soon just turned to exhaustion, as he watched the darkness shift and form into something new. The newly formed creations slowly stiffened up once again, a slideshow of blue eyes matching the tattered rags and basket of one, the jaws ablaze matching a hairpin with flowers, and the final one, simply staring at him with desperation and fear.

There was the sound of footsteps as the boy ran off down the mountain, followed by the creaking of stone as the mountains swallowed bone up once again. He ran towards a distant screaming, leaving nothing but bodies in his wake.

As the blood on the mountain dried overnight, the sun blazed it's way across the sky and colouring the rock an odd pale brown. Over time the bodies decayed, fusing with rock and plant alike, but coloured the peak differently from others. Although the village and the fires decayed and melted away with time as did the war, the magic didn't, encapsulating bones within rock for decades to come.

Rekindle the Fire in Your Heart

ESF Island School, Teahan, Anakin – 15

The explorer heaves out a triumphant breath as she reaches the peak of the largely undiscovered and secluded mountain.

Before Huang Ruiying knew it, she had been greeted with a peculiar sight, and what was there was vastly different from the rumours. However, she was not going to falter. She had come here looking for this prized treasure, and she would not be stopped this far.

She firmly places one of her hands on the pedestal, and with the other hand starts to flip the first page of the journal.

He steadies his step on the perilous mountain. From here, he can barely see the intricacies that nature put on sight to see. Even so, the breathtaking landscape nearly distracts him for a split second, where he's almost bewitched by the number of plants, trees and flowers surrounding him. He walks rhythmically up the cobblestone steps, and the sound of his footsteps reverberate into the distance.

One, two. One, two. One, two.

Here, well-renowned throughout the entirety of China, the 8th century Huangshan Mountains were a place of indescribable and immaculate beauty.

There, on the mountaintop that Prince Li Jingyi lies on that waning evening, summer's last traces are slowly fading away, just as the sun's silhouette disappears above the horizon. The sea of white, picturesque clouds and the clear skies are starting to dissipate into the distance, signalling the coming of autumn. The young and fresh pine trees had already started losing their lush green colour, instead favouring and changing into the bumblebee yellows and apple reds with the changing climate. Even the singsong birds were not as chirpy as before, growing wary of the cooler temperatures and harsher environment. Nonetheless, Prince Jingyi tried his best to enjoy the last fleeting moments of summer and his minimal restriction, with a view that overlooked the entirety of the Huangshan mountains. Yet, the sky's stars seemed too shy to come out on that very day, leaving an offbeat hollowness to the near-perfect environment.

Moments like these were few and far between for a 17-year-old Prince. Jingyi wondered to himself about his looming future. His 18th birthday was fast approaching, which meant he was almost of age to ascend to the throne. And yet, all he had done was ignore reality further and further, much to the dismay of his father, the Emperor of the area he lived in. It was like the entire world was spinning around him, and he had lost his footing, without a single thing for him to hold onto.

It was then when the soon to be 18 year old had taken out his pocket notebook and began to voice out his inner turmoil on paper. He took notice of the captivating sights and sounds that never seemed to grow old on the peak and took a deep breath. It was always here that he could clear out his mind and just focus on what he loved doing the most. It was here that he was free from all the unasked burdens and unrealistic expectations that he had been forced on him for as long as he had known. His escape into the world of poetry was freeing and limitless, like how the sky seems to stretch on infinitely into the distance, never fully satisfying one's curiosity. Writing poetry was the key that let him escape his stifling and controlling life whenever it was too much to handle. Naturally, he felt his spirits lift up from the stupor from before. He knew deep down in his heart that it was *the* thing that he was destined for and always sought, but for the moment, he pushed those thoughts aside and let his passion dim to a candlelight's flame.

He wondered if he could ever escape the confines of his father and royalty. All he had dreamed of as a little child was to explore the beautiful world beyond where he had been permitted to go.

Unknowingly, Liu Qiwei, the Prince's close friend, had wandered into what was deemed their spot in the entire area. Being his own and only friend from childhood, they had been through thick and thin together, and at times it felt like the two of them were pitted against the entire world. Aiming to surprise his childhood friend, he creeps up to Jingyi, and with a loud shriek, manages to startle him.

Jingyi had fallen off his feet, with his notebook flinging out of his hands, tumbling onto the grass. It elicits a loud and resounding laugh from Qiwei, and Jingyi instantly recognises who it is.

After regaining his composure, Jingyi takes a few deep breaths before saying, "What on earth are you doing here, surprising me like that?"

"Gee, you're not gonna even say hello to me or ask what I've been doing? Che. What a friend you are. I'm not ALWAYS here to deliver what your father wants to say." Qiwei snarkily replies.

"You know that I know that." Jingyi says, "I wonder what he said this time. Oh! I just got an idea. Maybe he wants me to finally leave the palace for good, but doesn't know how to deliver the news! That would be a dream come true. Who am I kidding, that'll never happen."

But all he gets in return is odd silence, uncharacteristic of his usually loud and over the top friend. He turns to face him, and what he sees startles him.

In a concerned gaze, his friend cups Jingyi's hand and lightly sighs.

"He's looking for you. Your father."

Jingyi's face instantly loses its colour. Jingyi seldom ever met with his father, but he could smell danger from a mile away. Qiwei picks up the instant change in mood and tries his best to cheer him up.

"Now, now. We can just relax here a bit longer without him knowing. I'm sure you'll make it out of it." he retorts.

With that, Jingyi gazes out forlornly into the distance, appreciating his last few moments up here on the top of the mountains. His dream flashes briefly in his mind, giving him a rush of emotions as he mentally prepares himself for the inevitable encounter. He begins to stand up, and chooses to take the long route back to the godforsaken palace.

Unbeknownst to him, Qiwei's eyes linger for a second on the Prince's features, before he jolts back to his senses, following the Prince.

The first thing the Prince notices when he enters the palace is the deafening silence. His footsteps suddenly feel as heavy as a hundred ton of bricks, as the *click-clacks* of his shoes loudly reveal his presence in the royal hallway. Usually not one to pay attention to the palaces' interior, the embellished pillars now icily gaze towards him, as he nears the door to the emperor's throne room. He wonders to himself, *how unusual*, as the halls were typically never this silent.

As he steps in, his eyes meet the piercing stare of the Emperor. He's sat at the very end of the room, on a large golden-plaid throne, with a frigid aura emanating. The Prince had tried to imagine how the situation would unfold in his head over and over again, but that did nothing to appease his anxiety. His father was ice-cold and apathetic, and he knew he had really angered him this time.

The Prince stood as tall as he could make himself be, attempting to look unfazed on his exterior. However, his father's knowing eyes cut through his flimsy shield of faux confidence.

"Li Jingyi, do you know why I've asked your little friend to call you here?"

"Yes, Father."

“And Li Jingyi, must I remind you again of your obligations?”

“No, Father.”

But the Prince’s answer clearly doesn’t satisfy the emperor, as he rises up to see his son face to face. One of the emperor’s servants to his right stumbles and trembles ever so slightly and the Prince catches a glimpse of pure fear in his eyes.

“Then, why does this not seem to be the case?” He doesn’t reply, and it only infuriates the Emperor more. The Emperor then starts to yell. “I’ve tried so very hard to craft you into the perfect prince of this kingdom. From the moment you were born, I’ve only done the very best for you. I’ve tried so hard to make you the perfect heir. Do you know how much effort and how times I’ve tried to make you and mould you into the perfect ruler?”

“But Father—”

“Who taught you to reply so rudely like that? I can’t believe you would dare speak back to me, after everything I’ve done. What more can I do? Is giving you lessons all day not enough? Is having a guard follow you not enough? You’ve only rejected my grateful help over and over again. A son defying his father – the very thought of it makes me sick to my stomach. I can’t believe you’re my son. A failure like you should have never been considered Prince. Get out of my sight, right this instant.”

He looks away, leaving his last words hanging in the air. He had felt akin to a famous artists’ failed sculpture at that moment, forgotten by history, left to collect dust in an old antique collectors house. His father sensed Jingyi’s uncomfortableness and picked up on his internal feelings, smirking on the inside.

Before he leaves to exit, his father utters one last phrase, “Only come back once you learn how to be a real prince.”

But, a part of Jingyi had awakened. What his father didn’t know was he was not defeated, and the long-gone fire in his heart had already begun to relight before their very encounter.

Within the confines of the palace, his isolated bedroom was always a safe haven for whenever he fought with his father.

His back pocketed journal instinctively called out to him, and he found himself oddly in a similar situation to not too long ago. But by now, the sky had turned dark, and it was painted with thousands of stars smeared across a purple-orange canvas. Suddenly, his life and worries felt so minuscule in the grand scheme of things, and his urge to explore even a fraction of it became overwhelming. Only the beautiful sights and nature of the Huangshan mountains were friendly to him when he was all alone.

Letting his words flow out onto paper, his soul began to recover from what had just transpired.

Before he knew it, he had already purged everything out of his system. With his mind cleared up, he began to finally piece together how his life had been forcefully moulded from the moment he was born. From the incessant duties to the controlling curfews, he had never truly realised his father’s wicked ways.

Now, with newfound confidence, Jingyi was going to escape. He was going to escape into the greater, outer world, and do what he always wanted to do: *become a poet*.

He hastens his steps towards his room. Without a second thought or any time to hesitate, he began to look for anything to bring with him. To fully leave his past behind, he decided to only pack his necessities. He even excluded his very own notebook filled with his own works. As much as he treasured it, he knew deep down that he would never move on with it. He would leave all vestiges of his past life behind, and it would all start tomorrow morning. He told himself that he would only endure this for one more night, for he would no longer be a bird caged by its master.

Just then, a resounding knock brought him back to his senses. Jingyi thought he was about to be caught in the act of his escape, but is instead met with a small smile by Qiwei.

“What happened?” he softly inquires.

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Tomorrow. I’m going to finally do it tomorrow.” Jingyi internally curses himself for telling him so early.

Not quite catching on, he inches closer to the bed Jingyi is sitting on and asks him, “Tomorrow? What’re you going to do?”

He silently mutters to himself a small *please don’t hate me for this*, then whispers a hushed, “I’m sorry. I’m leaving. By myself. I’m going to go up to my dad and tell him I’m leaving for good. I won’t let him control me anymore.”

Oh.

The revelation didn’t particularly surprise him. In fact, Qiwei saw it coming. Jingyi had mentioned in passing a multitude of times about his qualms and unhappiness of his life. Even still, he felt a sense of inexplicable emptiness residing in his heart. He pushed his feelings aside, but the lack of response seemed to make Jingyi feel worse. He hurriedly replied before he could get the wrong idea.

“Okay. It’s okay. It’s okay. I’ve known you long enough to know what’s best for you, so don’t think I’m mad.” Qiwei chuckles to himself, “Actually, I’m quite proud of you. You’ve really come a long way, huh?”

A bright grin beams across Jingyi’s face.

“I guess so.”

Sensing Jingyi’s unwillingness to speak any further, Qiwei walks and sits on the porch next to an open window. He motions the Prince to sit next to him. They both stare out into the distance, with a good view of the ethereal and distinct pine trees far away, on the barely visibly secluded peak. Welcomed by the ambience of the night, they fall into a comfortable silence, even with unsaid words lingering in the air.

Qiwei lays his head on Jingyi’s shoulder, and before he knew it, Qiwei had dozed off. Jingyi turned to look at him with a solemn look and tight-lipped smile. He had then hugged him like there was no tomorrow, not before whispering, *I’ll come back for you someday*.

He pauses and takes one look back into his room. Any last bit of resistance to his escape was not to be found.

He was going to do it. There was no turning back now.

Steps no longer shaky, and with a renewed mind, Prince Jingyi strides in the direction of the throne room. There were a couple of people hanging around outside the room, whose mouths were open in shock when they saw the Prince with his head high, and a small pouch of belongings in tow.

His father first doesn’t even notice his presence, but he’s slightly taken aback once he does. He begins to say, “Ah! Have you come to your senses? I always knew you’d come through, my dear son. You’re awfully early today, but fret not, we can start the lessons—” before being cut off by a stark, loud voice.

“I’m done.”

“You’re done? I don’t understand. What do you mean by—”

“I’m done, Father. I’m done with your sick and twisted ways. I’m no longer going to listen to what you want any more, or am I going to just let you control every aspect of my life. I’m so sick and tired of being so pliant towards you. I would go on for days, but I know someone like you would never listen. I won’t waste any more time with you in my life. You’re undeserving of a proper goodbye, so here are the last words you’ll ever hear from me: I hope I never see you again.”

He storms out, letting his wings finally spread out wide and the fire in his heart burn the brightest, as he now finally ventures into a better life.

Somehow, after a stretch of time, Qiwei ends up back on the mountaintop, with Jingyi’s journal and a notebook filled with poems, along with his own. Starting to feel sentimental, he opts to begin to set up what he came here to do instead of letting his thoughts run amok.

He managed to place everything as he thought Jingyi would like it, from the way it oversaw the view with the always peculiar-looking and ever-changing pine trees, or how the sky seemed to have free reign over here.

He let a small smile creep onto his face as he closed his eyes on the wistful peak, hoping deep down, that the Prince, Jingyi, would one day return his promise.

“I’ll be waiting, right here.”

The explorer reaches the last page. She discovers that behind it, all along, contained books of poetry and thoughts, long gone undocumented for centuries, as well as notebooks detailing two lives. She knew she had to leave these personal treasures here, and respect the wishes and words of what was written. Previous explorers had done as much, so she knew it was only right to mend the ancient books. Although the pine trees were withering, their hundreds and hundreds of years of being well-kept retained the image on the top of this mountain. It gave a picture as if it was a moment frozen in time, to be cherished for all those who came before her, and all those who came after.

As Ruiying begins to pack her things to leave, she takes one last look at the peak. In the centre, a single journal with extra notebooks lay on a stone pedestal, neatly put back by herself.

Finally turning to leave, she lets herself be engrossed by the evening sky. As the sky shifts into nighttime, the stars shine ever so brightly. The constellations lit up on the sky are proudly dancing, swerving in and out of each other, exuding playful confidence for their display that night. Ruiying turns to look back on the secluded peak. They cheer her on as another explorer finds out the truth behind a long-forgotten Prince and his partner, revealing the true secret of the place and the isolated mountain.

For she now knew that she too had to listen to her truth and rekindle the fire in her heart, no matter what that would take.

The Emperor's Poet

ESF Island School, Yuen, Nicole – 15

I was eighteen, my grandfather's hand resting gently on my shoulder. My hands rested at my stomach, tight with nervousness. My gaze followed the outstretched crimson carpet in front of me, the metallic soldiers on either side, and finally the glorious throne that stood tall on the other end. On top of it sat Emperor Huang, his face not yet reddened, his belly not yet sagging like it is today.

"Master Chen, what is your request?"

His voice was unwavering and firm. He was perfectly courteous and respectful, but his addressing my grandfather had caused me to shrink further than I already had. My grandfather, however, held his head high and spoke.

"The honourable Emperor Huang may view this as an unusual request, but should you fulfill it, there will not be a day where you regret doing so."

The emperor raised his eyebrows. "Name it."

"I ask that you instil my granddaughter as your court poet."

Armour clattered as the soldiers drew their spears. It was a blasphemous request, even I understood that. Girls were things that were meant to be seen, whether in bed or at the arm of the king, and not heard.

The emperor dismissed the spears with a wave of his hand, but his brows furrowed in disbelief.

"Master Chen, I have much respect for you, but have you gone mad? You expect me to appoint a mere girl to my courts? Can she even read?"

"Your Majesty, I have educated her just as I educated you."

A hush ascended over the throne room. What over, I was unsure. I did not know which part was more astonishing, the claim that a girl had been educated at all, that a man had taken the time to waste his knowledge on a girl, or that there was someone who received education that rivaled the emperor's own.

The emperor remained unshaken. "That is a bold claim, Master, but because you have taught me to this standard, I will entertain you. What is your granddaughter's name?"

At this point, my grandfather squeezed my hand and nudged me forward. "Go on."

I wobbled forward, my clammy hands clasped together at my stomach. "Honourable Emperor Huang, I am Chen Bao An. It is an honour to be on your court today." My voice tinged with unconfidence.

Emperor Huang's severe face did not change. "Read one of your poems for me."

I stopped short. I did not prepare more. I had not expected to even have to introduce myself, let alone to have my poetry be heard. Truthfully, I had not expected to be here this long, still alive and still unseized. I looked back slightly, not knowing what to do. My grandfather looked back at me, his eyes smiling, his nod encouraging.

I inhaled deeply and began. My words spun tales of the evergreen Huangshan Mountains, the ones this very palace ruled. I sang of their ever-viridescent valleys, rolling endlessly into the horizon. I spoke of the melodic harmony crafted by the rustling leaves and whistling forests. I described the villagers, my neighbours, and their sincerity and ceaseless perseverance. I had not written down anything prior, yet when I tried to articulate the love and pride I held for this land, the words filled my mouth and spilled out, like a song pours out of a bird.

When I finished, I bowed. There was no clapping; there was no praise. But when I stood upright, the emperor no longer held prejudice and doubt in his eyes; instead, there was a scintillating warmth in his eyes, one that promised more than a mere dismissal from his courts.

“Your lexical choice was sloppy,” he said. My heart dropped. Had I been wrong? “But you show far more promise than any man your age, maybe even more so than men older than yourself.”

The iron-clad soldiers bristled. I myself knew the impossibility of this occurrence. Never before had a woman been spoken of more highly than a man. Both pride and fear inflated in my chest, and gratitude for my grandfather’s belief in me tripled tenfold.

“Very well, Master Chen. Your granddaughter has proven herself to be worthy of a position in my courts as a scholar. She will learn from the greatest intellectuals alongside the other boys, and one day, she will be our nation’s greatest poet.”

—

I spent my first years as an adult as a student in the Huangshan Courts. I woke up before the sky cleared into light azure. I walked around the court, the rich hues of the royal grounds greeting me at every turn, with my quill and scroll grasped tightly between my fingers. When the dawn broke, I began my so-called ‘lessons’ with Master Li, who had lacked the impartiality and wisdom my grandfather held. He would usually read what I wrote, wave it off, and go to teach the other boys. They, in turn, snickered and laughed. I was not bothered in the slightest. They had been ordered not to touch me, and I was able to learn from a much better teacher. After Master Li dismissed us, the boys would frolick off to play *sanguoqi*. I, on the other hand, snuck away to my grandfather’s quarters, where he would read over my poetry, tut at what he thought was written badly, and make corrections with me until he deemed the poem adequate. I would then tiptoe back to my own quarters, the beautiful poem worked on by my grandfather and myself rolled up tightly in my arms, and read it over and over again until it was time for dinner. I think back now, and I am completely and utterly sure that those were the best years of my life.

Emperor Huang evaluated us every full moon. We would present our best poems before him, and he would hear them, before deciding who was no longer worthy of their title as a royal scholar. Master Li did his best to allow his students to shine, however his teachings, no matter how focused he was on the boys, fell short in comparison to my grandfather’s. After five years of seeing my male counterparts diminish before my eyes, I was the last poetry scholar.

“I was right,” Emperor Huang said at the end of my last evaluation. “There will be no finer poet in all the land.”

I blushed profusely, bowing my head low to hide the deep crimson that bloomed on my face. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

“I think it is time,” Emperor Huang said.

“What for, your Majesty?”

“That you are named the Emperor’s Poet.”

Even though I was the last one in that room, even though there could physically be no one else, the proposal still shocked me.

“B—but your Majesty, I am a girl, and I am still young—”

“And yet you are already the nation’s most brilliant poet. I cannot begin to imagine how well you will nurture your skill as you mature. And as for your gender, it is time that girls in Huangshan are given a chance.”

I stood there, open-mouthed, gaping like a fish. Emperor Huang ignored it.

“Chen Bao An, you are an extraordinary poet. You will do this nation proud. I hereby name you the official Emperor’s Poet.”

—

Almost immediately, my good fortune was plagued.

I had begun weaving tales of waterlilies and sparrows, of clouds and skies. The Huangshan I depicted was the truest form of it, the vibrant hues of it painting my words and poems. I would share these with my grandfather, who scrutinised them just as closely as he had when I was a scholar. When I told him I was the Emperor’s Poet, he only said ‘And I knew you would be.’

Unfortunately, the omnipresent war was looming closer. This time, it was Wanling that threatened to spill over our tranquil mountains with their spikes and swords. I knew close to nothing about Wanling and their kingdom, but their coming tinted my Huangshan with dark and murky colours, and it darkened Emperor Huang’s mood even more so.

It was a slow descent into insanity. It started as a glass of *huangjiu* during the evenings where he would call me into the throne room to deliver a new poem. He would swirl it elegantly, the brown fracturing into different shades of cedar and hickory. As the clip-clop of the Wanling horses grew closer, Emperor Huang was responsible for developing more and more war strategies. Every war meeting with the army generals called for alcohol, some stronger than others. By the time I joined their meetings when they wanted a break, the emperor and the army generals were often already red-faced and oblivious.

When the Wanling soldiers began flooding into Huangshan, Emperor Huang grew unpredictable and erratic. He had two jugs in his throne room, one to hold the *huangjiu* he was currently drinking, the other to shove in the hands of a servant as he barked at them to go fetch more alcohol. I would then open my mouth to begin, only to instantly have my poetry be criticised. His drunk comments were often lewd, unnecessary, and most of all, completely unlike the just emperor I knew only ten months prior.

“Come on, why is today’s poem so boring? I didn’t make a girl my poet just for it to amount to nothing.”

“You should just tear that one apart. Why are you so useless?”

And the one that stung most of all, “I should have just bedded you when I had the chance.”

It was painful, seeing a man who had once only needed a wave of his hand to command an entire group of soldiers, who had seen through the prejudices of the world, who had made history by choosing talent over tradition, bow down to alcohol’s tyranny. I ached, and I often expressed this to my grandfather.

One night, after an especially alarming night, I meekly tip-toed to my grandfather’s room. He lit a candle, and invited me onto the floor with him.

“Come, sit, Bao An. What do you want to talk about?”

I blushed, abashed. “I’m still worried about Emperor Huang.”

My grandfather chuckled. His eyes crinkled at the sides, like leaves during autumn. “Why?”

“I understand he’s probably just drunk out of his mind but... I don’t know, he says he should’ve just slept with me when he had the chance.”

The kindness in my grandfather’s eyes blazed alight into fury. “What did he say now?”

I retreated slightly. “It’s nothing—”

My grandfather, in his aged state, had risen to his feet. “That won’t do. I’ll have to talk to him.”

“Please don’t—”

It was futile. He had already lifted the paper screen, and was headed in the direction of the throne room.

I wish I had stopped him.

I waited in that room, my skin prickling. Emperor Huang had been drinking immensely. It was the kind of drinking that made him egotistic and easily agitated all at once. I was unsure so as to whether I wanted time to go slower so I would not have to see what happened or whether I wanted it to go faster so I would not have to be tortured like this.

When the moon had risen high in the hard black sky, Emperor Huang called me to the throne room. With knocking knees, I stood up and trembled all the way to the room. It was the most treacherous journey I had ever taken. I just needed to know that my grandfather was safe, that he had not harmed my grandfather in his alcoholic state.

I heard him before I saw him. I still hear him now.

The guttural moaning echoed into the courtyard. I recognised the sounds of my grandfather’s agony, each scream burrowing deeper and deeper into my skin. I quickened my pace. I had to see if he was okay. I had to.

I arrived too late.

My grandfather was on the floor, a cross cut into his stomach, the emperor standing on top of him with a red-glistening knife in his hand. My grandfather wrapped a hand around the wound, still groaning and choking. His mouth foamed with crimson.

But when he saw me, his eyes still lit up.

“Grandfather!”

“Don’t come closer.” Emperor Huang warned, pointing the dagger at me. “I heard you were complaining about me.”

I felt my cheeks becoming wet, though I did not remember crying. “Yes, it’s true, I was complaining, kill me, kill me and not him, I beg you.”

My grandfather choked out three words: “Don’t. You. Dare.”

The emperor pointed the weapon back at my grandfather. “Shut up.” he hissed, kicking my grandfather in the back. “Old man trying to accuse me of treating a girl badly. Like I don’t have the right to.”

“Please, stop.” I got on my knees, the bloody floor staining my purple tunic. “Please.”

His head was flushed. With alcohol or rage? Probably both. “You need to learn your place, little girl. It is under me. You work to entertain ME!” he roared, the words reverberating all around me.

I nodded, my vision going blurry. “Yes, yes! I pledge allegiance to you, and to you only!” I sobbed. Anything, anything that would let him leave my grandfather alone long enough for me to be able to carry him to my room.

For a second I thought that he might step away and be reasonable. There was a look, of sobriety, of logic, of remorse. I prayed for it to last. I stayed on my knees, looking up at him through glassy tears.

“Too late. I need to teach you a lesson.” he snarled.

The silver glinted, and then disappeared into my grandfather’s stomach.

I wailed. The emperor collapsed in his throne, the alcohol probably giving way to his fainting. I rushed to my grandfather’s side, clutching his dying hand in my own bloody one, the tears coursing down my cheeks. He grasped my hand with what strength he could muster, and coughed. Burgundy streamed out of his mouth.

“It’s not your fault. I love you, Bao An. I always will.”

I sobbed and sobbed, holding on as my grandfather slipped through my fingertips.

—

I do not know how long I was on the floor for. I think I remember getting jostled back to my room by two guards. I am not sure.

I was numb. The emperor called me to his throne room the next day, as if nothing happened. He was still drunk. I delivered my poem, my voice void of emotion. He slung his list of crude insults at me. I went back to my quarters.

I remained in that state for months. The war worsened around me. I watched as girls younger than I had been when I first came begin to enter the king’s chambers, frightened and anxious, and leaving numb and void of emotion. I watched as the emperor boasted about his conquests, both murderous and sexual. I did nothing. I could do nothing.

A period of time passed. I had been preparing to deliver that day’s poem. It was the classic the—trees—are—green—and—the—flowers—are—pink poem. The same thing I had been doing for months. I wrote, my brush’s wishy—washy strokes meaning nothing to me.

“Your poetry is so beautiful.”

I was startled, and then I was angry. “Who are you?”

I turned fully around, and instantly regretted my actions. I recognise now that was the first emotion I had properly felt since my grandfather’s death. “You’re one of Emperor Huang’s... Yes, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise.”

The girl looked ashamed. “Sorry— my eunuch just abandoned me for a second so I wanted to come see.”

I looked properly at her. Her face was young. Even through the horrific things she endured, a naive and curious glow still remained in her eyes. She still held hope in her small, youthful hands, and she still looked forward to a brighter future.

“Thank you. It means a lot. Please, come visit me anytime you want.”

That night, I went out to be under the moonlight, my scroll and brush clutched in my hands like they were many years ago. I sat on the ground, my scroll on a slab of rock. I began to write.

I allowed myself to feel it. I felt the loss of my grandfather trickle from my heart, to my hand, to my brush. I felt my own guilt gush out onto the paper. Most of all, I let the fury, the anger, the hatred I felt towards the emperor out onto the scroll. I called him a swine, I called him a degenerate, I called him stupid. It was risky and grounds for execution. But when I finished, I rolled it up and clasped it to my chest, silently crying tears of relief.

I am not finished. But I know what I am. I am not just a girl. I am not the Emperor's Poet. I am my own person. I am Chen Bao An.

凤凰山 Phoenix Mountain

ESF King George V School, Yu, Cheyenne – 14

Prologue

“It’s going to be ok.” A meaningless phrase meant to bring comfort to children, to give them a sense of security and peace. But as those children grow up, they realize that, more often than not, it’s not going to be okay.

12 years ago

I remember being 4 years old, when my mother had woken me up, her eyes shining with hope and happiness. I remember those same eyes, welling up and crying rivulets of tears down her face, while I asked “What’s wrong, mommy? Where’s daddy?”. I remember the elders from the village trying to pull me away, then carrying me when I wouldn’t leave my mother’s side. They took me to another room and locked the door while I cried, kicked and screamed at the door. They left me alone for a while, listening while my screams turned to sobs, sobs to small snivels, then utter silence.

I remember being so confused, so frustrated, and feeling all alone in the small white room. No one came to collect me until the next morning, when they finally took me to my mother. That’s when they told me. My mother held my hand in hers, smiling through tears and telling me it was going to be okay. But it wasn’t ok. They told me that my father was dead. That dying in a war was the most honorable thing in the world. That he was in heaven now, with all of our ancestors in the sky. But there is nothing, absolutely nothing you can say to a child who lost their father to console them. They left me there, crying in my mother’s arms for what seemed like an eternity. They stood next to us, ever so still in their white robes giving us time to grieve. It was only then when my tears had finally subsided and the only sounds left were those of crickets on the windowsill. I remember looking at them, wondering if they knew how my world had been completely and utterly shattered.

Part 1

People ask why I always go to the mountains. Sometimes, if they had heard of my family, they would assume it was because of my father. He had loved staying there for hours on end, admiring the ever-green trees and great oaks. And for the most part, they were right. But what they didn’t know was that my father had built a cabin in the woods, many moons ago. It was in that cabin where he had built a small apothecary of sorts, with books full of spells and potions. It was there, 3 miles into the woods, where he had spent hours upon hours studying witchcraft. Out of the eight types of magic, my father had mastered three, which in itself was no easy feat.

Magic, for humans, was too easy to mess up and dangerously so. One wrong syllable and your intestines could be splattered across the walls. More than once I had overlooked a seemingly insignificant detail and ended up in searing pain for my ignorance. It was the most problematic thing about my human nature, the fact that we were designed to be flawed, to always get something wrong. It was crucial in the magic arts that everything was completely and utterly perfect. Even so, magic was more or less just basic science, with a few slight modifications. Once you got the basics down, all it came down to was precision and accuracy. That was why I had been so careful, so meticulous when I had made the necrophone. Necrophones were incredibly hard to come by, and where I was, it would be almost impossible. So I made my own.

After I discovered his cabin, I studied necromancy, putting all my time and effort into the art of the dead. A few years ago, there was a car crash in the mountains. Funny thing is, the driver had leapt out of the window before the car actually crashed. It had smashed into the great oak right next to the cabin, nearly knocking the poor tree over. I had rummaged through the wreckage late at night, searching for anything that might be of use and taken it back to shed. The nuts and bolts had been extremely useful for my various projects over the years, which largely consisted of failed attempts at necrophones.

Once, I had tried to repair the wreckage, but the car had fallen apart after barely a second, as if it were in a cartoon. After that, I never tried to fix it again. Instead I used whatever I could find to make necrophones – 23 of them, to be exact. The glass for the necrophones had come from the windows of the car, melted and crafted into the husks of light bulbs. Any metal parts had come from the hood of the car, after I had scraped away the paint and applied a fresh coat of polish. The wood was from the fallen oak the car had crashed into, sawed and filed into perfection. Afterwards, I had carved runes onto the surface, turning the contraption into a speaker for the dead. The only thing left was the animal skull. Of course, I had put it off for years, as I knew that this would taint my soul.

Out of all the necromancy books I had read, each and every one of them stated, very clearly, that whoever wished to use the necrophone needed to kill an animal, even a small one, and then (after an extensive and irritable process) place the skull within the necrophone. Subsequently, all the necromancer then needed to do was say an incantation and the name of the person they wished to talk to. Of course, there was always a warning that followed, more or less implying that intentionally killing the animal would result in a tainted soul, abhorrent and loathsome. But to me, even just hearing my father for a split-second would be worth it. Either way, as long as I rectified my actions, I would still get into heaven.

Part 2 – Present day

When I wake up, the sun hangs low in the sky, giving off an ambient glow. The sun's rays fell upon the trees, illuminating the forest with a warm light. This kind of weather was perfect, as it gave a false sense of safety to humans and animals alike. I smiled as I sat down on the tree stump, careful not to make a single sound. Any noise would alert prey of my existence. So I sat, waiting for the right moment to strike. Within a few minutes, a small, ochre brown squirrel skittered past, gnawing on some sort of nut. I drew my bow. It was a perfect shot, hitting the creature square in the eye. As I walked to collect its carcass, I saw that it was frozen in shock, motionless and terrified. I walked back to the cabin, an uneasy feeling settling in my chest, squirrel in hand, bloody arrow in the other. Now, the critter had dropped the nut; instead it clinged onto my index finger, desperate for warmth and security. I stroked its small head, whispering words of regret as it died in my open palm. It looked as though it could have been sleeping.

The door creaks open as I step into the cabin. I set down the bow and arrows, but kept holding the squirrel in my palm. I sat down on the desk and started to work, making tiny but precise cuts around the skull. In less than a minute, I had the skull out, the body still intact. Using tweezers, I then pulled out what seemed to be the brain, and set it aside in the empty head. As soon as that was done, I took the tiny coffin I had made earlier and placed the corpse inside, all whilst saying prayers from the bible, from Buddha, and anything that might express how truly sorry I was. Of course, I then went outside to give it a proper funeral, right before placing it in the miniscule grave. I had even made a headstone to mark the place where the squirrel lay, engraved with the words "Thank you" and "Squirrel" beneath it.

I turned the tap, letting the water flow over the diminutive skull. The water ran in between the grooves and cracks of the skull, reaching even the farthest places. I thought about erosion, and how, given enough time, this skull could be reduced to dust. It was a depressing thought that even the hardest and toughest things wore down with time. Once I deemed it clean enough, I dried it and left it by the Bunsen burner, where flame would expel any water left.

After a while, I got up and turned the burner off. The latch on the necrophone opened easily, letting me place the skull amid two coils of wire. The lightbulb flickered, then lit up brightly; it was ready. "William wong" I said, clearly pronouncing each syllable. It flickered again. The next thing I spoke was "Ember wong". My name. The necromancy book had given specific instructions, to state who you wanted to see and who you were. It flickered a third time. Then I heard my father's voice. "Daughter." He said, his voice deep and rumbling. "Dad, it's me." I laughed, wiping away tears of joy that threatened to damage the speaker. "Why did you call me here?" He sounded troubled, as if he were not glad to hear me. "I just wanted to hear you again, dad." I said, still smiling. For the next few hours, my father told me stories, from fairy tales he never got to read me, from the army of his hardships, and most of all, of magic.

Part 3 – Phoenix Mountain

One of the tales was Phoenix Mountain. “Once upon a time, there was a little girl. Just like you”, my father said, laughing as he spoke. “She lived in a village, far far away. It was a beautiful place, filled with lush green fields. Then, one day, there was no rain.” My father paused, as if it were a part of some mystery I was to solve. “It didn’t worry anyone at first, of course, since a few days without rain is nothing to worry about. But soon, the villagers became worried. It had been almost half a year without rain, and all the crops were shrivelled and inedible. ” He paused again, and gave a light, breathy, laugh. “The villagers thought the gods were punishing them, so they prayed and set up altars and did everything they thought would help. Only there was still no rain. ”

“A year passed with no rain. The villagers thought all hope was lost. That is, until a hooded figure showed up in the middle of the night. It turns out that the hooded figure was the little girl at the beginning of the story, who had come back from her study abroad. The villagers told her to go back, to go somewhere other than here. When she asked why, they told her there had been a drought, and that the gods were angry at them. ” “Why don’t you use phoenix tears? She had asked in return. The villagers stared at her, eyes shining with a new hope. And so began the search for phoenix tears. It was a legend, dating long back into chinese history, that phoenix tears would heal anything and everything. If a man on the brink of death could be brought back with the tears, so would a dying mountain, the villagers thought. ”

“Then came another month with no rain and no tears anywhere to be found. The villagers started to doubt, and hopelessness overwhelmed them again. But the girl did not give up. She scoured the mountains with her friends every day, trying her best to find the legendary phoenix. But she did not find it, not for another 8 weeks and 8 days. ” “8 is the luckiest number in chinese culture”, my father explained. “ On that day, she and her friends climbed the mountains as usual, finding nothing at all. But when she got home, her pet bird, whom she had named 笨笨(Ben ben, meaning stupid), suddenly burst into flames. She looked at it in horror, terrified of the fire, but the flames went out just as suddenly as they had appeared. But it was too late for her bird, for the cage now held only a large pile of ashes. Or so she thought. A tear slipped from her cheek and fell onto the ashes, dampening the material. She sat there, mourning the death of her little bird, until a small fowl peeked its head through. It turns out that her little bird had been a phoenix. Her sickly bird was now no longer sickly, but instead majestic, fit as a fiddle.”

“The little bird flew through the open cage and onto her hand, where it cried into her vial. The next day, she poured the tears onto a field of dried wheat while the villagers cheered behind her. It had almost an instantaneous effect on the land, turning everything that was shrivelled and dry into luscious crops. That day, the villagers had a feast, toasting both to the sickly bird and the girl. The End.” My father laughed again, and asked if I enjoyed the story. “Yes!” I answered, grinning from ear to ear. “Do you know what the girl’s name was?” He asked me. I told him I didn’t. “Well, that girl was called Ember. Your namesake.” He said, and I knew he was smiling as he did so. “It is said that the mountain is the center of all magic”, He said, as his voice trailed off at the end. “Bye, Dad” I said, shutting the necrophone off. I laid my head on the pillow and fell asleep.

The next time I opened my eyes, my parents stood in front of me, dressed in white robes and smiling wide. “Hey, sweetie.” My mother said, hugging me tightly. “What’s happening?” I asked, momentarily confused. “It’s alright, sweetheart. Your time on Earth was up, so now you’re here. With us.” My mother replied. “The elders said you died of a sudden cardiac arrest. It’s alright now though. We’re all here, in heaven, as one happy family.” He said, leading me to a group of old ladies. “Here is your great- grandmother, Esther”, He said, introducing them one by one. And for the first time in years, I felt truly happy.

The Storyteller

ESF Sha Tin College, Leung, Bonne – 15

A cough wracked through the boy, who at first glance, didn't seem to resemble much of a boy at all. A walking wraith—not exactly dead but not entirely alive either. The colours of youth had been stripped from him. Shadows marred his pallid skin and a blue tinge had started to discolour his lips; the rose of vitality deigned to bloom on his gaunt cheeks. Disease had found its way to their quaint village, tucked away in a nook within towering mountains. The boy had once fancied them slumbering titans, awakening when their protection was needed. But not even the colossal giants could have kept the insatiate beast of a plague from ravaging their village.

During the day, his family members sat by his side, wearing coverings over their mouths and noses, holding his hand in their cold, gloved ones as if that alone would keep him tethered to Earth. A mixture of pity and fear trailed them like a stench, so much so that often, he feigned repose to avoid their mournful gazes.

It was only his sister whose eyes remained unchanged. They were the same uptilted almond brown, a promise of mischief held in them. Her scathing remarks and pinching fingers remained unaffected too, and while they once irritated him, he found it a relief that not even a malady could deter her sisterly scorn.

When she wasn't rolling her eyes, she spoke only of one person: the Storyteller—a woman who came to young children to bring them solace in the form of stories.

The wisdom of sisters was, apparently, a bottomless well. She spoke grandly of a woman who spun stories like strings of gold and breathed life into tales. She said the Storyteller had the power to weave together the clouds of the sky if only to suit the tales she told.

"The Storyteller is pish posh," he'd muttered, though the ghost of a boyish smile touched his lips inadvertently as he held the little packet of sweets between his hands. When he was still well, he and his sister would frequently raid the kitchens, pillaging through Ma's pots and pans in their hunt for the forbidden jar. The thrill often left their hearts rattling, eyes meeting conspiratorial.

"Must you be so petulant? The Storyteller isn't *pish posh*, you heathen. She's real," she said pragmatically.

"Then why hasn't she come to visit? Any company would be better than your company," he retorted.

Though she wore a mask, he recognised the look of disdain by the way her eyes narrowed. She pinched him. The boy yelped and touched the hurt gingerly, glaring. She continued blithely, lacing her fingers together in her lap, eyes dancing.

"This may come as a surprise to you, but the world isn't at your beck and call, not even if you're..."

Dying.

Unspoken words spoke multitudes as they hung in the air.

"Anyway," she cleared her throat. "The Storyteller comes and goes as she wishes. But do you want to know what *I* heard?" she asked, lowering her voice. Despite himself, he leaned in to hear her secret.

"I heard, she only visits at night, when not even the wind dares sigh nor the sun dare rise. She comes when all is silent, and then in moonlight, she appears."

The boy scoffed. "The last thing I want is for some strange woman to come visit me at night. If I'm going to die—"

"You're not going to die," she snapped, her eyes defiant. For the rest of the evening, the subject of storytellers and irremediable sicknesses were pointedly avoided.

The window by his bed made a maddening screeching noise during the windier nights, but it showed him the most beautiful vistas. The sky was a different painting each night; some nights were decorated with every shade of purple, and other nights, strange shapes could be found in the clouds. He considered his sister's words again, and found comfort in knowing that there could be someone who took special care in weaving together clouds and strands of sky for him.

His sister had long gone now, and the house was quiet. It was the quiet in which secrets were born, whispered and dissipated into the dark. He could hear Da's soft snoring, the rustle of Ma tossing in her sleep. His mother was a harsh woman, tempered only by her husband's smile and her children's love. It was only in the silence of the night that she allowed herself to cry. With nobody but the moon as witness, she'd weep for her son.

But the house leaked. Like the steady drip of rainwater from the leak in the roof, secrets seeped from the walls.

The boy knew, to some extent, his mother was grieving. Though she hadn't quite lost him yet, she had lost the son who had roused laughter at the dinner table with a chopstick up each nostril. The boy that wasn't a ghost.

...

Such was the peculiarity of dreams that one could never quite remember how one came about to be doing whatever manner of whimsical enterprise that the dreamer dreamt up. The boy couldn't recall the events that led him to ride a bird up into the sky, but he took delight in it all the same.

The moon was irradant, so bright that the boy flung a hand before him to shield his eyes from the light. But then they were so high above the clouds that even the moon fell behind them, and before him laid a river of starlight—on opposite banks, the two brightest stars in the sky.

A sudden feeling of trepidation filled the boy. It grasped his heart, squeezing. And just as suddenly, he was falling. Falling back to Earth, past the winking stars and the gentle-gazed moon. Past the clouds, the wisps like caresses on his skin, trying and failing to catch him. He fell—

—and landed jarringly on his bed. He pushed himself up on his elbows glancing about his bedroom rendered silver by the moon.

Between one heartbeat and the next, a woman appeared.

The strangeness of her arrival was characterised only by the fact that, like a dream, the boy couldn't remember how she had taken a seat by his bed; it was as if she had simply materialised from the moonlight that spilled in through the window. To say she was an elderly woman wouldn't have been quite accurate. She was primordial, belonging to a bygone era. Her eyes, however, held the gleam of curiosity, shining with a childlike wonder. Her robes were spun silk, dyed crimson and embroidered with dragons. Serpentine creatures trailed her sleeves glaring with ruby eyes.

"You're the Storyteller," he breathed.

"Yes, I am," she said, the silken cadence of her voice like the hum of a river. "And what story would you like to hear, young one?"

The boy took a moment to consider her question. The odds were that this was but an inexplicable dream brought on by another fever, the Storyteller just a symptom of his sister's words from that afternoon. But...

"Tell me a happy one."

The Storyteller smiled, endearingly though the curve of her smile was tinged with melancholy. Wrinkled hands extended from her robes, fingers moving in fluid motions despite her age. The boy watched entranced as strings of gold—glittering, glowing, gold—grew from her fingertips, weaving together a story, just for him. Within the woven cords, an image appeared: a jagged set of mountains stretching high into the clouds, daring to scrape the sky. The sea of clouds trickled lazily through the ridges, an endless tide of white with no start nor end. Trees stood steadfast against the whispering wind, their leaves dancing to a song only they could hear. Somewhere, a bubbling brook sang as it ran beneath the canopy of the trees, attracting all sorts of strange creatures to drink from its waters.

"Why are you showing me the mountains?" he demanded. He had expected tales from distant lands, filled with mischievous genies or impish sprites, not one that was set in an environment he already knew.

"Not just any mountains, I'm showing you the *Huang Shan*," the woman said. "The Yellow Mountains. Beyond your village lies a great expanse of woodland, filled with all manners of oddities and wonders.

“The mountains themselves are so old that many of the creatures that inhabit them have forgotten their own names,” she said. The image in her hands changed again, revealing a white fox with nine tails, its eyes perturbing for it was humanity that stared back; a strange creature with the body of an ox but the scales of a fish; the glowing eyes of a snake-like creature, coiled in the the darkness of a cave. “*Ling* and *jing* wander the woods, but as you ascend the mountains themselves, things grow stranger. The trees whisper and the grass is said to grant immortality; the fruits sweeter, attracting *shen* from their heavenly palaces to taste them.”

The boy felt a puerile sense of wonder as he looked on, but scowled, remembering himself, as the images rippled, like a reflection in a body of water interrupted by falling rain. “Well, the name is pointless. There’s nothing yellow about those mountains at all.”

“We’ll get to that,” the Storyteller laughed, a sound not so different from a tree rustling in the wind.

“Before the rivers carved up the land and your ancestors settled here; before the nine suns were shot from the sky, and before the Monkey King journeyed across the west, there lived a simple cow herder named *Niu Lang*. This boy had nothing to his name but the dust of his home and the contempt of the brother who raised him. Despite his circumstances, he had nursed his heart into one of gold, shining with kindness and solicitude,” she said. The image in the woven strands changed, this time depicting a smiling boy with a straw hat, unruly hair sticking out beneath it. “He lived a secluded life, but he found company in cows he looked after, one of which could speak, and so the cow herder was content in his simple life.

“One day, the daughters of *Tian Hou* came to bathe in the river nearby. The youngest was the most beautiful. Her hair fell to her waist in a cascade of raven’s feathers. Many a poets have tried and failed to capture the onyx of her gaze, a mirror of the night sky and all the celestial bodies residing within them.

“I am certain that you are familiar with sisterly taunts,” she said, pleased at the slightest quirk to the boy’s lips. “So, you will not be surprised when I tell you that her sisters, played a trick on her, hiding her clothes.

“By the time she had found them, the gates back to *Tian Gong* were already closed, and not even her mother *Tian Hou* could open them again. Her tears of despair brought on rainstorms and floods. *Niu Lang*, disconcerted by the strange occurrence, ventured out to investigate, and finding the weeping daughter sitting on the rocks, offered her shelter from the storm.

“Touched by his kindness, the storms subsided, the skies clearing once more. Not long after, the two fell in love and married. She never revealed her true identity to the cow herder. The only indication of who she had been was her inimitable skill with a loom. She wove the strands from the cocoons of silkworms into fabric that rippled like water and shimmered as if stars were entrapped within the threads for her name was *Zhi Nu*, the weaver girl who spun clouds from her loom.”

The Storyteller’s fingers wove a new image, this time of a young couple, flushed with youth and the vivacity of unmarred love.

“But their happiness was transient. *Tian Hou* was enraged. She thought *Niu Lang* was keeping her daughter prisoner. As punishment, from the Earth rose jagged mountains: tops so high they severed clouds; darkness laying heavy in the abysmal, *yao guai*-infested valleys. It was a labyrinthine horror where even immortals feared to tread.

“*Niu Lang* was condemned to wander the mountains forever, and *Zhi Nu* was brought back to *Tian Gong*, never to see each other again” the Storyteller paused, noticing the boy’s wide-eyed gape. “Or so she thought.

“The cow herder wandered, though nobody knows for how long. The sands of time trickled differently in those mountains. One day, he encountered a wise dragon, with scales of gold and eyes that shone like rubies. Taking pity on him, he snuck into *Tian Gong*, and brought *Zhi Nu* back to Earth. They reunited, and vowed to never again leave each other. They stayed in the mountains, building a palace filled with opulence to rival *Tian Gong*. *Zhi Nu* wove them yellow robes from shafts of sunlight, and so they were heralded the Yellow Emperor and Empress. With time the mountains and its creatures changed, growing benevolent under a reign of peace and prosperity.

“But again,” the Storyteller said ruefully. “Their happiness was transient. *Tian Hou*’s wrath shook the very bones of the lovers’ palatial home when she realised that *Niu Lang* had thwarted her punishment. She turned the dragon who aided him to gold, forevermore standing guard at the gates, immobile. The lovers begged for mercy; *Tian Hou* gave them severance. They became constellations, and she carved a river of stars in the heavens between them so they could never again feel each other’s touch. *Zhi Nu* beseeched her mother to allow her to stay with *Niu Lang* again. *Tian Hou* paused in her fury, heart softened by her daughter’s cries. Remorse filled her heart, so she

promised her daughter: “You will see your beloved again— when the clouds fall like ashes from the sky and when the sea dries, when the stars deign to shine and the sun’s fire has evanesced. Only then, will you see him again.”

“You lied to me!” the boy cried, his features contorting as the image he swiped at dissipated like smoke. “That wasn’t happy at all!” A coughing fit erupted from the boy, eyes stinging though his sickness was not the sole blame for the tears.

“I haven’t finished,” the Storyteller said cautiously as the coughing subsided, reweaving the previous image of the two star-crossed lovers. “Do you know why magpies are a symbol of love?” she asked.

Silence.

“When the two lovers realised how hopeless their situation was, their cries were heard from all four corners of Earth. Calamitous floods and tempestuous storms ravaged Earth, all results of the lovers’ fallen tears. Now, the cow is often an overlooked character in this story. The cow had remained faithful to his old friend, and the pain of watching him despair proved unbearable. So the cow mustered the last of his *chi* and journeyed to Earth, pleading with all of his friends for help. Every animal refused, unwilling to risk the wrath of *Tian Hou*. But it was the magpie,” the Storyteller said, “the small, inconsequential, negligible magpie who was moved by the lovers’ story, and agreed to help them.

“The magpie rallied all her kin and formed a bridge over the river of stars, allowing the two lovers to meet once more. *Niu Lang* wept with the realisation that his old friend, his first friend, had sacrificed himself for him. For although the cow had remained by his side all those years, *Niu Lang* had taken him for granted.

“So you see, it was the cow who allowed the two lovers to meet again, high above the Yellow Mountains they once ruled, at the centre of a bridge formed by magpies. Their love moved even *Tian Hou*, and so she allowed them to meet once a year—one night to embrace each other and remember the cow’s sacrifice.”

The boy sat holding his breath, apprehension written on his face, waiting for more. “That’s it?”

The gold glow of the Storyteller’s woven threads disappeared. “That is the end of the story,” she said, a tentative hand cupped his cheek. “I know it may seem as if the lovers’ situation is helpless, but we can learn much from the story. From the lovers we learn resilience in the face of difficulty, waiting for the day they can reunite once more. From the cow we learn compassion, and in the magpies we learn empathy.

“Don’t push away those who love you,” she whispered. “Be strong in the face of difficulty, and don’t take for granted those who remain by your side through hardship”

The boy closed his eyes, and between one heartbeat and the next, the Storyteller was gone, only her lingering words remaining.

...

Dawn was a warm embrace as the sun roused from its nocturnal slumber. The sounds of roosters calling the hour was followed by bustling activity as his family prepared for the day. Habitually, Ma came into his room to check on him, and was startled to see that he was awake already. She fussed about beside him, tucking the blankets around his shoulders, muttering that he was going to get sicker if he didn’t stay warm.

Though this might have exasperated the boy once, his hand reached for hers as she turned to leave, squeezing. Ma smiled, squeezing back—the loss and yearning in her eyes alleviating infinitesimally—but all the same, she seemed lighter when she left.

Da said goodbye to him on his way to work from the hallway as he always did, unable to come any closer. The boy lifted a hand in farewell.

His sister wandered into his room sometime later, bringing him a steaming bowl of soup and the bitter tasting medicine that the doctors insisted he drink.

“All right you heathen, drink up,” she said, shoving the bowl towards him.

The boy accepted it without his usual protests, but set it in his lap, a familiar smile taking his features.

“You’ll never believe who visited.”

The Unofficial Unearthing of a Passage to the Past

ESF Sha Tin College, Tsang, Benjamin – 15

Suddenly, there was stinging. Scorching. Excruciating. Pain. In the darkness, a light. Writhing, resisting the scathing burn that was everywhere, it lurched out. And emerged into an agonizing, white, hot brightness. It retracted, curling up.

Through the distorted tunnel vision of Dr Castillo's binoculars, he could see virtually nothing. Nothing but mist. Mist. What a strange thing. Droplets of water suspended in the atmosphere. Folding, unraveling, dancing in the mountain valleys. Flaunting its freedom, taunting the insipid creatures held back by the mere laws of physics, haunting those lost in its limitless embrace. Gracefully, the mist teased him. For an instant, it would uncover the path ahead, but in a split second, it would conceal the rupture with swift frivolity.

'Goddamn budget cuts,' he muttered under his breath.

He knew there was no one around but cursing his department's absurd financial situation gave him some satisfaction after his fifteen-hour long numbing flight from Cuba to the middle of China. Typical of CITMA, unable to afford decent field equipment. Fuming, he tossed the binoculars behind him, allowing it to hang on the string around his neck. Engulfed by the heavy moisture that hung in the air, and baked by the blazing afternoon sun, thick beads of sweat streamed down his weathered and wrinkled face, seeping into his eye.

As he widened his eye and wiped it along the sleeve of his shirt, Dr Castor made a grave mistake: he looked down.

Suddenly, he was exceedingly aware of his environment. Pupils dilated. Breathing quickened. Palms perspiring. Between himself and the cold hard ground was one thousand and eight hundred meters, and he felt every single one. Towering trees said to be a thousand years of age which had earlier awed him with their sheer magnitude were but a miniscule green speck on the ground below. A sharp wind whistled in his ear and swung him back and forth like a powerless puppet dangling by a thread. His only lifeline, rusty metal chains sitting around his waist, started to feel brittle and delicate. Shuddering, Dr Castillo took in a breath, wrapped the chains around his waist one more time, and resumed his careful shuffling along the unbelievably narrow ledge that seemed to be on the verge of crumbling upon his every step. For science, he thought. Be brave for the sake of science.

'Zzzzzzz,' just as Castillo stepped off the ledge back onto the main mountain path, an unknown insect whizzed in front of him, circling. Then it disappeared. Castillo's eyes scanned the four corners of his vision, and there it was. Perched on the tip of his nose. Metallic blue wings. A Scolia dubia? Its crimson vertex would say otherwise. Perhaps a Miridae Halticotoma. Yet it possessed a venom sac and a stinger, eliminating it from any species of plant bug. Beautifully ironic, Dr. Castillo thought to himself, how humanity is recklessly destroying the earth, and yet man is left clueless in the presence of nature. Every time his eyes were tempted to dart away, Castillo forced them back to this peculiar, intriguing insect and still, his mind remained blank. It turned, then flashed away. Still grasping the chains that supported him, Dr. Castillo scanned his surroundings, longingly searching for the insect. Realizing that it was gone, he released a sorrowful sigh, then slowly dragged himself up onto the mountain path.

Unhooking his safety chains, Dr. Castillo peered upwards. Upon the canvas that was the sunset sky, shadows crept into the hues of glowing amber, fiery red, and sapphire blue. He stood back expectantly, grateful to be able to fully appreciate the world's descent into darkness. Darkness. It was already sunset! Castillo immediately recalled his conversation with Perez.

'You might not like this, but you're going to have to reach the first summit before dark and set up camp for the night. If you do not, you'll be complete lost,'

He leaned over to Castillo and whispered, 'They say there are creatures that hunt you in the night.'

Dr. Castillo remembered being lost for words.

Then Perez's face erupted into laughter, and he doubled over. 'Man, you don't have to be so tense all the time! I know you're the world's *leading* scientist and all, but you've got to chill out!'

The part about predatory creatures hunting in the night might have been a joke, but Castillo really preferred sleeping soundly rather than trekking Huang Shan in complete darkness. He tightened the straps of his rucksack with a grunt and quickened his pace.

So, what was this middle-aged scientist doing trekking amid the Huang Shan mountains? It all started four months ago. CITMA had sent a satellite into Earth's atmosphere, made to pinpoint substantial natural disasters like wildfires and volcanic eruptions before they took place. Dr Castillo was one of the leading scientists in this project aimed at reducing both human and animal deaths caused by the unpredictability of nature. Only two weeks after the satellite had launched, it had detected unforeseen levels of radiation in China. Other members of his department disregarded these measurements as anomalous errors, but Castillo was determined not to ignore such paranormal levels, and was the sole volunteer sent to the field to find out more.

The light faded. It slithered. Crawled out. Bare, exposed, yet fearless, thrilled...

Starved.

His eyes flew open. One second, he was sound asleep, the next, his heart was pounding in his chest. Rustling. Right outside.

Scrambling, Castillo ripped open his rucksack and plunged his hand in, clawing for his flashlight. Got it. Hunched over, he unzipped the flap of his tent. Swallowing nervously, he grimaced, his throat sandpaper dry. He emerged into the pitch-black world and slowly, the ethereal glow of his flashlight scanned around. In the trees? Nothing. In the grass? Nope. Just as he was about to turn around and retreat to his tent, Castillo's torch revealed something. A clump of crimson. As he advanced, Castillo made out a black hook-like projection protruding from the clump. A beak! As he knelt down, his nose twitched. A wave of metallic odor hit him. The red clump was an animal covered in fresh blood.

Through the night, Dr. Castillo made an elaborate sketch of this poor slaughtered creature. Despaired, he couldn't take his eyes off it. Where its feathers weren't matted with vermilion blood, it had a cream-colored complexion. Its tail was the shape of ball, almost like a curled-up rodent. As his drawing materialized, Castillo realized what it was. It was unmistakable, but at the same time, utterly impossible. Originally, the dodo bird was endemic to the eastern coast of Madagascar, on the other side of the world. What's more, it had been completely extinct for over six hundred years. After covering up the body and going back into his tent, he slipped into his sleeping bag and lay still. He had much to do tomorrow, but Castillo simply could not fall asleep. The image of the bloodied bird was burned into his mind. It had dropped him in a boundless sea of questions and left him there to drown. How was there a dodo bird existing in 1968? What did it prey on? What sort of deadly predator had butchered it?

He jolted awake, eyelids almost stuck together. Forcing them open, Castillo glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock of day two. Carefully, he folded his sleeping bag and placed it into his rucksack, collapsed the tent and took out the Geiger counter. It was time to find what he came for.

Once he switched on the Geiger counter, a tumultuous crackling noise was produced. Turning around in a circle, he started towards the direction in which the crackling was most intense, the direction of the radiation. Though probably thought of as mindless white noise to a layperson, with every click emitted and every change of direction, Castillo was more captivated and appreciative of the meticulous science behind the device. When the detector is exposed to ionizing radiation, the radioactive particles penetrate the Geiger-Muller tube and collide with nearby electrons, building enough charge to create a pulse and therefore the unmistakable click. While he was hiking along the valley path, Castillo imagined the particles periodically colliding, pulsing, clicking; colliding, pulsing, clicking.

Another right turn. Bracing himself, shielding his face as he passed through a never-ending lattice of tree branches, his legs started to tire. Being in his early fifties certainly didn't assist him on this journey, but his curiosity and desire to know the unknown did. He kept going. Finally reaching a clearing, Castillo let himself crumble to the ground. White hot, the afternoon sun shone alone in the sky, as if its unwavering heat had pushed the clouds away. Its glaring light jutted into his vision. The colliding, pulsing and clicking from the Geiger counter now seemed almost numbing. For the last mile, nothing had changed. Constant, repetitive, clicking, of the same tempo.

Suddenly, the crackling escalated into blaring. Something flashed by at the edge of his vision. Castillo jumped to his feet, just in time to catch a glimpse of a scaled bloodred tail. He leaped in the animal's direction, but the blaring quickly diminished into clicking. He turned left, and the blaring resumed. Right or left? He had to decide before he completely lost the creature. Instinctively, he knew whatever animal he saw, it was different. The possibility of discovering a new species overwhelmed, so he mustered up the energy still left in his veins and sprinted after the animal. After running straight through a multitude of tree branches, the creature's tail, always a moment away from disappearing from his sight, led him to the very edge of the mountain. Wooden planks nailed to the side of the cliff formed a surface that looked as though it would collapse under the slightest pressure, yet the animal seemed to glide effortlessly over. Castillo followed. At this point, his breaths were hoarse and heavy, so he was grateful when the creature finally stopped.

Dr. Castillo was completely mesmerized. It was a dragon, a thing of the legends. Breathtaking scales glimmering, luminescent in the sunlight. Silver fins lined its back. Four monstrous, menacing claws were attached to its lean midsection. As it reared its head, Castillo saw golden horns attached to its head. Unhinging its jaw, it revealed a row of razors. Ha! His colleagues who dismissed the radioactive signs were back in Cuba stuck in the labs, and he was here marveling at a dragon. Despite the dragon's grandeur and supernatural aura, Castillo started to notice that it seemed tormented. Its slender torso bordered on willowy and weak. Its four limbs seemed to strain under its own weight. It released ragged, uneven breaths, almost as if it were affixed in a state of suffering. Gazing at Castillo, it seemed to almost plea for help. Castillo was now unsure whether to feel dread, despair or delight.

Nauseated. Strangled. Poisonous air intoxicated it. Heavy heat suffocated its skin. Ailing, it crumbled.

Evidently, the dragon could not bear its suffering anymore. It staggered around, as if senseless, and collapsed at the edge of the peak. Lazily, it slid downwards. Fine grains of rock and sand escaped from under its body as it skidded. It needed help. The panic in Castillo's mind built up exponentially. Scrambling, he tied a tensionless hitch knot around the nearest tree and a French bowline on the other side. Right as the creature disappeared from his view, he sprinted over to the edge of the peak and launched the rope over, hoping for the best. After a painstaking few seconds, the rope tightened. Castillo couldn't help but place both hands on his head, exasperated. With the combined efforts of his tugging and the dragons scrambling, the creature was saved. Rushing to its side, he placed his hand on the dragons' neck, to realize it was burning up. He trickled his own water into its mouth and hung his tent from a tree, serving as some form of shade. He poured his food rations on the ground beside it, and watched it seemingly inhale the food in seconds. He slept leaning on a tree beside it. He imagined how groundbreaking a bloody dragon would be. A legendary mythological creature rumored to have existed in ancient China. Even if he received no recognition for such a discovery, he would have never forgiven himself if he had let such a majestic creature die without at least attempting to save it. Hopefully, when it awakened, it would recognize Castillo's kind actions and restrain from feasting on him.

First a dodo bird, now a dragon. He had long forgotten his original mission, to find out the source of the radioactivity. The peculiarity of these animals eclipsed that issue completely. What else was Huang Shan hiding? After so many years, had no one in the surrounding villages noticed such strange creatures? Why was the rest of the world unbeknownst to this? Castillo lost himself in thought. Both dragons and dodo birds were animals of the past, whether six hundred or several thousand years. Could it be possible.....

A booming growl tugged him back to reality. He whipped around. The dragon was on all fours, howling, squirming and thrashing around violently as if it was trying to break free from chains that imprisoned it. It was alive! As it regained balance, it looked Castillo in the eye, and flew. A pair of wings unveiled, the dragon's body forming the shape of a striking bow. Wind rippled as the dragon beat its wings and ascended. Castillo scooped up his backpack, laughing wildly, and chased after it once again. Castillo clambered over sharp rocks and sturdy tree branches, occasionally tripping over. Suddenly a crackling emitted from his backpack. The Geiger counters! The clicks steadily heightened, signaling that he was nearing a radioactive source. Castillo strained, keeping his head up trying to discern the direction of the dragon's shadow looming above the forest canopy. Suddenly, he felt his shin smash into a rock. Splitting pain. He was hurtled forward. Crashing into the ground, he stuck his hand out, grasping, but his momentum overpowered it. Castillo felt himself skid across the ground, helpless in the face of gravity. Then it disappeared. A cold feeling exploded from his stomach. up his body. Every inch of his body paralyzed. For a second he was free falling. Then everything went black.

Before he even opened his eyes, he felt the pain. His shoulder felt as though it was soon to be wrenched out of its socket. His arms shook and his ears rang. Forcing his eyelids open, he absorbed the scene around him. It was shockingly beautiful, like nature was dressed in lustrous flamboyancy. The sky was a multicolored gradient, transitioning from light velvet to rose gold to dark crimson. The sun was just slightly above a distant peak, a glowing white diamond embedded onto a rugged foundation. Castillo gazed upward to see whatever was causing the pain digging into his shoulder. His fingers were tightly holding onto a slight ledge on the side of a cliff. In an instant, everything rushed back into his memory. Dragon. Forest. Running. Stumbling, sliding. His arm seemed detached from his body, like that of a safety strap, and he was unable to move it even an inch. Just as he was going to look down, Castillo stopped himself. Not this time. Steadily, he lifted his head upward. With one arm, he fished for a long metal screw in his rucksack and slammed it into the rock. It slipped off his fingers and dropped down below. Fortunately, the roaring from the Geiger counter covered the noise of the nail hitting the ground, so Castillo still had no idea how high up he really was. Taking in a breath, he took a second nail, gradually digging it into the side of the cliff. After wiggling it around to test for stability, he tied a rope around it and lowered himself down. Down, down, down. He thought about where the dragon might have gone.

Slowly, the ringing subsided, and a familiar deafening crackle attacked his ears. Was he close to some sort of radioactivity? Then it appeared before him. A gaping hole, a wormhole, something straight out of a science fiction novel. Serrated edges formed a circular shape, a passage to the past. This must have been before the Jurassic period, before the Cenozoic era because a multitude of dragons like the one he encountered earlier were flying around. Basilisks slithered along the forest floor. These weren't just mythical creatures after all. They didn't seem to notice him, but every now and then a peculiar insect would cross the wormhole and emerge in front of him, suddenly immersed in a different world, not unlike the strange insect Castillo encountered on his first day in Huang Shan. His mind was utterly blank, his conscious psyche fully focused on soaking in the details of this phenomenon. He wrote everything down. *Wormhole. Dragons. Basilisks. A world of the past.* Taking out his camera, he took snapshots carefully, to make sure no one would accuse him of insanity.

The spike of radioactivity detected by the CTIMA satellite. The unknown insect, with unprecedented features. The dead dodo bird, supposedly extinct hundreds of years ago. And the majestic dragon. It all originated here. But as Castillo gazed in to the unpolluted, uncorrupted, and breathtakingly natural world that hovered before him, his mind was plagued by recollections of what humanity had done to its Earth. He would not let the same thing happen to this world too. A strange bliss blossoming within him, he deleted his photographs, his sketches, and his evidence. As far as the world would ever know, Huang Shan was just another scenic spot. Its secrets would be forever shrouded in its beauty.

The Unofficial Unearthing of a Passage to the Past

ESF Sha Tin College, Tsang, Benjamin – 15

2020 CE

4 words.

Only 4 words. Once upon a time. A day spent sitting on my old chair with a thin cushion for support, staring at my bright computer screen, resulted in just 4 words. It was a start, well not really. More like a generic opening to a story, set in some fantastical land that I was yet to conjure. It was not that I was unwilling to find ideas, I couldn't. Usually my imagination soared through the vast skies, showering ideas like rain. But today, I was blank. An empty book that could not be written in.

I never wanted to be a writer. In fact, for most of my life, I thought writing was the most strenuous and tedious task to have ever been created. How could one sit and write word after word, without exhausting themselves? It never appealed to me. Yet I would find myself sitting on that chair – with one leg shorter than the others, that rocked back and forth with every minute movement of my hand or leg – in front of the desk that my mother got from a neighbour who wanted to discard it, writing. Writing word after word, getting exhausted, to a point where many years later I finally gave in to this painful activity and somehow made a living out of it.

I needed to write this story. A story that transcended time and evolved over more than 2000 years. It wasn't just a story, it was a mystery, about something more valuable than gold. Many people had attempted to claim this story as their own. But I had something they didn't...

The rocks. Differently shaped, each one. Each had its own story to tell. The monkey watching the sea, the immortal pointing the way. The large ones like tall towers, guarding the area with their strength and might. Some were animals, coexisting in this fantastical kingdom. Who was the leader, and who was just another bystander witnessing the events that would unfold?

215 BCE

"It's too dangerous." The words echoed in my head, as I cautiously walked down the stone stairs, "They cannot find out."

My long flowing robes held many pockets and compartments, which I pressed against my shaking body protectively. The nip in the air felt cold against my tense perspiration. My slippers were hanging off my only two free fingers, my feet bare on the cold floor. I walked fast enough to reach the bottom of the large, spiralling staircase, but slow enough to be silent. Once I reached the bottom, I slipped swiftly into the small room, rushing to a dark corner as there was no door to give me privacy. Once I was convinced that I was alone, I removed the contents of my pockets and placed them in a box that my hands sought from memory, mostly flowers, herbs and twigs from special trees that I had found myself. Soon all the items were safely inside for me to work with later. All except one. I left it in the pocket of my robe, the pocket that had a small button my mother had sewn for valuables. I felt around the pocket to make sure the item was still there, and quickly left the room, hurrying back up the stairs.

The sun had just begun to set as I made my way up the seemingly never-ending path to the peak. The air was cool, and a light mist filled the scene, hiding what was ahead, beckoning me to come forward. I clutched the pocket of my robe tightly; so tightly that I thought the item may break. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, and looked around the destination I had reached. The tall trees stood majestically against the darkening sky, the clouds floated gently, delicate ferns coexisted with large, hard rocks. My eyes were reluctant to let go, but I had a task at hand. My ferns would have to wait. I walked through the trees and slowly found the opening to the small cave. I looked up at the tall pines one last time before carefully stepping into the darkness. I felt my way along the walls until I reached the

end of the cave, where I quickly removed the item from my pocket. I was running out of time and had to be quick. I dragged my fingers along the uneven wall, as I had done many times before, counting the tiny depressions until I reached nine, where my finger sought a small hole. Suddenly I saw a flicker of light from the corner of my eye. I wasn't alone. Quickly and hastily I pushed the item into the hole, and covered it with some dirt I found on the floor. Whatever happened now, the item was safe, I told myself.

Elixir.

2020 CE

200 words

What can you do when the only place you feel safe is darkness? Where reality pauses just for a moment, and reduces to nothing. Where you can hide from the future, dwelling in nonentity. Some consider that darkness turns reality into a game, where everything becomes unexpected, like a piece of radioactive substance, and every step you take could be your last. But I'd like to differ. Darkness to me is like light to someone who is lost. I find a sense of hope in emptiness. For those few moments, when all I see is nothing, everything seems to fall in place, until the lights are turned on again...

The pines were a sight to behold. They didn't grow on earth like other members of their species, but instead defied regular traditions and grew on steep ravines, cliffs and peaks. They searched for light amidst the mountains' shifting shadows, twisting together. One could learn more lessons from these extraordinary entities than any book. But we are too blinded by our distorted sense of superiority to ever take a moment to forget ourselves and become one with our surroundings.

760 AD

I had to know if the rumours were true. The journey would be arduous and intense. Still, the reward would make it worth it.. I had discovered the note a few months ago, while on an excursion with my father – an important man in our village – to see the legendary Huangshan. The story was old, and people knew it from generations – it was placed in a crevice under a large magical rock at the peak. The rock was apparently inscribed with the word 'peace'. I didn't believe it at first, but as I walked the area, I became more and more aware of the rock as if it were seeking me rather than me trying to find a fabled rock in the wilderness. Until I actually found it. The note described an item that had been hidden in a cave somewhere on the peak of a mountain. No one had ever discovered the elusive item, and if I found it, who knows what I could do with it?

I left my house just before the sun rose, so that I would reach just before the sun set. As I reached the top, I couldn't help but notice the beauty of my surroundings. I looked down a small stream and noticed my shaking reflection. I quickly turned and started my search for the cave. The note had given me a vague description, and I didn't think I would find it. But somehow, I was drawn to one particular cave that my instincts forced me to enter. Once I reached the end, I remembered what the note said and felt for 9 depressions, and finally found the hole that I was looking for. My hand quivered as I reached inside to retrieve the item that I had left the comfort and safety of my home to find. And there it was. The tube was small and smooth, rounded at the bottom. I carefully pulled it out, unable to contain my excitement, only to realise... it was a fake. My excitement started to turn into anger, and I wanted to scream, run, do anything. But before I could, I saw a flicker of light from the corner of my eye. I wasn't alone. I pulled out the note from my pocket and quickly shoved it into the hole. I would have to write my own one for someone else to find.

Of.

2020 CE

500 words.

Imagination. A world that we create for ourselves in our minds, where anything and everything is possible. A parallel universe, where we can steer the course of our own destiny. The only danger is the one that we create. The only rules are the ones we create. No need to wait for buildings to be built, trees to grow, everything appears in the split of a second. A place where we can escape from reality, and enter a world where everything is perfect.

The most mystical part of the mountains were the clouds. The floating clouds that fell below the peaks when it rained, making them look like islands in the ocean. The feeling of bliss and serenity as one stood above the clouds – the clouds that quenched the world of its thirst – was the driving force to reach the top. And once you were there, even the sky wasn't the limit...

1430 CE

My village was situated within the mighty mountains. People came from far and wide to witness the pointed peaks, tall pines and stunning scenery. I had met many people here, from young children who came to run around, to the old and dying who came here to take their last breath in the serenity of this magical place. Most people just came and went, but one day I saw something strange.

That day I was walking around my village, as I usually did in the afternoons. In the morning a group of about five people had gone up to the peak, and now I could see them coming down. All but one person. I wondered where that man was, but didn't think much about it until I went up later in the evening to visit my cave. My cave. A small cave I had found a few years ago, where I often went to have time to myself, and where I kept my valuables that I was too scared of losing. The walk up to the cave was not a long one, but the steep path often found me gasping as I breathed in the cool air. Once I reached, I walked the familiar path to the cave, through the tall trees, past the narrow stream of crystal clear water, along the delicate ferns to the opening, when I saw a shadow.

My heart started to beat rapidly and my head was throbbing; this was the first time anyone had ever entered my cave. My cave. I cautiously walked along the side of the cave until I reached a second opening, the shortcut into the back of the cave. I quickly slipped in and remained in the darkness, trying to hide myself behind a curtain of ferns and get a glimpse of the intruder at the same time. I saw the feet first, large with hard, worn sandals that had thick leather straps. As I slowly looked up, I realised that this was the man who had gone up with the group earlier in the morning, but hadn't come down. I wanted to run out and tell him to leave, but a sense of fear clouded my ambition. The man looked tall and strong, he could easily take me down. I stayed in the comfort of my fern shielded corner as the man slowly approached the back of the cave. I held my breath and prayed that I would not give myself away. I wondered what he was going to do, when I saw him running his fingers along the wall. How peculiar, I thought. Then suddenly, I heard a loud bang coming from the front of the cave. I almost flinched, but I kept still as the intruder was still here. He must have gotten scared, as he suddenly ran out of the cave. Once I was convinced that I was alone, I slowly emerged from my corner and went to the wall where he had run his fingers. I could not decipher what he was trying to do, and wondered why he had come here. I sat there and pondered over this until no more light entered the cave and it was time to return.

As I left the cave, I found a small piece of paper on the floor near the opening. As I bent down to pick it up, I noticed the frayed edges and the creases from many folds. The man must have dropped it here as he ran out. I picked it up and carefully unfolded it. A short poem was written on it.

Immortality.

2020 CE

1000 words.

Destiny. We cannot steer the course of what happens next. Fate is inevitable. But is our future really written in stone? Has everything about our lives been decided before we were born? Does anything we do today make any difference to what occurs tomorrow?

One would not believe in magic until they saw the magic of the mountains. One minute it was a peaceful sanctuary, then before you could take a breath the sky was a raging monster spewing shades of red, orange and yellow. But before you could make sense of this sudden explosion, it is replaced with showers, cooling the rage that the mountain had felt not long before. The mist slowly closed in on your senses, and peace was restored. This, was true magic.

1927 CE

It had been almost 500 years since it was discovered. Inside the small cave up on the peak of the mountain. The magical mountain. Where it had been hidden for hundreds of years. But not anymore. It had a new home now. A village near the cave. A village which no longer had any inhabitants, but the relics of the life before still remained. As I trekked up the mountain and the first glimpses of the village caught my eye, I wondered what life would have been like all those years ago. The slanting roof tops, the children playing, the cold air, it all came to life as I took in the scene. I entered the grounds and looked around. I wasn't sure exactly how I would find what I was looking for, but I would find a way.

The legend said that the last person to have found it had left two words as a clue to its new location. Many people had pursued and persisted, but had failed. What made me think I would find it? An uninitiated young person who was yet to experience the world? But I was not unpracticed by my history. For generations my family had sought this treasure. Every ancestor got closer to finding it, but some obstacle always prevented the final possession. My father too had embarked on the same journey as me, exactly 10 years ago. Now it was my turn.

Only two words. Black fern. At first I thought this was describing a species of fern which was naturally black in colour. But after a few hours of searching, I found none. I had heard and remembered that the person who left the clue had a thing for riddles,and couldn't help but wonder...

I found the grave not long after I realised what the words meant. I now understood why no one had been able to find this before; they had not solved the riddle, the two word riddle. It was quite simple when I thought about it, but it was very well crafted, so well crafted that not everyone would be able to find the answer. The area around the grave was not well kept, with weeds growing in every direction and moss covering the dirty stone. But it was here – the treasure – I just had to be patient. I lifted the grave-stone knowing that it wasn't a real one. Everything had been placed so smartly, as if it were a puzzle, waiting to be solved. Underneath the 'grave' was a small box. My heart leaped as I slowly opened the box. At that second, I felt something creeping up behind me. Legend stated that spirits lurked between the trees and came out as the sun began to set. Whether this was a spirit or not, I would never know. Before I ran, I quickly picked up the box and replaced it with the piece of paper I had been holding with me the entire journey. The game was not over.

And.

2020 CE

2000 words

I now had all the pieces. Just a few more paragraphs.

I laid out the four pieces of paper in a neat row. A note, a poem, a riddle and an image. My own paper had finished printing and I took a long look at what I had created. A story. I had sewn together these accounts from various times in history into one entity that transcended time. As I kept the pieces together, I hoped that someone would read my story and solve the mystery of the magical item. The 2000 year old unsolved mystery. I hoped that they would look at the pieces and find something I couldn't. After all, I was only playing my part as the messenger carrying forward something I myself could not understand. And that was the beauty of stories. That someone else may understand something I wrote better than I could. I hoped one day someone would go back up to the mountain and find the treasure.

Magic.

Find my clue, link the words.

Conquering the Fear of Death

ESF West Island School, Huang, Vincent – 14

Ancient trees stretching away from the forest floor. Rustling foliage. Squirrels' tails peeking out under bristles of wispy moss. I was walking, but both my body and mind were wandering elsewhere. As I trudged through the forest, I reminisced about my favorite idol in the ancient tales that were told to me when I was a child: the legendary Sun Wukong – the Monkey King. Since I was a child, I always believed in him... but all the others at the temple thought that the Monkey King was a lie.

The crackling of the dry leaves under my shoes came to a stop. Gazing up, I saw colossal red pillars; a gigantic statue of a bearded teacher, and the red doors, fastened open: the temple. It was welcoming in a way, but at the same time, something was different. This was the place where I used to visit daily in my childhood. The place I thought I left behind.

I stepped into the temple. Heavy, fragrant incense pierced my nose. Glancing up, I saw the statue of Confucius, the great teacher.

“What do you mean Tang Shinai is gone?” I paced back and forth agitatedly.

“Your mentor, he just disappeared one day. All that was left was this parchment paper – take it,” the temple coordinator, Xiaodao said, as he stroked his white, fluffy beard.

Holding the rolled up piece of paper close to my chest, I pulled the chair out, scraping the ground, and dropped onto the chair. Delicately, I placed it on the table, and carefully rolled it open. Magnificent, gigantic mountains clothed in parched evergreen, with a small pitch-black void of some sort near the top of a mountain, circled in red, were carefully drawn on the paper. "I recognised it at once," Xiaodao murmured behind me. "It's the Huangshan mountains, just south of Anhui. You need to go before it's too late."

“Why not send someone else there? Why me?” I asked.

“Thing is, you were close to him. You were one of the only people he cared about. Once you were forc—left, well, he changed. Are you willing to help your mentor?”

I nodded.

Using my hand to shield my eyes from the strong, afternoon sun, I surveyed the mountain. It rose into the sky – steeper, more precipitous, than anything I’ve encountered before. Tying the coarse rope to the nearest outcrop, I tugged with all my strength. It held. Planting my foot on one of the barren, rock-like surfaces of the mountain, I started to climb, one foot after the other, hands gripping the rope tightly. Sweat was forming on my forehead and my hands were burning: I could feel the rough bristles of the rope peeling my skin away – it was excruciating. When I heaved my legs over the steep rock and onto the flat platform, I was panting, my shirt slick with sweat. I sat down on the ground, grabbed my flask, and took a sip. Holding my breath, I squeezed my eyes shut. Images of *Nian*, that demonic beast, flashed in my head – the time when he pounded on and ambushed me in my nightmares.

My eyes fluttered open; the sky was already indigo blue – it was nearly night time. Rolling open Shinai’s paper, I stared at the mountains dummfboundedly, pondering the cavern that was circled – *What was so significant?* It appeared to be some kind of cave. Abruptly, I felt a furry hand on my shoulder. It was then I noticed that the gentle breeze was gone and that I could no longer hear the creaking of the crickets. “I recognize that drawing,” a gruff, gravelly voice yawned behind me. Petrified, I slowly turned my head around. It was someone who resembled a person, but at the same time possessed the features of a completely different species. His whole body was coated with a thick layer of auburn and a bit of grey fur, with his chest encased in golden armor, with red accents. He was dressed both elegantly and traditionally, with his whole body leaning towards his hands, which was gripping his long baton. It was Sun Wukong.

Immediately, my fist met my open palm, as I held them in front of me, and bowed down as far as I could go. “Rise, mortal,” the Monkey King growled. “This is no time to be fooling around with such theatrics; we must find him.”

“How do you know him?” I asked.

Shaking his head, he muttered, “I can’t believe Shinai would do this. I told him – it’s too risky...”. Even though he was shorter than me, he managed to walk over and look down at me and ask the same question back to me. “Now, how do you know Shinai?”

I explained that Shinai was my mentor and that I had set out to search for him. “Everyone... everyone thought that you weren’t real, but I always believed in Sun Wukong... you. Anyway, Shinai, he was the only one who understood me, but... soon, I got forced out.”

“This is my fault...” Sun Wukong murmured under his breath, rubbing his eyes. “I should’ve never sent Shinai down, but if he’s left the temple that means... that means he went to...” He turned his back to me and limped away, shouting, “I will help you!”, not looking back at me once. As the Monkey King journeyed on, I followed him. Even though it was him who offered to help, he still occasionally glanced back now and then, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Well,” I questioned him, “What did Shinai go to do?”

Ignoring my question, Sun Wukong snapped his fingers, and Shinai’s paper flew into his hands. He appeared to be glaring at the sheet of paper. “I shouldn’t have told him where to find *it*,” he frowned, tapping the baton on the ground twice. Instantaneously, a cloud appeared beneath us, lifting the Monkey King and me up into the air. I gasped; I could see many granite peaks, each shaped like a distinct being. One of them looked like a peach; the other looked like a man – it was an astounding sight!

I didn’t know how much time had passed, but the cloud eventually slowed down and landed on a rugged surface. The Monkey King glanced at my shocked face, and smirked, “One of the many advantages of being immortal.”

We crept into the void; I could barely see anything. A pool of inky black water was trapped in a narrow area, with vicious teeth protruding from the ceiling above it. As we walked away from the entrance, I couldn’t see anything and the temperature continued to drop, sending a brutal chill down my spine. Mumbling quietly about mortals, he snapped his fingers and a torch appeared in my hand. The temperature rose, but my vision was confined to a small area of flickering gold cast by the torch. Sun Wukong continued walking forward; all I could do was follow.

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Suddenly, I heard an ear-piercing, guttural growl from behind. Claws scraped my back, forcing me onto the ground. But it wasn’t interested in me, it seemed. Slowly, turning my head around, I saw one of my worst nightmares – *Nian*. The beast was like a lion, but draped in a sort of greenish, thick hide, with long horns protruding from its head. Startled, the Monkey King dropped his baton onto the ground, but in a swift movement, he plucked one of his hairs, threw it in front of Nian, and jumped in front of me. “Stay behind me,” he ordered. As Sun Wukong reclaimed his baton, the hair slowly grew into a... a... blue-tinted clone of some sort. I saw before me two Monkey Kings, both fighting Nian. The clone raised his hand, summoning a red fire barrier which surrounded the monster, while the original Monkey King jumped up, and attempted to slam his baton into Nian, but... he missed – by a lot. Sun Wukong glanced at me, “stop star-” Unexpectedly, leaning on his stick, he started coughing, his hands covering his mouth. The clone faded away. As the Monkey King motioned for me to stay back, I saw the sticky, red blood on his hands. Nian threw itself towards the Monkey King.

I had to do something; otherwise, the Monkey King would be severely injured, all because I let him accompany me in the Huangshan Mountains. Shouting “Nian!” I turned and speedily spirited away. I could hear it pounding on the ground behind me. When I could feel its breath on my back, my fear of Nian became a tangible, prowling beast that paralyzed me to the spot, immobilizing me, leaving me as mere food for Nian. Suddenly, I was backed up into a wall, and I could hear the beast coming closer. Slowly, I turned around, and there it was: jaws wide open, saliva drooling from its canine teeth, moving, inch by inch, towards me. I squeezed my eyes shut.

It was the end.

But why am I still conscious? I peeked, only to find myself staring right into the golden, merciless, frozen eyes of Nian.

Nian crumbled before my eyes, leaving only traces of fur behind. “That... was certainly an unfortunate encounter,” Sun Wukong said. “Drink this.” A cup appeared in my hand. I raised it towards my face, there was an aromatic scent — similar to the drink Shinai used to make me. Initially, when I swallowed it, it was flavorless, but after a while, there was an astringent aftertaste. “You’re welcome. It should heal you,” the Monkey King replied, and just for a second, I could almost see a twinkle in his eyes.

I stared at him in awe; I’ve heard of the king procuring clones from just one strand of his hair and using his fixing power, but I had never thought I would see it in person (and with such ease), or drink one of his healing potions. “Are you okay?” I asked. The Monkey King simply shook his head and continued walking.

I was confused: this Monkey King was quite different from the one in the legends... no longer was he a young and energetic warrior; now, he just seemed older... exhausted, in a way.

The Monkey King sporadically tapped the walls of the cavern as we continued stumbling through the pitch-black, abyss-like, cavern. Abruptly, a small portion of the wall disappeared. “Illusion spell,” he mumbled. Walking into the secret room, I saw Shinai tied up, confined to the wall. Shinai gasped, “Father, I failed to dissuade the mortals of your existence, but there were always some who still had faith in you.”

“I know,” Sun Wukong said grimly. “You found the fourth peach of immortality, but in doing so, you have awakened Baigujiing.” Abruptly, the wind, enraged, nearly blew my torch out, confining my view to only myself and the entrance.

“Sun Wukong, I have captured your first son, and I have been waiting for this moment for centuries...” a young lady, with a crown poised delicately on head, strolled in. Then, Baigujiing saw me. “Gah! What is a mortal doing here? You’ve sunk too low.”

She raised her staff, about to strike me, but then Sun Wukong shouted, “Go, my friend. You have proven yourself; the only thing you can do now is run,” and waved his hands. In the blink of an eye, I was on the lush grass in the Huangshan mountains. But, as the sun continued to warm me up, dread engulfed me: *what if Sun Wukong... loses?* Gathering my strength, I charged towards the cavern void — towards the hidden room. But, as soon as I tried to run back into the cavern void, there was some sort of barrier preventing me from entering. It was then that I realized, even under the comfort and warmth of the cascading rays of light from the sun, I was feeble... weak. I could only wait.

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Suddenly, the cavern exploded. With her silver, merciless eyes reflecting the Monkey King and his three blue-tinted clones, Baigujiing punctured the Monkey King’s arm with her sword, oozing with crimson red blood. The Monkey King and his clones collapsed, while Baigujiing leaped towards me with her fingers stained by the blood of her previous victims. Terrified that the end was near, I stood there, petrified.

Time froze.

I thought about what I would have done differently — then, I realised that even if I could redo it, change my decisions, I would still go to the Huangshan mountains and search for Shinai, because trying to save Shinai and the Monkey King was worth it. But... I wasn’t dead yet. Baigujiing stood stock-still, but she was glaring at me. The Monkey King threw his staff into the air, and out of nowhere, lightning bolts shot down from the sky. A giant thunderbolt struck Baigujiing, causing her skin to melt off, morphing into a skeleton before my eyes. In her arm and legs, there were spots of pink where a bit of scorched flesh remained.

Baigujiing’s head swiveled as if searching for something. I slowly crawled backward... Suddenly, a dry leaf crunched beneath my foot. Her head froze, and in the blink of an eye, she was in front of me. Her talons, with elongated nails, were right beside my throat. Pain jolted my body; my arms and legs began to weaken as I collapsed to the floor.

“Sun Wukong,” Baigujiing took the crown off her head and turned it around. Inside, was a peach. She advanced, forcing me forward with her, and knocked Sun Wukong onto his furry knees, “You must choose: I can give you the fourth peach of immortality – for a price.” She snapped her hands, and suddenly, she and Sun Wukong switched places. “You ate three peaches. Kill this mortal that has never harmed anyone; violate Buddha’s principle of no harm: Ahimsa. In doing so, I will give you the fourth peach, which will give you the ability to do what you have tried to do for centuries: to erase your name from the Book of Life and Death.”

“I did that, already,” he mumbled. “The Kings of Hell added my name back a millenia later...”

“If you eat that peach, you will be immortal. Betrothed to me, no one would dare mortalize you once again.”

Sun Wukong collapsed onto his knees, his armor stained with blood; I was shocked – Sun Wukong, the *legendary* warrior, was on his knees. “I... I will *never*... eat the fourth peach. I was wrong in seeking it out in the first place... I will always be loyal to Buddha’s disciple Xuanzang; to all who believe in me.” The monkey forced himself up, and his baton flew towards him. There was resolve and tension in his tone that I could feel.

“Well... that’s too bad,” Baigujiing sighed and flicked her hand. The Monkey King was being hurled around by Baigujiing, but no matter where my gaze fell, I couldn’t identify where he went. “Guess I’ll have to kill your son.” Shinai slowly phased into existence.

Suddenly, the Monkey King crashed into a pine that looked like a man, stretching its “hand” out. Then, I realized – it was the Guest-Greeting Pine: one of the most famous in the Huangshan mountain, symbolising friendship and perseverance. At that moment, I remembered two quotes – Confucius’ and one of my mentor’s quotes.

Faced with what is right, to leave it undone shows a lack of courage, and friendship is stronger than any dark force.

It was then that I realized – even though I was a small, feeble, mortal compared to these beings, I could still influence the outcome of this battle – the weapon I was to use to save the Monkey King was the power of friendship.

I scampered towards Sun Wukong. Without thinking twice, I reached out to the Monkey King and yelled, “GRAB MY HAND!” A furry hand brushed against my fingertips, and with all the strength I had, I grasped his hand. Sun Wukong’s eyes cleared, twinkling, and then the baton appeared in his hand once again. He glanced back at me for reassurance, let go of my hand, and flew into the sky.

Sun Wukong tore a handful of his fur off and threw her all around Baigujiing. All of a sudden, I saw hundreds of Sun Wukong’s surrounding Baigujiing in a tumultuous frenzy, attacking her, until all that remained of her was the crown.

Amidst the pack of monkeys, was the Monkey King! He was grinning with that distinct twinkle shining in his eyes. “She’s gone. I... we did it.” The Monkey King’s clone came over with Tang Shinai. He looked more like himself, but the peach was still in his hand. As his clones slowly faded away, I realized Sun Wukong looked much stronger and much more like the formidable Monkey King I have read about in the legends – except more genial. Crushing the peach, he said, “Four... that always meant death. There is no escape from death; it’s a natural part of life that I have avoided for long enough. I have accepted the truth – now, I’m going to live the remaining years of my life helping others. But, before I do that... I must thank you. You helped save me and my son. I... I can’t thank you enough. I admit it was misguided of me to hide my existence. From now on, you will no longer be a disgrace to the temple; they will know the truth that I exist..”

I was in the temple again. The adventure, when I went through the Huangshan mountains and the caverns within it was truly an experience. Sun Wukong — he was real, but now I knew: mortals like me could make a big difference, and shouldn’t be afraid of death.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

ESF West Island School, Lee, Claire – 15

I'm always asked about the origin of the magical Huangshan, the mysterious aura that pulls people in. This is a legend that I've never told a single soul about, and if you're smart, you'll take this story to your grave.

There were stories about a jade that was gifted by the gods after the bloody rebellion, when the Emperor begged the heavens for it. People said that the jade was the one thing that kept everything in balance, the one thing that prevented chaos from spilling over, should it fall into the wrong hands. It was said that only the great Emperor was shown to it himself by the heavens, but child, this was what happened when he discovered the jade.

He sprinted his chubby self back to the palace, screaming for his minister, commanding him to immediately meet him at the base of the mountain in great peremptory, for there was good news. They walked on moss-hidden pathways, and this time, it seemed to take a longer time than the first time for the agitated Emperor, and as they climbed higher and higher, fog became much more dense, and the branches on trees wilted. But just as Minister Liu was about to risk his head to ask if they had arrived, the fog cleared in a whoosh, and a large, blooming garden of violet orchids growing from lush grassland surrounding rocks, the damp smell was no more, instead, a fresh breeze of peony filled the air and floated away into the sky.

The Emperor blinked.

What on earth was he going to show me? Liu thought to himself. *You'd think that it'd be an extravagant find from the way he reacted.*

"No, no... this... what?" the Emperor spat flying sprays of spit onto Liu's face while stomping on the ground, "this was certainly *not* what I wanted to show you! I had a calling—the heavens called me and took me here, there was a large jade, it was the protection I prayed for!"

He couldn't understand why the heavens would hide the jade from him and his advisors now—he was obviously at the right place.

"Your highness, are you alright? You woke up *quite* early this morning, perhaps you require some—"

"No bed rest! Curse the heavens, get me off this stupid mountain!"

"Yes, your highness," Liu chanted.

That evening, the Emperor had a dinner with provincial leaders, and with a thundercloud above his head at having been humiliated by the heavens, he gulped down bottles of wine. With his head above the thundercloud now and in a false delicate trance, he giggled, and raved about the day's events loudly for the whole table to hear about.

"The bloody heavens, taking me out of bed at the crack of dawn just for some illusion of a jade and making a fool of me, what do they get out of it? I'm telling you, I'm not mad. Go to Huangshan, and you'll see a cave."

That fateful night, two special men were in attendance—the Emperor's Sorcerer An, an ancient man who wobbled even with the support of a browning bamboo cane. He was barely ever seen, in the palace, and people said he lived in the mountains. Next to the Emperor himself was Minister Liu, and although we'd been introduced to him, child, he was secretly a magical singer, and loyal to the rebellion. After their defeat, they escaped underground in the midst of purges. The leader of the rebellion asked for Liu to "repent" to the Emperor, in hopes that he would gain his trust as a spy for the rebellion while they built up their own army again. It worked, for Liu became one of the Emperor's trusted councilmen.

When Liu heard the Emperor's story, he began to formulate a plan, one that could comfortably fund the rebellion—to take the jade before the Emperor sent a group of miners to collect their treasure.

The moment the moon brushed against the ginkgo tree at midnight, Liu tiptoed out of the palace, hummed a long, monotone song just loud enough for the palace guards to hear. With a soft *thump*, they fell and snored long, nasally

snore. Liu smirked, whistled a shrill tune, and conjured a cloud, drifting him upwards to Huangshan in the shadow of the moonlight. Hidden by a thick cluster of clouds was an array of bamboo sticks with sharpened rock ends that surrounded a dingy straw hut; the secret base of the rebellion was here. Liu stepped off the cloud and walked through the fence as though it never existed, and rammed his fist onto a fragile wooden door.

“It’s Liu. I have news,” his rough voice echoed throughout the eerie night.

The door creaked open, revealing a crackling fire that lit up the room with a bright red glow, reflecting onto the men’s bony cheeks as they immediately stood up and bowed to Liu, except for a chubby woman wearing a silk robe that brushed the floor as she walked towards Liu.

“What...news have you brought us?” her eyes glowed with the crimson fire, making Liu withdraw slightly.

“The Emperor discovered a jade, and from his telling, a large one, ma’am. It would earn us a great amount of money if we were to mine it and sell it. It could be the beginning of our return, ma’am.”

The woman swept her eyes across the room, eyeing the men in there.

“Yes, we could do with some money... set off tomorrow morning, Liu, you’re the strongest of us all. I’m expecting a nice bag of money by tomorrow evening,” she giggled, “go now, we await you.”

“Yes ma’am,” Liu bowed, and left the mountain.

The following morning, just as the sun popped up to say hello, Liu was already at the foot of the mountain. Judiciously, he followed the path the Emperor took yesterday. He snapped off a long tree branch and hummed a hurried tune, and set off at an abnormally fast walking pace with the branch in his hand. Birds were greeting each other with cheery chirps, while the leaves on trees swayed every now and then in the direction of the wind. Curiously, with each step, the sun seemed to cower behind trees, and Liu shivered as he neared the top.

Suddenly, a large gust of wind nearly blew Liu off his feet and the sun was nowhere to be seen. Clumps of inky mist hid the road ahead of him, but Liu whistled a sharp tune, and the mist diffused away and birds sang again as the sun’s heat hugged him tightly. Humming, he continued to take a fragile— looking dirt path up and ahead, round and round Huangshan until he was dizzy himself, and began to question the Emperor’s sanity, until his foot caught onto a twig. Tripping, he cursed and dusted himself off, but while doing so, he noticed a small hole in the mountain rocks, and peered inside.

He inhaled sharply, and his jaw fell. It was a cave filled with gems and jewels so glamorous and gaudy that it was as bright as day in there. *These are definitely worth twice as much as the jade!* He thought, *but how am I supposed to get in there? I don’t suppose I could sing my way in.*

As atrocious that idea was, his voice was his specialty, and the only thing around him were clusters of brittle— looking trees, and a sharp leering edge that could lead him to his death. He took a gamble, and with a doubting mind, inhaled a large breath for such a long time he felt that his chest would explode, and screamed into the tiny hole like a scene of catharsis. Instantly, there was a tremor from the mountain rocks— they rumbled and grumbled, shaking the earth in great vibrations, while Liu’s legs gave away. He fell on the ground and his walking stick clattered lifelessly away to its downfall, while his sweaty hands sought out support and acutely tried to grasp onto flat surfaces, with nothing to hold.

The earth and rocks continued to shake as Liu cried out, “Oh Heavens, forgive me, save me!” in his state of dismay to the sky, when suddenly, it appeared that the heavens forgave him, and a large *crack* ripped through the rocks and the hole, revealing an arched entrance... to the dark, and nothing more. Although they were nowhere to be seen, twinkles of giggles of the gems could be heard with a sensitive ear.

Damp, earthy smell made Liu gag. Nauseous, he hesitantly pushed himself up and put a foot ever so slightly through the entrance, and when nothing appeared to come up to tear off his foot, he continued to walk in great fortitude until he was completely immersed in the dark while his hand trailed over the rocks, like a guide. “For the rebellion.

For the greater good,” he kept repeating to himself. No matter how large he tried to peel his eyes open, the only thing he could see was nothing. Nothing was the only thing he could see and sharp rocks were all he felt until his next step was no longer on solid ground, but instead, *air*.

In a blink of an eye, Liu was falling and shouting curses, his heart about to plunge out of his chest as gravity pulled and pushed him down and he tightly shut his eyes, embracing a hard impact, and his death. But instead of a sharp pain in his body, his landing was instead a delicate and fluffy one. Was he already dead? Was this heaven? But the voice he heard next told him otherwise.

“What are you doing here, Singer?” a gravelly voice asked.

Liu opened an eye, and old Sorcerer An stood before him with tangled silvery hair draping down his back. Although his voice enquired such, his eyes were placid, as if he knew exactly why he was there.

“I fell,” Liu abruptly stood up, and observed his surroundings.

What he saw from outside was no illusion. His fall led him to a tall cave, where gemstones sat on the stone walls. It was no longer dark—the jewels reflected every source of light with beams of it bouncing off every rugged gem, like a puzzle of staircases leading up to the very top.

An smooth gem directly above him on the ceiling caught his eye: the jade, guarded by layers of crystals that grew around the circumference of the jade, but Liu found himself disappointed in the Emperor, for the jade seemed no different from any other jade he’d ever seen in his life; a fluid green filled the glossy gem that was unusually small, about as small as the Empress’ pearl earring.

An’s eyes followed Liu’s, and with no hesitation, said, “no.”

“No?”

“You cannot touch the jade.”

“Why’s that, old man?”

“The heavens forbid it. It’s under my protection, and they have entrusted me with it.”

Liu snorted and began to make his way towards the jade, “Oh? And what are they going to do if I touch it, curse me for the rest of my life?”

“It’s not what the heavens will do, it’s the jade, boy! No corrupted hands are to even graze upon it, let alone touch it!”

The exclamation echoed throughout the cave with such power and boom that it sounded like the heavens themselves were speaking to Liu through An, and with a wave of fear, Liu nearly collapsed once again.

“I—I need the jade, you can’t stop me, you—you look like you’re going to die any second, you’re outdated!”

Contrarily, it appeared that “outdated” An could. For with a loud thump of his bamboo stick, a wisp of white gas immediately washed through the air and twirled around Liu’s limbs like a vine. An reeled it tighter and tighter as Liu’s face screwed in pain when he began to feel his bones, crushing under immense pressure. He began to see fuzzy black spots and was about to succumb to the torment, when he suddenly felt the pressure no more, instead, shock of electric waves that An sent, and it seemed that millions of fire ants were crawling onto him, while bees stung him left and right, in which Liu could bear it no longer, and let out a long shriek so vociferous that the roof of rocks began to tremble, and the gems began falling out one by one, then in waterfalls.

An gulped and sent another shock, only to hear a second round of Liu’s screams and the crystals guarding the jade began to crumble in turn too. The cave cowered at the sounds of Liu and let go of its tight grip of the jade.

The jade fell ever so gracefully, and in An's terrified view, fell in slow motion while rotating every now and then, reflecting the light of rubies and emeralds, as if telling An, "save me," but to no prevail. In the blink of an eye, it crashed onto Liu's arm, brushing his skin, then falling onto the ground with a ringing *cling*.

"No," An gasped. He immediately stopped the attack and ran towards Liu, who was sprawled out on the floor, gasping for air with streams of tears escaping his eyes, but An didn't care about that, maybe, just maybe, his eyes were tricking him, and the jade was fine...

But it wasn't. Waves of obscure green began overpowering the lush ones in graceful swirls as the jade became corrupted. An's heart sank, he grabbed it, whispering enchantments in desperate attempts to revive it, to fix it, but nothing worked—he watched and watched until slowly, the jade he once knew was no more. The cave stopped rumbling, Liu's breathing shallowed and became the only sound that could be heard in the space.

A tear plopped to the floor, for An knew that China was doomed, and the heavens did not favour him.

He was right, of course, child. Outside, a murky cloud suddenly trapped towns and villages in, shooting out streams of rain over the royal palace and sharp rays of lightning here and there in a maniac-like style. Thunder growled even louder than a livid dragon, and children bawled, for nothing could deafen them from the sounds. People who tried to run indoors found their houses sodden and muddy, the roofs with holes in them, thanks to the lightning, and those who tried to escape villages were thrust back and sent flying by an invisible trampoline. Not even the "mandate from heaven", the emperor, was safe—the palace, too, was decorated with cracks in its roof and walls.

The storm carried on for days, then weeks. Water flooded all the dams, then crops, drowning them in their soil with no mercy. People prayed to the heavens, asking for salvation from the torture, asking if they were being punished for something they did. Fortunate ones who had been on travelling roads fled to Huangshan, where, for some reason, not a single cloud was spotted over it, and the sky was as blue as delphiniums, which were happily swaying to a gentle breeze and basked itself in forever sunshine.

And as for An and Liu? Only the heavens will know.

Now, child, nobody knows how that jade possessed such powers, but there were whispers, whispering that the jade absorbed whatever energy the person they came in contact with had, and assimilated their true desires and intention. They said that the jade took in the youthful powers of An, which became the reason for his sudden aging. Liu had foul intentions, and the jade abandoned An's energy for Liu's. But child, there *is* no turning back once one has been corrupted, or at least, it's been said to be extremely difficult. My task for you today, my young apprentice, is to revive the jade, bring it back to the light! You still hear the thunders chanting their taunts at us, the rain trying to suffocate us. You possess The Light, my apprentice. Be courageous, employ fortitude as you have since your birth. Go to Huangshan, do what Liu failed to, and save us all!

Dawn's Purification

ESF West Island School, Leung, Caitlin – 14

Zhang Sengyou was their creator, albeit a reluctant one, being forced to create them under the orders of the emperor. Zhang was forced to paint the eyes on the temple wall that would awaken their consciousness, that would allow them to have free thought and soar into the skies, free of their restraints of being painted dragons on a wall.

The dragons were grateful for their creation, for during the short time their creator could spend with them, they were truly cherished as if they were his children. It was their only solace and peaceful memory, before the haze of hatred covered the rest of their memories after their creator was snatched away from them by the emperor, who was furious about the fact they destroyed the royal palace after Zhang's death.

Zhang was taken away from them. They were a unified group of four, with Zhang as someone like a parent to them. They didn't care if Zhang hadn't been able to visit often. They just wanted to be with their creator, but their only wish was taken away by the emperor.

Now, they could do nothing but watch as Zhang's descendants came by year after year, carrying gifts under the impression that they were gods sent from the heavens. Painfully watching as each descendant resembled Zhang less and less, but even the faintest resemblance made them adore the descendants. As if a curse was chaining them to Zhang something stopped them from leaving the land of their birth. Indeed a curse, one that stopped them from leaving even the faintest memory of Zhang.

I

As the sun rises, casting the mountain towers with a soft golden shine, awakening the villagers and critters and the shadows retreat under the glow.

Quiet whispers spread throughout the mountainside village, the villagers beginning their trek up to the peak of Eight Pillars mountain. Their intricate hanfu a bright contrast from the earthen colors of the well-worn path and trees, each of the adults carrying a basket filled to the brim with offerings within their arms.

In the midst of the mild and quiet group of adults, two children, brothers whisper excitedly to each other, not at all carrying the respectful air their elders hold. Only when their parents give them a warning pat on their shoulders do they stop scampering about. They quieted down, instead peering curiously at the golden dawn-stained clouds surrounding them, shrouding the path enough that they could barely see in front of their feet.

The younger brother raised his head, curious as to their destination, curious as to why they had to climb to the peak of the mountain when the elders normally forbade such an action.

"Mengyou, be a bit more patient, we're almost there," his mother whispered softly, shifting her arms around her basket and patting his head.

Mengyou was still curious, but held back his questions, instead opting to hold his older brother, Mengsheng's hand. Busying himself somewhat with the feeling of calluses on Mengsheng's hand, trying to ignore the somewhat burning feeling in his legs as they continued their trek up the mountain, as well as the pricking feeling at his nape.

He began to see more through the fog, and rose his head to emerge through the clouds. As if entering through the gates of the jade emperor's palace, the sight was mythical. With the clouds thinly blanketing the stone ground, the dawn colors coloring it like a gold woven carpet, the carpet leading to an ancient cave temple, with sculptures of lizards engraved into the temple pillars, and two dragons standing proudly at the entrance like the guard dogs to the palace gates.

Mengyou was frozen, stunned at the beauty. Yet there was something other than the mythical beauty of the temple that made him freeze, something familiar, something spiritual.

“... Mengyou? Are you ok?” his brother's naturally soft voice broke him out of his trance, and he snapped his head towards the voice.

“... I... yeah, I'm ok. It's just... really awe filling, this place,” he stammered in reply, looking around to see the adults already beginning to enter the temple.

“Yeah, it really is, isn't it?” Mengsheng breathed, walking quickly to catch up with the adults, hand in hand with Mengyou.

The brothers quietly placed the incense sticks into the cup filled with ashes and other incense sticks the adults had placed before them, giving a prayer silently under the watchful gaze of the two painted dragons -- a yellow one on the left, and a green one on the right -- on the walls. Then shuffling over to their parents, still in a somewhat daze from entering the temple.

“Mengyou, Mengsheng, we're going to offer some offerings to the other gods. Here's some offerings, you can offer them yourself, you're old enough now, be good,” with those words, and a basket full of fruits placed into Mengsheng's hands, their parents went off to a different corner of the cave temple.

The brothers looked at each other, somewhat confused. Their parents had never left them alone before during ceremonial offerings to the gods, especially when it was their first time visiting the peak temple. They felt somewhat uneasy, but were soothed somewhat by the sacred air of the temple.

“I want to give offerings to the dragon gods, I've never seen them in the temples in the lower mountain,” Mengyou tugged on Mengsheng's sleeve, tilting his head towards the inner part of the temple.

Mengsheng nodded, agreeing with his younger brother's suggestion.

II

The dragons seemed real, despite being painted. With scales that shimmered under the candle light, and black eyes that seemed to stare at the brothers with furious intensity. It unnerved Mengsheng, for painted creatures to seem real, perhaps the rumours of the dragon gods from their great ancestor's time were real.

A shiver went down his spine, a cold sweat that chilled down to his bones. Mengsheng shot up, glaring behind him. Only to see nothing but the empty hallway, with the shadows flickering from the candle light.

“Brother? What's wrong?” Mengyou called, still kneeling down on the provided bamboo mat and praying.

“I thought... someone was watching us, but I guess I was wrong,” Mengsheng shook his head, turning his eyes back to the painted dragons.

Huh? I could've sworn that black dragon's eyes were turning another way earlier?

Mengsheng narrowed his eyes at the black painted dragon, and indeed, the eyes were facing a different direction from before.

“Mengyou, is the black dragon's eyes facing a different direction from before?”

Mengyou looked up, tilting his head in confusion, "... why would the black dragon's eyes be facing a different direction, brother? It's a painted dragon."

"No, I was sure that... it was facing a different direction," Mengsheng shook his head, stepping forward to get a better look of the dragon, whose scales seemed a bit duller than before despite there being no change in the light.

"Mengsheng, Mengyou, it's time for us to offer our prayers and offerings to the Jade Emperor," their mother called gently from the entrance of the dragon god's prayer cave.

Mengyou gave a quick bow to the painted dragons, and jogged towards their mother. Mengsheng, after giving a suspicious stare at the painted dragons, bowed and followed his family's lead, a pit of unease growing in his stomach.

"Brother... Why are we going to the peak temple so late? Didn't the elders tell us we're not allowed to go to the temple without permission?" Mengyou asked cautiously, following after Mengsheng like a scared lamb.

Mengsheng looked at Mengyou, his lips thinning, "I know, but I can't get that weird incident with the black dragon's eyes out of my head. I promise we'll go back right after I check ok?"

"... you promised ok!" Mengyou shuffles a bit closer to his older brother, for both comfort and warmth to keep warm from the cold early morning air.

"I promise."

It was early morning, despite the fact it was dark and the fog was thick, the brothers were familiar with the mountains and shouldn't have much to fear.

They shouldn't have much to fear. Yet, there were shivers running down their spine and the piercing feeling of eyes drilling into the back of their skulls. The silence of the mountain, with most of the critters and animals asleep, was unnerving. There was something missing... something crucial and would normally be something neither of the brothers paid attention to, was missing.

"Brother... something doesn't feel right," Mengyou whispered, gripping onto Mengsheng's sleeve.

Mengsheng's gaze darted around, trying to find the location of the piercing eyes, but all that stared back at him was the dark fog, "... Mengyou, let's run. We're almost to the temple, we should be able to take shelter there."

Without warning, he grabbed Mengyou's smaller hands and began running up the mountain steps. Their breaths, that would normally turn white with the chill of the early morning, didn't seem to appear even though both of them were breathing harshly.

Zhang...

A cold whisper brushed against his ear, and he heard Mengyou's frightened cry. Mengsheng's arm suddenly tugged down as Mengyou fell down, terrified of the unknown voice and the chilling air that didn't seem quite right.

"Mengyou!" Mengsheng called out, reaching out for his brother but...

Where's Mengyou's hand? It was right there...

He froze, paralyzed by fear. The feeling of an ice-cold hand landed on his shoulder, even though they should be the only ones out at this time.

You dare come back Zhang?

Mengsheng didn't know the voice, he couldn't recognize it, but the pit in his stomach grew, and it felt as if he was about to vomit. His vision began to swim, and his legs crumpled, a warm feeling ran down his cheeks, tears.

I shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have brought Mengyou... now he's in danger too. Who's Zhang? Why is it so cold? It shouldn't be so cold, even if it's early morning. Where's Mengyou? Mengyou where are you? Mengyou Mengyou!!--

Mengsheng flinched back as a figure crashed towards his lap, closing his eyes and shielding himself for--

Huh? Mengyou?

Mengyou's sleeping form laid on his lap, with fresh tear streaks running down his still chubby cheeks. All of a sudden, it was as if Mengsheng could breathe a bit easier, and the heavy feeling on his chest was gone. The fog didn't seem so dark anymore either.

The fog didn't seem so dark anymore, but his vision was still darkening, but he didn't feel that it was the same terrifying dark as before but instead rather calming...

As the calming darkness filled his vision, Mengsheng thought that he could see black scales, just like the painted dragon back in the temple, and the sound of thunder.

Yeah... just like that dragon... but surely not... that dragon... was a painted... dragon...

III

"Emperor Wu," the yellow dragon growled, curling possessively over the two unconscious brothers.

The figure of a man dressed in lavish robes came out of the dark fog in front of the yellow dragon, with eyes glowing eerily, standing out from the dark colours of the fog surrounding him, "why if it is not one of the four dragon my old painter Zhang Sengyou painted for me, where are the others?"

"None of your business, Shuda," the yellow dragon spat hatefully, a wisp of fire coming out of its fanged mouth.

"... I don't recall allowing you to call me by my courtesy name, filthy lizard," Shuda's glowing eyes narrowed, his form spiking in annoyance.

"I don't recall you being a disgusting gui, it seems a step down from your former place as a terrible human emperor," another, deeper voice joined in, hissing at the fog formed emperor.

"It was a step up if you ask me, though I took a while to be able to cultivate this form. Though now I can finally take revenge on the traitors who wronged me during my reign, don't you think so, Lǚ?" Shuda addressed the newcomer, another dragon with shimmering verdant scales.

"Don't call me that, only Zhang can call me that." Lǚ growled, the wind began to pick up and as if with a will of its own, turned into a swirling tornado.

"Zhang is dead, and he gifted you to me, didn't he? Doesn't that mean you're my property? I believe I can do whatever I want to my property," Shuda huffed.

"Huáng, take the children somewhere else. I'll take care of this dog whelp," Lǚ addressed the thundering yellow dragon, who looked mildly annoyed at having to leave, though he understood that the human children would certainly get into danger if they stayed.

"... I'll be back soon, leave some of the trash behind for me, Lǚ. If I had known he was still alive, even with that form..." Huáng curled gently around the unconscious children, soaring into the dark sky, leaving nothing but a trail of buzzing electricity.

“I would have thought you were Hóng with that kind of tone. I make no promises on leaving a scrap though.”

Shuda raised his ghostly hand, and the swarming mass of pitch-black smog reacted to his call, swirling together to form an army of ghosts.

He swung his arm at Lǚ, “attack the foolish dragon, my loyal army!” he cried, the army charging forward with their spectral spears and swords.

Lǚ roared and twisted out of the ghost army’s reach, swishing his tail and summoning a strong gust of wind to sweep apart the army.

Shuda glared at the sight of his army being blown apart like dolls without strings, the army drifting down to the ground lifelessly and without will.

“Move!” his shadowy form flared, and the army flopped around and rose again, their movements like puppets, jerky and unnatural.

The army rushed towards Lǚ, strengthened by Shuda, and pins the dragon midair. Lǚ roared in fury, the wind around the black mass lashing out and becoming almost like a miniature tornado.

“You’re going to go down first, green dragon,” Shuda smirked, his eyes glowed brighter as he envisioned the mass crushing the dragon within.

Lǚ yowled in frustration, feeling the space around him tighten, his body being forced into a ball. He was unwilling to go down before his brothers came, but the restraints around his scaled limbs were tightening, almost threatening to break his bones if he tried to struggle.

Then, a heat enveloped the black mass around him. A familiar magma red that Lǚ had seen thousands of times before peeping through the cracks, Hóng’s color.

“Did you get weak over the years when we didn’t have anything to do, Lǚ?” A striking vermilion red, a magnificent contrast against the ultramarine night sky, greeted Lǚ like the warmth of the summer sun, Hóng.

“... where’s Hēi?” Lǚ ignored Hóng’s jab at his weakness, looking around for the red dragon’s constant companion.

Instead of replying, Hóng simply pointed his snout towards the frothing black mass not too far away from them. Which, on closer inspection, had an onyx dragon in its midst, laughing as he tore his way through the ghost army.

“I should be asking you where Huáng is.”

Lǚ was about to answer, to tell Hóng about the pair of brothers who were Zhang’s descendants, but then a black mass came flying towards him, courtesy of Hēi’s rampage. Which was then struck by a sudden strike of lightning, followed by a roar of thunder as the yellow dragon soared by.

“... I guess no more chatting around is allowed, is it?” Lǚ snorted, and swooped towards the rampaging black dragon and thundering yellow dragon.

Four swirling dragons, each with their own elements swooped across the sky, with the raging former emperor raging and lashing, getting increasingly violent as the dawn began to rise.

The dragons, having overseen the mountain for so many centuries, wanting to protect Zhang’s descendants, knew this was their chance to get rid of the one being that truly hated Zhang and his descendants. Ghost did not fare well under sunlight after all.

The temple of their birth wasn’t somewhere they wanted Shuda to stain, but it was the best option.

They knew that sealing Shuda meant they too could not roam free under the fear of the seal breaking, but... for Zhang, even if it’s his descendants, it was worth it all.

“I guess overseeing Zhang’s descendants for a couple thousand more years don’t sound all that bad,” Lǚ says under the warm glow of dawn, as their bodies were chained down by the restraints of the seal, in order to seal away Shuda and his ghost army.

The temple was sealed, even the path up to it was difficult to get through. The clouds formed a fog that was exceedingly difficult to navigate.

The large temple doors, although had no lock, were impossible to open. As if the engraved dragons on the doors were warding anyone from entering, as if there was something forbidden hidden inside.

Mengsheng gripped a yellow scale to his chest, holding Mengyou's hand with his other hand. Staring at the clouds that forbade entrance to the sacred mountaintop temple beyond.

Murder in the Mountains

ESF West Island School, Lim, Jack – 14

THE CELL: Day 2

He sat there, in the white cell. Quite inadequate. Blistered with many little bugs and peeling walls, it was indeed a very ugly site. One could not believe that the smell was simply of rancid garbage trucks. Yet the mysterious man thought little of it. It was as if he was immune to such horridness. No gags. No chokes. He wasn't even holding his breath.

A chair was located at one side of the cell and another chair was located at the other. A long, metal, greyish table separated the two chairs. The door, perpendicular to the table, was white with peeling paint and a slightly broken handle. It was wary, barely clinging on support.

The man was ugly for a sixteen year old. Only a child really. He had old wounds all over his body that never fully recovered with massive white scars. He vividly remembers his step father screaming at him: "You're weak. You're bloody weak. Stop crying you little bastard!" His step father would scream at him and yell at the top of his lungs. And he would grab his belt, with his mother complaining, shouting at him to stop and saying that he was only a child, but he wouldn't listen. The step father would whip the little boy. He would whip him until he bled. The child was like an old war veteran from Vietnam: scarred for life.

The child was quiet and in deep thought. Pensive. It was so quiet that you could hear the breathing. Exhale... and inhale... and exhale once again... He just sat there in his feeble orange prison uniform, with a puzzled look on his face. He assumed something must have happened within the past week to get him in this little, dismal cell but he can't seem to think of anything. All he remembered was going on this trip... to the Yellow Mountains. The very first day. Suddenly, the door creaked open and a voice spoke out to him, finally breaking the silence.

"So Mr. Johnson, do you remember anything that happened within the last week or so?" inquired a middle aged man. He was American. His voice was hoarse and rough as if he's been sick with the flu for the past week: got that Southern Texas accent. He was scrawny: barely any muscles, looked like he'd never been in a fight. He's quite handsome as well. Black hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones with round spectacles. He was in a suit with a magnificent navy blue tie. All that perfected by a straightened back and a confident head up. A true man of fashion. His name is Desmond Allen; named after the world war 2 hero Desmond Doss. He stood at the door motionless, waiting for a reply.

"No sir. I'm fairly confused... Why am I here? I didn't do anything wrong did I? Please, would you like to clear things up because I have no idea what the hell is going on!" exclaimed the child seated in the chair with handcuffs. Suddenly, he felt electrifying shivers down his spine and the damp air crawling up his arms like repulsive termites. It was a horrifying realization.

'My father can't find out about this. He can't find out that I've been in this cell. If he did... I would be in big trouble,' he thought. His heart beat started raising. Sweat beads began to erupt on his forehead. Instead of being solemn and sombre in a state of shock like before, he was now agitated. His hand fumbled with each other: relentlessly shaking.

Desmond walks up to the table and puts his rigid and rough hands on it. "Well, this might be difficult to take in but you're currently in the world's most secure prison. Now I know you might be wondering why this is. And I'm going to tell you. It is quite a big story." He winked with a smirk on his face. The smirk quickly disappeared after a few seconds and transformed into a face of seriousness. Not a sign of cheekiness like before. He was like those teachers that would talk in a friendly, dulcet voice to his fellow colleagues and later scream at the students for not listening in his class. It happens all the time.

“You, Jake Johnson, 16 years old, have killed 3 of your fellow classmates with a handgun.” He sighs at this point as if he was in disbelief of a mere 16 year old committing such an appalling and atrocious act. He continued. “And I’m your lawyer protecting you.”

Jake gasped in utter sudden shock. He felt like he was hyperventilating. He couldn’t have committed this crime. ‘No, no, no! I was the nerd. I was the one that studied day and night. I couldn’t have done this,’ he thought. It wasn’t possible. There was no certainty. It must have been set up. Jake instantly proclaimed, “I didn’t do it.”

“And I thought you’d say that. Both the FBI and CIA have gathered enough information and evidence against you. There is a reason you’re in this—” he looked around him in dismay and fumbled for the right wording... “barbaric and viciously disgusting cell.” He paused, once again, for a moment to gather his thoughts. “So, why don’t we try and refresh that memory of yours?” Desmond took a seat while glaring at Jake. It was as if he was trying to decipher why he committed such an outrageous act. After taking his seat, he fumbled with his small briefcase and eventually took out a folder.

Jake stammered, “I guess we could try but I don’t think it cou—”

“I wasn’t asking for permission, Jake.” Desmond looked at him with a little frown. He took out what seemed to be like a picture. He slowly slid it over to Jake. “I want to know if you have any backstory available about this picture. What event led up to this exact moment? Have you ever seen it before?”

The picture was explicit. A student lay on the ground with one hand on his stomach and the other on his face. Bullet wounds. Specifically from a glock 25. Tons of blood poured out of the wounds when the photo was taken with the boy’s face in shock; mouth wide open as if he was surprised and his eyes. The eyes. It was as if he saw the devil rise from hell to burn the earth down to its core. Diabolic. It was fear and terror to the maximum. He just sat there in his own blood, knowing he would die. Knowing that it’s all going to be over.

‘And he was dead. Gun shots. Didn’t even look 18 yet. Probably never had a girl, never drank, never knew pleasure...’ Jake thought. He slowly looked up from the picture with his eyes filled to the brim with tears. “No!” he bellowed. In an instance he remembered; all it took to spark back his memory was a photo. He looked back at it, frantically scratching at it like a crazy madman as if attempting to erase it from existence. “Where. Where did you get this?” He looked back up with his now deranged, bloodshot eyes filled with deep hatred. He continued shouting — trying to find an answer — while smashing his handcuffed hands on the table. “Where!”

“Seems like you know it.” Desmond says this as if it was factual; there was no hesitation. “Found it on a nokia 3. There are more photos in you want to see—”

Jake looked at him in the eye; dead serious. He said 2 words. 2 words that would please Desmond. 2 words that would make all of this less confusing.

“I remember.”

Desmond smiled and licked his lips as if he was admiring his own work. His eyes sparkled but after a short moment it was all gone. He grabbed the picture back and stuffed it into the folder with great elegance. He put the folder back into his briefcase and instead took out a clipboard, pen and paper. “So, tell me... give me some story context. How many people went along? Where did you go? How long was the trip?”

“2 teachers, 5 students. 7 people in total. We went to the Huangshan mountains all the way in China. Exquisite. Beautiful. Fascinating. It was a 5 days and 4 nights school trip. But it was cut short because of... obvious reasons,” answered Jake in monotone. ‘He was the one that refreshed my memory. The one that showed back all the pain. The bullying, the suffering and the horrors of that one night. I hate him...’ he thought as he glared at Desmond with his sinister eyes filled with both anger and pain.

“Look Jake, please don’t give me that look. I’m here to help you. We’re on the same side. I simply just need to know your full story,” Desmond proclaimed in defense; he was trying his best to ensure that he could be trusted. Jake slowly lowered his glance wearily. “Look if you don’t want to do this now, we can continue tomorrow,” Desmond said in a gentle and smoothing way.

“You know... I haven’t eaten any food or drank water during my whole stay here.” Jake spat out. “The service is that poor,” he bitterly murmured to himself.

“2 days?” Desmond was shocked. He rubbed his forehead with his palm. It was one of the many things he did when in surprise. Things were seriously wrong here. He unexpectedly put his clipboard, pen and paper back in his briefcase. Jake looks at him with an eyebrow raised, curious. Desmond locks his briefcase with a slam and stands up. “I’ll try my best to get you some food and water. Maybe even get those handcuffs off you as well.” He stood up and started to walk out.

“Why are you doing this?” Jake was even more astonished. Nobody has ever done this to him. Not once: an act of kindness.

“We’re all humans here. I know you must’ve had your motives to kill them. I know you have your reasons. And I’ll find out soon enough.” Desmond’s eyes were full of determination. He turned back, opened the cell door with a creak and walked out.

“Thank yo–” shouted Jake with the door slamming shut stopping him from fully finishing his sentence. He looked down once again. It wasn’t until tomorrow that Desmond would return. Jake wished for it to come sooner. He was wrong about him: Desmond was relaxed, caring and he was a pleasure to be around. He desperately wanted to be in his company again. The one compassionate, understanding and sympathetic friend that Jake never had.

THE CELL: Day 3

“I’m sorry Jake. I couldn’t get you food and water from the staff working here. They were vigorous, thinking you’ll die anyway from execution in court. I... I’m sorry.” Desmond sat there looking melancholy but soon enough he cracked a smile and said, “ Good thing, I got you some water from back home and a cheese and ham sandwich with some chocolate for dessert.” He winked and laughed it off with great charisma. Desmond reached into his briefcase and brought out the food. He put them on the plain-looking table and gestured to Jake to take whatever he wanted to eat.

Jake smiled with hope and quickly grabbed a water bottle. He wrenched it open with great force and gulped down the water, savouring it. It had been a long time since he had tasted fresh water like this. Moving on, he grabbed onto the sandwich and started consuming it with big vicious bites. It was impeccable. Perfectly chopped apple cider smoke roasted ham with sticky mozzarella cheese. The beautifully created and exquisite craft would even please Gordon Ramsay! Jake devoured it all down in mere seconds.

“Slow down boy, you don’t want yourself choking on it.” Desmond looked at Jake with a smile on his face. He was truly happy for him. It wasn’t a lie. It was the truth. After a moment Desmond asked “So, we going to start now or should I wait?”

Jake replied, “Yes yes of course, we can start now.” Jake grabbed the napkin off the table and cleaned his mouth. “So what we talking about today?”

“Well, I’m going to need your story.” Desmond rubs his hands together while piercing his lips. He’s waiting for the uncomfortable and awkward silence to break.

“I don’t know where to start. I mean... it’s a very big and complicated sto–”

“It’s fine, start wherever you want. I just want the truth to be told.” Desmond looked at Jake with his caring and passionate eyes. “Yes and also I’ll need to write some notes. I hope this isn’t a problem with you.” Desmond opened up his briefcase and took out the same pen, a huge chunk of paper and a clipboard. “You may begin...” Desmond lets out a small forced smile to reassure Jake as he starts his story.

THE TRIP: First main event

JAKE: “It was the very first day. We had this 3 hour bus ride to the airport.”

“Come on students, get on the bus. We’ve got a long ride ahead of us. Don’t forget your water bottles!” Mr. Chan shouted in excitement as he waved his hand in the air for his students to see. He was of asian descent. Black eyes with huge spectacles, brown hair; getting whiter by the day, not a hint of freckles and stood at a height of 180 centimetres. He was a jolly person, always having a big smile on his face. He was very young as well, being only in his 30s. It was only later that I would notice that he wasn’t what we thought of him.

That particular day, he was wearing an oversized pink T-shirt that said: HAVE FUN! with some ripped jeans. The girls always drooled and fought over him. They thought he was cool, smart and just great to be around! I even heard rumours he’s been modeling in Shanghai!

Me and 4 other students boarded the bus with an extra teacher. She was Swedish. Blonde hair tied up in a bun with smooth and skinny, tanned legs. Her name was Jennifer Miguel. She was the definition of a goddess to my friends. They all had a massive crush on her. It wasn’t unusual. Most of the students in my school have tons of crushes. They weren’t hard workers; never even batted an eye about their future. All they cared about was gaming and enjoying life to the fullest.

My friends used to stare at her photos, talking about their fantasies and how great her legs looked. They also talked about some other explicit stuff that I don’t think you’ll want to know. I honestly don’t know where they got the photos; I always assumed it was from her instagram account or something.

Regardless, we were on the bus. It wasn’t too eventful. Nothing much happened. Me and my best friend Bruce sat next to each other and were talking about video games. Bruce was fantastic; he always tried to make me laugh when I’m down. He didn’t care that I had ADHD and couldn’t concentrate well in class. He didn’t mind if I would have frequent mental breakdowns randomly in school. He was my best friend. My only friend.

However, he was not the best looking dude with small eyes; big, puffy lips and a massive sprinkle of freckles on his nose. He wore a casual t-shirt with jeans. On the bus ride, I also thanked him for his support on the constant bullying I received when I first joined the school 2 months ago.

“I just wanted to say thank you, Bruce.”

“What for bro?”

“For helping me out against the bullies. I wouldn’t have been able to stop them without you.”

“It’s no big deal fam. I mean, I always try my best to help people. My older brother was quite a jerk. He was the notorious bully at the school ya know. So famous that I reckon the President knows about him! Even bullied me a few times. I don’t know why he did it. Now, I just didn’t want other teens to feel like how I felt after he bullied me. I try my best being nice because I saw what my brother became and I don’t want to be like him. I don’t want to be a bully and jerk. I wasn’t destined to be that!”

Little did we know that he would become just like his brother within the next 2 days.

The teachers were chatting and relaxing on the bus ride although I did hear Mr. Chan say something about a gun and lots of beer. I’m not so sure what he’s going on about but... at that time, I thought little of it as I was looking forward to checking out the fascinating and splendid views of the Huangshan mountains. Back then I thought this trip was going to be awesome! However, I was very wrong.

The bus came to an expeditious stop. We had arrived at the Dallas International Airport in Texas.

“Ok students! Don’t forget to take your luggage and any of your belongings with you. We will not be returning to this bus so if you leave your wallet or any item of wealth like watches, smartphones, headphones etc... you will lose it forever. Don’t go crying to me because I warned you.” Mr. Chan smiled and continued talking. “Also remember to go to the bathroom before going into the airplane. I’ll remind you later on so don’t worry,” Mr. Chan shouted at the chattering students. Our intestines were doing little flips of joy. It was our first time at the airport and going abroad. It was exhilarating to finally arrive.

To be continued...

The World Will Not Wait

ESF West Island School, Wang, Kiely – 14

“Please...!” He desperately screamed, thrashing and hitting the large creature that threatened to eat him alive once he was carried off to the nest above those mountain peaks. “Save me!”

However, the young girl who looked no older than fifteen didn’t waver. She looked down at him with cold-blooded eyes as she watched him get carried away to his impending doom.

Turning away, she quickly made her way up the mountain. Branches, vines, rocks, jagged areas as well as her own blades served as her footholds. Remains of those who made the oh-so-wise decision to bite off more than they could chew were nowhere to be found as creatures who dwelled here left not even bones to remember them by.

Her long and luxurious black hair was eerily still, making her itch and twitch as she tracked unseen noises and movement around her.

She peered into the black hole she had come across and dived into it without hesitation.

Was there a better way to do this? Probably not. The place she was at, the famed place where tourists flocked, poets admired and painters portrayed.

Huangshan, China.

A wonderful tourist spot with views like none other. Sharp peaks and floating clouds on top of 60,000 granite stairs carved out for easier access. That’s what it looked like on the outside.

The Huangshan she knew wasn’t as nice as that.

It was a place that had no bounds, containing an endless amount of treasure. Thousands upon thousands of people have tried to climb Huangshan and find ‘the entrance’, but to no avail.

‘Entrances’ come in various shapes, sizes and forms. The overall structure is like a tower, Huangshan being one of the entrances leading to the next level. An ‘entrance’ is found on every floor. And this repeats, over and over again. Until you reach the top.

No one has, not yet.

Unfortunately, you must take your own route to reach the entrance. If you don’t reach it, pity, you’ll have to keep searching.

The consequence of giving up before reaching the ‘entrance’ is to become food. Each death upon those mountain peaks would make it harder for those who followed.

Of course, that didn’t stop numerous people from trying.

The girl squinted her blue eyes, which from a certain angle, looked transparent, like a drop of clear holy water that crystallizes into a priceless gem.

“You can do this A-Yuan. Just a little bit more...” She whispered before closing her eyes with a resigned expression. The corners of her lips lifted into a small smile. She didn’t care for all the other fancy items out there waiting to be found.

What she sought, was one of the two final ingredients to complete the elixir of Wen Xiang. A poison that could destroy everything and anything, crafted by a vengeful ghost who fell from the path of immortality.

It could even destroy gods and demons themselves.

She had already collected 15 of the 17 ingredients. What were two more?

The one she was specifically after, was: *The tears of a dragon.*

She awoke to the scent of flowers and fresh dew. What surrounded her was no longer the dark nothingness that she jumped into, but instead, a field of red spider lilies that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere.

Two moons hung in the sky, one slightly smaller than the other. But the moons, flowers and horizon paled against the beauty in front of her.

Large feathered wings that were coloured a pure white, like freshly fallen snow on a winter's day. Four horns, perhaps six, grew out from the sides of its head, each resembling a clear ocean diamond. The body of the being, excluding the wings, was around the size of a car. It had four legs and two wings and a long tail that seemed to be made up of crystals. The smooth skin that was tinted blue and grey stood in contrast against the feathery wings. Its eyes donned the same blue as her own, albeit a darker shade. Its gaze held the innocence of a child that 'A-Yuan' had lost ages ago. Underneath those eyes were streaks of gold, making the colour pop out even more.

"*You're awake.*" It walked in circles around her, carefully observing and taking in the appearance, as well as the scent, of the new addition to the world. "What's your name?"

The girl paused for a moment before smiling brightly.

"Si Yuan's name is Si Yuan. It's nice to meet you..." Si Yuan replied in response to the dragon's question, prompting the dragon to share their name as well.

"Si Yuan's a nice name! I don't have a name." The dragon said cheerfully as it clawed at the ground in a playful manner. "Mother says that names have powers, and they can come back and bite you when you grow older!"

"Really now?" Si Yuan stifled a chuckle as the dragon sneezed, blowing a few flower petals off the ground.

"Really! Mother says that names carry the weight of the world!"

The weight of the world?

"That's it! Si Yuan! 'Si' means 'your own', and sometimes even 'selfish'. And 'Yuan' means 'wish'! To find one's own selfish wish, from now on, you're Si Yuan! Do you like it?"

.... Perhaps it's fate.

Si Yuan paused for a second, before smiling even brighter than before. "Mn. They do." Her voice was soft and soothing, but her words made the dragon bright up like the sun itself.

"Really?!" The dragon's eyes sparkled.

"Mn. The world... doesn't wait. So you must be ready."

"Is that so... Si Yuan, what are you? You smell like a human, but there's something different." The dragon flopped onto its side after giving Si Yuan another sniff, tail flicking lazily. Si Yuan gave a small smile in response before gently stroking the dragon's cheek.

“Well, it’s complicated, little one.” Nostalgia flooded her eyes when she spoke.

The dragon leaned into her touch but soon pouted. ““Little one”? I’m bigger than you!”

“To A–Yuan, little one, you’ll forever be a little one.” Si Yuan replied. The playfulness and innocence of the dragon made her feel her years.

The two chatted for a while, the dragon asked questions about what the place she came from was like while Si Yuan asked more about the place they were in.

“We’re in the fields of Everlasting Flowers. The flowers change according to the person in the field, it represents what they yearn for the most!” The dragon said happily, “I love to hang here, I usually get protea flowers! Mother says they symbolise change and transformation!”

“I don’t know what spider lilies symbolize though... do you?” Si Yuan paused at the young dragon’s question.

“...Red spider lilies symbolize final goodbyes. It is said that they are the flowers of the heavens.” She responded as she picked one up herself.

...They are also said to guide the dead into the afterlife.

“Really?” The dragon asked, in awe. “That must mean you want to say goodbye to someone don’t you? Since it’s supposed to symbolize what you yearn for.”

“....Mn.”

Eventually, the dragon dragged Si Yuan to meet his mother. After all, it might help her case.

She relished in the feeling of wind brushing past her face at a pace one might call overwhelming. The height she was above the ground gave her a sense of security and excitement. Which was rare.

Unfortunately, the peace did not last.

As she rested on her new friend’s broad back, she felt a tickling sensation surround her ankle. A thin transparent string that resembled silk and steel wrapped around her leg, yanking her off her dragon friend.

Aside from the immense pain in her foot, and the fact that she was falling from at the very least 7,000 feet above the ground, she heard voices.

Familiar voices that she was so very desperate to hear again.

It was overwhelming, even for her.

‘A–Yuan!’

‘What were you thinking?!’

‘Stay behind me!’

‘A–Yuan.’

‘Si Yuan.’

‘Si Yuan!!!’

‘What... what have you done?’

‘Do you know what’ll happen to you?!’

‘Si Yuan... I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I... can’t take this anymore... forgive me.’

‘A–Yuan. Let’s meet up in the heavens... Okay?’

‘Hey, why is your name Si Yuan?’

‘...Revenge?’

Clutching her head, she let out a blood–curdling scream before blacking out.

‘There.’

‘A–Yuan!! How could you do this to me? I’m wounded!’

‘My king. You might need to work on your poker face.’

‘Hey!’

‘Agreed.’

‘A–Bing!’

‘Yeah. You’re too easy to read.’

‘Oi!’

'No offense, my king, but you're just not very good at this game.'

'A-Yuan!!'

'Ooof! You said it, not me Si Yuan!'

'..... — restrain her my chil... — and...'

'A-Yuan...'

Si Yuan opened her eyes.

"Hm?" She asked as she rubbed her eyes. It felt like she just had a very... *familiar* dream.

"Si Yuan!" The smaller dragon said, tearing up. "I'm sorry... I forgot there were faes in the area. They saw you as a threat so they..."

Si Yuan blinked at this. "A-Yuan is fine!" She said. "Really! But now... A-Yuan needs to get down to business."

"Business...?" The little dragon panicked, "You're not going to leave are you?!"

"A-Yuan's not going anywhere for now, little one, no need to panic." Si Yuan replied before turning to the larger dragon, "You must be this one's mother! Nice to meet you."

"...A-Yuan came here looking for 'the tears of a dragon', how can A-Yuan get it?"

"...why do you seek such a thing?" The voice was soft yet booming, it sounded relaxed but the larger dragon narrowed its eyes upon knowing what Si Yuan had come for.

"A-Yuan.... Wants to see her friends. A-Yuan happened to come across a method that would... allow me to go to them."

"And what method do you have in mind?" The dragon inquired, was that really all it was?

"The elixir of Wen Xiang." Si Yuan replied.

The dragon flinched and drew backwards until she no longer was just looming over Si Yuan, but instead, looking down on her with an unreadable expression. "Wen Xiang was a vengeful ghost... his elixir capable of destroying millions." The large dragon stated, but what she implied was something so much more.

"A-Yuan... will drink it!"

If not for her dark words, Si Yuan's voice could be considered chirpy.

The dragon paused.

“For what reason do you court death young one? A mere whiff of that elixir causes immeasurable pain, but you intend to drink it?”

“Well Ms Dragon,” Si Yuan said as she sat down cross-legged, the smaller dragon curled up behind her, “A-Yuan is no longer a ‘young one’ anymore. A-Yuan thinks A-Yuan has lived long enough.”

“... It’s time to meet my friends in the heavens.”

“But..!” The smaller dragon butted in, “You can’t die!! You’re my friend, you can’t leave me!” He whined, tears forming in his ocean blue eyes.

“Little one,” Si Yuan said as she patted his head, “A-Yuan has lived long enough, and besides, life is beautiful because it has an end. Because it’s short, we treasure and make the most of every single moment.”

“But A-Yuan’s life is unnatural. A-Yuan has lived for a very *very* long time.”

“A-Yuan has been hurt many times.” *By both friends and enemies. Allies and foes.*

“A-Yuan is fine with the pain, it goes very quickly.” *It disappears like it was never there.*

It’s so very....

Sickening.

“But A-Yuan... thinks it’s time for A-Yuan to leave, while everything is still peaceful.”

“A-Yuan misses her friends. Her king.” *It is so very lonely.*

“So A-Yuan must leave and meet with them up above.”

“Ms Dragon, please give A-Yuan the tears of a dragon,” Si Yuan smiled apologetically before lowering her head, “It’s A-Yuan’s one and only wish.”

My selfish wish. To go to the heavens.

“It suits A-Yuan’s name doesn’t it?” She laughed dryly. “Si Yuan,” The larger dragon began, seemingly hesitant.

“Dragon tears... don’t exist.”

Si Yuan furrowed her brows.

“We are incapable of shedding tears as we see only the truth. The cruel, harsh truth.”

The dragon smiled bitterly. “We have sacrificed, killed, protected, guarded. Yet nothing can protect us from the corruption of a human mind.”

“‘The tears of a dragon’ is simply the tears of those who see this truth like us dragons. Granted that the truth doesn’t break them.” Ms Dragon explained.

“So Wen Xiang...”

“Wen Xiang was once an immortal. Wise and generous. He too has seen too many. But alas, went down the path of hatred.”

“... That means A-Yuan can just use her own tears...” Si Yuan questioned. “...In theory, yes. ” Ms Dragon responded.

“Ahhh,” Si Yuan groaned as she flopped onto the back of the smaller dragon, “That means A-Yuan has been searching for something that doesn’t even exist this whole time!” She whimpered pathetically.

She started to cry.

The dragons expressed their concerns but instead, she efficiently collected her tears and stored them.

“Hey... I want to understand more about the situation. Mother says that there are 17 ingredients in the elixir.... How many do you have?” The smaller dragon asked.

The larger dragon of the two nodded as well, expressing her curiosity as well. She’s never seen what goes into the elixir and dragons, who actively seek knowledge would of course be interested in what goes in the infamous poison.

“Well...” Si Yuan put a finger on her chin and leaned backwards to lie on the soft grass, “The first one Si Yuan got is something called the ‘eye’ of a manticore.”

“Manticore?” Both dragons tilted their heads.

“It’s a beast from where A-Yuan comes from! It’s said to be an unconquerable beast!”

“It has the body of a lion, tail of a scorpion and a head of a human! ” Si Yuan tried to express how big it was with her arms and body language. “The ‘Eye’ is the thing the manticore guards is called.”

“The second one was the forbidden fruit of lake Styx! The lake was formed by a person who escaped death and brought a bottle of water from the river Styx! It’s a fruit that invokes one’s worst fear and feeds off the souls of passersby.” Si Yuan proceeded to tell stories and explained the ingredients she had collected one by one, going through the notes, belongings, weapons and items she had brought with her.

“Si Yuan.” Ms Dragon called out, “You’ve collected 16 ingredients, one more is yet to be found.” The dragon looked straight at Si Yuan. “What is the last ingredient?” She asked.

Si Yuan answered immediately, without any sort of hesitation as if it was on her mind constantly.

“The essence of a corrupted djinn...” Si Yuan said, “Is the last one.”

The dragon nodded, though corrupted djinns could potentially destroy entire levels and races, she knew after looking at the determined eyes of the girl sitting next to her child, that there was nothing she could do to stop her.

“A-Yuan... I don’t want you to leave...” The little dragon whined, ears drooping, eyes downcast and tail flopping onto the ground without any sign of it’s once energetic and playful nature.

Si Yuan sighed, gave a small chuckle and wrapped her arms around her new friend’s neck. “Don’t worry little one. A-Yuan won’t be leaving so soon! We’ll have tons of fun together, it’s been a while since A-Yuan’s found an area so peaceful!” Si Yuan smiled.

“Really?!” The little dragon’s ears and tail perked up, contrary to its previous appearance. “Mnhm! A-Yuan’ll stick with you for a little while.”

“I really like A-Yuan! A-Yuan... is the most kind human I’ve ever met!”

Kind?

With these hands stained with bloody murder?

“You’ll have to stop calling me ‘little one’! It sounds weird,” The dragon pouted as his mother smiled at his antics.

“What do you want A-Yuan to call you then?” Si Yuan asked, mind thinking back to the nostalgic feeling within her chest, like something similar happened before.

“Nnnnn.... Blue? No it’s too simple....! What should I be called....!” He seemed to be having an internal dilemma while Si Yuan smiled softly.

“Ah! Why don’t you come up with a name for me!” The little dragon beamed, showing off that 1000 watt smile. “Mother, is that alright?” He asked, puppy-dog eyes twinkling at his endearing mother.

“That’s fine dear. Go ahead.”

“Yess! A-Yuan, if you come up with something stupid, I’ll stab you with a spork!” He threatened playfully as Si Yuan choked. There was the feeling of déjà vu in the air.

My king! Why don’t you give me a name? But be warned, if you come up with something stupid, I’ll stab you with my chopsticks!

Si Yuan smiled. How this little fledgling of a dragon reminded her of herself, all those four-thousand-eight-hundred-and-seventy-seven years ago, pure and naive.

Living life to its fullest. Driven only by passion, curiosity and wonder.

Si Yuan pondered for a while, even despite the little dragon’s pleas to hurry up, she took her time.

“Why don’t we call you ‘*Ying Xian*’?” Si Yuan said eventually as she wrote the two characters down on a piece of paper.

“Ying... Xian... *Ying Xian*... I like it! It’s pretty! And complicated!”

It's wonderful, thanks my king!

“What does it mean?”

“Well, A-Xian, it means ‘because of envy’. *Ying* being ‘because’ or ‘as a result of’ and *Xian* being ‘envy’.”

The bright smile Ying Xian gave her made her heart warm. It's been a long time since she felt welcomed.

And so, the following thought came to mind.

.....Maybe A-Yuan can delay meeting with her friends for just a little while. A-Yuan's sure they won't mind.

For sure, they won't mind.

For once, in those lonely 4,000+ years she had been searching for ingredients, she thought, *that Death could wait a while longer.*

Unlike the world that broke her, Death could afford to wait a little longer.